

THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT: WHAT GERMANY'S CONSERVATIVE TURN MEANS FOR EUROPE

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SUMMARY

- Germany's federal election in February shattered political precedent: a far-right party, the Alternative for Germany, surged into second place for the first time in the federal republic's history and a newly elected chancellor broke a longstanding taboo by signalling a willingness to cooperate with them.
- These developments reflect a broader shift. Younger conservatives are more likely to embrace hardline policies and far-right parties; their opinions are less influenced by Germany's post-war legacy and the Holocaust. This is pushing the new government towards more nationalistic domestic policies and a more assertive foreign policy.
- An increasingly self-assured Germany, driven by more conservative debates, may form coalitions with right-wing northern and central European countries, bypassing lengthy negotiations at the EU level.
- The consequence may be a two-speed EU, with one bloc led by Germany and the other by France and Italy. Yet European leaders need not fear this. Member countries have been on two speeds before, and it worked to the EU's advantage; with one group becoming the trailblazers and the rest joining once they had caught up.
- European policymakers should embrace the new German dynamism and brace for the associated friction—that way, they can turn Germany's leadership into a catalyst for deeper, more effective integration across the continent.

Helmut's shadow

European leaders have high hopes for the new German government that emerged from February's federal election. Many see the new chancellor, Friedrich Merz, as someone who could lead a new push for stronger European unity amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine and trade tensions with America. The 69-year-old represents the "old guard" of the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party; he wants to make the CDU more traditionally conservative again through stricter migration rules, but he also supports the EU and wants to give its central institutions more power.

Merz has already done two things that supporters of a stronger, more united Europe wanted to see from Germany's leadership. First, he signalled the revival of the close Franco-German partnership, which lies at the core of European integration, when he met French president Emmanuel Macron, making Paris his first official trip soon after winning the election. Second, he led an informal coalition that scrapped the laws limiting government borrowing—the "debt brake". The rule change allowed Germany to exceed its strict borrowing limits and take on €500bn in new debt, earmarked for investments in infrastructure and climate protection. Germany will now be able to borrow money to fund defence spending above 1% of its GDP, which could lead to a big jump in its military budget—up to €120bn a year if expenditure reached 3% of GDP, from around €72bn in 2024. This would make Germany's defence budget much larger than France's (€51bn) and Britain's (€70bn). Pro-European advocates have been pushing for these changes for a long time.

The moves, and Merz's pro-European reputation, raised expectations that his government might pursue a major new agreement—a "grand European bargain"—to strengthen Europe. The goal would be to create more powerful EU institutions in Brussels, so the EU can better face challenges from Russia, China and even Trump's America. German commentators liken Merz to former chancellor Helmut Kohl (in office 1982-1998), a major pro-European leader remembered for his role in European integration, such as the creation of the euro.

However, Merz is not facing the same domestic environment as Kohl did. Kohl was able to push for a stronger, more united Europe because, at the time, all major German parties—including conservatives within the CDU/CSU—supported European integration. There was no powerful far-right party in parliament calling for nationalist policies. This made it easier for the conservative and progressive parties to work together on pro-European policies, smoothing the way for major EU integration projects.

Now, the political landscape is different. The previous political consensus that made pro-European policies easy to pursue is no longer there. The far right is more powerful than

before, which has shifted the policies of centre-right conservative parties further right. Voters now also view foreign policy as more of an election-deciding issue than they did before, which promotes short-termist nationalist policies to the detriment of further European integration.

This policy brief argues that Merz's CDU-led government, despite its pro-EU rhetoric, is unlikely to achieve a "grand bargain" for deeper European supranationalism because of generational changes in German conservatism, nationalist politics becoming more mainstream and Merz's constrained leadership of a divided party. Instead, Germany's focus on immediate national interests will likely result in a two-speed Europe, with a "Hansa 2.0" bloc of central and northern European states potentially pursuing closer defence integration and leaving the rest behind. Although this could lead to friction, it is also an opportunity for deeper EU integration. European leaders should embrace these dynamics as the first step towards a fully integrated EU.

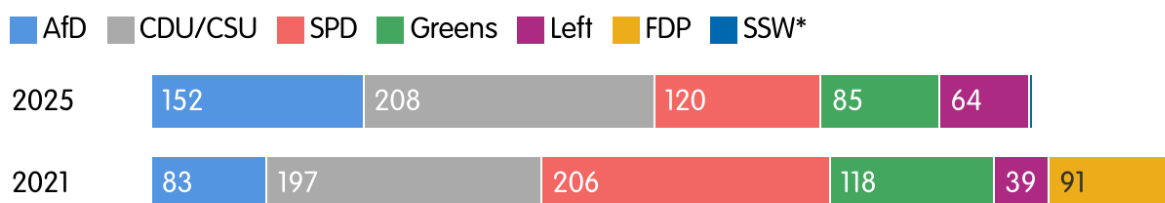
The new Germany

Understanding the domestic constraints facing German policymakers could help European policymakers to influence Berlin's foreign policy agenda.

