Islamophobia and Far-Right Extremism Among German Youth

Lili Bazargan and William Edwards

Laguna Beach High School

INTRODUCTION

For over 40 years, East Germany was under Soviet-allied control and operated with a command economy. The Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 led to the reunification of long-divided East and West Germany.

Today, those living in the former East are less satisfied with the performance of Germany's democracy and twice as likely to have favorable attitudes towards the far-right populist party, Alternative for Germany (AfD) (Gramlich). AfD weaponizes citizens' concerns about immigration to achieve political gains (Zhou). The party emboldens its supporters and calls for the preservation of a "pure" Germany (Zhou).

In September 2024, AfD won a historic victory in the eastern state of Thuringia, a victory largely spearheaded by young voters 18-24 years old. While many papers have researched the causes of AfD's rapid rise, this paper will focus on growing far-right sentiments among youth in the former East and how the formation of Young Alternative for Germany (JA) empowers dangerous anti-Muslim attitudes. In a world where social media elevates the voices of the extreme, it is important to recognize the dangers of extremists who capitalize on human fears to further their agendas.
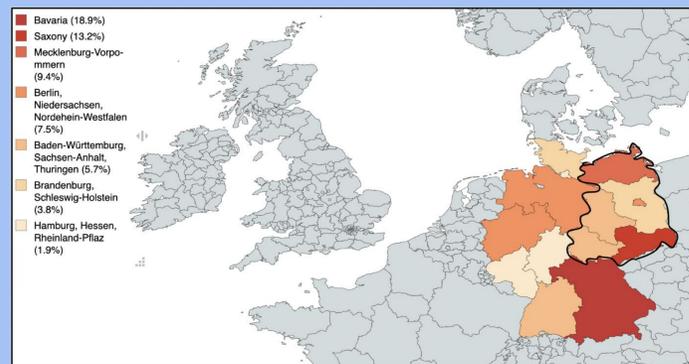
DATA AND FINDINGS

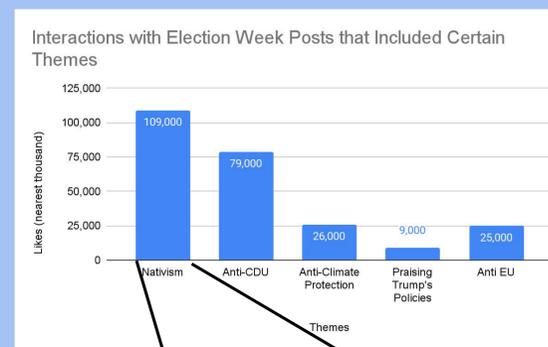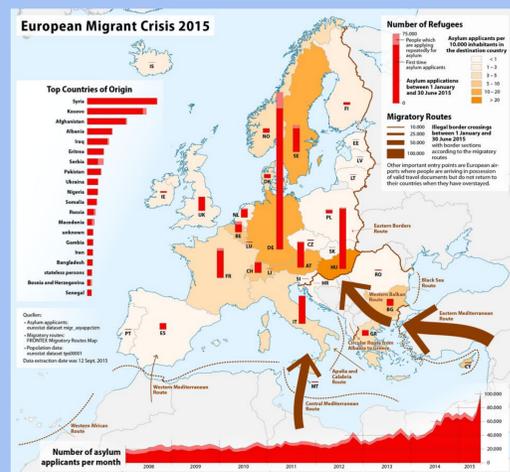Figure 1: Percentage of Young AfD Instagram followers in each German state

Source: Maximilian Dörrbecker, *Data from EuroStat and Frontex*
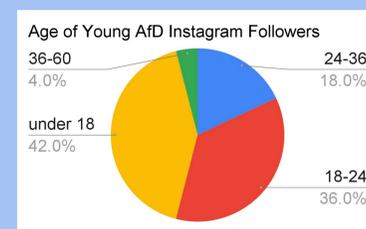
Figure 3: Age of Young AfD instagram followers

