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‘We must openly address uncomfortable realities’

Matthias Miersch, SPD parliamentary leader, on security challenges and addressing them amid inequality

As we are having this conversation in the heart of Europe, we in Brussels are also aware that democracy in Europe is under pressure. A few months ago, the first warnings came from the SPD group in the European Parliament, followed by reports that concluded that the so-called firewall in the European Parliament had collapsed. How is this development perceived in Berlin? And what lessons should be drawn from it?

For the SPD, it is clear that there can be no cooperation with the AfD. That is why we also raised the issue in the coalition committee. The CDU/CSU has been more reserved on this matter and points to the individual responsibility of the Members of the European Parliament. While also categorically rejecting such an approach in the German Bundestag, they also place part of the responsibility with the Social Democrats and their relationship with the EPP. What remains decisive for us is this: cooperation with the AfD cannot happen. In a coalition with the SPD, such an approach would not be acceptable.

Are there uncomfortable truths about Germany’s future that are currently not being discussed enough?

The world is changing dramatically. Many things that were long taken for granted no longer are. The transatlantic alliance has suffered considerably under Donald Trump. This leads us to conclude that we must invest more heavily in our own defence capabilities. Ten years ago, I could not have imagined that we would find ourselves in this situation.

The same applies to energy and climate policy. Developments in the Middle East show how important greater independence is. At the same time, conflicts arise whenever concrete changes are on the agenda: electric mobility, climate-friendly heating, or the transformation of the automotive industry. Many workers are worried

about their future.

Added to this are political forces that question human-made climate change and reject necessary change. That is why we must openly address uncomfortable realities. What is decisive is how we explain these changes and what solutions we offer.

Staying with the topic of defence: greater security also means higher spending. Many people fear this will come at the expense of the welfare state. What is your response to those concerns?

That is precisely why we introduced a constitutional change. Defence spending was moved into what is known as an exemption category. This means that these expenditures are not counted against the debt brake. In this way, we prevent social policy and defence policy from being played off against one another. The claim that every investment in defence automatically comes at the expense of social benefits is therefore not correct. Of course, we must bear in mind in the long term, additional borrowing also generates interest costs. This is currently being discussed. At the same time, the following holds: if a state cannot ensure its own defence capability, even the best welfare state is at risk.

So, both are possible?

Yes. We have committed ourselves to both a strong defence and a strong welfare state. Nevertheless, the federal budget is under pressure regardless of defence spending. That is why we will have to discuss where savings can and cannot be made. This is currently a central debate within the coalition.

In your view, where should there be no cuts under any circumstances?

Where social cohesion is strengthened. That includes social security systems — for instance covering illness or unemployment — but also education, research, and infrastructure. These are the foundations for a country's viability in the future. That is why we are investing, for example, through the special fund, in educational infrastructure and culture. These are central areas for me. At the same time, we must also speak about the revenue side of the state. Wealth inequality in Germany is growing. That is why we must discuss questions around large fortunes, capital income, and the financing of social security systems. This also includes issues such as contribution ceilings and the treatment of very high incomes.

How realistic is it that the coalition will make progress on such issues? The reactions to similar proposals from Lars Klingbeil were in some

cases quite critical.

The next few weeks will be decisive. I would currently put the chances at around fifty-fifty. There are increasing voices within the CDU as well who view growing wealth inequality critically. Many people feel the situation is unjust. That is why I hope there will be movement — for instance on greater taxation of very large fortunes or on the treatment of capital income. The question of the top income tax rate is also being discussed: one option would be to have it kick in only at higher incomes while also adjusting it. These debates will be conducted with intensity.

Are there policy areas where you would like to see more courage within the SPD itself?

In a coalition, there is always the challenge of maintaining one's own profile without being seen as divided. We need to keep developing that balance. At the same time, we must make clearer what the SPD stands for, independently of coalition compromises. That is why we have begun a process to develop a new basic programme. The aim is to articulate more clearly our own ideas for the future of the country. We are living in a time of profound change: the transatlantic alliance is under pressure, artificial intelligence is transforming the economy and society, and many certainties of recent decades no longer hold. We need new political answers and compelling visions for the future.

How can these ideas reach people in their everyday lives? Many citizens do not even notice what the SPD has already achieved.

This is also a question of communication. We need to convey our content more effectively and develop clearer profiles. We have long underestimated the importance of social media. Other political forces were present there considerably earlier and more successfully. That is why we must find new ways of making political content understandable and visible. Communication and political profile are closely connected.

It is, of course, easier for the AfD when figures like Elon Musk support their positions.

That certainly plays a role. Algorithms and the owners of large platforms influence public debate. At the same time, it would be too simplistic to attribute all problems to that alone. Our task is to develop our own responses and actively shape the digital space. That includes regulation. It cannot be acceptable that platforms have such a large influence on the formation of public opinion without there

being any transparency about how their algorithms actually work. This is a particular responsibility for Europe. National solutions alone will not be sufficient to effectively regulate the major digital platforms and protect democratic processes.

This interview was conducted by Valentina Berndt.



Matthias Miersch
Hanover/Berlin

Matthias Miersch is a German politician and criminal defense lawyer who serves as the Chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) parliamentary group in the German Bundestag.