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Radicalising the Mainstream in Western Europe

The Far Right and Narratives of Islam in Contemporary and Historical Perspective

Edited by
Liriam Sponholz
Anna-Maria Meuth
Mirjam Weiberg
Sabrina Zajak
Stefan Berger

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ISBN 978-3-031-85962-5 ISBN 978-3-031-85963-2 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-85963-2

Cover illustration: Pattern © Melisa Hasan

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Contents

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List of Figures

List of Tables

1

Introduction

Anna-Maria Meuth, Liriam Sponholz, Mirjam Weiberg, Sabrina Zajak, and Francina Guggenberger

Abstract This introduction offers a more comprehensive overview of the debate surrounding the radicalisation of the mainstream. The recent electoral success of far-right parties and movements has highlighted the shift of previously marginal ideologies toward the political centre. In a number of European liberal democracies, ideas characterised by antagonism towards minorities, gender and sexual diversity, and immigrants appear to be gaining increasing acceptance as common sense. Islamophobia, in particular, has become a potent unifying force among radical-right actors.

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L. Sponholz et al. (eds.), *Radicalising the Mainstream in Western Europe*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-85963-2_1

The increasing acceptance of such discourses poses a significant challenge to democratic values and necessitates scholarly scrutiny. Whilst a substantial body of research has been conducted which contrasts radical actors with the democratic mainstream, the heterogeneity of the latter—and its role in this process—remains insufficiently explored.

This volume addresses this gap by offering new empirical insights and proposing an agenda to investigate how mainstream institutions, media, and everyday practices absorb, adapt to, or resist far-right ideas. By means of comparative case studies and interdisciplinary approaches, the contributions examine the subtle dynamics that enable exclusionary narratives to enter and transform democratic discourse.

This volume thus invites scholars and policymakers to reconsider the process of radicalisation—not only at the political margins but also in relation to the political and cultural mainstream. Furthermore, it prompts a reflective process concerning the potential for prevention or counteraction of this development.

Keywords Radicalised Mainstream • Western Europe • Far Right • Islam • Anti-Muslim Racism

With the recent rise of the far right in many countries and regions worldwide, a rapidly growing body of research is exploring how the electoral successes of the far right are enabling parties, social movements, agendas, and discourses to move from the fringes to the mainstream (Völker & Saldivia Gonzatti, 2024; Mullis, 2024; Weisskircher, 2024; Quent & Virchow, 2024; Krzyżanowsky et al., 2023, p. 4).

We are witnessing a dangerous "mainstreaming" trend across Europe that involves previously taboo ideas, frames, and practices becoming the new "common sense" on divisive ideas of the contemporary far right regarding minorities, gender and sexual diversity, and immigrants. In particular, incitement against Muslims and the spread of Islamophobia have become significant and unifying factors in various currents and parties of the radical right (Kallis, 2018).

Such mainstreaming has been enabled by the fact that the base of these parties has spread to all social groups (with predominantly male support). As a consequence, far-right ideologies and norms, also carried by

movements, have slowly and steadily moved out of the shadows, becoming increasingly accepted and only little excluded within society (Mudde, 2019). This perspective of the problem—the mainstreaming perspective—has been intensively investigated and focuses on how predominantly far-right actors adapt their narratives, rhetoric, and repertoires of action to move closer to mainstream norms in order to appeal to the majority (Fangen & Nilsen, 2020; Newth et al., 2025).

As a consequence, the normalisation of far-right discourses has become a critical topic demanding scholarly attention (Krzyżanowski et al., 2023; Rothut et al., 2024; Santos, 2024). Normalisation refers to the normative level, to social norms, conventions, and moral values being challenged and subsequently (gradually) changed, frequently resulting in discursive shifts, whereas mainstreaming can be defined as the empirical manifestation (of different kinds) of normalising developments (Wodak, 2020). A process of normalisation requires an adaptation of the party landscape to, in part, the extreme right-wing agendas of right-wing populist parties (Wodak, 2020). Importantly to mention, there are also developments progressing in the opposite direction (ibid.; this book).

In such perspectives, radicalised actors/ideologies and the mainstream are considered opposing poles within the aforementioned concepts. However, while many studies have focused on understanding the processes of mainstreaming and normalisation, the ways in which radicalisation processes emerge and are activated, solidified, and also overcome within the centre of society are not fully understood. This book aims to deepen the discussion and gain new insights into these processes by focusing on the radicalisation of the mainstream.

It is thus worth considering the following thesis: Is it possible that it is not that radicals are arriving in the mainstream, but that the mainstream itself is becoming increasingly radicalised? We want to approach this question by using quantitative and qualitative research to analyse the narrative that proclaims Islam to be radical and the narrative that considers Muslims/migrants to be a threat. In order to discuss and interrogate the contrast between the radical margins and the mainstream, in the following chapters we analyse how narratives about Islam, Muslims, and migrants emerge and how and by whom these narratives are disseminated. We are also interested in how these narratives have developed historically, how they are normalised in the centre of society, and how

extremist attitudes are activated and awakened there. Our aim is to provide insights based on empirical examples from Western European societies.

Talking About Islam: Between Continuities and Changes

The public and academic debate on Islam and Muslims in European societies over the last two decades has been closely linked to the dramatic events of terrorist attacks. On the one hand, this means that changes and caesuras in narratives can be traced over time, and on the other hand, terrorist attacks take place within certain social conditions and political settings and activate deeply rooted prejudices and racism in these particular constellations, revealing continuities. In 2001, after decades of terrorist action in Muslim countries (Reynié, 2021, p. 7), religiously motivated terrorism reached the Global North. The discourse in the Western mainstream after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001—especially among leading politicians and the media—first adopted the narrative of "Western and the Rest", along with the assertion of the superiority of the "West" (see, for instance, Hooper & Connelly, 2001). The emerging narrative not only led to a construction of "us" versus "them", but also to a devaluation of the "other" (Islam) and the proclaimed need to defend one's own belief system and culture (Western Judeo-Christian culture) (cf. Haynes, 2021). This was mirrored and constructed in media discourse (Norris et al., 2004). The terrorist attacks in New York in 2001 were followed by severe attacks in Madrid in 2004, London in 2005, Paris in 2015, Brussels in 2016, and Vienna in 2020, which brought this type of terrorism further into the focus of public and academic interest in Europe and the transatlantic region. In addition, the global networks and influence of terrorist Islamic groups changed and new geopolitical wars and conflicts emerged (e.g., in Syria and various North African states, not least in some societies in the aftermath of former "Western" interventions). In a globalised and interconnected world, the consequences of these conflicts were not territorially limited but also

influenced the international order and distant countries. In 2015 in particular, the conflicts in the Middle East became visible through the influx of refugees into European countries. Issues of migration and integration became a major topic in political and public debates. At the same time, European democracies were confronted with multiple crises, such as the loss of trust in democracy, the partial renunciation of the European Union, climate change, and uncontrollable financial markets. Within individual countries and the European Union, new measures to combat terrorism were again introduced and asylum laws were tightened. With regard to Islam, this solidified the narrative of "radical Islam" (Hoewe & Bowe, 2021).

With this narrative "shift", a new (old) personage entered the spotlight, the Muslim migrant. The critical discussions about the balance of security and freedom in the course of new restrictive laws and measures against terrorism were supplemented all the more emphatically by the criticism targeting foreigners and religious and ethnic minorities (Saiya & Manchanda, 2020). This multi-layered complex development (re-)activated and reinforced anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia, since these attitudes were actively or passively adopted in larger sections of the population (Decker et al., 2022; Zick et al., 2023; Foroutan et al., 2022). Rising numbers of hate crimes against Muslims in Western Europe were noted (Tell Mama, 2017; King & Sutton, 2013; Hanes & Machin, 2014). In the sense of the deep roots of anti-Muslim racism in European societies, there was not a profound change, but rather an activation and actualisation of already existing prejudices and narratives that have existed for a long time (Shooman, 2014). The rise of various far-right currents and their mobilisation against Islam and Muslim immigration falls into this setting, and the terrorist attacks were also instrumentalised to spread fear of Islam. Research shows that voter support for far-right parties has been backed by anti-immigration and anti-Islam mobilisation and vote-seeking strategies (Haynes, 2020). Even this brief outline of the complex dynamics makes it clear that anti-Muslim narratives are also deeply rooted and disseminated in the social and political mainstream and an exclusive analysis of far-right mobilisation would remain too narrow to explain the societal shift to the right.

Conceptualising the Radicalised Mainstream

As Hafez and Mullins (2015) define it, the term radicalisation refers to a gradual process of entering into an increasingly extreme belief system. Radicalisation does not necessarily unleash physical violence or even terrorism (Borum, 2011). Other outcomes of this process may include discriminatory laws and politics of surveillance. A "radicalised mainstream" refers to the outcome of a process in which the mainstream turns more extreme in its system of beliefs. Findings from the German National Racism Monitor (Foroutan et al., 2022) suggest, among outcomes of other studies, that attitudes like racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia are deeply rooted within society and are held not only by radical far-right actors—a phenomenon that has been observed in many countries around the globe.

From that perspective, following the rationale of Brown et al. (2023) the mainstream is neither neutral, passive, nor static. As they point out, the mainstream is not a neutral "centre" but is constructed, contingent, and fluid. In this sense, the mainstream is not inherently good, rational, or moderate, but rather a normative, hegemonic concept that imbues a particular ideological configuration or system. In addition, who and what is the mainstream itself becomes an increasingly contested topic (Wodak, 2024; Zick et al., 2023).

While it is important to look into the different dimensions of the far-right normalisation process as explained above, we suggest that future research should shift the focus, theorising and empirically exploring the radicalisation of the mainstream. This would imply a fundamental shift in perspective of radicalisation research, moving from looking at extremist fringes and social groups, which by definition are at those extremes, towards looking into the continuous dynamics between normalisation and de-normalisation in the middle.

Nevertheless, recognising the mainstream as a dynamic construct is only the beginning of a discussion about a radicalised mainstream. The effects of certain social and historical events have to be taken into account, for example political, economic, and religious events. Such events activate the already existing racism, Islamophobia, antisemitism,

nationalism, and other ideologies of inequality, as well as the emergence of anti-democratic discourse and practices, awakening them from a latent state in the body of social knowledge (cf. Heitmeyer, 2024; Sponholz, 2018; Krzyżanowskik et al., 2023).

The so-called mainstream should be considered as a very heterogeneous agent. Different agents in various areas of society are accommodating, aligning, justifying, and normalising far-right actors, actions, and attitudes under very different circumstances and for various reasons. Moreover, the processes of polarisation and struggles over democratic hegemony need to be traced and made visible.

In this context, we want to emphasise that the normalisation of radical ideologies not only leads to the radicalisation of single actors and the often understood extremist fringes of society. We also seek to demonstrate empirically that the mainstream as such becomes radical—and the radical becomes the new normal. When things are recognised, named, created, and fought for, there are also underlying processes of definition and processes of becoming visible. The term "radicalised mainstream" is intended to reveal the radical roots of these ideological shifts and point towards the dangers of this process for democracy. This implies a fundamental shift in perspective of radicalisation research, moving from looking at extremist fringes and social groups defined as at those fringes, towards looking into the continuous dynamics between the normalisation and de-normalisation in the middle.

About This Book

By connecting theoretical conceptions and current empirical dynamics between far right and their embeddedness in societies, this book tries to approach the phenomena of the mainstreaming of radicalisation and its converse.

As **Radicalising the Mainstream in Western Europe** demonstrates, actors who resort to narratives surrounding Islam stem as much from the mainstream as the fringe, both of which activate, update, and re-create antinomies in tandem, mobilising social actors in both traditional and social media. The various essays in this volume explore mechanisms, such

as historical othering, media agenda building, and online mobilisation of the far right (hereafter, online far right), to propose that the effects of such mechanisms are far from purely symbolic. Local actors from city councils and civil society who describe the challenging impacts of this othering process underscore the damaging repercussions. This volume offers a mixed-method approach to analysing anti-Muslim narratives in interactions between the far right and the mainstream by combining historical, media content, and social media network analyses with qualitative surveys. By critically naming and empirically demonstrating media distortions of discourse, the impact on those affected, and the effects on politics and democracy, as well as complex historical lines of development, the book ties in with current practical debates on the development of counterstrategies and prevention of extremist phenomena.

The chapter by **Ruth Wodak** presents the normalisation hypothesis. Wodak argues that, as evidenced by far-right or right-wing populist parties (RPPs) winning elections and leading in opinion polls across Europe and beyond, the political spectrum is drifting to the right. This trend is accompanied by significant discursive shifts, which are facilitated by the support of conservative mainstream parties and the manipulative use of (social) media. As Wodak argues, discursive shifts are often accompanied by processes of normalisation, mainstreaming, and democratic backsliding. Presenting interdisciplinary explanatory approaches for the rise of the far right—Manichaean division and polarisation; the instrumentalisation of crises; the politics of emotions; and media strategies—Wodak states that the far-right populist programme and its related rhetoric are gradually and increasingly infiltrating the political mainstream. A process of normalisation has taken place, reshaping the boundaries of political discourse and norms.

Stefano Allievi critically explores narratives on Islam within the European public space. Allievi draws on the increasing presence of migration and mobility in the European social landscape to assess both quantitative and qualitative changes that influence various social and cultural dynamics. As argued in the chapter, internal ongoing processes of pluralisation challenge the perception of the nation-state as a coherent and homogenous identity, as well as reductionist approaches that fail to acknowledge the complexity of cultural and religious diversity. Conflicts

over Islamic symbols in the public space, as Allievi argues, are symptomatic of broader issues surrounding perceptions of Islam. To address these conflicts, Allievi emphasises the importance of moving beyond reductionist and essentialist approaches.

Emanuele Toscano explains the spread of the Italian radical right as the result of a long-term process in which political, cultural, and social causes play a role. Toscano first explains the origins of the electoral success of the radical right during the recent general election in 2022 in Italy. Tracing it back to governments led by Silvio Berlusconi, Toscano explains the emergence of a process of radicalisation of the mainstream that continues to this day. In the second part, the author argues that discursive aspects play a crucial role in the normalisation of extreme-right positions and discourses opposing migration processes. These aspects have led to a progressive (rather than abruptly) radicalisation of the mainstream and resulted in current policies.

Max Brunner provides a critical investigation of various concepts of collective identity in Europe from a history-of-ideas perspective. The chapter explores how these concepts influence contemporary far-right identity politics in Europe. Brunner argues that the ideologies of Civilisationism and Ethnonationalism, as presented in the works of Oswald Sprengler and Carl Schmitt—two representatives of Ethnonationalist Decisionism in the Weimar Republic—form the foundation for a collective European identity in opposing ways. The examined ideological traditions are foundational for the ways in which the modern far right perceives the relationship between "us", the West, and a collective other, namely Islam.

Damla Keşkekci and Liriam Sponholz analyse the purposes behind far-right actors' use of digital platforms to share hyperlinks. The researchers analysed more than 120,000 posts published on 100 Facebook pages of far-right actors and came to the conclusion that hyperlinks on Facebook are mainly used to maintain the far-right network online. The authors also observed a high rate of links shared from traditional media outlets instead of alternative media sources and their fringe content. This enables such actors to present themselves as "normal", performing what the authors called "platformed mainstreaming".

Anna-Maria Meuth investigates processes of racialisation and ethnicisation in municipal spaces and sub-national politics and governance arrangements in Germany and England. Employing a descriptive and explorative approach, the qualitative research aims to reconstruct the specific patterns and mechanisms of normalisation in urban regions while explicitly considering the connection with (radicalised) mainstream and everyday/institutional racism. The empirical results reveal specific mechanisms of normalisation that are shaped by the opportunity structures of domestic sub-national politics, alongside approaches to denormalisation. Meuth's study offers meaningful insights into highly normalised urban spaces and the significance of everyday racism for the latter.

Liriam Sponholz, Anna-Maria Meuth, and Sabrina Zajak trace back the radicalisation of the mainstream through the media discourse. Using a mixed-method design, the authors analyse how the media agenda on Islam and Muslims was constructed in the press coverage from 2000 to 2020 in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. After analysing more than 260,000 articles in the leading quality press in these countries, the results show that not all, but only a few Islamist terror attacks trigger media attention and media storms on the topic of Islam. Such attention tends to homogenise the definition of Muslims as a problem. As Sponholz, Meuth, and Zajak show, the main triggers for defining Islam and Muslims as a problem are media actors and the experts who take the floor in media coverage. It is the media itself that problematises Muslims and Islam, the authors argue, thus driving the radicalisation of the mainstream.

Synopsis and Towards an Open Research Heuristic

On the basis of our research findings, we would like to outline dimensions for a research programme/open heuristic. This process entails:

(a) **A Cultural-Political Dimension**

This axis highlights the many context-dependent socio-political, economic, cultural, and historical factors that lead to a radicalisation of the

mainstream and to normalisation (Wodak, in this book; cf. also Krzyżanowski et al., 2021; Wodak & Rheindorf, 2022). In order to understand the process of radicalisation of the mainstream, relying solely on an analysis of electoral flows is not enough. As Mondon and Winter (2019, 2020) remind us, limiting the focus to the aspects relating to the electoral dimension of the radicalised mainstream process runs the risk of returning a distorted interpretation of this phenomenon. The cultural-political dimension also involves the conflict over values, as in the case of identity conflicts. Such conflicts have led to a rediscovery of Christian roots or badly defined European cultural roots in politics and in intellectual debates, by writers from Oriana Fallaci to Thilo Sarrazin (cf. Sponholz, 2016, 2018), political leaders from Geert Wilders to Eric Zemmour, or entire parties, from the Italian Lega to the German AfD (Allievi, in this book).

(b) **A Historical-Ideological Dimension**

This axis critically investigates the ideological underpinnings of far-right ideology over time (Miller-Idriss, 2022), such as narrative shifts on identity politics (Backes & Moreau, 2021; Brubaker, 2017) or its appeal to workers (Berger, 2022). Particularly interesting in this context is the narrative shift towards a civilisationist approach, which counterposes "the West" and Islam, replacing the antinomy between the West and the socialist East (cf. Attia, 2016, p. 175; Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2007, p. 34). At the same time, Islam, and more specifically Islamism, can be viewed as a potential ally in a common struggle against the more fundamental threat associated with universalism and the West (Brunner in this book; cf. also Weiss, 2018, pp. 211–227). Brunner's analysis in this volume reveals major ideological continuities of different ideological frames rather than pinning ideology down to a specific type of group or actor. The tracing of radical roots in mainstream society shows that different ideologies find connection in different ways within mainstream society. However, in this dimension, it is also important to note that different far-right ideologies and currents of thought emerge and are transmitted and activated independently over time. Even the extreme/far right is not a homogeneous actor (Mudde, 2019).

Another stream within the historical-ideological dimension focuses on how history has been appropriated, transformed, and instrumentalised by far-right actors according to their own interpretations and goals (Berger, 2024).

(c) **A Socio-Political Dimension**

This axis addresses the political actors behind the radicalisation of the mainstream, such as parties and politicians at different levels of government, but also civil society. Charismatic and mainstream politicians in the government, such as for instance Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, have played a pivotal role, enabling a post-fascist right that has become normalised (Toscano in this book). Also members of civil society and local councillors play a crucial role in the everyday practice of democracy and encounters in the urban space (Lefebvre, 2014/1991). In this context, shifting the focus to the local encounters, perceptions, and interactions of citizens in negotiating and countering far-right movements sheds light on the important role of "everyday racism" in these processes (Meuth in this book; cf. also Friese et al., 2019). Such insight also has the potential to aid the development of tools to de-normalise far right ideologies.

(d) **A Media Dimension**

Literature along this axis investigates the role of traditional and digital media in shaping public discourse. This role, however, has often consisted of reproducing or amplifying (quasi passively) far-right narratives. Traditional media has itself been an actor of the radicalised mainstream, as has been illustrated by, for example, the role of talk shows in promoting an anti-immigration agenda and in popularising far-right actors (Kieslich & Marcinkowski, 2020), as well as by the media coverage of events such as terror attacks (Sponholz, Meuth, and Zajak in this book). However, not only narratives, but first and foremost the media logic (which overlaps with right-wing populist logic, cf. Krämer, 2014) has contributed to the mainstreaming of radical ideologies. Social media logic (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013) not only lowers the threshold of media ethics and the costs of media production, but also enables fringe actors to

trigger interactions through new patterns of communication. Thus, far-right actors may utilise the manifold affordances of digital platforms, such hashtags and hyperlinks (cf. Keşkekci and Sponholz in this book) in order to present themselves as "normal" (for an overview, cf. Sponholz, 2021).

(e) **A Dimension of Attitude**

In this axis, the shifting of attitudes, de-tabooisation, and the identification of indicators for this, especially in long-term surveys, provide insight into the changes of society that reflect social attitudes and can thus map radicalisation processes beyond the fringes (cf. for instance, Zick et al., 2023; Pickel, 2023; Decker & Brähler, 2020). This axis can also integrate the perspectives of persons affected by racism and discrimination, both in quantitative and in qualitative research (Foroutan et al., 2022) over time.

Funding and Acknowledgements

This book displays the outcome of the research project "From the Margins to the Mainstream: Right-wing Populist Interpretations of (Radical) Islam as a Societal Challenge in Europe and Beyond", abbreviated as RaMi. The RaMi project commenced in 2021 and was funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. This project was a collaborative effort involving scientists from various fields in social sciences and humanities and included three institutions: the German Centre for Integration and Migration Research in Berlin, the University of Münster, and the University of Bochum.

We are very grateful to Dietmar Loch (University of Lille), Kristian Berg Harpviken (Peace Research Institute Oslo), Luca Ozzano (University of Turin), Mathias Quent (University of Applied Sciences Magdeburg-Stendal), Ebtisam Ramadan (DeZIM-Institut), Ruth Wodak (Lancaster University and Vienna University), and Yasemin Shooman (German Chancellery), members of the scientific advisory board of the RaMi

project who supported our team over the years with a high level of expertise and international perspectives.

We would also like to thank our colleagues from the transfer project RADIS (Research on Radical Islam in Germany and Europe), to which the RaMi project belongs, and our institutions for the exchange on research, our project management organisation, and the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research for their support and supervision, as well as the numerous international colleagues for their helpful comments and debates at our conferences and presentations. Last but not least, this work would not have been possible without the support of our student assistants Hannah Busemann, Imani Faber, Francina Guggenberger, Teresa Hessing, Rossella Merullo, Linnea Müller, Nastia Nedjai, Felicitas Pfuhl, Katharina Reuther, Lena Scharrenbroich, and Christoph Windmüller.

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2

Normalising, Mainstreaming, and Democratic Backsliding: Discursive Shifts to the Populist Far Right

Ruth Wodak

Abstract Many context-dependent socio-political, economic, cultural, and historical factors, apart from the performance of allegedly charismatic leaders, lead to the rise of the populist far right, supported by conservative mainstream parties and the manipulative use of (social) media. Formerly taboo subjects and expressions in mainstream discourse are becoming increasingly accepted (*normalisation*) and have become part and parcel of mainstream politics and the culturalisation of exclusion. This chapter introduces and elaborates some of the main factors leading to discursive shifts to, and the normalisation of, the far right, after providing important definitions of some salient concepts, such as far-right populism, normalisation and mainstreaming, and democratic backsliding.

Moreover, I claim that such normalisation goes hand in hand with a certain *shamelessness*: the limits of the sayable are shifting with regard to both the frequency of lies and the violation of rules for discourse and

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L. Sponholz et al. (eds.), *Radicalising the Mainstream in Western Europe*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-85963-2_2

politeness conventions—as well as with regard to repeated attacks on salient democratic institutions, for example freedom of the press, judicial independence, and so forth. Discursive strategies of provocation, blame avoidance, denial, Manichaean division, victim-perpetrator reversal, as well as eristic argumentation and conspiracy theories dominate official communication, accompanied by ever more nativist nationalism and the racialisation of space.

Keywords Populism • Far right • Normalisation • Discursive shifts • Mainstreaming

The Context-Dependency of the Rise of the Far Right

> A political theory of populism has to focus on populism in power, on the way populism interprets, uses and changes representative democracy, its main target in contemporary experience. Nadia Urbinati (2019, p. 113)

The rise of far-right populism has recently led to a surfeit of gloomy predictions in the public sphere. Far-right or right-wing populist parties (hereafter RPPs) are winning elections across—and beyond—Europe and are leading in opinion polls in many countries. In this way, the political spectrum is drifting to the right, accompanied by significant discursive shifts. The agenda, arguments, slogans, rhetoric, and performances (meaning written, spoken, and visual texts on specific issues) propagated by RPPs (Wodak, 2021)[1] are becoming increasingly acceptable and are being adopted by (predominantly conservative) mainstream parties. Such discursive shifts go hand in hand with processes of *normalisation*, *mainstreaming*, and *democratic backsliding*. Several preconditions are responsible for the success of these changes. These include, among other things: crisis-ridden socioeconomic developments on both global and local levels; ethnonational (*völkisch*) and nativist ideologies and narratives

[1] In this chapter, I draw on much previous research, summarised in this book, as well as on Wodak (2023, pp. 31–35).

propagated by RPPs; the strategic mediatisation of politics; and, not least, support for RPPs by conservative parties, who thereby hope to stave off their potential loss of power.

As a result, many politicians both on the EU and the national level, as well as prominent individuals in public life, are warning that Europe (and the world as a whole) is drifting towards increasing (ethno-) nationalism, illiberal democracy, and authoritarianism (Imwinkelried, 2022; Kahlweit, 2023). These warnings are justified, for the developments in question entail, among other things, systematic infractions against, and violations of, human rights, international treaties, and the values and norms upheld by the European Union and/or United Nations (Grabbe & Lehne, 2019). Lies, demagogic rabble-rousing, conspiracy narratives, insults, and defamations may engender outrage, yet they mostly entail no legal consequences and are usually forgotten within a matter of days, due to the current media logic (Pörksen, 2018). It seems as though the public has become accustomed to daily provocations and scandals. A process of normalisation has taken place.

Until now, the two EU member states most frequently cited as examples of these developments are Viktor Orbán's Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyński's Poland (however, see below; Wodak, 2021, pp. 225–226). The EU is hesitant in its official reactions, which follow long-winded, bureaucratic, and institutionally regulated processes (Kelemen, 2017). Currently, the AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) in Germany has achieved higher poll ratings in some places than the governing coalition (DAWUM, 2024), while the extreme-right Austrian FPÖ (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreich*) has held the lead position in all opinion polls in Austria since September 2022 (Statista, 2024). In Sweden, a conservative coalition is governing with the support of the ethnonationalist Sweden Democrats, while in France, Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* poses a threat to Emmanuel Macron's government (Holzer, 2023). Giorgia Meloni, the head of the post-fascist *Fratelli d'Italia*, won the election in Italy in 2022, replacing the government of centrist Mario Draghi, while in the United Kingdom, the Tories adopted the entire agenda of the right-wing populist UKIP in their government programme, particularly its human rights-contravening migration and asylum policies—see, for example, the slogan "Stop the boats" and the decision to deport refugees to Rwanda, despite

the dire human rights situation reigning there (cf. The Brudge Group, 2013). On top of all this, important socio-political and economic initiatives are currently being threatened in the United States by the possibility of Donald Trump's re-election.

Yet there are also developments going in the other direction: on Sunday, 15 October 2023, the far-right governing party PiS in Poland was voted out by a liberal-left-wing coalition of three opposition parties (Matthijs, 2023). Although the formation of a new government will certainly take time in Poland, the trajectory towards an illiberal democracy has been halted and freedom of press and independence of the judiciary will be reinstalled and guaranteed, amongst other important agendas. In Spain—despite predictions to the contrary—the right-wing radical party Vox lost an enormous number of votes in the parliamentary elections in 2023 (Ladurner, 2023). In Israel, hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated every week for a period of forty weeks against the planned evisceration of the state of law by an extreme-right government under Benjamin Netanyahu (Dake, 2023). The opposition to the Israeli government ceased in the aftermath of the terrible terrorist attack, a veritable pogrom, by Hamas on Israeli territory on 7 October 2023, leading to escalation and war in the Middle East, with an unpredictable outcome. In Brazil, the left-oriented politician Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva won the last election, defeating the far-right extremist Jair Bolsonaro (Spiegel online, 2022) Denmark, Luxembourg, Portugal, Germany, Ireland, Belgium, and Norway have governing coalitions consisting of various constellations of social democrats, liberals, and green parties.

To be sure, this—necessarily brief—stocktaking does not evince a general and exclusive discursive shift of the political spectrum "towards the right", but rather a huge polarisation; a struggle over hegemony—directed both towards the future and the past—in which the mediatisation of politics and politicisation of media play a decisive role. Both traditional media and social media platforms have a salient impact on determining the content of and disseminating right-wing populist agenda and arguments, thus propelling the *perpetuum mobile* of far-right populism (Wodak, 2021, pp. 25–26). Ever new provocations and scandals are readily sold as headlines and thus contribute to the marginalisation of other

important information and news. The mutual dependence of RPPs and the media ultimately functions as an "ideological partnership" (e.g., Mazzoleni, 2014).

Defining Far-Right Populism

Before discussing the rise of RPPs and possible counter-discourses in more detail, it is necessary to provide a brief definition of the most important dimensions of the former's ideological agendas (Wodak, 2021, pp. 34–35):

(a) **Nationalism, Nativist Nationalism, or Anti-pluralism**

Far-right populist parties identify a seemingly homogenous ethnos, a *populum* (community, or *Volk*), which is arbitrarily defined, often in nativist (blood-related) terms. Such parties value the homeland, or *Heimat* (or heartland, if an internal distinction within the nation is made), which requires protection from dangerous interlopers.

(b) **Anti-elitism**

Such parties share an anti-intellectual attitude—an *arrogance of ignorance*—which in Europe is associated with strong EU-scepticism and in other contexts often opposes international organisations and treaties. According to these parties, democracy should essentially be reduced to the majoritarian principle within the nation, meaning the rule of an (arbitrarily defined) people. In this ideological imaginary there is no need for experts, who—allegedly—merely confuse the issues.

(c) **Authoritarianism and Hierarchical Leadership**

A saviour is elevated and worshipped, alternating between the roles of Robin Hood (protecting the welfare state, taking back from the rich to give to the poor) and "strict father", the repository of paternalistic values. Such seemingly charismatic (and media-savvy) leaders require a

hierarchically structured party and authoritarian structures to guarantee what they see as law, order and security.

(d) **Historical Mythologising, Welfare Chauvinism**

Far-right populist parties represent traditional, conservative values (e.g., traditional gender roles and family values) and insist on preserving the status quo or promise a return to the good old days. The aim of protecting the homeland also builds upon a shared narrative of the past, in which "we" are cast either as heroes or as victims of some evil. Social care, in the resulting welfare chauvinism, should only be extended to so-called true members of the (ethnic) community.

"Bad manners" also play a big role, as do deliberate impoliteness, lies, insults, destructive (eristic) argumentation, and intentional breaches of taboos. Norms of political correctness are not merely violated without apology, but explicitly challenged as restrictions on free speech. The breaching of norms captures the ability to convey messages by opening space for "calculated ambivalence" (Engel & Wodak, 2013). The latter is defined as a phenomenon whereby one utterance carries at least two more-or-less contradictory meanings, oriented towards at least two different audiences. This not only increases the scope of the audience, but also enables the speaker or writer to deny any responsibility: "it wasn't meant that way". Finally, the power of discourse creates regimes of quasi "normality".

Some Interdisciplinary Explanatory Approaches for the Rise of the Far Right

Manichaean Division and Polarisation

All RPPs typically employ nativist us/them binaries alongside anti-Muslim, antisemitic, anti-ziganist, and/or homophobic stereotypes, depending on the respective socio-political and historical context. Such stereotypes promote ostracism. The German sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer listed three relevant functions of such Manichaean discourses:

the occupation and colonisation of problematic and unresolved issues (frequently based on disinformation and defamation), the expansion of the limits of what is sayable, and the creation/implementation of a new discursive normality. These processes, which are often supported by conservative actors, potentially lead to an *authoritarian national radicalism*. According to Heitmeyer, this entails the following levels/stages of escalation: the process begins with *provocation gains* in the media, proceeds with *spatial gains* in public spaces alongside *displacement gains* (for example through assaults on refugee accommodations), and ends with *normalisation gains* that eviscerate democratic culture (e.g., Heitmeyer, 2018).

This phenomenon often draws on an ethnonational concept of peoplehood, the fiction of a "homogenous people": "We, the real German, Austrians, …" against "the others". "We" are imagined as good, honest, and victimised; the "others" are liars, cheats, and perpetrators. People who cannot be assigned to either of these two groups go unmentioned and remain invisible; the discourse solidifies a simple Manichaean pattern. Nevertheless, the group of "others" is usually divided into three sub-groups, each of which threatens the "we": "those up there" (the fictional elite), "those out there" (the "strangers"), and "those down there" (the "freeloaders" or even "parasites", namely the homeless, long-term unemployed, and beggars; see Wodak, 2021, p. 9).

Moreover, the fundamental opposition of the "we" and the "others" always implies a campaign "against us"—with such conspiratorial imaginaries and conspiracy narratives not infrequently resorting to traditional antisemitic patterns.[2] Such an understanding of peoplehood, as expressed for example in the—infamously successful—slogan of "Fortress Austria" (*Festung Österreich*) propagated by the FPÖ,[3] excludes the majority of the population on principle while at the same time alluding to a—frequently revisionist—"blood and soil ideology". Alice Weidel, the current deputy head of the AfD parliamentary group and deputy federal spokesperson of her party, already maintained in 2013 that "the enemies of the constitution ~~[who]~~ are governing us. These pigs are nothing more than puppets of the victorious powers of the Second World War and have been charged

[2] For example, in the case of "anti-Sorosism" (see Wodak, 2021, pp. 139–142).

[3] See www.festung-oesterreich.at.

with keeping the German people down, an aim they achieve by inducing molecular civil wars in metropolitan areas through mass invasion (*Überfremdung*)".[4]

Crises and the Far Right

Right-wing populist actors additionally instrumentalise crises to legitimise their demands for an increasingly strict and restrictive law-and-order politics. As the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde stated: "Far-right groups are therefore obsessed with security (…). Almost every political issue is perceived through the lens of a 'threat to the natural order'" (Mudde, 2019, p. 33). This does not mean that they always trigger crises out of the blue; rather, they latch on to specific contexts and discursively construct dangerous and dystopian scenarios. Together, a "politics of fear", coupled with a rhetoric of exclusion, have become the defining components of a discourse about strangers both within and outside of the nativist "body politic" (*Volkskörper*) and/or the nation-state (Wodak, 2021, pp. 67–68). RPPs present themselves as "saviours of the occident", defending the common man and woman against "those up there" as well as against "the others". They appear to offer simple, clear answers to all the fears and problems addressed, specifically through the construction of scapegoats, "the others" who are ostensibly to blame for "our" current suffering. The construction of scapegoats often draws on, refers to, and instrumentalises traditional antisemitic, anti-Muslim, xenophobic, misogynist, and homophobic stereotypes.

In this context, the rise and success of RPPs can certainly also be explained as uniting the so-called *modernisation losers*, the people who are "left behind" (Betz, 2017). In this context, Burgoon et al. (2019, pp. 52–55) observe the salient role of "*positional deprivation*". We define positional deprivation as a situation where the increase in disposable income of an individual is smaller relative to the growth in income of other groups in the same income distribution of a given country. Such

[4] Sven-Felix Kellerhoff/Martin Lutz/Uwe Müller, "Diese Schweine sind nichts anderes als Marionetten der Siegermächte", 9.9.2017, www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/plus168480470; cited in Heitmeyer (2018, p. 266).

positional deprivation may foster feelings of unjust misfortune, resentments that in turn get channelled towards blaming mainstream political institutions and parties. As a result, positional deprivation can be expected to spur a retreat from mainstream politics and an embrace of anti-elite radical parties and party programmes. Old cleavages prove to be increasingly obsolete, and values are perceived as more important than social class and traditional class struggles.

The "refugee crisis" in Europe in 2015/16 is a pertinent example of such a crisis being "colonised" by nativist politics. Xenophobia and an associated moral panic were stoked to a massive degree in many countries during this period, not least of all by RPPs. This often led to specific practices of exclusion, for example in discussions about social contributions for "new arrivals", who were constantly described as "illegal (illegitimate) migrants (profiteers)" in the media, a discourse that—from the outset—served and continues to serve to criminalise all migrants and refugees. Aside from the normalisation of RPPs and their agenda, this also resulted in a political and institutional mainstreaming of the far right. These processes lead not only to a change in norms, but also to far-right populist actors collaborating with actors from the political centre, as the latter now propagate comparable agendas. This sort of amalgamation has been demonstrated empirically through a detailed, in-depth qualitative and quantitative discourse analysis of the Brexit campaign of 2016 (Brown, 2022).

