

The Bundestag Election 2025

X: What will success look like – the government narrative and its flaws

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A framework for arguing with the AfD which leaves it with the initiative

What story is Germany's new government going to tell its citizens to persuade them that what it is doing can be seen as success? In his first address to the Bundestag as Chancellor, on 14 May, Friedrich Merz offered the start of an answer.

The stakes could not be higher. If this government is seen to have failed, the far-right AfD, now the second largest party and so the official opposition, may become the largest party at the next election.

Merz's address covered defence, the economy, security and migration. The tone of each was different, "statesmanlike" – say – on defence, "subtle" on the economy, "reassuring" on security, "emotional" on migration. Although the AfD was never mentioned, it is possible to detect the lines of an argument to be used against it.

Yet the coalition itself is numerically weak not strong. The emotional narrative around migration offers no sense of what success would look like. This leaves the AfD always free to demand more. And time is short. Crucial state level elections take place in 2026, while the one in early 2027, in Germany largest state, may be decisive.

What will success look like? The government's priorities

Friedrich Merz's statement took an hour to deliver.¹ Although it did mention specific policy details at times, these were incidental to its main purpose, to provide a sense of the government's priorities and its argument for them; in short, its narrative.

Between introductory and concluding remarks, it covered four subjects. In the order they were discussed they were defence, economy, security and migration. Economy had the most time devoted to it, migration the least.

Defence

Merz began what he had to say about defence by reaffirming Germany's unequivocal support for Ukraine.² This didn't make Germany a war-party, nor would it, he said, but neither was it a third party standing in the middle. The outcome of the war in Ukraine wasn't just about the fate of that country but about whether international law and order would prevail over tyranny, force and the rule of the strongest – in short, about peace across the continent of Europe.

In defence of this peace, Merz made several commitments. The first was to work with NATO and European partners, emphasising at one point that Poland (“our big neighbour to the east”) would be as important to this government as France (“our big neighbour to the West”).

The second was to the principle of deterrence: “being able to defend ourselves so that we don't need to”, Germany and Europe “being strong enough to mean that there would be no need use our weapons”.

Third, the government would provide all the financial means necessary to make the Bundeswehr the strongest conventional army in Europe. Enabling and promoting a voluntary spell of military service in Germany would be part of this.

Economy

The focus of what Merz had to say about the economy was the need to return to economic growth:³ never before in the history of the Federal Republic had there been such a long period without it; his government would do all it could to revive it.⁴

The centrepiece of the plan to bring this about was an increase in public spending directed towards investment (€150bn over four years, being the first phase of a 12-year programme). This pledge aside, Merz dwelt little on numbers. Instead, the picture he painted of Germany's economy was as a series of relationships, many of which had either gone awry or needed adjustment to make them fit for the world of 2025.

The first relationship was between the country's economic fundamentals and the framework within which they operated. The fundamentals – Germany's innovative and world-leading companies, its strong middle-sized companies, high-performing employees, specialists, top researchers – were sound. The framework surrounding them – regulation, bureaucracy, dilapidated infrastructure, energy costs, comparatively high taxes – was not.

Policy remedies to repair the framework included less bureaucracy, more digitalization, tax breaks for private investment and a cut in corporation tax. The priorities on energy would be affordability, cost efficiency and supply security; lower electricity prices would be the first step.

The second set of relationships were international: every fourth job, said Merz, depended on trade. The relationship with China needed derisking. Other relationships in Asia, as well as with Germany's neglected southern neighbours, needed developing. The EU's internal market – vital for German business – needed deepening. It was even time for greater co-operation with the UK.

The third relationship was within Germany. He himself, said Merz, belonged to a generation for whom Ludwig Erhard's promise of "prosperity for all" had been a lived reality. Now, however, many Germans doubted that promise. The new government would govern in a way that renewed that promise, strengthening social cohesion especially where it had been lost.

So housing must remain affordable ("build, build, build"). There would be a rent commission. Reducing income tax for those on low and middle incomes was a goal – once growth permitted. When growth and competitiveness had been restored, the social state would be restored too. Pensions would rise. A minimum wage of €15 per hour in 2026 looked reachable, although it wouldn't be written into legislation.

