

## Germany can turbocharge Europe's renewal – if it will only seize this moment

By historian, political writer and Guardian columnist



Three times in the postwar era Germany made strategic choices that benefited Europe – with the US at its side. Now it must do it in opposition to Trump

Three times in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, its chancellors have made strategic choices that opened the door to a better future for Europe. Today there's not just an opportunity but an urgent need for a fourth such historic moment. If the country's new coalition government under [Friedrich Merz](#) manages to seize the chance of this crisis, both Germany and Europe will go forward. If it fails, then by the end of the 2020s both may have fallen backwards farther and faster than most of us could have imagined in our worst nightmares.

**The big difference with those three earlier pivotal moments is this: in 1949, 1969 and 1989 the Federal Republic's policy was fundamentally aligned with that of the United States. This time, Germany has to build up a stronger, free, democratic and Ukraine-supporting Europe *against* the current policy of the US.** *The most staggering moment of Sunday's election evening was when the lifelong Atlanticist Merz declared that Europe must “[really achieve independence from the US](#)”.* (When compared with Emmanuel Macron's almost British sycophancy in the White House the next day, Germany's prospective chancellor is sounding more robustly Gaullist than the French president.)

The **1949** choice of **Konrad Adenauer**, the Federal Republic's great founding chancellor, to **integrate the western half of his divided country firmly in the emerging transatlantic geopolitical west**, and into a more integrated Europe, was in tune with the post-1945, cold war orientation of the US and the new state's key European partners, France and Britain. Chancellor **Willy Brandt's 1969** opening to the east, his **Ostpolitik**, chimed with detente policies being pursued by Washington, Paris and London. Chancellor **Helmut Kohl's 1989** determination to **embed German unification in further steps of European unification**, including a common European currency, was welcomed by the US and opened the door to French acceptance of German unity. In all three cases, there were big reservations in one or other western capital – the most shortsighted of them being Margaret Thatcher's opposition to German unification – but *in the broad sweep of history, Germany's big strategic choices were aligned with those of a US-led geopolitical west.*

*Today no more.* So long as Donald Trump is in the White House, there will be no “west” as a single geopolitical actor. On Monday, the third anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we had the scandalous spectacle of the US voting with Russia against a British-European UN resolution in support of Ukraine. The US has now joined the transactional [great and middle powers of the Brics](#) in assaulting what's left of the liberal international order that America itself built. *The international relations scholar John Ikenberry once described the US as a [liberal leviathan](#). Today, the liberal leviathan has become a rogue elephant.*

*The free Europe we have built since 1949 is therefore under attack from inside and out, and the two kinds of threat are intertwined. An anti-liberal, populist nationalist Europe is gaining ground everywhere.* The chancellor candidate of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), Alice Weidel, was not wrong, from her point of view, to describe her party's election result – one fifth of the overall vote, [clear election winner in eastern Germany](#), second-largest party in the new Bundestag – as a “historic success”. Shockingly, it was supported from Washington. US vice-president JD Vance's rant at the Munich security conference was in effect an

election speech for the AfD. On Sunday evening, Merz caustically observed that the interventions in German democratic politics from Washington were “no less dramatic than those from Moscow.”

*After Germany’s unification in 1990, we celebrated the fact that Germany had become a “normal” European country. Now, in a sense, we must mourn it. For to be a normal European country today is to be one in which the liberal centre is drinking in the last-chance saloon. **If the liberal centre doesn’t make the changes that will win voters back from the populist extremes, Marine Le Pen will become French president in 2027, the AfD will win the German elections in 2029 and Nigel Farage’s Reform UK will overtake the Conservatives at the ballot box.***

*The good news is that there’s growing clarity across mainstream German and European liberal democratic parties about what needs to be done. **Europe has to save Ukraine. We must rapidly build a much stronger common European defence, including Britain. All of us, but especially Germany, have to restore economic dynamism, without reversing the green transition, and also address the concerns about socioeconomic and geographical inequality that have driven voters to the populists. We must control irregular migration yet make a success of the integration of large numbers of immigrants, which is the only way to address our acute demographic challenge.***

How to do it? ***How to pay for it?** The obstacles inside Germany are immense. A country famous for its automobile engines is now most notable for its brakes – including a constitutionally anchored “debt brake”. Yet it’s also true that a German chancellor has immense possibilities to steer the country in a new direction if, like Adenauer, Brandt and Kohl, they have the will and the skill to do so.*

Traditionally, the forthcoming coalition talks between Christian Democrats and Social Democrats would result in a set of compromises involving each party getting slices from a large and growing cake. But what if the cake is shrinking and two large new slices – more investment in defence and in the country’s neglected infrastructure – must be cut out of it? **Obviously Germany must somehow ease that debt brake, but if this is really to be a moment of strategic change – a true *Zeitenwende* – then Merz will have to follow his two great Christian Democratic predecessors, Adenauer and Kohl, and take a further big step towards a stronger Europe.** For security, the defence industry, energy, the green transition and AI, Europe needs *scale* to hold its own in this world of bullying giants. *The solutions don’t always have to involve classic Brussels-type integration, but they can’t just be national.*

*The biggest German brake of all is a state of mind – a curious mix of being at once too comfortable and too fearful. As a lover of German compound nouns, I was delighted to see the German political scientist Karl-**Rudolf Korte** capture this brilliantly by characterising Germany as a ***Wolferwartungsland*** (a country constantly expecting the wolf to arrive). *But today the wolves are actually there: two big ones at the door, Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, and one small one, the AfD, already inside the hen coop.**

To see off those wolves, Germans need one quality above all: **courage**. Let them take advice from their national poet. “Property lost,” wrote Goethe, “something lost! ... Honour lost, much lost! ... Courage lost, everything lost!”