



## EUROPEAN POLICY ANALYSIS

# First steps on the EU stage: Germany's new coalition offers continuity and change

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### Summary

Germany's new government agreed an ambitious programme regarding European affairs. The traffic-light coalition between the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Greens) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) aims higher than the lowest-common denominator. There is a widespread perception that the new coalition could inject momentum into the European Union (EU), but what does this mean in concrete terms? What European priorities does the traffic-light coalition have and how do they fit into the broader dynamics of EU decision making? Is the new government fully aligned with the West on Russia and Ukraine?

On the one hand, the traffic-light announcements show that Berlin has shifted on some of Germany's priorities and has more common ground with Paris and Brussels. Examples are the future of the EU, the rule of law, public finances, foreign and defence policy, environment and climate protection, asylum and migration and digital policy.

On the other hand, a lot depends on the new policy makers: the allocation of ministerial portfolios and high-level appointments shows the desire of each of the three parties to leave its stamp on EU policies. Often the government must still forge a common approach, build alliances and find compromises at the EU level. In short, there will be continuity and change. This paper provides early insights into where continuity and where change seem to prevail.

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The opinions expressed in the publication are those of the author.

## 1. Introduction

Germany's new traffic-light government took office on 8 December 2021. By mid-March 2022, it will have governed for 100 days. This provides a good opportunity to take stock, look ahead to the future and address the following questions: What does the perception that the new coalition could inject momentum into the EU actually mean? What are the European priorities of the traffic-light coalition? How do they fit into EU decision-making dynamics?

The three partners have been able to frame their future EU policies in an integrationist and occasionally even federalist way. However, to inject life into its objective of 'strengthening the EU', the government must translate and decide how exactly to transform these words into concrete actions. The biggest challenge for the new government is to forge a common approach and subsequently to build coalitions and find compromises at the EU level. Based on a detailed investigation of the coalition agreement and the first steps of the new government on the European stage, this paper analyses Germany's future EU policies under the traffic-light coalition.

**'The biggest challenge for the new government is to forge a common approach and subsequently to build coalitions and find compromises at the EU level.'**

Section 2 next presents the EU-related issues in the election manifestos on which the new governing parties were elected. Section 3 then discusses the objective of strengthening the EU. Subsequently, section 4 presents short assessments of individual EU policy areas in the coalition agreement. The remaining sections ask what is new and what is different (section 5), present the new players in German EU policy making (section 6) and argue that there has been no grace period for the traffic-light coalition (section 7).<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Election manifestos of the SPD, the Greens and the FDP: we've got the EU covered

The three parties forming the new German government have had to overcome quite significant policy differences, especially between the two centre-left parties and the Liberals. In particular, whereas the SPD and the Greens have sought a more social and greener Europe, the FDP has been opposed to the additional resources that these steps would require. Despite this issue, the SPD and the Greens were willing to sacrifice some of their policy priorities to persuade the FDP to form a traffic-light coalition with them.<sup>2</sup>

- In its election manifesto (SPD 2021), *the SPD* called to develop the Stability and Growth Pact into a 'sustainability pact', to continue the EU investment policy initiated during the coronavirus crisis and to enable the EU to evolve into a genuine fiscal, economic and social union. Besides a European Health Union, the SPD advocated better working and living conditions for all Europeans, for example through a legal framework for European minimum wages. The SPD also wanted the EU to have greater autonomy in its foreign and defence policy, with a separate EU foreign ministry and a European army. Moreover, according to the SPD's election manifesto, the EU should be given a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, and dialogue and willingness to cooperate must be maintained with Russia and China, despite the difficult relations that characterise the present.
- The electoral programme of *the Greens* (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen 2021) demanded that the European Parliament be strengthened by giving it full right of initiative for legislation and strong budgetary powers. According to its manifesto, there should be majority decisions in all policy areas and common investment in climate protection, digitalisation, education and research. Furthermore, the recovery fund should become a permanent investment instrument, funded by revenues from climate tariffs as well as taxes on plastics or on digital corporations. The

<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful for the suggestions and comments provided by Katarina Engberg, Mats Engström, Daniel Tarschys, Göran von Sydow and Patricia Wadensjö on an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The following summary of electoral manifestos is based on Kreiling (2021), p. 7.

Greens also called for human rights violations and the rule of law in authoritarian states such as China and Russia to be explicitly named and more resolutely opposed.

- Last but not least, in its election manifesto (FDP 2021), *the FDP* advocated a strong EU in terms of foreign policy. It described its vision for the future as a federal and decentralised European state with its own constitution, a parliament with the right of initiative, a uniform electoral system and, in the long run, a European army. However, the FDP rejected EU taxes. It advocated rules-based free trade and further free trade agreements. The Liberals also criticised the political situation in Russia and China while offering moral support for the anti-government protests in Belarus and Hong Kong.

Agreeing a coalition treaty was therefore not an easy task. Even though all three parties share certain common ground and believe that the EU should become stronger, their priorities and responses have tended to differ.

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### 3. 'Strengthening the EU': fundamental questions to be answered

Although the desire to have a stronger EU is undisputed within the new government, the broad objective of strengthening the EU raises a few fundamental questions that need to be answered. These pertain to decision making, strategic autonomy, financial resources and the Conference on the Future of Europe.

- Over the past ten to fifteen years, the EU has gradually been building up capabilities in many policy areas, from migration management to defence as well as financial means and increased regulatory power. All this has happened not with an institutional big bang, but through a mix of intergovernmental coordination and

some supranational empowerment. Germany has been a vocal advocate of this approach. In what direction are Germany's EU policies now heading under the traffic-light coalition? More of the same? Or is the German government willing to cede more of the country's sovereignty to the EU and accept majority decisions?

