

Resurgence of Far-right parties and Anti-Immigration wave in Eastern Germany: Antisemitism and Narrative Building

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Abstract

In recent years, Europe has witnessed a significant rise in anti-immigration sentiment alongside the resurgence of far-right political parties. This trend is particularly pronounced in Eastern Germany, where parties such as Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) have garnered substantial public support. This study conducts a comprehensive secondary analysis of existing literature, newspaper articles, and academic research to understand how far-right parties have shaped public narratives around migration in Eastern Germany. This research highlights the region's unique historical and socio-economic context, such as its position in the former Eastern Bloc during the Cold War and its higher unemployment and poverty rates, which contribute to public disillusionment. Findings suggest that far-right parties strategically manipulate economic anxieties and historical narratives to amplify anti-immigration sentiment. Additionally, this analysis explores the complex relationship between anti-immigration rhetoric and antisemitism, considering Germany's historical legacy of the Holocaust. The study argues that far-right parties do not merely reflect existing public opinion but actively distort and reshape it through media channels and political discourse. Furthermore, the success of far-right parties influences mainstream political parties to adopt stricter immigration stances, thereby altering the broader political landscape. This secondary research offers important insights into the mechanisms of political narrative construction in the context of migration and extremism in Germany. It provides a foundational understanding of how anti-immigration waves are interlinked with far-right political strategies, emphasising the need for further empirical research to investigate voter behaviour and the role of media in perpetuating these narratives.

Keywords: Anti-immigration, Far-right parties, Eastern Germany, AfD, Antisemitism, Political discourse, Migration narratives, Secondary research

2015 marked a year of great significance for the European Union, representing both the onset of the immigration crisis and the beginning of heightened anti-immigration sentiments (Krzyżanowski, et. al., 2018). Over the past decade, this development has coincided with the rise of far-right populist movements across the

continent (Mudde, 2019). Germany, although traditionally positioned with the liberal bloc of the European Union, has not been immune to this shift in public sentiment (Arzheimer, 2018). The rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), particularly in Eastern Germany, signals a profound transformation in the nation's

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political discourse surrounding migration, identity, and nationalism (Weisskircher, 2020). This paper examines how far-right parties, especially the AfD, have shaped public narratives around migration in Eastern Germany through a comprehensive analysis of existing literature, newspapers, and academic research.

The study situates this phenomenon within the region's unique historical, political, and socio-economic contexts. As a former part of the Eastern bloc during the Cold War, Eastern Germany has continued to experience disparities in terms of higher unemployment, economic stagnation, and social alienation compared to Western Germany (Weisskircher, 2020). These conditions have served as a foundation for the growth of exclusionary political ideologies that diverge significantly from those dominant in the West. This paper builds its argument along these lines, asserting that far-right parties exploit these conditions by manipulating economic grievances, historical narratives, and national identity anxieties to construct anti-immigration discourses that resonate deeply with disaffected citizens (Wodak, 2015). The core of this research paper is to understand how anti-immigration sentiment intersects with antisemitism and broader xenophobic tendencies in Germany's political culture. By analysing Germany's legacy of the Holocaust, the study investigates the tensions between the nation's post-war commitment to democratic tolerance and the resurgence of extremist narratives. The paper concludes by examining how far-right movements influence mainstream political actors, compelling them to recalibrate their policies and discourse on immigration. Through a secondary analysis, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how political narratives are constructed, circulated, and normalised in contemporary German society.

Historical and Socio-Economic Context of Eastern Germany

To understand the rise of far-right political parties in

Eastern Germany, it is very important to unravel the historical and socio-economic factors that have shaped the region's political atmosphere (Weisskircher, 2020). The fall of the Berlin Wall is a good starting point to really understand the nuances of this issue. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, it was remarked as a symbol of liberation and celebrated widely, but these very events led to economic and psychological upheavals in the East. This was essentially because the transition from a planned socialist economy to a market-oriented capitalist system resulted in widespread factory closures, job losses, and mass emigration of young people to Western states (Weisskircher, 2020). Within a day, the lives of the people on the eastern side had to change, which did not really solve the root problems when compared to the western counterparts in terms of unemployment and poverty (Weisskircher, 2020).

