

Germany: conflict inside the grand coalition

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The ongoing migration crisis is causing ever more frequent conflicts inside Germany's government coalition. Horst Seehofer, the Minister-President of Bavaria and the head of the CSU (which is in the government coalition) has criticised Chancellor Angela Merkel's (CDU) policy on the migrant issue over the past month, and especially strongly so last week. He even threatened the federal government that a complaint to the Constitutional Court would be brought unless the influx of refugees is stopped. The dispute between the leaders of the two Christian Democratic parties was temporarily suspended on 1 November, when a list of priorities for the next few weeks was agreed. However, whether these priorities are put into practice will depend on consent from the Social Democrats (SPD). They are unlikely to grant this at the moment because the continuing migration crisis is adversely affecting public support levels for the Christian Democrats and is beneficial for the SPD themselves. Even though the chairman of the Social Democratic party, Sigmar Gabriel, serves as vice chancellor and minister for the economy in the present cabinet, he is already thinking about the upcoming election to the Bundestag in 2017.

Sibling rivalry

Since the beginning of September, Horst Seehofer has criticised Angela Merkel's decision to allow migrants who were at that time in Hungary into Germany. In his opinion, this set a precedent which led to an uncontrolled inflow of migrants to Germany. Since that moment, Seehofer's criticism of the chancellor has consistently increased. On 9 October, he threatened to bring a complaint against the federal government to the Constitutional Court. Stricter asylum regulations were introduced on 15 October 2015 but, according to Seehofer, they did not go far enough, and he continued insisting that migration to Germany needed to be stopped. He also criticised Merkel for failing to put pressure on Austria, which lets migrants through its territory and helps them reach the German border. It is worth noting that the German Minister of Internal Affairs, Thomas de Maizière, has also spoken critically about the practices seen in Austria; he has claimed that Austrians bring buses full of migrants close to the German border by cover of night, thus making it impossible to German services to carry out any form of supervision. On 28 October, the CSU spread an 'unofficial' rumour that Seehofer was considering withdrawing three Bavarian ministers from Berlin. Seehofer's recent actions have been taken in response to real problems Bavaria has been facing; at present it is bearing the brunt of the wave of migrants. The threat that the ministers would be withdrawn most likely behind the 1 November decision by the CDU and the CSU to agree on an action plan to curb immigration. However, this plan was not

approved by the SPD. Among the Christian Democrats' declarations was the intention to fast-track the construction of so-called 'transit zones' in the vicinity of national borders where initial assessments of migrants' chances of being granted international protection in Germany would take place. In addition to this, the CDU and the CSU agreed that the process of reuniting refugees' families should be slowed down and restricted in some cases, and that joint German-Austrian police patrols should be organised on the border. Even though it is unlikely that these ideas will be implemented due to the SPD's lack of consent, the fact that they have been announced needs to be viewed as a tactical success for both the CSU and the CDU. Horst Seehofer has presented the consensus view as a personal success. In turn, Merkel may expect that – at least temporarily – criticism from Bavarians and the internal opposition inside the CDU will stop.

Gabriel off the leash

The Social Democrats' lack of consent to tighten asylum laws further is partly an effect of their political calculations. As the migration crisis continues, the support levels for their main political rival, the Christian Democrats are falling (according to the most recent poll, 36% of the electorate would vote for the Christian Democrats, which is the lowest level since September 2012). Even though the SPD is a member of the government coalition, its leader, Sigmar Gabriel, has been guided by the logic of an election campaign rather than the common government's interests. He in fact confirmed this on 28 October, when he announced in an interview for *Stern* weekly that he would like to compete with Angela Merkel for the office of chancellor in 2017. Throughout the migration crisis, Gabriel has on numerous occasions criticised the CDU and the CSU for their lack of ideas how to resolve the problems, for stirring up anti-immigrant sentiment and at the same time disregarding citizens' concerns. He has also accused the Christian Democrats of infighting, building his image of an unbiased arbiter and thus in a way taking on the role of chancellor. His visit to Moscow on 28–29 October was further proof of his ambition to become chancellor. He met Vladimir Putin to discuss Russia's relations with the West, the situation in Ukraine, and energy co-operation, almost exceeding his competences as vice chancellor and economy minister.

The rising threat

The SPD's attempt to politically capitalise on the migration crisis has so far failed to bring the desired results. Support levels for the Christian Democrats have been falling, but this has still not translated into growing support for the Social Democrats. This is because the SPD's message to the public lacks credibility, due to being inconsistent and focused on criticising the CDU/CSU. The party which is benefiting from this is the anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) – 8% of respondents stated they would vote for this party (up from 3% in August this year – for more data see Appendix). The number of people who want more decisive measures adopted to stop the wave of migration is growing (71% of Germans want transit zones to be created on the borders), and German police agencies are warning against the increasing radicalisation of a section of citizens who until recently shared centrist views. On 30 October, the head of the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA), Holger

Münch, warned in an interview for the *Focus* weekly that the increasing threat to internal security is one of the consequences of the uncontrolled influx of migrants to Germany.

Appendix

Public support for political parties in Germany (according to polls conducted by Emnid)

	CDU/CSU	SPD	Greens	Left Party	AfD	FDP	Other
31.10.2015	36%	25%	10%	10%	8%	5%	6%
26.09.2015	40%	25%	10%	10%	6%	4%	5%
29.08.2015	41%	24%	10%	10%	4%	4%	7%
25.07.2015	43%	24%	10%	10%	3%	4%	6%
27.06.2015	41%	24%	10%	10%	5%	4%	6%