- The idea that the EU must become more sovereign or autonomous has been widely discussed recently. Neither the precise objective nor the path towards achieving it has been agreed among the EU's institutions and member states. More specifically, Germany's positioning will come to play an important role in the future: how will its government see and define European strategic autonomy or sovereignty?
- Furthermore, besides words and (institutional) power, the EU's future will depend on the resources that it is able to allocate. The Next Generation EU (NGEU) programme has significantly increased the resources that are distributed from Brussels. In addition to this fiscal and economic response to the pandemic, Europe's twin transition to a green and digital future will require greater funding. The new government's EU ambitions will therefore have to match the size of the budgets: is the traffic-light coalition ready to allocate the necessary financial means and 'own resources' to the EU?
- Finally, the ongoing Conference on the Future of Europe and its follow-up represent a process in which the positions of the traffic-light coalition will face their first litmus test. Are the members belonging to the three parties pursuing a common approach at the Conference? What are the government's objectives at the Conference and how will it position itself in the subsequent inter-institutional follow-up?

This brief and necessarily incomplete reflection shows that there are underlying questions which a coalition agreement cannot answer directly. Nevertheless, by carefully interpreting the different announcements and connecting the dots, it is possible to shed light on the question of how the new traffic-light coalition wants to strengthen the EU, by what means and how decisively it intends to act.

## 4. Individual EU policies in the coalition agreement

The coalition agreement of Germany's new government contains an ambitious programme with regard to individual EU policies. The traffic-light coalition aims higher than the lowest-common denominator of the three partners.

This section examines the announcements in terms of EU policies in the 178-page government programme, published on 24 November 2021. The agreement passes over certain aspects in silence. The traffic-light announcements that are linked to EU integration concern the future of the EU, the rule of law, public finances, foreign and security policy, asylum and migration, the environment and climate protection as well as digital policy. Most of these are included in chapter VII of the coalition treaty, called 'Germany's responsibility in Europe and the world' (pp. 130–158). However, some EU-related issues pertaining to these topics are covered in other chapters, too.<sup>3</sup>

### 4.1 The future of the European Union: a 'federal European state'

The coalition agreement puts forward far-reaching ambitions regarding the future of the European Union. The three parties promise to use the Conference on the Future of Europe for reforms and to support the 'necessary treaty changes' (p. 131). They even state that the Conference 'should lead to a constitutional convention and to the further development of a federal European state' (p. 131).

In terms of institutional reforms, Germany wants to strengthen the European Parliament by giving it a right of initiative, 'preferably in the Treaties, otherwise inter-institutionally' (p. 131). Priority will be given to the Community method again, but Germany is ready to lead the way with individual member states where necessary. The traffic-light coalition supports a uniform European electoral law with partly transnational lists and a binding system of lead candidates (*Spitzenkandidaten*). Moreover, Germany calls for greater transparency in the work of the Council. It will take an initiative

for Commission proposals to be publicly debated in the Council within a set time limit. The three partners state that they 'will use and expand' (p. 131) qualified majority voting in the Council. The next government also promises to establish a procedure that will improve the information and participation opportunities of the Bundestag in accordance with Article 23 of the Basic Law.

In addition, Europe's 'strategic sovereignty' is mentioned under the heading concerning the future of the EU. According to the agreement, this means establishing the EU's 'own capacity to act in the global context and being less dependent and vulnerable in important strategic areas such as energy supply, health, raw material imports and digital technology, without sealing Europe off' (p. 133).

**The institutional changes that the new German government seeks to achieve are clearly named and lay the groundwork for the policy changes that should follow [...]**

These announcements set the tone for the entire chapter. The institutional changes that the new German government seeks to achieve are clearly named and lay the groundwork for the policy changes that should follow, according to the three partners. Particularly noteworthy is Germany's commitment to the Conference on the Future of Europe, the European Parliament and the Community method. This has occurred just as the EU faces the question of how to take into account citizens' views from the Conference and is confronted with the return of institutional issues (transnational lists) on the political agenda. The mid-term of the EU institutions also signals that the peak of legislative productivity is imminent. Unlike the traffic-light coalition, former Chancellor Angela Merkel had implicitly preferred solutions with a strong intergovernmental element under what she had called the 'Union method'.

<sup>3</sup> Whenever necessary, this paper also includes such references. In this text, references to the coalition agreement are to page numbers in brackets, for example: (p. 131). The document that is referred to in these cases is the coalition agreement: SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, FDP (2021b). All translations are mine.

## 4.2 Rule of law: ‘use and enforce’ the instruments

The three partners call on the European Commission ‘to use and enforce the existing rule of law instruments more consistently and promptly’ (p. 132). They commit to more consistently enforcing and further developing the application of the existing rule of law instruments. Here, the rule of law dialogue, the rule of law check, the conditionality mechanism, infringement procedures, recommendations and findings under Article 7 procedures are specifically mentioned.

A further announcement is that Germany will agree to the Commission’s proposals on the recovery plans as long as preconditions such as an independent judiciary are secured; if not, it suggests that Germany will oppose them. The coalition agreement supports the Commission in the further development of the annual report on the rule of law in the EU via country-specific recommendations. Finally, the term of office for judges at the EU Court of Justice should be extended to twelve years.

The fact that the rule of law is positioned at almost the very beginning of the chapter is a clear signal to Germany’s EU partners and the European Commission. Whereas the previous government had sought to continue dialogue with Poland and Hungary, the traffic-light coalition adopts a tougher stance and pushes the Commission to deploy the toolbox that it has at its disposal.

## 4.3 Public finances: the Stability and Growth Pact ‘has proven its flexibility’

The Stability and Growth Pact ‘has proven its flexibility’ (p. 133). With regard to any further development of the fiscal rules, the coalition agreement defines the objectives of ensuring growth, maintaining debt sustainability and providing for sustainable and climate-friendly investments. The pact should become ‘simpler and more transparent, also to strengthen its enforcement’ (p. 133). When it comes to NGEU, the wording is that it is ‘an instrument limited in time and amount’ (p. 133).

Further into the coalition agreement, chapter VIII contains a statement that the output gap

estimates relevant to the national debt brake will be evaluated: ‘[W]e will evaluate the cyclical adjustment procedure based on the knowledge gained over the past 10 years, for example through systemic crises, and adapt the resulting needs accordingly, without amending the constitutional debt brake’ (p. 160).

In this area, the FDP has acquiesced to not pressing its ordoliberal positions. The coalition agreement lacks precise announcements and remains at the declaratory or even descriptive level. It often merely describes the current situation and does not include any positioning regarding the further development of fiscal policies. However, the text does not draw any red lines against such ideas, either.

