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CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 25.01.2017 www.osw.waw.pl

Schulz – the SPD candidate for the position of chancellor

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On 24th January, during the session of the Social Democratic faction in the Bundestag, the SPD chairman Sigmar Gabriel announced that he would not stand for the position of chancellor and would also step down as the party's chair. Martin Schulz, the former president of the European Parliament, is set to become the party's candidate for this position in the parliamentary election in September and the new chair of the party. Gabriel said that he wanted to resign as the minister for economic affairs and energy and take over the position of the head of German diplomacy for the remainder of the current term. Brigitte Zypries (SPD), who was the justice minister from 2002-2009, could replace him in the ministry. Gabriel's decision surprised many of his fellow party members but most of them welcomed it. Nevertheless, the way his decision was announced was negatively assessed since the information was first leaked to the press. The party's convention, during which the new chairman and the new candidate for the position of chancellor will be approved, will be held earlier than scheduled – in four weeks' time instead of in May.

Commentary

• Unfavourable results of opinion polls were the main reason for Gabriel withdrawing from standing for the position of chancellor in the election. According to an internal poll conducted among SPD members, Schulz has a higher chance in the electoral campaign against Chancellor Merkel. Opinion polls across Germany indicate that the former president of the European Parliament enjoys more recognition than Gabriel. In a recent poll of the popularity of politicians, conducted at the beginning of January, Schulz came in third (following Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Wolfgang Schäuble) and Gabriel came in eighth.

• The SPD is hoping that Martin Schulz will be a reliable symbol of a new opening in the party and will provide an alternative to the rule of the Grand Coalition. Gabriel was associated with the SPD's co-operation with the CDU/CSU and the SPD's inability to regain popularity (which has oscillated between 20-25% for years). Schulz's lack of involvement in domestic politics to date may prove an asset in the short term. From 1994 he has been based in Brussels and therefore did not take part in introducing unpopular reforms of the welfare system and the labour market launched by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, "Agenda 2010", which had turned many voters away from the SPD.

• Despite the fact that the SPD (particularly its left wing) is determined to portray Schulz as an alternative to Angela Merkel and the rule of the Grand Coalition, it is more of an electoral strategy than a realistic plan. Schulz's candidacy does not translate into increased opportunities for the formation of a left-leaning coalition between the SPD, the Green Party

and the Left Party. He is as critical of certain demands put forward by the Left Party in the area of foreign and European policies as the remaining Social Democrats. The radical faction in the Left Party considers Schulz to be the embodiment of the EU's negative traits, such as the dissociation from the problems of average EU citizens and the championing of neoliberal economic solutions.