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## Negotiating counterstrategies against the far right in Cottbus, Germany: shifting relations between the state and civil society

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# Negotiating counterstrategies against the far right in Cottbus, Germany: shifting relations between the state and civil society

Gala Nettelbladt  <sup>a,b</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This article examines how democratic actors from the state and the realms of civil society and the private sector form alliances to negotiate local counterstrategies against contemporary far-right contestations. It attends to two blind spots in the existing discussions about cities as bulwarks against the global rise of the far right. First, while much scholarly attention is paid to the heterogeneity of progressive civil society movements in this fight, state–civil society relations are understudied. Second, local contexts where far-right actors have already gained significant power are seldomly examined. Based on an explorative case study in the peripheral city of Cottbus, Germany – known as a hotspot of far-right organising – the article uses the Gramscian notion of the ‘integral state’ to analyse how actors come together and how this process is marked by contentious problematisations, positionalities and motivations. The discussion reveals that the state becomes a contested terrain in these negotiations as the far right’s success does not leave municipal institutions untouched. While this weakens traditional democratic state–civil society alliances, it also enables the building of new ones as community activists’ perspectives shift from a position of resistance towards (cautious) partnership with the state. To conclude, I discuss the political implications of these findings.

## KEYWORDS

cities; civil society; counterstrategies; far-right politics; Germany; Gramsci; local state; urban governance

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Urban scholars have described cities as resilient ‘bulwarks’ (Turam, 2019) against the global surge of authoritarian and racist forces (Mudde, 2019), highlighting the pivotal role of progressive metropolises such as Barcelona, Berlin or Istanbul, where leftist governments and strong civil society organisations have stood up against the far-right threat by advocating progressive agendas, particularly in fields such as asylum and migration policy. In Germany, attention is often cast to the increasingly plural coalitions within progressive civil society movements in this context (Briata et al., 2020; Hamann & Türkmen, 2020). They have emerged between the *Rechtsruck* (rise of the far right) and simultaneous acts of solidarity in many cities since the

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'long summer of migration' in 2015. This has included volunteer organisations and refugee support groups founded in the name of *Willkommenskultur* (Karakayalı, 2018; Kreichauf & Mayer, 2021) and urban movements such as *#unteilbar* and *Seebrücke*, which have organised protests mobilising hundreds of thousands against racism, discrimination and the EU's inhumane border politics through campaigns such as *#LeaveNoOneBehind* or the German *#BlackLivesMatter* movement.

Concerned with the potential of cities to resist the current far-right moment, this article sets out to attend to two blind spots in these discussions. First, local contexts where far-right actors have already gained significant power are seldomly examined. Often, they focus on urban centres where public support for progressive politics is already high. Second, while much attention is paid to the increasing heterogeneity of progressive civil society movements, new alliances between civil society and the local state remain understudied. Thus, turning the analytical angle away from progressive urban centres, this paper is interested in alliances between democratic civil society actors<sup>1</sup> and the local state in a context where far-right mobilisation and normalisation have already solidified; thus contributing to teasing out geographic blind-spots on the far right (Ince, 2019). Analysing state–civil society relations is crucial here, as the global rise of far-right politics also ignites the authoritarian transformation of the state (Brown, 2019). In places where this is the case, organisations and actors developing counterstrategies against the far right – which this article defines as civil society movement consisting of 'multiple arenas of contestations' within and beyond the party sector (Pirro & Gattinara, 2018) – are gradually pressured from outside and inside the state (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021a).

However, those confronted with this challenge have not suffered passively but resisted these attacks by coming together in innovative ways. Consequently, practices for an open city and migrant support have continued and sometimes even increased despite (or because of) growing racist and authoritarian articulations. This process of coming together is shaped by diverging interests that must be negotiated (Bürk, 2012) and is not without conflict and contradictions. To uncover these complexities, this article asks: How do actors from the realms of the state, civil society and the private sector come together to negotiate counterstrategies against the far right? How are these alliances shaped by contradictions? What political implications do they entail?

Guided by the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), I trace these questions through an explorative qualitative case study in the peripheral city of Cottbus, East Germany. Cottbus has gained (international) media attention as far-right hotspot over the past years (Buck, 2018; Connolly, 2022). This portrayal of Cottbus is caused by its high voter turnout for the German far-right party AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*);<sup>2</sup> but also because of frequent anti-immigration protests; continuous violent attacks on people with marginalised identities and a high degree of institutional racism.<sup>3</sup> Making use of the idea of 'contracted spaces of solidarity' (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021b), I elaborate how this melange of far-right actors is contesting and pressuring those who organise for an open society and solidarity in the second section, where I also provide contextual information about far-right developments in the region more broadly and explain the research design.

However, rather than asserting this image of the city, in this paper I analyse how pressured democratic actors have reacted to this far-right dominance by crafting new alliances. To trace this process, I mobilise literatures on urban governance and civil society and make use of the Gramscian concept of the 'integral state' (Gramsci, 1948/1971). This is a productive concept to capture the shifting dynamics of state–civil society relations because it illuminates the state as contested terrain. Interrogating this relationship, I am particularly interested in the dialectical unity of democratic community activists and the local state, which describes coercion as 'the immanent condition of consent in capitalist modernity' (Davies, 2011, p. 3; Jessop, 2016). I develop this conceptual background in the third section to subsequently examine its different dimensions

on a spectrum between partnership and resistance, which has emerged as empirically relevant for my research participants' approaches to alliance building.

Presenting my empirical material (mainly semi-structured interviews) in the fourth section, I scrutinise how these complex and diverging positionalities can prevent united municipal strategies, promote contradictory positions towards far-right contestations and even further their normalisation. In other instances, they have created innovative ways of working together. I illustrate this by constructing three types of alliances that have emerged in Cottbus. First, I dissect how a traditional, longstanding partnership between the municipality and local civil society initiatives campaigning for an open society has been weakened by far-right normalisation, which culminated in the withdrawal of the municipality from this alliance. Second, I show how the success of local far-right actors has given rise to a new alliance between the municipal government and local businesses that see the far right's success as a challenge to the city's competitiveness and economic growth. Their aim is to curb the far-right trend to create a multicultural and diverse image. Third, I argue that even though these different problematisations in the past often resulted in the fact that community activists and local state officials thought in incompatible frames about the role of alliances, the community activists' perspective has shifted from a position of resistance towards (cautious) partnership. Given that the normalisation of far-right ideology has long reached state institutions, 'the fight must be fought within the institutions', as one research participant put it. This strategy leaves community activists in a difficult equilibrium between partnership with and resistance against the local state. Finally, I discuss the political implications of this analysis in the fifth section, reflecting on the potentials and limitations of alliances in Cottbus and what they can reveal about the combat against the far right and antifascist alliances in municipalities globally beyond the case.

