

# The rise of Germany's AfD: From ordoliberalism to new right nationalism and into the Bundestag?

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/06/27/the-rise-of-germanys-afd/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/06/27/the-rise-of-germanys-afd/)

27/06/2017

*Opinion polls suggest that as many as six independent parties could cross the electoral threshold and enter the Bundestag in Germany's federal elections in September. In advance of the elections, we are running a series profiling each of these parties. In the second article of the series, [Julian Göppfarth](#) traces the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which narrowly missed out on entering the Bundestag in the last federal elections in 2013, but which is well placed to gain representation this time around.*



## The Greek debt crisis and Lucke's ordoliberal economics (2013-15)

On 14 July 2013, a skinny and youthful man jumps onto the stage of a Berlin convention centre. Against roaring applause, he euphorically presents the recently founded *Alternative für Deutschland* as a “new type of party” that “dares to have more democracy” in the face of “Merkel's governance without alternatives”. A party that is the only alternative for Germany, a real opposition to an establishment of “yea-sayers without opinions” and which has the guts to oppose Merkel's European policies. His speech marks the beginning of the first party rally of the AfD.

The man is called Bernd Lucke, founder of the AfD and an [ordoliberal economist](#) at the University of Hamburg. He sees himself and the party in the tradition of Kohl, Schmidt and Adenauer who acted, so he says, in the interests of the people and in respect of other European nations. Merkel, however, makes the Germans pay for Greek mistakes while interfering in other countries' business. Rather than saving Europe, she threatens it.

The true alternative, he goes on, is one that tells the truth, namely that through the euro, Germans are paying for the dysfunctional economies and states of countries such as Greece. The solution is to dismantle the Eurozone, and to return to the Deutschmark and a national economy that trades with the world but which is based on few but strict rules. Above all, he calls for more direct democracy and an immigration system limiting the possibility of “immigration into the German welfare-state”. The last point shows that what the AfD was later to develop into, namely an anti-immigration party, was already in its original DNA.

Lucke's supporters, some of which are prominent German economists, interrupt his speech on several occasions, enthusiastically cheering his claims. Most of the 1,500 initial members used to be in Merkel's CDU. In terms of electoral support, some [polls](#) suggest that up to 24% would be ready to support a new party of the profile of the AfD. In the 2013 federal elections, the party narrowly misses the threshold required to enter the Bundestag, but in 2014 it is elected into three German state parliaments as well as the European Parliament. In the national polls, the party soars up to 10%. However, its rise only lasts as long as the Eurozone crisis dominates the German media. By July 2015, as other topics dominate the news, the support of the party in the polls falls back to 3%.

## The refugee crisis, Petry and the rise of the nationalist AfD (2015-16)

Given the enthusiasm of the early days, few, least of all Lucke himself, would have expected that just three years later he would not only be leaving the AfD, but would be [expressing regret](#) over what his former party had transitioned into. But in the summer of 2015, the AfD duly ousts its own founder and elects Frauke Petry, until then the leader of the AfD in Saxony, as the new party leader. Instead of calling for a national alternative to Merkel's Eurozone policies, the AfD now propagates an alternative way of handling one of the biggest refugee crises in European history – and with it an altogether different idea of what German identity means.



### **AfD congress in Cologne, April 2017. Credits: [Olaf Kosinsky](#) (CC BY-SA 3.0)**

In light of the Paris attacks and rising numbers of refugees coming to Germany, the party calls for a halt to all immigration, if necessary by using violence. Leading AfD members tie the party's critique of Merkel's migration policy to Islamophobia, questions of German identity and nationalism. Some even openly support [PEGIDA](#) – the Dresden based movement made up of a diverse array of supporters united by Islamophobia and a fear of the decline of the German *Kulturnation*.

During this time, the influence of the New Right as well as radical and extremist nationalism rises. While Lucke opposes this development, Petry and Alexander Gauland, leader of the AfD in Brandenburg, support the shift from ordoliberalism to nationalist conservatism. Throughout 2016, as the refugee crisis dominates the media, the party surges yet again in the polls. Stopping only a few percentage points short of the SPD, it reaches its preliminary climax in September 2016 at 16%. At the state level, the party enters into five more parliaments, becoming the second strongest party in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (20.8%) and Sachsen-Anhalt (24.3%).

