

The strength of the Christian Democrats, the weakness of the opposition. Germany before the parliamentary elections

Marta Zawilska-Florczuk

The political campaign before Germany's parliamentary elections to be held on 22 September has in all its glory reflected the trends visible during the last four years of the government of Chancellor Angela Merkel – the strength of the Christian Democrats, the weakness of the opposition and the increasing marginalisation of the coalition partner, the FDP. The CDU/CSU remains the most popular political choice in Germany, largely because Angela Merkel has consistently remained the most popular German politician. Everything indicates that the CDU/CSU will win the election, even though it has been running a passive campaign and the Chancellor herself has been avoiding confrontation, presenting herself as a kind of cross-party representative of the interests of all social groups. The Christian Democrats' main competitors, the Social Democrats, have been unable to play to their strengths and present themselves as a serious alternative to the CDU/CSU. The Christian Democrats, despite their difficult cooperation with the liberal FDP, have declared their willingness to continue doing so during the next parliamentary term. If the numbers make that impossible, and the Social Democrats and the Greens have too few votes to be able to form a government, a grand coalition of the Christian Democrats and the SPD will be formed in Germany.

The lacklustre electoral campaign gives the impression that there is no desire to change the ruling coalition. Also, polls suggest that the German public does not want a radical shake-up of the forces on the German political scene. This is despite the fact that the coalition of Christian Democrats and liberals, which was initially regarded as being bound to succeed because of the similarity of the parties' programmes, ironically turned out to be very confrontational. After just a few weeks, a dispute arose between the liberals and the Christian Democrats, and the FDP began to lose support dramatically (from over 14% to around 5% now). Conflicts

between the coalition partners, on matters including the protection of personal data and European policy, persisted for the entire term. As a result, the Chancellor became dependent on opposition support in the Bundestag, as in the vote on the aid package for Greece, and the vote on mechanisms for stabilising the euro. Summing up the current term of parliament, on the plus side the ruling coalition can point to starting the process of transforming energy policy, as well as reform of the *Bundeswehr* (the German defence forces). However, they have not succeeded in reforming the tax code and geriatric nursing.

The formal side of the election campaign

The campaign started three months before the elections, even though it had previously been declared that the campaigning season would be short. In reality, however, it has been running at least since the parties' appointment of their individual candidates for the office of Chancellor, i.e. the autumn of 2012.

The Federal Election Commission has allowed 38 parties to participate in the parliamentary elections.¹ As the polls indicate, the only groups with hopes of entering the Bundestag are those whose members have already been in parliament for years – the CDU/CSU, the SPD, the Greens, the FDP and the Left Party. In 2011-2012, it seemed that the Pirate Party would bring a new quality to German politics; they succeeded in entering four regional parliaments and for a long time enjoyed support at the federal level, with ratings similar to those achieved by the Left Party (about 7%). However, the success of the party proved to be a temporary phenomenon, which has passed as the crisis in its leadership has deepened.

As in previous years, the political parties have employed traditional methods of campaigning (rallies, discussions with parliamentary candidates, visits by local politicians to small businesses, farms, etc.). Debates between the CDU and SPD candidates and those of smaller parties have also been broadcast by the major private and state TV channels. The campaign conducted on the Internet, which aims to reach out to young people undecided on who to vote for, has been increasingly important. At the forefront of this is the Pirate Party, which has only a small campaign budget (about €400,000). The most dynamic election campaign, however, has

been run by the Social Democrats. They have the largest budget of all the parties seeking to enter the Bundestag (€23 million, compared to the CDU's €20 million)². 100 days before the elections, the Social Democrats' campaign staff launched a blog which scores every move made by the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition and keeps a tally of their electoral promises³. The Social Democrats are also the only opposition party to have presented a shadow cabinet.

The Christian Democrats' strong position under the wings of Angela Merkel...

