

Pressure Mounts on Germany's Merz After Fractious Reshuffle



German Chancellor and Christian Democratic Union (CDU) leader Friedrich Merz looks on as the newly elected leader of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group Thorsten Frei speaks during a press conference in Berlin, Germany July 29, 2026.

BERLIN (Reuters) - Pressure is intensifying on German Chancellor Friedrich Merz after a cabinet reshuffle that sparked anger in his own ranks and put a spotlight on his government's competence as it battles to fend off a far-right surge at state elections in September.

After a testing first year in office, Merz's CDU/CSU bloc is trailing in the polls behind the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and faces the prospect of the AfD gaining power for the first time at state level in September.

Frei will have a key role as a point

person to coordinate with the centre-left Social Democrats, the junior ally in the ruling coalition, to push reforms Merz has promised to revive growth in Europe's largest economy.

Merz's personal popularity is in the doldrums, according to a poll by broadcasting group RTL/ntv published on Tuesday, with only 15% of respondents satisfied with his performance, and only 49% of his own party's supporters happy with him.

The AfD has also for the first time overtaken the conservatives on perceptions of competence and ability to solve Germany's problems, the poll

said.

"The events of the past week have significantly damaged Merz's standing within the CDU," a member of the CDU federal executive board told Reuters.

For his part, Merz predicted the storm would pass by September, when parliament reconvenes and his choice of new ministers is due to be sworn in.

"I assume that tempers will have cooled somewhat by September," Merz said.

His situation contrasts with that of his conservative predecessor and one-time political rival, Angela Merkel, who outshone her party in opinion polls during her 16 years as chancellor.

The reshuffle was sparked by the abrupt resignation of party heavyweight Jens Spahn over a decision to have a child through surrogacy abroad after supporting a ban on the practice in Germany. Merz picked his chief of staff Frei to succeed Spahn, while making Health Minister Nina Warken chief of staff.

But he also made other changes. Patrick Schnieder was sacked as Transport Minister, sparking anger from conservatives in his home state of Rhineland-Palatinate.

In a leaked letter, conservative lawmakers in the state's legislature declined to meet Merz, saying such a meeting "requires a minimum level of mutual trust and respect".

Thousands of Audi Workers Protest Over Threatened Plant Closure



Workers gather to protest at Audi's car plant, one of the facilities threatened with possible closure as part of restructuring plans by parent company Volkswagen in Neckarsulm, Germany, July 29, 2026.

NECKARSULM, Germany (Reuters) - Thousands of Audi workers demonstrated on Wednesday against the possible closure of the German automaker's Neckarsulm plant as parent Volkswagen pushes ahead with a group overhaul expected to include tens of thousands of job losses.

The protest came as rival premium carmaker BMW announced thousands of job cuts, the latest blow to employment in Germany's auto industry, where high costs, growing Chinese competition and U.S. tariffs are forcing

painful restructuring.

"We are scared of factories closing and endangering our future," Audi worker Melih Cevlik said at the protest in Neckarsulm.

About 6,000 people took part, according to the works council.

Workers demanded clarity from Volkswagen, whose CEO Oliver Blume has warned Neckarsulm is among four German plants that could close after 2030 if no alternative solution is found.

"The staff wants clarity because they're worried about coming to work. Many families are worried,

too," Audi trainee Frank Wojko said against the din of rattles waved by protesters.

Blume has sought to avoid plant closures and floated alternatives including defense partnerships and production of Volkswagen's Chinese models, which are not currently sold in Europe, at underutilized factories in Germany.

But no decisions have been taken and the second half of the year is expected to be dominated by tense negotiations with Volkswagen's powerful labor representatives, including over a proposed doubling of job cuts to 100,000 across the group.

About 15,000 people work at the Neckarsulm site, which produces Audi's A5, A6 and A8 models and is also home to low-volume production of the all-electric Audi e-tron GT.

Alexander Reinhart, head of the site's works council, said allocating a high-volume electric vehicle to Neckarsulm could help secure its future.

