



No favourable winds for Brussels

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This could not have been the way in which European Commission President Jean Claude Juncker imagined the elections in Germany would turn out. After, from a Brussels perspective, we had got through the Dutch and French elections better than many had expected, Brussels would have preferred a continuation of the grand coalition after the German elections.

Whether with Merkel or Schulz, stability and the necessary stimulus to overcome a whole series of accumulated problems at the European level had already been factored in. In addition, the hope was that coalition partners who knew each other well would quickly come together in a new government. A golden autumn and a mild political spring were already shining through in Juncker's 'state of the Union' speech in mid September: right wing populists banished, the economic situation better than expected, cohesion on Brexit, a French-German engine revving up once more and the Commission given a boost and back in the driving seat.

German domestic policy set for instability

None of that will come about now because German domestic policy will get more unstable. The coalition negotiations must be allowed to take their time if they succeed at all. Europe will have to wait for Germany again. That is problematic for the Commission's ambitious agenda up to the end of the legislature in the summer of 2019.

France's President must also be deflated as he will not be in a position, without Germany's close cooperation, to carry forward the ambitious visions for Europe that he set out at the Sorbonne two days after the German elections.

In the EU, people are beginning to suspect that the big loser in the election is the Chancellor. Her capacity to push things through in the European Council will be weakened. For that to happen the EU needs stable governments in big countries, which are able to compromise and can push through different European negotiating options in their national contexts. This is all the more true for Germany as the biggest and economically strongest country in the EU. It is pretty unlikely that that will be possible in a Jamaica coalition.

Coalition building difficulties

This is because, in the elections, the positions of the CDU, CSU, FDP and the Greens with regard to Europe lay so far apart that a consensus on the issues of eurozone reform, migration and security policy or Brexit only seem imaginable if a coalition partner goes up to or over the boundaries of its identity. But that would be the continuation of the Merkel system,

in which up until now all coalition partners have been shredded and which the electorate overwhelmingly voted against in this election.

The conflict between the CDU and CSU in that political grouping may well also be particularly interesting in itself. The greens and, above all, the FDP, which have already been removed once from their place in a coalition government by Merkel's CDU, should be warned. Emmanuel Macron is already dreading the possibility that his wide-ranging reform plans for the eurozone could depend on the agreement of an FDP Finance Minister, who has a different vision of Europe and who – looking at the election programme – sees his loyalty more in his small better earning clientele in Germany than in Germany's responsibility for Europe.

From a Brussels perspective, the success of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) with 12.6% of the vote is admittedly somewhat more than expected but it is being considered as manageable in a European context. Some may even contemplate it succinctly by saying 'Welcome to the Club'. The concern for Brussels is not the size of the AfD but how it was in a position to shape the discourse and issues in the election campaign, which was ultimately the reason for the unexpected outcome of the election. This clearly shows how corrosive right wing populism still is for representative democracies.

Consequences for the SPD And how about the SPD?

The defeat turned out to be clearer than expected but it was not politically deserved. After much had been done wrong in the election campaign and after it became clear that no voters were to be won with a successful issue-oriented policy (SPD had the better ministers in the outgoing cabinet), everything was done right on the evening of the election. With its announcement that it is going into opposition, the party has gone on the attack and has marked out the contours of the debates after the election. Many in the party must have felt this as belated relief. In its decade long patriotism the SPD has always put the country above the party. It will remain loyal to this maxim if it now pursues 'democratic polarisation' (Habermas) as the leader of the opposition and does not leave the confrontation with the new government to the right wing populists. At the European level the election result has had a contradictory effect for the SPD Group in the grouping of Socialists and Democrats.

Direct access to power, i.e. to ministers in the most powerful cabinet in Europe and thereby exerting influence on the orientation of German politics is blocked. So in Brussels people must not no longer take into account previously agreed coalition agreements in Berlin. With regard to reform of the eurozone for example, the SPD has for long been closer to Macron or the southern European countries than to Schäuble. An open and inclusive debate with the whole breadth of the middle-left spectrum will be needed in order to be able to compete again for majorities in Germany and Europe. And the SPD must look precisely into what the worries are of those who have drifted to the right wing populists. Because it is clear that, with the traditional left wing issue-oriented policy approach (labour market, social policy, family policy, education policy, rule of law) alone the party will not succeed in getting back to power. The election was lost in the area of identity politics. Without a new narrative, which succeeds in building the bridge between real losers or those who perceive themselves to be losers of globalisation and the winners, between the home country (Heimat) and the world, it is hard to imagine a return to a left wing people's party that is capable of winning

majorities. This new 'We narrative' will have to contain a national and European component because there is only protection from globalisation whilst achieving economic prosperity at the same time with and not against Europe.

About the Author

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