

# **'Criminal foreigners out!' On the normalization of extreme far-right positions through politically motivated communication on crime**

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## **Shift in discourse and normalization of far-right positions**

The increasing adoption of far-right narratives in the political center can be analyzed within the framework of the theory of discourse shift. A central concept in this context is the so-called overton window, which describes which political positions are considered acceptable in a certain social context (Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 2019). The window shifts when previously radical positions gradually appear as legitimate contributions to the public debate through repeated reproduction and strategic communication. Far-right extremist actors use targeted mechanisms to shift the discourse by underpinning narratives such as 'Criminal foreigners out!' with supposedly factual arguments and selective statistics. In doing so, they use a strategy, that Mudde (2019) describes as something of a hinge: Far-right extremist parties and movements formulate positions that are initially rejected by the center of society, but are gradually de-tabooed through repeated inclusion in the media and political discourse. This process does not happen in isolation, but in interaction with established political actors, who – partly for electoral reasons – take up far-right extremist narratives, weaken them or transform them into supposedly moderate demands (Wodak, 2015). Another central concept in the analysis of far-right populist discourse strategies is the so-called culture war, which the New Right in particular uses to construct a social enemy image. In the context of migration-related crime discourse, this means the targeted juxtaposition of a threatened majority society and a group that is constructed as threatening and associated with crime, violence and insecurity. The recourse to law-and-order narratives reinforces this dichotomization and enables positions critical of migration to be presented as legitimate security interests, while voices critical of anti-immigration policies are delegitimized as naïve or unrealistic (Haller, 2017).

The adoption and dissemination of such narratives by democratic parties and the media contributes to the normalization of previously extreme far-right positions

in the long term. Far-right-populist parties are increasingly relying on discursive connectivity to the political center, especially in the areas of crime and migration, in order to make their issues socially acceptable. This process is reinforced by media logics that contribute to the emotionalization of public debates through sensationalism, selective reporting and polarizing frames (Eberl et al., 2018). The analysis of the shift in discourse shows that far-right positions not only enter the public sphere through explicit political demands, but also through subtle linguistic shifts that legitimize far-right argumentation patterns. Terms such as ‘remigration,’ ‘parallel societies’ or ‘imported criminality’ are examples of linguistic constructions that originated in far-right contexts, but are now also being adopted by conservative and liberal actors (Meyer, 2024).

### Crime, politics & far-right extremism

Although crime rates in Germany have been falling for decades and the risk of becoming a victim of crime is continuously decreasing, crime and internal security remain key election issues (Kerner, 1994; Singelstein & Kunz, 2021). Hardly any campaign, whether at local, state or national level, can do without constantly outbidding apocalyptic tales about how crime is becoming more and more widespread and how the respective campaigners intend to counter this with law-and-order policies (Singelstein & Kunz, 2021). The basis for this is usually the police crime statistics (Polizeiliche Kriminalstatistik; PKS). The fact that these are hardly meaningful for the actual occurrence of crime and, due to their distortions, often even suggest false circumstances (Heinz, 2024; Singelstein & Kunz, 2021) is basic criminological knowledge that will only be discussed by way of example in this article. Much more important here is the contribution that the presentation of the PKS for 2023 has made to the shift in discourse. The tenor of the Federal Minister of the Interior at the press conference for the presentation, as well as the parliamentary debate in the Bundestag, the federal parliament, and the resonance in many media reports, was unanimous: there has been a sharp increase in non-German suspects. The conclusion drawn from this is that migration has led to more crime in Germany (Heinz, 2024).

The narrative of ‘criminal foreigners’ is not new, crime and immigration are often linked. In particular those who are perceived as foreign are generally assumed to have a greater tendency to commit a crime. Especially racialized people thus become a projection surface for ascriptions of criminality. Far-right extremist political actors in particular have recognized the racist logic behind this as a way to give their narratives a veneer of respectability and make themselves socially acceptable. This works above all because the underlying biologicistic and cultural manifestations of racism are widespread and can be found deep in the political center of society (Zick

& Mokros, 2023) thus creating points of contact far beyond the (supposed) fringes of far-right extremist parts of society (Singelstein & Kunz, 2021).

