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## German Party Think Tanks: Lineage, Fallacies, Controversies, and Prospects

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### Abstract

Among the global community of think tanks, German political party think tanks have long enjoyed a distinguished reputation, comparable to that of their American counterparts. Regrettably, for an extended period, Chinese academia has primarily focused on American think tanks that champion independence and excel in policy consultation, while remaining inadequately informed about German political party think tanks that maintain close affiliations with political parties and have political education as their core mission, even harboring numerous prejudices and misconceptions. This article elucidates the “foundation lineage” of German political party think tanks, clarifies many of the prejudices and misconceptions surrounding them, reveals the controversies arising from their “reliance on government funding,” and offers prospects for their future development.

### Full Text

## German Partisan Think Tanks: Roots, Misconceptions, Controversy, and Prospects

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### Abstract

Among the world’s think tanks, German partisan think tanks enjoy a long-standing reputation comparable to their American counterparts. Unfortunately, Chinese academia has long focused primarily on American think tanks that champion independence and excel at policy consultation, while developing only a superficial understanding of German partisan think tanks that maintain close ties to political parties and prioritize political education as their core mission.

This has resulted in numerous misconceptions and misunderstandings. This paper examines the “foundation pedigree” of German partisan think tanks, clarifies widespread misconceptions, reveals the controversies arising from their reliance on public funding, and explores their future development prospects.

**Keywords:** German politics; partisan think tanks; political foundation; party foundation; consultative policy system; political education; diplomacy; Desiderius-Erasmus-Stiftung

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Among the world’s think tanks, German partisan think tanks enjoy a long-standing reputation comparable to their American counterparts. On January 28, 2021, the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) at the University of Pennsylvania released the *2020 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*. In this report, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) was ranked first among “Best Party-Affiliated Think Tanks” for four consecutive years (2016–2019), earning the distinction of “Center of Excellence.” Meanwhile, among the 38 “2020 Best Party-Affiliated Think Tanks” selected globally, German partisan think tanks captured five positions: the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) ranked first, the Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit (FNF) second, the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung (HBS) third, the Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung (HSS) eighth, and the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (RLS) twentieth [1]. Given that the number of partisan think tanks in Germany is quite limited, this high praise in the *Global Go To Think Tank Report 2020* warrants the conclusion that German partisan think tanks are “few but strong.” For Chinese think tanks, which are numerous but have yet to achieve satisfactory international influence and discursive power, examining the success of German partisan think tanks is both necessary and timely.

Unfortunately, Chinese academia has long focused primarily on American think tanks that champion independence and excel at policy consultation, while developing only a superficial understanding of German partisan think tanks that maintain close ties to political parties and prioritize political education as their core mission. This has resulted in numerous misconceptions and misunderstandings. In this “era of think tanks,” strengthening research on German partisan think tanks can not only provide reference, inspiration, and support for the construction of similar think tanks in China, but also help Chinese think tanks avoid the problem of “orange trees transplanted north of the Huai River turning into trifoliate oranges” —that is, to better ground themselves in China’s own soil, people, and spirit, and forge a development path suited to China’s national conditions.

As Hu Shi said, “In scholarship, one must doubt where there seems to be no doubt.” In examining German partisan think tanks, we might as well start with some of the most fundamental questions.

## 1. The Overlooked “Foundation Pedigree”

It is well known that German partisan think tanks mostly exist in the form of foundations (*Stiftung*)—this is their distinctive characteristic. Therefore, to examine German partisan think tanks, we must first understand the German tradition of association and foundation culture.

Germans are enthusiastic about forming associations and living an associative life, so much so that they jokingly say, “When three Germans meet, they will form an association” (*Treffen sich drei Deutsche, gründen sie einen Verein*). This tradition has deep historical roots, traceable to the 12th century. Moreover, German law fully guarantees citizens’ right of association. For example, Article 9, Paragraph 1 of the German Basic Law (*Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland*) explicitly states: “All Germans have the right to form associations” [2]. Currently, Germany has approximately 627,000 registered social organizations and over 500,000 unregistered but normally active ones, covering fields such as healthcare, environmental protection, education, sports, culture, charity, and politics [3]. Given that Germany has only 83.1 million people [4], the number of social organizations is staggering.

