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**European Issues as a Domestic Proxy:
The Case of the German Federal
Election 2013**

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Abstract:

The German federal election held on 22 September 2013 resulted in a spectacular victory by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU). After the predicted yet still historical setback of the Free Democrats (FDP), who failed to enter the Bundestag for the first time since 1949, the biggest surprise of the elections was the robust support for the Eurosceptic Alternative for Germany (AfD), which fell only 0.3 percent short of entering the Bundestag. However, despite the unprecedented high public salience of European issues and the prominent rise of a viable threat from a new Eurosceptic competitor, direct debates about the future of Europe were missing. European issues themselves were largely skirted around during the campaign and served rather as proxies for domestic issues used to further legitimize the dominating CDU narrative of security and stabilization.

EUROPEAN ISSUES AS A DOMESTIC PROXY: THE CASE OF THE GERMAN FEDERAL ELECTION 2013

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Introduction

Heribert Prantl, the renowned political commentator from *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, aptly described the 2013 Bundestag election campaign as a "dead calm": "There is a lack of contrast, lack of alternative, lack of dispute. The most important difference between CDU/CSU and SPD seems to be that the former are in government, the latter in opposition".¹ In spite of that, the elections on 22 September 2013 were observed in Europe with perhaps even more curiosity than in Germany itself. For European observers, elections in the biggest economy and an important political centre of the European Union were an important signpost indicating the possible trajectories of European politics to come in the time of economic destabilization described using the catch-all term of "Euro crisis". In addition, with the emergence of Alternative for Germany (AfD) before the 2013 elections, the German party system witnessed the rise of a new Eurosceptic competitor campaigning nearly exclusively on the European issue. As the research on party competition between mainstream and "niche" parties shows, the politicization of a growingly resonant political issue by a new actor with enough potential to be a threat to its competitors can lead to increased polarization of the party system around that salient issue or conflict line.² Therefore, considering the potential of

¹ Prantl, Heribert (2013): "Große Flaute". In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. 19 August 2013.

² Pytlas, Bartek and Kossack, Oliver (forthc.): "Lighting the Fuse. The Impact of Radical Right Parties on Spatial and Narrative Shifts within Central and East European Party Systems". In: Minkenberg, Michael (ed.): *Transforming the Transformation? The East European Radical Right in the Political Process*. London: Routledge. Cf. Minkenberg, Michael (2002): "The New Radical Right in Political Process: Interaction Effects in France and Germany". In: Schain, Martin; Zolberg, Aristide R.; Hossay, Patrick (eds): *Shadows over Europe. The development and impact of the extreme right in Western Europe*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 245–269; Bale, Tim (2003): "Cinderella and her ugly sisters: the mainstream and extreme right in Europe's bipolarising party systems". In: *West European Politics* 26 (3), 67–90; Meguid, Bonnie M. (2008): *Party competition between unequals. Strategies and electoral fortunes in Western Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

a Eurosceptic competitor of growing strength, the German election of 2013 was expected to focus far more on European questions than ever before – an expectation that was not completely met.

These developments give shape to a context that would seem to perpetuate previously observed shifts of interaction patterns between national and European-level policy making and governance.³ The European dimension seems to remain a political opportunity structure of secondary importance for national parties in Germany, as individual political parties “are unable to influence the EU decision-making process in order to gain an advantage in domestic competition”.⁴

What has nevertheless changed is that the EU has become an increasingly important discursive opportunity structure⁵ for national parties. Several authors have already noted the influence of European issues on the level of party discourse. In 1994, Moravcsik observed that supranational institutions carry the potential to change not only the institutional and information-related domestic policy context, but also to shift control of domestic agendas and potential ideological justifications for policies.⁶ For Ladrech, dimensions of programmatic change and patterns of party competition served as crucial areas of the EU’s impact on the agency and operation of political parties.⁷ In the wake of research on Europeanization as a

³ On the various aspects and dimensions of Europeanization of national party systems see Ladrech, Robert (2002): “Europeanization and Political Parties Towards a Framework for Analysis”. In: *Party Politics* 8 (4), 389-403; Poguntke, Thomas; Aylott, Nicholas; Carter, Elisabeth; Ladrech, Robert and Luther, Kurt (2007): *The Europeanization of National Political Parties*. Abingdon: Routledge. Börzel Tanja and Risse, Thomas (eds) (2007): “Europeanization: The Domestic Impact of European Union Politics”. In: Jørgensen, Knud Erik; Pollack, Mark and Rosamond, Ben (eds): *Handbook of European Union Politics*. London: Sage, 483-504; Beichelt, Timm (2009): *Deutschland und Europa. Die Europäisierung des politischen Systems*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften; Moroska, Aleksandra (2010): *Prawicowy Populizm a Euroceptycyzm (na przykładzie Listy Pima Fortuyna w Holandii i Ligi Polskich Rodzin w Polsce)*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego. Külahci, Erol (ed.) (2012): *Europeanization and Party Politics. How the EU influences Domestic Actors, Patterns and Systems*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

⁴ Ladrech [2009] (2012): “Europeanization and political parties”. In: *Living Reviews of European Governance* 4 (1), 5-23 (8). <http://www.livingreviews.org/lreg-2009-1> (last access on 10. March 2014).

⁵ Discursive opportunity structures “determine which collective identities and substantive demands have a high likelihood to gain visibility in the mass media, to resonate with the claims of other collective actors, and to achieve legitimacy in the public discourse”(Koopmans, Ruud, Statham, Paul, Giugni, Marco and Passy, Florence (2005): *Contested Citizenship. Immigration and Cultural Diversity in Europe*. Minneapolis: Univ. Of Minnesota Press, p.19).

⁶ Moravcsik, Andrew (1994): “Why the European Union Strengthens the State: Domestic Politics and International Cooperation”. In: *Center for European Studies. Working Paper Series No. 52*. Harvard University.

⁷ Ladrech (2002): “Europeanization and Political Parties...”; Ladrech [2009] 2012: „Europeanization and political parties“. Cf. Hertner, Isabelle/ Sloam, James (2012): „The Europeanisation of the German Party System”. In: Külahci, Erol (ed.) (2012): *Europeanization and Party Politics. How the EU influences Domestic Actors, Patterns and Systems*. Colchester: ECPR Press, 35-55. For empirical examples of the impact on party

general issue, a growing body of scholarship looked at how political actors “reframe policy problems in European terms therefore actively constructing adaptational pressures and demanding policy changes in response to European pressures”.⁸ In the particular case of Germany, the most recent scholarship has also analysed how aspects of European governance are nationally legitimized via particular EU-related interpretative patterns in the party discourse on the level of Bundestag policy making.⁹

In Germany, European issues seem to have gained much more public visibility and salience than in the past (see the section on *Election Results and the Role of Europe* below). The discussion of Europe’s future has become a resonant topic in the general debate on the course of German and global economic development. At the same time, the discourse has become much more differentiated than in the past. Germany’s post-war European policy was seen as dominated by a pro-European “basic consensus” and therefore of little salience for party competition.¹⁰ Yet despite a continuing general adherence, or “permissive consensus”, to the European idea in the German mainstream party discourse, diverse EU-critical and Eurosceptic stances have begun to emerge with increasing frequency in recent times.¹¹ This may be due to the fact that the issue of Europe’s development is no longer a vague and amorphous matter that can be reduced to a dichotomous pro- or anti-European stance. Instead, the question of how to deal with the “Euro crisis” has led to nuanced, concrete policy proposals much more influenced by ideological and programmatic platforms of particular party families. Euro-critical ideas therefore seem to receive much more mainstream legitimacy than was the case before the crisis. In this sense, the interpretative pattern of the European Union in the German public and party discourse seems to be shifting further from the idea of “Konsens-Europa” towards one of a “contestable community”.¹²

Given the context laid out above, the analysis undertaken in the following working paper aims to look in more detail at the main issues and debates that emerged in the German electoral

programmatic see: Moroska, Aleksandra (2009): “Right –Wing Populism and Euroscepticism in Western and Eastern Europe – List Pim Fortuyn and League of Polish Families. Comparative Approach”. In: Arato, Krisztina and Kaniok, Petr (ed.): *Euroscepticism and European Integration*. Zagreb: Political Science Research Center, 297-323; Brunsbach, Sandra, John, Stefanie and Werner, Annika (2012): “The Supply Side of Second-Order Elections: Comparing German National and European Election Manifestos”. In: *German Politics* 21 (1), 91-115;

⁸ Börzel and Risse (2007): “Europeanization: The Domestic Impact of European Union Politics”, p. 488.

