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MASTER THESIS

"Facebook Communication of the German Alt-Right: A Content Analysis"

submitted by Jan Jesko Mantey

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Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Menno De Jong

                        Msc. Sikke Jansma

ABSTRACT

Several rising, far-right political movements, commonly referred to as the Alt-Right, have successfully focused on using social media to promote themselves and attract followers. The goal of this paper is to identify common themes and strategies employed by far-right groups in Germany in their Facebook activity.

This research employs a content analysis of Facebook posts by nine influential German far-right social media accounts chosen to represent the extreme right of the political spectrum. Two rounds of coding were performed. During the first, an extensive coding scheme was developed which was then used in the second round.

The result is a comprehensive overview of communication themes of the German far-right. These themes are organized into three major categories: anti-multiculturalism, populism and Alt-Right, all of which are consistently found in each observed organization's posts.

These results confirm the presence of Alt-Right ideology (as observed from international contexts) in German far-right political movements, but also discover differences in how various topics are emphasized. The observed organizations combine this with a populist communication style and a strong message of anti-multiculturalism. They employ a strategy of normalizing far-right talking points in order to shift the spectrum of political discourse to the right and gain more mainstream appeal.

Keywords

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1 Introduction

Recent years have seen a noticeable rise of far-right political movements, often referred to as the Alt-Right, both in the US and across Europe. These groups often brand themselves as a more modern and civilized version of traditional far-right extremists. Their views range from right-wing populist standpoints all the way to white supremacy. A commonality among these groups, and an integral part of their growth, is their extensive use of social media for image cultivation and networking (Whine, 2012).

Existing research on (right-wing) populism as well as internet activism provides a valuable background and will be presented in the theoretical framework, but little research has been done that focuses on the social media strategy of the Alt-Right specifically in Germany. One reason for this is that until recently, far-right politics had very little success in Germany compared to other Western nations and were only pursued by largely irrelevant fringe groups with little to no impact on mainstream politics (Decker, 2008). This has changed with the rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) as well as other far-right movements outside of political parties gaining traction.

This research asks the question: which are the prevalent themes in the German far-right's Facebook communication and how can those be categorized? The main goal is therefore to create an overview of common topics and strategies in the German far-right's Facebook communication and to develop a comprehensive categorization of those themes.

To understand why the Alt-Right might communicate in the way they do, the possible reasons that drive people towards political fringes and the appeal of populism need to be considered. Populism can be defined as an ideology, which considers society to be separated into two antagonistic groups: the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite". Populists argue that politics should be an expression of the true will of the people and that they are the ones who can enact that will (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). While populism is obviously not a new phenomenon, it has enjoyed a revival in contemporary politics (Moffitt, 2016).

While some efforts have been made to identify commonly used themes in Alt-Right communication, further research to support these findings is certainly useful, especially considering existing studies often focus on one specific group and do not necessarily allow for generalizations of those findings. Other researchers have claimed that the prevalence of social media has caused an increase in (international) networking among far-right groups (Grumke, 2013). This study examines to what degree this is observable in the German Alt-Right's online presence. This research could also help to provide a basis for further studies that examine commonalities and connections between Alt-Right groups across different countries. In this study, a content analysis is performed using posts by some of the most influential German far-right social media accounts. These posts are classified using a coding scheme which was continuously developed during the coding process. The results deliver an overview of how the far-right in Germany markets its political opinions via social media.

While the goal is to remain politically neutral in this research, there may well be implications of its findings that reach beyond purely academic understanding and that might be used to further a more honest and consensus-focused discourse needed for deliberative democracy, by inoculating people against common far-right propaganda tactics. Deliberative discourse is essential for a functioning democracy (Chappell, 2012) and the current trend away from that,

exemplified by the prevalence of words like "post-truth" in public discussion (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016), is often connected with far-right politics.

2 Theoretical Framework

This section showcases theoretical background information on how populism can appeal to people in general, which can help to explain the growing influence of the Alt-Right. Then it will outline the origin and meaning of the term Alt-Right. Following that, this paper will try to organize pre-existing knowledge about common talking points and themes of the Alt-Right's social media communication in general, so that it can later form the basis for the coding process. Lastly, what is known about the impact of social media on these movements and their communication will be presented.

2.1 Deliberative democracy

To contextualize far-right populism it is useful to look at the ideals of liberal, pluralistic democracy it is at odds with. One ideal of how a democracy could function which has been gaining popularity is the theory of deliberative democracy (Bohman, 1998). According to this ideal, public deliberation of citizens should be at the heart of democratic politics (Bohman, 1997). Deliberative democracy places an emphasis not on political conflict, but on cooperation and collective decision making (Chappell, 2012).

What deliberative democracy and populism have in common is their expressed desire to shift the focus of political decision making away from political elites towards citizen participation. It must be noted however, that populists tend to present themselves as a necessary middleman that will enact the people's will for them. Despite their assertion of speaking for the people, they ultimately aim to take power themselves. Deliberative democracy does not need an arbiter of that kind. Where deliberative democracy and populism fundamentally disagree is their view on pluralism. Deliberative democracy acknowledges the existence of a pluralistic society and proposes a way to transform this plurality of opinions into a common political will (Chappell, 2012). Populism, with its idea about the true will of the people, is incompatible with this idea, as will be explained in the following section.

2.2 Populism

Populism is a controversial term, with many scholars choosing to focus on different aspects for its definition. It is described as a political communication style (Jagers & Walgrave 2007), a type of party organization (Taggart, 1995) or an ideology (Rooduijn & Pauwels 2011).

While there is some disagreement about the definition of the term populism, a common view, which will be adopted by this study, is to see populism as a political style that is not associated with one side of the political spectrum, but generally features a dichotomy of the elites against the people and that employs a certain style of communication. Populists claim that there is a political elite, which is not acting out the true will of the people. They therefore urge the "true people" to empower the populists, so that they can overthrow the corrupt political establishment and enforce the true will of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Müller, 2017). Because this line of reasoning does not hold up to intense scrutiny, it is

imperative to pair it with a style of political communication that focuses on emotional reactions and makes use of inherent biases, rather than fact-based arguments. According to the dual-processing theory by Kahneman there are two distinct ways how humans process information. The fast and intuitive System 1, which is based on emotions and heuristics, and the slower, more analytic System 2, based in cognitive deliberation (Kahneman 2011). This theory can be applied to politics. Stoker, Hay, & Barr (2016) claim that citizens predominantly use System 1 when making political decisions. The result is that political statements that are in line with pre-existing biases or appeal to emotions can be very effective.

For the purpose of this study, populism therefore has two core components: an anti-establishment sentiment and an appeal to emotions.

Müller (2017) agrees that an anti-establishment sentiment is a necessary condition for populism and adds that populism includes being anti-pluralist, because of the assumption of a single, true will of the people that can only be represented by the populists. As alluded to before, this goes against the idea of deliberative democracy.

2.3 Appeal of far-right populist movements

In addition to the way humans process information, which is an inherent factor in any political environment, there are other factors that lead to a rising appeal of populist movements in recent years. Mudde argues that there is populist zeitgeist (Mudde, 2004). He mentions the convergence of established parties towards the political center and a decline in their ideological differences as on of the causes why populists on the political fringes are gaining strength. Mudde also gives an explanation for why populism in Europe today is associated mainly with the political right (although he does acknowledge examples of left-wing populism as well). Since populism focuses on "the people" and right-wing politics tends to value the nation state, Mudde argues that it is only a small ideological step from "the nation" to "the people" (Mudde 2004).

Another useful theoretical background to understand the appeal of right-wing populist movements is the disintegration theory by Heitmeyer. According to him, disintegration occurs when a society and its institutions are unable to make good on their promises of securing financial and material stability, social recognition and personal safety (Heitmeyer & Anhut, 2006). With the degree of disintegration (and importantly also just *fear of* disintegration) the extent and intensity of conflicts rises. Worries about the negative effects of globalization and social decline lead to tribalism in First World countries that manifests itself in increased support for far-right movements. This is supported by studies that show that a generous welfare state depresses votes for radical right-wing populist parties (Swank & Betz, 2003). With people across Europe feeling the impact of globalization in changing job markets and, especially with the European migrant crisis beginning in 2015, increased migration from poorer countries in Africa or the Middle East, far-right populists are able to take advantage of real or feared disintegration effects.

However, their recent successes can not only be explained by external factors. Far-right organizations have also started to adapt their messaging to give it a more mainstream appeal. For example, several groups vehemently deny any racist intention, while still drawing on

historically racists symbols (Doerr, 2017). These serve as a dog-whistle[1] for their more extreme followers, while their official communication appeals more to people on the right edge of traditional conservativism. Simpson and Druxes also argue that the "New Right" across Europe and the US share a pragmatic approach to "mainstreaming their message". They find a common ground between the "average" and the extreme (especially on the topic of immigration), making them more attractive to mainstream voters (Simpson & Druxes, 2015). In finding common ground with non-extremists, far-right parties are managing to increase their number of voters, while also still catering to their more extreme supporters.

