

Constructions of Threats to the “Volk” in Right-Wing Online Discourses and Their Reinforcement by Cosmopolitan Processes

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Abstract *The contribution deals with constructions of threats in (extreme) right-wing online discourses. These include feminism and gender discourses, abortion, immigration and birth rates, and the chapter focuses on German speaking contexts. It also includes examples of constructions of threats by abortion of the right-catholic website Kath.net. The described threat constructions refer to feminist and human rights achievements, which are regarded as intimidating and endangering. Based on the assumptions of Ulrich Beck concerning cosmopolitanism, I outline how the background of cosmopolitanism can reinforce these threat constructions. Thereby, emancipatory processes become an even greater threat, as they enable legal access to abortion, the disturbance of biological and traditional gender roles and ideas of family, which aggravates the preservation of the “Volk”. This can reinforce existing uncertainties and enable right-wing online narratives to appear efficacious, which may lead to a more rapid dissemination of those narratives, which may thus be more easily adopted by people.*

1. Introduction

In a postdigital world the consideration of online phenomena has become inevitable when analyzing societal changes and challenges. As Fergal Lenehan argues, the material world is “[...] engraved with a web of various cosmopolitanisms embedded in the digital, which may be seen as a *labyrinth of postdigital cosmopolitanisms* (...) [emphasis in the original]” (Lenehan, 2022: 15–16). In view of growing right-wing tendencies in e.g. Germany, Italy, Austria, and the United States of America, the discussion of right-wing discourses may be seen as intertwined with the online communicative space. As Simon Strick (2021: 22) points out, far-right sentiments are constantly present in the intimate public spheres of the internet, they determine the climate of discourse and are readily available to very many people with mass effect. This also applies to opposition to emancipatory achievements, mainly through opposition to feminism and discourses regarding gender as well as reproductive rights.

In recent years, discussions and struggles for physical self-determination and legal access to abortions have repeatedly been a topic for discussion in public media.¹ In some cases, the overturn of reproductive rights is linked with these growing right-wing discourses. Among these was the reversal of the *Roe v. Wade* ruling in the United States, which ensured access to abortion nationwide and was overturned by the Supreme Court on June 24, 2022.²

Emancipatory efforts, including e.g. the dissolution of traditional and hierarchical gender roles, self-determination regarding sexuality and the lifeworld, and struggles for minority rights, as well as the facilitation of access to abortion, have been rejected by various actors. Among them are far-right actors; so-called “pro-life” activists as well as Christian fundamentalists. They shape discourses surrounding abortion, e.g. abortion is labelled the “killing of unborn children”. Thereby, constructions of an extremely powerful feminism or gender discourse is created, to which a totalitarian suppression of self-determined life choices is attributed.

The following contribution deals with these various constructions of threat in (extreme) right-wing online discourses, focusing on German speaking contexts. Herein, I will show how such constructions of threats related to emancipatory processes are created. Also, considering the above-cited notion of cosmopolitanisms in the postdigital world (Lenehan, 2022: 16), I use assumptions regarding cosmopolitanism emanating from Ulrich Beck, to show how such constructions of threat are actually reinforced through cosmopolitan processes.

When talking about right-wing discourses, with a focus on German speaking discourse and Germany, a brief clarification regarding the terms used here is nec-

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- 1 Legal access to abortion enables potentially pregnant persons to decide themselves about their own body and lifestyle. Demands for bodily autonomy are part of emancipatory struggles because denying this access incapacitates such persons, as they are denied the right to make decisions concerning their bodies. The denial of bodily autonomy for potentially pregnant persons also upholds supposedly natural ways of living, such as the heterosexual nuclear family and the role of women as mothers, as the norm. This corresponds to a patriarchal, supposedly “natural” (and possibly God-given) social order. Questioning and dissolving such norms is part of emancipatory and feminist struggles, in which the struggle for rights to bodily autonomy continues to play a role. In addition to that, Antje Schrupp (2022: 45) states that it is important to point out why it is immoral and unethical, if third parties or society claims to decide about the bodies of pregnant persons.
 - 2 In Poland abortion has been de facto banned since new regulations introduced by the former PiS-government of October 2020, but under the new prime minister after the latest election in October 2023, the abortion law is set to be loosened. Abortion is also criminalized in Austria with similar regulations as in Germany (where abortion is classified as a criminal offence, but which remains unpunished under certain conditions such as a consultation and a three-day “consideration period”); in Italy abortion is currently permitted within the first 90 days of pregnancy, although it might yet be restricted under the new far-right, and fiercely anti-abortion, government (effective February 2024).

essary. As Manès Weisskircher points out, due to historical reasons, the term right-wing is used differently in German than in other European languages where political actors often use descriptions such as "la droite" for themselves, while in Germany "[...] the centre-right usually prefers to refer to itself as 'conservative'" (Weisskircher, 2024: 10). English-language publications often follow the definition of far-right as an umbrella term, with a focus on nativism and authoritarianism as suggested by Cas Mudde (2007) (cited in Weisskircher, 2024: 9). I follow the common use of the term far-right where appropriate, but look to be as specific as possible when discussing right-wing discourses in Germany. At the same time, I wish to refrain from using the description of "conservative" when actually speaking of right-wing discourses, to avoid the danger of trivializing these discourses.

