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ARTICLE

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OPEN

# The populism of the Alternative for Germany (AfD): an extended Essex School perspective

Seongcheol Kim<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT** This paper seeks to draw on the tools of Ernesto Laclau's theory of discourse, hegemony and populism as well as recent Essex School work on populism to examine the discourse of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and, in the process, come closer to a more systematic understanding of nature and limits of *right-wing* populism as well as the interplay and distinction between populist and non-populist discursive logics more generally. The paper situates itself in the context of existing Essex School work that has distinguished populism from institutionalism—and, more recently, from nationalism—in terms of either the length of the equivalential chain or the centrality of “the people” as nodal point in addition to the degree of antagonistic division between “people” and “power.” Building on this latter strand in the recent work of Yannis Stavrakakis and others, this paper proposes a formal distinction between *populism* and *reductionism* as internal to Laclau's theory of populism. Reductionism, it is argued, tends to reduce “the people” onto a differential particularity that sets *a priori* limits on the equivalential chain as opposed to constructing it as a *tendentially empty signifier* attached to an *open-ended* chain—producing a tendential *closure* of the equivalential chain and thus undercutting the primacy of the logic of equivalence that is fundamental to Laclau's understanding of populism and subsequent Essex School applications of it. It is argued that predominantly ethno-, cultural- or nativist-reductionist discourses may nonetheless deploy a populist logic of *partial openings* in the equivalential chain, especially through the selective equivalential incorporation of sexual or ethno-linguistic minorities against a common (often “Islamic”) constitutive outside. This is demonstrated empirically in a discourse analysis of the AfD and its development from a “competition populism” into an ethno-culturally reductionist conception of “the people” coexisting with partial openings in relation to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community and Russian-Germans in the Berlin context in particular.

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## Introduction

The question of the nature and limits of *right-wing* populism occupies a curiously underdetermined place in Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism and Essex School approaches building on it. Recent work by Yannis Stavrakakis and others (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014; Stavrakakis et al., 2016; Stavrakakis et al., 2017; De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017) has made substantial advances in distinguishing between populist and non-populist (e.g., nationalist, nativist) elements in the discourses of parties typically labelled "right-wing populist" in terms of the centrality of the signifier "the people" as nodal point and its relation to other signifiers in the equivalential chain. This paper seeks to build on this line of work by proposing a formal distinction between *populism* and *reductionism*, whereby the latter tends to reduce "the people" onto a differential particularity that sets *a priori* limits on the equivalential chain, producing a tendential essentialist closure of the latter and undercutting the primacy of the logic of equivalence that is fundamental to Laclau's (2005a, 2005b, 2017[2014]) understanding of populism and subsequent empirical applications of it (Griggs and Howarth, 2007, 2008; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014; Stavrakakis et al., 2016; Stavrakakis et al., 2017). It is argued that the tension between populism and reductionism is characteristic of Western European parties commonly labelled "right-wing populist," which may seek to resolve this tension through a populist logic of *partial openings* that cuts through the essentialist closure in the equivalential chain so as to enable a selective incorporation of sexual or ethno-linguistic minorities against a common (often "Islamic"; see also Brubaker, 2017) constitutive outside. This is demonstrated in a discourse analysis of the Alternative for Germany (AfD)—a party categorised almost universally as "right-wing populist" in the German political science literature (Franzmann, 2014; Arzheimer, 2015; Bebnowski, 2015; Häusler, 2016; Lewandowsky et al., 2016)—and its development from a "competition populism" (Bebnowski and Förster, 2014; Bebnowski, 2015) into an ethno-culturally reductionist conception of "the people" coexisting with a populist logic of partial openings in relation to LGBT persons and Russian-Germans in the Berlin context in particular.

## Laclau and the other(s) of populism: theoretical considerations

Laclau (2005a, p 74) develops his theory of populism in terms of three "preconditions":

- (1) the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the "people" from power; and (2) an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the "people" possible [...] (3) the unification of these various demands [...] into a stable system of signification.

These three elements—antagonistic frontier, logic of equivalence, and the "discursive production of emptiness" (Laclau, 2005a: ch. 4)—form a conceptual complex that has shaped much of what has come to be known as Essex School discourse analysis (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000; Marchart, 2017). *Antagonism* as an empirical (as opposed to ontological) category can be understood as an "effect" of the formation of opposing chains of equivalences separated by a frontier of radical exclusion (Nonhoff, 2017, p 93). The ("tendentially") *empty signifier*—empty in the sense that it tends to renounce attachment to a differential particularity in order to represent the equivalential chain—takes on a hegemonic function insofar as it stands for the absent fullness of the system of signification thus constituted (see also Laclau, 2007[1996]: ch. 3). What is characteristic of *populist* discourses, then, is that the antagonistic frontier divides "the social" as such into two camps, pitting a "people" with its

equivalential chain of demands united in their negative dimension of non-fulfillment against a "power" interpellated as unwilling or unable to fulfill them. "The people" as empty signifier, then, represents an absent "communitarian fullness," the unity of the social whole as impossible object rendered representable through the frontier of radical exclusion.

If the antagonistic frontier of "people" vs. "power" is an *effect* of the logic of equivalence, however, it would seem that the equivalential construction of the "people" takes analytical precedence—and that equivalence vs. difference constitutes the primary analytical dimension—in the study of populism. Laclau (2005b, p 44–45) suggests as much when he equates populism with "the prevalence of the equivalential over the differential logic" as well as the "*reductio ad absurdum* extreme" of a continuum "in which the logic of equivalence operates unchallenged"—as opposed to an "institutionalist discourse, dominated by a pure logic of difference." When Laclau (2005a, p 154) holds that "the political becomes synonymous with populism," therefore, he understands populism as the ontological extreme of an equivalential logic that serves as "the moment of institution of the social" via an antagonistic frontier constituting a social whole; yet because equivalential and differential logics—and, by extension, populism and institutionalism—never exist in pure form, the analytical question is always "*to what extent* is a movement populist" (Laclau, 2005b, p 45). Ardit (2010) attempts to parse this "politics-as-populism" in Laclau by proposing an interpretation of populist and institutionalist discourses as two "species of the genus" *hegemony*.<sup>1</sup> In other words, *populism* and *institutionalism* represent two poles of a spectrum marking the preponderance of a logic of equivalence and difference, respectively.

