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**European Crises and Euroscepticism:  
The case of the German AfD**

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## **Abstract**

In light of current political events, which present a strong rise of right-winged Eurosceptic parties, this study conducts research on how the position of the AfD, regarding the European Union, developed between 2013 and 2024. Since this is carried out based on different crises faced by the EU during these years, a textual analysis of election programmes and parliament transcripts serves as the research design. By means of a content analysis, these documents become subject to a coding process with the software ATLAS.ti. Concepts such as populism, Euroscepticism, crises and the Political Opportunity Structure theory form the theoretical foundation of the study. Hereby, the Eurosceptic change of the party in the course of the Eurocrisis, the Refugee Crisis, Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine-Russia can be examined. The results present that different crises triggered different Eurosceptic aspects. No matter the EU action, the AfD displays strong criticism towards the European Union. Additionally, an accumulation of Eurosceptic aspects has led to a consolidation of this attitude over the years, and to a slight increase in hard Eurosceptic tendencies concerning the AfD's position between 2013 and 2024. Thus, the conclusion is formed that the party is Eurosceptic by nature.

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# 1 Introduction

Over the last decade, Euroscepticism has become politically more important in the countries of the European Union (EU). Among the actors of this phenomenon, populist parties can be witnessed to play a main role in spreading Eurosceptic views, using Eurosceptic arguments to gain voters and embedding the concept of Euroscepticism in their election programmes and campaigns (Csehi & Zgut, 2020). While European unity and integration can be perceived as essential in times of crises, research has found that crises affecting Europe and the EU have often served as a push factor for such parties and their Eurosceptic position. Whether this has been the Eurocrisis in 2013, the period of the migration crisis from 2015 on, or others (McDonnel & Werner, 2019). This can also be observed while examining the German right-winged populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which even emerged in 2013 during the Eurocrisis, hereby, starting off by using a Eurosceptic framework as their founding party position (Roch, 2023).

While several articles and scientific papers can be found covering the connection between the Eurosceptic stance of the AfD and crises of the EU, the current research on this matter mainly focuses on separate crises further in the past, such as the Eurocrisis or the so called 'Refugee Crisis'. Events including the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the ongoing Ukraine war have not yet been fully explored due to their recency. Some scientific papers such as Juan Roch's article on "(..) how the German AfD frames the EU in multiple crisis" from 2023 have started to touch upon this topic, anyhow, since this may have drawn a wider picture on the pandemic, it is already further behind in terms of the situation in the Ukraine. A complete overview on the development of the AfD's change in Eurosceptic attitude and its main aspects of criticism during critical times until today has, therefore, not yet been conducted. The latter could be done by looking at several crises of the last years and examining them on how they may have affected the AfD's position regarding the EU.

Since crises have demonstrated to influence how populist parties, operate, frame topics and are generally received by the population, more research is needed in face of the current happenings to expand the understanding and knowledge on this issue. Therefore, the research gap on how crises have shaped the Eurosceptic stance of populist parties, shall be filled, by taking a closer look at the example of the German

AfD. Anyhow, not only the latest crises which the EU had to face, namely the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine-Russia war, are going to be at the centre of this paper's research but all the crises since 2013. The main five which can be identified in this context include the Eurocrisis, the Refugee Crisis, Brexit and as mentioned, the pandemic and the Ukraine-Russia war. Hereby, the development of the AfD's position towards the European integration can be evaluated, also considering the different impacts they had.

While climate change can also be considered a crisis, challenging political leadership over the last years, it will not be part of this study as it presents no sudden starting point or end but a slow rise of importance during the past decades. This paper exclusively focuses on crises presenting themselves during the AfD's existence or, as the Eurocrisis, giving decisive reason for the party's creation.

The examination of this matter shall take place through answering the following research question: *"How did the position of the AfD, regarding the European Union, develop throughout different crises between 2013 and 2024?"*.

To address this exploratory question, the following sub-questions will be used to lead the research:

1. What are the Eurosceptic arguments presented by the AfD in reaction to different European crises?
2. Do different types of crises differ in their effect on AfD Euroscepticism?
3. How has the intensity of the AfD's Eurosceptic discourse changed in the context of major European crises?

The hereby gained results are, however, not only relevant in the context of the German political system and party landscape. Over the last years, many European countries recorded a striking rise of right-winged populist party support in parliament elections. The increase of national radicals in the results of this year's 2024 European parliament election are, therefore, not a complete surprise. Despite its preceding election campaign scandals, the German AfD still managed to score as second place in Germany. This overall gain in votes for Eurosceptic parties can greatly affect topics as the Green Deal or support for the Ukraine and imply far-reaching consequences for reaching a common ground on matters that require immediate actions within the EU. (Pfitzner, 2024)

As right-winged Eurosceptic parties, thus, increasingly become a phenomenon which requires even more attention, further research on the topic is highly relevant.

The aim of expanding the knowledge on how different kinds of crises affect the Eurosceptic stance of the populist right-winged AfD, therefore, supports research on a matter that is of great importance in the current times.

## **2 Theoretical framework**

When it comes to research on the general topic of Euroscepticism in connection to European populist parties, quite a large amount of scientific work can be found, dealing with different perspectives and emphasises on this issue. This includes articles covering the emergence of individual populist parties, either left- or right-winged and their stance on Euroscepticism (Dechezelles & Neumayer, 2010) as well as portraying their common Eurosceptic trajectory in the framework of the whole EU (Pirro & Kessel, 2018). Either in comparison among another, or singular does research frequently cover the connection between crises and the inflow these parties can record, which again demonstrates the importance of this correlation.

In order to now conduct research on the specific case of the AfD as a populist party and their Eurosceptic stance throughout their history, there are some concepts and theories that firstly have to be clarified.

### **2.1 Populism**

Since the AfD is known to be defined as a populist party (Schuster, 2024), and Eurosceptic views often can be found among parties that show signs of populism (Henley, 2024), the latter is a concept which shall be defined to offer a greater understanding to the context of this study.

Populism is a contested concept which has been defined as a variety of terms, them being an ideology, a movement, a syndrome or more. While the meaning evidently can be expanded in different areas, the definition of populism also depends on the context. Whereas in a European context the concept of populism is often connected to anti-immigration or xenophobia, in Latin America it, for instance, rather implies clientelism and economic mismanagement. Additionally, the term is not seldomly used to brand or stigmatise political leaders and movements. (Urbinati, 2019)

A recent approach of populism comes to define it as a vernacular style of politics which is utilised by leaders and parties to mobilise the population, or an “amateurish and

unprofessional political behavior that aims to maximize media attention and popular support” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 4). Moreover, a common narrative of populist leaders is that they strongly support the image of standing with the ‘people’ against the ‘elite’. By claiming to be one of them, this impression often is being underlined by populist figures behaving in different, even unconventional manners of appearance or language use. (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017)

Over the years, the EU increasingly had to face allegations of being an ‘elitist democracy’ marked by a ‘democratic deficit’ (Pausch, 2014, p. 1). Reasons for this argumentation were often found in the limited scope of action of the European Parliament, the only institution of the EU, which is elected by European citizens directly, in contrary to the European Commission, holding the most power over decisions. (Pausch, 2014) Considering these viewpoints, it is not a surprise that Eurosceptic tendencies are likely to be found among populist parties, such as the AfD, since the argument of ‘us as the people’ against an ‘elite’ can be transferred to the political structure of the EU versus nation states. Baring these main features of populism in mind will enhance the comprehension of the AfD as a party during the analysis.

## **2.2 Euroscepticism**

As this paper will continue to discuss the stance of the German AfD towards the European Union and European integration, the concept of Euroscepticism will be the leading one. Breaking down the term of Euroscepticism, it means at its very basics to oppose EU related factors to some aspect (Leruth et al., 2018). Hereby, the concept expresses scepticism, doubt or disbelief towards the EU in general and can therefore be used to describe a stance based on its dispositions towards European integration, its policies, institutions, or principles (Hooghe & Marks, 2007).

To obtain a clearer overview the concept has been categorised into ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ Euroscepticism. Soft Euroscepticism in this context stands for a rather moderate-critical dissent and corresponding opposition towards the EU or their projects and institutions. This kind of criticism can strengthen a healthy democratic structure. Hard Euroscepticism on the other hand is defined to be a fundamental, comprehensive or even militantly hostile rejection towards the EU and European integration which manifests itself in the support for leaving the Union. (Hrbek, n. d.) Despite this categorization, those criteria are again open to interpretation, therefore, making it not always easy to categorise political parties.

