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# European Sovereignty

Commentary on the Findings  
of the Survey in Germany

**EUROPA**

**FRIEDRICH  
EBERT  
STIFTUNG**

## THE CONCEPT OF 'EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY' IN THE GERMAN DEBATE

In the context of an intensified discussion of the European Union's international role the German government made the concept of European sovereignty a key topic of the German EU presidency in the second half of 2020. Thus the notion – which is viewed very positively in Germany – assumed central importance in the German government's European policy communications, both within Germany and externally in relation to the 26 other EU member states.

An example of the central role of this concept is the speech given by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas<sup>1</sup> in Paris on 31 August 2020 at the French Conference of Ambassadors. To begin with, he took up the definition provided by his French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian, namely that 'European sovereignty means making its own decisions freely and asserting its values freely'. He added, however, that it was not a question of rejecting national sovereignty in favour of a 'European super-state', but rather of creating a European capability in order to maintain the sovereignty of nation states.

## NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY AND CAPABILITY

Two fundamental features of the German approach to the further development of the European Union are revealed by the choice and handling of the notion of European sovereignty. On one hand, German policy on Europe traditionally aims to defuse internal tensions in the EU and to reach compromises. On this basis, too, in its choice of European sovereignty as a topic for its EU presidency Germany carefully distanced itself from the idea of 'strategic autonomy'.

The EU set itself the goal of developing strategic autonomy in the 'European Global Strategy of 2016'. Previously the idea had been used in the conclusions of the European Council. It came to the fore in internal European discussions when then president Donald Trump stepped up the political and economic pressure on the EU. The European Commission, headed by Ursula von der Leyen, describes itself in this context – and with a view to global power shifts, such as systemic rivalry with China – as a 'geopolitical Commission'.

In these circumstances, in which it was clearly established politically that international pressure on the EU and thus the necessity of further developing its international role was increasing, the long-established notion of strategic autonomy came more prominently to the fore. Within the EU, however, it initiated an intensive debate and concerns that the then US president Trump could exploit internal European discussions as an excuse to turn away from Europe and to disengage

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.france-allemande.fr/Rede-von-Aussenminister-Heiko-Maas-anlasslich-der-Konferenz-der.html>

from transatlantic security guarantees. Germany gave these concerns, which were articulated mainly by Poland, the Baltic states and other central and eastern European countries, comparative prominence, not least because for years Germany had developed its own defence policy on this basis.

Thus, secondly, it is part and parcel of the German approach to potential European integration measures not to weaken transatlantic relations. In the German discussion systemic considerations have emerged, such as how the goal of European sovereignty can be brought into line with transatlantic relations and even used as a means of improving the transatlantic partnership. An example of this is the structured defence cooperation PESCO, which Germany has understood right from the outset as a contribution to strengthening NATO.

Germany's position is thus quite clear in the discussion on European sovereignty: a sovereign Europe should be firmly bound in to the transatlantic partnership. There is no question of decoupling, but rather of finding ways of strengthening the EU and thereby making it a more attractive and reliable partner for the United States. The opinions reflected in the survey are interesting in this regard: 21 per cent of Germans asked still stress that US pursuit of power constitutes a reason to boost European sovereignty. That is 4 per cent more than the survey average and 7 per cent more than in France. The pressure of the Trump years undoubtedly contributed a lot to this. The then US president heavily criticised Germany for its low defence spending and stepped up economic pressure in pursuit of reducing the US foreign trade deficit. Disgruntlement towards the United States had already been on the rise among the German population, however, among other things because of the Iraq War and the so-called NSA affair, in which the US secret services had tapped the mobile phones of leading politicians, including Chancellor Angela Merkel. Popular trust in the United States thus had long been on the decline, to which the debate on European sovereignty looked set to provide a political answer.

The European initiatives in the second half of 2020, which under the German EU Council presidency were supposed to contribute to a sovereign Europe, were definitely not intended as alternatives to the EU's presence in transatlantic relations and especially in the NATO defence alliance, but as ways of strengthening it. This includes, for example, the 'Strategic Compass', a document that takes a broad view of the overall European security situation and provides an important basis for a European discussion of necessary capabilities, both military and civil. European differences are interesting in this regard, regardless of whether they are related to European sovereignty or European autonomy. Perspectives vary greatly: geographically between east and south, and substantively between questions of hard security, hybrid threats, migration and economic issues. Correspondingly, in the German discussion, the notion of European sovereignty is very broad-based, encompassing security and the economy, the possibility of independent decision-making in pressing circumstances and questions of long-term cooperation. This was also evident in the 2021 Bundestag election campaign: the moderate parties all recognised that in a changing world a Europe with decision-making and practical capabilities, along the lines de-

scribed by Foreign Minister Maas, should be a goal and instrument of German foreign policy. The substantive focus may vary in connection with the particular priorities of a given party. In the case of the Greens, for example, Europe's role in international climate policy is to the fore.

