Exploring Regional Divides: A Comparative Discourse Analysis of the AfD's Communication in East and West German Federal States

Kurz, Pia

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Pia Isabel Kurz

Supervisor: Dr. Brian Shaev

Second Reader: Dr. Morena Skalamera

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1. Introduction

During a Bundestag debate on the 30th anniversary of German reunification in 2020, the then German Vice Chancellor Olaf Scholz honoured the unification of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) with the Western Federal Republic as a "story of success" and stated that many see Germany as a "country that succeeded" (Spiegel 2020). However, he also acknowledged that much remains to be achieved. Indeed, reunification is not just a moment but a decades-long process and with many continuing challenges. These challenges concern economic and structural development, the neglect of structurally weak areas in the 'new Länder' (federal states), disparities in income and pensions, unfulfilled hopes, feelings of lack of opportunities and prospects in rural areas, and perceived shortcomings in the culture of remembrance in dealing with the legacy of the GDR and with experienced injustice under the repressive Socialist regime (Britsche 2020, 3). Additionally, it appears that East and West German culture and mentality are still perceived as distinct by 78% of West Germans and 83% of East Germans (Statista 2019). It thus seems like "the wall in the heads," as it is often referred to, persists.

Besides these obstacles, perceived differences, and varying sentiments, there seem to be political divides within Germany. Citizens in the East of Germany, for instance, feel more alienated from the European Union than citizens in the West of Germany (Leggewie 2020, 49) and political attitudes are distinct (Holtmann 2020, 494). The political divide that seems to endure roughly 30 years past reunification is, for instance, highlighted by the success of the right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). The 2017 federal elections are regarded as the party's breakthrough, as it achieved 12.6% of the votes, making it the third strongest party behind the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) (Tagesschau 2017). In the 2021 national elections, it could not exceed this result, but once again entered the Bundestag with 10.3% of the votes (Tagesschau 2021). One might assume that the emergence of right-wing populism is not a new phenomenon, and that Germany simply follows other European countries such as Austria, France, or The Netherlands that experience the rise of right-wing populist parties. However, what makes the rise of the AfD in Germany distinct is the fact that, while ranking third among all German parties in the 2017 federal elections, its success is unequally spread across the country, despite it not being a regional party. A comparison of the vote shares the AfD received reveals, that in the old Länder, *viz*. the parts of the countries that used to constitute the GDR before reunification, the AfD is

significantly more popular. In 2017, two-thirds of its overall votes stemmed from the East German Länder, in four out of five, it ranked second, and in Saxony it was the party that received the most votes, ranking in front of the CDU (Decker 2022). This trend continued in the 2021 national elections. The AfD generated 18.9% in the East, making it the second-strongest party behind the Social Democrats. In contrast, in the West, the AfD received 8.2% and ranked in 5th position (Tagesschau 2021). The regional division is exemplified at the Länder level by the results of Hamburg, where the AfD received 5%, whereas it received 25.6% in Saxony. Thus, the success of the AfD is evidently unequally spread between East and West Germany.

The review of the academic literature reveals that possible reasons for the AfD's appeal in the East are well-researched and established, and they seem to be connected to the matter of "unfinished" unification. An explanation that has been presented in the literature is that the population in Eastern Länder suffers from economic and cultural grievances such as physical and material insecurity (Rensmann 2019, 39), disillusionment with the new democratic and capitalist system, and a sense of loss or devaluation of identity (Yoder 2020, 42-43). These aspects are regarded as contributing to the AfD's appeal in East Germany. Based on its success in the East of Germany, it intriguing to uncover whether AfD employs a different strategy in the East, such as mobilising Eastern grievances. Surprisingly, the AfD's communication style on a comparative level between East and West has received little scholarly attention so far. The research question that derives from this is: *do the communication strategies and rhetoric of the Alternative für Deutschland differ between East and West German federal states?* To shed more light on this question, a discourse analysis of state election party programmes and campaign speeches will compare the AfD's approach in East and West Germany. This analysis of the AfD's regional strategy offers a novel angle of investigation into the party's unequal success because there has not yet been a systematic comparison of this kind. Based on the results of the analysis, it can be concluded that there are regional differences in terms of the AfD's communication. These differences are especially visible in terms of references to the past. The East German chapters make extensive negative references to the GDR past and the legacy of reunification. These references bolster a shared Eastern narrative and identity, reinforce a divide, and represent the party as a defender of Eastern interests.

This thesis will proceed as follows. A review of the literature discusses various aspects of the unfinished German reunification and drivers for the success of the AfD and finally establishes the relevance of the research question. The chosen methodology and research design, including a discourse analysis of party programmes and speeches are be presented and

justified. The results of the discourse analysis are be presented and discussed, followed by concluding remarks on the analysis and reflections on the research as a whole.

2. Literature Review

The two themes of the academic literature that are relevant to this thesis are the seemingly incomplete German reunification process and the explanations for the rise of the AfD. This literature review reveals that many scholars regard German reunification as incomplete and point out persisting imbalances in terms of the economic situation, attitudes towards democracy, or voting behaviour. These factors seem to also play a role in explaining the rise of the AfD and why it primarily attracts voters in East Germany, making the two themes deeply intertwined. The literature review identifies numerous explanations for the AfD's success and uncovers that, while its communication seems to play a crucial role, it has not yet been studied extensively, particularly against the background of the enduring East-West divide.

The Legacy of German Reunification: Political Divide, Memory, and Identity

Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the debate about the state of unification has not lost momentum. Several authors argue that the process of German reunification is incomplete or that differences between the East and the West persist (e.g., Miethe 2019; Leggewie 2020; Reiser and Reiter 2022). Leggewie (2020, 51), for instance, argues that differences between East and West Germany endure because the model of the West was imposed on the East, leaving East Germans disregarded. Ther (2020, 36) argues that the way in which Germany was reunified highlights a power asymmetry because, in his perception, there was no unification of two equal parts but merely an accession of the five new Eastern Länder, which he refers to as an "enlargement of West Germany." Heider (2019, 1462) highlights that due to the abrupt nature of the reunification process, the economic and demographic consequences for East Germany are exceptionally severe.

The economic and demographic differences that result have numerous implications. For instance, the East has lower productivity-levels and a lower number of top earners (Leggewie 2020, 53). Moreover, the average monthly income in West Germany between 2010 and 2017 was 2.653 euros, whereas in the East it amounted to 2.047 euros (Krause 2019, 833). Thus, a significant income gap persists between East and West Germany. The demographic implications manifest themselves in a decrease in the Eastern working population, which creates labour shortages (Leggewie 2020, 54). In the post-reunification period until 2015, the East German population declined by more than 11%, or about 2 million people (Heider 2019, 1461). Individuals who migrate from East to West Germany are often younger, better educated, and earn higher wages, than those remaining in the East (Melzer 2013, 425). The East German

population has aged due to declining birth rates, emigration, and little external immigration (Krause 2019, 830). Affected areas that are characterised by a declining population and weak economy have been termed "shrinking cities" (Bernt 2009). Hence, economic differences manifested themselves in lower wages, providing an incentive for East-West migration, which negatively affects many Eastern regions in terms of demography or productivity.

Apart from economic and demographic differences, there seem to be political divides and long-standing distinct voting patterns between East and West. In fact, East-West differences regarding political culture and satisfaction with democracy have been identified by Pickel and Pickel (2023). They argue that these differences stem from a combination of feelings of disadvantage and lack of recognition. Thus, according to Pickel and Pickel (2023, 19), differences in terms of political support stem from feelings of being treated unfairly in comparison to West Germans. Moreover, recent election results fuel the debate about a "profoundly 'divided' voting behaviour between East and West," according to Reiser and Reiter (2022, 1), however, these differences date far back.

Indeed, reunification changed the established party system via the entry of the post-Communist Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) (Elff and Rossteutscher 2011, 108). The PDS originates from the SED, the founding and ruling party of the GDR, which was dissolved and transformed into the PDS. Elff and Rossteutscher (2011, 108) argue that after reunification, the PDS gained its votes from East German voters who felt nostalgic towards the GDR and who felt represented as East Germans by the party. Similarly, Thomeczek (2023, 5) highlights that the PDS framed the East-West divide in a populist way, combined criticism of West German elites with East German people-centrism, and succeeded in appealing to the "losers of reunification." Due to its difficulty in gaining votes in the West, however, some researchers refer to the PDS as a type of "Lega-Ost" (Thomeczek 2023, 5). In 2007, the PDS merged with the West German Electoral Alternative for Labour and Social Justice to form Die Linke. Today, Die Linke is "generally more well-established in East Germany," according to Thomeczek (2023, 2) and it is debated, how closely today's Die Linke remains linked to its Socialist predecessor (Decker 2023). Rensmann (2019, 46) argues that Die Linke uses its legacy to claim to give a voice to Eastern interests and to mobilise Eastern identity. Thomeczek's (2023) analysis shows that Die Linke takes different political positions across German federal states and thus exemplifies variation within the same party at the subnational level (p. 13). Thus, political differences, distinct voting patterns, and attempts by certain parties to appeal to the Eastern population have existed since reunification, and the PDS, followed by Die Linke, have served as the 'voice of the East.'

