

Heading into the mainstream? Reviewing a year of the AfD in the German parliament



Almost one year has passed since the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) was elected to the Bundestag in the 2017 German federal elections. [Julian Göppfarth](#) looks back on what has happened since, and how events have shaped both the AfD and German society.

Media coverage in Germany has been dominated in recent days by far-right violence in the city of Chemnitz. Embedded in large crowds of anti-refugee and anti-immigration protests, the pictures offered shocking images of neo-Nazis reminiscent of the violent outbreaks in Rostock, Solingen and Hoyerswerda almost 30 years ago. The self-confidence visible in many of the protagonists, the support of large sections of the local population, and the entanglement of the protests with local institutions in Chemnitz, reflects the increased reach and normalisation of far-right positions in parts of the German population.

An important milestone for the institutionalisation and spread of far-right positions was the AfD's election to the Bundestag with 12.6 per cent of the vote on 24 September last year. While Chemnitz has yet again shifted the attention to the far-right's strength in economically weak areas in East Germany, the AfD's success in 2017 and its stable position in polls all over Germany suggests that far-right ideas chime with a substantial number of German citizens. A look back at the past 12 months shows that the AfD has managed not only to act as a spark for and institutionally support street movements, but that it has also increased its impact on the German public debate and established and institutionalised a far-right milieu that now reaches deep into German mainstream society.

September to December 2017 – scandals, electoral success and a growing far-right public sphere

The 2017 elections were dominated by fear of a strong performance by the AfD. Concerns about a strong AfD presence in the Bundestag had been further sparked by a [speech](#) given by then AfD lead candidate and now party leader Alexander Gauland in early September. At the so-called Kyffhäuser-Treffen, organised by the AfD's ultra-nationalist organisation "Der Flügel", Gauland called for an end of coming to terms with Germany's Nazi past, stating instead that Germans "have the right to be proud of the achievements of German soldiers in two World Wars".

The speech provoked outrage and led the social democrat candidate [Martin Schulz to call for an observation of the party by the Verfassungsschutz](#), Germany's domestic security agency – a debate that has recently been [reignited](#) by the events in Chemnitz. Yet this discussion did nothing to harm the AfD's performance in the elections. The party won 12.6 per cent of the vote, an increase of 7.9 percentage points compared to the previous elections in 2013. Those who hoped the party's rhetoric would be tamed by its success were proven wrong when one of the first statements by Gauland after the vote was that the party aimed to "[hunt down](#)" Angela Merkel.

The success of the party was only overshadowed by the decision of its former leader Frauke Petry to [leave the party](#) on the morning after the elections to found her new, more moderate movement "Die blaue Partei" (The Blue Party). Petry's move failed to bring about a split in the AfD, as many had hoped, and her new party met with little success. Only one further member decided to leave the AfD, while the performance of "Die Blaue Partei" has fallen short of expectations.

The election of 92 AfD candidates into the parliament also meant a financial boost as it allowed the party to receive [around 400 million euros of state funding](#) over the following four years. This state support is in addition to the money the AfD receives at the subnational Länder level where the party is present in 14 out of the 16 Länder parliaments. In the Bundestag, AfD parliamentarians alone receive 38.3 million euros every year, money which allows them to institutionalise and extend their outreach to civil society.

Beyond the party-political realm, actors close to the AfD have managed to extend their outreach, which had already grown since the climax of the so-called refugee crisis in 2015. Publications such as *Eigentümlich Frei*, *Tumult*, *Sezession* or *Tichys Einblick* have managed to stabilise their position on the online and print media market. They have become influential media aimed at a more educated and intellectual audience and complement the network of more populist publications such as *Compact* or *Junge Freiheit*.

Cato magazine falls into the former category. It was founded shortly before the elections and is closely connected to the *Bibliothek des Konservatismus* (Library of Conservatism), a think tank seated in Berlin and with close links to the AfD and its parliamentarians. While the position of these publications towards the AfD oscillates between strong support and sceptical distance, they have nevertheless built up an alternative public sphere carrying much the AfD's basic positions, first and foremost the call for a return to the nation and rejection of multiculturalism. Most importantly, they have successfully given an alternative intellectual home to Germans [whose scepticism towards more established media has grown](#) over recent years.