Audi has been hit by falling sales in the once-lucrative Chinese market and a lack of U.S. manufacturing capacity, leaving it exposed to tariffs.

Last year, it announced plans to cut up to 7,500 jobs in Germany by 2029, mainly in administration and development.

EU Crisis Chief Urges Tougher Climate Action Amid France, Spain Wildfires

BRUSSELS (AFP) - The European Union's crisis management commissioner says the bloc needs to invest more in tackling climate change and accelerate its response, as France and Spain prepare for another crippling heatwave that could ignite new wildfires and intensify blazes already burning.

Hadja Lahbib said the EU must ensure its climate strategy remains in lockstep with realities on the ground, as global warming advances faster than scientists previously projected. She has called for increased funding, better education on fire risk and a renewed focus on forest management. "Climate change is accelerating. So our response must evolve just as quickly," Lahbib told Reuters. "We must prepare for risks before

disasters strike and not simply react afterwards."

Lahbib's comments come as devastating wildfires continue to burn across parts of France and Spain, forcing the evacuation of 330,000 people.

French Interior Minister, Laurent Nunez, said the country has "very likely" carried out its largest civilian evacuation outside of wartime. Around 220,000 have so far been evacuated in France and more than 110,000 in Spain have fled their homes.

The EU's Emergency Response Coordination Centre has warned Greece, Italy and countries in central Europe could soon face wildfires too.

Europe is the world's fastest-warming continent. As temperatures

rise, evidence continues to emerge that climate change could have severe economic consequences for the continent. The annual Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change found that Europe is woefully unprepared for the health impacts of global warming.

Neighboring Spain is also grappling with several blazes but progress has been made, allowing thousands to return to their homes. Spain's national weather agency has warned that the risk of wildfires will be "very high or extreme in most of the country".

On Tuesday, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said climate denialism was "the worst of fuels" as the world confronts a climate emergency.

China Accuses U.S. of Suppression Over Humanoid Robot Ban



A worker reacts near a line of humanoid robots displayed at the World AI Conference in Shanghai, Friday, July 17, 2026.

BEIJING (AFP) - Beijing accused the United States on Wednesday of seeking to "suppress" Chinese companies, after Washington banned imports of humanoid and quadruped robots manufactured abroad.

Most humanoid robots sold in the United States are imported, particularly from China, where local companies have raced ahead in the booming sector.

Beijing's Foreign Ministry said it "firmly opposed" Tuesday's move by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to add "advanced robotic devices" to the list of banned items on national security grounds.

"China has always firmly opposed the U.S. overstretching the concept of national security to suppress Chinese companies," Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning told a regular news conference.

Beijing will take "necessary measures" to safeguard the rights and interests of Chinese companies, Mao added.

"Protectionism cannot enhance U.S. competitiveness. It will only harm the interests of American companies and consumers," she said.

Robots of all shapes and sizes are ubiquitous in China, from hotels to shopping centers and factories.

Certain types of drones, as well as Chinese companies Huawei and China Telecom, were already on the FCC's list.

It now also includes "mobile robots", which mimic how humans and animals walk by standing on two or four legs.

The FCC's decision was based on findings from a task force convened by the White House, which concluded that foreign-built robots could create "a cybersecurity risk that threatens the security of critical infrastructure" and "the safety and security" of U.S. residents.

Most humanoid robots in the United States are used for industrial applications in confined spaces, such as automobile factories or storage warehouses.

U.S. Muslim Group Documents 183% Increase in Mosque Incidents



WASHINGTON (Anadolu) - A Muslim civil rights and advocacy group in the U.S. said Tuesday it has documented a 183% increase in incidents targeting Islamic places of worship compared to the same three-month period last year.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) said it recorded 17 incidents targeting Islamic places of worship in May, June and July to date, representing 51% of the previous year's total. It documented six incidents during the same period last year.

The incidents include a terroristic attack on a mosque, threats of violence, arson, acts of intimidation and opposition to Islamic places of worship based on religion.

