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Holger Marcks & Janina Pawelz

To cite this article: Holger Marcks & Janina Pawelz (2020): From Myths of Victimhood to Fantasies of Violence: How Far-Right Narratives of Imperilment Work, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, DOI: [10.1080/09546553.2020.1788544](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1788544)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1788544>



Published online: 24 Jul 2020.



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# From Myths of Victimhood to Fantasies of Violence: How Far-Right Narratives of Imperilment Work

Holger Marcks  and Janina Pawelz 

Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany

## ABSTRACT

Why is far-right rhetoric so dangerous? In recent years, scholars and policy makers alike have striven to unpack the black box of extremists' online communication and the rise of far-right violence. Particularly the role of social media in spreading hate speech and fostering radicalization has caught a lot of attention; however, there has been little success in pinning down the drivers of violence. Drawing on the concept of dangerous speech, we take a step back from the violent effects of far-right online communication. Instead, we examine its logical functioning to illuminate the upstream processes that constitute hate and legitimize violence. More concretely, we study how far-right narratives employed on social media mobilize emotions that prepare for the acceptance or even use of violence. Analyzing the argumentative structures of two anti-immigration campaigns in Germany, we find a network of narratives where narratives of imperilment—supported by narratives of conspiracy and inequality—converge into a greater story of national threat and awakening. By constructing a situation of collective self-defense, violence becomes a logical option, even if violent action is not explicitly proposed. Counter-narrative efforts should thus not only focus on hate speech but also address the myths of victimhood, which are constitutive of (violent) palingenetic fantasies.



## KEYWORDS

Far right; radicalization; political violence; social media; narratives; hate speech; dangerous speech

## The emotional preparation of violence: An introduction

Immigration and asylum are central topics of the far right's mobilization efforts. The fear and the dehumanization of the alien have always been standout features of the discourses in this part of the political landscape. This is evidenced by the harassment of (alleged) foreigners, which has shaped the image of far-right politics for decades now. Such intimidation is often accompanied by violence against such groups—in Germany, for instance, in the form of attacks on asylum accommodations. Since the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, hate speech and violence have increased sharply in Germany, culminating in a drastic rise in violent assaults on refugees.<sup>1</sup> Remarkably, a large number of people who do not fit the typical far-right profile have participated in this violence. At the same time, the far right is increasingly using refugee policy to justify threats and attacks against political opponents.<sup>2</sup>

Social media plays an important role in this development. Far-right actors are among the most active users of Web 2.0 and benefit particularly from ongoing digitalization.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, many social scientists assume there is a close link between far-right actors' communicative action on social media and the rise in violence against (suspected) foreigners and political opponents.<sup>4</sup> However, it is difficult to weight the impact of individual factors when hatred on the Internet translates into violence on the street, since social media has become an integral part of everyday life under the

**CONTACT** Janina Pawelz  [jpawelz@hotmail.com](mailto:jpawelz@hotmail.com)  Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, Beim Schlump 83, 20144 Hamburg, Germany.

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

postdigital condition.<sup>5</sup> Thus, separating online from offline factors in radicalization processes is an onerous task.

Nevertheless, it is plausible to assume that social media offers a particular opportunity structure for far-right actors, since they use it to drive their agenda forward discursively and to mobilize for violent action.<sup>6</sup> However, while previous research has primarily focused on how the virulence of online hate speech translates into acts of violence, this contribution is devoted to identifying the prerequisites of such a transmission—namely, the discursive processes that constitute hate and legitimize violence. More concretely, it will examine how far-right actors attempt to influence political discourse on social media in order to mobilize emotions that prepare for the acceptance or even use of violence.

To grasp these processes, we concentrate on narratives unfolding in the discourse on migration—at present, the dominant topic of far-right campaigns across the globe and in online expressions of the far right.<sup>7</sup> This focus is useful because narratives not only crystallize political discourse in a popular form but also construct reality in a way that entails the conveyance or activation of emotions. Of particular interest here are narratives that cite a situation of being existentially threatened, like the terrorist attackers in Oslo/Utøya, Christchurch, El Paso, Halle, and Hanau did, for example. We consider these narratives to be critically important, since referring to such a threat is particularly suited to justifying violence. After all, it suggests a need for self-defense and thus a situation, in which everything is permitted, if not necessary. Here, we follow Susan Benesch's plea to shift the focus from hate speech to "dangerous speech"—that is, narratives that are dangerous insofar as they convey the feeling that drastic action has to be taken against one or more particular groups.<sup>8</sup> This theory is the starting point of our contribution, which aims to substantiate how exactly dangerous speech works.

In pursuing this aim, it has to be recognized that the dangers of migration are not simply central to the far right's discourse; they are deeply intertwined with many other topics that are addressed by its political program. For instance, the justification of illiberal politics is closely linked to the alleged threat of migration as well as to the idea that people who allegedly promote and/or cover up the threat have to be punished. Furthermore, the construction of a national threat in far-right discourse always accompanies the notion of a superior culture that has to be resurrected. How narratives of conspiracy and inequality interweave with narratives of imperilment is thus as relevant as how these narratives combine to justify "palingenetic fantasies" that seek to regenerate the nation.<sup>9</sup>

We will explore this narrative interplay by analyzing two far-right campaigns in Germany. The first is the mobilization against the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (short: migration pact), a UN agreement by a number of states committing to a common approach in dealing with migration. Although not legally binding, it became, in 2018, a central mobilization topic for Germany's far right, which depicted it as the end of civilization. In this campaign, the predominant narrative tells of national communities that are threatened by migration in general. The second is the mobilization around the town of Kandel, which was the scene of numerous far-right protests between 2017 and 2018 following the murder of a fifteen-year-old girl by an Afghan refugee. The murder became a well-known symbol in far-right mobilizations and was used to portray immigrants as barbaric and homicidal. In this campaign, the predominant narrative tells of a specific physical threat (to women) presented by so-called migrant violence.

Since both campaigns employ myths of victimhood that serve as an emotional foundation for radical action, the cases promise to offer valuable insights into far-right mobilization techniques that can result in violence. Drawing on a collection of relevant social media data, we examine how the narratives that unfolded during the campaigns are structured and intertwined, particularly in terms of how they create credibility and consistency. The purpose of this contribution is thus to map the functional differentiation of a *narrative network* that far-right actors draw their legitimization of violence from.