Qualitative discourse analyses of the normalisation of racism in various Central and Eastern European countries has moreover allowed a reconstruction of the various stages through which governments strategically disseminate anti-Muslim and xenophobic sentiments, in the Polish case specifically through the example of the then governing PiS party in Poland since the end of 2015 (Krzyżanowski, 2020). This case involved the mobilisation of collective memories relating to virulent traditional antisemitism. The Polish discourse analyst Michał Krzyżanowski identified three different stages in the acceptance and normalisation of racism in Poland, in a teleological direction: the first is "enactment", through which a "discursive shift" penetrates the public sphere; the second is "gradation", which is characterised by the perpetuation of existing discourses while at the same time integrating new elements; and the third is

"normalisation", at which point norms have in fact changed (ibid., pp. 512–522).

Other quantitative and qualitative in-depth studies have succeeded in tracing such normalising and recontextualising, multi-level processes of discursive and political change in even more systematic detail, by examining day-to-day media reporting and manifold other genres (such as speeches, parliamentary debates, posters, and laws) in a specific period that was clearly externally defined by politically salient events. For example, Markus Rheindorf and Ruth Wodak (2018) analysed debates about salient concepts that metonymically condensed significantly different ideological positions towards integration, migration, asylum, and so forth, in vehement and antagonistic political struggles in the Austrian context of 2015/16. In this way, we were able, for example, to illustrate how the term *Integrationsunwilligkeit* ("unwillingness to integrate") came to dominate Austrian political and media discourse in 2015 and how the so-called refugee crisis was subject to increasing securitisation and economisation.

Tracing the trajectory of this term, we combined qualitative and quantitative linguistic methods to show its frequency, collocations, contextualisation, and instrumentalisation in legitimising ever-stricter policies. Indeed, this term, which was previously only employed by the FPÖ, has now been established as a fixture in the Austrian media and, by implication, public discourse, and marks a notable shift in the political discourse on integration, by providing an example of the culturalisation of discourse on integration, now recontextualised as assimilation. Figure 2.1 illustrates our cross-sectional approach, providing the advantage of revealing the intertextual links between party politics and other discursive fields, sometimes evident and sometimes coded. Normalisation processes encompass the incorporation of fringe ideologies into the mainstream—not only of politics but of popular culture and other fields as well—through recontextualisations and resemiotisations, usually moving from backstage to frontstage, and across fields as well as genres (Rheindorf & Wodak, 2019, p. 307).

Thus, normalisation refers to the normative level, to social norms, conventions and moral values being challenged and subsequently (slowly) changed, frequently resulting in discursive shifts, whereas mainstreaming

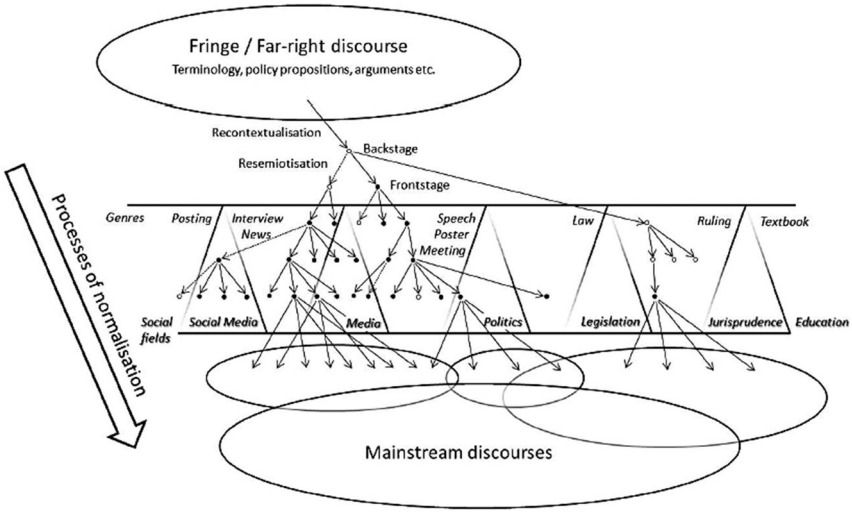

Fig. 2.1 The normalisation of far-right/extreme-right ideologemes (adapted from Rheindorf & Wodak, 2019, p. 6)

could be defined as the empirical manifestations (of different kinds) of normalised developments.

Resentment and the Politics of Emotions

RPPs intentionally instrumentalise and evoke a range of emotions, such as anxiety, fear, resentment, anger and rage, and nostalgia. "The history of radical tight-wing populism", the Swiss political scientist Hans-Georg Betz (2017, pp. 340f) claims, "is a history of hysteria, hyperbole, and conspiracy narratives"; books, manifestoes, pamphlets, and brochures could fill entire university libraries. For many people, the future is negatively defined, the optimism which had reigned in the 1960s and 1970s has long disappeared. Insecurity and uncertainty as well as the many crises (such as the financial crisis of 2008, refugee movement of 2015, the continuing climate crisis, and so forth) are instrumentalised by far-right politicians and have led to the rise of such parties even in countries which had seemed immune to date (such as Germany and Spain). A paradoxical

mix of xenophobic and neoliberal agendas serves to attract mostly male middle-class and working-class voters, young and old.

The attractiveness of such parties seems to depend on two factors (Betz, 2017): on the one hand, they are capable of mobilising resentment and protest; and on the other, they promise some kind of radical change, which would solve the problems posed by the economic, social, and cultural transformation of the advanced Western societies and economies. The concrete policies of radical change, however, are rarely specified or consist in vague promises of returning to a previous status quo ("*retrotopia*"; see Bauman, 2017). In this way *resentment is doubly mobilised*: firstly, addressed to the so-called modernisation losers while instrumentalising xenophobic beliefs against migrants and refugees; secondly, addressed to those protesting against parties that monopolise political power and allegedly suppress true democracy, thus appealing to the anger and malaise towards politics and political parties in general and to the growing crisis of political representation and—as already noted above—to the failure of left-wing parties to represent the modernisation losers more specifically (Burgoon et al., 2019).

US psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2003, p. 853) defines moral emotions as "those emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent". Such emotions frequently mobilise bad manners (i.e., impoliteness), as systematically investigated by Culpeper (2011). For example, anger is defined as "not just a response to insult, in which case it would be just a guardian of self-esteem. Anger is a response to unjustified insults, and anger can be triggered on behalf one's friends as well as oneself" (Haidt, 2003, p. 856). It is not by coincidence that the so-called *Wutbürger* (angry/enraged citizens) are angry; they feel unjustly treated by the elites, and consequently, might support the far right. In contrast, shame and embarrassment might lead to low self-esteem, to a "recognition gap". Recognition gaps are defined "as disparities in worth and cultural membership between groups in a society. These gaps can be closed through the social process of destigmatization" (Lamont, 2018, p. 422).

In this context the US sociologist Michèle Lamont (2018, pp. 434–435) proposes a detailed research programme to "gain a better understanding of the factors that foster solidarity … and that would help bridge the

ideological 'silos' (or 'bubbles') that have come to define the US public sphere". She emphasises the necessity of investigating what brings people together, which she calls "ordinary cosmopolitanism", that could combat anti-immigrant and anti-poor rhetoric. Such a counter-discourse would be able to bridge the existing and painful recognition gap quite a different way than that suggested, for example, by Donald Trump's shameless demagogy. Obviously, such a counter-discourse would also be needed outside of the United States, indeed globally.

Media Strategies

The media strategy of RPPs draws from traditional forms of propaganda and acts as a *catalyst*, as an instrument of mobilisation, distraction, and finally of normalisation. Once in power, RPPs quickly try to implement new laws to prevent the work of critical and investigative journalists or try to shut down independent media altogether, as has already been done for example by Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. Other conservative and/or right-wing ethnonationalist politicians, like the former Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, implement a step-by-step campaign of influence (*message control*) through manipulated surveys or by financing ads reserved exclusively for uncritical media. Critical media, by contrast, is starved out.

Message control implies the targeted selection of information as well as the precise wording of news items, and agenda-setting through weekly governmental press conferences, briefings, as well as personal conversations and interventions through so-called background discussions (*Hintergrundgespräche*), WhatsApp messages, and text messages. This serves to establish and normalise a new media logic based almost entirely on cronyism and clientelism.

The specific codes consist, among other things, of allusions to the "common sense of those in the know" (Wodak, 2021, p. 6); euphemisms intended to cloak, and distract from, crises and discriminatory politics; and strategies of argumentation and legitimation intended to justify what cannot be justified and to express the unsayable. Another salient factor here is the strategy of calculated ambivalence and the above-mentioned

strategy of provocation. Kurz's attempt to control the form and content of news in Austria thus obviously stands in contrast to Trumpism in the United States, which delegitimises any form of investigative journalism without explicitly trying to control it. Former US President Donald Trump is a pertinent example of the "agitator" already described by Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman in 1949, who supports right-wing extremists and uses media channels (in Trump's case Breitbart, Fox News, as well as Twitter/X) to systematically disseminate disinformation (Wodak, 2022a, b).

The discursive shifts being enacted by far-right populists along the lines outlined above not only affect the media, but also have tangible effects on the quality of a given pluralist and liberal democracy, as much recent research on *democratic backsliding* has illustrated. This research focuses on the socio-political processes running counter to democratisation—from eventual and gradual democratic erosion[5] to massive autocratic tendencies. Studies have also illuminated the influence of RPPs on elections, the increase in socioeconomic ruptures in society, and reactions to democratic erosion in various national and transnational contexts (Wolkenstein, 2022; Oleart & Theuns, 2022).[6] The political scientists Adam Holesch and Anna Kyriazi (2021) concluded from an analysis of the Hungarian-Polish alliance in EU committees—especially in opposition to joint resolutions of the European Union—that "[t]he current trends of collaboration and support among illiberal leaders within the EU (Salvini, Le Pen) signals the importance of analysing the interactions of political leadership and their impact on domestic developments, including the deterioration of democratic quality. Moreover, since Hungary and Poland have acted as 'trendsetters' in ECE they could play a key role in popularising the idea of backsliding among leaders with similar ideological predilections and ambitions" (ibid., p. 15). The authors cite Orbán's "soft power" attempts in certain Balkan countries as characteristic of this strategy.

[5] See Schedler (2015) for relevant theoretical approaches to democratic backsliding.

[6] See also Wodak (2021, pp. 44–49), and Wodak and Ötsch (2021), for an extensive and detailed discussion of socioeconomic factors (impact of neoliberalism) as well as the mobilisation of negative emotions (such as resentment, envy, shame, and rage) as important elements serving RPPs and mobilised by RPPs.

Polarisation and the Rejection of Dialogue

Currently, we are confronted with a polarisation of antigonistic narratives and "discourse worlds". The strategic rejection of democratic routines, constitutionally guaranteed rights (such as the freedom of opinion and the press or the independence of the judiciary), agreed procedural laws (for example in parliament), and conversational maxims as well as politeness conventions serves multiple functions: *first*, it is intended to systematically undermine liberal democratic institutions and guaranteed constitutional and human rights; *second*, it aims to dominate the media through continual provocation and the transgression of taboos; this is intended *third* to establish separate and parallel discourse worlds through disinformation; and finally, *fourth*, it offers identification and recognition to those people who feel that the so-called elites have treated them unfairly or not listened to them or that they are discriminated against through social conventions of political correctness.

Through these processes, the programme of the far-right populists and their related rhetoric is gradually and increasingly infiltrating the political mainstream. The "boundaries of the sayable" are being moved, and norms and rules of political culture are being constantly violated and transgressed through continual provocations, which are disseminated by the media, supported by mainstream conservatives ("populistization of the right wing"; Schwörer, 2018, p. 9), and thus normalised. This dynamic of—what I label as—*shameless normalisation* is contributing not least to influential politicians enacting behaviours perceived as "authentic" by their respective supporters—or even by the broader electorate. Similar patterns of scandalisation and the erosion of democratic processes could already be observed in the past, for example in Italian politics in the 1990s under the government of Silvio Berlusconi (Diehl, 2017). They constitute a tangible threat to the future of liberal democracies, and they need to be taken seriously.

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3

Exceptionalism and Reactive Identities: Narratives on Islam in the Public Space

Stefano Allievi

Abstract The presence of increasing percentages of immigrants in the European social landscape has consequences for several social and cultural dynamics on multiple levels. The diverse quantitative indicators produce not only a quantitative change; together, they produce and create a qualitative change as well. The case of Islam—and particularly of Islam in Europe—can probably be considered the most visible example of this larger issue. Exceptionalism is a common but misleading way to interpret this phenomenon. Cultural conflicts—typically conflicts over Islamic symbols—are often the way differences emerge in the public space.

Keywords Immigration • Islam • Europe • Exceptionalism • Cultural conflicts

Fondement – Toutes les nouvelles en manquent
Gustave Flaubert, Dictionnaire des idées reçues

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L. Sponholz et al. (eds.), *Radicalising the Mainstream in Western Europe*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-85963-2_3

Is It Really Islam in Question? Changes in the European Religious Landscape

The presence of increasing percentages of immigrants in the European social landscape is not only a quantitative fact, with consequences for several social and cultural dynamics. Different quantitative levels of so many indicators produce not only a quantitative change; together, they produce and create new problematics, new processes of interrelation: in sum, a qualitative change. Nothing less than a different type of society: quite different from the one imagined with the rise of the nation-state, with its founding principles.

Among other changes, one of the more visible is the return of religions to the European public space, in political discourses and socio-cultural debates. The presence of immigrant populations is neither culturally nor religiously "neutral". Immigrants do not arrive empty-handed: they bring with themselves visions of the world, traditions, histories, faiths, practices, values, moral systems, images, and symbols. And they turn to these as indispensable identity references (this term is more pertinent than "identity systems", which implies too coherent a connotation: culture is all but systematic). More than this, immigrants often turn to such references—or, better, use them—not only individually, but also collectively and as communities. Cultural and religious pluralisation is not only a phenomenon imported by immigrants, however: there is an ongoing internal process of pluralisation, one that is very visible not only where religion is concerned, but in many societal debates, from bioethical discussions on euthanasia to family models and gender issues (and the fact that this increasing pluralisation is most often attributed to external imported phenomena than to internal evolution and transformation is more an effect of perceptive distortion—particularly when seen through the lenses of politics—than a realistic analysis). Altogether, these processes produce a radical change of paradigm, in the strong sense proposed by Thomas S. Kuhn (1962), in our interpretative criteria of society and in our perception and experience of our lives.

One of those things that have changed dramatically, even if we hardly have a clear consciousness of this transformation, is our idea of the places we live in. We have a traditional definition of the nation-state, whose

elements, in the classical doctrine, are: *one* territory, *one* people, and *one* normative system (the law). An implicit element, which is not part of the doctrine but is rooted in the collective unconscious of many, is also *one* religion, or at least a common religious heritage, with the possible inclusion of some recognised religious minorities (this is also the starting point of classical sociology, such as in Durkheim's texts, 1912). For different reasons, all these elements are undergoing a deep change: increased mobility and migration, different forms of territorial autonomism, politics of recognition at different levels, emerging transnational (including European) normative systems, the internet itself, and the e-world of connection, global institutions, and many other factors, are all affecting this perception of the state as a coherent and homogeneous unity. A visible aspect of the picture is that cultures and religions that are not (considered) part of a collectivity's historical heritage manage to find their place in society: in a more or less integrated or isolated way, but apparently with a certain success. In the same territory, people, cultures, and religions enter in contact with each other, mix with each other (or refuse to), but in any case, co-exist, peacefully or antagonistically, or both, depending on the moment. From being a pathology, plurality is becoming a physiology. It is, or is becoming, "normal". And in many situations, it is also becoming the norm (as noted already more than half a century ago by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann 1996; see also my theoretical introduction in Allievi, 1998). The case of Islam—and particularly of Islam in Europe—can probably be considered the most visible and visibilised, problematic and problematised example of this larger issue, in a complex interrelation between internal and external (to Muslim communities) production of knowledge and imaginary (Van Bruinessen & Allievi, 2010).

Approaches to Islam: Between Reductionism and Essentialism

The risks facing the observers of Islam in the context of emigration (researchers included) are essentially of two kinds: that of misrecognition and of its opposite, over-emphasis (see Allievi, 2005 and the references in it). There is misrecognition of the fact that, for Muslims in Europe, Islam

is first and foremost a religious fact, albeit one with important social consequences. This attitude leads to the widespread temptation to consider Islam to be one cultural element among many, a stance that is explicable, now that economic and social(-ist) forms of reductionism are no longer fashionable, in terms of the sociology of migration. Over-emphasis consists in highlighting supposed peculiarities, defined a priori, through which every possible act and behaviour of Muslims is explained—even those that could be attributable to other factors: what Aziz Al-Azmeh (2004) calls the "over-Islamization of Muslims".

The reductionist approach (probably dominant three or four decades ago, but still existing) sees only the individual dimension of Islam and preconceives its integration through the diminishing power of definition of religious categories and their impact on the lives of people. Essentialism, on the other hand, accentuates its holistic or communitarian dimension, and somehow fears (yet sometimes exalts) its irreducible diversity. A good example of essentialism may be that of a certain neo-Orientalism (or its mass-media version: less intellectual but no less pervasive), unable to distinguish between the Islam described in a diffuse literature and that experienced (or not experienced) by the Muslims who more or less recognise themselves (or not) in it. It basically proceeds from a pre-defined image of what Islam is, into which it tries to place by force the flesh-and-blood Muslims. And if they don't fit in, ironically, they will be considered "bad" Muslims…

Exceptionalism and Islam

In many countries of Europe, the emerging presence of Islam as an internal actor (in religious, social, cultural, and political terms), and its entrance and increasing visibility in the public sphere (through collective activism and politics of recognition, but also through mediatisation, institutionalisation, and incorporation), is raising new problems concerning the presence of religion in the public space (among others, see as foundational references Dassetto, 1996; Maréchal et al., 2003; Nielsen & Otterbeck, 2015).

To these problems, in many cases, political parties, media, public institutions, parliaments, and governments—at the local, regional, and national level—tend to give specific and contextual answers, finding specific solutions, even when the issues raised, if correctly interpreted, could be compared and comparable to the issues raised by other religious (and even non-religious) groups.

We might define this as **exceptionalism**: the tendency to see Islam and Muslims as an exceptional rather than standard case, one that does not fall within the cases relating to religious pluralism and therefore requires specific bodies, actions, and targeted reactions, unlike those used for other groups and other religious minorities. Examples of exceptionalism include the forms of representation of Islam in various European countries, as well as the rejection of specific Islamic (or perceived as Islamic) costumes and symbols (laws banning various forms of hijab, conflict over mosques, minarets, Islamic cemeteries, or the introduction of specific questions or conditions when applying for citizenship).

Forms of exceptionalism from a legal, political, and social perspective are, however, present in many other fields, following a pervasive trend, in countries with different state structures: they even include, in some countries, the language used about Islam and Muslims (and the existence and success of a specific anti-Islamic literature) and the creation and increasing impact of political parties for which the presence of Islam and Muslims in Europe is becoming a central point of their agenda.

These politics and policies concerning Islam and Muslims often contradict the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of religious communities that is proclaimed and applied when other denominations and religious communities are concerned. And their basis and conceptual foundation is neither equality of treatment nor religious freedom: exceptionalism seems to be constructed in these cases as a (problematic) third way.

The mediatic perception of Islam in conflictual terms can be considered a form of exceptionalism. Cultural conflict seems a specific way of understanding Islam (or, better, Muslims: too often statically defined or "deduced" from a rigid interpretation of what Islam is supposed to be).

It seems as if Islam in European public space cannot go unnoticed either socially or culturally. It is, or is perceived to be, too visible or too

different not to provoke debates or even tensions, for historical, cultural, religious, political, social, and even statistical reasons. This is not necessarily the outcome of debates or direct dialogue/confrontation **with** Muslims. Often these are debates **within** societies **about** Muslims and Islam.

Reactive Identities, Hermeneutical Incidents, and Symbolic Conflicts

Identity conflicts are often characterised by reactive identities: identities that emerge only in opposition to one another, and because of a (supposed) conflict between the two. We find them among those who—in politics and in intellectual debates—are rediscovering their Christian roots (sometimes, even more coarsely, among avowed atheists) or badly defined European cultural roots, precisely because Muslims are present, and in order to oppose them (this can be the case for writers, from Oriana Fallaci to Thilo Sarrazin, political leaders, from Geert Wilders to Eric Zemmour, or entire parties, from the Italian Lega to the German AfD). The essentialisation of Muslims is a pre-condition of reactive identities, which at the same time essentialise also supposedly clearly defined European roots or Western values. We also find reactive identities among Muslims who rediscover their roots, manifesting them through customs that they did not necessarily practice (or not in the same way) in their countries of origin, but have adopted since living in Europe: the "halalisation" of the daily life of Muslims could be considered part of the process. The very use of their own self-definitions, by Muslims as well as anti-Muslim groups, in terms of "community" is an example of this: as if they really existed, as if all members of a supposed community actually belonged to it or adhered to it or identified with it.

It seems as if the presence of Islam within the European public space could neither socially nor culturally go unnoticed: it is too visible and culturally cumbersome not to induce debates and even tensions. A sign that it is indeed a fact that touches sensitive chords, or is perceived as such. These debates about Islam are extremely broad in nature. The

presence of Islam in Europe raises different kinds of tensions, controversies, debates, and conflicts. Conflicts about principles and ideas: from the Rushdie affair in Britain to the cartoon affair in Denmark and others related to censorship and self-censorship. Conflicts brought about by dramatic events concerning Islam and caused by Islamic actors: terrorism in particular (from 9/11 and its consequences in European countries to the terrorist attacks in London, Madrid, and Brussels, from the assassination of Theo van Gogh to the season of terrorist attacks in France—Charlie Hebdo, Bataclan, and the like—and the foreign fighters of the Islamic State). Controversies frequently raised and discussed in public debates relating to gender issues: the hijab being the most symbolic one, but, more generally, questions related to the role of women in Islam, how this role is perceived in the West, and its effects on Muslim families, conflicts between generations, etc. Apart from the Islamic scarf (and burkini, and related) controversies in France, the case of mosques is the most significant when the visibility of Islam is the issue, because this relates to a conflict that is debated not only within society but is about society itself. This point seems even more crucial, implying the perception of control over territory and its symbolic imprinting. After all, control of and over territory is not only a cultural and symbolic fact, but is also (and remains, despite everything) a very concrete and material sign of dominion and power (Allievi, 2009).

The list of issues that have been raised in public debate in recent years in Europe and have become controversies in the public space, even partially, is longer and more detailed, including a large variety of examples: the headscarf or hijab, the niqab, the burqa, the burkini, gender-segregated sports activities, women-only swimming pool courses, mosques, minarets, the use of the Arabic language during the *khutbah* or Friday sermon, the status and qualifications of imams, Quranic schools, training institutes and Islamic universities, religious symbols in schools, Christmas plays, nativity scenes and creches in schools (although almost always controversies on these issues are raised not by Muslims but by others, sometimes—allegedly—in their name), ritual slaughtering, halal meat and its certification, the presence of pork derivatives and alcohol in canteens, Ramadan, the Eid al-Adha with related animal sacrifices, Sharia courts,

polygamy, forced marriages, honour killings, mixed marriages, conversions, female genital mutilation, infibulation, Scripture and literalism, censorship, tolerance with respect to homosexuality, and of course—for obvious reasons—everything related to radicalism, violence, (prevention of) radicalisation of second generations, terrorism, martyrdom, suicide bombings, foreign fighters, Daesh, Isis, Islamic State, and so on…

These debates involve more subtle reflection. Passing continuously through what we might call hermeneutic incidents, or communicative conflicts, the image of Islam cannot but be conflictual. Islam in Europe is not perceived for its "normal", acceptable, interesting, even fascinating aspects, which also exist, and are predominant in people's daily lives (after all, most Muslims spend most of their time **not** conflicting with others nor within their respective communities; and nor are non-Muslims in their ordinary interactions—at school, at work, in meeting places, from cafés to stores to stadiums—in conflict with Muslims). Islam thus inevitably becomes a conflictual element in itself: even when it is others, such as those who hate Islam, who create the conflict. It is no accident that the best-known Arabic word—and almost always the first one Europeans learn—is the word jihad: understood by default in its meaning of holy war rather than the doctrinally more important one of spiritual conflict between good and evil.

Paradoxically, it seems that the integration of Islam into the religious and also social and cultural (and political) European landscape necessarily passes through the conflict around it. This can also be explained historically: "L'Islam vis-à-vis de l'Occident, c'est le chat vis-à-vis du chien", as Fernand Braudel wrote long ago (as quoted in Jean Delumeau's history of fear in the West, which has a chapter on the fear of Muslims; Delumeau, 1978). A legacy that it would be naïve to think is not reflected in today's history. Moreover, it is these exceptional cases, the real *kulturkampf*, that also become media events, that produce the imaginary concerning Islam. Communications theory has long noted how the importance of media events ensures that they also become the collective memory of cultural encounters/clashes, becoming in some ways the equivalent of historical monuments, through which public opinion reconstructs these processes and remembers them (Dayan & Katz, 2006).

The Rejection of Islam and Islamophobia

Conflicts involving this or that aspect of Islam are clearly affected by the more general climate around Islam and attitudes towards Muslims in Europe, of which they are a symptom. They immediately reveal whether we are in a situation of normality, or at least of what could be understood as a relatively linear process of integration, or whether, on the contrary, there are important indicators of suspicion and distrust, if not outright Islamophobia.

This word has a recent and still contested history, "enshrined" with its inclusion in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2006 (the same year in which the first official European report on the topic was issued: EUMC, 2006); although already present in earlier years, it received an initial major boost to its dissemination with the report Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All, published by the Runnymede Trust (1997) and also known, more simply, as the "Islamophobia report". Since then, there has been an explosion in the use of the word and in initiatives related to it (articles, researches, books, conferences, and militancy), in response to its emergence in the public space. This framing of the issue, albeit relevant, has some weaknesses, the first of which is its linguistic inappropriateness. Although instrumentally useful, the issue is often not properly a phobia—that is, fear—but rather the active choice of the Islamic enemy as a target and scapegoat, blamed for a range of phenomena that do not necessarily have much to do with it, and as a tool for raising identity issues and reactive slogans around which to create consensus for broader ideological battles: a form of hatred that is motivated by different reasons and ends, of which fear is not necessarily the main one. On the level of social values and morals the situation is perhaps even worse: that is why several observers prefer to speak of anti-Islamic forces and watchwords (even though the expression "political entrepreneurs of Islamophobia" is legitimate, because in this case there is an objective and direct instrumentalisation of the fear of Islam for political ends). The second reason for limiting the use of the word is that it has entered a politically correct vocabulary that sometimes risks itself becoming a part of the problem to be solved, in that it may be misleading in its indication of the problem and thus of

the solutions needed to solve it, and in the fact that broad currents of opinion now find it objectionable. There can also be a mild fear, a reasoned and rationally motivated concern with respect to societal developments, which the word Islamophobia (as other phobias) radicalises and reduces to an extreme. This does not mean that Islamophobia does not exist, obviously: it is alive and visible, in many milieux and from many points of view. But the term, used extensively, reduces all reactive phenomena addressed towards Islam and Muslims to the same species, failing to capture non-subtle differences in quality and degree, and often ends up constructing the object of analysis rather than correctly defining it. The third reason is that the word in fact responds well to a temptation of victimhood, in some Islamic militant circles, useful only for blaming the other (not unlike what is observable among other minority religious groups). For these reasons, despite the fact that the term has entered the vocabulary and literature on the Islamic presence internationally, its use has raised some criticism, even in circles far from suspicious of anti-Islamism. And it would perhaps be more correct—and no less worrying—to speak of the growth of an anti-Muslim climate and sentiment in Europe.

That said, if Islamophobia is the fever, empirical conflicts around Islam become an excellent thermometer for measuring its level and understanding how much the patient is suffering. And today, in many countries, in different cities, in a variety of situations, a level of fever serious enough to cause concern is being measured.

Conclusion

Mosques and minarets, veils and burkinis, and other subjects of conflict end up increasingly resembling **a discursive substitute: a transitional object**, to put it in psychoanalytic terms. The issue is not the specific topic being debated: but the fact that it is related to Islam, thus to the imaginary about Islam in Western societies (this is very evident, for example, when halal slaughtering is in question: it remains a problem until the proponents of an eventual ban discover that, technically, it is

not different from kosher procedures—similar considerations in different and less evident forms can be made on very different topics, related to Islam, that produce cultural conflict).

To address the conflict, it is necessary to start calling it by its real name. Pitiful masquerades, politically correct lies, instrumental falsehoods serve no purpose. As in everyday life and relationships, to solve any conflict, it is necessary to examine it thoroughly, but sometimes it is also unavoidable to experience it—letting the reasons (even when unreasonable) for the feelings and behaviour of significant segments of society, the fears that move them, the drives that inhabit them, emerge, guiding the conflictuality (that can explode in different ways) through democratic instruments. In any case, the conflict is there, in the heart of society: nothing is solved by ignoring it. In the meantime, it is necessary to move away from the indefensible concept of Islamic exceptionalism, from the presumption that Muslims are always different (implicit in, among other examples, the frequent presumption that Muslims require unique and peculiar tools of administration: several nations have created specific bodies that concern the representation of Muslims, which often differ from those concerning other religious groups and apply different rules). Exceptionalism cannot be a starting assumption: it must be corroborated by evidence. And verification can only come through the serious, honest, and thorough work of systematic, diachronic, and synchronic comparison: with the past (of Islam and Europe, and the relations between them) and with other religious denominations, minorities (not only religious), and ethnic and immigrant groups. This is the only way to verify what today remains an unproven postulate, that nonetheless weighs like a boulder on the Western understanding of Islam. It is also necessary to move away from the logic of definitions of conflict in terms of mutual phobias (Islamophobia, Christianophobia, Judeophobia…), which risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading towards a clash that is by no means inevitable. Constructing and imagining society in terms of phobias is like wanting to reconstruct history through "black books" (that not by chance represent a popular literature and approach): the black book of communism, that of Christianity, that of capitalism, that of colonialism, that of Islam…. It may be useful for ideological opposition and

political struggle, but it is useless and misleading for historical reconstruction, and devastating for processes of social cohesion. If we do not escape the trap of self-victimisation and accusation of the other, we will not resolve the conflict: we will not even begin to really deal with it.

We mentioned Islamic symbols as a transitional object, alluding to a main object, which is the imaginary about Islam. But this is only the first half of the argument, the most immediate. The second is that Islam is itself also a transitional object: that it stands for and signifies the pluralisation of society and, specifically, religious pluralism—the topic we addressed in the beginning. Islam has become the discursive substitute for important changes in society, which are generically related to religious pluralism: related to gender roles and the (control of the) feminine body (dress codes, family patterns, parental authority, ideas of modesty, purity, etc.), related to the visibility of religion in the public space (symbols, public rituals, worship places), and related to the relationship between religion and politics, religion and democracy, religion and the state. Issues which, in secular and secularised European societies, are considered as resolved, but have only been removed from the surface: in the unconscious of society, they are still central, and unresolved (probably because they cannot be unequivocally resolved once and for all, but always need a new equilibrium, precarious by definition). Cultural and religious pluralisation instead brings these issues back to the fore and call into question their fundamentals.

The world is changing, society is pluralising, horizons are widening, symbols are multiplying, certainties are crumbling, the possibilities of choice—and the associated responsibilities, duties, and anxieties—become virtually infinite, and no one (least of all politicians) offers a decent and understandable explanation of what is happening. Islam—rightly or probably wrongly (other diversities are often much more "other")—is perceived as the most extreme example of otherness and the changes that otherness entails for our societies. Only the problem is far deeper, and the issues to be addressed therefore even more decisive: for they affect not only Islam and Muslims but also European societies themselves. Yet Islam, because of the symbolic overload and problematic history that binds it to Europe, because of the striking and fearsome aspect of some of its contemporary manifestations (starting, of course, from the emergence of transnational Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, which

even European Muslims cannot ignore, merely emphasising that they have nothing to do with it), but also because of the statistically significant dimension of its presence, is inevitably at the centre of European political and social debate. And it will remain there for a long time. With important consequences: for Europe and for Islam.

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4

The Evolution of a Radicalised Mainstream: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Far-Right Shift in Italy

Emanuele Toscano

Abstract This chapter investigates the significant rightward shift in Italy's political mainstream. The rise to power of the Italian radical right is the result of a long-term process in which political, cultural, and social causes played a role: historical context, socio-political dynamics, and ideological shifts. Through an analysis of electoral data and public discourses, this study identifies key drivers of the radicalisation of the Italian mainstream. It will focus on three fundamental aspects: (a) the global economic crisis, which has increased competition for diminishing resources, including employment and the use of public services, thus widening old socioeconomic cleavages and generating new, more pertinent ones; (b) the role played by Silvio Berlusconi and the governments he led from 1994

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L. Sponholz et al. (eds.), *Radicalising the Mainstream in Western Europe*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-85963-2_4

onwards, enabled by a post-fascist right that has been normalised; (c) the normalisation of discourses and positions opposing migration processes in the name of a fictitious theory of ethnic substitution.

Keywords Far right • Mainstream • Radicalisation • Italy • Normalisation

Introduction

The national elections in September 2022 saw a landslide victory for the radical right[1] in Italy, which established itself in the political mainstream and at the helm of the country at an unprecedented level in recent history. The rise to power of the Italian radical right is the result of a long-term process in which political, cultural, and social causes played a role: historical context, socio-political dynamics, and ideological shifts. These have led to a progressive radicalisation of the mainstream (Brown et al., 2023) in which political and cultural positions inspired by ethno-pluralism, sovereignty, and anti-immigration rhetoric have been imposed, giving indirect legitimacy to taboo ideas of an extremist matrix and becoming an agent of their dissemination. So much so that today, the Italian mainstream right has become so radicalised that it is extremely difficult even to define what "radical right" means (Pirro, 2023).

Among the various factors that have contributed to this situation, we will focus here on three fundamental aspects: (a) firstly, the global economic crisis, which, as in other Mediterranean European countries (Kallis, 2013), has increased competition for diminishing resources,

[1] Following the distinction made by Cas Mudde (2019), we have chosen here to define the political forces that identify with the sovereigntist right in a different and specific way. The term *radical right* identifies those parties and organisations that accept the essence of democracy while opposing certain fundamental elements of liberal democracies, such as the recognition of civil rights in a universal perspective. The term *extreme right* is applied to all those groups, generally movements but not exclusively, that reject the very essence of democracy, such as popular sovereignty and the majority principle. In contrast, the term *populist* can be associated with all those political forces, not necessarily right wing, that interpret a separate social reality consisting of two distinct, antagonistic and homogeneous groups: on the one side, the corrupt elites, and on the other side, the "pure" people, those for whom populist forces want to be the direct expression.

including employment and the use of public services, thus widening old socioeconomic cleavages and generating new, more pertinent ones; (b) secondly, the role played by Silvio Berlusconi and the governments he led from 1994 onwards, which were labelled as centre-right governments even though they included political formations originating directly from the post-fascist right; (c) finally, the normalisation of discourses and positions opposing migration processes (Wodak, 2015) in the name of a fictitious theory of ethnic substitution that has long been supported by the right-wing government now ruling the country. This is also the result of the growing presence in the political and media debate of non-parliamentary far-right groups, thanks to links with certain *anti-vax* movements.

The first part of the chapter examines the electoral success of the two major parties of the radical right leading the country today, *Fratelli d'Italia* and *Lega per Salvini Premier*, while the second part explores some of the complex factors that have led to a radicalisation of the Italian mainstream. The main objective of the chapter is to provide a better understanding of how a relatively small radical party like *Fratelli d'Italia* has managed to gain more than six million votes in five years, becoming the party with the highest number of votes in Italy's last general election, in 2022.

