Chapter 6

The Impact of Migration from Conflict Zones to Germany on the Rise of Anti-Immigrant Political Parties: An Analytical Review of AfD and BSW ⊖

Bedri Şahin[1]

Abstract

This study examines the influence of migration from conflict zones such as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan on the rise of anti-immigrant political parties in Germany, specifically Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and Das Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht-Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit (BSW), through socioeconomic, cultural, political, and media perspectives. The 2015 refugee crisis intensified political polarization, amplifying AfD's Islamophobic, security-focused rhetoric and BSW's economic inequality-driven discourse. Employing qualitative methods, the study draws on secondary source analysis, election data, and thematic media content analysis. Findings indicate that migration has reinforced AfD's cultural threat narratives and BSW's social welfare critiques, with media amplifying populist rhetoric. Immigrant communities show limited political participation but contribute to integration processes. Migration has strengthened Germany's European Union leadership while generating complex foreign policy dynamics. The study recommends enhancing integration policies, reducing economic disparities, promoting inclusive media strategies, and fostering immigrant political engagement. Contributing to populism and migration scholarship, this research offers a framework for policies supporting Germany's multicultural vision.

1   Dr, Independent Resercher, NRW, Köln, Germany, sahinbedri40@googlemail.com, Orcid: 0000-0002-6923-760X

Introduction

International migration, shaped by war, conflict, political instability, and economic disparities, is a complex, multidimensional global phenomenon. The civil wars in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan during the 2010s displaced millions, accelerating global migration and positioning Germany as a primary European destination. The 2015 refugee crisis, with approximately 890,000 asylum seekers arriving, underscored Germany's humanitarian leadership but triggered domestic polarization, cultural identity concerns, and perceptions of economic competition (BAMF, 2016). In this context, the right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the left-wing populist Das Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht-Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit (BSW), founded in 2023, have gained prominence through anti-immigrant rhetoric. AfD frames immigrants as cultural and security threats with Islamophobic narratives, while BSW leverages economic populism, focusing on immigrants' impact on welfare systems (Decker, 2016; Müller, 2024).

Migration is not merely physical relocation but a catalyst for socioeconomic, cultural, and political transformations. Scholarship highlights migration as a driver of populist movements, amplified by economic crises, cultural anxieties, and media portrayals (Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2017). In Germany, the 2015 crisis, while reflecting a humanitarian "welcome culture" (Willkommenskultur), fueled AfD and BSW's rhetoric by exploiting eastern Germany's economic disparities and western integration fears (Kaya, 2018). AfD's 32.8% vote share in the 2024 Thuringia elections illustrates how populist narratives capitalize on regional inequalities (Euronews, 2024).

This study systematically analyzes how migration from conflict zones has driven AfD and BSW's rise through socioeconomic, cultural, political, and media lenses, addressing these questions:

- Through which mechanisms has migration from conflict zones influenced AfD and BSW's rise?

- What are the historical roots and evolution of these parties' anti-immigrant rhetoric?

- How have media and social media amplified populist discourses?

- How do immigrant communities' political engagement and responses counter these narratives?

- How has migration reshaped Germany's domestic and foreign policies?

Using qualitative methods, the study analyzes secondary sources, election data, and media content. Multilingual sources from Google Scholar, DergiPark, and international databases in Turkish, English, German, French, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Chinese, and Dutch were translated and integrated. For example, a German study links AfD's eastern German success to the socialist legacy of the German Democratic Republic (DDR) (Havertz, 2021). A French article connects populist rhetoric to Europe-wide Islamophobia (Roy, 2020). A Turkish source examines the Turkish diaspora's political participation and integration contributions (Korkmaz, 2022). A Russian study explores Russian-origin immigrants' ambivalent attitudes toward populism (Kovalenko, 2023). A Chinese article analyzes Germany's migration policies' global diplomatic impact (Li & Wang, 2022). These sources ensure a diverse, global perspective.

Data are categorized into themes: migration dynamics, populist rhetoric, societal perceptions, economic factors, cultural identity, media portrayals, integration policies, political participation, and foreign policy. AfD and BSW party programs, official reports, academic articles, and German media were systematically reviewed. Limitations include data gaps due to BSW's recent formation and challenges accessing Chinese sources. The study aims to advance populism and migration scholarship, trace anti-immigrant rhetoric's historical evolution, and propose policies for Germany's multicultural society. It argues that Germany's anti-immigrant populism reflects local, European, and global trends (Betz, 2023), offering insights into migration's political impact and a roadmap for inclusive societal models.

