

POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS – THE CASE OF GERMANY

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***Abstract:** The unprecedented magnitude of the ongoing refugee crisis has the potential to change the dynamics of German politics dramatically and permanently. It will dominate the political discourse for many years to come and may cause considerable changes in electoral preferences. The long cherished stability of the German party system is endangered. While the government is facing a massive decline in its approval ratings, the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany is gaining ground in federal politics. Angela Merkel has long been considered as a successful but uninspiring leader. In the wake of the refugee crisis, she has eventually come out with a vision and offered leadership. However, in her struggle for more European solidarity, she has been abandoned by her partners in the EU and has to deal with increasingly disillusioned members of her own party. This article is an attempt to answer two key questions with regard to the current situation in German politics. Can the refugee crisis spell the end of the Merkel era? And can the AfD (Alternative for Germany) achieve a long-lasting re-arrangement of the German party system, bringing the era of political moderation and ideological convergence to an end? The answers are formulated within the broader context of Germany's domestic policy dynamics and reflecting the changing role of Germany in international and European politics.*

Keywords: Germany, refugee crisis, Angela Merkel, Alternative for Germany (AfD)

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1 Introduction

Germany belongs to countries most affected by the ongoing refugee crisis triggered by the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Germany is struggling to cope with the unceasing influx of refugees – in 2015 the country received 1.1 million fugitives [13]. German Chancellor Angela Merkel is becoming increasingly isolated over her open-door refugee policy. Her calls for more solidarity within the EU, e. g. in the form of the compulsory quota system, have been rejected by other European countries. Rising political tensions at home are making the position of Angela Merkel increasingly insecure.

German politics has within months become polarised to an unprecedented extent. With Merkel's approval ratings plummeting, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) is using this extraordinary momentum to gain ground in regional and federal politics. The AfD, which was founded only in 2013 as a political platform for those who had opposed Germany's euro rescue policy, is now surfing the populist wave of anti-immigrant sentiments. Chancellor Merkel's accommodating stance towards refugees was initially appraised as remarkably bold and humane. Prior to the crisis, her political style had been usually described as very cautious, rather reflecting than shaping public opinion [33]. Merkel has been in office for more than a decade and has enjoyed the reputation of a sound manager and cool pragmatist. This is the first time in her office of German Chancellor when she is knowingly and relentlessly pursuing a policy against the increasingly disillusioned electorate. However, this surprising manifestation of leadership comes at high cost. The so called *besorgte Bürger* (disconcerted citizens) are looking for a new political home and the Alternative for Germany is offering one. The AfD is currently (2016, June) polling at 15 percent [39] nationwide, which is an increase of 11 percentage points since July 2015. In March 2016, the party entered three state parliaments with surprisingly high gains.²

It is not the obvious financial burden of the refugee crisis Germans worry about the most. It is the fear of *Überfremdung* (overalienation), the feeling of being overrun by foreigners. Even people acknowledging that providing asylum to refugees fleeing war is a humanitarian responsibility are aware of the fact, that even a country as prosperous as Germany is incapable of dealing with such high numbers of refugees in the long run. People who are responsible for implementing the government's policy into practice are sounding alarms.

² In Saxony-Anhalt, an eastern state, the AfD won 24.4% of the vote and came second. In Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate, the AfD came third with 15.1% and 12.6%, respectively.

The police are understaffed, mayors and aid workers exhausted. There is a strong and growing belief that the government has lost control over the crisis.

The migrant crisis has become an issue disturbing the social balance and threatening the political stability in Germany. As a result, it could shake up German political scene – endanger the authority of Angela Merkel and fuel the political ambitions of the AfD. Hence, in this article, we identify two key questions. Can the refugee crisis spell the end of the Merkel era? And can the AfD achieve a long-lasting rearrangement of the German party system? We formulate the answers within the broader context of Germany's domestic policy dynamics and reflecting the changing role of Germany in international and European politics.

