



# BULLETIN

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## From “Less Europe” to a “Little Europe:” Why AfD’s Success Could Change German Policy

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*A political beneficiary of the recent European crisis is opposition party Alternative for Germany. Its sharp criticism of Chancellor Angela Merkel and its open Euroscepticism has brought it increasing popularity amongst voters, reaching now 12% or so. If AfD continues to strengthen, the German parties of the ruling coalition may revise their European policy to push forward a project of integration at different speeds. This scenario would seriously weaken the position of Poland in the EU.*

Elections to regional parliaments in Germany will be held on 13 March 2016 in Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt. They will have a significant impact on policy at the federal level. On the one hand, the outcome will be treated as a judgment of Chancellor Angela Merkel’s handling of the refugee crisis. On the other hand, the elections will be verification of the actual power of the opposition party Alternative for Germany (Alternative fuer Deutschland, or AfD), which in recent months in federal polls has reached 12%, and in some areas even 20%. Its popularity results not only from strong criticism of the government or, more broadly, the establishment in Germany. AfD gives its followers a suggestive vision of a strong Germany, one which copes better with crises and challenges in a sovereign manner without sacrificing for what it sees as the increasingly imaginary, ineffective and expensive notion of European unity.

**The Party of Crisis.** This idea worked for the first time in 2013 when AfD, then a new party, protested against the position of the German government concerning the crisis in the eurozone. The party’s indictment of the support programmes for Greece turned out to be catchy: AfD came close to winning its first seats in the Bundestag in the parliamentary elections in 2013 (4.7%) and collected 7% of the vote in the European Parliament elections in 2014. It also managed to get into the parliamentary assemblies in five German Lands.

The party, led at that time by the respected economist Bernd Lucke, claimed that weaker economies should be compelled to leave the eurozone and the area itself should shrink to the group of similar, “North European” economies. There were also many voices—and in time they became louder—that the best solution would be a return to the D-Mark and integration should be restricted to the coordination of exchange rates. The euro appears to supporters of AfD as too political and “federal.” Moreover, it carries too much risk of “coercing” Germany into permanent financial transfers in favour of the periphery of the continent. It argues the basis for cooperation in Europe should be a common market with strong national states, the indisputable principle of subsidiarity, and the highly limited and clearly cut competence of the Community. These ideas move AfD closer to the views of the radical part of the British Conservatives. For this reason, the current party leadership wants the UK to remain in the EU because it perceives it as a strategic ally in pushing the vision of the “Europe of sovereign nations.”

Another breakthrough for the party was the migrant crisis. It allowed AfD to take over the support of anti-Islam radicals from the Pegida movement as well as a part of the middle-class centre anxious about the dissonance between Merkel’s slogan “We can do it” (*Wir schaffen das!*) and the increasingly noticeable ineffectiveness of the state in the crisis. After the dramatic events in Cologne on New Year’s Eve 2015 (assaults on women blamed on immigrants), AfD, which had for a long time accused the government and the public media of hiding inconvenient facts about the crisis, gained in the polls.

In the current phase of the migrant crisis, AfD is in favour of the intensification of actions at the national level, not at the Community level. The party has demanded implementation of border control in Germany since the autumn of 2015, expanding the list of so-called safe countries, and restoring the visa requirements for those coming from such places as

the Balkan countries. The message of “national security” and the need to protect the German borders have in the last several months been constantly repeated in statements by the party’s politicians, sometimes shockingly so. It is enough to mention the “lapse” by the party leader Frauke Petry in calling for the use of firearms against refugees, including women and children. AfD also postulated accepting asylum applications only from abroad and that those made in Germany be examined within 48 hours. Among other demands appear, not surprisingly, the immediate expulsion of asylum-seekers who are charged with violating the law as well as granting refugees only material benefits instead of cash. According to AfD, the EU-wide mandatory refugee quotas pushed by Merkel’s government is unrealistic. Instead, it insists on a reduction of the German contribution to the EU budget to offset the country’s expenses on taking in the disproportionately high number of refugees.

