Shifting Narratives of the Alternative for Germany

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving narratives of the German political party Alternative for Germany (AfD) and its potential as a hybrid threat. Through narrative manipulation, the AfD has demonstrated its ability to influence public discourse and distort reality via disinformation dissemination. The AfD established in 2013 in response to the financial crisis and dissatisfaction with the European Union, has transitioned into a populist party, and along with this change, it has also changed its narrative. This shift was notably evident during the migrant crisis in 2015, showcasing the party’s adeptness at evoking fear and animosity among German voters. The AfD’s narratives have been for years similar to those of the Russian Federation, which has used almost identical narratives on some topics. The German party is consequently working with Russian politicians to reshape democratic politics within Europe, and the AfD is accordingly acting as a hybrid threat to the entire European Union. The study is based on a discourse analysis of interviews conducted with German experts on the topic as well as a content analysis of selected German media to explore these narrative dynamics and their broader implications.

Keywords

Alternative for Germany; Hybrid threats; Narratives; Populism; Extremism; Shifting Narratives.

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Introduction

The Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) was founded in 2013 as a protest Eurosceptic political party, with a program advocating for the withdrawal of Germany from the EU. However, over time, it has slowly changed into a populist party. The changing character of the AfD, which has moved from Euroscepticism to populism, has been demonstrated by how the party has communicated with the German public, which topics and issues it selects and how these have been presented. In this article, we provide an analysis of this communication using a narrative approach.

The AfD as such, has largely been studied using the concepts of far-right populism, the radical right, Euroscepticism, nationalism, or the East-West divide in Germany (e.g., Arzheimer 2015; Weisskircher 2020; Berbuir, Lewandowsky, and Siri 2015). In this article, however, we offer a different perspective on the AfD, which we perceive as a political party constituting an example of a hybrid threat.

Our contribution to this area is twofold. First, we analyse the AfD through the lens of hybrid threats, a perspective that has not been applied to the party before. Exploring the narratives promoted by the AfD, we show how these narratives often align with and support the narratives used by Russian propaganda, thus addressing a gap in the existing literature. Second, we highlight the unusual success of a party in Germany that has significant ties to Russian interests. This success is particularly notable in the German context, where such foreign influence is usually met with resistance.

By introducing the concept of hybrid threats into the analysis of the AfD and exploring the implications of its narrative strategies, we provide new insights into how the party's communications can be considered dangerous. This perspective highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing potential hybrid threats posed by domestic political actors with foreign ties.

The structure of the article is as follows. We begin by introducing the concept of hybrid threats and apply it to the context of the AfD. After this, we proceed to the theory of narrative and narrativism and a description of our methodology. From the methodological perspective, the research had two phases in which different methods were used. In the first phase, we conducted interviews with experts on the AfD. This phase aimed to acquire specific information about the AfD in the context of hybrid threats; this solicited knowledge was then used for structuring the second phase. In the second phase, we analysed a corpus of articles from German media, in which we looked for narratives, spread or shared by the AfD, which could be perceived as hybrid threats.

Hybrid Threats

Hybridity itself is originally a biological concept referring to the outcome of the crossbreeding of two different species, varieties, or races (Brah and Coombes 2000). In the social sciences, the adjective hybrid has been widely used in various research fields, such as culture studies (hybrid cultures and ethnicities) (e.g. Bhabha 1994), political science (hybrid regimes) (Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010), and international and domestic security (hybrid warfare, hybrid threats). In essence, the adjective hybrid denotes the interweaving of two phenomena, something in between but retaining elements of both (c.f. Bhabha 1994, 2–4). In this regard, hybrid threats refer to a situation in between peace and war “enabling the actor to target its opponent continuously, even during peace
time at a low intensity” by “ambiguous means/instruments aimed at targeting the vulnerabilities across society” (Balcaen, Bois, and Buts 2022, 27). In Bhabha’s (1994, 227) words, hybridity is “how newness enters the world”. In the case of hybrid threats, the newness does not lie in the fact they are something strikingly new; on the contrary, they differ from previous conflicts “more in degree than in kind”, further “blurring the distinction between combatants and citizens” (Treverton et al. 2018, 9–10).

The concept of hybrid threats should be differentiated from the concept of hybrid war, which “is to describe the changing character of warfare against violent adversaries” (Monaghan 2019, 85). According to Bilal (2021), “hybrid warfare entails an interplay or fusion of conventional as well as unconventional instruments of power and tools of subversion”. The main purpose is to damage a specific territory of a state at minimal cost, which is one of the many differences between hybrid and traditional warfare. Additionally, these methods of war are often conducted discreetly. In many cases, hybrid warfare takes place in the background of a traditional war (Bilal 2021) or on the other hand, one side does not know that a hybrid actor is conducting hybrid warfare against them. Because of this, hybrid warfare is always connected with discreetness. This means it is harder to react accordingly and employ appropriate defensive measures.

In contrast to hybrid warfare, “hybrid threats are passive, being real or imagined threats from possible future actions against oneself” (Weissmann 2019, 18). Typically, hybrid threats target human trust. They often try to undermine the trust between the state and its people and ruin the basic values of coexistence, especially in democratic societies; this contributes to the weakening of the legitimacy of the state (NATO 2022).

Hybrid threats can be implemented by using several tools. The range of such tools provided by Treverton et al. (2018, 4) or Balcaen, Bois, and Buts (2022, 27) include propaganda, fake news, strategic leaks, cyber-attacks, foreign interference in elections, support of extreme left and right parties, organized protest movements, paramilitary organisations, funding organizations that promote views friendly to the external power, and exploiting economic (inter-) dependencies etc. In this article, we focus specifically on one of the hybrid threats listed above, i.e. political parties supported and influenced by external powers, in this case by Russia; to promote Russia’s interests, they typically spread narratives which either promote the Russian interpretation of the social and political reality or at least target vulnerabilities in society by providing “alternative” interpretations of selected sensitive or contested issues, such as migration, radical Islam, climate change, and anti-COVID-19 measures etc. (c.f. Stelzenmüller 2017, 6–8; Treverton et al. 2018, 51–52).

Narratives

A narrative is a way of structuring and presenting information to create a compelling and relatable account. Sommers and Gibson (1994, 59) argue that “the chief characteristic of a narrative is that it renders understanding only by connecting (however unstable) parts to a constructed configuration or a social network (however incoherent or unrealizable)”. Narratives can take various forms, including written or spoken stories, films, plays, and visual art. The study of narratives is often associated with philosophy, literary theory, and history; however, it has also been increasingly used
As Patterson and Monroe (1998, 315) argue, “[n]arrative plays a critical role in the construction of political behaviour. In this sense, [individuals] create and use narratives to interpret and understand the political realities around [them].” As suggested by Routledge (2019, 149), “[n]arratives do battle within an asymmetric environment that favours dominant, elite discourses.” In this regard, spreading specific narratives is an effective tool used by the AfD and similar actors for starting new battles in cultural wars, to manipulate the citizens and destroy their trust in democracy and democratic political parties.

As claimed by Hellmann (2021), “[n]arratives allow political actors to portray themselves as capable ‘fixers’ of problems that weigh on society.” While people can use their experience to recognize manipulation, people also forget their experience, and therefore, forgetting is also a product of narratives. Because narratives are the products of remembering as well as forgetting (Humphrey 2000, 10), it is not difficult to share narratives full of manipulative lies and fake news, especially, if they offer an alternative explanation of the social reality. In this way, narratives underpin the essence of conflicts and encourage citizens’ emotions through language to divide society (Žižek 2004). The threats lie not only in the possibility that a part of the population might be manipulated but also in the possibility that the manipulation will come from an internal group of people who want to subvert liberal institutions and destroy democracy and Western liberal values in society.

**AfD as a Hybrid Threat**

The AfD can be considered as a hybrid threat due to two principal reasons. Firstly, there is an apparent connection between the AfD and the Kremlin. This relationship has been substantiated by multiple sources indicating financial, ideological, and strategic alignments between the party and Russian interests (Shekhovtsov 2017, Weiss 2018). Reports suggest that members of the AfD have engaged in frequent communications and visits to Russia, fostering a relationship that facilitates the exchange of ideas and support.

Secondly, by its activities the AfD aims for "the undermining of public trust in government institutions" (European Union 2018). The party’s dissemination of false information and conspiracies about migrants, elections, and governmental actions serves to erode confidence in democratic processes and institutions. This tactic aligns with Russian hybrid warfare strategies, which often involve disinformation campaigns to destabilize adversaries (Franzmann 2016).

Hybrid threats like those posed by the AfD are particularly dangerous for Germany and the EU because they exploit and amplify existing social and political divisions. By promoting narratives that question the legitimacy and functionality of democratic institutions, the AfD not only weakens domestic governance but also compromises the cohesion of the EU. The propagation of Russian-aligned disinformation narratives by the AfD can lead to increased polarization, reduced public trust, and a more fragmented political landscape (Pirro 2018).

The connection between the AfD and Russian propaganda adds another dimension to its characterization as a hybrid threat. Reports and analyses have highlighted how the AfD has been involved in disseminating narratives that align with Russian strategic interests, particularly regarding issues such as undermining European unity, criticizing NATO and EU policies, and promoting...
anti-immigration sentiments similar to those pushed by Russian disinformation campaigns (Shekhovtsov 2017; Weiss 2018).

