

Rallying ‘round the Drag: Anti-gender Mobilization and the Mainstreaming of the Far Right

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This article explores the link between anti-gender mobilization and the mainstreaming of the far right. It addresses the question of to what extent and how the far right allies with ‘mainstream’ actors in the context of anti-gender protest. Drawing from a social movement approach, the article contributes a novel operationalization of the mainstreaming of the far right in terms of discourse coalitions and protest alliances, with anti-gender frames working as a ‘symbolic glue’ between the far right and the mainstream, but also fringe actors on the extreme right. As a case study, the article focuses on anti-gender mobilization in Germany, fathoming the critical case of far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). It adopts a localist perspective to analyze AfD’s discourse coalitions and protest alliances in the context of a protest event against a ‘drag story hour’ in Munich in 2023. The qualitative protest event analysis demonstrates the only partial normalization of the far right in the context of anti-gender mobilization: While discourse coalitions between the far right and the mainstream have normalized, protest alliances remain a political taboo. Instead, at protest events the far right allies with fringe actors such as COVID-19 deniers, conspiracy activists, and right-wing extremists.

Keywords:

AfD; anti-gender; collective action frame; Germany; far right; mainstreaming; protest

Introduction

Anti-gender mobilization in contemporary Europe focuses on such diverse issues as abortion, same-sex marriage, gender self-determination—and so-called drag story hours (Chou et al., 2024; Martiny and Lawrence, 2023), an event type originating in the United States in which drag performers read books to children, usually in public spaces such as libraries. Working as a ‘symbolic glue’ (Kováts and Pöim, 2015), in many such instances anti-gender discourse connects party, protest, religious, and other actors from across the political spectrum. Among them, far-right forces have recently become especially vocal. Indeed, in the full swing of the fourth wave of far-right politics in postwar Europe (Mudde, 2019), we witness the widening of the far right’s ideological core beyond the issue of immigration, now also including climate change denialism (Küppers, 2022), COVID-19 skepticism (Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2022), and anti-gender campaigns (Köttig et al., 2017).

Against this backdrop, this article explores the link between anti-gender mobilization and the ‘mainstreaming’ or ‘normalization’ (Krzyzanowski, 2020; Mondon and Winter, 2020; Wodak, 2020) of the far right, a phenomenon which counts among the most pressing issues in current research on right-wing radicalism and extremism in Europe (Brown et al., 2023; Heinze, 2022; Mudde, 2019). In focusing on anti-gender mobilization in Germany, this study contributes to this growing body of work by conceptualizing mainstreaming in terms of discourse coalitions and protest alliances (Reinhardt, 2023; Zajak and Haunss, 2022) beyond the far right, with anti-gender discourse working as a symbolic glue between the far right and the mainstream. Somewhat unexpectedly, however, my analysis demonstrates the only partial normalization of the far right in the context of anti-gender campaigns: While discourse coalitions between the far right and the mainstream are indeed normalizing, protest alliances remain a political taboo. Instead, the far right forms—at times unintentionally—protest alliances with fringe actors such as conspiracy activists and right-wing extremists.

Conceptually, I draw from a collective action approach to the European far right as a social movement (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro, 2019; Minkenberg, 2019). As a case study, I focus on Alternative for Germany (AfD), a hybrid ‘movement party’ (Minkenberg, 2019) that employs social movement strategies and repertoires (Weisskircher, 2024). Alongside its involvement in protest politics, AfD’s ambivalent ideology makes for an interesting case of far-right anti-genderism: Its turn from neoliberalism to far-right ethnonationalism in 2013-2017 (Arzheimer and Berning, 2019) should have entailed a shift from modern to (neo-)traditionalist stances on the gender issue (de Lange and Mügge, 2015). And indeed, AfD opposes various rights of LGBTQ+ people such as adoption rights for homosexual couples. Still, within AfD has formed a sub-organization of Alternative Homosexuals, and since 2017 AfD is (co-)led by female politician Alice Weidel, who lives in a civil union with a woman, with whom she also raises children. Even though Weidel—not untypical for homosexual far-rightists (Dickey et al., 2022)—does not identify as ‘queer’ (Das Erste, 2023) in the sense of anti-normative (Ahmed, 2014, p. 149), Weidel still does not quite comply with transnationally cherished far-right female figures à la Giorgia Meloni (‘I am a woman, I am a mother’).

Methodologically, I approach anti-gender mobilization and the mainstreaming of the far right in Germany from a localist perspective (Chou et al., 2022), that has only recently been adopted in the study of the far right (e.g. Domann, 2023). My qualitative research strategy is to analyze AfD’s discourse coalitions and protest alliances at the local level in the context of a specific instance of anti-gender mobilization, namely a demonstration against a drag story hour that took place in the city of Munich in June 2023. Demonstrations against drag story hours

constitute important case studies of the mainstreaming of the far right in the context of anti-gender mobilization since, as Chou, Busbridge, and Moffitt (2024) observe, they have the ‘capacity to blur and blend different far-right ideologies and geographies with distinctly non-far-right actors and ideas’.

This study departs from the question if and to what extent political actors from the political center, the far right, and the fringes ‘rally ‘round the drag’. Specifically, it asks: How does the far right form discourse coalitions and protest alliances in the context of anti-gender mobilization? Empirically, I aim for the detailed and contextualized reconstruction of AfD’s anti-gender protest event by triangulating sources and data (Aronoff and Kubik, 2013, pp. 23–59; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). My multimodal corpus includes data generated through web-based research on AfD’s, mainstream parties’, and fringe actors’ websites and social media accounts, on municipal websites and in the media, and from an expert interview.

