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END OF THE MERKEL ERA: GERMANY AFTER COVID-19

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Abstract

Apart from a deadly epidemic, which claimed more than 100.000 lives in Germany since 2020, the new coronavirus brought about a shakeup of the political system in Europe's greatest economy. In 2021, general elections ended 16 years of Christian Democracy (CDU) rule under Angela Merkel, replaced by the Social-Democratic Party (SPD) lead by Olaf Scholz.

COVID-19 did not change international relations fundamentally – it rather deepened already dramatic scenes, setting polities even more apart, enhancing liabilities of the current international framework. We should not underestimate, however, decisive effects that pandemic impinged on domestic scenarios – already seen in Joe Biden's triumph over Donald Trump in United States.

The shadow of COVID-19 overlapped with political fragmentation in a German liberal democracy already in crisis – reducing Merkel's profile and bringing the voting share of CDU and SPD combined to the lowest level after Reunification. With traditional parties in positions of institutional fragility, political transition in Germany signalized deeper changes in European politics across a new decade.

Keywords: COVID-19. Elections. European Union. Germany. Globalization.

Resumo

Além de uma pandemia mortal, responsável por mais de 100.000 mortes na Alemanha desde 2020, o novo coronavirus trouxe mudanças ao sistema político da maior economia da Europa. Em 2021, eleições gerais puseram fim a 16 anos de governos da Democracia Cristã (CDU) sob a liderança de Angela Merkel, substituída pela Social-Democracia (SPD) liderada por Olaf Scholz.

A COVID-19 não transformou as relações internacionais fundamentalmente. Por outro lado, ele aprofundou cenários já dramáticos, separou ainda mais os estados, salientando deficiências da atual arquitetura internacional. Não deveríamos subestimar, porém, efeitos decisivos que a pandemia impôs aos cenários domésticos – já vistos na vitória de Joe Biden sobre Donald Trump nos Estados Unidos.

A sombra da COVID-19 se somou à fragmentação política numa democracia liberal alemã já em crise – reduzindo o legado de Merkel e trazendo a soma dos votos de CDU e SPD para o nível mais baixo desde a Reunificação.Com os partidos tradicionais em posições de fragilidade institucional, a transição política na Alemanha sinalizou mudanças profundas na política europeia na nova década.

Palavras-Chave: Alemanha. COVID-19. Eleições. Globalização. União Europeia.

Apart from a deadly epidemic, which claimed more than 100.000 lives in Germany since 2020, the new coronavirus brought about a shakeup of the political system in Europe's greatest economy.

In 2017, the Social-Democratic Party (SPD) experienced its most significant defeat since WWII, reduced to less than 20% of chairs at the *Bundestag*. In sharp contrast with the misfortunes of Martin Schulz, Christian Democracy (CDU) under Angela Merkel obtained nearly one-third of popular votes, retaining its prominent position obtained in 2005 – eventually, spending 16 consecutive years in power. By then, the rapid ascent of the far right AfD was the most impressive feature of a recurring crisis in liberal democracies (GAMA, 2017). Under Merkel, Germany managed to keep economic growth in

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place even with austerity. The country was open to significant demonstrations of international solidarity, receiving 1 million Syrian refugees in a matter of months, in spite of recalcitrance by other EU polities.

Four years on, SPD's share of the pie increased incidentally (just above 25%) whereas CDU fell considerably (at around 22%). The tipping point had arrived between January and March 2020.

The first COVID-19 case in Germany was recorded in Munich, in January 27. By then, CDU joined a regional coalition in Thuringia, which, apart from the Free Democratic Party (FDP), included AfD. This alliance brought Thomas Kemmerich to victory in February 6th – the first time in post-war Germany when the far right integrated a regional government. CDU's leader, Defense Minister and chancellor in perspective Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer was already under pressure by the arrival of the disease. Electoral acrimony ended her leadership. Additionally, CDU left the Thuringian coalition, plucking the state into governmental crisis. New elections, scheduled for 2021, were scrapped, due to COVID-19.

Suddenly, Merkel was left without a presumed heir. Her premiership would encompass the first years of pandemic, additionally dealing with multiple political burdens (the debris of breaching with FDP, and also accusations of "turning down" offerings from Green Party and left-wing Die Linke formation).