In research right-wing extremism is defined as follows:

"Attitude patterns whose unifying characteristic is ideas of inequality. In the political sphere, these are expressed in an affinity for dictatorial forms of government, chauvinistic attitudes and a trivialization or justification of National Socialism. In the social sphere, they are characterized by anti-Semitic, xenophobic and social Darwinist attitudes." (Decker & Brähler, 2006, p. 20; own translation)

Enmity of foreigners in the form of xenophobia works by valorizing the self-group ('Germans') against the devaluation of the foreign group ('foreigners'). This dynamic is a long-standing component of German consciousness that can be found in the history of both the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. Despite constant migration to both German states, which was desired by state and society, there was never any real recognition of Germany as a post-migrant and multicultural society, so that a pronounced separation of 'Germans' and 'migrants' can still be seen in both the state and society today. The slogan 'Foreigners out!' is therefore a traditional component of far-right extremist demands, but in different variations it also enjoys a high level of approval, at least in some areas, which is continuing to rise and has recently even reached a majority of people in Germany (Decker et al., 2024). Xenophobia has thus developed into a kind of gateway drug that enables extreme far-right parties to mobilize their own supporters and also develop appeal outside closed far-right milieus (Decker et al., 2024).

Narratives of the extreme far right often revolve around a threat to the constructed self-group from outside or inside. When it comes to crime and migration, it is assumed that migrants are particularly prone to crime and violence and thus become an invasive threat that despises the German state, its society and its laws. Based on this, an apocalyptic picture is painted, according to which the German people constructed in this way are threatened with extinction due to 'asylum abuse' and the 'import of crime' (Rippl & Seipel, 2022; Schulze, 2021). In the social media strategies of extreme far-right parties, for example, migrant men in particular are portrayed as a threat to women, children and general safety, and this type of scare-mongering and threat projection succeeds in gaining reach far beyond the immediate supporters (Rippl & Seipel, 2022). The modern veneer of such campaigns should not obscure the fact that they are classic strategies of the (post)fascist extreme far right. Christoph Butterwege writes in this context:

"The thrust (...) is aimed at a nationalist or racist treatment (...). (...) If foreigners are not attacked across the board, they are (...) divided into those who live in accordance with the law and those who are criminals. The campaign strategy is very

simple: foreigners are equated with criminals (multicultural society = multicroiminal society)". (Butterwegge, 2002, p. 55f; own translation)

## Recording crime in Germany & current developments regarding foreign suspects

In the vast majority of cases, the basis for media reporting and political discourse on crime in Germany is the PKS. It has been published annually by the Federal Criminal Police Office (Bundeskriminalamt) since 1953 and is usually accompanied by a great deal of media and political attention. It records (with a few exceptions) the crimes known to the police and 'solved' by them. The PKS is a so-called output statistic, because it only contains the final processed crimes. This means that the cases are only included in the statistic once the police investigations have been completed and the files have been handed over to the public prosecutor's office. The PKS thus only depicts the reported crime, that's known to the police. In addition to reported crime, there is also the so-called dark figure of crime, that includes crimes that do not come to the attention of the police. How large the respective reported and dark figures are depends, for example, on how likely people are to report to the police or what priorities the police set in the prosecution of crimes (Bundeskriminalamt, 2024b). In principle, however, it can be said that there is no clear relationship between the reported and dark figure areas of crime and the PKS therefore has little to no significance for assessing the actual state of crime (Heinz, 2024).

The presentation of the most recent PKS in 2024 regarding the 2023 reporting period drew particular attention to so-called 'foreigner crime'.<sup>1</sup> For example, 41.1% of suspects were foreign nationals, while they make up only 14.6% of the population. The number of non-German children and adolescents suspected of violent crime also increased by 28.4%. Overall, there were also 17.8% more foreign suspects, an increase that was still at 13.5% even when adjusted for immigration law violations, i.e. offenses that can only be committed by non-Germans (Bundeskriminalamt, 2024b).