2.4 The Alt-Right

2.4.1 Origins

A term inextricably linked with the resurgence of right-wing populism is the "Alt-Right". This section attempts to explain what the term Alt-Right means and which groups fall under this umbrella. The term Alt-Right, which to this day is only loosely defined, was originally coined in 2008 by Richard Spencer, an American white supremacist, who criticized mainstream conservatism for moving too much into the liberal neocon[2] direction and abandoning its white, European, Judeo-Christian heritage or what he called at the time "paleoconservativism" (Spencer, 2008). In today's political discourse, "Alt-Right" is used to describe a variety of groups, including isolationist nationalists, neo-Nazis, anarcho-capitalists and many other movements on the far right of the political spectrum, many of which have partially overlapping ideologies. What unites them is a general orientation towards extreme conservative or reactionary viewpoints, usually combined with the use of populist rhetoric, and a distaste for "the mainstream", be it in media or politics.

2.4.2 Anti-multiculturalism

One central ideological point of the Alt-Right is the rejection of multiculturalism and its ramifications, such as immigration or supranational organizations like the European Union. Today's Alt-Right, while still nationalistic, is more connected and cooperative across country borders than far-right organizations in previous decades (Grumke, 2013). Grumke (2013) uses the term "Pan-Aryanism" to describe this shift of focus towards a proclaimed common North-Western-European identity, while remaining in favor of nation states and opposed to supranational organizations. Right-wing movements across Europe acknowledge their common interests in isolationist, anti-European, anti-globalist policies.

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[1] Dog-Whistle: A form of communication using coded language that means one thing to the general public but conveys a separate meaning for the specific sub-group it is targeted towards.
[2] Neoconservatism is a political trend (mainly in the US) that, compared to traditional conservativism, pursues more globalist and interventionalist policies. It is commonly associated with a more open immigration policy, justified by economical advantages, as well as a general departure from isolationism. The administration of G.W. Bush is most closely associated with Neoconservatism (Fukuyama, 2006).
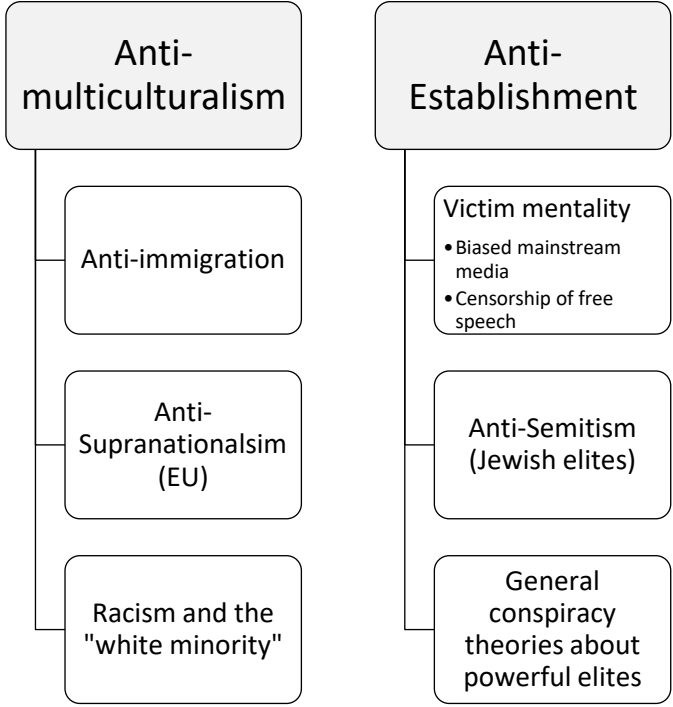
A strong anti-immigration stance is common among the Alt-Right, remaining a crucial issue that unites far-right movements across both the Europe and the United States" (Simpson & Druxes, 2015). The reasons these movements adduce to justify this position vary. Some organizations openly propagate the superiority of the white race and an ideal of racial purity, often while evoking fears of whites becoming a minority because of declining birth-rates, others hold more mainstream positions (or at least profess to in their public communication, see "mainstreaming"). The Identitarian Movement, for example, one of the most prominent Alt-Right organizations with offshoots in France, Germany and Austria, claims to be non-racist, as they do not argue for the superiority of certain races or peoples over others, but merely demand a "right to diversity". This however, includes a duty to diversify along the lines of a claimed ethno-national identity (Simpson & Druxes, 2015). Simply put, they argue that people should stick to their own kind. The Identitarians argue for "Völkertrennung", the separation of peoples (Simpson & Druxes, 2015). This concept is also referred to as ethnopluralism (Rydgren, 2005). Some Alt-Right groups claim that they are not concerned with race, but rather with culture and that an overwhelming number of immigrants threatens to dilute or even destroy the native culture. Part of the Alt-Right's strategy is to take over traditionally liberal or left-wing rhetoric and adjusting it to fit their intent. "Pluralism", for example, becomes "ethnopluralism" and is now describing the opposite of the original meaning. To conclude, there is a clear current of ethnonationalist xenophobia among the Alt-Right (Rydgren, 2005). They see multiculturalism as a threat to "their people" and tend to argue for a division along ethnic / national lines. Openly racist ideology is present in some, but not all Alt-Right groups.

2.4.3 Anti-establishment

Another common theme is an anti-establishment sentiment, which expresses itself in multiple ways, which are linked to a victim mentality or the idea that the Alt-Right is an underdog in the fight against the powerful reigning elites (Rydgren, 2005). For instance, a subject commonly brought up is the accusation of censorship of free speech. According to this idea, the mainstream culture of "political correctness" has deemed it taboo to express facts that do not fit its liberally tainted narrative. This taboo is enforced by the mainstream media, that are often seen as being controlled by those in power. These are often believed to be the state or the political elites, or sometimes, if anti-Semitism and/or conspiracy theories play a part, an international Jewish conspiracy (Grumke, 2013). Conspiracy theories, especially anti-Semitic ones, are prevalent among the Alt-Right (Wilson, 2008). This anti-establishment mindset fits in with the above-mentioned concept that populism entails the view that there is a divide between the "real people" and the "elites" (Mudde, 2010).

Figure 1 summarizes the themes that have been identified to be recurring talking points in the Alt-Right's communication. These will form the starting point for the content analysis described in the method section.

Figure 1. Common themes in Alt-Right communication

As explained, the Alt-Right harbors strong anti-multicultural sentiments. These are based on racism, more so than for more moderately right movements, who might share an anti-immigration stance, but are less extreme in their underlying ideology. Right-wing populists in general are anti-establishment and the Alt-Right add their ideological component to this anti-elitist mindset. This results in the prevalence of Anti-Semitism. Because they are a small, but extreme minority, their anti-establishment focuses on a victim-mentality mindset.

2.5 Impact of social media

Whine (2012) claims that the arrival of social media has accelerated creation of new radical right groups and increased their ability to connect and network with each other. This is also supported by Grumke, describing the Alt-Right as an international network of cooperating organizations as opposed to isolated national movements (Grumke, 2013). While the membership numbers of extremist organizations seem to be declining overall, the voices of these groups are amplified to reach a receptive global audience. This gives the illusion that these views are more common than really is the case (Simpson & Druxes, 2015). Simpson & Druxes (2015) cite a report by the German Amadeu Antonio Foundation from 2013 that tells of "shorter and shorter intervals until radicalization" as a result of social media and filter bubbles. The internet drastically reduces publishing costs and grands almost universal access, allowing fringe writers much greater potential reach. Simpson and Druxes (2015) argue that the internet can facilitate any form of activist and/or terrorist ideologies. Moffit offers extensive insights into the possibilities of social media for populists. He claims that social

media has opened up "performative opportunities for populist actors", giving them an opportunity to speak directly to and for "the people" (Moffitt, 2016). He also argues that blogs, social networks and content delivery systems like YouTube make any potential censorship of far-right extremists impossible. They allow populists to sidestep traditional media channels, while also letting them appear closer and more direct to their followers. Furthermore, he argues that the nature of social media grants a number of advantages to populism over traditional, "slow" politics. The prevalence of content delivery algorithms further ideological divisions, a phenomenon often referred to as "filter bubbles". The virality of social media also conforms well to populistic messages and the immediacy cuts out slow and deliberate fact-checking processes (Moffitt, 2016). With the literature clearly agreeing on the importance of social media for the Alt-Right, it seems consequential to conduct research focusing on this aspect of Alt-Right movements.

3 Method

3.1 Coding scheme

This research consists of a content analysis with a combination of bottom-up and top-down approach to developing the coding scheme. Content analysis is a suitable research method, especially if the study aims at understanding meanings and intentions behind the observed content (Krippendorff & Bock, 2009). Krippendorff & Bock (2009) also claim that for analysts seeking specific political information", focusing mostly on quantitative data is "insensitive and shallow" and they stress that qualitative content analysis is well suited for political research. Markham also advocates for the use of qualitative content analysis for research on social media communication (Markham, 2013). Atkinson suggests two research methods for analyzing online content of activists (Atkinson, 2017): Firstly, content analysis with deductive category application uses categories drawn up prior to the research and then checks if/how the research objects fit into these categories. Secondly, content analysis with inductive category development. With this method, the categorization does not happen prior to, but during the research, by discerning relevant narrative components within the research objects. According to Kenix, both methods can be combined to achieve an "organic exploration of narrative", beginning with preconceived ideas of what categories might be present in the content and then, in the process of analyzing, revealing ones that may not have been considered (Kenix, 2009).

