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The AfD within the AfD: Radical Right Intra-Party Competition and Ideational Change

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Abstract

The normalization of radical right (RR) politics fosters opportunities for RR parties, but can also facilitate intra-party conflicts over the 'true' version of the shared party ideology. Previous research has highlighted two factors that influence ideational change within RR parties: contextual conditions and the formal power of intra-party factions. Yet, surprisingly, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) progressively radicalized to the right and witnessed the increased influence of its extremist grouping Der Flügel, despite contextual normalization pressures and the grouping's lower formal power. Analysing three crucial conflicts within the AfD between 2013 and 2021, we show how intra-party competition additionally plays into nativist party radicalization. Flügel balanced contextual and 'hard' power disadvantages by fostering its 'soft' power as 'the true party within the party'. Simultaneously, this power was cemented by more established AfD actors who used Flügel's ideas against other competitors for office. Our conclusions have important implications for comparative research on competition within and between RR parties.

In recent decades, radical right (RR) parties and politics have moved from the margins to the mainstream, and in some cases from mainstream to power. The normalization of the RR, driven by accommodative reactions by some conventional competitors, as well as by active attempts by RR parties to broaden the acceptance and reputation of their nativist ideology, constitutes a major trend in the most recent wave of RR politics (Akkerman et al. 2016; Mudde 2019). While rhetorical attempts to appear as 'normal' parties have become a particularly useful mobilization tool for RR organizations, normalization does not come without risks (Froio 2018; Pytlas 2022). Most notably, it opens RR parties to internal conflicts between activists with different, more 'fundamentalist', (relatively) 'realist' or 'opportunist' orientations (Art 2011; Kitschelt 1989).

Indeed, several newer and older, less and more centralized RR parties (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016), including the Austrian Freedom Party (Freiheitliche

Partei Österreichs – FPÖ), the Dutch Forum for Democracy (Forum voor Democratie – FvD) or the Finns Party, witnessed intra-party power struggles that interestingly did not always end with sidelining the more fundamentalist faction. The Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland – AfD) is a particularly puzzling and dynamic case (Art 2018). Since its founding in 2013, the party has experienced three major conflicts in which its fundamentalist, extreme right grouping Der Flügel (the Wing) gained increased influence in the party, while still lacking 'hard' formal power in the party board or delegate congress (Decker 2018). The AfD's attempts to portray itself as a 'normal' party were thus accompanied by the growing impact of its extreme right faction and progressive substantive radicalization further to the right (Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Häusler and Roeser 2022; Pytlas 2021). Flügel has managed to keep and increase its influence even despite its nominal 'dissolution' in 2020 after the informal grouping was put under observation by the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz – BfV).

These developments invite us to revisit the still under-researched question on how intra-party competition can play into party ideational change (Budge et al. 2010; Fagerholm 2016). Although parties operate in a shared ideological space, party factions often compete over a 'true' interpretation of their shared ideology and the best way to realize it in practice (Budge et al. 2010; Kitschelt 1989). Previous research specifically on the RR suggests two interacting factors that influence the outcomes of such struggles: the 'hard' power of different activist types to enforce or veto decisions impacting the whole party; and external conditions – such as the extent of legal sanctions and societal stigmatization, as well as reactions of *inter*party competitors (Art 2011). Normalization incentives, and especially pressure to avoid legal sanctions against the whole party, constitute unfavourable conditions for more fundamentalist activists if they do not already control the party.

Yet, how can intra-party actors impact their party's ideational profile even given unfavourable external conditions and formal power disadvantages? To explore this question, we bridge literatures on contentious politics and RR agency in interparty competition (Benford and Snow 2000; Kitschelt 1989; Minkenberg 2001) with ideational approaches to policymaking and bargaining (Béland 2009; Schimmelfennig 2001). We accordingly complement the focus on formal power resources and external conditions by analysing how intra-party actors can foster their 'soft' ideational power (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016), or their capacity to drive the interpretation of how their party should be and work. We argue that how intra-party actors contest such party ideas, and especially how more established intra-party actors react to these claims, can play into RR ideational change such as party radicalization. In other words, formally less powerful intra-party actors can balance formal disadvantages and impact their organizations more indirectly by establishing themselves as a 'true party' within the 'party-as-system' (Sartori 1976).

We illustrate our argument by exploring intra-party competition dynamics within the deviating case (Gerring 2007) of the AfD. We perform a process-tracing analysis of competing messages and interactions of relevant intra-party actors during three crucial intra-party conflicts between 2013 and 2021. We find that Flügel was able to balance disadvantageous intra-party power constellations and unfavourable external conditions by building up its ideational power as the 'true AfD within the AfD'. By justifying its platform with the anti-establishment profile that the AfD

used in *inter*party competition, Flügel established itself as a relevant player at the cost of its *intra*-party competitors, equated with external adversaries. Yet the key role in fostering Flügel's ideational power was played by party leaders who used its claims against other competitors for office. This proved vital for Flügel's attempts to sustain intra-party conflicts and withstand increasing external constraints. In consequence, the AfD's rhetorical normalization coincided with the cementing of power of its extreme right faction and substantive radicalization further to the right, rather than the opposite. These findings have important implications for comparative research on competition within and between RR parties.

