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# Uniting the far right: how the far-right extremist, New Right, and populist frames overlap on Twitter – a German case study

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## ABSTRACT

Recent elections in Europe have demonstrated a steady rise in the success of right-wing populist parties. While advancing an anti-immigration agenda, these parties have been adamant to distance themselves from ‘right-wing extremism’. This article analyses a sample of tweets collected from the Twitter accounts of the German AfD, Identitarian Movement and the Autonomous Nationalists by employing frame analysis. We conclude that *the frames* of far-right actors *classified as extremist, New Right, and populist* in fact *converge* and we discuss our findings in the context of related case studies in other European countries.

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## Introduction

Recent elections in Europe have demonstrated a steady rise in the success of far right parties: some relatively young parties, such as the German Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany – AfD); some others with previous histories of participation in the democratic process (such as the Partij voor de Vrijheid [Party for Freedom – PVV] in the Netherlands, the Sverigedemokraterna [Sweden Democrats – SD], or the Rassemblement national [National Rally – NR] in France); and some that even entered government coalitions if only temporarily (such as the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs [Freedom Party Austria – FPÖ] and Lega [League] in Italy). While advancing an anti-immigration

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agenda, these parties have been adamant to distance themselves from ‘right-wing extremism’, although some analysts continue to classify them as right-wing extremist (e.g. FPÖ in Bailer n.d.). More broadly, there has been a shift in the discourse of some of these parties away from the concept of ‘race’ to others such as ‘culture’ or ‘religion’ (see for example Elgenius and Rydgren 2018; Froio 2018), which might suggest a replacement of typical right-wing extremist frames. In this article, we take a closer look at the frames propagated on Twitter by three far right actors in Germany: the populist AfD; the extremist, neo-Nazi movement Autonomous Nationalists (AN); and the Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland (Identitarian Movement Germany – IBD), who contest their official classification as ‘extremist’. The frame analysis reveals convergence rather than divergence, as expected. We illustrate how, across the three discourses, frames are formulated and twisted and how rhetorical and visual elements are employed, in order to, together, create a coherent story of a hyperbolic and imminent threat through an impending ‘invasion’, conspiratorially directed by outside forces and a compliant national government. In the following we outline some relevant definitions and classifications relating to the far right as they have been developed in the literature in relation to far right ‘extremist’ and ‘radical’ actors, we then introduce our case study and methodology, followed by the empirical analysis and discussion.

### A question of labels: who is who in the far right?

The far-right scene – understood as farther right from the mainstream – is highly complex, and definitions and classifications remain disputed. As Fielitz and Laloire (2016: 14) aptly point out, ‘the clear-cut boundaries between parties, movements and subcultural actors are increasingly becoming obsolete’. Traditionally the literature distinguishes between the *extreme* right and the *radical* right. The use and support for violence is oftentimes a central criterion for these differentiations, as well as the relationship and attitude towards representative democracy. As such, groups and parties falling under the *extreme* category tend to reject the fundamental values and procedures of democracy and have a propensity towards violence (Carter 2005: 17–18), whilst populist *radical* right-wing parties actively participate in the democratic system and do not openly advocate violence. A further difference concerns the construction of the enemy. For example, the extreme right are rather more overt regarding biological racism and their links to fascism (ibid.); populist radical

right-wing parties on the other hand, promote a nativist agenda which emphasises outgroups along the lines of culture or religion, rather than race (Mudde 2017: 4).

Within the *radical* right variant, the most ‘sophisticated’ manifestation of the contemporary far right is arguably the European New Right, whose roots can be traced back to the French *Nouvelle Droite* (New Right), a far right intellectual movement which developed in France in the late 1960s (Griffin 2000: 170). This ‘sophistication’ is largely attributed to calls to modernise the scene through producing high quality, intellectual content that would resonate with a wider demographic (ibid.: 170). Whilst Griffin accepts that the European New Right<sup>1</sup> is not a homogenous movement, there are a number of themes that recur and that have inspired contemporary far right movements and individuals. Primarily, the idea of ‘right-wing Gramscianism’<sup>2</sup> underpins much of the New Right’s strategy to emphasise the importance of ‘cultural hegemony’ and the need to first shape public debate through cultural institutions and the media, rather than through political hegemony (ibid.: 170).

Like populist radical right-wing parties, the New Right movement looks increasingly towards culture, specifically the European culture as a unique homeland with ‘pre-Christian mythic roots’ and defending this culture against migrants and the increasing threat of multi-culturalism (Griffin 2000: 171). One of the leading intellectuals of the movement, Alain de Benoist, was largely responsible for spreading the message across Europe through publications and the *Nouvelle Droite*’s flagship ‘think-tank’, the *Groupement de recherche et d’études pour la civilisation européenne* (Research and Study Group for European Civilization – GRECE). As Bar-On (2012: 335) notes: ‘De Benoist has also been responsible for restoring an aura of credibility to the extreme right-wing milieu and turning French ultra-nationalists into avid pan-Europeanists and radical ethnopluralists’. This is another feature of the New Right, which looks beyond the traditional idea of nationalism constricted by borders, towards a more ‘Europeanised’ coalition of forces (ibid.; Griffin 2000). Whilst the New Right movement shares common features with the populist radical right in terms of its abandonment of violence

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<sup>1</sup>Hereafter, ‘New Right’. In this article, the ‘New Right’ encompasses all aspects of the New Right movement across Europe, including the French *Nouvelle Droite* and the German *Neue Rechte*.

