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# **EVER MORE RADICAL, EVER MORE POPULAR?**

## **The AfD after Germany's 2025 election**



## Main Theses

1. The results of the 2025 German *Bundestag* election were as much a success for the far-right Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) as they were an indicator of the increased fragmentation of the German political landscape and decline of the *Volksparteien*.
2. We are witnessing a new level of *Rechtsoffenheit* in Germany, i.e. the openness of both mainstream parties and parts of the German population towards right-wing policies and ideas.
3. While the AfD's influence at the European level has been somewhat limited so far, its continuous success poses new challenges for the EU. Over the years, the party's Euroscepticism and anti-European strategies have shifted from a principled opposition to the EU, especially in the context of the Eurozone crisis, to practices focused on undermining the EU from within, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Introduction: German government politics at a crossroads

In the weeks in which the new German government coalition between the Christian Democrats (*Christlich Demokratische Union*, CDU, and the Bavarian *Christlich-Soziale Union*, CSU) and the Social Democrats (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD) was taking shape, news about their negotiations was repeatedly trumped by headlines about the biggest opposition party in the future parliament (*Bundestag*): the far-right AfD. In early April, only six weeks after the CDU/CSU had won the election and even before the formal coalition negotiations between them and the SPD had been completed, the news broke that the AfD was, for the very first time, ahead of the CDU/CSU in one of the country's major nationwide opinion polls. For the first time in German post-war history, a far-right party was the most popular political force in the country. Since then, its standing has again declined slightly. At the beginning of June, it enjoyed the support of almost 25% of voters.

In early May, in turn, news about the planned ministerial appointments by the coalition parties was swept away by the spectacular development that the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*, BfV) had, after years of investigation into the AfD, finally categorized the party as a whole as “definitely right-wing extremist”. The domestic intelligence agency explained that the categorization was made “due to the extremist character of the party as a whole, which disregards human dignity”. The group also added that “The party's prevailing ethnic and descent-based understanding of the people is not compatible with the free democratic basic order.” The AfD aims, according to the BfV, to exclude certain population groups from equal participation in society: “Specifically, the party considers, for example, German citizens with a history of migration from Muslim countries as not being equal members of the German people as defined by the party ethnically.” This is all part of the striking developments affecting the AfD since its foundation as a rightwing-conservative “Anti-Euro party” in 2013. While right-wing parties in other European countries such as France and Italy primarily achieved political success by presenting themselves as more moderate, conciliatory and bourgeois, the growth of the AfD has so far run parallel to its continuously increasing radicalization in terms of both content and rhetoric.

The new German government thus seems to face a powerful, ever-more popular and ever-more radical opponent from the right. What will the government's strategy, and particularly

the Christian Democrats' stance, towards this "double threat" look like in the coming years? And how will the relation between the processes of popularization and radicalization further evolve within the AfD? Is there a 'glass ceiling' for its success and radicalism? In the following, we will address these questions with a focus on three aspects: the decline of Germany's *Volksparteien*; the future of the established parties' firewall policy towards the AfD; and the German far-right's success in a European context.

## **Volksparteien in decline, Rechtsoffenheit on the rise**

The rise of the AfD is both a result of and a further accelerator for a fundamental transformation in the German political landscape. The most prominent trait of this transformation is the decline of the CDU/CSU and the SPD, which have been traditionally labeled as Germany's two big *Volksparteien* (literally "parties of the people", meaning major parties that are open to voters and members from all social strata, generations and different ideologies). While the CDU/CSU and SPD are joining forces in the new government, there are good reasons to assume that their fifth coalition in German history will, in the mid to long-term, not stop the erosion of their voter bases. The SPD only received the third-most votes (16%) on 23rd February 2025 and thus achieved its worst election result in post-war history. The CDU/CSU, while having won the elections (28%), received its second-worst result. Their claims to be *Volksparteien* have been increasingly contested by analysts and aggressively challenged by the AfD, which came second (almost 21%). As a result, it is now trying to label itself as the "new" *Volkspartei*, referring to the diversification and growth of its votership.<sup>1</sup>

