

The trend towards the Europeanisation of domestic politics is unstoppable (and good) but for the time being will be messy and uneven.

Last month, German Chancellor Angela Merkel threw her support behind the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, over his challenger François Hollande, and this week some of Europe's centre-left leaders are gathering in Paris to support Hollande. Olaf Cramme argues that these events represent the continuing trend towards the Europeanisation of domestic politics in the EU, which may eventually see the emergence of a genuine debate between left and right politics at the EU level.



People agitate again about Angela Merkel. For a change it is not about her economic strategy and approach to the Eurozone crisis. No, this time it is about her politics and decision to campaign alongside the embattled French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Recent newspaper reports even claim that she is orchestrating a Europe-wide boycott against Sarkozy's hopeful challenger François Hollande who is yet to be received by any of the major EU governments. But whatever the truth of this latest accusation, Merkel seems determined to build a common political front across national borders in support of the EU's path towards fiscal prudence, budgetary consolidation and strict conditionality. Those who are perceived to sheer out of line – like Monsieur Hollande – are given the cold shoulder.

Unsurprisingly, this move has provoked a lot of criticism. In particular experienced mandarins are horrified by the idea that ideology is now elevated to a level where it can undermine long-standing diplomatic relations between EU member states. They fear lasting damage to the European project which too often relies on difficult technical compromises worked out not by politicians but by skilful experts. The last thing Europe now needs, so one argument goes, is the domination of fractional politics over consensus-building in an already polarised Union.

This misses the point. If only on this occasion, Merkel's decision to intervene so palpably in a foreign country should be applauded. It represents an inevitable and logic next step in the Europeanisation of domestic politics. When the authors of the EU's 'Fiscal Compact', a product of clear ideological orientation, defend it jointly before the electorate they render a valuable service to public contestation in a democracy under siege. Indeed, what the EU system urgently needs is much greater clarity about its direction and choices attached to it. Personification helps if it leads to better perceptibility of the issues at stake.

This welcome politicisation of EU affairs still faces, however, an all too familiar challenge: do we eventually witness the emergence of a genuine debate between left and right politics at the EU level, or do national interests and particularities continue to define the major dividing lines? Looking at the case of Greece, this intriguing question seems to come back in full force. Put accordingly, should we assign the treatment Athens is currently receiving to the dominance of conservatism in the European Council, or is it rather a powerful manifestation of the North-South cleavage in the EU?



Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy
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A quick examination of three relevant countries – Germany, Austria and the Netherlands – offers a few interesting insights. All three are net contributors to the EU budget as well as surplus countries. All three countries hold the highest credit rating, the much talked about triple A. And in all three countries, sizeable parts of the population mistrust the efforts of their respective governments to bail out their Southern European partners.

When it comes to the overall attitude towards debt control and debt reduction, centre-left/right differences are slightly more discernible in Germany than in the Netherlands or Austria. The German SPD advocates, for instance, a “European Debt Redemption Fund”, puts a stronger emphasis on investments and seems to attach less importance to a EU-wide “debt brake”, despite supporting it in the domestic context. In the other two countries, recognisable disagreements are much harder to depict. Instead, a broad consensus across the mainstream exists on the need for more supervision of national budgets, tougher spending limits and the introduction of effective sanction mechanisms.

Or take the elusive theme of “European solidarity”. To make sense of it, the attitude towards Eurobonds as a form of debt mutualisation and risk-sharing, and the readiness to support fiscal transfers across the EU can serve as rough indicators. While the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) has taken a noticeably different line to that of Angela Merkel (that is, pro Eurobonds and no sweeping averseness to a “transfer union”), the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) aligns itself much closer to the tough-minded position of the ruling government, feeling the pressure from both the populist left and right. In Austria, where a grand coalition binds together the centre-left and right, none of these issues has yet produced a seriously damaging open conflict.

In short, the picture is a mixed one. Some social democratic parties, like the SPD, have cautiously started to play the European card in an attempt to oppose parts of the conservative settlement. But heterogeneity prevails among the European centre-left with some being far less determined to offer a genuine political alternative than others. All this has yet to make a difference to widespread public perception, let alone the citizens of those peripheral countries, such as Greece, who continue to regard the dispute over the right course of action one being between the dominant North and a subordinated South.

To be sure, Angela Merkel’s interference in the French presidential elections is no game changer in the politicisation of EU affairs. But we should not condemn it either. This week, centre-left leaders, such as Germany’s Sigmar Gabriel, Belgium’s Elio di Rupo and Italy’s Pier Luigi Bersani will gather in Paris to support the campaign of François Hollande and his message of a different approach to the Eurozone crisis. A positive development in a restrained EU democracy.

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