

Germany: the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats in coalition talks

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On 20 October, the SPD members decided to enter into coalition talks with CDU/CSU after three rounds of exploratory discussions. The negotiations start on 24 October. The Green Party, sounded the CDU/CSU out in two meetings but finally withdrew from further talks with the Christian Democrats on 15 October. The Social Democrats have thus become their only potential coalition partners. Politicians from the SPD are likely to take advantage of this during the negotiations, to force the Christian Democrats to make concessions regarding the political agenda and ministerial posts. On the other hand, the CDU and CSU received the best result at the elections and will thus seek to maintain the position of stronger coalition partner. This heralds protracted and arduous talks which may last until the end of December.

The Christian Democrats' difficult situation

Despite achieving the best result in the election to the Bundestag (over 41% of the vote) the Christian Democrats are in an exceptionally difficult situation. They are only five seats short of being able to form a government on their own. They are the strongest group in parliament but they are paradoxically more dependent on their potential coalition partners than before. Their natural coalition partner, the FDP, did not gain enough votes to enter parliament and so, in order to avoid a new election being called, the Christian Democrats have to establish co-operation with one of the opposition parties – either the SPD or the Greens. In both cases this requires concessions be made to the coalition partner. The Christian Democrats would find it easier to cooperate with the Greens, despite their views and political manifestos being apparently more divergent than would be the case with the SPD. This is because the Greens are a smaller party and could not thus impose their conditions to such an extent as the Social Democrats and they would demand fewer ministerial posts.

Why the Greens withdrew from coalition talks

The strength of the Christian Democrats proved to be an obstacle in forming a coalition with the Greens. Preliminary talks were held in a peaceful and calm atmosphere but the Green Party decided against entering coalition talks due to being concerned that they would be dominated by the CDU/CSU in a possible coalition government. The FDP provides an example of how small parties run the risk of being marginalised when forming part of a

coalition government. After four years of co-operation with the Christian Democrats, the FDP polled below the 5% electoral threshold, despite having gained over 18% in the previous election. Changes in the Green party's leadership and the need to establish their future priorities were another reason why they withdrew from coalition talks. Angela Merkel took over the most important item on the Greens' political agenda—Germany's energy transformation towards renewable sources of energy (*Energiewende*), leaving the Green Party needing to find a new slogan which will provide it with credibility. A part of the former leadership of the Green Party stepped down following the party's poor performance in the election and the new party leaders need to gain experience and show which direction they want to take in the future. This is much more easily done when in opposition than in government where the Greens would have to deal with consequences of all political decisions.

The main hurdles in negotiations between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats

Before entering into talks, the SPD announced a catalogue of its 10 demands. It has made the establishment of a coalition with the CDU/CSU dependent on whether these demands are fulfilled. The demands include: the introduction of a minimum wage of €8.50 an hour, the curbing of rising rents, the taxing of financial transactions, that dual citizenship be extended to people from outside the EU and the Schengen countries, making pensions in the east and in the west of Germany equal and increasing allowances for those taking care of the elderly and the seriously ill. However, one of the SPD's most important election slogans was missing from the catalogue of the demands – that the highest tax threshold be increased. This demand was firmly rejected by politicians from the CDU/CSU. The Social Democrats' catalogue of demands may mean that the party leadership is inclined to form a coalition and that the proposed demands are intended to reassure regional SPD circles which are reluctant to work with the Christian Democrats. It may also be intended to emphasise that the SPD will not allow itself to be reduced to the role of a much less important partner in the government. Certain Christian Democrats are signalling their willingness to make concessions, for example in the case of the minimum wage and dual citizenship. The largest conflicts may be caused by personnel issues and the number of ministries allocated to each party. The Social Democrats will certainly insist on taking the Ministry of Finance, which the CDU considers to be the most important. The party will also seek to take the Ministry of Labour and to concentrate the competences related to energy into one ministry (at present they are divided between several ministries). Bavaria's CSU, strengthened by good results in the election for Bavaria's parliament and the Bundestag, will also demand a larger number of posts than before.

A grand coalition – not an easy task?

Despite Chancellor Merkel's declarations that she is seeking to establish a government as quickly as possible, the coalition talks may take several months. The last session of talks has been pencilled in for the end of November and politicians have set the end of December as the deadline for the establishment of the government. Before the election it seemed that a grand coalition of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats would be the best

solution for Germany and would guarantee effective governance and the introduction of indispensable reforms. This resulted from strong support in society for this coalition scenario and the good experiences of co-governance between 2005 and 2009. However, preliminary talks and announcements from politicians before opening talks indicate that work undertaken by a potential new CDU/CSU/SPD government may be full of clashes. On the one hand, in the Bundestag the ruling parties would dominate the opposition as taken together they hold 80% of all the seats. Thus the opposition would not have the required number of seats (25%) necessary in order to set up investigative commissions. This would substantially facilitate the government's work but limit parliament's self-monitoring function. On the other hand, difficulties should be expected in developing the coalition partners' joint positions. These parties will compete for domination – the CDU/CSU as the stronger partner and the SPD as a coalition partner without whom the Christian Democrats would not stand a chance of ruling the country.

This will not necessarily lead to complete paralysis in Germany's possible new government as the parties are in agreement about crucial issues such as European policy. Decisions will however be delayed, which will not make it easier to effectively solve problems.