

# Germany's small parties go for the jugular

BERLIN — Germany's moribund election campaign just got interesting.

A day after Chancellor Angela Merkel and her Social Democrat challenger Martin Schulz muddled through a television standoff lampooned as “more of a duet than a duel,” the country's smaller parties clashed in a pair of fast-paced, engaging debates in the race for third place.

In contrast to the largely harmonious exchanges between Merkel and Schulz on Sunday evening, Monday's debates left little doubt about the differences between the smaller parties. In back-to-back confrontations, the first between the junior parties now in parliament — the Christian Social Union (CSU, the Bavarian sister-party of Merkel's conservatives), the Greens and the Left party — and a second one that added the liberal Free Democrats (FDP) and the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), candidates squared off on issues ranging from domestic security to tax policy to digitalization.

Though both debates were shorter than Sunday's 97-minute marathon between Merkel and Schulz, the moderators managed to cover more ground and for the most part succeeded in keeping the candidates on topic.

At several points, the exchanges became heated, a reflexion of how tight the race is between the cluster of parties vying for third.

“Everything you're saying is wrong, it's a bald-faced lie,” Left party leader Dietmar Bartsch told his Green rival when challenged about his party's environmental record.

The FDP, Greens, the Left and AfD are all at between 8-10 percent in the polls, suggesting the shape of the next government could be decided by a very slim margin.

Merkel's Christian Democrats and the CSU stand at a combined 38 percent. Their preferred partner is the FDP, but it's far from certain the party will win enough votes for a two-way coalition. That could force either a three-way combination

with the Greens or another grand coalition between Merkel's bloc and the SPD.

In Monday's debates the CSU candidates, as representatives of the current government, found themselves under fire from all sides.

Transport Minister Alexander Dobrindt of the CSU struggled to defend his handling of the ongoing diesel scandal. The studio audience broke into laughter when Dobrindt said the government had done everything in its power to deal with the manipulations by Germany's auto companies.

When Dobrindt tried to blame the Greens for the threat of diesel car bans now hanging over many German cities, Green leader Katrin Göring-Eckardt shot back: "It was your responsibility to undertake regular controls ... the driving bans are yours because you didn't ensure that the rules were respected." The audience applauded.

The second debate, which included FDP chief Christian Lindner and AfD candidate Alice Weidel, was no less feisty.

Overall, the candidates for the Left, the FDP and the Greens appeared to score the most points, though there wasn't a clear victor in either of the two debates. The CSU and AfD representatives, meanwhile, seemed largely on the defensive and isolated.

Though the candidates offered detailed arguments on the fight against terror and the refugee crisis, the primary focus was domestic. Both Turkey and Russia were discussed, but surprisingly little attention was devoted to Europe. As was the case with Merkel and Schulz, hot button topics in the EU, such as Brexit, French President Emmanuel Macron's blueprint to reform the eurozone and Poland, weren't even mentioned.

Nonetheless, most observers welcomed the aggressive back-and-forth as a kind of vindication for Germany's political culture after Sunday's lackluster performance.

"There is still passion in Germany's political landscape after all," German talkshow host Frank Plasberg declared at the close of Monday's debates.

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