The growing influence of these relatively new actors became visible in October 2017 when the Frankfurt book fair was shaken by [violence between pro and anti-far right groups](#) over events and stands organised by the far-right publishing house *Antaios* and *Tumult*. As a reaction to the events at the book fair, the so-called [Charta 2017](#) was initiated. Aimed against an alleged emerging "Gesinnungsdiktatur" (mindset-dictatorship) the online petition ended with the words "Wehret den Anfängen" (Resist the beginnings) – an emotionally highly charged phrase that is usually evoked in the context of the rise of fascism in the 1920s. Another reaction was the publication of the book "Mit Linken leben", authored by Marin Lichtmesz and Caroline Sommerfeld. The book later earned Sommerfeld a [homestory by the New York times](#). Overall, the first months following the election benefitted the AfD. While the [Jamaica coalition talks failed](#), and the other parties struggled to reposition themselves after the elections, the AfD was able to profit from a general feeling of crisis and apathy.

January to April 2018 – a struggling CSU, emerging protest networks and intellectual support

A new scandal made sure that the AfD stayed in the headlines at the beginning of 2018. This time, however, the scandal was not triggered by the AfD but the CSU, the CDU's Bavarian sister party, tempting far-right waters in sight of the upcoming Bavarian elections and the increasing strength of the Bavarian AfD. Its then general secretary [Alexander Dobrindt called for implementing a "conservative revolution"](#), another highly charged term associated with a [group of conservative intellectuals in 1920s Germany](#), some of whom are viewed as having paved the way for the rise of National Socialism. It is also the group that is the central historical reference of the contemporary intellectual New Right.

On the streets, the PEGIDA-like movement ["Zukunft. Heimat" in Cottbus](#) emerged in the wake of a knife attack committed by a refugee. As a reaction, a mix of "concerned citizens" and neo-Nazis marched to protest against "Überfremdung" (excess of foreigners) and the "multiculturalisation of Germany" – a pattern that could be observed again recently in Chemnitz. Since the beginning, the movement had close links to PEGIDA. Activists of both have been promoting and supporting each other with speakers, infrastructure and the provision of travel opportunities to Dresden or Cottbus. A well organised protest network has emerged, often facilitated by such pre-existing structures as the Identitarian Movement or "Ein Prozent". A mirror of the growing networks online and spanning a broad spectrum from the radical right to a conservative bourgeoisie and frustrated citizens.

The shift to the right of parts of the German population has also been reflected in the book market. Simon Strauß, son of Botho Strauß, a playwright and writer close to the New Right, recently published his literary debut. In the book, the 30-year-old laments a lack of meaning in his saturated generation's life and a lack of pathos, topics that chime with far-right audiences. The book sparked another scandal, less because of its content, but because of [Strauß's alleged links to Götz Kubitschek](#). The latter was [proclaimed the "Prophet of Germany's New Right" by the New York Times](#) and founded the now influential far-right think tank "Institut für Staatspolitik" as well as the publishing house "Antaios" and the network "Ein Prozent". Other more established authors have shown sympathy for far-right positions. Monika Maron, for example, has [written articles in favour of the AfD](#), used book readings to warn of Islamisation and published a book that is largely based on fears of a new religious 30-years-war in Germany.

Together with the standstill in forming a new government, these events and publications informed a general feeling of crisis, captured by the Spiegel in its February [front page entitled](#) "The German Crisis – the Weakness of the Big Parties – the Weakness of the Republic". This feeling was far from tamed by the CDU/CSU and SPD's agreement on a new grand coalition in March.

Instead, the beginning of March was marked by a discussion between two writers in Dresden – Uwe Tellkamp and Durs Grünbein. Both started out as local authors and have become well known national and international writers. In the discussion, they respectively represented the German polarisation between a camp leaning toward the AfD and PEGIDA-positions and those who oppose them. [Tellkamp sparked outrage](#) with his claim that 95 per cent of refugees “do not flee war and persecution but to immigrate into our welfare state” and anti-Muslim statements. For his positions, Tellkamp received applause not only from PEGIDA activists and Kubitschek, but also from the [German star painter Neo Rauch](#).

At the end of March, the chain of far right protest movements in the East was broken by a large [protest movement in Kandel](#), a small town in the south-west of Germany, again after a murder committed by a refugee. As in Cottbus and Chemnitz, the far-right used the crime for self-promotion in its campaign “Kandel ist überall” (Kandel is everywhere). The AfD also decided to [drop its ban on cooperation with PEGIDA](#) and similar movements, which was celebrated enthusiastically at one of the PEGIDA gatherings in Dresden.

The development of Kandel as a sort of west German “centre of resistance”, as the far-right terms it, was paralleled by the spread of the so-called [“Erklärung 2018”](#) (Declaration 2018). The petition was signed mainly by well-known public figures such as CDU-member and former GDR civil rights activist Vera Lengsfeld, Uwe Tellkamp, SPD member and Islam critic Thilo Sarrazin, and journalist Henryk M. Broder, as well as influential thinkers of the far-right such as Karheinz Weissmann and Michael Klonovsky. It positioned itself against “illegal mass immigration” and called for solidarity with the “peaceful protest movements” on the street. So far, the petition has reached over 65,000 signatures. It has thus reached the threshold of 50,000 necessary for a discussion in the committee of petitions of the Bundestag, for which a session will be held October.

