

## One year before the Bundestag election - leaders, parties, possible coalitions

On 27 October 2012, three years passed since the inauguration of the 17th tenure of the Bundestag. According to article 39 sec. 1 of the Constitution, the next Bundestag elections should take place no sooner than 46 months and no later than 48 months from the inauguration of the Bundestag sessions of the previous tenure, which is between 28 August and 27 October 2013. The date for the election of the 17th tenure of the Bundestag has not yet been set, but it is expected that it will most likely take place on 15 or 22 September 2013 (the previous election took place on 27 September 2009), if there is no early election (like in 2005). Therefore, less than one year remains until the election and the political parties have already begun their preparations for election campaigns. It can be assumed that they will be dominated by economic subjects. A debate concerning the eurozone crisis will also be an important event.

### Leaders

The position of a party candidate for Chancellor may have important influence on the outcome of the election. A proper candidate may motivate the party ranks, improve the popularity of the party in the eyes of the voters and attract the undecided part of the electorate to his or her party at the last moment. The importance of this function is best exemplified by the former Chancellor of the FRG, Gerhard Schröder, whose popularity and charisma gave SPD their victory in the election of 2002. In 2005, the Chancellor of that time almost managed to lead the social democrats to another victory, but two months before the election SPD lost almost 20% in polls to the Christian democratic parties (*Politbarometer* from 22.07.2005 – CDU/CSU 43%, SPD 26%).

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The choice of the party's candidate should not only take into consideration the mood and distribution of force within the party, but also reflect the popularity of the particular politician with the public. An appropriate leader may steer the election campaign to the right course, but at the same time has to be acceptable for the potential coalition partners. In the case of the two largest parties - CDU/CSU and SPD - the situation is different. The leader of the Christian democrats is Angela Merkel, who declared in summer 2011 that she will lead the German Christian democrats to the election for the third time. The Chancellor, despite the drop in the popularity of the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition government in polls, enjoys unwavering trust of the society and in the newest poll (*Politbarometer* from 26.10.2012) she received the best evaluation of the respondents out of the 10 most important politicians in Germany (+1.8 on a scale from -5 to +5). A. Merkel maintains her strong position in the Christian democratic camp despite some significant failures (the presidential election, the defeat of CDU in North Rhine-Westphalia and the resignation of Norbert Röttgen, a close associate of the Chancellor) and the criticism of the conservative wing of CDU and CSU. The social democrats lacked such a leader, could herald a fierce battle for the party nomination for Chancellor. Three candidatures were taken into consideration: the party chairman, Sigmar Gabriel, the former Vice-Chancellor and Minister of Foreign Affairs (2005-2009), currently the chairman of the SPD faction in the Bundestag, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, and the former Minister of Finance (2005-2009), Peer Steinbrück. S. Gabriel, despite his popularity within the party itself, had the smallest chances in a clash with Chancellor A. Merkel, so he stopped applying for the nomination and concentrated his efforts on leading the party. F.-W. Steinmeier, who was crushingly defeated by A. Merkel in the election for Chancellor in 2009, as a candidate of SPD, also resigned and supported the candidature of P. Steinbrück. On 28 September 2012, the chairman of the party, S. Gabriel, stated that P. Steinbrück is a party candidate of SPD for Chancellor in the Bundestag election in 2013. Three days later this choice was supported by the Board of SPD and the official party nomination will be given to him on 9 December 2012 during an SPD convention in Hannover. The choice of P. Steinbrück is a clear signal that economy will be a priority for the social democrats during the election campaign. The nominee is believed to be an expert in finance and European politics. Observers consider him to be the only relevant SPD politician who is capable of rivaling Chancellor A. Merkel during a debate when it comes to substance. He gained popularity while serving as the Minister of Finance during a financial crisis of 2008/2009. P. Steinbrück is known for his controversial statements and attacks. In September he suggested the regulation of the banking sector (e.g. the creation of a European restructuring fund financed by the banks instead of tax-payers) and accused the Chancellor of procrastination in the face of crisis in the eurozone. In the SPD itself P. Steinbrück does not have the trust of the party left wing, however, it cannot be excluded that



thanks to a skillfully conducted election campaign he will be able to attract the undecided voters from the center of the political scene. P. Steinbrück is a controversial politician - there were accusations that he, as a Minister of Finance and an avid chess player, solicited prominent concerns for funding for a chess tournament. In the context of a debate concerning the additional income of MPs, he was accused of gaining large profits from lectures and features for newspapers. But maybe such a controversial and charismatic politician will be able to defeat the popular, but colorless Chancellor A. Merkel and, just like G. Schröder in 2002, lead SPD to victory in spite of unfavorable polls. According to the last poll (*Politbarometer* from 26.10.2012 r.), 53% of the respondents would like to see A. Merkel as the head of the government and 37% would choose P. Steinbrück.

### **Middle parties**

Apart from both the great parties, there are also four more which are capable of exceeding the 5% electoral threshold: the Greens, FDP, *Die Linke* and the Pirate Party. The Greens, who became the third force in Germany, would like to reactivate their coalition with the social democrats, with whom they cooperated in the years 1998-2005. Also SPD see the Greens as their future coalition partner, which was confirmed by their leader, S. Gabriel, in his statement on September 28. The Green Party conducted a fully democratic primary election of the party leaders in the coming election. Almost 60,000 members of the party could participate and two candidates were elected: one man and one woman. The results were announced on November 10 at 10 a.m. The winners were the chairman of the parliamentary faction of the Greens, Jürgen Trittin (71,9% of votes) and Katrin Göring-Eckard (47,3%). It was surprising that Claudia Roth, the chairperson of the party, and Renate Künast, the vice-chairperson of the parliamentary faction in the Bundestag, were eliminated in the voting. The choice of J. Trittin and K. Göring-Eckard was very welcome among the Greens. They both represent different wings of the party and should complement each other during the election campaign.

