

**"Where people in the countryside feel left behind  
populism has a clear path" –  
an analysis of the popular media discourse on how  
infrastructure decay, fear of social decline, and  
right-wing (extremist) values contribute to support  
for right-wing populism**

Larissa Deppisch

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**Larissa Deppisch**

Phone: +49 531 596-5275

Fax: +49 531 596-5599

E-Mail: [larissa.deppisch@thuenen.de](mailto:larissa.deppisch@thuenen.de)

Johann Heinrich von Thünen Institute

Federal Research Institute for Rural Areas, Forestry and Fisheries

Thünen Institute of Rural Studies

Bundesallee 64

D-38116 Braunschweig

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## Kurzfassung

'Gefühle des Abgehängtseins', welche vor allem in ländlichen Räumen vorzufinden seien, werden oft als Erklärung für den Wahlerfolg der Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) bei der Bundestagswahl 2017 herangezogen. Was unter 'abgehängt sein' zu verstehen ist, wird wissenschaftlich jedoch nicht definiert. In diesem Thünen Working Paper setze ich mich deshalb systematisch damit auseinander, wie der Ausdruck 'Abgehängtsein' im Kontext des AfD-Wahlerfolgs 2017 und ländlicher Regionen diskursiv besetzt und in welche inhaltlichen Zusammenhänge er gebettet wird. Dabei greife ich auf die Methodik der Grounded Theory zurück. 233 Beiträge (online und print) des populär-medialen Diskurses stellen den Materialkorpus dar. Neben Artikeln aus überregionalen Tages- und Wochenzeitungen habe ich auch Beiträge aus regionalen Zeitungen und durch die Onlinesuche bedingt auch Magazinartikel sowie vereinzelt Fernseh- sowie Audiobeiträge einbezogen. Die Sichtung der Printmedien wurde auf das dritte und vierte Quartal 2017 beschränkt. Deutlich werden drei verschiedene (im oben benannten Kontext verortete) Formen des 'Abgehängtseins': infrastrukturell, wirtschaftlich und kulturell. Das 'Abgehängtsein' geht dabei sowohl mit einem Gefühlskonglomerat aus Ängsten, Unzufriedenheit und Ohnmacht als auch mit einer Kritik am demokratischen System selbst einher.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Gefühle des Abgehängtseins, ländliche Räume, Demokratie, Rechtspopulismus, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), Grounded Theory, Diskursanalyse

## Abstract

Feelings of being 'left behind,' which, according to the discourse, can be found especially among people in rural areas, are often cited as an explanation for the success of the *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)* in the 2017 federal elections. The concept of being 'left behind' has not been scientifically defined. Therefore, in this Thünen Working Paper, I examine systematically what meanings are discursively attached to the expression being 'left behind' in the context of the success of the AfD in the 2017 elections, and the rural regions and in which these connections are embedded. For this analysis, I use the methodology of Grounded Theory. The material corpus consists of 233 articles (online and print) of the popular media discourse. In addition to examining articles from national daily and weekly newspapers, I have included in my analysis articles from regional newspapers, and, through an online search, magazine articles and occasional television and audio reports. My review of the print media was limited to reports that appeared in the third and fourth quarters of 2017. In the abovementioned context, three different discursive forms of being 'left behind' – economically, culturally, and in access to infrastructure – become evident. Being 'left behind' goes hand in hand with a conglomeration of feelings of fear, dissatisfaction, and powerlessness; and with a criticism of the democratic system itself.

**Keywords:** Feelings of being left behind, rural areas, democracy, right-wing populism, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), Grounded Theory, discourse analysis



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## List of abbreviations

A	
AfD	Alternative für Deutschland
ARD	Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland
F	
f.	following
N	
n.d.	no date
N.N.	Nomen nescio
S	
sic	Sic erat scriptum



## Summary<sup>1</sup>

Feelings of being 'left behind' – which are particularly prevalent in rural areas – are often used to explain the success of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the 2017 federal elections. The AfD won 7.9 percentage points more of the vote than in the 2013 elections, and thus entered the Bundestag for the first time. Against this background, the question of what is actually meant by being 'left behind' concerning rural areas and the success of the AfD arises, and what social interrelations contribute to this phenomenon.

