Defying the Stigma: Radical Right Parties and Extreme Fringe Groups in Western Europe



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Abstract

In recent years, radical right parties (RRPs) in Western Europe have surged in electoral success, often achieving double-digit results and entered governing coalitions. Despite efforts to appear more moderate, all RRPs in the region engage—albeit to varying degrees—with far-right, anti-democratic fringe groups. Given the reputational risks of associating with these ostracised organisations, a key question arises: why do RRPs engage with fringe groups, and what determines the extent of these interactions? While theories from related fields address party-fringe group linkages, no holistic theory of this phenomenon exists, nor has a systematic comparative study yet been conducted. I argue that RRPs' engagement with fringe groups is shaped by two factors: (1) the party's organisational capacity and (2) the salience of immigration, which influences party leaders' perception of reputational risks. To examine these dynamics, I conduct a comparative analysis of the German AfD and the French RN. Using process tracing and a broad range of primary and secondary sources, I identify the conditions and causal mechanisms that drive or constrain RRPs from engaging with fringe groups. This study stands out by applying theories of party organisation to these engagements and focusing on how RRPs calculate reputational costs. Understanding these interactions is crucial for filling gaps in the literature and deepening our knowledge of radical right party-movement linkages. As RRPs gain electoral ground, reshape political discourse, and amplify far-right claims, their engagement with fringe groups is among the most pressing political phenomena of our time. These interactions can influence policy agendas, bolster RRPs' electoral prospects, and fuel political polarisation. A clearer understanding of how RRPs engage with far-right actors can inform more effective strategies to counter threats to democratic norms and stability while advancing research on radical right dynamics.

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List of abbreviations

Acronym	Full form
AfD	Alternative for Germany (German: Alternative für Deutschland)
BfV	Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (German: Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz)
BZÖ	Alliance for the Future of Austria (German: Bündnis Zukunft Österreich)
CDU	Christian Democratic Union of Germany (German: Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands)
CNDCH	French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (French: Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme)
DÖW	Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance (German: Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes)
EU	European Union
FBU	Free Citizens' Union (German: Freie Bürger Union)
FDP	Free Democratic Party (German: Freie Demokratische Partei)
FPÖ	Freedom Party of Austria (German: Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs)
GI	Identity Generation (French: Génération identitaire)
IfS	Institute for State Policy (German: Institut für Staatspolitik)
NPD	National Democratic Party (German: Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands), renamed to The Homeland (German: Die Heimat) in June 2023
NSV	Flemish Nationalist Student Association
ÖVP	Austrian People's Party (German: Österreichische Volkspartei)
PACA	Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region
Pnos	Swiss Nationalist Party (German: Partei National Orientierter Schweizer)
RN	National Rally (French: Rassemblement National), formerly the Front National until the party was renamed in 2018
RRP	Radical right party
SPÖ	Social Democratic Party of Austria (German: Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs)
SVP	Swiss People's Party (German: Schweizerische Volkspartei)
VB	Flemish Interest (Dutch: Vlaams Belang)
VdU	Federation of Independents (German: Verband der Unabhängigen)

Chapter 1: Introduction

On 11 May 2019, a disturbing scene unfolded in the German Bundestag. Far-right bloggers, publishers and activists from the ethno-nationalist Identitarian movement[1] gathered for the so-called 'First Congress of Free Media,' hosted by the Alternative for Germany (AfD). Barred to mainstream journalists (Am Orde, 2019), the event was a bold statement of intent. Among the attendees were Daniel Sebbin, an identitarian media strategist specialising in 'counter-publicity,' and Lisa Licentia, a prominent YouTuber championing identitarian ideals. Their aim? To strengthen the AfD's ties with far-right media outlets, build an alternative media ecosystem to challenge so-called 'biased' mainstream narratives, and coordinate a unified media strategy. Proposals included launching an 'alternative news agency,'[2] pushing back against perceived censorship by fact-checkers in the Bundestag, and encouraging AfD MPs to share far-right content on social media over mainstream articles (Eckert, 2019). This was more than a media strategy session—it was a demonstration of how radical right parties (RRPs) engage with far-right actors to amplify and normalise divisive, extremist narratives. By discrediting mainstream media and claiming to represent a silenced majority, the far-right actors involved contribute to an echo chamber that spreads conspiracy theories, erodes public trust, and uses alternative media to weaken democratic foundations.

Such overt interactions between RRPs and far-right actors reveal a strategic dilemma for these parties. RRPs must carefully balance maintaining links with their radical core supporters while moderating their image to appeal to a broader electorate. This balancing act is critical as they seek to position themselves as credible contenders for governmental power without alienating loyal voters or risking the rise of more radical rivals to their right. This is particularly pressing in the current political climate, where radical right discourse is increasingly mainstream (Akkerman, De Lange, and Rooduijn, 2016; Brown, Mondon, and Winter, 2023; Lindekilde, 2014) and RRPs are gaining acceptance among significant segments of the electorate. Over the past decade, in what Mudde (2016b) calls the 'fourth wave of the far right', RRPs have resurged across Western Europe, achieving

[1] A far-right pan-European ethno-nationalist group that advocates the preservation of Western culture and territories exclusively for white European ethnic groups and is under intelligence surveillance in Germany.
[2] Like dpa (Deutsche Presse-Agentur), Germany's largest news agency, founded in 1949, providing multi-lingual news coverage to media around the world.

double-digit electoral results and entering national parliaments.[3] This rise opens up the prospect of governmental power for RRPs, although many still have their roots and most loyal voters on the extreme right.

RRPs' public interactions with far-right fringe groups[4] can undermine their efforts to project a more moderate image. The extent of these interactions varies, reflecting how well RRPs manage the balance between maintaining support from their core base and appealing to the mainstream electorate. Notably, all RRPs in Western Europe maintain some level of connection with far right and openly anti-democratic fringe groups, although the degree of engagement differs significantly. This raises a central question: why do RRPs openly engage with fringe groups, and what explains the variation in the extent of this engagement?

The AfD, for example, regularly engages with far-right groups, attending rallies organised by movements like Pegida[5] (Serhan, 2018), co-developing a right-wing media platform[6] (Petter and Laufer, 2020), and inviting fringe members to speak at party events (Am Orde, 2019). Similarly, Belgium's Vlaams Belang (VB), long embedded in the Flemish nationalist subculture and politically isolated for decades, maintains close ties with groups like Voorpost and the Flemish Nationalist Student Association (NSV) (Art, 2008; Van Holsteyn, 2018). In December 2018, VB joined these groups to protest a UN migration pact (Gotev, 2018) and later supported Voorpost after members were convicted of inciting hatred during an anti-Muslim protest (Antifascista Siempre, 2021). The Finns Party formally denounces far-right groups like the Soldiers of Odin[7] (Jungar and Jupskås, 2014; Rosendahl and Forsell, 2016), but maintains informal links at the local level, with its youth wing participating in neo-Nazi events[8] (Varis, 2021). In contrast, France's Rassemblement National (RN)

[3] In France, the National Rally (RN) won a quarter of parliamentary seats in the 2024 snap parliamentary elections (Cokelaere and Goury-Laffont, 2024) and more than 40% of the vote in the presidential election in April 2022. In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats became the second largest party with 20.5% of the vote in mid-September 2022. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy became the largest party with 26% of the vote in late September 2022 (Silver, 2022, p. 28).
[4] I define fringe groups as national, offline far-right collective actors who hold radical or extreme right views, which may be expressed through violent or non-violent means. More details in the theory section of chapter 2.
[5] Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West) is a German far-right movement founded in 2014 that opposes the perceived Islamisation of Europe and promotes nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric.
[6] Fritzfeed, now known as Flinkfeed, is a right-wing platform closely linked to the AfD and far-right movements in Germany. It uses viral content to spread nationalist and Islamophobic messages, particularly to younger audiences. Key figures like Christian Schäler and Tim Beuter, who have links to both the AfD and extremist groups, have played a central role in its development. Some posts directly copy AfD parliamentary material, blending propaganda with journalism.
[7] The Soldiers of Odin is a far-right vigilante group founded in Finland in 2015, known for its anti-immigration stance and patrolling urban areas to monitor and confront what they perceive as criminal activity by immigrants.
[8] Members of the party's youth wing gave speeches at neo-Nazi demonstrations and took part in a neo-Nazi 'summer camp' involving shooting exercises.

engages less often with fringe groups, mainly defending them when facing government-led dissolution (Trouillard, 2021). Spain's Vox also has limited direct links with far-right groups but strategically borrows their slogans, symbols, and messages to resonate with its base. Vox does not distance itself from these groups, occasionally welcoming former fringe members into the party and publicly defending them (Europa Press, 2022; La Vanguardia, 2021).

The very existence of this engagement between RRPs and fringe groups at the margin of society, as well as its varying degrees, present a puzzle for researchers, raising the key question of what determines the extent of these interactions. Understanding the drivers of these interactions is crucial to fill gaps in the existing literature and improve our understanding of party-movement linkages within the radical right. Given the widespread electoral gains of RRPs across Western Europe, their influence on the boundaries of acceptable political discourse and norms (Valentim, 2021; Valentim and Widmann, 2023), and the increasing visibility of far-right claims by fringe groups (Amenta and Elliott, 2017), interactions between RRPs and fringe groups are among the most pressing political phenomena of our time. Such engagements can lead to RRPs advocating policies developed with or proposed by fringe groups, contribute to RRPs' electoral success, and increase political polarisation. A clearer understanding of how RRPs interact with other actors in the far-right space can inform more effective strategies for countering and mitigating threats to democratic norms and stability and advance our knowledge of the dynamics within the radical right.

In this thesis, I argue that two key factors shape RRPs' engagement with far-right fringe groups. First, a party's organisational needs influence its reliance on fringe groups for mobilisation, policy development, and operational support, thereby shaping the likelihood of interaction. Second, the salience of immigration affects party leaders' concerns about reputational costs and their cost-benefit calculations, which in turn affect their willingness to engage. These factors are dynamic and interdependent, and together drive RRPs' behaviour in nuanced ways.

This thesis contributes to the literature on party-movement linkages, and in particular to the underexplored relationship between RRPs and fringe groups (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro, 2019, 2024). What sets this work apart is its application of arguments about party organisation to RRP-fringe group interactions and its focus on the reputational cost calculations that underpin these alliances. To examine these dynamics, I develop an index of RRP-fringe group interactions and conduct a small-N

cross-case comparison to uncover the causal mechanisms at play. Before outlining the research design, I will first review the relevant literature and situate this study within it.

Literature review

Research on social movements and political parties has long operated in silos, with little cross-pollination (McAdam and Tarrow, 2010). Traditionally, parties and movements have been seen as playing different roles in political systems. Parties primarily aggregate interests and compete in elections to gain representation, while movements articulate interests and seek to influence decision-making through contentious, extra-institutional actions (Minkenberg, 2019; Tarrow, 2021).

In recent years, however, scholars have increasingly explored the complex, dynamic, and context-specific linkages between parties and movements. While alliance building is a central form of interaction, research has shown that parties and movements influence each other in diverse ways, often shaped by the strategic calculations of political actors (Hutter, Kriesi, and Lorenzini, 2018).

Despite these advances, little theoretical attention has been paid to radical right party-movement linkages. Much of the existing literature consists of descriptive work or single case studies. Notable exceptions include Pirro's application of McAdam and Tarrow's (2010) typology of six party-movement linkage mechanisms to Hungary's Jobbik Party (2019), Froio et al.'s analysis of how CasaPound Italia blended elements of party organisation and social movements, integrating far-right ideology with pop culture symbols (2020), and Weisskircher, Hutter, and Borbáth (2023)'s exploration of how protest dynamics contributed to the electoral rise of challenger parties like the AfD in Germany.

The increasing use of contentious politics by RRPs (Minkenberg, 2019), the rise of far-right bottom-up protests (Mudde, 2016a) and the growing hybridisation of RRPs and movements are recurring themes in the literature. Fielitz and Laloire note that the boundaries between RRPs, movements, and subcultural actors are becoming increasingly blurred (2016). Similarly, Castelli Gattinara and Pirro argue that RRPs and far-right groups show a 'high degree of reciprocal influence' (2019, p. 452; 2024). This hybridisation challenges Kriesi's (2012) earlier claim that movement-party relations on the political right follow a different logic than those on the left—specifically, that the far

right alternates between electoral and protest mobilisations—instead suggesting that the two forms are increasingly combined.

Three strands of literature offer valuable insights into why RRPs engage with far-right fringe groups to varying degrees: studies of party-movement linkages, party-terrorist group interactions, and party-interest group relations. Drawing on these strands, a number of possible explanatory factors—both party-specific and structural—can be derived to explain the extent and nature of RRPs' engagement with fringe groups.

Party-specific factors include a party's organisational strength, extreme origins, and governing experience. Resource mobilisation theory suggests that an organisation's success hinges on its ability to acquire and use resources effectively (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Betz and Immerfall (1998) stress the importance of charismatic leadership and a tight party structure, which enable parties to respond quickly to new issues and seize political opportunities. Kitschelt underscores the role of formal structures in enhancing a party's mobilisation capacity and overall success (2006), while Heinisch and Mazzoleni emphasise the significance of party centralisation, organisational complexity, and coherence for the radical right's adaptability (2016). Although the literature does not directly link a RRP's organisational strength to its engagement with fringe groups, it can be inferred that a party's organisational capacity—or lack thereof—influences how it strategizes these interactions. Schlozman (2015), in his analysis of the impact of social movements[9] on US political parties, argues that parties engage with movements not only when they share priorities, but also when these alliances offer electoral advantages, particularly through access to votes, time, money, and networks. Similarly, Hutter, Kriesi, and Lorenzi (2018) suggest that parties are more likely to engage with interest groups before elections, relying on their support to mobilise voters.

Beyond mobilisation, another strand of literature highlights the issue-setting capacity of movements. Movements can shape discursive fields and politicise issues, creating discursive opportunities for parties (Weisskircher, Hutter, and Borbáth, 2023). Hafez argues that parties may

[9] Schlozman examined how organised labour and the Christian Right have influenced the development of the Democratic and Republican parties since the 1970s, specifically the mechanisms through which these movements are embedded within party structures and shape party agendas, strategies and electoral outcomes over time.

engage with movements to adopt issues that align with their agenda,[10] while Castelli Gattinara and Pirro (2019) suggest that movements can also help parties better disseminate their existing messages. Meanwhile, Art (2008) notes that organisational weakness can also affect a party's engagement with groups, as parties with unclear structures may struggle to turn away group members who flock to them.[11] Drawing on this literature, I apply the concept of organisational strength to the question of why RRPs engage with fringe groups, hypothesising that weaker organisational capacity increases a party's reliance on—and thus openness to—fringe groups engagement (developed as an independent variable in the second chapter on theory and research design).

The second party-specific factor that may influence RRPs' engagement with fringe groups, as inferred from the literature, is the party's origins. Historical roots can leave lasting organisational, ideological, and strategic imprints that shape a party's present-day behaviour. Research on the radical left suggests that historical ties between parties and movements can shape current organisational relationships (Charalambous, 2021, p. 28). Similarly, RRPs with extreme right backgrounds, such as the French RN or the Austrian FPÖ, may maintain links with far-right groups because of historical ties. During their formative years, some RRPs absorbed significant elements of the extreme right-wing movement sector, integrating them into their organisational structure and ideological framework. This resulted in substantial 'backstage links' with fringe groups (Minkenberg, 2019, p. 473). For instance, Klandermans and Mayer (2006) note that the RN (formerly Front National) brought together various far-right currents within its multi-organisational field and continued to draw support from these networks. Such historical ties often become embedded in a party's identity, shaping its strategic culture and influencing its interactions with contemporary far-right actors. RRPs with extreme right roots tend to remain closely linked to fringe groups, as severing these ties risks alienating a loyal base that still values them. Breaking away requires a conscious political effort but does not follow naturally from theory. While it is theoretically plausible that RRPs with far-right roots engage with fringe groups, this remains to be tested empirically.

[10] Referring to the Austrian far-right FPÖ, he posits that the reason why Pegida demonstrations were probably smaller in Austria, and why the FPÖ did not adopt the movement to the same extent as the AfD in Germany, is that it had already dominated the issue of migration with strong anti-immigration rhetoric, and the movement therefore did not represent a discursive opportunity for the party (2016).

[11] Studies of far-left party-movement relations have found that organisational autonomy can affect the degree of interaction (Charalambous, 2021).

A third party-specific factor possibly influencing the different tendencies of RRPs to interact with far-right fringe groups is their governing experience. Parties in government, or those with recent experience of government, may be reluctant to engage with stigmatised fringe groups that are often critical of governing entities. RRPs may seek to project themselves as legitimate political actors, be constrained by the pressures of governance, or seek to project their re-election prospects (Rucht, 2004, p. 197), thus limiting their interactions with fringe groups. The impact of electoral success on the policy and rhetorical moderation of RRPs is debated. While some RRPs moderate their positions to broaden their appeal and meet the demands of government, others maintain or even intensify their radicalism to retain their core supporters (Mudde, 2007).[12] Akkerman and Rooduijn (2015) argue that non-ostracised RRPs have not necessarily become more moderate over time.

Although it seems theoretically plausible that government experience would reduce a RRP's propensity to engage with fringe groups, this factor lacks empirical support. It cannot fully explain the differences in RRPs' tendencies to engage with fringe groups, as these vary considerably between parties with and without governing experience. For example, parties such as the Finns Party, Italy's Lega Nord, Norway's Progress Party and Austria's FPÖ have openly engaged with groups such as Soldiers of Odin, CasaPound, Stop the Islamisation of Norway and Mosche ade, despite having government experience at the national level. This suggests that government experience alone is unlikely to explain the variation in RRPs' interaction with fringe groups.

In addition to party-specific factors that focus at the meso or organisational level on parties' 'internal supply-side' strategic decisions about engaging with fringe groups, it is important to consider the broader political, cultural, and institutional contexts. RRPs operate within the alliance and conflict structures in which groups and movements are embedded (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro, 2019; McAdam and Tarrow, 2010). From the literature, several potential macro-level explanatory factors can be derived for the varying propensity of RRPs to engage with fringe groups.

First, a country's electoral system significantly shapes the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary dimensions of the far right (Minkenberg, 2019). Adopting a movement-centric perspective, Hutter,

[12] Mudde (2007, p. 290) notes that the success of some RRPs, such as the Vlaams Belang, has led to a moderation of positions, while Italy's Lega Nord or Romania's Greater Romania Party have not moderated after electoral success.

Kriesi, and Lorenzi argue that the electoral system influences the number and orientation of parties available as potential allies for social movements, suggesting that in two-party systems, movements opt for intra-party mobilisation to gain influence, given the low chances of winning electoral contests (2018, p. 325). Schlozman (2015) echoes this, noting that in FPTP systems, social movements face higher barriers to forming political parties. As a result, parties tend to view these groups as 'anchor groups'[13] that provide votes and networks. In contrast, party leaders in PR systems often see such groups as potential competitors, thus discouraging open collaboration with them.

While it is theoretically conceivable that RRPs in PR systems might be more inclined to ignore or distance themselves from far-right fringe groups, it is equally plausible that they might embrace, absorb, co-opt, or pre-empt these groups to mitigate their electoral threat. Since the electoral system does not prescribe a fixed logic for parties' behaviour towards fringe groups, I deliberately deprioritise this factor in this study. The evidence presented in the empirical chapters shows that electoral systems alone are unlikely to explain the variation in RRPs' engagement with fringe groups in the cases analysed. In most Western European countries with PR systems, RRPs engage with fringe groups to varying degrees, suggesting that the electoral system alone cannot account for this variation. Moreover, as electoral systems remain relatively stable over time, they fail to explain changes in fringe group engagement in the same context.

A second potential macro-level factor is a country's fascist past. Historical experiences of fascist or extreme-right regimes often leave a lasting imprint on the political landscape, influencing public perceptions and party behaviour. Several scholars argue that these legacies create strong social aversions and normative pressures against associating with the far-right fringe (Ignazi, 2003; Mudde, 2019). In countries like Germany, Italy, or Spain, memories of authoritarianism, persecution, and violence act as a powerful deterrent, discouraging modern RRPs from openly associating with extremist elements. The stigma of a fascist past induces caution, compelling RRPs to avoid extremist elements lest their reputations be tarnished by association (Art, 2008; Minkenberg, 2019, p. 468). To maintain political legitimacy and electoral viability, these parties often eschew public alliances, opting

[13] Anchor groups are groups that are closely associated with a particular political party, supporting it organisationally and sometimes financially, providing it with a platform to promote its policies and agenda (Schlozman, 2015, p. 41).

instead for coded language or strategic borrowing of ideas to appeal to core supporters without risking broader backlash.

However, while it is plausible that a country's fascist past would reduce the likelihood of RRPs associating with fringe groups, this does not hold up empirically. In Germany, for example, despite the country's horrific Nazi past, the AfD openly associates with, and sometimes publicly defends, far-right fringe groups. Similarly, in Italy, despite the country's fascist history under Mussolini, the Northern League and the Brothers of Italy have on several occasions[14] interacted with neo-fascist and identitarian movements. These examples highlight the limits of historical stigma in constraining RRP behaviour, suggesting other factors also play a role.

A third macro-level factor related to a country's fascist past is the severity of the government's response to far-right actors. Countries with a fascist history often establish legal and institutional frameworks to curb far-right activities that are seen as a threat to democratic principles (Capoccia, 2007; Eatwell, 1996). These frameworks may include banning extremist symbols, criminalising hate speech, increasing surveillance of extremist groups, or banning parties and organisations that promote anti-democratic ideologies. Strong state responses are expected to increase the reputational costs of associating with fringe actors (Minkenberg, 2006, p. 34), thereby discouraging RRPs from engaging with such groups.

While Koopmans[15] (1997) and Kriesi (1995) argue that repression, in the form of a strong state response to extreme right-wing actors, functions as a component of the political opportunity structure that imposes costs on far-right actors that they must weigh up, Tilly (2005) and Neidhart (1989) suggest that repressive measures can also foster solidarity among far-right actors, potentially provoking resistance that undermines the intended deterrent effects. Minkenberg contends that the impact of repression varies according to the type of actor (e.g. violent or non-violent), offering a non-linear perspective that incorporates both the fear of reputational damage and the anger provoked by such measures (2006).

[14] One example is the participation of several Northern League and Brothers of Italy MPs and regional councillors in the annual meeting of Lealtà Azione, a far-right movement in Lombardy (Santangelo, 2018).
[15] Note: Koopmans focuses on the impact of repressive government policies on xenophobic violence and manifestations, not on the impact of the ideological or organisational work of the radical right.

While the idea that a strong state response stigmatises far-right groups and deters RRPs from engaging with them is theoretically plausible, its explanatory power is limited. For example, both France and Germany have robust state responses to far-right actors that threaten democratic principles (Laumond, 2020; Minkenberg, 2019), with Germany's measures often seen as more repressive. However, the AfD in Germany engages with fringe groups more frequently and in more reputationally risky ways than the RN in France (see Chapter 3). This suggests that a strong state response alone is not sufficient to explain the variation in RRP interactions with fringe groups.

The review of the academic literature reveals that RRP-fringe group linkages remain largely underexplored. No comprehensive theory explains the interactions between RRPs and far-right movements, and systematic comparisons of their engagement with fringe actors are notably lacking. However, related scholarship on parties' interactions with movements, interest groups, and extra-parliamentary associations points to six potential explanatory factors: three at the meso level (party-specific) and three at the macro level (structural, cultural and institutional contexts). While these factors are not established or tested explanations, they provide valuable insights and a basis for further analysis.

Among the party-specific factors, the idea that a party's organisational circumstances shape its likelihood of engaging with fringe groups is particularly compelling. I therefore draw on this concept and, in the next chapter outlining the theoretical argument, develop organisational strength as an independent variable, suggesting that organisational weakness leads RRPs to compensate by turning to fringe groups. However, party-specific explanations alone cannot fully account for the variation in RRP-fringe group interactions, highlighting the importance of broader political and social contexts. A second compelling possible explanation derived from the literature is a macro-level factor—that a country's electoral system shapes RRPs' propensity to engage with fringe groups. While this factor lacks clear predictions for its impact on RRP-fringe group interactions and, due to the stability of electoral systems over time, is unlikely to explain cross-temporal changes, it may influence RRPs' strategic cost-benefit calculations of associating with fringe groups. This is further explored in the main cases analysed. Additionally, a party's previous experience in government also appears to be a plausible explanation for the different levels of fringe group engagement. As neither of the main cases

in this study—the AfD and the RN—has governed at the national level, this factor is examined in the shadow case analysis in Chapter 6, which includes the Austrian FPÖ, a party with multiple stints in government. Other potential explanations, such as a party's extreme right roots, a country's fascist past, and the severity of state repression, seem inconsistent with the observed patterns of engagement. While these factors are less likely to explain variation, they are critically assessed to determine their relevance. Understanding why and under what circumstances RRPs engage with far-right groups is both timely and essential, as these parties increasingly influence public discourse and policy, while posing a potential threat to democratic institutions and social cohesion across Western Europe. This study seeks to contribute to this critical area of inquiry.

Preview of thesis argument and structure

This thesis examines the factors driving variation in RRPs' engagement with far-right fringe groups through a small-N comparative case study of the German AfD and the French RN, with findings extended to two shadow cases—the Austrian FPÖ and the Swiss SVP. I argue that two key variables—organisational strength and immigration salience—shape these interactions. First, organisational strength is crucial. Weak RRPs often rely on fringe groups to fill gaps in mobilisation, policy development, and operational capacity. In contrast, strong RRPs, with robust infrastructure and resources, are less dependent on external support, reducing their engagement with such groups. Second, the salience of immigration plays a key role. When immigration dominates public discourse, party leaders may perceive lower reputational risks in engaging with fringe groups, either due to a reduced likelihood of intra-party backlash or diminished societal condemnation. These conditions shift leaders' cost-benefit calculations, making engagement more strategically appealing. Crucially, these variables interact in dynamic and context-specific ways. For example, high immigration salience may increase the strategic value of engaging with fringe groups for weak RRPs, while strong RRPs may still avoid such links despite favourable conditions. This interplay highlights how context shapes RRP behaviour in complex ways, and underscores the need for a closer examination of these dynamics and their underlying drivers.

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework, hypotheses, and research design. Chapter 3 introduces the main case studies—the German AfD and the French RN—and presents an initial cross-comparative test of the hypotheses. Chapters 4 and 5 delve deeper into the interactions of the AfD and the RN with far-right fringe groups, respectively, and provide a more detailed cross-temporal and sub-national test of the hypotheses. Chapter 6 broadens the analysis by assessing the applicability of the argument to two shadow cases. Finally, Chapter 7 summarises the main findings, explores their broader implications, and suggests directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Theory and research design

Theory

The dissertation takes its lead from the inherent dilemma faced by RRPs in the current political conjuncture: on the one hand, they must moderate their radical positions to attract broader electoral support and improve their chances of attaining executive power, on the other hand, they must avoid alienating their loyal base and encouraging the emergence of a rival party to their right. This electoral dilemma relates to spatial theory, which posits that voters prefer parties closest to their political beliefs, causing parties to gravitate towards the centre (Black et al., 1998, p. 111; Downs, 1985, p. 128). However, as parties become less distinct, voter attachment decreases, incentivising parties to adopt more extreme positions (Lupu, 2013, p. 50). This electoral dilemma requires RRPs to strike a balance between their core and more moderate constituencies. RRPs can connect with their core supporters and signal their loyalty to far-right ideas by engaging with far-right fringe groups.

I define *fringe groups* as far-right, national, offline, collective actors who hold ideological views on core issues, such as immigration, that are more extreme than those of RRPs. They typically advocate for strict immigration controls, particularly targeting non-European immigration, reject multiculturalism, and harbour strong nativist sentiments. Alongside this strong anti-immigration stance, they often endorse authoritarian measures on issues like law and order and support welfare chauvinism, prioritising benefits exclusively for certain social groups. Fringe groups express their views through both violent and non-violent means, frequently using inflammatory rhetoric. The label *fringe* refers to these groups' position at the far-right fringe of the political spectrum. This definition excludes lone wolves. While it includes small extreme right-wing parties,[1] such as neo-Nazi parties, to explore why and under what conditions RRPs might align with these highly stigmatised actors, most fringe groups operate outside the parliamentary

[1] Extreme right-wing parties are characterised by an 'anti-democratic opposition to equality', often tied to racism, xenophobia, exclusionary nationalism, conspiracy theories, and authoritarianism (Jupskås and Segers, 2020) while radical right parties exhibit an 'illiberal opposition to equality', associated with radical nationalism, authoritarianism, populism, and xenophobia (Jupskås, 2020).

framework. These groups seek to influence through alternative channels, often using unconventional actions (e.g. border patrols) and using ambiguous language and double coding to convey exclusionary messages that border on hate speech.

While fringe groups may attempt to infiltrate or influence RRPs, I focus on RRP agency for several reasons. First, unlike fringe groups, RRPs participate directly in electoral competition and have clear incentives to adjust their strategies to maximise votes, shape public opinion and influence policy. This makes them more inclined to make strategic choices, such as adopting specific rhetoric or aligning with fringe groups. RRPs must consider the reputational costs of engaging with fringe groups and can therefore be seen as deliberately choosing when and how to engage. Second, RRPs wield greater formal power through institutional presence, formal organisation, and greater resource mobilisation, positioning them as more powerful and skilled actors. Third, RRPs have stronger agenda-setting power, with fringe groups generally reacting to or amplifying the issues raised by RRPs. Focusing on the strategic considerations of RRPs is key to understanding these dynamics (Hutter, Kriesi, and Lorenzini, 2018).

Dependent variable

The dependent variable in this dissertation is the level of public engagement between RRPs and far-right fringe groups. This is defined as visible, cooperative interactions between RRPs and fringe groups, which can be either organisational or ideological in nature. Drawing on Kriesi's (1995) operational approach to protest, I conceptualise public engagement by identifying a list of specific actions (Table 1).

Table 1: Specific actions classified as public engagement

Overt engagement with fringe groups	Details	Reputational costliness
Organisational cooperation	Acceptance of current or former fringe group members into party	Very costly
	Acceptance of fringe group members at radical right party events	Somewhat costly
	Co-organisation of rallies, protests, and other events	Very costly
	Election campaign support by fringe group members	Somewhat costly
	Hiring of current or former fringe group members into party positions	Very costly
	Presence of party leaders at fringe group events	Very costly
	Speeches of party leaders at fringe group events	Very costly
Ideological cooperation	Dissemination of fringe group content among party members	Somewhat costly
	Guest articles by party leaders in publications of fringe groups	Somewhat costly
	Public party statements in support or defence of the fringe group	Somewhat costly
	Reference by party leaders to shared ideological or programmatic positions with fringe groups	Somewhat costly
	Reference to fringe group symbols or actions in party documents	Somewhat costly

Engagement classified as 'organisational' primarily serves a practical or organisational purpose for the RRP. This includes actions such as co-organising events with fringe groups, appointing fringe group members to party roles, having them stand as candidates, or receiving support from fringe groups in election campaigns. Organisational interactions can also have a signalling function, where a RRP communicates its positions to its base—for example, when RRP leaders speak at fringe group events.[2] 'Ideological interactions,' on the other hand, primarily serve a signalling function, conveying the RRP's 'true' positions and alliances to its core supporters or targeting far-right audiences through specific media outlets, often those associated with the far right or 'alternative' media. Since interactions between local party members and non-party groups

[2] However, these actions carry reputational costs, as the RRP risks alienating more moderate supporters or attracting negative attention for its ties with fringe groups. The party must balance reinforcing its ideological alignment with potential damage to its reputation.

do not necessarily reflect the central party line, I refer only to the engagement of senior party members.[3]

Engagement with fringe groups can vary in frequency and reputational cost. Frequency is categorised as low, medium, or high. Low engagement refers to rare, isolated instances where senior party members interact with fringe groups on specific issues. These interactions are not part of a consistent RRP strategy but tend to occur in response to specific events or pressures. Medium engagement refers to repeated, though not constant, interactions that occur when the RRP sees a strategic advantage in engaging with fringe groups. High engagement denotes frequent, public interactions between RRPs and fringe groups, where the benefits of engagement outweigh the reputational risks. Although it is difficult and potentially arbitrary to set strict cut-off points for these categories, I define low engagement as fewer than five recorded instances of interactions per year, as recorded in a newspaper-based incident analysis (outlined in the Research Design section). Medium engagement is defined as between five and fifteen recorded instances, and high engagement refers to more than fifteen recorded instances of engagement per year.

In addition to frequency, public engagement can vary by reputational cost. For simplicity, I distinguish between 'somewhat costly' and 'very costly' types of interaction. Somewhat costly interactions are perceived as less significant, and therefore less likely to provoke public backlash or negative media coverage for the RRP. For instance, an RRP might issue a statement in defence of a fringe group facing a government ban, highlighting the importance of free speech. Other examples include actions that can be easily downplayed by party leaders by explaining the difficulty of controlling for them, such as fringe group members attending party events—a situation the leadership can attribute to a lack of control over attendance. In contrast, 'very costly' interactions involve significant actions by the RRP (e.g. a RRP leader speaking at an event) that cannot be easily downplayed, that express explicit support for fringe groups (e.g. accepting former fringe

[3] These are defined as national or state-level executive committee members, leaders of the national parliamentary group, official spokespersons, or national MPs.

group members into the party), and that are likely to provoke a strong public outcry and widespread negative media coverage.

Independent variables

RRPs seek to appeal to mainstream voters to improve their electoral prospects without alienating their core supporters. Overt engagement with far-right fringe groups can signal alignment with fringe ideas, potentially strengthening the loyalty of core supporters and encouraging their participation in the party. RRPs' interactions with far-right fringe groups can serve both organisational and symbolic functions (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro, 2024). However, such engagement can also damage the party's reputation and alienate mainstream voters. I hypothesise that two key factors influence the extent to which RRPs openly interact with far-right fringe groups: the organisational strength of the party and the salience of immigration in the political discourse (Figure 1).

Organisational strength

The first factor, organisational strength, is central to understanding RRP behaviour. I propose that organisationally weak RRPs are more dependent on fringe groups to compensate for deficiencies in recruitment, supporter mobilisation, and policy platform development, making them more likely to engage openly with such groups. In contrast, organisationally strong RRPs with established infrastructure and resources, can recruit and mobilise supporters relatively independently, reducing their need to engage with fringe groups.

Organisational strength can be conceptualised in various ways. Drawing on Poguntke et al.'s (2016) framework, I define party strength as a function of resources—such as party membership, staff, and finances—along with institutional structures and linkage mechanisms. Together, these elements contribute to a party's stability and operational capacity in the political arena. In particular, strong linkage mechanisms, allow parties to connect with voters and mobilise support through effective communication, grassroots engagement, and visibility in civil society. This

enables them to translate citizens' interests into policy agendas, thereby enhancing both electoral appeal and voter loyalty.

Robust organisational strength is crucial for parties seeking to maximise votes. Van Dyck (2014) highlights the importance of local party infrastructure for electoral success, showing how the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT) used investment in local membership and network expansion to improve electoral performance. Strong local organisations enable mobilisation through rallies, canvassing, and material distribution (Levitsky, 2003; Zarazaga, 2011). As Scarrow (1996) notes, professionalisation has become a strategic response to competitive pressures and declining party membership, allowing parties to conduct targeted outreach through data management and advanced voter engagement. Scholars studying the rise of RRPs in Europe often attribute their growth to increased organisational strength and mobilisation capacity (Art, 2008; de Lange and Art, 2011; Kitschelt and McGann, 1995). Art (2011) argues that robust organisational structures—rather than just charismatic, skilled leadership—underpin electoral success, with trained activists bringing essential skills in public outreach, negotiation, policy drafting, and platform development.

In addition to internal resources, parties can draw support from interest groups and civil society organisations. Schlozman (2015) argues that social movements provide valuable resources, such as an expanded constituency, greater ideological coherence, and organisational support. Grassroots movements can lend legitimacy to parties (Anria, 2019) and create discursive opportunities, shaping political narratives and politicising key issues (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro, 2019; Weisskircher, Hutter, and Borbáth, 2023).

However, while mainstream parties often have stable, structured relationships with such organisations (Allern et al., 2021; Katz and Mair, 1995; Smith, 1989), RRPs tend to have fewer links with them (Berkhout, Hanegraaff, and Statsch, 2021). The 'thin' populist ideology of RRPs, characterised by anti-elite rhetoric and a singular concept of 'the people' (Mudde, 2007), is at odds with the role of interest groups, which complicates collaboration (Berkhout, Hanegraaff, and Statsch, 2021). Furthermore, the anti-systemic, nationalist, and exclusionary rhetoric of RRPs often

clashes with the values of civil society organisations, leading many to actively exclude RRPs from public life (Betz, 1994; Wodak, 2015).

Organisationally weak RRPs, often stigmatised by elites and mainstream voters, may turn to far-right fringe groups to compensate for their organisational deficiencies. By engaging with these groups, RRPs can tap into resources typically provided by interest groups or civil society organisations, which may exclude them due to ideological differences. As RRPs struggle to secure support and traditional political resources, alliances with fringe groups offer alternative channels for communication, funding, and mobilisation. Forming 'a network of networks' (Minkenberg, 2002), these groups provide a committed base of supporters, grassroots networks for recruitment and campaigning, and access to alternative media platforms and private donors, helping RRPs to bypass mainstream channels that may be hostile. Unlike traditional interest groups, fringe groups offer RRPs opportunities for greater visibility and outreach, as well as the chance to push political boundaries and normalise far-right ideas in public discourse. As a result, organisationally weak RRPs, with limited resources and difficulties in attracting supporters, are more likely to accept the reputational risks associated with such alliances to compensate for their internal deficiencies.

Salience of immigration

The second factor influencing RRP engagement with fringe groups is the salience of immigration. Given that RRPs may suffer reputational damage and alienate mainstream voters by associating with far-right fringe groups—due to their stigmatisation—RRP leaders carefully weigh the potential costs and benefits of such alliances. I hypothesise that when immigration is highly salient, RRP leaders perceive lower reputational risks from engaging with fringe groups. High salience reduces intra-party reputational constraints and shapes RRP leaders' perceptions of immigration as a widely shared public concern, which affects their strategic calculations and increases the likelihood of engaging with fringe groups.

Salience refers to the intensity of concern that individuals attach to a specific issue (Krosnick, 1990). When immigration is highly salient, two causal mechanisms are likely to

influence RRPs' cost-benefit calculations about engaging with fringe groups. First, high salience reinforces existing anti-immigrant sentiments among the party's base (Malet, 2024). During elections, voters prioritise salient issues (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Mendelberg, 2001), which activates deeply held predispositions (Tesler, 2015). As immigration becomes more salient, the RRP base may signal[4] to party leaders that engaging with fringe groups carries minimal reputational risk. This growing focus on immigration may make the base more tolerant of, or even supportive of, such alliances, reducing the perceived reputational costs. Indeed, party leaders may even feel pressure to align themselves more explicitly with these groups to demonstrate their commitment to the party's core ideological tenets. RRPs and fringe groups often share common ideological underpinnings, such as a commitment to national identity, anti-immigrant sentiments, and fears of cultural heterogeneity. Immigration, therefore, becomes a unifying issue, strengthening their alignment and making engagement with fringe groups more strategically advantageous. Engaging with fringe groups can help consolidate the core voter base and attract voters disillusioned with mainstream politics but deeply concerned about immigration.

Second, when immigration is highly salient, RRP leaders tend to perceive immigration-related fears as widespread (Ivarsflaten, 2005), reducing the perceived reputational risks of interacting with fringe groups. With immigration dominating public discourse, RRP leaders are more likely to exploit these fears by linking immigration to national identity and security (Art, 2011; Dennison and Geddes, 2019; Ivarsflaten, 2008). RRPs adopt a fear-based narrative that resonates with voters concerned about immigration. When immigration becomes the focus of political competition, it often signals conflict and takes on a negative connotation (Jin, 2024). Restrictive, nationalist positions can gain traction, overshadowing concerns about the party's links with fringe groups. The prominence of immigration issues reduces the stigma of such ties, as the media, voters, and political commentators focus on perceived immigration-related threats and policies. Consequently, RRPs may feel less pressure to distance themselves from more extreme

[4] Signalling here refers to the spontaneous response of self-interested individuals (or other organisms) to information asymmetries by communicating information about themselves to others (Connelly et al., 2011).

actors, as their shared restrictive stances on immigration become less ostracised. The extreme positions of fringe groups on immigration align more closely with those of RRPs, creating opportunities for RRPs to leverage fringe group narratives to bolster their legitimacy and appeal.

I also hypothesise that in societies where xenophobic views are widespread, the effect of immigration salience on RRP leaders' reputational cost calculations is further amplified. Opposition to immigration among RRP supporters is likely to be strongly conveyed to party leaders, who may also perceive that a larger proportion of the population shares their concerns about threats to security and national identity. This further reduces fears of reputational damage from engaging with fringe groups.[5] However, the stability of xenophobic and nativist views throughout the analysis period (Couvelaire, 2022; Siemer, 2022) limits the ability to test this condition beyond the sub-national level in the empirical part of the thesis.

Moreover, when immigration is highly salient, RRP leaders may see engagement with fringe groups as a strategic opportunity to normalise extreme positions in the medium to long term. While there may be an initial backlash, such engagement can increase the visibility and gradual acceptance of these positions over time, thereby broadening their electoral base. With reduced concerns about reputational costs—whether due to intra-party dynamics or reduced perceived societal backlash—RRP leaders may become more tolerant of overt fringe group engagement. They may enforce rules against such engagement less strictly, condemn and sanction violations inconsistently, and tacitly approve of fringe group interaction.

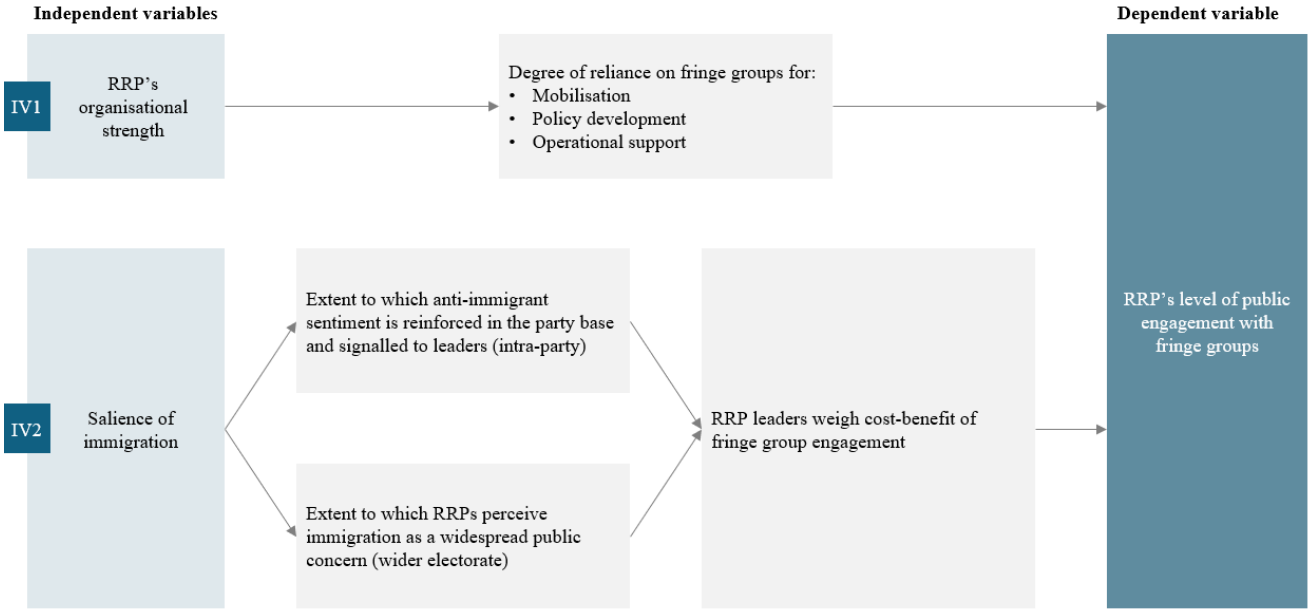
The extent to which the perceived reputational costs of RRP leaders decrease in contexts of high immigrant salience depends on several external factors, including variations in electoral

[5] This builds on Minkenberg (2003, 2019), who discusses the cultural and structural opportunities for RRPs, and Deodhar (2022), whose study of the AfD's rise in Saxony highlights the entrenched right-wing and anti-Islam rhetoric. When xenophobic views are somewhat widespread, the salience of immigration reinforces anti-immigrant attitudes among RRP supporters, which in turn reduces leaders' concerns about reputational damage (Pesthy, Mader, and Schoen, 2021). Betz (1994) shows how RRPs flourished in Western Europe in the 1990s as nationalist and xenophobic views normalised fringe associations and encouraged anti-immigrant rhetoric. That in regions where xenophobic views are widespread, RRP leaders may be less concerned about reputational risks when immigration is salient could be reflected in more assertive anti-immigration rhetoric in public statements, campaign material and policy proposals, as leaders feel empowered to take stronger positions that reflect the concerns of their supporters. In addition, RRP leaders may report shifts in internal party dynamics, with a greater focus on addressing the xenophobic and nativist views of their base and aligning party goals accordingly.

systems and the nature of the fringe groups involved. In proportional representation systems, the reputational dynamics faced by RRPs differ from those in majoritarian systems, where securing a majority requires moderation. Moreover, even in contexts of high immigrant salience, some groups remain politically 'undesirable' because of their association with violence, overt racism or historical extremism. For example, neo-Nazi organisations typically carry such high reputational costs that any engagement with them is likely to provoke a backlash from the public and within the party itself.

In contrast, when immigration is less salient, RRPs face greater reputational risk due to increased media scrutiny and public criticism (Art, 2008; Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Minkenberg, 2019). Without immigration dominating public discourse, the media, voters and political opponents may focus more on RRPs' broader behaviour and associations. Fringe group ties, which may have previously been overshadowed, come under closer scrutiny, reinforcing perceptions of extremism. While high immigration salience may make it easier for RRPs to frame such links as part of a shared response to pressing national concerns, in its absence, these associations lose their strategic justification, leaving RRPs vulnerable to accusations of extremism and intolerance. Moderate voters, who may tolerate restrictive policies in times of perceived crisis, may ostracise RRPs for their links to fringe groups, damaging the party's reputation and reducing its electoral appeal. Low immigration salience can also expose intra-party divisions between hardliners, who favour fringe group ties, and moderates, who seek broader legitimacy. To avoid inconsistent messaging and reputational damage, RRP leaders are incentivised to distance the party from fringe groups by enforcing stricter rules and consistently condemning violations. This environment encourages RRPs to limit overt associations with fringe groups. However, this does not mean that they can credibly disavow groups with which they have previously been openly associated. Rather, it reflects a greater awareness of reputational costs in a low-salience context, prompting party leaders to limit visible interactions with fringe groups. Nevertheless, underlying links with fringe groups are likely to persist discreetly.

Figure 1: Argument in visual form



Relationship between explanatory variables

So far, the two explanatory variables, organisational strength and immigration salience, have been treated as largely independent in explaining RRPs' interactions with fringe groups. However, their relationship is more dynamic and interconnected than previously suggested. Together, these factors shape RRPs' cost-benefit analysis of engaging with fringe groups. Their effects are mediated and amplified by feedback loops and strategic synergies, illustrating how internal and external dynamics jointly influence RRPs' behaviour. The two dichotomous variables—organisational capacity and immigration salience—yield four possible scenarios for the dependent variable (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Expected outcomes

		Salience of immigration	
		Low	High
Organisational capacity	Low	Medium level of engagement *(Necessary for effective party operation and campaigning, but reputationally costly)*	High level of engagement *(Necessary for effective party operation and campaigning, and at lower reputational cost)*
	High	Low level of engagement *(Not necessary and at risk of stigmatisation)*	Medium level of engagement *(Not necessary but possible for selective/ strategic purposes)*

These outcomes can occur in different cases, but also in different time periods and regions within the same case. To explore this, I conduct a cross-comparative analysis of the two main cases in Chapter 3, followed by a detailed cross-temporal analysis of each case in Chapters 4 and 5, and a high-level shadow-case analysis of two other cases in Chapter 6 to further test the applicability of the hypothesised variables.

First, if RRPs lack organisational capacity and immigration is not particularly salient, a medium level of engagement with fringe groups can be expected. To fill organisational gaps, RRPs may turn to fringe groups for support. However, low immigration salience increases concerns about reputational damage, acting as a constraining factor. In the case of this *necessary but reputationally costly* engagement, RRP leaders often portray themselves as victims of exclusion by mainstream politics and the media, highlighting perceived injustices. Divisive rhetoric is used to reinforce their narrative of marginalisation and foster unity among their base.

Second, when RRPs are organisationally weak and immigration is more salient, higher levels of fringe group engagement are likely. Weak organisational capacity necessitates interaction with fringe groups, while high immigration salience reduces the reputational risk of such engagement. As immigration salience increases, RRP leaders perceive their anti-immigration views as widely shared and sense an activation of anti-immigrant sentiment among the party's base, reducing their concerns about reputational backlash. In the context of this *necessary but less*

reputationally costly engagement, party leaders are likely to make little effort to moderate their image, adopt radical positions consistent with fringe group ideologies, emphasise perceived widespread social concerns about immigration, and actively seek alliances with fringe groups.

Third, when RRPs have strong organisational capacity and immigration is not particularly salient, low engagement with fringe groups is to be expected. Strong parties are less dependent on fringe groups and are more cautious about reputational risks. Party leaders in this scenario are likely to enforce rules against interaction with fringe groups, work to moderate the party's image, and distance the party from extremist associations. Although this combination of values should theoretically lead to zero engagement with fringe groups, some interaction will still occur. The RRP leadership cannot fully control the actions of all party members, so there will always be a minimal level of engagement that reflects actions beyond the control of the central leadership.

Fourth, where the RRPs are organisationally strong and immigration is politically salient, there tends to be a medium level of engagement with fringe groups. Although strong organisational capacity reduces the need for such alliances, high immigration salience lowers reputational costs, allowing RRP leaders to engage if they can gain specific strategic advantages. In this scenario, RRPs are in a favourable position: they can selectively engage with fringe groups on issues that align with their agenda, amplify these issues, and increase the visibility of their positions. Engagement can also help to reinforce the party's anti-establishment image and provides tactical flexibility, allowing them to explore more extreme positions associated with fringe groups without outright endorsing them, thereby navigating the challenge of balancing fringe and mainstream support.

Organisational strength and immigration salience can interact in reinforcing cyclical dynamics. For example, organisationally weak RRPs may rely on fringe groups during periods of high immigration salience to bolster mobilisation. Over time, this reliance could entrench the party's association with these groups, complicating efforts to disengage even as organisational strength improves. Moreover, a party that makes strong electoral gains during periods of high immigration salience and emphasises the issue during the campaign may face organisational

bottlenecks after the election, for example in staffing MP offices. This may increase their reliance on fringe groups to fill these gaps. These reciprocal processes highlight the dynamic and interdependent nature of the two explanatory variables, and how they collectively shape RRP behaviour in nuanced ways.

Causal process observations

The hypothesised independent variables give rise to specific expectations about the causal process. If the hypothesis about the organisational strength of RRPs is correct, I would expect strong RRPs to be able to independently attract new members, mobilise existing supporters, and develop robust party programmes. The ability to attract new members and supporters could be reflected in the extent of the party's communication and outreach activities, the frequency of calls for volunteers, and members' accounts in interviews of the challenges or ease of recruiting members or volunteers and the resulting need (or lack thereof) to turn to fringe groups. Similarly, the ability to mobilise existing supporters could be reflected in the frequency of party events, the turnout at these events, and the ease or difficulty of recruiting qualified staff for grassroots mobilisation activities, based on expert or party member assessments. RRPs are likely to justify their engagement with fringe groups on the basis of the need for campaign support. The ability of RRPs to develop party programmes independently could be reflected in members' accounts of strategies for refining party positions, assessments of the party's intellectual capital, and the resources allocated to research and policy development. Organisationally weak RRPs are likely to rely on the output of far-right think tanks[6] and recruit from these groups to fill gaps in their capacity to develop party programmes.

If the hypothesis about the salience of immigration is correct, I would expect RRP leaders to be less concerned about the reputational risk of openly engaging with fringe groups when immigration is a prominent issue. In this context, pre-existing anti-immigrant sentiments within the

[6] Far-right think tanks have varying degrees of influence across Western Europe. In Germany, the Institute for State Policy (IfS) shapes nationalist and anti-immigrant ideologies. In France, groups like GRECE have faded to the fringes, with little parliamentary impact. Overall, these think tanks focus more on spreading ideology than wielding direct political power.

RRP base are activated and communicated to the party leadership. Leaders may recount feeling greater leeway, or even pressure, from their base to adopt harsher anti-immigration positions, intensify the rhetoric, and place greater political emphasis on it. When immigration is salient, RRP leaders perceive that many in the public share their concerns about immigration threatening conservative values such as security and national identity. As a result, they may be less concerned about the reputational damage of engaging with far-right groups. This could manifest itself in the absence of new internal rules against such engagement, weak enforcement of existing rules, leniency towards fringe interactions, inconsistent condemnation, and milder sanctions. Party leaders might also describe shifts in internal party dynamics, with an increasing focus on defending conservative values against perceived threats from immigration, leading to greater tolerance of fringe engagement. Senior party members would recall strategic considerations of interacting with fringe groups to consolidate the base, attract disillusioned voters concerned about immigration, and normalise extreme positions. Conversely, when immigration is less salient, RRP leaders may be more wary of reputational damage from fringe interactions. This will be reflected in their past efforts to downplay such associations, the introduction of strict vetting procedures to block individuals with far-right backgrounds, and the enforcement of strict rules against fringe engagement. Other signs may include frequent references to these rules, appeals to the party base to avoid fringe interactions, and consistent and severe sanctions for any breaches.

Endogeneity

A party's organisational capacity can theoretically be influenced by its interaction with fringe groups. For instance, RRP leaders who favour a movement-style party may intentionally maintain a decentralised, movement-like base and openly engage with fringe groups, resulting in a less institutionalised and organisationally weaker party. Alternatively, a party may emerge from or be co-opted by a fringe group, with its organisational capacity shaped by the extent of such engagement. To address the issue of endogeneity concerning the independent variable ‘party organisational strength’, I initially considered conducting a cross-temporal analysis to test whether an exogenous shock—an event beyond the party’s control that affects its organisational capacity—

would also lead to the expected change in the party's overt engagement with fringe groups. An example of such a shock could be a change in party financing laws, introduced while the RRP was in opposition and thus not involved in shaping these laws. However, while changes in party financing laws did occur in both major cases, the composition of other party incomes at the time moved in the opposite direction, rendering this planned test for endogeneity infeasible (see details in Appendix I). More importantly, qualitative evidence from this study's main cases, drawn from interviews with RRP leaders, strongly supports the hypothesised causal direction. It shows that gaps in a party's organisational capacity precede party leaders' considerations of engaging with fringe groups. As a party's organisational strength grows, its reliance on fringe groups diminishes, reducing the likelihood of party leaders engaging with them to compensate for organisational gaps. Moreover, interviews with RRP politicians revealed that they did not seek to keep the organisation less institutionalised and weak or dependent on fringe groups. Nor did they follow the demands of fringe groups. Rather, their engagement with fringe groups was a pragmatic response to organisational needs.

The salience of immigration is generally regarded as exogenous to RRPs' public engagement with fringe groups, shaped instead by broader societal dynamics such as economic conditions, cultural attitudes, media framing, and historical contexts. Economic factors, such as recessions or high unemployment, may increase public concern about immigration independently of the actions of RRPs. Similarly, cultural attitudes, rooted in long-standing national identities and historical narratives, significantly influence how immigration is perceived and prioritised. Media framing also plays a critical role by directing public attention to specific aspects of immigration, such as border security or humanitarian concerns, potentially amplifying or diminishing its salience. Historical contexts, including previous waves of immigration or colonial histories, further shape contemporary attitudes and the political salience of immigration. While RRPs can influence social norms around the public expression of far-right views (Valentim, 2021),[7] the salience of

[7] Valentim shows that the parliamentary representation of RRPs that challenge social norms can contribute to normalising support for the far right. This suggests that while RRPs influence societal attitudes, they do not have complete control. Societal attitudes towards immigration and other far-right positions are the result of a complex interplay of factors, with RRPs acting as one of several forces shaping, but not solely driving, their overall prevalence.

immigration is largely determined by these broader societal factors, rather than by RRPs alone. However, recognising that RRPs can affect the narrative and elevate the importance of immigration through their discourse and interactions with fringe groups, I will analyse how immigration shocks—such as terrorist attacks perpetrated by migrants—heighten immigration salience and affect RRPs' engagement strategies with fringe groups in the aftermath of such events (see details in Appendix I). Crucially, the qualitative evidence in Chapters 3 to 5, based on interviews with RRP politicians, supports the hypothesised causal relationship. The historical sequencing illustrates how RRP leaders' considerations of perceived reputational risks evolved in response to heightened immigration salience.

Research design

To better understand why RRPs in Western Europe engage openly with fringe groups to varying degrees despite the associated stigma, I am conducting case study research. My universe of cases includes all Western European countries with a significant RRP and a far-right fringe movement sector. An initial review of the analytically meaningful cases has shown that public engagement between RRPs and fringe groups occurs in all Western European countries. Existing explanations and theories from related fields do not fully explain why RRPs in some countries engage with such groups more than others. Therefore, this small-N comparative case study analysis is a first foray into examining RRPs' varied engagement with fringe groups. Testing my hypotheses against the evidence requires intensive analysis, which necessarily limits the number of cases.

Case selection

The scope of this dissertation includes large democracies in Western Europe with prominent RRPs that have achieved national representation. Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and France's *Rassemblement National* (RN) serve as the primary case studies. Both countries have

significant far-right fringe groups rooted in fascist, ethnocentric, and authoritarian ideologies (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, and Levinson, 2019) that are active both online and in street movements (Froio, 2018). Moreover, Germany and France operate within a robust militant democratic framework that provides their governments with sufficient legal tools to combat these groups (Canu, 1997; Klandermans and Mayer, 2006; Laumond, 2020). The AfD and the RN were chosen as case studies for four main reasons. First, they exhibit notable variation in the dependent variable—public engagement with far-right fringe groups. This variation makes them ideal for theory testing, providing insights into how differences in the independent variables influence engagement outcomes, thus shedding light on the underlying causal mechanisms.

Second, they present counterintuitive variations in background conditions that allow certain alternative explanations to be ruled out by design. For example, despite Germany's history of Nazi extremism and the resulting increased stigma associated with far-right groups, the AfD engages with such groups more openly and at greater reputational cost than the RN. This challenges the notion that a country's extreme past necessarily increases the reputational cost to RRPs of engaging with fringe groups. Similarly, despite strong government responses to far-right elements in both countries, the AfD demonstrates a greater willingness to engage with these groups, suggesting that the strength of a government's militant response does not necessarily deter RRPs from engaging with fringe elements.

Third, as the two most populous nations in Western Europe with electorally successful RRPs, Germany and France are intrinsically important cases. A theory on Western Europe that has Germany and France as outliers is questionable. To assess the representativeness of the two main cases and the potential generalisability of the findings, the theoretical argument is tested on two shadow cases in Chapter 6. Finally, both cases are data rich, making them particularly suitable for process tracing, a method that relies on extensive data for theory testing and inference (e.g. Van Evera, 1997).

For the AfD, the analysis period covers its founding in 2013, its subsequent shift to the radical right,[8] and the national elections in 2017 and 2021, with an end point in December 2022. For the RN, the analysis period spans from 2002, when it first reached the second round of the presidential election, through Marine Le Pen's early influence on the party,[9] subsequent electoral gains,[10] and culminating in the 2022 legislative elections, where it secured 89 seats. December 2022 marks the end point for both cases.

After testing the theory on the AfD and the RN (Chapters 3-5), Chapter 6 assesses its applicability to two additional 'shadow cases'—the Austrian FPÖ and the Swiss People's Party (SVP). Variation in the dependent variable across these cases provides a further opportunity to assess whether the proposed causal mechanisms hold in different contexts (Soifer, 2020). The FPÖ's and SVP's history of participation in national government offers a useful lens to challenge the alternative explanation that governing experience influences a RRP's likelihood to engage with fringe groups. In addition, the FPÖ—like the RN—has its roots in extreme right-wing movements, allowing for further exploration of the alternative explanation that such origins inherently increase RRPs' engagement with fringe groups. The selection of the FPÖ and the SVP also addresses a potentially complicating factor in the comparison of the main cases. The RN has long dominated French political discourse on immigration, potentially reducing its need to engage with fringe groups. Even when immigration is highly salient and reputational risks are lower, the RN's established credibility on the issue may reduce its incentive to align with far-right actors. Given that the FPÖ and the SVP have similarly shaped public debates on immigration in their own countries, analysing these shadow cases offers a broader understanding of how 'issue dominance' may affect RRPs' engagement with fringe groups in different contexts.

[8] Most scholars agree that the party conference in Essen in July 2015 marked the AfD's shift to the radical right (Heinze and Weisskircher, 2021, p. 265).
[9] Marine Le Pen succeeded her father as head of the party in 2011, having led the party's presidential campaign in 2007. Le Pen pursued a strategy of 'de-demonisation' to change the party's image and reduce its polemical positions.
[10] The FN won no seats in the 2002 and 2007 legislative elections, 2 seats in 2012, and 8 seats in 2017.

Alternative explanations

Possible alternative explanations from the academic literature include two intra-party factors and three macro-level factors. The first intra-party factor suggests that a party's origins shape its links with fringe groups, with far-right roots making it harder to distance oneself from such groups. However, this lacks empirical support. For instance, the French RN, rooted in the far-right neo-fascist *Ordre Nouveau*, engages less visibly with fringe groups than the German AfD, which originated from disillusioned conservatives and eurosceptics. As this factor seems unlikely and cannot be meaningfully tested I n the two main cases—one with far-right roots and the other without—it is deprioritised and only revisited in the shadow case analysis (Chapter 6). The second possible intra-party factor suggests that government experience reduces fringe group interactions. This, too, lacks empirical support.[11] Moreover, neither the RN nor the AfD has ever governed at the national level, which limits its applicability in the main cases. However, the shadow cases of the FPÖ and SVP—both with national government experience—provide an opportunity to explore this alternative explanation further in Chapter 6.

Of the macro-level factors, the first posits that electoral systems affect RRP-fringe group ties, with RRPs in PR systems engaging less than those in FPTP systems. This potential explanation is deprioritised for two reasons. First, it does not prescribe a fixed logic for parties' behaviour towards fringe groups—RRPs in PR systems could distance themselves from fringe groups but could also co-opt or pre-empt them to neutralise competition. Second, since most Western European countries, including the cases in this study, use PR systems, meaningful comparisons are difficult. The evidence from the main cases suggests that this factor alone cannot explain the observed variation. The remaining macro-level factors—a country's history of fascism and the severity of government responses to far-right groups—are considered despite weak empirical support. Chapters 3 to 5 critically assess these factors and present evidence from the main cases that challenges their explanatory power.

[11] Several parties, such as the Finns Party, Italy's Lega Nord, Norway's Progress Party and Austria's FPÖ, have all, despite their experience of governing at national level, publicly associated themselves with fringe groups such as the Soldiers of Odin, CasaPound, Stop the Islamisation of Norway and Mosche ade.

Data analysis and sources

In the empirical section, I first establish variation in the dependent variable. I then test the validity of the proposed hypotheses using process tracing, which is particularly suited to uncovering causal mechanisms by examining observable effects and evaluating evidence against alternative explanations (Campbell, 1966).

The dependent variable in this study—the overt engagement or visible, cooperative interactions between RRPs and fringe groups—is measured through a newspaper-based event analysis. This approach captures the types of interaction outlined in Table 1 and allows for the construction of a longitudinal index of instances of engagement. Factiva, a digital archive of global news content, was chosen for this analysis because of its extensive range of sources and its accessibility through the University of Oxford. For each of the main cases, three high-circulation national newspapers and two news agencies were selected as sources. Details of the construction of the Factiva-based index[12] can be found in Appendix C.[13]

The first independent variable, a party's organisational strength relative to its competitors, is measured by its professional staff, membership size, and total income relative to its seats in parliament (Gibson et al., 1983, p. 197). Quantitative data for these indicators were obtained from official party records, financial disclosures, staffing budgets, and expert estimates. This quantitative analysis is complemented by qualitative assessments, such as the presence and activity of regional party branches, the existence of party-parallel organisations, and the effectiveness of outreach and communication efforts relative to rival parties (Poguntke et al., 2016). Sources for these assessments include party documents, public statements, analysis of party websites and social media, news articles, reports on party events, expert evaluations, and interviews with party members.

[12] A full list of the fringe groups considered can be found in Appendix A on page 213.
[13] I had initially considered complementing this index with a Twitter (now X)-based retweet analysis, using retweets by RRP leaders of fringe group tweets as an additional indicator of engagement levels. However, as only a small proportion of fringe groups have an X account, I decided not to use the retweet analysis as an external validity check.

The second independent variable, the salience of immigration,[14] is measured using public opinion polls. Salience is typically assessed by asking respondents to identify the most pressing issues facing their country or themselves. While this approach has its challenges—such as its sensitivity to short-term fluctuations driven by news cycles and the ambiguity in respondents' interpretation, as they may prioritise issues for different reasons (Wlezien, 2005)—the 'most important issues' question is the most feasible option. Although the vote share of far-right parties could theoretically serve as a proxy for immigration salience (Johnston and Sprong, 2023), this is not feasible in this study, which focuses on RRPs and their interactions with fringe groups. I use data from the Eurobarometer survey, which since 2005 has bi-annually asked around 1,000 respondents in each EU member state—through face-to-face interviews—to name the two most important issues affecting their country. This closed-ended question offers 14 possible answers, and I focus on the percentage of respondents who identify 'immigration' as a key issue. The Eurobarometer data provides comparability across my selected cases. I complement the Eurobarometer data with national opinion polls with similar questions. I also include Google Trends data to assess search interest in 'immigration' over time. This dual approach provides a cost-effective means of supplementing the Eurobarometer data with data on search behaviour, rather than relying solely on self-reported data.[15]

To measure the prevalence of xenophobic and nativist views, which are expected to amplify the effect of immigration salience on the level of reputational concern of RRP leaders, I rely on public opinion surveys, a relatively straightforward if imperfect method. For Germany, I use data from the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study,[16] which measures six dimensions of right-wing extremism, including xenophobia. For France, I use data from the National Consultative

[14] Salience here refers to what Epstein and Segal (2000) call contemporaneous salience, i.e. what the citizen found salient at the time, not in retrospect.
[15] Google Trends data has several limitations: it measures search frequency, not the intensity of interest or opinion about a topic. Variations in search behaviour based on age, education and other demographics can skew the data. Also, not everyone uses Google, and the platform lacks context for why a term is being searched. A spike in searches for 'immigration' could be influenced by factors such as news events or policy changes, and may not indicate a uniform level of concern across the population.
[16] Conducted every two years since 2002 with a representative sample of around 2,500 people. Sampling is a multi-stage randomised process. First, a regional random selection is made from 258 regions. The target households are then randomly selected using sampling points. Within the households, the member participating in the survey is again randomly selected.

Commission on Human Rights' (CNDCH) Longitudinal Tolerance Index,[17] which measures prejudice against immigrants, hostility towards Islam, and anti-Semitic and ethnocentric attitudes.[18]

After establishing the values of the dependent and independent variables in each case, I assess the hypothesised causal mechanisms in RRPs' engagement with fringe groups through process tracing. To do this, I construct comprehensive cases to assess the evidence against the theorised observable implications and the possible alternative explanations (Collier, 2011). I draw on multiple data sources, including news reports, social media content, party documents, press releases, and—most importantly—primary interviews with senior party members to analyse the impact of a party's organisational capacity on its ability to independently attract supporters and mobilise its base and its reliance on fringe groups, as well as the impact of the salience of immigration on the RRP's reputational considerations and thus its openness to interacting with fringe groups.

Interviews are central to process tracing, offering valuable insights into causal relationships, particularly when theorised mechanisms involve individual or collective actors, their internal cognitions, behaviours, and interactions (Gonzalez-Ocantos and Masullo, 2024). To understand the motivations, decision-making processes, and interaction dynamics of RRP leaders with fringe groups, I conducted semi-structured interviews with senior party figures to generate focused data on their strategic preferences and calculations regarding these engagements (Brinkmann, 2013). Between December 2023 and May 2024, I conducted 54 interviews: 30 with AfD members and 24 with RN members (see Appendix B for a full list).[19] Interviewees included former party leaders, national and state-level party executives, members of parliament, and press spokespersons. These

[17] This is an annual opinion poll carried out since 1990, based on a national sample of over a thousand representatives of the adult population living in metropolitan France. The survey is based on face-to-face interviews. Although it is comparable to the Leipzig Authoritarian Study in terms of the number of participants, administration and type of questions asked, it does not cover all six dimensions of right-wing extremism as the German study does.

[18] This national data is complemented with findings from Bjånesøy, Ivarsflaten, and Berntzen's (2023) conjoint survey experiment on political tolerance of various far-right extra-parliamentary groups, in which respondents from the 2017 European Internet Panel were asked about their agreement with allowing various far-right extra-parliamentary groups to rent community centres for meetings with their members and sympathisers.

[19] Note that while most interviewees agreed to be named, some asked for their names and quotes to be anonymised. Two-thirds of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in Germany and France, and one-third were conducted remotely via video call or telephone.

decision-makers were selected to shed light on RRPs' calculations about alliances, voter outreach, public image and positioning vis-à-vis fringe groups. In addition, I interviewed several parliamentary aides who, while less involved in high-level strategy, offered valuable perspectives from their indirect access to decision-making and internal discussions. These aides were generally more accessible than senior figures, but often chose to remain anonymous.

As RRP politicians are generally considered to be a 'hard to reach' group, I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002), which included reaching out directly through emails, cold calls, and referrals from previous interviewees. Almost two-thirds of the interviews were conducted in person, either in party offices, headquarters, or public spaces, with the remainder conducted via video or telephone.[20]

The openness of the interviewees strengthens the probative value of the evidence gathered. Interviewees, particularly from the AfD, were notably candid about the party's organisational shortcomings, discussing recruitment challenges, structural issues, and the perceived benefits of engaging with fringe groups, as well as the limited reputational concerns associated with such interactions. Importantly, the perspectives shared by former party members regarding the motivations behind these engagements closely aligned with those of current members. This consistency is notable, as former members, given their distance from the party, were likely to be more forthright and potentially more critical. By including insights from both current and former senior party members, as well as several parliamentary aides, the study aims to provide a well-rounded representation of perspectives across different levels of affiliation. Applying the principle of saturation, I ended the interviews when additional data offered minimal new insights, with findings becoming repetitive and increasingly peripheral.

[20] To maximise the probative value of the interviews, I aligned my questions with the theoretical model, developing protocols to capture components of the causal process relevant to the study. I began with general questions about party organisation, mobilisation activities, and recruitment following electoral success to gauge potential dependencies on external groups to mitigate organisational challenges. Questions then progressed to perceived reputational risks, including those associated with fringe group engagement, and to the impact of immigration salience on these considerations. Specific cases of fringe group interaction were then discussed to better understand the motivations and strategic calculations of party leaders in these contexts. The sequence of questioning aimed to document a coherent progression of events consistent with the hypothesised causal process.

The theorised hypotheses are tested in three ways. First, Chapter 3 conducts a cross-case comparison of the two main cases, the German AfD and the French RN, assessing the effectiveness of the theorised variables in explaining the differing levels of these RRPs' engagement with fringe groups, establishing a basic understanding of the dynamics at play. Chapters 4 and 5 then extend the investigation through a within-case, cross-temporal, and sub-national analysis of the AfD and the RN. These chapters provide a nuanced examination of how each party's engagement with fringe groups evolves over time and varies across regions, allowing for a deeper exploration of the causal mechanisms at play and the contextual factors influencing engagement strategies. Chapter 6 serves as a third test of the theoretical model by applying the insights from the previous chapters to two shadow cases: the Austrian FPÖ and the Swiss People's Party (SVP). This chapter assesses the applicability of the developed theoretical framework to other RRPs operating in different national contexts by examining how the FPÖ and the SVP engage with fringe groups and whether similar patterns emerge. This comparative analysis enriches the thesis by demonstrating the broader relevance of the theoretical model across different political landscapes.

Building on the first chapter's introduction to the inherent dilemma RRPs face in today's political climate, this chapter outlined the central argument of the thesis. I hypothesise that two key variables explain the varying degrees to which RRPs in Western Europe engage with fringe groups. First, a party's organisational strength affects its reliance on, and likelihood of interacting with, these groups. Second, the salience of immigration influences the extent to which RRP leaders fear reputational damage and perceive strategic benefits from such interactions, thereby shaping their propensity to engage. To test this theory, I conduct a small-N case study analysis, using process-tracing techniques to examine the circumstances and mechanisms driving RRP leaders' decisions to moderate their party's image and limit fringe group engagement. Drawing on a range of primary and secondary data, I develop detailed accounts of the German AfD and the French RN. This comparative analysis incorporates temporal and regional variation to further test the

hypotheses, with findings expected to be partially generalisable to other Western European contexts. The next chapter introduces the two main cases, detailing the AfD's and RN's engagement with fringe groups. Through a time-fixed cross-case comparison, it provides an initial test of the effectiveness of the theorised variables in explaining variation in RRPs' engagement with fringe groups.

Chapter 3: Patterns of RRPs' public engagement with fringe groups

This chapter provides a cross-case analysis as the first of three tests of the hypotheses that explain why RRPs engage with fringe groups to varying degrees. It begins by introducing the study's main cases—the AfD and the RN—and outlining their patterns of engagement. The AfD is shown to engage more frequently and in more reputationally costly ways with fringe groups, with initial evidence supporting the hypotheses. The second section explains how the AfD's limited organisational capacity forces it to rely more heavily on fringe groups to compensate for its weaknesses. Moreover, the increased salience of immigration reduces the AfD leaders' reputational concerns, shifting their strategic cost-benefit calculations and leading to greater engagement with fringe actors. In contrast, the RN's stronger organisational capacity reduces its dependence on fringe groups. Furthermore, because immigration is less politically salient in France than in Germany, RN politicians are more attuned to reputational risks, making them more cautious about associating with fringe actors. Through this comparative lens, the chapter demonstrates how the two independent variables—organisational strength and immigration salience—shape political actors' strategic calculations. Subsequent chapters will further test the hypotheses through detailed within-case, cross-temporal, and sub-national analyses.

Main cases

In Europe's two most populous countries, Germany and France, leading figures of the main RRPs have openly interacted with far-right fringe groups[1] in recent years, despite efforts to appear moderate and electable. However, the level of engagement has been higher in Germany than in France. Figure 3, based on an analysis of events reported in newspapers,[2] shows that the AfD openly engaged with fringe groups almost three times as often as the RN between 2014 and 2022.[3]

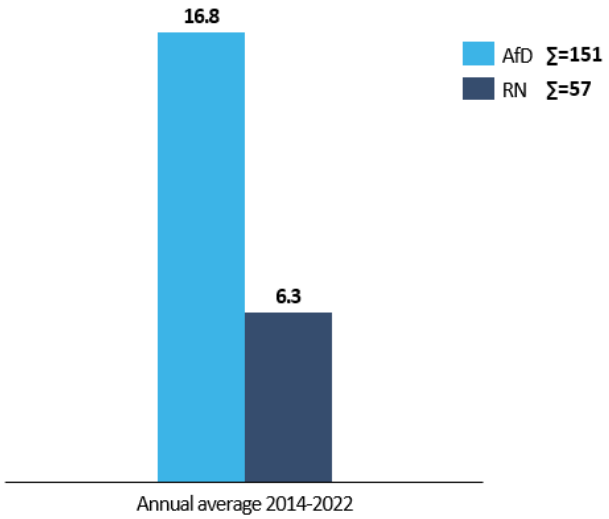
[1] The far-right fringe in Germany and France is comparable. Scholars such as Lévy (1998), Sternhell (1983), and Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, and Levinson (2019) note that there is a strong tradition of fascist, ethnocentric and authoritarian worldviews among fringe groups in both countries. The list of current right-wing fringe groups to be included in this study can be found in Appendix A on page 213

[2] Details on methodological approach in Appendix C on page 232.

[3] Note: The analysis period for France is 2002-2022 and for Germany 2015-2022. In this cross-comparison chapter, the data are presented for the overlapping years 2013-2022. Chapter 5 on France presents data for the whole period.

This raises the specific research question of why the AfD in Germany interacts openly with fringe groups more often than the RN in France.

Figure 3: AfD and RN average annual fringe group engagement, 2014-2022



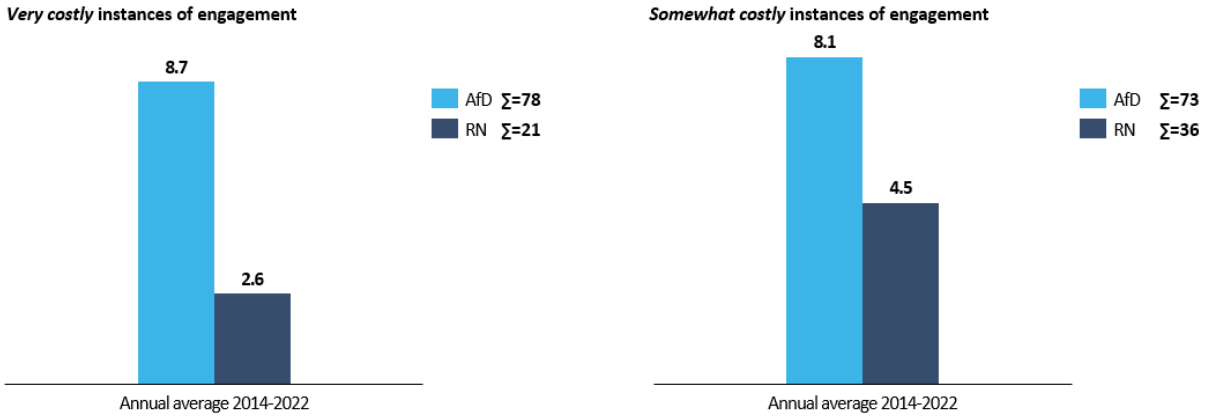
Sources: Factiva search (GE: Die Welt, Süddeutsche Zeitung, taz, dpa, Reuters; FR: Le Figaro, Le Monde, Libération, Reuters, Agence France Presse), selected right-wing media outlets (GE: Compact, Junge Freiheit, Sezession; FR: L'Incorrect, Minute, Rivarol)

The trend of higher public engagement with fringe groups is puzzling because, given Germany's Nazi past, one might expect the AfD to be reluctant to associate with fringe groups due to the reputational costs resulting from historical stigma. Similarly, one might assume that the AfD would be deterred from public engagement by Germany's militant state action against extremist movements, informed by its concept of protection of the state (*Staatsschutzkonzeption*), which does not exist in France (Minkenberg, 2006). While governments in both Germany and France have a range of measures at their disposal to contain anti-democratic groups and respond to political extremism (Canu, 1997; Macklem, 2006), far-right groups in Germany are frequently monitored, and the media regularly report on this surveillance.

Beyond the puzzling overall higher level of engagement in Germany, there are also surprising differences in the nature of engagement with fringe groups. The AfD engages in more reputationally costly ways with fringe groups. Given Germany's Nazi past and its militant democracy, one might expect the AfD to be more cautious. However, as Figure 4 shows, over 50% of the AfD's interactions with fringe groups are considered reputationally very costly, compared to

less than 40% for the RN in France.[4] On average, the annual number of such very costly interactions in Germany is more than three times higher than in France.

Figure 4: AfD and RN fringe group engagement by reputational cost, 2014-2022



Sources: Factiva search (method explained in Appendix C)

Table 2 delves deeper into the types of engagement, showing that RRP leaders attending or even speaking at fringe group events accounted for 34% of the AfD's cases, compared to 16% for the RN. Additionally, when asked about these instances, RN politicians often emphasised that their party members were attending these events in a private capacity, reflecting a greater sensitivity to reputational impact. In contrast, AfD representatives did not make such claims, often justifying their presence by citing perceived benefits for the party. Furthermore, reports of AfD leaders hiring current or former fringe group members for party roles[5] were almost twice as common as for the RN. Although this practice is less visible and often only uncovered by investigative journalism, it is arguably very damaging to the party's reputation, suggesting a high tolerance of fringe groups within the party ranks and possibly a need to fill organisational gaps.

While the AfD engaged with fringe groups in more reputationally costly ways, both the AfD and the RN interacted with these groups to a similar extent in less costly ways. For instance, leaders of both parties made statements in support of fringe groups when these faced dismantling by the state, often citing freedom of speech. The presence of fringe group members at party

[4] For details on how different types of engagement are classified by reputational cost, including the distinctions between 'somewhat costly' and 'very costly' engagement, refer to Table 1 on page 23.
[5] These are clustered under 'other forms of public engagement' in Table 2.

events—less reputationally costly than party leaders actively speaking at fringe group events or hiring fringe group members—occurred at comparable rates in the AfD (13%) and RN (7%). The higher absolute figure for the AfD may indicate a greater tolerance for, or even reliance on, fringe groups. Similarly, guest articles and interviews by party leaders in far-right media—more visible but only slightly damaging to reputation, as they are not entirely unexpected by RRPs and are unlikely to cause a public outcry—were equally common in relative terms for the AfD (11%) and the RN (11%). However, the AfD's higher absolute presence in far-right media may reflect its efforts to increase its media coverage and attract new supporters.

Table 2: AfD and RN type of fringe group engagement, cumulative, 2014-2022

Type of engagement	**Germany**	in %	**France**	in %
Fringe group at party event	19	13%	4	7%
Guest article or interview by party leader in far-right media	17	11%	6	11%
Other form of public engagement	20	13%	13	23%
Party leader at fringe group event	52	34%	9	16%
Party seeks coalition with other far-right party	0	0%	3	5%
Publicly siding with fringe group	43	28%	22	39%
Total	**151**		**57**	

One type of engagement that is unique to the RN is entering into electoral list agreements with extreme right-wing parties.[6] This may be due to differences in the requirements for presenting electoral lists, the distinct party landscapes—with a greater number of small far-right parties in France—or the differing traditions of list coalitions between Germany and France. While the AfD has occasionally interacted with Germany's main extreme right party, the NPD (now *Die Heimat*), these interactions have not involved filling electoral lists. Instead, they have involved issuing statements in defence of the NPD, hiring some of its members for party positions, or attending NPD-organised events.

[6] The term *fringe groups* in this study deliberately extends beyond extra-parliamentary far-right groups to include extreme right-wing parties, as I seek to understand why RRPs engage with potentially reputation-damaging actors, including extreme right-wing parties.

Despite differences in the level and nature of their engagement with fringe groups, the AfD and RN interact with similar types of organisations. These include identitarian movements, extreme-right parties, far-right student associations, and small xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim groups. In France, the top ten fringe groups make up 80% of the RN's recorded interactions, while in Germany, they account for 86% of the AfD's interactions.[7]

The puzzling pattern of the AfD's higher public engagement with fringe groups compared to the RN, as well as the unintuitive nature of the AfD's engagement with fringe groups at higher reputational costs, underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the drivers of such interactions. No clear explanation accounts for the annual differences in the parties' engagement levels. This chapter proceeds by establishing the relative organisational strength of the AfD and RN and the salience of immigration in both countries, before presenting cross-country evidence supporting the hypotheses, which the next two chapters expand upon through within-case, cross-temporal, and sub-national analyses of the AfD's and the RN's engagement with fringe groups.

RRP's organisational strength

I propose that a party's organisational strength affects its likelihood of engaging publicly with fringe groups. Stronger parties rely less on fringe groups because they can independently mobilise supporters for campaigns, develop policy platforms, and address operational needs, such as staff shortages. In contrast, RRPs with weaker organisational capacity are more dependent on fringe groups for mobilisation, policy development and operational support, and are therefore more willing to engage with these actors. As outlined in Chapter 2, organisational strength includes factors such as membership size, financial resources, professional staff, the scale and activity of affiliated organisations, and ties to civil society groups. To establish the AfD as a case of low

[7] For details, see Figure 29 and Figure 31 in Appendix G.

organisational strength and the RN as a case of high organisational strength, this chapter focuses on the three quantitative indicators relative to their national competitors.[8]

AfD's organisational capacity

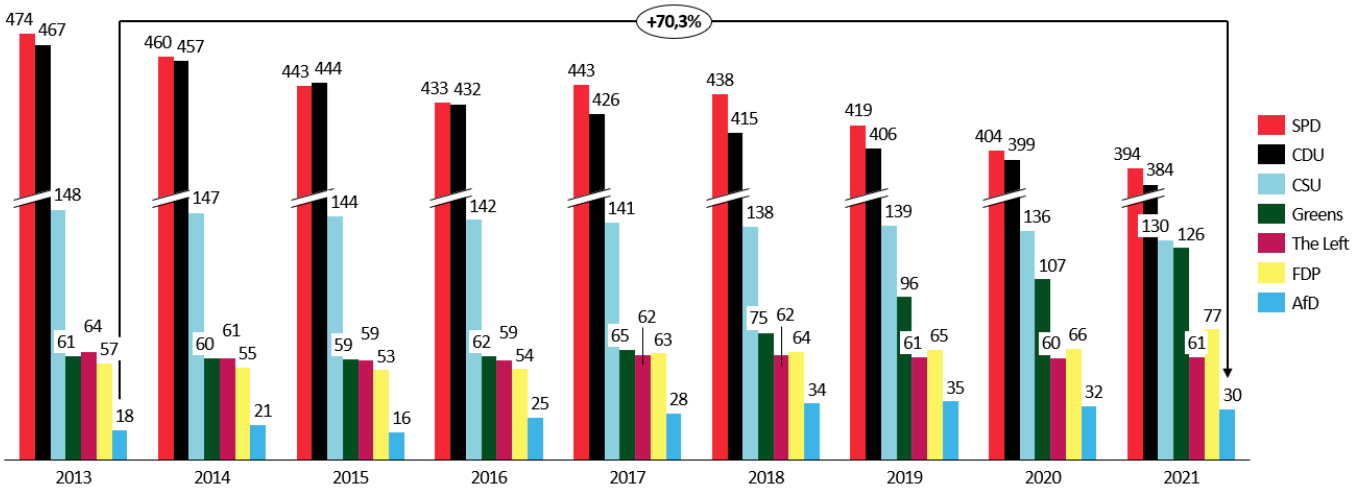
Founded in February 2013, the AfD quickly established an organisational structure, forming 16 state associations and attracting around 10,000 members. The party tapped into existing social and political networks[9] with economic liberal, social conservative, and nationalist tendencies. It also attracted former centre-right members of the CDU and FDP who had not progressed beyond the middle ranks of their parties (Decker, 2016, p. 2). Despite its rapid growth, the AfD still lagged behind its main rivals in terms of organisational capacity.

Party membership

As the AfD built its organisational structures, party membership almost doubled between 2013 and 2021, with an average annual growth rate of 7%. Although the party lost around a fifth of its membership following the departure of co-founder Bernd Lucke in 2015, it quickly recovered. Initially, membership growth was even across all German states, but by 2021, the AfD had a stronger presence in the eastern states.[10] Despite this growth, the AfD lags behind other parties in membership. Although it entered the Bundestag as the third largest party in 2017, its membership was less than half that of the next smallest party (Figure 5). Compared to its main rivals, the FDP and CDU, the AfD's membership is significantly smaller—2.5 and 7 times lower, respectively, when adjusted for Bundestag seats (Table 3).

[8] Competing parties are those that have directly contested voter support with RRPs in elections. They are identified by analysing historical election results to determine which parties have gained or lost support relative to the RRPs. For details on the parties used to assess the organisational strength of the AfD and RN, see Appendix D on page 234.
[9] Examples include the League of Free Citizens (a Eurosceptic party dissolved in 2000), the Hayek Society, the Initiative for a New Social Market Economy, and the Alliance of the Citizens' Will.
[10] In 2021, for example, 8% of AfD members came from Saxony, which accounts for 5% of the population.

Figure 5: Membership of German political parties, in thousands, 2013-2021



Source: (Niedermayer, 2020, 2022)

Table 3: Membership of German political parties in relation to Bundestag seats, 2013-2021

Year	CDU	SPD	CSU	FDP	Greens	The Left	AfD
2013	1,832	2,454	2,650	n/a	974	996	n/a
2013 (second vote)[11]	3.13%	4.21%	4.57%	2.75%	1.66%	1.70%	0.86%
2017	2,130	2,896	3,065	788	971	903	294
2021	2,528	1,911	2,897	840	1,066	1,556	363[12]

Source: (Die Bundeswahlleiterin, 2013; Niedermayer, 2020)

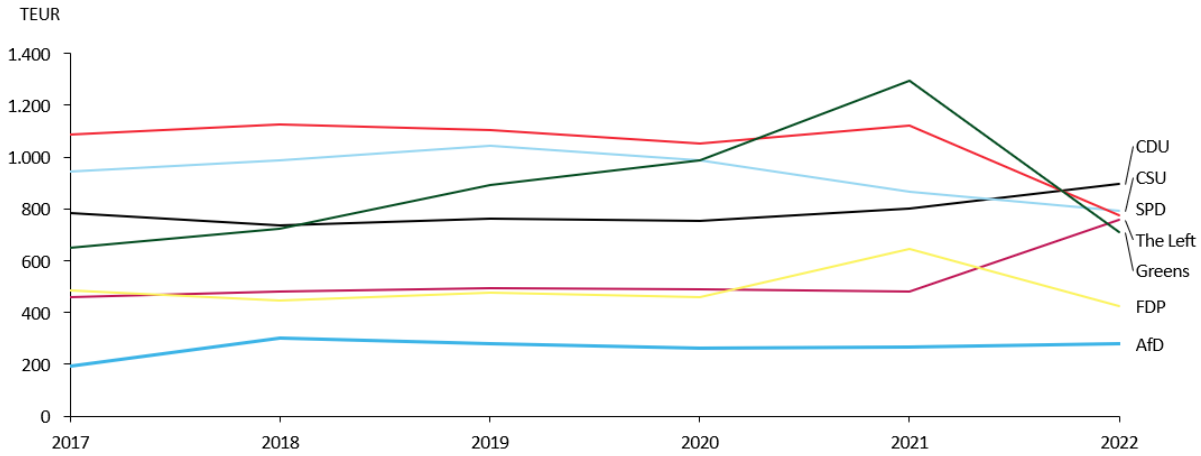
Party income

The AfD's relative organisational weakness is also reflected in its income. Although starting from a low base, the party's income has grown since entering state and national parliaments, with an average annual increase of 18% between 2013 and 2022. While state funding and contributions from MPs have increased, donations and other sources of income have been more volatile, typically spiking in key election years. Despite this growth, the AfD's income remains significantly lower than that of established parties, largely due to its smaller membership base.[13] Even when adjusted for parliamentary seats, the AfD's income is still 2.5 times less than that of the FDP and 4

[11] There are two rows in the table for 2013. As the AfD did not pass the 5% threshold to enter parliament, a comparison by seats in parliament is not possible. The second row for 2013 shows the ratio of party members to second votes (Zweitstimme, absolute) for comparison purposes.
[12] Although the AfD had 83 members entering parliament after the 2021 election, five MPs have since left the parliamentary group, slightly changing the ratio of party members to representation in parliament to 386.
[13] For a view on the German parties' total income not adjusted for seats in the Bundestag, see Figure 33 on page 240.

times less than that of the CDU (Figure 6). The AfD has fewer financial resources than its competitors to recruit new members or mobilise existing supporters.

Figure 6: German parties' income in relation to Bundestag seats, in thousand EUR, 2017-2022



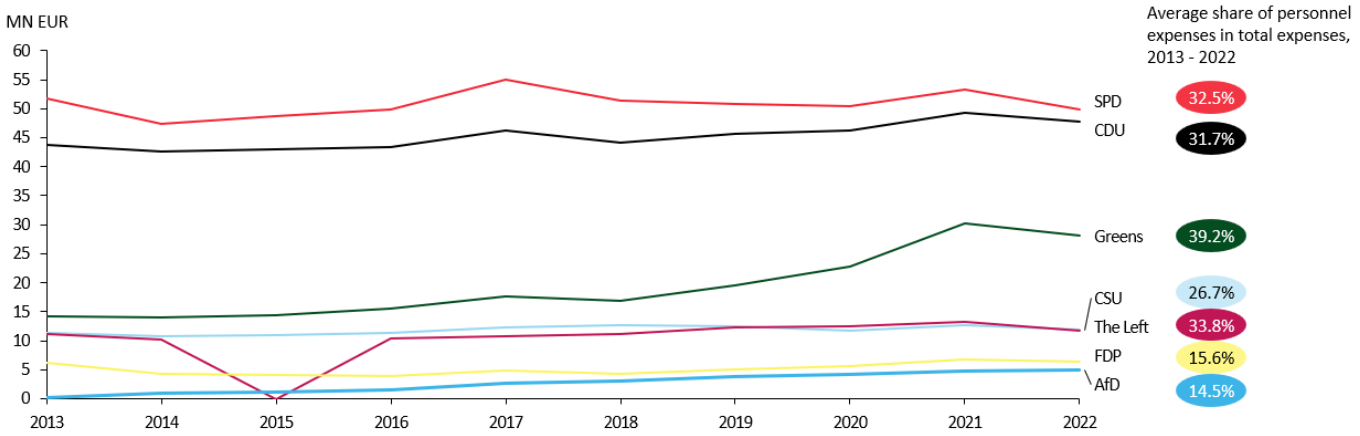
Source: (Deutscher Bundestag, 2016, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024)

Party staff

The AfD's staffing levels further underline its organisational weakness. As the party does not report staff numbers[14] at the national or state level, I use staff expenditure as a proxy. The AfD's staff costs are significantly lower than those of other parties, both in absolute and relative terms. Personnel cost for the AfD rose from EUR 0.2 million in 2013 to EUR 5.0 million in 2022, but remains significantly lower than that of its competitors throughout the analysis period. By comparison, the FDP, which also has relatively low staff costs, spent EUR 6.4 million in 2022 (Figure 7). Adjusted for the number of seats in the Bundestag, the AfD's staff costs are about half those of the FDP and a fifth of those of the CDU's (Table 4), indicating that the AfD employs far fewer full-time staff than its competitors. Even senior party figures, like the chairman of the AfD's state association and parliamentary group in North Rhine-Westphalia, acknowledge this organisational gap, admitting that the AfD is 'by far the smallest established party, with fewer members and staff than both the FDP and the Left Party, despite its presence in more state parliaments.'[15]

[14] The only staff numbers reported are those of the AfD parliamentary group, which is an imperfect proxy for the party's overall staff, as parliamentary group staff are largely determined by a budget set by the Bundestag.
[15] Dr. Martin Vincentz (video interview on March 6, 2024).

Figure 7: German parties' staff expenditure, in MN EUR and as share of total, 2013-2022



Source: (Deutscher Bundestag, 2016, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024)

Table 4: Parties' staff expenditure relative to Bundestag seats, in thousand EUR, 2013-2020

	CDU	CSU	SPD	The Left	Greens	FDP	AfD
2013	171.7	201.8	268.7	173.5	226.3	n/a	n/a
2017	231.7	266.7	359.6	155.6	264.3	61.9	28.3
2020	230.8	253.4	329.8	181.3	339.3	70.6	44.3

Source: (Deutscher Bundestag, 2016, 2021, 2022)
Note: Neither the FDP nor the AfD passed the 5% threshold to enter the Bundestag in 2013.

Impact of AfD's organisational weakness

In addition to the quantitative indicators of party membership, income, and staff, qualitative assessments reinforce the picture of the AfD's relatively low organisational capacity. The party has fewer, smaller, and less active party-parallel organisations than the CDU and FDP.[16] It also faces broad rejection from civil society groups, such as trade unions, churches, environmental organisations, and family and youth groups. Furthermore, the AfD has been barred from advertising in mainstream media,[17] limiting its reach to mainstream voters. These organisational deficiencies compel the AfD to rely on fringe groups to fill gaps, prompting its leadership to engage with these groups to attract new supporters, mobilise for campaigns, and address staff shortages.

[16] See Table 16 (page 242) for a comparison of the party parallel organisations of the AfD and the CDU and FDP.
[17] In 2014, the left-leaning *taz* decided to ban AfD party advertisements. In 2015, the publishing groups Funke Mediengruppe and Axel Springer also decided to reject AfD ads in dailies such as *Bild* and *Welt* on the grounds that the party violated their values and publishing principles.

Attraction of supporters

The AfD's engagement with fringe groups is partly driven by its need to attract new supporters, which is crucial for a young party with a small base. This is reflected in the party's links with the far-right anti-Islam Pegida movement, which emerged in Dresden in October 2014. Senior party figure Alexander Gauland even described the AfD as a 'natural ally of the movement,' and there were numerous reports of AfD leaders attending, speaking at, and even co-organising[18] the weekly Pegida rallies (Korsch, 2016). Moreover, AfD leaders justified their participation in these demonstrations as a way to 'reach a wider audience, including politically inactive individuals, who might be encouraged to connect with party representatives after hearing their speeches at Pegida rallies.'[19] This view was supported by the AfD's chairman of the Bavarian state association, who stated that attending Pegida rallies helped 'win voters, increase visibility, and show Pegida supporters that the AfD represents their interests.'[20] An AfD Bundestag MP from Saxony, where Pegida originated, agreed that the party had 'certainly benefited and gained new members, which is what counts for a young party.'[21]

The AfD's efforts to expand its base also included engaging with fringe groups, such as the NPD-affiliated Free Citizens Union (FBU). In the state of Saarland, the AfD branch, led by Josef Dörr and his deputy Lutz Hecker, held several meetings with FBU representatives, and Dörr even attended an FBU event in July 2015 (Löer, 2016c). To boost its small membership, the AfD Saarland considered measures like reduced fees and dual membership for FBU members (Ibid). Rüdiger Klesmann, then the deputy head of the AfD Saarland, confirmed that Dörr's aim was to 'win new party members, regardless of their background.'[22] Dörr, a former Green party member, focused on increasing membership to fund the party, which relied heavily on membership fees. The AfD's repeated involvement with Pegida and the FBU underlines its leadership's willingness to engage with controversial groups to attract new supporters and paying members.

[18] For example, Achim Exner, an AfD member from Dresden, was also part of the Pegida organisation team.
[19] AfD Bundestag MP from North Rhine-Westphalia, anonymised upon request (interview in Berlin on January 31, 2024).
[20] Stephan Protschka, Bundestag MP and Chairman of the AfD in Bavaria (interview in Berlin on January 31, 2024).
[21] Karsten Hilse, AfD Bundestag MP from Saxony (interview in Berlin on February 21, 2024).
[22] Rüdiger Klesmann, deputy chairman of the AfD Saarland (video interview on February 14, 2024).

Mobilisation of campaign support

AfD leaders' interactions with fringe groups were also motivated by the need to recruit volunteers for campaigns. While not an official party strategy, several members admitted to relying on these groups for tasks like putting up posters and distributing flyers, particularly in districts with limited party volunteers. For instance, Attila Sonal, a member of the AfD's Rhineland-Palatinate executive board, worked with the NPD-linked group Pfälzer Spaziergänger. He met with them several times and accepted their help with campaign tasks (Löer, 2016b). Uwe Junge, then head of the AfD in Rhineland-Palatine, attributed this reliance to a lack of volunteers, stating, 'Mr. Sonal's district association was quite weak and had few active members, requiring him to seek outside help.'[23] A senior representative of the Pfälzer Spaziergänger confirmed their involvement, explaining that 'Mr. Sonal simply had problems motivating sufficient people for posters and flyers' (Löer, 2016b). The AfD's reliance on fringe groups in its early days was also acknowledged by a Bundestag MP and member of the party's Bavarian executive. Referring to his eastern German party colleagues' participation in Pegida rallies, he noted that 'AfD sympathisers at Pegida rallies, some of whom later became campaign supporters, were urgently needed at that time.'[24]

In addition to filling gaps in campaign volunteers, the AfD also turned to fringe groups to promote its platform and monitor elections. Organisations like One Percent were pivotal in boosting the AfD's online presence and producing campaign materials (Fuchs and Geisler, 2017). Leyla Bilde, a prominent AfD member[25] and former parliamentary advisor, praised One Percent, stating that 'it campaigned strongly for the AfD online and promoted the platform in far-right circles.'[26] One Percent was also instrumental in coordinating volunteers for election monitoring, particularly in eastern Germany. In Saxony-Anhalt, the group was given access to the AfD's mailing list to 'stimulate interest in supporting election monitoring' and 'organised volunteers at polling stations,' according to a Bundestag MP from the region.[27] These examples underscore how

[23] Uwe Junge, former AfD Rhineland-Palatinate chairman (2015-2019) and former MP of Rhineland-Palatinate state parliament (video interview on February 16, 2024).
[24] Stephan Protschka, Bundestag MP and Chairman of the AfD in Bavaria (interview in Berlin on January 31, 2024).
[25] She organised the Women's March in Berlin in February 2018, protesting alleged threats to women's safety from immigration policies. The event drew support from far-right groups and faced significant counter-protests.
[26] Leyla Bilge, former parliamentary assistant to an AfD MP (video interview on January 26, 2024).
[27] AfD Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt, anonymised upon request (interview in Berlin on January 23, 2024).

the AfD leadership leaned on fringe groups to compensate for weaknesses in mobilisation, tapping into their resources and networks to bolster campaign efforts during critical periods.

Recruitment of qualified staff

The AfD's difficulty in recruiting qualified staff is a significant organisational weakness that drives its engagement with fringe groups. Eighteen of the thirty AfD representatives interviewed mentioned without prompting the difficulty of filling party positions with competent candidates, often blaming the stigma surrounding the party. Jörn Kruse, former head of the AfD's Hamburg branch, explained that 'applications often came from within the AfD's bubble, with people jockeying for positions around the MP. Eventually, these roles were filled because qualified candidates who could find jobs elsewhere were no longer available to the AfD.'[28] This challenge became particularly acute after the party's 2017 electoral success, when 94 MP offices had to be staffed in a short period of time. Due to the urgent demand, 'we sometimes had to resort to staff who were, to put it mildly, less well vetted for past activities and memberships,' acknowledged the head of the AfD's Bavarian branch.[29] Former party co-leader Jörg Meuthen echoed the difficulty of quickly staffing MPs' offices with parliamentary aides. He noted that the urgency and weak background checks at the time led to mistakes. However, Meuthen added, 'if fringe group members are working for AfD MPs today, it is clearly deliberate and not due to inadequate checks.'[30] This remark underlines the party's calculated decision to accept reputational risks in exchange for the benefits of recruiting ideologically aligned individuals.

Several AfD members openly admitted to recruiting from fringe groups to fill staff shortages. Steffen Königer, a former Brandenburg state parliamentarian and advisor to Alexander Gauland, explained that 'due to our personnel problem, we recruited people from fringe groups

[28] Prof. Dr. Jörn Kruse, former chairman of the AfD Hamburg parliamentary group and former state parliament MP who left the AfD in mid-2018 (interview in Hamburg on December 13, 2023).
[29] Stephan Protschka, Bundestag MP and Chairman of the AfD in Bavaria (interview in Berlin on January 31, 2024).
[30] Prof. Dr. Jörg Meuthen, former party co-chairman and former AfD MEP who left the AfD in January 2022 (Phone interview on January 18, 2024).

because we knew they shared our ideology and could be relied on.'[31] He pointed to the hiring of members from One Percent, a far-right group led by publisher Philip Stein, as well as from the far-right think tank Institute for State Policy (IfS) and nationalist student fraternities. This approach was echoed by Lars Schieske, a current AfD member of the Brandenburg state parliament. Discussing his links to One Percent and Zukunft Heimat, a nationalist and anti-refugee group, Schieske emphasised the 'advantage of meeting talented people who represent potential party personnel that [the AfD] desperately needs.'[32] These examples illustrate how the AfD's recruitment challenges have led it to rely on fringe groups.

Operational deficiencies

The AfD's weak party-parallel organisations contribute to its reliance on fringe groups. Unlike its competitors, the AfD lacks strong party-parallel organisations[33] and does not receive state funding for its political foundation, the Desiderius Erasmus Foundation.[34] This limits its capacity for political training, policy research, and ideological development. As a result, the party sometimes turns to fringe groups and think tanks like the Institute for State Policy (IfS) to fill some of these gaps. As a co-leader of the AfD in Hesse noted, 'the IfS fills a gap for the AfD, providing valuable content for MPs, albeit less detailed than what other parties' political foundations develop on current policy issues.'[35] A parliamentary aide echoed this, stating that the 'IfS fills a gap in the provision of background analyses' and that although its publications are 'not of such high quality or originality, they still form a basis for the work of some AfD MPs.'[36] The importance of the IfS is also underlined by the appearances of AfD leaders such as Jörg Meuthen, Alexander Gauland and Alice Weidel at IfS events.

[31] Steffen Königer, former MP in Brandenburg state parliament and member of the state executive committee who left the AfD in November 2018 (interview in Werder on February 1, 2024).
[32] Lars Schieske, MP in Brandenburg state parliament (interview in Potsdam on February 1, 2024).
[33] For a detailed comparison of the party-parallel organisations of the AfD, CDU and FDP, see Table 16 on page 242.
[34] Established in 2017, the Desiderius Erasmus Foundation was recognised as a party-affiliated foundation by the AfD in 2018.
[35] Andreas Lichert, AfD Hesse co-chairman and MP in the state parliament (video interview on February 7, 2024).
[36] Parliamentary aide to Bundestag MP, anonymised upon request (interview in Berlin on February 2, 2024).

Beyond policy research, the AfD also relies on fringe groups for educational programmes and training. While some state branches, such as those in Bavaria and Lower Saxony, offer training academies, there is no centralised programme for campaign strategy, public speaking, or policy development.[37] Organisations close to the party, such as the Kommunalpolitischer Heimatverein in Brandenburg, aim to fill these gaps, especially given the limited resources of the Desiderius Erasmus Foundation, according to Lars Hünich, AfD parliamentarian in Brandenburg.[38] In addition, the IfS provides relevant training in areas like rhetoric, local politics, and political communication.[39] These organisational shortcomings—resulting from weak party-parallel organisations—appear to be an important driver of the AfD's interactions with fringe groups.

This section has provided initial evidence that the AfD's organisational weaknesses increase its reliance on fringe groups and the propensity of its leaders to engage with them, particularly for mobilisation, policy platform development and operational support. The next section pivots to the RN, highlighting its stronger organisational capacities and how these reduce its dependence on fringe groups.

RN's organisational capacity

Turning to the RN, I first demonstrate its organisational strength relative to its French rivals (which exceeds the AfD's strength relative to its German rivals), before showing how this reduces the RN's reliance on far-right fringe groups.

Party membership

Unlike Germany, where formal party membership figures and annual expert estimates are available, data on party membership in France are relatively imprecise and unreliable. For the RN,

[37] In some states, such as Brandenburg, AfD politicians have set up party-parallel organisations, such as the Kommunalpolitischer Heimatverein Brandenburg, to provide local political training for local officials. Despite these efforts, AfD leaders acknowledged in 2022 that the party still lacks a fully functioning local political association that could significantly improve the professionalisation of its elected officials (Lorenz, 2022).
[38] Lars Hünich, Brandenburg state parliamentarian and former member of party's state executive committee (video interview on February 19, 2024).
[39] Parliamentary aide to Bundestag MP, anonymised upon request (interview in Berlin on February 2, 2024).

membership figures (Table 5) are sporadic and often inflated through self-reporting.[40] The data reveal significant fluctuations: a decline following the Bruno Mégret-led party split, a gap between 1999 and 2009, a self-reported peak in 2014, and recent estimates of around 40,000-50,000 members.

Table 5: Self-reported FN/ RN membership figures, 1978-2023

Year	Self-reported membership figures	Source
1978	7,000	(DeClair, 1999, p. 14)
1983	10,000	(Millington, 2019, p. 136)
1985	65,000	(Marcus, 1995, p. 41)
1993	70,000-80,000	(Marcus, 1995, p. 41)
1998	100,000 (42,000)	(Crépon and Lebourg, 2015)
1999	25,000-37,500	(Millington, 2019, p. 139; Perrineau, 2015, p. 284)
2009	(13,381)	(Crépon and Lebourg, 2015)
2011	(46,868)	(Crépon and Lebourg, 2015)
2014	83,087 (42,130)	(Crépon and Lebourg, 2015; Dézé, 2016)
2015	51,551	(Dézé, 2016)
2019	20,000	(Cimbidhi, Gentilhomme, and Xerri, 2023)
2022	40,000	(France Info, 2022)
2023	50,000	(Cimbidhi, Gentilhomme, and Xerri, 2023)

Note: Figures in brackets are estimates by academics based on a comparison of National Commission for Campaign Accounts data on political funding with the average cost of membership, reflecting inflated self-reported figures.

Fluctuations in self-reported party membership are not unique to the RN. The centre-right Les Républicains also shows significant year-on-year variations (Table 6), partly due to tactics like temporary membership drives.[41] These fluctuations undermine the value of standardising RN and Les Républicains membership relative to their parliamentary seats. However, using academics' more conservative estimates, the average RN membership between 2010 and 2022 was 23% of that of Les Républicains. By contrast, the AfD's average membership from 2013 to 2021 was only 6% of that of its centre-right rival, the CDU.

[40] Dr. Nonna Mayer explained that self-reported party membership figures in France tend to be inflated and are therefore an imperfect measure of a party's organisational strength (interview in Paris on October 9, 2023).
[41] For example, in 2013, donors were automatically enrolled as members unless they opted out (Vergnaud, 2014).

Table 6: Self-reported UMP/ Les Républicains membership figures, 2006-2023

Year	Self-reported membership figures	Source
2006	250,000	(Vergnaud, 2014)
2007	370,000	(Quinault-Maupoil, 2014)
2010	155,000	(Vergnaud, 2014)
2012	324,000	(Vergnaud, 2014)
2013	318,634	(Vergnaud, 2014)
2014	143,000	(Quinault-Maupoil, 2014)
2015	210,000	(Baudot, 2022)
2019	48,500	(Baudot, 2022)
2022	85,000	(Baudot, 2022)

The RN's relative organisational strength is also reflected in its rallying power. Dézé (2016) notes a revitalised activist base and larger rally audiences in the 2010s, although this has not translated into a younger or more female supporter base. Jean-Yves Camus echoes the RN's growth over the past decade, with stronger membership, operational capacity, and mobilisation of supporters.[42] Elisa Bellé, drawing on her ethnographic research into the RN's territorial anchorage, underscores the strength of its regional branches, which are key to independent campaigning, market stall presence, and leafleting.[43] Despite imperfect membership data, the RN's relative strength suggests that it can mobilise supporters more effectively than the AfD and is less reliant on fringe group resources.

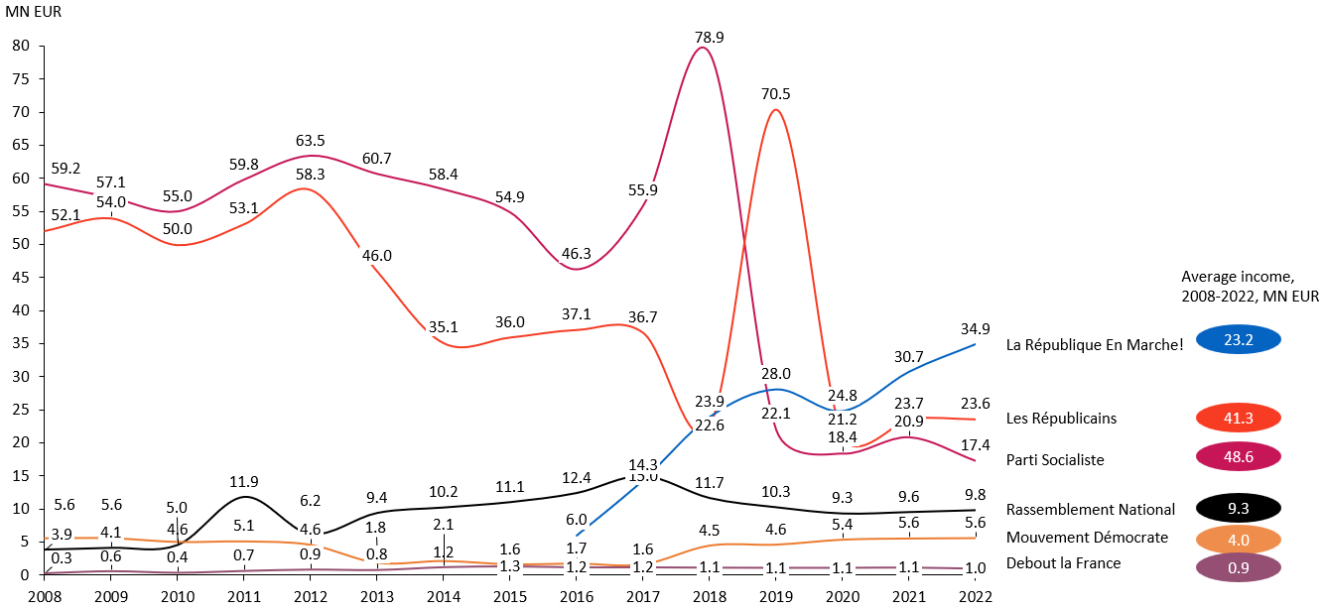
Party income

Since 1990, French political parties have been required to disclose financial information to the National Commission for Campaign Accounts and Political Financing.[44] Compared to Germany, party funding in France is significantly lower, reflecting the less central role of parties in shaping the political process (Koß, 2015). In 2021, the combined financial resources of the seven German parliamentary parties totalled 568 million EUR, while the French parliamentary parties

[42] Jean-Yves Camus, expert on the European far right and a research fellow at the Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques (IRIS) in Paris (interview in Paris on March 12, 2024).
[43] Elisa Bellé, Postdoctoral Fellow at Sciences Po, Paris, working on the Marie Curie project entitled 'Ethnography of Right Across Nations and Territories' (video interview on March 18, 2024).
[44] The law of 15 January 1990 organised the three basic rules of financial control of political life, i.e. the limitation of candidates' expenses, the reimbursement of candidates' campaign expenses and the public support of political parties eligible for state funding (European Commission, 2009, p. 15).

had only 139 million EUR at their disposal (CNCCFP, 2023). Figure 8 compares the annual funding (208-2021) of France's two traditionally largest parties (Les Républicains and Parti Socialiste), the RN, and its main centre-right and radical right rivals. Over this period, the RN's average funding was around a fifth of that of Les Républicains and Parti Socialiste. By contrast, the AfD's 2021 budget was only around 15% of that of the CDU or SPD in Germany. The RN's relatively higher budget suggests less reliance on fringe resources.

Figure 8: Budget of the main French parties, in MN EUR, 2008-2022

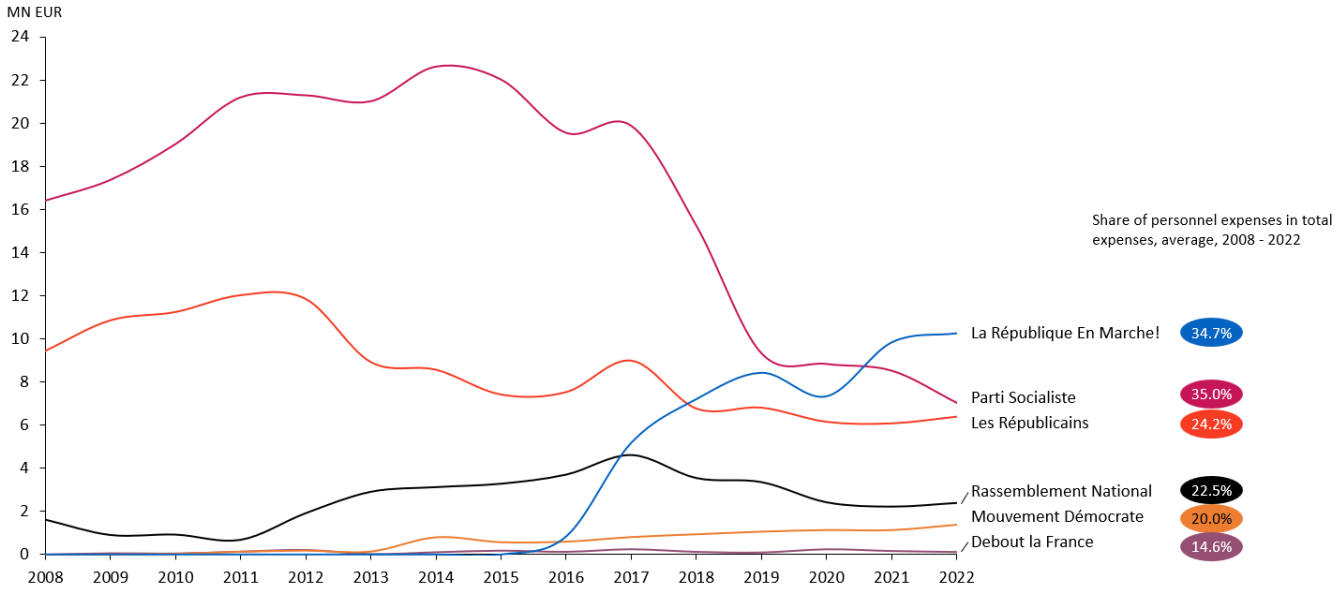


Source: (CNCCFP, 2024)

Party staff

French political parties do not disclose staff numbers at the national or parliamentary level, so staff sizes must be inferred from expenditure. Figure 9 shows that the RN's staff spending has fluctuated significantly, from 12% of total expenditure in 2010 to 32% in 2019. While the RN's absolute staff costs are lower than those of larger, historically more successful rivals like Les Républicains, the proportion of spending on staff is comparable. On average, the RN's spent 22.8% of its budget on staff, compared to 24.4%. for Les Républicains. To put this in context, the AfD spent less than half as much on staff as most other parties in the Bundestag, except for the FDP. This suggests the RN likely has a higher relative staff size than the AfD compared to its national competitors.

Figure 9: French parties' staff expenditure, in MN EUR and as share of total, 2008-2021



Source: (CNCCFP, 2023)

Impact of RN's organisational strength

Despite less comprehensive data than in Germany, the three indicators suggest that the RN is organisationally stronger than the AfD relative to its national competitors. Qualitative assessments further support this view. In France, party-parallel organisations are uncommon, due to smaller party budgets and the less central role of parties in shaping the political process (Koß, 2015). Instead, rejection by civil society serves as a key qualitative indicator, affecting a party's ability to attract supporters and recruit staff. While the AfD faces widespread rejection from German civil society, the RN encounters a more moderate and sporadic backlash in France. Trade unions and environmental groups strongly oppose the RN—issuing voting recommendations and occasionally organising protests—yet many other organisations, including employers' organisations[45] and churches,[46] adopt a more moderate stance. Civil society opposition in France tends to be episodic, often triggered by the RN's electoral successes.

[45] Except for CGT and Medef in the last two presidential elections, the employers' organisations have refrained from issuing explicit voting recommendations against the RN. Instead, they have concentrated on warning of the negative economic consequences of an RN victory. Moreover, in addition to not consistently issuing voting instructions against the RN and only expressing concern about the potentially adverse economic consequences of the party's rise, the employers' organisations have shown a willingness to meet with the RN leader and listen to the party's economic programme.

[46] While the Catholic Church has historically taken a strong public stance against the FN (Schlegel, 2015) with the French Bishops' Conference (CEF) issuing several warnings against the FN since 1985, highlighting the party's incompatibility with the 'good news and teachings of the Catholic Church' (Lesegretain, 2017) and expressing explicit

Given the RN's support among working-class and Catholic voters, as well as small business owners, the moderate civil society opposition has a relatively limited impact on its organisational strength. In contrast, the more categorical rejection of the AfD by German civil society underscores its stigmatisation. Notably, the RN's stigmatisation has diminished over time: in 2004, 67% saw the then-FN as a threat to democracy, but by 2022 this had fallen to 47% (Kantar Public-Epoka, 2022). This shift reduces the organisational challenges posed by civil society opposition.

Low fringe group dependence

Compared to the AfD, the RN's strong organisational capacity significantly reduces its dependence on fringe groups. First, the RN's robust activist base allows the party to attract new supporters and to run effective, independent campaigns. Unlike their AfD counterparts, RN politicians often highlight their party's long-standing active base, its membership growth since 2014, and its strong grassroots presence. Paul Henry Hansen-Catta, vice-president of the RN group in the Hauts-de-France regional council, notes that 'the RN's strength lies in its dedicated core of activists, who have maintained and expanded a strong network of supporters, even during years of low political representation.'[47] A RN spokesperson and MP adds that 'the RN's strong presence and activities on the ground have drawn supporters from new socio-economic backgrounds, consolidating the party's position in French politics.'[48]

The RN's capacity to organise election campaigns independently further reduces its dependence on external actors. Jimmy Bourlieux, RN departmental delegate for Gironde, credits the 'active base of members and supporters' with sustaining the party's strategy of direct voter engagement.'[49] The RN's increased self-sufficiency and reduced need for external support is

voting instructions against the FN in the 2002 presidential election, the Catholic Church's *cordon sanitaire* around the FN has weakened since 2015. In 2015, Marion Maréchal Le Pen was invited to a political round table at the Sainte-Baume summer university organised by the diocese of Fréjus-Toulon. Moreover, in the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections, the CEF no longer recommended voting against the RN, but only cautiously commented on the results of the first round, reflecting a milder opposition to the RN (Campistron, 2017).

[47] Paul-Henry Hansen-Catta, Regional Councillor for Hauts-de-France and former adviser to Marine Le Pen (video interview on April 29, 2024).

[48] Alexandra Masson, RN MP and press spokesperson (video interview on April 17, 2024).

[49] Jimmy Bourlieux, RN departmental delegate for Gironde (interview in Bordeaux on April 15, 2024).

echoed by Philippe Chapron, regional councillor in Calvados, who claims that while the FN was more dependent on support from fringe groups until the 1990s, the RN is now very capable of running independent campaigns and grassroots activities.[50]

Second, the RN's ability to recruit qualified staff has further reduced its reliance on fringe groups. While AfD politicians often struggle to find qualified staff due to the party's stigma, RN politicians report no significant challenges in this area. Bruno Gollnisch, a former RN national bureau member and MEP, credits the influence of RN leaders[51] educated at prestigious grandes écoles for attracting skilled candidates.[52] Even after its unexpected legislative success in 2022, which required the staffing of more than 80 MP offices, the RN efficiently filled the positions by tapping into its activist network and attracting former parliamentary assistants from other parties. The RN 'had no great difficulty in recruiting suitably qualified people as parliamentary assistants,' confirms Wallerand de Saint-Just, a member of the RN's national bureau.[53] Renaud Labaye, secretary general of the RN parliamentary group, attributes this smooth recruitment process to the party's strong network and improved image.[54]

The RN's reduced dependence on fringe groups due to its ability to recruit qualified staff is explicitly expressed by Renaud Labaye, who asserts that the RN 'has no shortage of qualified people and therefore does not need to recruit from right-wing groups.' However, he noted the importance of not rejecting former fringe members solely based on their past activities, recognising occasional programmatic overlaps. This reduced reliance on fringe groups for recruitment extends to the regional and local levels, as the party has worked to build strong departmental and local networks over the past 25 years. Thibault de la Tocnaye, RN regional councillor and director of the party's Iforel training institute, explains that while the RN used to recruit from groups such as the

[50] Philippe Chapron, RN departmental delegate for Calvados (video interview on May 14, 2024).
[51] An example provided is that of Jean-Yves Gallou, a Sciences Po and ENA graduate and far-right thinker and GRECE member, who went on to head the RN general secretariat before joining the newly formed MNR after Mégret split.
[52] Bruno Gollnisch, former FN Vice-President and former MEP (interview in Paris on January 24, 2024).
[53] Wallerand de Saint-Just, political bureau member and regional councillor (interview in Paris on February 27, 2024).
[54] Renaud Labaye, Secretary General of the RN parliamentary group (interview in Paris on April 11, 2024).

Identitarians and Bastion Social to fill hard-to-fill positions, this practice is now rare and unnecessary.[55]

Third, the RN's ability to draft its programme independently further reduces its dependence on fringe groups. Unlike AfD politicians, RN members often downplay the influence of far-right groups and think tanks on their party's agenda. While Jean-Marie Le Pen's FN drew influence from far-right think tanks like GRECE and traditionalist Catholic groups,[56] RN politicians now suggest that the party's increased competence in policy research and formulation has reduced this dependence. In the Factiva-based index, most interactions with far-right think tanks and Catholic groups occurred before 2014 and involved long-time RN members like Bruno Gollnisch, who were used to the party's historical openness to such organisations. Thibault de la Tocnaye acknowledges that 'under Jean-Marie Le Pen, GRECE and traditionalist Catholic groups like Civitas or Chrétienté-Solidarité had an influence on party positions,' but explains that the party's 'policy-making capacities were less developed' at the time.'[57]

The party's growing capacity to develop its policy proposals is reflected in its growing internal expertise and collaboration with recognised advisers. Although the FN has had an internal research unit[58] since 1978, it was only under Marine Le Pen's leadership that the party significantly strengthened its policymaking capacity and actively sought input from external experts (Faure, 2016). In the run-up to the 2017 presidential election, Marine Le Pen met regularly with a group of 80 experts, known as the *Horaces*, to discuss a range of policy areas such as the economy, defence, and the EU, reflecting the party's reduced reliance on fringe groups for policy development (Faye, 2016). The party's increased capacity to develop policy proposals is also evident in the expanded remit of its internal think tank, which extends beyond immigration and security to include issues such as agrarian reform and affordable housing (Paugam, 2024). Louis-Marie Mautin, a

[55] Thibaut de la Tocnaye, RN regional councillor for Centre-Val de Loire and former member of the RN national bureau (interview in Orléans on March 14, 2024).
[56] The past influence of traditional Catholic groups on the FN is also reflected in the fact that Bernard Antony, the founder of Chrétienne Soliadité, was an RN MP for three terms with Jean-Marie Le Pen.
[57] Thibaut de la Tocnaye, RN regional councillor for Centre-Val de Loire (interview in Orléans on March 14, 2024).
[58] CEDIR was founded in 1979 and served as the party's internal research department, supporting the development of the party's programme.

parliamentary advisor to former RN and now Reconquête senator Stéphane Ravier, highlights this shift, noting that the RN no longer seeks input from far-right think tanks, as it has been 'very dynamic since the mid-2010s, expanding its staff, especially those working on the programme.'[59]

In sum, the cross-case evidence discussed so far suggests that the RN's robust organisational capacity—evidenced by its activist mobilisation, skilled recruitment, and independent programme development—reduces its reliance on fringe groups, making RN leaders less inclined to engage with them compared to the AfD.

High party centralisation

In addition to the RN's organisational strength, which reduces its reliance on fringe groups, its high degree of centralisation further discourages such engagement. The RN is more centralised than the AfD, with a strong leadership that sets core doctrines and ensures adherence. Allowing too many members of fringe groups into the party or working closely with such groups could undermine the party's cohesion and centralised message. RN politicians cited strategic reasons linked to this centralised structure as discouraging systematic interaction with fringe groups. Thibault de la Tocnaye, a RN regional councillor, explained that Marine Le Pen has worked to limit the Identitarians' influence on the party, despite some sympathy for the group and occasional hiring from it: 'Party leaders want to maintain control with an iron fist and manage the party's political messages.'[60] This scepticism toward fringe groups' influence was echoed by Alain de Benoist, co-founder of the ethno-nationalist think tank GRECE, who remarked that Marine Le Pen 'does not like organised groups within the party due to their potential impact on cohesion.'[61] Even under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who was generally more open to fringe groups,[62] the

[59] Louis-Marie Mautin, parliamentary assistant to Stéphane Ravier, (ex-RN) senator (interview in Paris on March 22, 2024).
[60] Thibaut de la Tocnaye, RN regional councillor for Centre-Val de Loire (interview in Orléans on March 14, 2024).
[61] Alain de Benoist, French philosopher of the Novelle droite movement and former leader of far-right think tank GRECE (interview in Paris on April 3, 2024)
[62] Long-time RN member and regional councillor Thibault de la Tocnaye explained that Jean-Marie Le Pen was more open to fringe groups like the GUD and l'Action française, both intellectually and in terms of personal overlap with the party. Two academic experts interviewed agreed that Jean-Marie Le Pen and his daughter Marine were similar in their search for centralised party structures, but that he was more tolerant of fringe groups or currents of thought within the party because he saw it first and foremost as an opposition party.

party ensured that no single group gained excessive influence. De la Tocnaye pointed out that the leadership has historically limited the number of individuals from any one fringe group accepted into the party to maintain control, underlining how the RN's centralised structure indirectly discourages interaction with such groups.

Selective engagement

This chapter has shown so far that the RN engages less with fringe groups than the AfD, partly because its stronger organisational capacity reduces its dependence on such groups. The RN's centralised structure also discourages such interactions. As a result, the party engages with fringe groups only selectively—typically to fill specific gaps in skills or resources, and often in an opportunistic and ad hoc manner.

First, the RN occasionally recruits members from fringe groups to fill specific skills gaps within the party, particularly in communications, social media, and graphic design. Although there is no formal ban on hiring from these groups, doing so is seen as risky, particularly under Marine Le Pen, due to the potential damage to the party's reputation and centralised messaging. As a result, these hires are not systematic but are made on an individual basis. Notable examples include Damien Rieu,[63] a former spokesperson for Génération identitaire (GI), who was hired as deputy communications director for RN mayor Julien Sanchez of Beaucaire (Monnot and Mestre, 2014), and Thaïs d'Escufon,[64] another GI spokesperson, who became social media manager for RN regional candidate Sébastien Chenu in Hauts-de-France (Caulcutt, 2021). These hires were driven more by the individuals' communication and social media expertise—especially in agitprop—than by ideological alignment. According to an RN spokesperson, these individuals were valued for their skills as the RN was still building its social media presence.[65] Louis-Marie Mautin, parliamentary assistant to former RN senator Stephan Ravier, added that 'given the RN's lack of

[63] This is a pseudonym. His civil name is Damien Lefevre.
[64] This is a pseudonym. Her civil name is Anne-Thaïs du Tertre d'Escoeuffant.
[65] This quote refers to the late 2010s, early 2020. RN politicians interviewed suggested that over time, the RN has been able to develop these social media communication skills in-house and no longer needs former GI activists for such tasks. RN MP and press spokesperson, anonymised upon request (interview in Paris on April 22, 2024).

staff with creative communication skills, GI activists were recruited for their avant-garde communication style, which attracted considerable media attention.'[66]

In some cases, fringe group members were recruited not only for their skills but also for their valuable networks and local influence. For example, Philippe Vardon, former head of the GI branch in Nice,[67] joined the Rassemblement bleu Marine coalition of nationalist parties in 2013. He later ran on Marion Maréchal's list for the 2015 regional elections and became vice-president of the FN group on the PACA regional council in 2017. Grégoire Eury, a RN regional councillor in Grand Est, noted that the inclusion of figures like Vardon was largely 'due to their influence in relevant networks.'[68] Vardon's deep local roots were seen as an important asset for Maréchal in the 2015 regional elections.[69] In addition, Vardon's strong ties to Matteo Salvini and the Northern League, with whom the FN formed a strategic alliance in the early 2010s based on shared nationalist and Eurosceptic views,[70] further increased his value to the party.

Second, beyond recruiting fringe group members for specific skills, the RN sometimes collaborates with these groups to fill electoral lists, particularly at the municipal level, where finding enough candidates is a challenge for all French parties. For example, in the 2014 French elections, the FN's list in Nevers included two Identitarians[71] who had previously stood in departmental elections for their own movement. Similarly, in Béziers, the FN-supported list included two Identitarians (Tronche, 2013). The RN's acceptance of these individuals was often driven by difficulties in filling municipal lists, leading local RN leaders to accept 'young, highly motivated individuals with mobilisation experience,' as noted by far-right expert Jean-Yves Camus.[72] Local RN leaders in Nevers and Béziers justified their decisions by highlighting the skills

[66] Louis-Marie Mautin, Parliamentary aide to Stéphane Ravier, (ex-RN) senator (interview in Paris on March 22, 2024).
[67] The Nice branch, called Nissa Rebela, has been active in the Nice region since 2005.
[68] Grégoire Eury, RN regional councillor and departmental delegate for Meurthe-et-Moselle (video interview on April 26, 2024)
[69] Louis-Marie Mautin (interview in Paris on March 22, 2024).
[70] Since then, Marine Le Pen has toned down her Eurosceptic rhetoric and the RN's positions are now often framed in terms of reclaiming French sovereignty from Brussels and regaining control over immigration and economic policy.
[71] Formerly the Bloc Identitaire, the parent organisation of the Génération identitaire, a French far-right political movement founded in 2002 and transformed into a political party in 2009.
[72] Jean-Yves Camus, research fellow at IRIS in Paris (interview in Paris on March 12, 2024).

these individuals brought to the campaign and the support they provided in mobilising voters (Tronche, 2013).

Third, the RN occasionally engages with fringe groups to fill organisational gaps on an opportunistic, ad hoc basis, particularly when additional campaign support is needed. This is particularly common in municipal elections, where the reputational risks of interacting with fringe groups are lower and the pool of available party activists is limited. For instance, during the 2014 municipal elections, Stéphane Ravier,[73] then RN regional councillor in PACA, tacitly accepted support from a dozen young activists from Action Française, some of whom openly displayed ties to neo-fascist groups on social media, to distribute leaflets and put up campaign posters (Fessard, 2014). Renauld Labaye, secretary-general of the RN parliamentary group and former parliamentary assistant to Ravier, explained that Ravier 'saw Action Française as a readily mobilised activist force' and accepted their help due to the shortage of young RN activists.[74] This opportunistic approach to filling temporary mobilisation gaps was echoed by Maxime Bot, RN departmental delegate for Aude, who noted that in 2014, it was difficult for the RN in some regions to create full electoral lists and find enough supporters for a large-scale campaign. 'Ravier benefited from the support of young activists to complement the efforts of party members,' Bot stated. [75] This example illustrates the RN's selective and flexible approach to working with fringe groups to meet specific organisational needs.

This section comparing the organisational capacities of the AfD and the RN and their impact on the party leaders' propensity for fringe group engagement provides evidence for the hypothesis that the AfD's lower organisational capacities increase its reliance on fringe groups for mobilisation and operational support. In contrast, the RN's stronger organisational structure reduces this dependence, leading to more selective engagement—mainly for specific skills, to fill electoral lists, or to opportunistically boost campaign support. The next two chapters explore these

[73] Ravier became an RN senator for Bouches-du-Rhône in 2014, symbolic of the RN's electoral breakthrough, but left the party in 2022 to join Eric Zemmour's Reconquête party.
[74] Renaud Labaye, secretary general of the RN parliamentary group (interview in Paris on April 11, 2024).
[75] Maxime Bot, RN departmental delegate for Aude (video interview on April 17, 2024).

dynamics further, testing the hypothesis that a RRP's organisational strength shapes its engagement with fringe groups through within-case analysis of cross-temporal and sub-national variation. The next section of this chapter shifts the focus to the second independent variable—immigration salience—and first assesses its importance in Germany and France, before analysing its impact on RRP leaders' strategic cost-benefit calculations regarding fringe group engagement.

Salience of immigration

The second hypothesis suggests that the salience of immigration shapes how anti-immigrant sentiment is reinforced within the RRP base and signalled to party leaders. It also influences how strongly leaders perceive immigration as a widely shared public concern. These perceptions of both intra-party dynamics and wider public opinion affect RRP leaders' reputational concerns and cost-benefit calculations when engaging with fringe groups. Leaders weigh the risks of backlash against the potential benefits of consolidating core supporters, attracting disillusioned voters concerned about immigration, and normalising extreme positions over time.

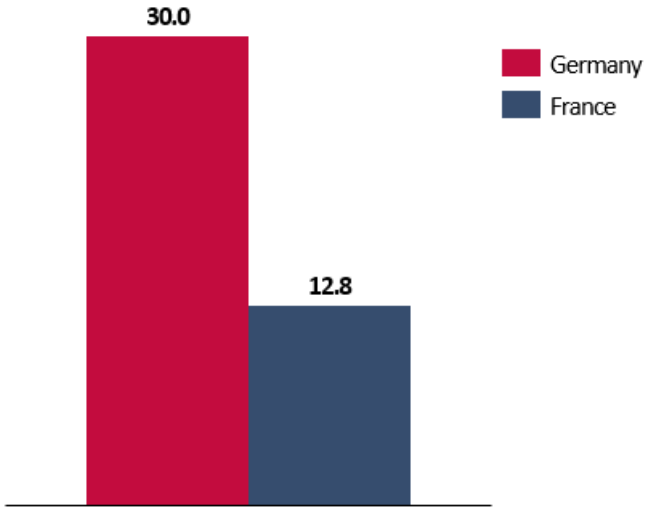
In contexts where immigration is highly salient, RRP leaders perceive lower reputational risks and exhibit greater tolerance for fringe group engagement, often responding with inconsistent condemnation or sanctions. This section shows that immigration was generally salient during the period analysed, but on average more so in Germany than in France. It then explains how this heightened salience in Germany has reduced AfD leaders' concerns about the reputational risks of interacting with fringe groups, in contrast to RN leaders in France, who remain more cautious.

Immigration salience in Germany and France

The salience of immigration reflects public concern about the issue and is typically measured through opinion polls asking respondents to name the most important issues affecting their country or themselves (Dennison, 2019; Krosnick, 1990). In this study, I use Eurobarometer data, focusing on the percentage of respondents who named 'immigration' as one of the two most important national issues. Figure 10 shows the average immigration salience in Germany and France between 2013 and 2022. In Germany, immigration was a major concern throughout this period, peaking during the so-called European migrant crisis in 2015 and 2016. In France, by contrast, the level of concern was comparatively lower and more stable. On average, 30% of Germans identified immigration as a top issue, almost two and a half times the 12.8% in France. Breaking this down further, between 2013 and 2018, immigration salience averaged 37.3% in Germany, compared to 13% in France. From 2019 to 2022, it decreased to 20% in Germany, while in France, it remained steady at 12.5%.[76] In a broader European context, Germany's average salience of 30% remains notably high, especially compared to countries like Austria (22.4%), the Netherlands (18.4%), Denmark (27.2%), and Sweden (23.8%), which had historically high salience levels. Immigration salience varies not only over time but also between regions. For this reason, its impact on RRP engagement with fringe groups is explored in more detail in the next two within-case chapters on Germany and France.

[76] The higher salience of immigration in Germany than in France is also reflected in the Google Trends data (Figure 28 in Appendix E).

Figure 10: Average immigration salience in Germany and France, 2013-2022



Source: Pan-EU Eurobarometer 89.1 survey (European Commission, 2023); (Dennison and Geddes, 2019)
Note: Percentage of respondents citing immigration as one of the two most important issues affecting their country.

The high salience of immigration in Germany is expected to reduce AfD leaders' concerns about reputational damage from interacting with fringe groups. The next subsection provides some initial evidence in support of this hypothesis.

Impact of immigration salience on AfD

Consistent with theory, AfD leaders expressed an underlying concern about the reputational risks posed by links to fringe groups. Two-thirds of AfD politicians interviewed acknowledged fears about the party's image due to alleged or confirmed links to such groups. Martin Vincentz, chairman of the AfD's North Rhine-Westphalia branch, highlighted this risk, stating that fringe groups' content 'sometimes goes too far even for the AfD and is considered unacceptable by large sections of society.'[77] Reputational concerns have occasionally led the party to distance itself from fringe organisations. In March 2016, for example, the AfD's federal executive banned its politicians from speaking at Pegida rallies to avoid association with far-right positions. Jörg Meuthen, the AfD's co-leader at the time, explained that the decision was to 'avoid the impression

[77] Dr. Martin Vincentz, Chairman of the AfD North Rhine-Westphalia and MP in the North Rhine-Westphalian state parliament (video interview on March 6, 2024).

that the AfD is in contact with right-wing extremists who are outlawed in Germany, and with Pegida there was always the suspicion that right-wing extremists were involved'.[78]

AfD leaders' reputational concerns are further underscored by their fear of being classified as a suspected or confirmed right-wing extremist organisation by Germany's domestic intelligence agency, the BfV.[79] Such a designation could damage the party's reputation and alienate moderate members and potential voters. Uwe Junge, former head of the AfD's Rhineland-Palatinate branch, noted that the party avoided contact with right-wing groups so as not to 'give the BfV a reason to defame the party', and warned that a right-wing extremist label 'would have scared off moderate members.'[80]

Reputational concerns also influenced recruitment decisions. Lars Hünich, a senior AfD figure in Brandenburg, explained that many state branches are wary of MPs hiring people with extremist backgrounds because of the potential impact on the party's base. He warned that the hiring of people with extreme-right affiliations could 'frighten members and drive them out,' stressing that such views are largely not tolerated in German society.'[81]

Despite these apprehensions, the high salience of immigration has reduced AfD leaders' concerns about reputational damage and their reluctance to engage with fringe groups. This shift can be attributed to two factors. First, high anti-immigration salience among the AfD's base puts pressure on leaders to take a tougher stance on the issue, reducing fears of backlash within the party. Second, high immigration salience reduces perceived reputational risks for party leaders by fostering a sense of broader societal acceptance of their anti-immigration positions.

In 2015 and 2016, strong anti-immigration sentiment among the party base gave AfD politicians more leeway to engage with groups like Pegida, especially in eastern Germany. Some

[78] Prof. Dr. Jörg Meuthen, former party co-chairman and former AfD MEP (Phone interview on January 18, 2024).
[79] In March 2021, the BfV classified the AfD as a suspected right-wing extremist organisation, giving it further powers to monitor the party. In 2023, the party's youth organisation was classified as a confirmed right-wing extremist organisation. In addition, as of 25 May 2024, three eastern German AfD state organisations (Thuringia, Saxony-Anhalt and Saxony) were also classified as confirmed right-wing extremist organisations.
[80] Uwe Junge, former AfD Rhineland-Palatinate chairman (2015-2019) and former MP of Rhineland-Palatinate state parliament (video interview on February 16, 2024).
[81] Lars Hünich, MP in the Brandenburg state parliament and former member of AfD state executive committee (video interview on February 19, 2024).

AfD politicians even felt pressured to attend Pegida rallies to demonstrate their commitment to tougher anti-immigration policies. Pegida rallies were seen as platforms for 'concerned' citizens to express their opposition to immigration. Two AfD state parliamentarians from Saxony explained that their colleagues were 'happy to use Pegida as a mouthpiece,' with some even considering the rallies 'a more important stage than parliament to express their anti-immigrant views and to satisfy the base's desire to align with right-wing citizens' groups.'[82]

This pressure from the base is also reflected in the widespread support for the Patriotic Platform,[83] a faction of far-right AfD members founded in Saxony-Anhalt. In June 2016, the faction called for closer ties with the Identitarian movement, claiming that the AfD itself was identitarian. This call caused little backlash, especially in Saxony-Anhalt, where it was largely supported by the base, whose strong anti-immigrant sentiments were heightened by the migration crisis. An AfD Bundestag MP from the region explained that this support for cooperation with fringe groups eased the leaders' concerns about reputational damage.[84]

In addition to lower intra-party backlash, high immigration salience also reduces AfD leaders' perceptions of societal consequences for fringe group interactions. Former party co-leader Jörg Meuthen indirectly acknowledged this dynamic. Referring to the 2015 migrant wave, he said, 'the AfD benefited from the migration crisis and the fact that immigration was increasingly perceived as a problem by the population [...], an important context for [the AfD] that made it easier for the party to cooperate with natural allies.'[85] A parliamentary aide echoed that particularly in the eastern German states, 'AfD politicians felt emboldened to participate in Pegida rallies due to the heated political atmosphere and the low perceived negative impact on the party's reputation.'[86] Karsten Hilse, a Bundestag MP from Saxony, echoed this sentiment, observing that

[82] Carsten Hütter, Member of the AfD federal executive committee and MP in Saxon state parliament (interview in Dresden on March 26, 2024); MP in Saxon state parliament, anonymised upon request (interview in Dresden on March 26, 2024).
[83] The Patriotic Platform was founded in 2014 by Prof. Dr. Hans-Thomas Tillschneider, a member of the Saxony-Anhalt state parliament. It sought to operate as a far-right wing of the party, without being constrained by party structures. In September 2018, the executive committee of the Patriotic Platform applied for its dissolution.
[84] AfD Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt, anonymised upon request (video interview on January 23, 2024).
[85] Prof. Dr. Jörg Meuthen, former party co-chairman and former AfD MEP (Phone interview on January 18, 2024).
[86] AfD parliamentary assistant to Bundestag MP, anonymised upon request (interview in Berlin on February 2, 2024).

the 'mainstream expression of [AfD] ideas on immigration is encouraging' and creates an impression that 'interactions with right-wing groups are highly tolerated.'[87] Similarly, a Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt remarked that in the context of growing concerns about security and rising crime rates in the wake of immigration surges, citizens are 'happy with almost any movement that wants to do something about it,' which explains why 'it has never mattered much here that the AfD is linked to front organisations like the Identitarian movement.'[88]

These examples illustrate how the high salience of immigration reduces AfD leaders' concerns about reputational damage from interacting with fringe groups. Anti-immigration positions are seen as more acceptable, and the party's base is seen as more tolerant of such interactions. This has led to a loosening of the rules on engaging with fringe groups, as evidenced by AfD Federal Executive Committee's decision in 2018 to lift the ban on cooperation with Pegida. An AfD Bundestag MP attributed this move to 'pressure from the party base due to low reputational concerns,' and inconsistent sanctions in previous cases.[89] While this section provides initial evidence that high immigration salience reduces AfD leaders' reputational concerns, Chapter 4 will further explore this dynamic through a sub-national analysis of AfD engagement patterns in eastern and western Germany. The next subsection will show how, in France, lower immigration salience has perpetuated RN leaders' fears of reputational damage from links with fringe groups, leading to selective engagement in local cases where they perceived their anti-immigration positions to resonate with the community.

Impact of immigration salience on RN

Like their AfD counterparts, RN politicians have expressed an underlying concern about reputational damage from association with fringe groups. This has been particularly evident since Marine Le Pen became party leader in 2011. Wallerand de Saint-Just, former party treasurer and

[87] Karsten Hilse, AfD Bundestag MP from Saxony (interview in Berlin on February 21, 2024).
[88] This statement was made in response to a question about the role of reputational concerns in the wake of the revelation that Holger Arppe (former head of the AfD in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania) had close ties to the Identitarian movement in Rostock and had exchanged strategies and events with leading activist Daniel Fiß, even asking for concrete support at an AfD demonstration.
AfD Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt, anonymised upon request (video interview on January 23, 2024).
[89] Bundestag MP from North Rhine-Westphalia, anonymised upon request (January 31, 2024).

current chair of the RN group in the Île-de-France regional council, voiced concerns about the party being linked to 'anti-Semitic, racist, or homophobic views that are widely rejected by society.'[90] A parliamentary advisor to former RN, now Reconquête senator Stephan Ravier, stressed the party's 'constant concern to communicate properly and avoid the label of extreme right,' which opponents could use to discredit the party.[91] Grégoire Eury, RN regional councillor for the Grand Est, and, Nicolas Olivier, RN departmental delegate for Aisne, both highlighted the efforts to moderate the party's image and avoid association with far-right views.[92] Experts like Jean-Yves Camus and Elisa Bellé have also noted the RN leaders' strong focus on avoiding reputational damage.[93]

In France, immigration was salient during the period analysed, but to a lesser extent, which sustained RN leaders' reputational concerns regarding engagement with fringe groups. With regard to the first theorised mechanism, anti-immigrant sentiment among the party base was less pronounced in the context of moderate immigration salience, and the highly centralised structure of the RN means that the base signals support for fringe group interactions less directly to the leadership. Given the moderate salience of immigration, RN leaders also perceive a potential societal backlash, which influences their cost-benefit calculations regarding fringe group engagement. As a result, RN leaders tend to engage with fringe groups only when they believe that the actions will carry minimal reputational risk and offer strategic benefits.

There is little evidence of bottom-up signalling from the RN party base. Interviews suggest that, despite strong concerns about immigration and strong anti-immigrant sentiments among members, these views do not translate into pressure on the party leadership to engage with fringe groups. Because of the RN's centralised structure, members rarely signal much course direction to the leadership. As Renaud Labaye, secretary general of the RN parliamentary group, notes,

[90] Wallerand de Saint-Just, member of the political bureau and regional councillor (interview in Paris on February 27, 2024).
[91] Louis-Marie Mautin, Parliamentary aide to Stéphane Ravier, (ex-RN) senator (interview in Paris on March 22, 2024).
[92] Grégoire Eury, RN regional councillor and departmental delegate for Meurthe-et-Moselle (video interview on April 26, 2024); Nicholas Olivier, RN departmental delegate for Aisne (interview in Villers-Cotterêts on April 25, 2024).
[93] Jean-Yves Camus, expert on the European far right and a research fellow at IRIS in Paris (interview in Paris on March 12, 2024); Elisa Bellé, Postdoctoral Fellow at Sciences Po, Paris, working on the Marie Curie project entitled 'Ethnography of Right Across Nations and Territories' (video interview on March 18, 2024).

members are 'familiar with Marine Le Pen's leadership style and the limited openness to bottom-up suggestions and criticism.'[94] Philippe Chapron, RN regional councillor in Calvados, concurs, noting that 'members rarely give upward feedback; they tend to carry out top-down instructions, with limited scope to shape the organisation at the local level.'[95]

While the first theorised mechanism affecting RN leaders' concerns about reputational costs—reduced perceived intra-party backlash from the base, signalling greater leeway or outright pressure—does not appear to be at play, there is evidence to support the second mechanism. RN leaders' concerns about reputational damage diminish as they perceive immigration to be a widely shared concern. Although RN politicians indicated that their overall perception of reputational risk remained relatively stable, they reported reduced concerns in specific instances of engagement with fringe groups on immigration-related issues. Examples include a conference on Islam and the French Republic organised by RN's Idées Nation with far-right speakers,[96] protests co-organised with fringe groups against a refugee centre,[97] or local demonstrations by RN politicians in support of arrested feminist-identitarian activists.[98]

In these specific contexts, RN politicians noted strong social support for drawing attention to the issue of immigration and, at times, widespread support for their anti-immigration positions, which mitigated reputational risks. For instance, Gauthier Bouchet, RN departmental delegate for Loire-Atlantique, defended his participation in a 2022 protest against an asylum seekers' centre near a school, organised by the Collectif de la préservation de la Pierre-Attelée and attended by far-right groups, as a means of aligning himself with the concerns of local residents.[99] Similarly, RN spokesman Julien Odoul justified holding up signs reading 'foreign rapists out' during a regional

[94] Renaud Labaye, secretary general of the RN parliamentary group (interview in Paris on April 11, 2024)
[95] Philippe Chapron, RN departmental delegate for Calvados (video interview on May 14, 2024).
[96] In 2013, Idées Nation invited speakers from far-right groups and the media to a conference on 'Islam and the Republic'. Among the speakers was René Marchand of the anti-Islam website Riposte laïque. FN leaders including Louis Aliot and Wallerand de Saint-Juste spoke at the conference.
[97] On 15 October, the Collectif de la preservation de la Pierre-Attelée organised a rally against the construction of a centre for asylum seekers next to a school. Members of the RN took part, including Bryan Pecqueur and Gauthier Bouchet, both candidates in the last legislative elections in Loire-Atlantique.
[98] In March 2024, RN deputies from Burgundy-Franche-Comté, including party spokesman Julien Odoul, held up signs reading 'Foreign rapists out' during a plenary session of the regional council in support of a feminist collective activist who had been taken into police custody after holding a similar sign.
[99] Gauthier Bouchet, RN regional councillor, departmental delegate for Loire-Atlantique, member of the National Council (interview in Saint-Nazaire on April 18, 2024).

council session, framing it as ‘support for activists of the identitarian Némésis collective and an expression of solidarity with all French women who suffer from uncontrolled immigration and pay the consequences, which are becoming more and more obvious to people.’[100] Commenting on the incident, Paul-Henry Hansen-Catta, RN Vice-president of the Hauts de France Regional Council, added that RN members ‘can feel more comfortable interacting openly with fringe groups and sharing their content if they feel that immigration is widely perceived as pertinent.’[101]

The interview findings suggest that while RN politicians generally fear reputational damage and are cautious about engaging with fringe groups, they are more likely to do so on immigration-related issues when they perceive widespread acceptance of their anti-immigration views and expect minimal backlash. A potentially complicating factor is the RN’s long-standing dominance of the French political discourse on immigration. Since the 1970s, the party has positioned itself as the most credible voice against uncontrolled immigration. RN politicians have repeatedly reiterated that they do not need to rely on fringe groups to put immigration issues on the political agenda.[102] Consequently, even in contexts where reputational risks appear minimal, the party’s established leadership on the issue may reduce its willingness to engage with fringe groups. This factor—primarily an issue of external validity—cannot be fully addressed in the analysis of the two main cases, as the AfD is a much younger party that has not dominated the immigration issue for as long. Instead, it is addressed in Chapter 6, where the theory is applied to two shadow cases—the Austrian FPÖ and the Swiss People’s Party, both of which have dominated the immigration discourse in their respective countries for decades.

In sum, initial evidence suggests that immigration salience affects RN leaders’ reputational concerns as predicted. Their fear of reputational damage remains relatively stable at moderate levels of immigration salience. There is no clear bottom-up signalling from the party base

[100] Julien Odoul, MP, party spokesperson and member of the RN national bureau (interview in Paris on April 29, 2024).
[101] Paul-Henry Hansen-Catta, regional councillor for Hauts-de-France and former adviser to Marine Le Pen (video interview on April 29, 2024).
[102] Renauld Labaye notes that the RN has 'always highlighted the issue of immigration and warned about its consequences, and is now seeking political solutions’ (interview in Paris on April 11, 2024). Jimmy Bourlieux add that the far-right fringe 'may also talk about mass immigration, which the RN welcomes, they lack the RN's credibility on this issue' (interview in Bordeaux on April 15, 2024).

expressing tolerance or even support for engagement with fringe groups that would reduce perceived reputational backlash within the party. The second mechanism, however, is evident: RN politicians' reputational concerns ease when they perceive immigration as a widespread public concern. This encourages them to engage with fringe groups on immigration-related issues, particularly if they believe that their views align with those of specific, often local, communities.

This chapter introduced the study's two main cases: Germany's AfD and France's RN and their patterns of engagement with far-right fringe groups. The AfD engages more frequently and in more reputationally costly ways than the RN. As a time-fixed cross-case comparison, this chapter provided an initial test of the proposed independent variables explaining the different levels of engagement. Consistent with the first hypothesis, which posits an inverse relationship between a party's organisational strength and the likelihood of fringe group interactions, the chapter shows that the AfD, with its comparatively weaker organisational capacity, relies heavily on fringe groups—to attract supporters, recruit staff, secure campaign support, and compensate for weak party-parallel organisations. In contrast, the RN's relative organisational strength, evidenced by its robust activist base, ability to recruit staff, and independent programme development, reduces its reliance on fringe groups. The RN engages more selectively with fringe groups to fill specific gaps on an ad hoc, opportunistic basis.

This chapter also provided evidence for the second hypothesis, that immigration salience affects the reputational concerns and cost-benefit calculations of RRP leaders when engaging with fringe groups. In Germany, high immigration salience lowers AfD politicians' fears of reputational backlash from within the party and wider society, facilitating bolder engagement with fringe groups. In France, as expected, lower immigration salience leads to more stable reputational concerns among RN leaders. However, RN leaders occasionally feel emboldened to engage with fringe groups when immigration is a prominent local concern.

The findings presented in this chapter challenge several alternative explanations, such as the idea that a party's origins, a country's history of fascism, or the severity of state responses to far-right actors influence RRPs' strategic cost-benefit calculations regarding fringe group engagement. RN politicians did not engage more with fringe groups because of historical ties. On the contrary, they emphasised the need to distance themselves from these historical associations, suggesting that high fringe group engagement does not naturally follow from a RRP's far-right origins. Similarly, AfD politicians did not express heightened reputational concerns related to the country's Nazi history, nor did they frequently refer to the stigmatisation of far-right actors associated with this history. Additionally, the severity of government responses to far-right actors and the risk of surveillance were rarely mentioned as deterrents by RRP politicians, with only a few AfD members from western states citing them.

Having provided initial evidence for the theoretical argument, the next two chapters will further test its validity through cross-time and sub-national analyses, starting with an in-depth analysis of the AfD in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: The AfD and far-right fringe groups – a cross-temporal and sub-national analysis

This chapter builds on the previous chapter's introduction of the two main cases and the initial cross-case comparison that provided supportive evidence for the hypotheses. It delves deeper into the AfD's interactions with far-right fringe groups, examining why the AfD engages with these groups more frequently and in riskier ways than the RN. Given the short period of analysis (2015–2022), a purely cross-temporal approach offers limited insights. Therefore, this chapter combines cross-time and sub-national analyses, comparing the AfD's engagement with fringe groups in eastern and western German states to test the proposed explanations for different levels of interaction.

The chapter begins with a brief history of the AfD's development. It then examines the AfD's interactions with fringe groups over time and across regions, identifying key patterns and variations. The core analysis focuses on two factors: how the AfD's organisational weaknesses drive its reliance on fringe groups, and how the salience of immigration diminishes leaders' reputational concerns about these associations.

Background on the AfD

The AfD was founded on February 6, 2013 by a group of economic liberals, conservatives, and national conservatives opposed to the German government's handling of the euro crisis and European integration (Havertz, 2021, p. 37). Initially organised as the Electoral Alternative 2013 to contest the national elections, it was soon replaced as the AfD. In its first two years, the party focused on liberal economic issues and Euroscepticism. Among its early supporters were 18 economics professors, including Hans-Olaf Henkel, former president of the Federation of German Industries, lending the party an aura of economic credibility (Bebnowski and Förster, 2014, p. 1). In its founding year, the AfD narrowly missed the five per cent threshold in the general election, winning 4.7% of the vote. However, it made significant gains in subsequent state, national, and European elections, as shown in Table 7. The AfD entered the European Parliament in 2014 and

has since gained representation in all state parliaments.[1] In the 2017 national elections, it became the third largest party overall and the strongest opposition party.

Table 7: AfD election results, 2013-2022

Election type	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
European		7.1%					11.0%			
National	4.7%				12.6%				10.3%	
State										
Baden-Württemberg				15.1%					9.7%	
Bavaria						10.2%				
Berlin				14.2%					8.0%	
Brandenburg		12.2%					23.5%			
Bremen			5.5%				6.1%			
Hamburg			6.1%					5.3%		
Hesse	4.1%					13.1%				
Mecklenburg–Western Pomerania				20.8%					16.7%	
Lower Saxony					6.2%					10.9%
North Rhine-Westphalia					7.4%					5.4%
Rhineland-Palatinate				12.6%					8.3%	
Saarland					6.2%					5.7%
Saxony		9.7%					27.5%			
Saxony-Anhalt				24.3%					20.8%	
Schleswig-Holstein					5.9%					4.4%
Thuringia		10.6%					23.4%			

Source: (Die Bundeswahlleiterin, 2023)

In its early years, the AfD was not seen as a radical right or populist party, but it quickly attracted members from the so-called New Right[2] (Arzheimer, 2015, p. 536). This led to internal conflicts as radical right forces gained influence. In the five eastern German states, the AfD had a radical right orientation from the outset, with early state-level leadership drawn from this spectrum (Häusler, 2018, p. 11). The party's success in the 2014 eastern German state elections boosted its

[1] As of January 2025, the AfD is represented in 14 out of 16 state parliaments, having failed to re-enter the state parliaments of Schleswig-Holstein in 2022 and Bremen in 2023.
[2] The New Right emerged in Germany in the 1960s as a reaction to the New Left. While avoiding overt Nazi ideology, it highlights overlaps between conservative and far-right views. The movement opposes core principles of the German constitution, particularly due to its ethnic nationalist stance.

radical right wing, giving rise to far-right factions like *the Wing*[3] and *Patriotic Platform*[4]. In their 2015 Erfurt resolution, these groups called for the AfD to become a 'resistance movement against the further erosion of German sovereignty and identity' (Höcke and Poggenburg, 2015 p. 2). In response, AfD co-founder and then leader, Bernd Lucke, created the association *Wake-up Call 2015* to preserve the AfD as a party that represented 'conservative as well as liberal and social values' (Phoenix, 2015). However, his influence quickly waned, and at the 2015 party congress in Essen, he was replaced by Frauke Petry and Jörg Meuthen as co-leaders, cementing the party's shift to the radical right (Heinze and Weisskircher, 2021, p. 265). In mid-2015, Lucke and ca. 4,000 moderate members—about 20% of the party's membership at the time—left the AfD. Petry, who sought to prepare the AfD for a coalition with the centre-right CDU, soon faced resistance and resigned as co-leader in 2017, leaving the party shortly after. Since then, internal strife has continued as the AfD has moved further to the right, reflecting the diversity of far-right actors within the party.

Beyond personnel changes, the AfD's rightward turn was also reflected in its evolving ideology. In 2015, at the height of the so-called 'European migrant crisis,' the AfD adopted a hardline anti-immigration stance, achieving double-digit results in five state elections in 2016. The party revived language previously stigmatised since the Nazi era, such as Frauke Petry's controversial attempt to rehabilitate the term 'völkisch' (Kamann, 2016b). In April 2016, the AfD unveiled its first manifesto, which included radical right elements such as a rejection of multiculturalism and an emphasis on defending German cultural identity as the *Leitkultur* (Alternative für Deutschland, 2016, pp. 46-47). In the September 2017 national elections, the AfD entered the Bundestag with 94 seats. After Frauke Petry's departure, the party accelerated its rightward shift, openly adopting far-right rhetoric and positions (Havertz, 2021, p. 47). In March

[3] The Wing (German: *Der Flügel*) is a nationalist, far-right faction within the AfD, formed in 2015 around Thuringia's AfD leader, Björn Höcke. By 2019, it reportedly had the support of 40% of the party's eastern German members. In March 2020, the BfV classified The Wing as an 'extremist endeavour against the liberal democratic order.' The AfD's federal leadership ordered its dissolution by April 2020, resulting in the group's online presence being shut down.
[4] The Patriotic Platform (German: *Patriotische Plattfo*rm) was a nationalist, far-right AfD association active from 2014 to 2018. Founded and led by Hans-Thomas Tillschneider, it sought to push the party further to the right. In September 2018, its executive board applied for self-dissolution.

2021, the German domestic intelligence agency (BfV) classified the AfD as a suspected case of right-wing extremism. This designation was confirmed by a court ruling in March 2022, granting the BfV permission to monitor the party (DW, 2021). The BfV had previously classified the AfD as a test case in 2019, a precursor to the suspected extremism designation. The agency also flagged the AfD's youth organisation and the Wing faction as suspected extremist entities. Since 2020, nine AfD state branches have been classified as suspected right-wing extremist cases, with three later confirmed (details in Appendix F). This underscores the intelligence community's assessment of the AfD as a threat to Germany's democratic order.

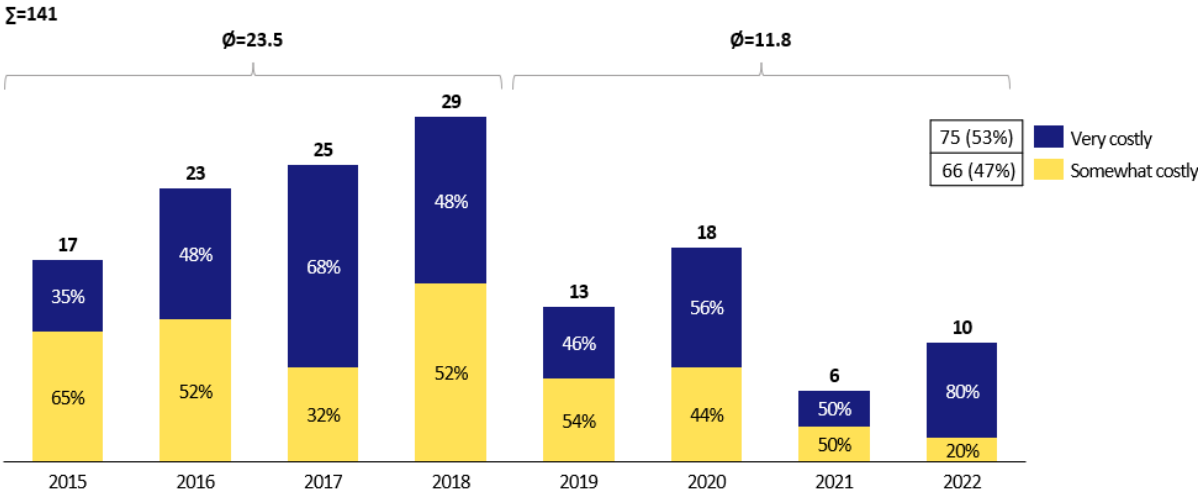
AfD engagement with fringe groups

The AfD's engagement with these groups can be divided into two distinct four-year phases. The first phase (2015-2018) marked the AfD's shift to the radical right and its first entry into the Bundestag. During this period, the party engaged with fringe groups more frequently, with an average of 23.5 cases per year. In the second phase (2019-2022), the AfD solidified its organisational and electoral position, including new entries into state parliaments. Engagement with fringe groups declined somewhat in this phase, averaging just 11.8 cases per year.

This trend aligns with expectations. In the first phase, the AfD, as a nascent party, faced significant organisational weaknesses, while immigration dominated the political agenda. To address these gaps, party leaders relied on fringe groups, prioritising organisational growth over reputational risks. Consequently, the AfD not only engaged with fringe groups more frequently during this period but also in ways that carried higher reputational costs[5] (Figure 11).

[5] Reminder: 'Somewhat costly' interactions are perceived as less significant and are less likely to provoke public backlash or negative media coverage. For instance, an RRP might issue a statement in defence of a fringe group facing a government ban, highlighting the importance of free speech. In contrast, 'very costly' interactions involve significant actions by the RRP (e.g. a leader speaking at a fringe group event) that cannot be easily downplayed, express explicit support for fringe groups (e.g. accepting former fringe group members into the party), and tend to provoke a strong public outcry and widespread negative media coverage.

Figure 11: AfD fringe group engagement by reputational costliness, 2015-2022

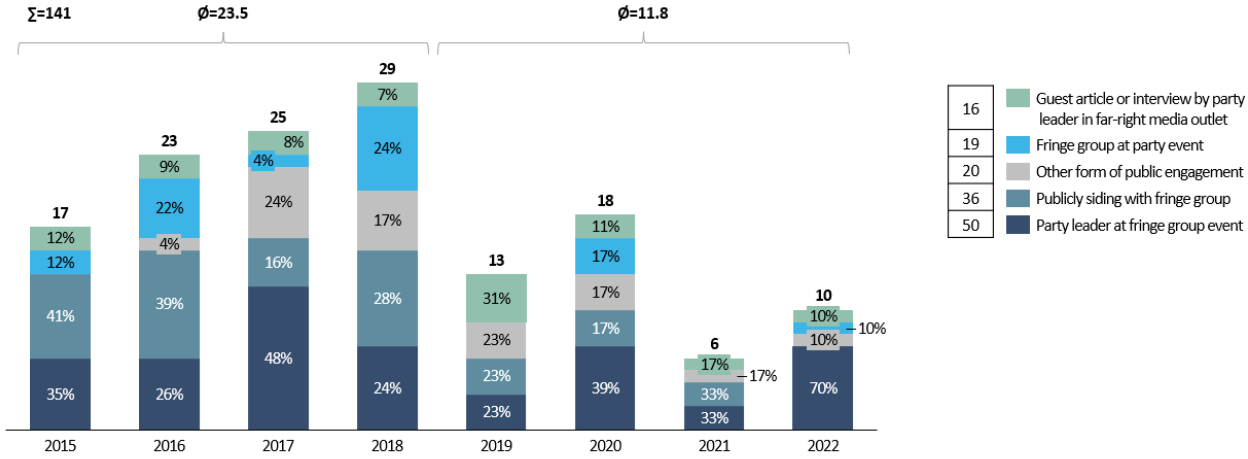


Sources: Factiva search (Die Welt, Süddeutsche Zeitung, taz, dpa, Reuters)

The nature of these interactions underscores the organisational pressures on the party. AfD leaders attended and spoke at fringe group events 12 times more often in the first phase than in the second, to garner support and compensate for a lack of members and volunteers in the early years (Figure 12). Public statements in support of fringe groups were also more common, reflecting a conscious effort to signal affinity. Fringe group members were also more frequently present at AfD events during the first period and were sometimes actively encouraged to attend, as the party's organisational weakness made it difficult to control or limit their participation. Notably, all recorded cases of the AfD seeking election campaign support from fringe groups occurred in the first period.[6] In contrast, as the party consolidated its organisational structure in the second phase, its reliance on fringe groups declined somewhat.

[6] Recorded as 'Other form of public engagement' in Figure 12.

Figure 12: AfD fringe group engagement by type of interaction, 2015-2022



Sources: Factiva search (Die Welt, Süddeutsche Zeitung, taz, dpa, Reuters), selected right-wing media outlets (Compact, Junge Freiheit, Sezession)
Note: Other forms of public engagement include the party employing members of fringe groups and fringe groups supporting the party's election campaign.

The AfD's interactions with fringe groups also differed in terms of the groups it engaged with in the two phases. Between 2015 and 2018, more than 60% of its interactions were with the far-right Pegida movement, which opposes what it sees as the 'Islamisation of Europe', and the Identitarian movement. Between 2019 and 2022, the AfD engaged with a wider range of groups. Interactions with Pegida and the Identitarian movement fell to between 11% and 33% of all cases. Instead, the party increasingly interacted with far-right think tanks like the Institute for State Policy (IfS), regional groups like the Brandenburg-based Zukunft Heimat,[7] or newer movements like Querdenker.[8] This shift suggests that while the AfD's early engagement with fringe groups focused on addressing organisational weaknesses, in the second phase, the focus shifted to ideological alignment and programme development. As the party matured and its membership base expanded, it worked to strengthen its ideological and programmatic framework by interacting with think tanks and other ideological allies.[9]

[7] Zukunft Heimat (English: Future Homeland) is a far-right group in Brandenburg, known for its nationalist and anti-immigration stance. Founded in 2015, it has organised protests against immigration policy and has links to broader far right and populist movements in Germany. From 2015 to 2021, it was led by Dr Hans-Christoph Berndt, who joined the AfD in 2018 and later became leader of its parliamentary group in Brandenburg.
[8] Querdenker (literally 'lateral thinkers') refers to a loose network of individuals and groups that emerged in response to the German government's COVID-19 measures. It includes conspiracy theorists, anti-vaccination activists and those concerned about civil liberties. While not all members are far-right, the movement has attracted significant participation from far-right groups and individuals.
[9] Details on the groups the AfD engaged with over time in Figure 29 in Appendix G.

A sub-national perspective provides further insight into the AfD's interactions with fringe groups. Figure 13 highlights the differences in engagement by AfD leaders across eastern and western states, as well as at the federal level.[10] While the party's organisational strength is relatively consistent nationwide—despite slightly higher membership[11] but fewer funds and staff in eastern branches—the greater salience of immigration and the stronger presence of xenophobic and nativist views in the east likely reduce concerns about reputational damage from such interactions.

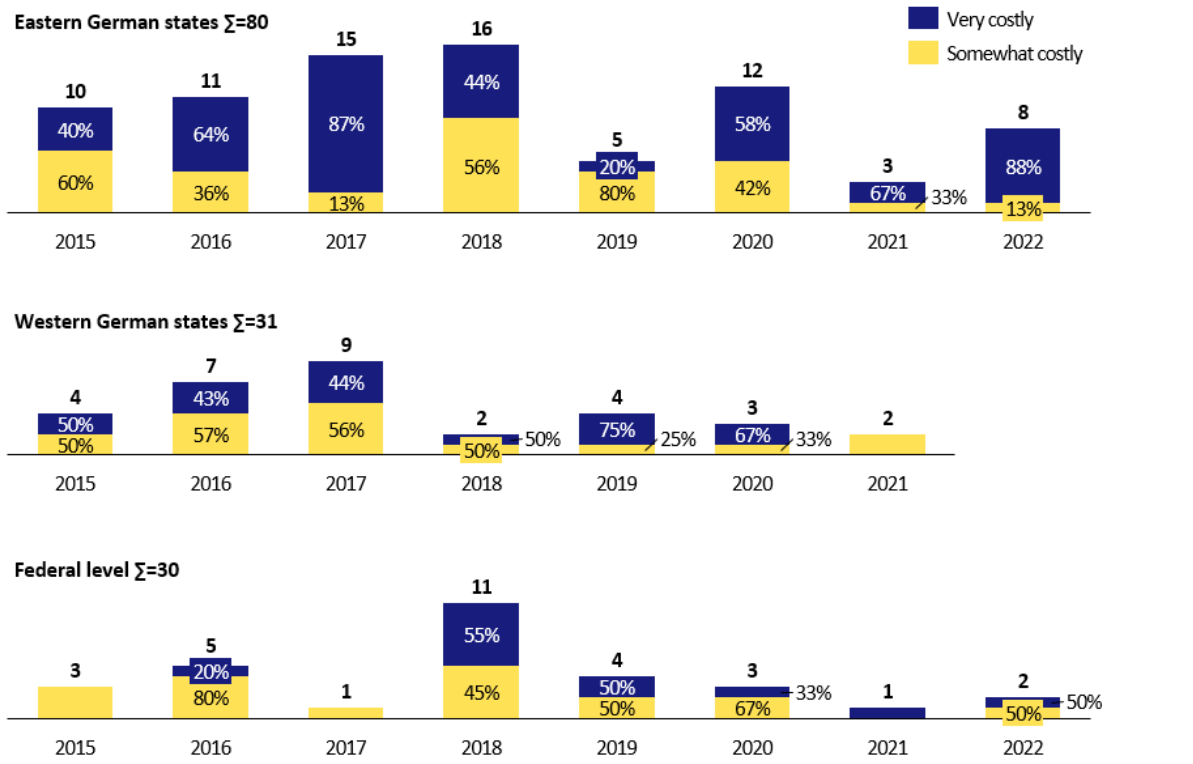
As expected, 57% of these engagements occurred in eastern German states, which account for less than 20% of the country's population.[12] In western states, AfD leaders' engagements were concentrated in the first phase (2015-2018). This is consistent with the expectation that, in the context of weak organisational capacity, party leaders prioritise filling organisational gaps over potential reputational risks, especially if they perceive immigration as a widely shared concern and xenophobic and nativist views are less prevalent than in the east. At the federal level, fringe group engagement increased significantly in 2018, largely due to the recruitment of fringe group members following the AfD's entry into the Bundestag in 2017.

AfD leaders in eastern states not only engaged more frequently with fringe groups but also did so in more reputationally costly ways. Leaders from eastern branches were more open to attend and speak at fringe group events, especially Pegida rallies. They also attended events organised by the far-right magazine *Compact*, classified as extreme right by the domestic intelligence agency (BfV)[13], as well as the far-right think tank IfS, and smaller regional groups like Freie Sachsen or Pro Chemnitz—both of which are monitored by the BfV as 'suspected cases' of right-wing extremism. This challenges the alternative explanation that a strong government response deters RRPs from engaging with fringe groups. Moreover, eastern AfD leaders were also more likely to

[10] Recorded instances of engagement involving party leaders from eastern German states were coded as 'east,' those involving party leaders from western German states were coded as 'west,' and those involving leaders of the federal party executive or parliamentary group were coded as 'federal.' Cases involving AfD Bundestag MPs were coded according to the constituency of the member, i.e., as either in a western or eastern state. Detailed overview of fringe group engagement by region in Figure 30 in Appendix G.
[11] For details, see Figure 32 in Appendix H.
[12] As of 2022, the population in the six eastern states listed above makes up 19% of the German population (Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis), 2022).
[13] In mid-July 2024, the Federal Ministry of the Interior banned the magazine Compact, describing it as a 'mouthpiece of the right-wing extremist scene.' The magazine has since appealed the ban to the Federal Administrative Court, which is currently reviewing the decision.

publicly support or defend fringe groups, particularly when these groups faced criticism from mainstream media or governing parties. In short, AfD leaders from eastern states were more explicit in their engagement with fringe groups and more open in expressing their approval of or alignment with them.

Figure 13: AfD fringe group engagement by region and reputational costliness, 2015-2022



Sources: Factiva search (Die Welt, Süddeutsche Zeitung, taz, dpa, Reuters), selected right-wing media outlets (Compact, Junge Freiheit, Sezession)

Having outlined the AfD's engagement with far-right fringe groups, particularly its higher activity in the party's early years and eastern branches, the rest of this chapter explores how changes in organisational strength and the salience of immigration, both over time and across regions, explain these patterns. The next two sections provide evidence supporting the hypotheses that AfD leaders engage with fringe groups to bridge organisational gaps and are less concerned about reputational risks when immigration is a key issue.

The impact of organisational weakness

To understand how the AfD's organisational weaknesses have shaped its engagement with fringe groups, a cross-temporal perspective is more insightful than a sub-national one. The party's organisational strength has fluctuated more significantly over time than across regions. Between 2015 and 2019, the AfD's membership more than doubled, albeit from a low base, rising from around 16,400 to 33,500. Membership then stabilised, averaging 32,300 between 2019 and 2022.[14] Despite this growth, membership distribution across states largely mirrors the overall population distribution. This underscores why changes over time provide greater insight into how organisational strength has influenced the party's reliance on fringe groups.

As the AfD achieved its first electoral victories, entered state parliaments, and grew its membership, its income nearly doubled between 2015 and 2022. Staff expenditure, an imperfect proxy for staff size, also increased, reflecting the development of its political apparatus. However, by 2022, the AfD's organisational capacity remained weak compared to Germany's established parties.

Despite these organisational limitations, the AfD has quickly caught up with—or even surpassed—its rivals in communication activities. It employs similar communication tools and matches its competitors in the frequency of press releases, especially when adjusted for budget differences.[15] Beyond traditional channels, the AfD was an early adopter of social media, using platforms like Facebook and YouTube to reach new audiences, bypass mainstream media, and mitigate the stigma often associated with engaging with the party. Among German parties, the AfD has relied on social media more heavily than any other, successfully building a large follower base and achieving high engagement levels. Studies (e.g. Brodnig et al., 2019) have highlighted the effectiveness of this strategy. For several years, the AfD has maintained the largest Facebook community of all German political parties, achieving high interaction rates and reach (Hope not

[14] Details in Figure 32 in Appendix H
[15] Details in Figure 34 in Appendix H

Hate, 2021, p. 4; Serrano et al., 2019, p. 218). It has also outpaced rivals in social media output, reflected in the increasing number of videos on its YouTube channel since its launch in late 2016.[16]

This catch-up in communication capacity has implications for the AfD's reliance on fringe groups. Throughout the period analysed, the party's organisational weaknesses compelled it to depend heavily on fringe groups, especially in its early stages, to fill gaps in mobilisation, recruitment of skilled parliamentary staff, and programme development. However, as the party's communication infrastructure improved, its reliance on fringe groups for communications support diminished, even as it continued to rely on them in other areas.

Mobilisation support

Differences between the AfD's two phases (T1: 2015-2018 and T2: 2019-2022) reflect a declining dependence on fringe groups for mobilisation. In its early years (2015-2018), when membership was low, the AfD relied heavily on fringe groups to attract supporters. Interviews with party leaders revealed a strong need for recruitment across regions. The then Rhineland-Palatinate party leader noted that following the departure of moderate national leader Bernd Lucke, only eight of the state's more than 30 district associations were functional by mid-2015. This left the party scrambling for officials like district chairpersons and treasurers, resulting in an 'openness to dubious individuals.'[17] Steffen Königer, a former advisor to Alexander Gauland, highlighted the appeal of far-right fringe groups, noting that 'AfD politicians have always been interested in far-right groups,' seeing them as a source of both voters and members.[18]

The Pegida movement became an important recruitment platform for the AfD in its early years. At its peak, Pegida drew up to 25,000 demonstrators, providing the party with opportunities to engage potential supporters, attract media attention, and expand its membership. Two AfD MPs from Saxony, where Pegida originated, noted that its events provided broad platforms to connect

[16] Details in Figure 35 in Appendix H.
[17] Uwe Junge, former AfD Rhineland-Palatinate chairman (2015-2019) and former MP of Rhineland-Palatinate state parliament (video interview on February 16, 2024).
[18] Steffen Königer, former MP in Brandenburg state parliament and member of the state executive committee who left the AfD in November 2018 (interview in Werder on February 1, 2024).

with like-minded individuals, recruit members, and boost visibility.[19] Leaders from western German states also recognised the strategic advantages of attending these rallies. A Hesse branch co-leader highlighted the benefits of 'networking with like-minded people, addressing potential voters, increasing media attention, and even learning about mobilisation tactics.'[20] The North Rhine-Westphalian leader added that these events helped the AfD to connect with people wary of the party due to negative media coverage, changing prejudices and indirectly enhancing recruitment potential.[21]

Smaller regional groups also played a crucial role in recruitment efforts in the early years. For example, Zukunft Heimat,[22] a regional far-right group, was instrumental in recruiting new members and boosting the party's image in right-wing circles. Two AfD Brandenburg state parliamentarians noted the benefits of engaging with this group to 'recruit new members' and 'present a positive image in right-wing circles.'[23] André Poggenburg, former head of the AfD in Saxony-Anhalt, emphasised that small right-wing citizens' movements offer local party leaders valuable opportunities to 'raise their profile and reach new voters.'[24] He justified his participation in panel organised by the far-right magazine *Compact* in 2016, alongside the leader of the Identitarian movement Austria,[25] as a way to connect with potential supporters ahead of the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern state elections. Until 2018, the AfD's high need for new supporters led it to engage frequently with fringe groups.

Between 2015 and 2018, far-right media outlets also proved indispensable in the AfD's early growth. At a time when the party faced negative mainstream media coverage and was largely

[19] Carsten Hütter, Member of the AfD federal executive committee and Saxon state MP (interview in Dresden on March 26, 2024); MP in Saxon state parliament, anonymised on request (interview in Dresden on March 26, 2024).
[20] Andreas Lichert, AfD Hesse co-chairman and MP in the state parliament (video interview on February 7, 2024).
[21] Dr. Martin Vincentz, Chairman of the AfD North Rhine-Westphalia and MP in the North Rhine-Westphalian state parliament (video interview on March 6, 2024).
[22] Zukunft Heimat is Germany's second-largest anti-asylum initiative after Pegida. Between October 2015 and April 2016, it held demonstrations in small and mid-sized towns across southern Brandenburg, attracting 300–400 attendees.
[23] Lars Hünich, MP in the Brandenburg parliament and former member of AfD state executive committee (video interview on February 19, 2024); Lars Schieske, MP in Brandenburg parliament (interview in Potsdam on February 1, 2024).
[24] André Poggenburg led the AfD in Saxony-Anhalt (2014–2018) and was a prominent figure in its far-right faction. He resigned in 2019 after making controversial statements and later founded the nationalist, far-right party *Aufbruch deutscher Patrioten*, which has struggled to gain traction (video interview on April 7, 2024).
[25] Martin Sellner was announced as a panel speaker, but did not attend the event due to illness (Speit, 2016).

excluded from public broadcasters, it turned to outlets like *Junge Freiheit* to increase its visibility. These platforms helped the AfD by 'spreading its positions', 'promoting scepticism about the government's work', and 'sometimes openly promoting the AfD' through party advertisements and content alignment.[26] While grassroots engagement with fringe groups facilitated personal interactions with potential supporters, guest articles and interviews in far-right media broadened public awareness of the party as it was still building its social media presence.

However, as the AfD grew in membership, funding, and organisational stability, its reliance on fringe groups for recruitment decreased. As one former party leader put it, 'the need to recruit at fringe group rallies diminished after the AfD entered national parliament and reached a certain organisational threshold.'[27] By 2019 and 2020, the party's engagement with fringe groups had shifted somewhat. While party leaders still attended events organised by groups like One Percent and the Identitarian movement, these appearances became less frequent and focused more on articulating party positions on key issues like immigration, rather than recruitment. A Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt explained his participation in protests with One Percent against a refugee centre in the Burgenlandkreis district as 'no longer primarily about recruiting members but about expressing AfD positions to natural allies.'[28] Although the AfD's reliance on fringe groups for new supporters has declined since 2015, persistent organisational weaknesses mean that such engagements remain strategically valuable.

[26] AfD Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt, anonymised on request (interview in Berlin on January 23, 2024); MP in Saxon state parliament, anonymised on request (interview in Dresden on March 26, 2024); Andreas Lichert, AfD Hesse co-chairman and MP in the state parliament (video interview on February 7, 2024).
[27] Prof. Dr. Jörg Meuthen, former party co-chairman and MEP who left the AfD in January 2022 (Phone interview on January 18, 2024).
[28] AfD Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt, anonymised on request (interview in Berlin on January 23, 2024).

