The Bundestag Election 2025

VIII: Wind back the clock to 2015? How the coalition agreement reveals the Union's priorities

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A two-party coalition depends on the small parties doing badly

The coalition agreement between the leaders of the centre-right Union and the centre-left SPD opens the way for a new German government to take office, led by the CDU's Friedrich Merz. This is likely to happen in early May, once the three parties to the coalition themselves – the CDU and CSU which make up the Union, and the SPD – have given it their approval.

For all the principles it espouses and the commitments it makes, by far the most important part of the agreement is its final 36 lines, which sets out how the cabinet seats and their associated portfolios will be allocated among the coalition partners.

There are two reasons why this allocation is so important. One is that it is definitive: unresolved ambiguities and continuing differences over policy are judged less important than being able to exercise the administrative power that comes from heading the department responsible.

The other is what the allocation reveals about the overwhelming importance both Union parties attach to migration and the departments responsible for controlling it – as if this and this alone is the key in their eyes to holding back the AfD.

The Coalition Agreement and the priorities of the Centre-Right

The 144-page coalition agreement ("Responsibility for Germany"), was drawn up by the leaders of the centre-right Union (the CDU and the CSU) and the centre-left SPD in just six and a half weeks.[1]

The agreement mixes policy commitments ("we will reduce corporation tax by 1% on 1 January 2028"), assertions of principle ("the fundamental right to asylum remains untouched") and beliefs about what's at stake ("the coming years likely determining whether Germany continues to be free, secure, just, and prosperous").[2]

With its numbered lines of text adding to the impression of an authoritative statement of what is – and at times, what is not – to be done, the agreement can look like a programme for government. This appearance, however, would be misleading.

For one thing, no agreement can have that force once unanticipated events intrude. The last coalition agreement ("Dare more Progress"), endured for just three months before the entry of Russian troops into Ukraine in February 2022 overturned the orderly world to which it was addressed.[3] The new agreement's goal of lifting the potential rate of economic growth by 1% has been undermined – before it's even been signed – by the introduction of American tariffs into a global trading system upon which the German economy depends so heavily.[4]

For another, a commitment to a legislative programme is one thing. This, though. is a programme of action for a state in which powers are divided between federal, state and local levels, subject to national and European law, and where matters to do with the border require – a key word here- "co-ordination" with European neighbours.[5]

One part of the agreement is, however, independent, of what anyone else may say or do. This is the part, contained in the last 36 lines of the document, which states how the 18 cabinet seats are to be divided between the parties: eight, including the Chancellorship, to the CDU; seven, including the Vice-Chancellorship, to the SPD; and three to the CSU. This alone, impacting the authors of the agreement directly, is definitive. It is also highly revealing of the priorities of the parties themselves, above all those of the Union.

Concessions to the SPD – and what the Union gets in return

The first thing that stands out is how well the SPD, the junior partner, has done: less the number of cabinet posts than the portfolios, including finance, labour and social affairs, and defence. As if to underline this, finance and labour and social affairs were identified as two of the four priority areas (alongside economy and migration) in a framework paper put out in advance of the detailed negotiations.[6]

It is not as if these are areas in which the Union had little interest. On the contrary: regular conservative policies (spending cuts and tax cuts under finance, social security reform under labour) had been signalled in the agreement.

Leaving key ministries as well as control over signature policies to the SPD is just the latest Union concession since February's election. First came the switch, from near outright

opposition to relaxing the constitutional limit on government borrowing before the election, to eager advocacy of such relaxation shortly after.

Second was the assent given to the creation of €500bn infrastructure fund. This proposal, which the SPD's Saskia Esken had long ago put to Angela Merkel, and later Olaf Scholz, had been turned down by both previous Chancellors.[7]

Third, in seeking the support of the Green party for these reforms, not only did Merz write a 2045 date for net zero into the German constitution but he asked the Greens quite openly, in the Bundestag, what else they wanted in exchange for their support.

What the coalition agreement makes clear is what these concessions have allowed Merz and his Union colleagues to secure, in turn revealing their own priorities. The first of them is that Merz should become Chancellor, something that only now at last looks certain.

The second is that the Union should control the two departments critical to the implementation of Germany's policies on migration, namely interior and foreign affairs. Interior is obviously crucial: allocated to the CSU, it is expected to be filled by Merz's close ally, the CSU's Bundestag leader, Alexander Dobrindt. Foreign affairs matters because migration depends on the EU and so negotiations with other member states. The measure of how unusual this is is that the last time the CDU headed this department was in the 1960s,

A centre-right strategy for defeating the AfD, rooted in reversing 2015

Through what they have given up since the election as well as their choice of departments, Union leaders appear to believe that the only way to defeat the AfD is to adopt its framing of, and its policies towards, migration – something that Merz did in the 29 January Bundestag debate – and then implement those policies themselves, within the framework of a centrist coalition.[8]

The agreement certainly does not lack for policies on migration. Policies to remove people who it is said shouldn't be in Germany include expanding the list of safe countries of origin (to which asylum seekers may be returned), and ensuring that rejected asylum seekers leave the country, whether voluntarily or obliged to by the state.