The Radical Right in Government: The Political Framework of a Radicalised Mainstream

There are essentially two radical right-wing political forces currently active in the Italian parliament and in the government of the country: *Lega per Salvini Premier* and *Fratelli d'Italia*. The Lega per Salvini Premier political party was established in December 2017, working alongside the Lega Nord party to gather members from the central and southern regions of Italy. Later, during the general elections of 2018, the two parties were united under the symbol of the Lega, removing the word "Nord" from the party's name and therefore definitively abandoning the northern and secessionist option that had characterised the party's policies since its

inception.[2] Since 2013, the year of Matteo Salvini's election as the party's federal secretary, the Lega has profoundly changed its political orientation, which has increasingly been characterised by right-wing populist and radical right-wing positions (Passarelli & Tuorlo, 2018): against illegal immigration, in favour of nationalist, sovereigntist, and Eurosceptic positions (the Lega's slogan since 2018 has been "Italians first") (Toscano, 2020), against the extension of civil rights to same-sex couples, and in general against the recognition of gender diversity.[3] Since Salvini took over as its leader, the electoral influence of the Lega has deeply changed, rising from just over 4% of votes in the 2013 general elections, and 6.1% in the 2014 European ones, to over 17% in the 2018 general elections (affirming itself as the third-largest party in terms of votes) and, most importantly, to 34.2% in the 2019 European elections, before collapsing in terms of votes in the 2022 elections. After supporting the first Conte government (2018–2019), during which Lega leader Matteo Salvini served as Minister of the Interior, and moving into opposition during the second Conte government (2019–2021), the Lega supported the Draghi government, in office from February 2021 to September 2022. Despite its drastic downscaling in the last electoral session, the Lega is currently part of the Italian government, together with Fratelli d'Italia and *Forza Italia*, and still enjoys a sizeable representation in the current executive (five ministers, including Matteo Salvini as Minister of Infrastructure and Transport and Vice-President of the Council of Ministers).

The political party Fratelli d'Italia was founded in December 2012, following the split from the party *Popolo della Libertà* led by Silvio Berlusconi, which the post-fascist right wing represented by *Alleanza Nazionale* had been part of since 2009. Its symbol features the tricolour

[2] The Lega Nord, whose full name was *Lega Nord per l'indipendenza della Padania* (Northern League for the Independence of Padania), was established in 1991 by its founder and secretary for over 20 years, Umberto Bossi, from a federation of several independence and regionalist movements operating in various parts of northern Italy.

[3] In 2016, the Lega voted against the Cirinnà Law, which introduced the acknowledgement of civil unions including for same-sex couples; in 2021, together with Fratelli d'Italia, it opposed the European Parliament resolution declaring the EU to be an "LGBTQ+ Freedom Zone". Finally, again in 2021, the opposition by the two parties was instrumental in scuppering the approval of the DDL Zan legislation, which would have introduced stricter penalties for crimes and discrimination against homosexuals and transsexuals, as well as women and the disabled, into the Italian legal system.

flame, underlining its ideological and political continuity with the *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, a neo-fascist party founded in 1946 by those nostalgic for Mussolini's fascism. Led by Giorgia Meloni since 2014, the party has an outspoken radical right-wing stance, with nationalist, traditionalist, post-fascist, reactionary, and sovereigntist positions. Opposed to same-sex civil unions (see footnote 3) and to any openness to multiculturalism, it advocates for a traditionalist and conservative vision of society (its oft-repeated slogan is "God, Homeland, Family") and for a defence of "Made in Italy" as a means of protecting national interests in the economic arena.[4] The party has experienced a meteoric rise in recent years, from 1.9% of votes in the 2013 general election to 4.3% in the 2018 general election and 6.5% in the 2019 European election, and in September 2022 it was the leading party in terms of votes, winning the general election with the support of 26% of voters.

However, it is necessary to underline the complex nature that characterises the radical and extreme right-wing bloc of voters in Italy, which cannot be narrowed down to just the two parties presented above. This bloc is characterised by a network of weak links with a polycephalic structure (Diani, 2003), simultaneously fragmented and centralised,[5] in which multiple inter-related actors are involved and which includes not only political parties, but also associations, movements, and subcultural groups.

In addition to these radical right-wing forces, it is worth mentioning here at least two extreme right-wing organisations that operate outside the parliamentary arc but which, in recent years and for different reasons, have had a significant media relevance and an important role in the recomposition of the Italian extreme right: *CasaPound Italia* and *Forza Nuova*.[6] Since the beginning of the new millennium, CasaPound Italia

[4] Now in power, Giorgia Meloni's party has established a Ministry of Business and Made in Italy.

[5] For a review of the networks, especially online, of the Italian extreme right, see Caiani and Parenti (2013) and Caiani and Wagemann (2009).

[6] Even if these groups and organisations are very active, both online and offline, their electoral weight is marginal. CasaPound Italia (CPI) participated in some local and regional elections, with poor results: in the Lazio Region, from 2013 to 2016, CPI doubled its votes at the local elections, going from 0.56 to 1.18%. In other Italian Regions, CPI electoral lists have gained better results: in Bolzano, in 2016, CPI obtained 6.7%; in Latina, a city in southern Lazio, 3.05%; in Lucca, in 2017, CPI reached 4.9% of the votes; and, at the national level, it got a little more than 2%. After these experiences, CPI decided not to participate any longer in democratic elections at any level,

has had the ability to redefine the terms and framework of Italian neo-fascism, revitalising its symbolic, linguistic, and cultural codes and attracting new generations to it, thanks also to its movementist approach (Di Nunzio & Toscano, 2011). Forza Nuova, an extreme right-wing neo-fascist party founded in 1997 by Roberto Fiore and Massimo Morsello, regained visibility during the COVID-19 pandemic, taking the lead and stoking the mobilisation against restrictive measures to contain the spread of the virus (first and foremost, the health passport or *green pass*) and supporting denialist positions (Toscano, 2023b).

The Composition of the Vote: Where the Electoral Success of the Radical Right Comes From

The recent general elections of 2022 saw the triumph of the Italian right, which achieved 44% of the vote with a coalition formed by the parties Fratelli d'Italia, Lega, and Forza Italia.[7]

In particular, the electoral share of the party led by Giorgia Meloni, Fratelli d'Italia, rose from 4% to 26% in the space of one parliamentary term, consolidating its position as the leading political force in the country. The impressive electoral result of Fratelli d'Italia in the September 2022 general election is attributable to several factors. Yet, while one cannot say that Italy is voting substantially more to the right than in the recent past, it is quite plausible to say that the right is moving increasingly to the extreme end of the political spectrum. Fratelli d'Italia has in fact been able to profit from an outflow of voters from Lega and *Movimento 5 Stelle*, who transferred a significant share of their votes in the 2018 political elections and the 2019 European elections to the party of Giorgia Meloni, the current prime minister. In fact, according to the post-vote

continuing its political activities only as a political and cultural movement. Forza Nuova, on the other hand, has always participated in general elections, since its foundation, but has never received more than the 0.5% of the vote.

[7] In the elections of 25 September 2022, just 63.9% of the eligible voters voted, the lowest record in the history of the Italian Republic.

analyses presented by the Istituto Cattaneo,[8] almost 4 in 10 Lega voters switched their allegiance to Fratelli d'Italia in the 2019 European elections, as well as 1 in 6 Movimento 5 Stelle voters. Table 4.1, which looks at the overall votes received by the five main political parties in Italy, shows the resounding growth experienced by Fratelli d'Italia (+406%) in the last round of elections.

From a geographical perspective, which is an important factor in a country like Italy, where the regional aspect of the vote has always been very prominent, Fratelli d'Italia has strengthened its regional presence in central Italy: in Lazio, where the extreme right—first the Movimento Sociale Italiano and then Alleanza Nazionale—has always had a strong electoral base; but also in Marche and Umbria. Unlike Alleanza Nazionale, however, whose electoral base was primarily in southern Italy, Fratelli d'Italia won votes in regions traditionally closer to the Lega, in the northeast and northwest of the country. The Lega, on the other hand, following its electoral successes in the 2018 parliamentary elections and the 2019 European elections, suffered a major decline in support, falling to 8.9%. Besides losing its electoral support in the central and southern areas, the Lega also contracted its presence, to the benefit of Fratelli d'Italia, in the areas that historically represented its electoral base, the northwest and particularly the northeast of the country.

However, with regard to socio-demographic groups, Fratelli d'Italia gained broad support from women, perhaps also due to its female leadership, in comparison to previous polling. In terms of age groups, its popularity is lower among 18–34 year-olds (who preferred to support the

Table 4.1 Votes in overall numbers of the top 5 parties in Italy (2018–2022)

	2018	2022	Difference (in %)
Fratelli d'Italia	1,429,550	7,233,735	+406%
Lega	5,698,687	2,442,679	-57.2%
Forza Italia	4,596,956	2,248,851	-51.1%
PD	6,161,896	5,305,566	-13.9%
M5S	10,732,066	4,282,920	-60.1%

Source: My calculations based on data from the Ministry of the Interior

[8] See https://www.cattaneo.org/elezioni-2022-le-prime-analisi/ (accessed 29 January 2024).

centre-left coalition and, in particular, the alliance between the *Verdi* and *Sinistra Italiana*) and retired people (among whom, on the other hand, the leading party is the *Partito Democratico*, while it has gathered wide support among 35–64 year-olds, particularly among the self-employed (Toscano, 2023a).

The working-class vote, the distribution of which, according to the post-vote analysis conducted by IPSOS (2022), is shown in Fig. 4.1, strongly favours the Fratelli d'Italia (over one-third) and rewards the Lega (which polls just over 13% among blue-collar workers) to a lesser extent, while heavily punishing the centre-left coalition: the Partito Democratico, Verdi-Sinistra Italiana, and Terzo Polo combined fail to reach 18% of the votes of this specific electoral group. Fratelli d'Italia and Lega have demonstrated their increased ability to reach those social classes most exposed to the social effects of the economic, as well as social and cultural, crisis that has been gripping the country for years. In fact, both parties have been able to position themselves as political leaders—more in words than

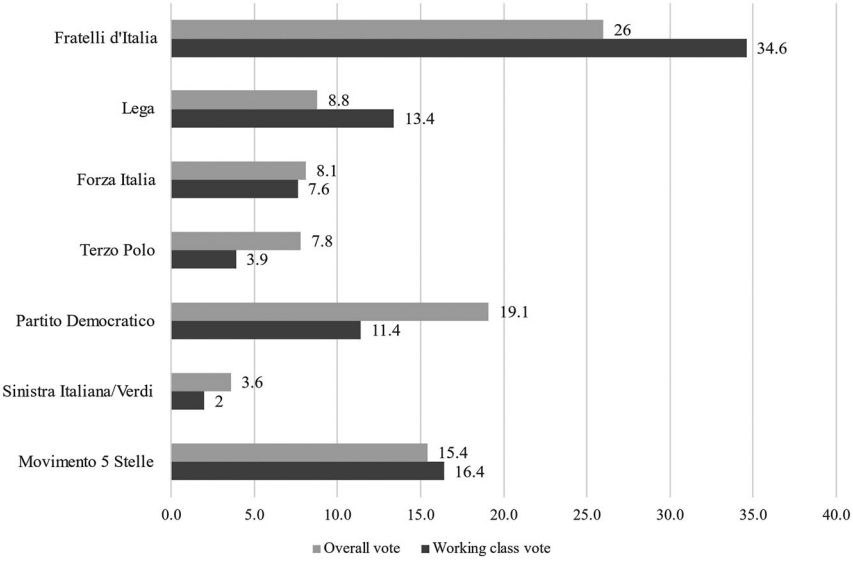

Fig. 4.1 The distribution of the working-class vote (in %, comparison with overall vote). Source: My calculations based on IPSOS 2022 data

in deeds—and to capitalise on and garner the vote in those social contexts where the presence of the "losers of modernisation" (Betz, 1994), those plagued by growing inequality, economic hardship, and insecurity, is greater. In fact, the consequences of globalisation processes have allowed the post-fascist right to overcome its historical inability to identify a social subjectivity on which to invest its political activity, and to now provide answers (real or presumed) on old and new social subjects to a public that is increasingly willing to listen to its discourses and proposals. As outlined by Renzi (2021), we therefore move from an ideological militancy aimed at small groups to the colonisation of the mainstream imagination.

After winning over northern workers in recent years (Biorcio, 2010; Maraffi, 2018; Mattina, 2019; Leonardi & Carrieri, 2020), the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia's anti-centralist and anti-immigration political positions are gaining increasing support among workers in the rest of the country and among the self-employed and low-skilled, on the basis of their promise to stop the immigration process, which is considered to be the cause of the labour crisis and welfare deterioration, as well as a threat to jobs and national identity. Indeed, it is not an accident that the slogans shared by the two parties are "Italians first" and the protection of "Made in Italy".

With regard to white-collar workers and, more broadly, the middle class, according to the post-election calculations provided by IPSOS,[9] the centre-left achieved greater support, around 30% overall, reducing, but not eliminating, the divide with the centre-right.

Some of the Factors Behind the Radicalisation Process of the Mainstream in Italy

To understand the process of radicalisation within the Italian mainstream, however, it is not sufficient to rely only on an electoral flow analysis. As Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter (2020) remind us, focusing only on the aspects relating to the electoral dimension of the process of radicalisation in the mainstream runs the risk of returning a distorted

[9] https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2022-10/Elezioni%20politiche%202022_le%20analisi%20Ipsos%20post%20voto.pdf (accessed 5 February 2024).

interpretation of this phenomenon. It is instead important to place this process in a broader framework that also considers its historical, social, discursive, and cultural aspects. While Mondon and Winter (2020) underline that this process has often been interpreted as a one-way path followed by the extreme fringes towards the mainstream to overcome marginalisation, it is in fact a two-way process, where complex historical, social, and cultural factors intersect.

The recent history of the Italian right is the first of the aspects to be considered for an understanding of the historical framework of this process of radicalisation of the mainstream. The advent of the Second Republic[10] saw the emergence of new political entities that occupied the political spaces left vacant by the collapse of the old political parties swept away by the *Tangentopoli* scandals. Among these, the most important player in the recent history of the Italian right is certainly Forza Italia, the party founded by the tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, which entered the Italian political scene in 1994 and remained a key player for more than 25 years. The role played by Berlusconi in the lengthy process of radicalisation of the mainstream in Italy is paramount, as it was in his first government that the Alleanza Nazionale party, a direct manifestation of the Movimento Sociale Italiano, became part of the majority, gaining 13.5% of the votes. This was the first case in post-war Europe that a party of direct neo-fascist origin entered the government of a European country (Gallagher, 2000). In the years that followed, the Italian right wing merged together, under the influence of Berlusconi, to form the Popolo delle Libertà, ensuring a level of continuity over time that has helped to strengthen its identity (Albertazzi et al., 2021). Despite having an ostensibly post-fascist political force at their core, Berlusconi-led governments and coalitions have always been identified with the term *centre-right*.[11] This was due to the figure of Berlusconi, who has always presented himself as a liberal leader, a reference point for a moderate electorate, and an ardent supporter of

[10] The term *Second Republic* refers to the new political order that took shape in Italy after the March 1994 elections, following the reforms in the Italian political system triggered by the *Mani Pulite* scandal that uncovered a dense corrupt network between political and economic players. The outrage caused by the investigations led to the disappearance of many political parties that had until then been major players in Italian politics.

[11] At the time of its foundation (2012) and until 2014, Fratelli d'Italia also included the words "national centre-right" in its symbol.

the European project (Bruno, 2022), contributing, as pointed out by Pirro (2023), to blurring the boundaries between the radical right and the extreme right (Mudde, 2019) and undermining the conceptual distinctions that define and differentiate the distinctive components of the Italian political right. This has undoubtedly encouraged a process of radicalisation of the mainstream with the stable presence, among the parties of the coalitions defined as centre-right, of political actors openly supportive of a post-fascist ideology, thereby normalising their hostile positions to immigration and fuelling a generalised sense of insecurity with regard to certain minorities, such as Muslims or Roma.

The second factor I wish to highlight here is more related to the discursive aspects and the normalisation of a post-fascism mainstream (Renzi, 2021), albeit directly linked to the terminological ambiguity that means that the Italian centre-right is actually composed of political forces and ideological perspectives that include those of the radical right, as highlighted above. With the breakdown of the Popolo della Libertà, the dominant role of Forza Italia and Silvio Berlusconi has dwindled, leaving room for more clearly populist and radical right-wing parties. I refer to Fratelli d'Italia and to the Lega, which, with the new trajectory laid down by its secretary Matteo Salvini, has shifted from its initial positioning as a party spokesperson for federalist demands to positions that are nationalist, Eurosceptic, and openly hostile to multiculturalism (Toscano, 2020) and has placed itself firmly in that grey area between the populist and radical right (Bruno, 2022).

The issue of resistance to multiculturalism and immigration therefore becomes a central theme in the activities of the governing Right, which builds its rhetoric by normalising positions that are openly racist and hostile to immigration processes, going so far as to advocate the theory of ethnic substitution through the voice of the Minister of Agriculture, Food Sovereignty and Forestry, Francesco Lollobrigida.[12] The latter theme has been repeatedly cited by the leaders of the Italian right: in 2017, Giorgia Meloni referred, during an election rally, to immigration as a "planned and intentional invasion", and in 2018, on another public

[12] The Minister spoke about this in May 2023 during a speech at the congress of the right-wing trade union CISAL, linking it to the falling birth rate in Italy. See https://www.rainews.it/video/2023/04/no-alla-sostituzione-etnica-le-parole-del-ministro-lollobrigida-c1db3c97-781e-4cdd-8ac8-af52b6e270ce.html (accessed 3 February 2024).

occasion, she accused the tycoon George Soros of being the "dark funder of the ethnic replacement of European peoples".[13] The Lega leader Matteo Salvini, meanwhile, has also repeatedly spoken of ethnic substitution. Salvini has repeatedly expressed opinions on this subject, both by adopting stances traditionally attributable to the extreme right and ethnopluralist racism (stating "I would like people to be able to grow up and build a future for themselves at home" and speaking of "ethnic substitution" as the basis of "organised and financed immigration")[14] and by defining migrants as "idle and dangerous" on several occasions, even going so far as to claim that there is "a true *genocide* of the Italian people underway to replace them with people from other parts of the world".[15] The conspiracy theory of ethnic substitution, also called the *Great Replacement*, has uncertain origins, although it has spread widely in European and American far-right circles in recent decades. This theory—which claims that there is a vast conspiracy against the white population and in favour of foreign migrants—has become an effective rhetorical tool for far-right politicians in many societies because, to put it simply, it has leveraged the fear among the white and lower-middle class of losing their privileges to foreign migrants arriving in the West.

The normalisation of these positions—until recently relegated to extreme right-wing conspiracy circles and now taken up by the mainstream media and relaunched on social networks without clear stigmatisation or condemnation by political commentators and the press—has led to a progressive radicalisation of the mainstream, resulting in policies adopted by the Meloni-led government aimed at supporting "naval blockades" in the Mediterranean to stem migratory flows.[16] Furthermore, the sharing and spreading of these theories by ministers and important political figures helps, as argued by the study conducted by Obaidi et al.

[13] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKayp2mZye0&ab_channel=La7Attualit%C3%A0 (accessed 3 February 2024).

[14] https://tg24.sky.it/cronaca/2016/05/29/matteo-salvini-migranti-sbarchi-austria (accessed 3 February 2024).

[15] https://video.corriere.it/salvini-in-atto-tentativo-genocidio-popolo-italiano/128b89d0-43fb-11e5-9a44-839af1b02c5d (accessed 3 February 2024).

[16] The expression *naval blockade* refers to a military operation designed to block the entry of ships into the ports of a specific region. In 2018, while still in the opposition, Meloni strongly supported this position, calling for the sinking of NGO ships that rescue migrants from the Maghreb coast in Mediterranean waters as another possible solution to counter migratory flows.

(2022), to increase the widespread perception of—while directly correlating with—Islamophobia, persecution of Muslims, violent attacks, and widespread hostility towards the immigrant population.

Another significant example of the process of radicalisation of the mainstream in relation to extreme right-wing content and discourse relates to the success of the book *Il mondo al contrario* (2023), written by army general Roberto Vannacci, who is politically close to the right and is a candidate for the Lega in the next European elections. The book has long topped the bestseller lists in Italy and promotes a traditionalist vision of society, advocating a return to the idea of the traditional family, opposing homosexuality and the recognition of rights for transgender people, and appealing to concepts such as common sense, homeland, family, and security.

A further, not insignificant aspect that has contributed to the radicalisation of the mainstream in Italy in recent years has been the emergence in the Italian political and media arena of organisations and groups of the extreme extra-parliamentary right, such as CasaPound Italia and Forza Nuova. By acting on the political as well as the social and cultural level, these political organisations have been able to establish themselves in the media by constructing rhetoric and narratives related to "taking everything back",[17] after decades in which Italian neo-fascism had been relegated to the margins of the political arena with very limited opportunities for action. CasaPound has engaged in grassroots activities, using social media and cultural events to reach a wider audience. This outreach has allowed the movement to connect with individuals who might not traditionally align with far-right ideologies, contributing to a broader acceptance of certain radical ideas within the mainstream (Di Nunzio & Toscano, 2011). Moreover, when the pandemic began, the extreme extra-parliamentary right focused on acquiring a wider level of popular legitimacy by exploiting the discontent that swept through society, in Italy as well as globally, created by the restrictions and impositions (vaccination obligations and certificates) necessary to contain the spread of the virus (Toscano, 2023b).

[17] The idea of *taking everything back*, a concept championed by CasaPound Italia, concerns the desire to reappropriate speech, practices of collective action, cultural symbols, and concepts that have been associated with the *mainstream* and return them to their own cultural paradigm (Di Nunzio & Toscano, 2011).

Final Remarks

The recent electoral success of the two largest parties of the Italian radical right, Fratelli d'Italia and Lega Per Salvini Premier, has contributed to reinforcing and accelerating the process of radicalisation of the Italian political mainstream, during which certain ethnonationalist, sovereigntist discourses, which oppose a multicultural model of society and the extension of civil rights to homosexual couples and, in general, the recognition of gender diversity, have become both normalised and considered part of the political perspective advanced by the current government of the country. By reproducing and appropriating (however strategically or opportunistically in many cases) aspects of the hyper-nationalist and xenophobic discourses of the extreme right, mainstream political actors have often severed the *cordon sanitaire* (Mouffe, 2005) in relation to extremism, providing indirect legitimacy to taboo ideas of extremist origin and becoming *de facto* agents of their circulation (Kallis, 2013).

The anchoring of this position is part of a far broader framework that is marked by a progressive radicalisation of the right-wing electorate, partly due to a misperception caused by the misuse of the term *centre-right*, used by the mainstream media and the political actors themselves to describe political coalitions characterised instead by political and ideological traditions openly inspired by post-fascism (Bruno, 2022).

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5

Beyond Civilisationism: Constructing European Collective Identity and the Muslim "Other" on the Far Right

Max Brunner

Abstract This chapter critically investigates the ideological underpinnings of contemporary far-right identity politics in Europe. It emphasises how these foundations influence contemporary discourses on Islam, "otherness" and European identity within the far right. The first section investigates civilisationism (Brubaker, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2017). Civilisationism is understood as an ideology that, like orientalism (Said, *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978), portrays Islam as a culture antithetical to the West. Originating in liberal European culture and a culturalised civic nationalism, civilisationism has been appropriated by the contemporary far right to gather support from voters previously associated with the so-called mainstream. In contrast, ethnonationalism is an explicitly antiliberal and anti-universalist ideology that perceives identity

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L. Sponholz et al. (eds.), *Radicalising the Mainstream in Western Europe*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-85963-2_5

as an expression of a mythical original difference. The second part of the paper examines the ideological foundations of ethnonationalism in the contemporary far right. Examining the works of the so-called conservative revolutionaries Oswald Spengler and Carl Schmitt, ethnonationalist decisionism is described as an ideology that, in moments of crisis, reaffirms the mythical notion of original difference, pointing to an "authentic" will. Spengler and Schmitt can be considered classic influences on the contemporary New Right. The final part of the paper will explore how ethnonationalism and ethnonationalist decisionism manifest in the New Right and its ambivalent relationship with Islam and the West.

Keywords Far right • Identity politics • Civilisationism • Ethnonationalism • Islam

Introduction

This paper investigates different concepts of collective European identity within the far right. Collective identity is understood as a form of historical subjectivity: it is a foundation for a collective sense of historical agency and allows the individual to imagine itself in the context of a broader historical narrative. The paper will engage in a critical investigation of two ideological traditions: civilisationism and ethnonationalism. Ideology is understood as a form of "false consciousness" (Marx) that generates a sense of historical subjectivity in the above-mentioned sense (on the term "ideology", see e.g., Stahl, 2018 or Adorno, 2018).

The ideological traditions investigated in this paper construct European collective identity in opposing ways. Civilisationism has its roots in liberal European culture. It understands European identity as an expression of civic values that are deemed inherently "European" or "Western". Ethnonationalism, on the other hand, dates back to Romanticism and to conservative circles of the Weimar Republic. It understands collective identity as an expression of a mythical original difference.

For Rogers Brubaker, the adoption of civilisationism by the far right is a key element of the current success of far-right movements in Europe (Brubaker, 2017). In the first part of this paper, civilisationism will be

described as a successor to what Edward Said famously termed "Orientalism" (Said, 1978). A critical investigation of the orientalism hypothesis and contemporary far-right discourse on Islam will reveal that a comprehensive understanding of how the far right constructs collective identity must also include ideologies beyond the framework of orientalism and civilisationism. Occidentalist thought during the Weimar Republic, for instance, differs from both orientalism and civilisationism. It is based on an ethnonationalist foundation in which collective identity is understood as an expression of a mythological origin and original difference. Within this framework, "Western civilisation" is considered an expression of universalism that poses a threat to the underlying foundation of collective identity.

The second part of the paper further investigates the ethnonationalist framework. It engages in an ideology-critical investigation of the works of Oswald Spengler and Carl Schmitt, revealing that within these works, historical subjectivity is based on the ideology of ethnonationalist political decisionism or, simply, ethnonationalist decisionism. The works of Spengler and Schmitt are considered classic influences on the New Right. An examination of these works demonstrates how ethnonationalist actors of the "Conservative Revolution" in the early twentieth century and the contemporary New Right ideologically construct collective identity subjectivity.

The third part of this paper will explore how ethnonationalist decisionism influences the contemporary far right. It will do so by pointing to the example of the French "pluriversalist" and follower of Aleksandr Dugin, Youssef Hindi. This example shows how the ideology of decisionism transcends its European origins and establishes an ethnonationalist understanding of historical subjectivity that serves as a basis for the interpretation of geopolitical events such as the Russian war against Ukraine.

Civilisationism, Orientalism, and Beyond

According to Rogers Brubaker (2017), within the contemporary European populist far right, traditional nationalism is increasingly being displaced by civilisationism. Within civilisationism, "Christian",

"European", or "Western" collective identity is constructed as a civilisational entity. This collective identity is associated with values such as secularisation, the equality of women, the rights of LGBTQI, as well as freedom of opinion and opposition to antisemitism. From the perspective of civilisationism, these "Western" values are increasingly threatened by a backward-oriented and expansionist Islam (ibid., pp. 3–4). Individual experiences, for example with homophobia, sexism, or antisemitism, are interpreted as expressions of a "clash of civilisations" and the supposed "Islamisation" of Western societies. Far-right populists take up the civilisationist narrative and mobilise voters who perceive the increasing visibility of Islam and actual or supposed Muslims as a threat to liberal "Western" lifestyles (cf., e.g., Brubaker, 2017; Backes & Moreau, 2021).

Civilisationism can be understood as a variation of what Edward Said described as "Orientalism" in 1978 (Said, 1978). Said argues that the concept of the "West"—and, by extension, so-called Western enlightenment values—is meaningful only in so far as it contrasts with a collective "other" that is considered backwards and inferior: namely, the Orient or Islam. He writes:

> Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying "us" Europeans as against all "those" non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. (Said, 1978, p. 7)

Said argues that the orientalist discourse creates both the "West" and the "Orient" as homogenous cultural entities that are ontologically different from each other. In doing so, it introduces a positional superiority of the "West" over its counterpart; the Orient or Islam is identified with notions such as backwardness, spiritualism, or collectivism. The "West", on the other hand, appears as the prototype of a progressive civilisation, oriented towards values such as empirical reason and a liberal concept of individual freedom. Following enlightenment traditions, these values are understood as expressions of universalist reason, cementing the notion of Western superiority as the result of a universal historical narrative of progress.

Like orientalism, civilisationism constructs "the West" as an embodiment of enlightened reason and culture. While it seems plausible therefore to view civilisationism as a variety of orientalism, the former tends to reject the latter's universalist claim. Samuel Huntington, one of the early protagonists of the civilisationist discourse, maintains that since Islamic culture is in principle incompatible with the West's values, the West must renounce universalism in order to survive the "clash of civilisations". Instead, he argues, the West must reflect on its own identity, renew itself as a culture, and protect itself from the challenge posed by non-Western societies. Huntington consistently rejects "multiculturalism" as well as "civilising" missions under Western leadership (Huntington, 1996, pp. 20–21).

Along with the rejection of universalism, in today's discourse, the "other" has been redefined from a passive object of (Western) universal history to an enemy of the West. This shift has already been noticed by proponents of the orientalism thesis, who argue that since the publication of Said's work in the 1970s, the relationship between West and Orient has adapted to changing geopolitical conditions. Thus, a conflict between the West and Islam has, to some degree, replaced a conflict between the West and the socialist East (cf. Attia, 2016, p. 175; Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2007, p. 34).

Important stations in this shift are the fall of the Soviet Union, Huntington's prediction that a conflict between Western and Islamic culture would be one of the central geopolitical struggles of the twenty-first century, the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the following "war on terror", as well as the rise of the so-called Islamic State that dominated Western media for some time in the mid-2010s.

To summarise, civilisationism draws on an orientalist tradition. Like orientalism it is an ideological construction of historical subjectivity that constructs Western collective identity by distinguishing itself from a collective "other", namely Islam. While orientalism views the West as the protagonist of universal history, in civilisationism, the West is understood as a particular Western "culture" that is struggling to survive in a conflict with other cultures. The universal historical framework of orientalism implies a mission to "civilise" the other. In the civilisationist framework, the "other" is perceived as uncivilisable and an enemy of the West.

While it is plausible to view civilisationism as a spiritual successor to orientalism, it should be noted that Said's argument—that the notion of the "West" contains meaning exclusively by referring to a collective cultural other—can and has been criticised as one-sided. The same goes for Said's construction of the Orient as a monolithic entity (Irwin, 2007; Varisco, 2017, pp. 148, 219–220). Said's view overlooks the fact that certain aspects of "Western" collective identity are the result of struggles within Western societies. For example, the French Revolution from 1789 and documents such as the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* are integral to the notion of "Western" collective identity to this day. And while revolutionary France was a colonialist society (Covo, 2015), it seems implausible to declare that the revolution was solely the product of colonialism, let alone orientalism. Such a view would oversimplify the complex social dynamics of revolutionary France and the *ancien régime* to a single factor. It would also conceal the transformative and emancipatory potentials of the revolution that have been realised not least in anticolonial endeavours such as the Haitian revolution (cf. Buck-Morss, 2011).

Rather than stating that every aspect of "the West" is the product of orientalist othering, orientalism and especially civilisationism should be understood as ideologies that interpret notions such as human or civic rights in a culturalist sense and thus obscure parts of their content and their emancipatory potential.

Beyond Civilisationism

The reservation concerning the limitations of the orientalism thesis is significant, because the concept of Western civilisation, characterised by enlightenment values, is by no means uncontested within the West, both historically and in the present. As Isaiah Berlin (1980) famously shows, anti-enlightenment thinking is as old as the enlightenment itself. This tradition is aligned with reactionary political movements and continues to influence conservative and far-right movements to this day. Accordingly, to view contemporary far-right discourses only through the lens of the civilisationism argument would fall short in the same way as Said's original thesis.

This does not escape Brubaker, who argues that his pattern of explanation can only partially be applied to the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) and the German far right:

> Yet notwithstanding its increasingly salient anti-Muslimism, the AfD does not belong to the cluster of civilizationist national populisms that are the focus of my analysis. The party remains more unsettled and internally divided than the parties I consider, so any overall characterization must be tentative. But so far, the AfD has not sought consistently to frame its anti-muslimism in "liberal" terms. (Brubaker, 2017, p. 3)

Many influential figures who represent the AfD's ethnonationalist camp indeed hold a notion of Islam incompatible with the civilisationist framework (cf. Hagedorny, 2019 on the New Right's relationship to Islamisation and Islam). In a speech in Erfurt, AfD politician Björn Höcke declared: "Islam is not my enemy […] our greatest enemy is our decadence" (Höcke, 2016).[1] Höcke and the ethnonationalist camp of the AfD understand collective identity in antiliberal and anti-universalist terms. In their view, collective identity is the actualisation of the mythological origin of the "Volk". In the same spirit, the German branch of the Identitarian Movement argues that the presence of Islam within Europe is a "byproduct of mass migration" that results from a "systematic error of Western liberalism" (Identitäre Bewegung, 2017). Outside Germany, the Russian politician Aleksandr Dugin, one of the central figures of the international New Right, maintains close contacts with the Islamic Republic of Iran, which he declares a main base in the "War against Modernity" (Haghighatnejad, 2018).

The examples listed above are representative of the so-called New Right. The movement understands collective identity in an ethnonationalist sense. This understanding traces back to Romanticism and to the conservative and protofascist discourses of Weimar Germany. In the following, this ideological tradition will be referred to as "Occidentalism". In this tradition, the collective identity of the Occident (in the sense of "Abendland", rather than "the West") is constructed in antiliberal and

[1] I have translated this and all following quotes from German originals with the assistance of machine translation tools, including Deepl.com and ChatGPT.

anti-universalist terms. It refers to the mythological origin of occidental or "middle European" peoples (see, for example: Conze, 2015; Faber, 2020; Gollwitzer, 1964). Originally, the term "Occident" marked the difference between the Roman Catholic world (the Occident) and the Byzantine "Orient" (cf. Gollwitzer, 1964, p. 22). In Romanticism, the term acquired a culturalist and religious connotation that continued to influence its usage in the twentieth century. The Occident was imagined as a closed geographical space ("Raum") inhabited by European peoples who shared a common heritage from antiquity. Additionally, the term remained closely associated with Catholicism and the longing for a return to the Catholic roots of faith (Conze, 2015, pp. 73–75). It was also often associated with an idealised past of the Holy Roman Empire of German Nations, which is sometimes portrayed as a protective power of "middle European" or "Occidental" cultures. As Felix Korsch notes, this idea expresses a German claim of domination over the Occident (Korsch, 2020, p. 58).

Particularly in the late German empire and the Weimar Republic, the desire to return to this idealised past reflected widespread scepticism towards modernisation, liberalism, and democracy, or, in short: "civilisation" (Conze, 2015, p. 75). This scepticism reached beyond the far right and is expressed, for example, in the works of Thomas Mann, who wrote that "the imperialism of civilisation" would be the "final form of Roman unification thinking", against which "with truthful German obedience" Germany would lead a "terrible, reckless, and in the greatest sense unreasonable battle" (Mann, 1974, p. 52).

In this period of German history, the term "civilisation" was often identified with the arch-enemies France and Britain. It represented modernisation, liberalism, and democracy and was associated with defeat in the First World War, the loss of German colonies, and the supposed decay of authentic occidental or German "culture" (cf. Weiss, 2016). In this context, the longing for a rebirth of the "Occident" can be understood as the rebirth of an "authentic" form of German existence or historical subjectivity, one not tarnished by the negative influence of Western civilisation.

Occidentalist thinking was accompanied by a variation of orientalism that is mostly excluded from Said's analysis. In this context, the "Orient" served as a projection screen for antimodern longings and was imagined

as a source of the renewal of "authentic" existence. Like Said's orientalism, the occidentalist view constructs the "Orient" as a counterpart to both the "West" and the "Occident". However, it does not embrace the West as an incarnation of universalist historical subjectivity, but regards it as an agent of decay. Instead, both Orient and Occident are imagined as "authentic" historical subjectivities, each opposing the destructive forces of Western civilisation by their own means (cf. Marchand, 2009, 2013).

In this context, the "Orient" can be understood as a historic enemy of the "Occident" and at the same as a kind of mirror image, a source of renewal and a potential ally in a common struggle against modernity and the West. An example of this version of orientalism can be found in the academic study of Indology or Oriental studies of the 1930s, which aimed to incorporate the history of Germany into a broader history of "Aryan" peoples beyond the influence of Judaism and Christianity (Marchand, 2009, p. 289).