While just after the election most Germans were in favor of a *Große Koalition* between the CDU/CSU and the SPD, which has now indeed been formed, a solid 30% of survey participants rather were in favor of a coalition between the CDU/CSU and AfD as the second strongest party. This is significantly more than those who had actually voted for the AfD.<sup>2</sup> This is indicative of a broader trend that, in different societal and political contexts in Germany, has been coined *Rechtsoffenheit* (literally "openness towards the right"). This term refers to new forms of acceptance of, or tolerance towards, far-right policies and stances as a legitimate part of the political and cultural spectrum, which ultimately leads to their political and cultural normalization. In academic contexts, this *Rechtsoffenheit* has also been discussed from the angles of mainstreaming or appeasing the far right.<sup>3</sup> It is unlikely that the increase in this German *Rechtsoffenheit* will come to an end in light of the BfV's national categorization of the whole of the AfD party as "definitely right-wing extremist". On the contrary, experience in the Eastern German states of Thuringia, Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt suggests that there may be no dampening effects at all. Here, the AfD's regional factions (*Landesverbände*) already received the same label years ago. However, this has not kept them from enjoying good to excellent election results since.

In general, these three Eastern states are strongholds of the AfD. While Western Germany is the more populous part of the country and therefore remains essential for the party to

1 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, AfD sieht sich als Volkspartei und fordert Regierungsbeteiligung, 23.02.2025, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/bundestagswahl/alice-weidel-afd-sieht-sich-als-volkspartei-und-fordert-regierungsbeteiligung-110315721.html>.

2 Anton Weineck and Roland Jäger, Koalition nach Bundestagswahl 2025: Wer regiert Deutschland? 27.02.2025, <https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/sachsen-anhalt/fakt-ist-bundestagswahl-regierungsbildung-koalition-102.html>.

3 Katy Brown, Aurelien Mondon & Aaron Winter, The far right, the mainstream and mainstreaming: towards a heuristic framework. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 2021, 28(2), 162–179. <https://doi-org.vu-nl.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/13569317.2021.1949829>.

also gather further support in the mid-term, the East is highly likely to soon become the AfD's testing ground for a new level of power politics. In several Eastern federal states, the AfD is able to score over 30% of the vote and could become unavoidable when it comes to the construction of stable government coalitions in the near future. Crucial for the party's success in the East is Thuringia's Björn Höcke. A significant share of the AfD's campaigning in the years leading up to the 2025 elections has been focused on him personally.<sup>4</sup> Höcke is both an important figure within the AfD decision-making processes and the most prominent face of the party's radical right-wing ambitions. His powerful position in the East may pose a particular challenge to any possible future negotiations with other parties. It may also result in the possibility of a further acceleration of the mainstreaming of far-right ideas as part of such negotiations.

This mainstreaming has already been seen in the build-up to the recent elections. All the major parties, to various degrees and with the exception of *Die Linke*, have embraced very strict migration policies compared to their international commitments. It remains to be seen how far the CDU/CSU in particular will be able to maintain its strategy to win over, or win back, voters from the AfD. Satisfaction with the new government is likely to drop once the euphoria over the agreement to loosen government borrowing limits has faded. In fact, almost three quarters of German voters already consider Federal Chancellor Friedrich Merz's U-turn on this issue – after he had ardently argued against more debt before the election – a kind of fraud against voters.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the “grand” coalition is likely to “water down” the CDU/CSU's conservative profile in the eyes of its right-wing votership. Merz had been eager to sharpen this profile after the era under Angela Merkel had been considered by many as a time of liberalization and appeasement towards the left. Now, however, the CDU/CSU may appear again as a party willing to make compromises across the aisle, even at the expense of their conservative campaign promises. The AfD's first reactions to the coalition agreement clearly demonstrated a strategic narrative in this vein. The party's co-leader Alice Weidel criticized the CDU/CSU for making too many concessions to the SPD, calling the agreement “Merz's certificate of capitulation”.