This Paper uses a combination of the two methods. As noted in the theoretical framework, some knowledge about common themes of the Alt-Right already exists, which has been used to define categories ahead of the analyzing process, resulting in the bare-bones coding scheme shown in Figure 1. Then, as part of the coding process, the coding scheme continuously evolved to consider new information that was observed. The coding scheme was then fleshed out more and more, using the coder's growing experience with the German Alt-Right groups. This combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches to content analysis is used to ensure a proper grounding in theory and a solid starting point for coding, but also allow for organic growth of the coding scheme and the representation of new insights gained during the research. The final version of the coding scheme can be found in the appendix.

3.2 Corpus:

The organizations observed in this study wore chosen as representative of the German far-right spectrum. Based on their number of followers and their characteristics as opinion leaders in the far-right scene on Facebook and in society in general, nine organization's Facebook accounts were selected for observation. These are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: **Observed organizations**

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland; far-right political party, currently third biggest party in German parliament with 12,6% of the vote. Founded in 2013 as a Eurosceptic, economically liberal party it has since shifted significantly to the right with many former leaders leaving the party as a result.
Junge Alternative	The AfD's youth organization. Recently critized for being extremely rightwing, possibly anticonstitutional and too closely associated with Neonazis. This has led to a dispute inside the AfD on wether to supports their youth organization or disavow them or even cut ties.
Ein Prozent für unser Land	Self-described as a „ patriotic citizens' network", it is a far-right citizens' initiative and is closely linked to the Identitarian Movement.
PI News	Political blog, anti-Islamic, pro-American, pro-Israel. Anti-political correctness. Its slogan is: "news against the mainstream"
COMPACT Magazin	Monthly political newspaper. Right-wing populist characteristic with a propensity for conspiracy theories. Often seen as a mouthpiece for AfD and PEGIDA.
Ich bin stolz, deutsch zu sein.	Far-right Facebook page with almost 50k fans. Operator is unknown, although it seems to be linked to the political blog Young German (youngerman.com). YG has their own page on Facebook but has far less followers.
PEGIDA	Abbreviation for "Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes" (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamification of the Occident). Anti-Islam, far-right political movement, founded in 2014. Focused on street protests.
NPD	National Democratic Party of Germany. The "traditional" far-right party in Germany, as opposed to the recently emergent AfD. While the AfD (before its recent shift) started out with a focus on economic freedom, the NPD has always rejected liberal capitalism. Their more openly racial focus has left them lacking mainstream appeal throughout their history.
Junge Freiheit	JF (Young Freedom) is a weekly newspaper focused on politics and societal issues. It has been described as ultraconservative, right-wing, nationalistic and associated with the "New Right".

The timeframe in which the sample was drawn ranges from December 2018 till May 2019. The sample size includes 100 posts per organization, except for Junge Alternative, who did only post 55 times during data collection, leading to 855 posts observed in total. Observations made during data collection and analysis were considered and the coding scheme was revised accordingly. After finalizing the coding scheme, the previous findings were updated in a second round of coding. The posts were coded by the main researcher and a random sample of 10% of all observed posts was also analyzed by a second coder to test the reliability of the data.

3.3 Reliability test

To check for reliability, Krippendorff's Alpha was used. To compare the two coders, the second level categories were tested (*Nationalism*, *Anti-immigration* etc.). The reason for collapsing the coding scheme in this manner are:

a) With binary variables (present or not present) it is common that one of the values (0 or 1) is very rare. This will automatically lead to a low Krippendorff's Alpha value, even if the coders barely disagreed with each other.

b) A very detailed coding scheme also naturally lowers Krippendorff's Alpha, as minor disagreements between coders become exacerbated. This is common in thematic coding (like in this research), where coders will often agree on which general category an item belongs to but might have slight disagreements about the details.

The results of this reliability check are shown in Table 2. While some of these values cast doubt on the reliability initially, it must be noted that disagreements between coders almost always occur, because the second coder was more generous in assigning posts to a category, whereas the main coder was much more cautious. It can therefore be assumed that the data

used for this research does not exaggerate the prevalence of far-right ideas in these organization's posts. If anything, some instances of using themes from the coding-scheme might have slipped through the cracks in an effort to not misrepresent these organizations. The category of *appeals to emotion* does have questionable reliability though, even if it can be explained this way.

**Table 2:** Krippendorff's Alpha reliability check results

Category	Krippendorff's Alpha
Nationalism	0.92
Anti-immigration	0.76
Anti-establishment	0.72
Appeals to emotion	0.26
Mainstreaming	0.64
Cooperation with other far-right groups	0.81
Anti-Progressivism	0.80
Narratives about the US and Russia	0.66

4 Results

4.1 Themes and categorization

As part of the results of this research, a final revision of the coding scheme was decided upon. All categories contained in this coding scheme are organized into three major blocks, which will now be elaborated on one by one. Figure 2 gives an overview of how the final coding scheme is organized. A fully detailed version can be found in the appendix.

Figure 2: Coding scheme (simplified)
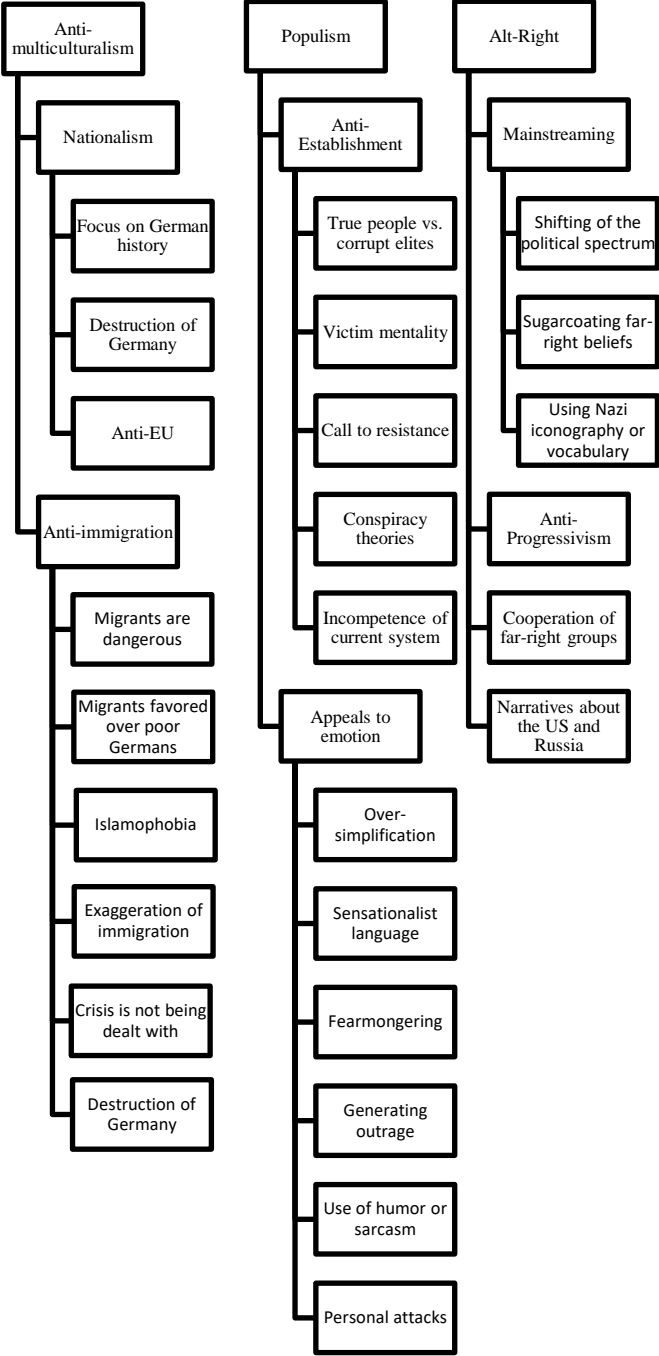
The first block, titled *anti-multiculturalism*, contains elements that are concerned with the preservation of an idealized German nation state, that these groups perceive as being under threat by outside influences. The second major category is *populism,* a political style that each of the groups engages in to varying degrees. The third block consists of themes commonly observed in Alt-Right groups which did not fit under the umbrella of either *anti-multiculturalism* or *populism*. Every category will now be discussed in detail using the analyzed data.

4.2 Overview

As shown in Table 3 all the three main coding categories are present in each organization's messaging, although to varying degrees. While ***populist*** messaging has the highest percentage scores in all organizations, the balance between ***anti-multiculturalism*** and ***Alt-Right*** differs between groups. In total, two thirds of all analyzed posts featured a *populist* component, 43% contained *anti-multiculturalism* and about a third featured typically *Alt-Right* themes. It is important to note that these percentages are not pure reflections of the organization's beliefs or prioritizations of topics but are also influenced by the format of their Facebook posts. For example, the posts by PI NEWS are generally shorter than those of any other organization, often consisting of only a picture and a headline, with no further text. Therefore, they contain less information that could be mapped onto the coding scheme, which can result in lower scores. On the contrary, the AfD regularly posts relatively long texts that can touch on multiple subjects. This can potentially result in relatively high scores, because there is more information present in their posts.

