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Views from abroad: the German elections

The upcoming German elections are perhaps the most hotly contested in over a decade. But how are they perceived in Warsaw, Paris, and Kyiv?

Poland

Poland is looking forward to the upcoming German parliamentary elections. Germany is Poland's largest neighbour, by far its most important economic partner, and home to around 2 million people with a 'Polish migration background'. The two countries are increasingly interdependent, not least because of the growing industrial connections and joint membership in the EU and NATO.

The fundamental feeling underlying the elections and possible government coalitions is uncertainty. People in Warsaw knew – or thought they knew – what to expect from a Chancellor Angela Merkel. In general, she was seen as a politician with a certain interest in the eastern neighbour, a discreet mediator in the conflicts with the Brussels institutions, and someone who was not naïve towards Russia – despite her support for Nord Stream 2. The relationship between Berlin and Warsaw in recent years has been characterised by what could be called 'controlled tension', in which both sides, however, ultimately did not want or could not let it come to a big bang. This era of predictability is now coming to an end.

In the summer, Poland's political and media discourse had largely agreed that a conservative-green government would follow the current grand coalition. Expectations varied between hopes for some sort of new beginning on the one hand, and very little change on the other. In general, it was assumed that a Chancellor Armin Laschet – the conservatives' current candidate – would look more towards France than his predecessor. In Poland, the fear of an even further marginalisation in the EU dominated, even though the national-conservative Warsaw government will always prefer a chancellor from the conservative CDU

or CSU to any alternative.

Surprisingly, however, there was also a certain hope in the Greens as the party by far most critical towards Russia in the German spectrum and therefore a potentially positive influence on German-Russian relations, possibly to the point of not putting the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline into operation.

Only in recent weeks have people begun to think about other government constellations. For the PiS-led government, a red-green-red coalition would probably be the most unpleasant possibility: the Left Party and – that's the suspicion – parts of the social-democratic SPD are more friendly towards Russia, while the Greens' fanaticism with deeper EU integration and the climate would put the euro-sceptical, coal-dependent Poland under even more pressure. The liberal FDP as a possible coalition partner, on the other hand, remains largely underexposed in the Polish debates. Even the figure of the SPD candidate Olaf Scholz had not generated much interest for a long time – not least because of the polls, which made an SPD-led government seem very unlikely. As in many other countries, Poland's media landscape was largely focused on the chancellor and her party as Germany's 'natural governing party'. Scholz tends to be a rather nondescript figure for Poland's political class. However, he is not necessarily seen as having a greater interest in Central Eastern Europe.

In assessing any government constellation in Berlin, a number of 'touchstones' are decisive from the Warsaw government's point of view. Their relative importance, however, is difficult to hierarchise as at any given moment it depends heavily on domestic political considerations: It is one of the peculiarities of the current government majority in Poland to subordinate foreign policy to a startling extent to domestic political and electoral considerations.

From the Polish government's point of view, however, it will always be important to what extent the German neighbour acknowledges Germany's historical guilt, at least symbolically (this then also rules out greater sympathies for the far-right AfD), stabilises economic relations, and commits to the NATO defence alliance with the US. Poland's current government does not want Europe's elites to force it into deeper EU integration, and it expects a certain sense of proportionality from its western neighbour in climate and environmental policy.

Poland is still heavily dependent on coal as an energy source and any restructuring of energy production – which a majority in the current government does consider inevitable – requires a lot of money and time.

In foreign policy, they hope for a hard line against Russia under Putin, which is considered potentially dangerous. Poland has suffered more than any other country in Europe from German-Russian agreements in the course of its history – the fear that the two large neighbouring states could reach an agreement against Poland's interests plays a significant role in the PiS leadership's world view and its intellectual and media environment, as irrational as it may seem from today's German perspective. Fortunately, this fixation is less and less shared by other political milieus and a younger generation, but it will probably not disappear completely any time soon. From a Polish perspective, the wounds of the past are still too deep.

Ernst Hillebrand, FES Office Warsaw

France

The German elections have provided France with the occasion for a variety of reviews of the Merkel era. Despite the often reported differences between Macron and Merkel and the resulting mutual irritations, Paris appreciated her political style of compromise and reconciliation of interests, dubbed '*mérkelisme*'. This way, Merkel had made a significant contribution to keeping Europe together in difficult times. In this respect, France would like to see continuity above all from the post-Merkel Berlin.

However, the assessment of the Merkel era becomes more critical when current challenges – European as well as German – are taken into account. In view of the shortcomings in many policy areas, which have become apparent in the pandemic, and considering the renaissance of geopolitical competition, Europe must move – and Germany in particular.

And on the other side of the Rhine, Germany's political stability and economic strength are no longer the only things considered important. The period of high growth rates at the beginning of the millennium has come to an end. Instead, the backlog in public investments, especially in digitalisation, as well as an insufficient economic structure to tackle the climate crisis and demographic challenges are now more frequently pointed out. 'Behind the prosperity lies vulnerability' – this was the title of a recent commentary on German current affairs.

According to a study by the think tank Terra Nova, the Merkel era's policy of gradual change is just as responsible for these shortcomings and weaknesses as it is for what is considered a lost decade in Europe. While France acknowledges that Germany has already moved a little, especially

with the initiative on the EU recovery fund and joint debt issuance, it expects Berlin to be more flexible, more willing to take risks, more willing to reform – in short: to be more daring politically in the future. In any case, a continuation of '*merkélisme*' is no longer seen as an appropriate response to the challenges of our time.

