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German politics in 2024: (Even more) turbulence ahead

Openly discussed plans of 'remigration', rising polarisation and a crumbling infrastructure indicate severe challenges in EU's biggest country. Both Germany's economic model and its political system are under pressure. Lacking public investment, decreasing competitiveness and growing populist factions within the parliaments challenge the self-image of German citizens. Growing polarisation makes coalition building more complex and the once stability-loving consensus country faces a snap election. The traffic-light coalition broke up because of different ideas of state and state financing. Structural changes in the party system and a blockage over major political projects will lead to even more turbulence during the next months and cause a period of German absence at the European level.

Alive and kicking? German civil society in the face of 'remigration'

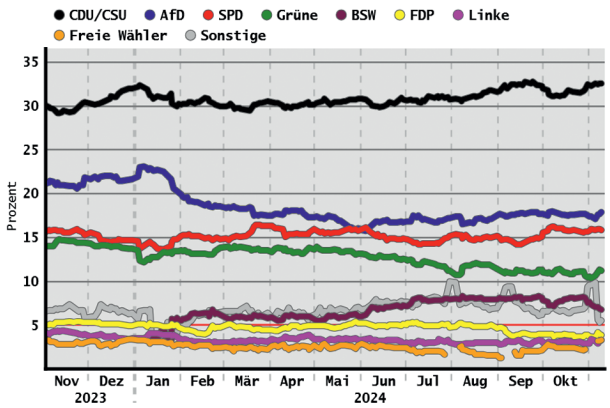
The political year in Germany started with a bang. In mid-January, it was made public that politicians of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), some members of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and other figures of the far right discussed a 'masterplan of remigration' inspired by the Austrian right-wing extremist Martin Sellner. During the meeting, it was discussed how refugees, foreigners with residence permits and 'not-assimilated' Germans could be deported from Germany.

The meeting and the corresponding network of politicians and right-wing extremists did cause a public outcry. It was not news to those who followed the leading figures of the AfD and the constant radicalisation of this party that the level of hostility towards migrants and people with a background of migration reached a new dimension within this party. It started in 2013 as a merely Eurosceptic project but has become an extremist party. Even though the broader public was shocked by the frankness with which the far right mused about mass deportation.

The following weeks marked new heights of public engagement towards right-wing tendencies. Almost throughout the whole country, rallies mushroomed by the end of January. Not only politicians, but also football stars, authors, church leaders and celebrities, called the people to the streets to make a stand against the far right. Carrying signs with 'no place for nazis' or 'never again is now', roughly 1.4 million marched on the streets during the height of the rallies. In Munich, the organisers had to ask people to leave the place for safety reasons. In several places, it was the largest public gathering since the end of World War Two.

What was the effect? In the short term, one could hear a sigh of relief from those who had been engaged against right-wing extremism for a long time and had witnessed growing public and electoral support for AfD during the last decade. President Frank Walter Steinmeier said that the protestors "give us all courage", and Josef Schuster, head of the Central Council of Jews, said that the demonstrations did "restore trust in democratic conduct". And, in fact, the polling figures of the AfD declined significantly (Figure 1). From heights of 23% by the beginning of January, it dropped to figures as low as 15% in May (which is, of course, influenced by other factors as well).

Figure 1. Opinion polling German (federal election), November 2023-November 2024.



Source: DAWUM.

The long-term effect may be more sinister. Whereas democratic political parties could see a small influx of people, the mass rallies did not translate into a structural change for organised civil society in Germany. Many organisations engaged in political education, civil rights and so forth are still lacking funding and members. And the term 'remigration', even though named as 'unword of the year', has become a more common expression in the language of the far right. AfD now openly calls for "remigration instead of mass immigration" and pushing 'remigration', and it benefitted from its ambiguous stance in 2024.

A not so super 'super election year'

It has become fashionable to call almost every political year in Germany a 'super election year'. Due to the complex federal political system, elections are more frequent than in most other European countries. Elections can take place on the local and regional levels, on the state level (*Bundesländer*), the federal level, and on the European level. Even though elections did not take place on the federal level, at least three important levels of decision-making were touched by elections in 2024: local, state and European level.

The election year started in June 2024 with the European elections. The conservatives benefitted from the governing coalition's poor approval ratings (Table 1). The SPD, Greens and Liberals, building the so-called traffic-light coalition, lost in the election. The Greens lost almost half of their electorate. The SPD's campaign centred on building peace and standing strong against the far right. It ended in the worst result the SPD has ever faced in a European election.

