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## GERMANY: MERKEL'S NEXT CABINET SHOWS YOUTH TREND

- 12.03.2018

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Deutsche Welle (11 March 2018)

As political quantum leaps go, the one Franziska Giffey is about to take is particularly daring.

When Chancellor Angela Merkel starts her fourth term on Wednesday, 39-year-old Giffey, a Social Democrat, will assume responsibility for the Ministry of Family Affairs despite having no prior experience at either the state or national level of politics.

Giffey only joined the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in 2007, and her political activity has previously been confined to the Neukölln district of Berlin, where she has been mayor since April 2015. She has drawn high marks for her political leadership in a relatively poor part of the capital with a high percentage of immigrants. The district has a somewhat undeserved reputation as a ghetto, and Giffey is seen as someone who is unafraid to take a firm approach.

"It's more difficult to run Neukölln than it is to run a ministry," acting SPD chairman Olaf Scholz announced last Friday when introducing Giffey as part of the new cabinet.

### **Giffey's main political experience comes from Berlin's multicultural Neukölln district**

"I think there are a lot of Neuköllns in Germany facing similar challenges," Giffey said in an interview with German public TV after her nomination.

Yet no matter how much the party and the politician play up her practical, on-the-ground experience, the fact remains that it's highly unusual for someone to go directly from the district level to the national spotlight of a federal ministry. To what else does the relatively unknown Giffey owe her surprising promotion?

### **Many voters believe younger is better**

It doesn't hurt that she's female and was born in formerly communist eastern Germany, ticking two major equality boxes. But perhaps more importantly, she's young. There is a youth movement sweeping through European politics, with figures like France's Emanuel Macron (40 years old), Austria's Sebastian Kurz (31) and Italy's Luigi di Maio (31) inspiring voters, many of whom have been sick of the status quo. With 63-year-old Chancellor Merkel, Germany may seem to be the exception, but dip below the top post and there are signs of rejuvenation in Berlin as well.

The only member of the new government who is older than Merkel is 68-year-old incoming Interior Minister Horst Seehofer, and that's by design. When she announced which members of her conservative CDU party would be filling the cabinet posts, the chancellor herself stressed that her picks were all younger than her.

Indeed, the median age of the cabinet has dropped from 54 to 49. Political veterans like Hermann Gröhe (56) and Thomas de Maizière (64) are now out. As well as Giffey, new cabinet members include designated Health Minister Jens Spahn (37) and Education Minister Anja Karliczek (46), both conservatives.

### **Merkel's fourth cabinet will be significantly younger than her third one**

This means that the average age of the most prominent representatives of both of Germany's largest parties is significantly younger than that of the average party member, which is around 60 in both the CDU and the SPD. While the rank and file may be headed towards retirement, the movers and shakers within the parties haven't necessarily even finished university. That, at least, was the case with the 28-year-old head of the SPD youth wing, Kevin Kühnert. He led an unsuccessful but widely respected rebellion against the party leadership that ultimately cost former SPD Chairman Martin Schulz (62) his job.

His designated successor, Andrea Nahles, is a political veteran, to be sure, but also one who is 15 years Schulz's junior.

### **Breaking with stereotypes**

The changing of the guard in German politics — the notable exception being Merkel herself — was prompted by the historically poor showing by both conservatives and Social Democrats in last year's election and the rise of the far-right populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party as an outlet for voters dissatisfied with the state of affairs. But will German politics necessarily be revolutionized by lowering the age of its main purveyors?

Spahn is an interesting example. Last year, defying the CDU's traditional opposition to opening the institution of marriage to homosexuals, the 37-year-old voted in the Bundestag to do precisely that. He even tied the knot with his own male partner in December. Yet while not all aspects of his lifestyle may be traditionally conservative, Spahn has staked out a position considerably to the right of Merkel, and has been very critical of the chancellor on refugee policy.

### **In some respects Spahn is a dyed-in-the-wool conservative — in others he's not**

Conversely, in her tenure as mayor of Neukölln, Giffey was far more law and order than one might expect from a member of the center-left SPD. She beefed up police presence in the district and oversaw an increased number of raids carried out on gaming halls and shisha bars. She also backed having armed security guards in schools and supported a ban on teachers wearing headscarves.

"We have to extend our hand in welcome," Giffey said in an interview after her nomination to the next cabinet. "But there are also situations in which we have to say that our hand is a signal to stop."

At the same time, Giffey joined protests after an arson attack against a Left Party politician in her district and took an active role in replacing Holocaust memorial "Stumbling Stones" that were stolen from a Neukölln street.

### **A host of new possibilities**

There's a lot riding on the decision to fast-track the careers of relative youngsters like Giffey and Spahn. Party leaders hope that the infusion of new blood, as well as an increased role for women and local political leaders, will reverse the decline in membership and enthusiasm among voters, and so better counter the populist lure of the AfD. It's a hope that some commentators share.

"Franziska Giffey's nomination has been celebrated, but perhaps not enough," wrote the influential weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*. "With it the SPD has surprisingly opened up a series of political chances."

Other publications have been similarly complimentary. For her part, the incoming minister pledged on Facebook to focus in her new job on "improving early childhood education and day care, fighting violence against women and combating child poverty."

There's nothing particularly new about the sorts of promises from politicians where family affairs are concerned. But the expectation on Giffey and the other members of Germany's new political guard is that they will achieve the results that have often eluded their elder predecessors and earn renewed respect and approval for Merkel's next government.

If they are perceived to fail, Germany's two biggest political parties — which according to the latest polls can barely muster a majority between them — will likely be in even bigger trouble than they are now.'s new

The new chancellor will be the same as the old one: Christian Democrat (CDU) Angela Merkel. It will be her fourth term as leader of the German government and the third time she heads up a grand coalition between the CDU, its conservative Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Social Democrats (SPD). It is also expected to be her last term as chancellor.