A rising far right

The federal election at the end of February shook up Germany's political landscape, ushering in a new coalition government. The CDU and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU)—longstanding allies who operate as a single force in the federal parliament (Bundestag)—claimed 28.5% of the vote. They joined forces with the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD), the third-largest party, to cobble together a coalition with only a slim majority.

Seats won in the Bundestag in 2021 and 2025



Seats are 630 in 2025, down from 736 in 2021.

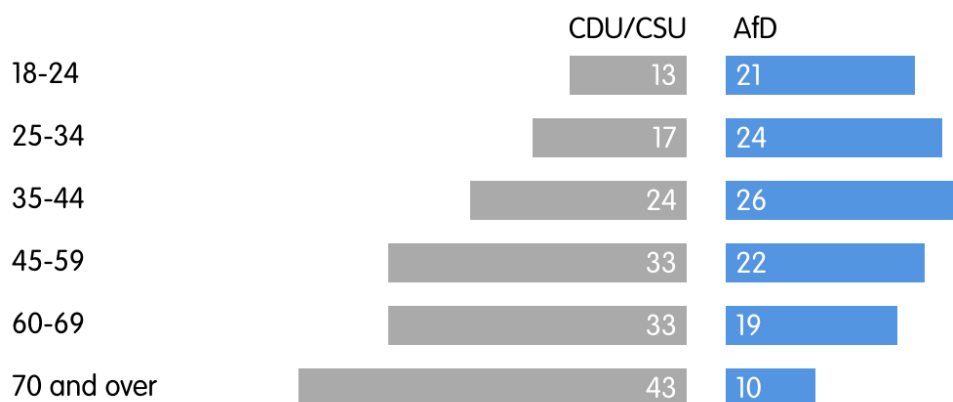
*SSW is a minority party and it is exempt from the 5% threshold required for parliamentary representation

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However, the real headline-grabber was the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), which surged into second place with 20.8% of the vote—a feat no far-right party has achieved in the history of the federal republic. The party performed particularly well with younger cohorts, especially among people aged 25-44.

Younger voters were more likely to support the AfD

Share of votes for AfD and CDU/CSU per age group, February 2025, in %



Source: Tagesschau
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The AfD has stormed the political stage just as public attitudes towards foreign policy and Germany's place in the world are shifting. The younger generations demand bolder foreign policies. The AfD's rise increases the incentives for centre-right parties to promote nationalist ideas at home, bolstering the influence of parts of the CDU/CSU that are sympathetic to these ideas, and pushing the party towards a more assertive and unilateral foreign policy.

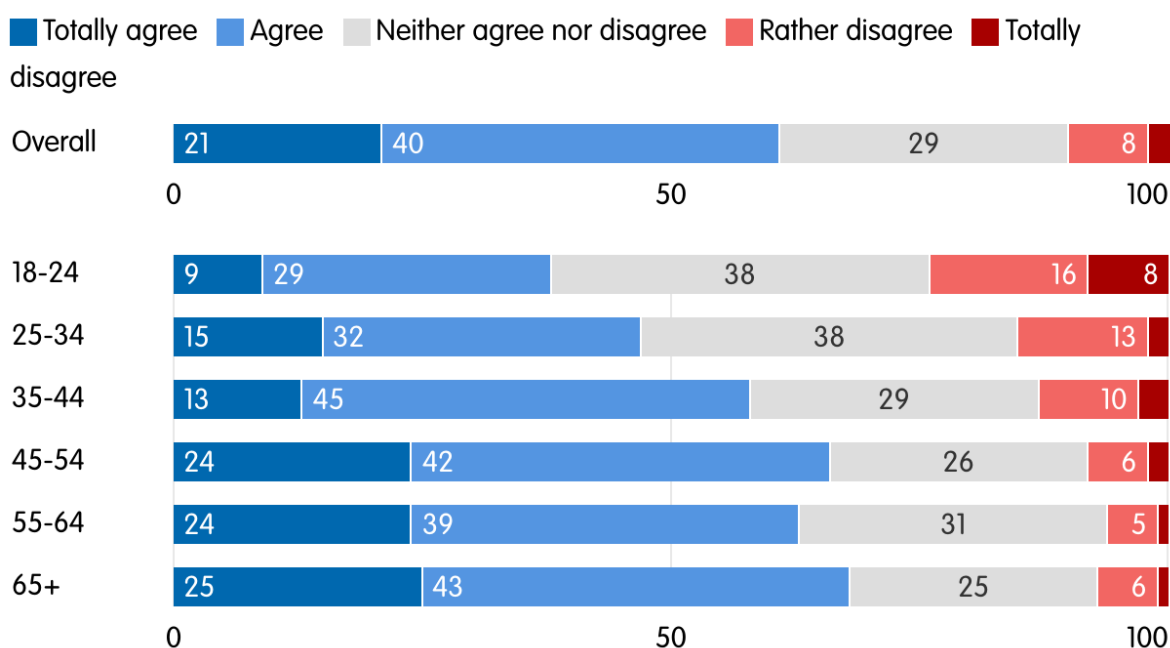
A more assertive and nationalist foreign policy