Radical right intra-party competition and ideational change

To understand how RR intra-party competition can play into ideational change, we build on the perspective on parties as 'party-as-system, … a system whose parts are the party subunits' (Sartori 1976: 73). Just as a party system consists of parties as subunits, parties themselves are also 'an aggregate of individuals forming constellations of rival groups, … a loose confederation of sub-parties' (Sartori 1976: 72). Accordingly, parties are 'groups composed of several factions in constant struggle over the party line' (Fagerholm 2016: 506). Ideas on how a party should be and work allow intra-party actors to shape broader party identity, which also informs party goals and specific policies (Budge et al. 2010). Intra-party factions hence often seek to impose their own version of shared party ideology and preferred strategy to realize it in practice on the whole party (Budge et al. 2010; Kitschelt 1989). Particularly in anti-establishment parties, classical research highlights the role of intra-party competition between activists with different, less or more fundamentalist orientations in influencing the overarching party line (Art 2011; Kitschelt 1989).

While RR parties are united by their ideological understanding as a nativist counter-force to egalitarian and pluralist principles of democracy (Minkenberg 2001; Mudde 2019), they are thus not free of internal conflicts (Art 2011). Generally, struggles over shared party ideology tend to be more intense early in the party life cycle (Loxbo 2011) – for example where a more heterogeneous anti-establishment newcomer includes RR intra-party actors. Yet, intra-party competition over ideational dominance can also unfold in older, more centralized and ideologically consolidated RR parties (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016). These struggles usually involve conflicts over strategies. We understand 'strategies' in broader terms as less or more planned goal-oriented ideas on how to translate party ideology and other priorities into political reality. Infighting over the most viable strategy to realize RR party ideology frequently leads to changes in party office and party splits (Heinisch 2003; McDonnell and Newell 2011). Intra-party strategy conflicts between more 'fundamentalist' and 'realist' RR activists can unfold over position-taking and issue (de-)emphasis. Crucially, they also involve contests over broader relational stances: on whether to portray nativism as antithetical or as a 'corrective' to the mainstream consensus, and whether or not to seek radical change by integrating the organization into the party system – for example by developing coalition potential (Kitschelt 1989; Pytlas 2022; Zulianello 2020).

Previous research underscored two interacting factors that influence the outcomes of intra-party competition in RR parties: intra-party actor constellations

that can determine the party line through formal power resources, particularly the propensity to enforce or veto decisions in central party institutions; and external opportunity structures, such as legal repressions or the extent of the party's sociopolitical stigmatization that can influence which ideational direction is perceived as viable (Art 2011). While several RR parties institutionalize away from strict 'charismatic leadership', most of them remain strongly centralized organizations where the leadership concentrates power to the detriment of intra-party democracy (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016). Yet, this does not mean that RR intra-party competition is irrelevant. In some RR parties (e.g. the AfD), relatively dispersed power relations and the importance of the party congress in decision-making (Heinze and Weisskircher 2021; Höhne 2021) are particularly favourable for intra-party competition to unfold. In more centralized parties, intra-party conflicts may instead develop on different levels and between different intra-party elites, such as within the inner leadership itself (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016).

External conditions may create incentives for pursuing different ideational trajectories and mediate activist constellations. Overall, RR actors need to avoid a too-close association with established parties. Yet they also strongly rely on broadening their perceived acceptability and reputation as 'normal' contenders (Froio 2018; Mudde 2019; Pytlas 2022). A sociopolitical cordon sanitaire impedes the viability of RR normalization and may discourage engagement by more 'realist' or 'opportunist' activists – yet only if stigmatization is early and comprehensive (Art 2011). The weakening of stigmatization facilitates RR attempts at normalization and increases the propensity of nominally less fundamentalist activists to dominate party organizations (Art 2011). On the other hand, normalization incentives and especially the much more pressing urgency to avoid legal sanctions constitute unfavourable conditions for extreme right activists if they do not already control the party.

However, the impact of external conditions is not automatic. Intra-party actors can attempt to navigate trade-offs between different perceived opportunities, as well as defy contextual constraints. Here, it is important to recall that rhetorical normalization is not necessarily accompanied by substantive moderation (Akkerman et al. 2016; Froio 2018; Pytlas 2022). Nominally more realist or opportunist leaders may still seek to bridge appeals to less and more fundamentalist nativist members and voters. They nonetheless still have an interest to prevent fundamentalist actors from actually controlling the party (Art 2011). On the other hand, the fact that formally powerful activists might see it as useful or necessary to normalize party appeals does not have to be perceived as a challenge by more fundamentalist activists as long as this approach also shields them. Fundamentalist actors might nonetheless engage in intra-party conflicts if they perceive that rhetorical normalization might 'spill over' towards substantive changes, or be used by their competitors to cement their control over the party.

While external conditions and formal power resources remain an important part of the puzzle, we hence also need to account more closely for how intra-party factions argue about their party. Research at the inter-party level shows that RR actors can influence the political agenda in more informal and indirect ways, even prior to obtaining pronounced parliamentary presence or executive power (Minkenberg 2001). This impact relates to the ability to foster one's 'soft' ideational power

(Carstensen and Schmidt 2016), which in our context means the discursive capacity to shape or even dominate the interpretation of the party's overarching principles. Ideational power unfolds through persuasive appeals to shared collective norms, but also through 'shaming' competitors, or accusing them of betraying such shared norms (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016; Schimmelfennig 2001). In addition to the impact of the RR in interparty competition, such ideational processes have been shown to play crucially into outcomes of policymaking (Béland 2009) or intergovernmental bargaining (Schimmelfennig 2001), particularly when actors lack the 'hard' power to realize their preferences.