2 Germany in the 21st Century – Great Moderation in Party Politics and Unintended Leadership in Europe

German politics underwent significant changes after the end of the cold war and reunification in 1990. In the 1990s, most of Germany's political energy was absorbed by internal challenges of the reunification process [6]. After the Kohl era had come to an end, economic and social issues became a priority. In the late 1990s and into the early 2000s, Germany gained the label “the sick man of Europe” [15]. In order to promote economic growth and reduce unemployment German government under Gerhard Schröder introduced a series of reforms, known as Agenda 2010. Unpopular welfare cuts into the German welfare state became the main controversy in German politics in the early 2000s. In any case, Germany transformed within less than a decade into an economic superstar [15] and came relatively unscathed through the Global Recession in the late 2000s. The coalition government of Social Democrats and Greens had been replaced in 2005 by the Grand Coalition of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats under the leadership of Angela Merkel. The cabinet's main focus was on reducing the public debt and introducing tax reliefs. Germany experienced an economic boom and strengthened its position as export champion.

The Global Recession marks the beginning of a new era in German politics. The rising economic power of the largest and strongest economy in Europe is accompanied by a growing perception of Germany as a hegemonic power within the EU. However, Germany was a reluctant hegemon, i.e. its leading role stays politically contested [7]. Merkel's management of the financial crisis in 2008 had been criticised for being too slow and indecisive

and interpreted as a proof of Germany's reluctance to claim leadership in Europe. The subsequent sovereign debt crisis in several European countries forced Germany as the leading Eurozone country to slowly accept its new and unintended position. As a result of the worsening market confidence, German government eventually took action. The hesitant stance towards a more active role of Germany in resolving the crisis has to be understood in a broader historical context. The fear of German hegemony is still present in the European political discourse. Not surprisingly, Germany's leadership in response to the crisis caused much controversy across Europe. The strict austerity measures imposed on the troubled economies of Greece, Spain, Portugal, and Ireland have been increasingly perceived as a "policy dictate" [22].

With the crisis in Ukraine Merkel had to face yet another foreign policy challenge, her biggest so far. Her role in the negotiations with Russia and Ukraine has been interpreted as Germany's claim to resume geopolitical leadership. Dropping her customary style of leading from behind, she has taken every opportunity to de-escalate the conflict [30]. The crisis in Ukraine marks a definitive end to Germany's "culture of restraint" [41] from geopolitics.

Germany's return to the international scene came along with a period of moderation in the domestic party politics. Angela Merkel was steering the CDU (Christian Democrats) towards the political centre, sacrificing some of its conservative principles. Modernising the party in sociocultural issues and incorporating some leftist position regarding the welfare state [10] might have been unpopular in her own party, nevertheless, it was supported by a majority of Germans. This programmatic renewal increased the attractiveness of CDU [14] but also left its right flank open. When conservative voters feel abandoned by established conservative parties, a platform for right-wing populists and radicals is created. This gap has been filled in 2013 with the AfD, which challenged the alleged *Alternativlosigkeit* (being without alternative) of Chancellor Merkel's policy. The Social Democrats (SPD) had experienced a similar development under the leadership of Gerhard Schröder. His Agenda 2010 had been perceived as neoliberal and ignoring the interests of the working class, the traditional electorate of Social Democrats. As a result, a part of the disappointed voters wandered to the new established populist radical left party *Die Linke* (The Left). The programmatic convergence of the German "Volksparteien" (big tent parties) has been critically assessed by media, intellectual elites and representatives of small parties. Their catch-all strategy might be successful in terms of electoral success but this consensus-oriented

politics has also created an atmosphere perceived as a lack of plurality that was destroying the political discourse in Germany.

Nevertheless, in the crisis-ridden recent past, there was little room to discuss the deterioration of Germany's political culture. With the euro crisis slowly disappearing from the front pages of German newspapers in the second half of 2015, German media and politics refocused to the problem of immigration. The question how to deal with the rising numbers of immigrants became a top priority and main issue in Germany. The phrase European migrant crisis or European refugee crisis³ became widely used during 2015 when a rising number of refugees and migrants from Asia, Africa, and Western Balkans came to the European Union to seek asylum. However, the rising number of people crossing the Mediterranean Sea was not a new phenomenon – according to the border management agency Frontex the various Mediterranean routes have experienced periodic surges in migrant traffic over the last decade [4]. However, Europe and Germany had been preoccupied with other issues and several EU countries even refused to fund the Italian rescue program *Operation Mare Nostrum*, which was replaced by the Frontex-run⁴ *Operation Triton* in November 2014. The situation became acute in spring 2015. Sinking vessels in the Mediterranean Sea had raised the public awareness and put pressure on European governments to cope with the situation. During the summer of 2015, the Balkan overland route has replaced the Mediterranean as the favoured passage for migrants [29]. Migrants arriving in Greece continued through the Balkans and Hungary, and north toward Western Europe, Germany being their preferred destination. Merkel, after a short period of hesitation, declared that Germany would do what it is morally and legally obliged to do. Her “We can manage it” approach initially sparked an atmosphere described as “September fairy tale.”⁵ Many considered the situation also as an opportunity for Germany to rehabilitate its image, resulting from the historical legacy as well as the merciless stance of the government during the Greek debt crisis. However, the fairy tale was soon over and the migrant crisis has become an issue disturbing the social balance and threatening the political stability in the country. As a