Scholars such as Pickel and Pickel (2026) note that this transition created enduring resentment and feelings of marginalisation among the Eastern Germans, who across years, felt they were second-class citizens in a unified Germany. The social fabric of many regions in the Eastern part weakened as communities experienced depopulation, ageing, and the erosion of social safety nets that had characterised life in the German Democratic Republic (Pickel & Pickel, 2026). These conditions created a perfect pathway for far-right parties to slide through by offering narratives of cultural preservation and national revival (Wodak, 2015).

This information on the socio-economic background of Germany is key in this study of the rise of far-right parties in Germany, as the AfD's success cannot be attributed to an isolated political phenomenon (Mudde, 2019). This is the outcome of decades-long socio-economic disparities and historical grievances that have manifested into extreme nationalistic ideas (Rensmann, 2017). The party's ability to translate economic frustration into cultural resentment against migrants and refugees represents a strategic narrative construction deeply

rooted in post-reunification anxieties (Schilling & Stillman, 2024).

Literature Review: Migration, Populism, and Narrative Construction

Migration is one of the highly discussed and contested topics in Europe, and the relationship to populism has also attracted significant scholarly attention. Many scholars, including Cas Mudde (2007), have discussed how far-right populism thrives on the dichotomy between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite,” often identifying migrants and minorities as threats to national integrity. Ruth Wodak, in her work *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (2015), argues that far-right discourse operates through what she calls the “politics of fear,” which frames migration as a crisis that endangers cultural homogeneity and economic stability. She says that this narrative creates a sense of emergency by depicting refugees or asylum seekers as threats that are destroying the very social fabric of the country and taking away free benefits that were built on the labour of its own citizens. Through various means such as emotional appeals, scapegoating, and the strategic use of crisis language, far-right political parties have normalised exclusionary politics and legitimised authoritarian policy responses. Wodak emphasises that these narratives rely on symbolic boundary-making, defining who belongs and who does not, and draw on historically embedded xenophobic tropes while maintaining ambiguous, publicly defensible language. In the German context, her framework helps explain how the AfD has leveraged fear-based communication to shift public debate, mobilise resentment, and portray itself as the sole protector of national order and identity.

In 2013, the AfD emerged as an anti-Euro party but later evolved into a xenophobic and anti-immigrant party following the 2015 refugee crisis. Scholars like Dennison and Geddes emphasise that the refugee influx served as a catalytic event that redefined politics in

the EU, with migration becoming the symbolic battleground for broader anxieties about globalisation, identity, and sovereignty.

As explained previously in the historical context, one of the key reasons that Eastern Germany provides a very distinct electoral base for the AfD is due to its post-socialist identity crisis that has deep roots in the society. Research by Pickel and Pickel (2026) provides an even deeper analysis of these regions; they explain that weaker democratic institutions and lower immigrant populations are also key reasons why far-right parties gain traction. What is ironic about this is that regions with very little immigrant population have higher anti-immigration sentiment, suggesting that perceptions are shaped less by direct contact and more by mediated narratives and political framing.

Media ecosystems play a big role in amplifying far-right narratives. Studies by Krämer (2017) and Engesser et al. (2017) show that digital media platforms such as Facebook and other social media platforms have become essential parts of the far-right winged party’s communication strategy to reach wider masses. It is through these platforms that the AfD spreads news that is emotionally charged to frame migrants as cultural and economic threats, often invoking historical analogies to Germany’s past.

Finally, the literature links anti-immigration sentiment with the re-emergence of antisemitic and racist tropes. Despite Germany’s extensive efforts toward Holocaust remembrance and education, far-right groups strategically evoke revisionist interpretations of history, portraying Germans as “victims” of post-war guilt politics. This rhetorical inversion allows them to connect present-day migration debates with deeper narratives of national humiliation and identity loss.

Far-Right Strategies in Shaping Migration Narratives

One of the key reasons for the rise of the far-right po-

litical parties in Europe lies in the AfD's ability to dominate public discourse. The party's strategic framing of immigration as a security threat and cultural invasion made it easier to connect with the people in Eastern Germany. Framing migration as a danger appeals to the general public on a much more emotional level. Marcus, Neuman & MacKuen (2000), in their *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment* argues that citizens do not only make decisions based on rational choices, but emotional sentiments as well. Fear activates a "surveillance system," making people more attentive to threats and more receptive to messages promising order and security. Their model indicates that emotional triggers, especially anxiety, shape how individuals interpret political cues and decide whom to support. The AfD presents itself as the defender of a threatened national identity juxtaposed against what it labels as the "liberal elite" and "globalist" political establishment that prioritises refugees over "native Germans."