Based on the premise that Germany remains internally divided, researchers also investigate issues of memory and identity. Hildebrandt and Trüdinger (2021, 147) focus on regional identity and highlight the relevance of regional attachment in helping people deal with the complexities and uncertainties of globalisation such as the erosion of national sovereignty, increasing immigration, social inequality, or cultural change. Strong regional identities, however, also serve as a potential breeding ground for exclusionary attitudes (p. 147). Similarly, Terlouw (2012, 709) argues that regional identities have strong mobilising power. Hildebrandt's and Trüdinger's (2021) research on regional identification in Germany shows that East Germans generally have a strong identification with their federal state, which slightly exceeds the level of identification in West Germany (p. 148). Moreover, Hildebrandt and Trüdinger (2021, 148) establish a relationship between regional identity and exclusionary attitudes towards foreigners. For Eastern Germany, they find a correspondence between stronger identification with the former GDR and with the federal states and a higher level of disapproval of foreigners. Thus, the strong regional identity of Eastern Germany can provide stability but also the potential for exclusionary attitudes.

Another facet of Eastern identity is the cultural phenomenon known as *Ostlagie* or "nostalgia for the East" (Straughn 2021, 11), which seems to persist among parts of the Eastern population. *Ostalgie* refers to the resistance to the present Western cultural and economic dominance while looking nostalgically at the past of the Socialist East (Godeanu-Kenworthy 2011, 162). It emerged as part of a widespread reevaluation of the GDR's history (Enns 2007, 475). According to Straughn (2021, 23), *Ostalgie* is a response to socioeconomic discontent, a residue of political socialization in the GDR, or a reaction to discrimination and negative stereotyping. Jozwiak and Mermann (2006, 783) add that *Ostalgie* emerged because East Germans experienced a pressure of assimilation that conflicted with their desire to retain elements of their social and cultural identity. In addition, they frame it as a "socio-cultural expression of longing for home, as well as an effort to partially reclaim what has been lost or taken away" (Jozwiak and Mermann 2006, 783). One of the main criticisms of *Ostalgie* is that it can provide a means to avoid questions of responsibility and accountability in relation to a burdened GDR past (Berdahl 1999, 205). Enns (2007, 476) also states that because *Ostalgie* is often associated with popular culture and commercial products, it appears to fail to engage with history and instead idealises the past. Additionally, Straughn (2007, 106) notes that within 'the East' there is also fragmentation in terms of national identity and collective belonging, meaning that there is no collective memory or identity that unites former GDR citizens *as such* or distinguishes them from West German citizens. That shows that feelings of *Ostalgie* cannot be

presupposed for every East German citizen. Therefore, feelings of nostalgia for the GDR seem to exist among parts of the population, which appear to be fuelled by discontent and a perceived loss of identity.

As a result, the review of the literature thus far has revealed, that Germany remains divided in terms of economics, demography, politics, and identity. These differences manifest themselves in feelings of alienation, discontent, and unfairness. For instance, Leggewie (2020, 56) identifies distinct emotional attitudes in the East. People have the subjective perception that their situation worsens and are more pessimistic about the future than in the West. As a result, feelings of alienation or being second-class citizens are widespread. Thus, the "unfinished" reunification seems to directly affect the circumstances, livelihoods, and sentiments of the Eastern population. In conjunction with this, Rädel (2019, 37) states that a possible implication of these differences and discontents is, that several actors on the political right might try to "conquer the discursive and geographic space in East Germany" by "exploiting the specific East German need for identity and historiography" (Rädel 2019, 37). The AfD seems to be one of these actors that potentially steps into this "space", which is why the party will be examined in the following.

The Rise and (Unequal) Success of the AfD

Thus far, scholarly research regarding the AfD has largely focused on its programmatic character, ideological development, and radicalisation. Subsequently, the AfD has been characterised as "right-wing populist" (Berbuir et al. 2015; Lewandowsky et al. 2016; Lees 2018), "Eurosceptic" (Arzheimer 2015; Lees 2018), or "nativist" (Olsen 2018). Interestingly, the party has undergone remarkable programmatic changes since its establishment in 2013. In 2015, for instance, Arzheimer (2015) classified the AfD as neither populist nor far-right. An analysis of its Euroscepticism shows that initially, the party employed a contingent and limited contestation of the EU that can be classified as "soft Euroscepticism." From 2015 onwards, Eurosceptic claims became embedded in a more populist discourse and critical attitudes towards the political system (Lees 2018, 304-305). Similarly, Olsen (2018, 78) states that the AfD turned from an anti-EU party with relatively conventional stances regarding other issues, including immigration, into a "populist radical right party." In this regard, Lees (2018, 279) argues that the party gained success *because* of its radicalisation and not despite it. In line with this, Rensmann (2018, 57) assumes that the radicalisation has not diminished but strengthened the AfD's appeal. Hence, the AfD has drastically shifted its profile from a single-issue anti-Euro party to embracing anti-immigration attitudes and populism. Apart from its ideological

transformation, another central aspect that has received considerable attention is the question of why the AfD succeeded in establishing itself in the German party system and the related question of what explains the regional differences in electoral results between the 'old' federal states of the West and the 'new' federal states that constituted the GDR until 1990.

Regarding the success of right-wing populist parties in general, Weisskircher (2020, 615) notes that cultural values, more specifically negative attitudes toward immigration, have long served as a key explanation for their success, while other factors, such as economic insecurity or dissatisfaction with representation, are often regarded as secondary. However, some authors also try to combine multiple angles. Eatwell and Goodwin (2018, 21-23) identify the four Ds of distrust (in representative politics), destruction (of traditional understandings of the national community), (socioeconomic) deprivation, and (partisan) dealignment. Moreover, Gidron and Hall (2020), regard populism as a problem of social integration. They assume that support for populist parties arises from deep feelings of discontent that are rooted in feelings of social marginalisation (Gidron and Hall 2020, 1028). Halikiopoulou (2019, 36) captures that the rise of populism is driven by popular discontent, which is aggravated by external triggers including immigration and globalisation, and translates voting for challenger parties, such as the AfD. Thus, various reasons for the rise of right-wing populist parties are identified in the literature, such as negative attitudes towards immigration, economic insecurity, dissatisfaction with democracy, or distrust.

In the literature that particularly investigates the AfD's success in the East, most explanations similarly refer to feelings of disillusionment and frustration among citizens, in addition to economic grievances and negative attitudes towards immigrants. Generally, dissatisfaction that stems from several sources seem to be key to explaining the AfD's success. According to Weisskircher (2019, 620), one of the reasons for dissatisfaction is the fact that East Germans are underrepresented in political elites but also in top positions in business, in the media, the military, or in academia. As a result, they do not feel recognised, which causes dissatisfaction with mainstream parties. Yoder's (2020, 42-43) argument follows a similar logic, highlighting feelings of disillusionment with the new democratic and capitalist system as well as a sense of loss and devaluation of GDR identity as fuelling frustration with mainstream parties. This frustration with mainstream parties, which is reinforced due to the mentioned circumstances in the East, can be seen as an explanation for the AfD's success.

In addition, economic factors are relevant in explaining the AfD's appeal. After reunification, the Eastern part of Germany underwent a drastic economic transformation. The area experienced high levels of deindustrialisation and privatisation. It became integrated into

the welfare state and received investment in infrastructure, but economic convergence has not yet been achieved (Weisskircher 2020, 617-618). Unemployment in the East, for instance, reached levels of up to 20% in the early 2000s (Weisskircher 2020, 617). The persisting economic gaps are assumed to produce a sense of being "left behind" in the East, which in turn reduces trust in liberal democracy's institutions and representatives (Rensmann 2019, 42). Similarly, Lees (2018, 303) points out that AfD voters feel economically distressed. Likewise, Pesthy et al. (2021), point out that discontent about the fact that living conditions are still not aligned, despite being promised, causes anti-elite aptitudes. However, economic anxiety as an explaining factor is challenged by Halikiopoulou (2019, 41), who argues that AfD voters do not fit into the typical profile of blue-collar workers or economically deprived groups. Consequently, economic reasons for the AfD's success are highlighted by numerous scholars, while this argument has also been challenged.