Subtle shifts in German voters' foreign policy preferences have been visible over the last few years. Although the public remains broadly pro-European, there is growing evidence of support among Germans for a more assertive, and at times nationalist, foreign policy, especially among younger Germans. That said, it is difficult to determine whether these are lasting generational shifts or temporary cohort effects, which might diminish as voters age. The Global Public Policy Institute, a German think-tank, conducted a survey in April 2019 asking whether Germany should "take on more international responsibility". The results show a clear shift: while only 30% of Germans supported this idea in 2016, the figure steadily increased, reaching 45% by 2019. The generational divide is even more pronounced; among respondents aged under 30, support for greater German responsibility was roughly 10

percentage points higher than among older age groups. Notably, the younger generations are more willing to countenance military force to achieve foreign policy aims.

Another survey in December 2024 asked whether Germany should adopt a more independent foreign policy stance and reduce its dependence on United States and France, following the rise of Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen. More than half of all German voters were in favour of becoming more independent from a Trump-led America, but this figure dropped to 38% for those under 25. In contrast, 63% of voters over 25 support greater independence from the US.

Germany should be more independent from Trump's USA



Germany should make more foreign policy decisions independently of the US, even if it leads to short-term financial disadvantages and less influence for Germany (fieldwork 7 Dec 2024 - 9 Dec 2024).

Source: Focaldata
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The rise of the far right has made it more acceptable for the CDU/CSU to consider or propose policies that question, or even openly oppose, the EU. The existing research shows there is a more assertive and nationalist stance among younger voters. This shift is important for Merz's CDU/CSU, because its voter base overlaps the most with that of the nationalist and anti-democratic far right. This means that the CDU/CSU and the AfD are in direct competition for those segments of the electorate that are less inclined towards European cooperation.

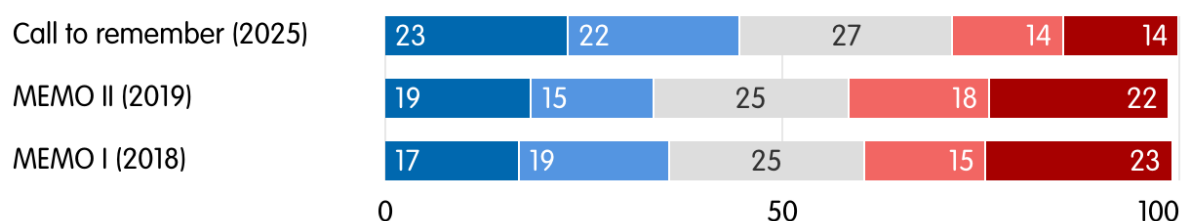
The role of history

German politicians often refer to the Holocaust and the second world war to explain foreign policy decisions. A notable example is then-foreign minister Joschka Fischer's justification for German military involvement in the Kosovo war in 1999, when he argued that the lessons of Auschwitz imposed a moral obligation to prevent genocide, even if it meant military engagement. This marked the beginning of a significant shift in the Green party, from originally being strongly pacifist to becoming a leading advocate of rearmament by 2025.

The change in the Greens reflects wider attitudes. The German public is becoming less receptive to arguments rooted in the 1930s and 1940s. In recent years, support has increased for an “end to the debate” about German guilt over the Nazi era: for the first time in 2025, a majority of Germans agreed with ending the debate. This argument is supported most strongly by middle-aged and AfD voters.

I'm annoyed that Germans are still being reproached for the crimes committed against the Jews

■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Partly disagree / Partly agree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree



Percentages may not always add up to 100% due to missing answers or rounding

Source: Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future (EVZ)
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Young conservatives, especially, are increasingly unwilling to use the Nazi era to legitimise German foreign policies. It is no longer seen as the defining feature of Germany's identity, but as just one chapter in a broader and otherwise more democratic story. This shift is reflected in political discourse: in an unpublished study that examined how German politicians explain the shift in foreign policies in recent years, even on issues deeply connected to Germany's post-war identity—such as relations with Israel, military spending and nuclear

deterrence—references to the Holocaust were rare. [1] During the 2015 migration crisis, while international commentators drew links between Europe's openness to refugees and the Holocaust, German politicians themselves rarely made that connection explicit.

