Far-Right Party Tries to Expand Its Appeal in Germany's West

To reach voters outside its Eastern heartlands, the AfD is putting a new gloss on its anti-immigrant message — while sticking with its agenda.

Duisburg has long been at the heart of Germany's steel industry. The site of one former steel plant is now an urban park. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

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By Clay Risen
Reporting from Duisburg, Germany

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It was a warm spring day in Duisburg, a rusty industrial hub in Western Germany, and Alan Imamura, a member of the City Council, was chatting with constituents in a shop-lined pedestrian mall on the city's impoverished north side.

Until recently, Mr. Imamura said, he was not welcome in places like this. That is because he is a leading local figure in the Alternative

for Germany, known as the AfD, a far-right party whose national organization was recently declared an extremist group by the country's domestic intelligence service.

Much of the AfD's support comes from the former East Germany. But in recent years, it has developed a beachhead in parts of Western Germany. During February's federal elections, several neighborhoods in Mr. Imamura's district gave the AfD some of its best results in the country, coming close to 40 percent of the vote.

"It's so different," he said. "You would not imagine, five years ago — when I put up some posters, people spat on me. And today the people, they say, 'Finally.'"

The AfD emerged over a decade ago around skepticism against the euro, but it soon morphed into a party built on the denigration of immigrants and refugees, one of the reasons it was designated as extremist.

A confidential, 1,018-page report by the domestic intelligence service, which was not released but was reviewed by Der Spiegel magazine, documents what it called "an entrenched xenophobic mind-set" within the "top leadership structures of the AfD." For example, Bjorn Höcke, who leads the AfD in the Eastern state of Thuringia, has repeated Nazi-era slogans and called for "large-scale" deportations with "well-tempered cruelties."

Such talk has not dampened the AfD's ambitions. After making steady gains in elections over the past five years, it is now trying to position itself to become the dominant party in Germany by the next federal election, in 2029.

Doing so, though, means branching out beyond its base in the East, which has a population of just over 14 million, less than the single state of North Rhine-Westphalia, where Duisburg lies. It also means tweaking its messaging to appeal to a new audience of voters.

"I can give different rally speeches in the former West and former East Germany," said Peter Boehringer, an AfD representative from the Western state of Baden-Württemberg. "With Westerns, you still have to convince them."

The agenda, though, has not changed. In the West, the blatant xenophobia, which gets less traction there, is couched in appeals to issues like law and order. Candidates lean into concerns over industrial decline, not civilizational decline. And the party puts forward figures like Mr. Imamura, who can persuasively speak to the working-class resentments bubbling up in places like Duisburg.

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A mostly Turkish suburb of Duisburg. Many residents are children or grandchildren of those who arrived to staff the steelworks in their postwar heyday. Some now vote for the far-right Alternative for Germany. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

The son of a Japanese American soldier and a German mother, Mr. Imamura, 51, grew up in Bavaria and studied business administration in college, then worked for UPS as an account manager. In 2013, he and a small group of friends started the AfD's Duisburg chapter.

Mr. Imamura is affably unpolished, coming across as an Everyman who got angered by the system and is telling it like it is.

"Politicians say, oh, no, you're imagining things, everything's beautiful," he said. "But people on the street level, they see it's not in the right direction."

While AfD politicians in the East speak openly about making Germany safe for "civilized whites," as the domestic intelligence service reports, Mr. Imamura avoids such explicitly racist language.

Instead, he talks about mass immigration as a strain on city budgets and schools, and draws distinctions between unskilled immigrants, whom he blames for Duisburg's increasing crime rates — violent crime was up by 8 percent last year — and skilled immigrants, whom he says Germany should encourage to come.

“For the ones we want, it should be not be as difficult,” he said. “And the ones that we don’t want should be regulated.”

Like many AfD figures in the West, Mr. Imamura offers a business-friendly, small-government gloss on the national party’s position, hearkening back to its roots as a euroskeptic movement while skating around its turn toward the far right.

