

The German EU Debate Ahead of the European Elections: Plus Ça Change?

Following the September 2013 federal elections and three months of coalition building, Berlin finally got back to business in late 2013. Chancellor Angela Merkel has since been leading the second grand coalition, in her third term in office. Like its 2005–2009 predecessor, this coalition includes Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU), its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The coalition treaty suggests that Berlin is set to continue mostly along the lines of the past four years on the eurozone and wider EU affairs,¹ which is what analysts predicted during the election campaign.² Wolfgang Schäuble is one of only two CDU ministers who kept his position, at the helm of the Ministry of Finance, a sign of continuity for the government’s approach to the ongoing reform of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). In her first speech in the Bundestag following her re-election,³ Merkel III portrayed herself as Merkel II revisited. After a federal election campaign in which, to the surprise of many outside observers, European affairs were largely absent, on the eve of the last European Council in 2013 the chancellor outlined the main topics to be discussed at the upcoming summit, and her government’s EU priorities for the year ahead. Her speech sounded more like business as usual than a new departure. The chancellor’s government policy statement

¹ “Deutschlands Zukunft gestalten, Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD,” 18. Legislaturperiode, Berlin, 16 December 2013.

² For analyses on the German federal elections’ European dimension see J. Rappold, “Germany at the Polls—What Europe Can Expect,” *SIEPS European Policy Analysis*, iss. 14, September 2013; U. Guérot, “The German Election: What Europe Expects—and What Germany Will Not Do,” *ECFR Policy Brief*, no. 88, September 2013.

³ “Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel zum Europäischen Rat am 19./20. Dezember,” Berlin, 18 December 2013, www.bundesregierung.de.

in January 2014 did not give any more clarity about the prospect of a “real” monetary union and the treaty changes needed for such a step.⁴

But ironically, the start of 2014 marks a “nach der Wahl ist vor der Wahl”⁵ moment for Merkel and her new cabinet: less than six months into the start of the coalition government, European elections are to be held, on 25 May 2014, and parties have started to get in gear for their campaigns. Having just agreed on a joint programme to work together for the next four years, this year’s European campaign is to bring a dynamic into the German EU debate that will not leave the new government coalition in Berlin unaffected.

While in previous European elections “Europe” hardly mattered in the national context, 2014 is set to be different. For the first time since 1979, European party families decided to nominate candidates who will campaign for the office of commission president. This decision reflects the ambition in the European Parliament (EP) to turn 2014 into the year of the first truly European elections, offering citizens both faces and real choices at the ballot box.

In the German context, this prospect is of particular interest since Martin Schulz (SPD), the president of the European Parliament, was nominated as the candidate designate of the PES for commission president in November 2013.⁶ The European Social Democrats are set to challenge the past years of crisis management dominated by Conservative governments in the European Council, and a commission headed by a Conservative president. Martin Schulz demonstrated over the past months that he is determined to run an ambitious campaign.

No less interesting is that the Angela Merkel’s previous coalition partner, the Free Democratic Party (FDP), aims to re-conquer the national political arena in this year’s European elections. For the first time in the history of the Federal Republic, the FDP did not make it into the Bundestag in the September 2013 elections, and is therefore seizing the 2014 opportunity for its political comeback.

⁴ “Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel,” Deutscher Bundestag, Berlin, 29 January 2014, www.bundesregierung.de.

⁵ “After the elections everything remains as before the elections.”

⁶ Martin Schulz reiterated his commitment to lead the PES campaign at a high-level party congress of the SPD in Berlin on 25/26 January 2014 where he received 97% of votes by the SPD. At this congress the SPD also adopted its election manifesto and overall list of candidates. Schulz is set to be elected as PES’s official candidate at the party congress in Rome in March 2014.

Is the German public eventually to wake up to “debating Europe”? What impact will the European campaign have on the new coalition government? How can the Social Democrats match their ambition of changing the majorities in the EU with their performance as part of a coalition at home? And how do the other German parties place themselves in the run for the 96 German seats in the European Parliament (EP)? This paper will show that, actual turnout and results of the European elections aside, the drive of the Lisbon Treaty has started to Europeanise political parties in the German national context.

A German Frontrunner for the Party of European Socialists

The prospect of the European elections began to have an influence last year, during coalition talks. This happened mainly for two reasons. First, the new provision of the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, stipulating that the president of the European Commission is to be proposed by a qualified majority of Member States “taking into account the elections to the European Parliament” (Article 17, TEU), will be applied for the first time in 2014. Second, it was clear when the coalition talks started that Martin Schulz, the representative of the SPD’s leadership on European Union affairs, and in this capacity in charge of the EU during the coalition talks, was to be nominated as the candidate of the PES for the office of commission president.⁷ While regional elections in Germany have always mattered for the tactics within any federal coalition, such a European dimension is rare.

