The Far Right and Democracy #2
The AFD and Far-Right Parties in Germany: a Racist and Nativist Movement that Threatens Democracy?

By Andrea Martini

Our series of interviews, launched with our conversation with Steven Forti, continues. We now turn to Germany, tracing the history of the Alternative für Deutschland (AFD, Alternative for Germany) party as well as that of other radical-right parties – a term widely used in research that Mahalia Thomas prefers especially in relation to the German context. These parties pose a threat to democracy due to their racist content and their tendency to conceive of the nation as a (exclusively) 'white' community. Despite the AFD's own statements against anti-Semitism, anti-Semitism is far from being a residual element within the far right in Germany.
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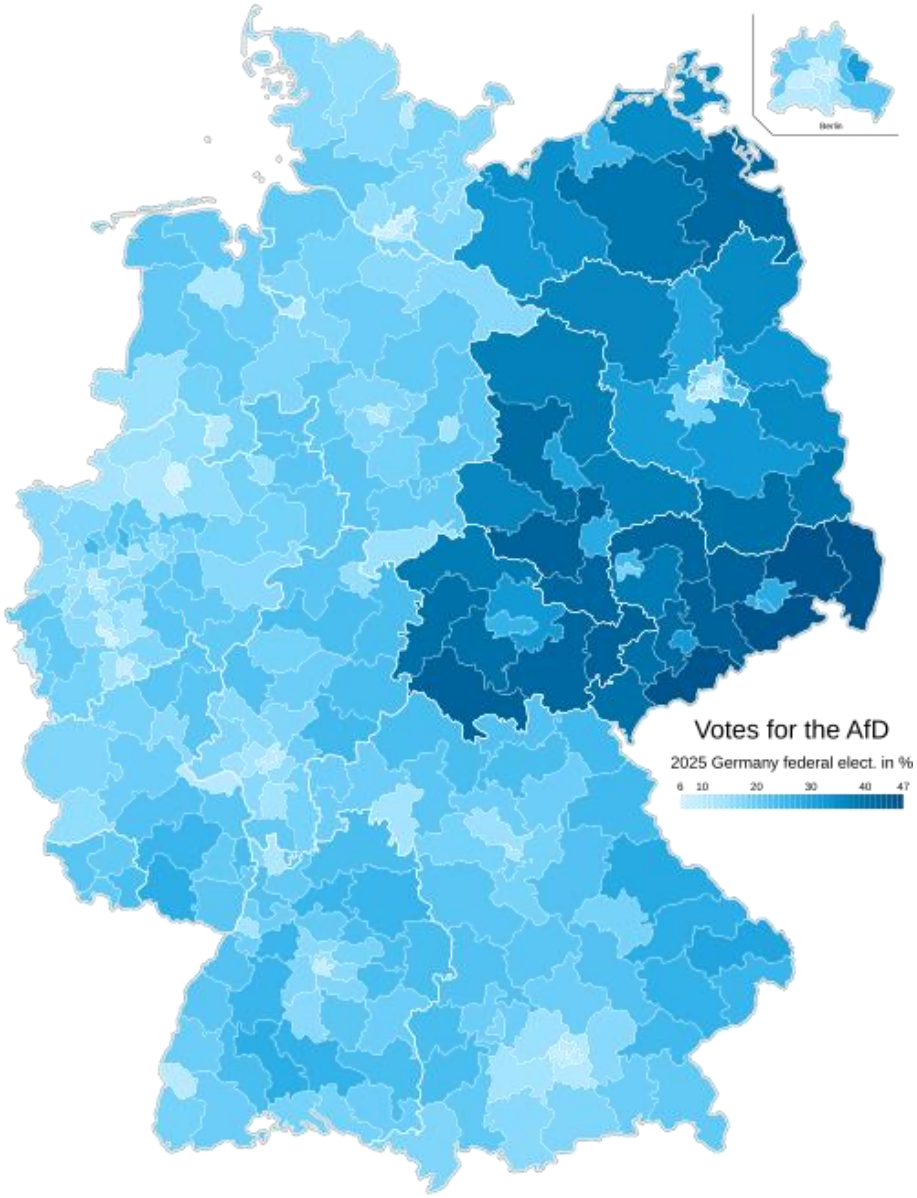
In your research, you have explored the origins and the evolution of right-wing parties such as *Alternative für Deutschland* (AFD) Could you first briefly outline the history of AFD and its leaders?
The *Alternative für Deutschland* is by far the leading force in Germany's radical right landscape. Founded in 2013 by Bernd Lucke, Alexander Gauland and Konrad Adam, this Eurosceptic party emerged in response to the consequences of the euro crisis and the shift towards the centre by the *Christlich-Demokratische Union* (CDU)[1]. As its name suggests, its initial aim was to offer an alternative to the mainstream politics dominated by the CDU (centre-right) and the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD, centre-left) for most of Germany's recent history[2].
Although the party failed to secure enough votes to cross the 5% threshold and enter the Bundestag in 2013, it achieved its first major success in 2014 by winning 7.1% of the vote in the European elections. Thanks to this electoral success, in 2017, it won 12.7% of the vote by championing hardline anti-immigration policies – partly through Islamophobic and xenophobic rhetoric. While the party refuted any accusations of extremism, controversial statements by prominent party members continued to make headlines. One of the most notorious was that of the AFD's former co-chair, Alex Gauland, who in 2018 described Germany's Nazi past as 'merely a speck of bird droppings' in the country's history, thereby significantly downplaying the atrocities and crimes committed during that period[3]. While the party only won 10.4% of the vote in 2021 – securing 83 seats – it doubled its share in 2025 to 20.8%. In these elections, they secured a total of 32.0% (18.9% in 2021) of the vote in the

[1] Frank Decker, "The 'Alternative for Germany:' Factors Behind Its Emergence and Profile of a New Right-Wing Populist Party", *German Politics and Society*, No. 34/2, 2016, pp. 1–16, [online:] https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2016.340201.
[2] Kai Arzheimer, "'Don't Mention the War!' How Populist Right-Wing Radicalism Became (Almost) Normal in Germany", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, No. 57/1, 2019, pp. 90–102, [online:] https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12920.
[3] Deutsche Welle, "AFD chief downplays Nazi era as 'bird shit'", *Deutsche Welle*, 6 February 2018, [online:] https://www.dw.com/en/AFDs-gauland-plays-down-nazi-era-as-a-bird-shit-in-german-history/a-44055213.

former east German *Länder*, compared with 18.0% (8.2% in 2021) in the former west German *Länder*[4]. This is also reflected in the composition of the AFD's parliamentarians in the Bundestag, as 42 of the 98 East German MPs are from the AFD[5].