Subsequent applications of Laclau's theory of populism to empirical research have diverged to varying degrees from this basic model. Griggs and Howarth, (2007, 2008, p 129), in a similar vein, argue that the degree of populism vs. institutionalism can be understood "in quantitative terms" as a function of "the number of demands articulated into an equivalential chain."<sup>2</sup> In their analysis of the "essentially non-populist campaign strategy" of the Stop Stansted Expansion movement (Griggs and Howarth, 2008, p 136), they introduce "localism" as a logic that may produce equivalential articulations of *local* demands that are nonetheless circumscribed in their extension onto a more systemic level—suggesting that the degree of populism may be limited by "heterogeneity" (Laclau, 2005a: ch. 5) even in spite of an equivalential articulation of demands. Stavrakakis (2004) and colleagues (2014, 2016, 2017) take a different approach in conceptualising the degree of populism in a given discourse as a function of the centrality of the nodal point "the people" and the degree of antagonistic division between "people" and "power." From this perspective, Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2014, p 137) suggest that populist discourses (such as that of Syriza) can be distinguished from "primarily 'nationalist' and 'racist' discourses where references to 'the people' are only peripheral and/or secondary." Stavrakakis et al. (2017, p 6) expand this notion to argue that in predominantly non-populist discourses, the signifier "people" either has a peripheral location "or, when it is given a more central place," is "referr[ed] back to 'race' or 'nation', discursive units that in extreme right discourse often function as naturalised, original (mythical) points of reference [...]" This attachment of "the people" onto "transcendental signifieds"—as opposed to its construction as a tendentially *empty* signifier—can likewise be seen in the discourse of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), in which "the people" refers back to "the working class" (Stavrakakis et al., 2017, p 7).

It thus becomes possible to draw a formal distinction between *populism* and *reductionism* in terms of the location of “the people” in the differential and equivalential play of signifiers: a reductionist logic reduces “the people” onto one more—albeit privileged—differential particularity that sets *a priori* limits on the equivalential chain, as opposed to constructing “the people” as a tendentially empty signifier attached to an “open-ended chain of equivalence” (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014, p 132). It should be noted that the privileged differential signifier likewise claims to represent a social whole, but only as constructed around the essential centre filled by “the nation” or “the working class.” In other words, the fullness of the social whole is not represented as an “absence,” but is tendentially already filled by “one more difference specifiable in its particularity” (Laclau, 2007[1996], p 57). The effect of this is, as Laclau (2007[1996], p 57) himself notes, an—at least tendential—essentialist “closure” of the equivalential chain, undercutting its extension and thus the production of emptiness.<sup>3</sup> This can be seen, for example, in the KKE’s (2013) equation of “the people” with “the working class and its allies”: the centring around the differential signifier “the working class” as *a priori* privileged subject circumscribes the surplus meaning that the name of “the people” can accommodate.<sup>4</sup> It should be emphasised that the difference between essential filling and tendential emptiness and between the closure and openness of the equivalential chain is strictly one of degree—but one significant enough that, in the case of reductionism, the privileged differential particularity circumscribes the extent to which the equivalential logic can operate and, in this sense, subverts “the prevalence of the equivalential over the differential logic” characteristic of populism.

Laclau (2005a, p 193, 196) largely prefigures the populist/reductionist distinction in his discussion of “an *ethnic* populism trying to enhance the particularism of the national values of specific communities”: “The ethnic principle establishes from the very outset, which elements can enter into the equivalential chain.” He also notes that “the emptiness of the signifiers constituting the “people” is drastically limited from the very beginning. The signifiers unifying the communitarian space are rigidly attached to precise signifieds.” McKean (2016) criticises Laclau on this point, arguing that ethnicity, just like all identities in Laclau’s theoretical framework, is enacted through articulatory practices as opposed to existing as “precise signifieds” prior to the “signifiers unifying the communitarian space.” Here, it might help to situate the key relation not between signifier and “precise signified,” but between the signifier “the people” and other differential signifiers (“ethnos,” “race,” etc.) to which it refers back: the point is not that “the people” of “ethno-populism” corresponds to a precise signified, but that it is tendentially reduced to the differential particularity of (an)other signifier(s). It is in this sense that the surplus meaning—the *emptiness*—of “the people” can be said to be “drastically limited from the very beginning.” If this is the case, however, there are clear grounds—returning to Laclau’s (2005a, p 74) three “preconditions”—for rejecting the label “populist”: not only is “the people” not tendentially empty; it is also not so much the equivalential articulation that makes the emergence of “the people” possible, but an already differentially inscribed essence of “the people” that determines the extent of the equivalential articulation. Reductionism, in stipulating an original differential essence of “the people,” inverts the logic whereby “populist discourse does not simply *express* some kind of original popular identity; it actually *constitutes* the latter” (Laclau, 2005b, p 48).

Indeed, it is possible to trace the concept of reductionism even further back in Laclau’s (and Mouffe’s) work, namely in the critique of “class reductionism,” which serves as no less than the starting point for a post-Marxist theory of discourse and hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001 [1985]). Here, the object of

Laclau’s and Mouffe’s critique is the ontological centrality of the working class stipulated in classical Marxism, which becomes incompatible with an understanding of hegemony as “a logic of articulation and contingency” whereby hegemonic subjects are always the product of an “irreducible plurality of the social” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001 [1985], p 85, 139). Reductionism, in other words, is an (ultimately futile) attempt to fix the logic of politics-as-hegemony around an ontologically privileged subject—a “people” that is always necessarily, as opposed to contingently, “the working class” or “the native-born population”—defined, in turn, by a privileged differential particularity (such as inability to accumulate capital, ethnicity or place of birth).<sup>5</sup> This is not, of course, to suggest a moral equivalence between Marxist “economism” and biological racism, but rather to conceptualise reductionism as another strictly *formal* category of politics-as-hegemony distinguishable (like institutionalism) from populism.

Another application outside of post-Marxist theory that illustrates the logic of reductionism at work can be seen in Portnov’s (2015) critique of “Galician reductionism” in the context of debates on Ukrainian national identity during and after the Maidan protests. Portnov criticises the notion that Ukrainian national identity finds its “true” expression in the Galicia region—for historical and cultural reasons—in contrast to the still “Sovietised” and un-Ukrainian Donbass. In other words, the equivalential construction “Ukrainian nation” is enacted not by constructing a signifier with enough emptiness to accommodate the differential particularities of both “Galicia” and “Donbass,” but through the reductionist mechanism of demanding that all other regions adopt the differential particularity of “Galicia” in some crucial sense in order to be part of “Ukraine” at all. Notably, Portnov argues that the logical consequence of “Galician reductionism” is the political (and not just rhetorical) exclusion of the Donbass and the division of the country.

