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## **MERKEL-SCHULZ TUSSLE FACES FIRST DRY-RUN**

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EurActiv (24 March 2017)

German Chancellor Angela Merkels party faces a first election-year litmus test against resurgent leftwing challengers when voters go to the polls on Sunday (26 March) in the tiny region of Saarland.

Although the state on the French border is home to just one million people, the poll there is seen as a dry-run for the battle between Merkel and the resurgent Social Democrats under new leader Martin Schulz.

The centre-left SPD has been gripped by almost giddy optimism under former European Parliament President Schulz.

The SPD has gained around 10 points nationally since he took over in January with a social justice platform and a bold vow to end Merkels almost 12-year reign in Septembers general election.

Schulz mania has particularly drawn younger voters to the veteran workers party, which was founded more than 150 years ago, putting it neck-and-neck with Merkels conservative bloc – both nationally and in Saarland.

'Sexy beast' Schulz fires up support ahead of German poll

Matthias Zeller, a 21-year-old Social Democratic activist, caused a stir in Germany when he enthused on national television that his partys new leader Martin Schulz was a geile Sau – which loosely translates as sexy beast.

Even if the CDU comes out ahead in the region, the SPD could grab power if it teams up with the far-left Die Linke party and possibly the ecologist Greens parties, a so-called red-red-green coalition it is also flirting with nationally.

Merkel, 62, who was due to campaign in Saarland yesterday (23 March), warned local voters that red-red or red-red-green experiments should be avoided and urged them to stick with the CDUs path of success.

GDR lite

A starker warning came from the top candidate of the pro-business Free Democrats, Oliver Luksic, who cautioned against turning Saarland into a modern version of the former communist East Germany or a GDR lite.

While Merkel long seemed unbeatable at the ballot box, she has been weakened by a populist backlash against her decision to open German borders to refugees which has brought in a million asylum seekers since 2015.

This has boosted the anti-immigration Alternative for Germany (AfD) party which, despite a recent dip in popularity, is still expected to enter the opposition benches of the 11th of Germanys 16 state assemblies on Sunday.

Europe's right in free fall as socialists surge

Marine Le Pen and the German far-right are suddenly losing votes but it remains to be seen how long the strong socialist rise led by Martin Schulz and Benoît Hamon will continue. EURACTIVs partner Treffpunkteuropa reports.

As the refugee crisis has abated, the campaign race is increasingly being fought along traditional ideological lines.

While Merkel broadly argues that Germany, the EUs export engine, is prosperous and needs to stay competitive to keep it that way, Schulz points to the army of working poor and promises to narrow the wealth gap.

Saarland, though tiny, in some ways reflects the bigger economic challenges. The former coal region, where the last mine closed in 2012, has sought to establish itself as a research and IT hub.

The predominantly Catholic region was occupied by France after World War II and only joined West Germany in the mid-1950s.

Since then it has been ruled by the CDU, alone or in coalition, except for the 1985-98 reign of former SPD premier Oskar Lafontaine.

Lafontaine, a one-time federal finance minister who later defected to Die Linke, has campaigned for a leftist coalition with posters that promise Weve paid enough, now its the turn of the rich.

A change of government was now within reach in Saarland, the 73-year-old said this week.

Martin Schulz's rapid rise from Brussels man to chancellor candidate

Martin Schulz is known in Germany mainly as a European politician and an ally of Chancellor Angela Merkel. But later this year they will face off in the countrys leadership race. EURACTIVs partner Der Tagesspiegel reports.

Too close to call

Polls predict a tight race between the two top candidates, both women.

One is CDU state premier Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, 54, often dubbed simply AKK, who is considered pragmatic and unpretentious and likes to dress up as a cleaning lady at carnival festivities.

Back home after icy Trump meeting, Merkel calls for open markets

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe issued a staunch joint

defence of free trade yesterday (19 March), as the United States pushes towards greater protectionism.

Her SPD challenger is AKKs current deputy in a grand coalition, Anke Rehlinger, 40, who happens to hold the state record in shot put (16.03 metres).

The latest Insa poll for the Bild newspaper gave the CDU a narrow 35-33% lead over the SPD, while the Social Democrats potential ally Die Linke scored 13%.

A victory for a leftist alliance in Saarland would send a signal, said news weekly Der Spiegel. And it would make red-red-green more likely at the national level.

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