

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

This work was supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822590 (Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe).

## CONTENTS

### LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

### EDITORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

### LIST ABBREVIATIONS

#### CHAPTER 1

##### **COVID-19 and Populism: A Sui Generis Crisis**

Giuliano Bobba and Nicolas Hubé

#### CHAPTER 2

##### **UK: Between managed moderation and far-right conspiracy theories**

Osman Sahin, and Bogdan Ianosev

#### CHAPTER 3

##### **Spain: Is ideology back in populist discourse?**

Jaume Magre, Lluís Medir, and Esther Pano

#### CHAPTER 4

##### **Italy: Populist in the mirror, (de)politicizing the COVID-19 from government and opposition**

Arturo Bertero, and Antonella Seddone

#### CHAPTER 5

##### **France: Governmental unpreparedness as a discursive opportunity for populists**

Martin Baloge, and Nicolas Hubé

#### CHAPTER 6

##### **Germany: The AfD's Staggering between Reason and Resistance**

Oliver W. Lembcke

#### CHAPTER 7

##### **Hungary: Crisis as usual - Populist governance and the pandemic**

Márton Bene, and Zsolt Boda

#### CHAPTER 8

##### **Czech Republic: Running the State like a Family Business**

Ondřej Císař, and Michal Kubát

#### CHAPTER 9

##### **Poland: 'If we don't elect the President, the country will plunge into chaos'**

Artur Lipiński

#### CHAPTER 10

##### **Between mitigation and dramatization: The effect of the COVID-19 crisis on populists' discourses and strategies**

Giuliano Bobba and Nicolas Hubé

## LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

### Tables

- 1.1 Contradictions, Decisive Interventions and Populist Interventions
- 1.2 Politicization of public problems/issues
- 1.3 Impact of COVID-19 in the cases selected (10 June 2020)
- 1.4 Populists parties in the cases selected
- 2.1 Main UK political parties (>5% in the last European election)
- 2.2 COVID-19 pandemic in UK
- 3.1 Main Spanish political parties (>5% in the last general election)
- 3.2 COVID-19 pandemic in Spain
- 4.1 Main Italian political parties (> 5% in the last General election)
- 4.2 COVID-19 pandemic in Italy
- 5.1 Main French political parties (>5% in the last general election)
- 5.2 COVID-19 pandemic in France
- 6.1 Main German political parties (>5% in the last general election)
- 6.2 COVID-19 pandemic in Germany
- 7.1 Main Hungarian political parties (>5% in the last general election)
- 7.2 COVID-19 pandemic in Hungary
- 8.1 Main Czech political parties (>5% in the last general election)
- 8.2 COVID-19 pandemic in Czech Republic
- 9.1 Main Polish political parties (>5% in the last general election)
- 9.2 COVID-19 pandemic in Poland
- 10.1 The consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on populist parties' performance

### Figures

- 2.1 Daily death toll and new cases in UK
- 3.1 Daily death toll and new cases in Spain
- 4.1 Daily death toll and new cases in Italy
- 5.1 Daily death toll and new cases in France
- 6.1 Daily death toll and new cases in Germany
- 7.1 Daily death toll and new cases in Hungary
- 8.1 Daily death toll and new cases in Czech Republic
- 9.1 Daily death toll and new cases in Poland
- 10.1 Map of European populist discourse faced with the COVID-19 crisis
- 10.2 The permanent crisis cycle fuelled by populists

## **EDITORS AND CONTRIBUTORS**

### **Editors**

GIULIANO BOBBA, Associate Professor, Department of Cultures, Politics and Society and Affiliate, Collegio Carlo Alberto, University of Turin

NICOLAS HUBÉ, Professor, Centre for Research on Mediations (CREM), University of Lorraine, Metz

### **Contributors**

MARTIN BALOGÉ, Post-doctoral researcher, Centre for Research on Mediations (CREM), University of Lorraine, Metz

MÁRTON BENE, Research fellow, Centre for Social Sciences - Centre of Excellence of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and assistant professor, ELTE Law Faculty, Budapest

ARTURO BERTERO, Research Fellow, Department Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Turin

ZSOLT BODA, Research professor, Centre for Social Sciences - Centre of Excellence of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and associate professor, ELTE Law Faculty, Budapest

ONDŘEJ CÍSAŘ, Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Prague

BOGDAN IANOSEV, PhD Candidate, Glasgow Caledonian University

MICHAL KUBÁT, Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Prague

OLIVER W. LEMBCKE, Professor of Political Science, Ruhr-University Bochum

ARTUR LIPÍŃSKI, Associate Professor, Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