Recruitment support

As the AfD consolidated its organisational capacity over time, its reliance on fringe circles for staff recruitment declined. In the party's early years, the challenges of recruiting suitable personnel were well-documented (Schroeder et al., 2017, p. 30). These difficulties were particularly acute for the party's inexperienced state MPs.[29] Between 2013 and 2016, filling roles for parliamentary assistants and advisors proved problematic, with many applicants either poorly qualified or linked to far-right ideologies (Pinkert, Pittelkow, and Riedel, 2017). As a result, vacancies often remained unfilled for long periods, and high staff turnover became a persistent issue, as evidenced by frequent job advertisements on AfD state parliamentary group websites during this period (Schroeder et al., 2017, p. 31).

The AfD's staffing practices in its early years underscore its dependence on far-right fringe networks. A WZB study of the party's parliamentary work highlights its search for staff with legal and public relations expertise, often drawing from individuals associated with the new-right newspaper *Junge Freiheit* or the think tank *IfS* (Schroeder et al., 2017, p. 30). Several *Junge Freiheit* editors transitioned into press roles within the AfD or its parliamentary group (Bender, 2019). In 2017, the Bundestag administration recorded 297 employees working for AfD MPs and the parliamentary group. Investigative journalists at *Zeit Online* reported that at least 27 of these employees had links to extreme-right groups. Eighteen AfD MPs were found to have employed individuals from organisations like the NPD, the banned Heimattreue Deutsche Jugend, the Identitarian movement, and the far-right group One Percent (Biermann et al., 2018).

Between 2015 and 2018, the party repeatedly advertised job openings in the right-wing nationalist magazine *Compact* and the weekly *Junge Freiheit* (Speit, 2023). A spike in hiring from fringe groups is also reflected in this study's Factiva-based index, which documented eight such hires in 2017 and 2018 after the AfD entered the Bundestag. Several MPs acknowledged that the potential far-right past of parliamentary staff was often overlooked due to the urgent need for

[29] According to Prof. Dr. Weßler, who conducted a study on the AfD's parliamentary activities for the Social Science Research Centre Berlin (WZB) in June 2017, the AfD's biggest problem was its staff. This issue was exacerbated by the inexperience of the AfD's state parliamentarians, as evidenced by the fact that only one MP in all ten state parliaments had previously worked in a state parliament (Schmelzer, 2017).

personnel, especially after the party entered the Bundestag in 2017, supporting the causal link between the party's organisational needs and its turn to fringe groups. Two AfD Bundestag MPs from Bavaria noted, 'of course, we recruited from the AfD's circles of influence and close organisations to fill positions,' adding that 'the background checks were less of a concern than filling positions.'[30]

From 2019 to 2022, as the AfD became more established, recruitment challenges eased. Membership levels stabilised, and positions were filled more efficiently. The Factiva index also shows a decrease in annual hires from fringe groups during this period compared to the previous four years. AfD politicians attributed this shift to a 'certain degree of professionalisation' and the 'strengthening of the AfD's own organisation.'[31] Despite the reduced reliance on fringe groups, occasional cases of hiring from far-right circles persisted.

For example, in July 2022, Saxony-Anhalt MP Jan Wenzel-Schmidt hired a former member of the Identitarian movement with ties to several far-right organisations.[32] Similarly, in 2021, the AfD's Brandenburg parliamentary group reportedly hired individuals linked to groups like the Identitarian movement and the IfS—both classified as right-wing extremist by the BfV[33]—as well as the banned Heimattreue Deutsche Jugend. These cases suggest that AfD politicians are increasingly unconcerned about the stigma of associating with fringe groups, challenging the notion that government crackdowns on far-right groups deter such links. Former party leader Jörg Meuthen has acknowledged this shift, observing that while the party has become more professional since 2017, 'when AfD members hire from fringe groups today, it is done deliberately for ideological reasons, with little concern for reputational damage.'[34]

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[30] Former AfD Bundestag MP from Bavaria, anonymised on request (interview in Berlin on January 31, 2024); Stephan Protschka, Bundestag MP and Chairman of the AfD in Bavaria (interview in Berlin on January 31, 2024).
[31] Bundestag MP from North Rhine-Westphalia, anonymised on request (interview in Berlin on January 31, 2024); AfD MP in the Hamburg state parliament and member of the AfD Hamburg executive committee, anonymised on request (video interview on February 9, 2024)
[32] The hired parliamentary assistant, Mario Müller, was formerly active in the far-right Aktionsgruppe Delmenhorst, had links to the youth organisations of the former NPD, became a leading member of the Identitarians during his studies and later wrote for the far-right magazine Compact (Baeck, 2024)
[33] The BfV had already categorised the Identitarian movement as a 'suspected case' of right-wing extremism and then as a 'confirmed case' in its annual reports between 2016 and 2019.
[34] Prof. Dr. Jörg Meuthen, former party co-chairman and MEP who left the AfD in January 2022 (Phone interview on January 18, 2024).

In sum, the AfD initially turned to fringe groups to address recruitment challenges, but this reliance declined over time. However, some recruitment from fringe circles persisted, particularly in eastern Germany. This continued despite domestic intelligence classifying many of these groups as suspected or confirmed right-wing extremist organisations. Such links exposed the AfD to reputational and operational risks, including increased surveillance, undermining the idea that strong government action against fringe groups would deter these ties. This chapter's section on immigration salience and its impact on reputational concerns in the AfD's regional branches further explores how these concerns influence recruitment from fringe groups in eastern Germany.

Campaign support

Between 2015 and 2018, the AfD relied heavily on fringe groups to support its election campaigns, a trend driven by organisational weaknesses. All instances of such collaboration recorded in the Factiva index occurred before 2018. Cross-temporal analysis reveals that this reliance declined as the party addressed its structural challenges. Steffen Königer, who oversaw early election campaigns with Guido Reil, recalls frequent requests from state branches for federal support, including manpower and campaign materials like posters, due to state-level bottlenecks.[35] Similarly, Rüdiger Klesmann, deputy chairman of the AfD in Saarland, confirms that weaker branches, such as the Saarland, often struggled to mobilise sufficient campaign resources.[36]

The AfD's dependence on fringe groups for campaign support is evident in examples from Bremen and Rhineland-Palatinate. In Bremen, branch chairman Frank Magnitz, along with two representatives of the party's youth organisation and members of the Identitarian movement, distributed protest leaflets at then-Chancellor Merkel's campaign event in August 2017 (Schnase, 2017). Despite the Identitarian movement being monitored by the BfV and listed on the AfD's own incompatibility list, party members involved seemed unconcerned about reputational risks.[37] Just

[35] Steffen Königer, former MP in Brandenburg state parliament and member of the state executive committee who left the AfD in November 2018 (interview in Werder on February 1, 2024).
[36] Rüdiger Klesmann, deputy chairman of the AfD Saarland (video interview on February 14, 2024).
[37] The incompatibility list, introduced in 2015, includes organisations whose membership or close association is incompatible with AfD membership, to distance the party from extremist elements. It primarily targets far-right and radical groups, including neo-Nazi and nationalist organisations. Despite this, AfD members have engaged with

weeks later, AfD Bremen state MP Alexander Tassis posted a photo on Facebook showing colleagues hanging campaign posters while wearing Identitarian movement t-shirts with the slogan 'In love with the homeland - Identitarian Movement' (Joswig, 2017). These actions challenges the idea that government crackdowns on fringe groups, such as classifying them as suspected right-wing extremists and placing them under surveillance, discourage RRPs from engaging with them. In Rhineland-Palatinate, an AfD state executive member accepted help from the NPD-controlled Palatine Walkers to distribute flyers and put up posters (Löer, 2016b). In both cases, AfD leaders contextualised or even justified these actions by citing the need for electoral support. Steffen Königer even pointed to the advantages of the Identitarian movement's experience in organising protests, stating that 'the people who organised such campaigns for the Identitarians often had more of a clue than those who stand up at AfD party conferences.'[38]

While the AfD's need for campaign support was high between 2015 and 2018, AfD MPs interviewed relayed that this need declined between 2019 and 2022 due to increased and more stable membership numbers—though still low compared to established parties—and improved organisational processes. This is reflected in fewer cases of fringe group campaign support and a shift in the types of support sought. From 2015 to 2018, support mainly involved putting up posters and distributing flyers. Between 2019 and 2022, the AfD focused less on hands-on support and more on specific tasks, particularly election monitoring, which had not been a priority before.

Stephan Protschka, Bundestag MP and head of the Bavarian branch, emphasised the reduced need for external support, noting that campaigns had evolved 'from a big chaos to a small chaos,' becoming 'less messy' as party membership grew.[39] Parliamentarians from other states echoed this, attributing the reduced reliance on fringe groups to the greater involvement of active, committed members. Karsten Hilse, Bundestag MP from Saxony, explained that 'many Pegida demonstrators

individuals from listed organisations, drawing criticism. There have been occasional discussions within the party about abolishing the list.

[38] Steffen Königer (interview in Werder on February 1, 2024).

[39] Stephan Protschka, Bundestag MP and Chairman of the AfD in Bavaria (interview in Berlin on January 31, 2024).

have either joined the AfD or supported its campaigns,' reducing the party's need for external support.[40]

However, the AfD remained open to fringe group support between 2019 and 2022 when necessary. A Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt acknowledged that while the party was better equipped, it 'would seek closer cooperation with fringe groups if the need arose.'[41] The MP also pointed to the AfD's cooperation with One Percent in election monitoring across several states, demonstrating that, even between 2019 and 2022, the party occasionally sought support to enhance its campaign activities and strategically undermine trust in democracy.[42]

Operational support

Furthermore, the AfD's comparatively weak party-parallel organisations led it to rely on fringe groups for operational support in its early stages. As noted in Chapter 3, the AfD's party-parallel organisations are much weaker than those of its rivals. Its political foundation,[43] which receives no state funding, lacks the capacity to strengthen the party's organisational structure, inform policy development, or promote party values. This creates significant gaps in policy research, training for elected officials, and organisational growth, compelling the party to turn to far-right groups and think tanks for support. While the nature of the AfD's interactions with fringe groups varied between 2015–2018 and 2019–2022, its reliance on them to compensate for weak party-parallel organisations persisted. Unlike more visible interactions, such as speaking at fringe rallies, hiring fringe actors, or endorsing these groups, the party's reliance on fringe organisations

[40] Karsten Hilse, AfD Bundestag MP from Saxony (interview in Berlin on February 21, 2024).
[41] Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt; anonymised on request, (video interview on January 23, 2024).
[42] The AfD's cooperation with the right-wing, xenophobic network One Percent for the purpose of election monitoring is well established. Dr. Bernd Baumann, the first parliamentary secretary of the AfD's parliamentary group in the Bundestag, confirmed the party's cooperation with One Percent in the 2016 state elections and the 2017 national elections in an interview with the researcher. During the 2017 parliamentary election campaign, the AfD not only launched its own campaign page on the topic of election fraud, but AfD politicians also appeared in One Percent's promotional videos advocating for election monitoring. Specifically, AfD officials Jens Maier and André Poggenburg spoke about 'courageous citizens' standing up to those 'who have made our republic their prey' (Vorreyer, 2017). Moreover, on the day of the 2019 European elections, One Percent published a post claiming that AfD votes had been misappropriated, with such insinuations undermining trust in democracy (Oswald, 2019).
[43] The Desiderius Erasmus Foundation, established in 2017 and recognised by the AfD in 2018 as a party-affiliated foundation, does not receive state funding.

for policy research and training has received less media attention.[44] However, interviews with AfD politicians and parliamentary staff confirm that the party frequently turned to fringe groups for support in policy formulation and training during this period.

AfD politicians have been relatively open about the organisational deficiencies stemming from weak party-parallel organisations. The chief whip of the AfD's parliamentary group described the party as 'relatively desolate organisationally,' with 'too little in-house expertise' and 'insufficient resources for thorough programme development.'[45] The party's political foundation was characterised as 'small' with 'limited influence' and 'unable to meet the AfD's need for research capacity to ensure knowledge transfer,' by a former head of the Rhineland-Palatine branch.[46] Representatives from smaller branches, like the Saarland, emphasised the lack of training for elected officials[47] and volunteers. Even in Saxony, where the party has a strong membership base, two state parliamentarians noted difficulties in securing qualified speakers for party trainings.

AfD politicians not only recognised these gaps, but also openly alluded to the resulting need to turn to fringe groups for support. A third of the AfD national MPs interviewed mentioned subscribing to publications from the far-right think tank IfS and using these resources for parliamentary work, including preparing speeches. An MP from Saxony-Anhalt noted that 'the IfS has brought debate into the party and has had a significant impact on some of our policies.'[48] Parliamentary aides confirmed that AfD MPs consult IfS publications, although they found them too high-level and insufficiently policy-specific for daily parliamentary needs. Nevertheless, they acknowledged the institute's 'considerable influence on the AfD', with 'some members holding dual roles in the party and the IfS.'[49] Aides described the IfS as an important source of programmatic

[44] Consequently, such interactions are less captured by the Factiva-based index.
[45] Dr. Bernd Baumann, chief whip of the AfD parliamentary group and MP (interview in Berlin on December 14, 2023).
[46] Uwe Junge (video interview on February 16, 2024).
[47] A former head of the AfD Saarland branch claimed that party members registered for political seminars and trainings organised by the CDU-affiliated Konrad-Adenauer Foundation.
[48] Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt, anonymised on request (video interview on January 23, 2024).
[49] Parliamentary aide to Bundestag MP and AfD district chairwoman, anonymised on request (interview in Berlin on February 2, 2024)

ideas, even if not all are directly adopted. Former party leader Jörg Meuthen echoed the importance of far-right think tanks to the AfD, stating that their influence 'was and still is relatively strong.'[50]

In addition to programmatic input, AfD politicians valued the training provided by these groups. With no national training institute and only limited state-level resources, the party relied on external training in rhetoric, political communication, campaigning, and local politics. For instance, a Bundestag MP and two state parliamentarians praised the political communication training provided by the IfS. André Poggenburg, former head of the party's Saxony-Anhalt branch, confirmed that party members had participated in such training, though he stressed these were individually arranged rather than centrally coordinated by the party.[51] Other party leaders mentioned smaller local associations, some co-founded by AfD politicians, such as the Brandenburg-based Kommunalpolitischer Heimatverein, which provide training for elected party officials.

Overall, the AfD's weak party-parallel organisations left persistent gaps in training and policy research throughout the analysis period, as such organisations take time to develop. These deficiencies required the party to rely on fringe groups, supporting the notion that organisational weakness drives party leaders to engage.

This section examined how the AfD's evolving organisational capabilities influenced its leaders' propensity to collaborate with fringe groups over time. Between 2015 and 2018, the party's struggles to mobilise supporters, recruit staff, and manage campaigns independently led to greater reliance on fringe groups. As the AfD's organisational structure solidified from 2019 to 2022, its interactions with these groups decreased somewhat and shifted in focus. However, all quantitative indicators suggest that the AfD remained organisationally weaker than its rivals, which helps explain its continued higher level of engagement with these groups compared to the RN. While this

[50] Meuthen added that the influence of Götz Kubitschek, Benedikt Kaiser, and others linked to the Antaios publishing house was significant, describing them as the AfD's 'intellectual whisperers'. He attributed this influence partly to the party's failure to develop its own programme and the lack of expertise, as qualified officials have gradually left the party.
[51] André Poggenburg (video interview on April 7, 2024).

section based on triangulated data, provides supportive evidence for the causal link between the AfD's organisational capacity and its willingness to cooperate with fringe groups, the next section adopts a sub-national perspective to assess how varying levels of immigration salience shape party leaders' concerns about potential reputational risk from such cooperation.

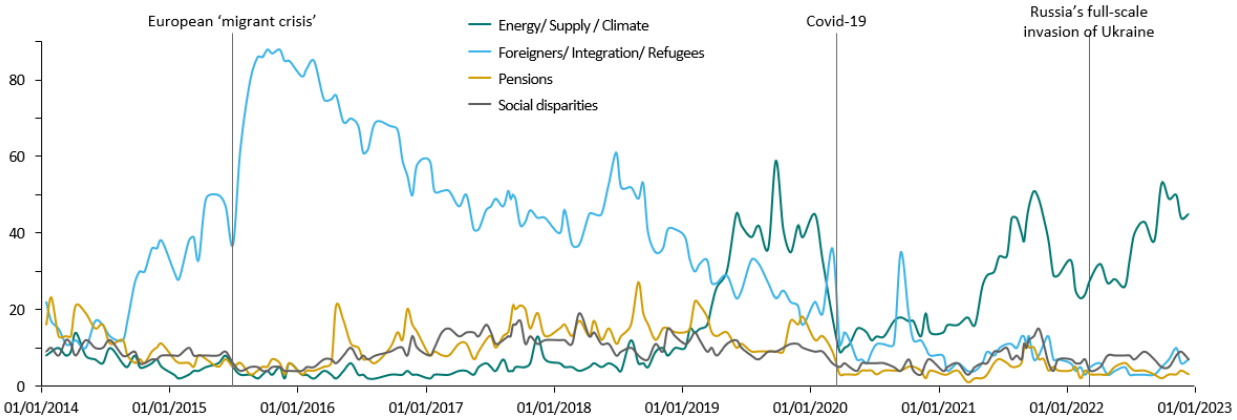
The impact of immigration salience and xenophobic views

Building on Chapter 3's cross-case comparison of how immigration salience influenced RN and AfD leaders' strategic cost-benefit calculations in engaging with fringe groups, this section adopts a sub-national perspective within the German case to further support the hypothesised causal relationship. To reiterate, I hypothesise that when immigration is highly salient, RRP leaders perceive lower reputational risks in associating with fringe groups. High salience reduces intra-party reputational constraints and reinforces RRP leaders' perception of immigration as a widely shared public concern, which affects their strategic calculations and increases the likelihood of engaging with fringe groups.

Figure 14, based on the Politbarometer's 'most important issue' question,[52] shows that immigration has been a high priority issue in Germany throughout the analysis period. The decline in salience since 2020 can be attributed to two major events: the Covid-10 pandemic and, in February 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which shifted public attention to energy security. Immigration remained similarly salient in both western and eastern Germany, with average regional differences of around 2%. Among AfD supporters, however, immigration was significantly more salient than among supporters of other parties in both regions (Figure 15). This heightened focus on immigration among AfD supporters appears to have contributed to reduced reputational concerns among party leaders about associating with fringe groups known for their strong anti-immigrant positions and rhetoric.

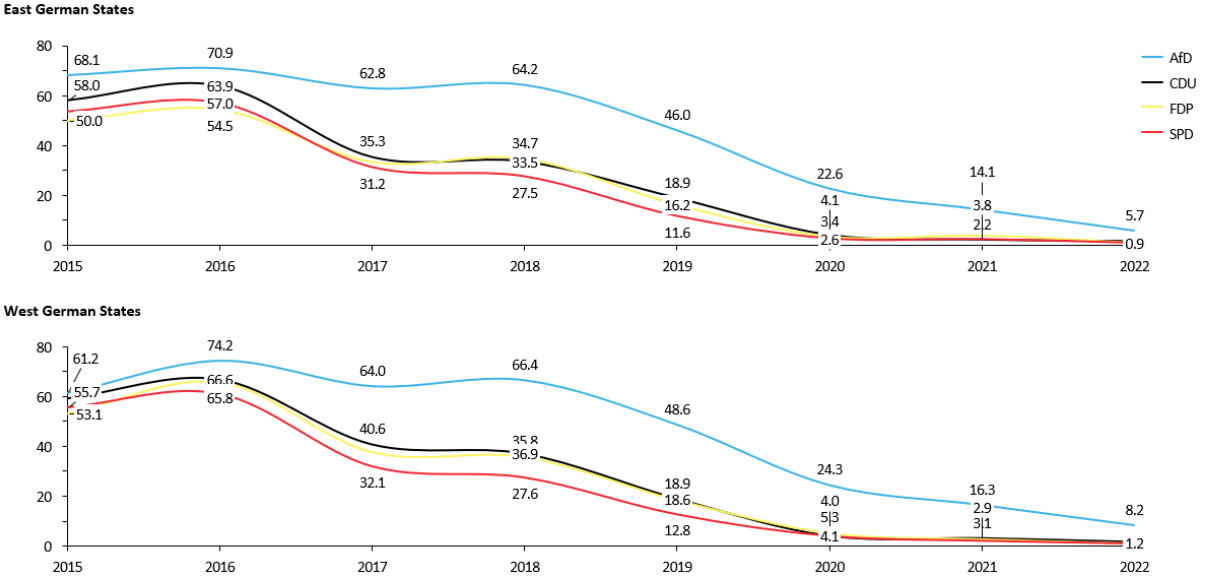
[52] Politbarometer is a monthly opinion poll by Forschungsgruppe Wahlen that measures political attitudes, voter preferences, and key issues. The sample is drawn from a representative pool of eligible German voters using both telephone and online methods.

Figure 14: Immigration salience in Germany, 2014-2022



Note: The y-axis shows the share of respondents naming immigration as one of the top two issues facing the country.
Source: (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2023)

Figure 15: Immigration salience in Germany by region and party vote intention, 2014-2022



Note: Share of respondents who said they would vote for the AfD if an election were held next Sunday and who cited immigration as the main problem facing the country.
Source: (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2023)

In addition to the broadly similar salience of immigration in opinion polls across Germany, several factors suggest that polls alone may not fully capture immigration salience and that immigration was likely more prominent in political discourse and regional media in eastern Germany (Pesthy, Mader, and Schoen, 2021). While a systematic regional analysis of immigration discourse is lacking, protests against refugee housing and hate crimes targeting refugees were more widespread in the east (Benček and Strasheim, 2016), increasing their visibility in local media and everyday life. Data from the Far-Right Protest Observatory (FARPO) confirms a higher number of

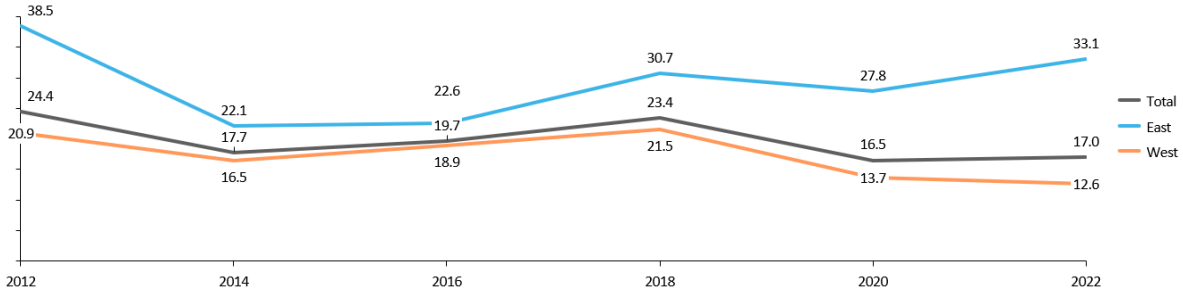
immigration-related far-right protests in eastern Germany than in the west (Castelli Gattinara, Froio, and Pirro, 2021). The anti-immigration Pegida movement also originated in the east and its regional offshoots held larger and more high-profile demonstrations in the eastern states (Dostal, 2015). This heightened public attention to immigration contributed to reduced concerns among AfD leaders in the eastern states about the reputational risks of engaging with fringe groups.

Besides the overall high salience of immigration, regional differences in xenophobic attitudes are likely to contribute to AfD leaders' lower reputational concerns and their higher levels of engagement in the eastern states. In regions where xenophobic views are more widespread, the impact of immigration salience on RRP leaders' reputational calculations is further amplified. Among RRP supporters, opposition to immigration is strongly conveyed to party leaders, who may perceive that their concerns resonate with a broader segment of the population. This further reduces fears of reputational damage from engaging with fringe groups.

As Figure 16 shows, xenophobic attitudes have consistently been higher—and more volatile—in eastern Germany than in the west. In the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study,[53] agreement with xenophobic views peaked at 38.5% in 2012, then declined before rising again to 33.1% in recent years. Despite these fluctuations, eastern Germany appears to be a more conducive environment for the open expression of xenophobic sentiments, especially in times of crisis. This pattern holds across all age groups. Responses to the study's three questions about foreigners show significantly higher levels of agreement with xenophobic statements among East German respondents (Figure 17).

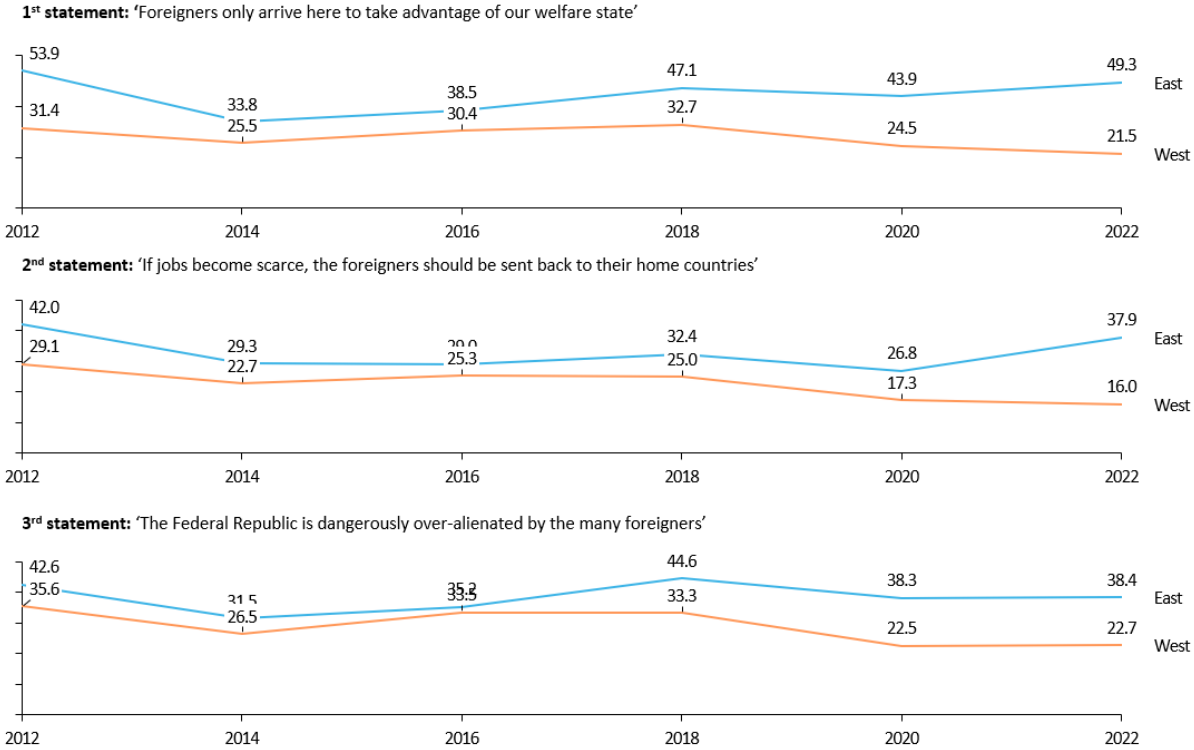
[53] The Leipzig Authoritarianism Survey measures six dimensions of right-wing extremism. It has been conducted every two years since 2002 with a representative sample of around 2,500 people.

Figure 16: Manifest agreement with the 'xenophobia' dimension in Germany, in %, 2002-2022



Source: Leipzig Authoritarianism Studies, 2012-2022 (Decker and Brähler, 2018, 2020; Decker et al., 2013; Decker, Kiess, and Brähler, 2016; Decker et al., 2022; Siemer, 2022)
Note: Manifest agreement = 'totally agree' and 'mostly agree'

Figure 17: Manifest agreement with xenophobic statements in Germany, in %, 2002-2022



Source: Leipzig Authoritarianism Studies, 2012-2022 (Decker and Brähler, 2018, 2020; Decker et al., 2013; Decker, Kiess, and Brähler, 2016; Decker et al., 2022; Siemer, 2022)

Having established that immigration is a salient issue across Germany, particularly among AfD supporters, and that xenophobic views are more prevalent in eastern Germany, the next section examines how these factors influence AfD leaders' perceptions of the reputational risks of associating with fringe groups and their willingness to engage with them.

Concerns about reputational risk

High immigration salience reduces AfD leaders' concerns about reputational damage through two key mechanisms. First, it reinforces anti-immigrant sentiments within the party base, fostering acceptance—and even support—for alliances with fringe groups that share similar views and prioritise immigration as a core issue. This signals to party leaders that such alliances carry minimal reputational risk. As concerns about internal backlash diminish, leaders may feel compelled to align more explicitly with fringe groups to consolidate their core voter base and attract disillusioned voters deeply concerned about immigration. Second, when immigration dominates public discourse, AfD leaders see it as a widely shared concern. This perception further reduces the reputational risks of engaging with fringe groups, as restrictive and nationalist positions gain traction and overshadow controversies over such ties. Media, voters and commentators increasingly focus on perceived immigration-related threats and policy responses, diminishing the stigma of these alliances. This dynamic reduces pressure on AfD politicians to distance themselves from extreme actors, enabling the party to adopt fringe narratives, broaden its appeal, and push the boundaries of acceptable discourse.

Evidence from interviews with AfD politicians supports both mechanisms, though their impact varies regionally. The first mechanism—where high immigration salience amplifies anti-immigrant views within the party base, signalling approval for fringe group engagement—is evident across Germany, but is more pronounced in the east. In western Germany, this dynamic is expressed more cautiously. For instance, a Bavarian state parliamentarian observed that since migration became a dominant issue in 2015, the party base has persistently urged the leadership at local meetings to adopt a more aggressive stance. This pressure reflects alignment with the anti-immigration positions and activities of far-right groups.[54] Similarly, a Bavarian Bundestag MP described the growing anti-immigrant sentiments of the base as 'increasingly politically relevant' and recognised by the party leadership.'[55] Another Bundestag MP highlighted Jörg Meuthen's

[54] Andreas Winhart, MP in the Bavarian state parliament (interview in Munich on February 6, 2024).
[55] Former AfD Bundestag MP from Bavaria, anonymised on request (interview in Berlin on January 31, 2024).

attendance at the annual Kyffhäuser meeting,[56] a key gathering of the AfD's former extreme-right Wing faction, as an example of party leaders responding to pressure from the base.[57]

In eastern Germany, where immigration features more prominently in public discourse and xenophobic attitudes are more prevalent, grassroots support for engaging with fringe groups is more pronounced. Eastern AfD politicians recounted explicit pressure to emphasise anti-immigration stances and engage with far-right elements. Two Saxon state parliamentarians shared that the base often insisted on their attendance at Pegida rallies, voicing complaints like 'you are too quiet for us on immigration', 'we want to hear you', and 'you must appear at Pegida because that is where the citizens are.' This pressure led some Saxon state MPs to feel that 'the Pegida stage sometimes became more important politically than parliament.' [58] A Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt confirmed that the 'base actively encouraged participation in Pegida rallies due to perceived alignment on immigration.'[59] Steffen Königer described 'grassroots demands to make common cause with the far-right fringe' driven by their 'very vocal anti-immigrant views.'[60] Strong opposition from eastern members to the federal party's decision to bar AfD representatives from speaking at Pegida rallies further illustrates this dynamic .[61] The stronger presence of the first mechanism in the eastern party branches is also reflected in the lower concerns about alienating the base through fringe group interactions.

In contrast, western AfD branches display greater concern about reputational risks tied to fringe group engagement. For example, a former leader of the Rhineland-Palatinate branch explained that as a young party aiming to position itself as conservative and patriotic, the AfD 'could not afford to alienate the party base' by associating with far-right groups.[62] Similarly, a

[56] It was an annual gathering of AfD members and supporters, particularly those associated with the party's more radical faction, The Wing. Named after the Kyffhäuser mountain range in Thuringia, the event served as a platform for the party's hardliners to network, strategise, and promote their nationalist and anti-immigration agenda. The meeting was held annually between 2015 and the dissolution of the Wing in 2019.
[57] Stephan Protschka, Bundestag MP and Chairman of the AfD in Bavaria (interview in Berlin on January 31, 2024).
[58] Carsten Hütter, member of the AfD federal executive committee and Saxon state MP (interview in Dresden on March 26, 2024); Saxon state MP, anonymised on request (interview in Dresden on March 26, 2024).
[59] AfD Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt, anonymised on request (video interview on January 23, 2024).
[60] Steffen Königer (interview in Werder on February 1, 2024).
[61] The AfD's federal party rule banning members from speaking at Pegida rallies was in place from May 2016 to March 2018. This rule, decided by the federal executive committee, faced significant opposition from the party's eastern state branches, especially in Saxony, where grassroots support for Pegida was strong.
[62] Uwe Junge, former AfD Rhineland-Palatinate chairman, 2015-2019 (video interview on February 16, 2024).

Bavarian state parliamentarian described the dismissal of a legal advisor who was a former NPD activist and head of the banned neo-Nazi organisation 'Heimattreue Deutsche Jugend'[63] as a measure 'not to scare off existing members' by damaging the party's reputation.[64] These examples underscore the greater reputational risk perceived by western branches from their base, limiting public interactions with far-right fringe groups, in contrast to eastern branches where the prominence of immigration and xenophobic attitudes minimise such concerns.

The second mechanism—where high immigration salience reduces reputational concerns by fostering the perception of widespread public agreement with anti-immigrant views—also appears to be at play in the case of the AfD, but also more pronounced in the east. After the so-called European migrant crisis, AfD politicians consistently perceived immigration-related fears as widely held. Many observed growing public concerns about security and the erosion of traditional values, which drew new supporters to the party. Leyla Bilge, a prominent AfD member and organiser of the 2018 Women's March, pointed to the 2015 refugee crisis as a catalyst for growing public unease about immigration policies.[65] Similarly, MPs from Bavaria and Hesse referenced widespread security concerns linked to immigration, along with perceived strains on the welfare system and cultural traditions, which they thought resonated with broader segments of society.[66]

In this context, AfD leaders expressed greater confidence that restrictive, nationalist positions aligned with public sentiment, further reducing concerns about reputational damage from harsher rhetoric or open alignment with fringe groups. Rüdiger Klesmann, deputy chairman of the Saarland branch, remarked that as 'the 'problem [of immigration] was increasingly recognised by society, some AfD politicians became less concerned with moderating their language, and reputational fears decreased.'[67] Former Brandenburg MP Steffen Königer similarly noted that

[63] In early April 2019, the AfD parliamentary group dismissed staff with links to the NPD. It emerged that Laurens Nothdurft, who had recently been appointed legal adviser to the AfD's Bavarian parliamentary group, was a former NPD activist and former head of the in 2009 banned neo-Nazi organisation 'Heimattreue Deutsche Jugend', which is on the party's incompatibility list.
[64] Andreas Winhart (interview in Munich on February 6, 2024).
[65] Leyla Bilge, former parliamentary assistant to an AfD MP (video interview on January 26, 2024).
[66] Former AfD Bundestag MP from Bavaria, anonymised on request (interview in Berlin on January 31, 2024); Andreas Lichert, AfD Hesse co-chairman and MP in the Hessian state parliament (video interview on February 7, 2024).
[67] Rüdiger Klesmann, deputy chairman of the AfD Saarland (video interview on February 14, 2024).

scepticism toward government refugee policies emboldened party leaders to engage more openly with far-right elements.[68] He argued that as media and commentators focused on immigration-related threats, the AfD's perceived public scrutiny of fringe group interactions lessened. A Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt explicitly stated that ties with fringe groups 'do not bother anyone' because 'citizens see how the streetscape has changed as a result of immigration, and they agree with a party that addresses this issue.'[69] André Poggenburg similarly argued that 'citizens perceive AfD politicians at Pegida rallies as expressing what they themselves think, which encourages more open cooperation with like-minded groups.[70]

This second mechanism was particularly pronounced in the east, where AfD politicians used harsher language to describe immigration, referring to immigrants as 'welfare scroungers' and equating them with criminals, while asserting that these views were widely shared. In contrast, western leaders employed more restrained rhetoric, criticising the 'government's poor response' to immigration and describing citizens' 'insecurity'. Western leaders often stressed their opposition to illegal or uncontrolled immigration rather than immigration in general. Eastern AfD politicians also spoke more explicitly about reduced reputational concerns, with six of eight interviewed addressing this dynamic unprompted. Some eastern AfD leaders also emphasised that reputational costs were at times outweighed by the strategic benefits of fringe group engagement. For example, a Saxon state parliamentarian noted that alliances with Pegida and smaller far-right groups helped consolidate core supporters, with the benefits outweighing potential reputational costs.[71]

In sum, high immigration salience reduces AfD leaders' concerns about reputational damage, shaping their strategic calculations regarding fringe group interactions. This effect is more pronounced in eastern Germany, where immigration dominates public discourse and xenophobic views are more prevalent. First, high immigration salience reinforces the base's anti-immigrant sentiments, particularly in the east, prompting signals of approval—or outright pressure—for

[68] Steffen Königer (interview in Werder on February 1, 2024).
[69] AfD Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt, anonymised on request (video interview on January 23, 2024).
[70] André Poggenburg (video interview on April 7, 2024).
[71] MP in Saxon state parliament, anonymised on request (interview in Dresden on March 26, 2024).

engagement with far-right elements. Second, leaders' perceptions of widespread public agreement with anti-immigrant views embolden them to adopt harsher rhetoric and align openly with fringe groups, especially in the east, where reputational concerns are minimal.

Diminished inhibition against fringe groups

While the previous subsection outlined how high immigration salience reduced AfD politicians' concerns about reputational damage, particularly in eastern Germany, where xenophobic views were more widespread, this subsection shows how these reduced concerns facilitated greater fringe group interactions. Reduced reputational concerns led to the disregard or relaxation of rules against such engagement, inconsistent condemnation, and weak sanctions for those involved. This effectively signalled tacit approval, further lowering the threshold for fringe group interaction. These tendencies were more pronounced in eastern Germany, where AfD leaders expressed less concern about reputational risks.

The tendency to ignore or abandon party rules against engaging with fringe groups when reputational concerns are low is reflected in the eastern AfD branches' defiance of the federal party's ban on speaking at Pegida rallies. This ban was in force from May 2016 to March 2018. During this period, the Factiva-based index recorded 17 cases of engagement with Pegida, ten of which violated the federal party's ban on speaking at Pegida rallies—nine of which involved eastern AfD politicians. An AfD state parliamentarian in Saxony noted that the party base's support for Pegida made it 'acceptable to participate in Pegida rallies and even to integrate Pegida supporters into the party.'[72] The continued presence of eastern party leaders at Pegida rallies 'lowered the threshold for other party members to participate', according to a parliamentary aide to an AfD Bundestag MP.[73] A Bavarian AfD Bundestag MP observed that his colleagues from eastern branches were probably 'encouraged by the heated immigration debate at the time' to participate in Pegida rallies, underscoring how reduced reputational concerns led to disregard for party rules.[74]

[72] AfD Saxony MP, anonymised on request (interview in Dresden on March 26, 2024).
[73] Parliamentary aide to AfD MP, anonymised on request (interview in Berlin on February 1, 2024).
[74] Stephan Protschka, Bundestag MP and Chairman of the AfD in Bavaria (interview in Berlin on January 31, 2024).

The participation of eastern leaders at Pegida events also encouraged engagement with other far-right groups. A Brandenburg state parliamentarian revealed that the participation of party leaders from Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia in Pegida rallies spurred him to join anti-asylum protests organised by Zukunft Heimat in South Brandenburg and Cottbus in 2016 and 2017.[75]

Diminished concerns about reputational damage emboldened eastern AfD leaders not only to ignore the ban on speaking at Pegida rallies but also to advocate for its repeal. Björn Höcke (Thuringia), André Poggenburg (Saxony-Anhalt), and Jörg Urban (Saxony) openly defied the ban, claiming it conflicted with the party's commitment to represent their voters' concerns, especially on immigration and cultural identity. They argued that engaging with Pegida was crucial to expanding the AfD's regional influence and solidifying its position as the voice of anti-immigrant sentiment. Poggenburg, who supported the motion to lift the ban, asserted that 'in practice, there is hardly any dissociation between the AfD and Pegida, especially in the east' and declared that 'it is time for the AfD to honestly show what we stand for' (Am Orde, 2018), highlighting how reduced concerns about reputational damage drove efforts to formalise an alliance with Pegida.

The disregard for party rules, particularly by the eastern AfD branches, is also evident in the handling of the party's incompatibility list, introduced in 2015 to prevent association with extremist groups. Over time, the list has been 'gradually watered down,' reflecting a diminishing concern about reputational risks.[76] Despite the list, members of fringe groups listed as incompatible have been hired, particularly in the eastern branches.[77] When interviewed, the AfD politicians involved expressed little concern about reputational consequences. For instance, Jan Wenzel-Schmidt, a Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt, hired a former NPD candidate[78] and continues to employ a former long-time head of the Identitarian movement[79] (Baeck, 2024). Wenzel-Schmidt downplayed reputational concerns, stating that they were 'not particularly important' to him, as public backlash

[75] Lars Schieske, MP in Brandenburg state parliament (interview in Potsdam on February 1, 2024).
[76] Steffen Königer (interview in Werder on February 1, 2024).
[77] Although employing fringe group members does not always violate the list—since not all AfD employees are also party members—it still undermines the list's purpose of avoiding close associations with incompatible groups.
[78] Stefan Träger, former NPD candidate for the Bundestag, was employed as a staff member in Wenzel Schmidt's constituency office when he was an AfD member of the Saxony-Anhalt Landtag.
[79] Mario Müller, formerly active in the far-right Aktionsgruppe Delmenhorst, with links to NPD youth organisations, and a leading member of the Identitarians, was hired as a parliamentary assistant.

over the first hire was brief, and he did not consider either employee to be a violent criminal. Similarly, when asked about a 2019 report revealing that a colleague in his parliamentary group employed individuals linked to the Identitarian movement (Fröhlich, 2019), an AfD Brandenburg state parliamentarian dismissed reputational concerns, stating 'an ideological proximity of employees is important for the base, so we do not have much to worry about.'[80]

Eastern AfD leaders have also openly engaged with fringe groups on the incompatibility list, showing little regard for reputational damage. For instance, a Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt without prompting mentioned his participation in a panel discussion at the far-right think tank IfS alongside Martin Sellner, the Austrian head of the Identitarians. He remarked, ‘we [MPs from Saxony-Anhalt] like to attend events in Schnellroda and exchange ideas with like-minded patriots.’[81] He further disclosed that he had donated to the Identitarians, spoken at their events multiple times, and found 'nothing objectionable in these connections.’ These remarks are particularly notable given that the Identitarian movement is classified as a right-wing extremist organisation and is under surveillance by the domestic intelligence services. His indifference to reputational risks challenges the alternative explanation that RRPs’ ties to fringe groups are constrained by the severity of government responses to such groups.

Eastern AfD leaders’ low concern for reputational damage has also spurred efforts to abolish the party’s incompatibility list. In 2019, Thuringia’s AfD leader, Björn Höcke, proposed a motion at the party conference to scrap the list entirely (Beck, 2024). Other prominent figures, including Andre Poggenburg, openly criticised the list, arguing that it hindered the party's ability to engage with nationalist groups. Between 2019 and 2022, additional motions to relax or abolish the list highlighted a growing push to strengthen ties with far-right organisations. State MPs from Brandenburg and Saxony derided what they called the party’s ‘distanceritis,’ arguing that efforts to distance the party from far-right elements were excessive and counterproductive.[82] In contrast, such

[80] Lars Schieske, MP in Brandenburg parliament (interview in Potsdam on February 1, 2024).
[81] AfD Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt, anonymised on request (video interview on January 23, 2024).
[82] AfD Saxony MP, anonymised on request (interview in Dresden on March 26, 2024); Lars Hünich, MP in the Brandenburg state parliament and former member of AfD state executive committee (video interview on February 19, 2024).

suggestions were rare in the AfD's western branches, where greater concerns about reputational damage acted as a restraint. Western AfD members were also more reluctant to comment on whether the party had gone too far in distancing itself from far-right groups.

The AfD's low level of concern about reputational damage not only encouraged fringe group engagement by disregarding or abolishing rules but also through inconsistent condemnation, signalling tacit approval. Over the period analysed, less than 10% of fringe group interactions recorded in the Factiva-based index were condemned by party leaders. Federal leaders were the most likely to issue condemnations,[83] while eastern branch leaders rarely did so. These condemnations were often only issued in response to media pressure or public outcry and, surprisingly, their frequency did not increase before elections, contrary to expectations. A notable example occurred in 2019, when it became known that Siegbert Droese, a Bundestag MP from Saxony and former state branch leader, had hired a co-leader of the Identitarian movement (Biermann, 2019). This decision drew little public criticism from the party. When questioned, MPs from eastern states such as Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Brandenburg, dismissed the need for condemnation, arguing that hiring decisions were at the discretion of individual MPs and carried minimal reputational risks within the party base. Steffen Königer, a former Brandenburg state parliamentarian, noted that in eastern branches, hiring individuals with far-right backgrounds often strengthened ties with the base. 'Those seeking re-election were well advised to hire even more extreme individuals,' he said, as it reassured the base that the MP was not 'soft' or part of the system but rather a 'comrade.'[84] Königer and a parliamentary aide to a Bundestag MP from Saxony suggested that such inconsistent condemnation reinforced the perception that engaging with fringe groups was tacitly approved by the party.

Similarly, sanctions for engaging with fringe groups were also inconsistent, with less than five per cent of cases resulting in any disciplinary action.[85] Sanctions were more common at the

[83] They often criticised engagement in eastern states or the involvement of leaders of eastern AfD state branches, which is not surprising given the higher proportion of engagement cases in these regions.
[84] Steffen Königer (interview in Werder on February 1, 2024).
[85] This small number makes it difficult to draw clear conclusions about differences in sanction severity between eastern and western states or their connection to the electoral cycle.

state level,[86] typically targeting the most egregious cases.[87] Moreover, the application of sanctions did not follow a gradual process. There were few public intermediate steps between the initial condemnation by party leaders and the formal initiation of procedures to expel members from parliamentary groups or the party itself. Warnings and admonitions were seldom made public, and other measures, such as demotions or suspensions, were rarely enforced against members involved with fringe groups.

While sanctions have generally been inconsistent, their timing has sometimes been influenced by reputational concerns, particularly before elections. For instance, when the BfV began monitoring the AfD youth organisations in Bremen and Lower Saxony in September 2018, the Bremen AfD urged its youth wing to disband in December—five months ahead of state elections (Theiner, 2018). Similarly, in May 2022, the Lower Saxony AfD refused to grant the newly founded Young Alternative official youth group status, citing concerns about its extreme-right image (Speit, 2022)—just weeks after failing to re-enter the Schleswig-Holstein state parliament. A month before the Saarland state elections, the AfD expelled its former branch leader Josef Dörr for his links to far-right groups such as the Free Citizens Union and the NPD (Schmidt-Lunau, 2022). These examples illustrate that while sanctions were irregular, they were more likely to be imposed before elections, driven by concerns about reputational damage.

Former AfD members and parliamentary aides acknowledged that inconsistent sanctions against those linked to fringe groups signalled tacit approval, inadvertently encouraged others or failed to deter similar behaviour. Steffen Königer, a former AfD Brandenburg state parliamentarian, and two parliamentary aides from Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony, pointed to the case of Andreas Kalbitz. Despite his known links to far-right groups, Kalbitz was appointed as the

[86] For example, between 2017 and 2022, nine AfD state MPs were expelled from the party for links to fringe groups and for making extreme statements such as relativising the Holocaust. Of these, five were expelled in western states and four in eastern states. In addition, during the same period, three AfD state parliamentarians were expelled from their respective factions for links to groups such as the Identitarians.

[87] More severe sanctions have been taken in cases where the party leadership at federal or state level felt that the party's reputation was at stake. Examples include the initiation of dissolution proceedings against the AfD Saarland branch in 2016 after it become known that party leaders had close ties with several right-wing extremists, including the former state deputy of the NPD in Rhineland-Palatinate. Expulsion proceedings were also initiated against the two state leaders, Josef Dörr and Lutz Hecker. The temporary dissolution of the AfD was initially halted by the state party arbitration court before a majority of party members voted in favour of the dissolution at a federal party conference. However, the final decision rested with the party arbitration court, which voted against the dissolution (Löer, 2016a).

AfD’s campaign manager for the 2019 European election campaign. He was only expelled in May 2020 for his past membership of a neo-Nazi youth group. This inconsistency in sanctions was seen by the party's base as tacit approval of such associations.

From a sub-national perspective, this section highlighted how high immigration salience in both western and eastern Germany reduced AfD leaders' concerns about reputational damage from engaging with fringe groups. However, this effect was stronger in the east, where immigration dominated the public discourse and xenophobic views were more prevalent. Two key mechanisms were more pronounced: First, strong anti-immigrant sentiment among the base meant there was little risk of backlash for engaging with fringe groups. Second, eastern AfD leaders perceived that a significant share of the population shared their anti-immigrant views, making such engagement appear more acceptable and further reducing reputational concerns. The evidence also showed that lower reputational worries led to greater disregard for party rules, inconsistent condemnation, and weak sanctions, signalling tacit approval and encouraging further engagement with fringe groups.

This chapter provides a second test of the two hypotheses on what drives the AfD's public engagement with fringe groups, focusing on variations over time (T1: 2015-2018 and T2: 2019-2022) and region. The findings suggest that the AfD’s engagement with fringe groups is largely driven by its organisational weakness. Between 2015 and 2018, the party’s struggles to mobilise supporters, recruit staff, and run campaigns independently increased its reliance on fringe groups, leading to more frequent and reputationally costly cooperation. As the party’s organisational capacity improved between 2019 and 2022, its reliance on fringe groups decreased slightly, supporting the hypothesis that organisational strength reduces dependence on fringe actors. The AfD’s continued cooperation with far-right groups, despite government surveillance, challenges the alternative explanation that state crackdowns deter such cooperation.

The chapter also explored how immigration salience affects reputational risk and fringe group engagement. High immigration salience in both western and eastern Germany mitigated AfD leaders' concerns about reputational harm. Reinforced anti-immigration sentiment among the base signalled approval of fringe group engagement, reducing concerns about reputational harm. Moreover, many AfD politicians perceived that a large part of the public shared their anti-immigration stance, further reducing reputational fears. The effect was particularly pronounced in eastern Germany, where immigration dominated public discourse and xenophobic attitudes were more widespread. Reduced reputational concerns led to higher levels of fringe group engagement. Evidence from interviews and triangulated data—such as speeches, press releases, and party documents—suggests that eastern AfD leaders were more willing to defy party rules against such engagement and faced less pressure to condemn these interactions. Sanctions were applied inconsistently in both regions and were tightened slightly before elections, reinforcing the idea that reputational concerns shape RPPs' propensity to engage with fringe groups. Furthermore, the frequent and costly engagement of eastern AfD branches with far-right groups under government surveillance further challenges the idea that state action deters such links. The next chapter examines how the RN's organisational strength and the comparatively lower immigration salience influence its engagement with fringe groups, and whether the same causal mechanisms apply in France.

Chapter 5: The RN and far-right fringe groups – a cross-temporal and sub-national analysis

The previous chapter's cross-temporal and sub-national analysis of the AfD's engagement with fringe groups supported the hypothesis that the party's organisational weaknesses drive its leaders to seek alliances with these groups to compensate for structural shortcomings. It also showed how the high salience of immigration in Germany reduces reputational concerns about such interactions—particularly in eastern states, where immigration dominates public discourse and xenophobic attitudes are more prevalent.

Shifting the focus to the French RN, this chapter further tests the hypothesis that a RRP's organisational strength and the salience of immigration shape its strategic calculations about engaging with fringe groups. It also builds on the previous chapters' challenge to alternative explanations—specifically, that government responses to far-right actors or a country's history of extremism condition RRPs' engagement with these groups. Additionally, it considers another potential factor: that a RRP's extremist origins influence its interactions with fringe groups, given that the RN, unlike the AfD, has its roots in neo-fascism.

The chapter begins with a brief overview of the RN's historical development before examining its engagement with fringe groups over time. Expanding on Chapter 3's finding that the RN interacts with fringe groups less frequently and in ways that pose lower reputational risks than the AfD, this analysis explores how the RN's stronger organisational foundation has reduced its dependence on them. It also assesses how the lower salience of immigration in France compared to Germany heightens RN leaders' sensitivity to the reputational costs of such interactions.

Background on the FN/ RN

The Front National (FN) was founded in October 1972 by leaders of France's main post-war neo-fascist group, the Ordre Nouveau. Its aim was to unite far-right factions under a single political entity to provide a more respectable political front for their extremist views, while maintaining

their street activism. Jean Marie Le Pen, who was not a member of the Ordre Nouveau but belonged to the right-wing populist Poujadist movement,[1] was chosen to lead the newly formed FN. He quickly became the face of the party, winning over supporters with his rhetoric (Millington, 2019, p. 132).

In the late 1970s, the FN underwent an ideological and organisational transformation, expelling or isolating many of its old neo-fascist members. In the early 1980s, the FN made its first electoral gains, notably in the 1983 local elections. Key figures like Jean-Pierre Stirbois, Bruno Mégret, and Carl Lang worked to build a national party structure, setting up branches across France. Faced with the challenge of winning parliamentary seats in France's two-round electoral system, the FN concentrated on securing local offices, particularly at the municipal level, and tailoring its message to local concerns (Marcus, 1995). However, the party retained a centralised, hierarchical structure.

A breakthrough came in 1986 when President Mitterrand introduced proportional representation for the legislative elections, enabling the FN to win 35 seats. Two years later, the FN's electoral alliance with the centre-right to limit the Socialists' success in the 1988 legislative elections marked another important advance for the party. While the URC,[2] a coalition of the centre-right Gaullists RPR[3] and the centrist UDF[4], refused to enter into an agreement with the FN at the national level, they allowed local agreements. The FN, RPR and UDF agreed to field a single right-wing candidate in several constituencies in Bouches-du-Rhône, Alpes-Maritimes and Var (Cole, 1989, p. 8; Kesselman, 1988, p. 12). However, the FN's electoral success was short-lived. In 1988, the return to the two-round electoral system penalised the FN, leading to the loss of its parliamentary representation and a significant reduction in its financial and organisational resources (DeClair, 1999, p. 88).

[1] For which he had been elected in 1956 at the age of 27 as the youngest MP.
[2] URC (Union du Rassemblement et du Centre) was a coalition formed in the 1980s between the RPR and the UDF, aimed at uniting centre-right and right-wing forces.
[3] RPR (Rassemblement pour la République), a right-wing political party founded in 1976 by Jacques Chirac, which represented the Gaullist tradition and supported strong presidential power.
[4] UDF (Union pour la démocratie française), a centrist political party in France, founded in 1978, which sought to unite various moderate and liberal political forces.

In response, the FN leadership shifted its focus to strengthening the party's organisation. They emphasised activist training and candidate workshops, as well as annual summer schools to refine campaign strategies. Throughout the 1990s, Jean-Marie Le Pen remained the party's most influential figure, able to mobilise support like no other (Ibid, p. 107). By the mid-1990s, the FN had firmly established itself as a force in French politics.[5] In the 1995 presidential election, Le Pen won over 15% of the vote, and the FN also won mayoral elections in Toulon, Orange, and Marignane. However, the FN continued to present itself as an outsider to the political establishment.

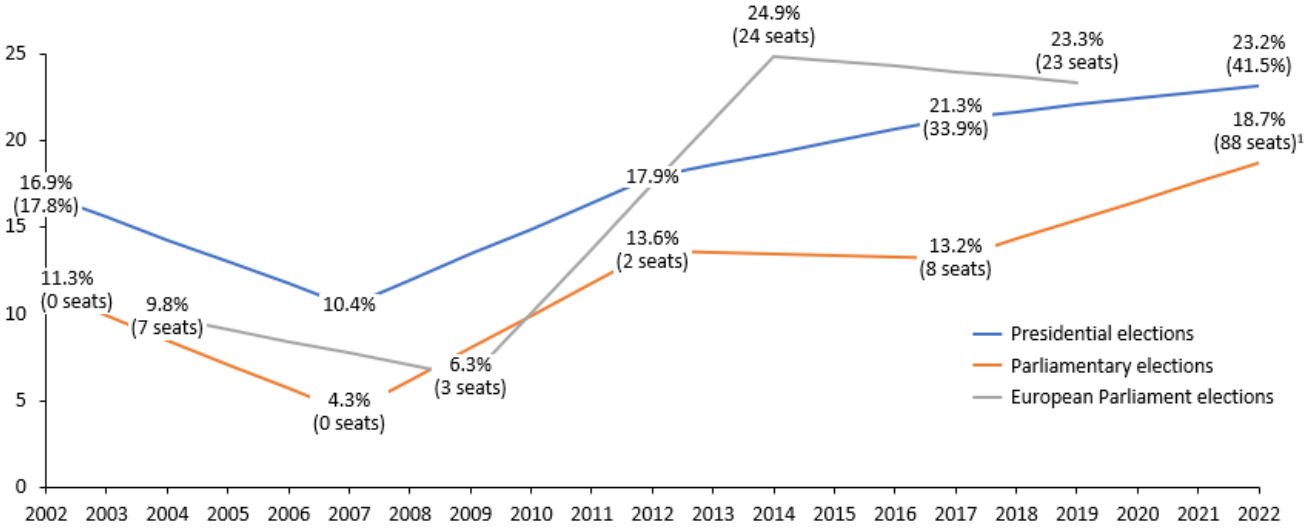
In 1998, the FN was dealt a blow when Bruno Mégret defected to form the Mouvement National Républicain. This split weakened the party, and by 1999 it had lost half its seats in the European Parliament. Although Jean-Marie Le Pen reached the second round of the presidential election for the first time in 2002, pushing the party's programme further into the mainstream, its influence waned at the local level throughout the mid-2000s (Millington, 2019, p. 129). Le Pen's repeated controversial anti-Semitic and Holocaust-denying statements increasingly tarnished the FN's image. Meanwhile, his daughter Marine Le Pen, groomed as his successor, rose through the party ranks, joining the executive committee in 2000, becoming vice-president in 2003 and managing her father's presidential campaign in 2007.

In January 2011, Marine Le Pen took over the party leadership from her father. Under her leadership, the party embarked on a strategy of *de-demonisation* to rid itself of its extremist tendencies and most repugnant elements, aiming to normalise its image without breaking with its historical legacy (Betz, 2018). Despite these efforts, the party's electorate remained firmly right-wing, concentrated in working class and poorly educated circles, with some inroads in the civil service, among Catholics, middle-aged groups and slightly among women (Mayer, 2013; Stockemer and Amengay, 2015). Marine Le Pen's de-demonisation strategy paid off with significant electoral successes (Figure 18), including a 17.9% vote share in the first round of the

[5] Despite a declining voting pattern at 13.9% in the 1992 regional elections, 12.4% in the 1993 legislative elections, and 10.5% in the 1994 European elections (Shields, 1995).

2012 presidential election (Ministère de l'intérieur, 2024). In 2014, her Liste Bleu Marine topped the European election results (Scrinzi, 2016), and, in the same year, FN candidates won 11 mayoral seats in cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants, breaking previous records (Millington, 2019, p. 143).

Figure 18: FN/RN election results, 2007-2022



Note: Percentages for the parliamentary and presidential elections reflect the results from the 1st round. For the presidential elections, the 2nd round results are shown in brackets. In 2007 and 2012, the FN candidate did not qualify for the 2nd round of the presidential elections. For the parliamentary elections, the number of seats won is provided in brackets.
[1] Initially 89 seats, but then 88 seats as one MP lost a by-election

Source: (Ministère de l'intérieur, 2024)

Marine Le Pen advanced to the second round of both the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections, facing Emmanuel Macron. Although Macron won comfortably in 2017, the margin narrowed in 2022 (58.5% to 41.5%). As part of its ongoing de-demonisation efforts, the FN rebranded itself as the Rassemblement National (RN) in June 2018. By 2022, the RN had become the largest opposition party in the National Assembly. Marine Le Pen stepped down as party leader in 2022, handing over to Jordan Bardella to focus on leading the RN's legislative agenda in the National Assembly (Wheeldon, 2022).

RN engagement with fringe groups

The analysis period for the RN is longer than for the AfD. During this time, the RN's overall engagement with fringe groups was relatively low, averaging less than five cases per year compared to 16 for the AfD. Despite some fluctuations, the RN's engagement remained limited, with notable increases between 2012 and 2015, and to a lesser extent around 2006 (Figure 19), coinciding with periods of high immigration salience, as theorised. In addition to engaging less frequently, the RN also tended to engage in less reputationally costly ways. Only 35% of the RN's engagements can be considered 'very costly,' compared to 52% for the AfD over its analysis period. RN members rarely attended or spoke at fringe group events (Figure 20), and when they did, they often emphasised that it was in a private capacity, reflecting concerns about reputational damage. Recruitment of fringe group members—another costly form of engagement—was also less common for the RN and was typically aimed at filling specific organisational gaps. RN politicians often claimed that these recruitment decisions were individual rather than part of a centralised strategy, again reflecting reputational caution. A more common and less costly form of engagement involved RN politicians defending fringe groups, particularly after government crackdowns, with the RN typically invoking freedom of speech in statements in support of such groups. Unique to the RN was the practice of entering into electoral list agreements with far-right parties, largely due to differences in electoral list requirements and party landscapes between France and Germany.

