

Brandenburg, Germany: Far-right AfD leads polls in state election

By Tino Jacobson
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Elections are due to take place in the east German states of Saxony and Brandenburg, on September 1 and in Thuringia on October 27. All of the parties involved in the federal government (a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union/CDU, Christian Social Union/CSU, and Social Democratic Party/SPD) are expected to suffer heavy losses in all three east German states, with the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) expected to register increased support. The polls for the state of Brandenburg are especially dramatic.

Brandenburg, with its 2.5 million inhabitants, surrounds the German capital of Berlin. Since German reunification in 1990, it has been ruled by the SPD, first under Prime Minister Manfred Stolpe until 2002, then by Matthias Platzeck until 2013, and since then by Dietmar Woidke. In its first four-year term, the SPD governed in an alliance with the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Greens, then as a sole party of government for five years, followed by a coalition with the CDU for 10 years. For the last 10 years, it has ruled in a coalition with the Left Party.

Now, the SPD has slumped in the polls with just 18 percent, trailing far behind the AfD (21 percent), whose leading contender in the election, Andreas Kalbitz, is associated with the neo-fascist *Der Flügel* (The Wing), headed by Björn Höcke. At the last state election, the SPD had won the highest share of the vote (32 percent). The Left Party has also since lost around 4 percent of its total since the 2014 election, when it received just under 19 percent. The AfD registered just 5 percent of the vote five years ago.

Along with the AfD, the main party to increase its support in polls is the Green Party (6 percent in 2014, compared to 17 percent today). Even the FDP, which won just 1.5 percent in the last election, is expected to exceed the 5 percent limit for entry into the state parliament. The CDU has dropped 6 percent in the polls despite its opposition status. It is hovering around 17 percent—i.e., comparable to the SPD and Greens.

The main reason for the growth of the AfD, which won around 20 percent of the vote in both the 2017 general election and the 2019 European elections, lies in the loss of confidence by layers of the population in Germany's political institutions—the state parliament, the federal government and the so-called opposition parties. This was confirmed in an analysis prepared last year for the state government.

Especially in Brandenburg, where the SPD ruled for 10 years in coalition with the CDU and 10 years with the Left Party, many

voters have concluded it does not make the slightest difference which of these parties is in power. Large sections of the population live in poverty, and the SPD and Left Party have systematically paved the way for the AfD with their right-wing policies.

The state is extremely polarised. The immediate belt around Berlin, which includes the state capital of Potsdam with its parks and castles, is home to many powerful, rich and famous figures, including TV moderators Günther Jauch and Johannes B. Kerner; Mathias Döpfner, Friede Springer and Kai Diekmann from the Springer Publishing house; fashion designer Wolfgang Joop; star conductor Christian Thielemann; and software billionaire Hasso Plattner (SAP), who donated an art museum to the city and a department to the university.

Nearly 600 millionaires live in Brandenburg. At the same time, large parts of the state have been deindustrialised and abandoned. The region is characterised by poverty and an ageing population, and this situation has not changed in the 10 years of the SPD-Left Party (so-called red-red) coalition.

Every fifth child is at risk of poverty in Brandenburg, compared with 18 percent as a whole throughout Germany. Most affected are the children of single parents. Those in poverty suffer poorer health and less social inclusion, their access to education is more difficult and they find it more difficult to get work. According to a Caritas study, 7.9 percent of teenage children in Brandenburg in 2017 left school without a certificate, 1 percent more than the national average.

The SPD and the Left Party have responded to growing social tensions by building up the police and reacting with “severity” to the weakest in society—refugees and migrants. The red-red coalition relied on a right-wing law-and-order policy vehemently supported by the Left Party.

In its refugee policy, the red-red coalition followed the lead of federal Interior Minister Horst Seehofer, who in turn adapted his policies to the demands of the AfD. The mayor of Frankfurt-Oder (a former steel town in Brandenburg), René Wilke (Left Party), has proudly expressed his support for the deportation of alleged foreign criminal offenders.

At present, there is no refugee detention centre in Brandenburg after the existing centre in Eisenhüttenstadt closed due to inadequate fire protection. However, it is clear that “Brandenburg needs a detention centre,” declared state Interior Ministry spokesman Ingo Decker. Until then, the state will “rely on mutual assistance from other states.”