### Through the firewall – two possible pathways for the AfD

If the decline in CDU/CSU and SPD support indeed continues, and if the AfD remains strong and *Die Grünen* and/or *Die Linke*, in turn, are able to consolidate or even enlarge their support during their time in opposition, a new situation may arise in four years when the next election is due. There would be no more major *Volksparteien*. Instead, three to five parties with comparable amounts of support could compete against each other. The AfD may then very well end up as the strongest group. This is especially true given its current solidified and substantial votership (with strongholds in Eastern Germany) and the likelihood of a rapprochement between the CDU/CSU and AfD that was addressed above. Its first strategic goal is thus to have the CDU/CSU ready to act as its (junior) partner by then. Two pathways may lead to this goal. First, the AfD may, throughout the coming years, depart from its course of ostentatious radicalization and present itself as a “milder”, more moderate “alternative”, as its peers

4 Maik Fielitz, Harald Sick, Michael Schmidt, Christian Donner, Social-Media-Partei AfD? Digitale Landtagswahlkämpfe im Vergleich, 18.11.2024, OBS-Arbeitspapier 73, <https://www.otto-brenner-stiftung.de/social-media-partei-afd/>.

5 Frankfurter Neue Presse, ZDF-Politbarometer März II 2025 / Knapp drei Viertel: Union und Merz haben Wähler getauscht / Mehrheit für Lockerung der Schuldenbremse bei Verteidigungsausgaben, 21.03.2025, <https://www.fnpp.de/na-pressemitteilungen/zdf-politbarometer-maerz-ii-2025-knapp-drei-viertel-union-und-merz-haben-waehler-getauscht-mehrheit-fuer-lockerung-der-schuldenbremse-bei-zr-93639307.html>.

in other European countries have done. If it became more moderate, the AfD could probably still rely on its radical votership and its protest voters, while attracting more votes from those right-wing conservative voters who are disappointed with the CDU/CSU's participation in the grand coalition. Furthermore, this move could also increase the pressure on the CDU/CSU to abolish its *Brandmauer* (firewall) policy towards the AfD. The second possible path is one of further radicalization. In this scenario, the AfD would continue to test the limits of *Rechtsoffenheit* and appeasement in order to reach the same goal: extinguishing the Union's firewall.

Indicators of a 'relativization' of the *Brandmauer* can be seen in some instances of the CDU/CSU's recent self-positioning regarding the AfD. In the longest interview Friedrich Merz gave in the weeks before the election, he addressed in some detail his perspectives on the AfD. When explaining his reasons for not cooperating, Merz named three factors: policy disagreements in a number of core areas; the "language" that proponents of the AfD were using; and the party's unreliability.<sup>6</sup> Strikingly, what was missing from this list was a comment on the AfD's authoritarian foundations and the fundamental threat that this party poses to liberal democracy. While the reasons named by Merz are serious, all three obstacles *can be changed*. After all, they are not "categorical", as many commentators mistakenly call them. In May 2025, in turn, Jens Spahn, leader of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, suggested dealing with the AfD on organizational issues in the same way as with other opposition parties. His vice-chairman Johann Wadephul also spoke out in favor of allowing the AfD parliamentary group to chair committees in the *Bundestag*. These stances were both controversial, as they referred to aspects of established political culture, rather than to hard legal requirements. Merz himself, most recently, rejected growing calls for a procedure to legally ban the AfD, referring to legal arguments that were rather questionable.<sup>7</sup>

## Germany's perspectives in light of European trends and challenges

The German *Brandmauer* is relevant not only in the German but also in the European context. Many foreign commentators were following the German election in light of the European wave of support for extreme right-wing politics. Germany, as the biggest economy and the country holding the most votes in all EU institutions, would be crucial for the Europe-wide success of this wave.

