

A reserve tandem: German–Italian intergovernmental consultations

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On 23 January, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz (CDU) and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni took part in the 33rd German–Italian intergovernmental consultations in Rome. Merz was accompanied by ten ministers, including Vice-Chancellor and Minister of Finance Lars Klingbeil (SPD), Minister of Defence Boris Pistorius (SPD), Minister for Foreign Affairs Johann Wadephul (CDU), and Minister of the Interior Alexander Dobrindt (CSU).

The two heads of government signed an updated version of the action plan, providing for closer cooperation in the economic, energy and security spheres, as well as the social and cultural spheres. Agreements were concluded in areas such as defence and space research. Merz and Meloni expressed support for strengthening the EU's external borders and combating illegal migration. They also announced that they would present joint proposals aimed at improving EU competitiveness ahead of the special meeting of EU leaders on 12 February. According to media reports, these proposals include reducing bureaucracy and strengthening the single market.

The intensification of cooperation with Italy may enable Merz to exert more effective influence on EU policy in such key areas as transatlantic relations, competitiveness, and adjustments to the climate strategy. In all of these domains, Berlin and Rome have succeeded in bringing their positions closer together, whereas the German–French tandem – hitherto the cornerstone of Germany's European policy – has proved unable to formulate a common line. The new opening in relations with Italy does not signify an end to the privileged relationship between Germany and France, but rather its diversification.

Commentary

- **Given the current difficult cooperation with Paris, Berlin is opting to build flexible coalitions of willing partners to pursue specific projects and initiatives.** From the German perspective, closer cooperation with Italy is also justified by the unstable political situation in France and the risk that the National Rally could come to power in the 2027 presidential election, which would weaken Berlin's cooperation with Paris at both the bilateral and EU levels.
- **Cooperation with Italy has resulted in Meloni supporting the EU–Mercosur free trade agreement, which is of key importance to Germany** and for which France had been one of the main opponents. Italy agreed to back the agreement in exchange for the allocation of additional funds to the Common Agricultural Policy and the inclusion of safeguard

clauses for agri-food products (see [‘Delay of EU-Mercosur deal sparks discontent in Berlin’](#)).

- **Germany and Italy are positioning themselves as leaders in strengthening EU competitiveness through deregulation and the reduction of bureaucracy.** Referring to the reports by Mario Draghi and Enrico Letta on EU competitiveness and the single market, one of the steps which Chancellor Merz has called for involves measures to foster innovation. Both states intend to place particular emphasis on the protection and support of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, which form the backbone of their economies (approximately 99% of all companies in both Germany and Italy) and provide the largest share of employment (58.4% and 75%, respectively). They also support the conclusion of further free trade agreements, including with ASEAN and India, given the significant share of exports of goods and services in their GDPs (41.4% in Germany and 32.5% in Italy in 2024). Berlin and Rome oppose certain EU regulations in the field of climate policy, viewing them as a threat to the competitiveness of their industries: both countries lobbied for the European Commission to abandon its plan to ban the sale of internal combustion engine vehicles from 2035.
- **In security policy, Germany and Italy emphasise the key importance of transatlantic relations and NATO’s role as a collective defence alliance.** In disputes between the United States and Europe, Berlin and Rome are seeking to defend the European position, but without resorting to the confrontational rhetoric towards Washington that Paris has employed in recent weeks. Germany and Italy host significant contingents of US troops on their territory, are purchasers of F-35 fighter jets, and participate in NATO’s nuclear sharing programme.
- **The defence cooperation agreement that has been concluded is not legally binding, but it signals a readiness to undertake joint action and cooperation,** including in the context of the crisis affecting Franco–German armaments programmes (MGCS and FCAS) and in connection with the continuation of military assistance to Ukraine. The defence industries of both countries already have experience of cooperation (for example, in the development and production of Eurofighter aircraft and Type 212 submarines) and could contribute to reducing the dependence on the United States in areas which the EU regards as strategic priorities (see [‘The European Council greenlights greater EU involvement in strengthening military capabilities’](#)).