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## The Impact of the Rise of Right-Wing Populist Parties on the European Integration Process Case Study: The Alternative for Germany Party (AfD)

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## تأثير صعود الأحزاب الشعبوية اليمينية في عملية التكامل الأوروبي: دراسة حالة: حزب "البديل من أجل ألمانيا"

مصعب محمد علي

### ملخص

**هدف الدراسة:** تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل تأثير صعود الأحزاب الشعبوية اليمينية في مستقبل عملية التكامل الأوروبي، لا سيما في ألمانيا (إحدى أقوى دول أوروبا الغربية اقتصادياً وسياسياً، وأكبر داعم لميزانية وسياسات الاتحاد الأوروبي). كما تركز الدراسة الضوء على العلاقة بين الصعود السريع لحزب البديل من أجل ألمانيا وموقف "التشكيك الأوروبي" لتوضيح تأثيره في مصير "التكامل الأوروبي". **المنهجية:** تم استخدام منهجين في البحث هما: منهج دراسة الحالة (حزب البديل من أجل ألمانيا)، والمنهج الاستشراقي لتحليل الظاهرة الشعبوية واستشراف مستقبل/ مصير عملية التكامل في الاتحاد الأوروبي. **النتائج:** هناك علاقة إيجابية بين صعود حزب البديل من أجل ألمانيا والتشكيك في أوروبا، وهذا يعني أن مستقبل عملية التكامل سيواجه المزيد من الصعوبات التي قد تؤثر سلباً في المشروع الأوروبي برمته. **الخلاصة:** إن صعود حزب البديل من أجل ألمانيا سيضعف قوة ألمانيا كدولة قيادية داخل الاتحاد الأوروبي، وسيؤثر ذلك بشكل مباشر في المشروع الأوروبي ومؤسساته فوق الوطنية.

**المصطلحات الأساسية:** حزب البديل من أجل ألمانيا- الشعبوية- التشكيك في أوروبا- الاتحاد الأوروبي- الأحزاب الشعبوية اليمينية.

# The Impact of the Rise of Right-Wing Populist Parties on the European Integration Process

## Case Study: The Alternative for Germany Party (AfD)

*Musaab Mohammed Ali\**

### Abstract

**Objective:** The study aims to analyze the impact of the rise of right-wing populist parties on the future of the European integration process, especially in Germany (one of the most powerful countries in Western Europe, economically and politically, and the largest supporter of the EU's budget and policies). The study sheds light on the relationship between the rapid rise of the AfD party "Alternative für Deutschland" and "Euroscepticism" stance to illustrate its effect on the fate of European integration. **Methods:** The research used two approaches: the case study approach (the AfD) and the Foresight approach to analyze the populist phenomenon and to anticipate the future/fate of the EU's integration process. **Results:** There is a positive relationship between the rise of the AfD and Euroscepticism, which implies that the future of the integration process will face more challenges that may have negative effects on the entire European project. **Conclusion:** The rise of the AfD will weaken Germany's power as a leading state within the EU, and this will directly affect the European project and its supranational institutions.

**Keywords:** The AfD - Populism- Euroscepticism- European Union- Right Populist Parties.

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**Research interests:** comparative politics, party behavior, and EU governance, particularly the responses of EU institutions to rising Euroscepticism.

## Introduction

The existence of populism in the European Union (EU) has become a tangible truth where populist parties have tripled their vote shares over the past 20 years. Also, these populist parties have been in government in (11) European countries, and in four member states of the EU, namely Poland, Hungary, Italy, and Greece, governments have been formed solely by populist parties. In addition, populist parties are part of coalitions in seven more countries: Norway, Finland, Switzerland, Austria, Lithuania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia) (Timbro, 2018).

The rise of populism in the EU is one of the major problems facing the EU's democratic values and its founding principles (Kriesi, 2014, p. 365), and it contradicts directly with the idea of "European Integration" because most populist parties adopt "Anti-EU Ideology" which is mainly based on Nationalism and Euroscepticism (Mudde, 2010, p. 1170) .

The sizable victory of the EU's populist parties, either on the National or European level, especially in Western European Countries like Germany, poses some questions about the fate of the European Integration Process. Because Germany plays a central role within the EU and is its largest financial contributor—providing more than 28 billion euros in 2020 (Statista, 2022)—the rise of the AfD can be seen as a significant indicator of the growing influence of right-wing populist parties (RPPs) across the EU. Moreover, their impact cannot be overlooked, as it poses a significant challenge to the entire European project.

Although the AfD has not been part of the government yet, it has been able to become the largest opposition party in the Bundestag in a relatively short period of time (since 2013). Also, the noticeable rising popularity of the party reveals that the increased level of Euroscepticism, inside one of the most influential European countries, will likely hinder the integration process and the EU's policies, especially, in some important areas such as: (CFSP, immigration and the common currency "EURO"). Thus, the research assumes that as the party's popularity increases, Euroscepticism is likely to intensify not only in Germany but also across the EU, given Germany's strong influence and leading role within the Union.

