Germany: SPD and Christian Democrats initiate exploratory talks on new government

Peter Schwarz
14 December 2017

The top leaders of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD) met yesterday night for the first round of talks on forming a new government. Although 80 days have passed since the federal election, both sides insist that the talks are "open-ended." The issue at stake is to "explore whether exploratory talks can go ahead," said Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU).

When one considers that the three parties are still in government together and that some of the representatives have sat across the cabinet table from each other every week for the past four years, this tactical approach appears utterly absurd. But it is due to the fact that the grand coalition's policies are deeply unpopular. Many SPD members, and also some in the CSU and CDU, fear that a continuation of the grand coalition will accelerate the decline of their parties. All three parties achieved their worst results in 70 years in the federal election in September.

For this reason, other options are being debated alongside the continuation of a grand coalition (GroKo). These include the toleration of a minority government and the recently proposed "cooperation coalition" (KoKo), under which agreement would be reached only on certain topics, while other initiatives would be negotiated in parliament.

The discussions over GroKo, KoKo or a minority government are aimed above all at sowing confusion among the public. Most experts and the chancellor herself are agreed that any other variant apart from a strong coalition will be too unstable to impose the tasks that the government will confront in the face of anticipated widespread opposition. In addition, all parties are agreed about the need to avoid new elections, because they don't want to have an open discussion of the right-wing policies they are preparing behind the scenes.

Pressure is now building for a government to be formed as quickly as possible. This is mainly due to foreign policy considerations.

Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is also leader of the CDU, called on Monday for talks to begin swiftly with the SPD due to pressing international challenges. "The world will not wait for us to be able to act," she said. On European policy, there was "a high degree" of commonality with the SPD. A "stable government" offers the best basis to work with France and for Europe, she added.

Leading mouthpieces for big business are also calling for the swift formation of a government.

Constanze Stelzenmüller from the Brookings Institution called in the *Financial Times* for Germany, "the putative European hegemon," to assume a leadership role. "Donald Trump is considering war with North Korea, while Turkey, Iran, Russia, and China are all exploring the power vacuums left by the west—including on the European continent. Small wonder that other European nations are anxiously looking for signs that Germany intends to pull its weight again." She continued, "The problems of Europe and the world will not wait while Berlin mulls the pros and cons of coalitions."

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) commented, "Due to various global developments, Germany urgently needs more than just an acting government. Because in foreign policy, it cannot enter into any reliable commitments." This applies in particular "to the future development of the EU after Britain's exit." Wide-ranging decisions are waiting to be made, the newspaper added.

By this, the FAZ means the expansion of the European Union into a combat-ready military alliance dominated by Germany and France. The Greens and SPD in particular are pursuing this goal, based on close cooperation with French President Emmanuel Macron. The same goes for Chancellor Merkel and sections of the CDU, which are,

© World Socialist Web Site

however, less willing to accommodate some of Macron's demands in finance policy than the SPD.

Acting Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel (SPD), one of the main proponents of a grand coalition, developed this line in a speech delivered to the Körber Foundation's Foreign Policy Forum on December 5. "The election of an aggressively pro-European president in France is really a stroke of luck of historic dimensions," he stated, and explicitly advocated an interest-based great power policy for Germany and Europe, based on the use of military force and not restricted by moral values.

Gabriel and other politicians pushing for a grand coalition believe that the window of opportunity to realise this goal is closing fast. Right-wing parties that decisively reject the integration of the EU in the name of nationalist politics are on the rise in several European countries.

While such parties have been in government in Poland and Hungary for some time, the "Czech Trump," Andrej Babis, was sworn in as prime minister in Prague last week. In Austria, it appears likely that an alliance of the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and right-wing extremist Freedom Party (FPÖ) will come to power next week, with an FPÖ member serving as foreign minister.

The victory of a right-wing alliance in Italian elections planned on March 4 next year is also possible. In France, the Republicans, the sister party of the CDU/CSU, recently elected Laurent Wauquiez as its new leader. He shares many right-wing positions with the fascistic National Front, and it is considered possible that he could form a governing coalition with them.

Along with the drifting apart of the EU, the proponents of a grand coalition are also being driven by events in the Middle East. European interests there are increasingly in conflict with those of the United States, Russia and China.

A comment in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on Tuesday warned that Russia and China are occupying the space left behind by the retreat of the US and are pursuing "their own geopolitical and economic agenda." This is "often incompatible with Europe's interests," the newspaper stated.

The comment praised President Macron, who has recognised that the Europeans must become active in the Middle East. But a more independent European policy in the Middle East has "the prospect of success only if we are honest about its prerequisites. Nothing will be secured with economic and development aid alone."

More than in any other region, hard power is the deciding factor, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* concluded. Putin "demonstrated this impressively with the military intervention in Syria." Whoever thinks one can "exert influence and make do without any military backup" will be "sorely disappointed," the comment continued.

The line that Germany and Europe must rearm in order to forcefully pursue their great power politics in the Middle East and elsewhere is backed by all political parties in parliament, including the Left Party. Left Party parliamentary leader Dietmar Bartsch praised the militarist speech by Gabriel, stating, "We support Sigmar Gabriel and hope that this quickly becomes government policy."

While talks on a grand coalition are dragging on, the acting government and parliament are already creating facts on the ground.

On Monday, Foreign Minister Gabriel and his European counterparts announced the official launch of the development of a European military union. They agreed to the first 17 projects as part of the "Permanent Structured Cooperation" (PESCO), which will unify the structures of the European countries' armed forces. The German army will assume leadership of four projects.

On Tuesday, the German parliament overwhelmingly approved the extension of five foreign interventions—in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, the Mediterranean, and Mali—for three months. The CDU, CSU, SPD and Free Democrats voted for all five missions, while the Greens and the right-wing Alternative for Germany backed some of them. The Left Party voted against all of them, as it generally does when the outcome is not dependent upon its votes.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) is the only political force countering this conspiracy. The SGP demands new elections and fights for the mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist programme directed against war and capitalism.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site