"Alternative for Germany" and Russia: The Limits of the Possible

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DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2025-23-2-88-107

Abstract

This article examines the history of modern Germany's right-wing opposition as represented by the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. Tracing its ideological and organizational evolution, the author identifies three factions (liberal-conservative, moderate-conservative and national-conservative) and two strategic approaches they battle over. While one approach seeks entrance into the political establishment as a conservative alternative, the other, fundamentally oppositional, approach resists the establishment's attempts to absorb the AfD's moderates and thereby eliminate the country's most successful conservative political project. So far, the battle has been won by the faction that advocates the latter approach. Currently, the AfD faces a stark choice: to become the Trumpist U.S.'s representative in Europe, or to try to rebuild continental cooperation around Paris and Berlin, drawing in Moscow in it at some point. The AfD's moderates favor the former, while the national-conservative wing supports normalization of relations with

Russia. The latter's strength and commercial pragmatism provide grounds for expecting cooperation with Russia in the energy and pan-European security spheres.

Keywords: Alternative for Germany (AfD), fundamental opposition, right-wing conservatism, sovereignty, internal party struggle, foreign policy, Russia.

The success of the conservative party Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the February 2025 elections prompts a fresh look at the party's potential influence on European politics and German-Russian relations. Among the various forces in German politics, the AfD stands out as the party most aligned with Russia as a political actor and, more importantly, as a historical and cultural entity. However, due to intra-party disagreements, the AfD contains a diversity of positions on numerous issues, including that of Russia. It is particularly surprising that, despite the growing attention of Russian political experts to this party, they overlook the important processes and trends that stretch far beyond electoral cycles and public politics. Recognizing the existence of different groups within the AfD, they do not scrutinize the ideological roots underlying those groups' policy statements and documents.

The AfD's decade-long history presents a successful example of a fundamentally oppositional yet non-extremist party. The designation of some members as extremist, by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, is caused not by their violating the bounds of German law, but by the constriction of what the mainstream media and political elite consider to be *legitimate*. Having emerged originally as a protest against Angela Merkel's economic and financial policies, the party began to embrace increasingly conservative and nationalist slogans, shifting to the right *while remaining within legal bounds*.[1]

[1] This position largely explains the party's alleged "radicalism" on a number of issues. (Incidentally, 'radicalism' is a relative concept that depends on the spatial and temporal context. What seems radical at one time appears part of reasonable everyday life at another; what appears to be socially or institutionally acceptable in one state may be beyond legitimacy in another. True, hardline conservative or right positions often bear the potential for "radicalism.") The reasons for the party's accusation of radicalism are discussed below.

At the same time, the CDU's leftward drift under Merkel was pulling the boundaries of permissible (legitimate) discourse leftward, creating a vacuum on the right and excluding alternative positions on many internal matters (such as migration, historical memory, and values) and foreign policy (including relations with Russia). (These borders are narrower than those that are legally permitted.) Hence the German establishment's "firewall" policy, which excludes the AfD from political decision-making.

The AfD contains three factions: a ***liberal-conservative*** *wing, the* ***moderate-conservative*** *center,* and a ***national-conservative*** *wing*. There are two opposing strategic approaches: an *aspiration to enter the establishment* as a *"conservative" alternative* (within the established *legitimate* bounds, and a ***fundamentally oppositional*** (though not insurgent) *strategy that opposes the establishment's attempts to absorb the AfD's moderate part* and thus eliminate the conservative political project. With the latter approach, the AfD hopes to gain a political status that would allow it to realize its political project without making concessions on principal issues.

Having secured over 20 percent of votes in the February 2025 parliamentary elections, the AfD emerged for the first time as the second-largest party in the country. It remains committed to the fundamentally oppositional course, resisting the establishment's attempts to impose conformism or to split the party and co-opt one of its factions. The AfD's leading, national-conservative faction aims *to sustain the party within the narrow gap between what is legal and what is legitimate, i.e., socially acceptable.* This faction has a consistent anti-Atlanticist approach, which embraces normalization of relations with Russia and closer cooperation with it in all areas.

