

IRMO BRIEF

11
2017

German Elections' Aftermath: Self-Perceptions and Perceptions

by Dr. Sebastian von Münchow

Introduction

Three days after Germany's Parliamentary Elections in late September 2017, Dirk Kurbjuweit, Deputy Chief Editor of Hamburg-based leading weekly magazine Der Spiegel wrote: "The days of Germany as a global power are probably numbered. (Those days) started with the refugee crisis in 2015 [...] and had their best moments after the election of Donald Trump as US president." He continues: "[...] the election results on Sunday ended this new high. For a liberal abroad, Germany was foremost a moral super power due to its refugee policies."

For a liberal abroad, Germany was foremost a moral super power due to its refugee policies."

The Shock

In fact, less than 33 % of the voters supported Angela Merkel's Christian-Democrats (CDU and Bavaria's CSU), at the cost of almost 9% fewer votes compared with 2013. The competing Social-Democrats (SPD) lost around 5% and hardly made it above a psychologically important 20% threshold. After a four-year interruption due to the constitutional 5% entry clause, the Liberal Party (*Freie Demokratische Partei, FDP*) returned with a respectful result of more than 10%. The Greens and former ruling socialist party of East Germany, today's *Die Linke*, gained each 10% of the ballots. The cutting development was the turnout in favor of a 2013-established rightist party, the AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*). The populist party became the third biggest player and will

send 94 deputies to the Bundestag due to its 12,6 % votes won in the elections.

In fact, less than 33 % of the voters supported Angela Merkel's Christian-Democrats (CDU and Bavaria's CSU), at the cost of almost 9% fewer votes compared with 2013.

The Context

Henceforth, Ms. Kurbjuweit's statement has to be seen in the context of an obvious loss of confidence by many Germans to opt once more for the political constellation of the CDU/CSU/SPD Grand Coalition, which ruled the country between 2013 and 2017. In addition, the loss of altogether 15% of votes was accompanied by the fact that for the first time since 1949, a party considered more right than the CDU managed to enter the Parliament. Therefore, the Spiegel linked the German domestic electoral developments to Berlin's breaking decision in September 2015 to allow an estimated number of more than a million individuals to seek asylum in the Federal Republic. This very decision, according to the journalist, obviously made Germany a super power ("Weltmacht"). He certainly views the events from fall 2015 in the light of Federal Republic acting in good spirit and in stark contrast to its difficult pre-1945 past; thus allowing *Deutschland* to turn into a humanitarian superpower at the present stage.

What makes the Spiegel's view remarkable is that it refers to the alleged eyes of a "liberal abroad", meaning that Germany must have been hailed for its generous act by third countries for having opened its borders, including the subsequent accommodation and lodging of the above-mentioned number of persons. This very view does not only deserve a closer look because it might eventually mirror the self-perception of the 3rd Merkel cabinet. It deserves a closer examination because it obviously alleges that others shared the assessment of the 2015 migration wave and the German manner to cope with it.

Therefore, this short piece wishes to randomly revisit some media voices from other countries related to the so-called refugee crisis and the impact it had on Germany and Europe, either supporting or rejecting Kurbjuweit's view. This paper does not intend to judge the 2015 migration wave and its blow on the 2017 elections. It does not make any legal, humanitarian or political considerations. This contribution can only refer to a number of selected publications out of thousands of reports and opinion pieces worldwide on the developments in- and around Germany between early September 2015 and the elections in late September 2017. In no way does it attempt to evaluate numerous international academic papers in the field of security studies, international relations, public international or European law, or alike.

Sampling

Starting with an early publication in September 2015, the Financial Times chose an optimistic tone right after the border opening.

Guntram Wolff, Chief of the Brussels-based think tank Bruegel, published a piece titled “Germany’s handling of immigration will shape the future of Europe”. Wolff’s assumptions start with sketching Germany’s demographic problem and the desperate need for qualified workers. He foresees positive effects of the migration wave and refers to the historic example of the Huguenots fleeing religious oppression in France and then boosting Prussia’s wealth. In one line only he points out that integrating large numbers of migrants would be a huge challenge to society, as well as to social cohesion.

