

German politics**AfD bloc turns up the heat in Germany's Bundestag**

Critics accuse far-right party of aggression, but its MPs say it is enlivening debate



AfD members stand but do not applaud Angela Merkel in Germany's Bundestag © EPA

Guy Chazan in Berlin APRIL 3, 2018

For German MP Franziska Brantner, the Bundestag is under attack — from within.

The enemy, the Green politician says, is the far-right [Alternative for Germany](#), which won seats in parliament for the first time in last September's elections and immediately set about redefining its political culture.

Ms Brantner sees the AfD as a kind of Trojan horse. "They want to change the system ... to dismantle our democracy," she said. Since the party's debut in the Bundestag, "the atmosphere has become more tense, more aggressive, more menacing".

[Bernd Baumann](#), the AfD chief whip, says her remarks are typical of the campaign of "defamation and demonisation" that has been unleashed against his party. He agrees the AfD has changed parliament — but for the better. "Sure, there are more polarised opinions now, but that has enlivened democracy," he said.

The AfD's entry into the Bundestag was a pivotal moment for German politics — the first time since the 1950s that a far-right party picked up enough votes to make it into the national parliament.

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Lothar Probst, University of Bremen

Since then, the legislature has reverberated with the kind of anti-Islam, anti-immigration rhetoric that was once the preserve of beer halls and far-right internet chat-rooms.

That has, however, triggered a backlash. MPs from other parties have fought back against the AfD with an intensity that has cheered Bundestag observers and made parliamentary debates much more interesting.

A recent exchange focused on Deniz Yücel, the German-Turkish journalist whose detention in Turkey long overshadowed relations between Berlin and Ankara. The AfD had proposed a motion to express "disapproval" of Mr Yücel, who was released in February after spending more than a

year in jail on charges of “spreading terrorist propaganda”, arguing he was “anti-German”.

In a combative [speech](#), Cem Ozdemir, a Green MP, accused the AfD of censorship. “You’re carved from the same rotten wood as those who arrested Deniz Yücel,” he said, to applause. A YouTube video of the speech was shared 130,000 times — almost unprecedented for the Bundestag.

“It was a prime example of how much sharper — and shriller — the tone has become,” says Lothar Probst, a political scientist at the University of Bremen.

The German press sang Mr Ozdemir’s praises but said the AfD also deserved credit. Thanks to the party, the Bundestag had been “shaken awake”, wrote [Die Welt](#). “Parliament, the beating heart of democracy, is alive again.”

The new Bundestag looks and feels very different to its predecessor. Six parties are represented, two more than in the 2013-17 parliament. The parties of the governing grand coalition — Ms Merkel’s CDU/CSU bloc and the Social Democrats — have 399 seats compared with 502 last time, while the number of opposition MPs has grown from 128 to 310. With 92 seats, the AfD is by far the strongest opposition party.

“It’s become much easier to land punches against the grand coalition than it was in the last parliament,” Mr Probst said.

The result is a more rambunctious, assertive legislature. “Issues that were just waved through before,” such as immigration, law and order, and the eurozone, “are now being discussed and debated,” Mr Baumann said.



AfD members of the Bundestag have deployed tactics such as arriving early and tweeting photos of the empty seats around them © Reuters

But the AfD has not only injected its own political priorities into Bundestag business, say critics: it has also introduced a sarcastic, contemptuous tone.

When the Bundestag is in session, AfD MPs arrive early and in force and tweet photos of the empty seats around them. One, taken by Jürgen Pohl last November, came with the caption: “We’re discussing our soldiers ... the old parties don’t care.”

The bellicose approach sometimes backfires. Petr Bystron, an AfD MP, was fined €1,000 last month for violating parliamentary procedure by tweeting a photo of his No vote against Ms Merkel on the day MPs elected her as chancellor.

Stephan Brandner, one of his colleagues and chairman of the Bundestag’s legal committee, [is also in trouble](#) for tweeting a photo of a ballot form resting on top of a roll of toilet paper in what looks like the gents’ loo of the Reichstag building.

Other parties are often unsure how to deal with the newcomers. Some just try to ignore them. “My principle is to be as unfriendly towards the AfD as the Bundestag’s rules allow,” Jan Korte, chief whip of the Left party, said last December.

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Some MPs challenge the populists’ every contentious utterance, while others refuse to rise to their provocations. MPs on the Bundestag’s powerful

budget committee, for example, allowed Peter Boehringer, a Eurosceptic, anti-Islam AfD MP, to be installed as chairman in January despite the fact he had called Ms Merkel a “bitch” and described German judges as “whores of justice”.

One MP on the committee said afterwards he did not want the AfD to be able to portray themselves as martyrs.

But one of the most effective strategies, some MPs said, has been humour. When the AfD proposed a motion that German should be designated in the constitution as the country’s official language, Johann Saathoff of the SPD delivered a [speech in Plattdeutsch](#), a north German dialect that resembles Dutch, provoking hilarity and applause.

“He just turned the whole AfD motion into a joke,” said Ms Brantner. “Sometimes that’s the best response.”

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