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German Christian Democrats Spar over Asylum Policy

Lidia Gibadto

It is difficult to consider the agreement between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Bavarian Christian-Social Union (CSU), which settled a dispute between them over rules on admitting refugees, as a radical change in German asylum policy. It rather proves that both parties began to see the risks and costs associated with continuation of the conflict. This is good news for Germany's neighbours who—at least for now—do not have to worry about the political stability of a country of key importance for the EU.

The conflict between CDU and CSU concerning asylum policy began in September 2015 but culminated in June. The source of the dispute was a proposal by the head of the CSU and Interior Minister Horst Seehofer. He proposed that people who submit an asylum application in another EU country should not be allowed to enter Germany.

The proposal was opposed by Chancellor Angela Merkel. That led to the largest crisis in years in the decades-long alliance between the two Christian Democrats. The results of the EU summit on migration on 28 June were unsatisfactory for Seehofer, who during a CSU leadership session that followed said he would leave the government and resign from the post of party chairman. Finally, on 2 July, representatives of both parties concluded an agreement, which three days later and after introducing amendments proposed by coalition partner SPD, were approved by the government. The deal stipulates that people who submitted an asylum application in another EU country are to be returned on the basis of bilateral agreements.

The negotiation of appropriate agreements with EU countries where migrants would be returned is crucial for the procedure to enter into force. This means that it is not known if and when it will be effectively used and that clearly reduces its real significance. It strengthens the impression that the compromise was rather about settling the dispute because of the increasing political costs and the possibility of a break in the alliance of CDU and CSU.

The Political Price of the Conflict. The motivation of both parties to conclude the agreement was primarily the weakening public support for the German government. According to the Infratest dimap poll from July, the public's satisfaction with the work of the CDU/CSU–SPD coalition fell by 15 percentage points (p.p.) compared to June. The lack of satisfaction in the government's actions was particularly noticeable among voters of the parties forming the grand coalition—63% of CDU/CSU voters and 73% of SPD voters declared less satisfaction or a lack of satisfaction. The fall in support was recorded just four months after the formation of the government. Such a significant weakening occurs at a time when the government is preparing for negotiations on the future of the eurozone, the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021–2027 (EU budget), and other key issues. Prolongation of the coalition crisis would, therefore, undermine Germany's influence in shaping important decisions about the future of the EU.

From the point of view of the political interests of both groups, the escalation of the dispute also would be risky. The demands to tighten asylum policy, formulated by CSU, were aimed to reclaim votes from Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the October elections to the Bavarian legislative assembly. The prolonged

conflict and the risk of disintegration of the alliance with CDU posed a risk of the opposite effect: a loss of support in favour of AfD and other groups. An additional factor that prompted CSU to reach an agreement was the uncertain reaction of party members to Seehofer's stepping down from his functions as the minister of internal affairs and the head of the grouping. His resignation could result in factional struggles between the supporters of the current chairman and the internal party opposition. That may hinder effective campaigning three months before elections.

For CDU, the disagreement posed the danger of dividing the Christian Democrats and, consequently, CSU leaving the grand coalition. CDU and SPD could decide to create a minority government but that would force the authorities to seek the support of other parties in the Bundestag, which would significantly impede the work of the government. It cannot be ruled out that this would eventually lead to negotiations with the Greens or the Free Democratic Party (FDP) on the establishment of a new coalition. In an extreme scenario, early elections would be necessary. Then CDU would have to reckon with lower support. The party's situation would be further complicated by the still open question of leadership succession after Merkel. The possibility of a change of leader would lead to rivalry to take this position, which creates the risk of new divisions within the party.

Advantages of the Christian Democratic Alliance. In addition to the short-term arguments for maintaining the CDU/CSU union, there are strategic considerations. With consistent cooperation, both parties may not only be able to pursue common interests but also use their differences to win over various groups of voters. The CSU presents itself as the conservative wing of the Christian Democrats. Criticism of Merkel's actions in the sphere of migration policy, opposition to the plan for the establishment of a common eurozone budget, or opinions questioning the "belonging of Islam to Germany" distinguish the Bavarian Christian Democrats from the CDU. This voice attracts right-wing AfD voters to the Union. At the same time, the CDU directs its programme to the electorate of the broad centre and liberal FDP voters. As a result, the votes of both parties accumulate, which translates into a larger number of representatives of Christian Democrats in the Bundestag.

This difference management also has a regional dimension. On the one hand, thanks to the agreement with the CDU, the CSU has the exclusive right to represent the Christian Democrats in Bavaria. At the same time, both parties form a common faction in the Bundestag. Thus, the CSU influences federal-level policy. If the CSU decided to end the alliance, then as a regional party, it would face a difficult and time-consuming effort to build structures in the other Bundesländer. On the other hand, the leadership of the party would have to take into account that the CDU's answer would be setting up its own structures in Bavaria. Therefore, the monopoly on the votes of the Christian Democrats would break, and CSU would gain another competitor.

The scenario of breaking up the CDU and CSU isn't eliminated from the discussion on the future of the Christian Democrats because of these strategic benefits. Research by the INSA institute conducted in June is an argument for supporters of a breakup. It indicates that if the CDU fielded its own candidates in the parliamentary elections in Bavaria and the CSU extended its activities to the other Bundesländer, the parties could count on 22% and 18% of votes, respectively. However, the sharp, electoral rivalry between CDU and CSU could discourage the Christian Democrats' electorate from voting or encourage support for other parties. In addition, the recorded support is not confirmed by long-term surveys.

Conclusions. Short-term factors and strategic considerations enforce the survival of the Christian Democratic alliance. Its existence supports the stability of the entire political system of Germany, it is also crucial for maintaining the current direction of Germany's European and foreign policy. From Poland's point of view, the strong union of CDU and CSU is a guarantee that Germany will continue to support the transatlantic community and remain cautious with Russia and with the vision of a Europe of "many speeds".

Although the situation with the Christian Democrats has calmed, recent events should be seen in the broader, not very positive context of changes in the political scene in Germany. To mark their presence in the public debate, German politicians resort to populist arguments, use harsh language, and ever more often treat escalating conflicts as an opportunity to win new voters. The result is a progressive fragmentation of the German political scene and the weakening of the so-called *Volksparteien*, or the largest parties that bring together different groups of voters and exert the strongest influence on German politics. The fall in support for CDU/CSU and the SPD is accompanied by the strengthening of smaller parties, which threatens further fragmentation of the political scene in an era of weak voter attachment to one party. As a consequence, there is a risk of a political system imbalance, shortened terms of office, the establishment of weak governments, and concentration on internal affairs. Such a scenario would, in turn, raise questions about the long-term stability of Germany's foreign and European policy.