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## **EUROPEAN RAISON D'ÉTAT DEMANDS A GRAND COALITION**

The fact that the EU simply cannot afford a weak Germany is the decisive reason for continuing the CDU-SPD government.

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What do Grexit, Brexit and fresh elections in Germany have in common? They were or are on everybody's lips, but they will not be implemented. The explanation is the same for all three: the complex negative fallout would exceed the expected benefit, and, what is more, would be impossible to manage. In such complex situations, the logic of substance subordinates itself to the logic of process.

The key argument against Grexit, Brexit and fresh elections is the need to maintain stability in the European Union. Since the Lisbon Treaty came into effect, it has forced member states to refrain from risky ventures, as the Hellenic crisis has demonstrated in such remarkable fashion.

In summer 2015, a large majority of Greeks voted in a referendum to reject the rescue package of the so-called troika, thus following the recommendation of Prime Minister Tsipras's government. Only a few days later, pressured by consultations within the euro group, the same Tsipras announced a new bailout programme, which largely corresponded to the one his people had just rejected.

Ironically, it was the left-wing Greek Premier Alexis Tsipras who disregarded the will of the people. In return, the creditors accepted the breach of many of Greece's reform promises. Both sides were under the overwhelming impression that any action to the contrary would have incalculable risks for the euro and the EU as a whole. In other words: for them, the interests of the EU outweighed the national interests of the member states.

In a slightly different, but no less impressive way, we are now witnessing the EU's power to wield influence following the Brexit shock. Like most people, I hadn't even considered the possibility that the majority of Brits would vote to leave the EU – too obvious were the disastrous risks for the UK, especially the London financial centre.

But today we know the extent to which fake news and the systematic manipulation of people's opinions and the general mood through social media are to blame for the narrow vote in favour of leaving. In an EU debate dogged by acrimony for many years, the sometimes grotesquely exaggerated claims about the disadvantages of the Single Market and the advantages of Brexit fell on fertile ground among many Britons.

The Oxford Internet Institute estimates that as much as a third of the Twitter traffic relating to the EU referendum was generated by bots, i.e. artificial Twitter accounts created to manipulate opinions and sentiment on the net – a disconcerting sign of the dangers emanating from a brave new world of data, threatening an ill-informed public. And to a hitherto unheard-of extent, algorithms and possibly foreign intelligence services influenced – and perhaps even decided – the most recent election campaign in the USA.

But despite the pressures of the euro crisis, refugee crisis, Brexit and Trump's America first policies, the EU has not disintegrated. On the contrary, it is gaining strength, as the outcomes of the elections in the Netherlands and France have demonstrated. You could even call it a renaissance of the European idea, an immunisation against neo-nationalist movements.

Back in November 2015, I stuck my neck out in FOCUS by forecasting that the EU would emerge stronger from the testing times of the refugee crisis (Focus 46/2015). And this is exactly how it turned out: as a result, Frontex, the EU's border agency, was given greater powers and the deepening of the EU advanced a little further. It is my firm belief that, for structural and process-related reasons, the cohesion of the European Union has become irreversible – at the latest since 2009 with the Treaty of Lisbon. Since then, the member states have become so closely interwoven, both economically and politically, that an exit is only possible de jure, but no longer de facto.

I committed myself already a year ago by saying in an interview that Brexit was not going to happen. Because ultimately (in March 2019), nobody in London will want to take responsibility for the immense damage this would cause; and today I am convinced of it more than ever. In the autumn of next year

at the latest, Britons will face the dilemma: leave the EU without any contractual guarantees, or exit from Brexit. London can do so simply by formally withdrawing the request to leave. The economy will want to know by no later than next spring how Brexit is going. But the clearly overwhelmed UK government won't have any straight answers, and this will trigger an exodus of companies from the country. For me it's a no-brainer: the UK will remain on board.

Very topical, too, is the impact of advanced European integration we are seeing here in Germany. Just before the collapse of the Jamaica coalition negotiations, Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier warned all parties as a precaution that he would not support fresh elections as a way out of the crisis in forming a government. As former Head of the Federal Chancellery and Minister of Foreign Affairs, he knows full well that a protracted election campaign in Germany would have disastrous consequences for the European Union in the first half of 2018.

There is no doubt in my mind that this is the decisive reason that there will be neither fresh elections nor a minority government, but that the grand coalition will continue. The SPD leader and committed European Martin Schulz has now admitted publicly how great the pressure is from other EU member states – notably President Macron and Prime Minister Tsipras – to form a stable government in Berlin. And Luxembourg's foreign minister Jean Asselborn put it in a nutshell by saying that Germany is the last country that can afford an "unstable government": "It's just not compatible with its role in the world and in Europe." A strong German government was essential for Europe's position in the world.

It would have been unthinkable 20 years ago that Luxembourg would heap such praise on a strong Germany. But in the capitals of our neighbours, the European dimension of German domestic politics has long since been recognised. This is because important decisions will have to be taken in the EU next year, and a powerful, predictable Germany is necessary to see them through. I have already mentioned the Brexit negotiations. No less significant is the forthcoming strengthening of the economic and monetary union through the creation of a European Monetary Fund (EMF). Far-reaching ideas have been mooted, such as the appointment of an EU finance minister or the creation of a eurozone budget. President Macron knows that he needs Berlin to make this work. But he cannot wait forever, or else he may lose the pro-European momentum his election has triggered.

The consequence of all of this is that there is a European raison d'état that is gradually overlaying and replacing the national interests of the member states. This is the result of the Lisbon Treaty of 2009, on the basis of which the member states have assigned a large portion of their sovereignty to the institutions of the EU. We have since then been experiencing the emergence of a United States of Europe (USE). This USE is already a powerful reality today, even without a constitution. A staggering development, considering how long it took to create the USA.