

The Future of Europe Debate in Germany: Searching for a coherent Reform Strategy

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General Position

Germany's position in the Future of Europe debate is determined by two strategic objectives. First, Germany wants to keep its reputation as supporter of supranationalism and federalism in general. Secondly, Germany seeks to coordinate the next steps in constitutional politics with France in order to refresh an old partnership in favour of Europe. Many observers in the media fear that there might be a trade-off between these two objectives. It seems that the official position of the German government is characterised by a good portion of carefulness and restraint. The reason for this might be the impression of officials that the time is not yet ripe for ambitious proposals for the European Convention. Additionally, it seems that the public debate on the future institutional shape of the Union is overshadowed by public concerns about the enlargement process and its possible implications for domestic politics. Last but not least, the problem of the possible future membership of Turkey is a big issue in Germany's public debate.

Institutional Reform

In general Germany's position regarding institutional reform is traditionally in favour of supranational solutions. This became obvious in the case of the future organisation of the EU Presidency.

EU Presidency

The so-called "Face of Europe"-ABC-proposal as it was suggested by Aznar, Blair and Chirac is generally not welcomed by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the German media as well. It has been often recorded in German newspapers that the smaller states of the Union hope to have an ally in Germany in this key question for Europe. The favoured solution is more in line with a strong Presidency located within the Commission. The idea of the Danish representative, Henning Christophersen, at the Convention to establish a kind of "Bundesversammlung" (like in Germany), in which European and national parliamentarians vote for the Commission's President, has been well received by Germany's media as well.

European Commission

Despite many criticisms of the Commission by German officials and the citizens, Germany is aware of the importance of a strong Commission. It is feared that the constitutional ideas of other big member states threaten the authority of the Commission as a policy innovator and threatens its right of initiative. It is not accepted that the Commission would be diminished to a kind of Council secretariat. On the contrary, the idea of the Commission as a European government, democratically legitimated by the European Parliament is well supported.

European Parliament

It has traditionally been in Germany's interests to continually back the European Parliament in its legislative functions. The favoured constitutional idea is bicameralism, where the directly elected Parliament is the first chamber and the Council is the second one. The establishment of a common electoral system for the Parliament is also strongly supported.

Transparency

One of Germany's key preferences is to strengthen the principles of transparency and subsidiarity. Future Council meetings, where legislating will not be done behind closed doors, has been well received. This is an important step toward more transparency in European policymaking. Germany's representatives are convinced that more openness and transparency in European actions brings the European governance system closer to the people.

Subsidiarity

Regarding subsidiarity, it has been welcomed that the Convention working group on this issue has already some useful solutions to offer. The distribution of competences along the three guidelines "exclusive" competences, "shared" competences and, finally, "supportive" measures in combination with the so-called "early-warning system", seems especially to be an attractive institutional choice for the supporters of the subsidiarity principle. Moreover, it is considered that this early warning mechanism, together with the right to appeal before the Court, secures a more important role for national parliaments in controlling European policymaking.

Conclusion

The current contribution of Germany's government to the constitutional debates are rather scarce because Germany seeks to march together with France as much as possible. Therefore, since the famous speech of Joschka Fischer at Humboldt University in Berlin two years ago the government has been rather cautious in the public debate. However, it is now expected that this period is over since Foreign Minister Fischer will participate in the European Convention. This will reevaluate Germany's position in the debate on the future institutional shape of Europe significantly.