Figure 2: Number of likes on AfD Instagram posts from February 16-23, 2025 displayed by theme
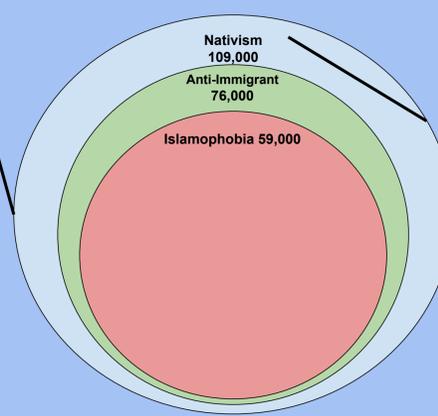

Figure 4: Nativism sub-themes - Number of likes on AfD posts from February 16-23, 2025

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND NEXT STEPS

The high level of support for the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) among young Germans suggests the party's influence is likely to grow in the coming years. In the February 2025 election, the AfD won a constituency in former West Germany for the first time, signaling an expansion beyond its traditional strongholds in the East. The party's nativist rhetoric, particularly its anti-immigrant and Islamophobic themes, has proven effective in mobilizing support.

Young AfD supporters are most concentrated in Bavaria, the primary entry point for many Arab immigrants due to its proximity to key migration routes. During the 2015 European Migration Crisis, significant flows of migrants entered Europe from North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, often passing through Eastern and Southern Europe. Historically, countries that have experienced large-scale immigration have seen a corresponding rise in far-right political movements, such as Giorgia Meloni in Italy and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Given these parallels, Germany may be witnessing a similar trajectory, with implications for both domestic policy and the broader European political landscape.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

I will engage in pure research by collecting qualitative data to gain a better understanding of the role of Islamophobia in encouraging far-right extremism among youth in former East Germany. My research will be observational as I gather qualitative data on the demographics who tend to support Young Alternative for Germany (JA). I will analyze social media platforms to identify the age groups, gender, and regional location of JA supporters. I will select a random sample of followers and gather data until I have 100 data points for gender, 50 for age, and 50 for region.

Additionally, I will track rhetoric and common themes used by AfD to recognize patterns. Looking at Islamophobia, my primary focus will be identifying what percentage of posts/publications focus on Muslim immigrants to gain support. Finally, I will analyze post interactions from AfD's Instagram account in the week leading up to the February 23, 2025 German election. I will recognize themes and number of likes to identify connections between the two.

I will create a Google Form which I will personally fill out to collect my data. The Form will generate a spreadsheet containing my data on follower demographics and rhetoric trends. Demographic categories will include age, gender, and location (if applicable). For rhetoric and imagery analysis, categories will include Islamaphobic rhetoric/imagery, emphasis on the nuclear family, and scapegoating of the "other". The specific data analysis I will be conducting is descriptive using data mining to identify patterns and trends in my data.

DISCUSSION, ANALYSIS, AND EVALUATION

As Junge AfD is not legally affiliated with AfD, their rhetoric is more extreme and they were classified as an extremist group by Germany's domestic intelligence agency in 2023. Their "Remigration Hit" dance video and "Germany Rescuer" video game celebrate mass deportations, invoke Nazi imagery, and encourage supporters to hate non-white individuals. Their messaging focuses on nativist sentiments that use islamophobic anti-immigrant sentiments to encourage support.

Junge AfD Demographics:
- The majority of Junge AfD Instagram followers are male and under 18 years old, possibly due to the slower development of the prefrontal cortex in young men, making them more susceptible to fear-based messaging.
- Junge AfD supporters are widespread across Germany, unlike AfD election results which are mostly concentrated in the East, and 42% are below voting age indicating potential future AfD growth throughout Germany.

AfD Instagram Themes:
- **Most Common Themes:**
  - **Nativism** (59.5% of posts)
    - **80% of nativist posts included anti-immigrant sentiments**
      1. 35% of anti-immigrant posts (16.7% of all posts) included explicit Islamophobia

Visual Patterns in Posts:
- 100% of families depicted followed the nuclear family model (mother, father, child) and all but one post featuring people depicted blonde-haired, blue-eyed individuals, highlighting similarities to imagery from Nazi propaganda in the late 30s.

AfD Instagram Engagement in Week Before February 2025 Election:
- The majority of engagement occurred with posts featuring nativist themes, primarily specifically islamophobic anti-immigrant sentiments.
  - This demonstrates the influence of islamophobia on AfD supporters as the primary reason AfD garnered supporters.

PAPER/ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS