From Posts to Polls:

AfD Social Media Activity in east Germany and the Growing Dilemma of Coalition Politics

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About this paper

On 1 September 2024, state elections will be held in the two eastern German states of Thuringia and Saxony, followed by state elections in Brandenburg on 22 September. This report outlines the findings of an analysis of the 100 posts with most interactions by local Facebook pages belonging to the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in the lead-up to these elections. It identifies key themes and targets of popular AfD posts; it also discusses the ramifications of the party's political entrenchment in eastern Germany and the risk that it could lead to unstable coalitions which may undermine trust in democracy.

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ANALYSING THE AFD'S SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN IN THURINGIA AND SAXONY

On 1 September 2024, state elections will be held in the two eastern German states of Thuringia and Saxony, followed by state elections in Brandenburg on 22 September. This report outlines the findings of an analysis of the 100 posts with most interactions by local Facebook pages belonging to the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in the lead-up to these elections. It identifies key themes and targets of popular AfD posts; it also discusses the ramifications of the party's political entrenchment in eastern Germany and the risk that it could lead to unstable coalitions which may undermine trust in democracy.

Key Findings

- ISD identified 117 AfD pages on Facebook with a total of 850,705 followers (ignoring duplicate followers across accounts), with an average of 8,681 followers. Individual pages varied significantly in terms of follower count, ranging from 210 to 92,000, with 21 pages having 10,000 followers or more. These 117 pages published 2,729 posts between 13 July (the official launch date for the AfD Saxony's campaign) and 14 August 2024.

- Opposition to migration was the most prominent issue among popular AfD posts, which typically blamed migrants for high crime rates and a declining welfare state. AfD pages frequently called for deportations of criminal offenders to countries including Syria and Afghanistan. Economic issues including low wages and pensions, rising costs of living, and unemployment were also common themes. A third major theme among popular AfD posts were calls for "peace" with Russia; a common narrative sought to portray the AfD as the only party truly committed to peace while depicting parties supportive of Ukraine as irresponsible warmongers.

- The post with the single highest engagement (81,145 interactions, compared to 9,935 interactions for the post with the second highest level of engagement) referenced the anti-trans campaign against the Olympic Gold medal winner Imane Khelif. Of the remaining top 10 posts sorted by interactions, 4 were about migration, 2 were related to the economy, 2 were focused on "peace" with Russia and 1 discussed far-left violence.

- The conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) was the most frequent target of criticism within popular AfD posts, ahead of the liberal-left Green Party and centre-left Social Democratic Party (SPD). This finding indicates that the AfD and its followers online view the CDU as their main political opponent and competitor in eastern Germany. The newly-founded Bündnis Sara Wagenknecht (BSW) only came up twice in popular AfD posts but was clearly portrayed as a political opponent and part of the establishment despite some political overlap (e.g. on their positions related to Russia).

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- The AfD and BSW are expected to secure strong results in the state elections in Thuringia and Saxony. If other parties adhere to the "firewall" tradition of refusing cooperation with the far-right AfD, unprecedented and unsustainable multi-party coalitions are highly likely. Furthermore, a coalition between the AfD and BSW currently remains improbable despite clear overlaps around Ukraine. For now, far-right parties are unlikely to exert direct influence over policymaking in Thuringia and Saxony. In the long term, however, unstable coalitions whose primary purpose is to uphold the firewall tradition may undermine trust in the ability of the parliamentary democratic system and its ability to deliver for its citizens.

Political Background

A tumultuous first half of the year

2024 has been an eventful year for the AfD. In January, investigative outlet Correctiv revealed internal deliberations at a meeting between far-right activists, representatives from the AfD and wealthy donors supportive of nationalist causes in Potsdam (near Berlin). At the meeting, Martin Sellner, founder of the ethno-nationalist Identitarian movement in Austria (Identitäre Bewegung) presented his "masterplan" for a "remigration" policy which would expel millions of German citizens of foreign origin if the far-right assumed power. These revelations led to widespread demonstrations across German cities. High-profile politicians were among those involved in the largest German pro-democracy movement in decades.

