Dear Friends,

This is the fourth issue of *Germany Brief* written by Dr. Peter Widmann and Mareike Rump. The paper reveals the ways in which the populist political formations have recently gained ground in Germany and the European Union. The authors claim that populist rhetoric finds the moments of crisis convenient to disseminate its divisive, nationalist, racist and xenophobic content. With a special focus on Germany and the movement of Alternative for Germany, the paper uncovers current debates on the European integration process.

Prof. Dr. Ayhan Kaya

Istanbul Bilgi University
Director of the European Institute
Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence
Department of International Relations
http://eu.bilgi.edu.tr

Between Europeanization and populist calls for renationalisation

Germany, the EU and the normality of crisis after the European elections

Dr. Peter Widmann and Mareike Rump (co-author)

Istanbul Bilgi University
European Institute German Studies Responsible
DAAD Fachlektor

The list of words that made it from German into English contains expressions with rather unpleasant implications like “Blitzkrieg”, “Hinterland” or “Angst”. In spring 2014 English language media borrowed a new German word that was not as gloomy as some other loanwords but turned out to be divisive: “*Spitzenkandidaten*” (leading candidates) became a concept that gave the campaigns for the European Parliament elections in May a new spin – much to the enchantment of those who believed that a personalisation of the campaigns could attract more voters, stimulate competition of political parties and strengthen European democracy.

Others, among them Angela Merkel and David Cameron, apparently took the *Spitzenkandidaten* idea as a coup attempt of a European Parliament trying to disempower heads of states and governments. The major party groups based their campaigns on the announcement that voting for a leading candidate – Jean-Claude Juncker for the European People's Party or Martin Schulz for the Social Democrats – is deciding for a President of the European Commission – a choice that up to that time was made by European leaders and then approved by the Parliament. After Chancellor Angela Merkel failed to prevent a campaign based on a leading candidate, her national campaign team chose to virtually ignore Jean-Claude Juncker. The German Christian Democrats based their campaign on Merkel's popularity even though she herself did not stand for election.

Jean-Claude Juncker

Nevertheless, the supporters of the *Spitzenkandidaten* strategy succeeded. Despite the discontent among some of the European leaders, Jean-Claude Juncker became designated President of the Commission, equipped with a legitimacy less dependent on the heads of state and government than that of his predecessors. In two respects the campaigns of this spring can be considered as an instance of Europeanization: First, a pattern known from domestic campaigns in member states has been Europeanized, i.e. transferred to a European level. And second, this might result in a lasting gain in power of the Parliament and the Commission, those two institutions that represent the supranational logic in the Union.

The *Spitzenkandidaten* campaigns have been a reaction to the popular feeling of a democratic deficit of European policy making and to the declining voter turnout in the past. Europeanizing the practices of national campaigns seemed to be the proper treatment. In this regard the story fits into a historical pattern. Time and again Europe's political elites have reacted to challenges and crisis with Europeanization strategies.

Many examples could be quoted, most importantly the program for completing the internal market, outlined in the Single European Act 1986 and leading to the Maastricht Treaty, a program that was a reaction to the crisis of the European economic model based on constant growth that had proved to be out-of-date in the 1970s. A more recent example is the present consensus among European elites that the common

currency needs a far greater European coordination of budgets, economic policies and regulations of financial markets. As it has often been stated, crisis is the basic mode of the European integration project's evolution.

What is new is the degree to which Europeanization is politicised and contested in the domestic arenas of the member states, even in a state like Germany, where being pro-European is a core element of the country's reason of state. The EU has become tangible for citizens in the form of a common currency, open borders in the Schengen zone, but also in intolerable levels of youth unemployment in southern member states. From a democratic and pluralist perspective politicisation is desirable. Presenting European integration as something without any alternative hardly complies with the ideals of a rational and democratic decision-making process.

The results of this May's European Parliament elections reflect this politicisation, albeit in a way that dedicated Europeans find frustrating. The Eurosceptic camp has grown, especially on the right side of the political spectrum. Germany got off comparatively lightly with the anti-Euro "Alternative for Germany" (Alternative für Deutschland) finishing in fifth place with 7 per cent after the Christian Democrats, the Social Democrats, the Greens and the Left. In other countries results shook the political publics. The United Kingdom Independence Party (27,5 per cent), the French Front National (25,0 per cent) and the Danish People's Party (26,6 per cent) came in in first place and humiliated mainstream parties of the left and right centre.

The "Alternative for Germany" (Alternative für Deutschland): a new challenge from the right

The "Alternative for Germany" (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) was founded in February 2013 and took part in elections for the German parliament for the first time in September 2013. The party describes itself as neither right- nor left-wing. Nevertheless, Euro-scepticism was the party's essential issue represented in the media mainly by its leader Bernd Lucke. The party aims for the dissolution of the Euro-Zone and a return to national currencies, "sincerely worried about the misguided political and economic development in Germany and in the European Union", as it says on its website. According to political analysts the party will try to establish itself as an alternative to the right of the Christian Democrats.The party claims to have more than 14 000 members. Its board members are Bernd Lucke, Frauke Petry and Konrad Adam. The national party is organized in 16 regional associations („Landesverbände") following the Germany's federal structure, and in regional sections according to the subdivision of administrative districts.

