

# German CDU leader Roland Koch resigns

Ulrich Rippert  
31 May 2010

The Hesse state premier, Roland Koch of the CDU (Christian Democratic Union), has announced that he will resign his post in late August and not run again for the CDU's state chair at the party convention in June. His resignation is a deliberate affront to Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU), and the decision has exacerbated the dispute inside the CDU about the future direction of the party.

Koch had been a leading proponent of the right wing in the CDU and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU). In the media, his politics are often described as a mix of neo-liberal and national conservative views. Several times he has tried to establish himself politically at the federal level. In the 2005 federal election campaign he was a member of Merkel's so-called competence team, and demanded a change in economic policy towards market liberalization, welfare cuts and privatization. After the election, however, the chancellor did not offer him a ministerial post.

Again in 2009, when Merkel formed her second government, she did not invite him to join the cabinet. Instead, she appointed Wolfgang Schäuble, a man whose health is very poor, as her finance minister. When a few weeks ago, Schäuble's health deteriorated and he was admitted to hospital during the dramatic negotiations over the €750 billion rescue package in Brussels, Koch was again under discussion. But the chancellor once again froze him out. Instead, following the devastating loss of votes for the CDU in the North Rhine-Westphalia state elections, Merkel indicated her willingness to consider a resumption of cooperation with the SPD (Social Democratic Party).

Koch's resignation must be seen in connection with this development. He is clearly distancing himself from Merkel's political course. He is also no longer available to her as the deputy national chairman of the CDU. His announcement that he would take on a job in

business should not be taken as his definitive departure from the political stage. There are strong indications that political calculations lie behind his decision.

At present, Koch is not able to secure agreement in the party at the federal level for his demand for a tougher stance on welfare. This became clear shortly before his resignation, when he publicly called for cuts in education, and was met with opposition in the CDU and from Merkel herself. He expects, however, that the policies of Merkel and Schäuble will exacerbate the economic and social crisis. If then the call sounds for a "strong man" and more political leadership, the demagogue from Wiesbaden can return to the political stage.

It cannot be excluded that the CDU will fall apart as a result of the crisis and that the right wing could establish its own party. Even the nationwide expansion of the CSU is possible, which would then act as competition to the CDU. The CSU had already threatened such a step in the crises of the 1970s and 1980s.

There was speculation about the formation of a new right-wing party two years ago, when Friedrich Merz, who then led the CDU parliamentary group, was defeated in a conflict with Merkel, resigning his party offices and taking up a business post. Earlier this year, Merz published a book together with the SPD right-winger Wolfgang Clement, who has since turned his back on the SPD, in which they called for an "Agenda 2020" and the "courage to undertake more cuts in social spending". Shortly before his resignation, Koch too called for drastic social cuts in all areas, including in education and childcare.

In Roland Koch, a new right-wing party would gain a figurehead who for a long time has acted as spokesman of the right wing of the CDU/CSU, and who has close links with industry and enjoys close contacts in ultra-right circles.

Koch's right-wing leanings were demonstrated most clearly in the campaign against dual citizenship, which launched him into the headlines nationwide in 1999 and won him the Hesse state election. His petition campaign against the new citizenship law of the then SPD-Green Party federal coalition was an open appeal to nationalist and xenophobic prejudices. At the time, his main concern was to raise his profile since as opposition leader in Hesse it was difficult to generate media coverage, he later commented.

He secured the respect of the hardliners in the CDU after his election as Hesse state premier by resolutely weathering the donations scandal that engulfed the CDU in Hesse. While the federal CDU faced many resignations because of a similar scandal, Koch remained in office untouched. The CDU in Hesse had stashed away millions in contravention of the Law on Political Parties, and cloaked this with references to supposed "Jewish legacies". For his part, Koch lied shamelessly to the public.

The brazenness with which Koch plays down his own violations of the law—while simultaneously calling for draconian punishments for petty criminals, preaching the benefits of "authority, discipline and service" to the youth—is reminiscent of the Republican right in the US and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Koch's conservative views are not accidental. Even before he took over the leadership of the CDU state association in Hesse, he was an ardent admirer of his predecessors Alfred Dregger and Manfred Kanther. Dregger was head of the Hesse CDU from 1967 to 1982 and Kanther led the party from 1991 to 1998.

Alfred Dregger was for decades a leading light of the national conservatives. In World War II he was a commander of a Wehrmacht battalion, continuing the campaign against the Soviet Union undeterred in 1945. As a passionate anticommunist, he fought tirelessly for the reunification of Germany and to rescue the "honour" of the Wehrmacht. His closest ideological allies were the publisher Axel Springer and TV presenter Gerhard Lowenthal. Dregger stood on the right wing of the CDU/CSU on social questions too. In the 1970s he opposed "Mitbestimmung" (union-management co-determination) and even accused the CDU's social policy committees of "socialism".

Manfred Kanther was regarded nationwide as the epitome of the law-and-order politician. With the

"black sheriff" as his nickname, he raised his profile from 1993 as interior minister by taking a hard line on asylum policy and the fight against crime.

There is strong evidence to suggest that Koch's resignation is only an interlude, serving to prepare for a right-wing offensive in the event of a collapse of the Merkel government, which is currently relying on the unions and the SPD in order to push through social cuts in the interest of big business.



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