

## A change of leadership in the German CDU

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The focus of the CDU's party congress in Hamburg (6-8 December) will be the election of a new leader. The best chances to take over as head of the party from Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has exercised this function for 18 years, are enjoyed by three candidates. From the latest opinion polls it appears that the current secretary-general, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, is most popular among supporters of the party; in a poll from 23 November, 38% of CDU supporters would like to see her as the new head of this group. Friedrich Merz, the chairman of the CDU in 2000-2 and a political opponent of Chancellor Merkel, has the support of 29%, and Jens Spahn, the health minister and the leader of the conservative opposition to Merkel inside the party, received 6% support in this survey. 1001 delegates, two-thirds of whom are men, are authorised to elect the new leader. These delegates consist of deputies to the Bundestag and the regional parliaments, as well as party functionaries. In many federal states, support for Kramp-Karrenbauer and Merz is evenly distributed, and the winner will be determined by the delegates' individual votes. Kramp-Karrenbauer can count on the support of representatives from Saarland, where she was prime minister, while Merz is openly supported by the CDU's local structures in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg. Merz also has many supporters in North Rhine-Westphalia, Hesse and Saxony.

Never in the history of the CDU have three candidates competed for the post of party leader. For the first time in 47 years, when the party had to choose between Rainer Barzel and Helmut Kohl, there is an open struggle for leadership at the party congress. The election was preceded by eight regional conferences, where the candidates presented their programmes and answered questions from party members. During these speeches and in numerous interviews, the candidates spoke vaguely or relativised their earlier statements concerning most policy issues. In addition to the election of a new leader, debates on 226 motions put forward by the delegates will form a central part of the programme.

### Commentary:

- The mainstream media give Kramp-Karrenbauer the greatest chance of victory, and she already enjoys considerable support from them. A victory for her will mean harmonious cooperation with Merkel. It is possible that the Chancellor will resign from her position in mid-term in favour of Kramp-Karrenbauer, thereby giving the latter an advantage in the lead-up to the next elections to the Bundestag in 2021. If Merz wins, his relationship with Chancellor Merkel will be tenser, and despite his declaration of "sincere and constructive"

cooperation, we may expect Merz to try and weaken Merkel's position and bring about her resignation ahead of time.

- Victory for either Kramp-Karrenbauer or Merz will bring about a change in the party's style of management. The candidates have announced that intra-party debate will be boosted, and that they will consider the demands of the CDU party members concerning the government's policies to a greater extent than has been the case during Merkel's leadership. The number of motions for proposals for discussion, the largest in the history of the CDU, already testifies to the revival of the intra-party debate, and marks the beginning of the process of strengthening the party's structures. The most important proposals are those concerning the changes to the CDU's programme for 2020, which will then be debated in the party's local structures, as well as topics related to the CDU's economic policy. One basic demand involves the party congress accepting an increase in defence spending to 1.5% of GDP by 2024 at the latest, while maintaining the long-term objective of reaching 2% of GDP. One of the biggest challenges for the new leader will concern which strategy the party should adopt with regard to the AfD. Merz has accused the CDU's leadership of passively accepting the increase in the AfD's support and failing to take action to stem the loss of their voters to the party, although he himself has not offered a plan to win back this part of the electorate.
- The biggest policy differences between the candidates concern the economy, and we may expect major changes in this area in the event of a victory for the economic liberal Merz. He is an advocate of deregulation and cutting red tape in the economy; he made his name in 2003 by setting forth a concept for the extreme simplification of Germany's very complex tax scheme, presenting it on the back of a beer mat. Kramp-Karrenbauer represents the social-welfare wing of the Christian Democrats in her economic policy.
- Under Merz's leadership, the CDU would also strengthen its conservative profile on social issues. Merz became famous as a precursor of the so-called 'leading culture' (Leitkultur) concept, opposing the 'multi-culti' idea. He has also made references to Germany's Judeo-Christian roots, and wants a further tightening of immigration policy. In turn, Kramp-Karrenbauer has spoken in a more conciliatory manner, although she too is much more conservative in her views on the role of the family and the rights of homosexuals than Merkel has been.
- The change in the CDU's leadership will mean that the main principles of its foreign policy are retained, but there will be changes of emphasis. Kramp-Karrenbauer will seek to strengthen cooperation with France (she was the first candidate to support the Macron plan for the creation of a European army); in contrast, Merz will seek to strengthen trans-Atlantic cooperation, using his excellent contacts in the US establishment. At the same time, we should expect the CDU to become more involved in the debate on reforming the euro zone. The possible support of both major candidates for a deeper integration of the euro area does not imply their consent to the communitisation of debts, and will be limited by strong resistance to deep reforms from within the CDU (as well as the FDP, if they enter a new coalition). Jens Spahn is strongly opposed to any form of debt communitisation.
- How long the current German government casts will depend not only on the new leader of the CDU, but also on the position adopted by the SPD, which may decide to leave the

coalition. The party's leadership has long been under strong pressure from rank and file members, who have been demanding an end to the cooperation with the Christian Democrats, and a change of party leader (together with the results of elections to the European and Bundesland parliaments in 2019) could determine which decision the SPD takes. From their point of view, Friedrich Merz is a more clearly defined political opponent than Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer; on the one hand, this could hinder or even prevent the functioning of the grand coalition, while on the other hand it could allow the dividing line between the CDU and the SPD to be redefined, and could boost the Social Democrats (even if they were in opposition). If the SPD leaves the coalition, that could lead to a change of Chancellor and a new coalition which the Greens and the FDP could join – or new elections could be called.