Mainstreaming the Radical Right? The ambiguous populism of the Covid-19 Street Protest in Germany.

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ABSTRACT:

In Germany, tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets to demonstrate against the government's actions on Covid-19 since the spring of 2020. What makes these protests puzzling is their unusual heterogeneous political composition and ambiguous symbolism. This paper argues that protesters used the pandemic (and calls for “freedom” from restrictions) to bridge left- and right-wing movement frames. Importantly, though, the amplification of radical right strands of populist discourse played a central role in this frame bridging. These arguments are supported by a visual discourse analysis using photographs of demonstrators and protest materials (N=212) taken at the Berlin *Querdenken* demonstration on September 29, 2020. The implications of these findings for the mainstreaming of right-wing politics are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Covid-19, radical right, populism, social movements, mainstreaming, movement framing, visual analysis, pictorial framing, ethnography, Corona protests

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The prominence of varied crisis discourses related to the Great Recession and immigration over the past two decades helped to foster a favorable canvas for a populist radical right (PRR) success in contemporary Western societies.¹ Notable highlights of this development, such as the election of Donald Trump and the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union, were shocking for many. And still another major crisis joined the scene with the declaration of a global pandemic in 2020. As Covid-19 drastically shifted the grounds for political mobilization, it raised numerous questions about the trajectory of the PRR and the ability of protest movements to adapt to this novel terrain.²

Arguably more than its predecessors, the pandemic crisis threw a wrench in the routines of everyday life and politics. Both the virus itself and measures to prevent its spread impacted individuals across all social strata - though not always to the same extent.³ The pandemic policies of many national governments included so-called "lockdowns," which entailed stay-at-home orders and curfews, and in some cases led to months of severe restrictions on civil liberties.⁴ These stark changes in social and political routines sparked anti-lockdown protests by pandemic skeptics all over the world.⁵ In Germany, protests against the government's measures persisted for months, mobilizing thousands of people in multiple cities.⁶

Beginning in March 2020, so-called Covid-19 and/or "hygiene" protests commonly took the form of demonstration marches in major cities such as Munich, Stuttgart, Leipzig, and Berlin. These actions reached a peak when around 37,000 people took to the streets of Berlin on August 29, 2020, and a smaller group of demonstrators equipped with flags of the former German empire tried to force their way into the federal parliament building.⁷ This attempted "Storming of the Reichstag"⁸ alerted the public and authorities to the movement's ties to the PRR and potential for radicalization.⁹ What made the protests puzzling was the prevalence of co-demonstrators –

participants in the same event – displaying insignia of progressive movements, such as rainbow and peace flags. But addressing this puzzle isn't easy.

While systematically assessing a protest movement's composition and claims-making is rarely straightforward¹⁰, it is particularly difficult in the case of the pandemic skeptic or so-called anti-lockdown protests. Notably, mainstream media coverage of protest tends to be strongly influenced by the demands of newsmaking, such as the need for drama and novelty.¹¹ Similarly, alternative and social media channels tend to give unequal weight to the handful of activists who most effectively attract attention.¹² The images and messages coming out of the pandemic skeptic protests, moreover, are highly ambiguous in their inclusion of both left and right-wing claims or framing elements.¹³ Finally, most studies on these protests and their supporters rely on indirect empirical approaches and,¹⁴ to the best of this author's knowledge, only two recent studies – both conducted in the southern German city of Konstanz – draw on direct interviews with protesters.¹⁵ This paper aims to contribute to filling this gap by systematically investigating the German Covid-19 protests in terms of their relationship to developments in the PRR. Mainly, it scrutinizes whether or not the claims-making visible at the protests aligns with key features of the PRR's ideological framework. By examining the commonalities and differences in the dimension of movement framing, the study further asks if the Covid-19 protests point to the entrenchment of the PRR in the political mainstream. Drawing on theories of social movement framing processes and recent work on the role movements play in the amplification or mainstreaming of the PRR and its claims in Germany, the paper employs a visual ethnographic methodology to analyze protest materials collected at a seminal protest event of the *Querdenken* movement in Berlin on August 29, 2020.

Social movements and the populist radical right

Research shedding light on the movement side of the PRR's mobilization only began appearing fairly recently. That is, the bulk of political mobilization studies on the PRR focused on political parties and the conditions of their electoral support.¹⁶ In many of these cases, grassroots movements and formalized political groups or parties were treated almost synonymously.¹⁷ In some others, researchers emphasized the interaction effects between party success and activity in the movement sector.¹⁸ And, in the few studies honing in on movement-side dynamics, emphasis was often on placed on violent mobilization, such as the politically-motivated violence of hooligan or neo-Nazi groups.¹⁹ The increase in attention to the movement- or protest-side of PRR over the past two decades can be traced, in part, to the greater participation of social movement scholars in this topic as well as to the 'institutional' political successes of right-wing social movements like the Tea Party in the U.S., Pegida in Germany,²⁰ and Les Identitaires (Identitarian movement) in France.²¹

Regardless of shifting scholarly emphases or disciplinary divides, the concept of "mainstreaming" is useful for understanding the changing face of the PRR. It broadly captures the idea of a mono- or bi-directional process wherein radical right frames, arguments, or positions converge with those of established political actors; or one in which formerly fringe groups and/or ideas become generally accepted among a populace.²² Empirical work suggests structural and strategic dimensions of mainstreaming. Work on the structural dimension, for example, suggests voter disillusionment with traditional "mainstream" parties drives their demand for PRR framing and contributes to PRR mainstreaming.²³ Similarly, work focusing on the supply or strategic dimension points to PRR groups using popular populist discourse to communicate with the general public, for instance, as a kind of Trojan horse for strategically camouflaging a more exclusionary agenda.²⁴ Other work stresses the link between discursive and organizational

features of the political field, often highlighting the changing opportunities for radical right actors to form alliances with more moderate political groups and positions.²⁵ Mainstreaming dynamics can be examined from the macro level of transnational right-wing party networks to the micro level of frame mobilization at protest events.

Mainstreaming closely aligns with scholarly debates surrounding the post-World War II resurgence of the radical right as the “New Right.” It is argued that the radical right has undergone an organizational and ideological transformation since the 1970s.²⁶ In terms of frame alignment processes, this change can be understood as a discursive process of realigning and changing the emphasis of certain frame elements, which allowed the radical right to link different issues and events in new ways.²⁷ Thus, along with the debate on the “silent counterrevolution,”²⁸ it is highlighted that radical right-wing politics has gradually distanced itself from the rhetoric and symbolism of postwar Nazism and its organizational representatives.²⁹ More specifically, the new generation of radical right-wing actors (“New Right”) moved away from the idea of biological racism and openly anti-democratic positions in their discourse in favor of a master frame that combines “ethnonationalist xenophobia based on the doctrine of ethnopluralism with anti-political establishment populism.”³⁰

The populist underpinnings of the new master frame are considered an important driver of the New Right's political success.³¹ Cas Mudde, in his widely cited article “The Populist Zeitgeist,”³² points to the impressive momentum with which populist rhetoric has spread across the European party landscape by the early 21st century.³³ In line with many other scholars,³⁴ Mudde defines populism as an ideological construct that is not necessarily bound to a singular political direction.³⁵ And while it can serve as a springboard for radicalization, populism is not inherently associated with politically radical attitudes. At the core of this ‘thin’ ideology is the perception that the power structure of society is characterized by “two homogeneous and antagonistic

groups, 'the pure people' [and] 'the corrupt elite',' while implying that the actions of those in power are systematically in conflict with the will of an imagined set of 'the people' as a manifestation of the general will.³⁶ Accordingly, the legitimacy of populist politicization arises not only along a systemic dimension in the sense of claiming to defend a certain understanding of democracy but also along a normative dimension that views this struggle as a Manichean one between good vs. evil.

In the case of radical right populist mobilization, the anti-elitist attitude is typically expressed in strong resentment against the prevailing values represented by political, economic, and media actors, as well as academic elites.³⁷ Another central anchor of this opposition is contesting social pluralism and liberal-left identity politics (e.g., gender, race, religion) by framing the inclusion of 'negative others' as part of a secret master plan by elites to maintain their power over the silent majority of the population.³⁸ Therefore, it is not surprising that the populist radical right-wing discourse has a certain openness to conspiracy theories and belief in the so-called 'deep state.'³⁹ The idea of "the great replacement" initiated by the French writer Renaud Camus, for instance, has gained prominence in recent years by connecting to the new radical right's position on the need for cultural segregation.

