

# Migrant Crisis Spawns Far-Right Leader's Rise

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MANNHEIM, Germany -- In the current tussle for the future of Germany, Frauke Petry is what you might call the anti-[Angela Merkel](#).

Where Ms. Merkel, the chancellor, has welcomed refugees, Ms. Petry, a rising far-right leader, has said border guards might need to turn guns on anyone crossing a frontier illegally.

Where Ms. Merkel has urged tolerance, Ms. Petry has embraced the angry populism now running through Europe and the United States.

"The preachers of hatred" was how the news weekly Der Spiegel characterized the new German right on its cover last month, emblazoned with a portrait of the petite Ms. Petry.

But this brisk, garrulous 40-year-old is more than Ms. Merkel's foil. She is a disruptive, new force on the German political scene.

She and her party, the Alternative for Germany, have ridden a wave of discontent over the chancellor's embrace of more than one million refugees to their strongest poll ratings ever.

They are now roiling Germany's placid, consensus-driven politics and threatening to alter its political landscape as insurgent parties have done in less stable or prosperous countries around Europe.

Not unlike Donald J. Trump in the United States, she is also breaking open a political dialogue and liberating a new and impolitic -- critics say racist -- language in the mainstream.

"The power of the established parties is crumbling," a jubilant Ms. Petry told supporters after her party took 13.2 percent of the vote in normally sleepy local elections in the central state of Hesse last Sunday.

This Sunday is another test, with elections in three larger and more important states -- one in the east and two in the west -- that are being

closely watched as a referendum on the chancellor's refugee policies and a bellwether for the nation.

In the east, support for the Alternative for Germany now nears 20 percent -- about double that in the west.

But even in the west, the far-right rebellion is chipping away at the chancellor's conservative Christian Democrats, as well as its Social Democratic coalition partners, in a country where the Nazi past looms large.

The Alternative for Germany party has already elbowed its way into five state Parliaments, and is predicted to sail into three more with up to one-fifth of the vote on Sunday.

Ms. Merkel's push this week for European Union leaders to hammer out a deal with Turkey to stem the refugee flow was intended in no small part to beat back the challenge Ms. Petry represents.

There is no doubt that the migrant crisis changed the fortunes of Ms. Petry's party.

Initially founded in 2013 as a protest against the euro, the Alternative for Germany shifted emphasis to protecting German identity as hundreds of thousands of migrants entered the country last year.

Ms. Petry and other nationalist-minded leaders ousted the more Europe-oriented founder of the party, then locked onto the identity issue as the embodiment of how Ms. Merkel and the German establishment were ruining the country and ignoring ordinary folk, said Hajo Funke, a politics professor at the Free University in Berlin.

Starting in the former Communist East Germany, in Ms. Petry's home state of Saxony, they whipped "unhappiness about political and economic alienation" into anger and double-digit scores in opinion polls, Professor Funke said.

Ms. Petry has stood out, he added. "She wants power, she wants to get into government."

Professor Funke and other leading political scientists are doubtful her success will last. But the immediate impact of the migrant crisis is undeniable, cutting across age, education, class, region and political persuasion.

Street protests rapidly descend into right-wing chants of "Merkel must go!" and left-wing cries of "Out with Nazis!" Violent attacks on asylum seekers and their housing have increased.

Now, the elections in three of Germany's 16 states on Sunday will be the first significant voter test of both Ms. Merkel's policy and Ms. Petry's rapid ascent.

Both women are from former East Germany, both hold doctorates in science and both have connections to the Lutheran church -- Ms. Merkel's father was a Lutheran pastor, as is Ms. Petry's estranged husband.

The similarities end there.

Unlike the 61-year-old chancellor, Ms. Petry sees 1990 as "a missed opportunity to really reunite."

"Much that was successful in the East was simply swallowed by the West," she said in an interview. In the next 25 years, she argued, a view of Germany evolved that demeaned the country, with policies against families, against nuclear power and against German traditions.

In this atmosphere, "it is not surprising that a party which argues for a self-conscious nation-state in a Europe of Fatherlands is seen as reactionary," she said.

"That only shows how one-sided the discussion in Germany has been for years," said Ms. Petry, a mother of four.

As for the Nazi past, she said, "the uniqueness, the singularity of German guilt has stood much too often in the forefront, and distorted the view that there are also enough positive aspects to our history."

In a shabby hall on the outskirts of Mannheim, a city of 300,000 about 60 miles south of Frankfurt, Ms. Petry got a sympathetic hearing from some 250 listeners.

"Germany is crazy," said Katja Kornmacher, 46, who said she works in a publishing house and holds two university degrees. "We have the feeling that we can't say anything" against the leftist view in Germany. "It starts in school, where we are told what is correct."

"And those who follow this line land better in life," she continued. "The line is: 'Right is bad, left is good.' And then the leftists are outside shouting against this democratic event."

Ms. Kornmacher was referring to perhaps 30 leftists who jeered those who came to hear Ms. Petry. More than 200 police officers were on duty to ensure there were no clashes.

Emotions are high since the local newspaper, the Mannheimer Morgen, ran a now-infamous interview with Ms. Petry in which she contemplated border guards using guns to keep out refugees.

Ms. Petry says her words were twisted by what she calls the "Pinocchio press" to say that she favored an order to shoot, similar to that in East Germany.

The political establishment in Germany has mostly dealt with Ms. Petry and her party by refusing to appear with them in public, and ruling out any coalition government with them.

Hotels and other institutions have even declined to rent halls to the party.

In Merseburg, a picturesque town of 36,000 in the eastern state of Saxony-Anhalt, which votes on Sunday, the Christian Democrat mayor, Jens Bühligen, 49, has managed to accommodate about 2,800 refugees, mostly spread through the town in empty apartments.

He said he has defused protests by going to them, and listening. "It works," he said.

But some of Sunday's prospective voters had a different view. When about 150 people rallied for the Alternative for Germany, the anger of a cluster of women, all 60 or older, was palpable.

"We were not asked!" about the refugees, they yelled.

A burly 63-year-old woman in a red anorak, who like the others declined to give her name, said she had worked for 42 years and gets 621 euros a month, about \$685, from her pension.

Watching how the refugees are treated, she said, "I have never had so much hatred inside me."