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LETTER FROM BERLIN

Why Angela Merkel Will Win in September

By David Crossland

It would take a Barack Obama to unseat Angela Merkel in the September election. Her rival Frank-Walter Steinmeier is anything but. The dour bureaucrat lacks the campaign skills needed to offset waning confidence in his Social Democrats.

They say it will take a miracle. Germany's center-left Social Democrats are faced with a challenge that will likely prove insurmountable. Conservative Chancellor Angela Merkel, analysts and commentators agree, is destined to win a second term in Germany's general election on Sept. 27.



REUTERS

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier would like to become chancellor. Analysts say it's unlikely.

The **SPD failed miserably** in Sunday's European parliamentary election, managing just 20.8 percent in Germany. The party is languishing in opinion polls and with just three and a half months left until the general election, it faces an even steeper climb than in 2005. Back then, the SPD almost pulled it off, with then Chancellor Gerhard Schröder -- the SPD's tub-thumping, baby-kissing, football-kicking, soundbite-coining campaign warhorse -- losing to Merkel by the narrowest of margins.

This time around, though, there is no Schröder in sight. There is just Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Germany's foreign minister and the SPD's candidate for chancellor. The 53 year old has worked hard to shake off his image as a passionless bureaucrat and fronted his party's European campaign in what was seen as a trial run for the general election.

Instead, the SPD's worst result ever in a nation-wide vote -- worse even than the last European election in 2004 when the SPD was universally unpopular for imposing the toughest welfare cuts since World War II -- have highlighted Steinmeier's shortcomings and shown the difficulties his center-left Social Democrats face in mobilizing voters, say analysts.

The quiet diplomat made matters worse with a woefully weak performance in a Sunday night television interview in which he responded irritably to questions and failed to mask an evident air of resignation. "We're going to roll up our sleeves and really go for it," Steinmeier said after Sunday's election drubbing. But the words seemed unlikely to inspire confidence.

"Sleeping Tortoise"

Almost instantly, Steinmeier has become the new favorite chew toy of the German press. A commentator in the German tabloid *Bild* called him a "sleeping tortoise" on Tuesday. The broadsheets have been more polite, but equally scathing. "Steinmeier is the best candidate the SPD has at the moment. But that's more a criticism of the stock of available people than praise of the foreign minister," wrote the *Financial Times Deutschland*.

Still, despite Steinmeier's weaknesses, the SPD has little choice but to stick with him at this point. "The SPD will stay with Steinmeier as its candidate because it can't risk a new leadership debate so close to the general election," Professor Jürgen Falter, a political scientist at Mainz University, told SPIEGEL ONLINE. "It would be political suicide."

Falter said the low turnout in the European vote -- just 43.3 percent, around half the turnout seen in general elections -- had hurt the SPD more than other parties, whose voters tended to be older and better-educated and thus more likely to vote.

That means the party is likely to fare better in September. But how much better? "I still think that the most likely outcome of the general election is a repeat of the current conservative-SPD coalition under Merkel," said Falter.

The European vote wasn't really Steinmeier's fault, analysts say. The problem is that unlike Schröder, Steinmeier, doesn't have the rhetorical clout and political savvy to override a chronic decline in SPD support.

The carpenter's son from northern Germany trained as a lawyer and has been a civil servant since 1991. He served as Schröder's chief of staff and is widely credited as being an efficient political manager. But he has never before campaigned for office.

"Steinmeier isn't Schröder," Manfred Güllner, director of the Forsa polling institute, told SPIEGEL ONLINE. "He doesn't have the campaigning experience and while he's been popular as foreign minister, that doesn't translate into support for him as chancellor candidate."

Far Behind Merkel

In a direct comparison between Merkel and Steinmeier, the chancellor regularly scores over 50 percent while Steinmeier languishes below 25 percent according to Forsa polls, said Güllner.

Beyond Steinmeier's drabness, however, is the SPD's ongoing struggle to attract support. The party is still paying the price for the deeply unpopular "Agenda 2010" welfare cuts it launched six years ago, which Steinmeier helped to implement under Schröder. The reform helped revive the economy and made the welfare system less vulnerable to the financial crisis, but it cost the SPD the 2005 election by driving away its core working class supporters.

Analysts say it's unfair that voters aren't giving the SPD credit for the reform and for the role the party has played in government as junior partner to Merkel's conservatives since 2005. Steinmeier has done a creditable job at the foreign ministry, and SPD Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück has had a strong hand in steering Germany through the financial crisis.

"People simply aren't honoring the SPD's contribution to government, and in a financial crisis, people tend to stick to the prejudice that the conservatives are better at managing the economy," said Bernhard Wessels, political analyst at Berlin's Free University.

Given the odds, it would take an uncommon political talent to turn the tide in the SPD's favor. "Public support for the Social Democrats has been waning since 1998 but Schröder managed to compensate for that decline by fighting three strong general election campaigns that were largely focused on himself," said Forsa's Güllner.

It's telling that the only memorable soundbite from the SPD in the run-up to the European election came from Schröder. He described Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, the increasingly popular conservative economy minister, who has opposed state bailouts of ailing companies, as the "Baron from Bavaria."

Targeting Guttenberg's aristocratic and Bavarian roots was the kind of rhetorical swipe Steinmeier

urgently needs to come up with if he wants to claw back territory from the conservatives, who were more than 17 points ahead of the SPD in Sunday's poll.

"A Little Old and Tired and Spent"

But Richard Schütze, a media and PR coach for politicians and business people, says Steinmeier simply isn't a natural campaigner.

"He seems a little old and tired and spent," Schütze, director of a Berlin-based consulting firm, told SPIEGEL ONLINE. "He's looks more like Merkel's uncle than her rival. He's copied Schröder's gestures and tone of voice, and he's managed to make his sentences shorter, more punchy and focused, but he can't seem to fix his facial expression -- the corners his mouth tend to droop. You'd have to tickle him a long time to make him smile."

Schütze continued: "He doesn't exude leadership, he exudes skilful administration. There's no passion, he can't convey a vision, a dream of tomorrow with which to inspire the crowds. Coaching him at this stage wouldn't help because he simply doesn't have an extrovert personality."

Still, a lot of those same things have been said about Merkel, particularly during her 2005 run against the gregarious Schröder. Indeed, her lack of campaigning skill almost lost her the election when she bored crowds in countless market squares with dull speeches and made a near-fatal tactical error in choosing tax expert Paul Kirchhof as her prospective finance minister, an academic whose radical flat-tax proposals provided an open flank for Schröder.

"Merkel has attained certain mystical qualities during her chancellorship," said Schütze. "She's as matter-of-fact and unemotional as Steinmeier but she has learned how to demonstrate her power with a knowing smile and an ominous silence."

Besides, she's going into the election with the aura of power gained in four years in which she hasn't put a foot wrong, largely by being as non-committal as possible and adopting a presidential, hands-off approach, say analysts.

And this time around, it looks as though that might be enough. "Steinmeier definitely won't be chancellor," said Wessels. "The SPD may well end up going back into opposition and that may finally give it a chance to consolidate and reinvent itself."

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