The AfD's relationship with EU integration has been changing over time in several ways, and in parallel to its radicalization. Euroscepticism is not only a question of scale but also a question of discursive framing. When we ask what exactly about Europe and European values the extreme right-wing parties oppose, we start to see the "chameleonic nature of Euroscepticism".<sup>8</sup> The AfD was initially founded in 2013 with a strongly Eurosceptic agenda, opposing reforms and financial bail-out measures for Greece, which was battered by the Euro crisis. It gradually went through stages of focusing its discourse more on ethno-nationalism during the migration crisis, as well as conspiracy discourses during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2022) and Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine (since 2022).<sup>9</sup>

6 Jochen Wegner and Christoph Amend, Friedrich Merz, warum wollen Sie Kanzler werden?, Alles Gesagt Podcast, 2025, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/2025-01/friedrich-merz-interviewpodcast-alles-gesagt>.

7 Dietmar Hipp, Das Gerede des Friedrich Merz, 26.05.2025, [https://www.spiegel.de/politik/afd-verbot-das-gerede-des-friedrich-merz-kommentar-a-2a9b85ad-d265-4a15-aaa8-d7d6176cfb56?sara\\_ref=re-so-app-sh](https://www.spiegel.de/politik/afd-verbot-das-gerede-des-friedrich-merz-kommentar-a-2a9b85ad-d265-4a15-aaa8-d7d6176cfb56?sara_ref=re-so-app-sh).

8 Juan Roch, From qualified to conspirative Euroscepticism: how the German AfD frames the EU in multiple crisis. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 2023, 32(2), 538–554. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2271854>.

9 Ibid.

Currently, the AfD opposes the EU to the extent that this opposition fits its populist rhetoric and critique of the international liberal order. The party's current main goal in this context appears to be to subvert the EU's foundations, rather than to directly exit the bloc. This is true even if the AfD's election program posits that Germany should exit the Eurozone.<sup>10</sup> While the party states that it supports the EU as an association of nations without federal functions or ambitions, many of its proposed policies clash directly with those proposed by the EU, especially in the domains of migration, climate change and finances. However, the AfD election program also calls for the enforcement of an EU Court of Justice ruling that decided that the German agency responsible for the electricity network was not sufficiently independent. Euroscepticism has thus shifted from being one of the AfD's core themes towards a function of the party's substantive policy proposals, opposing those put forward by the EU and other international organizations.

In terms of politics at the EU level, the AfD has failed to have much influence so far. The French National Rally (*Rassemblement National* - RN) party led by Marine Le Pen, who has spearheaded the process of turning her father's party into a more moderate-looking and electable political force, has refused to be associated with the AfD in the European Parliament (EP). The group appears to fear the impression that such an association would raise questions on the RN's stance on the Holocaust. Moreover, several prominent AfD politicians in the EP have pending criminal procedures for accepting financial support from Russia. Still, the rise of the AfD in Germany could overall provide support to the illiberal bloc in European politics. This bloc stretches from Viktor Orban, in power for over a decade but increasingly isolated in EU politics, to Giorgia Meloni, who successfully mainstreamed her far-right party in the international arena.

