

European interview

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# “The Greens will do everything they can to make the Conference on the future of Europe a success!”

**2021 will be a pivotal year for Germany. Several elections will take place at regional level and the parliamentary elections on 26 September will mark the end of the Merkel era. What do you expect from this?**

Angela Merkel has been in power for sixteen years and during her «reign» she has had to deal with a succession of major crises: financial, migratory, health. This leaves its mark! A page in German history will be turned with her departure. We do not know what the post-Merkel era will be, but we do know that it will change. I think it is important to look closely at what will happen in the federal elections on 26 September, to see how the political map will be reorganised, which parliamentary majorities will be possible, which new personalities will emerge or, on the contrary, which will have made their last appearance in the autumn of 2021. This is likely to be a major turning point in German politics, which will undoubtedly have significant repercussions at European and international level. A turning point that we may enjoy and look forward to.

**Your party has become a major force in Germany. Will the German Greens be able to enter the government or even the Chancellery?**

We want to govern, and we are going into these elections with the firm intention of convincing the electorate to give us their votes and a clear mandate to govern the Federal Republic, probably as part of a coalition. But we should not count our chickens before they're hatched. We know what it is like to believe opinion polls and public rumour that the Greens will be in government anyway! Four years ago, at about the same time of year, we were hearing the same thing, and yet four years later, we have just spent all that time on the opposition benches. Let us be clear: it is

quite possible that the «grand coalition» of the CDU and the SPD will be renewed. The SPD's electoral programme is based on continuity, and if they get enough votes, it would be conceivable and probably even reasonable in the eyes of the CDU to renew, because it is obvious that the negotiations will be more cumbersome, more complex and, without doubt, less pleasant with us than with the SPD. The same goes for the conquest of the Chancellery, there is still a long way to go until September. No one knows what the pandemic has in store for us, or how much more work we will have to do before we can return to some semblance of normality; any prediction now as to the outcome of the federal elections would be completely meaningless. We are going to do it; we are going to campaign and we are going to win this election!

**At the congress on 22 November, your co-president, Robert Habeck, said that in the Greens' mind, power had often been considered as something «dirty». How has this relationship with power evolved?**

Let's start at the beginning, 40 years ago. We, the Greens, came out of various post-1968 movements; we wanted to influence the political world, some wanting to govern by participating in the institutions, others wanting to influence them without participating and by organising an extra-parliamentary opposition. The choice was quickly made to enter Parliament and, therefore, to set up a party. This parliamentary presence led us to face the question of power and our desire to govern; in 1998, we decided to enter a government coalition with the SPD, aware that this required compromises. For more than twenty years, the question has not been whether to govern or not; the question that concerns us is what compromises we are prepared to accept, and with whom, to advance a certain number of our ideas. But, as in the 2017 federal elections, evidently, we want

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to participate in a government to work in the fight against climate change, in the ecological and social transformation, in the defence of democracy and Europe. On the issue of climate change, I would like to stress that it is not about green lobbying but about defending the interests of the planet and achieving the European objectives of reducing CO2 emissions. Even if for us, the Greens, the urgency of the situation means that we want to do even more, and above all much faster.

**What are the keys to the German Greens’ success: ecological expertise, the weakening of the two major parties?**

The key to our success is the German proportional electoral system! It is obvious that, compared to France among others, this electoral system has allowed us to enter the Bundestag, as well as many regional governments (Länder). The strength of the Greens is that, from the outset, they wanted to embody a very broad vision of society by bringing together feminists, pacifists, ecologists and human rights activists, who together created the party. This plurality has always strengthened us, even if it was and still is difficult at times.

**What advice would you give to the French ecologists?**

I would be careful about giving them advice, except one thing: demand a change in your electoral and representation system! This is the major difference between the French Greens and the German Greens. For the rest, the diversity here is just as great and a source of potential conflict. But for us, the option of power being a reality - we participate in 11 out of 16 regional governments - it is no longer a question of abstract discussions that divide our party; on the contrary, it is very concrete, and we have to find solutions and compromises every day and on a day-to-day basis. The French Greens always have to build alliances before the elections, which is much more complicated.

