

Leftist Upstart Threatens to Shake Up German Politics

Sahra Wagenknecht has announced a new party, which could become another populist force scrambling German politics.



By Christopher F. Schuetze

Christopher Schuetze reported from Berlin and Jena, in the eastern German state of Thuringia.

Germany's political landscape has been fracturing for a decade or more as traditional parties lose ground to populist elements, forcing the establishment of a three-way coalition government for the first time in the country's modern history.

A significant new fissure opened on Monday, when one of the country's most prominent leftist politicians, Sahra Wagenknecht, announced that she would form her own party, throwing up yet another wild card and challenging the political mainstream.

Few Germans do not know Ms. Wagenknecht. A gifted orator, she has made something of a brand for herself with her biting criticism of the government and over-the-top political rhetoric. She is a frequent presence on television debate shows and at signings for her new best-selling book; on weekly YouTube clips, which are watched hundreds of thousands of times; and on the floor of the parliament, where she is a member of the Left party, or Die Linke.

True to form, the association she founded with four others to build the party is named after herself: the Sahra Wagenknecht Coalition, or BSW in the German acronym, making it the first party in postwar Germany built entirely around one figurehead. Ms. Wagenknecht said the party would be a home for those who feel abandoned by mainstream politics, and stand for "reason and fairness."

"We decided to establish a new party because we are convinced that things cannot go on as they are at present," Ms. Wagenknecht told Berlin's press corps on Monday, adding: "Otherwise, in ten years' time, our country will be unrecognizable."

For decades after World War II, Germany was governed by just two major parties — the conservative Christian Democrats and the progressive Social Democrats. As that consensus breaks down, Ms. Wagenknecht's new populist party may present another hurdle to finding parliamentary consensus in what has long been a consensus-minded country.

The new party threatens not only to break up the far left, who are the political heirs to Communist East Germany, but to further erode the political mainstream. It may also compete for the disaffected voters who have flocked to the country's leading populist party on the far right, the Alternative for Germany, or AfD, which is now polling at 22

percent support.



Ms. Wagenknecht argues that progressives are too focused on diet, personal pronouns and the perception of racism, and are not worried enough about poverty. Steffi Loos/Getty Images

A poll taken over the weekend by Bild found that 27 percent of voters would consider voting for Ms. Wagenknecht's party, even if little concrete information about her actual platform is available. In a country where more than one in five say they would vote for the far-right AfD, Ms. Wagenknecht's new party has the potential to act as a spoiler, effectively loosening the AfD's grip on protest voters.

Marcel Lewandowsky, a political scientist who studies populism at the Federal Armed Forces university in Hamburg, says the new party could attract voters who are on the political right when it comes to migration, but believe in the importance of the welfare state.

"The thinking is that there are AfD voters who on things like migration are very far to the right of the spectrum, but at the same time maybe fear for their own social status, and also have economic fears," he said. "There's no guarantee, but there is potential that it could work."

As long as Ms. Wagenknecht sticks to her vow not to collaborate with the far-right AfD, her party could help buffer a takeover from the right, especially in the East, where Ms. Wagenknecht has her roots and is especially popular.

Ms. Wagenknecht is one of the very few federal politicians still active who started their political career in the former East Germany. Months before the fall of the Berlin Wall, she joined the Communist Party.

She made her name after reunification in the party's successor, which is now called the Left, and was voted into the European Parliament in 2004 and Germany's national parliament in 2009. Since then she has held almost every post in the Left party, including acting as head of its parliamentary group.

Ms. Wagenknecht loves to attack what she calls the "lifestyle left." She argues that progressives are too focused on diet, pronouns, and the perception of racism, and are not worried enough about poverty and an ever-growing gap between rich and poor.

She says immigration by people who do not have a chance for asylum has gotten out of control. "It definitely has to be stopped because it is completely overwhelming our country," she said on Monday.

Though details are still scant, Ms. Wagenknecht and her allies have outlined four major planks for the party platform. Perhaps surprisingly for a left-wing politician, the economy is the first and most important.



Ms. Wagenknecht announcing the formation of the new party on Monday. John MacDougall/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“If the economy goes under, you don’t even have to worry about pensions and wages and social benefits,” Ms. Wagenknecht said during an interview in her office last month. “All those things will go under too.”

During the interview, Ms. Wagenknecht was especially critical of the environmentalist Green party, part of the governing coalition, for focusing on things like rules governing the heating of public buildings.

“People think this government is haphazard, shortsighted, plain, incompetent and ideologically driven,” she said, adding, “And that — in fact — is the case.”

She has long criticized Germany’s support for Ukraine, especially the 7.4 billion euros worth of weaponry Germany has sent to help in its defense. On Monday, she proposed buying Russian energy directly from Russia again, and decried the billions spent trying to replace Russian gas.

It’s a message that could play well among voters for the AfD, who tend to be less

supportive of Ukraine than others.

Manfred Güllner, whose polling firm, the Forsa Institute, conducted a poll gauging Ms. Wagenknecht's viability as a political brand, says the new party has as much a chance of attracting voters from traditional parties as it does of attracting those who vote on the right.

Noting that the far right was at a high point after successes in state elections in Bavaria and Hesse earlier this month, he said: "All those who have migrated to the AfD, they see now that the AfD is successful — why should they suddenly vote for the Wagenknecht party?"

After hinting at the move for months, Ms. Wagenknecht said on Monday that she would form the party. Nine other parliamentarians joined her in leaving the Left. It could represent a death blow to her old party, which will lose not only its most recognizable member, but also its status as a parliamentary group, which is linked to funding and provides hundreds of jobs.

The timing of Ms. Wagenknecht's announcement will allow her and her team to field candidates for the European Parliament's election in June, where no minimum hurdle is required to win seats. And if that goes well, they could then field candidates for state elections taking place in three eastern Germany states in the second half of 2024.

"Now she will actually have to give concrete answers instead of just criticizing the woke left-wing lifestyle," said Frank Decker, a political scientist at the University of Bonn, who has studied the AfD.

At a recent book signing in her native city of Jena, in the eastern state of Thuringia, Ms. Wagenknecht was treated like a celebrity by the roughly 1,000 people who gathered to watch her read from her best-selling book, "Die Selbstgerechten" or "The Self-Righteous."

Many in the audience were disappointed in mainstream politics, they said afterward. Thomas Hultsch, 52, had brought his two daughters to the reading. Mr. Hultsch said that while he would never vote for the AfD, he does not like the traditional parties either.

"I would give her a chance," he said.

Christopher F. Schuetze covers German news, society and occasionally arts from the Berlin bureau. Before moving to Germany, he lived in the Netherlands, where he covered everything from tulips to sea-level rise.