⁹ Barnickel, Christiane (2013): “Der Bundestag in der Europäischen Union – (Ein)Blick von innen“. In: *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen* 43 (2), 324-340.

¹⁰ Hertner and Sloam (2012): “The Europeanisation of the German Party System”, 35f..

¹¹ Cf. Beichelt (2009): *Deutschland und Europa*, Chapter 4, pp. 110-166.

¹² Op. Cit. pp. 164ff.

campaign of 2013. This case study will give us the opportunity to explore the discursive role of European issues as well as their relevance in the debates leading up to the Bundestag elections.

The starting point: German political parties at the onset of the 2013 federal election

The previous election to the German Bundestag in 2009 marked the end of the "grand coalition" between the Christian Democratic Union of Chancellor Merkel with the Christian Social Union on the one hand, and the Social Democratic Party on the other. Internal leadership conflicts as well as policy convergence and the incapacity of the Social Democrats to strengthen their own profile within the grand coalition led to a double electoral setback in 2009. In July of that year, the Social Democratic Party received only 20.8 percent of votes in elections to the European Parliament, and 23 percent in the Bundestag election a month later (compared to 34 percent in 2004). Both results marked the worst electoral performances in the party's history. The winners of the election were the liberals of the Free Democratic Party. On the one hand, the party managed to profit from the popularity of its chairman, Guido Westerwelle, as well as from a focus on salient issues of economic policy. On the other hand, the unpopular grand coalition allowed the Liberals to sharpen their profile against this background (the same effect that also strengthened other parties such as the Greens and the Left). As a result, the new coalition established in 2009 consisted of the traditional "black-yellow" constellation of the CDU/CSU and the FDP, with the SPD, the Greens and the Left occupying the opposition benches in the Bundestag.

For the CDU, the last four years can be described as "business as usual". Angela Merkel's politics steered clear of controversial, unpopular decisions or groundbreaking reforms. Instead, it remained satisfied with a vague policy of security and stabilization. At the same time the CDU pursued "catch-all" politics, adopting fiscal, social and environmental issues from its competitors. Internally, Merkel also positioned herself well between the party's conservative and moderate wings. Her standing was further boosted by the Chancellor's publicly visible role in combating the growing Eurozone crisis. This secured stable support for the Christian Democrats in terms of both leadership and public opinion. Even a number of scandals revolving around the question of party credibility or *Glaubwürdigkeit* had only a

minor impact on the continually strong support for the party.¹³ Before the election, the CDU poll numbers oscillated around 35-40 percent of votes.

The electoral setback of the Social Democrats led to leadership changes within the party. Franz Müntefering resigned immediately as party Chairman and was succeeded by the Minister of Environment in the grand coalition, Sigmar Gabriel. The party set out to recover from its losses but internal power struggles between party fractions made it impossible to consolidate around a unified image and a single charismatic leadership figure. While still trailing in the federal polls, the SPD achieved far better success at the local level. The party managed to win several State elections (such as North Rhine-Westphalia in 2012), and contributed to the CDU and the FDP losing their majority in the Bundesrat. Still, despite short periods during which support for the Social Democrats was equal to that of the CDU on the federal level, a year before the 2013 election the party lost its momentum and its support again dropped to around the 25-30 percent mark.

Despite their excellent polling results, the FDP underwent a potentially fatal crisis in the run-up to the 2013 elections. On the one hand, the clientelist image of the party that stuck to an elitist, free-market liberalism had discouraged more and more voters. On the other hand, the discussion around the financial crisis and the problems within the Eurozone has been dominated by Angela Merkel and the CDU, leaving the FDP in the shadows. Internal destabilization was fostered mostly by a fraction formed around Frank Schäffler, a long-time critic of the European Stability Mechanism. In 2011, Schäffler succeeded in initiating an internal members' referendum that put to a vote a shift in the party's position on the Euro crisis and a rejection of EU bailout funds. In the end, the referendum failed to reach the quorum of one-third of all party members, but did cause deep, long-lasting internal divisions. After failing to enter the Landtags in Saxony-Anhalt and Rhineland-Palatinate, and a bad result in Baden-Württemberg, Westerwelle resigned his post as Chairman. He was succeeded by the Minister of Economy, Philipp Rösler, who has since struggled to hold together the divided party locked in internal conflicts. In regional elections in Berlin, the party received only 1.8 percent of votes. In Saarland the Liberals achieved their worst historical result with

¹³ As an example, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, Minister of Foreign Affairs from the CSU and Annette Schavan, Education and Research Minister from the Christian Democrats both had to resign as well due to accusations of plagiarism in their dissertation theses. The Guttenberg-scandal was extremely resonant due to the strong popularity of the Minister with the public and his position as the great hope to become a future Chancellor.

1,2 percent. The party managed to recover in other regions, such as Lower Saxony. Nonetheless, they required the support of a large share of "loaned" secondary (i.e. party list) votes cast for the FDP by Christian Democrat voters in hopes of securing the "black-yellow" coalition. Yet the party remained stuck in one of the worst crises in its history, balancing on the 5 percent threshold just before the 2013 Bundestag elections.

Between 2009 and 2013, the German Greens and Green issues experienced a surge in electoral popularity. While the Greens' numbers had been rising since 2010, the March 2011 nuclear disaster at Fukushima renewed the debate on the phase-out of Germany's nuclear power plants, coupled with energy transition (*Energiewende*) towards renewable, green energy sources. The Greens have prominently pursued this policy for decades. The impact of the issue was so significant that the Merkel government made a *volte-face* in regard to their long-standing energy policy. While back in 2010 the ruling coalition had decided to extend the operational lifespan of German nuclear plants, the anti-nuclear momentum forced Chancellor Merkel to "greenwash" her position and declare a complete nuclear phase-out by 2022. In this environment the Greens experienced high growth in electoral support. At one point they even surpassed the Social Democrats and had the support of 28 percent of declared voters. Their popularity was fueled by a historic victory by the Greens in elections to the State parliament in traditionally conservative Baden-Württemberg. The high salience of Green issues, enhanced by local public protests against the costly, murky and environmentally unfriendly renovation of the Stuttgart train station (*Stuttgart 21*) elevated the Greens to first place with 24.1 percent of votes. Winfried Kretschmann became the first Green prime minister of a German State and forced the CDU into the opposition benches for the first time since 1953. The success of the Greens has nonetheless contributed to an internal debate within the party's base itself, who recall the consequences of the red-green coalition between Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer, leading them to fear that broadening their electorate may lead to compromises in their programme and to a departure from the party's left-alternative traditions. After the anti-nuclear debate faded from public view and in the aftermath of failed coalition talks following regional elections in Berlin, where the SPD opted for a grand coalition, polling numbers for the Greens slumped and stabilized at around 12-15 percent.