The same study also showed that only six of the 11 politicians interviewed mentioned the Holocaust, and those who did were mostly from left-leaning parties. [2] Right-of-centre politicians, including those from the CDU and the CSU and far-right ones, such as from the AfD, rarely invoked the Holocaust. While the sample size limits generalisation, a clear pattern emerges: respondents from left-wing parties referred to the Holocaust most frequently, while those from the three right-wing parties did not mention it at all. This shift in emphasis highlights how changing public attitudes towards history are having a greater impact on the CDU/CSU than on other centrist parties, making them more likely to prioritise immediate national interests over long-standing structural commitments to Europe or historical remembrance.

This was apparent in the euro-zone crisis in the 2010s, when historical arguments lost their resonance in political debates. The German government quickly dismissed calls for additional war reparations to Greece. For this new generation, Germany is a natural leader in Europe, and the restraint that once defined foreign policy is no longer a core value. Their political identity is shaped by a reunified, successful Germany, not by the burden of past guilt.

A younger generation in government

This generational shift is reflected in the present leadership of the CDU/CSU. Apart from Merz, the CDU's leaders are generally younger—the leader of North Rhine-Westphalia, Hendrik Wüst, is 49; the new leader of the CDU's powerful parliamentary group, Jens Spahn, is 45. They came of age in a reunified, confident Germany and view their country as a clear leader in both Europe and the EU. Their parents were born after the second world war, while their grandparents—who might retain some connection to the post-war order—may have long since passed away. Consequently, they lack the ties which defined previous generations of German leaders. To them, restraint in foreign policy is not a concept rooted in personal conviction.

Both Spahn and Wüst are heavyweights. Wüst alone represents at least one-third of the CDU's entire political power, as the leader of the party's largest and most influential state chapter in North Rhine-Westphalia. For his part, Spahn now heads the CDU/CSU's parliamentary group and leads the party's informal but more conservative wing, which flirts with nationalist positions, particularly during migration debates. Both individuals have the credibility and the power to sway conservative voters to support changes to German foreign policy. Merz needs

them to decide on any major future German foreign policy commitments.

Merz is often seen as a classic German conservative: tough on migration but committed to the EU, much like Kohl. However, the chancellor now leads a party and a society that have changed dramatically. Unlike earlier generations, today's CDU/CSU is far less anchored in the post-war tradition of power-sharing in Brussels to atone for past aggression. While Merz himself remains attached to these values, younger conservatives in the party are less inclined to see Germany's foreign policy through this historical lens. That means Merz is not the bearer of the coming change; he is part of an older generation of German leaders who understood the EU as a safeguard against excessive German dominance. Much like Joe Biden's presidency marked the end of an era of transatlantic consensus in the US, Merz's chancellorship may represent the "last hurrah" of a CDU that unequivocally supports a big bargain to strengthen the EU.

The end of political consensus

The shifts in attitudes and the concomitant rise of the AfD put an end to the feature of domestic politics that enabled Germany to act as an "honest broker" among EU member states and to forge supranational compromises. Previously, Germany could relinquish elements of national power in favour of strengthening EU institutions in Brussels. The reason for this was that German mainstream parties had traditionally avoided making foreign policy issues central to their election campaigns. Promises in this area are rarely achievable because implementing foreign policy proposals almost always requires cooperation with international partners that are beyond Germany's control. Maintaining a cross-party "permissive consensus" to keep foreign policy out of election campaigns likely helped Germany become a reliable international partner and is why—until recently—nationalist parties found it difficult to gain traction.

However, from a democratic perspective, this policy stability comes at a cost: foreign policy issues remain largely outside direct popular oversight. And there is one catch to a pro-EU foreign policy consensus. Supranational cooperation is almost always in the medium- and long-term interests of the participating states, and very rarely in their short-term interests. Especially for relatively powerful states like Germany, it sometimes seems more advantageous to act alone or with a few allies than endure the lengthy coordination processes and compromises required within NATO and the EU.

German membership of NATO and the EU has long been successful because it was not a topic of domestic political competition. When foreign policy did become politicised, it led to major shifts in the party system. For example, the AfD gained popularity during the euro-zone crisis

in the 2010s because the CDU/CSU made promises—such as “no money for Greece”—that they ultimately could not keep, disappointing middle-class voters and prompting some to switch their support to the AfD. Similarly, disagreements over NATO policy in the early 1980s fractured the German left, led to the creation of the Green party and allowed the conservative CDU/CSU to dominate German politics for over a decade.