Figure 19: RN fringe group engagement by reputational costliness, 2002-2022

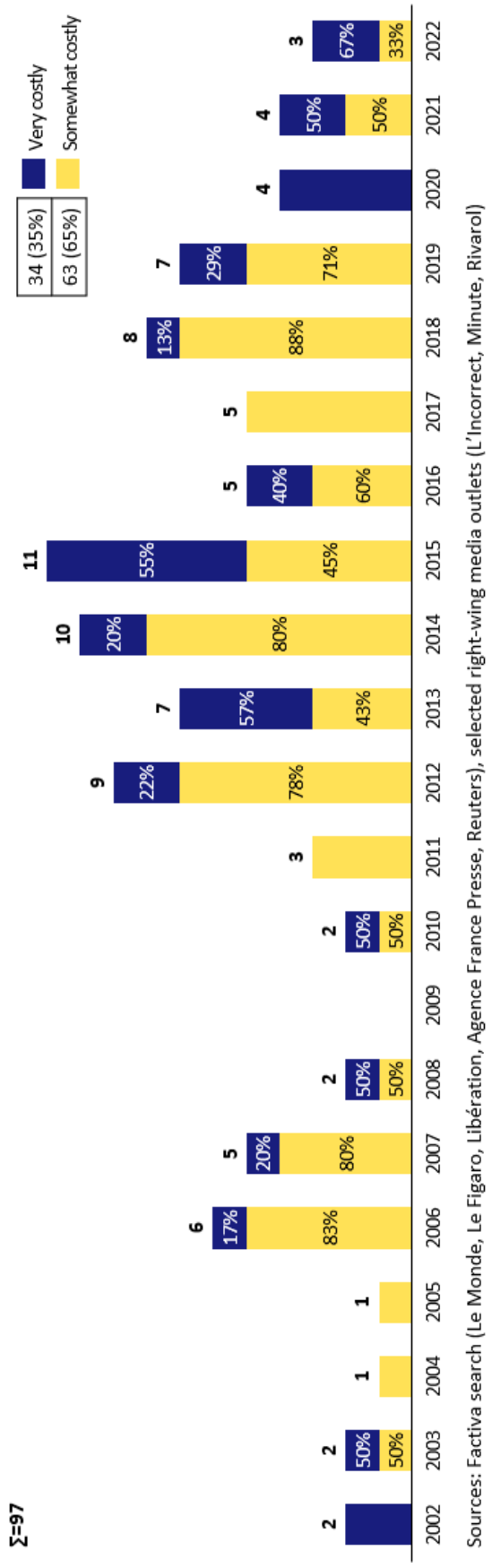
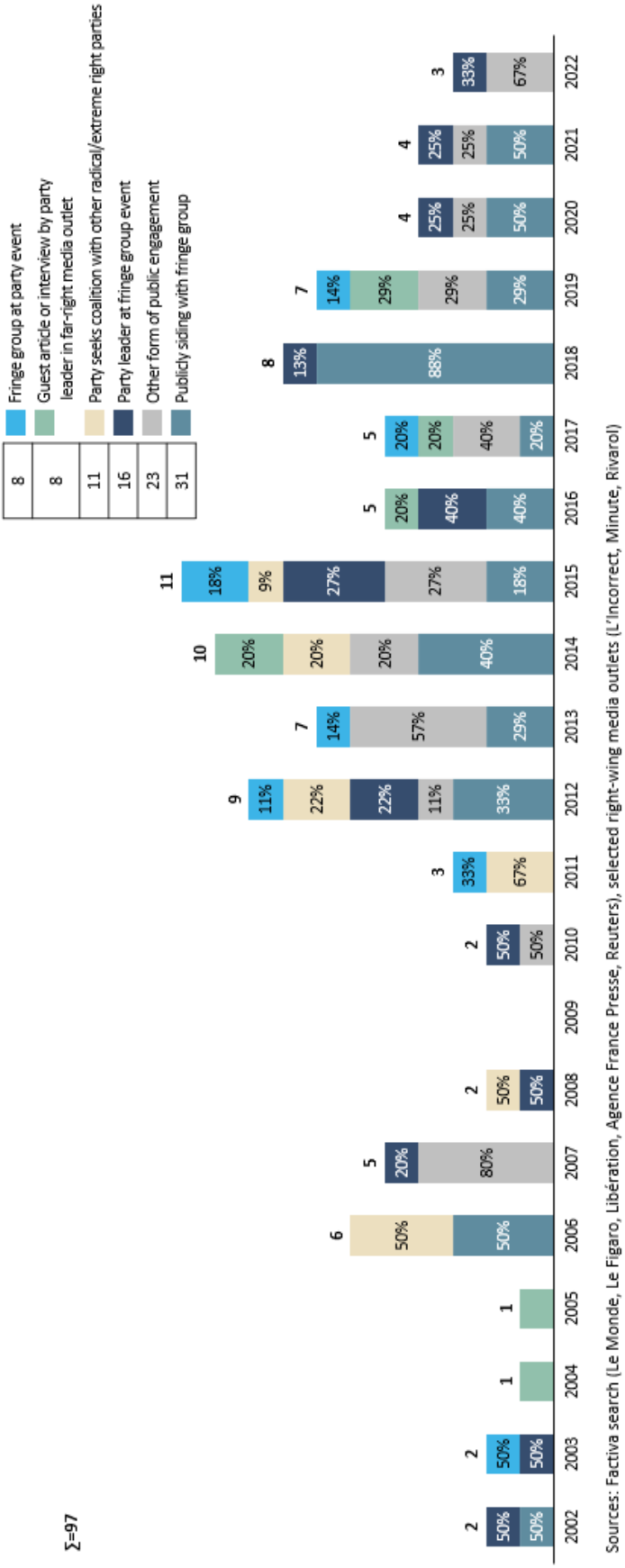


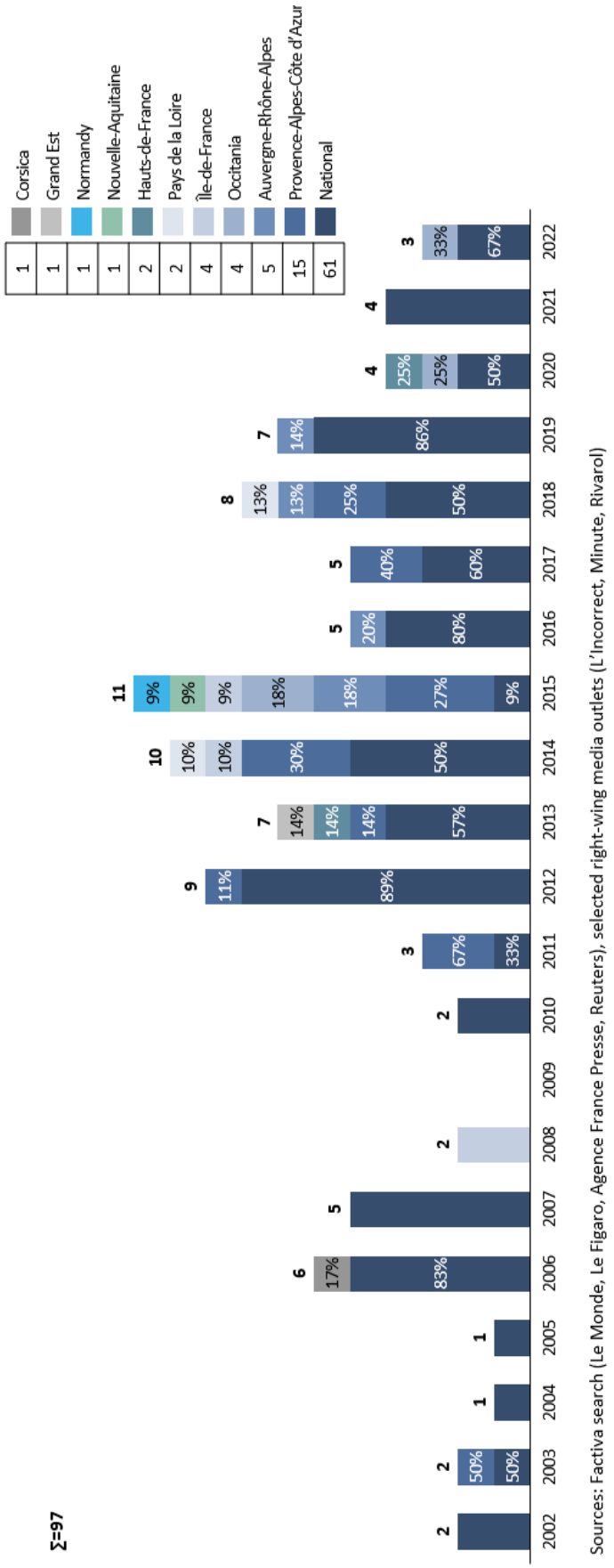
Figure 20: RN fringe group engagement by type of interaction, 2002-2022



As in Germany, the RN interacted with a mix of identitarian groups, extreme-right parties, and smaller, often local, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim organisations. A third of these interactions involved the Identitarian movement, with the ten most prominent groups accounting for nearly 80% of all recorded interactions (Figure 31 in Appendix G). This suggests that, as in Germany, the RN repeatedly engages with a small core of organisations with which it likely has strong underlying ties, even if visible interactions, the dependent variable in this study, are less frequent.

There are also notable regional differences in the RN's engagement with fringe groups. More than 60% of the recorded cases involved national party leaders (Figure 21). Additionally, a quarter of all interactions involved party leaders from the south-eastern regions of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes, and Occitania— where immigration is a more pressing issue and xenophobic views are more common than in the rest of France. This suggests that not only is the RN's overall lower engagement with fringe groups compared to the AfD in line with expectations, given its stronger organisational structure and the comparatively lower salience of immigration in France than in Germany, but also that the sub-national variation in the RN's engagement with fringe groups follows expected patterns, with greater interaction in regions where immigration concerns are more pronounced.

Figure 21: RN fringe group engagement by region, 2002-2022



Sources: Factiva search (Le Monde, Le Figaro, Agence France Presse, Reuters), selected right-wing media outlets (L'Incorrect, Minute, Rivarol)

Having outlined the RN's engagement with far-right fringe groups, the remainder of this chapter examines how the party's organisational strength and the relatively low to moderate salience of immigration affect its leaders' propensity to interact with such groups. The following sections provide evidence that RN leaders engage less with fringe groups than their AfD counterparts, due to less dependence on them and greater reputational concerns in a context of lower comparative immigration salience—supporting the hypotheses. The RN is not only a 'negative case,' where low engagement is in line with expectations. Subnational variation also follows predicted patterns, with engagement typically aimed at filling specific organisational gaps or occurring when regional leaders perceive less reputational risk due to lower immigration salience—further supporting the hypothesised causal links.

The impact of organisational strength

Chapter 3 has shown that, overall, the RN has a high organisational strength compared to its national competitors in terms of party membership, income and staff. Throughout the analysis period, the RN was an established force in French politics. While membership, income and staff levels fluctuated slightly from year to year, these changes were minor and did not alter the overall picture of the RN as an organisationally robust party compared to its rivals. As party membership figures are self-reported and fluctuate annually, they provide little insight into long-term shifts in organisational strength. Similarly, while the RN's income has risen with its electoral success, it also reflects increased demands on its organisation, making income an unreliable stand-alone indicator of strength. However, the RN's relative staff expenditure compared to its national rivals has remained consistently higher than the AfD's relative staff expenditure, underscoring its superior organisational capacity between 2002 and 2022.

The RN's communication activities further underline its organisational strength. It uses similar channels to its competitors and has a comparable number of followers.[6] In terms of communication spending, frequency of press releases, and Twitter engagement, the RN is either on

[6] For details, see Table 17 in Appendix H.

par with or more active than its rivals.[7] Another key indicator of its capacity is its ability to field candidates in municipal elections, reflecting strong local networks and mobilisation, which reduces its reliance on fringe groups. Despite the challenge all French parties face in presenting full electoral lists for municipal elections, the RN has performed comparably to other French parties in this respect.[8]

Building on these indicators of organisational strength, this section presents evidence supporting the hypothesis that the RN's limited engagement with fringe groups stems from its low reliance on them. As the RN maintained a relatively stable level of organisational strength throughout the analysis period, a longitudinal analysis similar to that of the AfD in the previous chapter offers little insight. Instead, this section focuses on how the RN's organisational capacity reduced its need for fringe groups, with interactions occurring mainly to fill specific organisational gaps. That such instances of engagement were also shaped by reduced reputational concerns among party leaders, particularly in local contexts where RN leaders had fewer reputational concerns as immigration was prominent in public discourse, is then explored in the next section.

Supporter recruitment

The RN's stable organisational strength has enabled it to maintain a low level of dependence on far-right fringe groups, in part by attracting new supporters independently. RN politicians emphasised the party's robust grassroots networks. They described well-organised teams of dedicated volunteers engaged in community outreach through market fairs, town hall meetings, and other local events, building direct links with potential supporters. Both party members[9] and experts[10] interviewed perceived the RN as having strong, visible local branches. The RN's

[7] For details, see Figure 36, Figure 37, and Figure 38 in Appendix H.
[8] For details, see Figure 39, Figure 40, and Figure 41 in Appendix H.
[9] Two thirds of RN politicians interviewed unprompted highlighted the party's strong grassroots activities. For example, Louis Aliot, RN vice president and mayor of Perpignan, noted that the RN significantly increased its support base by establishing a strong presence in towns and villages (interview online on January 25, 2024). RN MP and spokesperson Alexandra Masson explained that the RN's strategy involves many activists meeting potential supporters and voters directly (interview in Paris on April 17, 2024). Maxime Bot, RN departmental delegate for Aude, added that the party sends cadres to areas overlooked by other parties, introducing social events like RN aperitifs, and remains active year-round to attract supporters, not just during election campaigns (interview online on April 17, 2024).
[10] Both Elisa Bellé, an Italian political scientist who conducted ethnographic research on the RN's territorial anchorage (interview online on March 18, 2024), and Jean Yves Camus, a French political scientist specialising in the French far

consistent engagement with communities—through in-person events or digital platforms—was seen as key to keeping new supporters involved in the party's mission and future actions. Members often recruited new supporters from their personal networks, offering opportunities for activism, volunteering and local leadership. This helped to build personal connections and a sense of belonging within the party. Additionally, the RN's effective use of social media and digital tools has facilitated two-way conversations and extended the reach of its messages. Its interactive content and viral campaigns were cited as crucial in attracting new supporters. Lastly, the party's relatively centralised structure contributed to its success in recruiting new supporters independently. Clear communication between the central party office, regional leaders, and local organisers ensured consistency in strategy and messaging. Together, these factors have enabled the RN to attract new supporters effectively without relying on fringe groups. This is also reflected in the greater absence of fringe groups at RN-organised events or rallies compared to the AfD, with the Factiva index showing almost four times as many recorded instances in Germany as in France between 2013 and 2022.

Supporter mobilisation

The RN's reduced reliance on far-right fringe groups was also driven by its ability to mobilise existing supporters independently. RN politicians credit the party's strong grassroots networks for this success, with consistent communication and involvement in non-electoral events keeping members active and motivated. Thibaut de la Tocnaye, a former member of the RN national bureau and current regional councillor for Centre-Val de Loire, emphasised the importance of the party's 'strong departmental and local network,' which enables effective campaign mobilisation without external support. He stressed the importance of regular local activities and member involvement to keep supporters motivated.[11]

right (interview in Paris on March 12, 2024) highlighted the RN's robust regional branches, which facilitate independent campaigning and attract party supporters.

[11] Thibaut de la Tocnaye (interview in Orléans on March 14, 2024).

Leadership development within the supporter base has been another key strategy. By cultivating future leaders, the RN has created a pipeline of committed individuals who mobilise others in their communities. For example, Jimmy Bourlieux, RN departmental delegate for the Gironde, praised the party's robust volunteer network which he said fostered a 'militant spirit.' He also identified local leadership opportunities as key to driving party affiliation and member engagement.[12]

High energy events such as rallies and marches play an important role in energising supporters. These events, described by three RN departmental delegates, physically and emotionally engage supporters, creating unifying moments that reinforce loyalty and commitment.[13]

The party's centralised structure further enhances its ability to mobilise. Clear lines of communication between the leadership and grassroots organisers ensure effective coordination. Several RN departmental delegates noted that increased training for party activists during the analysis period has also bolstered the RN's organisational strength. For instance, Maxime Bot, RN departmental delegate for Aude explained that regular regional-level training sessions, both formal and informal, focus on topics such as public affairs, parliamentary functions, and the party's programme, equipping members involved in local councils with the skills needed for effective mobilisation and campaigning.[14]

With robust staffing levels, low recruitment difficulties, and a strong volunteer base, the RN has been able to mobilise relatively effectively on its own. Of the seventeen RN politicians with whom recruitment was discussed, all reported that the process was relatively smoothly. While some, including Wallerand de Saint-Just, a longtime member of the RN political bureau and regional councillor, and Renaud Labaye, Secretary General of the RN parliamentary group,

[12] Jimmy Bourlieux (interview in Bordeaux on April 15, 2024).
[13] Jimmy Bourlieux, RN departmental delegate for the Gironde (interview in Bordeaux on April 15, 2024), Nicolas Olivier, RN departmental delegate for the Aisne (interview in Villers-Cotterêts on April 25, 2024), and an anonymous RN departmental delegate for the Val-de-Marne (interview in Créteil on April 23, 2024) all emphasised the importance of energising rallies and marches in engaging supporters and encouraging their commitment to the party.
[14] Maxime Bot (interview online on April 17, 2024)

acknowledged pressure to recruit quickly following recent electoral successes, they insisted that there was no shortage of qualified talent.[15] Recruitment, often from within the party, was described as both smooth and conscientious, reflecting concerns about potential reputational damage from fringe hires. This combination of strong local branches, clear leadership structures, and a committed volunteer network enables the RN to engage supporters without relying heavily on fringe groups. This reduced reliance on fringe groups is reflected in well-organised campaign events, frequent local rallies, structured local party branches,[16] and regular visits from senior party figures to energise members and participate in community outreach. Experts also noted the RN's improved campaigning capacity over the analysis period,[17] suggesting a reduced reliance on far-right fringe groups for mobilisation.

Policy formulation

The RN's growing ability to formulate its own policies has reduced its dependence on far-right fringe groups and think tanks. Until the early 2000s, under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the party drew inspiration from New Right think tanks such as GRECE and the Institut Iliade, as well as Christian far-right groups. Over time, this reliance has steadily declined.[18] This is reflected in the Factiva-based index, where interactions with far-right think tanks occurred mainly in the first half of the analysis period, and involved mainly long-standing senior party figures accustomed to the party's historical openness to such think tanks. This shift towards greater ability

[15] Wallerand de Saint-Just (interview in Paris on February 27, 2024); Renaud Labaye (interview in Paris on April 11, 2024),

[16] The RN has a clear hierarchical structure within its departments, with specific roles such as departmental delegates, regional leaders, and local organisers, which enhances communication and decision-making. Its website offers detailed information on departmental structures and key personnel. In contrast, Renaissance (formerly LREM) has a national framework, but its local organisations are less formalised and provide less transparency regarding roles. Les Républicains also have a structured organisation akin to the RN, but transparency varies significantly by region.

[17] For example, Elisa Bellé, an Italian political scientist who studied the RN's territorial anchorage (interview online on March 18, 2024), noted that regional party branches organised campaigns independently, employing traditional methods such as information stands, speeches by party leaders, and leaflet distribution. She did not observe any significant presence of external groups or organisations supporting the party.

[18] Several RN politicians interviewed acknowledged the historical influence of far-right think tanks due to ideological and policy overlap. Bruno Gollnisch, former FN Vice-President and former MEP (interview in Paris on January 24, 2024), and Wallerand de Saint-Just, RN political bureau member and regional councillor (interview in Paris on February 27, 2024), explicitly outlined the historical influence of GRECE on RN policy proposals citing personal overlaps and exchanges of ideas.

to formulate policy independently and less reliance on fringe groups is the result of several key developments.

First, the party has significantly strengthened its internal policy research capacity. Senior figures like Bruno Gollnisch[19] and Thibaut de la Tocnaye,[20] suggest that the expansion of the policy staff and the creation of specialised research units have reduced the need for external support. While they acknowledge the ‘ideological proximity’ and 'important work' of far-right think tanks, the RN's internal expertise now allows it to formulate policy more autonomously.[21] Renaud Labaye, who as Marine Le Pen’s chief of staff helped develop the 2022 programme, stressed that they 'did not need to interact with right-wing think tanks in preparation, but rather relied on specific external experts and interest groups.'[22]

In addition, the RN has placed greater emphasis on direct engagement with the public. Through town halls and forums, the party gathers voters' insights and incorporates them into its policy-making process. This grassroots approach strengthens the RN’s ability to develop policies that resonate with the electorate without relying on ideologically extreme sources.[23]

Another factor that strengthens the RN's independence is its clear and focused message. Strong communication strategies help the party convey its positions effectively to voters, reducing its reliance on fringe groups. This is supported by the party’s highly centralised organisation, where strong leadership and a streamlined decision-making hierarchy enable efficient policy development.

[19] Former FN Vice-President and former MEP (interview in Paris on January 24, 2024)
[20] Former member of the RN national bureau and current regional councillor for Centre-Val de Loire (interview in Orléans on March 14, 2024)
[21] For example, Thibault de la Tocnaye stated, ‘we do not really need far-right groups, even if they do important work or share similar programmatic issues. We've developed our own doctrine and internal capabilities to independently formulate policies, such as our social welfare reform’ (interview in Orléans on March 14, 2024). Louis-Marie Mautin, parliamentary assistant to former RN senator Stéphane Ravier, seconded, ‘The RN is very dynamic and has far more people working on the party programme now than it did twenty years ago’ (interview in Paris on March 22, 2024).
[22] Interview in Paris on April 11, 2024.
[23] Renaud Labaye, for example, noted that in preparing the policy programme, ‘we tend to go out, talk to people, consult experts and interest groups, and test our political proposals. We do not need the kind of ideological training that these [far-right] institutes provide’ (interview in Paris on April 11, 2024). Jimmy Bourlieux, RN departmental delegate for the Gironde, added, ‘we try to meet all the relevant players when formulating our programme, whether it's farmers' unions, employers' unions, or workers' unions. We meet them all and listen to what they have to say. It’s important to engage with all these intermediaries, as it enriches our programme’ (interview in Bordeaux on April 15, 2024).

Together, these factors—improved research capabilities, greater public engagement, clear messaging and strong internal organisation—have made the RN increasingly self-sufficient in developing its programme. Its reliance on far-right think tanks has declined, reflected in less interaction with such groups over time and a greater focus on expert consultation.

Opportunistic operational support

While the RN's greater organisational strength compared to the AfD reduces its overall reliance on fringe groups, specific organisational needs lead the RN to engage selectively with fringe groups, often in an opportunistic and ad hoc manner.

First, the RN occasionally recruited members of fringe groups to fill gaps in expertise that the party lacked internally. In the early 2010s, as social media began to transform politics, Marine Le Pen prioritised the RN's digital strategy after assuming the leadership (Boyadjian, 2915).[24] To broaden its electoral base, the party launched its own social network in 2014,[25] enlisting the services of Riwal, a communications agency led by Frédéric Chatillon, a former leader of the far-right student group GUD[26] (Valerio, 2014). At the time, the RN had limited in-house expertise in digital presence and turned to fringe groups, in particular Génération identitaire, which excelled in this area. Scholars of the French Identitarian movement have highlighted its expertise in leveraging social media to spread messages and mobilise supporters. The group's proficiency in digital activism made it a crucial player in amplifying far-right narratives online (Castelli Gattinara and Froio, 2018; Jacquet-Vaillant, 2021, 2022). Experts interviewed[27] noted the identitarians' 'textual skills,' along with their 'strong training in social media and visual graphics,' as valuable resources for the RN. In addition to prominent figures like Damien Rieu and Thais d'Escufon, mentioned in Chapter 3, the RN has hired several other members of Génération identitaire for social media and

[24] The party has traditionally been at the forefront of digital communication, being the first party in France to launch a website in the mid-1990s.
[25] LesPatriotes.net was an online platform launched to engage FN supporters and build a social network, but it failed to gain traction and was mostly abandoned by 2016.
[26] GUD was a far-right, militant student organisation, founded in 1968. Known for its ultranationalist and often violent actions, it was active in universities, promoting an anti-communist and neo-fascist agenda before disbanding in 2017.
[27] Marion Jacquet-Vaillant (interview in Paris on October 25, 2023), Jean-Yves Camus (interview in Paris on March 12, 2024).

communications roles. For example, in 2013, Arnaud Naudin, former editor-in-chief of Novopress—a media platform founded by the Bloc identitaire—was recruited as a communications assistant for the RN Lorraine Regional Council (Mestre, 2013). Similarly, in 2015, RN MEP Nicolas Bay hired Guillaume Pradoura,[28] co-founder of Génération identitaire's Marseille branch, as his parliamentary assistant in charge of social media (Vincent, 2016).

Several RN members justified these hires as necessary to address skills gaps within the party. A parliamentary aide characterised the early 2010s as a period marked by a 'lack of qualified personnel capable of great imagination and of putting communication into practice', emphasising Génération identitaire's 'well-polished' and 'avant-garde' media stunts.[29] The RN admired the group's ability to attract media attention and closely followed its sophisticated digital activities. Another parliamentary assistant acknowledged that Génération identitaire members brought 'qualities that benefit the party', explaining that they were hired for 'professional reasons, almost like service providers.'[30] Similarly, Marine Le Pen, when asked why she chose Riwal, the communications agency run by former GUD president Chatillon, to design campaign materials, cited its 'serious professionalism' (Rosso, 2010). However, several RN members maintained that these hires were not part of a coordinated strategy but rather opportunistic, aimed at filling specific gaps in the party's communications and social media expertise. The party sought to transfer these skills from fringe group hires to internal teams while also training its members in digital communications.[31] By 2017, the RN had developed sufficient in-house expertise, significantly reducing its reliance on Génération identitaire and similar groups for communications tasks. This shift is also reflected in the decline of such hires as the party became more digitally self-sufficient.

Second, the RN has also occasionally drawn on fringe resources to address temporary organisational gaps during its election campaigns. While the party usually has a robust local

[28] After an anti-Semitic photo of Guillaume Pradoura surfaced, he was expelled from the RN. Shortly afterwards, he was hired by AfD MEP Maximilian Krah. Pradoura is currently under investigation for his alleged involvement in Russian interference and corruption.
[29] Louis-Marie Mautin, parliamentary aide to ex-RN senator Stéphane Ravier (interview in Paris on March 22, 2024).
[30] Gabriel Tomatis, parliamentary aide to RN MP and press spokesperson (video interview on April 17, 2024).
[31] Maxime Bot, RN departmental delegate for Aude (video interview April 17, 2024) emphasised the RN's 'concerted effort to transfer these skills of the former Identitarians' and 'create an internal team to develop skills in-house.'

network and is prepared for elections, it has sought external support in specific instances where reputational risks were perceived to be limited. For example, in Béziers, a city in the southern Occitanie region, two members of the Bloc identitaire supported the RN in the 2010 municipal and the 2011 cantonal elections. Robert Ménard, who headed the party list, defended this cooperation, stating ‘since they are helping us in the campaign, they are welcome', reflecting a pragmatic approach to enlisting fringe group members despite potential reputational risks (Tronche, 2013). Similarly, referring to the 2014 municipal elections, Maxime Bot, RN departmental delegate for Aude, recognised the value of Identitarian movement members, describing them as 'young, active, and often well rooted in the region,' assisting with practical tasks like distributing leaflets in areas where operational support was needed.[32] Stéphane Ravier also accepted help from members of Action Française during the same elections, even celebrating with them on election night (Gilles, 2017). Gauthier Bouchet, RN departmental delegate for Loire-Atlantique, explained that Ravier sought such help ‘for practical support with campaign logistics.’[33] These localised cases reflect the RN's readiness to leverage fringe group resources when necessary.

Fringe support also extended to national campaigns. Reports indicate that members of the Identitarian movement attended Marine Le Pen’s presidential campaign events and organised parties on the sidelines, with RN members present (d'Angelo, 2017; de Boni, 2017), further demonstrating the party’s underlying openness to fringe support. Furthermore, the party benefited from assistance by far-right student unions like La Cocarde,[34] with some RN members acknowledging their support: ‘We have strong links with La Cocarde, and some members have personal ties with Jordan Bardella,’ adding that ‘La Cocarde is important because it brings together different strands of the nationalist camp’ and ‘La Cocarde occasionally supports us in campaigns’ with practical tasks.[35]

[32] Video interview on April 17, 2024.
[33] Interview in Saint-Nazaire on April 18, 2024.
[34] La Cocarde étudiante is a far-right French student union founded in 2015 that promotes nationalist and conservative values in universities, opposes left-wing groups, and advocates the defence of French identity and heritage.
[35] First quote from Nicolas Olivier, RN departmental delegate for Aisne (interview in Villers-Cotterêts on April 25, 2024), second and third quote from Paul-Henry Hansen-Catta, regional councillor for Hauts-de-France and former adviser to Marine Le Pen (video interview on April 29, 2024).

When questioned about seeking campaign support from fringe actors, RN members downplayed its significance, stressing that such cases were rare and driven by local organisational needs. Gauthier Bouchet insisted that the RN 'generally organises campaigns without any outside help' and only relies on fringe support in areas where it 'lacks sufficient hands on the ground.'[36] Similarly, the RN departmental delegate for Calvados framed such support as a matter of 'common ideological ground' and 'helping hands where needed' rather than a formal alliance.[37] He added that accepting fringe support 'is not the same as being on an electoral list, which would be more significant,' reflecting the party's sensitivity to reputational risks. Louis-Marie Mautin, parliamentary assistant to Stéphane Ravier, described the involvement of Action Française members in 2014 as 'temporary support' from young people with shared goals.[38]

Third, in addition to selectively turning to fringe groups for communications expertise or electoral support, the RN has occasionally filled its electoral lists with members of these groups. A prominent example is Philippe Vardon, a former Bloc identitaire leader and a member of the far-right rock identity band *Fraction*, notorious for its skinhead following and fascist salutes at concerts. Vardon ran on Marion Maréchal-Le Pen's FN list for the 2015 regional elections in Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur with Marine Le Pen's approval (Faye and Rof, 2017; Prissette, 2015). Similarly, Elie Hatem, a steering committee member of the nationalist and royalist movement Action Française, was included on the FN list for Paris' fourth arrondissement in the 2014 elections (d'Angelo, 2014).

Experts on the French far right pointed to the RN's occasional openness to recruiting from the Identitarian movement to fill gaps in its candidate pool for local elections. Marion Jacquet-Vaillant recounted several cases in which female Identitarian activists were approached by the RN to join electoral lists due to a lack of female candidates.[39] Similarly, Jean-Yves Camus noted that the party occasionally turned to Identitarian members to complete its electoral lists because of their

[36] Interview in Saint-Nazaire on April 18, 2024.
[37] Philippe Chapron (video interview on May 14, 2024).
[38] Interview in Paris on March 22, 2024.
[39] In particular, she cited examples in Toulouse and Lyon where activists with political ambitions who were considered suitable were approached by the party (interview in Paris on October 25, 2023).

youth, dynamism, and education levels.[40] Estimates suggest that up to 50 current or former Identitarian activists appeared on FN or RBM[41] lists in the 2014 municipal elections (Camus, 2018). However, as the RN's popularity has grown over the past decade, its reliance on fringe group members for electoral lists has declined, with local members and activists increasingly standing as candidates.

RN members have openly acknowledged the strategic benefits of recruiting fringe group members to fill electoral gaps and forming alliances with smaller far-right parties. They described these moves as opportunistic, often citing the specific skills of the candidates involved. RN spokesman Julien Odoul explained that difficulties in filling municipal election lists led the party to ally with groups like L'avenir français in smaller municipalities, where 'political affiliation is less important, but the personal dimension and local presence of a candidate can make a difference.'[42] Nicolas Oliver, RN departmental delegate for Aisne, echoed this, emphasising that the RN remains open to 'members of [such] mini-parties that gather around and join the RN list.'[43] Other party members pointed to electoral alliances with parties like SIEL and Ligue du Sud, speaking of 'alliances of political opportunity.'[44] In discussing cases where Identitarian activists have been able to join RN lists, two RN regional delegates and a regional councillor justified their inclusion by highlighting the candidates' skills, particularly their expertise in communication and mobilisation.[45]

Similarly to the downplaying of seeking support for fringe group campaigns, RN members downplayed the inclusion of fringe group members on electoral lists, describing such cases as rare and often dismissing fringe group affiliations as 'youth mistakes'. They also emphasised their success in recruiting centre-right candidates, highlighting the party's ability to attract people from

[40] Interview in Paris on March 12, 2024.
[41] The Rassemblement Bleu Marine (RBM) list was a coalition of far-right candidates, led by Marine Le Pen's FN, in the 2014 municipal elections. It sought to expand the party's appeal by including non-FN allies under a broader nationalist banner.
[42] Interview in Paris on April 29, 2024.
[43] Interview in Villers-Cotterêts on April 25, 2024.
[44] Louis-Marie Mautin, Parliamentary aide to Stéphane Ravier, (ex-RN) senator (interview in Paris on March 22, 2024).
[45] Thibaut de la Tocnaye, RN regional councillor for Centre-Val de, explained that the party accepted Identitarian activists as members because 'some of them were very well trained in communication and the use of social media and were thus well suited to campaigning' (interview in Orléans on March 14, 2024). Maxime Bot, RN departmental delegate for Aude, agreed that the acceptance of Identitarian activists on the party lists was due to their 'communication skills, which were not very developed in the party at the time' (video interview on April 17, 2024).

different ideological backgrounds. A former RN National Bureau member clarified that the inclusion of fringe group activists on electoral lists was not an institutionalised practice but rather driven by personal connections and assessed on a case-by-case basis, as some fringe group activists were considered too extreme.[46] Regarding electoral alliances with smaller far-right parties, he described these partnerships as 'occasional and local,' adding that most of these groups were 'too small and irrelevant for the RN.'[47] RN members further highlighted the party's focus on grassroots organisation, particularly over the last decade, as electoral gains have made it easier to recruit local members to its electoral lists, reducing the need to rely on fringe activists.[48]

In sum, this section has demonstrated that the RN's strong organisational capacity enabled it to attract new supporters, mobilise members for campaigns, and develop a political programme with relative independence. As a result, its dependence on far-right fringe groups remained low. Compared to AfD members, RN interviewees were more vocal and consistent in emphasising how their robust organisation reduced the need for such alliances. However, when RN members did engage with fringe groups, they did so selectively, in an ad hoc and opportunistically, to fill temporary organisational gaps—particularly to acquire social media skills, secure campaign support, or complete local electoral lists. This further supports the hypothesis that organisational needs drive such engagement.

The impact of immigration salience

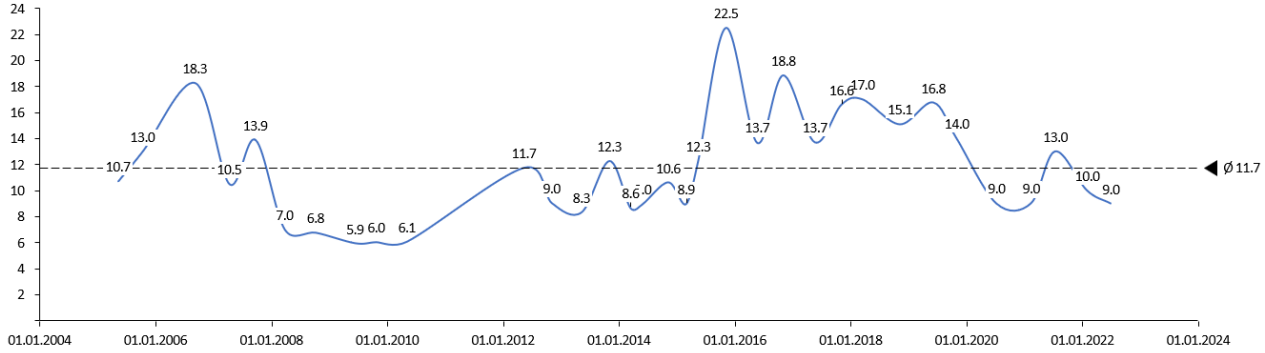
Chapter 3 presented initial evidence that the comparatively lower salience of immigration in France than in Germany has limited the extent to which anti-immigrant sentiment among RN supporters or the wider public is activated and signalled to the party leadership. As a result, RN leaders remain wary of the reputational risks of associating with fringe groups, with little change in their willingness to engage with them. As immigration salience has remained more stable in France

[46] Thibaut de la Tocnaye (interview in Orléans on March 14, 2024).
[47] Ibid.
[48] Gauthier Bouchet, RN regional councillor, departmental delegate for Loire-Atlantique, member of the National Council, explained that 'with so many deputies in the National Assembly, our following has grown. It is quite easy to build our lists on the basis of local party leaders, members and activists' (interview in Saint-Nazaire on April 18, 2024).

than in Germany over the period analysed, and regional variations are more pronounced, a sub-national analysis provides deeper insights than a cross-temporal one. Moreover, xenophobic attitudes vary across regions, further emphasising the relevance of a regional comparison. This section tests the hypothesis that immigration salience influences the reputational concerns and strategic calculations of RRP leaders by examining how France's lower overall immigration salience and regional variations have shaped RN leaders' concerns about reputational damage and their likelihood of engaging with fringe groups.

As Figure 22 shows, immigration salience in France remained relatively stable over the period analysed, with an increase during the so-called European migrant crisis.[49] On average, it stood at 11.7—almost a third of the German average.[50]

Figure 22: Immigration salience in France, 2004-2022



Source: Pan-EU Eurobarometer survey (Standard Eurobarometer, 89.1), 2005 – 2021
Note: Percentage of respondents citing immigration as one of the two most important issues affecting their country.

Regional data on immigration salience based on public opinion polls is limited in France, but both qualitative research and individual, non-longitudinal studies point to notable regional differences. In regions like PACA, Occitanie, and Hauts-de-France, immigration is a more prominent issue. Local media and political campaigns in these areas often focus on integration, public security, and social cohesion (Calabrese, Gaboriaux, and Veniard, 2022; Imbert, 2022). Surveys show that citizens in these regions are more inclined to agree with statements like 'there

[49] Actual immigration numbers did not significantly increase between 2015 and 2016. However, as Reddy and Thiollet (2023) demonstrate, media framing played a key role in amplifying immigration salience during this period.
[50] In Germany, immigration salience averaged 30% between 2013 and 2022, meaning that 30% of respondents listed immigration as one of the top two issues facing the country. In France, over the exact same period, an average of 12.8% of respondents cited immigration as one of the top two issues.

are too many immigrants in France today' and are less likely to see immigration as an opportunity for the country.[51] Issues such as insecurity, violence, and Islamism are more often associated with immigration in these areas than elsewhere. Residents are also more inclined to believe that immigrants do not integrate well into French society and express greater scepticism about immigration (Holloway, 2022). These regions also exhibit historically higher support for the RN, with Ipsos polls consistently finding that RN voters see immigration as a more pressing national issue.[52]

This section next presents evidence to support the hypothesis that, in the context of an overall comparatively lower salience of immigration in France than in Germany, RN leaders have significant reputational concerns about engaging with fringe groups. In regions where immigration dominates the public discourse, triangulated evidence from interviews, press reports, and party documents suggests that RN leaders' reputational concerns diminish.

Reputational risk concerns

As expected, in a context of comparatively lower immigration salience than in Germany, the RN remains highly sensitive to associations with far-right fringe groups. Compared to AfD respondents, RN members reported perceiving less widespread public opposition to immigration or heightened concerns about its impact on security and French cultural identity. Instead, they expressed concerns about reputational risks, highlighting the party's strict policy against association with fringe groups, rigorous vetting of new members and candidates, and enforcement of sanctions against members involved in activities that could damage the party's image.

Many RN members expressed concern that working with far-right fringe groups could damage the party's public image. A political bureau member noted that 'the RN sees engagement with fringe groups as risky and damaging to its reputation,' adding that while the party avoids

[51] For example, the study 'Les Français et l'immigration', conducted in 2018 and 2023, shows regional differences in the importance of immigration and attitudes towards immigration (Zulfikarpasic, Craplet, and Lapointe, 2023).
[52] For example, the 2022 study 'Les Français et l'immigration dans le cadre de la campagne électorale' found that RN supporters were 12 percentage points more likely than the average respondent to identify immigration as a major concern (Gallard, 2022).

actively recruiting from these groups, some fringe affiliated members may join at the local level if they benefit the organisation.[53] Echoing this, a former advisor to Marine Le Pen stressed that the leadership is 'constantly mindful of its image and public communication,' aiming to avoid giving opponents ammunition to discredit the party.[54] With increasing electoral success, the RN has faced greater media scrutiny, prompting heightened vigilance in reputation management.[55] The RN departmental delegate for Calvados noted the party's 'institutionalised suspicion of far-right groups', citing their uncontrollable nature and the inherent reputational risks they pose.[56]

Driven by these concerns, RN members interviewed emphasised, unprompted, the party's incompatibility with fringe organisations. Under Marine Le Pen, there is 'a clear incompatibility with the far-right fringe.'[57] Party leaders are barred from holding positions in far-right or traditionalist Catholic groups, and institutionalist links at the party level are discouraged, explained the secretary-general of the RN parliamentary group. Several departmental delegates echoed that 'interaction with fringe groups is discouraged', insisting that the RN 'does not seek to build bridges with these groups' and actively avoids links perceived as damaging.[58] While inconsistent, these efforts to limit engagement with fringe organisations challenge the alternative explanation that a party with far-right roots inevitably has significant links with such groups. Instead, they highlight the need for a conscious effort to manage and limit relations with fringe organisations.

In addition to emphasising incompatibility with fringe groups, RN members demonstrated their concern for their reputation by placing greater emphasis on vetting new members and staff to minimise potential links with far-right groups. The secretary general of the RN parliamentary group outlined a rigorous screening process for applicants, particularly parliamentary assistants,

[53] Wallerand de Saint-Just, political bureau member and regional councillor (interview in Paris on February 27, 2024).
[54] Paul-Henry Hansen-Catta, regional councillor for Hauts-de-France and former advisor to Marine Le Pen (video interview on April 29, 2024)
[55] For example, Grégoire Eury, RN regional councillor and departmental delegate for Meurthe-et-Moselle, noted that the RN 'is under constant observation by other parties and the mainstream media, especially since 2014, so we must be careful and cannot afford to make any mistakes' (video interview on April 26, 2024).
[56] Philippe Chapron, RN departmental delegate for Calvados (video interview on May 14, 2024).
[57] Renaud Labaye, secretary general of the RN parliamentary group (interview in Paris on April 11, 2024).
[58] Jimmy Bourlieux, RN departmental delegate for Gironde (interview in Bordeaux on April 15, 2024), Nicholas Olivier, RN departmental delegate for Aisne (interview in Villers-Cotterêts on April 25, 2024).

favouring candidates with no significant history as activists in organisations like Action française.[59] This screening extends to candidate selection for electoral lists, including background checks and interviews to avoid association with groups that could harm the party's image.[60] Experts on the French far right have also noted the RN's reluctance to fully integrate former identitarian activists due to these reputational concerns. For instance, in the 2014 municipal elections, while the RN included female Identitarian activists in lower positions on its electoral list, it refrained from giving them a more prominent party profile. Similarly, a male Identitarian activist working in communications for the RN in Rouen was not allowed to stand as a party candidate to limit public exposure to links with the Identitarian movement.[61]

Moreover, RN members were more vocal than their AfD counterparts in criticising and sanctioning party members who engaged with fringe groups, underlining their reputational vigilance. They readily cited examples of criticism and expulsions for behaviour that damaged the party's image. [62] Commenting on the emergence of the Reconquête! party, Wallerand de Saint-Just, a member of the RN's political bureau, expressed approval, stating, 'I'm glad it exists because it takes on all these far-right people.' He stressed that 'as soon as we find racist or anti-Semitic members who express their views publicly, we throw them out.'[63] It is worth noting, however, that only a small fraction of the documented cases of fringe group involvement have resulted in internal party consequences.

The RN leadership's heightened reputational concerns in the context of low to moderate immigration salience were also evident in their deliberate avoidance of certain fringe group demonstrations. For example, when asked about his past involvement in right-wing

[59] Renaud Labaye, secretary general of the RN parliamentary group (interview in Paris on April 11, 2024) stated 'if you have an RN employee who is also a member of a right-wing group and then does or says something stupid, it's the MP and the RN parliamentary group who are responsible and who will be dragged in and held responsible.'
[60] The process was outlined by Nicholas Olivier, RN departmental delegate for Aisne (interview in Villers-Cotterêts on April 25, 2024).
[61] Marion Jacquet-Vaillant (interview in Paris on October 25, 2023
[62] Examples listed included Alexandre Gabriac, former regional councillor in Rhone-Alpes, who was expelled in 2011 after a photo showing him making the Nazi salute circulated, and Yvan Benedetti, former municipal councillor in Vénissieux, who was expelled also in 2011 for anti-Semitic remarks.
[63] Wallerand de Saint-Just, member of the political bureau and regional councillor (interview in Paris on February 27, 2024).

demonstrations, the RN departmental delegate for Aisne acknowledged that he had distributed leaflets and posters opposing high levels of immigration, but noted that he steered clear of openly xenophobic demonstrations with chants like ‘everybody out,’ which could tarnish the RN’s image. Similarly, the RN departmental delegate for Aude reiterated that the party 'is not here to take part in sensational fringe actions such as 'climbing a mosque or burning flags', asserting that such actions, which may have been acceptable a decade ago, now harm the party’s reputation and are ‘no longer in the party's DNA.’[64] Furthermore, regarding the RN’s past involvement with the Identitarian and traditionalist Catholic group Academia Christiana, the RN's Calvados departmental delegate explained that while senior party figure Bruno Gollnisch had spoken at the group's summer academy in 2011, such official party involvement was no longer tolerated by the party's leadership due to the reputational impact.[65]

Overall, in a context where immigration is less salient than in Germany, RN members perceive weaker public opposition to immigration than their AfD counterparts. They consistently emphasised reputational concerns, particularly regarding engagement with fringe groups. This supports the theory that reputational concerns remain strong when immigration is not a dominant issue. However, interviews revealed that in local contexts where immigration was highly salient, RN leaders felt less constrained to engage with fringe groups in anti-immigration activities. This dynamic further reinforces the causal link between immigration salience and RRP leaders’ concerns about reputational damage, shaping their willingness to engage with far-right fringe groups.

[64] Maxime Bot, RN departmental delegate for Aude (video interview on April 17, 2024).
[65] Philippe Chapron (video interview on May 14, 2024) stated that 'it is no longer legitimate to speak in an official capacity to Catholic fundamentalists or other far-right fringe groups, and the RN cannot have official links with such groups, which are damaging to its reputation.’

Diminished inhibitions against fringe groups

While reputational concerns among RN leaders remain significant when immigration salience is low to moderate, several interviewees noted that these concerns diminish when immigration becomes a prominent local issue. In such cases, party leaders perceive an alignment between their views and citizens' concerns about the perceived immigration-related threats, which provides a sense of social validation. For instance, the RN departmental delegate for Aude observed that local interactions with far-right groups often stem from personal contacts and shared agendas, especially when RN members sense a broad consensus on immigration-related issues.[66] Similarly, a Val-de-Marne departmental delegate noted that departmental party leaders sometimes 'interact with right-wing groups or retweet their content when they perceive that immigration is a major local concern.'[67] A former advisor to Marine le Pen and regional councillor for Hauts-de-France more explicitly stated that 'the more sensitive the French are to the issue of immigration and its consequences, the more the old demons in the party may be awakened.' He suggested that the increased salience of immigration could lead some party members to sharpen their rhetoric or engage with extra-parliamentary actors.[68]

In addition to these general observations, specific interactions with fringe groups were justified by RN members based on reduced reputational concerns amidst heightened immigration concerns. For example, when asked about a 2013 Idées Nation[69] conference on 'Islam and the Republic' featuring René Marchand of the far-right anti-Islam website Riposte laïque,[70] two organisers explained that their aim was to discuss how Islamism might conflict with the values of the Republic. They pointed to France's 2013 asylum law reforms and the tough immigration stance of Interior Minister Manuel Valls (Todd, 2013) as reflecting a public consensus on the need to address the consequences of high immigration, which encouraged them in their choice of speakers.

[66] Maxime Bot, RN departmental delegate for Aude (video interview on April 17, 2024).
[67] Anonymous interviewee, RN departmental delegate for Val-de-Marne (interview in Créteil on April 23, 2024).
[68] Paul-Henry Hansen-Catta, regional councillor for Hauts-de-France and former adviser to Marine Le Pen (video interview on April 29, 2024).
[69] Idées Nation was a publication and think tank affiliated with the FN, created to develop and disseminate the party's ideological framework.
[70] Riposte Laïque is a French far-right, anti-Islam, and secularist website founded in 2007, known for its provocative articles and has been linked to anti-immigration and nationalist movements.

Similarly, a former advisor to Marine Le Pen pointed to the actions of RN regional councillor Christophe Boudot, highlighting how regional councillors sometimes engage with small groups on local immigration issues. Boudot supported Génération identitaire's 2015 occupation of a public building intended as an 'integration village' for Roma people (de Boni, 2015) and joined protests by the same group in 2016 against the creation of the French Institute of Muslim Civilisation (Enjalbal Oliveira and Burlet, 2022). The advisor to Marine Le Pen noted, 'once an RN elected representative is made aware of an issue by a group, even if it is not necessarily aligned with the RN or shares the same values, and once the issue becomes a hot topic, the RN elected representative is likely to speak out and support the cause,' reflecting the reduced reputational concerns in the context of heightened immigration salience and perceived public alignment.

Moreover, a member of the RN national council attributed his participation in an October 2022 demonstration, organised by far-right groups against a reception centre for asylum seekers in his constituency, to the strong community opposition to the centre and shared concerns about immigration. He noted that the widespread local support for his stance lessened his concerns about reputation. However, he clarified that he distanced himself from the movement once it was overtaken by right-wing extremists.[71] Similarly, RN spokesperson Julien Odoul justified his support for two female activists from the Identitarian group Collectif Némésis,[72] who were arrested after a protest, citing the need to defend the French people against the consequences of uncontrolled immigration. Odoul stressed that the impact of immigration, particularly on women's security, was a widely recognised concern in his constituency and that his reputational worries were diminishing in a context where the mainstream media were increasingly 'highlighting the consequences of uncontrolled waves of migrants.'[73]

Overall, the interviews strongly suggest that increased perceptions of the importance of immigration lead to reduced reputational concerns among RN members. This is driven by a sense

[71] Gauthier Bouchet, RN regional councillor, departmental delegate for Loire-Atlantique, member of the National Council (interview in Saint-Nazaire on April 18, 2024).
[72] A far right identitarian group that focuses on defending French identity and culture against what it perceives as threats from immigration and multiculturalism.
[73] Julien Odoul, MP, party spokesman and member of the party's national bureau (interview in Paris on April 29, 2024).

of social affirmation and a perceived alignment with public concerns about the effects and threats of immigration. Regional variations further underline this causal link, with party members from regions where salience is higher expressing their lower reputational concerns more openly, and also linking this to a greater openness to engaging with fringe groups.

Regional variations in immigration salience

Over 60 per cent of the cases of fringe group involvement recorded in the Factiva-based index, involving regional rather than national party leaders, took place in the southern regions of Occitania, Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PACA). In these regions, where immigration dominates public discourse and polls show a more critical attitude towards immigration and the success of immigrants in assimilating into French society, experts on the far right and RN members have observed that party leaders are less worried about reputational risks. This reduced concern also affects the RN's willingness to engage with local fringe groups. Marion Jacquet-Vaillant noted that in the southern regions, the RN found it easier to recruit members from the Identitarian movement due to less reputational repercussions from the electorate.[74] Local RN leaders perceive strong popular support for the party's anti-immigration stance, making reputational risks less of a deterrent. As two RN regional councillors explained, party leaders feel less pressure to avoid controversial associations because they believe that a significant proportion of the local population shares or tolerates their views on immigration. Jimmy Bourlieux highlighted this dynamic, saying, 'in local contexts, like Marseille, where there is a very specific mentality, links with certain right-wing groups are possible in a way that they would not be at national level.'[75] Gauthier Bouchet added that 'the mentality in the PACA region is different' and more 'permissive towards fringe groups,' leading to more interactions with such groups, which are generally less frowned upon.[76] A former advisor to Marine Le Pen remarked on the proximity of Christophe Boudot, head of the RN list in Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes during the 2015 regional elections, to the

[74] Marion Jacquet-Vaillant (interview in Paris on October 25, 2023).
[75] Jimmy Bourlieux, RN departmental delegate for Gironde (interview in Bordeaux on April 15, 2024).
[76] Gauthier Bouchet, RN regional councillor, departmental delegate for Loire-Atlantique, member of the National Council (interview in Saint-Nazaire on April 18, 2024).

Identitarian movement, suggesting that reputational fears were lower in the local context. Engaging with this group may even have been seen as a means of consolidating the RN's base and reinforcing the party's image as a champion of local anti-immigrant sentiment.[77]

The case of former RN senator Stéphane Ravier further illustrates this trend. During his 2014 election campaign, he sought the support of Action française members, recruiting them to distribute leaflets and assist with outreach. His parliamentary advisor, Louis-Marie Mautin, emphasised the diminished reputational fears amidst the perceived importance of immigration in Marseille. Due to the city's geography, large immigrant population, and perceived social unrest, Mautin observed that Senator Ravier had little concern about media scrutiny of his associations with far-right groups. He asserted that 'we do not constantly calculate reputational risk, nor do we dismiss those who support us,' underscoring the reduced fear of reputational repercussions.[78] An RN MP added that Ravier was aware that his local constituents, and the people of Provence more generally, were more concerned and vocal about the negative effects of immigration, making them more tolerant of interactions with fringe groups espousing similar views.[79] This MP also pointed to Marion Maréchal's presence at an Action française conference in May 2016 (Casajus, 2022), and the willingness of RN members in the southern port city of Fréjus to refer to members of the Génération Identitaire as the 'Trotskies' of the RN (Faye and Rof, 2017) as the result of low reputational concerns in a context of high immigration salience and a calculated openness to engage with such groups in order to broaden the party's regional appeal.

These examples illustrate how, in southern regions marked by heightened immigration concerns and prevalent xenophobic attitudes, RN politicians perceive significant public support for their anti-immigration stance, leading to increased perceived social validation and a lower threshold for reputational risk when engaging with far-right fringe groups.

[77] Paul-Henry Hansen-Catta, regional councillor for Hauts-de-France and former adviser to Marine Le Pen (video interview on April 29, 2024).
[78] Louis-Marie Mautin, Parliamentary assistant to Stéphane Ravier, (ex-RN) senator (interview in Paris on March 22, 2024).
[79] Anonymous interviewee, RN MP (interview in Paris on April 29, 2024).

Through a detailed analysis of the French RN, this chapter demonstrated how the party's superior organisational capacity, compared to the AfD, reduced its reliance on far-right fringe groups. Throughout the analysis period, the RN maintained robust organisational structures that enabled it to independently attract supporters, mobilise members for campaigns and develop a political programme. RN interviewees placed greater emphasis on their organisational strength and reduced dependence on fringe groups than their AfD counterparts. France is not only a 'negative case' where strong organisation leads to low fringe group engagement. Evidence suggests that the RN occasionally interacts with fringe groups to fill temporary organisational gaps—particularly in social media communication, campaigning, and filling electoral lists—on an ad hoc and opportunistic basis. This lends further support to the hypothesis that organisational weaknesses can drive engagement with fringe groups.

The chapter also explored how the lower salience of immigration in France, compared to Germany, shaped RN leaders' reputational concerns regarding fringe group engagement. RN leaders perceived public opposition to immigration as weaker, reinforcing their apprehension about reputational risks. This concern was reflected in interviewees' emphasis on strict rules against engagement, rigorous candidate vetting, and sanctions for breaches. While lower immigration salience sustained these reputational concerns, RN leaders occasionally justified fringe group engagement in local contexts where strong anti-immigration sentiment provided social validation. When immigration dominated public discourse, their reputational concerns diminished, increasing their willingness to engage. This pattern supports the theorised mechanism, with qualitative evidence indicating that the RN's reluctance to engage with fringe groups weakens in regions where immigration salience is high.

Given the RN's far-right origins, its leaders' strong reputational concerns, and its lower engagement with fringe groups compared to the AfD, this chapter challenges the alternative explanation that a party's roots necessarily determine strong ties with fringe groups. Instead, the findings suggest that limiting such ties requires deliberate effort, and high engagement is not an inevitable consequence of extremist origins.

The next chapter applies the theorised framework to two shadow cases—the Austrian FPÖ and the Swiss People's Party—to assess the broader relevance of the hypotheses beyond the specific contexts of the German AfD and the French RN.

Chapter 6 – Broadening the analysis: Insights from the Austrian FPÖ and the Swiss SVP

This chapter builds on the findings of the previous three chapters, which used cross-comparative and within-case analyses of two core case studies to provide supportive evidence for the two key drivers of RRPs' engagement with fringe groups. The first driver is that a party's organisational needs shape its reliance on fringe groups for mobilisation, policy development and operational support, thereby influencing its likelihood of engagement. The second is that the salience of immigration affects party leaders' concerns about the reputational costs of engaging with such groups.

To test whether these hypotheses hold in different contexts, this chapter examines two shadow cases—the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the Swiss People's Party (SVP). These cases allow to explore potential alternative explanations that could not be fully addressed in the core cases. Both the FPÖ and the SVP have been part of national governing coalitions, providing an opportunity to assess whether governing experience affects a RRP's tendency to engage with fringe groups. Additionally, the FPÖ's extreme-right origins allow for a deeper investigation into how a party's ideological roots shape its engagement patterns, a factor not fully explored in the core cases, as only the RN had extreme origins. Moreover, both the FPÖ and the SVP are long-standing parties that dominate the immigration discourse in their respective countries. This helps to address a potentially complicating factor observed in the core cases—that the RN's entrenched dominance in French immigration discourse may reduce its leaders' perceived need to engage with fringe groups to push immigration issues onto the political agenda, even in high-salience contexts.

The analysis of the FPÖ and SVP covers the period from 2010 to 2022. This period captures key developments in both parties, including shifts in political strategy, organisational changes, and evolving relationships with fringe groups. It also covers their participation in government, enabling an assessment of how this affects their engagement with fringe groups. By aligning this timeframe with that of the RN case study, the analysis ensures consistency in the comparative framework.

The chapter focuses on whether the outcomes in these shadow cases align with the theoretical expectations derived from the independent variables. It begins with an overview of the FPÖ and the Austrian far-right landscape, before detailing the FPÖ's engagement with fringe groups. The analysis shows that the FPÖ's high level of engagement is driven by specific organisational needs and low reputational concerns in a context of high immigration salience. In this environment, FPÖ leaders believe that the strategic benefits of engaging with fringe groups outweigh the potential risks. The chapter then turns to the SVP, outlining its engagement patterns. The analysis finds that the SVP's strong organisational capacity reduces its dependence on fringe groups. However, in a context of high immigration salience, the party's reputational concerns are lower, prompting some engagement with fringe groups, particularly at the local level. This mirrors the dynamics observed with the RN.

Throughout the chapter, the analysis challenges alternative explanations suggesting that a party's governing experience or extreme roots constrain RRPs' engagement with fringe groups. The analysis is based on expert interviews with academics and journalists who closely study the FPÖ and SVP, primary party documents, publicly available interviews and speeches by FPÖ and SVP politicians, and secondary sources.

Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)

Background of the FPÖ

The Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ) was founded in 1956 as the successor to the Federation of Independents (VdU). Formed shortly after World War II, the VdU united a coalition of pan-Germanists, national liberals, free-market advocates, populists, and former Nazis, who opposed Austria's dominant political forces—the Socialist Party (SPÖ) and the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). While the FPÖ provided a political home for these diverse groups, it initially struggled to maintain support and declined after the early electoral success of the VdU in the 1949 general election, where it won 12% of the vote.

Under its first leader, Anton Reinthaller, a former Nazi and SS officer, the FPÖ focused on pragmatic policies and gradual integration into Austrian politics. Despite some local cooperation with the SPÖ and ÖVP, the FPÖ remained excluded from national power (Pelinka, 2022, p. 40). Friedrich Peter succeeded Reinthaller in 1958 and steered the FPÖ towards the political centre in the 1960s and 1970s, alienating the more extreme faction, which split in 1967 to form the National Democratic Party. The FPÖ's support remained modest during this period, typically below 8%.

In 1980, Norbert Steger took over as leader and sought to modernise the FPÖ by emulating Germany's centrist Free Democratic Party. Under Steger, the FPÖ adopted a pro-European, centrist platform, culminating in its first national coalition in 1983 as the junior partner of the SPÖ.[1] However, this alliance ended in 1986 when Jörg Haider took over the leadership and transformed the FPÖ into a nationalist, right-wing populist party (McGann and Kitschelt, 2005). Haider's hardline approach led the SPÖ to withdraw from the coalition. Since then, the FPÖ has been classified as 'radical right' or 'far right' due to its extreme nationalist and populist policies, which diverge sharply from Austria's mainstream parties (Boréus, 2013; Heinisch and Werner, 2019). Haider's populism resonated with voters and strengthened the FPÖ in opposition (Heinisch, 2004).

The FPÖ's popularity soared under Haider, peaking at almost 27% of the vote in the 1999 elections (Figure 23). This led to a controversial coalition with the ÖVP in 2000, sparking international criticism and temporary EU sanctions (Raffeiner, 2021). Internal divisions eventually forced Haider to resign, and in 2005 he left to form the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), temporarily weakening the FPÖ.