This analysis is the first part of the research project *'Feelings of being left behind' in rural areas?*, which is led by PD Dr. Andreas Klärner at the Thünen Institute of Rural Studies. The focus of the project is on addressing precisely these questions. Being 'left behind' has not been clearly defined in the scientific discourse. However, the popular media discourse provides data that could serve as a basis for developing this concept and the social issues related to it. Therefore, in this Thünen Working Paper, I will systematically examine how the term being 'left behind' is discursively used, and in which contexts it is embedded. A total of 233 articles (online and print) from the popular media discourse provide the data basis for the study.

In the analysis, I use the methodology of Grounded Theory, which is designed to derive theoretical explanations from data. Applying the Grounded Theory approach involves the following analytical steps: First, the data are *coded* by assigning abstract terms to text sequences, which capture the symbolic meaning of the sequences. The sequences are thus sorted into overarching categories, which are enriched during the coding process with content-related dimensions and interrelations (in this case, to explain what it means to be 'left behind'). Then, I *compare* the sequences of a category to identify central aspects, and to check whether new sequences contribute new aspects. If not, this is a sign that the coding process has been completed. Finally, by means of *reduction*, certain categories that are theoretically related to each other are combined into more abstract 'concepts,' and other categories that turn out to be irrelevant with respect to the theoretical explanations that have been developed are deleted. It is important to note that the following explanatory approaches are theoretical assumptions based on the popular media discourse, which will be followed by an empirical investigation based on those assumptions in the further course of the research process.

The discourse about feelings or states of being 'left behind' has different discursive meanings of the term 'left behind,' which are embedded in three narratives. In the first narrative, being 'left behind' is understood in terms of infrastructure. This narrative assumes that there are deficiencies in public and private infrastructure for the provision of services of general interest, especially in rural areas. Such deficiencies are attributed to the economic consequences of an infrastructure policy that allows for the construction or maintenance of infrastructure only if it is profitable to do so. Thus, the state does not guarantee that municipalities will have adequate infrastructure. However, local characteristics, such as demographic change, outward migration, and weak economic

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<sup>1</sup> This Working Paper is a translation with minor adjustments of Deppisch 2019b. Furthermore, I would like to thank Miriam Hils and Dina Führmann for language editing.

power, also influence the extent of infrastructure provision. According to this discourse, the lack of infrastructure limits people's opportunities for social participation. Particularly noticeable here are deficiencies in the areas of mobility, internet service, health care, and shopping facilities.

This situation creates a feeling among the so-called 'left behind' that they lack access to sufficient infrastructure. They have the impression that the state is not taking action to stop the deterioration of services in their local area, and that politicians are not interested in the rural population. The latter impression, they say, is reinforced by the failure of politicians to campaign during elections in smaller municipalities. Thus, frustration and dissatisfaction with their individual living situations, as well as with politics, are spreading among people in rural areas. Feelings of powerlessness are also reported. For example, people say they have the impression that nothing can be done to change their deteriorating conditions. According to this discursive narrative, it was the interplay of having limited services of general interest, dissatisfaction with the ruling parties, and feelings of powerlessness that ultimately led people in these municipalities to vote for the AfD.

The second narrative revolves around being 'left behind' economically. This narrative posits that the increased competition between companies and between workers as a result of globalization leads to social decline, for example, through the loss of employment or threats to the social position. At the same time, it is said, state benefits, which help to compensate for these economic losses, are being reduced. According to this discourse, the effects of these trends are particularly severe for people with low professional qualifications. In this narrative, migrants appear primarily as competitors for jobs and social benefits. At this point, a clear distinction is made between the so-called economically 'left behind' and those who are economically well-positioned, but who are afraid of experiencing social decline in the future. Both groups have similar fears about, for example, their jobs, their old age security, or the future of their children. Moreover, the impression is reported that the state does not do enough to address their economic concerns and fears, but instead focuses on the needs and interests of migrants. Thus, according to this narrative, the economically 'left behind' are frustrated and dissatisfied with their living situations and with politics, and feel powerless. This narrative asserts that an interplay of economic hardship (or fears of it), dissatisfaction with politics, and feelings of powerlessness can lead people to vote for a right-wing populist party.

The third narrative is that of being 'left behind' culturally. In the context of globalization and modernization, societies may embrace modern and cosmopolitan values and ways of life, such as multiculturalism or same-sex marriage. The so-called culturally 'left behind' are confronted with values and ways of life that contradict their own conservative or right-wing (extreme) attitudes. According to this discourse, the arrival of migrants who are perceived as strangers, and who bring different cultural backgrounds into society (e.g., Muslim), is seen by these people as a threat (e.g., supporting terrorism). This narrative assumes that, therefore, these people reject modern, cosmopolitan politics and the opening of the borders in 2015, and are dissatisfied with the policies of the ruling parties. According to this discourse, the culturally 'left behind' feel that their interests are not democratically represented, and develop political distance from the ruling parties. In this narrative, the alienation of the culturally 'left behind' from the cultural values perceived as dominant, and their dissatisfaction with politics, are identified as decisive influences that led them to vote for the AfD.