JAUME MAGRE. Associate Professor in Political Science at Universitat de Barcelona, director of the Carles Pi i Sunyer Foundation

LLUÍS MEDIR. Associate Professor in Political Science at Universitat de Barcelona

ESTHER PANO. Assistant Professor in Political Science and member of the Carles Pi i Sunyer Foundation, Barcelona

OSMAN SAHIN, Research Fellow, Glasgow Caledonian University

ANTONELLA SEDDONE, Assistant Professor in Political Science, Department Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Turin

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Translated Name of the Party	Original Name of the Party	Acronym
<b>United Kingdom</b>		
United Kingdom Independence Party	United Kingdom Independence Party	UKIP
Brexit Party	Brexit Party	Brexit Party
<b>Spain</b>		
Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	Partido Socialista Obrero Español	PSOE
People's Party	Partido Popular	PP
VOX	VOX	VOX
United We Can	Unidas Podemos	PP
Citizens	Ciudadanos	C's
<b>Italy</b>		
Go Italy	Forza Italia	FI
Brothers of Italy	Fratelli d'Italia	FdI
League	Lega	Lega
Five Star Movement	Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S
Democratic Party	Partito Democratico	PD
<b>France</b>		
National Rally	Rassemblement National	RN
Indomitable France	La France Insoumise	LFI
The Republic on the Move	La République en Marche	LREM
MODEM	MODEM	MODEM
Democrats and Independants' Union	Union des Démocrates et Indépendants	UDI
Socialist Party	Parti Socialiste	PS
Greens	Les Verts	EELV
The Republicans	Les Républicains	LR
<b>Germany</b>		
Alternative for Germany	Alternative für Deutschland	AfD
Federal Minister of Health	Bundesministerium für Gesundheit	BMG
Christian Democratic Union	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands	CDU
Christian Social Union in Bavaria	Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern	CSU
Liberal Democratic Party	Freie Demokratische Partei	F.D.P.
Green Party	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	Grüne
The Left Party	Die Linke	Linke
Robert Koch Institute	Robert Koch Institut	RKI
Social Democratic Party	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands	SPD
<b>Hungary</b>		
Fidesz	Fidesz	Fidesz
Christian Democratic People's Party	Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt	KDNP
Hungarian Socialist Party	Magyar Szocialista Párt	MSZP
For a Better Hungary	Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom	Jobbik
Democratic Coalition	Demokratikus Koalíció	DK
Another Politics Is Possible	Lehet Más a Politika	LMP
Momentum	Momentum	Momentum
Dialogue	Párbeszéd	P
<b>Czech Republic</b>		
ANO 2011	ANO 2011	ANO
Freedom and Direct Democracy	Svoboda a přímá demokracie	SPD
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia	Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy	KSČM
<b>Poland</b>		
Law and Justice	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	PiS
Confederation 'Freedom and Independence'	Konfederacja 'Wolność i Niepodległość'	Confederation
Civic Platform	Platforma Obywatelska	PO
Polish People's Party	Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe	PSL
Democratic Left Alliance	Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej	SLD

## CHAPTER 6

### GERMANY: THE AFD'S STAGGERING BETWEEN REASON AND RESISTANCE

#### **Abstract**

This chapter argues that the AfD has not been able to capture the media's attention and display itself as the centre of protest against the government's COVID-19 policies. One of the key reasons is that the AfD has limited its critique to highlighting the failures in prevention and to stressing mistakes made in effectively managing the crisis. Consequently, the AfD could not exert the same radical critique as for example during the migration crisis. To be sure, the AfD has refused to participate in the overall COVID-19 consensus by politicizing the issue. It also tried to radicalize its critique by switching from a 'safety first' strategy to a strategy of 'individual rights first'. But with no avail. It seems that the party has been suffering from some 'outbidding' by forms of extra-parliamentary opposition (APO), which are much more radical and in some ways also more populist than the AfD itself.