<sup>2</sup>In reference to the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci and his idea of ‘cultural hegemony’. Gramsci reasoned that the key to power was to win over the hearts and minds of people and elites through the creation of cultural institutions. Namely, ideas were more likely to resonate with the masses through control over the narratives wielded through cultural, rather than political, institutions (see Bar-On, 2011: 204).

and biological racism, we have chosen to focus on the New Right as a separate category in this study due to the fact that it is an intellectual and social movement. As Marcy and D'Erman (2019: 65–6) point out, in comparison to populist radical right-wing *parties*, less research has been carried out on the New Right *movement*; and as a movement, the New Right seeks to effect change through cultural hegemony and not directly through the ballot box.

### The German far right

Using Mudde's (2017: 4) three core features of the populist radical right (nativism, authoritarianism, and populism) as a guide, the AfD fits this typology within the German context. Whilst the AfD was first established as a party predominantly opposed to the single currency, the AfD has taken an increasingly nativist turn since 2015, retaining its Eurosceptic roots and anti-establishment populism (Lees 2018). In their 2017 *Manifesto for Germany: The Political Programme for the Alternative for Germany*, the AfD identify Islam and 'the ever-increasing number of Muslims in the country' as a 'danger' to the German state, society, and values (AfD 2017: 48). Other populist themes are evidenced throughout the manifesto, such as strengthening law enforcement and limiting the power of political parties by handing more power to the electorate through referenda and direct democracy. In the 2017 Federal Elections, the AfD were the third largest party with 12.6% of the vote.

Within the German extremist spectrum in Germany, the AN are particularly modern and present on online platforms (Kruglanski *et al.* 2019: 21–2). Amid a surge of racist violence in the 1990s, many right-wing extremist parties were banned and replaced by local, loose-knit groups known as the *Freie Kameradschaften* (free fellowships) and *Freie Nationalisten* (free nationalists). When the *Kameradschaften* allied with the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (National Democratic Party of Germany – NPD) in the early 2000s, the AN was formed in protest (Schedler 2014: 242–3). The AN believed that revolution would only occur on the streets through violent demonstrations (*ibid.*: 244). Generally, the AN have not only (violently) targeted foreigners or immigrants, but also the police and political opponents, with their more organised violence primarily targeted against anti-fascists (Schlembach 2013: 305). The AN borrow far-left ideas, outfits and action styles to the point that it is difficult to identify the political affiliation of the protestors. Already in name, the AN reference the leftist Autonomous Movement

and in demonstration style, the AN use tactics such as the black block<sup>3</sup> (see PISOIU and LANG 2015; SCHEDLER 2014; SCHLEMBACH 2013). Schlembach (2013: 306) argues that whilst the AN appears to be a ‘modern’ far right movement, their ideology remains ‘traditional’, given the overt references to National Socialism (NS).

Building on the intellectual legacy of the New Right movement, the IBD are the German ‘chapter’ of the wider Identitarian Movement, which started with the French Le Bloc Identitaire, Le Mouvement Social Européen (The Identity Block, the European Social Movement) in 2002, a direct follow-up of the now-banned organisation, Unité Radicale (Radical Unity). In 2012, a Facebook group called Identitäre Bewegung Deutschlands was established, followed by one in Austria around the same time (Steiger 2013: 28). Defending (European) identity is at the very core of the movement and can be traced back to the New Right and Alain de Benoist and Charles Champetier’s *Manifeste pour une renaissance européenne* (Manifesto for a European Renaissance), in which the authors are highly critical of what they see as the ‘neoliberal imperialism’ of the West that seeks to homogenise the world according to the Western worldview. As a consequence, they believe that identities are at risk of being ‘erased’ (Zúquete 2018: 10–11). It is important to note here, that de Benoist is highly critical of the concept of ‘biological identities’ and does not necessarily view certain identities as *superior* to another, rather that each identity group should stay within their borders to ensure cultural ‘purity’ (ibid.: 10–11). Guillaume Faye, on the other hand, had differing views regarding identity. Faye is a former intellectual of the New Right who championed the idea of ‘ethnocentrism’, which has become a central theme amongst the Identitarians (ibid.: 13). Faye (2011: 134) defines ‘ethnocentrism’ as: ‘The mobilising conviction, distinct to all long-living peoples, that they belong to something superior and that they must conserve their ethnic identity, if they are to endure in history’. According to Faye, ‘*identity’s basis is biological; without it the realms of culture and civilisation are unsustainable*’ (ibid.: 171, emphasis in original). Zúquete (2018) argues that the views of the New Right are intertwined within the Identitarian ‘defence’ narrative and that they ‘pick and choose á la carte what serves them the best in the ND [New Right] cultural production in order to carry on their combat for Europe’ (ibid.: 11).

