

“Everything goes against the German here!” : self-victimising discourse in comments on migration-related posts on the Alternative für Deutschland Facebook page

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“Everything goes against the German here!” Self-victimising discourse in comments on migration-related posts on the Alternative für Deutschland Facebook page

Abstract

This chapter investigates user comments on migration-related posts on the Facebook page of the far-right German political party *Alternative für Deutschland*. After a conceptualising discussion of hate speech online and a contextualising description of *the Alternative für Deutschland* and its Facebook presence, user comments on nine migration-related Facebook posts are investigated in a qualitative discourse analytical framework. The chapter demonstrates by way of a contextualised discourse analysis how a range of recurrent topoi of immigrants as burden, danger, exploitation and injustice and specific recurring features, including expressions of physical revulsion and sarcasm, combine to form a discourse of self-victimisation in the user comments. These findings will be discussed in the light of a need for contextualised discourse analyses of hate speech beyond the use of derogatory terms that considers a range of recurrent features in combination. .

1 Introduction

The phenomenon of online hate speech is a crucial contemporary challenge which has increased with the affordances of participatory online media and particularly social media. The challenge involves, broadly speaking, balancing a set of rights – to free speech on the one side, and to dignity and protection from discrimination and harm on the other. It is further complicated by the somewhat blurry notion of ‘hate’ involved in debates about hate speech and by the comprehensiveness and context-dependency of means through which hate can be expressed, prompted and maintained. This chapter explores instantiations of hate speech in a specific discourse context: user comments on migration-related posts on the Facebook page of the German far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland*. In doing so, rather than looking at more obvious features of hate speech, such as slurs, derogatory language and promoting violence against members of a social group, attention will be given to recurrent features in comments on a number of such posts that might fall below the radar of perceptions of hate speech but that are likely to have the same effects as hate speech. In particular, this chapter aims to show how a number of established topoi in discourses about migration combine into a self-victimising discourse in which native Germans are subjected to injustice and exploitation by migrants in combination with a government that condones or even encourages this perceived development. Through a discourse analysis of a sizeable amount of comments on nine different migration-related posts, the chapter will also point out a number of recurrent features of the commenters’ discourse that further perpetuate this self-victimising discourse. To this end, the chapter starts out with a discussion of conceptualisations of online hate speech (section 2), after which the context will be described by characterising the AfD and the activity on its Facebook page in relation to the issue of immigration (section 3). Following this, the data and methodological approach will be briefly described (section 4) before analysing recurring topoi and features in comments (section 5), followed by conclusions (section 6) as to how recurring features sustain a discourse of self-victimisation and how this discourse relates to hate speech.

2 Hate speech online

Research into online communication addressed the extent to which it is likely to enhance (e.g. Loader/Mercea 2012) or endanger (e.g. Vaidhyanathan 2018) public debate and democratic deliberation. While the enhanced participatory affordances in particular of social media were seen to be in favour of the former, occurrences such as impoliteness, incivility, derogatory language and hate speech were considered indications of the latter. Papacharissi (2004) made an important distinction between impoliteness and incivility, whereby the latter is related to “offensive behaviour toward social groups” and to “disrespect for the collective traditions of democracy” (260) by denying personal freedoms and stereotyping social groups. It has been pointed out, however, that delineations of incivility may be marred by established power relations (Chen et al. 2019) and that while incivility “poses a genuine threat to the civic culture of democracies” (Edyvane 2020, 101), it can also “have instrumental value as a mode of dissent” (ibid., 102). Hate speech, however, can be considered as an extreme form of incivility that runs counter to democratic values because it spreads, incites, or promotes “hatred, violence and discrimination against an individual or group based on their protected characteristics” (Kilvington 2021, 257). The harmful effects on the targets of hate speech and possible spill-over into real-world violent attacks are particular concerns, as are the desensitisation to hateful content due to ongoing, repeated exposure. Hate speech

can (a) incite, promote or justify hatred and violence to larger audiences, (b) it is mainly propagated through social media, (c) it often has a broader scope than derogatory language used in interpersonal discourse (...), and (d) it relies on a wider range of rhetorical tools and arguments. (Cervone/Augoustinos/Maass 2021, 82)

With regard to (a), affordances such as “anonymity, invisibility, dissociative imagination and rapid response (...) encourage disinhibition which exacerbates online hate” (Kilvington 2021, 261). Echo chambers perpetually reinforce similar viewpoints, “equipping some people with the confidence to post discriminatory material online” (ibid., 267). User communities might develop group dynamics contributing to de-individuation (cf. Oz/Zhen/Chen 2018), thereby lowering the threshold to produce hate speech. Last but not least, public accessibility and visibility of instances of hate speech, as well as the accessibility online forums on which hate speech is likely to occur, or even to be prompted, increases exposure to and engagement with hate speech. When it comes to a link between post content and violent action, Müller/Schwarz (2020) point to social media as facilitating exchange of information, as persuading “potential perpetrators that refugees may be dangerous or undeserving” (37), as a motivational factor for prompting collective action, and finally that social media may enable “local spillovers, e.g. through ‘copycat’ incidents” (38).

While it is possible that, unlike suggested in (b), hate speech occurs outside of social media as well, such as in small social groups of like-minded individuals, when it comes to considerations of the public sphere, social media have certainly contributed to initiating and spreading hate speech in unprecedented ways. Users are generally free to post whatever they want, only more recently have calls to limit online hate speech lead to measures of regulation and moderation (cf. Kalsnes/Ihlebak 2021, Medzini 2021). In Germany, the *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz* (Network Enforcement Act, passed 2017) “threatens providers of online platforms such as Facebook with fines up to EUR 50 million for failing to delete ‘criminal’ content that is ‘obviously unlawful’” (Müller/Schwarz 2020: 6) It also makes

platforms responsible for “taking down hate speech within pre-defined timeframes, and to provide content reviewers with training and access to counseling services.” (Medzini 2021, 10).

