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## **Deconstructing the Migration ‘Crisis’ in Germany: Problem Representations and Hegemonic Discourses in the Political Debate**

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# Abstract

European politics is undergoing a profound shift to the right, characterised by increasingly restrictive migration legislations. In Germany the welcoming culture of 2015 has evolved into a more restrictive political climate. As centrist and progressive parties increasingly adopt deterrence-driven systems to counter right-wing pressure, the mechanisms that legitimise these harsh policies remain under-examined. This thesis addresses this gap by critically deconstructing how political debates manufacture migration as a systemic threat. The central research question is: how do dominant discourses within the German political debate construct a hegemonic problematisation of migration that serves to legitimise policies of deterrence?

To answer this question, the research employs a Foucauldian, post-structuralist methodology. It applies parts of Bacchi and Goodwin's (2016) 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach to contemporary German parliamentary debates and policy documents to systematically deconstruct the framing of the 'migration problem'. The analysis is also informed by Donna Haraway's (1988) feminist concepts of the 'god trick' and 'situated knowledges'.

The findings show that the most powerful political actors, primarily the governing coalition and the right-wing opposition, produce the dominant discourses. Securitisation, nationalist and juridical discourses are combined to create a dominant problem representation: migrants are fundamentally portrayed as an existential threat to German societal order and national security. By presenting this threat narrative as an objective fact, the state silences humanitarian viewpoints and directly legitimises deterrent policies, such as border controls and deportations, as necessary interventions to protect society.

The discussion reveals that this problematisation is strategically constructed via Haraway's 'god trick', whereby the state's exclusionary interests are masked as a universal necessity. However, this illusion fractures when confronted with structural paradoxes: the discourse ignores Germany's urgent need for labour migration and integration, while simultaneously enforcing segregation. These contradictions prove that the deterrence system is legitimised purely through discursive power and systematically excludes the situated knowledge of migrants.

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# Abbreviations

AFD	Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany)
AMMR	Asylum and Migration Management Regulation
BAMF	Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge)
CDA	Critical discourse analysis
CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union (Christian democratic union)
CEAS	Common European Asylum System
CSU	Christlich-Soziale Union (Christian Social Union)
EEA	European Economic Area
e.g.	example given
EU	European Union
GRC	Geneva Refugee Convention
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PRR	populist radical right
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei (social democratic party)
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WPR	'What's the problem represented to be?'
WWII	World War II

# 1 Introduction

European politics is currently undergoing a profound structural shift towards increasingly restrictive border regimes. Germany is a stark illustration of the intensity of this transformation. A decade after former Chancellor Angela Merkel's historic declaration in 2015 of 'Wir schaffen das' ('We can do it') (Merkel 2015) and the subsequent era of a widely praised welcoming culture, the domestic political climate has dramatically hardened towards exclusion. As migration has become a highly polarising electoral issue dominated by right-wing populism, centrist and progressive parties have been forced to adopt a defensive approach (Hillje 2025; Bünger 2025). Consequently, even centrist policymakers in Germany are increasingly advocating for a restrictive asylum system designed to actively discourage arrivals, often citing the 'Danish model' of deterrence as inspiration for German migration policies (Witvrouwen 2025; Donovan 2025). The current government's rhetoric vividly captures this Danish-inspired political imperative to reduce overall asylum numbers and minimise the physical visibility of migrants. Chancellor Friedrich Merz recently stressed the ongoing need to address the 'problem in the cityscape', even while celebrating a 60% drop in asylum requests (Merz 2025).

While Germany's reception of refugees in 2015 is well documented, the discourses driving this contemporary aggressive shift towards deterrence remain under-researched. Focusing exclusively on the German political debate between 6 May 2025 and 1 April 2026, this thesis addresses this research gap. By investigating how political power operates through language and knowledge production to justify systemic exclusion, the thesis asks how dominant discourses within the German political debate construct a hegemonic problematisation of migration that ultimately serves to legitimise deterrence policies.

To achieve this, the thesis applies a poststructuralist understanding of discourse. It utilizes Carol Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' (WPR) approach as its primary methodological tool to deconstruct how German policymakers actively manufacture migration as a specific 'problem' requiring deterrence. This methodology is heavily grounded in Michel Foucault's theories as the main inspiration for the thesis. Drawing on Foucault's understanding of discourse, power, and knowledge, as well as his concepts of governmentality and biopolitics, the research explores how state power regulates populations and defines acceptable 'truths.'

Additionally, Donna Haraway's concept of the 'god trick' is utilized to critique how the state masks its highly situated, exclusionary political interests as an objective and universal reality.

The thesis progressively deconstructs the German migration debate using a structured, multi-level analysis. It begins by establishing the contextual and theoretical framework. Chapters 2 and 3 contextualise the study within existing literature on deterrence and migration framing, outlining the structural realities of the German migration system. Chapter 4 then introduces a poststructuralist framework, utilising Foucauldian concepts to explain the mechanics of discourse and governmentality. With this theoretical lens in place, Chapter 5 details the methodology and Chapter 6 traces the historical development of the German migration debate, providing a necessary baseline for contemporary discussions. Chapter 7 presents the core empirical analysis, applying the methodological framework to parliamentary texts from 2025–2026 and revealing precisely how the state constructs the 'threat' of migration and suppresses alternative policy solutions. Finally, Chapters 8 and 9 summarise these findings and discuss how the structural paradoxes and empirical failures of these deterrence policies demonstrate the absolute power of the state's hegemonic discourse. The study concludes with an examination of its limitations and final theoretical insights.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Framing of migration

Considering the recent shifts in the German migration debate and the new demands from political actors and the population in Germany, it is necessary to look at the general framing of migration in different contexts across Europe to position the German shift into the general trends of the debate. Across the literature, scholars agree that the media and political presentation surrounding migration is overwhelmingly negative and heavily reliant on frames of conflict and threat (e.g. Eberl et al. 2018; Temizisler 2023; Vliegenthart and Roggeband 2007; Huysmans 2000; Krzyżanowski 2020). It is also remarkable that these frames have been mapped over different kinds of analytic material. While Vliegenthart and Roggeband (2007) and Temizisler (2023) analysed media outlets such as newspapers and digital media, Eberl et al. (2018) conducted a systematic literature review of quantitative and qualitative studies across Europe and Krzyżanowski (2020) for example analysed the political rhetoric, speeches and public statements of right-wing populist politicians across Europe. Together, these studies

demonstrate that the identified framing and narratives have been thoroughly researched across various outlets, providing insights into diverse contexts and showcasing a well-developed field of research.

While in Germany the development of the extremization of the topic seems to be relatively recent, in the literature the negative framing of migration has been well researched across varying contexts. That results in different researchers having found multiple frames of how migrants are usually presented in the media and political debate. Eberl et al. (2018, 207) for example explore how migrant groups are generally under-represented in the media and when they are visible, the coverage is often conflict-centred and frames them primarily as delinquents or criminals. The authors also describe how migrants and refugees can be framed as a threat to society. The term 'migrant' is often associated with an economic threat, with the focus being on competition for jobs and the economic burden posed by migrants on the welfare system and the state. In contrast, the terms 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers' tend to trigger a welfare burden frame, evoking fears of draining state resources (Eberl et al. 2018, 210–14; Krzyżanowski 2020, 507). Other types of framing concerning migrants and refugees that are often found in the literature include metaphors of water, such as floods and masses, or narratives of 'biologizing metaphors' which depict migrants as parasites or carriers of diseases. These dehumanise refugees and depict them as natural disasters invading the country (Eberl et al. 2018, 214; Krzyżanowski 2020, 518). By employing these dehumanising metaphors of natural disasters to describe migration, political and media actors use symbols that are immediately understood by the public and thus normalise latent racism in everyday society without always needing explicit racist language (Wodak and Reisigl 1999, 192; Eberl et al. 2018, 214). Common framings also include framings of perpetrators versus victims, for example, immigrant women as victims of misogyny or religion (Vliegthart and Roggeband 2007, 301; Eberl et al. 2018, 214). A different, more positive framing, is the 'Multicultural' framing, which depict cultural diversity as an asset (Vliegthart and Roggeband 2007, 301). Since the terror acts of 9/11 and Islamic terror in the EU in 2015/2016 framings of Islam as a threat, which depict Islam as a fundamental danger to Western values such as gender equality and freedom of expression have also become more popular (Vliegthart and Roggeband 2007, 302). Temizisler (2023, 208–9) also explores how narratives frequently frame migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers as 'invaders' and an existential threat to the well-being and public order of the receiving countries. This shows that scholars have identified specific

typologies used to frame immigrants, which often depend on the migrant's origin, gender, or religion. Eberl et al. (2018, 212) note that framing varies depending on the specific group discussed. For example, Eastern Europeans are typically framed as an economic and welfare threat, whereas Non-Europeans, particularly North Africans are often framed as a cultural or security threat. This leads to the term 'syncretism' which was coined by Wodak and Reisigl (1999, 181) to describe modern anti-immigrant discourse, which they describe as an 'ideological mixtum compositum'. In order to portray migrants as the ultimate threat, political actors establish pseudo-causal links between imagined biological characteristics, cultural practices and social behaviours. This creates a flexible negative hierarchy that justifies exclusion (Wodak and Reisigl 1999, 185–86).

## 2.2 The securitisation of migration

In this literature review I want to look more closely into the securitisation of migration and the framing of migrants as a security threat, that is a result of some of the frames from the previous chapter. Ceyhan and Tsoukala (2002, 21–23) provide a foundational framework for understanding the transformation of migration into a security issue. According to Ceyhan and Tsoukala (2002, 21), profound existential anxieties regarding state sovereignty and national identity in Western societies have been triggered by modern events on the world stage. Examples of these events include globalisation, the deterritorialization of markets and the erosion of traditional physical borders. In an attempt to compensate for this perceived loss of control, political actors in Europe actively produce a 'discourse of fear', replacing traditional external enemies (such as the Soviet Union in the past) with the figure of the migrant. The migrant is now positioned at the centre of a newly constructed security threat. Consequently, migration is stripped of its historical, economic, or humanitarian contexts, and is perceived almost exclusively through a securitarian lens (Ceyhan and Tsoukala 2002, 22–23). To achieve this securitisation, political and media debates strategically frame the migrant through specific, highly ambivalent arguments. Ceyhan and Tsoukala (2002, 24–29) identify four primary rhetorical axes used to construct this threat, which are highly similar and related to the frames identified by the authors in the previous chapter. For the securitisation the authors identify the socioeconomic axis and the identitarian axis, which describe migrants as free-riders who are responsible for unemployment and as unassimilable because of cultural differences. The other axes are more specific to securitisation. According to the authors migration is also framed through a lens of 'lost control'. The border becomes a mythical symbol, and migrants

are framed as the ultimate proof that the sovereign state is failing to protect its territory from external invasion. That way the demonization of migration is utilized as a calculated political gambit. Politicians deploy xenophobic discourses to capture electoral benefits, believing that adopting a tough-on-migration stance is necessary to survive in modern political elections (Ceyhan and Tsoukala 2002, 24–29).

A key mechanism of securitisation involves the deliberate criminalisation of migrants. Ceyhan and Tsoukala (2002, 25) note that authorities create a ‘security short-circuit’, making the term ‘immigration’ entirely synonymous with ‘insecurity’. In order to justify military-style border enforcement, the debate constructs a ‘continuum of threats’. Undocumented border crossing is no longer treated as a mere administrative issue, but is instead rhetorically and legally linked to severe criminal activities such as organised crime, drug trafficking and terrorism.

While political debates and specific framings play a significant role in securitisation, the literature also emphasises that the institutional framework of the European Union can be argued to have fundamentally established migration as a security threat. Huysmans (2000, 751) argues that the process of European integration, particularly the establishment of the internal market and the removal of internal borders under the Schengen Agreements, has inevitably led to the securitisation of migration. By removing internal borders, European policymakers perceived a ‘security deficit’ that had to be compensated by significantly strengthening the EU’s external borders. Consequently, migration became structurally linked to a ‘security continuum’, whereby the movement of asylum seekers and migrants was politically and legally associated with terrorism, international crime and drug trafficking (Huysmans 2000, 752). This institutional shift significantly altered the nature of borders. Walters (2002, 561–62) argues that the Schengen process ‘denaturalised’ the border. Rather than merely being the physical edge of a sovereign state, the border became a biopolitical and networked filter. The focus shifted from territorial defence to population management, with migration policies designed to constantly regulate, track and filter populations based on their perceived threat to European internal order.

### **2.3 Deterrence in migration**

In the context of the securitisation of migration, the concepts of deterrence and deterrence policies become relevant. In the context of migration, different authors conceptualise deterrence differently. As mentioned in the introduction, Denmark was a driving force behind

the German government's decision to openly call for deterrence measures in an attempt to manage migration. The goal is to emulate Denmark's perceived successful approach to manage migration. Additionally, previous chapters on the framing of migration have demonstrated the current trend of securitising migration and adopting negative framings towards it, rendering deterrence a pertinent issue which is relevant for most states in the current migration debates across Europe.

Different authors conceptualise deterrence in different ways and identify different dimensions of deterrence policies. Accordingly, there is no single definition of deterrence or deterrence policies; rather, the various measures and actions produced by legislation can be considered deterrent. FitzGerald's (2020, 4–7) conceptualization for example focuses on the spatial and jurisdictional expansion of state power. Deterrence here is not just about defending a physical border but about actively pushing the border outward to intercept migrants before they can make a legal claim. FitzGerald gives multiple examples visible in global political regimes today as examples for control mechanisms as a tool for deterrence. The author mentions funding third countries to act as buffer zones, maritime interventions in international waters and sanctioning airlines for boarding passengers without proper visa (FitzGerald 2020, 4). This phenomenon is also known as the 'externalisation of borders' used to manage and protect the borders of a sovereign state (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015, 73). Modern migration literature shows that sovereignty has evolved from the straightforward exercise of power over domestic territory to a more decentralised geographical exercise of power, known as the 'externalisation' of borders (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015, 73). Walters (2002, 573–74) observes that traditional geopolitical borders have been transformed into complex, mobile surveillance networks. Rather than waiting for migrants to reach physical state borders, European and Western states now extend their border enforcement far beyond their own territories. Hyndman and Mountz (2008, 268–69) refer to this spatial strategy as 'neo-refoulement'. They argue that states deliberately use geography to circumvent their international human rights obligations. This prevents asylum seekers from ever reaching sovereign territory, where they could legally claim asylum. The primary goal of this extra-territorial deterrence is to circumvent international law. Under the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention (GRC), states cannot return individuals to face persecution (non-refoulement) once they are on sovereign territory. By physically preventing arrivals, states can avoid triggering these legal obligations altogether (FitzGerald 2020, 5–9).

Additionally, to the physical externalized barriers that FitzGerald describes Gammeltoft-Hansen (2017, 104–8) explores deterrence as a psychological and informational weapon. Rather than relying solely on physical barriers, according to the author, the state weaponizes its own international reputation to manipulate migrant decision-making. In the article the author uses Denmark as an example to visualize the tools a state can use as a deterrence measure. The article describes how Denmark places for example advertisements in foreign newspapers (e.g. Lebanon) to directly warn potential asylum seekers about slashed welfare benefits and strict family reunification rules in Denmark. This form of deterrence assumes that asylum seekers have the agency to control and choose their destinations. With the psychological forms of deterrence the state aims at redirecting migration flows toward neighbouring countries that appear more welcoming (Gammeltoft-Hansen 2017, 108). Another psychological form of deterrence is explored by Vedsted-Hansen (2022, 8). The author examines how deterrence is created through the manipulation of legal statuses. States can use the psychological precarity of a person's situation as a deterrence measure by denying permanent security and the right to stay in a country. This hinders the migrants and asylum seekers from settling and integrating as well as from having a feeling of security. By keeping refugees in a state of temporariness by never giving them prolonged legal status in the country, they remain unable to plan for the future, pursue long-term education, or feel secure. That way the state deploys legal temporariness as a profound measure of deterrence designed to encourage voluntary departure.

This is also connected to what Casas-Cortes et al. (2015, 67) refer to as the 'border spectacle' which is a theatrical display of state control involving military deployments, fences and public deportations. This spectacle is designed to dramatically enact exclusionary performances that brand specific migrant groups as 'illegal' and dangerous. However, academic literature emphasises that the true purpose of this spectacle is not to completely seal borders. De Genova (2002, 439) offers a critical perspective, arguing that the strict border enforcements are utilised to 'legally produce migrant illegality'. The highly visible spectacle of enforcement does not stop migration, but it creates a permanent condition of 'deportability' for migrants living within the state. It is the constant, looming threat of deportation that serves as the ultimate disciplinary tool (De Genova 2002, 438). By keeping migrant populations in a precarious state of 'illegality' and deportability, the state satisfies the domestic public's demand for security and control while simultaneously rendering migrants highly vulnerable

and easily exploitable. Thus, the spectacle disciplines and criminalises migrants in the country and pushes them into a state of illegality' and insecurity (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015, 67, 73; De Genova 2002, 438–39).

Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999, 85) build on the concept of legal and administrative precarity to demonstrate how deterrence is deeply embedded in everyday bureaucratic processes and language. In their analysis of the practices of the Austrian immigration authorities, the authors demonstrate how official letters rejecting family reunification applications function as a severe form of administrative deterrence. The state denies immigrants the right to be joined by their families, justifying these rejections not only through strict legal rules, but also through subjective moral evaluations of the applicants' ability to 'integrate' (Wodak and Van Leeuwen 1999, 89). Through the use of particular 'legitimation strategies', such as appealing to impersonal authority, citing economic rationalisations or moralising the concept of 'public interest', the state establishes an invisible bureaucratic barrier. This administrative deterrence keeps migrants isolated and reinforces the temporariness of their stay, effectively weaponizing bureaucratic processes to prevent them from settling permanently and establishing a sense of belonging (Wodak and Van Leeuwen 1999, 104–9).