## Conceptual access: Constructs and narratives of imperilment

To address the empirical material with the right questions, we first have to clarify which concepts are useful to access the research object. In doing this, we outline why constructs of imperilment are an important

instrument for the far right to prepare extraordinary measures emotionally; explain why they are particularly suited to justifying violence against other groups, and distinguish between two ideal-typical constructs of imperilment utilized by the far right. We then discuss how narratives can convey constructs of imperilment to make violent action seem a logical consequence, illustrate how the logical structure of such narratives of imperilment can be understood by using frame analysis, and theorize how different far-right narratives of imperilment relate to each other and to other (complementary) narratives.

### ***Constructs of imperilment as legitimization of violence***

Justifying illiberal politics and the violent measures necessary to enforce them with constructions of imperilment is at the core of far-right rationality. In classical fascism, for instance, a key mobilization tool was to stir up the idea of a nation in demise that could only be resurrected through purges and uncompromising measures. Roger Griffin once described this rationality as “palingenetic ultranationalism,” highlighting the fact that although fascism may contain other features, fascist dynamics would not be possible without such rationality.<sup>10</sup> One can plausibly argue that this “fascist minimum,” as Griffin also called it, is still a central feature of the far right today, since it undeniably pursues a “politics of fear” to mobilize for its illiberal agenda.<sup>11</sup> In particular, the purported threats posed by migration serve the far right as a discursive hub that guides its political readings in many matters. By looking at diverse social problems through the lens of migration, the far right seems to be almost monothematic.

That far-right propaganda centers on depicting threats and orchestrating myths of victimhood while simultaneously promoting slogans of cultural superiority and physical strength is not necessarily a contradiction. After all, very intense actions such as violence and politics of exclusion are particularly in need of justification if they are to resonate positively.<sup>12</sup> And no scenario makes such extraordinary measures seem more opportune than a state of emergency where survival is at stake and no weakness is allowed. Violent and authoritarian politics thus often entail the dehumanization of one or more groups, since legitimating violence against them is most effective if such groups are perceived to possess a potential for violence that represents an existential threat.<sup>13</sup>

This compensation mechanism, which functions as an inversion of human rights, has been described as an “accusation in the mirror.”<sup>14</sup> It follows the logic of denying a group its right to exist, because it is assumed to endanger other existences. Benesch considers this mechanism, among others, as a key factor in dangerous speech. The concept of dangerous speech, in turn, refers to forms of expression that increase the willingness of a certain audience to endorse or even participate in violence against another group. In this respect, it is particularly “a mortal threat from a disfavored or minority group, which makes violence seem not just acceptable but necessary.”<sup>15</sup> Where the challenge is to ensure one’s own survival, violence ranks as self-defense: actually the only social norm that undisputedly allows one to kill. From this perspective, constructions of imperilment can function as “scripted violence”: even if they do not contain explicit calls for violence, they encourage violence not only by implying its necessity but also by making its use appear to be a heroic act.<sup>16</sup>

In right-wing terrorism, for example, the assumption of an existential threat is a central motive for violent action. The attacker in Oslo and Utøya referred to an endangered white race that had to be saved, as did the attackers in Christchurch, El Paso, Halle and Hanau. They all adhered to the theory of a “great replacement” or “white genocide,” which has become well-established in the far right.<sup>17</sup> This perspective, which is very popular in the U.S. alt-right and the European Identitarian Movement, perpetuates a doomsday scenario that has inflamed radical nationalist movements from its outset. In Germany, for instance, far-right actors speak of a “people’s death” (*Volkstod*)<sup>18</sup> —a term that has been coined by the old fascist movement in Germany.<sup>19</sup> Today, this idea is by no means limited to far-right militants: it gradually has found its way into the public via varying forms, thus becoming a prominent expression of “mainstreamed extremism.”<sup>20</sup> This is shown by vibrant public debates about the “Islamization of the Occident,” the “abolition of Germany,” and the “anxious citizens,” who fear the loss of their culture, increasing crime and violence, or social marginalization. Moreover, those who

have attacked refugee shelters or local politicians have shown that they felt authorized to act because they saw the “people” betrayed and their way of life threatened.

As the variations of debated threats already indicate, it is necessary to distinguish between two ideal types of imperilment constructed by the far right: insecurity and extinction. The former refers to the concrete, physical threat to the individual—for example, through so-called migrant violence (*Ausländergewalt*); the latter describes the abstract, identitarian threat to the community—for example, through so-called superalienation (*Überfremdung*). While the abstract threat does not inevitably give rise to fears of violence (it can manifest itself as a fear of cultural marginalization or the loss of tradition through migration and demographic change), the concrete threat triggers a fear for health and life, for instance, if one feels endangered by allegedly criminal, violent refugees. The question is how these two types of imperilment interplay in the emotional preparation for violence.

### **Narratives of imperilment in the postdigital context**

To illuminate how the two types of imperilment take effect, we analyze how they are applied in the narratives of the far right. In general, narratives are accounts that describe a situation or process in a way that makes certain goals and values seem to be a logical consequence.<sup>21</sup> As such, narratives offer adequate access to the subject of interest, since they represent communicative actions designed to construct reality and to involve the recipients emotionally. In social science, the concept of narratives had long played a subordinate role but recently became more used after being popularized by civil society discourses.<sup>22</sup> While there is no consensual definition of the term, it is convenient for our purpose to understand narratives as a “cohesive and coherent account of events,” telling of actors whose actions “result in questions or conflicts for which answers or resolutions are provided.”<sup>23</sup>

However, with this definition (and other narrative approaches in social movement research as well), it is not clear how the concept of narratives differs from that of frames. This concept, in turn, can be understood as “schemata of interpretation” that actors use to define a situation<sup>24</sup> based on “diagnoses and prognoses” about reality that determine what is perceived as opportune action.<sup>25</sup> Framing involves the selection of certain aspects of life—the perceived reality—bound together in a narrative to “define problems, specify causes, convey moral assessments, and endorse remedies.”<sup>26</sup> The concept of frames thus presents semantics that are similar if not intersecting with the concept of narratives. However, to avoid entering a deeper debate on conceptual differences here,<sup>27</sup> it suffices to note that the tools of frame analysis should be transferable to the analysis of narratives due to this semantic affinity.

