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German Greens prepare for participation in government

Fourteen years after the failure of the first Social Democrat-Green Party government, the Greens are being considered as a viable party of government in Germany once again. Given the possible end of the grand coalition following upcoming state elections in Saxony, Brandenburg and Thuringia, where the Social Democrats (SPD) and Christian Democrats (CDU) are expected to lose large numbers of votes, various scenarios are being discussed.

The Greens are playing a central role in all of these plans. Over the last period, the Greens have hovered around 25 percent in national opinion polls, around double the rate of support for the SPD and only slightly behind the CDU/Christian Social Union (CSU).

Daniel Kohn-Bendit, the 1968 student leader, long-standing Green politician, and adviser to French President Emmanuel Macron, even considers Green Party co-leader Robert Harbeck as a future candidate for German chancellor. Harbeck, who together with Annalena Baerbock took over the national leadership of the Greens in January 2018, is “certainly the person who could go down in history as the first Green chancellor,” Kohn-Bendit told *Die Zeit*. “Today, Robert Harbeck is the Green political personality who can lead the way to the Chancellor’s Office.”

When the Greens entered federal government for the first time in 1998 under Joschka Fischer, a wave of illusions existed that the SPD-Green government would undertake a left turn after 16 years of conservative rule. In its election manifesto of the day, the Greens proclaimed their support for pacifism and social reforms.

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But these illusions were to be bitterly disappointed. Under Foreign Minister Fischer, the Greens organised the first post-war military interventions of the German army in Kosovo and Afghanistan, which broke a decades-long taboo on foreign military operations. They adopted massive tax cuts for the rich and gave their full backing to SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's Agenda 2010, which initiated the largest social counter-revolution since the formation of the Federal Republic. As a result, millions of people now live in poverty and in precarious social conditions.

The Greens no longer attempt to rouse left-wing illusions. They are much more focused on showing their determination to energetically push ahead with the return of German militarism, the construction of a police state, and social spending cuts. Their preferred partner is no longer the SPD, which has also moved steadily to the right, but the CDU/CSU.

Harbeck and Baerbock have used the summer break to argue in a series of interviews for a global German foreign policy, the strengthening of the army, and a tougher stance towards refugees.

Harbeck declared that he could imagine European participation in a naval operation in the Strait of Hormuz, because in the Iran conflict there are "independent European interests," and Europe can no longer rely on others to defend its interests. We reported on this in an **earlier article** .

Baerbock did not want to be left behind on this issue. In the latest edition of *Der Spiegel*, she called on Europe, by which she mainly means Germany, to become "capable of a global policy." "The European Union is currently weak on foreign policy, in part because Germany has refused to assume leading responsibility over recent years. Europe suffers as a result."

Anyone who is familiar with German history knows very well what is meant by a "global policy." It was the official battle cry of the German Reich in its swing behind an imperialist policy of military threats and conquest, which ultimately led to the catastrophes of World Wars I and II.

Baerbock's claim that Europe has suffered because of a lack of German readiness to assume "leading responsibility" can only be made by someone who denies or ignores the crimes of German imperialism in two world wars, or, like Alternative for Germany (AfD) leader Alexander Gauland, considers this period to be "so much bird shit" in 1,000 years of successful German history.

Like Harbeck, Baerbock has declared her support for a military operation in the Strait of Hormuz, provided the United States doesn't participate. She is even prepared to send the army to the Gulf without a UN mandate, even though the Greens' election manifesto explicitly excluded such operations just two years ago.

The Green co-leader is also advocating for more effective cooperation on arms purchasing within Europe. "We Europeans spend four times more on our militaries than Russia but still have fewer capabilities," she complained to *Der Spiegel*.

Already late last year, Baerbock told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that she favoured a stricter regime of deportations for asylum seekers convicted of a criminal offence, thereby making clear that she agrees with the hardliners in the CDU/CSU and AfD.

The state must "more firmly intervene" against multiple offenders, she demanded. This applies in particular to sexual offences, she added. A criminal offence must be followed swiftly with a conviction and imprisonment, otherwise the impression will be created that violence will not be punished in Germany, according to Baerbock. She called for the implementation of group criminal trials and appealed for an additional €400 million for the judiciary.