The literature highlights levels of anti-immigration attitudes as another driver of the AfD's success. Based on lower exposure to immigration in the closed GDR society, Yoder (2020, 41) argues that voters in the East have "relatively weaker attachments to cosmopolitan, multicultural, post-national culture and identity." According to Yoder (2020, 41), this can lead to a demand for policies that restrict immigration, which the AfD supplies. Weisskircher (2020, 619) argues that the Eastern middle-aged and elderly population has had fewer intercultural experiences, because the GDR was relatively culturally homogenous, which often translates into more negative attitudes towards migration. Moreover, a national-exclusivist legacy of understanding of the political community can reinforce the perceived distance to the more multicultural West, according to Rensmann (2019, 40). In line with this, Pesthy et al. (2021, 76) explain that the currently low migrant density in the East increases perceptions of a cultural threat posed by migration. This indicates that not the actual numbers of immigrants, but the attitudes and perceived threats encourage voting for the AfD, which is in line with the analysis of Stockemer (2016). Subsequently, scholars agree that negative attitudes towards contribute to the AfD's success.

Apart from more negative attitudes towards migration in the East compared to the West, differences in nativism and populism among Eastern voters serve as another driver. Pesthy et al. (2021, 80) find higher levels of populism and nativism in the East, especially for the older population, which they connect to the increased success of the AfD in the East. The authors hypothesise that former GDR citizens might be more populist and nativist because their idea of democracy is less aligned with the ideal of liberal representative democracy and they are less familiar with a multicultural society (Pesthy et al. 2021, 80). These aspects align with the

argument that older East German citizens have a different understanding of democracy based on their historical experiences (e.g., Rensmann 2019; Yoder 2020; Weisskircher 2020). To conclude this section, contextual factors, and residues of reunification, such as general dissatisfaction, economic inequalities and grievances, distinct perceptions of democracy, and negative attitudes towards immigrants, have been identified as contextual factors that contribute to the AfD's success, especially in East Germany.

Apart from societal factors that contribute to the AfD's appeal, its communication and rhetoric seem important as well. Accordingly, Halikiopoulou (2019, 37) argues that to understand the rise of populism, it is necessary to focus on how right-wing populists make their message appeal to voters. In this regard, research has identified that the AfD's communication and (populist) rhetoric seem to play a central role. As Gannuscio (2019, 112-115) highlights, the AfD uses language as a crucial tool for "propagandistic persuasion," making its persuasive power undisputable. Concerning the AfD's communication, Berbuir et al. (2015, 156) identify the populist features of an anti-establishment attitude, protest character, demands for the alleged truth, as well as a grassroots appeal. Another strategy that has been identified is taboo breaking in the media (Grönegras and De Cleen 2022). Berbuir et al. (2015, 173), moreover, state that the AfD utilises the discourse of "Politikverdrossenheit" (political apathy) and criticises the "parliamentarism" in Germany, which displays an anti-establishment attitude. Moreover, the party's communication is characterised by the rejection of multiculturalism, political correctness, and non-heteronormative lifestyles (Berbuir et al. 2015, 165). Additionally, Halikiopoulou (2019) identifies the use of civic nationalist rhetoric as central to the AfD's communication. She argues that the party utilises civic nationalist rhetoric to appeal to broader sections of society (p. 37). More specifically, this means that the AfD employs a nationalism that is centred around cultural threats posed by "the other" whose values differ from "ours" (Halikopoulou 2019, 41). Hence, focussing on the AfD's communication reveals that it generally serves a populist, anti-establishment, and nationalist rhetoric.

Additionally, the rhetoric of representation seems to play a crucial role. To illustrate, Yoder (2020, 39) argues that the AfD successfully stepped into a representation gap in the East. In her analysis of the 2016 manifesto, she identifies that the AfD focuses on identifying problems and criticising the current German political leadership. The AfD presents itself as a lone voice against depoliticisation and the 'There Is No Alternative' discourse (also called TINA-argument) (Yoder 2020, 48). Moreover, the manifesto supplies protest rhetoric about returning power to the people. Similar representative claims are also identified in the analysis of Heinisch and Werner (2019). Their analysis of the AfD's manifesto for the 2017 national

elections reveals that the party claims to represent a strong national people whose sovereignty and preservation are central (Heinisch and Werner 2019, 481). In the manifesto, the party also claims to represent citizens without migration backgrounds, and more specifically, pensioners, families, and the rural population (Heinisch and Werner 2019, 483). Thus, the representation of those who are 'left behind' also seems to play a central role in the party's strategy.

Related to this, representation of East German identity, specifically, seems to be an additional relevant component of the AfD's communication. Rensmann (2019), for instance, argues that the AfD uses the discourse of East German identity to reinforce a separation between East and West (p. 44) and mobilises Eastern grievances (p. 46). Moreover, based on his analysis of campaign slogans, he argues that the slogans focus on fostering and mobilising an Eastern identity (Rensmann 2019, 47). In addition, Richardson-Little et al. (2022) investigate how the AfD engages with the public memory of the East German past. Their analysis of tweets about the East German Uprising (1953), the construction (1961) and fall (1989) of the Berlin Wall, and German reunification (1990) shows that the AfD tries to re-shape memory culture to celebrate national greatness rather than acknowledging mistakes (Richardson-Little et al. 2022, 1361). They conclude that the AfD contests the mainly consensual approach to public remembrance within the political mainstream (p. 1361). As a result, evidence for appeals to East German identity and memory has been found, but research in this regard remains rather limited to this day.

Research Gap: A Regional Comparison of the AfD's Communication

The literature review has shown that the two phenomena of unfinished reunification and the Alternative for Germany's success in East German Länder seem to be connected. The economic grievances and political differences which seem to persist in East Germany due to its historical legacy, are regarded as drivers for voting challenger parties such as the AfD by several authors (e.g., Rensmann 2019; Weisskircher 2020; Yoder 2020). Apart from the AfD's thematic attractiveness, for instance, e.g., the anti-immigration agenda, the role of communication has been highlighted in the literature (e.g., Berbuir et al.; Halikopoulou 2019). Some authors point towards attempts by the party to represent Eastern identity and history (e.g., Rensmann 2019; Richardson-Little et al. 2022), but the evidence in this regard remains limited. Hence, a systematic analysis of *regional differences* in the AfD's communication is currently missing. As it seems that due to the historical legacy of Germany, different grievances exist in the East and the West, it is intriguing to investigate whether these contextual differences translate into different communication strategies that target distinct voter demands. The research question

that derives from this and that this thesis aims to answer is as follows: *Do the communication strategies and rhetoric of the Alternative for Germany differ between East and West German federal states?* To answer this question, the most recent election manifestos as well as campaign speeches of a selection of federal states will be analysed based on aspects that derive from the literature review.

3. Research Design and Methodology

It has been established that the AfD is significantly more successful in the East of Germany than in the West. Various explanations for this have been presented, and issues that appear to be connected to this are the seemingly incomplete reunification of Germany and economic and social grievances that persist among the Eastern population. Based on this, this thesis aims to assess whether the AfD mobilises these grievances differently in its communication in East German federal states than in West German states. To identify differences in the strategies used by the AfD in West German federal states in comparison to East German federal states, a discourse analysis of state election party programmes and of campaign speeches will be conducted, the theoretical embedding of which will be laid out in the following. Subsequently, the source selection will be elaborated and justified.

Discourse Analysis and Political Rhetoric

Discourse analysis includes a range of approaches across different disciplines (Taylor 2013, 1). In its most basic sense, it refers to "the analysis of language in use" or the investigation of what language is used for (Brown and Yule 1983, 1). Similarly, Taylor (2013, 7) refers to discourse analysis as "the close study of language and language use as evidence of aspects of society and social life." Moreover, Taylor (2013, 10) points out that in this regard, language is seen as a system that forms meanings which are connected to society. Thus, the social and societal aspects of language play a crucial role here. As Machin and Mayr (2012, 4) state, language is a means of social construction which both shapes and is shaped by society. For politics, language matters because political activity is inseparable from language use (Chilton 2004, 6). *Party discourse* can be defined as a combination of stylistic, rhetorical, and ideological elements (Stockemer and Barisione 2017, 2). It has been argued that changes to a party's discourse can help to attract support (Stockemer and Barisione 2017, 2), which is why analysing the political discourse that parties employ can be fruitful.

As mentioned, rhetoric is a relevant element of party discourse. In this context, it can be defined as "speech or writing intended to be effective and influence people" (Oxford Dictionary n.d.). Rhetoric has a long tradition, and since the times of Aristotle, people have been interested in the art of persuasion in public contexts (Machin and Mayr 2012, 163). Political rhetoric, more specifically, entails the "use and role of persuasion in the public sphere and the political process" (Feldman 2020, 1). It includes appeals to reason as well as appeals to emotions and is employed for instance in speeches, press conferences, manifestos, or posters (Feldman 2020,

1-2). Analysing rhetorical tropes matters because metaphors, for instance, can have ideological significance and affect how we think about and understand the world (Machin and Mayr 2021, 164). This again highlights the interconnectedness of language and society and reveals that we can analyse language to make sense of societal phenomena.