³ *Refugees* are persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution and they are defined and protected by international law. *Migrants* choose to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons. Unlike refugees who cannot safely return home, migrants face no such impediment to return. (Definition by UNHCR [35])

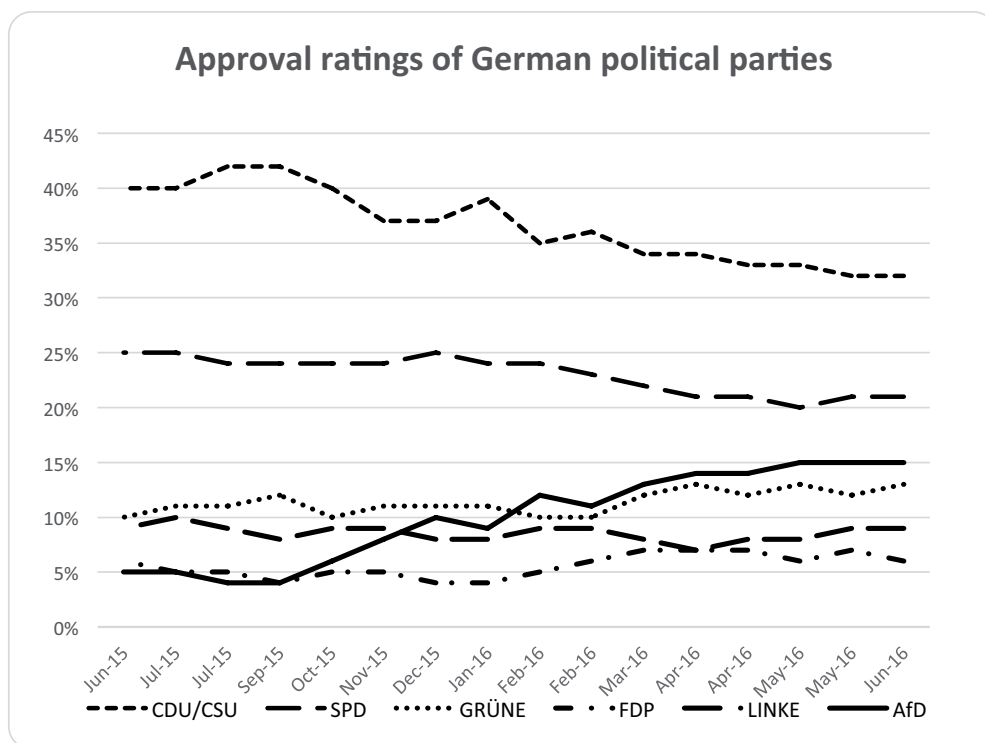
⁴ Frontex is an EU agency managing the cooperation between national border guards securing its external borders.

⁵ September fairy tale is a reference to the summer fairy tale 2006 as Germany hosted the soccer World Cup and surprised the world with its generosity and hospitality.

result, the German political scene is currently undergoing a significant change (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). On the one hand, both Angela Merkel and the coalition government of CDU/CSU and SPD are facing an unprecedented decline in their approval ratings and on the other hand, the right-wing populist⁶ Alternative for Germany is becoming a relevant political force, bringing Germany's era of moderation and convergence to an end.

Figure 1

Approval ratings of German political parties June 2015 – June 2016



Source: [39].

