

Crisis in Germany's Christian Social Union

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The annual conference of Christian Social Union (CSU) members of parliament (Bundestag) is traditionally used as an opportunity for the Bavarian state party to score some points against the national government in Berlin. The CSU is based in the single German state of Bavaria where it has dominated political life throughout the postwar period. It was here that a former CSU leader, Franz Josef Strauss, had threatened the chairman of Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Helmut Kohl, by declaring CSU intentions to emerge as a national force. For decades, the CSU was able to exercise a virtual monopoly over politics in the state of Bavaria and make clear that it would tolerate no other party challenging its own right-wing role.

This year was different. Those in attendance at the CSU meeting in Kreuth made gushing declarations of their loyalty to party chairman and Bavarian Prime Minister Edmund Stoiber, assuring him of their unconditional trust. Regional committee leader Peter Ramsauer promised that the conference would send a signal of the "legendary unanimity of the CSU."

Prior to the conference, the CSU executive in Munich had drawn up a resolution expressing unanimous support for Stoiber, which declared: "The CSU presidency will continue its successful policy for Bavaria up to 2008 with party chairman and Prime Minister Edmund Stoiber." The statement amounts to confirmation of Stoiber as the party's leading candidate for the state election due in the coming year, although such a nomination is usually the decision of a full party conference. The executive categorically rejected a vote on the issue by the party membership, as proposed by the CSU state deputy and Stoiber critic, Gabriele Pauli.

The fact that Stoiber is now being paid homage in a manner that recalls the ovations for party leaders at Stalinist party congresses in former East Germany is an unmistakable symptom of a deep crisis in the CSU. If Stoiber could count on his party, he would not have to depend on unanimous proclamations of support such as those received by East German prime Minister Erich Honecker prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The ranks of the CSU have seethed with discontent and intrigue for many years. It only took the proposal by Pauli—a largely unknown CSU member—for a ballot of the membership a few weeks ago over the nomination of a leading candidate for the next state election to unleash a state of panic in the Munich headquarters of the CSU.

Party leaders assembled behind their chairman—although all of them were aware that his future is limited and the battle is heating up over his successor. The party leadership is united on just one point: the membership is to be denied any say in decisions over future policy and the party's leadership, although such procedures would be self-evident in a democratic party. Such a concession to the membership is seen as far too dangerous, although the average CSU member is hardly prone to any sort of progressive or revolutionary inclinations.

The demonstrative unanimity of the CSU in Kreuth is an automatic

reflex aimed at resisting increasing pressure from the party ranks. During the past few years, the "Bavarian People's Party"—as the CSU likes to call itself—has pushed through a drastic austerity programme with wide-ranging consequences for the population, which in turn finds expression in increasing pressure on the party and tensions within the party itself.

The conflict erupted at the beginning of December during a CSU executive meeting, when Pauli accused the party head and prime minister of spying on her. It then emerged that Stoiber's office manager, Michael Höhenberger, had made extensive enquiries into Pauli's private life with the aim of coming up with a scandal, which could then be used to put her under pressure. Stoiber's first reaction was to denounce such accusations against his manager as "absolute nonsense," but when it was no longer possible to deny the facts, he turned around and sacrificed his trusted collaborator. Stoiber sacked Höhenberger and tried to portray the latter's actions as those of a rogue staff member.

The incident was grist for the mill of Pauli and other party dissidents. Publicly, Pauli denounced the system of informers and spies in the CSU, whose activities are aimed at "silencing critics." Her case, she said, was not the only one, and other critics of the party leadership had also been victims of intrigues.

Pauli is not the only one calling for Stoiber's dismissal. A number of state parliamentary deputies had initially supported the proposal for a ballot of the membership. Stoiber has become ever more unpopular within the ranks of the CSU. According to current polls, the party chief has the support of only 50 percent of the membership, while nearly half the party favours a ballot of the membership.

It should be noted, however, that Pauli's own initiative has little to do with installing democratic procedures in the CSU. The 49-year-old has been a member of the party for 30 years and has been a member of the CSU executive committee since 1989. Her initiative is rather the expression of deep divisions within the party apparatus over its future political course.

It has long seemed as if no one could challenge the power of the CSU in Bavaria. The party has filled the post of state prime minister for the past 49 years, with Stoiber as prime minister for the last 14 years. For most of this period, the CSU has enjoyed an absolute majority. It has been able to depend on a stable electoral base in the state's expansive and conservative rural regions. In addition, the CSU was able to profit from the role played by the main opposition party, the Social Democratic Party, which sought to compete with the CSU by trying to copy it in every way. SPD leaders sought to stress their identity by intoning their belief in God and their roots in the state, while seeking to prove they were just as narrow-minded and could spend as much beer as their CSU colleagues. The result was that the SPD always trailed in elections behind the CSU.

In the 1970s and 1980s, rural-based Bavaria was to some extent able

to redefine itself and develop a modern industry, based on autos, weapons manufacture and, later, high-tech enterprises. A part of the newly acquired wealth flowed directly into the treasuries of CSU apparatus, which was able to increase its independence from its own members and the electorate. The result was the creation of a dense web of relations between the party and big business, relying on mutual favours, dependency and corruption—notoriously named the *Amigo system*.

