

A return to conservatism: the CDU's new platform

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During its party congress in Berlin on 7 May, the CDU adopted its new basic platform (*Grundsatzprogramm*), which supersedes the 2007 document. It sets the party's main policy lines for the next several years (see Appendix). On the preceding day, the CDU's leader Friedrich Merz was re-elected for another term with 89% of the delegates' votes. Carsten Linnemann was re-elected the party's general secretary (91% of the votes). In addition, five deputy leaders and seven members of the CDU's executive board were elected. In both these bodies, a very high number of votes went to conservative politicians from Germany's eastern federal states: Mario Voigt (90%, the leader of the CDU in Thuringia) and Michael Kretschmer (87%, minister-president of Saxony).

In his platform speech, Merz repeatedly referred to the adopted document's key slogans: freedom and security (the manifest is entitled *To live in freedom. To safely lead Germany to its future*). For example, he highlighted the intention to boost Germany's defence capability and protect the country against Russia, as well as the need to continue supporting Ukraine. He emphasised that Germany should improve its relations with France ("they are the worst in many years") and to enhance its cooperation with Poland. Aside from security issues, he emphasised social and economic problems (for example, he proposed to lower taxes and cancel the basic citizen's allowance [*Bürgergeld*], which is one of the flagship initiatives of the SPD–Green–FDP coalition). As regards the problem of immigrant integration, he highlighted the need to sustain Germany's *Leitkultur* (leading or guiding culture) as an issue of key importance. Another important element of the speech involved clearly naming the AfD as the CDU's main rival in the electoral fight, in particular in the elections to the *Landtags* of Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg scheduled for September. In all three of these federal states, the AfD is topping the polls, and its level of support is running around 30% (the CDU ranks second).

Commentary

- Although the CDU's new platform is fairly general in nature, it sets the main directions for the party's development and will serve as the basis for drawing up consecutive, more detailed plans and manifesto promises. The process of preparing the document was mainly intended to unite the party around its new leadership and – in a controlled manner – to introduce modifications to the platform following Angela Merkel's long years of leadership. The former chancellor did not attend the party congress, and the adoption of the platform document has brought a symbolic end to the CDU's 'Merkel era'. Carsten Linnemann, Merz's closest aide, was responsible for the organisational and substantive

aspects of the preparations, the former involving a two-year-long process of holding conferences and regional meetings. As the party's general secretary, he will have a key influence on the future government's policy if the CDU wins the 2025 elections.

- The platform deliberately highlighted a return to the CDU's conservative profile. The document openly proposes curbs to migration and emphasises the need to integrate the new immigrants into German society. It also makes repeated references to the German culture & language and to Christianity. It highlights the importance of the security policy and the role of the Bundeswehr: for example it proposes introducing a compulsory year-long period of service for the benefit of society as a whole, which individuals could attend as part of compulsory military service in the Bundeswehr or work at non-governmental organisations (in 2011 the Merkel government suspended conscription). During the document's preparation, the items which raised most controversy included social and moral issues, including a dispute over the approach to Muslims. In the final version, the wording was softened and emphasis was placed on the statement that followers of Islam who share German values form an element of the German community. The dispute over this issue has continued to divide the party for years, and the current wording is unacceptable to both the more liberal proponents of immigration and the conservative groups within the CDU.
- Merz's speech was balanced. It was intended to present him as the Christian Democratic party's best candidate for chancellor in the 2025 elections. On this occasion the CDU's leader, who is known for his rhetorical skills and impulsive disposition, read his speech from a prepared text in order to maintain his composure during the event. In a break from precedent, he avoided criticising his political opponents both within and outside the party (with the exception of the AfD), and focused on presenting the main points of the new platform. He appealed to broad social, professional and age groups, and went beyond his usual topics such as economic, financial and domestic security issues. The speech also contained numerous references to the need to protect the climate and a moderate appeal to limit the number of migrants Germany takes in.
- Merz's position within the CDU remains unchallenged. During his previous term he combined the roles of the party's leader and the head of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, and has successfully consolidated the party around himself. The CDU is currently enjoying consistently high levels of support (the party tops the polls with an approval rating of around 30%), and Merz is popular in the eastern federal states. This state of affairs means that the internal party opposition, centred around liberal minister-presidents representing the younger generation such as Hendrik Wüst (North Rhine-Westphalia) and Daniel Günther (Schleswig-Holstein), will not opt for confrontation with him. Merz will most likely be named candidate for chancellor in the 2025 elections (the CSU, the CDU's sister party, will take its decision on this in autumn).

