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Fear, Anger and Hatred

The Rise of Germany's New Right

By SPIEGEL Staff

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For years, a sense of disillusionment has been growing on the right. Now, the refugee crisis has magnified that frustration. Increasingly, people from the very center of society are identifying with the movement -- even as political debate coarsens and violence increases.

Martin Bahrmann, a local politician in the Saxon town of Meissen, was just preparing to speak in a council debate on refugee shelters when a ball-point pen ricoched off the back of his head. It was a cheap, plastic writing utensil -- blue with white writing.

As a member of the business friendly Free Democrats (FDP), Bahrmann's seat in the regional council is at the very back and the visitors' gallery is just behind him. The pen must have come from somebody in the audience. When Bahrmann turned around, he found himself looking at a sea of hostile faces. Although there were around 80 visitors in the gallery, nobody admitted to having seen who threw the pen. On the contrary: The FDP representative and his colleagues were later insulted as being "traitors to the German people."

Bahrmann, 28, does not draw a salary for his involvement in local politics. It is merely his contribution to a functioning democracy. He was born and grew up in the region he represents and he has known many of the people there for many years. But even he, Bahrmann says, now must be more careful about when and where he makes political appearances. Ever since the regional council discussed transforming the former Hotel Weinböhla into a refugee hostel, the established political parties have been confronted with the hate of many locals. One Left Party representative was spit on as he was walking down the street while another was threatened with violence. Meanwhile, representatives from the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party and the neo-Nazi NPD were celebrated for having voted against the refugees in the regional council.

The pen thrown in Meissen may not have garnered much media attention, but it says a lot about the public mood in Germany, a country in which increasing numbers of people are united against the state, its institutions and its elected officials. It is a country in which antipathy towards democracy is gradually increasing while xenophobia is growing rapidly. And it is a country where incidents of right-wing violence are on the rise and refugee hostels are set on fire almost daily.

It is still just a radical minority that is responsible for much of the xenophobia and violence. The tens of thousands of volunteers who offer their assistance in refugee shelters every day still predominate. But at the same time, a new right-wing movement is growing -- and it is much more adroit and, to many, appealing than any of its predecessors.

Reinforcements from the Center of Society

In the past, the right wing was characterized primarily by thugs with shaved heads, bomber jackets and jackboots -- people who had difficulty getting the words "Blood & Honour" tattooed on their arms without a spelling mistake. After the 1990s, the jackboot crowd was replaced by the "Autonomous Nationalists," right-wing extremists who disguised themselves by wearing left-wing clothing, but who were just as violent as their forebears.

These street-extremists are still around, but they have received reinforcements. The New Right comes out of the bourgeois center of society and includes intellectuals with conservative values, devout Christians and those angry at the political class. The new movement also attracts people that might otherwise be described as leftist: Putin admirers, for example, anti-globalization

activists and radical pacifists. Movements are growing together that have never before been part of the same camp. Together, they have formed a vocal protest movement that has radicalized the climate in the country by way of public demonstrations and a digital offensive on the Internet.

The state and its organs, such as the government and parliament, have become the object of a kind of derision not seen since the founding of postwar Germany. Once again, political representatives are being denounced as "traitors to their people," the parliament as a "chatter chamber" and mainstream newspapers as "systemically conformist." All are insults that have origins in Germany's dark past.

It's not just the government's refugee policies that are bringing the New Right together. The origins are much deeper, reaching back to the protests against the welfare reforms passed in the early 2000s, the anger at the euro bailouts and demonstrations against massive construction projects such as Stuttgart 21. They were all demonstrations of angry citizens who felt their politicians were failing them. Many of them have since become even angrier and have, at least internally, transformed into radicals.

The 1 million refugees who have arrived in Germany in 2015 are now acting as a catalyst for this new right-wing movement. The fear of foreigners, of being "swamped" by them, is bonding the New Right together and drawing more "concerned citizens" into their ranks every day.