For the present topic it is important to note the specific effects of online spheres as an important ground for the dissemination of right-wing discourses. After pointing out some of those effects, the construction of threat by feminism and gender is illustrated, followed by the construction of threat by abortion. Here, an illustration how abortion is constructed as a threat by using examples from the right-wing Catholic website Kath.net is included. I will then outline the construction of threat by immigration and birth rates, which remains partly intertwined with abortion. Afterwards, I describe some arguments regarding cosmopolitan societies, arguing that (some) cosmopolitan processes actually reinforce the constructions of threat towards the so-called "Volk"³, particularly evident in the role of women as mothers.

2. Research Context

The present contribution examines the phenomena of antifeminism, anti-abortion activism and the far-right in online spheres. I thereby focus on opposition to abortion as well as emancipatory gender discourses and feminism, seen as components of antifeminism. For the English-speaking world, the work of Debbie Ging and Eugenia Siapera (Ging & Siapera, 2019), *Gender Hate Online: Understanding the New Anti-Feminism* remains a central text when dealing with digital anti-emancipatory discourses. Regarding the phenomena of anti-abortion activists online, research does exist, e.g. on groups of violent Christians in the UK (Littler, 2020). As for the German context, works of actors and discourses countering abortion can be primarily found concerning the so called *Lebensschutz* [pro-life] movement (Sanders et al., 2018), or on the reproduction and population policy of the far-right so-called "Identitarian Movement" (see Goetz, 2020). Important contributions relating to the far-right are

3 The "Volk" is seen as a "descent- and generation-crossing »Zeugungsgemeinschaft« [emphasis in the original]" (Kellersohn, 2018: 63), which means something like a procreation community [translation by Alina Jugenheimer. All translations by the author, except where stated].

to be seen in the anthology *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right* (Fielitz & Thurston, 2019). As the editors stress, a differentiation of online and offline practices will not be useful anymore, as “(...) contemporary protest politics is fundamentally post-digital” (Albrecht et al., 2019: 9). Especially conveyed narratives and contents cannot be easily separated between online and offline narratives. However, there may be differences in the effects of providing right-wing narratives in online spheres. Based on the aforementioned work, this chapter discusses right-wing anti-abortion activists online and their intersection with other anti-democratic narratives and describes how threat constructions are reinforced against the background of cosmopolitanism.

3. The Internet and the Dissemination of Right-Wing Discourses

In a postdigital world, online spheres are permanently available, part of daily-life and have become easier to use as “(...) the internet is now always-on, always-there, and always in mind for the vast majority of the world and for every social group and nation-state” (Hunsinger et al., 2020: vi). Thus, digital activism is increasing also in Germany, where various online spheres of the far-right have emerged in recent years (Volk, 2022: 102). The internet, including social media, thereby functions as a partly uncontrolled area where right-wing extremism can receive new impetus, mainly by providing dramatic narratives of a national threat in the digital sphere (Fielitz & Marcks, 2020: 160). The dissemination of such narratives and the construction of (non-real) threats have also increased more dramatically meaning threatening content in online space due to the *disinhibition effect* (Suler, 2004). Through this disinhibition, narratives of threats such as emancipatory gender discourses, feminism, abortion or migration can be loaded dramatically by drastic statements and language, which can amplify the perceived threat. The online sphere facilitates instant reactions to global events and thereby enables the use of these for threat constructions or the construction of threatening changes observed in other parts of the world. Moreover, it is possible to contextualize events for one’s own agenda in a very short time.

Next to the dissemination of right-wing narratives and discourses in online spheres, such narratives and discourses, also including threat constructions for the “Volk”, are supported by online effects such as the echo chamber effect. Cinelli et al. (2021: 1) “[...] broadly define echo chambers as environments in which the opinion, political leaning, or belief of users about a topic gets reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers or sources having similar tendencies and attitudes.” In the context of echo chambers, threat constructions can be confirmed or even be sparked by like-minded individuals and therefore become more threatening. Another aspect supporting this, is the idea that supposedly everyone can become a self-appointed expert on almost every topic. Due to the constant availability and flood of infor-

mation on social media and online platforms, supposed knowledge about almost everything can theoretically be acquired by most people and afterwards be disseminated among like-minded groups and underpin the constructed threats. This can very often be highly problematic, especially when the acquired and widespread information is not based on facts, or only partially so. Thereby fake news is spread, and it also has significance in relation to the supporting of threat constructions. As Ruth Wodak points out, more and more people rely solely on information in their own echo-chambers and consider information apart from that as fake news (Wodak, 2020: 81).