Both at the national and state level, support for the AfD dropped following Correctiv's investigation. The party was polling as high as 24 percent nationally in January, with 35 percent in Saxony and 36 percent in Thuringia; in EU elections in June, the AfD only reached 15.9 percent of the vote. In addition to the protests earlier in the year, the party's campaign was undermined by scandals surrounding its lead candidate Maximilian Krah, including accusations of promoting Russian propaganda, Chinese espionage in his inner circle and revisionist statements about the Waffen-SS. Current polls put the party between 16-19 percent nationally and around 30 percent in both Saxony and Thuringia.

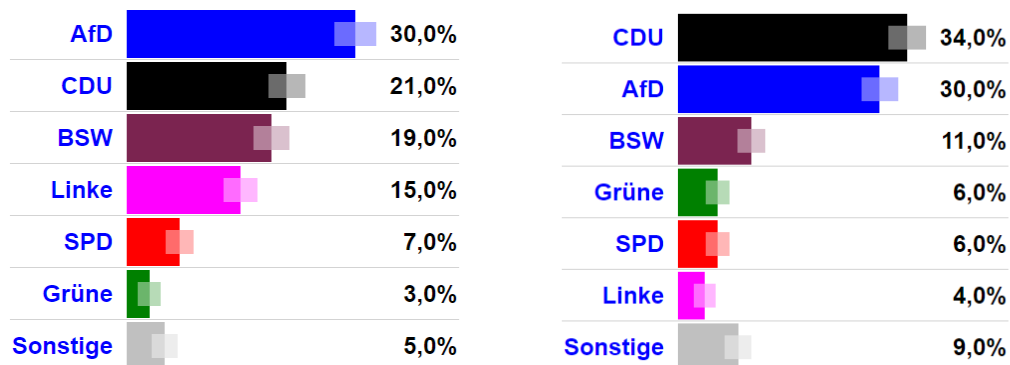| Thuringia	%		Saxony	%
AfD	30,0%		CDU	34,0%
CDU	21,0%		AfD	30,0%
BSW	19,0%		BSW	11,0%
Linke	15,0%		Grüne	6,0%
SPD	7,0%		SPD	6,0%
Grüne	3,0%		Linke	4,0%
Sonstige	5,0%		Sonstige	9,0%

Figure 1: Polls on the upcoming state elections in Thuringia (left) and Saxony (right) by Forschungsgruppe Wahlen. Data from dawum.de (Licence: ODC-ODbL)

The AfD's appeal in east Germany

The causes for the AfD's strength in east Germany are complex. Studies have highlighted a greater [prevalence of authoritarian and xenophobic views](#) in Thuringia and Saxony (as well as in neighbouring Saxony-Anhalt). The prevalence of these views in east Germany may be linked to a loss of status following German reunification, dissatisfaction with the performance of the democratic system (despite overwhelming support for democracy as an idea) and the perceived inability of citizens in these states to influence politics.

However, the regions are also characterised by economic grievances including lower wages; although the AfD attracts voters across all social classes, working class and unemployed voters are [more likely](#) to support the party. Similarly, [men are much more likely](#) than women to vote AfD: the [emigration of young women to Western states](#) after German reunion has resulted in a gender-imbalance in eastern Germany, especially in rural areas. The AfD's opposition to COVID-19 measures, which were [met with greater scepticism](#) in eastern Germany (especially Saxony), likewise distinguished the party from its competitors. Finally, the AfD profits from [wide-spread disapproval](#) of military support for Ukraine in eastern Germany.

Previous electoral successes have enabled the AfD to cultivate the image of a party prioritising the interest of people in eastern Germany – a role formerly played by the far-left Die Linke, the successor to the Communist state party Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED). The AfD has capitalised on the fears and grievances of eastern German voters who believe that other parties prioritise spending money on refugees and migrants, Ukraine, environmentalism, minority rights and European integration rather than defending the interests of 'ordinary people' or local companies.

The success of the Thuringian and Saxonian AfD chapters is particularly noteworthy in the context of the ongoing investigations by domestic intelligence services. Starting in 2019, Germany's domestic intelligence services [began](#) to assess whether groups within the AfD and its youth wing could be classified as extremist (i.e. whether their political aims contradict the German constitution). Over the next four years, three state-level AfD chapters – including both Thuringia and Saxony chapters – and the national youth wing were [designated](#) as proven extremist organisations, while the national party has been [placed under surveillance](#).

