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Left Conservatism: Sahra Wagenknecht's Challenge to the German Party System

JÖRG MICHAEL DOSTAL

Abstract

This article reviews the record of Germany's current coalition government consisting of the SPD, Greens and liberal FDP under chancellor Olaf Scholz, a member of the SPD. Since 2021, the coalition's failure to set a coherent policy agenda, permanent infighting and external challenges, such as the Ukraine war and immigration, have led to a dramatic decay in support for the governing parties. The opposition CDU/CSU has profited little from the government's weakness, while the rightist AfD rides high in opinion polls and elections. Conversely, Die Linke experienced a split in December 2023 when a group of its legislators—led by Sahra Wagenknecht, the former co-chair of the left's parliamentary group, decided to found a new political party, the 'Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht—Reason and Justice'. The article evaluates Wagenknecht's political discourse which aims to combine progressive welfare and conservative migration policies. It is suggested that Wagenknecht's 'left conservatism' is a promising electoral project filling a representation gap in German politics.

Keywords: Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), Germany, German party system, migration, Sahra Wagenknecht, left conservatism

Introduction

IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, Germany has displayed mediocre or below-average performance in all fields of policy making. Decision making in German politics on critical questions often occurs without adequate processes of deliberation and in a spontaneous manner. Subsequent top-down imposition of unpopular decisions demonstrates a display of state authority that divides civil society and undermines past attempts at consensus and mutual trust. Many transformative decisions follow patterns that are referred to in English as 'culture wars' or *Kulturkampf*.

The major events contributing to the decline of trust in German society and the growing rejection of the political class include: deep cuts to the welfare state between 2003 and 2005 under the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (or Social Democratic Party, the SPD)-Green coalition; the 2015 decision of *Unionsparteien* (CDU/CSU) chancellor Angela Merkel to open Germany's borders to migrants and refugees based on her claim that national borders could no longer be policed in the era

of globalisation; subsequent cultural and socio-economic conflicts over migration costs borne by civil society without adequate public policies or support for disadvantaged sectors; and Germany's draconian Covid policies that included lengthy economic lockdowns, closure of schools and national borders and sustained efforts to enforce vaccination of the population by threat of job loss in the event of non-compliance.

Recently, this list of divisive policy issues has expanded to include Germany's position following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Crucially, Germany's economic foundations look increasingly unstable, with very high levels of inflation leading to falling living standards. The annual inflation rate in 2021 before the invasion of Ukraine was the highest since 1993, while the rate in 2022 was only higher in the former West Germany during the 1973–74 oil price shock. Among G7 countries, Germany is currently the worst performing economy, with negative growth rates in 2023 and stagnation in the first half of 2024.

At the end of 2023, ten of the thirty-nine *Die Linke* (left party) legislators in the federal

parliament resigned from their party. On 8 January 2024, they founded the *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht—Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit* ('Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht—Reason and Justice'), abbreviated in German to BSW. In its first electoral contest in the European parliamentary elections on 9 June 2024, the BSW achieved 6.2 per cent of the vote while the left's vote share collapsed to 2.7 per cent. In opinion polls, BSW consistently polls above the 5 per cent threshold required for representation in Germany's national and regional parliaments, while the left consistently polls far below. Moreover, the European elections once again highlighted the fact that Germany continues to be politically divided between west and east. In the west, the CDU/CSU was almost universally the largest party, while Greens and SPD retained a handful of urban strongholds. In the east, the party hierarchy was totally different. In each of the five eastern regions, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) became the strongest party followed everywhere by the CDU and the BSW as second- and third-largest forces respectively. The special electoral conditions in the east—namely the rise of AfD and BSW, combined with the collapse in the vote share of the left and the very low support for the SPD, Greens and *Freie Demokratische Partei* (FDP)—all point to structural change in Germany's party system.

Crucially, the BSW as a new political party represents an untried political combination in the German context: left-wing social and economic policies, combined with conservative migration policies and opposition to green taxes. This new approach—dubbed 'left conservatism' by Wagenknecht and some of her supporters—might appeal to voters from across the political spectrum. Thus, the BSW poses a major challenge to Germany's current party system.

Germany's divided coalition government

Since December 2021, Germany has been governed by a coalition consisting of the SPD, Greens and liberals (FDP). In theory, the coalition is supposed to focus on efforts to decarbonise the economy. This includes replacing oil and gas with wind, solar and so-called 'green hydrogen'—a term frequently used in

recent German political discourse. In reality, the coalition does not agree on how to impose its green goals with deadlines between 2030 and 2040, well beyond the current parliamentary cycle ending in 2025. Should the energy transition be advanced through legislation and the closing down of existing fossil fuel industries? Must the Covid lockdown be followed by a climate lockdown? Who should bear the costs of the transition? Is the project viable? Who will be the central catalyst and decide whether energy alternatives are reliable, cost effective and feasible? While the SPD and Greens focus on state agency and top-down regulations, the FDP believes that markets and 'technological openness' are key to success.

