



**The Center for the Study of  
Contemporary European Jewry**  
The Lester and Sally Entin  
Faculty of Humanities  
Tel Aviv University

## **PERSPECTIVES**

**No. 41, February 2025**

The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: [cst@tauex.tau.ac.il](mailto:cst@tauex.tau.ac.il). We are glad to share with you the forty-first issue of Perspectives.

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### **Germany's Post-Election Task**

*Amidst Trump's High Treason, Europe Must Assume a New Role*

*Uriya Shavit*

There are four ways to make sense of Donald Trump's betrayal of Ukraine and of liberal democracy, and they are not mutually exclusive.

One is that Trump is ignorant about the lessons of history. He does not know what happens when democracies desert fellow democracies and try to appease dictators.

Another is that Trump is a childish, narcissistic bully. Zelensky offended him the other day in the school's backyard by not succumbing to his threats, so now, back from detention, he seeks his revenge.

Yet another is that Trump, being a despot at heart, is enchanted by Putin, a pro-Hamas, pro-Iran dictator responsible for more civilian deaths than any other person since the end of the Cold War, who had led his country from one embarrassing defeat to another over the past three years.

Sadly, it is also impossible to rule out the option that Trump is a Manchurian candidate, operated in one way or another by one or another sophisticated enemy of the United States.

There is a fifth option, the one the old-school hawkish anti-Russian Republicans advocate while searching for their souls and trying to reassemble their bones. Those Republicans imply that Trump's desertion and blackmailing of the nation to which the free world owes so much is a sophisticated gambit intent on flattering Putin and allowing the war to end with a peaceful, respectable-for-all resolution.

Alas, the bitterness and contempt with which Trump talks about Ukraine suggest otherwise.

It has become common to compare Trump to Chamberlain. The comparison is flawed. Chamberlain was naïve, but a democrat at heart and not a vicious person. Some historians exonerate him by arguing that Britain was not ready for war at the time he appeased Hitler. He had to buy time.

Trump, on the other hand, has been Putin's best hope for three years. He deliberately encouraged Congress to block aid for Ukraine for half a year, allowing Putin's forces to moderately advance in Ukraine and imposing immense and unnecessary suffering on Ukraine.

History will never forgive you, Lindsay Graham, you and your likes. In how many lies can people live?

Whether the United States is still a democracy or not is today a credible question. The minimal criteria for democracy is peaceful transfer of power. The United States is led by a man who four years ago inspired a violent insurrection and threatened, together with his bearded and more eloquent Harvard-trained parrot, to launch another one should he lose again.

And then the purges, the conflicting interests, the rule of the super-rich. Taking pleasure in humiliating real and fictitious rivals has become an end rather than a means in American politics.

Like the Soviet Union in its final days, the United States is a country ruled by changing guards of old and possibly mentally incompetent men. It struggles with huge debts, inflation, addiction-epidemics, nepotism, politicized academia, declining life expectancies, old infrastructures, and so many other ailments.

Most Americans realize that radical changes are needed, and are needed fast. To their regret, the Democrats, Obama included, spoke the language of status quo, moderation, compromise, and empty unity (and speaking was most of what they did). In their despair, the voters turned elsewhere.

Which brings me to Germany, where the recent elections ended with a mixture of good and bad news.

The bad news is that the AfD, a party with strong pro-Putin and some antisemitic and anti-Israel elements, won a fifth of the votes, and in the former DDR federal states became the strongest force.

The good news is that things could have been much worse.

The leftist populist evil-twin of Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Bündnis Sara Wagenknecht (BSW), a pro-Putin and anti-Israel party, was 14,000 votes short of making it to the Bundestag. A fair share of its votes would have gone to the AfD had it not run.

The BSW's defeat demonstrates again the role of chance in politics.

Aside from the well-earned *schadenfreude*, the implications of that defeat are enormous: It will allow the speedy creation of a two-party coalition between the conservatives (CDU and CSU) and the social democrats (SPD), that is likely to be stable and resolved about standing for Ukraine.