## Political reactions to the 2023 PKS and its relationship to far-right extremism

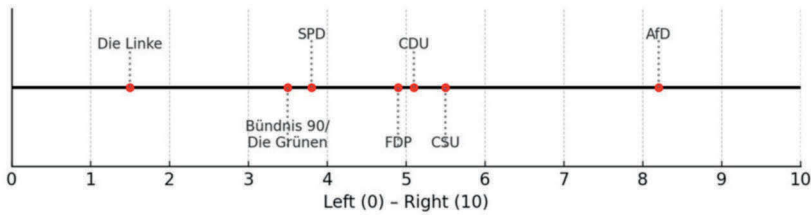
For a better understanding of the political classification of the following reactions, a brief overview of the political scale of the Federal Republic of Germany should first be presented here. As part of a representative survey conducted in 2020, the SINUS

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1 The PKS defines the status of 'foreigner' by a lack of German citizenship.

Institute showed how people in Germany would classify the parties represented in the Bundestag at that time on a left (0)-right (10) scale:

*Perception of political parties on a left-right scale (own representation based on: SINUS, 2020). The respondents rated the parties with the values 1.5 (Die Linke)<sup>2</sup>, 3.5 (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen)<sup>3</sup>, 3.8 (SPD)<sup>4</sup>, 4.9 (FDP)<sup>5</sup>, 5.1 (CDU)<sup>6</sup>, 5.5 (CSU)<sup>7</sup> and 8.2 (AfD)<sup>8</sup> (SINUS, 2020).*



At the press conference to present the PKS 2023, the Social Democratic Federal Minister of the Interior and Homeland, Nancy Faeser (SPD, 3.8 on the left-right scale), was quoted as follows with regard to the high proportion of 'foreigner crime' in the PKS: *"Anyone who doesn't play by the rules has to go. (...) [One must] talk [about the topic] without shyness and without resentment. (...) Increasing migration has led to more crimes."* (quote in Lemkemeyer, 2024; own translation)

Her cabinet colleague, the Green Party's Cem Özdemir (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 3.5 on the left-right scale), Federal Minister of Food and Agriculture, made the following comments on a short message platform: *"The crime statistics figures should give us pause for thought. Anyone who comes to Germany to seek protection and commits a crime*

- 2 Left-wing socialist party, formed from the merger of the successor party to the ruling communist party of former East Germany and West German left-wing groups (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2025e).
- 3 Green-progressive party, emerged from East German civil rights activists and West German environmental activists (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2025b).
- 4 Social Democratic Party, which emerged from the 19<sup>th</sup> century workers' movement and is the oldest party still in existence in Germany (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2025g).
- 5 Liberal party with a focus on individual freedom, market economy principles, less state and more personal responsibility for people (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2025f).
- 6 Conservative, Christian-social party (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2025c).
- 7 Bavarian sister party of the CDU with similar conservative values. Increased emphasis on regional identity and Bavarian traditions (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2025d).
- 8 Right-wing populist and, at least in part, far-right extremist party. Its radical and populist positions include national conservatism, anti-migration and euro-criticism (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2025a).

*here cannot expect leniency. They have to leave our country again. This cannot be trivialized as a social problem.” (Özdemir, 2024; own translation)*

Conservative member of the Bundestag Andrea Lindholz (CDU, 5.1 on the left-right scale) said in a special parliamentary session on the occasion of the PKS 2023: *“Germany has been getting less safe for two years now, and this is mainly due to the sharp rise in foreigner crime.” (Deutscher Bundestag, 2024; own translation)*

Her Liberal colleague Konstantin Kuhle (FDP, 4.9 on the left-right scale) also sounded a similar note in the session: *“[There is] a tendency towards violence in certain circles, especially among young men with a migration background.” (Deutscher Bundestag, 2024; own translation)*

Although these politicians cover the democratic spectrum, at least from moderate-left to conservative, what they have in common is that they all take up and reproduce the far-right narrative ‘Criminal foreigners out!’ Before going into this further, however, it is first necessary to examine the extent to which the PKS 2023 actually allows the conclusions drawn here.