Rakib Ehsan of the Royal Holloway University of London published a very interesting summary of opinion polls titled “Are Germany’s Immigration Policies Ripping at the Seams?” It came out a little less than a year after the opening of the border, first in *The Conversation*, and later was reprinted in *Newsweek*. Ehsan wonders if Merkel’s decision was unwise and links a growing discomfort by ethnic Germans towards the migration in comparison with the first wave of Turkish “guest workers” started in the 1960s. Emotionalized after the New Year’s sex attacks in Cologne, an attempted suicide bombing in Ansbach, then a stabbing spree in a train in Würzburg, the Mercator Foundation cited many interviewees who in 2016 expressed less easiness with foreign immigration in comparison with 2014 polls. The author mirrors these results with polls from Germany’s biggest minority, the Turks. According to Münster University’s findings, a troubling figure of 20% of German nationals or

residents with Turkish background justify religiously inspired violence because of “the threat which the West poses to Islam.” Hence, Ehsan hints that Germany did not even succeed in integrating a group from previous waves of immigrants. He concludes that the influx of a million refugees constitutes an integration challenge that has intensified to an unprecedented degree.

Around that time - in mid-2016 - Alison Smale, former Berlin bureau chief for *The New York Times*, published an article titled “Angela Merkel’s Problems in Germany Could Challenge Europe, Too”. Her *Times* piece alleges that Merkel’s continued defense of the decision to admit more than a million migrants to Germany has left her increasingly isolated from other European leaders coping with anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim sentiment in their electorates, especially after terrorist attacks. Smale links additional European challenges such as the Eurozone crisis, Brexit, maintaining a controversial refugee deal with Erdogan’s Turkey, and the emerging populist movements with Merkel’s former talent to hold Europe together.

Jacopo Barigazzi’s article published a few days before the German 2017 elections echoed the sentiment of eventual German isolation and the struggle with opposing allies. Barigazzi is a Brussels-based journalist who covers migration issues. His contribution to the pro-EU magazine *Politico* is titled “Orbán wins the migration argument”. Thus, he refers to the Hungarian Prime Minister who became one of Angela Merkel’s major inner-European opponents on migration, refugees,

border-management, relocation and detention. The Italian writer admits that the Hungarian may be much maligned in European capitals for his respective rhetoric and for building a border fence. However, he goes on to say that a closer look at how EU leaders currently deal with the issue and the adopted policies since the 2015 crisis reveals that Orbán's preference for interdiction over integration has somehow prevailed. Barigazzi cites Juncker who emphasized the importance of efforts to stop migrants before they leave Africa, and repatriate those who reach Europe's shores: "When it comes to returns: people who have no right to stay in Europe must be returned to their countries of origin." He then wonders if the Commission's Chief has aligned his position with the ones of the so-called Visegrad Four: namely Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The article also turns to French and Italian initiatives tackling the migration issue. As for Italy's efforts to crack down on NGOs and the EU's push for accords with African governments, Barigazzi finds that those steps are rather in line with Orbán's long-stated positions calling for a stronger protection of external borders and establishing migration reception centers in Africa. The French diplomatic initiative to host a meeting of EU leaders from Spain, Italy, and Germany, plus EU's foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, ended in a blessing of Rome's decision to outsource the solution to Libyan political powers. It also accused NGOs of colluding with smugglers and forcing them to accept an EU-backed code of conduct. Hence, the article's author speculates whether recent migration policies might take Budapest's approach. In relation to Berlin,

Barigazzi cites Milan Nič, a senior fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations: "Germany was quietly looking for common ground with the Visegrad; several aspects of what they were proposing were incorporated into the discussion." The Politico wraps it up by stating that Europe continues to stick to its official message, humoring Berlin's approach to remain committed to policies of openness, but that Brussels cannot admit that it de facto adjusted its concept for Viktor Orbán's comfort.