### **2.3 Political Opportunity Structure Theory**

To support the research of this paper, the Political Opportunity Structure (POS) theory will serve as an underlying theoretical framework. Originally, the development of this theory was foreseen to supplement the research on social movements in political landscapes. At its centre it has the aim of analysing degrees of openness or accessibility within certain political systems for a potential number of political entrepreneurs or organizations (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006). As Herbert Kitschelt explained Political Opportunity Structures in one of his studies, it is a “specific configurations of resources, institutional arrangements and historical precedents for social mobilization, which facilitate the development of protest movements in some instances and constrain them in others” (Kitschelt, 1986, p. 58).

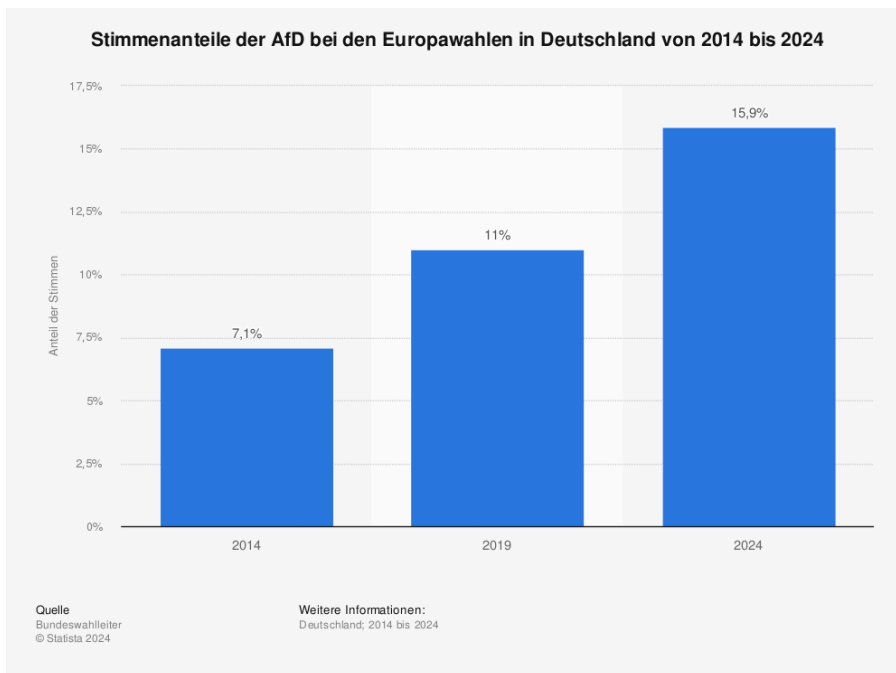
This shows that the theory of Political Opportunity Structures has its emphasis on the exogenous factors that condition party success on the contrary to other theories that focus on their actor-centred success instead. As the crises to be discussed in this paper stem from outside the AfD’s internal party structure, they can be perceived as the exogenous factors which the POS theory highlights. Nevertheless, Political Opportunity Structures theory also is a broad concept where various elements have been included in the definition of the term by different authors and researchers. However, practically all studies which incorporate the theory in their research find their common ground in the assumption, that when fixed or enduring institutional features are combined with rather short-term, volatile factors, they hereby create a particular opportunity structure. (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006)

Since the basic premise of this theory is that, through exogenous factors such as crises, the mobilization for certain claims or for particular strategies of influence, inhibits prospects or is enhanced (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004) it presents the possibility for not only being used in the context of social movements. In several research projects this is something that has already been done. For instance, in the study on Political Opportunity Structures and right-wing extremist party success by Arzheimer and Carter in 2006, in context of the success of the German left party (Nachtwey & Spier, 2007), or through: “A Two-Dimensional Approach to the Political Opportunity Structure of Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe” (Spies & Franzmann, 2011). For the research of this study, the theory shall be used to examine if, or how, the AfD took advantage of Political Opportunity Structures provided by different crises in Europe, to strengthen their Eurosceptic narratives. Certain crises could have highlighted specific



weaknesses of the European Union from which the crises occurred, or shine light on poor crisis management by the EU. This could create the opportunity for the party to use these new circumstances for their election campaign or as arguments to support their existing political direction and to further advocate against the Union.

The following graph presents the vote shares of the AfD in the European parliament elections in Germany, developing from 7,1% in 2014, over 11% in 2019, to the current 15,9% in 2024.



(Statista Research Department, 2024)

Considering the POS theory, one could argue that due to the insecurity among the population which European crises caused over the past decade, the AfD was able to use these opportunity structure for its advantage. By conducting an analysis on the development of the party's Eurosceptic stance during crises, this strategy should be kept in mind as a possible explanation.

## 2.4 Crises

Another relevant concept to this research is that of a crisis since it is going to lead and structure the approach of analysing the Eurosceptic development of the AfD. As it has been stated by Sylvia Walby in 2015, a crisis can be defined as: "an event that has the potential to cause a large detrimental change to the societal system and in which there is a lack of proportionality between cause and consequence" (p. 14). Crises can further be distinguished as being 'real', referring to actual changes in the social process, or as

being socially constructed. The latter means that different interpretations of a certain crisis have implications for its outcome, in the sense that they can under-, or overstate its impact and magnitude or attribute blame to the cause (Walby, 2015).

In relation to the EU as a political system, a variety of crises had to be faced over the years. They can be termed as endogenous crises, having their cause within the EU or because of the EU, as well as exogenous crises which have their origin outside of the Union’s political system. Since the creation of the AfD, five main crises are the Eurocrisis, the Refugee Crisis, Brexit, Covid-19 and the Ukraine-Russia war.

Overview			
Crises	Origin	Type	EU-Measures
Eurocrisis	endogenous	Economic, financial	Rescue fund, European Stability Mechanism
Refugee Crisis	exogenous	Security, cultural	Admission of refugees, financial funds, Frontex expansion
Brexit	endogenous	Political	Exit negotiations
Covid-19 pandemic	exogenous	Health, economic	Financial funds, common strategies
Ukraine-Russia war	exogenous	Security, economic	Sanctions (Russia)

**2.4.1 Eurocrisis**

The Eurocrisis started around 2010, following the outbreak of the global economic crisis in 2007. As it highlighted weaknesses and challenges of the euro currency zone it can be categorised as an endogenous economic crisis within the EU. As a response to the events, the member states of the European Union set up a temporary rescue fund at the beginning of the crisis and a permanent European Stability Mechanism (ESM) in 2012. (Gomez et al., 2017) Even though this was a united and mainly effective European reaction, it caused controversial debates which can, for instance, be perceived in the creation of the AfD, taking place in the course of the Eurocrisis.

**2.4.2 Refugee Crisis**

Although irregular immigration had been a challenge for European countries bordering the Mediterranean for quite a while, it was not until 2015 where the Refugee Crisis was being defined as a transnational problem in Europe, due to an extensive increase in the number of asylum seekers reaching the continent. While it presented an exogenous crisis, with its cause outside of the EU, it led to debates about security, and cultural aspects in the member states. The response of the EU under leadership of German chancellor Angela Merkel showed a strong attempt but was also under controversial discussions. Around 160 000 refugees arriving in Greece and Italy were

allocated among the Member States of the EU, initial reception centres were set up for asylum seekers, the EU increased funds to support NGO's and an expansion of the EU border protection agency, Frontex, took place. While this could be viewed as a united EU response, several member states additionally chose their own consequences such as the closing of their borders and showed discontent towards some actions taken, making the overall response of the EU a divided one. (Gomez et al., 2017)

### **2.4.3 Brexit**

Brexit, the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union, which was decided on in 2016, posed a whole new political challenge to the EU. Deriving from discontent in the British population and political landscape, and scepticism towards the European integration project it presents another endogenous crisis. As the United Kingdom was the first nation to withdraw from the EU it was followed by long exit negotiations and debates on closer cooperation in Europe. Since it had the actual withdrawal of the country as a consequence, it shows that the efforts made by the EU after the proposal was brought forward by the UK, were obviously ineffective and divided. (Gomez et al., 2017)

### **2.4.4 Covid-19 pandemic**

The Covid-19 pandemic which reached the European countries in its full extent in 2020 challenged the EU again with its exogenous cause. While the Union attempted a united response through financial support within the Member States, common strategies and vaccine programmes, the states themselves mainly took internal measures. Overall, the EU supported actions to be taken to control the virus but was nevertheless perceived as rather ineffective by great parts of the European population. (Gomez et al., 2017)

### **2.4.5 Ukraine-Russia war**

As an ongoing exogenous crisis, the Ukraine-Russia war brought about security concerns and economic implications within the EU. The response of the member states was divided at first as they coordinated themselves internally, but later on supplemented by united sanctions towards Russia which was a success considering the range of different interests within the states of the Union. (Gomez et al., 2017)

### **2.4.6 Hypotheses**

Based on the few differences that can already be distinguished between the crises, three broad hypotheses can be created considered during the analysis.