3 The End of the Merkel Era?

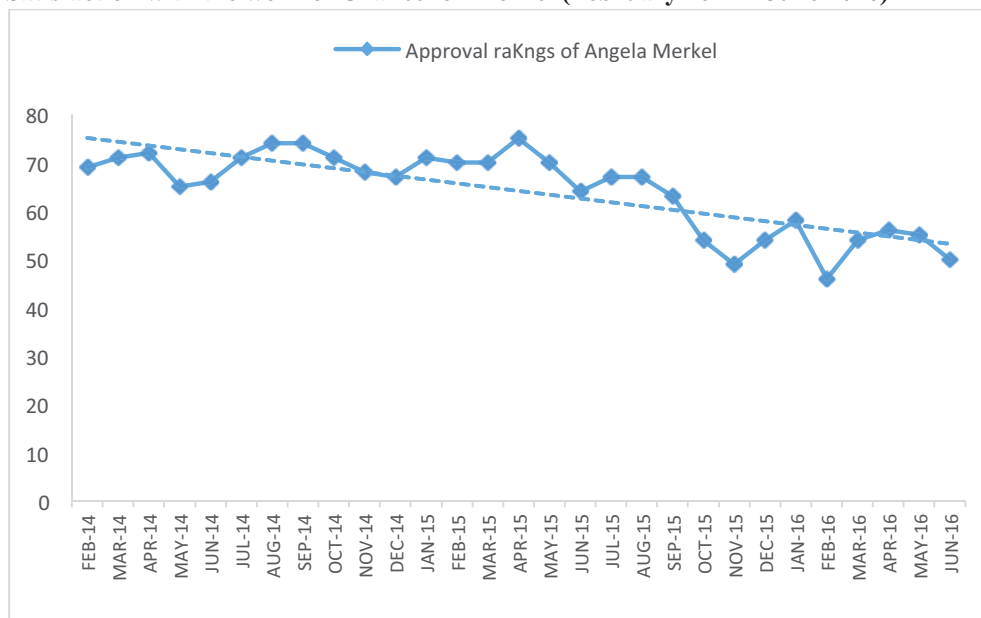
With more than ten years in power (as of June 2016), Angela Merkel is considered to be the most powerful woman on the planet [19]. Her success has usually been ascribed to her managerial qualities, cool pragmatism, and ideological flexibility. Her appeal among voters has been attributed to the general satisfaction with economic achievements of her governments and the new

⁶ There is a debate among scholars how to label the AfD, see Chapter 4.

prominence of Germany on the global stage. However, her carefully cultivated image of a good manager and a steady and incorruptible leader [25] has recently become overshadowed by her incompassionate stance on the issue of refugees. Germany's humane gesture in early September 2016 to let migrants stranded in Hungary to travel to Germany initially provoked a wave of sympathy, but shortly after a strong domestic and international backlash against Merkel's unwavering stance followed [34]. Even some of her critics acknowledge that Angela Merkel made a bold and humanitarian gesture but on the other hand, they accuse her of being unreasonable and naïve. It is a strange irony and an inexplicable twist in Angela Merkel's political career. The woman with the image of a sound manager and flexible pragmatist is now being accused of mismanaging the crisis, losing control over the situation and ignoring the growing disillusionment of Germans. Always being mocked for her obsession with public opinion polls on the German electorate's feelings, she even seems unimpressed by her rapidly declining popularity (see Figure 2). At the beginning of her third term as German Chancellor, 75% of Germans embraced the fact that she has resumed this position [24]. While in the first year of her third term, her average approval ratings were 70%, in 2015 they declined to 65%. The average value of her hitherto approval ratings in 2016 (January – June) is only around 53% [24].

Figure 2

Satisfaction with the work of Chancellor Merkel (February 2014 – June 2016)



Source: [24].

Prior to the refugee crisis, Merkel has been often criticised by media and political opponents for her wait-and-see policy. Always watching her words, using vague phrases and non-committal statements, intentionally not saying what she stands for too soon. Hence, the surprise when she announced in September 2015 that “we can manage it.” However, this phrase could cost her the fourth term in office. Her public approval ratings continue to fall together with the sinking support for CDU. Her quarrel with Horst Seehofer, head of the Christian Social Union (CSU), the CDU’s Bavarian sister party, has reached a dangerous level. Seehofer even threatened to take the government to court if it does not adopt measures to limit the flow of migrants [34].