## Empirical findings on so-called foreigner crime

Contrary to Cem Özdemir’s steep thesis that crime cannot be trivialized as a social problem, crime is first and foremost just that, a social phenomenon (Singelstein & Kunz, 2021). In order to understand the phenomenon of crime, it must be reiterated that it takes place in two areas, the reported crime and the dark figure of crime. The reported area of crime includes all offenses that come to the attention of the investigating authorities. Accordingly, the PKS covers that area almost completely for Germany. On the other hand, there is the dark figure, which includes all crimes that have occurred but of which the investigating authorities never become aware. There is no relational relationship between those two areas. This means that developments that can be observed in the reported area of crime do not necessarily also take place in the dark figure area and that characteristics that occur in the reported area (e.g. nationality, age, gender, type of offense, location, etc.) can in no way be regarded as representative of the dark figure or crime as a whole (Heinz, 2024). In order to shed light – in the truest sense of the word – on the darkness, there are a number of research undertakings that are used to brighten up the dark figure and through which, at least in part, statements and assumptions can be made about the actual occurrence of crime.

If we now try to approach so-called foreigner crime in this way, it must first be said that the Federal Criminal Police Office itself also points out that no statements can be made about the actual incidence of crime from the PKS and its situation reports (Bundeskriminalamt, 2024a). The federal police also points out that 24% of foreign suspects alone come from so-called migration-related offenses, i.e. offenses that German citizens cannot commit at all (Bundeskriminalamt, 2024b). In

addition, the German criminologist Wolfgang Heinz comes to the conclusion, based on the PKS, that crime committed by foreign nationals has decreased over the long term since 1994 at roughly the same rate or even slightly more than crime committed by German nationals (Heinz, 2024).

In the area of the dark figure a number of studies provide indications of the extent to which people without German citizenship or those with a 'history of migration' actually show criminal behavior in comparison to German citizens or those without a 'history of migration.' Heinz (2024) has conducted a comprehensive analysis of the media and political discourse surrounding the PKS 2023. Among other things, he points out that it is almost impossible to make statements about the scope, structure and development of crime as a whole, as, apart from the less informative PKS, even dark figure research can only shed light on sections of the actual crime occurrence and make assessments based on this (Heinz, 2024).

In his analysis, Heinz points out a number of factors that indicate that the PKS is by no means a true reflection of the reality of crime, but rather a distortion. With regard to findings from criminological research on non-German suspects, the following seems particularly relevant:

1. **Reporting behavior:** The PKS primarily provides information on the willingness of the population to report crime. Studies on the reporting rate show, on the one hand, that a large proportion of all crimes are not targeted by law enforcement authorities as a result of original police work, but through reports from the public and, above all, that the reporting rate varies greatly depending on the offense and the individual characteristics of those involved (Heinz, 2024).<sup>9</sup> For example, regular, representative studies carried out by the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony among the federal states 9<sup>th</sup> grade students show that migrants are up to twice as likely to be reported in the event of a violent crime than Germans 'without a history of migration' for the same offense (Bergmann et al., 2017; Bergmann et al., 2019; Dreißigacker et al., 2023; Krieg et al., 2020). This is consistent with other research findings on the willingness to report crimes committed by foreigners, which indicate that there is an increased motivation to involve the investigating authorities if the perpetrator is perceived as foreign (Atanisev et al., 2019; Singelnstein & Kunz, 2021).

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9 In addition, because the PKS essentially only provides information on the criminal offenses that have become known and have been processed by the police, it does not provide any information on actual convictions. It is thus based on the PKS not possible to determine whether a suspect actually committed the offense.

