



Cultural Drivers of Radicalization

Germany/D5.1 Country Report

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About the Project

D.Rad is a comparative study of radicalization and polarization in Europe and beyond. It aims to identify the actors, networks, and wider social contexts driving radicalization, particularly among young people in urban and peri-urban areas. D.Rad conceptualizes this through the I-GAP spectrum (injustice-grievance-alienation-polarization) with the goal of moving towards measurable evaluations of de-radicalization programmes. Our intention is to identify the building blocks of radicalization, which include a sense of being victimized; a sense of being thwarted or lacking agency in established legal and political structures; and coming under the influence of "us vs them" identity formulations.

D.Rad benefits from an exceptional breadth of backgrounds. The project spans national contexts including the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Finland, Slovenia, Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo, Israel, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, Georgia, Austria, and several minority nationalisms. It bridges academic disciplines ranging from political science and cultural studies to social psychology and artificial intelligence. Dissemination methods include D.Rad labs, D.Rad hubs, policy papers, academic workshops, visual outputs, and digital galleries. As such, D.Rad establishes a rigorous foundation to test practical interventions geared to prevention, inclusion, and de-radicalization.

With the possibility of capturing the trajectories of seventeen nations and several minority nations, the project will provide a unique evidence base for the comparative analysis of law and policy as nation-states adapt to new security challenges. The process of mapping these varieties and their link to national contexts will be crucial in uncovering strengths and weaknesses in existing interventions. Furthermore, D.Rad accounts for the problem that processes of radicalization often occur in circumstances that escape the control and scrutiny of traditional national frameworks of justice. The participation of AI professionals in modelling, analyzing, and devising solutions to online radicalization will be central to the project's aims.

Executive Summary

The report scrutinizes the role of the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD), which entered the German parliament as the largest opposition party in 2017 and has been driving far-right radicalisation and polarisation with its anti-immigrant agenda. Using the example of two regional election campaign spots, the report shows how the AfD ties in with existing mistrust in democratic institutions and creates the image of an existential threat to the German people, which supposedly can only be rescued by the AfD. The audience reaction to both spots confirms that the AfD indeed profits from widespread mistrust in democratic institutions and from a perception shared by many citizens of being overlooked by a government that for the last sixteen years has been represented by chancellor Merkel. This mistrust plays together with extreme racist attitudes among the public that are expressed in the context of immigration. The comments clearly show that it is not simply a dissatisfaction with an overly liberal migration policy or with social inequality, but radical racist positions, including the belief in conspiracies such as a 'great replacement', that explains the support of the AfD both in eastern and western Germany. Against this backdrop, the role of the AfD appears to be less that of normalizing radical messages, than that of echoing, reinforcing, and translating them into the political system to subvert the democratic institutions of the representative political system.

List of Abbreviations

AfD – Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany)

CDU – Christlich Demokratische Union (Christian Democratic Union)

CSU – Christlich-Soziale Union (Christian Social Union)

FDP – Freie Demokratische Partei (Free Democratic Party)

GDR – German Democratic Republic

NSU – Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund (National Socialist Underground)

Pegida – Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamicisation of the Occident)

SPD – Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party)

VK – V-Kontakte

1. Introduction

Cultural objects such as memes, videos, or films play an important role in processes of radicalisation. They represent, transmit and legitimise radical political ideas, myths and conspiracies, and are strategically used by political actors to promote polarisation and to mobilize grievances and resentment against marginalized groups. Through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, cultural objects circulate intensively and reach a wide audience, ultimately being echoed by traditional media. They are, therefore, an important element in understanding how radical ideas become mainstream. D.Rad WP5 explores the mainstreaming of radicalisation through digital platforms and popular culture and considers the role that contemporary mainstream media cultures play, including traditional and new media channels, in representing and triggering perceived injustice and grievances.

The representation and scandalization of the increased influx of Syrian refugees since 2014 under the label of “refugee crisis” in the German public sphere is a case in point illustrating how an interplay of traditional and social media platforms trigger dynamics of polarization. The term “refugee crisis” refers to the dominant framing of the developments in 2015 and 2016, when a rising number of asylum seekers arrived in Germany, mainly as a result of the Syrian civil war, and supposedly overwhelmed state infrastructure and civil society. Almost all major public actors framed these events as a “crisis” and thus contributed to a discourse in which ethnic nationalism, xenophobia and racism became more pronounced and salient throughout Germany (Sadeghi, 2018). As a result, trends of radicalization accentuated, leading to a wave of anti-migrant mobilization, the rise of the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) and a series of hundreds of arson attacks against refugees (Vorländer et al., 2018).

This process of radicalising anti-migrant attitudes was accompanied by a political campaign against the freedom of press and particularly against public-service broadcasters that became attacked under the label of a “lying press” (“Lügenpresse”) by a broad alliance of right-wing actors. As in many other countries, the German far-right succeeded in spreading and normalizing the claim that mainstream media misrepresents the opinions of large majorities and invisibilizes people who are critical of state migration policy altogether. Moreover, right-wing actors, especially the anti-Islamic movement Pegida and the AfD, have accused public-service broadcasters of complicity with the government and of celebrating a German welcome culture instead of critically reporting on the supposedly breach of law by chancellor Angela Merkel allowing refugees enter Germany.

In fact, Germany’s media system is neither monolithic nor controlled by the state. As result of the Second World War, a public broadcasting system was established that carries the role to inform the public and ensure plurality of opinion in order to prevent state-run media and information monopoly (Koliska & Assmann, 2019, p. 5). Its political and financial independence is ensured through public funding and upheld by the constitution. On the other hand, a broad spectrum of private newspapers and broadcasters has developed since the 1980s that is primarily financed through advertising and enjoys greater freedom in content production (ibid.). One of the best-known and most influential players is the Axel Springer publishing house, which issues the daily newspaper ‘Bild’, with the highest circulation of 1,2 million copies sold (Statista a 2021). The highest market share in the TV sector is held by the TV station RTL with 7.7 percent, followed by Sat.1 with 5.2 percent and Vox with 4.7 percent. By comparison, the market share of the public broadcasters is significantly higher, with ZDF up to 13.8 percent (Statista b 2021).

Given the current tense situation, often referred to as 'polarization', the report investigates the role and strategies of the AfD in disseminating radical political positions through its media activities, in particular through the use of social media channels. Examining two election campaign spots, published on Facebook and YouTube in 2018 and 2019, it demonstrates how the party attempts to communicate radical racist positions for a broad public and contributes to making racism socially acceptable. Comparing two media objects that were designed for two different audiences – one socialized in the former East Germany and one in the former West Germany – the report points out the spectrum of strategies to mobilize grievances and shape them into an anti-migrant agenda.

Methodologically, this report draws on the cultural circulation model of Stuart Hall, which offers a theoretical account of how media content is produced, disseminated and consumed (1980). It is interested in both the narrative and technical elements of the representation of reality, and in the audience reactions to it. The analysis is divided into three steps, including the content analysis of the representations, as well as the use of visual and technical elements, the circulation of the media object, and the audience reactions to the video. It follows an inductive coding strategy, whose results are organized in tables and illustrated by images of the video.

2. Methodology

The D.5.1. country report builds on the cultural circulation model of Stuart Hall (1997, 2003) to study the representation, distribution and consumption of radicalised media and mediated patterns of othering and marginalisation. According to Hall, "representation connects meaning and language to culture" (Hall 1997, p.13). He understands representation not as descriptive processes, but as essential part of the process by which members of a culture use language to produce meaning. Such a constructionist approach motivates us to examine the actors involved in the production of meaning and the strategies they apply to constitute a specific social reality. Following Stuart Hall's model of 'coding/encoding', the process of mass-communication can be conceptualized as a circuit consisting of 'production', 'circulation', 'distribution/consumption' and 'reproduction' (Hall, 2003, p. 43). The object of these practices is meaning and messages, which are 'encoded' and circulated in a discursive form and distributed to different audiences. In order to complete the circuit, the discursive meaning must be translated into social practices ('consumption'). In other words, it must be decoded (interpreted) by the audience to have an effect (ibid., p. 45). Since the codes of 'encoding' and 'decoding' may not be symmetrical, there are different degrees of understanding and misunderstanding between the producer and receivers of messages. From this follows that an analysis of cultural objects of radicalization needs to include both the process of encoding meaning by the producer and the practices of decoding by the audience. In addition, the process of circulation and distribution must be taken into account in order to reconstruct the circuit of communication.

Against this backdrop, the report covers two election campaign spots of the far-right party AfD and examines them in terms of their representations, distribution channels, and associated consumption practices. Using these exemplary cases, it discusses the AfD's media strategy in conveying and legitimizing radical ideas and radicalized political action as well as its effects on the audience. The selection of the two videos followed the identification of right-wing political actors using media platforms to convey radical messages. These include the anti-Islamic movement Pegida, the nationalist Identitarian Movement, the AfD party, as well as the

far-right NGO Ein Prozent für unser Land (“One percent for our country”) and the right-wing magazine Compact Magazin (Baldauf et al., 2017). Out of these, the AfD was selected because it constitutes the most important actor of the New Right in Germany and is represented in all state and federal parliaments, illustrating in a particularly vivid way how radical messages become mainstream.

Born as a national-liberal party with right-wing populist rhetoric in 2013 against the backdrop of the global financial crisis, the AfD emerged from a national-conservative milieu that, during its political development, increasingly interacted with the radical right-wing milieu that had existed long before (Häusler, 2018, p. 9). In the context of an increased influx of Syrian refugees that followed Syrian civil war and the expansion of the terrorist militia Islamic State, the party became an important driver of radicalisation in Germany, carrying out an anti-Muslim racist campaign and attacking the pluralistic immigration society. According to Karolin Schwarz, who has studied far-right agitation in the digital sphere, the AfD focuses more than any other German party on issues that are expected to fuel rage, fear or grief among the public (Schwarz 2020: 34). This claim is underpinned by a study by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, which has compared the digital campaign strategies for the 2019 European elections in Germany and Austria (Brodnik et al., 2019). The authors of the study proved that right-wing populist parties deliberately provoke negative and angry reactions to increase their reach and the resonance of their postings (ibid., pp. 23ff).

From the extensive social media material produced and circulated by the AfD, we have selected two regional election campaign spots shared by regional branches of the AfD on its Facebook account in 2018 and 2019 as case studies (see table 1). The selected cases enable us to explore how the anti-migration agenda is linked to other social issues such as social inequality, the perceived lack of political and media representation, and social deprivation in order to exploit existing grievances and shape them into a political agenda. Since the election campaigns chosen for analysis strongly differ in terms of the audience targeted, we examined two different strategies of transmission and normalization of radical messages. Moreover, due to the high popularity both videos gained, we can scrutinize how the messages represented in the videos are perceived and adapted by audiences and thus gain a better understanding of how cultural objects influence radicalization in the context of online communities.

The report draws on a qualitative video analysis to critically interpret the representations produced within the two election campaign spots (Mikos, 2014). It does focus on both the represented message, and on the aesthetical and stylistic means of representation, as well as the technical elements used to create meaning and structure social reality (see table 2 and 4). Moreover, in accordance with Hall’s model of ‘encoding/decoding’, audience reactions to the spots, manifested in user comments, are included in the analysis. The analysis of user comments followed the procedure of thematic coding as outlined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke: (1) familiarising with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes (2006, p. 87). The results of thematic coding are summarized in part 5 and depicted in table 3 and 5.

3. Media landscape of radicalisation

1990, the year of German reunification, is a key date for understanding radicalisation in Germany. With the “new” federal states from the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), the country also acquired a new political cleavage, pitting West versus East in a clash of

contrasting perceptions about who benefits from reunification. An important part of the public in the former GDR believed that reunification and the West Germans' management of the process had harmed its interests. It also felt that reunification had done much to depopulate the new federal states and deteriorate living standards. Initially, it was a left-wing political party that aggregated these perceptions into political discourse. As of 2015 it was increasingly the far-right AfD that sought to mobilize East German sentiment. It did so by appropriating some of the slogans of 1989-1990, such as *Wir sind das Volk!*, "We are the people!" (Mau, 2019; Weisskircher, 2020). The beginning of the 1990s is important also because it represented the culmination of the *Asyldebatte* ("Asylum Debate"). This debate was a massive public campaign initiated in the early 1980s by the centre-right and right-wing parties problematising the arrival of refugees and attacking the left-wing social-democrats (Herbert, 2001). Soon after reunification, a wave of far-right riots and arson attacks spread throughout the country, with the most severe attacks in cities of the former GDR, Rostock-Lichtenhagen and Hoyerswerda. These far-right mobilisations played an essential part in facilitating that the push of the centre-right and right-wing reaches its objective of introducing a more restrictive asylum policy in 1993 (Adeire, 2019; Prenzel, 2015). Twenty years later, following the increases in refugee numbers, reaching 441,899 asylum applications in 2015 and 722,370 in 2016, the AfD launched a similar campaign in 2015. This time the campaign largely occurred on social media and in particular, Facebook. As in 1991-1993, it led to a country-wide wave of mass demonstrations and arson attacks on refugee homes on a daily basis (Müller & Schwarz, 2018).

As in most Western European countries following the 9-11 attacks, the public debate and law enforcement in Germany throughout the 2000s had focused primarily on Jihadist radicalisation, with a wary eye on Germany's Muslim communities. This attention to Jihadism partly builds on the spirit of the *Asyldebatte*, partly on newer developments. First, there was an appropriation by Christian Democrat (CDU) politicians and other public figures of the *Leitkultur*-concept ("guiding", "leading" culture) around 2000. The concept initially referred to a set of European values (Tibi, 1998). Still, Friedrich Merz (CDU) and others adapted it to describe German values that immigrants need to adapt, and as the preferred opposite of multiculturalism (Scholz, 2017). A second development was the public debate surrounding the publication of *Deutschland schafft sich ab* ("Germany abolishes itself", by Thilo Sarrazin), a book with sharp anti-immigrant rhetoric that became a national best-seller in 2010, selling 1,5 million copies by 2012 (Irrgang, 2011; Wasmer, 2013).

However, the public debate would change tremendously from 2011 on, with the discovery in November 2011 of an underground-operating group of armed far-right extremists, the National Socialist Underground (NSU), of its complex country-wide network of supporters, and of the failure of security organs to stop the group despite the massive presence of police informants in this network. The discovery of the NSU led to an increasing acknowledgement of the gravity of far-right radicalization in the country (Wasmer, 2013, p. 175). This acknowledgement received further support with the nationwide wave of arson attacks on immigrants in 2015-16. The arson wave attracted the mass participation of people without any previous involvement in far-right structures. It showed dramatically how fast radicalization occurs, at first sight requiring little to no organizational structures. In hindsight, the arson attacks and riots of 2015-16 were hardly spontaneous and came in response to the social media campaign organized by the AfD and other representatives of the New Right (Biermann et al., 2016; Eppelsheim & Freidel, 2016; Müller & Schwarz, 2018).

The public broadcasters in Germany are equidistant and largely aware of the radicalizing effects of unbalanced reporting. In contrast, a private media corporation, the Axel Springer Publishing House, practised a polarizing approach to reporting and news coverage, most evidently during the *Asyldebatte*, when it openly sided with the right-wing (Herbert, 2001; Irrgang, 2011). Ever since and following increased public scrutiny, the publishing house, which issues the country's most widely-read newspapers, pursued a more moderate course, although its negative reporting of immigrants continued (Irrgang, 2011). For instance, it would be the leading newspaper of the Springer House, *Bild*, that played an essential part in disseminating Sarrazin's views. *Bild* illegally re-published an older interview with Sarrazin, initially published by *Lettre Internationale*, which included several anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim statements (Büch, 2009).

However, most media outlets that pursue a polarizing depiction of social and ethnic groups are no longer found among established media corporations. This trend manifests itself in the diffusion of the *Lügenpresse*-slogan ("lying press"), used indiscriminately in far-right milieus to describe public and private national media. This slogan dates back to 1914, when nationalist propaganda used it for referring to the foreign press. As of the 2000s, it was the far-right to increasingly appropriate it, with a culminating moment in 2014-15, when the far-right anti-immigrant Pegida movement used it to such an extent that it largely became associated with it. The slogan reflects a lack of trust in the established media outlets among the population (Denner & Peter, 2017). It epitomizes the rise of alternative media, distancing themselves from the established media holdings. An essential reference is the *Compact Magazin – Magazin für Souveränität*, established in 2010 and the main media outlet for Pegida and AfD (Simpson, 2016). Its style and topics are representative of the wider universe of a conspirationist media presence that demonizes the federal government, centrist political parties, immigrants, and more generally, a political establishment positively influenced by the 1968 revolts. The unifying figure for that which it opposes most is that of chancellor Merkel, portrayed with a headscarf in one of the magazine's most well-known attacks on her, and titled *Mutti Multikulti* ("Mama Multiculturalism"). Next to *Lügenpresse*, slogans such as *Überfremdung* (over-foreignization), *Volkstod* (national death or extinction), and *Umvolkung* ("re-peopling", a term close to "Great Replacement"), all three used or introduced by the Nazis, give a good glimpse of the narrative in the far-right media presence and in *Compact* publications (Baldauf et al., 2017; Botsch & Kopke, 2019; King, 2013). They point to immigration and the political elites' acceptance of it as existential threats to the German ethnic nation. It is, however, not only the far-right that casts a wary eye on refugees. Top public figures such as Thomas de Maizière, the Christian-Democrat Minister of Interior Affairs in 2009-11 and 2013-18, relaunched discussions about a *Leitkultur* in 2017 (Prantl, 2017), same as Merz seventeen years before, casting the "culture" of Muslim immigrants as potentially incompatible with the German one.

A shift similar to that from established media corporations to alternative media has also taken place on online platforms. With increasing scrutiny by YouTube, Facebook and other corporations of radicalising content on their platforms, many actors involved in the production and online dissemination of such content have moved elsewhere. The critical turning point was in 2019. Following far-right attacks in Christchurch (New Zealand), El Paso (US), and Halle (Germany), YouTube Germany increased the pressure on the far-right actors present on its platform by changing its algorithm, preventing commercials from being run by far-right channels, or by shutting down some of these channels altogether. In response, many far-right actors abandoned these platforms, replacing Facebook with V-Kontakte (VK), Twitter with Gab.ai and YouTube with BitChute. Important to note, this migration to more marginal

platforms significantly reduced the reach of far-right actors. For instance, changing from Youtube to BitChute caused a decline in the case of one far-right actor from 70.000 to 3.000 followers (Schwarz, 2019), while Martin Sellner, the leader of the Identitarian Movement went from 28.000 followers on Facebook to 3.000 on VK, causing him to abandon the channel altogether (Dittrich et al., 2020, page 23).

The sense of “being victimised” as a crucial ingredient for radicalization is a key component of the I-GAP framework; so is the sense of “being thwarted or lacking agency in established legal and political structures”, followed by “us vs them” identity formulations. Parts of the national media landscape have regularly connected these three components (victimization; alleged lack of agency; “us vs them” polarization). The media discourse surrounding immigration translates since the 1990s into the periodical portrayal of migrants as potentially incompatible with German values, at times victimizing Germans as un- or misrepresented by a political establishment too welcoming of foreigners. Over the last thirty years this discourse has shifted from more established, mainstream media outlets to far-right and conspiracyist magazines and social media presences. Yet immigration continues to be the prominent topic it was thirty years ago. Since the Asylum Debate, it periodically returns to public attention first through the debate around *Leitkultur*, then 9-11, the polarizing effect of Sarrazin’s declarations, and finally through the refugee crisis and the growing numbers of North African and Middle Eastern refugees following the Arab Spring.