The conflict of values that underlies the contemporary radical right's views on cultural segregation is embedded in populist discourse. In comparing the ideological framework of radical right parties and movements, scholars find a strong emphasis on cultural differences in terms of an assertion of cross-cultural incompatibility.⁴⁰ In contrast to the Nazi notion of a racial hierarchy, the new "ethnopluralist" paradigm maintains links to culture and land, especially within the construct of nationhood.⁴¹ This is undergirded by the premise that different cultures and their "original," often traditional values must be protected from change through mixing to better maintain social cohesion and the collective identity of each society.⁴² Within the discourse

of ethno-nationalist pluralism, religious traditions are often pointed to as an obvious manifestation of the incompatibility between ethnic groups and used to push a nativist political agenda. In this regard, Islamophobic attitudes have played a relatively longstanding role in the transformation of the radical right into the New Right (e.g., away from or a softening of antisemitism).⁴³ Nevertheless, since the 9-11 terrorist attacks and the European refugee crisis of 2015, Islamophobia has become an even more unifying ideological driver in populist radical right movement mobilization.⁴⁴

At the organizational level, scholars generally assume that movement groups play a smaller role in spurring the mobilization of the New Right than in mobilizing the leftist side of the political spectrum.⁴⁵ However, recent studies – especially those probing mobilization strategies via newer media technologies - suggest that right-wing movements are growing in prominence.⁴⁶ Social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), in facilitating the connection and coordination of individual participation in both online and real-world protest action, are shown to be important tools for politicization: radical right-wing movements, for instance, routinely use digital communication to express mistrust of mainstream media and disseminate "alternative" claims or frames for understanding current events.⁴⁷ Although there appear to be major differences in terms of the quality of involvement across countries, radical right movement groups are an integral part of both domestic and cross-national communication and mobilization infrastructures.⁴⁸ In line with the informal network-based organization typical for contemporary social movements,⁴⁹ these infrastructures represent critical networks for collectivizing and mobilizing parties and other movement actors, especially in pandemic contexts.⁵⁰ For Germany, research shows that the radical right network is “denser and much more concentrated on a few central actors” than in other European countries.⁵¹

PRR mainstreaming in pre-Covid-19 Germany

The political success of the PRR in Germany is a relatively recent phenomenon compared to other European countries (e.g., France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Austria).⁵² Scholars argue that one reason for this delay is the greater stigmatization of the radical right and sensitivity to radical right-wing discourses in German society due to the country's historical experience with National Socialism.⁵³ Another related reason can be traced back to the country's reunification in 1990.

German reunification, in combining two very different national identities (or orders of collective identification) and political regimes (or opportunity structures), largely privileged the West's model of capitalist democracy over that of the communist model of Central and Eastern Europe.⁵⁴

Against this backdrop, radical right protests, such as acts of racist violence by members of the neo-Nazi and skinhead scene,⁵⁵ rarely attained broader public support.⁵⁶

It wasn't until 2014 when the anti-Islam and anti-immigration movement known as Pegida (*"Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes"*//Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West) began mobilizing thousands of protesters for demonstration marches in the East German state of Saxony that the PRR began gaining momentum as part of the New Right.⁵⁷ With large numbers of refugees arriving from civil war-torn Syria and Chancellor Angela Merkel's push for a *"Willkommenskultur"* (welcoming culture), anti-government Pegida protests quickly spread throughout the country. However, the movement's epicenter was the city of Dresden, the capital of Saxony, where protesters took to the streets every Monday to symbolically connect their action to the 1989 protests against the socialist GDR (German Democratic Republic) regime.⁵⁸ Pegida's success in mobilizing street protests was eventually accompanied by the electoral success of the newly formed right-wing party, AfD (*"Alternative für Deutschland"*//Alternative for Germany). Founded in 2013, the AfD party managed to enter the Bundestag in 2017 by politicizing the financial and refugee crises. Thereby,

support from voters with negative attitudes towards immigrants, anti-establishment sentiment, and dissatisfaction with democracy in Germany played an important role in this electoral success.⁵⁹ Here, too, the AfD's policies found more approval among East German voters than among voters in the Western federal states.⁶⁰

In achieving support among the middle class with their anti-immigrant positions, though, both Pegida and AfD can be seen as helping to mainstream strands of radical right-wing discourse and protest in Germany.⁶¹ Even if these political inroads were stronger in the newly incorporated federal states (*Neue Bundesländer*), their combined impact was a significant shift in how certain political issues could be addressed in the nation's public discourse.⁶² By establishing right-wing populist discourse with a strong anti-elite (e.g., anti-government and anti-media) emphasis, these New Right actors delivered critical "semantic hinges" for connecting the issues of social justice, xenophobia, and nationalism.⁶³

