

# Merkel's future bedfellows must stoke Germans' European identity

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Almost 25 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Germany's divided past still matters, as it mirrors certain electoral splits. Whatever the shape of the new government, Chancellor Angela Merkel's future coalition partner should make one task its own: bringing Germany's European identity back to the fore, writes Tereza Novotná.

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The 2013 German Bundestag elections were supposed to be boring. They were not. Not only did the liberals (FDP) for the first time in the history of modern Federal Republic of Germany fail to cross the 5% threshold, but the victorious Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) led by Angela Merkel only just missed out on an absolute majority of votes and the chance to govern the country alone, which has not happened since the era of Konrad Adenauer.

Angie will now have to find herself a new partner to form a coalition. With only four parties in the Bundestag, there are not that many options available to her.

Yet the elections were remarkable for another reason. European politics was almost totally absent from the election campaign.

At the time of the deepest economic crisis in Europe since the 1930s, with the euro still weathering a crisis and Germany seen to be playing an (albeit arguably reluctant) leading role and in a country which has traditionally been a pro-European stronghold, it is indeed surprising.

If European issues made it to political campaign proclamations, it was all about Germany footing yet another bill or about the need to calm the financial markets.

Despite many important issues facing the EU such as possible treaty change, a genuine discussion about what a new German chancellor and her/his coalition should achieve in Europe within the next legislative period was not on the agenda at all. European themes were largely the preserve of the new anti-euro eurosceptic Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, which nearly made it into the German parliament.

At the final CDU rally in Berlin, just yards from where the Berlin Wall once stood, the Merkel did mention Europe, but rather than dwell on the present crisis, the CDU leader intertwined references to Europe's history of freedom and peace with her memories of East Germany, provoking the loudest applause of the day.

So why did neither the CDU nor any other mainstream party speak about Europe? Pundits disagree whether it stems from the fact that politicians think that they cannot score any political points with the topic or the challenge of explaining the intricacies of Brussels decision-making.

Yet all previous CDU as well as SPD chancellors, from Adenauer through Brandt and Kohl to Schröder, were convinced Europeans who would project German identity through Europe. Why does Merkel not use the same strategy? Why does she speak about the EU in terms of costs and benefits rather than values and identity? The explanation might be simple and lie in her personal history.

All previous German leaders, either those born pre- or post-war, were Europeans by nature, brought up believing that Europe can redeem Germany's past and that the country is obliged to be a good European.

Yet Merkel, an East German, has experienced Europe only as a second tier entity. After the collapse of the Berlin Wall, many East Germans' main wish was to join their Western neighbours. It was only through unification that they joined the EU. Thus they did not even need to go through the painstaking accession process and, unlike in other post-communist states, calls for a return to Europe were not high on their agendas.

As an East German, Merkel perhaps does not feel deep-seeded gratitude to Europe and, similarly to many Central and East Europeans, sees the EU as a cash cow albeit as the one to be fed rather than milked.

It was striking that the CDU won the West of Berlin while communist-successors Die Linke (The Left) came out on top in East Berlin in the recent elections.

Next year Germans will celebrate 25 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, but the east's communist past and the division of Germany still matter a quarter of a century on. They explain certain electoral splits, but they can also explain Merkel's posturing towards Europe.

Thus, Merkel's future coalition partner should make one task its own: bringing Germany's European identity back to the fore.

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