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GEORGE WILL: GERMANY'S OPPOSITION PARTY

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By GEORGE WILL

ARMIN-PAULUS Hampel, a former journalist and commentator who now is a member of the Bundestag, is ebullient, affable, opinionated, voluble and excellent company at lunch. But because his party is Alternative for Germany, one wonders whether he is representative of it, and whether he is as congenial politically as he is socially.

AfD is a Rorschach test for observers of German politics, who see in it either a recrudescence of ominous national tendencies or a healthy response of the political market to unaddressed anxieties. It was founded in 2013, two years before Chancellor Angela Merkel impulsively decided to welcome almost a million asylum seekers, most from the Middle East. The nation was abruptly challenged to become a melting pot at a moment when there was increasing interest in recapturing a sense of Germanness.

Politics usually is grounded in grievances, and Hampel nurses AfDs originating complaint, which was that Germanys role under the EUs common currency has been to bail out slothful, spendthrift Greeks and other southern Europeans. In this, AfD resembles Americas tea party movement, which was a spontaneous combustion in response to TARP (the Troubled Asset Relief Program), the bailout of banks and of people with improvident mortgages.

AfD is strongest where resentments are deepest in what was, until 1990, East Germany. There, change has come fast and hard, and incomes are still significantly below those in the rest of Germany, which was spared immersion in socialism. AfD has populisms hostility to the disruptions and homogenization that accompany globalization. Hence AfD partakes of populisms failure to will the means for the ends it wills: Globalization is not optional for any developed nation, least of all Germany, which on a per capita basis exports roughly four times more than the United States and 10 times more than China.

Hampel, who sits on the Bundestags foreign relations committee, is, to say no more, understanding of Russias ongoing aggression against Ukraine, which he says has long been central to Russian identity, has many ethnic Russians, and so on. He suggests that Russias behavior in its sphere of influence is none of Germanys business. His views on this call it Germany first can be wrong without being disreputable. However, given what is known about Russian meddling in other nations domestic politics, it would be reassuring to know that AfD receives no Russian subventions. Three years ago, hackers working for Russia penetrated the Bundestags computer

network.

Edmund Burke, founding father of modern conservatism, said: To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. He meant that national patriotism sprouts from local soil, from the rich loam of civil societys communitarian institutions such as families, churches, labor unions, clubs, service organizations, etc. But as the European Union moves, more implacably than democratically, toward ever-deepening harmonization of national political practices and economic policies, populist movements recoil by embracing Europes nations themselves as the little platoons, the molecular subdivisions that focus affections.

The Economist magazine diagnoses many developed nations discontents as an outbreak of nostalgia, an orgy of reminiscence that serves as an anchor in a world being transformed and a source of reassurance and self-esteem. In Germany, however, nostalgia is, for reasons as painful as they are obvious, still problematic, even presumptively disreputable.

When an AfD election party concluded with participants singing the national anthem, many scolds considered this transgressive. It is, however, dangerous for a nation to detect danger in expressions of national pride, or in the search for a national identity beyond economic success. Suppress expressions of national pride and you risk reaping a curdled version of pride.

A premise of postwar German politics has been that there should be no party to the right of the Christian Democratic Union. There is now, and AfD is the largest opposition party in the Bundestag. Hampel considers AfD the natural successor to the CDU, which has governed Germany for 50 of the last 70 years. His measured judgment is that Germany can have an AfD chancellor in 2023. Then the party will be just 10 years old. However, Americas Republican Party was just 6 years old when it won the presidency. But in 1860 the American nation was coming apart in an irrepressible conflict, while stable, temperate Germany will not be unraveling four years from now.

Kaynak/Source: