

# **The Legitimization of Fear: AfD and Its Discursive Strategies in Framing Immigration as Crisis**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates how the German party Alternative für Germany (AfD) employs ideas of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory to shape public perception of immigration. Although the party avoids using direct conspiratorial terminology, AfD frames immigration as a civilizational threat to Germany's national identity, social and cultural cohesion. These narratives are explored through AfD's social media and in-depth interviews with a party member, using Robert Entman's framing theory and Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis. The study explores how framing and discourse create a narrative of crisis and the need for direct political action. The findings show how AfD defines immigration as a systemic crisis, blaming the political elite, and positioning themselves as the only legitimate defenders of the German people. Using strategic mainstreaming, the party makes narratives of demographic fears and existential threats more moderate and acceptable, meanwhile still invoking feelings of fear and urgency. The analysis shows how AfD's communication mirrors the core idea behind the Great Replacement, suggesting cultural replacement and elite conspiracy, without being overt enough to lose political legitimacy. This research explains how right-wing actors normalize extreme ideas through discursive strategies. It highlights the importance of critical analysis of political communication in a democratic society.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Right-wing parties have been part of European politics since the 1980s, but they have had limited success in German politics after WW2. However, this all changed in 2017, when the German political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) managed to gain 12.6 percent of the votes, entering the Bundestag as the first new party since 1990. The party was formed in 2013. It comprised mostly of a political elite who were skeptical of the EU, and they favored economic liberal politics. The party carefully avoided any association with right-wing extremism. However, this slowly changed when the party started forming a populist stance against migration and Islam. Euroscepticism became less important. The party members became less elitist and more populist, especially after an unregulated influx of refugees numbering in the hundreds of thousands. The party has since taken a radical anti-immigration stance. (Arzheimer & Berning, 2017:1)

AFD's growing popularity has made it the main opposition party in the German Bundestag for voters seeking anti-immigration politics, both for the normal German voters and far-right extremists. Policies such as Self-determination from the EU and strict immigration policies are subjects for intense political debate, making them great for weaponization through conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories work particularly well when they use controversial subjects that can easily mimic reality and go alongside it. One of the popular conspiracy theories in far-right movements in Europe is the Great Replacement Theory. (Davey & Ebner 2019: 7-9)

This conspiracy theory argues that white European populations are being replaced deliberately, through the migration of other minority groups with a different ethnic and cultural background. Often based on hypothetical demographic projections, which are used as evidence that ethnically white populations are becoming a minority in their own country, and groups with other ethnic and religious backgrounds are taking over. Muslims are seen as being incompatible with the majority culture in Western countries. The theory fits well within other narratives in white supremacist groups, such as white genocide and Eurabia. These terms and theories have been popularized on both radical online media outlets but also in mainstream media. They all build on the idea that Islam is undermining Western society and can be expressed to various degrees of extremism. Conspiracy theories such as these have inspired the shooter in the 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack, as well as the Norwegian

terrorist Anders Breivik. They have also been used by populist right-wing politicians in the European Parliaments. (Davey & Ebner, 2019: 7-9)

## **Research question**

How does AFD use the Great Replacement Theory and its social media to shape public perception of Immigration as an enemy?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

To explore how AFD uses the Great Replacement Theory and its social media to shape public perception of Immigration as an enemy, it is useful to review what other texts have done. The text: *How the far-right extremist, New Right, and populist frames overlap on Twitter a German case study* by Reem Ahmed and Daniela Pisoiu explores the rise of right-wing populist parties in European elections. The authors do this by looking at anti-immigration narratives on social media. They try to answer how these parties pursue strong anti-immigration sentiments while being extremely careful not to be associated with right-wing extremism. The text uses frame analysis to explore a series of tweets from accounts related to the German AfD, the Identitarian Movement, and the Autonomous Nationalists. Ahmed and Pisoiu outline certain frames within these groups and show their similarities across a broad range of overlapping narratives. They show how these groups construct and disseminate their messages. They find that these groups share a common resonance in that the German people are at risk of dying out. Terms like “Volkstod” (death of the people and “Abschaffung” (demise) of Germany, and the Great replacement theory converge online, across different platforms and actors. Propagated by far-right extremists, populist right, and new right movements in Germany. They all identify problems as related to foreigners and refugees, national and international establishments facilitating immigration, and the feminist/LGBT Community. The proposed solutions are deportation and increasing the German birth rate. The groups use apocalyptic language and emotional appeals to increase salience. They exploit current events to build a sense of urgency and threat. They also present negative incidents involving immigrants as empirical evidence, as well as different official statistics, such as declining birth rates, to build credibility. (Ahmed and Pisoiu 2021: 237-251). While this text focuses on three different groups on Twitter/ X and broad narratives. We specifically focus on how AfD uses the Great Replacement theory to frame immigration as an enemy.

Ahmed and PISOIU focus on an in-depth method within one country. They analyze underlying frames and mechanisms, rather than general themes and keywords, through a quantitative analysis. They show how they overlap, but also call for an examination of comments on posts from AfD's Facebook page, which other groups often refer back to. (Ahmed and PISOIU 2021: 250). We employ a similar method. We aim to narrow the focus even more by looking at framing on AfD's Facebook page. Furthermore, deepening our understanding of AfD through interviews with party members. To gain an even deeper understanding, critical discourse analysis is used to see how AfD constructs immigration as an existential threat.

A text that examines the demographic conspiracy theories of replacement is the text: *'They love death as we love life': The 'Muslim Question' and the biopolitics of replacement,*" by Sarah Bracke, Hernández Aguilar, and Luis Manuel (2020). The text argues that demographic fears about Muslims in Europe are used to frame them as a threat to civilization because of their birthrates, religion, and their refusal to integrate. The authors explain how these fears are spread through a *palimpsest* of conspiracy theories. These theories exist in many different forms and can be used on multiple levels. Still, the main idea is that Muslims are replacing native Europeans. They are portrayed as an "alien body" that threatens national identity and social stability. The text describes it as a matter of biopolitics. It deals with how populations are divided into categories based on biology, separating Muslims as outsiders, and questioning their right to citizenship. The text explains how this logic forms in the Great Replacement theory, where Muslims are portrayed as a short-term threat, as terrorists, and a long-term threat through higher birth rates. The demographic threat only makes sense when Muslim families are not seen as a part of Europe, seen as replacing and not contributing to the future of Europe (Bracke, and Hernández Aguilar, 2020: 695-696). Their text helps us to show how the AfD uses racialized, conspiratorial language to frame immigration as a crisis in Germany. The text focuses on broader European discourses, while we aim to narrow our approach to how AfD uses this type of rhetoric on social media and interviews.

Right-wing conspiracy theories can often seem far-fetched, but they can exist on multiple levels, as pointed out by Bracke, and Aguilar. The Great Replacement, in particular, is a flexible political discourse that can be strategically adapted. This is what the text *"The great replacement: Strategic mainstreaming of far-right conspiracy claims"* deal with, written by Mattias Ekman (2022). The Great Replacement theory is not just used by right-wing extremists, but also by mainstream right-wing parties. The message is easy to water down and can be changed depending on the audience. Words like mass immigration or the loss of national identity are softer ways of spreading the idea, and making it acceptable.

