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Schroeder scores points at home by spurning Italy

By David Crossland

BERLIN, July 10 (Reuters) - German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder may not be popular with his stepdaughter Clara for scrapping his Italian holiday but is scoring points with voters offended by an Italian junior minister's insults.

His decision to spend his holiday at home after a minister described Germans as "hyper-nationalistic blondes" is getting a thumbs up from ordinary people and shows the same feeling for public opinion that narrowly won him re-election last year.

A survey by the Emnid polling institute showed 66 percent of Germans backed Schroeder's decision to stay at home after Italian junior minister Stefano Stefani said Germans needed intelligence tests and "loudly invaded" Italian beaches.

Schroeder's move is a reminder of how he tapped public opposition to the looming Iraq war to score a come-from-behind victory in last September's election, political analysts said.

"This is the old Schroeder who follows his instincts, he thought 'hang on, this will give me good media coverage for three days'", said Karl-Heinz Nassmacher, political scientist at Oldenburg University.

Schroeder's job approval ratings have been gradually picking up of late from a slump caused by the sluggish economy and turmoil in his government. His Social Democrats still trail the conservatives by around 15 points, but the gap is closing.

Last month, he managed to silence rebels within his Social Democrats opposed to major economic reforms. In addition, the opposition conservatives as well as powerful trade union opponents have been weakened by internal power struggles.

POPULIST TOUCH

Cancelling his trip to Italy and spending his holiday in his northern home town of Hanover was a deft move targeted mainly at a domestic audience, and followed a campaign by top-selling newspaper Bild urging him to spurn Italy, analysts said.

"This is helping Schroeder get out of a little performance crisis," said Richard Schütze, who heads Ipse Communication, an agency which gives managers and politicians media tips.

"He had become boring, hadn't cracked any jokes, everything had seemed laboured, he'd become like an accountant and had even been fluffing lines," said Schütze of the northerner, whose rhetorical skills usually enable him to outshine opponents.

"He has again proven his skill to ride a wave with his feeling for populism. He's risked very little and won a lot -- positioned himself and his family in the media, and shielded the population from blanket prejudice without causing a diplomatic incident."

Stefani, responsible for tourism, told a right-wing newspaper last week that Germans had been "indoctrinated from the beginning to feel top of the class whatever the situation".

The comments compounded a diplomatic row sparked when Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi compared a German European Parliament deputy to a Nazi concentration camp guard.

Beate Zeitler from Berlin, age 33, agreed with Schroeder's decision. "As a signal, I think it is correct, or at least understandable. But I would go there myself."

Hanover, razed by World War Two bombing, has a limited range of holiday attractions for Schroeder, his fourth wife Doris and her daughter -- some medieval houses, royal garden and a zoo.

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