Below we examine the AfD's history from this perspective.

FROM FINANCIAL-ECONOMIC PROTEST TO A SYSTEMIC ALTERNATIVE

The AfD was founded in 2013. Its fundamental origins are often associated with either conceptual opposition to the current European project or a reaction to the "social-democratization" of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) under Angela Merkel's leadership. In any

case, the immediate catalyst for the AfD's emergence was economic. On 25 March 2010, Chancellor Merkel, during a speech in the Bundestag, ruled out direct financial aid for Greece; however, shortly thereafter, she approved the first aid package at an EU summit. Merkel's assertion that there was "no alternative" would inspire the new party's name (Rabotyazhev, 2022, p. 164). In autumn 2010, Bernd Lucke, an economics professor at the University of Hamburg and a CDU member for over thirty years, united more than three hundred German scholars in criticism of the EU. The political momentum for these concerns (previously purely academic) only gained traction the following year, as it became clear that financial rescues were set to become the new normal. By mid-2012, an inter-party movement had formed, comprising various politicians and economists from the CDU and the Free Democratic Party (FDP). A decisive step towards the AfD's creation was the establishment of Alternative for Elections 2013 (Wahlalternative 2013) by Lucke, along with conservative CDU politicians Konrad Adam and Alexander Gauland, in September 2012.

The founding congress, held in Berlin on 14 April 2013, elected Lucke, Adam, and Frauke Petry—an entrepreneur born in Eastern Germany and mother of many children—as the party's equal representatives at the federal level. The AfD had around ten thousand members, most from the CDU or the FDP. The party's key figures were not grassroots, but from the financial, academic, industrial, and political elites, earning it the nickname of "professors' party." The AfD was initially characterized as a liberal-conservative and moderately (financially) Eurosceptic party that fit within the political establishment.

Yet, the AfD soon began to integrate the conservative agenda of family issues, gender, and immigration policy into its program. This was caused primarily by co-optation of both market liberals, conservatives, and moderate nationalists (while excluding former, let alone current, members of far-right groups like the National Democratic Party of Germany), presaging the emergence of three or at least two and a half internal factions.

In the 2013 federal elections, the AfD got only 4.7 percent of the votes,[2] below the bar for seats in the Bundestag. A year later, in *lander* elections, the party entered the legislatures of Thuringia, Saxony, and Brandenburg, reflecting its greater popularity in the east, which continues to this day. In its election campaign, the AfD deemphasized economic criticism, as the financial crisis had largely passed and such an agenda had turned out to have limited appeal (Gribovsky, 2019, p. 88). Instead, the party, called for strengthening financial sovereignty focused on family policy.

The wider agenda and sharper rhetoric inevitably triggered internal rifts: by the summer of 2014, some members of the liberal faction left the party. In the fall, many AfD representatives showed interest in the emerging anti-Islamic social and political movement, PEGIDA. Its quick rise and radicalization amidst the 2015 migration crisis, and the subsequent shift in the AfD's rhetoric exacerbated the already tense internal party situation. Lucke's liberal wing preferred to distance itself from the "anti-foreigner" protests, while the national-conservatives viewed PEGIDA as natural allies and stuck to their anti-immigrant rhetoric, aligning with it under Petry's moderate conservative, virtually sole control.

SPLIT NUMBER 1. THE ERFURT RESOLUTION

The internal contradictions within the AfD soared in the spring of 2015, particularly following the publication of the Erfurt Resolution on 15 March. This document was authored by Björn Höcke, the party chair in Thuringia, his colleague André Poggenburg from Saxony-Anhalt, and other party members from various regional chapters. The resolution served as the founding document for the so-called *Der Flügel* (The Wing), a national-conservative faction within the party.