The post-socialist German Left party experienced ups and downs in the four years prior to the 2013 elections. While managing to stay in many regional parliaments (including ones in

western Germany, such as North Rhine-Westphalia and Hamburg), the party failed to thrive in others (Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Württemberg). The main challenge for the party remained its high internal fractionalization and its attitude towards its state socialist legacy. Both of these factors contributed to a growing internal dispute among the party's members and its base. After the highly popular Left politician Oscar Lafontaine withdrew from federal-level politics due to health concerns, the party struggled to identify leadership that would satisfy all the fractional interests. A year before the 2013 elections, support for the party oscillated around the 9 percent mark.

The newest development on the German political scene is the emergence of the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*) that became a platform for Eurosceptic politicians previously active in local electoral committees such as the Free Voters (*Freie Wähler*).¹⁴ Founded in April 2013 by the former CDU member and economics professor Bernd Lucke, the AfD continuously presented itself as a main competitor to the European politics of the CDU and the counterargument to the words of Chancellor Merkel, who spoke of no alternative to the policy of assistance and rescuing Eurozone states threatened with bankruptcy.¹⁵

It is difficult to place the AfD within a single ideological party family spectrum. The party was created mainly as an elitist and technocratic project, and profiled with a single-issue, populist anti-Euro programme. Especially considering the previously-mentioned, diversifying mainstream Euro-critical discourse, categorizations of anti-EU stances must be more nuanced. In its own declaration and official rhetoric, the AfD is not against Germany's membership in the EU, but rather demands Germany's exit from the Eurozone. The party could therefore be placed in the Eurosceptic category of Kopecký and Mudde (pro-integration/anti-trajectory), distinct from explicit Eurorejects (anti-integration/anti-trajectory).¹⁶ In Flood's categorization

¹⁴ Kubiak, Piotr (2013): "Alternatywa dla Niemiec (AfD) – nowa siła na niemieckiej scenie politycznej?". In: *Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego* 127/2013. Available at: http://www.iz.poznan.pl/news/646_AfD.pdf (last accessed: 11.03.2014).

¹⁵ Op.cit. See also for example Greive, Martin (2013): "Lucke gibt den eisenharten Wahrheitskämpfer". In: *Die Welt*. 26. August 2013. Available at: <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article119406263/Lucke-gibt-den-eisenharten-Wahrheitskaempfer.html> (last accessed: 11.03.2014).

¹⁶ Kopecký, Petr and Mudde, Cas (2002): "The Two Sides of Euroscepticism. Party Positions on European Integration in East Central Europe". In: *European Union Politics* 3 (3), 297-326 (303), cited in: Szczerbiak, Aleks and Taggart, Paul (2003): "Theorising Party-Based Euroscepticism: Problems of Definition, Measurement and Causality". EPERN Working Paper No. 12, p. 7.

based on a six-category scale ranging from EU-rejectionist to EU-maximalist positions,¹⁷ the AfD could be classified even more aptly as an EU-revisionist party (second strongest anti-EU stance), demanding to retract specific integrationist treaty provisions on the “entire configuration of the EU or in relation to one or more policy areas”.¹⁸ While the party also follows a chauvinistic anti-immigration policy, it is trying to avoid the label of right-wing populism and instead portrays itself as a party of experts seeking “unpopular” alternatives feared by the political establishment. It therefore channels its rhetoric and public image primarily in the direction of an “anti-Euro-party”, keeping the “anti-immigrant” stance found particularly in local structures and voter base hidden in the background as much as possible. The ranks of AfD furthermore provided a home for members of the academic establishment (economics professors), entrepreneurs and professionals opposed to monetary union, which provided the initiative with legitimacy. This strategic mix of populist rhetoric presented under the guise of supposed scientific expertise allowed the party to reach a broader electorate than clear-cut radical right parties. While it was able to mobilize parts of Germany's conservative, welfare-chauvinist and Euro-critical mainstream middle class, the party has nonetheless also become a safe haven for the (increasingly less) latent anti-immigrant and right-wing populist portion of the German electorate. In the three months after its founding, the AfD managed to create local associations in all sixteen federal states and mobilize over 10,000 members.¹⁹ At the end of February 2014, the party already boasted 17,000 members.²⁰ Before the election, the party was able to count on around 3-4 percent of voters.

The campaign

True to Heribert Prantl’s “dead calm” metaphor, the Bundestag campaign indeed proceeded slowly and only slightly gained pace during its final week. According to a time series survey carried out for the established political magazine *Cicero*, one week before the election 67 percent of respondents called it “pure spectacle”. Just 38 percent said that issues of interest to them were addressed in the campaign. Even fewer, namely only 18 percent, said that the

¹⁷ Flood, Chris (2002): „Euroskepticism: A Problematic Concept”. Paper presented at the UACES 32nd Annual Conference, Queen’s University Belfast, 2-4. September, cited in: Szczerbiak and Taggart (2003): “Theorising Party-Based Euroscepticism...”, p.10.

¹⁸ Op.cit.

¹⁹ Kubiak (2013): “Alternatywa dla Niemiec...”

²⁰ AfD Kompakt 02/14, p. 4.

Available at: https://www.alternativefuer.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/AfD_Kompakt_02_14.pdf (last accessed: 11.03.2014).

campaign had helped them to make a decision about who to cast their vote for.²¹ Furthermore, the rhetorical stagnation and convergence of political parties visible during the campaign resulted in a worrying percentage of undecided voters. Unlike in the years before, in the campaign itself each of the parties remained on their own, familiar programmatic "turf" and did not attempt to take over issues from their competitors. This made it much harder to convince voters outside of the "core" electorates. According to the aforementioned time series survey performed for *Cicero*, in July 2013 only 58 percent of respondents knew which party they would vote for on 22 September. Two days before the election, 70 percent had decided. However, even at that late stage, 20 percent of respondents said that they might change their mind on who to cast their vote for shortly before the elections.²²

The Christian Democrats engaged in a campaign that advanced a narrative of security and continuation of the *status quo* guaranteed by Chancellor Merkel in unstable times of economic hardship. Merkel was practically the only face of the Christian Democrats' campaign. The image of *Mutti*, or "Mum" as the Germans dub her, together with her trademark "Merkel diamond" hand-gesture²³ helped in this endeavor. This pose stood for stability, cautious focus and careful political cogitation. At the beginning of September, a 2,400-square-meter banner of the "Merkel diamond" decorated the Berlin Central Station façade, with the slogan "Put Germany's future in good hands".²⁴ Election posters displayed a similar message, with vague statements such as "Successful together. For Germany", "A strong economy", "Solid finances" or "More for families". The party also opposed plans by the opposition to raise taxes for the highest income brackets. The strategy of the Christian Democrats proved successful. Not even a series of setbacks, such as the passivity of the government in the face of the NSA surveillance revelations, scandals that shook the Ministry of Defense led by Thomas de Maizière,²⁵ as well as discoveries of entrenched nepotism in the Bavarian

²¹ Seils, Christoph and Faas, Thorsten (2013): "Steinbrück holt auf". In: *Cicero*. 15 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.cicero.de/berliner-republik/cicero-wahlkampfindex-7-welle-steinbrueck-holt-auf/55775> (last accessed: 04.11.2013).

²² Seils, Christoph and Faas, Thorsten (2013): "Leihstimmen-Kampagne der FDP zündet nicht". In: *Cicero*. 20 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.cicero.de/berliner-republik/cicero-wahlkampfindex-leihstimmen-kampagne-der-fdp-zuendet-nicht/55861> (last accessed: 04.11.2013).

²³ A typical Chancellor pose that stands for stability, cautious focus and careful political cogitation.