For example, the Duisburg AfD branch has hammered repeatedly at a recent European Union directive calling for the production of carbon-neutral steel by 2050, which they say could drive the city’s remaining steel mills out of business. Steel accounts for about 5 percent of Europe’s emissions.

Alan Imamura helped found the Duisburg branch of Alternative for Germany and now represents it on the City Council. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

“You cannot stand in front of the biggest steel company in Germany and say, ‘Hey, we demand that you produce carbon-neutral steel,’” Mr. Imamura said. “Green steel means no steel.”

He and other Western AfD politicians can sometimes sound like a Germanic MAGA. Mr. Imamura recently had hats made with “Make Duisburg Great Again” on the front, though in AfD blue, not Trumpian red.

Experts see a clear strategy in how the AfD is trying to build support in the West.

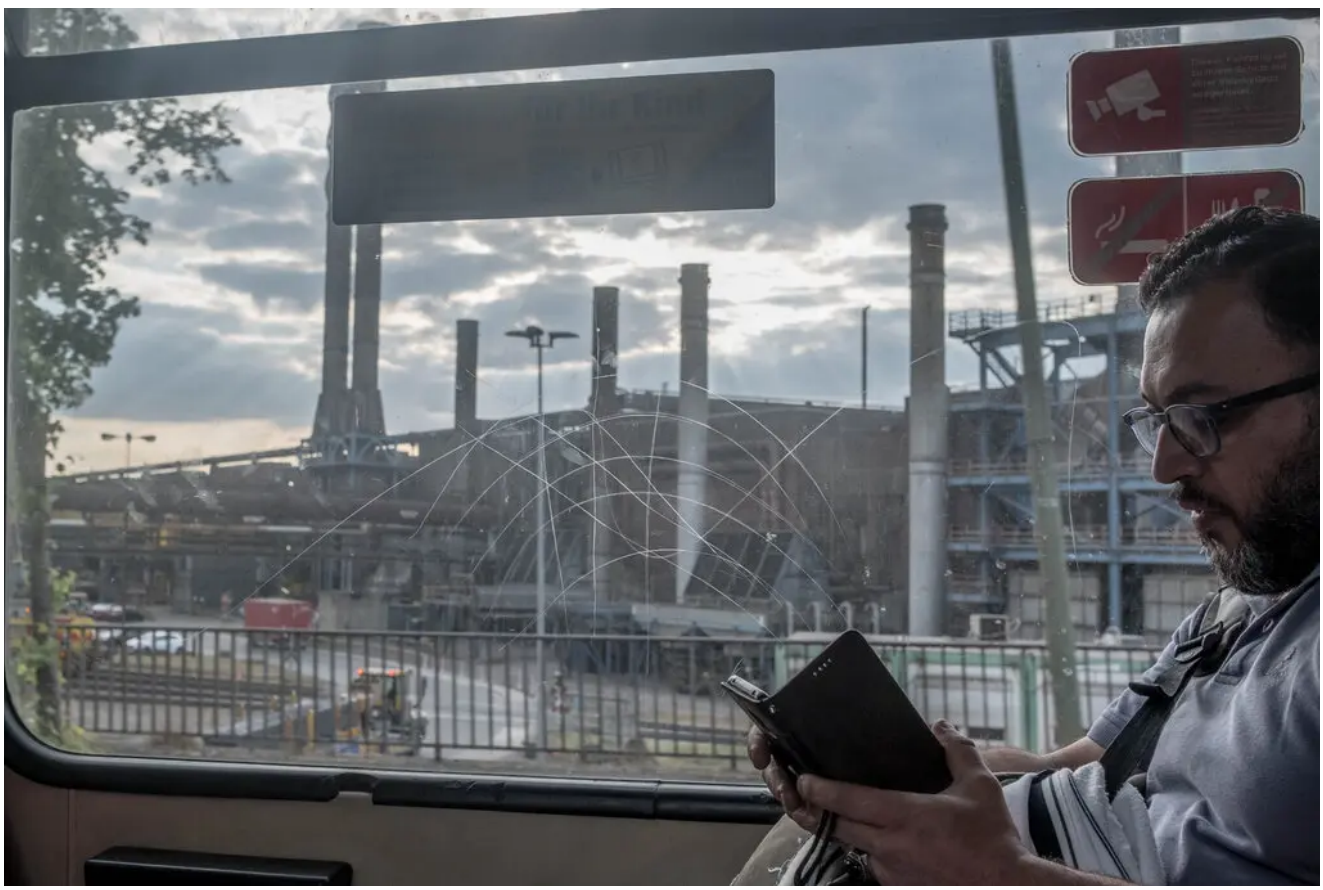
“In Western Germany, they offer more subtle complaints about the economic situation,” said Conrad Ziller, a political scientist at the University of Duisburg-Essen. “They really use specifically targeted advertisements for postindustrial decline.”