According to the authors, the project Alternative for Germany was threatened by a "tendency to excessively and unnecessarily limit the political scope" of its activities. The signatories cautioned the party's leadership against transforming it into a "technocratically oriented party" and insisted on the necessity of preserving it as a "fundamental, patriotic, and democratic" alternative to the establishment. The resolution also criticized "gender

[2] All election results borrowed from wahlrecht.de

mainstreaming,[3] multiculturalism, and arbitrariness in child-rearing matters," as well as the "erosion of Germany's sovereignty and identity." In conclusion, the authors stated that maintaining an uncompromising stance would inevitably lead to conflicts with other parties, the media, and "those responsible for the destructive social experiments in our country," but that such confrontations should not be feared.

The day after the resolution's publication, party leader Lucke criticized the initiative, stating that any "wings" would lead the party to infighting and factionalism. Petry responded with caution, adopting an "above-the-fray" position and proposing to reconcile all opinions within the party. In contrast, Gauland, who signed the resolution, provided "absolute" support for it among the party's top brass (JF-Online, 2015a).

This clear shift to the right accelerated the erosion of the party's unity.

The AfD's liberal-conservative co-founder, Hans-Olaf Henkel, resigned in April from his position as deputy leader, arguing that "the rightists is out to grab power" and calling for a "purge of these elements" from the party (JF-Online, 2015b; Der Spiegel, 2015). In an attempt to regain control, Lucke amended the party's statutes to ensure that, after a brief transitional period, the AfD would be led by a single chairman—namely, himself. To prevent being ousted before this could take effect, he gathered his supporters into his own internal faction, *Weckruf 2015* (which can be translated as "Alarm Call" or "Signal to Action"), thereby institutionalizing a state of de facto dual leadership (Bpb, 2022).

However, Lucke's strategy backfired at the party congress in Essen on 4 July 2015, where Petry was elected chair by a majority vote, while the co-chairmanship was won by Jörg Meuthen representing the moderate conservatives. Within just one week, about two thousand members, including Lucke and Henkel, left the party.

A few months later, Germany found itself at the epicenter of a migration crisis. In this context, Björn Höcke and closely aligned Alexander Gauland in November 2015 presented *Der Flügel*'s second

[3] Defined by the UN as "ensuring that gender perspectives and...the goal of gender equality are central" to all public policies.—Ed.

document, entitled *Five Fundamental Principles for Germany* (Fünf Grundsätze für Deutschland, 2015).

The document was confrontational: "Our state and our nation are not products of chance. They are the fruits of many generations' labor. We can rightly take pride in our rich culture, civil and political freedoms, and prosperity," reads the ***first*** principle. The ***second*** rejects contemporary leftist social experiments—multicultural society and non-traditional family relations. The ***third*** criticizes the lack of Germany's political and military agency. The ***fourth*** criticizes the "lying press" and the political correctness that has "overgrown Germany like mold." And the ***fifth*** states: "Germany was the homeland of our ancestors. Germany must remain the homeland of our children. Germany is our homeland, our country, and our nation!"

The migration crisis predictably made many Germans more receptive to such rhetoric. In the March 2016 regional elections, the AfD garnered 15.1% of the vote in Baden-Württemberg and 12.6% in Rhineland-Pfalz, becoming the third-largest force in their parliaments. In the east, the party was even more successful, taking second place in Saxony-Anhalt with 24.3% (5% behind the CDU), and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern with 20.8% (10% behind the SPD). Even in "left-green" Berlin, the party won 14.2%.

As the Bundestag elections drew near in the fall of 2017, hardliners became more active. On 17 January, the leader of *Der Flügel* delivered a notorious speech in Dresden, much of which was dedicated to historical policy (Höcke, 2017). Björn Höcke stated that the famous speech by Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker in 1985, in which he first referred to 8 May as "the day of liberation" rather than of defeat, was directed "against his own people." Höcke labeled the bombing of Dresden, along with the destruction of dozens of other German cities, as a war crime, its sole purpose being "the destruction of German identity" and "the elimination of its roots"—a process that continued after the war through the "re-education of German society." According to the former history teacher, German children are indoctrinated with an extremely negative view of their own past from an early age, and it is essential to "turn historical policy by 180 degrees." In that same speech, Höcke made perhaps his most famous remarks, asserting that

Germans had erected a "monument of shame" (i.e., the Holocaust victims' memorial) "in the heart of their capital." He sharply criticized Germany's military and, more importantly, cultural dependence on the United States. He also warned of a demographic threat to the existence of the German people, while labeling the AfD as the country's "last evolutionary, peaceful chance."