The present research attempts to investigate the language use of the AfD at the Länder level to see whether a difference in employed strategies can be identified in a regional comparison between federal states in the West and the East. The analysis aims to identify whether different topics are stressed in general and whether particular references to Eastern grievances or the historical legacy of the former GDR territories are employed to appeal to the diverse electorates.

Source Selection

To allow for an in-depth analysis, two types of sources have been selected: party manifestos and campaign speeches. Analysing these source types in combination enables to examine more content overall and allows to identify how the written manifesto translates into campaign speeches that are delivered to the electorate. Due to the limited scope of this research, not all 16 federal states can be analysed. Instead, the three states each from West and East Germany with the highest election results of the AfD in the most recent state elections have been selected. For West Germany these are Bavaria, Lower Saxony, and Hesse. The selected Eastern states are Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia. This selection also broadly covers different geographic areas within the two regions. The time frame of the most recent elections spans from 2018 to 2022, which constitutes a suitable period to analyse because it covers the period after the AfD's major national breakthrough in 2017. The 2018 Hesse elections mark the point at which the party succeeded to enter in the parliaments of all Länder.

Party manifestos are routinely employed in party research, according to Harmel (2018, 230). They provide information about which issues and populations are most relevant to the desired electoral outcome of a party (Harmel 2018, 230). Eder et al. (2017, 76-77) identify three campaign-related functions of party manifestos, which include the provision of a compendium of valid party positions, streamlining the campaign, and serving as campaign material. Some of the literature argues that voters do not read manifestos. However, Heinisch and Werner (2019, 480) state that there is no systematic empirical evidence that this is the case. Moreover, manifestos serve as the basis for campaigning, in which the content of manifestos is communicated to the public (Heinisch and Werner 2019, 480). Manifestos thus provide a useful overview of which issues a party prioritises and how it wants to be perceived by the public. The

selected AfD's party manifestos are similar in length (80-100 pages) and have been accessed via the websites of the representation at the Länder-level, where they are publicly available.

In addition to the manifestos for the most recent federal elections, campaign speeches from the same election year have been selected to complement the analysis. For each federal state, the main campaign speech of the leading candidate of the AfD state chapter has been chosen. Usually, these speeches are delivered as the final highlight of the election campaign, shortly before the state elections. They are given at public AfD electoral campaign events in which party members and supporters, the general public, and press representatives are present. In many cases, opposition protests are also on site. The speeches have been accessed in video form via YouTube and have been manually transcribed to facilitate the analysis. The length of the speeches varies from 25 to 40 minutes. The in-depth analysis of these two types of sources will allow for a detailed comparison of the issues addressed and the rhetorical strategies employed by the AfD across different federal states in Germany.

Approach

The literature review serves as an empirical base to derive the aspects of comparison for the analysis. Different grievances of the East German population have been identified, which informed the choice of aspects to assess whether the manifestos or speeches provide certain appeals to these grievances. Moreover, topics that seem to mobilise votes for the AfD such as Eurosceptic attitudes or migration, have been incorporated. The aspects of comparison are as follows: i. framing of democracy; ii. national identity; iii. regional (including federal state or East/ West) identity; iv. migration; v. socioeconomic aspects and rural areas; vi. Euroscepticism; vii. the (GDR) past and legacy of reunification. Special attention will be paid to how these issues are rhetorically communicated. The analysis will compare the sources within each region and, most importantly, between the two regions of Germany to assess whether remarkable differences can be identified between the Länder of the East and of the West.

4. Analysis

The aim of this research is to examine whether the AfD uses different communication strategies in East German Länder as compared to West German Länder, specifically, whether the AfD mobilises specific grievances of the Eastern population. To gain an understanding of this, the party manifestos and campaign speeches for the most recent state election of Hesse, Lower Saxony, and Bavaria, as representing West Germany and Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia as representing East Germany, will be analysed. For the party manifestos, special attention will be paid to how discourse around national and regional/ federal state identity is framed, the framing of democracy and migration, socioeconomic aspects and rural areas, Euroscepticism as well as references to German history. These aspects have been derived from the literature as aspects that may mobilise AfD voters. Moreover, attention will be paid to striking rhetorical choices. As the thematic focus of the speeches' content slightly differs from the party manifestos, the analysis of the speeches additionally focuses on the portrayal of the established parties but pays less attention to some other issues that are stressed less in the speeches, such as Euroscepticism. The following section presents the results, first focussing on the party manifestos, and subsequently on the campaign speeches. For clarity, the results of each aspect of the analysis have been summarised in tables (Tables 1-11) that follow the corresponding written section.

Länder Party Manifestos for State Elections

Firstly, there is variation regarding the way the party manifestos are introduced. The programmes from Brandenburg and Thüringen begin with a personal preamble accompanied by large images of the leading candidates. These personal preambles give the party and the campaign a face and seem to be an attempt to create a personal relationship between the party figures and the potential voters. Saxony and Bavaria also make use of preambles that speak in the name of the party and directly address the voters, but they are not written in the name of the leading candidate. The Hessian programme does not include a preamble. The attempt to create a sense of community in the preambles is showcased by expressions such as "us Thuringians" or "we as Bavarians" that also appeal to the regional identity, which will be discussed in more detail later. Thus, especially the Eastern chapters make use of personal preambles to address the electorate.

To begin with, the framing of democracy is similar in all analysed cases. Democracy is displayed as damaged or threatened by the politics of the established parties. To illustrate, the current German democracy is characterised as "unfinished" (AfD Hessen 2018, 7), in "rapid

decay," or "acutely endangered" (AfD Bayern, preamble). Similarly, the programme from Lower Saxony states that democracy and sovereignty are jeopardised by the current politics (AfD Niedersachsen 2022, 71). The portrayal of democracy is often connected to the 'failure' of the established parties, who are portrayed as acting unconstitutionally (AfD Saxony 2019, 10), having caused damage, and not acting in the interest of the people (AfD Brandenburg 2019, 8). The AfD Bavaria calls the current Bavarian government a "rule of injustice" (p. 30) that is abusing its power, is corrupt, and manipulates the political education of society, which is why the AfD stands for a "democratic restart" (AfD Bayern 2018, 9). It also displays the AfD as the only democratic force that wants to restore the rule of law (p. 30). The Thuringian party programme makes explicit reference to the GDR in claiming that the current democracy is losing its essential participatory and representative elements, which will lead to a "German Democratic Republic 2.0" (AfD Thüringen 2019, 7). The AfD Thuringia thus uses a negative reference to the GDR past on the first page of the main part of the party programme, which is striking. All party programmes, furthermore, include calls for direct democracy, especially at the regional level. So overall, all regional chapters of the AfD frame democracy as under decay because of the mismanagement of the established parties. Thuringia stands out for drawing negative parallels between current politics and the GDR dictatorship. Moreover, a strong anti-establishment discourse unifies the programmes.

Table 1. Results Framing of Democracy.

	AfD Chapter	**Framing of Democracy**
West	Bavaria	Rapidly deteriorating, significantly at risk
	Hesse	Incomplete, not fully developed
	Lower Saxony	Jeopardised by current politics
East	Brandenburg	Flawed due to established parties' failure
	Saxony	Undermined by the established parties
	Thuringia	Losing its participatory and representative elements, negative comparison with GDR

The portrayal of national identity is also relatively similar across all analysed Länder; however, the extent to which it is emphasised differs. Generally, it is presented as coherent but threatened by 'the other.' German identity is broadly defined in connection to Christianity, for instance by referring to Christian (family) values (AfD Hessen 2018, 31) or a "common Christian-Occidental culture" (Brandenburg 2019, 5). The programmes refer to 'our' culture and identity and thus create a sense of community, which is harshly contrasted with the elements that are not part of 'our' culture or threaten it. Islam is portrayed as incompatible with the Charter of Human Rights and as not being part of "our" identity in the Thuringian manifesto (p. 38). Hence, this constitutes the strategy of othering. Moreover, the programme of Lower Saxony refers to the German *Leitkultur* (leading culture), which implies the superiority and general applicability of 'the' one German culture. In this context the programme also speaks for 'the people' by stating that "many Germans are helpless and speechless because of the loss of tradition and societal deconstruction" (AfD Niedersachsen 2022, 61). Here, the AfD Lower Saxony clearly tries to represent the people and employs a populist discourse. The programme of Brandenburg explicitly points out that German cultural identity needs to be protected against the proponents of multiculturalism (AfD Brandenburg 2019, 5). Moreover, AfD Lower Saxony states that Germany suffers from a loss of tradition and societal deconstruction (p. 61). Overall, German culture and identity are generally defined in terms of Christianity and are displayed as coherent and shared by all Germans but threatened by foreign influences from "the other." Moreover, a clear populist discourse that contrasts 'us' with the threatening 'other' can be identified. Hence a sense of shared national identity that is endangered is reinforced.