Yet, how convincing is the idea that Germany can assume a global leadership position in energy transition against strong competition from state actors such as China and the United States? These two countries—among others—enjoy much larger economies of scale, employ many more people in research and development and have long-standing industrial policies with very high levels of direct state investments in key technologies unmatched by Germany or the EU.

In 2023, chancellor Olaf Scholz of the SPD charged that 'high investments in climate protection will allow Germany to achieve growth rates that last occurred in the 1950s and 1960s'.¹ The head of the German Economic Institute commented that the chancellor's statement triggered 'irritation and surprise' since the 'transition to climate neutrality lacks tools and political coherence to create reliable conditions for the necessary investments.' Moreover, 'transformation as a national project is neither economically viable nor ecologically useful.'²

If people still wondered how the climate transition was to be funded, economy minister Robert Habeck from the Greens provided answers by advancing drafts for a new

¹Ntv, 'Wie in 50er und 60er Jahren: Scholz beschwört erneutes deutsches „Wirtschaftswunder“', Ntv, 9 March 2023.

²M. Hüther, 'Die größte Chance auf ein neues deutsches Wirtschaftswunder', *Die Welt*, 13 March 2023; <https://www.welt.de/wirtschaft/article250015170/KI-Die-groesste-Chance-auf-ein-neues-Wirtschaftswunder-in-Deutschland.html>

'building energy law'. This law—drafted by his secretary of state—focused exclusively on CO₂ reduction targets. In the context of rapidly rising energy prices for private households and industry since the invasion of Ukraine and the German government's cancellation of further gas deliveries from Russia, it stated that oil and gas heating systems should be phased out after a short transition period. Installing conventional oil and gas heating systems would be outlawed almost immediately. In the event of breakdowns of existing heating systems, the purchase of electric heat pumps based on so-called green electricity should become mandatory. Many homeowners feared that large and unexpected investments in heat pumps would be enforced and that those residing in older and less valuable homes would face the highest bills. The subsequent fear that people's retirement provisions might be in doubt in order to pay for costly refurbishments resulted in a rapid build-up of public anger. In response to large-scale protests, Habeck promised generous subsidies for heat pumps. This failed, however, to quell the unrest. Citizens realised that new subsidies would mean higher taxes amidst growing military spending, fiscal transfers to Ukraine and urgent investments in Germany's declining public infrastructure. Ultimately, Habeck's secretary of state was forced to resign over conflict-of-interest issues, specifically his attempt to appoint his close friend and best man as head of the German Energy Agency. The Buildings Energy Act was eventually passed in parliament as a watered-down version, marking the moment when the German public realised that energy transition potentially compromised their future prosperity.

Housing problems were also mounting elsewhere. During the 2021 election campaign, the SPD promised to build 400,000 apartments per year—including 100,000 rent-controlled social housing units—to address Germany's acute housing shortage. In reality, rising interest rates, price inflation of building materials and new costly energy efficiency standards produced a decline in the number of new apartments in 2022 and 2023. Industry observers predict that the number of finished units will continue to decline for the foreseeable future, with regulatory burdens making new housing units unaffordable.³

Regarding foreign policy, all coalition parties and the opposition CDU/CSU have aligned behind extensive military and economic support for Ukraine. Past policies of *détente* with Russia/Soviet Union and the German-Russian energy partnership dating back to the 1960s are now denounced as historical mistakes. Conversely, the German government did not react to the attack on the German-Russian Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines in the Baltic Sea on 26 September 2022. Multiple rounds of US-German consultations have since passed without visible efforts to clarify responsibility for the attack. Owing to the official boycott by Germany of Russian gas and oil deliveries—although Russian energy still reaches Germany via Belgium and India—the German government now purchases large quantities of fracking gas from the USA, resulting in significantly higher energy prices compared to competing economies.

Domestically, the heaviest push-back against coalition policies originated from what can be called the 'permanent state apparatus'. First, following a complaint by the opposition CDU/CSU, the Federal Constitutional Court declared the coalition's plans to roll over unspent Covid compensation payments into a new 'climate and transition fund' as unconstitutional. This decision undermined the authority of chancellor Scholz who had held the position of minister of finance in the former government. According to the court, the planned transfer of debt from one annual budget to the next violated Germany's 'balanced budget [constitutional] amendment' (articles 109(3) and 115 of the Basic Law) as well as basic principles of accounting.⁴ Consequently, the budget planning for 2025 must now include urgent spending cuts.

