

Power Matters: Rethinking Germany's European Role

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In recent years, Germany has blocked attempts to deepen European integration and strengthen EU-wide environmental regulations. How has the country with the greatest responsibility – and the most incentives – to “act European” turned into an obstacle to effective EU policymaking?

Since the coalition government of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), and Liberals (FDP) took office in 2021, Germany has not played a particularly constructive role in EU decision-making. The latest substantial step towards deepening European integration in which Germany played an important role was the NextGenerationEU recovery package in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Since then, however, there have been no ambitious EU policy proposals initiated by Germany, or in tandem with France. Worse, Berlin has turned into a blocking force at EU level, throwing overboard carefully negotiated agreements – and thereby emboldening uncooperative behaviour by others.

The pro-market FDP, the junior partner of the coalition, bears the biggest responsibility for Germany's lacking European efforts. In 2023, the party pushed to water down carbon neutrality standards for e-fuels, ignoring EU legislative processes and backtracking on agreed-upon compromises. In March this year, the FDP's last-minute opposition to the landmark Nature Restoration Law opened the way for other EU governments to express their reservations. The law was approved by the European Parliament in February but failed to secure support in the EU Council. Earlier this year, the FDP almost toppled the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), leading to an 11th-hour abstention on corporate supply chain rules, which were eventually passed.

The FDP, which currently polls at around five per cent nationally – the required threshold to enter the Bundestag – is preventing 27 member states from finding a compromise simply to gather public attention in Germany. But the Liberals are not the only ones to blame for Germany's lacking European ambition. While Social Democrats and Greens consider themselves pro-European forces, they did little to nothing to prevent the FDP from instrumentalising EU policymaking. Instead, they played along, allowing the externalisation to the EU level of domestic feuds.

Olaf Scholz's social-democratic chancellery, for example, has not acted European, particularly on defence issues. Earlier this year, Germany asked for a “rebate” on its contributions to the European Peace Facility, a financing instrument aimed at preventing conflicts. While differences in approaches to foreign and security policy have always existed in Europe, especially between France and Germany, they don't have to lead to paralysis. In view of the US elections in November this year, Germany should have a clear interest in strengthening Europe's defence capacity. A second Trump presidency could be very risky for European security, given that Russia is unlikely to stop its aggressive behaviour at the EU's borders.

A European role for the Greens?

Also in foreign policy, the German government has not been up to the task, despite Green Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's ambitious agenda. Germany has struggled to cope with ongoing geopolitical shifts, which has led to a full-blown identity crisis. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has put Germany's dependence on Russian gas on the spot. Then, Hamas' attack on Israel and Israel's retaliation war on Gaza, which has killed more than 35,000 civilians and caused a famine, has led to difficult conversations in Germany. Many decision-makers seem lost when the pillars of German identity – pacifism and unconditional support of Israel – become untenable. While Greens are trying to deal with these crises at the German level, they seem to have forgotten to act European.

Germany, which should be the most aware of its own influence and with the greatest historical responsibility to act European, seems to be oblivious to the consequences of its own actions.

Greens could be much more strategic when it comes to strengthening Germany's EU policy. First, they could reinforce the foreign and economics ministries' role in EU policymaking, rather than leaving the task to the chancellery, especially as Social Democrats seem to have little interest in the work done in Brussels. Second, they should make use of the yawning gap left by the SPD and the FDP to become the German face of European policymaking and strengthen relations with partners in Europe. This is even more important in light of Scholz's less-than-idyllic relations with France's President Emmanuel Macron. Lastly, they could fight harder to prioritise EU interest over coalition infighting. Even if the Greens were not the ones to block EU legislation, they should have done more to keep the Liberals from using the EU for their domestic electoral interests, and to pressure the SPD to act more European.

Uncooperative Germany

The shift to the far-right across Europe already makes EU decision-making difficult enough. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán regularly disrupts compromises and blackmails his peers, and the political differences between the 27 member states are extremely difficult to bridge. This requires pro-European governments – such as, theoretically, Germany's ruling coalition – to put much more effort into advancing the EU's agenda.

The challenges facing Europe are complex: the economic and security context requires decision-makers to make drastic decisions, such as rethinking energy supply, combatting rampant inflation, and dealing with impending economic recession. This "polycrisis" necessitates an EU with sufficient capacity to act, and a strong European Commission able to propose ambitious initiatives.

Unfortunately, Germany seems unwilling to put the necessary weight behind new policy initiatives; even less so when it comes to reforms of the EU institutions. Instead, Chancellor Scholz seems to believe that he can replicate Angela Merkel's modus operandi, which consisted mostly of sustaining the status quo. However, following such a path is a sign of tone-deafness in the current geopolitical context. In addition, Scholz is behaving in a much less cooperative way than Merkel did, not informing his French counterparts about important German initiatives with effects for the entire EU single market (as in the case of the "Doppelwumms", domestic subsidies to support the national economy introduced by the government in 2022). The lack of coordination between Berlin and Paris was also evident in Scholz's recent visit to China, and China's President Xi Jinping's visit to France in early May.

