

Title of Podcast: The Rest is Politics

Episode: Trump's Far-Right Allies in Germany: Is History Repeating Itself?

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Toplines:

- According to Gerald Knaus, **Western Europe is threatened by parties, like the AfD**, openly seeking to undo the whole post-war liberal order.
- The AfD is a far-right party, which is growing in popularity across Germany.
- Knaus believes that the **AfD's rise is not accidental but ideological**, rooted in strategically told stories that liberals have failed to counter.
- Far-right leaders are openly suggesting mass expulsions, echoing dangerous rhetoric from the past.
- The **far-right winning elections is now more realistic than ever**.
- Knaus says that Putin wants 10 million people to come to Europe to overwhelm our systems: He argues that Putin wants to destroy the infrastructure because he knows that refugee crises have political benefits for his allies.
- Knaus warns against cultural pessimism: He argues that we do not need to be optimistic, but we cannot give in to the idea that the far right will win by default.

Hosts and Guests:

- **Rory Stewart**, Host
- **Alastair Campbell**, Host
- **Gerald Knaus**, Chairman and Co-Founder of European Stability Institute

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Key Points:

Rory: *Who are the AfD, where do they come from, and why should we be interested?*

Gerald:

- This is **the most dangerous moment for the Western European** order, not only due to threats from Putin, but also because of the AfD.
- Identitarian movement in France started in 2012, promising to expel Muslims from Europe.
- In 2013, Bjorn Hocke and others started a small institute in Saxony-Anhalt. Through seminars and workshops, they figured out how their ideas could become a platform for a national party and became the AfD.
- Hocke led the AfD to winning the elections last year in the state of Thuringia

- The party is now favoured by 39% in Saxony-Anhalt, which will have an election next year, leading polls in each of East Germany's five states, and in some national polls, are head-to-head or slightly ahead of the Christian Democrats in number one.

Alastair: *On a scale of Trump, Maloney, Orban, Le Pen, and Farage, where is the AfD?*

Gerald:

- Closest to Trump.
- Hocke's election campaigns last year urged the expulsion of 1.4 million people, meaning **anyone with illegal status, and even citizens who have not integrated.**
- Members of the AfD have proposed an institute that measures how many people are attuned to the national culture.
- Identitarians have calculated that Germany is home to 400,000 people of Afghan origin, including German citizens, and believe there should only be a few thousand, so the others must be expelled.
- This is reminiscent of the former Yugoslavia, urging peaceful separation of groups, then committing ethnic cleansing.
- People who vote for the AfD are not all in favour of ethnic cleansing, just like not all the Nazis were in favour of concentration camps. *But* they are supporting a party that openly talks about making millions of people so uncomfortable that they leave or are expelled.
- Hocke believes:
 - This 'new' Germany's closest ally should be Putin.
 - Germany should leave the EU.
 - For Europe to live, the EU must die.
 - Human rights treaties should not exist.
 - Germany should be a threat to its neighbours.

Rory: *Recently, Tommy Robinson held a demonstration of 130,000 people in Trafalgar Square, which brought in other voices, including Elon Musk. What is the international coalition around this?*

Gerald:

- Because Germany has the largest economy, military, and population in Europe, it is the pillar of the post-1949 European order.
- Russia and MAGA both know this, so they support parties in Germany that will disrupt this order.

Rory: *What is the connection between Orban, MAGA, the AfD, Tommy Robinson, etc.?*

Gerald:

- They **take the battle of ideas seriously**, and the liberals do not. **The liberals have not been telling good stories for the last 10 years.**
- Orban, despite radical speeches, is not Putin *because* he knows Hungary is dependent on funds from the EU.
- Putin got 4.5 million Ukrainians to flee to the EU. He *wants* 10 million to come to overwhelm our systems, because he knows refugee crises have political benefits for his allies.