Civilisationism and orientalism, on one side, and occidentalism, on the other, construct historical subjectivity in fundamentally incompatible ways. In the case of civilisationism and orientalism, historical subjectivity builds on a culturalist interpretation of the universality of liberal values. Conversely, occidentalism is an ethnonationalist ideology in which historical subjectivity is based on a notion of a mythological origin or a myth of original difference. Facing the "disenchantment of the World" as described by Max Weber (2002, p. 488) this form of mythical thinking is met with a need for justification that cannot rely on a rational or materialistic argument. This is a problem that Herbert Marcuse describes as follows:

> Mankind, whose existence is fulfilled in unquestioning sacrifice and unconditional devotion, whose ethos is poverty and for whom all external goods of happiness are submerged in service and discipline: this image of man, as the heroic realism of the time models it, stands in stark contrast to all the ideals that occidental mankind has conquered in recent centuries. How to justify such an existence?[2] (Marcuse, 1965, p. 43)

[2] "Der Mensch, dessen Dasein sich in fraglosen Opfern und unbedingten Hingaben erfüllt, dessen Ethos die Armut ist und dem alle äußeren Glücksgüter in Dienst und Zucht untergegangen sind: dieses Bild des Menschen, wie es der heroische Realismus der Zeit als Vorbild entwirft, steht in schroffem Gegensatz zu allen Idealen, die die abendländische Menschheit sich in den letzten Jahrhunderten erobert hat. Wie ein solches Dasein rechtfertigen?"

With the term "heroic realism" Marcuse refers to ethnonationalist intellectuals of his time and to figures later associated with the so-called conservative revolution, most notably Carl Schmitt. To solve this problem, these thinkers engaged in an ideological justification that Marcuse referred to as "political existentialism". To differentiate this ideology from philosophical existentialism, in this paper it will be referred to as political decisionism, or simply decisionism.[3]

The core of this ideology is a philosophy of history that places an underlying antagonism at the centre of historical subjectivity. According to the decisionist view, the course of history cannot be determined by factors such as rational considerations, democratically legitimised principles, or objective truth. Instead, for political decisionism, history is determined by an original difference between friend and enemy. In the decisionist worldview, the present is characterised by a universalist (Western) rationality, which threatens this underlying antagonism and thus historical subjectivity as such. political decisionism revolves around the notion of an allegedly *authentic* will that is impervious to the historical and material conditions of the present and initiates a rebirth of historical subjectivity. Political decisionism is ideological in the sense of a false consciousness that serves as a foundation for historical and political subjectivity: it claims to be a radical and authentic subjectivism, while in fact being entangled in an ethnonationalist discourse that is itself a product of the modern world.

Ethnonationalist Decisionism in the Weimar Republic

Two representatives of ethnonationalist decisionism in the Weimar Republic were Oswald Spengler and Carl Schmitt. Both authors have become classic influences that shape the ideology and language of conservative and far-right movements like the so-called New Right today.

[3] On Marcuse's notion of political existentialism see Marcuse (1965, pp. 44–55). On the notion of decisionism or political decisionism, see von Krockow (1958) and Löwith (1990).

Oswald Spengler

In 1919, Oswald Spengler's work *The Decline of the West*[4] (der Untergang des Abendlandes) topped the bestseller list of the Weimar Republic. While Spengler is usually not categorised among political decisionists, his antagonistic notion of history and especially his focus on the personality type of the fascist leader reveal a decisionistic logic that underlies his work.

Spengler outlines his view of history as one in which "cultures" are regarded as organisms that are each bound to a specific "space" and undergo a natural life cycle that is fuelled by a "primeval policy of all life" ("Urpolitik alles Lebendigen"; see Spengler, 1963, p. 1108) based on the natural difference between "races". For Spengler, "races" are original communities that form because of natural factors such as the "power of the soil", the "energy of the blood", and an "enigmatic cosmic force of the same beat of closely knit communities" (Spengler, 1963, p. 705). They are, in other words, the products of a geographic or biological determinism or fate (cf. Thöndl, 1993, pp. 430–436). For Spengler, "races" naturally oppose each other. The "primeval policy of all life" is therefore a struggle for the survival of supposedly natural communities facing a permanent threat from the outside. Only in the process of this struggle do "crowds" emerge from "masses of singular beings" and finally develop a sense of unity, continuing the struggle for survival as "cultures" organised in societies (cf. Thöndl, 1993, p. 418).

Spengler posits that these "cultures" undergo a natural life cycle, characterised by a youthful stage, a flourishing phase in adulthood, and a final stage of life that Spengler calls "civilisation". He writes that "once the goal has been reached and the idea, the whole abundance of inner possibilities, is completed and realised outwardly, the culture suddenly freezes, it dies, its blood coagulates, its forces break—it becomes civilisation" (Spengler, 1963, p. 142). According to Spengler, in his own present, occidental culture is living through this final stage of life. In the civilisation

[4] While "the decline of the West" is the book's common translation, "the decline of the Occident" might be the more appropriate translation of the German title "der Untergang des Abendlandes", since Spengler, who clearly belongs to the occidentalist tradition outlined above, refers to the Occident as an ethno-cultural entity and not to the West in the sense of "Western civilisation".

stage, he explains, so-called leftist forms of politics appear. What Spengler describes as "leftist" politics are in fact political programmes that are based on an individualist or universalist understanding of humanity. For Spengler this understanding is based on "the intellectual, rationalistic-romantic belief that reality can be conquered by abstractions" (Spengler, 1933, p. 172; cf. Thöndl, 1993, p. 427). It views people as inhabitants of certain rights or representatives of the human species instead of as "authentic" incarnations of their culture" and would thus disregard the "original" antagonism that is essential for the notion of politics.

Spengler argues that once these inauthentic forms of politics are established, consequences include the decay of morality and art and the loss of religion, resulting in a mechanical "materialism" as well as the triumph of an unconscious entertainment industry over the cultural and intellectual life of high culture. He describes civilisation as a stage of "horrible misery" as well as a "savagery of all habits of life" (Spengler, 1963, p. 675) that is associated with an atomisation of society, turning people into "cosmopolitans" (Weltstadtmenschen) or so-called fellaheen who are deprived of their capacity for culture and a future (Rensmann, 2020, p. 71). What Spengler describes as civilisation comes down to a state of stagnation, decay, loss of identity, and existential disorientation.

Following Spengler's argument, the universal realisation of "leftist" politics would lead to the end of history and historical life itself, since it undermines the original antagonism and the "primeval policy of life". However, this scenario for Spengler remains hypothetical, as he assumes that in the late phase of the civilisational stage, a "dictatorial Caesarism" will emerge and initiate a phase of cultural renewal. It is important to note that Spengler, unlike his adepts such as Julius Evola, does not understand this "renewal" as a reversal of the historical process leading to a second bloom of occidental culture. For Spengler, the "decline of the Occident" is an irreversible natural process. Renewal is understood as the renewal of history, in which a new culture is born from the ashes of the old.

Spengler believes that dictatorial Caesarism is embodied by a charismatic dictator like the fascist leader Benito Mussolini. However, for Spengler, Mussolini's exceptional position does not result from the political programme of fascism, but rather from a special personal quality of

the fascist Duce. Thus, Spengler draws a picture of Mussolini in which he appears as the epitome of a decision-making power:

> The fully realised Caesarism is dictatorship, not the dictatorship of one party, but that of one man against all parties, especially his own. Every revolutionary movement comes to victory with a vanguard of praetorians, who are then no longer useful and only dangerous. The real master shows himself in the way he sees them off, ruthlessly ungrateful and looking only to his goal, for which he first has to find and knows how to find the right men. […] Mussolini is a nobleman (Herrenmensch) like the condottiere of the Renaissance, who has the southern cunning of the race in him, and therefore calculates the theatre of his movement perfectly right for the character of Italy—the home of opera—without ever being intoxicated by it himself, from which Napoleon was not entirely free, and from which, for example, Rienzi perished. (Spengler, 1933, p. 135)

To summarise, in Spengler's work the "Occident" is historical subjectivity that results from the "primeval policy of all life": an original difference between "races". This notion is opposed to individualist or universalist understandings of humanity. For Spengler, history is understood as a natural process and the individual has only two choices: to submit to historical necessity or to be erased by it. Human beings only appear as collectives and executors of historic necessity, even in the case of outstanding personalities such as a fascist leader. Spengler's philosophy of history is strongly anti-universalist. For Spengler, historical subjectivity can only emerge by antagonising the "other". Any other notion of historical subjectivity, for example "humanity", would thus be inauthentic. As inauthentic versions of politics gain foot on the civilisational stage, Spengler invokes the fascist leader as a decisionistic agent who initiates the rebirth of history and historical subjectivity.

Carl Schmitt

Another influential work based on the foundation of ethnonationalist decisionism is found in the writings of Carl Schmitt, most notably his "notion of the political" (Schmitt, 1932a) and his "political theology" (Schmitt, 1922). In the "notion of the political" Schmitt argues that, like

the aesthetic or the ethical, the political was based on an original difference. Thus, while the ethical is based on the difference between good and evil and the aesthetic on a difference between beauty and ugliness, Schmitt states that the political is based on the difference between friend and enemy, or in short: enmity. For Schmitt, enmity is "existential" in the sense that it is self-evident and not an expression of external factors, such as economic competition or different ethical views. While for Schmitt such factors may precede enmity, they are not its essence. An enemy for Schmitt is thus an enemy not because they are evil or a competitor, but because they are "existentially something different and foreign" (Schmitt, 1932a, p. 14).

According to Schmitt, enmity always aims at the "negation" of the enemy's existence, or in other words: their unconditional, irreversible, and "existential" extermination. Thus, enmity for Schmitt always implies the possibility of war, which he defines as "armed conflict between organised political units", each aiming for the extermination of the other—the "ultimate realisation" of enmity (Schmitt, 1932a, p. 20). Schmitt explains that the permanent threat of war is the origin of all political life. The permanent threat to the self by the enemy provides meaning and "tension" to human existence. It forces humanity to decide to form political units and thus enables people to become players in world history.

Consequentially, Schmitt's notion of politics leads back to its starting point: the decision to form a political unit creates an existential difference that is expressed in enmity and reaffirms itself. In its circularity, political decisionism can provide a substitute for a solid metaphysical or rational argument as the basis of an ethnonationalist historical subjectivity such as the Occident. The ethnonationalist concept of historical subjectivity rests on a mythological distinction that lacks any solid rational or metaphysical basis capable of withstanding the "disenchantment of the world", which Max Weber famously characterises as the core feature of Enlightenment rationality (Weber, 2002, p. 488). To fill this gap, ethnonationalist decisionism posits that the original difference is "existential", i.e., self-founded and reaffirmed through the decisionistic act of choosing one's friends over enemies. As the examples of Chantal Mouffe (2013) and others show, a decisionistic notion of the political does not

necessarily lead to an ethnonationalist ideology. However, it does so at the moment when political decisionism becomes linked with an ethnonationalist notion of "natural" or "original" difference such as race, ethnos, or an essentialised culture.

Unlike progressive philosophies of history such as those of Kant, Hegel, or Marx, decisionism views history as an end in itself. According to this view, history is a continuous struggle that is constitutive of an antagonistic form of historical subjectivity and thus provides meaning to itself. Consequentially, Schmitt stands opposed to any notion of historical or political purpose beyond mere self-preservation (Wolin, 1990, pp. 406–407). Schmitt regards any form of politics that expresses a set of values, or the material interests of those it represents, as "disfigured" to the point of being "parasitic and caricature-like" (Schmitt, 1932a, p. 18). Like Spengler, who regards "leftist" politics as a symptom of civilisational decay, Schmitt views these forms of politics as symptomatic of the "neutralisation and depoliticisation" that he regards as characteristic of his present age.

For Schmitt, European history from the seventeenth century onwards is a history of decay, one that unfolds through several paradigmatic shifts: "from the theological to the metaphysical, from there to humanitarian-moral, and finally to the economic" (Schmitt, 1932b, p. 67). For Schmitt, this progression is continuously moving away from a "theological" paradigm. It is evident that for Schmitt, the driving force behind this movement is nothing other than modern enlightened rationality, which initially identified God with reason and eventually replaced the notion of the divine with that of humanity. Ultimately, for Schmitt, the economic paradigm emerged as the dominant one, where humans are seen as individual representatives of material interest that determine political life.

Both the humanitarian-moral and the economic paradigm undermine Schmitt's notion of history and the political, as they view individuals not as embodiments of either friend or enemy, but as bearers of universal or civic rights or representatives of individual or economic interests. Due to the progressive actualisation of these paradigms, Schmitt describes the present as an "age of neutralisations and depoliticisations" (Schmitt, 1932b) in which the very notion of the political and thus history itself is under threat.

In line with this apocalyptical view, a recurring concept in Schmitt's work is that of the katechon.[5] The term stems from Christian tradition and can be understood as "that which holds back the apocalypse". In the Christian tradition, the *katechon* is usually identified with the Roman Empire: a secular power that prevented the imminent apocalypse and the reign of the Antichrist. Thus, in the face of the impending end of politics and history, the question of the *katechon* is for Schmitt the central question of an historical understanding of the present.[6] From the standpoint of political decisionism, the *katechon* is a decisionistic force that leads the fight against universalism and modernity, which Schmitt identifies with the "West", the United States, and Judaism. Although Schmitt does not explicitly name the *katechon* of the present age, his writing indicates that it is actualised in the fascist dictator that Schmitt portrays as the immediate expression of the will of the people, concentrating sovereignty and decision-making power in one person (Schmitt, 1922, pp. 67–70; Wolin, 1990, pp. 400–402).

Who Is the Enemy? Actual and Absolute Enmity

For Schmitt and Spengler, history is essentially founded on an "original" antagonism. While Spengler refers to a natural difference between "races", Schmitt describes the original antagonism as an "existential" self-evident relationship between friend and enemy. In practice, Schmitt's philosophy, like Spengler's, leads back to a supposedly natural ethnonationalist distinction. For both authors, the present is characterised as an age of decay and stagnation where history is threatened by a Western rationality identified with universalism and individualism. Facing a present of decline, both authors invoke a decisionist power that stands against this rationality and reinforces the antagonistic notion of history and historical subjectivity. However, the threat posed by this "Western" rationality suggests that the expected renewal of historical subjectivity cannot be

[5] On the notion of *katechon* in Schmitt's works see Grossheutschi (1996).

[6] "I believe in the katechon: for me, it is the only way to understand history as a Christian and to find meaning in it" ("Ich glaube an den Katechon: er ist für mich die einzige Möglichkeit, als Christ Geschichte zu verstehen und sinnvoll zu finden") Schmitt (2015, p. 63); see also Grossheutschi (1996).

achieved simply by renewing the antagonisms of the past. A new paradigm needs to address the existential threat posed by this rationality.

In his 1963 *Theory of the Partisan* (Schmitt, 2006), Schmitt distinguishes between "actual" and "absolute" enmity. He writes that an actual enemy appears as a threat to the self while at the same time resembling it in its desire to maintain its own identity. An actual enemy is thus a sort of mirror image of the self. The absolute enemy, on the other hand, is for Schmitt an enemy that is not interested in maintaining its own identity. Rather it strives for the complete annihilation of the other. It should be noted that here Schmitt views the potential "annihilation" not as a precondition for the political, as he does in *The Concept of the Political*. Rather, he identifies "annihilation" with "an allegedly objective enforcement of the highest values, for which […] no price is too high" (Schmitt, 2006, p. 94). Consequentially, for Schmitt "absolute enmity" was not actualised in National Socialist Germany and its project for the annihilation of all Jewish life. Rather, Schmitt identifies "absolute enmity" with the socialist revolutions and the victors of the Second World War, whom he considers agents of universalist thought. Accordingly, Schmitt views the Nuremberg Trials as an act of absolute enmity aiming for the "final moral destruction of the Germans", as Volker Weiss put it (Weiss, 2018, p. 215).

Within the framework of decisionism, both "actual" and "absolute" enmities are constitutive for a form of historical subjectivity. An actual enemy is constitutive of a specific subjectivity like the Occident. "Absolute" enmity on the other hand is a threat to history itself. It thus leads to the emergence of a regenerative force that seeks to renew history itself: the *katechon* or the fascist leader.

The New Right

Civilisationism and ethnonationalism have been described as two ideologies that are foundational for a notion of collective European identity. Civilisationism refers to an ideology that has its roots in so-called orientalism and liberal European culture. It constructs European identity via a culturalisation of civic values that are interpreted as exclusively European

or Western. Ethnonationalism, on the other hand, constructs collective identity by reference to a mythical notion of original difference. The ideological structure that reaffirms this notion of original difference in a moment of crisis has been described as ethnonationalist decisionism.

The ideologies of civilisationism and ethnonationalism are foundational for how the modern far right perceives the relationship between a collective "us"—the West—and Islam. This can be exemplified through a discussion that took place in October 2012 between Michael Stürzenberger, an author of the anti-Muslim blog "PI-News", who later became a prominent activist within the PEGIDA movement, and Karl-Heinz Weißmann, a co-founder of the New Right think tank "Institut für Staatspolitik".

Stürzenberger and Weißmann discuss the question: "Is Islam our enemy?". Stürzenberger draws a comparison between the Quran and Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. He argues that Islam is at its core a violent and expansionistic ideology that threatens Western civilisation and its values. In his view, the West needs to confront Islam and "liberate" humanity, including the Muslim world, from the grip of this ideology. Weissman, on the other hand, puts Stürzenberger under "suspicion of liberalism". He remarks that he has no interest in "liberating" other cultures in the name of "Western values" that can be put aside if need be. He argues that the threat associated with Muslim migration is not a result of inherent traits of Islamic culture or religion, but rather that it stems from a loss of identity and what he refers to as a "replacement policy" (Umvolkung).

In essence, Stürzenberger follows the civilisationist playbook as he portrays Islam as a threat to Western values and civilisation. Weißmann, on the other hand, follows an ethnonationalist argument. He attributes the threat to a historical state of decline in European culture that is associated with a loss of an ethnonationalist sense of identity. This historical state has prepared a breeding ground for an increasing Muslim dominance over Europe. For Stürzenberger, the answer to the threat of Muslim dominance over Europe is to fight Islam as an ideology. For Weissman, the answer is not primarily directed at Islam. It is a rebirth of an ethnonationalist sense of identity.

The objective of a rebirth of an ethnonationalist sense of identity lies at the centre of the New Right's ideology and its "metapolitical"

programme to reclaim "cultural hegemony" from liberalism and the left via a "cultural revolution from the right" (see for example: Bar-on, 2016; Salzborn, 2017; or Weiss, 2018). Like the "conservative revolution", the New Right's ethnonationalism is entangled with a decisionist ideological structure. In the decisionist framework, Islam is seen as one enemy among others. At the same time, Islam, and more specifically Islamism, can be viewed as a potential ally in a common struggle against the more fundamental threat associated with universalism and the West (cf. Weiss, 2018, pp. 211–227). The influence of ethnonationalist decisionism in the New Right is evident, for example, in the enduring presence of the term *katechon* within New Right publications (see Sellner, 2022), including a podcast by the German "Library of Conservatism", as well as for the Russian propaganda website Katehon.com, supervised by Aleksandr Dugin. The decisionist logic is also present in the ideology of ethnopluralism, an ethnonationalist ideology that portrays "cultures" as internally homogenous and antagonistic entities that form a "pluriversalist" world order of separate cultural spaces. The ideology of ethnonationalist decisionism is adjacent to conspiracist and antisemitic world views and opens a potential for alliances between reactionary movements that transcend the European context, like that between Islamism and the New Right. This can best be illustrated by pointing to the example of an essay by a French follower of Aleksandr Dugin, Youssef Hindi, in which the author presents his interpretation of the Russian war against Ukraine (Hindi, 2022). The essay was published on the Russian platform Katehon.com in September 2022. In it, Hindi interprets the Russian attack on Ukraine as an eschatological event. He perceives it as nothing less than the prelude to a final battle against the Antichrist on the eve of the apocalypse. For Hindi, the Antichrist is embodied as a geopolitical force that has declared as its mission the eradication of all cultural and religious differences and the integration of all of humanity into a globally expanded Western civilisation. Hindi traces the origins of this mission in rabbinic messianism, which, according to the author, has influenced the self-image of the entire West. He invokes an antisemitic interpretation, according to which all major geopolitical events of the past 500 years can be traced back to alleged Jewish influences—from British imperialism, the spread of liberalism and universalism, as well as the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, to the alleged

campaign of the West against Islam and the threat to Russia by NATO. It was in the face of the eminent threat of Western aggression and its "messianic fanaticism", Hindi argues, that the otherwise "rational" and "pragmatic" Russian leadership itself adapted an increasingly religious, eschatological language. The "Judeo-Protestant" or "anti-Christian" imperialism of the West is thus forcing the Russian leadership to embrace its own Christianity and to commit itself to its eschatological mission: defending Russia against the Antichrist. Hindi quotes former Russian president and loyal associate of Vladimir Putin, Dmitry Medvedev, who stated: "It's not a forecast, but it's what's happening. You can look at it in different ways. You can say that the horsemen of the apocalypse are coming at a gallop. And we have to trust in Almighty God" (Hindi, 2022). The "horsemen of the apocalypse", for Hindi, represent the threat of Western universalism. Accordingly, Hindi interprets the Russian attack on Ukraine as a preliminary highpoint of the Russian leadership's eschatological mission.

Finally, in the Carl Schmittian tradition, Hindi interprets Russia as a katechon of the present: a bulwark in the struggle against the apocalyptic forces of the West. He declares Moscow a "third Rome", a successor to both the Roman Empire and the Islamic caliphate—both katechons in their own way. Ultimately, Hindi invokes an alliance of Russian, Christian, and Islamist forces that he pitches against Western imperialism: "All the cross-checks we have made here, using the different religious traditions, their respective eschatology, the theological-political history of Christianity, the Qur'an and the geopolitical developments of recent years, converge to point to Russia as the Katechon, the ally of the Muslims, facing the forces of the Antichrist" (Hindi, 2022).

In summary, civilisationism and ethnonationalism can be described as ideologies that are foundational for the far right's interpretation of the relationship between a collective "us"—the West—and a collective other, namely Islam. The two ideologies stem from opposing ideological traditions. Civilisationism has its roots in liberal European culture. It is essentially a culturalised civic nationalism in which civic values are interpreted as being exclusively Western or European. The "other" is depicted as unwilling or unable to subscribe to these values, due to its affiliation with a monolithic Islamic culture. Ethnonationalism, on the other hand, is

described as an ideology that originated in the anti-Enlightenment sentiments of Romanticism. In the ethnonationalist framework, a collective "us" refers to a mythic notion of original difference. This tradition is explicitly antiliberal. Ethnonationalists view civic nationalism as a threat since it challenges the notion of a mythical foundation in its prioritisation of values and its association with universalist thought. In a moment of crisis, when the mythical foundation of ethnonationalist identity is questioned, political decisionism appears as an ideological reaffirmation of original difference. For ethnonationalist decisionism, a political reality that questions the mythical foundation of identity invokes a decisionist power, the katechon, that initiates a renewal of the underlying antagonism. Ethnonationalist decisionism produces an ambivalent relationship to the "other". It perceives the collective "us" and the "other" as historical enemies that can only exist in this antagonistic relationship. They are dependent on one another and united by a common threat identified with universalism and the West. While both ideological traditions described in this paper serve as a basis for racist discrimination against those perceived as "other", ethnonationalism and Ethnonationalist decisionism in particular are closely related to antisemitic and conspiracist worldviews and ideologies.

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6

Platformed Mainstreaming: How and for What Does the Online Far Right Use Hyperlinks?

Damla Keşkekci and Liriam Sponholz

Abstract In this chapter, we explore how the German far right strategically uses hyperlinks on Facebook and what functions they serve. For this purpose, after gathering a sample of public Facebook pages of far-right actors from the German context (n = 100), we collected their posts dated between 2017 and 2020 (n = 120,370) using CrowdTangle and conducted a hyperlink network analysis. Our results show that the German far right on Facebook comprises a sparse unidirectional network, in line with the restrictions imposed by the platform logic of Facebook and the role far-right actors have assigned to the platform. Hyperlinks on Facebook are used generally to maintain the far-right network online,

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L. Sponholz et al. (eds.), *Radicalising the Mainstream in Western Europe*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-85963-2_6

where a limited group of actors are responsible for most of the hyperlink shares. Other functions of hyperlink sharing include self-promotion and attempts to mainstream their marginalised images in society. Thus, we observe a high rate of links shared from traditional media outlets instead of alternative media sources. Future research is needed to assess the content of the shared third-party links and the user interactions with these on Facebook to determine the reception and "success" of the strategies used by far-right actors from the German context on Facebook.

Keywords Digital platforms • Facebook • Far right • Mainstreaming • Hyperlinks

Introduction

Far-right mobilisations of any form pose an increasing threat to liberal Western democracies (Vassilopoulos & Lachat, 2018; van Assche et al., 2019). In the last few decades, the internet has been providing highly fertile ground for the rising influence of far-right mobilisation in politics (Heft et al., 2021). It offers almost endless possibilities and platforms for far-right actors, such as but not limited to social media platforms, instant messaging services, websites, blogs, podcasts, memes, etc. However, in an online setting, far-right actors are not the only ones who have agency over the processes.

Digital platforms, with their media logic, shape how people can interact with each other. For instance, if far-right actors with similar ideological positions want to build an organic community of like-minded individuals online, they could leverage the anonymity and reach offered by discussion forums like 8chan and Reddit (see, e.g.: Rieger et al., 2021; Gaudette et al., 2021). If they want to amplify and disseminate their ideological stances around specific issues like migration and Islamophobia to engage (new) audiences, they could use #hashtag-activism on X (formerly known as Twitter) (see, e.g.: Darius & Stephany, 2020). If the goal is to reach and recruit young people, ingroup elevation through praising white beauty on Instagram (cf. Leidig, 2023), a mainly visual platform, may be a better deal than Facebook. This is because even though Facebook

is still the largest social media platform (Larson, 2024), it reaches primarily older users (Koch, 2022). However, Facebook could be useful for creating (private) groups and public pages to share content, including electoral propaganda, alongside further plans and strategies that could translate into offline action, such as the Defend Europe (Keşkekci & Nissen, 2023) campaigns by the Identitarian Movement. These online platforms could be used in various combinations by far-right actors as well, through cross-posting, for instance, to maximise the opportunities offered by each platform (logic).

All of this indicates that the online activities of far-right actors create an entity that goes beyond the internet presence of their offline selves and actions on scattered platforms. On the contrary, this creates a new ecosystem within an online arena—with its own rules, actors, strategies, and outcomes (cf. Baele et al., 2020). In this new ecosystem, communicative strategies are shaped by both users and platforms, social and technical. In such an ecosystem, platformed mainstreaming takes the floor. Therefore, research on problematic aspect of the far-right's online activities requires a unique ecosystem perspective for analysis.

As we hinted at previously, far-right actors can apply the miscellaneous affordances provided by digital platforms and the new online ecosystem for distinctive goals, such as maintaining and mobilising their networks or promoting their leaders or their agendas (Törnberg & Nissen, 2023). This chapter analyses the online strategies of the German far right when applying one such affordance provided by social media, namely, sharing hyperlinks, to present themselves as "normal" (as opposed to fringe), enabling a move from marginal positions on the political spectrum to the middle.

Concretely, we ask: How and for what purposes does the German far right use hyperlinks on Facebook? What functions do these hyperlinks serve? What kinds of hyperlinks are shared? Are the far-right actors sharing more content from alternative or from mainstream news media sources? In order to answer these questions, posts published between 2017 and 2020 on 100 public Facebook pages of far-right actors in Germany were collected using CrowdTangle and analysed using hyperlink network analysis.

Our results show that the most authoritative pages in the German far-right network belong to the mainstream media. Nonetheless, differences in hyperlink usage according to far-right actor types can be observed. While mainstreamed far-right actors, such as political parties like the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), share mostly national quality newspapers, social movements prefer tabloids and regional newspapers. Far-right alternative media outlets, in turn, use link sharing much more intensely, but in a self-referential way.

In the following section, we first explain our theoretical framework. The second section describes our method and research design. Thirdly, the findings are presented. Following these, we discuss our results before drawing some conclusions.

Theoretical Framework

The existence (and perseverance) of collective action, such as political mobilisations and social movements, is contingent on a dynamic set of opportunities (and/or constraints) that are offered by the institutional structure and political culture of the context in which these groups operate, by affecting their potential for success or failure (Caiani & Parenti, 2013, p. 15; Giugni et al., 2005; Tarrow, 2011). Opportunities can be created or destroyed as a result of various factors, such as socio-political change, historical developments, and technological advances.

The advent of social media and the widespread usage of smartphones created numerous structural changes in social and political mobilisation, leading to new technological opportunities and a high rate of platformisation of everyday life (Van Dijck, 2021), rendering social media platforms central for mobilisation. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X permanently altered the structures of the mobilisation arena with their new ways of information flow and interactions, leading to the creation of new repertoires of (collective) action and the establishment of a new logic of mobilisation.

Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 2013) use the term *connective action* to distinguish this new type of collective action. While the existence of digitally networked connective action does not presume the end of

traditional collective action, and the two can co-exist in various combinations, connective action follows different assumptions about mobilisation in the digital age. It is based on interactions surrounding (shared) online content that involves "broadly inclusive, easily personalized action frames as a basis for technology-assisted networking" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 2), rather than on "strong leadership, brokered coalitions among formal organizations, and action frames that draw on ideology or group (class, race, gender, nationality) identity" (ibid.).

Connective action heavily benefits from social media platforms and digital media. Social media allows for the rapid spread of ideologies, the organisation of events, and the creation of online communities that can transcend geographical boundaries. As a result, social and political mobilisations from a broad political spectrum, including political parties and social movement organisations, among many other less institutionalised actors, all try to establish themselves both online and offline. Far-right actors have also developed new repertoires of action for using social media platforms: disseminating their messages, recruiting new members, coordinating activities, and more (Törnberg & Nissen, 2023; Klein & Muis, 2019).

Over time, however, the boundaries between connective and collective action have become blurry as some aspects of traditional collective action have seeped into the online realm.[1] For instance, social media platforms quickly became an integral part of democratic processes by not only enhancing communication among the public but also opening new channels for dialogue with influential actors in society, such as politicians and (inter)national institutions/organisations. As a result, political parties also established programmes to mobilise the masses for their causes/leaders, and not only for voter activation, while social movements started using #hashtags and @mentions online to campaign, before or instead of taking to the streets.

[1] We do not argue that the online and the offline are entirely independent entities. The decisions made offline can directly affect the online actions and strategies of actors in real time. A political decision to monitor the actions of certain groups could, for instance, have implications on how these actors present themselves online or act as a push for them to migrate to less public digital platforms. We do, however, underline that even this kind of effect would only take place within the limitations of the different logics of online mobilisation, as opposed to offline collective action.

In this sense, contemporary online mobilisation has become more than just an online reflection of traditional offline collective action. This has to do with two things. Firstly, the online realm has different opportunity structures, such as (inter)national laws and regulations for accessing certain online platforms and content. The discussions on banning TikTok in the USA (since 2022) or the restrictions on accessing YouTube (2007–2010) and Wikipedia (2017–2020) from Turkey are such examples. Secondly, contemporary online mobilisation inherently has a different logic than offline mobilisation, one dictated by digital (social media) platforms. As a result, how social actors can use social media platforms depends not only on their goals and ideological positions or offline activities, but also on the media logic of the different platforms they use (cf. Van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

A Far-Right Online Ecosystem

Online repertoires can differ based on the actor type and the platform choice, among other things. For instance, a political party might be less likely to call for street action and might share less radical content online but focus on political communication to gain votes (see Hutter, 2014; Vaccari, 2013). Individual actors or extremist social movements could care less about voter behaviour and focus instead on mobilising their (online) audiences for different purposes. However, in the end, it is still mainly the online platform that decides whether to keep any extremist content or remove it, taking into consideration the (inter)national laws and regulations surrounding said content and their own platform guidelines.[2] However, this process, known as content moderation (cf. Gillespie, 2022), only explains one side of what we refer to as platform logic.

Platform logic also concerns the user experience and the technicalities of the platform, which dictate user activity and interaction. For instance,

[2] Facebook's user guidelines are called "Community Standards". They determine what content the users can share and what will be flagged as inappropriate, to be removed from the platform. By setting up offices in multiple countries focusing on more than 100 languages, Facebook monitors users' actions so that they follow these standards. Content that is reported by other users as going against these standards, or flagged as such by Facebook's own algorithm, are then reviewed by human moderators employed by Facebook, who ultimately decide what happens to the content.

Facebook mainly operates through mutual networking, by adding other users' profiles to one's profile as "friends" and sharing content; in most cases, all of one's "friends" can see and interact with one's homepage. For far-right actors, this means that Facebook is designed to maintain and enhance networks rather than enable discussions. X, by contrast, offers followers. Unlike with friends, you do not automatically see the content your followers share on your homepage; you only see the content you choose to follow, with no obligation to follow the other user in return. However, the main activity is once again to view and interact with the content shared by others and to form connections through posts, hashtags and mentions. As a result, on X, far-right actors/profiles can draw attention to specific topics by creating networks around them (Baele et al., 2020; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Froio & Ganesh, 2019). All these factors together co-determine how and for what purpose actors can use a platform and what they will be able to see on their homepages.

A good example that stresses the importance of the technical side of platform logic and the surrounding algorithms occurred in 2017, when Facebook announced that they were updating their newsfeed algorithm to prioritise "reactions" as up to five times more valuable than "likes" (Merrill & Oremus, 2021). As a result, users saw posts with (more) reactions further up in their newsfeeds, or simply more often. This seemed reasonable, as the company claimed, for instance, "users care more about stories they react [to] than stories they like, and are more engaged with that type of content" (Gallagher, 2017). Nevertheless, it was revealed that the weight of the anger reaction was the strongest, meaning that posts with negative reactions were systematically placed at the top of homepage newsfeeds, providing them with a much wider audience. Such posts were also "disproportionately likely to include misinformation, toxicity and low-quality news" (Merrill & Oremus, 2021).[3]

This was not the only manipulation Facebook used to alter the flow of information on the platform. However, the algorithm used in these determinations mostly remains a mystery for users and researchers alike. Although it is known that they include measures such as "how many long comments a post generates, or whether a video is live or recorded, or

[3] The weight of the anger reaction was demoted to a zero in 2019 (Merrill & Oremus, 2021).

whether comments were made in plain text or with cartoon avatars" (Merrill & Oremus, 2021). Implemented with the claim of presenting users with "meaningful social interactions" (Hagey & Horwitz, 2021) online, any minor tweak in the algorithm can have significant ripple effects on the users' experiences and national political dynamics. In short, platform logic affects not only how a social media platform is used but also the opportunities available to political actors for mobilisation, communication, and more.

Users who don't follow the rules and regulations of these social media platforms risk having their actions restricted, their content removed, or themselves being deplatformed. Deplatforming refers to the "removal of one's account on social media for breaking platform rules" (Rogers, 2020, p. 214). It has become an increasingly common practice: social media giants like Facebook and Instagram (2018), YouTube (2019), and the former Twitter (2020) have purged their platforms of far-right actors on multiple occasions and continue to do so. For instance, Donald Trump's account was permanently suspended after the Capitol Riot in January 2021 (X.com, 2020).[4] This ultimately also puts far-right actors in a limbo where their actions online are dictated not only by their worldviews but also by the platform logic of the platforms they wish to exist in, lest they become deplatformed, losing these technological opportunities. As a response to (the threat of) deplatformisation, actors sometimes migrate to different platforms or establish new ones (see Rogers, 2020).

Against this backdrop, we suggest that the complex dynamics of the online far right require a unique perspective of analysis and should be understood as an ecosystem, rather than only as the internet presence of (offline) actors. A digital ecosystem, in its very basic definition, "is a group of interconnected information technology resources that can function as a unit" (TechTarget n.d.). A far-right online ecosystem consists of an indefinite and almost infinite number of diverse actors/users, ranging from individual activists and small local groupuscules to large social movements and political parties with an (inter)national scope. National

[4] On 25 April 2022, Elon Musk bought Twitter for 44 billion US dollars. Shortly afterwards, the platform was renamed X and Donald Trump's account was reactivated. Although, at the time of writing, Trump has not returned to the platform actively, this example shows that platform logic fluctuates not only as a result of changes in the algorithm but also through administrative changes.

far-right networks online form a smaller-scale version of these ecosystems while potentially remaining interconnected with the larger network of the online far-right milieu. Due to various reasons such as state monitoring or electoral defeat, these actors frequently have a high turnover rate, as some actors divide, dissolve, or evolve into other things. Therefore, the far-right online ecosystem could be interpreted as a digitally interconnected changing set of actors and resources, devoted to pursuing and furthering the far-right agenda.

