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Guido Westerwelle, Germany's Likely Next Foreign Minister, Openly Gay

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KIRSTEN GRIESHABER | 09/29/09 07:56 AM | 

BERLIN — Guido Westerwelle and his gay partner are Germany's new "power couple" — at least according to the nation's leading daily, which splashed a photo of the pair hugging on election night on the front-page above the fold in Tuesday's paper.

The ringing endorsement for the 47-year-old Westerwelle, who is widely expected to be tapped for the high-profile post of foreign minister in Chancellor Angela Merkel's new government, in the Bild daily also highlighted his personal life in a way he rarely has.

"His man makes him so strong," Bild wrote about Westerwelle, declaring that his 42-year-old partner Michael Mronz was not only his most important adviser during the campaign, but also "gives him security and ... supports him when he suffers a setback."

Despite eight years as leader of the pro-business Free Democrats, Westerwelle's homosexuality has generated relatively little discussion. But with his party set to become kingmaker to Chancellor Merkel's conservatives and him foreign minister, it has been thrust into the spotlight.

On Monday, a local official had to apologize for an anti-gay remark he made about Westerwelle on election night. Peter Langner, the city treasurer of the western city of Duisburg and a Social Democrat, had said that "I don't want a gay foreign minister."

Germans have been generally tolerant of openly gay politicians and others have paved the way, including Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit, who already declared back in 2001 that "I'm gay, and it's good that way."

While Westerwelle's certainly no gay activist, he has said before that his lifestyle may be "encouraging for some young gays."

"I can only tell all young gays and lesbians to not be disheartened, if not everything goes their way," Westerwelle told the Berlin's gay magazine Siegessaeule this month. "This society is changing for the good in the direction of tolerance and respect ... though slower than I would wish."

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Westerwelle has been known to be gay since 2004, when he brought his partner to Merkel's 50th birthday party.

"I've never been hiding my life," Westerwelle said back then. "I just lived it."

Mronz, who met Westerwelle in 2003 according to Bild, is an event manager who also organized the athletic world championship in Berlin this summer. He recently joined the Free Democrats, saying that after having listened to 120 speeches of his partner, "I am completely convinced."

Westerwelle, who has led the Free Democrats since 2001, also spoke out for stronger civil rights during the election campaign and has criticized in the past that German law does not give complete adoption rights to gay couples.

The Lesbian and Gay Association in Germany welcomed Westerwelle's victory and hoped his election would become a motor for gay rights in Germany.

"We think it's awesome that it has become so normal that an openly gay man becomes foreign minister," said Klaus Jetz, the head of the association, adding that the gay community expected him to advocate gay rights in Germany and abroad as well.

"It's important that as foreign minister he will openly talk about human rights and the persecution of gays and lesbians in other countries."

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