Similarly to these measures theorized upon by Gammeltoft-Hansen (2017) and Vedsted-Hansen, Whyte et al. (2020) analyse deterrence through the physical built environment, arguing that state-provided infrastructure can be intentionally weaponized to make life harder for asylum seekers. The study in this paper shows how in 2015 Denmark bypassed existing, functioning asylum centres to explicitly build freezing, isolated tent camps for single male migrants. The physical harshness of these camps was designed to be punitive on purpose (Whyte et al. 2020, 146). The authors argue that these camps were a form of political theatre. They were visually striking symbols meant to show the Danish electorate that the government was being 'tough' on immigration, while simultaneously signalling to migrants that they would suffer if they stayed. This shows the symbolically deterring effect but also the physical effect of these deterrence measures (Whyte et al. 2020, 148).

As exemplified with these examples from the migration policies and their deterrent nature there are multiple dimensions of deterrence policies: psychological and physical measures in the host country and externalization measures to deter migrants from coming. Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan (2017, 29) argue after analysis of the different dimensions that deterrence is

no longer just a collection of ad-hoc policies, but has evolved into a paradigm that gives a system to how the Global North faces migrants and asylum seekers from the Global South. The authors find that deterrence has become the default political decision for governments when faced with migration issues and is closely connected to the securitisation of migration. They argue that many states default to restrictive measures rather than pursuing capacity building, burden-sharing, or integration. This thesis aims to determine which deterrent measures can be found in Germany and how a deterrent system was established in the German migration debate.

## 2.4 Anti-immigrant framings in relation to right-wing extremism

Recent literature on the framing and securitisation of migration shows that extreme anti-immigrant discourses are gradually becoming normalised in public debate, often as a result of right-wing populist strategies. The media is used by political actors to create an immigration-related 'moral panic', which is an exaggerated, often imaginary crisis designed to stigmatise migrants and spread stereotypical, hostile opinions across society (Krzyżanowski, 2020, 506). Far-right parties can exploit these highly visible media panics by emphasising the division between the citizen-group and the migrant-group (identity and sovereignty concerns) to expand their electoral base (Temizler, 2023, p. 215). I want to briefly examine how right-wing parties influence the framing of migration in policy debates, and how this generally benefits right-wing parties in a country.

The political right does not create the described moral panics in a vacuum. Rather, they capitalize on the institutionalized securitisation already established by mainstream European policies. As Huysmans (2000, 752) observes, the EU's framing of migrants as a threat to public order and the welfare state has a significant impact on the 'politics of belonging'. When mainstream institutions officially treat migration as a security and crime issue, they lend institutional legitimacy to the radical right's exclusionary rhetoric. Far-right populists exploit this pre-existing security framework to validate their narrative that the 'pure' native population is under threat from 'evil' external forces (Uysal et al. 2024, 2). Furthermore, as states increasingly rely on geographic exclusion and offshore detention, treating all migrants with suspicion and hostility, they normalise a culture of fear that right-wing actors can easily translate into extreme nationalist and xenophobic electoral platforms (Ceyhan and Tsoukala 2002, 23–25).

Building on this, Muis and Immerzeel (2017, 910) argue that the populist radical right (PRR) not only reacts to the 'moral panics', but also actively creates them using a highly adaptable 'master frame of nativism'. This frame dictates that 'the own people' must come first, and that non-native elements will inevitably threaten the homogeneous nation state. In order to maintain the relevance and electoral power of this moral panic, PRR parties continuously shift their discursive targets. For example, the literature reveals a strategic shift from historical anti-Semitism to modern Islamophobia. This is often being paired with the adoption of progressive values, such as women's rights and individual liberty, to portray Muslim immigrants as culturally incompatible and inherently authoritarian (Muis and Immerzeel 2017, 916). This continuous reinvention of the 'threat' ensures that the 'us versus them' dichotomy remains at the forefront of the public and political debate, ultimately shifting the entire political spectrum as mainstream parties adopt similarly restrictive rhetoric to avoid losing voters (Muis and Immerzeel 2017, 918–19).

However, the consequences of this 'us versus them' division (Othering) extend far beyond winning elections and changing policies. In a study focusing specifically on Germany, Uysal et al. (2024, 2–3) demonstrate that this populist framing has profound psychological and physical impacts on society. The authors note that right-wing rhetoric constantly portrays migrants as an 'evil' outgroup that is favoured unfairly by corrupt elites. By portraying the native population as pure and immigrants as a dangerous moral threat, this language triggers extreme, defensive national pride among its followers. Crucially, this moralised framing shifts the boundaries of what is considered acceptable behaviour. It provides a psychological justification that allows individuals to morally condone political violence and hate crimes against asylum seekers in Germany (Uysal et al. 2024, 3–6). Ultimately, the literature reveals a clear pattern. The political right uses moral panic and exclusionary language to normalise xenophobia and expand its voter base. In doing so, they create a public debate in which extreme deterrence against migrants becomes morally acceptable to their supporters and mainstream political actors adopt more securitised and anti-migration agendas (Muis and Immerzeel 2017, 910–16; Uysal et al. 2024, 2–6).

### 3 The German Migration System

Since this thesis aims at exploring the German application of deterrence policies, this chapter will give an overview of the German migration and asylum system and its application of EU-

law. The German migration system is a highly structured legal and administrative framework. Because Germany is a highly federalized state and a member of the European Union (EU), its migration system operates under a mix of national constitutional law, federal administrative law, and EU regulations.

The very basis of the German migration and asylum system is Article 16a of the German constitution which explicitly guarantees the right to asylum for individuals persecuted on political grounds. This makes Germany one of the few countries with a constitutional right to asylum (Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany 2025). Additionally, Germany is subscriber to the Geneva Refugee Convention (GRC) and is thus bound to uphold the protection standards of the 1951 GRC and its 1967 Protocol (UNHCR Deutschland 2015). In addition to the constitution Germany has a Residence Law Act which is the core law governing the entry, residence, and economic activity of third-country nationals (non-EU/EEA citizens). It dictates who gets a temporary residence permit, a permanent settlement permit, or an EU Blue Card (Residence Act – AufenthG 2024). To specify the conditions for Asylum seekers Germany also has a national Asylum act, which dictates the administrative procedure for asylum seekers. It regulates how applications are filed, how the state must accommodate asylum seekers, the appeals process in administrative courts, and the criteria for subsidiary protection (Asylum Act 2016). Since Germany has a federal and decentralized system different steps during a migration or asylum procedure are being executed by different national authorities. The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF - Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge) is responsible for the execution of the Asylum act and the implementation of the asylum system. Together with the Federal Police, who is responsible for border controls and the registration of migrants at the borders, the BAMF is under the authority of the ministry of interior on the federal level (Bundesministerium des Innern 2026b; 'BAMF - Bundesamt Für Migration Und Flüchtlinge' 2026). Finally, there are the local municipal and district offices of the Foreigners Authority (Ausländerbehörde). They operate under the jurisdiction of the 16 federal states (Bundesländer). While the BAMF decides who gets asylum, the local Ausländerbehörde actually issues the physical residence permits. They also handle family reunification applications, student visas, and are legally responsible for enforcing deportations if a migrant is ordered to leave (Bundesministerium des Innern 2026a).

As an EU member state, Germany is additionally legally bound to incorporate the directives and regulations of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) into its national legal framework. Originally established to harmonise asylum laws and ensure the transparent, standardised treatment of asylum seekers across the EU, the CEAS underwent major reform in June 2024 (EUAA 2024a). During the analysis period of this thesis, Germany was in the process of integrating these extensive changes, which must be fully enacted into national law by June 2026 (EUAA 2024a, 2024b, 3). Crucially, this reform introduces a legal framework that enables member states to implement stricter measures for managing and restricting migration. A central element of this systemic shift is the replacement of the controversial Dublin III Regulation. Under the previous Dublin III framework, responsibility for processing an asylum claim fell almost entirely on the state of first entry. This placed a disproportionate administrative burden on nations with external EU borders (BAMF - Bundesamt Für Migr. Flüchtlinge 2018). To address this, the newly introduced Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR) retains the 'first-entry' criterion as a baseline but introduces a mandatory solidarity mechanism. This mechanism fundamentally alters the system by obliging other member states to actively support frontline countries by relocating asylum seekers, providing financial contributions or offering personnel support (Galeone 2023). A focal point of the migration debate analysed in this thesis are the discussion around the implementation of the CEAS regulations and the strictness of how to implement them.

## 4 Theoretical Framework

### 4.1 Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism is the basic school of thought this thesis is built upon. The intellectual roots of poststructuralism can be traced back to Michel Foucault's methodological interventions, which emerged as an internal critique of structuralist frameworks. While structuralists looked for universal laws that governed society, poststructuralists used structuralist methods to reveal the inconsistencies in the structuralist approach (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 46; Peters and Wain 2003, 60–61). Foucault (2002, 17) clarified that he never wanted to apply structural analysis forcefully to historical events or organise history around rigid cultural totalities. Central to the post-structural approach is therefore the active dismantling of the structuralist's reliance on a sovereign, rational human subject. Poststructuralism is a theory that challenges the traditional view of humans as autonomous, free-willed agents discovering a fixed reality.

Instead, it argues that individuals are fluid constructs, significantly influenced by surrounding social practices and power relations (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 49). According to poststructuralist thought, history does not move in a straight line toward a logical goal. Foucault (2002, 14–16) argued that traditional, uninterrupted timelines are an illusion and a ‘protective barrier’ designed to uphold an idealised and limited view of humanism, which his work sought to dismantle. Because it rejects this illusion of objective, steady progress or the ‘teleology of reason’ (Foucault 2002, 9), poststructuralism defines history differently: rather than functioning as a smooth narrative, history actually operates as a messy, unpredictable series of accidental changes, sudden disruptions, and fragmented events (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 46; Peters and Wain 2003, 60–61). To this end, Foucault elevated ‘discontinuity’ and ‘rupture’ to the status of key analytical tools. He argued against the idea that history is a smooth, continuous evolution of thought. Instead, he suggests that a ‘rupture’ marks a sudden break in which an established regime of understanding collapses and is replaced by a new framework. During these transitional periods, knowledge shifts abruptly, propelling society into a new era. Importantly, concepts do not evolve gradually during a rupture, instead their core meanings and the rules governing their application change completely (Foucault 2002, 4–5).

Generally, poststructuralism is regarded as a philosophical approach because of its broad, critical nature. This means it is a ‘sensibility’ that questions the very foundations of modern thought, rather than a single, rigid theory (Bacchi 2010, 62; Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 4–9, 13–14). The post structural ideas are the foundations for Foucault’s conceptualisations of discourse, knowledge and power, which are used in this thesis to conceptualize and understand the German migration debate.

## 4.2 Discourse

In the early conceptualizations discourse was theorized as a linguistic tool that recognized discourse as a language tool to interpret actions and events and construct the world through symbols and idealistic constructs (Donati 2001, 146–47). However, this changed significantly and discourse was broadened into a multi-layered concept that was conceptualized and theorized upon by different researchers with different backgrounds.

As explained above this thesis takes a poststructuralist approach and uses a Foucauldian conceptualisation of discourse. Foucault shifted the analytical focus from what individuals

mean when they speak to the overarching systems that form and make speech (Spanger 2011, 520). Within a poststructuralist framework, discourse is not merely a reflection of reality, instead Foucault (2002, 49–50) explicitly argues that discourses are not just an ‘intersection of things and words’, but rather ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’. He defines discourse as a coherent, structured system of thought, describing it as ‘a group of statements that belong to a single system of formation’ (Foucault [1969] 2006, 121, as cited in Spanger 2011, 520). These discursive formations arise whenever a pattern can be defined between various dispersed statements, objects and concepts that are governed by the same rules. Essentially, a discursive formation acts as a structural boundary for a specific field of knowledge. Its rules function as invisible gatekeepers, strictly determining what can be said, who is authorised to say it and what is accepted as ‘truth’. The rules of formation dictate the conditions of existence, coexistence, maintenance and modification of any given statement (Foucault 2002, 41–42) and operate as a system of exclusion. They permit only certain types of knowledge to be recognised. Anything outside the discursive system is rendered as unintelligible or ‘insane’ because it does not fit into the discursive frame and thereby what is seen as reality (Hook 2001, 521–23). By establishing these strict boundaries, discourses produce what are known as ‘discursive effects’. These discursive effects refer to the limitations that are set on what can be thought and said in a debate through discourses (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 23). This concept is deeply rooted in Foucault’s theories, in which he defines discourses as socially produced forms of knowledge that dictate ‘what is true’ and determine what can be said or formulated about a given social object (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 35–37). Therefore, as Spanger (2011, 520) notes, discourses produce their own internal ‘truth-producing logic’.

This can be best explained by examining the production of knowledge in political debates. According to a Foucauldian understanding, debates simultaneously support and create discourse, which Spanger (2011, 521) describes as a ‘double process’. First, discourses support the debate by providing its foundational rules. Speech only becomes intelligible through pre-existing rules of discourse. That means that the discourses in the debate dictate what constitutes a valid argument or a recognisable problem. Secondly, debates actively create and reshape discourses. Political debates can be seen as ‘discursive practices’ (Spanger 2011, 521), meaning that every political debate is essentially a ‘discursive struggle’, in which participants strive to establish their own framework as reality (Spanger 2011, 521). Due to this dual process,

poststructuralists do not view the resulting laws and policies as neutral reactions to objective problems, but as discursive practices. By debating a specific issue, actors actively construct the representation of the problem they claim to be addressing (Bacchi 2010, 72; Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 5).

In this system of knowledge creation, language shifts from being a tool for describing reality to becoming a means of defining it. Language encompasses not only words, but also the presumed meanings behind them and complex systems such as myths and ideologies that structure human understanding (Viehöver 2001, 177). Furthermore, discourse in the public arena is 'dialogic', meaning one voice constantly reacts to or transforms the discourse of others, acting as a means to frame policy issues and influence public opinion (Donati 2001, 148–52). Within this framework, narratives act as a central rule system that structure discourses. 'Narrativization' is the process by which social factors and cultural traditions are woven into the debates, acting as both a structured and structuring element that allows actors to give coherence to their interpretations of the world (Viehöver 2001, 178–79). In line with Foucauldian thought, these narratives rarely exist in isolation, instead they form collective intertextual connections across various forms of expression. They construct plots, provide meaning to events and connect to larger cultural or institutional contexts (Viehöver 2001, 181–87). As part of the narrativization process, 'framing' helps to translate raw data into meaningful reality by providing interpretive prompts (Temizisler 2023, 208). A frame acts as a psychological 'script' that enables the perceiver to interpret individual observations as part of a familiar categorisation system, often using existing symbols, metaphors and visual images to instantly give new information meaning (Donati 2001, 149–52; Vliegenthart and Roggeband 2007, 297). In a Foucauldian sense, this framing process relies heavily on historical 'epistemes' that determine what is accepted as 'knowledge' in a given era. Frames often depend on deeply rooted binary structures, such as 'us and others'. By dividing people into groups, this binary categorisation creates knowledge that can be used to exert and maintain power. The appropriation of an 'Other' through selective knowledge production is termed 'Othering' and creates 'epistemic violence', which intertwines symbolic and material inequality to justify the differential treatment of outside groups (Akbulut and Razum 2023, 1110; Viehöver 2001, 186). This categorisation process relies heavily on what Foucault defines as 'dividing practices'. These are dynamic 'practices of differentiation and subordination' that separate groups of people from one another. These practices frequently target minorities or specific groups based on

‘race/ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality’ (Foucault 1982, cited in Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 51). They serve as vital governing mechanisms because they produce ‘governable subjects’ by creating opposition between groups, which can ultimately lead to division within society (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 23, 50–51).

As discourses determine what can be debated and how, and what can be accepted as truth, they are inextricably linked to power. According to literature citing Foucault, power can be exercised by controlling the accepted knowledge within a system (Miller 1990, 117). Knowledge is established through historical processes that shape discourse over time. These processes can result in different valid forms of knowledge emerging at different points in time, with different discourses becoming dominant regarding the same political debate (Miller 1990, 122; Jäger 2001, 86). According to the literature, it is not the autonomous individual who creates discourse, rather, individuals occupy a ‘plurality of possible positions and functions’ set by the system’s rules (Miller 1990, 116).

The process of assigning positions to individuals introduces the concept of subjectification. Subjectification is defined as the ‘production, or making, of provisional ‘subjects’ of particular kinds through policy practices’ (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 49). It encompasses ‘the characteristics, behaviours and dispositions’ that political ‘subjects’ are encouraged to adopt. It also covers how they may develop in relation to those ‘repertoires of conduct’ (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 49). Consequently, discourses and policies produce profound subjectification effects. These refer to how ‘subjects’ are affected by dominant discourses and problem representations in a debate. These representations also show how subjects are produced as specific kinds of subjects (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 23). Analysing these effects requires consideration of the potential impact of specific governmental problematisations on people’s perceptions of themselves and others, and critical examination of how policies can shape, harm, and limit ways of being (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 50, 52). To analyse this phenomenon of who is authorized to speak and govern, Foucault investigates ‘enunciative modalities’, asking: ‘Who, among the totality of speaking individuals, is accorded the right to use this sort of language? [...] Who is qualified to do so?’ (Foucault 2002, 55). The power to influence the system ultimately often lies with recognised institutional actors. Scholars emphasise that reality and truth are established by the authority of systems such as universities, the media

and political institutions, whose representatives possess recognised power to shape the creation of knowledge in debates (Hook 2001, 524).