In search of viable political majorities

Debates about how political parties in eastern German states should respond to the rising popularity of the AfD are not new. In 2020, Thomas Kemmerich from the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) was [briefly elected](#) Prime Minister of Thuringia with votes from CDU, FDP and AfD parliamentary groups. This caused a major national controversy, as it broke with the tradition of refusing cooperation with the far-right (the so-called "firewall" or *cordon sanitaire*). A few days later, Kemmerich stepped down. Ultimately, a minority government was formed under the leadership of current Prime Minister Bodo Ramelow from Die Linke.

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Five years later, the emergence of the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), which currently polls around 19 percent in Thuringia and 11 percent in Saxony, may further complicate matters. BSW, founded by former Die Linke MP Sahra Wagenknecht in January 2024, combines opposition to immigration and "woke" politics with left-wing economic stances and pro-Kremlin views on foreign policy. Wagenknecht calls for peace negotiations with Moscow, blames NATO for the war in Ukraine and seeks an end to Western sanctions against Russia. Documents uncovered in 2023 showed the Kremlin seeks to support the AfD and Wagenknecht to build a broad coalition against German support for Ukraine.
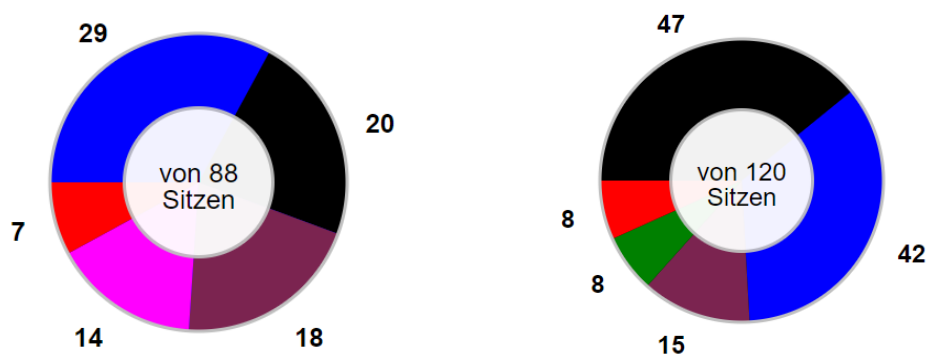

Figure 2: Projected seat distribution in the state parliaments of Thuringia (left) and Saxony (right) after the upcoming state elections, based on the polls by Forschungsgruppe Wahlen. Data from dawum.de (Licence: ODC-ODbL)

The anticipated results for the AfD and BSW in Saxony and Thuringia and the erosion of the centre ground will make unprecedented and likely unsustainable multi-party coalitions unavoidable. In Saxony, the AfD is currently projected to come in second behind the CDU led by Prime Minister Michael Kretschmer. However, the SPD, the Green Party, and the FDP (which form the current federal government) as well as the Die Linke are not guaranteed to enter parliament; this may leave a CDU-BSW coalition as the only option to build a majority coalition without the AfD.

In Thuringia, the AfD is expected to become the strongest party. Forming a majority coalition may therefore require an even broader and ideologically unstable alliance or a minority government. Even a CDU-BSW-SPD coalition may not have a majority, and a coalition between Die Linke and an eastern German CDU chapter would appear extremely unlikely, given the historical roots of Die Linke in the ruling party in East Germany between 1949-1989.

Research Approach

This report analyses key themes and targets of the AfD's social media activity on Facebook. The purpose of this analysis is to provide insights into the key narratives employed by the AfD in the lead up to the state elections in Thuringia and Saxony, especially in relation to issues the party priorities to mobilise voters and whom it views as its most important political opponent. As the content was filtered to identify the content with the highest interactions, the findings additionally provide insights into the interests and preferences of the digital audiences that consume and engage with AfD content.

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The following sections outline the platform selection, data collection and coding approach.

Platform Selection and Data Collection

AfD politicians in Saxony and Thuringia have most consistently used Facebook for reaching online audiences in their state election campaigns so far. While there are AfD accounts with significant reach on YouTube, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok, key AfD figures from the two eastern German states were not using these platforms, had almost no reach or were inactive.

ISD researchers used Crowdtangle, a Meta-owned software tool that enabled the analysis of the posts of public pages and groups on Facebook; it was shut down by the company in August. Through Crowdtangle, ISD downloaded all 2,729 from a list of 117 Facebook pages including AfD politicians and party pages in Thuringia and Saxony between 13 July (the official campaign launch of the AfD Saxony) and 14 August 2024 (the day Crowdtangle was shut down). A sample of the 100 posts that received the most interactions was then qualitatively analysed to identify key themes[i].

