



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# Could the rapprochement with the far-right be too costly for Germany's conservatives?

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Just three weeks before the federal parliamentary elections, the German conservatives have taken a risky step by removing the "firewall" to the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

By allowing the AfD to pass non-binding restrictive measures against migrants in the Bundestag, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), have broken the decades-long consensus of the political mainstream that the far-right should not come to power.

The outgoing German chancellor and leader of the Social Democrats, Olaf Scholz, is one of those who **accuse** the conservatives of destroying the historical consensus to prevent history from repeating itself and extremists from coming to power.

The firewall has fallen, said Mr Scholz on the occasion of the joint vote by the mainstream conservatives and the AfD in the Bundestag last Wednesday. Alice Weidel, the AfD's candidate for chancellor, said the same thing, but in a winning tone.

The considerable political divide with the far-right was bridged, but just two days later, the Bundestag **rejected** the first motion involving both the centre and far-right.

However, the scar on the political face of the candidates for the formation of the next conservative German government and its leader, Friedrich Merz, will remain very visible until the end of the election campaign.

## Conscious risk

Mr Merz, who, as CDU leader, was already considered a future chancellor, deliberately took the risk of working with the AfD. When he launched an initiative in favour of more restrictive regulations against migrants, he said that he was going in that direction "regardless of who agrees to them."

"I don't look to the right or the left. When it comes to these matters, I only look straight

ahead," **said** the leader of the conservatives on the eve of the parliamentary episode that brought an unprecedented storm to German political life.

Merz's calculation, in which he clearly called for support for the AfD (and thus for removing the "firewall"), was guided by the expectation that migration restrictions would be a strong reaction to the horrific **murder** of two people, including a child, in a peaceful Bavarian town, Aschaffenburg, on 22 January, by an Afghan immigrant.

## The leadership of the conservative coalition overreached themselves by formally aligning with the AfD on migration policy

This was a decidedly populist move by the CDU, which is not typical of a traditional and centrist party. What's more, the CDU did not need to make a strong shift before the elections, as it is leading convincingly in the **polls** with a rating of around 30%.

However, the leadership of the conservative coalition overreached themselves by formally aligning with the AfD on migration policy. What could their expectations have been?

## Migrants have become the number 1 election issue

They seem to have succeeded in putting migrants at the top of the list of election campaign topics, thereby somewhat displacing the economic issues that caused the previous government of Social Democrats, Greens, and Liberals to fail.

It is clear that the Conservatives expected that they would be able to make decisive progress at the end of the campaign ahead of the 23 February elections if they pushed through their policy of toughening attitudes towards migrants.

The decisive factor was a series of murderous attacks perpetrated by migrants, of which the tragedy in Bavaria was only the latest in a series and one of the most serious.

### Merz's emphasis on the migration issue had the potential to provide a decisive boost in support at the end of the election campaign

From this point of view, Merz's emphasis on the migration issue was fully justified, i.e., it had the potential to provide a decisive boost in support at the end of the election campaign. Simultaneously, this would have aligned the CDU and CSU with the majority of the moderate European right, a group that supports stricter migration regulations.

Friedrich Merz also sees such a course as an opportunity to prove to his voters and sympathisers that he is a man of discontinuity with the policies of his predecessor, Angela Merkel, particularly with regard to her liberal migrant policy, which many Germans now consider wrong.

### Is there still time for a correction?

However, the conservatives may be paying a very high price for this risky strategy.

Last Friday's vote showed that several CDU MPs also contributed to the narrow majority that rejected the package of migration regulations, even though it was proposed by their party.

By setting an important political precedent, the CDU, whether consciously or unconsciously, has presented Germans with a new dilemma that they will have to resolve very quickly in the elections in three weeks' time.



*The conservatives are under the combined heavy fire of opponents from different political directions - Olaf Scholz*

The dilemma lies in deciding whether to prioritise tightening regulations regarding migrants, including the establishment of border controls, for which the CDU has the support of two-thirds of society over another equally important priority, namely the historic consensus to prevent extremist parties from coming to power.

The conservatives quickly suffered a setback for their rapprochement with the AfD when their proposal for tougher measures against migrants was rejected in the Bundestag last Friday. They now have very little time to correct their policy and mitigate the risk of further damage.

Although Mr Merz tried to soften the negative impact of his parliamentary initiative right at the start, saying he "regretted" that the passage of his initiative was only possible with the support of the AfD, he is already under the combined heavy fire of opponents from different political directions.

An even greater challenge for him over the next three weeks will be to convince everyone, including his conservative supporters, that there will be no room for the far-right AfD in the future government he would form.

Friedrich Merz stated last June that "the CDU would be selling its soul if it were to cooperate with a right-wing extremist party in Germany." After the support he received from the AfD in the Bundestag this week, his words have lost their firmness.