This ideological and narrative convergence between the AfD and Russian propaganda not only reflects common goals but also suggests a strategic convergence aimed at destabilising European institutions and policies. By promoting divisive narratives in Germany and across Europe, the AfD is playing a key role in advancing broader destabilizing goals usually associated with hybrid threats (Galeotti 2019).

For example, the AfD’s stance against the EU and NATO, combined with its opposition to sanctions on Russia because of the war in Ukraine, aligns closely with Russian foreign policy objectives. This alignment poses a strategic risk by potentially weakening European solidarity and response capabilities to external threats (Shekhovtsov 2017). Additionally, the party's use of populist rhetoric that demonizes migrants and minorities contributes to social instability, which is a critical element of hybrid threats (Decker 2016).

**AfD and the Kremlin**

Since the 1990s, the relations between the EU and Russia have fluctuated between cooperation and tension. In the early 1990s, there was optimism about building a strong partnership. However, the process of NATO enlargement into Eastern Europe, driven by the free will of sovereign Central and Eastern European states seeking security and stability, contributed to rising tensions. This period also saw significant political changes within Russia, including a shift towards more assertive and sometimes imperialistic policies.

In the words of Forsberg and Haukkala (2016, 1), EU-Russia relations were “the partnership that failed.” From the time of NATO enlargement, Russia increasingly preferred to develop bilateral relations with individual member states, aiming to weaken the cohesion of the EU. Part of this strategic shift involved establishing ties with several anti-establishment Eurosceptic political parties, such as the AfD.

The connection between Russia and the AfD is apparent because of the activities of the leaders of the AfD, who frequently travel to Russia to meet representatives of the Kremlin and members of Putin’s United Russia party (Jopling 2018, 4). Our respondents agreed that the AfD is financially supported by Russia. A telling example is the case of Marcus Pretzell, a member of the EU Parliament for the AfD. In February 2023 a group of investigative journalists of the OCCRP exposed that he received payments to push proposals favourable to the Kremlin in Germany. Additionally, Moscow paid him to attend the Yalta International Economic Forum in 2016. This forum was sponsored and attended by Russian government officials. It was the first proven payment between the AfD and the Kremlin (OCCRP 2023).

However, more members of the AfD maintain contacts with Russia. In 2021, the Russian ideologue Alexander Dugin published the obituary "He was a real fighter. He was a true German patriot" (Tagesschau 2022). Dugin was referring to Manuel Ochsenreiter, a Bundestag staff member from the AfD, who had an association with Pretzell (OCCRP 2023). Ochsenreiter had been impressed by Dugin’s vision of a Eurasian empire dominated by Russia (Tagesschau 2022). The "experience"
that Ochsenreiter had was utilized by the AfD during demonstrations where they shared slogans full of Russian propaganda.

The OCCRP highlights connections between the AfD and Russia, such as Bundestag member Markus Frohnmaier, whose 2017 political campaign reportedly received financial support from Russia. In return, Frohnmaier was to promote the rejection of anti-Russian sanctions (Tagesschau 2022). Similarly, Tino Chrupalla, chairman and chief spokesperson of the AfD, has engaged closely with Russian officials, including meetings with Foreign Minister Lavrov. Chrupalla’s rhetoric often echoes Russian narratives, particularly evident when he referred to the German government’s allocation of 100 billion euros to the Bundeswehr as an "arms race" (Schmidt 2022).

This characterization draws on Cold War-era narratives propagated by Russia, portraying military build-ups as provocative actions akin to an arms race. Such narratives seek to undermine Western defence efforts by framing them as aggressive manoeuvres rather than defensive measures. In the context of the war in Ukraine, these narratives imply Western responsibility for escalating tensions, deflecting attention from Russia’s military actions and policies in the region (Lucas 2019).

**AfD, Narratives, and Culture Wars**

The AfD shares and spreads narratives (frequently shifting ones) which are in line with those shared and spread by Russian officials, as well as by pro-Kremlin trolls and bots (NATO 2018, 4). These narratives typically target vulnerabilities in German society, correlating with issues that are typically subjects of individual battles in a culture war.

A culture war is a contested concept (c.f. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005; Williams 1997) which originally appeared in the context of the US (e.g. J. D. Hunter 1992; Hartman 2019); however, recently it was also critically applied to cases associated with individual European states or the EU as a whole (Furedi 2018; Ozzano and Giorgi 2016). In the words of Dan Hunter (2004), a culture war is not “a war between cultures, but a war over [particular] culture”. Metaphorically speaking, culture wars consist of individual battles waged over sensitive issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, abortion, euthanasia, religion in education, vaccinations etc. (c.f. Ozzano and Giorgi 2016), although, these issues or their importance differs from country to country. Culture wars may also correspond with new cleavages (e.g. the winners and losers of globalization, material and post-material values) (e.g. Inglehart 1989; Grande 2008) and therefore also with the emergence of new political parties and electoral realignment (e.g. Hawley and Hanania 2020; Kaufmann 2002).