These pages had a cumulative 850,705 followers (although there are likely overlaps between followers across accounts) with counts ranging between 210 and 92,000 followers. The mean number of followers was 8,681. 21 pages had 10,000 followers or more.

Coding Approach

When reviewing the gathered posts, ISD analysts inductively assigned themes to the content. Whenever new thematic categories were added which challenged previously established ones, all posts that had already been coded were reviewed again to ensure these were still labelled appropriately. This created an iterative process between an analysis of the content and the identification of themes.

The key themes identified through this process were:
1) Migration,
2) Campaigning (i.e. posts expressing support for the AfD without discussing political ideas or policies),
3) Economy and finance,
4) "Peace with Russia" (i.e. posts opposing support for Ukraine or military deterrence against Russia, or advocating for a diplomatic end to the conflict that would involve major concessions by Ukraine in Russia's favour),
5) Climate and energy,
6) Alleged state repression,
7) COVID-19.

Although most posts were assigned one theme, some were assigned multiple: for example, an AfD post arguing that the CDU had failed Germany because of its approach to migration,

support for Ukraine and climate policy would have been labelled as Migration, Climate and energy and "Peace with Russia."

Where applicable, ISD analysts also noted which political parties or politicians were the target of criticism. The purpose of this was to provide insights into who AfD accounts view as their most important political opponents as well as effective targets to mobilise voters.

Topical Findings: Migration, the Economy, and Russia's War as Key Themes

Migration was the most prominent issue discussed in popular AfD posts, followed by posts focused on general campaigning, economic and financial issues, "peace with Russia", climate and energy policy, alleged state repression and the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 1). However, 15 percent of the posts analysed also at least partially focused on other, smaller themes (more detailed breakdown in the "Other" section).
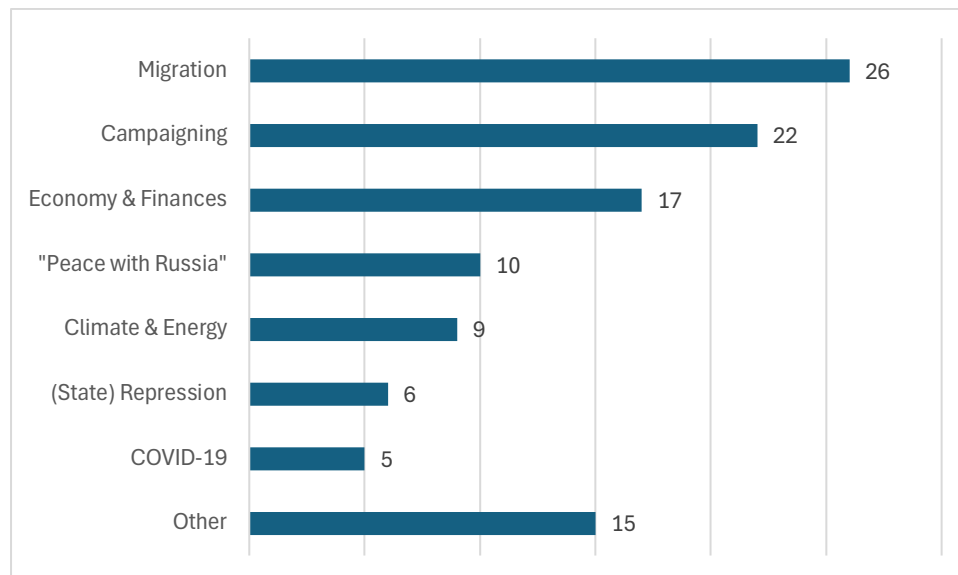

Figure 3: Most common themes across popular AfD posts. As some posts were assigned more than one theme, the sum of these categories exceeds 100.

The post with the single highest engagement (81,145 interactions compared to 9,935 interactions for the post with the second-most interactions and 3,981 interactions on average for all 100 posts) cited a boxer who said that men should not participate in women's boxing competitions. While not stated explicitly, this post should be seen in the context of the harassment campaign against Olympic Gold medal winner Imane Khelif who was, without evidence, accused of being a man competing in women's boxing.

Of the remaining top 10 posts sorted by highest number of interactions, 4 were about mass migration and calls for deportations to Syria and Afghanistan, 2 were about the economy, 2 covered "Peace with Russia" and 1 lamented state inaction in the face of far-left violence.