**Friends of Russia.** AfD does not identify itself as playing the role of an advocate for European unification, unlike the parties of the current establishment. Instead, it claims to support the longing of sizable groups in German society for a return to policies based on national interest that also do not take into account the objections of Germany’s neighbours and partners in the EU and NATO.

The means of this emancipation may become for AfD a renewed relationship between Germany and Russia. The party pays Moscow the compliments of “a full-fledged co-player” in the “common struggle against Islamic terrorism” and insists its importance requires lifting sanctions on Russia and a return to their previous strategic cooperation. In matching this rhetoric, the party downplays the annexation of Crimea and objects to closer relations between the EU and Ukraine and to the strengthening of NATO’s eastern flank. AfD sees the underlying cause for the current conflict with Russia as the EU’s and NATO’s expansion to the east.

The assumptions that AfD wants to move away from the constraints imposed by the Euro-Atlantic community and towards a regional alliance with Russia strengthens the party’s reservations about cooperation with the United States. Although, its importance for Europe’s stability is appreciated, at the same time it is blamed for triggering the Russia-Ukraine conflict, as well as for the destabilisation in the Middle East and North Africa. The U.S.’s failed interventions in these regions have led, according to AfD activists, to the creation and strengthening of the so-called Islamic State.

**Core Europe as a Remedy.** If AfD’s results in the next Land elections are quite good, it does not necessarily mean that the party will quickly be coalition-ready. The mainstream parties can easily isolate AfD, as they did with Die Linke, a left-wing counterpart. It should not be expected, however, that the emergence of AfD will not mean consequences for political life in Germany. Other parties, particularly those from the government, will have to selectively use some of the party’s ideas, an approach already in play in coping with the migration crisis. More important, however, they will need a political idea that can be an effective counter to AfD’s vision, namely, that the nation-state, possessing strong political legitimacy and tools, will always be the best form to deal with crises and challenges.

The concept of strengthening European unity, that is, the search for solutions to crises within the large EU, suits Germany less and less. There is no consensus among EU members about the direction of integration and the differences are actually growing. Although Merkel continues to support pan-European solutions, there is a rising number of those who see advantages in a “little Europe”—the deepening of integration within a narrow group of countries ready for such a project, including in particular the “old six” EEC states and Austria. In their opinions, a *Kerneuropa* (core Europe) would allow for more effective policies towards the migration crisis and would be a better instrument in the event of another crisis in the eurozone, as well as a proper political answer to the Brexit. The core also would become a strong identity component, emphasising the importance of the “Carolingian” Europe and possibility of federalisation of the project.

For Poland and other Central European countries, both the AfD vision of “less Europe” and the vision of *Kerneuropa* carry definitely more risk than advantage. At the operational level, many of AfD’s ideas may appeal to the governments of the Visegrad Group, as they share in the scepticism about the reception of refugees and to deepening the economic and monetary union, but it is to be reckoned that included in the package with these ideas is a Germany seeking to enforce its national interests without much historical or moral reflection, as well as openly parleying with Russia about the future of the region. *Kerneuropa* comes with the threat of “peripherisation,” which would deprive Poland and its neighbours of having an impact on Germany and Europe, which for not is still significant thanks to the existing decision-making structures of the “wide” EU. Simply deepening cooperation in the region would not be a sufficient remedy against a “little Europe.” There is not enough economic and political weight in the area, not to mention the lack of shared interest among the countries of Central Europe, for this idea to have much effect.

For these reasons, the most desirable situation for the interests of Poland and other countries in the region is one in which Germany remains a supporter of the existing design of European integration. To maintain this, first, they must support the political currents in Germany that see its interests better protected in a “wide” not “core” Europe. It is positive then that the former view continues to dominate German politics. Second, there is a need to strengthen the political role and effectiveness of Community institutions as the main field for levelling the differences between national interests. This does not preclude in any case building coalitions around specific issues, especially with Central European countries. The combination of a strong EU and a high capability to form and join coalitions is, for a medium-sized country like Poland, still the most effective means of persuading the strongest players in Europe, namely but not only Germany, to listen to the region’s proposals.