Thus, Germany, as a nation-state, can engage in long-term international cooperation as long as foreign policy does not become a prominent issue in domestic election campaigns. When foreign policy debates become highly visible and emotionally charged, sooner or later political actors emerge who, rightly, point out the high short-term costs of long-term cooperation. As a result, they tend to gain the upper hand. Brexit and Trump’s “America First” policy are prime examples of how such dynamics can ultimately undermine sustained international collaboration.

Normalising the far right

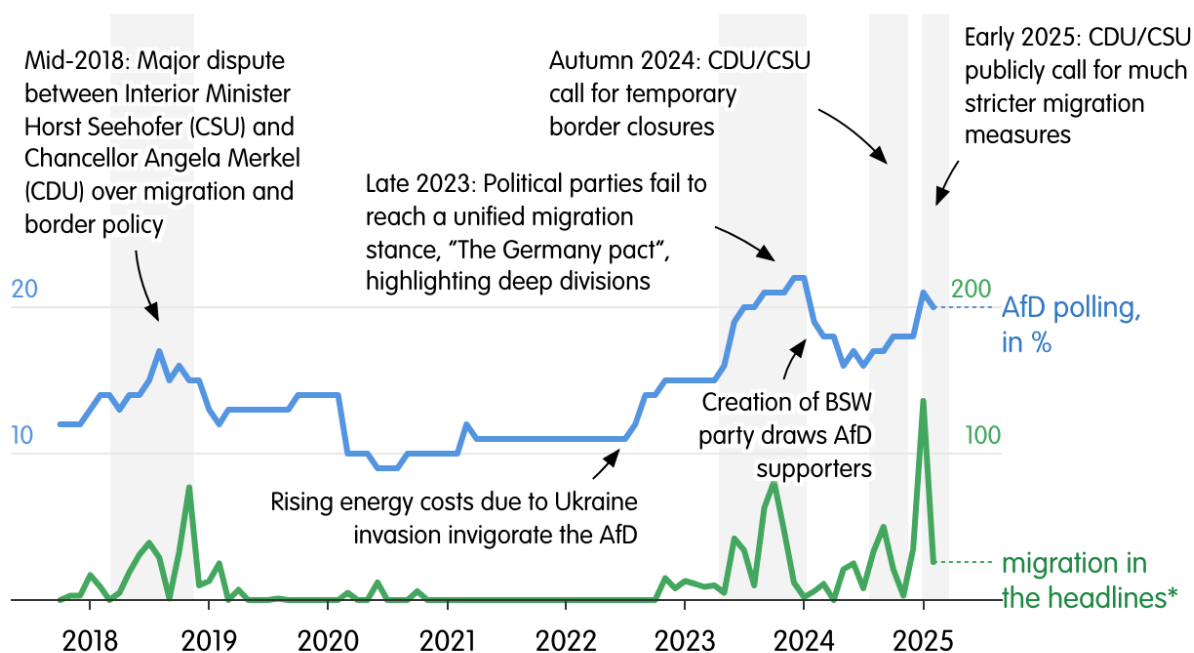
The reintroduction of foreign policy issues to German election campaigns has accelerated under Merz. Under Angela Merkel, the CDU/CSU deliberately avoided making migration a campaign issue, with only a few figures like Spahn, and Alexander Dobrindt, who is now interior minister, highlighting immigration challenges. Spahn and Dobrindt remained relatively minor voices within the CDU/CSU, but their interventions nonetheless raised the profile of the issue and likely contributed to the AfD’s gains. Although the wider party’s strategy of avoiding discussing migration may have alienated some conservative voters, it also limited the AfD’s ability to capitalise on its signature issue. Under Merz, this strategy was reversed; he argued that the AfD’s rise was due to the CDU/CSU’s reluctance to address immigration robustly, and pledged to win back voters by taking a tougher stance. He promised to “halve” the AfD’s vote share as CDU leader. In reality, however, the AfD’s support more than doubled, rising from 10% in 2021 to 21% in 2025.

As the AfD’s electoral strength grew, the CDU/CSU softened its approach. Internally, the party began to debate whether and how to cooperate with the AfD. Before Merz, the CDU/CSU maintained a strict policy of non-cooperation with the AfD, refusing to work with the party at any level of government due to its extremist positions. Merkel and other senior conservatives consistently emphasised that the AfD did not share the values of Germany’s democratic centre. Yet under Merz the question of informal cooperation—such as voting together on specific bills—became more acceptable, even though formal coalitions were still off the table.