The internal situation of FDP is much more complicated. FDP, sharing their power since 2009 in a coalition with the Christian democratic parties, has been in a deep crisis for several months. The fact that the unpopular Minister of Foreign Affairs, Guido Westerwelle, resigned his leadership did not help after the catastrophic results of the liberals in the elections to three *Landtags* in March 2011. The new leadership, with Philipp Rösler as its head, did not improve the condition the party was in. Polls indicate that FDP is below the electoral threshold and the position of its chairman is weak. There are accusations that FDP in the coalition with the Christian democratic parties is only a complement and P. Rösler cannot convince the coalition partners to his ideas. The internal opposition is growing in strength and in the past weeks Wolfgang Kubicki, who promotes the idea of creating a



coalition with SPD and the Greens, was proclaimed the main critic of P. Rösler. In October, the secret meeting of G. Westerwelle and W. Kubicki in Majorca was widely discussed, suggesting another revolution within the party. The liberals have not yet selected the leader before the election and the perspective of choosing P. Rösler is not certain. This is why the leader of FDP wanted to achieve success, for example during government negotiations.

*Die Linke* managed to exceed the electoral threshold in the polls only slightly. These results are much worse than those from the election in 2009 (11.9% of support). There is no doubt that SPD, recovering from the crisis of 2007-09, managed to regain part of the electorate taken by *Die Linke*. Nonetheless, also this time the leadership of *Die Linke* is counting on the votes of at least some followers of the left wing of SPD who are not fond of P. Steinbrück.

The popularity of the Pirate Party, which bursted into the German political society, started to visibly shrink in September and October and is currently balancing on the edge of the electoral threshold. Is it possible that their success was only short-term and they were not able, just like NPD in 1969 and the Republicans in 1990, to translate their *Landtag* election success into the general German forum?

### **Possible coalitions - perspectives**

According to the last *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* poll (*Politbarometer* from 26.10.2012), commissioned by ZDF television, if the election takes place on 28 October 2012, the following parties would make it to the Bundestag: CDU/CSU 39%, SPD 29%, the Greens 13% and *Die Linke* 6%. FDP and the Pirate Party would be outside the parliament with the support of 4%. The results of other polls did not differ significantly. The poll was performed near the beginning of the election campaign and its results show that the campaign next year may be very stormy and each vote will count and have the potential of drastically changing the distribution of power. If the results of the Bundestag election next year are similar to the current polls, it may be very difficult to create a coalition with a majority in the parliament. Most likely neither the coalition of SPD and the Greens nor the Christian democratic parties would manage to achieve majority. In this case *Die Linke* would be able to tip the scales as a party with which nobody wants to form a coalition. A minority government created by SPD and the Greens, tolerated by *Die Linke*, would not be a good solution. Such a government would have a weak position and would be dependent on *Die Linke*, with which it would have to negotiate every initiative. In such a situation, the best solution seems to be the government of the great coalition - CDU/CSU-SPD. There is no doubt that in the face of the crisis in the eurozone, Germany needs a strong government. However, such a solution does not raise optimism in either of the parties involved. The social



democrats very well remember the costs that they had to pay when they were the weaker partner in the great coalition government of A. Merkel in the years 2005-2009. However, if e.g. FDP exceeds the electoral threshold, the situation may change drastically and make it possible for the current coalition to maintain power or cause the creation of a new “traffic light coalition” (*Ampelkoalition*) of SPD-the Greens-FDP. If the Pirate Party enters the parliament, it may destroy the current arrangement and open new possibilities. If all six parties exceed the threshold, the only sensible solution to create a stable government would be to form a great coalition government.

### **The election campaign has already started**

The recent actions of the governing coalition point to this fact. On Sunday, November 4, internal budget consultations took place within the coalition with the participation of representatives of the governing parties: CDU, CSU and FDP. After almost eight hours of negotiations, the coalition parties made an agreement concerning the budget for 2014, giving their voters a present. In the face of the criticism of the government pro-family policy by CSU and the right wing of CDU, a resolution was passed to introduce a bonus (*Betreuungsgeld*) for parents bringing up children (up to 3 years of age) in their homes and not using any state educational facilities. This bonus will amount to 100 euros a month (from 2014 - 150 euros) for the parents of a child in his or her second and third years of life. On the initiative of the liberals the quarterly payment, equal 10 euros, for the first visit at the doctor was abolished. For the liberals and F. Rösler, fighting for their survival, this was a significant success showing that the party is still capable of forcing through important issues within the coalition. These gifts from the government were strongly criticized by the opposition. The chairman of SPD, Sigmar Gabriel, called them a “done deal” (*Kuhhandel*). At the same time, he promised that having won the election, the SPD-the Greens coalition will do everything in their power to abolish *Betreuungsgeld* and that SPD will refer the mode in which it was implemented to the Federal Constitutional Court as the first step. The election campaign is gaining color.

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