In the Western European context, the discourses of parties commonly labelled “right-wing populist” are often the site of a tension between populism and reductionism. There are numerous indications that most cases of (successful) “right-wing populism” go beyond simple ethnic, cultural or nativist reductionism to some extent or another, from “the exceptional case” of the List Pim Fortuyn and its defence of homosexuality on the basis of liberal values (Akkerman, 2005) to the selective equivalential incorporation of ethno-linguistic minorities into an otherwise ethnically centred discourse, such as the FPÖ with Serbs in Austria or (as will be seen) the AfD with so-called Russian-Germans. In the Front National, Marion-Maréchal Le Pen’s defence of “the traditional and natural family” against homosexuality—a clear case of reductionism—stood in conflict with her aunt and party leader Marine Le Pen’s strategy of avoiding a reductionist closure on the basis of sexual orientation, exemplified in her infamous assertion that it is unsafe to be “a woman, homosexual, Jewish, or even French or white” in parts of France under “Muslim occupation” (*Le Parisien*, 2016).<sup>6</sup> In other words, the equivalential chain can be tendentially open or tendentially closed, corresponding to predominantly populist or predominantly reductionist discourses, respectively. In cases where predominantly reductionist discourses enact tendential essentialist closures of the equivalential chain but, at the same time, selectively articulate equivalences that contravene this closure, it is possible to speak of a populist logic of *partial openings* in the equivalential chain.<sup>7</sup> Partial openings may result from a displacement of the antagonistic frontier that enables the equivalential incorporation of an element from the other side of the frontier into “the people” in common opposition to a greater threat—roughly corresponding to Nonhoff’s (2006, p 234) concept of a “targeted and isolated breaking through of the antagonistic frontier.” As will be seen in the analysis of the AfD, partial



openings may be limited to certain local or regional contexts within the same discourse, while an equivalential incorporation that is articulated as a partial opening in one context may be articulated internally to a reductionist logic in another.

The analysis opens with a brief overview of the overall discursive context of the emergence of the AfD, followed by a discourse analysis tracing the development of the AfD's discourse from its 2013 founding up to (but excluding) the 2017 federal election. The analysis draws on an Essex School approach of identifying relations of difference and equivalence between demands and their structuration around nodal points (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000; Marchart, 2017). The material analysed is a mixture of programmatic documents, public statements by leading party figures, speeches at party rallies, and electoral campaign materials, all of which constitute articulations of a certain salience given their coverage in either mass-media outlets or the party's own platforms as well as the speaker positions involved. Höcke's speeches at the periodic AfD rallies in Erfurt are of particular interest as a saliently transmitted (given the speaker position of the Thuringia AfD leader and party vice-chairman) and documented (in the Thuringia AfD website) form of identity-building articulation in a protest rally setting—and are drawn on extensively here.

### The discursive context of Merkel's Germany

The emergence of the AfD can only be understood in its context of the discursive field of German politics, which will be analysed only briefly here as one structured until 2014/15 with remarkable stability under Angela Merkel's chancellorship according to a *logic of difference*: that is, an institutionalist logic of processing demands separately so as to prevent (or counteract) the populist articulation of an equivalential chain against "power." As Laclau's examples of post-World War II Western European welfare states and Third Way social democracy (in its brief run of electoral successes) suggest, the successful operation of a logic of difference presupposes economic conditions that enable a ruling-party discourse to satisfy key demands so that a chain of unfulfilled (or unfulfillable) demands cannot form against it. Merkel—certainly aided by a favourable economic climate even after the onset of the European financial crisis—displayed (until 2014/15) a rare mastery of a differential incorporation of demands that might otherwise have had the potential for equivalential aggregation, most notably with the phase-out of nuclear power plants (NPPs) (articulated by sizable protests in 2010/11, adopted by the Christian Democratic (CDU/CSU)-Free Democratic (FDP) government after the Fukushima disaster in 2011) and the introduction of a legal minimum wage (a key demand of the trade unions, adopted by the (CDU/CSU)-Social Democratic (SPD) coalition agreement in 2013).<sup>8</sup>

This logic of difference can be seen exemplarily at work in Merkel's justification of her energy policy U-turn as a one-off, circumstantially dictated affair calling for a technocratic logic of conflict-free interest mediation. In announcing a 3-month moratorium on the extension of NPPs on 17 March 2011, Merkel emphasised that "the events in Japan [...] are a cut for the entire world, for Europe, also for Germany" and repeatedly iterated, over the heckling of opposition members of parliament (MPs), that "we have a new situation" (German Bundestag, 2011a). She also appealed (in spite of the government's 2010 decision to extend the NPPs, which was the subject of much of the heckling) to an already existing cross-party consensus on energy policy: "In Germany there is a consensus of all parties that we do not build new NPPs and that nuclear power is a bridging technology, that nuclear power is expiring" (German Bundestag, 2011a). In announcing the government's proposal for a scheduled phase-out

of NPPs by 2022 on 9 June 2011, Merkel openly declared that "Fukushima has changed my attitude to atomic energy" and articulated the policy shift as something that can be managed in a conflict-free manner in the interest of the entire society:

For all this we need—and this is especially important to me—wide support and acceptance in the society. We want no *Against* [*Dagegen*], but rather a *For* [*Dafür*]. (17 March 2011; German Bundestag, 2011a)

Which country, if not our country, shall have the strength for this? Germany has already shown many a time what it can do, what it has in it, and has already overcome entirely different challenges: the introduction of the social market economy, unparalleled worldwide in this form; the completion of German unity, historically without example; [we have] come stronger out of the worldwide financial and economic crisis than we went into it, and—yes, this too—better than most others. (9 June 2011; German Bundestag, 2011b)

Merkel thus incorporated the nuclear phase-out into a long chain of "hegemony projects" beginning with the social market economy (Nonhoff, 2006) and turned an issue that had triggered one of the largest waves of mass protests in recent years into a question of competent management in the interest of all.<sup>9</sup>

In the context of the European financial crisis, Merkel took her institutionalist discourse to another level with her attempted closure of the discursive field from legitimate alternative projects. A case in point is her use of the term *alternativlos* ("alternative-less")<sup>10</sup> to justify the May 2009 law enabling the nationalisation of banks, pointing to the need to prevent banks "with systemic risk going into bankruptcy" (*Die Welt*, 2009), and the First Memorandum of Understanding on Greece in May 2010 (German Bundestag, 2010a). In both cases, Merkel apodictically undergirded the claims of no alternative with the technocratic premise that the banks (with "systemic risk") and the Euro ("If the Euro fails, Europe fails") could not be allowed to fail. In the latter case, Merkel went on to paint an alternative of a European transfer union "that had to be prevented"; accentuating thus not only the lack of an existing alternative project of the opposition but also the lack of an even hypothetically discussable alternative, she responded to heckling from an SPD MP in the following terms:

I cannot imagine, honestly speaking, that you, if you had been in such a situation, would have done something with open eyes that is legally not acceptable and economically would not have brought us forward. (German Bundestag, 2010b)

### The AfD from 2013 to 2014/15: "Competition Populism"

It was in this context of a discourse of *Alternativlosigkeit* that the party calling itself the "Alternative for Germany" (AfD) was founded in 2013. In the period from its formation to the leadership coup of July 2015, the party presented a programme centred on opposition to the Euro and rejection of all bailouts for member states of the Eurozone—a direct negation of Merkel's dismissal of precisely these demands as no alternative. Here, the function of "the people" as a *nodal point* in the AfD discourse already became visible in the party's four-page manifesto for the 2013 Bundestag election. The document justified the key demand for a "controlled dissolution" of the Euro and for corresponding changes to the European Union (EU) treaties with reference to the people (*das Volk*): "Every people must be able to decide democratically on its currency"; it also followed up the call for "more direct democracy also within the parties" with the

statement: “The people should determine the will of the parties, not the other way around” (AfD, 2013, p 1–2). Yet “the people” still lacked an overarching signifier for the latter’s opposite: “parties,” “states,” or even “the Brussels bureaucracy” were given on-off mentions in individual policy domains instead of being linked into a unified “power block” of some kind.

