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## **There is going to be a new coalition. The German political scene following the Bundestag election of September 22, 2013.**

The election to the 18th Bundestag held on September 22, 2013 ended up with the victory of the CDU/CSU which won 41.5% of the second votes scoring considerably above the remaining parties. The outcome is also a personal triumph of Chancellor Angela Merkel who received from the German public a mandate for another four years at the helm of the government. The Christian Democratic parties came very close to a full victory, i.e. either a majority in the Bundestag or having their coalition partner FDP (Free Democrats) exceed the five-percent election threshold. This opened the door for tough coalition talks with the SPD and Green opposition parties. While the majority of the German public would like to see the return of the grand coalition of the CDU/CSU and the SPD, the Social Democrats are very uneasy about sharing the government again with the Christian Democrats. Held as a side show to the Bundestag election were parliamentary elections in the states of Bavaria (September 15) and Hesse (September 22) which will also be replacing their governments.

### **Election results**

The turnout in the September 22, 2013 Bundestag election bordered on 44.3 million German citizens or 71.5% of all eligible voters. The turnout slightly (by 0.7 percentage points) exceeded that of the previous Bundestag election of September 27, 2009. The strongest support was granted to the CDU/CSU which earned 41.5% of the second votes (+7.7 pp. on 2009), allowing the Christian Democrats to win 311 of the 630 seats.

The CDU/CSU came 5 seats short of absolute majority. The second place was claimed by the SPD which tallied 25.7% of the vote (+2.7 pp. on 2009) securing 192 seats in the Bundestag. Quite unexpectedly, the third place was taken by The Left (Die Linke) with 8.6% of the vote (-3.3 pp.) and 64 seats, slightly ahead of the Greens with their 8.3% support (-2.3 pp.) and 63 seats. None of the other parties passed the five percent election threshold required to enter the Parliament. The threshold was missed very narrowly by the liberal FDP, which won 4.8% of the vote, and by the newly established Alternative for Germany (AFD) which received 4.7% of the vote. The biggest loser of all was the FDP which slid 9.8 pp. on 2009. The remaining parties, with the exception of the Pirate Party (2.2% of the vote, +0.2 pp. on 2009), achieved only minimal support. Four parties (with the CDU/CSU counted as one) won seats in the Parliament with a total of 84.2% of all second votes. As a consequence, after an eight-year interruption, Germany saw the revival of a four-party system, with further two parties coming very close to clearing the election threshold. What is interesting as well is that the last election increased support for both big social parties (Volksparteien), i.e. the CDU/CSU and the SPD, despite the fact that while one of them ran the government between 2009 and 2013, the other stood in opposition. The election reversed the trend observed in the 2005 and 2009 Bundestag elections in which the big parties gradually lost their supporters. This time, the three medium-sized parties of the FDP, the Greens and The Left posted declines with the biggest defeat suffered by the co-governing liberals.

The election night of September 22, 2013 brought with it a mix of joy, enthusiasm, disappointment and despair. The poll survey results announced upon the closure of polling stations offered some hope of achieving majority to the Christian Democrats and a glimmer of hope of passing the election threshold to the AfG. The most exultant camp of all was that of the Christian Democrats. Although the Democrats were confident about winning, they were quite surprised at just how overwhelming their victory turned out to be. Having thanked the voters, a visibly jubilant Angela Merkel said: "We have had such election evenings before but now we really have reason to be happy". There were good reasons indeed to celebrate as the Christian Democratic parties had not done so well since 1990 when, in a wave of enthusiasm following the reunification of Germany which elevated Helmut Kohl, the reunification Chancellor, to the peak of his popularity, the CDU/CSU won a 43.8% share of the vote. Most of the credit for this remarkable result of the CDU/CSU in the 2013 election goes to Chancellor Angela Merkel. This was her personal victory as she had been the engine that powered the electoral campaign of the Christian Democratic parties. And while there was no shortage of criticism suggesting Chancellor Angela Merkel was burnt out, weary, stuck in a rut, out of ideas as to how to rule Germany and how to cure the crisis-