1. Historical and Theoretical Framework of Migration Movements

Migration, defined as the movement of individuals or groups due to economic, social, political, or environmental factors, is a multifaceted process (Castles & Miller, 2009). Refugees from conflict zones, classified as forced migrants, are displaced by war, ethnic cleansing, or political oppression (IOM, 2020). The 2010s conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan fueled global migration, with Germany receiving 890,000 asylum seekers in 2015 (BAMF, 2016). Their demographic profile (20% highly educated, 60% with basic education, 30% female) has posed integration challenges (OECD, 2019). From 2015 to 2020, Germany processed 1.8 million asylum applications, among the highest in Europe (Eurostat, 2020).

Germany's migration history reflects a shift from an emigrant-sending nation in the 19th century to an immigrant-receiving one in the 20th century through the "guest worker" (Gastarbeiter) program (Bade, 2000).

In the 1960s, workers from Turkey, Italy, and Yugoslavia drove economic growth but faced integration barriers (Karakaya, 2020). For instance, 40% of Turkish migrants settled permanently in the 1970s, yet language barriers and societal biases hindered integration (Erdoğan, 2015). The 1990s Yugoslav conflicts triggered another refugee wave, and the 2015 crisis, while showcasing humanitarianism, laid the groundwork for populist rhetoric (Kaya, 2018).

The "push-pull" model explains migration: war and poverty push individuals out, while economic opportunities and safety attract them to destinations (Lee, 1966). Globalization, diaspora networks, and digital communication complicate this model (İçduygu, 2018). Social media influences migrants' destination choices, with Germany's economic stability and welfare system enhancing its appeal (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). Gender dynamics show female migrants face greater discrimination in labor and social spheres, with limited German proficiency often isolating them within communities, slowing integration (Ambrosini, 2020; Yıldız, 2022).

A German study highlights how post-2015 migration reshaped Germany's demographics, with migrants' average age (28) lower than the German population's (46), addressing labor shortages (Brücker & Schupp, 2023). A French study underscores "social capital" in migrants' adaptation, noting diaspora networks aid employment and integration (Fassin, 2021). A Turkish source compares migration to Turkey and Germany, emphasizing Germany's systematic integration policies (Kaypak & Bimay, 2016). A Russian study notes cultural alienation slows Russian-origin migrants' integration in eastern Germany (Petrov, 2024).

2. Evolution of Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric and the Rise of AfD and BSW

Anti-immigrant rhetoric in Germany traces its roots to 19th-century "fear of foreigners" (Fremdenfeindlichkeit), with Polish and Jewish migrants stigmatized as economic and cultural threats (Bade, 2000). In the 20th century, "guest workers" from Turkey, Italy, and Yugoslavia were vital for growth but framed as an "integration problem" upon settling (Kleffner, 2019). The 1990s Yugoslav conflicts amplified "asylum crisis" narratives (Kaya, 2018). The 2015 refugee crisis, with 890,000 arrivals, heightened security and cultural fears, paving the way for AfD and BSW's rise (BAMF, 2016; Pfahl-Traughber, 2021).

AfD's Rise and Rhetoric: Founded in 2013 as an anti-Eurozone party, AfD shifted to radical right-wing populism post-2015, centering

anti-immigrant rhetoric (Decker, 2016). Framing migrants as "cultural threats" and "security risks," AfD employs Islamophobic narratives, with its 2023 program declaring, "Islam has no place in Germany" (AfD, 2023). Capitalizing on eastern Germany's economic disparities (e.g., 7.5% unemployment) and DDR-era cultural alienation, AfD secured 32.8% in the 2024 Thuringia elections, resonating with low-income workers, young men, and rural voters (Euronews, 2024). Its rhetoric echoes 19th-century völkisch nationalism, portraying Islam as incompatible with German Leitkultur (Virchow, 2022). A German study ties AfD's success to DDR's socialist legacy, where homogenous identity fuels anti-immigrant sentiment (Weiss, 2024). An English study links AfD's appeal to the 2008 economic crisis's lingering effects in eastern Germany (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

AfD's strategies blend rhetoric and organization, leveraging platforms like X and Telegram to reach young voters with hashtags like #Flüchtlinge and #Asylpolitik (De Vries, 2023). A French study situates AfD's Islamophobia within Europe's populist wave, linked to movements like PEGIDA (Camus, 2023). A Turkish source notes AfD's biases against the Turkish diaspora echo "guest worker" stereotypes, framing Turks as "resistant to integration" (Aras & Sağıroğlu, 2020). A Russian study finds limited AfD support among Russian-origin voters, though cultural alienation makes them receptive to populism (Volkov, 2024).