## 4.4 Social affairs: an increase of the minimum wage in Germany

Germany’s minimum wage will rise to €12 per hour.<sup>4</sup> The coalition agreement supports the Commission’s proposal for a directive on adequate minimum wages and advocates binding minimum standards in the inter-institutional negotiations, ‘as will apply in Germany with the new Minimum Wage Act after its adoption’ (pp. 69–70).

**The coalition agreement supports the Commission’s proposal for a directive on adequate minimum wages and advocates binding minimum standards [...]**

The three partners want to promote upward social convergence across the EU, complete the Single Market, implement the Pillar of Social Rights and fight social inequalities. To this end, they ‘will also use European coordination processes such as the European Semester’ (p. 134).

Notwithstanding the FDP’s previous opposition to such an increase, the Social Democrats have managed to push through their signature policy. Other commitments regarding social affairs are merely declaratory at this stage and the European Semester is already extensively addressing social

<sup>4</sup> A legislative proposal under preparation in the Labour Ministry puts September 2022 as the date for this increase to take effect.



issues. Nevertheless, the traffic-light priorities signal a major shift in German policies.

#### 4.5 Foreign and defence policy: more military cooperation and a 'genuine' EU Foreign Minister

The new government wants to replace the unanimity rule in the Council for the Common Foreign and Security Policy with qualified majority voting and 'develop a mechanism [...] so that the smaller Member States can also participate appropriately in this way' (p. 135). The role of the High Representative as a genuine EU Foreign Minister and the European External Action Service should be reformed and strengthened.

Increased cooperation among the national armies of EU members willing to integrate is also advocated in the coalition agreement. To this end, the new German government wants to 'create joint command structures and a joint civil-military headquarters' (p. 135) while ensuring interoperability and complementarity with NATO command structures and capabilities.

Beyond these EU-related matters, foreign and defence policy are covered with respect to Germany's international partners and also depend on the financial means in the ministerial budgets. In 2020, for instance, the German defence ministry had recommended that the ageing and (in terms of carrying nuclear weapons) dual-capable Tornado aircraft should be replaced by the Eurofighter Typhoon and US F-18 aircraft, certified to carry American nuclear weapons (Engberg 2021, p. 37). This contentious issue is one on which the coalition has so far refrained from making a decision.

**'It is not only difficult to make the EU speak with one voice in foreign policy; the same also applies to Germany.'**

On Russia, China and other international issues, cleavages between (and within) the three coalition partners are papered over in the document, but they are likely to re-emerge. It is not only difficult to make the EU speak with one voice in foreign policy; the same also applies to Germany.

#### 4.6 'A new beginning' in asylum and migration policy

The traffic-light partners 'want to shape a new beginning in migration and integration policy' (p. 137). They seek an active and orderly policy that will reduce irregular migration and enable regular migration. Frontex should be further developed into a genuine EU border protection agency on the basis of human rights and the mandate it has been given. The goal must be an 'effective external border protection based on the rule of law, transparent and subject to parliamentary control' (p. 141). Frontex should actively participate in sea rescue within the framework of its mandate.

Regarding the objective of a common asylum system, the coalition agreement promises that the government wants 'to lead the way with a coalition of receptive member states and actively contribute that other EU states take more responsibility and comply with EU law' (p. 141).

These announcements indeed signal a paradigm shift regarding integration, migration and refugees. Whereas German policies in this area were previously shaped by the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) and the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU), the handwriting of the Greens and the FDP is recognisable in the coalition treaty. The migration crisis at the border between Belarus and Poland quickly demanded the new government's attention but has not influenced the political agenda beyond the short term.

#### 4.7 Environment and climate: coal exit 'ideally' in 2030

Internationally, Germany will promote climate and development partnerships, knowledge and technology transfer, the expansion of renewable energies and other climate protection and adaptation measures. The coalition regards climate transition as an important part of industrial policy and supports a European carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM). Together with European partners, Germany will use the EU and international bodies for an initiative 'to establish an international climate club, open to all states, with a uniform minimum carbon price and joint carbon border adjustments' (p. 26). This objective is also part of Germany's G7 Presidency Programme for 2022.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Germany's G7 Presidency Programme: <https://www.g7germany.de/g7-en/g7-presidency-programme>

Domestically, the traffic-light coalition does not tighten the climate targets any further but rather concentrates on implementation. The coalition agreement sets high targets for the expansion of renewable energies: 80% electricity from renewables as early as 2030 (compared to 45% today and a previous target of 65% by 2030). New gas-fired power plants are to be built. As for the phase-out of coal, there is only the formulation that it should 'ideally' (p. 58) be brought forward to 2030. The three partners want to create a regulatory framework 'that clears the way for innovations and measures to bring Germany onto the 1.5-degree path' (p. 5).

**'The coalition regards climate transition as an important part of industrial policy and supports a European carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM).'**

However, the new government has so far failed to provide an answer as to how it intends to achieve these goals. Much is still to be negotiated and conflicts lurk therein. In addition to the expansion of renewables, new gas-fired power plants are important for the government (provided that they are suitable for green hydrogen), which has accordingly designated them as a transitional energy source.

#### 4.8 Digital: catching up to the reality

The traffic-light parties state that 'Germany pursues an active digital foreign policy for a global, open internet and a consistent EU digital policy across departmental boundaries' (p. 144). The agreement commits to strengthening Germany's engagement in international bodies, standards and standardisation processes as well as multi-stakeholder forums.

In terms of concrete EU policy proposals, the coalition agreement names the Digital Service Act and the Digital Market Act. The government will 'advocate for the preservation of communication freedoms, strong user rights, clear reporting procedures, access to data from very large platforms for research purposes, verifiability of their algorithmic systems, and clear regulations against

disinformation' (p. 17). It will also pursue a policy of disarmament in the digital space by 'stopping the transfer of surveillance technologies to repressive regimes and protecting civilian infrastructure from cyber-attacks' (p. 144).

The embeddedness of digital policy into the EU chapter is slightly stronger than that of environment and climate protection. 'Digital sovereignty' at the EU level is also mentioned as a commitment of Germany to work with its partners to build independent digital infrastructure.