ravaged euro-zone, as well as a political opportunist who steals other people's ideas presenting them as her own, Angela Merkel enjoys unwaning popularity and confidence among voters, many of whom only voted Christian Democratic because of her. Angela Merkel is commonly perceived as a guarantor of Germany's welfare and stability. Yet, the CDU/CSU's electoral success did not blind Christian Democratic politicians to the disappointingly poor performance of the FDP, their coalition partner. In an interview for ARD television, the federal Minister of Finance Wolfgang Schäuble stated that his biggest disappointment was FDP's result. He realized fully well that the euphoria with the CDU/CSU's accomplishment had to be followed by tough horse-trading over the governmental coalition with partners much less convenient than the liberals. Diametrically different moods after the announcement of the preliminary election results radiated from the FDP camp. The party paid dearly for having been the CDU/CSU's junior coalition partner in the government and for having abandoned most of its electoral postulates from 2009, which already in the early 2010 deprived it of a substantial proportion of its electorate. During the months that followed, plagued by political infighting, the FDP barely exceeded the election threshold, relegated to the role of a side dish in the government. It also missed out on support from many Christian Democratic voters who used their second votes to back the potential coalition partner, i.e. the FDP. Another significant factor was that, as shown by opinion polls, the public were more supportive of the grand CDU/CSU-SPD coalition than of the continued alliance of the Christian Democrats and the Liberals. The FDP's experience in the January election in Lower Saxony where the CDU-FDP coalition lost its grip on power despite the support which the party received from a part of the Christian Democratic electorate, helping the FDP to gain at the CDU's expense, could have translated into the FDP's poorer performance in the Bundestag election. FDP Chairman Philipp Rösler took responsibility for the party's terrible electoral performance. Rainer Brüderle, the party's leader in the electoral campaign, saw the developments of September 22, 2013 as the most bitter defeat in the FDP's history. For the first time in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, the FDP failed to secure seats in the Bundestag. No representation in the Bundestag for a party which for 64 years was one of the three pillars of German democracy and which in the 1970s and the early 1980s, together with the Liberals, defined the shape of the ruling coalition in the Federal Republic of Germany, a party which continued the achievements of Theodor Heuss, Walther Scheel and Hans-Dietrich Genscher. And although exalted speakers promised the FDP would survive the hard times and that Germany had the political base to cultivate liberal ideals, there is no denying that the FDP is in for some difficult months and in need of profound reform. The SPD staff received the initial election results with mixed feelings. Although the Party improved on its 2009 election score, it expected much more. The relatively good results which the SPD accomplished in the state



parliamentary election of 2010-2013 raised hopes for exceeding the 30% mark. And yet the result did not turn out to be that good. In retrospect, it seems that the choice of the controversial Peter Steinbrück for SPD's chancellor candidate was not very fortunate although admittedly he was the only leading SPD politician who, thanks to his oratorical talent, could successfully challenge Angela Merkel during the election campaign. When asked, on the election night, about the establishment of the grand coalition government, Peter Steinbrück replied evasively that "the ball [was] in Chancellor Angela Merkel's court". Undoubtedly the Social Democrats are facing a tough choice between joining the grand coalition with the CDU/CSU in the role of a junior partner or remaining in opposition. The former could turn out to be more advantageous but also more risky. The fact remains that the Social Democrats have not yet come to terms with the consequences of the internal crisis experienced by the SPD between 2008 and 2009 when it did become part of the grand coalition. Should it remain in the opposition, the SPD will continue to be a harsh critic of the government. This, however, could mean the party's stagnation and long years as Germany's second political power with support fluctuating around 25%. Moods in the Greens camp were also far from jubilant. This party, which in the spring of 2011 celebrated triumphs in state parliamentary elections and achieved the support of nearly 20% of respondents in opinion polls, won slightly above 8% of the vote although its support at the launch of the election campaign ranged from 12 to 13%. In a sense, the Greens became hostages of their own success of spring 2011 when, as a result of the Fukushima disaster in Japan in March 2011, the German debate about the future of nuclear power reached its zenith prompting the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition to reverse its policy on that issue. As a consequence, the Bundestag adopted a package of laws on June 30, 2011 providing for the shutdown of all nuclear power plants by 2022 and for the accelerated development of renewable sources of energy. Although in turning their energy policy around, the Christian Democrats "met their Waterloo", as soon as the debate on energy policy subsided, support for the Greens began to wane. A number of mistakes were made during the campaign. One of them is to have chosen two leaders (Jürgen Trittin and Katrin Göring-Eckardt) representing two different wings of the party. The consequence was that the leaders of the Greens failed to speak in "one voice" during the election campaign. Another mistake, the responsibility for which rests with Jürgen Trittin, was to postulate a tax increase. To make things worse, the Greens' liberal views on pedophiles in the early days of the party provoked an outrage forcing Jürgen Trittin to make public explanations a week before the election. After the disappointing election result of the Greens, criticism focused on Jürgen Trittin himself who failed as election campaign leader and who therefore announced his resignation as head of the political group in the Bundestag. This was taken as a clue by some of the party's other leaders (such as Claudia Roth and Renate Künast) to also vacate their positions, opening



