

GERMANY



To Russia with love? German populist actors' positions vis-a-vis the Kremlin

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Abstract

Russia's attack on Ukraine and its many international and national repercussions have helped to revive the fortunes of Germany's main radical right-wing populist party, the "Alternative for Germany" (AfD). Worries about the threats posed to Germany's traditional export-led industries by spiking energy prices, the country's historical anxieties over becoming involved in armed conflict in Europe, and hundreds of thousands of refugees arriving in Germany seem to have contributed to a modest rise in the AfD's poll numbers after a long period of stagnation. However, the situation is more complicated for the AfD than it would appear at first glance. While many party leaders and the rank-and-file have long held sympathies for Putin (and for Russia more generally), support for Ukraine among the German public remains strong, even if there is some disagreement about the appropriate means and the acceptable costs. At least some AfD voters are appalled by the levels of Russian violence against civilians. Like on many other issues, there is also a gap in opinion between Germany's formerly communist federal states in the east and the western part of the country. The AfD's leadership has responded by blaming the government and unspecified external actors for the economic crisis, calling for a "diplomatic solution," and demanding a "return to normal." While this policy has helped to keep the AfD's base mobilized, the stated approach is scarcely feasible and has not led to a surge in support for the party among the general population.

Keywords: *Germany, Alternative for Germany (AfD), Pegida, energy security*

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Background: Populism in Germany

The “Alternative for Germany” (AfD) is currently Germany’s most prominent and influential Far Right party. It is represented in the Bundestag, the European Parliament, and in fifteen of Germany’s sixteen state parliaments. Over the last ten years, it has effectively absorbed the fragmented support that existed for older Far Right parties, most prominently the right-wing extremist National Democrats (NPD). Only recently has the AfD faced some fresh competition from the Grassroots Democratic Party of Germany (“dieBasis”) and “Team Todenhöfer” (a personal party founded by former conservative politician and journalist Jürgen Todenhöfer), which were launched during the pandemic and target Germany’s so-called “Querdenken” (“lateral thinkers”), COVID-19-sceptics and conspiracy theorists. However, at the federal election in September 2021, these outfits groups won just 1.4 and 0.5 % of the votes, respectively.

Founded in 2013, the AfD started as a soft Eurosceptic outfit that positions itself on the centre-right (Arzheimer, 2015). However, immigration and the Muslim minority in Germany quickly became the AfD’s main issues, and by 2016, the party had transformed into a prototypical populist radical Right party. However, what sets the AfD apart from other European parties of this type is that it cultivates ties to openly right-wing extremist actors outside the party and tolerates extremist tendencies among its own members, which have become more pronounced and visible over time (Arzheimer, 2019).

Since 2014, the AfD has drawn up a series of increasingly comprehensive manifestos that aim to address all fields of public policy. As ardent supporters of Germany’s car industry and the internal combustion engine, they are sceptical of climate change and vehemently anti-“woke.” Their economic, fiscal, and welfare policies also place them on the Right, economically speaking. While welfare chauvinists on the one hand and market liberals on the other have long wrestled about the AfD’s pension policies, this conflict contributed little to the public perception of the party, which is framed almost entirely by the interlinked issues of immigration, asylum, and Islam.

The AfD won 10.3% of the list vote in the 2021 federal election, a modest decline compared to their 2017 result of 12.6%. More recently, the party has regained some support in national polls, but considerable regional variation remains. Almost from its foundation, the AfD has been disproportionately

successful in Germany's formerly communist eastern states, particularly in Thuringia and Saxony. In some districts within these states, the AfD has become the strongest political force, necessitating the formation of awkward coalitions across the political spectrum (e.g. the CDU/SPD/Greens coalition in Saxony or the Left/SPD/Greens minority government in Thuringia that has a confidence-and-supply agreement with the CDU).

While the AfD is the most important populist actor in Germany, it is worth pointing out that the Far Left Linkspartei, generally stylized as "die Linke" ("the Left"), is also considered populist, as noted by The Populist (<https://popu-list.org/>). As a self-professed pacifist party that is also the (indirect) successor of the socialist state party in the GDR, die Linke has long campaigned for the dissolution of NATO, frequently taken a pro-Russian stance and is highly suspicious of the United States, the EU, and Germany's security apparatus. However, Russia's atrocities against Ukrainian civilians have proven too much for most members of die Linke. Its parliamentary party condemns Russia's attack as a violation of international law, portrays Ukraine as the victim of a power struggle between the West and Russia, and calls for Western countries to spearhead de-escalation (Die Linke, n.d.).

