

Germany: Parties in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania elections focus attacks on refugees

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2 September 2016

A state election takes place Sunday, September 4, in the state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (MV). The ruling parties, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Christian Democratic Union (CDU), have focused their election campaigns on attacking refugees.

“There is nothing to add to the fact that refugee policy is dominating this election,” reported *Die Zeit*. The radio station *Deutschlandfunk* reported: “The election campaign is determined by the topic of refugees.”

The right-wing extremist Alternative for Germany (AfD) has been the beneficiary. It has placed candidates on the ballot for the first time and, like the CDU, stands at 21 percent in the polls. The two parties are in a neck-and-neck race for second place behind the SPD, which leads at 28 percent. In the last election, the social democrats, who placed Erwin Sellering on the ballot for minister president, received 35.6 percent of the vote.

The concentration of the election on refugee policy is even more remarkable given how few refugees live in the sparsely populated state and how many leave it as soon as possible. The German radio station *Deutschlandfunk* estimates that about 11,000 refugees live in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. This corresponds to about half of 1 percent of the entire population of 1.6 million. Other media outlets have reported that there are only 8,000 refugees in the state.

The campaign against refugees serves a different purpose. It is meant to divert into right-wing channels anger over poverty and social decline and fears on the part of middle class layers of losing their status.

The state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania is mostly composed of rural countryside. Industries such as shipbuilding and fishing struggle to survive. The unemployment rate, at 9 percent, is one of the highest in Germany. A recent decline in the jobless rate is mostly a consequence of the fact that so many young people have continued to leave the state in search of work. The migration of young people to the west in search of work is an ongoing trend that began with the reunification of Germany 25 years ago.

Altogether, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania has lost approximately 300,000 residents since reunification. They have left behind dying villages and small cities and an ageing

population. Tourism provides most of the jobs, especially in the summer. For the most part, these jobs are badly paid.

Although unemployment is the most important issue to 38 percent of voters, this issue has barely played a role in the election. One also searches in vain for posters opposing war and rearmament.

CDU candidate and the sitting Interior Minister Lorenz Caffier is leading the charge in encouraging a mood hostile to refugees. Although no fully veiled women have been seen in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania up to this point, he advocates banning the burqa.

On the program *Report Mainz*, he openly admitted that the purpose of the demand for a burqa ban was to encourage a law-and-order climate. In answer to the question whether he had seen a burqa before, he said: “In case it escaped your notice, I am the spokesperson of the union [Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union]-led states in Germany, and we have worked out a position paper on security and integration, and the burqa plays a role in that.”

He claims that “one has the feeling that Mecca is located in the middle of Germany” and justifies this with the words: “I believe that we use a certain visual language at certain times. And in this regard, I have nothing further to add.”

The spokesman for the security policy of the CDU state parliamentary faction, Michael Silkeit, put out a flyer showing the collapsing Twin Towers in New York City. When *Report Mainz* asked him about the flyers, he said: “I think it is right.” In Rostock, there are many international cruise liners. “It is not new that American ships, American tourists, for example, are attacked all over the world,” he said.

Report Mainz commented that “there have been approximately as many exploding American cruise ships as burqas in Meck-Pomm up to this point.”

Erwin Sellering, the lead candidate of the SPD, is also staking everything on propaganda against refugees. In an interview with *Spiegel Online*, he attacked German Chancellor Angela Merkel from the right. She “created the impression last fall that we must accept refugees without any limit and acted at the same time as if anyone who voiced any doubts was either a right-wing extremist or an idiot.” The acceptance of refugees has “led to a divide in society.”

In the same interview, SELLER said: “It is not about categorizing everyone who voices criticism as a member of the AfD. That would prevent us from seriously addressing justified criticisms.”

The AfD is thriving on this sort of poison. As in other eastern German states, the party is part of the far right in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. Holger Arppe, their candidate in Rostock, was fined for hate speech in 2015 because of a comment he had posted on an Internet forum attacking Muslims.

