

Forging New Alliances at Home and Abroad: German Greens in a Post-Industrial Era

By Sebastian Gräfe

How have transatlantic influences affected the Green Party?

Can the Green Party overcome the German *Lagerdenken*?

What does the new generation of the Green Party look like and what are their goals?

Colors matter in politics—on both sides of the Atlantic. The United States has blue and red states. In the first few decades after the Second World War, West German politics seemed to rely on a similarly small variety of colors. Relevant political parties were either black, referring to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), red, referring to the Social Democratic Party (SPD), or yellow, referring to the Liberals with their Free Democratic Party (FDP). But in 1979, a new color was introduced in Germany resulting from new social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s: the Green Party. Following its founding, this new party successfully stirred up the established political system and entered parliaments on the state, federal, and European levels. Today, in many towns across Germany, the Greens have become the new people's party in local elections by carrying more than 25 percent of the votes (i.e., Stuttgart), and in select neighborhoods, even more than 50 percent.

Since the early years of this project, political opponents have argued that the Green Party is only a political phenomenon of one generation; their project would be doomed to fail and disappear soon from the political stage. Thirty years later, the Greens—meanwhile having merged with the East German civil rights party Alliance 90 after the peaceful revolution in 1989—are a stable political actor in re-unified Germany. Their central ideas—sustainable development in environmental and economic terms and strengthening a liberal and open society—are of even greater importance nowadays.

While Germans from all parties were excited by the election of Barack Obama, the Greens were especially so. In Obama, German Greens saw the potential for cooperation across the Atlantic on issues at the heart of the Green Party's platform: combating climate change, diplomacy, social justice. They heard policy proposals from Washington reminiscent of their own red-green policies from 1998 to 2005 on climate change mitigation and green jobs. For the Green Party, the 2008 election marked a new opportunity in transatlantic relations.

German Greens—Building Transatlantic Bridges

Today, there is a lively dialogue across the Atlantic on how to tackle climate change—although the recent announcements from several U.S. Senators not to pursue a Senate climate and energy bill before 2010 could be a setback for joint transatlantic efforts in this matter. The German Greens are closely following U.S. climate policy because they are convinced that only an ambitious and joint deal with the U.S. (including China) will bring about the needed emission cuts. People like Reinhard Bütikofer, former co-chairman of the German Green Party and newly-elected Member of the European Parliament, his fellow party member Jürgen Trittin, foreign policy spokesperson for the Greens in the Bundestag and one of their frontrunners in the 2009 federal elections, and Cem Özdemir, the party's new national co-chairman, have spent a lot of time pushing for a global "Green New Deal." They argue that the enormous sums governments have been mobilizing to give the economy a boost must be used to create a sustainable economy and society. If governments let this historic opportunity pass by, successive generations will inherit not just staggering national debts but also an enormous pile of unsolved problems. Therefore, massive investments in education should ensure equal opportunities and participation in welfare, and the global capitalism should be embedded in a global regulatory

framework to avoid also protectionism and nationalism.

Putting aside the often highly controversial policies coming out of the White House, the United States and its civil society have always been an inspiration for the German Greens and their political precursors. Self-determination, individualism, sexual liberation, and new forms of political grassroots activism—those things were soaked up like a sponge by the “68 generation” in their struggle against their parents and the political establishment in (West) Germany. Petra Kelly, co-founder of the German Green Party and one of their early icons, embodied like no other this aspiration for the “other” United States. She was born in Germany but spent her high school years in the U.S. and graduated from American University in Washington, D.C. An admirer of Martin Luther King, Jr., she was politicized in the United States during the 1960s and campaigned for Robert F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey in the 1968 U.S. elections. During that time and in the years to follow, she served as a unique transatlantic bridge-builder for anti-nuclear, pacifist, and feminist ideas and distinctly influenced the German Greens’ agenda. Reinhard Bütikofer and Cem Özdemir, the previous and current co-chairmen of the party, share this strong interest in the United States. The former spent some of his high school years in the U.S.; the latter was a fellow with the German Marshall Fund. The enthusiasm for the “other” United States goes even so far that some German expats living in Washington founded a D.C. chapter of the German Greens in spring 2008. One of the issues they often discuss with their party fellows back in Germany is the latent existing anti-Americanism among the German political left.

For the Greens, it goes without saying that today’s challenges of combating climate change, creating sustainable security and peace, shaping a global economy, and fostering development cannot be dealt with on a national scale only. With Barack Obama as the new U.S. president, this and the coming years will serve as a unique opportunity for international cooperation to tackle those challenges and to create new alliances. Therefore, the German Greens welcomed the invitation to join an initiative led by the Center for American Progress to develop a common progressive agenda on security, environmental, and economic policies in the coming years. On 1-2 October 2009, progressives from all parts of the world will gather in Madrid under the patronage of Prime Minister Zapatero to launch this so-called ‘Global Progress’ project (in cooperation with the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, a think tank affiliated with the German Green Party, the Spanish Fundación Ideas, and the British policy network).

German Greens—Building Bridges Across Domestic Political Camps?