For our purpose, the concept of master frames appears to be particularly exploitable, as it describes a generic framework of interpretation that has enough elasticity to integrate broad parts of a spectrum of actors with varying readings of a situation. In a figurative sense, the grand story of a national threat that requires extraordinary measures could thus be classified as the master narrative of the far right.<sup>28</sup> This master narrative, which mirrors the rationality of palingenetic ultranationalism, appears in the far-right spectrum in different forms, with the degree of intensity of the constructed imperilment varying. In the most dramatic account of the threat, the narrative makes the use of violence seem to be the only logical option for action.

Nonetheless, to be credible, narratives should display a certain degree of complexity—that is, they must be multidimensional, pervasive, and comprehensive in content.<sup>29</sup> On the one hand, this does not seem applicable to far-right discourse with its monothematic tendency. On the other hand, it may indicate that a focus on constructs of imperilment, which are geared to distract from other issues and self-contradictions (so the function of “frame amplification”),<sup>30</sup> also requires complementary narratives that support the construction. A situation of self-defense, for instance, is basically much suited to justifying violence; but to unleash this potential the threat must first be conveyed in a credible way. From this perspective, we can speak of a network of narratives in which side stories function as support for the master narrative.

Here, the question arises of how the types of imperilment we have identified relate to each other, as narrative subjects, in such a network. We assume that the discursive mixing of both types enables the far right to lay the emotional groundwork for the abstract threat to the community, which is

constitutive of palingenetic ultranationalism. After all, this latter type of imperilment is only indirectly fearsome, since it concerns—despite all physical tropes—the existence of a collective identity that is not physically tangible and thus less suited to activating self-preservation reflexes. Bolstered by the concrete threat, which is seen in far-right discourse as the epitome of the abstract threat, the latter possibly takes on a tangible form. As such, it may allow for the transfer of the feeling of being physically or even critically threatened—and thus the logic of self-defense—to the collective identity.

In the empirical analysis, we pursue this hypothesis by focusing on two postdigital campaigns of the far right. More concretely, we use frame analysis to investigate how the narratives of imperilment used in these campaigns are argumentatively structured, intertwined with each other, and entangled with other narratives. In our final interpretation of the analytical evaluation, we pay particular regard to the legitimation of violence—not only explicit justifications but also implicit ones in the sense of dangerous speech or scripted violence. The purpose of our interpretation is to enable a better understanding of how far-right narratives function, providing essentials for further considerations on possible counter-narratives.

### Postdigital campaigns of constructing imperilment: Two case studies

In the following part, we present two postdigital campaigns of the far right in the German-language area. We understand campaigns, quite generally, to be cohesive efforts to mobilize on a specific issue, comprised of a series of activities with the intention to achieve a particular goal.<sup>31</sup> The selected campaigns are postdigital insofar as the communicative actions in the digital space are an integral part of real-world politics; although, in this analysis, we focus on how these campaigns manifest themselves digitally. Both campaigns are “typical cases” of far-right narratives of imperilment and thus well suited to a qualitative analysis of how these narratives function.<sup>32</sup> The mobilization against the migration pact is typical of the construction of an abstract threat (extinction), whereas the mobilization around Kandel is typical of the construction of a concrete threat (insecurity). To reconstruct the logical structure of the narratives that convey both constructs, we selected digital propaganda material that is representative of the campaigns, making in sum four instances of each campaign.

For the first campaign, we chose videos of four actors that we identified as nodes—that is, transmitters of online content that significantly shaped far-right discussions on the migration pact. To identify them, a network analysis of interactions on YouTube was necessary since the campaign is a multicentric one that has been concurrently formed by dispersed actors.<sup>33</sup> For the second campaign, which is a concentric one with a local focal point, the group Kandel Is Everywhere (*Kandel ist überall*) obviously qualified as representative since it is almost identical with the campaign. Out of its various propaganda material we chose four videos as well. A summary of all videos’ content will be provided in [Tables 1 and 2](#).

#### *The mobilization against the migration pact*

In December 2018, numerous UN member states agreed on the Global Pact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. Although the pact is not legally binding and highlights national sovereignty, five states (United States, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, and Israel) voted against it, while twelve others abstained (including Austria, Bulgaria, Italy, and Romania). Their decision not to vote for the pact followed controversial public discussions. UN Secretary-General António Guterres later noted that “an insidious campaign tried to drown the [pact] in a flood of lies,” poisoning the debate with “false narratives” that spread “like wildfire through social media.”<sup>34</sup> Far-right organizations, activists, and vloggers did indeed use social media to disseminate information designed to discredit the pact and thus strongly influenced the discourse.<sup>35</sup>

The first example of such far-right voices is Gerhard Wisnewski, a conspiracy theorist who presents himself as professorial and reputable, with almost 40,000 followers on YouTube. On September 7, 2018, he released a video entitled “Global migration pact: The next millions will come!”<sup>36</sup> In the opening scene, it shows a group of black men triumphantly posing with an EU flag. The crowd, which allegedly broke through a Spanish border fence, appears to be out of control and, according to Wisnewski, is “armed with sticks and homemade flamethrowers.” Referring to police sources, he

**Table 1.** Overview of far-right messages in the mobilization against the migration pact.

Propaganda material	Centrality	Concrete threat	Abstract threat	Inequality	Conspiracy	Action proposals
Wisniewski's video	"New, massive migration movements;" "global elimination of democracy"	Violence by migrants with sticks and homemade flamethrowers"	"Land grab;" "assignment of national sovereignty;" states "suppress, persecute, and combat critical voices"	Video sequence with African men seemingly out of control	Mass media conceal pictures of migrants' inrush; politicians want unlimited reception of migrants	Ordering the <i>Expresszeitung</i> (Wisniewski's organ)
Grell's video	"Flood of settlers;" Germany is doomed to extinction	"Most brutal violence by asylum migrants"	"The end of our civilization;" "sovereignty completely surrendered;" "our casket nail"	"Parasites;" "maggots in bacon;" video sequence with African men gesticulating wildly	Press lies about the problem; governments "cart millions upon millions of people here"	Participating in Grell's commentary column; donations; "nail for their casket"
Sellner's video	"Piece of insanity and impudence;" the "most antidemocratic, dangerous, and insidious" thing	NA	"Doom for the European people;" "death sentence against the nation state, its sovereignty, democracy, and its peoples"	NA	Population "betrayed, cheated, and sold" and kept in "ignorance"	Petition; "info war;" "conflagration of enlightenment;" "smash ... their base of power;" not "to be patronized any longer"
AfD's video	Germany will be changed "forever;" millions of migrants "set off for Germany"	Housing shortages, wage decreases, declining education and living standards; "culturally and religiously motivated conflicts"	"Strangers in our own country;" ongoing Islamization; "covert resettlement program"	Extreme overpopulation in Africa; many adults willing to emigrate, reducing the education level of Germany	Public has been excluded; "purposely damaging to our country"	Protests; spreading of leaflets and posters; donating and voting for the party



Table 2. Overview of far-right messages in the mobilization around Kandel.

