TECHNISCHE UNIVERSITÄT CHEMNITZ

2: Far Right Meets «Concerned Citizens»: Politicization of Migration in Germany & the Case of Chemnitz

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Introduction

At least since the sudden shift of the refugee routes in 2015 and the concomitant massive arrival of asylum seekers in Germany, migration is by far the most debated issue in Germany. The politicization of migration reached out into all parts of society, leading to societal ruptures, increase of hate speech and aggressive discourses, and the appearance or growth of new political actors, notably on the far right-wing side. Right-wing parties and neo-nazi activists successfully connected the topic of migration and asylum with questions of legitimacy, cultural otherness, belonging and identity, and thus reached a large part of the German society who put the legal and practical support of asylum migration into question and stress the negative consequences of mass-immigration for German society.

The societal ruptures could be clearly observed during the so-called “Chemnitz incident”, referring to a violent and fatal battle among Germans and asylum seekers in the city of Chemnitz in the night of August 26th, which was followed by a series of demonstrations where the extreme right-wing united with ordinary “concerned” citizens in their protest against immigration.

In this blog we will explore how right-wing populist groups used the “Chemnitz incident” to politicize migration and why they were successful at that. In doing so, we incorporate explanatory approaches from communication studies and other social sciences and we will place the events in Chemnitz into the larger context of politicization of migration in Europe. We thus directly refer to the research of CEASEVAL on Patterns of politicization on refugees and policy responses, which will produce a series of country reports on the politicization in Finland, Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, Spain, Italy, Greece and Turkey.
After having started with a review of “THE CHEMNITZ INCIDENT” in Part 1 of this Blog, we continue today with

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Part 2: HOW WAS THE INCIDENT POLITICIZED?

Politicisation of Migration

The term "politicization" is most commonly understood as "an increase in polarisation of opinions, interests or values", which affect "the process of policy formulation" (De Wilde 2011, p. 560). Major components of politicisation are 1) an increase in salience, resulting from societal actors' increasing attention to a specific issue, 2) a diversity of opinions on a specific societal topic, leading to the polarisation of opinions, and 3) an expansion of actors and audiences engaging in the process of opinion formation (De Wilde 2016 et al., p. 4).

In the "Chemnitz case", all three aspects of politicization can be discovered: The "asylum question", is heavily debated since 2015 and is frequently framed by sentiments of insecurity, identity loss, and a debate on fairness and legitimation regarding the public expenditures for asylum seekers who evidently don't (yet) contribute to society. In public discourse, opinions seem to diverge more and more, or, as one of the participants of the Chemnitz dialogues (Freie Presse 06.10.2018) complained, the "core of society", located in-between extreme left-wing or right-wing-positions "get's lost". Also the third aspect of politicization, the expansion of actors and audiences, can be detected in the "Chemnitz case". The appearance of the PEGIDA-movement (which was founded in Saxony's capital, Dresden, in 2014 and also has a large number of supporters in Chemnitz) and the right-wing party "Alternative for Germany/Alternative für Deutschland AfD" (which gained 24,3% % of electoral votes in Chemnitz in the parliamentary elections of 2017), but also the establishment of radical Neonazi-groups like the hooligan group "Kaotic Chemnitz" or the right-wing terrorist group "Revolution Chemnitz", can be counted as new actors. Those actors from the right wing side are apparently well connected, which helped to mobilize large numbers of right wing protesters from all over Germany after the "Chemnitz incident".

What is also new is that parts of the local population, expressing their concern and anti-immigrant sentiments, did not hesitate to join those demonstrations, even though the initiators were known and the Nazi-habitus of hooligan and skinhead groups were clearly visible to everyone. One explanation for this collective behavior is the normalization of right-wing ideologies and discourses, which were brought about by a specific framing of asylum migration since 2015, strongly supported by those news actors who gained political power since then. We will explain the concept of "framing" and its effects in the following section.