Unsettled Germans

German society seems more unsettled than it has in a long time. In a survey performed by TNS Forschung for SPIEGEL (see left-hand column), 84 percent of respondents said that the large number of refugees currently coming to Germany will result in "lasting changes" to the country. Some 54 percent said they are concerned that the danger of terrorism is higher due to the influx of refugees and 51 percent believe that the crime rate will rise. Forty-three percent are worried that unemployment will increase.

The answers reflect a deep unease in our society. Many people seem to have lost their orientation. They feel that their concerns are not being taken seriously enough by the federal government, which hasn't exactly given the impression that it has the refugee crisis under control. That doesn't mean that these people will succumb to the siren song of the far-right, but it does mean they have become more susceptible to it.

Yet the right-wing populist phenomenon is not one that is typically German. Such parties have been gaining in strength almost everywhere in Europe in recent years and societies appear to be radicalizing across the entire Continent while the political center empties out. Thus far, though, German politics and the German populace have been able to resist the right-wing seduction -- movements like the Front National in France, for example, which celebrated strong results in the first round of regional elections last Sunday.

These days, though, the question as to whether such a thing could happen in Germany has become more pressing. Germany's New Right is following a strategy similar to that of Front

National head Marine Le Pen: that of putting a friendly face on radicalism. Her followers are no longer to appear threatening. They should seem friendly, like the nice conservative next door.

There is much that is reminiscent of the Tea Party in the US. That movement came into being as a result of a radical rejection of establishment politics in Washington. Those who joined were united by a sense that they were being cheated by political, business and media elites.

Watching Helplessly

Their radicalism has since changed US society and the Republican Party to such a degree that they are hardly recognizable anymore. Driven in part by Tea Party ideology, the campaign ahead of the Republican primaries has turned into a contest to see who can come up with the most drastic positions. Donald Trump, who is currently leading in the polls, slid to a new low with his demand that all Muslims be prevented from entering the United States.

There are plenty of indications that such a Tea Party movement would fundamentally alter the political landscape in Germany as well. The right-wing populist AfD now has up to 10 percent support according to the most recent surveys -- and this despite an embarrassing power struggle at the top over the summer and an extreme lack of professionalism.

The other parties, though, have been left to helplessly watch the developments on the right wing of the political spectrum. Sigmar Gabriel, who is Chancellor Angela Merkel's vice chancellor and head of the center-right Social Democratic Party, felt in the summer that it was important to keep the lines of communication open to "Pegida," the xenophobic protest movement that stages weekly anti-refugee marches in Dresden. Not long after, though, he abandoned that idea, preferring instead to refer to the demonstrators simply as a "pack."

But it is Merkel's conservatives -- her Christian Democrats combined with the Christian Social Union in Bavaria -- that are the most unsettled. Their members and functionaries are torn between their loyalty to a chancellor who opened Germany's doors to the refugees and their desire to provide a political home to those who are concerned about the migrant influx. Indeed, Merkel's political fate will partly be decided by how she chooses to deal with the New Right.

It is a movement that one can see firsthand every Sunday at 4 p.m. in Plauen, just south of Leipzig in Germany's east, just as the glittering lights of the Christmas market come on in the historic city center. The organizers of the weekly "We Are Germany" demonstration have assembled their flatbed trucks and an audience of a couple thousand people has gathered. The purpose of the event is to provide a stage to everyday citizens, an idea that goes back to the weeks leading up to the collapse of East Germany.

Hilmar Brademann is the first to step up to the microphone. A house painter from Plauen, he is the founder of the local carnival club and is well-liked and respected. Brademann says he doesn't have anything against foreigners in principle. But please not here in Plauen. "I don't want Plauen to turn into another Berlin-Kreuzberg, where one sees women in headscarves or even burkas," he says. The audience applauds his words. They continue cheering when he says that he is opposed

to public benefits being given to refugees. He then addresses his concerns about crime. "They should be immediately deported." The crowd is rapturous.