## 2. THE CASE OF COTTBUS AND RESEARCH METHODS

Today, Cottbus is a mid-sized city with roughly 100,000 inhabitants situated around 125 km south-east of Berlin in the federal state of Brandenburg in East Germany. Two developments have shaped the city significantly since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. On the one hand, as the former centre of the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) coalmining industry, Cottbus experienced a combination of socio-economic and discursive-symbolic processes of peripheralisation (Kühn, 2015), which devaluated the city's economic role and nationwide symbolic meaning significantly. Mass unemployment induced by deindustrialisation was followed by shrinkage and a massive 'brain drain' to West Germany.

On the other hand, the city has been faced with the increasing normalisation of far-right attitudes and ideology over the past years (Fröschner & Warnecke, 2019), meaning that formerly tabooed topics such as a harsh anti-immigrant agenda have reached the political and social mainstream (Wodak, 2021). Following political scientist Mudde, I use the 'far right' as an umbrella term to denote common characteristics between reactionary political actors, including the extreme right, the (populist) radical right and (neo) fascists (Mudde, 2019). Further, I conceive of the far right as operating in 'multiple arenas of contestation' within and beyond the party sector (Pirro & Gattinara, 2018). In Cottbus, this melange is indicated by a high voter turnout for the AfD (gaining 27% in the Brandenburg state elections in 2019 and 24% in the federal elections in 2021) and the regular success of the local far-right civil society movement ZH (*Zukunft Heimat*), founded in 2015, to mobilise thousands for anti-immigrant rallies (Minkenberg & Sündermann, 2021). Crucially, however, it is important to point out that the current rise of the far right in East Germany is not a new phenomenon that can solely be related to the political developments of recent years. Botsch demonstrates that the emergence of a fundamental, radical nationalist opposition in East Germany can be comprehended as 'first, a relic of the GDR, second, a consequence

of the *Wende*, and third, a specifically German phenomenon affecting “both Germanys” (Botsch, 2012, p. 555).

### 2.1. The far right in Brandenburg and Cottbus

Contrary to mainstream national public discourses declaring the contemporary German far-right scene as a sole phenomenon of ‘the East’, it is vital to underline that, even though there are significant specificities to the rise of the far right in East Germany (Rippl & Seipel, 2021), this is not an East German phenomenon as such. Thus, my research processes was accompanied by a continuous reflection about the mechanisms of *Ossifikationsdiskurse* (ossification discourses) (Heft, 2018), describing the often one-sided, devaluing connotations associated with East Germany in public discourse; cautiously attending to historical, socio-economic and political contextualisation as well as the local variations of the spatialisation of the far right (Luger, 2022). Hence, it is useful to briefly illustrate the evolution of the far right in the federal state of Brandenburg generally and Cottbus particularly.

In Brandenburg, Botsch and Schulze differentiate three stages in the development of far-right politics since the *Wende*: Phase 1 from 1990 to 2000 saw the formation of various neo-Nazi subculture youth movements, inheriting a ‘latent far-right extremism’ from GDR times, which resulted in violent and brutal far-right attacks on migrant minorities and anti-fascists in many East German towns (Aktionsbündnis Brandenburg, 2021).<sup>4</sup> Partially, these groups were hijacked by West German neo-Nazi groups. A second phase (2000–10) constituted the strengthening of far-right extremist parties such as the NDP (National Democratic Party of Germany) and the DUV (*Deutsche Volksunion*). The third phase from 2010 until now is characterised by the founding of the AfD in 2013, which united actors from former extremist parties as well as members previously known for their activity in neo-Nazi groups. It is in Brandenburg, where the AfD’s radical faction *Der Flügel* (the wing) was founded and surveilled by domestic intelligence until its official dissolution in 2020 (Botsch & Schulze, 2021).

Cottbus is a paradigmatic case (Yin, 2014) of these developments. It was a neo-Nazi hotspot in the 1990s and today has well established far-right networks, including actors from the neo-Nazi scene, hooligans and martial arts milieu and organised crime (Fröschner & Warnecke, 2019; Müller & Zimmermann, 2020, the author 2021). Concomitantly, there is a tradition of neglecting and downplaying the threats by far-right organising among local authorities in Cottbus. The following quotation by a university professor illustrates this:

This [negligence] is also something Cottbus has in common with other Eastern cities. All these years [since the *Wende*], mayors, and they were and still are mostly men, said ‘we have no problem with far-right extremism’. Actually, the word didn’t even cross their lips. It was no different in Cottbus. But at some point, Cottbus [the municipality] understood that it was no longer possible to hide it, because it was so present. (interview CB\_02, 10 July 2020)<sup>5</sup>

An article published in the weekly *Spiegel* magazine in 1999 documents how the municipal government – then led by a social democrat mayor – declared the city’s far-right youth scene a ‘passing fad’ and essentially ignored the targets of violent far-right attacks that happened frequently (Emcke, 1999). Against this backdrop, Cottbus often serves as a case in mainstream media discussions about the ‘brown East’ (Heft, 2018, p. 359), suggesting a narrative of the ‘far-right East’ as ‘the other’ of ‘the West’, whereby reactionary tendencies are understood as a relic of the past that is already successfully overcome in the West, but still on the agenda in the East. Nevertheless, while I frame Cottbus as a paradigmatic case for the context of East Germany, I also want to allude to the parallels that can be seen with contexts like the US American ‘Rust Belt’ region or the post-industrial North of England, for instance, where processes of economic decline, social



alienation and support for far-right politics have also intersected (Barbulescu et al., 2019; Hochschild, 2018). Without suggesting falling into easy causation, this is why studying the case of Cottbus is also intrusive for regions experiencing similar socio-political developments outside of Germany.

