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[Whither the Alternative for Germany?](#)



For the first time in its history, the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany party (AfD) has won seats in Germany's national parliament, the Bundestag. Elections this September saw the AfD emerge as the country's third largest party, garnering 12.6 percent of the vote and 94 seats. That number has dropped off slightly after its leader, Frauke Petry, and one other AfD MP, split away. So there are currently 92 MPs in the faction (including two Russian speaking politicians.) Spokesmen for the AfD are [downplaying](#) the significance of this split. Nevertheless, could this be the beginning of a wider internal strife for these Bundestag newcomers? What does the future hold?

The first scenario: a split

Frauke Petry entered big-league politics in 2013 when she became one of the three founders of the AfD. Two years later, she managed to defeat the moderate Eurosceptics in her party and became its sole leader. Petry was seen by party faithful as a symbol of national conservatism. Her success was perceived as a signal that the "unhappy professors' party," as it had previously been dubbed, had undergone a stark transformation. (This political force was founded initially, after all, because its members included economists who doubted the

viability of the Eurozone in its current form. At the outset, the then head of the party, Bernd Lucke, had served as a professor of economics in several German and foreign universities. Lucke has since left the party, [decrying](#) its foreign policy as “Islamophobic and anti-Western, openly pro-Russian”.)

Petry has now followed Lucke out the door. In September 2017, shortly after being elected a Bundestag MP, Petry announced her decision. Her husband, Marcus Pretzell, a member of the European Parliament and AfD’s regional chair in North Rhine-Westphalia, has also left the party. Similar decisions were made by Petry’s trustees from different German regions, as well as another Bundestag MP, Pretzell’s close affiliate Mario Mieruch. While Petry herself is avoiding lengthy explanations of this move, her former party fellows have proved more talkative. This is how the party’s vice president in Saxony, Sven Simon, explained his resignation: “the way in which the AfD is developing is disturbing. I am not sure this is the same party that I once joined”. His colleague from the party leadership, the AfD youth-wing activist Ralf Nahlob, was also quite outspoken. It [was important for him to prevent AfD](#) from “shifting” towards a political extreme, but “this goal has not been achieved”. Nahlob does not specify the final destination of this “shift”, but this is evidently about far-right extremism. Petry’s opponents inside the AfD don’t hide their delight, [arguing](#) that their former leader’s resignation was “inevitable”, and that she was “incapable of working in a team”.

Petry’s resignation shows the various contradictions tearing the AfD apart. She represented a “flirting” with a far-right strategy, in which she courted radical-right views. But she always tried to preserve a “conservative veneer,” teetering along the brink of what is permissible to say in German politics. The departure of Petry and her supporters heralds a crisis in the party’s two main strongholds: in Saxony (where the AfD won three ‘direct mandate’ seats) and North Rhine-Westphalia (the most densely populated German region, where 14 out of 16 AfD faction local MPs are considered to be pro-Petry). In another federal state important for the AfD, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, the [split has already been acknowledged officially](#): the four landtag MPs who left the AfD at the same time as Petry have formed a separate parliamentary faction.

According to unofficial data, there are up to 30 Petry supporters among the newly elected Bundestag MPs. The increased tension within the party could lead to a separate faction emerging at the federal level. What’s more, such a parliamentary force would be in demand. Experts and journalists have frequently drawn attention to a number of AfD politicians who are ideologically seen as close to the CDU’s right wing, the so-called “Berlin group”. In 2016, the CDU’s right wing published a letter in which it strongly criticised the Chancellor’s policies and her “swing to the left”.

In particular, the letter [expressed disagreement](#) with the country’s refugee policy and “gender ideology”, repeating almost word-for-word AfD’s rhetoric. However, while Petry’s supporters are acting under the AfD brand, any cooperation is impossible due to the firm position on this matter held by Angela Merkel and the loyal majority of CDU leaders. A couple of days before the election, the “Berlin group” even had to issue a special statement, [publicly disassociating](#) themselves from AfD. The appearance of a separate faction of former AfD MPs would open a new window of opportunity for CDU. A new coalition of Christian democrats, their Bavarian allies, the liberals and the Greens (which is currently being negotiated) is shaping up to be highly unstable due to fundamental disagreements over a whole range of core issues. Voting on these separate issues is exactly where support from a right-wing contingent, which formally no longer belongs to AfD, would come in handy.

The second case scenario: far-right extremism

Die Welt journalists have conducted the first analysis of AfD faction members and discovered that a large percentage of its MPs could be [described as ultra-right](#): Holocaust-deniers; supporters of conspiracy theories; blatant anti-Semites.

