



under discussion

No Longer on the Sidelines? Youth and Politics

Fuel for the European Engine

What Does the Franco-German Partnership Mean for Young People on Both Sides of the Rhine?

An Interview with Hugo Leclerc and Jannis Stöter

In spring 2021, Hugo Leclerc and Jannis Stöter, along with a group of students, founded the Franco-German think tank La DenkFabrik. The two students spoke to us about the young generation's view of the Franco-German partnership and European integration – and revealed to us what they associate with Konrad Adenauer.

Ai: Mr Leclerc, Mr Stöter, what first comes to mind when you think of Franco-German relations?

Hugo Leclerc: I immediately think of my grandfather, whose brother was deported to Auschwitz

during the Second World War. My grandfather spent his whole life keeping the memory of this terrible time alive, and he coordinated a memorial group in Caen for relatives of deportees. And he was strongly committed to reconciliation and building links between France and Germany. I'm sure he also would have been proud of my commitment to this.

Jannis Stöter: My personal view of Franco-German relations is not as strongly characterised by family history. My parents grew up in former East Germany, so there was no opportunity to get to know France more closely through an exchange programme or travel. I was the first to be able to add a chapter to our family history that deals more intensively with our neighbour in the West.

My perspective on Franco-German relations is characterised by my personal experience. In tenth grade, I spent three months in La Rochelle on a student exchange programme. That was my first time in France. Back then, I still had little grasp of the historic magnitude of Franco-German relations, but I quickly became aware of it when I was there.

Ai: You both studied law in a Franco-German programme in Cologne, which is where you met. And you then founded a think tank together – DenkFabrik – which deals with Franco-German relations. Why did you decide to do that?

Stöter: Both of us, or rather the group that founded the think tank, wanted to help shape in practice

what we deal with in theory during our studies. We set up DenkFabrik so that we could get involved in the Franco-German dynamic. We want to make ideas heard, bring together young people from France and Germany and inspire them to get involved in Franco-German relations.

Ai: How does that look exactly?

Leclerc: We organise events and projects which bring together young people from both countries.

It's not only about politics, but also about other topics, such as social issues and culture. We are also working on a project which will bring young people into contact with

heads of companies, researchers, and authors from France and Germany. We want to connect people and help them engage in dialogue. On top of that, students also get involved with DenkFabrik by writing articles and analyses on current topics.

Ai: In your opinion, how do you think young people see relations between the two countries? Are teenagers and young adults aware of the special nature and conflict-ridden history of Franco-German relations – or does that rather play a minor role?

Leclerc: Yes, the history is still alive, and it still plays a role for our generation. In France, we learn

about this topic in history class. But its role today is different to what it was immediately after the war, of course. What distinguishes the Franco-German relationship today goes beyond remembering the past, but is also deeper than simple terms like friendship.

Stöter: If I think back to where my first image of France was formed, I certainly remember my French class. It was a romanticised image of France; with beautiful places like Paris. And it was the same image that made me want to explore France. However, as I have already mentioned, once I was there I really became aware of the bloody side of our joint history for the first time. It was mainly through contact with the older generation that I realised that wounds from the war are still there today. For my generation, however, the awareness of a common European identity, and the opportunity to work together in a united Europe appears to be in the foreground. The high demand for exchange programmes, for example, shows that the relationship between the two countries is now on quite a solid footing.

Ai: Exchange programmes and other contacts between young people from Germany and France have been severely limited because of the pandemic. And other things taken for granted within Europe, such as open borders, were suddenly no longer a given. How do you view Europe's handling of the coronavirus crisis? And what does this period mean for young people?

Stöter: We saw that the coronavirus pandemic initially led to more protectionism, but also to more

solidarity. For example, in the face of overcrowded intensive care units, patients were flown from France to Germany and treated there. Furthermore, it was through a joint initiative of France and Germany in particular that a comprehensive European reconstruction fund could be set up.