It therefore becomes clear that according to these narratives, it is not just structural aspects, such as infrastructure, demographic, or economic conditions, that have contributed to the perceptions of being 'left behind,' and, thus, to the popularity of the AfD; but also a certain conglomeration of feelings that are potentially associated with these aspects. In addition to having concerns about the current and future life situations, the feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction with current politics are relevant. Of central importance is the feeling of powerlessness; i.e., the perception of not being able to change situations that are perceived as problematic. This feeling is connected to the relationship of the 'left behind' to the state and to democracy. On the one hand, it is argued that the state does not adequately meet its responsibilities to address the problems and the needs of the (rural) population. On the other hand, it is reported that the 'left behind' doubt the representational function of the democratic system itself, and feel unrepresented. Against this background, the decision to vote for the AfD is also interpreted as a form of protest.

Furthermore, these narratives make clear that spatiality plays a large role in the feeling of being 'left behind,' as people in East German and/or rural areas are described as being particularly likely to be 'left behind'. It has been pointed out that the infrastructure and economic conditions in these areas may be particularly problematic due to system changes. A south-north divide in terms of economic power and population growth is also sometimes cited. In addition, these groups are differentiated according to gender. *East German men* in particular are often portrayed as single losers who are 'left behind' by East German women, both geographically and socioeconomically.

This discourse analysis has shown that feelings of being 'left behind' exist as a discursive phenomenon that goes hand in hand with a broad debate in the popular media. In order to answer the question of the extent to which feelings of being 'left behind' can be found beyond their discursive existence, the narratives presented here point to way hypotheses-like. Further investigations within the framework of the research project '*Feelings of being left behind' in rural areas?* will be devoted to group discussions conducted using a socio-empirical approach.



## 1 Introduction

In the 2017 federal elections, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) won 12.6 percent of the vote, and thus entered the Bundestag. In 2017, the AfD attracted 7.9 percentage points more of the vote than in the 2013 federal elections (Der Bundeswahlleiter 2017). This result led observers to raise the question of how such a large increase in support for the AfD could have come about. What motivated so many people to vote for a right-wing populist-market liberal party in 2017? Various explanations linked the success of the AfD to the feeling of being 'left behind'<sup>2</sup> – which, according to the discourse, is particularly prevalent in rural areas (Focus-Online 09/27/2017; Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung 11/19/2017; Lausitzer Rundschau Online 09/26/2017; Märkische Online 10/02/2017).

In this working paper, I will take up the expression of being 'left behind' by looking at how it is used discursively, and in which contexts it is embedded. This analysis is the first part of the research project '*Feelings of being left behind*' in rural areas? led by PD Dr. Andreas Klärner at the Thünen Institute of Rural Studies. The project investigates the potential connections between social, infrastructure, and economic conditions in rural areas, and the dissatisfaction of the population with certain established parties or the democratic system as a whole.<sup>3</sup> The following analysis of the media discourse on '*feelings of being left behind*' lays the foundation for the entire research project. A broad spectrum of theories<sup>4</sup> will be developed based on the problematizations and explanatory approaches found in the media discourse, which will then be translated into concrete research questions. The aim is thus to generate theories or relevant questions from the data. These questions will, in turn, serve as a basis for further steps in the research process, from the systematic recording of the state of research to the creation of a guideline for group discussions in rural regions.

In order to understand whether and, if so, to what extent people in rural areas feel 'left behind' and vote for right-wing populist parties in response to this feeling, it is first necessary to define what is meant by the term 'left behind.' As being 'left behind' is not a scientific category, the term does not refer to a clear definition negotiated in the scientific discourse. Indeed, within their professional frameworks, some scientists have even distanced themselves from the term. For example, the sociologist Holger Lengfeld cautioned:

*As a scientist I wouldn't talk about being left behind either. When someone is left behind, it is an active process, and as a rule we think that someone is specifically responsible for it: Some are decoupled from economic development. (Süddeutsche.de 09/22/2017, own translation)*

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<sup>2</sup> In this Thünen Working Paper, two types of quotation marks are used. I use the single quotation marks whenever I want to emphasize an expression; e.g., 'left behind.' I use double quotation marks only for direct quotations.