In terms of the culture war, the AfD typically takes strong anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ+ positions. The AfD uses manipulation to lead citizens to the same opinion, it shares fake news, and conspiracy theories, organizes anti-government protests, and advocates for a referendum concerning Germany’s exit from the EU, etc.
Methodology

The research was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, we conducted seven expert interviews with selected German specialists on the AfD, to obtain specific knowledge (c.f. Döringer 2021; Meuser and Nagel 2009). These experts were selected using a combination of key informants and chain referral sampling. Initially, two key informants based in a leading German university were contacted. Acting as gatekeepers, they facilitated the initial contact with other potential participants, thus supporting the sampling process.

In total, we interviewed seven informants, ensuring strict adherence to ethical research standards. All participants provided informed consent, understanding that their identities would remain anonymous to safeguard their privacy and confidentiality. Disclosing their names would breach this agreement and compromise the trust and integrity vital for ethical research. However, the informants agreed to be presented as (1) a representative of the Institute for Political Narrative; (2) a university research fellow, a specialist on political parties; (3) a representative of the Intercultural Association; (4) Professor of sociology; (5) a right-wing extremism researcher; (6) a representative of a political foundation;¹ (7) a representative of the Foundation for Democracy.

The interviews were conducted in July 2022 in Germany. The length of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 110 minutes, and all the interviews were conducted in German. We held them in person, without an interpreter. They were audio-recorded, and all the informants were informed about this beforehand. At the beginning of the interview, each informant was allowed to speak freely about the general characteristics of the AfD. After that, the conversation continued as a semi-structured interview focusing on specific topics. Each of the topics was introduced with an open question (c.f. Flick 2009, 156).

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and the whole text was then subjected to a thematic analysis (c.f. Meuser and Nagel 2009) based on identifying individual information units and their generalisation through the comparison within and between the interviews. The outcome of the thematic analysis gave five main categories, which were later used in structuring the following phase of our research. We coded these categories as follows: (1) Taboo-breaking protest party – the beginning of the AfD as a protest Eurosceptic party; (2) We are the (one) nation! - how the AfD narratives have changed from Euroscepticism to populism; (3) Drifting the AfD to the extreme right – about the AfD’s shift to political extremism; (4) The AfD wing as a threat to democracy – which position does the extremist wing have in the AfD; (5) Multiplier of Russian propaganda – the connection of the AfD to Russia.

Phase 2: Content Analysis of German Media

In the second phase of the research, we used the themes generated from the expert interviews as a guide for the content analysis of the German media (Flick 2009, 452). Our methodology was based

¹Political foundation (German: Politische Stiftung) is a common term in Germany for a foundation that is linked to a political party but independent of it.
on qualitative research practices (Silverman 2013; Krippendorff 2018). We selected newspapers with a large readership but with different focuses and perspectives to capture a complex view. Using a specialized search tool, we accessed news articles from 2013 to mid-2022 on topics related to the AfD and its policies. The search tool's advanced algorithms enabled efficient and precise searches for relevant articles (Neuendorf 2017).

We aimed to ensure that similar news stories appeared in all selected newspapers, allowing us to identify patterns and differences in media coverage. By comparing content from these different sources, we wanted to see how different media portrayed the AfD and its politics, the political speeches, and narrative dynamics and thus contribute to a broader understanding of the AfD's political discourse (McQuail 2010; van Dijk 2011).

We followed a systematic approach to conducting the content analysis to guarantee rigour and reliability. We began by creating a coding scheme derived from topics identified during the expert interviews. Each article was analysed and coded based on predefined categories such as the tone of the report, the main topics of discussion, the representation of AfD politicians, and the framing of AfD politics (Mayring 2000). Specific codes we used were migrants, migrant crisis, Euro, protest culture, leadership change, extremist wing, radicalism, Björn Höcke, nationalism, ideology, and COVID-19 concerning AfD.

To ensure comprehensive coverage, we used a specialized search engine of selected newspapers designed to find articles based on specific codes and keywords relevant to our study. This system helped us to efficiently and precisely identify news content related to the focus of our research. We aimed to include articles from different periods and important occasions to cover a variety of relevant contexts and situations. In total, approximately 150 articles were analysed, ensuring that the sample was large enough to identify meaningful patterns and differences across media (Creswell, Poth 2018).

The selected media includes (1) Süddeutsche Zeitung, which can be described as liberal (Conrad 2014, 243) and has one of the highest readerships in Germany; (2) Tagesschau, the public TV news service; (3) Die Welt, a German conservative newspaper (Cazzamatta 2014, 76); (4) Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung für Deutschland, which is published in the western part of Germany and can be characterized as conservative-liberal; 5) Die Zeit, which is a liberal magazine that tends to have an academic readership (Večera 2015, 225); 6) The MDR newspaper, which mainly covers the eastern part of Germany, including Saxony, the political stronghold of the AfD; 7) Der Spiegel, a German news magazine that often deals with topics that are debated in society (Wehrheim 2022).

Our narrative analysis focused on identifying and categorizing the narratives used by the AfD. This approach allowed us to explore how the AfD's communication strategies have evolved and how they resonate with the narratives typically employed by Russian propaganda. By systematically examining these narratives, we aim to provide a deeper understanding of the potential hybrid threats posed by the AfD's alignment with foreign propaganda efforts.
Linking to Hybrid Threats

Strategic narratives are essential tools through which political actors construct and communicate a shared meaning of the social world to influence the behaviour and perceptions of domestic and international audiences (Roselle et al. 2014). By applying this framework to the AfD’s communication strategies, we can better understand the party’s evolving narratives and their alignment with those propagated by Russian media.

The AfD’s narratives often emphasize themes such as national sovereignty, anti-elitism, and cultural identity, which are similarly echoed in Russian propaganda. This alignment is not coincidental but rather indicative of a strategic effort to influence public opinion by resonating with existing sentiments and fears within the population. As Roselle et al. (2014) note, "strategic narratives are used to influence the actions and perceptions of others in the international system."

By systematically categorizing these narratives, we can identify how the AfD adopts and adapts these themes to fit its political agenda, thereby amplifying the impact of foreign propaganda efforts. This is particularly relevant in the context of hybrid threats, which involve the blending of conventional and irregular tactics, including information warfare (Roselle et al. 2014). Expanding on the concept of hybrid threats, our analysis explores the congruence between the theoretical understanding of hybrid threats and the AfD’s narratives, investigating how the AfD’s alignment with foreign propaganda efforts contributes to the broader hybrid threat landscape.

The Shifting Narratives

In the following paragraphs, we present the results of the narrative analysis of German media and demonstrate how the AfD’s narratives have been changing and shifting from its foundation in 2013 until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and how they were addressing vulnerabilities in the society in line with the Russian propaganda. We structure our analysis based on five key narrative categories observed: 1. protest narratives (Taboo breaking protest party), 2. populist narratives (We are the (one) nation!), 3. extremist narratives (Drifting the AfD to the extreme right), nationalist narratives (The AfD as a threat to democracy) and victim narratives (Multiplier of Russian propaganda). This categorisation was created based on a thematic analysis of interviews with experts.

This framework enables us to systematically examine how AfD’s messaging has evolved and how it aligns with the broader strategic objectives of Russian propaganda.

Taboo-breaking Protest Party

The Alternative for Germany was founded on the 6th of February 2013 as a new conservative protest party. Although Bernd Lucke, Alexander Gauland, and Konrad Adam, the leading figures of the AfD, argued that the AfD is not a protest party or a far-right party, as one of our informants explained, “that wasn’t true, that was just the narrative of the AfD” (Interview No. 4).

According to Ronald Tiersky, “new protest parties arose on the right in protest against high taxes, and growing immigrant populations, and the fact that the bourgeois parties administered
the social-democratic system rather than abolishing it” (Tiersky 2004, 427). However, the formation of the AfD was somewhat different and was closely connected with the European Debt Crisis of 2009. The AfD criticised the inability of European countries to repay their national debts and protested against the policy of the ruling parties (the CDU/CSU and the FDP), who were suggesting the creation of a fiscal union across the eurozone.

The AfD protested against the whole concept of the Euro. As one of the informants explained, “[t]he AfD began as a financially critical, Eurosceptic party,” (Interview No. 7) this relates to the name Alternative for Germany – which was derived from the words of Chancellor Angela Merkel (Deliso 2017, 140), who had said about that “[t]here was no alternative to euro politics.” (Interview No. 2).

In the Election program of 2021, the AfD said of the EU that “such an entity has neither a nation nor the necessary minimum level of cultural identity”. This type of rhetoric can contribute to hate speech and protests, as numerous studies have shown that incendiary political statements often lead to increased hostility and violence. Additionally, the program advocated for “Germany to leave the EU” (Wahlprogramm der AfD zur Bundestagswahl 2021, 28-29).

Research indicates that hateful rhetoric from political leaders can amplify social divisions and incite violence against targeted groups. For example, studies have found a correlation between anti-refugee sentiments on social media and subsequent acts of violence against refugees in Germany (Müller and Schwarz 2021), (Byman 2021). Furthermore, exposure to derogatory rhetoric against immigrants and minorities has been shown to erode anti-discriminatory norms and foster political radicalization. Bilewicz and Soral (2020) explain how such rhetoric can replace empathy with contempt, leading to intergroup violence and political radicalization (Hamed 2021).