In relation to (c), it should be taken into account that hate speech may not always be a reflection and an impulsive expression of a speakers’ emotional state. Where this is the case, psychological variables such as listed by Cervone/Augoustinos/Maass (2021, 84) might be useful explanatory factors. However, hate speech might also, or even first and foremost, comprise expressions which have been produced with the intention to trigger such emotions in the recipients. Hate speech might also ‘join the choir’ within an echo chamber and thereby amplify or enhance previously circulating hate speech, without a genuine emotion at the source. Taking this into account, functions of hate speech such as “prejudice perpetuation; maintenance of status hierarchies; legitimization of violence against outgroups; norm and role compliance; and ingroup cohesion” (ibid., 84) will be of further interest. The last criterion (d) also indicates that it may be difficult to identify hate speech without detailed, contextual analysis:

While derogatory labels, slurs, and offensive metaphors are central features of hate speech, it is typically more expansive containing arguments, conspirational narratives and beliefs that justify collective hate. This makes hate speech conducive to qualitative discursive approaches that analyze the rhetorical and ideological patterns that legitimize the expression of hate. (Cervone/Augoustinos/Maass 2021, 82)

Delgado/Stefancic (2004) focus on specific lexical items that constitute racial slurs. Winiewski et al. (2017) categorise the content of hate speech against social minorities as ascriptions of lack of intelligence, wildness, abnormal behaviour, expressing disgust, referencing historical grounds for hatred, justifying hate speech – e.g., it is the objected group’s own fault that they are perceived so negatively –, ascribing criminal behaviour, and propagating active aggression against these minorities. Assimakopoulos/Baidar/Millar (2017) point out a number of linguistic features, including keywords and metaphors, that are used to stereotype targeted social groups and to discursively construct and polarise in-group and out-group. Overall, however, it is far from clear which linguistic means constitute hate speech, which on the one hand demands a detailed and contextualised analysis of potentially a variety of linguistic and indeed multimodal features, and on the other hand might make the argument about hate speech and regulation against it more complicated.

3 The *Alternative für Deutschland* and its Facebook presence

The *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) was founded in 2013 as a mainly neoliberal, EU-sceptic party in reaction to the European debt crisis (Speit 2016, Häusler/Roeser 2016, Weiß 2017). As a result of the federal elections in the same year, the party only narrowly missed the threshold of 5% of the votes for their representatives to enter the German parliament. It should be noted that the new party was able to build on networks established in previous, less successful attempts to influence and shift the political agenda (Hafeneger 2018). Since 2014, the party surpassed the threshold to constitute parliamentary fractions in the sixteen federal states. In the years 2014 and 2015, founding members with a mainly neoliberal, Euro-sceptic agenda were pushed back and right-wing, anti-immigrant positions in the party

became more prominent. A number of founding members left the party as a consequence, and the ethno-nationalist wing became dominant, even though neoliberal economic policies are still on the party's agenda. Voices and actors within the ethno-nationalist wing hover between right-wing populist and extreme right stances (cf. Kim 2017). In such a changed formation it appears to have capitalised on scandalising the immigration of refugees especially since 2014: In the 2017 federal election, the AfD won 12,6% of the vote – the third largest share of votes among all parties. The AfD therefore needs to be considered a powerful political player in Germany, even though it positions itself as an anti-establishment party that campaigns for more direct democracy in form of referendums. Kemper (2017) succinctly characterises the AfD as promoting inequality across the three of its most essential political concerns:

Demands for class-related inequality are mostly represented by its neoliberal stream; the issue of gender-related inequality is forced by the Christian-fundamentalist and anti-secular stream; in support of this is the third stream, the ethno-nationalistic stream which propagates a 'natural gender order' from a demographic perspective, but actually seek to achieve a racist inequality between so-called biological Germans and non-biological Germans. (17f.)

Kemper (2017) details how the concerns pursued by these three wings are represented in the party's 2016 manifesto. Tensions within the party keep on arising around where, or if, to draw a line towards extreme right positions. Such tensions are prompted regularly and not least by controversial and intensely criticised positions and statements of prominent AfD politicians, especially Björn Höcke who leads the party in the federal state of Thuringia (Kim 2017). For the sake of the following analysis, it is important to note that the AfD has a clear right-wing and anti-immigration agenda. Hafener (2018, 12) summarises the official AfD position on immigration as problematising immigrants' purported exploitation of the social benefit system and lack of participation in the labour market, emphasising a danger of social unrest, and a supposed danger of a creeping extinction of European culture. They advocate closing access to Germany and dealing with asylum applications outside German borders, as well as deporting immigrants who are not accepted as refugees on first application. A number of AfD politicians regularly exhibit more extreme views in their statements and positioning.

The AfD Facebook page can be found under www.facebook.com/alternatiefuerde. It was initiated on 3 March 2013 and as of 12 April 2021, it has attracted 512,193 likes and 538,916 followers. According to Müller/Schwarz (2020), the party's reach on Facebook exceeds that of other German political parties. The AfD page does not state rules of conduct for posting comments and it is "consistently more focused on refugees than that of traditional news reports and frequently contains loaded terms that civil rights groups have identified as 'hate speech'" (ibid., 3, cf. also p. 33). Compared to all other German political parties, Medina Serrano et al. (2019) find that the AfD Facebook page has the most followers, that it posts most actively, and that its posts attract the most comments, as well as likes and shares. They also find that the AfD posts are provocative or even sensationalist, and that the "topics discussed are controversial, which encourages users to engage with the posts and express personal opinions." (218). Moreover, they can show that the AfD highlights certain issues on its social media platform, which does not reflect the attention devoted to an issue in its manifesto: Whereas 21% of manifesto content is devoted to economic politics and 19.2% to immigration, on its Facebook page, only 4.5% is devoted to economic issues, as opposed to 16.1% to immigration (ibid., 222; based on data from January 2015-May 2018).