Table 3: Percentages of main coding categories present in posts across organizations

	AfD	COMPACT	Ein Prozent	Ich bin stolz…	Junge Alternative	Junge Freiheit	NPD	PEGIDA	PI News	**Total**
Anti-multiculturalism	63%	39%	39%	52%	18%	25%	53%	57%	30%	43%
Populism	75%	76%	69%	72%	46%	37%	72%	86%	49%	66%
Alt-right	24%	42%	53%	53%	29%	18%	22%	37%	22%	34%

It is also noteworthy that 17,4% of posts did not contain any of the themes identified in the coding scheme. This number also varied considerably across organizations. Junge Alternative and Junge Freiheit both featured a lot of posts that did not contain any identified themes (40% and 42%, respectively). On the other hand, for PEGIDA only 3% of posts did not contain at least one of the themes from the coding scheme.

4.2 Anti-multiculturalism

The three main coding categories will now be discussed in further detail, starting with ***anti-multiculturalism***. Table 4 shows how this category has been broken down in the coding scheme.

Table 4: Coding scheme: Anti-multiculturalism – percentages of categories present in posts

1. Anti-multiculturalism	43%
1.1. Nationalism	7%
1.1.1. Whitewashing of German history	1%
1.1.2. Glorifying of German history	2%
1.1.3. Anti-supranationalism	5%
1.1.3.1. Anti-EU-sentiments	4%
1.2. Anti-immigration	38%
1.2.1. Migrants are dangerous	16%
1.2.2. Migrants exploit our generosity or are favored over Germans in need	9%
1.2.3. Islamophobia / concerns about Islamification	7%
1.2.4. Exaggeration of the extent of immigration and its effects (doom and gloom scenario)	4%
1.2.4.1. Stylistic clue: vocabulary: comparison with natural disasters	1%
1.2.5. Crisis is not being dealt with	9%
1.2.5.1. Current system is too incompetent	5%
1.2.5.1. Current system is unwillingly to act	2%
1.2.6. Destruction of Germany	6%
1.2.6.1. Destruction of German culture (focus on cultural conservativism)	3%
1.2.6.2. Replacement of ethnic Germans (racial focus)	2%
1.2.6.2.1. Stylistic clue: use of "Volk" or "Austausch"	1%

Nationalistic content as defined by the coding scheme (a combination of *whitewashing* or *glorifying of German history* or a stance *against supranationalism* and in favor of a more sovereign German nation state) is present in 58 out of 855 cases (7%). Figure 3 shows an example of how German history being glorified and whitewashed. The general sentiment in this case and in most other examples is that German history is unfairly reduced to the time of the Third Reich, while most of the countries "glorious" history is being ignored. According to this view, Germans should be allowed to be proud of their nation and its history, which is not the case at the moment, because the current system is determined to uphold a culture of shame centered around the Nazi times.

Anti-supranationalism mainly expresses itself in *anti-EU sentiments*. Here, two main narratives can be identified. Firstly, the European Union is blamed for the migration "crisis" (see Figure 4). Migration is viewed as harmful and dangerous, and the EU is seen as being responsible for the extent of immigration, particularly immigration into Germany due to refugee quota requirements.

Figure 3: "Absolution for Germany"

Figure 4: "Migration kills"

Secondly, the other main narrative is that due to ever expanding EU jurisdiction the EU is seen as encroaching on German sovereignty. This evokes a fear of foreign rule over Germany. Often this sentiment is combined with accusations of the EU being slow, bureaucratic, inefficient and lacking in democracy. Figure 5 shows the AfD claiming that the Greens are "clattering about even more EU coercion". It is interesting to note, that the AfD in this example also invokes vocabulary often linked to the Nazis ("Reich"). While it is not uncommon in other countries for anti-EU parties to invoke Nazi comparisons to express their fear of a Germany-controlled European Union, this appears less sensible coming from a far-right party in Germany.

Figure 5: "We don't want your European Reich"

The *anti-immigration* message emerges as one of the most prevalent narratives observed in this study. 38% of posts contain some form of *anti-immigration* statement. For the AfD and PEGIDA this number is as high as 55% (see Table 5). It is important to note that for the majority of posts there is no clear distinction between refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

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The important distinction seems to be between "Germans" and the unwanted "foreigners". In some instances, this is even acknowledged by the organizations themselves, who then blame it on the foreigners themselves, who allegedly try to claim refugee status when they are really economic migrants, or on the incompetence of the current system, which is not filtering people effectively. Getting rid of this nuance helps to simplify the *anti-immigration* message and alleviates concerns about the morally and legally dubious demand to deport refugees.

Table 5: Posts containing anti-immigration message across organizations

		AfD	COMPACT	Ein Prozent	Ich bin stolz	Junge Alt.	Junge Freiheit	NPD	PEGIDA	PI NEWS	Total
Anti-immigration	Count	55	30	35	47	6	22	45	55	26	321
	% within Organisation:	55%	30%	35%	47%	11%	22%	45%	55%	26%	38%

16% of all posts are claiming that *migrants are dangerous*, usually implying they are prone to violent crimes like assault, rape or murder (see Table 6). This is often supported by images of weapons or supposed victims that accompany the post (see Figure 6 & 7).

Table 6: Posts containing "Migrants are dangerous" across organizations

		AfD	COMPACT	Ein Prozent	Ich bin stolz	Junge Alt.	Junge Freiheit	NPD	PEGIDA	PI NEWS	Total
Migrants are dangerous	Count	20	8	11	20	2	14	17	28	14	134
	% within Organisation:	20%	8%	11%	20%	4%	14%	17%	28%	14%	16%

Figure 6: Migrants are dangerous – example 1

Figure 7: Migrants are dangerous – example 2

In addition to the accusation of being dangerous, migrants are often portrayed as *exploiting* their host country's *generosity*, for example by getting rid of their passports in order to take on a false identity and wrongly claiming refugee status (and associated social benefits). In cases where the emphasis is placed more on the shortcomings of the current German immigration system and less agency is ascribed to the migrants, this can also take the form of claiming that the people currently in charge *favor migrants over Germans in need*. An example of this can be seen in Figure 8. Here, COMPACT claims that poor older Germans are suffering because the government is more concerned with the interests of refugees. In Figure

9 the NPD can be seen doing the same, this time with families instead of senior citizens. This juxtaposing of the concerns of poor Germans with migrants / asylum seekers, even in cases when there's no clear connection between the two, is a common theme across the observed organizations.

Figure 8: Migrants are favored over Germans in need – example 1

Figure 9: Migrants are favored over Germans in need – example 2

Table 7: Posts containing "Migrants exploit our generosity or are favored over Germans in need" across organizations

		AfD	COMPACT	Ein Prozent	Ich bin stolz	Junge Alt.	Junge Freiheit	NPD	PEGIDA	PI NEWS	**Total**
Migrants exploit our generosity or are favored over Germans in need	Count	24	6	8	9	1	4	11	10	2	75
	% within Organization:	24%	6%	8%	9%	2%	4%	11%	10%	2%	9%

Another common theme is fear of an ***Islamification*** of Germany or a general ***islamophobia***. This is by far most common with PEGIDA (see Table 8), which is hardly surprising, considering they were essentially founded as a one-issue-organization. According to their name ("Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident") their primary goal is to limit Islamic migration and Islamic influence on German culture. However, other organizations also publish a significant amount of Islamophobic posts. Therein Islam is identified as being incompatible with Western civilization and often being the root cause of many of the alleged problems with migrants. According to this view, many Muslims are religious radicals. They are inherently disrespectful of women to the point where sexual assault and rape are prevalent (leading to the cacography of refugee as "rapefugee"), and also full of hatred of Christians and Western culture in general, making them prone to committing violent crimes, including terror attacks, against the native German population. The fear of Islamification can also be linked to concerns about the higher birthrates of Muslim immigrants and conspiracy theories about the "Great Replacement" (more on that in the corresponding paragraph). The worry here is not only the number of Muslim immigrants, but the fear that they will eventually "outbreed" the native German population, turning Germany into a majority Muslim country over time. Figure 10 shows the page "Ich bin stolz, deutsch zu sein" promoting a book that plays on all the above-mentioned concerns while also claiming that this view is being censored by political correctness.

Table 8: Posts containing "Islamophobia / concerns about Islamification" across organizations

		AfD	COMPACT	Ein Prozent	Ich bin stolz	Junge Alt.	Junge Freiheit	NPD	PEGIDA	PI NEWS	**Total**
Islamophobia / concerns about Islamification	Count	6	8	2	8	4	4	3	17	8	60
	% within Organization:	6,0%	8,0%	2,0%	8,0%	7,3%	4,0%	3,0%	17,0%	8,0%	7,0%

Figure 10: "The silent Islamification"

Figure 11: "War criminals are flooding our land!"

Figure 12: Current government is not dealing with the crisis

To justify the focus on migration as the number one issue, the extent of the ***immigration crisis and its effects are frequently exaggerated***. Far-right groups may choose to exaggerate how many immigrants are actually coming to Germany or how much their arrival will influence mainstream culture in the country. Sometimes this includes quite severe *"doom and gloom" scenarios* (e.g. Germany becoming an Islamic theocracy). The vocabulary or imagery used in communicating this topic may contain *comparisons with natural disasters* (see Figure 11).

Some of the observed groups displayed a significant amount of posts about how the ***migration crisis is not being properly dealt with***, either because the *current system is too incompetent* or because the people in charge are *unwilling* to act. As shown in Table 9, the AfD, Ein Prozent and PEGIDA all scored above the average in this category. A reason why particularly the AfD does this by far the most could be that as a political party they would like to present themselves as a more competent alternative in this regard. An example of this is shown in Figure 12. The AfD presents a low number of people turned away at border checkpoints as evidence that the current government does not solve the problem of immigration, rather it is causing it. The implied conclusion from this is to elect the AfD instead, because they would be willing and able to tackle the crisis.

