

The Radical Centre: German Greens Won't Sit at the Fringes

Article by Serge Lagodinsky

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High poll ratings have put the German Greens in the spotlight ahead of the September 2021 federal election, with the party's structure, policies, and leading figures under heavy scrutiny. But beyond the hype and headlines, what is the vision Greens are campaigning for and how well equipped are they to lead? We spoke to German Green Member of the European Parliament Serge Lagodinsky about the key issues shaping public debate in the run-up to the elections, where the Greens stand, and what the outcome could mean for the future of Europe.

This interview is part of a series that we are publishing in partnership with [Le Grand Continent](#) on Green parties in Europe.

Green European Journal: The campaign for the German federal election in September is in full swing. What issues are driving the campaign?

Serge Lagodinsky: The public debate in Germany is not much different to the debate all over Europe. The first major issue is about the transition of our society and economy, especially in a world impacted by the Covid-19 crisis and following the fatal flood catastrophe in Western Germany. We all are witnessing how unsustainable many aspects of our life and economy are, from how we manufacture goods to modes of work that involve daily commutes by car or on over-crowded public transport where passengers breathe into each other's faces. Society has woken up to the reality and urgency of current and future crises, and issues of climate, environment, and consumption have entered the mainstream public conversation.

The second big issue is the future of democracy. What is our response to authoritarian attacks, and what would a resilient counteroffer look like? This question is a global issue, which immediately leads to the question of what role Germany will play. Now is the time to talk about the global responsibility of Germany and, for the Greens, this is always linked to the global role of Europe.

The Greens have very clear stances and can position themselves as forces of change on sustainability and foreign policy issues. Have they managed to lead and shape these debates? Or are they just in step with the rising public sentiment?

At the start of the campaign, almost a third of German voters were ready to vote Green. Of course, it's a very volatile and dynamic situation but this figure shows the resonance of our decades-long agenda and that it is in sync with the predominant sentiment in society.

Naturally, some societal groups and actors resist change. Change brings us out of our comfort zone and generates resistance, both from the vested interests of powerful economic actors but also those not prepared to share space and power. The Greens are making a democratic claim to power, to rule and to govern. Their intrusion into the domain of traditional power elites is also a matter of generational difference and how we perceive society. The reaction of German parties, especially the Conservative parties, to the growing importance of the Greens shows that they have a lot to lose and they don't want to let it go.

Talking about interests, the Greens advocate much greater public investment in the energy transition and sustainability. The Conservatives and Social Democrats, traditionally the two main parties, have always been rooted in German industry, especially the car industry. How is Germany's shift away from a fossil-dependent economy shaping the campaign?

Germany is struggling against becoming economically irrelevant. This is a real risk for the future. Germany in the Merkel era missed its opportunity to give a visionary answer to this challenge and to go beyond competent, solid management of the status quo.

Take the backbone of the old-school German economy: the car industry. For too long, the political goal was securing new markets instead of transitioning to a post-CO₂ era. The Greens have been making an offer of transformation. To the people that work and invest in the car industry – which includes many small savers, not just major investors – we offer to secure their position and investments through green innovation. Of course, there's a debate within the German Greens about the sense and sensibility of cars in principle. But in any case, we offer a path to managing change instead of managing status quo. It would be fair to say that such an approach was put on the agenda many decades ago by the Greens, both nationally and globally. We were the early agenda setters of this century.

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Now Greens will yet again have to prove that we're up to this transformational claim. But what distinguishes us from other political forces that talk green is that they do so only reluctantly. It's the credibility of decades of fighting for environmental issues that makes us distinct from our Social Democrat or Conservative counterparts. When I talk to people in Brandenburg, it's clear to most that it wasn't the Conservatives that for years were against the transition in Lausitz and other coal-producing areas, but the Social Democrats and the Left. For years they torpedoed the region's transformation, and now suddenly they flip their position? If the Greens don't enter government, take responsibility, and credibly safeguard the transition, I'm not sure whether it will happen in a way that's as fast and effective as the desperate climate situation demands.

Europe is an important element that often ends up excluded from national political debate. Does Europe feature in the German public debate so far and what are the Greens bringing to this debate?

Europe naturally forms part of our political outlook. On foreign policy, we don't see a global

role for Germany without a global role for Europe. It has to be embedded in European politics. Similarly, the question of economic transformation cannot be isolated nationally from European issues, as is shown by the transition funds and the question of resilience when it comes to foreign investment. There's a lot to discuss and improve regarding Germany's role in Europe. Look at the number of infringement procedures against Germany, for example. Or look at how Germany muddled through with many important issues during the German presidency in late 2020. The point that Greens make is that Germany needs to start thinking as a responsible European actor. The slogan for a German government must be: "Europe first, Germany second".

The summit with Russia proposed by Merkel and Macron in June 2021, which was opposed by other EU member states, exposed the difference between responsible leadership on the one hand and arrogance of the big powers on the other. It's the thin line that Germany must walk and Greens want to walk it on the side of responsible leadership. This means that the capitals take responsibility for transition, environmental and global issues and that the challenge is building majorities and bringing others on board rather than dominating them. Too often, the German government has held back with a constrained position and blamed Brussels for moving too fast and not protecting German interests. We want to make the case that European interests are our interests, common interests. If you want to call something a European way of life, then this is it.

Germany has often leant towards inaction or weak compromises on European issues. Where do the Greens' priorities lie on European issues?

