



THE AFD'S PARLIAMENTARY DEBUT: A RECONFIGURATION OF POLITICS IN GERMANY

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On September 24, 2017, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany celebrated its success, having secured 13% of the vote marking the entry of the open nationalist party in Bundestag in six decades.¹ Established in 1961, the party holds the most substantial presence of rightwing extremists since the Nazi era. It is on course to occupy 88 seats in the Bundestag, compared with 217 for the CDU/CSU and 137 for the SPD.² Alexander Gauland, the AfD's top candidate called it "a great day for our party political history. We are entering the Bundestag for the first time and we will change this country." His verdict carried additional fervor in his words "we will take our people and our country back."³

The AfD gained more than 8 points on its 2013 result, when it failed to reach the 5% hurdle that would have allowed it into the Bundestag.⁴ Thirty-five percent of its supporters were first-time voters. It has now entered into German parliament as the third biggest party, with a stunning 13.3% increase of 8.8 percentage points according to the exit poll.⁵

¹ Safiya Bashir, "Merkel faces tough coalition talks, amid rise of AfD", *The Investment Observer*, September 25, 2017. www.theinvestmentobserver.co.uk

² Kate Conolly, "German election: Merkel wins fourth term but far-right AfD surges to third", *The Guardian*, September 24, 2017. www.theguardian.com

³ Safiya Bashir, "Merkel faces tough coalition talks, amid rise of AfD." Op. cit.

⁴ Melanie Amann, Thomas Darnstadt and Dietmar Hipp, "Is Germany's Parliamentary Hurdle Obsolete?", *Spiegel Online*, October 4, 2013. <http://www.spiegel.de>

⁵ Kate Conolly, "German election: Merkel wins fourth term but far-right AfD surges to third". Op.Cit.

Originally founded in 2013, AfD was an anti-euro party, but later turned its focus to immigration and Islam. Incompatibility of Islam with the German culture was the most commonly seen in AfD posters. Placed high on the lampposts, the far-right remarks showed a woman in traditional Muslim dress next to the caption, "Islam does not belong in Germany."⁶

The declaration of ban on minarets and its hard-line position has helped AfD to win seats in 13 of Germany's 16 state parliaments in the last few years. "We'll start debates on migration, we'll start debates on Islam, and we'll start debates on ever closer union", declared by one of its party leaders.⁷ Beatrix von Storch, told the *BBC* that AfD would call for stricter asylum rules to curb the abuse of the system, including vetting of claims in countries of origin that are deemed "safe".⁸

Yet, despite its nativist stance against immigration and its attacks against the European Union, one uniquely German reason for the party's success has been the broad support it paradoxically enjoyed amongst the Russian emigrant community. AfD has estimated that about a third of its support comes from Russian-speaking voters, several million of whom have settled in Germany since the 1980s; they now make up as much as 5% of the population. It translated its fliers and brochures into Russian, ran information stands and outreach programs in Russian-speaking neighborhoods, and catered its platform to the interests of this community. Three out of the party's top 12 candidates for parliament were native Russian speakers. Among the AfD's core pledges on foreign policy is to lift German sanctions on Russia and seek warmer relations with President Vladimir Putin. In fact, AfD's *Hochburgen* (strongholds) is in the former communist east of the country. While it scored on average 11% in West Germany, it got 21.5% in East Germany, almost twice as much.⁹

The AfD has also siphoned a lot of votes by harnessing the anti-establishment sentiment. In many ways, this is an anti-Merkel vote, reflecting opposition to her controversial *Willkommenspolitik* (Welcome politics) towards refugees. Merkel allowed nearly a million refugees, mostly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, to apply for asylum in Germany. The backlash to this decision was fierce across the German political spectrum, and Merkel's approval ratings went into sharp decline, reaching a five-year low of around 45% in September 2016. This approach even mobilized previous non-voters. The same poll also shows, for example, that 89% of AfD voters thought that Merkel's immigration

⁶ Sarah Wildman, "Meet the far-right party that's bringing racism and xenophobia back to Germany", *Vox*, September 26, 2017. www.vox.com

⁷ Holly Elyott, "Germany's far-right AfD Party: Five things you need to Know", *CNBC*, September 25, 2017. www.cnbc.com

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Simon Shuster, "How Russian Voters Fueled the Rise of Germany's Far-Right", *TIME*, September 25, 2017. <http://time.com>.

policies ignored the “concerns of the people” (i.e German citizens); 85% want stronger national borders strangely similar to the demands of Brexit.¹⁰

The trends however, reflect that the European leaders should start accepting a new political reality. German politics, as with most European countries, are going to be much more fragmented. Far-right parties' influence on politics is often much greater than simple numbers would suggest. The mainstream party losses fit a pattern that has played out across other countries where the far right is rising. In France and The Netherlands, for instance, the mainstream parties' losses in recent elections were far greater than the gains of far-right parties. Already, the loss of faith in the mainstream parties has given advantage to the populist parties. In an article in the *Foreign Affairs*, Cas Mudde, a professor at the University of Georgia who studies populism, blamed the “undemocratic liberalism” of mainstream politics for the loss of voter support.¹¹

Similarly, anxiety over identity and social change, experts say, not economic distress, generally attracts voters to far-right politics. According to Immo Fritsche, a professor at the University of Leipzig, “there has never been a positive definition of German identity since the Nazi era.”¹² After the war, national identity, even national pride, were seen as too close to the aggressive nationalism that had led to Nazism. Decades after the end of the World War II, many Germans are rubbing against that taboo. At a rally in Dresden, a young AfD supporter regretted that unlike other countries, Germans were not allowed to have national pride. The AfD has proved adept at exploiting the signature issue of immigration as a major concern of its supporters to strap up this desire.¹³

Further, sudden demographic change also features strongly in setting off a nativist backlash that can fuel far-right populism. Accepted that all across Europe, populist parties themselves rarely captured more than a small minority of the votes, their success has however, pushed mainstream parties to court far-right parties to shape policy from the fringes. In Britain, for instance, the UK Independence Party, known as UKIP, tended to poll between 10% and 15% in 2012 and 2013. It had put enough pressure on the center-right Conservative Party, which announced a referendum on European Union membership in order to court those voters. The result was obviously Brexit.¹⁴

¹⁰ “Anti-migrant, anti-Muslim, anti-Merkel: Germany's AfD”, *The Citizen*, September 21, 2017. <http://www.thecitizen.co.tz>

¹¹ Cas Mudde, “What the stunning success of AfD means for Germany and Europe”, *the guardian*, September 24, 2017. www.theguardian.com

¹² Amanda Taub, “What the Far-Rights Rise My Mean for Germany's Future”, *The New York's Times*, September 26, 2017. www.nytimes.com

¹³ “Anti-migrant, anti-Muslim, anti-Merkel: Germany's AfD”, Op.Cit.

¹⁴ Cas Mudde, “What the stunning success of AfD means for Germany and Europe”. Op.Cit.

Polarization is yet another very noisy form of corporal threat for social harmony. Would AfD's presence in the Bundestag cause divisions to grow or the political system will be able to bear the strain, is an evident query.