75 percent of posts focused on Saxony and Thuringia rather than national issues, a far higher percentage than seen on the national AfD Facebook page. ISD's findings show that the

regional party pages received the highest engagement with posts which featured a mixture of AfD core themes such as immigration combined with specific concerns of voters in Saxony such as economic uncertainty. It is worth highlighting that many of the issues raised in high engagement posts such as foreign policy are dealt with at a federal level; conversely, education policy and other topics which are decided at state level generally did not receive high levels of interaction.

The following sections outline the findings from the thematic analysis in greater detail.

Migration

The most prominent theme in popular posts by AfD pages on Facebook since the beginning of their state elections campaign has been migration. Posts often claimed that migration had led to increased crime rates, making Germans less safe. For example, one AfD page argued that Germans were no longer able to use public swimming pools due to sexual and violent crime committed by foreigners. In other posts, AfD pages asserted that migration was "destroying" the German welfare state.

Such posts were frequently connected to calls for deportations of criminal offenders, including to Syria and Afghanistan. The AfD also attacked the CDU for making up "excuses" preventing such deportations. Two posts called for "remigration", a term popularised by the far-right Identitarian movement. Posts calling for deportations/remigration regularly depicted airplanes, symbolising the mode of transport through which the AfD hope to be able to expel foreigners from Germany.

AfD pages predominantly framed their rejection of migration in terms of ethnic or national origin rather than religion. While opposition to migration was often related to Muslim-majority countries, only one post mentioned Islamist extremism and none directly mentioned Islam or Muslims. Two posts showed posters of the slogan "So that Zwickau [town in Saxony] does not become like Mannheim." The slogan refers to the suspected Islamist extremist attack in Mannheim on 31 May 2024, during which anti-Islam activist Michael Stürzenberger was wounded and a police officer was killed.

The AfD has long promoted anti-Islam stances, including from the leader of the party's Thuringia state chapter Björn Höcke.[ii] However, there is significant debate among the German far right about the appropriate approach to Islam and Muslims, including within the AfD. While some argue that Islam and Muslims are incompatible with liberal Western values, others believe that liberalism is at the core of Germany's problems and support limited alliances with conservative Muslims against shared political opponents.

Figure 4: A series of AfD Facebook Posts. Top left: "Violence excess in Heidenau. Deport criminal foreigners to Syria and Afghanistan as well!" Top centre: "The East does it! Summer, Sun, Remigration." Top right: "Missing deportations to Syria and Afghanistan. The lazy excuses of the CDU." Bottom left: "Migration destroys our welfare state! Welfare contributions rise to over 50 percent" Bottom centre: "We want our swimming pools back! Constant sexual and violent crimes by foreigners…" Bottom right: "So Zwickau does not become like Mannheim."

Campaigning

A little less than a quarter of AfD posts primarily focused on promoting the party and its candidates for the upcoming state elections without emphasising any political ideas or policies. These posts either called voters to use both of their votes for the AfD, cited encouraging survey results, advertised upcoming party events or highlighted key candidates such as Höcke.

Figure 5:: AfD Facebook Posts. Left: "Both votes; AfD." Centre: "You [plural, directed at AfD supporters] are simply great!" Right: "The East does it! Summer festival with Björn Höcke. Erfurt marketplace"

Economy and finance

The third-most prominent theme was the state of the economy and financial issues. Party pages and politicians accused the Thuringian and Saxonian state governments as well as the federal government of "destroying" the German economy. Posts frequently made the case that this was not simply a lack of economic competence: rather, they argued there was a trade-off between rational economic policies and "ideological" projects, such as climate policies and support for Ukraine. AfD posts frequently sought to highlight the negative impact these ideological policies had on ordinary people in Thuringia and Saxony, such as lower wages, lower pensions and higher unemployment.

Figure 6: AfD Facebook posts. Left: "German economic shrinks during the second quarter. The traffic light [i.e. federal governing coalition] destroys our economy and thus our country." Centre: "Funding wars and saving the world climate? No! More money for retirement!" Right: "Erzgebirge and Görlitz with the lowest wages nation-wide: 'Poor despite work' is a shame!"

