

German election campaign series: CDU/CSU – “For a Germany in which we live well and enjoy living”



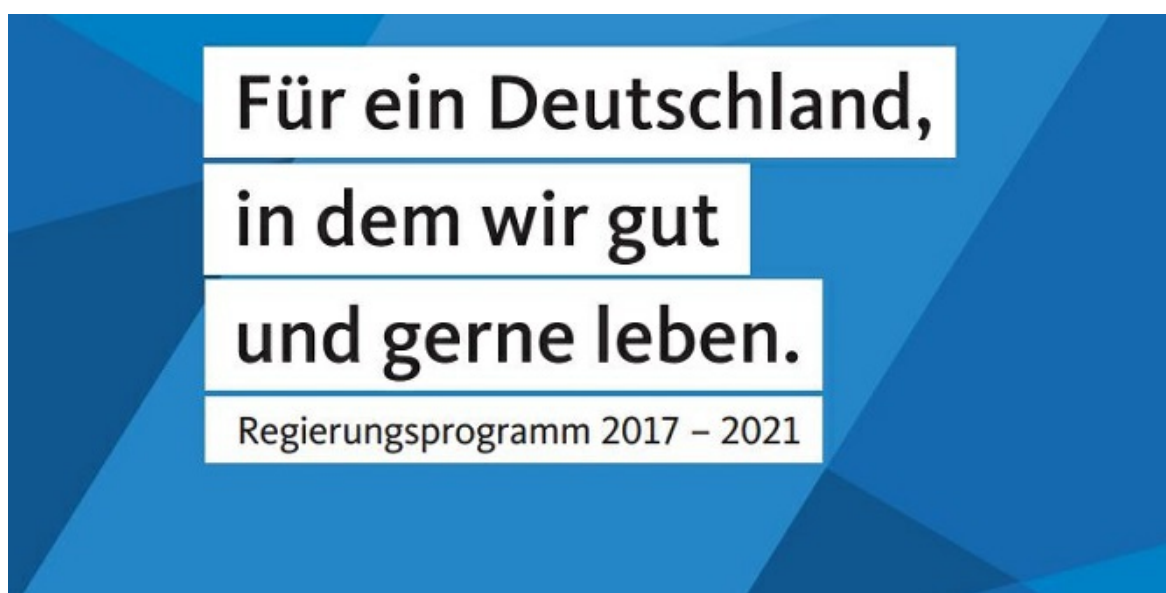
German voters will go to the polls on 24 September for federal elections. But what do the country's parties want? What are the possible coalitions? And who has the best campaign strategy to sell their proposals to the electorate? In the first of a series of articles analysing each of the main parties' campaign pledges, [Julian Göppfarth](#) assesses the programme of Angela Merkel's CDU/CSU.

After four tumultuous years, the CDU/CSU embodies the principle of getting “back to normal” after the Eurozone and migration crises as well as months of terror and international instability. The two-party coalition of the Christian Democratic Union and the Bavaria based Christian Social Union were the last to reveal their [programme](#) ahead of the 2017 elections. Instead of putting forward their proposals at a party conference, like most other parties did, the programme was presented by Angela Merkel and her former major critic, CSU leader Horst Seehofer, during a somewhat sombre press conference.

The core aim of the programme is to obtain full employment by 2025. This has been presented as a realistic goal as Germany's present economic situation is as good as it has ever been: decreasing unemployment, rising salaries and pensions, well-functioning and well-financed welfare institutions, as well as a high degree of inner security. The programme portrays these achievements as the success of the past three Merkel-led governments, without referring to the Agenda 2010 reforms introduced by her social democratic predecessor Gerhard Schröder or its long-term coalition partner, the social democrat SPD. Some measures such as the minimum wage, strongly opposed in the past by the CDU/CSU and introduced under the pressure of its coalition partner, the SPD, are now portrayed as a self-evident part of the parties' main policies.

What future? Security, taxation and family

As for the future, the party puts a strong emphasis on supply side policies opposing the SPD's focus on demand side measure and social justice. This core difference is symbolised by the CDU/CSU's slogan “social is what creates jobs”, which serves as the guideline for other core points in the programme such as economic success, protection of the environment, security, free trade, a social market economy, and the strengthening of the *Mittelstand* (medium-sized companies) and families. By following these principles, the party promises a Germany that is an “anchor of stability in the world” and that is based on Christian-social, liberal and conservative values.



The CDU/CSU programme, titled: “For a Germany in which we live well and enjoy living.”

In light of increasing international instability, recurrent terrorism and the recent G20 riots, inner security has appeared as one of the core issues during the election campaign. As a result, the CDU/CSU have attempted to portray themselves as *the* parties of inner security. The programme promises to increase police staff by 15,000 and recalls Merkel’s now famous sentence that Europe has to take its fate into its own hands. Therefore, the programme aims to increase the defence budget to 2 percent of the country’s GDP.

