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The Kremlin Within. Exploring the role of German
politicians in the dissemination of Russian
propagandistic narratives.

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Author:
Tabea Böing

Supervisor:
Dr. Olga Dovbysh
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Author: Tabea Böing

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Abstract:

This thesis focuses on the domestication of international propagandistic narratives through domestic political actors. Taking the German far-right populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) as an example, this thesis analyzes how national actors utilize narratives of international propaganda for their own benefit. This is done in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, attempts by the Russian government to influence public opinion abroad have reached an unprecedented scale. Germany as one of the main financial and military supporters of Ukraine is one of the main targets of these influence operations. As demonstrated in this research, not only actors related to the Russian government contribute to the dissemination and thus the growing acceptance of propagandistic narratives in the German population. Rather, the narratives are utilized by German political actors and thus integrated into their own discourse. This phenomenon is approached taking the example of the AfD. This thesis analyses how the AfD interacts with these narratives for its own purpose. The research is based on domestication theory which assumes that international events, or as in this case, propagandistic narratives, need to be adjusted to the domestic context in order to be deciphered and comprehended by its target audience. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the Facebook communication of the AfD within the first year of the Russian full-scale invasion (2022-2023) is analyzed. The aim is to demonstrate how narratives of Russian state propaganda are domesticated by the AfD.

Table of Contents

1. <u>INTRODUCTION</u>	3
2. <u>DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS: DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA</u>	4
3. <u>CONTEXT: INTERNATIONAL PROPAGANDA AND FOREIGN MEDIA INTERFERENCE IN THE CASE OF GERMANY</u>	7
3.1. TWO INTERNATIONAL PROPAGANDA CHANNELS OF THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT: RT AND SPUTNIK.....	8
3.2. ROLE OF INFLUENCERS AND ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN THE DISSEMINATION OF RUSSIAN STATE PROPAGANDA	13
3.3. TIES BETWEEN POLITICAL ACTORS OF THE FAR RIGHT AND THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT	15
3.4. STRATEGIES OF THE AfD	17
3.4.1. COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES OF THE AfD.....	19
3.4.2. RHETORICAL STRATEGIES	19
3.4.3. THE USE OF (SOCIAL) MEDIA IN THE AfD’S PARTY COMMUNICATION	21
4. <u>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</u>	22
5. <u>RESEARCH DESIGN</u>	25
5.1. METHOD: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS	25
5.2. STEPS OF ANALYSIS	27
5.3. METHODS OF ANALYSIS	28
6. <u>ANALYSIS</u>	31
7. <u>RESULTS AND CONCLUSION</u>	49
<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	51

1. Introduction

Attempts by the Russian government to influence public opinion abroad, predominantly through the spread of disinformation, are increasing. This is not a recent development. Since the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014, there have been increased endeavors to disseminate narratives of Russian state propaganda internationally (Steinberg & Vitter, 2022). However, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022, efforts to shape global public opinion have reached an unprecedented scale (ibd.). Russian state propaganda is not only targeted towards Russian-speaking audiences within Russia and abroad, but also towards foreign audiences. One of the main targets of this propaganda is Germany (ISD, 2024). Given Germany's large share in financial and military aid to Ukraine, it is in the interest of the Russian authorities to undermine public support for Ukraine as well as to push narratives that justify the Russian aggression and make the Russian government appear in a favorable light.

Within Germany, disinformation and propaganda are disseminated through different media outlets, predominantly via social media, pro-Russian media outlets and other pro-Russian actors such as actors of the alternative media (Plattform Wiederaufbau Ukraine, n.d.). Besides those actors and outlets, narratives of Russian state propaganda relating to Russia's war against Ukraine are also increasingly employed and appropriated by political parties and actors, primarily the far left and right of the political spectrum (Siggelkow, 2024).

One party that stands out is the right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). The AfD was known for its strong ties to the Russian government in the past. The party also has called for rapprochement with Russia already shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Schroeder & Weßels, 2023). In this context, the AfD has repeatedly reproduced and appropriated narratives of Russian state propaganda (Die Zeit, 2023). Through this appropriation, the propagandistic narratives become a double threat. This is because they are not only employed by foreign actors to influence public opinion abroad. Rather, they are also reproduced by domestic actors in the target country in the pursuit of their own goals. As a result, narratives that could previously be attributed to the Russian state leadership become entrenched in domestic social and political discourse. Against the backdrop of rising approval ratings for the AfD, this development is problematic, as it potentially impacts long-term support for Ukraine as well as exacerbating societal tensions and divisions.

Departing from this problem, the question of how the AfD is utilizing and reproducing narratives of Russian state propaganda will be explored. The underlying assumption is that the AfD is not just an actor within the Russian government's strategy to influence public opinion in Germany. Rather, it is assumed that the party is using the propagandistic narratives for its own purpose. Here, the case of the AfD is considered exemplary for domestic engagement with foreign propaganda. Thus, the overarching research question of this thesis investigates how local political actors utilize foreign propaganda for their own benefit. Using domestication theory, which addresses the adaptation of international news to a domestic audience, this thesis analyses how international propaganda is domesticated to a national audience (Clausen, 2004). The analysis is based on Facebook posts published by the AfD in the first year after the invasion. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), it is assessed how the narratives are domesticated to the domestic German context. Particular emphasis is placed on how the narratives are tied into the prevailing local discourses of that time. In addition, it is analyzed which rhetoric and linguistic strategies are used in the domestication process.

This thesis is structured as follows: considering the central topic of the thesis, definitions of the core concepts that form the conceptual basis of the subsequent argumentation, those being disinformation and propaganda, are provided. In order to contextualize the thematic focus, the functioning of international propaganda generally and in the German context, will be examined in the following. In addition, contextual information on the AfD is provided, taking into account the AfD's connections to Russia and its communication strategy. This information forms the contextual basis for the subsequent analysis. The thesis concludes with the presentation of the results and concluding remarks.

2. Definition of key concepts: Disinformation and Propaganda

When addressing issues of political interference, two concepts are frequently employed, often in an interchangeable manner: disinformation and propaganda. Given that the analytical focus of this thesis will be on the appropriation of propagandistic narratives, it is necessary to define the concept of propaganda to provide the conceptual basis for the analysis. As both concepts are closely related and even synonymously used by some authors, both concepts will be defined for the provision of clarity and to rule out potential misunderstandings (Tolz & Hutchings, 2023).

Schünemann (2022) defines disinformation as information that is misleading by nature and designed to irritate and deceive its addressees. More profound approaches to understanding disinformation also consider the aspect of malign intentionality behind the dissemination and its false (and not merely misleading) nature (McKay & Tenove, 2021). Intentionality and the specific objective of causing uncertainty in order to amplify societal divisions constitute the distinguishing factor between disinformation and other forms of misleading information such as misinformation, that is, the unintentional dissemination of false information (Ziemer et al., 2024).

While the definitions provided by the aforementioned authors do not elaborate on the intended recipients of disinformation, Kupiecki et al. (2025) assert that disinformation is primarily directed toward audiences residing abroad. In this context, the strategic use of disinformation as a means of pursuing national interests and achieving strategic advantages is acknowledged. This advantage should be reached by strategically confusing and misleading of the opponent (Kupiecki et al, 2025). Besides that, the underlying intention in the dissemination of disinformation is the improvement of one's own strategic position as well as increased influence, power, and control over political and societal processes in the target country (Kupiecki et al, 2025). Furthermore, particularly the large-scale dissemination of disinformation is driven by a deliberate intent to erode epistemic functions within society, meaning the erosion of generally recognized truth convictions. This development is problematic, as it impairs and limits the ability of large parts of the population to form an independent opinion on the basis of credible and truthful information (Kupiecki et al, 2025). Other notions on the societal impact exceed the mere incitement of uncertainty and confusion among the recipients of disinformation. Rather, it is argued that disinformation actors aim to instigate a shift in opinion and behavior that aligns with their own interests. As posited by Ziemer et al. (2024), the desired consequences encompass e.g. a shift in political opinion, which in turn causes a change in voting behavior.

These intentions and strategies employed by disinformation actors demonstrate the threats disinformation causes to democratic systems. Next to the influence on public opinion and voting behavior, the democratic order takes harm as disinformation contributes to the coarsening of societal discourse and the systematic exclusion or demonization of dissenting voices (McKay & Tenove, 2021). More extensive notions go even further, hinting to the negative impact of international cooperation that disinformation causes on both individual and interstate levels

(Kupiecki et al, 2025). Exemplary for this threat are Russian disinformation campaigns in different African countries aiming to sow anti-Western sentiments and hinder the multilateral influence of Western countries (Ehl & Ghaedi, 2025).

Propaganda, on the other hand, is defined as “active way of using information with the intent of communicating one’s intentions, hiding them, or influencing the perception of partners or opponents” (Kupiecki et al, 2025, 42). Other approaches focusing on the objectives of propaganda define it as method of psychological influence that aims to elicit certain behaviors and ways of thinking in the target population that align with the interests of the propagandists (Amanatullah et al, 2023). This behavioral shift is brought about by the specific adjustment of propagandistic narratives to the needs, values and emotions relevant in the target population (Kupiecki et al, 2025). Other scholars focusing on propaganda's effectiveness and impact go into greater depth here. They argue that propaganda functions by linking the desired results to the target group's existing attitudes, beliefs, symbols, and emotions. By making subtle suggestions that align with the interests of those who created it, a change in thinking is brought about (Amanatullah et al, 2023). In addition to views and emotions, other authors also point to the relevance of social trends, myths, and ideologies, to which propagandistic narratives must be adapted in order to be accepted by their target audience (Arnold, 2003).

However, as other approaches to the effectiveness of propaganda note, adaptations to local contexts such as those mentioned above are not sufficient for propaganda to be successfully accepted. Accordingly, propagandistic narratives must be repeated constantly in order to bring about a lasting change in opinion and behavior (Kupiecki et al, 2025). The desired mode of action behind this effect is what Kupiecki et al (2025) coin as “mental laziness”, meaning the impaired tendency to verify questionable information in light of their constant exposure (47).

Generally, propaganda is strongly aligned with the political and ideological context of the target country and aims for the establishment and manifestation of political power structures (Arnold, 2003). According to Arnold, propaganda is “therefore about presenting comprehensive claims that are to be enforced by shaping a certain ideological system in public” (Arnold, 2003, 73). Thus, the propagandists have no interest in a pluralist society or a diverse societal discourse. Instead, a universal version of the alleged truth should be spread within society. Compromises are not desired or are only made for tactical reasons (Arnold, 2003). This claim for alleged

“universal truth” contributes to the effectiveness of propaganda, as any divergence in opinion or disagreement is ruled out or at least made increasingly more difficult (Arnold, 2003, 76).

As a consequence, the information value of the disseminated narratives is of secondary relevance at best. Instead, the dissemination of a central political ideology is a central goal (Arnold, 2003). A similar perspective is held by Jowett and O’Donnell (2015) who link propaganda to behavior and opinion formation rather than to ideology. According to their understanding, propaganda is a targeted and systematic attempt to change the perception and behavior of a target group in a way that it corresponds to the intentions of the propagandists.

As the definitions of both concepts show, they exhibit fundamental differences regarding their aims and utilized communication strategies. While the concepts of disinformation and propaganda overlap in some respects and are utilized in similar contexts and manners (e.g., by state-level actors and with the intention to advance national interests and ideologies), they comprise different strategies and hence cannot be used synonymously. Unlike disinformation, propaganda is not necessarily disseminated with malicious intent and does not only rely on false or misleading information. While disinformation is a strategic tool of propaganda, the mechanisms of the latter exceed the dissemination of false content. Besides, instead of solely aiming for confusion and distrust among the target audience, it is the overarching goal of propaganda to persuade its audience and cause a shift of opinion, behavior and attitudes (Alieva et al, 2024).