### 1. *Different crises trigger different Eurosceptic aspects*

In general, it can be expected, that different crises trigger different aspects of Eurosceptic attitudes regarding the AfD. While one can think that the Eurocrisis, the Ukraine-Russia war and maybe even the Covid-19 pandemic caused economic criticism, surely the refugee crisis added factors of cultural criticism to the AfD's standpoint. Brexit as a crisis can seem to have different impacts on Eurosceptic arguments, since it could on one hand, inspire debates of hard Euroscepticism and a German "Dexit" to follow the British example.

### 2. *Effective EU crisis management is followed by less AfD Euroscepticism*

In the case of a united and effective crisis management of the EU which highlights its advantages, less Eurosceptic reactions are expected to be found within the AfD than during ineffective and controversial crisis responses.

### 3. *Endogenous crises cause criticism of the EU as an institution while exogenous crises cause criticism on the EU as a crisis manager*

Since endogenous crises have their cause within the EU itself, it could be expected that they deliver more ground for Eurosceptic reactions that criticise the respective shortcoming of the Union as an institution. On the other hand, a certain respond of the EU on an exogenous crisis can also give room to criticism of the EU as a crisis manager depending on its implications.

The data analysis to be conducted in this research will be able support, falsify or supplement these assumptions.

## **3 Methods**

### **3.1 Research Design**

The chosen research design to conduct an analysis on how the AfD's attitude towards the European Union developed over time, is a combination of a deductive and inductive textual analysis. Hereby, the deductive part is based on the presented theoretical concepts of political opportunity structure, populism, Euroscepticism, and types of crises as well as the broad hypotheses. In the course of the analysis it is, thus, possible to support or falsify the existing assumptions. While this gives direction to the analysis, a supplementation of an inductive approach is needed to develop a full understanding

of the evolution regarding the party's Eurosceptic stance, and to acknowledge factors that were not considered before. In this sense, the examination of the given data offers the chance to also derive new theories about the phenomenon and the Eurosceptic development of the AfD can be carved out based on the chosen data set.

Hereby, an analysis of primary data stemming from the AfD serves as the underlying method. Through this analysis, officially published statements of the party as well as verbal statements transformed into transcripts, in which its stance on EU-matters is commented, are being examined which takes place in form of a textual content analysis. The collection of this sort of qualitative data supports the forming of a comprehensive picture and understanding on the object under study. This specific method has been chosen due to it offering the possibility to evaluate the AfD and to explore their standpoint in each crisis based on existing data.

In general, the decision of collecting qualitative data has been made, as the positioning towards the EU can for a great part been observed in statements of the party and aspects of election programmes. On the contrary to mere numbers and statistics obtained on the AfD, qualitative data can offer rather detailed observations and insights. Since it concerns the bundled position of a party and not the opinion of a singular person, the chosen procedure seems fitting to answer the research question posed by this paper and the associated sub-questions.

### **3.2 Method of data collection**

The data to be collected can be allocated to two categories, the first of them being election programmes of the party between 2013 and 2024. Due to the case that the position of the general party is the focus of this paper, the textual analysis only takes publications of the party's federal association into consideration, not the single associations representing the AfD in each German state. Since each programme of the federal elections contains a specific part on European matters, those are the sections in focus, for the programmes regarding the European parliament election the whole publication are analysed. These documents are being retrieved from the official website of the AfD or other official German websites publishing the election programmes of the state's party landscape. As a main source of data, the information to be gathered through these programmes can offer insights on the direct position and demands of the party on European Integration throughout the different years.

The programmes which specifically stand under study are six in total, three programmes of the federal elections, and three programmes of the European parliament elections.

The second and main category of the data under analysis is made of parliament transcripts of the German national parliament meetings. As the AfD entered the federal parliament 'Bundestag' in 2017, protocols covering the time period from October 2017 to June 2024 are taken into consideration. In order to enable an efficient and comprehensive analysis of the protocols, which provides a stable insight into the development over the years, the protocols of the first parliamentary session of each month are included in the analysis. Since during all years there was either no parliament meetings in July or August, the total number of documents under analysis is 75. Within these transcripts, all speeches of the AfD's parliamentary minutes can become subject to this study's examination. A main reason for this is to obtain information with a direct linkage between the crises that are observed, and actions as well as statements made on the AfD's side on the EU. By examining this information, it also might be possible to find a clearer potential connection between the AfD using its Eurosceptic attitude in light of the political opportunity structures theory. The transcripts of the party's parliamentary minute speeches can be found among the published official protocols, of the official Bundestag website.

### **3.3 Method of data analysis**

The examination of the data is conducted through a content analysis, which can be defined as: "the systematic analysis of the content of a text (...) in a quantitative or qualitative manner" (Bhattacharjee, 2012: p.115). As the central procedure of a content analysis stands the sampling of the set of data for the analysis, the identification and application of rules to divide data into segments to be analysed and the final application of concepts and codes to execute the analysis. This study proceeds with the sentiment analysis as a technique of the content analysis, which has the aim to "capture people's opinion or attitude toward an object, person, or phenomenon" (Bhattacharjee, 2012, p. 116). Thus, the analysis highlights the identification of positive, negative or neutral disposition of the data towards an issue. For the given case this signifies the AfD's stance on the European Union and can be separated into a specific analysis of the different crises.

The research tool which is being used for this analysis is the standard software programme ATLAS.ti, which is a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software that facilitates the analysis of qualitative data for qualitative, quantitative, mixed method research. It supports locating, coding or tagging and annotating features within sets of unstructured data and additionally offers functions for visualization of the results. (ATLAS.ti, 2024)

While for this study ATLAS.ti is used on qualitative data sets it shall help to efficiently organise, sort and process the dataset based on codes. To guide this process, the following coding scheme has been developed.

Coding scheme		
Categories	Codes	Sub-codes
AfD reaction	Eurosceptic AfD reaction	Economic/Financial aspect Nationalist aspect Security aspect Cultural aspect Social aspect Health aspect Rule of law aspect Democratic aspect General aspects  Soft Euroscepticism Hard Euroscepticism
	Neutral/Positive AfD reaction	
Crises	Eurocrisis Refugee Crisis Brexit Covid-19 pandemic Ukraine-Russia war	

The coding scheme for the data analysis of this study is arranged in a hierarchal order. There are two overarching categories one being *Crises* and the other *AfD reaction*. The category *Crises* contains codes which stand for the five crises under analysis: the Eurocrisis, the Refugee Crisis, Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Ukraine-Russia war. As the category *AfD reaction* consists of the two codes *Neutral/Positive AfD reaction* and *Eurosceptic AfD reaction*, the aim is to use them in seeking to identify the general position of the party towards the EU in regard to each crisis. Through eleven additional sub-codes under the code *Eurosceptic AfD reaction*, the exact aspect of Eurosceptic criticism and its intensity can be determined. While the aspect codes

*Economic/Financial, Nationalist, Security and Cultural* were present from the start on, the aspect codes *Social, Health, Rule of law, Democratic* and *General* were inductively added during the coding process. All nine aspect codes are applied to carve out the causes and argument positions of Eurosceptic reactions while the two sub-codes *Soft Euroscepticism* and *Hard Euroscepticism* can present the Eurosceptic intensity. By applying these codes in combination with crisis codes the analysis will deliver the respective Eurosceptic position of the AfD under the particular circumstances.

Through applying the presented research design, method of data collection and analysis, patterns shall be found among different Eurosceptic aspects during different crises and their intensity. This shall present the frame in which the AfD ranges in terms of its stance on the European Union and European integration.

