

The SPD convention: green light given to coalition talks with the Christian Democrats

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On 7th – 9th December the SPD held its convention in Berlin. Delegates reelected Martin Schulz as the party's leader (with support at 82%). The majority was in favour of beginning non-binding talks with the CDU/CSU, the results of which – as was clearly stated – remain an open question. The SPD is considering forming a grand coalition government, backing a minority government, or holding a snap election. The outcomes of the negotiations will be discussed at the SPD's extraordinary convention scheduled for mid-January and then subject to voting by the party's members. In an opinion poll conducted by the Forsa Institute on 9th – 10th December, 69% of respondents stated that the SPD should enter coalition talks with the CDU. Abroad, it was Schulz's appeal that resonated the most. He called for a new constitution for the EU which would provide a basis for a European federation – the United States of Europe.

Commentary

- The announcement about the renewal of the party and its political platform, following its worst election result since 1949 (20.5%), was in fact subordinated to the preparation for coalition talks with the CDU/CSU on the establishment of a grand coalition government. The SPD is deeply divided over the issue of whether it is justified to enter a government led by Angela Merkel for the third time. The main demands of the party (the harmonisation of corporate tax at the EU level, approval for the reunion of refugee families, higher taxes for the richest, investment in education and infrastructure) were therefore discussed in the context of the coalition talks – regarded either as a catalogue of requests or non-negotiable demands in the negotiations with the Christian Democrats.
- It is the young section of the SPD that is most opposed to the party forming a joint government with the CDU/CSU. In order to calm the atmosphere, the leaders of the SPD – among them Schulz, but also the head of the SPD parliamentary group, Andrea Nahles – have announced that while there is a need to begin talks with the CDU, their outcome remains an open question. It is also a form of pressure placed on the CDU/CSU and Angela Merkel in order to persuade her to make larger compromises. Additionally, the vice-presidents of the SPD, Manuela Schwesig and Olaf Scholz, have publicly called Chancellor Merkel's leadership abilities into question, suggesting that it is her that may constitute an issue in the establishment of a coalition. They have thus returned to the

SPD's suggestion made in the election campaign that a grand coalition could be formed but with a different chancellor, even if one hailing from the CDU.

- The vision of establishing a United States of Europe by 2025 presented in his speech is above all Schulz sallying forth. Having delivered it, without going into detail over its premises, he hopes to consolidate the party and its voters around a grand idea, such as Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik which has so far been perceived as an international success for the SPD. In reality, the idea to work on a new constitution for the EU and the establishment of a European state may now rather lead to increased divisions in Europe, not its consolidation. The important subject of the EU's future is becoming an instrument of political persuasion within the party. Not only is Schulz's vision not shared by the main CDU politicians, with Angela Merkel first amongst them—German society does not embrace it either. According to a survey conducted by Emnid on 7th December, 48% of respondents rejected Schulz's idea, and only 30% were in favour of it.