Electoral votes for the AFD in 2025 federal elections – Costamiri, Creative Commons via Wikimedia Commons.

[4] Tagesschau, "2025 Federal Election: The Election Results by Federal State", *Tagesschau*, 17 March 2025, [online:] https://www.tagesschau.de/wahl/archiv/2025-02-23-BT-DE/ergebnisse-bundeslaender.shtml

[5] mdr.de. (n.d.). East Germans in the Bundestag: How much political influence do the 98 MPs really have? | MDR.DE. Retrieved 3 March 2026, from https://web.archive.org/web/20250817105325/https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/deutschland/politik/bundestag-ostdeutsche-abgeordnete-einfluss-macht-100.html_It is important to note here that the definition of what constitutes an East German is still the subject of heated debate. While some criteria are based on place of birth, others focus on educational background or simply on whether or not a person identifies as East German. For further reading on this issue, see for example (in German): Naika Foroutan, Mara Simon and Sabrina Zajak, *Wer ist hier eigentlich ostdeutsch, und wenn ja, wie viele? Zur Konstruktion, Wirkungsmacht und Implikation von Ostidentitäten*, DeZIM Research Notes +, Berlin, 2023, [online:] https://www.dezim-institut.de/fileadmin/user_upload/fis/publikation_pdf/FA-5820.pdf

In terms of the party's size, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz or Verfassungsschutz* – BfV) reports that in 2024 it had around 50,000 members, 10,000 more than the previous year.

Today, the party's leader, Alice Weidel, appears to be something of an enigma to many, even though clear parallels can be drawn with patterns typical of radical right parties in Europe. The first aspect is her gender. As studies have shown, radical right parties tend to be dominated by men and to centre their policies on them. Nevertheless, we are seeing the rise of prominent women, such as Marine Le Pen in France and Giorgia Meloni in Italy. As such, it is important to recognise the diversity of leaders within right-wing populist parties in terms of gender and to be wary of over-generalising about a predominantly male leadership within these parties today. The second aspect concerns Weidel's sexuality and her marriage to a Swiss woman of color born in Sri Lanka. This is not the first time that an LGBTQ+ politician has led a radical right party; we saw this with Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands. It is important here to examine Weidel's statements regarding her sexuality, in which she distances herself from the term 'queer', stating: 'I am not queer. I am married to a woman I have known for 20 years"[6].

What Weidel's presence and prominence have provided for the AfD is plausible deniability on topics of sexism and homophobia, allowing them to point to Weidel when such accusations and observations are thrown their way. This fits within the concept of "tokenisation"[7], According to which dominant social groups exploit minorities who adhere to their ideology to discredit critics. Nevertheless, even though tokenisation is a form of oppression, we cannot and must not ignore the agency Weidel has to present herself as a symbol and use this platform to perpetuate exclusionary policies.

[6] Original quote: *"Ich bin nicht queer, sondern ich bin mit einer Frau verheiratet, die ich seit 20 Jahren kenne."*

[7] A practice whereby a given organisation highlights members from minority backgrounds within its ranks to project a positive image and pre-empt accusations of discrimination.

Alice Weidel at CPAC (Conservative Political Action Committee) Hungary, on May 30th, 2025 – Elekes Andor, Creative Commons via Wikimedia Commons.

In addition to the AFD, I would also like to draw attention to *Die Heimat* ("The Homeland", a party formerly known as the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* or NPD). Although this party never reached the scale of the AFD, with only 2,500 members in 2024, it was the main radical right-wing party before the emergence of the AFD.
The NPD, founded in November 1964, was mainly composed of right-wing extremists and former members of the NSDAP[8]. Despite some electoral successes in regional elections, it failed to enter the Bundestag in 1969. The party was twice brought before the Constitutional Court for conduct and an ideology contrary to Germany's fundamental democratic order. One of these legal proceedings, in 2003, was dismissed by the German Constitutional Court for reasons to which we shall return later, whereas the 2017 case resulted in a ruling in which the Court found that the ideology of Die Heimat was contrary to the fundamental democratic order, but that it was too marginal to justify a total ban. The party was therefore never banned, which constituted a victory for the entire spectrum of radical right parties. Nevertheless, in 2024, the Court restricted its access to public funding for a period of six years.
These two court cases have shaped the context in which the AFD operates today and, as such, must be taken into account in our reflection on the history and future of this party.

Returning to the AFD, you have described it as a radical right-wing party (just like *Die Heimat*), whereas experts are deeply divided on this issue and often use terms such as 'far-right' and/or 'extremist party'. Why describe the AFD as a "radical" party (and why apply the same criteria to *Die Heimat*)?
If we define an extreme-right party as one that is both anti-liberal and anti-democratic, I have no difficulties in considering the AFD to fit this definition. On the other hand, if we refer to the definition given by the German Constitutional Court, the matter becomes more complicated. Since the 2017 case mentioned earlier concerning *Die Heimat*, the Court has added the requirement that parties must meet a criterion of 'potentiality' to be labelled as un-democratic. This is often understood to mean possessing sufficient power and resources to implement an anti-democratic ideology, but at what threshold can this be considered to be the case? With the AFD now the second-largest party in Parliament, it is more likely than ever that it meets this criterion of potentiality. On the other hand, the AFD has always been excluded from coalitions at the national level and has never held a majority. It is therefore unclear whether the party will be deemed both anti-constitutional and unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court.

In terms of how the AFD can be defined within the framework of party family research, this party fits well into Cas Mudde's classification system, where it represents the fourth wave, characterised by the normalisation of far-right sentiments within political systems[9]. As early as 2007, Mudde drew a distinction between radical-right parties (RRP), which are anti-liberal, and extreme-right parties, which are anti-democratic, all grouped within this typology under the label of 'far right'. When analysing the current phenomenon of the far right, researchers such as Angela Bourne[10], Anja

[8] David Art, *Inside the Radical Right: The Development of Anti-Immigrant Parties in Western Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 196 pp.
[9] Cas Mudde, *The Far Right today*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2019, 160 pp.
[10] Angela K. Bourne and Bastiaan Rijpkema, "Militant Democracy, Populism, Illiberalism: New Challengers and New Challenges", *European Constitutional Law Review*, 18(3), 2022, pp. 375–384, [online:] https://doi.org/10.1017/S1574019622000281

Hennig[11] and Marlene Laruelle[12] have, however, emphasised the importance of studying illiberalism to understand current movements[13], but also the way in which these movements threaten democratic systems. Thus, while Mudde regards the radical right and the extreme right as distinct (yet closely linked) phenomena, Michael Minkenberg questions the strength of this border between what is considered radical an what is considered extreme, arguing instead that extreme right parties constitute a sub-group within the family of radical right-wing parties. As such, he defines the 'radical right' as follows:

«primarily by the ideological criteria of a romantic ultranationalism, a myth of a homogenous nation which puts the nation before the individual and their civil rights and which therefore is directed against liberal and pluralist democracy (though not necessarily in favor of a fascist state), its underlying values of freedom and equality and the related categories of individualism and universalism»[14].

