

Germany: conflict over the head of the counter-intelligence

Artur Ciechanowicz

The leaders of the German government coalition CDU/CSU – SPD have managed to calm down the approximately two-week conflict over Hans-Georg Maaßen, the head of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV). In the opinion of critics, including the Social Democrats who co-govern the country, the head of the BfV added credibility to the message of the national-conservative party Alternative for Germany (AfD) and undermined the policy of Chancellor Angela Merkel, challenging the opinion that lynch law and immigrant hunts had been seen during the Chemnitz riots. Politicians from the AfD and the CSU, including the minister of internal affairs, Horst Seehofer, stood in Maaßen's defence.

Initially the leader of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats agreed that Maaßen would be dismissed and transferred to the Ministry of Internal Affairs to serve there as secretary of state in charge of public security. When it turned out that the transfer would in fact be a promotion and would mean a pay rise and that one of the deputy ministers representing the SPD would lose his position as a senior official at the ministry, Social Democrats began fiercely criticising their leader, Andrea Nahles. Under pressure, the initial arrangements were changed on 23 September. Hans-Georg Maaßen will be transferred to the Ministry of Internal Affairs as a plenipotentiary of Minister Horst Seehofer (CSU) for European and international affairs and his remuneration will remain at the previous level.

Commentary

- The Social Democrats, by categorically insisting on Maaßen's dismissal, wanted to demonstrate that they had a real impact on the operation of the grand coalition and were able to bring about the dismissal of a controversial official even though he was supported by Seehofer. The SPD is losing support and its desire to make itself distinct from its coalition partners has so far had an effect contrary to that expected. The Social Democrats have not gained supporters and, according to some polls, their party has slipped behind the AfD into the position of the third party on the German political scene.
- The conflict over the head of the BfV has clearly adversely affected the government's popularity ratings. According to a survey conducted by the public opinion research centre Emnid for *Bild* daily, the parties forming the grand coalition may now count on combined support as low as 45%. This result is insufficient to form a government. 67% of respondents believe that Merkel (CDU), Seehofer (CSU) and Nahles (SPD) are unable to co-operate fully trusting each other. From the perspective of public opinion, personal disputes have dominated the government's work, and the coalition partners have been

unable to fully display their message concerning the coalition's concrete achievements over the past few months, such as lower medical insurance premiums, higher benefits for families with children and amendments of legal regulations to the benefit of employees.

- The manner in which the conflict developed and the difficulty with reaching a compromise shows that Angela Merkel is finding it increasingly difficult to maintain the unity of her cabinet and even discipline inside her own parliamentary faction. Another clear proof that the chancellor's esteem has been undermined was the unexpected defeat of Volker Kauder, whom Merkel backed in the election for the head of the CDU's faction in the Bundestag held on 25 September. The dispute over the dismissal of the head of counter-intelligence, which posed the threat of destabilising the government, and the defeat of a trusted politician of the chancellor who manages the work of the parliamentary club on her behalf, all provoke the question as to whether the government led by Angela Merkel will survive until the next election.