In Cottbus, however, it would be inaccurate to speak of a far-right hegemony in the city. A more careful view uncovers a large variety of civil society actors practicing solidarity and standing up for an open society (Sander, 2021, p. 41). These include various cultural projects organised by actors like the local youth-theatre, parts of the local university, anti-fascist organisations, migrant empowerment organisations and refugee support groups or local businesses campaigning for a liberal urban society. But rather than simply examining the heterogeneity of these groups, in the remainder of this paper I want to focus on the way in which they interact with the local state.

## 2.2. Research design

To uncover these interactions, I draw on empirical material collected in Cottbus in 2020 and 2021. I comprehend this East German city as 'strategically situated micro-situation' (Sayer, 2000, p. 151), that is, a situation where the key structures in contention or transformation of one's study intersect, and which can be used as a vantage point to illuminate a much wider field. To understand how urban actors come together in order to stand up against the far-right threat, I carried out semi-structured interviews.<sup>6</sup> They provide a productive space for answering necessary questions with regards to the research topic while simultaneously allowing for unanticipated topics to emerge (Longhurst, 2003). For the overall research project from which this article emerged, I selected research participants based on a mix of purposive sampling and 'snowballing'. While the former describes 'choosing people based on their experience related to the research topic' (p. 118), the latter entails 'using one contact to help you recruit another contact, who in turn can put you in touch with someone else' (Valentine, 2005, p.117). During the initial stages of my research I mainly employed purposive sampling, while the snowballing technique facilitated access to the field later on. Importantly, I utilised purposive sampling in the beginning as I aimed to reflect the diversity of the political landscape of Cottbus in my interview sample and to collect contrasting views on the topic at hand.

The sample consists of 26 semi-structured interviews;<sup>7</sup> each interview lasted between 1 and 1.45 hours. In total, 12 interviews were conducted with actors on a spectrum of conservative to progressive civil society organisations as well as five interviews with representatives from all democratic political parties and five additional expert interviews with high-level municipal officials and policymakers. Five interviews with senior municipal officials and civil society actors were of special relevance for the present article, as they represent accounts from members of the three alliances discussed, providing contrasting perspectives on state-civil society relations in the negotiation of democratic counterstrategies against far-right contestations. The entire fieldwork took place during the global COVID-19 pandemic, which compromised the research processes significantly (the author, 2021) and entailed that half of the interviews had to be recorded via the online platform Zoom. Additionally, I collated documents such as official reports, press releases, blog posts and newspaper articles to contextualise the interviews. I coded this qualitative data set using the software MAXQDA.

Following the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), the data analysis was oriented towards initial and focused coding techniques. Accordingly, the research questions were answered in a retroductive process, describing an iterative movement from deductive to inductive reasoning and back and forth again, always involving interpretative and casual dimensions of explanation (Belfrage & Hauf, 2017, p. 206). Thus, in my case, a movement from remote desktop research (including the consultation of official documents, websites and newspaper articles) and critically sensitising theories to open-minded fieldwork in Cottbus and from there alternating between emerging theories, inductive analysis and theory-building. This

analytical approach allowed for the emergence of my own conceptualisations and interpretations while I continuously compared them to existing ones, and in doing so refined and complexified my initial thoughts. Consistent with this focus on retroduction, I would go back to the field with research memos in mind to check conjunctures, asking other interlocutors from civil society organisations how they cooperate with the local state (a procedure also known as theoretical sampling). I conclude the process when new data no longer sparked fresh theoretical insights, nor uncovered new properties and aspects of the core theoretical categories I had developed.

### 3. WITH OR AGAINST THE STATE? DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCES IN CONTRACTED SPACES OF SOLIDARITY

A Gramscian perspective on the state postulates that it is a terrain upon which struggles amongst interests, groups and classes are conducted. He defined the notion of the integral state as ‘political society + civil society’, whereby political society signifies government by force, and the struggle for hegemonic leadership in civil society is reinforced by the ‘amour of coercion’ (Gramsci, 1948/1971, p. 210). Put simply, the integral state constitutes the entirety of governing institutions, practices and technologies entangled in the struggle for hegemony throughout state and civil society. Davies has demonstrated that the integral state is scalable to cities and a productive lens for exploring urban governing networks (Davies, 2012). Consequently, the struggle for and against urban hegemony takes place through state violence and subaltern resistance. He distinguishes the role of city governments by the multiple technologies of administrative domination they have (p. 2694). These include the management of space and housing, everyday policing and other regulatory functions of local authorities and agencies (see below about how this plays out in Cottbus regarding institutional racism).

Further, what follows from Gramsci’s definition of the integral state is the idea that in contemporary capitalist societies the state does not constitute a means of maintaining capitalism through the dilution of class tensions, but the ‘crystallisation of political strategies’ (Jessop, 2016). It is a multitude of institutions through which competing interests and groups battle for domination or hegemony. The state is not an instrument through which a dominant group/class rules. It is a dynamic territory, reflecting the balance of power within society, that is, the outcome of an ongoing hegemonic struggle.

Concerning state–civil society relations, this implies a dialectical unity between democratic community activist and the local state defined by coercion/consent, which extends to the fostering and management of urban governing networks. In times of neoliberalism, defined as ‘a new model that overcomes the embedded liberalism, characterised by social and political constraints and a regulatory environment’ (Harvey, 2005, p. 2), administrative domination has increasingly substituted trust-based partnerships (Davies, 2012). Consequently, and particularly since the financial crisis in 2008, civil society scholars have diagnosed an increasing repression of political and social actors such as trade unions and progressive civil society movements, which have fought for social rights for all, rendering the consequences of welfare state retrenchment visible (Brenner et al., 2012; della Porta, 2017). This has increasingly led to calls for an ‘exit-action strategy’ (Davies, 2007), arguing that the empowerment of community activists in civil society depends less on networked partnerships with the local state but rather on independent community organising, acting autonomously and coercively against governing institutions and local elites. Extending this theoretical lens on the state–civil society relations in the context of the negotiation of counterstrategies against the far right, two aspects seem crucial.