Foundations constitute an important category of German social organizations. The *Report on the Investigation of Foundation Development and Management in Germany*, written by a training group from the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China on “Foundation Management Systems Research,” accurately points out: “In Germany, a foundation refers to a corporate organization with legal capacity established by individuals, enterprises, or other organizations that donate funds or other property for a specific purpose...Foundation is not a legally exclusive concept; associations, social service agencies, joint-stock companies, schools, and even some unregistered organizations can all use the name of foundation to carry out activities” [3]. The history of German foundations can be traced back to classical antiquity. According to the records of the Bundesverband Deutscher Stiftungen, five foundations claim origins in the 12th century, 23 in the 13th century, and 35 in the 14th century. In the Middle Ages, foundations were mainly established by political and religious elites and wealthy individuals who, following the Christian tenet of “loving thy neighbor,” were enthusiastic about charity [5]. By the 13th century, foundation affairs officially became part of canon law. After the 13th century, secular foundations gradually emerged, distinct from ecclesiastical foundations [6]. Since the 21st century, German foundations have flourished, reaching over 140,000 in number (approximately 100,000 ecclesiastical foundations and about 40,000 secular foundations), playing important roles in culture and arts, development aid, social movements, health, and politics [7].

It can be said that precisely because of Germany’s profound foundation culture, political parties have naturally chosen foundations as their partners. This is logical and self-evident. In the past, scholars researching think tanks in China have generally overlooked the “foundation pedigree” of German parti-

san think tanks, often consciously or unconsciously examining German partisan think tanks through the lens of the American think tank model, leading to numerous misconceptions and misunderstandings.

In the long river of history, German political parties and foundations are like intertwined reeds, depending on each other. Let us examine them carefully.

## 2. Widespread Misconceptions and Misunderstandings

Over the years, Chinese scholars have conducted intensive research on German partisan think tanks, producing numerous academic works and articles. Meanwhile, however, some erroneous information and viewpoints have also spread widely in Chinese academia. Clarifying these fallacies is crucial for deepening our understanding of German partisan think tanks.

**On the number of German partisan think tanks.** The conventional view holds that Germany has six political foundations: the Adenauer Foundation close to the CDU, the Ebert Foundation close to the SPD, the Naumann Foundation close to the FDP, the Böll Foundation close to the Greens, the Seidel Foundation close to the CSU, and the Luxemburg Foundation close to the Left Party. We argue that this view is inaccurate and urgently needs updating. On the one hand, it only counts federal-level or nationwide political foundations, while ignoring those at the state level. In fact, although state-level political foundations are smaller in scale and influence, they are numerous and therefore cannot be ignored. On the other hand, in recent years, the number of federal-level or nationwide political foundations has also changed with the addition of the Desiderius-Erasmus-Stiftung (DES), which is close to the AfD. In short, strictly speaking, as of June 30, 2022, Germany has seven federal-level party foundations and 45 state-level party foundations [8].

**On the naming of German partisan think tanks.** In recent years, several scholars have written that German political foundations are “named after important historical figures.” We argue that this view is similarly oversimplified. Take the most influential Adenauer Foundation: when it was named after Konrad Adenauer, the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and then-chairman of the CDU, in 1964, Adenauer was still alive and playing an important role in German politics—he had not yet become a “historical figure.” Additionally, it should be noted that although German political foundations are generally named after prominent individuals, we cannot assume they were established specifically to commemorate that person. On the one hand, Germany has separate foundations specifically dedicated to commemorating historical figures. For example, the German Bundestag currently maintains six non-partisan “Federal Political Memorial Foundations” (*Politikergedenkstiftungen des Bundes*) to commemorate outstanding historical figures who played important roles in German and European politics in the 19th and 20th centuries. These foundations are funded by the federal budget and subject to legal supervision by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media (BKM) [9].

Clearly, these federal political memorial foundations are entirely different from the political foundations that are the subject of this study. On the other hand, when naming political foundations, there are sometimes multiple options. For example, before the Luxemburg Foundation was finally named, there was intense debate over its name, with candidates including Karl Marx, Marx/Engels, Clara Zetkin (female), Larissa Reissner (female), Karl Liebknecht, and Paul Levi. However, since Luxemburg was the only name everyone could agree on, the foundation was ultimately named after her [10]. In short, German political foundations are usually named after prominent individuals. These individuals may be male or female (such as Luxemburg), German or foreign (Luxemburg was Polish, Erasmus was from the Netherlands [present-day Netherlands and Belgium] during the Renaissance), living (such as Adenauer) or deceased, contemporary or from centuries ago (such as Erasmus), and may have had direct contact with the political foundation or may simply share its ideals without any actual connection.