'The Same Could Happen to Us'

The "We Are Germany" demonstrations in Plauen have thus far been seen as a more moderate version of the Pegida marches in Dresden. It is neither a place for waving Bismarck-era war flags nor for wooden gallows bearing Angela Merkel's name -- both of which have been seen in Dresden. Representatives from right-wing parties are unwanted.

But in recent weeks, the mood in Plauen has become more aggressive. Instead of referring to the "Federal Republic," speakers increasing refer to it as the "shit state" or the "gang state." Few speakers refrain from accusing Chancellor Merkel, who was just named *Time* magazine's "Person of the Year," of being a "traitor to the people." A certain Mr. Dinnebier, a construction supervisor from Plauen, warned recently of new customs that he fears could be brought to Germany by refugees from Africa: "When a local king there dies," he said, "at least seven virgins are buried in his grave with him." A Dr. Rothfuss, formerly a professor at Tübingen University, says that Christians "have almost been exterminated" in the Arab world. "The same could happen to us here."

Such hateful slogans and sentiments against the state and foreigners are coming from law-abiding citizens from the heart of society. They display a mixture of old prejudices combined with new conspiracy theories that is typical for the movement on the right-wing of Germany's political spectrum.

The Otto Brenner Stiftung, a foundation with ties to German labor unions, published a study of right-wing populism in Germany over the summer. The organization found that supporters of the New Right no longer clearly identify themselves as right-wing. "The division between traditionally leftist and traditionally rightist attitudes is disappearing," the study says. "The actors are increasingly positioning themselves outside the classic right-left schemata." Study author Wolfgang Storz speaks of a "cross-front," a term that goes back to the Weimar Republic, when young conservative thinkers such as Arthur Moeller van den Bruck were trying to understand how nationalist and socialist ideas might fit together. The effort found success not long thereafter.

The new "cross-front" is fond of reading the monthly magazine *Compact*. Editor-in-Chief Jürgen Elsässer used to be a member of a communist organization and wrote for such left-wing publications as *Junge Welt*, *Neues Deutschland* and *Freitag*. Many of his commentaries, such as those in opposition to the trans-Atlantic free trade deal or the alleged warmongering of the US would still not look out of place in leftist newspapers. Elsässer's admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin is also widely shared among German left-wingers.

Political scientist Markus Linden, from the University of Trier, believes that the new protest movement is primarily united in its distrust of societal elites. Politicians, business leaders, media professionals: They are all suspected of having formed a conspiracy against everyday people.

Bringing the Movement Together

When Elsässer appeared before a demonstration in Berlin recently, he called for the unification of all the movements he supports. "Antifa, Pegida, Mahnwache, left and right, march together," he called out. "You don't have to love each other. But you do have a civil responsibility: that of showing those at the top where the limits are."

Elsässer is one of many who are trying to bring the new movement together. He studied education, wears a fashionably tailored black suit and invites his readers to events in the Best Western Premier Hotel Moa Berlin. Not unlike a medical conference.

It is a Saturday in October and more than 1,000 people have paid €99 to take part in Elsässer's "Freedom Conference." Some of them are skinheads, but most are from the center of society, married couples and a surprising number of fathers who have brought along their grown-up sons.

Participants were only told of the conference's exact location by email one day earlier. The checks at the entrance are strict, so the event gets started an hour late. Media coverage is not desired.

Elsässer's tirades are well received by the gathered public. In the Germany he describes, supermarket cashiers are threatened by refugees "with machetes." Women are afraid to go out on the street alone because of "young foreign men" who don't have their hormones under control and "grope, leer at and do worse" to women. German schoolchildren, he says, are being disadvantaged by their do-gooder teachers and are being forced to dress in accordance with "Islamic custom." Elsässer doesn't say where his information comes from, but when he shouts "Defend Yourselves!", he is rewarded with loud applause.