And below the political level, positive ideas and developments have certainly emerged from the crisis. There's a new willingness to build relationships and networks, for example through Zoom and social networks. We didn't use these opportunities to this extent before. For example, as a think tank, we engaged in conversations with city officials and politicians on both sides of the Rhine. We organised them from our living rooms, so to say.

Ai: So, in a way, the pandemic has also opened up new opportunities for you – despite all the downsides.

to come into contact with these people? However, although Zoom opens up new paths, it's clear that it in no way replaces direct interpersonal contact. I see restricted mobility as a silent threat to European integration.

Stöter: Exactly. Who knows how long it would have taken otherwise for us as a young think tank

Ai: What do you mean by that?

mobility as their prerequisite, be it a school exchange, the European Youth Parliament, an internship, a semester abroad, or simply an Interrail trip. For many, these opportunities had become inaccessible as a direct result of the pandemic. The really sad thing is that the opportunity to gain such experiences, and to link them to Europe, doesn't come back so easily in many cases because of the passage of time. To me, it is even more serious that the pandemic has shaken the basic trust in unrestricted mobility within Europe to a certain extent, as well as the trust in being able to take part in an Erasmus programme, if desired. This image of closed borders and unfulfilled promises mustn't be allowed to become fortified in the minds of young people.

Stöter: Many projects that are designed to help young people explore Europe have unrestricted

Ai: Germany and France are sometimes described as “the engine of Europe”. Is this engine currently running smoothly or is it faltering?

is an example of the power of compromise. This has also been shown in the management of the coronavirus pandemic – in the reconstruction fund. We don't always agree, but we find compromises through dialogue. And that's precisely the strength of the relationship. However, the term “engine of Europe” is sometimes misinterpreted as meaning that France and Germany lead the way in Europe, and forget about other countries. I would say, rather, that the Franco-German pair is more fuel than engine. When it works, the European engine works.

Leclerc: I believe that what France and Germany are doing together

Ai: Where do you see the greatest weaknesses and potential for tension in Franco-German relations? Or in other words, what's not going well between the two partners?

poses on important decisions. It's said that, in his first years of office, President Macron made many calls to Berlin that went unanswered. However, when it came to adopting the economic stimulus package, the two countries were in agreement and took a big step forward. As with any relationship, they must beware of misunderstandings that could divide them. My personal concern is that the next few months have especially high potential for such misunderstandings.

Leclerc: There's a danger of France and Germany talking at cross pur-

Ai: In what way?

Leclerc: One example is the French EU Council presidency, which will begin in January 2022.

For some days now, we have been hearing about the impatience and anticipation of some French politicians who hope that Germany will come to the table with a new government, and thus with a real will to act. If not, there would be a risk of France making a move on its own without waiting for Germany. This is all the more true given the importance of the French EU presidency for Macron a few months before the presidential elections. Another point of tension is the deficit rule. It's possible that Germany will return to a stricter position on the European rule on exceeding deficit limits, which France no longer wants. This would be a major difference of opinion on economic policy that would also lead to frustration.

Stöter: As Hugo already said, under Angela Merkel's coalition of Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD), Germany had a rather hesitant attitude towards France's integration proposals. The formulation of a clear stance towards the further development of the EU will therefore become even more important for the new German government. At the same time, it must show a willingness to compromise on contentious issues, such as the deficit rule for example. With a view to the upcoming French Council Presidency, a fast-acting government would be desirable – not for the purpose of supporting Mr Macron in his election campaign, but to send a signal that the Franco-German fuel for Europe is working, and that the two countries have a common will to shape the future. At the same time, however, elections in France are coming up in April. That could slow down the process again – or give the new German government the opportunity to sharpen its position and show initiative itself.

Ai: A few months ago, a debate was ignited between French president Emmanuel Macron and then German defence minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer over the idea of “strategic autonomy for Europe”. Kramp-Karrenbauer at the time emphasised the central role of the United States for Europe's security, and called Europe's strategic autonomy in this context an “illusion”. Macron meanwhile demanded more European autonomy, and labelled Kramp-Karrenbauer's assessment a “misinterpretation of history”. How did you follow this debate?