This issue came to a head shortly before the February 2025 federal election, when, following a knife attack in Aschaffenburg, Merz declared he would accept the AfD’s support in the

Bundestag—a move without precedent. Yet his subsequent bill failed because centre-right MPs refused to be seen voting alongside the AfD. This episode likely boosted the AfD’s public support and it intensified the debate within the CDU/CSU about future relations with the far right—it also broke the long-standing taboo against cooperation.

The rise of the AfD closely tracks how often migration dominates the headlines



Source: *Author's calculation based on political claims in media reporting; Forschungsgruppe Wahlen
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The debate flared up again during the coalition talks after the election. Spahn even proposed to treat the AfD like a “normal party”, at least in formal processes in the Bundestag. Notably, both Spahn and Dobrindt—who had previously challenged Merkel’s approach by campaigning on stricter immigration policies—are highly influential within the CDU/CSU. Their party will thus continue to try to outmanoeuvre the AfD on immigration despite previous failures, keeping the issue in the news. There is also a growing probability that the CDU/CSU will further normalise the far right, potentially paving the way for future coalition arrangements. This trajectory mirrors developments seen in other liberal democracies.

The policies of Merz’s government

The CDU/CSU’s fear of losing ground to the far right is encouraging it to pursue more

nationalist policies and assert itself more on the global stage. For instance, many in Europe welcomed Germany's decision to relax its debt brake in favour of more spending on infrastructure and defence, but hardly anyone noticed the European implications. In 2022, Germany spent €200bn to stimulate domestic demand to cushion the economic impact of the energy crisis after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. European partners were deeply disappointed that they were not consulted, because such significant spending inevitably affects the broader European market. Now, in 2025, Germany has committed to spending five times that amount—around €1tn—on infrastructure and defence. The scale of this investment could dramatically alter the economic landscape within the euro-zone. Despite the significance of Germany's removal of the debt brake, European partners have largely refrained from criticising either the assertive nature of this move or the fact that, once again, they were not consulted at all (even if they benefit from it).

Similarly, European partners may welcome the formation of a coalition government between the CDU/CSU and the SPD, especially the parties' agreement on stricter asylum and refugee measures after the previous government's long resistance to agreeing to an asylum reform in Brussels. However, the final migration deal represents a significant dilution of the CDU/CSU's original demands. The party itself is much more conservative and in parts less enthusiastic about the EU than the coalition agreement suggests. Europe should thus brace for more conservative demands in the future. Throughout the election campaign, the CDU/CSU openly called for stricter control of Germany's national borders, without consulting European neighbours. This marks a complete reversal from Merkel's open border policies, principles also reflected in the Schengen agreement.

Another significant change is Germany's renewed prominence as a major player in Ukraine policy, working closely with France and the UK. Notably, the coalition government has stopped disclosing details of German weapons deliveries to Ukraine. This marks a clear break from the approach of the previous SPD chancellor Olaf Scholz, who published such lists to reassure the pacifist wing of the SPD that the weapons delivered had a "defensive nature". Merz has abandoned this practice, choosing instead to base arms deliveries solely on Ukraine's military requirements, regardless of domestic pacifist sentiment. As a result, it is now highly likely that Germany's next round of military aid to Ukraine will include advanced offensive weapons, such as more Taurus cruise missiles, which are capable of striking targets deep inside Russian territory.

Merz's recent visit to Brussels showcased a markedly more self-assured and uncompromising German stance within the EU. He firmly rejected any changes to EU debt rules and called for the removal of corporate sustainability and due diligence regulations, which he argues disadvantage German industry, stating: "We will repeal the national law in Germany. [...] I

also expect the European Union to follow this step and truly repeal this directive.” What stood out was not just the substance of Merz’s positions, but the way he presented them—not as starting points for negotiation, but as items for EU partners to accept, causing consternation in Brussels.

This assertive posture is emblematic of the broader transformation in German domestic politics, which now prioritises national interests, though Merz’s direct and sometimes confrontational style has intensified this. Such newfound assertiveness has enabled Germany to mobilise substantial resources for Europe, as demonstrated by the increased delivery of weapons to Ukraine, but it has also generated significant friction with European partners. During his inaugural trip to Paris, Merz clashed with Macron on trade, EU fiscal rules and defence.

