

Richard von Weizsäcker Forum 2021 Reader Study Tour

Saar-Lor-Lux Region | 11 – 15 October 2021

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The SaarLorLux Region

Europe & SaarLorLux

Saarland (Website), 28.09.2021

Saarland has always seen itself as the "pacesetter" in terms of cooperation and cohesiveness within the European Greater SaarLorLux Region, which also includes its neighbors in Rhineland-Palatinate and the German-speaking communities in Belgium and Wallonia. The entire Greater Region covers a total area of 65,400 square kilometers bounded by the Rhine, Moselle, Saar and Maas rivers. But also the European policy plays a prominent role in Saarland. The promotion of European unity and cross-border cooperation are issues of constitutional status which are firmly embedded in politics and society.

SaarLorLux – This is the heart of the Greater Region

The proximity of European centers such as Paris, Strasbourg, Luxembourg, Brussels and Frankfurt fosters international business relationships and also provides attractive promotion and further education opportunities for workers. It makes the region one of the most mobile labor markets in Europe. This is also reflected in the many thousands of cross-border commuters who cross what are now barely visible national frontiers to get to work every day.

SaarLorLux cross-border cooperation

SaarLorLux politics goes back a long way in Saarland, but it is still a new task every day: state politicians work hard to simplify everyday cross-border contacts for local people. By doing this, Saarland and its neighbors, Lorraine, Luxembourg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Wallonia make a distinctive contribution to European cohesion, as it's in its border regions that Europe is moving closer together.

Since the 1950s close cross-border relationships encompassing economics, politics, culture, research and civil society have been established in the five sub-regions. Since 1995 the most senior government representatives of the partner regions have met up regularly for the "Greater Region Summit". This is a significant task for the whole Greater SaarLorLux Region. The summit sets the guidelines for inter-regional policies.

Its business and information center is the "Haus der Großregion" ("Greater Region Offices") in Luxembourg, which also houses the summit secretariat. The "Greater Region Summit" receives advice not only from its own working groups at civil servant level but also from bodies such as an independent economic and social committee where business and social

partners regularly meet and devise recommendations which are passed on to the summit.

Members of parliament from all the sub-regions come together for meetings in the “Interregionaler Parlamentarierrat” (IPR) (“Interregional Parliamentary Council”), and they pass their queries and recommendations on to the summit. However, things are also very well organised at local authority level: local authority issues are for instance pooled in “Eurodistricts” such as the newly established “SaarMoselle Eurodistrict”, the “QuattroPole” city network, or the “EuRegio SaarLorLux+” local authorities association. Trade unions and professional associations as well as universities operate on an inter-regional basis. The latter offer integrated courses with joint degrees; the “University of the Greater Region” acts as an umbrella association supporting the mobility aspirations of students and academic staff.

The Greater Region also acts as a single unit on a wider stage, and above all it takes positions on European issues based on its experience as a border region. For instance, the “Interregional Group” within the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) was formed at the initiative of Saarland's Prime Minister, Peter Müller. The Interregional Group is chaired by the CoR member whose country or region chairs the summit.

Europe

European policy plays a prominent role in Saarland. The promotion of European unity and cross-border cooperation are issues of constitutional status which are firmly embedded in politics and society.

Saarland's representative office in Brussels opened on 1st July 1985 and it acts as a link between the institutions of the European Union and Saarland. The representative office promotes regional interests in the European institutions' decision-making processes. The new building where the employees of Saarland's representative office cooperate with their colleagues from three French regions in a joint partnership office is situated at Rue du Luxembourg 15, close to the European Parliament and the European Commission. The art nouveau listed building has four stories, a basement and an internal courtyard that can also be used for hosting events.

The secrets of the Saarland – What the outsize influence of a tiny state says about Germany

The Economist, 23.02.2019

At the end of the annual Munich Security Conference on February 17th, most of the foreign- and security-policy elites in attendance jetted back to their countries. But Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, the pluri-syllabic new leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)¹, motored instead to St Ingbert, a sleepy town in western Germany. There the front-runner to succeed Angela Merkel as chancellor donned an apron and headcloth and, pushing a mop around a stage, performed a comedy routine as her alter ego, Gretl, a wisecracking cleaning lady with a thick Saarland accent. To laughter from the audience of local residents and politicians at the carnival-season Volksfest, “Gretl” grumbled about the wiles of federal politics: “What a mess,” she despaired, divulging that she had been sent to Berlin to clean it all up.

The contrast between the salons of Munich and her skit in St Ingbert says something about the rise of Ms Kramp-Karrenbauer (known by her initials of AKK). Before her move to Berlin in October, she was the premier of the Saarland, a hilly federal state of only 1m inhabitants abutting Luxembourg and France. Over its history it has been French, German and, for a decade after the second world war, independent. In their singsong, French-influenced dialect, folk here still refer to the rest of Germany as the Reich (empire). To other Germans it is an odd place. Presenting François Mitterrand with a plate of Saumagen (sow’s stomach), Helmut Kohl apocryphally joked: “Eat up, or you’re getting the Saarland back.”

AKK is not the only Saarländer to overcome her state’s marginal status. So did Peter Altmaier, Germany’s economy minister, Mrs Merkel’s closest cabinet ally, and a possible contender for the presidency of the European Commission. So, too, did Heiko Maas, Germany’s foreign minister (from the Social Democratic Party, or SPD); Sabine Weyand, the brains behind the EU’s negotiations with Britain over Brexit; and Oskar Lafontaine, the doyen of the socialist Left party. “The Heute Show”, a satirical television programme, deadpans that the Saarland is the real centre of power in Germany.

It may not be a fluke. Saarländers have certain political strengths. One is charm. They are known for bon-vivant informality, with a Gallic knack for cooking and a greater propensity than other Germans to use the friendly du pronoun rather than the formal Sie. The state’s smallness virtually puts its politicians on first-name terms with residents. Saarländers are linguists by necessity and have good links to Brussels and Paris, giving them

¹ From December 2018 to January 2020, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer served as CDU Chairwoman.

advantages in European politics. Mr Altmaier, a clubbable, multilingual problem-solver whose dinner parties are the stuff of Berlin political legend, typifies this Saarländisch mix of conviviality and down-to-earthness. So do Ms Weyand's sardonic asides at the negotiating table and AKK's routine with the mop.

In substance, too, politicians from the Saarland have distinctive traits. The state long made its living from coal-mining—the last shaft closed in 2012—and is the most Catholic in Germany. The two traditions intertwine in local customs (Saint Barbara, the patron saint of miners, is revered), in a high degree of civic engagement (it has the densest network of volunteer organisations in Germany) and in a “Christian social” political culture emphasising egalitarianism. The local wing of the CDU, Germany's largest party, is more “socially oriented” and closer to trade unions than the party in other parts of the country, explains Tobias Hans, AKK's successor as premier. “Saarland was always marked or threatened by war,” adds Oliver Schwambach, an editor at the Saarbrücker Zeitung, the state's most-read newspaper. He notes that Mr Maas's grandmother never moved but held three passports during her lifetime: “So people here hate conflict of any sort. Elections here are less angry, politics is more mild than elsewhere.”

All of which starkly characterises AKK, whose identification with the Saarland is so strong that she is still known as the Landesmutter, or “state mother”. As minister-president she was a modest, pragmatic consensus-builder and Volksfest regular who governed in a near-frictionless “grand coalition” with the centre-left SPD. She is socially conservative, opposing gay marriage. In the autumn she beat Friedrich Merz, a swaggering economic liberal from the Rhineland, to the CDU leadership, an anteroom to the chancellorship, by styling herself as a bridge-builder on polarising subjects like migration. She backed Mrs Merkel's decision to keep Germany's borders open in 2015, but insists there must be no repetition of those events. She is emotionally European and, those who encountered her in Munich concluded, has a good grasp of the world beyond Germany's borders.

The Reich stuff?

