

Eyes on Germany: Culture Wars on Climate Policy

Article by Inge Jooris

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The compromise reached on a disputed heating law allows the Greens to catch their breath after a scorching spring that saw them lose support in the polls. But the culture wars around climate policy seem set to become the new normal.

On 13 June, a sigh of relief could be heard from the Green Party headquarters in Berlin as far away as Brussels after it was confirmed that a controversial heating law will be debated by the Bundestag before the summer recess.

The news was greeted as a necessary breakthrough. The dispute over the law almost brought the government to its knees and opinion polls show it cost the Greens a lot of popular support. Postponing the debate until after the summer recess would only have compounded the damage done. How did things get so bad?

At the end of March, an unfinished draft by Economy and Climate Protection Minister Robert Habeck was leaked to the tabloid *Bild*. It stated that the Green minister wanted to introduce a ban on new oil and gas heating systems as early as 2024. The law would herald the end of gas and oil heating. “Without a rapid change of course in the area of building heating, Germany will not be able to achieve its climate goals and reduce its dependence on fossil fuels quickly,” the draft bill reads. Currently, households are responsible for around 10 per cent of Germany’s carbon dioxide emissions.

It was immediately clear that the person who leaked the bill to the press did not do so to do Habeck a favour. “I have to assume that it was done on purpose – to damage confidence in the government,” Habeck argued. “Since something like this does not happen by chance, I am a little worried that there is no will to reach an agreement at all.”

Criticism to Habeck did not only come from the opposition. FDP, the Liberal government partner, was quick to jump on the bandwagon of the opponents – although there were rumours that it was the Liberals who leaked the information.

Existing clichés about the Greens as a party of bans were eagerly invoked: the new law was a “Verbotsorgie”, an “orgy of prohibition”, and a sledgehammer that would have forced the demolition of well-functioning heating plants. It would also plunge people into poverty, it was said: not everyone could afford an expensive, energy-efficient installation. The law, its critics argued, was not technologically open but favoured heat pumps as the only possible alternative to oil and gas. The scarcity of pumps and skilled workers to install them was also underlined.

In the midst of all this fierce opposition, it emerged that Habeck’s right-hand man, Secretary of State Patrick Graichen, had helped his best man to get a key job at the German Energy Agency.

For the Greens, who were already losing ground in the polls, the decline accelerated. According to an Insa poll released in May, half of the Germans thought that Habeck should resign as economy minister.

Facing a backlash, the Greens did what they could to correct the image of a reckless law that would plunge people into poverty. Read: the law was made more social, but at the same time it was hollowed out. There would be support measures to help less well-off households through the transition, as well as more technological openness, a gradual implementation starting with new buildings, and a number of exemptions, such as for people aged 80 or more.

The FDP eventually agreed to the proposal within the government, but could not resist an eleventh-hour trick. The approval of the law was accompanied by a protocol statement, according to which the Ministry of Finance agreed to the bill in the knowledge that it would still be subject to possible changes during its discussion between parliamentary groups in the Bundestag. “Breach of promise,” said an irate Habeck.

If there was a ray of light for Habeck in this whole debacle, it was that it brought him closer to his former friend and Green co-leader, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock. According to Baerbock, Habeck had no reason to feel discouraged. “When Putin turned off the gas tap, Habeck steered us through an extremely difficult winter,” she said. “What I cannot understand at all is that those who not so long ago could not get enough of Russian gas and slept through the energy transition, now consider themselves the greatest heating experts.”

On 13 June, after weeks of wrangling, the government coalition partners agreed on a watered-down proposal. New heating systems using at least 65 per cent renewable energy will only be required in newly built properties from 1 January 2024. Everyone else can wait until a local heat plan is drawn up. This should be done by 2028 at the latest.

The bill will now be debated in the Bundestag. The Greens hope it will pass before the summer holidays begin, offering some much-needed cooling after a scorching spring.

After the stalling of the Kindergrundsicherung (a kind of basic insurance to lift children out of poverty), the internal party struggle over the recently concluded asylum agreement at the EU level, and the endless disputes with the Liberal Finance Minister Christian Lindner, the Greens could use a political success, even if it is a much watered-down law.

“I really fear that climate policy will become part of the culture wars,” European Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans said last week in an interview with Flemish daily *De Standaard*. This is precisely what has happened in Germany in recent months as the heating law has taken shape. The question is whether culture wars are a viable way to reach climate targets. For now, the Greens are licking their wounds.



Inge Jooris is a writer and communications consultant. She was previously head of communications at KVS, one of Belgium's largest municipal theatres, and spokesperson for the Flemish Greens. She is current advising Cinquantenaire 2030, a project to transform Brussels' Cinquantenaire Park into Belgium's cultural and scientific hotspot, and follows German politics for the Belgian Green parties, Groen and Ecolo.

Because of her years of experience as spokesperson for the Flemish Greens and her now broader view, we asked Inge Jooris to write a monthly column on the work of the German Greens, drawing on her own experience where possible and looking for lessons that could be useful to all European Green parties.

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