



German Christian Democrats after the Elections to the European Parliament

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The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) European Parliament election results indicate its weakening position on the political scene. The change in management in 2018 and announcements presenting a new programme did not help the party. There is little time to reverse the unfavourable trend. There is currently an increasing risk that the party will perform poorly in the next German parliamentary elections, and lose power.

Despite their victory in this year's elections to the European Parliament, Germany's Christian Democrats have no reason to be satisfied. They won 28.9% of votes, the worst result they have ever obtained at the federal level. After the elections to the Bundestag in 2017, and following the Land elections in Hesse, this is another signal that the electorate is unhappy with government policy and the situation inside the party. Furthermore, some public opinion polls regarding elections to the Bundestag suggest the Greens will usurp the Christian Democrats as the strongest party. There is a risk that the CDU will be unable to reverse the negative trend before the elections to the regional parliaments of Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia in autumn this year, threatening to weaken their situation to the point that they risk losing power at the federal level.

Rising Costs of Governance. The decline in support for the CDU was caused by public dissatisfaction with the government's actions towards the refugee crisis. Although many Germans enthusiastically welcomed asylum seekers to Germany, research conducted in September 2015 by the Infratest Dimap institute showed that 77% of respondents assessed the government's asylum and refugee policy lacked planning, and 63% said it resulted in a burden on the state. Before the Bundestag elections in 2017, the highest number of respondents said actions in this area (including the introduction of new regulations) should be a priority for the next cabinet. Dissatisfaction with the management of the crisis translated into changes on the German political scene. This benefited Alternative for Germany, which, thanks to the criticism of Angela Merkel's policy on migration and asylum, gained part of the Christian Democrats' electorate. On the other hand, tighter asylum regulations in the later period helped the Greens gain some of the Christian Democrats' centrist voters, who did not support these decisions.

The CDU has also been burdened with failures in other areas. Climate and environmental policy have become particularly important in this context. For 48% of respondents of the Infratest Dimap institute poll, it was the main theme of the elections to the European Parliament. In the same survey, only 14% of respondents declared support for the CDU's activities in this field, which should be read as a negative assessment of the slow pace and manner of implementing energy transformation policy (Energiewende). Despite ambitious targets for reducing carbon dioxide emissions, Germany still remains the largest source of emissions in the EU (according to Eurostat, the country was responsible for 22.5% of emissions in 2018). At the same time, energy prices for households are a problem. They are among the highest in the EU, and

Forsa Institute research suggests that 78% of Germans are afraid of an additional financial burden if prices rise further.

The low result for the CDU is also a result of conflicts within the government coalition. Last year's dispute with the CSU about changes in asylum law, as well as the critical attitude of the Christian Democrats to SPD proposals in the programme "Social State 2025", undermined the confidence of the electorate and called into question the ability of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats to create a well-functioning government. As a result, 60% of voters declared dissatisfaction with the government's work, up 11 percentage points on the results of a survey during the 2017 Bundestag elections.

Ineffective Renewal of the Party. Voters were also influenced by the CDU's failure to make changes in the party leadership. In June, only 13% of respondents agreed with the statement that Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, the new CDU leader, would be a good chancellor. She is among the poorest rated German politicians, with just 24% of Germans saying they were happy with her work in June. To the detriment of Kramp-Karrenbauer, there is a separation of the functions of the chairperson of the CDU and the German chancellor. In this way, the leader of the ruling Christian Democrats has limited possibilities to push through their proposals, yet at the same time bears some responsibility for the actions of the cabinet, which she does not manage. Neither the election of the conservative-leaning leader of the party's youth organisation, Paul Ziemiak, as the CDU Secretary General nor the replacement of Merkel's close associate Volker Kauder with Ralph Brinkhaus as the head of the CDU CSU parliamentary faction helped the party.

The party under new leadership was also unable to communicate effectively with young voters. An example is the lack of an appropriate response to the popular film by vlogger Rezo (over 15 million views by the end of June 2019). In the material published more than a week before the European elections, the author summarised the nearly 14-year rule of the Christian Democrats, criticising climate policy, growing social inequalities and foreign policy. The lack of a convincing response perpetuated the image of the CDU as an older generation establishment party with no understanding of the problems of the young Germans. This was confirmed by the loss of 15 percentage points in the 18–25 group, and 11 percentage points in the 25–34 group, compared to the 2014 EP elections.

The falling support has not been stopped by announcing that CDU will renew its conservative-liberal stance, which could help it to regain some of the right-leaning electorate who voted for AfD and mobilise CDU supporters who did not vote due to disappointment with their party of choice. Since becoming party leader, Kramp-Karrenbauer has tried to distance herself from her predecessor's more centrist policy. Examples are her proposals to review migration policy, and opposition to the introduction of a CO₂ tax. The next signal of the new leader's independence was the publication of the conservative-liberal vision of European integration as an alternative to President Emmanuel Macron's proposals in March. The Christian Democrats' results at the EP elections indicates, however, that these actions did not attract new supporters and only discouraged existing ones. Of the people who supported the CDU in the federal elections in 2017 and refrained from voting for the party in 2019, 55% did not vote at all, and 25% voted for the Greens.

Conclusions. The alarming results of the elections and polls indicate a weakening of the Christian Democrats, which may result in a revision of the current direction of programme changes. The elections to the European Parliament have shown that currently the CDU's most serious rival is not AfD, but the Greens. It is possible, then, that the party leadership will decide to abandon some more right-wing ideas and fight for the centre electorate. On the one hand, such a decision will generate intra-party disputes, and on the other, it will discourage CDU voters in the former East Germany in local elections this autumn. A low result in the east of Germany may undermine Kramp-Karrenbauer's position and be an excuse to remove her from her post.

In the European dimension, the CDU result contributed to reduced representation of the European People's Party (EPP) in the EP, weakening their camp and forcing them to build a coalition. At the same time, the results of the other parties allowed the German Christian Democrats to maintain their status as the largest national representation within the framework of the popular faction. From the CDU's perspective, it was a success to get the support of the European Council for the candidacy of Ursula von der Leyen, the Christian Democrat minister of defence, for the post of president of the European Commission.

The weakening of the Christian Democrats will have unfavourable consequences from Poland's point of view. First, there is a risk that the party's position on foreign policy may be undermined by its own members in order to win voters who are in favour of intensifying relations with Russia and critical of U.S. policy. Examples include an open letter from Leipzig activists to Kramp-Karrenbauer and a statement from the Christian Democratic prime minister of Saxony, who supported abolishing sanctions on Russia. Second, AfD's success in the autumn elections may trigger a debate in the CDU on the prospects for a coalition with the extreme right. This would be a source of a serious internal party crisis. At the same time, it would be an important step towards the exit of AfD from political isolation, strengthening the position of this anti-European and pro-Russian group on the German political scene.