Despite the change in polls in recent weeks, there are doubts as to whether a new federal government without Merkel will also overcome '*merkélisme*' in Germany. The rather modest, 'provincial' level of the election campaign debates is registered with disappointment and irritation, which is not appropriate to the urgency and dimension of the challenges.

Moreover, there are concerns that Germany's parliamentary system, which has so far ensured a clear balance of power, could now prove incapable of producing stable majorities. The fact that in future it will take not just two but three parties to form a new government coalition is seen as a factor of instability. France is worried about the likelihood of difficult and protracted coalition negotiations. The fear is also that the end result of these negotiations could be a government programme that privileges the status quo and leads to immobility in the face of major challenges – not least European ones – instead of igniting the momentum for reform considered necessary. And how willing will a German government be able to compromise at the European level if it is already forced to make countless concessions because of the domestic balance of interests?

As far as the composition of the new federal government is concerned, Paris' sympathies are distributed differently depending on the policy area. When it comes to foreign and security policy, France can live well with a conservative and liberal government. The commitment of the CDU/CSU and FDP to an increase in the defence budget and to armed drones falls on sympathetic ears in Paris. Conversely, the SPD's and Greens' emphasis on nuclear disarmament and stricter arms export controls tends to provoke consternation.

The situation is different, however, when it comes to economic and fiscal policy. Paris is pushing for the revision of the EU's fiscal rules and the creation of a common stability and investment budget. While the CDU/CSU and FDP are seen as guardians of a fiscal orthodoxy that has become obsolete, hopes lies on the SPD and the Greens for more flexibility and willingness to make concessions, even if Olaf Scholz's cautious statements in this regard on the occasion of his recent visit to Macron did not quite live up to expectations of a more daring German policy.

Ukraine

For a long time, it looked like a green-conservative or conservative-green coalition would be the result of the next German elections. And Ukrainian politicians made no secret of the fact that this would probably be the most desirable outcome. This may be because of Angela Merkel's intensive commitment to solving the war in eastern Ukraine and her high popularity in the country – which has recently been shattered by the rigid commitment to the Nord Stream 2 Baltic Sea pipeline: the disgruntlement became clear when no Ukrainian political representative greeted the Chancellor on her farewell visit to Kyiv airport.

Perhaps even more important than Merkel's would have been the strong presence of Green politicians and their clear critical stance towards Russia. In this context, Green politician Robert Habeck's visit to Ukraine in May was remarkable. He called for arms deliveries, which was probably a bit of an accident. But thoroughly impressed by what he saw in eastern Ukraine, he declared on Deutschlandfunk 'Weapons for defence, for self-defence, in my view, defensive weapons, can hardly be denied to Ukraine'. Kyiv rejoiced at this unexpected openness on the part of a German politician.

However, the Greens promptly rowed back: their Chancellor candidate, Annalena Baerbock, specified that it was 'about clearing ammunition, about the recovery of wounded persons, civilians, with armoured vehicles and also about the question of supporting the OSCE mission'. The Green base was astonished. A prominent member, Jürgen Trittin, for example, criticised Habeck's statements and recalled the original Green position that no weapons should be supplied to crisis areas. Finally, Habeck also rowed back: defensive weapons, which he had so far been just as unable to define as military experts, became 'night vision equipment, reconnaissance equipment, explosive ordnance disposal, medivacs.' Again, this sounded less like the Kyiv wish list, which ranges from anti-aircraft guns, coastal defence, ships to submarines.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky must apparently have been so impressed by the visit that in an interview with the Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* he said quite openly what he would think of a Green election victory: 'It seems as if it would be symmetrical if the head of state of Ukraine were "Zelensky" and the strongest party in Germany were the Greens (in Ukrainian 'Selenyj)'. As far as I know their candidate, he is a good man!' Apparently, even when editing, the presidential office was

not aware that Robert Habeck is not the leading candidate of the Greens.

The conservative CDU had also taken precautions for a long time: Immediately after Armin Laschet's election as leader, he phoned Zelensky, which led to a personal meeting in Berlin. Kyiv's mayor Vitali Klitschko even came to Hanover for a CDU election campaign event. The polls, however, which at this point pointed to the possibility of a resounding defeat for Laschet, created concern in Ukrainian politics: nothing had been learned from the mistakes of the 2016 US presidential election, when they openly supported Hillary Clinton – and afterwards had problems establishing a connection with the Trump administration. Ukraine should therefore stay out of other countries' election campaigns.

The social-democratic SPD had actually been written off for a long time. The polls were too bad, the disappointment with its former chancellor Gerhard Schröder, whose name will forever be associated in Ukraine with Nord Stream 2 and Russian politics – Schröder's real influence on today's SPD notwithstanding.

A chancellor Olaf Scholz would not have an easy time in Ukraine: there is disgruntlement over Nord Stream 2, disappointment over the lack of military support, and the sympathy of many SPD politicians towards Russia, which is often perceived as too one-sided in Ukraine. And then, the possibility of a coalition with the Left Party, some of whose representatives are sometimes courted in Crimea or in the separatist regions in eastern Ukraine without consulting Kyiv, would create additional tensions.

At the same time, the tasks of the new German government's Ukraine policy couldn't be more urgent: with Angela Merkel's departure, Vladimir Putin is the last of the four signatories of the Minsk agreements who will still be in office, the Normandy format is faltering and is being openly questioned, there has recently been increasing fighting in eastern Ukraine, and Ukraine is counting on German support for the expansion of the hydrogen industry and the socio-ecological transformation that will hopefully bring the country closer to Europe.

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