Moreover, even before the 2015 migration crisis, Höcke had stated that "the question of identity is central in the 21st century," and that the family, as the primary cell of society, was being destroyed by the modern global economy and "the decadence of gender mainstreaming" (Fomitschjow, 2022, p. 27).

SPLIT NUMBER 2. THE KYFFHAUSER MANIFESTO

In the spring and summer of 2017, ahead of federal elections, internal conflicts within the Alternative for Germany over the choice of strategic approaches flared up anew. This time, however, the faction advocating for a more compromise-oriented approach was represented by those who opposed such a development just two years earlier. Frauke Petry, who was still close to the moderate conservatives, called for "more realistic" positions that would gain the AfD entrance into a center-right coalition (Rabotyazhev, 2022, p. 166), but her proposal was successfully rejected by hardliners. Although Petry remained co-chair of the AfD alongside Jörg Meuthen, the party's leadership for the elections was taken over by hardliner Alexander Gauland and Alice Weidel, a more "oppositional version of Petry", although she was a moderate conservative as well.

Less than three weeks before the federal elections in September 2017, Höcke's faction issued the Kyffhäuser Manifesto[4] (Der Flügel,

[4] Kyffhäuser is a small mountain range located on the border between Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt. According to legend, Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (1122–1190) lies in eternal slumber in the mountains of Kyffhäuser, his beard having grown through a marble table in the cave where he rests. Each day, ravens come to inform him whether the time has come for the greatest trials of the German people, at which point he will awaken to lead them to victory. This legend undoubtedly carries a Christian eschatological undertone. In the late 19th century, amidst the ruins of the medieval Kyffhausen Castle, a grand Hohenstaufen-Romanesque-style monument was erected to Wilhelm I (1797–1888), the first Kaiser of unified Germany. At its base, set below ground level—as if beneath the mountain—lies a statue of sleeping Barbarossa.

2017). Its preamble described *Der Flügel* as the "most important and stable" faction within the AfD, whose primary task is to maintain the party's stance as a "fundamental political alternative" and guard it against conforming to the establishment's mold. It cautioned against divisiveness or the premature pursuit of coalitions, suggesting that the AfD could aspire to become the ruling party on its own terms in the future. Besides, the Manifesto proclaimed the AfD as a "people's party."

In a gesture to confirm the emerging trend away from compromise, Petry, a week before the elections, distanced herself from the national-conservative election program (Programm für Deutschland 2017) of Gauland-Weidel, expressing her outrage at their "radical statements." This primarily referred to Gauland's controversial speech at the Wing's conference in Kiefhóyser, where he asserted Germans' right to take pride in their own achievements, including military ones, just as the French and British do (Fomitschjow, 2022, p. 26).

The Bundestag elections were relatively successful for the AfD, which took 12.6 percent of the vote, becoming the third-largest faction in parliament and the formal leader of the opposition. However, the day after securing her parliamentary mandate, Petry announced that she would not join the AfD parliamentary group, and dramatically quit the party, citing controversial statements by members of the Wing and the AfD's overall shift to the right. Her supporters followed suit, marking the AfD's second significant split. Nevertheless, this did not weaken the AfD's position. At the next party congress, the vacant co-chair position was filled by Alexander Gauland, the leader of the parliamentary faction and representative of the national-conservative *Der Flügel*.