Müller and Schwarz (2020) observe that the narrative in AfD Facebook posts containing the word *Flüchtling* (refugee)¹ “centers around the idea that the ‘elites’—politicians and mainstream media outlets—have betrayed ‘the people’ by allowing ‘streams’ of illegitimate ‘economic refugees’ to enter the country, who are described as being criminals and rapists for ‘cultural reasons’”. (Müller/Schwarz 2020, 9). They also find that responses to these posts demonstrate that “the overwhelming majority appear to agree with the positions of the AfD.” (ibid.) Based on their analysis of posts relating to refugees on the AfD Facebook page, they summarise the characteristics of the AfD’s stance on refugees as follows:

(1) a belief to speak for the ‘true will’ of the people, i.e. the in-group (citizens) compared to the out-group (refugees); (2) an opposition to ‘elites’, in particular politicians and the media, who supposedly mislead or betray the people in an undemocratic way; and (3) a legitimization of discrimination against refugees by highlighting crimes by refugees, an alleged incompatibility of cultural differences, and negative repercussions for vulnerable ‘locals’ (e.g. women, children or pensions).” (Müller/Schwarz 2020: 33)

As the overview of migration-related AfD Facebook posts provided below in section 4 will show, the posts already only deal with issues pertaining to the perceived most problematic aspects of migration. It should be noted that there is a likely interplay between the gist of the post that prompts the comments, and the reactions to the post expressed in the comments. As observed also by Wahlström/Törnberg/Ekbrand (2020) in the case of the radical right Facebook group *Stand up for Sweden*, the “framing in the top post conditioned the occurrence of violent and dehumanizing rhetoric in the discussion threads.” (14)

The post is therefore “not just about establishing abstract frames about the state of society, but an instance of a continuous moral work that raises negative emotions and motivates action.” (ibid., 15). Therefore, the “initial poster establishes a *diagnostic frame* by exemplifying a social problem; subsequently, the commenters either elaborate on this diagnosis (who is responsible and how is the example part of a broader pattern) or move on to *prognostic framing* (what to do) and legitimizations (why it is morally permissible to do it).” (ibid., 16). This observation also pertains to the AfD commenters’ interaction with the post content. It reinforces concerns about the placing of calculated messages in order to provoke or intensify hate and the expression of hate.

Kalsnes/Ihlbæk (2021) investigated moderation practices of moderating debates on political parties’ Facebook pages, since “pressures and public expectations have increased for political actors to pay attention to and delete comments perceived as hateful or derogatory.” (329). Especially in light of the *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz* mentioned above, it can be assumed that some degree of comment moderation takes place on the AfD Facebook page – however, for the purposes of this chapter, a detailed exploration of the extent to which this happens, and how it happens, cannot be undertaken. An indicator for this might be the discrepancy between Facebook’s comment count and the number of retrievable comments – see Table 1 in section 4 below. This discrepancy might be an indicator that some comments were hidden by moderators (cf. Kalsnes and Ihlbæk 2021 about the relevance of this moderation option), so that they are still included in the Facebook comment count and visible to the respective commenter, but not retrievable due to a lack of visibility of the comment to

¹ While *Flüchtling* translates *refugee*, the words differ in that *Flüchtling* is derived from the verb *flüchten*, to flee, or to escape.

anyone else. There are also indicators in some user comments that users had previously had their comments removed or that they were temporarily blocked: Users themselves explicitly mention the fact that this has happened to them, or state that they refrain from writing what they would wish to write in order to not be banned or to not have their comments removed. Despite such indicators of moderation activity, there are still visible comments that propagate violence against refugees.

4 Methodology

In a first step, to gain an overview over the activity on the AfD Facebook page, and over the kind and amount of migration-related posts, a sample time span of three months was selected during which all posts were surveyed for content and amount of interaction. The selected time span covers the months of October, November and December 2020. The time span was not selected with the intention to capture any specific events or likely issues occurring during the time span. It was selected so as to be practically manageable – first in terms of the volume of analysis and second in accessibility of posts. During these three months, typically three or four posts appear on the page every day. On any day, apart from 25, 26 and 28 December 2020 where there were no posts, no fewer than two posts appeared. More than four posts appeared on two days in October; six posts was the highest number on any day within the three months surveyed.

Posts during the selected period cover a range of issues besides migration; criticism of the government's Corona-related measures; campaign against an increase of fees for public broadcasting, and against (paying for) the latter more generally; posts critical of EU politics; posts relating to data protection policy and energy policy; posts about purported left wing extremism, and posts scandalising other parties' politicians' conduct. Posts were considered to relate to migration if they referred to a) movement by foreign nationals, including refugees, into Germany, or b) the presence of and provision for refugees, or c) conflicts arising from current or past immigration, including posts highlighting criminal activities by immigrants and d) posts critical of Islam.

In October, there were 33 migration-related posts, 27 in November and 8 in December, which amounts to a total of 68 migration-related posts during the selected time span. A few migration-related posts in the second half of October relate to the murder of Samuel Paty in Paris and might have led the AfD to push the issue, also going into November, where a lot of the migration-related posts relate to 'Islamist terror' or to purported sympathisers with radical Islam. In December, the AfD pushed the issue of the fees for public broadcasting as well as criticism of the government's measures relating to the Coronavirus. Thematically, these 68 migration-related posts pertain to

- 1) purported criminal activity by Muslims in Germany or elsewhere in Europe (14 posts);
- 2) advocating sanctions for such purported criminal activity (15 posts);
- 3) criticism of Islam and the presence of Muslims in Germany, including references to purported endorsement of violence committed by other Muslims and/or in the name of Islam, or references to Muslims/Islam as illiberal and lacking integration (16 posts)
- 4) provisions for refugees such as accommodation or rights granted (9 posts)
- 5) (potential) movements by foreign nationals, including refugees, into Germany and the EU (12 posts)
- 6) individual migrants who are presented as in agreement with the AfD (2 posts).

