

Germany: Musical chairs at the Pirate Party congress

Dietmar Henning
5 May 2012

The Pirate Party changed its leadership at a party congress last weekend in Neumünster. The former deputy chair Bernd Schlömer became chair, former chair Sebastian Nerz is now his deputy. Decisions on substantive matters were adjourned till the autumn for lack of time; so that the Pirates still do not have a clear statement of their central programmatic views.

Five and a half years after its foundation, the Pirate Party remains largely a blank sheet that can be filled with any political content. The party is characterised by opportunism and conservatism. Its refusal to take a clear stand on political issues—whether out of indifference, ignorance or in order to hide its true positions—makes the party a melting pot for the most diverse people and views. The media hype surrounding the Pirate Party is the main factor for its current standing at 11 percent in opinion polls.

Approximately 1,500 of the party's presumed 24,000 members travelled to the congress in Schleswig-Holstein. The focus was the election of a new party executive. The eight candidates each were given just three minutes to introduce themselves to the assembled membership. All the candidates were then supposed to answer questions from the membership. However, delegates expressed no interest in this procedure. Instead, the candidates were asked previously submitted and randomly drawn questions. Four of the candidates did not even have to submit to this ritual.

Thus without much debate, Bernd Schlömer and Sebastian Nerz were able to change positions on the executive. Schlömer was supported by 67 percent and Nerz 56 of members, who were able to vote for several candidates. A serious discussion about the direction of the party was impossible under these conditions. The transparency and freedom of expression of which the Pirates boast hide political arbitrariness.

The newly elected leadership reflect this arbitrariness. There can be no talk of “young”, “unspoiled” or just “different”—all attributes that the media use to describe the Pirates. The Pirate Party is not an alternative to the existing parties. It is intended primarily to channel widespread discontent with the official parties back behind them.

The new party chair Bernd Schlömer personifies this role. He studied social sciences and criminology, the latter because he aspired to a career in law enforcement. In 1998 he arrived at the Bundeswehr (military) University in Hamburg, and since 2010 has been director of the federal Ministry of Defence. Schlömer is responsible for the management of the two armed forces universities in Hamburg and Munich, where officers are trained in the principles and ideology of the German army in addition to their specialized training.

Schlömer does not foresee any conflict of interest with his employer, the Ministry of Defence. “With us, completely normal people can take office,” he said in an interview with *Spiegel Online*. So someone could become party chair who is also employed in a ministry, he said. Although he is “naturally committed to loyalty and secrecy”, he sees “no problem there”. On the contrary: the Pirate Party has succeeded “in winning people to the democratic process”. This should “surely make every ministry happy”.

Apart from the fact that civil servants in government departments—and in particular the Ministry of Defence—are pledged to loyalty to the state and as a rule are subject to background checks on their political views, the Pirate Party has not yet stated its position on German participation in foreign military missions.

For Schlömer, it can stay that way. He told *Spiegel Online* that a party does not have to have an answer to all political questions. He could well imagine that the

Pirates could participate in the general election in 2013 without taking a stance on this issue. “It’s not necessary that we have an opinion about Israel before 2013”, he said just after the furious attacks on Günter Grass, who had warned of Israeli war preparations against Iran.

He told the press that whether the army was sent abroad was a decision for parliament. “That’s a good thing.” But he did not say what position the Pirates would take on this question in parliament. Schlömer is leaving plenty of room for all kinds of manipulation and political manoeuvring. This fits in with what he said on the fringe of the congress, emphasizing the fundamental willingness of the Pirates to enter coalitions with all other parties in state legislatures or at the federal level.

The congress elected Johannes Ponader as the new political director. The 35-year-old from Munich replaces the 24-year-old Marina Weisband, who has been the public face of the Pirates in recent months on numerous talk shows and other media appearances. Weisband retired her post to complete her thesis in psychology. But she left open the possibility of running as a candidate in the 2013 general election.

Ponader, in the Pirate Party for just two years, describes himself as a “social artist”. He now works as a “freelance actor”, director and author in Berlin and lives on welfare.

Apart from the demand for an unconditional basic income, Ponader like Schlömer is vague about his political beliefs and positions. “I’m not here to make policy, but to keep your backs clear so that you can make policy”, he said on Sunday in Neumünster. It was not his task to provide a policy impetus to the party, but to mediate the impulses coming from the party.

“On important issues, it should be people who are competent that are asked, and not necessarily those who are in office,” he said. Like Schlömer, he considers the tasks of the executive to be the facilitation, organization and optimization of the political process. This was more important than expressing his opinion.

In Berlin, Ponader had helped organise the Occupy movement. “Without Johannes Ponader, the Berlin Occupy camp would have only survived half as long,” writes *taz*. Until early January, the camp stood on the former site of the Federal Press Beach for two months. According to *taz*, it is thanks to Ponader that a deserted

beach cafe was occupied. When the police finally cleared the camp, Ponader said, “We will go, if only out of respect for the police. They are only citizens in uniform.”

Another topic at the congress was the party’s financial problems. For 2012, the Pirates have only received €580,000 (US\$760,000) out of a potential total of €151 million (\$198 million) in state funding for political parties. State funding is calculated according to the votes received (70 cents per vote) and on the party’s own revenue, subsidized at 38 cents per euro raised. But this must not exceed the party’s own revenue from membership fees and donations.

The congress increased the annual membership fee from €36 to €48. Compared to other parties, this is extremely low, and the Pirates receive few donations, which means they only qualify for a portion of the state funds to which they are entitled. The congress also rejected a motion committing those who win office from having to pay over a portion of their entitlements to the party. Members of state parliaments receive between €5,700 (Saarland) and just under €10,000 (North Rhine-Westfalia); a member of the Bundestag (federal parliament) currently receives €12,000 plus expenses.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact