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The Making of a New German Government

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Introduction

Elections in Germany are a complicated process, but they are revered as one of the most equitable. Germans cast two votes: one for a candidate in their constituency and one for a political party. The process is called a personalized proportional representation system. Simply put, Germans vote to decide how the 598 base seats in the Bundestag will be divided among members of Germany's various political parties (Schulze 2017). The party must receive at least 5 % of the popular vote, to be able to join parliament. The system was put in place to prevent the “splinter parties” or far-right parties from entering parliament, which has worked until now. There are five major parties in Germany: Christian Democratic Union & Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) which are in the same parliamentary group, Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), Free Democratic Party (FDP), the Greens, and the Alternative for Germany (AfD).

On September 24th, 2017 the German elections were held. Tensions were high, due to various events which governed the German headlines. The previous govern parties – CDU/CSU with the SPD – formed a grand coalition. During their rule, the migration crisis escalated into a continental issue, terrorist attacks struck fear into the hearts of the German citizens, and swift rise of European populism swept through the European Union. Germany was no exception; the Alternative for Germany has been on a steady growth since the 2013 elections and was expected to do well in elections 2017.

The elections were won by a large margin by CDU/CSU (33 %) lead by Angela Merkel. Second place was occupied by Martin Schulz's SPD (20.5 %), third place by AfD, the far-right populist movement (12 %), and fourth by FDP (10 %) (CT24 2018). The elections were a disaster for Merkel and Schulz, which posed the question of a grand coalition as a significant issue, due to the fact, SPD refused to serve another term with the conservatives. How these turbulent times were handled and which effects had it have on the future of the SPD leadership is the center of the analysis.

The Coalition Crisis

Angela Merkel's negotiations ended abruptly when the leaders of the FDP and the Green parties stated that “it's better not to govern than to govern badly” (Karnitschnig 2017). The ideological differences between the conservatives and the Greens were too great, and the talks were shut down. Yet, it is believed the negotiations were canceled due to Horst Seehofer, leader of the Christian Social Union (CSU), who insisted that war refugees not be granted the right to bring relatives to Germany, that “bedeviled” the talks more than any other issue (Karnitschnig 2017). The negotiations were a pure example of the complexity and seriousness of the problems at hand. Even though Merkel pushed for a consensus, creating a coalition with three different parties, which are based on different ideas, proved to be too much of a challenge.

Even though Merkel led her party to victory in the elections, she has lost a significant portion of support among her voters since

2013. Merkel's popularity plummeted even further as a consequence of the coalition debacle, and with no agreement reached, the threat of a snap elections was in the air. New elections would push more voters to side with the AfD and CDU would lose more support. Furthermore, Merkel could not turn to her former ally the Social Democrats. Even though the SPD and conservatives have governed together for eight of the past 12 years, many Social Democrats believe the arrangement eroded their party's identity and blamed the grand coalition for their poor showing in the September election (Karnitschnig 2017). Witnessing the unfolding crisis, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier called SPD to reconsider their position and invited Merkel, Schultz, and Seehofer to the negotiation table, to prevent early elections (Karnitschnig 2017). The SPD leadership agreed to meet, acknowledging the issue.

This can be viewed as the breaking point for Martin Schulz, and the SPD would be embroiled in internal struggles for the next few months. One could have observed Martin Schulz losing his credibility after promising not to work in the Chancellor's government, nor opening negotiations. In fact, there is a serious dispute, whether pride should make way to national obligations, which was Schulz's argument for reopening negotiations. Nevertheless, this decision would influence his future political career in an unprecedented way.

The Downfall of Martin Schulz

The internal struggles of the SPD began with Schulz leading his party into a catastrophic election. Even though the party ended in second place, it has lost over 40 seats in the parliament; the worst result in SPD history. Schulz was Merkel's serious rival for chancellorship, being the President of the European Parliament, he planned to ride the coattails of his popularity straight into the office. However, he was in for

a rude awakening after the elections results. Many believe Martin Schulz's party has failed to target popular policies. On contrary, the SPD is good at having sufficient concepts and values which it upholds. However, it is insufficient when it comes to making any specific policy proposals, which would present their position to the public. After the Merkel's grand coalition talks failed with the FDP and the Green Party, Schulz decided to work with the Chancellor to prevent early elections. The negotiations were successful, obtaining three central ministries: labor, finance and foreign affairs. However, whether the coalition would be successful had to be decided in an internal SPD referendum (Knight 2018).