From the onset of the crisis, Merkel argued that accepting refugees is a matter of moral and legal obligation on the part of Germany. Germany’s asylum practice is based on article 16a of the *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany) [3] which states (Paragraph 1) that “persons persecuted on political grounds have the right of asylum.” However, Paragraph 2 of this article also states that the right of asylum “may not be invoked by a person who enters the federal territory from a member state of the European Communities or from another third state in which application of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms is assured.” This is in line with the Dublin III Regulation, based on the principle that the first Member State where fingerprints are stored or an asylum claim is lodged is responsible for a person’s asylum claim. However, Germany decided to use the derogation possibility of Article 17 of the Dublin III Regulation. This article gives any member state the possibility “to derogate from the responsibility criteria, in particular on humanitarian and compassionate grounds.” [16].

Merkel has repeated countless times that an *Aufnahmestopp* (upper ceiling on immigration) does not come into question and the same stands for building fences on national borders. According to Angela Merkel, the only way to solve the crisis is reducing the number of new immigrants arriving in Germany in order to relieve the overstretched capacities in German cities and to concentrate on the challenging process of integrating those who already arrived. According to Angela Merkel, sealing off borders would not just be ineffectual, but would also represent the end of the European ideal [32]. Instead, she is constantly urging for more cooperation and solidarity within Europe and stressing the importance of improving the situation in the crisis-shaken home countries of the refugees, as well as in the refugee

camps in the neighbouring countries. In order to achieve that, she proposed a quota system to distribute asylum seekers among all EU member countries and initiated an agreement between the EU and Turkey aimed at ending the irregular migration from Turkey to the EU.⁷ Nonetheless, asking Turkey for help has a political and a financial price, which is quite high, for some of her partners in the EU even unacceptable. Prior to the crisis, Angela Merkel itself used to criticise Turkey for its bad human rights record. However, she had to respond to Turkish requirements in order to slow down the tide of migrants from Turkish refugee camps. These requirements included six billion euros in funds, unblocking of some chapters in Turkey's EU membership negotiations and a visa-free access for to the Schengen border-free area at the latest by the end of June 2016 [18]. However, the implementation of the refugee pact between the EU and Turkey is endangered as Turkey refuses to change its anti-terror legislation which is a requirement on the part of the EU in order to start the process of visa liberalisation.

Angela Merkel is under tremendous pressure. Nevertheless, a tactical retreat from her position is highly implausible. She has repeatedly pointed out that she considers the handling of the refugee crisis being not only a practical question but first and foremost a question of European values. "If a continent like Europe with 500 million people is not capable of taking in one million Syrians, perhaps temporarily, then that is not in line with our values," said Merkel, citing examples of countries which have sheltered even more refugees than Germany, like Lebanon, Jordan or Turkey [5]. She continues to reject the proposals made by her opponents with the argument that they simply will not work. Furthermore, they could spark the process of dismantling of the Schengen area border-free travel regime.

Sometimes, the case of the *Energiewende* (energy transition) is used as an example of Merkel's ability to change completely her policy when facing public opposition and important regional elections. After the Fukushima Power Plant disaster of 2011, she made a surprising twist and announced Germany's retreat from nuclear energy by 2022. This decision was a radical reversal of her previous policy, as she had announced to extend the lifespan of nuclear power plants – with the last scheduled to go offline 2036 [23]. Merkel insisted on her decision despite the criticism for its impact on commercial

⁷ The EU and Turkey agreed that all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands as of 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey. However, for every Syrian being returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled to the EU. More details about the agreement can be found here: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-963_en.htm [17].

and domestic energy bills. However, this time, it is different. The domestic discontent with the way she is handling the refugee crisis is incomparably higher than in the case of the protests against nuclear energy. Moreover, the clash with Central European countries over migrants is bigger than the earlier clash with Southern European countries over austerity measures during the Eurocrisis. Merkel, however, shows only little willingness to back down this time. Yet even she cannot endure the rising pressure forever. As the success of her plan is dependent on external factors (the end of war in Syria, cooperation with Turkey), her fate is not in her own hands anymore. With practically no allies left in Europe, she can only count on the success of Syria peace talks and is at the same time on the mercy of Turkish president Erdogan. However, her authority has declined massively and her voters are losing patience. In February 2016, 81% of those surveyed said that the German government did not have the situation under control [24].

Merkel's stubbornness over the refugee policy has prompted speculation about her political future. As people are increasingly questioning her competence, the possibility of her resignation is being discussed. It is only indicative of her strong position that these discussions are still surprisingly rare if taken into account the seriousness of the situation. This is obviously the result of the fact that there is no apparent successor in sight. During the decade in power, Angela Merkel eliminated practically every possible contender. Waiting for their mistakes she had not hesitated a second to oust them from power. Today, the strength of the CDU is defined through the popularity of Angela Merkel. Even now, when the inner party rebellion is growing, there is no new leader in sight. Angela Merkel was the party's recipe for success, now she could turn out to become a burden.