As a umbrella term, captures not only illiberal parties but also those that are both illiberal and anti-democratic, this category can include both the AFD – a radical-right party – and, to return to your last question, parties such as *Die Heimat* – an extreme-right party as defined by the Constitutional Court. This broad framework allows the term Radical Right Party (RRP) to encompass both the far right as defined by Mudde and its most extreme manifestations, thus covering a range of actors united by an illiberal ideological core. By adopting Minkenberg's broader definition – in line with Mudde's work – my analysis moves beyond procedural boundaries to focus on common rhetorical strategies, examining in particular their use of exclusionary language and hate speech, which permeate both radical and far-right circles.

[11] Anja Hennig, "Christianity and Illiberal Politics", in Marlene Laruelle (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism, Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 347–372, [online:] https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197639108.013.11

[12] Marlene Laruelle, "Illiberalism: A conceptual introduction", *East European Politics*, no. 38/2, pp. 303–327, [online:] https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079

[13] Categories such as "anti-liberal" and "illiberalism" are not synonymous: anti-liberalism, as understood here, is a pure and simple rejection of liberalism. In contrast, illiberalism allows for a degree of ambiguity in this rejection, insofar as radical right actors aspire to a less liberal *polis*, but are prepared to use liberal concepts and arguments to achieve this objective.

[14] Michael Minkenberg, "From Pariah to Policy-Maker? The Radical Right in Europe, West and East: Between Margin and Mainstream." *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 2013, no. 21/1, pp. 5–24, here pp. 16-17.[online:]https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2013.766473.

NPD "White Lives Matter" rally in Berlin, 2020 – Leonhard Lenz, Creative Commons via Wikimedia Commons.

It is often said that the AFD has undergone a process of gradual radicalisation, and that it was not part of the 'far-right sphere' in its early days. Do you agree with this view?

From the outset, the AFD was a conglomerate of diverse ideologies, ranging from more traditional conservative positions, similar to those of the CDU (centre-right), to right-wing extremist views. When examining the AFD's radicalisation, this is not the result of a unifying shift, but of a vision that has gradually become dominant. In other words, the elements of xenophobia and exclusion that have formed the cornerstone of the AFD's policy since 2017 were already present from the very beginning. Nevertheless, when the 'radicalisation' of the AFD is discussed, it is often in the context of internal conflicts between the party's more moderate members and *Der Flügel* ('The Wing'), a faction founded in 2015 by Björn Höcke and André Poggenburg to form the party's extremist wing. *Der Flügel* placed greater emphasis on nativist arguments and employed populist rhetoric targeting not only the political elites of other parties, but also members of its own party, such as former chairwoman Frauke Petry. I am referring here to the definition of nativism[15] as presented by the European Centre for the Study of Populism, which defines it as "the political policy of promoting the interests of native inhabitants against those of immigrants, including by supporting immigration-restriction measures". These anti-immigration and nativist positions have enabled the AFD to establish itself as the standard-bearer for these issues in the minds of many German voters, and contributed to the AFD's electoral success in 2017, when it won 12.7% of the vote. This development has been accompanied by a series of racist and anti-Semitic statements from party members – including Höcke – which, taken as a whole, have firmly solidified the AFD in the 'extreme-right sphere'.

[15] The European Centre for Populism Studies. (n.d.). Nativism. The European Centre for Populism Studies. Retrieved 6 March 2026, from https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/nativism/

Beyond the definition of AFD as an extreme right-wing party or not, can we unequivocally describe it as anti-democratic, violent, racist and anti-Semitic?

I believe there is no doubt about this, especially following the report published in 2024 by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), which we will return to in a moment.

In my research, which goes beyond the German context to study radical right parties (RRPs) across Western Europe, I identify five marginalised groups that are targeted by RRPs namely: (1) people racialised as 'others', (2) LGBTQ+ people, (3) women, (4) people with disabilities, and (5) religious minorities. The choice to use the term 'racialised "other"' rather than expressions such as 'people of colour' or 'migrants' stems from the specific way in which RRPs in Europe employ the concept of the 'other'. This term highlights the social construction of race, while emphasising the decisive role of the perceiver in determining whether a person is exposed to racism and 'othering', and in how this occurs. Here, the perceived identity may differ from how the person identifies themselves: Christian Turks may be perceived as a Muslim, even if they are not. This term draws on research conducted in Central Europe – particularly in Germany – which highlights the blurred lines between xenophobia and racism, and examines anti-Black, anti-Muslim, anti-Slavic, anti-Semitic, anti-Asian, anti-Roma and anti-Sinti discrimination from the perspective of racism. Thus, phenomena such as anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism are analysed on two levels. The first recognises the status of these communities as religious minorities within European countries. The second examines how these communities have been racialised, as well as the resulting stereotypes and discrimination. This allows for a more comprehensive understanding of what these identities encompass, beyond mere religious affiliation.

If we focus on the issue of racism, we see that the AFD employs rhetorical techniques that promote a cis-heteronormativitiy[16], but above all white, conception of the nation. According to Minkenberg and Zsuzsanna Verg: "[the] so-called right-wing populists comprehend the notion of 'the people' less as demos and more as ethnos. In other words, their demands for the empowerment of the people against the elites boil down to a politics of ethnocentrism" [17]. This is made apparent throughout the rhetoric of the AFD, where I would like to focus on three aspects. The first stems from a proposal to establish a two-tier citizenship system, in which 'true' citizenship, defined according to racial and ethnic criteria, would be contrasted with 'false' citizenship, where terms such as '*Pass-deutsche* ' ('Germans by passport' or 'Germans on paper'), which suggest that there are people who may belong to the state but who do not – and never will – belong to the nation. This aspect is also reflected in the second aspect, namely the use of the term 'remigration'. Unlike the term "*Abschiebung*" (deportation), the term "*Remigration*" originates from radical-right circles and encompasses not only the deportation of non-German citizens, but also that of German citizens. The AFD's relationship with 'remigration' was made apparent when journalistic efforts uncovered a meeting of radical right networks as well as members of the AfD to discuss the 'remigration' of German citizens, who had not sufficiently integrated into society. Since then, the AFD has incorporated this term into its vocabulary and included it in its 2025 election manifesto[18].

