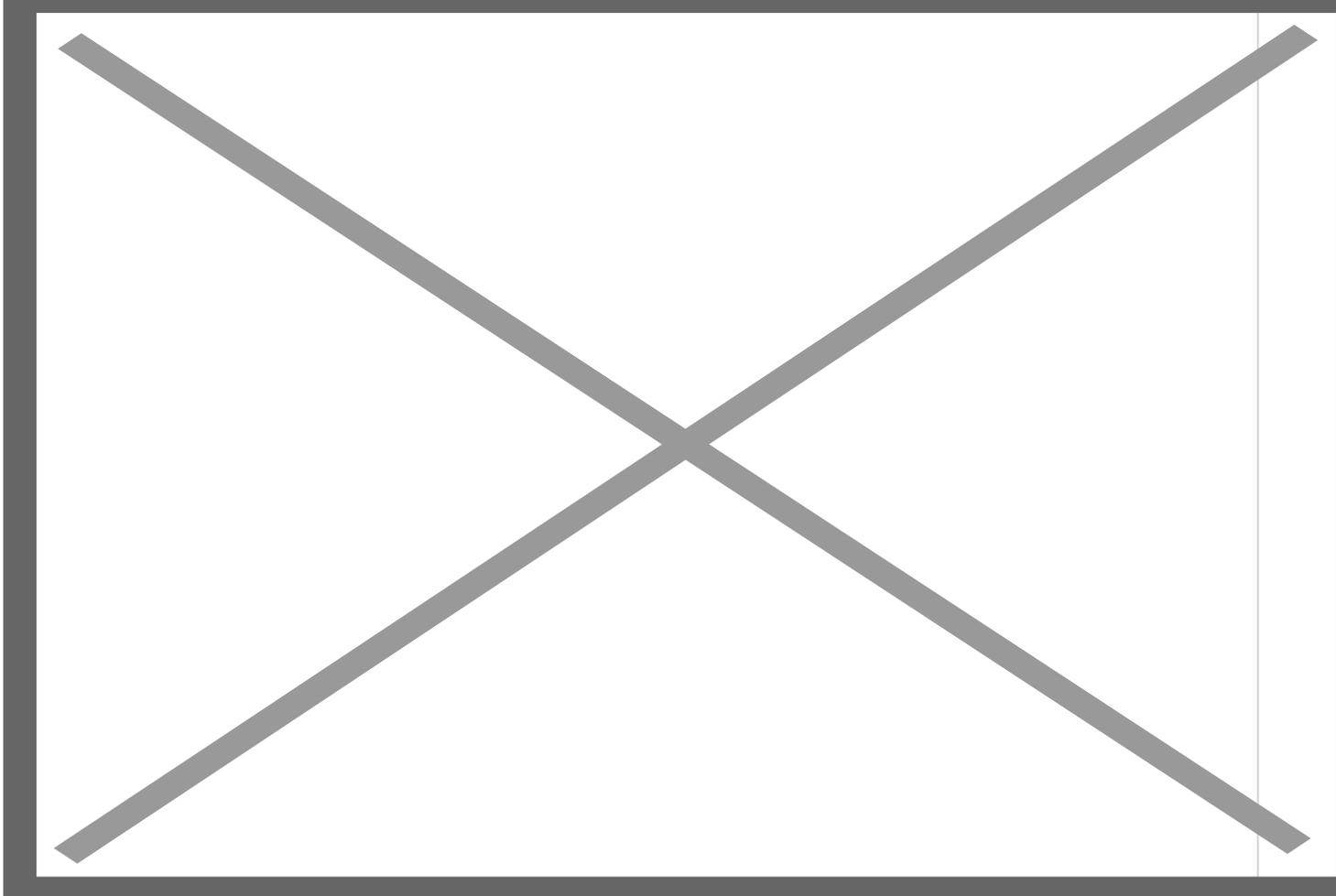


Germany's CDU ahead in election exit poll, strong support for far right

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Friedrich Merz from the opposition CDU is on track to be Germany's next chancellor. Leaders of Germany's conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) are gearing up to lead the country's next government [Odd Andersen/AFP]

Berlin, February 24 (RHC)-- Germany's opposition conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party has been projected to win the national election, putting leader Friedrich Merz on track to be the next chancellor, exit polls show.

On Sunday, the first exit polls said Merz's CDU/CSU alliance had won at least 28.5 percent of the votes, crushing the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) of the outgoing chancellor, Olaf Scholz, with SPD looking at around 16 percent.

Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) also roughly doubled its score to at least 19.5 percent and were in second place, the exit polls said.

Germany's election authority noted that 52 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots four hours before the closure of polling stations in Sunday's high-stakes snap election, which took place due to Chancellor Olaf Scholz's three-party coalition government collapsing last November.

"Tonight we will celebrate and from tomorrow we start working," Merz said in a first reaction to the exit polls in Berlin, surrounded by supporters. Merz – a longtime party rival of ex-Chancellor Angela Merkel – has vowed to crack down on irregular immigration and remedy Germany's economic policies.

Reporting from Berlin, Al Jazeera's Step Vaessen said that the CDU leader has already delivered a message to Germans, saying it was time for the country to have a "solid government" and show it is "present in Europe." She noted that "Merz is known to be much more conservative" than Merkel.

"He has a very tough stance against immigration, and he has been working together recently with the far-right AfD on anti-migration policies," Vaessen said, adding that he has been heavily criticised for working together with the far right."

But 69-year-old Merz has reiterated in the past that he is not aligned with the AfD's anti-migration rhetoric and also hopes to halt its rise, which has stunned many in a country still seeking to atone for its dark Nazi history.

For now, the AfD – basking in the vocal support of key allies of US President Donald Trump – is set to stay in opposition. All other parties have vowed to keep it out of power and behind a "firewall" of non-cooperation.

On Sunday, AfD's jubilant leader Alice Weidel hailed the "historic" result and said her party was ready to govern with the CDU and Christian Social Union (CSU).

Meanwhile, Scholz has acknowledged his "election defeat." "This is a bitter election result for the Social Democratic Party," the incumbent chancellor said in his first remarks after the polls closed.

"It is also an election defeat, and I think that needs to be made clear at the outset." Directing his comments towards Merz, the conservative party leader, Scholz added: "Congratulations on the election result."

Before Merz takes over from the now caretaker chancellor Scholz, he will have to forge a new coalition government in Europe's top economy, an often drawn-out process he has vowed to complete by Easter, April 20.

This threatens to leave Berlin paralysed for weeks to come as the Trump administration has forced head-spinning change on the world scene and among European allies, especially over the Ukraine war that has raged for three gruelling years.

To build a majority, Merz would be expected to reach out first to the SPD, though without Scholz, who has led Germany's traditional workers' party to a historically poor result.

To gain enough seats, he may also reach out to the Greens, who scored at least 12 percent in the exit polls, although the CDU's Bavarian sister party the CSU has so far rejected this.

Reporting from the German capital Berlin, Al Jazeera's Dominic Kane said that Merz will have to make some "compromises and concessions".

"Mr Merz is very clearly saying that there need to be quick negotiations, but with which specific parties? Because, obviously, the Social Democrats have been repudiated, their vote dropping to the sort of level which is one of the worst performances they've ever had since the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany," Kane said.

"We know that some of Merz's allies in Bavaria have said they do not want to govern with the Greens," he added.

"So actually, forming a coalition is going to be particularly difficult for Mr Merz, and he is going to have to make compromises, concessions insofar as some key policies are concerned."

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