

The debate between the candidates for German chancellor reveals no clear winner

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The debate between Angela Merkel (CDU) and Peer Steinbrück (SPD) was aired on TV on 1 September. This was the first direct confrontation of the major candidates for German chancellor ahead of the election to the Bundestag scheduled for 22 September. The discussion was calm and to the point. Domestic policy issues were predominant in the debate, such as problems linked to the labour market, fiscal policy and the healthcare system, and also the energy transformation (*Energiewende*) and German wire tapping by US and British secret services. The only foreign policy issues raised were the possible intervention in Syria and the eurozone crisis. The issues which revealed the greatest differences between the candidates were the SPD's proposal to raise taxes on the highest incomes and the minimum wage. The visions of the next steps Germany should take in the eurozone crisis presented by Merkel and Steinbrück did not differ much. While Merkel was emphasising the need to continue structural reforms, Steinbrück wanted to shift the focus from the requirement to severely cut spending aimed at stimulating the economies of the countries in recession. Both of them ruled out the participation of German troops in a possible military intervention in Syria. However, Merkel emphasised that a reaction from the international community was necessary and that she would continue talks regarding this subject with the presidents of Russia and China, and also of the G20 states.

Commentary

- As expected, the debate followed the pattern characteristic of this year's pre-election rivalry. The SPD's candidate was more active in the discussion, while Chancellor Merkel focused on fending off criticism and emphasising the achievements of the government she leads. However, Steinbrück did not manage to launch a successful attack on Merkel and to present himself as a more reliable politician.
- Not even the topics which had polarised the public opinion, such as another instalment of aid for Greece, were able to add spark to the discussion. This is due to the fact that the CDU and the SPD agree on the essence of the points of the management of the eurozone crisis which are the most important for Germany. Both the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats have shifted over the past few years to the centre of the political scene; and thus their manifestos are becoming increasingly similar. Furthermore, Angela

Merkel is skilfully taking over the issues which have previously been seen as the domain of the Social Democrats, such as the pro-family policy or (as in this election campaign) the cost of renting a flat.

- The mild tone of the debate could also be an effect of the Christian Democrats' strong position and the great likelihood that Angela Merkel will continue as chancellor, and also of the plans to build a grand coalition (CDU/CSU-SPD) after the election. The coalition could be formed, unless the CDU/CSU (current support level at 40%) and the SPD (25%) garner a sufficient number of votes to enter into a coalition with the partners of their preference: the FDP (6%) and the Green Party (12%), respectively. The arguments in favour of a grand coalition include the fact that the same coalition in 2005–2009 operated much more smoothly and with less conflicts than the cabinet composed of the Christian Democrats and the FDP, despite the fact that their policies are outwardly more similar. A grand coalition would also be backed by the public. Neither of the candidates have explicitly ruled out co-governing with their main competitor on the political scene.