[16] The AFD perpetuates a cis-heterosexual conception of the nation by presenting the family as consisting of a (cisgender) mother and a (cisgender) father, while opposing same-sex marriage and adoption. The fact that this position runs counter to the personal experience of the AFD leader, Alice Weidel, who married a woman and has adopted children, constitutes a contradiction and may reflect a separation between her private and political lives.

[17] Michael Minkenberg and Zsuzsanna Végh, *Depleting Democracies: Radical Right Impact on Parties, Policies, and Polities in Eastern Europe*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2023, [online:]https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526160195, p. 14.

[18] Alternative für Deutschland, *Zeit für Deutschland. Programm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl zum 21. Deutschen Bundestag*, Alternative für Deutschland, 2025, [online:] https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/AFD_Bundestagswahlprogramm2025_web.pdf, p. 101.

Poster for the AFD advocating "Starting remigration immediately", in Thüringen, 2024 – PantheraLeo1359531, Creative Commons via Wikimedia Commons.

A final aspect I wish to address here is the criminalisation of migrant communities. In this regard, the AFD presents migrants as a security risk and as the catalyst for rising crime. Muslim men, in particular, are often the target of this criminalisation, in which the AFD portrays them as a danger to (white) women, thereby perpetuating colonial and Orientalist stereotypes. Echoes of this rhetoric can be found in the mainstream media, as evidenced by the Chancellor's recent statements regarding the '*Stadtbild*' (urban landscape), in which he asserts that the presence of migrants in the city visually distorts it. In a subsequent statement, he suggested that women and young girls felt uncomfortable in the presence of migrants in cities[19].

Within the framework you have outlined, where right-wing populist parties such as the AFD focus on five key targets, how is this mirrored, for example, in their anti-immigration rhetoric?

[19] Richard Connor, "Merz's 'discriminatory' cityscape migration remark draws Ire", *Deutsche Welle*, 16 October 2025, [online:]https://www.dw.com/en/merzs-discriminatory-cityscape-migration-remark-draws-ire/a-74390107.

As part of my research, I am particularly interested in the use of hate speech by radical-right parties, including the AFD. I also analyse how institutional constraints can shape this discourse[20]. Looking at the 2021 German federal elections, it is clear that this type of discourse is not uncommon within the party, particularly on social media. While 1.1% of sentences in its election manifesto contain some form of hate speech, this figure rises to 20.2% when analysing tweets[21]. Here, the main targets were migrants, refugees and Islam / the Muslim community. The rhetoric targeting migrant communities, as well as those perceived as migrants and racialised 'others', can be summarised into three categories: (1) cultural, (2) security-related and (3) social. The first thematic strand fuels the argument that 'migrants erode culture' and, as such, pose a threat to Western values. Migrants are presented as intrinsically "different" from the countries in which they settle. For example, the party states in its manifesto that migrants are causing a "demographic catastrophe" and that "the current immigration system undermines German culture".

The second rhetorical strand targeting these communities is that of security. This manifests through a securitization frame, a recurring theme in the rhetoric of RRPs in Europe and elsewhere, where migrants are portrayed as a threat to national security, thereby creating a sense of urgency among their electorate. The AFD's tweet is a good example of this: "Over 500 #Islamist threats! The fact that our country faces a massive threat from #Islamist terrorism has once again disappeared from the media spotlight and the political consciousness — yet this threat has by no means been averted. Quite the contrary: #afd #Islamism." The use of terms such as "massive threat" and "Islamist terrorism" conjures up images of terrorist attacks and an invasion. Once this alleged national threat has been identified, the current government's supposed lack of response can then be interpreted as the state abandoning the security of its citizens.

Finally, migrants are portrayed as people abusing social welfare and support systems. Much like the archetype of the 'welfare queen' promoted by the Reagan administration in the 1980s, radical right discourse today seeks to portray migrants and asylum seekers as parasites on the country's social system. The AFD achieves this by perpetuating the myth that refugees and migrants come to Germany solely to take advantage of the welfare system. On Twitter, for example, one can read: "Uncontrolled mass #migration is NOT a solution, but represents to a large extent a burden on the welfare state." In reality, migrants and refugees face numerous difficulties in accessing the labour market, and encounter racism and xenophobia when seeking employment[22]. Ultimately, this rhetoric creates a strong sense of division between "us" and "them", with migrants serving as scapegoats to justify inadequate support. This is clearly stated in their 2025 election manifesto, where they declare: "This mass immigration, which is a drain on public funds, threatens the financial viability of the state, to the detriment of those members of our society who are genuinely in need, of taxpayers and of the German welfare state as a whole."

Both the terrorist attack launched against Israel on 7 October 2023 and Israel's military response in Gaza have forced all political parties on the international stage to take a stance. According to experts, the issue is even more complex for far-right parties. Can you tell us whether the AFD's political programme, the positions it has adopted and the party's rhetoric have evolved following these two major turning points? If so, in what way?

[20] Mahalia Thomas, "From manifestos to Twitter: Radical right parties and hate speech in Germany's militant democratic context", *Political Research Exchange*, No. 7/1, 2025, [online:] https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2025.2569407

[21] The sample covered the five months preceding the election and the month following it.

[22] The Federal Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration, The Federal Commissioner for Anti-Racism, *Racism in Germany: Current situation, fields of action, measures*, Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration, Federal Commissioner for Anti-Racism, 2023, [online:] https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/2277952/2285614/fc917071877fe77e83b4ff1752753b2f/rassismus-in-deutschland-english-download-ib-data.pdf#page=57.99

To understand the AFD's current position on Israel and Palestine, we need to analyse more broadly the views within radical right parties on this subject. Some researchers, such as Bodo Kahmann[23] and David J. Wertheim[24], draw a distinction between extreme right-wing parties and those on the radical right. The latter use pro-Israeli rhetoric and opposition to anti-Semitism as a weapon against Muslim migrants. Conversely, extreme-right parties that are closer to neo-Nazi and neo-fascist sentiments more often position themselves as anti-Israeli. The German NPD/*Heimat*, for example, positions itself as strictly anti-Israeli and regards Israel as a threat to its neighbours and to Europe[25]. In a recent study, Omran Shroufi examines the differences between the AFD and the NPD and shows how the latter resorts to old anti-Semitic tropes to portray Jews as a dangerous 'other', while engaging in a rewriting of history to downplay the Holocaust[26]. The party presents Judaism here as a threat to German culture and the concept of the nation.