Table 9: Posts containing "Crisis is not being dealt with" across organizations

		AfD	COMPACT	Ein Prozent	Ich bin stolz	Junge Alt.	Junge Freiheit	NPD	PEGIDA	PI NEWS	**Total**
Crisis is not being dealt with	Count	28	4	13	8	0	4	3	12	4	76
	% within Organization:	28%	4%	13%	8%	0%	4%	3%	12%	4%	9%

The final point in the anti-immigration category is the ***destruction of Germany***, either *culturally* or *ethnically*. As shown in Table 10, this is not a major narrative, not reaching over 9% of posts in any organization, but it is nevertheless present with all of them. It is interesting to note how the organizations differ regarding either the cultural-conservatism-aspect or the focus on ethnic Germans. Of the organizations with more than one post featuring the *destruction of Germany*-narrative, only the AfD focuses only on culture, while the others include a racial / ethnic element (see Figure 13). The latter occasionally also manifests itself in making references to the "*Great Replacement*" (or in German, "*Großer Austausch*"), a racist, far-right conspiracy theory about the replacement of white Europeans by ethnic non-Europeans (conducted by evil Jewish elites), as shown in Figure 14.

Table 10: Posts containing "Destruction of Germany" across organizations

		AfD	COMPACT	Ein Prozent	Ich bin stolz	Junge Alt.	Junge Freiheit	NPD	PEGIDA	PI NEWS	**Total**
Destruction of Germany	Count	9	9	5	7	1	1	7	7	4	50
	% within Organization:	9,0%	9,0%	5,0%	7,0%	1,8%	1,0%	7,0%	7,0%	4,0%	5,8%

Figure 13: Distribution of the two aspects of the "Destruction of Germany"-narrative across organizations
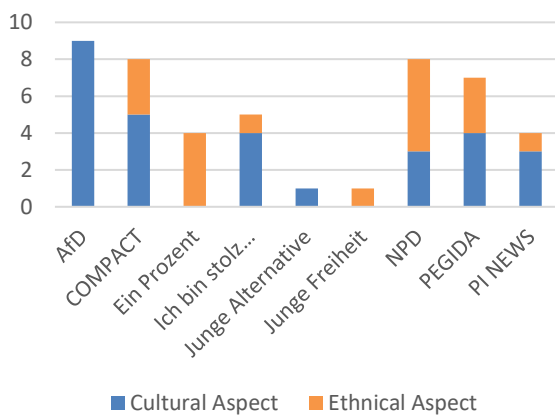

Figure 14: "Stop the great replacement!"

4.2 Populism

As can be seen in Table 11 populist messaging is split into ***anti-establishment*** sentiments and ***appeals to the emotions*** of the recipients. Both of these two major subcategories are present in over 40% of posts.

Table 11: Coding scheme: populism – percentages of categories present in posts

2. Populism	66%
2.1. Anti-establishment	49%
2.1.1. True people vs. corrupt elites	6%
2.1.2. Victim mentality	24%
2.1.2.1. Censorship of free speech	6%
2.1.2.2. Biased mainstream media	8%
2.1.2.2.1. Stylistic clue: "Lügenpresse"	1%
2.1.2.3. Lying politicians	7%
2.1.2.4. Biased institutions (courts etc.)	6%
2.1.3. Call to resistance	15%
2.1.3.1. Calls for demonstrations / protest	5%
2.1.3.2. Self-branding as resistance / counterculture	9%
2.1.3.3. Appeal to take (back) control of institutions (e.g. "Wahlbeobachter")	2%
2.1.4. Conspiracy theories	10%
2.1.4.1. Climate change denial / stance against climate activism	5%
2.1.4.2. Anti-Semitism (conspiracy theories about Jewish elites)	1%
2.1.5. Incompetence of current system	12%
2.1.5.1. Rule of law is crumbling or no longer in effect	10%
2.1.5.1.1. Stylistic clue: "Rechtsstaat"	2%
2.1.5.1.2. Too lenient on migrants (anti-immigration angle)	5%
2.1.5.1.3. Too harsh on right-leaning people (victim mentality angle)	1%
2.2. Appeal to emotions	41%
2.2.1. Oversimplification	8%
2.2.2. Sensationalist language	12%
2.2.3. Fearmongering	4%
2.2.4. Generating outrage	12%
2.2.5. Use of humor or sarcasm	12%
2.2.6. Personal attacks against opponents	15%
2.2.6.1. Angela Merkel	2%
2.2.6.2. Green party politicians	4%
2.2.6.3. Greta Thunberg	3%
2.2.6.4. George Soros	1%

Nearly half the posts contained an ***anti-establishment*** component (see Table 12). While this category sees relatively high scores across the board, the way these scores are made up from the various sub-categories varies significantly across organizations.

Table 12: Posts containing anti-establishment messages across organizations:

		AfD	COMPACT	Ein Prozent	Ich bin stolz	Junge Alt.	Junge Freiheit	NPD	PEGIDA	PI NEWS	Total
Anti-establishment	Count	55	56	57	34	15	28	68	67	35	415
	% within Organization:	55%	56%	57%	34%	27%	28%	68%	67%	35%	49%

Regarding the theme of ***true people vs. corrupt elites*** it can be noted that the AfD (17%) and COMPACT (12%) are the highest scoring organizations. The others all lie below 10%, although it is still a relevant subject for Ein Prozent and the NPD with 6% each. This narrative of a dichotomy of the true people against a corrupt elite, which is often cited as being one of the defining features of populist politics, is often combined with an *anti-EU sentiment* by these organizations. The European decision makers in Brussels are seen as bureaucratic, power-crazed, inefficient, corrupt, undemocratic and out of touch with the "real people" who they supposedly govern. It can also be observed that the organizations equate their own opinion, particularly regarding the intake of refugees (see Figure 15), with what "the people" think. If this assumed consensus then clashes with the actions of the German government or the EU this is interpreted as a sign of the elites going against the will of the people.

Figure 15: "Not Germany, but German politicians want to take in refugees"

COMPACT-ONLINE.DE
„Deutschland will Bootflüchtlinge aufnehmen"? Nein, deutsche Politiker wollen das!

The ***victim mentality*** category features relatively high scores across all organizations, ranging from 18% (Junge Alternative, NPD) to 34% (Ein Prozent). As shown in Table 13 however, these scores are also distributed differently across the four sub-categories of *victim mentality*. Generally, these organizations portray themselves as being suppressed in some way by the current system, but who they see as the main culprit varies from organization to organization. For example, the AfD mainly accuses other *politicians* of being disingenuous (11%), while Ein Prozent complains about *biased institutions* (17%) and the *mainstream media* (12%). In total, the four sub-categories score similarly high (between six and eight percent of all posts each). Interestingly, the stylistic clue for *biased mainstream media*, "*Lügenpresse*", is present in less than 1% of cases. Considering the amount of usage and attention the term had gained previously, this finding is quite surprising. A previous study has observed the term being used in 12% of the posts they analyzed in 2016/2017 with a similar selection of far-right organizations (Baldauf et.al., 2017). These accusations towards the media are still common (8%, see Table 13), so it is not clear, why the term has fallen out of favor.

Table 13: Posts containing "victim mentality" across organizations

		AfD	COMPACT	Ein Prozent	Ich bin stolz	Junge Alt.	Junge Freiheit	NPD	PEGIDA	PI NEWS	Total
Victim Mentality	Count	24	29	34	20	10	20	18	28	22	205
	% within Organization:	24%	29%	34%	20%	18%	20%	18%	28%	22%	24%

Table 14: Percentages of posts containing sub-categories of "victim mentality" across organizations

	AfD	COMPACT	Ein Prozent	Ich bin stolz…	Junge Alternative	Junge Freiheit	NPD	PEGIDA	PI NEWS	**Total**
Censorship of free speech	6%	3%	5%	4%	0%	4%	11%	9%	5%	6%
Biased mainstream media	6%	11%	12%	6%	7%	1%	8%	15%	8%	8%
Lying politicians	11%	15%	5%	7%	2%	4%	3%	8%	4%	7%
Biased institutions (courts etc.)	5%	4%	17%	3%	7%	4%	5%	8%	3%	6%

Overall, 15% of posts fall into the ***call to resistanc****e* category. Interestingly, two of its three sub-categories are only relevant for one organization each. PEGIDA *calls for demonstrations or protests* in 37% of their posts. No other organization scores higher than 5%. The *appeal to take back control* is only used by Ein Prozent, who do so in 16% of their posts. Their main way of doing that is by calling on followers to sign up as "*Wahlbeobachter*", volunteers who monitor the election process. Whether they truly believe that there is election fraud going on is questionable. This is likely an effort to sow mistrust in the democratic system in Germany by alleging that it might not work as intended.