<sup>3</sup> For further information on the project see also: Thuenen Institute for Rural Studies 2018.

<sup>4</sup> By a theory, I mean here an explanatory approach that has a hypothesis-like status.

Moreover, Antonia Milbert from the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs, and Spatial Development criticized the term:

*I find the term 'being left behind' an unfortunate term. It's not that there is no development taking place there, but the development doesn't come close to the other regions, it is below average. (Deutschlandfunk.de 08/31/2017, own translation)*

At this point it also becomes clear that the understanding of being 'left behind' can differ. While Lengfeld spoke of a rigid decoupling of economic development through external influence, Milbert put the term into perspective by describing being 'left behind' as merely indicating below-average development – and without making clear whether this development is economic, or refers to other conditions. Due to these basic differences in the understanding of the term being 'left behind,' which are cited here as examples, it makes sense to systematically develop the various levels of meaning and connections associated with being 'left behind' that can be found in the popular media discourse. Here, the term is used intensively and in a variety of ways in connection with emerging right-wing populism and with rural areas. Therefore, the popular media discourse promises to provide a broad set of data.

Given the described situation and the objectives of this work, the use of the Grounded Theory approach is appropriate here. This approach is used to generate the theory from the data, instead of to empirically test assumptions that were made previously (Glaser/Strauss 1967: viii). Accordingly, the theory has not been established at the beginning of the research process, but is understood as a process (ibid.: 9). Thus, the use of the Grounded Theory approach will enable me to apply an explorative approach to the initially exclusively discursive phenomenon of being 'left behind.' Instead of relying on a subjective understanding of being 'left behind,' which is narrowly framed at the beginning of the research process, and which is subjective due to a lack of preliminary scientific work on the term's definition, this approach will allow for a methodical openness to a diversity of interpretations of being 'left behind.' Thus, the use of the Grounded Theory approach promises to lessen the chances of missing certain potentially relevant contexts of meaning by relying on subjective settings at the beginning of the research process. Furthermore, the use of the Grounded Theory approach is advantageous as a starting position, as it allows the theoretical foundation of an investigation to be built directly on empirical data, which is advisable given the current diversity and comprehensiveness of interpretations of being 'left behind' in the popular media discourse in contrast to the scientific discourse. At the same time, the possibility of enriching and further developing the theoretical drafts with scientific literature in the course of the research process is not excluded (ibid.: 37).

## 2 Grounded Theory as a method of discourse analysis

The research process of the Grounded Theory approach consists of three analytical steps: the collection of data, the coding of the data, and the analysis of the data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasized that these steps are not carried out one after the other in a strict order, but tend to overlap (ibid.: 43). The first phase of data collection, which takes place at the beginning of the research project, is oriented toward the sociological perspective of the researcher and the problem reference (ibid.: 45).

Accordingly, the core questions of this analysis are as follows:

- What does being 'left behind' actually mean?
- How does being 'left behind' come about?
- What are the political consequences of being 'left behind'?

Later in the process, the researcher decides, based on the theory developed in the course of the previous analysis, which data should be collected or gathered with the aim of further developing the theory. Glaser and Strauss also referred to this process as *theoretical sampling* (ibid: 45). Accordingly, this part of the work will end with an outlook; i.e., a series of questions that will guide the further research process of the entire project.

The coding of the data involves assigning (more or less) abstract terms to text sequences, which capture the symbolic meanings of the sequences (Miles et al. 2014: 71 f.). These terms are called *categories* by Glaser and Strauss, and the coded sequences are sorted into these categories (Glaser/Strauss 1967: 106). A category can thus be brought into being by a single sequence. Further cases can, however, enrich that category (ibid.: 30).

Even if it were possible to pick out categories by reviewing existing research and applying them to the material, Glaser and Strauss have advised against doing so. Although these categories may seem appropriate at first glance, they run the risk of not being supported by the empirical material, of not being relevant, and, ultimately, of being unsuitable. However, a review of the state of research on the topic of this study should not be omitted altogether. According to Glaser and Strauss, once the central categories have been established, references should be made to the state of research (ibid: 37). For this reason, the categories are derived from the data, and are not defined in advance by the researchers.

