

How a Sleepy German Suburb Explains Europe's Rising Far-Right Movements

By [AMANDA TAUB](#) MARCH 20, 2017



A mural of the church in Buch, Germany, this month. Alternative for Germany, a far-right populist party, won more than 22 percent of the vote in the 2016 local election in the town. Gordon Welters for The New York Times

BUCH, Germany — Buch, a small community on the outskirts of Berlin, seems at first glance to be the kind of place Goldilocks would declare “just right.” It is not too rich or too poor, not too expensive or too scruffy, not too close to the crowded city center but not so far that its tree-lined streets of tidy apartments are beyond a daily commute.

It is probably not the sort of place people picture when they think about the

tide of far-right populism overwhelming Europe. But beneath the surface, this cozy, safe neighborhood is starkly different from the depressed postindustrial zones often portrayed as the populist wellspring, and is emblematic of the forces threatening to upend Western politics as we know it.

In this apparent stronghold of ordinariness, the Alternative for Germany, a far-right populist party, won more than 22 percent of the vote in the 2016 local election — more than any other party.

I went to Buch to better understand how far-right populism has taken root across much of Europe. I found signs of subtle forces that social scientists have long theorized could be driving the populist surge rising across Western societies.



The center of Buch. Beneath the surface, this cozy, safe community on the outskirts of Berlin is starkly different from the depressed postindustrial zones often portrayed as the populist wellspring. Gordon Welters for The New York Times

‘You Should Be Careful’

The streets were blanketed with several inches of snow the day I visited in January, lending a picturesque quality to the brown-brick shopping area in Buch’s center. A fast-food restaurant glowed invitingly, its sign advertising hamburgers and salad as well as falafels and doner kebabs.

Mahmoud Ceylan, whose cousin owns the restaurant, stood behind the counter. Right-wing parties sometimes accuse Turkish immigrants like him of being unable to assimilate in German society. Asked whether he’d experienced any harassment, he snorted.

It happened all the time, he said. People would say things to him on the train and on the street.

“People look at you and they don’t know you’ve been here almost 25 years,” he said. “They don’t know you work.”

But asked about the Alternative for Germany, he shrugged. Though the party’s rise had shocked much of Europe, to Mr. Mahmoud it was the [Germany](#) he already knew.

As we spoke, a middle-aged customer who had been chatting volubly at the counter, Jakob Raff, grew quiet. He leaned over to offer a warning: “There are right-wingers here,” he said. “You should be careful asking such questions.”



A sidewalk at a shopping area in Buch. There are few migrants in the town, and it has remained overwhelmingly white. Gordon Welters for The New York Times

The Halo Effect

Buch, on the surface, appears to be an unlikely source of anti-immigrant anger.

For one: There are few migrants here. While many nearby parts of Berlin are tremendously diverse, filled with refugees and other immigrants from all over the world, Buch has remained overwhelmingly white, despite the presence of a small refugee center in the middle of town.

Social scientists call this the “halo effect”: a phenomenon, repeated across Europe, in which people are most likely to vote for far-right politicians if they live close to diverse areas, but not actually within them.

Jens Rydgren and Patrick Ruth, sociologists at the University of Stockholm,

wrote in [2011](#) that people in such communities may be close enough to immigrants to feel they are under threat, but still too far to have the kinds of regular, friendly interactions that would dispel their fears.

[Eric Kaufmann](#), a political scientist at Birkbeck College in London, has found that rising diversity can push the “halo” outward. East London was a center of far-right activity in the 1970s, but as neighborhoods there became more diverse, far-right support fell and rose in the whiter suburbs just beyond them.



Buch, too, seems to fit that pattern. Despite the arrival of some refugees, there are so few Muslims that the supermarket does not even stock halal meats. But it lies in a district that borders Wedding, one of the most diverse parts of Berlin.

Buch’s white residents, according to this theory, are fearful not because their lives or jobs have been upended by migration, but because they perceive this as happening in areas like Wedding and worry they could be next.

A Negative Identity

Across town, down a road lined with communist-era apartment blocks, I arrived at the church building where Cornelia Reuter and her husband, Hagen Kühne, live and work as pastors.

Ms. Reuter said some of her parishioners were preoccupied with fears that more refugees would be sent to Buch.

She and her husband traced this fear, in part, to a deeper problem: Many within their community, they said, long for a clear sense of identity and belonging, but struggle to find one.