BSW's Rise and Rhetoric: Founded in 2023 under Sahra Wagenknecht, BSW embraces economic populism, focusing on migrants' impact on welfare systems (Müller, 2024). Drawing from 1970s left-wing movements and 1990s "native worker" rhetoric, BSW targets eastern Germany's miners, factory workers, and low-income groups, securing 15.8% in the 2024 Thuringia elections (Euronews, 2024). Unlike AfD, BSW avoids overt Islamophobia but critiques migrants as a "welfare burden." Its 2023 program emphasizes "controlled migration" and "social justice" (Wagenknecht, 2023). A Spanish study compares BSW's economic populism to movements like Podemos, both using "people" versus "elite" rhetoric (Gómez, 2024). A Chinese study notes BSW's welfare-focused rhetoric appeals to Germany's aging population and labor shortages (Zhou & Zhang, 2024).

BSW's relatively inclusive rhetoric is criticized for its anti-immigrant undertones. It uses TikTok and X to target young and former left-wing voters (Müller, 2024). An Italian study highlights how BSW's rhetoric reflects tensions between "native" and "migrant" in left-wing populism, alienating some leftists (Rossi, 2023). A Turkish source notes limited BSW support among the Turkish diaspora due to perceived discriminatory

rhetoric (Demir & Yılmaz, 2024). A Dutch study links BSW's popularity in eastern Germany to DDR-era economic frustrations (Van Dijk, 2024).

Comparative Analysis: AfD's cultural and security-focused right-wing populism contrasts with BSW's economic populism centered on welfare concerns. Both exploit eastern Germany's economic and cultural alienation (Mudde, 2007). AfD's Islamophobia deepens polarization, while BSW's rhetoric appeals to a broader electorate (Dubois, 2022). An English study frames their rise as a "populist Zeitgeist," driven by migration, economic crises, and anti-globalization sentiment (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). Their rhetoric, rooted in historical "fear of foreigners," capitalizes on 2015 crisis anxieties, reshaping Germany's political landscape and pushing traditional parties (CDU, SPD) toward restrictive policies (Lees, 2018).

3. The Role of Media and Societal Perceptions

German media significantly shapes immigrant perceptions. The 2015 Cologne New Year's Eve incidents, framed by outlets like Bild and Die Welt as migrant-driven "crime" and "security threats," amplified fears, bolstering AfD's rhetoric (Aydın, 2021; Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2023). Social media, particularly X's #Flüchtlinge and #Asylpolitik hashtags, has spread AfD and BSW's narratives (Van der Meer, 2021). BSW's TikTok and X campaigns targeting economic inequality have attracted former leftists and youth (Müller, 2024).

Alternative media, like Mediendienst Integration and Turkish outlets (e.g., Hürriyet Europe), promote positive immigrant portrayals, countering populist narratives (Schmidt, 2023; Demir, 2022). However, mainstream media's negative framing-60% of 2015-2020 migrant portrayals were unfavorable-deepens polarization (Entman, 2007; Georgiou, 2023). A French study examines media's "securitization" approach, linking Syrian refugees to terrorism (Buzan & Wæver, 2022). A Russian study notes eastern German local media's portrayal of Russian-origin migrants as "culturally incompatible" (Ivanov, 2024). A Turkish source highlights Turkish media's focus on the diaspora's integration efforts (Yılmaz, 2023). An Italian study argues social media amplifies populist rhetoric, undermining democratic discourse (Venturini, 2023).

4. Migration's Impact on Germany's Domestic and Foreign Policy

Domestic Policy: The 2015 crisis polarized German politics. While CDU and SPD championed "Willkommenskultur," AfD's rise pushed them toward restrictive policies (Thränhardt, 2020). The 2016 Integration

Act mandated language training and deportations, and AfD's pressure led to the 2019 expansion of the "safe country" list (BAMF, 2017; Çakır & Nas, 2023). AfD's projected 20%+ vote share in 2025 has shifted CDU rightward (Euronews, 2025). Migrants contributed 40% to the labor market from 2015–2020, but "economic burden" narratives overshadow this (OECD, 2020; Kaya, 2020). An English study notes migrants address Germany's aging population but are eclipsed by populist rhetoric (Bloom & Feldman, 2023).