Policies to restrict entry include suspension of a right to family reunification for people granted subsidiary protection, and "in coordination with our European neighbours", turning people back at the German border, including asylum-seekers.[9]

The interpretation of "co-ordination" was one of the main sticking points during the negotiations, the dispute turning on whether it meant "in agreement" with those neighbours (so giving them a veto) or merely giving them notice of something that Germany reserved the right to do unilaterally. If the words haven't changed, that difference remains.

With Dobrindt at Interior, the Union may calculate that it can act first and argue later. But there's enough in the agreement by way of principle – "the fundamental right to asylum

remains untouched" – to allow the SPD to push back, even before any judge in Karlsruhe or Luxembourg get involved.

The Union leaders' obsession with migration seems rooted in a belief the AfD's rise is a direct result of Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision in 2015 to allow over a million asylum seekers into Germany. How else can one interpret the remark made during the press conference by the CSU leader, Markus Söder, that the coalition agreement signalled that Germany was now returning to a time "before 2015"?[10] On this view, the key to defeating the AfD lies in the Union itself removing the supposed stain on its own record left there by the actions of its former leader Merkel.

Conclusion: sentiments matter too

The six and a half weeks that it has taken the parties to reach this agreement is a little quicker than usual. Only once this century (in 2009, Merkel's second government) was much less time needed.[11] Yet the failure to make progress on the meaning of "consultation" with neighbouring countries makes this less of a true agreement and more of an agreement to disagree. One sign of the sensitivity here came in the press conference when Söder turned to his fellow leaders and said he was going to say something about migration. The body language of all four leaders makes it look as if he was not sticking to the script.[12]

Assuming party leaders retain sufficient control to deliver the party endorsements needed to put the agreement into effect, the question is how strong that support actually turns out to be. Only in the case of the SPD is it clear that that question will be answered publicly. The departmental haul promised to the SPD will win votes for the agreement. Serving alongside a coalition partner committed to an AfD agenda will lose them.

For it's not just policies that matter, sentiments do too. How does Söder's quip about "going back before 2015" sound to the hundreds of thousands who came to Germany around that time and have now long since called it home?[13]

Or his claim that the many years of insecurity are now past?[14] Past? When the winner of the German election is championing removal? For surely what these hundreds of thousands of people hear, even those who've since become German citizens, is that the years of heightened insecurity have only just begun.

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1 „Verantwortung für Deutschland: Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD", April 2025

2 Koalitionsvertrag, pp 45, 92 and 1.

3 „Mehr Fortschritt wagen", November 2021.

4 Koalitionsvertrag, p4.

5 "Co-ordination with our European neighbours" is the nearest to a neutral translation of the all-important phrase „Abstimmung mit unseren europäischen Nachbarn" – to which we return later.

6 SPD, 8 March 2025,„Ergebnisse der Sondierungen von CDU, CSU und SPD"

7 Alexander Neubacher, Der Spiegel, 29 March 2025, „Siegerin SPD"

8 See my "After Aschaffenburg: escaping the embrace of the AfD"

9 Koalitionsvertrag, pp 92 to 95.

[10] Anna Ehlebracht, Der Spiegel, „Regierungsbildung Live Analysis“, 9 April 2025, 14:39. For the live delivery, see ZDF-heute Nachrichten, 9 April 2025, „Union und SPD einig: Pressekonferenz mit Merz und Parteispitzen zu Koalitionsvertrag“ (at approx 38 mins)

[11] That is, between two and three months from election to new government, as per 2021, 2013 and 2005.

[12] The four leaders being the SPD's Lars Klingbeil and Saskia Eskin as well as Söder and Merz. ZDF-heute Nachrichten, 9 April 2025, „Union und SPD einig: Pressekonferenz mit Merz und Parteispitzen zu Koalitionsvertrag“ (at approx 38 mins)

[13] This was exactly the challenge that the Greens' Robert Habeck levelled at Merz in the 29 January debate: think how your words sound. To borrow from my earlier blog: "How, (Habeck) asks, does all this sound – this racist speech that originates with the AfD – what sort of message does it send to the parents of the little boy of Moroccan origin who was killed in Aschaffenburg, or to the parents of the little girl of Syrian origin who was injured there, or to the nurse who, having looked after the injured at Magdeburg, was then herself attacked and subject to racist abuse?"

[14] Anna Ehlebracht, Der Spiegel, „Regierungsbildung Live Analysis“, 9 April 2025, 14:39