

Growing up...

Europe is maturing but Germany's still quite shy

German European politics after the general election

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Behind us lies a multitude of crises in a European vale of tears. Financial and economic crises, Russian annexation of Crimea, refugees fleeing to Europe: loss of control, painstaking crisis management, barely any breathing space. When the English and Welsh voted to leave the European Union, 2016 became an absolute "annus horribilis". The EU could evidently offer no more. The stores were empty! Poll results plunged. The people and a whole kingdom turned their backs on the EU. And now suddenly everything is running as normal. The Dutch, Austrians and French have sent their anti-European nationalists packing and the Germans can safely bet that the next chancellor, female or male, will stand firmly by the EU. At least that is what election programmes and all the possible coalitions are predicting. So the Eurofederalists of the Europa-Union and the Pulse of Europe activists can roll in their Europe flags and leave it up to the freshly oiled German-French engine? Far from it. Even after the general election on 24 September many more political and social forces than just the French and German seats of government will have to concern themselves with better European politics. A description of the European-German state of play.

All's well that ends well? No matter which coalition forms in autumn, it will not be an easy task with their European partners and the political actors at home. As emphatically pro-European as the new German government might present itself, it will not simply be able to act as the European poster child. Across Europe the actors are too multifaceted and the variables too unknown

with which Brussels and Berlin and many other capitals have to deal.

Relevance and acceptance

Rarely have so many people been so greatly affected by and concerned with European

politics. Whether refugee aid workers, unemployed young people, holiday-makers on their mobile phones or environmental lobbyists. There is hardly any sector which does not have a European dimension. As a result of the crises it has become clear to everyone: Europe only functions collectively. For years politics has only focussed on national themes, even if there was a great deal of European legislation behind them. In 2003 there were still seasoned German diplomats who were claiming that the euro was a success and there would soon be a European "constitution". It was, however, also enough for many stakeholders simply to have good connections to the Chancellery and a strong lobbying office in Brussels. Then the great shock came. In 2005 the French and the Dutch rejected the constitutional treaty which had been developed at a convention by a wide array of European and national parliamentarians, government representatives and with the greatest possible involvement of interest groups. The constitutional treaty could nevertheless be rescued with its essential components intact under the 'pseudonym' of the Treaty of Lisbon. There was meant to be no further reminder of a European state. In terms of communication, there were negative results. Beginning with the multitude of crises from 2008, only specialist officials and lobbyists were familiar with European politics. The rescue measures did give rise to a learning curve among further ranks of the decision-makers, but a comprehensive solution for the design flaws in the EU family of nations was not provided. In some areas a faulty structure even weakened the capacity to act.

The crises did, however, achieve one thing: for some years now European politics has no longer been a niche topic, where you could present yourself as European, while everything else just carried on in the same way as before.

The mood throughout Europe has improved though. The crises have lost some of their public drama. The elections in Austria, the Netherlands, and France strengthened pro-European politicians. In places where there are attacks by nationalists on the constitutional state, demonstrators are showing the EU flag to make the case for pluralism and democracy.

Europe's citizens are also backing the European project once more. 68% of those surveyed in the most recent Eurobarometer consider themselves EU citizens. The result has never been so high. It is, however, a different matter how strongly they back the EU. The resultant consequences for the politics of multi-level-governance have not been sufficiently recognised.

Can German European politics concentrate on national themes again? It appears so.

Key European themes for the new government

National politicians are 'Europeanised' as never before. Martin Schulz was the most famous European politician to take the national political stage. The Chancellery is led by an EU official on leave-of-absence: Peter Altmaier. The former Member of the European Parliament Cem Özdemir is a party leader, and the acting Vice President of the European Parliament Alexander Graf Lambsdorff should be able to enter the Bundestag if his party is successful. The European Parliament is no longer a place for those nearing retirement.

The election programmes of the member parties of the European Movement Germany (EBD), Bündnis90/Die Grünen, CDU/CSU, FDP, Freie Wähler and SPD clearly back the European project. There is less focus on which EU-policies should be followed in the future. The one conspicuous point is that the FDP programme recommends a "federally-

structured" EU. In other respects, most EBD members are concerned with democratisation and improvement of procedures and institutions. The non-EBD member 'Die Linke' expresses a sentiment of reluctant acceptance of the EU and would not want to destroy the EU, despite fundamentally criticising it. The situation is different in the case of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). It profoundly questions the EU. It wants to return to the pre-Lisbon era and even wants a referendum on withdrawal, not only from the euro, but from the EU itself.

The CDU/CSU as well as the SPD published their programmes quite late, which led to a change in characteristic style in terms of their European policies compared to the other parties. In particular, in the chapter "Germany and France as the engine of Europe" in the CDU/CSU programme, it becomes clear that the 'Union' parties are wholly relying on Emmanuel Macron, and so on a close cooperation between the Chancellery and the Élysée. The SPD also emphasises the joint responsibility for the solidarity of the EU and unity in Europe. Only very few parties are likely to call into question German-French cooperation. The situation is different in case of the leadership candidate and the parliamentary system. While the SPD, 'Greens' and FDP favour the strengthening of the European Parliament and leadership candidates for the office of the commission president, the 'Union' has kept a low profile. In contrast, unlike for the 'Union' parties, changes in the EU treaty structure would be necessary for the other EBD member parties. Their demands for reform and democratisation are far-reaching. In terms of European law a convention would then be mandatory, consisting of national parliaments and the European Parliament, the national governments and the Commission. De facto, even if not de jure, this would oblige a strong involvement of the public and interest groups.