Germany, the country that should be the most aware of its own influence, and the one with the greatest historical responsibility to act European, seems to be oblivious to the consequences of its own actions – to the detriment of the entire EU.

Power as oppression

If German political actors struggle to take up a more constructive role in Europe, it is partly because of their troubled relationship with political power. Until today, power retains a negative connotation in Germany. It is considered a force of oppression and manipulation, framed in democratic discourse as something to avoid, or at least to keep quiet about. This negative vision is a remnant of Germany's dark history, where power was used to bring about unimaginable suffering and violence. It is no coincidence that Carl Schmitt, the constitutional lawyer of the Nazis, wrote one of the most compelling books about the use of power. Unfortunately, this also means that power is still equated with violence, ignoring Hannah Arendt's lesson that violence is a sign of weakness, and that political power does not need to use violence.

The taboo around power prevents a necessary public debate on its use.

This negative connotation has made power a taboo subject linked to nationalism and violence, rather than a central tenet of democratic politics. The unintended consequence of this refusal to talk about power is that it leaves room for political actors to act irresponsibly, and for the far right to shape its own understanding of power.

In Germany, the rise of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in recent years has influenced other political parties, from the centre-right CDU to the Social Democrats, shifting the public debate even further to the right, and promoting a regressive and anti-democratic understating of power. Despite the far-right threat, democratic forces stay idle: the taboo around power prevents a necessary public debate on its use.

The less we talk about power, the more we accept its current rules. However, power relations are inherent to social relations. In a democracy, it is up to us to define what forms of power we give value to, and which ones we consider less desirable. Currently, we mostly interpret power as "power over" and as a tool to advance individual interests, rather than as "power to" or "power with" – a tool to act together for a greater good. Power is seen as a "zero-sum game": If someone gains power, someone else will lose it.

This "thin" definition of power is the root of many of today's problems, in Germany and in Europe. For instance, many countries fear that they will lose power to others if they give up their veto rights in the EU. They simply do not see the benefits of acting together, such as a stronger positioning on the international stage or a stronger national economy thanks to a deepened EU single market.

Again, Germany is a case in point. The ruling coalition is blocking EU legislation in the name of German interest, but the result of a less united EU is a weaker Germany. A more constructive and collaborative approach by Berlin would not lead to an abandonment of national interests or a loss of national sovereignty. On the contrary, it would prevent Germany from becoming isolated in Europe.

Power for constructive change

Progressive political forces should strive to redefine power as a tool to advance the common good via collective action. In German, *Gestaltungsmacht* (“power to act”) enshrines this notion of constructive power. Without such power to act, politics will not be able to bring forward the change we need, for instance for a green and fair transition.

Political power in democracies is supposed to improve citizens’ lives, prosperity, and wellbeing. Citizens have better life quality in democracies than in autocracies, and it should therefore be in our interest to uphold democratic power. To do so, we need more inclusive and representative political forces, as well as institutions that are more resistant to potential capture by vested interests, be they private actors or foreign countries.

In addition, very little attention is currently being given to collective action: the power to change society through alliances and collaboration. Traditionally, trade unions channelled this collective power to fight for labour rights, and women’s associations leveraged it to fight for equality. More recently, climate movements such as Fridays for Future have used it to call for climate action. Even the EU is based on a collective understanding of power, as most member states are aware that they have little leverage compared to countries such as China, the US, India, or Brazil.

Germany should use its weight to advance a constructive understanding of power at the European stage. Over ten years ago, in the wake of the European debt crisis, sociologist Ulrich Beck criticised the emergence of a “German Europe” rather than a “European Germany”. The rise of the AfD, which is currently polling at around 20 per cent nationally, is another sign of Germany turning less European and more nationalistic. If Germany does not open an honest debate on its use of power at the EU level, it is likely that it will continue to act as a blocking force in EU policymaking after the European elections in June.

Advancing the common good

Beyond the need for a powerful EU, Berlin has an interest in strengthening its European position. Germany might soon lose its status as economic powerhouse, especially if energy prices remain high and other countries continue to subsidise their own industries. Therefore, Germany should invest in strong partnerships – not only with the US and China, who are competitors in many respects – by deepening the single market, ensuring good relations with old-time friends and allies, and focusing on overcoming differences with France.

Rogue “power moves” in the EU will, in the long term, weaken Germany’s position in European decision-making. The German government is unlikely to be recognised by its peers as a reliable and respected partner if it continues on its current path. This could make other member states reluctant to engage in dialogue. This, in turn, would reduce Germany’s leverage in future negotiations, and harm its ability to influence EU decision-making.

Worse, Germany’s disrespect of hard-fought EU compromises could lead the way for other countries to disregard European decision-making. The irony is astonishing: a progressive government of Social Democrats, Greens, and Liberals could be responsible for weakening the EU’s capacity to respond to crises and plan for the future.

There is still a small window of opportunity for the German government to change course. In the year between the European elections and the next federal elections in Germany, Berlin could start a serious debate on its power in Brussels and position itself as a constructive force for the common European

good.



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