Platformed Mainstreaming

Mainstreaming refers to "the process by which parties/actors, discourses and/or attitudes move from marginal positions on the political spectrum or public sphere to more central ones, shifting what is deemed to be acceptable or legitimate in political, media and public circles and contexts" (Brown et al., 2021, p. 170). Far-right actors use various mainstreaming strategies in order to be seen as "normal"[5] (as opposed to deviant/fringe), for instance, by a process we refer to as platformed mainstreaming. Platformed mainstreaming is shaped by the collective efforts of fringe actors on digital platforms, which, despite constraints, eventually enable the actors to change their image in society from the margins of the political spectrum to the middle, by generating a different image of broader acceptance and legitimacy through visibility.

Based on their platform logic and clientele, social media platforms can also be broadly categorised into mainstream (cf. Rogers, 2020; Sinderman et al., 2023) and fringe social media platforms (Russo et al., 2023). YouTube and Meta products like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat are examples of mainstream platforms with content moderation and efforts to comply with (inter)national laws in terms of managing extremist content and hate speech. Gab, VK, and Parlor are considered fringe platforms in this sense, where their rules and regulations do not always comply with (inter)national laws on hate speech or extremist content.

[5] Mainstreaming is related to, but not the same as normalisation. While mainstreaming is a process triggered by the far right, normalisation must be performed by mainstream actors (cf. Brown & Mondon, 2021).

Here, Facebook is a paradigmatic social media platform for analysing the mainstreaming strategies of the far right in the online ecosystem. Firstly, despite increasing competition in this industry offering different platform logic and content moderation regimes, Facebook remains the largest social media platform, even considering only monthly active users (Statista, 2024). In Germany, Facebook is still the most-used social media platform, particularly among users older than 30 years of age (Koch, 2022), thus offering far-right actors many opportunities for visibility and a broad(er) audience.

Secondly, as mentioned, Facebook presents itself as a mainstream social media platform, especially after the purge that took place in response to the Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018, when thousands of private and public profiles, pages, and groups of actors belonging to the far-right milieu were permanently suspended from the platform. As a result, Facebook now hosts almost solely the more legitimised and mainly institutionalised far-right actors, such as political parties, commercial organisations and publishers, and some social movements and individual actors. These actors and their content are allowed on Facebook as long as they do not go against Facebook's rules. This means that, regardless of the level of extremism in the far-right actor's offline claims, to exist on the platform, they need to present a much more peaceful version of themselves. For instance, according to the kind of media they share, they could present themselves as less or more "normal", while sharing alternative media sources to increase the threshold for reaching people outside of their digital ecosystem. Therefore, by simply allowing far-right actors to continue their activities and keep their following, albeit potentially forcing them to rebrand themselves under a more peaceful light, Facebook also contributes to the normalisation of their views, thereby paving the way for platformed mainstreaming.

Methods and Research Design

Building on this theoretical framework, in this chapter, we address the question of how far-right actors are using hyperlinks on Facebook, by following an *online ecosystem* perspective. According to Baele et al. (2020),

an analytical framework that characterises the far-right online ecosystem should have the following elements, each corresponding to a level of analysis: *entities* (shared links), *communities* (strategic or organic), *biotopes* (community clusters), and the *whole network*. We adopt a focused, smaller-scale approach and conduct hyperlink network analysis using the posts on far-right actors' Facebook pages to visualise the German *network* on the platform. Here, Facebook hyperlinks form *entities*, as tools that tie together the far-right network that shares/uses them. The characteristics of the nodes and connections that we manually code allow us to comment on the types of *communities* and *biotopes* which "categorize communities into a limited number of groups defined by a shared ideological, thematic, or cultural sub-identity within the general umbrella of the far-right ecosystem writ large" (Baele et al., 2020, p. 4) in the network. Below, we elaborate on our research design and how we used hyperlink network analysis by focusing on these sub-questions:

RQ1 How and for what purposes does the German far right use hyperlinks on Facebook?
RQ2 What functions do these hyperlinks serve?
RQ3 What kinds of hyperlinks are shared?

Sample

Our timeframe of analysis is between 2017 and 2020. This period covered many crucial events in the aftermath of the long summer of migration (post-2015) when far-right actors in Germany became increasingly more prominent online (and on the streets and in electoral politics). For instance, the entrance of the far-right party AfD into the German parliament (Bundestag) for the first time (2017), the Cambridge Analytica scandal (2018), the Christchurch mosque attack in New Zealand (2019) which hinted at transnational ties of the European far right, and the COVID-19 pandemic (2020).

We focus on Facebook and exclusively use Facebook data in our analysis for several reasons. First of all, as indicated before, far-right actors use

and see their existence on mainstream social media platforms as a strategy to become more mainstream in society. Therefore, in order to explore this phenomenon, we could only consider mainstream social media platforms as data sources. Secondly, however, considering the variation among social media platforms in terms of their niche and platform logics and data access, while using data from only one social media platform is limiting by default, combining data from multiple platforms is also methodologically problematic, even when data collection/access could be similarly easy with an API.

For instance, when looking at hyperlink sharing on X versus Facebook, both of which are mainstream social media platforms, on X it would not be as meaningful if the repost/retweet function was not considered in the analysis. This function does not exist in the same sense on Facebook, thus creating a duality in user experiences, not to mention the different regimes of content moderation. Consequently, bearing in mind these issues, Facebook's influence in the online realm, and the pragmatic concerns regarding data access, we retrospectively collected our data from Facebook, using CrowdTangle API.[6] Our final dataset has 120,370 posts shared between 2017 and 2020.

The complex and dynamic character of far-right online ecosystems makes it next to impossible to gather an exhaustive overview of the universe of actors they comprise. With this in mind, before collecting our data, we first conducted a systematic review of media reports (Zeit Online, 2021; Reuter, 2017), grey literature (HOPE not hate, 2021; Gürgen et al., 2018), and academic research (Geiges, 2018; Heft et al., 2020, Henrichsen et al., 2022; Salzborn, 2018), to gather a list of far-right actors in Germany. However, not all of these actors were active on Facebook, and for the sake of analysis, we only collected the posts from those far-right actors' Facebook pages that had at least 10,000 followers.[7]

[6] CrowdTangle was the only official channel that Facebook allowed for data access at the time of our data collection between July and October 2022

[7] Facebook pages that fulfilled this criterion were still excluded from our sample when there was more than one page with the same actor name and/or when it was impossible to identify which page was officially associated with the far-right actor in question (i.e., lack of Facebook blue tick). During the compilation of Facebook pages for data collection, CrowdTangle suggested similar pages to include. We also considered these suggestions and snowballed more pages into our sample if they fit our criteria.

Data cleaning and preparation processes also resulted in the loss of more Facebook pages, which could be interpreted as a balancing of the snowballing strategy. Our final sample ultimately consisted of 100 Facebook pages belonging to far-right actors in Germany, including their official/main and regional/local pages.[8]

Hyperlink Network Analysis

We used hyperlink network analysis to explore how the online far-right ecosystem in Germany is connected on Facebook. A hyperlink, also referred to as (web)link or web address, directs the user, upon clicking, to content at another destination, such as another website, webpage, or different section of the same website or content (images, videos, etc.). Hyperlinks form the backbone of internet and social media platforms like Facebook. The target of a (hyper)link is most often a Uniform Resource Locator (URL), which "specifies [a] web resource's location on a computer network/server and a mechanism for retrieving it" (World Wide Web Consortium, 2009). URLs that connect to websites start with the protocol indicator HTTP(s), a hostname indicating a domain name, and an extension, most commonly a version of ".com". Hence, the final result is "https://www.domainname.com". On Facebook, hyperlinks can take many forms and resemble texts (i.e., #tags, @ mentions) or URLs shared from other platforms or websites.

The initial raw data from CrowdTangle consisted of all types of Facebook posts within our timeframe by all pages in our sample. These included, but were not limited to, textual status updates, videos, images, live streams, as well as links/URLs. In order to conduct hyperlink network analysis, we filtered this data to only include posts where a website URL was shared by the Facebook page (n = 120,370), which made up about 40% of all Facebook page posts overall.[9]

[8] Therefore, we do not have 100 unique far-right actors' Facebook pages, but in total 100 Facebook pages of far-right actors from the German context.

[9] At this stage, we also filtered out some Facebook pages from our sample that had fewer than 100 link shares, for the sake of better network analysis.

Table 6.1 Classification of domains per arenas

Arenas	Domain examples
Political Arena	afd, npd
Alternative Media Arena	unzensuriert, rtde
Traditional Mainstream Media Arena	welt, bild
Social Media Arena	X/Twitter, Facebook, Gab, VK, Spreaker (Although not a social media platform, Spreaker was coded under this category as well, since it is a podcast-hosting platform, and social media platforms have also aspired recently to integrate similar features.)
Other	journalistenwatch

Domains and Actors

We first stripped these URLs down to their domain names as we focused on the shared hyperlinks. Moving on, following Törnberg and Nissen (2023), we also categorised the shared domains in the network into arenas (see Table 6.1 below) based on their characteristics beyond their formats, such as societal function and ideological standing. We manually coded domains affiliated with political parties and politicians at any level under the "political arena" category. For the "alternative media arena", we coded the domains that represented "media that is under-represented, working outside established societal power structures and a challenge to the conventional way of doing things" (Rae, 2021, p. 1123). These included post-truth conspiracy-promoting domains as well as Russia Today Deutschland (RT DE). In contrast, under the "traditional mainstream media arena" category, we coded media outlets such as quality or tabloid newspapers and magazines. We used the "social media arena" category to broadly cover a variety of domains of digital platforms where actors can create an account and share information with others. Lastly, the "other" category consisted of domains that do not fit into any of the categories above, such as watchdog organisations.[10]

[10] While it was also possible to consider these domains in the political arena, as they are also political actors in the broadest sense, in light of the dominance of parties and politicians in our sample and in order not to further inflate this category we used a more restrictive criterion.

There were an abundance of shares of/from RT DE in our dataset. While we go into this in the analysis, it is important to discuss where RT fits within our domain categorisation as it plays a determining role within the hyperlink network. RT is a Russian state-funded and controlled television network that targets international audiences. Therefore, RT's arena categorisation is not straightforward. From an outsider's perspective, RT comes across as Russian state propaganda, with the purpose of disorienting audiences, "not to convince the audience of any particular truth but instead to make it impossible for people in the society subject to the propagandist's intervention to tell the truth from non-truth" (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 36). This character makes it eligible for the "alternative media arena" category, as well as that of "hyperpartisan media" (Rae, 2021) or simply, "Russian media" (Törnberg & Nissen, 2023). Furthermore, our dataset includes RT DE (RT Deutsch), a television channel based in Berlin that is part of the RT network but focused on Germany (Baumgärtner et al., 2021).[11] Nonetheless, RT DE has an internet presence and offers live TV programmes in German on its website, which is a crucial case in our analysis.

Following the example of Caiani and Parenti (2013), we also manually assigned actor categories to the far-right Facebook pages in our sample based on their characteristics, as indicated below in Table 6.2.

Following these steps, using Gephi, we visualised the network and calculated network statistics. For this we first created nodes from the (sharer) Facebook pages (n = 100) to the (shared) domain names (n = 82). Thus, the act of sharing/posting on Facebook forms the connections/edges between these nodes in our hyperlink network. The resulting unidirectional/directed[12] hyperlink network comprises 3254 connections/edges

[11] In early February 2022, the channel was banned in Germany due to its failure to obtain a suitable broadcast license. Subsequently, following the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it was also banned within the European Union.

[12] The reason we get a unidirectional network mainly has to do with the platform logic and the online strategies used by the far-right actors. Our node structure is from Facebook pages to domain names, where domain names cannot reciprocate in the same way as a Facebook share, nor would they be involved in our sample unless they are Facebook pages of far-right actors. Even then, we would still be looking at their share strategies, which would mean we would get the domain name "Facebook" if they shared news from the Facebook page of a far-right newspaper. Consequently, since nodes representing the domains cannot share Facebook pages in reciprocity, closeness centrality is 0 for the Facebook pages' nodes and 1.0 for domain nodes, by default. Betweenness centrality

Table 6.2 Far-right actor categories of Facebook pages

Political parties and politicians (*n* = 79)	**Social/Political Movements (*n* = 6)**
Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD), Die Republikaner, European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECRP), Bürgerbewegung Pro-Chemnitz	Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes (PEGIDA), Zukunft Heimat, Weg mit ihr, Merkel Muss Weg
Commercial Organisations and Publishers (incl. journalists and online news platforms) (*n* = 13)	**Other (*n* = 3)**
Russia Today Deutschland (RT DE), Eigentümlich Frei Magazine (EF Magazin), Tichys Einblick, Achse des Guten (Achgut), Junge Freiheit, Unser Mitteleuropa, Deutsche Stimme Verlag (DS Verlag), ZUERST Magazin, AfD Kompakt, Freie Welt, Kopp Verlag, Boris Reitschuster	Der Verein Deutsche Sprache, German Rifle Association, Verein Recht und Freiheit

(through 120,370 links shared between 2017 and 2020) and 182 nodes (from 100 Facebook pages with over 10,000 followers to 82 unique domains).

Connectivity in a network is measured through the degree of a node, which refers to the number of connections/edges a node has with other nodes. Nodes with higher degrees tend to have more influence/authority and play a more significant role in the network structure. Nodes with degrees above the average degree are considered more central or influential in the network, as they have more connections than the average node. These nodes can act as important hubs or bridges for information or influence flow; hence, they are crucial for enhancing and maintaining a network. It's also possible to assess the importance of a node in a network through their authority, and PageRank values.

However, network statistics such as closeness centrality, eccentricity, and betweenness centrality are not very useful when interpreting unidirectional/directed networks, since these quantify the centrality or

is also zero throughout the network, which indicates that there are no interim nodes connecting two (or more) sets of nodes together. Thus, the information flow is solely through the 1-to-1 sharing of the domains by the Facebook pages of German far-right actors, which is very easy and frequent, as we already know.

importance of a node based on its average distance to all other nodes. Nonetheless, the (longest) distance in the network at any moment is one node, as we look at an aggregate image of single hyperlink shares.

In a unidirectional/directed network like ours, the degree measure is divided into two types: in-degree and out-degree. In-degree values measure the number of incoming edges pointing towards a particular node, while out-degree values measure the number of outgoing edges that a specific node is pointing to. These measures can also be weighted, when calculated as the sum of the weights of incoming or outgoing edges to a node in a directed network.

Weighed in-degree/out-degree therefore measures the total influence or information flow directed towards/from a particular node from/towards other nodes in the network. In-degree measures allow us to see what information is being shared in a network, by signalling what nodes receive the most incoming traffic and, in our case, which domains are shared the most. Out-degree measures, conversely, focus on the out-going nodes, in other words, the sharer nodes in our network. Thus, by looking at the out-degree measures, it is possible to comment on what type of far-right actors' Facebook pages share what (kinds of) domains and how often they use hyperlinks overall.

Findings

While, at 41% of all posts, sharing links might not be the most commonly used action on Facebook, they still represent a somewhat stable strategy used by all actor types in our sample. Within our timeframe, the overall rate of link sharing initially almost doubled between 2017 and 2018, from n = 20,530 (17%) in 2017 to n = 38,865 (32%) in 2018. This was followed by a slight decline starting in 2019 (n = 31,410) at 26% to (n = 29,565) 24.5% in 2020, but the rate never again dropped below 2017 levels even when it was at its lowest.

The link-sharing activity by Facebook pages of far-right political and social movements differed from this trend, where we observed an initial sudden dip of 2,000 fewer link shares between 2017 and 2018. This decreasing use of link sharing might indicate that in our sample, such

political parties and social movements might have been the most affected category of actors in the Cambridge Analytica deplatformisation aftermath. For political parties as well as commercial organisations and publishers, we also see a trend of increasing link shares until 2019, then a gradual decline. In contrast, for social movement actors, this decreasing trend only escalates, falling to 116 link shares in 2020 from 2,345 in 2017. Nevertheless, as mentioned, shares of posts with URL links only made up 41% of all posts by our actor sample during this period. The predominance of other types, coupled with the use of third-party links rather than Facebook links, indicates that the majority of the URLs involving posts might not have been originally or solely created by the far-right actors themselves for Facebook. This implies limited direct engagement with their audiences on the platform and possible cross-posting between other social media platforms.

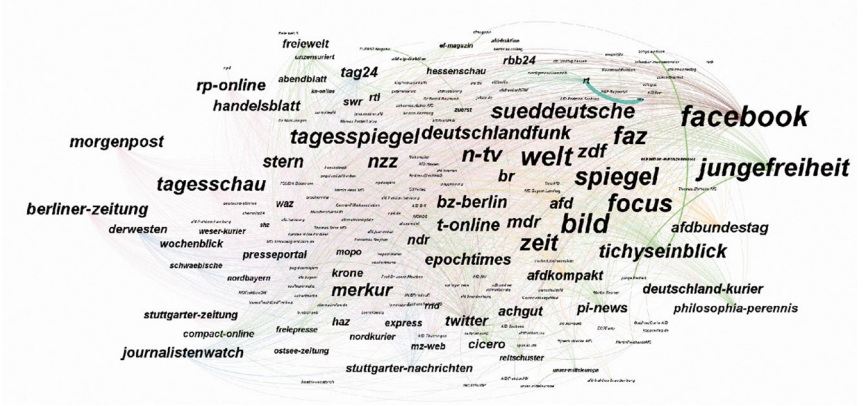
However, engaging with their audiences through hyperlinks seems to be a particular core strategy for far-right commercial organisations and publishers on Facebook, since 69% of all the hyperlink shares in our network belong to these pages, although they only make up 12% of our Facebook sample. In comparison, Facebook pages of far-right political parties and politicians, which make up most of our sample, only shared 27.45% of the overall links in our network, 24.27% of which were exclusively AfD-related pages.

Network Enhancement and Maintenance

The hyperlink network on Facebook by German far-right actors, illustrated below (see Graph 6.1), comprises a single sparse community with an average degree[13] of 17.88. This means that a single node in our network might, on average, have about 18 connections. Therefore, the graph density for our network is calculated at 0.099, which further confirms that the network is indeed sparse.

Lower-density networks such as ours indicate selective and specialised connections. This means that very strong connections and nodes connected to many others are rarely observed. These networks suggest a low

[13] The sum of the degrees of all the nodes in the network divided by the total number of nodes.



Graph 6.1 Overall in-degree network of domains shared. *The size of the domain names is proportional to the frequency of shares in the network. ** Thicker edges indicate repeated domain-sharing relations, such as the thick mint green one between RT DE and RT. *** Edge colours signal different arenas per our manual coding. Green: alternative media (Mint green: Russian-sponsored alternative media), Pink: traditional media, Orange: political arena, Brown: social media, Light blue: Other

potential for information flow, interactions, and influence spreading within the network, making the network more vulnerable to disruptions or changes. If some edges are removed, there may be relatively few alternative paths for information or influence to flow.

What domains or Facebook pages keep the network together? While Facebook is the eighth most shared domain in the network, it has a great influence on forming and keeping the network together. Unsurprisingly, 90% of the Facebook pages in our sample have shared the Facebook domain at least once, as indicated by the in-degree value (See Table 6.3). The eigenvector centrality values further confirm this. However, as indicated in Table 6.3, in terms of having authority in the network, Facebook is only the third most authoritative node after *Die Welt* and *Bild* newspapers.

In a directed network, authority scores are calculated based on the number/quantity and quality/relevance of incoming connections to a node. They represent the importance or influence of nodes as authoritative sources of information within the network, because high authority

Table 6.3 Most important (central) links shared by far-right actors in the overall network (centrality measures of top influential nodes)

Domains	In-degree	Weighed in-degree	Authority	PageRank	Strongly-connected pages	Modularity class	Eigenvector centrality
facebook	90	3317	0.17777471	0.021521218	ach.gut	10	1
bild	84	2387	0.18113151	0.014233128	npd.de	10	0.933333333
welt	84	4881	0.18135758	0.013779942	AfD.BW	10	0.933333333
jungefreiheit	79	11207	0.17493163	0.014336496	afd.brandenburg	8	0.877777778
spiegel	78	1146	0.1767068	0.011922198	PEGIDA.Bodensee	10	0.866666667

nodes receive connections from other nodes with a high out-degree. Therefore, the high authority of *Die Welt* and *Bild* can be explained by their lower in-degree (84) and lower PageRank scores in contrast to Facebook. Consequently, in our hyperlink network, the most authoritative domains belong to media actors that are influential sources of information and expertise deemed trustworthy by many far-right actors. However, Facebook (as a domain and platform) has the main responsibility for the existence of the network in the first place and for keeping it together.

Super-Sharers and Super-Spreaders

When we look closely at the out-degree values and the highest sharing nodes/pages in our network, we further observe some clearly differentiated patterns of how far-right actors use hyperlinks on their Facebook pages (*RQ1*). Initially, we see that only 18 out of the 100 pages in our sample are responsible for sharing more than 1000 hyperlinks overall (weighed out-degree), yet this makes up 79.37% of all links shared in the network (see also Table 6.4). Among these, 12 pages share an above-average number of hyperlinks (+1203). Mirroring the dataset structure as explained at the beginning of this section, once again, the hyperlinks shared by far-right commercial organisations and publishers are the most common among the top sharers (86.47%).

The top seven pages with the highest number of hyperlinks (minimum 2600 links) share from fewer than eight unique domains, reflected by the out-degree values. Here, RT DE is the top sharer page with 33,777 link shares (of the domains Russia Beyond The Headlines— RBTH, RT, and Facebook). Differently, we also see that some of the remaining frequent sharer pages (n = 11) that share at a lesser rate of between 1000 and 2500 hyperlinks share from a larger variety of unique domains, ranging between 60 to 70 (maximum) domains. For instance, AfD Schleswig Holstein's page shared 2444 links from 70 unique domains.[14] Thus we observe that

[14] It should be noted that this rule does not strictly hold for all pages with over 1000 domain shares but only 15 out of 18. We also see other pages sharing 50 and more unique domains, albeit at a lower rate, even going down to around 340 hyperlink shares.

Table 6.4 Super-sharer Facebook pages and their most frequently shared domains

Pages with +1000 shares	Top domain	%
RTDE	rt.de	99.4
tichyseinblick	tichyseinblick	99.94
Achgut	achgut	99.73
jungefreiheit	jungefreiheit	99.76
Zuerst	zuerst	99.98
Efmagazin	efmagazin	99.91
unser-mitteleuropa	unser-mitteleuropa	99.96
AfD.Schleswig.Holstein.de	welt	15.85
AfDNDS	welt	16.73
afd.kompakt	afd.kompakt	97.84
PEGIDA.Bodensee	bild	15.71
Republikaner	welt	16.29
NPD	npd.de	15.21
pegidamittelfranken	nordbayern	18.35
afd.bayern	welt	15.74
Thomas.Seitz.AfD	jungefreiheit	19.87
DSVerlag	deutsche-stimme	68.34
AndreasBleckMdB	welt	39.08

the top sharer pages seem to operate under two different logics and act as either super-sharers or super-spreaders in the network.

Super-sharers refer to pages that share more than 2500 hyperlinks, but from only a handful of domains, thus establishing few strong connections in the network. Super-sharer actors help enhance the network. This seems to be a strategy exclusively used by the far-right alternative media (including Russia-backed media like RT) in the hyperlink network of German far-right actors.

We refer to the rest of the pages that also share many links but connect to many sources as *super-spreaders*. In comparison to super-sharers, super-spreaders are a more diverse group of actors. We see political parties (AfD, Republikaner, NPD), social movements (PEGIDA), and a far-right publisher (DSVerlag) in this category. These super-spreader actors help to maintain the network.

As mentioned before, this dynamic, coupled with the unidirectional nature of the shares, results in a low-density network with selective and specialised connections, which are only at times very strong, while the rest of the nodes are more loosely connected to (many) others.

Self-Promotion

What functions do these hyperlinks serve? (*RQ2*) Beyond network enhancement and maintenance, hyperlinks also enable self-promotion and mainstreaming. For self-promotion purposes, some actors almost exclusively share their personal, official, or affiliate(d) website(s) on their Facebook pages, leading the audiences to third-party websites. Looking at the edges closely reveals that while super-spreaders and super-sharers follow different strategies on Facebook, they have one strategic commonality: their use of self-referential link-sharing for self-promotion, indicated by the modularity class values[15] and the strength of the connection (see Table 6.3).

Far-right actors use hyperlinks to promote themselves within and outside their own ecosystem. Ten out of the top 18 pages, shown in Table 6.4, mostly share their own domains; among these, eight pages (all alternative media actors) share their own domains at a rate above 97%. The remaining two are NPD and Deutsche Stimme Verlag. These pages share more diverse domains than their counterparts, although they still self-promote the most. But the NPD shares hyperlinks from their own website at only 15.85% and DS Verlag at 68.34%.

The actors who almost exclusively self-promote belong to the alternative media arena. Here we have blogs like "Die Achse des Guten" (achgut), and "Tichys Einblick" (tichyseinblick), magazines like "Eigentümlich Frei" (efmagazin), "Junge Freiheit" (jungefreiheit), "Zuerst" (zuerst), and the alternative news website "Unser Mitteleuropa" (unser-mitteleuropa), as well as the Russia-backed television channel Russia Today, which is the top sharer in our network, with 28.06% of all links. We then also have self-shares from media outlets close to political parties, namely AfD's magazine "AfD Kompakt" and NPD's newspaper publisher Deutsche Stimme Verlag sharing their official websites (see Table 6.4). Finally, we

[15] Modularity class values represent the assignment of nodes to different communities or modules within a network based on modularity analysis. It evaluates the quality of community structure in a network by comparing the observed connections between nodes with the expected connections in a random network. Our network is divided into 13 communities based on this measure, 12 of which are the nodes are those that heavily share their own weblinks.

have the NPD, a political actor, sharing its official website. Hence, we see an almost complete overlap between super-sharers and self-promoters.

These observations indicate, firstly, that by sharing their own domains, these far-right actors might aspire to create reciprocity between the shared links and the sharer Facebook pages, as the far-right actors can tailor this content as they wish. Secondly, this could be a strategy to direct their audiences to the original sources of their messages instead of posting them directly on Facebook, where the content might be subject to moderation.

Mainstreaming

What kinds of hyperlinks do German far right actors share on Facebook? (*RQ3*) While the far-right alternative media sources most frequently share self-referential domains, the far-right political actors with the most shares seem to focus instead on traditional media sources. When not self-promoting, top sharers are heavily focused on sharing traditional media sources, namely the quality daily newspaper *Die Welt*, which once again explains the authority score of this node in our hyperlink network.

In Table 6.4, we also see that the AfD's Schleswig Holstein, Bavaria, and Lower Saxony regional pages and Die Republikaner party most frequently share the quality newspaper *Die Welt*, at around 16%, while the AfD MP Andreas Bleck also shares *Die Welt* the most, at a higher rate of 39%. On the other hand, PEGIDA, the only social movement actor among the top sharers, posts a variety of domains on its regional Facebook pages. Nonetheless, as Table 6.4 shows, the most shared links by PEGIDA Bodensee (Lake Constance) are from the tabloid newspaper *Bild* (15.71%). Meanwhile, for PEGIDA Mittelfranken (Nürnberg), the top link shared is a regional newspaper, *Nordbayern* (North Bavaria). This indicates that while far-right social movements focus on tabloid and regional news, far-right political parties (including the pages of their MPs) share a combination of quality traditional media sources. NPD here remains an outlier, as it self-promotes by sharing its own domain "npd" most frequently.

Apart from the most shared domains in the network (+1000 times), which are Facebook and RT, we also see that almost half of the remaining top shared domains are traditional media sources like national quality newspapers (*Die Welt, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*), tabloids (*Bild*), and magazines (*Spiegel, Focus*). The rest of these domains belong to mostly far-right alternative media magazines (*Unser Mitteleuropa, Jungefreiheit, Zuerst, Eigentümlich Frei*) and the blog *Tichy's Einblick*. Against this backdrop, it is possible to say that the most influential domains shared overall belonged both to traditional and alternative media (see Graph 6.1), which means that far-right actors on Facebook still heavily rely on traditional media when communicating with their audiences.

Discussion

The hyperlink network of the German far right on Facebook reveals a sparse, fragmented network of various kinds of actors applying hyperlinks with different intentions and strategies. With regard to the use of hyperlinks, between 2017 and 2020 the number of hyperlinks by political parties, publishers, and commercial organisations increased in 2017 and 2018, declining later in 2019 and 2020. The exception here are political and social movements, whose number of link shares suddenly dipped between 2017 and 2018. This period is the same as the mainstreaming efforts of Facebook Company, now Meta, after the Cambridge Analytica scandal, when they deplatformed many politically active fringe actors.

As to the function of hyperlinks, publishers and commercial organisations use hyperlinks more intensively, particularly for self-promoting content published on their (official) third-party websites. This is particularly the case of alternative media. Publishing the link and not directly distributing the content on Facebook also enables these actors to overcome content moderation and adapt themselves to platform constraints. This is a step towards platformed mainstreaming.

Once again, taking the shared domains into account, when not self-promoting, far-right parties and politicians share heavily from traditional media sources, especially the quality daily newspaper *Die Welt*. Far-right social movements, in turn, share content from the tabloid newspaper

Bild. These outcomes also indicate that most content was neither created originally by far-right actors themselves nor created only for Facebook. The most shared links overall are Facebook itself and *Russia Today,* followed by mainstream media such as national quality newspapers (*Die Welt, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*), then tabloids (*Bild*) and magazines (*Spiegel, Focus*), and finally alternative media magazines (*Unser Mitteleuropa, Jungefreiheit, Zuerst, Eigentüumlich Frei*) and the blog *Tichy's Einblick*.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we analysed how far-right actors are (still) using hyperlinks on Facebook to present themselves as "normal" (the opposite of fringe), enabling their move from marginal positions on the political spectrum to the mainstream. Our assumption was that this process of mainstreaming is shaped by both platform media logic and the collective efforts of these actors.

To test this assumption, posts shared between 2017 and 2020 on 100 Facebook pages from the far-right spectrum in Germany, including publishers and commercial organisations, political parties and politicians, and political and social movements, were collected. Those posts, including URLs, were further submitted to a hyperlink network analysis.

Our findings show that while we observe a trend of decreasing link shares across all far-right actor types, hyperlink sharing continues to be a stable strategy used by the remaining Facebook pages of far-right actors in Germany, despite factors such as deplatformisation and migration to other (social media) platforms. However, only some of the far-right content on Facebook is produced by the actors themselves.

While publishers and commercial organisations use hyperlinks almost solely to promote themselves and their content, political parties and politicians mostly post content from mainstream media like the daily newspaper *Die Welt*, and self-promotion is secondary for them. Far-right social movements, in turn, share mostly content from the tabloid newspaper *Bild.* This illustrates that in their pages on the mainstream platform Facebook, far-right actors are associating their profiles with content that

circulates broadly in the mainstream of society, rather than from "fringe sources". This not only enables such actors to present themselves as "normal", but also has consequences for tackling the far right online: instead of "fact-checking" content from alternative media, challenging this online ecosystem requires also monitoring the third-party content and narratives that far-right actors employ, no matter if they are spread by alternative or mainstream media content.

We acknowledge that observations based on a single platform, even one as large as Facebook, can only offer an imperfect portrait of the German far-right ecosystem online. Employing methodological nationalism by focusing on the German case also prevents us from claiming to explore the entire far-right online ecosystem as a whole. Furthermore, CrowdTangle enforces limitations on data collection, on top of the common issues that arise from using an API in terms of reliability and reproducibility. Finally, our focus on the one-directional link-sharing activity without much insight into content or reciprocity could be hiding further dynamics of the German far-right ecosystem online from our sight. Future research should address these issues.

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7

Dissemination and Prevention of Anti-Muslim Narratives and Practices in Urban Governance in England and Germany

Anna-Maria Meuth

Abstract Far-right movements and parties have become a visible part of the political landscape in Germany and England. This article examines the processes of racialisation in local spaces, councils, and urban governance, contrasting the two different democracies. The study aims to contribute to research on the populist turn in local politics. Using an exploratory case study approach, it focuses on mechanisms and local conditions that shape the articulation and dissemination of anti-Muslim discourse and practice in the reciprocal dynamics between groups of the (heterogeneous) "radicalised" mainstream and the normalisation of the far right. The interviews with Muslim/non-Muslim members of civil society and local politicians show that the normalisation of the far right occurs through both the polarisation and instrumentalisation of

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L. Sponholz et al. (eds.), *Radicalising the Mainstream in Western Europe*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-85963-2_7

seemingly neutral policies in local councils as well as through a shift to the right in the statements of local politicians. However, the study underlines the influence of anti-Muslim racism in everyday urban politics and its impact on local communities and democracy. Thus, institutional racism in political recruitment in democratic parties, the preservation of particular political interests, or a lack of transparency in political decision-making can affirm far-right normalisation. The conclusions emphasise the crucial role of civil society in promoting democratic resilience.

Keywords Far right • Populism • Local politics • Normalisation • Anti-Muslim racism

Introduction

This chapter deals with processes of racialisation and ethnicisation in municipal spaces and councils in Germany and England. It focuses on mechanisms and conditions that shape the articulation and dissemination of Anti-Muslim narratives and practices in the reciprocal dynamics between groups of the (heterogeneous) "radicalised" mainstream and the normalisation of the far right. Far-right currents and parties have become a visible part of the political landscapes in Germany and the United Kingdom (UK) in recent years. Particularly since the long summer of migration in 2015, with the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, the UK Independence Party (UKIP), and recently the Reform UK Party (Heath et al., 2025) in England, political forces with an alleged threat to (White) Christian Western European societies through (perceived Muslim) migration processes have mobilised and attained peaks of attention, institutionalisation, and influence. Islamophobia has become a major ideological frame of extreme right movements (Kallis, 2018). At the same time, an articulation of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant policies and narratives can be observed across almost the entire spectrum of the political mainstream (Syeda & Molkenbur, 2023; Mondon & Winter, 2017; Abdelkader, 2017). Brexit and the so-called

Rwanda deal[1] in the UK and the recent tightening of asylum laws in the EU provide some evidence of the political consequences. While a normalisation of illiberal politics, discourses, and in broader terms anti-/post democratic actions and their societal consequences is currently being intensively studied for national party landscapes, debates in the public sphere, and media discourses often against the background of crisis (Heitmeyer, 2024; Krzyżanowski et al., 2023), the specific expressions of mechanisms in municipal democracy and effects on affected communities have thus far been rather neglected. Only relatively few studies on the negotiated shift to the right and the mechanisms of spread of right-wing narratives in urban politics and opportunity structures are available thus far (Bescherer et al., 2021; Chou et al., 2022; Domann, 2024; Domann & Nuissl, 2022) and there has recently been a localist turn in populist studies to consider the question of how populism intersects with localism (Chou et al., 2022). The objective of investigating such normalisation is also to identify approaches to denormalisation and to understand their scope and dynamics (Wodak, 2020a, p. 48). The city is of particular interest for this research field, especially as it is considered a "bulwark" against the (normalisation of the) far right (Turam, 2019). Moreover, the study of municipalities attaches importance to democratic everyday practice and encounters in the urban space (Lefebvre, 2014/1991). In this context, shifting the focus to the local encounters, perceptions, and interactions of citizens in negotiating and countering far-right movements has already shed light on the important role of "everyday racism" in these processes (Friese et al., 2019). Against this backdrop, this chapter examines the following questions: Have specific mechanisms of normalisation developed in the context of urban governance in Germany and the UK? Whether and how are they entangled with the "radicalised mainstream" and therefore institutional and

[1] As part of a strategy to externalise border control, all those who do not have the necessary papers to stay in England are to be deported to Rwanda, even if they do not come from Rwanda. There they should apply for asylum and, if the decision is in their favour, remain there and not return to the UK. For the moment (July 2024), the implementation has been halted by the new Labour government.

every-day racism?[2] How do they effect local communities and democracy? Based on an exploratory case study in cities with a high degree of far-right normalisation (hereafter: normalisation), the study contrasts regions in Germany and England with varying levels of demographic and religious pluralism. In the sampling strategy of the interviewees—members of civil society[3] and local councillors—particular importance was attached to the inclusion of perspectives of Muslim subjectivities and positionalities so that experiences of racism in urban society can be reconstructed to enable the examination of their significance for normalisation processes. Design and methods are explained in more detail in the methodological section below. This is preceded by a section that links the theory of normalisation and of anti-Muslim racism in mainstream society to urban governance studies and provides an overview of the relevance of the respective domestic policies and debates on religion and migration in each of the countries studied. Further, it is argued that the normalisation process leads away from the exclusive consideration of far-right movements towards negotiation of authoritarian developments within the state (Brown, 2019). Therefore, the relationship between the state and civil society becomes crucial for counter-strategies (Nettelbladt, 2023). However, independent, autonomous civil society and its function to negotiate conflicts efficiently also play an increasing role, especially in regions with a high degree of normalisation accompanied by the phenomenon of a radicalised mainstream. Overall, the empirical results reveal and discuss specific expressions and forms of mechanisms of normalisation and dissemination of Anti-Muslim narratives that are shaped by the opportunity structures of domestic sub-national politics, and thus suggest potential and already applied approaches to denormalisation. Although it is considered difficult to push back against the high degree of far-right normalisation in some regions, the current polarisation and

[2] Following the definition of Paul Mecheril and Claus Melter, racism is understood here as "a powerful system of discourses and practices operating with racial constructions or connected to these constructions [...] with which inequality and hegemonic power relations are firstly effective and secondly plausibilized" (Mecheril & Melter, 2009, pp. 15). As noted by the Combahee River Collective and Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1970s/80s, simultaneities and therefore intersectionality of different forms of discrimination such as race, class, and gender must be considered as a perspective of analysis (cf. Crenshaw, 1989).

