
CDU, SPD BUTT HEADS AND SHAKE HANDS IN ALL-NIGHT COALITION MEETING

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As dawn broke in Berlin on Thursday morning following a marathon meeting among Germany's grand coalition partners, politicians from Germany's Christian conservative parties and the Social Democrats (SPD) headed home from the federal Chancellery having reached agreement on a slew of contested policy proposals.

At the same time, the failure to reach consensus on certain key issues further delineated each party's position ahead of national parliamentary elections this coming September as representatives accused one another of obstructionism.

Grand coalition politicians spent hours hashing out their differences in the chancellery

Pointing fingers

On Thursday morning, Volker Kauder, the parliamentary group chairman of Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), described his party as having been ready to compromise and blamed the SPD for excessive demands. With respect to the unresolved issue of limiting manager pay, Kauder told German broadcaster ZDF, "The SPD did not do this [respect promised conditions], we would have done it because it is in the coalition contract."

Still, Kauder painted the all-night bargaining session as a "beautiful success" for the CDU.

Thomas Oppermann, parliamentary group chairman of the SPD, also expressed satisfaction with the results of the meeting. "We reached important agreements," he said on Thursday morning in Berlin.

Schulz vs. Merkel - what are the odds?

Like Kauder, Oppermann attributed the coalition's inability to unite on certain initiatives to the opposing party.

"On all the questions regarding more justice, we ran into the ideological limits of the union," the SPD politician said, referring to the political group formed by the CDU and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU).

Shaking hands

In what the German press described as a constructive atmosphere, leaders from the three parties that make up the so-called grand coalition managed to unite on 11 points of previous

disagreement, according to a resolution presented to the German dpa news agency.

The two coalition partners agreed on a child marriage ban that would automatically invalidate all marriages when one of the partners is under 16 years of age. The SPD heralded the result on Twitter.

The parties also united on taking a firm approach to asylum-seekers who commit social fraud: by agreeing that social authorities should be allowed to access refugee fingerprints stored in central data systems and to order paternity tests to prove right-of-residence claims on the basis of fatherhood.

Politicians also agreed on cuts to child support benefits paid to migrants from EU nations whose children reside outside of Germany, harsher punishment for burglary, and an injection of 100 million euros (\$107 million) into a national program to prevent "Islamist extremism."

Butting heads

However, the SPD and the CDU failed to unite on key controversial themes that are likely to reappear on the campaign trail ahead of September's parliamentary elections.

Despite SPD pressure to legalize gay marriage, conservatives pushed back against the "Marriage for All" initiative on Wednesday night, arguing that the existing institution of civil unions already provides homosexual couples with a legal institution. The CDU/CSU maintains that marriage is only between a man and a woman.

The parties also butted heads on limits to manager pay and a reform of part-time work laws.

"Marriage for all" supporters outside the upper house of the German parliament

Staking out their positions

The coalition committee meetings come six months before Germans are set to vote in national parliamentary elections on September 24.

Both the SPD and the CDU find themselves in a tricky position. As polls reveal a tight contest between Merkel's conservatives and Schulz's Social Democrats, and amid criticism that very little distinguishes the parties from one another, each party needs to carve out their policy positions. At the same time, they need to show a willingness to compromise across party lines and not alienate potential future coalition partners.

Opposition Left party chairwoman Katja Kipping challenged the SPD to clearly separate itself from the CDU. "Last night it became clear that with this CDU, the SPD will not be able to implement a social justice program," she told dpa on Thursday.

Coalition party meetings tend to be called when members have key hurdles to overcome. Chancellor Angela Merkel attended the six-and-a-half hour-long session, as did SPD chancellor candidate and Merkel-rival Martin Schulz and CSU head Horst Seehofer. Government policy ministers, party chairmen, and general secretaries were also present.