Declared support for the Chancellor consistently runs above 50%, which makes her the most popular politician in Germany. Merkel is often referred to in the media as 'Mutti' (mum), and it appears that the role she has been given meets

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the expectations of German society. The Christian Democrats' high ratings are primarily due to Chancellor Merkel's popularity, and this is what the CDU/CSU's entire campaign has been based on. The Christian Democrats have not themselves initiated any discussion on issues that could determine the outcome of the election, and have avoided discrediting the opposition parties directly. Their campaign has been based on presenting the CDU/CSU-FDP government's achievements, and on responding to attacks by the opposition parties. This passive

¹ In addition to the well-known smaller parties (such as the Pirate Party, the Free Voters, *Alternative für Deutschland* and the nationalist NPD), various groupings will stand which have no realistic chance of getting a noticeable number of votes, such as the Animal Protection Party, the Party of German Pensioners, and the Party of Christian Bible Believers.

² <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/millionenaufwand-spd-goennt-sich-groesstes-wahlkampf-budget-a-905334.html>

³ For example, the CDU's election programme appeared on the blog before the Christian Democrats officially published it.

election campaign has brought positive results for the Christian Democrats. Despite the decisions and political events that could have had a negative effect on their ratings (such as Germany's position on the eurozone crisis, reports of a subsequent tranche of aid to Greece, and the scandal connected to the surveillance of Germany by US and UK intelligence), the number of people declaring themselves ready to vote for the CDU/CSU runs at 40%, about 20 percentage points higher than for the SPD. Merkel herself has adopted a campaign position which is almost non-partisan; she has been making media appearances and meeting voters, but has avoided taking any clear positions on political disputes or entering any open confront-

The Social Democrats' election campaign has not had the expected results. This is a result of the Christian Democrats' strategy and the lack of charisma of the SPD's candidate for chancellor Peer Steinbrück.

tation with her rivals for the post of Chancellor. Instead, the CDU's attacks of the opposition have been led by trusted associates, such as the Head of the Chancellor's Office Ronald Pofalla (in connection with the surveillance scandal), and the defence minister Thomas de Maizière (in connection with the failed purchase of the Euro Hawk unmanned aircraft). The Chancellor's behaviour during the campaign is not really surprising, since Merkel is known for waiting to see how events develop, and for only taking important decisions when it is inevitable.

... and the impotence of the opposition parties

Since the beginning of the campaign, the opposition parties (particularly the SPD and the Greens) have attempted to exploit the government's weaknesses in the political struggle.

In the initial phase of the election campaign, the dominant themes were energy and the eurozone crisis. Although these issues should have brought the opposition supporters, the balance of the opinion polls has not changed. This is because despite differences in the details, most parties agree on the fundamentals: the rescue of the euro area through in-depth reform in the countries threatened by the crisis, and the need to continue the transformation of Germany's energy policy. The Social Democrats and the Greens supported Merkel's European policy in the Bundestag votes on the eurozone rescue mechanisms, so now they find it difficult to portray themselves as any kind of real opposition in the eyes of potential voters. Despite the general belief that the Germans contribute most to the stability of the euro area, there has not been any notable public support for the *Alternative für Deutschland* party, which was established as a form of criticism of the currency union⁴. As for energy policy, the Christian Democrats have successfully taken over the arguments which belonged to the Greens and the Social Democrats before the announcement in 2011 of the revision of the national energy policy. The opposition's allegations – that the project has received insufficient financing, that the percentage of energy from renewable sources in the German energy plan is too small, and that the costs have been unevenly distributed – have not harmed the CDU/CSU's poll numbers. The Social Democrats and the Greens have also tried in their electoral campaigns to exploit the surveillance of German telecommunications by US and British special forces, as well as the Defence Ministry's expensive failure to purchase five Euro Hawk unmanned aircraft. The opposition succeeded in calling a parliamentary commission of inquiry on the Euro Hawk affair, which questioned the defence minister Thomas de Maizière, a close ally of Merkel. However, the

⁴ According to a poll conducted on 1 September 2013 by the Emnid research institute, only 3% of those eligible voters would vote for the party.

SPD and the Greens failed to discredit the policy or the Christian Democrats themselves. The commission completed its work, and the issue of the Defence Ministry's mismanagement was overshadowed by international issues, including reports of another tranche of aid to Greece and the debate on military intervention in Syria. It is these issues which will dominate the final phase of the election campaign. While the Christian Democrats and the SPD have criticised potential military involvement in Syria, a more skilful attack on the need to take further funds out of the federal budget to help Greece would be more likely to harm the CDU/CSU's popularity in the last stage of the campaign.

