

The rise of the AfD after Cologne poses a serious challenge for Merkel's policy on refugees

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*Following events on New Year's Eve, in which a number of women were sexually assaulted in several cities including Cologne, the issue of immigration has come to the fore of domestic politics in Germany. [Julian M Hoerner](#) writes that the Eurosceptic *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) party has experienced an upturn in support since the incidents, with Angela Merkel also receiving criticism from some of her own political partners. He notes that with the next federal election still some time away, it remains to be seen whether domestic political pressure will force Merkel to shift her policy on refugees.*



The Eurosceptic *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) party positioned itself initially as a liberal party opposed to the euro in its current form and to further bailouts for countries such as Greece. After a split in 2015, when the classical liberal wing of the party led by its founder Bernd Lucke left to form a new outlet called ALFA, the AfD clearly moved to the right fringe of the political spectrum and initially fared rather badly in opinion polls in the summer of 2015, often remaining below the five per cent which would be necessary to enter parliament.

However, with the number of refugees reaching Germany remaining high and Chancellor Merkel increasingly seen as isolated in Europe with her position on the matter, support for the AfD has grown again. It came in [third in a national poll](#) for the first time after the Paris attacks in November 2015. By now, the party had abandoned its liberal rhetoric and focused almost completely on issues of immigration, security and an anti-Islam platform. Björn Höcke, the party's leader in the *Landtag* of Thuringia, [caused outrage](#) when he talked about 'different reproductive strategies of Africans and Europeans' at a public event of a right wing think tank.

Incidents on New Year's Eve, most notably in Cologne, in which hundreds of women were sexually harassed – the perpetrators largely from a North African immigrant background, some of them reportedly having entered the country as refugees – suddenly brought the AfD's rhetoric close to the mainstream of public debates in Germany. While groups of refugees showed solidarity with the victims and [fiercely condemned the acts](#), and feminist activists aimed to seize the opportunity to initiate a wider debate on sexism and racism in Germany under the slogan [#ausnahmslos](#) ('no excuses'), politicians from across the political spectrum were quick to demand more restrictive asylum policies.

Horst Seehofer, the leader of the Christian Social Union (CSU), the sister party of Merkel's CDU in Bavaria, demanded a [cap on the number of refugees](#) Germany would accept of 200,000 per year. Sigmar Gabriel, chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) with which Merkel is in coalition, called for a [quicker repatriation](#) of asylum seekers who commit offences, and even Sara Wagenknecht, leader of the opposition and member of *Die Linke*, a far-left party, made a public statement about the limits of the ['right to hospitality'](#) in Germany.

The AfD could now benefit from an issue which they focus on making it into the political mainstream, while sober debates about the real challenges and necessary steps to integrate refugees now often give way to polarised discussion, especially on social media. Throughout Germany, so-called *'Bürgerwehren'*, [vigilante groups](#) with the aim of taking the law into their own hands because of a perceived threat to German women, have formed throughout the country.

In this nervous political atmosphere, the AfD could again improve its showing in opinion polls. According to a recent Insa poll, the party reached a [new record high](#) of 13 per cent at the national level. In the important upcoming state elections in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate, two west German states, the party is projected to take

10 and 8 per cent of the votes respectively, while in the eastern state of Saxony-Anhalt it could even reach 15 per cent.

By contrast, Chancellor Merkel's CDU and her coalition partner, the SPD, have lost support in recent polls. Their strategy of isolating the AfD in the public debate does not seem to be paying off. The decision of Malu Dreyer, the social democratic Prime Minister of Rhineland-Palatinate, not to participate in a TV debate with an AfD candidate was heavily criticised by media representatives, prompting the editor in chief of the public TV channel SWR to [question](#) the conception of democracy held by the governing parties and the Greens, calling them 'Schoenwetterdemokraten' ('democrats only under favorable circumstances').

The political consequences of this surge of the AfD and the increased prominence of anti-immigrant rhetoric for German politics are likely to be far reaching. Chancellor Merkel so far remains steadfast and is rejecting any calls for a cap on the number of refugees entering the country. But she has announced that she would ['see where we stand'](#) after a Syria Donors Conference and an EU Summit in February.

The AfD is likely to continue to use immigration as an issue to exploit division between the coalition partners and within Merkel's own 'Union' parties, the CDU and the CSU. In the current situation, no government coalition without the CDU/CSU would be possible. But Merkel is increasingly facing criticism and threats from within her own ranks, with some senior figures [hinting](#) that they would put their preferences on the refugee question above loyalty to the Chancellor. The next federal election is still some time off in September 2017. It remains to be seen whether Merkel will stick to her current policy or change her position closer to a major electoral test, as she has done in the past.

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