

## The SPD after the federal election in 2017

By Fedor Ruhose

**The SPD has lost the fight against Angela Merkel and her CDU for the fourth time in a row. The worst result since the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany has a new element to it even for crisis-hardened social democrats. The party must look at the causes of the relentless decline if it is to have any chance of making a comeback.**

It was a tough campaign. Despite dissatisfaction with the chancellor, there was no real movement for change: Merkel's reputation and Germany's economic situation were too good and the international environment was too insecure. Long-term strategies and a distinctive programme would have been essential preconditions for a successful SPD campaign in such a situation.

As a result, Martin Schulz started off with a big handicap on January 21, 2017. That was the day on which he was surprisingly nominated as SPD leader and candidate to be chancellor. Once again, the candidate to be chancellor was sent into the race without any preparation time, programme and appropriate structure.

### **The SPD's election difficulties**

Schulz has united the party like no one else and is still a uniting force. His 100 percent of the vote for party leader is not for nothing. Martin Schulz began the campaign as a projection screen for many - he served the longing for an alternative to Merkel. Driven by this euphoria, the first mistakes began. The dip ahead of the NRW election, the concentration on minor deadlines while the chancellor painted the big picture. All of this has already been covered by analysts. The ominous effect of plunging poll data this time was felt all the more because the SPD's initial 'Schulz effect' was very clear: with a convincing candidate and a consistent programme, numbers above 30 percent seemed possible even against Merkel. Against this background, the devastating electoral defeat of the NRW SPD in particular became a major turn-off for potential voters.

There were also car crashes such as the ill-fated presentation of the election programme or the Google advertisement which claimed Schulz to be the winner of the TV duel before it even started.

The TV duel could not bring the hoped-for turnaround, as it looked more like an appearance of the grand coalition given the limited differentiation between the parties. The key issues were taken away from the SPD's election campaign on the public stage. There was no 'Merkel must go' campaign. A 48 or 43 percent pension level is not a decisive issue, particularly when the party's own base considers 48 percent to be too low.

### **Mixed messages**

There were mixed messages too. Initially, Schulz and the SPD were strongly opposed to Gerhard Schröder's agenda policy. In the initial hype at the beginning of 2017 many former party members rejoined the SPD precisely for this reason. However, former chancellor Schröder was invited to the party congress in Dortmund as a guest speaker.

The SPD did not have a government alternative this time either. This is also because the idea of a red-red-green alliance had been dropped after the Saarland election in spring. In the end, it wasn't about the duel for the chancellor's office. It was not a question of

electing the SPD to vote Merkel out of office but a question of who came third: the right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) or the liberal FDP.

The SPD never managed to initiate major debates in this election campaign. This was not only due to Merkel, who did indeed contrive to depoliticise the election campaign. It was also due to the fact that the SPD and the CDU are currently barely distinguishable at the national level and that the SPD is still marked by its brand meltdown following the agenda reforms.

### **The party needs to renew itself**

Martin Schulz fought until the end. Now he and the SPD are on the rocky road back to being a powerful party. Excluding itself from a Grand Coalition – which has now shrunk to miniature size – was a logical step. This constellation has also lost its support in the population. Moreover, it is essential to prevent the right-wing populists from the AfD from being in the leaders of the opposition.

The very existence of the SPD is threatened. The worrying outlook for the European arena must become an incentive. The exciting political debates are taking place in a different environment today. In addition, in Germany of 2017, the right-wing populist AfD will continue to shape the political discourse.

In East Germany, the election results have caused Germany's political stability to wobble. The SPD must deal with this issue intensively and recover structures and people in a targeted manner. Otherwise, the SPD will remain what it is at present: a regional party. The SPD is also facing major problems in the south. In large parts of Germany, the SPD is hardly even capable of campaigning.

The air is actually thick with social democratic issues. But there is a lack of a narrative and key figures. That is why we need a long-term renewal process now. The SPD has to reconsider its thinking, which takes time and is not a task for the day after a lost election. The party must undergo a self-critical analysis, scrutinising its existing credibility problem. Seventy nine percent of its voters voted for the SPD because of longstanding strong ties. These voters appear to be the nucleus of the social democratic electorate. The Social Democrats have lost contact with crucial constituencies for years. This election result is the latest bad result but it still leaves the SPD with a chance to renew itself. This will require a contemporary, Europe-oriented version of a welfare-state social democracy. In order to regain its former strength the party has to put everything on the table: content and people, organisation and government options.

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