Propaganda material	Centrality	Concrete threat	Abstract threat	Inequality	Conspiracy	Action proposals
Kandel Is Everywhere website	"Protection and security in Germany" does not exist; "freedom of women and girls is dying"	"Terrible crimes happening across the country," more and more "rape and murder"	"Uncontrolled immigration"	"Immigration from cultures that despise women," "bestial" migrants	Repression by "black-hooded Antifa, ruling cliques in politics, and state media," "organized irresponsibility"	"Force" politicians to change; "effective averting of danger"; not standing back anymore
Baum's video	"As a woman, as a mother, and as a grandmother" concerned about Germany; "what is your children's future worth to you?"	Freedom and security in danger	No "proud nation" anymore	NA	Illegitimate politics	Revive national pride; protest; take a stand; don't keep silent anymore
Mobilization video	Recalling the fate of murdered women	Fear of "sexual humiliation, abuse and violence, rape, and even murder"	"Uncontrolled migration"	Direct relation between violence and other cultures	NA	Protest; reestablishing "protection and security"
Speeches	Commemorating the "dead children," "slaughtered by strangers"	Young women are being slaughtered as a result of "illegal immigration"	Germany became a "country to loot" and "open prison"; "a people without identity will be wiped out"	"Strong knifemen from the Orient and Africa"	Treason by Antifa, feminists, "mendacious press," and politics; women are left to "walk right into a trap"	Standing up against injustice; call to "defend our country"



also claims that only local media reported on this, while the mass media had failed to show the pictures. He then links the armed migrants to the migration pact, which was supposed to “guarantee that migrants can immigrate permanently in a regular manner to other countries by making the destination countries eventually obliged to unlimited reception.” With the pact, Wisniewski argues, “new, massive migration movements” will be set in motion, and the “ancestral populations will not be able to resist against this land grab.” It thus stood for the “assignment of national sovereignty to the future UN superstate, the dissolution of democratic structures, and a consistent strategy to suppress, persecute, and combat critical voices.” In short, it represented the “global elimination of democracy.” Wisniewski underpins his extinction narrative by addressing the feeling that European citizens are politically powerless and eventually recommends that viewers subscribe to his newspaper.

The second example was produced by Hagen Grell, a YouTuber with 85,000 followers who presents himself as down-to-earth and close-to-nature. On September 10, 2018, the vlogger published a video entitled “Köthen and the migration pact—A journey to doom.”<sup>37</sup> The video explains that the pact made further acts of violence by migrants likely. Referring to single incidents of violence and an eyewitness report from Köthen—a place that had witnessed the “most brutal violence by asylum migrants”<sup>38</sup>—it suggests that Germany was doomed to extinction. According to Grell, the UN and the EU “cart millions upon millions of people here and distribute them among us, and we must accept this” so that “sovereignty would be completely surrendered” and “the end of our civilization” would be possible. The pact, which would bring a “flood of settlers,” was thus “our casket nail.” Europe might not be able to survive the stream of migrants described by Grell as “parasites” and “maggots in bacon” with the aim of “skimming money” from the German welfare state. These messages are accompanied with video sequences showing a group of black men gesticulating wildly toward the camera, appearing out of control. Grell also underpins his extinction narrative by addressing the feeling of being noninfluential and lied to by the press. Nevertheless, he suggests that the pact could also be “the nail for *their* casket,” apparently referring to migrants and/or the politicians responsible. At the end, Grell encourages his listeners to express their opinions in the commentary column of the video.

The next example comes from Martin Sellner, who has over 100,000 subscribers on YouTube and 35,000 followers on Telegram. On September 16, 2018, the “poster boy of the modern far right”<sup>39</sup> published a video entitled “Stop the UN migration pact—Not in our name!”<sup>40</sup> Sellner argues that the pact was the “most antidemocratic, dangerous, and insidious” thing he, the cochairperson of the Austrian Identitarian Movement, “has ever seen.” It was the “final blow, the death sentence against the nation state, its sovereignty, democracy, and its peoples.” In short, it “spells doom for the European people.” Furthermore, Sellner, who says he has been “betrayed, cheated, and sold,” claims that the population is kept in “ignorance,” which is “their base of power.” Asserting that he no longer wants to be “patronized,” Sellner argues that it is necessary to “smash” that base and emancipate oneself. He directly addresses the viewers of his video, telling them that “your state” signed the pact “in your name.” He then calls for an “info war,” which would represent a “conflagration of enlightenment”: “Let’s make the pact as well-known as Coca-Cola.” Sellner also presents a petition against the pact, which is the core of the “Stop the migraton pact” (“YouTube”) campaign launched by him.

The final example comes from the Alternative for Germany (AfD). On July 19, 2018, the AfD published a video entitled “AfD faction explains: Global pact for migration.”<sup>41</sup> The video problematizes the change in “political majorities, culturally and religiously motivated conflicts, and the limited capacities of the social systems” the citizens of the host countries had to “accept without complaint.” In another video interview,<sup>42</sup> the party’s cochairperson, Jörg Meuthen, further claims that mass protests would have taken place if the population had known what was being negotiated. The pact was “purposely damaging to our country.” Additionally, the official mobilization video of the AfD predicts that the pact would change Germany “forever,” since it would cause millions of migrants to “set off for Germany.”<sup>43</sup> Underpinned by illustrations of population growth in Africa, which has many “adults willing to emigrate,” the video foretells an intensification of social problems in Germany: “Housing shortages will become worse, wages will decrease even more, educational levels and living standards will decline.” It concludes that the related effects of marginalization and ongoing Islamization would

“make us strangers in our own country.” In other AfD materials, the migration pact has been described as a “covert resettlement program.”<sup>44</sup>