**On why political parties establish partisan think tanks.** Article 21, Paragraph 1 of the German Basic Law states: “Political parties participate in the formation of the political will of the people” [2]. Based on this, some scholars claim: “The formation of the people’ s political will is a complex process that political parties cannot adequately fulfill with their limited resources. In this situation, parties thought of using political foundations to construct and consolidate the people’ s political will. Thus, political foundations emerged and have continued to grow.” We consider this pure speculation. On the one hand, in Germany, party-affiliated foundations are explicitly prohibited from participating in the “formation of the political will of the people” as stipulated in Article 21, Paragraph 1 of the Basic Law. On February 12, 1998, the German Federal Administrative Court, in its ruling on the Franz-Schönhuber-Stiftung, interpreted the Federal Constitutional Court’ s specialized ruling on political foundations of July 14, 1986 (BVerfGE 73, 1 - Politische Stiftungen) [11]. The Federal Administrative Court explicitly stated: “Party-affiliated foundations may not participate in the formation of the political will of the people...Foundations are prohibited from engaging in matters related to the ‘participation of political parties in the formation of the political will of the people’ as confirmed in Article 21, Paragraph 1 of the Basic Law” [12]. On the other hand, in Germany, it is a recognized fact that the original intention of parties in establishing party foundations was primarily for the latter to conduct political education work. Thomas Krüger, who has served as Chairman of the Federal Agency for Civic Education (*Die Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, bpb) since July 2000, clearly stated: “Political education is part of the self-image of the Federal Republic of Germany. After World War II, when the focus of ‘Reeducation’ was on democratic education, political education centers were established at the federal and state levels. As a result, various affiliated educational institutions and ideologically diverse educational organizations began to engage in educational work. The parties in the Bundestag established large foundations, which, together with a broad network of adult education colleges, enriched the field of

political education. These institutions are all operated with public funds” [13].

**On the conditions for establishing partisan think tanks.** In numerous articles by well-known scholars published in prominent newspapers and journals, one can find formulations such as “According to the German Political Party Law, parties that have entered parliament for two consecutive terms and hold 5% of the seats may establish party foundations” or “According to the German Political Party Law, parties that have entered parliament for two consecutive terms and hold 5% of the seats may establish party foundations with the same political ideology.” However, we find that the German Political Party Law (*Gesetz über die politischen Parteien*) contains no such provision [14]. Although the Party Law mentions political foundations in two places—one in “Article 11 Executive Committee,” which states that “a party’s chairman and treasurer may not exercise similar functions in any political foundation related to that party,” and another in “Article 25 Donations,” which prohibits parties from accepting donations from political foundations (both added when the Party Law was amended on December 22, 1983 [15])—neither is related to the establishment of political foundations. In fact, German political parties have considerable flexibility when establishing political foundations. First, for many years, with very few exceptions, the desire of German parties to establish political foundations has been satisfied. The most recent exception occurred more than 20 years ago. On February 12, 1998, the German Federal Administrative Court completely terminated the German Republican Party’s attempt, initiated as early as October 1989, to establish the Franz-Schönhuber Foundation named after the party’s former chairman, on the grounds that the planned foundation would endanger the public interest [12]. Second, the law does not impose strict requirements on the form of political foundations. Among Germany’s seven existing federal-level political foundations, the Ebert, Adenauer, Seidel, Böll, Luxemburg, and Erasmus foundations are registered associations (*Eingetragener Verein*), while the Naumann Foundation is a private law foundation (*Stiftung des privaten Rechts*). Third, the law also imposes no requirements on the registration timing of political foundations. Consequently, some political foundations have chosen to “board first, then buy the ticket” (meaning they begin operations before registration). For example, the Böll Foundation started work at its new headquarters in central Berlin on July 1, 1997 [16], but did not enter the association register until March 17 of the following year [17]. Finally, when establishing federal-level political foundations, German parties sometimes adopt an approach similar to the historical German practice of electing the Holy Roman Emperor from multiple electors. Specifically, parties select one foundation or association from several that are close to the party to serve as the federal-level political foundation. In Germany, the common formulation is that a party recognizes a certain foundation as its closely related political/party foundation, or that a party recognizes a certain foundation as a federal foundation (*Bundesstiftung*). The Erasmus Foundation was successfully “promoted” in this manner. Since early 2018, intense debate has raged within the AfD over which foundation or association should serve as the party’s political foundation. The competition mainly took place

between the Erasmus Foundation and the Gustav-Stresemann-Stiftung, though the Academic Erasmus Foundation (*Akademische Erasmus-Stiftung e.V.*), the Johann-Gottfried-Herder Association for Democracy (*Johann-Gottfried-Herder-Verein für Demokratie*), and the Immanuel Kant Association (*Immanuel-Kant-Verein*) also expressed interest. Ultimately, after months of debate, on June 30, 2018, at the AfD party conference in Augsburg, nearly two-thirds of attendees voted in favor of the Erasmus Foundation [18].

