



## Looking Ahead to the German Elections

*GMF Experts From Across the Atlantic On Their Expectations For The New Bundestag*

**Washington:** American leadership is not always a given. An opening has been created, and it is up to the next German chancellor to grab it.

**Paris:** Merkel has lost a liberal ally and gained adversaries. She understands that there is no alternative to the political partnership with Macron.

**Brussels:** There is a striking difference between the expectations for a new German government and the reality of the campaigns. The risk is that Merkel will continue to muddle-through.

**Ankara:** Turkey has played a surprisingly prominent role in the last months of the campaign. Ankara is waiting to see if rhetoric will become reality.

**Bucharest:** Romania expects the new German administration will continue to keep Russia responsible for its actions in the region and throughout Europe.

**Belgrade:** If Merkel's party fails to win a strong majority, the Balkans fear a coalition compromise that will shift attention away from their region.

**Warsaw:** Though Europe's future and Poland's place in it are at stake, Poles are more focused on the topic of WWII reparations.

Americans only have eyes for Angela Merkel. When we look across the Atlantic at the German election, we cannot imagine that anyone other than Merkel could lead Europe's most powerful economy. Merkel has become the indispensable European.

Merkel looks poised to glide to victory on September 24 and secure a fourth term in office. Even if she succeeds, we would be mistaken to assume that German politics is static. Merkel's dominance of Germany's highest office masks a shifting political landscape with a record seven parties likely to be represented in Parliament.

Assuming the CDU is the big winner later this month, Merkel will set out to build a new coalition. Some argue that the path of least resistance would be for Merkel to restart another Grand Coalition. But Merkel herself may not want to pursue that option, because she senses that the electorate is uneasy. German voters may well opt for stability in their chancellor at a time when the world around them is in tumult, but they also are hungry for change. After 12 years in office, Merkel may want to reinvigorate her government by changing up her coalition partner. If the liberal swing party, the Free Democrats, do well enough, perhaps she can forge a black (CDU)-yellow (FDP) coalition. Or if the numbers do not suffice, some are betting on the addition of the Greens. Thus,



we should stay tuned in well past the 24th. A new and different coalition will mean four more years of Angela Merkel will not be old hat.

- *Karen Donfried, GMF President*

## Washington Waits for Leadership

Viewed from Trump's divided America, the German election campaign has seemed refreshingly uneventful. The resilience and stability of German democracy in resisting significant support for populist candidates has been reassuring. But lurking underneath the surface are very real challenges. German policymakers face some of the same hurdles as their American counterparts in responding to voter anxiety about the changing nature of modern economies, global threats like terrorism, and an increasingly unstable world. The next government must determine how to absorb more than a million refugees and asylum seekers into German society. Meanwhile, Russia will continue to attempt to undermine German democracy, even if its tactics are less public than in the United States and France.

Despite these challenges, the relative tranquility of German politics is a testament to the progress made by postwar Germany and the allied powers that facilitated this progress. The remarks of the Federal Republic's first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, in 1949 are worth reviewing. He highlighted the utter devastation that Germans have suffered, as well as the dangers of nationalism "with its attendant splintering of life in Europe."

Unlike 1949, a unified Germany is no longer reliant on the good will or permission of occupying powers. Yet, German politics has not entirely evolved from this 1949 mindset. The United States, but even more importantly, Germany's EU partners, need a strong and engaged government in Berlin that is willing not just to tackle its internal challenges and advance German economic interests, but to provide strategic leadership, all while convincing the German public that their country is ready to play this role. The last fifteen years have shown that American leadership is not always a given. An opening has been created; it is up to the next German chancellor to grab it just as Adenauer did in those dark and uncertain times 68 years ago.

The Trump administration, which has in many ways reverted to a more traditional engagement of European allies, may resist increased German autonomy given the issues on which the German agenda differs. Yet, more leadership from Berlin, especially on European security, is in the long-term interest of the United States given the global challenges in the coming decades. With her experience and her stature, Chancellor Merkel has the ability to grasp this opportunity if she forms the next government. Yet, leaders at the end of their tenure are often not bold and decisive figures and the current American president certainly is.

- *Jamie Fly, Senior Fellow and Director, Future of Geopolitics, Asia Program*

## Paris Plans for Renewed Partnership

With Brexit and the rise of populist governments in Central Europe, Merkel has lost a liberal ally and gained adversaries. In this context, she understands that there is no alternative to the political couple "M&M" that she forms with Macron.