The 2014 European Parliament election manifesto exhibited a significant change in this regard with the repeated reference to the *Altparteien* (“old parties”) <sup>11</sup> as the constitutive outside: “The *Altparteien* have sacrificed the future of Europe for the bailout of the Euro and of the banks. There needs to be an alternative to this!” (AfD, 2014a, p 23). Here, references to “the people” were centred on “the peoples of Europe” whose “democratic, voluntary growing together” the party claimed to defend against the actions of the *Altparteien*: “For the Euro idol, the *Altparteien* have jeopardised beneficial cooperation between peoples and well-being in the countries of the Eurozone at the altar of a single currency.” Building on Bebnowski and Förster’s (2014) analysis of the AfD’s “competition populism,” it can be argued that “competition” emerged as an additional nodal point in conjunction with that of “the people”: in a programme largely dedicated to EU policy, “competition” took on not only the function of headlining the party’s vision of “a Europe of competition,” but also delimiting the parameters of legitimate EU policymaking in accordance with German and “citizens” interests. The AfD thus called for “a European Union that goes for subsidiarity instead of centralism and competition instead of levelling-out and harmonisation” and denounced the “unity-Euro” (*Einheits-Euro*) for undermining “fundamental principles” including “competition between the nations,” while affirming the necessity of EU actions where they “serve the citizen interest”—such as “oversight of cartels for the securing of fair competition” (AfD, 2014a, p 2–4). The party specifically denounced any measures proposed at the EU level “to dismantle [Germany’s] competitive advantages,” in particular the German export surplus, which it defended as “the result of free competition” (AfD, 2014a, p 4–5). Thus, references to the sovereignty of “peoples,” German (or “citizen”) interests, and the core value of competition combined to mark the boundaries of EU policymaking—and of the European project as such: “Europe must grow out of its peoples instead of being imposed from above” (AfD, 2014a, p 3).

In the AfD’s “competition populism,” then, an antagonistic frontier emerged between “the people” or “peoples” blocked in their sovereignty and the top-down, “competition”-endangering menace of “the *Altparteien*” and “the unity-Euro.” “The people,” far from being reduced onto an ethno-cultural particularity, remained—at least in these programmatic statements—an open container that expressed common opposition to a locus of power and even appealed to a generalisable sovereignty of “peoples”; at the same time, its linkage to German “competition” interests as additional nodal point was at least suggestive of a coupling of “cultural feelings of superiority with economic outcomes” (Bebnowski, 2015, p 15) <sup>12</sup> as well as an underlying tension with the appeal to the sovereignty of all European “peoples.” <sup>13</sup> While this antagonism was articulated primarily in the context of the banking and Euro bailouts—perhaps most stridently in AfD chairman Bernd Lucke’s denunciation of Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble as a “misleader of the people” (*Volksverführer*) for “never forthrightly inform[ing] the people what risks lurk in German liability for European debt” (*Handelsblatt*, 2014)—the AfD campaigns in three eastern state-level elections in August and September 2014 brought to the fore the first indications of an ethno-reductionist conception of “the people” linked to biological reproduction: Saxony AfD leader Frauke Petry argued in an interview that “German politics has a responsibility to ensure the survival of its own people, of its own

nation,” preferably with families of at least three children (*Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung*, 2014). This apparently isolated statement from the margins of a state-level campaign foreshadowed the more large-scale shift in the AfD discourse to come.

### The AfD and Pegida

The Pegida <sup>14</sup> movement that emerged in Dresden (and later in other places) in October 2014 signalled arguably the single biggest break in the discursive order of the past decade in Germany, if not of the entire post-reunification period. The slogan “We are the people” (*Wir sind das Volk*), appropriated from the 1989/90 anti-regime protests in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and iterated repeatedly on placards and at the end of speeches as a sign of acclamation (Vorländer et al., 2016), served as a *nodal point* of movement discourse that condensed various demands and sentiments into a dichotomous representation of society with “the people” pitted against the likes of “Merkel,” “traitors of the people” (*Volksverräter*), “the Islamisation of the Occident” (the “ida” part of the “Pegida” acronym), or “liar press” (*Lügenpresse*), with “Merkel” and “liar press” being articulated as the constitutive outside with particular regularity. <sup>15</sup> The demonisation of Merkel became acutely visible in various placards showing the chancellor wearing a headscarf (with the caption “Mrs Merkel, here is the people”), dressed in a Nazi-like uniform (with the swastika replaced by a Euro sign), or superimposed onto the GDR coat of arms (with the caption “National Stasi Agency”).

A systematic analysis of Pegida is well beyond the scope of this paper; what is important to note here are the intersections with the AfD discourse and the influence on the AfD’s subsequent development. Notably, Pegida banners represented Merkel not only as the Euro-authoritarian (suggestive of the AfD signifier “unity-Euro” with its authoritarian connotations <sup>16</sup>), but also as the enabler of radical Islam. In the AfD leadership’s positioning up to December 2014, this led to cautious articulations of equivalences tied to clear boundaries: in an interview, party chairman Lucke articulated common opposition to “Islamist thinking that glorifies violence, discriminates women and questions our legal system,” while warning against “crude Islamophobia” that “would be unacceptable to me. One must hope that Pegida does not become misused for such purposes” (B.Z., 2014). Brandenburg AfD chairman Alexander Gauland, who attended the (at the time largest, with 15,000 participants) Pegida rally on 15 December and called it an “entirely normal demonstration” (Korsch, 2016, p 118), nonetheless warned: “Such protests cannot, however, be misused by extremists of the right or left to provoke violence or let extremist thought slip in” (AfD, 2014b). Both Lucke and Gauland explicitly limited their designation of Pegida as “natural allies” to the contents of the “official” Pegida position paper of 10 December (Korsch, 2016, p 118). The industrialist and AfD MEP Hans-Olaf Henkel accentuated the distinction between opposition to “Islam” and “Islamism,” emphasising the need “to ensure that justified criticism of excesses of Islamism does not lead to the religion of Islam, asylum seekers or foreigners as a whole being discredited, disparaged or even threatened” (AfD, 2014c). At the same time, Gauland also used the Pegida protests to reinforce the antagonistic frontier between the AfD and the *Altparteien*, declaring on 19 December:

One does not necessarily have to share the concerns of these people. The Alternative for Germany, too, does not share all the political demands of the demonstrators. Yet the insults and humiliations from the *Altparteien* that these people must put up with are unworthy. The majority of these demonstrators are reasonable people who are doing nothing but exercising their civic rights and peacefully

making use of freedom of opinion and assembly. (AfD, 2014b)