**On the core mission of German partisan think tanks.** In recent years, some scholars have misinterpreted this issue. For example, some have excessively elevated foreign affairs work, claiming that “the primary mission of the Adenauer Foundation is non-political diplomacy, broadly defined. The foundation actively engages in various forms of foreign exchanges, shares Germany’s development experience and achievements with other countries, discusses common problems and challenges, and reports these activities to the German government.” Others, when writing about German partisan think tanks, introduce policy consultation, public diplomacy, and political education in sequence, creating the misimpression that policy consultation is the most important work of German partisan think tanks. We argue that, unlike American think tanks that excel at policy consultation, German partisan think tanks prioritize political education as their core mission. On the one hand, this is the self-perception of German partisan think tanks. Examining the charters of the seven federal-level party foundations, we find that all place political education in the primary position. Moreover, senior executives of these think tanks repeatedly emphasize the important status and role of political education when speaking publicly. For example, Ursula Männle, who has served as Chairwoman of the Seidel Foundation since 2014, stressed: “The mission of German party-affiliated foundations is primarily to promote democracy. Political education for all citizens conducted by party-affiliated foundations is an important tool for achieving this goal” [19]. On the other hand, this is also the common view of all sectors of German society. For years, German political parties, official institutions such as the Federal Constitutional Court, Federal Ministry of the Interior, and Federal Foreign Office, as well as authoritative figures including the German President and renowned experts and scholars, have all expressed this view. For instance, former German President Roman Herzog regarded “education for democracy” (*Erziehung zur Demokratie*) as the “permanent and actual task of political foundations” (*permanente und eigentliche Aufgabe der politischen Stiftungen*), believing it helps “citizens in an open society to participate as knowledgeably as possible in the development of democracy” [20].

**On the relationship between German partisan think tanks and political parties.** In the past, people generally believed that partisan think tanks were subordinate to political parties, and statements such as “the Seidel Foundation is a subordinate organization of the CSU” were commonplace. In reality, however, both the German Federal Constitutional Court and the Federal Administrative Court have repeatedly emphasized that party-affiliated foundations are legally and factually independent of political parties. In particular, the Federal

Administrative Court explicitly stated: “The Federal Constitutional Court’s ruling on the independence of party-affiliated foundations from their respective parties prohibits treating foundations as ‘auxiliary organizations’ (*Nebenorganisation*) of parties.” The Court also refuted the erroneous claim that party-affiliated foundations are “tools for parties to seize state finances, essentially fishing nets used by fishermen to catch fish” [12].

The river of history flows ceaselessly, and the tide of the times is magnificent. For many years, German political parties and partisan think tanks have stood at the forefront of the tide, jointly facing various challenges. What challenges have they encountered?

### 3. Controversies over Public Funding

Unlike American think tanks, many German partisan think tanks “eat imperial grain” –that is, they receive public funding. However, where benefits exist, flaws easily arise, and this “imperial grain,” or public funding, has attracted considerable criticism to German partisan think tanks.

#### 3.1 Insufficient Legal Basis

This is the greatest controversy. In the past, some domestic and foreign scholars believed that the famous ruling of the German Federal Constitutional Court on political foundations on July 14, 1986, had laid a solid legal foundation for German partisan think tanks to “eat imperial grain” [for example, British scholar Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, who long served as Chairman of the Political Finance and Political Corruption Research Committee of the International Political Science Association (IPSA), erroneously believed that this ruling confirmed the constitutionality of federal subsidies to party foundations [21]]. This is not the case. These scholars may have been dazzled by the prestige of the Federal Constitutional Court or misled by the identical rhetoric of the German federal government and party foundations.

We know that on July 19, 1966, the German Federal Constitutional Court issued a specialized ruling on party financing (BVerfGE 20, 56 - Parteienfinanzierung I), holding that since political education work by parties could not be clearly distinguished from parties’ general work, providing budgetary funds to parties for political education work was unconstitutional [22]. Subsequently, beginning with the 1967 fiscal year, the German federal budget began providing “global grants” (*Globalzuschüsse*) to party-affiliated foundations. In 1967, 9 million marks were allocated as “global grants for socio-political and democratic educational work” (*Globalzuschüsse zur gesellschaftspolitischen und demokratischen Bildungsarbeit*). Afterward, the amount of global grants grew robustly, and the controversies they triggered intensified. Ultimately, the Greens, who were founded in 1980 and entered the German Bundestag for the first time in 1983, filed a lawsuit with the Federal Constitutional Court [11].