## **4 Findings**

As the selected documents have been coded through Atlas, the gained results will now be presented as an overview. Additionally, the main part of the analysis aims to elaborate on the substantive results which the coding process delivered and to delve into the leading factors of the AfD's Eurosceptic argumentation throughout the five crises. Thus, an answer to the first sub-question of this paper, which Eurosceptic arguments the AfD presents in reaction to different European crises, will be provided. The presentation of the arguments is going to be outlined in the chronological order of the crises and in the occurrence hierarchy of coded aspects. Within the presentation of the aspects, statements stemming from the election programmes will be explained first since they carry a greater weight compared to comments of individual parliament delegates. If further substantive points are existent, these election programme arguments will nevertheless be supplemented by contributions from AfD parliament speeches.

### **4.1 Eurocrisis**

In the course of analysing the six AfD election programmes and the 76 protocols of German parliamentary meetings, 33 statements of the party regarding the Eurocrisis were coded with at least one Eurosceptic aspect code. While the, by far, most used Eurosceptic argument can be found to be the *Economic/Financial aspect*, being coded 24 times, the second most frequent one presented itself as the *Nationalist aspect* with a coding number of 7 times. Additionally, three other Eurosceptic aspect codes were



applied. The *Social aspect* with a frequency of 3, and the *Rule of law aspect* as well as the *Democratic aspect* with a frequency of 1. Besides this number of clearly allocated aspects, the *General aspects* code contained 4 additional codes existing of non-specific light Eurosceptic quotes which did not fit under a particular category.

In total, 3 of these 33 Eurosceptic statements turned out to contain *Hard Eurosceptic* tendencies.

Eurocrisis			
	Election Programmes	Parliament speeches	Codes per aspect:
Economic/Financial aspect	15	9	24
Nationalist aspect	5	2	7
Security aspect	-	-	-
Cultural aspect	-	-	-
Social aspect	3	-	3
Health aspect	-	-	-
Rule of law aspect	-	1	1
Democratic aspect	1	-	1
General aspects	2	2	4
Soft Euroscepticism	18	12	30
Hard Euroscepticism	3	-	3
Total number of quotes:	33		

As it can be seen, the main Eurosceptic arguments deriving from the examination of the data regarding the Eurocrisis have shown to be based on the *Economic/Financial aspect*. Along the years since the party was created some statements have been repeated often and with a special emphasis.

Looking at the election programmes, one statement with high presence was that Germany has to pay too much of an amount into the budget of the European Union, standing as the main purser among the Member States (BT17). Especially during and after the Eurocrisis this criticism dominated the debate of the AfD on the EU. Through the euro rescue politics of the Union, the party's discourse was marked with the argument that Germany always stays liable for other Member State's debts, which would eventually ruin the country since it aggravates further necessary reforms in the state (BT17). Furthermore, the AfD criticises that the euro rescue programmes stand in contradiction to the 'no bailout clause' from article 125 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) which states that Member States cannot take on debts of another Member State (EU24). Since these circumstances were not

foreseen in the creation of the eurozone, the AfD advocates for leaving the latter. (BT17)

Already in the AfD's European parliament election programme in 2014, it criticises that economic decision-making competencies are being increasingly transferred to EU institutions. According to the party, the euro and the transfer union failed and since one currency across borders with differently developed countries is not possible, Member States should return to having their own currency (EU19).

Considering the Eurocrisis, the party claims in its parliamentary speeches that the supranational rescue politics of the European Union are breaking with existing laws and that it stands vehemently against an economic government led by the EU (Nov17).

As the second most dominating content of Eurosceptic criticism in the frame of the Eurocrisis is, as presented in the results, the *Nationalist aspect*, there are also main points repeating themselves in AfD statements which can be identified. In their first election programme for the national government in 2013, the party advocates for the dissolution of the eurozone since the currency is not perceived as needed for Germany but in fact damaging. Additionally, the AfD demands a change of the European treaty in the programme, so that every Member State has the ability to leave the eurozone for their national interest (BT13). One year later, during the party's election campaign for the European parliament in 2014, the AfD states that the centralised measures of the euro rescue weaken the independency of the Member States and undermine the principle of subsidiarity (EU14). Furthermore, the AfD accuses the EU of having utilised the Eurocrisis to advance the transition of the Union to a European state, which should be stopped to protect the nation state (EU24).

Also in the following years, the Eurocrisis is used for criticising the EU during speeches in the German parliament. The party states that the shortcomings presented by the crisis should be seen as proof for the EU to develop back to prioritising the interests, values and the well-being of its individual nations (Dez17). Additionally, the parliamentary minutes of the party show that the *Nationalist aspect* can be seen to have overlaps with the *Economic aspect*. When the AfD criticises that the EU's plan to support other Member State economically, entails that Germany being the country to pay for everyone, the consequence of the party is to demand protection for the German state (May18). Hereby, the AfD argues with a nationalist interest.

Moving on to the *Social aspect* of Euroscepticism in connection to the Eurocrisis. In its election programme from 2017 the AfD argues that the euro currency as well as the euro rescue policy are responsible for social upheaval in the Southern Member States. In terms of Germany itself, it is perceived that the euro rescue, and Germany's part in it, strongly slows down the tackling of social challenges within the country such as poverty. (BT17)

Regarding the *Rule of law aspect*, the AfD comments in a parliamentary speech that the 'aloof politics of arrogant lords far away from citizens must stop' (Nov17, p.112) and that the people responsible must return to rule of law the way it is supposed to be in Germany. In doing so, TARGET2<sup>1</sup> as well as the never-ending euro rescue should be put to an end. (Nov17)

In light of the *Democratic aspect*, the party again criticises the expansion of power of EU institutions through the euro rescue in its election programme. The AfD states that it happens with no further democratic control as, hereby, without consent of the population, an artificial European state is created far off from the people. (EU14)

As *General aspects*, the demand to stop TARGET2 can be identified in both the party's parliamentary speeches and election programmes (BT17), as well as the accusation towards the German government to be incapable of appropriate decision-making. According to the AfD, this is eventually leading to an increase of failed programmes and strategies within the EU such as the euro rescue. (Sep18)

Additionally, several quotes of the party regarding the Eurocrisis were found to contain tendencies of *Hard Euroscepticism*. In both the party's election programmes from 2017 and 2019, a possible 'Dexit' from the EU is mentioned following the demand to end the excessive use of TARGET2.

„Als Sofortmaßnahme, noch vor einem „D-Exit“, fordert die AfD darum die Bundesregierung und die Deutsche Bundesbank auf, die politisch bislang geduldete Überbeanspruchung des Verrechnungskontos „Target-2“ zu beenden. *[As an immediate measure, even before a "D-Exit", the AfD therefore calls on the Federal Government and the German Bundesbank to*

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<sup>1</sup> TARGET2 is the Eurosystem's payment system and the leading European platform for processing large-value payments, central and commercial banks use TARGET2 to process real-time payments in euros. (European Central Bank, 2024)

*end the politically tolerated overuse of the "Target 2" clearing account.]“*  
*(BT17, p.15)*

Furthermore, the AfD states in its 2021 election programme that the vehemence with which the European Union has driven forward its transformation into a planned economy superstate in recent years has led the party to the realisation that its fundamental reform approaches cannot be implemented in this EU. Therefore, the AfD believes it is necessary for Germany to leave the European Union and establish a new European economic community and community of interests (BT21).

Throughout all statements on the Eurocrisis, the AfD can be observed to extremely criticise the crisis management of the EU, no neutral or positive reactions of the party were coded.

## 4.2 Refugee Crisis

As the second crisis under examination, the Refugee Crisis stands out with the highest number of Eurosceptic aspect codes throughout all documents, which is 44. Leading is the *Security aspect* with 14 codes, followed by the *Economic/Financial aspect* (9) and the *Cultural aspect* code (9). Furthermore, the *Nationalist aspect* was coded 7 times, close to the *Social aspect* (5). With a coding of only 1 in all the documents presents itself the *Health aspect*.

In addition to these specific aspects stands again the *General aspects* code with the number of 10 times being coded as well as the *Hard Euroscepticism* code which supplements 1 of the 44 found statements.