#### 4.9 Other policies

These are just eight of the EU policy areas in the coalition agreement and it has only been possible to touch upon them superficially, while other policy areas and topics have not been discussed here. Indeed, chapter VII also contains long sections on disarmament, human rights, defence and bilateral cooperation. However, the selection of policies in this paper reflects key priorities at the EU level and offers the opportunity to compare the government programme to the preferences expressed by the EU institutions and some of Germany's EU partners.

### 5. What is new, what is different?

The government programme or coalition agreement (*Koalitionsvertrag*) of the traffic-light coalition is 178 pages long and was presented on 24 November 2021, two months after the federal election. As expected prior to the election, the new government programme offers both continuity and change (Kreiling 2021).

This section draws three comparisons: first, to the coalition treaty of the previous so-called grand coalition; second, to the 12-page exploratory paper (*Sondierungspapier*) that was published on 15 October 2021; and third, to the preferences expressed by the EU's main institutions and some of Germany's EU partners.

#### 5.1 More ambitious than the grand coalition and its 'new start for Europe' in 2018

In 2018, the coalition agreement of the previous grand coalition between the CDU/CSU and the SPD promised '[a] new start for Europe'. This emphasis and the chapter were reportedly heavily influenced by Martin Schulz (SPD), who had

hoped to become Foreign Minister. The language was more enthusiastic than in previous documents of its kind as well as in the coalition treaty of the 2013–2017 grand coalition. One key sentence stated that ‘Germany owes an infinite amount to Europe’. For Germany, a strong and united Europe was the best guarantee of a good future in peace, freedom and prosperity (Tarschys 2018).

European cooperation should be deepened in many areas, not least in those related to security and defence. The agreement stated that Europe needed to take its destiny into its own hands, a phrase that had been used by Merkel in reaction to the United States (U.S.) President Donald Trump.

Cooperation with France was strongly emphasised, but on several issues ‘a hint of dissent from the French government’ was noticeable (Tarschys 2018, p. 2), particularly with regard to being in favour of free trade and rejecting protectionism. The coalition programme was mostly silent about the euro area and the idea of a multi-speed EU integration process. Germany appeared to be focused on strengthening the Union as a whole. In some areas, however, it was prepared to make special arrangements with like-minded states. Just like four years later, the role of the European Parliament was emphasised by the grand coalition (Tarschys 2018, p. 2).

### ‘[...] a gradual alignment between Germany and France occurred.’

Although the wording was pro-European, the grand coalition initially disappointed many figures whose expectations were high, including the new French President Emmanuel Macron, who often had to forge compromises with Germany (Kreilinger 2021). During the four-year mandate of the last Merkel government, however, a gradual alignment between Germany and France occurred (Engberg 2019). Examples are the Meseberg Declaration, the need for a geopolitical EU in reaction to U.S. policies under Trump, the recovery fund and a softer position on the Stability and Growth Pact. Compared to the outline of the previous government, the coalition agreement of the traffic-light coalition is more ambitious and more concrete.

## 5.2 The traffic-light exploratory paper of 15 October 2021 as a solid basis

The coalition agreement of the traffic-light coalition is long, detailed and almost all-compassing. An exploratory paper (*Sondierungspapier*) laid the foundations for the subsequent negotiations. It was shorter than the exploratory paper of the previous grand coalition (12 pages compared to 27 pages). Section 10 on ‘Germany’s responsibility in Europe and the world’ is less than two pages long (SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, FDP 2021a).

However, the three parties still managed to cover many important EU issues. Indeed, they expressed their determination to make the EU more capable of action and more democratic. They also articulated their commitment to protecting EU values and the rule of law both internally and externally as well as strengthening its capacity to act. Furthermore, the document declared that the future government would advocate increased cooperation among Europe’s national armies.

Several key phrases from the paper could later be found in the coalition agreement. The term that the phase-out of coal should ‘ideally’ (SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, FDP 2021a, p. 11) be brought forward to 2030 is probably the most prominent one. The parties also stated that the Stability and Growth Pact had ‘proven its flexibility’ (ibid.). The argument that something ‘has proven its flexibility’ is often used when two negotiators have deeply entrenched but conflicting positions. Here, the text alludes to a certain laxity in the Commission’s oversight and a tendency to treat small and big states differently. The formula thus constituted a bridge between the positions of the Greens and the Liberals, being diametrically opposed on the issue. Based on the Stability and Growth Pact, all three future coalition partners agreed that they wanted ‘to ensure growth, maintain debt sustainability and provide for sustainable and climate-friendly investments’ (SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, FDP 2021a, p. 11).

## 5.3 Compatible with many of the preferences expressed by the EU institutions and some of Germany’s EU partners

*A New Strategic Agenda* for 2019–2024 was adopted by the European Council in June 2019, in an attempt to put forward an agenda for the



ongoing term. Although it was adopted before the pandemic, it has set the tone for a more internationally assertive role. The Strategic Agenda constitutes the common position of the 27 EU member states. The focus is on ensuring that the EU delivers – for instance, in terms of security and protection against threats – both internally and externally (European Council 2019). The heads of state or government provide the overall direction and steer European integration. This should mostly happen by consensus, as Charles Michel's defence of unanimity in EU foreign policy confirms.

On taking office in late 2019, Ursula von der Leyen stated that she wanted the European Commission to be a 'geopolitical Commission'. In her Political Guidelines she spelt out six 'headline ambitions': a European Green Deal, a Europe fit for the digital age, an economy that works for people, a stronger Europe in the world, promoting the European way of life and a new push for European democracy (European Commission 2019). All this still seems congruent with the plans of the new German government. COVID-19 has forced the Commission President to adjust her agenda, but has also allowed her to even add new projects to the twin-project of the EU's green and digital transformation: the joint procurement of vaccines and NGEU are joint initiatives that have put the Commission in charge.