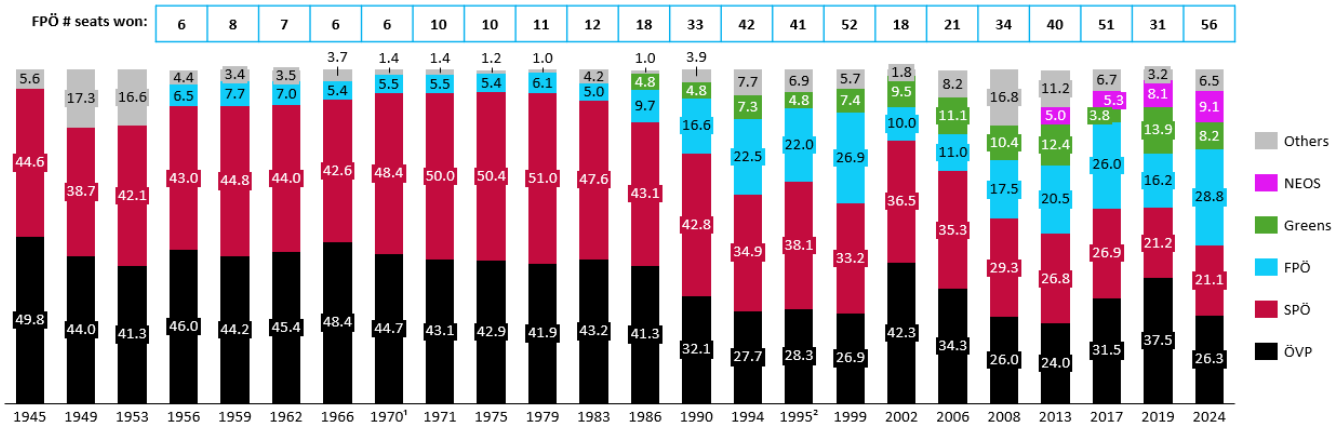
In the late 2000s, Heinz-Christian Strache revitalised the FPÖ with a platform focused on anti-immigration, law and order policies, and opposition to political Islam (Duncan, 2010). This agenda aligned with a broader wave of right-wing populism across Europe. The FPÖ re-entered

[1] The 1983 general election was a watershed. The SPÖ lost its absolute majority in parliament. The FPÖ won 4.98% of the vote, enough to gain a small representation in the National Council. The SPÖ, led by Fred Sinowatz, decided to form a coalition government with the FPÖ, marking the first time the FPÖ had participated in a national government.

government in 2017 as a coalition partner of the ÖVP, prioritising strict immigration policies and welfare cuts for immigrants. However, the coalition collapsed in 2019 following the Ibiza scandal,[2] in which Strache was implicated in a corruption controversy, leading to his resignation and new elections.

Since 2021, the FPÖ has been led by Herbert Kickl, whose focus on anti-immigration, Euroscepticism, and opposition to COVID-19 restrictions has boosted its support. In the 2024 Austrian legislative election, the FPÖ's share of the vote rose from 16% to 29.2%, placing it in first place and marking the best result in the party's history (Belfkih and Leibetseder, 2024).

Figure 23: Results of the Austrian National Council elections, 1945-2024



Source: (Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2024a)
Notes: Others include all other parties that did not reach the 4% threshold
[1] Including the repeat election of 4 October 1970
[2] Including the repeat election of 13 October 1996

[2] The Ibiza scandal in Austria refers to a political controversy in 2019, sparked by a secretly recorded video showing Vice Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache and a colleague discussing possible corruption and favours with a woman posing as the niece of a Russian oligarch. The footage led to the collapse of the Austrian government and widespread public outrage over political malpractice (Oltermann, 2019).

Far-right scene in Austria

Austria's right-wing extremist scene is diverse and encompasses a wide range of groups, movements, and organisations operating outside the formal political system. These include violent neo-Nazi factions, militant hooligan groups, the Identitarian movement, and traditional pan-German fraternities. Common themes among these groups include nationalism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism (DÖW, 2024). Many share overlapping ideologies, reinforced by personal ties and strategic connections.

Neo-Nazi groups, often operating as underground associations, deny or relativise the Holocaust, recruit sympathisers, and promote extremist activities aimed at challenging Austria's constitutional and social order. Similarly, the Identitarian movement, founded in Austria in 2012 and also known as 'die Österreicher,' represents a modern form of far-right activism. Acting as a central hub for the 'New Right,' it employs 'metapolitics' to shape public opinion and undermine democratic institutions. Its propaganda promotes an ethnically and culturally homogeneous society, directly challenging democratic principles and fundamental human rights (Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2024b). Traditionalist and pan-German organisations, including far-right fraternities, wield considerable political influence despite their small size. These groups maintain strong ties with established political parties, particularly the FPÖ, and play a key role in fostering a shared far-right ideology (Weidinger, 2018).

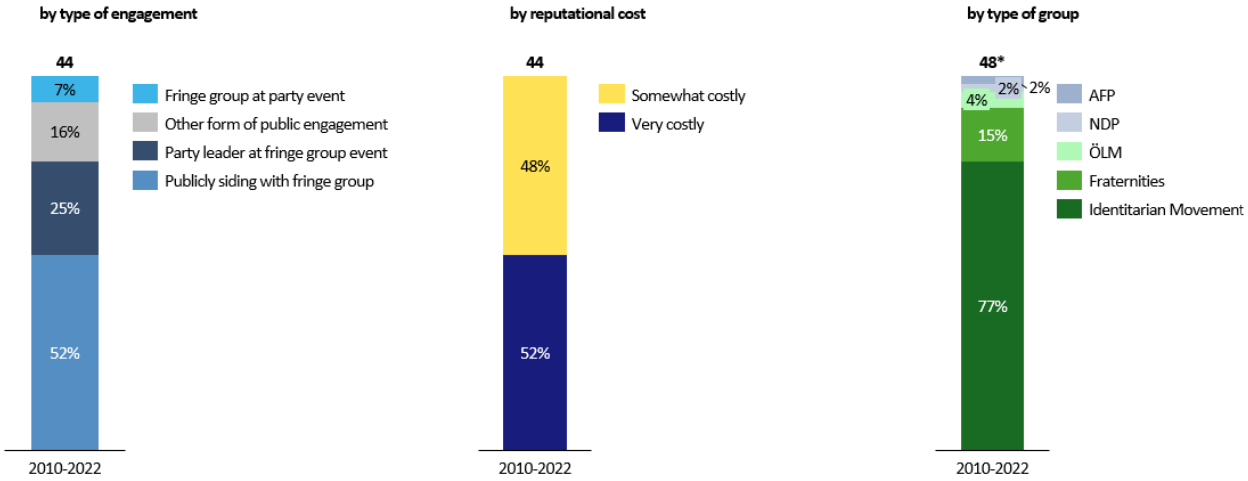
Amid this diverse far-right landscape (see Table 11 in Appendix A), this analysis focuses on twelve organisations: the Identitarian movement, the Aktionsgemeinschaft für Politik, the Schutzverein Österreichische Landsmannschaft, the Bürgerschutz Österreich, and eight far-right fraternities[3]. These groups were selected for their prominence, as highlighted in the Austrian Constitutional Protection Report, insights from the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance (DÖW), and expert interviews on Austria's extreme right.

[3] The fraternities included are the Wiener akademische Burschenschaft Olympia, the Burschenschaft Aldania, the Burschenschaft Marcho-Teutonia, the Burschenschaft Scardonia, the Burschenschaft Silesia, the Burschenschaft Marko Germania, the Burschenschaft Silvania, and the Burschenschaft Vandalia.

FPÖ's fringe group engagement

The FPÖ has maintained significant links with far-right fringe groups in recent years. A Factiva analysis,[4] recorded 44 cases of such engagement between 2010 and 2022 (Figure 24). Over 30% of these cases involved senior FPÖ members publicly supporting far-right groups, while 18% involved current or former fringe group members joining the party. FPÖ members were also found attending (16%) or speaking at (9%) events organised by these groups. In 9% of cases, FPÖ members actively recruited fringe group members into party positions. Notably, over half (52%) of these engagements were classified as 'very costly' in terms of reputational risk, a level comparable to the AfD (52%) but significantly higher than the RN (35%). This suggests that FPÖ leaders perceive minimal reputational risks in maintaining such ties. Like the AfD and the RN, the FPÖ's engagement is concentrated on a few key groups, notably the Identitarian movement, which accounts for 77% of recorded cases, and far-right student fraternities, which make up 15%.

Figure 24: FPÖ fringe group engagement, cumulative 2010-2022



Source: Factiva search (Kronen Zeitung, Der Standard, Kurier, Austria Presse Agentur)
* Note: Total is higher as some incidents involved several fringe groups

[4] For Austria, three high-circulation dailies were selected for analysis: a centre-right (*Kronen-Zeitung*), a centrist (*Kurier*), and a centre-left (*Der Standard*), along with the main news agency, the Austria Press Agency (APA). The analysis covered the period from 2010 to 2022. In contrast to the AfD and RN cases, where a wide range of fringe groups were examined, the Austrian shadow case analysis focused on twelve fringe groups. These groups were selected on the basis of their relevance, size, public visibility and political influence, as determined by expert assessments, government reports and academic literature.

A July 2024 report[5] further highlights the FPÖ's high level of engagement with far-right individuals and groups. More than 200 links were documented between 2014 and 2024.[6] Senior FPÖ officials have frequently expressed public support for these groups. For instance, in November 2023, FPÖ secretary-general Christian Hafenecker praised the party's parliamentary club for inviting German right-wing extremist Götz Kubitschek to speak. Similarly, in an interview with Austria's national public broadcaster in August 2023, FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl described the Identitarian movement as a 'right-wing NGO', likening it to Greenpeace, and advocated its inclusion in public broadcaster programmes (SOS Mitmensch, 2024).

FPÖ politicians have also attended far-right rallies. Notably, Paul Dürnberger, the head of the FPÖ in Salzburg, attended an Identitarian rally in July 2023, where he waved the group's yellow flag. Herbert Kickl, then secretary-general of the FPÖ and now party leader, spoke at the 2016 Defenders of Europe congress, organised by extremist and Identitarian-linked groups, describing it as 'a discussion event among like-minded people' (Bartlau, 2016). Additionally, FPÖ MP Wolfgang Zanger and politician Gerhard Kurzmann attended or spoke at Identitarian events in Graz in 2016 and Styria in 2017.

The FPÖ's links extend to employment practices, with far-right figures being recruited into official positions. While serving as Minister of the Interior, Herbert Kickl employed Alexander Höferl, a former editor of *Unzensuriert*, a far-right disinformation outlet that supports the Identitarian movement. Similarly, FPÖ MP Axel Kassegger employed Siegfried Waschnig, a regular participant in Identitarian rallies. The party has also recruited members from far-right student fraternities, further embedding extremist influences within its ranks.

Furthermore, the FPÖ has cultivated close ties with far-right media outlets, with members frequently writing guest columns and giving interviews to Identitarian-aligned publications such as

[5] The report investigated the FPÖ's links to right-wing extremist groups and media, its handling of right-wing extremists within its own ranks, and its adoption of far-right ideological positions. It draws on SOS Mitmensch's independent research, as well as reports from the Austrian and German Federal Offices for the Protection of the Constitution, and findings from non-governmental documentation centres and research platforms focused on right-wing extremism.
[6] Extreme right-wing individuals or groups were identified based on their classification as right-wing extremists by the domestic intelligence services of Austria and Germany.

Info-DIREKT and *AUF1*, a far-right platform notorious for promoting conspiracy theories. Additionally, FPÖ members have purchased advertisements in antisemitic publications like *Aula*.

Taken together, these examples underscore the persistent and substantial links between the FPÖ and far-right extremist elements, highlighting the party's low concern for potential reputational damage.

Organisational strength

The FPÖ has a strong organisational capacity, characterised by a solid organisational framework, a broad support base, solid finances and party-parallel organisations. This reduces its reliance on fringe groups for mobilisation or policy formulation. However, despite these strengths, the party has organisational gaps, particularly in recruiting skilled labour, which drives its engagement with fringe groups. It also strategically engages with these groups to boost campaign support and collaborates with far-right media to create a parallel media sphere that allows the FPÖ to connect with its core base and test the limits of its ideological boundaries.

Mobilisation and policy formulation

The FPÖ has a strong and resilient organisational structure that mirrors that of its domestic competitors.[7] Once an outsider in Austrian politics, the party has steadily institutionalised its presence at the regional and local level since the 1990s, building a solid support base (Heinisch, 2004; Luther, 2001). Despite setbacks, such as Jörg Haider's 2005 split to form the BZÖ[8], the FPÖ quickly recovered under Heinz-Christian Strache. Returning to its radical populist roots, the party rebuilt its structures, resolved its financial challenges, and restored its operational effectiveness (Belafi, 2017; Pelinka, 2022).

[7] Prof. Dr. Reinhard Heinisch, Professor of Comparative Austrian Politics at the University of Salzburg (video interview on November 22, 2024), Dr. Bernhard Weidinger, Senior researcher at the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance (video interview on November 13, 2024), and Prof. Dr. Birgit Sauer, Professor of Political Science at the University of Vienna (video interview on December 10, 2024) have described the FPÖ's organisational strength as high.

[8] The Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), a right-wing populist party founded by Jörg Haider in 2005, split from the FPÖ seeking a more moderate stance but struggled for relevance after Haider's death in 2008.

A key to the FPÖ's organisational strength is its highly decentralised national structure, which grants significant autonomy to regional chapters. These chapters form the party's operational backbone, managing membership, setting fees, and selecting candidates in a bottom-up approach (Heinisch, 2016). At the national level, the federal chairperson wields considerable authority, steering the direction of the party within a vertically integrated framework. The party congress, representing both the national apparatus and the regional branches, facilitates coordination and legitimises decisions. This balance of local autonomy and central control reinforces legislative cohesion and party discipline.[9]

With around 40,000 dues-paying members, the FPÖ has a smaller membership base than its rivals but benefits from its members' strong commitment to its political agenda. This grassroots mobilisation model allows the party to maintain a direct link with its base while reducing its dependence on external actors (Heinisch, 2016; Henrich, 2024, p. 40). In contrast to the ÖVP or SPÖ, which are more dependent on state resources, the FPÖ's grassroots-driven approach enhances its operational capacity and secures sustainable support.

The party's organisational reach is further extended by affiliated groups representing business, farmers, and students. Although less influential than the ÖVP's party-parallel organisations, these groups extend the FPÖ's network and provide additional support. Financially, the FPÖ has historically been less resourceful than Austria's major parties, but electoral success has increased subsidies and campaign reimbursements, strengthening its financial position (Heinisch, 2016, p. 32).

The FPÖ's robust organisational framework, grassroots mobilisation, and growing network of party-parallel organisations have significantly reduced its reliance on fringe groups for mobilisation and policy development.[10] In its early years, financial and human resource constraints

[9] Emphasised by Prof. Dr. Birgit Sauer in a video interview on December 10, 2024.
[10] Prof. Dr. Farid Hafez noted that in its early years, the FPÖ's limited financial and human resources forced it to engage with the far-right milieu. However, since the early 2000s, the party has become financially and organisationally stable, reducing its reliance on such groups. He explained in a video interview on 16 December 2024 that while the FPÖ had close ties with far-right circles in the 1990s—some neo-Nazi groups even served as bodyguards at events—this cooperation has since declined as the party's organisational needs have evolved.

necessitated closer engagement with far-right actors. However, as the party became more financially and structurally stable, this reliance diminished. The FPÖ has a strong mobilisation capacity, with members actively distributing campaign material—work that other parties often outsource to external companies. This internal mobilisation strength is now unparalleled in Austria, comparable only to the early years of the Greens when they operated more as an activist movement.[11]

Similarly, the FPÖ formulates its policies largely independently. Officially, policy development is based on party congress resolutions. However, under Haider, the party moved away from long-term programmes in favour of short to medium-term action plans announced unilaterally through the media, forcing the party to align retrospectively. Despite this, the FPÖ has maintained strong programmatic cohesion (Heinisch, 2016, pp. 33, 43). It relies on its own educational institute[12] to prepare programmatic points, publish materials, and organise training seminars. Unlike in Germany, where far-right think tanks such as the IfS play a role in shaping far-right ideological discourse, there are no comparable institutions in Austria, meaning that the FPÖ relies primarily on its own intellectuals and party foundation for policy preparation. Its hierarchical structure, de-prioritisation of detailed programme formulation and in-house expertise allow it to develop its policy positions relatively independently.

While the FPÖ does not depend on fringe groups for policy formulation, it remains open to their ideological influence.[13] Certain far-right concepts, such as ‘remigration,’ have been integrated into FPÖ discourse after gaining traction in Identitarian circles.[14] In some cases, members of extremist groups have joined the party’s educational organisation, contributing to ideological discussions. The Identitarian movement, in particular, influences the FPÖ’s ideological direction,

[11]Andreas Peham, expert at the DÖW specialising in research, monitoring, and documentation of right-wing extremism in Austria, noted the FPÖ’s unmatched grassroots mobilisation, with members handling campaign distribution—reminiscent of the Greens' early activist years (video interview on November 13, 2024).
[12] The *Freiheitliches Bildungsinstitut* is the FPÖ-aligned educational institute that offers ideological training, political education, and leadership development for party members and affiliates, advancing the party's agenda.
[13] Andreas Peham and Prof. Dr. Birgit Sauer.
[14] Andreas Peham, who closely monitors the party, observed ‘entryism from the extreme right’ with members from the Identitarian movement being accepted into the FPÖ’s educational organisation.

serving as an external source of inspiration.[15] This receptiveness stems partly from the party's low reputational concerns on immigration-related issues, where public sentiment aligns with its hardline stance. The next section will explore this dynamic in greater detail.

Recruitment of skilled staff

Despite its strong organisational capacity, the FPÖ has struggled to recruit qualified staff through conventional channels, prompting it to recruit from far-right circles. This was particularly evident during its time in government (late 2017–May 2019), when several FPÖ-led ministries employed individuals with links to extremist groups (SOS Mitmensch, 2024). Notable examples include the Ministry of Sport under Vice-Chancellor and then FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache, the Ministry of the Interior under Herbert Kickl, and the Ministry of Social Affairs under Beate Hartinger-Klein. In addition, over the past decade other FPÖ politicians have employed or awarded lucrative contracts to individuals from far-right circles. In Upper Austrian, for example. FPÖ-led ministries have awarded contracts to Stefan Magnet, a well-known right-wing extremist (SOS Mitmensch, 2024).

Far-right student fraternities are a key recruitment pool for the FPÖ, particularly for academically qualified staff. As the party struggles to attract professionals through conventional channels, it turns to these nationalist groups to fill key positions in MP offices and government ministries when in power (Weidinger, 2017).[16] Nearly a third of the FPÖ's current national MPs are estimated to be members of these organisations.[17] Beyond personnel, the fraternities provide financial backing, access to established right-wing networks, and a stable voter base.[18]

[15] Journalist and Herbert Kickl biographer, Robert Treichler, seconded that the identitarians provide a 'kind of ideological thought leadership' for the party (video interview on November 19, 2024).
[16] Prof. Dr. Heinisch explains, 'the FPÖ simply has a recruitment problem because it needs academics, especially when it assumes government responsibilities' (video interview on November 22, 2024). Journalist Robert Treichler concurs that these ties help the FPÖ staff key roles in MP offices and ministries when in government (video interview on November 19, 2024).
[17] Dr. Bernhard Weidinger, Senior Researcher at the DÖW (video interview on November 13, 2024).
[18] Prof. Dr. Reinhard Heinisch notes that the FPÖ leverages these resources for both staffing and broader political gains. This influence is reflected in its parliamentary ranks, where nearly a third of its national MPs are members of far-right student fraternities.

The FPÖ's willingness to recruit from far-right circles reflects its low concern for reputational damage, even while in government. During its last period in power, from late 2017 to May 2019, several FPÖ-led ministries employed individuals with extreme-right connections. For example, Beate Hartinger-Klein, then Minister of Social Affairs, hired two staff members linked to the Identitarians, including one individual who had attended the 2016 Congress of the European Defenders. This challenges the notion that government experience discourages RRPs' from interacting with fringe groups.

Ultimately, the FPÖ's reliance on far-right networks is a strategic response to its recruitment challenges. While its organisational strength reduces its reliance on these groups for mobilisation and policy formulation, they remain crucial for recruiting academically qualified staff and filling a significant organisational gap.

Opportunistic campaign support

In addition to recruiting academically qualified staff from far-right associations and fringe group, the FPÖ also engages with these networks to opportunistically secure additional campaign support. While the party does not rely on them to organise demonstrations or monitor elections, it remains open to mobilisation assistance, showing little concern for reputational risks.[19] Far-right fraternities play a notable role in FPÖ campaigns, with members often assisting at events.[20] However, their involvement remains limited, as their numbers are small, and they prefer to operate discreetly, maintaining a formally non-partisan stance.

The FPÖ has also received support from fringe groups such as the Identitarian movement. Identitarian activists have attended FPÖ rallies, including an event in Vienna in September 2024, where some attacked a camera crew from the private broadcaster Puls24 (Die Presse, 2024). In addition to their physical presence, they support the FPÖ's election efforts online, promoting the

[19] This point was raised by Andreas Peham, Researcher at DÖW (video interview on November 13, 2024).
[20] The FPÖ 'definitively receives support from far-right fraternities,' and 'far-right fraternity members often support FPÖ campaign events' explain Dr. Weidinger and Prof. Dr. Sauer.

party through social media, Telegram channels and specially produced videos.[21] Identitarians have also appeared at FPÖ election parties, at times openly displaying the white power symbol next to party leader Herbert Kickl, further underlining not only the FPÖ's willingness to opportunistically accept campaign support from extremist groups but also its disregard for potential reputational consequences (Sager, 2024).

Far-right parallel media universe

In addition to recruiting personnel and securing campaign support from far-right networks, the FPÖ actively collaborates with far-right media to build a parallel information ecosystem. This strategy strengthens ties with its core supporters, amplifies its message, and enables the party to push ideological boundaries with minimal backlash.

A 2024 report highlights the FPÖ's close ties to far-right media outlets such as *AUF1, Info-DIREKT*, and *Heimatkurier*—all of which have been classified as part of the right-wing extremist spectrum by Austria's domestic intelligence agency. At least 42 FPÖ members have been involved in financing, designing, or promoting far-right media and events, and 24 current or former FPÖ politicians have written articles or appeared in these outlets over the past decade—even during their time in government (SOS Mitmensch, 2024). This further underlines that governing experience does not necessarily discourage RRPs from engaging with fringe groups.

Historically frustrated by its limited access to mainstream media, the FPÖ has cultivated a mutually beneficial relationship with far-right outlets.[22] The party leverages these platforms to amplify its message and reach ideologically aligned audiences. These outlets are key to the FPÖ's communication strategy, as they share the party's ideology and can bypass traditional media gatekeeping. For instance, in the first half of 2024, four senior FPÖ figures appeared on *AUF1* ahead of the national elections (Ibid). After the results, party leader Herbert Kickl chose *AUF1* for

[21] Explains Austrian journalist, Robert Treichler (video interview on November 19, 2024).
[22] Dr. Bernhard Weidinger and Andreas Peham (video interviews on November 13, 2024).

his first public appearance, highlighting the importance the FPÖ places on these media and its confidence in facing minimal reputational risks (Pechtl, 2024).

Far-right media serve several strategic purposes for the FPÖ. They amplify the party's messages among its core supporters, thanks to their significant reach. This alternative media ecosystem reduces the FPÖ's reliance on mainstream outlets, reinforcing its narrative control.[23] It also allows the FPÖ to stretch its rhetoric, challenge social norms, and normalise extremist ideas.[24] Operating in this parallel information space, the FPÖ can push the boundaries of its ideological narrative while facing minimal backlash from its supporters.[25]

The FPÖ actively supports these outlets through direct engagement and financial backing. The party grants them exclusive interviews and funds them via party advertisements. At least 22 current or former FPÖ politicians, including party leader Herbert Kickl, ex-leader Norbert Hofer, and key figures like Manfred Haimbuchner and Udo Landbauer, have either placed ads in far-right media or personally appeared in FPÖ-sponsored promotions (SOS Mitmensch, 2024). This financial and political investment further cements the party's reliance on and commitment to its far-right media allies.

This subsection has demonstrated that, despite the FPÖ's strong organisational capacity and independence from fringe groups in terms of mobilisation and policy development, the party's difficulty in attracting academically qualified staff has led it to recruit from far-right fringe groups. Furthermore, the FPÖ's willingness to collaborate with these groups for additional campaign support and its use of far-right media to amplify messages, engage core supporters and test ideological boundaries highlights its low concern for reputational risk and opportunistic reliance on

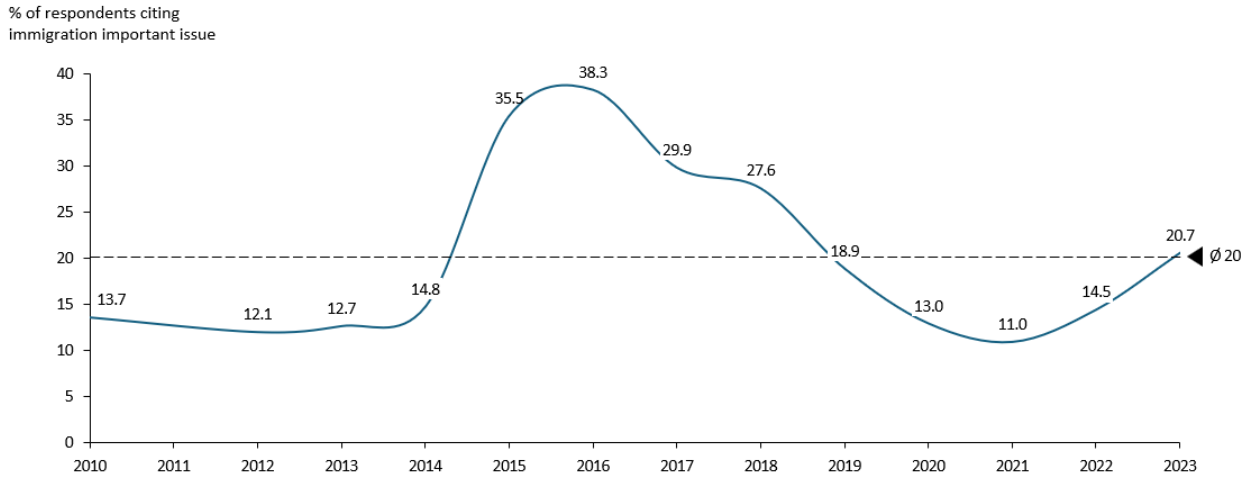
[23] As Prof. Dr Heinisch and Roberrt Treichler noted.
[24] Prof. Dr. Hafez (video interview on December 16, 2024).
[25] Three experts, Andreas Peham, Dr. Bernard Weidinger and Prof. Dr. Farid Hafez, unprompted addressed the FPÖ's strategic motivations for interacting with and appearing in far-right media as an opportunity to sharpen its discourse, shift acceptable norms and generate discussions on key issues such as immigration, which the FPÖ can then respond to in other media.

extremist networks for operational support. The next section outlines how the high salience of immigration contributes to low reputational concerns.

Immigration salience

Immigration has been an important issue in Austria throughout the analysis period. On average, 20% of Eurobarometer respondents identified immigration as one of the two most important issues in their country, compared to around 13% in France and around 30% in Germany. There was a noticeable spike during the European migrant crisis in 2015 and its aftermath. Previous peaks occurred in 2001, 2007, and 2009, with Austria seeing higher levels of concern about migration than many other Western European countries (Meyer and Rosenberger, 2015).

Figure 25: Immigration salience in Austria, 2010-2022



Source: Pan-EU Eurobarometer 89.1 survey (Dennison and Geddes, 2019; European Commission, 2023)
Note: Percentage of respondents citing immigration as one of the two most important issues affecting their country

Internal party reputational constraints

In a climate where immigration is a highly salient issue, FPÖ leaders believe their hardline stance resonates widely with the public. They also perceive their base as open to, or even expecting, engagement with fringe groups, reducing concerns about potential reputational risks within the party. This dynamic is particularly evident in the influence of the party's far-right wing and its youth organisation, both of which actively advocate for closer ties with far-right groups.

These factions show a strong affinity for the Identitarian movement, participating in its events, adopting its rhetoric and incorporating its symbols in party media.

The FPÖ leadership has responded to these signals from the base by publicly supporting its youth wing and defending its actions. For instance, in August 2023, the youth organisation released a video, later shared on the party's official channels, in which it proclaimed itself as Austria's 'last chance' to address issues such as 'loss of culture,' 'language bans,' 'rainbow terror,' and 'the great replacement.' The party spokesperson defended the video, framing it as consistent with the FPÖ's platform and as a distinguishing feature of the party compared to others (Schiretz and Czadul, 2023).

The perceived encouragement of the party's base to engage with fringe groups is also reflected in the leaders' frequent sharing of far-right, immigration-related rhetoric on social media and their readiness to appear in and publish content through far-right outlets like *Aula* and *Info-DIREKT*.[26] The far-right faction has long played a dominant role in shaping the FPÖ's ideological orientation (Pelinka, 2022). Similarly, the presence of FPÖ leaders at the annual ball of the far-right student fraternities in Vienna—an event also attended by members of the Identitarian movement and other far-right figures—signals alignment with the values and positions of the base.

For the FPÖ, participation in such events is a strategic move to reassure supporters and reaffirm the party's commitment to far-right principles.[27] Another example of this responsiveness to the base was the symbolic invitation of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as the first international guest of the FPÖ's Walter Rosenkranz, following his election as president of the Austrian National Council in October 2024—a gesture widely seen as an attempt to galvanise the party's base (Fink, 2024).

[26] As explained by Andreas Peham (video interview on November 13, 2024).
[27] Prof. Dr. Heinisch noted that the FPÖ relies heavily on its core supporters, who are vital to the party's survival. Despite experiencing two major implosions, the FPÖ has rebounded each time due to this loyal base. The party understands that losing these voters—or facing competition from another right-wing party—could threaten its existence. This was evident after the split with Haider's new party, when core supporters sustained the FPÖ. Even when moderating its image, the party ensures it retains this base. Events like the fraternity ball serve as key signals to reassure core <voters that the FPÖ remains aligned with their values, despite any tactical adjustments.

Pressure from the base to maintain links with far-right groups is also reflected in the FPÖ's adoption of the term ‘Distanzeritis.’ This term rejects calls from other political parties to distance themselves from far-right affiliations. Its adoption was celebrated by the party's base and within the far-right milieu as a symbolic victory, reinforcing the party's commitment to the views and values of its supporters.[28]

These examples illustrate how, in an environment where immigration remains a central issue, the FPÖ perceives significant support from its base for engaging with far-right groups. This perceived pressure reduces the reputational risks associated with such alliances and shapes the party's rhetoric, actions and symbolic gestures accordingly.

Reputational public backlash

Given the prominence of immigration in political discourse, FPÖ leaders believe that their tough stance on immigration resonates strongly with the public. This further reduces their concerns about reputational risks. Long-time observers of the FPÖ describe this as a 'subtle causal mechanism' whereby the dominance of immigration in public discourse reduces the party’s sensitivity to reputational backlash. Electoral success has emboldened the FPÖ to adopt more radical rhetoric and openly engage with fringe groups. Party leaders recognise that voters continue to support them despite their open embrace of fringe actors.[29]

This diminishing concern for reputational consequences is reflected in the party’s adoption of radical language and policy demands, including terms once considered taboo. For example, with immigration a hot-button issue, the FPÖ feels comfortable using phrases such as 'mass deportations' and advocating measures such as 'a complete stop to immigration' and calling for 'the deportation of those who are already in Austria', despite the questionable practicality and constitutional feasibility of such proposals. Similarly, terms such as 'remigration', once considered

[28] As noted by Prof. Dr. Heinisch.
[29] As Dr. Bernhard Weidinger and Andreas Peham explain (video interviews on November 13, 2024). Journalist Robert Treichler, agrees that 'in the context of high immigration salience and electoral success, the party has gained confidence that its positions are widely accepted, which has lowered inhibitions about interacting with fringe groups’ (video interview on November 19, 2024).

extreme, have gained traction within the party. This demonstrates the FPÖ's willingness to push the boundaries of political discourse with minimal concern for reputational consequences.

The party's reduced sensitivity to reputational risks is also evident in its diminishing need to justify interactions with fringe groups. For example, FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl openly praised the attendance of far-right German publisher Götz Kubitschek at an FPÖ parliamentary club event, signalling the party's defiance of mainstream pressure to distance itself from far-right figures (Sager, 2025). Kickl's description of the Identitarian movement as a right-wing NGO further underlines the FPÖ's openness to such groups and illustrates its belief that these links will not lead to serious internal or external repercussions.

Amid heightened immigration salience, FPÖ leaders perceive a broad acceptance of their positions, making the strategic benefits of engaging with fringe groups outweigh the potential risks. One significant advantage is the norm-breaking and normalisation of extreme right-wing positions. The FPÖ regularly adopts and shares Identitarian content and even allows their representatives to attend FPÖ events. This creates a recurring pattern where Identitarian actions provoke outrage, the establishment reacts, and the FPÖ frames this reaction as a sign of the establishment's 'intolerance.' By sharing content related to Identitarian actions or views, the FPÖ can distance itself from the source, claiming to merely respond to the intolerance of others, while simultaneously amplifying the Identitarian message.

This tactic also shifts the boundaries of acceptable discourse. The FPÖ regularly introduces provocative ideas—referred to as 'balloons'—which may initially spark backlash but gradually lose their shock value and become normalised. Terms like 'remigration' or 'Volkskanzler' are prime examples of this process.[30] As these concepts become more accepted over time, they contribute to expanding the boundaries of what is considered politically permissible, reshaping the discourse in the process.

[30] As outlined by Prof. Dr. Brigit Sauer (video interview on December 10, 2024).

Widespread xenophobic attitudes in Austria amplify the impact of immigration salience and reinforce the diminished reputational concerns of FPÖ leaders. In a political culture described as 'shameless,' actions are often taken without significant consequences. Many Austrians remain unaware of the extent of racism within society, and xenophobic or racist views are prevalent. This environment allows the FPÖ to cross political taboos with little risk of major backlash, reinforcing the party's perception that it can push the boundaries of acceptable discourse without facing serious consequences.[31]

Despite this reduced sensitivity to reputational risks, there are still red lines that the FPÖ is careful not to cross. Open expressions of neo-Nazi nostalgia or anti-Semitism remain largely off-limits, as such actions would trigger significant backlash and could damage the party's position in the European Parliament, particularly with allies such as Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen.[32]

In sum, the FPÖ demonstrates selective and strategic engagement with far-right fringe groups, driven by the need to fill specific organisational needs. While the party's strong organisational capacity reduces its reliance on fringe groups for mobilisation and policy development, its difficulty in recruiting qualified staff leads it to actively recruit from far-right fraternities. The FPÖ also opportunistically accepts campaign support and uses far-right media to amplify its message and connect with core supporters. Amid high immigration salience, party leaders seem less concerned about reputational risks. Evidence suggests that reduced intra-party pressure and perceived public support for its positions lessen hesitation about engaging with fringe groups. The FPÖ views the strategic benefits—such as signalling alignment with its base, attracting disillusioned voters, and normalising far-right discourse—as outweighing any potential reputational costs. This behaviour challenges the notion that government experience or the government's harsh response to far-right actors dissuades the FPÖ from such engagement. Even in

[31] As explained by Prof. Dr. Farid Hafez (video interview on December 16, 2024).
[32] As noted by journalist Robert Treichler (video interview on November 19, 2024).

government, the FPÖ has interacted with groups classified as extreme right and monitored by the Austrian intelligence service. Unlike in France, the FPÖ's dominance of Austrian public discourse on immigration does not diminish its willingness to engage with fringe groups. Instead, FPÖ leaders appear to see this engagement as a way of pushing ideological boundaries and legitimising far-right positions.

Swiss People's Party (SVP)

Background of the SVP

The Swiss People's Party (*Schweizerische Volkspartei*, SVP) emerged from the merger of conservative and agrarian groups, primarily the Farmers, Artisans, and Citizens' Party and the more liberal Democratic Party. The SVP sought to protect Switzerland's traditional values, neutrality, and direct democracy while promoting free-market principles. It opposed the growing influence of the Social Democratic Party and other left-wing forces. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the SVP maintained a modest electoral presence, consistently securing around 11% of the vote without expanding significantly beyond its base.

The 1990s marked a turning point for the SVP, largely driven by Christoph Blocher,[33] a charismatic businessman who, though not the party leader, became its central figure. Blocher redefined the party's identity, steering it towards a more radical right-wing nationalist, populist, and anti-establishment stance, emphasising opposition to potential European integration, tighter immigration controls, and safeguarding Swiss sovereignty. At the same time, the SVP underwent profound structural changes, experiencing enormous and sustained organisational growth, expanding its regional branches and enhancing electoral mobilisation. Blocher's populist rhetoric

[33] Blocher was one of the SVP's most influential figures, shaping its ideology and public image. He was a Federal Councillor (2004-2007) and played a key role as a strategist and figurehead. During his rise, the party was led by Ueli Maurer (1996-2008) and later by Toni Brunner (2008-2016).

resonated with voters and propelled the SVP into the political mainstream (Mazzoleni and Rossini, 2016).

In the 1999 federal elections, the SVP made a historic breakthrough, winning 26% of the vote and becoming the largest party in the Federal Assembly (Table 8). This rise was fuelled by its strong organisation, effective voter mobilisation and Blocher's central role as the party's public face. In 2003, the SVP won a second seat in the Federal Council and Blocher was appointed Minister for Justice and Police. His tenure was marked by confrontations with other parties, especially over immigration and foreign policy (McGann and Kitschelt, 2005).

In the 2000s, the SVP gained notoriety for its hardline anti-immigration campaigns, portraying mass immigration as a threat to Swiss culture and security. It strongly opposed potential EU integration and international agreements that were seen as undermining Swiss autonomy. The party's increasingly hardline rhetoric, particularly its portrayal of foreigners—especially Muslim immigrants—as a threat to national values, drew widespread criticism. Its 2009 'minaret ban' initiative, which sought to ban the construction of minarets in Switzerland, polarised the political landscape. Although widely condemned, it solidified the SVP's identity as a defender of Swiss values (Soukup, 2009).

In 2007, the party's share of the vote reached 29%, cementing its dominance. However, a left-liberal coalition removed Blocher from the Federal Council in December 2007, relegating the SVP to opposition.[34] In December 2008, the Federal Assembly elected SVP president Ueli Maurer to the Federal Council, marking the party's gradual reintegration into government.

The SVP's continued electoral strength was evident in the 2011 and 2015 federal elections, when it retained its position as Switzerland's largest party. In 2015, the election of Guy Parmelin to the Federal Council restored the SVP's full participation in the concordance system.[35] While in

[34] Additionally, in 2008, the party underwent a split, involving some of its cantonal branches, but the national party organisation continued to maintain a high capacity for mobilisation.
[35] Switzerland's concordance system is a power-sharing model in which the major political parties are represented on the seven-member Federal Council to ensure broad political consensus and stability. This system aims to integrate different political perspectives and prevent any single party from dominating.

government, the party only partially adapted to the common rules of the game, maintaining a certain anti-establishment character.

Since 2015, the SVP has been led by Albert Rösti (2016-2020), Marco Chiesa (2020-2024) and Marcel Dettling (2024-present). Each leader has maintained the party's core focus on Swiss independence, immigration control, and national sovereignty. Recent priorities have included energy security and post-pandemic reconstruction. The SVP's influence on Swiss politics remains profound, dominating debates on immigration, security and national identity (Biard, 2017). Despite criticism of its divisive rhetoric, the SVP continues to thrive as the dominant force on Switzerland's political right.

Table 8: SVP vote share (in %) and National Council seats (absolute), 1971-2023

Year	SVP Vote Share (%)	Seats in National Council
1971	11.1%	23
1975	9.9%	21
1979	11.6%	23
1983	11.1%	23
1987	11.0%	25
1991	11.9%	25
1995	14.9%	29
1999	22.5%	44
2003	26.7%	55
2007	28.9%	62
2011	26.6%	54
2015	29.4%	65
2019	25.6%	53
2023	27.9%	62

Source: (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2024)

Far-right scene in Switzerland

Switzerland's far-right scene is diverse, spanning militant neo-Nazi factions, nationalist and cultural traditionalist groups, Islamophobic organisations, and extreme-right political parties. These groups share common themes of ethno-nationalism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and conspiracy theories, often mixing xenophobia and anti-Semitism (see Table 12 in Annex A for an overview).

One of the most prominent far-right groups is *Junge* Tat, which advocates for a culturally homogeneous Switzerland and rejects multiculturalism and democratic pluralism. It exploits polarising issues, such as asylum centre construction, to push its agenda. Highly skilled in social media, *Junge Tat* effectively recruits members and promotes its ideology. Its members actively participate in anti-immigrant protests, particularly in Zurich and Bern, amplifying their presence online and on the streets.

Cultural traditionalist groups like the *Freiheitstrychler* (or *Glockenschwinger*), represent a more subtle but ideologically aligned strand of the Swiss far-right. Often associated with protests against COVID-19 measures, they use folkloric symbols—such as traditional bells and costumes—to convey nationalist and anti-globalist messages. While not openly violent, their rhetoric overlaps with conspiracy theories and anti-elite narratives, fuelling social division and intolerance.

At the more extreme end, clandestine neo-Nazi groups such as *Blood & Honour* and *Combat 18* glorify Nazi ideology, downplay the Holocaust, and engage in violence against immigrants, minorities, and left-wing activists. Concentrated mainly in German-speaking Switzerland, their activities include secret gatherings, propaganda distribution, and violent clashes. These groups also maintain links with wider European far-right networks.

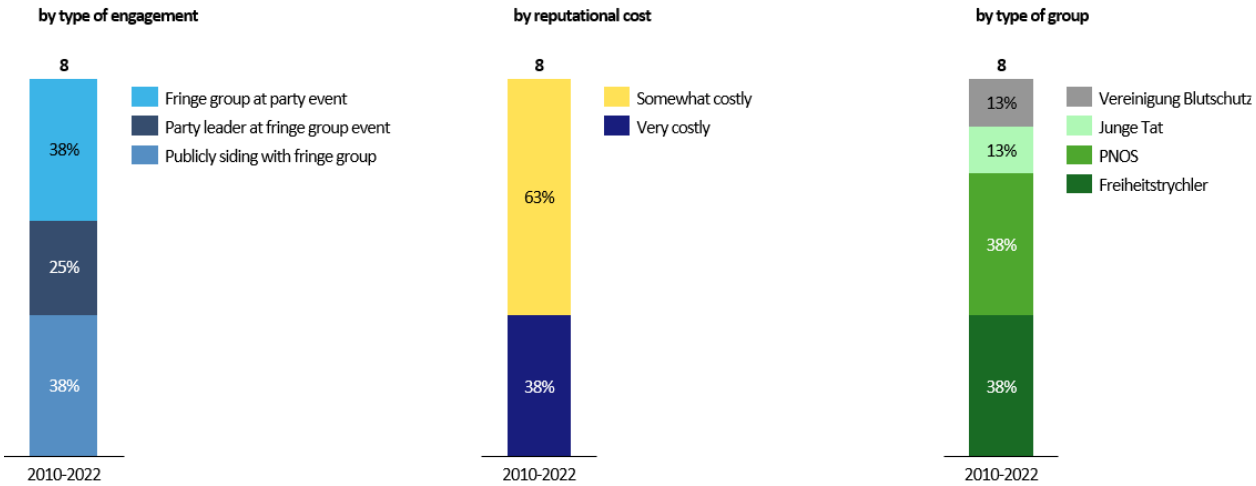
Right-wing extremist activity in Switzerland is most concentrated in German-speaking regions, while French- and Italian-speaking areas see less activity, though isolated incidents still occur. Unlike Germany, Switzerland sets a high threshold for state surveillance of extremist groups, requiring evidence of violence or advocacy of violence before intervention. The mere pursuit of anti-constitutional goals is not enough to justify surveillance, which limits state action.

This shadow case analysis examines the SVP's interactions with four fringe groups: Junge Tat,[36] the Freiheitstrychler, Nationale Aktionsfront (NAF), and Pnos. These groups were selected on the basis of their significance, as highlighted by the Swiss Foundation against Racism and Anti-Semitism and by expert assessments.

SVP's fringe group engagement

Compared to the FPÖ, the SVP has had fewer overt links to far-right fringe groups. A Factiva analysis found 44 instances of FPÖ engagement with such groups between 2010 and 2022, while only eight were recorded for the SVP (Figure 26). While this analysis may underestimate the actual number of cases, it highlights a notable disparity. An Austrian report in 2024 documented over 200 FPÖ interactions with fringe groups, underlining the party's extensive links with these organisations. In contrast, Swiss media report only moderate SVP fringe group interactions, with a slight increase since 2020. There is no evidence that the SVP's level of engagement is close to that of the FPÖ.

Figure 26: SVP fringe group engagement, cumulative 2010-2022



Source: Factiva search (Blick, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Tages-Anzeiger, Reuters)

[36] And its indirect predecessors Eisenjugend and Nationalistische Jugend Schweiz

Despite fewer public links, backstage ties between the SVP and far-right groups exist (Hedinger and Wild, 2023). Publicly, the SVP has occasionally expressed support for such groups, as illustrated by events involving the Identitarian movement. For example, in 2024, after the Austrian head of the Identitarian movement, Martin Sellner, had planned to give a speech in the canton of Aargau, but was expelled from the canton by the Swiss police, who considered the event as a threat to public safety, the Young SVP in Aargau described it as a 'black day for democracy' and expressed solidarity with Sellner on social media (Steiner and Walser, 2024). Senior SVP figure Christoph Blocher described Sellner's theories as 'harmless' when questioned by journalists from the *NZZ* (Tobler, 2024). Similarly, in 2022, the SVP Zurich declined to condemn the actions of Junge Tat, a far-right group that disrupted events such as a drag queen reading and a Pride church service in Zurich. While other parties denounced Junge Tat's actions in a joint statement, the SVP qualified them and submitted a motion calling for the immediate cancellation of the drag queen reading (Scherrer, 2022a, 2022b).

Support for fringe groups has also manifested itself in symbolic gestures. For example, leading members of the SVP, including Christoph Blocher and Ueli Maurer, have been seen wearing shirts of the Freiheitstrychler, a nationalist group originally opposed to the COVID-19 measures, and have welcomed members of this group at party events (Tischhauser, 2021a, 2021b).

In addition, the SVP has occasionally accepted fringe groups members into its ranks. Notable examples include Dominic Lüthard, founder of the extremist Pnos youth wing, Helvetische Jugend, who joined the SVP and ran for the Bern cantonal parliament before being expelled (Hedinger and Wild, 2023). Similarly, in 2008, a former Pnos member chaired the founding conference of the Upper Engadine branch of the Young SVP (Knellwolf, 2008). Members of fringe groups have also participated in SVP events, such as in 2017 when Pnos members attended an SVP rally (Preisig, 2017).

The Young SVP has shown a greater openness towards far-right fringe groups (Jirát, 2014; Ott, 2024). For instance, its head of strategy, Sarah Regez, met with Martin Sellner of the Identitarian movement, and some Young SVP members have openly expressed sympathy for the

group Junge Tat (Neuhaus, 2024). Since 2020, there has been a slight increase in the SVP's overt engagement with far-right fringe groups. This trend is reflected in news coverage of events such as SVP president Marco Chiesa inviting two representatives of the French identitarian group Némésis, known for its racist propaganda, to the Federal Palace in September 2023 (Culet, 2023).[37]

Although the SVP occasionally interacts publicly with far-right groups and expresses overt sympathy for certain organisations, such engagement appears to be less frequent and systematic than that of the FPÖ. Reputationally costly forms of engagement, such as hiring members of fringe groups or co-organising protests, are rare. Despite sporadic incidents, the SVP's overt engagement with the far-right fringe remains limited.

Organisational strength

The SVP's limited engagement with fringe groups stems from its strong organisational capacity and independence. The SVP attracts and mobilises supporters independently, develops its own political programmes and requires little external operational support. Scholars describe the SVP as highly capable, resembling a mass party in both structure and strategy (Mazzoleni and Rossini, 2016).

The party's organisational framework strikes a balance between centralisation and sub-national variation (SVP Schweiz, 2018). Under Christoph Blocher, the SVP adopted a fourfold strategy to enhance centralisation, operational efficiency, and electoral appeal (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015). This approach empowered the national headquarters while granting limited autonomy to regional branches, thereby promoting both coherence and loyalty to the central leadership. At the national level, the SVP strengthened its framework to implement strategies efficiently, while local branches retained grassroots dynamism. This combination of strong central authority and local adaptability allowed the SVP to cultivate an active grassroots following (Favero, 2021).

[37] Chiesa and National Councillor Jean-Luc Addor said they had not invited the representatives, but the latter later thanked them on social media for the invitation.

Supporter mobilisation

The SVP does not rely on far-right fringe groups for mobilisation. Under Christoph Blocher, it developed professional, resource-intensive campaign methods (Skenderovic, 2009). Since 2001, the party has established branches in every canton, ensuring a strong territorial presence (Mazzoleni and Rossini, 2016). This expansion broadened its sociological base in the 1990s, attracting urban working- and middle-class supporters (Lutz, 2008). Membership grew from 59,900 in 1996 to 90,000 in 2007 and has remained stable at around 80,000 since the late 2010s.[38] No other Swiss party has expanded its territorial reach, intensity, and centralisation to a similar extent (Mazzoleni and Rossini, 2016).

The SVP's ability to attract new supporters independently further reduces the need for alliances with fringe groups. It fosters a strong sense of community, offering 'communitarian' incentives that create tight-knit groups of like-minded individuals (Albertazzi, 2016). Local branches organise events to strengthen members' ties to the party, often framing it as a community under attack from the media and left-wing forces (Favero, 2021). These branches act as the main link between the party and potential supporters, using social activities, canvassing and personal contact to engage voters. This mix of clear messaging, strong ideology and activist community building keeps mobilisation high.

Financial resources also underpin the SVP's mobilising power. The party has seen a net increase in resources as a result of advertising campaigns and events organised by the national party. Campaign budgets have also grown significantly due to increased financial support from wealthy supporters and party members (Mazzoleni and Rossini, 2016). According to the 2019 budget, the largest sources of income were donations, which accounted for 41.7%, and state contributions from the parliamentary group, which made up 46.7% (Favero, 2021; SVP Schweiz, 2019).

[38] As of 2020, SVP membership stood at 80,000, making it the third-largest party in Switzerland by membership size. The FDP leads with 120,000 members and sympathisers, followed by the CVP with approximately 100,000 members. In contrast, the SP is significantly smaller, with only 33,000 official members (Favero, 2021)

The SVP's ability to launch popular initiatives, unparalleled among Swiss parties, further underlines its strong mobilisation capacity and independence from fringe groups. In Switzerland, a popular initiative requires at least 100,000 signatures to qualify and must secure a majority of both voters and cantons to pass. Between 2009 and 2016, the SVP launched 12 out of 37 federal initiatives, more than any other party. Of these 37 federal initiatives, only six were approved. Notably, the SVP initiated or directly supported three of the successful ones, including the 2009 ban on minarets, the 2010 expulsion of criminal foreigners, and the 2014 initiative against mass immigration (Mazzoleni and Rossini, 2016).

The SVP's high mobilisation capacity—reflected in grassroots activism, professional campaigns, financial resources, and effective popular initiatives—minimises any reliance on fringe groups. By drawing on its mass-party legacy, the SVP has successfully expanded its repertoire of action and secured its position as a dominant force in Swiss politics without external dependence.

Policy formulation

The SVP's limited engagement with fringe groups is also driven by its ability to independently develop political programmes. The party does not struggle to recruit qualified staff and is widely recognised as a highly organised and sophisticated political force (Favero, 2021; Hildebrand, 2017; Mazzoleni and Rossini, 2016). Policy direction is primarily shaped by the SVP's central office, which oversees the party's programme, electoral platform, and national campaign messages. Its authority is reinforced by the party's statutes, which give it control over national campaigns, campaign materials, and key slogans for federal elections. The central office also decides on referenda, reviews and adopts policy documents, and elects members of the steering committee and general secretariat (Mazzoleni and Rossini, 2016).

This strong centralisation ensures internal cohesion, leaving little room for deviation from the official programme. Swiss far-right expert Adrian Favero describes the SVP's programme as

highly structured and consistent, reflecting its long-standing role as a governing party.[39] Policies are developed by a strong internal team, removing the need to rely on external fringe groups. However, recent programme updates—including entire chapters on 'woke madness' and 'gender terror'—suggest a deliberate effort to appeal to far-right voters. This shift demonstrates the party's ability to adapt its messaging while maintaining independence in policy development.

Operational support

The SVP's organisational strength means that it is only minimally dependent on fringe groups for operational support. Unlike the FPÖ, which depends to some extent on fringe networks for recruitment, the SVP has no difficulty in attracting qualified staff. It also runs its campaigns independently without the need for external assistance. Adrian Favero describes the SVP as 'well-organised' with tightly structured and consistently framed campaigns. The party works exclusively with the same advertising agency, run by an SVP member, which reinforces its operational independence. Any interaction with fringe groups is likely to be driven by personal or ideological overlap rather than strategic necessity.

The SVP also does not rely on fringe groups for its social media campaigns. Unlike the AfD and, to a lesser extent, the RN, it does not recruit social media specialists from far-right networks. Social media play a limited role in membership recruitment or activist mobilisation. Instead, SVP members primarily use digital platforms to react to political developments and to disseminate the party's ideology (Favero, 2021).

The party's independence from fringe groups extends to far-right media. While far-right outlets are crucial for parties like the AfD, RN, and FPÖ, the SVP relies on them much less. This is due to the party's strong communication capabilities and the limited number of far-right media platforms in Switzerland.[40] The SVP has invested heavily in self-promotion, developing

[39] Assistant Professor in European Politics and Society, University of Groningen (video interview on December 13, 2024).
[40] Adrian Favero, Assistant Professor in European Politics and Society, University of Groningen (video interview on December 13, 2024).

newsletters, podcasts and YouTube programmes that allow it to bypass the mainstream media. Although publications like *Weltwoche* and *Schweizerzeit* amplify SVP positions and feature party authors, their reach and influence remain relatively limited. Ultimately, the SVP's strong internal organisation, effective communication strategies, and skilled staff enable it to amplify its message without significant reliance on far-right media or fringe networks.

Immigration salience

The previous section outlined how the SVP's organisational strength reduces its reliance on fringe groups. This section examines how the high salience of immigration in Switzerland shapes the party's reputational concerns and strategic decisions regarding engagement with these groups.

Immigration has remained a dominant political issue throughout the analysis period. While Switzerland lacks a longitudinal measure of immigration salience comparable to the Eurobarometer surveys of EU citizens' key concerns, qualitative evidence highlights its prominence. For example, a 2024 DemoSCOPE survey found that 65% of 6,300 respondents were concerned about Switzerland's population potentially reaching 10 million (Cavalli and Reinhardt, 2024). Other surveys show that 62% of the population support stricter immigration controls (Poletti, 2023).

Between 2010 and 2022, immigration remained a central focus of Swiss public discourse and media coverage, often linked to debates about national identity, security and cultural integration. A 2015 study of Swiss media from 2000 to 2009 found that immigration dominated social media discussions, with an increasing tendency to portray Muslims as a homogeneous and problematic group, distinct from other immigrant categories (Feddersen, 2015). This narrative persisted into the following decade, with media coverage continuing to highlight challenges associated with Muslim communities. By 2016, the media focus on immigration remained strong, demonstrating the enduring salience of the issue despite the lack of systematic, longitudinal opinion data (Information FDFA, 2016).

Internal party reputational constraints

As with the other case studies, evidence suggests that the high salience of immigration has influenced the SVP's reputational cost calculations. In particular, it is likely to have weakened internal reputational constraints on engagement with far-right fringe groups. Some factions, particularly the Young SVP, have become increasingly comfortable with open engagement in this context. For instance, Sarah Regez, the Young SVP's head of strategy, has met with members of Junge Tat and the Identitarian movement. Some cantonal representatives of the Young SVP have even openly stated that Junge Tat addresses the same issues as the SVP (Neuhaus, 2024). Moreover, the Young SVP has adopted the immigration-related rhetoric of such groups, including terms like 'remigration' to align itself ideologically with the far-right fringe on immigration (Ryser, 2020). Regez, for example, publicly used the term 'remigration' in a hashtag under a racist post on X (Hunziker, 2024).

Lower internal reputational concerns amid high immigration salience are also evident in the SVP's willingness to engage with other groups such as Mass-Voll! and Freiheitstrychler, which initially opposed the government's Covid-19 policy but later adopted far-right positions on immigration. Despite clear links between Mass-Voll! and the Identitarian movement, including participation in Identitarian rallies in Vienna, the SVP in Solothurn entered into a list alliance with Mass-Voll! The president of the SVP in Solothurn, Christian Imark, justified this alliance by citing 'overlaps in content in the area of freedom and personal responsibility' (Washington, 2023). Many in the SVP do not see such groups as far-right, but as representing traditional Swiss values, despite their clearly far-right ideology.[41]

Further evidence of low internal reputational constraints can be seen in the participation of SVP member of the Council of States Pirmin Schwander in a demonstration against a federal asylum centre in Büsingen, where far-right groups such as Junge Tat and Freiheitstrychler were present. The rally featured posters calling for remigration, but no significant internal criticism emerged within the party, highlighting the reduced reputational concerns amid the high salience of

[41] Adrian Favero (video interview on December 13, 2024).

immigration (Erol, 2024). Similarly, after Regez met with representatives of the Identitarian movement and Junge Tat, neither the Young SVP leadership nor the parent party distanced themselves from or condemned the engagement. Leading figures such as SVP president Marcel Dettling and parliamentary leader Thomas Aeschi remained silent on the matter (Neuhaus, 2024). Christoph Blocher downplayed Regez's meeting with Identitarian leader Martin Sellner, suggesting that if a few young people wanted to hear about repatriation, a lecture on the topic would not 'destroy society' (Hunziker, 2024). Moreover, the president of the Zurich SVP, Domenik Ledergerber, dismissed concerns about the Winterthur SVP leader's hiring of two Junge Tat activists with criminal records, stating that 'the choice of business relationships by party members is a private matter' (Schöni, 2023).

Despite these moderate to low internal reputational constraints, SVP politicians who interact with fringe groups retain the option of distancing themselves if necessary, demonstrating an awareness of reputational risks. After facing internal criticism for her meeting with Junge Tat, [42] Regez claimed that she was unaware of the meeting's content and defended her openness to listening to all sides (Bohrer, 2024). The SVP operates strategically, with most actions coordinated centrally. Internal deviations from the party line are usually dealt with discreetly, with reprimands sent privately and without public attention. The SVP often allows its youth wing to take the lead in testing more radical positions, allowing the main party to distance itself from any fallout if necessary.[43]

Interactions with groups like Junge Tat—including participation in their rallies and the hiring of two Junge Tat activists by the SVP president in Winterthur[44]—not only highlight the low reputational constraints within the party but also challenge the notion that a strong government response to far-right groups could reduce engagement with fringe actors. Although long-time SVP member Xavier Dufour has expressed concern that Regez's meeting with Junge Tat activists could

[42] Six sections of the Young SVP protested against the meeting and called for Regez's resignation.
[43] As explained by Adrian Favero (video interview on December 13, 2024).
[44] Maria Wegelin, president and National Council candidate of the SVP in Winterthur, has her election videos produced by Manuel Corchia, a member of the far-right Junge Tat. Another member, Tobias Lingg, manages Wegelin's account on X.

attract the attention of the Federal Intelligence Service, which monitors violent, anti-constitutional groups (Schöni, 2023), the SVP appears undeterred by this prospect.

Reputational public backlash

In addition to moderate internal reputational constraints, the SVP perceives limited public backlash to its engagement with fringe groups in a context of high immigration salience. The party views immigration as a broadly shared public concern and believes that much of the population supports its anti-immigration stance, reducing the reputational risks of such interactions. Swiss far-right expert Adrian Favero explains that widespread concern about immigration alleviates the SVP leadership's reputational worries.[45] The party feels secure in engaging with fringe groups because its position on immigration aligns with public sentiment. With immigration dominating Swiss political discourse and fears of overpopulation—embodied in the '10 million Switzerland' narrative[46]—resonating in this small, densely populated country, the SVP sees little risk in aligning itself with groups that share its anti-immigration views.

Furthermore, the SVP's strong position in Swiss politics gives its members confidence that they can engage with fringe groups without facing significant negative consequences. The party's size, influence, and consistent re-election create a sense that it can afford such interactions. Voters largely expect the SVP to be re-elected regardless of its associations, and the party can always distance itself from these groups later if necessary. This weakens the notion that a RRP's engagement with fringe groups is constrained by its governing experience or role in government.

In this environment, SVP leaders weigh the strategic benefits of engaging with fringe groups against reputational concerns. A key benefit is the normalisation of far-right positions. SVP figures like Andreas Glarner[47] deliberately push the boundaries of acceptable discourse by addressing

[45] Video interview on December 13, 2024.
[46] The term '10 million Switzerland' refers to fears that Switzerland's population will reach 10 million, symbolising concerns about overpopulation, the strain on resources and cultural preservation in the context of high immigration. The idea has become a key issue in Swiss political discourse, particularly for parties that advocate strict immigration controls.
[47] Andreas Glarner, a member of the SVP and National Councillor since 2015 representing Aargau, serves as President of the SVP Aargau (since 2020) and oversees the party's Asylum and Migration portfolio.

issues that were once considered taboo (Hürlimann, 2024). In doing so, they attract media attention without facing voter backlash. This is part of a deliberate party strategy to test the limits of acceptable discourse while benefiting from media coverage. Occasional interaction with fringe groups such as Junge Tat allows the SVP to reinforce far-right narratives, normalise these positions and signal to radicalised supporters that their views are no longer fringe.

Such engagement also helps the SVP secure the support of radicalised voters and prevent the rise of competing far-right parties. The SVP's youth wing often adopts more extreme positions, enabling the parent party to distance itself when necessary and mitigate any reputational fallout (Schöni, 2023).

In sum, the SVP engages sparingly with far-right fringe groups because it has little organisational need to do so. While high immigration salience creates moderate internal constraints and low perceived public backlash, fostering a permissive environment, the SVP interacts with such groups selectively, only when it sees strategic benefits or minimal reputational risks. These interactions primarily serve to mainstream far-right positions and appeal to radicalised voters.