This strategy, used by the AfD, operates on various levels. The first being that AfD consistently links migration to crime, even when empirical evidence provides contradicting results to such associations. Media analysis reveals that far-right political parties like the AfD amplify isolated migrant criminal incidents to construct a narrative of chaos and insecurity (Hestermann & Hoven, 2020). These narratives are particularly effective in economically distressed areas, wherein the public has little to no trust in the public institutions. In these areas, it is very easy to frame the migrants as the issue due to the low economic conditions of their regions.

The second thing that the AfD does is that it employs symbolic nostalgia, idealising the social cohesion of pre-1990's and criticising how there is now an erosion of traditional values. They invoke an imagery of their homeland as being very pure and portray immigrants as an existential threat to their cultural purity. This symbolic dimension resonates strongly in Eastern Germany, where post-reunification modernisation is often per-

ceived as a form of Western domination rather than national progress. When analysing speech patterns and public discourse of the AfD Terms like "remigration," "Überfremdung," or "Lügenpresse," which once carried strong far-right connotations, now appear more frequently in public debates. By constantly repeating these concepts, the party lowered the social stigma attached to them and shifted what is considered "acceptable" speech in mainstream politics (Wodak, 2015).

Third, the AfD presents itself as an unbiased and corrective force against the biased and politically manipulated mainstream media landscape. They frame the established news outlets as untrustworthy and elitist in suppressing the dissenting views, which taps into the existing reservoir of public scepticism toward traditional journalism. This positioning is reinforced through its extensive use of alternative media ecosystems, including far-right blogs, partisan news portals, encrypted messaging channels, and highly coordinated social-media networks. These platforms enable the AfD to amplify conspiracy narratives, anti-globalist critiques, and xenophobic messaging without the editorial constraints or factual scrutiny that conventional media impose. Over time, this communication strategy cultivates tightly insulated echo chambers in which supporters encounter largely homogeneous information flows that validate their fears and grievances. The result is a parallel sphere of political communication that not only deepens polarisation but also steadily erodes the authority of evidence-based reporting and democratic deliberation, making it more difficult for fact-based public debate to function effectively.

The Interlinkage of Anti-Immigration and Antisemitic Discourses

While overt antisemitism remains a taboo in mainstream German politics, the far-right parties have found loopholes and ways around the law to change narratives through either coded or implicit forms of

antisemitic rhetoric. Far-right organisations continue to disseminate similar ideas in indirect ways, even though overtly antisemitic remarks are socially unacceptable in Germany. They suggest that powerful foreigners are behind migration policies and attempting to undermine the country by using coded terms like “global elites” or “hidden interests,” rather than specifically mentioning Jews. Old antisemitic conspiracy theories are thus recycled without being explicitly stated. Creating such narratives draws in classical antisemitic tropes that frame Jews as threats to national cohesion (Rensmann 2017). These narratives find more receptive audiences in Eastern Germany, where the collective memory of the Holocaust is occasionally less institutionalised than in the West. In contrast to Western Germany’s strict post-war denazification, far-right organisations take advantage of the historical discontinuity of memory politics in the area. As a result, it becomes harder to distinguish between xenophobia and more general extremist ideologies as antisemitic undercurrents resurface under the cover of anti-globalist or anti-elite sentiments.

The AfD’s instrumentalisation of the historical narratives, a major one being that Germany no longer feels and should not collectively feel the guilt of the Holocaust, really reflects efforts to normalise nationalistic pride. Party leaders, including Alexander Gauland, have publicly referred to Nazi crimes as mere “bird droppings in history,” signalling an attempt to rehabilitate nationalist discourse (Associated Press, 2018). This normalisation process not only undermines Germany’s memory culture but also provides moral legitimacy to anti-immigration and racist rhetoric.

