

Westerwelle will no longer lead the FDP

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Guido Westerwelle made this decision under pressure from increasing opposition inside the party and because the polls show an exceptionally low level of support for the FDP. The criticism of Westerwelle as the leader of the FDP increased as the party sustained one defeat after another in recent local elections. On 5 April, members of the party's presidium and local FDP leaders announced that Westerwelle would be replaced by Philipp Rösler, the current health minister in the central government. Despite this, the FDP's situation is far from stable. Now that this party will be led by a representative of the team of young ambitious politicians, a conflict with the more experienced and conservative members of the party's presidium and with representatives of the FDP in the federal government may be expected. If Rösler wants to reinforce his position after the May election, he should aim at a reshuffle in the government and taking charge of a ministry which provides more opportunities for self-promotion. Considering both his personal competences and the governmental agency rank, the most natural solution for Rösler would be to become minister of economy. However, this would automatically mean a confrontation with the currently popular and influential head of this ministry, Rainer Brüderle (FDP). The party could also improve its image by replacing the current foreign minister since the activity of Guido Westerwelle is evaluated very negatively by both public opinion and part of his own political team.

The FDP's position on the German political scene

The FDP, having been in opposition for eleven years, in autumn 2009, formed a government coalition at the federal level with the Christian Democrats. The FDP regained public support and achieved its best result in history in the 2009 elections to the Bundestag (14.6%), thus getting 93 of the 622 parliamentary seats, mainly owing to Guido Westerwelle, who had been chosen to lead this party in 2001. Westerwelle was nominated as deputy chancellor and minister of foreign affairs in the new cabinet. The FDP has four more ministers in Angela Merkel's government: minister of justice (Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger), minister of economy (Rainer Brüderle), minister of health (Philipp Rösler) and minister of developmental assistance (Dirk Niebel).

However, the FDP was unable to maintain its record support for long. A scandal related to a law granting tax allowances to hotel owners, as a result of which the FDP was accused of clientelist practices, broke out soon after the elections. German public opinion also negatively evaluated the long-standing dispute between the Liberals and the Christian Democrats over Erika Steinbach's (from the CDU) candidacy for membership in the board of

the Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation. The FDP was seen as the one which had provoked the conflict. The FDP, being a liberal party, has also not managed to fulfil its key electoral promise—tax reduction. Furthermore, Guido Westerwelle has been regularly criticised for his lack of successes as foreign minister – most recently for his decision to abstain from voting at the UN Security Council on the resolution regarding Libya. According to polls, he is the least popular foreign minister since the reunification of Germany. In effect, public support for the FDP over the past few months has been at 5%, the level of the electoral threshold. As a result of the recent local elections, the FDP no longer has representatives in the *Landtage* of Saxony-Anhalt and Rhineland-Palatinate, and barely crossed the election threshold in its key federal state, Baden-Württemberg (5.3% of the votes), where it had ruled in a coalition with the Christian Democrats. Now, the FDP is represented in fourteen of the sixteen local parliaments. This party is a member of the government coalitions in six federal states.

The reasons behind Westerwelle's decision

Despite the difficult situation in which the Liberals had found themselves in under Westerwelle's leadership, his decision not to run for re-election as the party's president is surprising. The consequences of the defeats were to be taken by the local FDP leaders in particular regions. However, at the end of last week, Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger, the influential leader of the Bavarian FDP, who is also minister of justice in the federal government, backed the coalition of local politicians (mainly from Thuringia and Schleswig-Holstein) demanding Westerwelle's resignation. He also lost the unconditional support of the 'young team': Philipp Rösler (38) and Christian Lindner (the 32-year-old secretary general of the FDP). Westerwelle most likely assumed that he would not be able to regain his position in the party before its May convention in Rostock. Thus his resignation from the positions of party leader and vice chancellor of Germany can be treated as an escape forward, which is intended to calm those dissatisfied and at the same time will allow him to keep his post as foreign minister. It also offers the FDP a chance to dissociate itself from its recent failures, to pin the blame for them on Westerwelle, and to try to regain support under a new leader. It was agreed during the joint meeting of the FDP's presidium and regional leaders on 5 April that Rösler would seek election as the party's president. This swift decision on Westerwelle's successor is aimed at preventing the magnification of the impression of disunity and lack of leadership in the FDP. However, this 'new start' may succeed on condition that a reshuffle is made in the federal government and that Rösler takes charge of one of the two prestigious ministries available now to the Liberals: the ministry of economy or the foreign ministry. One of the arguments for the former option is his experience as he already held the post of economy minister in the local government of Lower Saxony in 2009. In turn, the argument for the latter option is the German political custom, which has been established over the past few years, according to which the head of the smaller coalition party holds the posts of deputy chancellor and foreign minister.

The impact on the federal government

The FDP's new president will focus now primarily on improving his support inside his party. The federal government is awaiting a reshuffle; whether it will be major or minor will depend on the strategy Philipp Rösler adopts and his success in pushing it through in the FDP. Whatever the outcome, the change in the FDP's leadership will weaken – at least at first – this party's position in dealing with its stronger Christian Democrat partner in the government coalition. The title of deputy chancellor will not offer any especial prerogatives to the new FDP head, and directing the Ministry of Health, which Rösler is doing at present, is a difficult task, now that a controversial healthcare system reform is underway in Germany.

If Westerwelle keeps his position as the minister of foreign affairs, the tendency towards weakening the foreign ministry's and strengthening the Chancellery's influence on the shaping of German foreign policy, which has been observed in this country since the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, will grow further.

Appendix

Philipp Rösler was born in 1973 in Vietnam. As a nine-month old baby he was adopted from a Catholic orphanage in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) by a German couple. He was brought up in Germany. He served in the Bundeswehr as a paramedic. He graduated from medical studies.

It can be said that the symbolic start of Rösler's political engagement took place in 1992, when he joined the FDP's youth organisation. He was party secretary in Lower Saxony in 2000–2004. He chaired the FDP's parliamentary grouping in Lower Saxony from 2003. He was elected head of the FDP in this federal state in 2006. He served as the minister of economy and deputy prime minister of Lower Saxony between February and November 2009, and since then has held the post the minister of health in the federal government. Rösler is married and has two daughters. He is a Catholic and a member of the general assembly of the Central Committee of German Catholics.