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<sup>3</sup>The ‘black block’ strategy is ‘a social movement tactic directly lifted from leftist activists in which groups of identically dressed, disguised protesters move as a ‘block’ against counterprotesters or police’ (Miller-Idriss, 2018: 51).

In sum, we have apparent diversity within the spectrum, with a populist radical right-wing political party participating in elections (AfD), a movement formally distancing themselves from National Socialism (IBD), and one not doing so at all (AN).

### Methodological considerations

While the methodological choice between depth and breadth needs to be made most of the time, we opted for the former, as we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how discourses are constructed, beyond counting slogans, keywords or hashtags. As such, this article aims to complement existing quantitative studies that have established some degree of overlap within the far right, as well as the mainstream (see for example, Davey and Ebner 2017; Stier *et al.* 2017). Looking at the far-right discourse in more depth however, is warranted by the fact that, as we shall see below, one of the specific skills of the far right is to precisely twist the meaning of words, to the point that simply counting co-occurrences might miss overlaps.

A number of mixed-method studies have already been carried out in the context of the European far right online, and have also included some qualitative assessment of frames and overlaps (Elgenius and Rydgren 2018; Froio 2018; Froio and Ganesh 2018; Klein and Muis 2018). The emphasis has been however thus far on quantitative and social network analyses, as well as comments analyses, and more on transnational comparison rather than an in-depth analysis of national discourses. Furthermore, the conceptualisation of frames in these studies has been at a higher level of abstraction and more descriptive, rather than conceptualised as a 'process'; i.e. authors have identified broader 'themes' (such as welfare chauvinism and preservation of culture) or individual keywords such as Islam. Overall, these works either conclude on a degree of overlaps or identify Islamophobia as the uniting theme across the spectrum (c.f. Froio and Ganesh 2018). As we shall see in our results, some of these broader themes also appear in our sample. At the same time, and mainly due to our different methodological choice, we find deeper and more concrete overlaps between the radical, the New and the extreme right discourse, stemming from the three groups. Furthermore, these overlaps relate to some individual themes, but especially to underlying framings of the problem, the cause, the solution, and to resonance mechanisms that they all use.

We chose Germany for this qualitative analysis following an initial exploratory quantitative study of EU-wide Twitter accounts that revealed many themes specific to Germany. For example, despite the fact that the sample in the exploratory analysis contained 175 accounts from countries across the EU, Chancellor Merkel and the AfD were prominent recurring themes in our hashtag analysis (Ahmed and PISOIU 2019). Moreover, Germany has a thriving far-right scene with numerous groups and activities that have grown in number and impact (see Kruglanski *et al.* 2019: 8–38). Whilst this is not a unique development, such an analysis can also shed light on the broader dynamics within the European far-right arena.

Finally, the choice of an online, social media medium as source of data is justified by the recent increase in focus and intensity of far-right propaganda activity here. For example, in the VOX-Pol *Year in Review* for 2018, Conway (2019: 11) observes that ‘the European extreme right online scene is diverse and fast changing, but was very much strong and growing in 2018’. Social media offers a series of possibilities to optimise propaganda and provides a more direct, personal communication channel with potential audiences (Ernst *et al.* 2017). Social media is used by groups, such as those mentioned above, to disseminate memes and (sub-)cultural references that resonate with a younger target audience (Forchtner and Kølvråa 2017; Simpson 2016). Of course, not all social media platforms are the same and in this study we focussed on Twitter, which among others means that we focus on the messages of the groups rather than the comments. At the same time, we analysed all linked items to other platforms, such as Facebook or websites, which ensured a rather broad capture of the groups’ discourse.

With respect to the selection of the qualitative material we sampled the AN (Groß-Gerau, Hesse: 140 tweets), IBD (Hesse and central: 148 tweets), and AfD (Hesse and central: 106 tweets) Twitter accounts for the period 1 August to 30 October 2018. We collected all the tweets and retweets for this period, including the links to other social media and websites. We chose this AN regional group due to its more prominent presence online. In the case of the IBD and AfD, we also included the national accounts in order to reach a comparable number of tweets with the ones propagated by the AN account. We chose this period (and considering the limited access to Twitter data) because of several important political events taking place at this time: elections in Hesse and Bavaria; ardent debates around the migration pact, which was eventually adopted by 164 member states of the United Nations (UN) on 10 December 2018; the Chemnitz incident (see below); and the

announcement by Angela Merkel concerning her withdrawal as head of the Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (Christian Democratic Union of Germany – CDU) party and her intention to not stand again for the position of Chancellor. Chancellor Merkel has been a main target of critique within the far-right scene in Germany and Europe (Ahmed and Pisiou 2019). The choice of a timespan with several topics of potentially mutual interest does not bias the data, as what we are interested in is *how* actors speak, how they frame events or issues, and their underlying meanings.