Table 2. Results Framing of National Identity.

	AfD Chapter	Framing of National Identity
West	Bavaria	Connected to Christianity, common Christian-Occidental culture
	Hesse	Christianity, Christian (family) values
	Lower Saxony	Emphasis on German "Leitkultur", loss of tradition
East	Brandenburg	German cultural identity needs protection against proponents of multiculturalism
	Saxony	Coherent and shared culture, threatened by foreign influences

	Thuringia	Coherent and shared culture, incompatible with Islam

The identity of the federal state or regional identity is more strongly emphasised than the national identity in the party programmes. The AfD attempts to highlight the uniqueness and sometimes even the superiority of the federal states in all analysed manifestos. In Hesse's programme, the cultural sovereignty of the Land is emphasised, and "ideological targets" supported by subsidies from the national level or the EU are rejected (p. 86). Lower Saxony is displayed as a "cradle of the German nation" and an important cultural space in Northern Europe (AfD Niedersachsen 2022, 61). The metaphor "regional anchors" that give feelings of security highlights the need to preserve local and regional traditions and culture (AfD Niedersachsen 2022, 61). Moreover, reference is made to Lower Saxony's heritage, coming from princedoms, bishoprics, Hanseatic cities, and free peasant towns, which needs to be restored and preserved (p. 61). Furthermore, the regional identities of Oldenburg, Freesia, and the Wendland region are specifically addressed (p. 61). The Bavarian programme speaks of "Bavarian pride," tradition, and consciousness of the uniqueness of Bavarian culture. Moreover, Bavaria is pictured as a "way of life" and the homeland of the Bavarians (AfD Bayern 2018, preamble). Hence, regional identity and uniqueness are strongly emphasised in the West German programmes and a patriotic attitude is clearly communicated.

In the Eastern Länder, similar strong appeals to regional identity can be recognised. Firstly, the programme of Thuringia makes a striking comparison to West Germany. It is stated that the AfD wants to preserve Thuringia as an appealing homeland instead of letting it become a "multi-religious and multi-ethnic melting pot" like Western Germany under the leadership of "hyper-moral know-alls" (AfD Thüringen 2019, 6). This contrasts West Germany negatively with the East and reinforces a sense of division. Moreover, the need to support local traditions is emphasised (p. 30). In the manifesto from Brandenburg, reference to a "sovereign Brandenburg" is made (AfD Brandenburg 2019, 7). Moreover, the need to preserve Brandenburg's traditions such as clothing, songs, poetry, fairy tales, festivities, and rituals is stressed (p. 37). Here as well, the importance of preserving the traditions of the local Sorbian and Wendish minorities is stressed (p. 37). In the programme of Saxon, the emphasis on Saxon culture and traditions is especially highlighted. Saxony is portrayed as "lovable" and "rich in tradition" and as a "proud, family-friendly, and secure" home (AfD Sachsen 2019, 7). It is stated that the Saxons are open-minded but also highly value and want to preserve their own identity (p. 9). Moreover, Saxony is portrayed as having one of the "most meaningful cultural spheres in Germany," and Saxony's world-famous and unique theatres and orchestras are praised (p.

37). Also in the Saxon program, the importance of regional minorities, namely the Sorbian culture, is stressed (p. 38). Overall, a strong emphasis on regional identity, culture, traditions, and cultural heritage can be seen across all party programmes. In one of the Eastern Länder, the situation is even contrasted with the allegedly negative and distinct situation of multiculturalism in West Germany. This reveals that local representation plays a central role in the programmes. Moreover, elements of a discourse that reinforces an East-West distinction can be identified.

Table 3. Results Framing of Regional Identity.

	AfD Chapter	Framing of Regional Identity
East	Brandenburg	Stresses need to preserve Brandenburg's traditions and minority cultures
	Saxony	Saxony as a lovable, rich in tradition, proud, secure home
	Thuringia	Stresses importance of supporting local traditions and preserving Thuringia's regional identity; negative contrast to multicultural West
West	Bavaria	Bavaria as a way of life, homeland of the Bavarians, emphasis on its cultural contributions
	Hesse	Emphasises cultural sovereignty of the Land, rejects "ideological targets" from national and EU subsidies
	Lower-Saxony	Lower Saxony as a cradle of the German nation

Unsurprisingly, migration is portrayed negatively and as a threat across all party programmes. The negative discourse around migration is usually accompanied by hostility towards Islam. The AfD Hesse states, for instance, that illegal immigration is a threat to peace, cultural identity, and economic stability (AfD Hessen 2018, 36). Moreover, it claims that "uncontrolled mass immigration harmed social peace and divided society" (p. 46). In Lower-Saxony's manifesto, migration is interestingly the 15th chapter and covers two pages only, which might signal a lower level of priority for the issue. In this chapter, migration is blamed for causing housing shortages (AfD Niedersachsen 2022, 26) and the financial burden of illegal immigration for Lower Saxony is stressed (p. 71). The programme uses the catchphrase

"Niedersachsen ist kein Einwanderungsland" (Lower-Saxony is no immigration country) to express hostility towards immigration. Interestingly, the original phrase "Deutschland ist kein Einwanderungsland" (Germany is no immigration country) dates far back and was part of the Administrative Regulation on the Nationality Act of 1913 (Meier-Braun and Weber 2017, 14). Moreover, the 1982 coalition agreement between the CDU and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) stated the same phrase (Bundesministerium des Innern n.d., 22). In 2015, former Chancellor Angela Merkel famously declared "Deutschland ist ein Einwanderungsland" (Germany *is* an immigration country). Thus, a well-known and debated phrase is adopted in line with the anti-immigration ideology of the AfD and is presented in contrast to the prominent statement by Merkel. Subsequently, the use of this phrase denies Germanys status as a country of immigration and expresses opposition to the immigration policies of mainstream parties. Moreover, programme of the Bavarian AfD, makes negative references to Islam in the context of immigration. It is stated that "Islam is not part of Bavaria," but its spread is a threat to peace, rule of law, norms, and cultural identity (AfD Bavaria 2018, 19), which can be seen as othering again. Subsequently, immigration is consistently framed negatively across all Western federal states, in one case, this is also connected to Islam.

The narrative that is created around migration in the programmes of the Eastern chapters of the AfD is similar. The AfD Brandenburg frames migration as economically unfeasible and as prone to conflict (p. 10). Moreover, the problems of increased criminality, terrorism in the streets, ethnic and religious conflicts, disregard of security bodies and state authorities, and attacks towards Christians and Jews are associated with immigration (p. 58). Here as well immigration is linked with Islam, which is explicitly associated with terrorism (p. 49). Similarly, the AfD Saxony expresses that political Islam is "a totalitarian ideology which is hostile towards our culture and not compatible with the German constitution" (AfD Sachsen 2019, 34), which also implies othering. In line with the previous claims, the programme from Thuringia states that the "above average criminality of migrants erodes our safety" (AfD Thüringen 2019, 12). Rhetorically striking is the reference to "alleged refugees" by the AfD Saxony (2019, 44) which denies the status and need for protection of refugees. Overall, the AfD serves a negative discourse around migration in all federal states, creating a sense of threat and a clear "us versus them" narrative. Regardless of the generally lower levels of immigration in the Eastern federal states (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung 2022), the same negative discourse as in the West is used.

Table 4. Results Framing of Migration.

AfD Chapter	Framing of Migration
East	
Bavaria	Links migration to Islam and associates it with the spread of threats to peace, rule of law, norms and cultural identity
Hesse	Illegal immigration as a threat to peace, cultural identity, and economic stability
Lower Saxony	Migration is blamed for causing housing shortages and financial burden to the state
West	
Brandenburg	Migration as economically unfeasible, prone to conflict, associated with crime and terrorism
Saxony	Links migration to Islam, labels political Islam as a totalitarian ideology hostile to German culture and incompatible with the constitution
Thuringia	Highlights above-average criminality of migrants and erosion of state safety

The references to rural areas across the party programmes reveal that the AfD aims at bolstering the regions that feel left behind in the East as well as in the West. The literature, however, stresses feelings of being left behind particularly for East German regions (e.g., Rensmann 2019, 42), but the AfD uses this strategy in both parts of Germany. To illustrate, all analysed programmes advocate support for structurally weak areas in terms of infrastructure, services, and employment. Moreover, countering demographic change and emigration to cities are prioritised, which are problems that the literature identifies for the East (e.g., Heider 2019; Krause 2019; Leggewie 2020). However, appeals to neglected rural areas and their population display no major regional differences between East and West Germany, which differs from the comparison regarding economic issues.