Besides inner security, the programme’s focus lies on taxation issues. Here the CDU/CSU promise to ease the tax burden on the Mittelstand by expanding the income threshold for the top tax rate from 54,000 to 60,000 euros. Moreover, the programme pledges the abolition of the so-called solidarity tax – a tax introduced after the German reunification to finance the rebuilding of the new East German states. Another core focus is the German family. The programme calls, for example, for a legal right to all-day-care for children under 10 years, an increase of child allowances, and a reduction of taxes for those who buy their first home.

Surprisingly, asylum and immigration policies only play a marginal role in the programme and are subsumed in a few paragraphs under the point inner security. There is no real differentiation between asylum seekers and migrants and the focus lies on a reduction of migration and a more effective deportation of those asylum seekers whose application has been rejected. One bullet point calls for the introduction of a coherent immigration law for skilled workers, however without going into details. The programme tries to avoid any longer discussion of the topic, arguably to veil the divergence between the CDU and CSU on migration and asylum policy, and also to prevent it from becoming a major campaigning topic (something that would only benefit the far right AfD).

In the past, the issue of immigration and asylum led to strong tensions between the CDU and CSU with Seehofer insisting on an *Obergrenze*, a maximum limit for the number of refugees accepted in Germany. Merkel refused to concede and attempted to appease right wing populist claims by the CSU and AfD through the publication of a widely discussed paper on German *Leitkultur*, including such populist slogans as “We are not Burka”. The dominance of German national colours on the official campaign posters can be interpreted as another symbolic concession to right wing populist pressure both from the CSU and the AfD. In the press conference, both Merkel and Seehofer avoided any reference to past divisions and presented themselves as being as united as ever. The controversial CSU claims are mainly absent from the programme and will be articulated through an extra election programme the CSU will present for Bavaria only.

Another issue that is not touched on in the programme, and that could lead to tensions among both parties, is the issue of same-sex marriage. While both parties had allegedly agreed on having an open vote on the issue, it was not supposed to happen before the end of the current term, but rather after the elections. Merkel’s recent swift change from fundamental opposition, to a parliamentary vote on the matter, which she allowed to happen in the last week of parliamentary activity, was grudgingly accepted by many social conservatives in the party in order to preserve party unity. However, this tolerance was often accompanied by the statement that the last word has to be spoken by the constitutional court, a sign that the peace is only provisional and that dividing lines are likely to reappear in the future.

Europe and Brexit

The programme calls for a stronger Europe and directly refers to pro-European movements (the “pulse of Europe”) as well as (more implicitly) Macron’s pro-European victory as a chance to reform Europe to meet future challenges. In the programme, Europe primarily figures as a guarantor of stability and security, complemented by but also more independent from NATO – hence the call for an increase of the German defence budget.

In terms of economic policies, the programme underlines Germany’s readiness to show solidarity, especially with those Eurozone countries suffering high rates of youth unemployment. However, it rejects the introduction of a common Eurozone debt and calls instead for a deepening of integration in the Eurozone in a joint effort with France by establishing a common monetary fund. In a paragraph solely on Brexit, the CDU/CSU emphasise that strong economic and political ties will remain important in the future and that negative consequences for citizens and the economy should be kept within a limit. At the same time, however, it makes clear that “Whoever decides to leave the EU, will not be able to continue to benefit from all the privileges of the community”.

A whole subchapter is dedicated to the importance of the Franco-German relationship for Europe. The programme calls for a revival of the “Franco-German engine for Europe” and, more specifically, for the harmonisation of corporation tax between both countries as well as more collaboration in the field of artificial intelligence. The goal here is to develop the area of artificial intelligence technology as a “great European project” in the tradition of Airbus and Ariane.

A lack of substance?

Even to many conservative commentators it seems clear that the CDU/CSU’s strategy is to rely on what has been achieved so far. It falls short of being an ambitious programme for the future, and is rather a call for the continuation of a successful status quo while integrating a plethora of points ranging from far right symbolism (the emphasis on national identity) to centre-left labour market policies that are branded as their own.

The conservative-liberal newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* even sees the programme as being [too close to the SPD’s positions](#), arguing that it would not really touch the (in their eyes) rigid labour laws that were introduced under the pressure of the SPD in the grand coalition. However, most of the points proposed are so consensus-oriented that they are unlikely to provoke any major public debate. Most propositions remain vague, and only few embody concrete visions for the future. Merkel’s message is the same as in previous elections: “You know me”. Why risk something new if Germany’s economy is roaring and the country’s standing in Europe and the world is stronger than ever before?

The choice of the programme title, which is at the same time the core campaign slogan, confirms the feeling that ‘everything is alright’ and ‘nothing really has to change’ are the CDU/CSU’s guiding principles. “For a Germany in which we live well and enjoy living” expresses exactly this: we like Germany the way it is now and the future should be more of the same. Even if its banality suggests otherwise, the slogan is the product of the renowned and highly successful PR-agency Jung von Matt, who have already developed successful campaigns for major German companies. It is an agency that seems to make sure to support “products” that already have a strong basis for success. And [according](#) to its founder Jean-Remy von Matt, the agency has never had a “more superior product than Merkel” to sell.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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