



Writing the Future of Germany

Progressive Politics in Turbulent Times

Sigmar Gabriel, Vice Chancellor of Germany

Europe has reached a turning point in history. 2015 marks the end of a European era that began with an entire continent embarking on a new age of progress. Twenty-five peaceful years since the fall of the Berlin Wall had raised everyone's hopes, and the future of Europe seemed to promise democracy, prosperity, security, and stability. Now, these hopes have been replaced by uncertainty. Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" with the anticipated triumph of liberal Western-style democracy, its normative consensus, and its market-oriented economy has not come about.

Instead of a world of peace and progress, we are experiencing a world of uncertainty and insecurity: The Ukraine crisis has brought war back to Europe. The Greece debt crisis brought the eurozone to the brink of failure. The nihilist murderers of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS, are exporting their terror to Europe—a continent that at the same time appears incapable of finding a common response to millions of refugees seeking protection and a new home in Europe. What's more, although a unified Europe was blessed with many years of growing prosperity after the founding treaties of the European

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Union were signed, the Europe of today is economically and politically unstable and increasingly perceived as a source of incalculable risks.

On the other hand, authoritarian states and nongovernment players nowadays seem able to achieve their goals more easily than the democratic states of Europe and their historically unique project of European integration. Whereas liberal-capitalistic democracy gained the upper hand in the conflict of systems merely 25 years ago, the Western system currently sees itself confronted with an unprecedented loss of confidence. In almost all European democracies, voter turnout is dwindling inexorably.

At the same time, we are experiencing the rise of radical elements on the political fringes: Hungary is governed by a right-wing administration, right-wing nationalists have won the elections in Poland, and in Sweden, surveys have shown the populist right-wing Sweden Democrats party to be in the lead. In Great Britain, the U.K. Independence Party is putting the British government under pressure with its middle-class bearing and aggressive policies. In France, the campaign slogan of the Front National is “nationalist and social,” and with 28 percent of the vote, it was the strongest party in the first round of regional elections.¹

In Germany, too, there is a clear manifestation of mistrust and, more and more frequently, of open rejection of the system to which the Social Democratic Party, or SPD, belongs as an established party. The political center is coming under increasing pressure.

At this turning point, German and European social democrats are fighting a critical battle for the political center. In the course of this, they are fighting against contempt for the system, nationalism, marginalization, isolation, intolerance, and racism. They are fighting for a free and open Europe, for cooperation and reconciliation, for pluralism and commitment to society.

Up to now, established political parties—including the SPD—have responded to the increase in right-wing populists and right-wing radicals by ostracizing them. Indeed, when right-wing forces start to publicly stir up hatred and do not shy from digital tirades that include open threats of murder and when society is experiencing politically motivated acts of violence, strong, defensive democracies must enforce the rule of law.

However, we cannot confine ourselves to this measure alone. Even an effective, capable constitutional state is not able to fulfill the task of compensating a massive loss in political confidence. As democrats, especially as social democrats, we cannot simply reject or dismiss those sections of the population that no longer feel adequately represented. On the contrary, we should address the reasons for this growing alienation.

The determined prosecution of criminals must therefore be supplemented by a dialogue offensive and by political offers from the SPD to those who are not right-wing radicals but have nevertheless started to shun democracy and have not been able to relate to the dialogues of the political and economic elite and media reports for some time. There is a risk that these people will turn their backs on democracy permanently and drift into a dismal parallel society and an obscure digital shadow world of disinformation, conspiracy theories, and resentment from which the path to radicalism and extremism is often frighteningly short.

We must rebuild confidence in an efficient democracy that is able to ensure the freedom, safety, and prosperity of its citizens; that offers individual opportunities and protection to a solidarity-based society; and that is not only aware of the realities of everyday life, but also is prepared to talk about and find effective solutions for its problems. In a lot of instances, confidence in our country has been shaken. Nowadays, the frustration of efforts to climb the social ladder and fears of falling down it clash more strongly and jeopardize social cohesion in Germany. Even though Germany, on the whole, is excellently positioned in terms of economic growth and employment and most people in this country are doing well economically, the fear of social exclusion can often be depressingly real.