The scores for the third sub-category, *self-branding as resistance / counterculture*, are shown in Table 15. The highest scoring organization, the NPD, includes the slogan "Widerstand jetzt" ("resistance now") on their election posters and subsequently in their Facebook posts (see Figure 16). Their *self-branding as resistance* goes further than just that slogan though. Not only does the NPD try to distinguish themselves from the political mainstream, they also draw a clear line between themselves and other far-right organizations, in particular the AfD, with whom they compete for voters. They position themselves as the "true" anti-immigration party, as exemplified by Figure 17. Here the NPD comments on the founding of a club of migrants in the AfD, implying that a party with migrants in their ranks cannot credibly call themselves an "alternative for Germany".

Table 15: Posts containing "self-branding as resistance / counter-culture" across organizations

			AfD	COMPACT	Ein Prozent	Ich bin stolz	Junge Alt.	Junge Freiheit	NPD	PEGIDA	PI NEWS	Total
Self-branding as resistance / counterculture	present	Count	10	7	8	0	1	0	46	4	0	76
		% within Organization:	10%	7%	8,0%	0%	2%	0%	46%	4%	0%	9%

Ein Prozent, in a post explaining what their organization does and what they stand for, one of the main points is simply "Gegenkultur", counterculture (see Figure 18). This rather vague formulation has the potential to appeal to anyone who is unsatisfied or feels left behind. Some of the other supposed "projects" are similarly vague. This could be done for more widespread appeal (*mainstreaming*) or used as a *dog whistle* for people that are already part of the Alt-Right scene and know how to decrypt and interpret these terms. The point about "German victims" sticks out and fits in with the often-prevalent *victim mentality*. For the AfD their *self-branding as resistance* focuses mainly on the so-called established parties. As their name suggests, they present themselves as an alternative to the political mainstream.
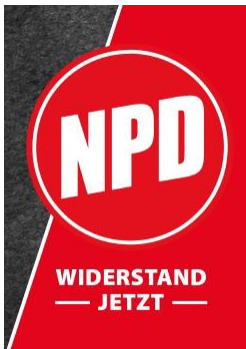
Figure 16: NPD – "resistance now!"

Figure 17: NPD criticizes the AfD for having members with migration background

Figure 18: Ein Prozent - "Our projects" - counterculture

The anti-establishment theme also manifests itself in the belief in ***conspiracy theories*** about hidden truths that the elites keep secret. One example of this is the already mentioned "Great Replacement", which also comes with an *anti-Semitic* component, since the "elites" in this case are usually believed to be influential Jews. Another manifestation is an overly skeptical attitude towards science, the most common example of which is *climate change denial*. This can take many forms: denying that the climate is changing at all, claiming that it does, but that humans are not the cause, believing that its effects are vastly overexaggerated, or simply taking a strong stance against any type of climate activism (without explicitly mentioning climate change denial). Overall this narrative is present in 5% of posts. Notable outliers are the NPD and Ein Prozent, both with zero posts, as well as COMPACT, with 18% of posts. The *anti-Semitic conspiracy theories* are relatively rare, this narrative could clearly be identified in just seven posts (below 1%). In six of those cases it was linked to Hungarian-American investor *George Soros*, who is reviled for his globalist attitude and support for progressive or liberal activism and is accused of contributing to the European migration crisis by the far-right.

The final sub-category of ***anti-establishment*** is ***incompetence of the current system***, which is present in 12% of posts. By far the highest score belongs to the AfD, who use this narrative in 27% of their posts, followed by the NPD with 15%. It generally tends to manifests itself in two ways: either the current government of Germany is said to be *incompetent* in some way (e.g. wasting tax money or not managing to keep the armed forces functional) or, more broadly, the current institutions (government, police force, courts, etc.) are said to be

dysfunctional, which is threatening the social order or the functioning of society. The most common form of the latter is the claim that the ***rule of law*** ("*Rechtsstaat*") ***is crumbling*** or no longer in effect in Germany. This can be observed in 10% of posts (see Table 16). The AfD (20%) and NPD (14%) are again the highest scoring organization in this category. A common narrative in this category is that the law is *not strictly applied to asylum seekers and migrants*, who get away with crimes as a result. This claim shows up in over 5% of posts overall and in 16% of posts by the AfD and 9% of posts by PEGIDA. The NPD scores very low here (1%), despite their 14% for the breakdown of the rule of law. They either keep their claims more general or focus on the narrative that the law is applied *too harshly on right-leaning people* (3% of their posts contained this element, other organizations all score lower). The NPD is somewhat unique in this category in that they openly support people who have been prosecuted for Holocaust denial. According to them is a violation of free speech and punishing people for their opinion is not in accordance with the rule of law (see Figure 19).

Table 16: Posts containing "Rule of law is crumbling or no longer in effect" across organizations

		AfD	COMPACT	Ein Prozent	Ich bin stolz	Junge Alt.	Junge Freiheit	NPD	PEGIDA	PI NEWS	**Total**
Rule of law is crumbling or no longer in effect	Count	20	6	9	6	2	8	14	9	8	82
	% within Organization:	20%	6%	9%	6%	4%	8%	14%	9%	8%	10%

Figure 19: NPD voicing support for Holocaust deniers

Regarding the ***appeal to emotions*** category it can be noted that 41% of posts made use of it (see Table 11) and the highest scoring organization is COMPACT with 66%. Table 17 illustrates how the organizations score across the sub-categories of "appeals to emotions". Appealing to emotions can be used to bypass critical thinking and present arguments that would not hold to logical examination or fact checking. This is not only true for negative emotions like fear or outrage, but also for the use of humor. If something makes the reader laugh, it does not need to be true. Often it even has to be false or exaggerated to make the joke work. Nevertheless, these humorous posts can reinforce far-right beliefs or make them more palatable. Figure 20 exemplifies the mix of far-right conspiracy thinking with humor. In this caricature, Angela Merkel is depicted in the role of Adolf Hitler during the battle of Berlin at the end of World War Two and climate activist Greta Thunberg as a member of the Hitler Youth. Merkel is dressed in Green, a reference to ecological protectionism and the Green party, and her hat features not only a CO_2-prohibition-sign but also the Antifa-symbol, implying the conservative chancellor is also a Green climate activist and a far-left extremist.

Table 17: Sub-categories of "appeal to emotions" across organizations

	AfD	COMPACT	Ein Prozent	Ich bin stolz…	Junge Alternative	Junge Freiheit	NPD	PEGIDA	PI NEWS	Total
Oversimplification	14%	16%	13%	6%	9%	3%	5%	3%	6%	8%
Sensationalist language	20%	23%	11%	13%	9%	4%	12%	4%	11%	12%
Fearmongering	10%	5%	2%	7%	0%	3%	7%	1%	1%	4%
Generating outrage	20%	21%	16%	14%	2%	7%	2%	10%	7%	12%
Use of humor or sarcasm	14%	19%	1%	21%	11%	3%	3%	28%	4%	12%
Personal attacks against opponents	22%	30%	13%	19%	11%	11%	9%	7%	8%	15%

COMPACT chose to use personal attacks the most out of the observed organizations. Especially noteworthy are their high scores for attacks against Green party politicians (9%) and Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg (13%). While the amount of media attention might have painted a target on Thunberg's back, it is nevertheless remarkable how much a teenager is targeted, especially since so many of her demands enjoy widespread support from the scientific community. Here the science-skeptical attitude and predisposition towards conspiracy theories among parts of the far-right seems to surface, otherwise it is difficult to explain how a teenage activist can be build up to such an icon of hate. Figure 21 shows how the climate change denial can be mixed with antisemitic conspiracy theories about George Soros. COMPACT lumps together Thunberg, Soros and the Greens, claims they all work together or for each other and implies they are planning to take over Germany and the EU to implement some sort of ecological totalitarianism.

Figure 20: Caricature of "Führer" Merkel and Greta Thunberg

Figure 21: Thunberg, Soros and the Greens - an unholy alliance according to COMPACT

4.2 Alt-Right

As can be seen in Table 18, 34% of posts contained an element of the "Alt-Right" category. The highest scoring organizations were Ein Prozent (53%), "Ich bin stolz, deutsch zu sein" (53%), COMPACT (42%) and PEGIDA (37%). Especially for the former two, who both scored above 50%, this is an expected finding, as both of these are not directly affiliated with a news outlet or a political party, freeing them to some degree of obligations to keep up a more acceptable public image, and they are also quite closely linked to "stereotypical" Alt-Right figures and organizations like the German Identitarian Movement, who's Facebook account was in the summer of 2018.