SPLIT NUMBER 3. A PATTERN DEVELOPS

Shortly after the 2017 federal elections, struggle began to resurface between the moderate conservatives (Meuthen) and national-conservatives (Gauland). In November 2019, Tino Chrupalla, a young politician from East Germany closely aligned with Björn Höcke's Wing, succeeded Alexander Gauland as the party's co-chair. By that time, the national-conservative faction within the party had significantly

strengthened, bolstered by the results of elections held in three eastern *lander* in September and October.

On the eve of the 2019 *lander* elections in Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia, the party faced yet another drama—this time in three acts. Following a cycle of escalating conflict between the moderate-conservatives and national-conservatives, Jörg Meuthen was clearly informed of his role in shaping the party's direction. Alexander Gauland actively participated in the meetings of *Der Flügel*, while Björn Höcke, merely the leader of the regional (Thuringia) chapter, asserted during his conflict with Meuthen that he could guarantee the current leadership duo would not be re-elected (Steffen, 2019). Another significant tactical victory for Höcke was success in drawing to his side another leader of the AfD parliamentary faction, moderate-conservative Alice Weidel (though her aligning with *Der Flügel* was more of a tactical maneuver) (Der Spiegel, 2019). The conflict between Meuthen and Höcke climaxed in the spring of 2020, following a political earthquake orchestrated by Höcke in Thuringia.

This event, known as The Erfurt Shock struck when the Left Party and the AfD collectively took more than half of the Thuringian legislature's seats. Initially, the AfD and the CDU got the Free Democratic Party's Thomas Kemmerich elected as Thuringia's prime minister (by a margin of one vote, even though his party won only 5 percent of the votes). The AfD had broken its isolation, exercising political influence, and the shock was enormous. CDU leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer demanded that the regional CDU retract its votes, but ultimately she was forced to resign. Angela Merkel, visiting South Africa, called for annulling Kemmerich's election, calling it a "bad day for democracy"[5] (Zeit Online, 2020). Media speculated about a "fascist conspiracy" and a "threat to democracy," and Kemmerich resigned less than a month later. To address the crisis, the Left Party, the SPD, the Greens, and the CDU agreed to elect the Left's Bodo Ramelow as PM, who would govern with support from the CDU.

[5] AfD members accused Angela Merkel of overstepping her authority and violating her duty to maintain party neutrality, and sued her in the Federal Constitutional Court. On 15 June 2022, the court ruled in their favor, determining that Merkel's statements had infringed upon the AfD's right to equal opportunities in a competitive democracy (Bundesverfassungsgericht, 2022). However, by that time, the Chancellor had already left office, and Ramelow remained in place.

A week after Ramelow's election in Thuringia, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution classified *Der Flügel* as a far-right extremist organization and shifted its status from "suspected case" (Verdachtsfall) to "observation case" (Beobachtungsfall) (Verfassungsschutzbericht, 2020, pp. 93-96). This allowed security services to monitor the entire party's activities.

Jörg Meuthen sought to capitalize on the situation, as many predicted he would share the fate of the moderate leaders ousted from the party. Now, just as Lucke had been displaced by Petry and Meuthen, and then Petry by Meuthen and Gauland, Meuthen now found himself on the defensive. Notably, after ousting Lucke from the party in the summer of 2015, Meuthen and Petry halted impeachment proceedings against Höcke that had been initiated by the previous chairman in response to the Erfurter Resolution. By early 2017, Meuthen was defending Höcke against Petry's criticism.

As a counteroffensive against Höcke to reclaim initiative in the internal party struggle, Meuthen launched an attack on a prominent *Der Flügel* member and head of the AfD branch in Brandenburg, Andreas Kalbitz, accusing him of concealing his membership in a far-right organization prior to joining the party. In addition to Kalbitz's expulsion from the party, Meuthen called for the swift dissolution of the Wing's internal structures, which was controversially approved by the party's federal council. Consequently, before the designated date, the dissolution of *Der Flügel* was announced at the end of March 2020, and Kalbitz was expelled from the AfD.