4. Threat Constructions in Right-Wing Online Discourses

Often combined with threat constructions of right-wing extremism, there are threat constructions regarding emancipatory and feminist achievements, such as rights for (bodily) self-determination. Also, there are constructions of threat by immigration, mainly immigration from countries that are allegedly not fitting to the construction of the “Volk” as a homogenous, white and Christian people. Most of these threat constructions are based on the aim of preserving hierarchical gender relations and the supposed homogeneity of the people, the so-called “Volk”. In right-wing discourses, a threat to the supposed “Volk” is constructed, with reference to often dramatic and hazardous narratives and expressions. Such constructions can be found in the online context of various actors including the extreme right.

4.1 Construction of Threat by Feminism and Gender Discourses

One pattern of opposing emancipatory achievements is to take action against feminism and gender discourses themselves. Thereby, feminism and gender discourses are constructed as the cause of the threat and are seen as responsible for harmful societal transformations. Such changes include the dissolution of gender roles, especially the role of women. In these discourses “woman” is seen as a biological concept. It includes childbirth as a supposedly natural desire of women and an important contribution for the “family” and the “Volk”. Family is thereby seen as the heterosexual nuclear family, limiting the concept of family to heterosexual relationships with children. Furthermore, the dissolution of sexual binaries is seen as a dangerous change. Thus, the very terms gender and feminism are themselves constructed as a threat. Birgit Sauer (2019, as cited in Birsl, 2020: 43) has argued that the term gender allows different actors to link the term with their concerns and to express them as a discourse of threat. Consequently, the construction of threat by feminism and gender discourses is able to consolidate various actors opposing the alleged danger coming from emancipatory achievements.

By constructing feminism and gender as a threat, they are re-constructed as ideological or totalitarian. Frequently, the narrative of a so-called “gender-ideology” is used to emphasize the alleged danger of the term, which is supposedly dangerous for children, women, families, or the “Volk”, where, depending on the narrative, often everything is threatened at the same time. The term “gender-ideology” can be ascribed to the Vatican, where the *Pontifical Council for the Family* mentioned the term for the first time in 2000 and recommended that it be investigated more thoroughly (Chołuj, 2015: 220). Such constructions of threat imply that gender discourses and feminism supposedly forbid one from living in freedom, whereby living in freedom in this context is equated with a form of living within a heterosexual nuclear family. The constructions of feminism and gender as threat suggest oppression, which is countered with the defence of a supposedly “natural” order – sometimes considered as God-given and therefore “natural” – and a self-declared fight for liberation from feminism and gender. Often, the self-declared struggle against feminism and gender is declared as a supposed struggle *for* women. However, women who do not conform to the role model of the biological concept of women are rejected because they are accused of being responsible for the impending destruction of “the family” and the “Volk”. Consequently, the narratives surrounding the constructed threat of feminism and gender discourses are about liberation *from* feminism and gender discourses, which are seen as threats to “the family” and therefore also the “Volk”.

4.2 Construction of Threat by Abortion

The right to legal access to abortion and therefore the right to bodily autonomy has been a very important part of emancipatory struggles. Consequently, the fight against abortion is embedded in a denial of these emancipatory struggles. By allowing legal access to abortion, it is possible not only to dissolve the ascribed and supposedly natural role of women as mothers but also the supposedly “natural” order of society which is considered fundamentally important to maintain the “Volk”. In general, feminist struggles for reproductive self-determination are countered by various actors. Actors of the extreme right often express this with the threat of an alleged “Volkstod [death of the nation]”: The term “Volkstod” expresses the fear that the German “Volk”, understood as a biological community of descent, is threatened by falling birth-rates, abortion and immigration (Botsch & Kopke, 2019: 9). Sonja Angelika Strube (2021: 54) points out that so-called “pro-life” activism, as probably the most morally respected orientation of anti-genderism, is particularly close to Christians and their institutions, and functions as a link between anti-genderism and explicitly extreme right-wing ideology. The opposition to abortion is a recurring public phenomenon in Germany. In a radical form it manifests itself, for example, at the annual “Marsch für das Leben [March for Life]” in September in Berlin, which took place simultaneously in Cologne for the first time in 2023

(Fromm et al., 2023), as well as in so-called pavement harassments in which anti-abortion activists harass pregnant persons, for example when seeking counselling services and medical interventions. This construction of threat by abortion not only links Christian and right-wing groups, but also enables other groups and actors to connect to this threat construction as long as they share the standpoint that emphasizes the supposed biological determination of gender. The latter can lead to the assumption that every person who has a womb has a supposedly “natural desire” to give birth. The aim of constructing a threat to the “Volk” due to abortion and the self-determination of pregnant persons is to preserve a homogeneous “Volk”, seen as a group of the same descent, of white and often of Christian people. Consequently, the construction of threat through abortion refers to the role of white (and Christian) women, as women without children are indirectly held responsible for such threat constructions, and feminism is often blamed for this. Besides that, the threat construction is supported by a generally critical attitude towards birth control measures. For example, Gabriele Kuby, a right-catholic anti-gender activist, sees the purpose of humans in the Creation of the Living and that humans are therefore fundamentally called to reproduce (Perintfalvi & Fischer, 2021: 254). This results in women being denied the right to self-determination, especially over their own bodies.

