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German Elections 2017: Continuity at the Top, a Looming Disaster from Below

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“Boring” is a word often used to describe the ongoing election campaign in Germany. The campaign will conclude on September 24 when the citizens elect new members to the Bundestag. A new government will be formed according to the results.

At first glance, not much exciting has happened in recent weeks. The two main contestants – the Christian Democrat Angela Merkel and the Social Democrat Martin Schulz – fought a duel on live television in which both tried to overbid the other in political correctness and kindness.

Notably, Schulz did not behave like a challenger but rather like a party colleague. Many would say correctly so, as for four years now and for the third time since the Bundesrepublik’s founding in 1949 their parties have governed Germany in a coalition. There seems to be no fundamental difference in the two parties’ programs.

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Expect More Merkel

When projecting the outcome of the election, one thing is almost 100 percent certain: Angela Merkel will not have to vacate the Federal Chancellery.

All [polls](#) give her party a roughly 37 percent lead. If the chancellor were directly elected by the people, 51 percent would opt for Merkel. Germany has no term limit for the chancellorship so, theoretically, Merkel could outrun the late Helmut Kohl who remained in office for 16 years.

If the election result comes close to the latest polls, Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its sister party the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU) will form a coalition, either once again with the Social Democrats (SPD) or with one or two small parties, most likely the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) and, if necessary, the Green Party as well.

Such an outcome would reflect the will for continuity among a large part of the people who, in light of big challenges at home and abroad, prefer a greatly experienced politician who takes decisions in a pragmatic way and knows how to deal with troublesome leaders such as Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan. At a televised town hall meeting with 160 people from all parts of Germany, Merkel presented herself as a sovereign politician motherly in the way she cares about the worries of the people.

Even if Merkel's alliance were to choose the FDP and the Green Party as new coalition partners, big changes would not be expected to Germany's foreign policy. The leader of the FDP, Christian Lindner, has already stated that his preferred field of work is financial policy.

His excursion into foreign policy during the election campaign did not go well. In an interview, he spoke of the annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula Crimea by Russia as a "permanent provisional arrangement" and suggested Germany begin lifting the sanctions against Russia once the leadership in Moscow begins to fulfill parts of the Minsk peace agreement. Merkel reacted with declaring that the position of the federal government remains the same as before: That the annexation is contrary to international law and sanctions would only be lifted after *complete fulfillment* of the Minsk agreement. Lindner's party colleague Alexander Graf Lambsdorff explained the FDP does not recognize the annexation of Crimea. Moreover, only sanctions connected to the situation in Eastern Ukraine could be partly lifted in case the situation there improves. Lambsdorff is vice

president of the European Parliament and is seen as a [candidate for the position of the Foreign Minister](#).

The Green Party is also interested in the post of foreign minister, but its foreign policy positions, especially those concerning Eastern Europe, are closest to Merkel's. The Green Party would take a tougher stance on Russia and Turkey.

However, foreign policy, especially when it comes to big topics like the European Union, Russia, Turkey, and the United States, has been taken over by the chancellery during recent years. For Georgia, that turned out to be an advantage, given good personal relationships and the fact that several staff members know Georgia and the circumstances of the Eastern Partnership countries very well.

Right-Wing Populism: A Looming Disaster

In all the forecasts lies a big unknown which may have consequences for Germany's foreign policy. Roughly half of voters do not yet know, or will not say, which party they plan to vote for. Given the results of recent elections in federal states such as Saxony-Anhalt chances are high that a new party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), could become the third force in the Bundestag, possibly even getting close to the result of the SPD. This outcome would not only be a disaster for the Social Democrats but even more so for Merkel because the AfD has positioned itself as a new conservative party right of the Christian Democrats. It has clearly staked out right-wing populist positions. Some AfD politicians even provoked the political establishment with neo-Nazi and racist slogans, leading to investigations for hate speech and demagoguery.

According to polls, the AfD is not widely seen as a party capable of solving problems. However, many voters give its politicians credit for speaking to the people's concerns which, in their view, are not properly addressed by other politicians. This mainly concerns migration policy, fear of foreign domination, and the perception of rising criminality and insecurity in Germany due to the more than one million migrants who have arrived in the country since 2015.

The AfD is also seen by many people as the only party protesting against the prevalent policy of the established parties and, especially, Merkel's way of dealing with problems.

Several times during her tenure Merkel has given up on positions held by the rest of her party. Each time, it came as a big surprise as it was not debated in the public beforehand.

While many conservative-minded voters accepted the decision to give up on nuclear energy, her decision not to close borders to the hundreds of thousands of refugees who entered Germany in 2015 is still much contested among a major part of the population. That decision led directly to the rise of the AfD and other right-wing populist movements, especially in Eastern Germany.

If the AfD becomes the third-largest party in the Bundestag, Merkel will not only face more pressure from the far right in Parliament but also by big parts of her own party, even though her government already hardened its positions on migration and internal security during the last two years.

How the Parties View Russia

Most far-right and far-left politicians, and even social democrats, demand a tough position on Turkey but a soft stance on Russia. The latter, in their view, is an important energy supplier and a necessary negotiating partner on security issues in Europe. Therefore, these politicians want to lift sanctions against Russia that were imposed after the annexation of Crimea and Russia's sponsorship of separatists in the Donbas. The two AfD leaders, Alexander Gauland and Frauke Petry, recently visited Russia. However, Russia and foreign policy in general did not play an important role during the election campaign.

It also seems that Russia's much-awaited exertion of influence on the public mood through "hybrid" measures has not happened, at least not in any perceptible way. Big questions remain on the sources of financial and other support for the AfD. There are also hints that ideas from the alt-right movement in the United States are being adopted by the AfD and other right-wing actors. The AfD launched a campaign similar to the one against Hillary Clinton, demanding to put Merkel on trial and lock her up.

With the AfD in a strong position, it will be more difficult for the next government to continue the sober-minded foreign policy Merkel has conducted in recent years. The government also has to cope with flagging confidence among some EU countries, a development resulting from decisions on migrant policy that Merkel made without

consulting Germany's partners. Moreover, the hard stance toward Greece in the financial crisis is unpopular in much of Europe. Merkel's lack of vision and strategy concerning the future of Europe and the European Union have also not been helpful. Neighboring states view with Berlin with suspicion.

Can Germany Assert Itself in the East?

Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States have also affected Germany's foreign policy, amplifying the necessity to develop an international security strategy adopted to new security challenges. A sober public debate on defense spending and expanded military engagement is necessary but difficult due to the pacifist attitude of the majority of Germans. Expanding Germany's military role will become only more difficult with right-wing populists fanning and using fear to further their own goals. These circumstances will make it more difficult to conduct an assertive foreign policy towards the east.

Germany is unlikely to become the leader of Europe or of the democratic world, as is suggested and even demanded by some of the country's partners. However, elites and a large portion of the population know very well that Germany's wealth depends on good relationships with its neighbors and with the wider world. Major international challenges can only be resolved in cooperation with countries in the immediate and extended neighborhood. For that reason, countries in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood can expect Germany to be a reliable partner in the future regardless of the outcome of the election.

Germany and other EU and NATO member states are not ready to take on new commitments by admitting new member states from Eastern Europe. However, close relationships on many levels will remain the goal. For example, Germany is playing an important role in the NATO program to improve Georgia's defense capacities, German soldiers recently took part in military exercises in Georgia, and Georgian soldiers are trained in Germany before beginning deployments in Afghanistan. Such activities help Georgia without giving Russia ammunition for denouncing further NATO expansion and, therefore, behaving aggressively toward Georgia.

The German government and others in Europe are under intense pressure to cope with the migrant situation as well as fight corruption and organized crime. On all these issues, there is high interest in cooperating with the countries of the Eastern Neighborhood. Any

success on these issues will increase German voters' acceptance of closer relationships with Eastern Neighborhood countries. For Georgia, the focus should not be on the election outcome but rather on cultivating closer cooperation with Germany on practical issues.

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