

## Germany: Merkel's new cabinet

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On 14 March, Angela Merkel (CDU) was re-elected Germany's chancellor at the Bundestag. 364 votes were cast for her with 315 against. Merkel accepted the nomination from President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and was sworn in by the president of the Bundestag, Wolfgang Schäuble. The new ministers were sworn in and the opening meeting of the government was held on the same day. This is Merkel's fourth term as the head of the German government and third as the leader of the grand coalition began.

### Commentary

- The staffing of Merkel's new cabinet has undergone a major overhaul. Only five of the ministers from the previous government (out of 15, including the head of the Chancellor's Office) are present in the new one, and only two of those have kept their previous positions: Ursula von der Leyen (CDU) will continue to serve as the Minister of Defence and Gerd Müller (CSU) will do so as the Minister for Development Aid. In the case of the CDU, the reshuffle was carried out in response to the demand from party's base to rejuvenate and feminise the government. In turn, the SPD's proposals took into consideration gender and regional parities. Each of the staffing solutions are consistent with the government's objectives as outlined in the coalition agreement between the CDU/CSU and the SPD.
- The most pressing task the government is facing is for the Bundestag to pass the budget for 2018, and this must be carried out by the end of June. At present, a provisional budget applies which does not allow new projects to be financed. Work on the budget is unlikely to continue for too long because there is a consensus between the two parties as regards the need to invest in welfare programmes, introducing tax reliefs and improving internal security, while pursuing a policy of moderate budget spending. Olaf Scholz (SPD), the vice chancellor and minister of finance, has experience in managing finances since he served as the minister of labour and mayor of Hamburg in the past and can communicate well with Angela Merkel.
- Vice Chancellor Scholz from the SPD will not be principled opponent for Angela Merkel in European policy, although some competence and political disputes may arise in this area between the Chancellor's Office on one side, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance (both of which are led by the Social Democrats) on the other. The constitution vests the chancellor with the prerogatives of setting the guidelines for Germany's policy, including foreign policy, and Merkel will want to maintain the decisive

say in European policy, as well. She will most likely try to weaken France's efforts to reform the EU and, above all, the eurozone, opposing the decrease in the role of the Bundestag in co-deciding on the European policy and also introducing financial transfers between the member states of the European currency union. The Social Democrats opt for more thorough reforms of the EU.

- The lack of diplomatic experience of the new minister of foreign affairs, Heiko Maas, will play to his disadvantage in possible disputes with Merkel. Maas will attempt to use his ministerial post to strengthen his position and popularity inside the SPD. As regards his statements concerning international affairs heard to date, he is best known for demanding that Germany should adopt a more decisive policy with regard to Turkey and for accusing US President Donald Trump of nationalism. Considering the key role played by the Chancellor's Office and the ministry of finance in shaping Germany's foreign and European policy and the fact that the Christian Democrats will continue to be in charge of the well-funded (8.5 billion euros, larger than the ministry of foreign affairs) ministry for development policy (Gerd Müller – CSU), Maas is likely to make attempts to look for a niche for his activity. Based on his activity so far, it can be concluded that he will focus in particular on promoting human rights, the respect of law and order, and combating anti-Semitism.
- In domestic policy, Horst Seehofer (the head of the CSU and the former prime minister of Bavaria), who has been nominated for the minister of internal affairs, will make efforts to streamline as soon as possible the process of deporting those migrants who have not been offered international protection in Germany, to regulate the issue of reuniting families and to introduce major changes in asylum procedures. Katarina Barley (who has served as the minister for labour and family affairs, and as a judge) as the new minister of justice will most likely try to prevent the full implementation of the CSU's plans in this area under the slogan of protecting human rights. However, Franziska Giffey (SPD), who has been put in charge of the ministry for family affairs, may become Seehofer's unlikely ally. Giffey has served as the mayor of Berlin's Neukölln district, and she and Seehofer share a common rhetoric condemning the insufficient levels of the integration of foreigners and their disrespect of the law.
- Peter Altmaier, who has been put in charge of the ministry of economy, will not push through any major reforms, will continue to maintain the pro-export economic model, and will focus on consuming the benefits of Germany's economic growth. In turn, as regards the energy sector (under the charge of the minister of the economy), a compromise may be expected between Altmaier and the minister for the environment, Svenja Schulze from the SPD, that will involve continuing the energy transformation (*Energiewende*), however, taking into account the interests of the industry. Altmaier has announced that the new priorities of the energy policy will include the implementation of the climate protection plan by 2050, the development of the electricity transmission network, and the launch of the German production of car battery units, while simultaneously protecting the energy-consuming industry. Schulze (who served until recently as the secretary general of the SPD in North Rhine-Westphalia) is a member of the influential trade union IG Bergbau, Chemie, Energie (IG BCE). During the previous government's term, IG BCE organised protests to maintain jobs at brown coal mines.

- The Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats are expected to co-operate smoothly as regards current affairs. The two parties share a moderate approach, and their politicians know each other well. However, the SPD, in an attempt to stop the haemorrhaging of support which has been underway for years, will make efforts to be seen as distinct from the Christian Democrats as frequently as possible, for example, as regards ideological issues. As soon as the coalition negotiations ended, the SPD attempted to bring about a debate and a vote on lifting the ban on advertising the services of abortion clinics. In turn, the Christian Democrats will employ the proven strategy of taking credit from the SPD, for example, in developing the legislation regulating welfare issues. Horst Seehofer is already making attempts to build an image of himself as a protector of the 'ordinary citizen' and has branded the coalition agreement as an action plan for the benefit of ordinary people, containing numerous promises of pro-social moves.
- Merkel's new cabinet will be criticised more harshly not only by the left-wing and right-wing opposition (which is much stronger than during the Bundestag's previous term), but also by MPs from the government coalition. The general secretary of the CDU, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, who is mentioned as one of the candidates for taking over from Angela Merkel, has criticised the new minister for health, Jens Spahn (CDU), for his controversial statements concerning people who receive unemployment benefits. In turn, the head of the SPD's youth organisation, Kevin Kühnert, who organised a campaign to reject the coalition agreement and became the leader of the opposition inside the party, has announced that he will continue to oppose the grand coalition government.