Refugee Crisis			
	Election Programmes	Parliament speeches	Codes per aspect:
Economic/Financial aspect	2	7	9
Nationalist aspect	5	2	7
Security aspect	9	5	14
Cultural aspect	6	3	9
Social aspect	5	-	5
Health aspect	1	-	1
Rule of law aspect	-	-	-
Democratic aspect	-	-	-
General aspects	3	7	10
Soft Euroscepticism	22	21	43
Hard Euroscepticism	-	1	1
Total number of quotes:	44		

For the Refugee Crisis, the main aspect of Eurosceptic AfD statements is, as presented, the *Security aspect*. Two dominant points made by the party in this regard are the ones of insufficient border protection by the EU and Germany (Sep18) as well as the argument of increased criminality through refugees entering the countries (EU19).

Especially the statements in the party's election programmes are high in number on these matters. According to the party, the EU failed at a full extent during the migration crisis which becomes visible at the lack of protection at the European external border which the Union is responsible for (EU24). It criticises that nothing is done against the, through criminal towing gangs organised, illegal mass immigration and demands that borders must be led back to their original purpose which is: the protection against attack, a form to distinguish between foreign and one's own, as well as a condition of sovereign statehood (EU24). The AfD expresses the opinion that this lack of border protection by the European Union hinders a clear identification of illegal immigrants which increases Islamist radicalisation tendencies and will cause security problems and potential terrorism (EU24). Therefore, the refugee crisis and the crisis management of the EU is supposed to lead to exuberant criminality and the fact that some Member States of the EU already face a loss of whole suburbs to Islamic immigrants (EU19). Since the increase in criminal activity can be traced back to the border crossing of migrants, the party sees that a reform of the Schengen Agreement<sup>2</sup> is needed to guarantee efficient border protection for the EU Member States and the security within them (EU19). Necessary measures to be taken are, according to the AfD, a further expansion of European border protection agency Frontex, the refusal of entry to migrants and consequent measures to send them back (EU24), since criminals and other rule breakers should never be eligible for protection (EU19).

In its parliamentary contributions the party also claims that the European Union forces its Member States through punishment to take in asylum seekers which eventually confronts German citizens with Islamic parallel societies and clan criminality (Apr20). Generally, the party takes the standpoint that an immediate change is necessary in the

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<sup>2</sup> The Schengen Agreement enables EU citizens free movement in the border-free Schengen Area which encompasses all EU countries except Cyprus and Ireland (European Commission, 2024).

EU's migration management since Germany will not be able to overcome a second 2015 in terms of security-policy (Aug21).

As another strongly emphasised argument in AfD statements stands again the Eurosceptic *Economic/Financial aspect*. As it was for the Eurocrisis, the main point of the party is, hereby, the view of Germany as the principal investor in the EU migration system (Sep19). The arguments in its election programmes are that the so-called irresponsible immigration politics cannot be carried by the German economy and taxpayers (BT17). Whether it is any European debt made or redistribution escapades (BT21).

According to the party's parliament speeches, there is generally too much of an amount of money used from the solidarity-based EU budget to cover migration costs and integration funds while Germany additionally pays social support within the country for persons with a migration background (May18).

A new argument supplementing the party's Eurosceptic discussions concerning the Refugee Crisis is based on the *Cultural aspect*. The AfD emphasises in its 2019 election programme that the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union postulates respect for the diversity of cultures and traditions of the peoples of Europe and for the national identities of the Member States. In diametric opposition to this promise, however, the party states that the political elites and institutions of the EU are pursuing an asylum and immigration policy that is putting European civilization in existential danger (EU19). Therefore, the policy of opening borders, according to the AfD, will result in a cultural demolition of historic proportions and all immigration to Europe must be limited and controlled in such a way that the identity of the European cultural nations is preserved under all circumstances (EU19).

Still in 2021, the party argued in the German parliament that the EU's handling of the crisis creates parallel societies in Germany since some cultures do not go together. In the AfD's opinion this means, that the cultural differences are too high, and the Islamic ways of living prevent any kind of integration processes, thus immigration must be restricted by the EU to a way higher degree. (Aug21)

Concerning the refugee crisis *Nationalist aspects* again play a role for the party's criticism of the EU. Even though the AfD aims at international collaboration in terms of crisis management, it is vehemently against binding refugee admission quotas for EU Member States since they represent serious encroachment on their national

sovereignty (EU19). Here as well, the party criticises the EU for utilising the refugee crisis to accelerate a supranational project of state-building (EU24).

Lastly, the AfD judges German EU functionaries in its parliament speeches for advocating for an increase in legal immigration. The party says that Europe should not be Germany's first priority but the nation state itself and that more actions in the interest of Germany are needed (Jul18).

Regarding the *Social aspect* of Eurosceptic AfD statements in this crisis the party argues in its programmes that through EU- and Germany led immigration politics, a likewise rampant immigration is taking place into the German social system (EU24). This, inter alia, is supposed to lead to a congestion in the German housing market and a rise in rent which displaces locals. According to the AfD an additional challenge is that the German money, used for EU migration policies, cannot benefit German social reforms any longer. (BT17)

Focusing on *Health aspects*, in its 2019 election programme the party puts forward the argument that a significant rise in notifiable infectious diseases with increasingly resistant pathogens has been observed since the start of the refugee crisis. The cause of this problem, as the AfD says, stems from the reason that there is no standardised, mandatory examination for migrants in Europe, posing a considerable risk to the health of the local population and medical staff. (EU19)

As *General aspects* the party cites, for the 2017 national parliament election, that the mass abuse of the basic right to asylum must be ended by amending the fundamental law. For the same reason, the AfD advocates that the outdated Geneva Refugee Convention and other supra- and international agreements must be renegotiated with the aim of adapting them to the threat to Europe posed by population explosions and migration flows of the globalised present and future. (BT17)

Even though a Dexit is not directly demanded by the party in connection to the Refugee Crisis, the complete rejection of the European asylum system shows tendencies of *Hard Euroscepticism*. This rejection can be observed in the parliament speech statement that neither the AfD, nor the German population agree with the EU's actions regarding the crisis, that the system is not working and an exit from it is therefore needed. (Oct22)

Again, this crisis has been examined to be a constant cause of criticism from the AfD towards either the EU or the German government and its crisis management. No neutral or positive reactions to crisis responses could be found.

### 4.3 Brexit

Thirdly, Brexit demonstrate the least number of coded statements with only 10 Eurosceptic references within the coded data. The *Economic/Financial aspect* presents itself as the leading argument being coded 5 times, followed by the *Nationalist aspect* with 2 codes. *General* Eurosceptic arguments appeared in 3 statements and factors of *Hard Euroscepticism* supported 3 quotes as well.

Brexit			
	Election Programmes	Parliament speeches	Codes per aspect:
Economic/Financial aspect	-	5	5
Nationalist aspect	-	2	2
Security aspect	-	-	-
Cultural aspect	-	-	-
Social aspect	-	-	-
Health aspect	-	-	-
Rule of law aspect	-	-	-
Democratic aspect	-	-	-
General aspects	1	2	3
Soft Euroscepticism	1	6	7
Hard Euroscepticism	2	1	3
Total number of quotes:	10		

Taking a closer look at Eurosceptic argumentations of the AfD considering Brexit, it becomes visible that the *Economic/Financial aspect* dominates again but this time only during parliamentary speeches. In the German parliament, the party describes the United Kingdom (UK) in December 2017 as an exemplary which presents an alternative to the forced integration of the EU on the way the state is going to organise themselves economically with other states after the decision to exit. These new arrangements are comparable with the former European Economic Community (EEC) (Dec17). The AfD also points out that even though the UK has left the EU, their economy is growing despite Covid-19 or the Ukraine crisis which is something that cannot be said about Germany or other EU Member States (Sep19). Again, the party strongly disapproves of the additional costs coming along with Brexit originating from debts by the UK to the EU in which case the AfD assumes that Germany once again will have to pay more (Sep19).



Based on the *Nationalist aspect* of the party's Euroscepticism, which was again only coded in parliament protocols, the AfD comes to the conclusion that Brexit demands an appropriate further development of the European understanding. This should be oriented along nation states since Brexit demonstrates a self-determination of the UK that stands for European diversity. (Dec17)

Along the *General aspects*, the party accuses the functionaries of the German government, in their election programme, to have caused a divided Europe along with Brexit the way they acted on the EU level (EU19).

During parliament meetings, the AfD claims that every person criticising the EU is seen as a warmonger since the Union stands for peace. However, according to the party, the EU is not a necessity for peace as Brexit shows since it cannot be expected that the UK will find themselves in a war any time soon. (Sep18) Additionally, the party labels the exit negotiation as envisaging a punishment of the UK, the way that they are led by the European Union (Dec18).