Die Linke's most prominent and controversial member, Sahra Wagenknecht (who has a huge presence in both traditional and social media), takes a more clear-cut pro-Russian position. For years, Wagenknecht has toyed with the idea of forming her own breakaway party, but so far, she has failed to follow through. Nonetheless, Wagenknecht is the frequent object of speculation of her intention to spearhead a "Querfront," namely, an issue-specific alliance of Far Left and Far Right actors.

German elite discourses on Russia

Before turning to populist demands for and supply of foreign policy, it is worthwhile briefly considering German elite discourse and positions on Russia. During the 1950s, when West Germany found itself at the front line of the Cold War, integration into NATO became a central plank of its political consensus and was deemed essential for West Germany's political survival. However, even then-Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, a staunch anti-communist, wanted a good working relationship with the Soviet Union and agreed to compromise over the resumption of diplomatic relations in order to free thousands of German POWs who were still detained in the USSR in the mid-1950s.



Not much later, the first scheme to supply Germany and Western Europe with natural gas from Siberia was drawn up. Due to the Cuban Missile Crisis, these plans were temporarily shelved but eventually led to a trade deal that supplied Germany with Siberian gas in exchange for West German steel pipes. Natural gas imports increased from the end of the 1970s. Although the United States put considerable pressure on its West European allies to limit commercial exchanges with the USSR, by the late 1980s, the Soviet Union supplied about 50% of the natural gas consumed in Germany. After the end of the Cold War, Russia's share of German natural gas imports fluctuated between 30 and 50% but began to rise steadily again after 2013 (Pleines, 2021, p. 2), exceeding 50% once more by 2017.

This increasing energy dependency, epitomized by the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, was seen positively (or at least not as a security problem) by both the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) and the centre-right Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), as it fit into the wider framework of Germany's policy toward the former USSR after the Cold War. In their analysis of this policy (which was loosely linked to the *détente* of the 1970s), Meister and Jilge (2022, p. 18) identify several core principles:

- A strong focus on Russia (to the detriment of other states in the region).
- A belief that economic interdependencies would secure peace and even modernization and democratization in Russia.
- The conviction that Russia *had to be a part* of Europe's collective security.
- A disregard for the security implications of economic and trade policy.
- The notion that Russia, as the principal successor state to the Soviet Union, was entitled to Great Power status with an accompanying sphere of influence.
- And, finally, a pervading sense of guilt over German atrocities committed in Russia during the Second World War, which crowded out the memory of Belarusian and Ukrainian victims and even clouded awareness of these countries' independent statehood and cultural identities.

In line with this general approach towards Russia, both the CDU/CSU and the SPD brushed aside the concerns voiced by the United States, Ukraine, and the eastern EU members over Nord Stream 2 as late as the 2021 federal election campaign. On the other hand, the liberal Free Democrats (FDP) and the Greens have taken a much more critical stance towards Russia in recent years. Still, the salience of foreign policy in general (and eastern policy in particular) has remained limited in German politics even after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014.

Ties between German right-wing populists and Russia

Although the Nazis justified their abhorrent crimes in the east with the supposedly inferior nature of the Slavic peoples, German right-wing extremists began to form networks with their counterparts in Central and Eastern Europe soon after 1990 (Maegerle, 2009). Among the states of Eastern Europe, Russia has held a particular attraction for the German Far Right because it was seen as offering both a check on US hegemony and an alternative to Western liberal democracy, which is increasingly seen as corrosive to Western traditions. The German Far Right also had contacts with extreme right-wing actors in Ukraine, but with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia became the main focus. For example, after the annexation, the anti-Islam movement Pegida added a demand for “an end to anti-Russian warmongering” to its manifesto (Jennerjahn, 2016, p. 539).

Unusually among West European nations, Germany has also accepted about 2.5 million immigrants from the former Soviet Union over the last three decades. While almost all of them hail from German-speaking communities within the former USSR (Russlanddeutsche), many are not well integrated into the wider German society and rely on Russian (state) media for political information (Sablina, 2021, p. 362). This group reacted particularly negatively to the influx of refugees in 2015 (Sablina, 2021) and was specifically canvassed by the AfD, which draws disproportionate support from Russlanddeutsche voters (Spies et al., 2023).