Der Flügel was dissolved, as stated, to "preserve party unity and avoid jeopardizing the project of a political alternative for Germany." The leading role of *Der Flügel* in the party's successes in the eastern federal lands was emphasized, along with its "function as a compass," which had "saved the young party from careless alignment with establishment forces." However, "any form of organization can only be a means to an end," and *Der Flügel* was declared nonexistent.

Nevertheless, the positions of the national-conservative faction hardly weakened—Höcke's supporters remained within the party structures, and three of the four most important positions were held

by individuals close or at least sympathetic to him (Gauland, Chrupalla, and Weidel). By dissolving *Der Flügel*, Meuthen did not achieve party unity; rather, he eliminated the formal organization of his rivals, complicating the containment of their growing influence.

This became evident at the party congress in Dresden on 10-11 April 2021, where delegates were tasked with formulating an agenda for the federal elections. It was also expected that a single leader (not a pair of candidates) would be nominated, symbolizing an end to the party's split and a shift towards greater compromise with the establishment. Jörg Meuthen—just like Lucke before him—saw himself in this role. However, his attempt to consolidate the previous year's "offensives" failed. A congress, where Meuthen had intended to put Höcke in his place, instead turned into a comeback for the latter, who got many of his initiatives adopted by a large majority (Weidel, who fluctuated between moderate and more radical attitudes, received her share of reproach as well). Gauland and Chrupalla predictably sided with Höcke. Ultimately, Chrupalla was chosen alongside Meuthen to lead the AfD in the upcoming Bundestag elections, while Höcke stated a preference to focus on party chairmanship in Thuringia (Der Spiegel, 2021).

In the spring and summer of 2021, the party lost a third of its votes in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Pfalz, and several percentage points in Saxony-Anhalt owing to the "mobilization" campaign based on the "either the CDU or the AfD" principle. In the federal elections of September 2021, the AfD received 10.3 percent of the vote, 2.3 percent lower than in 2017. It also lost a fifth of its votes in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, and nearly half in Berlin.

Meuthen announced that he would not run for the party chairmanship again and, by the end of January 2022, he had completely exited the party, citing the victory of the formally dissolved but functionally alive Wing. Meuthen lamented that "the heart of the party beats too far to the right," that the AfD no longer stood "on the ground of a free democratic order" (Pittelkow, 2022).

Meuthen's successor was elected at the party congress in Riesa on 17-19 June 2022, against the backdrop of Russia's Special Military Operation. The AfD now became the most moderate party regarding

Russia. Björn Höcke, like many of his close associates within the party, repeatedly condemned "NATO's provocative policy" and arms supplies to Kiev. According to him, the conflict is not "Germany's war"; it is far more important to maintain economic relations with Russia. Therefore, Berlin and Europe should focus on peacekeeping and establishing a new security system that includes Moscow. In choosing between Moscow and Washington, Höcke would prefer the former, emphasizing that Germany should be "a central force and a bridge between the East and the West" (Deutschland Kurier, 2022; 2023). This foreign policy (geopolitical) attitude has not changed significantly so far.

The AfD's new agenda included the development of policy regarding the EU, and the transition from two party chairs to one. Given the lack of political successes and a sense of "electoral deadlock," the supporters of a compromise-moderate course hoped to prevent the re-election of Tino Chrupalla, which was more likely if a single chairmanship was adopted. However, this did not happen. Chrupalla remained co-chair, with Alice Weidel taking Meuthen's place. For the first time, the same people chaired the party and led its parliamentary faction. This had all evidently been pre-agreed with Höcke, who declined to run for chair but was a central figure at the congress. Furthermore, about two-thirds of the AfD federal council's seats were filled by individuals close to Höcke (Küstner, 2022).

The central and summary document was intended to be the resolution Rethinking Europe (Resolution "Europa neu denken," 2022, pp. 8-12), developed by a broad circle of politicians and experts mostly aligned with Höcke, with a largely unchanged set of the AfD's sharp policy proposals: the EU's replacement with a Europe of Homelands; protection of the nation-state and identity from globalization and migration; Fortress Europe; and a moderately pro-Russian foreign policy.