The article is structured as follows: The next two sections provide an overview of research at the intersection of (anti-)gender mobilization, the far right, and its mainstreaming. Then, I present this article’s case study design and methodological approach. Subsequently, the qualitative protest event analysis traces AfD’s discourse coalitions and protest alliances in the context of the anti-gender demonstration in Munich in June 2023. In the concluding section, I reflect on my findings, emphasizing several lessons to be drawn from the case.

Anti-Gender Mobilization and the Far Right in Germany

The umbrella terms of anti-feminism (Goetz and Mayer, 2023; Stögner, 2022), anti-gender politics (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018), or also anti-genderism (Hark and Villa, 2015; Reinhardt et al., 2023) capture the social and political backlash to the promotion of gender equality (Verloo, 2018). This article adopts the notion of anti-gender mobilization to denote the politically oriented organized opposition to gender equality beyond hegemonic heteronormative, cis-gender identities. As an umbrella concept, it captures the opposition against diverse forms of feminist and queer politics—what opponents call ‘gender ideology’—referring to ‘the complex intertwining of issues related to the institutionalisation of gender equality, women’s and LGBTQI+ rights, bodily integrity, kinship structures, and sexual morality’ (Lavizzari and Pirro, 2023, p. 3). Related concepts include anti-feminism, misogyny, and sexism, as well as homo- and transphobia, which all denominate ideologies of inequality with regard to the interrelated issues of gender, sex, and sexuality.

‘Gender is a central issue across the complex landscape of the far right’ (Blee, 2020, p. 417), and there is a growing body of work at the intersection of (anti-)gender and far-right or right-wing populist politics (Coffé, 2018; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Köttig et al., 2017; Norocel and Giorgi, 2022; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018; Reinhardt et al., 2023; Segers and Eslen-Ziya, 2023; Stögner, 2022). Far-right ideologies and anti-gender mobilization are connected in multiple, interrelated ways: Not only is the opposition to equality and the embracement of allegedly natural hierarchies between human beings defined by factors such as race, birthplace, gender, and others, the principal marker of (far-)right ideology (Bobbio, 1996). Also, western far-right actors typically articulate the conspiracy of the ‘Great Reset’, according to which political elites aim to replace the ‘native’ populations with foreigners among whom birth rates tend to be higher than among native (say: white) women. Hence, historically, far-right political projects have been marked by their anti-feminism (Mudde, 2007, p. 68). Crucially, recent cases of right-wing terrorism such as in Utøya and Christchurch revealed that anti-gender attitudes at the individual level may be related to far-right violence (Sanders, 2019).

Within this theoretically, methodologically, and empirically diverse field, a couple of distinct traditions have crystallized: Departing from the dominant conceptualization of the far right as ‘men’s parties’ (Mudde, 2007), one strand of thought focuses on the manifold roles of women in far-right politics, for instance as voters of far-right parties (Immerzeel et al., 2015; Spierings and Zaslove, 2015), as activists in far-right social movement organizations (Blee, 1996; Leidig, 2023; Pilkington, 2017; Svatoňová and Doerr, 2023), and as objects in the anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic ideology of ‘femonationalism’ (Farris, 2017).

The strand of thought chiefly informing this article fathoms the broader phenomenon of anti-gender mobilization by the far right that is directed against issues such as women’s reproductive rights as well as, more recently, gay and trans rights, and the visibility of anti-normative queer identities in public—like in pride parades or drag story hours. Introducing the notion of ‘symbolic glue’ (Kováts and Põim, 2015), recent contributions to this literature emphasize the unifying power of anti-gender discourse: In various locations in Europe, the joint opposition against ‘gender ideology’ fosters the cooperation between the far right and other actors, including ultraconservative and religious groups (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022, p. 7), as well as the so-called mainstream such as the political center and traditional media (Reinhardt, 2023). Also on the level of individual attitudes, survey research finds that ‘[a]nti-feminist beliefs are one of the main pillars of the spread of right-wing extremist beliefs’ (Kalkstein et al., 2022, p. 262).

In Germany, anti-feminist attitudes have risen from 19 to 25 percent between 2020 and 2022 (Kalkstein et al., 2022, p. 253), indicating the increasing politicization of the issues of gender, sex, and sexuality. Indeed, after having emerged with what can be identified as a ‘delay’ (Villa, 2017, p. 99), by the 2020s public anti-gender campaigns have become a visible component of the German protest landscape. Importantly, these campaigns are (still) mostly organized by media and religious actors, and not by AfD which was founded only in 2013 (Dombrowski and Hajek, 2021; Schmincke, 2015). Compared to some of its ideological cousins across Europe—one may think of Viktor Orbán’s anti-LGBT laws in Hungary or Law and Justice (PiS)’s so-called LGBT-free zones in Poland—German AfD was thus somewhat late to the anti-gender party: While AfD positioned itself as an anti-feminist party early on (Lang, 2017), gender issues have long not been at the core of AfD’s discourse. Instead, the issues of immigration and COVID-19 dominated AfD’s discourse in the past couple of years (Lehmann and Zehnter, 2022; Rensmann, 2018; Rensmann and de Zee, 2022).

