

## **German election debate verdict: Schulz didn't beat Merkel, but he pushed her into some surprise statements**

*di Julian Göppfarth*

The social democrats had waited for this moment for many weeks. After experiencing a surprising rise in the polls to more than 30 per cent support following his nomination as SPD candidate for Chancellor earlier this year, Martin Schulz has been desperately fighting his party's decline in the polling. Three state election losses prompted the party to react with a fully-fledged programme covering several key issues, while on an almost daily basis, Schulz has tried to attack Merkel and to propose new measures on taxation, immigration, integration, education and the welfare state.

But at no point has Schulz managed to really threaten Merkel and some polls put the SPD as low as 22 per cent – around the same level as they were at before Schulz's nomination. Schulz has blamed this on Merkel's unwillingness to debate topics crucial for the future of Germany and Europe. As a consequence, expectations were high for the first and only direct confrontation between Merkel and Schulz in the campaign. For many of his supporters, it was Schulz's last chance to turn the tide.

### Turkey, pensions and coalition options

Just like in the campaign, Schulz tried to set topics and to present himself as a clear alternative in the debate. The problem is that his SPD has been part of the government for 15 out of the past 19 years. It is difficult for him to present himself as a real alternative and Merkel did everything to emphasise the SPD's role in recent government decisions. Nevertheless, the more aggressive posture adopted by Schulz led to some interesting exchanges, some of which led to surprising statements on both sides.

The first major topic was the migration crisis. Merkel's decision not to close Germany's borders has brought her some harsh criticism and helped allow the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) to mount an unexpected comeback. Accordingly, Merkel has sought to avoid the topic during her campaigning. In the TV debate, she refused to take responsibility for the rise of right wing extremism and insisted that her decision was the right one to take to prevent a humanitarian crisis. Schulz agreed, but criticised Merkel for not acting in accordance with Germany's European partners and for insufficient resources being provided to those local actors in charge of handling the situation. While these may be fair points, the positions

expressed here were simply too close to make Schulz appear as a true alternative – a problem that he faced for most of the rest of the debate.

Yet the debate included two surprise moments on the topics of Turkey and pensions. When asked what to do about Turkey imprisoning German citizens, Schulz bluntly called for an end to the EU Turkey agreement and Turkey's EU accession negotiations. Merkel's surprise at these statements was evident: at no point until now had the SPD hinted that it would change its position on Turkey's EU accession. Her first reaction was to portray the position put forward by Schulz as unrealistic, undiplomatic, and one that would endanger rather than help the imprisoned Germans. A few moments later, under pressure from Schulz and the journalists present, Merkel said that she would end the accession talks as well. Both Schulz and Merkel's statements were unexpected and would imply a decisive change in Germany's Turkey policy.

In the following debate on European border protection as well as the North Korea crisis, Schulz tried desperately to highlight his distance from Merkel. Again, no substantial disagreements were visible. But a second surprise moment arrived when the topic of social justice was raised – the core topic of the SPD. When asked about the pension system, Schulz criticised Merkel for wanting to raise the retirement age to 70 – a plan supported by parts of the CDU and prominent members of the government such as finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble. Merkel reacted by rejecting the characterisation of her position and stating that she would not be raising the retirement age to 70 – a position that has never been clear until now and that Merkel will have to sell to sections of her party.

One further interesting detail is that when asked about possible coalitions after the election, Merkel excluded only the far left (Die Linke) and far right (AfD). Schulz, on the other hand, did not exclude any party. Both answers could be interpreted as a general openness to form yet another CDU-SPD grand coalition and thus another change in the SPD's positioning. Only recently has SPD foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel clearly spoken out against a new grand coalition.

In his final statement, Schulz appeared nervous, presenting a statement clearly learned by heart. He sought to portray himself as the more visionary politician: a Chancellor attempting to shape the future instead of administering it, and one that would look for European answers before turning to petty national interests. Merkel, on the other hand, calmly referred to her years of experience and her unbroken curiosity when it comes to solving problems. The underlying message was one of continuity and stability in times of change and crisis. Regarding the challenges of the future, she simply stated that “together we can make it”, a sentence with some parallels to her controversial “Wir schaffen dass” regarding the migration crisis two years ago.

### First polls and reactions

Shortly after the debate, the ARD published some initial polling. The results indicated Schulz was seen as being more aggressive and closer to citizens. However, when asked about each candidate's general performance, a majority saw Merkel as being more credible and competent, including undecided voters. Many journalists also expressed disappointment in their initial takes on the discussion, claiming the debate lacked real controversy and criticising Schulz for not having attacked Merkel more. While the CDU celebrated Merkel's performance, the SPD criticised the choice of topics, arguing they had not been sufficiently grounded in social issues. Arguably the best words to sum up the debate came from former defence minister, Theodor zu Guttenberg. Schulz was not bad, he said, but in the end he "bounced off Merkel's padded walls of experience".