Applying these observations to intra-party competition helps us to understand how even formally weaker intra-party actors can play into party ideational change. Intra-party competition involves contests over how an ideal 'party-as-system' (Sartori 1976) should be and work. Intra-party actors thus compete over the dominant interpretation of party principles, as well as securing ownership of this interpretation. Two factors facilitate the success of formally weaker intra-party actors in such struggles: their ability to shape resonant ideas about the party, and the promotion of these ideas by more established intra-party actors (Benford and Snow 2000; Béland 2009; Minkenberg 2001).

First, ideas become more influential when RR challengers manage to foster the resonance, or broader legitimacy and credibility, of their own positions at the cost of their competitors (Benford and Snow 2000; Minkenberg 2001). With this goal, intra-party actors can attempt to turn claims used by the party in interparty competition against intra-party adversaries. Capitalizing on the character of parties as 'party-as-system', they can try to appropriate anti-establishment and radical ideas of the whole RR party with their specific interpretation and translate them into intra-party competition. Thereby, they position themselves as a 'true party within the party': the guardian of the party's 'founding myth' against intra-party competitors, equated with interparty adversaries. Such ideational processes may unfold in new parties when ideas on party identity are vaguer. But the intra-party use of anti-establishment rhetoric can also impact the party later on, even in conventional parties (Watts and Bale 2019), if such narratives enjoy broader resonance and the current leadership fails to uphold the dominance of its own interpretations.

Second, the ideational power of intra-party challengers is crucially facilitated when more established – formally and/or informally more powerful – actors lend them reputation by promoting their ideas, for example for their own competitive gains (Art 2011; Béland 2009; Minkenberg 2001). If the original owners find it useful or necessary, they can in turn accuse established actors of not realizing their accommodated ideas in practice (Pytlas 2021). This fosters the ability of formally less powerful actors to contest more established intra-party actors on their own turf and to portray themselves as defenders of an already dominant party idea. In turn, their competitors or former allies become 'rhetorically entrapped' (Schimmelfennig 2001) by their previous commitment to the version of party ideology they themselves helped establish. This limits their potential to openly oppose the owners of the now dominant party idea (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016). By co-opting ideas of their formally less powerful contestants, more established intra-party actors hence assist the former to build up their 'soft' ideational power, in consequence fostering their influence on party ideational change.

The case of the AfD and Flügel

The remainder of this article illustrates our argument by analysing intra-party competition in the German RR AfD. We place particular focus on the AfD's extreme right informal grouping, Der Flügel, with its most prominent figurehead Björn Höcke. We explore how the formally weaker extreme right Flügel could contribute to the AfD's substantive radicalization despite contextual pressures on party leaders to normalize the party's image. Accordingly, we observe the AfD as a 'deviant case', or one where the outcome diverges from prior general theoretical expectations (Gerring 2007). We apply explaining-outcome process-tracing (Beach and Pedersen 2019) to the identified three AfD intra-party conflicts between 2013 and 2021. These constitute critical junctures most likely to make the causal mechanisms visible.

In line with this process-tracing approach we proceed in two steps. First, we introduce our deviating case, evaluating the AfD's radicalization against external conditions (reactions of other parties and state authorities), as well as the intra-party formal power of respective challenging activists (in terms of their relative faction size and power in the federal party board). As data on party factionalism is generally still scarce (Fagerholm 2016), we gauge the trends holistically by evaluating measurements and assessments from available academic literature and media reports. Triangulating these various data points helps us to safeguard the plausibility of our evaluations. Second, we explore mechanisms behind Flügel's potential to build up ideational power, and its consequences for the previously assessed AfD radicalization (details below). To account for mediated and unmediated statements made by relevant AfD intra-party elite competitors in different arenas to the broader intra-party public we triangulate various sources, including faction manifestos, party-close and mainstream media, activists' social media channels, as well as public and party congress speeches.

The AfD was founded in February 2013 by heterogeneous actors that fundamentally contested established politics from conservative, neoliberal and RR positions (Berbuir et al. 2015). Before 2022 the party had faced three major intra-party power struggles. The first one was initiated by a Flügel manifesto contributing to the establishment of a joint electoral list of various RR currents, including frontrunner Frauke Petry. It resulted in the split of the dominant neoliberal AfD faction in 2015 after party co-chair Bernd Lucke lost his chairmanship to Petry. The second power struggle unfolded in 2017 over Petry's motion to bind the party to an office-seeking realpolitik strategy. In the wake of the conflict against Flügel, which also involved its established allies such as co-chair Jörg Meuthen, Petry left the party. The third conflict crystallized in 2020 after the BfV classified Flügel as extreme right, which led to a nominal dissolution of the (still informally organized) Flügel and the exclusion of one of its main figureheads, Andreas Kalbitz. However, this did not halt the increasing power of Flügel, its ability to directly shape the 2021 election manifesto and the departure of Meuthen in 2022.