In a second development, the Federal Audit Office issued a report criticising Germany's energy transition. The report warned that 'very high electricity costs burden Germany as an

³T. Mischke, 'Wie Normen und Vorschriften die Baupreise treiben', *tagesschau.de*, 26 March 2024; <https://www.tagesschau.de/wirtschaft/verbraucher/baukosten-normen-vorschriften-100.html>

⁴Bundesverfassungsgericht, 'Second supplementary budget act 2021 is void', *Bundesverfassungsgericht*, 15 November 2023; <https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/EN/2023/bvg23-101.html>

economic destination and private households' while 'risks in all sectors of energy policy have increased'. According to the office, there is a growing implementation gap between the planned expansion of solar and wind energy, the electricity grid capacity and the necessary backup of the green energy sector by conventional power plants. The office stressed that it 'does not see the goal of reliable provision of electricity as guaranteed'.⁵

As for the long-standing issue of very high migration to the EU and Germany—including undocumented young men from war zones such as Syria and Afghanistan—the country is now in permanent crisis mode, especially following the arrival of around 1.5 million refugees from Ukraine since 2022. Representatives of local government authorities from all political parties stress that they are overburdened and unable to integrate any more newcomers. Germany's poor track record of making rejected asylum applicants leave the country remains unchanged. Furthermore, labour market integration happens either slowly or not at all. For example, while most Ukrainians arriving in the Netherlands since 2022 are at least partially employed, most Ukrainians in Germany are not. Overall, welfare state institutions and local governments are exhausted and the burden is increasingly shifted to civil society.

In conclusion, the current coalition government is characterised by convoluted discourse oscillating between grand announcements and the failure to deliver effective crisis management. There is not a single policy-making field in Germany where the coalition can seriously claim to have improved the situation.

Germany's party system in transition

Since the last federal election in September 2021, the German party system has experienced significant changes. The three coalition parties

⁵Bundesrechnungshof, 'Bericht nach § 99 BHO zur Umsetzung der Energiewende im Hinblick auf die Versorgungssicherheit, Bezahlbarkeit und Umweltverträglichkeit der Stromversorgung', *Bundesrechnungshof*, 7 March 2024, p. 27; https://www.bundesrechnungshof.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Berichte/2024/energiewende-volltext.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=4

(SPD, Greens and FDP) have seen their electoral support erode, while the CDU/CSU has moderately recovered, the AfD has risen rapidly and the left party's future viability is in doubt. The three coalition parties are now in danger of ceasing to be genuinely national organisations. In east Germany, their support in current opinion polls is either too low to retain regional parliamentary representation (Greens and FDP) or in danger of doing so (the SPD in the states of Thuringia and Saxony). Conversely, the opposition CDU/CSU—led by Friedrich Merz since 2022—has increased its support to around 30 per cent from 24.2 per cent in the 2021 election. However, the main winner in opinion polls is the AfD, which now polls nationwide at close to 20 per cent, compared to the 10.4 per cent it achieved in the 2021 election.

To explain the current situation, one needs to examine the main reasons for the AfD's rise and the severe crisis facing *Die Linke*, which is likely to result in its future removal as a federal political actor. The core reason for the AfD's electoral rise is the unwillingness of all other parties to show substantial commitment to reduce the number of migrants and refugees entering Germany. Moreover, the AfD is clearly opposed to weapons deliveries and monetary transfers to Ukraine, whereas *Die Linke* remains silent on this issue. Some opinion polls suggest that a relative majority of Germans now oppose weapons deliveries to Ukraine (43 per cent opposed versus 39 per cent in favour).⁶ This allows the AfD to represent significant sections of the population who are currently ignored by the other parties. In reaction to this conflict over wedge issues, significant sectors in the media and state apparatus now treat the AfD as a far-right party endangering German democracy rather than a right-wing, populist party that legitimately competes in the context of a liberal democratic system.

In recent months, prominent CDU/CSU and SPD politicians began describing the AfD as a 'Nazi party'. Directly after the devastating defeat of the SPD in the 2024 European

⁶R. Grimm, 'Presse-Information: Nur jeder Vierte hält Sieg der Ukraine noch für realistisch, Waffenlieferungen bei Deutschen umstritten', *Ipsos*, 22 February 2024; https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2024-02/Ipsos-PI_Ukraine-Krieg_2024-02-22.pdf

parliamentary elections in which an estimated 570,000 former SPD voters switched to the AfD, the SPD co-chair Lars Klingbeil suggested that ‘the Nazis have gained strength in this election’, subsequently confirming that ‘I mean the AfD and [Alice Weidel]’. This rhetorical bravado was directly afterwards criticised by Sahra Wagenknecht suggesting that Klingbeil ‘does not seem to realise that he is doing a favour to the AfD because people will see this as totally lacking in credibility’.⁷

