

Germany's Merkel faces political crisis over migrant policy

The political future of world's most powerful woman could be decided on Monday.

MAINZ, Germany — Not even 100 days after she negotiated her way to a fourth term as German leader, Angela Merkel is mired in a political crisis that underscores Europe's divisions over immigration amid a surge in populism.

The German chancellor faces a showdown with her own interior minister that threatens not only her fragile ruling alliance but also her European Union-wide vision of cooperation to deal with the migrant crisis.

The world's most powerful woman will embark on a weekend of talks ahead of a Monday meeting that could decide her future — and potentially signal the end of the Merkel era. She has been in power since 2005.

Along with French President Emmanuel Macron, Merkel is seen as one of the last bastions of European liberal democracy amid the rise of populism across the continent.

Merkel may be forced to make a U-turn on her open-door policy which has already been scaled back since Germany opened its borders to welcome around 1 million asylum-seekers in 2015. At times more than 10,000 people were arriving daily in the country, which had a population of around 81 million.



Migrants walk from the main station in Dortmund, Germany, in September 2015. Martin Meissner / AP file

Her refugee policy is widely blamed for a surge in support for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), which became the main opposition party after last September's inconclusive election.

Germany's political turmoil comes amid a rise in populism and anti-immigration sentiment across Europe, including in neighbors such as Poland, Austria and Hungary.

Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, a conservative critic of Merkel's migration policy, this week pushed for an "axis of the willing" among Austria, Germany and Italy to fight illegal migration.

It is a view shared by German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer, who wants to reject migrants at his country's border if they have already registered in other E.U. states to the south.

In March, Seehofer told a newspaper that "Islam does not belong to Germany." Seehofer is a member of Merkel's CSU Bavarian allies, who are further to the right than her own Christian Democrats (CDU). He has also vowed to implement a

“master plan for quicker deportations.”



Chancellor Angela Merkel’s coalition is at risk after clashes with Interior Minister Horst Seehofer over Germany’s refugee policy. Carsten Koall / Getty Images

Keen not to antagonize Germany’s neighbors, Merkel prefers an E.U.-wide solution and wants to wait until the outcome of a summit of the bloc’s leaders on June 28. She has warned that Seehofer’s plan could shift the migrant burden onto countries such as Greece and Italy, where she is already unpopular for her economic policies.

“I personally think illegal migration is one of the big challenges for the European Union, so I don’t believe we should act unilaterally,” she said Thursday. “We should not act in an uncoordinated way, and we should not act at the expense of third parties.”

However, lawmakers from the CSU have backed Seehofer, who said he might defy Merkel by going ahead with his plan next week without her agreement.

If defied, Merkel could be forced to fire Seehofer, or lead her CDU to split up the parliamentary bloc in which they have cooperated with the CSU since 1949. That would leave her coalition without a majority and could result in another election.

“Merkel is caught between a rock and a hard place,” said Thomas Walde, co-host of the political affairs show “Berlin Direkt” at NBC’s German partner channel ZDF. “She could either revoke her own policy, which would in effect mean that she is correcting herself and that everything she did so far was wrong. She cannot possibly do that because then she would be a lame duck in her position.”

He added: “Or, she could fire the minister of the interior on Monday, if he were to act. But then her coalition partner would leave the coalition, which would leave her without a majority in Parliament, which would be tough. She could try to go for a little while, but in effect that might lead to new elections.”

“She is fighting various fires in Europe.”

It is unclear whether Merkel would run again should German voters be sent back to the ballot box.

The CSU’s hardline stance on immigration comes ahead of regional elections in Germany. In the Bavarian heartland, along Germany’s southern border, the migrant crisis is a crucial issue and the party fears anti-immigration sentiment could bring to an end its decades-old dominance of Bavaria’s government.

However, others have criticized the CSU for putting its interests ahead of national unity.

Malu Dreyer, the premier of the Rhineland-Pfalz region, called the CSU’s tactics “scandalous.”

“The CSU is risking a lot, namely the stability of this government,” she said Thursday.

Andrea Nahles, the leader of Germany’s center-left Social Democrats, accused Bavaria’s CSU governor, Markus Soeder, of “behaving like a bonsai Trump.”

“We won’t allow the panic of the [Bavarian] state government to take all of Germany and Europe hostage,” said Nahles.

Gero Neugebauer, professor of politics at the Free University Berlin, said Seehofer’s CSU wanted to change the law that automatically guarantees asylum to anyone facing persecution overseas, replacing it with the power to accept or reject asylum applications.

However, the dispute is also a power struggle over who dominates German politics.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel holds a news conference in Berlin on Friday. Markus Schreiber / AP

“That is why the dispute is in substance about [migration policy], but it is also a conflict between people,” Neugebauer said, adding Seehofer is hoping to emerge as the winner in a confrontation with Merkel.

It cannot be excluded that a collapse of the coalition government “could be imminent,” Neugebauer warned, but added that that would pose risks “which are higher for the CSU than for Merkel’s CDU party.”

Sophia Besch, a research fellow at the Centre for European Reform think tank, said Merkel has become more isolated on the European stage but her patience and experience could ensure her political survival.

“She is fighting various fires in Europe. She has the Dutch and the northern and Scandinavian countries on her side, but she is certainly not strong enough to be called the undisputed leader of Europe as she might have been,” Besch added. “She’s great at surviving these things, in part because of her calm approach,

which is in stark contrast to the posturing in the CSU and the ‘Merkel must go’ faction of the CDU.”

Merkel and Macron are among the few remaining European leaders to explicitly shun populism and the protectionist trade policies of President Donald Trump, and share a vision of a stronger, more unified E.U.-wide foreign policy.

Macron warned in March that the European Union faces a “civil war” and “fascination with the illiberal” as nationalist governments in Poland and Hungary turn away from liberal democracy and appealed to Europeans not to “sleepwalk” into authoritarianism.

Andy Eckardt reported from Mainz, Germany, and Alastair Jamieson from London.

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