The leadership debate in Germany's Christian Democrats and the steady political march to the right

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28 February 2020

The current contest for the leadership of Germany's Christian Democrats (CDU) is being presented in the media as a debate over the party's political direction. But this is nonsense. The reality is that there is fundamental agreement on the party's right-wing policies. The dispute is over how a right-wing offensive can best be imposed in the face of widespread popular opposition.

More than two weeks have now passed since CDU leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (AKK) announced she would not run as the party's candidate for chancellor and would soon step down from the leadership. She lost control of her party after the CDU and Free Democrats (FDP) allied with the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) to elect a minister president in Thuringia, provoking mass protests. Ever since, the race has been on for the party's leadership and its candidate for chancellor.

When the right-wing terrorist attack occurred in Hanau just days after Kramp-Karrenbauer's resignation announcement, popular opposition escalated. Spontaneous protests, marches, and rallies occurred in over 50 cities against the far right.

Under these conditions, the CDU is searching for the best figure to enforce its policies of rapid military rearmament, the gutting of social spending and attacks on democratic rights.

One of the four frontrunners, Health Minister Jens Spahn, decided to withdraw from the race. He appeared at a joint press conference on Tuesday with North-Rhine Westphalia Minister President Armin Laschet to announce that he would back Laschet's candidacy. They declared that they were a team.

Shortly thereafter, Friedrich Merz spoke at a press conference to confirm his desire to lead the party. He also made clear that he believes that the party leader should be its candidate for chancellor. Norbert Röttgen, the former head of parliamentary affairs for the CDU and former Environment Minister, declared his candidacy and pledged to nominate a woman as general secretary of the CDU if he wins.

All three candidates have known each other for decades and have worked closely together in various combinations.

Laschet has headed a coalition government with the FDP for almost three years in North-Rhine Westphalia, which with 18 million inhabitants is the most populous German state. He has overseen deep cuts to social spending. There is nothing to support the claim that Laschet represents a more moderate brand of politics than Merz.

At Tuesday's press conference, Laschet noted that he was reluctantly running against Merz, because he values him very highly as a person and a politician. He added that he would have been much happier if he had managed to include Merz in a leadership team. Laschet commented that his close political alignment with Merz could be seen by the fact that he appointed Merz as Brexit commissioner for the state of North-Rhine Westphalia two years ago.

Spahn likes to describe himself as a spokesman for the conservative wing of the party, and he has made no secret of the fact that he was, and remains, a fan of Merz on many issues.

Merz enjoys the support of the business wing of the CDU and is the darling of the financial press and conservative media outlets. He withdrew from active politics 15 years ago and made millions in the private sector. Along with a number of posts on supervisory boards and as a consultant, he was the chairman of the German supervisory board and a lobbyist for the largest global hedge fund, Black Rock. His task now is to tailor the CDU and federal politics to the interests of the

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financial markets.

His political message is: Make the AfD superfluous by adopting their policies and implementing them in practice.

Parliamentary President Wolfgang Schäuble, the hardline conservative patriarch of the party, is backing Merz and has explicitly recommended a vote for him. Thomas Strobl, the leader of the CDU in Baden-Württemberg, announced Wednesday that his party, the southwest CDU, would vote for Merz. This is no surprise, since his wife is Christine Schäuble, the daughter of Wolfgang Schäuble.

Merz ran for the party leadership 18 months ago. At the time, the party delegates voted for Kramp-Karrenbauer, which was presented as a political turn away from the right-wing course of Merz and Co. However, it soon became clear that the election of AKK had further accelerated the CDU's shift to the right.

When she became defence minister last summer, she intensified the pace of military rearmament. Her speech to 400 recruits at Berlin's Bendlerblock, the second official home of the Defence Ministry, will long be remembered. The occasion for the well-funded reactionary spectacle was the 75th anniversary of the attempted assassination of Adolf Hitler on July 20, 1944, by Wehrmacht officer Klaus Schenk Graf von Staufenberg.

Kramp-Karrenbauer made clear that she would "continue to push with full force" for the modernisation of the army, and would "unconditionally" advocate for the military's interests. "Thanks alone is not enough," she told the assembled generals, admirals and new recruits. "Your service demands respect, your service should be valued, your service demands support. And from myself most of all. I know that Germany can rely on you. And I tell you, you can rely on me."

Just two weeks ago at the Munich Security Conference, AKK reaffirmed the grand coalition's determination to do everything in its power to push ahead with German remilitarisation. "We are keeping our promise to our NATO allies and increasing our defence budget year after year. In 2023, 10 percent of NATO's total capabilities will be covered by Germany. This means we need a defence budget of 2 percent of GDP," she said.

In absolute terms, this means a doubling of the defence budget to more than €90 billion annually.

This huge programme of military rearmament requires social spending cuts in every area, and is closely bound up with the suppression of popular opposition and destruction of democratic rights. On top of this, there is the economic slowdown and the growing impact of trade war, which is leading to mass layoffs in the auto and parts supply industries and many other sectors. In preparation for the coming class battles, the grand coalition is planning to use dictatorial measures and establish a police state.

Regardless of who emerges victorious from the leadership race, the CDU will stick to this course.

It is not only the competing factions within the CDU who agree on this agenda, but all parties represented in Parliament. The Social Democrats, the CDU's coalition partner, criticises the Christian Democrats from the right and claims to be better able to uphold Germany's imperialist interests.

The Greens, which have already put into practice a wide range of social spending cuts in a number of coalition governments with the CDU at the state level, are preparing for a CDU/Green alliance at the federal level. The contacts with Laschet and Merz are "great," commented Green co-leader Annalena Baerbock recently. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* quoted Baerbock as saying, "The CDU decides who is going to lead the CDU. But it must be led, because this squabbling is damaging politics as a whole."

Not so long ago, the Left Party was celebrating Kramp-Karrenbauer's election as CDU leader. "Congratulations to AKK!" wrote Left Party parliamentary group leader Dietmar Bartsch at the time. The CDU has "chosen continuity."

With regard to the current contest, Left Party leader Bernd Riexinger told the *Rheinische Post*, "From the point of view of electoral tactics, it would be preferable for Friedrich Merz to run." Merz would be the clearest opponent of the Left Party's policies, he continued. In reality, the Left Party is willing to work with the most right-wing elements in the CDU, and, as recent developments in Thuringia have shown, even with the AfD.

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