

The dismissal of the German minister for the natural environment – Chancellor Angela Merkel goes on the offensive

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On 16 May, the German president, Joachim Gauck, acting upon a motion by Chancellor Angela Merkel, dismissed Norbert Roettgen (CDU) from the post of minister for the natural environment of Germany. The justification for the dismissal of Roettgen, who is the head of the CDU in North Rhine-Westphalia, was his unsuccessful electoral campaign and the defeat of the Christian Democrats in the parliamentary election on 13 May (the CDU achieved the worst result in the history of elections in this federal state). This gave rise to criticism from many prominent politicians from the CDU and the CSU, who publically demanded his dismissal. Roettgen was seen as one of the closest associates of Chancellor Merkel, and even her potential successor. The new head of the ministry for the natural environment, which is now among the key ministries, will be Peter Altmaier (CDU), the secretary of the CDU/CSU in the Bundestag. Altmaier has not yet dealt with the energy sector. In 2005–2009, he was the parliamentary secretary at the ministry of internal affairs. Altmaier has a reputation of being a trusted aide to Angela Merkel and is a respected figure in the Christian Democrats.

Commentary

- Such a sudden and ostentatious dismissal of a minister (politicians had previously resigned voluntarily) happens for the first time since Angela Merkel took office as German chancellor. The manner in which this dismissal was carried out proves that she has completely lost confidence in him. Merkel blamed Rottgen not only for the Christian Democrats' electoral defeat in North Rhine-Westphalia (he announced that the election in this federal state was a plebiscite of support for the financial policy of Chancellor Merkel, which gave rise to accusations of disloyalty) but also for errors in the implementation of the key project of this government, the energy transformation (*Energiewende*), which is aimed at rearranging the German economy so that it is more based on renewable energy sources.
- As a consequence of the increasing criticism of the way the energy transformation has been carried out (including the lack of progress in the development of transmission networks and the high costs of the rapid withdrawal from the use of nuclear power) and

the increasingly frequent appeals for improving the coordination of actions (currently, several ministries are in charge of *Energiewende*, with different levels of responsibility) Merkel decided to take over control of this large project herself. Therefore, she needs the minister for the natural environment to be a loyal and efficient aide, someone who will deal with the implementation of the necessary reforms without his own political ambitions being involved and will be supported by other Christian Democrat politicians and the governments of the federal states.

- This decisive move made by Chancellor Merkel is also a demonstration of her strong position in the party and the government, and is aimed at consolidating the Christian Democrats (elections to the Bundestag will be held in autumn 2013). The Christian Democrats' position is still relatively strong. In opinion polls, they have been above the SPD for many months. The SPD has not been able to achieve support levels above 30% and has no strong leader. Although the popularity of Hannelore Kraft, the leader of the SPD in North Rhine-Westphalia has been rising since the recent local election, she still claims she will not run for the post of German chancellor. The CDU and its coalition partner, the FDP, are losing power in more and more federal states. Therefore, to be able to win at the federal level, Chancellor Merkel must implement the two main tasks of the government: it must overcome the crisis in the eurozone and carrying through the energy transformation in Germany.