## The research problem

The rise of populism poses a genuine threat to the EU's democratic liberalism (Abts and Rummens, 2007, pp. 410-412). Moreover, the growth

of the populist Euroscepticism, since the 1990s, across the EU has played a pivotal role in challenging the European integration process (Wellings and Vines, 2016, p. 312). Furthermore, the entry of populist parties into the parliaments of many EU member states could steer the future of the European project toward an uncertain fate, given the tension between populism and constitutional democracy (Houtum and Lacy, 2017, p. 90).

The growing rise of Eurosceptic attitudes, as a main characteristic of the (RPPs), inside the most influential countries in the EU may have a direct effect on the EU's decision-making institutions due to the so-called dilemma of "Integration - Sovereignty" as the integration process depends mainly on the increased Supranationalism; however, Euroscepticism may derive from the view that integration could threaten social, economic or cultural interests, or that groups that oppose the government's policies may also oppose its supranational agreements by extension. Hence, the arguments of Eurosceptics is mainly based on the increased tendencies toward Sovereignty and the refusal of "Integration" (Sitter, 2002, p. 12). Moreover, the rise of Euroscepticism enables populists to further erode trust in the EU's democratic and supranational institutions, while also intensifying the mobilization of all forms of cultural, economic, and political discontent. As a result of this, there are popular anti-immigrant and anti-European integration attitudes with a broader criticism of the political establishment (Krouwel and Abts, 2007, p. 256).

The AfD was formed as a party that campaigned for the dissolution of the Eurozone and a radical reconfiguration of German foreign policy, and it was characterized as a Eurosceptic and anti-immigration party. Nevertheless, the emergence of this party has been viewed as a big shock to the German party system, with considerable implications for Germany's future position on European integration and immigration policies (Arzheimer, 2015, p. 539) .

The importance of this study stems from the strong political and electoral representation of the AfD, not only on the national parliament level but also on the European level. Thus, this paper seeks to address the following research question:

What is the impact of the rise of the AfD in Germany on the European integration process?



## **The Research Hypothesis**

This research assumes that the growing rise of populism in the EU, especially in some of the most influential European countries like (Germany) will have a negative effect on the EU's integration process and supranational institutions due to the dominant ideology of the AfD that is mainly based on Nationalism and Euroscepticism.

Furthermore, this study assumes that there are some factors, such as the immigration crisis, the Euro crisis, Islamophobia, the Brexit's vote among others that play a vital role in supporting the AfD on both the European and national levels. Therefore, these factors will have a strong direct effect on the EU's integration process as a whole, because of the inherent intellectual/ ideological conflict between "Integration" and "National Interests and Sovereignty".

## **Methodology/Approach**

Case study approach was implemented in this research paper (the AfD party) to describe and analyze the populist phenomenon, and also to illustrate the main reasons underlying the rise of right populism in the EU, in general, and in Germany, in particular. In addition, the case study has been used to clarify the inherent ideological clash between "Right Populism" and the "Integration" in some areas, such as The Common Foreign and Security policy (CFSP), Immigration, and the Single Currency "EURO".

Furthermore, this research employs the Foresight approach to anticipate the future of the European integration process in light of the AfD's rise and the rapid expansion of the right-wing populism across Europe.

In doing so, the research used a joint Quantitative and Qualitative method that basically depended on literature and numerical data reviews of the populist parties in the EU's member states, in general, and in Germany, in particular.

## **The Research Structure**

This study comprises five sections as follows:

- I. Historical background and ideological classification of populist parties in Europe
- II. Main Reasons underlying the rise of populist parties in the EU

- III. Rise of the Alternative for Germany Party (AfD) in Germany
- IV. Impact of the rise of AfD on the European integration process
- V. Results and discussion

## **I. Historical background and ideological classification of populist parties in Europe**

The origin of the word “Populism” came from the “Prairie Populists”, an 1890s movement of US farmers advocating a more robust regulation of capitalism (Baker, 2019); the word "populist" refers to "a person, especially a politician, who strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups" (Chang and Gregor, 2021, p. 18), and the concept of populism refers to "political activities or ideas that claim to promote the interests and opinions of ordinary people" (Collinsdictionary, 2021).

This concept is usually described as "a strategic approach" that frames politics as a battle between the "ordinary masses" and "corrupt elite" (Rice-Oxley and Kalia, 2018). Hence, populism is defined as ‘an ideology that considers society ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, i.e. “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should manifest the common will of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p. 551). Also, it has been defined as "a style of political rhetoric" that seeks to mobilize ordinary people against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society" (Mudde, 2016, p. 69).

Historically, the establishment of the Agrarian Populist (or People’s) Party in the 1890s in the United States (U.S.) is considered as the origin of populism today (Greven, 2016, p. 2). The American populist Movement was a politically oriented coalition of agrarian reformers, in the Midwest and South, that advocated a wide range of economic and political legislations in the late 19th century because of the discontent of the Farmers’ Alliances with crop failures, falling prices, and poor marketing and credit facilities (Knoles, 1943, p. 298) .

