



Defence reform in Germany

The Teflon minister

BERLIN

Germany's popular defence minister may survive a plagiarism scandal. Now he must show he can reform the armed forces

HE IS married to a Bismarck, wears bespoke suits and pays photogenic visits to the troops in Afghanistan. He even held a doctorate. Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, Germany's defence minister, is without doubt the country's coolest politician. But as of February 23rd he is a doctor no longer. He renounced the title days after the discovery that much of his 2006 doctoral thesis was copied from other sources without proper attribution. More than a fifth of the text was plagiarised, according to Gutten-Plag Wild, a website dedicated to vetting it. The media have delighted in bestowing nicknames on the minister, such as "Baron Cut'n'paste" (a reference to his blue-blooded origins) and "zu Googleberg". He has admitted to "grave mistakes", but said he did not commit them knowingly.

His powers of survival seem preternatural. "I didn't hire him as a research assistant," said the chancellor, Angela Merkel, herself boasting a PhD (legitimately, it is believed). She described his ministerial performance as "outstanding". Mr zu Guttenberg's allies envy his popularity, but they need him. His charisma has lifted the sagging poll ratings of his Christian Social Union (csu), the Bavarian branch of Mrs Merkel's Christian Democratic Union. Facing six more state elections this year (after a heavy defeat in Hamburg on February 20th; see next page) and the ongoing euro crisis, the chancellor can ill afford a cabinet

reshuffle. Voters encourage the pretence that the plagiarism does not matter. According to a poll, nearly three-quarters want Mr zu Guttenberg to stay in office.

The scandal has diverted attention from the reform of the armed forces, one of the government's main projects. Mr zu Guttenberg has done one big thing: ending conscription, which had been a bulwark of Germany's post-war order. He promises much more: a leaner, cheaper and more effective force fit for the 21st century. Although Germany's 250,000-strong army is to shrink, the number that can be deployed on far-flung missions may double, to 14,000. So far Mr zu Guttenberg has not realised these plans. "The announcements sound good, but I'm concerned because there seem to be no hard decisions," says Alexander Bonde, a Bundestag member from the opposition Green party.

That is partly because Mr zu Guttenberg's colleagues have tied his hands. The government insists on maintaining a bigger army than he wants: 185,000 troops, about 20,000 more than he has argued for. It also demands €8.3 billion (\$11.3 billion) of savings from his budget by 2014. That target is debatable. Some analysts think money-saving reform requires extra spending up front, for example on higher salaries to attract volunteers. Others welcome the fiscal pressure as a spur to efficiency. But the larger army stipulated by

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the government seems wrong-headed. A smaller force would propel bigger cuts in military flab, such as the 450-odd bases spread across Germany. With fewer soldiers the ministry could spend more to equip each of them properly and still meet the budget targets, says Mr Bonde.

But there are bigger problems. The reshaping of the army ought to be guided by new thinking on strategy and by a sensible division of labour with Germany's allies. That is not happening, says Christian Moiling of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin. Mr zu Guttenberg is paying too little attention to the lessons of Germany's experiences in Afghanistan and elsewhere, which show that military action in failed states is worth little without civilian complements like police-training and school-building. Civilian ministries are not part of the reform discussion, says Mr Moiling.

At the same time, collaboration with allies is on a slower track. Last summer the defence ministry compiled a "priority" list that promised billions of euros in savings on weapons systems. Little has been heard since. "What we're doing now is strategy-formation backwards," says Mr Moiling.

The most concrete ideas so far have been bureaucratic. They come from Walter Otremba, a defence-ministry official who refined the recommendations of a commission set up by Mr zu Guttenberg. He would pare the ministry to its core functions—planning, policy, and making sure the armed forces have the structure and resources to carry out missions—and cut its headcount from 3400 to 1,800. The top general, until now a first among equals, would be placed more firmly in charge of the armed forces and more clearly in authority over the service chiefs. These are good ideas, says Mr Moiling, but they deal only

German politics

Unhappy in Hamburg

BERLIN

Angela Merkel's party takes a pasting in a state election

IN AN election on February 20th the citizens of Hamburg, a port city with the status of a state, inflicted an historic drubbing on the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the party of Germany's chancellor, Angela Merkel. Its share of the vote tumbled by nearly half, to 22%. The mayor, Christoph Ahlhaus, was turfed out after just six months in office. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) stunned even itself by winning nearly half the votes and a majority of the seats in the city's legislature, the Bürgerschaft. Olaf Scholz, the incoming mayor, will govern without a coalition partner.

This was the first of seven state elections in 2011 that will test both the resilience of Mrs Merkel's coalition with the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the prospects of the main opposition parties: the SPD, the Greens and the ex-communist Left Party. Happily for Mrs Merkel, the Hamburg vote was a verdict on Mr Ahlhaus's government rather than hers. The CDU-Green coalition, the first of its kind at state level, fell apart soon after the popular mayor, Ole von Beust, retired prematurely in August. Mr Ahlhaus, a conservative Heidelberger, never appealed to the liberal Hamburgers.

The results mean more for the SPD, which hopes to break through the 30% ceiling in national polls. Mr Scholz wooed Hamburg's middle class and its entrepreneurs, naming an ex-head of the

chamber of commerce as his shadow economy minister. The lesson, said Sigmar Gabriel, the SPD's chairman, is that economic issues matter as much as social justice, the party's usual emphasis.

Almost as happy was Guido Westerwelle, the beleaguered chairman of the FDP and Germany's foreign minister. He and his party were so unpopular that he looked in danger of losing at least one of his jobs. Helped by a telegenic candidate, Katja Suding, and its opposition to an unpopular school reform, the FDP re-entered the Bürgerschaft after a seven-year absence. If this recovery is sustained in the next few elections, Mr Westerwelle will be out of danger.

Mrs Merkel cannot be indifferent to the Hamburg defeat. Last year her government lost its majority in the Bundestag, the upper house of parliament, which represents the states. After Hamburg her influence will wane further. The government got a taste of what that means this week when it was forced into an expensive compromise with opposition parties on welfare, which will entail higher benefits and a minimum wage for several types of worker. The three elections in March—in Saxony-Anhalt, Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Württemberg—should turn out better for the CDU than Hamburg did. But the stakes, especially in Baden-Württemberg, which the CDU has run since 1953, are higher.

with management, "which can't be better than the policy."

Mr zu Guttenberg knows this. The armed forces cannot meet Germany's strategic needs "with cosmetic changes alone", he has said. He has declared "the hour of Europe," a time to pay "more than lip service" to the idea of a common defence. Last September he helped launch a German-Swedish initiative to co-ordinate military capabilities, which was later taken up and expanded by the European Council, the assembly of European heads of government.

It is above all Mr zu Guttenberg's rhetoric, which feels uplifting and bracingly candid, that has endeared him to German voters. He has the trick of appearing to speak truth to power while being riveted to power himself. You might expect the sin of plagiarism to be fatal for the zu Guttenberg brand. Not yet, apparently. Thanks to Germans' willingness to overlook it, Mr zu Guttenberg may yet have a chance to turn his own words into deeds. •

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