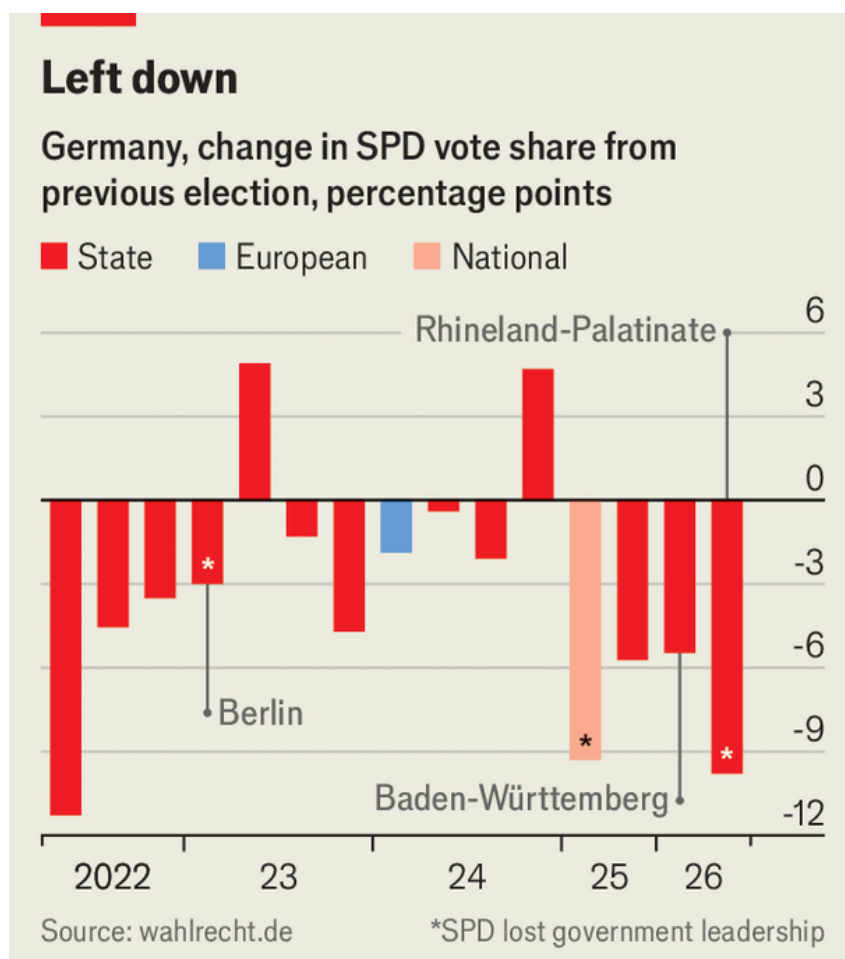


Germany's Social Democrats gaze into the abyss

THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS (spd) have helped rule Germany for all but four of the past 28 years. Yet rarely has the party known such gloom. On March 22nd it was soundly defeated by the centre-right Christian Democrats (cdu) in an election in Rhineland-Palatinate, long an spd stronghold. This followed a drubbing in Baden-Württemberg, where the spd barely crossed the 5% threshold to enter parliament. In recent years the spd, junior partner to Friedrich Merz's cdu in Germany's coalition government, has lost ground in almost every state and national election (see chart). Many in the spd openly admit they no longer know what their centre-left party stands for.



Yet Mr Merz's troops did not crow over their victory, because an embittered spd may hinder their plan to revive the economy. After his much-heralded "autumn of reforms" flopped last year, the chancellor wants to push a series of changes to tax, health insurance and pensions before the Bundestag adjourns for summer. Whether he gets his way depends largely on whether his coalition partner can swallow tricky compromises.

The party's centrists have long sought to recapture the energy of the 2000s, when an spd-led government pushed through far-reaching labour and welfare reforms. Some think the SPD has since lost its way. "For too long we gave the impression of caring more about those who don't work than those who do," says Dirk Wiese, an spd mp, adding that this perception is false. But some younger mps want to focus on redistribution and preserving the welfare state. And the coalition's slim majority creates opportunities for spoilers.

The crucial figure is Lars Klingbeil, the vice-chancellor and spd co-leader. On March 25th he gave an important speech aimed mainly at his own party, urging reforms to labour, tax and pension rules to increase working hours, and calling for restraint on spending.

It will have landed well with Mr Merz. The question is whether Mr Klingbeil, who is mistrusted by his left-wing comrades, can bring his own party with him. Ursula Münch at the Tutzing Academy for Political Education says the spd's position is so dire that Mr Klingbeil may feel he has nothing to lose by taking on his internal foes. If so, the spd's biggest fights may lie ahead.