Online communication has significantly changed the dissemination of conspiracy theories, making them more widespread and mainstream. (Ekman 2022: 1139). This aligns well with how the great replacement is framed on social media. Together, all of these texts explore how different conspiracy theories like the Great Replacement are constructed and spread. They show how far-right actors frame immigration as a threat to civilization. Ahmed and Piosiu (2021) show that right-wing actors in Germany have framing strategies, overlapping with right wing extremist. Bracke, Aguilar, and Manuel (2020) explore the deeper biopolitical fears and categorizations that drive the narratives of replacement. Ekman (2022) shows how these ideas are softened, and made mainstream to appeal with broader audiences through emotions on social media. These studies tackle the subject of the role of conspiracy theories in far-right discourse, especially through general patterns of multiple groups across Europe. The goal of our research is to narrow the focus on AfD specifically. We aim to investigate how the party uses the Great Replacement theory on social media and in interviews with party members. This narrows the focus and gives a detailed, case-specific understanding instead of the many broader comparative studies that deal with this issue.

Ahmed and Piosiu examine Twitter content from extreme far-right actors. In their paper, they specifically call for a more in-depth analysis of mainstream parties, especially the AfD, and also their use of other platforms like Facebook. (Ahmed and Piosiu 2021: 250) This paper aims to do exactly that and fill this gap. We aim to do an in-depth analysis of multiple AfD Facebook posts and interviews, gaining insight into how these replacement narratives become mainstream.

### **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.**

#### **Fairclough (CDA) and Foucault (Power, Knowledge & Governmentality)**

For our research/assignment, we have chosen to implement the Critical Discourse Analysis by Norman Fairclough as well as Michel Foucault's concepts of Power, Knowledge, and Governmentality, in order to analyze the discourse vis-à-vis the replacement theory in our conducted interviews with members of the AfD. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as developed by Norman Fairclough, provides a robust theoretical and methodological framework for examining the ways in which language both reflects and constitutes social power relations, ideologies, and identities (Fairclough. 2013.). Rooted in a critical realist epistemology, Fairclough's approach views discourse not merely as a means of communication but as a form of social practice that both shapes and is shaped by broader

socio political structures. CDA is therefore uniquely suited to the study of political communication, particularly when investigating how actors construct, legitimate, or contest dominant narratives within specific sociocultural contexts (Fairclough. 2013).

In this project, we draw on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA to analyze interviews conducted with members of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). The first dimension—textual analysis—focuses on the linguistic features of the interview data, including lexical choices, syntactic structures, modality, and rhetorical strategies. Through this layer, we identify how AfD representatives linguistically construct the “Great Replacement” theory and the European Union as an antagonistic force. For example, we attend to how metaphor, repetition, and evaluative language contribute to the production of fear-based or oppositional framings (Fairclough. 2013).

The second dimension—discursive practice—concerns the processes of text production, distribution, and consumption. Here, we situate the interviews within broader discursive fields by exploring how AfD discourse draws upon and reproduces established ideological frameworks, such as ethno-nationalism or Euroscepticism. This involves an analysis of intertextuality and interdiscursivity: how the party members echo or reconfigure existing narratives found in far-right discourse, both nationally and transnationally (Fairclough. 2013).

The third dimension—socio-cultural practice—places these discursive acts within their wider social and political contexts. We explore how these constructions of identity, threat, and belonging intersect with the current political climate in Germany and Europe, particularly amid rising concerns over migration, national sovereignty, and the legitimacy of supranational institutions like the EU. By analyzing how the AfD discursively positions itself in opposition to these perceived threats, we can better understand how the party mobilizes language to reinforce its ideological agenda and appeal to particular segments of the electorate (Fairclough. 2013).

Overall, our implementation of Fairclough's CDA enables a systematic unpacking of how AfD members strategically use discourse to frame complex geopolitical issues in emotionally resonant and politically potent terms. This approach not only sheds light on the linguistic construction of far-right ideology but also reveals how such constructions operate within and contribute to broader struggles over meaning, identity, and power in contemporary European politics (Janks. N.d.).

Alongside Fairclough's CDA, we also engage Michel Foucault's theoretical contributions regarding power, knowledge, and governmentality for the purpose of further

interrogating the ideological underpinnings and socio-political implications of AfD discourse. Foucault's framework emphasizes how power is not merely repressive but productive, operating through dispersed networks rather than centralized institutions. In this context, discourse becomes a primary vehicle through which power circulates, establishing what is accepted as truth or "common sense" within a given society (Schneck, 1987).

By applying Foucault's concept of governmentality, we analyze how the AfD implicitly constructs idealized notions of citizenship, national identity, and governance through its rhetoric in particular in discussions revolving around welfare dependency, cultural preservation, and last but not least, immigration. Foucault's theory of knowledge/power helps us to understand how narratives such as the "Great Replacement" gain authority not because of their empirical validity but perhaps rather due to their alignment with broader regimes of truth within nationalist or identitarian politics (Schneck, 1987).

By incorporating Foucault's insights, we move beyond a purely textual analysis to consider how discourses around security, race, and belonging function as instruments of power, legitimacy, or threat within the imagined political community. By applying Foucault's theoretical lens, the project will appear more in-depth and enriched regarding our interpretation of AfD rhetoric (Schneck, 1987).

## **Framing theory**

Framing, according to Professor Robert M. Entman, is *"to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described."* (Entman 1993: 52). Framing deals with how certain information from one location, for example, a speech, Twitter, or news media, enters into a receiver's consciousness. According to Entman, frames diagnose, evaluate, and describe. Framing is about how a communicator shapes a view of reality through a text to a receiver within a certain culture. (Entman 1993: 51-53).

As an example, the frame "immigration crisis" has dominated the European right-wing discourse. The frame highlights certain events as problems: refugee arrivals, border crossing, and demographic changes. The frame identifies the sources of the problem: mass migration, open-border policies, political elites, and specific ethnic groups. The frame offers moral judgment through portraying immigration as a threat to national security, economic stability, and cultural identity, invoking fears. The frame then offers treatments: strict border

control, deportations, and so on. Frames do four things: define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. (Entman 1993: 52-53)

Frames function through context, they include, but also through what they choose to leave out. Framing works because it makes certain aspects of reality more salient. Framing makes it more noticeable, meaningful, and memorable, but obscures other aspects by omitting them. The process of making information more salient happens through interaction between the text and the audience. What the audience notices depends on their pre-existing beliefs. Entman refers to this as *schemata*. Schemata are a collection of stored ideas, such as stereotypes, categories, and scripts, that shape how a person would interpret new information. When a message aligns with an existing schemata, it is more likely to get noticed and accepted. When a message falls outside these frameworks, it likely would not get noticed at all. A frame needs to be a designed message that aligns with the receiver's prior experiences and expectations to be successful. What to omit is just as important. When certain concepts or solutions are left out, it makes it less perceived by an audience. Changing what is displayed reshapes how an issue is understood. For example, using immigrant vs refugee, or talking about deportation instead of integration. Framing plays a crucial role in political communication. Different political actors struggle for public attention. They seek to impose their frame on an issue to shape public perception. Entman uses US policy against Iraq as an example. Public discourse talked about sanctions and military intervention, but nothing about diplomatic alternatives. Frames are tools of communication that determine how the public understands the issue. Framing also determines what is legitimate to talk about in the first place. (Entman 1993: 55-58)

#### **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This section outlines the methodological framework applied in our analysis of the project. The project combines discourse analysis and case study methodology to explore how the AfD constructs immigration as an existential threat through political discourse and social media communication.