Table 18: Coding scheme: Alt-Right – percentages of categories present in posts

3. Alt-right	34%
3.1. Mainstreaming	19%
3.1.1. Shifting of the political spectrum	15%
3.1.1.1. Portraying opponents as extremists	12%
3.1.1.2. Grouping together all political opponents into one	4%
3.1.2. Sugarcoating of far-right beliefs	5%
3.1.2.1. Euphemisms (e.g. "patriots")	3%
3.1.2.2. Dog whistles	2%
3.1.3. Use of Nazi iconography or vocabulary	1%
3.2 Cooperation with other far-right groups	14%
3.2.1. Transnational cooperation of nationalists	5%
3.2.1.1. Praising far-right, anti-EU politicians from other countries	3%
3.2.2. Cooperation between different Alt-Right groups within Germany	10%
3.3. Anti-progressivism	3%
3.3.1. Anti-LGBT+ or anti-feminism stance	3%
3.4. Narratives about the role of the USA and Russia on the world stage	3%
3.4.1. Pro-USA / pro-Western / anti-Russian / pro-Israel	1%
3.4.2. Anti-American / anti-Western / pro-Russian	2%

The most important sub-category, present in 19% of posts, is ***mainstreaming***. It contains several methods by which far-right organizations will try to raise their mainstream appeal or to shift the Overton window of acceptable political positions to the right. This ***shifting of the political spectrum*** is often paired with the *victim mentality* stance by suggesting that there is a cabal of established political parties, mainstream media and leftist activists that are all out to get them. In this worldview, far-left activists and conservative politicians become almost indistinguishable and their common political goal is working against the "patriots", as the far-right likes to describe themselves. The feeling of being a victim is amplified by ***lumping together all political opponents*** into one "leftist" block and eliminating any nuance, especially if those opponents are then also ***portrayed as extremists***. In Figure 22, Ein Prozent voices its support for the Identitarian Movement and claims that the "peaceful, patriotic youth group", faces harsh repercussions by a vengeful state and its media apparatus. This movement was recently classified as far-right-extremist and anti-constitutional by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. In Figure 23, COMPACT claims that the Conservatives, Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals are all betraying their former policies and voters and are merging into one socialist unity party. Despite the obvious falsehood this is particularly

glaring as it references soviet rule in the German Democratic Republic, where the ruling party was called the Socialist Unity Party of Germany[3]. Trying to associate the Merkel government with former East Germany or communism generally is a trend that was observed several times across multiple organizations. By dividing the political spectrum into communist totalitarians and "patriots", these organizations portray themselves as a sensible alternative in a political dichotomy, instead of a fringe movement on the extreme right.

Figure 22: Support for Identitarians

Figure 23: Grouping together all political opponents

Mainstreaming also takes the form of ***sugarcoating far-right beliefs***. An example is the previously mentioned branding of far-right activists as "patriots", obfuscating the fact that they are advocating for unconstitutional policies. Besides this usage of ***euphemisms***, ***dog whistles*** are also a strategy employed to garner more mainstream support while retaining extremist followers. Innocuous language to the layperson can carry a meaning obvious only to insiders of extremist circles. For example, when COMPACT mentions "conspiracies of high finance", only people with experience in right-wing conspiracy thinking will notice the implication of a grand Jewish conspiracy. During the coding it also became apparent that some of these groups occasionally ***use Nazi iconography or vocabulary***. One possible explanation for this could be, that commonly using images and words associated with the Nazis, sometimes in a joking manner, might remove some of the stigma around them and make them more acceptable in the long run. If that is the case, this would also fall under "mainstreaming" extremist messaging. While the data does not provide evidence that this is done by the observed organizations with that strategy in mind, this reasoning has previously been stated in international white supremacist circles.

Another common theme that has been observed in Alt-Right groups is ***cooperation*** with similarly minded organizations across country borders. Despite them being clearly and openly

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[3] In German: Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED)

nationalistic, this suggests an ambition beyond just country level. A white-European identity, in addition to the national one, is common in Alt-Righters. This leads to these organizations *praising far-right politicians from other European countries*, especially for their anti-EU-stance. There is also *cooperation between the different far-right groups within Germany* (both between those featured in this research and others) and in the German-speaking area, particularly Austria. A prominent personality in this context is Martin Sellner, leader of the Austrian branch of the Identitarian movement. During the coding is was observable that several of the organizations repeatedly featured him in their communication (see Figure 22). COMPACT also used him as an endorser to promote their publication.

5 Discussion

5.1 Main findings

All three major categories of the coding scheme *(anti-multiculturalism, populism and Alt-Right)* have been found to feature extensively in the Facebook communication of these organizations. The coding schemes also covers a large majority of the posts. Only a relatively small number of posts did not contain any of the themes from the coding scheme. It can therefore be concluded that the developed coding scheme is effective in capturing the major communication themes of the German far-right.

Interestingly, while the corpus of organizations was chosen to represent a varied spectrum of organizations, the identified common themes are applicable across all groups. This study observed the Facebook accounts of political parties, far-right news outlets, blogs and activist groups. While all of them are meant to fit under the ideological umbrella of the populist far-right (which is confirmed by the results of this study), it is nevertheless interesting that there are no obvious outliers. The coding scheme was successfully applied to all observed organizations.

When comparing the results to the themes identified from literature (Figure 1), it is noteworthy that several categories are confirmed and do feature prominently in the analyzed posts. *Anti-immigration* remains a major category. *General conspiracy theories* also play a large role in the far-right's Facebook communication, but the emphasis on *climate change denial* is surprising. To the best of the authors knowledge this prevalence of dismissal of global warming has not been recorded in literature so far. *Victim mentality* and its sub-categories still feature as well and are a major component of the *populism* category.

On the flipside, it became apparent during coding that major adjustments had to be made to the basic coding scheme as well. This was then confirmed by the results. *While anti-EU-sentiments* are definitely part of the results, this was not quite as prominent as expected. Furthermore, overt racism was seldomly found. While these findings do not necessarily dispute that racist ideas are at least partly behind the anti-immigration stance that these groups hold, it has to be said that in their public communication on Facebook explicitly racist statements are rare. The focus is instead set on the negative effects of immigration (influx of criminals and drain on the welfare state). Describing all migrants as dangerous is arguably racist, but the observed organizations avoid drawing a direct line from genetics to negative personality traits. Instead, "culture" is used to convey a similar demonization without the explicit racism. This fits with the tendency of sugarcoating more extreme positions to gain broader appeal that has been observed in Alt-Right groups.

Based on the existing literature, a prevalence of anti-Semitism was expected. However, the results do not support this. With only 1% of posts having an anti-Semitic component, this seems to not be a major theme in the German Alt-Right's communication. A possible explanation is that the existing research focused on a more international (especially American) context. Because of Germany's unique history around the Holocaust, it is feasible that anti-Semitism is especially frowned upon in German society. This could lead to anti-

Semitic conspiracies being less prevalent even among far-right extremists, or it could simply cause anti-Semites to be especially careful about expressing their views publicly.

The two components of populism, *anti-establishment* and *appeals to emotion* have both been observed to a large degree. Unfortunately, there are reliability concerns about the latter category. Nevertheless, these findings indicate that the observed organizations are firmly rooted in a populist background and frequently employ populist rhetoric and communication strategies.

5.2 Theoretical contribution

5.2.1 Strategic implications

Far-right organizations use a variety of strategies to undermine the belief in the current political system. According to political scientists Kai Arzheimer, calling on their followers to oversee elections is intended to awaken associations with states in which democracy is threatened or already damaged and is part of right-wing disinformation campaigns aimed at instilling distrust of democratic institutions and political dissidents (Huesmann, 2017). Highlighting perceived incompetency of institutions, signal-boosting crimes committed by migrants or the plight of socioeconomically disadvantaged Germans are done with the same purpose. They are constructing the image of a corrupt, inefficient system in crisis that has lost touch with the people and is too incompetent to reform itself or deal with the problems its facing. According to the disintegration theory (Heitmeyer & Anhut, 2006), the perception of liberal democracy disintegrating raises the appeal of political extremists.

Establishing that the current political system is failing in various regards is not enough though. Far-right organizations need to also present themselves and their views as a viable alternative. The strategies employed here are largely what in this research is referred to as *mainstreaming.* Firstly, the polarization of the political landscape: fostering an us vs. them mentality, eroding the political center and claiming that the far-right and the far-left are the only alternatives. Secondly, the shifting of the political spectrum. By trying to change what is politically acceptable to say and by portraying their opponents as extremists, these organizations are trying to pull the Overton window to the right. Repeatedly overstepping the lines of what is deemed acceptable political discourse leads to a creeping normalization of far-right ideas and erodes those boundaries. These strategies have been identified as common for Alt-Right movements (Simpson & Druxes, 2015) and the results of this study confirm that this also occurs in Germany.

5.2.2 Conflict with deliberative democracy

Deliberative democracy can be seen as an antithesis of populism. While both proclaim the goal of enacting the common will of the people, populists only feign this interest to gain power and do not acknowledge the pluralistic nature of every populace. It comes as no surprise then, that populists make use of several strategies that go directly against the ideal of

deliberative democracy. As mentioned by Chappell (2012), common roadblocks on the way to a functioning deliberative democracy are uninformed voters, biased media and the existence of filter bubbles.

Social Media has been shown to create filter bubbles, where people are only exposed to opinions they already agree with (Moffitt, 2016). The organizations in this study deliberately construct an environment within which their followers are exposed to content of ideologically similar movements. This is done via sharing posts of other blogs and organizations from within the Alt-Right social media sphere. Alt-Right groups use social media to create the illusion that they enjoy broader support by the general population than they actually do (Simpson & Druxes, 2015). Sharing each other's content gives the impression that there is broader support for these ideas outside their own organization.

The idea behind deliberative democracy is that the essence of democratic politics lies not in voting and representation, but in a common deliberation and cooperative problem solving (Chappell, 2012). While it would be inaccurate to blame the absence of this idealized version of the democratic process solely on the far-right (every major party is guilty of focusing on contestation and differentiation to some degree), there are nevertheless major themes in the far-right's communication that run directly counter to the idea of deliberative democracy.

