

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Vote losses put pressure on Kohl

The Free Democrats and the "Moscow Faction" of the Christian Democrats are demanding a reunification deal.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl's Christian Democrats (CDU) suffered heavy vote losses in two state elections on May 17. In Rhineland-Palatinate, losses for the CDU were 6.8% statewide, but 14% and more in the wine-growing regions along the Mosel River. Voter abstention was high—13-20% in many districts, and this not only in the countryside, where farmers and wine-growers stayed home, in protest against the economic policies of the government. Workers in the bigger cities, such as Ludwigshafen, Pirmasens, and Kaiserslautern, the centers of chemical production and shoe manufacturing, also boycotted. But the abstention did not make the difference; the shift of votes from the CDU to the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) did.

The vote was a catastrophe for the CDU, especially so in Rhineland-Palatinate, the main stationing ground for the U.S. armed forces in West Germany. The CDU will remain in the government here, but only in a coalition with the Free Democrats, who advocate the "zero-option" withdrawal of U.S. missiles from Europe.

The result of the elections in the city-state of Hamburg was similar. Here, the CDU lost a victory which was within reach, simply by giving votes to their would-be coalition partner, the FDP, enabling them to reenter the city council after nine years of absence. But the first thing the FDP did after election day was to announce its intention to form a coalition with the Social Democrats (SPD), instead.

In both states, the FDP, therefore, emerged as the main "swing factor,"

controlling the respective coalitions.

The events in Hamburg have a special meaning beyond that, because an SPD-FDP coalition there would be the first in the republic since the breakup of the government of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt in October 1982. To Chancellor Kohl and the CDU, the warning is clear: Follow the zero-option policy of your FDP coalition partner, Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher—or else!

This blackmail is not coming only from the FDP. There are also accomplices inside the CDU's "Moscow Faction." Posing as their spokesman, party manager Heiner Geissler blamed the election defeats of May 17 on "those who put into question the zero-option policy of the government." These critics, Geissler charged, had "discredited the public reputation of Chancellor Kohl," and thus scared the voters away. The abstention of farmers, wine-growers, and workers, motivated by Chancellor Kohl's economic recession policy, was reinterpreted by Geissler into an alleged "vote of the people against the missiles." The party should, he said, pay "more attention to this popular mood."

These remarks indicated that a duplicitous game was on. The shift of CDU votes to the FDP, ordered by circles around Geissler, aimed at convincing Chancellor Kohl to agree to U.S. disengagement from Germany.

This game became fully apparent on May 19, when the parliamentary group of the Christian Democrats met for their weekly session in Bonn. Still in disarray over the election defeats, the deputies were hit by a motion "to

introduce initiatives on the reunification of Germany into the general arms-control dialogue."

The motion advocated the removal of all nuclear weapons from the territory of the two Germanies, and their reunification, at the price of broad cooperation between the German and Soviet economies. In the view of Bernhard Friedmann, the author of the resolution, "a reunified German economy would be much more attractive to the Soviet Union, than the current economy of the G.D.R. [East Germany]."

This motion would not have received the support of the majority under "normal" circumstances, because Friedmann is known for his Moscow-leaning views. But this time, he had the backing of Alfred Dregger, the chairman of the parliamentary group, and he seized the opportunity provided by the CDU's election losses. His motion, which caught the parliamentary group off-guard, resulted in an official appeal to Chancellor Kohl to urge President Reagan to "introduce the reunification question in the ongoing Geneva arms-control talks."

Friedmann then contacted the offices of Genscher and Kohl, and was given promises of a personal meeting "soon." He also discussed the idea with President Richard von Weizsäcker, to have him bring the issue up during his July 6-11 visit to Moscow, which will include a meeting with Mikhail Gorbachov.

The trial balloon that the "Moscow Faction" has launched, however, may be somewhat overblown. Its advocates have exposed themselves to growing criticism from those who believe that the "zero option" means suicide for the West; a few good jabs, and the balloon will burst, as has happened with many such ventures before.