The Greens argued that party-affiliated foundations primarily serve the political

affairs of their closely related parties. Although foundations are legally independent, they are in fact largely controlled by their “mother parties” (*Mutterpartei*), whose personnel and material resources can be used openly or secretly by the mother party. Moreover, even party-affiliated foundations cannot draw a clear line between political education work and parties’ general work. In short, the Greens believed that global grants to party-affiliated foundations constituted secret financing of the foundations’ closely related parties, violating Article 21, Paragraph 1 and Article 3, Paragraph 1 of the Basic Law. The German Bundestag countered that the Federal Constitutional Court’s ruling of July 19, 1966, did not fundamentally question the legality of political education work, but only questioned state support for political education work by parties. Since funding political education work by parties was deemed unconstitutional, the legislature now supports other social organizations committed to this task. This change in funding recipients ensures that political education work is not combined with parties’ political activities. Foundations are legally and factually independent of parties, and their activities are primarily not aimed at supporting parties. In short, the Bundestag argued that global grants allocated to foundations do not constitute direct or indirect party financing [11].

On July 14, 1986, the German Federal Constitutional Court issued a specialized ruling on political foundations, holding that whether the Bundestag’s inclusion of 85.8 million marks in global grants in the *Federal Budget Law for Fiscal Year 1983 (Gesetz über die Feststellung des Bundeshaushaltsplans für das Haushaltsjahr 1983)* and its authorization of the Federal Minister of the Interior to allocate them to the foundations of the four parties with seats in the Bundestag (the Adenauer, Seidel, Ebert, and Naumann foundations) violated the Basic Law could not be the subject of this ruling; individual abuses by foundations do not justify the assumption that global grants constitute secret party financing; the fact that the federal budget for fiscal year 1983 only provided global grants to foundations that already existed in 1983 did not infringe upon the Greens’ rights, particularly not violating the principle of equality (*Gleichheitssatz*) stipulated in Article 3, Paragraph 1 of the Basic Law; allocating public funds for promoting political education work to party-affiliated foundations is permissible on the condition that these foundations are legally and factually independent of parties, undertake this task with an open mind, and maintain the necessary distance from parties in practice [11]. It must be said that although this ruling gave the green light to global grants, it avoided the crucial question of constitutionality. Subsequently, in 1988, the Greens established the Rainbow Foundation Association (*Stiftungsverband Regenbogen e.V.*) and recognized it as a political foundation close to the Greens. Intriguingly, the brief history of the Böll Foundation on its official website today not only makes no mention of the Greens’ early critical attitude toward global grants, but instead vigorously promotes the claim that the Greens had attempted to establish a Green-affiliated party foundation at the federal level before 1983 [16].

Due to the revered status of the Federal Constitutional Court, the German federal government repeatedly invokes its July 14, 1986 ruling when explaining the

legal basis for German partisan think tanks “eating imperial grain.” For example, on January 23, 2018, the German federal government stated in response to an inquiry from the AfD parliamentary group that, in principle, the budget legislator decides on global grants and project financing. Since appropriations began in the 1967 fiscal year, the allocation of budgetary resources to political foundations in the federal budget has always been conducted through parliamentary procedures and constitutes the exclusive task of the Bundestag’s Budget Committee. The practice of promoting political foundations complies with the Federal Constitutional Court’s ruling on providing global grants for the political education work of political foundations. There is no legal basis outside the Budget Law (*Haushaltsgesetzes*). The legal basis for expenditure is always the federal budget stipulated in the Budget Law. In some cases, ministries have issued further regulations for their areas of operation [23]. Similarly, on March 30, 2021, the German federal government essentially repeated its January 23, 2018 statement in response to an inquiry from the Greens parliamentary group, which need not be elaborated here [24].

Like the German federal government, German party foundations also use the Federal Constitutional Court’s July 14, 1986 ruling as a shield when discussing the public funds they receive. Further examples are unnecessary.

In short, because the legal basis for providing public funds to German partisan think tanks consists of the annual Budget Law, which is not substantive law (*materielles Gesetz*), and because the Federal Constitutional Court’s July 14, 1986 ruling avoided the constitutionality question of global grants, the legal foundation for German partisan think tanks “eating imperial grain” is not solid.

### 3.2 Unfair Fund Distribution

Currently, according to the Federal Constitutional Court’s July 14, 1986 ruling, the decisive factor for whether a party-affiliated foundation can receive funding is whether it represents a “lasting, significant political current” (*dauerhafte, ins Gewicht fallende politische Grundströmung*). In state practice, this is generally interpreted to mean that if the relevant party has crossed the 5% “threshold” in two consecutive Bundestag elections and entered the Bundestag with the strength to form a parliamentary group, the foundation will receive funding from the federal government [25]. Subsequently, if the relevant party fails to meet the “threshold clause” (*Sperrklausel*) only once, the foundation will not be deprived of funding [26]. Obviously, this is highly advantageous for large parties and very disadvantageous for small and newly established parties. In the author’s view, this can almost be said to be a “double threshold” more difficult to cross than the “5% threshold.”