[3] Civil society refers to the societal sphere between the market and the state. In accordance with the research question, the sampling is focused on democratic pluralist actors in civil society.

disturbance of politics—as well as the role of the local context and conditions of local democracies and governance in the expression of local populism—are thoroughly analysed in order to understand (local) mechanisms of normalisation and their impact on politics and society as a whole. Also examined are the ways in which democratic actors in urban politics and civil society react to these changes and try to constantly develop counter-strategies by seeking ways of dealing with the new paradoxes in the urban governance of the "contested state" in everyday practice. Ultimately, the results clearly show the interdependencies of normalisation processes with the manifestations of mainstream racism. These findings must be considered for the understanding of denormalisation and further democratisation processes in European societies, as will be discussed in the conclusion, together with the strengths and limitations of the approach.

Theoretical Framework

This section discusses the relationship between normalisation processes and mainstream racism for the dissemination and thus the prevention of anti-Muslim discourses and practices for urban spaces and sub-national politics, considering country-specific national discourses on religion, Islam, and migration in Germany and England.

Anti-Muslim Discourses and Practices Between Mechanisms of Normalisation and Mainstream Racism

With right-wing populist[4] and partly anti-democratic movements entering local, national, and supranational parliaments at the strongest level

[4] Populism is a political concept that refers to a (thin, sometimes syncretic) ideology, strategy, discourse, or style of communication and, at its core, emphasises a dichotomy between the elites and ordinary people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The term populism has lost precision through its inflationary use. Nevertheless, for Ruth Wodak, the central point is that it focuses on the currents, policies, and actors who claim to have democratic goals but instrumentalise democracy for their own often undemocratic purposes (2018). Following Cas Mudde the term far-right is used as a generic term for movements such as extreme right, (populist) radical right, and (neo)fascists (Mudde, 2019).

since 1945, the causes and forms of their rise have been the subject of intensified research and public debates (Brown, 2019; Norris & Inglehardt, 2019). The current "fourth wave" of strengthening is characterised on the one hand by the fact that the base of the parties transcends social class and on the other hand by the low degree of exclusion of these currents, i.e., the normalisation of far-right ideology in society (Mudde, 2019, p. 14; Weisskircher, 2023). This "shameless normalisation" (Wodak, 2020b) exhibits mechanisms by which right-wing agendas and ideologies are adopted by established political actors and cross political borders or seep through permeable borders. They involve the incorporation of fringe ideology into the mainstream—not only of politics but also of popular culture and other fields—through recontextualisation and resemiotisation. They manifest particularly in tightening migration and asylum politics (i.e., from announcements to the construction of walls or fences) (cf. Wodak, 2018, 2020a, b). Such processes tend to proceed from backstage to frontstage and across social fields and different types of text formats (Wodak, 2020a, p. 43).

Furthermore, there has been a current shift within the right-wing spectrum, which, under the concept of mainstreaming, refers to strategies of the far right to adapt its positions to the social mainstream to provoke less contradiction and to align with democratically legitimised social majority positions (cf. Newth et al., 2025; Fangen & Nilsen, 2020). Actors tend to resort to a rhetoric of self-victimisation and at the same time break taboos in the public sphere, shifting the discourse to the right. The erosion of democracy from within is recognised as a central mechanism, whereby freedom of speech, pluralism, and the role of the oppressed are claimed by far-right actors.

The normalisation processes in Germany and England differ in several respects (Brubaker, 2017; Goodwin & Dennison, 2018; Schellenberg, 2013). In Germany, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a party with tendencies of undemocratic ideology and unconstitutional activities and aims, entered the Bundestag in 2017 for the first time since 1945 (Klinger et al., 2023). Compared to other European countries, its entry into parliament came relatively late within the forming of anti-immigrant resentments in summer 2015. In sub-national politics, the party has achieved

different successes regionally (Hafeneger et al., 2018; Weisskircher, 2020). Recently, the intensified networking of the AfD with far-right actors has been analysed (OBS, 2018). In the two-party system of England, right-wing ideologemes and rhetoric have been repeatedly adopted from the fringes to the mainstream in recent decades. For example, Nigel Farage (UKIP) has intensified the anti-migration/anti-Muslim discourse that was pushed by the far right and adopted by government officials (Syeda & Molkenbur, 2023). No far-right party—apart from seats in local parliaments—has ever gained a parliamentary foothold, yet the spread of anti-Muslim narratives has not ceased. Although such parties have not entered the national parliament in England, a specific normalisation process has also taken place here at the same time as in other European countries (Trilling, 2013).

The relationship between mainstream racism and far-right normalisation processes discussed in this volume and chapter has already been addressed particularly in the debate on the rise of Islamophobia and the mobilisation of far-right organisations. Scholars emphasise the central role of anti-Muslim racism and anti-migration attitudes of these currents and, in this context, the use of pseudo-liberal discourses (e.g., the supposed defence of women's rights) by the actors and narratives to aid in the mainstreaming of these concepts. In particular, such liberal roots of right-wing Islamophobic resentment are highlighted (Berntzen, 2020). Following on from this argument, Islamophobic movements such as the German *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (PEGIDA) (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West) are situated in the centre of society and, accordingly, facilitate a misdirection of an extremism paradigm (Küpper et al., 2019). Consequently, approaches to countering Islamophobia are generally not directed against the far-right mobilisation alone, but often imply a preventative approach for (urban) society as a whole (Kedikli & Akça, 2018; Allchorn, 2016; Hyökki & Cubelic, 2023; Ramalingam et al., 2012).

Given the important role played by anti-Muslim racism rooted in the centre of society, it must be considered in connection with normalisation processes in the urban space and in subnational politics. A local Muslim politician analyses from her point of view:

> It's not so on the fringes anymore, like the time when Solingen and Mölln happened, right-wing radicals, shaved head, Springer boots, Nazi. No, now they look different. They look completely normal. And then there's the racism in the middle of society. We all have racism in us. (R24G)

In the context of normalisation processes, the focus of the analyses turns to the authoritarian transformations of states themselves (Brown, 2019) and here to the (re-)activation and role of the radicalised mainstream. In terms of democratic theory, the relevance of resilience and defence of democracy is now placed at the centre of attention. The shifts caused by normalisation processes thus represent a new accentuation compared to the times when far-right groups were seen as a social sub-sector that was more distinct from the parliamentary system. As a result, the need for increasing social negotiations against normalisation processes within the state and thus for successful cooperation between the state and civil society has become more important; the adaptability and reshaping of this relationship between state and civil society has already been demonstrated, even if spaces have become narrower and conflicts must be dealt with (della Porta and Steinhilper, 2022; Weiberg et al., forthcoming). Through parliamentary normalisation processes, the relationship between politics and administration on the one hand and civil society on the other must therefore be renegotiated along the dimensions of criticism/autonomy and cooperation/consensus, not least depending on the different (migrant/religious) positionalities and objectives of the established and new actors and alliances (Nettelbladt, 2023). However, "practices for an open city and migrant support have continued and sometimes even increased despite (or because of) growing racist and authoritarian articulations" (ibid., p. 2). To the extent that certain relationships between the state and civil society are severely strained by criticism of normalisation processes vis-à-vis established politics, the need for democratic civil society to function autonomously also increases. Therefore, normalisation processes within civil society (e.g., in church communities (Haspel, 2023)) must be considered more intensely.

Normalisation in Subnational Politics and Civil Society

Subnational policy is often described as administrative: municipalities are "delivering welfare services on behalf of central governments" (Callanan & Loughlin, 2021, p. 1). Against the backdrop of financial crises, the introduction of neoliberal management structures has changed municipal administrations, implementing a "post-political" and market-oriented governance (Deas, 2014). In this context, city marketing plays an important role in the attractiveness and competitiveness of the city in dealing with social challenges such as regional demographic and economic developments. Improving the image of a city is becoming increasingly important, especially in the case of strong local far-right traditions (Brichzin et al., 2022).

The academic debate currently revolves around the question of whether a consensual mode of negotiation in local parliaments, as a special opportunity structure, can contribute to the normalisation of the far right, as this particularly favours the search for common positions. Studies from Germany show regional differences when considering the structures of local voter mobilisation (personnel, strategies, and structures in local associations; see Mudde, 2007, p. 302). In many places, established parties succeed in preventing the far right from winning elections. If the role of criticism is unclear, if mayors have fallen out of favour, or if there are strong concordance structures and strong support for the far right, the latter has a better chance of gaining a foothold in local parliaments (Domann & Nuissl, 2022, pp. 214–215). In England, studies on the demographic composition of voters show a correlation between far-right mandates and cities with poorer, shrinking populations.

In Germany, civil society is involved via manifold instruments of civic participation, while local councils in England also maintain close links with the local communities in their constituencies. Despite increasing problems of funding and organisational maintenance, protests against far-right mobilisation and engagement in refugee support are taking place locally in many places among long-standing alliances and/or with new organisations and committed individuals.

Social conflict dynamics with or against the far right must be understood in the context of the supposedly post-political urban governance (Mullis & Miggelbrink, 2022, p. 9). In the context of negotiating local conflicts, camouflage tactics and the dark side of civil society, in the form of right-wing-influenced initiatives, become apparent. A study by Busher et al. identifies key aspects that are decisive for the (non-)development of violence in protests against minorities in local communities in England, Germany, and the US. Among them specific local field relations between movement actors and political and cultural elites, and between movement actors and the general public, can lead to intensifying dynamics for confrontation. Different path dependencies that can lead to violence must also be taken into account. On the one hand, marginalised movements that are decoupled from society can become radicalised, but radicalisation can also occur through integration into society and through the encouragement of other groups (Busher et al., 2022). Finally, the category of space is highly relevant in local conflicts: long-standing conflicts and negotiation processes take place, e.g., around religion- and migration-related issues in urban public spaces. In the 1990s, refugee homes and mosque construction projects became frequent fields of mobilisation for the far right, but also for established local politicians.

National Debates and Domestic Politics on Religion, Politics, and Islam

Deeply embedded and country-specific Islamophobic traditions are reflected in the political culture in public debates on the intersecting issues of immigration, integration, and religious policy in Germany and England. Since 9/11 at the latest, these have been increasingly linked to counter-terrorism policies.

In England, the history of Muslim immigration is closely linked to colonial history. In the 1960s, numerous (labour) migrants from Pakistan moved to the UK. Thus, on the one hand, the self-image of a multicultural society is retained in the public consciousness due to the Commonwealth, but post-colonial racist continuities continue to permeate society until today (Koram, 2022). In West Germany, labour

immigration from Turkey (and other countries), as part of so-called guest worker agreements, began in the 1950s. In the German Democratic Republic (GDR), labour recruitment agreements were concluded with so-called socialist brother states. It was not until the 2000s that migration policy changed, with the acknowledgement by the government that Germany had become a country of immigration. While labour migrants had previously been perceived predominantly according to their nation of origin, this shifted towards a primary perception of them as Muslim migrants (Tezcan, 2021). Islamophobic ethnicisations of groups or threat scenarios caused by migration processes are regularly raised in national media discourses on integration and cultural diversity (e.g., the Sarrazin debate, German Leitkultur, the New Year's Eve riots).

The history of (labour) migration in both Germanies led to various levels of demographic pluralisation regionally, but more recent immigration movements are currently changing these patterns. The organisation of religious policy in England is regulated very liberally in the absence of institutional guidelines, and religious symbols are permitted in the public sector, unlike in other European countries. Nevertheless, Islamophobic discussions about the affiliation of Muslim immigrants have also taken place there, for example based on the question of dual citizenship or regarding the education system (Turam, 2004).

In Germany, religious policy—which is based on the special relationship between the state and religious communities as public corporations—has established the Islam Conference as a body for cooperation with Muslim communities (Thränhardt & Weiss, 2016). Critical voices emphasise the difficulties arising from continued discrimination against Muslim communities compared to the established churches. Other problems are seen in the reduction of the approach integration to a single issue—religion—and thus generalising the heterogeneity of Muslim subjectivity and paying too little attention to key areas such as participation in the labour market.

Finally, the social consequences of the Islamist-motivated terrorist attacks of 9/11, the attacks in France in 2015, the London bombings of 7/7, or the attacks on Breitscheitplatz in Berlin in 2016 have become a tense topic in the discourse on Islam in Europe. The security agenda frequently connects to the discourses on migration and religion. Political

programmes, such as the counter-terrorism policing Prevent programme in the UK, can contribute to the alienation of the Muslim population, the strengthening of the far right, and the spread of Islamophobia (Abbas & Awan, 2015; Heath-Kelly, 2012; Schiffauer, 2008). British policy in the 1980s and 1990s was strongly focused on promoting multiculturalism without strong pressure to assimilate, before it changed to an integration policy. The surveillance and control of Muslim communities after the terrorist attacks led to a tension between the pursuit of security and the protection of individual freedoms and to a shift of public attention to immigration policy (Spektorowski & Elfersy, 2020).

Methods and Research Design

The aim of this study is to reconstruct the specific expressions and patterns of mechanisms in the normalisation of far-right racist discourse, considering aspects of the radicalised mainstream in urban areas in Germany and England, explicitly taking into account the connection with the manifestation of everyday racism. Based on a descriptive/explorative approach, a double-contrast design was applied in which a total of four different regions in Germany and England were selected for a case study. The limited scope of the study does not aim to systematically investigate causalities between the local context and the expression of a radicalised mainstream. Rather, a spectrum of different cases is included in order to incorporate possible variances for research on the connections between locality and populism. The cities/regions were selected for similarities and differences to include a possible range of patterns of regional normalisation. All cities are mid-sized and located in post-industrial regions. Far-right networks are traditionally anchored in these cities and more advanced normalisation processes can be observed in the electorate's behaviour (high Brexit vote, UKIP votes in EU election 2014, high affinity to the AfD). Selecting cities with more pronounced normalisation processes makes it possible to explicitly explore these mechanisms, while at the same time revealing the continued adaptation and vitality of counterstrategies under "strained conditions" in these regions (Nettelbladt, 2023).

At the same time, the selected cities differ in their migration history, so that one case per country is demographically more pluralised in contrast to a less pluralised one. In Germany, some cities in the pluralised Ruhr Region were chosen and others in parts of the former East Germany for the less religiously pluralised cases. In England, cities in regions in the Northwest (highly pluralised case) and the Northeast (less pluralised case) were the focus of research interest. Forms of struggles and conflicts for recognition and participation possibly vary with different degrees of integration and representation (El-Mafaalani, 2020) and influence normalisation processes. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted in person, mostly in summer/autumn 2022 and later, on themes including positionality, views on normalisation, and everyday racism, as well as on counterstrategies. All interviewees are participants in (religious/anti-racist) civil society and local city councils and are committed to an open, pluralistic democratic society.

Particular emphasis was placed on Muslim subjectivities in order to include the simultaneities and interweaving of processes of normalisation and examine the particular role of everyday racism in the fields of action. The interview transcripts were coded in MAXQDA in collaboration with student employees using an inductive qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014) to develop codes based on the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In addition, the analysis is supplemented with material from (local) newspaper articles, websites, flyers, and field protocols from ethnographic observations of the urban spaces and participation in (local) events.

Findings

The significance for negotiations within the "contested state of the normalisation of the far right in subnational politics, the civil society–state relationship, and within the realm of civil society was developed in the theoretical derivation. Each empirical section draws attention to each of these spheres. The double-contrast design of the two-country comparison and the surveys in pluralised and less pluralised regions structures the presentation of the results. In each section, the presentation begins with

a condensed description of the findings for both countries, followed by a sub-section with the empirical evidence and differentiations for the normalisation and expression of mainstream racism in different regions, thus presenting moments of the emergence and (re-)activation of a radicalised mainstream.

Local Democracies Between Specific Expressions of Mechanisms of Far-Right Normalisation and Everyday Racism

Findings show specific expressions of mechanisms of normalisation of far-right actors and ideologies in the local councils in Germany and England. In interviews, many of the local councillors highlighted the shifts in the political system due to the entry of the AfD into parliaments in Germany, to Brexit and the rising anti-Muslim ideologies in the UK, and likewise the adoption by centre parties of anti-Islamic and anti-migrant narratives in politics in both countries.

In Germany, contrary to common assumptions, municipal politics is perceived by interviewees as increasingly polarised, a situation that some perceive to be provoked by the tactics of AfD factions, among others, in (re-)activating conflicts. In religiously pluralised regions, political issues are taken up by the AfD as part of the regional handling of topics such as migration, integration, and religious freedom and framed with anti-Islamic perspectives, thereby increasing insecurity and distrust. Examples include the construction of religious buildings or public calls to prayer. Concern about the instrumentalisation of topics leaves interviewees with the impression of being restricted in their own freedom of speech. If there are no Islam- or migration-related issues on the agenda of local parliaments, the focus lies on strategies that bring up supposedly neutral citizen-related issues such as mobility and transport to mask their underlying agenda, as one interview partner observes. However, these practices of assuming a veneer of normality can also be applied to migration and integration issues: "*When I proposed a model [for local integration], I was praised for the good concept for integration policy*" (R23G). This tactic of applied consensual local politics makes it difficult to criticise local actors.

In all visited regions, proceedings of local democracy lead to political and public controversies when parliamentary groups from democratic parties win majorities with approval of the AfD or fill positions in committees. Such processes are taking place in many municipalities, which means an extensive political normalisation at this level. While the demand to maintain a political firewall against the far right is publicly strong (Matzner, 2024), at the same time predominantly conservative politicians are testing forms of collaboration (cf. Hummel & Taschke, 2023). All interviewed persons try to recognise these ongoing processes and build up new strategies, such as ignoring far-right provocation or trying to prevail on agencies to present convincing solutions in local councils. One method is to respond explicitly to supposedly neutral proposals, e.g., on street lighting or infrastructure in certain neighbourhoods, and to combine these with feminist and anti-racist perspectives when insecurities about safe local space are created by far-right actors.

Altogether, some far-right mainstreaming approaches are perceived as strategically orchestrated with regard to local opportunity structures. No matter whether far-right politics are strategically and ostensibly depoliticised or such actors intervene in a polarising way, their anchoring in urban society is also linked to (supra-regional) far-right mobilisation on the streets, according to the interviewees, which also flexibly adapts to local migration or global conflict issues depending on the respective opportunity structure.

In England, normalisation processes take place through the adoption of Islamophobic statements and restrictive migration policies on the part of established parties. These processes greatly influence the impressions of local players, as one interviewee describes with regard to the spreading of Islamophobia: "*Yes, because in the UK, it's mainstreamed. When prime ministers, when people in influence are making these statements, then it's worrying*" (R34E).

There are media reports of particularly serious, nationwide local cases of this adoption and advances by mostly Tory councillors across the entire country, showing the shifts in discourse, framing, and breaking rhetorical taboos. For example, a local councillor tweeted that Islam was "domination not integration". The councillor was expelled and the council has directed him to undergo equality and diversity training ("Dudley

councillor breached conduct code", 2020). In some cases, expelled politicians remained in the local council as independent politicians and continued their Islamophobic agitation. In other cases, they were quietly rehabilitated and are standing for elections again, as a dossier by the group Hope not Hate revealed ("Tory councillors suspended", 2023). This shows how the breaking of taboos shifts local political discourse, and rehabilitations and trivialisations in local democratic structures can run below the radar of media publicity.

In some regions, far-right actors such as the English Defence League (EDL) and successor organisations mobilise systematically in the municipal sphere, often in connection with so-called grooming gang[5] scandals or negotiations about religious symbols in the public sphere. Such actors are described by interviewees as exploring cities with ongoing, polarising conflicts about Islam(ism) and migration and then organising local rallies, which are often picked up by the media and can thus have an impact on local politics. Mistrust around the topic of Islamism and the essentialisation and racialisation of Muslims as a homogenous group massively disrupt urban social cohesion and the safety of those affected by racism.

Examples from both Germany and England showed that in the logical frame of local politics, the negotiation on normalisation is about positions, elite networks, maintaining power, and majorities. In this context, anti-Muslim racism is highly relevant in the institutional racism of local political councillors and must be highlighted as a particular co-existing phenomenon for local normalisation processes, as evidenced in three ways. First, one example from Germany shows ongoing othering processes taking place in subnational politics, which means that local policies are becoming ethnically essentialised and certain persons or groups become delegitimised. Specifically, criticism of opposition is racially framed and politicians are defamed, although the political participation of people with a history of migration has a long tradition. A female Muslim local politician in Germany shared her experiences with attempting to implement a pluralistic democracy for all citizens: "*When I stand*

[5] The racialised public reception of these violent events, a form of abuse of minors by groups, is critically discussed in the literature in England (Gill, 2023).

up for the rights of migrants and Muslims in the city, I am accused by the local city authorities of pursuing a 'Turk thing'" (R24G).

A second phenomenon could be called a racist undermining of local political decision-making structures. The local politician mentioned above also criticises the lack of transparency of municipal agreements made backstage, as these can be used to exclude individual actors from information, preparing political decisions without their knowledge and contribution.

Thirdly, a phenomenon can be identified that one might call "diversity resistance as a mainstream norm". A female Muslim local politician tried to convince her labour party superiors to improve the diversity of recruitment in a historically small but recently more pluralised region in England: "*I think decision makers in the council need to be educated and trained about discrimination*" (R43E). According to her descriptions, because leaders assume they have the right strategies in place to reduce Islamophobia and racism, or just claim to, without intending to change, it is very difficult to achieve truly effective change. In the expert's experience, it is often about implementing an expected label, but the results are never evaluated.

These examples show that anti-Muslim racism is often embedded in the logic of local political structures and becomes visible in the ongoing negotiation of diversity, in shifts to normalisation in political systems, and in negotiating political power and influence. Especially the perspectives of councillors affected by racism personally clearly emphasise this point, in both countries.

In summary, normalisation takes place on the one hand through the polarisation of local politics and on the other hand through the instrumentalisation of supposed non-ideological policies in local democracies. In Eastern parts of Germany, where the religious life (of Muslims) is less present in the public sphere and everyday life, at times when it is not being scandalised, normalisation tactics are often pushed by occupying allegedly citizen-oriented issues.

Thus, in both Germany and the UK, developments express diverse intersections with conscious and unconscious mainstream racism when it comes to the negotiation of political representation and power. The implications of regional demographic plurality are expressed here, when

the awareness of diversity, participation, and discrimination in White hegemonies is even less negotiated. In pluralised regions, (un-)conscious, but more and more challenged and yet unchanged, and therefore radicalised racist attributions may be used by conservative and social democratic (White) majorities during political power negotiations in everyday practices.

Mistrust and the Silence of the Mainstream Influence the Relationship Between the State and Civil Society

With an increasing degree of normalisation, there is an increasing need for a resilient relationship between the state and civil society to prevent anti-Muslim discourse and practice and therefore to build up an open democratic society more generally. With coordinated tactics and strategies, local democracy could be strengthened through the joint efforts of the local stakeholders, as was discussed in the theory section of this chapter. Otherwise, increasing normalisation could lead to shifts and disruptions in the relationship of state and civil society in both countries.

In Germany, these issues go hand in hand with the question of how local mayors but also (White) majority society openly deal with mutual criticism and how they publicly show solidarity for local activists engaged in antiracist and interreligious groups. In highly normalised cases, it remains essential for local civil society actors to encourage local politicians distinguish themselves from normalisation processes in politics and society.

In a potentially highly normalised region in Eastern Germany, which is reflected in the local council, civil society actors explicitly expect politicians to show public solidarity with their efforts to fight far-right normalisation. However, this expected demarcation does not always seem to work properly. On the contrary, the situation provoked a public debate in Germany in the summer of 2023 about the need to politically isolate the far right in (local) parliaments. But, as shown above, in numerous cities collaboration has taken place in the local sphere.[6] Against this backdrop,

[6] https://kommunalwiki.boell.de/index.php/Beispiele_kommunaler_Zusammenarbeit_zwischen_CDU_und_AfD.

local activists in civil society alliances and councils explain that this situation creates problems for cooperation and creates mistrust towards the state for such engagement: "*It would be so much easier if the local mayors would say something instead of remaining silent!*" (R12G). Critical voices, in the sense of countering far-right normalisation, feel isolated and see threats to future developments in local democracy: "*Ultimately you let the enemies of democracy play at democracy until they eliminate it*" (ibid.).

Some note that even locally established party functionaries themselves politically endorse the normalisation and shifting of anti-migration and Islamophobic patterns, accepting the consensus.

> If the financial background is there, for example, when it comes to refugee homes, you can influence the building authorities. And that you make it so difficult that it doesn't get built. There's a lot going on backstage with influence. (R15G)

The results for Germany show that this ambiguity and silence—which may be for tactical reasons, so as not to cause a stir around conflicts or offer a projection surface, or out of a need to protect themselves from personalised political attacks against local elites, or out of political pragmatism or seeking approval—enable a certain discursive mainstreaming strategy that allows the far right to stylise itself as a victim. This can become more of a problem under supposed citizen-oriented politics:

> When you publicly criticise right-wing populist politics or actors, you are often accused of calling for undemocratic measures. (R14G)[7]

Recently, in England, the relationship between the state and in particular democratic anti-racist and Muslim civil society has also become more strained as a result of the normalisation processes. There is a long history of frustration and alienation from parts of (heterogeneous) Muslim civil society and speakers as a result of the Prevent Programme, which still influences subjective mistrust, especially on the part of less politically integrated groups or critical voices against racism in society. All

[7] Recently, the far right has been utilising another strategy of re-enforcing accusations and trivialising the scandal as misguided.

interviewees confirm how the Prevent Programme—although it has been improved—has evoked this mistrust on the local everyday level. A Muslim anti-racist activist summarises:

> Prevent was about isolating the Muslim community. But a lot of those laws that first came out, counter-terrorism laws, are now being used to target other activists. It was a direct attack on them, at a time when they were building solidarity with non-Muslim groups. (R34E)

Further, there was a public controversy surrounding the introduction of a definition of Islamophobia in national and local parliaments, where some felt it could be used too strongly as a cover for Islamism and others wanted to draw attention to the structural implications of anti-Muslim racism in society in terms of definitions (Siddique, 2024). However, there were positive reports in the interviews about the organisation of the annual month against Islamophobia, which led to lively regional participation, exchange, and information formats. Also, close collaboration with local authorities regarding reporting and measuring Islamophobia was appreciated.

However, from the perspective of the interviewees, the described constraints on the relationship between state and civil society groups caused by normalisation processes is not solely due to problems with representation and solidarity in the political sphere. Rather, interviewees in both countries assumed that the developments in the political sphere were intertwined with a broader racist political climate in some regions.[8]

In this sense, a well-connected person within state, church, and interreligious activism in Germany states:

> When it came to xenophobia, it was actually more about the men who came from Syria. Or those from Iran, Iraq, that they are now here in the city centre. And that they MIGHT be harassing women. But that came from the whole population. (F11G)

[8] This is not intended to indicate a generalised causality—none of the single case descriptions do—but is rather an observation from a regional case with a high level of normalisation (in a certain context of space and time) that needs to be examined in greater depth. In many cases a considerable mass can be mobilised against normalisation, as shown by recent country-wide demonstrations in Germany against the AfD.

One local group in England, which organised protests against far-right attacks against a mosque, revealed the silence of the White majority when it came to protesting against anti-Muslim violence and action: "*When we held a demonstration to show solidarity with the Muslim community, the residents from the majority White neighbourhood stayed away*" (R23E).

Examples show that the relationship between politics and civil society is thus changed and negatively affected by the passivity, ignorance, prejudice, or silence on the part of mainstream groups.

In summary, such silence in the (radicalised) mainstream can be seen as a central momentum or tipping point for normalisation processes in both countries. In Germany, especially in regions with little pluralisation, the interviewed persons often blame a silent, indifferent, or simply normalised societal mainstream for the political normalisation processes (cf. Nierth & Streich, 2016). However, in more pluralised and less normalised regions, the opportunity structure for interacting and collaborating with diverse local councillors and administrations may remain as an option for countering far-right normalisation.

Preventing and Countering Racism and Prejudice: Challenges for Denormalisation

The more pronounced the degree of normalisation processes in politics and society, the more important the role of an independent and active democratic civil society for processes of denormalisation. The findings with regard to the function and vitality of local civil society show a strong effort in the handling and integration of conflicts at the local level and the associated preventative work against racism and prejudice. Despite (or because of) declining normalisation processes, local democratic pluralistic civil society stands united (sometimes in factions) against far-right normalisation—albeit with different strategies and objectives—and is furthermore negotiating social conflicts in the everyday interactions in all the cases studied. At the same time, the negotiation of internal conflicts and adaptations to societal change processes must be developed further in an ongoing open and constructive process. In both countries, the negotiation of everyday racism, diversity, and representation proceeds differently in regions that are less or more pluralised.

Especially interfaith groups and alliances established decades ago are still active today, publishing information leaflets and organising interfaith events and demonstrations in all visited regions.

> I would say our work now is actually to shape and promote peaceful coexistence in the city. And of course, prejudice and other things play a role here. And also right-wing populist ideas, which we want to counter or oppose. (R21G)
>
> I think we must recognise that we now live in multicultural Britain. And more and more people who live here will come to accept that this is now the case. And that there will always be those who wish to divide us. (…) But over time, one would hope, through religious literacy and education, that communities would learn to live side by side. And how integrated they are will depend on each local community. I think it is the local that's fundamental. (R41E)

Public declarations of solidarity come from broader interreligious, antiracist, and anti-antisemitic alliances when mosques or synagogues are attacked by far-right groups. Actions are also organised together against Islamism and antisemitism:

> Of course, we have stood in solidarity with the Jewish community as a working group. And not just me personally or as a representative of the Christians, but really members of the mosque, in other words the entire working group has expressed a clear vote against such hostile ideas. (R21G)

But, in addition to these public activities and the impact on society, internal negotiations on diversity and racism are increasing, the interviewees reported. Furthermore, social change processes such as secularisation and demographic changes, financial difficulties, and associated challenges for engagement were reflected upon as forms of adaptation to these overall changes in society.

Internal conflicts take place within one's own (religious) community, for example, as one pastor recalls from the beginning of his anti-racist activism: "*I have had hate mail, as a consequence. My own community didn't like it to start with, but they've now got used to it. Many people have said it's the right thing to do*" (R41E). Among Muslim volunteers, the

diversification of voicing is emphasised: "*I'm not an imam. I can sit with all manner of people, and I won't be criticised for it*" (R42E).

A differentiation and new formation of organisations is taking place in the Muslim/migrant religious field, combined with a diversification of political self-understanding:

> We shouldn't have to go through an MP. We shouldn't have to go through a councillor, or an imam, or a priest, or anything like that. We should be able to have our own voice, and it should be independent of all the caveats, all the pressures, all the challenges that are presented to the people who are elected representatives, if you like. (R31E)

An interviewee from England reports on the experiences of generationally changing forms of violence and racism, so that a constant rearticulation of criticism and agency needs to take place against it. Increasing self-empowerment and awareness make it possible to identify and define the embeddedness of racism in everyday life. For all the interviewees affected, institutional/mainstream racism across societal fields is addressed in a central way for schools, public spaces, job-related fields, the health and justice system: as an everyday threat. In this context, conflicts about recognition, participation, and equality in society are fought out within existing civil society alliances. White hegemonies in old alliances are called into question, especially in more pluralised cities.

Here, a Muslim woman reports on her experience that, as part of an interfaith alliance of established actors, it is important to prevent "urban society" from becoming frightened of Muslim life in public:

> Then I said, I am part of urban society after all. Who do you mean? I said that what you were saying was very racist. The question was always, do I belong to urban society in your image or not? (…) I can also understand when people feel alienated or anxious or have a phobia, whatever. There is also a solution. Dialogue. People are ready. (R24G)

In summary, in all the regions analysed, civil society alliances have been working for many decades with a focus on conflict prevention and social cohesion, to reduce prejudice and racism, and, at the same time, alliances have always successfully established themselves as heterogeneous

counter-movements to local and supra-regional far-right movements. The results show that, while the prevention of racism and antisemitism in social controversies is practised efficiently in intra-religious/anti-racist/anti-fascist alliances and has been built up for many decades, the adaptations to changes and challenges and negotiations within the alliances and communities will now have to be included and developed further for the success of the creation of an open pluralist democracy.

Conclusion

In a two-country comparison between Germany and England, this contribution examines the way in which normalisation processes of the far right exhibit specific characteristics in the opportunity structures of local politics and spaces, as these have only been examined to a limited extent. With the shift to the "contested state", negotiations and struggles around normalisation processes in local politics, in the relationship between state and civil society, and within local civil societies are reconstructed in an explorative case study. In addition, the perspective on pronounced normalisation processes and counter-movement strategies is combined with the perspective on the radicalised mainstream in the local space. Concretely, local political structures may provide an opportunity for the far right to insert itself into municipal democracy through de-politicised citizen politics. In summary, it can be stated for the local political space in Germany that normalisation takes place on the one hand through the polarisation and disturbance of local politics and on the other hand through the instrumentalisation of supposedly non-ideological policies in local democracies, and in this context the spread of anti-Muslim narratives and practices receives a certain consolidation and manifestation through the establishment tactics of far-right actors.

In Germany, these two patterns vary regionally and from city to city, whereas in some eastern regions, the normalisation tactic is particularly driven by the occupation of supposedly civic issues. In England, the normalisation and dissemination of anti-Muslim discourses and practices in local councils is largely mediated by (independent) individuals. The low level of public awareness of local political issues here means that these individuals, as well as new political actors and sometimes civic or local

lists, are sometimes able to repeatedly stand for local political office despite warnings and pose new challenges to traditional state-wide parties (Bolgherini & Vampa, 2021).

In all regions, normalisation dynamics are strengthened when extra-parliamentary far-right groups take up widespread anti-Islam and anti-Muslim attitudes with an anti-Islam agenda and reinforce existing fears and hostility.

As a result, specific adaptations and local characteristics of the mainstreaming mechanisms and their dissemination through the municipal conditions can be assumed. Despite differences in political systems, the overall results show that the fusion of locality and populism can be observed in the normalisation process for the urban spaces in the different political systems of Germany and England.

Ways of dealing with and rejecting these everyday occurrences are being considered and still being developed. At the same time, public far-right mobilisations and increasing normalisation processes in the parliamentary sphere are giving rise to strong counter-protests and the formation of democratic alliances. However, as normalisation processes progress, relations between the state and civil society are often strained and must be renegotiated, for example when it comes to articulating criticism of the adoption of right-wing populist positions. The greater the extent of normalisation, the greater the need for cooperation between democratic forces and the need for the resilience of internal and external negotiations and compromises between individual groups and actors. This will also challenge and change politics, and forms must be developed to deal with this in a critical civil society organised according to different interests and different aims and forms of organisation.

