
ANGELA MERKEL'S CDU BACKS GERMAN GOVERNMENT 'GRAND COALITION' STRATEGY

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The Christian Democratic Union led by Chancellor Angela Merkel has thrown its support behind pursuing a new alliance with the Social Democrats. But the SPD's former leader said people shouldn't expect a coalition yet.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and several other leaders in her center-right Christian Democratic (CDU) party gathered in Berlin on Sunday to formulate a plan as Germany enters its second month without a new government.

After four and a half hours of deliberation, CDU officials told reporters they had agreed to pursue a new alliance with the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) to once again form a "grand coalition."

"We have the firm intention of forming an effective government," Daniel Günther, conservative premier of the state of Schleswig Holstein, told reporters.

"We firmly believe that this would not come from a minority government, but instead an alliance with a parliamentary majority. That is a grand coalition," he said.

Make-or-break moment for Angela Merkel

Best option for Germany

Before the meeting, the head of the Christian Social Union (CSU) CDU's Bavarian sister party threw his weight behind a grand coalition.

"An alliance of the conservatives and the SPD is the best option for Germany – better anyway than a coalition with the Free Democrats and the Greens, new elections or a minority government," Horst Seehofer told German tabloid Bild am Sonntag.

Speaking at an event hosted by Hamburg-based Die Zeit newspaper, Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, the former leader of the SPD, said no one should expect the center-left party to commit to a coalition yet.

"Everyone agrees that it's also not really a good idea to say to the German people: 'Our vision of democracy is to vote until we reach a result that is suitable,'" Gabriel said.

But Germany needs "a sufficiently courageous, majority-equipped government that is capable of action" in order to ensure its position as one of the EU's leading nations, he added.

Can Merkel gain from Germany's political crisis?

Jamaica dreams crushed

Exploratory coalition talks between the CDU/CSU, the Greens and the business-friendly Free Democrats (FDP) collapsed last Sunday, sending Merkel's conservatives back to the drawing board.

The collapse of talks has placed increasing pressure on the SPD to rejoin a so-called grand coalition with Merkel's conservative bloc — an option that was first fiercely ruled out by SPD leader Martin Schulz following the party's record-low results in the September 24 election.

Under pressure to preserve stability in Germany and avoid new elections, the SPD reversed its stance and agreed to talk to Merkel, raising the prospect of a new "grand coalition" such as the one that has governed for the last four years.

On Thursday Merkel, Schulz and CSU chief Seehofer will meet with German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

Merkel is facing pressure from within her party after the CDU's youth wing pushed for a quick coalition deal with the SPD.

On Sunday, the "Junge Union" or "Young Union" published a resolution urging the parties to reach an agreement by Christmas. They also said that the deal should not concede ground on core conservative issues, including immigration and budget.

Should an agreement not be reached by Christmas, the negotiations "should be viewed as failed" and Merkel's CDU/CSU should then opt for a minority government.

Merkel is not the only one facing internal pressure: Schulz also faced growing dissent within his party over his willingness to make a coalition with Merkel's conservative bloc.

The SPD's youth branch, the Jusos, or "Young Socialists in the SPD," ended their two-day congress calling for their leaders to move further to the left rather than try out a new grand coalition.

Their resolution called for SPD heads to "usher in true alternatives for progressive, solidarity and leftist policy from the opposition."

Christmas on the horizon

Other SPD leaders have also started setting conditions should the party enter into talks with Merkel's conservatives, including changes in health insurance and investment in education and homes. One of the more tricky points that is bound to cause conflict is the SPD's refusal of a cap on asylum-seekers — one of the Bavarian CSU's main policy goals.

Ahead of Sunday's meeting, CDU officials warned the SPD against making "unrealistic" demands during exploratory coalition talks.

"We have Christmas in four weeks, but one should deal with wish lists realistically," said CDU Deputy Chairwoman Julia Klöckner.

"With 20 percent, one cannot make 100 percent of the demands," added Hessen state premier, Volker Bouffier, referring to the SPD's tally during parliamentary elections in September.

While the CDU/CSU and the SPD are struggling under the pressure to form a new alliance, German voters appeared to be warming up to the idea.

According to a weekly Emnid poll conducted for Bild am Sonntag, support for the CDU/CSU jumped by 2 points to 33 percent while support for the SPD ticked up 1 point to 22 percent.

"It is at least a day of deep contemplation about how things proceed in Germany. But I want to say to you that I, as chancellor will do everything to lead this country through these difficult weeks."

Is,rs/aw (AP, AFP, dpa, Reuters)

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