

Merkel's Party crushed in German Elections

Monday, 14 May 2012

Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives suffered a crushing defeat on Sunday in an election in Germany's most populous state, a result which could embolden the left opposition to step up its criticism of her European austerity policies.

The election in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), a western German state with a bigger population than the Netherlands and an economy the size of Turkey, was held 18 months before a national election in which Merkel is expected to fight for a third term.

She remains popular in Germany for her steady handling of the euro zone debt crisis, but the sheer scale of her party's defeat leaves her vulnerable at a time when a backlash against her insistence on fiscal discipline is building across Europe.

According to first projections, the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) won 38.8 percent of the vote and will have enough to form a stable majority with the Greens, who scored 12.2 percent.

The two left-leaning parties had run a fragile minority government for the past two years under popular SPD leader Hannelore Kraft, whose decisive victory on Sunday could propel her to national prominence.

Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU) saw their support plunge to just 25.8 percent, down from nearly 35 percent in 2010, and the worst result in the state since World War Two.

"This is not a good evening for Merkel," said Gero Neugebauer, a political scientist at Berlin's Free University.

"The SPD is strengthened by this election, which will stir things up in Berlin."

The blow comes only two days before France's new president, Socialist Francois Hollande, is due to visit Berlin and press Merkel for a shift away from austerity and more emphasis on growth-oriented measures in Europe.

Other big countries like Italy also want Merkel to take a more balanced approach to the debt crisis and an election in Greece last week showed massive public resistance to tough austerity.