Finally, an independent civil society that is able to deal with conflicts at the regional level holds strong potential for denormalisation processes. The perspectives of the interviewees have shown that normalisation processes remain contested even in regions where they are expressed more strongly, and that this can even contribute to the formation of heterogeneous alliances. Because of this, an independent and vital civil society thus gains enormous importance for the resilience of democracy in times of disrupted and polarised politics in local and national parliaments and public spheres.

When considering the findings on the question of how local normalisation processes are interwoven with institutional and everyday racism in the societal mainstream, the results show that normalisation processes cannot be thought of independently from mainstream racism. In particular, the central inclusion of the voices of those affected enables these connections and simultaneities to be recognised.

In all the regions visited, negotiations about integration and diversity in society are taking place at the same time as normalisation processes. These negotiations can lead to racist attributions that defame and marginalise the voices and participation of Muslims. The silence of mainstream groups in mainstream society can sometimes support a lack of differentiation between established parties and far-right parties or isolate anti-racist initiatives.

Forms of normalisation thus overlap with conscious and unconscious mainstream racism, especially when it comes to negotiating political representation and power in local politics. The effects of regional demographic plurality on this racism are evident when, in less pluralised regions, resistance to diversification in appointments to positions in their own parties and committees emerges and, in more pluralised regions, racist statements are made against Muslim actors in political office in order to push back against them personally or against their parties.

In a broader sense, the study reveals that discrimination is continually reproduced in mainstream society and the ways in which it is confronted become relevant for the analytical shift to the "contested state" and for understanding the tipping points of a radicalised mainstream. Diversity, recognition, and participation must be further negotiated in urban societies, and democratic practices between trust and critique/conflict must be developed further.

Finally, how do normalisation processes interact with racism in mainstream society to affect local democracy? Normalisation processes can lead to massive disruptions in the usual processes of decision-making and negotiation in local democracies and an increasing loss of trust in democratic institutions. In highly normalised regions and spaces, far-right threats can restrict the scope for local political and civic engagement, especially for racialised people or those who position themselves visibly and publicly as critics of far-right normalisation.

If these individual or group actors are simultaneously racially defamed and repressed in their democratic engagement by established politicians, this also restricts the scope for democratic engagement by local politicians and civil society activists. For democracy, these restricted accesses and narrowed spaces for action for the representation of the interests of different social groups and the negotiation of the conflicts between them will result in massive dysfunctionalities.

Finally, the camouflage and adaptation tactics described above raise questions about the legitimacy of the desired exclusion of far-right actors, which needs to be discussed in terms of democratic theory. The resilience of local democracy in the municipal space is clearly assured by the everyday democratic practices of the actors—less so by institutional framework conditions alone. This is expressed in the search for and implementation of counter-strategies and the formation of democratic alliances.

Overall, although normalisation processes lead to shifts and disruptions in local democratic processes and certainties, it is important to emphasise that the study discusses results on the level of particular regional and municipal cases, and in many other cities normalisation processes are pushed back or are prevented. The study thus makes a particular research contribution to highly normalised urban spaces and the significance of everyday racism for the latter. While there is a growing body of research on the normalisation of right-wing ideology, different forms and degrees of (de-)normalisation and struggles over hegemony still warrant further research, especially as inside/outside perspectives remain to be overcome, not least in order to reduce experiences of racism and to fulfil the promise of equality of democracy in everyday practice.

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8

How the Mainstream Radicalises: Media Narrative on Islam as a Normaliser of Anti-Muslim Racism

Liriam Sponholz, Anna-Maria Meuth, and Sabrina Zajak

Abstract This chapter aims to show the role played by the mass media coverage of Islam in normalising anti-Muslim racial discourse. It claims that the presentation of Islam as a radical ideology and the framing of Muslims as a violent or even terrorist social group causing social problems in Europe reflects and further reinforces the already radicalised mainstream. To reconstruct this process of radicalisation, we assessed empirically (a) how media attention to Islam is distributed and what events trigger the most media attention on Muslims; (b) how such trigger events shape the definition of Islam and Muslims as a problem; and (c) how problem definitions of Islam and Muslims differ according to the type of

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L. Sponholz et al. (eds.), *Radicalising the Mainstream in Western Europe*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-85963-2_8

social actors in the media coverage. For this analysis, all articles on Islam or Muslims published in the quality press of United Kingdom, Germany, and France from 2000 to 2020 with at least 50 words ($N = 262{,}105$) were subjected to a content analysis. Outcomes show that (a) not every, but only a few anti-Western terror attacks cause media attention on Islam and Muslims to soar; (b) anti-Western terror attacks lead to Muslims being defined as a problem by homogenising Muslim countries, organisations, and migrants as an undifferentiated whole, which does not happen when media attention is low; and (c) media and experts not only attribute terrorism to Muslims, but also frame it as a matter of a belief system (the "backwardness of Islam") as opposed to their own. In this way, particularly the media become a trigger for the radicalisation of the mainstream.

Keywords Mass media • Islam • Normalisation • Terrorism • Media storms

Introduction

This chapter explores the media narratives of Islam and Muslims in mass media in three European countries. It aims to show the role played by mass media coverage of Islam in normalising anti-Muslim racial discourse. Rather than simply contributing to the vast literature on media representations and discourses of Islam and its effects, our analysis suggests that anti-Muslim racial discourse is a key component of what is currently discussed in the literature as the normalisation of far-right ideologies (Krzyżanowski & Ekström, 2022).

In fact, we go a step further and claim that the presentation of Islam as a radical ideology and the framing Muslims as a violent or even terrorist social group causing social problems in Europe is not merely a form of "shameless normalisation" (Wodak, 2020)—where far-right ideologies from the fringes and margins of society are adopted and absorbed by the mainstream—but also an expression and self-reassertion of the already radicalised mainstream. This is the case because media debates, public attitudes, and belief systems are interactive—they continuously influence each other.

As we outlined in the introductory chapter, we do not consider "the mainstream" as a homogenous social group, but rather as a normative, hegemonic concept that infuses a particular ideological configuration, suggesting that the mainstream is inherently good, rational, or moderate (Brown et al., 2023). To construct this version of a "good" or moderate mainstream, there is a need for an opposite "other"—bad, irrational, and extreme. Here, Islam and Muslims have been constructed as the radical and violent "other" (for the historical reconstruction of this process, see Brunner, in this book).

In this chapter, we use quantitative media analysis in three European countries (Germany, England, and France) covering a period of 20 years (starting in 2000) to open up a different perspective on the debate on Islam: through the lens of a "radicalised mainstream" as the outcome of a process in which the mainstream becomes more extreme in its system of beliefs. We follow Hafez and Mullins's (2015) definition of radicalisation as a gradual process of entering into an increasingly extreme belief system. In this study, radicalisation of the mainstream can be observed when anti-Western terrorism is framed as a matter of a belief system, thereby attributing it to the alleged backwardness of the Islamic system of beliefs in contrast to the Western system of beliefs.

We attempt to grasp this radicalisation of the mainstream using an agenda-building approach. Unlike studies on negative representations of Muslims or stereotypes, the agenda-building approach goes beyond valence ("negative representations") and enables us to observe what leads to and who constructs the narrative of Islam and Muslims. It assumes that media narratives are not only conveyed or amplified by the media, but are actively constructed by them. Following this approach, media content is analysed through a three-step process of thematisation, problem definition, and problematisation (cf. Vu, 2020).

By thematisation, we mean the visibility and salience of issues in media coverage: the media "talk about" it. This provides evidence, in this study, of the conditions under which Muslims become salient in the media and how strongly this salience is linked to terrorism.

Defining a problem in media content means framing it (cf. Entman, 1993, p. 52). Defining something (or someone) as a problem indicates that (a) something (or someone) is wrong because it causes harm; (b) it

affects a significant number of people; (c) it poses a condition that can be changed; and (d) something needs to be done (cf. Loseke, 2017).

In this study, we analyse who or what is the problem by empirically assessing the centrality of Muslims in media debates after terror attacks and how Muslims are defined: as people, countries, situations, political actors, and so forth.

Problematisation refers to the interaction among actors regarding a problem definition. Here, media not only "talk about" an issue, but the content becomes a subject of contention. In this process, different actors—media, experts, security agencies, or governments—may link Islam and Muslims to different frames, such as terrorism, backwardness, integration, economic burden, and so forth.

We trace how an agenda on Islam and Muslims is constructed in the mainstream media in the United Kingdom, Germany, and France by empirically assessing (a) how media attention to Islam is distributed and what events trigger the most media attention to Muslims (thematisation); (b) how such trigger events shape the definition of Islam and Muslims as a problem (problem definition); and (c) how problem definitions of Islam and Muslims differ according to the type of actors in the media coverage (problematisation).

To do this, all articles on Islam or Muslims published in the quality press from 2000 to 2020 with at least 50 words were subjected to automated content analysis (N = 262,105). To empirically assess how media attention to Islam is distributed and what events trigger the most media attention to Muslims, we applied the concept of media storms (Boydstun et al., 2014) to identify the highest peaks of attention on the topic of Islam over time (thematisation). Subsequently, an automated content analysis of all articles published in the four weeks after the highest media storms was conducted to analyse how the trigger events behind such media storms—terror attacks—change the definition of Islam and Muslims as a problem (problem definition).

In the third and final step, a random sample of these articles was analysed manually, identifying actors and frames to show how problem definitions of Islam and Muslims differ according to the type of actors in the media coverage (problematisation).

Outcomes were as follows: (a) thematisation: not every, but only a few anti-Western terror attacks cause media attention on Islam and Muslims to soar. Beheadings, protests, or symbolic conflicts like controversies do not have this effect. Terror attacks targeting Muslims, in turn, result in decreased media attention on Muslims; (b) problem definition: well-publicised anti-Western terror attacks lead to Muslims being defined as a problem by homogenising Muslim countries, organisations, and migrants as an undifferentiated whole, which does not happen when media attention is low; (c) problem definitions differ according to the type of actor. For the average person, Muslims raise the issue of discrimination; for security agencies, it is a matter of terrorism. Media and experts, in turn, not only attribute terrorism to Muslims but also frame it as a matter of the Islamic belief system (the "backwardness of Islam") as opposed to their own. By doing so, the media in particular become a trigger for the radicalisation of the mainstream.

Theoretical Framework

Narratives are "chains of argumentation patterns and events that emerge from one another, standing in a causal relationship" (Shooman, 2014, pp. 23f.). For this reason, it is not possible to assess narratives on Islam and Muslims as radical without considering the events that constitute such narratives. Argumentation patterns and events, in turn, do not emerge in a vacuum but are triggered, discussed, supported, and countered by social actors.

Thus, to understand narratives of the radical as narratives that radicalise, it is pivotal to consider more than the valence of portrayals or depictions in the media. This is why we adopted the approach of agenda building. This approach enables us to empirically assess all dimensions that give sense to communication, namely, the timing (events), content (frames), and social dimension (actors or, in the case of media, speakers, cf. Luhmann et al., 2013).

Together, these dimensions enable the building of an agenda through three processes:

(a) **Thematisation**

Thematisation: the process by which an issue becomes salient in media content. Issues get into the media as a consequence of events (Trilling & van Hoof, 2020) and can only have influence if they reach an audience (Kearns et al., 2019).

The type of event—and not necessarily its content—increases media attention, i.e., the amount of coverage, making an issue salient in the media. Therefore, an event with a real-life impact, such as a supposedly "religious-motivated" terrorist attack, receives more media attention than a pseudo-event such as a politician's statement associating a religion with terrorism (Wettstein, 2015).

Previous literature has shown that Islam is mostly thematised in conflictual settings (Richter & Paasch-Colberg, 2023). Due to events like terror attacks, Muslims are also much more salient in the media than other religious groups, such as Catholics or Hindus (Bleich & Van der Veen, 2021; Lajevardi, 2020). However, not all terrorist attacks are treated similarly by the media. Various factors can impact why a particular terrorist attack receives more news coverage than others (cf. Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006). Even considering such factors, terrorist attacks perpetrated by Muslims generate 357% more news stories than attacks by non-Muslims (Kearns et al., 2019; cf. also Elmasry & el-Nawawy, 2020).

This finding demonstrates once again that the definition of Muslims as a problem is not a "natural" consequence of news events such as terror attacks. For example, non-Islamist-motivated perpetrators are more often portrayed in a personalised way, as having mental-illness problems (Betus et al., 2021). Moreover, most terrorist attacks in Western Europe are not Islamist-motivated (European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, 2018). In addition, the vast majority (89.5%) of Islamist terrorist attacks are perpetrated in countries with predominantly Muslim populations, and the vast majority of deaths from Islamist terrorist attacks (91.7%) occur in Muslim countries (Reynié, 2021, p. 7).

When terror attacks are the main events that trigger media attention on Muslims, and terror attacks perpetrated by Muslims get more coverage than others, then this treatment by the media paves the way for a radicalisation of the mainstream.

(b) **Problem Definition or Framing**

Problem definition or framing: determining "what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, diagnosing causes, identifying the forces creating the problem; making moral judgments, evaluating causal agents and their effects; and suggesting remedies" (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

An extensive body of research (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017) has shown that Islam and Muslims are depicted in news media mostly negatively. They are often linked to violence (Bleich et al., 2015; Bleich & van der Veen, 2021; Ekström et al., 2022), to terrorism (Dixon & Williams, 2015), and portrayed as "radical" (Hoewe & Bowe, 2021) in Western societies' media. Even in cases where depictions of Muslims are sympathetic or neutral, the media still position stories almost exclusively in ways that emphasise Muslims' otherness and deal with the topic of terrorism (Rastegar, 2021). At the same time, the media fail to classify non-Muslim, white perpetrators as terrorists (Dreier et al., 2022). In a nutshell, media coverage has been defining Islam and Muslims as a problem.

But what kind of problem do Islam and Muslims allegedly pose? Islam and Muslims are often defined as a problem within the framework of different agendas: on security, foreign policy, and integration (Sedgwick, 2010).

Although these agendas may intersect, they refer to different fields. The security agenda involves issues such as terrorism and jihadist propaganda and actors such as intelligence and police agencies. The integration agenda involves issues such as immigration and neo-nationalism and actors such as far-right politicians and parties. It addresses Muslim minorities in Western European countries. The foreign policy agenda addresses Arab countries and governments that are seen as friendly and allied and have been using the term "radical" themselves to attack political adversaries in their own countries, receiving support from Western countries for this with the excuse of tackling terrorism (cf. Sedgwick, 2010, p. 487).

These different agendas arise depending on the event. Sedgwick observes a narrative shift linked to the London bombings in July 2005. Before 2001, "radicalisation" was rarely referred to in the British press, although the term was occasionally used in academia. The greatest increase in the frequency of use of "radicalisation" in the press was between 2005 and

2007, a timing that strongly suggests that the term's current popularity derives from the emergence of "home-grown" terrorism in Western Europe, notably the London bombings in July 2005 (known as the "7/7 terrorist attacks", Sedgwick, 2010, p. 480). Hoewe and Bowe (2021), in turn, observe that the usage of the term "radical Islam" increased in 2015, at the time of the coordinated terror acts in Paris.

(c) **Problematisation**

Problematisation: the interaction between actors such as news media, political figures, and the public surrounding a problem definition, by taking a position on it (cf. Vu, 2020).

The question "What is at issue?" (Cobb & Elder, 1980) is pivotal for understanding the entire narrative, because it influences which actors take the floor. Moreover, by taking a position, public figures generate further events for media reporting and keep the public conversation going (Resodihardjo, 2021).

Venger (2019) analysed the press coverage of the London attacks in the USA, the UK, and Russia. She observed that government and official sources were the most frequently cited, except in the country where the attack happened. In the UK, the most frequent source was ordinary people.

Although the problematisation of Muslims has been intensively triggered by far-right actors on social media (Poole et al., 2021), this outcome cannot be automatically attributed to the media system as a whole. The mainstreaming of the far right in public debates, and thus the access of these actors to mainstream media, can be observed particularly in the 2010s. In previous periods, far-right actors and their discourse networks were rarely visible in the public sphere and were mainly portrayed as isolated fringe actors (Völker & Gonzatti, 2024, p. 15).

Furthermore, Matthes et al. (2020) analysed how far and which sources make statements linking Muslims to terrorism and found that non-Muslim news media sources are more likely to make statements linking Islam to terrorism than Muslim voices.

Yet what does agenda building have to do with the radicalisation of the mainstream? How does the media agenda interact with the public agenda?

Citizens' knowledge of terrorist events is almost solely informed by media reports (Williamson et al., 2019), and most people do not have personal contact with the Muslim minority in Western countries (Lajevardi, 2020).

Moreover, such a media agenda has not only a cognitive dimension but also a behavioural one. Several studies have evidenced a correlation between fear of terrorism and news consumption (for an overview, see Nellis & Savag, 2012). Heightened fear of terrorism, in turn, is associated with more punitive attitudes towards counterterrorism policies (Misis et al., 2017; Matthes et al., 2019). Exposure to news portraying Muslims as terrorists is also positively associated with support for military action in Muslim countries and for public policies that harm Muslims domestically and internationally (Saleem et al., 2017, p. 480).

Another aspect of this behavioural dimension refers to hate crimes. In the week after the referendum in the UK on leaving the EU, for instance, the organisation Tell Mama (2018) registered a 475% rise in anti-Muslim street incidents. Similarly, studies showed that following the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 and the London terrorist attacks, hate crimes with a specific anti-Islamic motive increased significantly (King & Sutton, 2013; Hanes & Machin, 2014). These authors conclude that hate crimes cluster in time and tend to increase, sometimes dramatically, in the aftermath of antecedent "trigger" or galvanising event, such as a terrorist act.

Methods and Research Design

To trace how the mainstream becomes radicalised in the media, we analysed how the media agenda is constructed. This includes examining the increasing attachment of the mainstream—in this case, media and government—to their own belief systems by attributing terrorism to the supposed backwardness of a belief system considered opposite to their own. Specifically, this involves empirically assessing when, how, and to what extent different actors define Islamist terrorism as a consequence of the backwardness of Islam and Muslims.

Research Questions

To examine this issue, we will assess:

(a) **Thematisation**

RQ1 How is media attention to Islam distributed, and what events trigger the most media attention on Islam and Muslims?

This step is important firstly to understand the dynamics of media attention to Islam and Muslims and secondly to empirically assess how anti-Western terror attacks, in comparison to other events, shape the problem definitions of Muslims.

(b) **Problem Definition**

RQ2 How does the increase in media attention after a terror attack change the definition of Islam and Muslims as a problem compared to periods of less media attention? Do anti-Western terror attacks change the problem definition of Islam and Muslims?

Answering these questions helps us to gain a better understanding of the role of trigger events like terror attacks in the media narrative and in how the mainstream radicalises.

(c) **Problematisation**

RQ3 How do mainstream actors define Islam and Muslims as a problem compared to other actors?

Once it is clear how intensive terror attacks increase media attention on Islam and Muslims and how such events shape problem definitions or frames, the third step is to understand how mainstream actors—media and government—react to it: What do they attribute terrorism to? Are they attributing it to a belief system opposed to their own? Attributing terrorism to the backwardness of the Islamic belief system is an indicator of radicalisation.

Research Design

(a) Thematisation: Time Series Analysis

To analyse how media attention to Islam is distributed and what events trigger the most media attention on Islam and Muslims (**RQ1**), we selected for the research design all articles mentioning Islam* OR Muslim* that contained at least 50 words and were published in *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Le Figaro*, *Libération*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and *Die Welt*. This was done irrespective of how often and whereabouts in the text these terms were mentioned (N = 262,105 articles; see Table 8.1). The selected articles were published between 2000 and 2020. Duplicates—articles published in the same newspaper on the same day with the same number of words and similar titles—were deleted. Articles were collected from Nexis Uni, Factiva, and the Süddeutsche Zeitung Archive.

The general search terms Islam* and Muslim* were chosen to avoid a priming effect. First, if we chose, for instance, a dictionary or bag of words containing terms such as "headscarf", "jihad", and so forth, this would preframe the search results. Second, the general terms work as a common denominator between the different languages (English, German, and French). Third, they enable a comprehensive search: it is unlikely that an article mentioning a term such as "jihad" would not mention "Islam" or "Muslim".

Table 8.1 Corpus overview

Newspaper	Editorial line	Number of articles	Gaps in the collection
The Guardian	left-liberal	60,840	April–June 2000
The Times	conservative	49,264	No
Süddeutsche Zeitung	left-liberal	48,480	No
Die Welt	conservative	31,990	January–October 2000 September 2008–August 2009 November 2018–February 2019
Libération	left-liberal	29,308	No
Le Figaro	conservative	42,223	No
Total		**262,105**	

The newspapers where the texts were published represent the national quality press in the selected countries (UK, France, and Germany), in each case consisting of a liberal and a conservative broadsheet. Though the advent of social media at the beginning of the 2000s produced a structural change in the public sphere, opening the gates to new speakers, frames, and issues, traditional media remains the primary force in setting the agenda (Langer & Gruber, 2021).

To trace the distribution of media attention on Islam and Muslims in the quality press in Germany, France, and the UK, we analysed the frequency of articles in one-week periods, following the definition of media storms by Boydstun et al. (2014). Accordingly, a media storm constitutes a sudden increase of at least 150% in the number of articles on Islam and Muslims from one week to the next.

(b) **Problem Definition: Automated Content Analysis**

Due to the large quantities of information involved, it is not practical to display the findings of the content analysis for all newspaper collections and all terror acts resulting in media storms. As previous research has found empirical evidence of a linkage between conservatism and the evaluation of terrorism according to the religiosity of the perpetrator (Hoewe & Bowe, 2021, p. 1023; cf. also Ekström et al., 2022, p. 771), we have chosen to include here only the outcomes of the content analysis of British, German, and French conservative broadsheets (*The Times*, *Die Welt*, and *Le Figaro*).

For example, after identifying the largest media storms, we analysed articles published in the four weeks after the Paris terrorist attacks of 2015, popularly known as "Bataclan" (14 November to 12 December 2015), and from the same period five years previously (14 November to 12 December 2010). These articles were subjected to an R-based automated content analysis. This period can be considered a randomised selection. Due to the large quantities of information involved, only the findings regarding the Paris attacks—the largest media storm in the 20-year-period under study—are displayed.

The automated content analysis aimed to answer how the definition of Islam and Muslims as a problem changes after a terror attack compared to periods of less media attention (**RQ2**). To do this, we assessed the most frequent collocations and co-occurrences in both periods—the 4-week period five years before the Paris attacks and the 4-week period immediately following the Paris attacks.

The most frequent collocations allowed us to determine whether media coverage after the Paris attacks was triggered by the event. This was the case if the collocations were intrinsically linked to places, dates, and actors associated with the event (such as Islamic State, Paris attacks, Bataclan).

We applied the same method to the period five years before. If event-related terms appeared among the most frequent collocations, building a connected framework, then the coverage was mainly triggered by a single event. The analysis of the articles from this period also provided evidence on what happens to the problem definition of Islam and Muslims when there is no terror attack acting as a trigger.

Following that, we looked at the most frequent collocations, such as "New York" or "Trade Center". Then we analysed co-occurrences, that is to say, words mentioned together with "Muslim" and "Islam". Networks of these co-occurrences reveal the problem definition of Islam and Muslims and provide evidence on how events shape content.

In the co-occurrence analysis, we did not stem words (i.e., reduce words to their root form) because results showed differences in the content of collocations and co-occurrences for words like "Islam", "Islamist", and "Islamic", and between the adjective and the noun "Muslim". We did not want to mask these variations in meaning. This automated content analysis was conducted using the R-package Quanteda.

(c) **Problematisation: Manual Content Analysis**

In order to answer **RQ3**, a random sample of articles published four weeks after the terror attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, the London terror attacks in 2005, the attacks against the newsroom of the magazine Charlie Hebdo, and the Paris attacks in November 2015 were selected and submitted to a manual content analysis (n = 600 articles, 2745 statements, Table 8.2).

Table 8.2 Number of statements per event (n = 2745 statements)

Period	Event	Frequency
12.09.2001–10.10.2001	World Trade Center, New York	645
08.07.2005–05.08.2005	London	638
08.01.2015–05.02.2015	Charlie Hebdo	747
14.11.2015–12.12.2015	Paris attacks	715
Total		**2,745**

In submitting these articles to a manual content analysis, different types of actors and their statements in these texts were identified. The types of actors who dominate in these moments include: government, legislative and judicial power, media, security agencies, experts, ordinary people, civil society, extremists, education, economy, and health (cf. Haunss & Kohlmorgen, 2010).

Regarding the statements, they were coded according to the mention of Islam and Muslims and the frames such statements entail. Statements may associate Islam and Muslims with the following frames: criminality, terrorism, gender, demography, disease, genetics, backwardness, discrimination, economic burden, sexuality, and antisemitism. These frames, including backwardness, were extracted from previous literature on media representations of Muslims, migrants, and ethnic minorities (cf. Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016; Sponholz, 2018; Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Hafez, 2014, among others). It is expected that different types of actors associate Islam and Muslims with different frames.

The frame of backwardness is particularly important here, as in this study it indicates an increasingly intense attachment to a belief system (the Western one) and therefore radicalisation. A statement was assessed empirically as backwardness when Islam and Muslims are depicted as culturally inferior, as the opposite of the West, due to their religiosity, culture, values, and habits.

The intercoder-reliability (ICR) for all content (not formal) categories was 89.8%. Only the results referring to the five most mentioned actor types and the five most frequent frames were displayed in the findings.

Findings

Thematisation: On the Spotlight

The terror attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 appears to have been a "game changer" in the media coverage of Islam and Muslims during the analysed period (cf. Fig. 8.1). In other words, since the terror attack on the World Trade Center, media attention not only soared in the short term (compared to 2000), but the increase following the 2001 attack also had a long-lasting effect.

In most of the analysed newspapers, around 25% of all the articles on Islam and Muslims published in 2001 were published in the first four weeks after this terror attack. The exception is the German conservative daily *Die Welt*, where 32% of all articles on Islam and Muslims in 2001 were published in the four weeks after the attacks on the World Trade Center.

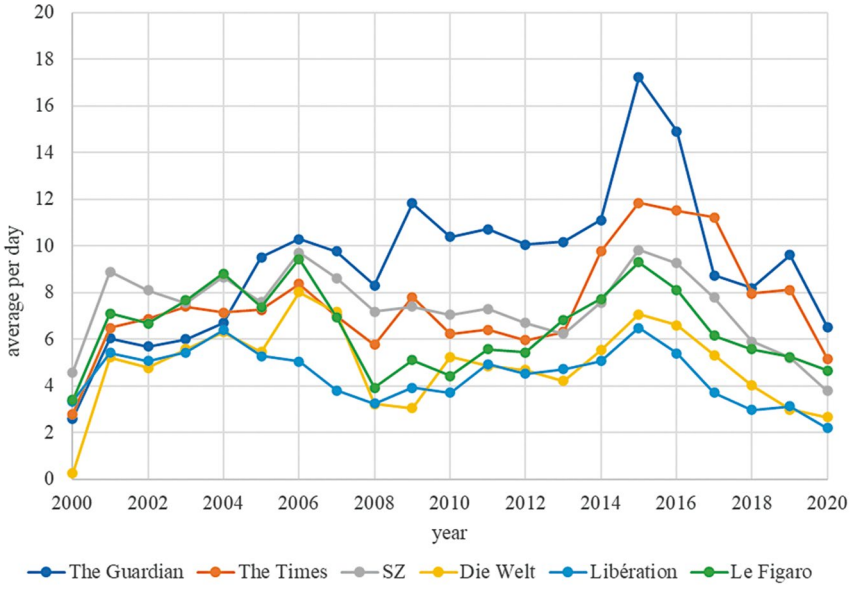

Fig. 8.1 Average number of articles per day (except Sunday's editions)

This and similar findings empirically evidence the intense concentration of articles on Islam and Muslims in the aftermath of terror attacks (thematisation). This means, in turn, that such media storms, and not necessarily everyday coverage, play a pivotal role in media narratives of Islam and Muslims.

In almost all analysed collections, the daily average of articles on Islam and Muslims remained higher throughout the 20-year period than the level observed in 2000. Only in *Libération* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* did the average of articles published daily return to the level of 2000, in 2018 and 2019 respectively.

Nonetheless, although the terror attack on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001 set Islam and Muslims on the media agenda, the period after the attack does not represent the highest point of media attention on these topics. The German newspapers and the French daily *Libération* are exceptions, but Islam and Muslims received even more attention in the aftermath of other events, such as the terror attacks on the newsroom of the magazine Charlie Hebdo in 2015 (*Le Figaro*), the coordinated attacks in Paris in 2015 (*The Guardian*), and the knife attacks on London Bridge in 2017 (*The Times*).

As Fig. 8.1 illustrates, once Islam and Muslims are on the media agenda, attention increases immediately after a trigger event and remains higher than before the trigger event. In other words, trigger events like terror attacks have a long-lasting effect on the issue salience of Islam and Muslims.

Since 2017, however, media attention on Islam and Muslims has been decreasing. Even in France, where some media storms can be observed after 2017, these have not reached the same high levels observed in previous years, such as in 2001 and 2015.

Results differ not only between countries but also between broadsheets from the same country. When the newspapers are analysed separately, we can see peaks of attention unique to particular publications, including those related to national events. For this reason, results in this paper are assessed empirically by newspaper.

In the British newspapers, attention peaks after the knife attacks at London Bridge on 3 June 2017 in *The Times*, while in *The Guardian*, the second highest media storm was registered in the aftermath of the bomb

attack at Brussels Airport on 22 March 2016. In *Le Figaro*, distinct from all other broadsheets, the period after the beheading of the teacher Samuel Paty on 16 October 2020, provided one of the five highest peaks of attention.

Only a few events that do not constitute terror attacks can be observed in association with such media storms. One is the US Executive Order 13769, popularly known as the Muslim Travel Ban from 27 January 2017, in The Guardian (cf. Table 8.3).

We consider these events as trigger events because they generated media storms, concentrating the media agenda around them. Media coverage of these events provided the background for framing Muslims as the violent, terrorist other, in contrast to the imagined peaceful mainstream that needs protection.

This section has so far shown that terror attacks indeed play an important role in bringing debates on Islam to the agenda in all selected countries. However, only certain terror attacks became trigger events catalysing the perception of radicalised Islam as the dominant other to the "neutral" mainstream in Europe.

In this context, attributing the thematisation of Islam and Muslims solely to "Islamist terrorism" falls short. Terror activities like the beheadings of Western Europeans, both abroad and in a European city (Paris), do not reach the same level of media attention. Future research should focus on additional factors that lead to more or less media attention to Islam and Muslims in the aftermath of anti-Western terror attacks.

On the other hand, unlike anti-Western terror attacks, findings suggest that terror acts against Muslims, such as the attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 15 March 2019, lower the level of media attention on Islam and Muslims (see Fig. 8.2, excluding French broadsheets).

This finding suggests that the media directs the spotlight on Islam and Muslims when they are defined as the problem (as in the case of Muslim perpetrators of terror attacks). The opposite is true when they are themselves targeted by terrorism. This indicates that media attention is linked to problem definition.

The de-thematisation of Islam when the terror attack is not perpetrated by Muslims aligns with previous literature, which showed that terror attacks perpetrated by Islamic terrorists receive more media attention (cf. Kearns et al., 2019).

Table 8.3 Peaks of media attention on Islam and Muslims (7-day sum)

	The Times	The Guardian	Le Figaro	Libération	Die Welt	Süddeutsche Zeitung
1	10.06.2017 London Bridge 173 articles	20.11.2015 Paris Attacks 255 articles	17.01.2015 Charlie Hebdo 181 articles	19.09.2001 World Trade Center 129 articles	25.09.2001 World Trade Center 162 articles	20.09.2001 World Trade Center 246 articles
2	19.09.2001 World Trade Center 170 articles	23.03.2016 Brussels 242 articles	21.11.2015 Paris Attacks 178 articles	14.01.2015 Charlie Hebdo114 articles	05.02.2009 non- identifiable 117 articles	21.11.2015 Paris Attacks 160 articles
3	20.11.2015 Paris Attacks 162 articles	04.02.2017 Trump Travel Ban 183 articles	13.10.2001 World Trade Center165 articles	21.11.2015 Paris Attacks 93 articles	13.02.2006 Mohammed Caricatures 112 articles	16.01.2015 Charlie Hebdo 138 articles
4	14.01.2015 Charlie Hebdo 137 articles	24.04.2009 non- identifiable 163 articles	24.10.2020 Beheading Samuel Paty 118 articles	04.09.2004 non- identifiable 80 articles	21.11.2015 Paris Attack 103 articles	10.02.2006 Mohammed Caricatures 121 articles
5	17.03.2009 non- identifiable 117 articles	12.10.2001 World Trade Center 127 articles	29.07.2005 London Bombings 114 articles	18.12.2003 non- identifiable 75 articles	20.01.2015 Charlie Hebdo 96 articles	14.07.2005 London Bombings 109 articles

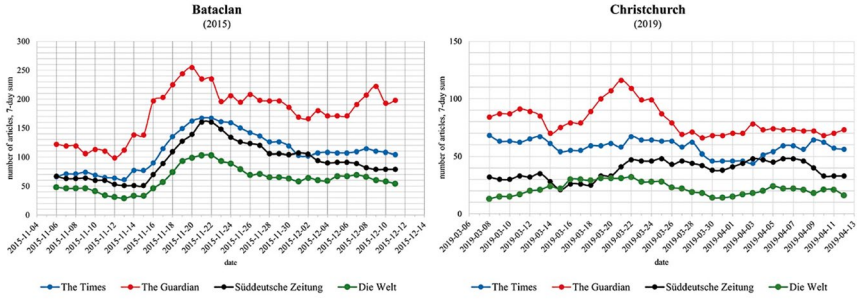

Fig. 8.2 Weekly variation in media attention after the terror attacks in Paris and Christchurch (without French broadsheets)

The results regarding thematisation show that Muslims are overwhelmingly spotlighted in the aftermath of anti-Western terror attacks, illustrating the context in which the mainstream radicalises. For radicalisation, however, merely talking about Islam and Muslims is insufficient. They must be defined as "the problem" of anti-Western terrorism.

Problem Definition: What Is at Issue?

How does the increase in media attention after a terror attack change the definition of Islam and Muslims as a problem compared to periods of less media attention (**RQ2**)?

This question can be answered by comparing a period of low media attention to a period after a terror attack, as described above for the time period five years before the Paris attacks, which offers a randomly chosen control. The Paris attacks were chosen to provide exploratory insight as they triggered the highest media storm in the period from 2000 to 2020.

Findings will be presented by country and discussed at the end in light of the process of mainstream radicalisation.

First, the most common collocations in the entire media coverage on Islam and Muslims during the analysed period are displayed to explore what is actually at stake. They reveal what events the media was reporting on at the time. If the most common collocations do not build a common framework but are instead discretionary, this empirically indicates that there was more than one event behind the coverage.

If the most common collocations, in turn, refer to places, dates, and actors related to the Paris attacks, building a common framework, this is an empirical indicator that there was one single, main event that triggered media attention. This is important because we presuppose that different events generate different problem definitions.

In the second step, collocations related to Islam and Muslims are analysed and co-occurrences are displayed in a network. The co-occurrence network illustrates (a) if Muslims were in the spotlight at the analysed moment and (b) what Muslims were associated with—that is, how they were defined.

Both findings together may also suggest which agenda is being set when Muslims are mentioned: a security, a foreign policy, or an integration agenda.

England: From Candidates and Organisations to the "Muslim World"

Five years before the Paris attacks, there are no clear references to a single event in the conservative broadsheet *The Times* in England, such as names of actors, places, and dates connected among them. This can be seen in the collocations "southern Sudan", "Middle East", and "New York" (cf. Table 8.4). There is also a lack of a common framework among the most frequent collocations ("world cup", "civil war", "infinity pool"), indicating coverage scattered across different topics.

The co-occurrence network shows that strong linkages are concentrated on one side of the network (cf. Fig. 8.3). This means that Muslims do not play a central role in the media coverage on Islam and Muslims at this time. Instead, the focus is on the elections taking place in Egypt and the votes given to the independent candidates from the banned Muslim Brotherhood. This can be observed in the strongest links between "Muslim" and "Brotherhood", "Muslim" and "banned", and "banned" and "candidates".

