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Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)

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German politics has a built-in firewall against the far right. It's beginning to crack

Germany is more resilient to populism than its neighbours. But parties such as Alternative für Deutschland are testing it to the limit.

The Germans have a term for what holds them together: *Wehrhafte Demokratie*. It roughly translates as fortified democracy, but that does not fully render its meaning. In essence, it refers to the idea that the state has the right to act against those who threaten the liberal democratic order.

Another guarantor of German stability was the postwar constitutional settlement that founded three *Volksparteien*, big-tent “citizens’ parties” operating along carefully regulated parameters, encompassing centre-left, centre and centre-right. None would enjoy absolute power, which required coalitions, compromise and consensus at national and regional levels. As a further safety net, parties with less than 5% of the vote couldn’t join parliament, excluding fringe groups.

Now, that is all being blown apart. Germany is engulfed in the same populist wave that has swept many of its European neighbours. The far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) is [surging in opinion polls](#) and sending panic into the system.

One political question dominates: what to do about the AfD? In recent weeks, I have seen people sob when discussing the issue. Some wonder whether it might emerge as the leading party in next June’s European parliamentary elections (unlikely, not impossible). In autumn 2024, 35 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of the German Democratic Republic, elections in three eastern states, Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia, could see the AfD triumph.

The four mainstream parties (the original three were joined by the Greens in the 1980s) have long maintained a taboo in any dealings with the AfD and other extreme groups. They might have to answer parliamentary questions posed by them; they might have to sit with them on a committee or on a TV chatshow; but they would refuse to cut legislative deals or enter coalition discussions.

Now this *brandmauer*, or firewall, is cracking. In Bavaria, the economy minister, Hubert Aiwanger, has been [caught up in a scandal](#) in which he is alleged to have written a leaflet at the age of 17, mocking the concentration camps. Aiwanger, from the just-about-permitted alt-right party, Freie Wähler (Free Voters), refused to apologise. Even more shocking to most Germans, his popularity ratings rose sharply. With an eye on Bavaria’s elections on 8 October, Bavaria’s state premier, Markus Söder of the mainstream conservative Christian Social Union party, [refused to sack him](#).

‘Bavaria’s economy minister, Hubert Aiwanger, has been caught up in a scandal in which he is alleged to have written a leaflet at the age of 17, mocking the concentration camps.’
Photograph: Sven Hoppe/EPA

This was the latest of several episodes. In June, the AfD candidate was [elected head of the district council](#) in the small town of Sonneberg in Thuringia – a first. Shortly after, in the

same state, the AfD helped the Christian Democrats (CDU) win an [opposition motion on cutting taxes](#). Amid national uproar, an embarrassed local CDU leadership said the AfD's support had not been sought and was coincidental.

Thuringia may be a special case, but the problem is growing urgent across the country. The AfD might become so dominant in the east that it would need three, possibly all four, other parties to join forces to keep it out of government. The CDU says the firewall will stay, come what may, but some are suspicious of its intentions.

And people talking all the time about the AfD is just what it wants: to foster the impression that the others are ganging up against it. The “authentic” voice of “real people” v the amorphous elite.

In this febrile atmosphere, the AfD is also looking over its shoulder at another extreme challenger. Her name is [Sahra Wagenknecht](#), an MP for the Left party, and a former member of the Communist party and its post-reunification successor groups. She has morphed effortlessly into a Covid-sceptical, immigration-obsessed voice who combines far-left economics with far-right identity and social policies. Wagenknecht is expected to launch her (yet unnamed) party in time for the European elections. She could split the AfD vote, but at the same time bring yet more people into the populist-nativist fold.

The AfD is also having an influence inside the establishment parties. Positions have already [hardened on immigration](#). It has rallied resistance to recent climate laws and is undermining support for military aid to Ukraine.

Germany's allies are looking on with concern, yet few European countries are bucking the trend. In 15 of the 27 EU states, [support for the hard right](#) is currently above 20%. There is a certain type of British commentator that can't resist marking the [Germans' scorecard](#). But amid the schadenfreude, there is also denial about the extent of rightwards drift in their own back yard to positions that mainstream conservatives would previously have shied away from.

Germany's critics fail to see that in its proportional system, where parties of all ideologies operate in the open, the lines between right and far-right are clearly drawn. The German firewall, while threatened, is still holding. In Britain, by contrast, the UK's ruling party has already integrated much of Ukip and other alt-right parties into the fold. On immigration, climate, and other issues, it's hard to see a difference between the Tory right and the AfD.

One little-known example in the heart of Europe speaks volumes. On the Council of Europe, a body that Winston Churchill helped create to defend democracy and of which the UK is still a member, the European Conservatives Group consists of Italy's Lega, Austria's Freedom party, Hungary's Fidesz, Spain's Vox, Poland's Law and Justice party, the AfD – and the Tories.

The firewall may be cracking in Germany. It might be argued that in the US, Britain and elsewhere it has already been dismantled.

John Kampfner is the author of [In Search of Berlin](#), published by Atlantic Books on 5 October.