Multiple analyses of the AfD's issue salience and positions in manifestos, social media communications and press releases show that the growing influence of Flügel was accompanied by the AfD's progressive shift towards core RR cultural issues and further to the right (Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Decker 2018; Franzmann 2016;

Gessler and Hunger 2021; Häusler and Roeser 2022). Furthermore, the AfD did not become integrated in the party system (Zulianello 2020) and with time consolidated its substantive strategy of fundamental opposition (Häusler and Roeser 2022). The AfD's substantive radicalization unfolded, although in the German context the RR continues to be particularly reliant on its broader perception as a 'normal' party. RR and especially more extreme right actors in Germany continually face comparatively strong societal stigmatization (Art 2018). From the start, RR currents in the AfD benefited from the reputational shield provided by its prominent neoliberal actors (Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Franzmann 2016). The share of normalizing claims in the AfD's radical statements (average of legitimacy-oriented mainstreaming and credibility-oriented streamlining) increased from 68% in 2013 to 83% in 2017 (Pytlas 2022). After 2017, the party continued to enhance its reputational shield. This is best symbolized by its attempts to portray itself as 'the party of the Constitution', as well as by its 2021 Bundestag campaign slogan 'Germany. But normal' (Häusler and Roeser 2022). Yet, while the AfD continued to depict itself as acceptable and respectable, it did not moderate its substantive nativist profile (Pytlas 2021).

Regarding external conditions, the relatively strong societal stigma contributed to an ostracizing stance against the AfD's party organization. In 2013, German parties tended to ignore or distance the newcomer (Niedermayer 2015). Despite singular attempts to break the cordon sanitaire in the east, the AfD's ostracization remained in place. For example, conventional parties in German state parliaments have progressively distanced themselves from AfD factions, particularly where those were perceived as closer to Flügel (Heinze 2020). At the same time, RR politics has increasingly permeated mainstream debates (Heinze 2020). Party press releases indicate that between 2015 and 2018 the Christian Democratic Union (and to some extent the liberal Free Democratic Party) meandered around its position on immigration, while its Bavarian sister party the Christian Social Union progressively co-opted more anti-immigration stances (Gessler and Hunger 2021). Increasingly demarcative stances on immigration by some conventional parties at the EU level also offered the AfD possibilities to capitalize on emerging opportunities (Pytlas 2021). This less restrictive context of the second conflict allowed more 'realist' activists to stick with the party even given its relatively stable ostracization. Still, the mixed incentives also created the potential for intra-party conflict on whether to use the chance to impact policy through taking office and to seek not only rhetorical but also the more substantive integration of the AfD into the party system.

By 2020 most German parties had turned more decisively to more adversarial positions. External conditions became increasingly difficult for the AfD after the change in BfV leadership in 2018. Under its former director, the BfV had been widely criticized for long treating the extreme right as a mere bagatelle (ZDF 2021). Since 2018, some State Offices for the Protection of the Constitution put Flügel under observation. In early 2019, the Federal Office classified Flügel as a suspected extreme right case and initiated the evaluation of the whole AfD. This put party leaders under much more pressure to avoid the entire organization being monitored.

The growing influence of Flügel and related AfD radicalization would perhaps be less surprising if the grouping had already formally dominated the party. Nonetheless, Flügel has increasingly impacted the party while holding only regional strongholds in some, mainly eastern German state associations. External observers and AfD politicians themselves estimated that as late as 2019 roughly 20–30% of party members and 24% of AfD Bundestag MPs were affiliated with the grouping (Lauer 2019). Furthermore, RR actors in the first conflict, and Flügel later on, still did not control the federal party executive (Decker 2018). While Flügel representatives increased their influence in the party board after 2015, it still did not have the power to veto unfavourable developments. For example, even in 2020, the grouping could not prevent the exclusion of one of its most important activists and his replacement in the board by an opponent of Flügel.

We should not overlook the higher formal strength and electoral performance of RR activists and Flügel in eastern Germany. Yet, first, the formal power of respective radicalizing factions comes closest to explaining the AfD's ideational change only in the first conflict. In 2015, the direct radicalizing thrust came from different RR activists who fostered their formal power by uniting under a joint electoral list. Nonetheless, the coalition was crafted only as the conflict unfolded, with RR frontrunner Petry initially signalling support for Lucke (Franzmann 2016). Second, Flügel's regional strength was balanced by the fact that eastern German activists (without former East Berlin) constituted only 20% of AfD members (Niedermayer 2019). Even at the onset of the third conflict, the grouping thus still had less formal power to directly block potential unfavourable decisions in the federal congress. Third, while less fundamentalist activists left the AfD in the first and the third conflict (Häusler and Roeser 2022; Schmidt 2022b; Schulte-Cloos and Rüttenauer 2018), these changes took place mainly in the wake rather than prior to the conflicts' outcome. Overall, our insights suggest that the formal strength of respective radicalizing activists constitutes a symptom rather than the main cause of the AfD's radicalization.

Finally, parties respond to recent national elections, especially if they have resulted in considerable electoral loss (Fagerholm 2016). The AfD's failure to enter the Bundestag in 2013 thus necessarily plays into the first intra-party conflict. Furthermore, while the AfD has since been successful across the country, eastern Germany remains the party's electoral stronghold. Since its first state-level electoral breakthroughs in Saxony, Brandenburg and Thuringia in 2014, the AfD has achieved its best election results in the five eastern German states, including 27.5% in Saxony in 2019 (Weisskircher 2020). However, regional-level performance cannot explain the outcome of the second conflict between two eastern German leaders. Both Höcke and Petry achieved comparable strong results in the 2014 regional elections. Second, throughout all three conflicts, intra-party actors still needed to argue that their regional successes could be translated to first-order federal-level elections. Third, competing intra-party actors can themselves attempt to argue about what constitutes considerable electoral shocks, and who exactly is to blame. As we shall see, competing actors often use such arguments in an attempt to foster their credibility at the cost of their contenders.

