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Difficult allies: Denmark, Social Democrats and the German election

Copenhagen may find that implementing its European policy will become more difficult if the Social Democratic Party's Olaf Scholz becomes German chancellor.

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One should not expect members of Europe's political families to automatically cheer for one another.

In February 2021, at Think Tank EUROPA's Annual Conference, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen described her expectations of Germany after Chancellor Angela Merkel leaves office:

It is the responsibility of whoever succeeds Merkel to hit the ground running. Europe needs a strong German chancellor both when it comes to our economy and when it comes to cooperation more broadly. Merkel has played an extraordinary role in Europe through her expertise and authority – but also through her willingness to, at times, put Europe before Germany.

Danish voters appear to echo Frederiksen's support for German leadership in Europe: in a [survey](#) the European Council on Foreign Relations' conducted in 12 EU member states in spring 2021, Danes expressed more trust than average in Germany to stand up for European interests across a range of policy areas, from economics to defence, to democracy protection. Moreover, in a similar [survey](#) ECFR conducted last year, 53 per cent of Danes named Germany as the country that it was most important to have a good relationship with – the highest share in any national grouping. (By comparison, just 33 per cent of Danes named the United States.)

In other words, on the eve of what may be the most important German election in decades, Denmark's political expectations of the future chancellor are as high as ever. Now imagine if, on top of this, the German government is led not by a Christian democratic party but a social democratic one of the kind that are omnipresent in Nordic states. Following Norway's election earlier this month, all five Nordic countries now have centre-left governments – for the first time since 1959. Could one then expect German-Danish relations to reach new heights in the years to come?

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There are plenty of reasons to be sceptical about such a turn of events, judging by the European policy priorities of Germany's leading political forces – the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens, and conservative allies the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU). In fact, regardless of its make-up, the next German government is likely to oppose Denmark's EU policy on at least three counts:

- **Economics.** During the coronavirus crisis, Denmark has boisterously relaunched the grouping of EU member states widely known as the ‘frugal four’. This coalition – which also includes Austria, the Netherlands, and Sweden (along with Finland, to some extent) – aimed to prevent the European Union from issuing joint debt in support of its €750 billion recovery fund. The group eventually gave in, but only after effectively downsizing the original Franco-German proposal. Today, the Frederiksen government is on a collision course with the SPD and the Greens, both of which have pledged to make the recovery fund quasi-permanent and to consider loosening the rules of the EU Stability and Growth Pact. Just recently, Denmark joined seven other member states, including Sweden and Finland, in signing an Austrian-initiated letter that warned against more flexible rules.
- **Defence.** The SPD and the CDU/CSU call for the creation of a European army, while even the Greens – who are long-standing sceptics of military force – support a European defence union. In her [State of the Union speech](#) last week, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen took up this baton by suggesting that there was a need to strengthen EU military capabilities, improve the interoperability of European militaries, and increase intelligence sharing between member states. However vague the idea of defence union may sound right now, it is one that – by definition – causes headaches in Denmark, whose almost 30-year-old defence opt-out prevents it from participating in any initiative with a legal basis in EU defence policy.
- **Migration.** The leading German parties all support attempts to renew the European Commission’s New Pact on Migration and Asylum, including its cornerstone idea of introducing quotas for relocating refugees within the EU. The Greens would also like to impose financial penalties on member states that do not take in their share of refugees. Despite its opt-out from justice and home affairs, Denmark would be affected by such moves. For example, Copenhagen will keep a close watch on any reform that involves the Dublin system of returning asylum seekers to their first point of entry into the EU. Such a reform could call into question Denmark’s complicated arrangements to align with EU policy on justice and home affairs – the so-called “parallel agreements”.

Therefore, even if Germany gets a social democratic government, Frederiksen and her political allies will not always be in agreement with Berlin. Just take their ways to power: whereas Frederiksen became prime minister by outflanking the right-wing Danish People’s Party’s on migration policy, Scholz’s possible move into the chancellery would happen without a similar shift to the right targeting the Alternative

for Germany. In fact, from a Danish perspective, it is striking that immigration policy has hardly played a role in the German election campaign.

Add to this Scholz's preference for more 'social Europe' – with a minimum wage and possibly a European unemployment fund – and one could even argue that Frederiksen might be secretly rooting for a CDU-led government (or at least one that included the liberal Free Democratic Party). However, this would overlook the fact that there is at least one area in which Denmark would wholeheartedly support an SPD-led government: it is time for less conversation and more action with regards to Europe's green ambitions.