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The Rise of the Populists A Problem for Merkel and Germany

A Commentary By Sebastian Fischer

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The state election in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania gave the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany a significant boost. It is a challenge for Chancellor Merkel and the entire country.

From a national political perspective, the eastern German state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, with its sparse population of 1.6 million, is a lightweight and largely meaningless. Usually. But this time around, following state parliament elections held there on Sunday, the situation is different. This vote, after all, was essentially a referendum on Chancellor Angela Merkel and her policies, which makes it quite meaningful indeed.

The results of that referendum don't look good for Merkel. Her center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) lost four percentage points relative to the last time the state's voters went to the polls in 2011 for a result of just 19 percent -- while the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) brought in fully 20.8 percent of the vote. The party didn't even exist five years ago.

To be sure, the CDU hasn't done particularly well in the state for 20 years, but it is home to the chancellor's own parliamentary constituency, which means that the AfD has essentially staged a revolution in Merkel's backyard. And it did so by turning the elections into a single-issue vote: Merkel's refugee policies.

The strategy was so successful that the CDU has been relegated to being just the third-strongest party in the state, behind the center-left Social Democrats (SPD) and the AfD. It marks the first time in Germany that the anti-Merkel party has come out ahead of Merkel's party -- and in some parts of the German leader's electoral district, AfD was the strongest party of all.

For the chancellor, it is a political debacle. Merkel must now come to terms with a challenge at least as monumental as the one which faced her predecessor Gerhard Schröder back in the mid-2000s. Back then, the SPD chancellor found himself trapped between, on the one hand, having to explain his cuts to social welfare benefits and, on the other, the rise of the Left Party, a political movement to the left of the SPD that was fueled by exactly those cuts. In the end, he failed on both counts.

The parallels to Merkel's situation -- a CDU that has been divided by her approach to the refugee crisis combined with the rise of a right-wing protest party -- are significant. But the end doesn't have to be the same. The Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania vote, after all, is only symbolically a debacle for Merkel. Her position as chancellor isn't (yet) at stake.

Emotions over Reason

But the returns on Sunday made clear that an increasing number of voters, at least in Germany's east, are turning their backs on the established, democratic party system. Furthermore, it doesn't seem to matter much if the economy is improving, cities are being renewed and the tourist sector is doing well, all of which are the case in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, which has been structurally weak since German reunification in 1990. And it is possible for a party to campaign on fears of refugees even in a state that very few foreigners call home.

In short, emotions would seem to have triumphed over reason. Facts took a back seat.

It is precisely here that the challenge lies for Merkel, a politician who has always staked her political success on clear arguments based on facts and figures. She will have to do more explaining and more communicating -- and she will have to embed her policies within an approachable, meaningful framework in order to keep her party behind her. She may also have to take a few rhetorical steps toward the CDU's Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), which has been sharply critical of her stance on the refugee issue. That could include admitting that she has made some missteps.

The CSU made it clear on Sunday evening that it wasn't interested in taking the pressure off Merkel. Senior party member Markus Söder spoke of the Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania vote as being a "wake-up call" for German conservatives. But his true meaning was clear: It was a wake-up call for the chancellor first and foremost.

A Problem for Germany

Indeed, the renewed success of the AfD is likely to intensify the CSU's anger with Merkel. Suddenly, German conservatives must now deal with a rising force to their right, a phenomenon similar to the one from which the SPD still hasn't found a way to recover.

And like the Left Party, the AfD doesn't look as though it will be disappearing as a political force any time soon. The right-wing populists are on the rise in both Germany's east and west, and have proven adept at motivating non-voters as well as poaching voters from the CDU in addition to the SPD and even the Left Party. One of the primary emotions uniting this diverse mixture is outrage with the chancellor.

Furthermore, in contrast to the Left Party, which has taken steps to leave its origins as a neo-communist protest party behind it, the AfD's strength lies in its complete rejection of the party system as currently constituted. It isn't interested in playing by the rules; it seeks to agitate and subvert. Indeed, it is a party that represents a danger to democracy.

The problem represented by it isn't just one for Merkel. Nor is it only an issue for her conservatives. It is a problem for all of Germany.