



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

# German elections and the crimes of the past



The German Bundestag elections this weekend are fateful both for the country and for Europe. The outcome does not seem to be in doubt, with the left-of-centre SPD of chancellor Olaf Scholz headed for a well-deserved drubbing.

What is in doubt is whether the country and the continent can forge a better way forward that will address the threats from outside – geopolitical and economic ones from Russia, the US and China – as well as from within.

Because in one sense, which he did not mean at all, US vice-president JD Vance was right when he recently **said** that the real threat to Europe comes from within.

Much like almost one century ago, the combination of brutal, populist, right-wing nativism with the craven complicity of an opportunistic and complacent establishment, a dissolute opposition, and a powerless civil society is threatening to collapse the continent from the inside.

Such a collapse will take the form of increasingly authoritarian countries that turn inward and reduce or phase out the very cooperation that now gives them together a seat at the table. Instead of acting together, they'll divide into blocs that owe fealty to various other powers and might well end up turning on each other again.

Such is the vision, for example, of Germany's far-right AfD, but I do not envy the German voters' choice, or lack thereof. The same can be said for French, British, Italian, Dutch voters, and so on. And the same was indeed true for last year's US elections. There are no good choices on offer, only least-bad.

## The leadership vacuum

The leadership vacuum is almost absolute, and democracy is clearly suffering everywhere if people time and time again have to hold their noses while voting.

The German party leaders offer no vision at all

to tackle the most crucial issues facing their own country and the continent. Lost in the panic-ridden rhetoric is that Europe is their best bet to get their economy and society back on track. Just look at how the British economy would benefit from still being in Europe.

On the key question of Ukraine and Russia, Scholz, while initially sounding tough and committing resources, has thereafter been much too hesitant. This is completely in the tradition of his SPD, whose former chancellor Gerhard Schröder is a Putin **pawn** who made his country addicted to cheap Russian energy, clearly without safeguarding it from the Russian dictator's caprices.

**The knee-jerk toughening of language on migration, combined with mostly-for-show measures, further undermines trust in the SPD**

The German left, including the back-from-the-dead Die Linke, which came out of the former East German party of government, cannot be trusted on Russia.

On migration, Scholz has superficially caved into the right, re-instating border controls with other Schengen free travel zone countries, highlighting extradition flights and stopping asylum claims from Syrians.

While a spate of **attacks** involving recent migrants and asylum seekers has certainly contributed to the even further escalation of sentiment against immigration, the way that this has been handled by the government has created little confidence.

The knee-jerk toughening of language on migration, combined with mostly-for-show measures, further undermines trust in the SPD.

## The wrong approach

Scholz's right-of-centre rival, Friedrich Merz

of the CDU/CSU, unfortunately, and predictably when looking at the trend across Europe, offers an even worse alternative when it comes to migration. Merz hopes that by bending in the direction of the far-right, anti-immigrant AfD, he can stop that party's rapidly rising popularity.

Judging by what we have seen in the rest of Europe, with the possible exception of Denmark, that seems to be exactly the wrong approach.

It's much more likely to legitimize extreme anti-migration fantasies and will likely lead to ever more electoral successes of the 'original' far-right parties. In the upcoming elections, the AfD will likely come in second, next time, it might even come out on top.

Merz is slightly firmer than Scholz on Russia and Ukraine. While in opposition he's at least willing to release more weapons systems and is even open to discussions on joint European borrowing for extra defence spending.

### The lack of vision is staggering, and not only in Germany

Yet, Merz has still not fully committed to getting rid of Germany's disastrous Schuldenbremse, the debt brake that stops the government from borrowing, which has led to underinvestment in crucial infrastructure and is strangling the economy.

He has opposed reforming the debt brake for three years, while in opposition, only now to signal some flexibility on borrowing if it were for investment or defence.

Once in power and confronted with Germany's budget squeeze, who's to say that he will not be as 'creative' as Scholz, who has in effect already scaled back promised defence spending and limited money for Ukraine.

Neither Merz nor Scholz and their parties have consistent, unified and above all honest and persuasive answers to the most crucial problems facing Germany and Europe. The

lack of vision is staggering, and not only in Germany.

## History offers no lessons

Granted, the gap between vision and honesty on the one hand and winning elections nowadays seems bigger than ever, but that's exactly where a politician's job starts and that of a commentator ends.

Among the political carnage, even tiny glimmers of hope could be worth examining and one of them might come in the unlikely form of the German Greens. While also being dragged down by being part of a deeply unpopular coalition, they are markedly outperforming the SPD in the opinion polls.

The Greens, other than Scholz, have been tough on Russia, soft on migration and, obviously, stuck to their guns on the environment. Where the SPD is headed for a loss of some 40 percent of its previous share of the vote, the Greens might limit the damage to some 10 percent, if the polls are borne out.



*This weekend, one in five Germans are likely to vote for the AfD - Alice Weidel*

Even as only the **fourth** largest party, still behind the SPD, they could conceivably end up as the CDU's coalition partners, which would be far preferable to a 'grand coalition' between CDU and SPD.

The Greens and the CDU have little in common when it comes to their principal domestic and economic agendas, but might be

more in tune on foreign affairs.

It would still be seen on the far-right as merely meant to keep the AfD from power, yet less glaringly so than when the two traditional parties of power, CDU and SPD, were to once again rule together.

The actual calculations for a new coalition will have to wait for the election results. The Greens might still do much worse than expected, and even if they don't, they offer no panacea for Germany's ills either.

Let's be clear, despite all the dangers, this is not the 1930s. German and European democracies are much more robust, and people are far, far better off than they were a century ago.

That's why it's all the more puzzling that this weekend, one in five Germans are likely to vote for a party, the AfD, that their own authorities have branded a threat to democracy and which is suspected of extremism.

The lesson of history clearly is that history offers no lessons. Only blueprints for how to repeat the crimes of the past.