By the beginning of the 2020s, AfD had increasingly assumed the role of an outspoken contestant in this ‘culture war’, acting as the most pronounced anti-feminist, anti-gender, and femonationalist player in the German party system (Doerr, 2021; Ishchenko et al., 2023, p. 9; Lang, 2017). During the coalition governments led by Christian Democrat (CDU) Angela Merkel in the 2010s, AfD fashioned itself as an allegedly ‘pro-family’ actor based on a strictly heteronormative concept of family. In the context of the ensuing left-liberal coalition of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens, and Liberals (FDP), that announced to strengthen gay, transgender, and nonbinary rights, AfD’s long-standing anti-gender stances gained greater prominence in relation to the party’s overall program. By way of example, the AfD group in the national parliament dedicated one of ten items to the gender issue in the ‘Instant program for an AfD-led national government’ from September 2023, positively framed as parents-friendly family politics in opposition to an allegedly dangerous ‘gender ideology’.

The Mainstreaming of the Far Right

In ‘gluing’ together the far right and the mainstream, anti-gender mobilization likely is a factor in what scholars refer to as the ‘mainstreaming’ of the far right (Heinze, 2022; Krzyżanowski, 2020; Mondon and Winter, 2020; Wodak, 2020)—a key feature of the fourth wave of far-right politics in post-war Europe (Mudde, 2019). Mainstreaming refers to ‘the process by which parties/actors, discourses and/or attitudes move from marginal positions on the political spectrum or public sphere to more central ones, shifting what is deemed to be acceptable or legitimate in political, media and public circles and contexts’ (Brown et al., 2023, p. 170; see also Domann, 2023, p. 7). Emphasizing the discursive dimension of mainstreaming, the notion of the ‘normalization’ of the far right (Krzyżanowski, 2020; Wodak, 2020) is often used synonymously to mainstreaming, for instance in the seminal article by Brown, Mondon, and Winter (2023).

A key factor in this process is the conduct of mainstream actors such as politicians, parties, and media that shapes the public legitimacy of far-right actors and ideologies, their development, and establishment (de Jonge, 2021; Ellinas, 2010). The literature distinguishes between two forms of mainstreaming of the far right: First, mainstream politicians may adopt far-right ideas themselves, thus normalizing such rhetoric (Wodak, 2020). Second, at a strategic level, they can choose between accommodating, dismissing, or confronting their far-right competitors (Meguid, 2005; see also Downs, 2001), thus opening or closing doors for formal and informal cooperation. Crucially, these two processes do not always co-occur, that means, mainstream actors might adopt a similar rhetoric but not collaborate with the far right—a phenomenon which I call ‘partial normalization’ in my analysis.

While mainstream parties’ adoption of far-right positions in the policy field of migration and integration constitutes a comparably well-researched field (Han, 2015; van Spanje, 2010), we still know little about the normalization processes in the context of anti-gender mobilization. Against this theoretical background, this article asks how the far right gets normalized in the domain of anti-gender mobilization by cooperating (or not) with mainstream actors. Specifically, I argue that a collective action approach to the far right as a social movement (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro, 2019; Minkenberg, 2019), especially an agency-focused, ‘cultural’ approach (Jasper, 2004) that emphasizes joint meaning-making (Snow et al., 1986) as well as alliance formation processes (Zajak and Haunss, 2022), can make an important contribution to the study of the mainstreaming of the far right based on shared anti-gender discourse. Crucially, focusing on the collective action framing strategies and politics of alliances by activists and social movement organizations, including movement-parties, this approach promises to shed new light on how actors from the far-right fringes to the mainstream jointly mobilize on the issue of gender, thus contributing to the normalization of far-right discourses and actors.

Hence, this study explores how the far right allies with mainstream and, as my analysis will show, extremist actors, based on an anti-gender collective action frame. To do so, I distinguish between ‘discourse coalitions’, operationalized as a ‘combination of actors (standing) with a particular evaluation (positioning) and interpretation (framing) of an issue’ (Reinhardt, 2023, p. 2834), and ‘protest alliances’ (Zajak and Haunss, 2022), understood as various forms of cooperation in the context of protest events such as the joint organization, promotion, and performance of anti-gender demonstrations. Importantly, discourse coalitions and protest alliances can be both official/formal and unofficial/informal and might not always be intentional and strategic, but emerge in the moment of protesting. The distinction between discourses and practices aims to add nuance to analyses of the normalization of the far right in

European politics and societies. Crucially, it allows to distinguish between what I call partial and full normalization, that is, the mainstreaming in both domains (discourse and protest) or only in one of the two.

Research Design, Case Selection and Method

To shed light on the link between anti-gender mobilization and the mainstreaming of the far right, I design a qualitative analytical framework centered around an exploratory case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Gerring, 2004). Following the ‘localist turn’ in (right-wing) populism studies (Chou et al., 2022), my case study approach underlines the value of the local level as a productive lens of knowledge generation: The notions of space and place are particularly important for far-right actors in a decentralized state like the Federal Republic of Germany that is characterized by strong regional and local identities (Arzheimer and Bernemann, 2023; Volk and Weisskircher, 2023).