Some of the newly elected, such as Bavaria’s AfD leader Petr Bystron, No.4 on the party’s regional list of candidates, are [under surveillance by the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution](#), in connection with “suspected anti-constitutional intentions”. By suggesting that Germany should be “proud of what their soldiers achieved during the First and Second World Wars”, and talking about their right to [“reclaim our country and our past”](#), the head of the faction and AfD’s de-facto leader, Alexander Gauland, was not only provoking German society, but was also testing his own party’s pain threshold. Gauland has gotten away with it, just like another newly elected Bundestag MP, Wilhelm von Gottberg, an infamous ultra-right

revanchist broadcasting the idea of the German “cult of guilt”. Their party fellows have either approved their statements, or kept silent. Such was also the reaction to nominating Martin Homann onto their party lists. Homann is a politician who lost his mandate and was excluded from CDU for his anti-Semitic response to AfD Thuringia’s leader, Björn Höcke, who had [described Berlin’s Holocaust Memorial](#) as a “memorial of shame”.

Other similar opinions expressed by AfD’s high- and low-profile members have also been left uncommented. Höcke, the leader of the party’s far-right group “Der Flügel”, has openly demanded his own “quota” in the party’s list of candidates, and, judging by their final appearance, got what he wanted. If the “moderate” (or rather pragmatic) party members will fail to form a separate faction in the Bundestag, AfD may expect a complete transformation into a “light” version of the right-wing extremist National Democratic Party of Germany.

The third case scenario: stagnation

Two important AfD members – Alice Weidel, the party and faction’s co-chair, and Jörg Meuthen, head of the AfD’s influential faction in Baden-Württemberg and its federal spokesman – have welcomed Petry’s resignation as party leader. At the same time, both politicians are among those who are against AfD becoming exclusively the mouthpiece of the far-right. Weidel is trying to keep the door open for the right-wing conservative members of LGBTI community. She supports the main party line, and while allowing for civil unions between same-sex couples, opposes same-sex marriages, [stating](#) that “the family is where there is a child”, referring to the adoption rights for same-sex couples. Meuthen is one of the last high-ranking figures of the “Lucke period” when the party was dominated by right-wing conservatives. He doesn’t criticise radicals, but takes the liberty of [talking positively](#) about the idea of a common Europe. Both politicians try not to lose voters who are further right from the CDU, but will undoubtedly be scared off from the AfD if Gauland’s and Höcke’s acolytes will take over the party. They understand that protest voting is highly irregular, and if the situation in the country becomes relatively calm, the AfD might achieve far more modest results at the next elections. After all, pre-election polls showed that the AfD voters were mainly driven by their refusal to vote for the traditional democratic political forces; fears, real or imagined, not their support for the party’s policy program, drew voters to the AfD. Essentially, it was more a [“red card” for the authorities](#). If Weidel, Meuthen and their followers would be able to remain between right-wing populism and right-wing extremism, “counterbalancing” the party’s far-right wing and discouraging fellow party members from taking radical moves, it could lead to a stalemate. The “Petry group” will remain in the faction, however, not as subordinates, but in a more privileged position. In the end, the AfD faction would be in a state of limbo.

Quo vadis, AfD?

Before it got to the Bundestag, the AfD already had 150 Landtag mandates and many seats in municipal assemblies. In some landtags, the AfD’s MPs were engaged in blocking the passage of legislation by re-submitting the same applications, usually related to migration issues, over and over again, or disrupting the work of committees altogether. Such tactics are impossible in the Bundestag: work at federal level is organised in a completely different way. Further developments depend not only on the outcome of the fight between different groups inside the AfD, but also on other factors. The AfD is now represented in the Bundestag and has officially become part of the ruling elite. First of all, ordinary party members with radical ideas might be averse to joining the ‘establishment.’ Grassroots pressure might affect the distribution of power at the top of the party pyramid. Secondly, the tasks of parliamentary committees are soon going to be divided up. There are reports that AfD [is aiming](#) at “leading roles” on several committees; the Sports Committee, for example, or [chairing](#) the Committee on Cultural Affairs. Party representatives will inevitably join the most “prestigious” parliamentary committees: foreign affairs, finance and defence. They will also work in sub-committees and interparliamentary committees, which inevitably will lead to them joining the German establishment, one way or another. From that point, not only personal preferences or party interests will become important, but also lobbying. The auxiliary staff in the parliamentary office and constituency (up to 10 people) that each MP is entitled to hire will only facilitate this process. No matter which case scenario comes true, AfD will lose its image of “non-systemic opposition” and will fail to repeat their success at the next elections.

Out of all the AfD politicians, Petry and Pretzell had the strongest ties to the Russian establishment. Their leaving the party was a blow to the Kremlin’s positions inside AfD. After Gauland complimented the German

Wehrmacht, it is highly unlikely that this party leader will be officially invited to Moscow. It doesn't mean, however, that AfD will turn against the Kremlin should the far-right win in the backroom power-struggle inside the party. The head of the AfD's Forum on Medium Business, Hans-Jörg Müller, has [long-standing connections in Russia](#) and is one of the [most active supporters](#) of the right-wing nationalist group "Der Flügel". Müller became a Bavarian "list MP" from AfD and was appointed as one of the faction's executives. This keeps a "window of opportunity" open for the Russian authorities.

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