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## ['Alternative for Germany' and the Kremlin: A marriage of convenience?](#)



'Alternative for Germany' (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD), a political party founded by Eurosceptics in 2013, which emerged in its current political shape in 2015, has become a notable political force in German politics within a short space of time. Representatives of AfD have already been elected to 13 of the 16 [Bundesrat](#) (the representative bodies of the [Länder](#), Germany's regional states) and some of them have taken on key positions on various committees. In 2016, the first ever city mayor from AfD was elected. Much like other political forces in Germany, the party has managed to acquire its own funding and build a number of associated organisations. AfD members are now commonly featured on popular German TV shows.

Global news media outlets have taken a growing interest in the various ties between the AfD and the Kremlin. Frauke Petry, the party leader, was [received](#) in Moscow by Vyacheslav Volodin while her fellow party member, husband and MEP Marcus Pretzell [visited](#) Yalta, a trip paid for by his Russian hosts. Moreover, according to the member of the Bundestag's Committee on Foreign Affairs, Roderich Kiesewetter (CDU), AfD receives funding from 'networks related to Russia'. So what are the possible affinities between AfD, which promotes German national conservatism and migrantophobia, and the leaders of a state which is a successor of the internationalist USSR?

### **Ideological points of contact**

The desire to establish close cooperation with Russia was part of the AfD's strategy almost from the moment the party was founded. Back in 2013, AfD became the first modern German political force to assume a Prussian-Bismarckian vision of Europe in its foreign policy. Its [manifesto](#) of that year suggested Germany take inspiration from its 19th century 'Reinsurance Treaty'. This convention of 1887, which was a kind of historical forerunner of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, actually provided for the concerted actions of the two empires in order to divide spheres of influence on the continent. In contemporary Germany, the idea of reviving the 'former German power' in an alliance with Russia has long been plying in political circles to the right of CDU, but was announced at the federal level only after the emergence of the AfD.

Control over Europe 'for two' without the 'Washington and Brussels dictates'; a strong national state; the rejection of globalisation and multiculturalism; a geopolitical revenge - all these postulates are something that the Kremlin and AfD have in common. Not surprisingly, Alexander Gauland, one of the AfD leaders, readily [acknowledges Crimea](#) as a 'primordially Russian territory', [supports the split of Ukraine](#) and emphasises that the 'activation of cooperation' between the EU and Ukraine should take place only '[in consensus with Russia](#)'. For the German right-wing forces, the former Soviet republics are the 'legitimate' zone of Moscow's interests.

In this context, sanctions against Russia look like a misunderstanding that prevents fruitful cooperation. This is where the unity of positions can be noticed. The press secretary of the Russian president, Dmitry Peskov, [calls](#) the economic sanctions on the Russian Federation 'illegitimate' whereas the head of the AfD for Saxony-Anhalt André Poggenburg [describes them](#) as 'morally unacceptable'. The two parties also agree on denying the idea of a united Europe. Representatives of AfD see the EU as 'a bed-ridden sick man' and [consider Brussels](#) to be

'anti-European by nature.' The Chairman of the State Duma Committee for CIS Affairs, Eurasian Integration and Relations with Compatriots, Leonid Kalashnikov (Communist Party of the Russian Federation), once stated on Russian television that the collapse of the EU would be 'beneficial' for Russia, because the EU is 'fighting' against Russia 'until exhaustion' and that is it ['better to talk separately'](#) with each EU member state.

### **Political pragmatism**

The relations between the AfD and the Kremlin look like a mutually beneficial exchange of services. AfD members cannot complain about a lack of attention from the German media. However, in order to get their message through to their target audience, they obviously consider the 'traditional' media insufficient, since many likely voters of AfD challenge the objectivity of the German media, considering them to be 'tools' used in the interests of those in power. Through the German versions of Russia Today and Sputnik News, the state holding company 'Rossiya Segodnya' provides AfD guests with a convenient platform. In May 2016, Russia's broadcasting media in German cited AfD 21 times. In April of 2016 alone, a total of [15 articles were published](#) which were in some way related to the statements of AfD members. The leader of the ultra-right wing of AfD, Björn Höcke, [appeared in 'Vesti'](#) as a generic German commentator on the terrorist attack at the Christmas Market in Berlin last year.

