



German Populists Shut Out: Establishment Parties Risk Terminal Decline

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The grassroots revolt against the Social Democratic establishment in Germany failed when two-thirds of party members backed the not-so Grand Coalition (GroKo) with Germany's conservatives. For the third time in four terms the once proud Marxist party, which traces its lineage back to Wilhelmine Germany and the "iron" chancellorship of Otto von Bismarck, will play secondary coalition partner. Some party members wonder if the SPD will survive.

The status of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (sister parties that act in tandem) may prove to be little better. Although the bigger vote-getter, Chancellor Angela Merkel's coalition gave up substantial policies and positions to win SPD agreement. Many expect her to make way for new leadership before her term ends.

Critics of the centrist governing cartel have been emboldened. The populist Alternative for Germany received almost 13 percent of the vote last fall and will become the official opposition. Also invigorated are the other opposition parties.

The most important question is whether the continuing breakdown of the two traditional governing parties will spark their renewal or continued decline. Since the first GroKo in 2005, the governing cartel has hemorrhaged votes. Just five years ago the SPD-CDU/CSU collected two-thirds of the vote. Last fall that total was barely a majority.

After the 2005 election, in which Merkel's promises of serious economic reform lost most of the CDU/CSU's early electoral lead, she moved sharply left, embracing much of the SPD's agenda. The nominal conservatives got credit for governing to the center-left, leaving the Social Democrats as a marginal political afterthought.

That trajectory seems likely to continue. There are some signs of life emerging in the major parties, but that may reflect fratricidal rather than beneficial competition.

The SPD debacle led to an unseemly, public squabble over positions and destruction of the party leader's career. Also notable is Chancellor Merkel's diminished stature. Although she has

dominated politics since becoming chancellor in 2005, the “safe hands” campaign lost its potency as her conservative parties slumped to their worst result since 1949.

She ended up concluding another coalition pact, but only by making substantial concessions to the Social Democrats. Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff of the German Marshall Fund called the agreement “one big giveaway, freebies for all,” leaving “a left-liberal feel to it.” At the party conference approving the pact one member complained about giving the AfD “one million of our voters.”

The changed debate reaches beyond the Bundestag. The traditional social consensus is fraying. Noted the American Foreign Policy Council’s Wayne Merry, “the official poverty rate among unemployed Germans is the highest in the EU, while German television views routinely see elderly and unemployed citizens fed by soup kitchens while migrants receive priority for housing, training and other benefits.” In response the charity Essener Tafel announced that it would restrict access to its food bank to German citizens, triggering heated criticism.

European elites praised the formation of a stable government, but Berlin is not likely to back greater continental consolidation and European Union control over member states’ finances, as hoped in Brussels. Few SPD voters and even fewer CDU/CSU supporters want to effectively turn Germany’s strong fiscal position over to the perceived wastrals which collected a succession of European bail-outs. Even the SPD member tapped for the Finance Minister, Olaf Scholz, leans conservative on fiscal matters.

Washington is unlikely to be satisfied with the new coalition. The last Merkel government promised to up Germany’s military outlays to two percent of GDP by 2024. But Berlin fell back from that goal this year and the coalition agreement envisions defense spending at 1.15 percent of GDP.

Germany has turned into the world’s most important example of cartel government, with three of four administrations created by a political carve-up between the two establishment blocs. The major parties hope that another GroKo will allow them to run out the clock, so to speak. If social peace returns, they believe, so will AfD voters.

However, the populists scored big last year even though immigration had dropped dramatically from its 2015 peak. Unless the respective party members find their voices and reinvigorate a debate that has been largely suppressed for years, public dissatisfaction will grow.

Warned Julian Reichelt, editor of the Bild newspaper: “If the mainstream parties don’t cover key subjects such as security and migration, they will be captured by radicals from both the left and right.” Disenfranchising those who are frustrated and angry is unlikely to deliver the kind of prosperous, peaceful future that most of us desire.

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