

The Party That Refused to Stay Contained: A Dossier on the Alternative für Deutschland

From its founding as a professors' protest against the euro in 2013 to its current status as Germany's second-largest political force, confirmed extremist by domestic intelligence, and polling above 27 per cent in 2026.

Précis. The AfD has passed through four distinct phases in thirteen years — monetary-policy protest (2013), migration-crisis vehicle (2015–2017), parliamentary opposition force (2017–2022), and post-election consolidation (2023–present). It emerged from the February 2025 federal election as the second-largest party, with 20.8 per cent of the vote and 152 seats, the strongest result by any party outside the CDU/CSU bloc in the post-war era. On 2 May 2025 the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz confirmed its classification as a *gesichert rechtsextremistische* organisation. By September 2026 its polling average stands at 27.9 per cent — seven percentage points above its election result. This dossier examines the party's trajectory, programme, institutional context, European alignment, and probable near-term scenarios.

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF SUMMARY — CARTOGRAPHER DESK DOSSIER

The AfD is a structurally unusual political object: a party that entered the Bundestag in 2017 with 12.6 per cent, lost a third of its vote in 2021 when the Covid crisis briefly reactivated mainstream credibility, returned in 2025 as the second-largest party at 20.8 per cent, was then formally classified as an extremist organisation by its own government's intelligence service, and has since risen seven points further in polling to 27.9 per cent by September 2026. Every institutional mechanism designed to contain it — the BfV classification, the *Brandmauer* (firewall) pledged by all mainstream parties, the European isolation enforced by the RN veto on its entry into the Patriots for Europe group, the preliminary steps toward a party-ban referral — has, empirically, been followed by an increase in its polling. The mechanism is not complicated: each containment measure is received by a significant share of the electorate not as evidence that the party is dangerous, but as evidence that the establishment is afraid of it. This dossier does not assess whether the AfD should be banned, classified, or admitted to government. It maps the structural conditions that have produced the current situation and identifies the few variables that could change the trajectory.

01 Origins: The Professors' Party, 2013

The Alternative für Deutschland was founded on 6 February 2013 in Oberursel, Hesse, by a coalition of economists, legal scholars, and conservative journalists who shared a single programmatic position: that Germany's participation in the euro-area bailout mechanism was unconstitutional and economically ruinous. The founding document was not a traditional party manifesto. It was closer to an academic petition, signed by men and women with the kind of credentials that made dismissal as "populists" initially implausible — Bernd Lucke held a chair in macroeconomics at Hamburg; Joachim Starbatty had advised multiple German governments on European monetary policy; Karl Albrecht Schachtschneider had filed constitutional challenges to Maastricht before the Bundesverfassungsgericht.

The party's founding thesis was precise: the euro, as constructed, created permanent cross-subsidisation of peripheral economies by northern ones; the European Stability Mechanism represented a transfer of fiscal authority to Brussels without democratic mandate; and Germany's constitutional order — specifically the Maastricht judgment of 1993, which reserved the Bundestag's budget sovereignty as a core non-transferable power — had been violated. The demand was for an orderly dissolution of the eurozone, or at minimum for Germany's exit from it, not for migration restriction, not for cultural nationalism, and not for any of the programme elements that would later come to define the party's public identity.

At the September 2013 Bundestag election the AfD received 4.7 per cent — just short of the five per cent threshold required for parliamentary representation under German electoral law. The result was simultaneously a failure (no seats) and a signal (nearly two million votes for a party that had existed for seven months, on a platform that had no populist register). A party that missed the threshold by 0.3 points had announced itself as a potential structural force.

"The AfD's founding document was closer to an academic petition than a party manifesto. The founding demand was for an orderly dissolution of the eurozone — not for migration restriction, not for cultural nationalism."

02 The Migration Turn, 2015–2017

The transformation of the AfD from a eurosceptic economists' party into a migration-restrictionist political force occurred in two phases, each accelerated by an external event.

The first phase was internal. The founding leadership — Lucke, Starbatty, and their allies — faced a sustained challenge from the party's more culturally conservative wing, represented above all by Frauke Petry, then chair of the Saxon AfD. The internal dispute was substantive: the Lucke faction wanted the party to remain anchored to monetary-policy critique and maintain what they regarded as a respectable distance from ethno-nationalist currents; the Petry faction argued that the party's natural electorate was not economists who disagreed with Draghi but citizens who felt culturally dispossessed by the pace and character of German demographic change. At the Essen congress of July 2015 Petry defeated Lucke. He left the party the same evening. Most of the founding academic cadre followed him within months.