For years, foundations close to Germany’s mainstream parties, comfortably sitting behind this “double threshold” and happily “eating imperial grain,” have been subject to constant criticism. In the 1990s, the Republican Party attacked party-affiliated foundations as “tools for parties to seize state finances, essen-

tially fishing nets used by fishermen to catch fish” in its complaint to the Federal Administrative Court [12]. In 2014, the German Ecological Democratic Party filed a lawsuit with the Federal Constitutional Court seeking to prohibit “covert state financing of parliamentary parties” (*verdeckte Staatsfinanzierung der Parlamentsparteien*) [27]. In recent years, the practice of providing public funds to party-affiliated foundations has faced strong challenges from the Alternative for Germany (AfD), founded in February 2013 and entered the German Bundestag for the first time after the September 2017 election.

Initially, people generally underestimated the AfD. Some even gloated over its repeated setbacks: after the September 2017 election, the AfD repeatedly submitted funding requests to the Bundestag Budget Committee (for example, in August 2020, the party applied to the committee for €900,000 for “socio-political and democratic educational work” in fiscal year 2021 [25]), repeatedly filed lawsuits with the Federal Constitutional Court [for example, on May 20, 2019, the Federal Constitutional Court ruled the AfD’ s constitutional complaint (*Verfassungsbeschwerde*) inadmissible [28]; and on July 22 of the following year, the Court rejected the AfD’ s urgent application demanding that the Federal Ministry of the Interior pay a total of €1.38 million for fiscal years 2018 and 2019 [26]], but all these efforts ended in failure.

Gradually, people began to take the AfD seriously. Recognition from competitors has not been absent: on March 16, 2021, the Greens parliamentary group in the German Bundestag specifically questioned the federal government about the funding, personnel, and social connections of the Erasmus Foundation, presenting a list covering 14 specific questions and demanding answers [29]. On March 30 of the same month, the federal government formally responded, stating that the Erasmus Foundation is legally, personnel-wise, organizationally, and financially independent of the AfD. As of the time of the government’ s response, the Erasmus Foundation had not received any funding from federal sources, nor had it received any funding between 2018 and 2020 [24].

An unshakable truth is that confidence is more precious than gold. During this period, when looking ahead to the German Bundestag election in September 2021, the AfD was bursting with confidence, and public opinion generally expected the party to successfully re-enter the Bundestag, after which the Erasmus Foundation close to it would qualify for federal funding. Driven by this prospect, the social organization “Anne Frank Educational Center” (*Anne-Frank-Bildungsstätte*) and some constitutional scholars and lawyers began to plot ways to create legal obstacles to prevent the Erasmus Foundation from receiving funding [25].

Ultimately, as expected, the AfD achieved respectable results in the September 2021 German Bundestag election, receiving 10.3% of the vote [30]. Subsequently, some media outlets began to “report” with vivid detail that the Erasmus Foundation had “already obtained” federal funding. For example, on January 11, 2022, The Paper, a Chinese news website, published an article by Àngel Ferrero originally carried on the website of the American magazine *Jacobin* [31], titled

“From Fringe Force to Transnational Alliance: What Impact Will the European Far-Right Alliance Bring?” The article stated that “after retaining most of its seats in the September 2021 election, the German AfD’s Desiderius Erasmus Foundation now qualifies for state funding, which the party can decide how to use. According to some media reports, the party has already decided to use some of the funds to hire more than 900 staff members” [32].

If things were truly as “reported” by the aforementioned media, the AfD and the Erasmus Foundation would probably be laughing in their sleep. However, the truth is less rosy. After the September 2021 Bundestag election, the Erasmus Foundation embarked on a long road to defend its rights. In October 2021, still basking in the joy of victory, the Erasmus Foundation publicly declared that it was entitled to approximately €7 million in 2022 and about €14 million annually for the following three years [33]. On February 17, 2022, Erika Steinbach, Chairwoman of the Erasmus Foundation, held a press conference in Berlin where she forcefully presented the foundation’s case to the public, denouncing the unreasonableness of the federal government (particularly the Federal Ministry of the Interior) and the Bundestag (particularly its Budget Committee), and demanding that public funds be allocated to the Erasmus Foundation specifically following the precedent of the Luxemburg Foundation. Steinbach pointed out that since the global funding (*Globalförderung*) for 2022 was €132 million and the AfD’s average vote share in the last three Bundestag elections was 9.13% (4.7% in 2013, 12.6% in 2017, and 10.1% in 2021), the Erasmus Foundation was entitled to approximately €6 million in 2022 (half of 9.13% of the total global funding) and about €12 million annually for the following three years (9.13% of the total global funding) [34].