Overall, our insights suggest that external conditions and the formal strength of radicalizing factions are important but not sufficient to fully understand the AfD's

progressive radicalization across all three conflicts. External conditions allowed the party relatively more flexibility only in the second conflict. Yet in order to defuse its broader stigma, party leadership continually relied on fostering the AfD's reputation as a 'normal' party. The increasingly restrictive context after 2018 has put party leaders under much more urgent pressure to avoid the AfD's association with the extreme right. This created particularly unfavourable conditions for Flügel, which did not dominate federal party institutions even as the third conflict unfolded. Of course, this does not mean that formal power, contextual conditions or electoral performance did not matter. As we shall see, these factors interact crucially with discursive processes within intra-party competition itself (Budge et al. 2010).

Intra-party competition in the AfD and ideational power

Continuing our argument, in the second step we thus further account for the role of intra-party competition and the propensity of Flügel to develop soft ideational power. To identify whether and how actors foster ideational power we focus on their use of legitimacy- and credibility-oriented claims, as well as their interactions with other actors. While the former provide clues that actors engaged in contests over ideational power, the latter point to the mechanisms behind their impact on the party (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016; Minkenberg 2001).

We identify legitimacy claims as appeals to compatibility with 'true' party principles (e.g. norm validity or acceptability) (Schmidt 2013). Credibility claims instead appeal to the plausibility and viability of translating party ideals into political reality (e.g. effectiveness, competence or respectability) (Benford and Snow 2000). To identify how formally less powerful intra-party actors can foster their soft power, we build on the previously discussed ideational approaches to competition, bargaining and policy change (Béland 2009; Carstensen and Schmidt 2016; Schimmelfennig 2001). We accordingly explore the potential of actors' ideas to structure intra-party conflicts; to become a dominant norm that cannot be easily opposed without risking own reputation; and actors' propensity to defend their ownership of these ideas. In the final step, we link these processes to the AfD's substantive radicalization.

The Erfurter Resolution and the departure of Bernd Lucke

The first critical AfD intra-party conflict surfaced after the unsuccessful 2013 Bundestag campaign, and subsequent successes in 2014 Landtag elections achieved by representatives of RR currents (Alexander Gauland in Brandenburg, Frauke Petry in Saxony and Björn Höcke in Thuringia). In addition to ideological strife, ongoing disputes revolved around the party's relationship with the RR Pegida movement (Franzmann 2016).

The conflict unfolded in full after Flügel, led by AfD state leader Höcke, constituted its activity in March 2015 by adopting the 'Erfurter Resolution'. With an open subscription list, Flügel's website became a place for AfD supporters to express their endorsement of a more nativist party line. The manifesto codified the still vague founding myth of the AfD in RR terms as 'a principled patriotic and democratic

alternative to the established parties' that becomes a 'resistance movement against the continued erosion of Germany's sovereignty and identity' (Höcke and Poggenburg 2015). The resolution also portrayed the AfD as a bottom-up movement antithetical to established parties. It indirectly equated the dominant neoliberal Lucke camp with the AfD's nemesis – the political establishment – and argued that the party 'without need adapted increasingly to established politics: to technocracy, cowardice, and betrayal of our country's interests' (Höcke and Poggenburg 2015). The document implied that the leadership betrays the true ideas central to key voters and engaged members. It also depicted Flügel's strategy as crucial for regional election successes (Höcke and Poggenburg 2015). By labelling itself as the alternative to Lucke, Flügel thus framed itself as both legitimate and the credible defender of 'true' AfD party identity.

Lucke's faction reacted by issuing its 'Deutschland Resolution'. In this, it did not appeal to party identity but rather warned against ideological radicalization. In terms of credibility, the document did not defuse RR claims of electoral effectiveness but underscored the need for 'competence, realism, and cogency' (Kölmel et al. 2015). Hence, this discourse fuelled the exact narrative established by Flügel in the Erfurter Resolution – the neoliberal faction as party establishment betraying party identity – and did not engage in counterbalancing the electoral credibility claims of RR actors.

The Erfurter Resolution at the same time provided a unifying blueprint that was adopted by federal intra-party leaders who associated themselves with an RR AfD as such, rather than specifically with Flügel. From the beginning, it was supported by one of the AfD deputy chairs and most popular figureheads, Alexander Gauland. Gauland's AfD Brandenburg described Lucke as unwilling to 'take the substantive positions that are important to the majority of the base' (AfD Brandenburg 2015). Only two weeks before the Essen congress, party co-leader Frauke Petry, who had initially signalled her support for Lucke's leadership bid (Franzmann 2016), officially joined the RR alliance as its frontrunner. Three days before the crucial vote, Petry stated that the central leadership 'must not make factual or personnel decisions to please its political opponents. The federal board must communicate the programme determined by the grassroots, and it must do so credibly. The party leadership should be loyal to AfD's base, program and ideals – not the other way around' (Petry 2015). Thus, although Petry did not sign the Erfurter Resolution, the statement evoked the manifesto's unifying party idea and signalled that the neoliberal faction was isolated in the federal board.

Overall, in the first conflict Flügel was able to broaden the resonance of its ideas, influencing the party agenda and alliance-building. AfD activists have become significantly polarized over the ideational differences codified in the Erfurter Resolution, yet interestingly only as the conflict unfolded among the elite (Jäger 2021). This suggests that divisive identities among the rank and file became activated by the party elite during the conflict itself. Concurrently, Flügel's ideational impact was mediated by other RR actors who used the manifesto's unifying ideas to consolidate their joint electoral list. In consequence of losing the leadership contest to Petry, Lucke left the party, together with a large share of his supporters (Schulte-Cloos and Rüttenauer 2018). The conflict marked the last step in the AfD's shift towards core RR ideology (Arzheimer and Berning 2019).

