

# GERMAN POLITICS IN TROUBLED WATERS

Posted on January 15, 2024



The left-wing coalition government looks fatally wounded. But will a fractured Right replace it?

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In the German chancellery in Berlin, Olaf Scholz's aides must be despairing when they look at the latest polls. The approval ratings for Scholz's Social Democratic Party (SPD) and his left-wing coalition government are abysmally bad and reflect the [car-crash course](#) of the *Ampelkoalition* ('traffic light' coalition). The SPD has fallen to a new low of only 13% according to the [most recent survey](#) by the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen (the research group on elections for the public broadcaster ZDF) published on January 12th. The Greens are at 14%, but the liberal FDP has crashed to 4%, below the 5% threshold, which could endanger the party's presence in the Bundestag at the next federal election in the fall of 2025. Up to four out of five voters have lost confidence in Scholz's government.

All together, the three ruling parties have fallen to not much more than 30% voter support. The headwinds for the government are enormous. Among internal fights and disputes, the government has displayed a level of incompetence, ignorance, and arrogance for voters' concerns, which is truly amazing. Last week, they faced angry farmers who blocked roads across the country and protested cuts in subsidies and higher taxes. Among the general electorate, there is widespread radical discontent, mainly fueled by the economic recession, the surge in energy prices, and controversial costly 'green' policies, and, above all, the failure of the government to contain the out-of-control mass immigration of asylum seekers. Germany is, as in 2015-16, again the epicenter of the new European migration crisis.

The main beneficiary of voters' discontent is the right-wing challenger party Alternative for Germany (AfD). AfD is remarkably on the rise and has soared to well above 20% voter support (22% according to Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, even 24% in a recent YouGov poll). Therefore, they are now the second-strongest political party in the national polls. Number one has consistently been the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) with its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU). Together, the CDU/CSU stand at 31%. While the CDU, under its leader Friedrich Merz, has tentatively tried to distance itself from Chancellor Angela Merkel's legacy of welcoming mass immigration, the AfD calls for tough measures to halt the influx of immigrants.

This week, a report about a meeting where ideas for 'remigration' or 'repatriation' of large numbers of unassimilated foreigners were allegedly discussed has made headlines. The media establishment is trying to corner the AfD with claims that they are a threat to the constitution. However, the polls show that the voters don't care any more about such defamations, even about official warnings from the Verfassungsschutz, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (which is in reality an internal spy organization that can easily be abused to discredit political opponents and critics).

Interestingly, and amazingly, in the three East German states of Saxony, Thuringia, and Brandenburg, where there are elections due this fall, the right-wing protest movement is particularly strong, and AfD is polling in first place, at 34% (Saxony) and even 36% (Thuringia). The 'firewall,' erected by the established parties to exclude AfD from any participation in power, might well crack this year. The establishment is in a kind of panic mode about this prospect. Several mainstream journalists were lamenting about the '*Ernstfall*,' which is usually translated as 'case of emergency' but also signifies a situation when the survival of the state is at stake. Well, at least the hegemony of the left-green mainstream is seriously challenged and about to fall.

However, there has also been talk recently about the fragmentation of German politics and possibly the fragmentation of the opposition forces. One new party has been founded, and another one is set to be founded. Sahra Wagenknecht, a popular former left-winger, has broken away from Die Linke party and launched her Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) last week. The new party wants to siphon votes from Left and Right, and many mainstream observers have high hopes that she might snatch a large share of the AfD vote. At the same time, former President of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution Hans-Georg Maaßen has announced that he will transform the WerteUnion (Values Union), originally a conservative CDU pressure group, into a party. Furthermore, there is a small conservative party called Alliance Germany (Bündnis Deutschland).

Could this fragmentation make a dent in AfD's success and stop the party? The EU elections in June are comparatively simple for newcomer parties and, due to the lack of a 5% hurdle, a tempting test run. The Values Union is probably eyeing these elections too.

However, there are massive doubts about its organizational capacity and the pool of politically skilled personnel. Apparently, it consists mainly of frustrated dropouts from AfD and a few CDU retirees who want to sit at the back of the bus when it gets going. But the question remains: who will build a functioning engine for the bus, who will get enough fuel, who will control the nutters and cranks that are always drawn to new parties, and how many drivers will be fighting for the steering wheel?

With a view to the extensive graveyard of failed small parties in Germany in the last decades, a large amount of skepticism about the prospects of these newcomers is well founded. The most recent survey indicates that Wagenkecht's party is polling at only 4%, well below the threshold needed to enter parliament in Germany.

Thus, AfD remains the most important focal point for any opposition on the Right. It is there where the main battle will be fought. The decisive question this year will be whether the 'firewall,' an unfair exclusion of millions of protest voters on the Right, can be overcome.