The current state of German politics: it's all about the Euro

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The issue currently at the top of Germany's political agenda is the future of the Eurozone and, related to this, the future of the European Union (EU). Historically, German politicians have tended to avoid speaking about the EU. German voters, like voters elsewhere, show very little interest in the topic, but the bailout of insolvent EU member states–most notably Greece–have made it an issue of considerable importance amongst German voters.

The main governing party, the Christian Democrats (CDU), has been much criticised by the German press for its lethargic and introverted response to the Eurozone crisis. Only now is a clear strategy beginning to emerge. Almost reluctantly, Chancellor Angela Merkel has called for the EU to have more powers to intervene in national budgets. In her recent speech to her party's annual conference on 15 November 2011, she said: 'we need to develop the structure of the EU further. This means more and not less Europe.' Typically, however, Merkel chose not to mention the threat to the German economy posed by any collapse in the Italian or Spanish economies and instead focused the strength of the German economy, the country's low rate of unemployment and her government's fiscal restraint.

The main opposition party, the Social Democrats, has become increasingly critical of Merkel's management of the Eurozone crisis. Its leaders have called for the creation of 'Eurobonds' and for the European Central Bank to be allowed to buy debt. Yet their response to the Eurozone crisis was also lethargic, and it has taken them some time to develop this alternative plan.

European policy has so far been largely consensual amongst German parties but it has also been somewhat low on their agenda. Research carried out at Birmingham University's Department of Political Science and International Studies has demonstrated that Europe's three biggest centre-left parties, the German Social Democratic Party, the British Labour Party, and the French Socialist Party, have all failed to 'Europeanise' their policy making processes and priorities. They and other political parties now need to develop and present credible plans if the Eurozone is to be saved. This will be a challenging task for all parties but especially for social democratic parties at a time when European economies are stagnant. Whether the left in Germany–and elsewhere–can rise to the challenge remains to be seen.

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For more information on Social Democratic Parties and the EU, please see: Isabelle Hertner (2011) 'Are European Election Campaigns Europeanized? The Case of the Party of European Socialists in 2009'. Government and Opposition, Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 321–344.

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