

Thuringia: the first post-Communist state premier

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Bodo Ramelow, a politician from the post-Communist Left Party (*Die Linke*) was elected minister-president of Thuringia on 5 December. This is the first time a post-Communist has been elected head of a federal state since the unification of Germany. His election was preceded by protests by politicians from various political parties across Germany and associations of victims of the East German Communist regime. Coming less than a month after the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and less than a year before the 25th anniversary of the unification of Germany, for some this is an event which symbolically rehabilitates the party which is the successor of the SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, the Social Unity Party of Germany, the party which governed in East Germany). For others this proves that the German political system has had a positive effect on making the agenda of this radically left-wing party more realistic. Although Thuringia has a population of only 2.2 million, the consequences of Ramelow's election will reverberate far beyond the borders of Thuringia and changes in the local balance of powers, since this will also have an impact on federal policy.

The coalition's Social Democratic agenda

Bodo Ramelow (58) is a trade union activist. He leads a coalition formed by the post-Communists, the SPD and the Green Party which has only a one-vote lead in the local parliament consisting of 91 members. Therefore, some commentators are speculating that the government will not see out the full term in office.

Ramelow became minister-president despite his grouping receiving the second largest level of support (28.2%) during the election. The election was won, as has been usual over the past 24 years, by the CDU (33.5%). However, the SPD (which this time had a support level of 12.4%), which co-governed Thuringia with the CDU in the last term in office, stung by the CDU's attacks during the election campaign, did not want to join a grand coalition once again. The Green Party (5.7%) also decided not to form an alliance with the CDU, and chose the left-wing camp instead. The CDU will be in opposition for the first time since 1990. Another opposition party, the Alternative for Germany, succeeded in entering the *Landtag* of Thuringia for the first time with 10.6% of the vote, but was unsuccessful in its offer to forge an alliance with the CDU against the left-wing parties. This signifies a possible reshuffle among the CDU leadership in Thuringia. Christine Lieberknecht (the regional CDU leader who until recently served as the minister-president of Thuringia) will be replaced by Mike Mohring (the head of the CDU faction in *Thuringia*).

The coalition agreement signed on 4 December by the new government of Thuringia envisages, for example, ensuring better access to preschools, investments in the renewable energy sector, intensified control of the Thuringian Office for the Protection of the Constitution (including reducing the possibilities of recruiting undercover operatives to a minimum). This has been done in response to the irregularities discovered at the office during the investigation concerning the neo-Nazi terrorist group NSU (*Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund* – the National Socialist Underground) which was responsible for killing ten people. Furthermore, the red-red-green coalition wants to launch additional programmes to support the unemployed and low wage earners, to withhold deportations of refugees who have been rejected the right to stay in Germany in the winter season, and to reduce the number of districts. The document also includes a statement that East Germany was a “unjust state” (*Unrechtsstaat*). Furthermore, Ramelow in his speech after the vote at the *Landtag* apologised to the victims of the SED regime and promised to continue the process aimed at holding the former Communist governments accountable. This was the condition for the SPD and the Green Party to join the coalition with Die Linke.

The dissonance in Berlin

The SPD’s decision to co-operate with Die Linke and not with the CDU will twist the knife further in relations between the parties which form the grand coalition at the federal government level. This is making the process of building support for the governmental project in the Bundesrat even more complicated. The federal states governed by the parties which form the grand coalition had 31 votes in the Bundesrat before the election (they were 4 votes short of having a majority) – now they have 27.

Angela Merkel and Joachim Gauck appealed to political parties not to co-operate with the Left Party already before Ramelow was elected. Following his election victory, politicians from the CDU and the CSU have accused the SPD of being irresponsible and unreliable, have warned against an economic catastrophe Thuringia is likely to face and have accused the party of co-operation with Honecker’s successors. The SPD has refuted the allegations, pointing out that it was no one else but the West German CDU which took over the assets and the functionaries of the East German CDU in 1990 (by the way, this explains why the CDU and Die Linke are strong and the SPD is weaker in the federal states in Eastern Germany). However, the criticism from the Christian Democrats has not been motivated by historical and ethnic reasons alone. The new coalition in Thuringia proves that German left-wing parties can co-operate with each other and is putting the possibility of co-operation between Die Linke, the SPD and the Green Party to the test at the federal level. The Social Democrats hope that if this configuration gains the required majority in the next election to the Bundestag (in 2017), their candidate will become the chancellor. This scenario is raising concerns among the Christian Democrats.

The test for compatibility with the political system

The fact that the Left Party has formed a local government is viewed in Germany as a test of the degree to which this grouping is ready to make compromises (as with the Green Party in Hesse in 1985). To become a coalition partner acceptable to the Social Democrats and the

Green Party at the federal level, Die Linke would have to relinquish some of the slogans which in many cases are important elements of the party's identity. These include the demands for Germany to leave NATO and to dissolve the Eurozone, criticism of Israel and the USA, solidarity with Russia and Cuba, extreme pacifism and the demand that banks and energy companies should be nationalised. A possible process of de-radicalisation of the Left Party will inevitably give rise to a conflict between the two wings of the party: the pragmatists led by Gregor Gysi (the head of the Die Linke faction in the Bundestag) and the radicals headed by Sahra Wagenknecht (deputy chairperson of the faction). Given the scale of the differences between the various groups operating inside Die Linke (radical leftist movements active in the west of the country and post-Communists with their roots in East Germany), this might even bring about a split in this party.

The dilemma of the Social Democrats and the Greens

The potential coalition partners of Die Linke are also set to face a dilemma in the future. Co-operation with the post-Communists is appealing to the SPD since this will offer it the opportunity to take the chancellor's office again, and to the Green Party because it gives it the opportunity to co-govern the country. The practice of isolating Die Linke is well-grounded for historical reasons, but it leaves the SPD no other opportunity but to play the role of minor partner in government coalitions with the CDU. However, since the SPD and the Green Party have decided to co-operate with Die Linke, they will have to change their approach to some issues, as well. Regarding economic and social issues, the Green Party and the left wing inside the SPD do not differ practically from the pragmatists from Die Linke; however, they still strongly disagree about the so-called 'East German legacy'. As revealed by discussions preceding the signing of the coalition agreement in Thuringia, the leaders of the Left Party on the federal level, unlike Bodo Ramelow, are not ready to accept the statement that East Germany was a "unjust state" even as a tactical move. As a consequence of this move they could lose a great share of their electorate in Eastern Germany where according to public opinion polls only 30% of residents are ready to accept this label (28% in the case of the Left Party's electorate). This forces the SPD and the Green Party to soften their narrative concerning East Germany.