Elsässer has adopted a number of revolutionary terms he learned during his time as a radical leftist and remains loyal to the powers that be in Russia. The Institute of Democracy and Cooperation, which has ties to the Kremlin in Moscow, supported the *Compact* conference as an event partner. Launched in 2008, one of the institute's co-founders is a lawyer with ties to Vladimir Putin.

The Tolstoi Institut, founded in 2014, is also among Elsässer's circle of friends. Located in Berlin, the institute "for the promotion of the German-Russian friendship" offers language courses, readings and concerts. It seeks to "counter" Anglo-Saxon influence with "something Russo-German," for example with Putin's vision of "Eurasia." According to a study by the Hungarian research institute Political Capital, Russia maintains relations with far-right groups in 13 European Union countries, including the FPÖ in Austria, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, Hungary's Jobbik and the Front National in France. At the end of 2014, a Russian bank even loaned Front National €9 million. "German right-wing extremists have been trying for years to establish contacts with Russian politicians," one German security official says. "And Moscow takes advantage."

'Resistance!'

In Hotel Moa Berlin, Elsässer's event has something to offer everybody, from the far left to the far right. The controversial playwright Rolf Hochhuth took the stage, saying "only Germany's exit from NATO can prevent its downfall." He was followed later by Götz Kubitschek, one of the intellectual leaders of the New Right. A former first lieutenant in the reserves, he was forced to leave the German military in 2001 for his participation in "right-wing extremist endeavors." In May 2000, he joined high school teacher Karlheinz Weissmann in founding the Institute for State Politics, a kind of New Right think tank.

Recently, Kubitschek has appeared several times with Elsässer and Björn Höcke, the AfD politician who laid a German flag on his armchair during an appearance on a popular political talk show. Kubitschek also speaks at Pegida events, such as one in Dresden at the beginning of October. It is good, he said, that a clash is brewing. The crowd answered: "Resistance!"

Ken Jebsen is also among the leaders and idols of the movement, a former moderator with the public broadcaster RBB who refers to the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks in the US as a "terror lie." Then there is Michael Stürzenberger, formerly a press spokesman for the CSU -- Merkel's Bavarian allies -- in Munich and now head of the anti-Islam party "Freedom." He is also a main contributor to the far-right website Politically Incorrect. Felix Menzel, editor-in-chief of the right-wing publication *Blaue Narzisse* and a creative muse behind the irredentist "Identity Movement," is also involved. In his blog, Menzel describes the current state of Germany as follows: "A government that no longer obeys the law, and supported by parliament, the press and possibly also the courts, is confronted by a protest movement that is searching for the lowest common denominator to transform itself into a mass movement."

Most New Right leaders don't perpetrate violence themselves. Rather, they exert influence on the mood of the country -- at conferences, on market squares and, most of all, in the Internet. In doing so, they are creating an atmosphere that encourages violence-prone right-wing extremists to act on the rhetoric. It is hardly surprising that the man who attacked the Cologne mayoral candidate Henriette Reker with a knife only now became violent. He had been well known as a neo-Nazi for 30 years, but had never been accused of violence. Now, though, he suddenly felt emboldened. "I had to do it," he told police after the attack, the motive for which was Reker's permissive stance on refugees. "The foreigners are taking our jobs away." Among right wingers, the attack has been celebrated as an "act of self-defense."

Cases of right-wing violence have increased dramatically in recent months -- and the attacks are getting more brutal. On the night of Dec. 7, two baby carriages were set on fire in the entry hall of an apartment complex housing 70 refugees in the Thuringia town of Altenburg. Ten people, including two babies, suffered smoke inhalation. Just two days prior, right-wing activists from Thügida, the local chapter of Pegida, had marched through Altenburg with signs reading: "Please continue your flight. There's nowhere to live here."

A 'Disgrace for Germany'

The demonstration and the fire were only reported in a few nationwide outlets. People have become used to such attacks in Germany.

