

When Germany stirs, the world is obliged to notice

By Dennis Sammut

Elections in Germany on Sunday did not throw up any major surprises. A few percentage point changes in the popularity of the parties got the media excited, but in essence the two parties that have dominated German politics since the end of WWII, the centre-right CDU-CSU and the centre-left SPD, remained the two biggest parties. Both had been part of the outgoing coalition government. One of them will lead the next government. Two other parties the Greens and the Free Democrats increased their vote, whilst the far right Alternative for Germany saw a decline in its vote, a sign that its populist appeal has started to ebb. A process of negotiations between the parties will now start to form a new governing coalition. It will take weeks to work out, and the optimistic forecast is that Germany will have a new government by the end of the year.

The reason why the elections in Germany were watched so closely is that country is something of a sleeping giant. Every time it is seen stirring the world watches carefully. The results should not prove of concern to anyone. Germany once more has proven that it is a bedrock of stability where politics is kept within bounds.

The nation has recovered from the trauma of the Nazi enormities of the 1930s, the defeat in War, and the pain of reconciling with its own sins best characterised by the holocaust and the destruction it brought on the whole of Europe in the first half of the 20th century. But the lessons remain imprinted in the minds of successive German generations. Germans will never again tolerate their politicians to drive them to the brink.

Germany has rebuild. It is today not only an economic superpower, it is also the engine around which the European Union evolves. The country has been led for the last 16 years by Angela Merkel. She has both epitomised the contemporary German political philosophy, and simultaneously helped to craft it. Throughout the past decade and half of tumultuous political events across Europe and the world, Germany has been an oasis of calm and stability. Populist parties that created havoc across Europe tried to rise their ugly head in Germany too, but their appeal was limited. Under Merkel Germany remained fully committed to the European project, even as Britain was leaving the EU and others toyed with the same idea. At crucial moments, such as the Greek financial crisis Germany acted resolutely, bailing the country out and receiving little thanks in return. Merkel was determined that the European project should not fail under her watch. Perhaps her most controversial decision was to allow hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees to seek asylum in Germany. In this too Germany was guided by the lessons of its past, as much as the expediency of the present.

In geo-politics, Germany plays below its weight. It is in some ways a shy foreign policy actor. It agonises every time its troops have to be deployed in overseas missions, unlike say in Britain and France where overseas military adventures are hardly ever questioned. Whoever replaces Merkel is unlikely to change this dramatically. But some change is likely. There is increasing demand for Germany to play a more assertive geo-strategic role, and it will be up to the new Chancellor, and his coalition government to forge the new role. It will be a nuanced change, but change just the same.

Unless there are some major surprises the new coalition government will be led by the SPD and its leader, Olaf Sholz. In recent years the SPD had looked as if it was in perennial decline. But the party of Willy Brandt has bounced back, marking a resurgence in support for centre-left social democratic parties also seen recently in other parts of Europe.

The Greens are likely to be an important part of the incoming coalition, probably holding the foreign ministry portfolio. They have a very strict policy as regards climate change, but their politics otherwise is nowadays very mainstream, and on foreign policy too their support for the EU will be the focal point.

A third coalition partner is likely to be the liberal Free Democrats who will seek influence on Germany trade and economy policy.

Like previous governments, the art of compromise will dominate both style and substance of the incoming German government. The new government is likely to be even more committed to Europe than that of Mrs Merkel. Here again there will be some important nuances. The EU is still adjusting to the departure of the UK from its decision making bodies. Often in the past the UK balanced France in discussions, with Germany playing the role of compromise builder. Increasingly now Germany finds itself having to play this role of counterbalance to France. It's a task that Germany does awkwardly given its very particular relationship with France, also forged through centuries of relations (and wars). But with the encouragement of other member states it is likely that Germany will in the future find itself increasingly playing this role as a necessity. There is then the question of how to take the European project to its next logical step – developing for the EU a geo strategic capability in both diplomacy and defence. The new government is likely to be keen on this, and ready to commit political capital and resources for it. There may be more desire in Berlin for renewed diplomatic engagement with Russia, but this should neither be overestimated nor misunderstood.

But all this is for next year. For the rest of 2021 Mrs Merkel will stay put in the Federal Chancellery as the new Bundestag is sworn-in and the negotiations about the formation of a new coalition proceed in earnest. Speaking minutes after the first results were announced on Sunday night, the likely new chancellor of Germany Olaf Sholz mentioned two attributes he hoped will characterise the new government: calm and pragmatic. Very reassuring words for both Germans and for the rest of the world.

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