In 2014, the AfD’s website showed “an unusual degree of sympathy for Russia and distrust” in the United States (Arzheimer, 2015, p. 548). In the same year, one of the party’s most influential leaders, Alexander Gauland, compared a possible division of Ukraine to the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1992 (“AfD für Spaltung des Landes”, 2014). In its 2017 federal manifesto, the AfD demanded (albeit without mentioning Ukraine) “détente with Russia,” an end to the prevailing sanctions, a “deepening of the economic cooperation with Russia,” and even Russia’s integration into (an unspecified) regional “security structure.” The juxtaposition with Turkey is also telling. According to the AfD manifesto, Turkey, unlike Russia, is “not culturally a part of Europe” and should be expelled from NATO. Similar calls for ending sanctions against Russia were presented in various state-level manifestos, including in Baden-Württemberg (in 2016), Western Pomerania (in 2016), and Saxony (in 2019). The 2019 AfD manifesto in Thuringia even demands more electrical power generation from natural gas and specifically



mentions “Russia, Norway, and the Netherlands” as “extremely reliable suppliers.”

In 2018, a group of German parliamentarians travelled to Crimea as “international observers” of the Russian presidential election. It later emerged that the Russian state paid at least partially for this trip (“AfD-Politiker”, 2020). One of the lawmakers, Markus Frohnmaier, is married to a Russian journalist and has repeatedly travelled to Crimea and eastern Ukraine. In 2019, the BBC published documents purportedly showing Frohnmaier to be a Russian asset. Nonetheless, he was re-elected in 2021. Another AfD politician, Gunnar Lindemann, also regularly visited the parts of Ukraine illegally annexed by Russia and even attended an “anti-Fascist” congress in Crimea, where he received an award. As late as September 2021, Lindemann and three other state-level deputies travelled to Russia to act as “observers” during the elections for Russia’s parliament, the Duma. As on previous occasions, they had no mandate from any international organization (Stöber, 2021).

In short, while pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian positions were not central to the AfD’s agenda, which remains focused on immigration, they were widely accepted within the party and were enshrined in the AfD’s manifestos. Moreover, the Kremlin made an effort to cultivate individual AfD politicians.

After February 2022, the party initially took a somewhat more nuanced position. Speaking on behalf of the parliamentary party during the first debate of the invasion in March, MP Matthias Moosdorf called the war a “tragedy” and demanded Russia return to the negotiation table. However, he also alleged that Russischstämmige (“ethnic Russians”) in Ukraine had been persecuted since 2014, painted a Russian victory as inevitable, and called for a negotiated compromise that would imply referenda in Crimea and eastern Ukraine (Deutscher Bundestag, 2022, p. 1435). He also repudiated sanctions against Russia and military aid for Ukraine. Similarly, the parliamentary party published a position paper in June that condemned Russia’s aggression as a violation of international law and called for a ceasefire and the deployment of a peacekeeping force under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (“Der unmögliche Krieg”, 2022, p. 16). In the same statement, the party renewed its support for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline as it was essential for a “reliable, secure and cheap energy supply” (AfD Bundestagsfraktion 2022). By that time, Russia had already reduced the throughput of Nord Stream 1 by 60%. Deliveries would cease entirely in September.

By the end of summer, the AfD reverted to a more hard-line stance and openly admitted that they hoped to capitalize on widespread worries about energy insecurity and economic instability. They did not, however, shift to the left on fiscal and economic policies but rather demanded the return to the “status quo ante,” which serves as the AfD master frame. Shortly before Russia held hastily organized sham referenda on the annexations in September 2022, another delegation of would-be “observers” travelled via Russia to the occupied parts of Ukraine. They only abandoned their trip after a massive public backlash and some criticism from within their own party (Joswig, 2022). In October, the AfD’s co-chair, Alice Weidel, claimed that the “main loser” of the conflict was “neither Russia nor Ukraine but Germany,” which she called the victim of an “economic war.” In the same interview, she denounced the West for “reflexively supporting Ukraine’s maximalist demands,” rejected any form of German involvement, and urged the government to focus on reinstating the supply of Russian natural gas to safeguard Germany’s economy: “what that means for Ukraine [...] for a partition, that is not our concern” (Finthammer, 2022). Six weeks later, Weidel’s co-chair, Tino Chrupalla, doubled down on that position in a rambling statement in which he stated that “American presidents were war criminals, too” while simultaneously refusing to call Putin a war criminal “because I am not in a position to judge his actions” (“Chrupalla bei Lanz über Putin”, 2022).

The demand side of right-wing populism

Insofar as Germans cared about foreign policy at all, the centre parties’ approach to Russia was widely seen as entirely reasonable. Against this backdrop, the positions and behaviour of the AfD outlined in the previous section were certainly radical but not completely outlandish.