Such typically Saarländisch traits made AKK Mrs Merkel's preferred successor. They also help to explain why the chancellor has relied on Mr Altmaier in the major policy dramas of her leadership; as chief whip during the euro-zone bail-outs, environment and nuclear minister during her great switch from nuclear to green power, chief of staff during the migration crisis and now economy minister amid Donald Trump's tariff wars. A reserved Protestant from the ex-communist east, the chancellor has a very un-Saarländisch background. But her cautious personality and centrist grand coalition make Merkelian Berlin a natural stamping-ground for politicians

from that state. The likes of AKK thrive in a Germany that prefers stability over bracing reforms or ideological struggle.

That points to the great caveat to the Saarlandisation of German politics and the great question-mark over AKK in particular: can she offer more than continuity? An economic slowdown is looming; Europe is divided; and Mr Trump is challenging the global trade order and the NATO security umbrella that have made Germany rich and safe over the decades. Pragmatic, cohesion-loving small-c conservatism has marked the comfortable Merkel era, but Germany—like Europe—will need something more dynamic from its leaders in the coming years. Gretl may need a bigger mop.

Travel without borders — get to know the village of Schengen

Evan Woodnorth, Deutsche Welle, 21.05.2019

Lots of tourists think Schengen is just the name of a visa. They don't realize it's a small border town in Luxembourg that has become a symbol of borderless travel in the EU. But the place itself is worth a visit.

At the mid-point of the Moselle River, which winds its way through the heart of Europe, is a place where three countries meet: Luxembourg, Germany, France. It was here, almost 34 years ago, where the idea of a Europe without borders was born.



The village of Schengen

Many people are familiar with the Schengen Agreement, which allows free movement of people and goods between the 26 states in Europe. Those

with a Schengen Visa can travel freely to more than half the European continent.

But have you ever stopped and thought about Schengen as a place?

Who knows, perhaps you will decide to make this pastoral wine-growing village in Luxembourg your next weekend getaway.

Not just a historic agreement

As you may have guessed, the Schengen Agreement gets its name from the small village in Luxembourg where the treaty was first signed in June 1985, between Belgium, France, West Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.



Europe united: Bridge in Schengen leading to Germany and France

The location in Luxembourg at the tripoint with France and Germany was a symbolic choice, as it's sort of a miniature version of Europe. There was no better place to commit to the idea of open borders than at the junction of three.

By doing this, the initial signatories dedicated themselves to their cause and showed what they hoped to achieve.

Back then, however, the notion of free movement between European countries was considered revolutionary. "This idea of open borders was a bit of a utopia. In 1985, you could not imagine that there would be open borders, especially between Germany and France. This was quite extraordinary," Martina Kneip, director of the European Museum Schengen, told DW.

Around 40,000 visitors come to Schengen every year, to see the small Luxembourg border town that has become a symbol of borderless travel in the EU. For many, the main destination is the European Museum Schengen. Out front, the "Columns of Nations" symbolically represent each of the 26 countries in the Schengen Area with a metal star sculpture. On the rest of the square, flags of all the member countries wave in the wind.

Inside, visitors can witness the significance of the Schengen Agreement and its impact and legacy across Europe and the world through interactive displays and archival footage. In a glass case against the back wall, there are 30 customs officers' service caps from across Europe, reminding visitors of the formalities that cross-border travel once entailed.

The museum is not just there to inform its visitors, it serves as a symbol for a unified Europe and a common European identity. Museum director Kneip, originally from Freiburg, a city in Germany's southwest, located close to France and Switzerland, is a firm believer of this: "There's a danger if people take [the Schengen Agreement] for granted. It's not a given – you have to work on it every day and that is really something we have to do to prevail."



The Columns of Nations in front of the European Museum Schengen

Trekking without borders

The area around Schengen offers so much more than merely a European history lesson. Its rolling countryside is a great destination for day hikes. I chose a roughly three-hour loop hike called "Schengen without borders", which promised to showcase all the countries at the border triangle. I was a little skeptical at first. It felt like "borderless" was just a trendy touristic label. But I decided to go along with it.

The 7.7 km (4.8 miles) hike starts at the European Museum Schengen and loops through France and Luxembourg, offering stunning views of all three border countries. The trail snakes its way through vineyards, thick woods, farm paths, fields overrun with bright yellow rapeseed, narrow switchbacks, and opens up midway to a plateau of shell limestone looking out over river valleys and wine villages along the Moselle river.

Despite my initial doubts, there is something quite captivating about seeing the border triangle from 300 meters (984 feet) above sea level. While the occasional coal barge slowly makes its way downriver, scores of cars and trucks seamlessly cross back and forth between Germany, Luxembourg, and France. No barbed wire fence, no border guards.



Rolling hills and the River Mosel - a view of the French wine-making village of Contz-Les-Bains

Without border checkpoints, there was only one visual cue that told me which country I was looking at: energy production. Towards France: steam billowing from nuclear cooling towers. Towards Germany: the ever-turning blades of a wind farm.



After borders became invisible customs officers also disappeared - but their service caps can still be seen at the European Museum in Schengen

With frequent changes of scenery and elevation, the hike is challenging but rewarding. For those interested in learning more about the area, information placards tell visitors about the local flora, fauna and geological makeup of the area. Towards the

end of the hike, you also walk past former gypsum mines.

Back in Schengen I wanted a look at the other aspect that makes this village so attractive: its winemaking.

Moselle wine in a no-frills cellar

With three vineyards for a population of 548, there's no shortage of wine in the village of Schengen. Diligently maintained rows of rivaner grapes (also known as Müller-Thurgau) seem to rise from the river up to the Markusberg. Each of the local hillsides where wine is cultivated has its own

patron saint. For Markusberg, it is said that Saint Mark the Evangelist watches over and protects the vineyards.

Lucien Gloden is a fourth-generation winemaker, born and raised in Schengen. He cultivates 5 hectares (12.4 acres) of vineyards, with property in each of the countries in the border triangle, and produces 40,000 bottles a year. Gloden is in favor of a unified Europe: "I think we could not survive without a common Europe and a common currency, and as a small country, this especially applies to Luxembourg," he told DW. While the other vineyards in the village cater to a more international and gourmet clientele, Gloden's wine cellar is local and down to earth. And that's exactly what I like about it. Just because you're in the richest country in Europe doesn't mean you need to pay a steep price for good wine.

I personally enjoyed the traditional rivaner white wine the most. It's light and smooth, a daily table wine for locals. It's also often combined with carbonated water to make a white wine spritzer. Before I leave, Gloden tells me to come back to Schengen, on the first weekend in August. That's when the annual "Pinot & Friture" festival takes place, when locals feast on pinot blanc wine and fried Moselle river fish. I won't be away for long.

How Corona affects togetherness in the Greater Region

Leonie Rottmann, Saarländischer Rundfunk (SR), 22.01.2021

Two countries that have repeatedly faced each other in wars throughout history have a special relationship today: The Franco-German friendship is especially strong in the border region between Saarland and the Grand Est region in France. But for the past year, it has been facing a test of endurance: the corona virus knows no national borders - but it has pushed the friendship to its limits.

Separated from their own children, no crossing at the borders, the workplace no longer accessible - a historic day has abruptly changed life in the border region in Saarland and the neighboring French region of Grand Est.

The friendship that unites the people across the border here was put to the test: On March 11, 2020, the Robert Koch Institute added the Grand Est region to the list of corona risk areas - shortly thereafter, border crossings were significantly restricted. Suddenly, borders became visible that had not existed for a long time. "The unilaterally decided border closure was a huge shock, especially on the French side," recalls Tanja Michael, holder of the Chair of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy at Saarland University.

By that time, the virus had already arrived in Saarland. "Everyone understood that there had to be measures, but in France there was a perception that the Germans wanted to believe that they would be spared if only the French were not allowed into the country," Michael says.

