

ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG

WEST AFRICA OFFICE

THE « PROBLEM » IN THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

WHAT MERZ COULD LEARN FROM SARKOZY



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German Chancellor Friedrich Merz is not Franz von Papen. That national-conservative politician who helped Adolf Hitler rise to the office of Reich Chancellor in 1933, under the mistaken belief that Hitler and his followers could be controlled. Von Papen handed over the first German Republic to the National Socialists and is counted among the most foolish conservatives in history. Merz, it seems, does not intend to help the AfD gain power. He knows that the AfD is the Union's main opponent, especially since the SPD has become a mere shadow of its former self.

The Berlin Republic is not Weimar. Much has already been written and said about the differences between the first German Republic and reunified Germany. Present-day Germany is politically significantly more stable.

In Weimar, people were accustomed to violence after the First World War and due to the ongoing clashes between communists, social democrats, conservatives and Nazis. Today, political violence still deters the majority of people - even though anger at system and a taste for destruction are on the rise.¹

The long-term expansion of social security systems and the fundamental liberalization (Habermas) since the 1970s have not only fundamentally transformed the German Republic but also stabilized it. Over the past thirty years, neoliberalism - with redistribution from the bottom to the top, the

devaluation of many careers through precarious employment, neglect of public infrastructure, and the lie of meritocratic advancement ("everyone is the architect of their own fortune") - has begun to erode this societal stability.

The cracks in the political structure are becoming visible. The rise of the AfD to become the most important political force in many parts of the country - especially where anger at the system is greatest - is, alongside the COVID protests, anti-migration demonstrations, and the increase in right-wing extremist violence, the clearest sign of growing tensions in German society.

1 Alemendinger/Nachtwey. Berlin 2025.

PERHAPS BERLIN IS WEIMAR, AFTER ALL?

There is, unfortunately, one parallel to the Weimar Republic: the political folly of conservatives.

Merz might well be warned: how can his tough stance and crackdowns on migrants - aimed at keeping voters from turning to the AfD - possibly succeed? Even the CDU-affiliated Konrad Adenauer Foundation recently warned against trying to copy or even surpass the AfD, ² as Merz repeatedly does when he constructs migrants as a homogenous group and presents them as a problem for Germany.

He did this again recently when speaking of a problem in the cityscape, referring to young migrants whom he blamed for young women no longer feeling safe on the streets.

Such statements - whether by Merz or other CDU/CSU politicians - have so far had no success. The CDU/CSU has not been able to win back AfD voters in recent elections and polls. Merz apparently hopes that more deportations and border controls will visibly change the cityscape and, consequently, increase support for his party.

A VISIT TO PRISON MIGHT HELP

Merz could ask his conservative party friend from France, Nicolas Sarkozy, about the prospects of this strategy - if Sarkozy were not currently in prison because the Libyan dictator Gaddafi financed his anti-migration election campaign in 2007.

Sarkozy was notable not only for his blunt statements against people with a migration background - whom he insulted as "scum" and claimed he would "clean" out of the suburbs with high-pressure hoses - but also for gradually tightening

² https://www.kas.de/de/einzeltitel/-/content/zwischen-abgrenzung-einbindung-und-tolerierung?utm_source=chatgpt.com

migration and citizenship laws. Sarkozy's migration policy largely failed if one ignores the harm to those affected, who suffered under the measures and harassment by security forces, and only considers the political intent of the conservative president, who was voted out after a single term.

Sarkozy's plan did not work. Migration to France did not slow under the hardline policies. On the contrary, it is likely that immigration slightly increased in the years following 2007. Migration is a complex system. The simplistic idea that merely reducing incentives would be enough is far too, well, simple. People's decisions to migrate are diverse.

Sarkozy also failed to curb support for the Rassemblement National. Over the past ten years, despite all attempts by French governments to tighten migration policies, the far right has risen to become the strongest political force.

In the 2022 presidential elections, nearly 13.3 million French voters supported Marine Le Pen in the decisive second round - the highest number

ever for a far-right candidate. Apparently, the normalization of their migration policies through conservative politicians such as Nicolas Sarkozy did not weaken them.

Sarkozy's hardline migration policies harmed societal cohesion and France's reputation - especially in its former African colonies. It is hardly far-fetched to link the widespread anti-French sentiment, particularly in North and West Africa, to both his harsh migration policies and the rise of nationalist right-wing forces in France.

Merz could therefore learn a lot from Sarkozy - certainly more than from von Papen.