To date, the AfD and the Erasmus Foundation continue to fight for federal funding for the foundation, repeatedly submitting funding applications to the Bundestag Budget Committee despite repeated defeats (for example, on May 19, 2022, the committee once again rejected the Erasmus Foundation’s funding request, provoking angry denunciations from the latter [35]), and repeatedly filing lawsuits with the Federal Constitutional Court (for example, on July 28, 2022, the Federal Constitutional Court once again rejected the AfD’s application for public funding for the Erasmus Foundation. The Court’s decision described the outline of the rounds of struggle between the plaintiff, the AfD, and the five defendants—the German Bundestag, the Bundestag Budget Committee, the federal government, the Federal Ministry of the Interior, and the Federal Ministry of Finance—over the Erasmus Foundation’s federal funding since 2018 [36]). On the Erasmus Foundation’s official website, one can easily find one angry and unwilling statement after another issued by the foundation following each defeat [37].

Admittedly, in March 2021, according to the German newsweekly *Der Spiegel*, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*BfV*) had classified the entire AfD as a right-wing extremism “suspected case” (*Verdachtsfall*) [38]. Moreover, on March 8 of the following year, in a lawsuit initiated by the AfD,

the Cologne Administrative Court ruled that, given sufficient evidence of anti-constitutional efforts within the AfD, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution was permitted to classify the entire AfD as a right-wing extremism “suspected case” and to monitor it [39]. Nevertheless, we must clearly recognize that the Erasmus Foundation is a social organization independent of the AfD, and to engage in “guilt by association” against it because of the AfD’s actions clearly violates the spirit of modern rule of law. The renowned German constitutional expert Professor Klaus Ferdinand Gärditz pointed out: “Since foundations are not part of the parties they are close to but act independently, unconstitutional behavior by party officials cannot simply be imputed to foundations” [25]. Moreover, on March 30, 2021, the German federal government explicitly stated in its response to the Greens parliamentary group’s inquiry that the Erasmus Foundation was not a “monitoring object” (*Beobachtungsobjekt*) of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution [24].

Politics is politics. Today, the parties that fight most fiercely with the AfD are the Greens and the Left Party. However, to those familiar with German politics, the attacks by the Greens and the Left Party on the AfD are nothing more than a case of the pot calling the kettle black. After all, the early Greens often presented themselves as “alternative” and were long considered by traditional parties to be radical, non-mainstream “rabble.” As for the Left Party, some consider it an extremist party whose commitment to the constitution and democracy is largely instrumental [40]. Moreover, in July 1995, the Left Party’s predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), was designated as a “monitoring object” of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution [41]. Perhaps the AfD is not a “perfect victim,” but it would not be wrong to say that it has been subjected to “double standards.”

In the future, who knows whether the AfD will follow the example of the PDS and stage a hunger strike to protest for federal funding. As the saying goes, only white hair is fair in this world—it spares no one, high or low. The practice of “fair play” is never easy anywhere.

### 3.3 International Work Under Fire

The first “point of criticism” is excessive cost. In recent years, the international work of political foundations has become increasingly expensive. Since the money political foundations spend overseas is mainly funded by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Federal Foreign Office [42], we can easily verify this by examining the data on funds these two ministries provide to political foundations. For example, in 2017 alone, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Federal Foreign Office provided €294.805 million and €72.38 million respectively to party-affiliated foundations, accounting for 50.7% and 12.4% of the total funds the German federal government provided to party-affiliated foundations that year.

The second “point of criticism” is excessive scale. One fact alone is sufficient to show that people’s doubts are not unfounded: German political foundations currently maintain approximately 300 representative offices abroad [27]. By comparison, the German government operates only 227 representative offices worldwide, including 153 embassies [43].

The third “point of criticism” is acting independently. Since German political foundations are independent actors rather than organizations that follow orders, they occasionally fall out of step with official German diplomatic work. There are many examples of this. In her article *Party-Affiliated Foundations as Actors and Instruments of German Foreign Policy (Die parteinahen Stiftungen als Akteure und Instrumente der deutschen Außenpolitik)*, Svetlana W. Pogorelskaja provides several examples. One example is that in 2000, bilateral relations between Germany and Iran were negatively affected because the Böll Foundation held an “Iran Conference” (*Iran-Tagung*) in Berlin.