A Stress Test

One foot in Grand Est, the other in Saarland - many Germans live in France but work in Germany and have friends in both Saarland and Grand Est. Likewise the other way around. There is little distinction between French and Germans: distinctions are made, if at all, by residence.

"For many people, the region is as important to identity as their nationality. There are many shared traditions, regional dishes and other commonalities," says Tanja Michael, who also works as a psychotherapist. She herself lives in France and is married to a Frenchman. "For me as a German, what is particularly striking is that the French here are very friendly to the Germans. That's not the case everywhere in France."

But with the border closures, the togetherness has changed: In Germany, employees who resided in France were initially sent home. Students were expelled from school in the middle of classes. "There are countless examples of children, young people and adult workers who were ostracized, shamed or antagonized because they lived in Grand Est," the psychotherapist explains. The border closure thus created a "we-you" reality that had not existed in this form for a long time. Still, she says, there was understanding for the measures. "One would have wished for better communication and more sensitivity."

Friendship of the Post-War Era

The friendship also has historical roots, explains Wolfgang Meyer, a sociologist at Saar University. "Due to mining, there have been commonalities and cross-border trade since the beginning of industrialization at the latest. Moreover, unlike other border regions, there are no natural borders." The end of World War II was particularly important. "From no other region a similarly strong impulse for reconciliation and rapprochement emanated."

The German-French Gymnasium (DFG) Saarbrücken also stems from this period: it emerged from a post-war French school in Saarland in the 1950s. Students, faculty and school administration come from both Germany and France. "The school is about getting to know each other, learning from each other, bringing together, and optimizing specificities and the respective strengths without diluting them," says Stefan Hauter, principal

of DFG Saarbrücken. The Franco-German friendship is the engine of Europe, he says: "It represents cultural and linguistic openness to the world and thus ultimately peace education."

Wolfgang Meyer also sees the Greater Region as the "heart of Europe." The opening of the borders did not have its starting point in this region just by chance, he said. Personal contacts and friendships have developed as a result of the strong cross-border ties. The sociologist also talks about a "cross-border normality" - by which he means, for example, public transport connections as well as cycling and hiking trails that link the two regions.

The Pandemic Reveals Differences

But the curfew restrictions in Saarland and the even stricter lockdown in France also tugged at people. "There were cases where parents couldn't see their children because they were living with their ex-partner on the other side of the border. Couples couldn't see each other. People who were in quarantine couldn't have food brought to their door," Tanja Michael lists some of the consequences. Many people were desperate, afraid or frustrated.

German citizens living in France were even cut off from health care - including Tanja Michael. The psychotherapist has health insurance only in Germany. Initially, she was forbidden to see a doctor in Germany. "I know many Germans who were extremely afraid of any illness during the pandemic because they didn't know if they were allowed to see their doctors."

Meanwhile, first-degree relatives, children, and spouses or cohabitants in Saarland, for example, are allowed to visit. Visits to Grand Est are also possible. "The fact that politicians are currently not reacting with border closures not only has to do with the obvious ineffectiveness of the measure, but also with the strong local opposition. This is gratifying, he adds: cross-border friendship had been so negatively opposed to border closure that now politicians are shying away from it.

For Each Other and With Each Other

The corona pandemic also showed how closely the countries cooperate. For example, patients from Grand Est were treated in hospitals in Saarland when the healthcare system in France threatened to collapse. "That was very important and is highly credited to the Germans on the French side," says Tanja Michael. She is sure that this neighborly help would also exist from the French side.

History also confirms this: "There were a number of mining accidents in the region, after which relief workers from neighboring areas were repeatedly involved and injured people were treated in hospitals," explains sociologist Wolfgang Meyer. "In general, cross-border, solidarity-based relief efforts are not unusual, even in war situations."

Friendship Is Stronger Than the Virus

Meyer does not believe that the pandemic will have long-term effects on the friendship. He fears more dramatic consequences through the death of businesses, for example, if people living in France no longer go shopping in downtown Saarbrücken. If Lorraine residents lose their jobs in Saarland and blame German politics for this. It also remains to be seen how sports and leisure clubs will function across borders in the future.

Tanja Michael also believes the Franco-German friendship is strong enough to survive the pandemic. The open borders in the second wave would have given people back confidence. Closing them again would be a test of friendship: "Unfortunately, the border closures have shown how quickly nationalistic thinking comes back. Any further border closures on either side would fuel this. That would be the last thing the world needs at the moment."

This article was originally published in German and has been translated for internal use.

Battery manufacturer plans billion-euro investment in Saarland

Peter Sauer, Saarländischer Rundfunk, 17.11.2020

The Chinese battery manufacturer for electric cars SVolt Energy wants to invest up to two billion euros in Saarland and build two plants. This is expected to create up to 2,000 new jobs.

SVolt spent a year searching for a location throughout Europe. Saarland ultimately prevailed over 31 competitors to become the first SVolt production site in Europe.

Battery production is to be built in Überherrn on the already designated Linslerfeld industrial site. A large center for battery packs is to be built in the former Laminatpark in Heusweiler. Construction work is to start as early as spring and be completed by the beginning of 2023. The first batteries are then to be manufactured in Saarland. The builder of both projects is the state-owned Strukturholding Saar GmbH. The state and the federal government will provide a guarantee for the projects.

Batteries for up to 500,000 cars

SVolt wants to produce 24 gigawatt hours per year with its battery factory in the final expansion stage. This means that, depending on the size of the battery, it could be used to equip 300,000 to 500,000 electric cars. SVolt is still a newcomer compared to the Asian market leaders in battery production - it currently employs around 3,000 people, around half of whom work in research and development, according to its own information. It is a spin-off of the Chinese carmaker Great Wall Motors, which is also one of its customers.

For the Saarland's automotive industry, the establishment of SVolt could be a groundbreaking decision that will secure the future of the region. Above all, the carmaker Ford, whose future in Saarlouis remains uncertain, could benefit from battery production in the immediate vicinity.

Hans speaks of "Anchor Investments"

Minister President Tobias Hans (CDU) spoke of a "unique settlement success" for the Saarland: "It is an anchor investment in the future of the Saarland automotive industry," said Hans. It is a signal that many people have been waiting for.

The establishment of SVolt is an important step for the future of industry but also for mobility in the Saarland, added Economics Minister Anke Rehlinger (SPD): "The car of tomorrow will be built in the Saarland."

Location factors crucial for SVolt

Before deciding in favor of Saarland, Svolt had looked at around 30 locations in Europe. Kai-Uwe Wollenhaupt, head of European operations, cited five reasons for locating in Saarland: There are highly qualified employees, green energy, a central location in Europe, excellent infrastructure and an existing environment of international companies.

In his statement, Wollenhaupt also praised the "trusting and entrepreneurial cooperation" with the Saarland state government.

This article was originally published in German and has been translated for internal use

A stop to the Cattenom nuclear power plant is necessary and feasible
Ministry of Economy, Labor, Energy and Transport / Energy of Saarland,
23.04.2021

Luxembourg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saarland present study on security of supply in the region.

35 years after the Chernobyl disaster and another catastrophe in Fukushima, the debate about increased promotion for nuclear power has flared up again in the EU. This time, the focus is ostensibly on the fight against climate change, when in fact the aim is to save financially burdened and completely unprofitable nuclear companies for the future.

Luxembourg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saarland are directly affected by the danger of nuclear power plants in neighboring regions. "That is why we are resolutely committed to opposing the further promotion of nuclear power, especially in our immediate neighboring countries. For us, it is clear that nuclear power, in view of its incalculable consequences and dangers, must finally be a thing of the past. No public money must be made available to promote the expansion of nuclear power. Germany shows the way that a highly modern and important industrialized country can phase out nuclear power. Belgium is also planning to phase out nuclear power," said Carole Dieschbourg, Minister for Environment, Climate and Sustainable Development from Luxembourg, Claude Turmes, Minister for Energy from Luxembourg, Anne Spiegel, as Rhineland-Palatinate Minister of State responsible for the Environment, Energy, Food and Forestry, and Anke Rehlinger, Minister for Economy, Labor, Energy and Transport from Saarland.