The main pro-EU groups in the European Parliament (the European People's Party Group [EPP], the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats [S&D] and Renew Europe) were able

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to strike a mid-term agreement in January 2022, outlining their joint priorities for 2022–2024 (European Parliament 2022a). This laid the basis for the election of Roberta Metsola (EPP) to succeed David Sassoli (S&D) as President of the European Parliament for the second half of the legislative term. The priorities of the majority in the European Parliament are largely compatible

with those of the traffic-light coalition policy-wise. However, in terms of the composition of the two alliances, it is worth noting that the Greens/European Free Alliance has not joined the pact of the three biggest groups in the European Parliament.

The objectives of the French Council Presidency (*relance, puissance, appartenance*) were presented by Emmanuel Macron at a press conference in December 2021 and during the January 2022 plenary session of the European Parliament. Generally, the Presidency has a bold programme and France continues pushing for reforms, but the six-month term faces the risk of being overshadowed by presidential and parliamentary elections in France in April and June 2022 (Rozenberg 2022). The extent to which the traffic-light coalition will follow the 'Frenchification' path of German foreign policy and put geopolitics at the heart of its thinking remains unclear (Parkes 2021).

On 15 December 2021, the Netherlands successfully concluded its long negotiations on forming a new government with a coalition agreement titled 'Looking out for each other, looking ahead to the future' (Government of the Netherlands 2021). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the agreement in detail, it is worth noting that many observers have recognised that it strikes a pro-European tone. It describes the international challenges and argues that they 'demand a leading role by the Kingdom of the Netherlands and a strong, decisive EU' (Government of the Netherlands 2021, p. 40). The phrasing on the Stability and Growth Pact was possibly influenced by the German coalition agreement, stating that the new Dutch government 'will take a constructive approach to the modernisation of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), as long as it is aimed at ensuring debt sustainability and upward economic convergence' (Government of the Netherlands 2021, p. 40), thereby softening the frugal stance of the previous Dutch government. The proposal to endow the European Parliament with the power to remove an individual European Commissioner is also noteworthy.

Furthermore, other countries present both intersections and areas of disagreement with the traffic-light coalition. This is true of Northern

European positions, for instance. Interestingly, the entire Nordic region – Denmark, Sweden and Finland as well as non-EU members Norway and Iceland – is currently being governed by social democratic prime ministers, the first time this has occurred since 1958. However, the more market-liberal and fiscally conservative Nordic countries may diverge from Germany's traffic light coalition on important policy issues (Helwig and Kreilinger 2021).

**'On all issues, the ability to build alliances and the determination of German policy makers will decide upon the fate of their plans for the EU.'**

To sum up, is the traffic-light coalition redefining Germany's EU policies? To a certain extent and in some areas, yes. The statement that the Conference on the Future of Europe 'should result in a constitutional convention and lead to the further development of a federal European state' (p. 131) is a clear commitment to deepening European integration. On all issues, the ability to build alliances and the determination of German policy makers will decide upon the fate of their plans for the EU. The new German government has not picked sides, but it has not defined a full-scale traffic-light agenda for the EU, either.

## 6. German EU policy making under the traffic-light coalition

Besides promises and commitments in terms of policies in the coalition agreement, the change of coalitions has affected German EU policy making. Some major changes have taken place across government. For instance, the Ministry for Economic Affairs gained a wide range of climate competences and is now called the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Transition. However, as discussed below, the national government and the Bundestag have both seen key positions in German EU policy making redistributed, both to familiar and to fairly new names in national policy making.

### 6.1 Claiming authority over the new government's EU policies

A lot will depend on the new actors in Germany's EU policy-making processes. Certainly, the allocation of ministerial portfolios and high-level appointments in the Chancellery (Olaf Scholz, SPD), the Foreign Ministry (Annalena Baerbock, Greens), the Finance Ministry (Christian Lindner, FDP) and the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Transition (Robert Habeck, Greens) shows the desire of each of the three political parties to leave its stamp on Germany's EU policies. The real challenge will be to forge a common approach and subsequently to build coalitions and find compromises at the EU level.

The traffic-light coalition agreement contains a promise for 'a more stringent coordination' (p. 135) in EU-related decision making. The three parties also 'want to take a clear and early position on proposals of the European Commission' (p. 135).

While the FDP secured the Finance Ministry, the Greens obtained the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action. During the successive Merkel governments, the Chancellery became more important in EU policy making as the European Council increased its role. Despite not having any of the three EU-related ministerial portfolios, it will enable the SPD to steer EU policies.

The Finance Ministry's power of the purse provides it with influence, while the clout of the two other ministries comes from Germany's national decision making in the preparatory bodies of the Council of the EU. The two ambassadorial configurations – COREPER 1 and COREPER 2 – are controlled by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Action and the Foreign Ministry, respectively, both led by the Greens. The FDP-led Finance Ministry is responsible for Ecofin and Eurogroup.

Germany distinguishes between two types of state secretaries (*Staatssekretäre*) to support federal ministers. On the one hand, parliamentary state secretaries are and remain members of Parliament (MPs). On the other hand, (normal) state secretaries are civil servants. Whereas the task of the former is mostly to ensure a close link between parliament and government and to replace the minister, the

latter actually run the respective ministry and are not necessarily affiliated with the minister's political party. Each of the bigger ministries has a couple of state secretaries representing either category:

- Christian Lindner picked FDP MP Florian Toncar as one of his two parliamentary state secretaries. He appointed Carsten Pillath, who had previously been Director-General at the Council of the EU (Economy and Competitiveness), as his state secretary for European policy and international financial policy.
- Annalena Baerbock chose newly re-elected Green MP Anna Lührmann as Minister of State for Europe (in the rank of parliamentary state secretary). She had been the country's youngest MP from 2002 to 2005 and then embarked on an academic career, including as Deputy Director of the V-DEM project at Gothenburg University. Andreas Michaelis, who had previously served as Germany's Ambassador in London, is one of Baerbock's two state secretaries and, among other tasks, oversees the European Directorate-General.
- Robert Habeck (who is also Vice-Chancellor) selected two EU experts from his party for his ministry: Franziska Brantner as one of his three parliamentary state secretaries and former MEP Sven Giegold as one of his four state secretaries.

