

## GroKo for Germany? How the prospect of a new grand coalition is dividing the country and the SPD



On 21 January, members of the German Social Democrats (SPD) will vote on whether to move to the next stage of talks over the formation of a grand coalition between the SPD and Angela Merkel's CDU/CSU. [Julian Göppfarth](#) writes that much like the country as a whole, the SPD faces a choice between pragmatic politics and a rebellious yearning for a fresh start.



Martin Schulz, Credit: [SPD Schleswig-Holstein \(CC BY 2.0\)](#)

The image could not have been more symbolic. When Angela Merkel, Horst Seehofer and Martin Schulz stepped in front of the cameras on 12 January to present the results of their exploratory talks, they were framed by blank white lecterns and a blank pale blue wall. No words, no strong colours nor catchy slogans that could represent a fresh start and the “new politics” their common agreement boasts about. Though unintended, this setting surrounding the leaders of the CDU, CSU and SPD conveyed visually how many Germans perceive a new Grand Coalition led by Merkel: a colourless, visionless and pragmatic “Weiter-So” (more of the same) based on reason but contradicting a widespread gut feeling that yearns for something new, something different.

Even if the content of the paper speaks to many needs, feelings and claims that have become apparent in the last few years – restrictions on immigration and asylum, an official immigration law, direct state investments in schools and more money for health care – few Germans are really convinced and voters are [split](#) in their support for a new grand coalition. What is important to many, it seems, is less the content but the form of the new government. A truly new politics, as one can hear and read frequently, can only be embodied by fresh faces. And while a Jamaican coalition still offered a compromise between old (CDU/CSU) and new (the Greens/liberals) – between an experienced generation and young leaders – a new Grand coalition evokes the feeling that the elections did not really matter and that no real visible change has taken place.

Yet at the core of this feeling of dissatisfaction and disappointment among many Germans lies a deeper problem: a vision expressing an idea of what Germany and Europe should look like in 10, 20 or even 50 years and, more importantly, the leadership to defend, fight and argue for such a vision. Instead, virtually none of the leading German politicians demonstrated true leadership in the months prior and following the elections in September. And this is not only true for Angela Merkel, who is known for her “muddling through” approach to politics. The party that embodies this in the most dramatic way is the SPD who, with Schulz’s sudden appearance on the national political stage, desperately attempted to embody a new approach to social democracy and to politics more generally. The reality, however, has caught up with Schulz. Instead of developing and branding a new social democratic project that develops a convincing narrative on how to shape this reality, Schulz has come to represent yet another SPD leader who promises a new start but is trapped in realpolitik in the end.

In the election campaign, Schulz wavered between a fundamental critique of neoliberalism à la Jeremy Corbyn and a more pragmatic approach, between a critique of the Hartz IV reforms and an appraisal of the role these reforms played in providing the basis for the economic success of Germany. After the elections, he fundamentally opposed a new grand coalition and rejected the prospect of becoming a member of a new Merkel government. Now he is defending a new cooperation between the CDU/CSU and SPD and potentially taking up a place as a minister under Merkel. Perhaps more importantly, he never really tried to present and argue for a coherent narrative about what kind of Germany he and his party stand for. Instead, a plethora of core points have been presented during and after the campaign but without putting them into a common vision and with the lack of a clear communication strategy.

Now, following the exploratory talks, he has failed to take responsibility and has shown an inability to present a strong argument for a new coalition with the CDU/CSU and thus actively shape the debate. Instead, he has sought to defend his sudden new support by referring to the failure of the Jamaica talks, the pressure of President Steinmeier and the international responsibility Germany has – all factors external to the SPD. But where is the Schulz who represents the sovereign agency of the SPD as a political party?

Many SPD members, but also the German public, are tired of this “we have to” approach. They call for a more substantial change and visibly differing visions for the future of Germany. It is this perceived split between the sober approach based on realpolitik and incremental change on the one hand, and a politics based on a fundamental change in German politics (even one more symbolic than substantial) that creates the dilemma the SPD finds itself in. Schulz’s problem is that he has not even tried to develop and argue for a coherent new identity for the SPD, but has rather left the hard decision to voters, the President or now, to the delegates and members of the SPD.

The yearning for a politics based on core values, convictions and strong arguments instead of consensus based pragmatic stability is also reflected in an idealisation of French President Macron. Across the aisle, he is seen not only as a politician who represents a younger generation, but also one who stands for certain principles and a political vision that integrates specific political projects and policies in a greater vision and political symbolism. In Germany, the politician that is often compared to Macron is Christian Lindner, leader of the liberal FDP and the figure who announced the failure of the Jamaica coalition. Even if in disagreement with his political views, many show respect for his decision against a Jamaica coalition.

On 21 January, 600 party delegates will decide on whether the SPD should start coalition talks with the CDU/CSU. If the vote is positive, another party conference will have all SPD members vote on the final coalition agreement produced from the coalition talks. Yet the outcome of the vote is less than certain. For many SPD members, the decision will be one between a politics based on reasonable pragmatism and a rebellious yearning for a fresh start.

If the vote is negative many leading SPD members will have to step down, including Schulz and it might even mean the end for Merkel as German chancellor. Then the decision about the next steps will yet again lie in the hands of German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier who has frequently warned that a failure to form a government would lead to a political instability in which parties like the AfD could thrive. A rejection of the vote might mean a new political instability, many opponents of a new grand coalition argue. But in their eyes an instability resulting from the insistence on an alternative political project for Germany is better than stability without alternatives.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.*

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