The heavily polarised debate once again raises the question of how to define the term ‘Nazi’. Is the AfD perhaps the representative of the ‘terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, chauvinistic and imperialist elements of “finance capital”’ as stated in the famous 1935 definition of historical fascism—including the German variety—by Bulgarian communist Georgi Dimitrov? In fact, the AfD is by no means a mass movement that frontally attacks the liberal state and competing political parties. Rather, the AfD currently fights in Germany’s courts—and the court of public opinion—for the share of public representation that the official rules and regulations offer opposition parties. This concerns the party’s claim to the chairmanship in some federal parliamentary committees, one vice chair of the federal parliament and public funding for the party. These have all been denied to the AfD by the other parties. While the Greens and the left party predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), also encountered some difficulty in being included in the entitlement system for political parties during the 1980s and 1990s, the exclusion of the AfD is without direct precedent. Moreover, contacts between the AfD and ‘finance capital’ (or any other business faction) are limited—certainly when compared to all other established parties.

The AfD’s political composition amounts to what right-wing intellectuals close to the party like to term the ‘mosaic right’. Different wings coexist in a relationship of cooperation and conflict. These are neoliberal conservatives, libertarian anti-statists, populists—referred to as ‘social patriots’ in AfD discourse—and

those stressing ethnic-cultural foundations of statehood. While the relative weight of the first two groups has recently declined in favour of the latter two, it is important to note that many of today’s AfD members previously belonged to the conservative wing of the CDU/CSU. Overall, the shift in political discourse in Germany advanced by the Merkel CDU/CSU and now the current coalition government—what could be termed ‘state-led multiculturalism’—hands the AfD a near-monopoly on expressing patriotic feelings that were previously catered to by Helmut Kohl’s CDU/CSU, Helmut Schmidt’s SPD and the German national football team.

Turning to *Die Linke*, the left party—and, between December 1989 and 2007, the PDS—its political roots go back to the SED, the state-socialist party of former East Germany, the GDR. During the 1990s, the PDS gained popularity in the east owing to its role as social and economic defender of eastern interests. Since an entire generation of East German academics and former members of the state-socialist service class lost their employment and status after unification in 1990, the party was able to recruit many of them for a second round of political activism. The PDS officially broke with ‘Stalinism as a political system’ and reassembled around some ‘Marx and other critical theories’ approach. Eastern advocacy was combined with demands for redistributive social policies and the rejection of NATO and other military alliances. Later, the neoliberal retrenchment of the German welfare state by the SPD and Greens—especially from 2003 to 2005—produced splits in the SPD and the trade union movement. A substantial group of western German leftists—led by former SPD chairman Oskar Lafontaine—unified in 2007 with the PDS to form the *Die Linke*, which peaked electorally in the 2009 federal election, achieving 11.9 per cent of the national vote.

Back then, two contradictory trends were evident. The west German members often became more radical, demanding pure opposition to neoliberalism. Many east German leftists were more pragmatic, as they had already joined regional coalition governments with the SPD and later the Greens. In this context, the eastern left started contributing to certain ‘neoliberal’ policies, such as large-scale housing privatisation in east Berlin.

⁷Ntv Nachrichten, ‘Ntv Talk Spezial: Europawahl 2024 – Runde der Parteichef’, *YouTube*, 9 June 2024, minutes 58:14–59:20; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FvcGrCjOHe&t=3441s>

Participating in regional governments led to the left losing its ‘moral and symbolic resources’—namely the claim to be fundamentally different from other parties. The decline was particularly visible in the membership’s failure to agree over core values. Mutual dislike among leading members of the left became notorious.

Three main party factions developed in this lengthy conflict over strategy: the ‘reform camp’—predominantly made up of eastern members who supported participating in coalition governments—the ‘movement leftists’ who grew in significance during the 2010s in both western and eastern Germany—suggesting that climate crisis was the main issue of concern and that identity politics should be accommodated—and the group around Sahra Wagenknecht stressing the continuing primacy of socioeconomic issues and anti-militarism. All three groups demanded a share of representation in party leadership positions, resulting in polyphonic debating nicely put in one party resolution from 2021 as ‘contradictory communication over key issues of our time’.

In addition to factionalism and regional divisions, the left suffered from generational transitions as the well-qualified east German intelligentsia and specialist politicians were largely replaced by urbanites and student activists.⁸ The newcomers wanted the party to focus on support for open borders and radical climate protection. This particular combination of moralism and ‘climate Jacobinism’ changed the internal dynamics of the left beyond repair.⁹ The departure of Sahra Wagenknecht and her network from the party at the end of 2023 and the subsequent foundation of the BSW in January 2024 was the logical outcome of this trajectory.