We collected the text and image material and analysed it manually, first deductively by following the categories of frame analysis as developed in the social movement literature, then inductively by adding new categories. In the course of the analysis, we realised that some of the messages were delivered in a condensed form, while at the same time referencing broader narratives that the audience was presumably already familiar with. To capture this we utilised the concept of *trope* from cultural criminology,<sup>4</sup> as fragmentary (word, phrases) references to ‘agreed-upon stories’, or allusions to ‘pre-existing systems of interpretation’, and pointers to hegemonic stories in a particular discursive space (Sandberg 2016: 3, 13). In this article, we follow Benford and Snow’s conceptualisation of framing, which focuses on the *process* of framing as a construction of reality rather than on the frames themselves; specifically, how messages are constructed in order to attract supporters and to motivate them for action. Within this context, frames follow a certain structure with two broad components: the actual frame or message, and a series of resonance criteria, which ensure that these messages are liked and accepted by the audience. The core framing tasks consist of *diagnostic*, *prognostic*, and *motivational* frames. As such, movements articulate a (perceived) social ‘problem’ and identify the source of the problem or the perceived enemy, who they believe to be responsible (diagnostic framing). They then offer solutions to the problem (prognostic framing) and urge activists and supporters to join them in enacting change (motivational framing) (Benford and Snow 2000: 615–8). Such frames only ‘work’ however, if they *resonate* with the target audience. Successful resonance is dependent on *credibility* and *salience*. In order for frames to be credible, they should be consistent and not contradictory

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<sup>4</sup>A ‘trope’ in this context is similar to the concept of ‘dog whistle politics’. López (2014: ix) defines the latter as: ‘coded racial appeals that carefully manipulate hostility toward nonwhites [...] Superficially, these provocations have nothing to do with race, yet they nevertheless powerfully communicate messages about threatening nonwhites.’

(frame consistency), be accompanied by evidence (empirical credibility), and be delivered by a credible source or individual (credibility of frame articulators). The salience of the message is contingent upon the extent to which the target audience places importance on the issues, beliefs, and values articulated by the movement (frame centrality), as well as the extent to which the frames resonate with their personal everyday experiences (experiential commensurability), and commonly known stories about the past (narrative fidelity) (ibid.: 619–22). The aforementioned studies by Froio (2018) and Elgenius and Rydgren (2018) also utilised a frame analysis approach, however at a more general level of the adoption and utilisation of a new ‘master frame’.

## Saying the same thing

### *Diagnostic frames*

Our analysis of the Twitter material stemming from the three groups revealed an alignment of frames at all levels. Following the structure of the frame analysis categories, we found that the main *diagnostic* frame, (i.e. the problem) is rather simple: *the German people are at risk of dying out*. The AN uses the concept of ‘Volkstod’ (‘death of the people’), the AfD and IBD refer to the concept of the upcoming ‘Abschaffung’ (‘elimination/demise’) of Germany, and the IBD also use ‘der große Austausch’ (‘the great replacement’). The Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (the domestic intelligence service of the Federal Republic of Germany) (2019) describes the extreme right’s conceptualisation of ‘Volkstod’ as the alleged imminent extinction of a people as a social and cultural unit, that is, a ‘people’s community’ (‘Volksgemeinschaft’). ‘Volksgemeinschaft’, is an NS term that relates to ‘a community based on shared racial characteristics’, whereby the state is expected to instinctively ‘act in accordance with the alleged unanimous will of the people’ (ibid.). The origin of ‘Abschaffung’ is by all accounts a reference to the well-known book *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany abolishes itself) by former politician Thilo Sarazin. The idea of ‘the great replacement’ is central to the Identitarian worldview and goes back to the French writer Renaud Camus, who argued that Europe’s cultural and ethnic makeup was at risk of being ‘replaced’ by non-Europeans in his 2012 book, *Le Grand Remplacement* (‘The Great Replacement’). Camus argues that such a ‘replacement’ is taking place not only due to demographic trends, but also due to the fact that non-Europeans are

committing violent acts against the indigenous population, who are the victims of a 'conquest' (Zúquete 2018: 147). 'Volkstod' and 'der große Austausch' are closely related to the white supremacist concept of 'white genocide' – a conspiracy theory that white people are at risk of dying out because of immigration. The term gained currency and united the American white supremacist movement following the publication of David Lane's *White Genocide Manifesto* in 1988 (Deem 2019: 3187). However, the very concept of the white race 'dying out' can be traced back even further to theories of 'race suicide' from the early twentieth century (Serwer 2019).

