



BULLETIN

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Germany's European Policy and Polish-German Relations after Bundestag Election

by Ryszarda Formuszewicz

The German election is not going to exert any major influence on the country's Europe policy. The new cabinet, to be headed by the present chancellor, Ms Angela Merkel, will be formed by the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and the Liberals (FDP). Guido Westerwelle, the FDP leader who is tipped to take the foreign affairs portfolio, says the foreign policy line will be continued. Favorable prospects are also ahead for Polish-German relations, especially if the Lisbon Treaty takes effect soon. But it should be remembered that in the new cabinet, the FDP will be less eager than the SPD to seek restricting the influence of the Federation of Expellees.

The election to the Bundestag, held on 27 September 2009, marked an end to the grand coalition government in Germany. Having won 332 seats in a 622-strong chamber, the new coalition parties will enjoy a stable majority. The Christian Democrats remain the strongest group, but with a voter support (33.8%) weaker than in the previous election in 2005 (35.2%). A historic defeat was suffered by the SPD, which got only 23% of the popular vote (against 34.2% in 2005). Its parliamentary group is going to be headed by the outgoing foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Considerable losses sustained by the main parties, coupled with increasing support for the FDP (14.6%, up from 4.8%) and the election results of the Left Party (11.9%) and, to a lesser extent, of the Alliance '90/The Greens, provide testimony to a continued process of reconstruction on the German political scene.

With a better relative pattern of election results, the FDP will hold a stronger position in coalition negotiations and the future cabinet, compared to the party's previous governments formed with the CDU/CSU. The smallest parliamentary representation among future coalition partners is held by the CSU, additionally weakened by the FDP's strong result in Bavaria. The new coalition can also expect a favorable composition of the Bundesrat.

European Policy of the Future Coalition. The new coalition configuration will only slightly modify Germany's Europe policy. The chancellorship stays with Ms Merkel, whose responsibility it has been to map out the lines of German activities in the EU forum. The change of a coalition partner may result in greater ambitions to influence Europe policy on the part of the new foreign minister. Such a prospect will be all the more likely if the head of the coalition party combines the positions of foreign minister and deputy chancellor (unlike in 2005, when these were separated). On the other hand, the Christian Democrats are going to have greater leeway in naming their candidate for the post of an EU commissioner, which they want to be taken by a politician with a strong personality.

Taking interest in the more effective EU, also as an instrument to build its stronger international position, Germany will continue giving priority treatment to the completion and implementation of the bloc's institutional reform. A more intense pursuit of this objective will be made much easier thanks to Lisbon Treaty ratification in Germany, completed just before the election. Both the CDU and the FDP want to focus in the coming years on EU consolidation. The change of government is not going to influence German support for the Eastern Partnership, whereas a debate on accession of new countries to the EU—where coalition members' declarations clash (the Christian Democrats are against Turkey's membership)—is receding into an unspecified future, perhaps with the exception of Croatia. Regarding Iceland's accession plans, an opposition has already been signaled by the CSU.

The coalition partners' positions on EU enlargement reflect their respective positions on European integration, the FDP being the most euro-enthusiast and Bavaria's CSU sometimes veering towards euro-skepticism, as was revealed during the election campaign. But all of the three parties pronounce themselves in favor of strengthening the subsidiarity principle. On enhanced cooperation among a group of member states, Merkel and Westerwelle stand differently: the FDP leader accepts the arrangement, while the chancellor sees in it a seed of new divisions, but her position may change if the prospect of Lisbon Treaty coming into effect recedes.

Freed of the election-campaign constraints, Chancellor Merkel may enhance her commitment to revamp the global economic order and fight climate change. Germany will seek to further boost its image within the EU as an effective mediator and a country that is solving problems rather than posing them. In keeping with the traditions of Christian Democratic/Liberal governments, priority will be given to keeping a balance in relations with the main partners and strongly supporting multilateral solutions to European and global problems.

In the previous term, the Liberals embraced a more critical approach to Russia than one they followed at the time of the Gerhard Schröder-led coalition of the SPD and the Greens. Just as the Christian Democrats, the Liberals criticize Russia's political development path and human rights violations. But the party's pro-business inclination rules out any major modification of German policy line on that country, which has been largely defined by the SDP. Possibly, in the coalition agreement the status of Russian partnership will be lowered from strategic to pragmatic.

Polish-German Relations. Further moves can be expected to keep up the positive trends in mutual relations. Ms Merkel brings into the new cabinet her personal experiences of contacts with Poland. And in addition, the new foreign minister's party, the FDP, declares that a new "generational task" is to bridge the divisions between EU member states in the East and West. The goal of imparting to relations with Poland a similar quality to that already present in relations with France, as championed by the Liberals, should be understood as the will to expand social, economic and cultural ties, rather than creating a new framework for political partnership. And yet this concept opens up opportunities for a joint effort to popularize in both countries a positive perception of the neighbour and mutual cooperation.

The FDP had been a staunch critic of the U.S. missile defense shield in Europe, but that difference in Polish-German relations has faded when the U.S. abandoned plans for locating MD elements in Poland and the Czech Republic. On the whole, the approach to transatlantic relations and NATO espoused by the Christian Democrats and Liberals is closer to Poland's position, compared to that of the previous coalition partner, the SDP. Prospects for cooperation, in particular, emerge with regard to European foreign, security and defense policy. In the aftermath of the Georgia war of August 2008 and the gas crisis of January 2009, CDU/CSU and FDP politicians have sharpened up their assessment of Russia's political developments, moving closer on many aspects to the views dominant in Poland. This, however, has not affected the willingness to build the Nord Stream gas pipeline. Yet, under the new coalition, Germany may come as Poland's important ally in developing—and, in future, financing—the Eastern Partnership, with a view to offsetting the Mediterranean element in European neighborhood policy.

With Germany's priority treatment accorded to institutional reform of the EU, the key role in mutual relations has been played by Lisbon Treaty ratification. Differences of opinions on continued enlargement or EU budget have been a constant in Polish-German relations so far. At this time of economic downturn, and given the strong left-wing opposition (with a tendency to radicalize), one should not expect Germany to modify its stance on Polish nationals' access to its labor market.

A dispute over different perspectives with regard to German history policy will remain a lasting element, especially in view of the election-campaign messages sent to the Christian Democrats from the Union of the Expelled. The Liberals, who have voted to establish the "Flight– Expulsion – Reconciliation" Foundation, do recognize the need for approaching contentious issues in the context of good-neighborly relations, but they will not act as a counterbalance to the Christian Democratic demands in the way the Social Democrats did. It can be expected, though, that the Bundestag's strongest opposition group, the SDP—without the longstanding head of the German-Polish parliamentary friendship group, Markus Meckel (who was not re-elected, according to initial results)—will continue opposing those Federation of the Expellees demands that pose a threat to relations with Poland.