The Chancellor has created a new state secretary position for Jörg Kukies, who had previously been one of his state secretaries in the Finance Ministry. He also acts as the Chancellor's Sherpa for G7 and G20. The Department of EU Affairs is headed by Undine Ruge. This role was previously held by Uwe Corsepius, with Ruge acting as his deputy.

In addition, the Greens secured the right to appoint the next EU Commissioner unless the Commission President again comes from Germany: '[t]he right to nominate the European Commissioner lies with Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen, provided that the Commission President does not come from Germany' (p. 177). This raised some attention and even led to speculation and enthusiasm within the Green Party about a potential German Commission President from the Greens, succeeding Ursula von der Leyen. However, the phrasing merely gives the

right to appoint the next Commissioner to one of the three parties and respects the commitment of the traffic-light coalition to support the *Spitzenkandidaten* principle.

Thus, today, each of the three parties claims authority over certain EU policies in the new government. Whenever future proposals or the German positioning at the EU level come to require interdepartmental coordination, turf wars between ministries may occur and paralyse decision making. This possibility cannot be excluded. In a nutshell, the distribution of portfolios that was reached can be summarised as follows: the Greens hold sway over Germany's positioning in the Foreign Affairs Council and on large parts of EU legislation, the FDP has the power of the purse and the SPD is ultimately in command.

**'[...] the Greens hold sway over Germany's positioning in the Foreign Affairs Council and on large parts of EU legislation, the FDP has the power of the purse and the SPD is ultimately in command.'**

## 6.2 Appointing new committee chairs in the Bundestag

In the Bundestag, chairpersonships of parliamentary committees are attributed according to parties' share of the seats. In 2021, however, candidates from the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) failed to be voted in as chairpersons of committees such as Home Affairs and Health over concerns about their extremist views. These chairpersonships have remained vacant.

The traffic-light parties took over two influential EU-related committee chairpersonships that had previously been occupied by the CDU:

- The new chairperson of the European Affairs Committee in the Bundestag is Anton Hofreiter (Greens), who had previously served as co-chair of the parliamentary party group and hoped but failed to become a minister in the new government. He succeeded Gunther Krichbaum (CDU), who had served as head of the committee for 14 years.

- The Foreign Affairs Committee of the Bundestag is now chaired by Michael Roth (SPD), former Minister of State for Europe from 2013 to 2021. His predecessor was Norbert Röttgen (CDU), who had been quite influential and visible in that position.

The new majority has thus also strengthened its hand on the parliamentary scrutiny of European and foreign policy in the Bundestag. This is, for instance, relevant when it comes to subsidiarity control or interparliamentary cooperation.

### 6.3 Domestic political dynamics: not much stability in a federal state

The *Bundesrat*, the chamber composed of the country's 16 state governments, was unaffected by the federal election and the formation of a new federal government. However, Germany's sixteen regional governments participate directly in the decisions taken at the national level, through their representation in the Bundesrat. The traffic-light coalition of the SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen and the FDP does not have an outright majority in the Bundesrat. Negotiations with the opposition will therefore be necessary for many legislative proposals, including possible EU dossiers, which the regions are monitoring closely.

**'Negotiations with the opposition will therefore be necessary for many legislative proposals, including possible EU dossiers, which the regions are monitoring closely.'**

The biggest opposition party, the CDU, elected Friedrich Merz as its new chairman in early 2022. Following its electoral defeat in September 2021, the party chose to distance itself as far as possible from the Merkel era. Some governmental policies such as regarding fiscal rules and Ukraine may give the opposition an easy opportunity to distinguish

itself from the ruling coalition. Merz also became chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the Bundestag on 15 February 2022 and is thus able to act as leader of the opposition.

On 13 February 2022, an electoral college, the Federal Assembly (*Bundesversammlung*) re-elected Frank Walter Steinmeier as the Federal President. He had widespread support, including within the CDU/CSU. However, the year 2022 holds four regional elections in store: Saarland (27 March), Schleswig-Holstein (8 May), North Rhine-Westphalia (15 May) and Lower Saxony (9 October). In the first three states, CDU premiers stand for re-election and have been leading different coalitions for the past five years: CDU/SPD, CDU/Greens/FDP ('Jamaica') and CDU/FDP. The SPD governs Lower Saxony together with the CDU in a grand coalition. The parties of the traffic-light coalition and, even more, the new CDU leader, face their first electoral tests. It seems that the regional branches of the Greens and the FDP will then have to decide on regional governing coalitions. Therefore, they will tip the balance.

All this will indirectly affect the role of the German government on the European stage: electoral victories could strengthen its hand in Brussels and vis-à-vis its EU partners. Last year's volatility of public opinion shows that the SPD, the Greens and the FDP should not take stability and electoral support for granted.<sup>6</sup> After the Red-Green government took office in late 1998, the CDU/CSU opposition won a landslide victory at the European Parliament election in June 1999, securing 48.7% of the votes. Public opinion towards EU membership is positive in early 2022: 73% of Germans think that their country's membership of the EU is a 'good thing' (compared to 62% in across the EU), 6% (9%) think it is a 'bad thing' and 20% (28%) see EU membership as neither good nor bad (European Parliament 2022b, p. 73).

<sup>6</sup> According to the ZDF Politbarometer at the end of January 2022, if federal elections were held next Sunday, the SPD would win 24%, the CDU/CSU 23%, the Greens 18%, the FDP 10%, the AfD 10% and the Left Party 7%. The remaining parties would win a combined 8% (ZDF Politbarometer 2022).

