



The Far-Right Foundation

The Desiderius-Erasmus-Stiftung's Affiliation with the AfD

By Emily Hruban

Just a few years ago, most Germans could not have imagined that members of a far-right party would enter the Bundestag. But in 2017, after the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) took home 12.6 percent of the vote in the federal elections, over 90 members of the party moved into offices in Berlin. Longtime Bundestag staffers joked that they would give their new neighbors wrong directions if they asked in the hall, or perhaps just ignore them completely. No one was willing to work with them.

Months later, the AfD's reception in Berlin remains icy, but the party has become a regular fixture in the opposition in national and state governments. The question looms: will the AfD be a short-lived reaction to migration anxieties or a permanent fixture in German politics?

The Foundation

The AfD has recently made some moves that suggest that the party is seeking more long-term legitimacy and acceptance. On June 30th, after fierce internal debates, the party voted to officially affiliate themselves with the Desiderius-Erasmus-Stiftung, a foundation that was originally established in 2015 by AfD leadership. Although the move was overlooked by much of the foreign press, the decision is quite significant.

Germany has a tradition of taxpayer-funded political foundations, which carry out work that connects to the values and interests of the party. The political foundations promote civic education, provide thousands of scholarships, conduct research and organize conferences. The impact of the political foundations can be significant in many realms, from school classrooms to government offices.

Fitting In

At first blush, the Erasmus Stiftung seems not unlike the other political foundations in Germany. Its website features a stock photo of the glass dome of the Reichstag along with generic information about conferences and educational programs.

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The mission statement, however, states that the foundation aims to create “clarity and transparency: Power, says Hannah Arendt, becomes dangerous exactly where the public ends.” The group’s evocation of Arendt seems a strange choice. The thinker fled Nazi Germany, authored *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and was one of the most powerful critics of populism and extremism of the 20th century. Yet by including Arendt in the mission statement, the foundation appears to reject the notion that they are the type of right-wing populists that Arendt would have criticized. They refuse to be written off as extremists.

Although the foundation’s website remains vague about the specifics of its priorities, its Eurosceptic rhetoric mirrors that of the party. It is likely that the foundation will also tackle other key AfD priorities like immigration.

Funding

Significant amounts of money are at stake. The Erasmus Stiftung is not eligible for state funding yet, but if the AfD is able to remain in the Bundestag in 2021, the foundation could receive 70 million euros of taxpayer money per year.¹

The AfD has been vocal in criticizing their opponents for taking taxpayer dollars, particularly connected to foundations. However, they now appear poised to take those funds after the 2021 election.

Perhaps they believe that the only way to beat the system is to take it down from within. Or perhaps they see an opportunity to expand their programs and spread their message. State funding would give them a more powerful voice across the country and potentially around the world. Their agenda could impact school curricula and institutes of higher education, which many find concerning given the party’s anti-immigrant and nationalist rhetoric. The funding also could help legitimize the party.

Long-term Legitimacy?

The AfD will likely remain an opposition party in the immediate future, even at the state level. However, as the party gains support in states like Sachsen-Anhalt, where the AfD won 22 of the state parliament’s 87 seats, they will become increasingly hard to freeze out entirely. The party’s move to affiliate themselves with the Erasmus Stiftung signals that they expect to be long-term players in Germany’s political landscape. In 2021, voters will have the chance to decide whether they actually will be.

Endnotes:

1 http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/warum-die-afd-die-erasmus-stiftung-gegruendet-hat-15668559.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_0