

Merkel meets her match

Germany in the pandemic

Even by Angela Merkel's own tastes, the last act of Germany's opera-loving chancellor is bursting with high drama. After nearly 16 years astride the political stage, mastering financial and political crises with her left hand while governing Europe's largest country with her right, the unflappable physicist of power has met her match in an invisible virus.

When she isn't haggling over vaccines with the EU's 26 other leaders, Merkel has to contend with the political priorities and egos of Germany's 16 state leaders. They - not Berlin's chancellor - carry front-line competence for pandemic priorities like health and education. Given that, Merkel has done a remarkable job using her political gravitas as leverage in talks.

But she has little direct control over Germany's chaotic vaccination strategy. Even without shortages in vaccines, each federal state has insisted on its own rollout strategy, creating 16 potential ways to get it wrong.

Things are no less chaotic in Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Three years after she stood down as leader, half a dozen members of the center-right parliamentary party thought a global pandemic, triggering a global run on protective equipment, was the right time to monetize their political connections.

Party leaders acted quickly to dismiss them, and prosecutors are investigating, but it has left voters wondering if these were isolated episodes of political brain fog. Until last month's revelations, the CDU blocked repeated opposition efforts to beef up Germany's lax lobby and donation rules.

With a whiff of sleaze in the air, new CDU leader Armin Laschet is spending the Easter break reflecting on his diminishing political options. When he was elected in January, he thought he had first refusal on leading his party, and their Bavarian allies, the CSU, to election day on September 26th. But the graft revelations and perceived pandemic dithering have hit his credibility hard, and his party even harder. After tipping 40 percent in polls during the first pandemic wave, the CDU has slipped six points in a month to just 27 percent in a public television poll.

Speculation is growing that, barring an Easter miracle, Laschet will stand aside and allow Bavaria's CSU leader Markus Söder front the election campaign.

With six months to polling day, Germany's alternative coalition options are looking more realistic by the day, with the Greens and Social Democratic Party (SPD) looking remarkably healthy and alert.

But there is little room for Schadenfreude among Germany's neighbours: the struggles of this country, and its largest party, to adjust to the post-Merkel era are coming soon to the pandemic-hit European Union.

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