

Walking the Tightrope: Can the German Greens be the Party of All People?

Article by Ricarda Lang

July 19, 2022

After intense negotiations following the September 2021 German federal elections, the German Green Party entered into a coalition with the Social Democrats and Liberals. So far, it has been a mandate marked by much turbulence – with the war in Ukraine and the related energy and cost of living crises to contend with. The party’s co-leader, Ricarda Lang, reflects on the significance of being in power at a time of unprecedented challenges and instability.

Green European Journal: German politics, like in other European countries, has shifted from being dominated by two major parties, to a much more volatile and fragmented state. How would you situate the German Green party in this new context?

Ricarda Lang: The Green party was founded in the 1980s as a force that came from outside the system. In the beginning, it was our mission to knock on closed doors, and demand change. Over the past years, we have increasingly managed to secure a seat at the table. After 16 years in opposition, the Greens are finally back in government, in key positions. And we’re more determined than ever to grasp the opportunity and show the remaining sceptics that we can be trusted – and that fostering much-needed change is the only way to provide stability in unstable times. The era when Germany had just two large parties, and a few smaller ones in the periphery, has ended. Conversely, the Greens are no longer, and actually have never been, a single-issue environmental party. Our manifesto, as much as our actual work in parliaments and governments, covers the entire spectrum of political subjects.

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Particularly with the war in Ukraine, the Greens have been front and centre of this new German government, with Robert Habeck taking on the role of minister for economic affairs and climate action and Annalena Baerbock as minister for foreign affairs. What is this visibility doing for the Greens as a party?

More and more people understand that the Greens are able and willing to face a rapidly-changing reality, take responsibility, and go the extra mile. The despicable attack by Russia

on Ukraine has forced us to take a number of difficult and painful decisions. But we have taken them, without giving up on our principles or our long-term goals. People are giving us credit for it.

Since the war began, Robert Habeck and our ministers have worked tirelessly to free Germany from its dependency on Russian fossil fuels. And we have tried to do so in a way that reduces new dependencies, while keeping the actual goal in sight: quitting fossil fuels altogether. The centralisation of economic and political power that comes with fossil-fuel monopolies has been a threat to European security for far too long. We combine a pragmatic approach in the present with a clear vision for the future. As a result, trust in us and our work has increased tangibly.

Government also means compromise. How do you navigate the disappointment among certain supporters when you have to make tough, unpopular decisions?

For me, as co-leader of our party, this has been a major challenge. When we formed the coalition a few months ago, and got the Conservatives out of power, it was like a breath of fresh air. Then, just a few weeks later, Putin started this cruel war and all of a sudden we had to go from extending reproductive rights and speeding up climate protection to discussing arms exports and buying gas from Qatar instead of Russia. For many in our party, including myself, this development felt extremely sudden and was not easy to swallow. After all, the Greens in Germany were born out of, among others, the peace movement. But we all know that currently, there is one outstanding priority: assisting the Ukrainian people in their right to self-defence. What we have done as party leadership, including our ministers, is to explain the reasons behind all those tough decisions, paint the bigger picture, and be open to criticism. As dire as the current situation certainly is, the war in Ukraine reminds us that confronting the climate crisis and investing in green energy is not just an environmental question, but a matter of security.

People used to talk about the *realo* and *fundi* wings of the German Greens. Is the distinction still relevant?

I personally think it is normal and helpful for a party of our size to be shaped by different interests, backgrounds, and opinions – and to open up spaces where these currents, *Strömungen* as we call them, can interact, communicate and, eventually, agree on the party's overall orientation and position. But things have changed, for sure. The feeling of pursuing a common cause, a common goal is omnipresent. Also, we have seen a blurring of the traditional borders between the currents. Many young left-wing Greens, for instance, were among the more fervent proponents of supporting Ukraine with military equipment, as they see the Ukrainian struggle as one in defence of European values, democracy, and freedom.

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In recent years, the Green party has moved towards a discourse that tries to reconcile seemingly opposed positions and concepts: freedom and security,

radical and realistic. How is this approach being translated into government?