In Europe, populism emerged about three decades ago especially in Western Europe. It was initially perceived as a new phenomenon despite the existence of some political precursors, such as “Qualunquismo” in Italy in the 1940s and “Poujadism” in France in the 1950s. Later, it

resurfaced in the 1970s and 1980s in the form of political protest, when the former Danish lawyer “Mogens Glistrup” founded the Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet) in 1972 to protest against his country’s high taxes, whose enormous popularity soon made his party the second largest in Denmark and spawned a sister party in Norway. While taxes and an overbearing welfare state had played a vital role in fueling sentiments of protest in Scandinavian countries, excessive forms of insider and partisan politics were stoking the anger of citizens in other European countries, such as Austria, France, and Italy (Skenderovic, 2021, pp. 47-64).

Ideologically, populism can be classified into three categories, as follows:

**a) Right-wing populism**

It is a political ideology which consists of right-wing politics and populist rhetoric and themes. In the European context, the term right-wing populism is used to describe groups, politicians and political parties that are characterized by the following: “Anti-immigration based on "ethno-nationalist and neo-fascism" ideology, Euroscepticism, Anti-establishment, Anti-environmentalism, Neo-nationalism, Protectionism, Nativism, Anti-multiculturalism and Anti- globalization” (Rydgren, 2005, pp. 41-69) .

**b) Left-wing populism**

It is characterized by an emphasis on socio-economic issues, left-wing populists often claim that the political elite only look after the interests of the business elite and neglect the interests of the common working man (Otjes and Louwerse, 2015, pp. 61-62). Moreover, left-wing populism is primarily inclusionary (focused on policies of economic, cultural and political incorporation). Also, it is predominately focused on socio-economic issues like egalitarianism (March, 2017, pp. 285-286).

Generally, left-wing populist parties frame their criticisms economically and seek to protect the proletariat from being exploited by capitalists. Therefore, they differ from (RPPs) in that they embrace an inclusive view of society contrary to the exclusive view; also, from a political perspective, they are anti-pluralistic. Moreover, while they generally neither discredit minority groups nor oppose granting them political rights, they refuse to accept political competition, believing that they - and only they - are the true representatives of the people (Huber and H. Schimpf, 2017, p. 148) .



### **c) Centrist populism**

It is defined as an alternative to traditional mainstream parties (and their blocs) without inclining towards extremist policies. Moreover, it is not an antisystem extreme because it does not position itself on the periphery of the system (Ucen, 2004, p. 47).

## **II. Main reasons underlying the rise of populist parties in the European Union (EU)**

It is worth noting that more than a quarter of the Europeans voted for populist parties in their last elections, which shows that (RPPs) are currently growing more rapidly than ever before and have gained a 33% increase in their voter support in a four year period ( Rooduijn, 2018). In addition, the number of populist parties in Europe has almost doubled from (33) to (63) during the period 2000-2017 (Eiermann et al., 2017, p. 5). In 2018, on the national level, six European countries (Italy, Hungary, Slovenia, Sweden, Latvia and Luxembourg) held parliamentary elections, through which populist parties gained great momentum (Boros et al., 2018, p. 8).

Overall, parties categorized as populist won 220 seats in the 2019 EP elections (29.3% of MEPs), compared to 185 in 2014 elections (24.6% of MEPs). Radical right populists in the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) Group and new potential allies in other political groups won 172 seats (22.9% of MEPs), compared to 129 in 2014 (17.2% of MEPs) (Fella et al, 2019, pp. 66-74). These results reveal the noticeable success achieved by populist parties on the European level, compared to (9%) of seats in the 1999 EP elections (Rankin, 2019).

Generally, many analysts and writers identify two main root causes behind the recent surge in populism, which can be classified as follows:

### **1. Economic Causes**

The adoption of Neoliberalism that puts emphasis on supporting: (free trade- deregulation- globalization- competition- free market- the private sector- decreasing government control over the economy- opposing the expansion of government powers and the welfare state (Venugopal, 2015, pp. 165-170), is viewed as the main catalyst underlying the rise of populism since these elements have created the so-called “economic

insecurity status”, which is crucial for understanding the electoral success of populist parties as well as immigration and the 2008 financial crisis. (Margalit, 2019).

Although neoliberalism believes that greater economic freedom leads to greater economic and social progress for individuals, it has some inverse results, such as misguided free market approach to public services- Monopolies- economic and social inequality (Manning, 2022).

Populist parties have exploited this point to assert their argument that globalization, associated with rising inequality and migration, imposes costs on low-skilled workers in the developed world. Also, they emphasize the role of Eurozone institutions in increasing economic insecurity in European Countries (Noury and Roland, 2020, p. 431).