However, at the last moment, the draft resolution faced artificially-created formal obstacles. After lengthy and heated debates, the congress ended prematurely, with division reopened based on proximity to the dissolved *Der Flügel*.

WILL THERE BE SPLIT NO. 4? LINES OF TENSION AND PROSPECTS

As the crisis within Germany intensified in 2022-2023, the AfD's stance on resolving the Russian-Ukrainian conflict saw its ratings rise significantly, to 21-24 percent by the winter of 2023-2024, only five points behind the CDU/CSU (Wahlrecht, n.d.).

In the six months leading up to the European Parliament elections—and nine months before the *lander* elections in Saxony, Thuringia, and Brandenburg—the AfD faced a barrage of political assaults and damaging narratives. Former Left Party politician Sahra Wagenknecht launched a new party, clearly aimed at pulling voters from the AfD. In January, massive demonstrations against right-wing extremism swept Germany. These protests were sparked by information published by the media outlet *Correctiv*, and widely disseminated by other news outlets, regarding an alleged "secret meeting in Potsdam" in November 2023, attended by AfD members, who were said to have discussed a "plan to deport millions of migrants" from Germany. Although a court later found these claims to be defamatory, they had already had their effect in the media. This was followed in the spring by criticism of several AfD hardliners. Maximilian Krah and Petr Bystron, the first and second candidates on the party's list for the European Parliament elections, and known for their relatively positive stance towards Russia, came under intense scrutiny, alongside Björn Höcke. Shortly thereafter, another scandal erupted around a statement on history by Krah.

In an interview to the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica,* Krah was asked "You said that Germans should be proud of their ancestors. Even if they were SS officers?" He responded: "That depends on what they did. … Each case should be judged individually. At the end of the war, there were nearly a million men in the SS ranks, and Günter Grass also served in the Waffen-SS. … Among the 900,000 SS soldiers, there were many farmers: undoubtedly, a significant percentage were criminals, but not all of them were. I would never say that everyone who wore the SS uniform was automatically a criminal" (Fomichev, 2024).

Noteworthy was the reaction of European nationalist parties to Krah's statements. France's *Rassemblement Nationale* of Marine Le Pen immediately announced termination of cooperation with the AfD,

Matteo Salvini's *Italian Lega* hurried to make a similar announcement, and just two days later the Eurosceptic *Identity and Democracy* group by a majority voted for expelling all AfD MEPs.

Nonetheless, the AfD scored an impressive success in the European elections and in *lander* elections, particularly in eastern Germany. In Thuringia, the party secured 32.8 percent of the vote, its first time as the leading party in a *land*. And it took second place in Saxony with 30.6 percent and in Brandenburg with 29.2 percent. All other parties have ruled out cooperation with the AfD, especially in Thuringia

Now, with the AfD exerting some pressure on the German establishment, the prospect of a split along old lines has resurfaced. Even some hardliners are calling for a more compromising stance and for the exclusion of certain figures—most notably Höcke—so as to gain entry into coalitions regionally or even at the federal level. This parallels the AfD's foreign policy shift towards moderate Atlanticism, which many ruling right-wing parties in EU countries are leaning on. This transformation is expected to be spearheaded by Alice Weidel, the AfD's candidate for chancellor in the latest elections, who advocated for Höcke's exclusion from the party in 2017 but later joined his camp (Kubitschek, 2024).

The intra-party dynamics may rapidly gain momentum due to some external developments beyond the AfD's control. As of the end of January 2025, the contradictions between the two strategic approaches have softened: Höcke has publicly supported Weidel, whose rhetoric remains to be close to the positions of the formally dissolved *Der Flügel* (Weidel, 2025).

Pressure on Höcke's faction and its fundamental platform may intensify at any moment—even after the AfD's success in elections, which has been attributed to Alice Weidel who has unexpectedly received U.S support, specifically from Ilon Musk.