The subject of Brexit also clearly shows that the current EU must be strengthened. A clear position is being presented to the United Kingdom. Strengthening the EU27 and no cherry-picking. Westminster can expect a clear message from any new German government.

An interesting consensus can be observed with regard to Europe-Russian relations. Here, the 'Linke' as well as the AfD support a rapprochement in security policy towards Russia. The AfD even goes one step further by calling for an expansion of economic cooperation.

However, it is evident that a new German government will advocate for a European defence community (often associated with a European army) and the effective protection of its external borders, as well as an EU asylum system that demonstrates solidarity. It is particularly doubtful whether it will be possible to organise the expansion of economic competitiveness in the EU, especially in countering current youth unemployment in Europe. For both questions, it is probable that any solutions will only be extra contractual.

It is unlikely that there will be a core Europe with a new German government. The coalition parties in question reject this idea, either categorically or in practice. What is most probable is the strengthening of the eurozone, for example through a European monetary fund within the framework of the Treaties.

Most parties remain relatively silent on the subject of EU budgetary policy. In any event, in the coming years a difficult new financial framework will probably be negotiated for the then downsized European Union. The German government has a huge task here to fulfil the expectations of the Federal States and local administrations, but also those of many interest groups. For the EBD the EU budget is an important cornerstone in the

democratisation of the European political debate and the capacity of the EU to act in solidarity.

The “black hole” of German European politics

In these programmes little mention is made of interest-led influence on politics.

Nevertheless, it is a feature of the German corporate and constitutionally pluralistic reality that laws cannot be made without the “involvement of Federal States, local umbrella organisations, expert groups and associations” (GGO, Joint Rules of Procedure of the Federal Ministries).

An exceptional situation is occurring in European politics. As soon as the European level requires compromises, participation can be avoided or hidden. It is difficult even in retrospect to recognise how a German government has reacted to requests and compromises in the European legislative process. Clearly there must be room for negotiation, in order to achieve results across Europe, but more involvement creates greater acceptance.

The EBD has for years criticised the fact that German governments keep a lower profile with their positioning in European politics than they do in the purely national political context that is in any case shrinking. Meanwhile, more than 80% of legislative procedures are negotiated in backroom trilogues in the institutions rather than in the public exchange of a parliamentary process. In the view of the EBD, the European Parliament must fulfil its responsibilities and make use of the room for negotiation afforded by the legislative process in three readings - and do so with the broad involvement of civil society.

Whoever becomes head of the government, however, will probably not want to alter anything about this practice. It should be interesting how far transparency in lobbying will include not only European politics but also German national politics. After all, more transparency and more involvement in Brussels only make sense, if the nation states also become part of the whole concept. It is vital that European legislation is shaped together in Brussels, Strasbourg and in the member states as a “democratic complete work of art”.

It is clear that lobbying regulated in a parliamentary EU system is a part and an expression of a free pluralistic competitive democracy. Lobbying should involve non-profit oriented groups in a transparent manner.

For a German government capable of dealing with Europe

Following the crises that have been overcome or at least contained, and shortly before a new German government, it is time to speak not only about a better EU, but also about a better form of German European political work

The election programmes are silent on this matter. Essentially, it is a question of how far the German government can adapt to an ever more diverse Europe. From the EBD's point of view, it should rely less on classic diplomacy and the ‘sherpacrazia’ that is conducted by a few government advisers, and instead also involve in its European politics democratic and representative associations and community groups from all areas of society. The new German government must modernise its European political coordination from the bottom up and organise it along parliamentary and

social lines. This is echoed in the recent call by EBD President Dr Rainer Wend for a government "Minister for European Integration" in the Chancellery, who can compare and coordinate the national politics of the German government with the diverse interests in politics, society and above all with those in the European partner countries. European politics must not be allowed to fall back into its niche existence. Each new German government must resist the temptation to advance European projects with little feedback in politics and society. And the election programmes? They will feed into government action through the new coalition agreement. It will be pro-European, but with the current instruments it is doubtful how effectively such action will be able to carry the EU forward. It is only with modern governance that a new German government will be able to meet the expectations for a peace-oriented, sustainable and Europe-friendly politics, such as the constitution demands.

Author

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European Movement Germany

The **European Movement Germany** (EBD) is Germany's largest network for European politics with currently 249 member organisations. These members represent almost all areas of society: trade and professional associations, unions, educational institutions, scientific institutes, foundations, parties and companies. In consultation with the German government and the European institutions, the EBD fosters dialogue between political actors and interest groups since 2004 through comprehensive de-briefings following important European councils. After extensive consultation processes with their members, the EBD updates its Political Demands annually in order to improve Germany's capacity to act in the EU and to boost the Europeanisation of politics and society through lobbying and educational projects. The European Movement was founded in The Hague in 1948. www.netzwerk-ebd.de

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