This topical overview makes it already likely that hate speech might occur because the topics described above serve to highlight, amplify, and exaggerate only the most problematic aspects of immigration and portray immigrants as a problem and a burden. For a more detailed study of the post comments, nine posts were selected. The selection includes posts from the three months for which data was surveyed as well as different topics from the above list, but it excludes posts about migration-related events or policy responses in other countries. Table 1 provides an overview together with an indication of the post content, with reference to the topic category above. The topic caption in the left column in Table 1 indicate the gist of each post.

Post date & topic	Reactions according to Facebook	Post shares according to Facebook	Comments according to Facebook	Number of extracted comments	Number of extracted replies to comments
1 October <i>no sanctions in place for illegal border crossing (5)</i>	10,000	4,000	1,300	1,139	387
14 October <i>refugees refuse flats offered to them as not good enough (4)</i>	9,900	3,700	3,100	2,107	681
18 October <i>twelve tax payers are needed to fund one under age refugee (4)</i>	16,000	11,000	2,700	1,576	720
24 October <i>murderers and rapists should be deported (2)</i>	20,000	7,100	1,800	762	373
9 November <i>link to newspaper article about 'Islamist' demonstration in Hamburg (3)</i>	14,000	3,700	5,400	3,897	1,035
17 November <i>asylum seekers appealing against asylum decisions (4)</i>	9,900	3,300	1,900	1,308	331
25 November <i>no sacrifice of women's rights to Islam (3)</i>	3,600	1,400	562	233	262
4 December <i>refugees accommodated in villa in millionaire's quarter (4)</i>	12,000	5,900	5,100	2,500	968
19 December <i>family reunification for refugees means further unlimited immigration (5)</i>	6,300	1,500	1,600	1,113	305

Table 1: Overview of data

Comments on the posts were retrieved with the aid of an online tool (<https://exportcomments.com>, last access 04/05/2021). The tool extracts all publicly visible comments and replies to comments to an excel sheet, including links to external content and emojis. The above table indicates the level of interaction on posts and comments both as per

Facebook's own count as well as per number of comments and replies that were retrieved by the tool. Both figures indicate that there is a sizeable amount of interaction with the post content, although numbers vary between different kinds of interaction: Generally, the number of simple reactions (like symbol, heart symbol, or emoji) surpasses the number of post shares, the number of post shares surpasses the number of comments, and the number of comments surpasses the number of replies to comments.

The average number of user comments retrieved by the downloading tool across the nine selected posts is 1,626. Rather than examining all comments per post in detail, the analysis will draw on the retrieved comments as a large pool of examples to first, as stated above, draw attention to some of the lesser-noted features of hate speech and second, to ensure that these are recurring, and not singular occurrences across a number of comments on different posts. This also sheds some light on the discursive community that convenes on the AfD Facebook page and the discursive resources community members draw on.

The analysis follows the model of the Discourse Historical Approach to Critical Discourse analysis (Reisigl/Wodak 2009). In line with this, discourse is understood to pertain to specific fields of social action, and to exhibit argumentativity. In order to situate the discourse at hand accordingly, it was contextualised in the previous sections with regard to user-generated content on social media (as a social practice) and within the political party and its Facebook platform (i.e. the field of social action) on which the user comments occur. The relation to the macro-topic migration was characterised above. Apart from noting the above level of interaction, the more micro-dynamics of the interaction, i.e. structures of comments and replies, will not be in the focus of this analysis. Having said this, the immediate co-text and other intertextual and interdiscursive relations will be taken into account and build on the above characterisation of the discourse of the AfD. Last but not least, having identified the contents and topics of the AfD Facebook posts above, the interest turns toward discursive features, whereby the focus will be on recurring means that can be considered to express or trigger hatred, and the aim will be to discuss the extent to which means that do not necessarily involve derogatory language or racist slurs can be considered hate speech. Thus, the analysis will consider recurring topoi that combine to sustain a discourse of self-victimisation. It will also consider how a number of other recurring features, namely references to mental illness, expressions of physical revulsion, and the use of irony, combine with and sustain these topoi. The following analysis will illustrate and discuss the use and realizations of these features by providing evidence from the gathered data and of their recurrence in comments across different posts.

5 Analysis

5.1 Topoi of self-victimisation

In his large-scale analysis of argumentation topoi in German migration discourse between 1960 and 1985, Wengeler (2003) demonstrates the persistence, amongst others, of three topoi that are also relevant for the discourse in the comments on the AfD posts: First, there is the topos of exploitation, according to which resources created by hard working Germans are exploited by migrants. A new aspect to this topos compared to the time span and material investigated by Wengeler is the claim that this exploitation is facilitated by the German government.

here, yuck, when will you finally wake up, each pensioner going through the rubbish bins here should make you ashamed 😞😞

A further continuing topos that is perpetuated by commenters on AfD Facebook posts to a somewhat lesser degree than the topoi of burden and of exploitation is the topos of danger, according to which immigrants pose a security threat to Germans.