- **The far-right winning elections is now more realistic than ever.**

Alastair: *How realistic is it that Nigel Farage will win the next UK election?*

Gerald:

- Quotes Jean Monet: 'I'm not an optimist, but I'm determined.'
- Our leaders do not have to be optimistic, but must not give in to cultural pessimism that sees the far right winning by default. We must be determined, while recognizing the threat.
- If Britain leaves the Council of Europe, it will collapse.
- Faced with threats to NATO from the U.S., European members must mobilize their own abilities to deter Russia from attacking the Baltic states.
- The European Integration Project is more popular now than 25 years ago, but this is passive. If the AfD and other anti-EU parties win, they can destroy it since the EU relies on governments acting voluntarily, with no enforcement mechanisms.
- **If the EU and NATO collapse, there is nothing in human nature that says Europeans will not fall back to where they were in the past.**
- We need to defend the idea that what Churchill and others created *worked* for a reason.

Rory: *Is Trump actually dangerous?*

Gerald:

- My friend was born in Austria in 1929. There was a very well-written constitution, a president, and a parliament, and yet in 1933, the democracy disappeared because the far-right, which had just one seat, managed to get Parliament closed off. By decrees, they abolished rights one after the other. There was no fighting until February 1934, but by that time, **democracy was lost.**

Rory: *And you think that could happen in the United States?*

Gerald:

- **It can happen anywhere.**
- We should believe what people say.
 - We should have taken Putin seriously years ago, as he talked about many of the things he later did.
 - We should take Trump seriously. He talks about the opposition being illegitimate, has attacked courts, and rules by decree. His intentions are clear.
- Trump is strategically taking over the military, firing generals and lawyers, and giving ICE more power. Trump blocking off Congress is not unrealistic.
- After my friend was forced to flee when Nazis attacked Austria, he researched how a democracy like Austria could succumb to authoritarianism, then Nazi totalitarianism. The answer: ideas developed in the decades before, and cultural pessimism.
- We have seen this all in the U.S.

Rory: *Charlie Kirk was just assassinated. One of Trump's staff says there is an existential threat posed by 'radical leftists and Islamist terrorists', which is 'inherent to the Democratic Party.' Is this part of the issue you are talking about?*

Gerald:

- Yes.
- We are witnessing a discrediting of the ideas of a loyal opposition. Previous party leaders accepted that, despite disagreements, there was a common framework, the constitution. Election results were accepted.
- Most assassinations are committed by far-right extremists. Blaming Democrats shows the administration cannot be trusted.
- **Democracy cannot exist if we lose respect for facts.**

Rory: *JD Vance says he wants European countries to rearm and spend 5% of their GDP on defence, and, simultaneously, supports far-right nationalists in these countries. This seems dangerous...*

Gerald:

- If you aim to destroy liberalism, the idea that Germany is part of a community of 27, submits laws to a European court, has European conventions on Human Rights, and has something above the absolute sovereignty of nation states, makes the EU a target.
- To destroy the EU, thinkers like Curtis Yarvin say you must help parties in Germany who promise to do this.

Rory: *European response to Gaza. You talk a lot about the rules-based international order...*

Gerald:

- If we believe in international law, we should not budge in our support for institutions like the International Criminal Court. It is shocking how few European governments are defending the principle.
- When the European Convention on Human Rights was signed, France and Britain did not ratify it for years because they were fighting nasty colonial wars.
- **Human rights-compliant actions are not just naive idealism. They are the basis for better policy.** The world in which we are moving is not a world I want my daughter, children, and grandchildren to grow up in.

Gerald is thanked and leaves.

Rory (to Alastair): *In Britain, are we paying enough attention to what is happening in Europe?*

Alastair: Partially no, partially yes:

- We have allowed this debate to get ahead of the facts. The British public thinks that 50% of immigrants arrive on small boats, but less than 4% do. Fact is being drowned out.
- The debate has slipped away - People just want it all dealt with and have a complete misunderstanding of the nature of the debate and policy choices.

Rory: There is also British exceptionalism and complacency—We like to tell ourselves that during the Second World War, other countries became fascist, but we did not. We did not study European politics much. As we see fascism in Britain, we cling to the idea that it has nothing to do with us.

Alastair: There is a sense that this is only happening to Britain, while far bigger asylum seeker crises have hit other parts of Europe, like Greece. We must focus on what is happening in the rest of the world.

Rory: ...And begin thinking more imaginatively about working with Europe on defence, security and immigration.