Related frames of the problem 'illustrate' this overall point of victimisation of the autochthonous population at the hands of foreigners in the form of violent criminality (in general and specifically against women and children) and abuse of welfare. This was articulated by all three groups; for example, the IBD suggested that Germans are hard-working, whereas the 'foreigners' are lazy and 'feed off' the state. The AN and IBD both tweeted about children abroad receiving benefits and the state 'wasting' money on refugees. Another theme which the AN mentioned to a lesser extent than the AfD and the IBD, was one of German poverty. The AfD built the link in an overt way by arguing that 'illegal migrants' receive money that 'should' go to German pensioners instead. This is an example of the poverty migration trope, which emphasises the nativist economic element. The AfD also exploited the topic of children receiving benefits abroad with an image; here again, they give the impression of immediacy by claiming there has been a 10% increase in child benefit to other EU states in only six months [see [Figure 1](#)].

The *main source of the problem*, which is identified by all three groups is twofold: on the one side the *foreigners and refugees themselves*; on the other side *the national and international establishment* which has facilitated their arrival through relaxed immigration policies. This parallels the white supremacist conspiracy of 'forced race-mixing' (Ferber 1998: 50–1), whereby native European populations are put at 'risk' through immigration. The individuals and groups accused by the AN, AfD, and IBD of 'inviting' foreigners into the country and contributing to the so-called 'demise' of Germany were the mainstream parties (with the exception of the AfD), the 'left', the 'elite', and NGOs that rescue migrants at sea. Specific individuals, such as Chancellor Merkel, the Minister of Interior Horst Seehofer, targeted Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany – SPD) and Greens politicians, as well as the German representative for the UN,



**Regierung könnte jederzeit handeln.**

**Kindergeld, das ins EU Ausland geht, nimmt in nur 6 Monaten über 10% zu.**

**Hessen. Aber sicher!**

**Am 28. Oktober mit beiden Stimmen AfD wählen!**

LANDESVERBAND HESSEN **AfD**

**Figure 1.** The text above reads: 'The government could act at any time. Child benefit sent abroad to other EU countries increases by more than 10% in just 6 months'

were also identified as directly responsible. Above all, the government was accused of not working in the best interest of the 'people'.

To illustrate, the AN claimed that the mainstream parties are responsible for the 'Volkstod' and the 'Überfremdung' ('foreign infiltration', a related NS concept). They also posted pictures of vandalised election posters, with 'responsible for Volkstod' stickers, in an attempt to demonstrate that their supporters were promoting this message on the streets. Demonstrating apparent evidence of 'Überfremdung', the AN tweeted a link supporting the view that the 'Volksverräter' ('traitors of the people') in Berlin (the government, the 'elite') were responsible for the fact that in some parts of Germany there are almost no Germans anymore. The IBD also suggested that the 'elite' is set out to 'destroy' German culture and values. They went on to claim that the government

was lying to the German people, as they continued to pursue the course of illegal migration and there were even accusations that the Chancellor was flying migrants in. The AfD also blamed all mainstream parties for the ‘invasion’ of migrants, in particular the SPD. More broadly, all three groups saw the left, and in particular the NGOs helping refugees, as part of this conspiracy against the ‘citizens’ and equally warned of the danger of left-wing extremism.

A *third source of the problem* was identified by all three groups as the feminists and LGBT community, contributing to Germany’s ‘demise’, due not only to their perceived lack of birth rates, but due to their ‘deviance’ from ‘healthy people [Volk]’. The AN sample revealed the hashtags #NoHomo and #Genderwahn (gender madness). We also found eclectic formulae such as ‘man + women + children = family’, or slogans such as ‘Protect children from delusions about gender issues – support families with many children’. In addition to this, the AN promoted a healthy lifestyle, whilst claiming that homosexuality and childless families were a ‘danger’ to the health and existence of the ‘people’. Different formulations of ‘gender madness’ were evident through the use of ‘Gendergaga’ in the AfD sample. For example, the AfD tweeted an eclectic manifestation of ‘Multikulti-Diversitäts-Integrations-Gendergaga-Vielfalts-Ideologie’ (‘Multicultural-diversity-integration-gender madness-diversity-ideology’), which was viewed as ‘troubling’. Another tweet argued against gender research because this would apparently prevent children from qualifying in ‘decent’ professions.

### *Prognostic frames*

In the discourse of the three groups, the proposed *solutions* to mitigate the supposed ‘demise’ of the German people were: deportation, vote for far-right parties, and increase German birth rates. For example, the AN Twitter account shared a link to the Facebook page of the NPD in Hesse, which showed a flyer campaign by the Young Nationalists (the youth wing of the NPD) along with the comment: ‘Our people must finally feel secure. Criminal foreigners and bogus asylum seekers must be deported immediately’. The IBD also proposed deportation through twisting (changing the meaning to turn against the original message) the left-wing slogan, ‘no person is illegal’ to ‘no *deportation* is illegal’. The AfD used the #Abschieben (deportation) hashtag alongside more graphic and concrete acts of violence committed by asylum seekers and the claim that German citizens have ‘lost their patience’ with the repeated

acts of violence. They all additionally claimed that the government was in fact lying about deporting people, and that many of the countries of origin that were declared unsafe, are in fact peaceful.