- 8) die deutschen finanzieren ihren eigenen Untergang und klatschen dafür Applaus...!! Zum Dank der Invasoren werden wir ausgeraubt, zusammengeschlagen vergewaltigt und abgestochen...!! Wie dämlich muss man sein?? (18 October)
The Germans finance their own downfall and applaud themselves for it...!! Thanks to the invaders we are being robbed, beaten up, raped, and stabbed...!! How stupid do you have to be??
- 9) Es kommt die Zeit, da werden wir Deutsche Schutz suchen vor den Schutzsuchenden.... (24 October)
The time will come, then we Germans will seek protection from those seeking protection...
- 10) Was das soll gerade die die uns so respektlos behandeln laufen durch die Stadt und verlangen das wir ihren Mohammed mit respekt behandeln . Sie sollen erst mal lernen das sie uns mit respekt behandeln und sich zu integrieren haben und nicht hier jagd auf deutsche machen (9 November)
What is this supposed to mean; especially those who treat us without respect walk through the city and demand that we treat their Mohammed with respect. They need to first learn to treat us with respect and to integrate themselves and not come here and hunt down Germans.

Incidentally, Hart (2010) finds the same topoi when analysing UK news media reports on immigration, pointing to the ubiquity of such topoi beyond the German context. While these topoi run through the comments, they combine with a new topos of injustice, according to which immigrants and Germans are not treated equally, but immigrants are being privileged and receive preferential treatment, while Germans are neglected and disadvantaged.

- 11) Finde von eine Seite richtig, die möchten gut leben. Wer möchte es nicht. Aber andersrum, so ungerecht. Neben mir bauen Sie eine Unterkunft für Flüchtlinge. Jahrelang hat man die Fläche nicht bebaut. Viele Menschen suchen Wohnungen. Arbeiten und finden nichts passendes. Aber für die anderen, die als Gäste kommen, finden sich Mittel und Weg unmögliche möglich zu machen. Das ist für mich Ungerechtigkeit die jetzt so oft in den Medien besprochen wird. Nur die meinen fast immer Ungerechtigkeit gegen Besucher. Ungerechtigkeit in der Gesellschaft betrifft aber uns alle, nicht nur die Asylsuchende. (14 October)
On the one hand okay, they want to live well. Who doesn't. But on the other, so unjust. Next to mine they are building accommodation for refugees. For years, the space hasn't been built on. Many people are looking for flats. They work and find nothing suitable. But for the others who come as guests, means and ways are found to make the impossible possible. This is for me injustice that is mentioned so often in the media nowadays. Only they nearly always mean injustice against visitors. But injustice in society affects all of us, not only asylum seekers.
- 12) Wir sind doch ein Rechtsstaat, gilt für alle nur nicht für uns Deutsche!! 😡 (24 October)
But we have the rule of law here, which applies to everyone, not only us Germans!! 😡
- 13) [Two out of 109 replies to a comment stating that the demonstrators should be dispersed rather than accompanied by the police, 9 November]:
Wenn deutsche demonstrieren werden sie von der Antifa provoziert dann greift die Polizei ein aber nicht gegen die Antifa sondern gegen friedliche demonstranten

When Germans demonstrate they get provoked by the antifa and then the police intervene, but not against the antifa but against peaceful demonstrators

Die Polizei verprügelt lieber biodeutsche Coronagegner.

The police prefer beating up bio-German corona opponents.

- 14) Und während diese undankbaren Pseudo-Verfolgten klagen, dürfen sich hier die Menschen mit Masken rumärgern und die volle Härte des Gesetzes durch die Polizei spüren. (17 November)
And while these ungrateful pseudo-persecuted appeal, people here have to bother with masks and get exposed to the full harshness of the law through the hands of the police
- 15) gegen die trauen sich aber unsere hysterischen Feministinnen aber nicht. Die trauen sich ja nur auszuflippen wenn ein älterer weißer Mann etwas abfälliges sagt, ja dann drehen die durch. Aber bei Islamisten ist ja alles ok... (25 November)
But our hysterical feminists don't stand up against them. They only dare to freak out when an older white man says something devaluing, then they go mad. But it's all okay when it's an Islamist.

The topos of injustice is based on a nativist discourse (cf. Schröter 2019) which is neither spelled out nor rationalised in the comments, but which presupposes that native inhabitants of Germany need to be prioritised in distributing resources, and immigrants' access to resources needs to be either restricted or denied altogether. Based on this presumption, the perceived preferential treatment of migrants articulated above amounts to the portrayal of a world turned upside down: According to the nativist stance, there should be inequality in that the Germans should be privileged over migrants (cf. Kemper's (2017) remarks on the AfD promoting inequality in section 3 above). Equal treatment would already be inadequate, and preferential treatment for migrants turns the world on its head. From a nativist stance, the arguments about exploitation, burden, and injustice lead to a self-victimising discourse in which migrants set about ruining Germany and the Germans. A new aspect in this is a conspiratory narrative according to which the government not only condones, but facilitates and encourages this purported exploitation and injustice. Examples (16) and (17) are comments in response to a post that juxtaposes the fact that there are purportedly no penalties for illegal border crossings with the prospect of fines for not truthfully stating the address for Covid contact tracing when visiting restaurants.

- 16) Dann sollte man nun,so tragisch wie es auch ist,nicht mehr in Restaurants, Eiscafés etc gehen! Alles Boykottieren! Der Bürger der versucht die Wirtschaft hochzuhalten wird bestraft! Hier geht alles gegen den Deutschen! (1 October)
So we should now, even if it is tragic, not visit restaurants or ice cream parlours etc. anymore! Boycott everything! The citizen tries to keep the economy going and gets punished! Everything goes against the German here!
- 17) unglaublich wie die da oben uns verarschen ohne Gewissen total skrupellos gegen das eigene Volk (1 October)
Unbelievable how those in power take the piss, without bad conscience without scruple against the own people
- 18) Rentner sammeln Flaschen und Flüchtlinge werden schon mal als neue Herrenrasse eingewohnt.... die Verantwortlichen gehören hinter Schoß und Riegel... (4 December)
Pensioners collect bottles and refugees are becoming induced as the new superior race...those responsible need to be locked up...
- 19) Der Garten des Anwesens wird dann vmtl. von einem deutschen Rentner gepflegt, dem die Rente vorne und hinten nicht reicht?! (4 December)
The garden of the estate will probably be looked after by a German pensioner who cannot make ends meet with his pension?!