*Hard Euroscepticism* can be found in the statement of the AfD that if there is no transformation within the EU back to an international organization of individual sovereign states, it sees that Germany is forced to follow the British example and act on a Dexit:

„Sofern eine solche Konzeption mit den derzeitigen Partnern der EU nicht einvernehmlich auszuhandeln ist, ist Deutschland gezwungen, dem Beispiel Großbritanniens zu folgen und aus der bestehenden EU auszutreten. *[If such a concept cannot be negotiated amicably with the current EU partners, Germany will be forced to follow the UK's example and leave the existing EU.]*“ (BT17, p. 8)

In addition, the German population shall be able to follow the British example and vote for a remain of Germany in the eurozone and potentially in the European Union itself (BT17).

The coding process has shown that Brexit has as well been used by the AfD to only put forward Eurosceptic statements instead of neutral or positive comments regarding the EU.

## 4.4 Covid-19 pandemic

Eurosceptic statements regarding the Covid-19 pandemic were coded 20 times within the data set. Once more, the *Economic/Financial aspect* was the leading argument being allocated to 14 statements of the AfD, solely accompanied by the *Nationalist aspect* (3) and *the Health aspect* (1).

Nevertheless, 3 *General* arguments were used in addition, and even 1 was again identified as *Hard Eurosceptic*.

Covid-19 pandemic			
	Election Programmes	Parliament speeches	Codes per aspect:
Economic/Financial aspect	6	8	14
Nationalist aspect	2	1	3
Security aspect	-	-	-
Cultural aspect	-	-	-
Social aspect	-	-	-
Health aspect	1	-	1
Constitutional State aspect	-	-	-
Democratic aspect	-	-	-
General aspects	-	3	3
<hr/>			
Soft Euroscepticism	8	11	19
Hard Euroscepticism	1	-	1
Total number of quotes:	20		

For the Eurosceptic *Economic/Financial aspect* in its election programmes, the AfD emphasises that the Covid recovery pact pushed the unwanted transfer union which would be most likely to lead to the descent of European economies (BT21). This, in the AfD's opinion, proves the bad crisis management of the EU and will end up in an irresponsible increase of debts and in costing too much, especially for Germany (BT21). Since the EU commission planned to loan billions of euros for Europe's reconstruction, the AfD demanded an immediate end to any EU borrowing that would be at the expense of future German generations. The party stated that if loans were taken out to mitigate the consequences of the government's excessive coronavirus measures, then this must only be done at national level. (BT21)

Another argument of the party, stemming from its parliament comments, was to condemn any further agreement of the German government to EU-Covid programmes due to them pushing the national inflation (Jul22). The rejection of the party towards any EU led financial Covid-support can also be seen by the fact, that the AfD neglected the Covid-fond in parliament in April 2020.

The covid crisis was also used by the AfD to argue under the *Nationalist aspect*, that the pandemic management has been utilised to push the building of a supranational EU state at the cost of national sovereignty (EU24). The party defines the pandemic as proof for the fact that healthcare policies should remain in the frame of the nation states responsibility as it states that since the start of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, it has become clear that the EU's influence in health policy is also increasing at the expense of individual states (EU24). As a result, the AfD sees a massive expansion of the influence of the EU Commission and several EU agencies and comes again to the conclusion that the EU has too much decision-making power (EU24).

Regarding the *Health aspect* in the party's Eurosceptic quotes, it demanded the stop of vaccine authorizations through the EU commission in the 2024 election programme, since the AfD viewed it as dangerous during the Covid-19 pandemic (EU24).

Under the *General aspects* the AfD criticised, during German parliament meetings, the EU based digital covid vaccine identification, claiming that it leads to discrimination of unvaccinated individuals in all EU Member States (Nov20).

The statement with aspects of *Hard Euroscepticism* in connection to the pandemic is the same election programme quote as the one coded for the Eurocrisis which was presented above. Namely, the transformation of the EU to a superstate through crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic which poses the necessity to the AfD to leave the EU and create a European economic and interest community. (BT21)

Even though the Covid-19 pandemic did not entail as many united EU actions as other crises, the ones that were decided on in a European frame, all became subject to Eurosceptic statements of the AfD. Again, neutral or positive reactions were absent.

#### **4.5 Ukraine-Russia war**

In contrary to the other crises, the 19 statements which were coded with Eurosceptic aspects relating to the Ukraine-Russia war do not illustrate a strong variation. 11 quotes of the party were found to be of *Economic/Financial* nature while only one other was allocated to the *Security aspect*. Besides these two aspects, 10 statements were identified as of *General* Eurosceptic content but none as *Hard Eurosceptic*.

Ukraine-Russia war			
	Election Programmes	Parliament speeches	Codes per aspect:
Economic/Financial aspect	2	10	12
Nationalist aspect	-	-	-
Security aspect	1	-	1
Cultural aspect	-	-	-
Social aspect	-	-	-
Health aspect	-	-	-
Constitutional State aspect	-	-	-
Democratic aspect	-	-	-
General aspects	-	6	6
Soft Euroscepticism	2	16	18
Hard Euroscepticism	-	-	-
Total number of quotes:	18		

By examining the Eurosceptic aspects of the AfD connected to the Ukraine-Russia war at last, it is quite clear that the *Economic/Financial aspect* once again records by far the highest occurrence. As a main point in its election programmes the party puts forward the argument, that the sanctioning policies of the EU affect Germany as an export and economy nation in a catastrophic extent, which is why more distance from the EU is needed (EU24). The country should aim at a peaceful German-Russian relationship since, for decades, Russia has been a reliable supplier and guarantor of an affordable energy supply, which is the Achilles heel of the German economy due to its energy-intensive industry. Thus, the party argues that restoring undisturbed trade with Russia requires the immediate lifting of economic sanctions against Russia and the repair of the Nord Stream pipelines (EU24).

During its parliamentary minutes, the party brings forward that the sanctions, which the EU decided on themselves, cost the Union billions of euros, but Russia on the contrary shows a surplus in the state budget compared to the year earlier (Jun22). In addition, the party focuses on the fact that other nations, such as the UK, which has left the EU, has likewise been able to record an economic growth, not as Germany facing an economic decline even though they should have the same relation to the Ukraine crisis (Nov23). Another point of criticism expressed by the AfD in its speeches is that offering the Ukraine to join the EU will harm the economy even more, since the Union requires markets which can contribute to the community instead of having to receive supportive payment by the European Union (Jun22). Generally, the party comments that the costs which already flow in favour of the Ukraine are too high. Besides the German support for Ukraine citizens and its weapon exports these costs include planned EU measure

such as the planned joining of the Ukraine. As the AfD claims, the latter will again end up in Germany being the main pursuer. (Dec23)

Under the *Security aspect*, the Eurosceptic perspective which the AfD put forward, entailed the argument that through the EU sanctioning policies towards Russia, Germany as well as other Member States were being pulled into conflicts which are not of their own interest. This again poses a security threat to Germany which is why, according to the party's election programme, the country should improve its defence capabilities. (EU24)

*General aspects* of the AfD's Eurosceptic debate in the German parliament include arguments that judge the planned expansion of the EU structure and costs. They are perceived as nonsense by the party and as an image created to make the European Union seem stronger in front of Russia even though it would in fact weaken the EU (Jun22). In addition, the AfD claims that through the EU's weak management, the Ukraine has lost millions of citizens to Moscow (Dec23).

Actions taken by the EU as a response to the Ukraine-Russia war can, hereby, again only be seen to be a constant cause of Eurosceptic criticism by the AfD.

## **5 Discussion**

Based on the findings of the analysis, comparisons can now be drawn between the crises in order to answer the second sub-question if different types of crises differ in their effect on the AfD's Euroscepticism.

Focusing on the development of different Eurosceptic aspect occurrence, several insights can be gained. The most coded Eurosceptic aspect was beyond dispute the aspect of economic and financial matter. While it is not surprising, that it scored the highest among the three crises which were typed as crises of economic/financial nature, namely the Eurocrisis, Covid-19 pandemic and Ukraine-Russia war, the aspect was furthermore quite dominant regarding the Refugee Crisis and Brexit. It was coded as the second most prominent code concerning the Refugee Crisis, and as the most used code in terms of Brexit. Since the creation of the AfD took place during the Eurocrisis, the party started off with using economic/financial Euroscepticism as one of their main components in political debates. The main points of critique which the AfD hereby established could now be noticed throughout the analysis regarding all five

crises: Germany as the leading financial supporter within the EU, and the EU taking on too many debts or spending too much money. Therefore, these arguments can be determined as shaping the AfD's Euroscepticism no matter the type of crisis.