Building bridges across borders and political front lines seems almost easier to achieve on the international level instead of the national level. For decades, German politics has been determined by “*Lagerdenken*”—thinking in camps. As described, governments were either based on black-yellow or red-green majorities on the state and federal level; grand (CDU & SPD) or red-yellow coalitions have remained exceptions. But like many post-industrial countries, Germany has changed sociologically in recent decades. Social diversification resulted in the formation of new (political) milieus. The two big people’s parties, the SPD and CDU, are constantly losing ground in nominal terms—not only as a result of the latest grand coalition—as voters shift to smaller parties like the Liberal, Green, or Left Party (or even radical right-wing parties). New “single-issue parties” are emerging such as the Pirates Party (*Piraten Partei*) focusing on one topic only (i.e., freedom on the internet). This puts smaller players in a decisive role—sometimes acting as kingmaker.

But those developments rarely end in constellations leaving behind decade-long patterns of traditional political camps. Almost all German politicians hide behind the excuses that their respective constituency would not yet be ready for new constellations beyond camp

front lines. The 2009 campaign for the Bundestag once again was full of this old-style rhetoric. Liberals persistently excluded the possibility of participating in a SPD-led government; the Greens constantly voiced their preference for a red-green government. Political leaders of all parties are afraid of irritating their voter base. But if the voters really don't like new constellations, shouldn't political leadership then be about preparing society for change?

But the political reality is moving faster than expected. Since 2008, Hamburg has been governed by a black-green government. Both parties always refer to the singularity of their project as a result of Hamburg's predominantly urban electorate. But since the election in the state of Saarland on 30 August this year, the Greens are in a very comfortable position to leverage either a left or a conservative government in Saarbrücken—both with green participation. The exploratory talks with both sides will continue beyond the federal elections on 27 September in order to avoid counterproductive signals to the national polls. After similar elections in the eastern German state of Thuringia, the Greens cleared the way there for the first talks of a joint government with the SPD and the Left Party. The same constellation could have already been in place in Hesse in 2008. There, the Social Democrats categorically ruled out a joint government with the Left Party throughout the campaign, and then broke their promise soon after election day when they began coalition talks with the Left Party. This drama ended in a chaotic and failed attempt to form a red-red-green government in Hesse's capital city, Wiesbaden. Soon after, conservative Prime Minister Roland Koch was re-elected in a new election.

These examples show that German politicians will be more and more challenged by unclear coalition options after elections, especially on the state level. Green political strategists will also have to discuss this new situation—and there will be plenty of occasions. The year 2011 will be the next super election year in Germany with six state elections in Baden-Württemberg, Bremen, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saxony-Anhalt, Berlin, and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. First, tackling the new coalition options is a question of changing the political culture in Germany. Yes, Germany will experience more exciting political times, including governments with changing majorities. To survive politically, politicians of all parties will have to take their ideological blinders off; otherwise, some of them will remain in the opposition ranks for the foreseeable future. This might be cozy but says nothing about political skills. Second, exactly those skills will be needed more than ever, especially in small parties, to deliver results to their respective constituencies.

After three decades of lively meddling in German and European politics and society, some complain that the Greens have finally arrived in the center of society. Those who worry about this development should rather consider it as an advantage. The fact that some of their issues have meanwhile become mainstream issues carries much potential to overcome "*Lagerdenken*." After having successfully set the agenda on climate change, the Greens now need to define their future role. The Greens need to identify their main political goals better and consider them less as a representation of a specific political camp. They will then be in an improved position to reach across the aisle without losing their identity.

In the years ahead, the Greens will need smart strategists and negotiators. Already today, those can be found among a new generation of younger Green politicians. Many of them were politicized in the early 1990s after Germany's re-unification. Better, affordable education for all, protecting the environment, and creating a liberal society open to immigrants have been and will remain very important issues for them. Members of the Green Party's younger generation such as Omid Nouripour, a Member of the German Bundestag, Tarek Al-Wazir, who heads the Green party contingent in the Hesse

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State Parliament, or Robert Habeck, Co-Chairman of the Greens in the northern German State Schleswig-Holstein have started to occupy leading positions in parliaments or the party itself. Others have taken advantage of the freedoms that an increasingly unified Europe is offering and gained experiences abroad like Franziska Brantner, a newly-elected Member of the European Parliament. The political attitudes of those young Greens are less ideological than those of the founding generation of the Greens. Old stories from the 1960s and 1970s can make them yawn, although they acknowledge the political and societal achievements of that generation.

Interestingly, the Greens also manage to involve people from civil society, such as Sven Giegold, Co-Founder of the German branch of the anti-globalization movement attac, or Barbara Lochbihler, former Secretary-General of Amnesty International Germany. Both also joined the Green Group in the European Parliament. In future, it will remain essential for the Greens' political agenda and their public support to stay open to input from these kinds of social movements. It will be the task of this new generation to continue shaping Germany as a country where nuclear energy will be phased-out, civil liberties will be strengthened, genetically modified food will be rejected, the economy will be turned into a low-carbon economy, immigrants will be welcomed, and diplomacy will prevail over military force. This means also speaking frankly with voters that progress on some issues will include compromises on others. If the Greens succeed in doing this, they could once again act as a political avant-garde by breaking decades-old German political thinking in left and conservative camps and advancing their own political agenda.

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