OLIVER W. LEMBCKE, Ruhr-University Bochum (oliver.lembecke@ruhr-uni-bochum.de)

#### **Introduction**

As the first right-wing party entering Parliament at the federal level, the AfD's aim is to challenge the established parties and to signify a rupture of German politics in style and action. The COVID-19 crisis could have been another boost for the AfD, considering the fact that the party has only grown bigger in times of crisis: It emerged from the financial crisis and the widespread critique of the EZB's EURO policy. Furthermore, the AfD had a streak of successful elections in the wake of the migration crisis in Germany. However, the AfD does not look like a profiteer from this pandemic; and this chapter tries to explain why. This chapter argues that struggles between the governments at the federal level ('Bund') and at the state level ('Länder') have absorbed most of the media attention during the early stages of the pandemic, which made it rather difficult for the AfD to get its own message out. Moreover, the AfD has been limiting its critique to highlighting the government's failures in prevention and to stressing mistakes made in effectively managing the crisis. Consequently, the AfD could not exert the same radical critique (in style and content) as for example during the migration crisis. Nevertheless, the AfD has refused to participate in the overall COVID-19 consensus by politicizing the issue. Finally, it also tried to radicalize its critique by switching from a 'safety first' strategy to a strategy of 'individual rights first'. Nevertheless, it seems that the party has been suffering from some 'outbidding' by forms of extra-parliamentary opposition (APO), which oppose the government's COVID-19 policies and are much more resistant, radical, and in some ways also more populist than the AfD itself.

#### **1. Political context**

The result of the 2017 federal elections has had a decisive impact on the political situation in Germany. On the one hand, the governing coalition of CDU, Bavarian CSU and SPD has succeeded in renewing its alliance. On the other hand, the great coalition between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, is also the coalition of the biggest losers of this election. As a result, the government does have relatively secure parliamentary majorities, and its room for manoeuvre is *de facto* limited due to internal tensions (especially within the SPD). From the beginning, the breakup of the coalition hovered over Merkel's fourth cabinet like a sword of Damocles.

The difficulty in forming a stable government at the federal level did not come as a surprise. The election trend at the state level clearly shows that government coalitions in Germany are

increasingly based on mathematical majorities, but no longer on ideological agreement between the coalition partners. One of the key factors for this development is the end of the two-party dominance. The CDU's future as a catch-all party is unclear; that of the SPD is already history due to lack of voter approval. While both parties were able to retain over 80% of votes well into the 1980s, nowadays the voter's support is only just over 50% (see table 6.1).

In the wake of these erosion processes, the fragmentation and polarization of the German party system has been growing since the re-unification of Germany – a trend that forms the ideal breeding ground for the emergence of new parties, especially on the fringes of the party system. Based on the Laakso-Taagepera index (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979), the German party system at the federal level is now more fragmented than it was in 1949. The governing parties are reacting to this situation by redefining their programs and changing personnel, but in both cases without much success. Both governing parties currently have no centre of power, which further damages the government's ability to act. One exception to this is the Bavarian regional party CSU, which, after its poor performance in 2017, has succeeded in repositioning itself under the leadership of Minister President Söder.

**Table 6.1 Main German political parties (>5% in the last general election)**

Political party	General Election 2017		2019 European election	
	Vote shares	Seats	Vote shares	Seats
<i>In power</i>				
Christian Democrats (CDU)	26,9%	200	22,6%	23
Christian Democrats in Bavaria (CSU)	6,2%	46	6,3%	6
Social Democrats (SPD)	20,5%	153	15,8%	16
<i>In opposition</i>				
Right-Wing Populists (AfD)	12,6%	94	11,0%	11
Liberals (FDP)	10,7%	80	5,4%	5
Socialists (Left Party)	9,2%	69	5,5%	5
Greens (B 90/Die Grünen)	8,9%	67	20,5%	21

The main beneficiaries of the government's weakness have been the right-wing populists of the AfD and, after a disappointing result in the 2017 election, the Greens. On the contrary, the Socialists and the Liberals have so far been unable to benefit in a similar fashion. The successes of the Greens and the AfD reflect not least an East-West divide, which is also of European relevance (Ignazi, 1992), as the recent European elections have shown: The West is becoming 'greener' with 'green, alternative and liberal' (GAL) values, while the East is becoming 'bluer' favouring 'traditional, authoritarian and national' (TAN) positions. This is particularly true in Germany, the once divided country. When the AfD was founded in 2011, it was a Western 'professor's party' under the leadership of Lucke, rallying against the monetary policy of the EU and against the euro. Thereafter the focus shifted more to an Eastern political style under Petry. With this shift in the party's base, the ideological core has changed to become more defined by TAN positions (Rosenfelder, 2017).