#### 3.1. The rise of the far right and authoritarian transformations of the local state

First, what emerged from the accounts of my interlocutors in Cottbus, is that the high degree of far-right mobilisation in the city does not leave state institutions untouched. On the contrary, in



the accounts of my research participants the immediate link between the strong voter turnout for the AfD with everyday institutional racism became clear, enacted at times through the police or 'bureaucratic regression' (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021b, p. 6). The following quotation from a high-level municipal officer in the Department of Education and Integration details how many of her colleagues are AfD voters, which she links to a heightened degree of institutional racism:

Yes, I believe, between you and me, that we also have a significant number of AfD voters in the administration. ... Specifically in departments that interact a lot with citizens, that's where racist prejudices are always present, and where you notice that citizens with an international migration history don't get the attention that a native would get. I think it's terrible that I have to say this as an administrative employee, but I think we should be honest and face reality – we should take a good look at what we are actually talking about. (interview CB\_10, 25 August 2020)

Correspondingly, the representative of a local migrant self-organisation engaged in refugee support describes how refugees frequently experience racist behaviour by the local police:

Yes, just racist. It's systemic within the structure itself. They [the police] don't come when they hear [on the phone] that you speak German with an accent, they don't even come when you speak in English and say I'm from Syria, they just don't come. But if you speak German without an accent, two police cars or more will come. This is how it is. (interview CB\_33, 25 May 2021)

In the same interview, he describes how the organisation has statistically documented the fact that refugees who rent flats from the municipal housing company consistently pay higher bills than their German neighbours.

One consequence of this manifest institutional racism<sup>8</sup> is that the above mentioned migrant self-organisation has decided to 'not be seen in the foreground' in public discourse and politics, as my interlocutor put it. The notion of 'not be seen in the foreground' captures the idea that the migrant-self-organisation purposefully avoids taking political sides in the city as an organisational entity. For instance, my interlocutor described how the organisation does not participate in public demonstrations for an open society, but rather asks its members to join such public events privately. 'To not be seen in the foreground', then, refers to a sense of flying under the radar, of not wanting to catch attention. He does not explicitly describe this strategy as a measure to stay unnoticed by the far-right scene and to avoid becoming targets of racist aggression. But given the fact that Cottbus has the highest number of violent far-right attacks in Brandenburg (Opferperspektive, 2021) and frequently sees attacks on offices of democratic parties (RBB, 2021), this is very much the tone I sense during our conversation.

In this sense, Cottbus indeed constitutes a 'shrinking space' for solidarity, an idea which seeks to underline that civil society is under pressure worldwide, resulting in the fact that state and non-state actors practising solidarity see 'restrictions in their work as a result of different types of policies and actions' (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1066). The rise of the far right has pushed this trend directly (through access to parliaments and governments) and indirectly (influencing centre-right partis and public opinion), contributing to the 'spreading of anti-liberal values toward law and order that have narrowed the discursive and operational spaces for humanitarian action and stigmatised migration' (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021b, p. 10). This insight highlights the necessity to consider the realm of the local state when studying democratic counterstrategies against the far right in cities. Engaging a conversation between the empirical description of 'shrinking spaces of solidarity' in Cottbus and Gramscian thinking about the state, it follows that the contemporary rise of the far right goes hand in hand with the potential authoritarian transformation of the state. While it is important to examine the progressive and increasingly heterogeneous civil society movements that are being formed in the wake of the crisis of neoliberal

democracy (e.g., Briata et al., 2020), attention needs to be paid to local state–civil society alliances that bring the struggle for a more inclusive and solidarity city onto the terrain of the state (Kuge, 2020). As will become apparent, this forms a departure from previously advocated exit-action strategies on the side of civil society actors.

### 3.2. Struggles for hegemony in civil society

Second, the discussion between empirical materials from Cottbus and the Gramscian notion of the ‘integral state’ demands considering the role of civil society both in terms of subalternity and participation in local governance networks, but also as actors that develop complementary and/or competing ideologies. Evidently, such an understanding departs from the normative idea of civil society as a homogenous entity that is inherently good and engaged. Instead, it is conceived as a complex, heterogeneous set of social relations (Jessop, 2020, p. 1). Thus, this article recognises that civil society is both a contested space and concept (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2018), which the far right is part of; emphasising a definition of the far right as civil society movement, operating well beyond the party sector (Göpffarth, 2021; Pirro & Gattinara, 2018; Rucht, 2018).

Given the dialectical unity of coercion and consent in the integral state, hegemony in civil society is seen as the basis of political power. For Gramsci, a prerequisite for an effective challenge of the emerging Fordist institutional arrangement was the development of an alternative hegemonic project on the terrain of civil society. He viewed ‘education, culture, the widespread organisation of knowledge and experience against those who exercise authority by divine right’ (Gramsci, cited in Koch, 2022). Making use of this notion in the context of local strategies to counter the contemporary far-right resurgence, it follows that (1) the integral state is always unstable, providing at once entry points for ‘charismatic leaders’ and opportunities for civil society movements (Koch, 2022); and (2) hegemony must be achieved within civil society before the state can be captured. In addition to speaking to the current context of today’s progressive urban movements, these conceptual considerations also allude to empirical examples of progressive city institutions in the context of regressive national governments in the past. In the US context, for instance, Clavel has traced how progressive Mayors in Boston and Chicago forged alliances with neighbourhood leaders under Reaganism (Clavel, 2010) and Trapenberg Frick has explored urban progressive/right-wing coalitions around shared issues like infrastructure and the environment (Trapenberg Frick, 2018); thus illuminating the always contested terrain of the local state.

## 4. BETWEEN PARTNERSHIP AND RESISTANCE

In the remainder of this article, I explore the three types of state–civil society alliances that have emerged from the analysis of my empirical material, before I discuss some of their political implications in the final part. I map these alliances by way of inductively tracing different actors from the realms of the local state, the private sector and civil society, asking how their respective problematisations, positionalities and motivations lead to alliances and how they in turn end up crafting counterstrategies, with at times contradictory outcomes.

### 4.1. ‘They broke away, plain and simple’: weakening ties in traditional alliances

The first alliance to be established in Cottbus against the far right was founded in 1999 under the name *Cottbusser Aufbruch*. At the time, neo-Nazi groups were regularly marching the streets on 15 February in an attempt to co-opt the date, which demarcates the anniversary of the bombing of Cottbus during the Second World War. Concurrently, racist attacks in public space occurred regularly. Most prominently, in 1992, far-right youth groups committed an arson attack on a local asylum seekers’ accommodation in the neighbourhood of Sachsendorf at the outskirts of the city (Tenner, 2021). These developments led to the foundation of *Cottbusser Aufbruch*,

which brought together a range of civil society actors including local churches, anti-fascist community activists, officials from the municipal administration (including local police, the mayor's spokesperson and high-level municipal officials from the office for public order (*Ordnungsamt*)), the local theatre, youth groups, as well as political parties and workers' unions. Their common ground was viewing these far-right attacks as a divisive threat to urban society, which needed to be countered through the unity of democratic actors.