As one of our informants explained, "hybrid narratives are used to shape AfD voters," (Interview No. 1). The AfD operates in a manner that some may consider a hybrid threat to European society. Advocating for a withdrawal from the EU could potentially lead to societal polarization, undermine democratic processes, and pose security risks. According to the EU's definition of hybrid threats, such threats involve exploiting vulnerabilities through a coordinated mix of diplomatic, military, economic, or technological measures, while stopping short of formal warfare (European Commission, 2024).

The AfD's protests of the financial crisis were replaced by new protest topics, namely, the fight against the European solution to the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 spread to Europe from China in 2020, and many European governments were forced to adopt unpopular measures. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the AfD organized anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests, etc. In the words of our respondent, "The members of the AfD tried to explain that the healthy German nation does not need vaccination because the coronavirus does not exist” (Interview No. 1).

The protests were planned to highlight disagreement with the government. Although the protests were focused on vaccinations and face masks, the AfD propounded other topics that were not related to the pandemic itself. The AfD organised one of the protests in Magdeburg under the motto
"For freedom! Against vaccination and 2G!" On the protest in 2021 in Nürnberg Chrupalla compared the current situation with the period before German reunification: "It’s worse today than in 1989" (FAZ, 2021). The leader of the AfD demonstrates, how close the AfD is to Russian leaders and as one of our informants explained, "There is this ideological level of connection of the AfD to Russia. Putin was seen as a role model at the Corona demonstrations (organized by the AfD)" (Interview No. 6).

During the protests, the AfD propagated fake news alongside classical protest and nationalistic narratives. This included disseminating misinformation that often resonated with nationalistic sentiments. As one of our informants remembered, "One of the slogans of the AfD was, 'We are the nation, and they [the government] are those above" (Interview No. 2). The meaning of these words was, that the government from the "high" position never understood, how the ordinary Germans lived. The AfD wanted to bring some emotion into the narratives overall (Kiess 2017).

There are indications that some of these protests or nationalistic narratives align with broader disinformation campaigns linked to Russian propaganda efforts. Russian state-backed media outlets like RT and Sputnik have been known to amplify such narratives, providing a platform for misinformation that supports populist and nationalist movements in Europe, including the AfD (Helmus 2018). This alignment underscores a shared goal of destabilizing democratic institutions and fostering social division.

The vaccine for Covid-19 brought up a new topic. Although the AfD viewed the COVID-19 vaccines as dangerous, it took a different position on the Russian Sputnik V vaccine. The German government disagreed with the Russian vaccination policy, so the AfD protested the attitude of the German government. The AfD objected to the EU’s decision not to buy Sputnik V and showed a connection to the Kremlin. As one of our informants explained, "We saw a connection to Russia with Sputnik V. Some propaganda of the AfD is clearly Russian. But this covid-propaganda has a Nazi quality" (Interview No 6). The protest narratives had the purpose of awakening Germans’ scepticism about the democratic system.

In another situation, the AfD protested the German government’s coronavirus measures by saying, the coronavirus pandemic was already over. The AfD politician Hans-Ulrich Mayer said this in 2020 and asked the patients in hospitals to take their masks off (Bergmann 2020). During this period Germany had more than 106,607 (DESTATIS) patients positive for coronavirus.

**We Are the (One) Nation!**

With the emergence of the migration crisis in 2015, the AfD’s narratives switched from anti-European protest narratives to nationalist and anti-immigrant ones with elements of radicalism and populism. The party planned to use anti-Islam and anti-immigration arguments (Volk, Weisskircher 2023) and as one of our informants explained, “With the refugee crisis, the AfD came up with a new topic, euro criticism was no longer important” (Interview No. 2).

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4 2G - Geimpft, genesen (vaccinated or recovered).
5 Statistisches Bundesamt (Statistical Office)
In 2015, Frauke Petry was elected as the new leader of the AfD. Her first anti-Islam speech showed the direction of the party, and it was connected to the new narratives (Süddeutsche Zeitung 2015). According to the words of one of our informants, "the AfD was suddenly a migration- and integration-sceptic party. With Petry, suddenly the party had a massive characteristic of populism" (Interview No. 4).

The populistic direction was confirmed at the Congress in 2016, where the first-ever AfD party program was adopted (Herden 2016). This program spoke about the relationship of the AfD to Islam, "Islam does not belong in Germany" (Herden 2016). The AfD promised Germany would only accept refugees who share German values and paid their taxes properly. The AfD presented anyone else as a people who would destroy German culture (Chase 2017).

Refugees were the party's winning issue (Chase 2017), and the AfD continued to use this issue to share populist hatred of the German government. In the words of our informant, "Just one thing about populist politicians: it does not matter what issues they are successful on" (Interview No. 2).

