

German elections: Angela Merkel finds support for refugee stance on final days of campaign

Rosenheim: At a recent election rally in the Bavarian town of Rosenheim, retired truck driver Klaus Harpich had some rare words of encouragement for German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

The refugee crisis wasn't her fault, Harpich said in a thick local dialect, as he stood on the town square behind a group of anti-immigration protesters shouting down the chancellor.

German Chancellor and Chairwoman of the Christian Democratic Union party (CDU), Angela Merkel, centre, arrives for an election campaign rally in Regensburg, Germany, on Monday.

Photo: AP

"She underestimated the problem and had no idea that the masses would be so big," said Harpich, 63, next to a shop that sells traditional Bavarian lederhosen and dirndl dresses. "She wanted to help."

The forgiving attitude is a sign that Merkel's allies in Bavaria are lining up behind her just in time for Sunday's election, delivering critical votes in the land of BMW and the Oktoberfest that she'll need for a fourth term as chancellor — and to limit gains by the populist Alternative for Germany party, known as AfD.

Young people wait for the arrival of German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Regensburg.

Photo: AP

A town of some 60,000 at the foot of the Alps that straddles train and road links from southern Europe, Rosenheim was on the front line in 2015 and 2016 as about 1.3 million refugees came to Germany, most of them crossing the border from Austria.

After a fraught two years of fighting and making up with Merkel over her open-borders refugee stance, Bavaria's ruling Christian Social Union party is polling at pre-crisis levels in the state ahead of the federal vote on September 24. That's good news for Merkel as well as the CSU, whose dominance in Bavaria allows the state, with only 15 per cent of Germany's population, to punch above its weight in the national government.

Merkel, whose Christian Democratic Union campaigns jointly with the Bavarian party in national elections, knows she needs those votes. Her final major campaign rally, on Friday in Munich, will co-star CSU leader Horst Seehofer, her main domestic antagonist at the peak of the refugee crisis. With the influx now largely under control, that embrace has become less awkward. For his part, Harpich said he expects to cast his vote for the CSU.

"A year ago, the mood on the street was quite a bit more critical than now," Daniela Ludwig, 42, a four-term CSU lawmaker who represents Rosenheim in the national Parliament, or Bundestag, said in an interview. "In terms of the way the government has tackled this, so much has changed that we really should be satisfied."

Angela Merkel pauses in her trademark hand gesture.

Photo: AP

Fallout from the crisis remains a risk for CSU candidates like Ludwig, who last won her district with 58 per cent of the vote.

Merkel, who's vilified by the AfD and dogged by its supporters on the campaign trail, stopped off in Rosenheim, praising the state's mix of innovation and tradition as she urged Bavarians to back the political centre.

"Make Bavaria strong in Berlin," Merkel told a market-square rally on September 12. "I tell you, CDU and CSU are only strong if we're both strong."

Having ruled Bavaria almost single-handedly since World War II, the CSU took 49 per cent of the statewide vote in the last federal election in 2013. Two polls in September put its support back at similar levels after a dip to the low 40s last year, even as the AfD makes inroads among socially conservative voters once virtually monopolised by the CSU.

That shared threat helped Merkel and Seehofer bury the hatchet at least for now. While the CSU still wants a cap on migration that Merkel rejects as unenforceable, relations have recovered since the Bavarian leader publicly humiliated the chancellor and threatened to sue the federal government if it didn't squelch the influx.

Fear of crime by refugees remains a factor in the campaign, even in a prosperous state that boasts an unemployment rate of 3.2 per cent, the lowest in the nation.

Three days before Merkel stopped in Rosenheim, the alleged rape of a female jogger in the region made national headlines. Police identified the suspect as a Nigerian whose asylum application had been rejected.

It's the kind of news that energises anti-Merkel demonstrators, who shouted, jeered and blew whistles as she addressed the CSU rally. Protest signs included "Merkel hates Germany" and "Whoever votes CSU gets Merkel".

"I can tell you that this will spur us on to do everything - and I mean everything - to give people both the sense and the reality of security," Merkel told the crowd, drawing applause when she evoked her campaign pledge that the refugee influx of 2015 will never be repeated.

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