APPENDIX

The CDU's basic platform (*Grundsatzprogramm*): main points

Internal and migration policy

- Emphasis is placed on the importance of “patriotism which is open to the world” (*weltoffener Patriotismus*). Although “we are proud of Germany... we are aware of our historical guilt and do not place our country above other countries. We intend to consolidate our national symbols in public life. 23 May, the Constitution Day, should become a national day of remembrance combined with a state of the nation address”.
- The role of *Leitkultur* (the ‘leading or guiding culture’) is highlighted. This concept is more precisely defined and understood as respect for the constitution, the rule of tolerance, reference to German tradition, respect for German culture and language, etc. Emphasis is placed on the fact that “Germany has been shaped by Christianity” and “churches have a stabilising role in society”.
- Emphasis is placed on the idea that “Muslims who share our values are a part of Germany”. The CDU proposes that German-speaking imams should be educated at German universities.
- The value of family and childcare is emphasised; respect for the “variety of sexual orientations and gender identities” is highlighted, although the ideological concept of gender is rejected (“*Einen ideologischen Genderbegriff lehnen wir ab*”).
- Emphasis is placed on curbing the inflow of migrants, the protection of the EU’s borders (including by building physical fences etc.), maintaining border checks within the EU as long as it is necessary, and the integration of immigrants. Each child should take a compulsory language test at age 4; children who need assistance are expected to attend classes to improve their German language skills in their crèche or kindergarten.
- It is proposed to enable the processing of asylum applications outside EU territory: “in the event of a positive decision, a safe third country will grant protection to the applicant on the spot. Requirements regarding safe third countries focus on the basic commitments resulting from the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the European Convention of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. These conventions do not introduce the right to freely choose the country of protection or grant the right to protection on grounds of the economic weakness of the applicant’s country of origin. We intend to accept individuals seeking protection on humanitarian contingencies”.
- Domestic security is to be improved, by means including the ‘zero tolerance strategy’: stepping up the fight against the criminal activity of clans, as well as organised, politically-motivated and anti-Semitic crime. Emphasis is placed on the fight against the manifestations of extremism and on preventing them.
- The document includes proposals to increase retirement age “for those who are able to work, while the standard retirement age should depend on the average life expectancy”.
- Emphasis is placed on an open attitude towards various climate protection technologies (the use of nuclear energy is not ruled out).
- The platform highlights the fact that Germany needs comprehensive reform of the state and its administration, including a reform of the rules of federalism.

Foreign and security policy

- Russia, which is waging war and threatening the European order of peace and the integrity of sovereign nations, cannot be viewed as a partner. “We hope that a different Russia will one day be considered a partner. To achieve this, Russia primarily needs to accept, fully and without reservations, the neighbouring states’ right to exist. Until then, European security can only be arranged in opposition to Russia”. Ukraine, which has fallen victim to Russian aggression, needs to continue receiving full support from Germany and other free Western democracies. This also concerns Ukraine’s path towards membership of the EU and NATO.
- The relationship with the US is of key importance to Germany’s security and foreign policy. The document highlights the need to increase spending on the Bundeswehr (“To reorganise the Bundeswehr and build armed forces which would be combat ready, we need to fully meet NATO requirements”). It proposes a gradual implementation of a year-long compulsory service period, either in the Bundeswehr or with non-governmental organisations. Until that time, the Bundeswehr will be required to specify individual contingents of conscripts to boost the ranks of the German armed forces. The CDU emphasises that the Bundeswehr must be “ready to defend and fight. Germany needs to face the reality of a changing global situation and maintain its leadership status. To achieve this, we need to be able once again to defend our country and protect the EU member states and the NATO alliance alongside our partners”. The Christian Democrats propose increasing the presence of soldiers as “uniformed citizens in a visible place at the centre of our society”.
- The sharing (*nukleare Teilhabe*) of nuclear weapons is “an important element of nuclear deterrence, which should be discussed with our European partners such as France and the United Kingdom, and subsequently transformed into a joint nuclear defence shield”.
- In the EU context, the document emphasises the principle of subsidiarity between the EU level and the national level, as well as Germany’s cooperation with France and Poland.
- A strong commitment to supporting Israel and its security is viewed as a foundation of German foreign policy.
- The document highlights the need to adopt a strategic approach to relations with China (which is described as a “strategic rival”), which will enable Germany to maintain a balance between economic cooperation and the protection of its own security interests.