### 4.3 Biopolitics and Governmentality

Governmentality is a concept closely related to discourse and identifying power relations. Originally coined by Foucault, the term conjoins the words 'govern' and 'mentality' to describe specific, historically situated ways of thinking about governance (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 42). Rather than viewing power as an instrument of force, governmentality treats power and governance as an interactive process that shapes, guides and disciplines human behaviour. Closely related to governmentality is the concept of biopolitics, which was also coined by Foucault. Foucault (2007, 1) defines biopolitics as 'the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species become the object of a political strategy and a general strategy of power'. Regarding modern Western democracies specifically, Foucault defines the form of governments as a 'triangle of sovereignty, discipline, and governmental management' (Foucault 2009, 143, cited in Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 42). This defines biopolitics as providing governmentality with its primary target: managing the population. In practice, this means that biological phenomena such as birth and mortality rates, public health, disease control and life expectancy are converted into statistical variables that the state can measure and optimise. This is achieved not through blunt force, but through 'apparatuses of security' and political economy, which seek to balance, regulate and secure the biological life of the masses (Foucault 2008, cited in Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016, 42). As governmentality requires visibility in order to function, it depends on biopolitics to convert human life into manageable data. In line with Foucault's concept of discourse, these biopolitical measurements create a 'truth' about a population, which the state then uses to justify and rationalise its governmental interventions (Lemke 2001, 191). Biopolitics within governmentality does not usually operate through direct physical oppression. Instead, it operates discursively, subtly structuring individuals' possible actions by guiding and shaping their behaviour from a distance, rather than forcing it explicitly. By establishing biopolitical norms, such as defining who is an 'illegal' migrant or a 'legitimate citizen', individuals are encouraged to self-regulate. Governmentality shapes the characteristics, behaviours, and dispositions that political 'subjects' are encouraged to adopt. When individuals align their behaviour with these biopolitical norms to ensure their own well-being, the state effectively governs them through their perceived freedom (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 49).

Governmentality is also closely related to sovereignty. While traditional sovereignty is based on strict territorial boundaries and the legal power to determine who is and who is not protected by the law, governmentality transforms this authority into a performative, management-based practice. According to Foucault's model, the modern sovereign state uses governmentality to shift its focus from purely territorial defence to the continuous, decentralised management of the population's daily lives (Lemke 2001, 191). In order to successfully govern a population, a sovereign power relies on 'governmental rationalities'. These rationalities are directly anchored in the 'truth' produced by discourse and establish the ways of thinking. That way they justify particular systems of governance, making specific state interventions both thinkable and practicable for those who implement them and those they affect (Burchell et al. 1991, 2–3). As discourse determines what a society accepts as valid knowledge, these rationalities are never arbitrary, but rather historically formed 'modalities of power' based on discursive truths and human practice (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 42–43). If, as Foucault (2002, p. 42) suggests, discourse provides the 'rules of formation' that define what a society accepts as objective truth, then governmentality is the rationale that uses these truths to manage, guide and discipline populations (Brighenti and Hatuka 2022, 20–21).

Within this framework, visibility becomes the critical technological link. Governmentality cannot operate in isolation, instead it requires visibility in order to map abstract discursive categories onto physical manifestations and laws (De Genova 2002, 2013, as cited in Casas-Cortés et al. 2015, 67). As established above, discourse is not merely a linguistic reflection of reality, but a system that actively creates the subjects and objects it describes. Visibility operationalises these discursive formations. Governance in modern societies is organised by 'regimes of visibility that contribute to the definition and management of power, representations, public opinion, conflict and social control' (Brighenti 2010, cited in Brighenti and Hatuka 2022, 20). By dictating what is made visible and what is strategically silenced, the state ensures that complex human experiences are categorised and 'made governable' (Casas-Cortés et al. 2015, 67). Crucially, the use of visibility as a tool of governmentality relies on significant power imbalances that mirror the exclusionary nature of discourses themselves. As Hatuka and Brighenti (2022, 21) note, 'asymmetries of visibility are asymmetries of power'. Modern governance produces a hierarchical 'ladder of visibility', in which powerful institutions and corporations occupy the position of the 'all-seeing eye' (Brighenti and Hatuka 2022, 25–26). Rather than being part of a secretive conspiracy, this refers to routine administrative

surveillance. For example, European border agencies use databases such as Eurodac to collect large quantities of biometric data, such as fingerprints, in order to track and categorise migrants (EUAA 2024a). This enables institutional networks to define discursive rules and monitor human behaviour while maintaining the anonymity and ‘facelessness’ of their own power structures. This creates an imbalance between the visibility of those being governed and those governing. Furthermore, this asymmetrical visibility enables the state to shift its discursive justifications for control fluidly. Depending on the needs of governmentality, the state can encourage the production of different discourses (Brighenti and Hatuka 2022, 18).

This production of discourse and the truth production that happens through the production of discourses is crucial for governmentality because it establishes the necessary relations between ‘institutions, economic and social processes, behavioural patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification, and modes of characterisation’ (Foucault 2002, 49). Abstract policies become active forces through this discursive ‘intellectual processing of reality’, meaning discourses can form the way legislations are formed and a population is governed. Governmentality can form the way in which discourses are influencing the policies and thus the lives of the population of a sovereign state. That way governing processes can create ‘policy worlds’ that forge ‘new social meanings, redefine social membership’, and ultimately ‘justify the sovereign state’s intervention’ into the lives of individuals (Shore et al. 2011, 11, 14).

#### 4.4 Situated knowledges and the ‘God’s trick’

Donna Haraway’s concept of ‘situated knowledges’ offers a fundamental critique of the traditional, disembodied notion of scientific objectivity (Haraway 1988, 581). At the core of her framework is the critique of the ‘god trick’. She describes the ‘god trick’ as an illusion which is characterised by a ‘conquering gaze from nowhere’. Haraway argues that this mythical gaze enables the ‘unmarked category’, often the authorities of a state and the government, to ‘claim the power to see and not be seen’, meaning to control without being perceived as an active actor that is controlling. By masquerading as a neutral, universal authority, those in positions of dominance are able to conceal the highly specific and often violent nature of their representation practices (Haraway 1988, 581). According to Haraway (1988, 582–83) this false doctrine of objectivity is dangerous because it promises ‘transcendence of all limits and responsibility’. This allows the dominant authorities to disguise their specific and situated

interests as absolute truths and at the same time to evade all responsibility for the knowledge they produce. In her critique of the way power operates through knowledge, Haraway builds directly on Foucault's understanding of discourse as a mechanism of social control. However, she expands upon this by arguing that a critical analysis of discourse should not reduce individuals to passive recipients of power. Instead, she insists that knowledge production is deeply embodied and material (Haraway 1988, 577–578).

In order to counter this illusion, Haraway (1988, 583) proposes the framework of 'situated knowledges', asserting that 'only partial perspective promises objective vision'. According to her, true rational enquiry, or 'feminist objectivity', cannot be achieved through detached transcendence or the separation of subject and object. Consequently, Haraway (1988, 589) outlines a strict theoretical principle: any valid claim of rational knowledge must explicitly acknowledge the specific social, material and historical context from which it originates. Rather than striving for an unattainable universal truth, it is crucial to recognise that acknowledging the partial and situated nature of one's perspective is the fundamental condition for producing objective knowledge. Instead of attempting to assert authority from a completely disengaged vantage point and pretending 'to be from everywhere and so nowhere' (Haraway 1988, 590) actors and researchers must transparently acknowledge their embodied positions. In doing so, they reject the irresponsibility of the 'god trick' and become 'answerable for what we learn how to see' (Haraway 1988, 583). In practice, this means recognising that all knowledge claims, whether produced by an academic researcher or articulated by a political actor in a policy debate, are fundamentally anchored in a specific vantage point. By exposing the underlying interests and structural positions driving these narratives rather than accepting them as universal truths, those in power can be held accountable for the realities they construct.

## 5 Methodology

This thesis aims to answer the question: How do dominant discourses within the German political debate construct a hegemonic problematization of migration that serves to legitimize policies of deterrence? To answer this question, this thesis will use the Foucauldian understanding of discourse, as mapped in the previous chapter and apply particular elements of the 'What's the Problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach offered by Bacchi and Goodwin (2016). To answer the research question, it is necessary to answer multiple working

questions as shown in figure 1 below. The analysis will therefore follow the following structure which will be explained closely in the following chapters.

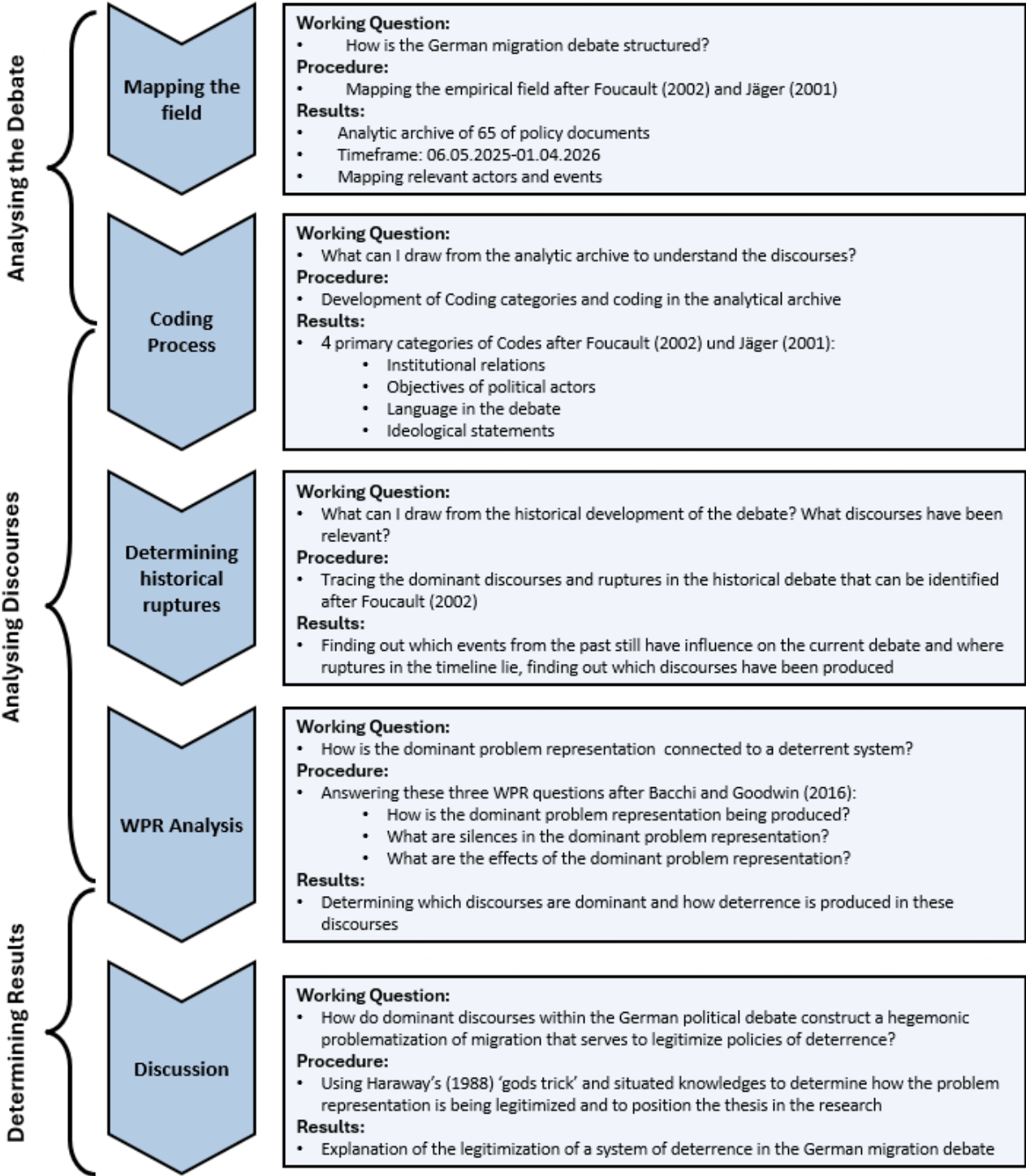


Figure 1: Analysis structure (Source: own elaboration)

### 5.1 Mapping the empirical field

The goal of the first part of this methodology chapter is to determine how the German migration debate is structured. To map the empirical field I am informed by Jäger (2001, 99),

who argues that to map the policy field the materials can be limited to governmental documents including press releases, legislative texts, policy documents and speeches. Accordingly, I have chosen documents from official government sites, the different German institutions and documents released by the parties in the Bundestag. Jäger (2001, 101–2) argues that salience of frames can be reached when documents do not bring up new themes and frames anymore, then the completeness of an analytic archive is reached. I determined that the archive reached salience after the analysis of 65 documents. The time span that will be analysed in this thesis reaches from 6 May 2025 to 1 April 2026, covering almost ten months. The beginning of this period was chosen because it marks the beginning of the current legislative period (Bundesregier. Inf. Startseite 2025). The end date was chosen to precede the start of the analysis. During this time span a selection of events was analysed closely.

According to Jäger's definition (2001, 98) relevant events for a discourse analysis are those that, through politics and often the media, receive significant attention and influence the direction of the debate. Accordingly, this analysis examines the debate surrounding the implementation of new federal migration and asylum laws proposed during the time period under analysis. This includes a directive introduced that allows for the refusal of entry at national borders. The policy targets individuals from 'safe countries of origin' who, according to the government, are not at risk of persecution; migrants who are already registered in another EU country under the Dublin regulations; and individuals lacking the necessary visas or documentation to enter. Furthermore, the legislation is designed to prevent individuals who have previously been deported from returning to German territory (Bundespolizei 2025; Mediendienst Integration 2025). The relevant events also include the debate around the government's new directive of prohibiting family reunification for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection (effective from 23 July 2025) (Auswärtiges Amt 2025) and the migration summit with other EU interior ministers on the Zugspitze in Germany. The goal of this meeting, which took place on 18 July 2025, was to compromise on new ways to manage migration across the EU (Bundesministerium des Innern 2025). Additionally, documents relating to discussions about increasing the budget for the Ministry of the Interior, which is responsible for managing migration in Germany, will be analysed. These discussions primarily occurred on 10 July and 18 September 2025 (Deutscher Bundestag 2025). On 29 December 2025, Germany officially enacted two additional relevant legislative packages. The first law transforms citizenship requirements by ending accelerated pathways, ensuring that the naturalisation process

remains rigorous. Simultaneously, the second law reforms the designation of 'safe countries of origin'. These are nations where the political climate suggests no consistent risk of state-sponsored persecution or inhumane treatment. Allowing the government to add countries to this list via executive orders rather than the standard legislative process enables the state to process or reject asylum applications from stable regions more quickly, effectively streamlining administrative responses to shifting global conditions (Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung 2025a, 2025b). Finally, the debate around the national implementation of the reform of the CEAS, which was discussed throughout the analysis period, and which was decided upon on 27 March 2026, will be examined (Bundesministerium des Innern 2026c). In addition to the debate surrounding the implementation of these laws, the so-called 'cityscape debate' will be analysed. Triggered by Chancellor Friedrich Merz on 16 October 2025, this debate sparked discussions about the visibility of migrants in German cities. During a press conference Chancellor Merz said: 'We still have this problem in the cityscape' (translated by the author) (Merz 2025, at 13:40), referring to migrants being visible in German society. Although this debate is not directly related to the implementation of a specific law, it has significantly influenced the political debate and has been a key topic in many of the aforementioned discussions. However, as it was the catalyst for many debates, as well as specifically designated discussions and press conferences on the visibility of migrants, it will be analysed separately.

In order to further map the empirical field and understand the power dynamics that structure the German migration debate, it is crucial to identify the relevant actors. Following Foucault's framework, this involves analysing the 'enunciative modalities' of the debate, specifically investigating who is granted authority to speak and the institutional sites from which they produce their statements (Foucault 2002, 50–51). As Spanger (2011, 521–22) demonstrates, mapping these diverse institutional actors reveals the underlying 'discursive struggles', exposing who holds the power to define the core problem and whose voices shape the resulting policy field.

Analysing the legislative documents from the analytical period (May 2025 to April 2026) reveals that various institutional actors are competing for the power to influence the migration debate in Germany. Within the Bundestag (the federal parliament), five parties act as key influencers. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian

Social Union (CSU), form a governing coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPD). They face continuous challenges from the Alternative for Germany (AFD), the right-wing party posing the biggest opposition within parliament. The other opposition parties, the Greens and the Left, position themselves further to the left than both the governing coalition and the AFD. (Die Bundeswahlleiterin 2025). However, the authority to produce legitimate political discourse extends beyond elected politicians. When the Bundestag attempts to implement new laws, the legislative process frequently incorporates multiple rounds of discussion, including expert hearings designed to legitimise policy decisions and provide political advice. These hearings are a vital institutional forum in which representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academic experts and government agencies from Germany's federal states are recognised as 'experts', enabling them to contribute alternative perspectives to the legislative process (Siefken 2016, 1). Finally, the debate is influenced by actors operating within the juridical debate. Apart from the federal and regional German courts, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) frequently becomes involved in national matters, since Germany is required to comply with overarching European asylum laws. Individuals and advocacy groups often bypass political debates by appealing to not only federal courts, but also the CJEU. By ruling on these cases, these courts dictate which laws must be reconsidered, thereby imposing strict legal boundaries and realities on political debate (Tschümperlin 2016, 442–43; Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg 2026).

