

2014 is not 1914, but Europe is getting increasingly angry and nationalist

While Germany focuses on forging a government, populist anti-EU parties look set to do well at next year's elections



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'Behind these new, diverse political parties is a popular discontent with unemployment, austerity and the Brussels bureaucracy.' Illustration: Belle Mellor

Now the German elections are over, Germany and France will launch a great initiative to save the European project. Marking the centennial of 1914, this will contrast favourably with the weak and confused leadership under which Europe stumbled into the first world war. Before next May's elections to the European parliament, the Franco-German couple's decisive action and inspiring oratory will drive back the anti-EU parties that are gaining ground in so many European countries.

In your dreams, Mr and Ms Pro-European, in your dreams. Now for the reality. We will not even have a new German government until just before Christmas. In the German coalition negotiations, which are meant to be concluded next week, European affairs are being handled in – wait for it – a sub-group of the working group on finance. That sub-group is called "Bank regulation, Europe, Euro". For all the three participating parties, Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, the Bavarian Christian Social Union and

the opposition Social Democrats, the hot-button issues are domestic. The introduction of a minimum wage, energy policy, dual citizenship, a proposed motorway toll – all count for more than the future of the continent.

Germany's politicians know what really matters for selling their parties to voters in future elections. As ordinary Germans get into the swing of their Christmas shopping, most are not feeling the pinch of the euro crisis. Youth unemployment is around 8% in Germany, compared with 56% in Spain. It is hard to convey just how far away, and how un-urgent, the crisis of Europe feels to the man on the Berlin U-bahn. Unlike his counterpart in Madrid, he does not emerge from the underground to find stinking garbage piling up on the streets.

Once the German government is formed, its European policy will be the product of compromises between three departments of state – the dominant federal chancellery, the finance ministry, and the foreign ministry – which will themselves be divided politically between Christian and Social Democrats.

Europe's reluctant leading power will have to make further compromises with France, which has different views on several key issues. France also has a weak president, François Hollande, who is failing to reform his own country, let alone helping anyone else's. The ageing and increasingly unequal German-French couple – which in January marked a rather downbeat golden wedding anniversary, with the German wife now definitely wearing the trousers – will have to take account of the concerns of valued partners such as Poland, as well as proposals coming from European institutions.

And from this dysfunctional orchestra is to emerge a clarion call that will knock the sceptics of all countries back on their heels and mobilise Europeans to vote for Europe? Ha, ha, ha.

Partly as a result, this will be the most interesting European election campaign since direct elections to the European parliament began in 1979 – for all across Europe there is the most amazing array of national protest parties. "Populists" is the blanket term lazily draped over them all, but it does not capture their diversity. With all due disrespect to the UK Independence party and Germany's anti-euro Allianz für Deutschland, it is quite wrong to tar them with the same brush as Greece's neo-fascist Golden Dawn, Hungary's Jobbik or France's Front National. That's even more true of, say, Catalan nationalists, let alone Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement in Italy – which could not be farther from the far right. Closer to the xenophobic politics of the French Front National – but with multiple national and sub-national variations – are groupings such as the Vlaams Belang in Belgium, Finland's The Finns party (until recently, True Finns), the Danish People's party, and so-called Freedom parties in Austria and Holland.

Two of their most skilful leaders, Marine Le Pen of the French Front National and Geert

Wilders of the Dutch Freedom party, have started trying to pull them together. After wooing in spring, over lunch at the elegant La Grande Cascade restaurant in Paris's Bois de Boulogne, this odd couple last week performed the political equivalent of a wedding dance in The Hague.

"Today is the beginning of the liberation from the European elite, the monster in Brussels," cried Wilders. "Patriotic parties", added Le Pen, want "to give freedom back to our people", rather than being "forced to submit their budget to the headmistress". In Vienna on Friday, four others – Austria's Freedom party, Sweden's Democrats, Italy's Northern League and Vlaams Belang – joined a wary waltz with Le Pen.

I will be amazed if these parties do not do well in the European elections. I see nothing at all coming from the current leadership in Berlin, Paris or Brussels (forget London) that is likely to reverse an electoral *grande cascade*. Behind these parties' typically 10% to 25% standing in opinion polls is a wider popular discontent with unemployment, austerity and a Brussels bureaucracy that goes on spewing out regulations about the specifications of your vacuum cleaner and how much water you can use in the lavatory flush. A German Christian Democrat candidate for the European elections tells me that the anti-euro and anti-Brussels arguments of the Allianz für Deutschland resonate with quite a few of his local activists.

I am now taking a couple of months off from regular commentary to finish the book I'm writing about free speech (a vital right, anchored in the European convention on human rights, which these parties enjoy and exploit to its limits). When I come back, I'll be up for the good fight against Le Pen, Wilders, Jobbik and their ilk. Yet, with this divided, slow-moving and uninspiring European leadership, I have no illusions that we'll succeed in stopping the cascade. And if my guess is right, what happens then?

Since the one thing most of these parties have in common is that they are nationalists, they may have difficulty agreeing on much beyond their shared dislike of the EU. If they are strongly represented in the European parliament, the immediate effect will be to drive the mainstream socialist, conservative and liberal groupings closer together. So you'd have an explicit "grand coalition" in Berlin and an implicit grand coalition in Brussels.

The trouble with grand coalitions is that since the mainstream, centrist parties are burdened with the responsibility of government, the field of opposition is left wide open for protest parties. On the other hand, the anti-parties' very success could at last mobilise a younger generation of Europeans to defend achievements that they take for granted. Nineteen-fourteen this won't be, but a hundred years on, Europe will again be living in interesting times.

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