

# Not Over Yet

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If your country is part of an international empire, the domestic politics of the country that rules yours are your domestic politics too. Whoever speaks of the Europe of the EU must therefore also speak of Germany. Currently it is widely believed that after the German federal elections of 24 September this year, Europe will enter a post-Merkel era. The truth is not so simple.

In October 2018, following two devastating defeats in state elections in Hesse and Bavaria, Angela Merkel resigned as president of her party, the CDU, and announced that she would not seek re-election as Chancellor in 2021. She would, however, serve out her fourth term, to which she had been officially appointed only seven months earlier. Putting together a coalition government had taken no less than six months following the September 2017 federal election, in which the CDU and its Bavarian sidekick, the CSU, had scored the worst result in their history, at 32.9 percent (2013: 41.5 percent). (Merkel's record as party leader is nothing short of dismal, having lost votes each time she ran. How she could nevertheless remain

Chancellor for 16 years will have to be explained elsewhere.) In the subsequent contest for the CDU presidency, the party's general secretary, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, appointed by Merkel only in February 2018, narrowly prevailed over two competitors. After little more than a year, however, when Merkel publicly dressed her down for a lack of leadership, Kramp-Karrenbauer resigned and declared that she would not run for Chancellor in 2021 either. A few months later, when von der Leyen went to Brussels, Kramp-Karrenbauer got Merkel to appoint her minister of defense. The next contest for the party presidency, the second in Merkel's fourth term, had to take place under Corona restrictions; it took a long time and was won in January 2021 by Armin Laschet, Prime Minister of the largest federal state, North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). To prevent the comeback of an old foe of hers, Friedrich Merz, Merkel allegedly supported Laschet behind the scenes.

While Laschet – a less-than-charismatic Christian-Democratic middle-of-the-roader and lifelong Merkel loyalist – considered the party presidency to be a ticket to the CDU/CSU candidacy for Chancellor, it took three months for this to be settled. As CDU/CSU politics go, the joint candidate is picked by the two party presidents when they feel the time has come, under four eyes; no formal procedure provided. Thus Laschet needed the agreement of Markus Söder, Prime Minister of Bavaria, who didn't keep it a secret that he believed himself the far better choice. In the background, again, there was Merkel, in the unprecedented position of a sitting Chancellor watching the presidents of her two parties pick her would-be successor in something like a semi-public

cock-fight. After some dramatic toing-and-froing, Laschet prevailed, once more supported by Merkel, apparently in exchange for his state's backing for the federal government imposing a 'hard' Covid-19 lockdown on the entire country.

As CDU/CSU candidate, Laschet is already having a hard time. In early June he will face a state election in Sachsen-Anhalt. Currently the state is governed by a CDU Prime Minister, who heads a coalition of his party (which won 30 percent of the vote in 2016) with the SPD (11 percent) and the Greens (5 percent), formed to keep the AfD (24) and Die Linke (16) out. If the state is lost, Laschet's enemies, certainly Söder, will find ways to publicly blame him for it. As for Germany as a whole, by early May electoral support for the CDU/CSU had fallen to 23 percent (below where it was before the pandemic; the party's worst ever result) while the Greens had risen to an unprecedented 26 percent, making them the strongest party for the first time. The SPD, Merkel's long-time coalition partner, remained stable at 14 percent, followed by the AfD with 12 and Die Linke with 6 percent. Asked who they would want to be Chancellor, Laschet, like the SPD candidate, Finance Minister Olaf Scholz, was favored by 21 percent. 28 percent picked the *Spitzenkandidatin* of the Greens, Annalena Baerbock, a 40-year-old newcomer who has never held government office and who, like Merkel, has always stayed aloof of her party's factional divisions; 30 percent were undecided.

If the election result is roughly along these lines, forming a government may prove difficult. Whoever ends up as Chancellor, his or her party will be smaller than ever before relative to their largest coalition

partner. CDU and CSU might be able to govern with the Greens, but they would do so only if they were the stronger party, with Laschet as Chancellor and perhaps the FDP as a third partner; call this Laschet/Baerbock. This assumes that the SPD would refuse to continue to serve as junior partner of the Christian Democrats, precluding Laschet/Scholz. The Greens might form a government with the SPD, either Baerbock/Scholz or, unlikely, Scholz/Baerbock, which would however require getting either Die Linke or, more preferable for the Greens, the FDP on board, none of which would be easy.

Under the German constitution a Chancellor remains in office until the Bundestag elects a successor. As long as coalition talks go on, Merkel will therefore wield the full constitutional powers of a *Bundeskanzler*. While in 2017/18 it was in her interest to bring the coalition negotiations to a fast conclusion, this time agreement will end rather than renew her term. Not being directly involved in the talks, Merkel can influence them from the outside, either obstructing or helping them along, depending on the direction she favors. Moreover, as acting Chancellor she may be able to nail down commitments in European and international politics that would be difficult to abandon for the government after her; alternatively, she can point to the coalition talks to put off unpleasant decisions. In 2017/18, expecting that once re-elected, she would join his project of ‘refounding Europe’, and apparently misinformed on the German political system, Macron scheduled a public speech at the Sorbonne for the day after the German election, to present to the world and to Merkel his plans for a new European Union. Over the next six months, Merkel and the German public

kept repeating that Macron's ideas 'deserved an answer', while expressing regret that without a new government it could not be given – until Merkel's fourth cabinet was sworn in and other issues took precedence.