A part of the increased tax receipts and subsidies from federation and European Union sources was used to pacify the broad population. In many respects, conservative Bavaria enjoyed better social security benefits and educational facilities than social-democratic-governed states in the west and north of Germany, which were confronted with industrial collapse and high levels of unemployment.

However, the situation changed in the 1990s, and the south of Germany has also been hit by the consequences of the globalisation. The region has seen more and more companies moving out during the past few years, with factory closures and mass redundancies becoming more common. Large established companies, such as the AEG works in Nuremberg and Infineon and the BenQ factory in Munich, have all closed in recent years.

During the reign of Germany's former SPD-Green Party government (1998-2005), anti-social measures such as the Agenda 2010 programme led to drastic social cuts. During the same period, Stoiber and the CSU, which have had a two-thirds majority in the state parliament since elections in 2003, have also significantly stepped up their anti-social policies.

Under the slogan "social is a policy which does not incur debts," state chancellery boss Erwin Huber enforced large savings, particularly in the sphere of social spending and education. In 2004, cuts amounting to 1.6 billion euros were made in the state budget, which totals more than 30 billion euros, with 160 million euros cut from social spending and approximately 60 million from support for refugees and immigrants.

Legally established rights such as state child-care benefits, payments to blind people and emergency rescue services were drastically slashed. Despite rising unemployment, subsidies for programmes aimed at reintegrating workers into the job market were reduced. State clerical employees and local officials were especially hard hit. The workweek was extended to 42 hours without extra payment, and other holiday benefits were cut.

Cutbacks in education were just as severe. A 10 percent cut in the budget of Bavarian universities led to the widespread loss of jobs, and fees were introduced for school books and school bus travel. Only recently, the Education Ministry was forced to concede that the state lacked a total of 800 teachers—an issue that in the past has led to repeated protests by students and teachers.

In the national elections held in the fall of 2005, the CSU lost 900,000 votes. But despite the loss in votes, and although the state incurred no new debts last year, Stoiber is determined to maintain his course of radical austerity measures.

An additional factor in the crisis of the CSU is the loss of influence for the state of Bavaria on a federal level following the reunification of Germany in 1990. While the Christian Democratic Party founded affiliated organisations in the newly opened-up states of East Germany, the CSU remained confined to Bavaria. Following the leadership conflict in the CDU in 2002, Stoiber was able to win a nomination for chancellor from both the CDU and CSU, but in the same year he lost in the elections to Gerhard Schröder (SPD), who

adopted a stance of opposition to the Iraq war.

In 2005, the CDU then nominated its chairman Angela Merkel as its candidate for chancellor. After considerable hesitation, Stoiber declared he was prepared to take a cabinet position in Merkel's government—only to quit immediately, when a conflict erupted in the CSU between state Interior Minister Günter Beckstein and state chancellery boss Erwin Huber over who should succeed as Bavarian Prime Minister.

Since then, Stoiber has been seen as politically weakened, with broad layers of the CSU membership seeking a change of leadership. Should Stoiber resign, however, renewed struggles over leadership and the future course of the party will inevitably break out.

The free-market fraction led by Huber and Finance Minister Kurt Faltlhauser are intent on continuing and intensifying the current course in Bavaria, but others, afraid of an uncontrollable social backlash, warn against the risks. In this respect, the CSU social affairs expect Horst Seehofer and the notoriously right-wing Interior Minister Günter Beckstein have formed an unexpected alliance.

On several occasions, Seehofer, who likes to think of himself as the "social conscience" of the party, has sought to criticise Stoiber's anti-social course. The former German health minister, however, has no principled objections to the dismantling of social gains—he prefers merely that such a process be carried out at a slower tempo and be more skilfully packaged. He himself is keen to modernise what he terms "outdated structures" in the health service and reduce employer contributions to the existing system. At the same time, he is in favour of retaining the existing system of free health insurance for children. Seehofer speaks of "reforms with a sense of proportion."

These "reforms with a sense of proportion" are to be supplemented by the forces of the state, for which Beckstein is responsible.

Gabriele Pauli has raised the possibility of both Beckstein and Seehofer as possible successors to Stoiber. Beckstein has rejected the offer, and Seehofer prefers to keep silent at the moment. In fact, Pauli represents a course similar to that favoured by Seehofer. At no point has she criticised the social cuts carried out in the state. Pauli even refrained from criticism when the former education minister Hohlmeier imposed cuts in schools and disciplined critical head teachers by forcing them to switch schools.

At the moment, the CSU leadership continues to officially support its party boss. Stoiber himself has claimed that the unanimous decision of the presidency to back him is "clear proof of confidence." But there is much evidence to indicate that conflicts could re-emerge very soon. Only on one issue is the CSU leadership united: there should be absolutely no concessions made to pressure from the grassroots of the party or the population as a whole.



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