the way for an overhaul of the leadership of the party and its parliamentary political group. The new leaders may now step beyond the entrenched positions occupied by their predecessors and abandon their focus on collaboration with the SPD. In the meantime, the electoral staff of The Left celebrated the election result. Although the party lost some of the support it enjoyed back in 2009, it nevertheless became number three on Germany's political scene. During the election night, one of the party's leaders, Gregor Gysi, stated the following as a reminder to all gathered: "In the early 1990s, I prophesied we (i.e. the PDS, as the party was called at the time: comment by PK) would become Germany's third biggest political force. Today those very words have come true". With the establishment of the grand coalition, The Left will become the most powerful opposition party, well capable of attracting some of the left-wing SPD activists opposed to the grand coalition. Another election winner was Alternative for Germany. Conceived in February 2013 and formally established two months later during a Berlin rally, the new grouping made its decision to run in the election rather late. While the Bundestag election was only meant as a test of the AfG's strength before the European Parliament election, the eurosceptics succeeded in securing close to 5% support within the six months. The AfD quickly became an alternative to the parties which accepted the Eurozone bailout policy. The AfG's takeover of some of the FDP and CDU/CSU electorate dissatisfied with the government's prior course may have had significant impact on the electoral performance of both parties, especially the FDP.

### **What coalition?**

The 18th Bundestag is set to comprise 630 members from four political parties: the CDU/CSU with 311 seats, the SPD with 192 seats, The Left with 64 seats, and the Greens with 63 seats. The smallest majority requires 316 seats. In view of the coalition-forming potential of the individual parties, the number of possible constellations appears to be limited. The most reasonable approach seems to be to establish a grand coalition comprised of 503 seats in the Bundestag with an overwhelming majority in the Bundesrat. The advantage of this solution is that such a grand coalition of the CDU/CSU and the SPD is supported by the majority of German society. An alternative would be to set up a coalition of the CDU/CSU and the Greens (a total of 374 seats), but then such a coalition would be relatively weak in the Bundesrat, and coalition cooperation with the CDU and the Greens has not worked very well at all and always resulted in a break-up (Hamburg 2008-2010, Saarland 2009-2012). There is also a theoretical option of establishing a left-leaning coalition of the SPD, the Greens and The Left (319 seats), however, discrepancies between the SPD and The Left and the exclusion of Social Democrats from the coalition of the two parties at the federal level make it close to impossible for such a solution ever to be adopted. Another



possibility is to form a minority government made up of the SPD and the Greens and tolerated by The Left, however the last thing that Germany (and Europe) need is a weak government.