According to many experts, economic history and economic theory both provide ample grounds for anticipating that advanced stages of economic globalization would produce a political backlash. Therefore, the rise of populism and its successful electoral campaigns were rather expected in many developed countries because populists have exploited the effect of “economic insecurity” to increase their popularity among frustrated citizens (Ruzza, 2018, pp. 201-216).

Populists have succeeded in using this effect to increase the sense of “Xenophobia”, “Extremism” and “Racism” against immigrants by focusing mainly on their negative effects on the economy. According to a report released in 2018 by the European Commission on Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), xenophobic populism and racist hate speech continued to make their mark on the contemporary political climate in Europe. The report states that the growing public anxiety about economic, geopolitical and technological changes was exploited by those scapegoating migrants and minorities, in particular populist politicians that intend to divide societies on ethnic or religious grounds. Not only were such views expressed by fringe politicians, but they increasingly gained footing within mainstream political parties and national governments (Populismstudies, 2022).

## **2) Cultural Causes**

They relate to changes in “value systems” that are described in the literature as “gradual changes in the values of Western societies” from conservative to liberal. Also, these factors focus on structural social changes

as the source of populist disaffection; structural changes like increased access to higher education, urbanization, and growing ethnic diversity have led to significant progressive cultural shifts. These changes and the perceived displacement of traditional social values have caused a sense of resentment among segments of the population in the West, particularly among white men, older people, conservatives, and those with less formal qualifications (Aiginger, 2020, pp. 38-42).

It is important to highlight that the increased exposure to foreign influences that comes with globalization and, even more so, the effects of immigration waves have played a significant role in exacerbating the sense of a cultural and demographic threat for western citizens. With gradual generational change, these formerly predominant majorities have increasingly felt their social standing erode, leading them to embrace populist nostalgia for a ‘golden age’ marked by cultural homogeneity, traditional values, and a strong national identity. They have become more receptive to populist charges against the ruling elite that has turned its back on them and on their values (Margalit, 2019b, pp. 159-161).

On the EU level, the main reasons underlying the rise of populism in the member states are diverse, for example in western Europe, the main factors are as follows:

1. A monopoly on power by mainstream parties, along with their extensive engagement in “clientelism”, which was often implicated in high-profile cases of political corruption, prepared the ground for political outsiders and new actors to challenge the political establishment.
2. Some populist parties emerged in the context of secessionist protests against “corrupt” or “non-responsive” national governments, such as the Flemish Block (VB) in Belgium and the Northern League Party in Italy.
3. The erosion of national sovereignty through accession to the European Union was another factor in the rise of populist protest as exemplified by the Swiss People’s Party (SVP), an early champion of the anti-European cause, which led several referendum campaigns that contributed to keeping Switzerland outside the EU (Swank and Betz, 2003, pp. 215-245).
4. The accession of poor countries to the EU from eastern Europe and the Balkans played an important role in leveraging populists in the

richer western European and Nordic member states of the EU, because this required significant subsidies from the wealthiest members and caused substantial labor migration across Europe (Jungar and Jupskas., 2014, pp. 215-238).

The situation was not very different in central and eastern European countries where populism continued to spread and achieved a remarkable victory over the last three decades, where the communist experience of the region played a prominent role in enhancing populist thoughts. This can be attributed to some factors, such as:

1. The economic transition, from a socialist economy to a capitalist market; many citizens think that economic development and globalization may cause inequality.
2. Citizens are becoming more skeptical about the development of their states, which has led to changes in electoral behavior.
3. The occurrence of multiple crises - financial, economic, and migratory-contributed to growing feelings of insecurity.
4. The existence of less homogeneous societies and lower levels of trust in state institutions.
5. The stagnation of the euro currency, the interference of EU institutions in national affairs, and particularly the high unemployment rates (Ucen, 2007, pp. 49-62).

### **III. The rise of the Alternative for Germany Party (AfD) in Germany**

The (AfD) party is a Euroskeptic and far-right populist party which has grown rapidly since its foundation in 2013 and is currently considered the biggest opposition party in the Bundestag (Federal parliament); it became the third largest party in the Country and succeeded in achieving a remarkable victory in the 2017 national parliament elections when its share of parliamentary seats had substantially increased from zero in 2013 to 94 seats in 2017, which was described by many analysts as a political earthquake that shook Germany at the time (France24, 2021). Despite the decline in its share in the last Bundestag elections of 2021 (80 seats), it is still considered as one of the four largest parties in Germany (Bundestag. de, 2022). At the European level, it also achieved remarkable success in the last two EP elections, rising from 7 seats in 2014-2019 term (Europarl, 2019) to 11 seats in 2019-2024 term (Europarl, 2019b).

It is worth noting that some writers try to relate the AfD to the NAZI party due to a common denominator between them, concerning some ideas such as: (Holocaust denialism, nationalist extremism / hyper nationalism, Xenophobia, and racism). However, they are in fact crucially different in areas related to democracy and freedom. Hence, many historians and political analysts are divided on this issue in two major groups:

- The first group refuses to accept that there is a link between the two parties, arguing that the differences are much stronger and deeper than any superficial resemblance between them (Relman, 2019).