The French scholar ends by saying that Germany's assumed future instability would not only constitute a threat to the Federal Republic itself, but would have a rippling effect beyond.

A grim piece by Guy Millière, a professor at the University of Paris, titled "Islamic Sunset on Germany", came out right after the German elections. The piece was published by the Gatestone Institute, which is run by John Bolton, the neo-conservative former US Ambassador to the UN. The French author quickly summarizes that due to its history with perpetrating genocide, Germany was impregnated with self-hatred and a rejection of its own identity. Hence, he views the opening of the border in light of Muslims replacing the non-Muslim population. Without further breaking down any figures, Millière refers to the fact that 40% of children under five who are born in Germany have foreign roots. Employing a blunt and angry tone, he continues to reason

on Germany's inconsistent stand towards Israel, a question of terrorist threats under Merkel's 3rd Cabinet term and the AfD's eventual position on Middle Eastern conflict actors. The French scholar ends by saying that Germany's assumed future instability would not only constitute a threat to the Federal Republic itself, but would have a rippling effect beyond.

Rounding-up this selection of contributions, a sharp editorial on the aftermath of Germany's elections was published by Marcus Somm in the *Basler Zeitung* on September 30, 2017. Headlined "She sowed the wind and reaped whirlwind" Somm wonders why Merkel did not resign facing a loss of voters like no other Chancellor in modern German history before her. Referring to her East German past, he argues that she never felt bound by the conservative CDU principles set up in the Adenauer epoch. Hence, Merkel's withdrawal from basic conservative beliefs caused a right wing party to gain ground. In reference to the uncontrolled migration influx, Somm regards the September 2015 decision as the Federal Chancellor's own choice. It was taken without the Bundestag, without a societal debate and without consultation with European neighbors. The *Basler Zeitung* Editor-in-Chief ends with requesting Merkel to resign due to the destabilizing effects, which her performance caused to the Continent.

Conclusion

This very small selection of voices is far from being exhaustive. The assortment does neither wish to ignore the numerous opinions saluting

Berlin's decision to host those fleeing their countries for reasons that fall under the Geneva Convention or due to humanitarian considerations. Nor does it intend to compile more cautious writings which couple the election turnout with frustration vis-à-vis the 2015 border opening and its consequences. Nonetheless, the casually chosen perspectives seem to adjust the Spiegel's vision of an incident-driven global power lasting from September 2015 until September 2017. As laid down in the beginning, the Deputy Chief Editor himself presents his claim by stating that "a liberal abroad" was Germany's label. Well, the above-cited observations come from the United Kingdom, Belgium, France, Switzerland and the USA. Hence, it could be misinterpreted that it falls into Hamburg's editorial (or Berlin's political) discretion to determine who is liberal, and who is not.

... the humanitarian Weltmacht allegory seems to be foremost... a self-perception.

From the outset, the quote has to be certainly understood in the framework of the entire political and historical background of the past two years. Fishing for international applause for a certainly exhaustive humanitarian act is understandable. Presenting this aim as an uncontested shared view by others may be regarded as blunt. However Berlin's September 2015 decision and the 2017 federal electoral outcome is evaluated in the future, the

humanitarian Weltmacht allegory seems to be foremost a perception. Possibly, a self-perception.

Dr. Sebastian von Münchow is a Professor of Security Studies at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies.

Disclaimer: This publication does not reflect official views of the US government, the German government or the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies.

IRMO

Institut za razvoj i međunarodne odnose
Institute for Development and International Relations

Institute for Development and International
Relations - IRMO

Lj. F. Vukotinovića 2, Zagreb, Croatia

www.irmo.hr



Hanns Seidel Stiftung

Amruševa 9, Zagreb, Croatia

www.hanns-seidel-stiftung.com.hr