Mainstreaming Far-Right Discourse: Political and Media Impact

The most consequential outcome of the rise of AfD is that it has changed the public discourse and their opinion on immigration to their standpoints. This is very evident in how many mainstream political parties, such

as the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), have increasingly adopted tougher immigration policies and rhetoric in response to the AfD’s growing electoral influence. Policy debates around border controls, refugee quotas and deportation have become central themes even within centrist coalitions as well. This process, termed “contagion from the right” by political scientist Cas Mudde (2019), illustrates how far-right movements reshape political competition not merely by winning votes but by redefining what counts as politically legitimate. Through this process, far-right narratives have essentially become embedded in policy agendas, public debates and electoral strategies. In Germany, this has been evident in the intensification of debates on asylum reform, accelerated deportations, and expanded police powers, demonstrating how far-right ideas permeate mainstream agendas even when political elites claim to resist them.

Media institutions have simultaneously contributed to this normalisation, albeit often unintentionally. This is mainly because of the visibility the mainstream media provides these parties with, while they view these parties through a critical lens, their continuous coverage of far-right actors, controversies, and provocations has contributed to a steady expansion of their visibility and perceived relevance. Scholars on political communication note that the media in Germany has struggled to find a balance between reporting critically on far-right movements and avoiding the amplification of their frames. This is essentially because they provide AfD with exactly what they want to be known for, such as sensationalist headlines and audience engagement. This constant loop of engagement with the public creates a space for these parties in people’s minds. As critique and amplification become increasingly difficult to disentangle, a feedback loop emerges in which the AfD’s anti-immigration messages circulate far beyond their core base. This dynamic illustrates how media and political actors interact in mutually reinforcing ways, shaping

public narratives around migration and contributing to the mainstreaming of exclusionary discourse.

The Role of Identity and Emotional Politics

Economic hardship is not the only factor contributing to the enduring anti-immigration sentiment in Eastern Germany. Emotional mobilisation and identity politics are the deeper drivers as well. By effectively encapsulating fears of cultural loss, political marginalisation, and national decline, the AfD has turned migration into a symbolic issue that has gained traction in the past decade.

People who feel cut off from the cosmopolitan narratives that predominate in urban Western Germany will find great resonance in this emotional dimension. Far-right actors turn structural inequality into cultural resentment by portraying themselves as the true voice of the “forgotten East.” According to sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2020), this is known as the “culturalization of inequality,” in which economic disadvantages are reframed as moral divisions between “liberal elites” and “ordinary citizens.”

In this way, anti-immigration sentiment turns into a stand-in for more general societal annoyances, including factors such as unemployment, disregard for local communities, and mistrust of the political system. The strength of far-right movements resides in their capacity to transform these disparate complaints into a cohesive, emotionally charged story that provides scapegoats as well as a feeling of community.

Conclusion

This research paper underscores that the rise of anti-immigration sentiment and far-right politics in Eastern Germany is not merely a reaction to migration itself but a complex sociopolitical process rooted in historical, economic, and identity-based dynamics. Far-right political parties such as the AfD have capitalised on the religious economic marginalisation and histor-

ical discourse to craft powerful narratives against the immigrants. These parties actively create and reshape preexisting opinions through media engagement and strategic political communication by playing on public fears and cultural insecurities.

Furthermore, the interaction of hidden antisemitism and anti-immigration rhetoric emphasises how fragile Germany’s democratic memory culture remains. The entire political landscape is being altered by the AfD’s discursive tactics, which normalise exclusionary worldviews and put pressure on mainstream parties to take more aggressive positions on immigration.

This study also reveals that the battle over migration in Germany is not only about borders or policies but about the politics of belonging, who is seen as part of the nation and who is excluded from it. Understanding these dynamics is vital for designing effective counter-narratives that reinforce democratic values, social cohesion, and inclusivity. Future empirical research should investigate how voters internalise far-right messages, the role of local media ecosystems, and potential interventions that can rebuild trust in democratic institutions.

In conclusion, the resurgence of far-right populism in Eastern Germany serves as a cautionary tale for Europe at large. It suggests that when economic insecurity and historical memory intertwine with cultural fear, political extremism has roots, and it is easier to cultivate anti-immigrant sentiments. Confronting this challenge requires not only policy reforms but also a sustained commitment to narrative reconstruction, one that reasserts solidarity, empathy, and shared citizenship as the cornerstones of a pluralistic European democracy.

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