It was only a poor consolation that a low turnout had inflated Europe's nationalists to a size larger than life. The consequences for the European parliament itself might be limited since the pro-European party groups, the centre-right European People's Party, the Social Democrats, the Liberals and the Greens still have a solid majority, so that the populists' noise will be greater than their influence. The main impact might be felt in the domestic arenas.

In the member states two diverging developments become visible. On the one hand, the Europeanization of decision making and governance is backed by those parts of the populations who feel that they benefit from the free movement in the common market and from a decreased significance of national borders. Many of these dedicated Europeans are equipped with a high formal education, they speak a second or even third language, go abroad as Erasmus students, for business, conferences and cultural events.

On the other hand, there are those who experience Europeanization as an opaque process and a threat. A twofold feeling of insecurity has seized these population segments: Economically, Europeanization is perceived as a form of globalisation that weakens welfare states and the barriers that once protected national job markets and social security systems. Culturally, the process is seen as a danger to familiar national traditions as it facilitates migration, strengthens the rights of immigrants and transfers decision powers to Brussels. These feelings are widespread not only among the low educated and marginalized, but also among parts of the middle classes stricken with fear of social decline.

Populist parties capitalize on these perceptions. They seem to be especially strong in those countries like France and the United Kingdom where established centre-right parties are weakened by inner conflicts. However, there is an additional reason why populists have an easy job of it. As a reaction to the challenge from the right, large sections of Europe's elites did not come up with much more than the mantra that Europe has to be better explained. The rhetoric rests on the assumption that Europeanization is good for everybody, and that the trouble just is that some have not grasped it. The political establishments blocked out the fact that a political, social and economic process like Europeanization can create winners and losers. As a consequence, they have not tried to find a language to communicate with the losers and those who fear to be soon among them, with those whose educational background

or circumstances do not put them in a position to profit from the freedoms of a common market and open borders. Although the populists have not much more to offer than a reactionary evocation of a better past, many of their voters seem to appreciate that somebody expresses their fears – and the resentments that come along with them.

Taking comfort from the fact that the conditions have been exceptionally good for right-wing populist parties in the last months would be short-sighted. Indeed, the populists benefitted from internal problems of mainstream centre-right parties, the financial crisis and its social consequences, and, to top it all, from the instability in Ukraine and the Middle East that strengthened isolationist tendencies in European states. Still, the populists are here to stay, because their existence is based on a persistent cleavage that stretches across European societies.

Angela Merkel

That also applies for Germany, as parliamentary elections in three East German *Länder* showed in August and September this year. The anti-Euro "Alternative for Germany", founded only one year before, came off with 9,7% in Saxony, 10,6% in Thuringia and 12,2% in Brandenburg. The party's combination of Euro-scepticism, the call for a tougher handling of immigration and its anti-elite attitude attracted voters from many backgrounds. The new party's success is a peculiar challenge for the Christian Democrats, who have moved to the political centre in the past years under Angela Merkel and relinquished many conservative core beliefs like compulsory military service, the support for nuclear energy or the categorical rejection of double citizenship.

Still, that the populist right in Germany is considerably smaller than in France or the United Kingdom is mainly due to the Christian Democrats. Compared to the conservative mainstream parties in other European countries their cohesion power is far greater. As a catch-all party the CDU can still attract voters from the centre to the right. But the Christian Democrats might not succeed in completely preventing the emergence of a competitor to the right in the long run as they did in the past.

The populist success in Europe is bad news for EU-Turkey relations which are strained anyway. At least on the level of public rhetoric nationalist, culturalistic and isolationist voices in Europe will become louder. The main question for the future will be if the established mainstream parties in Europe will be up to reconnect with those who feel left behind in the rapid changes European societies are going through.

Prof. Bernd Lucke, 52, is a professor for economics at the University of Hamburg. He was one of the founders of the AfD and is the party's leading figure. In the 2014 European Parliament Elections he was the leading candidate, now he is the head of the AfD delegation and a member of the board of the European Conservatives and Reformists parliamentary group.

Dr. Frauke Petri, 39, is a chemist and entrepreneur who conducted a successful campaign for the AfD in the elections in Saxony in August 2014. As the leader of the party in Saxony she was the top candidate and is now leading its parliamentary group. After its first success in the German National Parliament Elections in 2013, where the party received 4,7% of the votes (due to the five-percent threshold not enough to be represented in parliament), the AfD won 7 out of 96 German seats in the elections for the European Parliament in Mai 2014 and joined the European Conservative and Reformists group.