The second phase was external and arrived in September 2015, when Chancellor Merkel's decision to permit the entry of approximately 890,000 asylum seekers — accompanied by her phrase *Wir schaffen das* — provided the AfD with the exact political terrain its new leadership had been constructing. The party's polling, which had been drifting between four and seven per cent, began a sustained climb that would peak at 15 per cent in early 2016.

By the time of the 2017 Bundestag election, the AfD had undergone a second leadership convulsion. Petry herself — who had moderated certain positions as the party entered its first serious parliamentary contest — was outflanked by a harder faction around Alexander Gauland and Alice Weidel. The party entered the September 2017 election polling at 12–13 per cent and finished at 12.6 per cent, winning 94 seats and becoming the third-largest party in the Bundestag, and the largest opposition force after the formation of the CDU/CSU-SPD grand coalition. Petry, who had been its leader through its transformation, announced on election night that she was leaving the parliamentary group.

03 The Bundestag Years, 2017–2022

The AfD's 2017–2021 parliamentary tenure served simultaneously as a radicalisation accelerator and an institutional normalisation. The radicalisation dynamic operated through the internal logic of the hardest internal currents — above all the *Flügel* (Wing), an explicitly ethno-nationalist faction led by Björn Höcke, the Thuringian AfD leader — whose positions, disseminated through party events and Höcke's public speeches, continuously moved the rhetorical baseline. The BfV had already placed the *Flügel* under surveillance by 2019; the *Flügel* was formally dissolved as a named structure in 2020, but its personnel and positions remained within the party. Höcke himself was confirmed by a Hessian court in 2024 to have used a prohibited SA slogan and was fined accordingly.

The 2021 federal election produced a setback. The AfD fell to 10.3 per cent and 83 seats. Several factors combined: the CDU/CSU's own rightward positioning under Armin Laschet partially crowded the space; the Greens' surge consumed part of the electorate that had used the AfD as a protest vehicle without being committed to its cultural programme; and the end of the Merkel era removed a figure against whom the AfD had most effectively defined itself. The party entered a period of internal recrimination and leadership instability that would not resolve until 2022.

04 Leadership: Weidel and Chrupalla

The party's co-leadership structure — mandated by internal statute and typically involving one figure from the western Länder and one from the east — reached its current configuration in December 2022 with the re-election of Alice Weidel and Tino Chrupalla as co-chairs.

Weidel is the more publicly prominent of the two and the more analytically striking. Born in 1979 in Gütersloh, she studied economics at Bayreuth, completed a doctorate on the pension systems of Asian economies, and worked for Goldman Sachs Asset Management in Frankfurt and Hong Kong before a career in private equity and financial consulting. She is openly in a same-sex partnership, lives in Switzerland, and is a practising Catholic. The distance between her biography and the cultural-nationalist programme her party advances has been the subject of sustained commentary in the German press — commentary she has consistently deflected by separating her personal life from her policy positions, a separation her electorate appears to accept without notable cognitive difficulty.

Chrupalla, a master painter from Saxony, represents the eastern base that has been structurally central to the AfD's electoral arithmetic: the former-GDR Länder where the party has regularly polled ten to twenty points above its western performance, reflecting a distinct social geography of post-reunification grievance that overlaps with but is not reducible to migration anxiety.

PART II — THE 2025 ELECTION AND ITS AFTERMATH

05 The February 2025 Federal Election

DATA — BUNDESTAG ELECTION RESULTS, 23 FEBRUARY 2025 (SELECTED PARTIES)			
PARTY	VOTE SHARE	SEATS	CHANGE VS. 2021
CDU/CSU	28.5%	208	+5.4pp
AfD	20.8%	152	+10.5pp
SPD	16.4%	120	−9.7pp
Greens	11.6%	85	−3.0pp
BSW	4.97%	0	(new party, missed threshold)
FDP	4.3%	0	−7.2pp (below threshold)

The AfD's result of 20.8 per cent — 10,328,780 votes, the largest absolute total any German party had received in the post-war period outside the Union bloc — reflected a decade's accumulation of structural conditions: the successive failures of the mainstream parties to resolve the migration question on terms acceptable to a substantial part of the electorate; the economic damage of the energy-price shock following Russia's invasion of Ukraine; the collapse of Scholz's coalition in October 2024; and the party's own organisational maturation after years of internal turbulence.