To ensure a radical shift in migration policy, all three groups demonstrated support for far-right parties. The AN usually tended to support extreme parties such as the NPD and Der Dritte Weg (The Third Way – DDW) and have rarely demonstrated direct support for the AfD; however our sample revealed a few retweeted AfD posts and they publicly rejoiced after the AfD obtained 13% of the vote in the elections in Hesse. In one tweet, the AN blamed the mainstream parties for mass migration and pleaded to their audience to ‘defend’ Europe and believe in the future (German) generation [see [Figure 2](#)]. Here and across the three groups, there was an appeal to German people to have more children to ‘mitigate’ the perceived high birth rates amongst migrants. Thus, all three groups proposed the same ‘solutions’ to the same perceived ‘problems’. Beyond these common formulations, the AN sample furthermore revealed more explicit NS references to the envisaged solution: #Volk, #Rasse (‘race/breed’), #Nation, #NSjetzt (NS now), #NSAREA.

### **Motivational frames**

All three groups framed the social and political situation in Germany in apocalyptic terms with heavy use of hyperboles and emotions in order to *motivate* their followers to support and act upon their cause. Motivational frames were generally aided through visuals, slogans, and captivating images. One common tactic was to use current events to motivate people into action. For example, the fatal stabbing of a German man at the hands of two asylum seekers in Chemnitz in August 2018 was used by all three groups to hyperbolise the violence frame. The solutions to the Chemnitz incident became increasingly militant and explicit and the #Chemnitz hashtag became the symbol for the murders, rapes, and ‘oppression’ against the German people at the hands of the ‘foreigners’.

All three groups used hyperbolised images of the ‘threat’ as: imminent invasion and impending violent crime and suggested vigilantism. A series of tweets by the AfD declared Chancellor Merkel a security risk, followed by the suggestion that Germany has been transformed into a ‘slum’ as a consequence of migration, and the claim that criminal asylum seekers are everywhere. The AfD also claimed that Germany was facing an actual ‘invasion’ and in order to avoid this looming ‘danger’ individuals should vote for the AfD. The invasion hyperbole was also abundantly



AN Groß-Gerau  
@AN\_Gross\_Gerau

Follow

#Heimat verteidigen - #Überfremdung  
stoppen!!!

#CDU #SPD #Gruene #FDP #DieLinke  
#Landtagswahl

#LTW18 #Hessen #Bayern

#LtwHessen #LtwBayern

#LtwHE18 #LtwBY18 #ltwhe #ltwby



**Figure 2.** The text above states: ‘Defend your #home – stop #over-foreignization’ followed by hashtags belonging to the mainstream parties and local elections in Hesse and Bavaria. On the image, they state: ‘We believe in our children! CDU/SPD/LINKE/GRÜNE [policies] on immigration’, followed by the slogan ‘For the People and Homeland’

used by the IBD, through both stories outlining the imminent arrival of masses of individuals, the use of terms such as ‘mass migration’, and visuals of hordes of dark-skinned men [see [Figure 3](#)]. This was to give the impression that the ‘stream’ does not stop, they keep on coming.

To construct the hyperbolised image of imminent violent crime, the AfD made extensive use of images and crude language, such as the last words of a dying victim. Knife attacks and other types of crime were portrayed as something that occurs regularly; for example, following a murder in Köthen, the AfD posted an emotive image with the caption: ‘how many more?’. A tweet by the IBD de facto declared all migrants

**Identitäre Bewegung**

@IBDeutschland

Follow



Während #Syrien seine Landsleute zur Rückkehr aufruft, tritt in #Deutschland heute (1.8.) die Neuregelung des #Familiennachzug|s in Kraft: Auch „Flüchtlinge mit eingeschränktem Schutzstatus“ sollen ihre Angehörigen nach Deutschland holen dürfen.



**Der heimliche Einmarsch: Neuregelung des Familiennachzugs tritt heute in K...**  
 Der VOLKSAUSTAUSCH galoppiert! Im vergangenen Jahr stieg die Zahl der Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund in Deutschland um unglaubliche 4,4 Prozent...  
[compact-online.de](http://compact-online.de)

**Figure 3.** The text above the link and picture reads: ‘While #Syria calls on its compatriots to return, in #Germany today (1.8.) the new regulation of #familyreunification comes into force: ‘Refugees with limited protection status’ will also to be allowed to bring their relatives to Germany’.

as ‘stabbers’ and ‘rapists’. Moreover, incidents of violence were reframed to portray masses of migrants ‘roaming’ around armed and wanting to take away ‘our land and our identity’. An image posted by the IBD contained a similar message to the aforementioned AfD one: ‘how many more times does it need to happen before people get active?’.