It is here, therefore, that the AFD differs radically from the NPD. While retaining a Manichean mindset pitting 'us' against 'them', the 'us' is defined as a Judeo-Christian culture threatened by Islam. Israel is presented here as a beacon of the West in the Middle East, which Germany has a duty to help defend. Conversely, Muslims and all those who support Palestine are portrayed as anti-Semites. The AFD capitalises on this positioning in two main ways. Firstly, it reinforces the party's Islamophobic agenda by labeling Muslims as anti-Semites and enemies of the West. In turn, the AFD presents itself as a staunch defender of Israel and positions itself as a bulwark against anti-Semitism. This was already its position prior to 7 October, but the party has since emphasised this point through various communication channels, such as blog posts and social media. It is important to highlight those who have engaged in anti-Semitic crime in Germany and how the AfD has turned a blind eye to the crimes of radical right and extremist right actors[27]. Looking at anti-Semitic crimes (i.e. property damage, verbal abuse and physical assaults) committed in 2024, around half were perpetrated by right-wing actors[28]. However, the AFD reduces anti-Semitism to an 'imported problem' caused by Muslim immigration, rather than a phenomenon already present in the country[29]. The AFD benefits from this positioning by distancing itself from Nazism and extremist parties like the NPD. As such, I would agree with the statement that the party utilizes its pro-Israel stance to present itself as a "respectable" party. Nonetheless, this pro-Israel stance must not be used to obscure the anti-Semitism that is clearly present within the party. Firstly, the party equates Judaism with Zionism, which leads to an essentialist portrayal of Judaism. By refusing to acknowledge the diversity of beliefs within the community and to take different viewpoints into account, they present the Jewish community as homogeneous and monolithic, which in itself constitutes a form of anti-Semitism. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the AFD exploits genuine fears linked to anti-Semitism to justify Islamophobia, using the Jewish community as a lever against Muslim migrants without tackling the main

[23] Bodo Kahmann, "'The Most Ardent pro-Israel Party': Pro-Israel Attitudes and Anti-Antisemitism among Populist Radical-Right Parties in Europe", *Patterns of Prejudice*, 2017, No. 51/5, pp. 396–411, [online:] https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2017.1394663.

[24] David J. Wertheim, "Geert Wilders and the Nationalist-Populist Turn Toward the Jews in Europe", in David J. Wertheim (ed.), *The Jew as Legitimation*, Springer International Publishing, pp. 275–289, [online:] https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-42601-3_16

[25] Admin, "Sanctions against Israel instead of Palestinian refugees in Germany!", Die Heimat, undated, [online:] https://die-heimat.de/sanktionen-gegen-israel-statt-palaestinensischer-fluechtlinge-in-deutschland/

[26] Omran Shroufi, "From 'Terror State' to Part of the 'Jewish-Christian Civilisation': Exploring Diversity in the German Far Right's Position Towards Israel", *Political Studies*, Political Studies Association, No. 73/2, pp. 547–566, [online:] https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217241255326

[27] Michelle Lynn Kahn, "Antisemitism, Holocaust Denial, and Germany's Far Right: How the AFD Tiptoes around Nazism", *The Journal of Holocaust Research*, 2022, No. 36/2–3, pp. 164–185, p. 178, [online:] https://doi.org/10.1080/25785648.2022.2069337.

[28] Mediendienst Integration, "Number of anti-Semitic offences", *Mediendienst Integration*, 4 March 2026, [online:] https://mediendienst-integration.de/rassismus-und-antisemitismus/antisemitismus/zahl-antisemitischer-straftaten/

[29] Cited by Omran Shroufi, "From 'Terror State' to Part of the 'Jewish-Christian Civilisation': Exploring Diversity in the German Far Right's Position Towards Israel", *Political Studies*, No. 73/2, 2025, pp. 547–566, [online:] https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217241255326

perpetrators of anti-Semitism, who are to be found in right-wing circles. Finally, one cannot deny the anti-Semitic remarks made by leading political figures within the AFD. This includes statements such as those by Gauland who, as mentioned earlier, downplayed the atrocities of the Holocaust[30]. As Michelle Lynn Kahn indicates in the title of her article, "The AFD Tiptoes around Nazism", and this is why we must be wary of this party's claim to be "anti-anti-Semitic", especially when these attempts to present a façade serve to legitimise Islamophobia and hatred[31].

Could the gradual radicalisation of the AFD mentioned above, which preceded the 2017 elections, be the reason why the party was not initially banned?

To answer this question, let us revisit the context surrounding the rise of the AFD. Looking at David Art's remarkable ethnographic work[32], one can see just how unique Germany is in its efforts to contain radical right parties. These have rarely achieved electoral success and, where they have, this has been limited to the sub-national level. Furthermore, Germany was considered largely socially immune thanks to a shared condemnation of historical atrocities, embodied by 'Never Again' culture[33]. This slogan encompasses efforts to erect monuments, provide in-depth teaching on the Nazi period in schools, and raise awareness of anti-Semitism.

[30] BBC, "German anger over AFD chief's 'Nazi era just bird poo' remark", *BBC*, [online:] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44354559

[31] Michelle Lynn Kahn, *op. cit.*

[32] David Art, *Inside the Radical Right: The Development of Anti-Immigrant Parties in Western Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

[33] Richard J. Evans, "From Nazism to Never Again: How Germany Came to Terms With Its Past", Foreign Affairs, No. 97/1, 2018, pp. 8–15, [online:] http://www.jstor.org/stable/44822008.

Anti-AFD protest in Germany, January 2023. The banners say, "Never Again is now" and "Voting AFD is no protest, but support to Nazis!" – Alex Fremer, Creative Commons via Wikimedia Commons.

At the same time, it is essential to recognise that (neo-)fascist/neo-nazi and discriminatory views never truly disappeared, nor did the reductive view of history, which, for example, failed to take into account the atrocities committed during Germany's colonial history. Nevertheless, this myth of 'Never Again' culture persisted, and for this reason, the AFD's electoral success was expected to be short-lived. This trend appeared to be confirmed by the 2021 elections, in which the party received 2% fewer votes than in 2017. But the recent 2025 elections, in which the AFD won 20.8% of the vote, have shattered the prophecies of natural decline.

