Russia and the World in the Eyes of the New Generation
Green and Flat?
The Future of the World through the Eyes of Young Germans

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What will the European Union look like by 2035? What kind of Europe will future generations of political leaders be destined to govern? Very few will dare forecast today what the EU will be like in fifteen years from now. The modern world is highly volatile. Now and then “black swans” change the domestic and foreign political landscape in an instant. Societies undergo in-depth transformations induced by the new technological, information and social setup.

The European Union’s development vector will largely depend on Germany, the engine of the European economy and integration. Europe in general and Germany in particular are at a crossroads. Strained relations with the United States, the migration crisis, the rise of populism, climate change, and China’s economic boom push relations with Russia into the background.

HOW DO YOUNG GERMANS SEE THE FUTURE OF EUROPE AND THEIR OWN COUNTRY?

To answer this question, it is essential to take a look at the entire spectrum of political trends in Germany and to analyze which of them evoke the greatest response from the younger generation.

The defeat of traditional political parties in the elections to the European Parliament on May 23–26 was the most resounding event in the EU’s political life. The electorate gave preference to the leftist liberal forces and the Greens, with the latter scoring the highest points in Germany, France and Britain.

It is noteworthy that the populist parties that had been regarded as the main threat were not equally successful: support for them was the greatest in Hungary (Fidesz—52.3%), Italy (League—33.6%), and France (National Rally—23.5%). Germany is in tenth place (Alternative for Germany—10.8%). The Alternative for Germany party had hoped for a better result, but scandals over financial support from Switzerland
caused an adverse effect on its popularity ratings. Just as the fact that the migration agenda had lost its relevance for the Germans in contrast to the peak registered three to four years ago.

In contrast to the results of the elections held five years ago, the Greens managed to rake twice as many votes (20.5%). They gained support from 40% of those who cast their ballots for the first time, while only 11% of novice voters opted for the CDU-CSU, and 7% for the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (the SDP).

The trend is quite remarkable, but a closer look at Germany’s elections with reference to age factor makes it clear that the age group of 45-60 will continue to determine the political course for quite a while. The share of young people (under 20) went down in 1950-2017 to 18% from 30%. By 2060 it is likely to shrink further to 17%. In other words, the older generation will continue to shape foreign policy in the foreseeable future. The above data prompts the conclusion that the success of the Greens in the pan-European election was largely a result of their ability to persuade the senior generation: in the age group of 45 to 59 one in four voted for the Greens. Even among the voters aged 60-69 the Greens got 19%.

However impressive these data may look, it is young people that largely influenced the outcome of the election in Germany—the younger generation made the environmental agenda a decisive factor in the success in the European Parliament elections.

**A YouTube REVOLUTION**

Several days before the election videoblogger Rezo posted a clip in the YouTube called *Die Zerstoerung der CDU*. Although originally the video was meant for his subscribers only, the clip scored a record 14.8 million views and 208,000 comments (in just one week the number of views grew by a factor of 200,000). The video came as a political bombshell. Many public and political figures expressed support. A few celebrities posted their video responses. Comments by the German-speaking audience indicate that there exists a great demand for an unbiased and non-ideologized political education in society.

“We’ll change henceforth the old tradition...” Rezo’s stunning video drew a wide response from the German public at large, including the leaders of the main political parties. Most German-language sources were unanimous that his video considerably influenced the outcome
of the European Parliament elections. The Rezo phenomenon should be considered with special attention, because he is a representative of the younger generation who have a specific outlook and values. Understanding the problems that worry young Europeans and the way they see their future will be the key factor in the success of the Russian foreign policy on the European track. Also, this particular case shows how the media is changing: the traditional instruments of influence on the public mind begin to fail now and then, while it remains unclear how the new tools work. It is an omen of our time: you can squander mammoth resources on the election campaign only to see its effects instantly vanish into thin air. Finally, the range of highlighted problems and, most importantly, the reaction of the key political players to them have exposed serious challenges to Germany’s political system.

A total of 260 hyperlinks to official documents, media resources, statistics, surveys, etc. were attached to the video.

**Winners and losers.** Rezo began his investigation with a scrutiny of the CDU’s claim that it is a truly popular party addressing the needs of all groups of the population and social strata. Of 36 years of its existence, the CDU has been at the helm of power for 29 years. During this time the gap between the rich and the poor grew wider ([Fig. 1a, b, c](#)). Attributing this to the industriousness of some and the lack of diligence in others is wrong: most of the well-off inherited their wealth ([Fig. 2](#)). Also, over the past twenty years the tax burden has hit heavier the poor than the rich ([Fig. 3](#)). During the CDU rule a whole lot more was done for the wealthy citizens than for the rest. Therefore, the voters think that this is a result of the party’s political course.