Concerning socioeconomic issues, an interesting regional difference can be observed because it seems that greater appeals to economic grievances and inequalities are made by the East German chapters of the AfD, particularly Brandenburg and Saxony. In Bavaria, the AfD advocates the abolishment of inheritance taxes (AfD Bayern 2018, 39), a policy that arguably

benefits the wealthier population,[1] and the AfD Lower Saxony stresses the importance of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (AfD Niedersachsen 2011, 22), whereas there is a much stronger emphasis on the economically vulnerable population in the programme of the Eastern states Brandenburg and Saxony. Here, it is stressed that the AfD wants to fight poverty and the persisting discrepancies in terms of wealth, inheritance, and ownership between East and West (AfD Brandenburg 2019, 18). It is also stressed that 30 years after reunification, wages in Brandenburg are still below the average of the West (p.18). The AfD Brandenburg declares that Brandenburg's workers work equally hard as their West German colleagues but receive lower wages (p. 19). The AfD Saxony demands the alignment of pensions in East and West, the recognition of pension claims from GDR supplementary pension schemes, and an end to discrimination against divorced GDR women (AfD Sachsen 2019, 43). These are clear examples of appeals to specific East German economic grievances by the chapters of AfD Brandenburg and Saxony. Thuringia differs from the other Eastern Länder in the sense that the discourse around economic issues resembles that of the Western states more. Here, support for SMEs and start-ups is demanded, as is the reduction of taxes and levies (AfD Thüringen 2019, 39), making it more similar to the programmes of the West.

Table 5. Results Framing of Socioeconomic Issues.

	AfD Chapter	**Framing of Socioeconomic Issues**
West	Bavaria	Advocates abolishment of inheritance taxes
	Hesse	Support for SMEs and giving a strong voice to the middle class
	Lower Saxony	Stresses the importance of SMEs in the region
East	Brandenburg	Emphasises the fight against poverty and persistent wealth disparities between East and West Germany
	Saxony	Calls for pension alignment between East and West Germany; fights against discrimination against divorced GDR women concerning pensions

[1] There are important equity arguments for inheritance taxes. See, for instance, Piketty, Thomas, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman. 2013. *Rethinking Capital and Wealth Taxation*.

| | Thuringia | Stresses support for SMEs; reduction of taxes and levies |

The degree to which Eurosceptic discourse is articulated varies between the individual federal states, but no clear East-West divide can be observed. While the AfD Saxony offers the most extensive critique of the EU and the AfD Lower Saxony and Thuringia dedicate whole chapters to European politics, there is significantly less emphasis paid to the issue by the Bavarian branch of the AfD. The Hesse delegation dedicates most of its critique to the policies of the European Central Bank (ECB), criticising, that from Frankfurt, of all places, the principle of national responsibility for economic action is disregarded and the free price formation of the Euro is prevented (AfD Hessen 2018, 50). The AfD Lower Saxony entangles its critique of the EU with the thematic areas it usually caters to. Hence, it criticises the loss of national sovereignty, the EU bureaucracy (p. 20, 34), and the monetary policy of the ECB (p. 79). Moreover, the rejection of the Green Deal is emphasised by the catchphrase "The Green Deal is a bad deal." This is an example of the use of a clear and simple message to convey a message. In the case of Saxony, the "natural" Saxon and German identity is contrasted with the "artificial" European identity (AfD Sachsen 2019, 7). The AfD Saxony also urges more sovereignty for Saxony and criticises that EU-managed subsidies as causing vast administrative costs and violating the principle of subsidiarity (AfD Sachsen 2019, 11). Moreover, Schengen is displayed as violating Saxony's security needs. Similarly, AfD Thuringia criticises bureaucracy and "over-regulation" of the EU (p. 39) and claims that EU policies are untransparent (p. 14). Hence, the degree to which Eurosceptic discourses are employed differs, but the regional chapters of the AfD succeed in framing the EU as disadvantageous for Germany as a whole as well as for the Länder specifically.

Table 6. Results Eurosceptic Discourse.

	AfD Chapter	**Eurosceptic Discourse**
West	Bavaria	Critique of Schengen and EU environmental policy
	Hesse	Critique of ECB and its policies: disregard for national responsibility for economic action
	Lower Saxony	Critique of loss of sovereignty, EU bureaucracy; opposition to ECB monetary policy; rejection of Green Deal

East	Brandenburg	Critique targets Common Agricultural Policy and Paris Agreement
	Saxony	Extensive critique: EU identity as artificial; loss of sovereignty; violation of subsidiarity; Schengen as a threat to security; against monetary and banking union; want to re-gain control over agricultural subsidies
	Thuringia	Critique of bureaucracy and lack of transparency; ideological constraints and over-regulation

An aspect that generates particularly interesting results and differences is the way the German past is referred to, because different historical eras are stressed across the Länder. East German representatives provide references to the GDR past, while in the West, other eras, such as the Weimar Republic or Prussia, are stressed. To begin with, the Bavarian programme does not make extensive references to the past but merely emphasises the period of Enlightenment and Humanism as important in the context of education (AfD Bayern 2018, 48). The programme for Lower Saxony stresses the need to preserve East Prussian cultural goods and the cultural heritage of (pre-WWII) Eastern territories (AfD Niedersachsen 2022, 61). Hesse's programme demands the same but additionally includes the preservation of the intellectual and cultural heritage of East Germany, thereby referring to the GDR (AfD Hessen 2018, 88). The AfD Brandenburg makes extensive references to Prussian heritage. As Prussia emerged from the *Kurfürstentum* (electorate) of Brandenburg, thus there is a contextual reason for this reference. According to the programme, Brandenburg-Prussia embodies the values of humbleness, discipline, progressiveness, punctuality, and frugalness, which are internationally valued virtues and an important part of the national identity (AfD Brandenburg 2019, 4). Prussia during the Weimar Republic is displayed as a "bulwark of democracy," a defender against Communist and National Socialist forces, and a role model for the AfD Brandenburg's current politics (p. 7). Whether the people of Brandenburg identify with the extensive references to Prussian heritage and values, is questionable, however. Interestingly, the Brandenburg programme exclusively focuses on this period, instead of referring to the GDR legacy that also characterises the region.

The GDR and the legacy of reunification, in contrast, are stressed by the AfD in Saxony and Thuringia. Here, it is stated that the CDU has abandoned the values of November 1989

(AfD Sachsen 2019, 10). This refers to the values of freedom and democracy that were embraced during reunification. Moreover, it is requested to publicly display GDR art that is kept in archives (p. 10). The programme of Thuringia negatively refers to the GDR. Here, it is written that today's practices of constitutional protection (Verfasungsschutz) remind many people of the GDR Ministry for State Security (p. 18). Thus, elements of romanticising the GDR past or appeals to *Ostalgie* that are highlighted as existing among the East German population (e.g., Jozwiak and Mermann 2006; Straughn 2021) are not employed by the AfD. Instead, a negative reference is made to the surveillance in the GDR, and the values of resistance to the regime that were embraced during the protests that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall are stressed. Even though these references are negative, East German citizens who share the experience of living under the GDR regime are likely to feel addressed. Thus, the GDR legacy plays a central role in the programmes of Saxony and Thuringia, while the other states stress Prussia or other historical eras.

Table 7. Results References to the Past.

	AfD Chapter	References to the Past
West	Bavaria	Limited references: mentioning of Enlightenment and Humanism
	Hesse	Emphasis on the preservation of the intellectual and cultural heritage of East German territories and GDR
	Lower Saxony	Emphasis on preserving East Prussian cultural goods and cultural heritage of German (pre-WWII) Eastern territories
East	Brandenburg	Extensive references to Prussian heritage; embodying values such as humbleness, discipline, etc.
	Saxony	Emphasis on the legacy of reunification and the values that were embraced in the protest that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall
	Thuringia	Negative reference that links the current practices of constitutional protection to the surveillance in the AfD; stress of resistance values

As a preliminary conclusion of the analysis of the party programmes, there are generally many parallels when comparing the way that key issues such as democracy and migration are framed in the AfD's regional party programmes in East and West Germany. In all federal states, threats to the 'heterogenous' German national culture are highlighted, and the special character of regional culture, traditions, and local minorities is stressed. It seems that in terms of socioeconomic issues, the Eastern chapters of the AfD make stronger reference to inequalities and support for people who are less well-off, while the middle class and policies that potentially rather benefit wealthier people are emphasised in the West. In that sense, it can be seen that especially the economic grievances of the Eastern population are mobilised, for instance, by demanding pension and wage settlement between East and West. In addition, negative references to the GDR past have been identified across the East German AfD party programmes. The second part of the analysis will investigate how the issues are communicated in the party programmes.