## 5.2 Analysing the empirical field

### 5.2.1 The Coding process

To analyse the positioning of the different actors in the political debate and the discourses during the analysed timeframe the analysed documents (the 'analytic archive' (Foucault 2002, 145)) were coded. This process aims to further understand the analytic archive and understand which discourses have been produced in the German migration debate.

The coding process was designed inductively and categorized deductively by drawing on Foucault's archaeological theories of discourse (Foucault 2002, 142–45) and Jäger's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method (Jäger 2001, 81–112). Following Jäger's (2001, 102) analytical criteria, the analytical archive was categorised into four primary categories to analyse both the structural features of the debate and its linguistic execution. The following paragraphs show how the codes were categorized and examples will be named to explain the categorization,

the full Codebook can be found in the Appendix, including the total frequencies in all documents of the single codes and the number of documents with the single codes.

According to Jäger (2001, 102) text fragments must first be situated within their institutional framework, as the source of a statement heavily influences its authority and function. The first category of codes captures the specific actors involved in the debate and how different institutional bodies interact, challenge or legitimise one another. Within the archive, this includes parent codes such as 'Court opinions' and 'Expert commission', and codes for political parties (LINKE, GRÜNE, SPD, AFD and CDU/CSU). By coding relations such as the Greens 'accusing the CDU of racism', the Left Party 'defending the right to asylum', or the CDU 'voting with the AFD', the analysis highlights the relationships between the actors in the debate.

The second category analyses the objectives and political actions of the actors. A central principle of poststructural discourse analysis, as developed by Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, 16) is that political measures actively construct the 'problems' they claim to address. Therefore, the texts were coded to identify macro-level propositions and government directives. This category encompasses the state's strategic aims, proposed solutions and administrative mechanisms for managing the population. In the archive, texts were coded under parent categories like 'Goals of the federal government' (e.g. 'Restricting migration', 'Organising/managing migration') and 'Measures of the federal government' (e.g. 'Repatriations', 'Border controls', 'Combating crime'). Grouping these codes makes it possible to analyse how the state exercises power through institutional procedures and identify dominant discourses in political legislations.

In the third category the coding system employed Jäger's (2001, 103) focus on the 'text surface' and vocabulary. Here, language is not treated as neutral, but as a deeply ideological tool. The third category focuses on micro-level vocabulary, recurring catchphrases and rhetorical framing devices employed by political actors. This is predominantly captured in the parent code 'Language used by the Bundesregierung'. Specific codes such as 'Migrationswende' (Migration Turnaround) or the recurring use of 'Irregular migration' were tracked to reveal how specific terminology shapes the debate. Additionally, wordings used by the federal government such as 'fair' and 'solidarity' were tracked. By coding these linguistic and rhetorical devices, the analysis reveals how rhetorical choices provide justification for the aforementioned goals and legislations.

Finally, the archive was analysed for ideological statements and the ways in which it creates distinct subject positions, in order to reveal its ideological impact (Foucault 2002, 57–60). Jäger (2001, 104) refers to this process as ‘coding for ideological statements and dividing practices’. This final category identifies how the text constructs specific types of people (‘subject positions’), assigns them moral values, and distinguishes the ‘normal’ citizen from the ‘deviant’ outsider (‘Othering’) (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 49; Foucault 2002, 48). This was coded through descriptions that highlight societal divisions. The most prominent example in the codebook is the code ‘Visibility of migrants as a problem/problem in the cityscape’. Additionally, codes such as ‘Control as necessary’ and references to ‘Restricting migration as a security measure’ were used to analyse how the debate is actively constructed through ideological statements.

To enhance the precision and comprehensiveness of the coding process, a quantitative overview was added to the qualitative analysis. Calculating the total frequency of documents associated with each code made it possible to measure the structural relevance of the emerging categories and systematically identify the most prevalent thematic patterns within the dataset.

### 5.2.2 The Analysis process

For a better understanding of the analysis I will briefly trace the development of the German migration debate and the prevailing discourses during different historical time periods of the debate to show what Foucault (2002, 4–6) terms ‘ruptures’ in the German historical debate. The ruptures will aid in identifying how migration has been problematised over the years and how the discourses that were dominant in the problem representation have changed. This analysis is based on literature discussing discourse in these periods.

After the detailed coding process recurring textual patterns were systematically grouped into broader thematic categories. This led to identifying six distinct discourses in the migration debate: The Juridical discourse, the Labour-migration discourse, the Integration discourse, the Nationalist discourse, the Securitisation discourse and the humanitarian discourse. Following Foucault’s framework, these discourses were categorised using three specific indicators. Firstly, the Juridical Discourse was identified via ‘enunciative modalities’ (Foucault 2002, 50–51) whereby statements were grouped based on the institutional sites and recognised legal authority of the speakers. Secondly, the Labour-Migration and Integration Discourses were

categorised by their 'formation of concepts' (Foucault 2002, 56–58) in these cases, despite having different institutional backgrounds, diverse actors shared a common vocabulary and theoretical framework. Finally, the nationalist, securitisation and humanitarian discourses were identified by analysing their 'formation of strategies' (Foucault 2002, 64–68) revealing how statements are deployed as ideological tools to achieve specific political outcomes. The identification of discourses and the historical tracing will aid in explaining the current problematization and prioritisation of the prevailing discourses.

To finally analyse the hegemonic problematisation that is produced, this thesis employs parts of the WPR methodology as described by Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, 20-25). This methodology is based on a poststructural understanding of discourse. According to this methodology the implemented policies and debates show how the relevant actors attempt to solve the perceived problem. The legislations are therefore solutions which can show which problem the actors are trying to solve and can then be traced backwards into explaining how this problem representation has come about (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 16–17). This thesis determines that in the current German migration debate migration is problematised as a threat to security and a threat to societal order. Accordingly, the analysis will determine how the problematisation has been produced and how the power relations of the different actors influence the production of the problem representation. Afterwards the silences of the current prevailing problematisation will be addressed to determine which perspectives are left unproblematic and are excluded from the problem representation (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 22–23). Thirdly the effects produced by the problem representation will be analysed (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 23). The effects will be divided into discursive effects and subjectification effects, as introduced in the theoretical framework, and lived effects. To analyse the lived effects of the dominant problem representation, I draw upon existing literature. Following the WPR approach, I do not treat this literature as a reflection of absolute truth or foundational subjects, but rather as empirical evidence of how discursive and subjectification effects translate materially into people's lives in highly specific, albeit provisional, contexts and according to concepts developed by the authors of the external literature (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 23).

### 5.2.3 The Discussion

Following the deconstruction of the texts and analysis using the WPR approach, the discussion chapter will apply Haraway's (1988) concepts as a critical lens through which to evaluate the findings. Specifically, I will examine the dominant problem representation identified to reveal how state actors use the 'god trick' to present their own political interests as universal security necessities. In order to systematically dismantle this constructed neutrality, the discussion will contrast the state's hegemonic discourses with the 'situated knowledges' of migrants that have been excluded from the debate, as well as the issues that have been silenced. Furthermore, in accordance with Haraway's (1988, 583) call for 'feminist objectivity', this methodology fundamentally rejects the pretence of absolute academic neutrality. Instead, I hereby openly acknowledge my own position as a researcher conducting critical discourse analysis. It is from this explicit vantage point that I will attempt to answer the central research question: how do dominant discourses within the German political debate construct a hegemonic problematisation of migration that serves to legitimise deterrence policies? Through this critique of state power, which is both positioned and reflexive, I will evaluate how the illusion of objective knowledge theoretically functions to justify, naturalise and uphold a system of deterrence.

## 5.3 Presentation of the material

The aim of this chapter is to present the empirical field. I briefly will map the results of the coding process, identifying the different positions of the relevant actors in the German migration debate, and demonstrate their opinions, motions, and legislative attempts during the analytical period. The chapter will demonstrate how the different parties interact and how their fundamental views on migration diverge.

### 5.3.1 The CDU/CSU and SPD

As the governing coalition, the CDU/CSU and the SPD are the primary drivers of the national migration agenda. Their overarching goals reveal a complex interplay between managing and restricting migration, with both objectives appearing equally prominent in the analysed documents (each defined in 21 of the 65 documents, see Table 1). Initially, the coalition's rhetoric focused heavily on management and legal pathways, explicitly stating: 'Germany remains a country of immigration (...) At the same time, it aims to manage uncontrolled migration' (A32, translated by the author). However, as the debate progressed, calls for

restriction became increasingly dominant. The government explicitly stated its intention to stop irregular arrivals, claiming that it intended to prevent illegal migration ‘through border controls and rejections’ (A28, translated by the author). This rhetorical shift occasionally created internal friction. For example, after Chancellor Merz’s controversial remark that migrants were a ‘problem in the cityscape’, the discourse temporarily shifted back towards management as coalition members warned against divisive language and emphasised a more balanced approach (e.g. A21, A47, A49, A50). Central to the coalition’s restrictive agenda is a sharp division between legal and illegal migration (15 documents, see Table 1). The government frequently emphasises that while ‘Germany remains a cosmopolitan country that is open to legal migration into the labour market,’ it must acknowledge that ‘when it comes to illegal migration, the country’s capacity for integration has its limits’ (A29, translated by the author). As a result, restrictive policies mainly target secondary movers under the Dublin regulations, asylum seekers who have been rejected, and human trafficking networks (e.g. A12, A15, A24, A36). Furthermore, although integration is mentioned as an objective in thirteen documents (see Table 1), specific legislative programmes are rarely discussed (A15, A55). Additionally, the need to protect federal states from administrative collapse by accelerating asylum decisions and easing local burdens is an urgent domestic priority driving these restrictions (noted in 17 documents).

To achieve these political goals, the government relies heavily on measures of prevention, explicitly aiming to ‘reduce the pull-factors’ (A26, A42) that make Germany an attractive destination for migration. This framework is implemented through several key legislative measures (see Table 2). The most heavily debated mechanisms include the integration of stricter CEAS legislation (e.g. A29, A31, A54, 23 documents), intensified repatriations and border controls (e.g. A1, A25, A26, 17 documents) and increased direct border rejections (e.g. A5, A36, A56, 15 documents). Furthermore, the coalition has sought to limit access to asylum by expanding the list of designated ‘safe countries of origin’ (e.g. A15, A42, A60, 12 documents). Though they are discussed less frequently, highly specific measures such as the suspension of family reunification (e.g. A24), the tightening of citizenship access (e.g. A55), and the establishment of secondary migration centres directly at the borders (e.g. A44) further solidify the state’s comprehensive pivot towards a restrictive border regime (see Table 2).

Table 1: Defined goals of the federal government regarding migration

Goals of the Federal Government	Frequency (number of documents with the Code)
Restricting migration	21
Organize/Manage Migration	21
Protect federal states from administrative effort / becoming overwhelmed	17
Prohibit illegal migration / only allow legal migration	15
Integration	13
Documents with Code(s)	41
Documents without Code(s)	24
All documents	65

Source: Own elaboration

Table 2: Measures taken by the federal government regarding migration

Measures of the federal government	Frequency (number of documents with the Code)
CEAS	23
Border controls	17
Repatriations	17
Rejections at borders	15
Safe countries of origin	12
Combating crime	11
Suspended family reunification for subsidiary protection	7
Restrict access to citizenship	6
Secondary migration centres / Asylum centres	5
Facilitation of access to education for Asylum seekers and Migrants	1
Cut social benefits	1
Documents with Code(s)	49
Documents without Code(s)	16
All documents	65

Source: Own elaboration

### 5.3.2 The AFD

As the largest opposition party, the right-wing AFD which is currently under investigation for right-wing extremism (Mediendienst Integration 2026), uses the migration debate to advocate highly restrictive policies. Although they rarely have the power to make legislative decisions, they contribute significantly to and shape the debate by raising awareness to the issue and proposing motions for the parliament to discuss. Although they lack direct legislative power, they actively influence the discourse by constantly accusing the coalition of being too liberal

and proposing controversial motions (e.g. A1, A24, A25, A43, A44, A47; see Table 3). The party consistently advocates tightening border controls and increasing rejections (A29, A44, A46).

A key tactic of the AFD is to submit radical motions with no real chance of passing, purely to keep migration at the forefront of the debate. For instance, in a motion in A43, an AFD politician calls for ‘minus migration’, demanding a ‘reversal of entirely illegal migration’. Targeting Syrian refugees directly, he states: ‘Hundreds of thousands of Syrians must be sent back to their homeland, where they are expected to help rebuild it.’, calling all Syrian refugees illegal (translated by the author). Similarly, in a motion in A46, the AFD proposed an amendment to the GRC that would absolve Germany of its responsibility to accept refugees. This was vehemently rejected by the CDU/CSU as an attempt to ‘shift the burden onto others without taking responsibility themselves’, and by the Greens, who summarised the motion as the AFD proposing: ‘Refugees should stay where it suits us’ (translated by the author, A46).

The AFD explicitly equates open borders with the abandonment of ‘national sovereignty, internal security, the welfare state and our cultural heritage’ (A28; see also A59, translated by the author). Furthermore, despite the governing coalition officially distancing itself from the AFD, the party frequently votes alongside the CDU and SPD to block progressive motions from the Green and Left parties, such as those enhancing migrant protections (A23) or easing citizenship acquisition (A55). The party has also actively defended Chancellor Merz’s remarks regarding migrants in the ‘cityscape’ (A47).

Table 3: The AFD’s opinions in the migration debate

<b>AFD opinions in the migration debate</b>	<b>Frequency (number of documents with the Code)</b>
Calls for stricter measures	12
Is pro border controls	4
SPD and CDU vote with AFD	3
Illegal immigration	3
All parties vote against AFD	2
Asylmigranten (Asylum migrants)	2
Stirs up hatred against a specific group or female migrants	2
Defending sovereignty	2
CDU is too left	1
Documents with Code(s)	15
Documents without Code(s)	50
All documents	65

Source: Own elaboration

### 5.3.3 The Greens and the Left-party

Positioned to the left of the governing coalition, the Green and Left parties often join forces to oppose the government’s restrictive migration policies (e.g. A24, A40, A42, A44, A60). They are particularly vocal in their opposition to border controls and rejections, and have actively proposed motions to end them (e.g. A23), while also protesting against the strict national implementation of the CEAS and the poor conditions in secondary migration centres (e.g. A28, A44). Both parties often accuse the coalition of unethical and unlawful behaviour in order to promote their humanitarian agenda. For example, regarding the suspension of family reunification, the Left Party accused Interior Minister Dobrindt of ‘constantly talking about illegal migration yet now wanting to take away the last remaining legal routes’, labelling the move ‘not only cynical, but also unlawful’ (A24, translated by the author). While united in their opposition, their specific arguments differ slightly. The Greens emphasise a strongly pro-European stance, calling for closer cooperation with EU member states on migration issues (A23, A28, A40; see Table 4). Meanwhile, the Left Party primarily focuses on defending the fundamental right to asylum, repeatedly arguing that the government’s deterrence strategies violate human rights as well as international and German law (A26, A27, A28, A44; see Table 5).

Table 4: The Greens’ opinions in the migration debate

The Greens’ opinions in the Migration debate	Frequency (number of documents with the Code)
Call for fair procedures	4
Against border controls	4
Accuses federal government of acting unlawfully	4
Pro European Neighbourhood	3
Integration as a key component of migration policy	3
Against rejection at borders	3
Accuses the CDU of racism	3
Accusations of inhumanity	3
Documents with Code(s)	11
Documents without Code(s)	54
All documents	65

Source: Own elaboration

Table 5: The Left party's opinions in the migration debate

The Left party's opinions in the migration debate	Frequency (number of documents with the Code)
Defending the right to asylum	5
Defending human rights	5
Against rejections at borders	5
Accuses the federal government of injustice	4
Citizenship independently from income	2
Allegations of the CDU's ties to the AFD	1
Documents with Code(s)	11
Documents without Code(s)	54
All documents	65

Source: Own elaboration

### 5.3.4 Courts and Expert Hearings

As has already been established, the debate is also influenced by the federal, regional and EU courts and the expert hearings in discussions. In the case of the migration debate, it is interesting to examine some of the court's decisions in order to understand the governing processes and the influences on the debate (see Table 6).

Federal courts actively shape the migration debate by both restricting and reinforcing government policies. For example, the Berlin Regional Court undermined the government's border policy by ruling that it was illegal to reject asylum seekers without a proper eligibility assessment (A64). However, the same ruling permitted the detention of asylum seekers near the border while this assessment was carried out, effectively providing legal justification for the secondary migration centres, which have been heavily criticised for being 'illegal' (e.g. A44). Furthermore, courts act as a check on national overreach by enforcing European law. For example, a German court invalidated the premature national classification of Ghana as a 'safe country of origin' because this preceded an EU-wide agreement and persecution could not be entirely ruled out (A19).

The legislative process is also influenced by parliamentary expert hearings (see Table 7). As political parties invite these experts selectively, their testimonies are inherently tied to the parties' own interests (Geschäftsordnung Des Deutschen Bundestages § 70 Anhörungssitzungen 2025). Institutional experts from courts and ministries generally support the government's restrictive proposals yet often voice concerns about the resulting administrative burden. Regarding the CEAS implementation, for example, they recognised its necessity yet criticised the lack of implementation details (e.g. A2, A19, A44). By contrast,

representatives in expert hearings from pro-migration NGOs consistently criticise the proposed measures on humanitarian and legal grounds (e.g. A2, A44). For example, a ProAsyl representative argued that bypassing the Bundesrat on ‘safe countries of origin’ was unconstitutional (A2). Similarly, the German Institute for Human Rights warned that, under the CEAS, ‘restricting freedom would become the norm’, while Handicap International urged the government to ‘protect vulnerable individuals’ (A44, translated by the author). Nevertheless, these humanitarian concerns are often dismissed by institutional experts, who describe the measures as ‘challenging but necessary’ (A44, translated by the author), and ultimately have little legislative impact, as, during the analysed timeframe, the governing coalition and the AFD consistently voted in favour of implementing the proposed restrictions.