"Peace with Russia"

Another key narrative of popular posts by AfD pages centred on opposition to German and Western support for Ukraine in its struggle against the Russian military invasion. 10 percent of all analysed posts expressed the AfD's desire to instead "make peace" with Russia; some attempted to stoke fear that support for Ukraine would lead to a nuclear war with Russia.

A number of AfD posts specifically criticised CDU politicians including Saxony's Prime Minister Kretschmer for their support for Ukraine (even though Kretschmer has in fact called for negotiations with Russia and cuts to military aid for Ukraine) and for stationing of nuclear weapons in Germany to deter Russia. One post used the slogan, "whoever votes for the CDU votes for war", a reference to the 1932 Communist slogan, "whoever votes for Hitler votes for war." Another AfD post also drew a connection between the failed assassination attempt on the US presidential candidate Donald Trump and his stance on the conflict, claiming that "peace[ful] politicians live dangerously."

Figure 7: AfD Facebook Posts. Top left: "New nuclear rockets 'absolutely correct.' Kretschmer is also a warmonger!" Top right: "Peace[ful] politicians live dangerously." Bottom left: "90 Seconds until the World War" Bottom right: "Whoever votes for the CDU votes for war."

Climate and energy

Posts related to climate change and energy policy made up a similar share of the dataset analysed (nine percent). For years, opposition to climate change policies has been a key issue for the AfD. It is the only major party in Germany that includes a significant number of politicians and supporters who are sceptical of the scientific consensus on climate change.

AfD posts questioned both the likely consequences from climate change as well as human contributions to it. Additionally, they argued that green policies proposed to tackle climate change would be economically damaging for Thuringia and Saxony. Their antagonism to such policies is often framed around defending the interests of 'common people' and small companies against liberal, urban elites who are out of touch with local realities in rural areas.

Figure 8: AfD Facebook Posts. Left: "Shrink bloated ministries. No new positions for 'sexual diversity' or 'saving the climate.'" Right: "Dumb, dumber, Green energy policy. Criticism from Namibia: Greens are destroying our biodiversity and environment!"

State repression

A smaller set of popular posts by AfD pages centred on the narrative that German state institutions are using authoritarian, illegitimate and possibly illegal means to combat the rise of the party.

Posts criticised Federal Interior Minister Nancy Faeser (SPD) for the ban of the far-right Compact magazine in July 2024.[iii] AfD pages referred to the ban as an "attack on freedom of opinion" and described Faeser as an "enemy of the constitution." Portraying political opponents as hostile to the German constitution has become a key theme of AfD communication since the domestic intelligence services [began](#) to investigate whether groups within the party could be classified as extremist. Related posts argued that Claus von Stauffenberg, a prominent Wehrmacht officer involved in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler and symbol of resistance under the Nazi regime, would be classified as extremist and investigated by Germany's domestic intelligence services today. Through such posts, the AfD attempts to claim that the political discourse has shifted so far to the left that even historical figures that are held in high regard would be branded as extremist.

Figure 9: AfD Facebook Posts. Top right: "Ban of the Compact-Magazin. Attack on Freedom of Speech!" Top left: "Faeser is the enemy of the constitution." Bottom left: "Today he would be a case for [investigated by] the [so called] Office for the Protection of the Constitution." Bottom right: "We vote freedom! No to any dictatorship of opinion."

COVID-19

A number of AfD posts focused on the COVID-19 pandemic. The key theme of these posts were COVID-19-related files from the Robert Koch-Institut (RKI), the federal agency for disease control and prevention, that were made public in July 2023. These documents have led to significant public debate about alleged political infringements on the independence of the RKI. Posts from the AfD, which had been highly critical of the government's lockdown and vaccination policies, claimed that they would investigate the "injustices" and "lies" about the COVID-19 pandemic if they were in power.

Figure 10: AfD Facebook Posts. Left: "Victory of the free media! All RKI protocols 2020-2023 uncensored." Right: "#RKIFiles We will investigate the injustice and lies around Corona [virus]!"

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Other

The remainder of popular posts by AfD pages included less commonly repeated themes, including three anti-LGBTQ+ posts. While this number may seem low, they included the single post about Women's Olympic boxing that received by far the highest number of interactions within the entire dataset.

Three posts lamented far-left violence against the AfD, while "the media" was likewise attacked in three posts.