By Dec. 7, the German Interior Ministry had registered 817 "criminal acts on asylum hostels." At the beginning of October, the total was only 505. Compared to 2014, the number of attacks has at least quadrupled. Arson attacks have increased 11-fold, from six in 2014 to 68 this year. In October alone, officials registered 1,717 politically motivated infractions committed by the right wing. In September, the total was 1,484. Since the summer, the increase in violence has been steep.

The development is "alarming" and a "disgrace for Germany," says Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière. He says it is not just a problem for the country's security apparatus, but for the entire society at large. "We have to be careful that xenophobia and right-wing extremism don't creep into the center of our society," he says. Officials, he says, are watching "very carefully to see if trans-regional structures are developing and what crime patterns and perpetrator characteristics are identifiable."

An analysis performed by Germany's Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) has determined that the perpetrators are not always right-wing extremists. Not even a third of the perpetrators identified have had previous encounters with the authorities. The majority had spotless records before they marched off to their local refugee hostel. Kim M., a 39-year-old tax inspector from Escheburg in the northern German state of Schleswig Holstein, is one example. On Feb. 9, he dumped a canister of paint thinner into an empty residence and then tossed in a pack of burning matches. His act was meant to prevent the arrival of new neighbors, six refugees from Iraq. "I thought I was doing a good thing," he told the Lübeck court. It is a common refrain. The more the New Right is able to present itself as the victim of a hostile political class, the stronger will be the impulse to resort to violence in the fight against that class.

This new form of resistance can be found across the entire country. In Heppenheim, a city of 25,000 in the state of Hesse, unknown arsonists set fire in early September to a baby carriage at the entrance of a hostel housing 50 refugees. It was the middle of the night, and smoke quickly filled the staircase. One resident jumped out of a second floor window and sustained serious injuries while several others suffered from smoke inhalation.

An analysis completed by the BKA found that the refugee issue has the capacity to "generate a substance-ideological consensus" on society's right-wing fringe. A "völkish ideology" is spreading across the country, the study found. Last summer, the BKA warned that those who welcome refugees with open arms could increasingly become objects of right-wing hate. The number of attacks on the offices of political parties or political representatives has spiked dramatically in recent weeks.

Next Wave of Hate

There are Pegida chapters now in several states, and some of them have come under observation by domestic intelligence officials. Right-wing violence was also a central focus of last week's state interior minister conference in Koblenz. State intelligence officials have been asked to develop a "counter-strategy" by spring. That is when the next big wave of refugees is expected -- and the next wave of hate.

But even more important than combating the symptoms is the question of what could have caused this shift to the right. Where does the rage against foreigners and "them up there" come from? What's the reason bestseller lists are full of literary diatribes like Thilo Sarrazin's "Germany Is Doing Away With Itself," Akif Pirinçci's "Germany Loses Its Mind" and "Warning! Civil War!" by Udo Ulfkotte, a former journalist for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*?

Some of this may be attributable to a kind of globalization that primarily benefits business and political elites, leaving many citizens feeling like they only ever see its downsides. All they see is jobs being outsourced abroad, wage dumping or migrants and refugees, whom they perceive as threats.

It seems as if the refugee crisis is bundling the suppressed fears of German society and stirring them into an explosive mixture. The nationalistically inclined -- the ones who were afraid of being overrun by foreigners well before the first foreigner moved into their neighborhood -- now feel a burning concern for their fatherland. Those critical of Islam have nurtured the illusion of an impending "Islamification of the West" or an outright German Shariah state as hundreds of thousands of mostly Muslim refugees arrive. Low-income earners are afraid the refugees will compete with them for jobs or welfare payments. Then there are the politically jaded, the ones who regard ruling politicians as incompetent and suspect democracy is a weak form of government anyway. They feel validated by the poor management of the refugee crisis.

Social scientists have been warning for a while that a considerable portion of the population has decoupled itself from what is known as democratic consensus. They don't vote, they ignore the established political parties and they hardly read the news anymore. "Our democracy isn't perfect," the political scientist Wolfgang Merkel recently warned. "The de facto exclusion of the lower class is worrying."