Table 6: The Courts rulings regarding migration legislations

The Courts rulings on migration legislations	Frequency (number of documents)
Notes on administrative problems/efforts	5
Constitutional issues	3
Accepts laws	2
Documents with code(s)	9
Documents without code(s)	56
All documents	65

Source: Own elaboration

Table 7: Expert hearings in the migration debate

Representatives in Expert commissions arguments	Frequency (number of documents)
Sees humanitarian issues	3
Criticizes the federal government for acting unlawfully	2
Criticizes organizational structures in federal states/ administrative structures	2
Agrees in principle	1
Documents with code(s)	5
Documents without code(s)	60
All documents	65

Source: Own elaboration

## 6 Development of the German migration discourse

### 6.1 Consequences of World War II

As established the German system for migration, asylum and refugees is a complex structure built upon international treaties, constitutional mandates and evolving European regulations.

Its history is marked by the start as an unconditional humanitarian system after World War II (WW II).

The systematic disenfranchisement and displacement of people during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century forced the international community to establish a legal framework to protect displaced persons. Following WW II, when there were 30 million displaced people in Europe, the United Nations (UN) set up the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1950. Subsequently, in 1951, the GRC was instituted as the prevailing legal instrument pertaining to asylum. In 1967, the GRC was augmented by the 1967 Protocol, which refined the definition of a refugee. According to the 1951 GRC and the 1967 Protocol, a refugee is defined as someone who has a 'well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; is outside the country of origin; and is unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country, owing to such fear' (Fortin 2000, 550).

Germany's refugee and asylum system is significantly influenced by the GRC and the 1967 Protocol. However, Germany's migration policies have also been heavily impacted by the consequences and atrocities committed during WW II. These events and their aftermath had a significant influence on the development of refugee policies. In 1949, the authors of the German constitution enshrined a distinctive individual right: 'Persons persecuted on political grounds shall enjoy the right of asylum.' This unconditional, enforceable right was intended as a historical lesson from the Nazi era, when many fleeing the regime were rejected at foreign borders, and it marked the beginning of Germany's humanitarian approach towards asylum seekers and refugees. (Stokes 2019, 21–22)

At the same time, the 'guest worker' system of the 1950s brought in foreign labour. During the Cold War, the intake of refugees was strongly encouraged. The Soviet refugees helped to solve Europe's acute labour shortage after the war. This 'guest worker' system was predicated on the 'rotation principle', a political illusion that workers would eventually return to their home countries, which later on resulted in a produced systemic lack of integration and integration measures. (Oltmer 2016, 2015, 915–28; Feller 2001, 129).

These historical developments show the solutions the policy makers implemented in the form of legislations which gives insights into the problems that were perceived and the discourses that formed them. It becomes visible that the German asylum system started out by being

guided mainly by a humanitarian discourse. The international community as well as the German society were largely affected by the knowledge of 'never again' and dealing with the effects of the Nazi-regime. At the same time a labour-migration discourse was also being produced, as the policy-makers recognized the need for foreign workers and saw an opportunity in refugees coming from the Soviet Union.

## 6.2 Right-wing extremism after the reunification

In 1989 the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the Yugoslav Wars led to a massive increase in asylum seekers in the early 1990s in Germany (Reck 2022, 53). This influx of refugees and economic migrants led to right-wing factions weaponizing the country's socio-economic instability and blaming migrants and asylum seekers for the general instability and dissatisfaction of the population (Nordbruch 2011, 4–5). This led to horrific acts of street violence and racist pogroms across the country. Examples being Hoyerswerda (1991) and Rostock-Lichtenhagen (1992) where racist mobs attacked refugee centres and migrant communities. During these attacks rioters threw rocks and Molotov cocktails into the houses of migrants while a crowd of thousands applauded and actively hindered emergency services for several days. As a reaction to these violent attacks against migrants and asylum seekers the German government passed the 'Asylum Compromise' in 1993. (Thomas and Virchow 2024, 104). This compromise fundamentally amended the constitution. From that point forward, the fundamental right to asylum was heavily restricted by two key legal mechanisms. First, under the 'safe third country' rule, individuals who entered Germany via a safe neighbouring state (such as another EU country) were no longer eligible for asylum in Germany; instead, they were required to apply in their country of first entry. This national principle was later superseded by the EU's Dublin Regulation. Second, the government introduced the 'safe country of origin' concept by compiling a list of nations deemed generally free of state persecution. Asylum seekers arriving from these specific countries were presumed to be safe, meaning their claims were fast-tracked for automatic rejection. (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2017). This policy shift severely restricted access to the German asylum system. Consequently, the number of successful asylum claims decreased sharply in subsequent years, with the responsibility for processing refugees shifting to peripheral European states (Nordbruch 2011, 4).

These developments show a clear rupture in the historical continuance of discourses from the dominance of humanitarian discourse and the discourse of labour-migration towards a prevailing nationalist discourse in which right-wing extremism and anti-migration sentiments were dominant and influenced how migration was perceived and accordingly the legislations implemented during this period.

### **6.3 Becoming an immigration country**

Following the turbulence of the 1990s, there was a complex effort to balance competing national interests in the evolution of German asylum and migration legislation in the 2000s. The country was faced with the dual challenge of needing skilled labour for demographic and economic reasons while simultaneously grappling with debates over refugee influxes, integration and cultural identity. Historically, Germany operated under an ethnically defined citizenship model based on the *jus sanguinis* (right of blood) principle, as set out in the 1913 Imperial Citizenship Law. Despite the long-term settlement of millions of foreign workers, the official political stance was that Germany was ‘not an immigration country’, which resulted in a significant lack of integration policies and clear pathways to citizenship (Hess and Green 2016, 316). However, this changed in 2005 with the formal and legal recognition of the new Immigration Act. In light of the desperate need for more foreign workers in the early 2000s, this Act recognised Germany as an ‘immigration country’ for the first time. Most importantly, it introduced federally regulated and funded integration courses for adult immigrants, thereby codifying the state’s responsibility for structural assimilation (Kohlmeier et al. 2006, 1, 15–25).

During this period that nationalist discourse became less prevalent and through the need of labour migration the labour discourse became dominant again. Differently than in the 1950s this time a need for long time integration and German acceptance of immigrants into the culture became visible which led to the integration discourse becoming prevalent during this time as well, influencing the policy solutions and framing migration.

### **6.4 The shift in 2015**

The migration-friendly framework established in 2005 was profoundly destabilised by geopolitical events in 2014 and 2015, driven by the Syrian civil war and instability in the Middle East and Africa. The number of asylum seekers surged to an unprecedented high of around 890,000 registered arrivals in Germany in 2015 alone (Mediendienst Integration 2016). In the beginning of 2015, the humanitarian discourse was prevailing in Germany. Chancellor Angela

Merkel's declarative 'Wir schaffen das' (We will make it) (Merkel 2015) became famous for the declared openness and promise of aid. However, the openness and humanitarianism were short-lived under growing pressure on the German asylum system and integration measures. Lemay (2021) poses that the 2015 'Welcome culture' was entirely predicated on framing incoming refugees through a lens of absolute 'suffering and innocence,' deliberately aligning with Germany's post-WW II moral identity (Lemay 2021, 115). Public and political solidarity was extended almost exclusively to specific demographic groups. Namely women, children, and clear victims of war, while autonomous economic migrants were excluded (Lemay 2021, 118). This showed the limitations on the humanitarianism back then, but also how framing of the incoming asylum seekers affected the discourse and political priorities. On New Years eve 2015 a chain of sexual assaults and rapes were committed by groups of young migrant men in Cologne, Germany. These assaults acted as the definitive catalyst that shattered the 'innocent victim' narrative, replacing it with accusations of betrayal and triggering a systemic 're-demonization' of migrants. Following Cologne, media framing violently pivoted to depict young migrant men as hyper-sexualized security threats. The immediate post-2015 era was defined by a rapid, media-driven discursive shift that strictly prioritized themes of national security and protectionism over humanitarianism (Krzyzanowski 2020, 508).

This prompted the German legislature to enter a period of heightened activity, leading to the enactment of over 35 federal amendments to asylum and residence laws in quick succession. The resulting legislative landscape was characterised by a dual strategy of simultaneously restricting asylum access for those deemed to have poor prospects, while aggressively integrating those deemed to have a high prospect of remaining (Koch et al. 2023, 3–6). Despite the growing restriction, the government framed the admission of refugees as a duty bound by international law and humanitarianism, actively downplaying cultural differences (Drewski and Gerhards 2025, 273) During this time multiple acts and regulations were implemented like for example extending the list of 'safe countries of origin', building on the original 1992 'asylum compromise'. In August 2016, the new Integration Act came into force. This Act codified a 'support and demand' philosophy. It mandated participation in integration and language courses, penalising non-compliance by reducing benefits. At the same time, it relaxed regulations to give recognised refugees easier access to the labour market. The government restricted access to asylum, but also recognised the severe domestic labour shortages (Koch et al. 2023, 7–10).

While the prevailing nationalist discourse in the 1990s led to political consequences, the nationalist interests at the time were mainly led by the population, while the right-wing parties had little legislative power. In 2015 this changed since the events were also used by the AfD to reframe their agenda from anti-European and economy towards securitisation. They rejected humanitarian arguments entirely, framing migration as an existential threat to Germany's societal and cultural identity (Uranga 2021, 3). The events of 2015 and 2016 show the existence of contrasting prevailing discourses at the same time. While in the previous decades the dominant discourses were more or less in line with each other the discourses of 2015/16 show stark contrasts. While on the one hand humanitarian and integration discourses were produced by the government and large parts of the population, a nationalist discourse and a securitisation discourse were produced by other governmental actors and the media, supported by the population. This discursive rupture is especially significant as the consequences of the time can still be seen in the debate today.

## 6.5 Reframing the migration debate

Following the initial changes during the 2015–16 crisis period, the legislative agenda shifted between tightening enforcement mechanisms and regularising the status of migrants who had become integrated. In July 2017, the Law for 'Better Enforcement of the Obligation to Leave the Country' was passed, granting federal states significant power to impose mandatory stays in first reception facilities for up to two years. This significantly changed the asylum processing phase and made it more about security. However, the sense of crisis diminished over the years after 2017, and the regulations became less strict. By 2022, the government faced an aging population and structural labour deficits. These deficits required hundreds of thousands of additional workers annually to stabilize the workforce. Faced with this situation, the government pivoted toward pragmatism. In October 2022, legislation was introduced that established an 18-month 'right to remain' for well-integrated, tolerated persons who had resided in Germany for five years (Koch et al. 2023, 11–12). Drewski and Gerhards (2025, 274) found that Germany was one of the few countries that in 2022 still held their humanitarian approach, compared to other countries. When the Ukraine war triggered a new wave of displacement in 2022, the German government refused to pivot entirely to ethno-nationalist solidarity (as seen in Poland). Instead, it maintained its cosmopolitan framing, admitting Ukrainians under the banner of defending liberal democratic values and international law. During this period the prevalence of securitisation and nationalist discourses was subsiding,

and the labour-discourse and integration discourses became more important. By recognizing the need for foreign labour and the value of integrated migrants, Germany addressed the problem of labour shortages through migration. Additionally, humanitarianism became more dominant regarding Ukrainian refugees.

## 6.6 The shift towards deterrence

In 2024, the government modernised the Citizenship Act, abolishing historical prohibitions on multiple citizenships and initially moving to shorten naturalisation timelines to facilitate integration (EU Commission 2025). However, by early 2024, the debate had reached a critical inflection point. The long-term normalization of the AFD's securitised threat narratives culminated in exposed, mainstreamed plans for mass 'remigration'. Additionally, when the governing coalition broke in November 2024 (Vieweger 2024) and a very short but intense election campaign started in Germany, the parties who had promised the most restrictions on migration (CDU/CSU and AFD) won the most votes, despite the initial protests against the AFD's plans. The most important topics in this short but intense election campaign were the economy and managing migration (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2025). A decade of relentless 'unsolvable crisis' narratives directly fuelled a record-breaking 82.5% voter turnout in the February 2025 federal elections, driven almost entirely by the migration debate and showing the importance of migration in the general political debate. Exploiting the normalized xenophobia, the AFD captured a historic 20.8% of the vote and 152 Bundestag seats solely via an anti-immigrant platform (Mixed Migration Centre 2025). The consequences of the 2025 election for the migration debate and the German migration system will be analysed in the following chapter.

# 7 Analysing the current German migration debate

## 7.1 The production of the dominant problem representation

As the historical tracing of the migration debate shows, the idea of 'problematizing' migration is not a new phenomenon. Throughout recent history, migration has been problematised, albeit with different prevailing discourses. Analysis of the analytic archive reveals that the federal government's dominant problem representation in the analysed migration debate is that migrants pose a threat to German security and societal order.

Driven by unequal epistemic power among the five parties in the German Bundestag, the most influential actors are able to dominate the migration discourse and solidify their preferred policy narratives. As discussed previously, the CDU/CSU and the SPD form the governing coalition and the majority in the Bundestag. They therefore hold the most power over policy decisions and, as shown below, have largely produced the dominant problem representation. However, there is a clear epistemic power imbalance between the two parties, given that the chancellor (Friedrich Merz) and interior minister (Alexander Dobrindt) are both from the CDU/CSU. Consequently, the two most influential positions on the migration agenda, with the power to significantly impact the debate and policies, are held by the CDU/CSU (Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung 2026a). The literature shows that the CDU/CSU only won the 2025 election because it adopted certain narratives and ideas previously used by the AFD (Mixed Migration Centre 2025). This means that, although the governing coalition consists of the same parties as in 2015, the things that were considered acceptable and actionable have changed (Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung 2026b). This also led to the dominant discourses concerning migration significantly changing in the migration debate. While in 2015/2016 the government mainly promoted a humanitarian discourse, the securitisation and nationalist discourses were mainly promoted by the media and the AFD, as was determined above. This has shifted in the current legislative period and in the dominant discourses multiple legislations become visible that show the government's goal to build a system of deterrence.

### 7.1.1 Securitisation discourse

The dominant problem representation has largely been produced through a discourse of securitisation which is closely connected with introducing deterrent measures to ensure the security of the German national state. For example, the governing coalition's focus on securitisation is evident in A12, where Dobrindt explicitly highlights the reduction in irregular migration and the dismantling of smuggling networks as major successes for the national security of Germany. He argues that the number of unauthorised entries fell dramatically, from around 40,000 in 2023 to 10,000 in 2024. This framing emphasises the importance that the governing coalition places on restricting migration as a means of safeguarding civil society in connection with combatting organised crime. Similarly, as seen in A36, the government frequently asserts that a strict deportation regime for criminal migrants is a necessary countermeasure against the supposed security threat they pose.

The government's securitisation agenda is fundamentally connected to the national implementation of the CEAS. This is being carried out as strictly as possible in order to maximise national security and minimise administrative burdens. This implementation strategy builds on the 'border spectacle' described in the Literature Review by creating physical infrastructure designed to deter arrivals and restrict freedom of movement. For instance, Dobrindt emphasised that the CEAS aims to 'secure external borders by introducing new screening mechanisms' and establish 'secondary migration centres' (A44). In these 'secondary migration centres', the asylum seekers' status is determined before they are permitted entry. As Dobrindt bluntly stated, 'there will be the possibility to travel back to the responsible country, but not to move freely in Germany' (A44, translated by the author). This physical manifestation of deterrence demonstrates how deeply Germany's internal security strategies, such as national border controls, are intertwined with the EU's broader focus on external border security (A12). Nevertheless, the German government refuses to rely exclusively on EU-level protection or the new solidarity mechanisms. While the CEAS is viewed as vital, the state continually implements its own additional domestic security measures, including the aforementioned secondary migration centres (A44, A64), increased deportations (A26), and an overarching mandate to drastically reduce overall migration numbers (A3, A4, A25).

Connected to the overarching goal of reducing arrival numbers, the empirical mapping reveals that most legislation introduced during the analytical period is designed to restrict asylum seekers' access to German territory. This legislative goal is fundamentally anchored in a securitisation discourse. By framing the mere arrival of migrants as an inherent threat to national security and societal order, the state is able to justify the implementation of severe deterrence measures. Throughout the analysed documents, the governing coalition repeatedly emphasizes that restricting and managing migration is its primary political objective (A3, A4, A25, A28, A44, A45). To legitimise these restrictive policies, the CDU/CSU actively highlights their deterrent success. For example, in July 2025, Dobrindt declared: 'We are turning the wave of migration into a turning point in migration. The number of initial asylum applications fell below the 7,000 mark in June this year. That is 60 per cent fewer than last year,' concluding confidently that 'The turning point in migration is working' (A26, translated by the author). Furthermore, the government explicitly outlines its strategy to 'reduce the pull-factor' (A26, translated by the author), meaning it deliberately seeks to make Germany a less attractive and more hostile destination for asylum seekers. Finally, by presenting aggressive

restriction and deterrence as the only logical solutions, the government's rhetoric reveals a clear problematisation of the issue. Within this securitised framework, the core 'problem' is constructed simply as migrants and asylum seekers entering the country and thus posing a threat to society.

Additionally, it is interesting to note, that in the debate the federal government often makes no distinction between asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. As defined in the GRC there is a clear definition for refugees and who qualifies for asylum. However, the German government rarely distinguishes between them and often calls asylum seekers and refugees migrants as well, giving the impression that them coming to Germany is voluntary or illegal. This can be seen in for example A3: 'The number of migrants who have entered Europe illegally over the past ten years, place considerable strain on our national asylum, reception and integration systems and, amongst other things, pose challenges to internal security' (translated by the author). This is an official statement by a group of European interior ministers, led by Germany, and shows the missing distinction between asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. In A29 Dobrindt says: 'Germany remains a cosmopolitan country that is also open to legal migration into the labour market, but when it comes to illegal migration, the country's capacity for integration has its limits.' and adds 'Consequently, the coalition agreement provides for a 'shift in migration policy', involving more deportations, faster procedures and more people being turned away at Germany's borders, including those seeking asylum' (translated by the author). This shows the government's generalisation of migration, specifically illegal migration to include asylum seekers. A term that has been used frequently to summarise migration in general is 'irregular', suggesting that migrants coming to Germany are out of the ordinary and disrupt the societal order but also are outside of traditional law. Often, 'irregular' is paired with frames of migration being a problem, control being a necessary tool to regulate migration, the migration turnaround, and combating crime. A25 for example shows Merz talking about the 'Reduction of irregular migration' for the 'future and safety of the country', not distinguishing between migrants and asylum seekers again. On the contrary just a few lines below the Chancellor refers to the successes in the change of the migration policies by referencing 'a significant drop in the number of asylum seekers'. A12 shows the connection the federal government makes toward crime and gang crime and how 'irregular migration' needs to be stopped to prevent crime in Germany. By making migration generally seem illegal and irregular, the reduction of migration seems necessary. Also, A12 shows how much the

government connects migration to crime: 'By facilitating and aiding illegal entry into Germany and unauthorised residence on a commercial basis, organised human-trafficking and smuggling gangs are profiting from the growing migration flows.' (translated by the author). People-smuggling is also frequently linked to other criminal activities (such as document and drug-related crime, and illegal employment). This shows how the framing of migrants being 'irregular' is directly connected to the production of the securitisation discourse as the dominant discourse. By deliberately erasing the legal distinction between humanitarian refugees and criminal networks, the state successfully portrays all forms of arrival as a homogeneous, 'illegal' threat. This justifies the implementation of exceptional security measures as the only logical political response and creating a system of deterrence to stop migrants from coming and feeling welcome in the country.

The securitisation discourse is also supported by discussions around the so-called 'cityscape debate' (A21, A49). At a press conference on 16 October 2025, Chancellor Merz said: 'We still have this problem in the cityscape' (translated by the author), referring to migrants being visible in German society (A49). At a press conference a few days later, on 21 October 2025, he was asked to explain and apologise for his statement. Instead, he said the following: 'Ask your daughters what I could have meant by that,' and 'I don't have anything to take back; on the contrary, let me emphasise this once again: We need to do something about it' (A21, translated by the author). This could be interpreted as him suggesting that women in Germany should be afraid of migrants, especially men when they are outside. This demonstrates how he justifies the requirement for the reduction of migrants through rejections and deportations by portraying migrants as a danger to society, particularly women. This is also a good example of Merz using 'Othering' as a tool to create distance between Germans and migrants. He differentiates between people based on their appearance rather than actual levels of threat. In this way, people who do not look German enough are portrayed as a threat. In these instances, migrants' visibility becomes the problem. This type of differentiation because of appearance also shows how a nationalist discourse is part of the debate.

### 7.1.2 The Nationalist discourse

While the AFD has historically led the production of nationalist discourse, a close analysis of the governing coalition, particularly the CDU/CSU, reveals a convergence of narratives. The

current nationalist discourse is not solely the creation of the AFD; rather, it is actively produced and normalised through a discourse shared by both the AFD and the CDU/CSU.

Despite not holding a majority in the parliament or possessing the authority to decide on policy implementation, the AFD generates significant epistemic power in the production of the nationalist discourse. The party produces the nationalist discourse by constantly provoking controversies, thereby forcing the political debate to focus on the AFD's preferred nationalist narratives. The 'cityscape debate' is a prime example of how the party uses government statements to generate maximum attention and promote a nationalist agenda. In A47, the party explicitly used Chancellor Friedrich Merz's controversial statement, in which he claimed that 'we still have this problem in the cityscape', as a pretext to call for a dedicated 'Aktuelle Stunde' (Current Hour) debate in the Bundestag. By officially titling the debate 'Increasing internal security, consistently repatriating and strengthening German guiding culture - Concrete measures for a better cityscape', the AFD successfully kept their preferred narrative at the forefront of the national agenda (A47, translated by the author). During the debate, an AFD representative emphasised that deportations and rejections would actively 'change the cityscape', claiming that this is what the AFD 'has been calling for for years' (A47). He used this platform to assert epistemic dominance, aggressively accusing the Chancellor of empty promises: 'As long as the Union [CDU/CSU] adopts the demands of the AFD but in reality does the opposite, it harms Germany and itself' (A47, translated by the author).

The AFD also further promotes a nationalist discourse through for example A1 which shows a request by the AFD to change the GRC, make the border controls more effective and deny all asylum applications at the border. This request was vehemently denied by all other parties in the Bundestag, even by the CDU/CSU. A member of the CDU in the Bundestag vehemently defended the CDU's policies and said: 'You talk about lies, but you're the biggest storyteller of all when you distort the situation like that.' (A65, translated by the author), reacting to the AFD's accusations that the border controls were ineffective and the government was not doing enough. However, while the CDU in this case did not support the AFD's agenda, this request still contributed to the debate and led to further discussions about the border controls and 'illegal migration', as the AFD calls specifically asylum, in A47. This shows how the AFD is not part of the governing coalition but still wields significant power to influence the debate and produce a nationalist discourse. This is achieved by selecting specific parts of motions and

speeches from the governing coalition and framing them in a nationalist way, or by selecting motions that align with the governing coalition's positions. Alternatively, extremely nationalist motions are introduced to spark discussion and controversy, as shown in A1 and A65.

Although the AFD openly criticises the government for its inaction and claims that the CDU merely copies the AFD's demands, closer analysis shows that the CDU/CSU is not merely a passive victim of the AFD's discursive strategy. In fact, the governing coalition actively and independently promotes these restrictive, nationalist narratives themselves. In the 'cityscape debate', for example, a representative of the CDU, fiercely defended the government's harsh policies, declaring that the coalition has a 'clearly defined agenda in refugee policy' aimed at ensuring that those without the right to remain must 'leave the country quickly and effectively and be deported' (A47, translated by the author). He unreservedly endorsed Merz's nationalist rhetoric, asserting that '63 percent of people in Germany understood what Merz meant and agreed with him' (A47, translated by the author). This active promotion of restriction is also evident when the SPD and the CDU/CSU attempt to distance themselves rhetorically from the AFD, e.g. in A1 and A43, where CDU representatives accuse the AFD of 'human coldness' while boasting that coalition measures have significantly reduced asylum numbers, which the AFD also demands but uses a more extreme rhetoric for. This shows their political alignment on the issues but the rhetorical differences. This active creation of a nationalist discourse through the AFD and in parts the CDU/CSU produces negative narratives regarding migrants, leads to a deterrence focused atmosphere in the country. The AFD is often the only opposition party to vote in alignment with the governing coalition (e.g. A47 and A55). This is evident in legislative moves regarding citizenship requirements (A55) and the implementation of further measures to restrict migration and reduce asylum numbers (A47). Clearly, this demonstrates that the governing coalition, particularly the CDU/CSU, is an active architect of nationalist discourse, aligning with the restrictive demands of the AFD in substance, even while attempting to maintain a more moderate rhetorical position.

### 7.1.3 Juridicial discourse

Another relevant discourse in the debate is the juridicial discourse. This discourse is closely connected to the securitisation discourse and the nationalist discourse because the arguments over how and who implements the measures proposed to protect the country and exclude migrants are highly relevant in the debate and the policy making process. By introducing e.g.

inner-European border controls and the secondary migration centres, thereby restricting the freedom of asylum seekers and introducing these deterrent measures, the enforcement of laws becomes an important factor in the migration debate. In a meeting with European Council president Antonio Costa Merz has to defend himself for the border controls within the Schengen area, saying: 'We are now carrying out more intensive checks at the borders. (...) We will continue to turn people away. But all of this is in line with European law' (A51, translated by the author). Additionally, in A26 the debate shows how the massively grown budget for the ministry of interior is discussed. The government argues that the budget for the ministry needs to be higher due to the successes to that point in reducing the migration numbers so the border controls and rejections can be continued and funded. The ministry of interior also funds the police and personnel working at the border controls and in secondary migration centres (Hausding 2026). Additionally, the federal government talks about continuing to fund deportations and Dobrindt says: 'Rather, the government will ensure, in the interest of the safety of people in Germany, flights of repeat offenders to Afghanistan on a continuous, regular and orderly basis' (A26, translated by the author).

The juridical discourse is significantly shaped as well by the contributions and decisions the courts make. Both the German federal courts and the CJEU contribute to the discourse. Since the courts can decide how laws are interpreted and are often involved when one of the Bundestag parties does not agree with a new proposal, they influence the debate and policy decisions by deciding what is legally possible, and whether a law needs to be changed. This can be seen in for example A64. A64 shows the court decision concerning the border controls that Merz defends in A51 above. The court finds that while the border controls themselves are legal, the rejections of asylum seekers without conducting a proper procedure regarding the Dublin-protocol and asylum request, is illegal. The court therefore puts down the groundwork for introducing the secondary migration centres, by explicitly stating 'under the Dublin Regulation, it is possible to carry out the Dublin procedure at the border or in the vicinity of the border without this necessarily entailing the granting of entry.' but also saying: 'rejection of the applicants is illegal. Under the EU's Dublin Regulation, the Federal Republic is obliged to carry out the procedure provided for in this regulation to determine the Member State responsible for the asylum procedure in its entirety in every case where an asylum application is made on German territory' (A64, translated by the author).

This is also relevant concerning A23 which shows the motions of the Greens and the Left party to stop border controls and secondary migration centres, because they find them ‘inhumane’ and ‘illegal’. However, as ruled in A64 the courts deem border controls at the German borders as legal. A similar discussion is also visible in A19, which shows the court’s decision regarding an asylum request denial because the person requesting asylum was from a country that the German federal government had recently designated as a ‘safe country of origin’. The man in this example was from Ghana, which was deemed safe, however, the asylum seeker argued that he was a victim of persecution because of his homosexuality. The court decided that this particular denial was illegal because first, the list of safe countries of origin was not agreed upon with the CJEU, and second, because in this particular case a risk for persecution could not be ruled out. This decision meant that although the list of safe countries of origin was legal, the individual asylum requests from people from these countries had to still be assessed individually for cases of persecution.

Aside from the courts, the experts in expert hearings have the power to co-produce the juridical discourse. In expert hearings the implementation of the federal countries is often discussed through the participation of different representatives from federal institutions like for example regional governments or the authorities on migration. In A2 the debate is about the new legislation of deciding upon ‘safe countries of origin’ without consulting the federal countries. In this expert hearing experts from government agencies from the federal countries, representatives from courts and from NGOs are contributing to the debate. On this topic the opinions differ significantly. Many of the representatives from regional agencies see the proposal as an aid in limiting bureaucratic effort. A representative from Bavaria explained that ‘from the perspective of enforcement practice, the new government’s plans are very much to be welcomed. Recent years have shown that a significant proportion of asylum applications come from applicants from countries of origin with low recognition rates.’ (A2, translated by the author). A judge at the Administrative Court of Baden-Württemberg added with regard to the legal feasibility of the proposed legislation by saying that it is ‘possible to classify safe countries of origin differently under German law and EU law in different proceedings, as two distinct legal systems were involved’ (A2, translated by the author). Many of the representatives of pro-migration NGOs like e.g. the Jesuit Refugee Service Germany find that the expansion of the list of ‘safe countries of origin’ would ‘unduly expand the group of asylum seekers that is already facing significant restrictions anyways’ and voices their concerns that

‘abolishing the rule on the mandatory appointment of legal representation would further exacerbate the plight of those affected’(A2, translated by the author). These examples illustrate that while the securitization discourse legitimizes deterrent measures like border controls and deportations, it operates in tandem with a powerful juridical discourse. This legal framing significantly influences how solutions to migration are presented by defining the boundaries of what is legally possible and categorizing migrants as either ‘legal’ or ‘illegal’.

## 7.2 Silences in the dominant problem representation

As analysed the dominant problem representation of migrants coming to Germany and posing a threat to the national security and societal order is mainly being shaped by the securitization discourse, the nationalist discourse and the juridical discourse. In the historical development it is visible that in the past the humanitarian, integration and labour discourses also played a role in the debate and shaped the problem representations. In the current debate, these discourses can be seen, but they remain silent in the problem representation.

### 7.2.1 Humanitarian discourse

Although the governing coalition has accepted that its migration policies are supported by a nationalist discourse due to its alignment with AFD narratives and its shift to the right compared to 2015/16, the government is still trying to distance itself from the AFD. The government uses words like ‘fair’ and ‘solidarity’ to reassure the public that they are acting fairly and to portray themselves as victims who need more solidarity, as they must protect the state. For example, in A44, the government discusses the CEAS reform, stating that its ‘aim is to strike a new balance between humanity, solidarity, and order’ (translated by the author), thereby emphasising that the government’s intention in implementing the CEAS reform is to promote solidarity not only between EU countries, but also with refugees who have the right to enter the EU. However, the speaker also immediately defines these measures entirely in terms of securitisation measures, stating that the practical application of this balance involves heavily securing the EU’s external borders, preventing secondary migration and establishing ‘return hubs’ and secondary migration centres where migrants cannot move freely. This illustrates how the government uses humanitarian buzzwords to distance itself from nationalist extremes, only to use them to justify its core agenda of securitisation and deterrence. In A53, the government promises that ‘immigration should be made predictable, legally certain and fair’, making clear that it promotes more certainty and fairness in its

migration legislation. Additionally, the government repeatedly asserts that its measures adhere to the rule of law and uphold humanitarian standards (e.g. A10, A25, A32, A36, A44). This is intended to distance them from the positions of the AfD, portraying themselves as caring and committed to humanitarian standards, but forced to act in order to protect the state. A10, for example, explains how Germany deals with refugees. While it makes clear that Germany adheres to the GRC and human rights law, it also clearly restricts who these programmes are for. 'Humanitarian admission programmes are designed, particularly in times of war and acute crisis, to provide safe routes into Germany for specific groups of refugees' (A10, translated by the author), this statement leaves no doubt that not all migrants are welcome.

The leading parties producing a humanitarian discourse are the Green and the Left party. As described above the humanitarian discourse historically used to be one of the most dominant discourses in Germany and was historically often involved in producing the dominant problem representation (e.g. in the 1950s and 2015/2016). However analysing the documents from the analytic period, it becomes obvious that the Green and the Left parties both hold little epistemic power and the humanitarian discourse is relatively weak and powerless in shaping the problem representation. The two parties have little influence on the debate. This becomes visible in their disagreement with most proposed legislations and their attempts to refer to for example human rights and humanitarian conditions, but also their failure in truly gaining attention with their motions and arguments. A60 for example shows a court application against the national changes to the process of determining 'safe countries of origin' without the EU and federal countries in Germany being questioned. This motion was meant to protect asylum seekers from a multitude of countries to be dismissed too easily and was also meant to prevent the government from gaining too much unrestricted power. At the end of the analysis period, this motion had not had success yet. A40 shows an unsuccessful application against inner-EU border controls, referring to Schengen and the freedom of movement as well as the right to asylum. As mapped in the methodology the Greens and the Left party in the migration debate are the parties openly criticising the government for their inhumane actions and accuse them of breaking human right law. In the discussion around the CEAS the Greens openly criticize the plan to implement the secondary migration centres at the borders saying: 'The German government is planning a full-scale attack on those seeking protection. The planned secondary migration centres serve no other purpose than to effectively detain people'

(A44, translated by the author). The Left party also criticises the plans of the government, saying the asylum seekers then would have to live under ‘conditions effectively amounting to detention, with limited legal protection and virtually no access to legal advice’ and that ‘this has nothing to do with asylum law. People fleeing war should not be locked up, they have done nothing except apply for asylum’ (A44, translated by the author). Similarly, in A37 the Left party reacts to Merz’s statements regarding migrants in the ‘cityscape-debate’ and says: ‘This statement is nothing short of racist and inhumane’ (translated by the author). Pointing to the nationalist discourse produced by Merz and the CDU/CSU and the unjustness of that. Representatives from human rights organisations, such as the German Institute for Human Rights, frequently support the perspectives of the Greens and the Left Party in parliamentary expert hearings. In the context of the CEAS Adaptation Act (A44), the Institute’s expert explicitly highlights the reform’s humanitarian shortcomings, emphasising the systemic failure to protect highly vulnerable individuals. The expert condemns the severe human rights implications of restricting asylum seekers’ freedom of movement through new border procedures and warns that, under the new legislation, ‘restrictions on freedom and detention threaten to become the rule rather than the exception’ (A44, translated by the author). The expert also criticises the government for exhausting all legal leeway to restrict rights while neglecting protection guarantees. In A44 a representative from the Freiburg Protestant University explains that the implementation of the CEAs would lead to an ‘inevitable chaos’ that would harm asylum seekers and says that there is particular need for adjustments ‘when it comes to safeguard for particularly vulnerable individuals, especially children’ and warns from the consequences for for example children or disabled persons of the secondary migration centres and the budget cuts on asylum procedure consulting measures. In A2 a representative from the Jesuit Refugee Service Germany warns that ‘abolishing the rule on the mandatory appointment of legal representation [for asylum seekers] would further exacerbate the predicament of those affected’ and tries to gain attention for the consequences of this new rule for asylum seekers.