Together, they successfully applied for federal funding through the funding scheme *Partnerschaft für Demokratie* (then *Toleranz fördern, Kompetenz stärken*) and to do so created a local action plan to fight far-right extremism. Its aim was to strive for 'a liveable, open and attractive city, where human rights are respected and practiced, a place to live and learn and with future prospects for people of all generations' (Stadt Cottbus, 2008, p. 5). Measures that were taken through this funding scheme supported the organisation of counterdemonstrations, anti-racist working groups in neighbourhoods or prevention workshops in schools. Talking to actors who were involved in this process today, many highlight that the strong sense of cooperation and partnership between representatives of the municipality and civil society made this alliance successful. In the late 2000s, neo-Nazis stopped marching in the city centre and there was a collective sense of democratic actors being present in the city. Taking the counterdemonstrations on 15 February as an example, one interviewee describes how there was a reoccurring disagreement within *Cottbusser Aufbruch* about how to organise this. Members of the local anti-fascist group were in favour of coercive blockages against Nazis, whereas the more moderate members from Church groups did not want to obstruct state regulations on demonstrations. Nevertheless, they would still launch common calls, informally agreeing that they would first demonstrate together and then later the antifa group would block the streets.

However, in my interviews with members of *Cottbusser Aufbruch*, they described how their alliance was becoming increasingly weak and fractured due to two reasons. First, they are notoriously underfunded. The same activists have been going strong on a voluntary basis. Even though the above-mentioned federal funding programme *Partnerschaft für Demokratie*, which the city has been part of since 2011, aims to strengthen local democratic partnerships that organise locally against far-right contestations, it does not cover personnel costs apart from a part-time coordination position in the municipal administration. It provides financial support for formats such as workshops and material needs such as flyers or paint, but it does not finance the alliance more substantively. Given the already financially weak situation of the municipality, this leaves very little leverage. In addition to the obvious financial constraints this puts onto the alliances, interviewees used this federal funding programme to illustrate that far-right contestations have in the past been interpreted by the federal government as local phenomena, entailing the responsabilisation of local actors. This, they say, stands in contrast to the actual financial support and the way Cottbus is often portrayed as far-right stronghold. As one interviewee puts it, paraphrasing the interior minister of the federal state of Brandenburg:

And he always says [about Cottbus]: You can't do it, you are too stupid, you don't manage. And then there's a defensive reaction. Although there are already a lot of structures here that try to deal with far-right contestations in a very dedicated way. (CB\_01)

The second reason for the weakening of this traditional alliance in the city concerns the splintering of the actors involved. In 2017, the municipality cut working with *Cottbusser Aufbruch*. One interlocutor from *Cottbusser Aufbruch* links this rupture in their cooperation process to the growing presence of *Zukunft Heimat* in the city and the organisation's 'civil look', which apparently entails that the city government did not dare to act against it as they view *Zukunft Heimat* as a legitimate part of the democratic realm:

This tactic of *Zukunft Heimat*, pretending to be a part of democratic civil society. ... This has of course brought about a great change ... people no longer dare to take open action against it. Like the municipality, so to speak, they stopped working with us because they [*Zukunft Heimat*] say that they are democratic. So that is ... this is a big problem. (interview CB\_28, 19 May 2020)

Against this backdrop, it has become very hard for *Cottbusser Aufbruch* to mobilise large parts of the city's population for the yearly demonstrations. Further, she describes how this rupture also extends to other civil society associations initially part of the alliance. The sentence 'they broke away, plain and simple' is illustrative of this development as it refers to the process of how the local protestant church, too, cut working with *Cottbusser Aufbruch*. She details how the church has a central, powerful role in the city and has always been a key place for organising demonstrations against the far right. But she describes a change of attitude within the parish, where the majority now views the regular far-right rallies with high turnouts as a civil act, a legitimate part of urban democracy in Cottbus. This change in attitude is what she describes as 'breaking away', denoting a general process she observes in the city – and which left her feel powerless.

Indeed, prompted with the question of why they ended their partnership with *Cottbusser Aufbruch*, city and church representatives confirm this development. For example, a high-level representative of the church described how the parish discussed the question of how the church would position itself in the face of *Zukunft Heimat's* successful rallies. Referencing the church's role in the peaceful revolution in the GDR in 1989, he links their decision to end the church's membership in *Cottbusser Aufbruch* to uphold the freedom of expression for everyone (an argument often used by the AfD in East Germany), which later on in the interview he linked to the fact that many in the parish were sympathising with the rallies:

We denied it because ... we do not forbid others to speak, this is where we are very influenced by the experience of reunification. To have an opinion was one of the most important demands; to truly create substantial freedom of expression. (CB\_03)

#### 4.2. 'We need to come together to improve our image': coming together to compete

Nevertheless, while the city government and more conservative civil society organisations have retreated from *Cottbusser Aufbruch*, new alliances and problematisations have emerged since the growing success of the AfD and *Zukunft Heimat*. These new developments have resulted in the coming together of the city government and local businesses. In the municipality's latest urban development concept, published in 2019, the city's far-right networks were mentioned for the first time as a threat for Cottbus. Given the fact that civil society activists already started campaigning against it in 1999, as explored above, this delay is striking. Twenty years later, the urban development plan reads: 'In the face of solidified far-right structures that foster xenophobia and in the context of current integration challenges, Cottbus has the difficult task of ameliorating the city's image' (Stadt Cottbus, 2019, p. 98). Accordingly, in this sentence the far-right structures are being first and foremost viewed as a problem to the city's image. In addition, it is intrusive to point out that the same sentence also alludes to the issue of integration (indirectly referring to the influx of refugees to the city since 2015), which is portrayed as a challenge without specifying how this challenge is impacting the city. Putting both aspects on the same level downplays the violent threats and consequences these far-right networks have had on the city. At the same time, relating the city's far-right scene to concerns about its image – and thus economic investment and competitiveness – highlights how a liberal and multicultural appearance is seen as an important asset in performing under neoliberal, competitive conditions. In this official view, the local far-

right scene contributes to a negative image of the city, which needs to be refuted in order to promote the city's attractiveness for business, and a potentially international workforce and students. Against the backdrop of the city's history of shrinkage since the 1990s, this is a particularly important factor in the city's urban development plan.