##### **4.1 Research Design**

Through Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Foucault's theory of Discourse & Power, this study employs a qualitative research design, which is particularly well-suited for examining how ideological narratives and political meaning are constructed and

disseminated. As Kristensen and Hussain note, qualitative research enables an in-depth understanding of how actors express, interpret, and shape reality through linguistic and social practices (Kristensen & Hussein, 2019). Taking the symbolic and discursive nature of far-right narratives like the Great Replacement into account, qualitative methods were assessed to be the most appropriate academic choice for unpacking the rhetorical strategies of AFD as well as the broader ideological structures in which they operate (McLeod. 2024.)

In this project we have attempted to create a case study approach focusing on a single unit, namely the AfD—as a bounded entity of analysis. This research design has thus allowed us to examine the discursive strategies of the party across two interconnected sources: One, an interview with AfD politician Wilko Möller and, two, official posts by AFD on the party's Facebook page.

By opting for a combination of these materials, the project investigates how the AfD reproduces and mainstreams conspiracy-based framings of immigration through both formal political speech and informal digital communication. The theories by respectively Fairclough and Foucault were selected on the basis of preliminary observations that the discourse of AFD exhibits ideological patterns of both fear-based governance and identity construction thus then applying these frameworks systematically in order to uncover the deeper power relations and the effects of such embedded in, and, correlated to language.

## **4.2 Analytical Framework**

### ***Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)***

Firstly, in regard to the analytical framework, we chose to employ it through Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, which conceptualizes discourse as a form of social practice embedded in broader structures of power and ideology ( Fairclough. 2013). The three-dimensional model by Fairclough (textual, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice) was used for the purpose of analyzing both the linguistic features of Möller's interview and the recurring themes in AfD's Facebook posts. Our goal with this analytical framework was to enable us to explore how AFD encodes political meaning through specific rhetorical tropes, lexical choices, and intertextual references to identitarian and populist narratives ( McLeod. 2014).

### ***Foucault's Theory of Discourse and Power***

The perspective of Michael Foucault on discourse as a regime of truth provided a complementary lens, particularly when attempting to understand how the AfD's language has

shaped the “field of intelligibility” vis a vis topics such as national identity, citizenship, and immigration (Schneck, S. (1987). Through this lens, we examined how Möller’s interview and AfD posts function as technologies of some sort of political entity/governance that produce fear, valorize a racialized national subject, and normalize exclusion. In particular, Foucault’s concepts of biopolitics and governmentality were useful in revealing how existential threats, such as “demographic change”, are discursively constructed to justify policy interventions (Schneck 1987).

### ***Framing Theory (Entman)***

In addition to discourse theory, we chose to incorporate Robert M. Entman’s framing theory for the purpose of analyzing how AfD’s Facebook posts select and amplify certain aspects of immigration-related events. The four framing functions—problem definition, causal diagnosis, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation—were used to code a sample of Facebook posts. This allowed for a systematic comparison of how AfD frames immigration across various topics and moments, revealing a coherent narrative of demographic crisis and elite betrayal (Entman, 1993).

## **4.3 Data Collection**

### ***Interview***

The first part of the empirical data consists of an in-depth interview conducted with AfD politician Wilko Möller. The interview responses serve as primary material to analyze the linguistic and ideological coherence of his answers with aligning perspectives of the Great Replacement narrative, with a focus on identity, culture, and threat perception.

### ***Social Media Analysis***

The second part of our data set includes a curated sample of AfD’s Facebook posts ranging from the period April–May 2025. These posts have been selected based on their relevance to the topics of national identity, immigration, and demographic change. The social media analysis was analyzed through the lens of the Entman framing theory in order to to affect appeals, ideological tropes, and identify recurring discursive patterns.

For the sake of the academic respect and values included in such, it must though be clarified that due to Facebook’s algorithmic filtering and personalization, one must acknowledge that the data set may not represent the full spectrum of AfD’s communication across all platforms or voter experiences. However, the sample provides sufficient insight into the mainstreamed rhetorical strategies used by the party during the selected time period.

#### **4.4 Methodological Implications**

The methodology chosen arguably creates an in-depth understanding of how political discourse operates as a site of ideological struggle. However, our project is limited in scope by its lack of empirical audience reception data. To concretize; While the analysis captures the production and encoding of AfD's discourse, it is arguably rather inadequate regarding the, for instance, lack of depth in examining how voters decode or respond to these messages— something we believe to be an area to be considered as crucial for future research.

Additionally, the focus on Facebook posts and a single political interview arguably narrows the scope of generalizability. In spite of that, one could argue that, as a case study at least, our project aligns with Gerring's notion of analytic depth over breadth thus still offering a focused yet theoretically robust investigation into how a far-right party uses language to shape public perceptions of immigration (Gerring, J. 2004.).

### **5. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Radical right-wing parties in Germany have not seen much support from the public, given the country's historical past. Although this trend has changed, given the successful 2017 elections, the party alternative for Germany (AfD) managed to become the third-largest party in the Bundestag. In the 2025 elections, the AfD raised the bar, becoming the second-largest party with 20.8 percent of the votes. Interestingly enough, despite the party's surge in popularity amongst certain voter groups, the party has been excluded from forming a government coalition in the Bundestag. (Cole, 2025:1)

The AfD's history can be defined in four different stages, which describe a significant ideological shift, from the party's formation until now. The first stage was when Bernd Lucke, Alex Gaul, and others formed AfD in 2013. The party comprised mostly the German right-wing elite, from Christian fundamentalists, ordoliberal, and other members who could be considered traditional center-right in Germany. Out of the 58 members, 28 were academics, earning the party the nickname professors' party. (Arzheimer & Berning, 2017: 1). The party took a skeptical viewpoint of the Eurozone crisis management policies and stood against bailout packages for struggling economies like Greece. A general

conservative anti-EU position emerged, skeptical of Germany's financial commitments to the EU. The party managed to win subnational political representation and gain access to mainstream media, avoiding any association with right-wing extremism. (Arzheimer & Berning, 2017: 1) The 2013 federal election resulted in AfD almost gaining the 5 percent threshold needed for representation in the Bundestag. Missing the 2013 German Federal Election, the AfD managed to get seven seats in the 2014 European Parliament elections. This secured the AfD as a political party during its formation, but a change in the party's leadership marked the second stage in AfD's history. Bernd Lucke lost his leadership to Frauke Petry in an internal power struggle. The party adopted new policies and became Germany's leading right-wing populist voice by broadening the focus on nationalistic rhetoric, skepticism of immigration, and opposition to Merkel's government. (Hansen, 2025). Opposition to the refugee crisis of 2015 and Angela Merkel's open-door policy for Syrian refugees, gave AfD more popularity. The party's strong anti-immigration stance gave the party massive support amongst voters in polls, and in state elections in Saxony and Thuringia. This secured the party from a Eurosceptic, economically centric party to a right-wing populist party. They relied on narratives of national identity, linking this with cultural and societal issues caused by immigration. Framing a message that immigration and multiculturalism threaten German traditional values and social cohesion in Germany. They also positioned themselves as an anti-elite, appealing to Germans who felt disconnected from the political landscape. The other parties were out of touch with the common concerns of the ordinary citizen. (Lees, 2018:7-12 )

The AfD secured itself as the main opposition against German mainstream parties, and this marked the third stage of their history. They managed in the 2017 German federal election to secure a significant breakthrough, winning 12,5 percent of the vote, gaining 72 seats in the Bundestag. The first time since World War 2, a far-right-wing party gained entrance into the German federal parliament. (Hansen, 2025).