These examples show how the Left and Greens, and also expert representatives, actively argue against the legislations produced by the governments and actively try to promote a more humanitarian discourse. It becomes visible how the expert representatives of humanitarian organisations play a vital role in the political arena, as they are often the only actors to visibly bring the lived realities, perspectives and rights of migrants into a debate otherwise

overwhelmingly dominated by securitisation. However, the lack of success in bringing these perspectives into the policies also shows the failure to bring the humanitarian perspective into the dominant problem representation. The Greens and the Left Party's inability to influence legislative decisions is evident from the fact that the restrictive laws were enacted despite their ongoing protests and the political unimportance of the humanitarian discourse.

### 7.2.2 Integration discourse

The debate on migration also differs from previous legislations in the way the integration discourse is formed. While in 2015, the German government increased the budget for integration and language programmes, started programmes to recognise foreign qualifications, and made psychological support more accessible for refugees (Bundesregierung.de 2015, 5–9) the government in 2025 talks about integration in a different way. While the integration discourse still persists, the intentions are different today. While in A36 the government emphasises their commitment to integration and names measures like 'more language classes and faster recognition of foreign degrees' to facilitate integration, they also make very clear that true integration can only be accomplished by cultural assimilation and proof of language skill. The recent reform of the citizenship law (A55) illustrates how integration is presented as the most important condition for migrants to be accepted into the national community, while also making it harder to achieve due to much stricter eligibility requirements. Such measures are often employed to render migrants less culturally visible, forcing them to fully assimilate, learn the language and achieve complete economic self-sufficiency before they are granted legal status. The government has explicitly confirmed this strict assimilationist approach, stating that under the new law, 'everyone must earn their own living to be able to get a German passport', and emphasising that 'whoever does not share our values cannot get a German passport. We have drawn a crystal-clear red line here and made the law much stricter than before' (A55, translated by the author). This perfectly demonstrates how the state uses the legal framework of citizenship to enforce absolute socio-economic and cultural adaptation.

By framing successful integration as primarily a tool for reducing welfare dependency and mitigating perceived societal threats, the integration discourse is effectively subsumed by the overarching securitisation narrative. Consequently, genuine integration perspectives are silenced, thereby reinforcing the dominance of the securitisation discourse. Furthermore, the

new citizenship laws shift the entire burden of integration onto migrants, demanding assimilation. By presenting integration as a personal obligation rather than a state responsibility requiring active funding and promotion, the government effectively evades its social and financial duties (Bonjour 2013, 840; Mullally 2013, 415; Blankvoort et al. 2024, 464). Although the government emphasizes their priority for integration measures in e.g. A15 or A35, saying that ‘Reducing pull factors and easing the burden on reception and integration systems’ (A15, translated by the author) is a priority, the budget for integration measures such as e.g. language classes have significantly gone down compared to previous legislative periods (Bremer Institut für Arbeitsmarktforschung und Jugendberufhilfe 2026). This shows how the integration discourse has visibly less priority and is less dominant for the federal government and is silenced for the prevalent problem representation.

### 7.2.3 Labour-migration discourse

Interestingly, compared to previous political cycles, the current debate has marginalised the labour discourse almost entirely. While past policy discussions emphasised the importance of attracting skilled labour and integrating refugees into the job market quickly, the government has largely abandoned this rhetoric. Currently, only A5 outlines the legal framework for foreign nationals entering the German labour market. Additionally, although Dobrindt briefly invokes this framework in A29, asserting that ‘Germany remains a cosmopolitan country that is open to legal migration into the labour market’, this is an isolated occurrence. Ultimately, unlike in previous years, the labour discourse is practically non-existent and deliberately excluded from the dominant problem representation.

## 7.3 Effects of the problem representation

This section will deal with the effects produced by the dominant problem representation of migrants being seen as a security threat and threat to Germany’s societal order. Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, 20, 23) determine an important distinction to analyse these effects: they divide the effects into discursive effects, subjectification effects and lived effects. This chapter will analyse the effects divided into these categories.

### 7.3.1 Discursive effects

As briefly mapped in the theoretical framework, the way a problem is represented creates specific ‘discursive effects.’ These effects ultimately limit what is accepted as valid knowledge or truth within the debate. While the previous chapter identified the silences within the

migration discourse, the discursive effects of the dominant problem representation reveal the severe political constraints the silences and prevalent discourses create. Following Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, 23), discursive effects set the limits on what can logically be thought and said within the political arena. By framing migration fundamentally as a security and administrative threat, the discourses effectively neutralise systemic arguments from the opposition.

A prominent discursive effect is the entrapment of political opposition within the thematic boundaries set by the dominant problem representation. The dominance of securitisation and nationalist discourse is primarily driven by the largest parliamentary factions in the Bundestag. This dynamic reflects the outcomes of the recent federal election, in which parties that had migration at the centre of their strategy, namely the CDU/CSU and the AfD, secured the most votes (Die Bundeswahlleiterin 2025). Consequently, the political debate becomes overwhelmingly fixated on migration, actively marginalising alternative issues such as climate change or social inequality, which are prioritised by opposition parties like the Left and the Greens (Fraktion Die Linke im Bundestag, n.d.; Fraktion BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN 2025). The resulting discursive effect is twofold: migration dominates the political agenda and the range of acceptable arguments is strictly confined to those permitted by the governing majority. This structural power enables the systematic entrapment of alternative voices to become fully visible. As previously demonstrated, the AfD excels at exploiting this dynamic to maintain the prominence of migration, actively shaping the overarching problem representation alongside the government. These discursive effects ultimately reveal how alternative topics are marginalised. Issues that would be central under a different problem representation are effectively ignored simply because they cannot be articulated within the prevailing logic of securitisation. For instance, while the Greens and the Left Party continue to advocate for a humanitarian perspective, they are nevertheless compelled to participate in discussions centred on border controls and migration restriction. This demonstrates that the debate is strictly confined to the parameters of the dominant problem representation, rather than exploring alternative approaches that are equally relevant to migration. This dynamic is clearly illustrated in A44 during the discussion on the implementation of the CEAS. Although the Greens and the Left Party fundamentally oppose most of the measures introduced through the CEAS, they are drawn into debating how to best implement border controls, the conditions for asylum seekers in secondary migration centres, and the procedures surrounding their return. Rather than being able to reject these measures outright, they are forced to concede

the implementation of these rules. This ultimately shows the limitations of their influence to negotiate the treatment of asylum seekers within this pre-established framework.

A37 and A61 show the Greens' and the Left Party's reactions to Merz's narratives and frames used in the cityscape debate. Although the parties vehemently disagree, they are forced to dedicate political energy to this topic, with A37 describing Merz's statement as 'racist and misanthropic', and A61 as 'racist, discriminatory, hurtful and indecent'. Dominant securitisation and nationalist discourses force opposition parties into constant defensive reactions. Instead of proactively shaping a humanitarian migration policy, they are merely fighting to prevent the normalisation of right-wing extremism.

Similarly, A29 and A62 reveal discussions about the federal government's fundamental goal of restricting and limiting migration through border controls and rejections. In this instance, the left-wing opposition parties are compelled to engage in debates on the subject of border controls and denials of entry at the border. Rather than being able to rely on purely humanitarian arguments, they find themselves having to adopt the language of legal representatives (referencing EU law, the constitution and administrative feasibility) in order to be taken seriously in the debate. This makes human beings disappear behind a debate over legal mechanics. The Left party for example tries to show how the government itself does not know the legal foundation for its actions and says: 'Chancellor Merz declared a state of emergency under Article 72 TFEU. This was denied later that very same day. At the same time, Mr Dobrindt said that European law would be suspended to allow for border controls. On Wednesday, Vice-Chancellor Klingbeil was unable to specify the legal basis for the rejections and border controls in the Bundestag' (A62, translated by the author). This demonstrates that, rather than presenting humanitarian arguments, the Left is compelled to employ legal reasoning to be taken seriously.

This discursive effect can theoretically be challenged by creating counter-narratives and rejecting the dominant problem representation, as Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, 20, 23) propose. This approach is taken in A29, where the Left party asserts the fundamental right to asylum, despite the discussion being focused on how to restrict access to asylum. The Left party says that 'the Left will always protect the constitutional right to asylum'. Additionally, in A62, the Left Party asserts: 'There is no crisis at the border; you know that yourself. The number of applications is falling, and the accommodation facilities in the federal states are

half-empty', thereby completely denying the federal government's fundamental reasoning for the securitisation narrative. This shows, as Foucault famously stated, 'Where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault 1978, 95). In the context of the parliamentary debate, the Left party provides this resistance by defending the fundamental right to asylum.

Through the lens of the WPR approach, this opposition represents what Foucault terms 'subjugated knowledges', which continuously challenge the dominant discourses authority (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 22, 45). This resistance however is held small and not taken seriously by the CDU/CSU who is defending their problem representation by saying that 'the influx of asylum seekers has intensified once again in recent years. Yet, compared to other EU countries, Germany is the main destination for irregular migration and bears a disproportionately heavy burden.' (A62). This demonstrates the dominance of securitisation narratives in political debates, despite contestation by the Left Party. It also shows how dominant discourses can limit the knowledge that is considered acceptable and believable in debates. This makes it nearly impossible to centre the physical suffering of migrants at the borders, because the problem representation has already designated the German population, German state and its societal order as the primary victims of the migration crisis.

### 7.3.2 Subjectification effects

While discursive effects establish the boundaries of the political debate, subjectification effects reveal how the problem representation actively produces specific categories of people. According to Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, 21–23, 51), subjectification effects draw attention to how discourses construct distinct 'subject positions' and utilize dividing practices to separate groups from one another. In the current migration debate, the problem representation fundamentally relies on an intense 'Othering' practice ), neatly dividing the population into 'wanted' citizens and 'unwanted' migrants to legitimise differential governing techniques.

The first notable subjectification effect that can be interpreted on the basis of Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, 103) is the creation of the 'useful' versus the 'burdensome' subject. This divisive practice is clearly evident in the analysed parliamentary debates. For instance, in A29, Interior Minister Dobrindt asserts that Germany is open to 'legal migration into the labour market' yet cautions that the country's 'capacity for integration has its limits' regarding 'illegal migration'. This rhetoric actively creates two distinct subject positions: the highly welcome 'skilled worker', who is economically valuable to Germany, and the 'illegal migrant', who is

perceived solely as a strain on state resources. As a result, individuals seeking asylum are stripped of their humanitarian context and reconstituted as an administrative burden.

Additionally, in the dominant problem representation labour migration only plays a minor role, while the migration debate is dominated by the fear of 'illegal' migration and asylum seekers. The economic and legal divide is further exacerbated by the categorisation of specific nationalities under the law. The debate surrounding 'safe countries of origin' in A42 is a highly effective means of division. By designating certain states as 'safe', the debate pre-categorises entire groups of migrants. This creates the 'genuine refugee', who conforms to the traditional, legally accepted narrative of persecution, in direct opposition to the 'illegitimate economic migrant' or 'system abuser' who is not in need of protection. A SPD politician also confirms this by saying: 'Those who flee for economic reasons cannot rely on it [the Refugee Convention].' (A46). Furthermore, as seen in discussions surrounding the Refugee Convention (A46), this binary enables the state to justify expedited deportations. A46 shows a quote confirming that parliamentary group leader Jens Spahn from the CDU had 'demanded agreements with third countries in order to be able to deport refugees there'. The subjectification effect is that individuals from 'safe' states are stripped of their narratives of suffering and labelled by the state as deceitful individuals seeking to exploit the German welfare system.

A second, profound subjectification effect occurs through the spatial and visual categorisation of subjects within the public sphere. The dominant discourse increasingly criminalises or problematises the mere physical appearance of subjects. This is evident in debates surrounding the 'cityscape debate' (A21, A37, A50, A61). As discussed in detail in this thesis, the 'cityscape debate' established a nationalist narrative which aided in the 'Othering' of persons who did not look German, thus creating a category of differentiation in the governing process. By framing the visibility of certain demographics in society as problematic and requiring increased deportations, the discourse produces a racialised subject position. This subjectification effect is severe, communicating to individuals who do not fit the phenotypic norm that their presence in public spaces is disruptive or illegitimate. This forces them to navigate society as perpetual 'outsiders' and not only affects asylum seekers and 'illegal' immigrants but also German citizens who do not fit the phenotypic norm.

A distinct subjectification effect emerges in the debates about suspending family reunification for subsidiary protection (A24). Here, the discourse creates subjects based on prioritisation of protection holders, dividing families into the 'deserving' and 'undeserving'. The suspension of family reunification for those with subsidiary protection is often justified in terms of municipal capacity, with the argument being that 'we must restrict secondary migration to protect our federal states from becoming administratively overwhelmed' (A24). This policy frames the family life of certain migrants not as a fundamental human right, but as an excessive threat to state resources. This divisive approach isolates these migrants, presenting them as solitary, temporary subjects whose family ties are deemed illegitimate, compared to other family ties. This can also be seen as an additional method of deterrence to make Germany less attractive to migrants.

Finally, the discourse employs dividing practices to create the concept of the 'vulnerable German citizen', which is in direct opposition to the idea of the 'migrant as a security risk'. As codified in the CEAS reform (A44), the normalisation of detention centres and strict border procedures structurally positions migrants as presumed criminals or threats until proven otherwise. In contrast, the German citizen is presented as a vulnerable individual who requires constant state protection. This can also be seen in Chancellor Merz's general debate (A57) and the discussions on internal border controls (A65), the emphasis on 'order' continually reinforces the idea that the German citizen is vulnerable and must be protected from external chaos. Border checks are often justified by claims that 'Thousands of illegal entries have been prevented. Border controls remain necessary for the time being' (A57). By repeatedly debating the necessity of intercepting migrants at internal European borders, the discourse portrays the migrating body as perpetually suspicious and unlawful by nature. The subjectification effect is clear here: the migrant is presented as a moving threat requiring continuous police surveillance, thereby justifying differential, punitive governance. This also justifies the entirely different governance of these two groups: citizens are governed through promises of security and order, while migrants are governed through surveillance, restriction and bodily control.

### 7.3.3 Lived effects

While discursive and subjectification effects determine the boundaries of political thought and create distinct social groups, analysing 'lived effects' requires an examination of how these groups manifest as physical consequences. Following Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, 23) this

analysis does not treat the empirical literature as revealing an objective truth about the implications of the debate. Instead, the literature is used to demonstrate empirically how the effects of the securitisation and nationalist discourses translate from an abstract political problematisation into tangible realities for those categorised through the debate (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 23, 38).

The most severe lived effect of the current problem representation is the translation of the security and nationalist discourses into direct bodily harm and geographical exclusion. As Ceyhan and Tsoukala (2002, 21–24) explain and the analysis of the German migration debate in this thesis has shown, the Western migration debate has increasingly securitised migrants and portray them primarily as an existential threat to domestic order and security rather than as humanitarian subjects. In the German parliamentary debates. For example, this can be seen in the constant association of migration with ‘combating crime’ and ‘administrative burden’. The material consequence of this securitisation is the weaponisation of geography. As Germany lacks an external EU border, it exercises control through the ‘border spectacle’ and externalisation (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015, 73–76). In the case of Germany, the Dublin-Regulation serves as a legal and geographical buffer, essentially outsourcing the physical violence of border enforcement to peripheral member states while preserving a domestic narrative of administrative order (Galeone 2023). Through its political and financial support for the European border regime (Frontex) and its negotiation of third-country agreements, the German state is involved in what Hyndman and Mountz (2008, 268–69) refer to as ‘neo-refoulement’. This describes a geographical strategy designed to prevent asylum seekers from accessing sovereign territory. In practice, the German political demand for ‘Restricting migration’ and ‘Rejections’, as discussed in political debates, is partly exported to the European borders, forcing migrants into dangerous environments such as the Mediterranean Sea and driving them into the hands of smuggling networks that the state is supposedly trying to combat. The German federal government acknowledges this when discussing the combatting of smuggling and gang violence in documents such as A15 and A36 by explicitly saying: ‘The German government is stepping up the fight against organised crime. A new action plan sets out a determined approach to tackling criminal networks’ (A15, translated by the author) but does not connect it to its own border regulation mechanisms. This violent geographic exclusion is what De Genova (2002, 436; Casas-Cortes et al. 2015, 66–68) terms the ‘border spectacle’. This leads to multiple lived effects: it produces migrants’ ‘illegality’ by forcing them onto

unauthorised routes, while simultaneously normalising their physical suffering to the European public as a natural and necessary consequence of defending the state. This structure that leads to the physical, geographical consequences for migrants can clearly be connected to the psychological deterrence measures explained in the literature review and consequently is one of the elements of the German deterrence system.

Another lived effect is created through the subjectification effect of the division between 'asylum seekers' and 'genuine German citizens', which is intensified by changes to the CEAS (e.g. A44). These changes allow the status of asylum seekers to be assessed before they are permitted to enter German territory freely. These institutions are called secondary migration centres and show how the division between asylum seekers, migrants and German citizens is materialised and institutionalised. The centres aid in physically isolating asylum seekers from the German public and effectively realise the political desire to remove visible migration from the 'cityscape' as requested by Chancellor Merz (A2, A49). However, the lived effect extends beyond mere confinement. De Genova (2002, 449) argues that the primary function of producing 'illegality' among migrants is not immediate physical exclusion, but rather a sustained state of deportability. For migrants caught up in the centres and the fast deportation processes in these centres, being sent back to another country is a constant threat which leads to experiences of feeling unsafe and powerless throughout the whole process. Their lives become completely subjugated to state power due to the constant threat of forced removal, demonstrating how this legal status can dictate the physical and psychological real-life for these asylum seekers. Here a different element of a deterrence system becomes visible. The precarity of the migrants' status can be seen as a psychological measure of deterrence policies as explained in the literature review.