Forming the next German government may take even longer than last time. A superficial selection of critical events and issues likely to come up during the transition include: the French presidential election in 2022, when Germany must keep Macron in office against the odds; French demands for a French-German fighter jet system, called FCAS, complete with supporting swarms of drones and satellites, ground stations, artificial intelligence and flying tankers, estimated to cost 300 billion euros between now and 2040 (which would realistically end up at twice as much at least); the role of the EU, if any, in the next Corona wave; the Biden administration's 'Buy American' policy with respect to its infrastructure renewal project; French demands that Germany join its postcolonial wars, about to be lost, in the Sahel zone; American pressures for Ukraine to be admitted to NATO and the EU, challenging Russia; and American and French demands for Germany to abandon the North Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia through the Baltic Sea, as Germany's 'energy turn' (*Energiewende*) is approaching a simultaneous exit from nuclear energy and soft coal.

What will it mean for Europe when Merkel is no longer in office? What will most obviously be missing is her impressive ability to fudge issues and conflicts by pretending that they do not exist, allowing her, and Germany, to be on both sides of an argument at the

same time, or on no side at all — take the *finalité* of the EU, migration, the US vs. Russia and China, France vs. the United States on the status of Europe, etc. etc. Crucial for this was Merkel's skillful use of empty and ambiguous public speech, her sphinxlike stereotypical non-answers in the rare situations when she allowed herself to be questioned by journalists from outside her coterie (if you don't understand her, it's not bad translation – it's intended). This fit nicely with the German situation in Europe and beyond, exposed to cross-pressures so hard to address that they are better not addressed at all, to be left to a future that, hopefully, will never come. None of those lined up to succeed Merkel will ever match her skill in this, which makes it likely that European conflicts and German contradictions will increasingly break into the open. After Merkel, the many incompatible promises she made to buy time will, like the proverbial chickens, come home to roost, only to discover that the chicken coop is too small to house them all.

A brief look at how the new government, once in office, will likely deal with some of the current issues in European politics. On the so-called 'fiscal capacity' of the EMU, both Laschet/Baerbock and Baerbock/Scholz will be ready to make more concessions of the NGEU kind, financed by more debt to be taken up by the Union. Inside either government, however, there will be warnings against excessive borrowing, given that Germany will have to repay its own Corona debt in the coming decade. Laschet, especially, will have to cope with fears among his supporters of rising interest rates and of German taxpayers having to bail out member states. On the other hand, defending the euro is at the heart of the German national interest; while Laschet

will try to lower the price Germany has to pay for it, Baerbock may want to top it up for Green emotional enthusiasm and international public relations, with Scholz warning in the background not to overdo it. On foreign policy and national security, Baerbock/Scholz will be strictly Atlanticist and pro-NATO – pro Biden-the-good-president – whereas Laschet will lean more towards France and Macron’s idea of ‘European sovereignty’. As Chancellor, he will, however, have to accommodate Baerbock and the Atlanticists in the CDU, while Baerbock, as Chancellor or Foreign Minister, will like Merkel need the French-German tandem as a cover for German European hegemony.

There will also be differences on the Eastern flank of the EU, where Baerbock, following the United States, will support Ukrainian accession to NATO and the EU, and finance EU extension in the West Balkans. That she will also cancel North Stream 2 will be a point of contention in a Baerbock/Scholz government. Laschet will be more inclined towards France and seek some accommodation with Russia, on trade as well as security; he will also hesitate to be too strongly identified with the US on Eastern Europe and Ukraine. But then, he will be reminded by his Foreign Minister, Baerbock, as well as his own party that Germany’s national security depends on the American nuclear umbrella, which the French cannot and in any case will not replace. On immigration, Baerbock will steer a more nationalist course, in the sense of more generous admission of refugees to Germany, while her coalition partner, certainly with Laschet as Chancellor and Scholz as Vice Chancellor, will prefer a ‘European solution’, meaning that Turkey and Libya should keep migrants from crossing the Mediterranean.

What all this means is that one must not underestimate the pressures for continuity in German politics, with or without Merkel. Some national interests endure regardless of who's in government, for example those arising from the fact that Germany is located between four nuclear powers but is itself allowed only conventional weapons. Also, rhetorical Euro-enthusiasm notwithstanding, Germany cannot agree to unlimited Eurobonds being drawn from the EU if Germany would be at risk of becoming liable for them. Germany also needs a reasonably safe energy supply, as well as open markets and favourable exchange rates for its export industries. Domestic pressures making for continuity include the state elections, which unlike the midterm elections in the United States are dispersed over the entire federal electoral term. Already in 2022, the largest state, NRW, will elect a new Prime Minister to succeed Laschet, and both the SPD under Baerbock/Scholz and the CDU under Laschet/Baerbock would get very nervous if their participation in a Berlin coalition failed to help them restore some of their previous electoral support.

Centrism *über alles?*