

# The beginning of the end for political stability? How the new generation of CDU and SPD members are seeking to reshape German politics



*An agreement has been reached on the creation of a new grand coalition in Germany, but the deal could potentially be rejected by members of the German Social Democrats (SPD), with results of the membership vote due on 4 March. [Julian Göppfarth](#) argues that even if the coalition deal is approved and Angela Merkel remains chancellor, the era of political stability in Germany is drawing to a close, with new younger members of the CDU and SPD now pushing for their parties to take a different direction.*



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For a long time, it seemed as if Germany was immune to political instability. While other European countries lived through moments of turmoil and were challenged by new political movements and parties, the German consensus and compromise making political machinery, embodied by Chancellor Merkel, long seemed capable of absorbing the tensions arising from the crises shaking Europe.

Last week seemed to be, yet again, the moment of victory for the old paradigm of political stability. After the failure of the so-called Jamaica coalition between the liberal FDP, the Greens and Merkel's conservatives, a new grand coalition was on its way. Both the social democrats and conservatives had to agree to painful compromises. But finally, after more than 24 hours of negotiations, a final agreement was presented on 7 February that granted crucial points to both sides and could be seen as yet another example of Merkel's art of compromise.

Even if not loved by most of the party members, the arguments that Europe needs a stable Germany, and that new elections would only further weaken the CDU/CSU and SPD while strengthening the far right AfD, appeared to generate more apprehension than the prospect of another grand coalition. The main resistance came from the SPD's base, with the party's youth movement taking the lead in the #NoGroKo campaign. Their central argument: yet another grand coalition would only further weaken the party. Only new elections would force the party to face its real challenge: namely to answer the question of what social democracy stands for in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While in the past such an inner party movement was rarely able to fundamentally challenge its leadership, the fact that the SPD party members are to vote on the final coalition agreement in the coming weeks has increased the pressure both on the SPD leaders but also on Merkel to face this challenge.

Well aware of this pressure, the chief negotiators did everything to calm the discontent inside the SPD by granting them six ministries, including such core portfolios as foreign affairs, finance, and labour. Even in terms of content, the SPD could introduce some changes in labour health policy. Finally, to further appease the anti-GroKo movement, SPD leader Schulz proclaimed that he would hand over leadership to the more left leaning Andrea Nahles, while himself taking the post of foreign minister. On paper all this seemed to be a perfect compromise. Everybody won something, everybody had to live with some minor negative points and, most importantly, Germany would finally have a reliable government.

Yet the party leaderships as well as many observers underestimated the frustrations in both party bases. Few expected how violently they could break out into a real challenge of the parties' respective leadership. It seems as if the frustrations of the many years when the stability paradigm trumped fundamental debates not only about the parties' future positioning, but also the path Germany would take as a society, have now burst into the open.

## Key dates to watch:

**20 February:** Ballots will be sent to the 460,000 SPD members until this date.

**26 February:** The CDU will vote on the coalition agreement.

**2 March:** Deadline for SPD members to send back their ballots.

**4 March:** SPD will announce outcome of the membership vote. If it is rejected could either be a new attempt to build a government (some want to try a Jai coalition again but this is highly unlikely), a minority government (which could be an option even if it proved unpopular in the CDU), or snap elections. President Steinmeier will have a say again.

**Mid-March:** If the coalition agreement is approved, Merkel should be elected chancellor by the German parliament by mid-March.

While resistance to the GroKo has been present in the SPD ever since the party agreed on entering talks with Merkel's conservatives, Schulz's decision to join a fourth Merkel government was the last straw that broke the camel's back. His promise to not be part of any government under Merkel now caught up with him just as his bold statement not to start any coalition talks with the conservatives had caught up with him a few weeks before. The little credibility he still enjoyed among party members was gone. The all so perfectly planned compromise that Schulz had presented collapsed.

Only two days later, he declared that he would not enter the government, less than a year after having been elected SPD leader with 100 percent of the vote. A tragedy unseen in German politics. Schulz was celebrated when he represented a fundamental difference to past SPD politics: when he criticised the Agenda reforms, when he criticised the neoliberal state, when he opposed any grand coalition or any new Merkel government. By letting the members down on all these promises he also lost the charisma of the outsider who would bring fundamental change. But as he leaves the SPD leadership, the yearning for a fundamental change in politics nevertheless remains in the SPD base.

The leadership chaos that followed not only contributed to an ongoing debate on who should take over the SPD, but also sparked unexpected discussions inside Merkel's conservatives on the future of the party's leadership. In the case of the CDU, this is even more remarkable as the party is traditionally known as the *Kanzlerwahlverein*, i.e. an association that exists only to elect a chancellor and thus never publicly questions the chancellor's authority as long as she or he is from the CDU. But the fact that the SPD were given six ministries and concessions in terms of labour, EU and health policies was for many CDU members proof that the CDU is selling its values simply to keep Merkel in power. Interestingly, the section of the CDU's membership which has been most open in criticising the coalition agreement and calling for new faces in the party leadership is, just like in the SPD, the party's youth organisation. A sign that the next generation in both parties is aiming to break with the status quo and move on to new, diverging horizons.

The sense of unease that attentive observers could detect in the past few weeks has now become more than a feeling. It has taken the shape of a crisis that is likely to see the end of any further grand coalitions for the foreseeable future, the end of Merkel as chancellor and the end of German politics as we have known it in the past 13 years. An outright rejection of the grand coalition would be nothing less than a rejection of the stability paradigm. A new grand coalition, on the other hand, will only delay this process.

The debates inside the parties point to a future where both the CDU and SPD will diverge and return to many of their respective "core values". The SPD could follow the example of the UK's Labour Party, while the CDU may return to several conservative issues that, in the eyes of many of its members, have been left behind or neglected under Merkel. What these discussions mean for the upcoming votes on the coalition agreement (shown in the 'key dates' above) is anybody's guess. It is unclear how strong and organised the movements inside each of the two parties really are and if those who are still undecided will opt to support or reject the coalition agreement. What is for sure, however, is that the era of political stability that has marked Germany for the past few decades is drawing to a close.

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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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