Security and migration

The sections of the address that discussed security and migration were far shorter than the other two.⁵ People expect to be able to move around safely, said Merz, including in the digital space. Germany's security authorities would be strengthened and better equipped. In the struggle against unbearable antisemitism, Germany must be, and must remain, a shelter for Jews. On Germany's relationship with Israel, "addressing our friends there from this place, we stand steadfastly on Israel's side".

On migration,⁶ Merz said that Germany had been "overwhelmed by largely uncontrolled migration". This had also meant too much low-skilled migration entering the labour market over the last 10 years, placing demands on the social security system. Yet Germany was, and would remain, a "country of immigration", one that wanted to remain "friendly and respectful" to those who "have come to us, live with us, work with us, who have become German citizens ... integral and indispensable".

Under the new government, he went on, migration is now being regulated with more restrictions, rejections, control and returns.⁷ Germany wasn't going alone on this but was in line with European law. Steps would also be taken to promote integration. Finding work for those who remain would be a government priority. A right would also be established, of residence, for well integrated migrants who could support themselves and spoke German.

An unspoken objective? A framework for confronting the AfD

Nowhere in his address did Merz refer explicitly to the Alternative für Deutschland. Yet beating the AfD back must be the political goal of these parties that refer to themselves collectively as the democratic centre. One way to see the speech is as a map of the narrative to be used when the government is confronting the claims of the far-right. Four elements stand out.

First, by adopting the AfD framing of migration but committing to deal with it itself, the government aims to deprive the AfD of its monopoly on this topic and, through the action it is already beginning to take, drain it of its political force.

Second, by emphasising Germany's central role in the defence of Europe, exercised through NATO and with Ukraine on the front line, the government is trying to paint the AfD – seen as pro-Putin, anti NATO, anti-Europe – not as the defender of Germany's true interest, but its enemy.

Third, by offering a nuanced view of what's wrong with the economy – relationships gone awry – the government aims to undercut the idea that everything is so terrible that only a radical break will do. Nuance, which allows the detail to be seen, leaves open the space for ordinary policy-making. The focus on Germany's many international relationships undercuts AfD isolationism.

Fourth, by holding out the promise of a shared prosperity, the government hopes to drain the pool of economic discontent which conventional wisdom sees as the necessary condition for populism to thrive.

A narrative fuelled by emotion leaves the initiative with the AfD

With just 45% of the vote behind it, the new coalition is built on weak foundations. That Merz was only elected Chancellor at the second time of asking underlines both the slimness of its Bundestag majority (52%) and the strength of opposition to it from within its own ranks. Facing a revived Die Linke to its left, the SPD is in a precarious position too.

“Events” test a government but what threatens it is internal weakness that impairs its ability to act. Merz's narrative has two such weaknesses, to do with migration, and the economy.

To say that Germany has been “overwhelmed” by migration is the opposite of the nuanced approach that Merz took when talking about the economy. Nuance emerges from attention to detail. The responses it offers are of remedies coming from limited actions, directed at specifics.

To be overwhelmed, by contrast, entails the sensation of something large. Instead of the detail, attention remains fixed on the thing as a whole, held in place by emotion.

Motivated like this, Merz's migration narrative has a general sense of direction – but no sense of what sorts of thing should be done (or not), or of how far is far enough. Without well-defined limits, the AfD, which will always go further, retains the upper hand.

For example, if Germany's neighbours, or EU law, hinder the extent to which the country can control the inflow of migrants, Merz's commitment to European partners and allies may be put to the test. "Germany or Europe?" is not a dilemma the government would want to face. Whereas the AfD would be delighted.

If Germany is already overwhelmed, controlling the inflow of migrants – through "rejections" at the border – can't be enough: people in Germany already must be removed too. The reference to "returns" acknowledges this. But stopping people entering is different from removing people already here, some of whom will be well-established, have friends, speak German and attract support. How many migrants need to leave before Germany stops feeling "overwhelmed"? Returns, more even than rejections, is treacherous terrain.