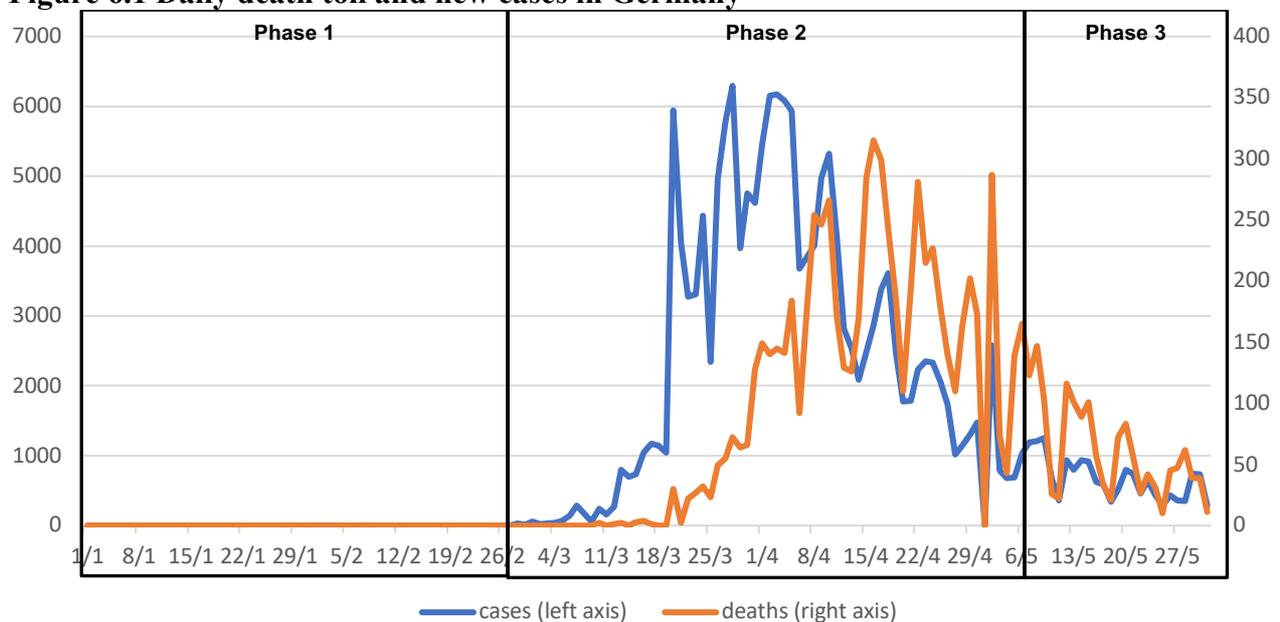
In the Eastern German states, the AfD has now established itself as a strong, if not the strongest, opposition party; in the West, however, it still has the character of a fringe party, although it is much more strongly represented in the Southwest than in the northern city states of Hamburg and Bremen or in the most populous state of North Rhine-Westphalia (Manow, 2018). For the moment, the AfD has a no real chance of participating in West-German governments. This was demonstrated not least by the Thuringian elections in 2019, in which the liberal candidate was surprisingly elected Minister President with the votes of the CDU and AfD, but had to resign after a few days because of the general public's outrage that he has been put into office with the help of right-wing populists.

No power in the sense of ‘coalition potential’ (Sartori, 1976) can be ascribed to the AfD. However, it has ‘blackmail potential’ since the party has issue-ownership in the policy field of migration and can put pressure on right of the centre parties. Moreover, the AfD has considerable influence on the arithmetic of government formation.

## 2. COVID-19 diffusion and political measures

The measures of the German Federal Government and the state governments to contain the spread of COVID-19 in Germany can be divided into three phases (pre-COVID-19, spread and containment measures, and contagion mitigation). In view of the fact that the outbreak of COVID-19 in China was officially detected already on December 1, 2019, the pre-COVID-19 phase in Germany lasted quite long. On February 26, 2020, the government re-evaluated the severity of the situation: Previously there had been isolated cases of infected persons in Germany, but at that point, according to the BMG, it was no longer possible to trace the spread of the infection due to missing links in the infection chain.

**Figure 6.1 Daily death toll and new cases in Germany**



Source: European Center for Disease Prevention and Control

Phase 1: pre-Covid-19; Phase 2: spread and containment measures; Phase 3: contagion mitigation

**Table 6.2 COVID-19 pandemic in Germany**

Cases	186,525
Total deaths	8,831
Total recovered	170,700
Cases for 1 M pop	2,227
Deaths for 1 M pop	105

Source: [www.worldometers.info/Coronavirus/](http://www.worldometers.info/Coronavirus/) (update 10/6/2020)