This chapter assessed the applicability of the theoretical argument through a shadow case analysis of the Austrian FPÖ and the Swiss SVP, demonstrating that the hypothesised variables hold in other contexts. The FPÖ case shows that, in a context of high immigration salience, low reputational concerns, and some organisational gaps, the party opportunistically engages with fringe groups to address its organisational deficiencies and advance the normalisation of far-right positions. In contrast, the SVP's organisational strength reduces its need to engage with fringe groups. In an environment of high immigration salience and low reputational concerns, the SVP's interactions with fringe groups were more selective. Both cases further challenge the alternative explanations. Despite both parties having experience in government at different times, participation

in government did not constrain their engagement with fringe groups. Furthermore, government responses to far-right groups—though structurally weaker in Austria and Switzerland than in Germany and France—did not deter the FPÖ and SVP from engaging with these groups. Experts confirmed that neither party saw potential surveillance from domestic intelligence services as a deterrent. Additionally, the FPÖ's engagement with fringe groups appears to be driven by a strategic effort to fill organisational gaps and normalise far-right positions, rather than by historical ties to the extreme right. This challenges the assumption that a party's far-right roots dictate its engagement with fringe groups. Lastly, despite their long-standing dominance in the immigration debate in their respective countries, neither the FPÖ nor the SVP viewed this dominance as a reason to avoid engaging with fringe groups. Instead, they saw such engagement as a way to normalise far-right positions. The claim by some RN politicians in France that there is no need to engage with fringe groups to put immigration on the political agenda, due to their dominance over the issue, may therefore be an idiosyncratic feature of the French context. Having broadened the analysis and shown that the hypothesised model also applies to other contexts in Western Europe beyond Germany and France, the next chapter summarises the thesis' key findings and explores their broader implications.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

As RRPs gain electoral ground across Western Europe—a trend Mudde (2020) describes as the 'fourth wave' of the radical right—they are increasingly shaping the boundaries of acceptable political discourse and amplifying far-right narratives. To secure electoral power, RRPs must project a more moderate image. Yet, paradoxically, they publicly interact with far-right, often anti-democratic, fringe groups. The very existence of these public interactions—with groups that are socially ostracised and carry reputational risks—poses a puzzle for researchers. It raises the key question: why do RRPs openly engage with fringe groups, and what determines the extent of these interactions?

This engagement matters. It can influence RRPs' policy positions, affect their electoral success, and fuel political polarisation. At their core, RRPs face a strategic dilemma: they must balance the need to appeal to more moderate voters while retaining the loyalty of their core base. Public engagement with fringe groups risks undermining their broader appeal, but severing these links could alienate their most committed supporters and open space for more extreme rivals. The extent of this engagement varies, reflecting how well RRPs manage this tension.

Despite the increasing visibility of RRP-fringe group interactions, academic research has largely overlooked this phenomenon. While studies on party-movement relations have expanded, little theoretical attention has been paid to RRPs' links with fringe groups. Existing research tends to focus on descriptive, single-case studies, leaving a significant gap in understanding the dynamics of these interactions. Studies on far-right party-movement dynamics highlight the increasing use of contentious politics, the rise of bottom-up far-right protests, and the growing hybridisation of RRPs and movements, challenging Kriesi's view (2012) that the far right alternates between electoral and protest mobilisation. However, a comprehensive theoretical framework explaining RRP-fringe group relations remains lacking, and the mechanisms driving these interactions are under-theorised.

To address this gap, I conduct a small-N comparative case study examining how two key factors—the organisational strength of RRPs and the salience of immigration—shape their engagement with fringe groups. These factors influence how RRPs weigh reputational costs and benefits, thereby determining their willingness to interact with fringe actors. Unlike previous research, this study applies theories of party organisation to these interactions, offering a novel perspective on how RRPs navigate these alliances.

Additionally, I consider five alternative explanations: two party-specific (a party's extreme origins and its governing experience) and three institutional (the country's electoral system, its fascist past, and the severity of the government's response to far-right actors). However, as I outline in the next section, my analysis challenges these alternatives. Instead, I argue that the organisational strength of RRPs and the salience of immigration best explain variations in RRP-fringe group interactions.

This chapter next recaps the thesis' core argument and shows how the findings challenge the alternative explanations. It then explores the research's broader implications, acknowledges its limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

Recap of the core argument

This thesis demonstrates that two key variables—organisational strength and immigration salience—shape RRPs' interactions with far-right fringe groups. RRPs with weaker organisational capacity depend more on fringe groups for mobilisation, policy development and operational tasks, whereas those with robust infrastructure and resources are less reliant on external actors. Immigration salience influences RRP leaders' cost-benefit assessments regarding fringe group engagement. When immigration dominates public discourse, perceived reputational risks decrease because intra-party backlash and societal condemnation are seen as less likely. This effect is amplified in societies where xenophobic views are prevalent, leading RRP leaders to perceive stronger anti-immigration sentiment among their base and a broader public consensus on security and national identity concerns. The variables, party organisational strength and immigration salience, interact in dynamic and context-specific ways. For example, high immigration salience

increases the strategic value of engaging with fringe groups for organisationally weak RRPs, while strong RRPs may still avoid such links despite favourable conditions.

The argument is tested through three empirical analyses. First, a cross-case comparison of the German AfD and the French RN in Chapter 3 provides an initial test. These cases were chosen for their contrasting levels of public engagement with fringe groups and differing contextual conditions, which helped rule out alternative explanations. As two electorally significant RRPs in Western Europe's most populous countries, the AfD and the RN are both intrinsically important and data-rich cases. Drawing on interviews with senior party officials, party speeches and documents, social media and press data, the comparison shows that the AfD's weaker organisational capacity increased its reliance on fringe groups for mobilisation, policy development, and operational support. During the analysed period, high immigration salience reduced the AfD leaders' reputational concerns regarding these interactions. In contrast, the RN's stronger organisational capacity relative to national competitors and lower relative immigration salience resulted in moderate to low engagement with fringe groups.

Second, two within-case, cross-temporal, and sub-regional analyses reinforce these findings. Chapter 4 examines the AfD's engagement with fringe groups in depth, showing that between 2015 and 2018, its difficulties in mobilising supporters, recruiting staff, and running campaigns independently increased its reliance on external actors, leading to more frequent and reputationally costly engagement with fringe groups. However, as the AfD's organisational capacity improved between 2019 and 2022, its reliance on fringe groups declined slightly, supporting the argument that greater organisational strength reduces external dependence. Immigration salience also played a crucial role in shaping reputational concerns; in both western and eastern Germany, high immigration salience lowered the AfD leaders' sensitivity to reputational risks. Strong anti-immigration sentiment among the party's base signalled approval of fringe group engagement, while many AfD politicians believed that broader public opinion aligned with their stance, further reducing concerns. This effect was particularly pronounced in eastern Germany, where immigration dominated public discourse and xenophobic attitudes were more widespread. In this context, reduced reputational concerns led to higher levels of fringe group engagement.

Triangulated evidence from interviews, speeches, press releases, and party documents confirmed that eastern AfD leaders were more willing to defy party rules against such interactions and faced less pressure to condemn them. Sanctions were applied inconsistently in both regions and were tightened slightly before elections, reinforcing the notion that reputational concerns shape RPPs' propensity to engage with fringe groups.

Chapter 5's within-case analysis of the RN further supports the hypothesised argument by demonstrating that strong organisational capacity reduced reliance on fringe groups. Throughout the analysis period, the RN's well-developed infrastructure enabled it to attract supporters, mobilise members, and formulate policies independently. Nonetheless, the party occasionally worked with fringe groups to fill specific operational gaps, particularly in communications, social media, campaigning, and electoral list completion. This supports the argument that even strong RRPs may engage with fringe actors when facing temporary organisational weaknesses. Although immigration was a salient issue in France, it was less dominant in public discourse than in Germany. RN leaders perceived limited public opposition to immigration, which sustained their concerns about reputational risks. This was reflected in RN officials' emphasis on strict rules against fringe group engagement, rigorous candidate vetting, and sanctions for rule breaches. While lower immigration salience reinforced reputational concerns, RN leaders occasionally justified engagement with fringe groups in local contexts where perceived strong anti-immigration sentiment provided a sense of social validation. They noted that when immigration dominated public discourse, their reputational concerns diminished, increasing their openness to such interactions—further supporting the theorised mechanism. Qualitative evidence of regional variation also supports the findings that the RN's willingness to engage with fringe groups is reduced in the context of higher local immigration salience.

Third, Chapter 6 tests the broader applicability of the argument through two shadow cases: the Austrian FPÖ and the Swiss SVP. The FPÖ, operating in a context of high immigration salience, low reputational concerns and some organisational gaps, opportunistically engaged with fringe groups to address organisational shortcomings and advance its goal of normalising far-right positions. By contrast, the SVP's strong organisational capacity reduced its need for such

engagement. Even in a context of high immigration salience and low reputational concerns, the SVP's interactions were more selective, underscoring that the hypothesised argument holds across different Western European contexts.

Alternative explanations

Of the five alternative explanations drawn from the academic literature, none adequately explains the variation in RRPs' fringe group engagement. Two party-specific factors are considered. The first posits that a party's extreme origins create enduring links with fringe groups. However, the evidence does not support this claim. The French RN, despite its neo-fascist roots in Ordre Nouveau, maintains fewer links with fringe groups than the German AfD, which emerged from disillusioned conservatives and eurosceptics. The case of the FPÖ further challenges this explanation, as its engagement with fringe groups is strategic, aimed at filling organisational gaps and normalising far-right positions, rather than a consequence of historical ties.

The second party-specific factor suggests that RRPs with government experience avoid engaging with fringe groups in order to appeal to moderate voters. This explanation does not explain the observed patterns either. While neither the AfD nor the RN has ever governed nationally, the shadow cases of the FPÖ and SVP provide further insight. Both challenge this explanation. Despite government experience, neither party showed restraint in dealing with fringe groups. The FPÖ openly cooperated with such groups while in office, even hiring fringe members in ministries and MP offices. Similarly, the SVP engaged with fringe groups—albeit to a lesser extent due to a lower organisational need—and showed little concern for maintaining a moderate image while in government.

Beyond party-specific factors, three institutional explanations were considered: a country's electoral system, its fascist past, and the severity of government responses to far-right actors. The first suggests that electoral systems shape RRPs' ties with fringe groups. However, this factor does

not prescribe a fixed logic for party behaviour. In PR systems, RRPs may distance themselves from fringe groups to avoid competition or co-opt them to neutralise threats. In FPTP systems, fringe groups may be ignored or engaged with because they do not pose a direct electoral threat. As most Western European countries, including the cases in this study, use PR systems, meaningful comparisons are difficult. RN interviewees did not indicate that France's two-round presidential system, which shares some features with FTPT in the first round, increased concerns about reputational risks. The evidence suggests that this factor alone cannot explain the variation in RRPs' fringe group engagement.

The second institutional factor, a country's fascist past, also finds weak empirical support. Despite Germany's Nazi past, the AfD openly associates with and sometimes publicly defends far-right fringe groups, more frequently and at greater reputational risk than the RN, highlighting the limits of historical stigma in constraining RRP behaviour. The third factor—the severity of government responses—similarly lacks explanatory power. Evidence shows that AfD members, especially in eastern state branches, frequently interact with fringe groups despite government scrutiny. Likewise, RN interviewees expressed little concern about reputational risks from state surveillance or crackdowns, despite France's robust democratic safeguards. In Austria and Switzerland, where state responses to far-right actors are weaker, neither the FPÖ nor the SVP saw potential intelligence surveillance as a deterrent. Experts confirm that both parties remain largely indifferent to potential state surveillance.

Overall, the small-n analysis shows that these alternative explanations are unlikely to account for, or in the case of a country's electoral system, fully explain, the variation in RRPs' engagement with fringe groups.

Significance and implications

This dissertation addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining why RRPs openly engage with far-right fringe groups—and why to varying degrees. The findings suggest that these interactions are not simply the result of ideological alignment but serve strategic purposes. By defining engagement in terms of specific actions, this study captures both organisational and ideational dimensions. Organisational engagement—such as recruiting fringe group members, hiring them into party roles, or accepting their support in election campaigns—helps RRPs compensate for weak membership, funding shortages, the absence of strong party-parallel organisations, or a lack of civil society backing. Beyond these organisational needs, RRPs also engage with fringe groups to advance their agenda—bringing far-right claims into the mainstream and normalising radical narratives. This underscores the significance of the broader far-right ecosystem in RRPs' rise, particularly through alternative far-right media that amplify their positions and act as a mouthpiece for their messages.

The study also highlights that RRPs do not engage with fringe groups indiscriminately, but rather carefully weigh reputational risks against strategic benefits. Immigration salience emerges as a key factor in this calculus. When immigration dominates public discourse, the reputational costs of such alliances—both within the party and from the wider public—are reduced. In such contexts, debates centre on national identity, cultural preservation and demographic change, with immigration framed as an existential cultural threat. This environment can make extreme positions seem reasonable to a significant proportion of the electorate, giving RRPs a distinct advantage in claiming to be the only parties willing to take decisive action. Moreover, heightened immigration salience often fuels concerns about economic competition and public finances, with immigrants portrayed as overburdening welfare systems, health care, education and other services. These immigration-related perceived threats reduce the perceived risks of aligning with fringe groups, while further reinforcing RRPs' radical stances among their supporters.

The current climate in Western Europe, where immigration is a highly politicised issue, creates fertile ground for the further mainstreaming of radical-right ideas. As RRPs shift public discourse and policy debates, democratic norms may erode and exclusionary narratives become

more entrenched. With far-right positions increasingly normalised, the strategic dilemma RRPs face—balancing a moderate image to attract mainstream voters while retaining core support—becomes easier to navigate. In this context, public interactions with far-right, often anti-democratic, fringe groups carry lower reputational risks and face less social ostracism. This dynamic reveals another aspect of far-right normalisation: while mainstream acceptance of these views grows independently of fringe group ties, the rising legitimacy of such groups reduces the trade-off RRPs face when considering these alliances. This thesis, therefore, sheds light on how normalisation affects RRP decision-making and their willingness to engage with extremist groups.

Furthermore, the findings challenge the notion that coalition or government participation necessarily curbs RRPs links with fringe groups. There is little evidence to suggest that entering government acts as a meaningful constraint. On the contrary, such ties may persist or even deepen once RRPs gain national power. This raises concerns that fringe group influence could extend beyond rhetoric to tangible policy outcomes, contributing to further RRP electoral success due to mobilisation support, the embedding of radical positions into RRP policy proposals, and deepening political polarisation.

Despite the gradual normalisation of radical-right views, RRPs remain somewhat selective in their associations. They engage with a range of fringe groups and show little concern about interacting with modern identitarian groups such as the Identitarian movement or Némésis, which present their ideology in more palatable, intellectualised, and less overtly extreme terms. Yet, RRPs largely avoid public ties with traditional neo-Nazi groups.[1] This suggests that while RRPs are willing to push the boundaries, they recognise that overt associations with explicitly neo-Nazi groups remain politically costly.

A clearer understanding of how RRPs interact with the broader far-right ecosystem is crucial for developing more effective strategies to counter and mitigate threats to democratic norms and stability. Efforts to curb extremist influence must take holistic approach, considering not only

[1] While both types of movement share exclusionary and nationalist views, identitarian groups strategically avoid explicit references to historical fascism, racial superiority or violent rhetoric, which are hallmarks of neo-Nazi groups. Instead, they focus on themes of cultural preservation, ethnopluralism and the defence of national identity, often using pseudo-academic justifications rather than overtly racist or antisemitic discourse.

RRPs themselves but also the wider support networks they rely on to fill organisational gaps. Strengthening democratic institutions is essential to limit the influence of the far right and mitigate its long-term effects. Greater transparency and public awareness of RRP-fringe group interactions are also key. Institutional cooperation, particularly at the EU level, can help monitor cross-border far-right networks that support RRPs. Joint task forces should track these connections and expose their activities. Investigative journalism and academic research on RRP-fringe interactions should be encouraged to inform both policy makers and the public. Civic education is another vital tool. Investing in programmes that teach critical thinking, media literacy, and awareness of misinformation and hate speech can reduce public susceptibility to radical narratives. Strengthening democratic resilience from the ground up will make societies less vulnerable to extremist messaging.

The findings also underscore the need for evidence-based, responsible political communication on salient, polarising issues like immigration. Policymakers and political leaders must address public concerns without resorting to populist rhetoric that inflames tensions and increases immigration salience. Journalists, too, play a critical role in shaping the discourse. By ensuring responsible reporting, they can avoid inadvertently amplifying RRP talking points or legitimising extremist positions. Civil society actors, including pro-democracy initiatives and watchdog organisations, are equally vital in countering radical narratives and strengthening democratic norms. By exposing and publicly stigmatising RRPs' interactions with fringe groups, they can raise the reputational costs of such links and push back against the normalisation of far right ideas.

Ultimately, this dissertation highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of RRPs' strategic calculations and their ties to fringe groups. Countering the rise of the far right requires not only legal and institutional responses, but also sustained efforts to strengthen civil society, reshape public discourse, and confront norm-breaking behaviour that enables extremist narratives to take hold. Without these measures, the normalisation of far-right ideas will continue to erode democratic norms and fuel political instability.

Limitations and avenues for future research

This study has several limitations. First, as a small-N comparative case study focused on Western Europe, the generalisability of the findings to other contexts remains limited. Notably, no cases with a FPTP electoral system were included. Electoral rules could plausibly shape RRPs' strategic cost-benefit calculations regarding fringe group engagement, but the existing literature does not prescribe a definitive expectation of how they would do so. Given this ambiguity, this factor was deprioritised in the analysis. Future research could investigate whether majoritarian electoral systems affect RRPs' strategic decisions in ways that differ from proportional representation systems.

Second, this study touches on, but does not conclusively address, the role of issue dominance—specifically, whether RRPs that already dominate the public discourse on immigration feel less compelled to engage with fringe groups, as they can set the political agenda independently. The case of the RN suggest that its entrenched dominance of the French immigration discourse may reduce its leaders' perceived need to engage with fringe groups to push immigration on the political agenda, even when the issue is salient and the perceived reputational costs of engaging with fringe groups are low. However, evidence from the shadow cases, FPÖ and SVP, challenges the idea that issue dominance necessarily reduces RRPs' propensity to engage with fringe groups. Future research should systematically examine whether, and under what conditions, a RRP's continued dominance of the immigration discourse affects its incentives to engage with fringe actors.

Third, this study deliberately focuses on RRPs as the primary strategic actors, treating fringe groups as passive entities rather than active participants in shaping engagement dynamics. While this research design choice reflects RRPs' greater institutional presence, resources, and formal political power, it overlooks the agency of fringe groups. Their own motivations, strategic incentives, and resource constraints may play a role in shaping RRP-fringe group interactions. Future research could assess how fringe groups actively seek, resist, or negotiate engagement with RRPs, thus providing a more reciprocal understanding of these dynamics.

Several questions remain open for future investigation. One key avenue is to test the applicability of these findings in other contexts, particularly in Eastern Europe, where historical trajectories, political institutions, and party systems differ significantly. Additionally, as far-right narratives continue to be normalised, future research could explore the extent to which RRP leaders' reputational concerns about engaging with fringe groups are shifting and the conditions under which they persist, e.g. whether certain fringe groups remain off-limits.

This study also focuses solely on public interactions between RRPs and fringe groups, assuming that behind-the-scenes relationships exist and are occasionally brought to the fore. However, the interplay between backstage and public engagement remains largely underexplored. Future research could investigate the conditions that lead RRPs to shift from backstage to public interactions with fringe groups, possibly employing ethnographic research or interviews with fringe actors to gain deeper insights. Testing the extent to which the two key factors identified in this study—organisational strength and immigration salience—drive the strategic calculations of RRPs in their transitions from backstage to public engagement would be a valuable extension.

As a first foray into the comparative analysis of RRPs engagement with far-right fringe groups, this study identifies two key drivers of such interactions and uncovers the causal mechanisms that facilitate or constrain RRPs engaging with fringe actors. However, further research is needed to explore broader institutional contexts, the agency of fringe groups, the dynamics between public and backstage engagement, and the role of issue dominance in shaping strategic calculations.

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Appendix

A. List of fringe groups in Germany, France, Austria and Switzerland

In this study, fringe groups are broadly defined as national groups or national branches of international groups with an offline presence that hold radical or extreme right-wing views and express them through violent or non-violent means. Lone wolves are excluded from this definition. While the focus is on non-partisan groups, national extreme right-wing political parties are included in the definition because I seek to understand why RRPs engage with such stigmatised parties that could harm their reputation, when RRPs try to moderate their image and enhance their electability.

Table 9: Relevant fringe groups in Germany

Fringe group	Detail
Alliance for Peace and Freedom (APF)	- Far-right party at EU level, founded in Brussels in February 2015 - Represents nationalist, racist and anti-Israeli positions and rejects the EU - In early 2016, the APF was formally recognised by the European Parliament, making it eligible for financial support of €400,000
Anti-Antifa	- Self-descriptive term used by the far right to refer to a targeted, campaign-style fight against political opponents - Anti-antifa acts through research, targeted intimidation, and physical attacks - Their aim is to prevent political opponents from working and to break their resistance; potential victims of the anti-antifa strategy are journalists, politicians and committed citizens
Artgemeinschaft - Germanische Glaubens-Gemeinschaft wesensgemäßer Lebensgestaltung	- Sect-like, religious-folk, anti-Christian and right-wing extremist organisation - Around 150 members nationwide and is networked with many right-wing extremist and new right-wing groups - Founded in 1951 by former Nazi Wilhelm Kusserow, a registered association since 1957, headquartered in Berlin - Promotes a racist, social Darwinist ideology and spreads anti-Semitic conspiracy theories
Autonome Nationalisten	- Emerged in the early 2000s in the neo-Nazi comradeship scene - Autonomous nationalists do not organise themselves in fixed structures, but only form loose groups - They consciously present themselves as anti-bourgeois and anti-parliamentary, including anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist views
Blood & Honour	- An international neo-Nazi network, with the aim of coordinating neo-Nazi bands and spreading National Socialist ideology - Founded in the UK in 1987 by a neo-Nazi band member, German branch established in 1994 - 10,000 members worldwide, around 250 members in Germany at the time of its ban in 2000
Bündnis deutsche Patrioten	- Lose alliance of right-wing activists, active since 2016

	- Demands focus on secure borders and the defence of supposedly 'German' values
Bürgerinitiative Ausländerstopp	- Since the 1980s, right-wing extremist groups linked to the NPD have been active in several German states under the name Bürgerinitiative Ausländerstopp, starting in North Rhine-Westphalia - In the 1990s and after 2000, some of these organisations successfully contested local elections in Bavaria
Combat 18 (C18)	- A militant, internationally active neo-Nazi group that originated in the UK, where it first acted as a hall guard for the far-right BNP - It split from the BNP in 1993 and spread to other countries - Banned in Germany since January 2020 because b its ideology was directed against the constitutional order
Compact	- German neo-fascist magazine founded in 2010 - Classified by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) as a right-wing extremist publication due to regular anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and contempt for democratic principles
Der III. Weg	- Far-right neo-Nazi party in Germany, founded in 2013 as a split from the NPD - Has never been represented in the Bundestag or any state parliament
Deutsche Liga für Volk und Heimat (DLVH)	- A far-right political party that occasionally contests state and local elections - Founded in 1991, the party tried its hand as a fringe right-wing movement in the early 1990s - Today it is virtually irrelevant; former members remain active in other far-right groups
Die Rechte	- Far-right neo-Nazi party in Germany - Founded in 2012, mainly by former members of the now-defunct German People's Union, which had merged with the NPD
Die Republikaner	- The most important party of the extreme right in Germany in the late 1980s and early 1990s - Today, the party hardly exists and is practically irrelevant
Ein Prozent für unser Land (One Percent)	- Far-right organisation that acts as a foundation, think tank and media collective with the aim to connect right-wing groups across Germany - Founded in 2015, classified as right-wing extremist by the BfV since 2020
Freie Kameradschaften, Freie Kräfte, Freie Nationalisten	- Informally organised neo-Nazi groups; legally non-incorporated associations, making their structure and membership difficult to identify - See themselves as part of a 'national resistance', a kind of right-wing united front - According to estimates by the BfV, there are around 150 regionally and supra-regionally active comradeships in Germany, each with between five and twenty members
Freie Sachsen	- A right-wing extremist party founded in 2021 in Schwarzenberg by right-wing extremists, neo-National Socialists and former NPD functionaries - Limited organisational structures and human resources, but active use of social media
Freiheitlich-Patriotische Alternative - Verein für neues Denken	- A far-right association founded by AfD members in 2017, but independent and not an organ of the party, although many members have historical ties to the AfD - Members of the association may only be members of the AfD, but not of other parties

Gemeinschaft deutscher Frauen (GdF)	- Germany's oldest far-right women's organisation, which grew out of the ‘Skingirl Freundeskreis Deutschland’ - The GDF's image of women is based on that propagated by the Nazis in the Third Reich
German Defence League (GDL)	- Far-right, Islamophobic group founded in 2010, modelled on the 'English Defence League' - Monitored by the BfV since 2013
Gesellschaft für freie Publizistik	- Large right-wing extremist cultural association that was close to the NPD in the mid-2000s - Its members are mainly far-right publishers, booksellers, editors, and writers
Gruppe Freital, Bürgerwehr FTL/360, Bürgerwehr Freital	- A right-wing terrorist group in Freital, near Dresden - Members of the group were proven to have carried out explosive attacks on asylum centres and assaults on refugee supporters - In March 2018, the supporters were convicted of founding a terrorist organisation and attempted murder
Hammerskins	- German branch, in existence since 1991, of the US neo-Nazi network founded in 1986 - Estimates of the number of its activists vary between about 200 and 300 people with strongholds in Saxony, Bremen, and Bavaria
Hooligans gegen Salafisten (HoGeSa)	- Nationwide action group from the hooligan scene, claims to oppose Salafism in Germany - Mainly operating online with a high-profile demonstration in Cologne in October 2014
Identitäre Bewegung (IB)	- A pan-European nationalist, far-right movement that originated in France in April 2003 - Asserts the right of European ethnic groups and white people to Western culture and territories claimed to be theirs exclusively
Institut für Staatspolitik (IfS)	- Think-tank founded in 2000 to serve as an organisational and action platform for the New Right in Germany - Listed by the BfV as a suspected right-wing extremist organisation
Junge Freiheit (JF)	- A German weekly newspaper on politics and culture, founded in 1986 - Characterised as conservative, right-wing, nationalist and the ‘ideological supply ship of right-wing populism’ in Germany
Junge Landsmannschaft Ostdeutschland (JLO)	- Founded in 1991 as the youth wing of the ‘Landsmannschaft Ostpreußen’, a revisionist organisation close to the NPD, ostensibly representing German expellees who fled or were expelled from the parts of Germany annexed by Poland and the Soviet Union after the Second World War - Main organiser of the neo-Nazi marches in Dresden between 1999 and 2011, in which up to 6,000 right-wing extremists from across Europe commemorated the anniversary of the Allied bombing of Dresden in February 1945
Junge Nationaldemokraten (Junge NPD)	- Official youth wing of the NPD - Often more aggressive in appearance and programme than its parent party - Function as a special link to the spectrum of militant neo-Nazi comradeships
Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD)	- Far-right neo-Nazi party in Germany, founded in 1964, renamed *Die Heimat* in 2023 - Between the late 1960s and early 1970s, the NPD was represented in up to seven state parliaments. In 2004 it was elected to the state parliament of Saxony. It has never held a seat in the Bundestag

Nordadler	- A national socialist-oriented association in northern Germany, founded in 2017, has been linked to right-wing terrorism - The Federal Ministry of the Interior banned the group in June 2020
Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident (Pegida)	- An anti-Islam, anti-immigration far-right movement, founded in Dresden in October 2014 - With several regional offshoots, e.g. Legida, Magida, Bagida
Politically Incorrect (PI-NEWS)	- Right-wing populist, xenophobic, racist and Islamophobic blog - Considered one of the main mouthpieces of the German right-wing populist scene (around 80,000 visitors per day) - Claims to be against the 'opinion terror' of 'political correctness' in the commercial media. In addition to Islamophobia, PI also publishes texts despising LGBT people, denying climate change, and inciting against gender equality
Pro Bewegung	- Conglomerate of parties, voter associations and groups that are de-facto independent but closely interlinked in terms of personnel and programme - The movement describes itself as right-wing populist, conservative and oriented towards other right-wing populist parties in Europe
Pro Chemnitz	- The citizens' movement is a right-wing populist voters' association in Chemnitz - Since 2018, it has been under intelligence surveillance by the Saxony state security agency
Pro Köln	- A citizens' movement and far-right micro-party founded in Cologne in 1996 - With its aggressively anti-Muslim, anti-European and racist election campaign, the party has managed to enter the Cologne city council on several occasions - In 2010, Pro Köln founded a nationwide umbrella organisation called 'Pro-Bewegung' - Since 2011, the party has been officially classified as anti-constitutional
QAnon	- An American political conspiracy theory and movement originated in 2017 - In Germany, far-right activists and influencers have created a German audience for QAnon across multiple social media channel - Reichsbürger groups have embraced QAnon to promote their belief that modern Germany is not a sovereign republic, but rather a corporation created by the Allies after World War II
Querdenker	- Since the spring 2020, Querdenker has been used as a self-designation by people who deny the danger or even the existence of the coronavirus, criticise the state's response to the pandemic, refuse protective vaccinations and partly combine these attitudes with a belief in conspiracy theories or elements of far-right ideology - The Querdenker movement does not belong to the extreme right per se, but there are ideological and personal interfaces
Reichsbürger	- Umbrella term for label for far-right groups and individuals who reject the legitimacy of the Federal Republic of Germany in favour of the German Reich - Reichsbürger supporters are scattered throughout Germany, but concentrated in the southern and eastern parts of the country
Revolution Chemnitz	- Right-wing terrorist group from the Chemnitz area - The group attacked people with an immigrant background in Chemnitz in September 2018, and eight members involved in the attack were sentenced to several years in prison

Sezession Magazin	- A German bi-monthly magazine for politics, culture and contemporary history, published since 2003 by the Institute for State Policy (IfS) and ideologically aligned with the New Right
Thule-Seminar	- Association of far-right intellectuals influenced by the French Nouvelle Droite - No major influence on the ideological orientation of the German New Right, because many right-wing intellectuals continue to orient themselves on the model of the Christian Occident - The BfV and various state security agencies classify the association as right-wing extremist
Witikobund	- A Sudeten German association founded in 1948/49 and based in MunichClassified as right-wing extremist by the BfV until 1967 and still suspected of right-wing extremist leanings
Zukunft Heimat (Future Homeland)	- Far-right association, founded in 2015 in Brandenburg, focuses on anti-immigration and anti-refugee rhetoric and activities - AfD members have been active in its leadership

Table 10: Relevant fringe groups in France

Fringe group	Detail
A Droite!	- Far-right faction within the party Les Républicains, which promotes the 'Great Replacement' theory
Academia Christiana (AC)	- Far-right, traditionalist Catholic youth movement, think tank, and educational centre, founded in 2013 during the anti-LGBTQ+ Manif pour Tous movement - Promotes a far-right Catholic nationalism that opposes the multiculturalism and secularism of the French Fifth Republic and is strongly anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-Muslim
Action Française	- Far-right group founded in 1899 as a magazine and movement - Split into two factions in 2021, both of which espouse right-wing extremism - Has hosted open anti-Semites, Holocaust deniers and pro-Petain figures at its conferences - Elie Hatem, member of the group' steering committee has close ties to the Le Pen family and ran on the FN ticket in the 2014 Paris municipal elections - Significant street presence: its supporters have clashed with counterdemonstrators, often working with other groups such as Némésis and La Cocarde Etudiant
Active Club France	- Network of neo-Nazis in France, dedicated to white supremacist propaganda, particularly the posting of stickers, but also to physical fitness and boxing and MMA competitions
Alliance for Peace and Freedom (APF)	- Far-right party at EU level, founded in Brussels in February 2015 - Represents nationalist, racist and anti-Israeli positions and rejects the EU - In early 2016, the APF was formally recognised by the European Parliament, making it eligible for financial support of €400,000
Alliance générale contre le racisme et pour le respect de l'identité française et chrétienne (AGRIF)	- Far-right organisation that claims to fight racism through legal actions that it claims protect people of French and Christian identity from defamation by others - Defends prominent far-right figures in court, files lawsuits against Muslim defendants, and brings claims against those who allegedly insult French or Christian identities - Closely linked to the FN for years, but recently broke away to support Zemmour in the 2022 presidential campaign
Alsace d'abord (Jeune Alsace)	- French regionalist and anti-Muslim party which advocates for Alsatian autonomy and is critical of Muslim cultural practices in Alsace - Founded in 1989 by former FN deputies Robert Spieler and Jacques Cordonnier
Animus Fortis	- Small local activist group in Bourges, advocating against immigration, capitalism (which they blame for immigration) and Covid-19 pandemic measures
Argos France	- Following the dissolution of Generation Identity, a group with similar methods of agitation and propaganda has emerged - With 5,000 followers on their Instagram page, their videos advocate radical change to defend 'European civilisation'
Auctorum	- Local identitarian group in Versailles that rails against 'unbridled immigration, general acculturation and the abandonment of traditions'

	- It works closely with identitarian groups across the country, particularly at sporting events - In October 2022, RN cadre Bruno Gollnisch took part in an event organised by the group
Audace Lyon	- Small, Lyon-based identitarian group with no discernible online presence, formed after the dissolution of Bastion Social - Activities focus on asserting Lyonnaise identity and expressing concerns about immigration
Bastion Social	- Neo- fascist movement, created in 2017 by former members of the GUD - Inspired by the CasaPound movement and based in Lyon, where its actions are concentrated - In 2019 the dissolution of the group was declared by the Council of Ministers, but it reappeared the same year in the form of decentralised local organisations
Civitas	- Formed in 1999 as the lobbying arm of the Civitas Institute aiming to re-Christianising France - Formerly associated with the far-right Society of St Pius X, known for its extremist teachings - Since 2016, a political party opposed to secularism, abortion, and same-sex marriage
Collectif Némésis	- Far-right 'feminist' collective founded in 2019 - Claims that women's rights, and particularly their safety, are being undermined by increased immigration from Muslim countries - Known for attending feminist demonstrations and attempting to undermine their cause by redirecting events to attack immigrants and Muslims
Comités Jeanne (CJ)	- Political party founded in 2016 by Jean-Marie Le Pen after his expulsion from the FN - Supported Marine Le Pen's candidacy in the presidential election, but has formed electoral alliances with other small parties ideologically to the right of the FN in legislative elections
Les Braves	- Far right identitarian group that emerged in the 2010s from Suavelos, a white nationalist movement led by Daniel Conversano that advocates ‘white communitarianism’, a society without a common state reserved for whites
Des Tours et des Lys	- Militant identitarian group based in Tours, involved in activism, street protests, conferences and physical training - Protests focus on anti-immigration, involved in river clean-ups and cultural sites, and works with other similar far-right groups such as Luminis and Lyon Populaire
Edelweiss Pay de Savoie	- Far right identitarian group from Alsace with fascist and neo-Nazi views - Joined Bastion Social and then reorganised after its dissolution - Engages in propaganda activities such as leaflets and stickers, which it publishes on its social media, and occasionally organises ‘cultural events’
Égalité et Réconciliation (Kontre Kulture)	- An anti-Semitic and far-right organisation founded in 2007 by the conspiracy theorist Alain Soral and two former members of the GUD - Promotes the left-wing nationalist ideas of Alain Soral and other controversial authors - Described by political observers as a means of recruiting young people to the FN

Fdesouche	- Far-right website founded in 2005, spreading far-right propaganda and fake news
Furie Française	- Small identitarian group in Toulouse that organises street protests against immigrants and LGBTQ+ rights
Génération identitaire (GI)	- Founded in 2012 as the youth wing of Les Identitaires, a now defunct white nationalist and anti-Muslim movement - Early propagators of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory and known for stunts to draw attention to their cause
Génération Zemmour (Génération Z)	- Youth wing of the Reconquête party, supports Zemmour and his anti-Muslim policies, including his belief in the Great Replacement conspiracy theory - Claims a membership of around 20,000
Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne (GRECE)	- Think tank founded in January 1969 by forty activists, with the philosopher Alain de Benoist as its informal ideological leader - The idea of GRECE was to reconquer the cultural terrain by leaving the purely political domain and promoting a New Right school of thought - Its journal Éléments criticises visions of progressive modernity
Groupe Union Défense (GUD)	- French far-right student organisation known for its violent actions - Very active in the 1970s, with a comeback in the 2010s under the name Union for the Defence of Youth, until its dissolution in 2017 and the creation of the Bastion Social
Institut Iliade	- Far-right think tank founded in 2014 by Philippe Conrad, Jean-Yves Le Gallou, and Bernard Lugan, aligned with the broader white supremacist Identitarian movement
Jeunesse Saint-Roch	- Identitarian group based in Montpellier, founded by local students with links to the neo-Nazi network Ouest Casual
Jeunesses Nationalistes Révolutionnaires	- French revolutionary nationalist group composed exclusively of skinheads - Originally active from 1980-1990, then reactivated in 2010-2013
L'action européenne	- Far right and negationist European network, followed by the New European Order in 2008 - Focuses on the abolition of the euro, the dissolution of the EU, the creation of a confederation with the aim of restoring European traditions, the repatriation of non-European immigrants and the abolition of anti-racist law
La Cocarde Etudiante	- Far-right student union formed in 2015, aims to unite far right students at universities across France - Virulently anti-immigrant and promotes white supremacist conspiracy theories
La Famille Gallicane	- Overtly Catholic, neo-Nazi group with no clear ideology - Advocates the white supremacist Great Replacement conspiracy theory and promotes hatred of non-white and Jewish people
L'Alvarium	- Identitarian organisation active in Angers between 2017 and 2021 - Founded by Jean-Eudes Gannat, it became known for occupying a building in 2018 and for several violent and racist attacks, and was disbanded in 2021
Les Identitaires	- Far-right political party founded in 2003, also known as 'Bloc identitaire' - Ideologically nativist, supports regional decentralisation and Catholic social teaching, and viewing the US and Islam as threats to Europe, and promotes white supremacist theories
Les Natifs	- Paris-based identitarian group founded by former members of Generation Identity after the group was banned

	- Opposes immigration and collaborates with other far right groups like Les Remparts
Les Nationalistes	- White nationalist, anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant movement originally founded in 1983 and then re-established in 2015 after the dissolution of L'Œuvre française
Le Parti de la France	- A French far-right nationalist party, founded in 2009 by several former FN members - Claims to be part of the 'national, social and identity right'
Les Remparts	- A Lyon-based identitarian group that regularly meets at the bar La Traboule for meetings, courses, presentations, and soirees - Regularly takes part in protests alongside other far-right groups - In addition to white supremacy, the group is vehemently anti-LGBTQ+
Les Zouaves Paris	- Violent group of neo-Nazis formed after the collapse of the GUD, when most of its branches became Bastion Social, except in Paris where they formed 'Les Zouaves' - Known for disseminating Nazi imagery and racist tracts, and engaging in street violence and hooliganism, including during the Gilets Jaunes protests and Zemmour's rallies in 2021
Ligue du Midi	- Regionalist identity group created in 2011 by Richard Roudier in the Montpellier region, active in the Yellow Vests movement in 2018 and 2019
Ligue du Sud	- Far-right regional party founded in 2010 by Jacques Bompard and some ex-FN members - Aims to defend the interests and culture of the citizens of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur
L'Œuvre française	- Ultra-nationalist, far-right French political movement founded in 1968 - Although dissolved in July 2013 for propagating xenophobic and anti-Semitic ideology, continues its activities under the name 'Jeune Nation'
Luminis/ Division Martel	- White nationalist group involved in propaganda, meetings, and interaction with other far-right groups, in particular the Ouest Casual neo-Nazi network, often reposting their material
Lyon Populaire	- White nationalist group emerged from Social Bastion in 2019 and with close ties to anti-gay marriage movement Manif pour Tous and smaller neo-Nazi groups
Nissa Rebela	- Identitarian political movement originating from the Bloc Identitaires, present in the Nice region since 2005, with an estimated 600 member - Led until 2015 by Philippe Vardon, former spokesman for the Jeunesses Identitaires
Novopress	- One of the most influential far-right news websites, founded by Les Identitaires in 2005-2006 - Promotes the ideas of Le Identitaire, often xenophobic positions and the spread of fake news
Ouest Casual	- Decentralised network of around a dozen individually named small neo-Nazi groups with regional affiliations - Acts as a platform to communicate and disseminate news of its network's actions - Close links with members of Génération identitaire, La Citadelle and Action Française
Parti Communautaire National-Européen	- Political organisation based in Belgium, founded in 1984, led by a former member of the neo-Nazi party FANE

	- Includes activists from both the far right and far left some of whom are also active in France
Polemia	- Identitarian think tank founded in 2002, best known for its most viewed video (>1 million) on 'Being French'
Reconquête	- Nationalist political party founded by Éric Zemmour in late 2021, which came fourth in the 2022 French presidential election with just over 7% of the vote
Renaissance Catholique	- Far-right Catholic fundamentalist group
Riposte Laïque/ Résistance Républicaine	- Far-right, anti-Muslim website founded in 2007 - Affiliate organisation Résistance Républicaine (the political wing) works in tandem with other far-right groups to defend French secular values against Islam and organise protests
Rivarol	- French far-right, anti-Semitic, Holocaust denying and openly racist weekly magazine
Souveraineté, Identité et Libertés (SIEL)	- Far-right party founded in 2011 by Paul-Marie Coûteaux, replaced in 2014 by Karim Ouchikh (with links to Action Française and Bloc Identitaire) after the former made provocative comments about putting Roma people in camps and the FN refused to cooperate with SIEL - Historically close to the FN until 2014, the party has been described as a 'satellite' of the FN, but more extreme ideologically - Has formed alliances in legislative elections with other small parties to the right of the FN, such as Parti de la France, Civitas, and Ligue du Sud
Synthèse nationale	- Far-right magazine offering a national and identitarian overview of politics and culture, founded in October 2006 by Roland Hélie, with close historical ties to Jean-Marie Le Pen - Aims to bring together the various movements that make up the Identitarian movement
Tenesoun	- Identitarian group based in Aix-en-Provence that participates in fundamentalist Catholic events, organises protests, distributes propaganda, and promotes the Provençal language - Has links to far-right organisations abroad and promotes the white supremacist Great Replacement conspiracy theory
Terre et Peuple	- Far-right cultural association in France founded by Pierre Vial in 1995 - Ideologically close to the Identitarian movement - Established international branches in Belgium, Spain, Portugal, and Italy
Troisième voie	- Far-right movement founded in 1985 by the merger of the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement and the Young Guard Movement and the GUD - Favours a strong Europe and declares itself anti-Zionist, anti-American and anti-communist - Self-dismantled in 1992, reactivated in 2010 and dissolved by the government in 2013
Vent d'Est	- Strasbourg-based identitarian group with neo-fascist influences, formed when Social Bastion was disbanded in January 2021 - Promoting xenophobic, anti-Semitic, and anti-immigrant views and organising walks, courses and other forms of activism
Zoulous Nice (Zulu)	- Local neo-Nazi hooligan gang in Nice that has evolved from 'Nationalist Nice', the hard fringe of Nice identitarians and neo-Nazis - Became known in September 2020 for an attack on students on the Nice campus who were holding a solidarity march

Table 11: Relevant fringe groups in Austria

Fringe group	Detail
Abendland (formerly: Neue Ordnung)	- A magazine that since 2004 has shifted from bridging conservative and far-right ideas to aligning itself with extremist views, often presenting ethnic nationalism, elitism, anti-democracy and historical revisionism in a favourable light - Its content sometimes promotes anti-Semitism, racism and challenges to Austria's prohibition laws, echoing neo-Nazi rhetoric and reinforcing its place in the far-right spectrum
Arbeitsgemeinschaft für demokratische Politik (AFP) & Aktionsgemeinschaft für Politik	- A political party in Austria - Also organised as an association under the name Aktionsgemeinschaft für Politik - Focuses on ideological and cultural work with a clear right-wing extremist orientation - According to a 2006 assessment by the Austrian Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counter-Terrorism, it was the 'most active meeting place of the organised right-wing extremist scene in Austria' - For years it has also played an important role in linking the far right across Europe
AUF1	- A far-right website based in Linz, Austria, founded in May 2021 by Stefan Magnet, who is also its editor-in-chief - Disseminates far-right content and appeals primarily to coronavirus deniers, climate change deniers, conspiracy theorists and Putin supporters - Although AUF1 does not have a television broadcasting licence, a regional broadcaster occasionally broadcast AUF1 content on one of its channels. The Competition Authority found this to be a serious breach of the law
Bund freier Jugend	- An Austrian right-wing extremist youth organisation of the AFP with a nationalist and neo-Nazi orientation that existed until 2007, with its main focus of activity in Upper Austria - Differed from the skinhead subculture both in its appearance and in its self-image, as well as in its strongly nationalist blood-and-soil ideology - It saw itself as a 'contact point for young people - who still want to defend themselves' and organised social activities such as midsummer celebrations, distributed leaflets and organised training courses, lectures and trips to demonstrations
Bürgerschutz Österreich (BSÖ)	- A far-right group led by former FPÖ member Peter Kurt Weiß, best known for anti-EU campaigns and the dissemination of racist, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories - Promotes anti-Semitic works, including The Secret of Power, which reproduces the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, and uses BSÖ publications to attack Freemasons, high finance and Austrian politicians as part of a 'sham democracy'
Deutsches Kulturwerk europäischen Geistes (DKEG) / Deutsche Kulturgemeinschaft (DKG)	- Austrian branch of a German far-right organisation with a cultural, political and ideological mission - Its agitation focuses on the denial of German war guilt and the relativisation of Nazi crimes - The DKEG, which operates as a cadre group, has gained a certain importance through its integrative and training function for militant

	right-wing extremist circles in the FRG and Austria, especially after the numerous party bans - The DKEG's activities are less outwardly focused; instead, it operates away from the public eye and primarily addresses a traditionally German national right-wing extremist to neo-Nazi audience at events
Die Aula	- A far-right Austrian monthly magazine, founded in 1951 and discontinued in 2018 - It saw itself as the mouthpiece of Austria's 'national-freedom' student associations - The media owner was the FPÖ-affiliated Arbeitsgemeinschaft Freiheitlicher Akademikerverbände Österreichs (FAV)
Die Bunten	- An Austrian right-wing extremist party, founded and led by Ludwig Reinthaler for the 2003 local elections - The party has repeatedly hit the headlines for its programmatic proximity to the NSDAP and the use of Nazi symbolism by party supporters, such as the Hitler salute at the Mauthausen concentration camp
Heimatkurier	- An Austrian far-right news outlet closely linked to the Identitarian movement that uses news and social media to promote nationalist, anti-immigrant and 'Great Replacement' narratives - Founded by former IBÖ leader Philipp Huemer, the platform covers events such as German farmer protests in order to link local grievances to broader identitarian ideologies - Through this framing, it seeks to normalise far-right views and expand its influence within populist circles
Identitäre Bewegung Österreich (IBÖ) / Die Österreicher (DO5)	- An Austrian far-right nationalist and right-wing extremist organisation - Inspired by the French Bloc Identitaire, it belongs to the pan-European Identitarian movement and is the Austrian branch of the organisation known as Generation Identity (GI) - It opposes liberalism, internationalism, Islam and Islamism, multiculturalism and the melting pot model, and instead advocates ethnopluralism - Classified by several government agencies as part of the wider New Right movement - Close links have been documented with several irredentist fraternities in Austria and the neo-Nazi scene
Info-DIREKT	- A far-right magazine that repackages traditional far-right ideologies with modernised visuals and accessible language, mixing anti-Semitic, anti-democratic and nationalist themes - It serves as a bridge between different right-wing extremist groups and uses cross-media channels (magazine, blog, social media) to reach a broad audience and facilitate networking between the Austrian and international right-wing extremist scenes
Kameradschaft IV (K IV) / Die Kameradschaft	- A right-wing extremist veterans' organisation of former members of the Waffen-SS, which still has a large number of members and consists of local groups and regional associations - Attempts to portray the Waffen-SS, which was declared a criminal organisation as part of the SS by the Nuremberg Tribunal, as the fourth branch of the Wehrmacht and therefore harmless, and derives its name from this
Kritische Demokraten / fakten	- A small far-right party that links Austria's neo-Nazi networks with the FPÖ, with Horst Jakob Rosenkranz, an ex-NDP activist and leader of the Austrian far-right, as a prominent member

	- Rosenkranz, along with neo-Nazis Franz Radl and Gerd Honsik, ran on the 'No to the flood of foreigners' platform in 1990 and later aligned himself closely with the FPÖ - His wife, Barbara Rosenkranz, served as a key FPÖ official in Lower Austria, further strengthening ties between the far right and the FPÖ
Nationale Volkspartei	- An extreme right-wing and nationalist party, founded in 2007 as a merger of several right-wing groups - It deposited its party statute with the Federal Ministry of the Interior in November 2007 - Pursues völkisch-nationalist goals and sees itself as a German nationalist
Notwehrgemeinschaft der Bauern (NWG)	- A small far-right group known for demonstrations, border blockades and verbal attacks on political and agricultural authorities - Former leader Robert Dürr, who once belonged to the FPÖ, previously wrote for the neo-Nazi magazine Sieg - The group's affiliated publication Der Pflug often contains anti-EU conspiracy theories and anti-Semitic content, in line with common far-right narratives
Österreichische Gesellschaft der Völkerfreunde	- A culturally focused far-right group with strong links to neo-Nazis and FPÖ members, led by Dr Herbert Fritz - Originally founded as an FPÖ front, but now an independent player in Austria's extremist scene - Promotes the preservation of 'Germanness' abroad, advocating racist, revanchist and revisionist ideologies under the guise of cultural preservation
Schutzverein Österreichische Landsmannschaft (ÖLM)	- A far-right organisation with a humanitarian veneer that is active in journalism and serves to unite German nationalist and far-right groups in Austria - It has close personal ties with the FPÖ; the Freiheitliche Bildungswerk (the FPÖ's educational institution), and the ÖLM co-organise events - Its magazine Der Eckart, known for its revanchist and xenophobic content, also serves as an important platform for announcing far-right events
Verband Österreichischer Kameradschaften (VÖK) / Kameradschaft ‚Prinz Eugen'	- A far-right veterans' organisation that emerged from a split with the Österreichischer Kameradschaftsbund, although it remains relatively insignificant - The most active sub-group, the Prinz Eugen Kameradschaft, focuses on promoting traditional values, military readiness and a commitment to German nationalism, while opposing foreign influence and questioning historical narratives after 1945
Wiener akademische Burschenschaft Olympia	- A right-wing extremist student fraternity in Vienna - A member of the Deutsche Burschenschaft (DB) and the Burschenschaftliche Gemeinschaft (BG)

Table 12: Relevant fringe groups in Switzerland

Fringe group	Detail
Blood & Honour	- Swiss chapter of the international neo-Nazi network Blood & Honour, promoting white supremacy and neo-fascist ideologies - Connected to Combat 18 and other far-right extremist groups, advocating for racial segregation and violent nationalism - Involved in the distribution of propaganda, organisation of white power music events and support for militant right-wing extremist activities
Combat 18	- Swiss branch of the violent neo-Nazi group Combat 18, known as the paramilitary arm of the Blood & Honour network - Linked to international far-right extremist organisations, advocating for white supremacy, anti-Semitism, and neo-fascist ideologies - Employs intimidation, violence, and propaganda to promote its agenda and target perceived enemies, including immigrants and left-wing activists
Eisenjugend	- Swiss far-right group with neo-Nazi influences, targeting young people with radical nationalist and racist ideologies - Linked to wider neo-Nazi and far-right networks, drawing inspiration from historic fascist movements - Uses social media, propaganda, and underground events to recruit and radicalise young people, spreading hateful narratives
Eisern Luzern	- Previously unknown far-right group from central Switzerland, active since 2020, known for organising the last major right-wing rock concert in the Lucerne area - Involved in neo-Nazi and far-right networks - Organises annual events, including a tug-of-war tournament, which in 2021 attracted key figures from Switzerland's far-right movement
Freiheitstrychler/ Glockenschwinger	- Swiss far-right traditionalist group known for its use of bell-ringing as a symbol of opposition to government policies - Rooted in nationalist and conservative circles, opposing measures such as COVID-19 restrictions and advocating for Swiss sovereignt - Uses traditional Swiss cultural symbols, such as cowbells and folk dress, during protests to evoke national identity and attract media attention
Hammerskins Schweiz	- Swiss branch of the global far-right network founded in 1988 in Dallas, Texas, with the first Swiss section established in Lucerne in 1990 - Closely linked to Blood & Honour, Combat 18, and other far-right extremist groups, both in Switzerland and internationally - Organises regular European and international meetings and concerts, bringing together delegates from Hammerskin chapters to advance their extremist agenda
Junge Tat	- Swiss far-right youth group founded in 2020, aligned with the Identitarian movement and the New Right - Youth offshoot of the National Action Front (NAF), ideologically influenced by far-right groups such as Blood and Honour and Combat 18 - Uses polarising issues such as the construction of asylum camps to gain media attention and advance its agenda
Nationale Aktionsfront (NAF)	- Swiss far-right umbrella organisation founded in 2014, serving as a platform for collaboration between various extremist groups

	- Has close ties to Blood & Honour and links to prominent international far-right figures, such as German Holocaust denier Nikolai Nerling - Facilitates coordination, propaganda, and activism between its member groups to advance ethno-nationalist and xenophobic agendas
Nationalistische Jugend Schweiz	- Far-right youth organisation in Switzerland, acting as a precursor to Junge Tat, promoting nationalist, anti-immigrant and ethno-nationalist ideologies - Linked to wider European far-right youth movements and Identitarian groups, with ties to extremist networks - Organises rallies, events, and online campaigns to recruit young people and spread far-right propaganda, paving the way for Junge Tat
Némésis Suisse	- Swiss far-right feminist group founded as an offshoot of the French Némésis movement, focusing on anti-immigration and nationalist ideologies - Connected to identitarian and far-right networks in Europe, promoting ethno-nationalist and traditionalist narratives - Uses provocative public demonstrations and social media campaigns on issues such as immigration and feminism to draw attention to its cause
Partei National Orientierter Schweizer (Pnos) - Swiss Nationalist Party	- Far-right Swiss nationalist party founded in 2000, advocating ethno-nationalism and a homogeneous Swiss identity, dissolved in February 2022 - Linked to other European far-right and neo-Nazi groups, promotes anti-immigration, anti-globalisation and anti-EU agendas - Engages in public demonstrations, publications, and political campaigns to promote nationalist and xenophobic ideologies
Pegida Schweiz	- Swiss branch of the German-based Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident), active against perceived Islamisation and immigration - Part of the broader European Pegida movement, aligned with anti-Islam and nationalist far-right networks - Organises public rallies, protests, and online campaigns to promote anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant narratives
Résistance Helvétique	- Swiss far-right identitarian group promoting nationalism, cultural preservation, and opposition to immigration - Part of the broader European Identitarian movement, with links to other far-right organisations promoting ethno-nationalism - Uses public protests, social media campaigns, and symbolic actions to spread nationalist and anti-immigration messages
Schweizer Demokraten	- Swiss nationalist and far-right political party, founded in 1961, focusing on anti-immigration and the preservation of Swiss culture - Historically linked to other right-wing populist movements, with a focus on opposition to multiculturalism and EU integration - Uses referendums, political campaigns and public statements to promote strict immigration policies and national sovereignty

B. List of interviews conducted for the German and French case studies

Table 13: List of AfD politicians interviewed

Name	Party position	AfD membership	Date	Location
Anonymous interviewee	Former party chairman and AfD MEP	Former AfD member	13/12/2023	Video interview
Prof. Dr. Jörn Kruse	Former chairman of AfD Hamburg parliamentary group Former state parliament MP; left the AfD in mid-2018	Former AfD member	13/12/2023	Hamburg
Dr. Bernd Baumann	Bundestag MP Chief whip of the AfD parliamentary group	Current AfD member	14/12/2023	Berlin
Prof. Dr. Hans-Olaf Henkel	Former deputy chairman of the AfD and former AfD MEP Left the AfD in July 2015	Former AfD politician	14/12/2023	Berlin
Prof. Dr. Jörg Meuthen	Former party co-chairman and AfD MEP Left the AfD in January 2022	Former AfD member	18/01/2024	Video interview
Anonymous interviewee	Bundestag MP from Saxony-Anhalt	Current AfD member	23/01/2024	Video interview
Leyla Bilge	Former parliamentary assistant to an AfD MP AfD member and campaign activist, renowned for organising the women's march	Current AfD member	26/01/2024	Video interview
Anonymous interviewee	Former AfD Bundestag MP from Bavaria	Former AfD member	31/01/2024	Berlin
Anonymous interviewee	Bundestag MP from North Rhine-Westphalia	Current AfD member	31/01/2024	Berlin
Stephan Protschka	Bundestag MP from Bavaria Chairman of the AfD Bavaria	Current AfD member	31/01/2024	Berlin
Anonymous interviewee	Parliamentary aide to Bundestag MP District chairwoman of the AfD	Current AfD member	01/02/2024	Berlin
Lars Schieske	MP in Brandenburg state parliament	Current AfD member	01/02/2024	Potsdam
Steffen Königer	Former MP in Brandenburg state parliament and member of the state executive committee, left the AfD in November 2018	Former AfD member	01/02/2024	Werder
Anonymous interviewee	Parliamentary aide to Bundestag MP	Current AfD member	02/02/2024	Bundestag
René Springer	Bundestag MP Chairman of the AfD Brandenburg	Current AfD member	02/02/2024	Bundestag

Andreas Winhart	MP in the Bavarian state parliament	Current AfD member	06/02/2024	Munich
Andreas Lichert	MP in the Hessian state parliament Co-chairman of the AfD Hesse	Current AfD member	07/02/2024	Video interview
Anonymous interviewee	MP in the Hamburg state parliament Member of the AfD Hamburg executive committee	Current AfD member	09/02/2024	Video interview
Rüdiger Klesmann	Deputy chairman of the AfD Saarland	Current AfD member	14/02/2024	Video interview
Uwe Junge	Former AfD Rhineland-Palatinate chairman (2015-2019) Former MP of Rhineland-Palatinate state parliament	Former AfD member	16/02/2024	Video interview
Albrecht Glaser	Bundestag MP from Hesse Chairman of the AfD federal programme commission	Current AfD member	19/02/2024	Berlin
Gerrit Huy	Bundestag MP from Bavaria	Current AfD member	19/02/2024	Video interview
Lars Hünich	MP in the Brandenburg state parliament Former member of AfD state executive committee	Current AfD member	19/02/2024	Video interview
Dr. Christian Wirth	Bundestag MP from Saarland Former chairman of AfD Saarland	Current AfD member	20/02/2024	Berlin
Karsten Hilse	Bundestag MP from Saxony	Current AfD member	21/02/2024	Berlin
Dr. Martin Vincentz	MP in the North Rhine-Westphalian state parliament Chairman of the AfD North Rhine-Westphalia	Current AfD member	06/03/2024	Video interview
Josef Dörr	MP in the Saarland state parliament Former chairman of the AfD Saarland	Current AfD member	08/03/2024	Saarbrücken
Anonymous interviewee	MP in Saxon state parliament Member of AfD Saxony executive committee	Current AfD member	26/03/2024	Dresden
Carsten Hütter	MP in Saxon state parliament Member of the AfD federal executive committee	Current AfD member	26/03/2024	Dresden
André Poggenburg	Former MP in the Saxony-Anhalt state parliament Former chairman of the AfD Saxony Anhalt	Former AfD member	07/04/2024	Video interview

Table 14: List of RN politicians interviewed

Name	Party position	RN membership	Date	Location
Bruno Gollnisch	Former FN Vice-President and former MEP	RN member	24/01/2024	Paris
Louis Aliot	RN Vice-President, member of the RN national bureau and executive committee, mayor of Perpignan	RN member	25/01/2024	Online
Wallerand de Saint-Just	Member of the RN political bureau RN regional councillor	RN member	27/02/2024	Paris
Thibaut de la Tocnaye	RN regional councillor for Centre-Val de Loire Former member of the RN national bureau	RN member	14/03/2024	Orléans
Louis-Marie Mautin	Parliamentary assistant to Stéphane Ravier, (ex-RN) senator	n/a	22/03/2024	Paris
Anonymous interviewee	Former RN MEP, former RN secretary general, former regional councillor	Former RN member	22/03/2024	Paris
Renaud Labaye	Secretary General of the RN parliamentary group	RN member	11/04/2024	Paris
Jimmy Bourlieux	RN departmental delegate for Gironde	RN member	15/04/2024	Bordeaux
Anonymous interviewee	RN MP	RN member	16/04/2024	Paris
Alexandra Masson	RN MP and press spokesperson	RN member	17/04/2024	Video interview
Gabriel Tomatis	Parliamentary aide to MP and press spokesperson	RN member	17/04/2024	Video interview
Maxime Bot	RN departmental delegate for Aude	RN member	17/04/2024	Video interview
Anonymous interviewee	RN departmental delegate for Haute-Loire	RN member	17/04/2024	Paris
Gauthier Bouchet	RN regional councillor, departmental delegate for Loire-Atlantique, member of the National Council	RN member	18/04/2024	Saint-Nazaire
Anonymous interviewee	Former RN MEP, former RN regional councillor	Former RN member	22/04/2024	Paris
Anonymous interviewee	RN MP Press spokesperson	RN member	22/04/2024	Paris
Anonymous interviewee	RN departmental delegate for Val-de-Marne	RN member	23/04/2024	Créteil
Nicolas Olivier	RN departmental delegate for Aisne	RN member	25/04/2024	Villers-Cotterêts
Grégoire Eury	Regional councillor Departmental delegate for Meurthe-et-Moselle	RN member	26/04/2023	Video interview

Julien Odoul	RN MP and press spokesperson Member of the RN national bureau	RN member	29/04/2024	Paris
Paul-Henry Hansen-Catta	Regional Councillor for Hauts-de-France Former adviser to Marine Le Pen	RN member	29/04/2024	Video interview
Anonymous interviewee	RN MP	RN member	29/04/2024	Paris
Philippe Chapron	RN departmental delegate for Calvados	RN member	14/05/2024	Video interview
Brice Coquet	RN departmental delegate for Allier	RN member	14/05/2024	Paris

C. Methodological details on the index of RRP engagement with fringe groups

For the database of relevant cases of engagement in Germany and France, I used three high-circulation national newspapers. To limit any ideological bias, I initially chose a centre-left and a centre-right newspaper: the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (centre-left) and *Die Welt* (centre-right)[1] for Germany, and *Le Figaro* (centre-right) and *Le Monde* (centre-left) for France. However, since centre-left newspapers are more likely to report cases of RRPs engaging with far-right fringe groups, I added a second centre-left newspaper for each country: *Die Tageszeitung* for Germany and *Libération* for France. To increase the likelihood of capturing relevant instances of public engagement, while limiting the research to a manageable number of texts, I added two news agencies for each country, one national and one international. For Germany, the news agencies are *dpa* (the largest national news agency) and *Reuters* (international). For France, the news agencies are *Agence France Presse* (international but based in France) and *Reuters* (international). This was complemented by an analysis of RRP leaders' interviews and guest articles in three national far-right media outlets. In Germany, these are *Compact, Junge Freiheit,* and *Sezession*. In France, they include *L'Incorrect, Minute,* and *Rivarol*.