In line with my collective action approach to the European far right as a social movement (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro, 2019; Minkenberg, 2019), and my focus on the German(ophone) far right that is characterized by strong movement-party interactions (Weisskircher, 2024), my case study stems from the protest arena: I analyze a street demonstration against a local library’s drag story hour, organized by the local AfD group in the southern German metropolis of Munich on 13 June 2023. I conceptualize this public rally as a ‘critical case’ of far-right anti-gender mobilization, that is, as a case that is ‘ideal for getting a clear fix on the relevant empirical and theoretical issues’ (Snow, 2013, p. 158). This case promises important insights into the phenomenon of mainstreaming in the context of anti-gender mobilization, because it indeed allowed actors from across the political spectrum to ‘close ranks’ in an ‘anti-feminist alliance’ (Dahm, 2024a). It caused massive public debate and received broad domestic and even international coverage (e.g. The Times, 2023). As AfD’s very first protest event exclusively dedicated to the gender issue, it soon became a point of reference for AfD politicians, and initiated a small series of public protests against drag story hours over the ensuing months, for instance in the southwestern city of Ludwigsburg in November 2023, and in the Bavarian city of Ingolstadt in March 2024.

Not least, the location of the Munich demonstration is of particular interest: The fact that the rally took place in the cosmopolitan capital of the wealthy state of Bavaria and not in a medium-sized town in the left-behind periphery demonstrates the importance of the German far right beyond its regional stronghold in the east of the country (Volk and Weisskircher, 2023). Munich has been a hub of anti-feminist activism in the Germanophone world since the 2000s, with various anti-abortion groups regularly mobilizing for public events such as the Marches for Life, ‘A thousand crosses for life’ marches, and others (Dahm, 2024a; Fachinformationsstelle Rechtsextremismus München, 2021, 2023). Yet, AfD’s demonstration against the drag story hour constituted a novelty in the city’s demonstration history, not only because it was the first event specifically targeting queerness, but also because AfD Bavaria—that had previously not been a major player in the local anti-feminist camp—took a leading role.

Methodologically, I conduct a ‘qualitative protest event analysis’, that is, a systematic reconstruction of AfD’s demonstration. Based on an interpretive lens (Aronoff and Kubik, 2013, pp. 23–59; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012), the strength of my approach relates to its potential to ‘[leave] openings for unanticipated discoveries and directions’ (Amit, 2000, p. 17). In line with the literature on the mainstreaming of the far right (Brown et al., 2023), my analysis focuses specifically on the discourses and actors of the anti-drag alliance. Drawing from the

toolkit of frame analysis (Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986), I first analyze anti-gender collective action framing as well as the discourse coalitions between AfD and mainstream actors in the run-up to the drag story hour. In so doing, I distinguish between ‘diagnostic frames’ that define problems, ‘prognostic frames’ that describe solutions, and ‘motivational frames’ that call to action (Caiani, 2023). I also apply the theory of populism as a ‘master frame’ (Aslanidis, 2020, 2016) to spell out how diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames are integrated into a broader meaning system of antagonistic group constitution (Palonen, 2020). Then, I reconstruct AfD’s protest alliances at the demonstration itself, examining the different actors involved as well as their interactions on the square.

My approach to data generation draws on the interpretive research practice of triangulation of sources and data. My key sources of data are websites and social media accounts by AfD and by many other involved actors. For AfD, I closely examine AfD Bavaria, the official organizer of the event René Dierkes (AfD Munich East), and the demonstration speaker Jurij Kofner (AfD Munich). For the ‘mainstream’, I focus on the center-right politicians Hans Theiss and Martin Huber of the Munich-based and the state-level Christian Social Union (CSU), respectively, and Hubert Aiwanger of the Bavarian branch of the Free Voters (FW). For fringe actors, I study the local COVID-19 denialist conspiracy grouping ‘UlliOma and Friends’ around activist Ulrike Pfeffer and the Bavarian branch of the Identitarian Movement. In addition to these websites and social media accounts, I draw from original data generated in a one and a half hours expert interview with Lina Dahm¹, a Munich-based investigative journalist focusing on anti-feminist mobilization, conducted via Zoom on 25 April 2024, as well as a podcast in which Dahm reports from AfD’s anti-gender demonstration on 13 June 2023. Finally, my sources include the online editions of newspapers that covered the public debate preceding the far-right protest event such as BILD and the websites of two local city councils.

Based on the systematic examination of these sources, I assemble a multimodal corpus that includes: AfD and mainstream politicians’ and activists’ statements and speeches as well as protocols from relevant city council meetings for the study of collective action framing, and the information given by the interviewed expert as well as website and social media data such as texts, photographs, and videos for the contextualized reconstruction of the alliance formation at the event itself.

Anti-gender Protest and the Partial Normalization of the Far Right

Only a few weeks after the Germanophone media had widely reported on far-right anti-gender protest against a drag story hour in the Austrian capital of Vienna, Munich’s municipal library published a new entry in its digital event calendar: ‘We read the world to you the way you like it: Drag story hour for children’ (Müncher Stadtbibliothek, 2023). The event, to take place in the library’s dependance in Bogenhausen, a wealthy district in the northeast of Munich, was described as such:

Drag queen Vicky Voyage with drag king Eric BigClit and the young transgender author Julana Gleisenberg take you into colorful worlds that show what life has in store for you regardless of gender, and that we can do anything if we stick to our dreams! They read from picture books that tell of a wide variety of heroes: boys in dresses, princesses with their own will, the colors blue and pink, rabbits and vixens, discovering your own freedom and much more.

¹ Lina Dahm is the journalist’s official pseudonym which I adopt here to ensure their personal safety and privacy.