Taking these notions into consideration, in the context of this research, international propaganda is defined as the deliberate attempts to influence populations outside of national borders and spheres of political influence of national regimes. Corresponding to the definitions above, the aim is to bring about a change in opinion and perception, and, ultimately, a change in behavior. This change aligns with the interests of the propagandists. Accordingly, the narratives are adapted to the cultural and social context of the target group.

3. Context: International propaganda and foreign media interference in the case of Germany

As the research question suggests, the utilization of foreign propagandistic narratives is a strategic method of domestic actors to attain their own goals and purposes. As argued in the following, the AfD deliberately engages with the narratives for its own benefit. However, the

AfD is not the only party whose interests are of relevance here. As the research of Belton et al (2023) has shown, the Russian government has also strategically fostered ties to the party as part of its strategy of societal and political destabilization in Germany. In order to provide a nuanced assessment of the intentions and strategies of the AfD in the dissemination of narratives of Russian state propaganda, it is essential to contextualize the ties between the Russian government and the AfD. For the same purpose, the communication strategy of the AfD will be assessed as well.

Besides, the AfD is only one actor with (past) ties to the Russian government that contributes to the dissemination of Russian state propaganda narratives within Germany. As mentioned in the introduction, narratives of Russian state propaganda are also disseminated by other media actors, such as actors of the alternative media. To assess the situation and to contextualize the role of the AfD within it, these actors as well as their roles, interests and intentions will be considered. Therefore, in the following, the current and past key actors as well as their strategies, roles and intentions will be examined in a nuanced manner. Emphasis will be placed on Russian foreign media channels and actors of the German alternative media sphere.

3.1. Two international propaganda channels of the Russian government: RT and Sputnik

Especially in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine since 2022, propaganda is increasingly directed against international audiences and thus potentially affecting and shaping public opinion abroad (Steinberg & Vitter, 2022). As acknowledged by Yang et al (2024), different tools and actors are utilized for the dissemination of propaganda, such as online trolls, spies, and hackers. Russian international propaganda is disseminated through various outlets, such as social media accounts and Telegram channels. However, Russian state-funded news media outlets (most prominently, RT and Sputnik) targeted towards international audiences play an overarching role in influencing target populations outside of Russia. To illustrate the impact of these outlets, Yang et al (2024) reference prior research on the subject. They note that negative news coverage of Ukraine, for example, negatively affects the perception of the Ukrainian government, even when RT is identified as the source (Yang et al. 2024).

As the European Parliament passed a ban on both RT and Sputnik as parts of their initial sanctions package after Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, their influence has

decreased significantly throughout the member states of the European Union (EU) (ISD, 2024). It has also been noted that media outlets as RT and Sputnik only constitute a small part of Russian influence operations and can thus only exert influence to a limited extent (Elsawah & Howard, 2020). Despite of these factors, the example brought forward above emphasizes the effectiveness of the media outlets and their strategies to influence public opinion. Besides, with regard to the analysis, the example of RT and Sputnik provides context on how international propaganda can be framed as legitimate and credible information that is perceived as relevant to a domestic audience. Therefore, it makes sense to examine the strategies used in the context of this research, i.e., propaganda aimed at an international audience.

Contextual information: RT and Sputnik

The Russian foreign media outlet RT was founded in the year 2005 under the name “Russia Today”. The aim of its foundation was to create a positive image of Russia abroad and to break the alleged Western hegemony in the foreign-directed media sphere (Kuznetsova, 2018). The media channel which is fully funded by the Russian government has greatly expanded its media presence in the years of its existence and now broadcasts its program in six different languages. Besides of this expansion, the outlet has also experienced a shift in its thematic outlook. Rather than promoting Russian language and culture, the focus is nowadays on political and societal issues within the target countries (Hellman, 2024).

The Russian news agency Sputnik, a subsidiary of the Russian state media outlet “Rossiya Segodnya” was founded in 2014 and differs from RT primarily in its thematic outlook and the rhetorical strategies employed. In contrast to RT, the news coverage on Sputnik is both more nuanced and more subtle in tone and content. Besides, it is broadcasting in over thirty languages, thus addressing a broader audience (Yang et al, 2024).

In light of their extensive reach, particularly at the outset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it will be explored how these platforms have succeeded in disseminating propagandistic narratives. As noted in the previous chapter, for propaganda to be accepted within its target audience, it must be embedded into its societal narratives and values (Hutchings et al, 2024). However, the strategies of these media outlets are far more complex and exceed the mere adaptation to their target audience. As shown in the following, the central strategies employed can be separated into three categories: strategies for adaptation to the local media sphere and for hiding the

connection to the Russian state; linguistic and rhetoric strategies; and strategies aimed at the mobilization of the audience.

Strategy 1: “Hiding the traces and fitting in”

Sputnik and RT adapt their content to its target group and consider locally prevailing narratives and understandings in their coverage (Hutchings et al, 2024). This adaptation does by far exceed the mere adjustment of employed narratives to local realities. Rather, RT is mimicking the rhetoric and thematic outlook of local media, making it appear as a legitimate part of the domestic media rather than an international news media outlet funded by the Russian government (Hellman, 2024). As a consequence, the coverage appears to the audience like an insider perspective that shows clear comprehension of the news event and its context (Hellman, 2024). This makes RT and Sputnik appear as credible alternatives to established domestic media (Henriksen et al, 2024). Besides hiding their connection to the Russian government, this strategy allows those media outlets to present propagandistic narratives and tendentious views that deviate from the general media discourse without risking losing their credibility (Moore & Colley, 2024). The underlying intention behind this strategy is explained by Moore and Colley as follows, taking RT’s activities in the United States as an example: “Propaganda works best when the intent of the propaganda is hidden. The more successful RT impersonates US news sources, the less it looks like Russian propaganda” (Moore & Colley, 2024, 1323).

In addition, Russian international state media such as RT and Sputnik serve an ideological and programmatic niche in the media landscape. Within this niche, populist, anti-elitist, and authoritarian ideologies are reproduced and presented as a legitimate part of social discourse (Hutchings et al, 2024). As a consequence, both media outlets could increase their influence particularly within networks of the far right, but also within demographics that are familiar with established news media as well (Hutchings et al, 2024). Especially networks of the far right take on an overarching role in the dissemination of propagandistic narratives. In this regard, it is pointed out by Hutchings et al (2024) that a systematic connection of Russian international news media outlets with both networks of the far right and so-called “alternative media” is sought to increase the reach of the disseminated narratives. This notion is also supported by other approaches who consider RT to be a tool to attract multipliers of Russian propagandistic narratives rather than a means to disseminate said narratives itself. It is argued that outlets like RT pursue the overarching aim to disseminate Russian propagandistic narratives via the sought

networks and ultimately cause a governmental shift in the targeted countries (Henriksen et al, 2024). A supporting assumption is made by Hutchings et al (2024) who claims that “the overriding function of RT News [...] is not the reporting of news – even from an alternative perspective – but the creation, dissemination, and bolstering of particular identities, for which bulletins simply serve as a vessel. Identities come first; news is grafted on” (99).

Strategy 2: “Tweaking the truth and making it credible”

The structural connections of the news media outlet are an important, but not the only factor of their influence. Another important aspect of their effectiveness is the systematic use of rhetorical and narrative strategies. Central to this is the appropriation of a populist framing, whereby the “ordinary people” is juxtaposed with an alleged “corrupt elite”. In this framing, RT portrays itself as an “underdog” and representative of its audience that allows for an alleged counter voice that is not represented through the established media (Hutchings et al, 2024). Through this strategy, an audience that is frustrated with or has lost trust in the established media is addressed. At the same time, underlying intention of spreading Russian state propagandistic narratives and the mobilization of its audience are concealed. However, while presenting as a representative of its audience, RT and its commentators rather represent the right-wing media sphere and thus, an alternative elite (Hutchings et al, 2024). This tactic of concealment aligns with the overall approach of RT to hide its own position and intentions in order to strengthen the impression of acting as a neutral or investigative medium.

Next to the instrumentalization of populist rhetoric strategies, RT also applies other rhetoric and narrative strategies to divert any arising criticism and to discredit political opponents. News coverage by RT frequently combines a seemingly factual news coverage with humorous elements. This increases the memorability of the addressed issues and viewpoints. Through suggestive content and the systematic omission of information in combination with humorous elements such as irony or sarcasm, a predetermined conclusion on the side of the audience is provoked (Hutchings et al, 2024). Similarly, humor is frequently used to discredit political opponents, e.g. by portraying representatives of western governments as incompetent and not suited for their position (Henriksen et al, 2024; Hellman, 2024).

As a consequence, news is rarely factual, but rather very emotional in tone. This emotional charging is also a conscious tool used to facilitate the internalization of conveyed information.

As noted by Hutchings et al (2024), emotions are remembered more strongly than actual facts, with the audience “remembering how they felt about what they heard and saw while forgetting about the specific details” (Hutchings et al, 2024, 191).

Strategy 3: “Content flexibility”

Next to the systematic use of populist and rhetoric strategies, the effectiveness of international propaganda can also be explained through strategies concerning the content and its framing. The news coverage of Russian international state media maintains a high level of ideological flexibility with regard to its content. This means that both critical arguments of the political left and right are utilized to adapt narratives to different political camps, thus reaching a broader potential audience (Hellman, 2024). Besides this ideological flexibility, a strategy of deliberate confusion is pursued. In the news coverage of RT and Sputnik, concepts and termini are frequently used in an incoherent manner, thus potentially confusing the audience (Hellman, 2024). Similarly, controversial views are presented alongside less controversial ones, which makes it difficult to interpret the information and form an opinion while also impeding the detection of disinformation (Hellman, 2024).

Subsequently, the credibility of issues brought forward is increased through the use of alleged insiders and experts, such as politicians, citizens or activists. Referring to the US-American context, Hellman (2024) states that experts and guests are strategically employed to portray the US government as untrustworthy and incompetent. Building up on this argument, alleged experts are employed with the aim to strengthen arguments and communicated positions and refute differentiated perspectives and criticisms.

As this chapter has shown, international state media outlets funded by the Russian government utilize different strategies to increase their credibility and persuasiveness, discredit political opponents, and to spread their narratives within their audiences and beyond. The discussed strategies are neither exhaustive, nor can inferences be made from those examples to the general mode of action of international propaganda. Despite of this, the examples discussed allow to offer an insight into the mode of action and effectiveness of international propaganda, with particular emphasis on the Russian case.

3.2.Role of influencers and alternative media in the dissemination of Russian state propaganda

In the given context, international propaganda is not just disseminated by Russian state media outlets such as RT and Sputnik, but also through other media actors such as pro-Russian social media influencers and alternative media. According to the definition by Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich (2019), alternative media considers itself a corrective to the general social discourse and dominant mainstream media within a given system. Thus, media are considered alternative media if they position themselves towards the mainstream or set themselves apart from it both institutionally and in terms of content. Departing from this definition, this means that alternative media cannot be considered as antagonistic or malicious per se, especially since alternative media exhibit a strong heterogeneity in terms of quality, content, and ideology. However, Beseler and Toepfl (2024) note that alternative media platforms are often established or utilized by radical and antidemocratic actors and are thereby actively contributing to the weakening of democracy. In this context it is also acknowledged by Beseler and Toepfl (2024) that due to overlaps in terms of content and format, no clear distinction can be drawn between political influencers and their platforms and alternative media. Thus, for its theoretical understanding, this research will attribute social media influencers and bloggers to the alternative media sphere.

In the German-speaking area, the most highly frequented alternative media outlets are primarily established by former journalists of established media outlets, as in the cases of the three most popular alternative media outlets “Tichys Einblick”, “Reitschuster” or “Achse des Guten”. The twenty most popular German-language alternative media outlets reach between 5,4 million and around 250.000 visitors each month on all their platforms combined (Beseler & Toepfl, 2024).

Although regular visitors to alternative media platforms only make up around 2-4% of the total German population, up to 17% of it has already come into contact with alternative media content (Klawier, 2024). Especially in the course of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, these media formats and platforms have increased in popularity and reach. This increase has not only occurred within Germany, but also in other European countries (Beseler & Toepfl, 2024). The phenomenon is reinforced through the EU-wide ban of RT and Sputnik. Through the ban, a vacuum in the information sphere has opened up that is filled by those media formats (Steinberg & Vitter, 2022). This becomes apparent in the example of the pro-Russian blogger Alina Lipp whose channel on the messaging platform Telegram has recorded an increase of followers from 2.000 (14.02.2022) to more than 184.000 (02.11.2022) in the first year of the

full-scale invasion. (Steinberg & Vitter, 2022). Lipp's media format is emblematic of the growing number of alternative platforms and actors disseminating pro-Kremlin content and narratives.

Despite of this development, it is important to note that alternative media as a media format do not primarily serve the dissemination of Russian state propaganda or conspirative content. Rather, the intentions and viewpoints of the actors are diverse. Some actors also adopt critical attitudes toward the Russian regime (Beseler & Heidsiek, 2024). However, Beseler and Toepfl's (2024) research indicates that some alternative media actors exhibit strong ties to the Russian government in organizational, media, and personal regards.

Mode of action and proximity to the Russian government

Alternative media platforms are both used for the reproduction of Russian state propaganda and the dissemination of content from Russian state media outlets such as RT DE (Steinberg & Vitter, 2022). Similarly, one- and double-sided content partnerships are established between German alternative media and the aforementioned Russian state media, which are limited to the sharing and forwarding of posts via messenger apps such as Telegram (Beseler & Toepfl, 2024). In some cases, the connection of alternative media actors and actors of the Russian state exceeds this form of partnership. As noted by Beseler and Toepfl, ties exist between some actors of the alternative media and the Russian political elite, which are in some cases of organizational, in some others of financial or personal nature. To provide an example, some German alternative media actors have repeatedly cooperated with Russian state-affiliated institutions and gained financial benefits from these cooperations in some cases (Beseler & Toepfl, 2024). For instance, the aforementioned Alina Lipp, a key figure of the pro-Russian alternative media, has repeatedly met with the Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Maria Zakharova (Marinov & Bau, 2022). Similarly, cases of direct exchange of media content between Russian state media and German alternative media have been documented. To stay with the example of Alina Lipp, she has provenly sold media content showing her in her role as self-proclaimed war correspondent in occupied territories in Eastern Ukraine to Russian state media (Luyken, 2023; Beseler & Toepfl, 2024).

There are also personnel links between, for example, RT and German alternative media, and reported cases of RT actors who switched to the editorial office of German alternative media

after the EU-wide ban of RT (Steinberg & Vitter, 2022). Despite of these partially obvious financial ties, no clear inferences can be drawn to the motives and intentions of these media actors. As Beseler and Toepfl note, there are some ideological intersections between the Russian government and German media outlets, suggesting dissemination based on personal conviction. Notwithstanding the personal interests and motivations of alternative media actors, alternative media constitute a central platform for the dissemination of international propaganda.

3.3. Ties between political actors of the far right and the Russian government

Besides of the dissemination of international propaganda through international news media outlets and alternative media, Russian political actors attempt to influence public opinion abroad through connections to political actors in the target country (Fisher, 2021). As noted by Fisher (2021), local political elites abroad are used to disseminate pro-Russian propagandistic narratives on a large scale and to establish them within societal discourse. Within the dissemination of international propaganda, political actors constitute a significant pillar, as they have the potential to reach a bigger audience as of their societal function and visibility. Additionally, compared to international propaganda platforms, these actors have a higher profile and credibility, and are correspondingly more effective in the dissemination of the narratives (Fisher, 2021). At the same time, it is noted by Fisher (2021) that broad parts of the population have no determined preferences and opinions about international issues and are thus highly reliant on political statements and assessments. Accordingly, political actors are more likely to influence domestic audiences' attitudes, thereby playing an important role in shaping opinions on international matters (Fisher, 2021).

The Russian government has utilized this knowledge already before 2022 to increase its political influence abroad and has approached foreign political actors for this purpose. This rapprochement has taken place via international conferences financed or initiated by the Russian government, appearances of Western political actors in the Russian state media, or through direct financial support (Fisher, 2021). At the center of these attempts are particularly parties of the far left and right spectrum, as those party families exhibit ideological and intellectual parallels in areas such as religion, conservatism, tradition and nation state (Laruelle et al, 2015). Moreover, Snegovaya (2022) assigns especially parties of the far-right spectrum a strong ideological and intellectual fascination with Putin's Russia, which makes these parties

particularly susceptible to the rapprochement strategies. As these ideological intersections are also partially shared by the electorate of those parties, the strategy of the Russian government also aims for the influence of this group.

The ties between parties of the far right and the Russian government as well as its intentions and strategies have been extensively studied (Innes et al, 2021; Vladimirov et al, 2024; ISD, 2024). However, arguments that only consider the Russian government's strategies and intentions and ignore the intentions of the targeted parties are criticized as one-sided (Wondreys, 2025). These arguments risk drawing erroneous conclusions about the intentions of far-right parties and deprive them of agency. In this regard, it is noted that intersections between agendas and ideological orientations of the Russian government and parties of the far right can be observed. However, these intersections cannot be attributed to the influence of the Russian state, but rather to ideological compliance (Snegovaya, 2022). Other approaches support this thesis and view the deliberate reproduction of positions as a deliberate strategy driven by specific financial or political goals (Wondreys, 2025). Thus, the deliberate reproduction of these positions is a strategy that is consciously employed, driven by the pursuit of own objectives. An example of this is the implementation of these positions into the own political agenda by portraying Russia as a supposedly natural alliance based on ideological parallels (Wondreys, 2025). Thus, the relations are not considered as cases of direct control of the parties through the Russian government or of influence characterized by one-sided interests, but rather as a "marriage of convenience" (Wondreys, 2025).

This argumentation is also supported by other approaches that consider the strategies of far-right parties to be highly dependent on societal and political circumstances. Accordingly, this makes a distancing of these parties from pro-Russian positions under a changing political climate likely (Snegovaya, 2022). Further evidence for this assumption is the high degree of heterogeneity within right-wing parties in Europe. For example, the right-wing party in Finland (Finns Party) exhibits positions highly critical of Russia and supportive of Ukraine, which is also likely attributed to strategic reasons (Wondreys, 2025). This shows that despite of ideological intersections and sympathies with the Russian regime, the parties pursue their own strategies in their positioning towards Russia and can by no means be considered as sole "puppets of the Kremlin".

3.4.Strategies of the AfD

Given Germany's role in the financial and military support of Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion, the Russian government has massively attempted to influence public opinion and German policymaking through the dissemination of propaganda, the employment of disinformation campaigns, and even the development of a strategy to influence the political landscape in Germany (ISD, 2024). This influence was also exerted by fostering ties with politicians of the most prominent far-right party in Germany, the Alternative für Deutschland ("Alternative for Germany" or AfD) (Heil et al, 2024).

The AfD was founded in 2013 as a response to Angela Merkel's decision on the economic bailout of Greece during the Great Recession (Küppers, 2024). While the party was initially centered around euroscepticism, its central topics soon shifted towards issues such as migration, with the party adopting an increasingly radical stance (Küppers, 2024). As of the time writing, the AfD is the most influential party of the far-right spectrum in Germany and politically represented on both regional and federal level. It has successfully monopolized the previously highly fragmented support for older far right parties (Arzheimer, 2023). The AfD is characterized by its pronounced far-right populist ideology. According to Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), populism is a thin ideology based on the separation of society into two antagonistic groups: the "pure people" and the "corrupt elites" (6). Furthermore, they claim that politics should reflect the "general will" of the people (ibid.). This ideology is reflected in the party's rhetoric, which blames "others," such as political elites, interest groups, and the EU, for societal problems (Lemke, 2020). While these dependencies are frequently addressed, concrete, workable alternatives are not developed.

Already since its foundation, the AfD has exhibited a close ideological proximity to the Russian government, which manifested both in the endorsement of Russia-friendly positions by individual politicians. For example, the party has opposed sanctioning Russia after its annexation of Crimea. Also, ties between politicians of the AfD and the Russian government have been actively fostered (Arzheimer, 2023; Schroeder & Weßels, 2023, 54). For example, individual politicians of the AfD have repeatedly attended events and followed invitations of the Russian government, such as for the purpose of sham election observations (Freytag von Loringhoven, 2024). Similarly, especially before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, politicians of the AfD have made a frequent appearance on Russian state media, posing as

established and high-level representatives of the German state (Schroeder & Weßels, 2023). In some cases, politicians have even disseminated propaganda on pro-Russian propaganda platforms for personal financial benefit (Arzheimer, 2024).

While some of these connections are driven by personal and economic interests, it would be erroneous to assume them to be purely motivated by personal gains. While personal interest is likely to play a role here, the connections are also reflective of the broader party line (Schroeder & Weßels, 2023). In this regard it is noted by Decker (2021) that the AfD's association with the Russian government is primarily driven by ideological agreement. Even amid Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, AfD has maintained its pro-Russian stance. While the party has tentatively condemned the war, it has relativized the Russian invasion by shifting the blame onto the German government. The party claims that responsibility for the war cannot be clearly attributed to Russia and has called for peace negotiations since the beginning of the invasion (Schroeder & Weßels, 2023). Similarly, the AfD has already in the beginning of the war called for the resumption of energy and trade relations with Russia, condemned the imposed sanctions and called for the reactivation of the Nord Stream gas pipelines (Arzheimer, 2024).

These advances are the reflection of a deliberate strategy. This is true of the overall party positioning vis-à-vis Russia. By calling for peace negotiations, the AfD could present as a proclaimed peace party, thereby attracting voters who share these attitudes (Schroeder & Weßels, 2023). Similarly, the call for resumption of energy relations reflects the societal climate of the time and is tied to social and political issues prevalent at that time, such as energy supply in times of the energy crisis. As openly admitted by the AfD, this is the reason why these issues were declared core issues in the summer of 2022 (Arzheimer, 2023).

The pro-Kremlin stance of the AfD has exceeded the mere relativization of the war and calls for normalizations of trade and energy relations. In its communication, the AfD has repeatedly utilized narratives that exhibit strong similarities to those propagated by the Russian government, such as claims relating to alleged German war involvement and the alleged harmfulness of sanctions for the German population.

3.4.1. Communicative strategies of the AfD

A close examination of the communicative strategies employed by the AfD is necessary to develop a profound understanding of the intentions and manner in which it interacts with Russian propagandistic narratives. This also allows to locate the AfD's engagement with Russian state propaganda within its broader communication strategy. Considering the aim of this research, emphasis is put on their social media communication.

The AfD's communication strategy is based on four central objectives. Besides the delegitimization of established media and the development of its own, party-affiliated media channels, the AfD is aiming for the creation of a right-wing populist parallel society and an extreme polarization of public discourse (Deutschlandfunk, 2024). This strategy reflects the party's understanding of language and communication as central tools of power and influence. Hillje (2021) notes in this regard that the AfD does not primarily seek to expand its power through parliamentary means, but through influencing the public discourse. As derived from the central objectives of the AfD, its communication strategies can be divided into two categories: institutional strategies, i.e. those relating to the establishment and use of communicative parallel structures, and linguistic as well as rhetoric strategies. The following will examine both categories. Emphasis is placed on the party's linguistic strategies and, considering the objective of this research, political communication via social media.