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Framing of Migration and the "Other"

Addressing the mutual relations between policy makers, the media and the public, we have to consider how public debates evolve and how different actors promote their specific interests. Framing theory suggests that public actors engage in a discursive contest in order to mobilize support for their argumentation and delegitimize opposing viewpoints. Frames in this context can be defined as interpretive storylines that systematize information, reduce complexity and raise awareness of the issues at stake (Gamson and Modigliani 1987). As frames are used to highlight specific "aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient" in communicative practices, they can play a crucial role in strategically structuring the social world (Entman 1993, p. 52). Also, as Lichtenstein et al. (2017) (referring to Reese 2001) point out, frames are closely related to culturally embedded values, beliefs and ideas and therefore have a high level of persistence over time. Thus, politicization processes, based on communicative action, are contingent in terms of time, place, and actor constellation, and result in different patterns "with respect to the relative strength of salience and polarization in various settings, the specific constellation of actors and audiences, the behavioural manifestation of politicisation and its substantive content" (De Wilde et al. 2016, p. 6).

In many European countries, the arrival of asylum seekers since 2015 caused politicization processes which changed the political landscape. In most of those politicization processes, migration and asylum were embedded in a framing of security, be it on the individual level (fear of personal attacks) or the collective level (fear of larger terrorist attacks by groups of foreigners). Also in Germany, those frames developed and were reinforced by incidents such as the "Silvester Assaults" in Cologne, where a huge number of men, many of them migrants from Maghreb countries, sexually assaulted women in a public space, or cases of murders of women committed by asylum seekers. Even though especially sexual abuse can rather be categorized as a product of gendered power relations than a problem of "cultural otherness", all those single incidents of sexual abuse and violent assault by asylum seekers reinforced a frame that created a vision of the "other" as being a young asylum-seeking Muslim, socialized in a macho-environment and tending to physical violence due to a (culturally embedded) low level of personal frustration.

During the last year, we could observe how the "security" and the "culture" frames were picked up by all kinds of public and political actors, who reinforced the "perceived truth" of this framing by introducing new stereotypes to the public debate. For example, a deputy of the party "Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)", Alice Weidel, introduced the notion of "Messermänner und Kopftuchmädchen" (*knife-men and scarf-girls*) summing up the population

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changes due to asylum migration in Germany during a parliamentary debate. The Minister of Interior, Horst Seehofer (Christian Social Union, CSU), stressed the necessity to carry out border-controls at the German border to Austria due to the "lacking security of the European external border", and thus created a public picture of large, uncontrollable flows of migrants, whom he identified in another talk to be "the core of all problems" ("Migration ist die Mutter aller Probleme" / "*Migration is the mother of all problems"*), formulated as a reaction to the "Chemnitz incidents".

Void in the center

A second explanation for the merge of "ordinary citizens" and right-wing extremists during the demonstrations after the fatal attack in Chemnitz could be the lack of representation, perceived by those citizens who have less polarized opinions. In a discussion event organized by the local newspaper "Freie Presse", a number of participants reflected on the societal shift towards the margins of opinion, which leaves a "void in the center" of society.

> *We are always discussing about groups at the margins, because they are the ones who receive large public attention. But where is the large center of society in Chemnitz?* (Chemnitz resident, male, 43 years)

The dialogue participants mostly referred to the demonstrations which took place after the fatal incident, and which attracted a large number of right wing radical groups, but also left wing actors with radical tendencies. The less politicized citizens, as the following quote puts it, felt lost between those extremes:

> *When during the demonstration people raised their arms for the Hitler salute, some protestors immediately left, the others stayed there. I thought I would find the center of society at the protest concert with 65,000 visitors. But then a speaker appeared who expressed deep rejection of our society.* (Chemnitz resident, male, 40 years)

One of the discussants reacted to this perceived void and organized a demonstration by himself, aiming to attract the "ordinary citizens" who perceive themselves as neither left nor right:

> *That's why I organized my own demonstration at September 6, to show that there is a center of society, which does not feel affiliated to neither of the extreme groups. Unfortunately, there were fewer participants than I hoped. But the approach is that we find our center again. Let's leave the right-wing and left-wing extremists aside, let's just live our democratic principles and thus present a role model.* (Chemnitz resident, male, 43 years)

Some of the discussants also reflected on the large success of the right-wing populistic party AfD during the last elections, and complained the lacking diversity of political approaches

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towards migration and asylum among the ruling parties. Thus, as the following quote suggests, voters may have chosen the AfD for their critical stance towards immigration, as they did not feel represented in this point in any of the other established parties.