- The second group believes that the emergence of the far-right populist party (AfD) is only a revival of Nazism again (Klikauer, 2018, p. 611).

Nevertheless, it can be said that the party position now is in between due to the strength of the current liberal democracy in Germany as well as the powerful economic position of the German State. However, in the future, the party may transform into or become close to absolute Nazism due to the inherent conflict between the major international powers and the rise of nationalist tendencies in the US and Europe, which may drive it to take much tougher positions against liberal democracy and freedom, and become closer to nationalist extremism, Xenophobia and racism, under the pretext of defending the values and the national interests of the German society.

### **1. The main characteristics/ features of the AfD's party and its political aims**

The party was not initially launched as a far-right party, but rather as an “anti-Euro” party, primarily opposing bailouts of indebted EU member states such as Greece. Since then, it has shifted its focus to immigration and Islam and is increasingly perceived as far-right in tone (BBC, 2020). Shortly afterward, it embraced far-right policies, and many of its leaders espoused far-right rhetoric that strictly called for making an amendment to the constitution that would abolish the right of asylum seekers to an individual hearing and called instead for the immediate deportation of all those applicants whose asylum applications had been rejected, regardless of their legal status in their own countries (Chase and Goldenberg, 2019) .

Generally, the AfD has two main characteristics/ features, as follows:

- “Anti- Euro” / “Eurosceptic” Party

Since its foundation in February 2013, the party concentrated mainly on Euro-related issues, which resulted in it being characterized as a “single-

issue party”. However, the party takes a soft Eurosceptic stance, in that it does not support a return to national currencies but rejects the Eurozone in its current form (Berning, 2017, p. 17).

According to its political program, the party calls for an end to the Euro experiment and for its orderly dissolution, and if this demand is to be rejected by the German Federal Parliament, it would call for holding a national referendum to vote on Germany’s continued membership in the single currency area. This demand emerges from the party’s belief that the Euro project has failed, and a common currency is no longer a viable option without making massive wealth transfers into EU member states that do not meet the standards of the currency union, especially after the financial meltdown in 2008 and the Euro rescue operations that took on a permanent character since 2010. Moreover, the party believes that the euro actually jeopardizes the peaceful co-existence of European nations which are forced into sharing a common destiny. Also, it considers the introducing this common currency has created resentment and confrontation amongst European countries. Moreover, the party considers the establishment of the euro zone threatens the cultural heritage and the peaceful co-existence of sovereign nation states (AfD Manifesto, 2017, p. 57).

It is worth noting that the Euroscepticism ideology that broadly refers to a negative attitude toward European integration can be scientifically classified into two main strands:

- Hard Euroscepticism: which refers to a principled rejection of European integration that is ultimately incompatible with the EU membership.
- Soft Euroscepticism: which does not oppose such integration but rejects the current state of European politics as well as the trajectory towards an ever closer union (Flood, 2009, p. 914).

The AfD’s manifesto reveals that it is not a hard Eurosceptic party and “soft euroscepticism” is the best description for the party’s political positions, as it opposes the present currency union, to current and future bailouts, and more generally to a federal European state. At the same time, they are committed to the EU as such and have dropped their former demand for a return to the Deutschmark from their manifesto. While they want to strengthen the principle of subsidiarity (which was established in the Treaty of Maastricht at the behest of the German Länder), they don’t intend to reduce the EU to a trade bloc (Arzheimer, 2015, p. 549).



- Anti- Immigration and Islam / a xenophobic party

One of the main objectives of the AfD is to stop immigration to Germany. Therefore, it firmly opposed Chancellor Angela Merkel's policy on migrants and refugees, which has paved the way for the arrival of more than 1.5 million people of asylum seekers in Germany since 2015. Also, it advocates closing the EU borders and setting up holding camps abroad to prevent migrants from entering Germany. It has been reported that the party's co-leader Alice Weidel has stated that the party aims to achieve negative immigration to Germany (MacGregor, 2019). Moreover, the party holds a strict stance against all types of family reunification, regardless of protection status. It seeks to radically intensify the measures of deportation against rejected asylum seekers as well as reform the current asylum law laid out in the German constitution to ensure granting asylum only to a minimal number of people (Bierbach, 2017).

According to the AfD, the ruling German political parties have recently tried to disguise the complete failure of their policies on asylum and immigration by banning open discussions about the negative developments about this issue, to avoid a sharp turn in public opinion. Also, the AfD believes that the current German migration system is infested with defects, and Germany has turned into an immigration country without any legal framework. So, the party calls for an amendment to the German immigration law, and the state should determine quality and quantity of migration to be key characteristics of state sovereignty (AfD Manifesto, 2017, p. 57).