Based on this growth-oriented perspective on far-right contestations in the city, a group of local businesses, the local university and the mayor's office came together to set up the alliance *Cottbus ist bunt* in 2018. It was initiated by the representative of a local business association, who told me that the idea to start *Cottbus ist bunt* was sparked because he felt the need to 'come together to improve our image'. He explained his perspective as follows:

There has to be something that opposes this negative image. ... It was a good thing to show that Cottbus has a different face. This was the idea behind the businesses' initiative. Of course, we also did it for our own good. Because you see, we also think this is a negative thing that we have to do something about, we also want to recruit employees in the future. (interview CB\_11, 19 May 2021)

He initiated round tables where participants would meet every six weeks or so to discuss strategies they could implement. As a result, they created a website<sup>9</sup> where they declared Cottbus as:

colourful, diverse and open to all people, regardless of their origin and religion. An internationally oriented technical university, a diverse cultural landscape, attractive housing opportunities and a well-developed job market make Cottbus an increasingly popular place to live, learn and work.

On this website, the city's residents were invited to leave their digital signatures or post pictures in support of this statement. An additional strategy included the sponsoring of banners (by the businesses) that were put up in public spaces across the city with the slogan *Cottbus ist bunt*, aimed at declaring support for an open and diverse city (Figure 1). Last, the alliance initiated a yearly 'day for diversity', where the participating institutions set up stalls on a 'diversity fair' on the city's central marketplace, showcasing the role of diversity in their respective business or university.



**Figure 1.** 'Cottbus ist bunt' banner in front of the townhall.

Source: Author, August 2020.



In essence, then, *Cottbus ist bunt* was founded to promote a branding strategy, based on a shared need felt by the municipal government and local business to ameliorate the city's image in the face of growing far-right contestations. Prompted about what she thought of this new initiative, an activist from *Cottbusser Aufbruch* cautioned that, in her opinion, these strategies did not grasp the root cause of the problem of far-right contestations and that she found it incomprehensible that the municipal government would leave *Cottbusser Aufbruch* and instead launched a new alliance with *Cottbus ist bunt*. Further, she lamented the business orientation of *Cottbus ist bunt*. To illustrate this, she told me an anecdote about the 'day for diversity' in 2020. *Cottbusser Aufbruch* was invited to join, but (like other participating institutions) required to pay 500 Euros, which was the impetus for declining the cooperation. She exclaimed:

We are not a business enterprise. In hell's name! We are committed to tolerance, democracy, and equality. Why do we have to pay 500 Euros so we can set up a stall on the square? I really don't like the general direction this is going. (interview CB\_28, 19 May 2020)

Contrasting this statement with an interview with the mayor's spokesperson, it appears that the city's leadership did not see this as a threshold to the participation of civil society organisations. But there is a third alliance at the state–civil society nexus, which brings an entirely new approach to the question of how alliances are formed.

### 4.3. 'We rely on people in the system': building new alliances from the grassroots

This last alliance between local civil society and the local state was initiated by local refugee support activists, who have been organising for more social justice for international refugees in Cottbus since 2015. This includes campaigning for language classes in their mother tongue at local schools, better housing conditions or organising neighbourhood-based encounters between long-term residents and newcomers. The migrant self-organisation *Geflüchteten Netzwerk Cottbus* (GNC) is particularly active in this regard. In addition to campaigning for these issues, they are also explicitly concerned with combating racism by, for example, collecting incidences of racist insults in public spaces. Since its founding in 2017, they have become increasingly aware that, given the high degree of institutional racism explored earlier, this goal could only be achieved if they were to work together with institutional actors. Thus, in essence, this new alliance constitutes an effort by local activists in support of refugees to 'infiltrate the municipality' (interview CB\_24, 10 September 2020) in policy fields related to migration, openly aiming to combat racism in Cottbus through working *inside* the local state. The awareness of the need to seek ties with institutional actors is illustrated in a statement by a local anti-fascist organisation:

in recent years it has become more and more about preventing 'the blue-brown-liquid' [the far right] from seeping into societal structures. Counter-protests are important here, but the focus now needs to be on the institutions and the way in which debates are conducted, because it is here that the AfD is pursuing the goal to creepingly normalise their inhuman agenda.<sup>10</sup>

This development is underpinned by the acknowledgement of 'being reliant on people in the system', as one of my interlocutors from GNC described it. The notion of relying on people in the system refers to the idea that grassroots organisations repeatedly voiced the need of establishing connections with actors in the municipal administration that are sympathetic to their cause in order to achieve their goals. It presupposes a certain sense of trust between institutional actors and community activists. The idea, however, does not refer to simply ameliorating pre-existing partnerships to implement policy more effectively or to build partnerships for the sake of



networks. Rather, it captures the more fundamental idea on the side of community activists to have to tap into institutional structure in order to effectively combat far-right contestations in the city. Essentially, it presupposes that this struggle, and the power relations it entails (e.g., access to material resources such as public funds or housing), needs to be carried out within the realm of the local state. The following reflection from my interlocutor from GNC illustrates this perspective:

It's like *Die Linke* and Antifa. So ... , the Antifa do whatever they want, somehow outside [the party and state institutions] and they may not recognise the rule of law. And what they do is important, in my opinion, but we also need people who belong in the system. So, we can't just marginalise ourselves and say we don't do anything with this regime or with this system or something ... (interview CB\_33, 25 May 2021)

Consequently, community activists proactively and successfully applied for positions within the municipal administrations. One activist-turned-bureaucrat from the Department for Social and Migrant Affairs thus emphasises the need for 'just doing the work' (interview CB\_01, 7 July 2020), which referred to the crucial aspect that through her new position she gained the power to apply for national and federal funding schemes which can be used to fund further personnel or launch new projects. Employees from the Department for Social and Migrant affairs even pushed for the city parliament to publicly declare their solidarity with the aims of the civil society organisation *#Seebrücke*, campaigning against the criminalisation of sea rescue in the Mediterranean.<sup>11</sup> What motivates this development, according to interviewees, is the belief that bureaucracy is a space of contention, which lets far-right forces like the AfD to 'seep in', while at the same time allowing progressive bureaucrats to open up spaces for policy change.

However, acknowledging the need to tap into 'the system' does not equal an uncritical engagement with the municipality. On the contrary, research participants from GNC repeatedly stressed how cautious they were about whom to work with and whom not. One asserted: 'We have 'good' and 'bad' people in the municipal administration. ... And if we can just work with the good ones, why waste a lot of time arguing with the others?' (interview CB\_33, 25 May 2021). Having probed and asked more questions about his taking-for-granted meaning of the morally charged description of 'good ones' and 'bad ones', I learned that 'good ones' referred to those who share the GNC's anti-racist agenda, recognising that one important way of tackling racism was to build structures to fight it within the municipal state. According to my interlocutor, this could only be achieved if the migrant self-organisation was accepted by the municipal administration as equal partner and was actively involved in the co-production of policymaking, where GNC can actively make suggestions. The 'bad ones' on the other hand, refers to those sympathetic of the AfD, who they did not engage with directly – but pressured by documenting incidents of racist assaults from institutional actors and making them public. Further, cooperating with municipal institutions also led to the consolidation and professionalisation of the initiative. The previously informal group is now registered as an association (*Verein*) and has gained a somewhat indispensable role within the urban policy field of refugee and migrant reception in Cottbus. However, this formalisation process has strengthened the sense that this new alliance is shaped by the difficult task for community activists to navigate the balance between partnership and resistance, as the latter is harder to maintain the more the former is strengthened.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS: REFLECTING ON THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SHIFTING ALLIANCES

Scrutinising how democratic alliances between actors from the realms of civil society, the private sector and the local state have been formed in Cottbus in order to counter far-right contestations,

I hope to have contributed to discussions in urban studies concerned with local struggles against the far right in a twofold manner. First, by offering insights into the alliances and strategies that are crafted despite – and because of – shrinking spaces of solidarity, i.e., in a context where far-right contestations have become solidified. Second, by illuminating the understudied, contradictory dynamics of state–civil society relations in this process.

My analysis in Cottbus showed that the process of alliance building is complex and contradictory. First, I demonstrated how longstanding alliances initiated by civil society organisations with the municipality have been weakened in the face of the contemporary far-right resurgence. While the alliance relied on cooperative partnership between the participating factions for decades, the strong support for local anti-immigrant rallies among the city's population has led to the retreat of more conservative civil society associations such as the church from this alliance. This retreat can be read in the context of the wide-ranging normalisation of far-right ideology in the city: high voter turnouts for the AfD and the success of *Zukunft Heimat* to address a significant part of the population are portrayed as legitimate concerns of fellow citizens that need to be articulated and heard. Crucially, this has also led to the withdrawal of the municipal government. Led by a CDU mayor, this can be interpreted as part of a political strategy to capture those voters sympathising with the far-right by adopting harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric.

This example shows how the far-right presence in the city has dire consequences, essentially intimidating the municipal government and more conservative parts of civil society to openly speak up against local far-right mobilisation. At the same time, the municipal government formed a new alliance with local businesses seeking to implement a branding strategy tailored at ameliorating the city's image by setting up posters and a website declaring a 'colourful city'. While this can be read as an attempt to strengthen the city's economy in the context of Cottbus' long history of socio-economic decline, it does not appear as a substantive attempt to counter far-right mobilisation, as it misjudges them as an 'image problem'. The shift in attitude of the municipal government is thus marked by a move from openly opposing the far-right scene, for example, through organising demonstrations with *Cottbusser Aufbruch* against it, towards organising branding strategies for diversity, which only addresses it indirectly. However, read through the Gramscian lens employed in this article, the far-right scene in Cottbus poses a serious threat to the local state and progressive civil society actors alike. Consequently, this business-oriented alliance triggers a contradictory message to urban society in Cottbus and beyond: Retreating from alliances that organise counterdemonstrations against the far right signals a giving in to the normalisation of the far right, while at the same time engaging in a rhetoric that promotes an 'open, attractive and diverse city'.

The third type of alliance I scrutinised took a different stance. Comprising community activists organising for social justice issues in refugee support and activists-turned-bureaucrats working for the municipality in realms concerning migration policy, this faction is concerned with the authoritarian transformations taking place in Cottbus, particularly *within* the municipal administration. This focus on state institutions signifies a shift in local community activist's perspective on working with the municipality. Whereas previously they were invested in (and to some extent still are) organising to *resist* the racialised practices of municipal institutions (e.g., through documenting higher *Nebenkosten* allocated by the municipal housing company to refugees), they have now shifted from a position of resistance towards cautious partnership with selected institutional actors and encroaching on these institutions by taking up positions as bureaucrats. This development illuminates the equally contradictory role of civil society activist, who have to navigate the field of tension between partnership and resistance.

What, then, are the political implications of these findings? Insights from Gramscian thinking emphasise the contested nature of the state–civil society relations. In a context where the far right has managed to advance in both realms, neither the state nor civil society are neutral safeguards of liberal democracy. In this light, the findings of this article have three implications for

future strategies against local far-right contestations. First, in a context of shrinking solidarity, any strategy exclusively aimed at (certain areas of) civil society and not the local state (or the other way around for that matter) is not likely to be successful. Examining the unfolding of institutional racism and its interconnectedness with far-right tendencies in civil society in the case of Cottbus has shown how the state becomes a central terrain of this struggle. In the vein of Gramsci, the struggles, and structures within one are constituted and coproduced by the respective other. It follows that those local strategies to counter far-right contestations must address both realms. The inherent instability of the 'integral state' increases in the current conjuncture of authoritarianism and racism. This in turn puts more emphasis on democratic civil society organisations that must achieve hegemony before the state can be won over. Practically, for those in municipal government concerned with democratic inclusion, this entails that they have the ability to either strengthen or weaken civil society actors campaigning for an open society. The case of Cottbus has illustrated how by choosing to leave a long-established state-civil society alliance fighting against the local far-right scene, municipal actors significantly weakened the remaining civil society organisations in the alliance. In addition to the material consequences this withdrawal has for the civil society organisations (e.g., denied access to municipal resources), it also sent a strong symbolic message to the local population, implying that the current municipal government no longer felt it necessary to draw a clear line against the growing far-right tendencies in the city. Further, the municipality's withdrawal went hand in hand with the retreat of more moderate civil society associations like the local church. The cooperation it instead initiated with local businesses in order to launch a branding strategy against the city's far-right image seems ineffective and appears more as a 'fig leave' rather than a sincere attempt to counter the far right. It follows that municipal governments play a vital role in upholding the values of an urban polity open and accessible for all.