Although a phase of “increasing distancedness” and then “dethematisation” followed in the AfD’s positioning *vis-à-vis* Pegida in January 2015—especially with the scandal around Pegida founder and chairman Lutz Bachmann’s dehumanising remarks about refugees and photograph of himself dressed as Hitler—intra-party conflicts over the leadership’s course spilled onto the open and eventually culminated in the leadership coup of July 2015 (Korsch, 2016, p 120–125). In March 2015, the Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt AfD leaders, Björn Höcke and André Poggenburg, launched the “Erfurt Resolution,” which, without mentioning Pegida directly, criticised the national party leadership for not extending the AfD’s equivalential chain onto recent mobilisations, as (by implication) it had previously done in challenging the *Alternativlosigkeit* of the bailouts:

The AfD could credibly convey to the citizen that it, as a democratic force with expertise, also looked after those problems that were never directly addressed. The initiators of the “Erfurt Resolution” see this success model endangered by the tendency to unduly and needlessly limit the political range of the AfD. [...] The party has [...] stayed away from civic protest movements and even distanced itself in anticipatory obedience, although thousands of AfD members take part in these awakenings as demonstrators or sympathisers [...]. (Der Flügel, 2015)

The declaration made clear what this new equivalential chain ought to look like by delineating “countless of our members[’]” understanding of the party

[1] as fundamental, patriotic and democratic alternative to the established parties; [2] as movement of our people against the societal experiments of the last decades (gender mainstreaming, multiculturalism, child-rearing arbitrariness, etc.); [3] as resistance movement against the further hollowing out of the sovereignty and identity of Germany; [4] as party that possesses the courage for truth and for truly free speech.

Given the preceding analysis, it becomes clear that while articulations #1, #3 and #4 were very much present but made primarily with reference to the banking and Euro bailouts in the AfD’s “competition populist” discourse, articulation #2 signalled a decisive extension onto a wider “right-wing cultural struggle” (*rechten Kulturkampf*) (Häusler, 2016, p 242).

Supporters of Lucke’s leadership responded in April 2015 with the “Germany Resolution” (Deutschland-Resolution, 2015), which criticised the signatories of the Erfurt Resolution for “want [ing] a different AfD, an AfD of flat slogans and shrill tones” and declared: “We want no ideology. We want to remain the party of common sense.” However, Lucke’s initiative in May 2015 of founding the association *Weckruf* (“Alarm Call”) to rally opponents of the national-conservative wing—a move seen by many AfD members as “dictatorial and divisive”—set the stage for the July 2015 congress in which Frauke Petry defeated Lucke in a contested vote for the party leadership, followed by the exodus of Lucke’s supporters from the party and the reconfiguration of the AfD into a “political umbrella for right-wing cultural struggle” (Häusler, 2016, p 241–242).

### The AfD since 2015: “The People” vs. “the *Altparteien*,” Round 2

On 25 August 2015, the Federal Office of Migration and Refugees announced that “the Dublin procedures of Syrian nationals are at the present time [...] effectively no longer pursued” (n-tv, 2015),

meaning that Syrians could apply for asylum in Germany rather than their country of first entry into the EU without the threat of deportation to the latter. On 31 August, Merkel declared in her annual press conference that “The Dublin Agreement does not work anymore the way it once did because the situations have changed”—arguing, in particular, that “Italy needs to be relieved”—and pronounced her now-famous quote on the intake of refugees (German Federal Government, 2015):

I say very simply: Germany is a strong country. The motif with which we get to work has to be: We have made it so many times—we will make it!

As in the nuclear phase-out case, Merkel articulated the shift in refugee policy as the result of exceptional circumstances and as a challenge for the entire society to rally around and overcome, as it had done “so many times.” The suspension of the Dublin Agreement also followed a differential logic in relation to the parliamentary opposition’s long-standing demands for the abolition of the Dublin system, reaffirmed in summer 2015: Alliance ’90/The Greens (2015, p 8), in a July 2015 pamphlet, called “the Dublin system [...] unsolidaristic, unjust and inhumane. And it does not work,” while Die Linke’s (2015) Ulla Jelpke called the system “unjust, contrary to human rights and ineffective,” with both favouring a system allowing refugees to choose their destination countries within the EU.<sup>17</sup> This constellation meant that the AfD could position itself as the sole opposition to Merkel’s refugee policy.

The AfD announced on 8 September an “autumn offensive” of events and campaigning under the slogan “Stop the asylum chaos and Euro crisis,” with vice-chairman Gauland calling the influx of refugees a “peoples’ migration” that had to be halted (AfD, 2015a). An AfD position paper released that month proposed a series of measures “to bring the asylum chaos under control,” including an “immediate closure of all national borders,” an immediate moratorium on all asylum applications in Germany, and restrictions to the right to asylum through expansion of the list of “safe countries of origin,” the processing of asylum applications in the countries of origin rather than in Germany, and immediate rejection of asylum for violations of German law (AfD, 2015b: 2–4). On 13 September, Frauke Petry called for the government’s resignation for the first time, linking the discourse of competition populism (“a sellout of German interests”) to Gauland’s notion of a “peoples’ migration” as a transformation of the very essence of the country (AfD, 2015c):

The situation in Germany has completely slipped from Ms. Merkel. Our country is changing dramatically through the uncontrolled stream of immigrants before our very eyes [...]. Merkel’s now-known demand for another Germany is a sellout of German interests.

The reductionist construction of “the people” as an entity existentially endangered in its very essence by migration and multiculturalism took clearer shape in the discourse of Thuringia AfD leader Björn Höcke, who called a series of protest rallies in Erfurt starting September 2015. At the first rally, held under the slogan “Serve Thuringia and Germany—end the asylum chaos,” Höcke declared that the “existence of our rule-of-law state [*Rechtsstaat*], of our culture, of our people is in danger” and went on to delineate the equivalential chain that they were up against:

For decades the principle of popular sovereignty has been trampled on [...]. The hardest currency in the world, the D-Mark, which the world envied us for, was sacrificed unscrupulously at the altar of Euro-ideology. [...] For decades the malicious do-gooders [*Gutmenschen*] in the



*Altparteien* and in societally irrelevant, exotic interest groups have led a campaign against the classical family. [...] For decades people have been let into the country who are of no use to us and do not fit in with us. [...] I demand a referendum [*Volksabstimmung*] on whether the German people should dissolve in a multicultural society! (AfD Thuringia, 2015a)

Höcke thus presented a starkly dichotomised image of a society in which “the interests of the people are trampled on by the political elite” and articulated this conflict with reference to both the Euro and the decades-long cultural “experiments” (as in the Erfurt Resolution) as well as the immediate context of the “uncontrolled inflow of asylum seekers,” which he referred to as an “invasion” (AfD Thuringia, 2015a). Höcke thus extended the AfD’s “competition populism” onto new targets, as already seen in the Erfurt Declaration, while introducing a reductionist logic that equated “the people” with an ethnic substance undermined by migration per se and, therefore, under existential threat of “dissolution.”<sup>18</sup>