In the context of nuclear power plant shutdowns - such as in the debate about Cattenom, which has been going on for years - the question of the resulting consequences for security of supply is often raised. This question is a key imperative in the energy sector. Electricity not only needs to be safe and clean, but also sufficiently available, as our energy supply will be electrified in many areas as part of decarbonization. "That is why we have had a study by an independent expert office examine the consequences that closing the Cattenom nuclear power plant would have on security of supply," they added.

Security of supply is ensured even after the closure of the Cattenom nuclear power plant; moreover, it is also possible to convert the plant.

This is shown by an assessment of the recognized independent expert office in the field of security of supply "Consentec". The experts conclude: "Security of supply concerns nevertheless do not stand in the way of decommissioning the Cattenom nuclear power plant, since suitable

remedial measures are technically known and can be made available in a comparatively short time." In view of the well-integrated and adequately supplied Western European power grid, no bottlenecks are to be expected. The experts also consider it conceivable to continue using machines in the non-hazardous part of the plant in a way that serves the system: One possibility would be to convert the machines in the non-nuclear part of the Cattenom power plant to so-called rotating phase shifters, as already practiced in Germany, for example, at the Biblis nuclear power plant, which is shut down.

The Cattenom nuclear power plant must be taken off the grid. A lifetime extension is unnecessary and completely unacceptable.

The French government plans to take several nuclear power plants off the grid in the coming years. The submitted study on security of supply shows that the Cattenom NPP can be among those plants that can be shut down as a priority. Luxembourg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saarland will work in close coordination for this overdue step and oppose the planned extension of the operating life of the Cattenom nuclear power plant beyond 40 years. In addition, the states will advocate for full transparency and co-determination: Any extension also requires a comprehensive transboundary environmental impact assessment, according to the international Espoo Convention.

Renewable energies are safe, clean, and increasingly cost-effective. The future belongs to them!

Renewable energies are safe and clean. Furthermore, they guarantee climate protection and economic development in our regions and are also becoming more and more cost-effective compared to nuclear power: In France, for example, electricity from offshore wind farms is now almost two-thirds cheaper than nuclear power. According to the French grid manager RTE, a 100 percent power supply for the country with renewable energies is technically possible and, according to the "Agence de l'environnement", also more cost-effective than nuclear power. Increasingly, studies show that a complete changeover in energy supply is possible throughout the EU and that climate protection targets can thus also be achieved. That's why we want to promote the expansion of renewable energies in all areas jointly and to a greater extent. To combine climate protection, security of supply and the protection of our population.

Background to the Chernobyl reactor disaster

On April 26, 1986, a nuclear super-GAU occurred in Chernobyl: In reactor 4, a technical test failed. The aim was to check whether, in the event of a power failure, the rotational energy of the turbine would be sufficient to

produce enough electricity until the emergency generators were running. As a result, the reactor went out of control and triggered an explosion that contaminated large parts of Europe. The human consequences of this nuclear accident are dramatic and can still be felt today: thousands died as a result. Undeniably, the most important trigger of the accident is the lack of control over nuclear technology. The human being does not control the nuclear technology.

Local and Federal Politics

Germany's Europeanized Malaise

Harold James, Project Syndicate, 27.09.2021

Although the 2021 German federal election has put an end to the country's long-standing two-party dispensation, that doesn't mean it has inaugurated a new era of change. On the contrary, Germans are still hewing to the center, but will now be subjected to a protracted, opaque negotiation process.

The razor-thin outcome of the German election marks a watershed in the history of the Federal Republic, signaling the final disintegration of the near-two-party system that long characterized the politics of West Germany and then of reunified Germany after 1990.

Together, the old two dominant parties, the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), have secured only around half of the vote. The result suggests that Germany has undergone a new degree of Europeanization, acquiring some of the most destructive features of politics in neighboring countries. The upshot is that fragmentation and paranoia will now dominate German political life.

Western European politics in the post-war period rested on the alternation between center-right (Christian Democratic) and center-left (social democratic) parties. The parties representing these two broad positions were necessarily centrist, because they had to compete for what political scientists call the "median voter." A party that pursued too much taxation and redistribution would offend the middle, as would a party that resisted solidarity and showed an insufficient commitment to the welfare state.

In Italy, this two-party dispensation disintegrated in the 1990s, when corruption scandals wiped out the Christian Democrats, and when the country's small socialist party also faded. In France, the old arrangement stretched on until the 2017 presidential election, when neither of the mainstream parties' candidates qualified for the run-off. Now, Germany,

too, appears to be headed for a multi-party system featuring endless negotiations and inevitably complicated coalition agreements.

The most obvious loser in this year's election is outgoing Chancellor Angela Merkel's CDU, which has held office longer than any other party in the Federal Republic's history. Up until the past decade, the CDU and its Bavarian sister party, the CSU, could generally count on securing over 40% of the vote. Even when it received only 33% in the 2017 election (compared to 20.5% for the SPD), it still emerged as the strongest party and de facto coalition leader. But this time, the CDU/CSU has received only 24%, and the SPD has surpassed it with 25.7%.

The simplest explanation for this is that the Christian element of the Christian Democratic base has shrunk as Germany has become increasingly secular, and thus more disenchanted with both Protestant and Catholic organized religion. The German electorate also exhibits a widespread sense of fatigue and a longing for something new. Merkel's departure represents the end of an era, and many Germans now feel that it is time for a change.

And yet, Germans are also gripped by nostalgia. They miss the time when their security felt relatively assured, and they worry about whether their country can meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world. After Chancellor Helmut Kohl's stodgy provincialism in the 1980s and 1990s, Merkel came to power in 2005 promising a fresh outlook. But, in the end, she offered merely her own version of provincialism.

Notwithstanding the new fragmentation, the election's outcome is still very German in the sense that a profound underlying consensus persists. With the exception of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the far-left Die Linke, all of the parties were competing for the center, all take environmental issues seriously, and all have strived to offer voters feasible solutions to the country's problems.

In the end, German voters were not faced with an extremely polarized choice – such as between Jeremy Corbyn and Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom in 2019, or between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen in France in 2017. The AfD and Die Linke both performed worse than they did four years ago.

During the campaign, the Greens, the SPD, and the CDU/CSU all presented themselves as Merkel's heirs. The CDU candidate for the chancellorship, Armin Laschet, emphasized continuity and party affiliation. The SPD candidate, Olaf Scholz, was finance minister in the last government and has sought to associate himself with the brilliant legacy of former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who was also from Hamburg, and

who struggled continually with the SPD's left wing. Finally, Annalena Baerbock of the Greens bears some resemblance to the young Merkel, who herself had been written off by rivals and the press as a lightweight.

The election was fought mainly on the grounds of character and personal appeal. The question was not who had the better program but who was most trustworthy. The only exception was the Free Democratic Party, which advocates slightly more fiscal conservatism. With around 11% of the vote, a small gain on its 2017 result, the FDP could play a significant role in the coalition negotiations.

A key feature of Merkelism was her strategy of consensus-building, or what her critics would call demobilization. She always sought to create the impression that there were no truly important issues at stake in elections, and that there were few realistic alternatives to the mainstream position she represented. (Thus, she emphasized – correctly – that there was no alternative to the euro.)

But as we have seen in the UK and the United States in recent years, one of the most devastating consequences of the new populism is its subversion of trust in electoral outcomes. Some Germans will now take a page from this playbook to claim malign interference in the election. While the Greens looked to be significantly ahead in the polls at the start of the campaign, their support then slumped, perhaps owing to a wave of social-media campaigns designed to convince young people that the party supports absurd lifestyle prohibitions. Green supporters are now wondering whether these campaigns were the result of their party's hard line vis-à-vis Russia and China.