The AfD managed to gain and maintain support by leveraging major crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The party strongly opposed the lockdown measures imposed by the government, vaccine mandates, and public health restrictions. This attracted voters that was unhappy with the way the government handled the coronavirus crisis. The pandemic measures were an overreach by the government and diminished personal liberty, according to the AfD narrative. This narrative also fitted well with the anti-establishment and AfD as an

alternative solution. A narrative that was already popular amongst the party's voters. The AfD started gaining significant negative criticism in the media and from government officials. Although this did not stop the party from gaining 10.3 percent of the vote in the 2021 federal election, only a slight decline from 2017. (Hansen, 2025). The party, as of 2025, has managed to increase its popularity even further, becoming the second largest party with 20.8 percent of the votes. (Cole, 2025:1)

The so-called "Great Replacement theory" is a theory that has sparked a lot of controversy since it was popularized in France in the early 2010s (Schiavenza & Parness, 2025). The controversial conspiracy theory pushes the notion that white European societies, through the support of mass migration policies, are systematically being replaced by non-white ethnicities. Furthermore, the theory postulates that the global elites found within international bodies such as the UN or EU are the "masterminds" behind this supposed plan, and that they wish to see their goals come to fruition within one or two generations (Wikipedia, 2025)

In relation to "Alternative Für Deutschland" (AFD), Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) has repeatedly warned of growing extremist and anti-democratic tendencies within the AfD, explicitly citing the normalization of conspiracy theories like the Great Replacement during major party events (Cole, 2025). One of the major exemplifications of such can be found when looking at the 2023 AfD party conference in Magdeburg, which served as a recent and vivid example of the party's alignment with Great Replacement narratives. During candidate selections for the European Parliament elections, multiple speakers referred to "mass immigration" and "multiculturalism" as deliberate attacks on German identity (Knight, 2023). Petr Bystron, a Bundestag member from Bavaria, stated: "The migrant quotas, the forced allocation of migrants—this is an attack on everything we hold dear: our culture, our religion, our homeland (Knight, 2023)." This language suggests not just opposition to immigration policy, but a conspiratorial belief that demographic change is being orchestrated as a form of civilizational warfare. Several candidates voiced variations of this theory, which the BfV president, Thomas Haldenwang, identified as "openly racist" (Knight, 2023).

Such an example is very interesting in terms of the history connecting AfD to the Great Replacement Theory, thus connecting AfD's deepening alignment with far-right identitarian narratives, many of which are arguably grounded in fears of cultural and racial erasure.

Historically, the AfD began as a Eurosceptic party focused on economic liberalism and opposition to the euro. However, following the 2015 refugee crisis, it underwent a substantial ideological transformation. Party figures such as Björn Höcke, who has made repeated references to “population replacement” and “remigration” (Davis, 2024) —terms frequently employed by white nationalist groups—have become increasingly influential. The use of “remigration,” echoed by AfD candidate Irmhild Bossdorf, is especially revealing, as it was popularized by the extreme-right Identitarian Movement, which explicitly endorses the Great Replacement theory (Knight, 2023).

Court rulings and political analyses further corroborate this radicalization. In 2022, a Cologne court found that slogans associated with remigration and the so-called population exchange reflect “massive xenophobic agitation” and a fundamental disregard for the principles enshrined in Germany’s Basic Law. These developments place the AfD not just in ideological proximity to extremist actors, but in active propagation of narratives that threaten liberal democratic norms (Knight, 2023).

This ideological shift is not without historical resonance. Statements made by AfD leaders often carry rhetorical echoes of the Nazi era, whether in content or structure. For instance, Björn Höcke’s declaration that “this EU must die, so the true Europe may live” parallels the fascistic, life-or-death dichotomies used in National Socialist propaganda, such as headlines from the *Völkischer Beobachter* about Stalingrad sacrifices. These allusions suggest that the AfD’s adoption of Great Replacement rhetoric is not merely tactical but part of a broader worldview steeped in ethnonationalist tradition (Knight, 2023).

As of 2024, the BfV has categorized the AfD as a “suspicious case,” subjecting it to surveillance due to concerns over its commitment to democratic principles. This classification underscores the degree to which the AfD’s flirtation with theories like the Great Replacement is not merely rhetorical but indicative of an ideological trajectory that places the party in conflict with the constitutional order (Knight, 2023).

The AfD’s entanglement with the Great Replacement theory illustrates its radical transformation from a protest party into a platform for anti-democratic and racialized ideologies. This alignment not only poses legal and political challenges within Germany but also reflects broader trends of far-right normalization across Europe.

## 6. ANALYSIS

AfD's growing popularity in recent elections has put the party in a powerful position as the second-largest party. However, they are still unable to form any coalition within the German Bundestag, preventing them from implementing policy. They stand as outsiders, but backed up by a strong voter base, with support from every fifth German. (Niranjan, 2025)

When examining AfD's Facebook page, this position is used as a clear framing strategy. AfD's Facebook post follows the same framework. AfD uses the same posts on multiple social media platforms, from Facebook to X. This analysis shows the recurring patterns with the use of Entman's framing theory. He has four framing functions that fit remarkably well on AfD's Facebook post. Firstly, *define problems*, how immigration and demographic change are presented as a problem. Secondly, *diagnose causes*, who is to be blamed, immigrants, the EU, or the ruling elite in Germany. Thirdly, *make moral judgments*, what values and emotions are invoked. Lastly, *suggest remedies*, what does AfD suggest as a solution to the problem, for instance, deportation. (Entman 1993: 52)

The table below uses Entman's categories on a selection of posts related to immigration. They are from AfD's Facebook page, from May 5, going back to April 8, 2025. Each post has been assigned a letter to distinguish it from the other. The Facebook posts were selected from AfD's official Facebook page from April 8 to May 5, 2025. The posts were chosen based on their relevance to themes of immigration, demographic change, and national identity. This gave us a focused analysis of how AfD frames immigration in terms of the Great Replacement theory.

| Date      | Post Title                                                                                      | Define Problem                                                                               | Diagnose Cause                                                                                  | Moral Judgment                                      | Suggest Remedy                                                               | Notes                                                                                   |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 5 May (a) | Reasons for Syrians to flee are no longer applicable: deportation instead of asylum application | Syrians remain in DE despite not qualifying for asylum anymore because of the fall of Assad. | The Office of Refugees conducts unrealistic symbolic policies and is stuck in pseudo-procedures | The state avoids responsibility and is ineffective. | AfD takes responsibility with a repatriation plan and immediate deportation. | Syrians have no right to stay. AfD regains control of the country by restoring the law. |
| 1 May (b) | The fox in Charge of the Henhouse: The CDU has                                                  | The Social health system is collapsing because of non-                                       | The CDU's 2015 border policy opened the floodgates.                                             | Negligence from the government.                     | Expel non-contributors (Syrians) and restore order in                        | Economic and ethnic framing. The collapse of the social health                          |