At the AfD protest rallies, the centrality and identity-building function of the nodal point “the people” and its constitutive outside came to the fore: an AfD participant in the party’s Berlin march of 7 November reported that “the surely most-said sentence was, without a doubt, “Merkel must go” and “We are the people!”” (AfD, 2015d). It was in the regularly held Erfurt rallies, however, that the ethno-culturally reductionist dimensions of “the people” became spelled out for everyone to hear. In his speech at the 23 September rally, Höcke defined *das Volk* as the non-“migrant” population in flatly rejecting the possibility of an “integration of refugees” and calling for a heightened “assimilation pressure”:

Quantity decides whether assimilation works: The few Turkish children in Erfurt speak Erfurter. The few German children in Berlin *Kanaksprach*.<sup>19</sup> We, the German people [...] are not obliged to become the minority in our own country and to give up our self-determination in our own country to migrant majorities. (AfD Thuringia, 2015b)

At the 7 October and 28 October rallies, respectively, Höcke referred to the “only 64.5 million Germans without migration background” and the “only 64 million native-born Germans”—an essentialist reduction that set clear limits on the surplus meaning that “the people” could accommodate. Höcke made this clear by privileging this differential particularity as a criterion of radical exclusion:<sup>20</sup> “the German people” was endangered in its very “self-determination” by “migrant majorities” and by the possibility that, given current immigration rates, “in the medium term at least half of the population in Germany will be Muslim. We cannot allow this!” (AfD Thuringia, 2015b). Höcke’s *Volk* and his defence of it—“Let us win back this state for our people!” (AfD Thuringia, 2015b; 30 September)—thus had to be tied to an ethno-nativist essence: one that is not only non-“migrant” and non-“Muslim,” but also “native-born.” Coupled with the reduction of “the people” onto the model of the “classical family—and that is father, mother, child—[as] the nucleus of society and state” (AfD Thuringia, 2015b; 16 September), this reduction enacted a double closure along ethnic and cultural lines, setting *a priori* limits on the extension of the equivalential chain in terms of criteria attached to birth and thus held to be unchangeable characteristics.

It was only within the confines of this ethno-cultural closure that Höcke could forge an equivalential chain going beyond the previous articulations of opposition to the bailouts, “societal

experiments,” and “uncontrolled migration.” At the 7 October rally, he linked the influx of refugees to the danger of “the minimum wage [being] reduced,” declaring:

With five million unemployed we bring millions of uneducated and illiterates into the country in order to employ them as wage pressers [*Lohndrücker*]? That is the end of the welfare state and of social peace in this country! That is in fact a betrayal of our people! (AfD Thuringia, 2015b)

At the 27 January 2016 rally (i.e., after the New Year’s Eve sexual assaults in Cologne), Höcke reaffirmed the extension of the equivalential chain onto low-wage earners, citing the economist Hans-Werner Sinn’s argument that “The refugee help is at the expense of the poorest,” and articulated the longest chain yet with the following:

In the name of the women of Cologne, in the name of the refugee helpers whose naivety was shamelessly taken advantage of, in the name of the German schoolchild who is bullied every day in his *multikulti* class, in the name of the police who are insulted and ridiculed daily, in the name of the countless who can walk through their city only with lowered heads, I declare: We want to live by our values and mores, we want to preserve our culture, we do not want to go back to the Middle Ages, we want to keep our country! (AfD Thuringia, 2015b)

Yet Höcke’s ethno-culturally marked closure had already foreclosed part of the space claimed by this extension: those with “migration background,” of “Muslim” religion, or living contrary to the “classical family” model were excluded from the equivalential articulations (“the poorest,” “the countless” in the cities, etc.) to begin with—not because they could not be integrated into Höcke’s symbolic register (Laclau’s “heterogeneity”), but because Höcke’s very construction of “the people” presupposed their exclusion through the elevation of a privileged differential particularity into a criterion of radical exclusion. In other words, the populist logic of “the people” as a tendentially empty signifier representing the equivalence of a chain of demands above and beyond their differential particularities became inverted: “the people” as tendentially pre-constituted by a differential particularity placed *a priori* limits on the extent to which equivalences could be articulated.

It should be noted that Höcke’s ethno-cultural reductionism has arguably been the most pronounced discourse of “the people” within the AfD and one that only went challenged within the AfD leadership in specific instances: namely, in December 2015, when he theorised on the differences in the “phylogenetic reproduction strategies of Europeans and Africans” (*Die Welt*, 2015), and in January 2017, when he referred to Germany as “the only people in the world that has planted a memorial of shame in the heart of its capital” (*Der Tagesspiegel*, 2017).<sup>21</sup> Indeed, intersections became evident in Gauland’s speech at a June 2016 rally (attended by Höcke) in which he accused “the parties represented today in the Bundestag” of “the attempt to gradually replace the German people with a population from all parts of this earth” (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2016). Party chair Petry, while leaving most of the “people” rhetoric to her two vice-chairmen, also spoke revealingly in a September 2016 interview of the need “to ensure that the term [*völkisch*] is again positively occupied,” maintaining that “*völkisch*”—with its explicitly ethnic connotations—is in fact “an associated attribute” of “*das Volk*” (*Die Welt*, 2016). To the extent that the AfD has a discourse of “the people,” therefore, the discourse has primarily been an ethno-culturally reductionist one.



## The AfD in state-level elections: of Russian-Germans and gay couples

In three state-level contexts, the discourse of the AfD has prominently featured equivalential extensions that, on the surface, appear to contravene the reductionist closure of the equivalential chain: namely, in relation to LGBT people (Berlin) and the so-called Russian-Germans (Brandenburg, Baden-Württemberg, Berlin). It is only in the Berlin case, however, that the equivalential incorporations actually correspond to a populist logic of partial openings as opposed to operating internally to that of reductionist closure.

Already in 2014, the Brandenburg AfD (2014) released a Russian-language version of its manifesto for the September state-level election, emphasising its status as the “only party” to do so. In announcing the document’s release, state-branch chairman Gauland declared the intention “to integrate the Russian-Germans [*Russlanddeutsche*] into the political life of Brandenburg” and “to seek intensive dialogue with the Russian-Germans. It is important for the homeland expellees [*Heimatvertriebene*] and late emigrants [*Spätaussiedler*] to know that there is a party committed to them” (AfD Brandenburg, 2014). Gauland thus articulated an equivalence between “Russian-Germans” (a common designation for Germans with some kind of Russian background) and “*Heimatvertriebene* and *Spätaussiedler*,” two categories with specifically ethnic German connotations.<sup>22</sup> Thus, while Gauland’s equivalential incorporation of the Russian-Germans went beyond Höcke’s 64 million strictly “native-born” Germans, it ultimately followed the same logic of ethnic closure. At the same time, the Russian-language manifesto also indirectly appealed to the Russian-German audience’s belonging to a “great” Russian “people,” reprinting a speech from the AfD party congress of March 2014 as the foreword without further commentary or even attribution, in which the unnamed speaker, while criticising the Russian annexation of Crimea as a “violation of international law,” contextualised the action in the “humiliations of a great people”—namely, of Russia “as a great power and as a people that gifted to humanity Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Pushkin” (AfD Brandenburg, 2014, p 5, 7).