When the Green Party was founded almost 40 years ago, it had deep roots in the pacifist movement. How can the transformation of this party into a pioneer of German militarism be explained? One must adopt the Marxist principle that one does not judge a party by what it says about itself, but rather by analysing the social interests it represents.

For the Socialist Workers League (BSA), the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, the reactionary character of the Greens was clear from the outset. The student revolts of 1968, from which the founding generation of the Greens emerged, oriented to the theoretical concepts of the Frankfurt School and related tendencies within the New Left. They rejected the working class as a revolutionary class and focused on liberating the individual from the constraints of society.

When the Green Party was founded in 1980, the radicals of 1968 had already abandoned their anti-capitalist rhetoric. This was replaced with pledges of pacifism, environmental protection, and to help bourgeois democracy to flourish anew.

The once rebellious students and their descendants have since become well-paid professors and state officials. More than almost any other party, the Greens embody a specific social milieu—the privileged, well-educated, urban petty bourgeoisie. Sixty-eight

percent of all party members have a university degree, while 45 percent of all working professional members are public service officials or employees.

The Greens' voters are also mostly to be found in a highly educated, urban milieu. Sixty-two percent either graduated from high school or college, average income is above average, and self-employed persons (14 percent) are the second-largest group of voters after public servants (18 percent).

At the same time, with an average age of 38, Green voters are comparatively young. Above all among young people, who are justifiably concerned about climate change, the Greens have won support due to their reputation as an environmentalist party. However, it would be an illusion to expect them to carry through any change. Wherever the Greens hold the position of environment minister, or minister president in the case of Baden-Württemberg, they have quickly made their peace with the major corporations.

The privileged sections of the middle class upon which the Greens are based are shifting ever further to the right in the face of social contradictions and the growth of international tensions. This is an international phenomenon. There is not merely a huge difference between the richest 1 percent and the "99 percent," but also between the richest 10 percent and the poorest 90 percent. Many who are part of the richest 10 percent of society, who can afford private schools, organic shops, and a house or large city apartment, view the social decline and mounting anger among poorer sections of the population as a threat to their lifestyle. This is the reason for the constant rightward march of the Greens.

The new Green Party leadership team, the 49-year-old writer Harbeck and 38-year-old lawyer Baerbock, embody this development.

As early as 2010, Harbeck published a book titled *Patriotism—a left-wing appeal*, in which he called for a "meaningful political narrative" and "left-wing patriotism." During the years of the SPD-Green coalition, wrote Harbeck, it was "cool to withdraw into patriotic ambivalence," but now a different conclusion is necessary.

Harbeck opposes old-fashioned nationalism. However, he names Barack Obama as his model, who "spoke a lot about America and patriotism." Obama's electoral victory was "celebrated as a new founding of America." He was able to "invoke a national pride based not on what is but what could be and which everyone should participate in."

One can now see clearly what became of this: social inequality rose under Obama like never before, he continued the wars of his predecessor and began new ones in Libya and Syria, and he instituted targeted assassinations by drone, and deported more immigrants

than Donald Trump. Harbeck is styling himself as someone who can follow in Obama's footsteps.

Notwithstanding his relaxed public appearance, Harbeck carefully planned and prepared his career. "In essence, the Harbeck system is based on a partially authentic, partially artificial pose of independence, combined with an awareness of power and a highly-personalised PR strategy," writes the Berlin-based journalist Birgit Marschall on the platform "Political Communications" about "The power system of the Greens' leadership duo." Harbeck's backers include Jürgen Trittin, who served for seven years as environment minister under Chancellor Schröder, and his predecessor in the Greens' leadership, Cem Özdemir.

Baerbock also carefully planned her rise through the ranks. "She meticulously prepared her election as party co-leader," writes Marschall. "Her campaign was supported by Can Erdal, a political adviser from Düsseldorf, and communications professional Michael Scharfschwerdt from A.T. Pearney." One of her most important advisers was her husband, Daniel Holfleisch, who worked in the Green Party headquarters for several years before switching to "senior manager for public affairs" at the postal delivery firm DHL, which is notorious for poor working conditions.

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