4.2.1 The Construction of Threat by Abortion on the Right-Catholic Website Kath.net

While political platforms do not necessarily take a position on religion and religious platforms do not necessarily position themselves on politics, Kath.net combines both topics and can therefore be seen as a right-wing Catholic platform. Kath.net covers a wide range of topics, including politics, the world church, family, and “pro-life” activism and views itself as a news portal (Kath.net, 2024). In general, the platform speaks out explicitly against abortion and makes the fight against reproductive rights part of their agenda (Kath.net, 2024). Key topics on Kath.net concerning the topic “pro-life” are, amongst others, the perception of abortion as a sin, referring to it as “killing children” and the focus on the alleged protection of children, whereby foetuses and embryos are also considered “children”. In various articles, narratives can be found which construct abortion as a threat.

For example, abortion is seen as a threat to heterosexual couples, respectively “family” and children. In an article (Kath.net 79017) it is claimed that in fertility laboratories children are supposedly killed:

“Rational ist die Wiederkehr des menschenfressenden Molochkultes nicht zu erklären. Und die perverse Schraube wird immer noch eine Windung weitergedreht. Nicht nur für “freie Liebe” darf man nun Kinder töten, nein auch für’s Mutterglück. Nichts Anderes passiert in den Befruchtungslabors, wo Unmengen von Embryo-

nen erzeugt und entsorgt werden, damit eine unfruchtbare Frau – oder ein schwules/lesbisches Paar – zu “ihrem Kind” kommt [The return of the Moloch cult cannot be explained rationally. And the perverse screw is turned still further. Children are now not only being killed for ‘free love’, but also for maternal happiness. Nothing else happens in the fertility laboratories, where vast numbers of embryos are created and disposed of so that an infertile woman – or a gay/lesbian couple – can have ‘their child’]” (Kath.net 79017).

This statement includes the narrative of abortion as killing children and at the same time claims that this happens primarily to assist certain women, assumed to be infertile, and non-heterosexual persons to have children. By using figurative language such as the phrase “Moloch cult”, the allegedly drastic effects of abortion are emphasized. Furthermore, the statement displays the profound antifeminist stand of Kath.net: By stating that the alleged killing of children is caused by non-heterosexual persons or certain women, an analogy between having children as a non-heterosexual couple and abortion itself as a sin is created. This points out that abortion is seen as a sin, but at the same time having children should only be possible for the heterosexual nuclear family, so abortion is seen as a threat to it.

Also, abortion is constructed as a threat to free speech. Media other than Kath.net itself are accused of spreading fake news concerning abortion. For example, the website claims that since the reversal of the *Roe vs. Wade* judgement the American media has supposedly promoted myths and half-truths regarding the consequences of abortion bans (Kath.net 79404, also Kath.net 79143), e.g. by stating that:

“Seit der Aufhebung des Urteils ‘Roe v. Wade’ verbreiten amerikanische Medien Mythen und Halbwahrheiten über mögliche Folgen von Abtreibungsverboten [Since the overturn of the ‘Roe v. Wade’ ruling, the American media has been spreading myths and half-truths about possible consequences of abortion bans]” (Kath.net 79404).

Part of the fight for reproductive rights is providing information about abortion as well as confronting the consequences if legal access to abortion is restricted. Thus Kath.net presents itself as a reputable news source.

Kath.net claims that the support of abortion is supposedly financially funded by e.g., billionaires, by former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer or Planned Parenthood (Kath.net 79983) as well as certain foundations (see e.g. Kath.net 80205), which indirectly refers to an alleged “Abortion Lobby”. This alleged lobby is also associated with politicians: “Buschmann betreibt Agenda der Abtreibungslobby [Buschmann pursues an abortion lobby agenda]” (Kath.net 78774) or they criticize how the supposed death of unborn children is allegedly turned into a business: “Wie kann eine Gesell-

schaft, die sich auch gerne als 'human' verstehen will, denen den Weg ebnet, die aus dem Tod ungeborener Kinder ein Geschäft gemacht haben? [How can a society that wants to see itself as 'humane' pave the way for those who have made a business of the death of unborn children?]" (Kath.net 78774).

By such claims, a supposedly powerful group is constructed, supported by financial means, which is allegedly able to influence politics. This shows parallels with antisemitic conspiracy narratives regarding powerful people who use financial means to influence political developments. In this context, as Monika Schwarz-Friesel points out, proverbs, names or catchwords are combined, which can be directly associated with Jews or Judaism, thus the anti-Jewish notion of a Jewish power with global influence becomes, for example, an alleged "Financial Lobby" that controls everything (Schwarz-Friesel, 2020: 50). Especially by using the term "lobby" for pro-abortion activists, an alleged threat is stated. "Lobby" indicates that a supposedly powerful, but clandestine group advocates for their issue, and endorses the constructed threat.