### **The mobilization around Kandel**

After an Afghan refugee murdered his former girlfriend, a fifteen-year-old German, in 2017, the small town of Kandel in Rhineland-Palatinate became a “place of pilgrimage for far-right agitators” for months.<sup>45</sup> Between January 2018 and October 2018 alone, there were thirty-eight demonstrations (protests and counter-protests) in Kandel.<sup>46</sup> The mobilization was supported by initiatives such as the Women’s Alliance Kandel (*Frauenbündnis Kandel*) and Kandel Is Everywhere (*Kandel ist überall*), both of which overlapped far-right structures such as the AfD and the Identitarian Movement. Kandel Is Everywhere—which is the focus of attention here—is present on Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, Instagram, and YouTube, using these channels to articulate calls and positions, on the one hand, and to inform about migrant-related criminality and violent incidents, on the other. In this way, Kandel became a symbol of so-called foreigner violence (*Ausländergewalt*) in the far-right milieu. As such, it was referenced in other antimigration mobilizations—notably, in the far-right call “From Kandel to Berlin: Against the UN migration pact.”<sup>47</sup>

The Kandel Is Everywhere website is particularly representative of the campaign. There one can find calls for demonstrations as well as the *Kandel Manifesto* (*Manifest von Kandel*), which lists ten demands “for the restoration of protection and security in Germany.” Referring to the “bestial” murder in 2017 and so-called foreigner violence, the group claims that there are “terrible crimes happening across the country,” which have “caused too many victims.” It even asserts there is a causal relationship between migration and violence: “Women and girls are [...] increasingly becoming victims of serious crimes such as rape and murder due to uncontrolled immigration from cultures that despise women,” while boys and men are also “increasingly being attacked by migrant groups.” The group says that anyone who criticizes the situation is subjected to insults by “black-hooded Antifa, ruling cliques in politics, and state media.” In turn, Kandel Is Everywhere threatens the politicians held responsible for the “deadly consequences of organized irresponsibility” and the “entirely failed migration policy” that began with Chancellor Angela Merkel’s “arbitrary border opening” by saying: “If the people in charge lack the political will for change, we must force them.” The group urges its audience to not stand back while “the freedom of women and girls is dying,” calling for an “effective averting of danger.” For this purpose, it demands electronic passport controls for all those entering the country, DNA-based age tests for all minor refugees, the immediate closing of the German border, and the immediate deportation of all those who entered Germany illegally, among other measures.

A key figure in the group is Christina Baum, the AfD chairperson in Baden-Wuerttemberg and member of the regional parliament (*Landtag*) there. Addressing her “dear friends” in a video call for demonstrations in Berlin and Kandel—released on February 6, 2018—the qualified dentist says that “as a woman, as a mother, and as a grandmother” she is deeply concerned about Germany.<sup>48</sup> She rhetorically asks the audience what their children’s future is worth to them before postulating: “The homeland, freedom, security, and the future of your children are in danger.” This situation, she argues, was in part down to their own passivity: “We were once a proud nation of men and women fighting for their freedom and security.” It is thus necessary to revive this pride, Baum argues, if one does not want to be accountable for a dark future. Declaring that “the time is right,” she appeals to the audience to join her at the demonstration, to “get up,” to “take a stand” like she does, and not to “keep silent anymore,” “because whoever remains silent is complicit” in an allegedly failed migration policy.

In the official mobilization video for a demonstration in Kandel, released on February 25, 2018,<sup>49</sup> the call for “protection and security” takes center stage. It employs dramatic music, footage of demonstrations, and a female narrator demanding that, “in the future, no woman needs to be afraid in Germany.” In general, German women are portrayed as potential victims who must fear “sexual humiliation, abuse and violence, rape, and even murder” in today’s world. The video directly links such acts of violence with migration and demands: “Our country must finally have secure borders

again to put a stop to uncontrolled migration.” Black-and-white imagery along with a slowly-speaking, thoughtful-sounding narrator are used to underline the seriousness of the issue. In one scene, there is a crowd of demonstrators carrying banners with the smiling, happy faces of three murdered young women. Their photos are captioned with the phrase “Not forgotten.” This emotional moment is then used to call for viewers to attend a demonstration on March 3, 2018.

The video “Demonstration in Kandel on 3/24/2018—Speeches” contains recordings of various speeches delivered at a demonstration in Kandel.<sup>50</sup> All four of the speakers featured present themselves as being deeply concerned about German girls, recalling the fate of the “dead children.” One of these children had been “cruelly slaughtered in public,” directly “here in Kandel.” Explaining that such incidents are “caused by illegal immigration and the dissolution of Germany’s borders,” they argue that “protection and security” is needed but that the “politicians in charge do not listen to us.” That is why people are now willing to “stand up against this new plague called injustice,” for which different groups of people are to blame: counter-protestors (“left-wing thugs called Antifa”), feminists (“our sisters betrayed and sold us out”), the media (“harassment and defamation by the media,” “lying propaganda media,” “system media,” “mendacious press”) and, above all, politicians. One speaker tells the audience that the fifteen-year-old girl murdered in Kandel has “paid the consequences of a drastically failed policy with her life,” accusing the mayor of Kandel of being negligent while “children are slaughtered by strangers.” One speaker claims that there are “strong knifemen from the Orient and Africa,” and that “our unsuspecting, young women” are being left to “walk right into a trap” of them. It is argued that Germany has become not only a “country to loot” (*Beuteland*) but also an “open prison” in which “the poorest people have to compete with strangers for work, housing, and even food”—it is thus “time to defend our country,” because “a people without identity will be wiped out.”

### **Evaluation: The network of narratives of imperilment**

The purpose of the following section is to provide an interpretation of the cases with regard to the argumentative structure of the narratives that appear in the campaigns and how they functionally intertwine. We aim to reconstruct the exact composition of the constructs of imperilment that are conveyed by far-right narratives and act as the emotional groundwork for violent action. Using instruments of frame analysis,<sup>51</sup> we first expose the core of the great story of threat and awakening by breaking down the argumentative connection between the concrete and the abstract threat. We then order the functional relationships between these narratives of imperilment and other (side) stories that also appear in the campaigns.

#### ***The functions of concrete and abstract threats***

In the examined material, we find, as expected, two different narratives of imperilment, which form the core of a greater story of threat and awakening. One narrative tells of the nation’s extinction, expressed, for instance, in the notion that its self-determination will be abolished and its culture replaced as a result of irresponsible politics or even as part of a planned project. This is a variant of a narrative that is currently voluble in the far right, foretelling a “people’s death,” a “great replacement” or even a “white genocide.” It is the main storyline in the mobilization against the migration pact but is also mentioned in the mobilization around Kandel (“a people without identity will be wiped out”).