With international pride month coming up in June, and relatedly a higher salience of the issue of (public) queerness, the political backlash did not take long: In early May 2023, various actors from across the political spectrum publicly condemned the drag story hour and demanded its cancellation via legal means. As a matter of fact, the local branches of AfD as well as of the CSU Munich, that is the ever-governing Bavarian branch of Germany's main center-right party CDU, and the conservative Free Voters, CSU's coalition partner in the Bavarian government, called for the cancellation of the event on their respective websites and vis-à-vis Germany's key tabloid medium BILD (Cremer et al., 2023; Mércier et al., 2023). While not supporting the cancellation, Dieter Reiter, Munich's social democratic mayor, asserted that 'I personally would not go [to the drag story hour] with my grandchildren—especially because of the names of the artists' (BILD, 2023).

Yet, the attempts to cancel the event via legal means, pushed by CSU in the Bogenhausen district council meeting on the evening of 16 May, and by AfD in the Munich city council meeting on the morning of 17 May, were unsuccessful. After what the Bogenhausen public protocol states, the CSU motion triggered 'a longer and controversial discussion', but failed to reach a majority of votes. AfD's last-minute motion in the Munich city council, in turn, was not considered as particularly urgent by city councilors, and thus not discussed in the session. The setting of the session must have been rather polarizing: At the occasion of the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT) that took place on 17 May of all things, councilor Thomas Lefner of the Left party delivered a speech dressed up as a drag performer (Görz and Kern, 2023).

In parallel to the attempts to impose the cancellation of the drag story hour, numerous actors started planning demonstrations to voice their opposition, scheduled to take place on Bogenhausen's Rosenkavalierplatz in front of the library at the time of the event (Paulus, 2023). And indeed, Munich's police registered no less than five demonstrations in Bogenhausen for the afternoon of 13 June 2023: one in support of the library event and four against it, including the one organized by AfD (Polizeipräsidium München, 2023). According to the police report, the supportive rally associated with the organization 'Munich is colorful' turned out to be the largest with about 500 participants. The anti-drag events gathered a bit more than 200 demonstrators in total, out of which about 100 were with AfD, another 100 with the locally well-known COVID-19 denier Ulrike Pfeffer alias UlliOma², and 25 with the 'Voices of the Quiet' (*Stimme der Stillen*), a Christian fundamentalist grouping that emerged in Munich in 2020.

AfD's demonstration was officially organized by René Dierkes, chairman of the AfD group in Munich-East and then candidate for the Bavarian regional parliament. The line-up of speakers gave away the demonstration's character as an election campaign event: It featured mainly regional (and not local) politicians, most of them in their role as candidates for the upcoming regional parliament elections. Among them were top candidate Katrin Ebner-Steiner, local Bogenhausen candidate Christoph Rätscher, list candidate Jurij Kofner, Simon Kuchlbauer for AfD Schwaben and Christina Specht for AfD Munich Land.

² Ulrike Pfeffer alias UlliOma is a Munich-based COVID-19 denier and conspiracy activist who mobilized for about bi-monthly rallies in Munich in 2021/22 (Fachinformationsstelle Rechtsextremismus München, 2022). Having emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, Pfeffer's anti-establishment discourse quickly radicalized and integrated elements of the extreme anti-system ideology of the *Reichsbürger*, the German branch of the so-called 'sovereign citizens' that deny German statehood and are associated with the failed *coup d'état* on 7 December 2022.

In line with the notion of anti-gender discourse as a ‘symbolic glue’ between diverse actors (Kováts and Pöim, 2015), this instance of anti-gender mobilization turned out to contribute to the partial normalization of the far right: My web-based research reveals both unofficial yet *de facto* discourse coalitions between the far right and the center-right and protest alliances between AfD and right-wing extremists and fringe groups, including COVID-19 deniers and the Identitarian Movement (for an overview see Table 1).

Table 1 AfD’s anti-gender discourse coalitions and protest alliances, May/June 2023.

	<i>Discourse coalitions</i>	<i>Protest alliances</i>
<i>When</i>	Before the drag story hour (May 2023)	The day of the drag story hour (13 June 2023)
<i>Character</i>	Unofficial	Unofficial, <i>ad hoc</i>
<i>With</i>	‘Mainstream’ center-right parties: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional and local branches of CSU Regional branch of FW 	Fringe groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local COVID-19 deniers/conspiracy activist groupings Regional branch of the Identitarian Movement Local Christian fundamentalist groupings
<i>What</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positioning: AfD, CSU, and FW separately call for the cancellation of the drag story hour Framing: AfD, CSU, and FW separately frame the drag story hour as case of child endangerment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Space sharing: Four anti-gender demonstrations and activists on the same square Cooperation: Informal and/or practical cooperation (e.g. speeches, sharing of electricity) Co-promotion: Fringe actors mobilize for the anti-gender demonstrations
<i>Mainstreaming</i>	Yes	No

Anti-gender Discourse Coalitions: Going Mainstream

To begin with, AfD entered an unofficial discourse coalition with mainstream actors based on the joint positioning against and negative framing of the Bogenhausen drag story hour (Table 2), supporting my argument of the mainstreaming of the far right in the context of anti-gender mobilization. Hitting all the chords of the transnational anti-gender discourse (Schmincke, 2015), the responses to the library’s event announcement by far-right AfD and center-right CSU and FW were barely distinguishable from one another: All of them framed the event, in which the drag performers read excerpts from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *Little Prince*, among other similarly child-friendly books, as a case of ‘child endangerment’ by dangerous ‘gender ideologists’ (Table 2).

