

German Chancellor Merkel loses closest ally

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Two days after Germany's grand coalition gave its backing to former secret service president Hans-Georg Maassen, after he defended neo-Nazi rioters, Chancellor Angela Merkel has lost one of her closest political allies. The Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union parliamentary group surprisingly voted long-standing parliamentary leader Volker Kauder out of office on Tuesday.

Kauder, who has led the CDU/CSU parliamentary group for 13 years, played a key role in maintaining support for Merkel's line among the deputies. Both Merkel and CSU leader Horst Seehofer intervened prior to the vote to declare their strong support for Kauder. Kauder was a guarantor for the stability and continuity of successful parliamentary and government business, stated the Chancellor and CDU leader.

Kauder lost the election nonetheless. In the secret ballot, the relatively unknown Ralph Brinkhaus secured 125 votes, while Kauder got just 112. Media commentators wrote of "a vote of no confidence in the Chancellor," "the Chancellor's twilight," and the approaching end of the government.

Merkel referred to it as a normal democratic process which had led to a disappointing election defeat. At the same time, she announced she would cooperate closely with the new parliamentary group leader. The newly-elected Brinkhaus rejected all talk of a planned putsch and also vowed to work closely with the Chancellor.

But the attempts to convince otherwise cannot conceal the fact that the defeat of Merkel's ally amounts to a political watershed. Kauder, who is a member of the religious and socially conservative wing of the CDU/CSU, was not for nothing described as Merkel's right-hand man. The CDU leader helped him become general secretary in 2004, and parliamentary group leader in 2005. He enforced Merkel's policies in the parliamentary group and also defended her over recent years against criticism of her refugee policy.

Brinkhaus is a member of the business wing of the CDU/CSU and has thus far operated in the background as one of the deputy leaders of the parliamentary group. Like the original founders of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), he opposes making financial concessions to the euro. He came briefly to prominence earlier in the summer when he emerged as spokesman for a skeptical wait-and-see approach toward French President Emmanuel Macron's plans for Europe.

The fact that Brinkhaus even challenged the candidate backed by the party leaders is itself unusual in the history of the CDU/CSU. A rebellion of parliamentary deputies against a Chancellor from their own party, like Tuesday's vote, has never before taken place. The main reason for this is the terrible numbers for the CDU/CSU in the polls. The CDU/CSU has recorded unprecedentedly low levels of support, both in polls at the federal level and for the upcoming state elections in Bavaria and Hesse in October. The same applies to their coalition partner, the Social Democrats (SPD).

The collapse in the polls is an expression of the mounting opposition to the grand coalition's right-wing agenda. Their policies of strengthening the repressive state apparatus at home and the military abroad, of inhumane attacks on refugees, and of anti-working class social policies are meeting with widespread opposition among broad sections of the population. Their decision to stand by ex-secret service chief Maassen, who defended the far-right rampage in Chemnitz, unleashed a wave of outrage. Ever since, thousands have repeatedly demonstrated in several cities against right-wing extremism.

However, the revolt by the CDU/CSU deputies is by no means an adaptation to the mounting opposition in the population. On the contrary, they have accused Merkel of not pushing ahead energetically enough with the government's reactionary programme and of repeatedly pulling back.

Leading big business associations, military personnel, and members of the security apparatus have increased their pressure on the government. They were involved earlier this year in working out the grand coalition's programme. Ever since, they have repeatedly stated that the agreements and goals contained in the grand coalition deal have not been enforced rigorously enough.

Just a few days ago, Dieter Kempf, head of the German Association of Industry, complained that the grand coalition was occupied far too much with itself instead of pressing ahead with the measures agreed upon to liberalise the economy. Behind the scenes, leading personnel in the German army are demanding that the rearmament programme be implemented more rapidly than was previously agreed.

The statement by Kauder's successor, Brinkhaus, that no daylight exists between him and Merkel must be understood in this context. Brinkhaus is firmly behind the grand coalition's reactionary programme, but wants more independence for the CDU/CSU parliamentary group so it can pressure the government to enforce it even more ruthlessly.

It has already become clear over recent weeks that the grand coalition relies on far-right elements within the state apparatus and the AfD to enforce its social and political attacks. Their decision to stick with the discredited Maassen, in spite of his close ties to the AfD, amounted to a signal to AfD supporters in the state apparatus that they enjoy the backing of the government.

The change in the CDU/CSU parliamentary group leadership strengthens this signal. Under conditions of deepening popular opposition, the coalition is drawing ever closer together, with the most right-wing elements setting the agenda. The SPD explicitly declared its trust in Merkel on Wednesday and sharply rejected the comments from those in its own ranks that Merkel had been weakened. SPD leader Nahles said that the task now is to continue trusted collaboration within the government and focus on issues of political substance.

Similar comments were made by Left Party parliamentary group leader Dietmar Bartsch. He complained that the government's permanent crisis was not good for the country or Europe, praised the coalition's programme, which contained nice headings, but was not being enforced decisively enough, and

warned that the government crisis was causing a deepening feeling of insecurity among the population.

At the same time, the groundwork is being laid with the change in personnel in the CDU/CSU's parliamentary leadership for future coalitions with the AfD, which the CDU/CSU, at least officially, has thus far ruled out. Even now, the AfD has a strong influence over government policy, particularly on the issue of refugees.

Just a day after the change in leadership personnel in the federal parliamentary group, Christian Hartmann, the new CDU parliamentary leader in Saxony's state parliament announced that he would not say no to a potential coalition with the AfD. Hartmann, a police officer for many years, was elected as the new leader against the wishes of CDU Minister President Michael Kretschmar on the same day as Brinkhaus.

This question could be acutely posed following the two state elections in October. In Bavaria, the CSU is certain to lose its majority and the majority of the CDU/Green coalition in Hesse is expected to disappear. It cannot be excluded that the CSU and Hesse CDU integrate the right-wing extremist AfD into government after the elections. AfD leader Alexander Gauland comes from Hesse, where he played a role for 40 years in the right-wing CDU originally led by Alfred Dregger, before switching to the AfD.

The integration of a far-right party into government would mark a sharp escalation of the rightward shift, and amount to a declaration of war against refugees, the left and the working class. However, this would be fully in keeping with the agenda of the grand coalition, which is already implementing the AfD's programme in practice.



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