The path that the AfD will follow remains, as we have seen, uncertain, and it will also depend on the degree of future right-wing appeasement from the side of the CDU/CSU. In this regard, the German conservatives should take a good look at major parties in other European countries. Appeasement has been a recurring pattern in recent years. In Poland, for instance, the liberal government led by Donald Tusk has adopted anti-immigration and anti-refugee measures to tap into the pool of far-right voters; the defeat of Tusk's liberal ally Rafał Trzaskowski to conservative-nationalist Karol Nawrocki in the recent presidential election casts doubt on the effectiveness of this strategy. Another recent example are the Netherlands: "Good populism' is both empirically and normatively the wrong strategy to fight 'bad populism'", the renowned populism scholar Cas Mudde warned in a 2019 commentary on the growing populist right-wing appeasement in several parties, especially in the conservative VVD.<sup>11</sup> Developments since then have proven him right. In the 2023 election, the VVD ended up as one of three junior partners in a coalition with Geert Wilders' far-right Party of Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid* - PVV). In light of the breakdown of this coalition in June 2025, initiated by Wilders himself who strategically aims to present his former partners as still being too weak to follow his own radical plans, it is uncertain which direction the country will take in the new elections in autumn.

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<sup>10</sup> Zeit für Deutschland, Programm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl zum 21. Deutschen Bundestag, 11-12.01.2025, [https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/AfD\\_Bundestagswahlprogramm2025\\_web.pdf](https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/AfD_Bundestagswahlprogramm2025_web.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Cas Mudde, 'Why 'good populism' is the wrong strategy to fight bad populism', The Guardian, 03.01.2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2019/jan/03/good-populism-wrong-strategy-fight-bad-populism>.

## Outlook

Two interdependent processes will thus be crucial for the AfD's further success and the possibility of the party eventually even achieving governmental power. These are the party's own strategical self-positioning (further radicalization or a more moderate self-presentation), and the other parties', particularly that of the CDU/CSU, self-positioning towards the AfD (appeasement and/or maintaining the *Brandmauer*). Concerning the former, signs are currently pointing to further radicalization. However, this may change depending on the latter. A mutual and incremental rapprochement between the AfD and CDU/CSU over the coming years is not an entirely unlikely scenario. Apart from the Union's signals that it may relativize the *Brandmauer* that we discussed above, factors such as the new government's announced implementation of strict border policies, even in violation of European law, as well as Merz's quasi-Trumpist strongman politics, may provide further fruitful ground.

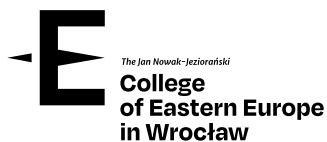
If the current trends continue, then the 2025 German election might have been the last one in which the question about the AfD's participation in government was off the table from the outset for the conservatives. Regarding the next election, the scenario we outlined above – the further decline of the CDU/CSU and SPD as *Volksparteien*, continued large support for the AfD, and the consolidation of *Die Grünen* and *Die Linke* – may result in three to five parties with similar voter turnout. This may also come with new challenges for finding political compromises between those centrist, non-radical parties that want to uphold the *Brandmauer*. An interesting long-term question is whether this could result in a “meta-populist” political playing field as has developed in the Netherlands. In such a setting, the constant need for finding compromises and common denominators amongst several heterogeneous parties can lead to decision making that is primarily based on the popularity of stances at a particular moment, rather than on party politics or political convictions. In short, short-term *popularity* feeds into *populist form*. In the Dutch case, two decades of heightened political pressure and cultural fears, particularly with regard to migration, have led to most political parties performing more or less moderate moves towards the right. This ultimately contributed to a far-right party not only winning the elections but forming a government with three junior partners willing to make far-reaching compromises with the radicals.<sup>12</sup> Overall, this is yet another confirmation of Jean-Marie Le Pen's notorious motto, which may yet again serve as an urgent warning to those who favor appeasement in the German case: In the end, voters will prefer the original over the copy.

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<sup>12</sup> Pola Cebulak, Florian Lippert, Shocks to the System. Lessons from Geert Wilders' Victory in the Dutch Elections. College of Eastern Europe (KEW), 15.02.2024, <https://www.kew.org.pl/en/2024/02/15/shocks-to-the-system-lessons-from-geert-wilders-victory-in-the-dutch-elections/>.

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Edited by Adam Balcer  
Proofreading: Niall Gray  
ISBN 978-83-7893-326-7  
DTP by Dolasu