Campaign Speeches for State Elections

The analysed speeches were given by the lead candidates for the state elections of the regional associations of the AfD. They have been delivered at public events that were attended by AfD members as well as the general public and media representatives. The analysis is guided by the same aspects of comparison as before, but additional attention will be paid to the representation of the established parties because it has been found that this aspect constitutes a substantial element of the speeches. In addition, not all themes and aspects are covered in every speech. The speech by Roland Magerl from AfD Bavaria particularly deviates from the rest of the speeches as it is not closely connected to the Bavarian party programme. It first lists many allegedly wrong claims about the AfD and refutes them with several examples. The second focus is on preserving the party's and especially the reputation of the speaker and his family. Thus, many of the aspects of comparison are not addressed in this speech, which is why it offers fewer grounds for comparison than the other speeches. Generally, the themes of European Integration, and, to some extent, rural areas are not addressed in the speeches, which is why the analysis must leave these issues aside.

It can be observed that in all speeches there is an extensive emphasis on degrading and delegitimising the established parties and their politicians, which is an aspect that unites all compared speeches. It can be observed that usually the governing parties of the federal state are targeted most, which shows how the regional context shapes the party's discourse. Magerl from AfD Bavaria claims that the CSU government is stuck in its ways, calling it a "government of

standstill." He creates a contrast between the established parties, who, according to him, use false accusations, and claims to use facts to counter these accusations of the AfD being racist, homophobic, or sexist. Marzischewski-Drewes from AfD Lower Saxony calls the CDU a "Fata Morgana" (mirage), suggesting that it has dissolved under the influence of the Greens and Social Democrats and lost its core values. He uses another metaphor, stating that the CDU "bent like a palm tree," which suggests that it has lost its backbone and core values. In the speech for AfD Hesse, Rahn goes one step further and degrades several politicians from other parties by name. harshly attacks Hesse's governing CDU president Bouffier by drawing parallels between a statement in which Bouffier calls the AfD a "bacillus" and the rhetoric of Hitler. Moreover, Rahn equates a statement from CDU politician Kramp-Karrenbauer with antisemitism. Thus, he uses strong and direct attacks to delegitimise the established parties and their politicians. He also highlights the 'decline' of the SPD which lost 40% of its voters. Thus, the West German speakers delegitimise the governing parties who are their strongest rivals.

Similar strategies are employed by the speakers in the East German Länder. Here, Kalbitz (2019) from AfD Brandenburg declares that the government of SPD and Die Linke failed and lied to the people, which is why it needs to be "voted out." Moreover, he contrasts the "arrogant" politicians from the established parties who sit in an "ivory tower," implying that they are detached from reality, with the "ordinary people" who know what it is like to work hard. He disassociates AfD politicians from the elite, stating that they come from "proper jobs," which they gave up to stand up for the people (Kalbitz 2019). Similarly, Urban (2019) accuses the CDU of being a "Conservative zombie party," for whom the retention of power is more important than its ideological positions. He argues that the CDU claims to be conservative but instead pursues left-wing policies. Kalbitz (2019) accuses the SPD of not caring for the ordinary people anymore, but instead for refugees (Kalbitz 2019). In the campaign speech for Thuringia, Höcke refers to the established parties as "cartel-parties" and he criticises that the established parties portray issues such as the Euro or environment as "alternativlos" (without alternatives). Höcke especially targets Die Linke because they are the AfD's main opponent in Thuringia. He, calls Die Linke "ex-SED," thereby referring to the Linke's origin in the ruling party of the GDR, which oversimplifies the party's history and clearly represents it in a negative light. Thus, a strong delegitimising and anti-elite discourse targeted at the established and governing parties can be identified. The AfD denies the traditional core values of these parties and presents itself as the only viable alternative across all analysed federal states.

Moreover, Höcke (2019) uses a rhetorically striking metaphor to refer to the establishment as an "extreme-left wetland" ("linksextremer Sumpf"), which evidently denotes

the established parties since he ascribes radicalism to them and because a wetland or swamp is clearly negatively connotated. He also metaphorically compares the AfD's fight against the established parties with David and Goliath to suggest that the AfD stands alone in its fight against the mighty mainstream parties. To sum up, the discourse around the established parties is framed in a similar way across both compared regions, however, which party is targeted most depends on the current government in the federal state, thus on the regional context.

Table 8. Results Framing of Established Parties.

	AfD Chapter	Targeted Party	Strategy/ Claim
West	Bavaria	CSU (governing)	Critique of lack of progress
	Hesse	Various parties, especially CDU (governing with Greens) and SPD	Degrades several politicians; parallels to antisemitism
	Lower Saxony	CDU (governing with SPD)	Has failed, lost its core values; adopts 'Green' policies
East	Brandenburg	SPD, Die Linke (governing)	Accuses government of failure and lying; contrasts 'ordinary people' with 'arrogant politicians'
	Saxony	CDU (main competitor), SPD	CDU lost core values; SPD does not care for 'ordinary people'
	Thuringia	Die Linke (main competitor in Thuringia) and various parties	Calles them "cartel-parties" and "left-extreme wetland"; criticises TINA discourse

Regional identity plays a key role in the speeches from East Germany, while it is not addressed in the speeches from the West. The discourse of the Eastern speeches includes strong appeals to the distinct East German identity and shared (negative) historical experience. Moreover, the East is contrasted with the West by Eastern AfD politicians. Jörg Urban from AfD Saxony presents Saxony's capital city Dresden as the capital of the good, civic, democratic,

and liberal resistance, by which he refers to the protests that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and positively represents the city's contribution to these protests. Moreover, this appeals to the citizens who have experienced this historical era and creates a sense of a distinct Saxon or Eastern historical memory. Urban (2019) refers to the Saxons as a 'Volk' with a meaningful history. Moreover, he uses numerous quotes by Theodor Fontane that ascribe "cultural superiority" to the Saxons. Höcke expresses pride in Thuringia's culture and history and calls for a "civic-patriotic reform," for which he uses the term "Wende" which is usually used to refer to German reunification as symbolising change and a new beginning. Höcke also stresses Eastern identity by referring to the AfD as the young, vital "Volkspartei" (people's party) of the East, by which he clearly claims Eastern representation. But he also stresses that the AfD will be the "Volkspartei of Germany" in a few years, which shows that there seem to be no aspirations to be a regional party in the East exclusively. Höcke also states that he wants to make Thuringia great which resembles the "Make America Great Again" slogan, which was popularised by Donald Trump and constitutes a populist discourse. Höcke also refers to the situation in West Germany, where, according to him "neighbourhoods are controlled by clans" and "giant groups of migrant youth rule the streets." He thereby suggests that West Germany experiences problems due to migration and exclaims that "we don't want such conditions in Thuringia and in the East!" This contrasts the situations in East and West Germany, reinforces the perceived divide, and creates a sense of threat for the East. Strong appeals to regional identity are also made by Kalbitz. He stresses that Brandenburg is a relevant area, which is "more than the parking lot of Berlin" or a "retreat for the urban population." He also distinguishes the people of the East from the people of the West because people in the East have experienced the 'Wende' (term for reunification, new beginning), and they know how it is to have no freedom based on their experience of the GDR regime. This is, again, a negative reference to the GDR past as well as a comparison that reinforces the East-West divide. In conclusion, the speakers from the East German Länder claim the greatness and uniqueness of the East German people and their culture due to their distinct past experiences during the GDR and the reunification period. Thus, a discourse that clearly appeals to the East German identity and the legacy of the GDR can be identified in the speeches of the East German AfD politicians. Furthermore, it can be concluded that AfD politicians seem to try to claim Eastern representation and to reinforce an East-West distinction concerning culture and historical experience.

Table 9. Results Framing of Regional Identity.

	AfD Chapter	Framing of Regional Identity
West	Bavaria	Not mentioned
	Hesse	Not mentioned
	Lower Saxony	Not mentioned
East	Brandenburg	Stresses relevance of Brandenburg; distinguishes people of East from the West due to GDR experience; negative references to GDR regime
	Saxony	Stresses Saxon identity and history; ascribes 'cultural superiority' to Saxons
	Thuringia	Expresses pride in Thuringia's culture and history; claims Eastern representation; use of term "Wende" to symbolise change; contrasts situation in East with West Germany

National identity, in contrast, seems to play a subordinate role since the degree to which it is stressed in the speeches varies and it is not addressed at all in the speeches for Saxony and Thuringia. Magerl from AfD Bavaria commits himself to patriotism but, apart from that, does not extensively embrace national identity. In the speech for the Hessian AfD chapter, he claims that the German core values that have developed over centuries were destroyed by the Merkel government which was in power at that time. National identity is expressed with a catchphrase by Marzischweski from AfD Lower Saxony. Marzischewski-Drewes (2022) states "peace, freedom, self-determination under black-red-gold, these are the colours of our constitution that applies to everyone." With this phrase, he expresses what he regards as German core values. The phrase also entails a sentiment of national pride. As a result, national identity is less strongly emphasised across the speeches in general. Interestingly, the speeches from Saxony and Thuringia make no explicit references to national identity but instead, strongly focus on regional identity, as mentioned before.

