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The CDU federal convention – fighting for the support of right-wing voters

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On 6th and 7th December, a federal convention of Angela Merkel's party was held in Essen. The German chancellor was elected the leader of the CDU, by a clear majority of voters, for the ninth time (in 16 years). However, it was the second lowest result in terms of the level of support she received – 89.5% (her worst score was 88.4% in 2004 when the CDU was in opposition). The migration crisis was the main point in Merkel's manifesto speech ahead of the election. Angela Merkel said that the situation where the borders opened in 2015 cannot happen again. She also confirmed she would support a ban on wearing the burka in public administration offices, schools and public transport, and the consistent deportations of foreigners who have been denied the right to stay in Germany. Recommendations to toughen procedures for asylum seekers were also included in the draft resolution which was passed on 7th December. Merkel had to face criticism from certain delegates who reproached her for leading the CDU towards the political centre, thus alienating the party's conservative voter base and contributing to the success of the anti-immigration Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Commentary

- The CDU convention and the election of Angela Merkel as party leader have officially launched the campaign for the 2017 Bundestag election. However, the campaign has de facto been ongoing for a long time. As is usual in such cases, internal party disputes have been silenced and prominent critics of the chancellor have demonstrated their support for her. However, as the results of the vote indicated, particularly in the context of the CDU's reputation as a disciplined party, the support pledged for Merkel is conditional. The government's policy on the migration crisis has led to the CDU's defeat in four (out of five) state elections in 2016 and has caused an important decline in confidence for Merkel in her own party.

- Both Angela Merkel's speech and the party resolution created by the party leadership (which will provide the basis for the party's election manifesto) have been aimed at right-wing voters. As the CDU had announced earlier, the party decided to win over those citizens who had turned away from the Christian Democrats and voted for the AfD. Bearing in mind that the AfD does not have a stable electorate and the support it receives depends on fluctuations in discontent at the government's work, this tactic may be effective. According to the latest opinion poll, 10% of those surveyed want to vote for the Alternative for Germany

(which is a four-point fall in comparison with 28th September).

- The party leadership was also elected at the convention. For the first time Thomas de Maizière became a member of it, which may be interpreted as a sign that Merkel is reconsidering his candidacy as her successor for the position of CDU leader. Monika Grütters, the Federal Representative for Culture and Media, is also a new face in the party leadership. Both Maizière and Grütters are absolutely loyal to Merkel. Their presence in the party management is intended to strengthen the chancellor in possible disputes with the opposition within the party.