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Germany: the final stretch before the election to the Bundestag

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On 3rd and 4th September, electoral debates were held in Germany. These were the culmination of a rather sluggish campaign and might have an important impact on the results of the election. Angela Merkel (CDU) and Martin Schulz (SPD) met in the first debate and representatives of the remaining parties participated in the second. Their discussion was dominated by the international migration crisis. It lacked, however, internal issues such as education, healthcare and the environment. Nor did the candidates address the crisis within the EU, Brexit, NATO, or relations with Russia. Both candidates announced that Germany would call for the closure of the Mediterranean migration route in collaboration with African countries. The policy towards Turkey will also be made stricter and the future German government will seek to break off accession negotiations with that country.

Commentary

- The Merkel–Schulz debate was the last chance for the SPD candidate to improve his ratings. However, according to all opinion polls conducted after the debate, Schulz lost. Chancellor Merkel was better prepared and more effective in presenting facts and figures. Importantly, for Merkel it was the first debate in her political career that she has won and therefore she may be relatively certain about a good result in the election on the 24th September unless a scandal or disaster stirs public opinion in the weeks preceding the elections. According to the Emnid opinion poll conducted on 2nd September, the CDU/CSU can count on 35% of the vote and has a 14 point lead over the SPD. If the election of a chancellor was decided by direct vote, Angela Merkel would win with 49% of the vote. 26% of voters would cast their vote for Schulz.
- The debate between the two candidates was exceptionally calm, which in part was due to its formula; the discussion was facilitated in a way to prevent direct confrontation between the candidates. This brought an advantage to Angela Merkel who gets defeated in verbal duels requiring quick exchange of replies and comments. However, the lack of a strong exchange of opinions also reflects similarities in the political platforms of the CDU/CSU and the SPD—their candidates agree on the majority of fundamental questions. Furthermore, they both realise that following the elections they may form a government together.

- The discussion between candidates of the remaining parties, albeit more vigorous, indicated possibilities of other government coalitions, apart from the CDU/CSU-SPD one. Statements made by the FDP head Christian Lindner and the leader of the Green Party Cem Ozdemir proved that both politicians were prepared to form a coalition government with the CDU/CSU. According to opinion polls, this coalition would however have few supporters – 27% of the respondents (with 69% against it). The grand coalition remains the most popular – it would be supported by 44% of those surveyed. The group of those in favour of the coalition between the CDU/CSU and the Liberals is smaller by one percentage point. Current opinion polls show that the following coalitions would be arithmetically possible: CDU/CSU-SPD, CDU/CSU-FDP-Green Party and CDU/CSU-FDP.