The results of this study show the prevalence of populist tactics and talking points. This includes the dialectic of the people and the corrupt elites (Moffitt, 2016), an inherently divisive concept that does not lend itself to the deliberative approach. In fact, the results have shown that the observed organizations' communication uses divisive rhetoric in several ways: the Germans vs. the immigrants, the "patriots" vs. the "leftists", the "rational climate change skeptics" vs. the "hysterical Greta disciples", etc. The last example also showcases another point of conflict with the idea of deliberative democracy: if the goal is not good-faith, fact-based discourse, but persuasion and gaining of political support, even in the face of scientific facts, then these actors cannot contribute to a deliberative democratic process.

The Alt-Right's vision of democracy is not that of a minority-protecting pluralism. It denies the existence of conflicts within an ethnically homogeneous society. This combines the populist notion of the "true people" with a racially motivated idea about who those people are.

5.2.3 Role of social media

Moffitt (2016) claims that social media has given people the ability to respond to events very quickly and interact with each other directly. This faster way of communicating also discourages reflection and fact-checking, which lends itself to populist communication.

The observed organizations clearly make use of social media to promote their ideas. Before the spread of the participatory internet, populist movements, especially on the right, tended to gather around a single leader (Taggart, 1995). And while that tendency is still present, as demonstrated by right-wing political figureheads like Trump in the US or Salvini in Italy, the Web 2.0 environment gives room for smaller groups to rise to prominence beyond what could have been possible without social media. Far-right activists and bloggers, who do not feature in mainstream media reporting, be it for their extremism or their relative unimportance, can build themselves a platform and regularly reach an audience of tens of thousands. Populist

propaganda, in the age of social media, is more decentralized. In this research it has become apparent that political activist groups (like PEGIDA or Ein Prozent) and blogs (like "Ich bin stolz, deutsch zu sein") can and do communicate very similarly to bigger organizations like established political parties (AfD). The internet allows populist actors to sidestep traditional media channels, while at the same time appearing more direct and closer to "the people" they supposedly represent (Moffitt, 2016).

The rising importance of social media has also eroded the once dominant position of mainstream media in the information market. This helps to decrease trust in these institutions, because they are no longer seen as *the* source of information, but as one source among many. This goes hand-in-hand with the notion of the *biased mainstream media* that is displayed by the observed organizations.

5.2.4 Cooperation between far-right groups

As outlined in the theoretical framework, Alt-Right groups have been shown to cooperate with each other, even across country borders, more so than before the age of social media (Grumke, 2013). This is also confirmed by the results of this study. In the social media sphere of the German Alt-Right, sharing and reposting each other's content is a regular occurrence. Several far-right blogs (Young German, Elmis moinbrifn, etc.) are shared frequently by multiple organizations observed in this study. The (German and Austrian) Identitarian Movement, particularly their prominent spokesperson Martin Sellner, are also featured frequently. Generally, this takes the form of portraying them as peaceful activists that are falling victim to overly harsh prosecution by an oppressive state.

As for international cooperation outside the German language area, direct sharing of foreign organizations' content was not observed (presumably because of the language barrier this would entail) but several cases of the observed groups praising far-right politicians from other countries were counted. Especially Matteo Salvini received praise for his strong stance against immigration as Italian Minister of the Interior.

5.3 Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study delivers a basis for analyzing far-right communication in a German context. Due to limitations on the scope of this research, it focuses on a representative sample of far-right movements in Germany. Future research might involve going into more detail regarding the differentiation of these movements. Where their commonalities and differences lie could only be broadly outlined in this research. For future research, it would be interesting to more closely look at the connection of these various organizations to see if and how they are linked and explore their relationship with each other, possibly in the form of a social network analysis. As was observed here, there is significant interaction between these observed groups (e.g. in the form of sharing each other's posts).

The coding scheme developed in this research may also be used to analyze far-right populist movements in countries other than Germany. Checking if it holds up in an international

setting or if / where there might be differences could provide further context to researching political communication on the right fringe.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to examine if and how the common themes found in this study shift over time.

In an effort to remain politically neutral as a researcher, no practical recommendations can be given. The aim of this research is not to provide policy advise. For future research it may nevertheless be interesting to explore ways to counteract the populist communication strategies mentioned in this paper.

6 Conclusion

This study has resulted in a framework through which to make sense of far-right communication on social media. It showcases the different components of which the Facebook communication of far-right groups in Germany is made up. By organizing common themes into the three major categories of *anti-multiculturalism*, *populism* and *Alt-Right*, as well as the sub-categories, this study was able establish a detailed overview of which topics the German far-right focuses their communication on. The most important topics are, firstly, a strong anti-immigration stance, which demonizes migrants and aims to stoke resentment among Germans of lower socio-economic standing. Secondly, the anti-establishment attitude is consistently pushed as a major theme. These organizations often combine it with a self-portrayal as victims in an oppressive system. The strategy of *mainstreaming* is consistently applied in order to make extreme views more acceptable to a broader audience.

These organizations generally try to establish narratives around specific topics (e.g. immigration, climate change etc.) and employ numerous populist strategies to convince followers of their opinion. Fact-based arguments are rare, and the preferred method of persuasion is instead an appeal to emotions.

The results of this study also demonstrate the presence of Alt-Right ideology and communication methods in the observed posts. While there are minor differences, this in generally in line with what is known about Alt-Right movements from other countries, supporting the idea of a more internationally connected far-right. Across the spectrum of far-right organizations featured in this research, there exists a remarkable overlap in the choice of topics and in the way, they are talked about. Strong ideological differences between them, while they might exist, are hardly discernable based on the results of these observations.

Further research into the relationships between far-right groups, both within Germany and across country borders, is needed to better understand, how and to which degree these groups network. It would also be interesting to confirm, if the findings of this study can be repeated in international contexts.

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Appendix

Full coding scheme:

1. **Anti-multiculturalism**
   1.1. **Nationalism**
      1.1.1. Whitewashing of German history
      1.1.2. Glorifying of German history
      1.1.3 Anti-Supranationalism
         1.1.3.1. Anti-EU-sentiments
   1.2. **Anti-immigration**
      1.2.1. Migrants are dangerous
      1.2.2. Migrants exploit our generosity or are favored over Germans in need
      1.2.3. Islamophobia / concerns about islamification
      1.2.4. Exaggeration of the extent of immigration and its effects (Doom and gloom scenario)
         1.2.4.1. Stylistic clue: Vocabulary: comparison with natural disasters
      1.2.5. Crisis is not being dealt with
         1.2.5.1. Current system is too incompetent
         1.2.5.1. Current system is unwillingly to act
      1.2.6 Destruction of Germany
         1.2.6.1. Destruction of German culture (focus on cultural conservativism)
         1.2.6.2. Replacement of ethnic Germans (racial focus)
            1.2.6.2.1. Stylistic clue: Use of "Volk" or "Austausch"
2. **Populism**
   2.1. **Anti-establishment**
      2.1.1. True people vs. corrupt elites
      2.1.2. Victim mentality
         2.1.2.1. Censorship of free speech
         2.1.2.2. Biased mainstream media
            2.1.2.2.1. Stylistic clue: "Lügenpresse"
         2.1.2.3. Lying politicians
         2.1.2.4. Biased institutions (courts etc.)
      2.1.3. Call to resistance
         2.1.3.1. Calls for demonstrations / protest
         2.1.3.2. Self-branding as resistance / counter-culture
         2.1.3.3. Appeal to take (back) control of institutions (e.g. "Wahlbeobachter")
      2.1.4. Conspiracy theories
         2.1.4.1. Climate change denial / Stance against climate activism
         2.1.4.2. Anti-Semitism (conspiracy theories about Jewish elites)
      2.1.5. Incompetence of current system
         2.1.5.1. Rule of law is crumbling or no longer in effect
            2.1.5.1.1. Stylistic clue: "Rechtsstaat"
            2.1.5.1.2. Too lenient on migrants (anti-immigration angle)
            2.1.5.1.3. Too harsh on right-leaning people (victim mentality angle)
   2.2. **Appeal to emotions**
      2.2.1. Oversimplification
      2.2.2 .Sensationalist language
      2.2.3. Fearmongering
      2.2.4. Generating outrage
      2.2.5. Use of humor or sarcasm
      2.2.6. Personal attacks against opponents
         2.2.6.1. Angela Merkel
         2.2.6.2. Green Party politicians
         2.2.6.3. Greta Thunberg
         2.2.6.4. George Soros
3. **Alt-Right**
   3.1. **"Mainstreaming"**
      3.1.1. Shifting of the political spectrum
         3.1.1.1. Portraying opponents as extremists
         3.1.1.2. Grouping together all political opponents into one
      3.1.2. Sugarcoating of far-right beliefs
         3.1.2.1. Euphemisms (e.g. "patriots")
         3.1.2.2. Dog whistles
      3.1.3. Use of Nazi iconography or vocabulary
   3.2 **Cooperation with other far-right groups**
      3.2.1. Transnational cooperation of nationalists
         3.2.1.1. Praising far-right, anti-EU politicians from other countries
      3.2.2. Cooperation between different Alt-Right groups within Germany
   3.3. **Anti-Progressivism**
      3.3.1. Anti-LGBT+ or anti-feminism stance
   3.4. **Narratives about the role of the USA and Russian on the world stage**
      3.4.1. Pro-USA / Pro-Western / Anti-Russian / Pro-Israel
      3.4.2. Anti-American / Anti-Western / Pro-Russian