The changed assessment of the situation, resulted in a tightening of measures implemented to contain the pandemic. While the federal government initially limited itself to measures to educate and inform the population, advising to take hygienic precautions (disinfection, hand washing) and to keep distance (social distancing); the second phase saw a relatively rapid transition to regulatory intervention supported by the media that seemed to share to a large extent the government’s

assessments. The direct measures to contain COVID-19 were still orchestrated quite uniformly at the beginning of the second phase by the German government with the support of the RKI. The RKI defined limit values and risk areas and made recommendations for the measures to be taken. Soon there was consensus that returnees from risk areas had to undergo a two-week quarantine (starting from April 10, 2020); and social distancing also became a general rule of behaviour in Germany. Soon, however, a Babylonian babble of voices became apparent as a result of the federal division of powers under the German constitution. According to the Constitution, the states and municipalities are responsible for interpreting and implementing the necessary measures. Thus Bavaria, as a neighbour to Austria, became the forerunner of a particularly strict COVID-19 policy that other federal states did not want to follow. And the general obligation to wear a mask was first introduced by the city of Jena on April 6, 2020, despite the fact that the infection figures in the whole of Thuringia, were well below the federal average.

However, the regulations were not limited to the acute danger of infection but extended to the entire economic and cultural life in Germany, bringing it to a 'lockdown' (March 16, 2020). Not only were mass events, such as the soccer league or music concerts cancelled, but all public institutions were closed to visitors, including schools, kindergartens, and universities. Cultural places, bars or restaurants were closed. Only 'systemically relevant' activities remained accessible, including grocery stores, especially supermarkets, and, in some places, drugstores and home improvement stores. All retail sales were prohibited unless the very restrictive safety regulations for employees were guaranteed. Companies switched to short-time work or to home office. These regulations were accompanied by various forms of government economic aid. For example, the short-time work allowance was reintroduced, which had already helped to alleviate the problem of unemployment during the financial crisis of 2008/2009. In addition, emergency aid measures were offered for the first three months to cover *operating*-expenses (e.g. office rent). The fact that this did not include the real cost of living has brought criticism of the federal government and the state governments involved, which, however, did not resonate too much in the media.

The third phase resulting in a relaxation of the restrictive measures started in Germany on May 6, 2020. The German government and the state governments agreed on common standards for infection control. According to these standards, counties and cities are only obliged to reinstate COVID-19 measures if more than 50 new infections per 100,000 inhabitants can be detected within seven days. The obligation to wear a mask and to socially distance remain in force. Under these conditions, not only companies and stores can reopen, but also public institutions, provided that the organizers can present an appropriate hygiene concept. This has contributed to a considerable normalization of life, allowing schools and kindergartens to reopen. In addition, cultural and sporting events are allowed to take place again, provided that government guidelines can be upheld.

In addition to the regulatory measures, government action was also characterized by several structural measures aimed at protecting the healthcare system from possible overburdening by COVID-19 patients. By the end of the first phase, the BMG had already initiated the massive purchase of protective clothing (PPE), particularly masks. At the beginning of the second phase, government regulations and initiatives were intended to increase the supply resources in hospitals, with a particular focus on the capacity of intensive care beds (ICB). As a result, these capacities were never exhausted in Germany at any time (the percentage of free ICB was never less than 34% during the time from April 16 to June 30). On the contrary, individual German states have made their resources available for the reception of COVID-19 patients from France and Italy. For some time now, however, the question has been investigated, initiated by some media reports, whether the government's subsidies have led to false incentives and deadweight effects.

Despite the fact that the health care system has passed the acid test for the time being, the pandemic has resulted in a considerable slump of the German economy. Forecasts unanimously expect considerable growth in 2021. However, it is highly questionable whether it will be able to compensate for the decrease of more than 6 percent in 2020. The same is applicable to the medium-term effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the German economy, which is still heavily dependent on exports. Indeed, there are clear signs of job loss and a shrinking of future opportunities for Generation Z, which is likely to be only marginally prepared for this challenged economy.

### **3. Populist discourse at the time of COVID-19**

It is commonplace that times of crisis favour the government. It is able to act while the opposition can only stand by and watch. In such situations, consensus-oriented cooperation often imposes itself as an opposition strategy to prove that the government is aware of its responsibilities. All parties, except for the AfD, adopted such an attitude during the COVID-19 crisis. For the AfD, the pandemic is proof of the incapacity of the country's elites. According to the AfD, the government's incapacity has three reasons (Stefan Keuter, 07/05/2020).<sup>33</sup>

First, the government under Merkel's leadership has not been able to recognize the challenge of the pandemic in time (e.g. Weidel, 04/03/2020), although the Coronavirus has long been acknowledged as a pandemic threat (Kraft, 12/02/2020). Secondly, it has failed to take precautions for emergencies, and instead, with its eyes wide open, has foolishly relied on foreign countries (e.g. Spangenberg, 12/02/2020), in particular China (Keinwächter, 13/03/2020) and the WHO (Oehme, 28/05/2020). Thirdly, the government's crisis management lacks any sense of proportion, because it presents the lockdown as the only possible solution (Komning, 14/05/2020), but ignores the harsh consequences for the people (Keuter, 07/05/2020) and the economy (Hilse, 18/06/2020).