Leclerc: In France, the discussion was quite controversial. Some saw it as a sign that the two countries

have very different ideas. From my point of view, the debate was too personal, but I think it is a debate we have to have.

Stöter: The debate you referenced is also a topic of discussion at DenkFabrik because it raises crucial questions for the future of Europe. How should the European Union position itself in the future in the geopolitical conflict between the US and China? What role does the EU want to play in this context? These questions must be asked and go hand in hand with other questions, such as that of a European army.



Ai: And where do you stand on the content of the debate? Does Europe need more autonomy? And what does that mean for relations with the US and China?

Stöter: In my view, Europe must become more strategically autonomous. It's important to take on a proactive role and to show initiative. This is not about competing with the US. When it comes to human rights, for example, Europe is of course much closer to the US than it is to China.

Leclerc: There are issues where we need more independent European positions. Strategies need to be developed, and more sovereignty and European strength are needed.



Bringing Paris and Berlin closer together: This is one of the goals Hugo Leclerc (right) and Jannis Stöter have set themselves in founding the Franco-German think tank La DenkFabrik. Source: © Louisa Heuss, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

Ai: Recently, there was a deep diplomatic crisis between Paris and Washington after a submarine deal agreed between France and Australia fell through, and the Australians opted to acquire nuclear submarines in cooperation with the US and the UK instead. France even withdrew its ambassadors from the US and Australia in this context. And in the course of the Afghanistan withdrawal, there was also criticism of the US, which was accused of inadequate coordination with its allies. Do these developments also speak for more European autonomy and a new positioning vis-à-vis the US?

Stöter: For me, the debate was not about the actual business at all, but rather about the trilateral

security pact agreed between the US, Australia, and the UK. The symbolism emanating from it looks like a unification of the Anglophone world to the exclusion of the EU,



especially since the agreed partnership also extends to other future issues involving artificial intelligence, quantum technology, and cyber defence. If the pact shows one thing then in this context it would be that Europe also needs to do its homework and make its own contribution. The pact makes this task even clearer. However, it would be a missed opportunity and also a wrong symbol not to advance these developments in partnership with other democratic countries. NATO should provide ample opportunity for this.

Leclerc: I know that Germany is not very fond of the side of France that tends to make a lot of noise about some little detail. But I believe this is about much more than just a lost contract. It's about our positioning at the core of the alliances, as well as the geopolitical perception of France and the EU. France's completion of the contract would also have been a positive flagship for the EU. This is why it's even more regrettable that the contract has now gone to the US. Of course, the same would have been true if it had been a large German arms contract instead.

Ai: How do you view the concept of a European army?

Leclerc: A European army could lead to more autonomy. However, it remains questionable what

exactly is meant by this. The question also touches on aspects of national sovereignty. In France, we are strongly attached to our army.

Stöter: The question of a European army is inseparably linked to the question of its competences and duties. To me, the debate seems to be particularly relevant in the context of defending joint European infrastructure, such as the European satellite navigation system Galileo, and will become even more crucial in the future in the field of cyber defence. Furthermore, especially regarding your previous question on the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the coordination of national forces in the planning of joint operations should be accelerated. However, this does not require a European army as such.

Ai: The discussion about a European army is one about further steps towards integration. However, there are now political personalities, movements, and parties in both Germany and France who not only want to prevent further steps towards integration, but who are also questioning the entire construct of European integration. How does your generation view such positions?

Stöter: Many young people in our environment take the basic

European freedoms for granted. We grew up that way, we didn't know anything else, and that's great for us. But this perception can also be deceptive. These freedoms are mostly taken for granted by those who had the chance to enjoy them at an early age. Others, who did not have the opportunity in this way, may tend to see the EU as an

How do they make their voices heard? Young people in front of the European Parliament building in Brussels. According to Hugo Leclerc, young people are still too often on the sidelines of European decision-making processes. [Source: © Yves Herman, Reuters.](#)



opaque institution that does not benefit them. This is dangerous, as it can lead to indifference towards Europe.