Case description and methods

With around 38,000 participants,⁶⁴ the August 29, 2020 mass demonstration in Berlin was the largest protest event of the newly emerging, German movement of pandemic skeptics. The considerable number of participants amassing in-person under lockdown conditions in Germany's capitol city was not the only characteristic of the day's events that attracted national and international attention. It was a small group of demonstrators, some carrying the flag of the German empire (*Reichsflagge*), attempting to enter the German federal parliament building, the Bundestag, which gained the protest particular notoriety.⁶⁵

Under the slogan #freedomday (*#TagDerFreiheit*), the protest was mainly organized by activists of the "*Querdenken711*," an anti-lockdown or Covid-19 skeptic movement group that originated in the federal state of *Baden-Württemberg*.⁶⁶ Located in southwestern Germany, *Baden-Württemberg* was part of the Federal Republic of Germany until national reunification. Prior to

the large march in Berlin, Querdenken activists initiated weekly vigils against lockdown measures in the city of Stuttgart that mobilized only a few dozen participants.⁶⁷ But as restrictions on public life to contain the spread of COVID-19 were substantially eased in Germany,⁶⁸ the movement launched its first demonstration march on May 2, 2020, with a turnout exceeding one thousand.⁶⁹ Participant numbers continued to rise at subsequent events until reaching a peak in Berlin on August 29, 2020.⁷⁰

Methodologically, this investigation relies on visual ethnographic research techniques to collect and analyze data from the largest mass protest so far against Covid-19 lockdown measures on August 29, 2020, in Berlin.⁷¹ The research strategy is based on participant observation geared towards a visual approach in which the researcher created a data set of the event by collecting visual material.⁷² More specifically, photos and videos of the activities experienced at the event were systematically collected during the field visit and then systematically analyzed using visual content analysis: The researcher followed the route of the demonstration march and photographed protest material with textual contents and significant symbolism visible to him. In the process, both objects with textual content and those that merely represented protest symbolism were documented. The intention was to capture as complete a picture of the protest event as possible. However, since it is impossible to be everywhere at the same time, the data is biased in terms of location and time. To assess the extent of such a bias, the material was at random cross-checked with third-party footage, particularly newspaper articles on the event, but also with digital media content (websites, youtube, videotube) from the movement itself. The visual dataset contains 116 photos and five short video clips – with a total length of one minute and ten seconds – taken along the route of the demonstration march (see figure 1).

[Figure 1: GPS location of the images captured along the protest route]

For the content analysis, textual information on protest materials (banners, buttons, posters, custom printed clothing, and objects) was transcribed and coded. Similarly, significant objects were identified, like balloons or flags, and added to the coding scheme (see figure 2). The protest materials found in the photographs were first removed from duplicates. Next, individual items (N=212) were qualitatively coded by a single coder, the author, using a primarily grounded approach. The author started with a rough coding scheme anchored in theoretically relevant concepts – such as categories for the people/popular will, anti-politician, the lying media, and so forth, as well as ones for capturing localism, nationalism, and international conspiracy based on conceptualizations of populist ideology and right-wing extremist rhetoric. For example, “All power emanates from the people” and “The people are here!” were coded as [the people]. While initial categories were kept as specific as possible to avoid the loss of nuance, the author refined and created new codes based inductively on the data, through multiple iterations, and while

bearing theoretical considerations in mind (e.g. treatments of progressive movement rhetoric). As a statement on a T-shirt or protest banner can contain multiple ideas and references, a single unit could receive more than one code within this coding scheme, especially once clustered into four categories.

[Figure 2: Examples of the visual coding strategy (coded entities in purple boxes)]

Figure 3 shows the relationship between the different framing elements according to their centrality to the discourse presented in the protest materials. Each node of the depicted network represents a single code derived from the content of the protest material, with the edges indicating all possible connections between the codes. The more connections a code has with other codes, the more central its position in the network. The majority of codes referring to populist demands, highlighted in green, appear close to the center of the network, which is interpreted as an indication of their importance or centrality in the framing that took place at the protest.