Recently, the AfD has exploited the Ukrainian migrants' influx, especially after their numbers reached one million, to renew its criticism of the government and the migration system. Also, the party has highlighted the migrants' effects on energy prices and housing problems in Berlin (Alsarras, 2023). This has significantly boosted the party's support in recent polls (Jovanovski, 2023).

Concerning Islam, the party affirms that "Islam does not belong to Germany", and it is incompatible with the German legal and culture system. Also, many AfD members view Muslim migrants from mainly Islamic countries and from Africa as a potential threat to national security and stability in Germany. Moreover, they firmly oppose Islamic practice which is directed against the liberal-democratic constitutional order, laws,

culture, and the Judeo-Christian and humanist foundations of Germany (AfD Manifesto, 2017, pp. 47-54).

Religion plays an influential role in the AfD policy towards migrants, especially Muslims, because the party is committed to the predominant German culture, which is derived from three sources: the religious traditions of Christianity, the scientific and humanistic heritage, and the Roman law) (AfD Manifesto, 2017, p. 46). Moreover, the party demands maintaining western Christian culture which it considers as an important requirement to build national and sovereign German State (AfD Manifesto, 2017, p. 5).

The Affiliation to Christianity is as an immunizing factor for the AfD because active Christians strongly reject the integration of immigrants and people of different faith. This has strengthened the phenomenon of xenophobia and hostility against Muslims ( Gert and Yendell, 2022, p. 155). Also, this may explain the relationship between the AfD and PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident), since they both collaborate against Muslims' influx to Germany (Chambers, 2018).

## **2. The main factors behind the rise of the AfD**

The successful AfD's entry into the Bundestag in the 2017 federal elections marked a turning point in German politics, as it became the first far-right party since the 1960s to gain seats in the national parliament. The last such party was the German Party (Deutsche Partei), which participated in Konrad Adenauer's coalition government until 1960; it ceased to be a national force in 1961 but continued to exist at the regional level until 1980 (Connolly, 2017). According to many writers and observers, there are many reasons underlying the rise of the AfD, as follows:

- Fear from the New German Immigration Policy

The outbreak of the Syrian refugees' crisis in 2015 played a vital role in supporting the AfD, when the German federal government decided to allow the refugees, who were then trapped in Hungary, to complete their journey to Germany. As a result of this, Germany received about 1.5 million refugees which was a strong reason for AfD members to sharply criticize the government's policy and become according to many the voice of outrage. It is worth mentioning that far-right parties claimed a very modest share of only 2%-6% of the electorate before September 2015. However, since then they have started gaining momentum and their popularity has risen

to reach 16% nationwide. Moreover, the AfD also used the terror attacks committed by asylum applicants to fuel their followers and gain more support, holding "Merkel" responsible for these attacks (Sueddeutsche.de, 2022).

- Use of the Digital Edge

The AfD has successfully implemented the social media to spread its message across, becoming the most influential party on the Internet in Germany. Since its foundation in 2013, the party's strategy has relied heavily on social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram). According to Christian Luth, the AfD spokesman, the party believes that "The platform is a quicker, more direct, and more inexpensive gateway to people". Many experts think that the success of the AfD's social media campaign, together with traditional media coverage, was essential in spreading and stimulating anti-establishment sentiment, which partially explains the rise of a far-right party in Germany (Serrano et al., 2019, p. 222).

- Export the Victim's Scene

Although populist parties are considered as serious threats to democracy in western countries, the AfD's strategists have exploited many situations to gain more public support during elections by focusing on the mistreatment of the established political parties accusing them of trying to prevent the party's members from exercising their democratic rights. For example, Alice Weidel, the AfD's leader, walked out of a televised debate and later claimed that the moderator had mistreated her (Pandey, 2017). Moreover, politicians, journalists, and other public figures have at times unintentionally helped the AfD. For example, before the 2016 state elections, Malu Dreyer, the minister-president of Rhineland-Palatinate, refused to participate in a televised debate if the AfD candidate was included, prompting the broadcaster to withdraw the candidate's invitation (Kate , 2016).

- The Party's Attempts to Gain Media Attention

The AfD has succeeded in drawing more attention by breaking rhetorical taboos. For example, Frauke Petry, the party's chairperson, called for the use of firearms against refugees at the national borders in case of emergency ( Beale, 2022). Also, her deputy, Beatrix von Storch, stated that women and children should be allowed to bear arms; Marcus

Pretzell, a senior AfD member, said after the attack that took place at the Berlin Christmas market last year that the individuals who lost their lives in the attack were “Merkel’s victims” (Theguardian, 2016). Another party member, Börn Höcke, called the National Holocaust Memorial the “Monument of Shame” (Dearden, 2022). According to the AfD’s internal strategy, the party seeks to win significant media attention through breaking taboos to remain as part of the national conversation inside the German society (Barkin, 2013).