The Zukunftsantrag and the departure of Frauke Petry

While the AfD consolidated around RR ideology and used it to politicize the humanitarian crisis from 2015, it remained riddled by internal strife. The second conflict unfolded prior to the 2017 Bundestag election. Flügel activists increasingly interfered with the AfD's normalizing rhetoric. In January 2017, Höcke's Dresden speech led to a wide public outcry. Referring to the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, Höcke said that Germans 'plant a monument of shame in the heart of their capital' and called for a '180-degree reversal on our politics of remembrance' (Art 2018). The speech and ensuing debate about the AfD's extremism threatened the attempts by intra-party elite actors to position the party as a serious 'bourgeois' contender in the party system.

In reaction, two weeks before the 2017 Cologne congress, Frauke Petry and her supporters published the 'Zukunftsantrag' ('Motion for the Future') manifesto, which demanded that the party was formally bound to an office-seeking strategy of realpolitik and filed a motion to expel Höcke. The Zukunftsantrag demanded a 'crucial strategic decision', arguing that the AfD 'will have to take responsibility in the foreseeable future if we want to return the country to its former strength' (Petry et al. 2017). It argued that the party could not keep waiting for 'our political opponents, of all people, to again bethink themselves of the values which only the AfD still stands for programmatically' (Petry et al. 2017). It also criticized Flügel's opposition strategy as ineffective in pursuing the shared idea of fundamental political change.

Thus, Flügel was portrayed as problematic mainly because it prevented the AfD from appearing as a coalitionable and serious contender. The document did not clearly confront Flügel on ideological terms and was careful not to oppose the Erfurter Resolution's idea of the AfD as an antithetical alternative to the mainstream. Instead, it highlighted the advantages of office-seeking realpolitik over Flügel's more long-term and non-pragmatic strategy.

In reaction, Flügel at first again attempted to gain the higher ground by portraying itself as the defender of 'true' party identity against both the internal and external political establishment:

> Petry's power struggles and intrigues … are the same methods that we denounce with the old-parties. … What we wanted was a different style in politics! … We need to remind that a party leader or delegate should not only follow their preferences but needs to follow the consensus preferences of those from whom he received his mandate. (Der Flügel 2017)

Yet this time, the Petry camp tried to pre-empt Flügel's attacks. Unlike Lucke, they turned Flügel's arguments against the grouping itself. Petry made sure to justify her direction as supported by the party base. In a letter to AfD members sent in the name of the party board shortly after the Dresden speech, she noted that the resulting public debate 'is not a democratic decision of party basis, but was yet again forced onto it by B. Höcke' (Petry 2017). Similar to the Erfurter Resolution, the Zukunftsantrag website featured a list of signatories and their reasons for support. The credible threat of the motion's success put Flügel on the defensive. Shortly

before the congress, Flügel adjusted its arguments. It began justifying its strategy not as contradictory to Petry's claims, but as 'true realpolitik': 'the current direction of fundamental opposition is very much realpolitik and by no means excludes a future coalition with other parties. But not too early and from a position of own strength!' (Poggenburg 2017).

Petry's power play had every chance to succeed for three reasons: her own electoral success and the AfD's falling numbers in the polls, her formal position in the party and support from associations with large membership, as well as her attempts to defuse Flügel's arguments. Still, the decisive turn in this conflict was brought about by Flügel's established allies – including co-chair Jörg Meuthen.

As Petry had against Lucke, Meuthen also adopted Flügel's arguments against his co-chair. At the start of the 2017 congress, the delegates voted against putting additional motions on the agenda. This included Petry's Zukunftsantrag. Yet, just as the conflict seemed to have been defused for the time being, in his subsequent opening speech Meuthen launched an unexpected harsh attack on Petry, using Flügel's rhetoric to publicly contest his co-chair. The speech deployed anti-establishment tropes that indirectly, but clearly, challenged Petry's political skills and strategic foresight. Meuthen taunted those who fearfully trust mainstream opinion polls rather than party supporters, invalidating Petry's interpretation of electoral shocks. The speech used the claims of the Erfurter Resolution, underscoring the difference between 'old parties' and the AfD as a grassroots movement requiring fervent and courageous activists (Meuthen 2017). It also applied arguments articulated by Flügel just days before the congress. It denounced the strategy dilemma as fallacious and described Flügel's strategy as the truly credible and responsible realpolitik. It explicitly renounced any attempt to enter coalitions with conventional parties, justifying this as 'not a lack of realpolitik, but a wise and necessary waiting on the time when our position – and this is already ongoing – once and for all gains majority appeal' (Meuthen 2017).

Overall, during the second conflict, Flügel was put on the defensive and still relied on support from established allies. At the same time, Meuthen's speech cemented the dominance of Flügel's ideas in the party. The shaming of Petry signalled that Flügel's ideas constitute the dominant party idea, which could no longer be directly opposed without consequences for one's own reputation. Petry left the party only hours after securing her Bundestag mandate. The AfD entered the Bundestag with 12.6% of the votes.