²⁴ Wittrock, Phillip (2013): "Angela Merkel Gets Super-Sized". In: *Der Spiegel*. 03 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/giant-merkel-campaign-poster-raises-eyebrows-in-berlin-a-920196.html> (last accessed: 04.11.2013).

²⁵ In May 2013 the German Ministry of Defence was forced to ground their Euro Hawk surveillance drones to prevent further losses on the 600-million-Euro deal. The project was discontinued permanently due to the incompatibility of the drone's construction systems with European airspace regulations, not allowing the Euro

Christian Social Union, could shake the foundations of the ruling party. In the Bavarian Landtag elections held one week before the elections to the Bundestag, the Christian Social Union even succeeded in securing an absolute majority of seats.

Due to the mostly vague and general programmatic formulations of the dominant Christian Democrats, the opposition found it hard to conduct a resonant, issues-based campaign. Instead, it was forced into a negative campaign against the government and politicians of the ruling parties. The Social Democrats entered the race with the slogan “The We matters”. The campaign oscillated around classic Social Democratic themes such as the welfare state, social justice and education. Election posters advertised party issues with slogans such as “More daycare centers for children”, “For affordable rents” or “For old age without poverty”. Several negative campaign banners were aimed directly at the government. One showed Merkel and de Maizière with the slogan “Merkel’s competent team?”. Another depicted a photo of a seemingly apathetic Chancellor Merkel and Vice-Chancellor Rösler, asking the question “The best government since unification...?”. But the most salient issue of the Social Democrats, alongside raising taxes on the highest earners, has been the question of introducing a statutory, blanket minimum wage of EUR 8.50 that would be universally applicable to all professional sectors and regions. Indeed, despite the Chancellor’s rhetoric of economic growth and decreasing unemployment, most new jobs were either temporary work, work performed in low-wage sectors or even full-time employment which did not guarantee that workers would be able to make ends meet. The issue of a blanket minimum wage had the potential to challenge the “black-yellow” coalition. Still, the starting position of the Social Democrats made it hard to win back enough voters to succeed. The task was not made easier by the Social Democratic candidate for Chancellor, Peer Steinbrück. The Finance Minister in the former grand coalition, while a good, uncompromising speaker and finance expert, had the image of an undiplomatic politician who was out of touch with the voter base.²⁶ In 2012, details emerged of Steinbrück’s exorbitant additional earnings as a keynote speaker and lecturer, including work for large corporations. His controversial remarks, such as one that the salary of German Chancellor is too low, earned him the nickname of *Pannen-Peer* (“mishap-

Hawk to perform flights at all. The investigation has discovered a series of irregularities and negligence within the Ministry and other responsible institutions.

²⁶ In April 2013, only 32 percent of respondents found Steinbrück likeable and only 40 percent believed he was fighting for the key Social Democratic issue of social justice. Were the Chancellor to be elected in a direct vote, Steinbrück would at that time have received only 19 percent of votes, compared to Merkel’s 57 percent. See Reuters (2013): “Umfrage. Schwarz-Gelb mit klarer Mehrheit”. In: *Die Zeit*. 10 April 2013. Available at: <http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2013-04/umfrage-schwarz-gelb-steinbrueck> (last accessed: 04.11.2013).

Peer"). Asked about his nicknames in a popular photograph interview series by *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*, Steinbrück responded by flipping his middle finger. Paradoxically, Steinbrück's middle-finger stunt allowed him to further pursue his strategic presentation as a counter-weight to the vague wanderings of Angela Merkel's "diamond" politics: dynamic and spontaneous, unhesitant and determined, straight-talking. This is a strategy that the Social Democratic candidate tried to apply during the most important public event of the campaign, the widely televised duel between candidates for the office of Chancellor. In the end, Steinbrück performed well in the debate and slightly boosted support levels, even though respondents differed on who won the debate in public opinion surveys.²⁷ However, it was too little, too late to turn the electoral tide.

With a grand coalition again emerging as the most possible result of the elections, other political competitors remained further in the background. The Left focused on their classic redistributive demands, presented mostly by Gregor Gysi, a popular politician and expert on social policies. The party's election posters presented straightforward demands such as "Tax the rich", "Minimum wage now", "More money for education, not for banks" and "The army out of Afghanistan". Similarly to the Social Democrats, the Left proposed a tax raise for top earners and a blanket minimum wage of EUR 10. However, the biggest challenge to the party was the refusal of the Social Democrats to accept the Left as a potential coalition partner, rejecting a red-red-green governing constellation from the onset of the campaign.

The Greens also pursued their standard issues. Their witty yet vague election posters argued in favor of inclusive integration policy, gender equality, ecological energy policy, social justice as well as equal education rights. Even if in 2013 the Greens remained "the most Europeanised of Germany's political parties [with] a core interest in European issues",²⁸ questions of Europe remained rather in the background of domestic or general issues (such as a banner stating: "People before banks"). Similarly to the SPD, the Greens also pursued a negative campaign against the government, with a banner showing Thomas de Maizière subtitled "Black Hawk Down". Due to the phase-out decision taken by Merkel's government, the party's key issue of energy policy was relatively neutralized. Furthermore, the Greens

²⁷Süddeutsche Zeitung (2013): „Beide Kandidaten als Sieger ausgerufen“. In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. 1. September 2013. Available at: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/tv-duell-merkel-gegen-steinbrueck-fernseh-zweikampf-um-die-kanzlerschaft-1.1759344> (last accessed: 04.11.2013)

²⁸ Hertner and Sloam (2012): "The Europeanisation of the German Party System", p. 44f.

decided to accentuate their demand to raise income taxes in order to combat social injustice. This strained the relationship with many Green urban, high-income voters. A rather unsubstantial, and yet briefly explosive “Veggie-Day” controversy²⁹ engineered by the German tabloid *Bild* also did not help the image of the Greens, who were accused particularly by the attention-striving FDP of being a paternalist, prohibitionist party. Finally, the “paedophilia scandal”³⁰, which erupted during the final stages of the campaign, buried the reputation of Jürgen Trittin, one of the party’s two leading candidates, alongside that of a substantial number of the party’s leading politicians.

The Free Democrats themselves struggled to establish themselves in the electoral race. Their classical liberal demands aimed to “relieve the middle [class]”, as one party banner demanded. The FDP thus rejected further increases in the public debt as well as any kind of tax raises, and argued in favor of the abolishment of the solidarity surcharge. In the end, the Free Democrats tried to repeat their “loan” vote strategy from the regional election in Lower Saxony and argued that those who wanted Merkel to remain Chancellor should vote for the FDP. Just a few days before the election, Merkel, aware of the cost of the “loan vote” strategy for their own party, decisively urged voters to cast both their votes for the Christian Democrats. Another threat to the Free Democrats arose from the Eurosceptic Alternative for Germany (see below). In line with their populist slogan “Have the courage to speak the truth”, the party presented itself mostly as a protest alternative for non-voters and a “black-yellow” disenchanted middle-class electorate. The electoral performance of the anti-Euro party, alongside that of the Free Democrats, has become one of the biggest puzzles of the televised election evening on 22 September 2013.

European issues in the 2013 German electoral campaign

It fell to CDU/CSU, and to the FPD to form a government in the era of the largest challenges faced in the history of European integration brought about by the debt crisis in Europe. The

²⁹ One of the - rather marginal – statements in the Green electoral program was to encourage the introduction of a vegetarian-only day at canteens in state-owned institutions. In its familiar tabloid fashion, the *Bild* titled: “The Greens want to forbid us to eat meat”. Cf. *Bild Zeitung* (2013): “Die Grünen wollen uns das Fleisch verbieten!”. 05. August 2013. In: *Bild*. Available at: <http://www.bild.de/politik/inland/vegetarisch/gruene-wollen-einmal-die-woche-in-kantinen-fleisch-verbieten-31661266.bild.html> (last accessed: 23.12.2013).