![Fig. 1a](#) Post-tax national income in Germany (1980-2016)
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**Fig. 1b**

The distribution of the aggregate state among the population (by households) in 2014

- **Property in mln Euro**
  - The poorest 50%
  - More affluent 10%
  - Group 60-70%
  - Group 70-80%
  - Group 80-90%
  - The richest 10%
  - Top 1%
  - Top 0.1%
  - Top 0.01%
  - Top 0.001%

**Fig. 1c**

Poverty in Germany and economic development in 2006-2013

- **GDP in billion Euro**
- **Poverty rate in %**
Rezo has shattered the myth about equal opportunities for all. These days it is widely believed that an individual’s success in life does not depend on his/her background. The problem is that the way up is through education. In Germany, upward social mobility through education is lower than in other industrialized countries (although in all fairness, Russia is number two on this rating list) (Fig. 4).

**Fig. 2**
Stock of inherited wealth in % of total wealth

**Fig. 3**
The change in the tax burden in Germany in 2015 compared with 1998
Climate crisis: to prevent an Apocalypse. Rezo claims that the CDU is ruining people’s lives. A large share of the expert and academic community can provide convincing proof of it. The blogger gives a clear and detailed explanation to the mechanism of global warming (which the audience liked a lot) and provided research data to back up each argument.
The main conclusion is this: humanity burns hydrocarbons, thus provoking climate change. The current policy is not only fraught with grave consequences of global scale but is unbefitting economically and strategically—the number of disasters and irreparable costs of eliminating their effects are growing ([Fig. 5a, b]). Rezo touched upon the Europeans’ most sensitive point: climate change will trigger a landslide influx of migrants, a worsening of the sanitation and disease situation, and wars for resources. It is not too late to prevent all this, though—a fundamental revision of the political course is needed.

The main problem is the German leadership’s reluctance to change anything. Rezo’s main point of accusation is that the people who make key political decisions lack professionalism. The CDU is not the sole target for his criticism: the author paid enough attention to the Alternative for Germany to show the incompetence of the party’s representatives in the spheres of their responsibility. In the
meantime, the lives of many thousands of people depend on their decisions.

**What is to be done?** To preserve the planet in its current shape it is essential to fast-track transition to ecologically clean energy sources and to stop using coal, oil, and gas. Instead, the government has closed 80,000 jobs in the green energy sector and slashed the funding of the high-tech sector of the renewable energy industry, while preserving jobs in the coal industry. The CDU destroys the environment at the expense of German taxpayers and plays into the hands of major concerns. As a result, the younger generation will have to pay with its future for the CDU’s irresponsible policy.

**Foreign policy: vote of no confidence in the hypocrites.** As far as Germany’s foreign policy is concerned, Rezo believes that the United States is not trustworthy. He accuses the government of conniving with U.S. policies, which he describes as unceremonious and defiant of international law. The author blames the CDU for spreading violence and terrorism, specifically for letting the U.S. use the Ramstein airbase. The representative of Germany’s younger generation has demonstrated a very realistic vision of strategic security: in case of nuclear war, for instance, between Russia and the United States, the Russians will try to do away with Germany as soon as possible in order to eliminate nuclear weapons located in its territory. So, Germany’s position is no good strategically. For this reason, many Germans protest against
the deployment of foreign armed forces in the country. Amazingly, the blogger sidestepped the theme of Russia’s alleged meddling in the European/U.S. elections, Russian hackers, and other clichés.

**Public response.** The German public came out in Rezo’s support: 90 stars of German YouTube released a joint video with a call on their fans against voting for the CDU, CSU, SDP and Alternative for Germany. The main target of criticism, the CDU, for a long time refrained from giving an official answer to the charges, except for tweets by several members of the party. In the end, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Merkel’s successor as the CDU leader, made an official statement, promising to react “to attempts at influencing the public opinion” ([*Meinungsmache*]) ahead of the elections, which many interpreted as an encroachment on the freedom of speech in the Internet. The official video posted in response by a young CDU member Philipp Amthor, was deleted from the world web. “This time we will not participate in populist debates. simplification of political issues and incitement are populists’ tools...” The party’s attempt to interpret the younger generation’s vision as a manifestation of populism will merely worsen the CDU’s positions. Many young members of the Christian-Democratic Union are critical of the leadership’s stance.

**WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?**

**First.** In German society there has emerged a great demand for changing the country’s political course. The people do not feel that the members of the political establishment represent their interests. The population sees no signs how current policy is correlated with their everyday life. The reaction of the party’s leadership to the crucial problems of the youth merely confirms this conclusion.

**Second.** The ecological agenda of the Greens in Germany is successful because the party is keen to provide a scientific basis for its goals. Professionals who care about the future of the nation and the globe look far more attractive to the electorate than the leaders of traditional parties, which, according to the disillusioned, push ahead with their inequality-breeding policy in the interests of large corporations and wealthy groups of the population, thus turning away from crucial social problems, in particular, those of the younger generation.