The extinction narrative is particularly constitutive of palingenetic fantasies. The threat to the national existence suggests a state of emergency, which requires the mobilization of all forces; it is a call for heroes and extraordinary measures. In the campaigns studied, actors spoke of oppression and persecution, of death sentences and casket nails, of a final blow and being doomed—in short, the struggle for survival. This is underlined by language that, as in the case of Sellner, is permeated by war rhetoric and calls for a national exertion. Basically, however, the narrative does not problematize a direct threat to life but the extinction of a culture. This threat is existential only in a metaphorical

sense, since it signifies the impermanence of an “anonymous community” that is imagined by the social construct of a “nation.”<sup>52</sup>

Such an abstract threat can only have an emotional impact where the nation is consolidated as an “emotionally experienced community”<sup>53</sup> and strongly anchored in the individual identity. Thus, the extinction narrative, which is supposed to be an engine of palingenesis, seems to lack emotional momentousness in times of confined nationalism. This is apparent in the forms of mediation far-right actors use to make the abstract threat as credible and as tangible as possible—for example, by making decidedly serious, sometimes pseudoscientific appearances or by citing self-generated statistics and text excerpts. In contrast, the other narrative of imperilment, which problematizes a situation of insecurity, is particularly suitable for conveying emotions, since it tells of a concrete danger to health and life, pointing to very concrete experiences and people.

This insecurity narrative is a commonly used story by the far right, which asserts there is a causal relationship between migration and insecurity, underpinned by reports of criminality, violence, and harassment by foreigners in general and refugees in particular. It often accompanies the notion of a social threat posed by immigrants, purporting they will intensify the competition for jobs and social welfare benefits. This narrative is the central storyline in the mobilization around Kandel, but it also plays an important role throughout the mobilization against the migration pact.

The narrative of the concrete threat is emotionally potent, since it is well suited to referring to tragic destinies (“our dead children,” “our unsuspecting young women”), showcasing emotional consternation (“they do not listen to us”), and presenting oneself as a terrified victim (“little mother who is afraid”). Such stories strike at the heart of the recipient, since they directly address aspects that are critical to survival and convey the feeling that the threat could affect anyone at any time. In the mobilization around Kandel, inciting fears of physical and even lethal violence (“many murders and knife attacks”) is the predominant motive. All the campaign’s elements examined here highlight the alleged danger of becoming a victim of violence by male migrants. Also addressed, although secondary, is the concrete danger of an increased competition “with strangers for work, housing, and food.”

Far-right actors apparently also use the emotional momentousness of concrete threats to make the narrative of an abstract threat resonate more strongly. As observed in the mobilization against the migration pact, the story of a nation in demise is repeatedly underpinned with elements that can be assigned to the narrative of a concrete threat. The scenes in the videos showing uncontrolled and howling crowds, the enumeration of violent incidents committed by migrants, and the combination of migrants and weapons deliberately aim to create a sense of insecurity. The same applies to statements by the AfD claiming that migration will also lead to a displacement in the labor, housing, and education markets. By incorporating sequences into the narrative that enable recipients to identify with the victims of tragic events and/or to promote the notion of becoming victims themselves, the abstract threat becomes more tangible, functioning as a palpable forerunner of extinction.

From this perspective, two narratives of imperilment with different functions form the core for a greater story of threat and awakening. In this interplay, the narrative of the nation’s extinction provides the cognitive groundwork from which the need for palingenetic efforts is deduced. Although this threat is framed as fundamental, it remains abstract, since it is not about human lives but about the *imagination* of a community threatened by “death.” However, by combining it with the other narrative of imperilment, which is about the insecurity individual members of the national community face, the abstract threat turns out to be more concrete: associatively, a situation of collective self-defense is constructed, suggesting that the nation as a whole is physically threatened. Through this combination, the narrative of extinction is given an emotional foundation, which allows palingenetic fantasies to flourish.

### ***Narrative relationships and interdependencies***

Particularly if intense actions (like acts of violence) have to be convincingly justified, “congruence building becomes key to acceptance.”<sup>54</sup> It is therefore of interest how the great story of threat and

awakening creates credibility and consistency,<sup>55</sup> which is utterly important for mobilization efforts. Therefore, we take a closer look at the relationships and interdependencies the narratives of imperilment are embedded in. Here, we can see that both campaigns represent efforts of frame amplification—that is, the strengthening of an interpretative framework centered on a specific problem.<sup>56</sup> Concretely, this means that the threats of migration are framed as the ultimate matter deciding the nation's fate. The campaigns thus blend into the discursive practices of the far right, which focuses almost obsessively on problems of migration and links it to various political issues (crime, media politics, political responsibility, social issues).

Narratives of imperilment diagnose migration as a problem of paramount importance. In doing so, techniques of dramatic storytelling are employed as rhetorical means of exaggeration, for instance. This includes the excessive use of superlatives (“most antidemocratic, dangerous, and insidious”), numerical dramatization (“millions upon millions”), and hyperbolic adjectives and verbs (“bestial,” “slaughtered”). This way, the centrality of the problem is bolstered, creating the impression it is a crucial issue. At once, the monothematic discursive practices are part of the exaggeration: where a problem qualifies as particularly dramatic, it stands to reason that other problems have to be subordinated. From this perspective, frame amplification also serves to bypass possible contradictions that actors may reveal within a broader agenda setting.

To create consistency and cover up contradictions, the actors examined in this study also use gaslighting techniques—which are manipulative ways of storytelling that disorient recipients in their perception of reality, making them dependent on the storyteller's depiction of reality.<sup>57</sup> For instance, the narratives appearing in the campaigns repeatedly diagnose a delusion of the masses, being held in cognitive captivity by false media coverage. This observation is in accordance with the numerous reports on far-right mobilizations, in which the conspiracy narrative of a “mendacious press” is omnipresent. In the campaigns we examined, it has been used mainly to substantiate the highly threatening nature of a certain problem, even though it is perceived and/or depicted differently by large parts of the public. At the same time, the narrative of a corrupt mainstream media helps to disqualify other sources of information than their own as untrustworthy, making it seemingly pointless and naive to attempt to verify the diagnosed problems. As part of the gaslighting technique, it is thus a means to cover up contradictions and to create consistency.