The solid performance of German economy – unemployment at a record low and the largest budget surplus since reunification in 1990 – would under different circumstances create an ideal predisposition for a fourth term of Angela Merkel. Amidst the refugee crisis, nobody really cares. Merkel has been abandoned by her European neighbours, she faces a rebellion in her own party and her public image is deteriorating. Even a leader such as Angela Merkel will not be able to survive such a massive erosion of her authority in the long-run. A possible failure of the EU-Turkey deal would be a massive setback for the German Chancellor. Angela Merkel has earned a reputation for mastering all of the past crises. However, even the most powerful democratic leaders are ousted when they lose the ability to win elections.

4 Alternative for Germany – the End of Moderation in German Politics?

In Germany, the importance of traditional cleavages of class and religion has been fading since the 1960s, as a result of major social and economic processes, such as secularisation and deindustrialisation [8]. In the post-unification period a territorial cleavage (West vs. East Germany) emerged [27] but has also been blurred to some extent with the party *Die Linke* (The Left) making limited inroads in the old federal states. The shift in the overall cleavage structure was accompanied by the decline in the voter turnout and partisanship in Germany [9]. German mainstream parties have adapted to the increasing personalisation of the party competition [26]. The cult of personality that has emerged around Angela Merkel has downgraded the importance of CDU as a party and of the party programme's distinctiveness [26]. This strategy has been highly successful for Merkel but it is also very controversial. The "system Merkel" has been described as a tactic of demobilisation and depolitisation [25]. Outflanking her political rivals, Merkel left little space for debate. She has been blamed for destroying the democratic culture of fighting and arguing in Germany.

However, the ideological convergence of mainstream parties can also provoke a populist anti-elitist backlash. Populism mobilises people "against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society" [31]. In comparison to other Western-European countries, Germany has long resisted the temptation of "the populist Zeitgeist," however the rising discontent over the euro bailout policies of the Christian-liberal cabinet created a favorable environment for a new protest party. Alternative for Germany was an answer to the proclaimed *Alternativlosigkeit* of the bailout packages. Whereas the criticism abroad focused on strict austerity measures imposed on Greece and other affected countries, the key point of concern in Germany was that the country could become a paymaster within a transfer union that had never been envisaged in the Maastricht Treaty. With all mainstream parties following the strong pro-European dictum of German politics, the AfD offered an alternative for those who questioned the consensus of an "ever closer union". In many European countries, the issue of European integration has already been one of the drivers of the alleged new cleavage on globalisation [12], but it has been something new in Germany. The party immediately attracted great attention in media with its call for dismantling the Eurozone [1]. In the federal election 2013, the AfD only narrowly missed the threshold for entering the Bundestag; nevertheless, 4.7% vote was considered as a great success for a party established only seven months before the election. In 2014 European parliament election the AfD came in fifth place, with 7.1% of the national vote and the party was also successful in every subsequent state election (in Saxony, Thuringia, Brandenburg, Hamburg, Bremen, Saxony-Anhalt, Rhineland-Palatinate, and Baden-Württemberg).

However, in the first years of its existence, the AfD had undergone a considerable transformation. The party was infiltrated by people from the far right scene and members of unsuccessful populist (radical) right parties. An inner fight between the moderate liberal faction and a nationalist conservative wing erupted. The infighting culminated in summer 2015 when the moderates around Bernd Lucke were defeated by the national conservative wing around Frauke Petry, who became the new party leader. Bernd Lucke and his supporters left the party in protest against its rightward shift. The party's shift to the right has been evident, especially in the rhetoric of several party representatives. In November 2015 the AfD had to rebuke Björn Hocke, one of its most popular regional figures⁸ for his borderline racist remarks on Africans' reproductive habits [11]. As the party leader Frauke Petry had said that police should have the right to shoot illegal migrants at the border "if necessary", outraged politicians even suggested to put the AfD under the surveillance of the *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz* (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution).