Although there are voices within the AfD calling for constructive cooperation in view of the crisis (Pohl, 25/03/2020) – even from prominent figures such as Alice Weidel (04/03/2020), the co-chair of the AfD parliamentary group in the German Bundestag – they remain isolated. Instead, they portray themselves as the only 'alternative' to the pandemic consensus of the other parties and as a true oppositional force for whom the topic of COVID-19 is not only a top priority (Robby Schlund, 12/02/2020), but who also fights to ensure that families are heard as the real sufferers of the pandemic (Reichardt, 22/04/2020). This issue has been hammered away since March (e.g. Kleinwächter, 28/05/2020). The AfD is now demanding unrestricted solidarity for families, financially (Pohl, 25/03/2020) and organizationally, i.e. by reopening schools and kindergartens as soon as possible (Schlund, 22/04/2020).

Moreover, the family support is also used as a cipher for taking care of the people – the German people (Hampel, 11/03/2020). Accordingly, in the international race for the vaccine, it is essential to protect the German people (Gauland, 25/03/2020), always according to the motto: 'Germany first, Germany first' (Müller, 23/4/2020). For the crisis now reveals what the other parties could not see or admit (Harald Weyel, 23/4/2020), namely that only the nation state has the necessary capacity to act, but not the EU. European cooperation can complement national politics, but it cannot replace it, because it is unable to represent German interests (Gauland, 25/03/2020). In the opinion of the AfD, it is simply not in Germany's interest to see the pandemic as an opportunity for European solidarity, let alone for deepening the European economic and financial integration via 'Corona bonds' (Boehringer, 25/03/2020). Even the admission of intensive care patients from neighbouring countries, which has been understood and endorsed by many in public discourse as a symbolic gesture, must be kept within limits according to the AfD (Spangenberg, 07/05/2020).

---

<sup>33</sup> All mentions in sections 3 and 4 are coming from the Bundestag debates ('Plenarprotokolle'). Due to place limitation, the references only give names and date.

In the AfD's opinion, the inability of the other parties to draw boundaries is one of the fundamental evils of German politics, which has been particularly evident in migration policy. Now the government is prone to make the same mistakes again: For instance, why are German countrymen not allowed to travel to the German coasts, while refugees are allowed into the country without quarantine (Hemmelgarn, 13/05/2020)? Further, why should Germany pay 'the many billions for the asylum industry', when its public finances will be under considerable strain for the foreseeable future as a result of the COVID-19 crisis? (Jacobi, 25/03/2020). Finally, when will the German government learn the lessons from the migration crisis and invest more in efficient border protection, which also provides the means to protect the German people against an import of COVID-19 (Kleinwächter, 11/03/2020)?

In short, according to the AfD's interpretation, the government is incapable. This is the unanimous verdict within the AfD. And one of the decisive reasons for this, in their view, is that the government cannot think in genuinely political categories: national identity and national interest. Instead, it follows scientific suggestions; and tries to hide the fact that its COVID-19 policies, like all political decisions, create 'winners and losers' as a result. The partner in crime is the media. As it has been before, the so-called mainstream media are the real scapegoats in this pandemic, according to the AfD, because they systematically suppress necessary criticism of the government (Reichardt, 07/05/2020) or stigmatize dissenting opinions, especially those of the AfD, portraying them as conspiracy theorists, Corona-deniers, or 'Covidiot' (Komning, 14/05/2020). Occasionally, however, these attacks have been self-inflicted by murmuring coming from the AfD about the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and its influence on COVID-19 (e.g. Braun, 15/05/2020).

Against this background, it is obvious that the AfD is seeking to establish a link to the demonstrations against the state's COVID-19 policy that have started in May 2020 immediately in the wake of the loosening of restrictions. The AfD welcomes these events as civil rights protest (e.g.ichert, 14/05/2020). However, these protests also show very clearly the limited political impact of the AfD during the Corona crisis. For the party is not able to bind or even channel the protests. In fact, it seems to chase the protesters rather than leading them.