Sahra Wagenknecht’s long march

Sahra Wagenknecht’s political journey began as the GDR ceased to exist as a state. Born in 1969 to a German-Iranian couple—her Iranian father subsequently left—she spent her childhood mostly with her grandparents. A bookish teenager with good school grades, she was denied university admission in the GDR owing to her failure to integrate into the collective. She subsequently earned a living by tutoring school children while reading Goethe, Hegel and the socialist classics in her free time. She was certainly not short of ambition, stating that she felt back then that ‘her life task might be to draft a new philosophical system along the lines of Hegel, but for the current era’.¹⁰

When the popular democratic movement in the GDR began in October 1989, many participants hoped that removing the old regime would issue in a renewed and democratic socialism. Identifying as a socialist, Wagenknecht joined the SED—the GDR’s state-socialist party—briefly before its transformation into the PDS. She was subsequently elected to the new party leadership as a representative of youth and of the ‘communist platform’—a PDS faction consisting of orthodox state socialists. Initially, she seemed to live in the past, suggesting that the GDR could have been more successful economically if the former SED leader, Walter Ulbricht—associated with the ‘new economic system of planning and guidance’, a 1960s GDR reform effort trying to reconcile central planning with cybernetics in the hope to increase efficiency—had remained in office in the early 1970s.

Over the years, Wagenknecht combined her role in party politics with academic study, earning a degree in the Netherlands under a Marxist professor, and subsequently a doctorate in economics in Germany. She was clearly an ‘ideas seeker’, gradually broadening her views on economic policy making. In particular, she began respecting elements of ‘ordoliberalism’, a West German school of economic thought advocating state intervention to prevent private monopolies in market economies. While her discourse expanded, she continued to focus on issues of social inequality and

⁸J. Frielinghaus, ‘Gesine Löttsch: Wagenknecht-Flügel ist nicht allein verantwortlich’, *nd-aktuell.de*, 27 November 2023; <https://www.nd-aktuell.de/artikel/1178035.linksparitei-gesine-loettsch-wagenknecht-fluegel-nicht-allein-verantwortlich.html>

⁹K. Palzer, ‘Kritik an neuem Kurs: Bundesgeschäftsführer der Linken tritt zurück’, *tagesschau.de*, 10 January 2024; <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/linkspartei-geschaeftsfuehrer-ruecktritt-100.html>

¹⁰F. Rötzer and S. Wagenknecht, *Sahra Wagenknecht couragiert gegen den Strom. Über Goethe, die Macht und die Zukunft*, Frankfurt, Westend, 2017, p. 54.

anti-militarism. In her private life, she was first married to a journalist and later—since 2014—to the former SPD chairman and subsequent left party co-leader, Oskar Lafontaine. Her second husband—the elder statesman of West German leftism—added his experience of leading regional governments, chairing or co-chairing political parties and his brief spell as Germany’s finance minister between 1998 and 1999 to the new family’s portfolio.

Wagenknecht’s most high-profile role in the left party was as co-chair of the parliamentary group in the federal parliament between 2015 and 2019. At the end of this period, she complained about burnout and her position was taken over by another member of her faction. By then, her following in the parliamentary group was substantial enough for her to delegate representation of her brand of leftism to deputies while she focussed on book writing and regular media appearances. It is worth mentioning that—owing to her rejection of German weapons deliveries to Ukraine—Wagenknecht is often accused in the media of being a Russian sympathiser or a naïve pacifist. She has implicitly responded to these allegations by mentioning that she forgot most of her Russian—taught in schools in the GDR—and last visited Russia, then the Soviet Union, in 1988 after graduating from high school.

Crucially, the long-term political phenomenon of Sahra Wagenknecht cannot be fully explained by her intellectual history or personal connections. In fact, her key talent is the ability to communicate clearly political ideas to large audiences in an effective manner. Her talent shines in TV talk shows where she consistently outperforms other participants and hosts owing to her meticulous preparation and stylish delivery. As an intellectual in politics, Wagenknecht has developed her communicative abilities over many years, mastering various popular formats such as parliamentary speeches, talk shows, publishing and her personal YouTube channel. She is now one of Germany’s best known politicians, with a steadily growing appeal across the political spectrum.

Sahra Wagenknecht’s political discourse

To understand Wagenknecht’s current political ideas, one should turn to her latest book

titled *Die Selbstgerechten* (‘the self-righteous’) published in 2021 and for some time the best-selling political book in Germany. Wagenknecht aims to provide a general analysis of contemporary capitalism based on a synthesis of recent academic literature and deals with issues ranging from welfare state policies and migration, to surveillance capitalism and future economic strategies. At the same time, she also provides her balance sheet of working in the PDS and the left party for three decades. One observer suggested that the book should be seen as the *de facto* programme for a new political party.¹¹