In July, one asylum seeker, Rita O. from Kenya, was found dead in a transit camp near Hohenleipisch, which lies completely secluded in a forest. The cause of death has not yet been determined. Instead, a fence was built around the transit camp to prevent further deaths. The conditions in the camp are horrendous. It lacks any recreational activities, the refugees are crammed into a confined space and transport links to the nearest town and shops are difficult. The camp is in a completely run-down state and full of vermin.

The SPD-Left coalition has even treated children's rights with contempt. In an unlawful deportation in June, two underage girls were separated from their parents and siblings. The immigration office transported the parents back their country of origin without their two daughters. Stripped of their parents, the two daughters have been left alone to survive and cope in Germany. The immigration office has refused to accept any responsibility for the pair.

At the beginning of 2019, the red-red state government introduced a new, stricter police law. Among its cornerstones are the "expansion of random identity checks, reporting requirements with regard to the law regulating assembly law without a judicial decision, preventive custody and contact and residence bans without concrete evidence of a crime, extension of the storage times of police video surveillance, bodycams, the expansion of public investigation in the run-up to a suspected criminal offence, and the use of hand grenades against individuals."

In mid-June, the red-red government also cleared the path for the state intelligence agency to recruit more staff and increase its powers. The intelligence service is to be expanded from 93 to 130 persons, previously convicted undercover agents can continue to work for the agency, and the agency can employ technical "tools" such as the International Mobile Subscriber Identity (IMSI) catcher. These devices can read the stored IMSI on the card of a cell phone and more accurately determine the location of a phone device.

In addition, the intelligence agency can compel the publication of the traffic and inventory data of companies. These include "Names, addresses, incoming and outgoing emails and phone calls, account balances, bookings, incoming and outgoing payments" as well as passwords from providers. The agency is also allowed within "narrow" perimeters to spy on young people from the age of 14. The CDU has been calling for the introduction of this measure at the federal level for a long time.

The right-wing refugee and law-and-order policy of the red-red administration has played into the hands of the state organisation of the AfD, which is far to the right of the federal party. Its state chairman and lead election candidate, Andreas Kalbitz, has made two films about Adolf Hitler, together with his father-in-law Stuart Russell, a former British soldier. The first deals with the role of Adolf Hitler in World War I. According to the historian Thomas Weber from the University of Aberdeen, the film seems to convey "the impression of a skilful glorification of Hitler." Hitler's remarks on anti-Semitism are "not criticised in the film and ultimately tacitly confirmed."

The second film deals with the Nazi 1st Mountain Division in 1941 and 1942, but ignores the unit's horrific war crimes. Also

known as the Edelweiss Division, the unit was involved in several campaigns—in Poland, the Balkans and Greece—during which it committed terrible war crimes. In 1943, on the Greek island of Kefalonia, 5,200 Italian soldiers were shot dead after surrendering to the 1st Mountain Division.

Andreas Kalbitz belongs to the populist-nationalist group *Der Flügel* led by Björn Höcke. This group extols fierce German nationalism, xenophobia and hatred for refugees. It supports a remilitarised German army committed to the interests of German imperialism, and opposes freedom of information, which it denounces as "fake news" and the "lying press."

Kalbitz has written articles for the right-wing weekly *Junge Freiheit* and the magazine *Witkობrief*. In the latter, he spoke of the "ethnocide of the German people." From 2010 to 2015, Andreas Kalbitz was chairman of the far-right club "Culture and Contemporary History, Archive of Time e.V.," founded in 1985 by the former SS captain and NPD fascist functionary Waldemar Schütz.

In Brandenburg, the number of right-wing extremists and far-right criminal activities has increased enormously in recent years. According to official data, there are 1,675 people in the state committed to right-wing extremism—an alarming high since German reunification in 1989 and an increase of 135 compared to last year. At the same time, Germany's domestic intelligence agency does not classify the AfD as right-wing extremist.

The SPD has not only paved the way for the AfD, it is also contemplating working together with the party, as its counterparts are doing in Austria with the ultra-right FPÖ.

"Maybe one should contemplate a coalition with the AfD," the SPD direct candidate for constituency 16 (Brandenburg I/Potsdam-Mittelmark I), Udo Wernitz, told the *Märkische Allgemeine Zeitung*. "Twenty percent of the population should not be neglected," he said in an interview with the newspaper. Moreover, it could make sense for the "right-wing populist party to take up responsibility," Wernitz added.

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