

Germany's Die Linke on verge of split over sanctions on Russia

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Leftwing party's future in balance after series of resignations, as former co-leader calls coalition 'stupidest government in Europe'

Germany's Die Linke could split into two parties over the Ukraine war, as the ailing leftwing party's indecisive stance over economic sanctions against Russia triggered a series of high-profile resignations this week.

The German Left party's future has hung in a precarious balance since it snuck into the national parliament last autumn under a special provision for parties that win three or more constituency seats. Should three of its 39 delegates resign from the party, Die Linke would lose its status as a parliamentary group and attached privileges over speaking times and committee memberships.

Party insiders say such resignations are a matter of when, not if, after a week of vicious public in-fighting over a speech in which the former co-leader Sahra Wagenknecht accused the German government of "launching an unprecedented economic war against our most important energy supplier".

Supporters of Wagenknecht, a controversial but prominent figurehead, are already hatching plans for a breakaway party to compete in the 2024 European elections, the German newspaper Taz reported this week.

Such a split would be likely to spell the end of Die Linke, 15 years after it was founded in a merger between the successor to East Germany's Socialist Unity party and former Social Democrats disillusioned by their party's direction under Gerhard Schröder, and just under a decade after it formed the largest opposition force in the Bundestag's 2013-17 term.

In her speech last Thursday, Wagenknecht had called chancellor Olaf Scholz's left-leaning governing coalition "the stupidest government in Europe" because it imposed sanctions on [Russia](#), which supplied over half of Germany's gas needs before the start of the war in the spring.

"Yes, of course the war in Ukraine is a crime", Wagenknecht said. "But how dumb is the idea that we can punish Putin by pushing millions of German families into poverty and destroy our economy while Gazprom makes record profits?" The speech was greeted with applause not only by the Linke leadership but also by delegates of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).

Wagenknecht no longer holds any official positions in Die Linke, but was nominated to be its sole speaker in the recent parliamentary session on the national climate budget.

In the run-up to the speech, Die Linke's parliamentary co-chair Dietmar Bartsch had reportedly urged Wagenknecht to avoid calling for an opening of Nord Stream 2, the Russian gas pipeline project that was [halted shortly before the invasion of Ukraine](#) in February.

While the 53-year-old did not mention Nord Stream 2, her “economic war” comments proved incendiary. Even though the German government has used similar language to describe its standoff with the Kremlin over gas deliveries, Wagenknecht suggested that the act of aggression in this conflict had been initiated by the west.

“The thesis that the federal republic of Germany is leading an economic war against Russia reverses cause and effect”, said Bodo Ramelow, the Left party state premier for Thuringia. “The phrase ‘the USA’s economic war against Russia’ is Kremlin propaganda”, said Martina Renner, a former deputy leader of the leftwing outfit.

While Die Linke has broadly opposed the delivery of heavy weapons to Ukraine, it voted in favour of economic sanctions against Russia in May, and a party congress in June condemned Putin’s war of aggression in Ukraine as “imperialist”.

Splits in the leftwing party, present since Die Linke’s founding, have become increasingly entrenched in recent years.

The biggest and most bitter split is between reformists who see the party’s future in a space where different union and social justice movements overlap, and those more traditional, nationalist leftists gathered around Wagenknecht, who accuse what they call the “lifestyle left” of having betrayed the party’s traditional working-class base.

While the movement-oriented *Bewegungslinke* dominates Die Linke’s leadership, the Wagenknecht faction continues to grab headlines, most recently by calling for a revival of cold war-era “Monday demonstrations” in protest against rising energy prices. With the party’s parliamentary status in a fine balance, there have until now been few attempts to rock the boat by seeking an open conflict.

Wagenknecht had ended her speech by calling for the resignation of the minister for economic affairs, Robert Habeck. Instead, her contribution triggered the resignations of two high-profile members.

Ulrich Schneider, the head of the German welfare association Der Paritätische, on Monday announced via Twitter he had handed in his membership over the party letting Wagenknecht take the podium. “That was too much”, said Schneider, who heads Germany’s largest umbrella organisation of self-help initiatives in the area of health and social work.

Fabio di Masi, a former Linke MP who had remained its most prolific expert on financial expert even after standing down as an MP last year, said a day later he was also handing in his membership, as he no longer wanted to bear responsibility for the “blatant failure of key actors in this party”.

The draining of support is reflected at a grassroots level. According to internal party figures seen by the Guardian, Die Linke has lost more than 3,000 members – or 5.5% of its total membership – in the first half of this year.

After gaining 4.9% of the vote at federal elections last September, the leftwing party has failed to make it over the electoral threshold at five consecutive state elections.

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