The Social Democrats' election campaign has not so far brought the expected results. This is both the result of the Christian Democrats' effective strategy based on the popularity of Chancellor Merkel, and the lack of charisma of the SPD's candidate for chancellor, Peer Steinbrück. Since the beginning of the election campaign he has committed gaffes, including criticising the salary of the Chancellor of Germany as 'too low', and has a reputation as a rigid bureaucrat, which does not bring him much popularity⁵. In addition, the Social Democrats disagree on the Agenda 2010 economic reform package, implemented in 2003, which allowed the German economy to recover and they cannot take advantage of this asset in the election campaign.

And after the elections?

A few weeks before the parliamentary elections, the Christian Democrats are in the most comfortable position. According to the polls, they will win the most votes, and they have the most coalition options. However, even if someone else did become Chancellor, the main assumptions of German policy will not change. The priorities of the new government will continue to be the fight

⁵ Around 30% support at the beginning of September 2013.

with the eurozone crisis and the energy policy. According to public opinion polls taken on 10 September, the Christian Democrats (40%), the Social Democrats (25%), the Greens (11%), the FDP (5%) and the Left Party (9%) will enter the Bundestag. The latter group has no chance of forming a coalition, as the other parties have renounced cooperation with it at the federal level, due either to policy differences (the Christian Democrats and the Liberals) or personal issues (the Social Democrats)⁶. The CDU/CSU has the most comfortable negotiating position. Arithmetically, it can form three different variants of coalition: with the FDP, the SPD, and the Greens. If the FDP manages to cross the 5% elec-

If the numbers do not favour a CDU/CSU-FDP coalition, the most realistic scenario is a grand coalition between the Christian Democrats and the SPD.

toral threshold, and the Christian Democrats maintain or increase their lead over the other parties, the present coalition is likely to continue after the elections. Government in coalition with the FDP revealed significant differences of views (including the rescue of the euro area and the protection of personal data), but the dramatically lower support for the liberal party has weakened their position, while strengthening the Christian Democrats' position in the formation of a new government. Unlike in 2009, the CDU has not stated in its electoral manifesto that the FDP is its preferred coalition partner⁷,

⁶ The Left Party was founded in 2007, including on the basis of the WASG protest movement created by a split in the SPD.

⁷ Unlike in 2009, the Christian Democrats have clearly emphasised the importance of casting both votes (for the candidate directly and for the party list) for the CDU/CSU. Chancellor Merkel has called for this in the party's TV commercials, and also stressed it during a televised debate with Peer Steinbrück. In previous elections, many people deliberately voted for the FDP (the party list votes decide the distribution of seats in the Bundestag) to allow a coalition between the Christian Democrats and the liberals.

but Chancellor Merkel has expressed a desire to continue cooperation with the liberals after the election. The FDP has clearly emphasised that they are not interested in any other coalition. If there are not enough parliamentary seats to recreate the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition, the most realistic scenario is a grand coalition between the Christian Democrats and the SPD. This is the preferred option for 44% of poll respondents⁸. The Christian Democrats/Social Democrats government in 2005-2009 ran smoothly and without major conflicts. The Christian Democrats have not dissociated themselves from this possibility, as indicated by the moderate tone of the pre-election TV debate between Merkel and Steinbrück. Nor have the Social Democrats ruled out this scenario. Cooperation with the

Regardless of which parties form the new coalition, the principal direction of German policy will be maintained. European matters and energy transformation policy will be most important in the 2013-2017 term.