3.4.2. Rhetorical strategies

As noted before, the AfD is a right-wing populist party. This ideological alignment highly impacts its communication. Central to it are populist patterns of thought such as the invocation of a supposedly insurmountable division between the so-called "true people" and the supposed "elites". The AfD uses this invocation to present itself as the sole genuine representative of the German people (Hillje, 2021). Tied into this separation and the evocation of the "elites" as a central enemy image, the AfD attempts to delegitimize critical voices such as journalists, independent media and other parties as mouthpieces of the supposed "elite". At the same time, the party is creating a persuasive foundation for its own media outlets. Through the employment of the aforementioned "us-vs-them dichotomy", the AfD also creates a sense of community and group identity that serves to mobilize supporters and potential voters (Deutschlandfunk, 2024).

Another aim of this strategy is the polarization of public discourse. Besides of the repeated invocation of the aforementioned dichotomy, this strategy relies on the purposeful distortion of facts and the dissemination of untruths, the simplification of complex issues as well as the emotional charging of societally relevant matters. An important tool in the polarization of public discourse is controlled provocation. The AfD aims to garner the attention of the public media by breaking linguistic taboos or making controversial or extreme demands. Through this strategy, the party also generates a social and political backlash to effectively disseminate its messages within the population and polarize societal discourse (Deutschlandfunk, 2024). In addition to increasing visibility and influence, this strategy aims to shift the boundaries of what can be said and to establish new, often controversial, terms. Thus, the AfD can shift the social and political conception of normality and political urgency according to its own interests (Hillje, 2021).

Another central strategy is the re- and decontextualization of certain issues. The core topics of the AfD such as a strong rejection of migration and Islam, are strategically connected to other political and societal topics considered relevant at a given point (Deutschlandfunk, 2024). Correspondingly, the central topics of the AfD gain visibility and are perceived as relevant. The AfD also repeatedly reinterprets terms or attaches new meaning to them. Especially for concepts that are perceived as relevant in the societal and political discourse, conceptual reinterpretations are made. This means that previously neutrally connotated terms are replaced by negatively connotated terms in the party discourse. For example, refugees are framed as “invaders”, or critical news coverage as “censorship” (Hillje, 2021). Through this connotational shift, the AfD aims to alter the public perception on these issues and ultimately cause a change in the political discourse (Deutschlandfunk, 2024).

In order to establish and normalize its positions within society, the AfD practices a strategy of self-trivialization, meaning the presentation as moderate and citizen-oriented party (Deutschlandfunk, 2024). In addition, the AfD is creating a kind of “hero myth” around itself, which becomes particularly prevalent in its online communication. Based on the enemy images and negative future scenarios allegedly caused by an incompetent political leadership invoked by the AfD, the party presents itself as a supposed alternative and hints to alleged solutions to the problems it has drawn up. According to Hillje (2021), this strategy of image cultivation and drawing of positive future scenarios is essential for the success of the mobilization efforts of

the AfD. This also illustrates the central role of enemy images in the AfD's communication strategy.

3.4.3. The use of (social) media in the AfD's party communication

As mentioned, the AfD heavily relies on the establishment of own media channels and formats in its party communication. The central objective of this strategy is to replace the independent media and, consequently, the information channels of its electorate rather than to complement them (Hillje, 2021). Besides of controlling its party communication, the AfD aims to eliminate the free press as a critical authority altogether and thus exert further control over its public perception. As part of this strategy, the AfD has developed its own online magazine, a podcast as well as a news-like program broadcasted on its Youtube channel. However, a central role in its communication takes on social media, through which the AfD disseminates its messages and has managed to build its own network of followers (Deutschlandfunk, 2024). Next to the official party accounts of the AfD, its core messages are also representatively shared via the accounts of members of parliament and local politicians (Deutschlandfunk, 2024).

Concerning its social media presence, the AfD has the broadest outreach on social media, also compared to other parties (Hillje, 2021). Neither the party's emphasis on social media communication nor its comparatively high popularity and reach are coincidental. It is rather the case that populist communication exhibits a strong affinity to social media. This affinity is related to the structure of social media which favors content that can be quickly captured and consumed. Thus, social media are well suited as a platform for simplified and often image-based statements typical to populist communication. In relation to the social media communication of the AfD, Hillje (2021) notes that repeated reference is made to core topics of the party which are combined with a complementing slogan or image. Thus, in line with the communication strategy outlined before, connections between the core topics of the party and societal issues are made, even if there is no factual connection between these topics.

Furthermore, the AfD utilizes the emphasis on emotions as well as the algorithmic functions of social media. Heyen (2020) notices in this regard that emotions take on a central role in both the perception and interpretation of shared content as well as used interaction with said content. In addition, the AfD's strategy of deliberately charging topics with emotion works particularly well on social media, as posts invoking strong emotions in users often lead to higher user

engagement, and accordingly, to a higher distribution and visibility of the posts (Hillje, 2021). Additionally, populist communication strategies that invoke a dichotomy between "the people" and "the elites" tend to be effective on social media. For example, on platforms such as Facebook, the AfD attempts to create a kind of "virtual people" by evoking a sense of belonging, e.g. by directly addressing its followers rather than communicating neutrally (Hillje, 2021). Given the core characteristics of social media such as the ability to form direct networks and connections with other groups of people, emphasis on immediacy and its social character, the AfD's strategy works particularly well on social media. Parts of its success can also be attributed to its pioneering role in the field of social media. In many instances, it was the first party in the party landscape to fully recognize the potential of social media as a tool for party communication and voter mobilization and has hence attributed more resources to its social media communication (Hillje, 2021).

As mentioned before, the AfD is active on different social networks such as Facebook, X, Instagram or TikTok. However, Facebook is the central communication medium of the party. This is also noted by Hillje (2021), who claims that the AfD has a significantly higher reach than other similarly sized parties, and Facebook has become its most important medium (Hillje, 2021).

4. Theoretical framework

As shown in the preceding chapter, close ideological, financial and political relations between politicians of the AfD and the Russian government can be observed. Particularly in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the AfD has taken a defensive stance towards Russia and has even adopted propagandistic narratives that were also disseminated by the Russian government and Russian state media. Considering that this behavior is the reflection of conscious ideological and strategic deliberations, it is the aim to show how German politicians of the AfD reframe and engage with Russian propagandistic narratives and adapt them to the national context. This will be investigated in the following. As a theoretical framework for this research, domestication theory will be utilized.

Originating from the field of media studies, domestication theory departs from the assumption that as a consequence of globalization, audiences are confronted with an increased influx of international news. This news has to be mediated to a given audience, i.e. adapted to the local culture and prevailing understandings (Clausen, 2004). The need for this mediation process that

is coined as “domestication” derives from cultural and ideological differences. As broadcasted news events are increasingly taking place in a cultural and political context different from the receiving audience, they need to be framed in a way both comprehensible to said audience and compatible with the dominant culture and ideology (Clausen, 2004). Next to comprehension, domestication also fulfils a protective role here, as a country’s cultural identity could potentially be endangered through the inflow of foreign information (Clausen, 2004). While Clausen (2004) considers the protective function of domestication primarily in regard to cultural identity, other approaches go further and acknowledge the need to protect the overarching nation-state discourse and national identity through domestication processes (Olausson, 2014). The predominant role of this function is also reflected in the observation of Ji et al (2024) who note that national interests heavily influence the framing of international news, claiming that “the more the national interests of a country are at stake, the more biased is the news coverage” (56). Accordingly, Ji et al (2024) attribute a much higher significance to the media in the protection of state interests and view the reinforcement of common values, which are propagated through domestication, as the basis of the domestication process (Ji et al, 2024).

Besides of comprehension and protection of identity and ideology, domestication processes are also largely driven by market mechanisms and marketability of international news. In order to be considered as relevant by the audience and receive its attention, news must be connected to the domestic context and thus domesticated (Ji et al, 2024). This process is not only influenced by media actors such as journalists, but also by other domestic actors such as politicians. In this regard, Ji et al. (2024) note that these actors frequently attempt to utilize significant news events for their own interest by connecting them to domestic policy issues.

This shows that domestication is not a neutral process but heavily driven by different interests and considerations. This is also reflected by the mode of action of the domestication process. In the framing of international news, certain information is selected and reorganized while using certain tones that affect how the news item and its relevance is perceived by its audience (Ji et al, 2024). This process is subject to both particularization and universalization processes. Universalization refers to the interpenetration of universal concepts and policies caused by the increased prevalence of international news (Clausen, 2004). Through processes of particularization, international events are adapted to local contexts and framed through national frameworks of interpretation (Clausen, 2004). Consequently, global news is, despite of its

international reach and relevance, specific to each country in which they are broadcasted (Clausen, 2004).

While domestication theory is primarily applied to the domestication of international news media in the national context, it has also been applied to the domestication of international propaganda and disinformation. Hence, it will serve as theoretical framework for the following analysis. With regards to domesticated international propaganda, it is noted that conspiracies and propaganda are routinely employed in political communication (Innes et al, 2021). In order to adapt these narratives to domestic contexts, domestication processes are applied (Innes et al, 2021). The process at play here is both bi-directional and interactive and is brought forward both by foreign and domestic actors. In their analysis of Russian influence in the European context, Innes et al (2021) note that in the context of their analysis, the domestication of Russian state propaganda is predominantly driven by both far right groups and Russian political actors and institutions (Innes et al, 2021). Both entities bring forward innovations in terms of domestication strategies in this field. These innovations are consequentially adopted by other actors, such as far-right politicians (Innes et al, 2021).

A common domestication strategy is the strategic insertion of international propaganda into the domestic context by mimicking right-wing social identities (Innes et al, 2021). Through this strategy, international propaganda can be disseminated within certain communities of thought (Innes et al, 2021). This process is driven by the so-called homophily effect, whereby certain narratives and messages are more likely to be believed and trusted if they are transmitted by a member from one's own group (Innes et al, 2021). At the same time, these narratives are reproduced by other international propaganda channels such as RT and Sputnik, who serve as amplifiers of those narratives (Innes et al, 2021). Likewise, far-right propagandists disseminate the narratives spread in articles of RT and Sputnik through their own channels and platforms. Innes et al (2021) coin this mechanism as "reciprocal pathway" of domesticated propaganda (38).

These methods are also adopted by domestic political actors who increasingly incorporate them into domestic policy routines (Innes et al, 2021). To provide an example, Innes et al (2021) illustrate how propagandistic narratives and other inflammatory content is spread on social media by political actors who pose as ordinary citizens in the case of Estonia. Similarly, civic and political supporters of certain propagandistic narratives have been mobilized in the past

(Innes, et al, 2021). Through the utilization of these strategies, the propagated matters have been turned into domestic issues and were pushed onto the public agenda (Innes et al, 2021).

This example demonstrates that different mechanisms and methods are at play in the dissemination of international propaganda compared to the domestication of international news. With regards to propaganda, domestication predominantly occurs through mimicking, repetition, and visibility. As Innes et al (2021) show, domestic political actors play a predominant role in the domestication of international propaganda, as they adapt the narratives to the domestic field and thus lead to their normalization (Innes et al, 2021). This mechanism will serve as the theoretical framework for the following analysis. It will be assumed that by framing the narratives of Russian state propaganda as domestic issues, adapting them to the national context, and connecting them to pressing national issues, they are being pushed onto the national agenda. Through the aforementioned strategies of repetition and visibility, these narratives are framed as national issues, leading to their incremental normalization and perception as domestic matters.

5. Research design

5.1.Method: Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a method of sociological research developed by Norman Fairclough. It aims to address social wrongs — aspects of social systems that are detrimental to human well-being and could be improved or eliminated through major changes — by examining their manifestations in societal discourse (Fairclough, 2010). By the term “discourse” Fairclough understands it as the verbal construction of different aspects of (physical or social) reality, which is approached differently by different actors according to their background and social position (Fairclough, 2010).

Scholars who conceptualize his method in broader terms utilize CDA with the primary goal of developing a greater understanding and explanations for social phenomena through the analysis of discourse. CDA assumes that the social reality and our understanding of the world is actively and collectively constructed by societal actors, structures and situations through discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). This process is not merely a constructivist process, but rather a transformative one that does not only shape social reality, but also its actors (Wodak & Meyer,

2015). Consequentially, although discourses are social constructs, they actively affect societal structures and can both sustain and transform the status quo (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). CDA aims to analyze and deconstruct how knowledge, social institutions and power structures are constructed, transmitted and reproduced through discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). CDA puts special emphasis on power structures and inequalities. It aims to investigate both how power structures are reproduced through discourse and how negatively affected groups discursively respond to their disadvantaged position. This is because of the predominant role of power for societal structures. As noted by Wodak and Meyer (2015), “power is central for understanding the dynamics and specifics of control (of action) in modern societies, but power remains invisible. Linguistic manifestations are therefore analysed in depth” (Wodak & Meyer, 2015, 12).

For this research, the data will be analyzed using the method and approach to CDA proposed by Jäger and Maier (2015). Discourse, as understood by Jäger and Maier (2015) refers to “an institutionalized way of talking [...] that regulates and reinforces action and thereby exerts power” (Jäger & Maier, 2015). This definition will be adhered to in this paper. According to the definition, discourses are not considered a reflection of social reality, but rather, reality is considered as constructed and enabled through discourse (Jäger & Maier, 2015). This means that reality and specific phenomena, actions, or objects are considered meaningful because they have been assigned meaning by actors who themselves are part of the discourse. In return, this entails that objects can also lose or change their meaning, depending on the actions of the actors (Jäger & Maier, 2015). Central for the construction of discourse (and hence, reality) are so-called “(intervening active) subjects”, meaning constructions of groups or individuals defined by a similar way of thinking and acting. Subjects take on a double role here and both actively create and thus sustain discourse and are similarly created and subjected through discourse (Jäger & Maier, 2015).

Assuming that reality is constructed through discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) aims to understand and analyze how this construction occurs in order to uncover social power relations (Jäger & Maier, 2015).

5.2.Steps of analysis

In order to distinguish between different thematic discourses and to enable the analysis of these individual thematic discourses, Jäger and Maier (2015) have developed the concept of “discourse strands”. Those discourse strands refer to individual elements of discourse relating to a common singular issue within the overall discourse. Each discursive strand is comprised of a multitude of single elements of utterance called “texts”. Examples for texts are newspaper articles, scientific reports, political debates, or classroom discussions. Single units within text that refer to a specific discourse strand are coined “discursive fragment” (Jäger & Maier, 2015). Discourse takes place on different discourse planes (Jäger & Maier, 2015). The concept of “discourse plane” refers to different field-specific or medial areas in which discourse takes place, e.g. science, the mass media, politics or education. These discourse planes are both intertwined and dynamic, meaning that they mutually influence each other and that discourse fragments can be integrated from one discourse plane into another (Jäger & Maier, 2015).

One of the aims of Jäger’s approach to CDA is the comprehension of societal discourse through the disentanglement of its discursive strands. This is done by identifying individual discourse strands on selected discourse planes which are considered relevant for the research topic (Jäger & Maier, 2015). As a next step, the corpus of data is determined. Building up on this, the selected data is prepared for analysis. For this, all text that is considered relevant for the discourse strand is compiled in a list. Besides of bibliographical information, this list should comprise notes on addressed topics, special characteristics, literary genre and the section in which the article appears (Jäger & Maier, 2015). As Jäger and Maier (2015) use newspapers to exemplify the procedure of analysis, the compilation of text corresponds to that of individual newspaper articles.

As a first step of analysis, a structural analysis of the chosen text is conducted, focusing on aspects such as illustrations, collective symbols, language and vocabulary, and the argumentation strategies employed. Building up on the structural analysis, the different subtopics of the chosen discourse strand are identified and dissected into thematic groups. This process is an iterative one, which should be guided by both parsimony and discriminatory power (Jäger & Maier, 2015). As a next step, the subtopics are assessed according to their frequency, allowing to estimate their individual relevance for the overall discourse. Besides that, it is identified how different discursive strands are mutually related and entangled with each other

(Jäger & Maier, 2015). Once these steps have been completed, a detailed analysis is conducted considering aspects such as the surface of the text, rhetorical means, content and ideological statements, peculiarities, discourse position and the overall message.

5.3.Methods of analysis

Adhering to the first step for analysis and data selection proposed by Jäger and Maier, the Facebook pages of the AfD are determined as the discursive plane of analysis. This selection was made because of the strategic relevance of social media platforms (and Facebook in particular) for the public communication of the AfD.

As elaborated in the preceding chapters, the rhetorical practices of the AfD are largely based on the simplification of complex contexts, populist slogans, repetition and emotional charging (Deutschlandfunk, 2024). Social media such as TikTok, Facebook or Instagram are suitable environments for this type of communication, as their affordances favor image-based, emotionally charged and engaging content (Hillje, 2021). In addition, the reliance on social media enables the AfD to maintain control over their communication and its reception. In contrast to traditional media, content shared on social media is not subject to any moderating intermediary body that evaluates content in a journalistic and differentiated manner. This lack of independent and objective evaluation also allows the AfD to keep the sovereignty over the messages it disseminates (Deutschlandfunk, 2024).

On social media, the AfD has the widest reach on Facebook, measured by the number of followers. It also reaches a comparatively larger number of people on Facebook than other parties do (Deutschlandfunk, 2024; Scheffel, 2023). Thus, it is considered the most relevant communication medium of the party (Hillje, 2021). The analysis therefore focuses on content shared by the four Facebook accounts with the highest reach which are associated with the AfD, as listed in the table below. The accounts chosen for analysis were selected based on their association with the AfD and their popularity as measured by the number of followers they had as of May 28, 2025. Next to the accounts of the AfD and the AfD parliamentary group in the German parliament, these were the accounts of the party chairpersons Alice Weidel and Tino Chrupalla.

Name of the account	Number of followers (as of May 28, 2025)	Link of account
AfD	652.174	https://www.facebook.com/alternatiefuerde
Alice Weidel	614.465	https://www.facebook.com/aliceweidel
AfD-Fraktion im Deutschen Bundestag	308.262	https://www.facebook.com/afdimbundestag
Tino Chrupalla	124.628	https://www.facebook.com/TinoAfD

Regarding the data collection, deviating from the approach of Jäger and Maier (2015) the data will not be gathered according to a selected discourse strand. Instead, corresponding to the research aim, the data is selected according to its reference to narratives of Russian state propaganda identified in previous research. This is based on the results of the research done by Kuznetsova et al (2024). In their research, they investigate the role of pro-Russian media exposure on the agreeability to Russian propaganda beliefs and relevant factors that influence the susceptibility of these beliefs. For this purpose, the researchers conducted an online survey in which users were confronted with propagandistic narratives derived of Russian state propaganda from a content analysis of RT DE. Based on the participants' agreement with the narratives and their exposure to (pro-)Russian media outlets, the influence of these outlets on the formation of pro-Russian beliefs was assessed (Kuznetsova et al, 2024).

For the research of this thesis, the propagandistic narratives identified by Kuznetsova et al (2024) are utilized. In order to assess the applicability of the propagandistic narratives, a limited sample covering posts published in the months of February to April of 2022 on the main Facebook account of the AfD was examined first for reference to the propagandistic narratives. Based on this initial examination, all narratives that were utilized and hence applicable to the research were selected and utilized for further data collection.

Of the initially 13 narratives, the following four were identified as applicable to the research as they were utilized in similar form in the AfD communication on Facebook:

6. "The current sanctions against Russia are particularly damaging to the EU's economy and population"

7. “Europe is fueling the war in Ukraine by supplying weapons”
8. “The USA strives for global world domination and interferes in the internal affairs of other countries”
9. “The EU is a vassal of the USA; it is used by the USA”

With regards to the corpus of data, all posts created and shared in the timeframe of February 2022 and February 2023 were considered. This timeframe was chosen for analysis because Russia’s war against Ukraine and related issues were prevalent in both media and society and dominated political and societal debates during that time. Central subjects of these debates included the energy crisis and inflation, calls for peace negotiation and a return to diplomacy, and military support for Ukraine. Within the researched timeframe, 133 posts that made reference to the previously determined narratives were identified.

On the basis of the identified posts, a structural analysis was carried out. For this step, the selected posts and their meta data (name of the profile, link to the post, date of publication) were collected and compiled in a data frame. Besides of the meta data, information on referenced propagandistic narrative(s), discursive strand(s) each individual posts referred to, and linguistic / discursive particularities such as historical references or rhetoric strategies were gathered. This information was then used to analyze which strands of discourse were addressed, how they were connected to the narratives, and with which frequency. As the focus was on domestication of the identified narratives, the step of dissecting the data into subtopics, as suggested by Jäger and Maier (2015) was not made. Besides, information for the structural analysis proposed by Jäger and Maier that were not relevant to the text format, such as layout or illustrations, did not find consideration.

In the structural analysis, five central discourse strands emerged that were used in connection to the identified narratives, those being the energy crisis, inflation, criticism of the German government, peace and diplomacy, and WWII / nuclear war. These discourse strands were chosen for analysis given their overall relevance measured by frequency in referencing. Other discourse strands that also referred to the identified narratives, but only in a limited number of posts (i.e., in less than 20 posts in total) were not considered for analysis. This decision was made given the limited relevance of these discourse strands for the overall aim of the thesis, as well as its limited scope.

As a final step, the data was subject to a detailed analysis, meaning the close examination of the material under consideration of argumentative and linguistic strategies used. Rather than investigating the reproduction and construction of reality or power dynamics through discourse, the analysis aimed to assess how the selected narratives are domesticated by the AfD to tie into the domestic discourse. For this purpose, the data was analyzed under consideration of the following questions that were derived from the approach of Jäger and Maier (2015):

1. Which discourses does the AfD draw on? How are certain discourses linked together? What effect does this linking have? What is the objective?
2. How does the linking/domestication (of narratives by linking them to local discourses) work? What argumentative strategies are used (e.g., references to expert opinions, poll results, opinion polls, etc.)? What is the structure of argumentation? What is the underlying logic of the argumentation? What language does the AfD use? What rhetorical strategies and stylistic devices are used?
3. How does the AfD position itself in its argumentation? What is its intention behind this positioning?
4. What understanding of society does the AfD presuppose?
5. What future prospects are presented?

6. Analysis

In the following, the argumentation of the AfD will be analyzed considering the questions above. Based on the identified discourse strands, it is assessed how narratives of Russian state propaganda are domesticated by the AfD. Using quotes and direct examples¹, the party's strategies for the domestication of these narratives are identified, and it is analyzed how the AfD ties the narratives into different strands of societal discourse. As demonstrated here, the AfD domesticates the narratives by connecting them to prevalent societal issues through different strategic means. Prevalent strategies are decontextualization or omission of context, emotional charging, and a biased presentation of different actors.

Discourse strand 1: Poor government

¹ In order to ensure linguistic accuracy, the quotations were partially translated using the DeepL translation tool

As mentioned, a total of five discourse strands was identified as relevant for the analysis, meaning that the identified narratives were tied into these discourses and mentioned in at least 20 of the examined posts. The discourse strand which was most frequently referred to by the AfD is regarding the performance of the government of that time, coined here, based on the negative portrayal of the government by the AfD, as “poor government discourse strand”. The government of the time was subject to criticism from both the public and political sphere. However, the AfD’s portrayal of the government exceeds mere criticism and does rather resemble attempts to delegitimize its actions. Accordingly, it tries to present itself as a viable alternative to the government it is portraying as incapable and lacking competence.

The AfD ties all five narratives identified above into the discourse strand. However, some narratives are more heavily utilized than others. Most frequently employed is narrative 1, claiming that European countries are more heavily impacted by the sanctions they have passed than Russia. The central domestication strategy utilized in this context is decontextualization. Decontextualization means the deliberate omission of contextual information with the intention of distorting a certain phenomenon, statement or decision in order to manipulate the formation of opinion into a desired direction. This strategy is illustrated in the following example:

„Citizens are now feeling the devastating effects of the traffic light coalition² government's disastrous sanctions and energy policy. Habeck, Scholz, and Co. are coldly leading Germans into a social catastrophe—because they refuse to represent German interests. With ideological stubbornness, they refuse to admit that the boycott of Nord Stream 2 is a mistake“ (AfD, 2022i)

As shown, contextual information on the sanctions adoption and involved actors are strategically omitted from the AfD’s argumentation. For example, it is explicitly not considered that the sanctions are passed on EU level and not on the national level upon resolution of the German government. By shifting the blame for the alleged consequences of the sanctions policy to the government and emphasizing its alleged agency, the impression is created that the German government is solely responsible for any negative effects the sanctions may be causing. Thus, the narrative on detrimental effects of sanctions is reduced to the German context and hence domesticated.

² Coalition called "traffic light coalition" based on the constituting parties (Greens, Social Democrats (red) and Liberals (yellow))

Another domestication strategy used in the example mentioned is that of emotional charging. This strategy entails the strategic charging of neutral processes and phenomena with negative emotions through the use of negatively connotated and expressive terms, which are thus perceived as detrimental. The abovementioned example illustrates how a specific process, in this case, the passing of sanctions, is charged with negative emotions, i.e. existential fears and looming insecurities that are particularly tailored to the German context. The emotional charging occurs through value-loaded expressions such as “devastating effects”, “social catastrophe” or statements such as “While Germany is now even selling Russian gas to Poland, Economy Minister Habeck is taking an axe to the basic needs of our citizens with a new package of sanctions” (AfD, 2022f). By attributing these emotionally charged phenomena to the German government and portraying them as a deliberate act rather than a consequence of the energy crisis, the narratives are domesticated to the German context. Likewise, domestication takes place by creating an immediate emotional connection to the German population and making it feel affected, exemplified through phrases such as “Habeck, Scholz and Co. are leading Germans into a social catastrophe”.

Besides decontextualization and emotional charging, prevalent domestication strategies include rephrasing and recontextualization. Rephrasing entails the use of alternative expressions in order to reframe a specific issue, often overlapping its description and judgment within the same term. Rephrasing is usually associated with recontextualization, meaning the manipulation of contextual information aimed at fitting a precise narrative of causes, consequences, and responsibilities. To deconstruct these discursive strategies, the discrepancy in meaning between the terms used and the ones they replace are highlighted. Besides that, the full context is provided when parts of it are omitted or distorted. This is shown in the following example:

“Federal Minister for Economic Affairs Habeck has declared economic war on Russia. Now, Russian gas company Gazprom has cut its gas deliveries to 20 percent of capacity. Instead of finally de-escalating the situation and initiating economic détente with Russia, the Minister for Economic Affairs and his party colleague, Federal Foreign Minister Baerbock, are actually toughening their tone” (Tino Chrupalla, 2022d)

In the provided example, sanctions are rephrased as “economic war on Russia” and removed from the context of Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine and annexation of parts of its territory.

Both strategies shift responsibilities from Russia to the German government, hiding the actual power structures within which economic sanctions have been implemented. As a result, Russia's narrative of sanctions as a means of aggression is domesticated into the German national context and treated as a matter of domestic interests that is removed from the wider system of international law and security.

As this example also suggests, the AfD reinforces specific enemy stereotypes in its communications that are connected to the sanctions narrative. This strategy of actor demonization is closely connected to decontextualization and emotional charging. Here, negative attributes are assigned to certain political actors or parties with the aim of devaluing and discrediting these actors. Besides of the attribution of negative traits and baseless accusations used to convey a negative image of the concerned actor, this strategy also relies on distorted representation through the use of e.g. decontextualized quotations. The following quote illustrates this strategy:

“It is not Putin, but Habeck who is responsible for the massive rise in energy prices. Habeck has no interest in a rapid normalization of economic relations. He is using the war to accelerate the energy transition — whatever the cost. Habeck's economic war is not affecting Russia at all; it is affecting Germany and the German people.“ (Tino Chrupalla, 2022e)

In this example, Minister of Economics Robert Habeck is portrayed as an ideology-driven warmonger who is failing to act in the interest of the German people. As a result, the actorness is transferred entirely to him as an individual, i.e., Russia's responsibility and role is deliberately omitted. The sanctions narrative is thus not only domesticated here but also expanded: Germany is not only negatively affected by the sanctions, i.e., a passive actor, but has deliberately and actively brought about the sanctions and is artificially maintaining the resulting shortage, which, according to the AfD's portrayal, could easily be remedied.

The AfD also connects the negative portrayal of the federal government to its domestication of the second analyzed narrative, i.e. the accusation of Europe for fueling the war through its military support of Ukraine. Similar to the abovementioned case, the narrative is closely linked to the German government. In this instance, the act of supplying Ukraine with weapons is decontextualized, meaning that the geopolitical context, strategic interests, as well as Russia's

responsibility for the war are strategically omitted in the communication. At the same time, the AfD assigns a different meaning to the narrative and connects it to the German government and its actions. Concretely, the narrative is applied to and thus embodied by the German government by accusing it of warmongering. This approach is used to discredit individual political parties and actors and make them seem untrustworthy, irresponsible and hypocritical. This intention becomes apparent here:

“It is grotesque enough that the Greens have done a complete U-turn since the federal elections in September: within a few months, their slogan of "No weapons and armaments in war zones!" has become "We must supply heavy weapons!" The former peace party has developed a penchant for war—with pithy words and actions whose consequences are apparently not at all clear.“ (AfD, 2022c)

As this quote shows, the domestication of the narrative relies on the omission of context and relevant information. In this case, the shifted geopolitical situation after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the corresponding necessity for a shift in global security architecture, is deliberately not considered. Furthermore, Russia’s responsibility is fully omitted from the discourse strand here, thus shifting the focus on the Green party, which is depicted as an aggressor. Once again, the narrative is tied to the German government (or as here, the Green party) which is thus delegitimized. This effect is strengthened through the use of emotive language such as “penchant for war” or the utilization of false quotes as a means of exaggeration.

In its communications, the AfD frequently ties in with social and political debates that, at the time of publishing, are widely discussed in the public sphere. This aligns with the very foundations of domestication theory, which emphasizes the necessity to adapt foreign narratives to domestic understandings (Clausen, 2004). Unsurprisingly, therefore, domestication strategies employed by the AfD include the exploitation of newsworthy events to advance domestic objectives, which is also indicated by previous research on the issue (Ji et al, 2024). For example, the question of whether and from what point in time the delivery of weapons to Ukraine could be considered Germany's participation in the war was a prominent subject to the public debate. The AfD makes reference to this discussion by claiming that, according to the Russian state narrative, military support not only contributes to the escalation of the war, but also actively makes Germany a party to the war. In this way, the AfD makes a connection to the

societal debate, provides a continuation of the narrative, and thus transfers it to the actions of the federal government.

This strategy is illustrated in the following example:

Yesterday, in the "Report from Berlin," Federal Minister for Economic Affairs Habeck did not rule out the delivery of battle tanks by the federal government to Ukraine. First armored personnel carriers, now even state-of-the-art battle tanks. The federal government is pushing Germany into a war with Russia." (Tino Chrupalla, 2023)

In general, it is evident that the AfD highly relies on recontextualization and factual omission for the domestication of narratives. For instance, the party uses the case of the Nord Stream gas pipelines to depict Germany as a vassal state of the USA. Essential information is deliberately omitted here, such as Germany's interest in achieving energy independence from Russia, the controversy surrounding the Nord Stream II project prior to its completion, and the high risk associated with past energy dependence on Russia. This creates the impression that maintaining energy relations and reactivating the Nord Stream pipelines are feasible options that are only being thwarted by the US.

This becomes apparent in the following example:

"And these alternatives [sources of energy] are not in sight." He also has an idea why Nord Stream II is not simply being put into operation: "Because Uncle Sam told Olaf: We can't do that. Sovereign, interest-driven politics looks different!" (AfD, 2022d)

By linking this argument to the established stereotype of a federal government that is driven by ideology and not acting in the interests of the German population, the AfD is domesticating the issue. At the same time, through recontextualizing certain information and events, the government is portrayed as passive and controlled by outside forces. The following quote exemplifies this:

"Germany is supplying a yet undetermined number of Marder [infantry fighting vehicles] to Ukraine. All it took was a phone call from the White House for German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to agree to the delivery of the weapon system. This was done without

consulting the public, 55 percent of whom were already convinced in November, according to an ARD Deutschlandtrend poll, that the German government's diplomatic efforts did not go far enough.” (AfD, 2023b)

By omitting information on the strategic interests and deliberations of the German government, the impression is created that it acts solely according to the US's demands. Through the decontextualized presentation of a public opinion poll on the German positioning, this impression is manifested by suggesting that the government is adhering to the demands of the US government rather than to domestic or public interests.

Discourse strand 2: Energy discourse

The AfD frequently references the energy discourse, meaning issues related to the energy crisis, energy supply, and rising energy cost (54 out of 133 examined posts). These issues were actively discussed in public at the time of publication of the posts. The energy crisis had multiple causes, including increased economic output following the pandemic, restricted gas supplies from Russia since late 2021, and Russia's war against Ukraine. As a consequence, European countries tried to become independent from Russian energy sources. The energy crisis caused challenges for the economy and society, such as increased energy costs, which put a financial burden on consumers (Praktiknjo & Priesmann, n.d.).

In accordance with the observation on domestication made by Ji et al (2024), it is unsurprising that the AfD frequently links the sanctions narrative to a central societal debate such as the energy discourse, which occurs in 48 of the 54 cases. Similar to the previously discussed discourse strand, the narrative is domesticated through decontextualization and emotional charging. Exemplary in this context is the following quote:

“++ Russia sanctions: Gas and diesel rationing looms! ++”

“It is not reported as the main news item on the "Tagesschau" news program or on the front pages of major daily newspapers, but almost exclusively as a side note: German authorities have called on numerous companies to prepare for rationing or even shutdowns of their energy supplies. The reason for this is the spiral of mutual sanctions between Russia and the West.” (AfD, 2022a)

As seen here, the narrative is strongly linked to the energy crisis's consequences affecting Germany and its population, such as rising energy prices, energy-saving measures, and the economic and social effects of these increased prices. By omitting contextual information on both the sanctions politics as well as the energy crisis and its causing factors, a cause-and-effect relationship is implied, creating the impression that the sanctions caused the current crisis.

As the frequency of cases in which the sanctions narrative is domesticated demonstrates, the AfD's argumentative strategy relies on the constant repetition of certain claims, images, and connections. This corresponds to the finding of Kupiecki et al (2025) who have emphasized the need for constant repetition of propagandistic narratives to ensure their effectiveness. By repeating the narrative of Germany taking economic harm through the sanctions, the connection between sanctions and the consequences of the energy crisis is deepened, and thus, the narrative is domesticated. Similarly, the AfD ties its cause-and-effect complex to local and societally perceived problems, such as the energy-saving measures imposed at the time of publication or the additional financial burden resulting from the energy crisis. The following quotes exemplify this strategy:

“And now it's going to end up being really expensive for customers after all: a four-person household will have to pay an additional €1,000 if it heats with gas in winter, up to five cents more per kilowatt hour! [...] And yet the Scholz team is itself to blame for the cost explosions on the energy market! With sanctions that do not harm Russia, but drive us into ruin.“ (AfD, 2022h)

„While Germany is now even selling Russian gas to Poland, Economics Minister Habeck is taking an axe to the basic needs of our citizens with a new package of measures. According to this, we Germans are now supposed to freeze and make some cutbacks in hygiene in order to save our country from the collapse caused by the traffic light coalition itself.“ (AfD, 2022b)

Here, again, the AfD uses emotional charging as a strategy to domesticate the narrative to the German context and the realities of its audience. For instance, the party uses vivid, judgmental, and emotionally charged language, employing expressions such as "drive into ruin," "cost explosion," and "take the axe." Besides of causing an emotional response in the audience, these

terms narrow the energy discourse, limiting it to a one-sided and negative view and preventing a nuanced discussion of the topic. This discursive limitation is a deliberate strategy employed by the AfD, which, against the backdrop of the problems it has drawn up, can offer an alleged solution: the withdrawal of sanctions. Through the strategy of discursive limitation and the deliberate omission of contextual information, this argument appears logical. Besides, the AfD applies the consequences of the energy crisis to the personal level by drawing up a concrete example of how risen energy costs affect private households, thus tying the narrative to an individual level and creating a relation to its audience.