³⁰ Back in 1981, Jürgen Trittin signed a political pamphlet of the Göttingen fraction of the Alternative Green Initiatives List, one of predecessor groupings of the future Green Party that in one of its points called to decriminalise sexual contacts with minors.

debate in Germany over the functioning and the future of the European Union was dominated by matters of strategy in combating the crisis. The various political groups represented in the Bundestag were united in their objective of maintaining the viability of the common currency and stabilizing the Eurozone. This unity was absent, however, in their views on causes of the crisis and on the means of overcoming it.

The austerity strategy adopted by the government of Angela Merkel, designed to reform the public finances of EU Member States and stabilize the Eurozone, was the source of numerous controversies among opposition parties dedicated to the ideals of solidarity and joint responsibility. The leading principle of the coalition parties, expressed as “No aid without reciprocation” or “Solidarity for solidity”³¹, served to highlight the necessity of states taking remedial measures such as structural reforms and fiscal discipline when applying for assistance. Particularly for liberals, aid became a measure of last resort, and a limited one at that. For both parties, the most effective means of conquering the crisis was the consolidation of a “stability union” through constant pressure to reform, increased coordination of EU Member States’ economic policy and improvement of European competitiveness in general. While the FDP’s election manifesto included the creation of a political union with decentralized structures, and a future federal European state, the CDU steered clear of putting forth a definite plan for the European Union. In the summer of 2012, both governing and opposition parties such as the SPD and the Greens were advancing the idea of institutional renewal of the EU, as well as of creating a political union as the next grand step towards maintaining Eurozone cohesion.³² Since that time the views of Chancellor Merkel have undergone a visible evolution. “More Europe” no longer meant simply transferring a greater number of powers to Brussels or strengthening community institutions, but rather greater coordination of policies across Member States by applying the intergovernmental method and limiting the involvement of EU institutions.³³ In an interview for the *Spiegel* magazine in early June this year Merkel said that “strengthening economic coordination in Europe [...] is something more than more authority to Brussels”, and that she saw “no need to transfer even

³¹ CDU/CSU. *Gemeinsam Erfolgreich für Deutschland*. Regierungsprogramm 2013 – 2017. Available at: <http://www.cdu.de/artikel/regierungsprogramm-zum-herunterladen>; FDP. Bürgerprogramm 2013. *Damit Deutschland stark bleibt*. Available at: http://www.fdp.de/files/408/B_rgerprogramm_A5_Online_2013-07-23.pdf (last accessed: 07.01.2014).

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ Buras, Piotr (2013): *The EU’s Silent Revolution*. Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations.

more rights to the Commission in Brussels in the coming years”.³⁴ The Chancellor has also been very reluctant to engage in any recent debates about institutional changes within the EU.³⁵ The pragmatic policy of “small steps” was visible in the CDU/CSU election manifesto, in which the Christian Democrats emphasized solving the most urgent problems associated with the debt crisis and on boosting Europe’s competitiveness in global markets. The political line on Europe taken in Berlin, and set out primarily by the Chancellor herself, did not meet with the unconditional acceptance of everyone in the ruling parties. Criticism from inside the CDU came from the “Berlin Group”, the party’s most conservative wing, and concerned what they felt was the excessive financial outlay by Germany in funding assistance packages for countries fighting with the economic crisis. Similar voices could be heard from inside the CSU, declaring the possibility of expulsion from the Eurozone for countries unable to manage their deficits and unwilling to improve their situation. A loosening of Berlin’s austerity policy was met with a hardening of the FDP position. The liberals even entertained the proposition of Greece to go bankrupt rather than continuing to pump money into the country’s economy.³⁶

Differences in European policy led to half-hearted support from the governing coalition for solutions offered by the government. As a result, the Bundestag was only able to pass further assistance measures and anti-crisis instruments such as the fiscal pact and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) with the support of opposition parties – the SPD and the Greens.³⁷ They were not, however, uncritical. From the beginning of the crisis, the left has demanded quicker, more far-reaching solutions, tighter European integration, intervention in EU financial markets and more solidarity across Europe. Several months before the election, the Social Democrats focused their criticism on the austerity-based strategy for fighting the crisis, which they felt had led to increased unemployment around Europe, particularly among younger people. Peer Steinbrück pushed a two-track strategy: coordination of policies and budgetary consolidation accompanied by economic stimulus. In their election manifestos the parties promoted “a union of joint responsibility”, paired with the conception of

³⁴ Pfister, Rene; Doerry, Martin; von Hammerstein, Konstantin (2013): “Wir sitzen in einem Boot”. In: *Der Spiegel* 23/2013, 03 September 2013.
Available at: <http://wissen.spiegel.de/wissen/image/show.html?did=97012795&aref=image054/2013/06/01/CO-SP-2013-023-0028-0031.PDF&thumb=false> (last accessed: 23.11.2013).

³⁵ op. Cit.

³⁶ Frymark, Kamil (2013): *Polityka Europejska Partii Niemieckich Przed Wyborami do Bundestagu w 2013 Roku*. In: Kruk, Aleksandra and Sus, Monika (eds): *Niemiecka Scena Polityczna 2009-2013. Aktorzy, zagadnienia i wyzwania*. Wrocław: Atut, pp.167-177.

³⁷ Wimmel, Andreas (2012): „Deutsche Parteien in der Euro-Krise: das Ende des Konsensprinzips?“, In: *Integration* 1: 19-34.

“Europeanization of debt” through such means as creating a Eurozone debt repayment fund, or Eurobonds, an idea particularly pushed by the Greens. These were the primary points of contrast between the government and the opposition. The parties also demanded the introduction of European minimum social standards, and in the SPD’s case a social union. Both groupings also set out a long-term vision for the European Union’s development. They pointed to the necessity of institutional reforms of the EU in order to increase democratic legitimacy, transparency and efficiency. The SPD wanted to apply the model of separation of powers typical of democratic states at the supranational level, under which the European Commission would assume the role of the government. They also proposed forming a Eurozone financial government that would not only coordinate economic policy, but would also bear responsibility for it. The Greens felt it was essential to expand decision-making authority at the European level by appointing a Commissioner for Economic and Currency Affairs.³⁸ The European crisis placed the SPD, as well as the Greens to some degree, in a strategically difficult situation. While these parties had serious doubts as to the effectiveness of the government’s efforts in combating the crisis, at the same time they felt that rescuing the troubled Eurozone members was vital, putting them in agreement with the CDU position in many areas. This made it difficult to formulate a clear alternative to Chancellor Merkel’s European policy, and to make the European issue a significant element of pre-election debate.

The position of the outsider negating the policies of “Merkel and Steinbrück” was occupied by The Left. The party felt that the proposed crisis-fighting measures were to the benefit of banks and the well-off at the expense of the working class, pensioners and states. While critical of the functioning and general idea of the Monetary Union, the party did not choose to reject the common currency. They proposed solutions to the crisis such as creating a social union based on taxation of the wealth and income of the rich (over 1 million), far-reaching regulation of the banking sector and direct loans from the ECB to states. These were accompanied by the demand for a fundamental reworking of the European Union towards construction of a democratic, social, ecological and peaceful union.³⁹ The anti-capitalist slant

³⁸ SPD. *Das Wir Entscheidet*. Das Regierungsprogramm 2013-2017. Available at: www.spd.de/95466/regierungsprogramm_2013_2017.html; Bündnis 90/Die Grünen. *Zeit für den Grünen Wandel. Teilhaben, Einmischen, Zukunft Schaffen*. Bundestagswahlprogramm 2013. Available at: http://www.gruene.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Dokumente/Gruenes-Bundestagswahlprogramm-2013.pdf (last accessed: 07.01.2014).

