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The European Parliament election in Germany: a vote of no confidence in the Scholz government

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The Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) won the European Parliament (EP) election in Germany with 30.0% of the vote (+1.1% compared to 2019). The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) came second with 15.9% (+4.9%). The coalition parties registered a drop in support: 13.9% (-1.9%) voted for the SPD, 11.9% (-8.6%) for the Greens and 5.2% (-0.2%) for the FDP. The Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), which was contesting elections for the first time, received 6.2% of the vote.

There is no electoral threshold in EP elections in Germany, which allows small parties to enter. Die Linke received 2.7% of the vote (-2.8%), the Free Voters 2.7% (+0.5%), Volt 2.6% (+1.9%), Die PARTEI 1.9% (-0.5%), and the Animal Protection Party (*Die Tierschutzpartei*) 1.4% (no change). Representatives of the Ecological Democratic Party (ÖDP), the Family Party of Germany and the Party of Progress (PdF), all of which scored under 1%, also entered the EP, winning one seat each.

Commentary

- These elections are crucially important for Germany's domestic politics. They represented the first stage of an electoral marathon, coming just a few months before the autumn elections in the east of the country and a year before the vote for the Bundestag. Voters saw it as an opportunity to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the policies of the SPD-Green-FDP coalition (see '*Elections to the European Parliament: the beginning of an electoral marathon in Germany*'). The vast majority of German people (76%) have a negative view of the government's and Chancellor Olaf Scholz's performance.
- The election's main themes were centred around the dominant issues in Germany's domestic politics: migration, security and the economy. Unlike in 2019, environmental issues did not feature prominently, or were even used to criticise the EU's climate policy, which contributed to the Greens' poor result. The weakness of the Greens' and the SPD's main candidates, who were largely unknown and lacked a coherent programme, was another reason for these two parties' failure. The demobilisation of the Social Democrats' electorate (which was also to some extent dissatisfied with the government's policies) also proved to be a problem: 2.6 million people from this group of voters stayed home. This was all the more significant as the sharp polarisation in the election campaign, marked by several attacks on politicians, contributed to a 3.4% increase in overall

turnout. 64.8% of eligible voters took part in the election. The SPD lost over one million votes to the CDU, 580,000 to the AfD and 520,000 to the BSW.

- The coalition parties' defeat will heighten tensions within the government. With just over a year to go before the Bundestag elections, each of these parties will be trying to highlight their own electoral profiles by adopting more rigid stances on issues that are fundamental to them; these include Ukraine, migration policy, climate policy and budgetary austerity. However, the coalition is unlikely to break up due to the lack of any viable alternatives. In addition, Chancellor Scholz will come under particularly intense pressure as he will increasingly face demands within his party to alter the government's policies, and even calls for him to be replaced.
- The CDU/CSU's victory resulted from an effective election campaign, the party's new, more conservative programme, its success in calming internal disputes and the weakness of the ruling parties. Moreover, the Christian Democrats under Friedrich Merz have been consistent in calling for migration to be significantly reduced, which was the main election theme (see '*A return to conservatism: the CDU's new platform*'). The public perceives the CDU as a party that is competent on security and the economy (concerns about welfare losses were one of the main issues raised in the campaign). The CDU's result in the EP elections has strengthened it ahead of the September series of votes in the eastern federal states, where the AfD will be the Christian Democrats' biggest rival.
- The AfD's success stemmed from its dominance in the east of Germany, where it has been leading the polls for many months (see '*A general rehearsal: strategies to contain the AfD*'). Its victories in municipal elections that were held in some of the *Länder* alongside the EP election also attest to its strength. The party won in most eastern German districts. In the European ballot, almost 30 percent of those eligible to vote in the former GDR supported it. Its result was only slightly weakened by scandals involving the party's main candidates; on the other hand, the murder of a police officer in Mannheim committed by an immigrant just a few days before the election and the support of the youngest voters helped to boost support for the party ; the AfD is the most popular party in the 16-24 age group, alongside the CDU. Its anti-immigrant message swayed 620,000 CDU voters and 580,000 SPD voters. The BSW also received very high support, especially in the eastern *Länder*, where it is open to collaboration with the AfD. Thanks to its charismatic female leader, the BSW took votes away from all the other parties, primarily the SPD (520,000) and Die Linke (410,000).