

How the split in Germany's Eurosceptic AfD is likely to help Angela Merkel

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The Eurosceptic Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) narrowly failed to cross Germany's five per cent electoral threshold in the country's 2013 federal elections, but managed to gain seven MEPs in the 2014 European Parliament elections. However, as [Julian M Hoerner](#) notes, this initial success has evaporated in recent months following a split within the party. He writes that the split represented a fundamental disagreement between the AfD's economically liberal/Eurosceptic wing, and a more traditional far-right element focused on restricting immigration, with the latter group now likely to dominate the party under the leadership of Frauke Petry.



On 4 July, the eve of the Greek bailout referendum, the [Alternative für Deutschland](#), Germany's new Eurosceptic party, held a conference in the West German city of Essen. The founder and most prominent face of the party, Professor Bernd Lucke, [failed to be re-elected as party leader](#). This outcome was the result of several months of severe infighting in the AfD epitomised by a conflict between Mr Lucke, who sits in the European Parliament, and Frauke Petry, the leader of the party in the *Landtag* of Saxony.

Mr Lucke and other prominent 'liberal' members have since left the AfD – and with them around [ten per cent](#) of the party's membership. Mr Lucke [almost immediately](#) founded a new party, the [Alliance for Progress and Renewal](#) or 'ALFA', which is, however, unlikely to be successful. This split comes just a year after the AfD gained seven MEPs in the 2014 European Parliament elections and received around ten per cent of votes in several German regional elections. The AfD has since slumped from ten to three per cent in [national polls](#).

To understand how this split came about, it is necessary to consider how the two biggest challenges Europe currently faces – the lengthy negotiations concerning a third bailout package for Greece and the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean – have influenced the different factions of the party and forced them to clarify their positions. When one takes a close look at the activity of the AfD in the European Parliament and the German *Landtage* in which it is represented, the split should not come as a great surprise. As a recent [analysis by Der Spiegel](#) has shown, the party groups of the AfD in the European Parliament and in the regional parliaments of the East German *Länder* have very different priorities when it comes to the focus of their parliamentary work.

While the parliamentary questions and motions of the AfD in the European Parliament are mostly concerned with the euro and economic policy, the parties groups in the *Landtage* of Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia are predominantly concerned with internal security and immigration policy. In Thuringia, one third of all questions and motions clustered around the terms 'Muslims', 'religious Extremism' and 'Asylum seekers'. The AfD in the EP thus positions itself as a liberal to conservative anti-euro party, while the party groups at the subnational level are clearly part of the far-right. Under Frauke Petry's leadership, the party is now likely to take the latter direction at the national level as well.

In Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia, former regional strongholds of the extreme-right [NPD](#) and [DVU](#), the AfD leadership has sought close alignment with the [PEGIDA](#) movement, as I have described in a [previous EUOPP post](#). While this group has lost a lot of its steam over the last few months, attendance at weekly marches has [risen again](#) recently. At the same time, Germany has seen a shocking series of [arson attacks](#) on asylum seeker shelters and [xenophobic violence](#) on the fringes of a neo-Nazi demonstration in the city of Dresden.

These shameful crimes are clearly not limited to the eastern part of the country. However, party functionaries of the AfD in some regional parliaments clearly fuel xenophobic sentiments. Sebastian Wippel, spokesperson for internal

affairs in the parliament of Saxony, recently [stated](#) that ‘Germany is becoming a gathering place for criminals from all over the world’. Frauke Petry has indicated before that in her view Islam is [not compatible](#) with the German Basic law.

Mr Lucke has been opposed to such rhetoric in the past. At the party conference in July, he was shouted down when he stated that general attacks on Islam would be [offensive to millions of German Muslims](#). Together with several other members of the liberal wing of the AfD, he had founded the initiative “[Weckruf 2015](#)” (wake-up call) in May, which was meant to clear the AfD of any radical right tendencies, but ultimately failed.

Hans Olaf-Henkel, former Head of the Federation of German Industry (BDI) and supporter of the liberal [FDP](#), [left the AfD](#) immediately after Mrs Petry was elected as leader. As a consequence of this disarray, the economically liberal and Eurosceptic wing of the party was unable to capitalise on what should have been its brightest moment – the weeks of insecurity around Grexit, the Greek referendum and reportedly intense clashes between national leaders at late night summits of the European Council.



Frauke Petry, Credit: Der Tempelhofer (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

It could be argued that the prospects of success for the ALFA, the new party founded by Mr Lucke, are fairly low. A recent poll for the public broadcaster ARD conducted by Infratest dimap showed that a majority of respondents [supports the German government's handling](#) of negotiations with Greece. The room for a Eurosceptic yet solidly liberal opposition party seems limited at a time when the German Minister of Finance, Wolfgang Schäuble, has floated plans for a [temporary Grexit](#) and is [more popular than ever](#) among his compatriots.

Indeed Chancellor Merkel's [CDU/CSU](#) was projected to have a chance to achieve an absolute majority in the next federal elections by the pollster Emnid, and she has reportedly hinted that she would [run for a fourth term](#). The FDP, the former junior coalition partner of Mrs Merkel, recently re-emerged from electoral oblivion after its annihilation in the 2013 federal elections and received around seven per cent of votes in the regional elections in the city states of [Bremen](#) and [Hamburg](#) earlier this year. According to a recent [nationwide poll](#) the FDP would receive six per cent and thus make it back into parliament whereas the AfD would fail to clear the five per cent threshold if a new Bundestag was to be elected this week.

There does not therefore seem to be the potential for another economically liberal, Eurosceptic but essentially bourgeois party in the German political spectrum. The far-right AfD is likely here to stay – but to become even more of a regional (East German) phenomenon than it used to be. The German chancellor Angela Merkel is likely to benefit from the split of the AfD, at least in the short run. With the Greek crisis temporarily solved and approval of her government's handling of the matter high, she does not have to fear attacks and mobilisation on the issue of the common currency from the right.

The more challenging topic is now bound to be immigration, where she is likely to [come under fire](#) not only from the 'new' AfD but also from the Bavarian sister party of her [CDU](#), the [Christian Social Union](#) (CSU). The leader of the CSU, Horst Seehofer, opposes a [new immigration bill](#) which some in Merkel's CDU and her junior coalition partner, the [SPD](#), support. While the debate on the euro and Greece has temporarily calmed down, a debate on immigration is likely to be the next challenge Merkel will face from the right, both from her own ranks and the AfD. Mr Lucke's

new party is likely to play only a marginal role in this context.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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