Examples (18) and (19) are comments in response to the post about migrants being accommodated in a mansion situated in a millionaires' quarter in Munich. They invoke an image of a world in which 'legitimate' power relations – the Germans should have superiority in Germany – are being turned upside down.

5.2 Germany as lunatic asylum

The above-described notion of a world turned upside down also forms the basis of comments about the state of affairs in Germany as lacking reason and rationality. Germany is compared to a lunatic asylum, and the situation resulting from immigration is repeatedly referred to as 'crazy', or 'madness'. These comments are mainly directed at the government for allowing a 'crazy' situation to occur.

- 20) Dass ist doch Schizophrenie!!!!Was die Regierung mit uns Treib!!!!!! Und noch als Krönung sagen sie , dass AfD ist an allem schuld !!!! (1 October)
This is schizophrenia!!!! What the government does to us!!!!!! And to top it, they say that it's all the fault of the AfD!!!!
- 21) soweit ist es schon in dem Irrenhaus Deutschland gekommen. Es wird Zeit das daran etwas geändert wird! (14 October)
...this is what it has come to in the lunatic asylum of Germany. It is time to change this state of affairs!
- 22) i r r e (17 November)
c r a z y
- 23) Völliger Wahnsinn (17 November)
Complete madness
- 24) Alle in die Klapsmühle (19 December)
All into the lunatic asylum

Comments blame the government for the perceived 'craziness' by describing it as 'lunatic' or 'abnormal', or by describing Merkel personally, as head of the government, as 'psychologically ill' or 'demented'. Examples (25), (29) and (30) combine with the topos of exploitation and burden, claiming that the 'madness' will lead to Germany's downfall, and example (26) with a demand to get rid of immigrants.

- 25) WIR WERDEN VON IRREN REGIERT UND LETZLICH ALLES VERLIEREN ! (18 October)
WE ARE BEING GOVERNED BY LUNATICS AND WILL LOSE EVERYTHING AT THE END!
- 26) 0.00001 PROZENT IST SCHON ZUVIEL ABSCHIEBEN. WIE ABNORMAL IST DEN DIE REGIERUNG. (24 October)
0.00001 PROZENT IS ALREADY TOO MUCH DEPORT. HOW ABNORMAL IS THIS GOVERNMENT.
- 27) Und unsere behinderte Regierung schaut zu ... (9 November)
And our retarded government just watches on...
- 28) Geisteskranke Regierung 🤔🤔 (19 December)
Mentally ill government 🤔🤔
- 29) Wann wird endlich ein Misstrauensantrag gegen Merkel gestellt ? Kann doch nicht sein das Deutschland von einer alten verbitterten psychisch kranken Frau in den Ruin getrieben wird. (18 October)

When will there be a vote of no confidence in Merkel? Can't be that Germany is driven into ruin by an old, bitter, psychologically ill woman.

- 30) Bei der Merkel setzt ganz einfach der Alters Starrsinn ein, deswegen muss die weg bevor Deutschland komplett am Ende ist (14 October)
Merkel is simply slipping into dementia, this is why she has to go before Germany is completely at the end

In turn, Germans that are seen to submit to this situation without effective resistance are also seen as 'idiots' or losing their minds. This also explains the occasional metaphorical reference to Germans as 'lemmings' as in examples (33) and (34) – by condoning this state of affairs, the Germans are purportedly committing collective suicide.

- 31) Wir Deutsche sind ein Volk von.....voll.....Idioten. Wählt weiter die Altparteien, ihr Narren. (18 October)
We Germans are a people of.....complete.....idiots. Go on voting for the old parties, you fools.
- 32) Ich habe ja schon geschrieben ,wir Deutschen haben nicht mehr alle tassen im Schrank (4 December)
As I already wrote, we Germans don't have all our marbles anymore
- 33) [...] Dann werden die Systemlemminge, Wahlurnenzombies, Klima- und Covidjünger vermutlich verstehen, dass sie ein Unrechtsregime an der Macht gehalten haben und ihre nun aktuelle Zustände hofiert, unterstützt und gefördert haben. (18 October)
[...] Then the system lemmings, voting cabin zombies, climate- and Covid-believers will understand that they have kept an unjust regime in power and that they have promoted, supported and fostered their current situation.
- 34) [...] Aber, da es noch genügende Lemminge gibt die einer unkontrollierten Masseneinwanderung zu stimmen, eine Regierung haben, die bei Vergewaltigungen wegschauen und verharmlosen und Pädophilie befürworten und Straftäter ungeschoren davon kommen lassen, bin ich für eine Opferung der Frauenrechte im Islam. (25 November)
[...] But, since there are still enough lemmings that agree with uncontrolled mass immigration, we have a government that looks away or play down rape and that supports paedophilia and lets perpetrators get away without punishment, I am in favour of relinquishing women's rights to Islam.

These repeated references to a complete lack of rationality in Germany and in German politics are based on the perception of a world in which relations that 'make sense' have been disturbed and disrupted. They reinforce the nativist idea that native Germans should have the upper hand in Germany and that this purportedly not being the case constitutes a state of affairs that does not make sense anymore and therefore needs to be considered 'crazy'.

5.3 Indicators of physical revulsion

The features of the discourse in the AfD post comments described above are often combined with expressions of physical revulsion. These can be worded; 'makes me sick', or 'I want to throw up', such as in the following examples:

- 35) Die bekloppte Merkel muss weg .Wir deutsche sollen zahlen bei falschen Angaben im Restaurant ,na klar die brauch Geld für Ihre GÄSTE 🤢🤢🤢🤢 Könnte nur noch kotzen. Stoppt die wahnsinnige (1 October)

The crazy Merkel has to go. We Germans are supposed to pay when giving false details in the restaurant. Sure, she needs the money for her GUESTS 🤢🤢🤢🤢 I could only keep on throwing up. Stop the lunatic.

