

Eyes on Germany: Politics Without Urgency

Article by Inge Jooris

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Criticised by the public for their disruptive demonstrations, Letzte Generation climate activists find very few allies even among the Greens. But while respecting differences, the uphill battle for climate calls for a united front.

In 2021, a group of activists in Germany formed a new climate initiative called *Die Letzte Generation* (The Last Generation). With the Earth approaching multiple climate tipping points, the activists see their generation as the last one that can avert a catastrophe. The group, made up mainly of young people, holds a confrontational mirror up to the political party Bündnis 90/Die Grünen. “This government with the Greens is driving us towards disaster. There is no plan of how they are going to obey their own laws,” said Letzte Generation spokeswoman, Carla Hinrichs, accusing the German transport minister of violating the Federal Climate Protection Act.

The activists speak openly and act radically, but non-violence is something they hold dear, they say. In sub-zero temperatures or in the blazing sun, they block main roads in major cities and fix themselves to the rough concrete with superglue. They smear the facades of political headquarters and throw potato mash at works of art (without causing permanent damage). In December 2022, they cut off the top of the Christmas tree under the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin; “This is only the tip of the Christmas tree,” they declared.

Their demands sound familiar to us Greens. They want to get rid of the collective addiction to fossil fuels. They want a 100 km/h speed limit on German motorways. They call for the re-introduction of the monthly 9-euro ticket on public transport, which allowed Germans to save money and energy in the summer of 2022. They are also pushing for a citizens’ assembly to make recommendations to the government on how to make Germany carbon neutral by 2030.

The activists claim they are open to dialogue and willing to cooperate. In Hannover, they agreed with Green mayor Belit Onay to end their disruptive actions. In exchange, Onay sent a letter to the members of the Bundestag asking for more urgency on climate action. “I wrote this letter with great pleasure,” he said. Tübingen and Marburg followed suit.

But most German politicians react very angrily to radical climate activists, accusing them of being sowers of mayhem, saboteurs, even terrorists. Centre-right Free Democrats leader Christian Lindner claimed that blocking roads and motorways is nothing more than “physical violence”.

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It is no surprise that parties defending the status quo show little sympathy to activists who fearlessly

stand up for change. Less expectedly, Green leaders are also distancing themselves from radical climate activism. According to the Green Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, Vice-Chancellor Robert Habeck, disruptive protest “makes people angry, divides society and makes no useful contribution to climate protection.”

Habeck may have a point: 79 per cent of the German public consider Letzte Generation climate protest wrong or rather wrong, [a survey found](#). But the flagship policies of the Greens in government do not enjoy great popularity either. [Another poll shows](#) that 79 per cent of Germans oppose Habeck’s planned heat transition law, requiring new heating systems to use at least 65 per cent renewable energy from 2024.

Habeck is in good company when it comes to condemning civic disobedience. Green chief whip in the Bundestag Irene Mihalic called Letzte Generation’s protest “elitist and self-righteous”. According to former Green MEP Daniel Cohn-Bendit, “paralysing all the drivers in Berlin” is nowhere near as effective in sparking debate on climate issues as demonstrating at nuclear power plants was back in the day. “We didn’t bother the public with it,” said former minister Renate Künast referring to older forms of environmental activism.

Such criticisms ignore the climate anxiety many young people feel. They no longer want to follow the news or knock on the door of psychologists. Some of them don’t want to have children because they don’t know what the near future holds. The “last generation” is turning fear into action. Climate activists are giving up their own comforts, their income, even their future. To call these sacrifices elitist when you are tackling the same issues from a privileged position within the Bundestag is more than just projection. German Green co-leader Ricarda Lang showed more sympathy to climate protest in February 2022, when she said that society must ask itself “why young people resort to such means”.

Besides, who can say that our way of protesting was better? We sang our voices hoarse at demonstrations, we signed and circulated petitions, we took to the streets selflessly to persuade people. What did we achieve? More coal is being mined in Germany, the Climate Protection Act is being watered down, the liberal transport minister is breaking the law by failing to meet climate targets and gets away with it.

Are activists right to argue that they are the last generation that can save the climate? Is it as bad as they fear? We will not know for sure until the time comes. What is certain is that politics shows no sense of urgency. Ricarda Lang recently said she feared that climate protection is becoming a niche issue again, since even the chancellor sees it as such. As Fridays For Future activist Luisa Neubauer put it, “We are more afraid of windmills than of the climate catastrophe.”

Another activist, Clara S. Thompson, [raised](#) the question of how climate activists can best relate to the German Green’s failure to deliver on climate change. She concluded that activists should not give up on the institutional Greens, because “there is potential for radical change from within the party’s own ranks.” Given the urgency of climate action, “we will need to work strategically with all the allies we can get, even if they are sometimes swayed by realpolitik,” Thompson wrote.

Could this be a double-edged sword for us Greens? To be allies, we don’t need to applaud all the activists’ actions: we can simply let them exist. But in the face of widespread climate apathy, we need all comrades-in-arms – even the most radical and confrontational ones.



Inge Jooris is a writer and communications consultant. She was previously head of communications at KVS, one of Belgium's largest municipal theatres, and spokesperson for the Flemish Greens. She is current advising Cinquantenaire 2030, a project to transform Brussels' Cinquantenaire Park into Belgium's cultural and scientific hotspot, and follows German politics for the Belgian Green parties, Groen and Ecolo.

Because of her years of experience as spokesperson for the Flemish Greens and her now broader view, we asked Inge Jooris to write a monthly column on the work of the German Greens, drawing on her own experience where possible and looking for lessons that could be useful to all European Green parties.

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