A two-speed Europe

These developments indicate that Merz will be reluctant to engage in protracted, consensus-driven negotiations that account for the diverse interests of all EU members, especially smaller states. Instead, he is likely to favour ad hoc, short-term coalitions with countries that share Germany’s conservative positions on fiscal discipline and migration. This approach resonates most with central, eastern and northern European states, countries that share Germany’s security concerns about Russia and scepticism of relying on the US or France for nuclear deterrence. As a result, Merz is likely to deepen intergovernmental cooperation with these partners, creating a coalition with the Baltic states, the Netherlands, Poland, Scandinavia and possibly Britain to promote free trade, market-friendly policies and financial self-responsibility—a “Hansa 2.0” inspired by the medieval Hanseatic League. Ideally, this would eventually encourage countries like France and Italy to join, much like the gradual expansion of the Schengen zone, which now includes the entire EU but began with a group of select countries (Germany, France, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) in 1985.

Germany's intergovernmental approach has driven significant integration in the recent past in specific areas, particularly security and defence. For example, in 2022, Germany led a coalition of northern and eastern European countries to develop a new air and missile defence system to pool the acquisition of air defence capabilities, the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI). The initiative quickly procured anti-aircraft defence systems for Ukraine in response to Russia's invasion. As of early 2025, ESSI has 21 members—including recent entrants like Turkey and Greece. However, France and Italy were against the initiative, having criticised ESSI for favouring German- and US-made systems. They remain outside the project.

This dynamic shows that Germany's approach can deepen integration in specific areas, but it can also create divisions within the EU, as not all member states agree with or benefit from this leadership style.

Nuclear deterrence as a test case

Security imperatives could soon test this two-speed Europe. The need for a common European defence mechanism and nuclear deterrent is as pressing as ever, now that Trump and Putin are undertaking Ukrainian "peace negotiations" without European involvement. Moreover, the Trump administration is unwilling to continue being Europe's primary security guarantor.

In theory, France could seize the moment to "Europeanise" and modernise its nuclear deterrent, but this could mean handing command over its nuclear arsenal to Brussels. Instead, France has proposed that EU countries fund the modernisation of its nuclear forces while Paris retains command. This proposal is unattractive to other European countries, which are unwilling to entrust their security to the authority of a single nation.

Alternatively, France could keep control of its own deterrent and instead help the EU to build its own. However, other Europeans would likely worry that this could reinforce French dominance in defence technology and would instead ask for unconstrained technology sharing. France is already reluctant to “Europeanise” its nuclear assets, and this reluctance is likely to grow as the 2027 French presidential election draws closer. Centrist candidates will be wary of being depicted as insufficiently “national” by right-wing rivals such as the National Rally’s (RN) current contender, Jordan Bardella, if they were to propose sharing French nuclear capabilities. As a result, France may become less willing to act as a security guarantor for Europe, and more willing to pursue its own independent, intergovernmental security policy without Germany.

In such a scenario, Merz would be the key accelerator of a two-speed Europe. Judging by his political track record, he seems neither interested in slow and long-lasting negotiations, nor in wooing France. He will more likely pursue an overarching security and innovation consensus reaching from the Balkans via Poland to Germany, ending up in the Netherlands and Scandinavia. His efforts could result in the Hansa 2.0 league creating its own Germany-led nuclear arsenal. This deterrent could see substantial integration leaps in innovation funding, and conventional and nuclear defence: a more modern arsenal that is cheaper for each country to sustain because of cost sharing. These incentives could entice holdouts such as France, Italy and Hungary to join their efforts.

In the worst case, it would lead to the institutionalisation of a two-speed Europe. Here, Hansa 2.0 would be one highly integrated camp, with Mediterranean southern Europe lagging behind. The greatest disadvantage, however, would lie in its polarising potential. Merz’s policies are already likely to cause tensions with France and Italy. China and Russia could easily exploit these tensions by stoking nationalist sentiments.

The German question is back

Eventually, Europe will have to confront the “German question” once again: how to manage the influence of an increasingly powerful Germany. Over the next 10-20 years, Germany’s power will most likely grow further. Despite the rise of the AfD, Germany faces a less polarised political landscape—ideological divides are comparatively muted, and that means that centrist parties have much more political energy to devote to economic and military reforms than their counterparts in countries riven by deep polarisation. Centrist parties still command majorities in both chambers of the German parliament so reform coalitions can draw on a broad base. This makes reforms more durable, as they are less likely to come

across as partisan victories but as national projects that transcend party lines.

Germany's economy is likely to rebound from a mild recession in 2023 and 2024 as its massive debt-financed spending on infrastructure and defence will stimulate industrial growth.

Despite the significant increase in borrowing, projections indicate that, at worst, Germany's debt-to-GDP ratio will peak around 90% over the next two decades (though more likely will reach around 75-80%), as stimulus-fuelled economic growth and relatively low borrowing costs (compared with the euro-zone average) help keep debt manageable. This means Germany will retain substantial capacity for further debt-funded investment.

