

# A Merkel win, but at what cost?

Her proposal to suspend Turkish application for EU membership will find obvious backers in Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic — the very states that EU itself is mulling action over the refugee crisis

In little more than two weeks, Germans will re-elect Angela Merkel as Chancellor, giving her a fourth consecutive term and allowing her to rule until 2021 — if not longer. The only thing to be determined in the September 24 vote is who will partner her Christian Democrats Union (CDU) in governing.

For all of her popularity — her ratings are generally above 50 per cent and she even touches 54 per cent support among those aged between 18 and 21 — the CDU will need a coalition partner. Best bets right now are that it will be a grand coalition once more between the CDU and the Social Democrats, led by Martin Schulz.

Schulz and Merkel participated in the only televised leader's debate last Sunday. With little to separate the two parties' policies, the 20 million Germans who tuned in were at least hoping to see the two trade tirades. Instead, the debate lived down to its expectations that there is indeed little to separate the two parties, and Schulz lacks the charisma to effectively challenge the chancellor or to lead Germany himself.

Should the Social Democrats not enter the grand coalition, Merkel would look to the Greens for support, and it is on the environment that she is politically vulnerable.

For the past three years, the German auto industry has been mired in a diesel emission standards scandal. Using software and other trickery, engineers overrode environmental test results, making it appear as if models with diesel engines were far greener than they actually were. The result is that German automobile manufacturers have faced billions of euros in fines from regulators across Europe and North America, senior executives have been sacked, and confidence in the auto sector has been shaken.

Putting it in perspective, the sector accounts for one job in seven in the German economy, sales in 2015 were worth €385 billion (Dh1.68 trillion) and represented

14 per cent of the nation's gross domestic product that year.

The Greens and their allies have control of many German city and towns, and almost 100 municipal councils are looking at a total ban of polluting diesel cars — causing an immediate knock-on for the auto sector and making owners of diesel cars left with virtually worthless metal boxes on wheels.

Merkel too faced a backlash over her decision two summers ago to open Germany's borders and accept a million refugees from Syria. In the televised debate, the chancellor said that she did not regret the decision then and would do it again if necessary.

The far-right Alternative for Germany party, AfD, has made inroads in smaller cities and towns, and has used Islamophobia to generate support.

German history shows the very real threat of far-right parties, and its constitution includes a provision that a party must win 5 per cent of the vote nationally before it can enter the Bundestag, or lower chamber in the bicameral federal parliament. The provision is meant to deter extremists from gaining a foothold in parliament, but there is every indication now the AfD will indeed meet that threshold in the first-past-the-post election system. A series of scandals over neo-Nazi sentiment, however, has dampened initial enthusiasm and led to divisions in its ranks and the loss of some more moderate elements who were attracted to its nationalist ideals rather than its purely Islamophobic leanings.

While Merkel will be the winner in two weeks, the loser of her return to power will be Turkey and its long-held aspirations to join the European Union (EU). Ankara and Berlin are now locked in a diplomatic spat over the arrest and detention of Germans with dual Turkish citizenry as a result of the events leading up to and after the attempted coup d'état of the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the summer of 2016.

Simply put, the war of words is nasty, and there's little likelihood of warmed relations any time soon. Berlin's Foreign Ministry went so far on Tuesday as to issue a travel advisory for its citizens not to visit Turkey.

During the televised debate, Merkel said that she would recommend to the other EU leaders meeting in October that it suspend any talks with Turkey over admission to the EU.

Should that be news to Erdogan? Hardly. The Turkish application has been gathering dust in Brussels since it was first filed on April 14, 1987. In the three decades since, it has been shuffled and filed, moved from desk to desk, and shuffled and filed once more.

Geographically, Turkey may straddle both Europe and Asia. Politically, in Europe, there is little appetite for a Muslim-majority nation to join the union. Indeed, given the anti-Muslim sentiment in central European and Balkan-based nations that reared its ugly head during the refugee crisis of two summers ago, Merkel's proposal to suspend the Turkish application would have obvious backers in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. How ironic is it then that these are the very nations that the EU itself is considering taking action over for their refusal to implement agreed refugee quotas?

The worst of the refugee crisis was stemmed by an agreement between the EU and Ankara. That allowed for payments from Brussels to fund refugee camps in Turkey. In return, Turkey was to have visa-free access to Europe — and its application to join the EU was to be fast-tracked. Yeah, it's been fast-tracked all right — to the nearest Brussels litter bin.

Don't be surprised then if Merkel does indeed have to live up to her words that she would take in refugees all over again. With her intent now on scuttling the Ankara application to join the EU, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the deal that stemmed the refugee flow into Europe might too be put in the nearest litter bin. In little more than two weeks, Germans will re-elect Angela Merkel as Chancellor, giving her a fourth consecutive term and allowing her to rule until 2021 — if not longer. The only thing to be determined in the September 24 vote is who will partner her Christian Democrats Union (CDU) in governing.

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