On the rule of law, there has been a tendency to surf compromises rather than trying to create a new status quo. The rule of law conditionality mechanism on EU spending was an example of settling for the lowest common denominator, skillfully presented by countries like Hungary and Poland as a big sacrifice. The Greens supported it only because there was no other choice at that point. However, saving the rule of law should be a priority issue for Europe.

Taking responsibility on this topic also means talking to German businesses invested in Hungary. The Hungarian economy is very dependent on German companies and that's why we're not powerless vis-à-vis Budapest. I don't like how people talk about "those Eastern Europeans we subsidise". There's no commitment to a common market without a commitment to a common democracy. You can't have the European cake and eat it. For too long, the EU has been living in a limbo of indecisiveness. It's a position of weakness rather than a position of mutual dependency.

When Greens take responsibility in any form, we'll be sure to prevent situations such as the eroding rule of law in Slovenia today. Because if we don't intervene now, it will be too late – as it is already with Hungary. This is something that Merkel missed and it must change because if this is the start of a new model for Europe then, at some point, there will no longer be the European Union as we know it. The EU's urgent triple crisis of rule of law, green economic transition, and its inability to act on the international stage hasn't been truly understood by Germany's governing parties. If they had understood it, they would have acted more decisively and ambitiously. Greens offer change on this point.

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How should Germany best operate in Europe? France has historically been its preferred partner but what about other partners across Europe?

Our preferred partners are the 26 other member states. Of course, we should coordinate with France, but not just France – also Spain, Italy, and Poland. With Poland, Germany has a specific historical relationship and legacy, both positive and negative, that can't be neglected. That's why Macron and Merkel's move to organise a summit with Russia without prior consultations with others was so damaging. They were trying to use their weight to put Eastern Europe and the Baltics in their place, and it didn't work. Let's not forget there are elections in France next year, and even though the Right currently appears weakened, we don't know how things will play out.

The important point is being aware of your country's power but deriving from this responsibility rather than dominance. The Greens are well equipped to do so because their natural political mode and origins lie outside of a position of power. It's a movement and movements are based around encouraging people to follow.

More than ever, there's rising competition between the US and China. In Europe, France wants a more independent role for Europe, while the Baltic states and Poland prefer a trans-Atlantic approach. Germany seems to sit somewhere in the middle. What would the Greens bring to this debate about Europe's place in the world?

Greens would seek to re-define alliances based, on the one hand, on the necessity to act on issues like environment, disarmament, and fair trade, and, on the other hand, a foundation of common values. That doesn't mean excluding the rest of the world but creating an open alliance of those who see that civil society, minority rights, and female empowerment are assets and values in themselves. Nobody wants to revive the Cold War, but there's a constructed ideology coming from the Kremlin and it's a growing part of international dynamics. We're competing with an ideology of traditionalism that dismisses and attacks the human and minority rights that we've all agreed upon.

Faced with that competition, we must re-define our natural friends and allies. From that perspective, it isn't just about NATO or the United States but about marrying values and geopolitics, or at least being open to defend values and think geopolitics at the same time. It's complex and we should be careful not to fall into a neo-conservative agenda or value colonialism. But the entire world agreed on universal values and multilateralism and everyone was on board for many years. They should be put to work and made resilient. The alternative is to watch them be dismantled by corrupt, power-hungry men.

Returning to the German Greens, the party has steadily grown over the decades. The Greens are now in government in most regional states, they're aspiring to

lead or join a federal government, and they're increasingly influential on the European stage. How has this been achieved and where next for the German Greens strategically?

The key success is occupying the progressive centre. The Greens have proved themselves able to leave a certain left-wing niche behind and move to the centre without losing the radical longing for transformation. Where next? Some structures could be improved and the party needs to be ready to face attacks if it claims to take over political leadership. It needs to get used to the new role it is playing in German society.

I admire the founders of the green movement who understood 30 to 40 years ago what the key issues were going to be. Today, being at the radical centre means being able to gain support from large parts of the population and standing there ready with an agenda that fits this point in history. The unique luggage of experience and concepts that Greens carry brings credibility, but you can only deliver it if you're no longer happy to sit on the fringes.

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What's your reading of the potential of the Greens to grow elsewhere in Europe?

The green transformation won't be possible without a movement that transcends borders. This is also part of our DNA. Just having a strong Green party in Germany won't deliver much change without similar positions for Greens everywhere. If current problems transcend borders, the solutions cannot be national, nor can the agents of change. From that perspective, I'm looking forward to a bigger role for the French Greens and I think we have a good position in western and northern European countries.

We do need to talk about, generate, and empower the Green movement in Eastern Europe. I recently visited Slovenia where there are attempts to establish a real Green party - and there's a need for one - as a third movement beyond the post-communist centre-left and the post-communist right wing. In large cities from Zagreb to Budapest, we see a thirst for an alternative to those dichotomies that Greens can overcome. Supporting the Greens in Eastern Europe is a huge but rewarding challenge for the years to come.

The symbolic and emblematic picture was that of Annalena Baerbock meeting the Green Mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony. Both are taking responsibility and facing attacks and they still say, "No, we want to go against the ruling elites." That's the embodiment of the change which is felt in Germany and can go in the direction of Central and Eastern Europe.



Sergey Lagodinsky is a Member of the European Parliament with the group of the Greens/EFA. Until June 2019 he was the head of European Union and North America division of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. His specialist expertise lies in transatlantic relations, international and constitutional law, and the politics of diversity and integration.

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