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5 on 45: Merkel wins, far right gains: What happened in Germany's elections?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

STELZENMÜLLER: My name is Constanze Stelzenmüller, Robert Bosh senior fellow at the Center for the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution, and I'm here to talk about Sunday's German national elections.

Germany, my country, it's a somber day for you, for me, and for Democrats across the west. In Germany's earthquake national elections on Sunday a radical right wing party enter the federal legislature for the first time in more than half a century. Founded in 2013 the Alternative for Germany, also known as AfD, failed to pass the 5 percent threshold and that year's elections. But it has now gained nearly 13 percent of the vote becoming the third largest force in the Bundestag, Germany's parliament.

The governing parties of the current Grand Coalition, Chancellor Angela Merkel's Conservative Christian Democratic Union the CDU, and the Social Democratic Party the SPD of her challenger Martin Schulz, were both brutally punished. Merkel was dealt her worst personal result at 33 percent, and the CDU's Bavarian sister party CSU, and the SPDC the Social Democrats, saw their worst ever outcome since 1949—the founding of the Federal Republic.

Small parties, meanwhile, benefited overall. The Liberals returned after a four year hiatus at 10.7 percent, and the Greens as well as the Left Party came in at around 9 percent. Voter turnout, at 77, percent was significantly higher than four years ago but that did not help the Democratic parties.

This is a caesura in German postwar history. In her fourth term, a weakened Merkel will have no other choice but to painfully forge an unprecedented difficult three-way coalition between her Christian Democrats, the liberals, and the Greens because the SPD has already ruled out another Grand Coalition. The liberals for their part have made it clear that they want a much more restrictive immigration policy and are skeptics on European Union integration, a blow to France's young president Emmanuel Macron

who had set his hopes on a renewed Paris-Berlin partnership to reinvigorate the European project. The Greens' leadership for their part will be wrestling with a fierce fundamentalist left-wing that would rather be waterboarded than compromise. So expect coalition negotiations to last until December at least and an introverted, conflicted Germany that is barely present in international debates.

At the same time, this outcome sets up a fight for Merkel's succession and a harsh power battle between her own camp of moderate modernizers and those in her party who want to chart a much more hard-edged conservative course. It will darken the tone of German political debate, polarize the country, and possibly change the political party landscape forever. The future of social democracy in Europe is more in question than ever before.

So yesterday's vote in the country that for months was thought to be a firm bulwark against the populist wave will be seen as an encouragement by populist movements who lost traction in this year's elections in the Netherlands and in France as well as by the alt-right in the United States. And the Kremlin whose official and unofficial propaganda organs were vociferously promoting the AfD must be beside itself with joy.

Let there be no doubt about it, the AfD is no alternative for any Democrat. It is a party bent on disruption and destruction. It seeks to tear down my country's post-war centrist consensus, its post-war commitment to atonement for World War II and the Holocaust, and reconciliation with their victims.

Its program is nationalistic and xenophobic, anti-European integration, anti-NATO, anti-Western, anti-Muslim, and overtly pro-Russian. And AfD's leadership, once content with discrete dog whistling signals to the extreme right and with refusing to distance themselves from the party's most Islamophobic and anti-Semitic elements, managed to nearly double the number of its supporters within a month with a ferociously aggressive, deliberately taboo-breaking campaign waged on all fronts. On social media it developed a commanding presence, supported it seems in the final stretch, by repurposed Russian bots. And on the street the AfD made sure to send jeering and howling protesters to each and every one of the chancellor's appearances.

In his first post-victory speech on national TV, party leader Alexander Gauland promised to “hunt down the government” and to “take back our country.” My parents who are now both dead would have been horrified. My father, born in 1927, was drafted into the Wehrmacht, the Nazi Army, at 16. My mother, born in 1933, was bombed out of Berlin as a child. They were part of a generation who despised the Nazis and rebuilt their country as a strong democracy so that it would never again succumb to totalitarian temptation. They would have been dismayed to recognize the language and the ideas of the AfD’s deliberate references to Germany’s darkest age. And I cringe with shame to think how Holocaust survivors, Jewish Germans, and Muslims in Germany, my fellow citizens must feel today.

And yet it’s important to look at the exact reasons that people voted for the AfD. Germany has been spared major terrorist attacks, it boasts full employment and record surpluses, and the uncontrolled inflow of refugees has slowed to a trickle. But more than two thirds of respondents in exit polls said they were concerned about terrorism, crime, and immigration showing that they remain worried about integrating the more than 1 million refugees that are likely to stay in Germany. And revealingly, two thirds of AfD voters said they had cast their vote as an act of protest rather than as an act of conviction.

This sadly speaks volumes about the Grand Coalition’s, and yes, Merkel’s inability to speak to and calm ordinary Germans concerns about the ability of institutions and civil society to cope with historic challenges. The AfD pulled in 1.2 million new voters, half a million votes from the Social Democrats, and nearly a million from the CDU. But this also shows the way out of this debacle.

The 94-strong party grouping of the AfD in the next legislature will contain many members with no experience even in local government. Its leadership has spent much of its four years existence with vicious infighting. Experience with the AfD’s performance in the European Parliament and 13 of 16 state legislatures has shown that it’s mostly neither willing nor able to engage constructively on the business of legislation and governance.

Still the fight is the Democrats to lose. Politicians, media, and civil society must learn to resist the AfD's constant attempts to trigger them with polemics and distract them from solving problems. They must learn to fight the enemies of democracy on issues not on slogans, on merits not on morals. And they need to address the concerns that drove nearly 13 percent of German voters into the arms of the radical right wing party, but not by adopting its positions.

This has to be the end of the sleepwalking complacency that has so often irritated even our friends. Without a doubt this is the hardest test for German democracy in my lifetime perhaps of the Republic's postwar history. It will take a huge effort, but I believe our institutions and our civil society are strong enough. We owe it to ourselves, to our neighbors and allies, and to fellow Democrats worldwide.

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