The assumption is that Merkel will be comfortably re-elected, and thus everyone is already focused on how Macron and Merkel will manage to make concessions and pursue a more balanced burden-sharing. Both sides have already made efforts: Berlin is undertaking a profound strategic reposturing largely shaped by Paris, with Merkel pledging an increase in German military spending and stronger defense and industrial cooperation with France.

The presumption in Paris is that if she wins with a significant majority, it will be easier for Merkel to make compromises and to pursue deeper eurozone integration together with Macron. On the other hand, Macron has learned the lessons from his predecessors' passivity on migration, by showing Merkel that she is not isolated in the EU and that she can count on him to support her cause of a European response to migration challenges. His narrative of a "Europe that protects" also converges with Merkel's preoccupations and willingness to contain populism in Europe.

Both France and Germany will have to develop a more genuine European spirit: Merkel's ambition should consist in "Europeanizing Germany," instead of "Germanizing Europe" and understand that Germany's fate is intertwined with its partners, France primarily. Under Macron, France needs to compromise on national sovereignty at the EU level, including on defense, if it wants to integrate the EU on key issues. In the end, Berlin will want to have the last word and this will be clearer after Merkel's re-election. Paris' political influence in the tandem with Germany and other partners will depend on Macron's ability to carry out domestic reforms. This places a responsibility on Germany to help him, but depends of course on the composition of the German post-elections coalition — which is observers in Paris are now watching.

- *Alexandra de Hoop Scheffer, Senior Transatlantic Fellow and Director, GMF Paris*

## Europe's Unfounded Expectations

The contrast between expectations in Brussels from the German elections and the actual campaign could not be more striking. In Germany, the debates have barely touched upon the future of Europe; in the EU capital the widely held expectation is that, after years of cliff-hanging politics, the results of the German election will push Europe toward its regeneration. The long optimistic wave initiated with the French elections will reach its shores: the Macron-Merkel tandem will fix Europe and end this decade of turbulence.

From Europe's core, the Franco-German alliance would reach an agreement on the governance of the euro, the economy, and defense. Keen to reassert French leadership, Macron has already laid down many cards, spanning beyond the crisis areas to the deeper problems of democracy and legitimacy in the Union. Merkel would have the opportunity to use what is likely to be her last term in office to leave a legacy on the continent.

There are pitfalls in this way of reasoning, based on the assumptions that Germany will bend its staunchly held economic principles, that Merkel will prefer to end the "muddling through" that has characterized her European policy so far, that progress on defence

will actually make a difference, and that the other 25 member states (apart from the U.K.) will follow the lead gratefully. Time will tell whether it is wishful thinking.

- *Rosa Balfour, Senior Fellow, Europe Program*

## Tensions with Turkey Play a Role

Turkey became a highlight in the recent TV debate between the two main candidates for the German chancellorship, Angela Merkel and Martin Schulz, when Schulz made news by committing to end accession talks with Turkey. Meanwhile, Turkish President Erdoğan had previously declared the two big centrist parties (the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats) and the Greens to be "enemies of Turkey" and called on Turkish-Germans voters, who number around 1.2 million, to support other parties.

Tensions between Germany and Turkey have been increasing for some time now. Central to the discord is Turkey's jailing of journalists and human rights activists, including more than five German citizens, and Germany's granting of asylum to Turkish military officers who are suspects of the July 15, 2016 coup attempt.

Just weeks ahead of the election, Merkel's government, having decided that economic pressure is the only language Erdoğan understands, announced that Germany would implement economic measures against Turkey, including blocking the launch of Customs Union modernization between the EU and Turkey, working through the EU to reduce Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) funds to Turkey, and dissuading German tourists from traveling to Turkey. However, it is not clear that economic pressure will make Ankara change its ways.

Erdoğan and the Turkish government perceive the tough positioning of Germany's leaders as election posturing, meant to prevent the far-right parties from gaining ground. The assumption is that Merkel will back down once the election is over. However, Ankara might be as wrong about that as Berlin is about the effect economic coercion will have on Erdoğan. Merkel's position is based on an increasing anxiety toward developments in Turkey and is shared across the political spectrum

in Germany. Thus the new German government after September 24th might change its mind on Turkey, but only if Turkey normalizes its democracy.

- *Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı, Director, GMF Ankara*

## Romania Expects Stability and Support

After a full year of dramatic and intense elections in both the United States and Europe, upcoming German elections bring a sense of calm, predictability, and relief. The calm is felt all the way to Europe's Eastern border, where the drama of any important election is exacerbated by the Russian threat in the region and physical and political distance from Europe's center. Subject to both, Romania is hoping the end of this important election season will bring a general sense of stability and the willingness of major players to focus more on strategic decisions for the future of Europe, in both security and economy realms.