To a large extent it is related to the specific situation of Martin Schulz, who currently finds himself in a multi-dimensional chess game. As president of the European Parliament, he is a heavyweight at the European level. But to lead the PES campaign successfully, the pressure is on Schulz to bring home as many as possible of the weighty 96 German seats in the EP, where the German contingent is by far the largest.⁸ This is why Schulz has worked the German public tirelessly for many months of travels, speeches and media appearances (leave aside his strong presence in other EU countries), which

⁷ Put forward by the German SPD and its party leader Sigmar Gabriel, Martin Schulz was nominated as PES’s “candidate designate” for Commission president, on 6 November 2013, with coalition talks in Berlin still in full swing. See “PES Ratifies Nomination of Martin Schulz as ‘Candidate Designate’,” 6 November 2013, www.pes.eu.

⁸ In this current legislative term the German contingent has 99 seats in the EP, of which 42 are taken by the CDU/CSU, 23 by the SPD, 14 by the Greens, 12 by the FDP, and 8 by the Left Party.

has earned him both visibility and respect in his home country. It was the conservative daily newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that called Schulz “the continuation of Adenauer with social democratic means,” and “a real adversary on the Left” to Angela Merkel.⁹ His involvement in the coalition talks in Berlin sent a signal to fellow PES members that Schulz is as much a heavyweight at home as he is in Brussels and Strasbourg. Schulz demonstrated that he was in a prime position to influence the stance of the SPD on the fundamental direction of the EU, as well as the discussions in the wider coalition.

But that coalition context also comes with challenges. Not only is the SPD expected to support the coalition rather than to differentiate its policies from the Conservatives (that are dominating the coalition by numbers).¹⁰ This made Schulz, at least during the coalition talks, part of the Merkel system (it helped that during the talks the whole EU chapter was hidden in a subgroup of wider finance issues). Even more importantly, the vagueness of the Lisbon Treaty makes life difficult for Schulz. Chancellor Angela Merkel has made it clear that, in her reading, the Lisbon Treaty did not suggest there was an “automatic link”¹¹ between the party and frontrunner that comes first in the European elections, and the nomination of the candidate for the next commission president. Taking into account the election results, the nomination of the candidate ultimately remained with the Member States that were to decide over a number of top positions this year—and majorities in the next EP might turn out slim. This stance is open to challenge, but as a tactical move it has given Merkel the upper hand in the power game for the moment. Will she agree to present Martin Schulz as the German nomination for commission president if the PES comes in first in the elections? Or, to put it differently, could she possibly disagree? There are currently a lot of tactical considerations around this issue, but it is clear that Schulz has to balance his campaign and place it both within the wider European context (think of Greece, Spain or Portugal), as well as that of German domestic politics in the coming months. The government coalition in Berlin agreed to consider the coalition and the elections as separate issues. While it is doubtful that this

⁹ D. Schümer, “Herr Präsident. Unterwegs mit Martin Schulz,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27 April 2013.

¹⁰ Interestingly, the coalition agreement stipulates that all coalition parties commit to fairness vis-à-vis one another in the European elections.

¹¹ See “German Coalition Talks Cast Long Shadow over EU Elections,” *EurActiv*, 29 October 2013, www.euractiv.com.

will be possible, in the German context, Schulz is likely to play softer than in his campaign elsewhere in Europe.

Who Is Fighting Whom?

Overall, the European elections are playing out in a domestic setting similar to the 2013 federal elections. The majority of Germans continue to be unaffected by the crisis that surrounds them, and Chancellor Merkel has continued her low-key approach to EU reform. Thus, EU affairs are not yet a subject of particular attention or even fierce controversy in the wider public arena, despite the strong performance of the new anti-euro Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) Party founded in February 2013. In September 2013, only a few months into its existence, the AfD won 4.7% of the votes and only just failed to enter the Bundestag. It is also likely to score well in the European elections.

The main issue in Germany is therefore about mobilisation. To avoid a record-low turnout and/or disproportionate gains by euro-sceptic, xenophobic and extremist parties, the parties of the political centre are set to mobilise voters to go to the ballot boxes. In February 2014, the Federal Constitutional Court declared the 3% EP threshold unconstitutional; in theory, this should enable the smaller parties to win seats more easily. This is likely to contribute to a fragmentation of the German EP representation and has become a subject of controversial debate.

Through this lens, the adversary of Schulz is not so much the Conservative political centre in Germany, but the parties on the margins of both left and right. A fragmented EP, potentially also with an increasing number of spoilers, is a prospect that worries not only any future commission president, who will have to steer important legislation through the EP and the council. Such a prospect also concerns those who want to give the EP more rights, since this argument will be more difficult to make in a paralysed or ridiculed EP. Although ambitions vary in greater detail, there is an overall agreement in the coalition government in Berlin that a strong and working EP is vital to the future of the EU, and that it is certainly vital with regard to future votes on the new eurozone architecture.