Table 2 Framing strategies of the anti-gender discourse coalition, May 2023.

<i>Frame type</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Expressions/themes</i>	<i>Examples</i>
<i>Diagnostic frame</i>	Child endangerment constituted by spread of ‘gender ideology’ and its immoral/unlawful representatives	‘Gender ideology’ as creating psychological confusion in children	Association of drag story hour with ‘early sexualization’ of children (e.g. Martin Huber, CSU)
		‘Gender ideology’ as creating physical harm to children	Association of drag story hour with failed gender-affirming surgery (e.g. AfD Munich)

		‘Gender ideologists’ as abusive of children	Association of drag story hour with Green party’s ‘pedophile roots’ (e.g. Hubert Aiwanger, FW)
<i>Motivational frame</i>	Need to protect children against dangerous ‘gender ideology’ and its representatives	Call to followers to protect children	‘Protect the children’ (Demonstration chant)
		Call to lawmakers to protect children	‘Ban gender propaganda’ (AfD demonstration poster)
		Call to representatives of ‘gender ideology’ to distance themselves from children	‘Hands off our children’ (AfD demonstration poster)
<i>Prognostic frame</i>	Restoration of order disturbed by dangerous ‘gender ideology’ and its representatives	Promise to restore heteronormative, cis-gender social order	Promotion of the concept of <i>Stolzmonat</i> (German for ‘pride month’) (Demonstration chant)
<i>Master frame</i>	Populist frame juxtaposing moral (i.e. heteronormative, cis-gender) Us vs. immoral (i.e. ‘genderist’) Them (see also Graff and Korolczuk, 2022, p. 7)		

This coalition’s master frame construed in and out-groups according to the populist logic of antagonistic group constitution (Palonen, 2020). In this construction, the Us refers to the heteronormative, cis-gender in-group, while the Them relates to a so-called ‘genderist’ out-group. With the antagonistic moralization of the categories of Us and Them being a key feature of political mobilization—not only, but in particular on the far right of the political spectrum (Mudde, 2007, p. 63), this right-wing populist frame thus juxtaposes a ‘moral’ in-group that ‘protects children’ with an ‘immoral’ out-group that ‘endangers children’ (see also Graff and Korolczuk, 2022, p. 7).

Both the far right and the mainstream used the same diagnostic frame, construing the drag story hour as a case of child endangerment (*Kindswohlgefährdung*) in a psychological and physical sense. My research on party websites and politicians’ social media channels reveals that not only AfD Munich vilified the library event as an ‘attack on the family’ and ‘political indoctrination in the sign of the rainbow’ aimed at the ‘early sexualization and the psychological confusion of our children’. In a strikingly similar vein, Martin Huber, CSU general secretary, agitated against the event on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter), using the same slogan of the ‘early sexualization of children’. While taking an overall more nuanced position, on X his Munich-based colleague Hans Theiss equated the drag story hour with ‘sexual education by drag queens’, thus also associating the event with inappropriate sexualizing content. Equally, Hubert Aiwanger, FW leader and vice-governor of Bavaria, appealed to the youth protection authorities, declaring the drag story hour a case of child endangerment (Cremer et al., 2023).

With regard to the framing of their opponents, this informal coalition’s discourse quickly radicalized, employing ever more extreme and disinhibited rhetoric. According to my review of media reports, FW leader Aiwanger publicly provoked by associating the lecture with the Green party’s alleged ‘pedophile roots’ (Schnitzler, 2023)—a statement that was later deleted from the corresponding BILD article. Similarly, in response to the transgender teenager that was announced to take part in the event, AfD Munich propagated alleged incidents of failed gender-affirming surgery for teenagers on their website, thus associating a reading session with threats to children’s physical health and even life. Moreover, AfD spread anti-gender conspiracy narratives in the context of the drag story hour, for instance in the form of the only halfway ironic exorcism of the ‘gender demons’ by Jurij Kofner (Klardenken TV2, 2023), a young charismatic AfD politician and—according to his campaign—a believing Christian with ties to the Russian-Orthodox church.

A particularly pertinent example of this discursive radicalization were the visual politics of the protest event. Widely distributed in the city of Munich and shared via social media, AfD's official protest poster triggered a large-scale public controversy as well as a criminal complaint on the grounds of rabble rousing, issued by a local Catholic priest. The poster condenses AfD's anti-gender stances by portraying queer people as a physical threat to children, and thus evoking 'transphobic' anxieties: It shows a fair-skinned, fair-haired boy with a frightened expression on his face, crouching on a sofa, his shoulders bent forward and his arms in his lap. Behind him lurks a man with long, dyed hair, trimmed beard, dark eye makeup and red lipstick who bends forward, stretching all five fingers of his right hand toward the boy as if to grab and harm him. The man's facial expression bears a diabolic grin.

Crucially, the poster underscores how AfD's anti-gender stances intersect with the party's long-standing populist master frame of a 'morally pure Us' against an 'immoral Them' (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022, p. 7). In this instance, AfD instrumentalizes the stereotypical image of a German boy as the most innocent representative of a heteronormative people to vilify the allegedly dangerous queer community as representative of an immoral elite. This Manichean construction of societal groups echoes previous femonationalist constructions of 'morally pure' German women as victims of 'immoral' Muslim immigrants, supposedly aided by similarly 'immoral' left-wing elites (Doerr, 2021). Not least, the poster reveals symbolic and aesthetic continuities from National Socialism to the contemporary German far right. Hence, it points to a certain 'stickiness' of far-right aesthetics across time and space despite AfD's repeated claims to adhere to democratic principles. The poster's visual references to antisemitic caricatures from Nazi times are in fact striking: The figure of the queer man seems to be modeled after the dehumanizing drawings of Jews that appeared in Nazi propaganda outlets such as *Der Stürmer* and others.

