

Germany: The resignation of Martin Schulz

By Peter Schwarz
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Just two days after Martin Schulz announced that he would hand over chairmanship of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) to Andrea Nahles and head the foreign ministry in a new grand coalition government, he withdrew as incoming foreign minister. The circumstances of his resignation indicate that fierce struggles over power and political orientation are taking place behind the scenes in Berlin.

These struggles are not limited to the SPD and its coalition partner, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), where criticism of Chancellor Angela Merkel is growing. On Thursday, the influential editor of the *Handelsblatt*, Gabor Steingart, was fired by the paper's publisher and majority shareholder Dieter von Holtzbrinck after Steingart fiercely attacked Schulz in his regular column on Wednesday. Gabor's sacking, however, could not save Schulz.

Officially, Schulz justified his resignation by declaring that he did not want to endanger the upcoming vote by the SPD membership on the coalition pact. He played a significant role in negotiating the pact. In his letter of resignation, Schulz wrote, "I saw a successful vote at risk due to the discussion surrounding my person."

Schulz's decision to take over as foreign minister in the grand coalition provoked widespread consternation in the SPD. Only a few weeks ago, he had declared that he would never join a government led by Angela Merkel. In addition, Schulz's decision meant the ousting of the acting foreign minister, Sigmar Gabriel, who, according to opinion polls, is currently the most popular SPD politician.

Some media outlets, with *Handelsblatt* to the fore, had worked to whip up sentiment against Schulz. In his "Morning Briefing," Steingart accused Schulz of seeking to "hunt down Gabriel and take his place in the ministry."

"The crime is being planned meticulously these

days," he wrote. "The victim is to stumble, without any push being seen. He is to hit the ground, apparently without external influence. When the face has stopped twitching, Schulz wants to be the first to determine the cause of death of his friend from Goslar [Gabriel]..." He planned "nothing less than the perfect murder."

Gabriel, who had led the SPD for seven years before relinquishing the chairmanship to Schulz last March, intervened and accused Schulz of breaking his word. "All that remains is to regret how disrespectful our dealings with one another have become in the SPD and how little a promise counts," Gabriel said in an interview with the Funke media group.

Reports from SPD state and local associations indicated that anger over Schulz's behaviour loomed as a potentially decisive factor in leading members to reject the coalition agreement, which was announced last week after months of closed-door negotiations. Apparently, the party executive put pressure on Schulz until he finally decided to forgo the post of foreign minister on Friday afternoon. Less than a year earlier, Schulz was being feted by the media as the saviour of the SPD and was elected chairman of the party with the votes of 100 percent of party delegates.

The rapid rise and fall of Schulz cannot be explained on the basis of personal rivalries. That political issues are at stake is also demonstrated by the dismissal of Steingart, which has triggered a severe crisis at the *Handelsblatt*.

In a letter to the newspaper's publisher, Dieter von Holtzbrinck, the editors-in-chief and managing directors of the media group declared they were "shocked and stunned" at the sacking of Steingart and protested against interference with freedom of the press. They wrote, "In our view, this is a devastating signal to the editors and our entire house: the punishment for an—albeit awkward—opinion is immediate sacking."

One can at this point only speculate on the precise political questions involved. Little is known about the agreements and deals struck behind the backs of the public during the weeks of wrangling over a new government.

What is certain is that as foreign minister Gabriel argued, like no other member of the government, for a great power policy for Germany based on its own national interests. He also argued strongly for loosening Germany's long-standing relationship with the US. On this issue, Gabriel agrees with Steingart, under whose leadership the *Handelsblatt* took a decidedly critical view of the US.

At the beginning of December, Gabriel gave a keynote address to the Foreign Policy Forum of the Körber Foundation in Berlin in which he described the US as "a competitor and sometimes even an opponent." He emphasised that this was "not just the result of the politics of a single President [Donald Trump]" and would "not change fundamentally even after the next election." Germany had to advance its interests more confidently in future, he concluded, declaring, "It cannot afford to wait or merely react to decisions made in Washington."

There is broad agreement with Gabriel in the German ruling elite that the country must build up its military force and pursue its own great power policy. This issue is at the heart of the coalition pact agreed by the SPD, the CDU and its sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU). But there are differences over the question of how far to go in breaking with the US and pursuing rapprochement with Russia and China instead.

There is no public discussion of these issues because of fears that the government's plans for massive rearmament and war will meet with powerful popular opposition. This is why the media presents the clashes within the SPD solely as a power struggle between individuals.

On Friday, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP—Socialist Equality Party) issued a statement calling for rejection of the coalition agreement and the disclosure of the contents of all secret talks.

The working class and the 450,000 SPD members voting on the coalition agreement have "a right to know where the grand coalition is headed," the statement declares. "This applies not only to the coalition agreement—the true contents of which are

being concealed, sugarcoated and distorted by the media and the political parties—but also to the wide-ranging secret deals reached and the content of the discussions held behind the scenes. The SGP demands that all secret protocols and lists of participants in the coalition talks be published."

The power struggles within the SPD, the behind-the-scenes intrigues, the way in which leading politicians are elected minister one day and shot down the next—all confirm the importance of this demand. It cannot be allowed that a cabal of politicians, business chiefs, the media and the military bring to power the most right-wing government since the overthrow of the Nazi regime.

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