With the new prospect of a German anti-euro party, as well as a strengthening of xenophobic parties in the EP, there is a common denominator for Schulz and the SPD on the one hand, and the CDU/CSU

on the other. In the speech following his election as the SPD's frontrunner at the party congress in Berlin 26 January 2014,¹² Martin Schulz avoided a direct attack on the German Conservatives and Angela Merkel, who Social Democrats elsewhere in the EU blame for a failing policy of austerity. The speech was statesmen-like and almost sounded detached from the split between left and right in the wider European context. At the same time, this was far from a speech that glossed over the fundamental crisis of the union. Such an approach might work for Schulz in Germany. But analysts predict that the race between the European People's Party (EPP) and the PES will be very close,¹³ which suggests a more aggressive strategy of demarcation from conservative parties, certainly in the countries where the EU debate is more polarised than in Germany. This suggests Martin Schulz has to perform a balancing act in the coming months.

A Merkel-type statesman strategy at home certainly makes it easier for top SPD politicians to support Martin Schulz in winning the PES campaign without stirring controversy within the coalition government. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, for example, who returned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after four years of leading the SPD opposition group in the Bundestag, accentuated both his role as foreign minister and his SPD identity on his first travels in Europe. When meeting his French counterpart, socialist Laurent Fabius, in Paris in January 2013, he announced that they were not only planning to coordinate travels in their roles as ministers, but also to campaign for the EU in the coming months. When he travelled to London in early February, Steinmeier not only met the UK foreign minister, William Hague, but also Labour leader Ed Miliband. It was then no coincidence that Michael Roth, Steinmeier's parliamentary secretary in the foreign office, a politician strongly rooted in the SPD, chose to meet two Social Democratic EU Commissioners, László Andor (employment, social affairs and inclusion) and Maroš Šefčovič (EU inter-institutional relations and administration) on his first visit to Brussels. Much of this is still part of the normal repertoire of any government, which, after all, is made up of politicians, but European party politics matter increasingly.

¹² See: "Rede des Spitzenkandidaten der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands für die Europawahl 2014 Martin Schulz beim außerordentlichen SPD-Bundesparteitag," 26 January 2014, Berlin, www.spd.de.

¹³ See Y. Bertoincini, V. Kreilinger, *What Political Balance of Power in the Next European Parliament?*, Notre Europe—Institut Jacques Delors, Policy Paper 102, 24 November 2013.

What Schulz did make very clear in his January 2014 speech was that in his campaign he was to fight parties on the extreme right that were set to destroy the very values of the union. Compared to countries such as France or the Netherlands, the German extreme right wing parties have so far proved less of a threat to the political centre. However, the mere prospect and the situation in neighbouring countries is something that has the potential to mobilise voters in Germany.

Does the Merkel Factor Prevail?

Angela Merkel finds herself in a comfortable position for the time being. She has managed to maintain her domestic strategy on EU affairs from previous years until now. Knowing that, among the German electorate, there is potentially powerful opposition to further integrating the eurozone, she capitalises on the sense of trust that many Germans placed in her in the September elections. Merkel and her party have cautiously avoided spelling out where the coalition wants to take the eurozone in the coming months and years. The CDU's manifesto for the 2013 federal elections remained both grand and vague on European issues, and the coalition agreement does not offer much greater detail, a recipe Merkel calculates still holds in Germany.

Merkel has no interest in major controversies over the future of the eurozone breaking out in Germany during the European election campaign. She knows her coalition has to address EU treaty reform, to which she alluded in both her December 2013 and January 2014 speeches in the Bundestag, at some stage after the elections. But she wants to avoid a fundamental debate on this issue before the end of May 2014. Her aim for the elections is to help Conservative MEP candidates capitalise on her weight in Germany, to mobilise and occupy as much of the centre as possible (here, Schulz can be helpful), and to keep things quiet otherwise. Both CDU and CSU are taking their time, and will only officially launch their election campaigns in April 2014.¹⁴

The EPP, then, is to decide its joint candidate at the party congress in Dublin 6/7 March 2014, with Jean-Claude Juncker and Michel Barnier competing over who will lead the EPP campaign. Jean-Claude Juncker as the EPP's candidate could become uncomfortable for Merkel. Since leaving

¹⁴ As of March 2014, see the draft European election manifesto of the CDU: *Europapolitischer Antrag des CDU-Bundesvorstands an den 26. Parteitag*, www.cdu.de.

office, Juncker has been a strong critic of the mechanics of the euro rescue, a debate that Merkel wants to avoid at home. Being fluent in German, in partnership with Martin Schulz, and challenged by the Alternative für Deutschland, Juncker could add just the kind of dynamics to the campaign that Merkel and the CDU would rather like to avoid.