#### **IV. The impact of the rise of the AfD on the European integration process**

Although the EU’s integration process, as mentioned in the first declared goal of the Treaty of Rome (1957), was to improve the quality of life for European citizens, and was designed to achieve prosperity and peace for the community and the whole European continent, it actually increased disaffection among Europeans and indirectly helped Eurosceptic attitudes to grow as a result of the existence of a gap between European citizens and EU institutions (i.e. democratic deficit). This gap had widened during the last two decades of the past century (Laschi, 2021). Hence, RPPs believe that EU is undemocratic and thereby destroyed the functioning of democratic nation states. Therefore, they call for the rescue of national democracies from authoritarian Brussels of “dark powers” (Kallis, 2018, pp. 285-302).

This gap has greatly contributed to shifting the economic domain from the basic driver for a further cooperation among member states and paving the way for political integration, to be the main source of Euroscepticism and disaffection among Europeans (Barry, 2003, pp. 897-921). Eventually, the general dissatisfaction became most evident through the rejection of the EU Constitutional Treaty by the French and Dutch electorate in 2002. In addition, the global financial crisis in 2008 and its austerity measures have increased the already precarious relationship between EU institutions and citizens (Busch et al., 2013, pp. 1-38).

It is worth noting that the factors mentioned above have played an effective role in supporting the rising populist ideology in Europe that succeeded in creating a state of popular rejection for the European integration process, especially the populist theory of democracy which proposes that populism is “a democratic illiberalism” because it takes government by the people and rejects all checks and balances on the

popular will. Moreover, constitutive elements of liberal democracy such as (the rule of law, the division of power or respect for the rights of minorities) are rejected because they confine the people's sovereignty. Also, Populists are against all kinds of intermediaries between the people and decision-makers, and against political parties. Hence, they plead for a more direct linkage of masses to elites (Kriesi, 2014, p. 370).

Populism has a strong anti-institutional impulse because it believes that institutions and incumbent elites are corrupt and act as usurpers of power, so its ideology depends mainly on denouncing them both. Moreover, populism tries to restore the people to the heart of institutions; this could draw a vague picture of populism as a political phenomenon, and may explain why many writers and political thinkers consider it as a democratic and anti-political or as a coherent ideology and/or a heterogeneous class of political movement (Surel, 2011).

Based on the above line of thought, the most common position between the EU and populism is a straightforward rejection of European integration in its current form; the populist movement contains a wide variety of rhetoric, positions and proposals that calls for ending the current form of the EU. While some populist parties consider European integration as dangerous and conflicts with their interests. Therefore, many populist parties offered some propositions including the rejection of European citizenship, refusal of cooperation with certain agencies on issues related to security and immigration, and renegotiation of European treaties to make them more compatible with sovereign states (Hartleb, 2012, pp. 45-63).

As mentioned above, Eurosceptic attitudes form the main components of the RPPs' ideology in Europe. Therefore, the growing public Euroscepticism and disaffection among Europeans towards the European integration process have been exploited to strengthen their electoral base, which may explain the rapid rise of these parties especially inside some invulnerable democratic countries in western Europe such as the UK, Germany, France and Italy (Taggart, 1998, pp. 363-388).

The AfD criticizes the European integration process either at the political or economic levels because of the following reasons:

- Its emergence was a direct response to Merkel's approach to the Eurozone debt crisis, specifically the so-called bailout packages offered to Greece from the spring of 2010 onwards. Moreover, its name is a direct

reference to Merkel's oft-quoted claim that there is “no alternative” to the common currency. From this perspective, the party's ideological roots stem from ordoliberal critiques of the Maastricht Treaty, which were reflected in a sense of emergency over European bailouts and more broadly over the European Central Bank's (ECB) monetary policy (Conrad, 2020).

- After the 2016 Brexit referendum, the AfD like most other RPPs has shifted towards the so-called “an Alt-European policy program”, which means a conservative, xenophobic intergovernmental vision of “a European community of sovereign states”, “strong nations” or “fatherlands”, that abhors the EU's centralized United States of Europe. Also, the term refers to the transnational alt-right ideology of White, Christian, conservative solidarity (McMahon, 2022, pp. 10-25).

Consequently, the AfD has a special vision on the European integration process, which differs from the current one. This can be summarized along the following lines:

- In terms of Foreign Policy, it advocates the pooling of European community interests without curtailing sovereignty, democratic co-operation, and legislative powers of member states. Moreover, it rejects the formal EU's CFSP as well as the Common European Foreign Service. Instead, it calls for strengthening interstate agreements among European partner nations to act jointly.

- It focuses on economic cooperation and joint interests of European countries, and it supports a foreign policy which is committed to safeguarding the security, economic and cultural interests of Germany, rather than the current EU's CFSP.

- Economically, it opposes the European Monetary Integration and the “EURO”, because some of the EU's members are incapable of meeting debt sustainability targets outlined in EU treaties, which pose unforeseen future repercussions. Therefore, the costs of maintaining the Euro zone will far outweigh its benefits, and European integration capabilities will be overstretched. Furthermore, the size of credits and liabilities overextend the German state, which is the main guarantor (AfD Manifesto, 2017, p. 57).