Christian Democrats, however, carries the risk of weakening the SPD; it would definitely be the junior partner in any coalition government with the CDU/CSU. Besides, the Christian Democrats' skilful takeover of subjects previously reserved to the Social Democrats (such as social policy) reflected negatively on the SPD's poll ratings after the grand coalition came to an end⁹. For this reason, the Social Democrats would be more comfortable working with the Greens, as they did in 1998-2002. It is possible that the Christian Democrats would also undertake coalition negotiations with the Green Party. A government of these parties would be un-

precedented at the federal level, although the CDU and the Greens have already governed together in Hamburg in 2008-2010. These parties certainly would find a common language on issues related to energy and the environment, which would facilitate the implementation of the energy transformation policy. However, their differences in general political outlook, especially on fiscal policy, would make such a coalition very unlikely because of the opposition each party would face from within. The distribution of power in the Bundesrat, the chamber of parliament in which representatives of the federal states (*Länder*) sit, will be important for the coalition negotiations. Currently, the Social Democrats and the Greens have an absolute majority that allows them to block bills proposed by the federal government. In this case, an SPD/Green coalition would therefore be most likely to implement reforms smoothly. In this respect the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition would be in the most difficult situation. Also, a grand coalition would not have the needed number of votes in the Bundesrat; it could only count on the support of states in which the Christian Democrats or the SPD govern singlehandedly, or in those already run by grand coalitions between the two. Federal states ruled by the government parties in coalition with another partner usually abstain from voting. The balance of power will not be changed by the elections to the parliaments of Bavaria and Hesse (on 15 and 22 September).

Regardless of which parties create the new coalition, the principal directions of German policy will be maintained. European matters and the continuation of the energy transformation policy will be the most important problems in the 2013-2017 term. In the case of European policy, the future government will continue to favour fighting the debt crisis by emphasising the need for far-reaching reforms. Regarding energy, the priority will be to expand the transmission networks connecting the north and south of Germany, to create storage capacity for renewable

⁸ According to a survey conducted in July 2013 on behalf of ARD television, such a government would be considered best by 44% of Germans, and 46% believe the current shape of the government would be best.

⁹ In the parliamentary elections in 2009, the SPD received the worst result in its history, a mere 23% of the vote.

electricity, and to provide funding for the transformation (i.e. to convert the German power industry to green technologies) without placing undue burdens on households and businesses. The *Energiewende* (energy transformation) is seen by all the parties which could potentially create a governing coalition as a German export product. If an SPD/Green coalition is created, it

is expected to create a separate Ministry of Energy. Major changes may occur in the areas of integration and fiscal policy. If the SPD and the Greens form the government, dual citizenship for non-EU nationals born on German territory will be legalised, and a minimum wage will be introduced. We may also expect an increase in tax rates for the highest earners.

APPENDIX

Summary of selected points from the election programmes of those parties which could form a coalition

| | CDU/CSU | SDP | FDP | Greens |
|---------------------|---|--|--|--|
| Economy and finance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The introduction of a minimum wage, set by social partners in sectors where there is no collective bargaining - Support for small- and medium-sized enterprises by maintaining labour costs at a stable level - Setting a limit on rent increases for apartments at 15% over the next three years - No agreement on raising taxes - Elimination of so-called tax drainage | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reducing the number of junk contracts and fixed-term contracts - Equal pay for men and women - Introduction of a minimum wage of at least €8.50 - Increase in capital tax - Increase in capital gains tax from 25% to 32% - Introduction of financial transaction tax - Increase the tax on the highest earners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lowering tax thresholds for individuals and businesses - Combating so-called tax drainage - Adding a brake on tax increases for individuals above a certain limit to the constitution - Privatisation of state-owned enterprises | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support for small and medium-sized businesses through tax credits - Increase in tax on capital - Increase the tax on the highest earners - Reducing the number of junk and fixed-term contracts - Equal pay for men and women - Introduction of a minimum wage of at least €8.50 |
| Energy policy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expansion of the electricity transmission and storage network - Faster construction of modern coal- and gas-fired power plants - Increase public acceptance of energy transformation by creating opportunities for the financial participation of citizens in emerging networks - Increasing energy efficiency - Promoting a common European energy market - Improving the safety of European nuclear power plants - Creating a radioactive waste storage facility in Germany | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Greater use of the eastern federal states in the production of energy from renewable sources - Better coordination and management of energy transformation - Reduction of excise duty on electricity - Financial support for citizens by increasing the energy efficiency of buildings - Covering 20% of heat energy from renewable sources - Building up small power plants and local structures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reducing the excise duty on electricity - Making renewables compulsory as the largest share in the energy network on the common EU energy market - A partnership with North African countries in the field of energy from renewable sources - Decentralisation of energy production - Increasing competition on the German and European gas market | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - All electricity production from renewable energy sources by 2030 - Modern gas power plants as backup during lower wind and solar energy production - Germany as a model region in the context of smart grids - Decentralisation of electricity supply - Increase the participation of citizens in the production and transport of energy - Expansion of the transmission grid - Total abandonment of coal from 2030, and the gradual abandonment of oil - Abolition of privileges and subsidies for businesses - Reduction of energy consumption in private households |