The last and relatively important “point of criticism” comes from host countries: interference in internal affairs. Sometimes, host countries’ rhetoric is extremely harsh. In rare cases, host countries have even issued “expulsion orders.” For decades, such stories have been common from Latin America to Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States. A recent example occurred in Russia under President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. On April 8, 2022, while engaged in full-scale war with Ukraine, Russia revoked the registration of the Böll Foundation and other German political foundations, thereby decisively banning their activities in Russia. In response, the Böll Foundation and others issued tit-for-tat statements [45].

In short, for many years, while leisurely “eating imperial grain,” German partisan think tanks have frequently been criticized on issues such as legal basis, fund distribution, and international work. Additionally, they have faced criticism for improper use of funds, lack of financial transparency, and using senior executive positions as political patronage. Since these issues are relatively less important, they will not be elaborated upon here.

The Master said by the river: “It passes on just like this, never ceasing day or night.” In the daily rising and setting of the sun and moon over the past century, German political parties and partisan think tanks have fulfilled their respective roles, with wives and husbands living in harmony, like lutes and zithers playing in concert. How should we evaluate German partisan think tanks? And what does their future development hold?

#### 4. Uncertain Development Prospects

In this world, only mediocre people escape both praise and blame. As highly watched “actors,” German partisan think tanks have been “singing, speaking, acting, and fighting” on the German and world political stages for nearly a century and have long been accustomed to both “applause” and “catcalls.” For observers, focusing solely on the clamor of public opinion when examining

German partisan think tanks would be superficial and might even lead to gaining “false appearances” while losing “true facts.”

We argue that German partisan think tanks constitute a political institution. When evaluating this institution, we can draw on Qian Mu’ s incisive analysis in his book *The Gains and Losses of Chinese Dynastic Politics*. First, this institution does not exist in isolation but cooperates with German political parties. Second, as an institution that has been in place for nearly a century, although it originated from the selfish interests of several large parties, it has also catered to the public need for political education. Third, this institution has both advantages and disadvantages. After all, as Qian Mu said: “No institution is absolutely advantageous without disadvantages, nor absolutely disadvantageous without advantages.” Finally, this institution has both origins and must have evolution [46]. Currently, German partisan think tanks are facing opportunities for change.

For many years, the amount of public funds obtained by party-affiliated foundations has been enormous. Data from the German federal government shows that the total funds it paid to party-affiliated foundations in 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2017 were €260.323 million, €293.138 million, €422.121 million, and €581.428 million, respectively [23]. In recent years, the “pie”divided among party-affiliated foundations has continued to grow robustly. In 2022, federal funds will disburse €659 million to party-affiliated foundations [47].

We foresee that due to sluggish economic growth and the accelerating transformation from relatively mild “growth politics”to fiercely competitive “distribution politics,” party-affiliated foundations will face increasing pressure both domestically and internationally. In particular, in Germany, the public will deliver even harsher criticism of the “oddity” that party foundations, which have long received public funds far exceeding party financing (for example, in 2017, federal budget expenditures on political foundations were 3.6 times those on party financing [48]), have no substantive law while parties have the Party Law.

In fact, social organizations such as Transparency International and the German Taxpayers’ Association (*Bund der Steuerzahler*) have called for the enactment of a *Foundation Law (Stiftungsgesetz)* to legally regulate German political foundations. Notably, Transparency International has also suggested that Germany should in the future publish a financing report for the entire political operation that includes all payments made by the state to parties, political groups, and foundations. The organization has criticized the current practice of splitting such expenditures into numerous separate and special items in the federal budget [27].

Looking ahead, although a *Foundation Law* similar to the Party Law cannot solve all controversies, it will greatly alleviate the domestic public opinion pressure faced by German partisan think tanks. Currently, the Greens are pushing for a *Foundation Law*, but some suspect the Greens’ real intention is to use the law to prevent the Erasmus Foundation from obtaining public funds [49].

The Union parties (the CDU and its sister party the CSU) are skeptical of a *Foundation Law*. Thorsten Frei, Chairman of the Union parties' parliamentary group, stated in 2021: "The question of whether, to what extent, and whom the state should support does not necessarily require a specific legal regulation." Meanwhile, the AfD parliamentary group has proposed a draft law that would in principle require the cancellation of all funding for party-affiliated foundations [25]. Finally, the "poor little" Erasmus Foundation supports the enactment of a *Foundation Law* [33].

How can a loach in a small puddle measure the vastness of rivers and seas? Moreover, the author stands on the banks of the Yellow River, imagining the blue Danube. Errors in the text are respectfully subject to criticism and correction.

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