Large-scale investment in the German military, together with the probable reintroduction of conscription, will transform Germany's armed forces into one of the most powerful in Europe within 10-20 years. This transformation would be further reinforced if Germany were to assume a central role in a European nuclear deterrent, independent of French or British leadership.

Eventually, if the German conservative parties secure symbolic victories on key right-wing topics such as defence and migration, and the economy strengthens, support for the far right would decline significantly. These factors taken together—a stable democratic centre, prosperous economy, powerful military—would set Germany apart from other European countries, which may possess one or two of these attributes, but not all three simultaneously.

Europe should not be afraid of Germany's growing power. This is not 1914 or 1939—it is 2025, and the context is fundamentally different. The best historical comparison is not the tumultuous first half of the 20th century, but the time when Merkel and her minister of finance, Wolfgang Schäuble (both CDU), dominated euro-zone politics, steering German policy with a steady, pro-European hand—though at the expense of southern Europe. Today, most German conservatives—and even more so the progressive parties—are staunch pro-European democrats. As Polish foreign minister Radosław Sikorski famously remarked, “I fear German inaction more than I fear German power.”

An opportunity for a stronger Europe

Other Europeans should view a more assertive Germany not as a threat, but as an opportunity: a chance for stronger, more cohesive European leadership and integration.

Embrace German assertiveness

European leaders should embrace Germany's assertiveness and channel its power towards

the broader European common good, recognising that a stronger German foreign policy brings both opportunities and challenges.

Policymakers should view Germany's increased pragmatism as a major chance to revive policy debates that were long stalled by its earlier pacifist and pro-Russian tendencies, such as how to develop a solid European defence policy. This is demonstrated by Merz's dramatic increases in defence spending and expanded weapons deliveries to Ukraine.

A two-speed Europe may be a good thing

European leaders should not automatically expect Germany to compromise for the sake of EU solutions; Berlin is now more comfortable with a "two-speed" Europe, where groups of states can move ahead on key issues, and the rest may follow. Although this approach can create short-term tensions, it often lays the groundwork for deeper integration in the long run, as the evolution of the Schengen agreement shows.

Using the nuclear issue as an example, European policymakers have two good options to address German assertiveness. First, they could support the emergence of a north-eastern Hansa 2.0 bloc led by Germany as a precursor to a grand bargain that enacts deeper European integration. Central and northern European members of Hansa 2.0 could develop concrete plans for closer cooperation so compelling—or so concerning—to those left out that other EU members are motivated to join a broader grand bargain rather than risk exclusion. This could see France and Britain giving up their national commands to pool their nuclear capabilities in exchange for Germany agreeing to further debt mutualisation, both sides "killing their darlings" for the sake of a broader European good; eventually resulting in more supranational integration.

If such a bargain proves elusive, European leaders should not resist a two-speed solution: a distinct north-eastern European nuclear deterrent alongside French and British forces could still enhance European security. First, because it would demonstrate how a group of states can overcome major differences and succeed at the intergovernmental level rather than the EU level. Second, because Europe is better served with three nuclear deterrents (France, UK, and Hansa 2.0) than only two. Nevertheless, the mere prospect of the Hansa 2.0 bloc should increase the likelihood of a grand European bargain, as it would pressure France and the UK to participate in a joint nuclear deterrent, especially if the new deterrent is jointly funded and technologically advanced. Even if these fail to induce Britain and France to join in the short term, the political and economic costs of Hansa 2.0 would likely diminish in the medium and long term, making it easier for other European partners like France and the UK to follow.

Avoid invoking the Holocaust

Regardless of the issue, European partners should avoid invoking Germany's second world war legacy or related topics to influence the German position in a more European direction. It is very likely that this will lead to the very opposite—a hardening of the German position. Instead, successful engagement will depend on appealing to Germany's current political, economic and security interests, especially given the Merz government's focus on realpolitik and its domestic competition with the far right.

Treat them like the French

Germany's future involvement in European integration will be more entrenched in domestic power politics, shaped particularly by the need to counter the far right. European diplomats should approach Germany as they do France: by understanding the domestic drivers of foreign policy and tailoring their strategies accordingly. European diplomats are adept at navigating such dynamics and can readily apply “French lessons” to their dealings with Germany. Analysing the short-term incentive structures—economic, security and political—of German decision-makers would help European partners use this understanding to advance the EU's common interests. Governments in Berlin and Paris are now becoming more alike in their approach to foreign policy. That is good news for Europe.

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About the author

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[1] Chudy, Nora (2025). *Investigating a Possible Interconnectedness Between Erinnerungskultur and German Political Ideologies*. [Unpublished bachelor's thesis]. Bard College Berlin.

[2] *Ibid.*

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