Through their coverage of the topic, far-right media outlets have driven the radicalization of segments of the German public. They portrayed the presence of immigrants as a threat to the majority’s culture, as evidence for the elite’s “treason” of national interests, finding the means to support unemployed asylum seekers while imposing increasingly restrictive social regulations for social benefits on Germany’s poor and unemployed. This perception is not the product of media alone; the media often amplifies declarations of well-known public figures. Examples include de Maizière’s 2017 Islamophobic declaration “We are not Burka”, or the line he drew between legitimate refugees fleeing wars and less acceptable immigrants fleeing poverty. The same minister also took his turn at formulating the principles of a German *Leitkultur*, or “lead culture” (Cattien, 2021; Heinemann, 2017; Prantl, 2017). Such distinctions recall the climate of the Asylum Debate and suggest to the broader German public that the presence of immigrants is potentially illegitimate if not accepting the principles of the “lead culture”. To use the I-GAP conceptual framework, the feelings of injustice prevalent among the anti-refugee demonstrators of 2015-16 are in part a product of the polarizing construction of immigrant or refugee “others”. These are depicted by top politicians such as de Maizière as belonging to a “culture” distinct from the German one, and that needs to accept the latter’s “lead” for being allowed to stay.

4. Representation, circulation, and consumption context of the media object

The following section examines the role of two election campaign spots of the AfD in representing and transmitting radical political ideas to mobilize grievances and facilitate polarization. The first spot – “Let’s take back our country” – was published by the AfD Thuringia on Facebook on the 16th of October, 2019, as part of a cross-regional campaign targeting the eastern German region, where in 2019 three regional elections took place (Ayyadi, 2019).

Running a campaign under the slogan “Completing the Turnaround”, the AfD attempted to address existing grievances about the transformation process after reunification, claiming that there had been no real or sufficient political transformation so far, which the AfD would now be supposed to initiate. There are two key messages communicated by the spot analysed as case study: (1) The AfD is a civic movement close to the people revolting against the alienated political elite and forming a radical opposition. (2) Today's political system is just as repressive and undemocratic as it was under the GDR and National Socialism and must therefore be overthrown by brave resistance fighters (see table 2). Despite a top candidate coming from western Germany, the AfD presents itself as the legitimate successor to the GDR opposition, which today continues their fight for a real democracy. Thus, it draws on the historical experience of East German voters and is tapping into their sense of crisis and uncertainty in order to win their support for its own radical political agenda (Begrich & Begrich, 2019). The main political theme of the AfD – migration – is not explicitly addressed in the spot through political slogans or demands. Nevertheless, it is present indirectly through the portrayal of the protest movement, which symbolizes the mass mobilization against immigration that emerged in the context of the so-called “refugee crisis”.

The video begins with a powerful sequence in which a crowd, surrounded by a sea of German flags, chants “We are the people” (see image 1). The date 1989 appears across the entire screen and after a few seconds is supplemented by the sentence: “In 1989, citizens took to the streets for a peaceful revolution”. The camera angles show the protest from inside and gives the impression that the viewer is part of the protesting crowd. The background music is dynamic and charged. Imitating the symbols and slogans of the GDR opposition movement, from the very first moment, the spot portrays the AfD and its supporters as the successors to the “peaceful revolution” that brought about the end of the GDR and is now once again fighting the political system of the FRG, which, like the GDR back then, is supposedly in its final stages.

The optimistic spirit of the protest movement is abruptly interrupted by the next sequence claiming that: “Today, 30 years later, many are disappointed...”. In the following seconds, two messages are communicated: (1) The political transformation to a democracy has failed and developed into a new dictatorship, which is as repressive as the GDR; (2) The citizens of the eastern part of Germany, the former GDR, experience structural inequality and deprivation due to a Western elite that dominates the political and media system. In order to prove these provocative and false claims, the spot refers to the angles in news coverage of two of Germany's largest newspapers. It first displays the headline “Despotism in the GDR was no worse than it is today”, while deliberately blurring the subtitle¹, which critically refers to the quote as an expression of frustration with democracy (see image 2). And then switches to another headline that claims “That's how he is, the Ossi. Cliché and reality. How the East ticks - and why it votes differently” (see picture 3). The cover is superimposed by the outcry “disappointed”. The expression “Ossi” can be understood as a pejorative term designating the eastern German population. It is used by the newspaper to ironically question the cliché about the eastern German population, but at the same time reproduces the idea of a dichotomy between West and East, with the latter being considered to have a right-wing political orientation and a tendency to be less democratic. Thus, it serves as a proof of cultural misrepresentation and at the same time sparks the group identity as eastern Germans. The

¹ The subtitle, which is not readable in the video is: “A ZEIT-survey on the anniversary of German unification shows that a large proportion of East Germans are sceptical about democracy. What has gone wrong in the last 30 years?”.

conclusion is obvious: only the AfD represents the eastern German population and is willing to finish the transformation and implement a real democracy.

This message of a deprived East and a supposedly major deficit of democracy is underpinned and further elaborated by survey data that points to the various grievances among the population (see image 4). On a blue background in white and bold letters the supposed survey data is quoted: “41% say: less freedom of expression than in the GDR”; “52% think: democracy is poorly implemented”, 67% criticize the wage gap between West and East”, “79% lament that there is less protection against crime than before the turnaround”, “82% of all Germans do not dare to freely express their opinion in public!”. The addressed audience appears as a group that experiences structural inequality and is forgotten by an alienated political elite that has broken their democratic promise. In contrast to their public image as xenophobic and undemocratic movement, the audience is represented as a democratic movement that seeks for political representation through the AfD, which is shown as a civic movement opposing the government from below.

In the light of the poll results, the election spot calls for a joint protest: “Now we go to the streets”. The following sequences show a montage of protests, all of which have the symbolic use of German flags in common. In addition, the Wirmer flag can be seen at the protests, which serves as a symbol of the anti-Muslim and anti-migrant Pegida movement and other far-right movements. The crowd depicted appears “average”, consisting of rather elderly people; there are no skinheads or people otherwise marked as right-wing extremists. Nevertheless, radical messages are expressed. A sign is viewed claiming: “No 3rd dictatorship in Germany” (see image 5), putting the current political system in a row with National Socialism and the GDR. In addition, the ad shows a sign with the inscription “Do not keep silent about Islamization”, communicating on another threat scenario which the AfD relies on. The video ends with the statement “We take the protest to the parliaments”, and the request to the viewers to “Complete the turnaround! Now or never!”. The state election on October 26 appears as the last chance to avert the impending dictatorship by voting for the AfD.

The second case, the election spot “AfD Bavaria demands: Prevent Asylum Abuse! Protect the Borders!” of the Bavarian branch of the AfD pursues a quite different strategy. Their election campaign spot, which was published a year earlier on the 20th of September, 2018, focuses exclusively on the issue of immigration and asylum. It is created as an animated video and presents three central messages: (1) Europe is threatened by a displacement of their population through mass immigration from Africa; (2) the political elite is supporting open borders to attract even more immigrants and does not control its territorial borders; (3) migration is a major economic and security threat to Germany, which can only be prevented through the AfD (see table 4). This exclusive focus on immigration shows that the AfD Bavaria feels confident in attracting voters through the issue of migration without addressing any other grievances among the population. This can be explained through the comparatively wealthy and conservative population in Bavaria, which is less affected by the questions of social inequality and economic deprivation.