- 36) Da kommt ein das Kotzen in ihre Heimat hatten die eine Lehmhütte ohne fließend Wasser und hie Ansprüche stellen pfui daibel (14 October)
I could throw up. In their homeland they had a mud hut without running water and here they make demands, yuck
- 37) Ist einfach nur zum K.O.T.Z.E.N.. und wir Rentner müssen noch unsere Rente versteuern!!! (18 October)
Just makes you T.H.R.O.W. U.P. and we pensioners need to even pay taxes on our pensions!!!
- 38) es ist nur noch zum kotzen wie dieses volk hier hoffiert wird und uns jeder cent dafür aus der tasche gezogen wird (4 December)
it just makes you sick how these people are being courted here and every cent is drawn from our pockets for it

The examples above demonstrate the relation between the topoi of exploitation (38) and injustice (35-37) and statements of physical revulsion. More commonly than describing it in words, the emoji representing the act of throwing up is used, often multiple times for intensifying effect. The following examples again demonstrate the link to the topoi of injustice (41, 43) and of burden (40, 42), but also outrage at a purported submission of the Germans to an unacceptable status quo (39), noted already above in examples (31)-(34).

- 39) Die sollen sich dahin verpissen, wo sie hergekommen sind. Ansprüche stellen ist schon mal gar nicht. Ekelhaft, wenn man sich sowas gefallen lässt 🤢 (14 October)
They should piss off to where they came from. Making demands is a no-no. Disgusting, when you let this sort of thing happen to you 🤢
- 40) Gar nicht erst reinlassen, geschweige denn holen. Es ist unser Steuergeld und unser Vaterland 🤢🤢🤢 (24 October)
Don't even let them in, let alone get them in. It is our taxes and our homeland 🤢🤢🤢
- 41) Warum wird das erlaubt, das deutsche Volk wird eingesperrt, und die hüpfen rum, zum 🤢🤢 (9 November)
Why is this allowed, the German people are being locked in and they are jumping about, makes me 🤢🤢
- 42) Kosten ohne Ende Gericht, Anwälte Fahrtkosten 🤢🤢🤢🤢 (17 November)
No end to costs; courts, lawyers, travel costs 🤢🤢🤢🤢
- 43) Und Obdachlose erfrieren 🤢 (4 December)
And the homeless freeze to death 🤢
- 44) Die Neubürger und Gäste der Regierung wollen doch gut versorgt werden 🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢 (19 December)
Well, the new citizens and government's very own guests need proper provision 🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢

The examples illustrate how the topoi described above are reinforced in statements combined with expressions of extreme disgust, and how expressions of extreme disgust can become a feature of hate speech in this self-victimising discourse. Example (44) also shows how disgust can also signal irony, which is another feature in the discourse on the AfD Facebook page, discussed in the following section. The use of emojis for expression of disgust also appears in lieu of a worded comment, or in addition to explicitly stating the absence of a comment - as though there was nothing left to say but just to give in to a physical reaction:

- 45) No Comment 🤔🤔🤔 (14 October) [original post is in English]
 46) Zum kotzen man hat keine Worte mehr (18 October)
Sickening, words fail me
 47) 🤔🤔 (19 December)

5.4 Irony and sarcasm

What emerges most clearly from the discourse about immigration and migrants in the comments on migration-related AfD Facebook posts is a self-centred discourse that puts purported negative consequences of immigration on native Germans into the focus. The comments portray migrants as exploiting the Germans. This behaviour is to some extent considered 'natural': Everyone would want to take advantage, if given the opportunity. The perceived scandal is the German government's purported providing of this opportunity and condonement or even encouragement of this behaviour when it should supposedly shield the Germans from this exploitation. These perceptions are also perpetuated in comments that use irony and sarcasm:

- 48) Wir schaffen das!! (1 October)
We can do this!!
 49) Nur das beste für Merkels Gäste!!!! (1 October)
Only the best for Merkel's guests!!!!
 50) so sind halt muttis goldstücke! (14 October)
That's what they are like, mum's gold coins!
 51) Zum Glück sind die rentner mit weniger zufrieden 😊 (18 October)
Lucky that the pensioners are happy with less 😊
 52) Da macht das Arbeiten doch wieder Spaß!!!! Endlich hat es einen Sinn.... (18 October)
This way, going to work becomes fun again!!!! Finally it has a meaning....
 53) Macht doch nichts,es laufen doch eh noch zuviel Deutsche rum... (24 October)
That's fine, there are still too many Germans here anyway...
 54) So helft doch ! -Die Villa ist wertlos, wenn den "Flüchtlingen" der dazu gehörende Porsche und Maserati verweigert wird. (4 December)
Please help! The mansion is worthless if the „refugees“ are being denied the Porsche and Maserati going along with it.
 55) Ja holt noch mehr Corona rein 😏 (19 December)
Yeah, get more Corona into the country 😏
 56) Bürger einschliessen und goldstücke holen mein Humor. Aber die Bürger wollen es ja so. 😊 (19 December)
Locking the citizens up and getting gold coins into the country, just my sense of humour. But the citizens want it this way. 😊

Examples (51) and (52) sarcastically perpetuate the perception that the Germans are disadvantaged by carrying the burden that migrants supposedly constitute. The statement "We can do this" (48) is used repeatedly in an ironic way in the comments. It is a much-circulated quote from Angela Merkel who used these words in 2015 to rally the Germans behind her government's willingness - compared to some other European countries - to accommodate a relatively large number of refugees especially from Syria. What is also striking across the comments is the reference to migrants as "guests" or "gold coins". The sarcastic use of the word "guests" (49) indicates an especially accommodating, if not preferential

treatment of migrants. This use is not a singular occurrence – reference to ‘guests’ occurs on average 26.8 times in the comments across the nine posts. The expression “gold coins” (50) works in a similar way: It can more widely be used as an endearing term, applied to someone who is ‘precious’ to the speaker. While the occurrence is less frequent than that of ‘guests’, it is a recurrent feature and can be found on average in 5.7 comments per post. The use of both terms serves to indicate and reinforce the perceptions that refugees are valued more than native Germans.