**Third.** The problem of migration in Germany has been pushed to the sidelines. Fearsome populism as represented by the Alternative for
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Germany has given in to pressures from the left-wingers and the Greens. Or has it just changed disguises? It is difficult to say if environmental protection will be the main course of Germany’s policy in the nearest future, or if this topic is just in vogue. One way or another, the problem of populism, let alone the suspicion the shadow of Russia is looming behind, was not exploited in Germany’s elections this time, which gives some hope for the stabilization of relations.

Fourth. In the foreseeable future Europe will be busy sorting out its internal problems, while relations with Russia will drift into the background. The likely sphere for establishing cooperation and mending trust should be seen in education and science, specifically, the green economy, innovations, etc. The younger generation of Europeans appreciate professionalism. Their attitude to Russia is by and large more neutral than that of their parents, so interaction in this field may be productive and strategically beneficial.

Fifth. The claims that the current climate policy is in a disaster must be considered in a special profound study. At this point the most important thing is that the European youth and part of the older generation are uniting around the idea of environmental protection, which is well seen in the results of the elections to the European Parliament. They have shown that Europeans are prepared to make decisions on the basis of this narrative. In particular, their opinion has changed the lineup of political forces in Germany. Now the traditional parties will be forced to include the green agenda in their platforms so as not to let power slip away.

What do these trends mean to Russia, a country that specializes in the production and export of hydrocarbons? The future of Nord Stream and other energy projects may soon be called in question. Russia should remember that the arguments in favor of natural gas as the most ecologically clean fuel are not on trend today. The green agenda stays focused on renewable sources. The public narrative automatically writes off natural gas and hydrocarbons in general as outdated sources of energy. Special clever promotion efforts may be required to blend the gas theme in with the fashionable ecological agenda.

THE SDP’S FUTURE

The Social Democratic party showed the worst results in the European Parliament elections. Their leader Andrea Nahles had to step down.
The party now pins hopes on Kevin Kuehnert, the leader of the youth wing Jusos, who is pressing for a policy of ideological renewal.

In an interview given after the European Parliament elections, Kuehnert said the SDP had been losing support not only of young voters, but also of the people about 60 years of age. He argues that reshuffles (Andrea Nahles’s resignation) alone won’t help. Digital technology policies and resistance to climate change were central to the election campaign. Kuehnert said the electorate did not associate the SDP with this agenda. Internal strife prevents the party from achieving success, debates about the SDP’s future are confined to discussions of personalities.

In his opinion, the Social Democrats should convey the idea to the voters that climate change is really one of their priorities. Snatching the hobby horse of global warming away from the Greens will be a no easy task, so the leader of Jusos suggests focusing on the potential of practical climate policy: innovations and technologies of the future, including their implementation in the automotive industry. Kuehnert recalls that the Greens say nothing about the redistribution of profit, financial inequality and the availability of social benefits, so the SDP may use this agenda as its trump card.

Kuehnert is trying to breathe a new life into a party whose ideology was based formed back in the 19th century: he raises the theme of struggle against capitalism in its current shape. His proposals, for instance, the idea of nationalizing the BMW have evoked a mixed response from the SDP and society. Asked by Der Spiegel magazine “What is your opinion of Kuehnert’s proposal for nationalizing large corporations?” most respondents (51%) chose the option “Very negative.”

Apart from nationalizing enterprises, the leader of Jusos called for restricting the right to own real estate, suggesting each person should be allowed to own the housing that is the permanent place of residence, adding that ideally the institution of housing rent should be abolished. A well-expected storm of criticism followed: his fellow party members interpreted this as a phantom of class struggle. Kuehnert replied, though, that the party’s program proclaimed socialism as the SDP’s official goal.

What conclusions can be made? Kuehnert’s attempt to invigorate the SDP is its sole chance of survival. He is keen to update the party’s ideology (established one and a half centuries ago) without changing the fundamental values, while at the same time proposing an agenda that
could be of interest to the voters and looking for a new niche for creating a new brand of the SDP’s that the electorate could accept. The German establishment has launched a crusade against his experiments and some ideas drew criticism from the voters. At the same time, certain proposals have sparked interest. Firstly, the intention to adopt as the party’s main course practical implementation of the climate policy (use of environmentally friendly technologies, priority for new energy and the introduction of green innovations in industrial production). In this capacity the SDP might serve as a bridge between the public, which demands a drastic change of the country’s climate policy, and big businesses. Secondly, Kuehnert feels that tensions in society are growing, but for the time being he is unable to devise a suitable ideology—nationalization of big businesses and the struggle with capitalism sound unnatural and radical. Possibly, he should heed Rezo’s point, namely, that the root causes of the problem are malfunctioning “social lifts” (above all, in education), an unfair tax policy and inequality by inheritance. If Kuehnert adds these ideas to his political arsenal, his party may well improve its shattered positions.

Today we are witnessing a transformation of the ideological and political landscape in Germany and in Europe as a whole. If the leadership of the main parties heeds the expectations of society and youth, then transition may happen without major upheavals. There are reasons to hope that the new generation of Europeans will be able to achieve consensus in the name of Europe where they grew up—that of its “golden age.”
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