Figure 11: AfD Facebook Posts. Left: "There are only two sexes! No to the self-determination law! No to annual sex and name change! No to puberty blockers! No to trans-propaganda in our schools!" Centre: "In front of the town hall: peace [flag] instead of rainbow flag. Christopher Street Day in Pirna becomes a failure. A few hundred instead of ten thousands at the demonstration." Right: "Where is the 'fight against left-wing violence'? Arson attack on family car of AfD MP Holger Hentschel"

The following issues appeared in a single post each:
- Crime unrelated to migration,
- Feminism,
- Progressive NGO Campact,
- Family policy,
- Education policy
- Support for direct democracy via referenda.

Finding: The CDU is seen by the AfD as its key political opponent

Across the full dataset of AfD posts on Facebook, individuals or policies associated with the CDU received the highest number of attacks (36 percent), followed by the Green Party (19 percent) and the SPD (16 percent). Half of the top 10 posts with the highest number of interactions criticised the CDU, compared to 3 against the Green Party and 2 against the SPD.
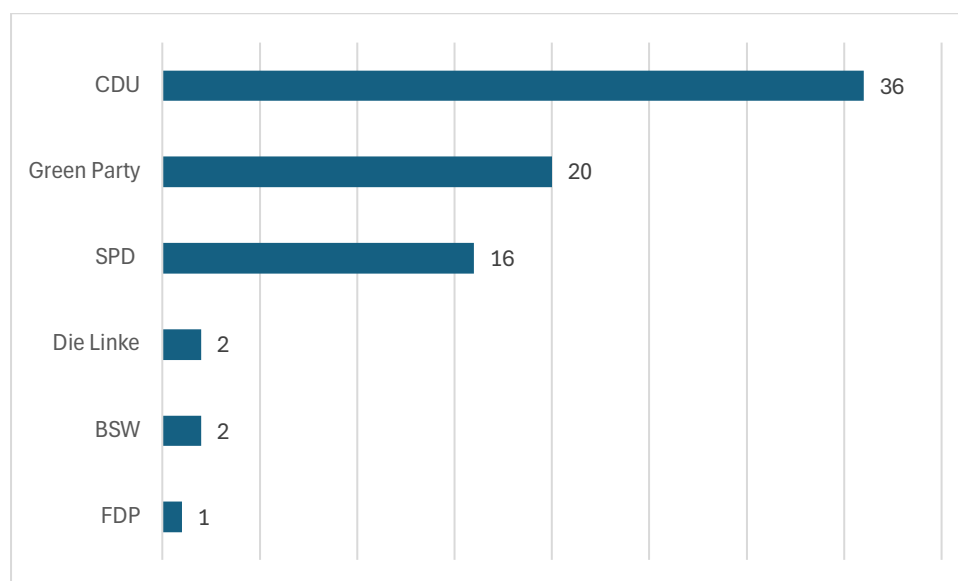
Figure 12: Most frequent targets of criticism of AfD posts on Facebook. Not all posts criticised political opponents, meaning that the total here is below 100.

This finding is noteworthy as the Green Party has generally been seen as the main ideological opponent of the AfD. The prominence of the CDU in AfD criticism may reflect the fact that polls suggest the CDU is their closest competitor in both Thuringia and Saxony. Moreover, the CDU's long-term dominance in Saxony, where it has ruled uninterrupted since 1990, may be a factor. Posts often accused the CDU of having become too liberal, and notably covered themes such as trans rights, the ban of the far-right Compact association or climate activism – issues more closely associated with the Green Party and the SPD.

Figure 13: AfD Facebook Posts. Left: "Habeck and Merz apparently already negotiate a Black-Green [CDU-Green] coalition. Whoever votes CDU gets Green [Party]." Right: "Kretschmers family policy the worst in all of Germany! Negative record: birth rates in Saxony collapse."

Die Linke (three posts) and the BSW (two posts) were hardly mentioned at all in popular posts by AfD pages. In the two instances in which BSW was criticised, the AfD sought to portray the newly-founded party as part of the political establishment that promises continuity rather than change. One post identified BSW as a Trojan Horse deceiving voters while secretly planning coalitions with Die Linke and the CDU; the other referred to BSW as the "next (fire-)wall party". This both references its origin as part of Die Linke (which has sometimes been

Figure 14: "AfD Facebook Posts. Left: "So that nothing changes!" Right: "Bündnis Katja Wolf [word play involving BSW's lead candidate in Thuringia]. The next (fire-)wall party."