| | CDU/CSU | SDP | FDP | Greens |
|--------------------|---|--|--|--|
| The European Union | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The establishment of a European banking union - Strengthening the European Commission's rights to oversee national budgets - The introduction of a competitiveness pact, in which states pledge to the Commission that they will undertake specific measures to improve competitiveness in exchange for aid and loan guarantees - Dismiss the possibility of introducing Eurobonds - Strengthening the role of the EU's High Representative for the CFSP - The granting of a membership perspective for the Western Balkans - No agreement on Turkey's accession to the EU, both because of its unpreparedness for membership, as well as 'accession overload' - Giving the German and French languages equal priority with English in EU institutions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The opportunity to create a common fund for the eurozone, to allow some of the southern countries to repay their debts - Comprehensive regulation of financial markets, including the strengthening of European supervision of major banks - The elimination of the electoral threshold in EP elections - The possibility of the transfer of competences from the European to the national level - Strengthening the CFSP - Agreement on the accession of Turkey and the Western Balkan countries to the EU | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rejection of eurobonds - The right of veto for the Bundesbank's representative in the ECB - Opposition to the creation of national funds to save banks threatened with collapse in the banking union - The ultimate goal of integration should be the establishment of a federal state - EP should be given the right of legislative initiative - Direct election of the President of the European Commission in a general election - Agreement on enlarging the EU, on condition the candidates are prepared (including Turkey and Ukraine), and that the EU has the capacity to integrate new members - The abolition of visas for citizens of the Eastern & Southern Partnerships and Turkey | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The creation of a common eurozone fund to repay the debts of the southern states - The introduction of Eurobonds in the long term - The possibility of EU enlargement with the Western Balkans and Turkey - The abolition of visas for citizens of the Eastern Partnership countries, Russia, Kosovo and Turkey - Legislative initiative for PE - Selection by the EP of the EC's President - Grant asylum seekers the right to choose which country the application will be made in |
| Foreign policy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The creation of a new partnership agreement with Russia to deepen the liberalisation of the visa regime for businessmen, academics and students; strengthening cooperation with the Baltics, and in the fields of foreign and security policy - To promote a free trade agreement with the US - Strategic partnerships with emerging powers - Development of relations with regional organisations (ASEAN, MERCOSUR) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Policy towards Russia based on economic, political and social dialogue within the Partnership for Modernisation, the need for greater visa liberalisation - Strengthen transatlantic cooperation through the signing of a free-trade agreement, increase cooperation with the US in the Middle East, and mediate in dialogue with Russia - Strategic partnerships with emerging powers - Strengthening cooperation with countries in Africa and South America - Creation of an additional body in the Bundestag to supervise the government's arms export policy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improve current relations (especially economic) with Russia and conduct a critical dialogue on civil rights and the abolition of visas - Achieving a free trade agreement is the strategic objective of cooperation with the US - Expansion of political and economic relations with emerging powers - To strengthen defence cooperation with Poland within the Weimar Triangle | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Restrictive arms export policy: abolition of the Federal Security Council, and export decisions should be taken by the government unanimously instead - Creation of an additional body in the Bundestag to supervise the government's arms export policy |

EDITORS: Olaf Osica, Anna Kwiatkowska-Drożdż

Katarzyna Kazimierska, Anna Łabuszewska

TRANSLATION: Jim Todd

DTP: Bohdan Wędrychowski

Centre for Eastern Studies

Koszykowa 6a, 00-564 Warsaw

phone: +48 | 22 | 525 80 00

e-mail: info@osw.waw.pl

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