The political consequence was the formation of a CDU/CSU-SPD coalition under Friedrich Merz — the only mathematically viable majority that excluded the AfD — which took office on 6 May 2025. The coalition commanded 328 seats against a Bundestag of 630, giving it a working majority of 26. The AfD entered opposition as the largest opposition party, with Weidel as its parliamentary leader.

The episode that defined the opening weeks of the new legislative period occurred before the coalition was even formed. In February 2025, during the caretaker period, Merz brought a migration-policy motion to the floor and secured its passage with AfD votes — the first time since 1949 that a German government had relied on far-right votes to pass legislation. The episode produced significant intra-CDU tension and immediate pledges that it would not be repeated. It also provided the AfD with precisely the kind of institutional acknowledgement it had sought for a decade: its votes, officially untouchable, had in practice proved indispensable.

06 Political Programme

The AfD's 2025 Bundestag election programme represented the most developed statement of the party's policy positions since its founding manifesto. Its core planks:

Migration and Asylum. A German constitutional amendment to remove the individual right to asylum; a system of deterrence-based processing outside EU territory; mandatory deportation of all rejected asylum seekers without exception; annual caps on legal migration tied to labour-market need and capped at levels substantially below current flows.

Eurozone and Monetary Policy. Withdrawal from the eurozone, with Germany returning to the deutschmark or participating in a restructured currency zone of northern states. Opposition to the European Central Bank's current mandate and the TARGET2 settlement system. This position has been moderated in public presentation — Weidel tends to emphasise "reform" rather than "exit" — but the programme text is explicit.

Energy and Climate. Withdrawal from Germany's renewable-energy transition (*Energiewende*); resumption of nuclear power generation; negotiated resumption of Russian gas imports including, where feasible, Nord Stream pipeline infrastructure. Opposition to the EU's carbon border adjustment mechanism.

Security and Rule of Law. Expansion of police powers; mandatory minimum sentences for specific offences; deportation of non-German nationals convicted of criminal offences. Opposition to mandatory gender-neutral language in official documents.

Constitutional and Sovereignty. Reassertion of the primacy of national law over EU law where the two conflict; opposition to further transfer of competences to Brussels; support for renegotiation of EU treaties.

07 The BfV Extremist Designation, May 2025

KEY FACT — BFV CLASSIFICATION, 2 MAY 2025

On 2 May 2025, the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV), Germany's domestic intelligence agency, confirmed the AfD's classification as a *gesichert rechtsextremistische Bestrebung* — a "confirmed right-wing extremist endeavour." The classification was based on a 1,100-page internal report and was the culmination of a multi-year surveillance period. A previous classification of the youth wing (Junge Alternative) as extremist had already been in place since 2023. The full party designation subjects it to enhanced surveillance powers and has implications for the employment of AfD members in certain public-sector positions.

The significance of the May 2025 designation lies not primarily in its immediate legal effects — which are substantial but bounded — but in its political-symbolic dimension. The German domestic intelligence service had now formally placed the second-largest party in the Bundestag, with 10.3 million voters and 152 MPs, in the same classification category as neo-Nazi organisations. The political economy of this classification produced, within the following sixteen months, a polling increase of seven percentage points for the classified party.

The explanatory framework for this counter-intuitive result is not complicated. A classification that designates 20.8 per cent of the electorate's preferred party as "extremist" is, for a substantial share of that electorate, not evidence that the party is dangerous. It is evidence that the establishment considers their political preferences illegitimate. The reclassification mechanism converts a security instrument into a grievance amplifier — not because the BfV's analysis is wrong, but because the political meaning of the classification is interpreted by voters through the lens of their prior disposition toward the institution performing the classification.

PART III — INSTITUTIONAL AND EUROPEAN CONTEXT

08 The Verbotsverfahren: Party-Ban Proceedings

Article 21(2) of the German Basic Law provides for the prohibition of a political party that "seeks to undermine or abolish the free democratic basic order or to endanger the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany." The mechanism requires a referral to the Federal Constitutional Court (*Bundesverfassungsgericht*) by the Bundestag, the Bundesrat, or the federal government. The court ruled on two previous party bans — against the neo-Nazi SRP in 1952 and the KPD in 1956 — and rejected a 2017 application against the NPD on the grounds that while the party was ideologically anti-constitutional, it lacked the organisational weight to actually threaten the constitutional order.

