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German voters move further to the right

Hans Pfeifer
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Following electoral setbacks in two state elections, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and his center-left alliance are under pressure. They could be forced to adopt tougher policies on asylum and migration.



The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party is gaining ground in all parts of the country

Image: Helmut Fricko/picture alliance

The parties of Chancellor [Olaf Scholz](#)'s three-party governing coalition recorded losses in Sunday's elections in the western German states of [Bavaria](#) and [Hesse](#). The results, the worst for them in postwar history, were particularly disappointing for Scholz and his center-left [Social Democrats \(SPD\)](#). In Bavaria, the neoliberal [Free Democrats \(FDP\)](#) party, the smallest in Scholz's coalition, did not even clear the 5% hurdle for representation in the state parliament.

But the right-wing extremist [Alternative for Germany \(AfD\)](#) triumphed. The party, which has been classified as an anti-constitutional suspect by Germany's intelligence service, achieved [record results in both state elections](#): In Bavaria, they became the third-strongest political force with a 14.6% share of the vote, and in Hesse, they even came in as the second strongest at 18.4%.



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German conservatives win in two state elections

As the incumbents from the center-right — the [Christian Democrats \(CDU\)](#) in Hesse and the [Christian Social Union \(CSU\)](#) in Bavaria — won in both states, there will be no immediate impact on the political balance of power in the country. "In Germany, centrist parties continue to dominate the political discourse," political scientist Karl-Rudolf Korte told German public broadcaster ZDF. "However, we see that there is a shift to the right not only in public discourse but now also in elections," he said.

In its election campaign, the AfD focused primarily on the issues of asylum and migration. The party has called for the deportation of millions of rejected asylum seekers from Germany and other European states. For years, it has deliberately stoked fear of Muslims and immigrants — especially from Africa and the Middle East. Despite Germany's massive labor shortage and the need to attract people to fill jobs, the party wants to limit immigration radically. It is a stance that seems to be resonating with a number of German voters: according to recent figures from the polling institute Infratest dimap, the AfD was able to attract non-voters and also supporters from all other political parties. Among young voters, it has even become the second-strongest force.

After the announcement of Sunday's election results, AfD co-chair [Alice Weidel](#) took up the topic of migration in a press conference. She claimed that Germany was allowing people from Iraq, Syria and other countries into the country "unchecked," without clarifying what she meant. "There must be an immediate stop to the immigration of people from these states," she demanded. However, Weidel failed to mention that the overwhelming majority of people from Syria who requested asylum in Germany were granted it, and therefore reside in Germany with full legal status.



The issue of migration has dominated public debate in Germany for months. Calls to deport more people whose applications for asylum have been rejected are becoming louder. At the same time, the number of asylum seekers has risen. Over 250,000 asylum applications were filed in Germany between January and the end of September — more than the previous year's total, according to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, which said that the vast majority of asylum seekers had a legal right to protection and thus a right to stay.

Meanwhile, there are cross-party calls in favor of limiting the numbers of new arrivals of people from abroad, although it is not clear exactly how or with which mechanisms this would be possible.

The center-right CDU/CSU has also picked up on the issues of asylum and migration. On the day after the elections in Bavaria and Hesse, they called on Scholz to act on migration policy. "We can see, after all, that things are tilted in Germany," CDU Secretary-General Carsten Linnemann said on public broadcaster ARD, referring to the high numbers of refugees. Schools and daycare centers do not have enough staff to care for children, he said, adding that the burden on the healthcare system was also evident. The opposition CDU has offered to cooperate with the federal government to find solutions for these systemic and structural problems.



And the pressure is likely to result in government action. Social Democrat co-chair Saskia Esken has promised that decisions will be made quickly: "On migration policy, Chancellor Olaf Scholz has reached out to the federal states, municipalities and the CDU/CSU for cooperation," she said after her party's executive committee meeting on Monday.

Numerous NGOs and associations have warned against undermining Germany's asylum law. An alliance of 270 scientists recently called for a human rights pact for refugee policy, pointing to the historical context for the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees: "During the Second World War, Nazi violence led to the persecution, expulsion and murder of millions of people. Attempts to reach an agreement in the international community to accept Jewish and other refugees failed: in the face of death, many faced

closed doors," they said in a declaration. Instead of stoking fears of immigrants and refugees, they said, policymakers should engage in a "fact-based, empirical, and constructive" debate.

This article was originally written in German.

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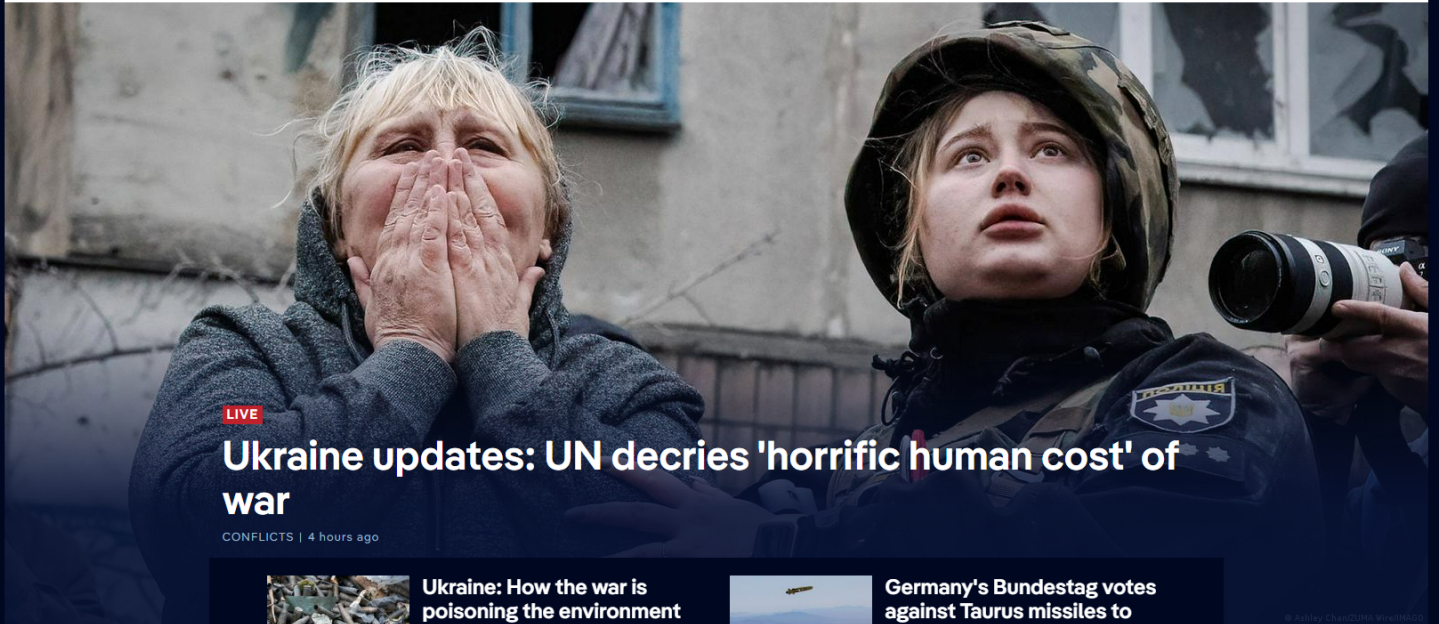
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