The unclear ideological alignment of the AfD has so far triggered much discussion over how to position the party in the political spectrum. AfD has been accused by media and political opponents of promoting radical ideas. Scholars have been more cautious, arguing with the moderate programme of the party (see [2] or [20]). However, with rising inconsistency between the party programme and rhetoric, the speculations about the genuine character of the party are piling up. In Germany, the high level of stigmatisation of radical right parties is one of the main obstacles to their electoral and political success [28]. Bearing in mind the historical legacy of the World War II, German voters have been shy to cast ballots for a far-right party [21]. Extreme and radical forces, such as Neo-Nazi National Democratic Party (NPD), the nationalist German People's Party (DVU) or the populist radical right party The Republicans (REP) had been isolated and their electoral achievements were not of significant importance. The AfD, however, has been trying to distance itself from the far-right milieu. The declared aim of the former party leader Bernd Lucke was to build a non-ideological civic party with a liberal economic programme. Nevertheless, the party attracted many members from the far-right milieu [21] and also became an alternative for those who consider the NPD as too extremist. With the AfD incorporating a significant number of protest voters, the NPD was not able to fully exploit the migrant crisis and its approval ratings remain widely insignificant.

Another important feature of German politics was the strong and practically unanimous support for the project of European integration. German political

⁸ Björn Hocke is the chairman of the AfD's Thuringia branch.

elites have been the most fervent supporter of an “ever closer union”. Germany has adhered to these principles even in times when other European countries faced an upsurge of extreme, radical, populist and Eurosceptic forces. In the 1980s immigration became a prioritized issue in Western European political discourse. Of course, opposition to the policy of multiculturalism emerged in Germany as well but a party expressing anti-immigrant sentiments has never entered the *Bundestag* (federal parliament). The situation could change fundamentally in the wake of the migrant crisis. After the AfD nearly imploded in summer 2015, many saw the party become yet another unsuccessful populist (radical) right subject. However, the split paradoxically did not mean the end of the AfD; on the contrary, it helped the party to get rid of an unpopular leader and in the wake of the migrant crisis refocus from euro to immigration issues. Although overshadowed by the Eurocrisis narrative, the AfD had from the onset defined “immigration law reform” as one its programmatic priorities and called for an end to “unregulated immigration into German social security systems” [1]. The migrant crisis currently fuels its political ambitions but it would be misleading to see the AfD merely as a single-issue (anti-immigration) party. It has rather become a platform for diffuse protest; typical populist right-wing party surfing on the wave of anti-establishment rhetoric (them-us narrative) complaining about the ruling “liberal political correctness” and a perceived existence of taboo issues which are considered to be undebatable in Germany.

Figure 3

AfD approval ratings November 2013 – June 2016

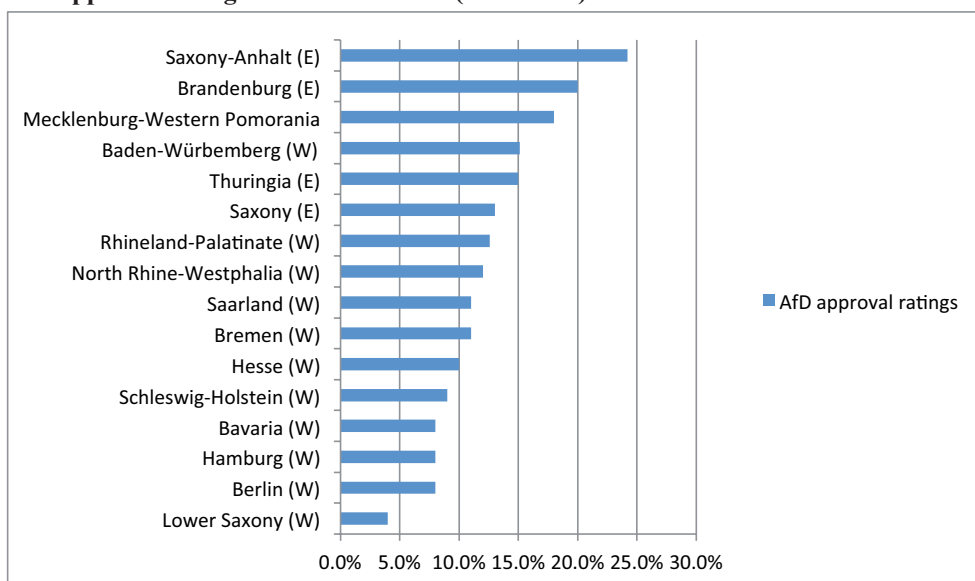


Source: [39].