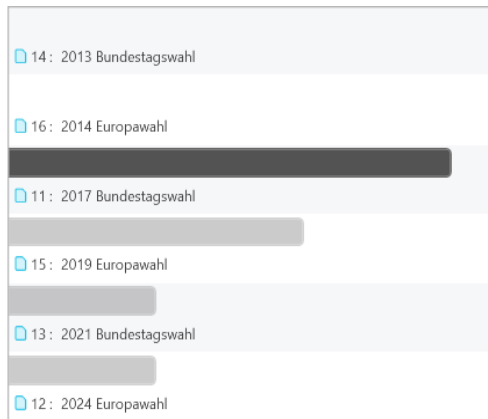
Nevertheless, it can be observed that, while the AfD started as a party of economic and financial Euroscepticism during the Eurocrisis, the crises following 2013 expand the party's Eurosceptic aspect ground by new dimensions. Above all, this takes place during the progress of the Refugee Crisis in which, most importantly, security- and culturally based Eurosceptic positions are introduced. Although Euroscepticism based on nationalist nature accompanied all crises except the latest Ukraine-Russia war, it cannot be traced back to be directly connected to a specific type of crisis. Rather, it is most present when measures taken by the EU invade the national scope of action too dominantly, as the AfD views appropriate, no matter their nature.

Considering all coded Eurosceptic aspects, the main ones to have influenced the AfD's debates on the EU throughout the crises can be narrowed down to being the four: *Economic/Financial*, *Security*, *Cultural*, and *Nationalist*. The remaining *Social*-, *Health*-, *Rule of law*-, and *Democratic aspect* as well as the *General aspects* were rather thin in their total occurrence. Even though they were applied as soon as a specific EU response opened the particular field, they cannot be said to have brought a newly important shaping effect on the Eurosceptic stance to the AfD.

Generally, it must be noted that the effect of particular crises on the AfD's Euroscepticism cannot be strictly separated but must be viewed as a developing accumulation of different arguments which often were continued within the following crises. Without doubt, the crises which were typed as of economic nature were clearly marked by evoking the strongest economic and financial Eurosceptic reactions. And security-typed crises were the only ones of causing security-related Euroscepticism. Nevertheless, as soon as a new field of Euroscepticism recorded an entry within the AfD's discourse it was, if possible, continued throughout the following crises as it can be seen with the *Economic/Financial aspect*.

One clear observation that presented itself during the analysis is, however, that endogenous crises were more likely to cause hard Eurosceptic statements by the AfD. While *Hard Euroscepticism* was coded three times in connection to the Eurocrisis and Brexit, it was coded only once or not at all regarding the other three crises. Observing

the time frame in which the AfD increasingly advocated for harsh measures within its election programmes, which were coded with *Hard Euroscepticism* it is striking that this was dominantly the case during the Brexit crisis. The following graph from the ATLAS.ti coding project illustrates this fact.



Even though, the hard Eurosceptic statements in the party's election programme were not necessarily coded in connection to Brexit but additionally in regard to the other four crisis, it demonstrates a noticeable peak after 2016 where Brexit was decided on. With three codes of *Hard Euroscepticism* in the 2017 national parliament election, two codes in the 2019 EU parliament election and one code for the following elections, the timing cannot be ignored considering Brexit. Therefore, it can be concluded that, although not necessarily Brexit arguments were used for incentives to leave the European Union, the example of the UK to exit from the Union seem to have inspired the party to be more daring in its own political demands.

In general, it can be said, the more measures taken by the EU regarding a crisis, the stronger the Eurosceptic reaction of the AfD turned out to be. As soon as any crisis management was undertaken by the Union, it can be observed as being harshly criticised by the AfD and used to argue against European integration and the European Union. Neutral or Positive reactions by the party towards the EU's crisis response were never recorded and the measures taken, were continuously framed as ineffective or damaging for Germany or Europe. Since the Eurocrisis and refugee crises can record the most united crisis response actions by the EU, it is therefore no surprise that those crises can be found to present the most Eurosceptic statements by the party.

After having discussed the detailed insight which derived from the analysis, several general remarks can be made by answering the third sub-question on how the intensity of the AfD's Eurosceptic discourse changed in the context of major European crises.

Firstly, it must again be recognised that the Eurosceptic discourse of the AfD has been shaped by constant negative criticism towards the EU's crisis management since the party was created. Throughout all five major European crises, the AfD stated its discontent with the way actions were taken by the persons responsible, whether that was the EU or German government. Even though it can be noted that the range of Eurosceptic criticism, which the party disposed of, expanded itself when a new crisis brought up additional aspects, the overall intensity cannot be said to have been strongly increased. It can rather be agreed on, that the nature of the party's Eurosceptic arguments gained diversity. While AfD statements containing hard Eurosceptic tendencies exist, even in the party's election programmes, they did not outweigh the great majority of its soft Eurosceptic arguments, especially in current times. Demands by the AfD for a German Dexit did record a noticeable increase during Brexit but were, nevertheless, again followed by a decrease. This presents only a slight increase in overall hard Eurosceptic tendencies within the total period of time. Therefore, the extent of the AfD's Eurosceptic discourse continuously demonstrates a strong presence and even a peak during 2017 but it does not present a linear development. The latest Eurosceptic statements of the AfD are once more quite low in their hard Eurosceptic tendencies. Additionally, the AfD's arguments can be determined to have gained on aspect variety. These factors leave the insight that there has been an increase in the party's Euroscepticism due to its risen diversity and supplementation of hard Euroscepticism during the crises. Still, it has demonstrated to also decrease again presenting its connection to the given outer circumstances which also strengthens the assumptions of the underlying Political Opportunity Structure theory.

After having provided answers to all three sub-questions, the assumptions that were formulated before the analysis was carried out can now be considered.

#### *1. Different crises trigger different Eurosceptic aspects*

Yes, as expected were different Eurosceptic aspects triggered by different crises. The Eurocrisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukraine-Russia-war and even Brexit caused strong economic/financial Euroscepticism while the refugee crisis was strongly supplemented by cultural-, and security arguments. Brexit again seems to have had a clear influence on the party's hard Eurosceptic development. Overall, the five crises each presented their own combination of different aspects varying in their weight.



2. *Effective EU crisis management is followed by less AfD Euroscepticism*

No, all crisis management carried out by the EU was perceived as ineffective, damaging and controversial by the AfD and became the target of Eurosceptic statements in the party's election programmes or parliamentary speeches.

3. *Endogenous crises cause criticism of the EU as an institution while exogenous crises cause criticism of the EU as a crisis manager*

Yes and no, both endogenous and exogenous crises caused Eurosceptic criticism of the EU as a crisis manager by the AfD, nevertheless, endogenous crises did lead to increased criticism of the EU as an institution. This can be seen by the fact that the Eurocrisis as well as Brexit led to an increase of hard Eurosceptic tendencies in AfD statements which implied a clear rejection of European Integration and the EU.

Finally, by briefly reconnecting the analysis insights with the introduced Political Opportunities Structure Theory it can be confirmed that the AfD actively uses actions of EU crisis responses to advocate against European integration. As the party constantly criticises measures taken by the EU in context of the crises, it utilises opportunities provided by critical times to blame the Union as being responsible for disadvantages which the German population now has to endure. Hereby, the party can be seen to create the image of the EU as the 'fall guy' of crises and presents itself as knowing the simple solutions. Considering Brexit and the AfD's rise in hard Eurosceptic election programme statements, the party can also be seen to actively have used these presented structures by another country exiting the EU. The following decrease in hard Eurosceptic tendencies could, connected to the theory, be traced back to setbacks due to other circumstances. Although it seems to be a consistent strategy of the party, to use political opportunity structures to strengthen their political arguments, or to frame the EU in difficult times as being responsible, it cannot be presumed as being the only reason why the party recorded an inflow over the last years. More research is needed to include other dimensions of its party success.

## 6 Conclusion

In summary of the conducted analysis, an answer to this study's research question: *"How did the position of the AfD, regarding the European Union, develop throughout different crises between 2013 and 2024?"* can now be provided.