The AfD has indeed the potential to spoil any such low-key strategy of the German chancellor. But, while the SPD presented both its list of candidates and its platform to get Martin Schulz started in January 2013,¹⁵ the AfD, convening that same weekend, did not manage to overcome internal controversies over its manifesto. This is yet another sign of the new party struggling to mature with regard to its programme. However, even without a much elaborated platform for the federal elections,¹⁶ the AfD almost made it into the Bundestag last autumn. And with Bernd Lucke and Hans-Olaf Henkel as top candidates in the European elections, the AfD is likely to get significant media attention.

Die Linke (The Left Party) is doing Merkel—and even more the SPD—the favour of yet another internal struggle. Discussions in the drafting of the election manifesto adopted at the party congress in Hamburg on 15/16 February 2014 revealed divisions in the party leadership over the party's EU orientation.¹⁷ It was also criticised by members of Die Linke in the European Parliament.

As to Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (The Green Party), at national level the party is still recovering from its losses in the federal elections. They lost more than 2% of votes compared to 2009, even in the favourable environment of policies such as the Energiewende, and started a process of re-orientation in late 2013. In general, however, they support the coalition government's overall direction of “more Europe,”¹⁸ which makes them less of an adversary to Merkel. But the campaign of the European Greens will certainly have visibility in Germany, with German Ska Keller voted in as

¹⁵ See “Europa eine Richtung geben,” Leitantrag Europa (Europe Manifesto), Berlin, 26 January 2014, www.spd.de/linkableblob/114364/data/20140120_leitantrag_europa.pdf.

¹⁶ See “Wahlprogramm der Alternative für Deutschland (Bundestagswahl 2013),” Parteitagbeschluss vom 14.04.2013, www.alternativefuer.de.

¹⁷ “Linke Streitet über Europapolitischen Kurs,” *Süddeutsche.de*, 3 January 2014.

¹⁸ See the European elections manifesto adopted at the party congress in Dresden 7–9 February 2014: “Europa mitentscheiden, erneuern, zusammenhalten,” Beschluss (vorläufig) Europawahlprogramm 2014 von Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 7–9 February 2014, www.gruene.de.

one of the frontrunners of the campaign in the first ever European primaries in January 2014. Keller's focus will be on youth unemployment, and asylum and refugee policies, two subjects that get a lot of attention across Europe at the moment. The German Greens, then, will be led by an MEP and veteran ecologist Rebecca Harms.

Winning Germany Back through Europe: The Case of the FDP

A most interesting case in this year's European elections is the campaign of the FDP. For the first time in the history of the Federal Republic, the Free Democrats did not make it into the Bundestag last September. Since then, the party has gone through a process of re-defining its identity and political goals, and has elected a new leadership. The European elections are seen as an opportunity to re-conquer political space in Germany, as the party works towards its return to the Bundestag in the next federal elections.

As early as 19 January 2014, the FDP nominated its frontrunner, MEP Alexander Graf Lambsdorff, and adopted a very detailed party manifesto with concrete suggestions in all areas of EU policy.¹⁹ The programme places the FDP as firmly rooted in the European idea, committed to building a federation, to further integration, and to strengthening the freedom and civil rights of European Union citizens. At the same time, the party makes the case for EU reform (including the proposal for a mechanism of withdrawal from the eurozone), which aims to make it attractive to almost half a million voters that it lost to the AfD in the federal elections last year.²⁰

With the dual objective of the European Parliament (in the short term) and the Bundestag (in the longer term), the FDP is likely to organise a high-profile campaign in Germany in the coming months, to make it into the European Parliament and to send a signal of determined realignment. In this process, the FDP will want to contribute to "debating Europe" in Germany and challenge Angela Merkel's silence on the future direction of the eurozone. Unlike the SPD, with its coalition constraints, the FDP can develop real punch vis-à-vis the Merkel government.

¹⁹ "Das Braucht Europa!," Programm der Freien Demokratischen Partei für die Wahl zum VIII. Europäischen Parlament 2014, Beschluss des Europaparteitages der FDP, Bonn, 19 January 2014, www.fdp.de (preliminary version).

²⁰ D. Deckers, "Von Großen und Gernegroßen," *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 24 September 2013, www.faz.net.

2014 is set to be the year in which Germans will eventually embark on discussing European alternatives. Eurozone reform, data security and mobility in the single market are subjects high on the European agenda that matter for the wider German public. The constellation of a German PES frontrunner, an ambitious FDP, a new anti-euro party and the threat of radicalism in the wider European context have the potential to bring more political drama to the 2014 European elections in Germany.