Success for the AfD at the European Parliament elections would entrench their place in the German party system

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At the 2013 German federal elections, the Eurosceptic Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) only narrowly fell short of the five per cent electoral threshold required to gain representation in the Bundestag. Ahead of the European Parliament elections in May, **Kai Arzheimer** *assesses the party's prospects. He notes that there is a significant gap between the party's leadership and its support base, with the AfD owing much of its success to disaffected voters. Nevertheless the lower electoral threshold at European Parliament elections should see them gain a presence in the European Parliament which could help establish their place in the German party system.*

For decades, Germany has lacked a Eurosceptic party. From its very beginnings, European integration has been uncontroversial amongst German elites, and the public went with it. The Maastricht treaty, the euro and the Lisbon Treaty were all adopted with broad support from all relevant parties. An analysis of roll call data shows that even the more controversial bailout legislation packages were approved by about 80 per cent of the members of the Bundestag, shortly before the German federal election in September 2013.

But 2013 was also the year a new party sprung up that challenges this near-universal consensus. The 'Alternative für Deutschland' (Alternative for Germany, AfD) was created by an alliance of Eurosceptic academics, economists, entrepreneurs, intellectuals and dissidents from the centre-right parties just half a year before the election. Their central plank was opposition against the bailout packages and the European Stability Mechanism. Within months, they created a viable party organisation from scratch, attracted some 17,000 members and came tantalisingly close to the five per cent threshold in the election, which makes them arguably the most successful new party in recent years. But who, or what, are they?

Bernd Lucke, Credit: blu-news.org (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

So far, the party has no proper manifesto (which is highly unusual by German standards) and only a relatively short list of political talking points. While opposition to the common currency and, more generally, to political integration is their unique selling proposition, content analysis of their programme document shows that 'fordern' (demand) and 'Deutschland' (Germany) are the most prominent words.

Other important words are 'Kinder' (children), 'Bildung' (education), and 'Parteien' (parties). Of course, 'EU', 'euro' and 'Demokratie' (democracy) also feature, but less frequently than one might have expected. This chimes with the public image the party has been projecting since the election: in recent months, party leaders have spent increasingly more airtime debating family values, immigration and the alleged dominance of 'sexual minorities' (i.e. homosexuals) in the public discourse than on their plans for dissolving the currency union and transforming the EU into a free trade area. In some state party chapters (most notably in Hesse), an open power struggle between warring factions is under way, with party conferences ending in mayhem and party leaders only communicating via lawyers.

Who will vote for the AfD?

It is perfectly normal for new parties to have teething problems, and these woes typically include controversies about what the party stands for. But findings from Germany's 'representative electoral statistics' – a special count of ballot papers that are colour-coded according to voters' sex, age, and region – point to a sizeable gap between the conservative/neo-liberal party leadership on the one hand and their electoral base on the other.

The party's front runner for the European elections, and their most visible public face, is Bernd Lucke, a Professor of Macroeconomics who specialises in trade liberalisation and its impact on growth. Second on the list is Hans-Olaf Henkel, the former Chairman of IBM Europe, Middle East and Africa, and a former president of the Federation of German Industries who is on a long time mission to downsize European welfare states. Other figures include a member of a state court of auditors, an insolvency lawyer, and another Professor of Economics.

According to the electoral statistics, however, a disproportionate share of the AfD's votes in the 2013 elections came from Germany's deprived eastern states, where demand for social policy spending is high as a result of a sluggish economy and the legacy of socialism (which more than two thirds of East Germans still consider a good idea in principle). Moreover, one in five eastern AfD voters cast their district vote (a preference vote for a regional candidate that does not affect the ultimate outcome of the election) for the Socialist Left party's candidates, while one in ten supported candidates standing for the right-wing extremist NPD (which campaigns, amongst other things, against free trade and globalisation). Exit polls indicate that nationwide, about 40 per cent of their voters had previously supported parties of the left.

Taken together, this suggests that the AfD's success was fuelled not so much by their economically liberal policies, but rather by more general feelings of political disaffection and resentment. While the leadership was forced to declare a ban on former members of Germany's failing extreme right parties joining the AfD, it seems almost inevitable that this segment of the electorate will help them succeed in the upcoming European Parliament elections in May.

The AfD and the 2014 European Parliament elections: onwards and upwards?

For the 2014 European Parliament elections, a three per cent threshold applies in Germany, which could be further lowered by a pending ruling of the Federal Constitutional court. Recent polls put the AfD's support comfortably above this margin, giving them a strong likelihood of success in the May election (see the Table below). A presence in the European Parliament would give the party a political foothold that would help them to establish themselves in the German polity. Unless something dramatic happens to the euro, however, it seems unlikely that Euroscepticism alone would see them through, since both the EU and the euro are still surprisingly popular in Germany.

Table: Voting intention in Germany (Updated 13 March 2014)

Party	Parliamentary group	Predicted vote share (%)	Predicted seats
Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU)	EPP	38	38
Social Democrats (SPD)	S&D	26	26
German Greens	Greens/EFA	10.3	10
Die Linke (The Left)	GUE-NGL	8.3	8
Alternative for Germany (AfD)	NI	6.4	6
Free Democrats (FDP)	ALDE	3.5	4
Pirate Party	NI	2.2	2
National Democratic Party of Germany	NI	1.3	1
Free Voters (FW)	ALDE	1	1

Note: **Based on an average of polls taken between 9-13 March. Chart is for illustrative purposes and is not an attempt by the author to predict the result of the European elections.**

On the other hand, the nonexistence of a successful populist anti-immigrant party in Germany is looking more and more like an anomaly. In the past, the German far-right has been tainted by its association with Nazism, their leaders being quickly ostracised by the elites. Filling that gap by setting up a 'modern' right-wing party in Germany must look like a very risky, but equally tempting long-term strategy for the AfD's political entrepreneurs.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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