May to August 2018 – new collaborations, new scandals and new violence

The close entanglement between radical and extreme right groups around the Identitarian Movement, parts of the AfD, intellectual circles and a more bourgeois establishment gained further substance between May and August 2018. On 5 May, the so-called “Neue Hambacher Fest” (New Hambach Festival) was set up by economist Max Otte and [celebrated by Cato Magazine](#) as an important first step towards a future coalition of CDU/CSU, FDP and AfD. Speakers at this revival of the 1832 Hambach Festival for national unity included Thilo Sarrazin and Vera Lengsfeld, both of which have become celebrated figures in the far-right in recent years. At the same time as far-right circles attempted to build up the Hambach Festival as the basis for a stronger German patriotism, Götz Kubitschek travelled to Italy. His aim being to build on a European far-right network and to intensify his connections to the freshly elected new Italian government, above all [Matteo Salvini](#).

In the Bundestag, co-leader of the AfD’s parliamentary faction Alice Weidel [claimed in a speech](#) that Germany “is governed by idiots” who would have allowed Germany to be ruined by “Burkas, headscarved girls and alimented knife-men”. Some weeks later, [AfD leader Gauland claimed](#) that in “a thousand years of successful German history” Hitler and National Socialism represented only a “bird-dropping” (Vogelschiss). At the same time, a photo taken of German national football players Mesut Özil and Ilkay Gündogan with Turkish President Ergogon sparked off a heated debate over German identity, [amplified by far-right actors and the AfD](#) and triggering a week long debate on integration and structural racism.

In June, this debate was further intensified by a chain of developments. First by a [scandal around the Federal Office of Migration and Refugees](#), followed by a [power struggle](#) between CSU interior minister Seehofer and Angela Merkel about the question of who and how to refuse migrants at the German border. Last but not least, [the murder of a teenage girl](#) in Wiesbaden came to light and was again used efficiently by the far-right.

The climax of a general sense of crisis and lack of security associated with refugees was finally reached with the early knock-out of the German national team at the 2018 FIFA World Cup. A deep shock for a Germany spoiled by years of successful football which led many commentators to draw [parallels between a crisis in football and a general German crisis](#). Again, the Spiegel front pages and titles reflected and exacerbated a widespread feeling of crisis. First, it declared the refugee crisis to be [“The German Question”](#), before calling the crisis in the German government and football the sign of an [“Apocalypse”](#) or the [decline of a strong Germany](#).

Amid this perceived crisis, the AfD made important steps to institutionalise and extend its reach to broader audiences. At its June party conference, it decided to [name the Desiderius-Erasmus-Stiftung its official party foundation](#). Led by former CDU member and ex-President of the “Bund der Vertriebenen” (Federation of Expellees) Erika Steinbach, the foundation was supposed to provide the AfD with “ideas” and help bring about a [“cultural revolution” against a dominant “leftist ideology”](#). With Karheinz Weissmann and Karl Albrecht Schachtschneider, it appointed two central actors in the German far-right with close links to Kubitschek. At the same time, Kubitschek’s far-right think tank “Institut für Staatspolitik” and “Ein Prozent” held their [first events](#) in the buildings of the German Bundestag – a huge step for actors that only five years ago were seen as a largely marginal phenomenon.

One year of the AfD in the Bundestag – a success story?

Looking back at the last 12 months, it is clear that the AfD and the multiple far, radical and extreme right groups more and less closely associated to it were successful in setting the agenda of the political, social and cultural debates in Germany. The recent clashes in Chemnitz can be seen as the preliminary climax of a normalisation and institutionalisation of far-right positions over the past year. The parallel publication of Thilo Sarrazin’s new book on Muslim immigration entitled “Hostile Takeover” also symbolises the convergence and increased entanglement of a conservative bourgeois elite and the far-right.

This article is by no means an exhaustive description of the developments and events that have accompanied and characterised the first year of the AfD in the German parliament. They show clearly, however, that the shift to the right is not only a phenomenon restricted to economically left behind cities in East Germany. Rather, far right ideas have spread into the mainstream and West German elites – a development that is likely to hold Germany in a strong grip in the years to come. As while many among the AfD and far-right elites have a West German background, the bulk of activist infrastructure and street movements are more centred in the East. Hence, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that the AfD’s success should be seen as the first significant political post-unification phenomenon that overcomes not only the East-West divide, but also the split between elites and street movements.

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