The NPD precedent established a threshold that has complicated AfD ban discussions from the outset: a party must not only hold unconstitutional positions but must have a realistic prospect of implementing them. An AfD with 20.8 per cent of the national vote and 152 Bundestag seats presents a substantially different factual basis than the NPD at its peak, but the bar set by the 2017 decision remains in place and would require the court to distinguish its own precedent.

As of September 2026, no formal *Verbotsverfahren* referral has been filed against the AfD. The political calculus is exposed: a failed ban application would be a significant institutional defeat that could further elevate the AfD's standing. The Merz government has explicitly declined to initiate proceedings. The Bundestag has held discussions but not voted on a referral. The option remains technically available; politically, it functions as an asymmetric deterrent whose use is constrained by the fear of failure.

09 Russia, Funding Allegations, and Voice of Europe

The AfD's relationship with Russia has been a subject of sustained investigative journalism and parliamentary inquiry since at least 2016, when the party's public positioning on Ukraine, NATO, and sanctions was demonstrably aligned with Kremlin preferences. The pattern intensified after the February 2022 invasion.

The most significant documented episode is the Voice of Europe investigation of 2024. Voice of Europe was a pro-Kremlin influence-operation network that channelled funds and organisational support to European far-right parties and media outlets. Belgian intelligence identified it as a Russian state-adjacent operation; the EU imposed sanctions on its principal operators. Two AfD MEPs — Maximilian Krah and Petr Bystron — were named in connection with the network. Krah gave an interview to an Italian outlet in April 2024 in which he stated that SS members were "not all war criminals" — a remark that produced his suspension from the AfD's European Parliament delegation and ultimately contributed to the party's exclusion from Le Pen's Patriots for Europe group.

NOTE — KRAH AFFAIR AND EP GROUP

EVENT	DATE	CONSEQUENCE
Krah interview (SS statement)	April 2024	Suspended from AfD EP delegation
Voice of Europe sanctions (EU)	May 2024	Bystron under investigation
AfD excluded from Patriots for Europe	July 2024	Joined ESN group instead
ESN group formation	July 2024	AfD largest party in ESN (15 MEPs)

10 European Alignment: ESN and Exclusion from Patriots for Europe

The formation of the Patriots for Europe group in July 2024 — assembled by Viktor Orbán's Fidesz, Geert Wilders's PVV, and Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National, with subsequent adhesions from Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia allies and others — immediately raised the question of AfD participation. The AfD sought entry; it was refused. The veto was exercised by the RN at Le Pen's explicit instruction.

The logic of the exclusion was structural, not personal. Le Pen has spent twenty years on the project of *dédiabolisation* — the systematic rehabilitation of the RN as a party capable of governing, by purging the most extreme elements associated with her father, calibrating its rhetoric to remain within the bounds of mainstream acceptability, and cultivating an image of institutional competence. The AfD, with its BfV extremist designation, its Krah episode, its Höcke wing, and its explicit programme for eurozone exit, presented an association risk that Le Pen calculated would impose costs on the RN's domestic positioning that exceeded any benefit from EP group solidarity.

The AfD instead joined the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) group — a smaller, harder grouping that includes the Hungarian Mi Hazánk party, the Bulgarian Vazrazhdane, and the Polish Konfederacja. The AfD is the ESN's largest member with 15 MEPs. The ESN group has limited committee weight and no realistic prospect of influencing EP legislative outcomes, but provides the AfD with a formal European parliamentary home.

11 The Firewall and Its Contradictions

The *Brandmauer* — the pledge by all mainstream German parties not to enter into coalition with, or pass legislation with the support of, the AfD — has been the central mechanism of AfD containment since 2017. Its operational record is mixed.

At the Länder level, the firewall has held structurally: no minister-president has been elected with AfD votes; no coalition has included AfD members. In Thuringia, where the AfD holds the relative majority of Landtag seats under Höcke, the other parties have constructed a minority government rather than allow AfD participation. The costs of this position are real — minority governments are functionally constrained and frequently unable to pass legislation — but the parties involved regard them as preferable to the legitimisation cost of AfD inclusion.

