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**By Prof. Michael Zürn,
Director, Global Governance,
Berlin Social Sciences Center
(WZB) and Founding Dean, Hertie
School of Governance Berlin**

Contact:
info@globalideascenter.org

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Germany’s Political Blind Spot in Dealing with the AfD

Plus: How to deal with right-wing extremism?

The strong rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) has unsettled Germany’s political system. The current “Brandmauer” strategy, if intended to prevent their rise, has obviously failed.

At this juncture, four key questions need to be explored in order to strengthen the resilience of Germany’s democracy:

1

Are there better ways to cope with the rise of an authoritarian-populist party like the AfD than the German concept of the “Brandmauer” (cordon sanitaire)?

2

Can a well-established democracy reshape the character of an authoritarian-populist party like the AfD?

3

In the broader European context, what if the rise to power of authoritarian-populist parties proves unstoppable?

4

Can these parties only be stopped in their political advance once they assume office, govern poorly and are then made to deal with the consequences?

There were encouraging signs in recent months pointing to the resilience of Western democracies and the strength of forces resisting authoritarianism. Just consider that Viktor Orbán, Hungary’s long-time authoritarian-populist prime

Note to journalists

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"If the rise of authoritarian-populist parties cannot be stopped, can democracies reshape the character of a party like the AfD?"

minister, was finally voted out of office this spring by a surprisingly large majority. Across the Atlantic, Donald Trump's approval ratings continue to fall, not least because of the war of choice he unleashed against Iran.

Yet Europe's largest economy, Germany, has experienced the opposite political trend. The hard-right Alternative for Germany party has held a healthy lead in nationwide polls for several months. It leads the Christian Democratic Union, the party that has been the bedrock of most German governments since 1949, by a margin of around ten percentage points (28 to 18 percent).

In one state election in the east of Germany, Saxony-Anhalt, the AfD came very close to winning an absolute majority. In Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the AfD is close to 40 percent, and the CDU did not pass the 5 percent threshold.

Some observers continue to hope this is just a momentary snapshot of voters' political preferences, but that seems increasingly illusory. The key question now is what an effective strategy is to cope with the rise of the AfD.

The broader European context

That consideration is also very relevant in the broader European context. Two big questions arise: First, what if the rise to power of authoritarian-populist parties proves unstoppable? And second, is it wise to assume, as some observers already do, that these parties will only be stopped once they assume office, govern poorly, and are made to deal with the consequences?

Next year, elections in Poland as well as the French presidential elections loom large in that regard. The two rounds of voting in that election will take place in April and May 2027, and there is a real chance Marine Le Pen may become president of France.

New thinking is needed

If the electoral rise of authoritarian-populist parties cannot be stopped, the task for established political parties changes. The challenge would no longer be simply to prevent or limit the success of a particular party.

The focus would change to a question seldom asked until now: Can a well-established democracy reshape the character of an authoritarian-populist party like the AfD?

A smart democracy should be able to do just that. To be successful, however, it must move beyond the focus on how to keep extremist parties down.

That, in turn, means understanding the differences between an unscrupulous anti-democrat such as Donald Trump and a politician like Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who also pursues right-wing populist policies but shows no intention of destroying the democratic political system. Moreover, Meloni is no Russophile and keeps her distance from the Putin fanboys.

This is the gaping blind spot in the German debate. Almost all policy and legislative proposals are currently judged according to whether they might weaken or strengthen the AfD. There is hardly any focus on whether, and especially how, political dealings affect that party itself.

The art of nudging

To defend itself from extremist elements, a mature democracy must focus on more than election results. The trajectory of political beliefs and ideologies also

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“Banning Germany’s AfD would likely cause its political movement to become even more radical. Different approaches are needed.”

matters. So do intra-party power relationships and the long-term character of political parties. Institutions are not only useful as instruments to defend democratic structures, but also as mechanisms of political selection and socialization.

Adopting a more pragmatic perspective that focuses on how measures affect the AfD’s behavior creates a different view of many of the controversies concerning the party.

Beyond the fixation on the “Parteiverbot”

At present, the German political debate about the AfD is too simplistic. The focus on the “Brandmauer,” i.e., the political strategy to exclude the AfD from parliamentary dealmaking, may turn out to be self-defeating. Opinion polls suggest it does not stop the rise of the AfD, and it further radicalizes it.