Second, my insistence to not neglect the role of the local state as central field in the negotiation of counterstrategies against the far right does not diminish or underrate the risks of the constraints put on civil society initiatives that emerge when entering alliances with municipal institutions, or even their co-optation by state bureaucracies. The analysis of the weakening and precarisation of *Cottbusser Aufbruch* is illustrative of this risk: the responsabilisation of local civil society actors in the fight against the far right they experienced by federal governments is accompanied by a continuous lack of funding. Equally, this risk is illustrated by the equilibrium between partnership and resistance the local refugee support activists find themselves in working together with activists-turned-bureaucrats in the municipal institution. Here, more partnership potentially implies less resistance – which many activists are against. Hence, this is an important discussion to be had within civil society movements. One aspect that could become crucial in such discussions is the importance of the connection between activists-turned-bureaucrats with people inside of civil society movements and the continuous strengthening of their relation. Koch (2022) has suggested that this could entail limiting the roles in public office to a certain amount of time as well as the strengthening of more modes of direct democracy to institutionalise exchanges between the two factions.

Third, the conversation between the Gramscian notion of the integral state and the empirical material from Cottbus has shown that a crucial precondition for countering the far-right moment within and outside the state is a broadened social basis for anti-racist work. This is because hegemony in civil society is seen as the basis of political power. In a context of 'shrinking solidarity' this is not an easy task. For example, the case of migrant self-organisations in Cottbus has shown the dangers and risks associated with their anti-racist work, also points to the limits of broadening the social basis for their work in an atmosphere of manifest far-right normalisation. In strategic terms, this could mean accentuating the question of scale and space, and for these civil society movements to reach across cities and regions in an attempt to unite beyond a specific urban context. Fundamentally, this would also require established

democratic movements in metropolises to forge ties with their counterparts in peripheral spaces of ‘shrinking solidarity’.

To conclude, it is indeed fair to say that cities have high potentials in resisting the current far-right moment; they are the arena where new relationships between the local state and actors from the realms of civil society and the private sector are fought out. What then might the Cottbus case reveal about global developments of the far right and how it is involved in local civil society and local governments more generally? As this article has shown, much depends on the interaction between actors and the direction it moves. Teasing out they dynamics and contradictions that mark this process, the Cottbus case demonstrates that this can at times mean that far-right infiltration of the local state can correspond with coalitions of solidarity (e.g., with asylum seekers), arguing that it is out of such contradictions that counterstrategies against the far right can emerge, even ones which partly normalise the far right. Doing so in one of the geographic blind spots on the far right (Ince, 2019) has proven fruitful, as it moves attention away from progressive urban centres towards places where far-right mobilisation and normalisation have already consolidated. Consequently, this article ends with a call for further (comparative studies) of this nature in other global contexts on municipal efforts to combat the far right.

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## ETHICS STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from the study participants for their data to be included in this article.

## NOTES

1. In this article, I loosely define ‘democratic actors’ as those in opposition to far-right actors, either practicing solidarity with migrants and/or developing counterstrategies against the rise of the far right. This broad definition of ‘democratic actors’ allows me to deduce three types of state–civil society alliances among them in section 4.
2. I conceive of the AfD as an archetypal example of far-right parties, as members of this party family share the core ideological traits of authoritarianism, nativism and populism, and hold radical positions and related policy issues which distinguishes them from the mainstream (Mudde, 2007).
3. The concept of ‘institutional racism’ emerged within the Black Power Movement in the United States (Car-michael & Hamilton, 1967), and is increasingly prominent in social science research tracing how policies, rules, and societal orders result in and continuously support the discrimination and unfair/harmful treatment of others

based on race. A milestone of empirical investigations into institutional racism was the so-called Macpherson Report on the killing of Stephen Lawrence in London, which found that it had been ‘marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership’ (Quinn, 2019) of the Metropolitan Police. In Germany, empirical research on institutional racism is in its infancy. Only last year, the German federal government has commissioned a report on institutional racism in Germany (DeZIM, 2022). Based on my interview sample, I nevertheless chose to make use of the term, as the topic repeatedly surfaced across various interviews.

4. This wave of far-right violence in the 1990s had long been left out of collective memory of the post-Wende years. It was through the Twitter hashtag *#baseballschlägerjahre* (baseball bat years) in 2019, initiated by journalist Christian Bangel, that the topic was treated in national public discourse (see also Wolters et al., 2020).

5. All translations from German into English by the author.

6. The semi-structured interview was developed in line with the principles of grounded theory and aims at generating theory by comprehending and interpreting individual actions and subjective perceptions. An open initial question aimed at eliciting a narration is followed by an interview guideline, which also allows for addressing topics not yet touched upon.

7. I did not aim for the sample size to be representative. Following the principles of constructivist grounded theory, my sample size is defined by saturation rather than representation. That is, the end of my research process was not marked by a specific number of participants, but rather by the quality of interviews and how fully they described the phenomena under investigation, in my case the dynamics of state–civil society relations in the local responses against far-right contestations. Accordingly, the validity of my qualitative results does not derive from capturing every variation across a population, but rather from capturing the full range of variation within an experience (Fisher Smith et al., 2020).

8. An increasing number of empirical studies document this in a number of sectors in Germany, including the education section (Gomolla & Radtke, 2002; Hunkler, 2014), the housing market (El-Kayed & Hamann, 2018) or the police (Hunold & Wegner, 2020).

9. See <https://www.cottbus-ist-bunt.de/index.php/>.

10. See <https://www.cottbus-nazifrei.info/>.

11. See <https://seebruecke.org/mach-mit/deutschland/brandenburg/cottbus/sicherer-hafen/>.

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