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What the German election result will mean for Brexit

Written by Sabine Tyldesley, Political Consultant on 26 September 2017



Angela Merkel secured a fourth term as German chancellor on Sunday, despite significant losses in vote share. Her Christian democratic party CDU recorded its worst result since 1949, with 33 per cent compared to 41 per cent in 2013. Her main rival and former coalition partners, the Social Democrats (SPD) only secured 21 per cent, their worst result in post war times, which led SPD Party leader Martin Schulz to announce his party would re-enter a “grand coalition” with Merkel, but head into opposition.

This makes a “Jamaica” coalition with the liberal Free Democrats (FDP) and the Green party likely. Thus named after their official party colours, black, yellow and green.

With no recourse into a coalition with the SPD, these smaller parties now hold a significant amount of leverage during coalition talks, as without their support, Merkel’s party risk having to call a new election. And the UK will have to therefore look more closely at the FDP’s and Green’s position on Brexit.

While a Merkel led Government overall will likely continue to show greater allegiance to unity in Europe than to German economic self interest, which is a view all parties share, their views on EU matters diverge ever so slightly, in particular on immigration and Eurozone reform.

Merkel is keen to sustain “in-depth economic and political ties with Great Britain” after Brexit but made it clear in her manifesto that the UK would not enjoy special treatment.

The FDP and Green echo this in their manifesto. The FDP said there would be no “cherry picking” and no watering down of general principles of Single market membership. The Greens too stress there will be no “a la carte” Brexit and make Single Market membership dependent on cohesion in judicial matters as well as the indivisibility of the four freedoms, including free movement of people.

The FDP are said to take a laissez-faire approach to Government's relationship with business generally supporting free-market economy and low regulation, but for those hoping this will favour Brexit Britain, their latest statement may put this in perspective. FDP representative Lambsdorff, who is also Vice President of the European Parliament, welcomed May's commitment to a transitional arrangement which would give certainty and minimise risk to businesses. However, he firmly stated it had to be time limited and British courts “taking into account” CJEU judgements would not be good enough in matters of free movement of workers and settlement rights.

The Greens, overall a more left leaning progressive party, also prioritise citizens' rights and protections, even suggesting to make German citizenship more easily obtainable for those Scottish and Northern Irish, and other Britons, who may wish to live in Germany to retain EU citizen's rights in full.

The FDP had also highlighted the importance of Scottish and Northern Irish interests in the past, who they stress, would be welcomed back into the EU should they seek independence from the UK.

More broadly on the EU, the Free Democrats are committed to the idea of a “multi-speed” EU, meaning a formalised categorisation of different stages of economic and political integration into the supranational framework, which will allow swifter integration for those willing, while allowing an opt out for some countries, who are not yet ready for integration in certain areas. This could benefit Britain as it seeks a quasi status quo deal outside of the EU.

The Greens are well known for their commitment to equality and rights, in particular stronger data and consumer protections, a hotly debated issue as long as arbitration mechanism involving the CJEU remain a red line for the UK.

After Theresa May's Brexit speech in Florence last Friday, Merkel's own party reacted irritated in a statement pointing out May had not conclusively committed to settling outstanding liabilities from EU membership - dubbed the Divorce Bill - and expressed disappointment that matters on CJEU jurisdiction had remained ambiguous.

Tough compromises on interior matters and possible disagreements with her new coalition partners may be on the horizon for Merkel but it seems overall her continued leadership will bring continuity to the bloc - and the Brexit negotiation position of the EU27 as a whole, - as the negotiations move into their fourth round today.

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