

Steinmeier – a candidate for German president

Kamil Frymark, Steinmeier kandydatem na prezydenta Niemiec

On 14th November the leadership of the CDU and CSU decided they would back foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) as a candidate for the German presidency. The Christian Democratic parties have thus accepted the proposal made by the leader of the Social Democrats, Sigmar Gabriel. Steinmeier is currently the most popular politician in Germany – 72% of Germans are satisfied with his work and 25% would like him to become Germany's next president (he is leading the opinion polls). Support from the coalition parties will ensure Steinmeier victory in the vote in the Federal Convention scheduled for 12th February 2017. The Greens have also accepted his candidacy. The head of German diplomacy will, however, not receive the support of the Left Party, who above all view him as one of the architects of Agenda 2000 – the programme of economic reforms that limited social spending under the Gerhard Schroeder government.

Commentary

- The fact that the candidacy of Steinmeier has been endorsed by Chancellor Angela Merkel and her party is a great political success for the leader of the SPD, Sigmar Gabriel. Germany's vice chancellor and minister for the economy has in fact forced the Christian Democrats to agree to this candidacy, blackmailing them by using a threat to cooperate with the Greens and the Left Party. By submitting the candidacy of the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the leader of the Social Democrats has also removed a powerful rival from frontline politics.
- The Christian Democrats were not unanimous in their support for Steinmeier. A section of CDU politicians, among them the chairman of the Bundestag's Committee on Foreign Affairs, Norbert Roettgen, believed that they should present their own candidate and call on support from the Greens. In summer that scenario seemed the most likely, despite the opposition from the Bavarian CSU, which feared that the Greens' Winfried Kretschmann, the prime minister of the neighbouring state Baden-Wurttemberg, might become Germany's next president. From the point of view of the CDU the support for the candidacy of Steinmeier is the lesser of two evils. It spells short-term victory for Gabriel, but also eliminates Germany's most popular politician from participation in the Bundestag election campaign (the parliamentary election is planned for September 2017). Furthermore, by presenting a joint candidate, the coalition might continue after the election, a possibility which voters of the two largest parties will support.

- The German media have been speculating that Martin Schulz, the President of the European Parliament since 2012, or Niels Annen, the SPD Spokesman of Foreign Affairs of the SPD's parliamentary grouping, might become Steinmeier's successor in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Martin Schulz, who belongs to the left-leaning wing of the SPD group in the Bundestag, has also been touted as a possible SPD candidate for Germany's chancellor. His possible candidacy may stem from the SPD's conviction (and internal research) that the party is not able to win more than approximately 22% of the vote under Gabriel. Despite the fact that German society has more sympathy for Schulz than Gabriel, the position of the former in the party is weaker than that of the latter.