The strategy has had some success. The local party’s emphasis on economic frustrations clicked with the people Mr. Imamura met with in the neighborhood of Neumühl, where the AfD won 36.4 percent of the vote in February’s national election.

“German politicians have always found a way to talk around everything, and the AfD is speaking straight ahead,” said Clive Fleming, who moved as a child from England to Duisburg in 1978, and now owns a cleaning service.

For well over a century, Duisburg was a thriving city built on heavy industries like metals, chemicals and coal mining. It is home to Thyssenkrupp, Germany’s largest steel producer.

It was also the heartland of the left-leaning Social Democratic Party, which once dominated local and federal elections here. Even in the mid-2000s, the Social Democrats could count on 60 percent of the vote in northern Duisburg.



Duisburg remains home to Thyssenkrupp, Germany's largest steel maker. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

But deindustrialization has put Duisburg into a slow, painful decline. Today, a city that practically guaranteed high-paying jobs a generation ago has an unemployment rate of 13.4 percent, versus 3.5 percent for Germany overall.

Similar stories can be told about similar cities in Western Germany, like Essen and Gelsenkirchen, where the AfD has likewise surged in recent years.

Dr. Ziller, the political scientist, said industrial decline occurred as the Social Democrats embraced issues like climate change and liberal immigration laws, stances that failed to resonate with their working-class base.

"The S.P.D. became too left on a social-cultural dimension, in terms of immigration, integration, climate change, gender rights and minority rights," he said, referring to the party by its German initials. "People who are working-class are not interested in these topics."

In February's elections, the Social Democrats won just 21.3 percent of the vote in Neumühl, a drop of almost 10 points from 2021.

Mahmut Özdemir, the Social Democrat who represents northern Duisburg in the federal Parliament, declined a request to comment.

A basketball game in Duisburg's central square. A generation ago, the city practically guaranteed high-paying jobs; now, its unemployment rate is 13.4 percent. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

The AfD has also taken advantage of a split within Duisburg's immigrant population. Many of its Turkish residents are second or third generation. Their families arrived during the city's postwar heyday, working in the steel mills and integrating into German culture.

Now, many say they resent more recent migrants, who compete for a dwindling number of jobs. The AfD has courted such voters with videos and social-media posts in Turkish.

Despite the party's aggressively anti-immigrant stance, its efforts have paid off. A study by the German Center for Integration and Migration Research in March found that voters with a migration background were just as likely as ethnic Germans to support the AfD, at around 20 percent nationwide.

Standing in Marxloh, another immigrant neighborhood that went heavily for the AfD, Yasmin Kul, a city employee of Turkish descent, explained that crime and the influx of new migrants dominated local conversations.

"People are scared, and the AfD tries to reach these people," she said, adding that she herself had voted for the Left, a small

progressive party.

It is unlikely that the AfD will be able to capture many voters in better-off Western cities like Cologne or Düsseldorf, though it does not necessarily have to. The sheer size of Western Germany means that even a few more percentage points in support could mean hundreds of thousands more voters.

And it remains to be seen whether the AfD can continue to capitalize on missteps by the governing coalition and Germany's chronic economic problems; should the situation improve, voters might turn away.

Mr. Imamura, though, is not worried.

"Time is working for us," he said. "The circumstances, too."

A view of the industrial zone in Duisburg. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

Clay Risen is a Times reporter on the Obituaries desk.

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