Ahead of the Baden-Württemberg election in March 2016, the AfD co-organised and supported Russian-Germans’ protests in reaction to Russian media reports (later shown to be false) of the alleged rape of a Russian-German girl by refugees in Berlin; in Pforzheim, where the rally featured slogans such as “Protect our people” and “We want peace and respect,” the local AfD branch expressed solidarity with the “demonstration against unequal treatment of Germans by refugees” (AfD Baden-Württemberg Pforzheim/Enzkreis, 2016). Thus, an equivalential articulation took place with both Russian-Germans and the AfD articulating the former’s belonging to “our people” and the “Germans” in demarcation from the refugees. The Russian-Germans’ generally ambiguous subjectification as somehow both German and Russian—an ambiguity previously maintained in the Brandenburg AfD manifesto—was thus rearticulated as a German identity.<sup>23</sup>

While the AfD’s equivalential incorporation of the Russian-Germans in these contexts was broadly in line with a reductionist logic of (ethnic) closure, the AfD in Berlin pursued a logic of partial openings in relation to LGBT people and Russian-Germans alike. Ahead of the Berlin election in September 2016, an AfD billboard showed a gay couple with the quote: “My partner and I place no value on acquaintance with Muslim immigrants, for whom our love is a deadly sin” (Weingärtner, 2016). The Berlin AfD thus openly contravened Höcke’s ethno-cultural closure of the equivalential chain—specifically, the cultural reduction onto the “classical family” model—to extend the chain onto LGBT people in common demarcation from “Muslim immigrants.” This was only made possible by a displacement of

the antagonistic frontier against a greater common threat: no matter what else the party did not do to support the LGBT community, it was supposedly the only one that could articulate a common frontier against the intolerance of Islam. At a press conference at the end of July (*die tageszeitung*, 2016), the Berlin AfD also presented a Russian-language version of its election manifesto and subsequently printed Russian-language billboards, including those that affirmed, in German and Russian, belonging to Germany (“Together for our homeland!”) as well as “an end to mass immigration and asylum abuse” (*Berlin Journal*, 2016). In marked contrast to Gauland, however, the Berlin AfD articulated equivalences with the Russian-Germans with reference not to German ethnicity, but to shared values (plus Russia foreign policy), with AfD candidate Hans-Joachim Berg stating (*Der Tagesspiegel*, 2016):

[The Russian-Germans] have a natural proximity to the AfD because they are conservatively structured, place value on family, child-rearing and education and have a high work ethic. [...] Moreover, our party is for an orderly relationship with Russia and against economic sanctions.

On its own, the articulation implies a logic of partial openings: namely, that *anyone* who is “conservatively structured, place[s] high value on family [...]” can also be a part of the AfD’s *Volk* if the Russian-Germans can. Yet a dislocation in this logic became plainly visible at the aforementioned July press conference, in which the Berlin AfD’s head candidate Georg Pazderski maintained that Turkish-Germans ought to integrate and thus be able to read the manifesto in German, but was unable to find an answer to the follow-up question why Russian-Germans do not have to integrate (*die tageszeitung*, 2016). Thus, the very selectivity of the would-be opening pointed back to the logic of ethnic closure that singled out the Russian-Germans as *already* German, with the result that this particular form of linguistic patronage did not, in fact, contravene a discourse that otherwise stipulated use of the German language as an act of “integration” or (for Höcke) “assimilation.” It is worth noting the contrast to the equivalential incorporation of LGBT people, where the party responded to doubtful journalists by adjusting its own identity to reaffirm the partial opening: at the July 2016 press conference, Frank Hansel, the openly gay number four on the party list, responded to the perceived incompatibility of LGBT and AfD with a broad (and non-reductionist) definition of the party’s identity: “We are centre-right” (*die tageszeitung*, 2016).<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

It can thus be seen that the AfD’s populism is a very much conflicted, if not deeply contradictory one: the party leadership’s (and especially Höcke’s) logic of ethno-culturally reductionist closure of “the people” coexists with partial openings contravening this closure in the Berlin context in particular. The Berlin AfD’s equivalential incorporation of LGBT people, which is openly at odds with Höcke’s championing of a *Volk* based on the “classical family,” throws into relief Stavrakakis’s (2014, p 514) characterisation of right-wing populism that “its populism is at best opportunistic, if it qualifies as populist at all.” The argument of this paper is that this observation may in fact be indicative of a wider phenomenon: namely, *partial openings* as an attempt of radical right-wing discourses to move beyond simple ethno-cultural reductionism onto a selectively open equivalential chain, especially in demarcation from a “Muslim” other.

It has been argued, based on a reading of Laclau and recent work by Stavrakakis and others, that a formal distinction between *populism* and *reductionism* can be identified internally to Laclau’s theory of populism. This distinction can be a useful one for Essex

School discourse analysis especially in light of the common criticism that Laclau's theory of populism fails to adequately account for what is political but *not* populist (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Müller, 2014). By taking into account *how* "the people" is constructed as a criterion for distinguishing between populist and non-populist logics, the populist/reductionist distinction takes another step away from a strictly "formalist" theory of populism (Stavrakakis, 2004) and towards greater conceptual nuance in understanding phenomena generalised all too readily as "(right-wing) populist" (Glynos and Mondon, 2016; De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017; Stavrakakis et al., 2017). The discourse analysis that followed applied this distinction to the case of the AfD, beginning with the discursive context of its emergence and tracing the development from "competition populism" to the uneasy coexistence of ethno-cultural reductionism with localised partial openings. The aim was to demonstrate that the concept of partial openings as a populist moment in predominantly reductionist discourses may contribute towards analytical clarity as to the interplay and relative preponderance of populist and non-populist elements in a given discourse—especially in the case of "the populist radical right," for which Mudde (2007, p 26) has argued that "nativism, not populism, is the ultimate core feature of the ideology of this party family." As the analysis has sought to show, the contingent articulation of populism with nativism and other forms of reductionism is of a complex, dynamic nature—pointing to the need for more systematic discourse analyses of these parties rather than their *ex ante* categorisation as "(right-wing) populist."