Wagenknecht’s most prominent claim is that she blames what she terms ‘lifestyle leftists’ for investing heavily in identity politics and an attitude of moral superiority. According to Wagenknecht, lifestyle leftists fail to compete successfully in elections because they abandon blue-collar workers and poorer sections of the population, ignoring their material interests and social values. As a result, ‘globalisation losers’—namely workers facing competition from overseas or owing to massive migratory pressures—either give up on politics altogether or turn to right-wing populist forces: ‘left liberal arrogance nurtures rightist gains of [political] territory. As noisier the rightist attacks, as more left liberals feel justified in their position. Nazis oppose migration? Thus, every critic of migration must be a crypto Nazi’.¹² She then hammers home the point:

...[i]nstead of addressing ... majorities with a programme attractive to them, [the] SPD and Left party have helped the AfD to electoral triumphs, turning it into the leading “workers’ party”. In an altogether submissive manner, they also accepted the Greens as intellectual and political avant-garde. This removed them [leftists] from any chance to win a majority on their own.¹³

¹¹A. Wehr, ‘Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht: Auf dem Weg zur Partei neuen Typus’, *andreas-wehr.eu*, 21 October 2023; <https://www.andreas-wehr.eu/buendnis-sahra-wagenknecht-auf-dem-weg-zur-partei-neuen-typus-2.html>

¹²S. Wagenknecht, *Die Selbstgerechten. Mein Gegenprogramm – für Gemeinsinn und Zusammenhalt*, Frankfurt, Campus Verlag, 2021, p. 13.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 17.

The alienation between ‘lifestyle leftists’ and disadvantaged groups is rooted in what Wagenknecht calls the ‘new education privilege’. She argues that all German parties are dominated by urban academics recruited along class and cultural capital lines. In particular, Germany’s political, media and academic elites no longer include representatives from service or production workers or from the traditional and declining middle classes. She mentions that the lower socioeconomic half of society almost completely lacks representation in the federal parliament. Thus, those who set the political agenda in society offend others who no longer have any voice defending their interests.

Wagenknecht’s analysis can be summarised as follows: leftists are wrong to abandon traditional family values, national and regional identity and concepts of German culture as defined by longstanding popular attitudes and sets of mutual expectations of the native population, including integrated migrants. She aligns herself with the ‘somewheres’—people with attachment to a particular state and locality—and against the ‘anywheres’—the globalised elites. Most crucially, she argues that the democratic nation state remains for the foreseeable future the pivot where popular demands can be voiced and welfare state policies drafted: ‘[t]he fairytale of the weak nation state in our globalised world is most of all a purposeful lie of governments to excuse their abandonment of former protective and security promises due to *practical constraints*—to justify a market-liberal policy that frustrates in most countries the wishes of the popular majority’.¹⁴ She further stresses that political structures above the nation state—such as the EU or the UN—are removed from popular pressures and fail to follow democratic principles.

Her argument is significant concerning leftist attitudes toward mass migration. For Wagenknecht, German and EU migration policies are market-liberal rather than leftist: ‘[t]he CDU of Angela Merkel stands for flexibility, economic liberalism, globalisation and high levels of migration, i.e. a policy that weakens cohesion and valuable mutual connections that previously offered people security and support’.¹⁵ According to Wagenknecht, only

migration between countries of similar levels of economic development is unproblematic. Conversely, attracting skilled migrants from developing and transition countries to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries is a net loss for their societies of origin. It is a convenient way for rich countries to cream off human resources—such as expensively-trained medical doctors, nurses and engineers. Wagenknecht mentions cases of eastern European transition countries losing an entire generation of prime working-age people to older EU countries and states that ‘half of the Syrians with higher education are in Europe, mostly in Germany’.¹⁶

By contrast, accepting unskilled migrants becomes a burden for national welfare states. Open borders for unskilled migrants and generous welfare policies are mutually exclusive, with the costs carried by welfare state institutions, civil society and—especially—local poor and disadvantaged groups. Wagenknecht highlights that the quality of life in Germany’s inner cities with high levels of recent migration is declining because of insufficient resources for integration in schools, housing and elsewhere. While it is possible to argue that resources must be found in order to integrate new migrants, one must wonder how much the German state can realistically accomplish in the context of limited resources and growing demands.

In Wagenknecht’s view, the material foundation of advanced OECD states—securing citizens’ loyalty and willingness to pay taxes—is the credibility of welfare state promises. Thus, ‘[i]f there is no longer any difference between citizens and non-citizens of a country, there is of course no longer any duty of a state to protect its population in a special manner’.¹⁷ She argues further that a policy of high migration enforces a minimal welfare state that is ‘cheaper for the upper and upper middle classes in comparison to a real welfare state, but it is not an attractive project for the middle and lower middle groups. Thus, if one wants to remove support for social provisions, this is exactly the way to do it’.¹⁸

Wagenknecht advocates for restoring inclusive social citizenship at the national level. The state is supposed to act as gatekeeper balancing the national welfare account—enforcing

¹⁴Ibid., p. 231, emphasis in the original.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 221.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 148, 151.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 131.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 129.

contributions and distributing benefits. Her advocacy for direct links between contributions and welfare generosity is of course nothing new but amounts to the basic idea behind the Bismarckian social insurance state. Perhaps it is possible to find at this point some ideological foundations of 'left conservatism'?

