

The Bundestag Election 2025

IV: After the Aschaffenburg attack: the wider political consequences

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February 2025

The politics of the centre holed below the waterline?

The Bundestag debate at the end of January in response to the terror attack in Aschaffenburg that took two people's lives shook Germany centrist parties to their foundations. The motions for debate tabled by the CDU/CSU (Union) breached the firewall placed around the AfD. The resulting shockwave split the liberal FDP while putting the two parties in the now minority government, the SPD and the Greens, having to choose between continuing to espouse a belief in a common ground between centre-left and centre-right – and abandoning it.

At this moment of maximum political uncertainty, a speech by one of the two leaders of the leftwing Die Linke, attacking not just the leader of the centre-right but also the leaders of the centre-left, looks (with the benefit of hindsight) to have altered the outcome of the election.

After Aschaffenburg: escaping the embrace of the AfD

This is the second of two posts about the political impact of the fatal attacks that have taken place in Germany since the campaign to elect a new Bundestag began in December. In response to the second of these attacks, in the town of Aschaffenburg in January, the centre-right Union (CDU/CSU) brought a motion to the Bundestag which only passed with the support of the far-right AfD. Two days later, a legislative amendment proposed by the Union was rejected, despite the support of the AfD.

What happened in Berlin on those two days upended the campaign in two ways. First, it turned the attacks, all by foreign nationals, into the campaign's central issue. Second, in relying upon the votes of the far-right, the Union's leader, Friedrich Merz, was widely seen to have breached the agreement among the parties of the centre not to co-operate with, or rely upon, the AfD.

Two weeks later, a third fatal attack took place, this time in Munich. Like the first, in Magdeburg before Christmas, a car was driven at speed into a crowd, this time trade unionists belonging to the service sector union, [ver.di](#). The attack injured 36, two of whom, a mother and her two-year-old child, later died.

The driver, detained at the scene, is a 24-year-old Afghan man who had entered Germany at the end of 2016 as an unaccompanied refugee minor. He is reported to have both a valid residence permit and a valid work permit.¹

The previous post, about the content of the Union's proposals, used excerpts from speeches made in the Bundestag, in favour of the proposals by Merz, and against them by Chancellor Olaf Scholz of the SPD, Vice-Chancellor Robert Habeck of the Greens and other senior ministers.

This post, about the political implications, looks more broadly at what was said in the Bundestag, this time by the liberal FDP, the far-right AfD, and the leftists of both Die Linke and the BSW.

Between the two Bundestag votes: what changed?

The two votes that took place in the Bundestag, for the Union's motion (Wednesday) and legislative amendment (Friday), produced opposite results. In the first, the Union's motion was accepted by a majority of four, with 348 voting in favour and 344 voting against. In the second, the legislative amendment was rejected by a majority of 11, with 338 in favour and 349 against.

The question is: how come the two votes produced different results? The answer is: basically, because two parties, the FDP and the BSW, changed how they voted.

It was not just the support of the AfD that the Union needed in order to win in the Bundestag. Even with the help of a few independents, that would still have left the Union some 90 votes short of a majority. What got it over the line on the Wednesday was the support of the FDP, a

party which had been part of the governing coalition until November when Scholz sacked the finance minister, Robert Lindner, the FDP's leader.

Lindner's argument for supporting the motion was that despite its shortcomings, the FDP would vote for it in order to send the message that the control and limitation of migration to Germany was not just a concern of the political extreme but of the political centre too.²³ They wouldn't be deterred from offering this support just because the AfD was in favour of it too. Indeed, the problem was not that the AfD supported it but that the SPD and the Greens did not.⁴

On the Wednesday, 80 of the FDP's 90 members voted for the motion, with none against. Without information on why members were absent, it is impossible to judge how much internal dissent there was even then. But whatever it was, dissent was both higher and more evident two days later, when a quarter of the party failed to toe the line: just 67 votes in favour, and two now against.

One consequence of Merz's political manoeuvre was to split the FDP.

The left-wing BSW went the other way, from abstaining on Wednesday to voting in favour on Friday. Speaking in the first debate, BSW leader Sahra Wagenknecht dismissed the motion's five-point plan as "largely symbolic" – "shopwindow offerings" that wouldn't change anything – even if some of what it said was right. What was really needed – what the BSW would vote for – was a law to limit the inflow of refugees into Germany.⁵

When they went on to vote in favour of the amendment on Friday, Wagenknecht called it "a first small step", which was "ridiculous to describe as a disaster".⁶ The seven BSW votes cast in favour, however, were too few to offset the loss of support from the FDP.

A second consequence of the Merz manoeuvre was to give the BSW the opportunity to make it clear this left-wing party shared some common ground with both Union and AfD.

And what stayed the same?