|              |                                                             |                                                                                                |                                                                                                      |                                                                 |                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                      |
|--------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|              | created the collapse of the social system itself.           | contributing migrants.                                                                         | Migrants are exploiting legal loopholes and a passive government.                                    | Structural imbalances.                                          | the migration influx.                                                                                                 | system, drained because of outsiders.                                                                |
| 22 April (c) | Illegal migration is overloading the social benefit system. | Uncontrolled migration threatens the welfare state. The contribution rate might exceed 50%.    | No actions taken by the government to distinguish between contributing and non-contributing Migrants | Unfair burden on middle-class citizens.                         | Controlled and qualified immigration. Clear rules for access to benefits or deportation.                              | Replacement narrative: Non-contributing migrants could overtake the middle class by over 50 percent. |
| 9 April (d)  | Half of all the unemployed are without a German passport    | The welfare state is collapsing due to migrants being dependent on it and unqualified to work. | Uncontrolled migration is the cause, and ignorance of the facts. No one is taking responsibility.    | Taxpayers are being exploited,                                  | Return to reason with AfD. immigration based on personal responsibility. Deportation of non-self-sufficient migrants. | Replacement narrative, through statistical framing                                                   |
| 8 April (e)  | Immigration is out of control. Relieve the municipalities   | Smaller cities are overwhelmed by migrants, scarce housing, overcrowded daycares, etc..        | Politicians have ignored reality and kept borders open. Quick fixes like emergency container homes.  | The citizens suffer, and the ruling government ignores reality. | Effective border control. Deportation of illegal immigrants, stop uncontrolled immigration                            | Breakdown of infrastructure. Overcrowded cities are replacing order and causing breakdown.           |

When looking at the table vertically on each of Entman's categories, clear patterns and recurring themes emerge.

When looking at problem definitions, AfD frames immigration as a systemic crisis in Germany, in the inability of the government to deal with issues of immigration. Immigration is framed as an existential threat that risks resulting in the breakdown of the social system. The government cannot handle the asylum process and is unable to implement the law. The welfare state might break down completely because of non-contributing migrants. The hospitals are likewise at a breaking point. The municipalities of Germany cannot handle overcrowded cities, with no housing or daycare. Immigration is not framed as a humanitarian challenge, but more of an invasion from migrants who want to benefit, threatening economic stability and social cohesion. (*Alternative für Deutschland 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, e2025*).

A clear pattern emerges when looking at how AfD diagnoses the causes. AfD consistently blames the perceived migration crisis on government institutions and the ruling government coalition. EU is also indirectly blamed when looking at pictures following the posts. The German Government is blamed for inaction, ignorance, and incompetence when dealing with the uncontrolled migration, as described by the AfD. The German bureaucracy is stuck in “pseudo procedures,” which is presented as being purely symbolic. The 2015 CDU border policy has opened “the floodgates”, and the asylum system has been unable to deal with it. (*Alternative für Deutschland 2025b*). AfD frames the handling of the migration crisis as a betrayal of the German working class by the political elite. AfD does not explicitly accuse the political elite of betrayal, but it is strongly implied. They suggest that they deliberately ignore the problems, through denial of reality, ineffective policies. For instance, the Office of Refugees ' symbolic policies or the political ignorance of the facts suggest that their efforts are a performance, rather than an effort to fix the issues. (*Alternative für Deutschland 2025a–e*). AfD is implying that these policies are deliberate, since it is an active neglect. Furthermore the post “*The fox in Charge of the Henhouse: The CDU has created the collapse of the social system itself*” (*Alternative für Deutschland 2025a*) implies deliberate betrayal, since those who should protect the system are deliberately damaging the system with an open border policy, well aware of the consequences, as the AfD post strongly implies. Phrasing like the collapse of the social system frames migration as something organized and a destructive force, rather than a humanitarian crisis. AfD leans into the Great Replacement narrative, where a political elite deliberately tries to instigate demographic change. Although the motivations of the political elite are not explored. The political elite undermines Germany through their incompetence and negligence, which AfD implies is deliberate. (Bracke & Hernández Aguilar, 2020: 695–696)

The AfD's Facebook post makes moral judgments, framing immigration as not only a problem that risks the collapse of German society, but a moral failure of the state. AfD positions itself as taking responsibility, restoring order, and protecting the national interest of the traditional German people. Migrants are often portrayed as non-contributors who exploit the welfare system, legal loopholes, and weak politicians. This creates a moral contrast to the taxpaying, hardworking Germans and freeloading outsiders. The government avoids responsibility and fails to protect its citizens. This creates an unjust narrative where the middle class suffers, and migrants benefit. AfD creates an emotional frame of betrayal, lawlessness, frustration, and a sense of urgency. The moral framing of the handling of the

migration issue is unsustainable and morally wrong. Only AfD, as an outside voice with its strong policies and the support of the German people, can restore order in the chaotic political system. (Alternative für Deutschland 2025a–e)

Afd suggests several remedies to restore order. One is border control framed as relieving the municipalities from overload in childcare, housing, and infrastructure.(Alternative für Deutschland 2025e). They also employ restrictions and categorization of migrants, questioning their right to stay, based on whether they are contributing or not, based on their qualifications. They also question the right to stay for Syrians who no longer qualify for asylum, according to AfD. The solution is a repatriation plan. (Alternative für Deutschland 2025a) AfD suggests immediate deportation across all of their posts. AfD frames itself as the main opposition of the German government. AfD has effective and immediate policies that restore order in a society on the brink of collapse. Migration is an existential threat, and AfD offers the solutions. (Alternative für Deutschland 2025a–e)

Afd does not directly mention the Great Replacement in their post, but the overall logic behind the theory is clear across their discourse. The party frames migration not as a global humanitarian issue, but as a coordinated threat. They describe migration as overwhelming cities, or collapsing the social system by taking over schools and healthcare. (Alternative für Deutschland 2025e) A clear construction of demographic displacement is framed. AfD also blames CDU, SPD, the state, and the EU for knowingly enabling national decline through migration. They choose to ignore, avoid responsibility, and deliberately use stalling tricks to deceive their citizens. (Alternative für Deutschland 2025a) All of this implies a conspiratorial logic, where a political elite actively enables demographic replacement.

The post also makes moral distinctions between the hardworking, ignored, overburdened Germans and the unqualified, exploitative migrants, dependent on welfare. Germans are losing out, and outside migrants are benefiting. Germans are losing out in their own country. This moral inversion aligns with the Great Replacement theory, through framing these groups as culturally and morally incompatible. AfD makes these narratives highly salient and excludes narratives of any positive contributions or multicultural coexistence. Although The Great Replacement is not directly used. Highlighting that over 50 percent of the unemployed are foreigners, implying replacement, and non-contribution. AfD

frequently applies narratives of collapse and overload of social systems, driving implicit fears of being outnumbered and overwhelmed. As argued by Ahmed and Psoiu (2021), the AfD avoids extremist terms but keeps the underlying message from radical ideas. They do this by using indirect references, softer wording, and specific statistics to highlight a certain reality, and omitting others (Ahmed and Psoiu 2021: 250).