To conclude, Wagenknecht's world view may be unbalanced from a sociological perspective and retains a strange nostalgia for the former West Germany—a country she never knew personally. She notably avoids references to the socialist canon—Marx is hardly mentioned—or the experience of former East Germans. Nevertheless, she successfully identifies a representation gap in German politics. Her book-length manifesto states clearly that a new party focussing on generous welfare policies, improving infrastructure, education and economic performance—while opposing unregulated mass migration, militarisation and green taxes—is feasible and even overdue.

Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht: a new type of party?

Successfully filling a gap in the political marketplace requires moving from analysis to practical activities. But it is not the first time that Wagenknecht has tried to build a new political movement. As recently as 2018, she was involved in founding a grassroots organisation named 'Aufstehen' ('Stand Up'). Back then, the goal was to create a left unity movement from the bottom-up, emulating certain political activities of the yellow vests and Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France and of Jeremy Corbyn in Britain. While *Aufstehen* initially succeeded in attracting a handful of former SPD and Green party functionaries, it quickly collapsed owing to internal political conflicts and a lack of organisational capacity.

In 2024, the situation is very different. Wagenknecht's new political formula is almost the exact opposite of her former approach. The new party, BSW, is founded from the top-down. As of mid-2024, the BSW only consists of 600 official members personally known to Wagenknecht and her closest supporters. Wagenknecht represents the new party almost on her own, exercising effective 'message control'. This tactic—and naming the party after the founder—is presented as a

transitional solution to avoid immediate infighting. At a later stage, it is expected that the BSW will become less centralised.

Effectively, the BSW represents an effort to broaden electoral appeal in the direction of a catch-all party. Wagenknecht stresses that her new party intends to appeal to all voters—including conservatives, a relatively neglected group in recent German politics. In this context, her opposition to 'gender-inclusive language' and other recent escalations in German-style wokeness is almost certainly electorally attractive. As for current AfD voters, Wagenknecht aims to offer a serious alternative. While other parties and even the churches morally condemn AfD voters as beyond the pale—and suggest that the AfD should be outlawed—Wagenknecht and her fellow BSW members in the federal parliament have stated that they will decide on a case-by-case basis how to react to the AfD's parliamentary initiatives.

In terms of foreign policy, the BSW demands an end to German weapons deliveries to Ukraine and supports negotiations to end the war based on a compromise solution. While condemning the Russian attack, the BSW advocates for future collective security structures in Europe that include Russia, and opposes efforts to punish Russia. The BSW understands the current war as part of a collective failure of Western decision makers to react positively to earlier efforts by Mikhail Gorbachev and other Soviet and Russian leaders to foster relations as part of a 'global peace order'.

Opinion polls suggest that Wagenknecht addresses important wedge issues within the German electorate. Directly after the foundation of BSW, an early opinion poll highlighted four main motives of Wagenknecht supporters: disagreement with current policies (69 per cent); personal confidence in Wagenknecht (59 per cent); the belief that the country is declining rapidly under the leadership of the current coalition government (57 per cent); and disagreement with the Russia policy of the other parties (48 per cent).¹⁹ Following the 2024 European

¹⁹T. Petersen, 'BSW mit hohem Wählerpotential im Osten – Sahra Wagenknecht wichtigstes Wahlmotiv/Allensbach Umfrage', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22 February 2024; <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/sahra-wagenknechts-partei-im-osten-liebaeugeln-40-prozent-mit-bsw-19535003.html>

parliament elections, a similar opinion poll confirmed this picture, stating that the top four motives of BSW supporters were parallel support for more social policies and less migration (86 per cent), supporting Sahra Wagenknecht (78 per cent), opposition to further weapons deliveries to Ukraine (74 per cent) and disappointment with the left party (63 per cent).²⁰ Thus, the BSW's political profile can be summarised as a combination of support for social policies, opposition to large-scale and unregulated migration and efforts to strengthen economic performance.

While 'left conservatism' remains full of internal contradictions—and a 'one-woman show' does not solve the representation crisis in German politics—one must nevertheless admire the good timing for the new party's founding. A case in point was the BSW's European election campaign, in which Wagenknecht displayed her skills as a political tactician. Rather than focussing on migration and AfD voters—the role that state TV and legacy media tried to cast her for—she instead put heavy emphasis on social policies and the failure of the SPD to deliver improvements to voters. Most of her campaign speeches dealt with pensions, education and opposition to further arms deliveries to Ukraine. She repeated that she wanted to make sure that children attending primary school 'shall once again learn how to read, write and calculate'.