The AfD made extensive use of online platforms to share their populistic narratives which often include hate speech. Research by Lewandowsky et al. (2020) highlights how the AfD has utilized social media to spread xenophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric. For instance, the party’s Facebook page has been a notable outlet for hate speech, with posts frequently targeting immigrants and refugees (Rheault, Rayment, and Musulan 2019). Concrete examples of this include the AfD's repeated use of terms like "invasion" and "criminal" about asylum seekers, as well as their propagation of conspiracy theories about a supposed "Islamization" of Germany (Benhabib 2018).

As one of our informants explained, "the AfD used populistic elements about representing the people. The party used the slogans ‘We are the representation of the people’" (Interview No. 4). This narrative was designed to position the AfD as the sole protector of German citizens against external threats, often portrayed in a manner that stoked fear and division. For example, in 2017, an AfD campaign ad depicted a pregnant woman with the caption, "New Germans? We’ll make them ourselves" – a clear nativist message that aligns with their exclusionary rhetoric (De Genova 2018).

These strategies reflect a broader trend in the AfD’s communication tactics, where hate speech is employed not only to marginalize specific groups but also to galvanize a sense of unity among their supporters based on a perceived common threat (Mudde 2019).

**Drifting the AfD to the Extreme Right**

The AfD showed multiple reasons to be classified as an extremist party, and all respondents agreed that the right wing of the AfD is extremist. The same statement was given by The Federal Bureau for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) in 2019, which classified the right wing of the AfD, known as “Der Flügel” as a suspected case in the field of right-wing extremism. Consequently, the BfV began tapping the wing’s telephone conversations and monitoring their e-mails (Jähnert 2020). By 2021,

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6 Das Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz
the BfV extended its surveillance to the entire AfD, classifying it as a "suspected case" of right-wing extremism, which allowed for increased monitoring and investigative measures (Tagesschau 2021).

The AfD has been trying for years to change the democratic system of Germany. As one of our informants explained, "the AfD is anti-systemic and wants to change the system" (Interview No 4). In 2018, Gauland said the AfD wanted to organize a “Peaceful revolution” (Zeit 2018) that would expel all people out of Germany who support the "Merkel system". Gauland's main problem was that the democratic basic order established by the main law was not separate from the political one.

The revolution was supposed to concern the media. Another dose of extremism related to the name of the revolution. The Peace Revolution was a reference to another peaceful revolution in Germany, the 1989 revolution that overthrew the SED7 dictatorship in East Germany (Kohler 2018). Thus, Gauland compared the politics of the CDU and Angela Merkel to the communist regime, which was associated with violence and totality. In the words of our informant, "The background of the AfD has developed. One can clearly see many different positions held by right-wing extremists who certainly see the extreme right beyond right-wing populism" (Interview No. 4).

Similar extremist narratives were used during the demonstrations against the government with a plan to destroy the confidence of ordinary Germans in the democratic state. The racist billboards “Give Islam no chance!” were replaced with hateful anti-chancellor, anti-system slogans, “Future for Germany – for freedom and democracy”, “Merkel is abolishing us” (Polke-Majewski, Steffen 2018). The AfD chose these narratives to show its anti-position and expectations for the future.

**The AfD Wing as a Threat to Democracy**

During interviews, the topic of extremism kept shifting to Björn Höcke as “the most important representative of the extreme-right wing” (Interview No. 1). Although the party used extremist narratives, the leadership of the wing wanted to move the extremist narratives to an even higher and more integrated level, in a nationalist way.

One of our informants argued that “there is a cult around the leader, Björn Höcke. They all want the leader, who can be the new Hitler” (Interview No. 5). The wing began to move the AfD in a nationalist, revisionist, and fascist direction. 20 % of the party's members belong to the wing, and it has acquired quasi-institutional structures and has thus become a “political party” within the AfD. The wing pushed through a proposal to write in the party's campaign that the party wanted to leave the EU (Pfeffer 2021). As one of our informants explained, “The AfD has an extreme wing, some people in the AfD are real right-wing extremists” (Interview No. 6). The wing's priorities were summarized in 2015 in the Erfurt Declaration, through which the wing was founded and described as a wing of resistance against the further weakness of German identity (FAZ 2015). The wing wanted to achieve a new German identity through racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia. The situation began to escalate in 2020 when the AfD wing was classified as a right-wing extremist by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Pfeffer 2021).

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7 SED; Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, was the ruling communist party in the German Democratic Republic until 1990.
Although the party reacted to this, and the wing was officially dissolved, in reality the positions around Höcke were stronger than ever. As one of our informants explained, “Höcke is too much of an extremist” (Interview No. 2). The wing was renamed but nothing else changed.

One of the activities of the right wing relates to the homogeneity of the German population. Höcke used the concept of ethnic homogeneity and the need to ‘Clean out the pigsty’ (Funke 2019). Germany needed a reorganisation of its citizens, those who were "real Germans" and the rest who should leave the country.

Höcke published a book ‘Nie zweimal in denselben Fluss’ (Funke 2019), in which he wrote that it is essential to protect "our national and European external borders. Perhaps we, unfortunately, lose a few sections of the population who are too weak" (Funke 2019). He motivated the readers not to have any fear of using violence because then the AfD could obtain power.

Höcke and the right-wing share these extremist, nationalist narratives. These were not just about the fight against the German government and the democratic state but also against the citizens of Germany with a different opinion.

**Multiplier of Russian Propaganda**

In the last few years, it has been easier to discover how connected the AfD is with Russia. In 2022, the president of the regional office for the Protection of the constitution in Thuringia BfV, Stephan Kramer, called the AfD a "Multiplier of Russian propaganda" (Wierzioch 2022). His words indicated that the AfD was a loyal friend and extremist investment of Russia, mainly due to the Russian propaganda that the party shares. This aligns with broader analyses of the AfD's behaviour, which show a pattern of disseminating narratives that align closely with Russian geopolitical interests (Shekhovtsov 2017).

As one of our informants explained, "The AfD and the Russian leaders are close to each other. Although, just now it is a bit more distant [because of the war in Ukraine]" (Interview No. 1). This reflects findings in recent studies on the interactions between European far-right parties and Russian entities, indicating a complex but sustained relationship (Weiss 2018).

Additionally, the AfD opposed arms supplies to Ukraine, the ban on Russia Today in Europe, and the economic sanctions imposed on Russia. The same comments regarding the war were possible to hear from the Russian side too (Wierzioch 2022). This stance is consistent with the AfD’s broader strategy of aligning with Russian foreign policy objectives to undermine European unity and stability.

What attracted the most attention was the anti-Semitic remarks made by the AfD about Ukrainians following the Russian narrative, “the regime in Ukraine has been taken over by national socialists and fascists” (Wierzioch 2022). Such rhetoric is not only a part of Russian disinformation campaigns but also a typical tactic used by populist radical right parties to delegitimize political adversaries.

Additionally, the war in Ukraine and the AfD’s criticism of the German Government drew the attention of Germany's Chancellor, Olaf Scholz. Scholz described the AfD as “the Party of Russia” after a call
by the AfD for the opening of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. "The AfD is not only a right-wing populist party but also the party of Russia" (Spiegel 2022).

Some of the narratives used by the AfD come directly from the Russian narratives, the critical narratives of the war in Ukraine, as well as the cult of the dominant leader. As one of our informants explained, "Many analysts have spoken of Russia as it has a hybrid system, that corresponds to the ideal of a state led by a strong leader, but with democratic elements" (Interview No. 1). One of the extremists plans for the AfD was the need for a strong leader. The party wants a democracy without minority rights, and people with a differing opinion. In the words of our informant, "The ideology of the AfD is very much in line with Putin and Russia. It is an authoritarian system where there is a leader" (Interview No. 5).

Other narratives that resemble the narratives of Russia are the victim narratives. The AfD often uses a national definition of “the Germans”, who have been oppressed since 1945 by the Americans and the Jewish world conspiracy (Garrelts 2019). The AfD must liberate the German people and help them regain power. As one of our informants explained "...we can see different victim narratives, the East German victim narratives, the German victim narratives, the ‘Hitler is only a small part of the whole German history’ narratives etc." (Interview No. 1).

**Conclusion**

The AfD was founded as a protest party in 2013 and had the plan to protest the European Sovereign Debt Crisis (Arzheimer 2015). After some years the AfD’s protests against the EU escalated to the suggestion of "Dexit" (Berbühr, Lewandowsky, Siri 2015). This solution was connected to the criticism of the German government, which the AfD wanted to dissolve (Franzmann 2016). The AfD protested the democratic regime and suggested changing the German parliamentary system to have just one strong leader (Pirro 2018).

With the migration crisis of 2015 the AfD shifted its narratives to those more in line with populism (Decker 2016). The party shared criticism of the German government through fake news about migrants and the dysfunction of the political system. The populistic narratives attacked democracy.

The AfD started to act more as a hybrid threat with connections to Russia when it changed the populistic narratives to those of extremism. From 2020 the members of the AfD started to travel to Russia and returned full of new extremist ideas (Weiss 2018).

The connections, the AfD has with the Russian leadership, are helping Russia to make the EU weaker. Both entities used similar narratives, which shows close contact between the AfD and Russia, and this connection was also confirmed financially when the OCCRP found a financial connection between the two entities in 2023.
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List of Interviews

1. Representative of the Institute for Political Narrative
2. University research fellow, specialist on political parties
3. Representative of the Intercultural Association
4. Professor of sociology
5. Right-wing extremism researcher
6. Representative of a political foundation
7. Representative of the Foundation for Democracy