Table 1. Results of the European election in Germany.

Party	Vote share (%)
Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU)	30.00
Alternative for Germany (AfD)	15.90
Social Democrats (SPD)	13.90
Greens (Die Grünen)	11.90
Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW)	6.20
Liberals (FDP)	5.20
Left (Die Linke)	2.70
Freie Wähler (FW)	2.70
Volt Deutschland (Volt)	2.60

Elections also took place in the federal states of Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg. A common feature of those states is that they are – 35 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall – still branded as 'new *Bundesländer*'. They are located in eastern Germany, and thus, represent a political culture and a party landscape that differ from most western states. Established links between certain groups of voters and parties are much weaker than in the west, and volatility is much higher.

Despite those common patterns, the three states did vary in the given power settings before the elections. In Thuringia, Bodo Ramelow has been minister-president since 2014. He has a background in western trade unions and joined politics on a ticket of Die Linke, a party of the left, dating back to the ruling party of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). He was able to run a minority government with the support of a 'red-red-green' coalition, consisting of the Left, Social Democrats and Greens.

In Saxony, Michael Kretschmer of the conservative CDU is minister-president. During his first term, he was able to form a so-called grand coalition between CDU and SPD; during his second term, he had to rely on the support of CDU, SPD and Greens to form a majority. Brandenburg, which surrounds Berlin, has been governed since 1990 by SPD.

The current minister president, Dietmar Woidke, has been in office since 2013, governing with a coalition based on SPD, Left and Greens.

Table 2. Results of state elections in 2019 and 2024, in %.

		SPD	CDU	Greens	Liberals/FW	Left	BSW	AfD
Brandenburg	2019	26.20	15.60	10.80	5.05	10.70	–	23.50
	2024	30.90	12.10	4.10	2.60	3.00	13.50	29.20
Saxony	2019	7.70	32.10	8.60	–	10.40	–	27.50
	2024	7.30	31.90	5.10	–	–	11.80	30.60
Thuringia	2019	8.20	21.70	5.20	5.01	31.00	–	23.40
	2024	6.10	23.60	–	–	13.10	15.80	32.80

Three common patterns became visible in the aftermath of the elections in the eastern *Länder*.

(1) The German party landscape is becoming more fragmented. The effective number of parties in the political system is growing. In addition to the relatively new AfD (founded in 2013), the 'Sarah Wagenknecht Alliance' (BSW) became a relevant figure within months of its establishment as a political party in January 2024. With a melange of redistributive social policies and a hard stance on migration and law and order, the party did successfully occupy a niche in the German party system. Political parties centred around a person, as much as BSW is staged around the former Left MP Sarah Wagenknecht, are relatively rare in the German political context, but in times of growing personalisation of party politics, this strategy seems to be paying off. The three mentioned cases do not speak for Germany as a whole, but they clearly signal a general trend.

(2) Populism is on the rise even further. In all cases, AfD was able to mobilise even more voters than in the previous elections, up to one third of the Thuringia electorate. This is even more staggering, given that the Thuringia branch is regarded as one of the most extreme factions within the party. It is classified by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution as clearly extremist and its leader, Björn Hocke, was sentenced for using slogans of the Nazi SA. In some regions, it has become a true people's party, not merely despite its extremist stance but because of it. In contrast, BSW is not regarded as extremist, but as a clearly populist movement. Their combined share of the vote was between 42 and 48% in the abovementioned elections, making it effectively impossible to form a coalition without one of those parties. Even if it were possible to form coalitions excluding AfD, the effect on the political system is already significant, for instance, when it comes to nominating judges.

(3) Coalition building becomes even more ambitious. Germany is considered a consensual political system, since its mainly proportional electoral system forces the parties to work together in coalitions. Minority governments are possible but regarded as shaky and, in the German stability-loving political culture, still very rare. Due to the mentioned fragmentation and the fact that no major party is, so far, willing to build a coalition government with AfD, the remaining parties have to form broader and more and more unlikely alliances to

build a government. In the cases of Thuringia and Brandenburg, the CDU and SPD have built a coalition including BSW. In both cases, Russian-friendly BSW is putting pressure on foreign policy issues. Among other things, during negotiations for the coalition, they discussed formulations on diplomatic efforts in the Ukraine war and the stationing of US medium-range missiles in Germany. In fact, the German *Bundesländer* have almost no competences in foreign policy and the Two Plus Four Treaty – the 1990 treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany, the GDR, France, Russia, the UK and the US that defines the foreign policy aspects of reunification – rules out such a stationing in East Germany anyway, but it shows the new challenges and irrationals in German coalition building.