With regard to vigilantism, the AN argued that it was necessary for them to take matters into their own hands because the police forces

were not capable of protecting the people –particularly women – from crime. They argued for the necessity to establish #Schutzzone (protection zones) and #Schutzstreife (protection patrols). In other retweets originating from the NPD, we found motivational calls to arms declaring, ‘when the state does not protect us, we have to protect ourselves’. The IBD also invoked the argument of state impotence in terms of protecting its citizens, particularly in reference to women, but also in the context of the Chemnitz story. Similarly, the IBD referred to the concept of ‘zones’ here, specifically IBD zones, as areas of information and contestation of the mainstream discourse. Their concept of defence extends beyond vigilantism in the sense that the IBD, in particular, perceive themselves as the ‘defenders’ of Europe through protest actions, but also through actual (meagre) attempts to stop migrants at the border. The AfD did not openly argue for vigilantism, however they were on the same page concerning the first part of the story, namely, that the police are not capable of protecting the people whilst making insinuating comments with regard to the protection zones. Additionally, they commended the establishment of a militia/vigilante group with the comment: ‘The state pulls back, and citizens take things into their own hands’. In addition to this, the AfD propagated for general protection of ‘our women and daughters’. Pupils and teachers were also deemed in need of ‘protection’ from violence as they are particularly at risk as a consequence of ‘diversity’.

In this context, all three groups call into question the competence of the state and its duty to its citizens. The support and encouragement of vigilantism may be articulated in different ways, but all three groups aim to sow seeds of doubt regarding the ability of the state to protect its citizens. These motivational frames feed into the wider ‘defence’ narrative, especially regarding the protection of women from immigrants, which is a common theme within extreme right and white supremacist discourses (c.f. Ferber 1998).

### **Resonance criteria**

In frame analysis, credibility and salience are important resonance criteria which enhance the persuasion potential of the frames. The three groups use a series of techniques to ensure the ‘credibility’ of their message. For example, they repeatedly posted the same incidents involving refugees in order to give the impression that these were happening every day at an unprecedented level. Here, the repetition, irony, and eventual twisting of the word ‘Einzelfall’ (isolated case) suggested that

incidents of migrant crime were not at all isolated, but regular occurrences. All three groups also resorted to techniques of *empirical credibility* (press reports and reports from far-right outlets), to give the impression that their points are substantiated. Additionally, these groups used official statistics in support of their arguments, and in so doing, they drew links to other hyperbolic frames or the main demise frame and presented skewed or incomplete numbers. For example, in one post, the AN suggested that almost every fourth citizen in Germany has foreign origins according to the Federal Statistics Office. In a tweet that followed, the AN stated that every second person will become a German citizen – followed by the hashtags #Migrationshintergrund #Überfremdung #Volkstod. The IBD also used statistics to highlight the number of children with a migration background in schools; this was then linked to a conspiracy theory around the ‘great replacement’. These statistics are used to ‘substantiate’ the conspiracy that the entire world has in fact been working tirelessly ever since the end of the Second World War to replace the ‘European’ population in an apparently historically unique ‘experiment’. The AfD also used statistics to link terrorism with the idea of a ‘mass invasion’ of Muslims. In a tweet linking to an image on their Facebook account, the AfD claimed that the authorities were ‘failing to control and protect’ the population from terrorism, followed by a picture that displayed statistics on the increase of criminal investigations of ‘Islamist extremists’ in Hesse, the title ‘Allahu Akbar! Europe belongs to us!’ and a stamp with ‘Islam does not belong to Germany’ [see Figure 4]. To highlight levels of crime, the AfD used official statistics from the Federal Crime Office to illustrate that in 2017, whilst 13 Germans were killed at the hands of asylum seekers, no Germans murdered asylum seekers. What is missing here of course is the percentage of those 13 convictions in the wider context of all murders in Germany that year.

In terms of *salience*, we observed references to traditional, conservative values, in particular gender roles, as well as to historical events (narrative fidelity). The IBD women posed as ‘Mädels’ (girls in dialect) and wore traditional dresses and hair styles. The AN showed full support for the idea of rewarding housewives. The AfD also referred to paying mothers to raise children, on the basis of performance. Both the AN and IBD made historical references, by commemorating individuals associated with (neo-)Nazism and the Second World War (AN), the call for action involving commemoration marches, demonstrations and other kinds of remembrances. The IBD also took other historical references



**Figure 4.** The text above reads: “Allahu Akbar! Europe belongs to us!” In 2013 there was only one single case! In 2017 in Hesse, there have been 71 investigative procedures against Islamist extremists!

from before the Second World War and individuals who had contributed in one way or another to the creation of the German people; an action was dedicated for example to Bismarck. In the time period studied, there were no similar historical references within the AfD sample.