When Schulz first signaled he would give up the party leadership, he did so under the impression he would be able to serve as Foreign Minister if the SPD members approve the coalition. But a wave of protest, fanned in part by his predecessor as party leader, current Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, forced Schulz to relinquish that post as well (Blond 2018). Thus, 48 hours later he dramatically announced he was withdrawing his candidacy and would not serve in the government after party members reportedly lost faith in him. Huggler makes an excellent point, "Still, the turmoil at the top of the party has angered many SPD stalwarts, who accuse the party leadership of putting their careers ahead of the party's interests" (Huggler 2018). Schultz was in the epicenter of these accusations. He had steadfastly ruled out another tie-up coalition with Merkel in the wake of last September's election. However, later changed course and endorsed a grand coalition. Furthermore, the fact that Martin Schulz backed away from a vow not to serve in a Cabinet under Merkel, has further eroded his credibility (Craigie 2018).

Moreover, after his resignation, the SPD leadership elected Andrea Nahles as leader of the party. However, party chiefs' plans to install Nahles as interim leader and then confirm her in the post at a party congress sparked more unrest. Some complained the move was high-handed and not in line with party rules (Karnitschnig 2018). Andrea Nahles can be thus considered as the overwhelming favorite to land the party leadership on a permanent basis. Nevertheless, she looks set to face a challenger; the Mayor of the northern city of Flensburg, Simone Lange, said she would also run for the leadership (Hille 2018).

Martin Schulz argued it was his national duty to re-establish negotiations with CDU/CSU. However, from the information mentioned above, one can observe the reason was to a substantial extent connected with his career, rather than to political responsibility. Despite losing his bid for the leader of Social Democrats, the foreign minister was a prominent role, which he was well suited for. Nevertheless, after observing the tremendous backlash from his party, he forfeited his ambitions. After the internal SPD referendum voted "yes" for the grand coalition, Martin Schulz is now expected to "take the side bench" which can conceivably signal the end of his top political career.

The Grand Coalition

Through the positive result of the referendum, SPD formally supported the Chancellor in creating a new government. Angela Merkel seemed optimistic about decision to re-establish the grand coalition but she is well aware of its great challenges, stating, "We have a lot of work ahead of us" (Karnitschnig 2018). The first international trip of newly re-elected Chancellor of Germany was to France where Angela Merkel visited the French President Emmanuel Macron. They discussed the pressing matter of further EU integration,

and the creation of a Finance Minister for the European Union. Even though the government talks lasted the longest in history, Germany seems to be prepared, once again, to take over the position of the predominant economic and political power in the European Union.

Conclusion

To sum up, the German post-elections negotiations proved to be an exhausting process, full of twists and turns. Even Germany's position of the leading actor of EU affairs was at stake. However, Angela Merkel was able to steer through the chaos and struggles by rebuilding a previous government platform – the grand coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD. Thus, Merkel has proved truthfulness of her reputation as consummate consensus-builder. Also, the President Steinmeier's efforts to bring all sides to the negotiating table reinforced the efforts of the Chancellor to solve the pressing issue.

Even though, the SPD has eventually decided in the referendum about the re-run of the grand coalition, the decision process was not without its drama. Due to the external and internal pressures of the public and some politicians, Martin Schulz was forced to vacate his post as leader of the Social Democrats and abandon his ambition to be the new Foreign Minister. Due to his political blunder, he is now expected to exit high politics. On contrary, Germany, as of today, is politically stable and is capable of leading the European Union through the next set of pressing issues at hand. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in cooperation with the French President Emmanuel Macron, can thus continue to determine the future of the European Monetary system, and further integration of the EU.

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