This asymmetry between the migrant subject and the German citizen can also be seen in Walters' (2002, 563–68) conceptualisation of modern European borders as biopolitical filters designed to denaturalise territory. These filters make movement seamless for the privileged European citizen, while creating punitive structures for the non-European 'Other'. As Germany reintroduces internal border controls to stop 'irregular migration', the effect for the migrants is a rise of state violence in the form of racial profiling, physical interception and restricted mobility at European border crossings. At the same time for the white German citizen, these same checkpoints produce a different lived effect. They experience virtually no physical

restriction. This shows that while the restriction of migration and the dominant problem representation in the current political debate have negative lived effects for migrants, they also create privileges for German citizens. In post-structural analysis, the absence of physical restriction is not a 'non-effect', instead it can be seen as a highly constructed biopolitical privilege (Walters 2002, 563).

As can be seen in the positive election results for the CDU/CSU and the AfD because of the migration agenda propagated by these parties, at least parts of the German population want the restriction and containment of migrants. Through the securitisation and nationalist discourses a need for security was created in the German population that can only be met through 'combatting crime' connected to migration or the deportation of criminals or just the restriction of entrance. Kinnvall and Mitzen (2020, 240–41) describe this as 'ontological security' which describes the need for 'cognitive consistency, biographical continuity, and the reliance on everyday routines to hold existential anxiety at bay'. The implementation of restrictive migration policies and the Othering-process within here function as a strategy to manage the public's anxiety and fear and lead to a sense of security as a lived effect for the German population.

The dominant problem representation also actively governs the emotional landscape of German citizens, generating a lived effect of heightened entitlement and belonging. Ayata (2022, 330) argues that states 'govern through affect'. This means citizenship is more than just a legal status. Rather, the state maintains citizenship by endorsing certain feelings as legitimate while discrediting others. For instance, the political debate in Germany often portrays migration as a 'burden' or a 'security threat' to the German population. This creates an exclusive emotional contract with white German citizens (Ayata 2022, 333–34). The resulting lived effect is a psychological consolidation. White Germans are affirmed as the 'proper, true citizens' who are naturally entitled to state privileges. Through this affective governance, the citizen feels a reaffirmed sense of community and belonging. However, this sense of belonging is constructed in direct opposition to the 'Other'. It is defined in contrast to the 'quasi' or 'technical' citizenship of racialised minorities, and the perceived illegitimacy of the asylum seeker (Ayata 2022, 330–31).

This is complemented by Ahmed's (2004, 117–26) concept of 'affective economies' which shows how fear influences citizen's reality. This explains how the fear circulates between, in

this case, German citizens and creates social boundaries towards migrants. The dominant political discourses in this case frame the ordinary German citizen as an 'injured party' who is damaged by the 'invasion' of others (Ahmed 2004, 117–18). Because of this framing, citizens can demand harsh, exclusionary policies without feeling hateful. Furthermore, this fear has direct spatial consequences. Ahmed notes that 'fear works to restrict some bodies through the movement or expansion of others'. The fear of the migrant leads to their physical containment, sealing them into the secondary migration camps and leading to the problem that is perceived if migrants become too visible in German society. The lived effects for the German citizen is frictionless mobility and the comfort of feeling 'at home.' However, this physical and emotional freedom depends entirely on restricting the migrant (Ahmed 2004, 126).

Finally, the overarching lived effect of the dominant problem representation is absolute epistemic inequality. The policymakers who enforce the 'Migration Turnaround' through securitisation and nationalist policies primarily experience the consequences of their problematisation as abstract political power or electoral success. The German citizens experience the consequences of the dominant problem representation as a sense of security and belonging. And in contrast to that, individuals affected by the policies' physical consequences, the migrants and asylum seekers, are structurally denied the authority to participate in the debate, and their representatives are often disregarded in the expert hearings in the Bundestag (e.g. A2, A19, A44, A62). This dynamic can be explained by Fricker's (2017, 54–55) concept of 'testimonial injustice', whereby a speaker is granted a diminished level of credibility due to structural prejudice. As the dominant discourse has already defined migrants as 'illegal' and 'system abusers', their testimonies about border violence or deportation trauma are systematically discredited or simply ignored. Consequently, migrants' lived experiences are reduced to subjugated knowledges (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 45) meaning their realities are disqualified by the dominant problem representation. This ensures the physical suffering of migrants remains structurally invisible and the securitization and nationalist discourses remain dominant within the migration debate, thereby establishing a dominant system of deterrence in the German migration policies.

## 8 Discussion

This chapter discusses how the dominant discourses in the German migration debate create a hegemonic problematisation of migration that ultimately legitimises deterrence policies. As

the previous analysis has demonstrated, the dominant problem representation frames migrants primarily as a threat to societal order and national security. This narrative is driven by powerful securitisation, nationalist, and juridical discourses. By establishing this threat narrative as an absolute fact, policymakers create a foundation where harsh exclusionary measures appear natural and necessary. I argue that the legitimisation process can be explained through Haraway's (1988, 581) conceptualisation of the 'God Trick'. According to this concept, the dominant production of securitisation, nationalist or juridical discourses by German policy makers in the migration debate, is the performance of the 'god trick'. That means that they present their policies and narratives not as subjective, ideologically driven choices, but as objective, rational, and necessary responses to the 'threat' that migrants pose. By claiming that their standpoint is 'unmarked' and 'neutral', these actors present their perspective as the only truth. As the analysis demonstrates, a major discursive consequence of this dominant problem representation is that alternative opinions and standpoints are effectively silenced. This dynamic can be further explained through the 'god trick', which illustrates Foucault's assertion that the creation of 'truth' is crucial for determining which knowledge is accepted within a debate. By performing this 'god trick', dominant parties and politicians elevate the state's highly situated perspective to the status of the migration debate's undisputed truth (Haraway 1988, 581). Ultimately, if migration is successfully and 'objectively' established as a 'threat to societal order', the deterrence measures previously outlined become legally and morally justified.

The essence of the 'god trick' is that authorities and politicians frequently are produced to hold an 'unmarked' position, which gives them considerable epistemic power. Haraway argues that the 'god trick' allows those in power to remain 'unmarked' while strictly categorising and 'marking' everyone else. In Western history, the 'unmarked' category has traditionally been white, male, and bourgeois (Haraway 1988, 581). In the German migration debate this 'unmarked' position is taken up by the governing coalition who is in a 'truth producing' position. Because this group holds power, their specific, highly situated worldview is treated as the default, universal standard of rationality. This allows this unmarked authority, the government, to point its gaze at marginalised groups and define them. In the case of the German migration debate the actors in power use the 'conquering gaze from nowhere' to mark the migrant as a 'security risk', an 'illegal' or a 'burden' (Haraway 1988, 581). As conceptualised in the literature review the state's power relies on its ability to define the migrant while

refusing to be defined or located itself. Haraway warns that this form of vision is not passive; it is an act of power and violence' (Haraway 1988, 585). As determined in the analysis, the state uses 'Othering' as a mechanism to differentiate between the migrants and the German citizen. This shows how, as Haraway (1988, 592) explains it, the unsituated power takes away the migrants' agency, by making them the observed and governed group with a clear subject position in the discourses. This explains the physical and psychological violence of deterrence policies. When the German state reduces migrants to passive 'objects of knowledge', they are seen only as a logistical problem that needs to be deterred via border controls, rejections, deportations or manipulated legal statuses. The violence of deterrence is thus justified because migrants have been successfully objectified by the state's gaze.

To resist this epistemic violence, Haraway (1988, 592) proposes the concept of 'situated knowledges', which demands that the 'object of knowledge' be pictured as 'an actor and agent' rather than a passive resource or logistical problem. The dominant deterrence discourse entirely excludes the situated knowledge and lived experiences of migrants themselves. The dominant problem representation also excludes the discourses produced by the Greens, Left party and the expert representatives of NGOs and other organisations that try to bring in a more humanitarian perspective and give the migrants a voice and thus agency. By systematically denying migrants their agency and silencing their subjugated standpoints, the state removes the human realities that would complicate and ultimately delegitimise the system of deterrence.

While the 'gods trick' explains who is silenced and why, in order to maintain the threat narrative, a full answer to the research question requires an examination of the internal fractures of the discourse itself. Specifically, it is crucial to expose the structural paradoxes and empirical failures of these policies because this proves that deterrence is not legitimised by rational arguments and the necessity for protection as the problem representation presents it. Instead, it shows that legitimisation relies entirely on the hegemonic power of the discourse to mask its own contradictions. Examining these fractures reveals that focusing solely on this dominant problem representation obscures several key structural paradoxes within the German migration debate. For example, humanitarian discourses and demands for migrant integration do occasionally feature in the political debate and are even expressed from the most powerful actors, the governing coalition. However, as the analysis shows, these are not

the dominant discourses. Because they lack hegemonic status, humanitarian and integration narratives fail to meaningfully influence or dismantle the overarching deterrence system. This creates a severe policy paradox: the state demands integration from migrants while simultaneously enforcing legal temporariness and spatial segregation and an anti-immigration narrative, which structurally and emotionally renders integration difficult if not impossible. Furthermore, the overwhelming dominance of the securitisation discourse completely obscures an obvious economic reality which is Germany's urgent demographic need for labour migration. Despite severe labour shortages, the economic necessity of migration is conspicuously marginalised in political debate. Ultimately, this proves that the hegemonic problematisation of migration is driven by the affective governance of citizens' anxieties rather than objective economic or logistical realities.

This disconnect between the discourse and objective reality is further highlighted by the actual efficacy of the policies themselves. The current discourse openly focuses on restricting migration by introducing border controls and other measures. However, Bossong (2026, 3) argues that scientific research shows no clear deterrent effect from tightened border controls. In fact, he claims that, contrary to the German government's assertions, such controls and detention centres often lead to the professionalisation of smuggling operations and human trafficking, posing greater risks to individuals seeking asylum or attempting to migrate. Wærp (2025, 9) even suggests that border controls can lead to more 'irregular' migration and greater security risks for migrants, rather than fewer. This aspect could also be expanded by asking whether measuring the success of a policy by the number of people it deters is useful when discussing securitisation and societal order. Alternatively, the problem could be presented as a lack of integrative measures and support, or a lack of compliance with legal and human rights standards. Crucially, the fact that deterrence policies are continuously expanded despite their empirical failure demonstrates the absolute power of the hegemonic discourse. It proves that the deterrence system is legitimised not by its actual logistical success, but by the state's successful discursive performance of the 'god trick' which prioritises the affective performance of security over scientific reality.

## 8.1 Limitations and fields for further research

Although Haraway's concept of the 'god trick' offers a robust framework for deconstructing the state's illusion of objectivity and the legitimisation of deterrence in German migration

debate through discourses, applying this perspective necessitates acknowledging the limitations of the thesis's own 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, 1988, p. 583). Methodologically, this analysis is restricted by its exclusive focus on official policy documents and parliamentary debates. By focusing on state-produced texts, the research risks perpetuating a top-down view of political power. Consequently, the broader societal context found in media discourses and the actual lived experiences of migrants and migrant grassroots organisations are excluded. These actors have vital situated knowledges that actively challenge the state's hegemonic problem representations and that oppose the 'god's trick', but they are not considered in this analysis.

In strict adherence to Haraway's call for 'feminist objectivity', it is imperative that I critically reflect on my own position as the author of this research (Haraway 1988, 583). As a German master's student with no personal experience of migration or asylum, my analysis is inevitably influenced by my own knowledge and perspective. Working within the privileged sphere of academia and belonging to territorially secure, 'unmarked' national citizenship, I am entirely shielded from the physical, legal and emotional violence of the deterrence regime that I critique. Consequently, my deconstruction of the state's hegemonic discourses is an 'outsider' perspective. While this institutional position provides me with the methodological tools to analyse state power and critically interpret the government's rhetoric, it lacks the embodied vulnerability of navigating these exclusionary structures. Therefore, this thesis must be understood strictly as a partial perspective: a critical academic analysis of state narratives that does not attempt to substitute or speak for the authentic lived experiences of migrants themselves.

Furthermore, when utilising a feminist epistemological framework such as Haraway's, this analysis is limited in its ability to fully explore the intersectional dimensions of the debate, particularly with regard to gender. The dominant securitisation discourse does not target an unmarked migrant body, and in parts it genders the 'security threat' as male while often ignoring or victimising migrant women. A more expansive feminist critique would be required to fully unpack how deterrence policies rely on and reproduce these gendered tropes.

Finally, the thesis's reliance on Foucault's understanding of discourse and the WPR approach of Bacchi and Goodwin presents a critical theoretical limitation. Although Foucault's theory of how discourse constructs hegemonic 'truth' is compelling, and the WPR approach effectively

deconstructs how policy documents manufacture the 'problem' of migration, both are inherently text-centric. If these theories are applied in a strict and exclusive way, they create a logical system that is closed off from other ideas. This can hide the real problems these policies cause when they are put into practice. The actual efficacy of the policies, that was highlighted in the discussion, highlights this disconnect between discourse and objective reality.

## 9 Conclusion

The question I aimed to answer in this thesis was: How do dominant discourses within the German political debate construct a hegemonic problematisation of migration that serves to legitimise policies of deterrence?

I argue that due to the application of the 'god trick' the German political authorities, meaning the actors with epistemic power identified in the analysis, get the power to produce the dominant problem representation of migrants posing a risk to the German societal order and to national security. This problem representation becomes hegemonic through the production of the dominant discourses of securitisation, nationalism and 'juridicalism' and the oppression of other discourses that have shaped the debate in the past. This problem representation creates discursive, subjectification and lived effects that show the effects of the dominant discourses and how the system of deterrence is legitimised in Germany. Ultimately, this demonstrates that policies of deterrence are not legitimised through practical efficacy, but through the epistemic power of dominant discourses.

As the analysis and discussion have revealed, the true strength of this hegemonic problematisation lies in its ability to withstand its own structural paradoxes and empirical failures. Even when scientific evidence proves that tightened border controls fail to manage migration meaningfully, the deterrence paradigm remains fiercely defended. This proves that the system is not driven by logistical rationality or economic reality, but by the affective governance of a powerful government. By performing the 'god trick', the state conceals its highly specific, exclusionary political interests as a universal necessity. It reduces migrants to threats, effectively silencing any humanitarian or integrative alternatives. Consequently, the deterrence regime endures because the discourse creates an unquestionable reality. While this thesis has exposed the discursive mechanics that create this illusion, dismantling the legitimacy of deterrence will ultimately require looking beyond state narratives and amplifying

subjugated knowledge like the knowledge and lived experiences of migrants who navigate and resist it.

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# 11 Appendix

## 11.1 Analytic Archive

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## 11.2 Codebook

Code-Categories	Found Codes	Overall Frequency	Frequency of documents with the Codes
Court opinions	Accepts laws	3	2
	Notes on administrative problems/efforts	5	5
	Constitutional issues	3	3
Opinions from Expert Commission	Agrees in principle with federal government	3	1
	Sees humanitarian issues	5	3
	Criticizes the federal government for acting unlawfully	5	2
	Criticizes organizational structures in federal states/ administrative structures	6	2

Measures of the federal government regarding migration			
	Facilitation of access to education for Asylum seekers and Migrants	1	1
	Cut social benefits	1	1
	Repatriations	23	17
	Secondary migration centres / Asylum centres	10	5
	Combating crime	19	11
	Safe countries of origin	28	12
	Restrict access to citizenship	9	6
	Suspended family reunification for subsidiary protection	11	7
	Rejections at borders	20	15
	CEAS	60	23
	Border controls	23	17
Goals of the federal government			
	Restricting migration	29	21
	Prohibit illegal migration / only allow legal migration	29	15
	Integration	20	13
	Organize/Manage Migration	40	21
	Protect federal states from administrative effort / becoming overwhelmed Adminstrative burden	29	17
Language used by the federal government			
	Migrationswende (Migration Turnaround)	27	16
	Emphasizes the rule of law	5	4
	Solidarity	4	2
	Unity	2	2
	Irregular migration	18	12
	Fair	8	4
Ideological Statements from the federal government			
	Germany as a pioneer regarding migration laws	9	9

	Making Germany less attractive for migrants	8	6
	Migration as a problem	14	11
	Asylum seekers are illegal	1	1
	Visibility of migrants as a problem / problem in the cityscape	11	7
	Defending humanitarian situation	13	9
	Country of immigration, in a positive sense	4	3
	Restricting migration as a security measure for Germany	18	12
	Control as necessary / positive	12	9
LINKE (Left party)			
	Citizenship independently from income	3	2
	Accuses the federal government of injustice	5	4
	Against rejections at borders	7	5
	Defending human rights	5	5
	Allegations of the CDU's ties to the AFD	1	1
	Defending the right to asylum	8	5
GRÜNE (Greens)			
	Accuses the CDU of racism	5	3
	Accusations of inhumanity	3	3
	Integration as a key component of migration policy	3	3
	Call for fair procedures	5	4
	Accuses federal government of acting unlawfully	6	4
	Pro European Neighbourhood	7	3
	Against rejection at borders	5	3
	Against border controls	5	4
AFD			
	Asylmigranten (Asylum migrants)	2	2
	CDU is too left	1	1
	Illegal immigration	3	3
	Stirs up hatred against a specific group of female migrants	2	2
	Defending sovereignty	2	1
	Is pro border controls	6	4
	Calls for stricter measures	15	12

SPD and CDU vote with AFD	4	3
All parties vote against AFD	2	2