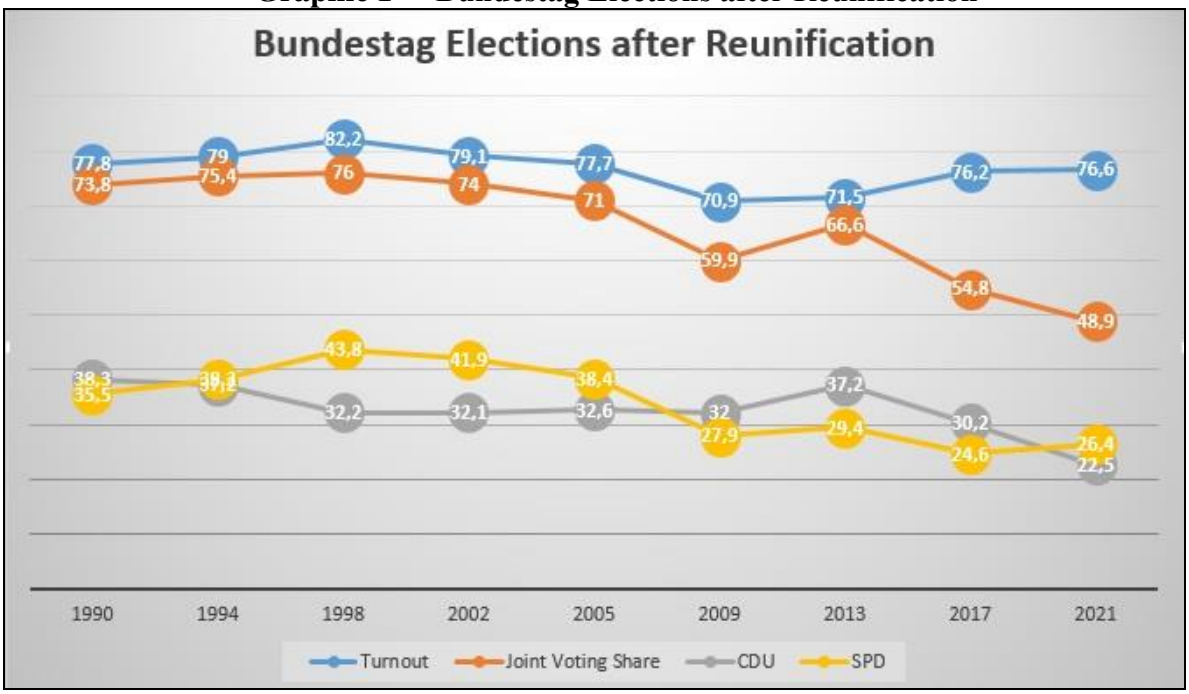
With lockdowns imposed unilaterally across Europe (and soon, the world), it was a matter of time before Schengen was enclosed for the first time (REUTERS, 2020). When Ursula von der Leyen, head of the European Commission (and Kramp-Karrembauer's predecessor in the Defense Ministry) declared a temporary closure of Schengen in March 17, Germany was already an epidemic epicenter in a walled globe (CHATHAM HOUSE, 2019). It was also one of the first states that adopted robust economic aid packages, announced in March 22 (surpassing 130 billion Euros), well before the EU mustered any figures – in December 2020, it committed 750 billion Euros across 10 years (European Commission, 2020). Massive economic aid put an end to Merkel's long-standing austerity policies and lowered down German criticism of highly indebted EU members.

The shadow of COVID-19 overlapped with political fragmentation in a liberal democracy already in crisis (Harris, 2019) – reducing the chancellor's profile. In a walled world of clusters in which multilateral institutions underperformed (Gama, 2021c), Merkel's legacies seemed closer to bookshelves than to the order of the day.

Even though vaccination arrived earlier than imagined (December 2020), nearly 30% of the German society remains unprotected. A mix of local negationism, economic side-effects of lockdowns and the diminishing popularity of the Federal government add dimensions to this unexpected phenomenon. The arrival of the Omicron variety coincided with general elections in Germany, with

turnout figures slightly surpassing 2017 – but with outcomes considerably different for an exhausted constituency. The new coronavirus was responsible for a changing of the guard as significant as the 2008 global economic crisis. In 2009, CDU kept its voting share whereas SPD paid the price in reduced numbers.

Graphic 1 - "Bundestag Elections after Reunification"



Source: <http://electionresources.org/de>.