"Islamophobia remains an acceptable form of hate in the U.S. American places of worship are too often seen as targets for cheap political smears and violence," said CAIR Research and Advocacy Director Corey Saylor.

"It is a duty on community leaders to ensure our sanctuaries remain places for prayer, reflection, and community. Vigilance is a piece of achieving this outcome," he added.

CAIR said researchers often examine the three-month period following a sig-

nificant incident to determine whether a surge has occurred.

The group pointed to the May 18 attack on the Islamic Center of San Diego, where Amin Abdullah, Mansour Kaziha and Nadir Awad sacrificed their lives to defend children from anti-Muslim white supremacist extremists who attacked the facility.

Noting that it identified 33 incidents explicitly targeting Islamic institutions, including mosques, Islamic community centers or other spaces self-identified as a Muslim place of worship in 2025, CAIR said all reports included in its data set must be sourced from publicly available information, including traditional media or social media posts.

In May, CAIR-NJ reported receiving reports from four mosques in the US state of New Jersey, describing targeted harassment, including threatening phone calls, hate mail and physical intimidation. Law enforcement authorities also alerted CAIR-NJ that six additional mosques had received similar targeted harassment.

CAIR urged community leaders to pre-register for its updated "Best Practices for Mosque and Community Safety Guide," which CAIR and North American Islamic Trust expect to release in late August.

News in Brief

WASHINGTON (AFP) - The Trump administration has instituted a rule change that could fast-track the deportation of hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers. Under the new rule some asylum applications will be referred directly to Justice Department immigration judges without a prior interview by an asylum officer with US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Trump campaigned for the White House on a promise to expel millions of migrants and has taken a number of actions since returning to the White House aimed at speeding up deportations.

BEIJING (Reuters) - Chinese and Russian naval warships have completed a joint patrol lasting more than two weeks and arrived in Vladivostok in Russia's Far East on Wednesday, China's state news agency Xinhua reported. The patrol was part of the annual military cooperation plan between China and Russia and was "not related to the current international and regional situation", Xinhua said. The task force departed Qingdao in eastern China on July 13 and sailed through key Northeast Asia waterways of Miyako Strait, Vries Strait and La Perouse Strait, conducting patrols in the western Pacific, Sea of Okhotsk and Sea of Japan, Xinhua said.

MOSCOW (Reuters) - Russia said on Wednesday it had charged Telegram founder Pavel Durov with facilitating terrorist activity, alleging that his hugely popular messaging app was being used by Ukrainian spies to organize attacks inside Russia. In response, Telegram's official account on X posted an image of the Russian-born billionaire making an obscene gesture with his middle finger. The charges, announced by the Federal Security Service (FSB), marked the culmination of a long investigation against Dubai-based Durov and Telegram.

NEW YORK (Reuters) - The United Nations Security Council will hold an initial round of informal closed-door "straw poll" ballots on Thursday to assess support for the seven candidates currently vying to become the next head of the United Nations. The candidates, from Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guyana, Senegal and Uganda, are seeking to replace Antonio Guterres of Portugal when he steps down at the end of this year after two five-year terms. Guterres' successor faces the task of revitalizing an organization in crisis and declining stature that is under increasing pressure to reform a bloated, costly bureaucracy and cut duplication across its many agencies. Straw polls are informal, non-binding votes conducted among the Security Council's 15 members. They are asked whether they "encourage," "discourage" or have "no opinion" on each candidate. The ballots are secret and only Council members are present during the exercise.

TOKYO (AP) - Japan's southwestern Kyushu region has had more than 100 aftershocks since it was struck on Tuesday by a powerful earthquake which left at least 13 people dead. Many others were said to be in cardiac arrest - a term often used in preliminary reports in Japan before a death is officially confirmed. In searing heat, rescue crews are digging through the rubble at a paper factory and a shopping mall in Kumamoto prefecture, looking for trapped survivors. The mall suffered an explosion in the hour after the quake struck.