The 'dissolution' of Flügel and the departure of Jörg Meuthen

While after the second conflict Flügel had established its ideational dominance, its external constraints had been aggravated since 2019 after the BfV classified the faction as a suspected extreme right case. This posed a challenge for the Meuthen camp, which sought to evade potential BfV monitoring of the whole party. The third intra-party conflict escalated in 2020 when the BfV classified Flügel as proven extreme right and put it under full surveillance. The party board initiated measures against Flügel, most notably 'dissolving' the (still informal) grouping and expelling one of its main actors, Andreas Kalbitz. While Flügel ultimately accepted its merely nominal dissolution, the departure of Kalbitz was a more critical blow to the

grouping, which lost a post in the federal board and an important networker crucial for fostering intra-party alliances. Flügel then intensified its direct struggle for formal power against the Meuthen faction. The two camps regularly engaged in an exchange of blows, competing for the mobilization of non-affiliated supporters.

In this conflict the Meuthen camp, which had previously committed itself to the now-dominant Flügel ideas, fell into its own trap. Höcke yet again challenged the leadership as betraying 'true' party identity, accusing his former allies of following a strategy of appeasement towards 'the establishment' (Höcke 2020). Meuthen and his supporters, who had themselves facilitated the dominance of Flügel's ideas, were now less able to oppose and defuse Flügel's attacks openly without losing their own credibility. Unlike Petry, Meuthen did not primarily attempt to confront Flügel head-on but rather scapegoated the external political establishment. He justified the dissolution of Flügel as a bureaucratic necessity to evade BfV investigation rather than as a decision about 'true' party ideas (Wendt and Meuthen 2020). Similarly, Meuthen's arguments that Flügel's regional electoral successes could not work on a national level (Wendt and Meuthen 2020) contrasted with his previous endorsement of its long-term strategy as 'true realpolitik'.

As the confrontation intensified, Flügel's opponents furthermore found it hard to mobilize non-affiliated supporters against the formally weaker, but ideationally dominant grouping. In 2020, one elite activist stated that 'having Flügel against you, you don't need to run in [internal] elections at all' (Wehner 2020). Another commentary noted that despite their numerical advantage, less fundamentalist activists felt intimidated by the consolidated Flügel, citing an AfD MP stating, 'The problem is this goddamn opportunism. … I want to keep my post, so I keep silent' (Schmidt 2022a).

In this third conflict, Flügel diminished the potential of Meuthen and his supporters to associate themselves with Flügel's ideas. Due to Flügel's ideational dominance, its competitors could no longer easily oppose the norms they had themselves promoted. In effect, Flügel began to translate its soft ideational dominance into 'harder' institutional power. Related conflicts escalated immediately after the 2021 election when the AfD re-entered the Bundestag with 10.3% of the vote. Meuthen urged that the result should not be glossed, criticizing the party manifesto and the frontrunners. The latter respectively praised the party's performance, and indirectly rebuked the chair (Der Spiegel 2021). Meuthen left the party in January 2022. At the subsequent 2022 party congress in Riesa, Flügel secured a formal majority on the party executive for the first time (Kiesel 2022).

Summary: Flügel's ideational power and the AfD's radicalization

Summing up, our analysis suggests that the propensity of Flügel to establish ideational power facilitated the AfD's progressive substantive radicalization (Figure 1). Flügel's ideational impact was at first mediated by intra-party elite allies that committed themselves to Flügel's vision of the 'true' party idea. The Erfurter Resolution allowed Flügel to indirectly influence the intra-party agenda and facilitate RR alliance-building. The departure of neoliberal activists and subsequent adoption of a nativist manifesto in 2016 (Schulte-Cloos and Rüttenauer 2018) did not precede the intra-party conflict, but was rather its consequence. This also holds for
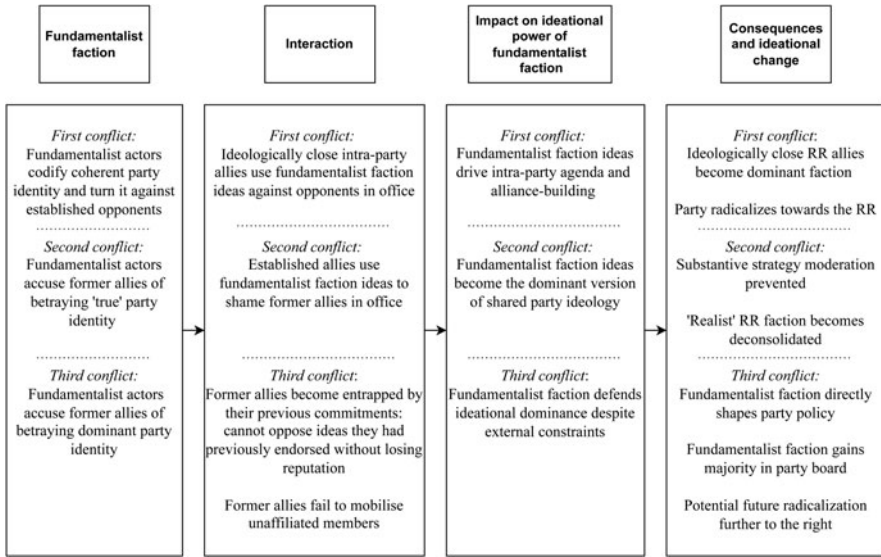
Figure 1. The Ideational Power of the Fundamentalist Faction and Radical Right Party Ideational Change in the AfD 2013–2021
Source: Authors' own composition.

the departure of Petry and prevented subsequent strategic moderation. Similarly, the most recent wave of party exits, particularly in the western associations since 2020 (Häusler and Roeser 2022; Schmidt 2022b), seems rather the result of Flügel's ability to hold onto its soft power despite an increasingly restrictive context.