The abovementioned examples also emphasize how connections between different discourse strands are made, as in this case, between the energy discourse and the German government. The AfD again relies on recontextualization, creating the impression of the sanctions as a unilateral German move. Thus, the AfD shifts the responsibility for the sanctions and their alleged consequences from the EU level to the German government. As a means of recontextualization, the AfD is working with selective comparison here, i.e. the comparison with selected cases that are not representative, thus causing a distorted depiction. This approach is visible in the following claim:

“Compared to other European countries, both Spain and France are importing more Russian gas than ever before. Hungary is also sticking to its imports. So while our neighbors are preparing for winter, the coalition government wants to see us freeze. (AfD, 2022e)

While this claim is not false, it is decontextualized and highly selective, disregarding the overall aim of the EU for independence from Russian gas. At the same time, by drawing comparisons with other countries and thus creating a relation to the German approach, the need for energy independence vis-à-vis Russia is relativized. As a result, the government appears as lacking competence in addressing the energy crisis or even hostile towards its own population. This depiction is emotionally charged through claims such as “the government wants to see us freeze”. At the same time, this presentation makes the sanctions appear irrational and inappropriate. Thus, this approach is another instance of a domestication strategy, through which the sanctions and their alleged societal and economic consequences are declared an exclusively German issue.

Similar strategies are also employed in the domestication of the narrative accusing states to fuel the war through military support to Ukraine. In this context, the AfD again uses decontextualization as a strategy of domestication. This is illustrated by the following example:

“That's what happens: The German government wants to supply tanks to Ukraine, and Russia turns off our gas tap! It's no secret that the coalition government, led by Olaf Scholz, Robert Habeck, and Annalena Baerbock, fails to grasp the simplest of connections. And so, the chancellor and his ministers will now probably ask themselves why Russia is cutting gas supplies to just 20 percent of the usual amount without warning. The answer could be related to the federal government's plan to supply tanks to Ukraine. And because that didn't really work indirectly, Germany now wants to officially become a party to the war, with all the fatal consequences for the people in our country.” (AfD, 2022g)

As this example shows, by omitting contextual information on the geopolitical interest of the German government in its military support and Russia's strategy of gas squeezes as a means of exerting political pressure, the impression is conveyed that military support to Ukraine is a direct provocation to Russia. Besides, through the omission of these information and emphasis on the societal grievances experienced through the energy crisis, the narrative is limited to the German context and thus domesticated. In addition, the vague and undefined narrative of “escalation” as the supposed consequence of arms deliveries is given concrete form and applied to the German context. Through means of recontextualization, a direct link is established between a particular action and its proclaimed consequences, thus transferring responsibility for the situation to the government.

In the context of the energy debate, the AfD uses this strategy in frequent connection with the demonization of political actors and entities, most frequently, the German government. This becomes visible in the following statement:

“If the German government actually responds to the demands of the FDP and the Greens and supplies Ukraine with Leopard battle tanks, for example, it cannot complain if Russian President Putin declares Germany to be a direct participant in the war. This could have all kinds of consequences, such as a further reduction in gas supplies or an intensification of cyber attacks on German infrastructure.” (Alice Weidel, 2022b)

Here, contextual information is strategically omitted to portray the government as lacking in competences and strategic deliberation. At the same time, speculative assertions about Germany's alleged imminent involvement in the war are made and linked to the behavior of the federal government. Through this strategy, the vague and undefined narrative of "escalation" as an alleged consequence of military support is given concrete form, applied to the German context, and hence, domesticated.

As mentioned before, the AfD uses the narrative primarily to argue for its own proposed positions and alternatives. Against the backdrop of the political events the party conjures, these alternatives seem like a viable solution. A similar approach is also pursued with narratives referring to the alleged vassal status of EU countries vis-à-vis the United States. For example, in many of its posts, the AfD presents the (re-)commissioning of the Nord Stream pipelines as a supposed solution to the energy crisis. In this context, the narrative about the US's quest for superpower status and the EU's supposed vassal status is transferred onto its claims in the Nord Stream debate. Here, domestication takes place primarily through the complete transfer of the narrative to the German context. Instead of the EU, the German government is portrayed as a supposed vassal of the US. This image is created through recontextualization, meaning that contextually relevant information, such as the German interests and intentions behind the adoption of sanctions and the decision on future energy independence from Russia, are deliberately omitted. Thus, the impression is created that the German government is subordinating itself to US interests in its decision not to purchase gas via the Nord Stream pipelines in the future.

Exemplary for this strategy is the following post:

"The rampant arrogance of a federal government that, according to Economics Minister Habeck, sees its role as exclusively 'serving' the US is becoming increasingly dangerous. Germany is not in a position to exert pressure on Moscow but is urgently dependent on cheap Russian energy." (Alice Weidel, 2022a)

Besides of the decontextualization of statements discussed prior, the AfD uses juxtapositions of alleged actions and needs. By contrasting of the federal government's alleged actions with the demand for cheap energy, the AfD's demand for the resumption of energy relations with Russia

is legitimized. It should be noted that the AfD only uses this narrative in the specific context of the Nord Stream debate. In other contexts, such as the adoption of sanctions, the AfD does not convey the impression that the federal government is acting under external control but rather depicts it acting independently and self-determined.

Discourse strand 3: Peace discourse

In the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, claims for peace and calls for a peaceful and diplomatic solution of the war were prominent in the public debate, with 67 % of the German population demanding peace negotiations in early 2023 (Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland, 2023) In its communication, the AfD is tying into these societal sentiments to strengthen its own argumentation and to discredit its political opponents, i.e. the German government. A central strategy is the demonization of political actors. The AfD sets itself in contrast with those actors in order to appear as a peace- and solution-oriented party. The following example illustrates this:

„Do not allow yourself to be pressured by the warmongers in your coalition or by your partners in the Western alliance into leading Germany down a disastrous path by agreeing to the Leopard delivery. Instead, advocate for a diplomatic peace solution!“ (AfD-Fraktion im Deutschen Bundestag, 2023)

As this example shows, the AfD is utilizing the polarity of war and peace in its argumentation and applies it to itself and the federal government respectively. Thus, it is presenting itself as the embodiment of peace, while the government is depicted as the embodiment of war. The AfD thus appeals to social sentiments and the need for a quick peace solution, exploiting existing societal trends for its own political gain. Through its argumentation, the AfD domesticates the escalation narrative, in this case by suggesting that the allegedly looming escalation could be defused through peace negotiations.

A similar strategy is also pursued in the domestication of the sanctions narrative, illustrated by the following quote:

"We reject costly sanctions and embargoes, which hurt Germany the most. Relief must reach citizens quickly and without bureaucracy. Instead of incurring horrendous debts for

the reconstruction of Ukraine, the European Union should work towards a swift peace agreement!" (Tino Chrupalla, 2022b)

Also in this case, the peace agreement is depicted as an allegedly tangible and realistic alternative to sanctions and arms deliveries, which, according to the argumentation of the AfD, would cause more harm than good to Germany. Here, again, the narrative and its implications are decontextualized and thus transferred entirely to the German context. Through the deliberate omission of other actors and interests, the impression is created that the sanctions are inherently negative and dangerous. On the contrary, peace and diplomatic efforts, regardless of their actual feasibility or risks, are depicted as positive and desirable. The AfD here also transfers the peace discourse to its agenda and thus appropriates it. In addition to the demonization of individual actors, the AfD also employs supposed unique selling points. The following post exemplifies this:

"The Alternative for Germany calls on the federal government and other proponents of new arms deliveries to finally make intensive efforts to promote peace negotiations between the countries involved, which could actually end the war in Ukraine and thus the suffering of the people there. [...]"

Tino Chrupalla, federal spokesman for Alternative for Germany:

"We are the party of peace. We are the only party that is united in its commitment to peace in Germany and on the European continent. The war in Ukraine must not be allowed to escalate further, and Germany must not become a party to the war." (AfD, 2023a)

As shown here, the AfD presents itself as a distinguishing party in terms of its positioning and demand for peace. The narrative on the supposed escalation of the war serves here as a tool to reinforce its own argumentation and positioning. Here, the narrative is domesticated by establishing a link to the party's positioning, i.e., the declared demand for peace against the backdrop of a supposed escalation. The argumentation structure follows a clear pattern here: First, the negative consequences of arms deliveries and sanctions for the German population and economy are highlighted, in order to then offer a supposed alternative by calling for diplomacy and peace efforts. This strategy legitimizes the claims of the AfD and allows it to present itself as an alternative to the governing parties.

Discursive strand 4: WWIII / Nuclear Threats

In a total of 20 of the examined posts, the AfD refers to a supposedly imminent nuclear or Third World War. In the majority of these posts, reference is made to the narrative of a potential escalation of the war through military support to Ukraine (18 out of 20 posts). This discursive strand is frequently linked to the poor-government discourse strand. Here, a nuclear threat is invoked to discredit the federal government and its actions. This linking of discourses is exemplified in the following passage:

“Arms deliveries to Ukraine are leading to escalation and dragging Germany into the war. President Putin is threatening to use nuclear weapons, Defense Minister Shoigu states that Russia is ‘not at war with Ukraine, but with the collective West’ [...] Now what we have always warned about is coming true. World War III is looming, and Germany would be a direct party to the war because of the traffic light coalition's escalation strategy.” (AfD, 2022j)

As this example shows, the AfD is exploiting the danger of a nuclear threat by transferring the narrative of an alleged escalation by the West to the German government, thus holding it accountable. Here, the AfD uses decontextualized direct quotations as a means of strengthening its own line of argumentation. The actual context of the quotes, namely the Russian government's strategy of justifying the invasion of Ukraine as a supposed proxy war against the "collective West," is strategically omitted in order to strengthen the AfD's own argumentation on the government's supposedly escalatory policy. At the same time, the narrative is domesticated by linking it to established enemy images. The emotions evoked by the existential threat of nuclear war are thus transferred to the previously established image of the enemy. Accordingly, the governing parties and politicians are portrayed as unscrupulous warmongers, linking social fears of an escalation of the war to the federal government and transferring them to its actions. This strategy is evident in the following quote:

“So far, it has mainly been members of parliament from the CDU/CSU, FDP, and the Greens who have appeared to be warmongers. Now, SPD members of parliament are apparently rebelling against the chancellor from within their own ranks because they are determined to lead Germany into war. To back up his claim, Roth [politician of the SPD] turns logic on its head. He writes that escalation can "only be prevented by extensive arms

deliveries." The opposite is true. If we supply weapons, this will contribute to escalation and not to a peaceful end to the war." (AfD-Fraktion im Deutschen Bundestag, 2022)

As this example shows, the narrative is not only reproduced, but expanded and transferred to the German context. In addition, through means of recontextualization, a reversal of roles and responsibilities is made. Instead of a passive role of military support, the AfD's argumentation strategy assigns an active role to the government by claiming that the government wants to lead Germany into war.

