

Germany: Merkel Dämmerung

Chancellor Angela Merkel just announced the end of her political career. The next federal elections in the autumn of 2021, at the latest, will mark the end of the Merkel era



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German Chancellor Angela Merkel today announced that she will step down as party chair at the December convention of the CDU. She has been party chair since 2000. At the same press conference, Merkel also announced that she will end her political career at the end of the current term. She explicitly ruled out any personal ambitions for a European top job and would also not run at snap elections, neither would she take a seat in parliament.

A surprise? Only at first glance

Even though Merkel has never hinted at a fifth term in office, she has never explicitly ruled one out, as she did today. Needless to say that after 18 years as party chair, this announcement is historic, as it marks the end of an era. At the same time, it is perfectly normal that such a long era would eventually come to an end. The decision looks driven by the last two election results but could also very easily be the result of a longer, more strategic, assessment. Normally, the CDU votes its chair every two years. The next party convention would come only half a year ahead of the next federal elections, giving very little time for any Merkel successor to build up a political profile. Even if the decision is a bit forced, as Merkel herself has always stressed that party and government

leadership should be in the hands of one single person, it also has some upsides. She still holds the initiative and control over her political departure by giving the party enough time to prepare for the post-Merkel period.

Succession race has already started

The race for a successor to Merkel at the top of the CDU has already started. This morning, three candidates announced their ambitions:

- Party secretary-general Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer
- Health minister Jens Spahn
- Former parliamentary leader when Merkel started as party chair, Friedrich Merz.

A new chair of the CDU party will clearly have to lead the discussion on the future strategy of the party. Will they move to the political right again or continue the Merkel strategy of capturing the political centre.

Unpretentiously pulling the strings

In our view, Merkel's announcement remains less of a risk for the German government than the SPD's losses in the last elections. The CDU has no interest in Merkel stepping down as chancellor or a snap election before any successor has been able to build up a profile. The SPD, however, remains in an existential crisis which could easily lead to the decision to leave the coalition next year.

As historic as today's announcement is, the approaching end of an era also holds the potential for positive developments. Not so much because new is always better but rather because it could give Merkel the freedom and the tailwind- freed from party ties- to put a final stamp on her legacy, possibly with bolder steps to reform the German economy and the monetary union. Three years of a lame duck government would clearly be harmful, not only for Europe but also for Germany. Somehow, the announced end is typical for the entire era Merkel: unpretentiously pulling the strings.

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