In both campaigns, we also find narratives that diagnose a political conspiracy. Those narratives accuse politicians and opposing movements of pursuing the marginalization of their own community's culture or of being responsible for violent acts like that in Kandel. Such notions of betrayal are, on the one hand, a logical consequence of narratives of imperilment, since they raise the question of why those with political power (and other political forces) do not tackle the alleged threat. On the other hand, they support the narratives of imperilment by suggesting that no relief can be expected from other actors and that their accounts cannot be trusted. Both narratives of conspiracy—one about the media, one about political opponents—therefore contribute to a self-referential system of argumentation, since they help to deflect from the fact that their own claims contradict other available information. Actors can also use them to stage themselves as bearers of truth, while recipients cherish the feeling of having access to knowledge that is being withheld from the others by the media and politicians.<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore, narratives of inequality are also present in the campaigns, albeit in a subtle way. According to those narratives, violence is a direct consequence of migration and refugees, who are portrayed as brutal and immoral. This expresses an assumed civilizational gap, whereby the own community's culture appears to be superior and the foreign culture inferior. This technique of scapegoating, which is common in the far right, primarily has an identity-forming function: by projecting problems onto a scapegoat, the threat assumes a personalized form in whose face the community can recognize itself.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, it serves to ensure consistency in the narratives of imperilment, since they would otherwise lack the necessary dramatics if cultural shifts caused by



migration were not identified as a loss of civilization. Similarly, without the presupposition of such cultural dispositions, individual cases of migrant violence could not be generalized as an epidemic problem.

Taken together, a network of narratives becomes apparent in the campaigns' digital communication, where narratives of conspiracy and inequality argumentatively support narratives of imperilment. These narratives ultimately converge into narratives of palingenesis, telling recipients of the need to rise up and gain new (old) strength. Although narrated rudimentarily, these prognostic narratives outline a solution for the problems diagnosed in other narratives. In doing so, they primarily explicate forms of action that are considered legitimate democratic means (e.g., participation in demonstrations, calls for donation, signing petitions, educational work, etc.). However, in view of the narratives of imperilment that construct a situation of collective self-defense, the calls for resolute action ("force them," "defend our country," "nail in their casket") also suggest that drastic measures are needed. Likewise, the complementary narratives of conspiracy and inequality inform recipients about who poses the threat and who their accomplices are. Whether recipients deduce the "right" palingenetic measures from these suggestions depends on their fantasies. (For an illustration of the narrative interrelations, see Figure 1).

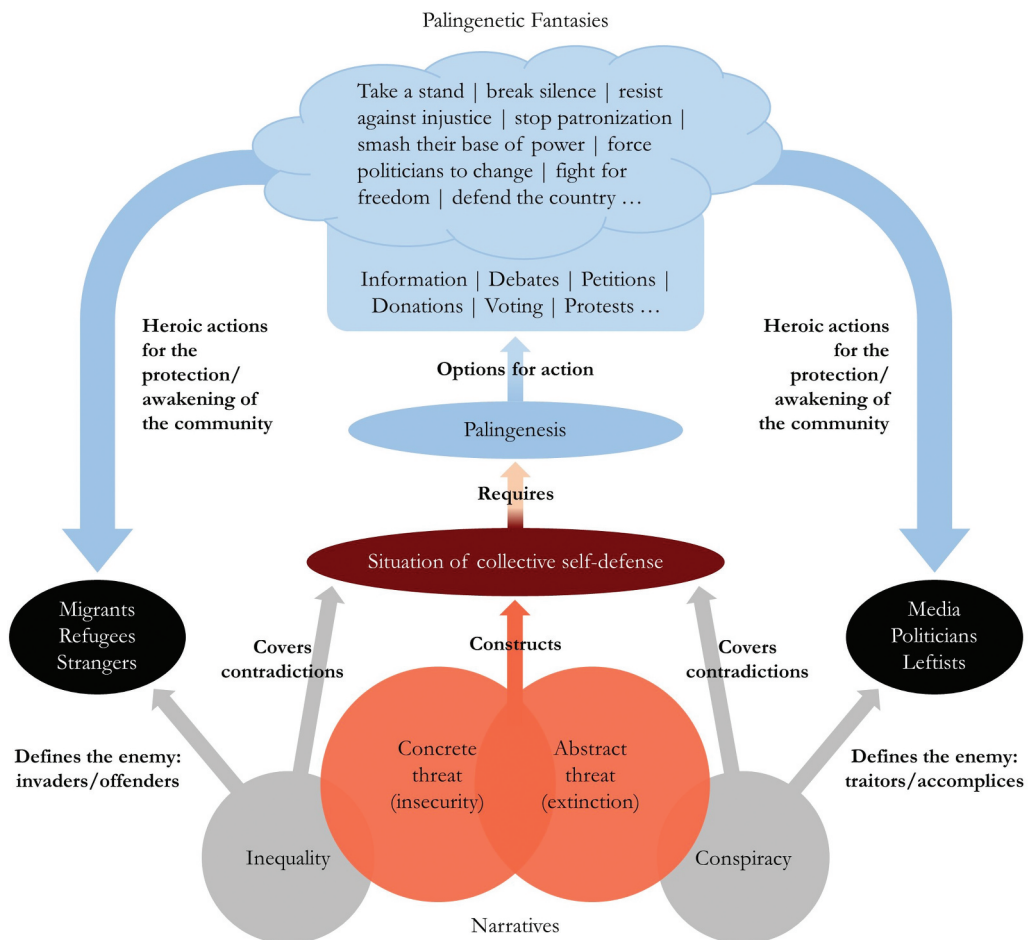


Figure 1. Mapping the narrative network.

## The engine of palingenetic fantasies: A conclusive interpretation

The subjects of this study were two postdigital campaigns of the far right, for whom communicative actions in the digital sphere are an integral part of mobilizations in the offline world. The analysis focused on narratives that appear in both campaigns. In these narratives, the far-right discourse on migration crystallizes in a communicable form of problem diagnoses and solution prognoses. They entail the activation of emotions and can thus encourage actions that are perceived as logical consequences. As a reference point for the analysis, we chose the far-right's great story about a national threat that requires extraordinary measures. This master narrative appears in various compositions in far-right discourse and is particularly influential in the militant spectrum, where it is often used to justify violence.