In order to substantiate its line of argument and reinforce the impression that its claims correspond to the social and political consensus, the AfD uses different methods. For example, the AfD strategically references alleged expert and third-party assessments to support its own argumentative claims. This method also relies on means of decontextualization: Besides of the selective choice of these experts, their statements are not subjected to further evaluation or contextualization. Instead, the credibility of their statements is suggested through reference to their supposed expertise or rank. This approach is evident here, for example:

"Former Brigadier General Erich Vad shares the view of the AfD. He calls the delivery of heavy weapons a "path to World War III." Like us, he sees the solution in negotiations: "If we don't want World War III, we must sooner or later break out of this logic of military escalation and enter into negotiations." Vad compares the war in Ukraine with the wars in Iraq and other countries. He considers the chances for negotiations to be realistic." (Tino Chrupalla, 2022a)

In line with the strategy discussed above, neither the argumentation nor the expertise of the alleged expert is not being subjected to critical evaluation. This creates the impression of credibility. At the same time, quotes of this expert that align with the position of the AfD are decontextualized and reproduced to strengthen its own argumentation. Thus, the narrative is domesticated through its reproduction by domestic experts. and the reproduction by the AfD.

Besides this, the AfD also ties its argumentation to the peace discourse. In this context, central strategies of domestication are demonization of political actors, recontextualization, and rephrasing. The following citation is exemplary for this approach:

"The Third World War is looming, and Germany would be a direct party to the war due to the traffic light coalition's escalation strategy. Now may be the last chance for peace negotiations. The federal government must commit to this and avert a nuclear confrontation." (Tino Chrupalla, 2022f)

As shown here, information on the strategy and positioning of the government are omitted, and the military support to Ukraine is rephrased as "traffic light coalition's escalation strategy". Thus, the narrative is transferred onto the approach of the government and hence domesticated. Based on this presentation, the AfD can again present itself as a peace party and substantiate its claims for peace negotiations. The AfD also uses emotional charging as a means of domestication. Through expressions such as "last chance", a sense of urgency is created, allowing the AfD to present as a rational actor and once again contrast itself with the supposedly irrational and warmongering government. By forming a counterpoint to the narrative through its appeal for peace, the AfD simultaneously contributes to its domestication.

Discursive strand 5: Inflation

Caused by the energy crisis and the war in Ukraine, the German economy experienced a strong increase in inflation rates of up to 8 %. In its communication, the AfD makes frequent reference to the inflation discourse and mentions it in a total of 20 of their posts. In this context, both the sanctions narrative and the accusation of the EU being a vassal state of the USA are domesticated.

In its argumentation, the AfD again builds up on societal fears and grievances present of the time of publication of the examined posts. However, its engagement with these issues goes beyond their mere discussion or reproduction. Rather, they are used to argue against the federal government and its sanctions policy. Here, the AfD strategically rephrases and recontextualizes certain issues in order to foster specific societal sentiments. This strategy is illustrated by the following example:

"It is the largest increase in producer prices since records began in 1949: a staggering 30.9 percent. This was announced by the Federal Statistical Office in Wiesbaden. The main cause is said to be the rise in energy prices (up 84 percent). One can imagine the social and economic damage that such a development will cause. What else needs to

happen before the government finally abandons its "energy transition" ideology?" (AfD, 2022b)

This example shows how certain political trends and decisions, in this case the Green energy transition, are rephrased and thus presented as an ideologically rather than ecologically and economically motivated shift from fossil to renewable energies. At the same time, the AfD is recontextualizing the issue by connecting the causes of the energy crisis to the political aims of the government rather than the Russian war against Ukraine. By domesticating the narrative this way and linking it to the discourse on inflation, the AfD's claim for abandoning the sanctions as a means of alleviating the economic situation also gains substance. Since the argumentation draws a connection between sanctions and inflation and strategically omits other causes for the rise in inflation rates and gas prices, the withdrawal of sanctions appears to be a supposedly effective measure for combating inflation.

In the context of the inflation discourse, the AfD also domesticates the narrative of the EU as primarily a vassal state of the US, acting accordingly under external control. This narrative is domesticated to the German context through means of decontextualization, thus conveying that not the EU, but Germany is subject to the decision-making power and dominance of the US. The domestication strategy is revealed in the following statement:

“During his visit to Washington in March, German Economics Minister Habeck said, "The more Germany serves, the greater its role." He reported that the US was pleased that Germany intended to "exercise a servant leadership role." In the months that followed, citizens learned the hard way what this servant role looks like. Aggressive interference in the war in Ukraine with sanctions and arms deliveries is leading to enormous inflation and an energy crisis of unforeseeable proportions.” (Tino Chrupalla, 2022c)

As demonstrated here, quotes and statements are strategically decontextualized in order to suggest the alleged subjugation of the German government to the US. Concurrently, the AfD decontextualizes the Ukraine policy of the German government. Besides, contextual information on both German geopolitical interests and Russia's rather than Germany's responsibility for the invasion is omitted. Thus, the impression is created that inflation and the energy crisis are caused by military support to Ukraine and sanctions against Russia. In this case, the two domesticated narratives are connected in order to foster sentiments against the

government and emphasize its alleged lack of competence and inability to alleviate the situation.

It is worth noting here the relevance of linguistic and rhetorical aspects in the AfD's communication. For example, emotionally charged terms such as "enormous" or "unforeseeable proportions" are used in relation to inflation to emphasize the seriousness of the situation, thus creating the impression of incapability of the German government. At the same time, the AfD repeatedly uses figures, ratios, and comparisons as well as concrete examples to emotionally charge the topic and establish an emotional connection to the readership (i.e., to emotionally engage them). This is illustrated by the following quotes:

"According to the Federal Statistical Office, the inflation rate in August was around 7.9 percent. Energy prices rose by 35.6 percent in the same month compared to the previous year, and food prices by 16.6 percent. One company after another is being forced to file bankruptcy, while government debt threatens to explode. And Russia? Despite the sanctions, it is doing excellent business" (AfD, 2022k)

"It is the largest increase in producer prices since records began in 1949" (AfD, 2022b)

This strategy, which relies on stirring up fears and emotions, aims to portray the federal government's sanctions policy as ineffective by using comparisons and contrasts as visible in the abovementioned example. Here, the AfD utilizes statistical data to visualize the inflation rates. By linking these data to the alleged threat of bankruptcy, it deliberately stokes existential fears and resentment towards the government. In contrast to these existential threats, the sanctions appear unjustified and are delegitimized. At the same time, these claims further mistrust in the federal government's competence, thus attaching greater credibility and trustfulness to the AfD.

As the analysis has shown, the AfD appropriates already persisting social and political grievances in its communications. It thus exploits its audience's receptiveness to simple and straightforward solutions in the context of a complex geopolitical situation for its own purposes. In the context of this research, this means that narratives of Russian state propaganda are deliberately linked to these grievances and are integrated into the AfD's strategy. The AfD adapts these narratives to the German context, i.e., domesticates them, in order to offer a

solution to the grievances or to delegitimize the government's actions. Central means of domestication are both the de- and recontextualization of statements, demonization of domestic actors, the selective use of expert knowledge and data, such as survey results. The AfD also makes extensive use of emotions by emotionally charging their statements, thus exploiting sentiments that are already present within society for the purpose of mobilization.

7. Results and Conclusion

This thesis investigated how local political actors utilize foreign propaganda for their own purposes. As demonstrated, propagandistic narratives are utilized by tying them into issues that are considered politically and societally relevant. Through means of re- and decontextualization of these issues, the narratives are adapted to the social context and thus supplement and reinforce the argumentation of political actors.

As the case of the AfD has shown, the strategies the party utilizes in this context are consistent with its overarching communication strategy. As discussed in the first section of this thesis, the party's communication highly relies on the simplification of complex topics, the distortion of facts by means of re- and decontextualization of topics, statements and assertions, and the emotional charging of societally relevant matters. The propagandistic narratives are adapted to this strategy and used to back the AfD's argumentation. Correspondingly, by these means, certain enemy images or concrete existential threats are conjured that are then used as a basis for offering a supposed solution to complex matters. Through this strategy, the AfD establishes an image of itself as a supposed "problem-solving party" and supposed alternative to the mainstream.

Noticeable in the AfD's domestication of propagandistic narratives is their reliance on propagandistic techniques in both the reproduction of the narratives and their communication in general. For example, in its communication, the AfD frequently repeats of its core narratives, claims, and self-attributions. As noted by Kupiecki et al (2025), this is a central tool of propaganda, as narratives must be frequently repeated to have a lasting effect on the formation of opinion. Besides, parallels between the communicative strategies and the mode of action of strategies of international propaganda can be observed, as shown in the example of RT in the second chapter. To provide an example, the AfD adapts its narratives to a concrete context and the target groups of its communication, thus obscuring their origins.

Overall, parallels between the AfD's communication strategy regarding its domestication of Russian state propaganda and strategies of international propaganda were observed as prominent in the analysis. However, while broadcasters such as RT are clearly channels of international propaganda and mainly serve the purpose to influence public opinion abroad, the AfD's communication serves different purposes. As the analysis has demonstrated, the propagandistic narratives and their domestication to the German context are mainly a means to an end. It is indicated that the AfD is adopting the domestication strategies observable in international propaganda strategies in its communication to increase the effectiveness and reach of its own statements and positions.

This shows that the AfD is not a mere "puppet of the Kremlin". The party has fostered close ties to the Russian government and has in the past repeatedly been used by the Kremlin to exert influence on German society and politics (Shekhovtsov, 2022; Belton et al, 2023). However, regarding its communication strategy, the AfD is pursuing its own intentions in the domestication of the narratives. The reproduction and domestication are hereby part of an overarching strategy to disseminate and establish its own positions and to mobilize its (potential) electorate. Thus, domestication is a consciously employed strategic approach to further the AfD's own means and intentions. Hence, it is likely that the party diverts from the domestication of the narratives if other strategies become more effective for the achievement of the party's goals. Considering that mainly those narratives were domesticated that could be linked to prevailing societal sentiments, this assumption is strengthened.

The analysis of the AfD's communication strategy has revealed that political actors primarily engage with propagandistic narratives that can be tied into discourse strands that dominate the societal and political debate and are thus perceived as relevant by its audience. This demonstrates that the connection to dominant local topics forms the foundation of domestication. This aligns with the theoretical assumptions on domestication by Ji et al (2024). Here, the scholars have observed a utilization of news events by political actors by tying them into domestic policy issues. There are also parallels in the way these narratives and news events are domesticated. As Ji et al (2024) have identified, narratives are both utilized selectively and framed in a certain way using different tones. The AfD domesticates the propagandistic narratives in a similar way. This means that it does not just reproduce the narratives but adapts

them in such a manner that it furthers its own argumentation and thus its overarching political aims.

As this shows, this thesis contributes to the research on domestication through its focus on the domestication of foreign propagandistic narratives by domestic political actors. Although the application of domestication theory to international propaganda is not new, existing research does not focus on the exact strategies and mechanisms used by political actors to adapt international propaganda to the domestic context (Innes et al, 2021). This thesis addresses this gap and demonstrates the precise mechanisms of domestication in this context.

However, this thesis also has limitations. Since the data basis was limited to Facebook posts and thus only reflects a part of the AfD's online communication, the results are only representative to a limited extent. The restriction to a specific party spectrum and the regional limitation to Germany also contribute to the fact that the results have only limited general significance. Nevertheless, this research provides insight into the mechanisms and strategies involved in the domestication of international propaganda.

The core assumption of this thesis is that foreign propagandistic narratives are utilized by domestic politicians for their own benefit. Future research could connect to this assumption. By considering greater timespans than used for this research and by investigating and comparing different countries and political parties, this assumption could be strengthened.

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