

What does an EU without Merkel look like?

Blog post by Adviser Denzil Davidson, 26 April 2021

Given how its neighbours have fared in comparison, the predictability - some would say the boredom - of German politics may have been a blessing. Chancellor Merkel and a CDU/CSU government have been a fixture of the EU for sixteen years. The Chancellor has long been the EU's most important political actor and the CDU/CSU, through the EPP, its most powerful political party. That this would remain so in the elections of 2009, 2013 and even 2017, was never really in doubt.

Little is currently certain. We do now know who the potential next chancellors are - Laschet for the CDU, Baerbock for the Greens and, at a considerable stretch, Scholz for the SPD. It is the sign of how transformed German politics is that it is likelier that the next German government will include the Greens than the CDU.

It would be a mistake to predict the outcome of September's election too confidently. Six months ago, the German government seemed to have handled the pandemic better than most its peers and the CDU/CSU were riding high. Now, it seems to have done worse and one poll puts it at an historic low. That a few CDU/CSU MPs seem to have sought to profit corruptly from the provision of health supplies in a deadly pandemic has not exactly helped, either. Come September, by when vaccine distribution is expected to have radically improved, the public mood may again be different. But unless the change in the CDU/CSU's fortunes is truly dramatic, three outcomes are most probable: a CDU/CSU and Green coalition, a Green/Social Democrat/Free Democrat (the "traffic light"/*Ampel* coalition) and, least likely but a political risk the CDU may highlight, red/red/green: Social Democrat/the Left/Green.

So, we should expect not only a change of chancellor but a change of coalition partners. This will have consequences for Germany's position and policy in the EU. The policy impacts will be most felt in foreign and environmental policies and, perhaps, the future of the euro zone and EU integration.

English speaking commentators are already excited at the prospect of the Greens driving a more values-driven, less commercial German foreign policy. This would be far more sceptical of Chinese investment - the CAI's chances of ratification are already slim, but the Greens in a German government would see it finished. It would be quicker to denounce the Kremlin's behaviour and the Greens would want the German government's support to be withdrawn from Nordstream 2. So far, so much music to Washington's ears, but there is a contrast between Green politicians' professed willingness to incur some economic pain for a more moral posture and the party's divisions on the place of hard power which underpins security, in particular Germany's defence spending and the place of American nuclear warheads on German soil. Both attitudes could prove a source of tension with the CDU/CSU as a coalition partner, although there would be some centre-right MPs cheering them on the former.

On the environment the Greens would press for more ambitious EU climate change goals and their plan for a national phase out date for fossil-fuelled cars would also have a European knock-on effect. France and eastern EU member states who want to secure nuclear and gas's place in the EU green taxonomy must hope they succeed before a greener German government forms.

The Greens' enthusiasm for deeper political integration and their relative - for Germany - lack of reservations about deeper fiscal integration and movement towards a transfer union would change and disturb the EU's dynamic. As the conference on the future of Europe gets under way this could create a new impetus for treaty change, which many member states fervently hope to avoid, and to efforts to make the Recovery Fund a permanent feature. Both would delight President Macron but would put northern European countries on the defensive. The latter, at least, could also strain coalition relations with either the CDU/CDU or FDP.

But the personal and political impact of a change of chancellor and coalition complexion will be at least as big.

The centre-right EPP alliance has been the most powerful political force in the EU for as long as Merkel has been chancellor. Its leading position in the Council, along with that in the European Parliament, has meant that the Commission presidency has been held by the EPP since 2004. Top EU jobs are decided at the leader level, so were the CDU/CSU to lose the chancellorship the chances that von der Leyen's successor would come from a different political family would rise. Von der Leyen herself would lose her home country's political sponsorship, making her job somewhat lonelier. In the European Council the largest EPP-led member state would become Romania: the EPP's Council pre-meetings would become significantly less influential.

German political parties have excelled in influencing European politics through their sister party networks and no party is better networked than the CDU. That has been one source of Merkel's and Germany's strength in EU leadership. But no EU member state has a Green head of state or government who attends the European Council. The Council would be less friendly turf for a chancellor Baerbock.

The impact of Merkel's personal departure should not be underestimated. Her extraordinary command of domestic politics ensured the stability and longevity of her position, a factor in her authority with her EU peers. There is no guarantee that her successor, whoever it is, will have the same skill.

If Merkel the domestic politician is a big pair of shoes to fill, Merkel the European politician is bigger still. Having myself attended more than twenty European Councils in two successive British prime ministers' delegations, it was hard to miss how often how crucial she was to brokering agreement. Merkel was at times the de facto European Council president in the room: understanding others' positions, bringing order to discussions that had got out of control, finding common ground. Her personal qualities - the tact not to flaunt her own country's strength, the persistent interest in finding solutions that work for others - will be hard to match. The European Council may be a less functional place without her. She was chancellor through several EU crises. With a chancellor who was less of a stateswoman, they could have been much worse.

The politics of the EU is a careful balancing act for any German chancellor. To keep the EU working well, they must forge a constructive working relationship with the French president. They must ensure the interests of northern and eastern Europe are heard, who lost a frequent big member state champion with the UK's departure. They must at least not alienate the southern, not easy in previous euro zone crises.

The EU will find that life after Merkel will take some getting used to. When the next crisis hits, we shall find out how well the EU can do without her.