
CDU ELECTION - MERKEL'S BIG GAMBLE OR MASTER MOVE?

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Angela Merkel's authority has suffered since her decision to maintain open borders during 2015's migrant crisis, with her infamous words of "Wir Schaffen Das" (We Can Do This).

It led to vocal resistance from the CDU's rightwing and the Christian Social Union (CSU), its Bavarian sister party, most notably by its leader Horst Seehofer.

Moreover, it fuelled support for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) that won 12.6 percent of the vote in 2017's federal election.

The election saw the CDU/CSU and Social Democratic Party (SPD) suffer historic losses, yet both parties were forced to continue their Grand Coalition after coalition talks of the CDU/CSU with the liberal FDP and Greens failed.

Unstable from the start, the coalition has been a marriage of convenience.

Merkel was also weakened due to several spats with Seehofer on stricter asylum policies that almost blew up the coalition.

The drama around the controversial sacked spy chief Hans-Georg Maaßen didn't make things any better either.

It prompted polarisation of the German political landscape with voters wanting stricter migration policies flocking to the AfD. Those more liberal switched to the Greens.

Merkel fading authority was symbolised by the surprise ousting of her ally Volker Kauder as the head of the CDU's parliament group.

Regional elections in Bavaria and then Hesse in October and November ultimately prompted Merkel to not seek re-election of the CDU party leadership.

Continuation vs rupture

To be elected as the CDU new party leader on 7 December, a candidate needs more than 50 percent of votes to win in the first round. If no candidate achieves this, a run-off is held between the top two.

The favourite candidate is Merkel's close ally Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (usually referred to by her initials, AKK).

A former Saarland PM, she was personally recruited by Merkel earlier this year for the position of CDU's general secretary and groomed as her successor.

AKK has supported Merkel's policies and shares her views on Europe and migration. Being mocked as "mini-Merkel", she is expected to continue Merkel's centrist path and careful step-by-step approach.

Her most popular rival is outsider Friedrich Merz, who was sidelined as parliamentary leader from the party following Merkel's control of the CDU in 2002.

After leaving politics, he became a multimillionaire in the private sector, most notably at Blackrock.

Merz often criticised Merkel's policies in the past. He wants to shift the CDU to the right and considers the SPD its natural opponent.

He intends to win AfD voters back by flirting with more restrictive migration policies, including a controversial change to the constitution.

AKK sharply condemned Merz's plans.

Another candidate is the young health minister Jens Spahn, who also positions himself as more right-wing. Yet, he is unlikely to win as he polls low.

Merkel's master move?

Some have argued that Merkel's decision is a master move.

By taking responsibility for the CDU/CSU's poor results in Hesse and Bavaria, her critic Seehofer was exposed as avoiding responsibility and pressured to give up CSU leadership.

An AKK victory would be also Merkel's. She could stay chancellor and continue her policies and focus on Europe, without being constrained by the new CDU party leader.

Recent polls amongst the wider public show AKK (48 percent) is ahead of Merz (35 percent) and Spahn (2 percent), showing Merkel's gamble could be successful.

Moreover, other polls indicate the CDU benefits from (now positive) media attention. Merkel regained her position of most popular politician and most prefer her staying chancellor until 2021, according to Infratest Dimap.

The internal election, with its debates in eight regional conferences, also brought back life to the party, suggesting negative dynamics surrounding Merkel's government could (temporary) be

reversed.

Risky gamble

Yet, her decision is also a gamble. Despite AKK's lead, it is unclear what the CDU delegates – who will actually determine the election – will decide, especially if a second round of voting is needed and Spahn would support Merz.

A Merz victory could imply a difficult cohabitation, weakening the CDU and government.

If he gets the support of the party, he could either pressure Merkel to resign or undermine her to an extent that would make her functioning difficult. A recent poll suggests they may actually lean towards Merz.

Such instability could also undermine Germany's leadership in Europe and current EU/eurozone reform discussions.

Moreover, an AKK win would not take away existing divisions inside and between the CDU/CSU. In this sense, continuation could imply more trouble rather than business as usual.

Furthermore, AKK promised a change of leadership style in an attempt to distance herself from Merkel.

She wants ideas to be first discussed and decided with the party, before the government can act. This could constrain Merkel, rather than setting her free.

In any case, Germany's (and with it, Europe's) political direction is at stake.

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