Germany wanted to give up provincialism, but what it got instead is complexity. There still is no alternative, and now the political system seems less transparent and more manipulated than before. The next government will be decided behind closed doors. That is a worrying first chapter for the next era of politics in Europe's most powerful country.

The long road to forming a post-Merkel government

Wolfgang Dick & Rina Goldenberg, Deutsche Welle, 27.09.2021

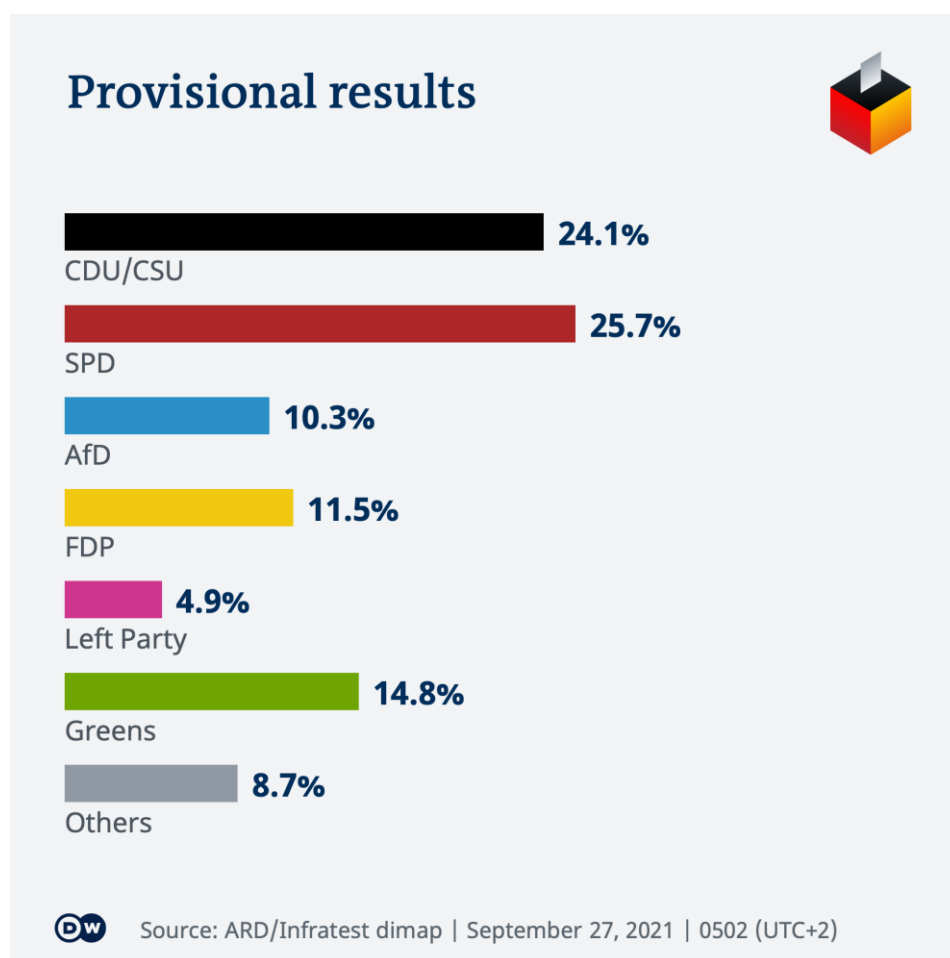
Germans have elected a new parliament. But forming a government and selecting a new chancellor will take a while. Until then Angela Merkel will remain in office.

Negotiations to form a new government can take months, but the freshly elected Bundestag gets to work relatively quickly. In accordance with the

German Constitution, it must convene no later than 30 days after the election — that's by October 26 this year.

If the new Bundestag cannot immediately elect a chancellor during its first session, because the coalition negotiations have not yet been finalized, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier will ask Chancellor Angela Merkel and her Cabinet to continue serving until the new government is chosen and sworn in.

There is no time limit for this phase. Angela Merkel could still be in office at Christmas. After December 17, 2021, she would then have surpassed Chancellor Helmut Kohl's previous record of 5,869 days in office.



Provisional results of the Federal Elections 2021

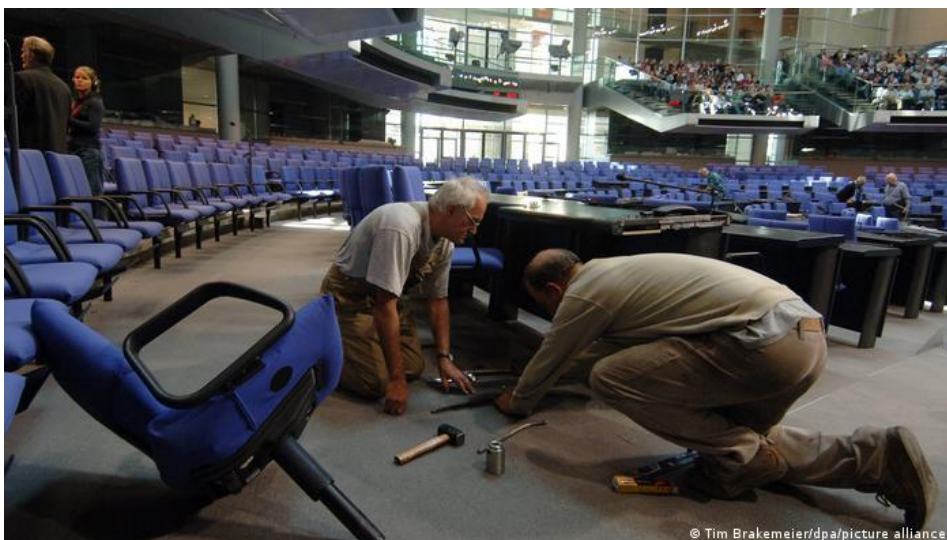
After the election, Angela Merkel will initially be allowed to continue with all her previous duties. These include personnel matters. So she could dismiss ministers and appoint new ones.

Appointments scheduled for the Chancellor also have to be attended. Because it is unlikely that a new government will be formed so soon, Angela Merkel will probably travel to Rome, for example, for the meeting of the leading economic powers, the G20 summit, at the end of October. The previous chancellor does not own the gifts she received during her time in office. All gifts have been inventoried and are the property of the state. So are the desk, desk chair and works of art that the state provided for her throughout her time in office.

The XXL Bundestag

The new Bundestag has even more deputies than the previous one — which was already a record 709. It will be the largest Bundestag ever and the second-largest parliament in the world (second only to China's National People's Congress). The reason is the complicated German electoral law and the mandates for the "overhang" seats (Überhangmandate) and compensation "leveling" seats (Ausgleichsmandate), which ensure that the composition of the Bundestag will be proportionate to the votes for the parties.

As soon as the official final result has been determined by the Federal Election Committee and the names of all the newly elected members of parliament have been finalized, the Bundestag administration's fitters in the plenary chamber begin to reassemble all the chairs.



All the seats in the Bundestag plenary chamber are reassembled to fit in more parliamentarians

Coalition negotiations

Probably the most difficult chapter after a federal election. Here, too, there are no legally-prescribed time limits. And all the parties involved know this,

as they negotiate over every detail – and thus over every scrap of power. It's all about the most important demands in the election platforms and individuals vying for particular ministerial posts.

The coalition negotiations are opened by the top candidate of the party that received the most votes in the federal election. The top candidate (usually also the candidate for chancellor) gets to choose which other parties he or she wants to work with in a government in the future. That's the procedure so far.

After this federal election in 2021, everything is different. The SPD and the CDU/CSU Union are so close in the election results that both the Union's candidate for chancellor, Armin Laschet, and the Social Democrats' candidate for chancellor, Olaf Scholz, each claim the right to begin exploratory talks with the two possible coalition partners, the pro-free market Free Democrats (FDP) and the Green Party, to form a three-way coalition.

