



# AFD... PARTY OF THE RUSSIAN GERMANS?

*Posted on November 1, 2022 by Stéphane Brizzi*



The October 9, 2022 elections in Lower Saxony saw the German populist party AfD (Alternative for Germany) double its tally with 10.9 percent. Fingers pointed for its pro-Moscow stance. This German political movement is coming out of a difficult year and soaring in the polls. In some districts, such as Hanover, the party even got 30 percent of the vote. These districts have a particularity—they are largely populated by Germans from Russia [also known as the "Volga Germans"].

On April 3, 2022, the media outlet Visegrad24 tweeted about Germans from Russia as a "fifth column" within Europe. Reacting to a video in which German Russians showed their support for the "Special Military Operation" this pro-NATO media pointed the finger at a community that has been living in Germany for nearly three decades. With Russian and German flags, mixing the two languages, this community, very little-known outside of Germany, is nevertheless 3 to 4 million strong. It is a community full of surprises.

The Germans of Russia are ethnic Germans, with some two and a half centuries of history. Originally from Germanic lands, who went out to the steppes of Kazakhstan and Siberia via the banks of the Volga, they only returned home after the fall of the USSR. They are not economic migrants like the Turks, or refugees who left the USSR as people today flee Afghanistan or Syria. The comparison with our compatriots *pieds-noirs* does not hold either because the latter lived in Algeria, but in French departments. To get an idea, we should rather imagine, as an example or as an improbable analogy, millions of Italian-Americans who, after a century of American way of life, returned to Italy. German Russians are characterized by their ethnic identity. Recognized during the time of the Soviet Union, their Germanness allowed them not only to return in 1992, but also to obtain German citizenship. Leaving Kazakhstan or Siberia, where they were deported by Stalin in 1941, these Germans returned to their homeland. A homeland they had left in 1763 when their ancestors responded favorably to the call of Catherine the Great.

### **Cultural Distinction and Political Shock**

The Germanic origin of these new citizens was not enough to erase two centuries of Russification and decades of Soviet rule. Their economic integration took a generation. But their "cultural" integration, which is slower, enrages German right-wingers. The Germans of Russia resembles the former citizens of the GDR more than the tolerant, open-minded West German of 2022, who is totally in line with the cosmopolitan type of "anywhere." Conservative, proud of their German identity while retaining their

Russian culture, the German-Russians became visible in the media in the mid-2010s, during the demonstrations against the reception of Syrians, by holding up signs that read, but written in Russian: "My homeland will remain German!" The Germans from Russia were then the talk of the media.

In the 2017 parliamentary elections, the AfD won 13% of the vote and became the third largest party in Germany. Russian Germans were 15 percent to vote for this movement against 10 percent for the rest of the German population. This was a shock for the German media. The AfD thus achieved its good tally among former citizens of the USSR and their descendants. In the last elections, the AfD fell to 10.3%, but limited the damage and again obtained good results in the German Russian districts.

### **A Community that is Now a Must for the AfD**

The Lower Saxony elections of October 2022 were a major victory for the AfD. After a difficult year of electoral setbacks, the nationalist party doubled its tally and national polls now give it 16 percent of the vote. This is a real "comeback" when some predicted the AfD would be marginalized after the war in Russia began.

In the Wahlbezirk district of Hanover, the party received 30 per cent of the vote. In the 2021 parliamentary elections in Berlin and in almost all major West German cities, the Russian-German districts carried the AfD. This was the case, for example, in Cologne-Chorweiler (15%), in the Marzahn district in Berlin (16.8%), Buckenberg in Pforzheim (30%) and Oberhausen (22.2%) in Augsburg, in Bavaria. The tally was down from 2017, but it was enough to allow the AfD to limit its drop and retain 83 seats.

Germans from Russia are the backbone of the AfD in Berlin, for example. The nationalist movement has a real electoral policy vis-à-vis this community, and this is not limited to campaigning the day before the election. Germans from Russia have even reached the highest level of the party, such as the MP Eugen Schmidt, born in Kazakhstan. There are leaflets in Russian, a proposal to relax language tests and family reunification, an international position favorable to the "Russian world."

Since February 24, the AfD has sought to be the bulwark of Germans from Russia against Russophobia in Germany. Despite pro-Kiev statements by Georg Pazderki, former head of the AfD in Berlin in the first weeks of the conflict, the party's line remains the following: Russia is not responsible for the war. Thus, the AfD demands an end to sanctions, an end to arms supplies to Ukraine and neutrality on pro-Russian

referendums. The attack on Nord-Stream and the increase in gas prices have led Alice Weidel, the party's co-president, to say that "an economic war is being waged against Germany." Voting preferences have risen from 9 percent in May to 16 percent at the end of October. Since mid-September, demonstrations have been held on Mondays in almost every city in Germany. Against the backdrop of inflation and the gas crisis, the demonstrators are criticizing federal policy towards Moscow. Russian imperial flags were flown alongside the German flag. The media and the party's opponents mocked them, saying that with the AfD, it was not "Germany first" (its slogan), but "Russia first." However, reducing the AfD vote of Germans from Russia to their pro-Moscow stance misses the point.

## **Fundamental Anchoring of the AfD Vote**

It should be remembered at the outset that the Russian-German community is strongly divided over the situation in Ukraine. Some Germans from Russia lived in present-day Ukraine before their deportation in 1941. Others understand the Russian position, but condemn the use of force. The AfD vote among Russian Germans is therefore not just a pro-Putin or simply anti-immigration vote. The AfD vote is a German vote. Russian Germans want to be recognized as what they are: Germans from Russia. And the AfD knows it. Russian Germans have been complaining for a quarter of a century that they are treated as immigrants by the rest of German society. In fact, their history is very peculiar—but they are Germans. They keep saying so. The AfD is the only party that plainly says to this population: "You are Germans. You must not be treated as immigrants." Assimilation? "How can that be? You are native Germans." These words really catch the attention of Germans from Russia, even if they do not vote AfD. In contrast to this, a left-wing newspaper, a few years ago, ran the headline: "All immigrants must learn German, except Russians."

The AfD is certainly not the party of Germans from Russia in the sense that the majority of them still vote for other political movements. Nevertheless, since 2017, the German populist party has achieved good results in this community. The war in Ukraine was a real dilemma for the AfD—either align with the media's one-track thinking or keep the bar high with respect to Moscow and the Russian world in general. The AfD chose to take a non-Atlanticist line. Declared dead in the spring of 2022, the movement is now in first or second place in many Länder. Whatever its electoral future, the Germans of Russia will be part of it!

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