

Germany: another attempt at the grand coalition

Artur Ciechanowicz

On 30th November the German president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, met with the leaders of the CDU, CSU and SPD and again urged them to form a grand coalition government. Following the meeting, all the parties declared their willingness to hold talks. The SPD leader Martin Schulz, who announced he was entering the opposition, received the green light from the party's management to begin preliminary negotiations with the CDU and the CSU. This decision will have to be approved at the convention of party delegates which will take place on 7th – 9th December and during which Schulz will stand for re-election. According to unofficial information, the SPD leadership is determined to make a decision on whether to participate in coalition talks by 15th December.

Commentary

- According to an opinion poll conducted within the SPD, 95% of members want Schulz to remain the party's leader. However, they are divided over the issue of a possible coalition with the CDU/CSU. 58% are in favour of the coalition negotiations. It is representatives of the young section of the party (Jusos) and rank-and-file party members who are opposed to the talks. Entering possible coalition talks, Martin Schulz may demand the future government implement the SPD platform to a larger extent than would be indicated by the share of the seats in the Bundestag. Angela Merkel is ready to make far-reaching concessions in order to prevent the establishment of a minority government or a snap election. The SPD platform includes such demands as the harmonisation of corporate tax at the EU level, approval for the reunion of refugee families, reform of the health insurance scheme, higher taxes for the richest, investment in education, social housing and infrastructure.
- All potential participants of the coalition negotiations admit that these will be very challenging. Even those SPD members (the foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel or the mayor of Hamburg, Olaf Scholz, who is predicted to become the finance minister in the future government) who would like to see the co-operation continued have announced that the party will not rush into making a decision. They plan to benefit from the fact that the German constitution does not compel political parties to stick to any deadlines regarding the establishment of a new government. It is in the SPD's interest to prolong the crisis since it may weaken Angela Merkel and the CDU's position. For this reason a section of CDU members have called on the SPD not to delay the process of forming a government.

- The situation in the Bavarian CSU will not have a positive impact on the speed of the coalition talks either. In the first quarter of 2018 changes will probably be introduced in the party's leadership: it is believed that the CSU leader and Bavaria's minister-president, Horst Seehofer, will step down as the head of the state's government to be replaced by the Bavarian finance minister Marcus Soeder, but he will keep the position of party leader. This is the price that Seehofer has to pay for the CSU's poor result in the election to the Bundestag. Due to the reshuffle and the approaching election in Bavaria (to be held in autumn 2018) the CSU will treat the coalition negotiations at the federal level instrumentally, as an opportunity to shape the CSU's image in the election campaign. The party will therefore be less inclined to seek compromises with the SPD which could affect its election result.