When analyzing these Facebook posts, similar ideas to the Great Replacement theory emerge. Although these are implicit, and the party carefully avoids talking about race, the underlying ideas are implied. Migration is construed as more than a policy issue, but as a demographic replacement that threatens the survival of Germany. The us versus them narrative is used to divide citizens into non-contributing immigrants who benefit at the expense of native Germans. The Germans are victims of an unjust system, which is being overtaken by outside migrants, with the blessing of the uncaring political elite. AfD's Facebook post mirrors the main idea behind the Great Replacement theory in this way. Far-right groups often spread a watered-down version of extreme conspiracy theories by being implicit and using softer language. This is what Ekman calls strategic mainstreaming. Conspiracy theories are made to become more acceptable in mainstream political discussion. Ekman points out that this strategy is very flexible and can be expressed in many different ways, whilst keeping the core idea. Conspiracy theories evoke strong emotions of fear, urgency, and existential threat, mobilizing political support (Ekman 2022: 1129-1135). AfD avoids being too overt in its narratives, while also exploiting the core idea behind the Great Replacement. The AfD creates clear distinctions about who qualifies as a German citizen and who does not. This is what Bracke and Hernández Aguilar (2020) refer to as bio-politics. They question who belongs to the society and on what basis. When highlighting Muslims as outsiders and non-contributors, they become a threat to the system, rather than an active part, justifying actions against them. (Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2020: 692–693).

### **Discourse Analysis of Wilko Möller's Interview: A Critical Engagement with Fairclough and Foucault on Power, Identity, and the 'Great Replacement' Narrative.**

This section conducts a comprehensive discourse analysis of the interview responses given by Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) politician Wilko Möller, integrating Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Theory (CDT) and Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power. Through these frameworks, the analysis aims to, through an academically and theoretical manner, analyze how Möller constructs national identity, portrays the European

Union as a cultural and political antagonist, and aligns his language with the ideological and rhetorical underpinnings of the "Great Replacement" theory.

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Theory situates language within a dialectical relationship between discourse, power, and society, and furthermore, emphasizes how discourse constitutes and is constituted by social structures and practices (Fairclough, 2013). In the case of the conducted interview with Möller, one could argue that discourse does not merely reflect opinion, rather it functions as a strategic tool for reproducing hegemonic ideologies and legitimizing particular social arrangements while simultaneously delegitimizing others. In terms of Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse (text, discursive practice, and social practice) an understanding of how Möller's language operates ideologically and politically is thus being exemplified through "layers" throughout the analysis (Fairclough, 2013).

First and foremost, when looking at the textual level, Möller is arguably using "tactics" aligned with his party's typical discursive strategy also found online, and through an arguably populist maneuver he utilizes evaluative and emotive language to describe European integration, immigration, and demographic changes. Phrases such as "unkontrollierte Masseneinwanderung" (Uncontrollable mass-immigration) and "Sozialsysteme destabilisiert, (destabilized social-systems) in his answer to question one is arguably a pejorative reference to multiculturalism constructing a world of existential threat (Möller, 2025). When looking at his lexical choices it arguably paints a rather black/white picture distinguishing clearly between the past- a nostalgic, ethnically homogeneous one, and the present- a chaotic, morally degraded one (Möller, 2025).

From the discursive practice level, Möller draws on and recontextualizes discourses from identitarian and nationalist narratives (Fairclough, 2013). The implicit opposition between "Leistungsträger" (contributors) and "Transferleistungsempfänger" (welfare recipients) echoes neoliberal economic discourses but racializes them by attributing the latter status disproportionately to non-European immigrants. In doing so, his language performs a dual ideological function: it upholds the values of productivity and merit while encoding them with ethnic and cultural connotations.

Finally, at the level of social practice, Möller's discourse participates in a broader right-wing populist project that seeks to naturalize a racialized understanding of national identity, positioning the AfD as the only political actor capable of resisting cultural erasure and demographic displacement (Fairclough, 2013).

## **2. Foucault: Discourse, Power/Knowledge, and Governmentality**

When looking at the interview from a discursive analytic level through Michel Foucault's conception of discourse it is rather interesting to dive into how it differs in its focus on how discourses constitute regimes of truth and subject positions (Schneck, 1987). An important and distinctive mark of Foucault is his eyes on discourse merely being reflective of social reality but instead being productive: it creates the conditions of possibility for what can be thought, said, and done (Schneck, 1987). Möller's discourse, in this light, must be understood as a form of biopolitical governance where intelligibility regarding race, citizenship, and belonging must all be perfectly aligned thus creating a, to him, perfect homogenic society where a biopolitical governance can first then be introduced in a merely flawless matter.

Through Foucauldian analysis, one observes that Möller's responses in the conducted interview do not simply reflect anxiety about cultural change; they produce a normative framework in which certain "bodies" referring to (Christian, ethnically German, nuclear families) are valorized, while others (Muslim, Arab, African migrants) are constructed as threats to the social fabric that according to Möller shall found and construct the biopolitical governance in order to restore the social intelligibility a society need in order to become a well-functioning productive biopolitical unity (Schneck, 1987). The interview thus operates as a discursive technology that disciplines collective memory and identity, simultaneously stigmatizing dissent as anti-national and reconstituting the citizen as a racialized subject.

Furthermore, Möller's narrative aligns with what Foucault describes as a governmentality of fear, wherein state policies are justified through the invocation of existential threats (Schneck, 1987.).

By invoking the loss of cultural traditions like Easter or Christmas celebrations and associating this with Muslim immigration, Möller, from a discursive aspect, constructs a civilizational crisis that warrants extraordinary political responses (Möller, 2025). This mode of governance, while formally democratic, relies on exclusionary biopolitics.

## **3. The 'Great Replacement' and Discursive Convergence**

Although Möller never explicitly mentions the term "Great Replacement in his answers for the interview," one could argue that his rhetoric mirrors the core of the theory in a strikingly aligning way. The "Great Replacement" theory, popularized by the French writer Renaud Camus, posits that European populations are being systematically replaced by non-European immigrants, particularly Muslims, through the mechanisms of immigration and

differential birth rates (Schiavenza & Parness, 2025). From a discursive point of view this theory functions by combining fear and anxiety of demographic changes with conspiracy logic thus creating its power through its ability to naturalize ethno-nationalist politics under the guise of cultural preservation (Duignan, 2022).

A good exemplification of Möller's usage of The great replacement theory can be found under his interview answer in question number one, where Möller's invocation of low birth rates among ethnic Germans and his critique of governmental refusal to engage in "Bevölkerungspolitik" reflect the demographic determinism at the core of the Great Replacement (Möller, 2025). His lament that women are discouraged from having children, alongside proposals for incentivized reproduction among German families, perfectly mirrors the policies often proposed by identitarian movements and the core of the discursive strategy of one using elements from The Great Replacement theory (Brockell, 2022). Moreover, his claim that parties like CDU and SPD "wollen keine Völker mehr" frames multiculturalism as an elite-driven conspiracy to dissolve national identities which furthermore directly echoes Camus's framework (Brockell, 2022).

The discursive construction of the "Other" in Möller's responses—particularly Muslims and Arabs—serves as a focal point for this replacement anxiety. By associating these groups with social instability, economic burden, and cultural regression, his discourse participates in a broader project of racialized securitization, which Foucault identified as central to modern governance (Schneck, 1987). Möller's narrative, therefore, not only reproduces but also mainstreams the logic of the Great Replacement within a parliamentary political framework.

#### **4. Rhetorical Strategies and Populist Narratives**

When attempting to break down the rhetorical strategies and populist created discursive frameworks within this interview, it is rather interesting to look at a few key strategies being used. From a discourse-analytical standpoint, Möller's rhetoric draws on a well-established populist repertoire of "moral polarization" (those defending tradition are righteous; those supporting change are traitorous), "crisis framing" (Germany as in moral and demographic freefall), "victimization" (AfD as silenced or criminalized), and "binary oppositions" ("us" vs. "them," "people" vs. "elites") (Fairclough, 2013).