However, the FDP and the Greens are currently so far apart on so many points in terms of their declared party goals that it will take a while for them to figure out whether they can work together in government – and if so whether with the SPD or the CDU/CSU at the helm.

And then the parties ask their members at party conventions whether they will give their consent to any coalition deal.

Four years ago, for example, the CDU/CSU first negotiated with the FDP and the Greens. When the talks failed, the question was whether the SPD should once again enter into a so-called grand coalition with the CDU/CSU. After its first experiences with the CDU/CSU, the SPD was very reluctant, fearing that it would not be able to push through its own party goals. In the end, 600 SPD delegates voted in favor of "open-ended" talks with the CDU/CSU coalition. Only then did the coalition negotiations begin. And finally, a special SPD party conference had to vote once again on the coalition agreement. After about six months, the coalition agreement was in place as the basis for the new government.

Parliamentary proceedings

The most important role of the new parliament is the election of the chancellor. He or she is elected, without debate and by secret ballot, on the recommendation of the German president. To be elected, the chancellor candidate needs an absolute majority of the deputies, known as the "chancellor majority." So far, all chancellors, including Merkel, have been elected in the first round.

If this does not happen, the constitution provides for further elections within 14 days and places another hurdle ahead of possible new elections: The person who receives the most votes in the last secret ballot round is elected chancellor. If the votes are less than the majority of the members of the Bundestag, then the German president decides whether to appoint the candidate or to dissolve the Bundestag. Such an occurrence is extremely unlikely.

Contesting the election

In Germany, any eligible voter can contest elections. They must send a written formal objection to the election review commission with the Bundestag in Berlin within two months of election day.

This commission processes all submissions. A decision is made on each individual challenge, and each objector receives feedback from the Bundestag. The entire procedure can take up to one year.

To invalidate the results of a Bundestag election, an objection must meet two requirements. Firstly, there must be an electoral error that violates the Federal Election Act, the Federal Election Code or the Constitution.

Secondly, the reported electoral error would have to have an impact on the distribution of seats in the Bundestag.

Objectors can also contest the findings of the election review commission and go all the way to the Federal Constitutional Court.

A German national vote has never been declared invalid.

Miscellaneous

What is the Legacy of the Angela Merkel Era?

Jan-Werner Müller, The Guardian, 26.09.2021

It's Auf Wiedersehen to the chancellor this weekend as Germany goes to the polls. But what has been her impact on politics across Europe and on the global stage?

The filmmaker and gay rights activist Rosa von Praunheim once confessed that he loved Angela Merkel, but hated her Christian Democratic Union party.

This sense of Merkel as a morally attractive, quasi-presidential figure above petty partisanship is widely shared within Germany and abroad: during the Donald Trump years she was lauded as the last defender of the liberal international order; Boris Johnson described her last week as a "titan" of diplomacy; and even Alexis Tsipras, the hapless leftwing Greek

prime minister who was forced by Merkel into years of austerity, cannot help but admire her “sincerity”.



Workers remove an advertisement showing German chancellor Angela Merkel with a slogan that reads ‘Mother of Nation – Thanks For 16 Years of Hard Work’ before this weekend’s elections in Hamburg. Photograph: Fabian Bimmer/Reuters

A contrasting narrative of Merkel as an opportunist with no real political convictions but a portrait of Catherine the Great above her desk and a metaphorical dagger underneath to stab male rivals in the back has largely disappeared.

This story was always sexist nonsense. But the apotheosis as the world’s last decent leader is too good to be true: yes, Merkel was successful in keeping her own party, various large coalitions, and the EU together at crucial moments. But she could only do so because, during a boom based on German exports, there was always enough money to buy everyone’s consent. While future historians are likely to marvel at her tactical skills in micropolitics, they may also conclude that she was uniquely placed globally to have done more on the climate emergency – and simply failed to do so.

As Germany’s first female chancellor prepares to step down, Merkelologists have been busy again ruminating about the deeper reasons for her unique style of governing: cautious, oriented towards consensus, pragmatic – the list is by now well known, if not outright clichéd. Might it have something to do with Protestantism (which made her a savvy outsider in a party profoundly shaped by co-founder Konrad Adenauer’s Rhenish Catholicism)? Is it her background as a physicist, predestining her

to be the obvious antidote to the world's science deniers, especially a certain former American president? Or is it all best explained by her upbringing in East Germany, which taught her not to trust too easily and talk as little as possible?

The truth is more banal. Merkel at one point did commit to a bold vision – and almost saw her political career end as a result. In 2005 she campaigned on a neoliberal platform of a flat tax, cuts in the welfare state, and ever more “flexible labour markets”; the federal election was hers to lose to Gerhard Schröder, who was deeply unpopular at that point. And lose she almost did.

That was the beginning of Merkelism as a political method: rather than make yourself vulnerable by prominent programmatic commitments (let alone rousing rhetoric in defence of them), observe carefully in which direction things are going, identify interests that might converge at one point, then occupy that point and claim that you were leading people there all along. She had once wanted to be the German Margaret Thatcher; instead, she decided to be all things to all people.

Tellingly, Merkel was happy to be celebrated at Harvard University as a great liberal promoter of marriage equality when she had actually abstained in the parliamentary vote on same-sex marriage.

She adopted many policies, such as the minimum wage pushed by Social Democrats during the latter's coalition with the Christian Democrats, and then sold them as her success – thus perfecting the art of what came to be known as “asymmetric demobilisation”: making sure supporters of other parties do not bother to vote, because they have been lulled into a sense that “Mutti” has taken care of everything already. This ecumenical approach was made easier by a kind of windfall profit: Schröder, marching down his very own version of the “third way”, had already implemented tough – critics would rightly say cruel – labour market policies, creating a large low-wage sector. Meanwhile, the euro made German exports cheaper; in combination with high demand from China, this meant golden years with high revenues for the German state, and little reason to make tough choices.

Merkel never took risks at moments of her own choosing: only crises forced her out of the politics-as-small-scale-problem-solving mode. But even when the house was on fire, she would sometimes wait and see how the mood of local spectators was developing: major Eurocrisis decisions were made with an eye on Landtag elections in Germany itself.



Angela Merkel feeds Australian lorikeets at Marlow Bird Park in Marlow, Germany last week. Photograph: Georg Wendt/AP

To be fair, crises allowed Merkel to initiate major changes, such as phasing out nuclear power in the wake of the 2011 Fukushima disaster – after having first reversed the decision of the previous Red-Green government to end nuclear, a zigzagging that cost billions of euros.

Not all crises were political bolts out of the blue. Today, leftwingers around the globe treat Merkel as a saint who “opened the borders” for refugees. No doubt, Merkel put a lot on the line in autumn 2015; it was also a rare moment when she explicitly invoked her Christianity to justify why those in dire need had to be welcomed with open arms.

But the crisis had longterm causes, of course: Merkel had for years been fighting against a fairer European asylum system; she had also used the term *Flüchtlingsbekämpfung* (combat against refugees) which sounded like *Schädlingsbekämpfung* (pest control) and thus appeared to associate deterring refugees from crossing the Mediterranean with controlling pests. For the writer Navid Kermani, Merkel’s remark in September 2015 that she had not realised the conflicts in Syria and Iraq could end up affecting the *Heimat* (homeland) so directly was an astonishing admission. It seemed that she would basically not get worried too much about anything, as long as all stayed quiet on the political home front.

After an acute crisis, Merkel would revert to her “radically reactive governing style”, as one Berlin journalist put it. There was little effort to improve safety or truly to rebuild once huge fires were no longer blazing. The “energy turn” away from nuclear power quickly became an administrative mess.

When the French president Emmanuel Macron, in a grand speech at the Sorbonne in 2017, pleaded with Merkel to build a more coherent EU architecture after the Eurocrisis, Merkel politely ignored him. She half-heartedly tried to find a different European approach to refugees – but then dropped the issue and rested content with paying off the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and assorted Libyan warlords to warehouse (or worse) refugees outside the walls of fortress Europe.