## COUNTRY-SPECIFIC DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF THE CONCEPT

In Germany, 31 per cent of those asked regard the notion of European sovereignty as modern, compared with 9 per cent who regard it as outdated. This is in line with values in Latvia, Poland and Sweden. More than half of respondents had no view on this issue, however, which shows how difficult it is to cultivate much interest in foreign and European policy issues in the general public. It is scarcely surprising that the relevant ideas – despite enhanced European communications on the part of the EU Council presidency – are somewhat intangible. The discussion of goals and ways of achieving a more self-determined Europe thus continues largely within expert and political circles.

The rather modern image of European sovereignty that predominates among respondents in Germany may be explained by the fact that they spontaneously associate it with the positively connoted notions of 'independence' and 'freedom'. A comparison with France is interesting. There, 49 per cent consider European sovereignty to be modern, compared with 12 per cent who view it as outdated, but as many as 30 per cent associate it with the political right. It may be that its similarity to the term 'sovereignistic' contributes to this association with the right and nationalism, as well as giving it a negative connotation. There is no comparable attribution of the term in Germany; only 8 per cent associate it with either the right or the left.

## NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY IN CONTEXT

From the standpoint of German respondents the desire to strengthen European sovereignty (83 per cent) goes hand in hand with the desire to strengthen national sovereignty (84 per cent). This value shows clearly that a large majority of respondents in Germany would like to strengthen national sovereignty together with European sovereignty. There is no contradiction here; national sovereignty is defined as the possibility for free and independent decision-making. It is important to recognise that de facto the Member States have already lost part of their national sovereignty in many areas, and in other areas as a result of international developments and European integration. Given that this is the case, deepening cooperation and integration provide an opportunity to regain joint capabilities.

For historical reasons, the handling of the idea of sovereignty is much more tentative in Germany than in, for example, the United Kingdom or France. This is to be attributed partly to consciousness of what happened under the Third Reich and during the Second World War. On top of that, Germany was under occupation in the post-war period and without full na-

tional sovereignty for decades. These two factors had a decisive influence on the development of Germany's foreign and European policy culture and the public debate on these issues. As a result, how politicians talk about Germany's international role differs fundamentally from the situation in, for example, France. Germany's international role has thus been viewed consistently through the dual prism of the European Union and the NATO transatlantic alliance. Against this background it is scarcely surprising that survey respondents regarded the development of national and European sovereignty as parallel processes.

On top of that comes a deep appreciation of the meaning of integration in the European Union. After all, no other Member State has benefited more than Germany from the openness and interconnectedness of the single market. In this context, it seems obvious that closer European cooperation does much more to boost the joint capabilities of Germany and the other Member States than if they tried to go it alone. That refers to every kind of policy area, not just defence and security policy. The argument applies also to issues concerning the euro zone: the exercise of national sovereignty has already been diminished to some extent by the Communitisation of individual policy areas and international developments. For example, governments in a currency union with an integrated monetary policy can determine macroeconomic developments only to a certain extent in the absence of a common budgetary policy. If there is closer cooperation in this realm or effective budgetary instruments, such as the European Recovery Fund launched in summer 2020 in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, governments together are likely to regain the capabilities they formerly had.

It is interesting that the eastern European states are characterised by high approval of the concept of European sovereignty, and particularly that, for example, public opinion in Poland seems to be developing at odds with the political rhetoric of the PiS government. This emphasises particularly strongly the need to safeguard or even to restore national sovereignty within the European Union against further integration or incursions by Brussels. In some states in eastern Europe and the Baltics, perceptions of the Russian menace, as a classic security risk and hybrid threat, are likely to be one reason why European sovereignty finds such strong support.

