



Re-introducing compulsory military service, 'restoring' Germany's military capabilities, toughening up 'soft' soldiers, setting up a German border police force and deleting the UN's 'Enemy States' clause: these are all policies from Germany's fastest growing party, the far-right populist Alternative for Germany (AfD), which is celebrating its fifth birthday this month, writes Penny Bochum.

Formed in response to the Eurozone crisis, the party was officially established in April 2013 at an inauguration meeting in Berlin. The AfD's short life has been dramatic. It is a party riven with internal contradictions, in-fighting and factionalism. Nevertheless, it has achieved stunning electoral success. It only just came under the "5% hurdle" political parties have to jump in order to win seats in the Bundestag in the same year as it was formed, won 7.1% in the 2014 European Parliament elections and then gained seats in ten states in regional elections in subsequent years.

In September 2017, the party swept into the Bundestag for the first time, coming third with 12.6% of the vote, meaning that it has 94 seats in Parliament and is the largest opposition party to Merkel's coalition government. It did particularly well in east Germany, taking 21.5% of the vote. In the state of Saxony, the party won 27%, more than any other party.

Despite its electoral success, the AfD's identity is hard to pin down because of the competing factions within the party. However, it has undoubtedly moved rightwards since its foundation. Its co-leader before the election, Frauke Petry, quit just afterwards because of the increasing

right-wing radicalisation of the party.

There is no question that the AfD is an anti-immigration, anti-Muslim party. After its success in the 2014 European elections, the party's momentum seemed to have slowed down. But Angela Merkel's decision in 2015 to open Germany's borders to more than 1.5 million refugees was seized on by the party, which has exploited the influx of refugees using inflammatory xenophobic rhetoric. Frauke Petry said in 2016 that the German police should shoot refugees attempting to enter the country illegally "if necessary". Petry lamented the way that "German politicians are exclusively wrapping themselves in the cloak of guilt" and that the government's "disastrous migration policy" would change German culture.

The AfD claims that Germany is being 'Islamified', and has called for, amongst other things, 'negative immigration', the sealing of EU borders, immediate deportation of asylum seekers whose applications are rejected, forced repatriation of immigrants who have committed crimes, and the establishment of a German border police force.

After 2015, Merkel did subsequently toughen up asylum laws and pushed for a more equal distribution of refugees across Europe, and there seemed to be a decline in AfD support for a while.

But the AfD is more than an anti-immigration party, and support did not die out. Like the Brexit vote, it is clearly part of a European trend reflecting a crisis of faith in the political establishment, which has stoked feelings of unfairness and alienation. 1.7 million of the AfD's 2017 vote came from non-voters who cast their first ever vote in an election. A report by the Hans-Böckler Foundation published in February found that reasons for supporting the AfD were diverse: there was a protest vote against the establishment (those who wanted to "show the system"); disappointment with the move of Merkel's CDU to the 'middle ground'; rejection of immigration; and a fear of social decline across all social classes, which is linked to a pervasive feeling of uncertainty caused by a changing society.

But can one compare the AfD to Nazism? This is a question which many commentators in Germany have addressed.

There is, and has always been, a power struggle between the party's 'moderate' and 'far-right' wings. The party was founded by a group of economists and professors who were opposed to the eurozone bailout and to the single currency, and had a socially conservative agenda. But by

2015 the founding leader Bernd Lucke had been thrown out, the far-right had taken over and the party had gained a new following of anti-establishment and anti-immigration voters.

The divisions in the party persist as it grows and evolves. Frauke Petry's decision to quit after the election was reported by Deutsche Welle as an extremist right-wing putsch, led by hardliners Alexander Gauland and Alice Weidl.

The party's lurch to the right has led some German commentators to conclude that the ghost of Nazism is haunting the country. A Spiegel article warned in February that the national socialist train hasn't arrived yet "but if you listen closely, you can hear it coming."

Alice Weidl is generally seen as a politician who attempts to give the party an 'acceptable face'; but a leaked email in which she called German politicians 'pigs' and 'puppets of the victorious powers in World War Two' shows a different face. Weidl is herself a contradiction. As a leader of an anti-immigration, anti-'alternative lifestyle' party which describes itself as the defender of traditional German family values, her home is nevertheless in Switzerland, where she lives in a lesbian relationship. She has recently been reported to be in conflict with another powerful woman in the party, Beatrix von Storch, who is pushing the 'Alternative Middle' agenda, which aims to restrain the move to the right in order to position the party as ready to govern.

Alexander Gauland is one of the key far right figures in the party, and has seen off two leaders. His extreme statements illustrate the AfD's media strategy of provocation and breaking taboos in order to gain widespread attention; this strategy involves using Nazi language such as attacking the mainstream media as the 'lying press'. Gauland once called for a Turkish-German government integration commissioner to be 'disposed of' in Anatolia (using a Nazi-era word 'entsorgen') and said that Germany should be proud of its soldiers in both wars. One of his key allies, leader of the party in Thuringia Björn Höcke, called the Berlin Holocaust memorial a "monument of shame" and said that Germany should stop atoning for its past. This hardline attitude can be found in the 2017 election manifesto. For example: Muslim immigrants, who "attain only below-average levels of education", are producing more children than Germans - this will "hasten the ethnic-cultural changes in society." The spread of "conflict-laden and multiple minority communities erodes social solidarity, mutual trust and public safety." The manifesto clearly states that "Islam does not belong to Germany."

The AfD's foreign and defence policy is concerned with re-establishing Germany as a sovereign power. The manifesto argues that other states and institutions have too much control over German foreign and security policy. It calls for a strengthened European component of NATO, the restoration of the military capabilities of the German armed forces, and the withdrawal of all Allied forces on German soil, including their nuclear weapons. The party wants a permanent seat for Germany on the UN Security Council, and for the UN Enemy States clause to be deleted. It proposes that compulsory military service should be re-introduced. It opposes the extension of the powers of the EU, and advocates withdrawal from the Euro and re-establishment of the Deutschmark.

AfD politicians have attacked the German defence minister, Ursula von der Leyen, arguing that Germany's participation in manoeuvres to deter Russia are an indication of 'catastrophically bad' priorities, when the state of German armaments is so poor. The party has poured scorn on von der Leyen's "dedication to developing uniforms for pregnant soldiers" at the expense of equipping the Bundeswehr (this is a reference to von der Leyen's attempts to make the Bundeswehr a more modern, attractive employer). And an AfD representative on the Bundestag's defence committee has complained that German troops are "too soft" because military trainers are scared of treating them harshly.

It is not clear who will emerge victorious in the AfD's internal power struggles, or how far the AfD will influence the political debate in Germany. But despite the success of post-war Germany in creating a strong, prosperous democracy, the AfD's rapid growth may send shivers down some European spines.