

## Berlin Perspectives

Analysing German European Policy

# A new German European policy: Merz' Intergovernmentalism or von der Leyen's Supranationalisation?

**iep** Institut für  
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Julian Plottka

Foto: ChatGPT

*While partner countries in the EU expect leadership from the new German government, European policy is increasingly polarised in domestic politics. The conservatives' party manifesto diverts from their traditional supranational approach. However, an intergovernmental approach to German European policy is likely to fail. The new German Chancellor should thus return to the roots of successful conservative European policy: Listening to EU partners, integrating their positions in a common approach, and proposing a comprehensive reform package with defence at its core. The 'Weimar Triangle' could serve as a basis for such an initiative.*

### **Diverging Expectations for a New European policy Inside and Outside Germany**

Expectations at home and abroad regarding the European policy of the potential new German federal government could hardly be further apart: After the traffic light coalition failed to take the initiative in European policy due to internal conflicts, Germany's European partners have high expectations for the new German government. It shall finally take on a leading role in the EU and launch initiatives to enable the Union to master current political, most notably geopolitical challenges. [Expectations range from a revitalisation of the Franco-German engine to a fundamental reform of asylum and migration policy, more support for Ukraine and a strengthening of European competitiveness.](#)

Meanwhile in the 2025 federal election campaigns, the salience of European policy was very low. The pro-European parties' positions on European policy are

changing in a [pattern that has been observed since the end of the 1990s](#): Traditionally, the conservative CDU was home to federalist positions in the German party system. On the left side of the party system, the SPD and, since the 1980s, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen were more sceptical concerning liberalisation in the Common Market. However, since the end of the permissive consensus in the early 1990s, parties on both sides changed their positions. The conservatives have put the principle of subsidiarity and de-bureaucratisation at the centre of their European policy agenda and support an increasingly intergovernmental approach to European integration. The 2025 demand for ['\[m\]ore Europe only where Europe creates added value for all'](#) is far away from the previously federalist CDU of Helmut Kohl. Today, federalist positions have their home with Bündnis 90/Die Grünen and the SPD. The former's election manifesto calls for a federal European republic with a constitution, while the latter supports a new European Convention for treaty reform. Being long-term supporters of European integration in the Common Market, the liberals' current position on the future of the EU is quite close to the social democratic and green visions for the Union.

Additionally, European policy has become much more polarised in Germany during the last three decades. The pro-European parties face increasingly vocal European-sceptic parties on the left and the right of the political spectrum, making it more difficult to launch pro-European policy initiatives. Their diverging views on intergovernmental or supranational approaches to European integration also complicate the chance of a CDU-led German government to take the initiative on the EU level.

## What are the Possible Options for a New German Government?

The new German government has at least three options to meet its international partners' expectations for German impetus to EU policies. First, the new government could return to Germany's traditional 'Leitbilder'-driven approach to European policy. Second, the new government could develop a new intergovernmental approach, which has never been spelled out so far. Third, German leadership could come from the Berlaymont, with German support by Manfred Weber in the European Parliament and Friedrich Merz in the German Federal Chancellery.

First, the traditional German approach to supranational integration would be in line with the SPD's party manifesto. [The German government's European policy has been characterised by 'Leitbilder' such as the 'United States of Europe', which not only set goals but also legitimise policies.](#) Since for Germany, the transfer of competences to the supranational level was always associated with regaining international actorness, the federal governments were prepared to make extensive concessions to the partner states in order to enable reforms and deepen European integration. A strong emphasis on the principle of subsidiarity, limiting the transfer of national competences to the EU, contradicts this approach to European policy. It used to focus on strengthening the level of policy making which can pursue a certain policy most effectively.

Since the end of the 1990s, Germany's European policy is increasingly led by national interests. In her famous speech at the College of Europe, [former German Chancellor Angela Merkel outlined the so-called 'Unionsmethode' as a new approach to German European policy.](#) However, it has never been fully spelled out what it means and how it differs from intergovernmentalism. Such a new approach would be the second option for the new German government. [Timo Lochocki shows what this might look like, detecting a generational change in the second tier of the CDU resulting in a new approach to European policy.](#) Elements of such a new approach are a stronger focus on Germany's short-term advantages, which are achieved on the basis of flexible coalitions with partner states. This would be a departure from the model of supranational integration. Progress towards integration can only be expected as unintended side effects of such flexible coalitions. From the perspective of those conducting negotiations at EU level, such a bi- or minilateralisation of German European policy may be tempting, as there is no need to overcome resistance by other member states, it can simply be circumvented.