In line with these radicalized anti-gender rhetoric and visual politics, the far-right/mainstream discourse coalition then formulated the need to protect children against the dangerous 'gender ideology' and its representatives as principal motivational frame. They repeatedly appealed to their followers as well as to Bavarian and German lawmakers to 'protect the children'. For instance, AfD's demonstration poster demanded a 'ban' of 'gender propaganda', while speakers repeatedly initiated the chants 'Protect the children' at the demonstration on 13 June 2023 (Klardenken TV2, 2023). In turn, they called upon their opponents, construed as the representatives of 'gender ideology', to distance themselves from children. Accordingly, the event's key advertising slogan, propagated on posters and reiterated by the speakers, was 'Hands off our children'.

Finally, this discourse coalition construed a prognostic frame focused on the restoration of a heteronormative, cis-gendered social order. To this aim, AfD employed a secondary, nationalist discourse, attempting to reframe its anti-gender stance in a positive light (Table 2). On 1 June 2023, AfD had joined a German-language social media campaign to spread the hashtag *Stolzmonat*, that is the German translation of 'pride month', across platforms. Devised to create a counternarrative to *#Pridemonth*, the hashtag expressed pride of German tradition and nationalism, not least through the use of national colors black, red, and golden as opposed to the rainbow (Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, 2023). At the Bogenhausen protest event, speakers such as Jurij Kofner animated the crowd to chant *Stolzmonat*, promising that every month would be a German-nationalist pride month if AfD were in power.

Anti-gender Protest Alliances: Staying at the Fringes

Even though AfD and mainstream actors from center-right CSU and FW had formed an unofficial discourse coalition in the run-up to the drag story hour at the Bogenhausen library, this coalition did not entail a tangible protest alliance on 13 June 2023, pointing to the limits of the normalization of the far right in the context of anti-gender campaigns (Table 1). CSU and FW did not participate in the protest event organized by AfD, but—somewhat unexpectedly given their previous calls for the cancellation of the event—some CSU politicians even joined the pro-drag demonstration of ‘Munich is colorful’. The following day, AfD’s main organizer René Dierkes commented on CSU’s contradictory behavior on Facebook in what reads as a rather satisfied tone: ‘There is only one Alternative for Germany! Only one relevant party that stands against gender madness and early sexualization! The CSU, on the other hand, is playing a double game again: first calling for a ban on drag readings, then demonstrating with Antifa and left-wing extremists for this dangerous reading and against us!’

My reconstruction of AfD’s demonstration reveals the party’s rather informal and practical ad-hoc protest alliances with various fringe and extremist actors, thus departing from discourse coalitions with mainstream right-wing forces. As a matter of fact, AfD shared the space with various extremist actors: Even though formally separate protest events, AfD’s demonstration took place side by side with COVID-19 deniers and radicalized anti-abortion groupings on the same square. As the time passed, AfD soon was in what Dahm (2024b) refers to as a ‘symbiosis’ with the fringes. These alliances include the relative large crowd mobilized by the local COVID-19 denier Ulrike Pfeffer (Dahm, 2024a), revealing AfD’s proximity to conspiracy activists also after the COVID-19 pandemic (Heinze and Weisskircher, 2023). Furthermore, various radical and extreme right groups joined AfD’s and UlliOma’s demonstrations. Among them were about 15 activists of the regional branch of the Identitarian Movement, whose name ‘Leather pants revolt’ (*Lederhosenrevolte*) alludes to the customary Bavarian male pants made from leather, as well as the COVID-19 denialist fringe groups ‘Munich stand up’ (*München steht auf*) and ‘Students stand up’ (Stauf, *Studenten stehen auf*). Expert interviewee Dahm (2024b) reported that additionally, a small group of local trans-exclusionary feminist activists attended the event. Not least, so-called demonstration reporters, a growing phenomenon in the German far-right protest scene (Pook et al., 2022), were present at the event, livestreaming it on social media (Klardenken TV2, 2023).

In addition, AfD engaged in relatively informal, ad-hoc cooperation with extremist actors on the square. As Dahm (2024b) relates, AfD and COVID-19 denier Ulrike Pfeffer coordinated the speeches given on AfD’s and her stages as to not drown each other out. Moreover, AfD politicians invited Pfeffer to give a speech on their stage, and Pfeffer also helped out when AfD struggled with the electricity (Klardenken TV2, 2023). On top of this, AfD greeted the Identitarians on the square—despite the party’s official doctrine to not engage with the Identitarian Movement. Seven Identitarians took the chaos created by the two opposing crowds as an opportunity for bypassing the police forces that were securing the entrance to the library, and came close to breaking into the room where the drag reading was taking place. Even though the Identitarians were stopped inside the library building by library staff and thus failed to interrupt the reading, they managed to get some socials-fit photographs to be disseminated via X later, for instance showing a blond activist in a tight ‘corporate’ top and mirrored sunglasses being taken away by police officers.