The lead candidate of the AfD, the former radio moderator Leif-Erik Holm, said: “Fear of foreign infiltration and the loss of German identity is not irrational, but is proved by the numbers. I personally feel this fear that we Germans could decline culturally one day the way it has happened in some parts of cities.”

Until a short time ago, Holm was an employee of AfD European Member of Parliament Beatrix von Storch. Like her, he demands an immediate stop to immigration and the taking in of refugees. He elaborates this with demands such as: Things should be better for families, more children, more security, and more police. The AfD is also against wind power and denies climate change. It bases itself on the widespread anger against the established parties and encourages antagonisms between Germans from the east and west: “We easterners are tough, we imbibed how important freedom is with our mother’s milk.”

Many representatives of the right-wing extremist National Democratic Party (NPD) have become supporters of the AfD. In order to support the AfD, the NPD, which has been threatened with a ban, has not placed candidates of its own on the ballot. Five years ago, the NPD got 6 percent of the vote and had its own faction in the state parliament. According to recent surveys, the NPD would receive around 3 percent, so it is unlikely that the NPD could enter the government again.

The AfD has large election posters everywhere. They display slogans such as “More protection for families and property! Vote for the AfD now” and “Prevent the destruction of Germany! Vote for the AfD now.”

The AfD claims it did not put up these posters itself. According to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, an “association for the maintenance of the rule of law and civil liberties” is behind the posters. The association has also produced a newspaper that is distributed to households free of charge. It is called *Special Edition for the State Election*. It condemns Angela Merkel and recommends voting for the AfD.

The association had already advocated a vote for the AfD in the state elections in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate in March. According to *Spiegel Online*, experts suspect the association of producing a “skilled packaging for illegal party donations.” According to information obtained by the *Bild* newspaper, Josef Konrad, a spokesperson of the campaign, had 12 millionaires behind him who wanted to help the party and were planning additional campaigns.

The head of the CDU in the state, Caffier, appears to have

little problem to work with the AfD. He said the AfD was just “more consistent and more patriotic” than the CDU.

However, the Left Party bears the main responsibility for the growth of right-wing demagoguery. Its lead candidate, Helmut Holter, explained the rise of the AfD in an interview with *Die Zeit*: “The AfD will not just get votes because of the refugees, but also because of frustration and anger. That goes back to the social reforms of Agenda 2010 and the rescue of Greece. Many people do not understand why there is money for that, but not for their own concerns.”

Holter forgot to mention his own role. The politician, who was born in 1953 and became a member of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), the state party of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), is directly responsible for the social misery in the state. Between 1998 and 2006, he belonged to a coalition of the SPD and the Left Party that was responsible for the implementation of the social cuts associated with Agenda 2010.

In its election program, the Left Party now promises to carry out all manner of good deeds, which everyone knows they would never implement if they were in the government. The party does not energetically oppose the propaganda against refugees. Moreover, leading representatives of the party such as Sahra Wagenknecht, leader of the Left Party parliamentary faction of federal parliament, and Bodo Ramelow, minister president of Thuringia, have joined in the attacks on refugees.

The cynical policy of the Left Party is to employ left-sounding phrases to cover up its support for social attacks. This has made it possible for the AfD to present itself as an alternative to the Berlin parties and rally protest voters around it.

The Left Party lies at about 13 percent in the polls, 5 percent less than in the last election. Attendees at its gatherings are almost exclusively older people who have remained faithful out of loyalty to the GDR.

Whether the current SPD-CDU coalition will continue to rule after the election or will be dissolved by another alliance also depends on the performance of the Green Party, which stands in the polls just barely above the 5 percent hurdle required for entering the government. However, the entry of the Greens would change little in the policies of the state government. The parties and their programs are largely interchangeable. A record 49 percent of those eligible to vote did not take part in the last election. It is to be expected that the number of abstentions will be similarly high this time.



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