

## POLITICAL SHIFTS IN GERMANY

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Following the effective resignation of Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (AKK), the leader of the governing Christian Democratic Union (CDU, EPP), internal party elections for a successor to Chancellor Angela Merkel have been scheduled for 25 April in Berlin.

This note describes the importance of this transition in the context of German national politics, its impact on dynamics within the EPP political family and on the upcoming Council Presidency. It also addresses the potential for a feedback loop between Brussels and Berlin and some key actors in that respect in the coming period.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The CDU has been in power in Germany since 1982, with a stint of Social-Democrats (SPD, S&D) in power between 1998-2005.
- Merkel announced in 2018 that she would step down following the 2021 general election and hand-picked her successor – AKK – who narrowly won the vote at the 2018 Congress (51.5% of the votes), and within a year lost the confidence of the file and rank of CDU.
- There are three candidates to be the next leader, all from the same German State of North Rhine-Westphalia: **Armin Laschet**, **Friedrich Merz** and **Norbert Röttgen**.
- All three candidates have similar profiles: they all have a mix of national [incidentally, all three served in the Bundestag at the same time], European and executive experiences.
- The biggest issue for the new leadership will be positioning the CDU in the context of the climate change/energy transition (materialised at EU level by the proposed “Green Deal”), facing the challenge of the strong Green Party.
- At EU level, some of the European Parliament (EP) veterans and even newcomer MEPs could play an increasingly important role in the feedback loop between Brussels and Berlin.
- Germany’s Council Presidency (July-December 2020) should not be impacted in a major way, but policymaking at the national level is likely to become more complicated.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The CDU has not just been the dominant force of German politics for the past 70 years, but also the central political force in the EPP political family at EU level. Being in power in Germany since the early 1980s, with a short 7-year intermezzo at the turn of millennia, the CDU has also been a foremost political player on the EU stage at many crucial moments for the continent. Therefore, what happens in the CDU reverberates in Europe.

### WHAT HAPPENED?

Following the decision of Chancellor Angela Merkel in the late 2018 to withdraw from politics at the end of this mandate in 2021, CDU held a highly contested internal leadership election where Merkel’s handpicked candidate – AKK – narrowly emerged victorious over the two conservative candidates – former CDU official Friedrich Merz and Health Minister Jens Spahn. The campaign deepened the

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divisions between conservatives and pragmatic moderates in the party. Following the election of Ursula von der Leyen as European Commission (EC) President in July, AKK joined Merkel's cabinet in the vacated post of defence minister. This caused even more discontent among conservatives in the CDU and their Bavarian sister party – Christian Social Union (CSU) – for two reasons: the dropping of the CSU's EC President candidate and EPP Spitzenkandidat Manfred Weber, and installing AKK as defence minister, a post conservatives believed should have gone to Jens Spahn.

The dichotomy between the base and the leadership on a number of issues, including positions on green policies and political priorities, culminated in the botched reaction to a coalition forming in the eastern state of Thuringia where the CDU entered for a day in a coalition with the far right AfD party (ID). It served as a proof that AKK had no control over the party, prompting her effective resignation and soon afterwards a snap party Congress.

## WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Whoever becomes the new leader of the CDU is likely to stay outside the Cabinet and prepare for the general election in 2021. The practical purpose of this is twofold.

Firstly, in the German system, it is difficult to replace the sitting Chancellor without the general election. The CDU/CSU's coalition partner – the Social-Democrats (SPD, S&D) – said they would not support anyone else as the Chancellor but Merkel. Neither the CDU/CSU nor the SPD are facing outstanding polls, both losing about 6% compared to the 2017 election, making them unlikely to break the coalition at the moment<sup>1</sup>. The focus of CDU therefore will likely be inwards-looking, dealing with divisions in the party and healing somewhat shaken relations within the CDU/CSU coalition.

Secondly, the CDU will have to develop narratives for the 2021 election, where the biggest threat to the centre-right is coming from the Greens at the moment [CDU/CSU is at ~27%, with Greens at ~24%]. That is another reason for the next CDU leadership to stay outside the Cabinet, allowing them to place blame on the old leadership and coalition.

## WHO IS IN THE RUN?

There are three candidates for the top post at the moment [the field is not very likely to expand much]: Armin Laschet, the Minister President of the largest and arguably most important state in Germany – North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW); Friedrich Merz, who is offering himself to the delegates again after being narrowly defeated by AKK last time around; and Norbert Röttgen, former Environment minister and Chair of the Bundestag foreign affairs committee. All three men actually come from NRW, started their Bundestag careers together in 1994 and have been closely cooperating in different forms ever since. Combined with the lack of an official endorsement from the establishment [or a hand-picked candidate like the last time] at this early stage, it should provide for a smoother, less divisive campaign.

It is also worth noting that the influential young conservative Health Minister Jens Spahn decided to endorse Laschet and become his effective deputy, making the Westphalian a clear frontrunner. For their part, Merz and Röttgen pledged to appoint women as their deputy leaders.

**Armin Laschet** is a veteran politician with more than 25 years of legislative and executive experience. He served as a Bundestag member and an MEP (from 1999 to 2005, sitting in the committees on Budget and Foreign Affairs), Minister President of NRW and one of the deputy leaders of CDU. The son of a coal miner, he comes from a staunchly catholic conservative background, which should appease the concerns of conservatives within the CDU. He worked for a Bavarian newspaper, which could go a long way to repairing the shaken foundations of the CDU/CSU coalition. He is not an anti-establishment

<sup>1</sup> Latest polls can be found [HERE](#)

outsider, but rather a part of the CDU mainstream, being also part of minister Peter Altmaier's team for coalition negotiations with the SPD during the last government formation. While this 59-year-old lawyer may lack appeal to the youth, he might well compensate for with the endorsement of the party's rising star Jens Spahn.

**Friedrich Merz** is also an experienced politician and a lawyer by background. He served one term in the European Parliament (1989-1994 as a member of ECON committee) and was Laschet's colleague in the Bundestag since 1994. At the turn of the century, he succeeded Wolfgang Schäuble as the leader of the CDU/CSU group in the Bundestag only to be deposed by Angela Merkel upon her takeover of the party leadership – something he never forgave her for. Following a half-decade of disagreements with the CDU leader, Merz moved to the private sector where he worked mainly in the banking sector. In 2017, his former Bundestag colleague Laschet appointed him the Commissioner for Brexit and Transatlantic Relations, testifying to an amical relationship and mutual appreciation between the two. In the last leadership contest, Merz, aged 64, surprisingly emerged as a candidate of the youth and anti-establishment in CDU, finally losing the vote by 517 to 482 [3.5% difference].

**Norbert Röttgen** is the youngest of the three candidates – he is 54 years old – and the only career politician among them, having been in the CDU since his high-school days, risen through the party ranks of the Youth in NRW. He joined the Bundestag in 1994 together with the other two contenders. He was the leader of the CDU in NRW, the CDU/CSU whip in the Bundestag, federal minister for the environment in the CDU-FDP government (2009-2012), and now serves as the Chair of the foreign affairs committee, making him a well-rounded politician and a strong contender in this race. Though seemingly an establishment candidate, he has been a strong advocate for a more assertive Germany in the EU and globally. Should he become the CDU leader, he is likely to change the Merkel-era CDU's strategy of asymmetric demobilisation, reacting to political and policy developments rather than driving the narratives.

## POLITICAL AND POLICY RAMIFICATIONS

Recent surveys show worrying signs for the governing coalition. The CDU/CSU has been polling between 25 and 29% consistently throughout the last 6 months, a serious decline from the 2017 election results of nearly 33%. The SPD is measuring equal decrease of support oscillating between 12% and 15% support [down from 20% in 2017]. The biggest beneficiaries of the drop in support for the long-term coalition partners were the Greens, being now the second strongest political force with around 22% of support [down from 27% last June just after the European elections, when they were briefly in first place]. The leader of the Greens, Robert Habeck, has been consistently polled as a clear favourite in German preferences for the next Chancellor.

At the moment, there seems to be no great appetite for another Grand Coalition (GroKo) of CDU/CSU-SPD, nor mathematical support for another compromise government, neither among the voters nor the party rank and file in either coalition block. A hypothetical majority of the Greens, SPD and left-wing Left party seems possible, but a coalition with the Greens could spell a disaster for SPD and has been facing serious internal resistance.

There is already a coalition of the EPP party and the Greens in Austria [which has served as a political litmus for the EPP in the past] and, depending on their success, it could lead to a similar arrangement in Germany. Granted, making such a coalition in Austria has been easier, with the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP, EPP) clearly dominating with three times as many votes as the Greens, whereas in Germany the two are almost within the margin of error. Deciding how to position the CDU next to the Greens will be the biggest political challenge for the new leadership, both in the intermittent period before the next elections in late summer/early fall of 2021, and afterwards, in coalition negotiations or opposition to them [the two scenarios most likely to transpire as it stands].

## BRUSSELS FEEDBACK LOOP

Turbulence in the CDU will inevitably reflect on the positions of the German delegation in the EPP [and by extension the EPP itself], the German government in the Council and Germany's Presidency (July-December 2020). With that in mind, the CDU's MEPs from the NRW [unlike the other political parties in Germany, the CDU/CSU submit their lists for EU elections separately for each State] will become an increasingly important bridge and communication channel between Brussels and Berlin:

- **Stefan Berger**, who until 2019 served in the CDU leadership in the NRW Parliament;
- **Axel Voss**, who has been leading the most influential NRW branch of CDU for nearly a decade;
- **Sabine Verheyen**, who has been a member of CDU NRW leadership for close to 20 years; or
- **Markus Pieper**, who has been the highest ranking member of the CDU's NRW delegation in the EP within the party structures.

Depending on the CDU's strategic decision on how to position itself towards the Greens nationally, the role of the EPP's ENVI coordinator **Peter Liese**, who was in the CDU's youth leadership in NRW before joining the EP in 1994, could also prove important in Brussels.

## IMPACT ON THE GERMAN COUNCIL PRESIDENCY

It is highly unlikely that there will be a major impact on the German Presidency of the Council in the second half of the year. If anything, the lack of desire to take the responsibility for the long-term budget deal could help accelerate the negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Otherwise, a political lame-duck government [both Merkel and the SPD members of the government have lost the leadership of their respective parties] could find itself in a situation of acting as close as possible to a neutral honest broker, without having to worry about carrying the political capital into the 2021 election.

At the same time, with both the CDU's and the SPD's leaderships effectively being in opposition to their own government, this could complicate policymaking at the national level.