[Studies](#) have shown that the majority of AfD-voters are economically successful members of the middle class. Thus [some](#) argue that the basis for the AfD's rise is neither a fear of economic globalisation, nor economic need, but a perceived lack of positive national self-consciousness and a perceived decline of German cultural identity. This perception seems to unite a diverse membership, with 47% of members having prior political experience. As [political scientists from the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin](#) have shown, 46% of AfD members used to be in the CDU, 12% in the liberal FDP, and 10% in the SPD. These numbers support the thesis that the AfD is not merely made up of radicals. However, the same study also shows that 21% of AfD members have a background in other radical or far right populist parties.

### **Gauland and Weidel – fighting decline and chaos to enter the Bundestag (2017)**

In 2017, the AfD's star is no longer rising, but is falling yet again. Since September 2016, the party has been in steady decline in the polls. There are several possible reasons for this development. First, the refugee issue is far less present in the media than it has been in prior months. Second, the election of Trump and Brexit might have deterred some voters and given Merkel the chance to reappear on the national scene as a strong leader. Third, some of the established parties have managed to regain the support of lost voters by either focusing on questions of

social justice (SPD), establishing stricter asylum and refugee legislation ([CDU and SPD](#)), or by incorporating some of the AfD's ideas on national identity ([CDU](#)). Last but not least, the party has done much to harm its own image.

The increasing influence of radical and extreme right currents has resulted in Petry becoming the target of inner party attacks. Paradoxically, she is now the one calling for moderation and it is her leadership that is now being questioned by radical nationalist currents in the party. An increasing number of influential party members see her as a threat to the core of the AfD, namely its anti-establishment character. The main sources of radicalisation are members with a radical and extreme right past as well as those from the party's youth organisation, *Junge Alternative*, which maintains [strong links to the extremist identitarian movement](#).

The dispute between moderate and radical currents took on yet another dimension earlier this year. Björn Höcke, leader of the Thuringia-AfD, who has strong links to the intellectual circles of German New Right nationalism, [openly called](#) for ending the “cult of guilt” around the holocaust. Instead, in Höcke's view, Germany needs to take a more “positive” attitude toward its history. Even if the party leadership reacted by instituting procedures to remove Höcke, his comments have made the AfD appear to be too extreme for many voters. The image of the party has further suffered from a series of scandals. The [most recent one](#) involves Petry herself, which might lead to her losing parliamentary immunity, but will more than likely see the end of her leadership of the AfD. Finally, [studies](#) have unveiled the party's poor performance in state parliaments, as well as a general lack of professionalism and willingness to debate constructively.

The AfD has tried to fight this chaotic appearance by the nomination of Alice Weidel and Alexander Gauland as its leading candidates for September's federal elections. For now, Petry remains the official party leader. At first sight, one may read this as an attempt to reconcile Lucke's original ordoliberal AfD with the national conservative and populist far right party the AfD became under Petry. Weidel, who has been called the [prototype of a cosmopolitan young professional](#), lived in China for six years, is fluent in mandarin and worked for Goldman Sachs. Holding a PhD in economics, where she was supervised by one of Lucke's early supporters, the 38-year-old is portrayed as symbolising the continuing importance of ordoliberalism in the party. However, in the past she has openly denounced immigrants and Islam as being incompatible with German culture, just as her companion Gauland has done. The 76-year-old former CDU state secretary has been a fervent supporter of Höcke and his New Right nationalism.

It remains to be seen if this duo will be able to overcome the AfD's chaotic image, to cut its links to extremism, and to unite the party. What is clear is that the AfD is now part and parcel of the German political landscape. Even if it is now in relative decline, the party is today in 13 out of 16 state parliaments. In national polls, it has stabilised its level of support between 6 and 8% and it is likely to be elected into the Bundestag in September. Most importantly, the party has played a significant role in pushing parts of the CDU and even the SPD and Greens to the right. Many voters still see the AfD as the only political force that has continuously opposed Merkel, be it in terms of their policies on the economy and migration, or by standing up for German sovereignty and identity in times of social change and perceived crises. As long as this is the case, the party will continue to play an important role in German politics and remain a means to ensure the influence of far right ideas on mainstream politics.

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

---

**About the author**

**Julian Göppfarth – LSE**

Julian Göppfarth is a PhD candidate at the at the London School of Economics. He holds a degree in European Studies from Sciences Po Paris and the London School of Economics and Political Science. Prior to his PhD he has worked for the European Parliamentary Research Service. His research interests include nationalist ideologies, radicalisation, European politics and philosophy.



•