The video starts with an animated representation of migration flows from Africa to Europe that comes very close to the far-right conspiracy myth of a ‘great replacement’, which claims that a “European people” would be “replaced” by government-planned immigration (Manemann 2020: 15). The first sequence depicts the European map and the regions bordering it. It is

titled “Immigration Europe”. While the European continent is filled with white figures, the surrounding territories of North Africa and Turkey appear filled with black figures that in the following sequence move to Europe and replace the white figures (see image 6). After a few seconds the number stops at 649855 (asylum applications). The black figures in Western and Southern Europe are now in the majority compared to the white people (see image 7). The white population has almost been displaced.

This scenario is driven further in the following sequence where the view shifts towards the south, so that the entire African continent becomes visible, populated by a huge mass of black figures (see image 8). The image is annotated showing Africa’s present population of 1,284,000,000 and its estimated population in 2050 of 2,500,000,000. The impression of a threatening growing population is then underpinned by statistics, saying that more than half of the population and up to 75 % is willing to emigrate (see image 9). The message is clear: a never-ending stream of asylum seekers from North Africa and the Middle East is populating Europe and turning a white Europe into a black continent.

The myth of a ‘great replacement’ is further indicated by the following sequence, during which a graphic appears that depicts the UN migration pact and its alleged contents, such as “open borders, family reunification, right to stay, censorship laws, propaganda, social migration”. It is claimed that this is happening “with the consent of CDU, CSU, SPD, FDP, Bündnis 90 Die Grünen, Die Linke”, that is, all parties represented in the parliament. The AfD appears as the only party to disagree with the migration pact and to want to prevent it in order to stop the “flooding” of Europe by black migrants (see image 10).

Subsequently, migration is linked to several economic and security threats (see picture 11). It is claimed that the influx of 1.6 million refugees has been linked to 289753 crimes and implies costs for the German state ascending to 20 billion Euro, as well as the influx of 760 extremists. Despite this threat – so the following message – the government does not protect its citizens and control the national borders. In reference to a pie chart, it is claimed that only 28% of all rejected asylum applications result in the expulsion of the applicant. The video ends with the AfD logo and the insertion of the election date on October 14, 2018, together with the campaign slogan “Bayern. Aber sicher” (Bavaria, of course!), which in German implies the dual meaning “Bavaria, but secure!”. The audience is told to elect the AfD as the political force that will protect the German people of a threatening flood of black immigrants, which otherwise will be further facilitated by all other parties.

The Circulation of the Media Object

The election spots analysed above were primarily spread via the AfD Facebook account, where they were watched and shared more than 60 thousand times (see table 1). In addition, the AfD Bavaria circulated the video via YouTube where it was watched almost 2000 times and liked more than 100 times. Both videos were heavily commented by their online followers. The spot of the AfD Thuringia counts 518 comments; the spot of the AfD Bavaria 397 comments. Only very few people (15) commented on the video on YouTube. Thus, Facebook appears as the most important platform to spread their election campaign videos. However, the two spots are just one piece of a larger puzzle, in which the election campaign combined other videos and formats that communicate similar messages and pictures. More important than the object itself are the messages conveyed by it, which are disseminated through many

other channels and picked up by the traditional mass media and further processed through interviews, reports and talk shows. In the case of the AfD Thuringia, the message of an East-West divide as well as the call to complete the revolution of 1989 have been taken up by many traditional media accounts and thus become steady elements in public discourse. A case in point is the feature “Civil rights activists on the right margin? Once resistance, always resistance”, transmitted by the public-service broadcaster Deutschlandfunk in June 2020. The protagonists of the feature are three former civil rights activists from the GDR who were publicly criticized for their closeness to the AfD or other new-right actors and who, against this backdrop, propagate the myth of restricted freedom of expression. Thus, the AfD and its framing of the issue managed to gain media attention thanks to a provocative attempt to reinterpret history and co-opt the heritage of the ‘peaceful revolution’ even if many media outlets critically reported about it and questioned the message. In comparison, the migrant-hostile messages spread by the AfD Bavaria can be seen as part of an overarching right-wing discourse, which is promoted by many different actors of the New Right. However, the myths of migration as a major threat, with uncontrolled open borders and an inefficient executive authority, were also picked up and critically discussed by many other traditional media outlets and became a frequent issue in many TV and radio shows.

The Consumption of the Media Object

In total, the election spot “Let’s take back our country” by the AfD Thuringia counts 518 comments (see table 3). Aside from comments praising the spot and wishing success in the election, there are numerous comments that directly address its content and refer to a ‘democratic deficit’ of the political system. Most of them pick up the notion of a ‘dictatorship’, which is referred to as ‘system of Merkel’ or ‘Merkel’ism’. Angela Merkel has become the main enemy image of the far-right, epitomizing the ‘established system’ against which the AfD is claiming to revolt. While the election spot voices a general criticism of the political system without referring to specific politicians, the audience is united through its hostile attitude against chancellor Angela Merkel: “I don’t like dictators, so I am against Merkel and her criminal unjust regime”. Moreover, the notion of a “lying press” is protested by the audience, which claims that “the media” does withhold the truth about migration flows to Germany, hinting at a secret pact between a pro-migration government and the press. Against this context, the AfD presents itself as ‘anti-establishment party’. The AfD is presented as both a ‘grassroot actor’, which is revolting against an overwhelming opponent, and a ‘victim’, whose arguments are constantly suppressed by the “left”.

The other main theme of the spot, the socioeconomic deprivation of East Germany, however, is rarely picked up on in the comments section and remains on the margins. Instead, most comments address the theme of ‘migration’ and use it to spread racist content. Many of them construe migration as a threat for security and cultural plurality as destruction of their homeland. These comments reproduce well-known far-right myths of a ‘dangerous immigrant man’, claiming that women in Germany can no longer freely move at night because of allegedly “traumatized murderer and rapists” that are not correspondingly penalized for their deeds. While the spot does only indicate “islamization” as a threat, commenters apparently feel invited to share their racist thoughts on the developments of the “last years”, in which “the last remnants of home and identity, of freedom and security, of trust and certainty about the future are being lost” and in which the “destruction of our country is so radical, the annihilation and extinction so fanatical and extreme”. The reactions in the comments show that it is not

socioeconomic problems following the transformation, like rising unemployment or growing inequality between East and West, that concern the AfD's potential electorate the most, but rather the perception of an undemocratic political system together with the rejection of a pluralistic society. Interestingly, the spot also provoked many critical comments that warn the audience of this "far-right" party and reject the narrative of a "turnaround 2.0", pointing the West German origin of the party leadership. In addition, there are several comments critically and ironically referring the narrative of a 'East-West divide' proposing to build a new wall to solve the problem in the "East".

