

The Bundestag and the Euro Crisis (June 24, 2012)

Abstract

Executive dominance in EU decision-making is particularly pronounced in crisis situations such as during the euro crisis. But the crisis also kept the Bundestag and its various bodies busy and other political issues were relegated to the backburner.

Source

Let's talk about it

The euro crisis is dominating the political goings-on in Berlin, and it has been for two years now. As a result, other issues have receded into the background – and there is no time for debates.

Recently, the financing of hospitals was on the agenda in the Bundestag. For an aging society like Germany, this is a huge issue. It was called around 11:30 pm, when hardly anyone was still listening. The discussion time was set for half an hour. For Jens Spahn, the speaker on health care policy for the CDU party group in the Bundestag, that process is an example of how the euro crisis has caused other important issues to recede into the background, losing attention both in public perception and within the parliamentary bodies.

Spahn's counterpart in the SPD party group, its speaker on health care policy, Karl Lauterbach, argues much the same way. While he is not complaining since he is receiving enough attention for his issues, he does believe that the discussion about basic questions like the future of private pension and health insurance is currently being shortchanged: "We are ignoring a lot of things that are at least as important for the country, in the long term, as the euro crisis," says Lauterbach. He thinks it is a good thing that the situation in the euro area is being so intensely discussed. However, he has concluded that the "public realm of discussion" has become smaller – also within the party group.

No one knows when things will change

The euro crisis is dominating politics as hardly any topic ever did. Ordinary members of parliament feel this way, as does the federal government and the administration. Among Bundestag staffers who work on European issues there are many who spend at least half, often two-thirds, of their working day only on this issue. Sometimes it eats up even more time. This has now been going on for more than two years. And no one knows when that will change.

The Bundestag has a data bank called "Documentation and Information System." With its help, the dimension of the ubiquity of the euro issue can be most readily grasped in numbers. Entering the keyword "EECU" for "European Economic and Currency Union" yields nearly 400 parliamentary processes of every kind for the current legislative period. They range from oral inquiry to the Chancellor's governmental declaration. The statistic shows 19 legislative procedures alone since 2010, when Greece got into trouble. They range from the Law for the Preservation for Financial Stability in the currency union to the regulation of Germany's financial participation in the stability mechanism ESM. In the previous legislature, when there was no euro crisis yet, the parliamentarians did not have to deliberate a single law on this issue.

To be sure, the crisis in the euro zone was not the only topic discussed in the Bundestag in the past two

years. Other issues were also given their due. However, it is noticeable that euro stability, the financial transaction tax, a bank levy, and the like are discussed during the best parliamentary speaking time, that is, Thursday and Friday mornings.

This topic dominates the internal meetings of the parliamentary groups in the Bundestag even more than the plenary sessions in the Bundestag. The crisis was on the agenda fourteen times at the twenty-three meetings of the Union group last year, and already nine times at the eleven meetings this year. The meetings follow the same pattern: first, group chairman Volker Kauder submits his report, in which the topic constantly appears. Afterwards, the chancellor speaks on the state of the fight against the crisis. In the process, she usually points out that the situation is extremely serious and demands decisive action. She makes clear that everything is at stake. The pressure she's building up is high.

First a few critics, then two, three proponents

This is followed by the appearances of Norbert Barthle, the group's speaker on budgetary policy, and Michael Meister, who, as the deputy group chairman, is responsible for financial, budgetary, and economic policy. In nearly every meeting, one of them reports on the fiscal pact, the banking crisis in Spain, or the euro rescue package.

Sometimes Barthle is also given two items back to back on the agenda, or shares one with the Federal Minister of Finance, Schäuble. Recently he got so involved in European affairs that he even talked about Serbia's accession to the European Union, an issue that is by no means part of the daily routine of someone in charge of the budget. The events that push the euro crisis from its usual position must be very pressing. In November of last year, it was the series of Neonazi murders, in March of this year the law on organ donation.

After the report on the euro, the parliamentary group usually discusses this issue, frequently in a similar sequence. First, a few critics of the rescue package speak up, then two or three proponents. The whole thing takes about three-quarters of an hour, sometimes longer. No other issue is debated as much.

The parliamentary body as the "forecourt of hell"

To be sure, the talk goes on for quite a while, the leadership grants all the necessary time. The chancellor also regularly stays from beginning to end. By doing so, she wants to show that she takes the parliamentary group seriously. Recently she even described the group as the "forecourt of hell" to demonstrate her respect. But many parliamentarians probably do not dare to discuss the ever more monstrous rescue maneuvers in all openness. At least that is what critical participants at the meetings report. One reason is likely that the gigantic issue creates enormous pressure all by itself. Nobody wants to make a mistake. It's also something that the chancellor herself has warned against clearly enough. Moreover, the whole thing is so complicated that many parliamentarians are reluctant to voice their opinion. One member of the Union has related that some were already afraid to attend events that deal explicitly with the state of the currency union, because they are afraid of running into citizens who know more about the complicated matters than they do. To make up for this, they often talk their heads off when it comes to socio-political issues.

The SPD parliamentary group is dealing with the crisis just as intensively. The Social Democrats say that in the budget area, the issue occupies about half of the working time, "the usual business about tax and budget policy" has "receded into the background." Among those dealing with Europe policy, it is even sixty per cent. Between May 2010 and June 2012, alone, the parliamentary group held twelve special sessions concerned with developments in Europe, it was explicitly discussed in twelve additional, regular sessions, and in additional meetings it was done outside of the agenda.

Praise from the opposition

Within the government, there are three offices that deal intensively with Europe, often in competition. These are the Chancellor's Office, the Federal Foreign Office, and the Ministry of Finance. Since the development in the European Union has revolved almost exclusively around money for some years now, it is hardly surprising that, in addition to the chancellor, Finance Minister Schäuble, especially, is moving to the fore. He is probably devoting about half of his working time to developments in the euro area. More than thirty additional crisis management positions have been approved in the relevant departments of his ministry.

Not only does the Minister of Finance brief his parliamentary group – that is, the Union – extensively, he is also a frequent guest in the relevant committees of the Bundestag, especially those dealing with Europe and the budget. This earns praise from the opposition: the chair of the budget committee, the SPD politician Petra Merkel, says that since the beginning of the crisis, Schäuble is coming to the committee more frequently. She feels well informed by the minister.

But it is not only the minister, the responsible parties in the committees also have to make themselves constantly available in these unusual times. And they must be ready for unusual assignments. For example, Petra Merkel recounts a phone conference with Schäuble and the representatives of the parliamentary group, which had to take place spontaneously when she happened to be on Tenerife. Because the mobile network was poor, but the matter was important, the chair of the budget committee simply climbed onto a garbage dump, where she had better reception. The crisis sends its greetings.

Source: Eckart Lohse, "Reden wir mal drüber," *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 24 June 2012.

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