The February 2022 invasion was, therefore, a shock to German public opinion. Overwhelming majorities expressed support for the opening of Germany’s borders to Ukrainian refugees (84%), new sanctions against Russia (85%), and even arms deliveries to Ukraine (67%), something that had been almost universally rejected just a couple of weeks before.¹ At the same time, the invasion triggered anxiety about the economy and energy supplies as well as fears about a broader Russian attack on Europe and even a global nuclear conflict.

1. Support for arming Ukraine depends on the weapons in question but in February 2022, 74% were against delivering any weapons. See Forschungsgruppe Wahlen (2022a, 2022b).



Over the course of the year and particularly since the summer, support for Germany's involvement in the war has slowly eroded, and worries about inflation and heating during the coming winter have come to the fore. The rally-around-the-flag effect quickly subsided, and although the new government managed to find new suppliers for natural gas in record time — imports from Russia effectively ended in August — its approval rates are very low. Once more, there is also a marked difference between Germany's western and eastern states, with easterners being particularly reluctant, worried, and unhappy.

However, there have been no mass protests, and the AfD has not benefited from the dramatic developments as much as one could have assumed. In January 2022, the party hovered between 10 and 11% in national polls, which was very close to their result in the 2021 election. A year later, their support had increased by about four percentage points. Although the arrival of more than a million refugees from Ukraine, the steepest increase in the cost of living since the 1970s, and a major land war in Europe have created an almost perfect storm, the AfD so far remains below its peak of 17–18% public support recorded in 2018.²

This is not to say that (right-wing) populism has been sidelined or disarmed during the crisis. On the contrary, the AfD has performed surprisingly well in the western state of Lower Saxony and has become entrenched in many eastern regions. However, there seems to be a ceiling to the AfD's support, and the party is already operating close to that limit. In November 2019, a polling outfit found that 80% of Germans said that extremist ideas had spread “far” or “very far” through the AfD (Forshungsgruppe Wahlen, 2019), and roughly the same number consistently states in opinion surveys that they would under no circumstances vote for the party. Since then, the AfD's involvement with the anti-vaccination movement and various right-wing extremist groups, as well as its support for Russia, have further consolidated the party's negative image. The invasion may have somewhat revived the AfD's support, but not on account of any specific political innovation of the party. The party simply offers more of the same, packaged in an ever more radical fashion.

2. Somewhat surprisingly, support not just for the CDU/CSU (now the main opposition party) but also for the Greens, which are part of the governing coalition, has risen by four to five points over the same period.

Discussion and perspective

So far, the invasion has had a minimal effect on right-wing populist politics in Germany. While the issue was quickly picked up by actors that had been active during the pandemic, there were very few pro-Russian or anti-war protests.

In terms of party politics, the country is currently forced to reconsider its largely failed eastern policy. Like in other areas of political life, the AfD is essentially campaigning for a radical version of what was once considered normal. However, the idea that Germany could somehow disentangle itself completely from the conflict, ignore the system of Western sanctions and simply go back to importing cheap natural gas from Russia must appear preposterous even to many of the party's supporters. Therefore, the AfD's leaders' sometimes almost cartoonish statements are primarily designed to grab the public's attention and further fire up their (limited) base. They are certainly not aimed at influencing public policy or redefining the AfD's image.

Therefore, the most likely scenario is that the AfD will continue to focus on the economic crisis while stressing the importance of diplomacy and a peaceful, negotiated settlement, ideas that are generally popular and may even attract some disgruntled supporters of die Linke, which remains in disarray. However, there is no sign of a shift in economic or fiscal policy. The AfD, which is currently led by a former business consultant and the owner of a small building company, remains committed to low-tax, pro-(small)-business, and welfare chauvinist policies.

Were Sarah Wagenknecht ever to set up a (pro-welfare, anti-immigration, and anti-war) personal party, that might be a game changer, as she is currently more popular than any politicians of either die Linke or the AfD and could attract disaffected voters from these and other parties, at least in the short term. However, this would likely break die Linke and seriously weaken the AfD, so it is unclear what the net effect on populism in Germany would be.

Of course, this does not mean that mainstream actors should be complacent: during the pandemic, right-wing populist mobilization, while confined to pockets of society, was associated with lower rates of vaccination and mitigation and hence with worse policy outcomes (Leistner, 2021). On the contrary, politicians, journalists, and civil society actors should dispel misinformation and propaganda, using proven techniques to avoid accidentally reinforcing these messages.



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