



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

Let's not write off Germany's centrist politics just yet



State **elections** in the east of Germany this month are widely seen as putting pressure on the centre of German politics, especially in terms of aid to Ukraine and immigration. The latter issue having been exacerbated by the fatal knife attack, allegedly by a Syrian asylum seeker, in the city of Solingen.

In fact, both Germany's 'traffic-light' coalition and the main opposition Christian Democrats might be able to breathe a bit more easily once the polls are over, as attention shifts away from these, in certain ways, outlier states and back to national politics.

In the short to medium term the results in three eastern German states that go to the polls on 1 and 22 September are not likely to significantly shift German politics at all, however shocking they may be in terms of votes for ultranationalist far-right and far-left parties.

The relatively small size of the East German population, some 13 percent of the total, combined with its very different political landscape in terms of voting patterns, mean that the more mainstream German political parties will refocus their attention on the bulk of the voters in the West, ahead of next year's national elections.

Also, after months of awful news for the coalition parties and opinion polls showing a possible win for the far-right AfD in Thüringen and Sachsen, who vote on 1 September, a lot of the effect on national politics has already been 'priced in'.

Financial support for Ukraine

The coalition, including Chancellor Olaf Scholz of the social-democrat SPD, has been sounding ever firmer on migration, already before the murders in Solingen.

On Ukraine, the government has **limited** spending on military support, and the main opposition leader, the Christian Democrat Friedrich Merz, who was a vehement supporter of Kyiv, has been mostly quiet on

the subject in the run-up to the elections in the east of the country.

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The leader of the new far-left ultranationalist BSW, Sahra Wagenknecht formerly of Die Linke, The Left party, has tried to take the credit for the government limiting its financial support for arming Ukraine. Wagenknecht is widely seen as one of the main apologists for Russian president Vladimir Putin in Germany.

While all mainstream parties, including the coalition's SPD, Greens and liberal FDP, are indeed trying to prevent the worst in the East German elections, the reason for limiting the expenditure on Ukraine is likely to be much more dictated by the severe budgetary constraints the country is facing.

Possibly disastrous outcome

The coalition parties are faring badly in the national polls but still have a year to turn things around. They also face a possibly disastrous outcome in Thüringen and Sachsen, where all three are in danger of not even passing the 5 percent threshold needed to gain any seats, although the SPD might just cling on.

This looming humiliation has featured heavily in the coverage of the elections, alongside the surge in support for AfD and BSW.

But, while the symbolism would hang heavily around the necks of the coalition parties in the run-up to next year's national, Bundestag, **elections**, the shifts in their shares of the votes would be relatively minor and less significant on the national level.

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The chancellor's party, SPD, is currently down to around 6 percent in both Thüringen and Sachsen, meaning respective losses of some 2 and 1.5 percent. That pales in comparison to some of the losses it faces in the west of the country. The same can be said for the Greens and the FDP.

The state of Brandenburg, which surrounds the city-state of Berlin, offers something of a different and more worrying picture. There, on 22 September, the SPD could lose almost 7 percent, the Greens could be eliminated and the AfD is very likely to come out on top.

Much will depend on the actual outcomes, as expectation management has been the name of the game for Germany's mainstream parties. The AfD not becoming the largest party in either election on Sunday, or the coalition parties just managing to cling on, will be met with a sigh of relief across Germany and in Europe.

CDU's dilemma

Still, whatever the outcome, the party that will probably face the toughest post-election challenge will be the conservative Christian Democrat CDU/CSU.

The party of former chancellor Angela Merkel is the mainstream bulwark against the fringe parties in the east of Germany. It is currently also miles ahead in the national polls.



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But with the other mainstream parties performing so badly in Thüringen and Sachsen, it would be hard-pressed to find acceptable coalition partners on the state level.

Its leader, Merz, has wavered somewhat on banning the local parties from cooperating with both AfD and BSW. But if the CDU, even on the state level, were to enter into a coalition with either party, that might well damage its prospects in national elections.

If the opinion polls hold for Brandenburg, the SPD might be faced with a similar dilemma.

The difference with national politics becomes clear, however, when looking at the coalition possibilities in the Bundestag if elections were held today.

Despite the AfD on course nationally to repeat its performance from last June's European elections and coming second ahead of the SPD, there are still several viable centre coalitions possible.

Anti-migrant sentiment

In the end, neither snapshot opinion polls nor state elections determine the next Bundestag, that's up to the voters in September next year.

Overall, German popular support for the EU, NATO and even Ukraine, remains strong, other

than in some of the eastern states and other than the programmes that the AfD and BSW are advocating.

On migration, though, attitudes have become less welcoming and that is likely only to be more so since the Solingen attack.

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As usual, though, anti-migrant sentiment is strongest in places with the fewest migrants, in Germany's case, the eastern states.

Because of its history and its significance in Europe, many observers look at the rise of extremism in Germany with trepidation.

Current trends are indeed worrying, with the AfD gaining ever more legitimacy. But they are not that different from other European countries and for now, the centre still holds.