**After sixteen years in the Chancellery, Angela Merkel has had a profound influence on the shape of the European Union. Some criticise her lack of vision, others praise her commitment. What do you think?**

[1] (in the second half of 2020, ndr)

[2] (in its decision of 5th May 2020, ndr)

Chancellor Merkel will certainly not go down in history for her visionary qualities. She has always done just the right thing to prevent the European project from exploding or imploding, but nothing more. Nor does she want to go down in history as the gravedigger of the European project, she understands perfectly well that she cannot let this project die. But she has never dared to address the fundamental issues that would help us approach the future in a better position. I really hoped that during the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union[1], I really hoped that she would give a great speech on Europe, but it didn't happen. I really hoped that she would use this presidency to finally give a response to French President Emmanuel Macron, to show her vision of Europe, but it didn't happen. I think her main objective is always to avoid conflicts within her party or her government coalition.

**Nevertheless, she took a major step forward in July by agreeing to the principle of a common European debt as part of the recent recovery plan.**

This remains in line with her prudent logic, that of taking the necessary steps to ensure that it does not collapse. And in this case, it was a question of giving a European impulse to the financial markets. She also did this because the German Constitutional Court has clearly defined[2] the limits of the European Central Bank's mandate. Angela Merkel's old option, which was to say that in the end the ECB will save us, no longer exists.

**Does the Franco-German couple still have any meaning for the younger generation?**

For me, it is essential, but I can see that there is less enthusiasm for it. Distrust of France is even greater than that of the United States in certain circles in Germany, as can be seen in the polls. At the same time, the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly has strengthened institutional links with France. Without the MPs, relations with France would be much more strained, the situation would be much less pleasant than it is. For the future, it will really depend on whoever takes over the Chancellery.

**Emmanuel Macron places great importance on European strategic autonomy. Would you agree**

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**with Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer that this is an «illusion»?**

Personally, I don't talk about autonomy, because this notion of being completely independent, autonomous in this world, this notion doesn't exist, and if it were one day achievable, it would not be any more desirable. What concerns us instead is the question of «sovereignty», in the sense of «capacity for action». We must have the capacity to act where necessary, in the economic sector, in the financial sector and, above all, in the digital sector, which is the priority for the years to come. Sovereignty is a completely different concept from autonomy, and I think there will never be a majority in Germany in favour of autonomy.

**In this context, what room is there for a more ambitious European defence policy?**

In my view, it is all about creating a well-framed European defence industry, moving away from the national logic of the defence industry, so that we no longer have so much duplication and waste with projects that do not work. We need to refocus on the capabilities needed for our interventions and develop them together. It is not a question of adding something to what is done at national level but of creating added value and stopping certain projects.

**The Green Deal for Europe to combat climate change is the Commission's top priority. Does it go far enough?**

The important thing is what the Commission will propose and, even more, what the Member States and the European Parliament will do with it. The Commission must

make concrete proposals on the circular economy, on the reform of the carbon tax mechanism and the border tax mechanism, and in favour of a real reform of the common agricultural policy. The first draft is good, but we can do better than that. In addition to the implementation of the Green Deal, our party has several European priorities: the strengthening of a European fiscal policy, the social dimension, women's rights, the issue of migration which must be managed humanely. We also need to see, in terms of foreign policy, who our partners and potential partners are and with whom we can go part of the way.

**The Conference on the Future of Europe is finally on track. What do you expect from it?**

I am sceptical, I wonder what the outcome will be. I hope that our governments and parliaments do not reduce this Conference to a mere talk show, but that they take it seriously and pay attention to it. I am not yet convinced that they have given it the necessary means. It's good that it was initiated, but I have my doubts about the determination of the Member States. Nevertheless, I want to give it a fair chance, and the Greens will do everything to make this Conference on the future of Europe a success!

*Interview undertaken by Isabelle Marchais translated by Helen Levy.*

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