

Angie: The Most Powerful Politician in Europe?

Written by Jocelyn Mawdsley

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JOCELYN MAWDSLEY, SEP 27 2013

Angela Merkel's resounding victory in the German federal elections has been portrayed in much of the European press as solidifying German power, or near hegemony, in the European Union. But although her personal triumph cannot be discounted, the manner of her victory has left her with some considerable domestic problems.

Firstly, Angela Merkel's CDU/CSU party did not win an absolute majority and so needs to enter into a coalition. Their preferred coalition partner, the liberal pro-business Free Democrats (FDP), failed to gain 5% of the vote and therefore will not be represented in the Bundestag for the next legislative period. Although in theory the other three parties represented in the Bundestag, the social democratic SPD, the Greens and the far-left die Linke, have a majority of seats between them such a coalition is still seen as taboo at the national level by key SPD politicians, because of die Linke's support for the former East Germany.

The more likely coalitions though are either a grand coalition or a CDU/CSU-Green alliance. But both the Greens and the SPD are reluctant. The Greens are in disarray after a poor election campaign with some spectacular own goals, especially related to the paedophilia scandal. Most of the leadership has resigned and the age-old arguments between the two wings of the party have re-emerged. Although they share some common policy ground with the CDU/CSU, a coalition with the Greens would leave Merkel without a majority in Germany's upper house, the Bundesrat. Neither is a grand coalition straightforward. Many of the SPD's key politicians still resent their electoral price paid after the last grand coalition in 2009, when voters punished them for seeming to get on too well with the CDU/CSU. While the SPD will probably be forced into coalition talks, they are likely to exact a heavy price from Merkel.

Secondly, Merkel has to deal with the fact that an unusually high 15% of German votes will not be represented in the Bundestag. Both the FDP and the new Eurosceptic party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), just fell short of the 5% needed for representation. Both could cause problems. The FDP will have to reinvent itself if it is to survive. Since its founding in 1949, this is the first time it has not been in the Bundestag, frequently serving as the junior partner in government. As pollsters suggest they lost votes to the AfD, one possibility might be the strengthening of an existing Eurosceptic tendency in the party. Given Merkel's response to the Eurozone crisis is unpopular domestically, this could be a problem for her, especially as elections to the European Parliament take place in summer 2014. Similarly, she has to respond to the unexpected success (particularly among younger voters) of the AfD, which if they can maintain momentum, are well-placed to do well in the European Parliament elections. Given Merkel's sister party, the CSU, is also trying to appeal to Eurosceptic voters, notably with its policy on charging foreign car drivers a levy to drive on German motorways (which does not seem compatible with EU legislation on free movement), this could be difficult territory for Merkel, who maintains that her policies on the EU in general, and the Eurozone in particular, will not change.

So what are the consequences of the German election results for the rest of the EU? The most obvious point is that given the tensions on European matters between the various groupings, the coalition talks are going to mean a period (possibly lengthy) of uncertainty for Germany's partners. Nor is the outcome likely to be wholly satisfactory for two key EU partners, France and the UK. While France would like to see a grand coalition, as power shifts towards Germany given the two countries' disparate economic fortunes, even this is unlikely to heal the tensions in the Franco-German partnership. For Britain, one possible casualty of a 'grand coalition' might be Merkel's tolerance of David

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Cameron's review of competences, given leading figures in the SPD are noted for their pro-EU credentials. Of crucial importance for those states, which have received Eurozone bail-outs, is Germany's future Eurozone policy. Merkel has stated that the austerity policies, that have made her a figure of hate most notably in Greece, will continue. But here there is real disagreement between the potential members of a grand coalition. Merkel has cooled on the prospect of further EU fiscal integration, which the SPD supports, along with more pro-growth policies. Merkel's sister party, the CSU, are even less enthusiastic than she is, and if the parties outside the Bundestag continue to make populist Eurosceptic mood music, then finding a compromise is going to be hard, even for a politician of Merkel's undoubted ability. For the rest of the EU, coping with an uncertain Berlin, at the exact moment where German power is at its greatest, will not be easy. Angela Merkel is certainly Europe's most powerful politician, at the height of her powers, but paradoxically the manner of her electoral triumph has brought some major potential problems in its wake.

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