³⁹ Die Linke 100% Sozial. Wahlprogramm zur Bundestagswahl 2013. Available at: http://www.die-linke.de/fileadmin/download/wahlen2013/bundestagswahlprogramm/bundestagswahlprogramm2013_langfassung.pdf. (last accessed: 07.01.2014).

of criticism aimed at the government and the ambivalent attitude of leaders towards the pillars of European integration (Oskar Lafontaine wanted liquidation of the Monetary Union, and there were splits over the Lisbon Treaty) made The Left a less-than-trustworthy alternative in European matters.

While the general mood has improved over the previous two years, research by the Allensbach Institute indicates that Eurosceptic parties continue to harbour significant potential. Among those surveyed, 60 percent displayed little or no trust towards the EU, 63 percent failed to trust the Euro and 27 percent felt that participation in the Eurozone had done more harm than good for Germany. At the same time, significantly fewer (35 percent) people than in 2002 (55 percent) desired to see the Deutsche Mark make a comeback, and 63 percent declared that, in spite of the difficulties, we Europeans must display solidarity.⁴⁰ However, surveys performed for Open Europe think tank show that 55 percent of voters agreed that “Germany should keep the Euro but membership should be restricted to a select group of more similar countries”.⁴¹ What is more, by a clear majority German voters do not consider the next government to have the mandate to press ahead with more direct or indirect financial support to the Eurozone after the September 22 elections. The popularity of monetary union’s critics like Thilo Sarrazin, and the birth of the Eurosceptic Alternative for Germany (AfD), are thus grounded in broadly shared convictions reinforced by distrust towards political elites.

The election manifesto of the AfD contained demands for an orderly dissolution of the Eurozone and a return to national currencies or the creation of smaller, more stable monetary ties, and included the phrase “the re-introduction of the Deutsche Mark should not be a taboo”.⁴² The party was strongly against more aid packages, while at the same time it demanded de-leveraging heavily indebted countries like Greece through a one-time debt cut. It was also against handing taxpayers the bill for aid and transferring responsibility to banks. The party linked its opposition to European policy and crisis-fighting measures with a typically populist critique of democracy and parliamentarism in contemporary Germany.

⁴⁰ Institut Für Demoskopie Allensbach. Das Vertrauen in die Europäische Union wächst. Eine Dokumentation des Beitrags von Dr. Thomas Petersen in der Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung Nr. 163 vom 17. Juni 2013. Available at: http://www.ifd-allensbach.de/uploads/tx_reportsndocs/FAZ_Juli.pdf (last accessed: 16.12.2013).

⁴¹ YouGov Deutschland poll for Open Europe and Open Europe Berlin: voters’ sentiments on the Eurozone, Open Europe, 03 September 2013. Available at: http://www.openeurope.org.uk/Content/Documents/130903_Briefing_Open_Europe_and_Open_Berlin_Berlin_1.pdf (last accessed: 16.12.2013).

⁴² AfD. *Wahlprogramm Alternative für Deutschland*. Parteitagbeschluss vom 14 April 2013. Available at: <https://www.alternativefuer.de/pdf/Wahlprogramm-AFD.pdf>. (last accessed: 07.01.2014).

Their electoral slogans included “The Euro ruins Europe. And [it ruins] us too”, “More Brussels = less democracy”, “More money for German streets than for southern European banks.” Their election manifesto did not, however, present a clear or detailed vision for the breakup of the Eurozone, nor for the future shape of a united Europe. In contrast to the EU-rejectionist radical right, AfD did not express hostility towards the European Union, but rather aimed to retract German membership in the Eurozone and opposed all manners of further integration, transfer union or creation of a centralized European state. Proposals of forming a Europe of sovereign states with a common market, restoration of legislative powers to national parliaments and reform of the EU in order to decrease bureaucracy and ensure transparency were intended to limit integration.⁴³ The party also strategically distanced itself from the EU-rejectionist radical right, which allowed its slogans to work their way into the mainstream public discourse.

The party pursued a very active campaign, especially on the internet and in social media, but also during spontaneous street events such as flash mobs in front of state institutions. The party’s election agenda was dominated by the European issue, visible in both the election manifesto (nearly one-third of which was devoted to Europe) and in television adverts featuring criticism of the Eurozone bailout policy, which was contrasted with the lack of funds for pensioners and infrastructure as well as the absence of democratic influence on decisions taken at the EU level. That said, the impact on the remaining parties’ election agendas was limited.

Politicians from the leading parties were aware that European issues, particularly bailout policy, were a source of deep controversy in German society and that there was little potential for turning them into votes. Interestingly, Chancellor Merkel said on numerous occasions during the campaign that a discussion of Europe’s future would be held after the September elections. This discussion is planned for the European Council summit in October, as well as for the run-up to next year’s elections to the European Parliament. Avoidance of the subject of Europe during the Bundestag campaign was visible in television adverts, where it featured only sporadically. In a spot by the Christian Democrats, Merkel calmly underlined her Government’s successes in avoiding economic stagnation and warned: “There are times where a lot is at stake. For example, during the Euro-crisis (...). Germany is doing well now

⁴³ op. Cit.

(...). This cannot be put at risk".⁴⁴ The advert did not, however, focus on European issues but was rather a backdrop for Germany's internal politics. During the campaign the crisis was frequently used to emphasize the government's economic successes, and less often to justify failures. In their election advert the Liberals made noises about assuring the stability of the Euro; for the Greens a priority was to guarantee employment for Europe's youth. Neither the SPD nor The Left addressed European issues at all.

Hope for a debate on Europe arose after words by Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, who declared during a campaign rally on 20 August in Ahrensburg that Greece would need yet another aid package. This provoked a lively reaction, as a definite statement had yet to be made that a third bailout would be necessary. The declaration served to again highlight divisions within the CDU/CSU ranks. It was also the impetus for renewed attacks by the Social Democrats on the Chancellor's European policy. The opposition did not speak out against the aid itself, but rather accused the government of hiding from the public the fact that further assistance for Greece was necessary, as well as Germany's real financial outlay. The SPD's ranks were stiffened by former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who harshly attacked Merkel with accusations of lying about the costs of the crisis. Peer Steinbrück took the occasion to claim that the government's European policy had failed. The government rejected the criticism and guaranteed that further aid would be given to Greece on condition of economic reforms. Merkel addressed this criticism indirectly in an interview for ARD during which she said "Social Democrats are totally unreliable in matters concerning the euro crisis".⁴⁵ While she added that her remarks concerned the issues of Eurobonds, the debt repayment fund and joint responsibility promoted by the left she failed to stem the opposition's outrage. Steinbrück warned Merkel not to "burn bridges"⁴⁶, while Thomas Oppermann, leader of the Social Democrats' parliamentary faction, demanded an apology. Greater restraint was shown by the Green Chancellor candidate, Jürgen Trittin. In a statement for a television news magazine he highlighted that the enemies of Europe were to be found

⁴⁴ <http://www.cdu.de/artikel/tv-und-radio-spots-der-cdu-deutschlands-zur-bundestagswahl-2013> (last accessed: 04.11.2013).

⁴⁵ Janssen, Hauke (2013): "So zuverlässig ist die SPD in Euro-Fragen". In: *Der Spiegel*, 16 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/muenchhausen-check-merkel-ueber-die-zuverlaessigkeit-der-spd-a-921247.html> (last accessed: 04.12.2013).