Finally, AfD’s protest alliances with extreme-right and fringe groups included the co-promotion of the demonstration. According to Dahm’s (2024b) systematic observation of social media, the event(s) were widely shared by activists on Telegram in the days and weeks before 13 June

2023. For instance, the student group Stauf's flyer, claiming 'Stop child endangerment! Is politics allowed to promote such people's ideology and impose upon children?', was widely distributed across Telegram groups. Importantly, Stauf activists stuck lots of posters on Rosenkavalierplatz during the night before the drag story hour, setting the scene for AfD's demonstration.

Concluding Remarks

This study has examined the link between anti-gender mobilization and the mainstreaming of the far right, focusing on the case of the German AfD and its public protest against a local library's drag story hour. Drawing from a social movement studies approach emphasizing collective action framing and the politics of alliances, my qualitative protest event analysis found that shared anti-gender discourse strongly contributed to the *partial* normalization of AfD: The joint opposition against the drag story hour allowed AfD to enter a discourse coalition, but not to form a protest alliance with so-called mainstream center-right actors such as the local and regional groups of Bavaria's governing CSU and its coalition partner FW. Regarding street protest, AfD instead formed unofficial and practical ad-hoc alliances with far-right fringe and extremist actors. In other words, the AfD succeeded in normalizing its discourse, but not its protest politics.

The analysis makes several contributions to the literature on the far right. First, it adds new insights into the phenomenon of mainstreaming. In focusing on (anti-)gender politics, my study demonstrates that the increasing politicization of the interrelated issues of gender, sex, and sexuality provides a fruitful ground for the normalization of far-right discourses and actors via the forming of 'anti-feminist alliances' (Dahm, 2024a). Then, drawing from the theoretical and methodological toolkit of social movement studies, I propose a framework to operationalize the concept of mainstreaming in terms of discourse coalitions and protest alliances that can be studied through the analysis of collective action framing and protest practices. Such a framework is necessary to make sense of the current European far right that is marked by its taste for street politics and strong interactions between movement and party actors (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro, 2019; Minkenberg, 2019).

Methodologically, my study's focus on a local protest event rather than national political and media discourses emphasizes the analytical value of a 'localist' approach to generate new knowledge about mainstreaming: Zooming in on far-right politics on the ground allows to yield original insights beyond official party ideology and national leaders. With regard to the case of Germany, my study underlines the potential of anti-gender mobilization beyond the east of the country that is regarded as the far right's principal stronghold (Volk and Weisskircher, 2023). The setting of AfD's anti-gender protest in a major metropolis rather than in a small, peripheral town is of scholarly interest because it defies widely held assumptions that the far right has mostly been normalized in structurally disadvantaged places in the countryside far from the 'center' (Brooks, 2020; Cramer, 2016).

Empirically, my findings shed new light on the (far-right) protest landscape in Germany. Clearly, movement-party interactions that characterize the German-speaking far-right scene with regard to the issue of migration (Weisskircher, 2024) are also highly relevant in the domain of (anti-)gender politics. Then, my findings demonstrate the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Germany's protest landscape. In 2023, COVID-19 deniers and conspiracy-focused groups that had emerged during the pandemic were still active on Telegram and on the

streets—even though the ‘Corona restrictions’ had ended in 2022. Claiming to protect children in the contexts of, firstly, pandemic-related school closures and, secondly, drag story hours, radicalized pandemic deniers and conspiracy activists adapted to the changing context conditions and constituted themselves as multi-issue players. In so doing, they demonstrated their ability to mobilize crowds—indeed, in my case study the COVID-19 deniers mobilized about as many participants as AfD.

Finally, my analysis contributes to critical approaches to the concepts of ‘far right’ as well as ‘mainstream’. Underscoring the importance of the gender issue for far-right mobilization, my findings address a gap in theorizing about the far right: Whereas the centrality of gender in the far right has long been emphasized by feminist scholarship (for instance Koonz, 1987; Blee, 1991), dominant definitions do not refer to it, underlining anti-immigrant positions (nativism) and anti-elitist discourses (populism) instead (Mudde, 2019, 2007; Rydgren, 2018). Clearly, the opposition against any form of social life beyond the heteronormative, cis-gendered family ideal constitutes a powerful ideological ground for far-right actors to capitalize on—especially taking account of widespread anti-feminist worldviews in European societies.

Hence, this study also underscores that the so-called mainstream is not ‘*essentially good, rational or moderate*’ (Brown et al., 2023, p. 166 emphasis in original)—as it is often assumed to be. In 2023, Ishchenko and co-authors still claimed that the difference between mainstream-right and far-right parties was that ‘the centre-right in principle accepts the other side – Social-Democrats, Greens, LGBT+ groups – as legitimate actors in the country’s social and political landscape’ (p. 9). Yet, my findings reveal that mainstream politicians’ anti-gender discourse do not only constitute a reaction to far-right claims, but come out of these parties themselves. As my expert interviewee analyzed, in this case mainstream actors ‘played with fire’ when mobilizing against the drag story hour, and then watched in surprise at the situation ‘being ablaze’ (Dahm, 2024b). Also beyond this case, one of the first policies passed by the newly elected Bavarian coalition government of CSU and FW in October 2023 was a highly controversial ‘gender language ban’ (*Genderverbot*), supposedly banning gender-inclusive language and spelling at public institutions, including Bavarian schools and universities.

In the context of anti-gender politics, the normalization of the far right thus does not only concern the adoption of far-right positions by mainstream players, but also the voicing of genuinely shared ideas. Especially when it comes to queer, anti-normative identities, actors from the center to the far right ‘rally ‘round the drag’.

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