But it has long been more than just people of limited means who are susceptible to the anti-democratic leanings of this new right-wing movement. The fact that conservative citizens have drifted further to the right in recent years also has to do with the evolution of the party system. Many traditional voters of the leading Christian Democratic Union and its sister party in Bavaria, the Christian Social Union, have long felt politically homeless in Germany. They have broken away from the Union because they disapprove of the sudden shift toward modernity by Angela Merkel, who in the course of her now 10-year chancellorship has abandon one traditional conservative position after the next. Near equal rights for homosexuals were received in conservative milieus with about as much incredulity as the vehement expansion of day-care facilities, paternal leave, the abolition of compulsory military service or Germany's shift toward renewable energy. If all that wasn't enough, the last links between Germany's conservatives and the CDU have crumbled since Merkel adopted her open-door policy toward refugees.

No Voice in Parliament

Then there's the fact that members of the ruling grand coalition, pairing the conservatives with the Social Democrats, make up nearly 80 percent of the Bundestag. The sole opposition parties, the Left and the Greens, are to the left. The Alternative for Germany party, or AfD, failed to win enough votes in the last election in the fall of 2013 to get into parliament. So did the FDP, the

CDU's former coalition partners. Millions of citizens who identify to the right of the Union have no voice in parliament.

The political scientist Herfried Münkler speaks of a "narrowing of the political horizon." "The resonance axis between the political establishment and broad swathes of the population is broken," says the sociology professor Hartmut Rosa. This is the real reason for the success of this new movement.

No established party is even listened to in the protest milieu of the new right -- with one exception: the AfD. The populists are despised by some rightists for being part of the political establishment, yet they still enjoy a kind of "outsider bonus" in the scene. On the off chance these people do vote, it's for the AfD -- regardless of whether they know the candidates or not. It's not the people that count, but the signal of protest.

It wasn't that long ago that the AfD, now led by Frauke Petry looked doomed. In the summer, party founder Bernd Lucke was dethroned and he and his followers bowed out, leaving the AfD to lick its wounds. Ten percent of AfD members left the party and its new leaders seemed paralyzed, according to insiders. Popularity of the right-wing party slipped so low that surveys were close to labeling them "other."

At a meeting of the party's new leaders in early August, Petry announced her idea of an "autumn offensive." The topics were the euro and immigration, but talk of the euro evaporated quickly. The AfD functionaries were practically falling over themselves to offer the most extreme demands regarding refugees, from border closures to lifting the right to seek asylum -- even suggesting that German police could fire on refugees with live ammunition, only in an emergency, of course. The party had long wrestled with the question of whether it wanted to be a middle-class party with a focus on fiscal policy or the New Right's representative in Germany. Now they've decided on the more radical variant.

No one embodies this as ruthlessly as the head of the AfD's branch in the German state of Thuringia, Björn Höcke, a man who openly prognosticates impending "civil war" in his speeches in the marketplaces of eastern Germany. In the past few weeks, Höcke has evolved into a sort of German Tea Party activist. He wants to use the potential of the New Right for his own party and like few others in the AfD, he nurtures the connection to the scene and makes the rounds at local citizens rallies. Höcke wants to make them into front organizations for the AfD, as unions once were for the SPD.

A Gift from the 'Barbarians'

Meanwhile, reputable pollsters such as Allensbach and Infratest dimap put the AfD's support among voters at around 8 to 10 percent. The AfD, for its part, prefers to rely on the studies of its own in-house pollster, Hermann Binkert, a former spokesman for Thuringia's Christian Democratic governor, Dieter Althaus. Binkert believes his party would get 22 percent of the vote if elections were held this Sunday.

"Of course we have first and foremost the refugee crisis to thank for our resurgence," says deputy party chief Alexander Gauland, a long-time CDU politician and publisher of the regional newspaper *Märkische Allgemeine Zeitung*. Like the other protagonists of the New Right, he puts emphasis on appearing civilized -- at least outwardly. "You could call this crisis a gift for us. It has been very helpful." That hasn't stopped Gauland from calling the people, whose arrival has been such a gift for him, "barbarians."