Strictly cutting out the party from involvement in the political process increases the level of resentment among current AfD voters, many of whom are merely frustrated about how things have developed in Germany, rather than being hard-right voters.

Demands to ban the AfD still predominate the German political debate. Yet, the broader context shows this approach is full of problems. First, it is reasonable to ask whether banning a party that accounts for close to one-third of the national vote is compatible with the principles of democracy. Following the great constitutional theorist Hans Kelsen, some answer the question on a party ban with a firm “no.”

For Kelsen, democracy thrives on the power of contestation and, hence, on disputes between world views. Any veritable democracy must therefore protect the open competition of opinions.

According to Kelsen, a rigorous and vigorous process of political contestation is an integral part of democratic hygiene. According to this view, no one should have the legal authority to ban a particular political viewpoint, as the Federal Constitutional Court would if it were to support a party ban.

Let pragmatism prevail

Even if one does not follow Kelsen and supports with Karl Loewenstein the idea of militant democracy in principle, there are sensible political reasons to reject a party ban at this point in time. The decisive question is what would happen to the authoritarian-populist movement after such a ban has been issued. There is little to suggest that the underlying political movement would disappear as a result.

One can prohibit parties, but no voter preferences. If the AfD were banned, one likely scenario is that members and supporters of the party would continue to be politically active and try to build a successor organization.

There would likely be intense competition among different wings and factions of the then-former party. And much past evidence from political science suggests a race toward radicalization would ensue. The “winners” would probably be those who then demonstrated the fiercest opposition to the “system.”

In the medium term, the consequence of a party ban would therefore not be to abolish an authoritarian-populist movement. Such movements exist in all democracies. A ban would influence the shape of the movement, but not for the better.

“There are options to defend democracy. Article 21 of Germany’s Basic Law makes it possible to deprive the AfD of public funding.”

“Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi-era propaganda minister, thought it funny that a democracy would give opponents the means to fight it.”

What a smart democracy should do: Three options

Are there political measures that could contribute to political moderation inside the AfD?

#1: Withhold public funding

There are a few approaches worth trying. For example, the AfD could be deprived of party funding provided by the state. That is possible under the provisions of Article 21 of Germany’s Basic Law.

After all, why should the state finance political parties that express a desire to topple the existing order? Threatening the revocation of state party funding would probably be easier to justify to the public than a complete ban on the party.

Just recall that Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi-era propaganda minister, was amused by the fact that a democracy would provide its opponents with the means to fight it.

The looming threat of a withdrawal of party funding would create different behavioral incentives for AfD politicians than a ban. The organization would survive, but it would lose considerable financial resources.

There would be a strong interest within the party to adopt a more moderate course if this would allow it to preserve or restore access to state funding. This financial instrument could therefore change the party without excluding it from the political process.

#2: Limit the passive right to vote

Something similar could be achieved by depriving particularly radical AfD party members of the right to pursue public office.

In this case, too, the party would be retained as an organization. Those people who represent the party’s most radical beliefs and attitudes, such as references to völkisch ideas or using Nazi symbols, would have a harder time being put forward as candidates, because the party would know those individuals could be removed from the election process.

If the most radical forces inside the AfD could not secure places in parliamentary races and leadership positions, their influence on the strategic orientation of the party could be expected to dwindle.

This could help shift the balance of power within the party toward its conservative wing, rather than the extremist showboats.

#3: The parliamentary reward principle

Similarly, a stronger institutional involvement of reasonably reliable AfD politicians, for example in parliamentary committees that do not deal with security-related issues, could strengthen the more moderate actors inside the party.

After all, a party that wants to demonstrate its political effectiveness needs to show that it can work successfully in such committees. Reliability, professional competence and the ability to compromise are key political coinage.

These attributes are clearly more important than the largely performative act of demonstrating categorical opposition to the system.

“The media should focus on AfD members with less potential for scandal instead of its click-driven obsession with the radicals.”

“The key question is which part of the AfD can be made compatible with liberal democracy. That question remains a blind spot.”

This does not mean that any form of involvement of AfD politicians makes sense. There is a world of difference between the election of a committee chairman at the parliamentary level and participation in an AfD-led government.

The latter should be prevented in any case. Think about 1933. What is sure is that each individual measure must be judged according to whether the potential gain is greater than the risk of empowering opponents of liberal democracy.

The role of the media

One implication of these potential approaches toward the AfD is that the media could focus more on the people in the party with less potential for scandal, instead of indulging its click-driven obsession with the radicals.

Such a refocus would help AfD members who are interested in parliamentary effectiveness gain influence within the party, while obstructionist politicians would lose it. At the same time, it would become easier to identify which politicians are able to work within the system.

The important matter is a change of perspective. As long as the AfD is seen only as an object to exclude, an essential part of the problem it poses remains invisible.

The question is not only how the AfD's power and influence may be limited. It is also which part of the AfD can be made compatible with liberal democracy. In my view, failure to ask this question is the blind spot in the German debate about the AfD.

Conclusion: A strategy of nudging

Defending democracy is as indispensable as ever. But that may no longer be enough.

A smart democracy asks not only how it may limit its antagonists. It also asks what incentives it can set for the reasonable bunch among them, and which political actors could arise as a result.

Yes, this is a strategy of nudging. That may prove to be the much wiser way, especially compared to advocating a ban with uncertain prospects for success in the Constitutional Court.

Not every remedy that promises to demonstrate strength in the short term safeguards German democracy in the long term.



Key Findings:

Germany's Political Blind Spot: Lessons for dealing with the AfD

1. With elections looming in Germany, France, Spain, Poland and Italy, democracies must prepare for authoritarian populists in office, rather than simply hope to keep them out of power.
2. The key question is: Which parts of the AfD can be made compatible with liberal democracy?

3. Banning a party like the AfD that accounts for close to one-third of the national vote is not really compatible with the principles of democracy.
4. Banning Germany's AfD would also likely cause its political movement to become even more radical. Different approaches are needed.
5. In a democracy, there must be room for political contestation. However, a smart democracy should be able to find ways to keep extremists down.
6. Depriving particularly radical AfD party members from public office could moderate the AfD. It is not unreasonable to block people who make references to völkisch ideas or use Nazi symbols.
7. Instead of a party ban with slim chances at the Constitutional Court, Berlin could withhold state party funding, as provided under Article 21 of Germany's Basic Law, and reward political moderation.
8. Let us recall that Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi-era propaganda minister, thought it funny that a democracy would provide its opponents with the means to fight it.
9. A viable option to be used by a resilient democracy is to bar the most radical members from public office. Such a move would shift power inside the AfD away from the ethnonationalists and toward its conservative wing.
10. Another way to apply a nudging strategy is for parliaments to involve reasonable politicians from the populist camp in committees without significance for national security. That would incentivize competence and compromise, rather than having them stuck in unconstructive, performative acts of opposition.
11. The media should focus more on the people in the AfD with less potential for scandal, instead of indulging its click-driven obsession to always highlight the radicals.

About the Author

Michael Zürn is Director of the Research Department on Global Governance at the WZB (Social Science Research Center Berlin), the head of WZB's Rule of Law Center and a professor of international relations at Free University Berlin.

Professor Zürn is also the founding director of the SCRIPTS project, a national Cluster of Excellence project exploring challenges to the liberal order from a historical, global and comparative perspective.

From 2004 to 2009, Professor Zürn served as the founding dean of the Hertie School of Governance. He is now the Hertie School's first honorary fellow.

He has been published frequently on international relations topics, such as global governance and European integration. In addition, he has edited various publications and journals in the fields of international relations, political science and public policy. He is currently co-editor for *Leviathan* and *Global Policy*.

In 1993, he was appointed Professor of International and Transnational Relations at the University of Bremen. Until 2004, Zürn was Chairman of the Collaborative Research Centre "Transformation of the State" in Bremen, funded by the German Research Foundation.

“Strategic Intervention Papers use lessons from other countries to widen what looks politically possible in a stalled debate.”

Professor Zürn also was a visiting professor at the University of Denver and Harvard University. He received his M.A. in international studies at the University of Denver and his doctorate at the University of Tübingen.

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Strategic Intervention Papers (SIPs) are the core format of the Global Ideas Center (GIC), a non-profit independent think tank based in Berlin. Each SIP takes on one concrete problem that a democracy has not yet solved.

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