Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 1.07.2025 www.osw.waw.pl

Germany: post-election reckoning in the SPD

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At the extraordinary SPD congress in Berlin (27–29 June), the party elected new leadership. Lars Klingbeil – Vice Chancellor and Federal Minister of Finance – assumed the role of co-leader for the third time. Although he ran unopposed, he received only 64.9% of the vote – the lowest result in the party's history. The second co-leader, with 95% support, is Bärbel Bas, the Federal Minister of Labour and Social Affairs. The position of Secretary General will be held by 33-year-old Tim Klüssendorf, who secured 91% of the vote. Five deputy leaders were also elected. The SPD announced plans to develop a new core platform – the last one was adopted 18 years ago – in response to the party's electoral defeat in February. During the congress, a motion to initiate proceedings to ban the AfD was also unanimously adopted.

Klingbeil's result weakens his position within the government. At the same time, the number of his rivals within the party is growing – from activists sidelined in the allocation of posts in the new cabinet to opponents of the Vice Chancellor's stance on fiscal policy and his support for Ukraine. The development of the SPD's new core platform is intended to consolidate the party around the current leadership and prepare it for the 2029 election.

Commentary

- **Klingbeil's result stems from discontent within the party following the SPD's worst Bundestag election outcome since 1887** – just 16.4%. Immediately after the defeat, Klingbeil announced a renewal and rejuvenation of the party, surrounding himself in the new cabinet mainly with young collaborators loyal to him. However, many party members have accused him of concentrating excessive power in his own hands despite the electoral defeat, while simultaneously taking on the role of Vice Chancellor. He is also criticised for attempting to shift the blame for the defeat solely onto the outgoing co-leader, Saskia Esken.
- **The SPD still includes a significant faction of activists seeking to rebuild support through a pro-Russian policy stance, which runs counter to Klingbeil's direction.** During the congress, the co-leader unequivocally stressed the necessity of continued support for Ukraine, stating 'being a party of peace in 2025 means something different than in the 1980s. Putin is not Gorbachev. Today, we must do everything to protect ourselves from Putin's Russia'. This was a direct criticism of the SPD 'Manifesto' announced a few weeks earlier, signed by several dozen prominent members of the party's left wing, including former parliamentary group leader Rolf Mützenich. In the document, the authors call for intensified diplomatic efforts and a return to talks with Moscow.

Moreover, during the congress, a motion entitled *No to Nord Stream* was adopted, expressing opposition to the resumption of 'any natural gas deliveries from Russia through the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 *pipelines*'.

- **Bärbel Bas's strong result confirms her popularity within the party.** If she succeeds in implementing the SPD's key social policy goals (such as raising the minimum wage, increasing pension payments, and introducing a tax system favourable to low-income earners), she could become a contender against Klingbeil for the chancellor nomination in 2029. Currently serving as President of the Bundestag, Bas is aligned with the party's left wing and is regarded by the party base as the archetype of a Social Democrat. She comes from a large, working-class family in Duisburg, the SPD stronghold in the Ruhr region. She holds qualifications in administration and social insurance and has been active in trade unions. Bas joined the SPD in 1988 and quickly took on roles in the party's youth wing and regional structures. Her principal weakness remains the absence of a clear political initiative – for example, she failed to directly address the party's electoral defeat during the congress. She has often attained key positions largely due to others stepping aside – notably, Manuela Schwesig, the popular Minister-President of Mecklenburg–Western Pomerania, declined to run for co-leader.
- **The SPD lacks a clear strategy for emerging from its crisis and improving its standing in the polls.** In the 2025 Bundestag elections, the party experienced a historic decline in support among manual, technical, and skilled workers – from 27% in 2013 to just 12%. At the same time, the AfD significantly expanded its influence in this voter group – from 6% to 38% – capturing a substantial portion of the SPD's traditional base (approximately 720,000 SPD voters switched to AfD). Like the CDU, the SPD is also losing ground among younger voters: in the Bundestag election, only 12% of those aged 18 to 24 voted for the party, compared with approximately 25% among those aged 70 and over. Another ongoing issue is the party's dwindling membership – from 443,000 in 2015 to approximately 358,000 at the end of 2024, a drop of nearly 20%. The 2026 federal state elections in Mecklenburg–Western Pomerania, Berlin, and Rhineland-Palatinate will represent the first test for the new party leadership. In each of these federal states, the SPD aims to retain power.