



**GERMANY:  
POPULIST  
PRESSURES  
ON "MUTTI"  
MERKEL**

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Already present in the US, the UK and Israel, the right-wing conspiracy website Breitbart is now expanding to Germany and France. One may disagree with its former executive chair, Steve Bannon, who helped to propel Donald Trump into the White House and is now his chief strategist, but he is certainly a successful political entrepreneur with a knack for turning populist sentiment into votes and money. The choice of Germany is not coincidental. It is the EU's most populous country and xenophobic views have witnessed an upsurge in the wake of the refugee crisis. Alongside Sweden, Germany was a preferred destination and received over one million refugees. Merkel invested her political capital in a solution of the crisis. After her initial humanitarian gestures and accommodating stance she tightened border controls, hashed out a deal with Turkey to limit migration flows and pushed for a pan-European redistribution of refugees that has come to naught so far.

Her transformation mirrored shifting public opinion. Germany witnessed an outpouring of solidary civic engagement at the beginning of the refugee crisis and such engagement still exists today, but concerns have been growing about the integration challenges involved. They are not restricted to the right-wing fringe. Integration of newly arrived migrants into labour markets is estimated to take five years on average, more than initially expected and there are security issues as well. Sexual harassment by groups of North African migrants at the Cologne railway station on New Year's Eve 2016 marked a turning point. Terrorist attacks in Würzburg and Ansbach by asylum seekers from Pakistan and Syria were followed by the Berlin attack, when a rejected Tunisian asylum seeker who was slated for deportation ploughed a truck into a Christmas market, killing 12 people.

These events have given pause. Merkel is now under constant pressure from her junior coalition partner, the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU), which is pushing for tougher security policies to block the

further ascent of the newly emerged right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD). Founded only four years ago, the party veered to the right in 2015 when it ousted its founding chairman, Bernd Lucke, who had run on a ticket of fiscal conservatism and opposition to euro bailouts, but had comparably liberal views on migration, provided migrants had the right qualification. With the onset of the refugee crisis AfD has increasingly developed into a single-issue party that has tried to capitalise on fears about the influx of migrants and Muslim migrants in particular.

The AfD has landed a string of successes in regional parliaments, where it achieved double-digit results. It is now present in the parliaments of 11 of the 16 *Länder*. In Saxony-Anhalt it got in 2016 over 24% of the vote and became the second strongest party after the ruling CDU, hinting once more at a greater prevalence of xenophobic dispositions in the east of Germany, where Dresden is home to the infamous Pegida marches. In Baden-Wurtemberg it got 15.1%, overtaking the social democrats (SPD), whose share of the vote almost halved to 12.7%. In Rhineland-Palatinate its success was slightly more subdued, with 12.6%. It was particularly successful among males, workers and the unemployed, receiving support from former conservative and leftist voters alike and attracting a lot of former non-voters. In May 2017 it could continue its success during the regional elections in Schleswig-Holstein and North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous *Land*, with almost 18 million people.

Right-wing parties are a sensitive issue in Germany for historical reasons and there is cross-party consensus on containing them. Should the AfD be able to enter the Bundestag during the federal elections in September this would be a first since World War II: Other right wing parties such as the Republikaner, the NPD (National Democratic Party of Germany) or the DVU (German People's Union) have come and gone and have occasionally managed to enter regional parliaments, but never the Bundestag.

As the AfD is shunned by all other parties, forming coalitions has become more difficult. Apart from the AfD, results for individual parties are also increasingly uneven across different *Länder* as the 2016 regional elections have shown: the Greens, a former fringe party, is now the strongest party in Baden-Wurtemberg, but collapsed in Rhineland-Palatinate and barely made it through the 5% hurdle in Saxony-Anhalt. The SPD collapsed in Baden-Wurtemberg and Saxony-Anhalt, but achieved slight gains in Rhineland-Palatinate where it remained the leading party. The CDU had massive losses in Baden-Wurtemberg, where it had been the ruling party for decades, but only slight decline in the two other regions. The Left (Die Linke) still has a much stronger presence in East Germany than in the west.

All this points to an increased fragmentation of the party landscape in Germany, where large "people's parties" (*Volksparteien*) have lost their power to attract

cohesive voting blocks. Elections are increasingly volatile and about mood swings and personalities rather than programmes. For many decades of its post-war history Germany had a bipartisan political landscape that consisted of the two *Volksparteien* CDU/CSU and SPD on the centre-right and centre-left with the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) as kingmaker in the middle. With the advent of the Greens in the 1980s and the Left in the 1990s this changed and led to a dispersion of the support base of the SPD, which now is only a shadow of its former self. While the CDU was better able to maintain its status as a *Volkspartei*, it is now subject to similar erosion processes to the SPD, losing votes to the AfD on the right and to the Greens on the left.

Meanwhile the AfD is feeling vindicated by Trump's election victory and is reaching out to other populist parties in Europe. In January 2017 they attended a congress organised by the right-wing Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) group of the European Parliament whose member Marcus Pretzell heads the AfD in North Rhine-Westphalia and is husband of federal AfD leader Frauke Petry. While the right-wing populists are in agreement on limiting migration and Muslim migration in particular, considerable differences exist in terms of social policies. Where Marine Le Pen tries to secure the welfare state for her national constituency, the AfD wants to cut it back and has in fact a rather neoliberal agenda aside from its xenophobic positions. In the foreign policy realm a considerable openness to Russian positions can be observed. While the AfD has not received official party funding from Russia like the French Front National, its leading member Alexander Gauland has close contacts in Russia and has pushed for a rapprochement with the country. This has added to the spectre of Russian meddling in the election campaign. Such concerns existed in Germany even before the Russian interference in the US elections by hacking the computers of the Democratic Party. A hacking attack on offices of the Bundestag originated in Russia and in the "Lisa case" Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov egged on demonstrations by Germans of Russian descent over an alleged rape of a girl by foreigners that later turned out to be untrue.

Of late the star of the AfD shows signs of fading in opinion polls where it hovers around 10% of voters. With fewer refugees arriving in Germany, its single issue lobbying is less attractive and it has got bogged down in internal party squabbles. Its initial endorsement of Donald Trump threatens to backfire, as the antics of the new US president and his chaotic administration are also unpopular among conservatives and right-wing sympathisers. The SPD on the other hand has witnessed a remarkable resurgence since it chose Martin Schulz, the former president of the European Parliament, as its front-runner in January 2017. A mildly leftist message of rolling back some neoliberal reforms from the 2000s and a certain weariness about another four years of Merkel was enough to propel the SPD from 20% to over 30% in the polls. A Merkel loss against a coalition of SPD,

Greens and the Liberals (FDP) or a leftist coalition of SPD, Greens and the Left, unthinkable only a few months ago, now appears a distinct possibility.

Substantial losses for the CDU/CSU would cause internal party uproar and Merkel would face increasing domestic pressure. Her positions on the refugee crisis are more popular among supporters of the Greens and the SPD than within her own party. Should Merkel's CDU/CSU lose the government to an SPD-led coalition it will likely veer to the right. Together with a stronger and more assertive left this would make it more difficult for the AfD to establish itself lastingly in the German party landscape.