In the third conflict, former allies who had themselves facilitated Flügel's ideational dominance became entrapped by their previous arguments. This allowed the grouping to impact the party more directly. Even though Flügel did not formally dominate party institutions, during the 2021 party congress it put its mark on the party's manifesto. The successful motions submitted by Flügel activists included a de-facto migration ban, Germany's exit from the EU and gave support to the positions of the conspirationist Querdenker movement that emerged during the COVID-19 public health crisis (Häusler and Roeser 2022). Thus, although the AfD did not backtrack from its self-depiction as 'normal' during the 2021 campaign, the policies that it normalized through its rhetoric became even more radical and shifted prominently in the direction of Flügel. Amid looming formal BfV classification of the entire AfD as a suspected extreme right case, the 2022 congress in Riesa for the first time granted Flügel a majority in the party board (Kiesel 2022).

Conclusions

Since its foundation in 2013, the RR AfD has attempted to normalize its positions in the political mainstream. Yet despite contextual normalization pressures, the party also experienced three major intra-party conflicts where the extreme right grouping Der Flügel established its influence over formally more powerful

intra-party actors. Exploring the puzzle behind the party's radicalization, we have complemented seminal research on the role of formal power resources and external opportunities for developments within RR party organizations (Art 2011) with insights on contentious politics and RR interparty behaviour (Benford and Snow 2000; Kitschelt 1989; Minkenberg 2001) as well as ideational approaches to policy-making and intergovernmental bargaining (Béland 2009; Schimmelfennig 2001). We showed that how intra-party competitors argue about the 'true' version of shared party ideology and preferred strategy (Budge et al. 2010; Kitschelt 1989), and particularly how more established intra-party actors react to challenging claims, can play into the radicalization of nativist party organizations.

The case of the AfD demonstrates that extreme intra-party actors in RR parties can overcome formal power disadvantages and withstand external constraints by building up their 'soft' ideational power (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016). Flügel's claim to embody a 'true' AfD within the AfD turned the anti-establishment appeal that the party used in interparty competition against its intra-party adversaries. More established actors adopted Flügel's messages against other competitors for leadership, lending the grouping their own reputation. Once Flügel turned against its former intra-party allies, the latter fell into their own trap of previous commitment to the now dominant ideas of Flügel. In consequence they – and not the formally less powerful Flügel – have become progressively isolated within the party. This enlarged the potential of Flügel to withstand increasingly unfavourable external conditions and more independently drive the party's ideational shift further to the right.

Our specific results are naturally limited to our case. Yet our general observations have broader implications for the study of intra-party dynamics. Our analysis responds to the call for more research into 'how intraparty struggles shape party standpoints' (Fagerholm 2016: 508). We show that while external conditions and the relative formal power of heterogeneous activists remain important parts of the puzzle behind RR ideational change, they are not the whole story. To better understand RR ideational trajectories, and to further explore how (de)radicalization might unfold within other anti-establishment, or even conventional parties (Watts and Bale 2019), it is useful also to look more closely at how intra-party elites argue about how their party should be and work. Of course, our analysis of intra-party competition processes is only a first step, but it invites future research on how intra-party actors navigate trade-offs between different goals, defy contextual disadvantages, and how their arguments might fail under nominally favourable conditions. Our analysis also underscores the need for more studies that assess party faction power in detail, as well as map dimensions of intra-party competition using further content-analytical methods. Further analyses could also focus more on assessing activists' motivations – for example through interviews and surveys. Finally, while we focused only on ideational change, future studies should analyse the role of ideational intra-party struggles in further aspects of party development, such as institutionalization and coherence.

Our general conclusions furthermore open new avenues for comparative research on competition within and between RR parties. First, our study invites research into other cases of radicalization processes within mainstreamed RR parties, such as the Finns Party, or the FvD. Second, comparative studies can assess

different arenas and paths by which intra-party bargaining over ideational power might impact newer and older, differently organized RR parties. While in federalist parties (e.g. the FPÖ) these contests can unfold between regional and federal mid-level activists, in divided leadership parties that also do not grant much power to the congress (e.g. Flemish Interest) such conflicts may emerge within the inner leadership itself (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016). Lastly, our focus on conflicts over 'true' RR ideology and strategy contributes to exploring how interparty competition unfolds *between* competing nativist actors within the same party system, such as the Italian League and Brothers of Italy, the Party for Freedom and FvD in the Netherlands, Marine le Pen and Éric Zemmour in France, or Fidesz, Jobbik and Our Homeland in Hungary.

Finally, our observations invite future studies on broader consequences behind RR party development between radicalization and normalization. Our findings at the intra-party level add to insights that attempts by RR parties to move to the mainstream do not necessarily equal their substantive moderation (Akkerman et al. 2016). Rhetorical normalization and substantive radicalization are not mutually exclusive but can coincide. Even nominally more 'realist' or 'opportunist' RR leaders are not unlikely to retain substantive radicalism for ideological and tactical reasons – for example to appeal to different groups of nativist members and supporters. Yet even if leaders see it as useful or necessary to isolate formally less powerful fundamentalist activists, the latter can still withstand these efforts once their ideas have already become established within the party. Attempts by RR intra-party actors to rhetorically normalize the party do not necessarily impede the ability of (even more) extreme actors to profit from the same phenomenon. When RR politics is itself mainstream, extreme right actors can more easily try to depict themselves as a mere corrective to this mainstream.

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