Not only did the AFD establish itself late in Germany compared to countries such as France, Austria or Belgium, but the international community and researchers regarded it as a country with a strong culture of 'containment'[34]. Art poses the question whether the AFD will mean the "End of Containment in Germany?" examining the role that media, civil society, and mainstream politicians play in sidelining the AFD.[35]. In this article, Art predicted: «the AFD will be treated as a political pariah and political coalition markets will remain closed to it»[36]. The issue became a burning one in 2025: the CDU, having put forward a non-binding proposal on immigration, then accepted the AFD's

[34] See, for example, Jan-Werner Müller, "Militant Democracy", in Michel Rosenfeld & Andras Sajó (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Constitutional Law*, Oxford Univ. Press, pp. 1253-1269.
[35] David Art, "The AFD and the End of Containment in Germany?", *German Politics and Society*, No. 36/2, 2018, pp. 76–86, [online:]https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2018.360205.
[36] *Ibid*., p. 83.

votes in Parliament. After seven years of the AFD's presence in Parliament, the Christian Democratic party thus appears to have paved the way for a new kind of collaboration [37].
Beyond the current issue of containment, this perception that German politics, civil society and the media are managing to keep the AFD in check has likely helped to curb the debate on a possible ban on the party. This is based on the fact that if pivotal political actors believe that these mechanisms are sufficient in preventing a further rise of the AFD, they will be less likely to want to engage in more "heavy-handed" techniques such as a party ban. This is evident in the parliamentary debate of 30 January 2025, which focused on whether the AFD should be subject to review by the Constitutional Court[38]. It is clear here that the majority of the CDU opposes this idea. CDU MP Philipp Amthor, for example, asserts that the criticisms that the AFD is anti-Semitic, racist and sexist are all well-founded, but that the way to combat these discriminatory views is through political means rather than repressive measures such as a ban. However, as containment might be coming to an end and the AfD continues to grow in power, a reexamination of this belief is underway.Lastly, we must also look at the legal context of party banning in the early days of the party. The AFD's emergence in 2013 was in the middle of an anticipatory period for the future of party banning policies in Germany. In 2003, proceedings to ban the NPD were initiated. However, it ended without a decision due to the quality of the evidence, a point to which I shall return in more detail[39]. The NPD was, however, much more closely linked to the extreme right (notably through its early members from the Sozialistische Reichspartei, or SRP, which was banned in the 1950s) than the AFD was in its early days, and had clearly opposed the values of the German Constitution. This decision would have defined the scope of the AFD's activities. A second trial, which did not take place until 2017, resulted in a decision not to ban the NPD, coinciding with the AFD's more radical anti-immigrant turn, which cast doubt on whether or not a ban procedure would lead to a ban. In conclusion, although I believe that the AFD's less radical beginnings delayed the debate on banning the party, the German culture of "Never again", the history of containment and the forthcoming legal proceedings against the NPD led to a wait-and-see approach during the early days of the party to assess the threat posed by the AFD and to devise a strategy to combat this increasingly radicalised challenger.

[37] Anika Taschke, "Die Brandmauer ist gefallen", Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, 31 January 2025, [online:]https://www.rosalux.de/news/id/53052/die-brandmauer-ist-gefallen.
[38] German Bundestag, "Heated exchange over motions to ban the AfD" (n.d.), German Bundestag, 8 March 2026, [online:] https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2025/kw05-de-AFD-1042014
[39] Federal Constitutional Court, "Discontinuation of proceedings regarding the prohibition of the National Democratic Party", *Bundesverfassungsgericht*, 18 March 2003, [online:] https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/EN/2003/bvg03-022.html.

"FCK AFD" tag in an abandoned commercial airfield in Germany, January 2021 – Felipe Topani, Creative Commons via Wikimedia Commons.

In your last reply, you referred, at least implicitly, to the 'militant' nature of democracy in Germany. Broadly speaking, the country is said to be a 'militant democracy', a concept dear to many political scientists. Could you explain the origin of this term, its development, and its relevance today?

The existence of mechanisms such as the banning of political parties in Germany can be explained by the country's reflection on the atrocities of the Second World War. In this regard, the work of the political scientist Karl Löwenstein, who developed the concept of 'militant democracy', exerted a particular influence, guiding the drafters of the German Federal Constitution. Löwenstein, who went into exile in the United States in the 1930s, presented, in his seminal work *Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights, I*, militant democracy as a system in which democratic means must not serve anti-democratic ends and where the democratic system, on the contrary, has a duty to be 'militant' in the face of such anti-democratic actors. Today, thanks to the work of the researchers who followed in his footsteps, militant democracy continues to be studied – and debated – sometimes as a component of the defence of democracy, sometimes as a concept in its own right. Scholars such as Meindert Fenema have conceptualised militant democracy not only as an anti-fascist tool, but also as an anti-racist tool[40]. Of course, in this way, the very expression 'militant democracy' goes beyond its original meaning, which was then closely linked to the greatest threat of the time (fascism). But after all, if militant democracy is to address current threats, it must necessarily broaden the scope of the term to include the fields of anti-racism and the fight against discrimination, and, in doing so, recognising that certain social groups are more vulnerable than others.

[40] Meindert Fennema, "Legal Repression of Extreme-Right Parties and Racial Discrimination*", in Ruud Koopmans and Paul Staham (eds.), *Challenging Immigration and Ethnic Relations Politics: Comparative European Perspectives*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 119–144, [online:] https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198295600.003.0006.

It is within this strand of research on militant democracy that I situate myself, defining militant democracy as "a legal framework that seeks to prevent the use of democratic means for un- or anti-democratic ends in the context of growing radical right parties in Europe that stand counter to liberal values of inclusion and pluralism.". In this sense, militant democracy can be seen as a set of tools designed to protect a liberal and pluralist democracy: the more comprehensive this set of tools is, the more effectively it can protect it. This definition also implies that a country does not need to identify itself as a militant democracy to possess these tools. Rather, it is the existence of these tools and their deployment against those who seek to undermine liberal democracy that establishes a militant democracy. This tool-based approach has made it possible to study militant democracy outside the usual contexts of Germany and Italy. For example, Bénédicte Laumond has examined the role of various political actors and the measures available to combat the far right in France, in parallel with German militant democracy[41].

Although militant democracy has historically fought against both right-wing and left-wing extremist parties, I argue that its function must be thoroughly revised depending on the political orientation of the target, whether it be on the right or the left. That is why, in this context, I will address militant democracy in the strict sense, that is to say, as it applies to the radical right.