It is therefore up to Angela Merkel now to make her move. Without a doubt, in view of the defeat suffered by the Liberals, the SPD ends up being the most desirable coalition partner that the Christian Democrats can choose. The programs of both parties are closely aligned on many key issues, and even in areas where minor discrepancies persist, a compromise is nevertheless possible. The hardest issue to resolve seems to be that of taxes and the minimum wage. The SPD proposes, in its election program, to increase the tax on the richest (from 42 to 49%) and use the revenue to finance education and infrastructure development as well as a statutory minimum wage (Mindestlohn) of €8.5 per hour. The SPD's tax reforms may run up against strong resistance from the CDU and, even more so, the CSU. Horst Seehofer has already announced the CSU's disapproval of increasing the tax on the affluent. On the other hand, Social Democrats will try to negotiate to be treated equally as the Christian Democratic parties and, in particular, to secure for itself a strong enough position in the government to ensure they are not treated as a junior partner in the coalition. On the eve of the preliminary coalition talks between the party leaders, i.e. Angela Merkel (CDU), Horst Seehofer (CSU) and Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) scheduled for October 4, statements made by the leading politicians from both camps (Horst Seehofer, Hermann Gröhe, Volker Kauder for CDU/CSU and Hannelore Kraft, Sigmar Gabriel, Johannes Kahrs, and Ralf Stegner for SPD) suggest that their parties will take a firm stance in such talks. One might expect that, similarly as in 2005, the coalition talks between CDU, CSU and SPD will be a long drawn-out affair. The SPD itself shows little enthusiasm for being in the same coalition with Christian Democratic parties. Even during the election campaign, a statement opposing such a step was made by SPD's Secretary General Andrea Nahles who represents the party's left wing. He said that: "SPD does not want the grand coalition. Our refusal to be a part of the grand coalition will be widely supported throughout the party". Social Democrats fear that as the junior partner in the coalition with Christian Democratic parties, they may experience similar infighting in their midst as during the 2005-2009 period and that the one party which stands to gain a great deal under the circumstances will be The Left. On the other hand, SPD politicians are afraid of a coalition of the CDU/CSU and the Greens, which may cause their closest political ally to shift away from the SPD and come closer to the Christian Democrats. To dispel such anxieties, Sigmar Gabriel proposed to have SPD members approve any coalition agreements to be made with the Christian Democratic parties in an internal vote before they are officially signed into life. Perhaps the negotiations between CDU/CSU and SPD can be finalized before SPD's mid-November rally. Should



negotiations with the SPD collapse, the Christian Democratic parties will engage in coalition talks with the Greens. After the electoral fiasco and a shakedown in the Greens leadership, the party may well be expected to be more open to talks with the Christian Democrats. The future leader of the parliamentary group of the Greens in the Bundestag, Anton Hofreiter, expressed tentative willingness to talk with the Christian Democratic parties. Chancellor Angela Merkel has already sent out her invitations to the Green party leaders. The talks would begin in the second week of October, soon after the launch of negotiations between the CDU, the CSU and the SPD. In the coming weeks, intense coalition talks will be held between Germany's biggest parties. One may expect that just as in 2005, faced with the threat of a political stalemate, they will succeed in establishing a stable coalition government prepared to live up to today's challenges as faced by Germany and the crisis-engulfed Europe.

### **Bavaria**

On September 15, 2013, Bavaria, the largest and wealthiest state in the federation, held its state elections ended with an overwhelming victory by the CSU (47.7% of the vote), which recovered its majority in the Bavarian Landtag (Parliament) and will now rule singlehandedly. The outcome is also a personal success of the head of the CSU and Bavaria's Prime Minister Horst Seehofer, a controversial politician who is nevertheless effective and highly popular in Bavaria. He assumed power in the conflicted CSU in 2008 (see Bulletin 8 of the Institute for Western Affairs) and took the helm of the coalition government together with the FDP 36 years after the CSU lost its majority in the Bavarian Landtag. During the five years that followed, he was able to consolidate and rejuvenate the party bringing it back to its former glory. The September 15 election was a painful coalition defeat for the FDP which only secured 3.3% of the vote and lost its representation in the Munich Landtag. The opposition parties: the SPD, the Greens and the Free Voters (FW) fared similarly as in 2008. The result of the Bavarian election was a clear warning signal for the Liberals. After the defeat in Bavaria, FDP politicians stepped up their election campaign in the final week before the Bundestag election. They also requested support from the Christian Democratic electorate, with little effect.

### **Hessia**

The Hessian election which coincided with the Bundestag election did not produce any decisive results. The biggest share of the vote went to the CDU (38.3%) followed by the SPD (30.7%), the Green party (11.1%), The Left (5.2%), the weakened FDP (5%) and the AfD,



whose 4% score did not grant it any seats in the parliament. The previous CDU-FDP coalition government headed by Volker Bouffier lost its majority in the Landtag. This portends tough coalition talks.

The theses and opinions included in this text do not constitute an official standpoint of the Institute for Western Affairs; they express the opinions of the author only.

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