

Germany's new anti-euro party, Alternative für Deutschland, might prove to be a game changer in German and European politics.

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22/04/2013

*In February, a new German political party, Alternative für Deutschland, was established ahead of the country's Federal Elections in September. Defining itself as 'anti-euro', but 'pro-EU', the party has already experienced significant growth in its membership numbers. **Robert Grimm** assesses the platform of the new party and its potential for success in the upcoming elections. He argues that while the broad nature of its support base might prove problematic in the long term, it nevertheless has the potential to be a 'game changer' in German and European politics.*



The German Eurosceptic party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) held its inaugural conference in InterContinental in the heart of Berlin on Sunday the 14th of April. The hotel's 1400 square-foot ballroom overflowed with 1,300 members of the German elite including entrepreneurs, representatives of the managerial class, doctors, lawyers, judges, journalists, and academics. The conference was professionally organised with dedicated pressrooms, sophisticated IT facilities, and an orderly agenda. It was a far cry from the beer tent mentality that is generally associated with Germany's far right.

Despite only being established on the 6th of February 2013, the AfD's success is already beyond expectations. In the weeks leading up to the conference, the party had broad media coverage and its ranks swelled from 5,000 to 7,500 in a 'tsunami of membership'. According to the German magazine *Focus*, no party, since the formation of the Greens in 1980, has been able to raise as much attention in such a brief period.

Bernd Lucke, Professor of Macroeconomics at Hamburg University, who calls the economic aspects of the current debt crises his 'home game', is the AfD's most prominent public face. Lucke also initiated the Economic Plenum, an association of 328 German macroeconomists, many of which voted against the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). As one conference's attendee put it, it is this 'concentrated intelligence' that makes many Germans receptive to the AfD's message.



Bernd Lucke, Party Speaker Alternative für Deutschland (Credit: Mathesar, CC BY 3.0)

As true Europeans, we need to abandon the euro

In essence, the AfD sees itself as an alternative to prevailing pro-euro politics among Germany's mainstream parties. To that purpose, the AfD has three essential aims: 'restore democratic values'; reinstate the 'state of law'; and return to 'economic common sense'.

According to Lucke, the single currency was a historic mistake. Market dynamics made some European regions more competitive than others creating a union of unequal partners. Before the introduction of the euro, less competitive countries were able to de-value their currencies to become attractive for investment. This option has

become inaccessible to members of the Eurozone. Europe consequently disintegrates into a poor and stagnating southern part and an affluent northern part. Correcting this mistake is the only way out of the current crisis. Lucke argues that: 'As true Europeans, we need to abandon the single currency that is tearing the union apart.' The AfD therefore demands an orderly dissolution of the euro and the return to either national currencies or smaller stable currency areas.

The AfD laments that the Stability and Growth Pact, set out in the Treaty of Maastricht and designed to maintain the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) by use of strict fiscal policy that limits government deficit to 3 per cent of GDP and national debt to 60 per cent of GDP, has been breached 80 times without repercussions. The German government under the chancellorship of Gerhard Schröder was the first to do so. Moreover, the 'No Bail-Out Clause' that was part of the original treaties and which bound governments to national budget discipline without further liability for other member states has been effectively overridden through the ratification of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) in September 2012. The ESM, according to Lucke and his followers, 'institutionalised the unlawful'.

Lucke's party also complains that German parliamentary politics has 'degenerated' into an apathetic farce without conviction and leadership. The AfD demands greater transparency of political processes and, most importantly, more democracy. Like people in other nations, Germans should be given the right to exercise a choice over euro membership in a direct referendum, rather than indirectly through elected representatives.

A fundamental reform of European Institutions and the renegotiation of Germany's relationship with Europe are central themes in the party's programme. The AfD calls for an end to European centralisation and the repatriation of legislative powers and budget control to national governments. Similar to the vision of (moderate) British Eurosceptics, Lucke's Europe is a union of sovereign states with a single market. The AfD proposes a 'politics of common sense' (Politik des gesunden Menschenverstands) as the response to Europe's and Germany's urgent problems. In light of the complex issues at hand and considering the party's substantial backing from 'academic intelligence', this sounds disappointingly simplistic.

Conservative populism without ideology

Sunday's meeting had a populist undertone. Although the 'little man' was notoriously absent in this gathering of academics and business leaders, the AfD builds on popular fear and discontent. The symbolic Aldi shop assistant appeared twice in Lucke's speech as a victim of German bailout politics and imaginative transfer unions. While Greece was described as a country where 'tax evasion and corruption are a sport', there was also a show of solidarity for the people of southern Europe who are enduring German imposed austerity. In a critique of speculative international corporate capital, the AfD's leader argued that German taxpayers' money was not used to bail out struggling Greeks and Portuguese, but American hedgefunds, French and German banks, as well as British insurers.

The AfD sees itself as the civil society revolting against the ruling class, similar to the [Vormärz](#). The Vormärz, associated with the struggle of progressive liberal and national forces to repel the conservatism following the Congress of Vienna, is an important historical period predating the 1848 bourgeoisie revolution. It ultimately led to the formation of the modern German nation. The ideals of the Vormärz are often re-invoked by Germany's ultra conservatives. The AfD can be located to the right of the centre-right, but it claims to have no ideological grounding. As Lucke puts it: 'we are neither left nor right, but a party of a new type that does not need ideological road signs'. In his address, he symbolically mentioned notable German statesmen who shaped German post-war politics, including Adenauer (CDU), Schmidt (SPD), Brandt (SPD), Kohl (CDU), and Genscher (FDP). The party spokesman was also quick to point out that the AfD attracts disenchanting members from the (far) left to the (far) right, a claim that was supported by [Focus](#) and [Infratest Dimap](#).

Drawing on broad support may be an advantage but the heterogeneity of the party's followers also poses considerable problems. Early disintegration is perhaps the biggest threat to the AfD's September election prospects.

In an obvious contradiction with the party's democratic principles, the leadership therefore decided to allow little time for thematic discussions during Sunday's congress. Imposing the election programme, for all intents and purposes, 'from above' may have prevented potentially catastrophic infighting and schisms.

Impact on German politics

The German political mainstream will find it hard to ignore the AfD and it has been quick to attack the newly formed party. The leader of the opposition in the Bundestag, Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), condemned the AfD for drawing political capital from a complex crisis to formulate populist arguments. Jürgen Trittin (Greens) argued that it was misguided to look to the old model of European nation states for a successful platform for German export industries. Meanwhile the leader of the left-wing 'Die Linke' party, Bernd Riexinger, identified the AfD as 'currently the most dangerous party' on the far-right.

For now, the real impact of the AfD on German politics can only be estimated. It is doubtful that the AfD will breach the 5 per cent threshold required to enter the Bundestag in September's general elections. The Freien Wähler, a party with a similar agenda, achieved only 1.1 per cent of the vote in the latest regional polls in Lower Saxony. However a representative survey by YouGov for *Die Zeit*, published on April 17th, found that 27 per cent of Germans sympathise with the AfD. If the AfD can keep up its current momentum it will be able to upset the balance of power in the Bundestag and force a reshuffle of coalition partners after the September elections. The Alternative für Deutschland might yet prove to be a game changer in German and European politics.

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