Ideologically, these function to produce resonance with great efficiency as well as mobilizing political support. Möller's discourse in the interview in fact manage to create a coherent mix of Fairclough's 3-dimensional analysis and the Foucauldian analytical concept

of “governmental fear” that is the core catalyst for AfD to perceive itself as the only political actor capable of resisting cultural erasure and demographic displacement by warranting extraordinary political responses for the mere sake of solving the “biopolitical crisis” that is, to AfD, in the current version of Germany. Möller’s discourse is not simply drawing upon one of either discourse theories; it is performing heavily on both, as aforementioned. From a Fairclough’s perspective, the painting of a picture distinguishing between the nostalgic past ethnically homogeneity and the dark present of chaos and moral degradation is an effective and populist strategy, and it is undoubtedly a tool which have gained many voters given the recent results from the Forsa Polling Institute indicating that a significant number of AfD votes were found to be “protest votes” (Simsek, 2025.)

### **Conclusion on the interview from a discursive point of view.**

Möller’s interview responses, viewed through the combined frameworks of Fairclough and Foucault, demonstrate the power of discourse to both reflect and shape political reality. His language operates as a form of symbolic power that legitimizes exclusionary policies, racial hierarchies, and anti-democratic narratives under the guise of cultural preservation. The alignment with the Great Replacement theory is discursively embedded through rhetorical emphasis on demographic decline, cultural loss, and political betrayal. In doing so, Möller contributes to the normalization of far-right ideology within mainstream political discourse, transforming radical anxieties into politically actionable worldviews.

Such discursive formations demand critical scrutiny not only for their content but for their effects: they reconstitute who belongs, who governs, and whose lives are deemed grievable.

Another interesting perspective of AfD in relation to The Great Replacement Theory, can be found when roaming through the party’s official manifesto. Under its section “Culture, Language & Identity” 7.6.1 “Islam does not belong to Germany” (AfD, 2017), it is clear to see that the party’s fear, or hostility, towards islam and muslims is rooted in something which aligns quite well with several points of the great replacement theory. Firstly, AfD writes in its manifesto that the expansion and ever-increasing number of Muslims in the country are viewed as a danger to the state, the society, and the values of which AfD stand for, and argues that Germany stands for. Moreover, AfD also writes that “An Islam which neither respect nor refrains from being in conflict with our legal system, or that even lays claim to power as the only true religion, is incompatible with our legal system and our culture, however, many Muslims live as law-abiding and well-integrated citizens amongst us, and are

accepted and valued members of our society” (AFD, 2017). Lastly under the 7.6.1, AFD writes that the party demands that an end is put to the formation and increased segregation by parallel Islamic societies relying on courts with shari’a laws, and that it wishes to curb a trend towards religious radicalisation amongst Muslims, and these turning into violent Salafists or terrorists (AFD, 2017).

This section articulates a concern about the growing presence of Islam in Germany, which the party characterizes as a challenge to the country’s legal system, cultural values, and societal cohesion. While the manifesto does not explicitly reference the Great Replacement Theory—a narrative that posits an intentional demographic transformation of European populations through immigration and differential birth rates (Brockell, 2022)—it does echo certain elements of that framework. In particular, the AfD emphasizes the perceived risks associated with the demographic expansion of Muslim communities and the development of what it terms “parallel societies” governed by values incompatible with the German constitutional order.

At the same time, the AfD distinguishes between Islam as a religious-political system and individual Muslims as citizens. The manifesto explicitly acknowledges that “many Muslims live as law-abiding and well-integrated citizens amongst us, and are accepted and valued members of our society.” This statement serves to delineate the party’s opposition not to individuals per se, but to what it describes as ideological or legal frameworks—such as Shari’a law—that it considers irreconcilable with liberal democratic principles. By articulating this distinction, the AfD frames its position in civic and legalistic terms rather than ethno-cultural or racial ones, which allows the party to claim that its stance is compatible with the principles of constitutional patriotism and non-discriminatory integration.

Nevertheless, the manifesto’s broader framing—particularly its emphasis on cultural preservation, legal incompatibility, and the need to curb religious radicalisation—can be interpreted as consistent with key premises of the Great Replacement Theory, albeit within a formal political discourse. The convergence of demographic anxiety and cultural protectionism, even when expressed through institutional language, illustrates how certain ideological motifs may operate in mainstream political platforms without direct invocation of fringe terminology.

## 7. DISCUSSION

To answer how AfD uses the Great Replacement theory to shape public perception of immigration, this paper has examined a sample of posts on social media and interviewed a high-ranking member of AfD. Immigration. The analysis reveals how AfD frames immigration as an existential crisis and systemic crisis to Germany, instead of a humanitarian policy issue. Entman's framing theory points out that framing highlights different aspects of reality, meanwhile omitting other aspects. AfD post on social media depicts immigrants as an encroaching population that could overwhelm German cities, collapse the health and social system. They frame immigration as a coordinated effort that threatens Germany's survival. When highlighting overwhelmed cities, immigration becomes a national emergency that requires urgent measures. The structural causes of these problems are omitted, making the damaging impacts of immigration highly salient. (*Alternative für Deutschland 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, e2025*)

AfD creates a crisis frame with a clear line of “us” and “them” dynamic. Native Germans are portrayed as hardworking, taxpaying victims who are losing out in their own country. Immigrants are portrayed as outsiders who exploit and threaten Germany. They are overburdening schools, the welfare system, and causing disorder. They are culturally and morally incompatible with the native population, who gain nothing. They face an existential threat, and it is implied that they are losing out and being replaced. This is echoing ideas of the Great Replacement. When AfD highlights a reality of crises and urgency, it reflects a broader trend in far-right discourse. Ahmed and Pisoiu (2021) point out that far-right groups in Germany use terms like “the demise of Germany” and “Volkstod”-death of the people, which fits into the overall logic of the Great Replacement. All of these narratives build on the idea that German people are dying out, and evoke narratives of crisis and strong emotions. (Ahmed and Pisoiu, 2021) As shown in our study, AfD's rhetoric also follows this pattern. They constantly link immigration with narratives of overrun and collapse. AfD makes these narratives highly salient, playing into already existing *schemata*, like the loss of culture to multiculturalism or economic anxieties. Well-recognized themes are easier to tap into to gain acceptance of a narrative. When AfD, for instance, uses words like flooding or overcrowded, chaotic, media images of the 2015 immigration crisis come to mind. AfD makes one reality more salient through Entman's framing categories. *The Problem definition*: immigration as a crisis. *Diagnose cause*, as migrants are flooding in. *Moral evaluation*: Betrayal of the

German people. *Treatment*: drastic immigration policies. Framing immigration in this light can simplify, polarize, and ultimately lead to certain political outcomes. (Entman 1993: 52)