A third option for a new German European policy puts the European Commission under its President Ursula von der Leyen (CDU/EPP) centre stage. Supported by Manfred Weber (CSU/EPP) as Chair of the Group of the European People's Party in the European Parliament and soon by a potentially new conservative German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, she started her second term in office with the aim of

following a more conservative agenda. The composition of the European Commission, the allocation of dossiers and von der Leyen's [political guidelines for her second term of office](#) have a clear conservative profile with priorities such as competitiveness, defence and security as well as reducing bureaucracy. ['More feminine, greener, more digital'](#) and the European [Conference on the Future](#), the key slogans of 2019, are a thing of the past.

A conservative German Chancellor could play a key role in the implementation of this programme. As the Commission takes a lead even in intergovernmental policy areas such as the Common Security and Defence Policy, it is unlikely that a single head of state or government will soon reclaim the agenda setting role from her.

This was particularly evident in the EU's most recent reaction to the turbulence in international relations following the [failed meeting between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and his US counterpart Donald Trump](#). The EU's first reaction was the announcement of an 800 billion euros investment plan in defence by the President of the European Commission. In [a letter to the heads of state or government](#), she presented her further proposals for strengthening European defence policy.

For the most part, [the conclusions of the European Council of 6 March 2025](#) read like a confirmation of the Commission President's agenda. The heads of state or government hardly added any additional impetus of their own. Only the list of capability development priorities and the request to European NATO members to coordinate within the EU framework before the next NATO summit have no direct reference to the European Commission. All other decisions of the European Council are either based on Commission initiatives or are addressed to the Commission. Published on 19 March 2025, the [Joint Communication on defence](#) not only proposes concrete measures to strengthen European defence, but announces the publication of an additional "European Armament Technology Roadmap" and a "Joint Communication on Military Mobility" as the next steps, how the Commission will shape the EU's defence policy agenda. In its [conclusions of 20 March 2025](#), the European Council again invites the legislative bodies of the EU to take forward the recent Commission initiatives, while intergovernmental initiatives are not proposed to strengthen European defence.

## Back to the Roots of Conservative German European policy

A new conservative German Chancellor is in a difficult position. He will only be able to meet international expectations for a revived German European policy when he breaks with the approach to European integration as presented in the conservative party manifesto. A more intergovernmental approach to European policy will only replicate deadlocks in European policy, which e.g. prevented a reform of the Common European Asylum System for nearly ten years. Such approaches of using

flexible coalitions are not new in international politics but have become en vogue in recent years. In the past, they have often been unsuccessful. Consider, for example, the British government's failed attempt to divide the EU-27 member states during the Brexit negotiations. The EU was successful in the Brexit negotiations because it rallied behind a common position.

In order to overcome deadlocks in European policy and effectively address current challenges, a new German European policy has to become again more supranational: either in a supportive role for the Commission agenda or with an own supranational agenda. The fragmentation of international negotiations or European policy is hardly suitable for tackling the tasks ahead.

Instead, German European policy needs an integrative approach that succeeds in winning over its partner states for European initiatives. Many EU member states seek guidance from the German government on European policy issues that are of secondary importance to them. [While doing it alone on European policy has become fashionable for German governments in recent decades](#), the next one should reverse this trend and return to the roots of conservative German European policy. It must once again engage more closely with its European partners, take note of their interests and positions and, in the best-case scenario, integrate them into joint initiatives.

Based on the mutual acknowledgement of different interests, a comprehensive [reform package](#), with defence at its core, would create considerably more room for negotiation and potential for compromise. In view of the current shift in the political centre of the EU towards the east and north, a revival of the Weimar Triangle – as proposed in the election manifestos of all pro-European parties – is an obvious basis for such initiatives. Proposals which are a compromise between Germany, France, and Poland have good chances of also finding support among other member states.

### **About the author**

Julian Plottka is Research Associate at the Jean-Monnet-Chair for European Politics at the University of Passau and Scientific Senior Project Manager at Institut für Europäische Politik in Berlin.

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# iep

Institut für Europäische Politik e. V.  
Bundesallee 23  
10717 Berlin

[info@iep-berlin.de](mailto:info@iep-berlin.de)  
[www.iep-berlin.de](http://www.iep-berlin.de)

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