On the other hand, the spot of the AfD Bavaria counts 397 comments, which also focus on these two main themes 'migration as a threat' and the 'undemocratic political system' (see table 5). The myth of the 'great replacement' is picked up by the audience and is further elaborated: "According to the planning in Brussels, 300 million immigrants will come to Europe, all domestic borders will be lifted, we have no way to protect ourselves. The struggle to survive, given the many knives, will inevitably come". Many comments also claim immigrants would abuse the German social welfare system. Overall, the number of racist comments clearly exceeds the number in reaction to the spot of the AfD Thuringia. Similar to the audience's reaction to the spot of the AfD Thuringia, the comments demonstrate a profound mistrust in democratic institutions, such as in free elections: "I just don't believe in honest elections. The old ones will find ways to manipulate it". There is also a widespread mistrust in free press, as one commenter exemplifies that they're "grateful" for the anti-migration election spot because public service broadcasters would "withhold such information". In this context, the AfD is perceived as the only party that will care for and rescue the German population: "I vote AfD, because I am of the opinion that we finally need politics again that represent the people. For years, the old parties run this country into the ground, they had enough time to change something!". This comment illustrates the widely held view that the "established" political parties do not represent the interests of the majority of the people. This deficit of representation is expected to be fixed by the AfD, which pretends to do a policy for the people by excluding the "immigrant others".

The analysis of both election spots illustrates how the German New Right fuels radical political ideas to mobilize grievances and facilitate polarisation. Through radical positions and provocations, the AfD has succeeded not only in spreading its messages on its own channels, but also in generating major media coverage (albeit negative) from public and private broadcasters. Its agenda of reinforcing widespread distrust in democratic institutions has had an impact, as the reactions in social media show.

5. Conclusion

Against the backdrop of rising refugee numbers in 2014/2015, the far-right movement in Germany has succeeded in gaining massive influence and forming the strongest opposition fraction in parliament with the AfD. However, the success of the far-right profits from previous patterns of interpretation that had already emerged in the 1990s against the backdrop of the "asylum debate". It picks up and radicalizes exclusionary positions that had been reproduced for years in the German middle class, for example in the context of the debate about a German "Leitkultur" ("leading culture"). The media landscape plays an ambivalent role in processes of radicalisation. On the one hand, private media houses such as the Axel Springer publishing house have helped spread and legitimise anti-Muslim resentment over the last decades.

Simultaneously, with the system of public service broadcasters, there is an independent media offering which, in view of its social responsibility, largely evades populist anti-migrant interpretations. Since 2014, this has set in motion a dynamic in which journalists have become the bogeymen of the New Right and have been attacked as the “lying press”. At the same time, an “alternative” right-wing media landscape has emerged that distances itself from the “established media” and forms a radicalized sub-public. In these echo chambers, victim narratives have emerged that legitimize resistance to the political system, which is labeled authoritarian.

The two AfD campaign spots exemplify how the New Right feeds the victim narrative and fuels radical positions by staging an existential threat to the German people. While the AfD Thuringia lays the focus on an alleged state repression and speaks of a “third dictatorship”, the AfD Bavaria focuses on the myth of a ‘great replacement’ of the white European people by black African immigrants. Both spots create the image of an oppressed and at-risk audience, but each in a different way. The spot of the AfD Thuringia constructs an eastern German group that is economically and symbolically deprived in comparison to a western German elite dominating the political and media system. In comparison, the AfD Bavaria constructs the image of a defenceless Europe unrepresented by a political elite that promotes mass migration. Against this background, the AfD present itself as the only rescuing alternative in the face of an otherwise inescapable catastrophe.

In particular, the spot of the AfD Thuringia can be interpreted through the prism of the I-GAP framework. It ties in with existing structural inequalities between eastern and western Germany, reinforces the associated grievances and provides a radical interpretation according to which the eastern German population is oppressed by a political elite that it needs to revolt against. The framing of the current political system as a dictatorship comparable to those of the NS-era and the GDR builds on the existing mistrust in democratic institutions (alienation) to further strengthen the ongoing crisis in the system of representative democracy, claiming that no dialog or compromise (polarization) is possible with any other party except of the AfD. On the contrary, the second election spot by the AfD Bavaria does not address the issue of socioeconomic inequality but picks on racist and xenophobic resentments and feelings of political alienation. It primarily focuses on the issue of migration, ties in with existing fears of an ‘over-foreignization’ and amplifies them by showing supposedly neutral statistics that suggest a ‘great replacement’ organized by European political elites. Both election spots show how essential feelings of political alienation and lacking representation are for processes of radicalization. In the face of dwindling faith in political representation, the AfD is intensifying resentment against “the elites” and presenting itself as close to the people, a grassroots movement that radically opposes the establishment.

The audience reaction of both spots shows that the AfD indeed profits from a widespread mistrust in democratic institutions and a perception of individuals feeling disrespected and overlooked by a political elite epitomized by chancellor Merkel, who has been governing the country for the last 16 years. In addition to this, it is the extreme racist attitudes expressed in the context of immigration that shape the reaction of the audience. The analysis of the comments demonstrates that it is not simply a dissatisfaction with the current migration policy or socioeconomic system that drives the potential electorate, but radical racist positions and a support of a ‘great replacement’ theory and of other far-right myths about abusive and criminal immigrants that motivate them to vote for the AfD, which promises to apply a radical

anti-migrant policy. Against this background, the AfD's role seems to be less in normalizing radical messages than in echoing, reinforcing, and translating them into the political system to subvert the democratic institutions of the representative political system.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Images

Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

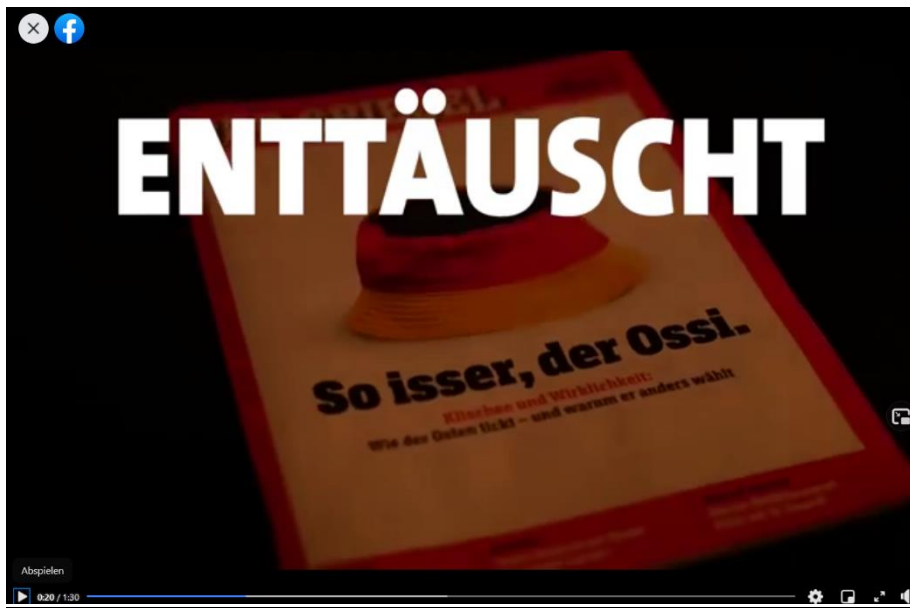


Image 4

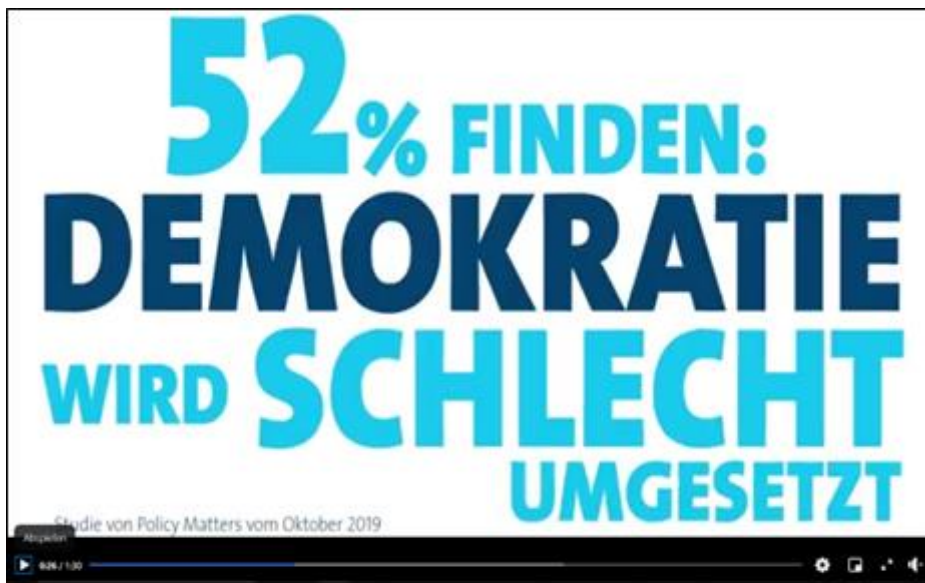


Image 5



Image 6



Image 7



Image 8



Image 9



Image 10

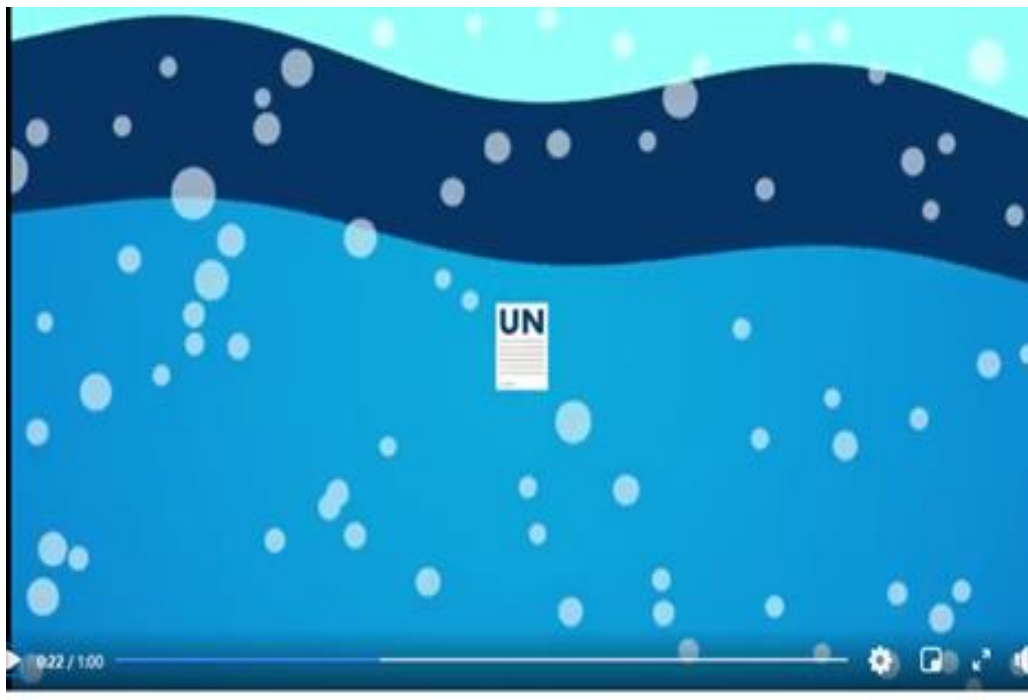


Image 11



Appendix 2: Tables

Table 1: Circulation of the Media Objects

	AfD Thuringia	AfD Bavaria
Link	https://www.facebook.com/166760213476486/videos/1177911522403801	https://www.facebook.com/alternativefuerde/videos/1995350270754886
Title	"Let's take back our country!" ("Holen wir uns unser Land zurück!")	"Asylum needs borders! Bavaria. But secure!" ("Asyl braucht Grenzen! Bayern. Aber sicher!")
Length	1:30 min	1:00 min
Date of Publication	Facebook: 16 th of October 2019	Facebook and Youtube: 19 th of September 2018
Accessed	April 8 2021	April 8 2021
Distribution on Facebook	1378 Likes Watched: 24789 Comments: 518	3046 Likes Watched: 76703 Comments: 397
Distribution on YouTube	-	107 like 15 do not like Watched: 1913 Comments: 15

Table 2: Representations and Technical Elements of the Election spot by AfD Thuringia

Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Political system is a dictatorship without freedom of speech - Current government repression is worse than in the GDR - Press is biased and tied to the government - East Germans are stigmatized in the press - Structural inequality between eastern and western Germany - People are disappointed - Revolution must be completed by AfD - AfD is close to the people
Aesthetical and stylistic means of representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Flags: German and Wirmer flag represent a political community - Protest signs represent messages of the AfD: "No Islamization", "No third dictatorship". - Reminiscence of the peaceful revolution in 1989 through the slogan "We are the people"

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Quotes from opinion polls to represent the positions of the AfD
Technical elements of narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Video sequences of the protests - The audience is part of the protesting crowd - Headlines of the newspaper are shown selectively to distort their actual message - Electric sound - No speaker

Table 3: Audience Reaction in relation to the video “Let's take back our country!” (AfD Thuringia)