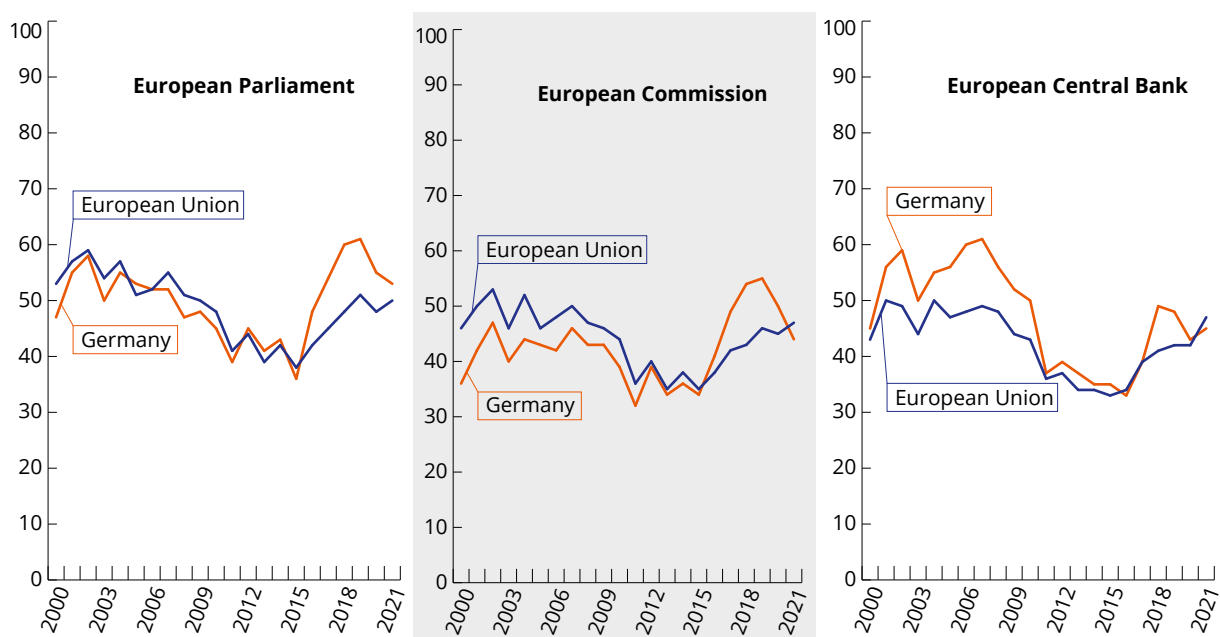
Considering the firmly pro-EU and occasionally even federalist stance of the new coalition, citizens' trust in the (supranational) EU institutions will be another decisive factor for government policies at the EU level. Currently, Germans have, on average, slightly greater confidence in the European Parliament than other EU citizens (53% to 50%). Trust in the European Commission and the European Central Bank is slightly lower than the EU average (44% and 45% compared to 47%). The longer trends show that trust levels varied over the past 20 years, with initially higher German confidence in the European Central Bank and a short-term increase in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum (see Figure 1).

## 7. No grace period for the new government

How has the new government performed during its first few weeks in office? There certainly was no grace period for the traffic-light coalition during the height of the pandemic. However, European and international affairs did not rest either.

Three topics encapsulated how the new ministers and their parties had to very quickly position themselves on potentially contentious issues: fiscal rules, the EU taxonomy and Ukraine. The internal challenges posed by each of these topics is briefly described in the following.

**Figure 1:** Trust in supranational EU institutions from 2000 to 2021



Source: Own elaboration based on Eurobarometer data via Eurostat.

The indicator measures confidence among EU citizens in a selection of EU institutions: the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the European Central Bank. It is expressed as the share of positive opinions about the institutions. Citizens are asked to express their confidence levels by choosing the following alternatives: 'tend to trust', 'tend not to trust' and 'don't know' or 'no answer'. The indicator is based on the Eurobarometer, a survey which has been conducted twice a year since 1973 to monitor the evolution of public opinion in the Member States. The indicator only displays the results of the autumn survey.



## 7.1 Reforming the EU's fiscal rules

The rules of the Stability and Growth Pact are probably one of the biggest areas of divergence between the three coalition partners. At his press conference with Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi in Rome, Chancellor Scholz merely echoed the wording of the coalition agreement by stating that it was 'plausible to assume that a framework that has proved flexible will also prove to be necessarily flexible in the future'<sup>7</sup> (Federal Chancellery 2021a).

Germany's new Finance Minister declared his openness to talk about 'sensible ideas'<sup>8</sup> (Federal Ministry of Finance 2022) regarding the further development of the Stability and Growth Pact, but insisted that 'in the view of the Federal Government, its fiscal rules and flexibility have essentially proved their worth' (ibid.). In his speech before the Bundestag in January 2022, Christian Lindner continued that 'transparent rules and the fiscal responsibility of the member states are indispensable prerequisites for stability' (ibid.). Domestically, he said that his goal as Finance Minister was 'to return to the normality of the Basic Law's debt brake in 2023'<sup>9</sup> (Federal Ministry of Finance 2021).

A few days after Scholz visited Draghi, the Italian Prime Minister and Macron published an op-ed in the *Financial Times* arguing that 'the EU's fiscal rules must be reformed' (Draghi and Macron 2021). Their joint ambition for a new growth strategy and an enhanced fiscal framework to ensure that the EU has the necessary financial means could prove toxic for the traffic-light coalition. A special meeting of the European Council, scheduled by the French President for March 2022, is supposedly an important milestone on the Franco-Italian path.

## 7.2 Are nuclear energy and gas 'green'?

The so-called EU taxonomy is an EU-wide system for classifying financial products, which intends to orient investors and direct capital towards the green transformation of the economy. On 31 December 2021, the European Commission published its

draft for the second delegated act, in which it proposed including nuclear power and gas in the taxonomy system. Asked about the forthcoming draft at the press conference with Macron after the European Council on 16 December 2021, Scholz emphasised that 'taxonomy is a small question within a very big topic'<sup>10</sup> (Federal Chancellery 2021b). The German Chancellor then declared that the question was completely overrated.

Like other stakeholders, the Federal Government had the opportunity to send a statement on the proposal to Brussels. Federal Minister of Economics and Climate Protection Robert Habeck and Federal Minister of the Environment Steffi Lemke stated that the Federal Government clearly expressed its rejection of the inclusion of nuclear energy: '[i]t is risky and expensive; new reactor concepts such as mini-reactors also bring similar problems and cannot be classified as sustainable'<sup>11</sup> (Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action 2022). The two ministers from the Greens also announced that they believed that Germany should reject the delegated act if it were to remain unchanged and the Commission were to fail to take into account critical opinions. The revised delegated act, published by the Commission on 2 February 2022, softened the rules on natural gas plants, allowing them to use fossil fuel for longer than previously foreseen, incorporating a German demand.