2. **Police behavior:** Not every report is actually recorded by the police, and the assumption that the police would act in accordance with the principle of legality<sup>10</sup> and really investigate every suspected crime with equal intensity can be considered empirically refuted (Heinz, 2024). At the same time, there are at least indications that police action in Germany can also be biased and that people who are perceived or racialized as non-German, for example, are more likely to end up in the PKS than those who are not (Heinz, 2024; Singelstein & Derin, 2022; Singelstein & Kunz, 2021). For example, people who are perceived as foreign on the basis of external characteristics state that they are checked by the police twice as often as those who appear to be local in their appearance (Müller & Wittlif, 2023; Singelstein & Kunz, 2021).
3. **Technically induced overestimation of frequency figures:** Crime is, among other ways, presented in the PKS in the form of so-called frequency figures. For this the number of offenses is set in relation to the resident population. If people without German citizenship and without official registration status (e.g. because they are tourists, cross-border commuters, business travelers or have only recently migrated to Germany) commit a crime and this is recorded in the PKS, the number of crimes increases, but not that of the resident population. This results in distortion effects, but no statement can be made about the exact amount.<sup>11</sup> However, it can be assumed that this effect is particularly pronounced in phases of increasing migration to Germany (e.g. due to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine).
4. **Differences in the group compositions Germans and Non-Germans:** A comparison of the crime rate between Germans and non-Germans would only make sense if both groups were comparable in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics and criminogenic factors. In reality, however, this is not the case. For example, the two groups differ considerably in their age and gender structure. This is particularly significant because the proportion of young men in the non-German population is significantly higher and young men (regardless of their origin, age or nationality, for example) are at a significantly higher risk of crime. It is also significant that non-Germans are more likely to live in large cities, are more likely to belong to lower income and education groups and are more likely

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10 The principle of legality (Legalitätsprinzip; also referred to as the obligation to prosecute) obliges criminal prosecution authorities in Germany, in accordance with Section 152 (2) of the Code of Criminal Procedure (Strafprozessordnung), to investigate and bring charges if there is sufficient suspicion of a crime. It serves the equal treatment of all citizens and the enforcement of the state's right to prosecute. Restrictions result from the opportunity principle, for example in the case of minor offenses (Sections 153 et seq. of the German Code of Criminal Procedure).

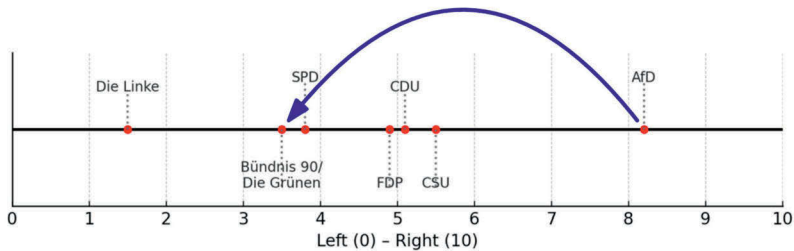
11 However, Heinz (2024) estimates that in some years up to 40% of the non-German suspects are non-residency-registration-required persons.



to be unemployed. All of these factors contribute to the risk of crime, regardless of ethnicity or nationality, as they do to the risk of being prosecuted by the police if the law is broken (Heinz, 2024).

Explicit dark figure research provides more information on how crime is distributed, for example, along the line of 'migration background.' Studies from various German federal states regularly come to the conclusion that there are hardly any differences in self-reported delinquency between young people with and without a 'migration background' (Heinz, 2019).<sup>12</sup> In addition, there are indications from smaller studies, at least for the subgroup of migrant workers, that they behave more law-abidingly than comparable natives (Geißler, 2008).