In another article on Kath.net the alleged restriction of democracy and the rule of law by abortion is claimed, whereby the author discusses US-president Joe Biden's and vice president Kamala Harris' support for the right of legal access to abortion (Kath.net 79725), e.g. by stating that:

"Biden und Harris treten für sogenannte 'abortion rights' ein. Aber 'zu einem Rechtsstaat gehört auch der Schutz der Rechte derer, die selbst keine Stimme haben, die sich nicht wehren können [Biden and Harris advocate for so-called 'abortion rights'. But 'the task of the state of law also includes protection of the rights of those who have no voice themselves and are unable to defend themselves]" (Kath.net 79725).

Therein, Kath.net claims that by allowing legal access to abortion, the state of law is endangered while democracy is being restricted. The latter also includes the construction of threat based on emancipatory struggles such as standing up for the self-determination of pregnant persons. This is constructed as a threat mainly to democracy and the rule of law. The author sometimes also uses some English terms and embeds their German equivalents in this German contribution. For example, by speaking of a "Geschichte von justice and equality [narrative or story of justice and equality]" (Kath.net 79725) or "ein Thema von Freiheit und Recht (oder vielmehr 'freedom and liberty') (... [an issue of freedom and justice (or rather 'freedom and liberty'])" (Kath.net 79725) to highlight the point of view that Harris does not actually stand up for justice and equality. By using such terms, which resemble U.S. culture wars terminology, Kath.net emphasizes the alleged threat of legal access to abortion for a supposedly free democracy. Similar applications can be also seen in another contribution (Kath.net 78807) by terms like 'Abtreibung 'on demand' [abor-

tion ‘on demand’]” and “Die Cancel Culture greift erfolgreich und führt zu steigender Verengung dessen, was man öffentlich äußern ‘darf’ [Cancel culture is working successfully and leads to an increasing restriction of what one is ‘allowed’ to say in public]” (Kath.net 78807).

Furthermore, abortion is also constructed as a threat to Christianity and the “Volk”, which can be seen in a statement on Kath.net citing that

“Heute werde die Abtreibung von der Führungselite, die in den meisten Bereichen in den USA das Sagen hat, als ‘heiliger Ritus’ betrachtet. Nur so seien die ‘hysterischen Ausraster’ vieler Befürworter legaler Abtreibungen über ein Urteil des Obersten Gerichtshofes nachvollziehbar, welches eine schlecht begründete Entscheidung (‘Roe v. Wade’) aufhebt und die Abtreibung wieder dem demokratischen Prozess überantwortet [Today, abortion is considered a ‘sacred rite’ by the ruling elite in most areas of the US. Considering this is the only way to understand the ‘hysterical outbursts’ of many supporters of legal abortion over a decision of the Supreme Court, which overturned a poorly reasoned decision (‘Roe v. Wade’) and handed abortion back over to the democratic process]” (Kath.net 78818).

That claim not only reproduces statements that mention a supposed secret elite but also presents abortion as a “sacred rite” and is quoted on Kath.net completely uncritically. The reason given on Kath.net for this portrayal of abortion is that persons demanding safe and legal access to abortion were supposedly reacting “hysterically” in light of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. This attribution emphasizes the derogatory attitude on Kath.net towards persons who stand up for bodily autonomy and subordinates their needs for “the family”. By using the term “hysterically”, reference is made to a supposed “disease”, which dates back to Antiquity and was, for example, a technique used in the 19th century to deny women positions in the public sphere (Gärtner & Nolte, 2020). Claiming abortion is a sacred rite resembles the antisemitic narrative of the blood libel⁴, especially in the context of abortion as the “killing of children”. Comparable to this antisemitic narrative, abortion is described as being performed for a ritual purpose. Such narrations, especially in the Middle Ages, are the framework for increased dissemination of an alleged Jewish conspiracy (Heil, 2006: 225).

These examples show how abortion and the struggle for more bodily autonomy is constructed as a threat by using dramatic comparisons and emotionally loaded narratives. Some of the examples show in particular that antifeminism and especially narratives of conspiracy ideology and antisemitism are used to highlight the opposition to abortion in a particularly inhuman manner.

4 The antisemitic narrative of the blood libel falsely asserts that “Jews kill children to drink their blood for ritual purposes”.

4.3 Construction of Threat by Immigration and Birth Rates

Associated with the construction of threat by abortion is also the construction of threat by immigration and birth rates. Hereby, the construction of threat through abortion and the responsibility of women for the “Volk” is combined with anti-migrant and conspiracy ideologist narratives. This is particularly evident with the narrative of a so called “Great Replacement”. According to Judith Goetz, reasons for the construction of the so-called “Great Replacement” by the self-appointed “Identitarian Movement” are in close connection to far-right ideas of gender relations, since a pronatalist, nativist and familist policy is being demanded to stop the birth decline (Goetz, 2020: 46). This includes, especially for women, a restriction of the right to self-determination, in order to re-traditionalize gender relations based on supposedly natural roles (Goetz, 2020: 46). Taking this into account, the construction of threat in those narratives opposes several emancipatory achievements, e.g., the right of self-determination of one’s own body and choice of the way of living. Such threat constructions disregard the fact that nations and national identity are themselves constructed and have not always existed as the frame of reference of the alleged threatened “Volk”. As Anne-Marie Thiesse (2007: 27) points out: “National identities are not perceived of as the product of a reconfiguration that homogenised differences but as creations *sui generis*, as perfectly autonomous. National identities have the particularity of being founded on a denial of change that glorifies archaism and the immutability of a long-lived community that has existed since time began [emphasis in the original]”. Instead of considering national identity as constructed, the “Volk” as a supposed national community in German right-wing discourse is seen as a supposedly natural and unchangeable community of homogeneous people. It is based also on the sustaining of traditional gender roles as a key factor in the maintenance of homogeneity. In the analysis of the postmigrant society of Naika Foroutan (2021), migration, freedom of movement (due to the Schengen agreement) and gender are described as the cause of a questioning of symbolic boundaries, which can trigger a high degree of confusion, if group contexts or symbolic ideas of nation and people become blurred (Foroutan, 2021: 161). Following this argumentation, migration also challenges boundaries which are seen as naturally given, and due to discussions of and struggles for feminism, the described shifting of symbolic boundaries also blurs supposedly naturally given gender relations and roles. It can also lead to fending off the changes of feminist struggles such as reproductive rights, or even sometimes strategically combating them. This includes a “fight” for the preservation of hierarchical gender relations and the supposed homogeneity of the people because they are seen as naturally given and, therefore, not changeable. Thereby anti-migrant ideas and the role of women, including their responsibility to maintain the “Volk”, are stated. Consequently, the described ques-

tioning of symbolic boundaries strengthens the construction of threat by immigration and birth rates.

5. Constructions of Threat and Cosmopolitanism in Online Contexts

Since contemporary life is embedded in “postdigital cosmopolitanisms” (Lenehan, 2022: 18), such processes as described in the previous sections also take place against the backdrop of cosmopolitanism and a cosmopolitan society, which also influences the constructions of threats in right-wing online discourses. Therefore, after describing the assumptions of Ulrich Beck with regard to cosmopolitanism, I argue that during cosmopolitan processes, threat constructions are reinforced.

5.1 Influential Process of Cosmopolitanism for Right-Wing Online Discourses

Online spheres play an important role in developing and spreading right-wing discourses, taking place against the background of cosmopolitanism. Ulrich Beck and Natan Sznaider (2010) argue that the discourse on cosmopolitanism should also consider the “*unintended and lived* cosmopolitanism [emphasis in the original]”, as it is becoming increasingly important due to the rising interdependence of social actors across national borders (Beck & Sznaider, 2010: 387). According to the authors, “(...) this ‘cosmopolitanization’ occurs as unintended and unseen *side-effects* of actions which are not intended as ‘cosmopolitan’ in the normative sense [emphasis in the original]” (Beck & Sznaider, 2010: 387). The authors therefore suggest a differentiation between the concepts of cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitanization, whereby they define cosmopolitanization as follows:

“The notion ‘cosmopolitanization’ is designed to draw attention to the fact that the emerging cosmopolitan reality is also, and even primarily, a function of coerced choices or a side-effect of unconscious decisions” (Beck & Sznaider, 2010: 387).

Thus, the threat constructions described in this contribution are embedded in the process of cosmopolitanization as well. In the following, when talking about processes of cosmopolitanism, it needs to be considered that those processes include unseen and unintentional processes as well. They are especially important for the discussion of right-wing online discourses, because they highlight that withdrawing from cosmopolitan processes is not completely possible since there may be unseen but impactful consequences of those processes. This applies to online discourses and thus also to the constructions of threats as well as to the defence of the supposedly natural order, including the role of women and the aim of preserving the homogeneous, white and Christian “Volk”. Especially in online spheres, which are character-

ized amongst others by fast communication and the easy dissemination of information and news, changes to the lifeworld due to emancipation are seen as threats. Considering the changing lifeworld, processes of cosmopolitanism initially also may lead to the breaking of formerly-held established ideas of the lifeworld. However, Ulrich Beck and Daniel Levy point out that the juxtaposition of cosmopolitanism to a naturalized and inescapable version of nationhood and statehood is not effective, as cosmopolitan orientations and the national can complement each other and the process of cosmopolitanism can actually change the idea of nationhood (Beck & Levy, 2013: 5). Consequently, cosmopolitanization is seen as “(...) a constitutive feature of the reconfiguration of nationhood” (Beck & Levy, 2013: 21). Beck also calls cosmopolitanization a process of “*internal* globalization, globalization *from within* the national societies [emphasis in the original]” (Beck, 2002: 17). Thereby “[i]ssues of global concern are becoming part of the everyday local experiences and the ‘moral life-worlds’ of the people” (Beck, 2002: 17). In a postdigital society, this process has become easier as global issues partly consist of daily digital life amid the flow of texts and images on mobile phones and are very easily accessed from everywhere with an internet connection. This applies to several kinds of content – including global issues in news and information as well as the possibility of global networks and communication – and also creates convenient opportunities for networking for right-wing actors online. Since the nation state and national identity are changing, it creates space for the emergence of ideas of identity and belonging adjusted to the cosmopolitan society. In what Beck calls the “*ethnic globalization paradox* [emphasis in the original]” (Beck, 2002: 38), he emphasizes that “[a]t a time when the world is growing closer together and becoming more cosmopolitan, in which, therefore, the borders and barriers between nations and ethnic groups are being lifted, ethnic identities and divisions are becoming stronger once again” (Beck, 2002: 38). This could lately also be seen in right-wing German speaking discourses online, including the revivification of “*völkisch*” [ethnic] ideas.

Regarding the emergence of such ideas and discourses, Fergal Lenehan (2022: 22) speaks of “(...) a type of alternative-cosmopolitan process, in which there is however a non-benign transformation in self-understanding as the result of engagement with (selected) others over issues of (supposed) global significance.” As Lenehan outlines, in this way forms of extreme antidemocratic thought can be created by the interaction in specific contexts of “*very specific* others [emphasis in the original]” (Lenehan, 2022: 22). Thus, cosmopolitan processes do not in any case unwind “*völkisch*” [ethnic] ideas, but in fact may lead to a reinvigoration of them and therefore also reinforce the described constructions of threat, which will be outlined in the next section.

5.2 Reinforcement of Threat Constructions by Cosmopolitanism

Right-wing (online) discourses also exist in a cosmopolitan society. Ulrich Beck (2011: 1346) introduces a “*cosmopolitan sociology* [emphasis in the original]” and provides eight theses regarding changes in society towards “imagined cosmopolitan communities” (Beck, 2011: 1346).⁵ By discussing three of Beck’s theses in view of the constructions of threats in right-wing online discourses, I argue that in a cosmopolitan society, the dissolution of traditional gender roles, and thereby also the role of women, becomes an even greater threat for the “Volk”.

The first thesis Beck provides is the following: “The endemic nature of global risks creates a new ‘cosmopolitan civilizational shared destiny’ or a new global civility” (Beck, 2011: 1349). According to Beck, because of “coercive cosmopolitization”, emerging insecurities due to *world risk society* lead to a global responsibility as well as counter-tendencies (Beck, 2011: 1349). The emergence of counter-tendencies of the new global responsibility may reinforce threat constructions: Instead of sharing responsibility for global risks, immigration is fought off (except for immigrants who are white and Christian) and traditional ideas of family and gender roles, as well as ideas of nation and “Volk”, become more important due to the focus on one’s “own” family and community. Therefore, abortion is seen as a threat, especially for one’s “own” as has been shown in chapter 4.2.1 and becomes evident e.g. in the narrative of abortion as the “killing of children”. As one’s “own” becomes more important (again), immigration is rejected and thus any responsibility for the protection of the alleged non-national “Others” is denied. Thus, immigration is seen as a threat to the “Volk”. Considering shared destiny and cosmopolitan processes, it becomes an even greater threat as the shared global destiny of *world risk society* aggravates the preservation of the “Volk”. Consequently, in cosmopolitan societies, the increasing necessity of global responsibility may increase the construction of threat by immigration and declining birth rates.

Another thesis Beck provides is:

“[...] The strength, the survival of the nation depends ultimately on the readiness of each member of this nation to sacrifice his life for it. Action in world-risk society is based on the complete opposite, that the interest in survival of all becomes the self-interest of each individual” (Beck, 2011: 1354).

5 In the above-mentioned article, Beck differentiates between cosmopolitization as a concept and a research program from cosmopolitanism as an idea (Beck, 2011: 1347). Since Beck introduces the thesis focussing on cosmopolitization, I will also use this term whenever Beck speaks about cosmopolitization. When talking about cosmopolitan processes in general, including the unintentional effects of cosmopolitanization, I talk about cosmopolitan processes.