It is worth noting that the AfD falls under what is known as “Conditional Euroscepticism”, which entails acceptance of the common heritage of European peoples and approval of the principle of European cooperation, but hostility toward the current EU policy practices as well as toward



the further development of a supranational European polity. Although Conditional Eurosceptics generally accept the system, they have certain objections to the policies and institutions of EU governance. This pattern is usually connected with a conditional wish for European cooperation to the extent that supranational institutions do not compromise state sovereignty (Vasilopoulou, 2009, pp. 3-23). Hence, the party's position on the European integration process can be viewed from the following perspective:

- Rejecting decisions taken by supranational institutions and endorsing reforms where nation-state interests are guaranteed
- A strong opposition to “ever-closer” union
- Supporting inter-governmental cooperation within the EU structures and within policies deemed beneficial to the nation-state
- Preferring the creation of a Europe administered by an institutional framework resembling a confederation, namely inter-governmental cooperation, without the presence or with limited power of supranational institutions.
- Denying the legitimacy of the EU project to the extent that the majority of decisions would be taken by supranational institutions and not by the member states (Vasilopoulou, 2011, pp. 223–244).

To sum up, it is expected that the AfD will continue to adopt more xenophobic and nationalist policies to ensure more support in the next elections by exploiting the rising hostility for migrants, either for economic reasons in the case of Ukrainians or for cultural and religious reasons in the case of Muslims. Moreover, this will exert pressure on the German government in the coming period. Therefore, the government is expected to acquiesce to some of the party's demands regarding migration, especially in light of its increasing popularity, according to the recent polls.

Concerning the EU's integration, it is expected that the AfD will shed more light on the advantages of “Intergovernmental cooperation” rather than the EU's supranational institutions by exploiting the failure of the EU's institutions to face the 2008 global financial crisis and the involvement of Germany in the bailout plans for some countries like Greece under the pretext of preserving the European Project.

This may cause division among the German society and affect its unity, through increasing political polarization (Eurosceptics verses Pro-EU). Also, increasing “nationalism” could lead to a clash that might

transcend within Germany and beyond. Also, at the EU's level, the rise of other populist and nationalist groups in other countries, such as France, Italy, Poland, and Hungary may portend the danger of repeating the war scenario of the last century.

## **V. Results and Discussion**

The rise of the RPPs in the EU, especially inside western European countries like the AfD, represents a stumbling block in the face of the European integration process because there is an inverse relationship between populism and integration. Moreover, there is a positive relationship between the rise of right populist parties and Euroscepticism, which implies that the future of the integration process will face more challenges especially in light of the rapid rise of (RPPs) which will create additional hurdles for the entire European project.

The noticeable rapid rise of the AfD either at the national or European level, within a relatively short period of time (since 2013), indicates that the EU's supranational institutions and their policies will clash with the rising populist voices that support an ideology based mainly on (Anti-establishment, Neo-nationalism, Protectionism, Nativism, Anti-multiculturalism and Anti- globalization). In addition to that, the rise of the AfD will weaken Germany's position as a strong leading state within the European Union and the largest funder of the union's budget and policies. Eventually, this will lead to the collapse of the European project or will at least affect the legitimacy of the EU and its decisions.

## **Recommendations**

The German government must respond to the party's allegations, especially regarding the negative political and economic effects of the European integration process and clarify the importance of EU's project for German citizens on both economic and political fronts. Also, it should launch awareness campaigns to enlighten German citizens about the disadvantages of Nazism and nationalist extremism.

Germany should exploit its strong position inside the EU to lead a reform of the EU's supranational institutions, with other European countries such as France, to immune the EU project and its institutions against the populist ideology that is mainly based on nationalism and Euroscepticism.

## VI. Conclusion

The rise of right populist parties plays a significant role in threatening the European integration process because of the existence of ideological differences between “Populism”, based mainly on nationalism and Euroscepticism, and “Integration Process”, based mainly on the increased Supranationalism. Moreover, most populist parties consider “the European Integration” as the main threat to their national interests. Hence, they call for "increased sovereignty" and refusal of "integration".

The noticeable success of the AfD either at the national or European level, during a short period, could be considered as an indicator for the growing popularity of right populism and its ability to penetrate the western European democratic values and its liberalism. Moreover, the economic and political importance of Germany (the most influential country within the EU) represents a real threat to the process of European integration because the AfD adopts what is known as “the Conditional Euroscepticism” that reject the current integration process and the decisions taken by the EU’s supranational institutions.

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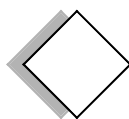


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# مجلة العلوم الاجتماعية

فصلية علمية محكمة - تصدر عن مجلس النشر العلمي - جامعة الكويت

## تأثير صعود الأحزاب الشعبوية اليمينية في عملية التكامل الأوروبي: دراسة حالة: حزب البديل من أجل ألمانيا

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