At the federal level, the firewall's theoretical integrity was breached, once, in February 2025, when Merz used AfD votes to pass a migration motion. The episode was framed by the CDU as an exceptional circumstance; by the AfD

as confirmation that its votes were in practice indispensable; and by the SPD and Greens as a fundamental rupture whose long-term consequences for the firewall norm remain unresolved.

12 September 2026: Where Things Stand

POLLING TREND — AfD NATIONAL AVERAGE		
REFERENCE POINT	AFD SHARE	NOTES
September 2021 (election result)	10.3%	Second term in Bundestag
February 2025 (election result)	20.8%	Second-largest party, 152 seats
May 2025 (BfV classification)	~21%	Classification announced
September 2026 (polling average)	27.9%	+7.1pp post-election

By September 2026, the AfD is simultaneously the second-largest party in the Bundestag, a formally classified extremist organisation, the subject of ongoing legal proceedings against individual members (Höcke), excluded from all governing coalitions at federal and Länder level, polling at its highest point in party history, and the subject of a putative party-ban debate that has produced no formal referral.

The structural dynamic that has brought it to this position — the interaction between genuine electorate grievance, institutional containment mechanisms that amplify rather than reduce the party's appeal, and the tactical decisions of the mainstream parties — shows no sign of resolution in the near term. The next scheduled federal election is 2029. If the AfD's polling average of 27.9 per cent were to translate directly into seats, it would be the largest party in the Bundestag — a position that would make the formation of any government without either AfD participation or a grand coalition of all other parties mathematically impossible.

The variables capable of materially altering this trajectory are few. A decisive break in the Russia-funding investigation that could be presented to the AfD's eastern electorate — for whom NATO membership is already ambivalent — as evidence of foreign state control would be the most destabilising. A resolution of the migration question on terms that the electorate regarded as credible would deprive the AfD of its most powerful single issue. A successful *Verbotsverfahren* would remove the party from the ballot but would not remove the electorate that supports it; the organisational and political consequences of a ban are more unpredictable than its proponents tend to acknowledge.

None of these variables is currently in motion at sufficient velocity to alter the trajectory before the next election cycle.

Appendix — Chronology of Key Events, 2013–2026

CHRONOLOGY	
Feb 2013	AfD founded in Oberursel by Bernd Lucke, Joachim Starbatty, and colleagues; anti-euro protest platform.
Sep 2013	First Bundestag election: 4.7% — misses 5% threshold by 0.3pp. No seats.
May 2014	European Parliament election: 7.1%, 7 MEPs. First elected representatives.
Jul 2015	Essen congress: Frauke Petry defeats Lucke. Migration becomes primary issue. Lucke and academic wing leave.
Sep 2015	Merkel's <i>Wir schaffen das</i> ; 890,000 arrivals. AfD polling climbs to 15%.
Sep 2017	Bundestag election: 12.6%, 94 seats. Third-largest party. Petry leaves on election night.
Jan 2019	BfV places <i>Flügel</i> under surveillance.
Mar 2020	<i>Flügel</i> formally dissolved as named structure; personnel remain in party.
Sep 2021	Bundestag election: 10.3%, 83 seats. Setback; CDU/CSU/SPD coalition formed.
Dec 2022	Weidel and Chrupalla confirmed as co-chairs.
Oct 2024	Scholz coalition collapses; snap election called for February 2025.
Feb 2025	Federal election: 20.8%, 152 seats. Second-largest party. Merz passes migration motion with AfD votes.
May 2025	Merz cabinet takes office (CDU/CSU + SPD). BfV confirms full AfD extremist designation (1,100-page report).
Sep 2026	AfD polling average: 27.9%. No Verbotsverfahren referral filed. Next federal election: 2029.

Sources and verification: Election results — Bundesrückgabeamt official returns, 23 February 2025. BfV classification — verfassungsschutz.de press release, 2 May 2025. Polling — PolitPro.eu aggregation, September 2026. Voice of Europe / Krah episode — Reuters, Euractiv, April–May 2024. Patriots for Europe / ESN affiliation — European Parliament group records, July 2024. Merz Bundestag vote — Bundestag plenary records, February 2025.

Desk note: The BfV classification is subject to an administrative-law challenge by the AfD; as of the date of this report it remains in force. The Hessian court ruling on Höcke's use of a prohibited slogan (2024) is final and not under appeal. The Thuringia government formation (minority, CDU-led) was confirmed in November 2024.

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