#### **4. The politicization of COVID-19 issue by populists**

Since the beginning of the crisis, the German government has been striving to achieve the broadest possible acceptance for its COVID-19 policy. This goal was served by the involvement of the RKI as scientific authority as well as close and consensus-oriented coordination with the governments of the federal states. Both elements can be understood as a strategy of depoliticization. This strategy must be seen in large parts as failed. Because up to the present day, the scope and orientation of the COVID-19 policy is still being debated. The main line of conflict, widely covered by the media, runs between the following positions: one side advocates nationwide uniform standards and typically also advocates more rigid protective measures ('safety first'). The other side advocates a targeted response to acute infections and emphasizes the need for proportionality in dealing with measures that restrict freedom ('individual rights first'). This conflict runs right through the parties, especially in the CDU ('intra-partisan conflict'); it also divides the governments between the Bund and some of the Länder ('intergovernmental conflict') and reflects to some extent the East-West-difference, because it is primarily East German politicians who, due to the small number of COVID-19 cases in their states, are against rigid pandemic policies.

The intergovernmental conflict in particular has consequences for the AfD: First, the intergovernmental line of conflict has led to a kind of permanent politicization of the pandemic, which became even more entrenched after Easter with the increasing replacement of the federal

government's leadership role by the Länder. This form of intergovernmental politicization of the pandemic has left little room for the opposition to present itself, and the AfD in particular has hardly had a chance to distinguish itself in the concert of media attention. In addition, the AfD's centre of power is located in the eastern part of the republic, but the two prime ministers of Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt have already been able to successfully present themselves in the media as critics of the federal government.

Initially, the AfD's politicization strategy was strongly aimed at accusing the federal government of incompetence in prevention and crisis management. With this focus of criticism, however, a preliminary decision had already been made on the status of COVID-19: The pandemic is real, as is the virus. Whereas many populists seem to question the biological existence of Corona, the AfD has not been challenging the main elements of the government's COVID-19 narrative. The *naming* and *blaming* is therefore only directed toward the *management* by the government. This led to a path dependency of the argumentation, which basically opened up little scope for castigating the *emergence* of the virus or the pandemic itself as a political problem; for example, as exaggeration on the part of the government or through conspiracy theories. For the AfD as an opposition, a *confrontation* with the state's COVID-19 policy was only possible within the government's narrative of what was necessary, which meant that the criticism lacked clout. For clout is gained through the 'pros and cons' of positions (salience) and not through a 'more or less' within a position (valence).

This open field of criticism of government policy has been occupied by actors of the civil society that apparently pursues the goal of aggregating the growing dissatisfaction and transforming it into a protest movement, possibly a political party. One of these attempts, called 'Resistance 2020,' became a non-starter. However, this example illustrates the growing willingness of the COVID-19 'losers' (the retail trade, the solo self-employed and artists, etc.) to demonstrate together with the 'system opposition', i.e. the radical left and extreme right. Not only does a radical refusal to comply with COVID-19 regulations take place in these circles, e.g. in the form of 'Corona parties.' This consensus of non-compliance is also the breeding ground for 'alternative' narratives on the origins of the virus and its spread. Due to the path dependency of its own argumentation, the AfD has so far not been able to establish a sustainable connection to these forms of protest within the civil society.

Such a lasting connection would require a form of *naming* and *blaming* that AfD has not been willing to do so far. With regard to prevention, it demands greater independence for Germany in production of drugs and protective equipment and greater consideration for 'national interests'; and with regard to the COVID-19 restrictions, it advocates a more family-friendly and economy-supportive approach. If the AfD, for example, refers to British studies on the risk of childhood infection in support of a more family-friendly approach, it does not question the scientific basis of COVID-19 in principle, but is instead affirming science-orientation as a basis for the debate. It is no wonder that this kind of *claiming* makes little impression on all those who think COVID-19 is a product of governmental fear politics or simply *fake*. Against this background, it does not come as a surprise that the AfD has changed its position – a strategy that aims at regaining the status as the 'true alternative' to government. It no longer belongs to the camp of the 'safety first' supporters, but to the 'individual rights first' representatives. It is no longer focused on the right measures to protect the population during the crisis, but on the 'Corona measures crisis' (Höchst, 29/05/2020), or simply on the 'lockdown crisis' (e.g. Protschka, 13/05/2020).