The AfD vote, with one absence only, was solid across the two days. The AfD's basic position, as its leader Alice Weidel put it on the Wednesday, was that it would support "any sensible initiative".⁷ But votes in favour were accompanied by sharp criticism. The five-point plan itself had been copied, said Weidel, from the AfD. And nobody would expect any real change to emerge as a result of it so long as the Union remained committed to coalition with the SPD and the Greens.⁸

On the opposite side, Die Linke remained solidly opposed to the position of the Union, but it also directed its criticism towards the government. Speaking during the first debate, Die Linke's co-leader, Heidi Reichinnek, asked Scholz why he had spoken of "terror" within hours of the Aschafenburg attack taking place, before knowing the background. To do that, she said, was to do the work of the AfD.⁹

Two days later, Reichinnek attacked the Union for having allied itself with the far-right, thereby “repeating every mistake that had led Germany to its darkest time”. The Union’s cooperation with the AfD was a “disgrace” not just for the party, but for the parliament and the country too.¹⁰

Besides demanding that Merz resign as the Union’s candidate for Chancellor, Reichinnek also called upon the SPD and the Greens to refuse to serve in government under him – and to say so both before and after the election.¹¹

While it was always unlikely that Die Linke’s attack on Merz would damage Union support, it was possible that the attacks on Scholz and Habeck might have an impact SPD and Green support. With the benefit of hindsight, they most clearly did.

A centrist migration policy?

Writing in the weekly Die Zeit as these debates were taking place, commentators Giovanni di Lorenzo and Bernd Ulrich offered “maybe” by way of an answer to the question of whether there could be a centrist policy towards migration. It’s a good question, but the Bundestag debates triggered by Merz and the Union do not lead that way.

Di Lorenzo and Ulrich argue that what’s tricky is that the critics of Merz are both right and wrong at the same time. The reason for this, they say, is that – as with other big questions – the subject is beset by some fundamental conflicts. For example, an ageing Germany cannot do without migrants for its economy, yet at the same time unregulated migration is seen to pose a threat. A globalized economy needs borders to be as porous as possible, yet the more that is so the harder it is to limit uncontrolled migration. And there is a “painful opposition” between humanity and security.¹²

Conflicts so fundamental are reason enough to believe that no new policy on this matter can be developed during an election that has been marked by such brutal attacks. But no centrist policy, whenever it is attempted, can be built on foundations created by, and borrowed from, the far-right. To do so, as Merz did, both in the motion and in the xenophobic framing of the problem that he chose to adopt, is to guarantee that no centrist consensus can be built around it.

The FDP’s support for the motion is not a counter to this, because Lindner claimed to be offering support only for the signal it would send, not for the substance itself.

One of the ironies here is that the firebrand Wagenknecht adopted a much more nuanced position, explaining where she differed from the Union motion and offering support only on Friday for the “first, small step”. Mightn’t this have been a better course for the FDP too?¹³

Deadly consequences?

Back in September, Merz had emphasised that while the theme of migration was an important one, he did not wish for it to be the election’s main theme. Yet by tabling a motion which attracted the support of the AfD – support that was decisive – he managed to do just that.¹⁴

In tabling that motion, he also reneged on the offer he had made in the Bundestag in November (after the FDP had left the government), that the Union would restrict itself to putting things forward that had been agreed in advance with the SPD and the Greens. This was to avoid the possibility of a majority arising thanks only to the AfD.

Merz was reminded of his offer by the former Chancellor, Angela Merkel, on the day after the first vote. Merkel said she supported what Merz had said originally and held it to be a mistake to have abandoned it.¹⁵

By taking its approach from the AfD, the Union has left itself with very little room for manoeuvre after the election. Having argued themselves into irreconcilable positions on the question of migration, a centrist coalition will only be possible if one or other of the parties in it – either the SPD or the Greens on the one side, or the Union on the other – backs down.

If talks stall, the Union will come under pressure to press ahead with the proposals it put before the Bundestag, regardless of what other centrist parties say. Unlike now, the new parliament may be one in which the Union and AfD do together command a majority.

Merz knows the danger. His first parliamentary response to the charge that he had breached the AfD firewall was to insist that his party would never offer its hand to the AfD, because it was the CDU that the far-right party wanted to destroy.¹⁶ The idea that the CDU is the AfD's mortal foe aligns with what German journalist Jörg Lau has said recently about the CDU itself being the firewall, having given "a home to conservatives of all stripes while drawing the line at those who deny or relativise the Holocaust".¹⁷

If the history of the British Conservative party since Brexit has any lessons to offer here, it's that one party can still get too close to another even without offering its hand. Simply making common cause may be enough.

With 12 of its members missing from the Bundestag vote on the Friday – on a high-profile matter brought forward by the Union itself – cracks on the centre-right are there to be seen.

If the Union doesn't go that way, cleaving after all to a centrist path, it is betting on being able to overcome the "enforcement deficit" that Scholz had pointed to as being the reason why the attacks of the past year had not been prevented. Legislative changes won't make enforcement any easier.

Nor is there a clean slate. For as Scholz also made clear, responsibility for this deficit is shared by the states, some of which are controlled by the Union; this isn't just a future problem. Attacks in both Aschaffenburg and Munich are especially embarrassing to the Union, providing the AfD with an opportunity (which it didn't overlook) to pin the blame on the party in charge in Bavaria, the CSU.

A way back?