Crumbling infrastructure and collapsing coalitions

The European Football Championship was a welcomed change in July 2024 for troubled Germany. Comparisons were drawn to the summer's tale of 2006, when Germany hosted the World Cup. The weather was perfect, and Germany came third. But 2024 was different. It was pouring, Germany left in the quarterfinals and instead of praising German hospitality like in 2006, international media was worried about German infrastructure. Especially the Dutch team made it into the headlines with its ambition to travel through Germany by train. And, of course, they had to take an emergency flight to take part in the semifinals after their train to Dortmund was cancelled.

Beyond the anecdotal potential of stories like that, they highlight a dramatic underinvestment in infrastructure. Public buildings, schools, the famous *Autobahn* and its bridges, and the railway, once famous for its punctuality, suffer from three decades of heavy underinvest. Public investment declined in the 1990s and has, since then, barely been enough to maintain substance. Germany was frequently near the bottom of advanced economies in public investment and the sudden collapse of the Carolina bridge in Dresden became a 'petrified' symbol of this.

The underlying pattern of this development is an unresolved conflict within the German public and party system. Whereas Greens, SPD and the Left want to mobilise resources to invest in infrastructure and the green transition, either via expanding public debt or raising taxes, conservatives, liberals and AfD focus on cutting expenditure. Given that both camps were represented in the traffic-light coalition, it is no surprise that tensions were implicit in the government.

The tensions were fuelled by a decision of the federal constitutional court in December 2023. The coalition included €60 billion in its budget that was meant as a credit authorisation in the 2021 budget to combat the pandemic. However, the intended loans were not called up but were transferred by the traffic-light coalition to the so-called energy and climate fund, today's climate and transformation fund. The money was intended to support measures for energy efficiency in buildings and investment in railways. The conservatives spoke out against this and turned to the court. The judges declared the procedure unconstitutional. The result: the €60 billion transferred to the fund was not available to the federal government

and caused severe problems for fixing the budget. From then on, coalition meetings looked more like an ongoing wrestling match than teamwork.

However, the coalition was able to push through some significant reforms. Probably most striking: the expansion of wind energy has made significant progress. The share of renewable energies in the electricity mix was above 60% in the first half of 2024, while it was around 44% when the coalition started. The Hartz IV system, which was implemented during the Schröder years as a social minimum level and troubled the SPD ever since, was replaced by the slightly more generous and target-oriented *Bürgergeld* ('citizens' money'), the minimum wage was raised as well as BAFÖG, a grants and loan system for students.

But public support for the governing parties crumbled even faster than German infrastructure in the face of the growing public split between coalition partners. Quarrels, especially between the Greens and the liberals, became frequent, while the chancellor defined his role merely as moderator, bridging between the diverging partners again and again. This not only damaged the reputation of the government severely, but also left the public wondering what Olaf Scholz and his SPD were standing for. The SPD's profile suffered.

Troubled waters

"A week is a long time in politics" – the catchphrase, attributed to British Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, seemed outdated on the late evening of 6 November 2024. On this very evening, a day seemed to be a long time in German politics. While rumours concerning a breakup of the coalition floated around political Berlin by October, most commentators were sure that a new Trump administration, and the successive challenges in international politics and transatlantic relations, would bind the traffic-light coalition together, it was different. The head of the liberals and Minister of Finance, Christian Lindner, was not able or willing to agree with Olaf Scholz on a strategy to secure the budget and realise investments. Instead, he suggested to dissolve the parliament, which led to his subsequent suspension by the chancellor. It turned out that the liberals had been planning to leave the government since at least late summer, calling the date 'D-day' in their simulation games.

The schedule became clearer over the next days. Olaf Scholz would ask the parliament for a vote of no confidence. This is one of the very few ways to realise snap elections in the stability-oriented German constitutional system. In February, a new Bundestag will be elected. While the outcome is open, it seems likely that populist parties will benefit from this.

In the meantime, Germany's tendency to revolve around itself will intensify further, lacking a significant contribution to strengthening Europe. Even more troubles are ahead, not only for Germany.