Götz Kubitschek, a national-conservative intellectual close to Höcke and a most influential AfD member, fears that American pressure groups may destroy the party's political structure and help create a CDU-AfD coalition under Merz's leadership, which will pose a high risk of the AfD's "reconciliation" with the establishment and gradual dissolvement (Kubitschek, 2025).

IN LIEU OF CONCLUSION. AFD AND RUSSIA: POINTS OF AGREEMENT AND DISAGREEMENT

So, can the Alternative for Germany be also a desirable alternative for Russia?

First and foremost, it is important to acknowledge that the AfD remains an opposition party, even at the regional level, and it is impossible to say with certainty what it might choose or be able to implement, if it were to gain power. Nevertheless, discussing this issue is certainly worthwhile, given current global dynamics.

At the level of policy, the AfD's positions are mostly favorable to Moscow. Its emphasis on pragmatic economic cooperation could breathe life into old projects and new energy infrastructure initiatives. The AfD has voiced a desire for an early solution to the Ukrainian conflict. It advocates for ending arms supplies to Kiev, increasing diplomatic mediation efforts, and establishing a pan-European security system that would include both Russia and Ukraine. And the conservative ideologies of Russia and the AfD are broadly aligned.

Russia-friendly positions are most consistently articulated by the party's dominant national-conservative wing, which pursues a fundamentally oppositional course. On 14 December 2024, the Höcke-led Thuringian branch of the AfD published a resolution entitled *Peace and Sovereignty: The German Position* (News-Pravda, 2024). In it, the Ukraine conflict is termed a proxy war waged by the U.S. against Russia to prevent Russian-European (specifically, Russian-French-German) cooperation. The resolution also calls for Germany to reclaim sovereignty through an independent foreign policy determined by German and European interests.

Strategically, the AfD faces two potential scenarios. One is to succumb to pressure and become the Trumpist U.S.'s representative in Europe, potentially gaining power and maintaining ties with the ruling and significant opposition right-wing parties across Europe, most of which still adhere for various reasons to a transatlantic stance. The other possibility entails continental cooperation centered around the Franco-German axis and inclusion of Moscow at some point, in the hope that the changing global political situation will open up new opportunities.

Members of the national-conservative wing have long supported the latter option, promoting normalization of relations with Russia and cautioning European right-of-center parties against drifting under the wing of American conservatives, and of Trump in particular. However, the situation is complicated by the Trump administration's unpredictable behavior and by Trump-affiliated individuals' involvement in German politics. Alice Weidel has been readily taking advantage of the unexpected support from across the ocean but is also reluctant to distance herself from the party's national-conservative faction, increasingly making public gestures in its favor.

Like many other conservative parties in the EU, the AfD is inclined to view post-Soviet Russia as a conservative nation with a European cultural background, "traditional values," and classical social and political priorities. This is further compounded by the deep historical ties between Germany and Russia, and a shared belief in the benefits of a Russian-German alliance. However, possible points of tension—most obviously the memory of WWII—can already be identified.

Having secured second place in the federal elections, the AfD has been relegated to the role of opposition leader, as the CDU/CSU has ruled out any cooperation with it. Consequently, there are no grounds for further attempts to moderate the party and gain entry to the establishment through compromise.

The AfD appears relatively comfortable with its position in the opposition, ready for constructive cooperation while maintaining a firm stance on key issues. If the CSU/CDU-SPD coalition enters a crisis—during or (more likely) shortly after its formation—the AfD could emerge as the main beneficiary. Thus, waiting for the CDU/CSU to discredit itself, rather than seeking to align with it, may prove most promising. On the other hand, the AfD seems to have once again hit the "electoral ceiling"—a point where neither external nor internal political developments are able to boost the party's ratings. This indicates that the party's leaders will have to find new ways of appealing to the electorate, which may bring further internal conflicts and schisms. The AfD's ability to overcome these challenges will determine its possibilities in the future.

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