In the final stages of the BSW's European election campaign, Wagenknecht attacked chancellor Scholz for changing his political line on Ukraine: '[Scholz] needs to explain to the public why it is suddenly no longer a problem if Ukraine attacks Russian territory with German weapons, although he previously warned over many months against the potential war threat for our country'.²¹

The European election result of the BSW was as follows: 580,000 votes gained from the SPD, 470,000 from the left, 260,000 from the CDU/CSU, 230,000 from the FDP, 160,000 from the AfD, 150,000 from the Greens

and 140,000 from former non-voters.²² While this BSW success must be put in context—namely that the SPD lost around 2.5 million voters to non-voting and 1.5 million to the CDU/CSU—the outcome confirmed that Wagenknecht's catch-all strategy paid off. Crucially, former AfD voters are not a major source of BSW support: around two-thirds of BSW voters are recruited from left-of-centre voters and disappointed former SPD supporters.

Directly after the European election, Wagenknecht stressed that 'Scholz is the worst chancellor in the history of the Federal Republic, while Merz—especially with the Greens as coalition partner—would not be an improvement ... but an extreme danger for peace in Germany'.²³ Crucially, the strategic question for the BSW is now how to position itself in the forthcoming 2024 elections in the eastern regions of Thuringia, Saxony and Brandenburg. To exclude the AfD from regional governments there, the BSW might be under strong pressure to join broad coalition governments that would include the CDU. While such move could quickly normalise the BSW's presence in the party system, it might also disappoint those hoping that Wagenknecht can act as a catalyst for a systemic renewal of German politics.

Conclusion

The current coalition government of the SPD, Greens and FDP has failed to put forward a clear-cut agenda, while suffering from permanent infighting. The political profile of its actors oscillates between naïve announcements—namely energy transition as an engine of green growth—and the reality of chronic economic crises owing to declining infrastructure, insecure and expensive energy sources and the urgent danger of deindustrialisation. While some of these interrelated problems are the result of the inactivity of earlier coalition governments under the former chancellor Merkel

²⁰'Wer wählt das BSW—und warum?', *tagesschau.de*, 12 June 2024; <https://www.tagesschau.de/wahl/archiv/2024-06-09-EP-DE/umfrage-bsw.shtml>

²¹Tagesschau Ukraine-Liveblog, *tagesschau.de*, 3 June 2024, 06:57; <https://www.tagesschau.de/newsticker/liveblog-ukraine-montag-374.html>

²²Infratest Dimap, 'Europawahl 2024: Analysen/Wählerwanderung BSW', *tagesschau.de*, 9 June 2024; <https://www.tagesschau.de/wahl/archiv/2024-06-09-EP-DE/index.shtml>

²³'Wagenknecht: Merz mit "politischem Kindergarten"', *tagesspiegel.de*, 12 June 2024; <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/parteien-wagenknecht-merz-mit-politischem-kindergarten-11810195.html>

(2005–2021), others are down to political choices of current actors. Since 2022, Germany has become the second-largest war sponsor of Ukraine after the USA, while also engaging in a national rearmament programme. In practice, this means purchasing US-made weapons on a large scale.

These geopolitical investments are intended to take place while the earlier focus on energy transition is maintained. Furthermore, declining infrastructure—education, public housing, railways—is supposed to be fixed. Finally, large-scale spending on migrants in the welfare system is also to be shouldered by the taxpayer. This convoluted agenda is unviable and something must give. Promising to protect the welfare state while adding further obligations to its portfolio has become customary for SPD and Greens. However, the German public cannot help but wonder when this tower of empty promises is going to collapse.

To be sure, the weak current government also faces a weak mainstream opposition. The CDU/CSU under former BlackRock manager Merz suggests retrenching welfare policies, partially privatising pensions and delivering more weapons to Ukraine—specifically German-made medium-range missiles that could potentially hit Moscow. A clear majority of Germans oppose such offensive military strategies, fearing that

Russia might retaliate. It appears unclear whether Merz values transatlantic relations more than winning German elections.

Thus, voters must turn to BSW or AfD if they wish to express their opposition to further arms deliveries to Ukraine. Moreover, Germany's welfare policies face major funding problems in the future. On welfare, BSW and AfD differ fundamentally in their respective policies. Supporters of Wagenknecht believe that she is a trustworthy defender of appropriate welfare policies. Ultimately, the Wagenknecht challenge is down to the failure of classical social democracy—including its democratic socialist variety—to defend effectively national regulatory and welfare capabilities in the era of globalised capitalism. This collective failure and the resulting decline in electoral support for parties such as the SPD and the left explain the 'Wagenknecht moment' in contemporary German politics.

Author's Note

All translations are by the author.

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