In the eyes of AfD politicians, this was a reflex to the state's Corona policy (Spangenberg, 23/04/2020). However, there can be no doubt that the change of position within the AfD itself took place relatively quickly. For example, the co-chair of the parliamentary group Weidel characterized the situation on March 4 in the German Bundestag with the sentence: '*We are at the beginning of a*

*Corona epidemic*' (Weidel, 04/03/2020). A good week later, MP Holm swore that the Germans have to come together in the crisis (Holm, 13/03/2020). And his colleague Hess added concrete demands, including the immediate nationwide closure of all schools and public institutions, a ban on entry of people from high-risk areas and the cancellation of mass events. '*Anyone who does not act decisively now,*' said Hess (13/30/2020), 'increases the probability that the crisis will get out of control, as it did in Italy.'

After the Bund and Länder agreed on March 22 on strict COVID-19 measures, the AfD immediately began to change its position towards '*individual rights first.*' '*What alternatives are there to the current course?*' Gauland (25/03/2020), co-chair of the parliamentary group of the AfD, linked his question with the demand for a time limit on protective measures, and argued that the government's policies are excessive and economically damaging. This set the tone for others: In the long run, Jongen said, these measures can neither be financed nor sustained, especially since they ignore the social costs of such crisis management (e.g., 22/04/2020). Therefore, back to normality – the faster, the better (e.g. v. Storch, 07/05/2020). From May onwards, this position was enriched with accusations that the government exploits the COVID-19 measures to pursue other purposes: the desire to distract from past failures (e.g. Hemmelgarn, 13/05/2020); the effort to expand governmental power (Wolfgang Wiehle, 15/05/2020); the plan to push through socialist utopias (Huber, 19/06/2020) or a sell-out of the country (Kotré, 27/05/2020)

Especially the accusations against the government of panic-mongering (e.g. Kotré, 06/05/2020), in order to incapacitate citizens (e.g. Witt, 02/07/2020), were suitable to join the new-APO against the government's COVID-19 policies. So far, the response to this politicization strategy has had no discernible effect. The AfD is not among the winners of the COVID-19 crisis in public opinion (<https://www.wahlrecht.de/umfragen/index.htm>): To the extent that state institutions, especially the government, have gained in confidence (Forsa, 02/09/2020), the survey results for the AfD are relatively meagre during the pandemic so far.

## **5. Conclusion**

During the past crises, especially during the high time of migration in 2015, the AfD was perceived as the 'true opposition' by many of those who were dissatisfied with the migration and integration policies of the German government. The party succeeded in attracting and mobilizing voters (Geiges 2018), compared to the CSU, because its criticism was always harsher and more extreme in rhetoric and demands than that of other critics. In this polarized field of migration policy this kind of radical approach helped in 'outbidding' the CSU and others because large parts of the citizenry viewed the AfD's performance as authentic and gave the party credit for it, particularly in the eastern parts of Germany. The COVID-19 crisis is different for two reasons.

First, the AfD itself became a victim of 'outbidding' by the APO, since the 'real opposition' takes place outside of parliament in the streets at 'Corona parties' and demonstrations in which many participants are not only criticizing, but resisting the government's Corona policies. Compared to this amount of resistance, the AfD appears to be part of the establishment due to its 'safety first' logic of *naming*, *blaming* and *claiming* in the beginning of the pandemic in Germany, which largely stayed within the government's narrative of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, the AfD failed to get the media's attention. In the early phase of the emergence of the pandemic in Germany this attention was absorbed by the intergovernmental conflict between the different government's Corona positions and policies. Now the media focus has shifted to the non-compliance of the Corona-APO with whom the AfD tries to connect, but without much success in terms of the limelight. However, this can change again relatively quickly, namely if the AfD succeeds in establishing a linkage between the government's Corona policy and the issue of migration (as for the attempts on part of the AfD). The other parties have so far been unable to find

a recipe against the AfD's winning theme of migration. The COVID-19 pandemic may have only postponed this problem, but not eliminated it.

## References

- Geiges, L. (2018) Wie die AfD im Kontext der 'Flüchtlingskrise' mobilisierte. Eine empirische-qualitative Untersuchung der 'Herbstoffensive 2015'. *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, 28(1): 49–69.
- Ignazi, P. (1992) The silent counter-revolution. Hypotheses on the emergence of extreme right-wing parties in Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 22(1): 3–34.
- Laakso, M. & Taagepera, R. (1979) 'Effective' Number of Parties: A Measure with Application to West Europe. *Comparative Political Studies*, 12(1): 3–27.
- Manow, P. (2018) *Die Politische Ökonomie des Populismus*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Rosenfelder, J. (2017) Die Programmatik Der AfD: Inwiefern Hat sie sich von einer primär euroskeptischen zu einer rechtspopulistischen Partei entwickelt? *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen*, 48(1): 123–140.
- Sartori, G. (1976). *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*. Cambridge: CUP.