AfD uses the populist narrative of a virtuous German people against inept elite politicians and undeserving outsiders. AfD blames the established political parties for enabling the immigration crisis, well aware of the consequences. A Facebook post like "*The fox in Charge of the Henhouse*" blaming CDU for causing the collapse of the social system, by opening the borders. (*Alternative für Deutschland 2025b*). This language implies betrayal since those who should protect the social system (the CDU) choose not to do so. AfD does not directly accuse the current political system of betrayal but they imply it. They accuse the political elite of ignoring the people's needs through incompetence and negligence. A "us" vs "them" narrative is created, both for immigrants and native Germans, the political elite against the will of the people. Mainstream parties become active facilitators of the growing migrant population. AfD creates a moral hierarchy between the hardworking native German and the underserving foreigners. One side is contributing, and the other is benefiting living of welfare. The German middle class is portrayed as suffering unfairly. Both the political elite and lazy, lawless immigrants have created this unjust situation. AfD uses emotions of anger at the elites' failures and the discontentment of immigrants. Only AfD takes moral responsibility for the situation and creates an anti-establishment voice. (*Alternative für Deutschland 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, e2025*). They segment themselves as the voice of reason and the people, protecting and restoring the nation's values. This narrative fits well, as the second-largest party in Germany, but outside the government coalition. These narratives fit well into other studies, such as Ahmed and Pisoui (2021). They showed that far-right actors often blamed immigrants and the established political elite for being responsible for society's downfall. Only themselves as far-right actors could prevent this. (Ahmed and Pisiu 2021: 250). AfD likewise follows this template, as our analysis has shown.

In this study, we found that AfD discourse uses the main idea behind the Great Replacement, without overtly mentioning it. Across Facebook posts and the interview, AfD insinuates that native Germans are being replaced by foreigners. They use demographic statistics and narratives of cultural decline. AfD highlights that over 50 percent of the unemployed are foreigners, implying that these foreigners are draining the welfare system and overloading the system that belongs to native Germans. AfD constantly uses phrasing of Germans being outnumbered or overwhelmed. Statements such as these use replacement

anxieties of immigration growth, through a massive influx. This influx is knowingly facilitated by the political elite, suggesting a hint of conspiracy. This is exactly the core of the Great Replacement Theory. Germans are being replaced by immigration from a globalist leftist agenda, which is enabling it through policy and inaction. AfD uses this in narrative in a subtle way, without referencing explicit terms like demographic change, or anything that could be interpreted in an overtly negative way. The core of the Replacement theory, however, remains intact, where ethnic influxes of migrations are linked to an existential threat, that is, replacing Germans, enabled by a political elite. AfD has plausible deniability, but keeps the effects of the Great Replacement. Similar to what Ekman (2022) refers to as the strategic mainstreaming of extremist conspiracies. The AfD can repack the Great Replacement, through indirect referencing, into a more acceptable mainstream narrative, by using soft wording and so on (Ekman 2022).

Ahmed and Pisoiu (2021) present a similar idea, where AfD speaks of traditional values or cultural identity, instead of using concepts of race. Blame is ascribed through failed policy, such as open borders, rather than classic supremacist ideas, although the narratives tell a parallel story. Extreme conspiracy narratives are watered down to become a part of public debate, without coming off as extremist. (Ahmed and Pisoiu 2021). AfD social media creates a fear and a sense of urgency and existential threat, allowing them to gain support. When they use the Great Replacement subtly, the narratives become mainstream. It becomes a concern for jobs, healthcare, safety, and culture. Immigration becomes an internal threat. Our study found support for Ekman's arguments on how right-wing populist parties can bridge the gap between right-wing conspiracy theories and make them politically mainstream. AfD, as our study has shown, can normalize radical ideas through careful framing.

While this project arguably offers a depthful and detailed discourse-analysis of both Wilko Möller's political rhetoric and lexical choices vis a vis its alignment with far-right ideologies such as the "Great Replacement" theory in the conducted interview, as well as the official AfD statements through the party's posts on its official Facebook page, the project does have certain limitations to it as well.

One of the most significant limitations lies in the absence of empirical research on how AfD supporters and other audience segments actually receive, interpret, or emotionally respond to the discourse analyzed. While the project applies Fairclough's and Foucault's theoretical frameworks to interpret ideological mechanisms and power structures within the language, it

remains speculative in terms of how these discursive formations are decoded or internalized by real-life receivers, such as AfD voters or undecided citizens exposed to the party's narratives (Rashid, 2023). This limits our ability to assess the real-world effectiveness, persuasive impact, or resistance to such discourses.

Another limitation of the project is something which relates to the methodology of the project- The analysis which is the core of the project, relies primarily on textual and discursive methods. As previously mentioned, while this allows for an in-depth and detailed, nuanced interpretation of lexical choices and rhetorical strategies, it does not incorporate mixed-methods approaches—such as surveys, ethnographic interviews, or digital behavior analytics—Which would arguably have provided a more comprehensive understanding of both production and reception. As such, the analysis remains confined to the production and structural encoding of meaning, rather than its socio-political consequences or uptake (Williams, n.d.).

With regards to the source material, it is also important to look critically at this project as it risks having “bias selection”. For instance, the selected Facebook posts provide a curated sample of AfD discourse and although these materials can be considered “revealing” and very much academically beneficial for the project, it may not represent the full range or diversity of communicative strategies employed by the AfD across regions, platforms, or different party factions through all time as it is simply not possible in a relatively short project to find and include a much broader academic sample through, for instance, facebook (Williams, n.d.). Furthermore, Facebook algorithms may tailor content differently across user groups which means that the posts we analyzed may not with full certainty mirror and completely flawless how facebook users on the AfD site views it or how every prominent or less prominent figure in the AfD party views the statements as such.

Lastly, we have the risk of overinterpretation. As with all discourse analysis, especially when applying frameworks such as Foucault's or Fairclough's, there is a risk of reading ideological intent or coherence into discourse that may not always be consciously or strategically constructed. While our theoretical approach emphasizes the ideological functions of language, it cannot definitively determine authorial intent or the internal strategic discussions within the AfD that shaped these public messages (Williams, n.d.).

## 8. CONCLUSION

This study examined how the German political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) uses the core ideas behind the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. Entman's framing theory and Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis have been used to show how the AfD's rhetoric constructs immigration as a civilizational threat, rather than a policy challenge. The party carefully avoids any overtly conspiratorial language, but their framing of problems echoes and legitimates the core ideas behind the Great Replacement. The theory becomes more palatable and can influence the public mainstream debate. When defining immigration as a systemic threat. Diagnosing immigrants and the political elite as the cause, and suggesting strong policies as remedies, AfD constructs a highly salient narrative of cultural displacement. They are the only defenders of the German nation, taking responsibility. They mobilize are populist us versus them narrative, which appeals to voters on important issues such as economic problems and distrust in institutions.

AfD's framing of immigration as linked to a crisis draws on what Foucault calls the governmentality of fear. This logic justifies extreme political measures by evoking existential danger. When presenting migration as a civilizational issue. AfD positions itself as the sole defender of the national community, which fits with its political position in the German Bundestag. AfD's narratives subtly align with the Great Replacement theory. They create an emotional narrative that appeals to pre-existing fears about economic security, culture, and the welfare of society. Radical ideas are in this way being pushed in a more digestible way and becoming a normal part of mainstream political discourse. This study contributes to the debate on how far-right rhetoric is becoming mainstream through social media and reshaping public debates. Although AfD never outright mentions the Great Replacement, the overall logic remains in place. Portraying immigration as inherently incompatible with Europeans. Creating a narrative where demographic change by moral outsiders through a complicit state, leading to the collapse of society. Entman's Framing theory and Fairclough's CDA serve as powerful tools to break down how language can construct powerful narratives that can legitimize extreme policies.

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