

# **‘Will we leave things to the fascists?’: the activist aiming to revive Germany’s far-left party**

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## **Carola Rackete, who made her name defying Italy’s far right, is set to lead Die Linke party into European elections in June**

She made her name as the captain of a ship that rescued stranded migrants from the Mediterranean. But now Carola Rackete is embarking on a new journey, focusing her activist sights on helping to save a crisis-ridden part of the German left.

The [35-year-old engineer](#) is to lead the beleaguered Die Linke party into the European parliamentary elections in June as its top candidate.

“I feel I have little choice than to get involved in politics. The time is right,” she told the Guardian in an interview. “This is a moment that should politicise us all, if we’re not already politicised.

“Do we want those in favour of human rights and climate justice to be in the majority, or will we leave things to the rightwingers and the fascists – it’s quite a simple question we face.”

Die Linke, a far-left party that emerged in 2007 from the former East German Communist SED, has recently faced disaster. Sahra Wagenknecht, its most prominent member and former parliamentary group leader, quit weeks ago to form her own new party [which launched this month](#). She has taken nine of Die Linke’s MPs with her and threatening its implosion.

The move follows years of tension between Wagenknecht and party leaders who have balked at her attempts to combine leftwing ideas, such as a wealth tax, with a rightwing nationalist-driven rejection of irregular immigration.

Wagenknecht has positioned herself as a valid alternative for German voters disillusioned by mainstream politics who might otherwise – as many tens of thousands of Die Linke supporters have done in recent years – shift their allegiance to the far-right AfD.

But Rackete – who is, as requested by the party, remaining independent (“it gives more leverage to reach a different audience”) – rejects the idea that she is joining a sinking ship.

“When they approached me it was quite clear the party would split. I see this as an opportunity to set it on a new, clear course, attract new members, ditch the nationalist rhetoric for good and turn it into a solid place of organisation for the progressive left,” she said. “I like the image of the phoenix rising from the ashes.”

Rackete says that the departure of Wagenknecht, followed by her arrival on the scene, has “created ripples” prompting a sudden surge in membership of Die Linke, momentum on which the party is

hoping to build.

“We’ve had a lot of interest from leftists who have never engaged with party politics, insisting now is the moment to do something,” she said.

Inspiration has been taken from the [rise of Labour](#) in the UK, Polish voters’ recent [decision to ditch](#) their illiberal government, and the return of [Lula da Silva](#) in Brazil, she said. “It shows that going in one direction, in terms of the move to the right, is not a given”.

Through the reputation she has built due to her environmental activism, Rackete would also like to attract Green voters disillusioned with the party’s performance in a coalition government.

“It’s shocking to me and a lot of others how much of their policy on migration and on climate they have abandoned.”

Rackete’s activism has taken her from occupying [bridges in London](#) with Extinction Rebellion in 2018 to standing up for the human and environmental rights of indigenous Sami communities in northern Finland. In 2019, she famously [defied Italy’s interior minister](#), Matteo Salvini, by docking a search and rescue ship of 42 migrants in the port of Lampedusa, for which she was arrested and later forced to go into hiding.

Salvini labelled her variously a “potential murderer, criminal and pirate” and a *sbruffoncella* (showoff). Rackete later took him to court and won. Elsewhere, her courage earned her comparisons to female heroes from Sophocles’ Antigone to Joan of Arc; praise came from the pope, and she even inspired a [children’s book](#).

“I don’t think my real, authentic self has much to do with this public story that exists about my person,” she said with a chuckle over breakfast in a Turkish cafe in Berlin. “I think that what this shows us is that as human beings we really crave stories of hope – such as the small NGO standing up against a big bully government.”

Like the strength in her story, she acknowledges there’s also strength in a name like Rackete, which in German is homophonic with the word ‘rocket’.

“As a kid it really annoyed me, but now I think it’s probably quite helpful, in terms of recognition,” she said.

As an MEP, she says she would seek to increase transparency about the bloc, about the 25,000 lobbyists based in Brussels (“the second biggest lobby capital in the world after Washington”), expose what she perceives as the organisation’s damaging drive to expand its emission trading schemes (“which don’t work to reduce emissions at all, but translate to a market for trading pollution”), and push for radical agricultural reform to tackle head on the growing problem of food security.

Take the EU trade market for nature currently being worked on, following the example of Australia and the UK, she said. “According to that, if someone cuts down a forest in [Germany](#) to build a factory, this can be offset by building a flamingo habitat in Spain. It’s ecologically absurd,” she said. She would like to see more focused action on topics that would have almost immediate ecological and social benefits, such as wetland restoration, creating a centrally operated public train service, and switching from animal to plant protein production.

“I think we have to scandalise these things. If people don’t even know the thing they should be upset about, you can’t build an initiative or any sort of public pressure.”

Matter-of-fact, modest and earnest in manner, even as a politician, Rackete, who has no fixed abode, insisted she wanted to remain an activist.

Her experience with [Sea Watch](#), she said, taught her “just how much a civil society organisation can achieve”.

*This article was amended on 16 January 2024. Sahra Wagenknecht took nine Die Linke MPs with her to form a new party, not 38 as stated in an earlier version.*

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**Kate Connolly**

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**P.S.**

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