By embracing the AfD's framing of migration and copying its policies, the Union is close to saying "yes they're right, but vote for us".

If there is a way back from this, it will lie through coalition negotiations that seek a shared understanding of what to do and why about a complex problem fraught with tension.

¹ Der Spiegel, 13 Feb 2025, 9pm, „Bayerns Innenminister korrigiert Angaben zum Tatverdächtigen“.

² References to the Plenarprotokoll, or plenary record, of the Bundestag include the name of the speaker, the date and the page number containing their words.

³ Lindner, 29 Jan 2025, Plenarprotokoll, p27048: „Die Freien Demokraten stimmen dennoch zu, um eine wichtige politische Botschaft zu senden: Kontrolle und Begrenzung der Einwanderung nach Deutschland ist ein Anliegen der politischen Mitte. Wir dürfen es nicht den Rändern überlassen“.

⁴ Lindner, 29 Jan 2025, Plenarprotokoll, p27048: „das Problem ist nicht, dass die AfD diesem Antrag zustimmt. Das Problem ist, dass Sozialdemokraten und Grüne es nicht tun“.

⁵ Wagenknecht, 29 Jan 2025, Plenarprotokoll, p27057: „Aber auch Ihre Anträge, Herr Merz, sind zu weiten Teilen Symbolik. Der Fünf-Punkte-Plan, ja, enthält Richtiges... Diese Schaufensteranträge werden auch nichts bewegen in unserem Land. Der einzige Antrag, der reale Veränderungen bewirken wird, das Zustrombegrenzungsgesetz – ja, da werden wir zustimmen“.

⁶ Wagenknecht, 31 Jan 2025, Plenarprotokoll, p270538: „Es ist durch und durch lächerlich, den vorliegenden Gesetzentwurf zu einem riesigen Desaster aufzublasen; er ist ein erster kleiner Schritt“.

⁷ Weidel, 29 Jan 2025, Plenarprotokoll, p27051: „jeder vernünftigen Initiative“

⁸ Weidel, 29 Jan 2025, Plenarprotokoll, p27051: „Glauben Sie im Ernst, Herr Merz, Sie könnten den Bürgern vormachen, dass mit Ihnen irgendetwas besser würde, wenn Sie sich gleichzeitig immer noch bei den Grünen und der SPD anbieten und sich darauf festlegen, mit diesen Parteien auch zu koalieren?“

⁹ Reichinnek, 29 Jan 2025, Plenarprotokoll, p27056, : „Aber nur wenige Stunden nach der Tat sprachen Sie, Herr Scholz, von Terror, ohne die Hintergründe zu kennen. Warum betreiben Sie das Geschäft der AfD, statt in dieser schweren Situation zu versuchen, den Menschen ihre Ängste zu nehmen?“

¹⁰ Reichinnek, 31 Jan 2025, Plenarprotokoll, p27537: „Sie wiederholen jeden historischen Fehler, der dieses Land in seine dunkelste Zeit gestürzt hat. ... Reichinnek, 31 Jan 2025, Plenarprotokoll, p27537: „Dass Sie mit einer Partei zusammenarbeiten, die offiziell in Teilen rechtsextrem ist – oder in meinen Worten: durch und durch faschistisch –, ist eine Schande, nicht nur für Ihre Partei, sondern für dieses Parlament und für unser Land“.

¹¹ Reichinnek, 31 Jan 2025, Plenarprotokoll, p27538: „Der SPD und den Grünen sage ich deswegen ganz deutlich: Mit einer Union unter Merz könnt ihr nicht zusammenarbeiten, sagt das, weder vor der Wahl noch danach“.

¹² Giovanni Di Lorenzo and Bernd Ulrich, 30 Jan 2025, Die Zeit, p1: Um Jeden Preis?“.

¹³ Wouldn't abstaining still have sent a signal about the importance of the subject, whilst reserving the party's position on the substance of the matter?

¹⁴ The Main Echo (the regional newspaper covering Aschaffenburg), 30 Jan 2025, p1, reports Merz as having said in September „Das Thema Migration bleibt ein großes Thema. Ich will allerdings auch noch einmal betonen: Es wäre mein Wunsch, dass es nicht das Hauptthema in Bundestagwahlkampf 2025 wird“.

¹⁵ Angela Merkel, 30 Jan 2025, „[Erklärung von Bundeskanzlerin a. D. Dr. Angela Merkel zur Abstimmung im Deutschen Bundestag am 29. Januar 2025](#)“

¹⁶ Merz, 31 Jan 25, Plenarprotokoll, p27517: „Und Sie müssten eigentlich, wenn Sie ruhig hinschauen, erkennen, dass nicht Sie von der SPD oder Sie von den Grünen oder Sie von der FDP, sondern wir als politische Partei diejenigen sind, gegen die sich der Furor dieser sogenannten Alternative für Deutschland am allermeisten richtet. Sie will die CDU vernichten“.

¹⁷ Jörg Lau, 3 Feb 2025, „[A political gamble backfired spectacularly – bringing the far right closer to power in Germany](#)“, The Guardian.