In turn, AfD opens access for Russia to the internal German political space. The AfD electoral lists feature six immigrants from the former USSR, including Waldemar Birkle, the leader of the intra-party group of Russian Germans. 'Friendship with Russia' is only one element of the election campaign for the top leaders of AfD, yet for the Russian-speaking right-wing politicians, this is the central claim of their campaign, right up there with anti-immigrant slogans. Birkle, who came to Germany in 1990 as a German repatriate, invokes the legacy of Bismarck (much like his older party comrades) but takes the liberty of speaking without excessive political correctness. He recalls that in the 19th century the alliance between Germany and Russia was 'necessary for the survival' of the German people whereas France was the 'sworn enemy' of Berlin. Birkle calls the current situation 'sick' and believes that the deterioration of relations between Germany and Russia is the fault of the 'geopolitical puppeteers from across the ocean'. The European Union is described by Birkle as the ['conduit of foreign interests'](#).

All Russian-speaking candidates of the AfD are running an active campaign in their native language, also via social media. For example, the Russian-speaking AfD groups in Odnoklassniki have a total of about 17,000 members. In early 2017, the 'Coordination Centre for Russian Germans' was established, supported by a number of Russian-speaking organisations which aim to bring the electorate towards right-wing forces.

### **Economic lobbying**

Support for the abolition of anti-Russian sanctions is only part of the economic agenda in relations between AfD and Russia. AfD has 25,000 members, many of them entrepreneurs. The leadership of AfD managed to establish close contacts with business circles and lobbying organisations in Germany. As early as in 2014, the influential Association of Family Business Owners invited the then head of AfD, Bernd Lucke, professor of macroeconomics, to deliver a speech at the opening of the party congress.

Three influential AfD politicians (leader of the electoral list Alica Weidel, MEP Beatrix von Storch and number two of the Bavarian list Peter Behringer) are members of the [prestigious Friedrich A. von Hayek Society](#), a closed organisation of well-known entrepreneurs and scholars. The board of the Society approached von Storch with a request to leave the organisation on a voluntary basis because of ['how the public perceives her behaviour'](#). Beatrix von Storch did not follow the recommendation and remains a member of the Society, which reflects her strong position within this structure. The interest of the Russian party in such relations established by right-wing politicians is quite understandable.

In August 2017, the AfD faction in the Landtag of Saxony-Anhalt organised the 'Congress on Russia'. Among the speakers was Hans-Jörg Müller, the head of the party's [Medium-sized Entrepreneurship Forum](#), who talked about the ['self-destruction'](#) of the German industry due to the sanctions against Russia. However, this politician may be a key link in the relations between the AfD and Russian business. Müller, who used to be the [Interim Manager of Bridge imp GmbH](#), a recruitment agency dealing with the selection of top managers for Russian enterprises, has a perfect command of the Russian language and over 20 years of experience in

cooperation with the Russian business community. In September 2016, he met with the vice-president of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation Vladimir Padalko in Moscow, discussing the 'trade and economic cooperation' and talking about his forum 'which unites about 300 small and medium-sized businesses'. The news about the meeting failed to mention that the organisation was a [division of AfD](#). In December 2016, the Forum published a video on YouTube about a "subsequent consultative meeting" between the AfD Bavaria and the Consul General of the Russian Federation in Munich Sergei Ganzha in the premises of the consulate. In his speech, Müller [advertised](#) opportunities for German business in Russia and stressed the need to create a single Eurasian economic space.

## **The prospects**

The current rating of AfD (8-10%) suggests that it may soon make it to the Bundestag. The potentially winning places on the electoral lists are relatively evenly distributed between 'moderate' and ultra-right groups, some of whom (especially the nationalists) see Moscow as their short-term 'fellow traveller', rather than a long-term ally. If AfD overcomes the entry threshold, its deputies will become members of parliamentary committees. In some cases, the primacy of domestic political interests will not allow them to maintain contacts with foreign partners with the same intensity, and the number of those who see Putin as the 'leader of European conservatives' will steadily decline. The further mode of collaboration between the AfD and the Kremlin will depend on what they can continue to offer each other.

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