⁴⁶ Reuters (2013): "Streit über Euro-Politik: Merkel entschärft Kritik an SPD". In: *Der Spiegel*, 03 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/euro-streit-mit-der-spd-kanzlerin-merkel-relativiert-ihre-kritik-a-920255.html> (last accessed: 04.12.2013).

not in the opposition, but rather within the CDU itself, which was visible during voting on the fiscal pact and ESM.⁴⁷

Yet, these events failed to contribute to an in-depth debate on issues of the utmost importance for Germany and Europe: stabilization of the Eurozone, its institutional architecture and long-term perspectives for the development of the European Union. The dispute surrounding the third aid package for Greece did, however, determine the manner in which European issues would be discussed during the pre-election television debates. Europe made up one-sixth of the discussion during both the clash between the two leading candidates for the Chancellorship and the debate between the three remaining parliamentary parties. What is more, in both cases the European issue was tightly linked with German financial policy, the costs of the bailout policy and assessment of the government's efforts in fighting the crisis.

Only shortly before the election, as public opinion polls started to show rising support for the Alternative for Germany, placing it on the verge of the parliamentary threshold, did the media put the Eurosceptics in the spotlight. As political commentators note, it was probably the rising threat from the right that led Angela Merkel to express a definitive position on the issue. In her final address on the eve of the elections, the Chancellor strongly confirmed her affinity to the European Union and the common European currency: "The stabilization of the Euro is not only a good thing for Europe, but is in the elementary interest of Germany (...). It secures our jobs, and it secures our prosperity".⁴⁸ Merkel also referred to shared values, pointing to the particular significance of integration for peace and freedom on the continent. In her praise for the current shape of European integration she doubtlessly made her cleanest break with those opposed to integration.

Election Results and the Role of Europe

On 22 September, 71.5 percent of eligible voters cast their ballot in elections to the Bundestag, a slight increase in turnout over previous elections which themselves featuring historic lows in voter turnout. The shape of the governing coalition would be decided by a few

⁴⁷ ZDF Heute-Journal (04.09.2013). Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nbm1WbNxC-o> (last accessed: 04.12.2013).

⁴⁸ Reuters (2013): "Wahlkampfabschluss der CDU: Merkel wehrt sich gegen Euro-Gegner". In: *Der Spiegel*. 21 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/cdu-wahlkampf-merkel-distanziert-sich-von-afd-a-923656.html> (last accessed: 04.11.2013).

percent, driving the parties to fight for every last vote possible, while placing primary emphasis on encouraging voters to participate in polling.

As Table 1 shows, the final results confirmed that the election had turned into a race between the two biggest parties - the incumbent CDU of Chancellor Merkel with its Bavarian sister party CSU on the one hand, and the SPD on the other. Together, these parties took 60 percent of votes, and were the only ones in the Bundestag to see a growth in support from the previous elections. The CDU, however, were the unquestioned victors, recording their greatest election success in two decades. They and the CSU fell just five seats short of an absolute majority in the Bundestag.

Table 1: September 2013 German parliamentary election results to the Bundestag (second votes)

	2013		2009		%Change
	%	Seats	%	Seats	
Christian Democratic Union (CDU)	34.1	255	27.3	194	+6.9
Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)	25.7	193	23.0	146	+2.7
The Left (Die Linke)	8.6	64	11.9	76	-3.3
Alliance '90/The Green (B90/Die Grünen)	8.4	63	10.7	68	-2.3
Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU)	7.4	56	6.5	45	+0.9
Free Democratic Party (FDP)	4.8	-	14.6	93	-9.8
Alternative for Germany (AfD)	4.7	-	-	-	+4.7
The Pirate Party of Germany (Piraten)	2.2	-	2.0	-	+0.2
National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD)	1.3	-	1.5	-	-0.2

Source: Der Bundeswahlleiter,

Available at:

www.bundeswahlleiter.de/de/bundestagswahlen/BTW_BUND_13/ergebnisse/bundesergebnisse/index.html

Pre-election public opinion polls indicated that for 78 percent of Germans, European and Eurozone policy including attitudes towards bailouts exhibited by their preferred candidate/party would be very significant in their voting decision. For 31 percent of German voters "the future of the Euro" was a very important issue for voters' choice. At the same time, almost twice as many respondents (57 percent) listed issues of adequate pay, working conditions and retirement benefits as very important for their electoral decision.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ ARD (2013): *Zahlen und Umfragen zur Bundestagswahl*. Exit-poll statistics of infratest dimap for the ARD broadcast. Available at: <http://www.tagesschau.de/multimedia/bilder/uvotealbum118.html>. Cf. YouGov

In this context, the CDU's success should be assigned mainly to Angela Merkel, who succeeded in convincing voters that she was the author of a successful decade and the guarantor of stability and security in times of crisis. Fifty-eight percent of voters felt that the Christian Democratic Union was the most competent party in economic matters (11 percent more than in 2009), and 45 percent viewed them as the best at managing the Eurozone crisis (in opposition to the SPD who could convince only 20 percent of respondents).⁵⁰

The election results were simultaneously a historic defeat for the CDU's coalition partners – the Free Democratic Party, which had entered government four years earlier with its highest-ever level of support of 14 percent. In contrast to the situation four years previous, the Free Democratic Party was unable to own traditional liberal issues associated with economic policy, nor present voters with a political agenda different from that of the Christian Democrats. They instead turned into an appendix of the Christian Democrats, and their contribution to the success of the "black-yellow" coalition was overshadowed by their larger coalition partner. Another weakness was the lack of a charismatic leader following the exit of Westerwelle, as well as party infighting. Ninety percent of previous FDP voters accused the party of breaking its promises, while 82 percent felt they only concerned themselves with particular groups of voters.⁵¹ The liberals were also victims of the CDU success, who managed to snatch over two million of their previous voters,⁵² as well as of the arrival of the Alternative for Germany party on the political stage.

The Social Democrats did record an increase in support compared to the last elections, but it remained far below the party's hopes and the support that they had enjoyed in previous decades. Contrary to the expectations of party strategists, the quite liberal but straight-shooting Peer Steinbrück failed to convince the left-leaning electorate. While SPD continued to be viewed as the most competent in matters of social justice and wages⁵³, as in the case of the liberals they were victims of Chancellor Merkel's adoption of many of "their" themes

Deutschland poll for Open Europe and Open Europe Berlin: voters' sentiments on the Eurozone, Open Europe, 03 September 2013.

⁵⁰ ARD (2013): *Zahlen und Umfragen zur Bundestagswahl*.

⁵¹ Op. Cit.

⁵² Spiegel Online (2013): „Bundestagswahl 2013: So wählten die Deutschen“. 22 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/bundestagswahl-2013-waehlerwanderung-gewinne-verluste-direktmandate-a-923290.html> (last accessed: 20.12.2013).

⁵³ ARD (2013): *Zahlen und Umfragen zur Bundestagswahl*.

already prior to the election campaign, making it difficult for them to present themselves as an alternative to Christian Democratic policies.

At the root of the Greens' weaker-than-expected showing were, as in the case of the liberals, internal tensions and a lack of party unity. A left-leaning shift in their programme, tax policy questions and adoption of their key issue of energy policy by mainstream parties during the last year before the elections led the Greens to holding on to the support of only their core electorate.

In spite of a 3.3-percent drop in support, The Left could be seen as a relative winner in the elections considering that for the first time it is the number three party in the Bundestag. The party was not, however, able to avoid internal conflict and programmatic discrepancies. A relatively stable position could be maintained thanks to the campaign conducted by the charismatic Gregor Gysi, who attracted much of the media's attention.