Under these circumstances, the current refugee situation acts as a catalyst in our society: It escalates the loss of confidence in our democratic system, its control competence, and its ability to solve problems. At the same time, it adds to the fear of social exclusion in view of new, perceived competition on the job and housing markets. Last but not least, fears of being swamped by foreigners are growing in view of so many new neighbors arriving from largely unfamiliar cultures. Here, social cohesion threatens to disintegrate, and the center of society is in danger of being marginalized.



We must rebuild confidence in an efficient democracy able to ensure the freedom, safety, and prosperity of its citizens.

Social democrats must avoid surrendering the center of our society to fear without putting up a fight. It is, indeed, their duty to restrengthen the roots of social democracy in the mainstream, to take a closer look at the population's everyday interests, and to treat the feeling of insecurity not with disdain but with compassion in the same way that former German Chancellor Willy Brandt did. The SPD must not be afraid to commit itself to the working middle of society in its programmatic debates.

At the same time, the SPD must underpin this attitude with wide-scale social policies designed to achieve double integration—the integration of newcomers into existing society and reintegration of those already living in Germany who threaten to move away from the center of our society.

In order to achieve this goal, we must continue to develop and enhance the institutions of our social and democratic constitutional state and its normative foundations. This includes investing in families, education, urban development, the labor market, and equal opportunities for all, as well as investing in public institutions that ensure social and inner security. Both are core competencies of the SPD. We need, therefore, economic policies that continue to support innovation and investment and provide the required framework conditions in the form of modern infrastructure. Economic success is essential in order to create the financial foundations for a formative social policy.

In order to meet coming challenges, we need a state that is in a position to take action, that commands respect, and that visibly solves problems. A strongly diversified society requires strong institutions that generate trust, promote the common good, and enforce the rules it has set down. At the same time, it also needs a sound set of fundamental values based on the first 20 articles of the Basic Law and that clearly and offensively defend the principles of coexistence for all people living in Germany.

Germany is standing at the crossroads. We must now decide what kind of a country and what kind of a society we want to live in: Do we want to be a country of timid people isolated

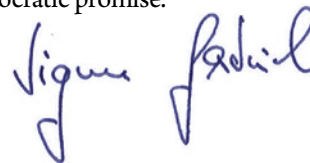
inside their own borders and imprisoned by their own fears, a country that defends its vested interests and takes no risks? This would be a divided country with traditional structures that doesn't know what it wants to achieve and only knows what it wants to avoid.

Or should we opt for a confident and optimistic country that believes in itself and sees the future not as a threat but as a promise? This would be a country that has confidence in its own strength and the opportunities it can offer and is prepared to tread new ground to make a new start. What is more important to the SPD than ever before is that we must take people's worries seriously, help them overcome their fears, and build up confidence and trust.

Election successes are not the political reward for past achievements; they demonstrate the voters' trust and confidence in political concepts for the future. For this reason, our perspective for Germany in 2025 must follow the guiding principle of safe living in an open society as a proud reformist party that courageously and hopefully places its cards on a better future and does not pit the concepts of security and modernization against each other.

We shall not be able to achieve one without the other. We cannot achieve security unless we open up outwardly, unless we maintain international partners, global networks, and willingness to innovate. Nor can we live safely if we do not open up our society inwardly toward greater equality of opportunities, as well as fair pay and benefits; if we do not remove barriers to participation and upward mobility; and if we do not reduce discrimination on account of origin, age, gender, family form, or sexual orientation.

This compass will guide us when working on our programs in the next few years and in 2017, and it will lead to an SPD government program showing a clear social democratic alternative for the future of our society. This program shall renew the social democratic promise.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Sigmar Gabriel". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S' and 'G'.

Endnotes

¹ French Interior Ministry, "Résultats des élections régionales 2015," available at http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Regionales/electresult__regionales-2015/%28path%29/regionales-2015/FE.html (last accessed February 2016).