I used Factiva as a news repository and searched for articles mentioning the AfD or the RN and at least one of the selected fringe groups listed in Appendix A. I ensured that all spellings of the parties and fringe groups were included in the keyword search. This search returned 2,430 results for Germany for the period 2013 to 2022, and 2,393 results for France for the period 2002 to 2022. I manually reviewed the search results to create an index of relevant instances of engagement, recording the date of engagement, type of engagement, fringe groups and party leaders involved, number of participants (in the case of protests), government sanctions, party sanctions, source, and date of publication. While I only list the first source that reported an instance of engagement, I extracted information about the instance of engagement from all sources. Where the sources disagreed on the number of participants, I used the most conservative estimate.

[1] The larger circulation *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (centre-right) was not available through the University of Oxford's Factiva subscription.

As the three far-right media outlets were not covered by Factiva, I conducted manual searches using the search functions of their online platforms. This was done to complement the instances of AfD and RN's public engagement with fringe groups with interviews and guest articles by AfD and RN party leaders in the respective three media outlets.

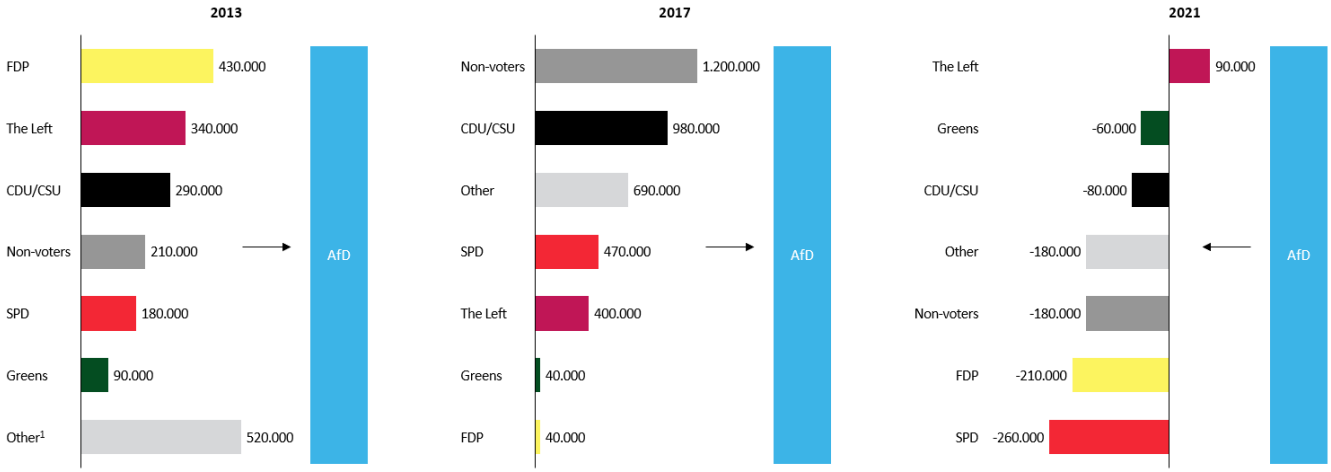
Analysing newspaper content allows mapping RRPs' engagement with fringe group across countries and time, but it has some limitations. While careful source selection mitigates ideological bias, variations in how news outlets perceive noteworthy events can still introduce bias. Events with large participant numbers ('logic of numbers') or involving violence ('logic of damage') are more likely to be reported (Della Porta and Diani, 2006, p. 171). Similarly, events relevant to a broad population (Hutter, 2014, p. 351) or orchestrated by or involving high-profile individuals (Demarest and Langer, 2022, p. 639) tend to garner more attention. Furthermore, the depth and frequency of event coverage can vary between newspaper reports and types of public engagement. For example, a party leader's presence at a protest is more visible and reportable than the discreet process of recruiting fringe group members for party positions, which must be uncovered by investigative journalists. Despite these limitations, newspaper content analysis still provides an approximate picture of trends in public engagement.

I first attempted to use a retweet analysis as an external validity check to complement the newspaper content analysis. Retweeting allows X users to 'rebroadcast status updates from other users to their followers, which represents a powerful way of increasing the reach of the original message' (Wüest, Mueller, and Willi, 2021, p. 586). Retweets by RRP leaders of fringe group tweets, measured as a share of total retweets by RRP leaders, could serve as an additional indicator of the level of open engagement with fringe groups. Although Twitter users represent a minority of the population, they include political parties and candidates, public officials, interest groups, journalists, and other organised groups (Barberá, 2015, p. 89). However, as only a small proportion of the fringe groups included in the analysis and listed in Appendix A have a Twitter account, I decided not to use the retweet analysis as an external validity check.

D. Competing parties of AfD and RN for relative organisational strength assessment

The AfD's main competitors are the CDU/CSU, the FDP and, to a lesser extent, the SPD. As Figure 27, depicting net voter migration, (i.e. the balance of voters moving to and from the AfD in national elections between 2013 and 2022), shows, in its early years, the AfD mainly attracted supporters from the FDP, the Left Party, the CDU/CSU as well as previous non-voters and first-time voters. After its shift to the radical right in 2015, the AfD effectively mobilised previous non-voters in the 2017 federal election and attracted voters from the CDU/CSU. In the 2021 federal election, the CDU/CSU was the party from which the AfD gained the most voters (410,000), but it also lost 490,000 votes to the party, resulting in a net migration of minus 80,000. For a comparative assessment of the AfD's organisational strength, the CDU/CSU and the FDP are used.

Figure 27: Net migration of AfD voters in national elections, 2013-2021



Source: (Infratest dimap, 2013, 2017, 2021)
Note: The voter migration model estimates the migration flows between two elections and the retention rates of the same parties. It uses official statistics, opinion polls, and preliminary election results to account for current and former non-voters, changes in the electorate and new first-time voters.
[1] Other includes other parties, first-time voters and relocated, new voters

In France, unlike in Germany, comprehensive data on voter migration based on exit polls are not readily available. Instead, voter migration is estimated based on voter intentions expressed in panels such as the panel électoral français. Consequently , the RN's competing parties cannot be determined using the same type of actual voter migration data as in Germany. Party identification is generally lower in France than in Germany, with left-right ideological identification playing a

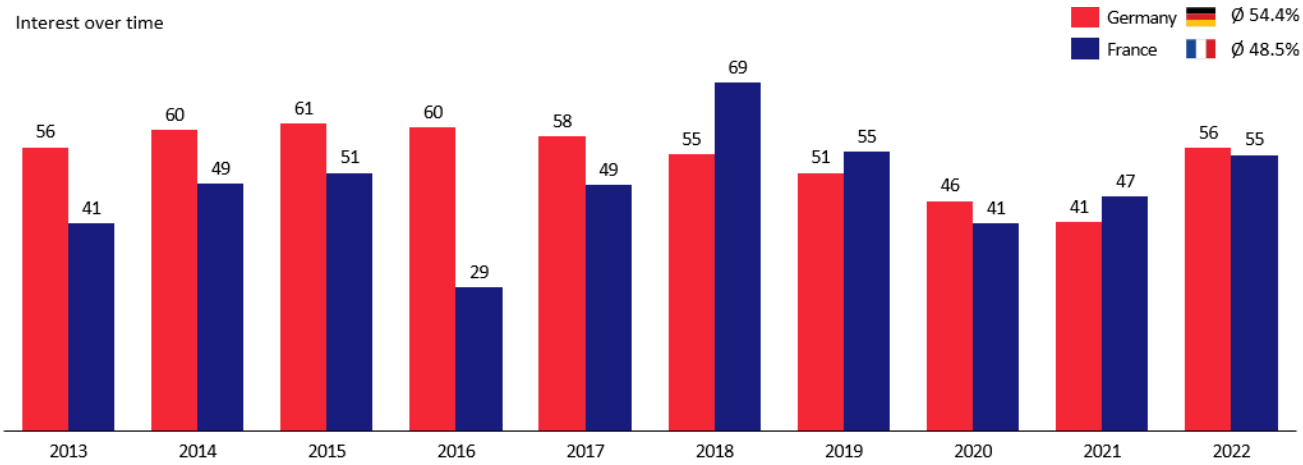
more important role in shaping voter choice[2] (Haegel, 1990; Mayer, 1997; Percheron, 1977). The RN's competitors are therefore centre-right, radical right, and extreme right parties. In the 1980s, the FN's success in exploiting immigration as a political issue allowed it to capture votes from radicalised supporters of France's conservative parties, the RPR and the UDF[3] (Buléon and Fourquet, 2003; Millington, 2019, p. 135). Nonna Mayer has shown that voters who voted for Le Pen in 2002 and for Sarkozy five years later agreed with Sarkozy's rhetoric on immigration, Islam, secularism and national identity appropriated from the FN, but saw Sarkozy as more presidential, reinforcing the notion of the RN's main rivals as centre-right (2007). For the more recent presidential elections of 2017 and 2022, Houard-Vial shows the electoral realignment towards the radical and extreme right to the detriment of the centre-right (2022). In this study, Les Républicains (centre-right, formerly UMP)[4] and Debout La France (radical right)[5] serve as the main parties to compare the relative organisational strength of the RN.

[2] Belanger et al. explain the relevance of left-right ideological identification over party affiliation in determining French voters' choices by pointing to France's highly fragmented and constantly changing party system, as well as frequent changes in party names, which result in a relative lack of meaning of party labels (2006, pp. 511-512).
[3] The Rassemblement pour la République (RPR) was a centre-right party that existed between 1976 and 2002, when it merged with three smaller centre-right parties to form l'Union pour un mouvement populaire (UMP). The UDF was a centre-right party supporting President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, which became a centrist party and renamed itself the Mouvement démocrate in 2007.
[4] The other centre-right parties, l'Union des démocrates et indépendants and Horizons, were only founded in 2012 and 2021 respectively, and therefore do not serve as a comparison for the entire analysis period.
[5] Debout La France is considered to have moved from the centre-right to the outspokenly anti-immigrant, populist radical-right, and it supported Marine Le Pen in the second round of the 2017 presidential election. Reconquête, an extreme right party founded by Éric Zemmour in April 2021, is not used to compare the relative organisational strength of the RN, as it does not allow for a comparison over time.

E. Google Trends data on immigration salience in Germany and France

Figure 28 below, based on Google Trends data, also reflects the higher salience of immigration in Germany than in France. The 'interest over time' metric, ranging from 0 to 100 with 100 representing peak popularity, measures the relative interest in the search term 'immigration' from 2013 to 2022. This value shows how search interest compares to the peak within each region, not the absolute number of searches. A score of 100 in one country does not correspond to the same number of searches as in another; it indicates the highest relative interest in each country.[6] Although Google Trends provides an insight into public interest in immigration, it has limitations[7] and serves in this study as a complementary measure to the Eurobarometer data. Figure 28 reiterates that immigration has been more salient in Germany than in France, with a peak in Germany between 2014 and 2016, and that the average search interest in the first period from 2013 to 2018 was notably higher in Germany than in France, broadly in line with Eurobarometer trends.

Figure 28: Interest over time in search term 'immigration,' in Germany and France, 2013-2022



Note: The 'Interest over time' value in Google Trends represents the relative popularity of a search term, scaled from 0 to 100, and indicates how search interest has fluctuated over a given period. It does not reflect absolute search volumes.

[6] Google Trends data is normalised, adjusting for variations in total search volume between regions. This ensures that the data shows the proportion of searches for the term relative to all searches during the period. As such, the data highlights trends in relative interest without providing exact search counts.

[7] Google Trends measures the search frequency, not the depth of interest or opinion on a topic. Variations in search behaviour based on age, education and other demographics can skew the data. In addition, not everyone uses Google, and the platform lacks context for why a term is being searched. A spike in searches for 'immigration' could be influenced by factors such as news events or policy changes, and may not indicate a uniform level of concern across the population.

F. Details on German domestic intelligence agencies' investigations into the AfD

The German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) classifies organisations or parties suspected of extremism into three levels: *test case*, *suspected case*, and *confirmed extremist endeavour*. A *test case* involves gathering preliminary information without intensive surveillance. At this stage, organisations are not subject to intensive surveillance or intelligence operations. A *suspected case* allows for more surveillance, such as monitoring public events, with restrictions on intrusiveness. A *confirmed extremist endeavour* indicates substantial evidence of activities that threaten the constitutional order, justifying intrusive measures such as wiretapping and undercover operations. Table 15 below outlines which state branches of the AfD have been investigated by the BfV and their current classification.

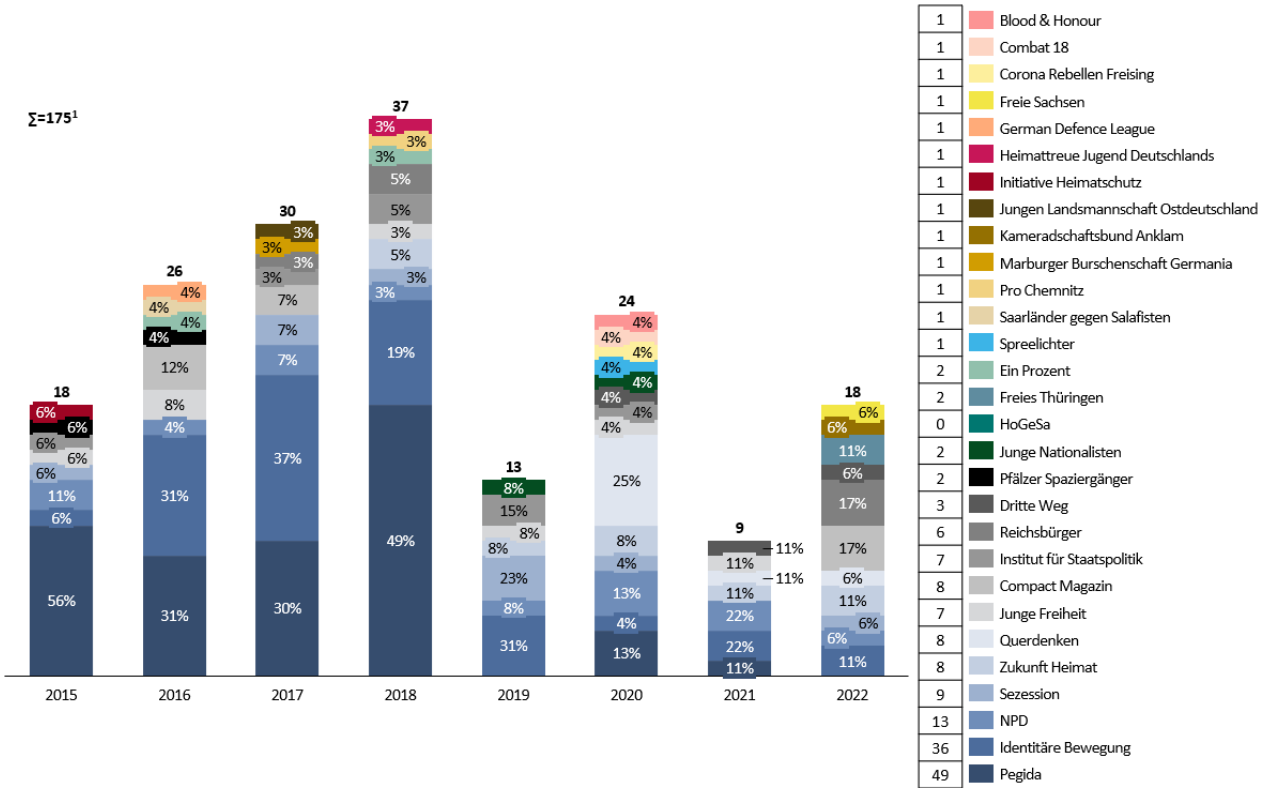
Table 15: Overview of the BfV's classification of the AfD as a suspected extremist organisation

AfD organisation	Most recent classification by the BfV[8]	Date
National / Federal party	Suspected case	March 2021
State-level party associations		
Baden-Württemberg	Suspected case	July 2022
Bavaria	Suspected case	June22
Berlin	Unclear	
Brandenburg	Suspected case	June 2020
Bremen	Suspected case	June 2022
Hamburg	Unclear	
Hesse	Suspected case	September 2022
Mecklenburg–Western Pomerania	At least test case[9]	January 2019
Lower Saxony	Suspected case	June 2022
North Rhine-Westphalia	At least test case[10]	
Rhineland-Palatinate	No assessment	
Saarland	Unclear	
Saxony	Confirmed extremist endeavour	December 2023
Saxony-Anhalt	Confirmed extremist endeavour	November 2023
Schleswig-Holstein	Unclear	
Thuringia	Confirmed extremist endeavour	May 2021

[8] Note: 'Unclear' means that, under current legislation, state intelligence agencies are prohibited from reporting publicly on cases of suspected extremism.
[9] In Mecklenburg–Western Pomerania, the current law does not allow the intelligence service to report publicly on cases of suspicion.
[10] In North Rhine-Westphalia, the current law does not allow the intelligence service to report publicly on cases of suspicion.

G. Additional graphs on the AfD's and RN's fringe group engagement

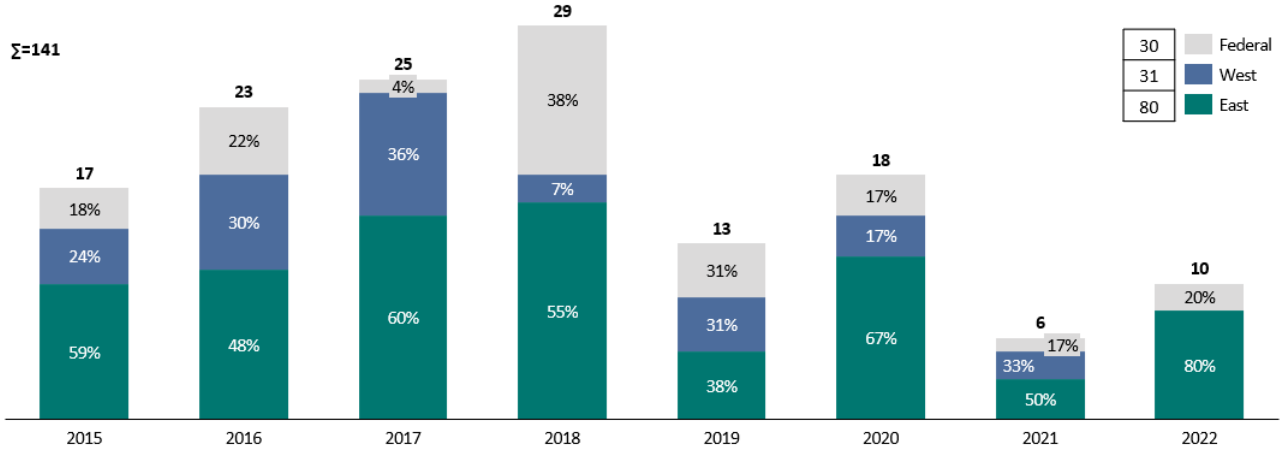
Figure 29: AfD fringe group engagement by group, 2015-2022



Sources: Factiva search (Die Welt, Süddeutsche Zeitung, taz, dpa, Reuters), selected right-wing media outlets (Compact, Junge Freiheit, Sezession)

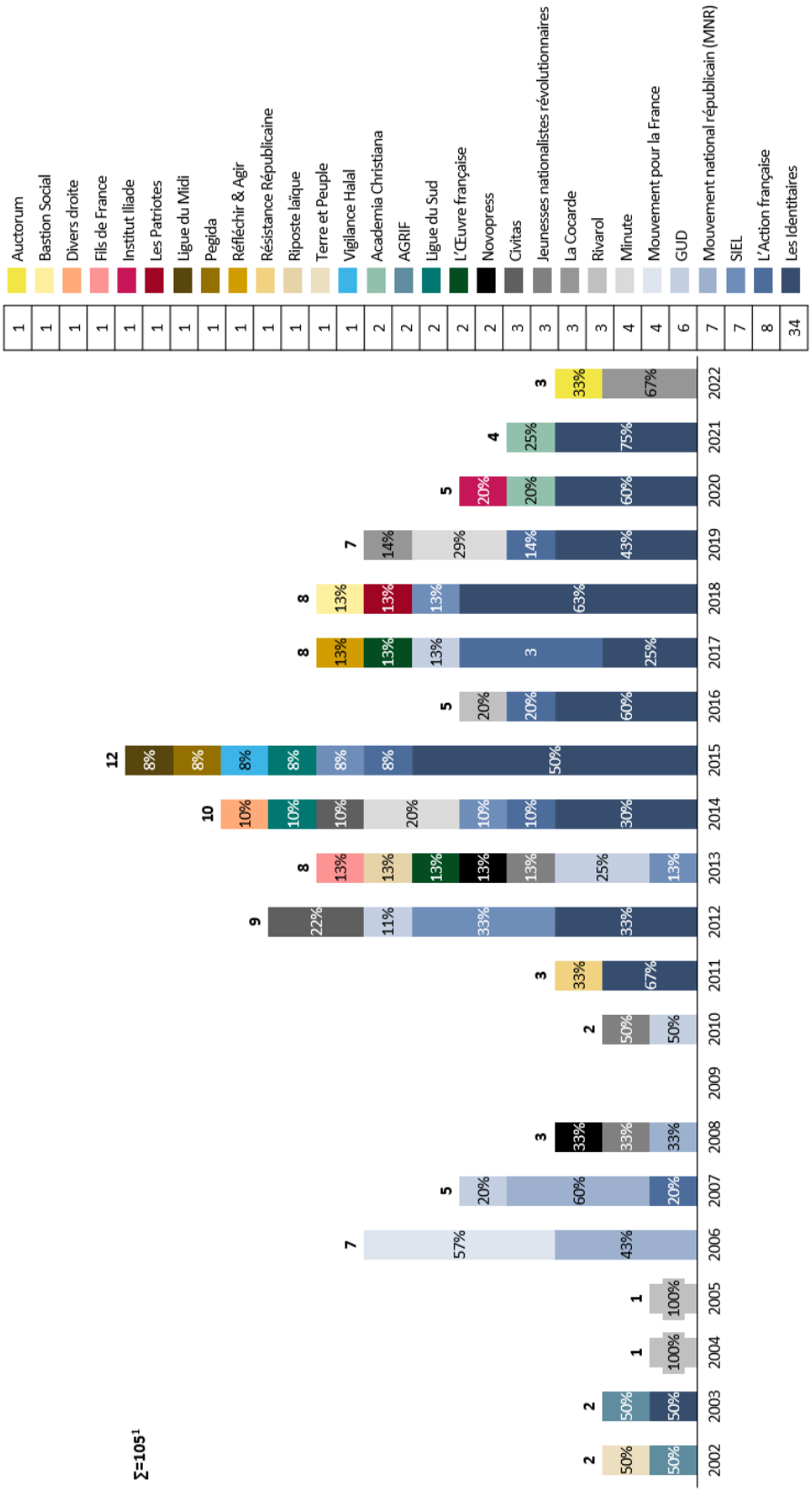
[1] The total is higher than the total number of recorded instances of engagement, as some interactions by AfD leaders involved more than one group.

Figure 30: AfD fringe group engagement by region, 2015-2022



Sources: Factiva search (Die Welt, Süddeutsche Zeitung, taz, dpa, Reuters), selected right-wing media outlets (Compact, Junge Freiheit, Sezession)

Figure 31: RN fringe group engagement by group, 2002-2022

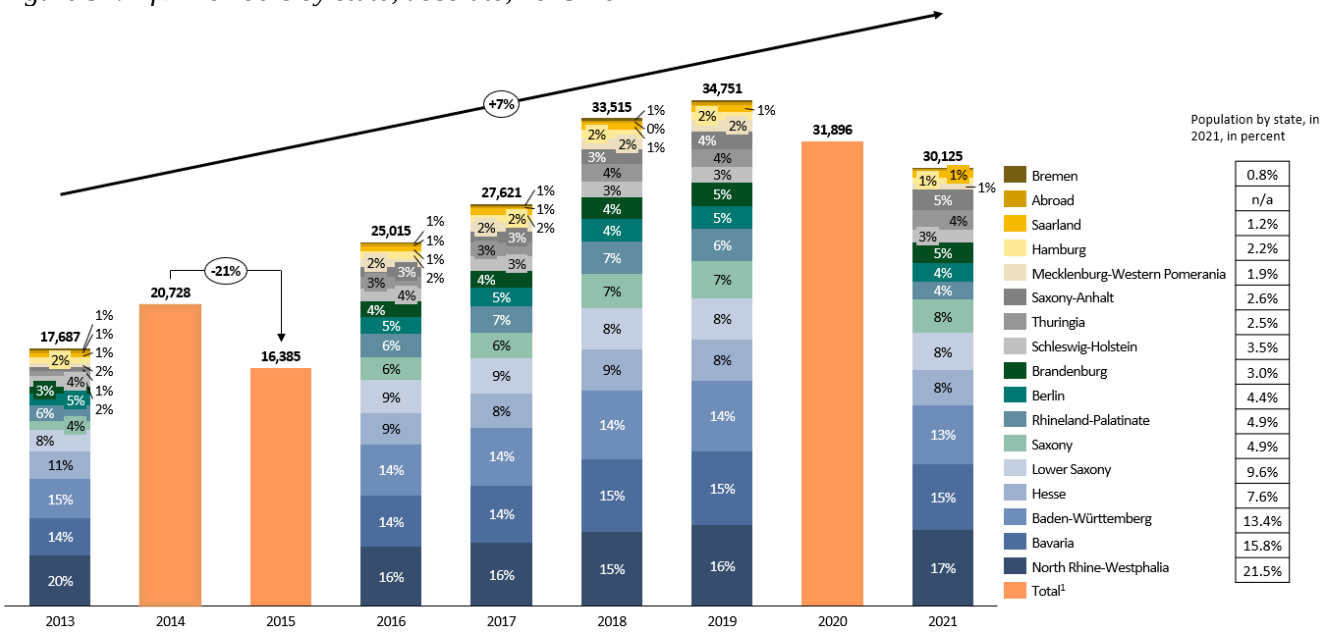


Sources: Factiva search (Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération, Agence France Presse, Reuters), selected right-wing media outlets (L'Incorrect, Minute, Rivarol)
[1] The total is higher than the total number of recorded instances of engagement, as some interactions by RN leaders involved more than one group.

H. Additional data on the AfD's and RN's organisational strength

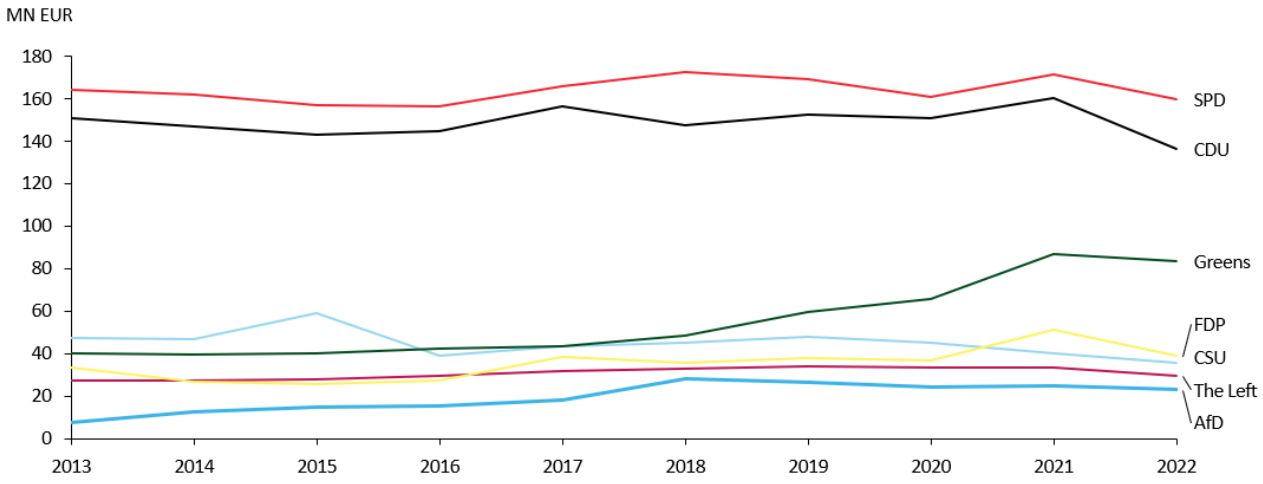
Additional data on the AfD's organisational strength

Figure 32: AfD members by state, absolute, 2013-2021



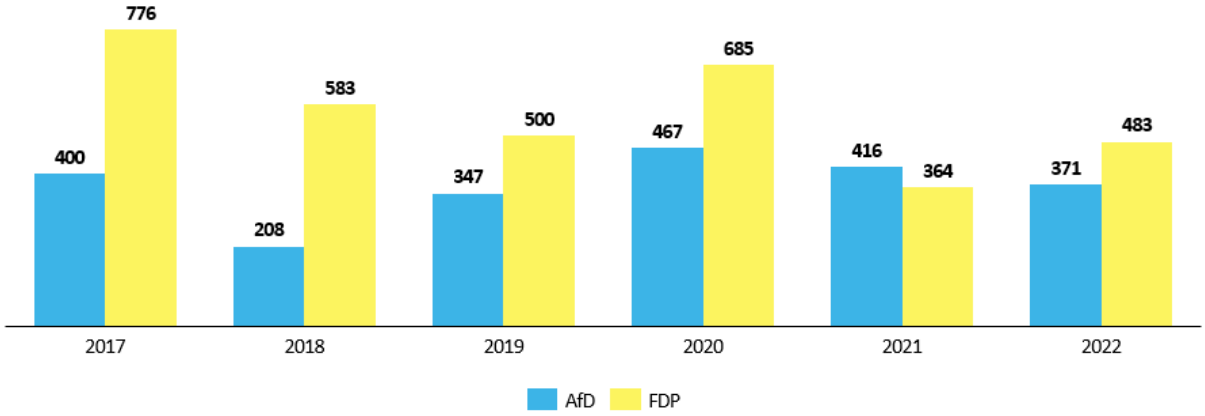
[1] For the years 2014-2015 and 2020 the breakdown by state is not available
Sources: (Niedermayer, 2020, 2022)

Figure 33: German parties' income, in MN EUR, 2013-2022



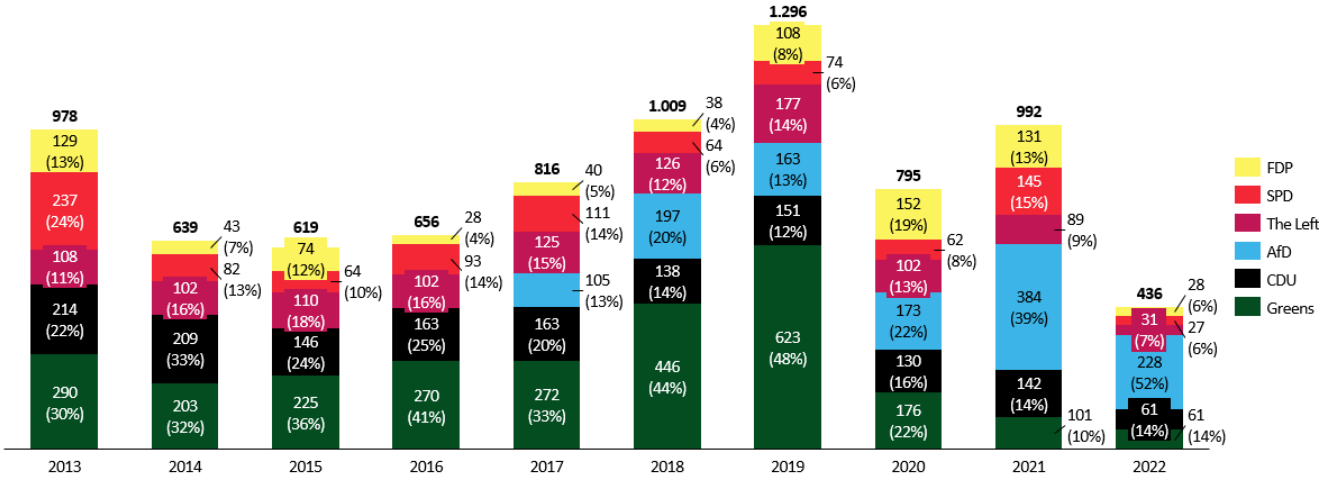
Source: (Deutscher Bundestag, 2016, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024)

Figure 34: AfD and FDP annual number of press releases, 2017-2022



Source: Number of total party press releases scraped from the parties' central websites for the periods for which data were available, 2017 to 2022.

Figure 35: German parties' annual YouTube videos, absolute and in %, 2013-2022



Source: Count of videos on parties' YouTube channels (as of March 30, 2023)
Note: Although the AfD was founded in 2013, its YouTube channel was not established until the fourth quarter of 2016. The Green Party's video count in 2018 and 2019 should be treated with caution, as it mainly included excerpts from MPs' speeches, rather than separately produced videos.

Table 16: Comparison of AfD, CDU, and FDP party-parallal organisations

Type of interest represented	CDU/CSU	FDP	AfD
Business	- Wirtschaftsrat (12,000 members and companies) - Mittelstands- und Wirtschafts-union (25,000 members)	- Liberaler Mittelstand (1,850 members)	- Mittelstandsforum (membership unclear, 150 SME entrepreneurs in 2015)
Labour	- Christlich-Demokratische Arbeitnehmerschaft (an important internal party power factor until the 1970s, but has since declined sharply)		- Arbeitnehmer in der AfD (no longer exists) - Alternative Vereinigung der Arbeitnehmer (little activity) - Alternative Arbeitnehmer-verband Mitteldeutschland (far right, little activity)
Youth	- Junge Union (91,000 members as of late 2021)	- Junge Liberale (15,000 members as of mid-2022)	- Junge Alternative (1,655 members in early 2019)
University	- Ring Christlich-Demokratischer Studenten (approx. 100 groups at universities, polytechnics and vocational colleges with a total of 8,000 members)	- Liberale Hochschulgruppen (present at 50 universities and colleges) - Verband liberaler Akademiker (Liberal academics, providing ideological/ financial support to liberal university groups)	- Campus Alternative (present at 26 universities and colleges in 2016, only one active in Halle by 2019)
Women	- Frauen Union (approx. 155,000 members, automatically includes all female party members unless they opt out)	- Liberale Frauen (approx. 1,000 members by the end of 2020)	- Frauen in der Alternative (founded in 2018, went offline shortly thereafter) - Frauen Alternative (no support from female party leaders)
Senior Citizens	- Senioren Union (54,000 paying members, 52% of whom are also CDU members)	- Liberale Senioren (membership unclear, but active with 16 regional branches)	
LGBTQ	- Lesben und Schwule in der Union (membership unclear, active in terms of organising events and producing social media content)	- Liberale Schwule und Lesben (membership unclear, active in terms of organising events and producing social media content)	- Homosexuelle in der AfD (group split in early 2017, little activity since then, no website) - Schwul - Lesbische Plattform (small group with little activity on social media, no website)
Local politicians	- Kommunalpolitische Vereinigung (representing the interests of ca. 75,000 party elected representatives)	- Vereinigung Liberaler Kommunalpolitiker (association of FDP local politicians, approx. 12,000 members)	- Verein konservativer Kommunalpolitiker (association of AfD local politicians, only in some states)
Teachers	- Arbeitskreis Christlich-Demokratischer Lehrer		

	(mainly active in Hesse and Rhineland- Palatinate)		
Lawyers	- Bundesarbeitskreis Christlich-Demokratischer Juristen (working group that advises the party's executive committee on legal issues and participates in the legal policy debates; party membership not required)	- Vereinigung Liberaler Juristen (Association of Liberal Lawyers, currently being rebuilt after being relatively dormant since 2013)	- Vereinigung von Juristen in der AfD (small association with no website and little activity on its Facebook page)
Climate	- KlimaUnion (founded in 2021 with limited influence on the party programme)		
Migration	- Netzwerk Integration (network of party members representing the interests of people with a migration background; membership unclear, limited media attention)	- Liberale Türkisch-Deutsche Vereinigung (founded in 1993, membership unclear) - Liberale Vielfalt (broad platform for minorities and people with a migration background founded in 2021; membership unclear)	
Religion	- Evangelischer Arbeitskreis (association of Protestant party members who want to bring Protestant thinking into the party based on their faith) - Jüdische Forum in der Union (platform for party members who want to raise awareness of Jewish life in everyday life)		- Christen in der AfD (around 300 members as of early 2020, organised in six regional organisations) - Juden in der AfD (founded in 2018; membership unclear; moderately active based on the number of events)
Party-affiliated foundations	- Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (45.6 million EUR public funding in 2022) - Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung (13.39 million EUR public funding in 2022)	- Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (16.35 million EUR public funding in 2022)	- Desiderius-Erasmus-Stiftung (no funding; the AfD has filed a lawsuit complaining that its foundation has not received state funding yet)

Note: Membership figures are self-reported, latest available. Public funding for party-affiliated foundations from the Federal Ministry of the Interior.

Additional data on the RN's organisational strength

In terms of communication, the RN is comparable to its competitors, using newsletters and social media channels to reach its members and supporters (Table 17).

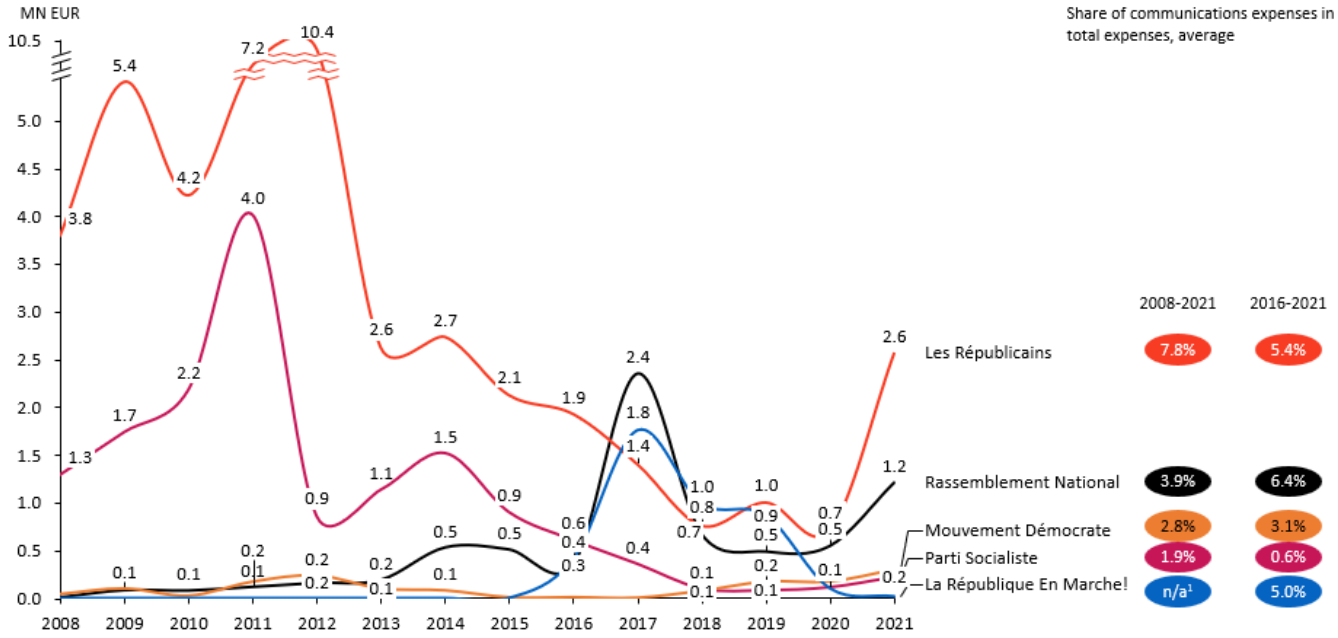
Table 17: Social media channels used by RN and its competitors and follower count

Party	Twitter	Facebook	YouTube	Instagram	TikTok	LinkedIn	Telegram
Rassemblement National	340,302	516,709	32,800	99,000	*unclear*	*n/a*	3,969
Les Républicains	329,025	206,907	23,800	57,000	2,454	7,000	*unclear*
Renaissance	321,400	258,314	29,600	97,000	4,188	32,000	*unclear*
Debout la France	409,925	660,882	122,000	29,000	20,900	145	3,980

Note: Number of followers as of 6 December 2023; n/a = no official account; unclear = unclear whether an official account exists

The RN's communication expenditure also shows that it is on a par with its competitors. Figure 36 shows that between 2008 and 2021, the RN's average communication expenditure as a proportion of total expenditure is exceeded only by Les Républicains. It is worth noting that the RN has had the highest average communication expenditure among the parties compared over the last six years. The year-on-year variation in spending is mainly due to the electoral cycle, with notable peaks in 2012, 2014, 2017 and 2021 - a trend observed across all parties.

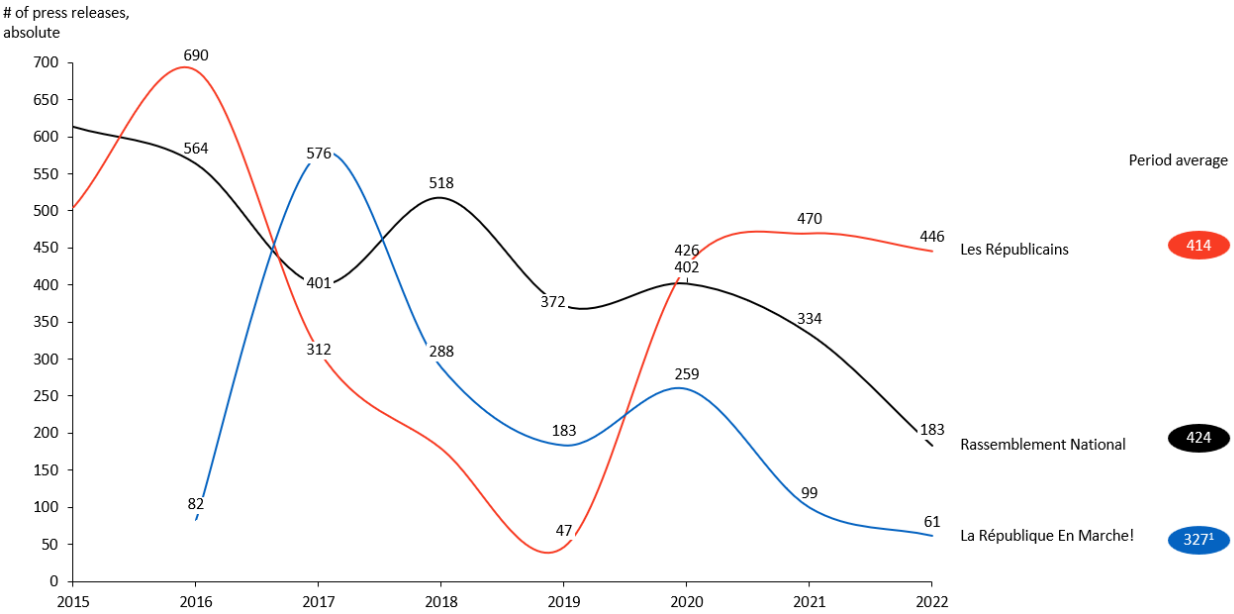
Figure 36: French parties' communications spend, in MN EUR and as share of total, 2008-2022



Source: (CNCCFP, 2023)
Note: As Debout la France did not provide the breakdown of its spending on communication and propaganda/events, but only a total, it cannot be included in this comparison.
[1] La République En Marche! was only founded in April 2016

In addition to communication expenditure, the number of press releases and social media posts provides an insight into the RN's relative communication activity compared to its competitors. Figure 37 shows the number of press releases issued by the RN, its centre-right rival Les Républicains and the centrist governing party La République En Marche. Despite significant fluctuations from year to year, the RN's annual press releases from 2015 to 2022 are comparable to, or on average slightly higher than, those of its competitors.

Figure 37: French parties' annual press releases, 2015-2022, absolute

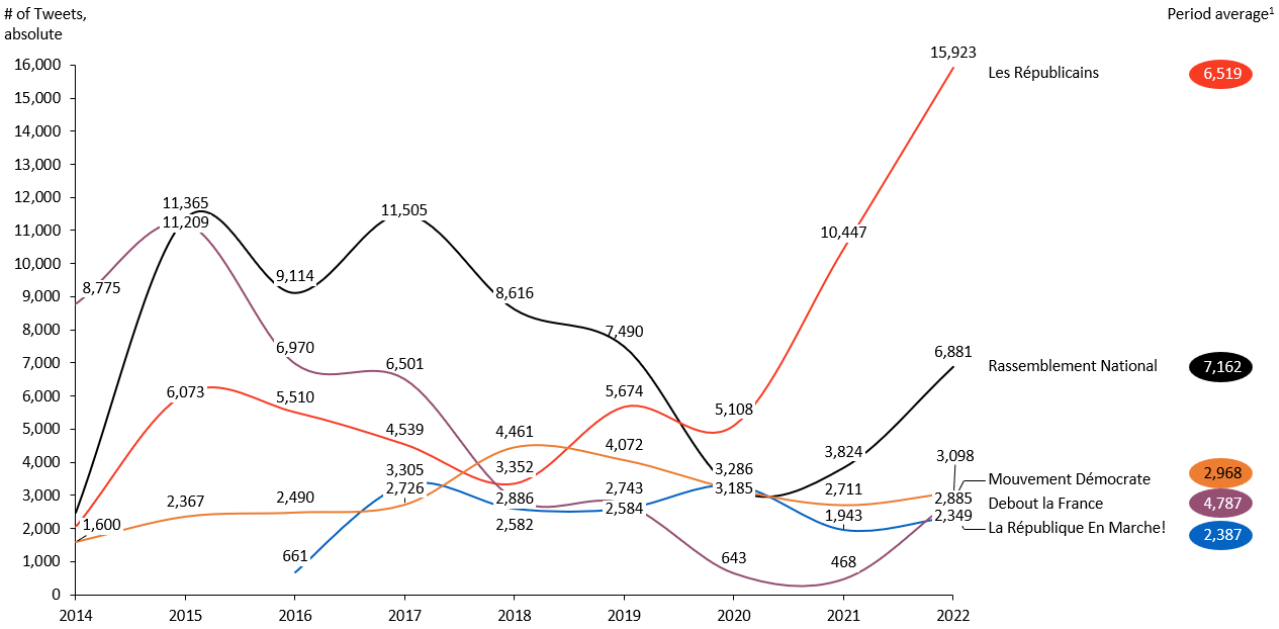


Source: Count based on press releases scraped for the different political parties for the period 2015-2022

[1] As *La République En Marche!* was only founded in April 2016 and renamed Renaissance in May 2022 when the party's website moved to a new domain, which explains the lower number of press releases in those years, the average for this party is only calculated based on the years 2017-2020.

An analysis of the official Twitter accounts of French political parties (Figure 38) shows that, despite fluctuations, the RN had the highest average number of tweets between 2015 and 2022, closely followed by Les Républicains, reflecting the RN's strong communication efforts. In contrast, party activity on YouTube and TikTok provides limited insight into their strategies. YouTube video output varied significantly year by year, with inconsistent content, and no official RN TikTok account existed during the analysis period.

Figure 38: French parties' number of annual tweets, 2014-2022, absolute



Source: Count based on tweets scraped for the central Twitter account (now X) of the different political parties for the period 2014-2022

[1] As *La République En Marche!* was only founded in April 2016, the average for this party is only calculated based on the years 2017-2022

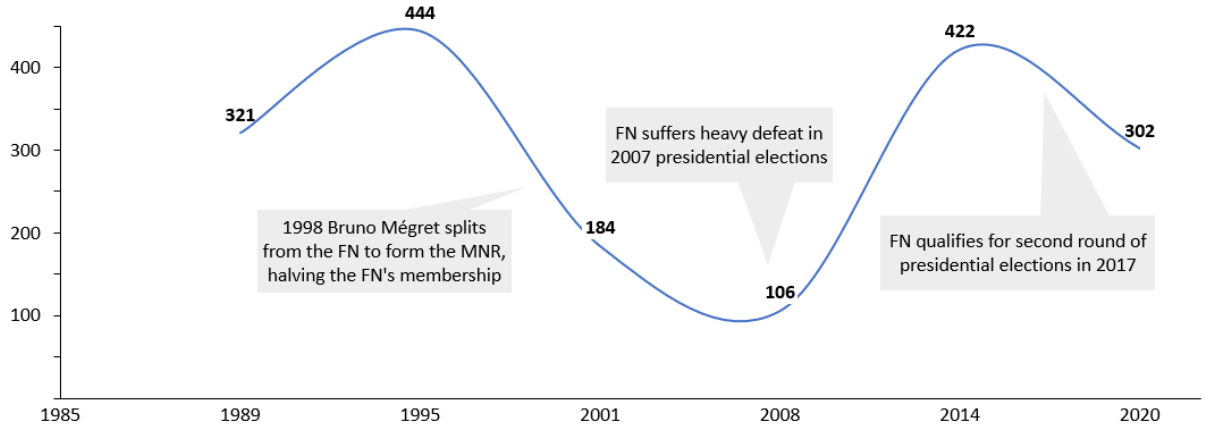
While a party's communications and social media efforts can help build collective identities and shared interpretive frames, they do not automatically trigger widespread mobilisation beyond its core audience (Gibson, Greffet, and Cantijoch, 2017, p. 103). However, when combined with other indicators like membership, income, and staffing, they reinforce the image of the RN as an organisationally robust party.

The RN's ability to present lists of candidates for the municipal elections is further evidence of its organisational strength, in particular its local presence, network, mobilisation capacity and administrative efficiency. As Figure 39 shows, the RN's ability to present such electoral lists in towns with more than 9,000 inhabitants[11] has fluctuated over the years. These fluctuations reflect the volatility in the number of party candidates and activists, with the recent decline attributed to strategic decisions. The departure of Bruno Mégret in 1998 and the resulting drop in membership negatively impacted the party's ability to present lists in the 2001 municipal elections, with less than half the number submitted compared to 1995. The FN's poor performance in the 2007

[11] Although this cut-off point may appear arbitrary, it is a standard convention in French electoral analysis.

presidential and legislative elections likely discouraged potential candidates from running in the 2008 municipal elections. However, the party rebounded in 2014, submitting 442 lists, winning 10 municipalities, and electing almost 1,500 municipal councillors (Ifop, 2020, p. 3). In 2020, the RN presented 28% fewer lists than in 2014, although it still fielded 52 more lists than the ruling La République En Marche. This reduction was a strategic decision to prioritise quality over quantity, following reports of councillors quitting due to insufficient support (Berteloot, Pezet, and Leboucq, 2020; Meynard, 2017).

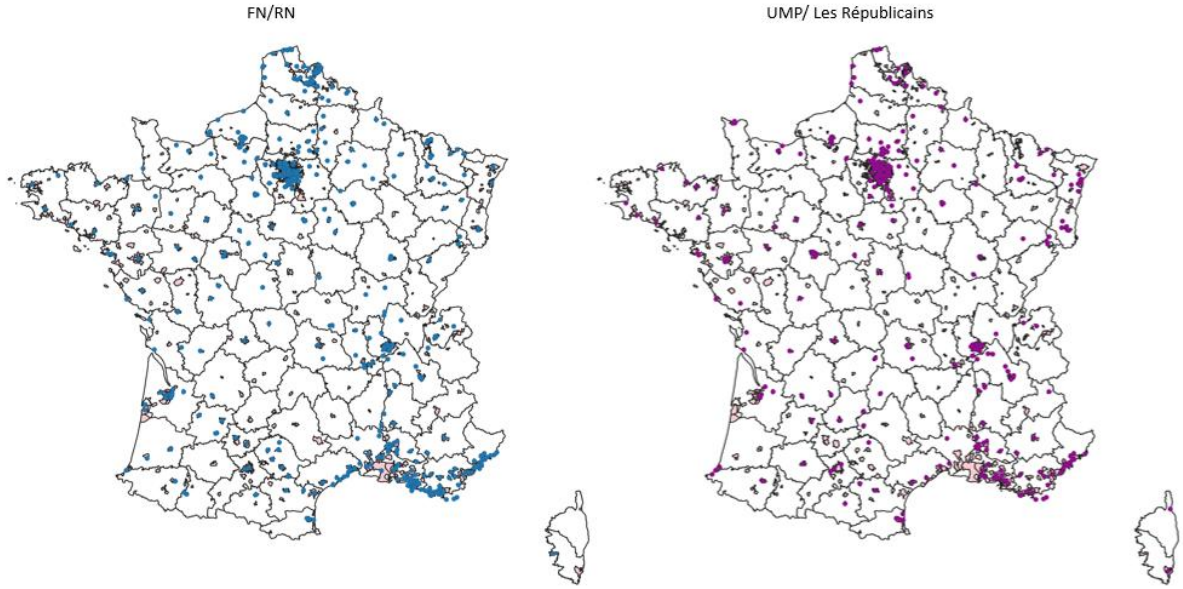
Figure 39: RN's number of electoral lists presented in municipal elections, 1989-2020



Source: (Ifop, 2020)

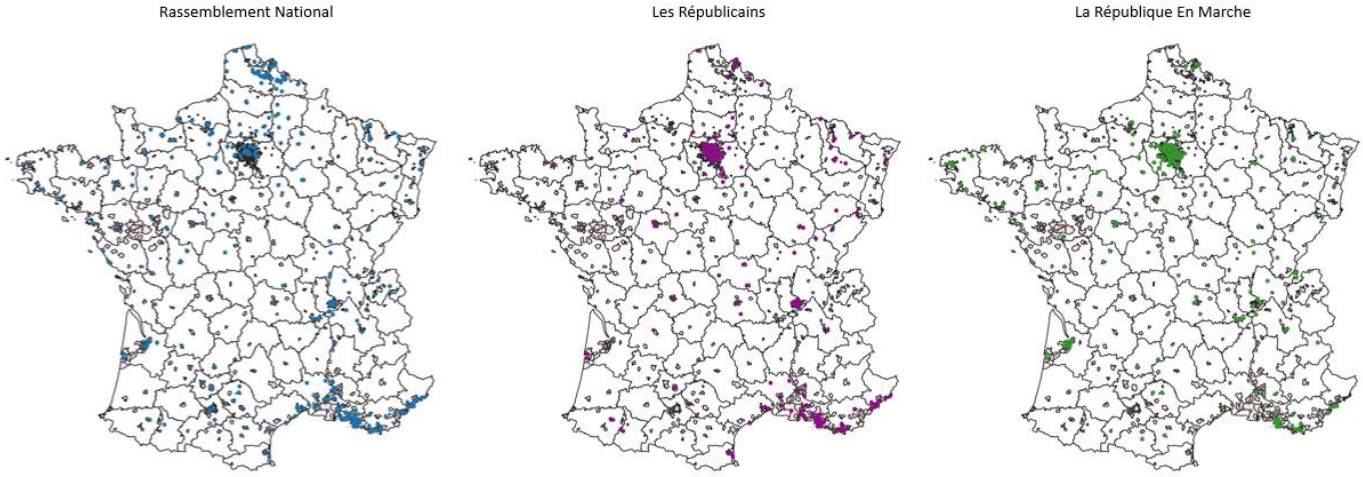
The maps below (Figure 40 and Figure 41) illustrate the RN's presence in towns with over 9,000 inhabitants in 2014 and 2020, compared to the centre-right UMP/Les Républicains and Macron's La République En Marche.

Figure 40: Map of FN and UMP candidate lists for the 2014 municipal elections



Source: (IGN, 2016; Ministère de l'intérieur, 2015)

Figure 41: Map of RN, LR, and LREM candidate lists for the 2020 municipal elections



Source: (IGN, 2020; Ministère de l'intérieur, 2020)

I. Endogeneity analysis for the two independent variables

A party's organisational strength

As outlined in Chapter 2, I seek to address the issue of endogeneity regarding the first independent variable—party organisational strength—by examining whether an exogenous shock, specifically the Political Parties Act of 15 June 2018, influenced the AfD's engagement with fringe groups in the expected manner. This act increased state funding for political parties above the rate of inflation, leading to a 16.9% rise in the AfD's state funding over two years, from €10.1 million in 2018 to €11.8 million in 2020. However, despite this increase, the AfD's overall income declined due to reductions in other revenue streams, including earnings from events, sales, corporate activities, and assets. This decline made it infeasible to test for endogeneity as initially planned.

Nevertheless, other indicators of organisational strength improved after the 2018 Political Parties Act. Party membership grew, staff expenditure (used as a proxy for staff numbers) increased, and the AfD continued to professionalise its internal processes more than five years after its founding. These developments reflect ongoing organisational consolidation. Quantitative data from the Factiva index showed that as the AfD's organisational strength increased, its engagement with fringe groups decreased. Additionally, qualitative evidence from the main cases of the AfD and the RN in Chapters 3 to 5 further support the hypothesised causal direction that a party's organisational capacity gaps precede party leaders' considerations about fringe groups engagement and that as a party's organisational strength increases, its dependence on fringe groups diminishes, reducing the likelihood of party leaders engaging with such groups to compensate for organisational gaps.

Immigration salience

The salience of immigration is widely considered exogenous to RRPs' public engagement with fringe groups. It is primarily shaped by broader societal factors, including economic conditions, cultural attitudes, media framing, and historical contexts. While RRPs can influence

social norms around the public expression of far-right views (Valentim, 2021),[12] immigration salience remains largely driven by these wider societal factors.

However, RRPs are not passive actors. It is conceivable that they may influence immigration salience through their rhetoric or potentially through interactions with fringe groups. To address the potential endogeneity of immigration salience, I focus on 'immigration shocks'—specific incidents, such as crimes or terrorist acts committed by migrants, that heighten public concern about immigration and shape RRPs propensity to engage with fringe groups. Research shows that crimes by members of immigrant communities receive disproportionate media coverage (Couttenier et al., 2019), amplifying public concern about immigration (Schneider-Strawczynski and Valette, 2021).

Two key examples illustrate how the AfD responds to 'immigration shocks' by intensifying its rhetoric and engaging with fringe groups, supporting the hypothesised causal relationship. First, on 19 December 2016, a Tunisian asylum seeker hijacked a truck and drove it into a Berlin Christmas market, killing 12 people and injuring dozens. The Af D seized on the attack to criticise Chancellor Merkel's refugee policies. André Poggenburg, from the party's Saxony-Anhalt branch, tweeted: 'The do-gooders whingeing about terror in Berlin is about to begin.' Similarly, the head of the North Rhine-Westphalia branch blamed Merkel directly, calling the victims 'Merkel's dead' (Das Gupta, 2016). The AfD's response went beyond rhetoric. On 21 December, senior figures such as Alexander Gauland and Björn Höcke attended a vigil outside the Federal Chancellery. Organised by the far-right group *One Percent*, the event attracted around 250 participants, including members of the Identitarian movement and prominent far-right publisher Götz Kubitschek (Breitegger, 2016; Kamann, 2016a).

Second, on 25 June 2021, a Somali asylum seeker carried out a knife attack in Würzburg, Bavaria, killing three women and injuring seven others. AfD leaders were quick to exploit the

[12] Valentim shows that the parliamentary representation of RRPs that challenge social norms can contribute to normalising support for the far right. This suggests that while RRPs influence societal attitudes, they do not have complete control. Societal attitudes towards immigration and other far-right positions are the result of a complex interplay of factors, with RRPs acting as one of several forces shaping, but not solely driving, their overall prevalence.

incident. Party leader Alexander Gauland blamed Merkel's policies, stating that 'the three people could still be alive without Merkel's irresponsible policy of open borders' (Alternative für Deutschland, 2021). A week later, the AfD organised a demonstration to commemorate the victims, drawing 100 participants, including state and national AfD politicians as well as representatives from fringe groups (Niemeyer, 2021).

These cases illustrate how, in the aftermath of 'immigration shocks,' heightened immigration salience emboldens AfD politicians to exploit such incidents for political gain while engaging with fringe groups. This behaviour supports the hypothesised causal relationship: as immigration salience rises, RRPs become less concerned about reputational costs and more likely to engage with fringe groups. Furthermore, qualitative evidence from interviews with AfD and RN politicians in Chapter 3 to 5 reinforce the hypothesised causal direction, showing how increased immigration salience shifts RRP politicians' calculations of reputational risk.