

The Third Grand Coalition under Merkel's Leadership (March 12, 2018)

Abstract

Never before has it taken so long – almost six months -- to form a government after national elections but on March 14, 2018 Angela Merkel was elected to her fourth term as chancellor. It was the third grand coalition (between CDU/CSU and SPD) during her tenure. Many commentators saw the new government as transitory but, according to the author of this article, its chances of getting things done were good.

Source

Why this Coalition Could Become a Good One

Rarely has a coalition been so exhausted already at the start. Still, the coming years could turn out well for the government – for two reasons.

Of course the new Grand Coalition has enormous flaws. The Union and the SPD together lost nearly 14 percentage points in the Bundestag election. Angel Merkel and Horst Seehofer have lost a lot of authority, as the SPD grandees already did.

For the first time, another Grand Coalition succeeds a previous one – the example of Austria shows where that can lead. And compared to the very first Grand Coalition, the personnel of the new government is second-rate. The cabinet of Kurt Georg Kiesinger had Willy Brandt, Gustav Heinemann, Franz Josef Strauß, Carlo Schmid, Herbert Wehner, Karl Schiller – formative politicians of postwar history.

By contrast, Merkel's new government is full of novices. Eleven of the fifteen ministers were not part of the 2013 government coalition. It took nearly half a year to form the government, rarely has a coalition been so exhausted already at the start. And yet, the new government can become a good one.

There are two primary reasons why. For one, the CDU and the SPD seem to have understood the message of the Bundestag election. The coalition agreement is a promise of greater safety – not only internally and externally, but also for social safety. The leader of the FDP, Christian Lindner, gripes that the agreement breathes “the spirit of an absolute state fixation.” The truth is, however, that the state will finally take care again of areas it has woefully neglected.

No one can solve all problems with a coalition agreement, not even the fifty billion euro that the government can now distribute is enough to do that. But the plans for nursing care, pensions, family, digital, or educational policy are laudably ambitious. Should the 177 pages of the coalition agreement become reality, Germany would in fact be more just and future-oriented.

In politics, hardly another trio is as familiar with each other as Merkel, Seehofer, and Scholz

That this could happen has to do with the second advantageous point of the new government: the trio at the top. Whether a coalition functions depends not only on the agreement, but also on the actors. Nearly all great challenges of the last few decades were not foreseeable when the respective governments negotiated their coalition agreements. And that is also how it will be in the future.

The trade disagreement with the U.S. is the first example. However, Merkel, Seehofer, and Scholz know

each other so well that they can become guarantors for the stability of the coalition. Seehofer is the longest-serving prime minister in the CDU/CSU, Scholz the most senior among the SPD heads of state government. Both have negotiated with each other dozens of times – and also with the chancellor; before their time as heads of government, both sat in Merkel’s first cabinet.

Hardly anyone in the political business knows anyone else as well as these three do. How much Merkel, Scholz, and Seehofer respect one another could also be seen when the coalition agreement was signed. They have all the requirements to be able to guide the coalition through difficult stretches. The quarrel over the prohibition against ads for abortions, which is currently driving apart the party groups of the CDU/CSU and the SPD, is already the first challenge in this regard.

The new coalition did not begin “as a love marriage,” Scholz recently said. Nor will it become a coalition of hearts racing to embrace. However, it could become a functioning relationship.

Source: Robert Roßmann, “Warum diese große Koalition gut werden könnte,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, March 12, 2018.

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