



By: TA | AP Insight

Merz's government doubles down on unpopular reforms despite electoral defeat



German Chancellor Friedrich Merz doubled down Monday on pushing through unpopular reforms to Europe's largest economy after a far-right party surged to a landslide victory in a regional election, with a very good chance of forming the first far-right **state government** since the Nazi era.

Merz said his center-right Christian Democratic Union was "deeply shocked" by what he called "the most serious election defeat that the CDU has had for years, for decades." But he indicated that he's determined to stay at the helm and said that "giving up is not an option for me."

The anti-migration and Russia-friendly Alternative for Germany, or AfD, fell just short of a majority in Sunday's vote in Saxony-Anhalt, a small eastern state that gained outsized prominence as AfD eyed power there. Its regional branch is one of several considered a proven right-wing extremist group by Germany's domestic intelligence agency.

Merz says Germany will stick to its values and Russia stance

AfD's victory is a major distraction for Germany and Merz at a time when Europe faces several challenges, including Russia's continued aggression against Ukraine, a suspected sabotage campaign targeting NATO countries, and difficult dealings with U.S. President Donald Trump.

Merz said he wanted to assure Germany's allies that "our institutions are resilient and stable" and the country will stick to its values and constitution after the AfD win. "We know that Germany carries special responsibility because of its history," he said.

He vowed that he won't "budge one millimeter from my fundamental conviction that we must defend our freedom against Russia now." Germany is one of Ukraine's biggest supporters in its war against Russia.

Modern Germany hasn't yet had a far-right or right-wing populist party leading a national, state or major-city government

Because of Germany's Nazi past, far-right movements have always come under strong scrutiny.

Other major parties have refused to **cooperate with AfD** in a so-called "firewall." Unlike many countries in Europe, modern Germany hasn't yet had a far-right or right-wing populist party leading a national, state or major-city government.

Determination to continue reforms 'unbroken'

Merz vowed to weaken AfD before he came to power last year, but instead has seen the party's support increase.

The governing coalition of his Union bloc and the center-left Social Democrats has developed a reputation for squabbling and become deeply unpopular, as has Merz himself.

The government has struggled to persuade voters that it can get the country's chronically **sluggish economy** moving, through potentially painful reforms, including to the pension system.

We need fundamental reforms in Germany - Friedrich Merz

But Merz insisted Monday that "we need fundamental reforms in Germany."

He said it's a question of "nothing less than the future of our country and the opportunities of our children and grandchildren, and we must not squander those. That is why my determination to continue the reform course is unbroken."

He acknowledged a need to “justify them, not just rationally but also emotionally.”

Germany faces another two regional elections on Sept. 20 — in Berlin and in another eastern state, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, where AfD is also strong.

AfD looks for a path to power in Saxony-Anhalt

While Merz continues to push back against resistance to reforms, AfD — whose victory was cheered by far-right parties across Europe — faces potentially tricky maneuvering to put its candidate for governor in Saxony-Anhalt, **Ulrich Siegmund**, in power.

Siegmund had pushed for an absolute majority in the state legislature that would allow AfD to sidestep mainstream parties' shunning of it.

After the vote, he signaled that AfD still isn't willing to make compromises, insisting that “we don't want to become like the parties that were punished” by breaking pre-election promises. He also rejected the idea of a minority government.

But he said that it has “a very clear mandate to form the government,” and that his party would reach out to other groups in the legislature and even to individual lawmakers. “Our goal now is to build precisely this stable majority in the coming days and weeks,” he said.



We don't want to become like the parties that were punished - Ulrich Siegmund

AfD is three seats short of a majority. It could reach out to the hard-left BSW party, which won five seats. The two parties share a Russia-friendly course and oppose immigration but disagree on some other issues.

BSW has criticized the “firewall” against AfD and signaled again Monday that it could allow Siegmund to become governor by abstaining in a potential third round of voting for a new governor in the state legislature, in which a simple majority would suffice.

It's also possible that newly elected lawmakers from other parties could defect to AfD, which would only need three to break ranks.

Forming a government excluding AfD would only be possible if all the other parties in the legislature worked together. However, an alliance of any kind between those parties is improbable and would be prone to instability.

Jubilation from Musk and right-wing populists

Billionaire Elon Musk congratulated the party on its election victory with a “Well done!” on his online platform X. Siegmund immediately thanked him for his support.

Trump posted a screenshot of the election projection on his Truth Social platform without any comment.

Russian presidential envoy Kirill Dmitriev on X described the outcome of the election as a “historic win for the pragmatic AfD that will put migration under control.”

Dmitriev also said that “AfD will restore Germany and Europe by leading the common-sense approach that migrant-friendly, warmongering Biden-think EU politicians tried to eradicate.”

The leaders of right-wing populist parties in Spain and Portugal also congratulated AfD.

AfD's platform is a betrayal of the European spirit – Jean-Noel Barrot

The Polish prime minister was critical. “In Poland, only idiots or traitors could rejoice the AfD triumph in Germany,” Donald Tusk wrote on X.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot, whose country faces a presidential election next year in which the far right is a leading contender, said that “AfD's platform is a betrayal of the European spirit” and that “our first responsibility is to resist the normalization of far-right ideas.”

Among voters who didn't back AfD, the reaction was one of deep dismay. Horst Walter Boerner, an 86-year-old from Magdeburg born during World War II, expressed shock.

“It's terrible for us,” he said, saying the election was “fear-driven.” He said AfD's victory was foreseeable because of the crowds it drew during the campaign, but he said “this should have never happened.”