Table 10. Framing of National Identity.

	AfD Chapter	Framing of National Identity
West	Bavaria	Commitment to patriotism but no extensive embracing of national identity

	Hesse	Not mentioned
	Lower Saxony	Reference to German core values and national pride
East	Brandenburg	Not mentioned
	Saxony	Not mentioned
	Thuringia	Brief positive references to the German language and homeland (Muttersprache und Vaterland)

As regards references to the past, significant differences between East and West can be identified. In the Bavarian, Hessian, and Lower Saxonian speeches, there are no references to the German past, whereas references to the past, more specifically the GDR, can be identified in the speeches from East Germany. In the speech from Brandenburg, for instance, this is illustrated by the drawing of parallels between current politics and the GDR. The empty promises of the politicians are compared to the empty shelves in the GDR due to the economy of scarcity (Kalbitz 2019). With this statement, Kalbitz appeals to a specific historical experience that the former citizens of the GDR share, and that the West German population would not identify with. Urban displays the Saxons as having historically acquired a sense of external control, dictated opinions, and lack of freedom. Both are negative references to the experience of the GDR past, and these references also create a sense of shared experience and uniqueness among the citizens of the East. However, Kalbitz (2019) also makes a more positive reference when stating that Perleberg, where he delivers the speech, used to be a relevant economic site in the GDR, but this status has been lost. Additionally, Kalbitz (2019) states that reunification remains incomplete, for instance, because pension levels have not yet been aligned between East and West. With these statements, he likely appeals to the parts of Brandenburg's society that feel left behind since reunification. Hence, he caters to the discourse of unfinished reunification and persisting East-West inequalities. Consequently, evidence for the mobilisation of Eastern historical grievances and of the notion that something has been 'lost', in this case, economic security, can be identified here. Extensive references to the GDR past can also be found in the Thuringian speech by Höcke. He states that 41% of the Thuringians feel like they cannot speak more freely now than during GDR times. He thus draws negative parallels to the surveillance state, suggesting that free speech is similarly limited in today's times. He goes on to criticise the process of reunification, stating that the experiences of East Germans were not

considered and that the elites from the West forced a united Germany. He uses the metaphor "the GDR was swallowed by Germany", which suggests that the two parts of Germany were not on an equal footing during the process of unification (Höcke 2019). He also suggests that unification did not benefit the region by stating that the problems that West Germany faced pre-1990, such as individualism, unemployment, squalor, drugs, parallel societies, and falling educational standards, are now also the problems of Thuringia. Therefore, he clearly separates East and West Germany and creates the impression, that the needs of the East have been disregarded during the process of reunification, which only brought new problems from West to East. As a result, the speeches from the Eastern Länder make extensive (mainly negative) references to the GDR past and the legacy of reunification, which seems to be utilised as a strategy to appeal to voters who share these experiences and to reinforce a distinct Eastern memory and identity.

Table 11. Results References to the Past.

	AfD Chapter	**References to the Past**
West	Bavaria	Not mentioned
	Hesse	Not mentioned
	Lower Saxony	Not mentioned
East	Brandenburg	Parallels between current politics and the GDR; negative references to GDR economy; positive reference to lost economic status; appeals to unfinished reunification discourse
	Saxony	Negative references to GDR experience: control, lack of freedom, dictated opinions
	Thuringia	Negative parallels to GDR surveillance state; criticism of reunification process; suggestion of unequal footing in reunification

To contextualise the analysis, several elements that are highlighted in the literature, such as representative claims (Yoder 2020), or populist and anti-establishment discourse (Berbuir et al. 2015), could be identified in the analysis across all federal states. Differences can be observed regarding claims for regional representation. Moreover, The East German AfD

chapters mobilise the remaining East-West divide and the corresponding grievances of the population. The analysis hence shows that the AfD can be understood as a defender of East German interests, which is a role that has previously been ascribed to Die Linke (Thomeczek 2023).

To illustrate, in all federal states, AfD representatives make appeals to 'the ordinary people' who have been betrayed by 'the elites' from whom the AfD distances itself. Moreover, the established parties, especially the governing ones, are degraded, delegitimised, and blamed for existing problems. Moreover, democracy is consistently portrayed as threatened or damaged by the established parties and immigrants, despite the potentially different understandings of democracy in East and West that are argued by some (e.g., Rensmann 2019; Yoder 2020). The identified nationalist rhetoric that emphasises threats is in line with Halikiopoulou's (2019) findings. Regional identity is stressed in the programmes of all federal states, claiming the uniqueness of regional traditions, identity, and culture. Moreover, a negative discourse around immigration, that involves many elements of othering, can be identified across all federal states. Thus, especially in terms of populist rhetoric, anti-establishment attitudes, framing of democracy, and disapproval of immigration, there is great overlap between the AfD's communication in East and West Germany.

In other areas, the communication style is distinct, mobilising grievances and reinforcing an East-West divide. Moreover, representation demonstrates key differences. In East German federal states, the AfD presents itself as a defender of the GDR cultural heritage and distinct Eastern identity, while acknowledging the historic experience of the population. On the one hand, negative aspects of the GDR, such as surveillance, lack of freedom, and the economy of scarcity are highlighted. On the other hand, the process of reunification is also criticised as having played out disadvantageously for the people in the East. Remaining differences in terms of wages, pensions, and wealth are stressed by the AfD representatives in East Germany. Thus, mobilisation around the issues of unfinished unification as well as Eastern grievances can be identified both in the manifestos and the speeches. Moreover, the AfD seems to claim Eastern representation.

Additionally, the Eastern politicians refer to problems in West Germany, which they partly blame on immigration, and warn that such problems have already been 'imported' to the East, which is a process they want to stop. Thus, they claim differences between East and West Germany in several aspects that include regional problems, identity, and historic experience, as well as economic imbalances. Such a discourse reinforces the perceived East-West divide. In

contrast, the AfD's West German manifestos and speeches do not include any East-West comparisons.

In response to the research question, it can thus be concluded that while there are similarities in terms of a populist discourse that negatively frames migration, democracy, and the established parties, it can also be identified that the AfD's communication in East Germany seems to reinforce the East-West divide and to mobilise East German grievances by making references to the negative experiences people made in the GDR, or the economic difficulties they still face today. This thesis therefore argues that the AfD can be considered a defender of East German culture and identity.

5. Conclusion

This research aimed to identify potential regional differences in the AfD's communication and rhetoric. The in-depth analysis of AfD election manifestos and campaign speeches from six federal states, focussing on aspects such as national and regional identity, socioeconomic aspects, or references to the past. In response to the research question, it can be concluded, that in some regards, the AfD's communication between East and West Germany differs, while there are also parallels. Overall, East and West share a populist and anti-establishment rhetoric, contrasting the 'ordinary' hard-working people with the 'elites' that are detached from reality and do not act in the people's interest. Moreover, democracy is consistently framed as threatened or damaged.

East-West differences can be identified concerning the references to persisting inequalities and the experiences of the GDR and reunification that are made across East German states. Moreover, the AfD mobilises the discourse of unfinished reunification in Eastern federal states and reinforces the sense of division. This shows that the AfD can be understood as a defender of Eastern interests and identity at the federal level a role that has previously been ascribed to Die Linke. While other authors have found similar trends regarding the AfD's mobilisation of Eastern identity (e.g., Rensmann 2019), this analysis sheds additional light on the issue, as a comparison of the party's communication and rhetoric across federal states and focussing on East-West differences, has not yet been made. Generally, this analysis contributes to the current body of research on the AfD and helps to make sense of its unequally spread success. More broadly, these findings imply that East German voters seek solutions for the problems they face and the discontent they perceive, which they believe to receive from the AfD. For the mainstream and governing parties, this signals that they might need to prioritise Eastern interests, such as pension and wage alignments more, in order not to lose more voters to the AfD.

The relatively small scope of the analysis limits the generalisability of the findings, which is why an extension to the remaining federal states would be useful. Berlin is especially intriguing, due to its prior division, and limited success of the AfD. Moreover, extending the analysis to other forms of communication such as social media or plenary speeches, could generate broader evidence. Additionally, the competition with Die Linke regarding Eastern representation offers potential for further inquiry. It remains to be seen, whether the AfD will continue to mainly be successful in the East, or whether it will succeed to expand its support all over Germany. Either way, communication appears to be a key strategy for its success.

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