A similar patten is apparent when analysing which politicians were most frequently criticised in AfD posts. Prime Minister Kretschmer (CDU) was criticised in 15 posts, followed by Interior Minister Faeser (SPD, 6 posts) and EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (4 posts). It should be highlighted that 3 posts related to migration and support for Ukraine criticising von der Leyen were in the top 10 posts with the highest number of interactions.

By contrast, Prime Minister Ramelow was only criticised in one AfD post. Other high-profile national politicians were either not mentioned at all in popular posts by AfD pages such as Finance Minister Christian Lindner (FDP) or Defence Minister Boris Pistorius (SPD), or surprisingly rarely. Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz (SPD), Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock (Green Party) and BSW leader Sahra Wagenknecht were only named once, Vice Chancellor and Minister for the Economy and Climate Robert Habeck (Green Party) twice, and CDU chief and opposition leader Friedrich Merz three times.

Beyond these direct attacks on political parties, AfD posts criticised the federal government (10 posts), state governments (2 posts) or simply "the government" (14 posts). Six posts attacked the so-called "Altparteien" (old parties), a disparaging term used by AfD supporters to collectively describe the CDU, FDP, SPD, the Green Party and Die Linke.

Outlook and Implications

The analysis of the AfD's most popular content pieces on Facebook since the launch of its state election campaigns shows that the party opportunistically combines core themes such as immigration with broader foreign policy goals such as a desire make peace with Russia at any cost, and regionally important themes such as economic concerns. Through its Facebook pages, the party argues that there is a zero-sum contest between the demographic, economic and security interests of "ordinary Germans" and ideologically-driven policies such as multiculturalism and diversity, measures to curb climate change, and military support for Ukraine.

Despite the authority's designation of the state chapters in Thuringia and Saxony as extremist, the AfD has become normalised in both states, and will likely be able to build on its strong results in the 2019 state elections. The ascent of the AfD and the BSW in the polls will make it increasingly difficult to form coalitions without both. This will create a real threat to the "firewall" which has so far prevented coalitions between mainstream political parties and the AfD.

Some major commentators have already started to advocate for this taboo to be torn down: in an op-ed in Die Welt, the prominent columnist Alan Posener made the case that the CDU should form state level coalitions with the AfD to "demystify" the far-right party. According to a recent survey, 45 percent of CDU voters nationally believe their party should not rule out cooperation with the AfD in eastern Germany. Locally, the firewall appears even more porous: in late March, Dresden city council passed an AfD motion to hand refugees food vouchers rather than cash with votes from the CDU and the FDP.

While the Green Party is often seen as the most diametrically opposed to the AfD, our findings suggest that the AfD and its followers online view the CDU as its main obstacle to even greater influence in east German politics. Some CDU party members and commentators may dream of breaking down the firewall between themselves and the AfD. However, the far right itself presents the CDU as a warmongering, pro-immigration, overly liberal political opponent that needs to be defeated, not a potential ally.

Lastly, while BSW was not a prominent theme for AfD pages analysed here, they are clearly seen as a political threat that could prolong the survival of the political system. Despite overlaps around their policies towards Ukraine, a coalition between the AfD and BSW remains unlikely for now. At the same time, it is far from obvious that BSW will truly become part of the firewall against the far right. In a recent interview, Wagenknecht advocated for pragmatism towards the AfD; local BSW politicians, she argued, should assess and potentially support AfD proposals on a case-by-case basis. It is inconceivable that Wagenknecht's old party, Die Linke, would ever adopt a similar position.

For now, far-right parties are unlikely to exert direct influence over policymaking in Thuringia and Saxony. However, increasingly contradictory coalitions that serve little purpose beyond keeping the far right out of power may paralyse politics and undermine trust in the ability of the parliamentary system to deliver for its citizens. The trajectory is clear: the erosion of the centre-ground represents a long-term threat to the survival of liberal democracy at the heart of Europe.

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[i] Interactions are the sum of reactions, comments and shares a post receives.

[ii] In 2018, Björn Höcke announced that upon assuming power, the AfD would "issue a directive that the three big M's, Mohammed, muezzin and minaret, are over at the Bosphorus."

[iii] At the time of the writing, the German courts have temporarily halted the Compact ban, whose merits will be reviewed in more detail to ensure it is proportional to the threat Compact poses and does not unnecessarily infringe upon freedom of the press.

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