This also illustrates what the media is associating Muslims with in collocations. As illustrated in Fig. 8.3, the most frequent collocation with the term "Muslim" is "Muslim Brotherhood" (lambda = 7,295,168; z = 13,835,615). This means that "Muslim" in this context refers to the

Table 8.4 Most frequent collocations at *The Times* before Paris attacks (Lambda and *z* describe the probability that exactly these two terms follow each other, which has to be differentiated from the absolute frequency, as it does not consider the occurrence of a partial term with all other words in the corpus (Puschmann and Haim, https://content-analysis-with-r.com/2-metrics.html). So, for instance, the metrics for the collocation "per cent" in the Paris attacks corpus of *The Times* are lambda = 12,302,586; *z* = 28,556,777)

	Collocation	Count	Lambda	*Z*
1	human rights	52	8,439,964	26,776,019
2	prime minister	27	9,818,592	16,259,663
3	southern sudan	17	7,787,945	19,320,096
4	rights record	17	6,794,477	19,218,516
5	new york	17	7,253,706	14,592,990
6	world cup	17	7,670,916	14,258,465
7	middle east	13	7,556,517	17,948,438
8	infinity pool	12	10,819,478	13,299,368
9	civil war	11	6,673,658	16,142,929
10	death stoning	9	7,112,675	14,987,816

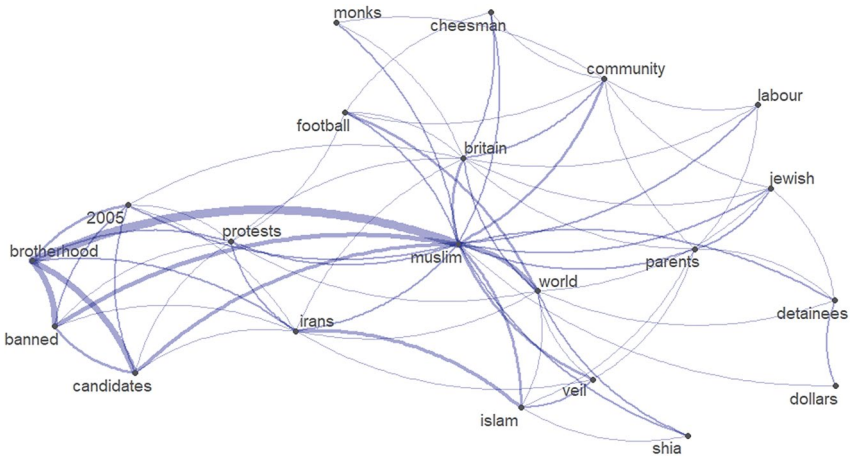

Fig. 8.3 Co-occurrence network of the term "Muslim" five years before Paris attacks in *The Times* (*n* = 130)

Egyptian political organisation (and not, for instance, to migrants in Western Europe).

"Muslim" is also linked to Iran, Islam, and veil, referring to a second event, protests in Iran. In this case, the linkage is weaker, and the problem

is not candidates or a political organisation (Muslim Brotherhood), but those who follow the Islamic religion in Iran.

As a result of their fragmentation across different events, different problem definitions emerge. In the case of the Egyptian election, "Muslim" refers to a political organisation. In the case of protests in Iran, it refers to the followers of the Islamic religion, including Shias, a branch of Islam.

Despite the difference in the question of who or what is the problem (an organisation or a religion), in both cases, Muslims are defined as a matter of foreign agenda, and not as an internal enemy (Fig. 8.3).

In the coverage immediately after the Paris attacks, the situation is different. Regarding collocations, there is a clear connection between them, pointing to a single event: the Paris attacks. The most frequent collocations in the British conservative newspaper *The Times* are directly related to events and places ("Paris attacks") and political actors in Western Europe ("prime minister", "Le Pen", "Labour MPs"). The foreign policy agenda ("Middle East") is now clearly linked to a European security agenda ("military action", cf. Table 8.5).

The co-occurrence network now shows the word "Muslim" at the centre, with strong linkages extending in all directions (cf. Fig. 8.4). This indicates that Muslims are in the spotlight. The coverage is clearly not about a political organisation or the Islamic community in a single country. The word "Muslim" has strong connections to "world", "faith", "attacks", and "community", indicating a homogenisation of Muslims as a single bloc, erasing differences.

Table 8.5 Most frequent collocations at *The Times* after Paris attacks

	Collocation	Count	Lambda	*z*
1	islamic state	293	7,653,480	60,520,453
2	prime minister	138	8,659,072	40,625,668
3	paris attacks	98	4,801,042	38,710,504
4	military action	82	6,325,118	39,409,293
5	middle east	76	9,189,450	34,209,187
6	le pen	66	9,731,623	29,022,559
7	special forces	64	7,081,733	34,812,691
8	david cameron	62	7,466,390	34,932,812
9	new york	59	10,036,968	12,112,543
10	labour mps	58	5,546,344	33,763,025

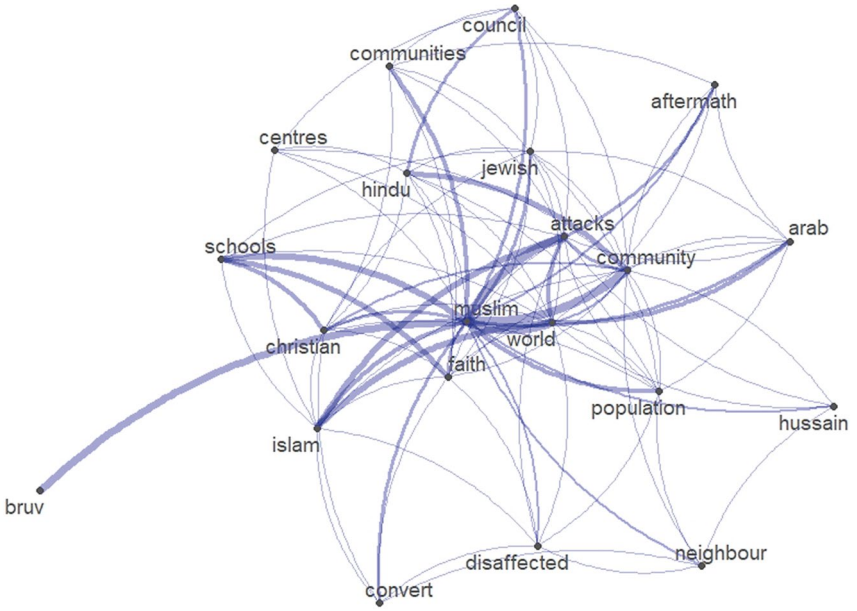

Fig. 8.4 Co-occurrence network of the term "Muslim" after Paris attacks in *The Times* (*n* = 531)

Terms like "communities" and "population" refer to Muslims living in France and mirror what is happening in British society, raising debates on immigration and integration. The connection between "Muslim" and "attacks" clarifies the main trigger event and links the integration agenda with a security one.

References to "Arab", "Muslim", "communities", and "population" demonstrate the linkage between the foreign policy agenda and the integration agenda. Thus, there is not only a homogenisation of "Muslims" regarding origin, faith, communities, and populations, but also a convergence of the foreign policy, security, and integration agendas. The marginal term "bruv" appears in its own independent, condensed discourse. During a stabbing in London, a witness shouted "You ain't no Muslim, bruv" at the perpetrator, and the statement went viral on social media.

It is important to note that the difference between the periods before and after the Paris attacks does not lie in the valence of the

representation. In both scenarios, Muslims are included in the agenda due to conflictual settings and are represented negatively. What makes the difference here is the homogenisation of Muslims as a single bloc and the convergence of agendas.

A convergence of agendas can also be observed in the collocations with "Muslim" and "Islam". The most frequent collocation with "Muslim" is "Muslims entering" (lambda = 7,178,241; z = 1,905,899). This points to references to immigration, indicating another agenda at stake in the aftermath of this terror attack—the integration agenda. Regarding the term "Islam", the most frequent collocations are "Islamic State" (lambda = 7,653,480; z = 60,520,453), "radical Islam" (lambda = 5,629,761; z = 1,925,710), and "Islamist terrorism" (lambda = 6,042,844; z = 1,839,066).

Germany: From Muslim World to "Bad" and "Murders"

As with *The Times*, in the media coverage on Islam and Muslims five years before the Paris attacks in the German conservative daily *Die Welt*, it is not possible to identify a single or main trigger event. Collocations referring to events, places, actors, and dates are not necessarily connected, as illustrated by "New York" and "Straßen Berlin" (cf. Table 8.6).

Additionally, collocations in the German case provide much weaker evidence of a foreign policy agenda than in the English case.

The collocations "lachen Islamismus" and "höhnische lachen" refer to an opinion piece in the newspaper, which sparked controversy and

Table 8.6 Most frequent collocations at *Die Welt* before the Paris attacks

	Collocation	Count	Lambda	z
1	de maizière	42	10,031,295	18,008,184
2	angela merkel	18	9,508,326	13,408,493
3	lachen islamismus	14	9,992,836	11,198,502
4	höhnische lachen	14	12,642,420	8,238,759
5	westen höhnische	14	10,695,948	7,363,728
6	new york	12	11,874,934	7,945,148
7	journalisten angst	10	7,354,003	14,802,742
8	angst straßen	10	7,729,646	14,432,266
9	straßen berlin	10	7,210,819	13,836,726
10	berlin miteinander	10	7,852,694	12,355,074

generated many reader letters. The opinion piece, titled "The West and the Mocking Laughter of Islamism", claims that "the global caliphate reacts to our clumsy reactions, to the naïve offers of dialogue, and intercultural understanding". The author is the publisher Matthias Döpfner, from the Springer Verlag.

Unlike in England, the coverage in *Die Welt* is less event-related and strongly opinion-driven. It deals with the fear of anti-Western attacks in Berlin, the connections of terrorists with the German Muslim community, and criticism of Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière after a terror alarm.

Regarding the co-occurrence network, it is not Muslims but Germans who are at the centre. The strongest connection is observed between "German" and "Islam". This outcome highlights the debate on the role of the German Muslim community in relation to anti-Western terrorism. It is accompanied by demands that this community should distance itself from anti-Western terrorism. In the co-occurrence network, an integration agenda emerges (Fig. 8.5).

The most frequent collocation related to the word root "Muslim" is "Muslim world" (muslimischen welt: lambda = 4,615,733; z = 9,549,216), though the connection is weak. When the word root is "Islam" the most frequent collocation is "laughing Islamism" (lachen islam). Nonetheless, the connection here is even weaker (lambda = 3,482,862; z = 7,646,527).

Just after the terror attacks in Paris, the most common collocations in the German conservative daily *Die Welt* refer to actors such as the Islamic State and the French president François Hollande, as well as a place ("Paris attacks" or "anschlägen paris"), posing a common framework linked to the terror attacks. This indicates that there was one single event triggering the media coverage (cf. Table 8.7).

Considering only the collocations related to "Muslim", the co-occurrence network illustrates that just after the terrorist attacks in Paris, the term "Muslim" took centre stage. It has strong links with the victims of the Paris terrorist attacks, who, in turn, represent the dominant thematic network in the coverage. This again illustrates a single event triggering the media coverage and setting the media agenda.

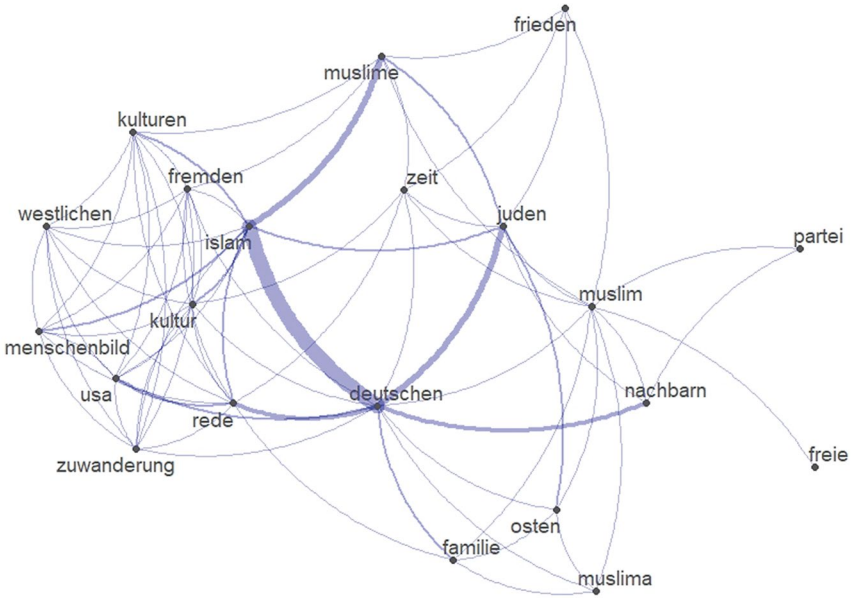

Fig. 8.5 Co-occurrence network of the term "Muslim" before the Paris attacks in *Die Welt* (*n* = 128)

Table 8.7 Most frequent collocations at *Die Welt* after Paris attacks

	Collocation	Count	Lambda	*z*
1	staat is	66	4,817,110	30,619,138
2	islamischer staat	53	8,457,471	21,245,802
3	anschläge paris	50	5,477,076	27,685,358
4	angela merkel	48	9,782,856	23,018,275
5	islamischen staat	39	5,718,996	27,275,168
6	de maizière	38	9,378,877	16,523,756
7	françois hollande	33	8,970,433	21,955,974
8	kampf is	31	4,191,409	20,237,570
9	terrormiliz islamischer	30	8,472,590	25,305,960
10	islamische staat	29	6,992,636	21,683,743

What is particularly striking here is that "Orbán", the head of the Hungarian government, is foregrounded more than the government of the affected country, France. Right-wing Hungarian populist Viktor Orbán claimed a link between the immigration of Muslims and terror in

Europe. He exerted considerable influence on the framework of the EU migration debate, in which he claimed that Schengen—an agreement covering many European countries that permits passport-free travel—could be saved by closing borders. Despite a co-occurrence network strongly linked to the event itself, the word "Orbán" indicates that not only a security agenda but also an integration agenda is at stake. A foreign policy agenda can be observed here solely in a European context ("Pariser", "Briten", "England").

In the German case, the problem definition of "Muslim" is even more clearly connected to the terror attack than in the English case. While in the latter case "Muslim" can refer to origin, faith, world, and so forth, in the German case there is a direct connection between "Muslim" and "böse" (bad) and "Muslim" and "mörder" (murder) (cf. Fig. 8.6).

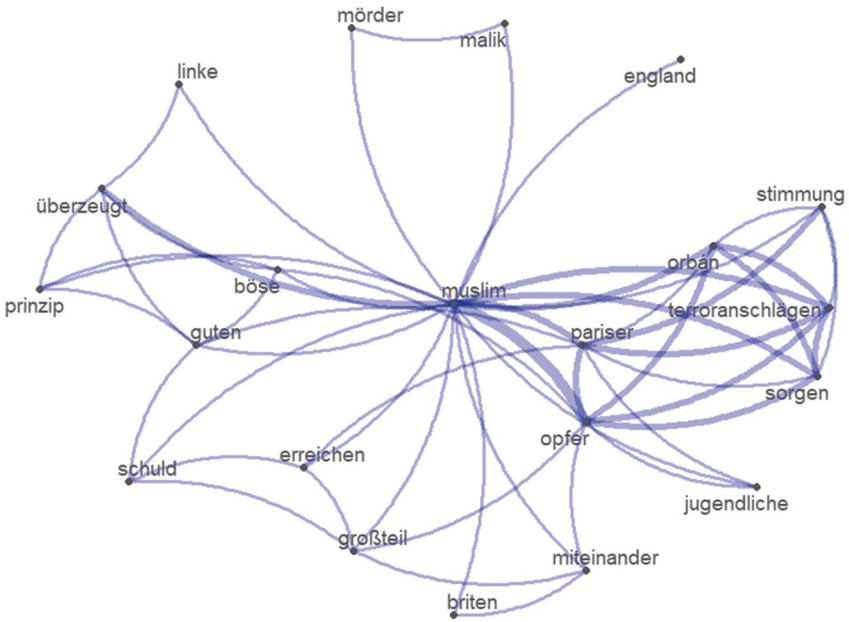

Fig. 8.6 Co-occurrence network of the term "Muslim" after Paris attacks in *Die Welt* (*n* = 293)

Collocations related to the word root "Islam" overwhelmingly involve the term "Islamic" (islamisch), referencing the terrorist group Islamic State. As a result, the word root "Muslim" is much less prominent; the most frequent collocation is "Muslims USA" (Muslime USA), with only seven mentions (lambda = 4,420,255; z = 11,256,889).

France: From Foreign Policy to Migrants

Five years before the Paris attacks, the most frequent collocations in the media coverage of the French broadsheet *Le Figaro* refer to different events such as the elections in Ivory Coast ("côte divoire") and in Egypt ("frères musulmans"). Pope Benedict XVI is also thematised due to the terror attack in Iraq. These events raise a range of issues with a predominant foreign policy agenda (cf. Table 8.8).

The co-occurrence network, in turn, shows that strong linkages with the term "Muslim" are concentrated on one side of the network, particularly with the words "Ouattara", "Bédié", and "milieu", which are also strongly connected to each other (cf. Fig. 8.7). This suggests that the term "Muslim" does not play the main role here. Rather, it refers to the presidential election in Ivory Coast and their main candidates, Alassane Ouattara and Henri Konan Bédié. Muslims are thematised in the context of the conflict between the Muslim North and the Christian South of the country. That is to say, it is not Muslims in the spotlight, but rather this (inter)national conflict.

Table 8.8 Most frequent collocations at *Le Figaro* before Paris attacks

	Collocation	Count	Lambda	z
1	nicolas sarkozy	21	10,501,047	11,520,348
2	benoît xvi	14	11,331,521	10,633,115
3	chef létat	13	6,792,669	15,685,724
4	côte divoire	12	12,792,724	7,718,918
5	ben laden	11	11,861,999	7,700,783
6	frères musulmans	9	7,863,353	11,915,974
7	défense antimissile	9	10,481,081	7,078,797
8	premier tour	8	7,362,849	13,107,403
9	milliards deuros	8	8,542,551	12,687,238
10	xviiie siècle	7	10,336,081	9,919,479

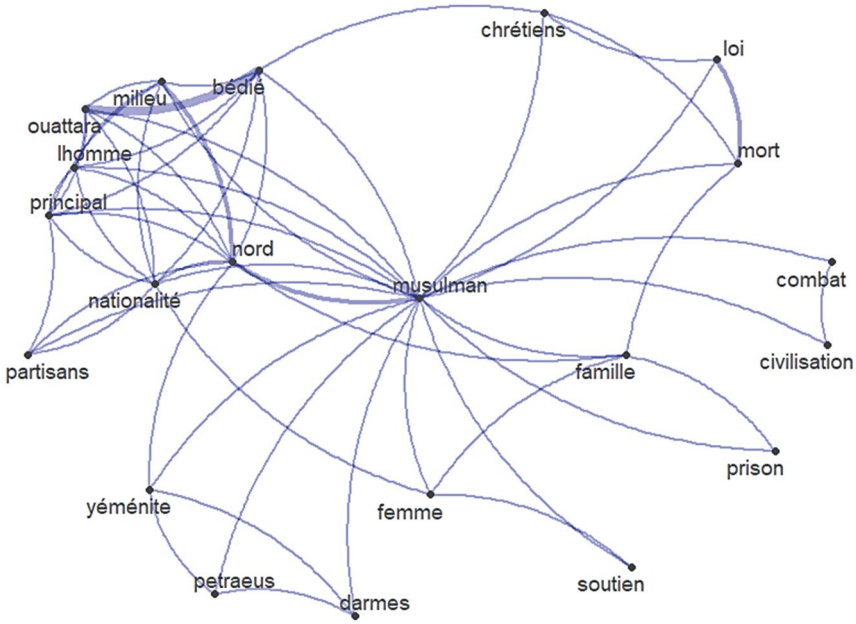

Fig. 8.7 Co-occurrence network of the term "Muslim" before Paris attacks in *Le Figaro* (*n* = 74)

The most frequent collocation linked to "Islam" is "Islamic law" ("loi islamique", lambda = 6,333,422; z = 9,109,115). The most frequent collocation with the term "Muslim" is "Muslim Brotherhood" ("frères musulmans": lambda = 7,863,353; z = 11,915,974). Here, "Muslim" is embedded in a context of foreign policy, defined according to political landscapes in different countries. These collocations also confirm a second event in the spotlight, the elections in Egypt.

Just after the Paris attacks, the most frequent collocations in Le Figaro demonstrate coverage mainly related to a single triggering event ("état islamique", "françois hollande", "13 novembre", "attentats paris"). The foreign policy agenda ("bachar el assad", "vladimir poutine") becomes clearly linked to a European security agenda (cf. Table 8.9).

At the same time, the co-occurrence network surrounding the word "Muslim" in *Le Figaro* after the event concentrates at a national level, as

Table 8.9 Most frequent collocations at *Le Figaro* after Paris attacks

	Collocation	Count	Lambda	*z*
1	létat islamique	267	7,241,037	5,450,667
2	françois hollande	166	7,705,804	4,655,811
3	13 novembre	139	7,940,050	4,052,375
4	attentats paris	85	4,362,596	3,314,265
5	chef létat	75	5,321,120	3,378,722
6	bachar elassad	64	10,812,682	2,348,853
7	vladimir poutine	55	10,709,369	2,197,144
8	front national	54	7,354,435	3,293,969
9	manuel valls	51	10,798,231	2,047,958
10	barack obama	49	10,874,126	1,871,318

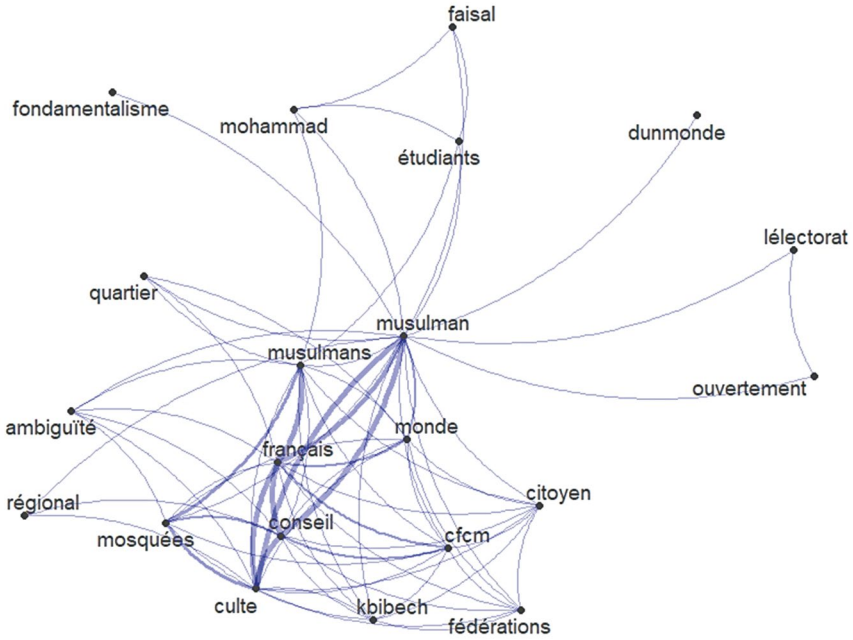

Fig. 8.8 Co-occurrence network of the term "Muslim" after Paris attacks in *Le Figaro* (*n* = 426)

evidenced by the strong connections with "mosques", "Français", "Conseil", and "culte". The latter references the French Muslim organisation, the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman, or CFCM (Fig. 8.8).

The most frequent collocation with "Muslim" also references the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman, or CFCM ("culte musulman", lambda = 7,650,234; z = 2,184,488). The Conseil often serves as a spokesperson, such as when it issues national appeals to mosques against radicalisation and criticises government policies that might lead to mosque closures. The role of mosques is seen in the context of the radicalisation of Islamist (Salafist) youth in France, reflecting a clear focus on the integration agenda. However, the media coverage rejects the notion of "radicalising mosques", emphasising instead the role of social networks in Islamist radicalisation. Regarding the term "Islam", the most frequent collocation is "Islamic State" ("l'état islamique", lambda = 7,241,037; z = 5,450,667).

Similarities and Differences Among the Countries

In England and France, the primary difference in narratives of Islam and Muslims before and just after the 2015 Paris attacks lies in the absence of a single or main trigger event. Headlines surrounding different events lead to more differentiation in the media narrative of Islam and Muslims. Five years before the Paris attacks, "Muslims" and Islam not only had different meanings but were also associated with different issues, such as elections in Egypt or Ivory Coast, protests in Iran, or debates on national identities. In these cases, Muslims are not in the spotlight as a singular entity; instead, they are associated with specific entities like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Islamic faith in Iran, or politicians in Ivory Coast.

The situation changed in 2015, with the terror attack becoming the primary event triggering media attention on Islam and Muslims. In this case, Muslims are in the spotlight and defined as a unified group, occupying the centre of the co-occurrence network and linked to various other words across the network.

However, the media agenda not only homogenises Muslims during this period but also converges different agendas. Before these incidents, events typically raised singular agendas, but after the Paris attacks, foreign policy, security, and integration agendas all come into play. Thus, political divergences, local events, and different Islamic branches not only disappear from the media narrative due to the homogenisation of Muslims but also shift the narrative to view Muslims as an internal threat.

Nevertheless, differences between the countries are also evident. In Germany, five years before the terror attack, discussions centred on Islam and German identity. This was unique among the three analysed countries, as they focused on local rather than foreign policy. This also reflects a different relationship with the Muslim world, not shaped by colonialism as in the case of France and the UK, but by migration. Since the 1950s, Germany has recruited workers from Southern Europe and Turkey, among others. Thus, unlike England and France, the Muslim community in Germany does not originate from former colonies but was built by former "guest workers".

After the terror attack, the term "Muslim" became directly associated with terms like "bad" and "murder" in the German daily. For France, however, the co-occurrences were different. Unlike in England and Germany, the Paris attacks represented a local event. As a result, fewer international authorities were involved, and a local actor—a Muslim organisation—took the spotlight in the French broadsheets.

What do these findings mean for the radicalisation of the mainstream? Firstly, Muslims are portrayed as a unified bloc. Secondly, they are viewed not only as a foreign policy issue but also as a matter of security and integration. In other words, Muslims are perceived as an internal threat. Both the convergence of agendas and the homogenisation of Muslims pave the way for the radicalisation of the mainstream.

Problematisation: Actors' Interaction

As evidenced earlier, the media not only highlight Islam and Muslims during Islamist-motivated terror attacks but also homogenise representations of Islam, conflating Muslim countries, organisations, and migrants into a singular entity. Yet, who are the actors behind such problem definitions? How do mainstream actors define Islam and Muslims as a problem compared to other actors? (**RQ3**).

Regarding the actors who speak in media coverage of Islamist terror attacks, most of them are public officials from the government (see Table 8.2). This finding aligns with previous literature indicating that terrorism coverage predominantly relies on official sources (cf. Venger, 2019). The exception is the terror attack on the newsroom of the

magazine Charlie Hebdo, where most statements came from the media (cf. Table 8.10).

The highest share of official sources in the media coverage of such attacks was observed after the terror attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. It is noteworthy that, unlike in the coverage of the terror attack on the World Trade Center, the proportion of ordinary citizens commenting on European events is much higher (Fig. 8.9).

However, the issue is not only who participates in media coverage but also which problem definitions are supported or refuted by different types of actors. Media actors (journalists, public intellectuals, news media, and social media influencers) mostly associate Islam and Muslims with terrorism, followed by experts and security agencies. Those who least support this association are ordinary people (cf. Table 8.10).

Strikingly, the results show that experts and media actors in particular associate Muslims with backwardness. The lowest shares making such association can be observed in statements from security agencies (3.9%), followed by statements from the government (Table 8.11).

Table 8.10 Statements defining Islam as a matter of terrorism per type of actor (top 5)

	11/09	London	Charlie Hebdo	Paris attacks
Government				
Agree	25.4%	9.5%	30.1%	30.1%
Disagree	12.2%	3.2%	2.7%	2.7%
Not associate	62.4%	87.3%	67.1%	67.1%
Media				
Agree	46.4%	24.1%	32.7%	32.7%
Disagree	6.2%	13.8%	8.2%	8.2%
Not associate	47.4%	62.1%	59.2%	59.2%
Ordinary people				
Agree	3.7%	4.2%	30.1%	30.1%
Disagree	29.6%	8.5%	4.1%	4.1%
Not associate	66.7%	87.3%	65.8%	65.8%
Security agencies				
Agree	39.2%	21.3%	50.0%	50%
Disagree	3.9%	1.6%	0%	0%
Not associate	56.9%	77.0%	50.0%	50%
Experts				
Agree	40.0%	9.1%	37.7%	37.7%
Disagree	17.5%	6.1%	6.6%	6.6%
Not associate	42.5%	84.8%	55.7%	55.7%

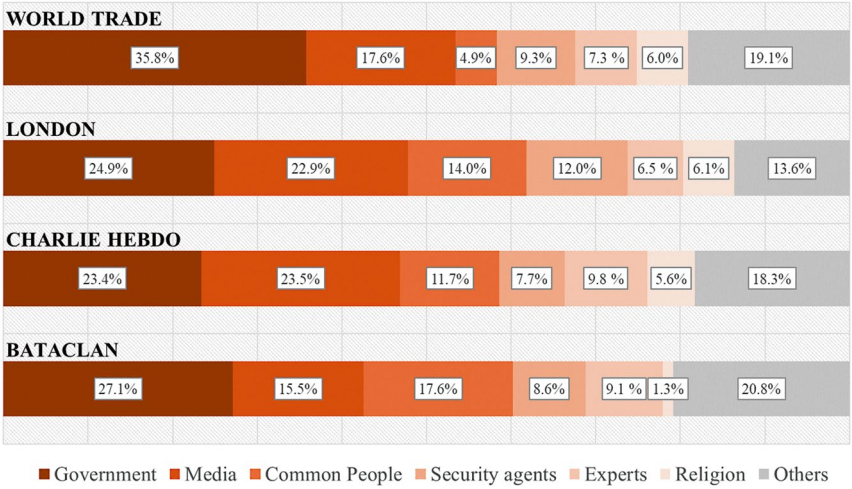

Fig. 8.9 Statements pro type of actor (in %)

Table 8.11 Statements defining Islam/Muslims as matter of backwardness per type of actor (top 5)

	11/09	London	Charlie Hebdo	Paris attacks
Government				
Agree	8.6%	7.1%	4.8%	8.7%
Disagree	5.1%	0.8%	4.8%	2.5%
Not associate	86.3%	92.1%	90.4%	88.8%
Media				
Agree	23.7%	30.2%	18.4%	23.9%
Disagree	8.2%	4.3%	10.2%	7.6%
Not associate	68.0%	65.5%	71.4%	68.5%
Ordinary people				
Agree	11.1%	2.8%	13.7%	1.0%
Disagree	14.8%	2.8%	8.2%	7.6%
Not associate	74.1%	94.4%	78.1%	91.4%
Security agencies				
Agree	3.9%	11.5%	2.1%	2.0%
Disagree	0%	1.6%	0%	3.9%
Not associate	96.1%	86.9%	97.9%	94.1%
Experts				
Agree	20.0%	6.1%	21.3%	18.5%
Disagree	20.0%	6.1%	4.9%	11.1%
Not associate	60.0%	87.9%	73.8%	70.4%

The issue of discrimination is particularly emphasised by ordinary people. Interestingly, actors do not disagree that Muslims experience discrimination; they simply do not mention this association very often (cf. Table 8.12).

The association with antisemitism, in turn, is much less pronounced than others and also varies significantly according to the event. Regarding the ideological position of actors, only 1% of all statements were identified as far-right, making statistical analysis challenging. Out of 28 statements from far-right actors, 15 were made after the attack on the newsroom of Charlie Hebdo, with another nine observed after the Paris terror attack. Following the attack on the World Trade Center, only three far-right statements were registered, and just one after the incidents in London.

Table 8.12 Statements defining Islam/Muslims as experiencing discrimination per type of actor (top five)

	11/09	London	Charlie Hebdo	Paris attacks
Government				
Agree	2.0%	1.6%	4.1%	4.3%
Disagree	–	–	–	–
Not associate	98.0%	98.4%	95.9%	95.7%
Media				
Agree	2.1%	7.8%	16.3%	9.8%
Disagree	–	0.9%	2.7%	1.1%
Not associate	97.9%	91.4%	81.0%	89.1%
Ordinary people				
Agree	11.1%	5.6%	9.6%	15.2%
Disagree	–	5.6%	–	1.0%
Not associate	88.9%	88.7%	90.4%	83.8%
Security agencies				
Agree	2.0%	3.3%	4.2%	5.9%
Disagree	–	–	–	–
Not associate	98.0%	96.7%	95.8%	94.1%
Experts				
Agree	2.5%	15.2%	9.8%	11.1%
Disagree	–	3.0%	–	–
Not associate	97.5%	81.8%	90.2%	88.9%

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter aims to reconstruct the process of how the mainstream radicalises. To achieve this, we trace how the media agenda on Islam and Muslims was built in press coverage from 2000 to 2020 in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. By doing so, this research invites a new approach to analysing media representations of Islam and Muslims, moving beyond studies on valence and (negative) stereotype research.

We contribute to this debate by examining how the mainstream radicalises through three interconnected processes of agenda building in the mainstream media: thematisation, problem definition, and problematisation. Regarding thematisation, terror attacks not only attract but also catalyse media attention to Islam and Muslims. However, the latter occupy the headlines particularly in the aftermath of a few anti-Western terror acts. The thematisation is therefore not triggered by "Islamic terrorism" as a whole. Beheadings, protests, or symbolic conflicts like controversies do not lead to surges in media attention on this religious group. Terror attacks on Muslims, in turn, decrease media attention on them. This indicates that media attention is linked to problematisation. In this context, calling for less negative representations means contradicting media logic.

Concerning problem definition, the few terror attacks on Westerners not only lead to more media attention but also change the agenda and the problem definition of Islam and Muslims. As illustrated in the case of the Paris attacks in 2015, the highest media storm in the 20-year period, terror attacks may lead to homogenisation by overshadowing political, cultural, and religious differences and transforming Muslims into a single bloc. Such trigger events can also lead to a convergence of the foreign policy, security, and integration agendas, transforming Muslims into an internal threat.

It is important to highlight that the difference of a media storm after a terror attack is not a matter of valence. Negative associations with radicalism and violence occur even before the terror attack, such as in the media coverage of elections and protests in countries with a Muslim majority. The point here is not negativity, but rather the lack of differentiation and the narrative shift from a foreign policy problem to an internal one.

Homogenisation of Muslims and convergence of agendas—and not negativity—pave the way for radicalisation. Therefore, the question lies in problem definition, not valence.

Regarding problematisation, government voices are the most common actors in the media. However, this share changes according to the event. Strikingly, while in the attack against the World Trade Center, religious actors still played a role, after that, they became irrelevant.

Different actors also define Islam and Muslims as different problems. The main triggers for defining Islam and Muslims as a matter of terrorism and possessors of a backwards belief system are media actors and the experts featured in the media coverage. Consequently, mainstream radicalisation originates from the media, which themselves problematise Muslims and Islam. This indicates that the media not only convey and amplify narratives but also primarily construct them against the backdrop of trigger events like terror attacks.

In a nutshell, mainstream actors in the West, such as experts and the media, become more extreme in defending a so-called Western belief system against a so-called Islam. This attachment can be observed in statements about the "superiority of the West". This process occurs by (a) putting Muslims in the spotlight when an anti-Western terror attack happens, (b) defining them as a single bloc (homogenisation), and (c) attributing terrorism to the "backwardness of Islam".

Therefore, addressing the problem should not rely on "positive representations". Instead, the media need more accurate problem definitions, returning to more differentiated media coverage, as seen during low tide periods. This means reporting on the complexity of the so-called Muslim world and addressing political conflicts, power struggles, and other factors that lead to anti-Western attacks, instead of radicalising themselves in a narrative of the backwardness of a world religion and the "superiority of the West".

The recent elections for the European Parliament in 2024 have shown that the normalisation and mainstreaming of the Far Right continues and gains momentum. Future studies should focus more intensively on how the mainstream has contributed to this trend.

Alongside the current debate on the mainstreaming of the Far Right and the normalisation of far-right ideologies, it is urgent to increase our understanding of how the mainstream radicalises. The media play a crucial role in this process, alongside institutionalised politics, parties, and far-right societal networks.

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Index[1]

[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

L. Sponholz et al. (eds.), *Radicalising the Mainstream in Western Europe*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-85963-2