

Cornelia Woll

Germany: "The Centre must not fall in the trap of the far right".

Interview with led by Stratis Angelis

Do you expect a further rise for the far right in the upcoming elections in Germany? Will it be an election on the economy or on the defense of democracy? Is there a temptation in CDU/CSU for any form of cooperation with AfD?

Recent polls position the far right AfD at around 18%, which would be an 8% increase from the previous election. It could well become the second strongest party in Parliament. The strong foothold of the far right has already been confirmed in the recent sub-national elections, not just in Eastern Germany, but also in the state elections in Bavaria and Hesse. So it looks like the formation of a future German government will be complicated. Since most centrist parties refuse to form a coalition with the far right, they might well be obliged to enter another three-party coalition. We have just learned how difficult and unstable such coalitions can be.

There are two topics the AfD strives on: economic nationalism and a tough stance on migration. Economically, they employ grievances about deindustrialization, high energy costs or the constraints of an ecological transition and propose simple sounding "Germany first" solutions. Culturally, they garner fears about labor markets access, security in the streets or societal changes and use migration as an easy scapegoat.

The challenge for the electoral campaign of the centrist parties is to address the concerns voters consider central, without falling into the agenda-setting trap of the far right. We have seen in the past months that centrist party politicians adopting populist rhetoric, for example by pointing the finger at foreigners, do not increase their own vote shares, but those of the far right. If they want to defend their vote base, centrist parties must develop clear messages about economic and industrial strategy, accessible labor markets and the future of work, as well as living standards in both cities and the countryside. That implies charting a clear way towards a stable and secure economy. To answer your question directly: in order to defend democracy, the election must be on the economy.

What is the future of German-Russia relations? How big is the fallout of the war in Ukraine for the German economy and is there a way to mend broken trust?

Relations between Germany and Russia have always been marked by a great deal of mistrust. In fact, Germany has been among the countries with the highest disapproval of Russian leadership for decades. After all, Eastern Germany had been under Communist control during the Soviet empire. Still, successive German governments attempted to move towards more peaceful engagement in the last decades by strengthening economic ties, an approach labelled "Wandel durch Handel" or change through trade. This was also driven by German industry eager to exploit opportunities in the East and gain access to cheap energy, which may explain why the approach was not challenged when Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 or annexed Crimea in 2014. But it did break down when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine

in February 2022, as German chancellor Olaf Scholz noted in his “Zeitenwende” speech. This rupture will outlast the war in Ukraine itself.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, German politicians have been freer to put words on the dire state of German-Russian relations. We are no longer in the terrain of a fallout or broken trust. German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock clearly stated that Germany is in the midst of a hybrid war waged by Russia. Germany had to fight cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns aiming to destabilize its society and elections for over a decade. We now see a whole portfolio of tactics including the sabotage of infrastructures, economic pressures, blackmails, the use of proxies and the weaponization of migration flows in third countries trying to enter the European Union. Indeed, an important support for the rise of extreme parties in Western democracies are the disinformation campaigns and the manipulation of both economic and security concerns by Russia. Even more concretely, media has revealed direct financial ties of German politicians on the far right and the far left with Russian sources.

Centrist parties all agree that Germany must respond to these attacks, invest in its defense capacities, and make its economy more autonomous, its digital and technological infrastructure more secure and its society more resilient. The economy can no longer be considered as a space independent from the country’ security apparatus and this means paying the price necessary to adapt.

There was a time when Germany and France were described as the locomotive of the E.U. Can we still talk of a locomotive and where is the European train heading?

To stay with your metaphor, the locomotive has just lost its German wheels on November 6th when the coalition broke down and its French wheels less than a month later when the French government was censored. Even prior to these oddly parallel developments, both countries suffered from weak governments with little capacity to move beyond domestic struggles to prepare the future of Europe. Those looking for leadership will not be comforted by recent developments in French and German politics.

And yet, the EU has never been more relevant than today. Europe is facing an increasingly dangerous and unstable world, with heightened security concerns on its Eastern front and in the Middle East, doubts about its reliance on NATO, and an economy that is too fragmented to keep up with the both the United States and China.

In the past, agreement on European projects were often born out of crisis and ruptures. The Single European Act was a direct response to the fact that European growth was lagging behind most developed economies in the 1980s, agreement on the Euro was tied to German reunification, the 2004 enlargement to the recompositing of Europe after the fall of the Wall, or more recently joint public debt in response to the pandemic. I am confident that we will see breakthroughs on European defense or industrial strategy and believe Germany and France will still be important partners at the negotiation table. Leadership, however, might come from elsewhere. In a union of 27, that is fitting and reassuring.

English translation of the published interview in Greek:

<https://www.tovima.gr/2024/12/07/world/germania-to-kentro-den-prepei-na-pesei-stin-pagida-tis-akrodeksias/>