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Editors: Sławomir Dębski • Bartosz Wiśniewski • Rafał Tarnogórski

Sebastian Płóciennik • Patrycja Sasnal • Justyna Szczudlik • Daniel Szeligowski
Jolanta Szymańska • Marcin Terlikowski • Szymon Zaręba • Tomasz Żornaczuk

A Conservative Europe: Kramp-Karrenbauer's Vision of Integration

Sebastian Płóciennik

The future of Europe, according to the chairwoman of the German Christian Democrats, is a free market, no-superstate EU that is able to play a greater role in the world. Her manifesto is not only a reaction to another French offensive in the area of European politics but also an ideological offer of cooperation to potential allies from Northern and Central Europe.

The text published by Kramp-Karrenbauer on 10 March is, first of all, Germany's direct response to French President Emmanuel Macron's call for EU reforms, announced just a few days earlier, and, second, the formulation of an ideological vision of integration with a conservative-liberal profile. This vision combines the primacy of the free market and caution in the institutional sphere with the ambitions to strengthen the EU at the global level.

The political fate of the document is a matter of openness. It will depend on whether such an offer will find allies in the EU and whether Kramp-Karrenbauer's ideas will actually become the official proposal of the German government in the discussion on the future of the EU.

Liberal Economy. Among Kramp-Karrenbauer's priorities, economic issues are the most consistently addressed. The statement that "creation takes precedence over distribution" and the praise of restrictive reforms in the euro area and the principle of subsidiarity can be understood as reluctance towards the idea of solidarity based on financial transfers. In a very liberal canon, the head of the CDU rejects "European centralism, European statism, communitarian debts, Europeanisation of social systems and minimum wages". Joint action and coordination are needed elsewhere, e.g., in the field of research and development, which should be financed from the EU budget.

There are more places in the text with a strong free market accent. For example, the currently popular ideas of European industrial policy are confronted with the inviolability of the principles of fair competition. She also calls for a fight against tax avoidance by large corporations, but the motive is not only to increase state revenues. It is also about equal rights and duties on a competitive market: a financial contribution appropriate to that which small and medium-sized enterprises bring. The key of liberal views also fits the slightly enigmatic concept of creating a common market for banks. Perhaps the idea is that the banking union built for several years now would work without, for example, risk pooling through a European insurance of bank deposits, but in close connection with the common capital and digital market.

Against a "Superstate". According to Kramp-Karrenbauer, EU governance should be based on balancing the intergovernmental and community methods. Her bold remarks on the importance of nation-states for democratic legitimacy and identity, and praise of the principle of subsidiarity may suggest, however, that it is rather the intergovernmental method that requires appreciation. This impression is reinforced by the lack of appeals to ideas of sanctions against states violating the rule of law and the demands to liquidate the

second seat of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, as well as tax exemptions for EU officials' incomes—both symbols of the expensive, EU “superstate”.

The conviction about the special role of nation-states and the principle of subsidiarity also can be seen in concrete postulates regarding EU crisis management. For example, in migration policy, Kramp-Karrenbauer proposes that the universal distribution of refugee quotas between the states be replaced by the idea of “communicating vessels”. According to it, EU members are to fight the causes of the crisis, protect borders, and accept refugees, but they can choose in which areas they want to engage more and in which less, according to their own capabilities and preferences. This flexible approach—clearly different from that of Chancellor Angela Merkel's previous cabinet—seems also to suggest Kramp-Karrenbauer's reluctance to diversify integration.

The preference for flexibility and a more decentralised approach are revealed in ideas for climate policy, too. “Nothing has ever been achieved by setting ambitious European goals and limiting values,” writes Kramp-Karrenbauer. The proper way is to consider all economic conditions and social costs. For this, a European Agreement for Climate Protection is needed at the national and European levels among representatives of enterprises, trade unions, and social organisations with a democratic mandate. Only in this way, according to the president of the CDU, will it be possible to build broad support for costly climate policy.

A Global Role for the EU. Kramp-Karrenbauer does not hide her concern that the Union may lose influence in the world and become a subordinate player adapting to the decisions of other powers. To avoid this scenario, a strong economy is necessary, one capable of responding if others reach for protectionism and excessive support in favour of their own, often state-owned enterprises. This, however, is only one of the elements of a much wider construction.

The EU's strong position in the world requires increased potential in security policy. Kramp-Karrenbauer intends to obtain an EU seat on the UN Security Council for this purpose, and at the EU level, create a European security council that includes the United Kingdom. The CDU head's proposals also draw attention to joint projects in the defence industry. She envisions not only new multi-task aircraft but even a European aircraft carrier. It is worth noting that the plans to expand the European security potential are not portrayed in the dilemma of relations with the U.S. “Thanks to the transatlantic alliance, we feel safe from external threats”, Kramp-Karrenbauer writes, and stresses that there is no conflict in being “transatlantic and at the same time more European”.

An expression of Europe's global ambitions is also to expand the ties with Africa to the level of a “strategic, equal partnership”. This idea is understandable, especially in the context of migration problems. Its implementation, however, requires concessions from Europeans: opening the agricultural market and reducing the level of regulation in this sector.

Conclusions. There are some unnecessary proposals in Kramp-Karrenbauer's document, such as the aircraft carrier, which focus media attention and obscure the actual meaning of the text: sending a signal to supporters of the conservative-liberal approach to the EU, unwilling to expand financial transfers and cautious about strengthening the Community level. This profile of views is most easily attributed to the political elites of the so-called Hanseatic group, but among the potential allies it also houses the countries of Central Europe, including, though not without reservations, Poland.

From Poland's perspective, a valuable point in Kramp-Karrenbauer's text is the primacy of free competition in the EU, which secures the interests of countries with relatively low production costs, as well as financing expenditures on innovation by the EU. Less convergence is expected in the common agricultural policy and the more general question of the role of the state in the economy and its financial discipline (in Poland, the budget deficit is expected to grow despite the high rate of growth). In the second area, EU governance, similarities can be seen in the approach to the role of nation-states, the precautionary approach to the community method, or greater flexibility in dealing with the migration crisis. Furthermore, in the sphere of the global role of the EU, Kramp-Karrenbauer's text calms Poland's greatest fear: that deepening cooperation in the sphere of security means competition for NATO and a weakening of transatlantic relations.

The political significance of Kramp-Karrenbauer's proposals depends, however, on whether they can be treated as a government program *in spe*, and thus the potentially official position of Germany. This is not a foregone conclusion. Germany's resignation from higher defence spending are difficult to reconcile with the ambitions on the global role of Europe, and thus weaken the credibility of the text. Kramp-Karrenbauer has faced pushback on her ideas by the mainstream parties—the co-governing SPD and the Greens, a would-be partner in the future. The political weight of the manifesto would definitely increase if Kramp-Karrenbauer, as speculated, takes over as chancellor. But according to recent surveys, 59% of Germans want Angela Merkel to perform this function until 2021. The CDU chairwoman's manifesto will therefore remain longer a party document, clearly below its political potential.