Themes	Codes	Examples
Feedback to election spot	Success	Good luck and votes in the election Sunday! Many regards from HAMBURG!
	Criticism of East-West Narrative	In 89 it was a completely different situation, but you have probably forgotten that! Foreigner criminality also existed in the times of the GDR, but that's not why we went on the streets. We have been because of the Stasi and the freedom of travel and also the freedom of speech. Today you go to the street because you are not allowed to say what you want to express with incitement of the people and that is just not the same as 1989 and PEGIDA is a good example of this! Revolution is something else! You do not even notice it!
	Right-wing extremism	Why is the SA hired as security for Mr. Höcke's event?
Migration	Exclusive German identity	You are right. The video from yesterday should have been shown in public. Supposedly a German. I have seen the video. Cruel and clearly not German. But no one talks about that.
	Myth of Criminal migrants	It's enough for me if a woman in Germany can go out alone at night and that murderers and rapists don't get off with lenient sentences because they are supposedly traumatized.
	Myth of Over-Foreignization	I live outside of Bln, here you don't see any veils, but we still have friends and relatives who live there, what they report is enough, when I get to

		Bln I have to cry and vomit [when I see] what this beautiful city has become
	Myth of National extinction	I have always lived in the West, in Baden-Württemberg. How can I describe it, it has all come so gradually. Twenty years ago, I couldn't have imagined all this. I used to be no dissident, no oppositionist, but the developments in the last few years have shaken me. So much that was once absolutely self-evident has been destroyed, and the last remnants of homeland and identity, of freedom and security, of trust and certainty about the future are now being lost. The destruction of our country is so radical, the annihilation and extinction so fanatical and extreme, I sometimes think maybe it's just a bad nightmare from which I'll wake up one day. But it's all real, unfortunately, and the worst nightmares are becoming more and more real. Each of us has to figure out how to deal with these developments. Some will pack their bags, others will hold out to the bitter end.
AfD as Anti-Establishment Party	Populism	Talk to Mr. Höcke to find out for yourself what kind of person he is instead of parroting the mainstream chatter, then you will find out that this person, unlike Mr. Ramelow, is close to the people and listens to them.
	Perception as Victim	To deal with critical points of view... hmmm one should give the AfD also the possibilities and not try in advance with all left means to silence and push them into a corner. Their offices are smeared, cars and trucks set on fire ect. So you think that's democratic?
	Rejection of right-wing extremism	Who in the AfD and their voters is right-wing extremist? I think they do not even know what right-wing extremism means, if they would say that to my face, I would call in my lawyer!!!! Do not always consume the media that try to shit people in the brain
Political system	Dictatorship	I don't like dictators, so I am against Merkel and her criminal unjust regime.
	Lying Press	None of this in the news and media!!! https://www.facebook.com/harry.stolch.1/videos/404500583807955/

Reunification	Social deprivation	Of what use are the beautifully restored old towns in the East, what use are the new highways, what use are the few economically successful islands, if most of the new federal states are economically desolate, the German population is migrating because there are no jobs, the infrastructure is being dismantled, and Merkel's open borders are causing crime and violence to explode as in the West? Reunification is not a success story, but a single disaster.
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Table 4: Representations and Technical Elements of the Election spot by AfD Bavaria

Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Narrative of displacement of European population by immigrants from Africa - Threatening population growth in Africa - Belief that everybody in Africa wants to emigrate to Europe - Unhindered migration to Europe - Political promotion of migration - No border security - Migration as a security threat for Europe - Migration as a financial burden for Europe - Censorship of positions critical of migration - People come to Europe for social benefits not because they had to flee
Aesthetical and stylistic means of representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Narrative of displacement is represented by a map of Europe that becomes populated by black population, while white population disappears - Symbols representing migration as a threat: knife and automatic rifle - Symbol representing immigrants: black stick-figures and rubber dinghy on the water - Symbol representing financial burden: “€€€” - Political promotion of migration is exemplified by the UN Global Compact for Migration

<p>Technical elements of narrative</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Animated 2D video consisting of a few very simple graphics: the map of the Europe and its borders, the map of Africa, black and white stick-figures, graphs and brief and concise headlines - Threat of immigration is represented by graphs and statistics - Time-lapse depiction of the rapidly growing number of immigrants, asylum seekers, African populations, and those seeking to emigrate - Binary construction of black and white race through black and white stick-figures - Electric sound - High speed of rising numbers and movements - No speaker
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Table 5: Audience Reaction in relation to the video "Asylum needs borders! Bavaria. But secure!" (AfD Bavaria)

Themes	Codes	Examples
Feedback to Election spot	Success	I hope in Bavaria 25% vote AfD
	Propaganda	Among other things, the video denounces alleged propaganda. Isn't the video itself propaganda?
	Criticism of Narrow Focus	Unfortunately, one-dimensional! We have many more problems in our country that require a solution / concept! It will not be better here if only one thing is off the table! It is not enough if refugee policy is the only identity of the AfD!
Migration	Myth of Great Replacement	According to the plan in Brussels, 300 million immigrants will come to Europe, all domestic borders will be lifted, we have no way to protect ourselves. the struggle to survive, with the many knives will inevitably come. If not a miracle happens, it is so far in December.
	Myth of Criminal Migrants	Good graphic representation and also for ignorant people well recognizable which drama in the unlimited asylum seeker flood and foreigner criminality exists (criminal foreigners are mostly of Arab-African origin)

	Myth of Migrants' Abuse of Social System	Wow, the refugees come with 15 children to the authority and get money for the 15 refugee children, then they give the children to the next refugee and he says; these are all my children and so it goes on, he gives children to the refugee he gets money together with all 15 refugee children and that turns in a circle and that's why they run around with the best clothes. Are you not irritated by this? It sucks.
	Race	I tell you.... If 1 million Scandinavians had immigrated, we wouldn't have problems today. So it must be somehow related tot hat.
Unemployment	Stigmatisation of Weak Groups	The AfD must also act against all the young Hartz 4 parasites who simply have no desire to work and prefer to make one child after the other. The child benefit and all other benefits should be immediately cancelled. Also, the new German invaders should no longer get paid anything at all.
AfD as anti-establishment party	Populism	I vote AfD, because I am of the opinion that we finally need politics again that represents the people. For years, the old parties run this country into the ground, they had enough time to change something
	Rescue	Only the AfD can still save our homeland. I hope that 25 % or more will vote for them in Bavaria, fingers crossed!
Political system	Lack of Representation	What did the old parties do for us in all these years, except to constantly rip us off, to let us live in poverty through constant pension cuts (pension fraud), but to help themselves with high pensions from the pension fund without ever having paid anything in, and there you could still write a book full of what they have done to us. Courage for a better life "Vote for the AfD".
	Lying Press	Thank you! This information is not conveyed by the public "information and education broadcasters". The citizen is to dumb down so that one can pull him at the nose ring through the arena...this is the plan...but it will backfire.
	Mistrust in Democratic Institutions	I just don't believe in honest elections. The old ones will find ways to manipulate it.

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