

Trailing Schroeder pins hopes on Merkel TV clash

By Noah Barkin

BERLIN, Sept 2 (Reuters) –

Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder gets a last chance to turn around his troubled election campaign on Sunday when he confronts his conservative rival Angela Merkel in a U.S.-style TV debate that will lure viewers across Germany.

Three years ago, Schroeder's nimble performance in the second of two debates against his then challenger Edmund Stoiber helped him vault from behind to a dramatic election victory.

But this time around, pollsters say Schroeder may struggle to gain much from the 90-minute showdown even if he is seen as a far more charismatic speaker than Merkel, leader of the Christian Democrats (CDU).

"Schroeder is in a much more difficult situation than in 2002," said Klaus-Peter Schoeppner of pollsters TNS Emnid.

"The population is deeply worried about domestic issues like unemployment, and in this context media savvy and rhetorical polish are much less important."

With just over two weeks to go until the Sept. 18 election that Schroeder himself brought forward by a year, Merkel's party holds a comfortable 11-13 point lead in opinion polls.

To narrow that gap, the Social Democrats (SPD) will need a tour de force performance from Schroeder, 61, who showed off his rhetorical skills in a rousing speech to the party this week, earning a 12-minute standing ovation.

Merkel, a 51-year-old from the former communist East who is often mocked in the press for her boxy outfits and monotone delivery, would seem easy prey for a political veteran like Schroeder, Germany's most telegenic post-war leader.

She has made blunders on the campaign trail -- mixing up net and gross wages for example -- and stumbled repeatedly in a high-profile speech to parliament on July 1.

Her election team privately admits to nervousness about Sunday's showdown -- the only head-to-head between the candidates after Merkel rejected Schroeder's request for two debates. That did not stop Schroeder from injecting himself into a round-table TV discussion on Sept. 12 in which Merkel and other top politicians will take part.

LOW EXPECTATIONS

In the end, however, the low expectations could help Merkel, as they did U.S. presidential contender George W. Bush in 2000 when he held his own in clashes with a more experienced Al Gore.

"I think Merkel can turn her weakness into a strength," said Richard Schuetze of IPSE Communication, a consultant for politicians and executives. "She's often criticised for being too dry and analytical, but right now that may be what people want. They may prefer serious to slick and flowery."

In debating a woman rather than the combative Bavarian Stoiber, Schuetze said Schroeder would also have to be careful not to come across as patronising or aggressive.

The debate kicks off at 8.30 p.m. (1830 GMT) on Sunday night and is expected to be watched by up to 20 million households, which would make it one of the most watched shows of the decade, eclipsed only by the World Cup final between Germany and Brazil in 2002.

In a bizarre twist, there will be twice as many moderators as debaters. Germany's four leading public and private channels have all insisted on sending presenters -- an arrangement some fear will lead to jousting among the questioners themselves.

Previous German leaders like Helmut Kohl shunned debates for fear they would raise the profile of their challengers.

But Schroeder, who has a knack for selling himself, seems tailor-made for the showy, personality-focused format that has been a mainstay of American politics for nearly half a century.

His spokesman said last week Schroeder saw no need to employ a coach to prepare for Sunday's clash. Merkel, by contrast, is undergoing intensive training with a former TV anchor, according to German media reports.

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