This means that because of cosmopolitization, individuals develop a great sense of responsibility for themselves and a cosmopolitan society. This leads to the fact that individuals feel less responsible for the “Volk”, and the preservation of this (descent-based) community. Also, a cosmopolitan society is not “(...) based on the idea that it is an honor for each individual to die for the fatherland” (Beck 2011: 1354). This is accompanied by a decreased obligation to maintain the national community, or, as in German right-wing discourses, the community of descent (“the Volk”), for example by ensuring the maintenance of the “Volk” through childbirth. In right-wing (online) discourses, the decline of birth rates and the individualization of ways of life are attributed to feminism or gender discourses and constructed as a threat. The declining willingness in cosmopolitan society to sacrifice oneself for the nation or “the Volk” reinforces the transition to different ways of living initiated by feminist achievements (such as legal access to abortion). As has been shown in chapter 4.2.1, the struggles of persons who stand up for bodily autonomy and their own rights are constructed as a threat to “the family” as well as having children not in a heterosexual nuclear family, which may both be seen as achievements of emancipatory struggles. Such emancipatory processes – as well as cosmopolitan processes – can lead to increased emancipation for individuals and thereby lead to a declining willingness to take responsibility for the “Volk”, and the willingness to sacrifice oneself for it. Therefore, cosmopolitization may reinforce the construction of feminism and gender discourses as a threat to “the Volk”.

And finally, the thesis of Beck (2011: 1351), stating that by the consideration of cosmopolitization, societies not only can become more open and communitarian but refer back to traditional values, which can be seen as emphasizing the reinforcement of threat constructions during cosmopolitan processes:

“The relation between cosmopolitization is, nevertheless, neither inevitable nor linear; instead, cosmopolitization can do the exact opposite, leading to re-nationalization, re-ethnicization, and so on, as can at present be observed in Europe as well as in many other parts of the globe” (Beck, 2011: 1351).

Following that, arguments such as those of right-wing online discourses such as traditional gender roles for the preservation of the “Volk” or the turndown of abortion presented above, which appear anti-progressive, can also exist in a cosmopolitan society. The examples of Kath.net presented in chapter 4.2.1 present such arguments, also including indirectly antisemitic and conspiracy ideologist narratives. They highlight the existence of ideas opposing cosmopolitization, understood as an opportunity for societies to become more communitarian and democratic. Consequently, even against the background of a cosmopolitan process, right-wing discourses and traditional gender roles can remain or even become more important, as the construction of homogeneity of the “Volk” is not (or not only) bound by terri-

torial boundaries, but is based on descent, and very often also on faith. In the face of re-ethnicization, the role of women as mothers – considering the construction of the danger of the “Volkstod” narrative, it is the role of white women – becomes particularly important because it is necessary to preserve the homogenous “Volk”. Emancipatory efforts, such as feminism and gender discourses, the dissolution of traditional gender roles and abortion threaten this role of women. However, since this role becomes more important during re-ethnicization, meaning referring back to supposedly ethnic criteria, such as defining a community as descent-based, the threat constructions are reinforced. Therefore, in a cosmopolitan society, the dissolution of traditional gender roles and thereby also the dissolution of the role of women as well as abortion become even greater threats to the “Volk”.

Those reinforcements of threat constructions by cosmopolitan processes are spread online in the same way that threat constructions also circulate. Due to the effects of online spheres, as echo chambers, those reinforced constructions of threat may acquire greater emphasis and thus may appear even more hazardous.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this contribution is to illustrate how feminism and gender discourses are used for constructions of threat in right-wing online discourses and how they are reinforced during cosmopolitan processes. It has been shown how threats are constructed and how those constructions are enabled in their partly very drastic form by online spheres, which can also amplify them. Alongside the construction of threat by feminism and gender discourses the construction of threat by abortion refers especially to the role of women as mothers and has been shown by focusing on forms of language gleaned from the right-catholic website Kath.net. The threat constructed due to abortion is answered by pursuing the preservation of hierarchical gender relations and the supposed homogeneity of the “Volk”, which can also be seen in the construction of threat by immigration and declining birth rates. In the end, this all refers back to the preservation of supposed biological, traditional and hierarchical gender relations, particularly the role of women as mothers and ideas of cohabitation. As Ulrich Beck states, anti-democratic tendencies may also lead to cosmopolitanism: “[T]he combination of ethnic nationalism and democratic authoritarianism adds up to severe attack on liberty. But at the same time, in a dialectical turn, it encourages and enforces cosmopolitical movements as well (...)” (Beck, 2002: 41). Even though cosmopolitan processes include many opportunities for a new global and hopefully more equal society, the focus here is on the effects of cosmopolitanism reinforcing the constructions of threats, and thus may lead to a fallback to a less emancipatory society. But to support the commitment to a more equal, global and democratic society, cosmopolitan processes are necessary and offer opportunities.

Future theoretical discussions dealing with the construction of threat in right-wing online discourses should consider the shifts in society based on the concept of a postmigration society of Naika Foroutan (2021) and their impact on such threat constructions such as traditional gender roles and abortion. Also, further research on how threat constructions are reinforced by communication in echo chambers, such as comment sections of right-wing platforms or on social media, are needed. Furthermore, future research on this topic should also examine how actors in right-wing online discourses deal with obvious effects of cosmopolitan processes.

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