The end of Germany's two-party system is on the horizon

This weekend's regional election in Germany will provide further proof of a fragmenting political landscape, writes **Slawomir Sierakowski.**

The German Social Democrats' (SPD) existential crisis can no longer be treated as a typical party crisis. The party captured a mere 9.7% of the vote in regional elections in Bavaria this month, and it is trailing the populist Alternative fur Deutschland (AfD) and the Greens in national opinion polls.

With another important regional election next week in Hesse, polls indicate that the SPD will lose still more support, though not as dramatically as in Bavaria.

The SPD and the Christian Democratic Union/ Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) have stood as the twin pillars of German politics since the end of World War II. However, with the SPD declining, Germany is moving from a de facto two-party system to a multiparty system in which no single party plays a dominant role.

The German post-war consensus is collapsing in key areas: history (attitudes toward WWII); geopolitics (attitudes toward Russia); the economy (attitudes toward the car industry); and ethics (attitudes toward refugees).

This is reflected in the fracturing of the political scene.

German voters have rejected the longstanding CDU/ CSU-SPD "grand coalition". Whereas smaller parties once functioned as mere subsidiaries of either the SPD or the CDU/ CSU, the bit players are now eclipsing the former stars.

Moreover, what was once "Red Munich" has now turned Green. Whereas cities had long been SPD strongholds, they are switching to the Greens and other smaller parties. Making matters worse for the SPD, the demographic profile of its core electorate amounts to a death sentence. Only 8% of SPD voters are under the age of 30, and 54% are over 60. By contrast, just 24% of Greens are over 60. And Die Linke, meanwhile, has become increasingly attractive to younger new leftists and ageing post-communists from the former East Germany.

Just as a two-party system ensures stability and predictability, so might its collapse contribute to radical social change. By definition, the fall of the establishment implies the rise of the anti-establishment, often in the form of populism.

Since 2005, the SPD has participated as the minority partner in three grand-coalition governments. As a result, it has come to be associated with the status quo, even though it hasn't been able to claim direct credit for the previous governments' successes.

Something similar happened in Austria, where the Social Democratic Party ruled either alone or in conjunction with the Austrian People's Party between 1971 and 1999 (except for 1983-1986). Such long periods of grand-coalition rule allowed for the right-wing populist Freedom Party of Austria to present itself as an agent for change.

When a grand coalition is threatened, its members tend to panic. Those who toe the party line lose support, as German chancellor Angela Merkel has. Others thus attempt to appropriate populist language, as CSU leader Horst Seehofer has done in recent months, while still others will try to associate themselves with new political platforms.

Hence, Alexander Dobrindt of the CSU has promised a "conservative revolution," while Martin Schulz, the erstwhile leader of the SPD, has promoted EU federation.

At any rate, when the constituent parts of a coalition start moving in different directions, things quickly fall apart. Still, it is worth noting that while the SPD and the CDU are currently losing support, their ideas remain popular.

Their problem is not that they are devoid of ideas, but that they lack political credibility.

This credibility deficit has created a vacuum for other parties to fill. Thus, the Greens have made gains in Bavaria by supporting an open-door refugee policy that actually originated with the CDU/SPD.

Likewise, the AfD has wrested the anti-refugee mantle away from the CSU and Seehofer, who went so far as to try to undermine Merkel's government from

within while serving as Minister of the Interior. The common thread connecting all of the parties that performed well in the Bavarian election is that they ran politicians who are at least consistent in their views.

Unfortunately for Germany, multiparty systems are generally unstable and less predictable, which explains why every other European country, Latvia is a current example, constantly struggles to establish a governing coalition.

Under such conditions, it is not uncommon for bizarre arrangements to arise, including coalitions between the far left and the far right, as we have seen in Greece, Italy, and Slovakia.

Germany's best hope now is that its newly emerging multiparty system will impede the progress of the AfD, by nullifying its anti-establishment appeal. The AfD will take its place on the radical right as one party among many.

Its support will remain in the 10% to 20% range, but it will not go any further than that. In fact, this has already happened in Bavaria, where the AfD garnered 10.2% of the vote this month, down from the 12.4% that it received in last year's federal election.

Another potential silver lining to a multiparty system is that it might lead to more political engagement. In the case of Bavaria, voter participation rose to 72.4% this election cycle, up from 63.6% five years ago.

Looking ahead, Germany may now end up with rotating coalition governments comprising multiple parties.

For example, one could imagine an arrangement between the CDU/CSU, the Free Democrats, and the Greens – the so-called Jamaica coalition.

However, this scenario would likely produce political paralysis, because politicians from competing parties within the coalition would constantly undercut one another other while pandering to the popular will. Moreover, the chancellorship will always be weaker in a patchwork government.

Most likely, the fall of the CDU/CSU-SPD duopoly will undermine German hegemony in Europe, even if no other country can replace Germany in that role. At the same time, the weakening of the SPD will diminish the socialist faction in the European Parliament, where a similar eclipse of two-party rule could be in the

offing.

Yet without the twin pillars of the European People's Party and the Party of European Socialists, the parliament will be incapable of making even insignificant decisions.

As Germany and the SPD go, so goes Europe.

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