It should also be noted when “refugees” is put into inverted commas (54) – there are a number of comments in which this occurs, and additionally, there are comments that question this choice of words, insinuating that the reasons for migrating to Germany are not genuinely seeking refuge from danger, but seeking to improve standard of living with the help of the German benefit system.

Calpestrati and Foschi Albert (2019) find that irony is rare in the discourse of the German extreme right, but in user comments on the AfD posts, irony and sarcasm are quite common. There is a discourse community here that presupposes shared interpretations of events and uses a variety of means to reinforce these interpretations, obviously with no fear to be misunderstood when sarcastically referring to migrants as “guests” or “gold coins”, or when ironically asserting that “We can do this” in the midst comments that construct a discourse of Germans suffering. The post that triggers the most sarcastic comments is the one about refugees being moved into a mansion: Numerous comments exhibit *schadenfreude* in anticipation of the reactions of the rich neighbours who would be ever so pleased about migrants moving into their neighbourhood.

While the self-victimising discourse prevails throughout the comments on all posts and involves a deeply negative perception of migrants as a threat, there are some comments that involve more direct negative stereotyping. Many comments on the post about migrants being moved into a mansion create scenarios of migrants behaving inappropriately in their new neighbourhood and wrecking the place. Negative stereotyping of Islam is involved in the comments on the post about a demonstration in Hamburg, and immigrants are portrayed as too demanding and not grateful enough in comments on the post about the refusal of flats offered to asylum seekers. Negative cultural stereotyping often occurs in sarcastic statements, such as in the following examples:

- 57) Vielleicht sollte man ja für "Flüchtlinge "Lehmhütten bauen,da fühlen sich viele heimisch 😊🇷🇺 (14 October)
Maybe we should build mud huts for the „refugees“, then they will feel at home 😊🇷🇺
- 58) Sie wollen es so haben wie in ihren Herkunftsländern. Also Todesstrafe und es wird besser. (24 October)
They want things to be like in their countries of origin. So, death penalty and it will get better.
- 59) Erstmal alles wegnehmen was es zu Mohammeds Zeiten nicht gab. Dann kann man sicher dem Glauben viel näher kommen (9 November)
First take away everything that wasn't there during Mohammed's time. Then you can get closer to your religion.
- 60) 1700 Quadratmeter erscheinen mir für öffentliche Steinigungen durchaus angemessen. Unsere Schutzsuchenden haben schließlich Anspruch auf kulturtypische Unterhaltungsshow. Die helfen schließlich auch gegen Heimweh. (4 December)
1700 square meters seem adequate to perform public stoning. Our protection seekers can demand culture-specific entertainment. This also helps against homesickness.

In the comments quoted above, the perception that Germany is ‘too accommodating’ for refugees is further exaggerated with suggestions of ‘replicating their culture’ in Germany so that ‘they feel at home’ - partly insinuating that this would repel them from staying in Germany (58) – whereby the stereotype of ‘uncivilised’ migrants’ cultures is drawn on. Mock suggestions like these along with the use of sarcastic labels for migrants that do not at first glance appear to be derogatory terms but need to be understood as such within the commentators’ discourse assert the in-group’s shared interpretation and perpetuate the rejection of the out-group.

6 Conclusion

The most recurrent and varied feature of comments on migration-related comments on migration-related posts on the Facebook page of the AfD is a self-victimising discourse, based on nativism and a conspiratory narrative, according to which the German government encourages immigration and at least condones injustice against and exploitation of native Germans. Without offering a detailed analysis of this feature, Fielitz et al. (2018) also find that self-victimisation is characteristic in discourses on extreme right online forums. The self-victimising discourse on the AfD Facebook page is triggered by the framing of the posts which already entail the topos of injustice (posts on 1 December and 19 December), burden (posts from 17 November and 18 December) and the portrayal of immigrants as ‘spoilt’ and too demanding (posts from 14 October and 4 December). The comments follow suit, and this framing gets taken up in a discourse where these topics combine into a self-victimising discourse according to which “everything here goes against the German” (quote from example 16 in section 5.1). Functions of hate speech (cf. Cervone/Aughoustinos/Maass 2021, 84) become apparent here as perpetuating prejudice about migrants as exploiting social benefits, maintaining status hierarchies according to which migrants need to be disadvantaged and native Germans preferred, and ingroup cohesion which is reflected especially in the use of irony. The self-victimising discourse also indirectly legitimates violence against outgroups by at least preparing a frame for it as self-defence.

This discourse is combined with, and reinforced through, other recurring features across comments on different posts: expressions of physical revulsion, the use of sarcasm and irony, and statements about the situation not making sense anymore. The ironic use of “guests” and “gold coins” also demonstrates how words that are on their own neither derogatory nor slurs can function as slurs in specific discourse contexts, reinforcing the idea of ‘them’ (privileged migrants) versus ‘us’ (exploited Germans). The self-victimisation is arguably suitable to trigger and maintain hate against migrants who ‘are doing this to the Germans’, but also hate against the government that ‘betrays the Germans’ of the protection that they expect from it. These findings also point to the difficulty of creating online spaces free of hate speech in that hate speech might be difficult to capture along specific linguistic forms and tokens, but also builds on topoi and narratives and might involve sarcasm and irony, all of which can be worded in various ways and requires contextualised analyses.

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