### Discussion and conclusion

Our frame analysis of a sample of AN, AfD and IBD tweets has demonstrated how the framing of the problem, the main cause and the envisaged solution, the use of rhetorical and visual elements to support motivation, and the utilisation of resonance mechanisms in fact overlap. The groups create an apparently logical and consistent (conspiratorial) story of how the left is set to ‘destroy’ Germany through migration – a story, which in

essence shares similarities to the NS story of how the Jews were set to ‘destroy’ Germany. At the same time, they add resonance and impact by mobilising emotions in a ‘politics of passion’, as was already observed in the case of PEGIDA (Önnerfors 2017).

In relation to similar comparative studies of far-right discourse online, we first of all find similar individual frames, such as welfare chauvinism or immigrants as a major cause of criminality, which is not surprising, given that these are frames that are common across the far right spectrum (Elgenius and Rydgren 2018). We could also confirm the incidence of rhetorical mechanisms such as the appeal to culture (Elgenius and Rydgren 2018; Froio 2018). At the same time, we find a number of differences – not least of which the overall and deep frame overlap – and we attribute this primarily to the choice and use of the method: an in-depth and focused analysis within one country; and frame analysis that looks at underlying frames and mechanisms rather than general themes or keywords. The choice of the medium could also play a role, however we explicitly also included linked content to Facebook and websites.

Klein and Muis (2018) examined the comments on Facebook pages of far-right parties and non-institutionalised groups in the UK, Germany, France, and the Netherlands and generally found that, in contrast to the groups, supporters of far-right parties tend to focus more on the struggle against establishment politics, rather than the exclusionary discourse of non-natives. In relation to Germany, they note that comments on the pages of Pegida and IBD mention Islam most often, and that the comments on the AfD page rather referred to European and political elites. In our sample, both of these topics are present in both cases; furthermore, we show how they are in fact interrelated and that ‘Islam’ is but one appellative for the presumable enemy. A more in-depth analyses of the material on Facebook comments might reveal a similar conclusion; given that, although the most frequent, Islam only appeared 94 and 64 times per 10,000 words, we cannot exclude this possibility.

Another apparent difference is the prominence of Islam and Muslims identified by other studies, either as an overarching and unifying theme for the transnational far right (Froio and Ganesh 2018), or as specific for some groups but not others (such as the study we just discussed). On Twitter, Froio and Ganesh (2018) find that anti-immigration and economic welfare are transnational themes that emerge across their sample in France, Germany, Italy and the UK. Qualitatively, they find that nativism is primarily driven by Islamophobia; here, a detailed methodological account is missing, while implied meanings without the explicit

mentioning of ‘Muslims’ seem to have also been considered. On the one hand, a focus on religion logically fits with the newer focus on culture propagated particularly by New Right movements and populist radical right parties. At the same time, we see in other individual country case studies, that under the surface of ‘culture’, there remains an essence, in this case of nationality, which is ‘inherited’ (Elgenius and Rydgren 2018). In our sample, we identified instances of ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islam’ to a lesser extent, with rather more focus on ethnic or national appellatives, as well as more general depictions such as ‘foreigners’, ‘refugees’ or ‘asylum seekers’. This might lead to the conclusion, that the New Right or the specific vocabulary is simply less present in Germany. At the same time, we also did not find differences between Identitarians and the other two groups in relation to the formulation of the threat, broken down in problem and cause. This means, first of all, that all of them articulated Muslims, but also foreigners, particular nationalities, etc. as a source of the problem. More importantly, however, and part of the argument that we make in this article is that it is necessary to go beyond individual keywords and themes, in this case individual instances and expressions of the enemy, and *capture the essence of the frame and how it is articulated in the overall argument*. In this concrete case, the underlying reason for why the enemy is seen as such and as threatening are not individual features, but the fact that it is *essentially different to German*, which applies to all of the above. We accept that there might be particular emphases at certain points in time and in certain countries or groups on one or the other articulation, and this is certainly interesting to highlight. It is, however, equally important to note the continuity in the discourse of the far right, both across the spectrum and in time. Our conclusion has been uniquely facilitated by an in-depth analysis and cannot necessarily be captured by quantitative, social network analyses, or qualitative analyses that only focus on themes or meta-frames. Future research might endeavour to investigate both of these aspects: underlying framing mechanisms and concrete themes, in order to advance the understanding on far-right discourse online.

More broadly, our analysis has implications on the current debate of an apparent ideological shift within the far right as evidenced by the use of different terminology. Based on our findings, we argue that the replacement of biological racism through ethno-nationalism, identitarianism, and anti-establishment populism in the case of the contemporary far right (c.f. Elgenius and Rydgren 2018), at least for our sample, is only cosmetic, rather than substantial. We do not contest this; we do argue

however, that this misses an important piece of the puzzle, which is the aforementioned *formulation of the problem*, which is anything but new.

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