While elements of militant democracy exist in all Western European countries, the way in which it manifests itself and is implemented varies. To examine a country's militant democracy, three criteria must be considered. The first concerns a country's constitutional values and principles, which serve as a benchmark for assessing the anti-democratic and anti-liberal nature of a radical right party. In Germany, the protection of human dignity is enshrined as a supreme value, regardless of citizenship status. Citizens are protected against any discrimination based on socially constructed categories such as race, disability and gender. The second aspect is based on the legal framework in force, which aims to protect these values. Here, the German Constitution contains numerous provisions, including Article 21, which authorises the Constitutional Court to dissolve political parties where it is established that they undermine the fundamental democratic order.

Furthermore, Germany has strict legislation on hate speech and requires political parties to uphold democratic values: they must demonstrate democratic principles both in their values and in their conduct. However, having a set of strict rules to combat radical right parties is one thing; implementing them is quite another. This is where the final element comes in, which concerns the application of militant democracy.

In addition to convictions handed down against RRPs under hate speech legislation, Germany has also seen a series of party ban proceedings, only one of which resulted in the effective banning of a radical right party, namely that of the SRP in 1952[42].

Moreover, there are several initiatives aimed at raising awareness of the dangers associated with joining radical right organisations, that offer support to members wishing to leave them. For example, WendePUNKT is a government programme established in 2001 with the aim of helping people who wish to leave or are in the process of leaving radical right organisations and/or those who wish to overcome racist prejudices.Through work with counsellors, participants are able to reduce their prejudices, while receiving educational and professional support to reintegrate into society[43].

Have these tools evolved over the years?

Yes, of course. Germany's commitment to an active democracy has evolved since Löwenstein's time, and this is reflected in the way the Constitutional Court approaches the issue of banning parties. The first party to appear before the Court was, as I have already mentioned, the *Sozialistische*

[41] Bénédicte Laumond, *Policy Responses to the Radical Right in France and Germany: Public Actors, Policy Frames, and Decision-Making*, London, Routledge, 2020, [online:] https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429327599.

[42] 1 BvB 1/51 (SRP), 1 BvB 1/51 (Federal Constitutional Court, 23 October 1952).

[43] Aussteigerprogramm Rechtsextremismus, Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, 26 June 2023, [online:] https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/DE/service/buerger-und-betroffene/aussteigerprogramm-fuer-rechtsextremisten/aussteigerprogramm-rechtsextremisten_node.html.

Reichspartei (SRP) in 1952. Given that it had many members from the NSDAP and adopted a nazi political stance, this party was an obvious target for a militant democratic constitution. The decision to ban the SRP was based on two factors: (1) the party's policies, which undermined the fundamental democratic order, and (2) its barely veiled attempt to continue the NSDAP. In doing so, the Court established a precedent whereby parties using language and symbols reminiscent of the NSDAP are subject to rigorous scrutiny. Furthermore, the Court took this opportunity to define the free democratic basic order that Article 21(2) aims to protect:

"The fundamental principles of this order include at least: respect for human rights as enshrined in the Basic Law, in particular the right of every person to life and to free development; popular sovereignty; the separation of powers; government accountability; the legality of administration; the independence of the judiciary; the principle of a multi-party system; and equal opportunities for all political parties"[44].

The ideas put forward regarding human rights, freedom, equality and dignity would constitute the values that would guide future proceedings relating to RRPs.

As the only left-wing party to have been brought before the Constitutional Court, the trial of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in 1956 reflected the fears aroused by communism at the time. Two important precedents were established during this case. Firstly, the Constitutional Court held that, regardless of a party's size, if it actively rejects the democratic principles set out in the SRP case, its ban is justified. In other words, it was sufficient for a party to espouse unconstitutional ideas in its election manifesto, even if it had no means of implementing them. In the case of the KPD, it was the party's objective of overthrowing democracy and replacing it with a communist system that was targeted. Secondly, the Court drew a clear distinction between the Marxist-Leninist ideology, which formed the basis of the party, and the anti-constitutional elements, making it clear that it was not banning the ideology.

The KPD case was the last ban proceeding of the 20th century, and it was not until 2003 that another party was brought before the Court. The subsequent cases, briefly mentioned above, concerned the NPD. The first case, in 2003, was dismissed when the Constitutional Court ruled that it could not reach a well-founded decision, as the evidence presented to it may have been influenced by state agents who had infiltrated the party. More specifically, the court argued that too many senior positions within the party had been held by undercover agents from the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, making the evidence inadmissible.

Fourteen years later, the NPD was once again the subject of a judicial review concerning its potentially unconstitutional conduct. Having determined that the evidence presented was admissible, the Court was able to deliver a ruling and, in doing so, set a new precedent. It held that, although the NPD held ideologies contrary to the free democratic basic order as defined in the SRP case, which rendered it *anti*-constitutional, it was not u*n*-constitutional as it lacked the means to achieve its objective. I am using the terminology of the Constitutional Court here, according to which an anti-constitutional party is a party whose ideology runs counter to the fundamental democratic order ("*Verfassungsfeindlich*"). In contrast, unconstitutional parties share this ideological position but also have the means to implement it. Thus, all unconstitutional parties are anti-constitutional, but not all anti-constitutional parties are necessarily unconstitutional ("*Verfassungswidrig*"). In practice, this means that anti-constitutional parties may continue to exist – though may face restrictions on access to public funding – while unconstitutional parties are subject to a total ban. This decision overturned the ruling in the KPD case, in which the court had explicitly stated that a party's size and the likelihood of it achieving its objective played no role in the decision to ban it. Some have argued that this new direction in militant democracy in Germany could be explained, in part, by pressure exerted

[44] Low, Benjamin. "The Centre Cannot Hold: Reflections on Militant Democracy in Germany", *Trinity College Law Review*, Trinity College, No. 136, 2018, pp. 136–158.

at EU level. Cases concerning the potential banning of parties have set precedents: risk analysis took precedence over ideology alone[45].
The second NPD case was the most recent ban proceeding. Questions remain as to how the Court will determine the level of influence a party must have to successfully implement its unconstitutional policies. As the AFD is currently the second-largest party in the German Parliament -- and currently the most popular party in polls --, could it be considered sufficiently powerful? Nevertheless, the legacy and reality of today's militant democracy continue to create a climate in which parties that overstep constitutional boundaries face severe sanctions.