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## Notes

- 1 The elegance of Arditì's solution can be seen in the fact that "post-politics" (Mouffe, 2000, 2005) as an extreme form of institutionalist discourse can be understood as both an antipode of populism *and* a form of "politics-as-hegemony," insofar as hegemony is understood as a "political type of relation" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001 [1985], p 139) that elevates a certain particularity onto the status of a constitutively impossible universality.
- 2 They add "the particular *salience* or *intensity* of each demand" as a further dimension that may lead groups to pursue a more institutional form of politics in pursuit of individual demands (Griggs and Howarth, 2008, p 129).
- 3 Here, Laclau (2007 [1996], p 57) also explicitly notes that if "[t]he 'something identical' shared by all the terms of the equivalential chain [...] can only be the pure, abstract, absent fullness of the community, which lacks, as we have seen, any direct form of representation and expresses itself through the equivalence of the differential terms [...] it is essential that the chain of equivalences remains open [...]."
- 4 In the same document (the Political Resolution of the 19th Party Congress), the equivalential chain becomes spelled out more explicitly: "The People's Alliance, expresses the interests of the working class, the semi-proletarians, the self-employed and the poor farmers who cannot accumulate capital, of the youth and the women from the working class-popular strata in the struggle against the against the monopolies and capitalist ownership, against the assimilation of the country in the imperialist unions" (KKE, 2013). It can be seen here that the equivalential chain is only extended according to membership in "the working class" or the criterion of inability to "accumulate capital" that, in turn, points back to an essential character of "the working class."
- 5 Whether nationalism as the construction of the people-as-nation (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017) is more reductionist than populist depends on the extent to which an essentialized differential particularity is stipulated for belonging in the "nation" (or, conversely, the extent to which the signifier "nation" is empty); it is certainly possible to think of *prima facie* examples of civic nationalist discourses that are not predominantly reductionist (e.g., that of the 2014 Yes Scotland campaign). In other words, not all forms of nationalism are reductionist, but there are also non-nationalist forms of reductionism.
- 6 It should be noted that because openness and closure are always a matter of degree, the *exclusion* of a differential particularity from "the people" (as opposed to the *reduction* of the latter onto a differential particularity) does not, in itself, imply reductionism; indeed, if Le Pen's equivalential chain is open to non-Muslims and not just Christians (as the above quote suggests), it would be more tendentially open than tendentially closed on the basis of religion. This difference in degree matters insofar as it helps us understand Le Pen's (apparently populist) strategy of defining "the people" in terms of common opposition to a particular something (e.g., Islam together with the political elite) and not in terms of essential belonging to a particular something (e.g., ethnic French, heterosexual and Christian).
- 7 In other words, the very notion of a *partial* opening presupposes tendential closure. If Le Pen (unlike her niece) does not reduce "the people" onto "the traditional and natural family," the openness to homosexuals is not a partial opening, but part of a strategy of tendential openness on the basis of sexual orientation.
- 8 The abolition of tuition fees (articulated by sizable student protests in 2009/10, eliminated in all federal states by 2013) is another such demand but does not fall within the purview of the federal government, though it was likewise made possible by CDU/CSU-led state governments' reversing course.
- 9 One *prima facie* indication of the effectiveness of this move are the opinion-poll ratings beginning in May 2011, which saw a reversal of both the CDU's steady decline and the Greens' meteoric rise.
- 10 Voted "un-word of the year 2010" by the Association for the German Language for suggesting "that, in a decision-making process, there are no alternatives to begin with and thus no need for discussion and argumentation" (Unwort des Jahres, 2017).
- 11 It should be noted that the signifier "old parties" as a compound noun (*Altparteien*) gives it a distinctive (indeed, pejorative) force that a separation of adjective and noun (*alte Parteien*) would not. I have, therefore, left *Altparteien* untranslated in direct quotations.
- 12 Bebnowski (2015, p 15–16) makes this argument with reference to the prior statements of some of the AfD's industrialist supporters, but does not specifically locate this element in the party's discourse at the time.
- 13 This tension is most evident in the following passage: "As a first step, every country has to be granted the right to leave the Eurozone without leaving the EU. Those countries that cannot or do not want to meet the terms of the monetary union ought to exercise this right" (AfD, 2014a, p 4). Here, the boundary between the sovereign *right* to leave and the economically determined *obligation* to do so is hardly recognisable. More generally, it can be argued that "competition populism" was the site of a tension between a populism with European pretensions (the nodal point "people(s)") and a neo-liberalism with nationalist underpinnings (the nodal point "competition").
- 14 An acronym for "Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident" (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*).
- 15 The fact that *none* of these signifiers came up in the official "position paper" of 19 demands released by the Pegida Association on 10 December 2014 suggests that the latter may be less meaningful than the slogans and speeches at Pegida rallies for understanding the discourse and identity of the movement. AfD chairman Bernd Lucke expressed this distinction thus: "If Pegida is really what is written in the position papers, then we are natural allies. But then, paper is tolerant" (B.Z., 2014) [*Papier ist geduldet*—an expression suggesting that anything can be printed on paper, whether true or false].
- 16 Note that *Einheits-Euro* is (once again) a compound noun—as opposed to the common term for "single currency," *einheitliche Währung*—suggesting associations with the GDR ruling party, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*).
- 17 Of course, the differential incorporation was only partial insofar as the suspension of Dublin was unilateral rather than a (much less immediately feasible) reform at the EU level. Wolfgang Streeck (2016) ascribes this to the "hegemonic self-righteousness" of Merkel's Germany in seeing the EU "as an extension of itself"—in other words, using politics at the EU level to pursue a logic of differential incorporation at home—as it had done with the Third Memorandum on Greece approved by the Bundestag just days earlier.
- 18 Here, the shift from a broadly civic to an explicitly ethnic nationalism becomes particularly evident.
- 19 A (not exclusively pejorative) term for the dialect spoken by some Turkish-German youths in Germany.
- 20 In Nonhoff's (2006, 2017) expanded framework of hegemony analysis, this would be the moment in which mere difference is "reshaped" into a relation of "contrariness," which, together with the opposing chains of equivalences, generates an antagonistic relation.
- 21 Höcke's December 2015 comments, which the political scientist Hajo Funke criticised as "pure biological racism," thus went too far towards the reductionist extreme for the party executive's taste. At the same time, media reports indicated that in both instances, a pro-Höcke faction of the executive led by Gauland prevented more far-reaching measures from being taken against Höcke, including a possible expulsion from the party.
- 22 This can be taken for granted for the purposes here as both terms originated as legal categories created in order to give those residing outside the borders of post-1945 Germany the right to German citizenship by virtue of ancestry or prior German citizenship.
- 23 It has been said of the Russian-Germans that "in Russia they were always seen as Germans—in Germany they are considered Russians." In this context, the migration researcher Jannis Panagiotidis interpreted high levels of Russian-German support for

the AfD in Baden-Württemberg thus: “Through the demarcation from new immigrants, a kind of arrivedness is signalised” (Mass, 2016).

- 24 It is evident that the social-conservative values structuring the partial opening towards the Russian-Germans are ultimately incompatible with the partial opening towards the LGBT community, even if a dislocation of a scale similar to the press conference incident did not emerge. This, in turn, points to the limitations of an equivalential incorporation that invokes positive differential attributes (Russian-Germans’ placing “value on family”) and a common constitutive outside (“mass immigration and asylum abuse”) as opposed to just the latter (“Muslim immigrants” in the case of LGBT persons). In this vein, Hansel’s choice of the label “centre-right” is indicative of the search for a nodal point with enough emptiness to accommodate both openings while providing more intension (which is always in a trade-off relation to the extension of an equivalential chain) than a common enemy alone.

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## Data availability

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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