As polls are indicating a steady increase in AfD approval ratings since the beginning of the refugee crisis (see Figure 3), the question arises whether the party could become a new relevant player in Germany or if it is just a temporary phenomenon profiting from the perceived mismanagement of the refugee influx. The problem of immigration has the potential to dominate the German political discourse for many years to come. The large-scale integration of refugees will be even a greater challenge than the influx itself. In line with the ethnic competition thesis [31], the AfD can exploit the fears of Germans that because of the immigrants they are going to face a competition over scarce resources. As polls are indicating, this strategy pays off mainly in the eastern German states. The support for the AfD is almost twice as high in the so-called “new states” than in the “old states.” As Figure 4 indicates, the territorial cleavage is still present in German politics.

Figure 4

AfD approval ratings in German states (June 2016)



(E) stands for an eastern state, (W) stands for a western state

Source: [40].

However, the appeal of the AfD is not based on immigration issues only. It feeds upon broader feelings of frustration and insecurity and is a reaction to the general disenchantment with politics (in German it is called *Politikverdrossenheit*). It seems that these are favourable conditions for a party to be successful in electoral terms.

The shift in electoral preferences was confirmed in March 2016 as local elections were held in three German states (Saxony-Anhalt, Rhineland-Palatinate, Baden-Württemberg). While Chancellor Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU) suffered painful defeats, the AfD entered state parliaments with significant gains. In Saxony-Anhalt, an eastern state, the AfD won 24.4% of the vote and came second. In Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate, the AfD came third with 15.1% and 12.6%, respectively [37]. Demoscopic data show that the AfD was able to attract many former non-voters but also former voters of the established parties, mainly from CDU/CSU. Surprisingly, in the eastern state of Saxony-Anhalt, the party was even able to persuade many former voters of the Die Linke, a populist left party [37]. This could indicate that Die Linke is losing its appeal of a protest anti-establishment party to the AfD. The number of people voting for AfD out of disappointment is significant and rising. In 2013 federal election, it was 57% of voters [38]; in the local election in March 2016, it was 62% in Rhineland-Palatinate, 64% in Baden-Württemberg, and even 70% in Saxony-Anhalt [37]. The survey by Infratest dimap also revealed that many AfD voters (57% in Saxony-Anhalt, 61% in Baden-Württemberg and even 70% in Rhineland-Palatinate) would appreciate the possibility of voting for the CSU – the Bavarian sister party of the CDU, which is opposing Chancellor Merkel's stance on migration [37].

Protest voting is not a German phenomenon; it is an overall European trend that Germany has long resisted. With AfD German voters have found a platform for expressing their general disenchantment with politics. We could even speak of a new type of cleavage emerging in Germany dividing the society in line with Mudde's definition of the populist ideology into two antagonistic and homogenous groups – the corrupt elite and the pure people [28]. However, it will be difficult for AfD to transform its electoral achievements protest driven by a diffuse protest into political relevance in Germany, which is very hostile to populist (radical) ideas. Currently, the AfD is denounced by all relevant parties. As a result of its radicalisation, the AfD has completely lost its coalition potential, thus, it will not be able to participate in the formation of governments, neither state nor federal.

5 Conclusions and Policy Implications

Germany's political landscape is changing dramatically in the wake of the ongoing migrant crisis in Europe. In this article, we identified two main

developments which can be observed at present. Firstly, it is the erosion of Angela Merkel's domestic authority and her growing isolation within Europe. Secondly, it is the growing popularity of AfD, a right-wing populist party that has become increasingly radicalised after its split in 2015. During the crisis, Angela Merkel has abandoned her risk-averse governing style, and she is decisively promoting a pan-European solution. Her political survival is dependent on her ability to implement such a solution in the hostile environment of European countries that are opposing her plan and prefer national measures instead. Angela Merkel has earned a reputation for her successful crisis management and pragmatic handling of crucial situations. However, this is the biggest challenge of her political career and it will be increasingly difficult to promote the solution she believes in, with almost no allies left – neither in Europe nor in Germany. Above all, socioeconomic processes like mass migration or economic crisis create a favourable environment for populist movements. The AfD could become the first right-wing populist party in Germany successful not only in the state but also in federal elections. However, due to its radicalisation, it will be extremely difficult for the party to transform its electoral achievements into real political relevance.

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