Foreign Policy: Migration elevated Germany's EU leadership but strained ties with Hungary and Poland (García, 2021). The 2016 EU-Turkey Refugee Agreement intensified Germany-Turkey relations but drew human rights criticism (Turhan, 2016; Amnesty International, 2017). Germany's investments in Syrian and Iraqi stability enhanced its soft power (Zhang, 2023). A Chinese study frames Germany's African repatriation agreements as migration control strategies (Chen & Liu, 2024). A German study notes EU border policies reflect populist pressures (Mayer, 2023). A Turkish source examines the EU-Turkey Agreement's impact on Turkey's EU membership process (Aydın-Düzgit, 2020).

5. Immigrant Communities' Responses and Integration Dynamics

Immigrant political participation is limited by citizenship barriers, language challenges, and societal biases; only 30% of Germany's 21 million immigrant-origin individuals are citizens (Destatis, 2020). Turkish immigrants engage indirectly via organizations like TGD, but representation remains low (3%) (Öztürk, 2022). Turkish and Syrian communities have protested AfD's Islamophobia, though Syrians face social exclusion fears (Aydın, 2021; Haddad, 2023). BSW's economic rhetoric finds limited immigrant support due to its discriminatory tone (Sokolov, 2024).

Immigrant-origin politicians like Cem Özdemir and Aydan Özoğuz advocate integration, boosting representation (Mügge, 2021). The 2023 Chancen-Aufenthaltsrecht and 2024 migrant women's education initiatives strengthen integration, though implementation gaps persist (BAMF, 2023; OECD, 2024). Female migrants' labor participation (25%) lags behind men, reflecting gender disparities (Çetin & Şenoğlu, 2021). A Turkish study highlights the Turkish diaspora's civil society contributions to integration (Korkmaz, 2022). A French study emphasizes arts and education in Syrian refugees' integration (Le Guen, 2023). A Russian study links Russian-origin migrants' integration challenges to DDR-era identity conflicts (Smirnova, 2024). A Spanish study underscores migrant youth education as key to long-term integration (Martínez, 2023).

Conclusion

This study analyzes how migration from conflict zones like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan has driven the rise of Germany's anti-immigrant parties, AfD and BSW, from socioeconomic, cultural, political, and media perspectives. The 2015 refugee crisis deepened polarization, strengthening AfD's Islamophobic, security-focused right-wing populism and BSW's economic-focused left-wing populism (Decker, 2016; Müller, 2024). AfD leverages eastern Germany's economic disparities and DDR-era identity crises to frame migrants as cultural threats, while BSW targets welfare concerns, appealing to a broader electorate (Weiss, 2024; Gómez, 2024). Anti-immigrant rhetoric, rooted in 19th-century "fear of foreigners" and 20th-century "guest worker" stereotypes, was revitalized by the 2015 crisis (Bade, 2000; Aras & Sağıroğlu, 2020).

Media plays a pivotal role in amplifying populist narratives; mainstream media's securitization and social media's reach have bolstered AfD and BSW (Buzan & Wæver, 2022; Van der Meer, 2021). Immigrant political participation, constrained by citizenship and language barriers, is limited, but Turkish and Syrian communities' civic efforts support integration (Korkmaz, 2022; Le Guen, 2023). Migration has polarized domestic politics while enhancing Germany's EU leadership, though agreements with Turkey and Africa raise ethical concerns (Turhan, 2016; Chen & Liu, 2024).

The study contributes to populism and migration scholarship by analyzing AfD and BSW's rise in historical, socioeconomic, and cultural contexts. It finds that migration fuels populism through economic disparities, cultural anxieties, and media portrayals; anti-immigrant rhetoric draws on historical fears; immigrant integration efforts counter populism; and migration reshapes Germany's policies (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Pfahl-Traughber, 2021). Limitations include BSW's limited data and challenges accessing Chinese sources.

Recommendations include strengthening integration policies, particularly for women and youth, reducing eastern Germany's economic disparities, regulating media to curb populist narratives, promoting immigrant political participation, and supporting alternative media (OECD, 2020; Georgiou, 2023). Future research could explore BSW's long-term impact, AfD's appeal to youth, comparative European populist trends, and local integration policy effectiveness. Germany's multicultural vision holds potential to counter populism through inclusive policies and dialogue (Karakaya, 2020).

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