In Germany, we have coined the term *Bündnispartei* – alliance party – to describe our overall approach. On the one hand, it reflects our origins. Indeed, the Greens were born, some 40 years ago, from a varied and rather unusual alliance of different movements. On the other hand, *Bündnispartei* also describes the way we understand our role today: we act as an ally to an entire range of different interests. We want the Green party to build bridges: between young people fighting for climate justice in the streets, and the unions fighting for workers’ rights in companies; between ordinary families and parents who care about the future of their children, and the growing number of industries that want to engage on the only way forward: the green transition. In short, we want to rally behind a common goal people who, at first glance, might appear not to have much in common.

Personally, when I got into politics at a rather young age, people used to tell me that I was radical now, but would grow up and become rational soon. I’ve tried to see the rationality behind the way we have been doing politics for the past 10 or so years. But I’ve failed. We’ve been missing almost all our climate goals, increasingly putting our common future at risk, and we’ve watched many grow poorer while a few have grown absurdly rich. That’s not going to bring us stability or wealth or jobs! It will induce turbulence, insecurity, conflict. Still, there are politicians who continue to tell people not to worry, that nothing is going to change. But people are smarter than that. They see for themselves that the world is changing.

To come back to your question: what we as Greens are offering, therefore, might seem contradictory, but it’s not. What we offer is not a choice between change and no change, but between passively letting change happen to us and shaping it – in order to make the best out of it. If you ask me, that is what being a progressive party comes down to.

Angela Merkel led Germany for 16 years. She always put stability first but, less than a year after leaving office, her compromises seem to have exploded. What is her political legacy?

Angela Merkel’s time as chancellor will be remembered and I share the general feeling of respect for her. She was – and still is – an honourable politician and person; someone who was in it for the job, not for herself; dedicated, outcome-oriented, entirely unpretentious.

When it comes to her political legacy, however, I would describe it as focused on the present rather than far-sighted. Under her governments, Germany did not prepare for the challenges of the future. Suddenly, the future is now.

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The Greens were very successful in recent Länder (regional) elections in Schleswig-Holstein and North Rhine-Westphalia. How do you interpret these results?

We are part of government coalitions both Länder now. In North Rhine-Westphalia, we tripled our results. Both elections reveal the structural change within the German party system. To put it rather bluntly, we are a force to be reckoned with even in heavily industrial regions such as North Rhine-Westphalia. People there have gone through hard times, most recently with the coal industry's decline. They have experienced for themselves what happens when politicians, in the face of galloping change, bury their heads in the sand and tell you, "it's going to work out just fine". People there know - it won't.

We as Greens don't pretend otherwise. We tell people what we believe is going to happen, and why we think our proposals will help. While some other parties tend to simplify complex developments into short slogans, we explain that the current inflation is driven by fossil prices, for instance, and that our dependency on oil and gas has made us vulnerable to price peaks and autocrats alike. In other words, we take people seriously.

Prices are going up much faster than wages all over Europe. Has there been a pushback against climate policy and what have the Greens put on the table so people can make ends meet?

I don't see a pushback against climate policy. At least in the longer run, fighting inflation and the climate crisis are two sides of the same coin. Indeed, sticking to fossil fuels would mean constantly running the risk of another episode of fossil inflation. Renewables, by contrast, allow us to become energy-independent - politically, but also economically.

In the short run, we have put forward two substantive support packages in Germany, parts of which are specifically tailored to people with lower incomes. Families with lower incomes and social-security recipients, for instance, are given extra financial support. We have lowered the price of using local and regional public transport to 9 euros per month - for everyone, all across Germany. And then, there is what we call the *Energiepreispauschale*: 300 euros for every worker, to help cover their energy costs.

The Green party achieved its best-ever result at the federal election in 2021. But the results could have been even better and at one point there seemed to be a real prospect of electing a Green chancellor. What do you see as the strategic objectives that will enable the party to secure victory in four years' time?

First and foremost, we want to do well in government. Not for the sake of winning any election, but because that is what assuming our responsibility means. At the same time, as basic as it might sound, that is also how you win people's trust. People want to see that things change when the Greens are in government. That is what we've been working on since day one of the new coalition. We have grown strong in Länder such as North Rhine-Westphalia and Schleswig-Holstein, but there is quite some way to go in eastern Germany - where a number of regional elections are coming up in 2024. And then, we want to widen our political spectrum even further, of course, or rather: convince people of the fact that we are not, and never have been, a single-issue environmental party.



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Published July 19, 2022

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

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