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A blank slate

Germany's new chief diplomat Heiko Maas is relatively inexperienced on the world stage. But his strong moral compass means we can expect some bold moves from the Foreign Office

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The appointment of Germany's new foreign minister Heiko Maas came as a surprise to most observers. His two social democrat predecessors, Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Sigmar Gabriel, had already built up international experience in their previous roles of Chief of Staff and Minister for Economic Affairs respectively. Maas, however, is a blank slate in this regard.

The lawyer, who hails from the Saarland region bordering France, is considered smart and cautious: a lucid thinker. He possesses a clear moral compass. In his four years as Minister of Justice, he took an unambiguous stance against racism, right-wing extremism and xenophobia. He repeatedly took issue with the simplistic, emotive slogans peddled by the right-wing populist AfD party, and strongly condemned attacks on asylum seekers and refugee shelters, making him a hate figure for the far-right. He has received hundreds of death threats, including a bullet cartridge through his letterbox.

The balance of freedom and security

As Minister of Justice, Maas was associated with two major laws: the Data Retention Act, which requires public telecommunication and internet providers to retain details of phone calls, text messages and internet usage, and the so-called 'Facebook Law' (the Network Enforcement Act), which punishes firms that fail to delete (perceived) online abuse within a period of 24 hours after receiving a complaint.

A pragmatist, Maas dropped his long-term opposition to the storage of personal data on request of former SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel and, as Minister of Justice, implemented the Data Retention Act relatively

quickly.

The Facebook Law aims to curtail hate crime, racism and the spread of false information on the Internet, especially through social media. Critics say it goes against freedom of expression. The law is partly seen as a reaction to the spread of 'fake news' during the 2016 US election.

Card-carrying European

Maas wears his Europhile credentials on his sleeve: 'I come from the heart of Europe. And I am wholeheartedly a European,' he said in his inaugural address at the Foreign Office.

However, the last decade has seen the role of the German Foreign Minister change dramatically. Since the financial crisis of 2008, German interests within the EU are represented mainly by the Minister of Finance or the Chancellor herself. The Foreign Minister deals mainly with issues beyond the EU's borders, though often within its neighbourhood: in North Africa, Israel, the Middle East, Turkey, Russia, and the countries of the EU's Eastern Partnership.

European cooperation against authoritarian powers

It will be interesting to see whether Maas as foreign minister will advocate the rule of law, human rights and freedom of the press as vehemently as before. In the past he has called for a tougher stance on Turkey.

During a trip to Paris – his first as foreign minister – he described the conflict in eastern Ukraine as a key priority: 'Our support for territorial integrity remains unshakable.' However, unlike Gabriel, he did not call for a reduction in sanctions. Could this be a shift in emphasis?

He certainly seems to be taking a tougher line against Moscow. He was sympathetic when Britain announced retaliatory measures against Russia following the Salisbury poison attack, and accused Moscow of seeming unwilling to clarify the facts. After Putin`s recent victory, he openly denounced the lack of transparency and real competition, and criticised its taking place on the illegally annexed territory of Crimea.

In 2017, Maas warned no one should take peace in Europe for granted: 'Those who doubt this should look to eastern Ukraine. Precisely because there are aggressive and authoritarian powers at the gates of Europe, the

continent must show unified strength – against Putin.'

At the same time, in social-democratic tradition, he has stressed the need for continued dialogue with Moscow in order to find solutions to the big international conflicts of our time. He says he expects 'more constructive contributions than we have seen in the recent past.'

When the ballyhoo surrounding the Russian elections has died down, we may see a revival of talks between the 'Normandy Four' (Germany, Russia, Ukraine and France) along with mediation in the Eastern Ukraine conflict.

German foreign policy is characterised by continuity. Even if the ruling party changes, the basic orientation of foreign policy remains the same. Any change is incremental. Nonetheless, the new chief diplomat is sure to bring to the role his own interpretation and style. Sigmar Gabriel's forthright personality, for instance, sometimes came across as brash and undiplomatic during his 14-month stint in the role. In any case, Heiko Maas has some big shoes to fill.



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