

Sigmar Gabriel resigns as Social Democratic Party leader and chancellor candidate

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26 January 2017

The announcement by Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader Sigmar Gabriel on Wednesday, that he will not take part in the next Bundestag election as the party's chancellor candidate and would also step down from his post as SPD chairman, has triggered feverish political debate and speculation in German political circles.

For months, the SPD chairman and minister of economic affairs had left his decision open, but in recent weeks it was regarded as certain that he would lead the SPD into this year's autumn election as the party candidate for the chancellorship. That is why there was widespread surprise when he announced his resignation to the SPD parliamentary group and instead proposed former EU parliamentary president Martin Schulz as the SPD's candidate to challenge the sitting chancellor, Angela Merkel. Gabriel also suggested that Schulz should lead the party.

In special programmes the media reported on this "major resignation" and speculated about possible personal reasons such as more time for the family or political frustration due to bad poll results.

However, on closer inspection, it is clear that the move is more of a political regrouping than a resignation and is directly related to the assumption of the American presidency by Donald Trump and his "America First" nationalism. The SPD is reorganising in order to take up the role of reshaping Europe in the interests of German imperialism.

Yesterday, the WSWS wrote: "The coming to power of Donald Trump has led to fierce reactions in Berlin." Gabriel's decision is bound up with such reactions. Already in November, he had asked Schulz to switch from the European Union (EU) to federal policy. Schulz has been systematically built up and celebrated by the media as a "great European"—a man who

strengthened the powers of the EU parliament and stood up for European unification.

In fact, Schulz's strength consisted largely in working closely with the conservative EU commissioner, Jean-Claude Juncker. The EU Parliament, under his leadership, was able to debate endlessly and controversially, but in the background, Schulz and Juncker, whose social-democratic and conservative factions hold 54 percent of the votes combined, prepared all decisions in detail and agreed upon majorities.

Merkel has also paid tribute to Schulz describing him as her favourite social democrat. To what extent Schulz as candidate for chancellor would favour a continuation of the current "Grand Coalition"—SPD and conservative parties (Union)—remains to be seen and depends not least on the election result.

Last autumn, Gabriel proposed Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) as new federal president and successor to Joachim Gauck. Merkel agreed, and it is certain that Steinmeier will move into Bellevue Castle on February 12.

Now, Gabriel has proposed himself as successor to Steinmeier as foreign minister. Gabriel remains vice-chancellor and moves from the Economics Ministry to the Foreign Office. If the SPD remains in the government after the election with an SPD chancellor or vice-chancellor and a social democratic federal president, Gabriel could lead the campaign to expand Germany's supremacy in Europe.

Immediately prior to the announcement of his plans, Gabriel had given extensive interviews to a number of papers. Following the latest threats made by Trump, Gabriel demanded more European self-assurance. One such interview appeared yesterday under the heading "Now is the time to strengthen Europe" in the business

paper *Handelsblatt*.

Handelsblatt reports that the vice-chancellor wants a “radical change of course” in the EU. In the face of the “turnabout in the United States and Brexit”, Gabriel is seeking to re-launch the EU: “We need not more Europe, but rather a different Europe.” If not all states wanted to advance at the same pace, then it was time to consider a “two-speed Europe.”

A two-speed Europe “would also greatly reduce tensions within Europe and strengthen core Europe tremendously,” *Handelsblatt* summarises Gabriel’s point of view, which was responding to the growing criticism of Europe by Great Britain and other countries. “The EU, which is working on detailed questions”, has reached its limits. Europe should not “continue the agonising process of constantly seeking the lowest common denominator”, but must permit alternatives. For Gabriel, this includes a closely interlinked foreign and security policy as well as a common economic and financial policy.

On Monday, the French presidential candidate of the Republicans, François Fillon, spoke in Berlin in favour of a revival of the EU and proposed a closer alliance with Russia. Gabriel sees Germany as a key player in the reorganisation of the Western world. However, he reported doubts about the suitability of the chancellor for this task. The Union (the SPD’s federal coalition partner, the CDU and CSU) was not prepared for the major challenges that faced Germany and Europe.

One day before, the co-editor of *Handelsblatt*, Gabor Steingart, wrote: “The hour for foreign policy reorientation has struck.”

Gabriel agrees. Germany and Europe should not be intimidated by Trump’s “highly nationalist tones”, but must “ruthlessly” define and defend its own interests, he told the *Bild* newspaper last weekend. Germany is “a strong country” and Europe “a strong continent that has to hold together”. If the United States “starts a trade war with China and all of Asia, then we are a fair partner,” he added. Germany and Europe would need a new strategy towards China and Asia. There are new opportunities, even if China is not an easy partner.

It would not be the first time the SPD has taken over control in order to realise the interests of German imperialism in times of major upheaval. In 1969, the Free Democratic Party (FDP), which had hitherto been on the right of the political spectrum, formed a

coalition with the SPD, and made Willy Brandt chancellor after Brandt’s own orientation to the East had met with strong opposition from the conservative CDU and CSU. In the midst of the biggest post-war international economic crisis, Brandt’s “Ostpolitik” promised to open up new energy sources and markets for German exports.

And then again, in 1998, the government of Gerhard Schröder (SPD) replaced CDU Chancellor Helmut Kohl after 16 years in office, thereby paving the way for the first post-war military operations of the Bundeswehr and the passing of the notorious anti-social Hartz laws.



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