The surprise of the elections was the high support given to Alternative for Germany, which fell just 0.3 percent short of the 5 percent threshold. The AfD drew the support of voters from all parties, but primarily those who had previously voted for the FDP (430,000)⁵⁴ which strongly contributed to the liberals' failure, by the same token contributing indirectly to the shape of the governing coalition. The party turned out to be a real alternative for those who wished to register their protest against the mainstream parties (37 percent of those casting a vote for the AfD declared that dissatisfaction with other parties was the reason they did so)⁵⁵ and for those who traditionally do not vote (as proven by the mobilization of 210.000 previous non-voters)⁵⁶, but primarily for those opposed to the government's European policy *de facto* supported by the opposition (over half of AfD's voters said that the Eurozone crisis was decisive in determining their ballot choice).⁵⁷ This allows for the assumption that in spite of the limited politicization of "Europe" in the election campaign, European issues were not entirely insignificant for those casting votes for other parties, especially given the high competence in the issue attributed to the ruling CDU.

⁵⁴ Spiegel Online (2013): "Bundestagswahl 2013. So wählten die Deutschen"; ARD (2013): *Zahlen und Umfragen zur Bundestagswahl.*

⁵⁵ ARD (2013): *Zahlen und Umfragen zur Bundestagswahl.*

⁵⁶ Süddeutsche Zeitung (2013): "Wer Union wählte". In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 22 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/waehlerwanderung-und-statistiken-woher-die-union-millionen-waehler-bekam-1.1777776> (last accessed: 20.12.2013).

⁵⁷ Op. cit.

What, therefore, was the role of European issues in the 2013 German elections? The Bundestag election campaign was clearly focused on domestic issues, while European matters seem to have taken a backseat. The observations above indicate that the discursive opportunity structure of the European crisis was used in German party competition only in an implicit manner. Politicians did not directly engage in discussions on measures to be taken during the coming months for fighting the crisis, nor did they present a broader vision for a united Europe. One exception is the new entry of AfD onto the country's political stage. The party was able to mobilize a portion of the electorate with its anti-Euro protest platform, but neither the new competitor nor the public salience of the issue succeeded in deeply polarizing and focusing the German party system around the European issue. Why was this so?

On the one hand, the main owner of the issue, the CDU, aimed at preserving its competence monopoly over European politics and the symbolic image of Chancellor Merkel without engaging in a controversial debate. The SPD, on the other hand, was far more focused on winning back its traditional voter base and on sharpening its social democratic ideological profile. Obviously, the party could achieve these goals most effectively as a domestic counterweight to the CDU. Other parties did not develop enough momentum to engage the dominating CDU discourse. In a manner parallel to the view of European elections as “second-order elections”⁵⁸, questions related to the common future of the European Union thus remained “second-order-issues”. Instead of serving as one of the polarizing dimensions of party competition they were rather used as contextualizing ideological proxies of domestic politics, especially in regard to fiscal and social policies. European issues did not fulfil the role of differentiating markers between particular partisan divisions, but rather served as abstract legitimation patterns in campaign discourses. Particularly for the CDU, the “Euro-crisis” enhanced the strategy of underlining the importance of political familiarity and stability symbolized by Angela Merkel. In the end, this strategy turned out to be successful.

Conclusions and Future Prospects

The results of the Bundestag elections saw a mixture of the return of old trends and emerging new developments. In the new Bundestag legislature the government is again formed by the

⁵⁸ Reif, Karlheinz and Schmitt, Hermann (1980): „Nine second-order national elections: A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results“. In: *European Journal of Political Research* 8 (1), 3-44.

CDU, the CSU and the SPD. As expected, soon after the elections, the three parties met to prepare the ground for renewal of the grand coalition. The Social Democrats proved that they have learned from their mistakes and demanded a high price during negotiations of the coalition contract. Aware of deep scepticism among the party's base, the leadership decided to allow Social Democratic members to hold an internal party referendum on the question of Social Democratic participation in the grand coalition. This widely-discussed novel democratic procedure also gave the Social Democrats powerful arguments in negotiations with the Christian Democrats: namely, the need to provide the party base with sufficient programmatic inclusion of Social Democratic electoral postulates in the coalition contract. In the case of Europe, the contract adopted the austerity positions traditionally articulated by Chancellor Merkel. The Social Democrats' ideas of solidarity and joint responsibility, including plans for the creation of a Europe-wide debt repayment fund were dropped. The contract neither sets out an ultimate form for integration, nor the necessity of institutional reform in the EU. Instead, it provides a measured emphasis on the role of community institutions, (particularly the European Commission), in overseeing and coordinating anti-crisis policy. It also points to the community method as the central mechanism of European integration. Plans for strengthening competitiveness, expanding investment, fighting youth unemployment and equalizing social welfare standards across the EU are all discussed at length, but in a rather general and wishful tone. The contract as adopted does not contain any new ideas, nor does it present the grand coalition as a reform-oriented one; it can safely be said that the European policy realized so far by Angela Merkel's government will not change the course. The provisions of the coalition contract remain contingent on actual legislative developments in the new parliament. On the one hand, this time the ruling grand coalition will hold an overwhelming majority of 80 percent of seats and thus the strong potential to implement the provisions. On the other hand, a grand coalition with a much more defiant Social Democracy than that of nine years earlier is prone for internal strife. The coming years will show whether the grand coalition is able to implement the primary reforms declared, and what effect cooperation in governing will have on all the political actors involved.

The rising Eurosceptic threat from Alternative for Germany undoubtedly remains a growing challenge for the mainstream parties, as it may have a say in the balance of powers on the German political scene during the upcoming elections to the European Parliament in May 2014. In these elections European issues will very likely come to the fore. The mainstream parties will therefore be forced to engage a much more differentiated debate on the future

trajectory of Europe. They will also need to confront AfD with its distinctive anti-Euro stance, especially given the controversial decision of the German Constitutional Court to abolish the 3-percent electoral threshold in European elections.

AfD itself came out strengthened from the 2013 Bundestag elections. In March 2014, the Euro-revisionists polled as high as 7.5 percent.⁵⁹ The position of AfD largely depends on the party itself – will it be able to maintain organizational cohesion between its variously radical and anti-immigrant fractions⁶⁰, will Bernd Lucke solidify his leadership, will the party be capable of expanding its programme, and will the mood in the country and in Europe be conducive to Eurosceptic positions. However, the electoral fortunes of AfD will also – and perhaps primarily – depend on the competition strategies of the mainstream parties. Lucke’s party can use the momentum won in 2013 to dominate the debate and become the discursive centre in the European election campaign. Mainstream parties therefore will probably be faced with issues and a competitor they cannot simply dismiss. Much will therefore depend on whether pro-European political forces will be able to offer effective counter-frames and arguments to delegitimize the AfD discourse.

The German party system, with its vast permissive pro-European consensus coupled with the current diversifying dynamic of interaction between political parties and the European Union⁶¹ therefore still “provides a unique context for Europeanization”.⁶² Admittedly, in this working paper it was possible only to scratch the empirical surface of this highly interesting research field. The study nonetheless has brought to light the scholarly potential for future systematic mixed-method evaluations of Europeanization patterns in regard to party competition and discursive policy legitimization within European party systems.

⁵⁹ Frankfurter Rundschau (2014): “Umfragen sehen AfD bei bis zu 7,5 Prozent”. In: *Frankfurter Rundschau*. 09. March 2014. Available at: <http://www.fr-online.de/politik/afd-bei-europawahl-umfragen-sehen-afd-bei-bis-zu-7-5-prozent,1472596,26507904.html> (last accessed: 12.03.2014).

⁶⁰ Litschko, Konrad (2014): “Auf rechtem Pfad nach Brüssel”. In: *Taz. Die Tageszeitung*. 06. March 2014. Available at: <http://taz.de/AfD-vor-der-EU-Wahl/!134372/> (last accessed: 12.03.2014).

⁶¹ Cf. Beichelt (2009): *Deutschland und Europa*.

⁶² Hertner and Sloam (2012): “The Europeanisation of the German Party System”, p. 49.

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