Ever since the success of France's Front National party, many in the AfD dream of becoming its German counterpart -- a far-right people's party. Officially, Petry distances herself from Marine Le Pen's party. But her political objectives are nearly identical on many points, especially on the issue of asylum, immigration and integration. Even in areas of economic policy, many of their respective positions could easily be mistaken for the other's. Both oppose TTIP, euro bailouts, a banking union and sanctions against Russia. Both the AfD and the Front National also mistrust big banks and corporations.

The AfD's base wouldn't mind seeing a closer relationship with the French. On the party's Facebook page, supporters have left comments asking why there was no praise for Le Pen. Lutz Bachmann, the founder of Pegida, wrote on his Facebook page, "Congratulations, Marine! Congratulations, Front National!"

Armin Paul Hampel would never congratulate Le Pen. He's one of the new heads of the AfD, though many people may already know his face. It's one of the many curiosities about the AfD that among its top leaders sits a member of the much-hated "systemically conformist" media. Hampel reported on German national politics for the broadcasters MDR and ARD for many years. Now he takes his microphone and shows up alongside Björn Höcke at the marketplaces in Erfurt and tells people that those very same broadcasters "lie and cheat and deceive. Just like in East Germany."

Self-Censorship

"Lying press!" the crowd chants. A few weeks later, he'll say that he doesn't like those words. He prefers, "Pinocchio press." He says it sounds nicer. In an elegant three-piece suit, Hampel is sprawled in a chair in a bistro in the Uelzen train station. He's got to leave soon for appearances in Pforzheim and Passau. In the beginning, the AfD didn't trust him, says the former journalist. But now they're grateful that he has explained to them the true state of affairs in the media.

"No, of course not all journalists lie. I always explain to people that I've never experienced an editor who censored reports. That's not how things work." But there are too many "colleagues" -- by that, Hampel means journalists -- that have "scissors in their heads." They simply censor themselves.

In front of the bistro, Hampel lights a cigarette. A group of pensioners walks past and looks at him stealthily, as if to say, "We know that guy from somewhere." At the moment, Hampel is talking about something that the "colleagues" had been particularly quiet about. "I don't mean to play down the problem under any circumstances, but it's obvious that a good number of these alleged arson attacks are coming from the refugees themselves, mostly out of ignorance of

technology. Honestly, many of them are probably used to having indoor fires back in their home countries."

Hampel uses the word "honestly" a lot, also to describe the alleged shift to the right in Germany. "Honestly, that seems to me to be pure propaganda. Are you afraid of a far-right mob? I've never seen one. I've never been attacked." Strange.

Hampel is a prototype of the new AfD strategy: an educated man, socialized in the West, who for years could be seen on the evening news. No one can easily label him a right-wing agitator. The ex-journalist goes down well with the AfD grassroots because he considers himself reformed, someone who was a part of the system but got out. In eastern Germany, people "held onto something," he says at a town square in Erfurt. "Thoughtfulness and a sense for when we are being told something that is not true. People are very sensitive to that here in Erfurt."

Verbal Feeding Frenzies

The fact that people on the far-right have their own illusions about the world has much to do with the fact that they deliberately boycott conventional media and prefer to rely on their own sources of information. In communications science jargon, journalists are known as "gatekeepers," because they fulfill a similar role as the watchers of city gates in the Middle Ages. They decide which news are relevant and interesting enough to be passed along to the reader.

More and more Germans are starting to believe that the gatekeepers of traditional media are withholding important news, like that climate change isn't so bad. Or that the euro is doomed, but nuclear power is safe. That the Americans are ruining Germany and Putin is fighting for lasting peace. The New Right therefore prefers to seek out its own gatekeepers -- and places its trust in people who filter and manipulate the messages way more radically.