> *Those who did not agree with the migration practices that developed during the last years, those who disagreed with this migration politics or maybe preferred an immigration scheme such as the ranking point systems in Australia and Canada, those had no other choice than voting AfD. Where else should they have market their ballot?* (Chemnitz resident, male, 60 years)

Looking at the distribution of AfD voter during the last parliamentary election on 24 September 2017, we can observe huge differences in the voting behavior, notably between the former West and the former East of Germany. We will explore this rupture in our third part of this blog.

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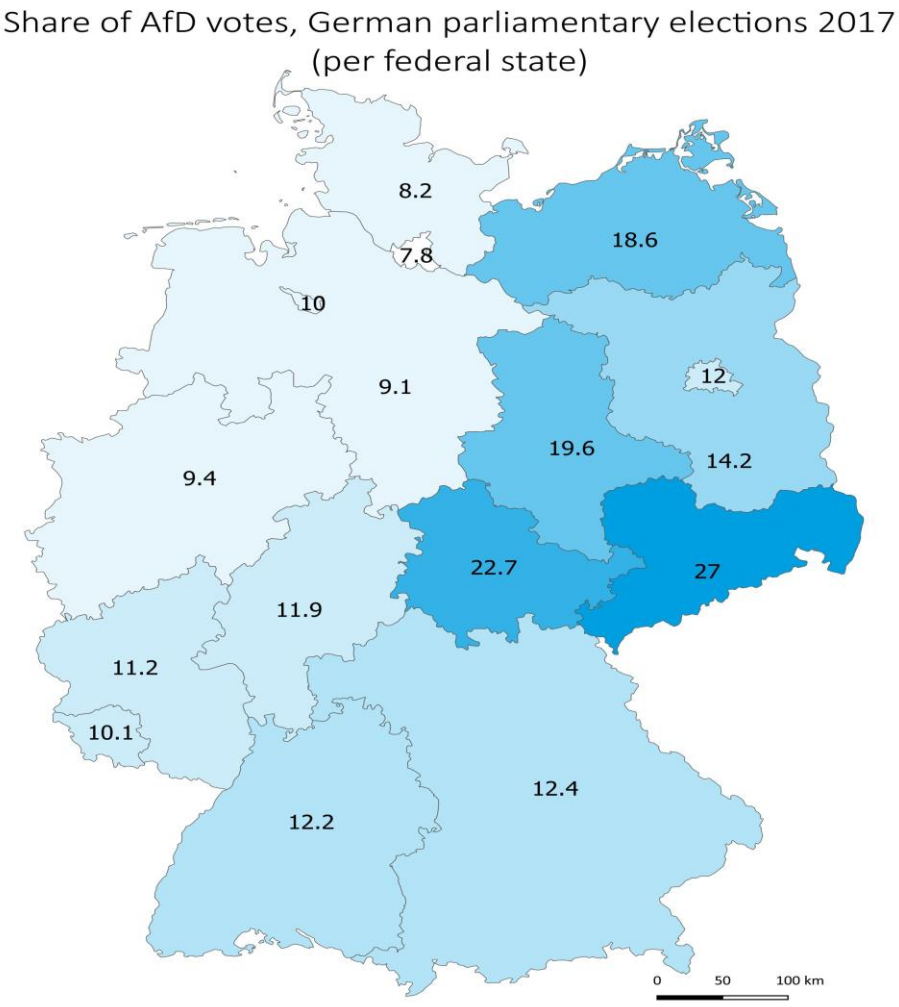

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