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Germany's most pro-European government ever?

The new German coalition calls for the EU to become a federal European state. Here's a breakdown of its policy on European integration

Germany's new federal government assumed office on 8 December. After the Merkel era, this is a turning point not only for Germany, but the European Union too. Brussels is expecting new impulses from its largest member state.

The new government brings together the three parties that had most strongly argued for the further development of the EU in their election manifestos. The SPD, for example, wants to 'make the EU the world's most modern democracy' and create a 'sovereign Europe in the world'. The liberal FDP advocates a 'constitutional convention' that would lay 'the foundation for a federal and decentralised European federal state'. And the Greens have declared a 'Federal European Republic with a European constitution' to be their 'guiding star.'

Consequently, there is no shortage of ambitious formulations on European policy in the three parties' coalition agreement. The most conspicuous one is undoubtedly the demand that the Conference on the Future of Europe, which will run until May 2022, should 'result in a constitutional convention and lead to the further development [of the EU] into a federal European state'. After many years during which the German government largely avoided European visions, this clear statement is a refreshing change that was met with great enthusiasm, especially among federalists.

Some reactions were also sceptical, however. After all, the last grand coalition in 2018 had also spoken quite prominently of a 'new departure for Europe' and even placed it at the very beginning of the coalition agreement – but then followed up with few actions, at least until the historic decision of the recovery fund in summer 2020. Can we really believe that the traffic light coalition will succeed in transforming the EU into a federal state within four years? Well, paper doesn't blush.

Reactions abroad

At any rate, the strong words in the coalition agreement amount to a symbolic fanfare, which was also heard in other EU member states. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán immediately wrote an essay throwing down the gauntlet to the new federal government, while his Polish counterpart Mateusz Morawiecki described a federal Europe as dangerous 'bureaucratic centralism'.

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By contrast, Guy Verhofstadt, former Belgian Prime Minister and liberal group leader in the European Parliament welcomed Germany's return to a leading role in Europe. And in France, according to one survey, 58 per cent of the population consider the new coalition's stance on Europe to be a 'good thing' – with high approval in all camps except for the extreme right.

In any case, the expectations of the new federal government are high. Even if the European federal state does not materialise anytime soon, with this slogan it has set a benchmark by which it will have to measure its practical European policy. But what exactly does the coalition agreement foresee?

Reform details

In matters of institutional reform, the traffic light coalition is completely on a federalist course. Among other things, it is aiming for a stronger European Parliament, a uniform European electoral law with transnational lists and lead candidates, and an expansion of majority voting in the Council. Moreover, many lines in the coalition agreement are devoted to defending the rule of law – which is probably the main reason for the harsh reactions from Budapest and Warsaw.

The plans for economic, fiscal, and social policy sound less ambitious, but here too, the new coalition is ready for reform and open to deeper integration. A new edition of the recovery fund in future crises is not promised, but not expressly excluded either. In terms of freedom of movement, the coalition wants to restore the 'integrity of the Schengen area' and make a 'more restrictive' use of derogations (which allow the temporary reintroduction of border controls). In terms of asylum policy, there should be a 'fair distribution' when taking in refugees and a 'European-led sea rescue in the Mediterranean'.

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Common foreign and security policy also plays a major role in the coalition agreement. There is repeated talk of 'strategic sovereignty of the EU' – a catchphrase that French President Emmanuel Macron uses time and again and which the coalition agreement defines as 'our own ability to act in a global context', along with reduced dependency in areas such as 'energy supply, health, raw material imports and digital technology'. To this end, foreign policy decisions in the Council should in future be made by a qualified majority, the European External Action Service is to be strengthened, and the High Representative should act as a 'genuine "EU Foreign Minister"' – whatever the latter may mean.

As is the case with European politics, the traffic light coalition will not be able to achieve most of these goals alone, but only through compromises with other member states. This raises the question of how much political capital it is willing to invest in which project. Only practice will tell the answer to this, and it is quite possible that not all parties in the coalition will always set the same priorities here.

The personnel

Not least for this reason, the question of which people are to assume responsibility for the German European policy of the next years is also significant. Unsurprisingly, all coalition parties have secured relevant cabinet portfolios. While the SPD controls the Chancellery with Olaf Scholz, the ministries responsible for European coordination – the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Economic Affairs – are in the hands of the Greens Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck. In turn, the FDP's Christian Lindner got hold of the equally influential Ministry of Finance.

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But the second row is also interesting for the government's profile. With Jörg Kukies as European policy advisor in the Chancellery, State Secretary for European Policy Carsten Pillath in the Finance Ministry, and his counterpart Sven Giegold in the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the Federal Government has gathered strong financial policy expertise. Another State Secretary in the Ministry of

Economic Affairs will be Franziska Brantner, the previous spokeswoman for European policy for the Greens. The new Minister of State for Europe in the Foreign Office, Anna Lührmann, has a background in the field of democracy promotion – a sign of the importance that the rule of law should play for German European policy in future.

The chairmanship of the European Affairs Committee of the Bundestag also goes to the Greens and will be taken over by their former parliamentary group leader Anton Hofreiter. And finally, according to the coalition agreement, the Greens are also to propose the next German member of the Commission, at least 'unless Germany provides the Commission President'. The latter could happen if Ursula von der Leyen secures a second term in office as the lead candidate of the European People's Party in the 2024 European elections. The new German government would obviously not stand in the way of that.

It remains to be seen how harmoniously the traffic-light team will work together over the next four years. There has never been a three-colour coalition at the federal level in Germany; and when, shortly before the new government took office, the SPD parliamentary group leader Rolf Mützenich declared that German foreign policy would be 'steered in particular in the Chancellery', this did not go down too well with the Greens.

But more European policy debate – including public debate – does not have to be harmful. In any case, the start of the new government gives reason to be confident that both Germany's presence in European politics and European politics' presence in Germany stand to increase in the coming years.



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