**'The ministers unsurprisingly rejected the classification of nuclear energy as a sustainable source of energy. They were, however, more lenient with regard to natural gas.'**

The ministers unsurprisingly rejected the classification of nuclear energy as a sustainable source of energy. They were, however, more lenient with regard to natural gas. Climate activists and some Greens were unhappy about this, resulting in a dispute within the coalition as to how strict

<sup>7</sup> My translation.

<sup>8</sup> My translation (also for the following quotations from the same speech).

<sup>9</sup> My translation.

<sup>10</sup> My translation.

<sup>11</sup> My translation.

the requirements for natural gas should be. The SPD was reportedly under pressure from municipal utilities, which feared that overly strict restrictions would slow down the conversion to modern gas-fired power plants. The FDP pushed for a relaxation, with only the Greens initially opposed to the inclusion of natural gas in the taxonomy, before they were ultimately forced to concede (Bauchmüller and von Bullion 2022).

### 7.3 War and peace in Europe: Russia and Ukraine

The new government was also confronted with the realities of Realpolitik soon after taking office. It was, as Foreign Minister Baerbock conceded at a speech before Parliament in January 2022, ‘a very frosty start in terms of foreign policy’. She insisted that ‘Ukraine’s sovereignty and the inviolability of borders in Europe are non-negotiable for us. Renewed military aggression against Ukraine will cost Russia dearly’ (Federal Foreign Office 2022a).

Germany’s position on Ukraine is mostly in line with those of the United States and the rest of the EU. Unlike some other EU or NATO countries, Germany does not supply Ukraine with defensive weapons due to a longstanding restrictive arms export policy.<sup>12</sup> The United Kingdom is, for instance, much more assertive than Germany and engages in what has been called ‘competitive virtue signaling’ (Parkes 2022). However, as of February 2022, it is clear that Germany does not diverge on the issue of sanctions against Russia in the case of an invasion.

Back in December 2021, Scholz commented that Nord Stream 2 is ‘a private-sector project that has been advanced to the point where there is now an approved pipeline and that a partial decision is still being made on the extent to which this meets the bundling criteria of European energy law’<sup>13</sup> (Federal Chancellery 2021b). This raised eyebrows across Europe given that it fell back behind the acknowledgement by his predecessor that the project had a political dimension. Baerbock also diverged from the Chancellor by insisting in an

interview with the Italian daily newspaper *La Stampa* that ‘of course, Nord Stream 2 also has geopolitical implications’ (Federal Foreign Office 2022b).

When U.S. President Biden stated at his joint press conference with Chancellor Scholz in Washington on 8 February 2022 that he would put an end to Nord Stream 2 if Russia invaded Ukraine, Scholz implicitly fell in line by stating that there would not be any measures on which the two countries would act differently (Federal Chancellery 2022). EU countries and the U.S. were reportedly perplexed by Scholz’s initial reluctance to sanction Nord Stream 2.

**‘Given the current stance of parts of the SPD, the Ukraine question could still turn out to be explosive not only for Europe, but for Germany’s governing coalition, too.’**

In reaction to some of the criticism, Baerbock stressed that Germany does support Ukraine, including militarily: the country currently supplies protective helmets at Ukraine’s request and helps repair protective fallout shelters near Odessa (Federal Foreign Office 2022c). Some Europeans and the United States seem to think that this is not enough, but it represents a continuity of Germany’s self-conception as a ‘civilian power’ (Engström and Rossbach 2021, pp. 3–4). Given the current stance of parts of the SPD, the Ukraine question could still turn out to be explosive not only for Europe, but for Germany’s governing coalition, too.

## 8. Conclusion

At this stage, there is a lot of speculation as to how far Germany’s EU policies will shift. In some areas, there are cautious signs that the new government intends to move away from Germany’s previous and long-standing role as Europe’s ‘reluctant hegemon’

<sup>12</sup> Cases of Germany supplying the Kurdish Peshmerga with weapons in the fight against Islamic State and arms exports to Egypt and some other states in the Middle East contradict this policy. However, according to a recent opinion poll, 73% of Germans are against sending weapons to Ukraine, while 20% are in favour (ZDF Politbarometer 2022).

<sup>13</sup> My translation.

(Bulmer and Paterson 2013). At present, these signs of change mostly stem from the coalition agreement and not from concrete actions.

The title of the coalition agreement, *Mehr Fortschritt wagen* (which roughly translates as ‘Dare more progress’), offers a path towards the German government becoming something like a progressive policy entrepreneur in Europe. Whether this turns into reality or whether continuity prevails depends to a large extent on what the traffic-light parties can deliver domestically. However, one also wonders if Germany’s partners and the other EU institutions will be ready for such a shift.

**‘In some areas, there are cautious signs that the new government intends to move away from Germany’s previous and long-standing role as Europe’s “reluctant hegemon”.’**

Up until 2020, Germany’s undeclared frugality in financial matters exempted those countries that later became the ‘frugal four’ from taking a firm stance. Surely the ‘new’ Hanseatic League had emerged, yet it was still Germany that was the ultimate veto player. With Germany moving towards greater EU spending as had already

occurred with the Franco-German compromise that ultimately led to NGEU, what does this imply for other member states? Similarly with the rule of law: Can Germany keep channels of communication open if it has committed itself to a tougher line than under the previous government? Alternatively, is it precisely this tougher line that will give the necessary push to the existing rule of law mechanisms and help ensure that democratic backsliding recedes? We cannot tell yet.

In the current crisis between Ukraine and Russia, doubts about Germany have gained the upper hand. On taking office, Foreign Minister Baerbock had promised that the world can continue to rely on Germany standing ‘firmly by European integration, the transatlantic alliance and [...] multilateral commitments’ (Federal Foreign Office 2021). Nevertheless, some observers are starting to see Germany as the weakest link in the Western chain, describing a zigzag course and the country as an overall brake. Allies started looking at German foreign policy with increasing alienation in January 2022, but during the first half of February 2022 Western unity and the visits of the Chancellor to Washington, Kiev and Moscow lightened many fears. The new government will have to continue reassuring its partners with concrete actions in order to offer the right balance between continuity and change.

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