Only when the pandemic hit was Merkel again willing to take a daring step – issuing bonds backed by the EU as a whole. What famously made British prime minister Harold Macmillan’s job so difficult – “events, dear boy, events” – were the occasions when Merkel was for once willing to do what she had probably known all along was right, but politically seemed risky unless shrouded in the fog of an immediate crisis.

Merkel’s famous formula *Fahren auf Sicht* – driving without being able to see too far ahead (let alone having a GPS) – made for safe-enough journeys; but when it comes to the climate emergency, it would probably take the world over the cliff. Or so young German activists have been complaining for years, with Merkel defending herself by patiently explaining that politics consists of “what is possible”.

But what is possible has of course also depended on Merkel. After all, she is a scientist with superb analytical abilities to break down large problems into specific policy changes; she had been a minister for the environment in the mid-nineties and her anti-charisma has by now turned into a particular kind of charisma which instantly communicates sincerity (comparable to the effect young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg has on certain audiences). Merkel was thus uniquely well placed to mobilise both national and international publics – but never did.

It turns out there is no such thing as leading from the back on climate.

The limits of Merkelism also became apparent during the pandemic. In spring 2020, the usual narrative about Merkel the rational problem-solver was deployed to explain why Germany had escaped relatively unscathed from the first wave. But by winter, her consensus-seeking style had produced literally fatal delays. Night-long meetings with the heads of the individual federal states about the right policies turned into a cartoonish version of EU summits: bleary-eyed politicians would announce an

agreement, only to have it immediately undermined by colleagues who supposedly had shared the consensus. Chaos and confusion resulted.



Angela Merkel leading cabinet meetings at the chancellery in Berlin. Photograph: Markus Schreiber/AP

Merkel's CDU – a bit like the Tories – has long lived off a nimbus of competence and being the default party of government. The management of the pandemic hurt that image; the long months of lockdown also gave Germans time to contemplate just how far they have fallen behind in infrastructure, education and basically anything to do with the internet; obsessed with balanced budgets, Merkel-led governments simply failed to provide public investment.

Conventional wisdom has it that Merkelism has left her party an intellectually hollow shell. But it's hard to argue that anybody has really articulated a 21st century vision of Christian democracy anywhere. That is one reason why so many centre-right parties – think of Sebastian Kurz's People's party Christian Democrats in Austria – have effectively mainstreamed the far right: without ideas of their own, and no clear sense of where the boundaries between centre-right and the far right should be drawn, nominally mainstream leaders have been busy accommodating nativism or even outright racism in countries such as France and the Netherlands.

In this respect, and to her credit, Merkel did hold it together. She made some remarks about how multiculturalism had "utterly failed" when, a decade ago, it became fashionable to do so. But she also dismissed, with

characteristic understatement, a 2010 bestseller that put the fear of being replaced by Muslim invaders into Germans with the words: “not helpful”.

To be sure, her words might have been stronger, and her stance should have been clearer when it came to foreign far-right populists. She was happy to keep the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, in the European People’s party, the supranational association of European centre-right and Christian Democratic parties, while the latter was busy hollowing out Hungarian democracy.

The reason is simply that German industry – the powerful car manufacturers in particular – has long been cuddled by Budapest.

Merkel was always more outspoken with Vladimir Putin, and when she first went to Beijing in 2006, she sought to push for “more openness and more freedom”. A year later, she invited the Dalai Lama to the Chancellery. But, as Germany’s dependence on Chinese markets grew, her government turned quieter and quieter; and one of Merkel’s last major initiatives was an EU-China investment pact that pays scant attention to human rights.

Still, even critics will concede her fundamental decency on many occasions. And her fans will remind us that, if nothing else, she is a thoroughly uncorrupt politician; it is hard to imagine her cashing in as a lobbyist or even just on the speaking circuit. Then again, the fact that such self-restraint becomes a matter of moral merit might just show how little we expect from leaders today.

Jan-Werner Müller teaches politics at Princeton University. His book Democracy Rules was published by Allen Lane in July.

European Rule of Law in crisis – is it too late for the EU to save it?

Daniel Freund, Heinrich Böll Stiftung Brussels, 04.01.2021

Commentary: MEP Daniel Freund (Greens/EFA) rates the new EU Rule of Law mechanism as a success despite all the criticism. For the first time, the disbursements of EU funds are linked to compliance with the Rule of Law, with the aim of combating corruption and illiberal attacks to democracy and fundamental values.

Sofia, September 2020. Through the narrow streets, between rows of tall buildings outside the Presidency Building the calls of tens of thousands of protesters echo back and forth. They have taken to the streets to demonstrate against the corrupt manoeuvrings of the government of Prime Minister Boyko Borissov. Some of the voices in this choir of the disaffected, however, are calling for help from the EU. In their personal conversations,

young people in particular repeatedly demand that payments of EU assistance to the government be cut off: “They are supporting a corrupt elite and are being misused to dismantle the rule of law and democracy”.

Corruption Made in Europe

During my travels through Hungary, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria this year, I heard many similar calls to the European Union to put subsidies and payments on hold, reduce them or stop them altogether. These demands sound radical. At first glance, they appear to contradict the philosophy of European solidarity. And yet, they arise from the frustration of many young activists to see a political elite whittling away the rule of law and basic human rights. They are an expression of the frustration of opposition politicians caused by seeing billions of euros disappearing into the pockets of government cronies. This throws an uncomfortable European truth into sharp relief: the way the European Union spends its money has contributed to the rise of corrupt, autocratic structures in its Member States.

When billions of euros of European taxpayers’ money are paid in aid to the governments of the Member States, there are virtually no controls on part of the EU as to how this money is sent and who its recipients are. This lack of accountability leads to structural abuses. One can only guess, how much of this money is channelled into illegal coffers in the EU every year. For Bulgaria alone, the figure could run to several hundred million euros. In Hungary, we are talking billions.

There are two major ways in which EU money is being misused. Firstly, it props up the political power of a party elite and, secondly, it enriches all those who have secured their political access to it. Structurally, the stream of money from Brussels is akin to the oil revenue of the Gulf States: it is external income that is available only to a highly exclusive circle and, concerning its expenditure, there is almost zero accountability.

Lining pockets and holding onto power

Hungary is a tragic example of this. The government is throwing universities out of the country. The free press and opposition parties are hounded mercilessly. The free media is bought up and then gagged. And while all this is going on, Viktor Orbán’s closest allies are growing unbelievably rich. Orbán’s father owns Europe’s most profitable quarry. He has a virtual monopoly on supplying the building materials for EU-funded construction projects and has turned an estate in his home village into a golf course. Orbán’s son-in-law has made millions selling and installing LED street lighting. Sponsored by the EU.

The opposition MP Akos Hadhazy has documented the sophisticated system of systematic pillaging of EU funds. Public tender procedures are manipulated and are ultimately only ever won by companies with links to Viktor Orbán. 19 major companies are registered to the modest home of Orbán's old school friend Lőrinc Meszaros alone.

According to conservative estimates, of every euro of EU aid spent, at least twenty cents end up in the private pockets of Orbán's entourage. Irregularities have been noted in hundreds of more than 40,000 projects. Very few investigations by local public prosecutors and the EU anti-corruption agency OLAF have, however, led to charges or fines.

In Bulgaria, Bivol – a collective of investigative journalists – has documented how common corruption with EU funds is in the everyday lives of Bulgarians. It may be overpriced renovation projects, broken paving slabs, an out-of-order lavatory or a minister who admits that the aim of the game is to siphon off as much money as possible into your own pockets. Almost everywhere you go, there are tales of how public money has been plundered and diverted into the further enrichment of a small elite group.

The arrogance and selfishness of the powerful destroys trust in politics and it destroys trust in the European Union. This is what angers the ordinary men and women taking to the streets. And it sends a disastrous signal: if you want to be successful, you need to be part of this system, or else you must leave the country.