[Figure 3: Code network of protest materials (populist claims highlighted in green)]

Analysis: the semantics of the anti-lockdown protests

In terms of experiencing the day's events on-the-ground, the general appearance of the crowds at the August 29, 2020 protests was not highly unusual; the glaring exception being the invisibility of the pandemic context – the presence of a crowd in the first place, the infrequency of masks, and so on. The protest resembled many of the social and iconographic patterns of a typical demonstration of the kind that new social movements (NSM) of the 70s and 80s made mainstream in many Western democracies, including Germany. Based on the visual ethnographic

observations, the crowds appeared fairly heterogeneous in terms of age and gender distribution. Many participants seemed to have joined the protests as part of a group (couples, initiatives, associations), which was recognizable by shareable or otherwise uniform protest materials (e.g., printed T-shirts or balloons). In line with the protest repertoire of the broader progressive movement family, the atmosphere in the streets had elements of a folk festival, with people singing, dancing, or holding colorful balloons, and familiar civil disobedience tactics (the sit-in, for example). Apart from these general features, the reference to the field of NSM was further observed in more explicit forms. Most noticeable was the strong symbolism of the peace/antiwar movement (e.g., peace dove, rainbow flag, Gandhi portrait) present at the demonstration march. Such referencing was also supported on the textual level by the almost ubiquitous presence of the terms "peace, " "love," and "freedom." Overall, frames reminiscent of various NSM, such as women's rights, environmental, and human rights movements, were appropriated for the purposes of pandemic skeptic claims-making (figure 4).

[Figure 4: NSM symbolism (from left to right): peace dove, rainbow flag, pro-choice slogan, heart-shaped balloon]

The frequency distribution of the combined codes in the protest material confirms the impression of a strong presence of signifiers that are usually connected to progressive movements' protest events. Codes corresponding to framing elements traditionally associated with progressive movements, such as claims for peace or the presentation of rainbow flags were found in about 30 percent of the textual and symbolic content (table 1). At the same time, a similar proportion of the protest material contained implicit and explicit signifiers that could be associated with radical right attitudes. Implicit signifiers are characterized by semantic ambiguity that is created by the co-presence of different and partially contradictory signifiers at the demonstration march. Only a small number of the material (5.7 percent) show explicit extreme right symbolism (e.g., Wirmer flag,⁷³ German empire flag) or make references to right-wing media and movement actors (e.g., COMPACT, *Reichsbürger*). Signifiers associated with populist attitudes and/or claims are dominant. More than every other textual unit contains at least one of the conceptual elements that characterize populist ideologies, such as anti-elitist sentiments.

[Table 1: Distribution of cumulative codes]

<i>Concept*</i>	<i>Freq (material)</i>	<i>% (total) N=212</i>
Populism	121	56,6
Prog. Mvmt.	64	30,2
Radical Right (implicit and explicit)	60	28,3
Radical Right (explicit)	12	5,7

* Underlying codes not mutually exclusive

Turning to the individual codes of this dominant category, statements referring to the perception of being manipulated and controlled by the state, its institutions, and public media were the most frequent (about 29 percent) and central to the discursive network (42 connections) (table 2). In terms of policies to tackle the pandemic, some protesters claim that the population is being subjected to systematic 'brainwashing,' which must be actively resisted. People are urged to

‘think for themselves’ (e.g., “Have the courage to use your own mind [...]”) and not to listen to the supposedly rigged information (false knowledge) spread by state-funded broadcasters in Germany. Along similar lines, alternative knowledge - this is information that can be trusted because it is not seen as originating from the ruling elites - is advanced in about 12 percent of the material coded as populist. The claim of all-encompassing manipulation by elites in politics and legacy media is closely related to the second most common type of framing element found in the material: the comparison of current social conditions with those of totalitarian regimes. This framing element appears in about 18 percent of the material and creates 27 unique connections to 27 other codes in the network. Protesters’ self-positioning as “against a totalitarian hygiene state” is most frequently expressed through references to George Orwell's dystopian novel “1984” or by directly referencing authoritarian regimes of the past. Here, both the GDR and National Socialist Germany served as references despite their dissimilarities.

[Table 2: Codes representing populist attitudes]

<i>Code*</i>	Centrality (material)	<i>Freq</i> (material)	% (total)	% (populism)
manipulation	42	35	16,5	28,9
totalitarianism	27	22	10,4	18,2
anti elites	26	13	6,1	10,7
the people	22	13	6,1	10,7
threat to social cohesion	20	17	8,0	14,0
deligitimate state	19	11	5,2	9,1
conspiracy	18	15	7,1	12,4
alternative knowledge	16	14	6,6	11,6
threat to constitution	14	10	4,7	8,3
corruption	14	6	2,8	5,0
1984	11	10	4,7	8,3
threat by media	11	8	3,8	6,6
threat to democracy	11	6	2,8	5,0
threat to popular culture	9	7	3,3	5,8
anti government	9	3	1,4	2,5
dictatorship	8	6	2,8	5,0
false knowledge	6	7	3,3	5,8
alternative elites	5	3	1,4	2,5
silent majority	4	1	0,5	0,8
threat by state	3	2	0,9	1,7
anti European Union	2	1	0,5	0,8
threat by censorship	2	1	0,5	0,8