Our analysis reveals that there are two typologically different constructions of imperilment at the heart of the great story. The first, which is about the extinction of the national community, is the central storyline in the mobilization against the migration pact. It is abstract insofar as it describes the anticipated loss of a culture's significance rather than a physical threat to concrete people. The second construction, which is about the insecurity caused by so-called foreigner violence, is the central storyline in the mobilization around Kandel. It is concrete insofar as it problematizes an everyday threat to health and life. Both campaigns mainly build upon one of the two narratives; however, each campaign also cross-references the other narrative, albeit to different degrees.

In the two campaigns, we find an almost relational entanglement of the narratives, with each complementing the other to evoke the desired awakening. The narrative of the abstract threat serves as the cognitive basis from which the need of a palingenetic exertion is deduced, while the narrative of the concrete threat serves as the emotional groundwork, conveying the feeling of a physical or even mortal threat to the collective identity—and thus the logic of self-defense. Through their entanglement, the abstract threat is subjectivized so that it can be perceived as a personal matter. In this process, both narratives of imperilment are exaggerated by methods of frame amplification, which enable right-wing actors to avoid disputes over other problems and contradictions that surface when actors address more complex coherencies in society.

We also show that complementary narratives of conspiracy and inequality support both narratives of imperilment. They facilitate consistency of the greater story. Conspiracy narratives, for instance, serve to discredit other political and media actors as untrustworthy. By accusing them of knowingly tolerating, covering up, or even promoting the threat, they are presented as part of the problem and disqualified as a source for verifying reality; only those who acknowledge the threat are considered credible. Thus, a self-referential system of argumentation is created—one that is immune to contradictions. Furthermore, narratives of inequality also contribute to consistency by making it seem plausible that demographic changes caused by migration result in a breakdown of civilization and that violence by foreigners is an epidemic problem, not one of individual cases.

Narratives of conspiracy and inequality converge with the narratives of imperilment into narratives of palingenesis. They are sequels of the narratives of imperilment used to construct a situation of collective self-defense, which demands extraordinary measures and the regeneration of strength. Here, a certain dialectic of far-right discourse shows up: by depicting the national collective as the victim, individuals have the chance to be heroes. Where the community is threatened and weak, the brave must find renewed strength and lead the way. This dialectic is the dynamic core of palingenetic ultranationalism, which draws revolutionary animus from constructed myths of victimhood and evokes fantasies of violence.

Nevertheless, narratives of palingenesis remain underdetermined, at least in the context of the campaigns. Where they appear more concrete, the proposed actions primarily seek to problematize migration more publicly and politically (e.g., petitions, donations, demonstrations). In turn, proposals that take aim directly at the alleged sources of the problem remain vague in the narratives but energetically appeal to combative morals. Precisely this indefiniteness bears a dangerous potential, since the narrative of palingenesis demands to be developed further by recipients, with violence



suggested as a logical continuation of the narrative. Although there are no direct calls for violence, the constitutive narratives of imperilment postulate a situation of self-defense, with violence appearing appropriate or even necessary.<sup>60</sup>

The “palingenetic fantasy” finds further sources of inspiration in the complementary narratives. Although the narratives of conspiracy and inequality function primordially as argumentative support for the narratives of imperilment, helping to build consistency, their diagnostic content merges with the defined situation that justifies a need for palingenesis and thus fuels the recipient’s prognostic imagination. The narratives of conspiracy, for instance, include images of inner enemies that are believed to be complicit in instigating the threat. It could be argued that the more emotionalized the threat, the more negative the emotions directed against those who supposedly allow or encourage them. At the same time, politicians’ alleged betrayal suggests a breach of the social contract between the state and citizens, thus further legitimizing actions outside the legally compliant framework. Finally, the assumption that the masses are held cognitively captive through disinformation can result in attacks against political decision makers being perceived as the realization of a (suppressed) will of the people.

The same can be said about the complementary narrative of inequality. As described above, it also primarily supports the narratives of imperilment. At the same time, however, it contains diagnostic information suggesting possible leverage points for palingenetic measures. Particularly the scapegoating of migrants, who are accused of committing bestial cruelties and threatening the community’s existence, makes them legitimate targets of violent resistance against a perceived invasion. This “accusation in a mirror” relativizes migrants’ right to exist and justifies the own community’s brutalities. Moreover, the influence of conspiracy narratives may also strengthen the impulse for violence against migrants, as where the true will of the people is suppressed and ignored by the media and the powerful, xenophobic attacks can be interpreted as the execution of that will.

In sum, the network of far-right narratives analyzed here provides a deeper understanding of how dangerous speech and scripted violence work. Likewise, it shows that examining the connection between far-right propaganda and violent action falls short if analyses focus on hate speech and explicit calls for violence. The acceptance and use of violence is also prepared by emotionalizing narratives that construct a situation of self-defense to stimulate “palingenetic fantasies.” As such, they serve the far-right’s intention to create praxeological moments of ultranationalist community building. The conclusions recipients draw from the narratives are not necessarily of a violent nature; however, violence against migrants and political opponents is at least a logical conclusion that one can draw from the networked narratives, even without it being made an explicit option. If strategies against far-right dynamics are to reach beyond the level of their symptoms, counter-speech efforts have to focus more on the communicative acts leading up to hatred and violence.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This work was supported by the PANDORA research project and funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

## Notes on contributors

*Holger Marcks* is a social scientist, researching at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg as a research associate in the PANDORA project. His focus is on virtual dynamics of right-wing extremism and Islamism, particularly on the nexus of extremist online propaganda and violence.

*Janina Pawelz* is a political scientist, researching on political, collective and urban violence, with a focus on youth. As a researcher at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg she works in the PANDORA project on far-right campaigns of mobilization in the virtual and real world.

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52. See generally Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, UK: Verso, 1983).
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54. Amitav Acharya, “How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism,” *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (2004): 239–275, 239.
55. Cf. Benford and Snow, “Framing Processes,” 619–620.
56. Snow et al., “Frame Alignment Processes,” 469.
57. Cf. Bryant Welch, *State of Confusion: Political Manipulation and the Assault on the American Mind* (New York, NY: Thomas Dunne Books, 2008).
58. On the appeal of conspiracy theories, see generally Jaron Harabam, *“The Truth is Out There”: Conspiracy Culture in an Age of Epistemic Instability* (Rotterdam, Netherlands: Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2017).
59. See generally René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
60. These narratives are also dangerous because, due to their subliminal nature and victim rhetoric, they are neither indictable nor do they appear to be proactively aggressive; they can thus circulate and be picked up more freely in the mainstream.

## ORCID

Holger Marcks  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8967-7039>

Janina Pawelz  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5547-3046>