As discussed, the crises have not led to a linear development in radical Euroscepticism of the party, namely, from soft-, to hard Euroscepticism or vice versa. However, the five crises: Eurocrisis, Refugee Crisis, Brexit, Covid-19 pandemic and Ukraine-Russia war, have shown to have influenced the position of the AfD towards the European Union within the spectrum of Euroscepticism. This can firstly be determined by the development of Eurosceptic aspects. The AfD started off as a party in 2013 during the Eurocrisis which was expressed by the fact that its Euroscepticism was dominantly led by economic/financial and nationalist criticism. Two years later, the Refugee Crisis introduced strong, additional aspects of cultural and security ground while the previous aspects remained. Even though Brexit did not contribute new aspects in the party's Eurosceptic debate, it caused a push in hard Eurosceptic tendencies, particularly connected to endogenous crises, which later on declined. Covid, as well as the Ukraine-Russia war are the most recent crises and were mostly dominated by economic/financial Eurosceptic argumentation which presents itself as a consistent main aspect of criticism of the EU throughout all years. As presented in the discussion, the Eurocrisis and the Refugee Crisis can be identified as causing the most substantive Euroscepticism among all crises which can be traced back to the fact that, in their frame, the EU undertook the most crises response actions. In addition, since the refugee crisis is an ongoing challenge on the contrary to the Eurocrisis, Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, the AfD is still actively criticising the EU for it on the base of the analysed aspects.

Since this study was limited in its extent and could solely conduct research on the AfD and how the five crises offered new aspects or directions of Euroscepticism to the party, further scientific work could also focus on the electorate of the AfD. An examination on how crises can influence the voters will turn to Eurosceptic parties could support a greater comprehension on the topic of Euroscepticism and European crises.

Regardless, this study on the AfD's Eurosceptic stance has helped to ascertain the fact that the party is a Eurosceptic party by nature. In the process of coding six election

programmes and 75 parliament protocols, no neutral or positive comment on the EU in connection to the five crises has been found, but a constant flow of negative criticism. The more actions taken by the EU as a crisis response which influenced Germany, the more Eurosceptic statements by the AfD were detected. Even though the party displayed Euroscepticism since its creation, the accumulation of the various aspects as well as its acquisition of hard Eurosceptic tendencies, throughout the years of crises led to an even stronger consolidation of its Eurosceptic nature. Today, the AfD cannot be categorised as a complete *hard* Eurosceptic party which would induce a Dexit as soon as it gains more power. Nevertheless, the party envisages a clear transformation of the EU back to being an intergovernmental organisation and distinctively distances itself from a supranational union. In combination to the AfD's current electoral success, this poses a great challenge to decision-making processes on a political European level, especially since it is a phenomenon which, as discussed in the introduction, can be seen all over Europe. Therefore, the political development of the years to come will remain quite interesting to observe within the European community.

## 7 Appendix

### 7.1 Data set (a)

AfD election programmes			
Nr.	Abbreviation	Type of election	Year
1	BT13	German Bundestag election	2013
2	BT17	German Bundestag election	2017
3	BT21	German Bundestag election	2021
4	EU14	European parliament election	2014
5	EU19	European parliament election	2019
6	EU24	European parliament election	2024

### 7.2 Data set (b)

Parliamentary transcripts			
Doc-Nr.	Abbreviation	Title	Date
1	Oct17	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/1	24 <sup>th</sup> October 2017
2	Nov17	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/2	21 <sup>st</sup> November 2017
3	Dec17	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/4	12 <sup>th</sup> December 2017
4	Jan18	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/6	17 <sup>th</sup> January 2018
5	Feb18	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/13	21 <sup>st</sup> February 2018
6	Mar18	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/19	14 <sup>th</sup> March 2018
7	Apr18	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/25	18 <sup>th</sup> April 2018
8	May18	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/31	15 <sup>th</sup> May 2018
9	Jun18	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/35	6 <sup>th</sup> June 2018
10	Jul18	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/44	3 <sup>rd</sup> July 2018
11	Sep18	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/47	11 <sup>th</sup> September 2018
12	Oct18	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/54	10 <sup>th</sup> October 2018
13	Nov18	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/60	7 <sup>th</sup> November 2018
14	Dec18	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/70	12 <sup>th</sup> December 2018
15	Jan19	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/73	16 <sup>th</sup> January 2019
16	Feb19	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/79	13 <sup>th</sup> February 2019
17	Mar19	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/85	13 <sup>th</sup> March 2019
18	Apr19	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/91	3 <sup>rd</sup> April 2019
19	May19	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/97	8 <sup>th</sup> May 2019
20	Jun19	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/103	5 <sup>th</sup> June 2019
21	Jul19	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/109	24 <sup>th</sup> July 2019

22	Sep19	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/110	10 <sup>th</sup> September 2019
23	Oct19	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/117	16 <sup>th</sup> October 2019
24	Nov19	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/123	6 <sup>th</sup> November 2019
25	Dec19	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/133	11 <sup>th</sup> December 2019
26	Jan20	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/139	15 <sup>th</sup> January 2020
27	Feb20	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/145	12 <sup>th</sup> February 2020
28	Mar20	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/148	4 <sup>th</sup> March 2020
29	Apr20	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/155	22 <sup>nd</sup> April 2020
30	May20	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/157	6 <sup>th</sup> May 2020
31	Jun20	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/165	17 <sup>th</sup> June 2020
32	Jul20	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/169	1 <sup>st</sup> July 2020
33	Sep20	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/172	9 <sup>th</sup> September 2020
34	Oct20	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/182	7 <sup>th</sup> October 2020
35	Nov20	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/188	4 <sup>th</sup> November 2020
36	Dec20	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/197	8 <sup>th</sup> December 2020
37	Jan21	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/203	13 <sup>th</sup> January 2021
38	Feb21	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/208	10 <sup>th</sup> February 2021
39	Mar21	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/214	3 <sup>rd</sup> March 2021
40	Apr21	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/220	14 <sup>th</sup> April 2021
41	May21	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/226	5 <sup>th</sup> May 2021
42	Jun21	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/232	9 <sup>th</sup> June 2021
43	Aug21	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/238	25 <sup>th</sup> August 2021
44	Sep21	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 19/239	7 <sup>th</sup> September 2021
45	Oct21	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/1	26 <sup>th</sup> October 2021
46	Nov21	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/2	11 <sup>th</sup> November 2021
47	Dec21	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/4	7 <sup>th</sup> December 2021
48	Jan22	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/10	12 <sup>th</sup> January 2022
49	Feb22	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/16	16 <sup>th</sup> February 2022
50	Mar22	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/20	16 <sup>th</sup> March 2022
51	Apr22	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/27	6 <sup>th</sup> April 2022
52	May22	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/33	11 <sup>th</sup> May 2022
53	Jun22	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/43	22 <sup>nd</sup> June 2022
54	Jul22	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/46	6 <sup>th</sup> July 2022
55	Sep22	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/49	6 <sup>th</sup> September 2022
56	Oct22	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/59	12 <sup>th</sup> October 2022
57	Nov22	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/65	9 <sup>th</sup> November 2022

58	Dec22	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/75	14 <sup>th</sup> December 2022
59	Jan23	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/78	18 <sup>th</sup> January 2023
60	Feb23	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/84	8 <sup>th</sup> February 2023
61	Mar23	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/87	1 <sup>st</sup> March 2023
62	Apr23	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/96	19 <sup>th</sup> April 2023
63	May23	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/102	10 <sup>th</sup> May 2023
64	Jun23	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/108	14 <sup>th</sup> June 2023
65	Jul23	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/114	5 <sup>th</sup> July 2023
66	Sep23	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/117	5 <sup>th</sup> September 2023
67	Oct23	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/127	11 <sup>th</sup> October 2021
68	Nov23	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/133	8 <sup>th</sup> November 2023
69	Dec23	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/143	13 <sup>th</sup> December 2023
70	Jan24	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/146	17 <sup>th</sup> January 2024
71	Feb24	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/153	21 <sup>st</sup> February 2024
72	Mar24	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/156	13 <sup>th</sup> March 2024
73	Apr24	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/162	10 <sup>th</sup> April 2023
74	May24	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/168	15 <sup>th</sup> May 2024
75	Jun24	Deutscher Bundestag: Plenarprotokoll 20/171	5 <sup>th</sup> June 2024

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