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One Year of the Grand Coalition (November 20, 2006)

After a year in office, the Grand Coalition's record was mixed. Although Chancellor Angela Merkel had clear majorities in the Bundestag and the Bundesrat, she didn't promise anything more than "many small steps" in her policy statement. According to the author of this editorial, more probably wasn't possible, because German citizens were risk averse.

A Reflection of this Country

The Germans aren't happy with their Grand Coalition. It's far too similar to its creator.

Just in time for the anniversary, some good news has gotten mixed in with the stream of bad news that has plagued the republic for years and has threatened to become the Germans' new destiny. Yet there will be no party atmosphere on the first anniversary of the Grand Coalition. Disappointment can be felt everywhere – disappointment that this alliance did not use its great majorities in the Bundestag and the Bundesrat to accomplish great deeds. Even the protagonists themselves are not denying this. But they never announced anything titanic in the first place.

The chancellor spoke of many small steps in her policy statement. And small steps are what the coalition has taken, from its work on social security insurance to federalism reform to the consolidation of state finances. Most of these steps went in the right direction. Things weren't at a standstill, but there was nothing revolutionary either. Theorists of the social order had plenty of reason to tear their hair out, but chaos didn't befall Germany in the end.

One could say that that's too little for an alliance of two mainstream parties, both of which claimed to be able to make the problem-ridden republic "fit for the future." Too little resolve, assertiveness, strategic thinking, unity. But this coalition is no superhuman creature totally removed from German reality. Its main problem is that it is an all-too faithful reflection of German society, with its antagonistic but well-organized interests and interest groups, most of which are bundled together in the coalition. Whatever it does is too much for some and not enough for others. A year ago, the nation did not have the courage of its convictions to declare a clear-cut direction [for the country], as is now constantly demanded of Merkel's government. But at least the people, the creators of this coalition, have someone to blame.

It is easy to refer to a policy of small steps as lacking ambition. But recent decades have shown that a highly cultivated social welfare state, especially one that is forced into a complex federal structure, cannot simply push policies through from the top down, bypassing opposition and avoiding compromises [*durchregieren*]. The welfare state, which has penetrated all corners of society down to the smallest crannies and has created dependencies there, has developed vast powers of self-defense. Any attempt to restrict it leads to strong defensive reactions deep in the core of the mainstream parties, which suffer along with their baby. Whoever does not protect the welfare state suffers the consequences. Agenda 2010 cost the SPD the chancellorship. The CDU almost had to say the same thing about its own reform campaign. The parties remember such lessons, especially when the punishment is being chained together for four years.

The Grand Coalition's great majority turned out to be an optical illusion. On many issues, the chancellor's party is discordant in and of itself. The perpetual wrestling between the economic-liberal camp and the welfare-state wing, which had to swallow a serious defeat at the Leipzig party congress, is again more obvious than the executive committee would like to admit. The present programmatic insecurity might not be as visible in the SPD as it is in the Union; it was partially covered up by the double "flying substitution" of the party chair.¹ But it is just as hard to speak of a cohesive regulatory model in the case of the SPD as it is with the Union.

Both, however, know that they are dealing with a populace that is generally conservative. Changes in this country are associated more with risk than with opportunity. Therefore, the necessary reforms can only be implemented if the parties are able to combat the feeling of economic and social insecurity that stretches far into the middle class. Jürgen Rüttgers took on this task enthusiastically,² not only to the annoyance of the SPD. Going it alone in the way that he did was enough to prompt the CDU to start discussing their direction again.

But the chancellor, too, is seeking to take the Germans' pronounced need for security into account: small steps don't trigger as much fear as big ones, and goals don't confuse voters as much as details do. However, Ms. Merkel needs to make sure that her reform agenda doesn't get hazy and that the coalition parties don't start competing to see who can move the least. In any case, this will become apparent in years three and four of this coalition – if it lasts that long. The coalition and the chancellor have pretty much just the coming year to improve their standing in the history books. They still lack a major triumph that will make people forget their formidable tragedy: healthcare reform. So far, even their respectable foreign policy hasn't been able to do that.

The Hessian state parliamentary election in early 2008 will be the first in a series of closely spaced mid-term report cards. The chancellor is already finding it difficult to control the minister

¹ In November 2005, Matthias Platzeck replaced Franz Müntefering as the party chairman. Platzeck then resigned in April 2006 and was replaced by Kurt Beck – eds.

² Jürgen Rüttgers, minister president of North Rhine Westphalia (2005-2010), questioned whether neoliberal policies – such as cutting taxes – would always lead to the creation of new jobs – eds.

presidents, for whom charity begins at home. Pressure on the three coalition parties³ to distinguish themselves is growing more and more with the approach of the Bundestag elections. No one should expect all that much from this coalition in the second half of its term.

Then it will be up to voters once again to determine the future path of the Federal Republic. The mainstream parties are showing signs of emaciation and are already feverishly awaiting a clear-cut mandate that will release them from their forced marriage. For Germany, one can only hope that this fever becomes an epidemic.

Source: Berthold Kohler, "Ein Abbild dieses Landes" ["A Reflection of this Country"], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 20, 2006.

Translation: Allison Brown

³ In this article, the CSU is considered the third party in the Grand Coalition government, together with the CDU and the SPD – eds.