Money as leverage for the rule of law

Corruption with EU funds and the decline of the rule of law in certain Member States of the European Union are closely connected. Consequently, any European action to safeguard the rule of law and democracy must hit corrupt politicians where it hurts: at their bottom line.

From 1 January next year, the EU will have an instrument at its disposal to connect the payment of EU funds to compliance with the principles of the rule of law. It is a success, but by no means a magic wand. The road to the mechanism was rough and stony – and many changes were made during the months of negotiations to the version initially proposed by the European Commission and improved by the European Parliament.

Even though the current law on the protection of the rule of law in Europe has (rightly) come into criticism, it should be borne in mind that in summer 2020, the mechanism looked as though it was on the brink of collapse. At the summit of EU heads of state or government in July, planned sanctions

for EU States infringing on fundamental rights and the rule of law were watered down to almost nothing.

The German Presidency of the EU Council later presented a position that did not even contain the term “rule of law”. Extensive – and unnecessary – concessions were made to the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán far too early in the game. Thus, the EU Council set off on a collision course with the European Parliament.

Orbán vs. EP

It is entirely thanks to the negotiating team of the European Parliament that the trilogue negotiations were able to salvage a fit-for-purpose rule of law mechanism from this “capitulation” to Viktor Orbán. Even though the law that was brokered is ultimately not as powerful as the European Parliament wanted, the compromise is still far more potent than what the German Presidency had come up with. The outraged protests from Warsaw and Budapest are a clear sign that this rule of law mechanism is by no means a paper tiger.

In the final round in the rule of law spat, the Polish and Hungarian governments let their masks fall completely. They were prepared to plunge Europe more deeply into crisis by vetoing the EU budget and coronavirus recovery fund – simply to block the rule of law mechanism.

The negotiations are over. With effect from 1 January 2021, the European Union will, for the first time, have in place a mechanism that connects the payment of EU funds to compliance with the principles of the rule of law. This means that the EU has an instrument that can be used not just to protect the rule of law, but also to clamp down on corruption.

The EU Commission must now show that it is serious about defending our values and fighting corruption. A test of the law by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) must not mean a grace period for rule of law infringers such as Viktor Orbán and co. The European Commission must use the time to bring all current tools to bear to defend the independence of the judiciary and tackle corruption. We must not leave the citizens of Hungary and Poland out in the cold without a functioning rule of law.

The answer to the crisis has to be more integration

It will not be possible to measure the worth of the rule of law mechanism until it has been used. Until then, however, the EU must, as a matter of urgency, learn some lessons for the future. The Polish/Hungarian veto threatened to topple the community of states into severe crisis. Corruption and authoritarian tendencies are on the rise – and not just in Poland and

Hungary. If we consider Europe to be a community of values embedded in solidarity, we will need to develop further. If it is our wish to take effective action against anybody flouting our values, then we need to be more powerful, more democratic and closer to the citizens.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is just around the corner. It must find answers, working jointly with the citizens and give answers to the crisis of the rule of law in Europe. Answers to rampant corruption. Answers to an obsolete institutional structure in the EU that managed to avoid the disintegration of Europe in the pandemic year of 2020 only by the skin of its teeth.

20 years West-Eastern Divan Orchestra: "We practice listening to each other every day".

Jakob Wittmann, Tagesspiegel, 12.08.2019



For the fan blocks. Barenboim and his orchestra are regulars at the Waldbühne. PHOTOS: JESSE LEE WEINER, WEST EASTERN DIVAN ORCHESTRA

At the end of the morning rehearsal, Daniel Barenboim is once again very clear: "Music is not just a profession, it is your life," he calls out to his orchestra. The musicians sit in front of their music stands in casual clothes, many wearing shorts. The instruments rest in their arms. The orchestra knows how important this message is to the conductor. No one should take for granted what happens here. Especially when things are going particularly well, as they are today.

It is the preparations for the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra's summer tour. On August 17, they will give a guest performance at the Waldbühne. It's an anniversary: twenty years ago this experiment was launched, bringing together Israeli and Arab musicians.

Lunch break. There is falafel, hummus, salad. Violinist Perry Tal and violist Nadim Housni take time to talk about experiences and impressions they would never have had without the Divan Orchestra.



Perry Tal plays the violin. PHOTO: KAI HEIMBERG

Perry Tal, born 1986 in Tel Aviv, Israel, member of the Divan Orchestra since 2010:

I can only agree with Maestro Barenboim. In other professions you can also be good and professional, but you have a private life that is very separate from that. For us, everything we bring to music is always something from our lives as well. How else do you want to express anger? How do you want to express love?

I joined the orchestra ten years ago. At that time, of course, I was already a musician, to a certain extent. But at that time, my thoughts and how I looked at music were still very malleable. Barenboim tears the music apart and puts it together again, with his mind and with his heart.

He does the same with us as an orchestra. He forms a unit that thinks and feels together. He is a genius, and we are very lucky to work with him, tour together and spend time together. We have become a family that speaks the same language. A language that also radiates to the audience. At our concerts I observe a silence, an attentiveness that I don't know from any other of my projects. It has almost something sacred.

Arabs and Israelis are actually one family

The orchestra does not exist to bring peace. It exists to show that dialogue and unity are possible. We are living proof that Arabs and Israelis are actually one family. In the beginning, we felt very differently.

But we discovered many more similarities than differences. We quickly realized how many shared experiences there are. Literally across borders.

Oftentimes, there are similar childhood experiences as well. That makes you soft and also vulnerable.

Hearing an idea in the oboe

The fact that we continue to meet regardless of the political atmosphere proves that there are people who want exactly this, and make it possible. I believe that any form of art can make that happen. But what is special about music is that the most important skill of any musician is listening.

That's what I think is most lacking in the Middle East. We practice listening to each other every day. Like hearing an idea in the oboe and following it up with the violin.

The faster and faster the world becomes, the more classical music will become something that challenges listeners because it requires listening for a longer period of time. In the Divan, I feel the power of classical music more than ever before. It gives me hope. A lot of hope.



Nadim Housni plays the violin. PHOTOS: JESSE LEE WEINER, WEST EASTERN DIWAN ORCHESTRA

Nadim Housni, born 1983 in Damascus, Syria, member of the Divan Orchestra since 2003:

We feel the connection with the audience all the time. Before, during the concert and after. Even when people come up to us and express their gratitude or joy. That gives me the strength every time to become even better.

Barenboim doesn't have to repeat his message. The way he works with us, the way he shows us that it's not enough if you don't stand behind it

one hundred percent, is message enough. There is no middle ground, especially in this orchestra.

The project and the maestro have decisively shaped ninety percent of my musical education and knowledge. I owe my perception, my openness, musically but also politically, to this. Apart from seeing my friends, there is nothing more important to me than to continue to be in touch with it.

I had other political views

The Divan is proof that we can talk to each other. Actually, we don't have to talk at all, we just have to play! You can hear it, how we play the same phrase at the same time in the same way. I used to have different political views too, just like Perry, but none of that matters anymore. When we sit and play together, it shows how close we've become.

I haven't been back to my country for many years. But I remember well that some were against it when I started working on this project 15 years ago. I even heard once that we were being watched by certain people. Even though there were never any incidents in the end, it was not easy to hear something like that and to know that not everyone agreed with what we were doing here.

Met Israelis for the first time

In this orchestra I met Israelis for the first time. I had never thought that was possible before. I remember how much we talked when we were new here: What do you think? Why is that? We were all full of spirit.

Sometimes we also got angry, and it happened that some left the room because it got so intense. We all pushed our limits and had to learn to recognize our similarities. But also our differences and why we think the way we do. This started an incredible process, and today all that is in the past. It's so wonderful to look back over the years and see what the orchestra has become. You can see that we have become a unit, a community.

This article was originally published in German and has been translated for internal use.