* Codes not mutually exclusive

A closer look at the connections between the clustering of codes (see figure 3) suggests that populism serves as an important discursive “peg”⁷⁴ through which right-wing and left-wing framing elements can be convincingly combined – at least on a superficial level. Frame amplification is created by anti-elitist sentiment broadly conceived, that links the claims for greater freedoms and rights (familiar from progressive movements) to a New Right discourse. The particular ability to bridge claims-making can be attributed to a minimum of two central features of the discourse reflected in the protest material. First, the extreme form of anti-elitist

populism enabled by the opposition to Covid-19 measures – advocating negatively against a nebulous, elite “Other” – creates a shared foundation for bridging political differences.⁷⁵ Second, re-appropriating the positive, though also relatively ambiguous, concept of freedom adds an additional layer to the thin ideology undergirding populist discourse.

Elites are portrayed as implacable and overpowering enemies of the people, whereas the latter are represented by the crowd of freedom- and peace-loving individuals at the protest march. A wide variety of protest material illustrates the entanglement of media, political and economic elites (often represented by Bill Gates and Warren Buffett) into a conspiratorial alliance that would even “torture children” to achieve its goals (e.g., “DICTATORSHIP CHILD TORTURER”). The most important device in this respect, however, remains the previously mentioned technique of projecting the image of a dictatorial or totalitarian regime onto the current political system. In this light, the official measures against Covid-19 are seen as the latest evidence that the onward march of totalitarianism is quite plausible. Moreover, the explicit calls for peace in this context evoke the threat of an imminent or already ongoing (cold) civil war between the “pure,” innocent people and powerholders. The protesters are taking to the streets to end this war against the people. Historical references to *movements and activist groups that opposed undemocratic regimes* – in particular, resistance to National Socialism (Anne Frank, crossed-out swastika, "1933") and the 1989 movement ("GDR 1989 = FRG 2020") are cited here to buttress the legitimacy of collective action against such a system.

In the case of the demonstration march on August 29, 2020, the concept of freedom appears to be a potent master frame for mobilization in the German anti-lockdown movement. Indeed, the term occupies a central position in the code network derived from the protest material ([threat to freedom]): About 15 percent of the material was assigned to this code, with links to 33 other codes. Its particular discursive quality is evident in these numerous connections between freedom

and other ideational elements. In a sense, freedom operates as a positive catch-all term that links demands related to the pandemic and restrictions on everyday life to other, more general and abstract areas of political conflict - even reaching as far as questioning the legitimacy of the current configurations of society and the state. The positive normative connotation of the term “freedom” (i.e., morally good) in combination with its conceptual openness (i.e., lacking inherent boundaries without context or relational nuance) probably gives it traction as a mobilizing frame. By mobilizing frame I mean an idea that is likely to be supported by most different milieus and can be meaningful in various claims-making situations. In short, “freedom” is easy to defend as an abstract concept – easy to project one’s own particular idea onto – and difficult to challenge (“IN DOUBT FOR FREEDOM”).

However, the rhetorical use of “freedom” in the protest materials can be broken down into three more specific, yet intertwined, strands of argumentation: freedom as collective liberation from actual and expected official measures to tackle the pandemic (e.g., lockdown, masks, vaccination); as an individual right to self-determination in terms of the decision to wear masks and receive vaccinations; and as a more libertarian concept to limit state regulation writ large. The last interpretation, in particular, provides a familiar vantage point for advancing more extremist, right-wing stances on the topic. That is, limiting state regulation incorporates anti-communist ideational elements, ones for fighting any restrictions on freedom of speech, and an explicitly right-wing notion of German nation-state sovereignty, such as that of the so-called *Reichsbürger* (e.g. “SOVEREIGN [heart] PEACE TREATY FREEDOM”). Embracing the German Reich, the *Reichsbürger* movement group fundamentally questions the legitimacy of the post-World War II German state.⁷⁶

These ideational elements are further tied together in a more specific frame advanced by the Querdenken movement. Namely, that of a threatened German constitution (*Grundgesetz*) that

needs to be defended against the "Merkel regime" and its "Corona dictatorship" (figure 5). In addition to its integrative function in the broader discourse, the idea of "threatened constitutional rights" also functions as a call to arms.⁷⁷ It conveys a twofold motivation for urgent action: the civic duty to protect democracy and the right to defend personal freedom as an act of self-defense. Identifying defending one's constitutional rights as a central framing element in the protest materials helps to account for the attempt of a handful of staunch supporters to "storm the *Reichstag*."