Had the BSW made it to parliament, a broader coalition that includes the Green Party would be necessary for a majority. Now, the Greens will most likely be left out, meaning that those dissatisfied with the government could shift to a mainstream, democratic, and anti-Putin option.

In essence, the anti-establishment, anti-liberal forces in Germany are not much smaller in size than the Trump-devotees in the United States. This is even more so the case for France. The difference is that in Germany and France, mainstream conservatives still rule out cooperation with anti-liberal, pro-Putin populists, no matter what the implications for their own political futures are.

There are different explanations for why so many Germans have turned away from mainstream parties, and some are similar to those given for the rise of MAGA in the United States.

There is truth in all of them, but none or all are exhaustive.

One explanation is migration and voters' concerns that it is endangering their safety and squandering their taxes.

Yet the most significant support for the AfD comes from German regions where migration, including from Muslim countries, is the smallest.

Another explanation is that social norms have been changing rapidly in recent decades, in particular with regard to gender, and men, in particular young men, are sick and tired of leaders ignoring their problems or, worse, seeing them as the problem.

Yet while more men than women vote AfD, the electorate of that party, which is led by a Lesbian woman, is far from a misogynist men's club.

Another explanation is that prices keep going up.

Yet when a poor person and Elon Musk support the same party, one of them has to be wrong, and most likely, it is not Musk.

Another explanation is that voters have become concerned about their personal freedoms, in particular since Covid-19 lockdowns.

Yet if personal freedoms were what motivated so many disgruntled German voters, it is unlikely that pro-Putin parties, let alone a newly-established one run as a despotic one-woman show, would be their first choice.

Allow me to offer a complimentary explanation.

Mainstream politics have become incredibly boring, and voters search for meaning, vision, and passion.

Can you remember a single sentence Joe Biden said during the past four years? Or Olaf Scholz?

They did not inspire. They did not provide a sense of mission. They did not call for action.

One of my favorite political events, globally, is the post-election program held jointly by Germany's two main channels an hour after the polls close, in which all party leaders take part together.

This assembly of bitter rivals who just ended tiring months-long campaigns, some triumphant, some defeated, is journalism and politics at their best. The journalists ask sharp questions rather than give long speeches. The politicians answer to-the-point and politely rather than squabble.

It is all so respectable. It is all so informative. It is all so much model democracy. And it is all so, well, kind of boring, especially when the voices of the mainstream are speaking.

No surprises this year (except perhaps that Mrs. Wagenknecht was kind enough to exempt us from her presence, sending in an equally disturbing proxy).

No surprises, until Putin's name was mentioned and things heated up a bit.

Because even the most mainstream German politicians understand what is at stake.

Friedrich Merz, the next conservative Kanzler, intends to make huge investments in security to address the Russian threat. His heart is in the right place when it comes to Ukraine. He has a measure of charisma and is experienced.

But so far, he does not seem to be bold enough.

The United States has decided to give up on its role as the leader of the free world. This is tragic, but it should not become Europe's tragedy or the free world's tragedy.

France and the United Kingdom are nuclear powers.

The major European liberal powers, when united, far outweigh the failed Russian state demographically, technologically, economically, and – if there is will – militarily.

Rather than make statements about investments, Germany should champion a simpler message and act in kind:

**Europe will not let Ukraine fall, at any price.**

If conscription is necessary, then so be it.

If dedication of all national and continental resources to that end is necessary, then so be it.

Many will oppose this message and doubt whether the cost is worth it and whether young people will heed the call. Just as many did in 1938.

But, allowing Russia to swallow Ukraine will not prevent an all-European war. It will just postpone it. Whereas standing firm just might lead to Putin's downfall.

A liberal mainstream that stands for high principles may find again its destiny, its sense of purpose, and its young voters.

Germany has invested so much in learning from history. Now, it is time to apply the lessons.



Uriya Shavit is Head of the Center.

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