*Shift of the narrative 'Criminal foreigners out!' on the left-right scale of political parties (own representation based on: SINUS, 2020).*



The bottom line of a scientific analysis of so-called foreigner crime is, firstly, that it is not possible to make serious statements about it on the basis of the PKS and, secondly, that, at least for the areas illuminated by dark figure research, it can be assumed that nationality, 'migration background' or ethnic attribution do not play a significant role in whether someone behaves criminally or not. The fact that the political reactions to the PKS in 2024 are nevertheless moving in a similar direction across the entire political spectrum makes it particularly clear how the narrative 'Criminal foreigners out!' has moved out of the far-right political spectrum. While it would traditionally be expected from a party like the AfD (8.2 on the left-right

12 In addition, taking into account control variables such as gender, residential environment, level of education, experience of parental violence or a delinquent peer group, higher crime rates among young people with a 'migration background' in certain fields proved not to be specific to the 'migration background,' but rather to those socio-economic and demographic factors (Heinz, 2019; Krieg et al., 2020).

scale), it now extends all the way to Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, which is perceived as more moderate on the left of the political spectrum (3.5 on the left-right scale).<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

The slogan ‘Criminal foreigners out!’, which was traditionally associated with the extreme far-right spectrum, is now also being adopted – in a weakened or implicit form – by political parties from the center to the left. This development is closely linked to the political and media staging of crime statistics. The PKS in particular serves as the basis for arguments critical of migration, although their informative value is considerably limited due to methodological distortions and structural selectivity. Although crime is not a phenomenon of origin but a social phenomenon, migration-related crime narratives can be observed more and more frequently in political debates, especially in reactions to the 2023 PKS. This creates the impression that migration is a primary driver of crime, contrary to conclusive research findings on that topic.

The political reaction to the 2023 PKS makes it clear that crime discourses critical of migration are no longer only instrumentalized by far-right extremist actors. Rather, politicians from the democratic spectrum are also reproducing narratives – sometimes probably consciously, sometimes seemingly without reflection – that directly link crime and migration. It can be seen that even parties with a moderate left to liberal political position formulate demands for tougher measures against non-German criminals and thus adopt far-right extremist argumentation patterns. This discursive convergence of democratic parties with extreme far-right positions should not only be understood as a strategic election campaign tactic but also indicates a far-reaching transformation of political communication patterns. This process harbors far-reaching social risks. The adoption and dissemination of far-right narratives by political and media actors contributes to the creeping normalization of positions that were previously rejected as extreme. This not only leads to a shift in the boundaries of what can be said, but also legitimizes racist and authoritarian political approaches in the long term. The public discourse on crime and migration is increasingly characterized by truncated and emotionalized representations that can deepen social divisions and undermine democratic principles.

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13 Fittingly, the newly elected party leader Felix Banaszak, who is considered to belong to the left wing of the Greens, was also quoted in a television interview: “*Maximum severity is needed here [violent crimes by foreigners]. (...) And I am absolutely clear on this: anyone who forfeits the right here, who abuses the right that is given to them. Then they have also forfeited it. (...) People who commit brutal acts of violence, kill people and all that have no place in this country in the long term.*” (quote in ZDF, 2024; own translation)

Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need for crime discourses to be based more on empirical scientific evidence. An evidence-based crime policy must move away from populist simplifications and instead focus on a differentiated analysis of the actual causes and structures of crime. This includes the consideration of socio-economic factors, the reflection of institutional selection mechanisms and the critical analysis of media and political narratives. Only a well-founded examination of the complex connections between crime, social inequality and social patterns of perception can prevent security policy debates from being instrumentalized to legitimize discriminatory and exclusionary policies. Furthermore, a critical reflection of political responsibility is necessary in this discourse. The willingness of democratic parties to use narratives critical of migration should not be seen merely as a pragmatic adaptation to public moods, but as a potentially momentous normalization of far-right positions. Political communication on crime and migration therefore requires a high degree of sensitivity and differentiation in order to prevent far-right ideologies from being gradually transferred into the social mainstream through discursive connectivity.

In summary, it can be seen that the discursive linking of crime and migration has become a central instrument of political debate that has an impact far beyond far-right extremist milieus. The reproduction of anti-migration crime narratives by democratic actors contributes to establishing social enemy stereotypes and emotionalizing security policy debates. Evidence-based crime research and differentiated political and media reporting are therefore essential in order to counteract the further normalization of far-right extremist positions and enable an objective, fact-based debate on crime and its causes.

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