



## **CEC Weekly Political Update** **2nd November 2018**

### **Polish-German bilateral relations**

German Chancellor Angela Merkel is visiting Warsaw today. Together with 14 German ministers, Angela Merkel engaged in bilateral talks with the Polish government. Such meetings usually occur on an annual basis, however, the last took place in 2016 – this was most likely a result of the ongoing German federal election campaign across 2017, and later government coalition negotiations. Friday's meeting was PM Morawiecki's and Angela Merkel's fifth meeting this year. The talks regarded, amongst others, the future of the EU, Brexit, the EU budget and economic cooperation.

Poland and Germany have a number of key issues on the agenda. Poland's dispute with the EU regarding the rule of law is certainly one of

them. However, the two countries also share bilateral disagreements, namely regarding the Nord Stream II project and the discussion on war reparations. Still, both Poland and Germany have recently proved that concessions are possible. Germany has avoided openly criticizing PiS, out of internal worry that anti-German sentiments will be reinforced. The mantra in Berlin was that the European Commission will take care of any issues. Polish decision-makers have oft said that Angela Merkel is the German politician which best compliment's Warsaw diplomatic strategy.

In March, following Merkel's reappointment as German Chancellor, and the formation of her new government, she visited Warsaw and met with both President Duda, as well as Prime Minister Morawiecki. This was the first of a series of meetings Merkel had with EU leaders to reaffirm her position in Europe. The visit was politically important for the ruling party, and top PiS politicians who argued that Polish-German relations are flourishing. Notably, during that visit Merkel offered an important political concession when she stated that Poland does accept "refugees from other geographical considerations". This echoed Warsaw's argument that the huge number of economic migrants coming in from the East has been overseen in the bloc's migration policy.

Angela Merkel's decreasing influence in German politics has also shaped her current term. Her CDU party lost major support, due to Merkel's "failed" open-door migrant and refugee policy - this translated to a major success of the AfD party, which presented an anti-migrant rhetoric. The reaction of Polish observers and experts to the 2017 German elections was quite mixed, with arguments being made for all possible scenarios: better relations with Germany, worse, or no change at all. Though, so far no major change in Polish-German relations occurred, a noticeable constructive dialogue has developed.

Recently, Angela Merkel announced she will be stepping down as CDU leader, and will not run for re-election in her party's December bi-elections. This announcement comes after 18 years of leadership. It is a clear sign that despite winning the elections, Merkel's policy has weakened the party, much to the dissatisfaction of her colleagues. The government she created after months of negotiations required numerous concessions, consequently forcing the CDU to redistribute its

political power across coalition members. Merkel's CDU took six ministries, their Bavarian coalition partner three and the SPD also received six. The CDU/CSU appointed mostly fresh faces, perhaps trying to give a new impulse to the cabinet after Merkel recorded her worst election result in history.

Currently, there are two major candidates running for Merkel's position. Friedrich Merz, a lawyer and fierce opponent of the current German Chancellor who advocates a return to the party's conservative background. Merz's return to front-line German politics, after his 2004 loss to Gerhard Schroeder's SPD, would mean a sharp turn for the CDU. Merz is remembered from his 2004 postulates, demanding a simplification of the German tax system and arguing that everyone who wants to live in Germany should "adapt to the dominant liberal culture". The second candidate is Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, a close ally of Merkel and her policies, who will likely continue the current party policy. Polls, however, suggest that Merz has a better chance of winning the leadership contest.

Though Angela Merkel will not be stepping down as Chancellor until the next federal elections, for Poland and the EU this will be an important process to follow. It is certain that the future leader of the CDU will have an increasing effect on the policy of the government. A conservative leader will likely opt for a stop to the overhaul of the eurozone and a stricter migration policy - potentially making Germany an ally to the position presented by the Polish government.

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