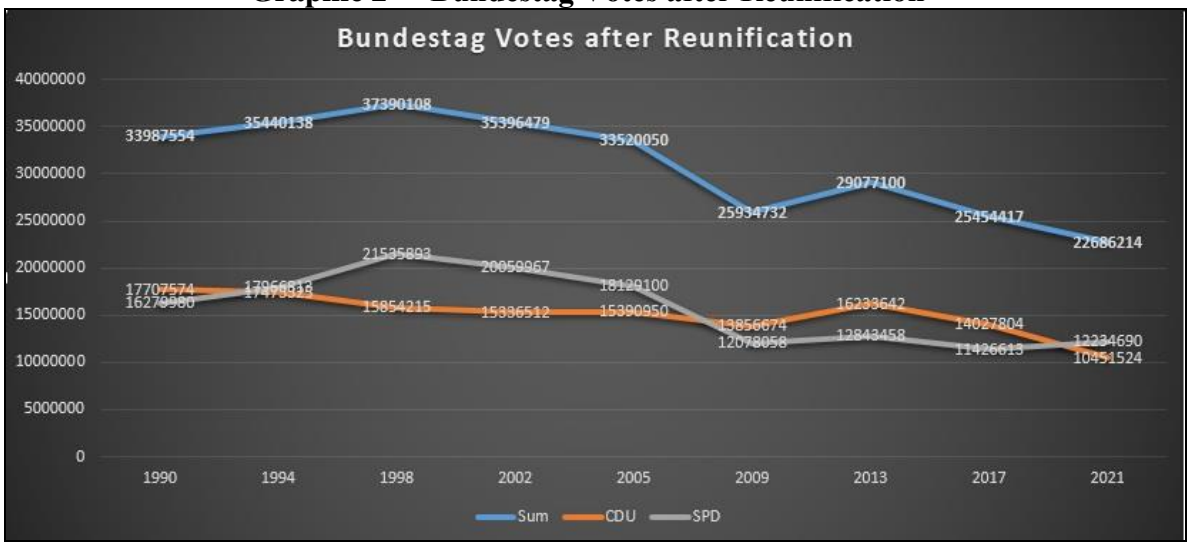
In 2021, a diminished CDU left the building for the arrival of the imbalanced *troika* of SPD, FDP and Greens. With party platforms so different, it remains to be seen if their electoral manifestos will come to any fruition. Regardless, Merkel displayed considerable resilience across waves of crisis in European integration (HABERMAS, 2001) – plus the latest cards of Germany's complex reintegration (GAMA, 2020A). Breaking the pandemic cycle of underdevelopment, mass indebtedness and industrial redundancy will prove crucial during the next few years (GAMA, 2021), by then under a new direction – or something of the kind.

New chancellor Olaf Scholz is a pragmatic politician, the reluctant centrist in a constellation of wildcards. His long stance as Merkel's Ministry of Finance brings tinges of continuity, including the broader consensus about Germany's role in Europe that provided blueprints for post-war economic miracles and eventual political reunification (GAMA, 2017). This said, his membership in SPD bears more than symbolic connotations for an economy facing indebtedness and prospects of a long-lasting energy transition. Europe also faces the rising spiral of US-China competition in its own shores,

uncertainty regarding NATO's and EU's overlapping roles in regional security (Knudsen, 2019), multiple anxieties and acrimonies with Russia, not to mention the already considerable fallout of an unfinished Brexit. That leaves Scholz and his crew (especially Green Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock) with enormous shoes to fill.

At the same time, the German polity keeps in place fundamental tracts of liberal democracies in crisis (GAMA, 2017). CDU and SPD combined kept on sliding down the ballots since reunification. In 2021, for the first time they represented less than half of voters. Combined with a high turnout, that puts such traditional parties in positions of institutional fragility. The arrival of new constellations (with Greens surpassing AfD) shifts the balance slightly for the Left, but the overall effect is enhanced fragmentation. At home as in Europe – so Germany is no longer the exceptional success story that surrounds ruling narratives.

Graphic 2 - "Bundestag Votes after Reunification"



Source: <http://electionresources.org/de>.

COVID-19 did not change international relations fundamentally (GAMA, 2020B) – it rather deepened already dramatic scenes, setting polities even more apart, enhancing liabilities of the current international framework (RODRIK, 2011). The dysfunctional international society of our days should not cast a blind eye, though, to decisive effects that pandemic impinged on domestic scenarios. They have been witnessed first case in Joe Biden's triumph over Donald Trump in US (GAMA, 2021D), in November 2020. One year after, Merkel's fall from grace provided Act 2. COVID-19 placed the major parties below the 50% threshold of *Bundestag* chairs – a long-term trend initiated by the 2008 global economic crisis. Between those crises, CDU and SPD combined "*lost*" more than 10.000.000 votes.

During the latter stages of 2021, political transition in Germany signalized deeper changes igniting in European politics across a new, turbulent decade (ROSENAU, 2006).

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