The strain from the economic policies stems from the sheer scale of the vision. The largest army in Europe? Repair and renew dilapidated public infrastructure? Restore faith in the promise of prosperity for all? If it has a date at all, this is a vision for the late 2030s.

This vision is bound to provoke disputes about both priorities and what can be done to show some progress soon. The constitutional amendment allowing more public borrowing gives the coalition more spending power than the last. Merz's vision increases demands on it.

€150 billion of public investment over four years is not a transformational sum for an economy with an annual GDP of €4,300 billion,. Defence Minister Boris Pistorius has said that Germany should now start upping its defence spending by 0.2% of GDP every year. Over four years, that adds up to €90 billion. Yet the growth prospects for the economy remain poor, the new forecast from the Council of Economic Experts foreseeing zero growth in 2025 and just 1% in 2026.⁸

Conclusion: two years is all there is

At the end of 2026, the new government will be almost halfway through its allotted term. By then, the rolling schedule of elections to Germany's state parliaments will have tested the coalition's popularity twice, first in Baden-Württemberg (Germany's third largest state) in spring 2026 and then in Saxony-Anhalt (in the former east) in the autumn. The second, an AfD stronghold, will show whether it's even possible to form a state government without the AfD.

In spring 2027, the largest state of all, North-Rhine Westphalia, goes to the polls. With more than a fifth of the whole population, this state election will deliver a decisive mid-term verdict on the federal government.⁹ The AfD came third here in February, just 4% behind the SPD.

By then, Merz's economic narrative needs to have moved beyond promises to point to tangible examples of success. If the coalition is to hold, the narrative needs to be one that the SPD, in its once industrial Ruhr heartland, is as comfortable with as the CDU.

¹ The source is the [Plenarprotokoll](#), or plenary record, of Bundestag proceedings for Wednesday 14 May 2025, pp80-89.

² Merz, 14 May 2025, Plenarprotokoll, S. 81-83, beginnend bei „80 Jahre nach dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges und in dem 35. Jahr der Wiedervereinigung unseres Landes wird unsere Freiheit durch die Gegner und die Feinde unserer liberalen Demokratie so sehr angegriffen wie selten zuvor“.

³ Merz, 14 May 2025, Plenarprotokoll, S. 83-86, beginnend bei „Deutschlands Sicherheit, Deutschlands Gestaltungskraft in der Welt steht und fällt mit unserer wirtschaftlichen Stärke. Das wirtschaftliche Fundament unseres Landes ist immer noch stark.“

⁴ Germany's economy was only fractionally bigger in 2024 than it was in 2019 (GDP indices of 104.56 and 104.27 respectively) – and fractionally smaller relative to the size of its population than in 2017 (GDP per inhabitant indices of 102.65 and 102.74). Source: [Destatis](#).

⁵ Merz, 14 May 2025, Plenarprotokoll, S. 86-87, beginnend bei „Verantwortung tragen wir auch für den Fortbestand unserer offenen Gesellschaft. Die Freiheit, in der wir mit-einander in diesem Land leben, ist vielleicht das größte Erbe, das uns mitgegeben worden ist. Sie ist zugleich die größte Zukunftskraft, die wir haben.“

⁶ Merz, 14 May 2025, Plenarprotokoll, S. 87-88, beginnend bei „Verantwortung für die offene Gesellschaft bedeutet auch, dass wir anerkennen: Die in weiten Teilen ungesteuerte Migration hat unsere Gesellschaft in den letzten Jahren überfordert.“

⁷ Merz used the present tense here, reflecting the fact that tighter controls had been introduced at the border as soon as the government had taken office, some days earlier.

⁸ German Council of Economic Experts, May 2025: [press release](#)

⁹ Because state parliaments serve for five years, a four-year federal government faces these state tests at a different point in its life from its predecessor. The East German three – Saxony, Thuringia, Brandenburg – which so knocked the last coalition in autumn 2024, won't get a chance to deliver a verdict on the new coalition at all.