[Figure 5: Protester holding a copy of the constitution and a sign stating "communism annihilates constitutional rights"]

The claimed opposition to totalitarian regimes and alignment with 'freedom' evidenced at the Covid-19 protests is compatible with the PRR's mainstreaming strategy of distancing itself from National Socialism and replacing it with the idea of ethnopluralism. This interpretation is supported by the high density of nationalist and localized⁷⁸ symbolism found at the

demonstration march (figure 6), which recalls the iconography of the PEGIDA movement. In addition to these implicit signifiers of radical right-wing discourse, other protest materials can be found that make direct, explicit references to ethno-nationalist movements in Germany. Due to its density and variety, the symbolism of the above-mentioned "*Reichsbürger*" movement stands out in this respect (Wirmer flag, German empire flag, "*#Friedensvertrag*"). Remarkably, the claim for a peace treaty ("*Friedensvertrag*"),⁷⁹ a routine "*Reichsbürger*" framing element, ties directly into the previously discussed master frame of freedom as well as in that of a peace movement challenging the war being allegedly waged against the people by illegitimate political decision-makers (figure 6).

[Figure 6: Protester holding a sign stating: "YOU WANT 2ND WAVE? WE ARE THE TSUNAMI #PEACETREATY" and Guy Fawkes head]

Regarding the presence of PRR framing elements identified in the literature, several topics stand out for their absence or solely indirect presence in the protest material (table 3). Notably, no direct mention is made of the PEGIDA movement and its core themes of anti-immigration and

Islamophobia. But the ethno-nationalist framing elements may still imply this stance. Also absent in the material are statements that explicitly contest liberalism or left-leaning pluralism.

However, some of the polarizing claims imply such a position or at least hint at antagonism with the left, especially anti-communist statements. Within the materials, 26 (12 percent) contain references to a place, either a city or a state, but only three mention East German localities (i.e., two in Thuringia and one in Brandenburg). I interpret the ratio as reflecting the central organizing role played by Querdenken as a movement active primarily in West Germany at the time of the protest. Nevertheless, the presence of references to both East and West German locales indicates an open ear to the movement in the East.

[Table 3: PRR framing elements found in the protest material]

<i>PRR framing elements</i>	<i>Found in material</i>
Populism (elites vs. the people, anti-media, etc.)	yes
Ethno-nationalist pluralism	yes
Radical Right symbolism	yes
Contestation of liberal-left social pluralism	weak/indirect/ambiguous
Connecting to 1989, GDR, and East Germany	yes
Beliefs in conspiracy	yes
Anti-Islam attitudes	no

Conclusion

This study examines the relationship between the German Covid-19 protests and the PRR in terms of similarities and differences in their framing. Particular attention is paid to new ways of linking framing elements that can develop an impact in terms of mainstreaming PRR discourse. The results from the analysis of protest materials collected during the August 2020 anti-lockdown demonstration by pandemic skeptics in Berlin identify clear overlaps with known discursive strategies of PRR mobilization. Populist framing linked to both local and nationalist symbolism as well as to explicit elements of radical right discourse is evident throughout the materials.

Importantly, such right-wing populist framing appeared literally side-by-side with signifiers that are commonly associated with left-wing or progressive movement protests and their framing. The embedding of these seemingly incongruous ideational elements within a shared perspective on Covid-19 contexts particularly striking. Mainly, these findings suggest that the collective experience and rejection of the government's Covid-19 measures enabled the expression of an extreme form of populism (or frame amplification) conducive to linking previously incompatible frames if not seemingly incompatible politics (the peace movement and the radical right, for example). In the analysis, "freedom" is found to be a central framing element in terms of alignment processes. As it substantially contributes to the integrative 'magic' of a "thin" populist ideology, freedom claims serve as an important, seemingly resonant extension of populist discourse.

Even if the discursive fusion found at the Covid-19 protests was not a deliberate effort in terms of mainstreaming the PRR, the analysis suggests that it did open up new opportunities to broaden support for the radical right in society. Given that the Querdenken movement has its origins and strongholds in former West Germany, the Covid-19 protests could create a novel channel for forging nationwide solidarity among supporters of right-wing populist attitudes. Moreover, the protests bring in framing elements traditionally associated with the political left, contributing to blurring the lines between left and right.