## **CONCLUSIONS: FUNDAMENTAL REFORM OF THE EU, ITS POLICIES AND INSTITUTIONS**

Conclusions for a fundamental reform of the EU can scarcely be derived from the various evaluations of the notion of European sovereignty. Instead, the findings exhibit differences between the Member States in terms of the most frequently deployed rhetoric, especially in relation to different emphases concerning European sovereignty and the term 'strategic autonomy', which has been in use for a good ten years now in official documents. In addition, there are the diverse historical features of the idea of sovereignty, which permit different degrees of freedom in public debate, to the extent that European sovereignty is in competition with or supports national sovereignty.

Interesting for the further development of the EU is the fairly general statement by 73 per cent of those asked, that European sovereignty should be strengthened. The EU is thus regarded as an important actor that can take decisions independently and has the ability to implement them effectively. Thus it can be inferred that more competences should be bestowed on the EU. The survey suggests that, in the respondents' view, this should happen in many areas, including economic policy, security and defence policy, but also, in the face of the Covid-19 crisis, in health care policy.

## **TOWARDS A GEOPOLITICAL AND GEOECONOMIC EUROPE**

In recent years the discussion of European sovereignty has broadened considerably. The focus of political debate today, besides the traditional issues of security and defence policy, is rather on technology and digitalisation, economic issues and, against the background of the Covid-19 crisis, also security of supply in health care.

In the survey, this broad discussion is reflected in the priorities it mentions: a strong economy (69 per cent), common security and defence (67 per cent), safeguards on European production in such strategic areas as food and health (65 per cent), and defence of European values (61 per cent). These responses reflect, on one hand, a realistic assessment that in many, outwardly directed policy areas the European Union needs to do more to protect its interests, to preserve or expand its decision-making capabilities and ability to act. The large number of policy areas mentioned indicates that the population feels itself to be facing challenges across the board, and that the EU is regarded as an important operational framework, also in areas in which hitherto cooperation has been primarily at the intergovernmental level, such as security and defence. The aspiration that, among others, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU, have formulated – namely not to be left on the side-lines in geopolitical upheavals, but to be a key actor – finds a lot of support here. The strong emphasis on the defence of European values in all this (61 per cent) is an important recognition of reality. The European Union must assert itself in a world of systemic conflict between liberal democracies and an increasing number of authoritarian regimes.

Looking at the substantive priorities mentioned as important for acquiring European sovereignty one is particularly clear: first of all, it's about Europe's freedom to make its own decisions, in other words to curb external influences. But limitations on creative freedom can also reside inside the European Union. Internal strength in all the areas mentioned is a condition for being able to act externally as sovereign Europeans. That also means that the agenda for strengthening European sovereignty is far from being primarily outwardly directed. It also involves – and even above all – internal consolidation, closer cooperation and more strength. The latter also refers to the area of European values and fundamental principles. If the EU and its Member States fail to safeguard such basic principles as the rule of law and democracy internally these

values will also be difficult to safeguard externally, and the effectiveness of national and European value-based foreign policy will be diminished.

## A CLEAR POLITICAL MISSION

In the survey, respondents cited the growing threat of terrorism, climate change and health threats as the main reasons for boosting European sovereignty. It appears that the population feels its security to be under threat across the board, and that averting danger comes before more positive endeavours.

The risks given priority are transnational in nature, requiring cross-border solutions. The European Union is better able to provide a response than individual Member States. That is the case both within the EU and in the international arena. At global level the EU can seek to ensure that adequate measures are taken to meet this challenge. This popular sentiment strengthens EU efforts to play a bigger international role, which time and again founder on national forces of inertia.

The notion of European sovereignty is well suited for use in national and European contexts. But it formulates a legitimate and forward-looking urge to shape developments. In order to be effective, especially in the current international situation and the changing risk environment, this has to be directed both inwards and outwards.

The notion of European sovereignty is less likely to be polarising within the European Union than the notion of strategic autonomy. Within the framework of the further development of this debate it is very important to focus very specifically on how the European Union can develop its capabilities. After all, the survey shows that people's expectations are quite distinct and that they perceive dangers that require solutions. Increasing European capabilities demands at least three things: the ability to unite around political priorities, take corresponding decisions on implementation and provide sufficient resources to make this possible. In light of the international and internal pressure to which the EU is subject, rapid and effective action is called for. This would show people – whose high expectations are evident in the survey – that the European Union can deliver in the interests of its citizens.

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### IMPRINT

© Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2021  
Dept. for Global and European Politics  
Hiroshimastraße 28, 10785 Berlin, Germany

Responsible for this publication in the FES:  
Dr. Ralf Hexel | European Integration / Sovereign Europe

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ISBN 978-3-96250-998-9