What are the reasons that led the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution to classify the AFD as a 'confirmed extremist' party?
I shall begin by examining what we know and what we do not know regarding the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution's (Verfassungschutz) decision to classify the AFD as *'gesichert rechtsextrem'* (confirmed extreme right). In the press release [46] announcing this decision, the Verfassungschutz cited three criteria that the AFD allegedly violated: human dignity, the principle of democracy and the rule of law. This press release has since been withdrawn, as the AFD has taken legal action to challenge this classification, which will prevent the Verfassungschutz from using this label and from carrying out the additional surveillance made possible by this classification. Much to the dismay of researchers and the media, the Verfassungschutz has still not published its 1,100-page report detailing how it reached its conclusions. Some parts of the decision have, however, been leaked to the media, but as they have not been officially verified, they should be treated with caution. Nevertheless, the 'Follow-up report on concrete evidence of efforts to undermine the free democratic basic order in the Alternative for Germany party', drafted in 2021, already provides us with numerous indications of what the report might contain. In particular, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution cites nationalist, xenophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric as examples of attacks on human dignity. Attacks on democratic principles and the rule of law manifest themselves in the rejection of the separation of powers and the trivialisation of Germany's fascist history.

What consequences might this decision have?
Many aspects remain unclear in this regard. During a parliamentary debate on whether the Bundestag should vote to have the Constitutional Court rule on the constitutionality of the AFD in January 2025, members of the CDU stated that they must first await the Verfassungschutz's decision to classify the AFD as a right-wing extremist party before deliberating and deciding whether to bring the matter before the Court. Given the legal challenges delaying the AFD's final classification, it is difficult to know whether this will also postpone Parliament's decisions. What is known is that this decision has not led to any mass exodus of party members. A look at the opinion polls[47] reveals a slight dip following the publication of the decision, but the party has since managed to regain ground. At present, the AFD has overtaken the CDU in some public polls. Finally, I would argue that the consequences of the Verfassungschutz's decision were muddled due to their decision not to release the Gutachten, which would have provided a concrete basis on which to discuss the classification and its potential basis for a party banning case.

[45] For example: Gelijn Molier and Bastiaan Rijpkema, "Germany's New Militant Democracy Regime: National Democratic Party II and the German Federal Constitutional Court's 'Potentiality' Criterion for Party Bans", Bundesverfassungsgericht, Judgment of 17 January 2017, 2 BvB 1/13, National Democratic Party II." European Constitutional Law Review No. 14/2, 2018, pp. 394–409, [online:]https://doi.org/10.1017/S1574019618000196.
[46] Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution,– "Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution classifies 'Alternative for Germany' as a confirmed far-right extremist movement. ", 2 May 2025, [online:] https://web.archive.org/web/20250502103259/https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/pressemitteilungen/DE/2025/pressemitteilung-2025-05-02.html.
[47] Philipp Guttmann. "Bundestag election: Latest opinion polls in Wahltrend | Sunday poll #btw2025." dawum.de, 21 November 2025, [online:] https://dawum.de/Bundestag/.

However, the classification of the AFD as a 'confirmed extreme right' party has sparked a public debate on the militant nature of democracy in Germany and on the effectiveness of measures designed to protect democracy in today's society…

To understand the role of this decision in the broader debate on militant democracy, let us return to the parliamentary session in January. This session reflects in miniature the debates animating society and the world of political sciences. Members of the SPD, the Greens and *Die Linke* [48] put forward arguments that echo the original justifications for militant democracy. This included a general call to protect democracy and prevent history from repeating itself. Here, particular attention was paid to the AFD's violation of human dignity and its conception of the '*Volk*', based on ethnic and discriminatory criteria. On the opposite side of the debate, many (though not all) members of the CDU, as well as of the *Freie Demokratische Partei* (FDP)[49], took the floor. The arguments put forward here were primarily aimed at combating the AFD on political rather than legal grounds, and emphasised the need to address the root causes driving voters to support this party.

These are themes also addressed by Carlo Invernizzi Accetti and Ian Zuckerman[50].I share their observation that the implementation of militant democracy is arbitrary in nature. I believe that this concept, while not inherently flawed, has been taken too far without justification for its extension. Rather, we must redefine militant democracy in accordance with its specific objectives and clarify the principles for identifying a threat to democracy. As noted above, the definition I use fits within the framework of modern conceptions of RRPs, based on the principles of inclusivity and pluralism, where the identities that constitute this inclusivity are clearly defined. This does not mean that there would be no risk of abuse, but it nevertheless constitutes a step forward in overcoming this arbitrariness.

In my view, combating RRPs through political rather than legal means is only possible when a balance can be struck between adequately addressing the underlying fears and uncertainties of many RRP voters and upholding the principles of justice, equality and human dignity. As Minkenberg and Vergh have shown in the context of Eastern Europe, when traditional parties collaborate with radical right parties or adopt their ideology, there is a decline in democratic quality[51]. Furthermore, studies have shown that as radical right parties gain power, centre-right parties begin to position themselves further to the right on immigration issues[52]. I would, however, like to challenge the idea that we must choose between one or the other: the law or politics. Rather, I believe that for a ban on the AFD to be successful – even if this success can be measured in many ways – it cannot be achieved without addressing the deep-seated concerns of voters, namely a profound sense of uncertainty or, as Galli so aptly puts it: "globalization, its unfulfilled promises, its failures, the frustrations generated by the end of the welfare state and the failed beginning of the individualistic prosperity that neoliberalism had flashed, only to then force societies into austerity and precariousness". Thus, it is only by combining political awareness with the fight against these frustrations and uncertainties that a ban can have a lasting effect.

[48] *Die Linke*, literally "the Left", is a German radical left-wing party. It was formed in 2007 from the merger of the WASG, a breakaway group from the SPD, and the PDS, the successor to the East German SED. It remains fairly strong in the *Länder* of the former GDR, although it faces stiff competition from the AFD.

[49] The *Freie Demokratische Partei* is a liberal party that has participated in federal government coalitions on more than one occasion, but currently has no elected representatives in the Bundestag.

[50] Carlo Invernizzi Accetti and Ian Zuckerman, "What's Wrong with Militant Democracy", *Political studies*, No 65/1, pp. 182-199.

[51] Michael Minkenberg and Zsuzsanna Végh, *op. cit.*

[52] Franziska Wagner, Dean Schafer and Mehmet Yavuz, "Opposition to Government and Back: How Illiberal Parties Shape Immigration Discourse and Party Competition", *Politics and Governance*, No. 13, 2025, [online:] https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9609.

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