



Germany's Coalition that Couldn't, and the Mess It Leaves

By Michael Leigh

BERLIN — Sunday a political earthquake hit Germany. The Liberals — one of four parties in talks to form the new government following September's election — withdrew from the talks, removing Merkel's only remaining coalition option. Thus for the first time since 1949, there is no majority grouping willing to form a government. The stable colossus in the middle of Europe is suddenly unstable. This will have severe consequences. Some of the ripple effects are unknowable at this point, but even the likely consequences are remarkable.

First, no stable government is in sight. Since coalition talks have failed and the Social Democrats continue to be unwilling to join a government as a junior partner to Angela Merkel's conservatives, a minority government is the only alternative to snap elections. But Germany has no political tradition of chancellors working with changing majorities in Parliament, and it is unlikely to experiment with it now. This leaves new elections as the most likely outcome.

But there are two problems with new elections. Firstly, politicians cannot just declare them. The German constitution puts a premium on stability and provides for multiple attempts to find a parliamentary majority for a new government. This will take time. Therefore, snap elections might not take place any earlier

than spring. Secondly, the outcome of elections is unknowable, especially following Sunday's rejection of compromise. Will voters find that the Liberals put party before country? Or will they see it as putting principle before power? Will new elections entice voters to vote for "stability"? Or will the inability to form a government strengthen populist forces?

All we know is that this process will need time to sort itself out — time during which Germany will be a paralyzed nation.

And no new leadership is in sight. Of the leaders at the head table these past few weeks, few will survive. Liberal Party chairman Christian Lindner looks like he will come out unscathed, but the leader of the Bavarian sister party to Merkel's Christian Democrats, Horst Seehofer, is the likely looking at his career's end. The duo of Kathrin Göring Eckardt and Cem Özdemir wanted to make the Greens palatable for conservatives — and failed. Their future is now also in doubt.

And then there is Angela Merkel. While she was the adult in the room once again, brokering compromises left and right, it is hard to see her hang on to the chancellorship for more than a few months. For her to be able to continue to lead Germany, she would either have to find stability in a minority government

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or receive a convincing mandate from the potential snap election. While that is not impossible, it is very unlikely.

The conservatives will need Angela Merkel for just a bit longer, since there is no reserve CDU-leader waiting in the wings. It is hard to imagine a transition of power that voters would bless at the ballot box. The best Angela Merkel can do right now is to start thinking about pathways to her own succession. For, given the weakness of the Social Democrats, the next chancellor of Germany is likely to be a conservative.

For decades, brokering power in Germany was quite simple: two main parties and the Liberals, the “kingmaker” party, battled it out. Things began to change with the splintering of the left in the 1980s. The Greens were an offshoot of the left-liberal spectrum, to be joined in Parliament by the post-communists (the Left Party) after German unification. Now, the right is fraying a well. The arrival of the populist right in Parliament has added to the complexity and led to needing a multi-party government. This experiment failed resoundingly this weekend. And while this failure will not lead to a consolidation of the party spectrum, it might well contribute to more polarization. After all, the idea of reaching across the isle and seeking compromise with seemingly distant partners collapsed this past weekend.

For better or for worse, Germany has “normalized” dramatically in the past few months. The election ended a phase of German exceptionalism during which the country seemed almost immune to the kind of populism that influenced its most important neighbors and allies. But the failure to broker a coalition government creates the kind of instability and uncertainty we have seen in neighbors and allies. Now, all major Western countries are in turmoil at the same time. Europe will have to live without the calming effect of a stable Germany for a while.

While that is certainly not a desirable state of affairs, it is tempting to exaggerate the significance of the moment. What we see is not the end of the world and not the end of the West. Germany has neither voted for Brexit and nor for Donald Trump, and will not face

similar consequences. It just cannot seem to get the current chancellor reelected with a new coalition. It is an earthquake of a political crisis, no more, no less.

About the Author

Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff is vice president at the German Marshall Fund of the United States where he oversees the organization's activities in Germany and leads the Europe Program.

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1744 R Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
T 1 202 683 2650 | F 1 202 265 1662 | E info@gmfus.org
<http://www.gmfus.org/>