The expectations in Bucharest is that the newly re-elected German administration will continue to keep Russia responsible for its actions in the region and throughout Europe, and will keep security high on the agenda. Romania is deeply interested in security and cooperation in the region, and it has lately initiated or joined various regional formats, including the Bucharest 9 format that is meant to enhance both.

However, the regional initiatives have been met with skepticism by Berlin and other major players in Europe. It is expected, or at least hoped, that once elections are over a new (presumably Merkel-led) government will re-evaluate its positions, and pay more attention to the grievances of countries East of Berlin, and decide to support the formats Romania and its neighbors designed to help voice their concerns and hold the line against Russia.

A steady partner of Germany, Romania expects relations to deepen once the noise of the elections has quieted, and is looking for stronger economic and political cooperation. Should Romania start putting more emphasis on what it is able to deliver than on the fact that President Klaus Iohannis is a member of Romania's

ethnic German minority, the strategic benefits of such a relation will surely become even more obvious to the new/old German administration.

- *Alina Inayah, Director, Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation*

## Western Balkans Hope for No Changes

The German elections, which close the cycle of critical national elections across Europe, have been intently watched in the Balkans.

Although most of the analysis agree that Merkel's victory is undisputable, observers here know that the size of her majority and what coalition she will form will be significant. If the devil is in the details, in this case it is in the turnout percentage to assure the majoritarian governance of incumbent Chancellor Angela Merkel. If Merkel's party fails to win a strong majority, people in the Balkans fear that it could mean a coalition compromise involves a shift in the current foreign policy and approach toward the Western Balkans — leaving the region with less support, less attention, and less hope.

Chancellor Merkel and her government have shown a strong commitment to the Western Balkans. While some argue the focus has been more on stability rather than democracy, I would say she has been focused on concrete projects that have not been only of symbolic value. It was Merkel who launched the Berlin Process together with their partners France, Italy, and Great Britain promoting both the unity of the EU's policy toward the region and the need for it to fully integrate into the family of European nations. This process not only gave way to infrastructural projects such as highways and railways, but even advanced the reconciliation efforts in the region despite turbulences caused by the migration crisis and the rise of right-wing radicalization. The Berlin Process has also been crucial in supporting the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue.

Angela Merkel and her government are seen as a pillar of stability in the Western Balkans, primarily because of their dedication to the strong EU. A strong EU means stronger Balkan states. Should by any chance the German elections end with a much different result than

expected, small Western Balkan countries would face weeks or months of anxiety. The integrity of the region is highly dependent on the EU and its strongest member states.

- *Gordana Delić, Director, Balkan Trust for Democracy*

## Warsaw: The Important Ignored Elections

The German election campaign is suspiciously absent from Polish media and policy discourse — despite the fact that Polish–German relations is one of the hottest topics in that same space. The victory of Angela Merkel seems assured and uncontroversial, though this does not necessarily mean a continuation in Polish–German relations (especially in the European context). Even critics of Dr. Merkel recognize that from Poland’s perspective, she is a far better alternative to the Social Democrat Martin Schultz — especially given her skeptical views of Russia and her hesitancy to endorse the idea of multi-speed Europe. But it is not the German elections that dominate the headlines in Warsaw — it is the topic of WWII reparations that Poland might decide to seek from Germany. The topic was raised over the summer by leader of the Law and Justice (PiS) party Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who argues that Poland never relinquished claims to the reparations and should pursue them given the destruction of the country during WWII. This last Monday, Polish Parliament’s Office of Analysis also determined that Poland has right to war reparations from Germany. The government has not yet officially taken a stand, nor raised the issue with the government in Berlin. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is said to work on the issue, but for now it is primarily a domestic topic.

The issue of war reparations is raising the temperatures between political camps in Poland as well as in relations between the governments, but it is Germany’s position on the future shape of European Union that will have the biggest consequences for Poland. After the elections of Macron, France is clearly calling for the reform of eurozone and reforming the EU along the logic of multi-speed Europe. Chancellor Merkel has signaled initial support for Macron’s reforms, but the shape of German–France cooperation in the EU will only start to be defined after the September 24th elections. The multispeed logic for the EU, combined with potential

EU rule-of-law sanctions against Poland creates a very real, strategically important risk that Warsaw could be left on the margin of a renewed European Union — a situation unacceptable for any Polish government, no matter its political color. But, by and large, this is not what Warsaw is talking about nowadays.

- *Michał Baranowski, Director, GMF Warsaw*

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