After [World War II](#), celebrating or even defining German identity became taboo, often seen as a step toward the nationalism that allowed the rise of the Nazis. The attitude shifted somewhat with the 2006 World Cup, where the German hosts unabashedly flew their flag and celebrated national pride.

But there is still enough of a void that leaves people with an “inner emptiness,” Ms. Reuter said. This gap in self-definition has left them no way to express their identity except by what they are not — what is sometimes termed a “negative identity.”

“You can say ‘I’m not a Muslim,’ but most people can’t say ‘I am a Christian,’” or otherwise articulate a positive identity, she explained. “There is an emptiness. And I think that’s a societywide thing. It’s not just one group. It’s a very wide problem.”

Taking Control

Germany’s identity taboo is not new. But recent events may have made it suddenly feel more painful.

Immo Fritsche, a political scientist at the University of Leipzig, has found that when people feel they have lost control, they seek a strong identity that will

make them feel part of a powerful group.

Identifying with something powerful and capable of bringing about change, like a strong nation, becomes very attractive, he said.

Ms. Reuter said that many people in Buch did feel a sense of lost control. The refugee crisis was perceived as a sign that Germany's borders had become lawless. And the presence of the local refugee center, though home to just a few hundred people, brought a sense of heightened stakes.

Many of her elderly parishioners, she said, had told her that they couldn't believe what young people today had to contend with. "And these are people who grew up during World War II! Who were bombed, and experienced the war!"

But they felt lucky to have experienced a kind of agency and identity that young people today were denied, she said.

"At least at that time I could do something," she recounted them saying to her. "At least at that point I was a part of it."

That has left an opening for Alternative for Germany, which promises to restore German patriotism. Far-right politicians like the party's [Björn Höcke](#), Ms. Reuter said, know how to exploit that identity taboo. "People like Höcke are pushing against this thing," she said. "He knows to put his words right there."

In an interview, Mr. Höcke told me he believed identity was "the question" for Germany today.

Minutes later, he [told](#) a crowd of hundreds of cheering supporters that Germans were "the only people in the world to plant a monument of shame in the heart of its capital," referring to Berlin's memorial to Jews murdered in the Holocaust.

“Germany needs a positive relationship with our identity,” he told me, “because at the foundation of being able to move forward is identity. The foundation of our unity is identity.”



A sticker welcoming refugees, top, and a neo-Nazi sticker in German reading “the boat is full,” on a sign in Buch. Gordon Welters for The New York Times

Comfort in Contact

As you approach the refugee center in Buch, signs of anti-immigrant hostility grow more obvious. Alternative for Germany placards, torn and strewn on the street, show grinning, swarthy men clutching handfuls of euros.

So does the air of menace. One of the refugee center’s buildings is scarred with scorch marks from a recent arson attack.

Juliane Willuhn, the center’s director, said the crime remained unsolved. No one was injured in the blaze, but the attack seemed designed to threaten:

Investigators concluded the fire was set intentionally, in a room containing baby strollers. Nothing was left of them except ashes and a few charred wheels.

And yet several Buch residents who lived near the center, in interviews, expressed optimism about their refugee neighbors. They hinted at the flip side of theories like the halo effect: that contact with people who are different eases the fears that can drive populist backlashes.

Martin Orthman was walking his dog, Sunny, in the park near the refugee center. Mr. Orthman said that he had developed a positive view of refugees after becoming a security guard in a refugee center in a neighboring town.

Across the street, Elena Salow, who lives a few blocks over from the refugee center, was walking home with her young daughter. She said she didn't have any "direct feelings" about the asylum center or Alternative for Germany, but that she had had good experiences with the refugees.

"Sometimes we meet on the playground and the children play together," Ms. Salow said.

These interviews pointed toward something called intergroup contact theory. When people have direct contact with members of a particular ethnic or national group, studies find, they tend to become more tolerant of the group as a whole.

This suggests that regular contact with immigrants reduces support for right-wing populist parties by removing the sense of fear that fuels them.

If true, that hints that Alternative for Germany's hold in Buch might be weaker than their recent electoral successes would imply. But that kind of contact is slow to take effect, while the party has already enjoyed a meteoric rise.

Far-right support may eventually diminish. But in the meantime it will leave

Germany's migrants, and European politics, under tremendous stress.