These include the makers of freiewelt.net, a portal run by the husband of one of the AfD's members in the European Parliament, as well as the homophobes from the fundamental Catholic site, kath.net. There's also the anti-Islam bloggers from Politically Incorrect and the self-proclaimed "ethno-pluralists" of the "Identitarian movement" or the national conservatives on the platform "Sezession." Not to mention the conspiracy theorists from Kopp-Online, KenFM and the German branch of "Russia Today."

Before, angry citizens had to write letters to the editors of local newspapers. These were typically published days later, if at all, and were often shortened. Today, they can chat with like-minded people for hours and let themselves be dragged into verbal feeding frenzies in the Internet's many forums.

But the master of disinformation remains Lutz Bachmann. Nearly every day, the trained chef with a criminal record for theft, drug trafficking and various burglaries, bombards his 20,000 Facebook fans with horror stories about refugees. Bachmann's daily routine probably looks something like this: Wake up, make coffee, sift through stories from both the "lying" and allied press, filter out the worst reports and then present them to his followers with somber comments:

- In Osnabrück, a foreigner without a train ticket got aggressive after being stopped by authorities.
- In Spenge in North Rhine-Westphalia, an Afghan allegedly molested a schoolchild.
- Lots of "unfortunate isolated incidents," Bachmann likes to quip.

Wild Rumors

When it comes to negative news, the agitator trusts the "lying press" without reservation. Then he floods his timeline with news that fits his world view, whether they're well-founded reports or wild rumors.

Just how much parts of the population have become radicalized is evident in the increasing number of people who are willing to use their real names, says the Bielefeld-based conflict researcher Andreas Zick. "Radicalization demands distancing oneself from the majority of society."

Plus, he says, that makes identification within groups even stronger. Right-wing leaders have recognized the effect and have begun explicitly calling for people to use their real names.

"We should throw these parasites in the shit head-first. Ingrate shit rabble!" writes a certain Stefan Edling on one of the many anti-refugee Facebook pages. "Doesn't Dachau have a camp?" writes Alex Matzke, and appends two smileys to his message. Karin Wünsch wrote the following comment underneath a video: "First hit them in the mouth a couple of times so the animals stop screeching and then deport them." A man named Burt Bleier even wrote: "They should all be exterminated. They don't contribute anything productive or useful to society anyway."

For much too long, Germany's middle did not pay close enough attention to the radicalization taking place on the right. We looked away and ignored it. We can't do that anymore. We can't look away anymore even if we wanted to. The New Right has become too loud; their influence on the climate in the country has become too great.

Germany's large political parties, though, also bear some responsibility. Bound together in a grand coalition, they are in danger of repeating the mistakes made in the 1960s. Back then, the 1968 movement gained momentum in part because the CDU and the SPD overlooked the need for modernization and societal reform.

'Germany Will Survive'

Today, the New Right is nourished by the refugee policies pursued by the Merkel administration, which has thus far been unable to address the concerns of many Germans, even as the readiness to help remains widespread. "Merkel doesn't have a plan," says former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, expressing a sentiment that a majority of parliamentarians from the SPD and conservatives are only willing to discuss behind closed doors.

But Germany's largest parties will only be able to regain their lost credibility if they clearly distance themselves from xenophobia and nationalism on the one hand while addressing societal concerns of vulnerability and of being unable to cope. Otherwise, as German Finance Minister

Wolfgang Schäuble noted this week in Brussels, election results like the one seen last Sunday in France will not be the exception.

Neither politicians nor the German populace should harbor any illusions about the ultimate goal of the right-wing thinkers and their growing numbers of followers. It is the same goal pursued by people like Carl Schmitt, a fascist thinker in the Weimar Republic. He wanted to destroy the democratic system so that something new could develop in its place, no matter what that might actually look like.

One of the most popular images in the new right-wing movement is that of a blond woman with a blond child in her lap. It has been shared thousands of times on Facebook. Underneath the image, it reads: "Germany will also survive the federal republic."