Leclerc: We shouldn't forget that young people themselves are also part of the populist dynamic in some areas. There is this concept of retreating inwards nationally. We have to show that this is neither something to strive towards, and nor is it realistic. That is also what we want to achieve with DenkFabrik. In doing so, it's important to promote Europe in a tangible way, and not just along the lines of "Europe is good and that's why you have to continue developing it". For us, it's important that young people have tangible experiences and that they can also contribute their own ideas to discussions.

Stöter: Our aim is to bring people together, but also to tell stories of people who are active in the Franco-German or European context. For example, we want to inform people about what it means to study in a Franco-German programme, and what opportunities and challenges there are. It's important to give the opportunity to experience Europe to those who have perhaps had less contact with it and are somewhat sceptical.

Ai: What are the most frequent criticisms you hear from young people about the European Union? And where specifically do you see the weaknesses of the EU?

Leclerc: This is a topic we would like to address in a new project. In very concrete terms, however, I can say that Europe must not remain as just a feeling or an idea. It's not difficult to be pro-Europe but what does that mean specifically? There are too few answers to this question. It's easy to say that you're pro-Europe without having any specific idea or ambition behind it. Maybe the fact that we see a ton of things that still need to be done prevents us from seeing anything specific. Still, I believe that, step by step and with real ambition, we can shape a different Europe that will have more support because it's tangible, efficient, and close to everyone.

Stöter: The question that arises for me, as it does for Hugo, when I think about the EU is that of a specific common vision. The political process often sends different signals on this, and it sometimes seems like a policy of the lowest common denominator. I think the EU's self-image needs to be clarified so that it can develop further and become more tangible for young people. At the same time, young people also need to be more involved in the European process. After all, it's about their European future, which they must also be able to help shape.

Ai: What do you think is needed at the political level to convince young people more about Europe?

Stöter: I don't think we need to convince the vast majority of young people about Europe and its beauty. At least that's my perception. When it comes to what specifically needs to be done, I think two issues are particularly significant. Firstly, there's the issue of sustainability, which is being tackled through the European Green Deal, and which addresses the question of how the future should be shaped. In this context, it's crucial – and this is the second major topic – that young people are involved. It's important to

facilitate forms of active involvement in Europe. If I can help to shape something, then I also have a more personal connection to it.

Leclerc: Young people are still often too sidelined in decision-making processes. There are many initiatives, but they are all too often organised in a top-down fashion. Active involvement is also a key issue for me. And that's what DenkFabrik is about.

Stöter: I might add that in order to shape things together, mobility is required. When it's easy to go to another country and meet people there, you also come up with new ideas. It's also important to simplify structures. As we have seen ourselves with La DenkFabrik, setting up an association is a lot of work. And it's not possible to do it at the European level so we had to decide between Germany and France. So, for practical reasons, we chose Germany.

Leclerc: So, I'm now a French chairman of a German association. That's cool (laughs).

Ai: One last question to wrap up our interview: In a few words, what do you associate Konrad Adenauer with?

Leclerc: Mayor of Cologne.

Stöter: And, of course, that he took the first steps after the Second World War and rebuilt relations with the West, and France in particular. That's what I associate him with. And that's a great legacy.

The interview was conducted by Sören Soika and Fabian Wagener – translated from German.

Hugo Leclerc (21) was born and raised in Paris. He moved to Germany for the first time to study Franco-German law at the University of Cologne and the Sorbonne in Paris. During his three years in Cologne, he founded La DenkFabrik. Today, he is the president of the association and steers its further development.

Jannis Stöter (24) started his legal studies in Cologne, but later decided to continue his studies at the Humboldt-University of Berlin. He also graduated from Duke University in December 2021 with a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science. He grew up near Schwerin in northeast Germany. As a co-founder and member of the board at La DenkFabrik, he is responsible for the think tank's strategic development in Germany.