Using protest materials as a source of data involves some imponderables, not the least of which is that we know quite little about the social conditions and processes through which materials arrive at a protest event. Therefore, the present results should not be considered fully comprehensive, but rather as a starting point for further and more detailed research on PRR framing and pandemic skeptic movement framing during the pandemic. Future research on the mainstreaming of movement frames should further explore the possibility and consequences of a mutually-

reinforcing relationship between ongoing PRR mobilization and skepticism-based activism (such as pandemic-, vaccine- or climate-skeptic protests). For example, to what extent has the populist Zeitgeist paved the way for the Covid-19 protests in terms of the participant's attitudes towards government and other public institutions? In turn, will the protest actions of pandemic-skeptics contribute to mainstreaming populist radical right views among publics that have thus far been distant to or even opposed to New Right demands?

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8. Ibid.

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“Querdenker”: die Corona-Proteste aus kultur- und sozialwissenschaftlicher Perspektive, ed.

Sven Reichardt (Frankfurt New York: Campus Verlag, 2021), 166.

13. See Sebastian Koos, “Konturen einer heterogenen »Misstrauensgemeinschaft«,” in *Die Misstrauensgemeinschaft der “Querdenker”*: die Corona-Proteste aus kultur- und sozialwissenschaftlicher Perspektive, ed. Sven Reichardt (Frankfurt New York: Campus Verlag, 2021), 85; Sandrine Gukelberger, Sebastian Koch, and Christian Meyer, “Querverbindungen: Semiotiken des Verdachts,” in *Die Misstrauensgemeinschaft der “Querdenker”*: die Corona-Proteste aus kultur- und sozialwissenschaftlicher Perspektive, ed. Sven Reichardt (Frankfurt New York: Campus Verlag, 2021), 67–90.

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15. Johannes Pantenburg, Sven Reichardt, and Benedikt Sepp, “Wissensparallelwelten der »Querdenker«,” in *Die Misstrauensgemeinschaft der “Querdenker”*: die Corona-Proteste aus kultur- und sozialwissenschaftlicher Perspektive, ed. Sven Reichardt (Frankfurt New York: Campus Verlag, 2021), 29–66; Koos, “Konturen einer heterogenen »Misstrauensgemeinschaft«.”

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Brexit, and the Rise of Authoritarian-Populism (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

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65. Ibid.

66. For details on the history and characteristics of the Querdenken movement, see Koos, “*Konturen einer heterogenen »Misstrauensgemeinschaft«*,” The movement uses telephone area codes to indicate the origins of its local groups. The digits in Querdenken711 therefore refer to the area code of the city of Stuttgart. <https://www.stuttgarter-nachrichten.de/inhalt.kundgebung-in-stuttgart-tausende-bei-demo-fuer-grundrechte-erwartet.3539f339-429a-424b-bd6e-f82c9a585a83.html> (accessed 10 October 2021).

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71. A distinctive feature of the protest was the deliberate violation by most of the participants of the official regulations to prevent the spread of Covid-19: the demonstrators did not wear face masks and ignored the mandatory distance of 1.5 meters from others. The researcher, on the

other hand, complied with these measures and was therefore asked several times by demonstrators about the reason for this.

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73. The so-called Wirmer Flage, originally designed in the context of the July 20, 1944 coup d'état against the Nazi government, has been adopted by Pegida demonstrators. Cf. Ned Richardson-Little, From Stauffenberg to PEGIDA: How the Far Right Adopted the Flag of the Anti-Hitler Resistance, <https://historyned.blog/2017/07/20/from-stauffenberg-to-pegida-how-the-far-right-adopted-the-flag-of-the-anti-hitler-resistance/> (accessed 12 August 2022).

74. Benford and Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements,” 632.

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77. David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance and Participant Mobilization,” *International Social Movement Research* 1 (1988): 197–217.
78. Localism refers to the emphasis on local symbols or the places of origin of protesters in protest materials.
79. The right-wing fringe group of *Reichsbürger* claims that there was no formal peace treaty after the surrender of German troops to the Allies in World War II and thus the present German state has no legal force. Therefore, they demand a return to the borders of the German Reich of 1937. Cf. Yasemin Désirée Krüger, “Das „*Reichsbürger*“-Milieu in Brandenburg aus demokratietheoretischer Perspektive,” in “*Reichsbürger*”: *ein Handbuch*, ed. Dirk Wilking and Demos, *Brandenburgisches Institut für Gemeinwesenberatung*, 3rd edition (Potsdam: Demos - Brandenburgisches Institut für Gemeinwesenberatung, 2017), 244–60.