In the course of coding text sequences into a category, the category is enriched with dimensions and connections (including to other categories) (ibid.: 106). Furthermore, the sequences of a category are always compared with each other in order to identify the central aspects of the category, and to check whether the new sequence has a new aspect. If this is seldom the case, it may be assumed that the point of theoretical saturation – and, thus, the end of the need to code sequences

that are to be assigned to this category – has been reached (ibid.: 108, 111 f.). Accordingly, theoretical saturation is the indicator of the end of the coding process.

A further partial step of the analysis process is the reduction. On the one hand, certain categories that are theoretically related to one another can be combined to form more abstract 'concepts' (ibid.: 110 f.). For example, categories such as the class and milieu of AfD voters, the share of AfD voters who are workers, and the economic situations of AfD voters are summarized in the concept of 'economic aspects of AfD electoral success.' Furthermore, the categories 'health care problematic,' 'closing down educational institutions' and 'closing down bank branches' are included in the concept of 'structural weaknesses/weaknesses in the provision of services of general interest' (see Table 1). On the other hand, categories that are less relevant with regard to the theory that is developed can be deleted from the list for the sake of clarity. Categories for the discursive discussion of the party's orientation in terms of content are, for example, not of interest here, and therefore do not have to be taken into account in the context of the genesis of the theory around feelings of being 'left behind.'<sup>5</sup>

**Table 1: From code to concept – examples**

Code	Category	Concept
<i>But a doctor might not want to go to the countryside because something else is problematic there, which you have already mentioned, namely that he cannot find schools for his children and the like. (Deutschlandfunk.de 10/09/2017, own translation)</i>	Problematic health care	Structural weaknesses / weaknesses in the provision of services of general interest
<i>The domino effect seems unstoppable in Genthin: More and more local institutions like schools are closing down, (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/12/2017, own translation)</i>	Closing educational institutions	
<i>The savings banks are cut off. The branches will be closed. It's getting worse and worse. (Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017, own translation)</i>	Closing bank branches	

Source: Own data.

Parallel to the coding process, it is recommended that the researcher writes so-called 'memos.' These are transcriptions of the researcher's own ideas on specific categories, including on their characteristic aspects, central contents, and interrelations. This analysis forms the basis for the

<sup>5</sup> With regard to the content of AfD, see, for example, Bebnowski 2015; Franzmann 2014; Häusler 2016; Koch 2016; Schiebel 2016.



written elaboration of the theory that is developed; and, if necessary, a further analytical view can be taken of the data itself, or it can be used for purposes of illustration (ibid: 107, 113).

Finally, the status of the statements that are extracted from the popular media discourse with the help of Grounded Theory is also of methodological relevance. To this end, it is first necessary to define what is actually meant by a discourse; i.e., the object of the investigation of this analysis. Michel Foucault, for example, defined a discourse as "a historically specific totality of all effective statements. This means a conglomerate of statements that is recognized as true within a certain period of time" (Deppisch 2019a, own translation, see also Foucault 2013: 500 f.). The statement analysis always refers to the statements that have reached the surface of the discourse – thus, the statements that have actually been spoken or written down (Foucault 2013: 590 f.).

The statements of a discourse always exist within a certain frame of reference in terms of content. Both the information content and the possible uses of a term can change accordingly (Foucault 2013: 585-586). For this analysis, which takes the concept of being 'left behind' as its starting point, this means that not every article containing the words being 'left behind' or 'left behind' belong to the *discourse of being 'left behind.'* In addition to a reference to the concept of being 'left behind,' a reference to right-wing populism or/and rural areas is also essential. If, for example, an article in a business newspaper mentions a company that has left another company behind, but this statement is not related to rural areas or the AfD election, it is not considered part of the discourse of interest here, and the article is accordingly not included in the material corpus.

Just as the statement is at the center of Foucault's understanding of discourse, it is also at the center of this analysis. The information about which person is supposed to have made certain statements and who wrote which articles is just as irrelevant in this analysis as the information about which newspaper published a certain statement. In the following, I focus exclusively on the content of the concept of being 'left behind' and the (causal) connections that the discourse describes in order to establish as broad a spectrum of theories as possible. Accordingly, linguistic introductions, such as 'according to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung on October 1, 2017,' will be avoided as much as possible. However, for the sake of scientific comprehensibility, the sources are always listed according to the respective statement.

In addition, the statements (narratives, stories) recognized as true in popular media discourse can be congruent with the statements recognized as true in the scientific discourse (considered as objective facts), but they do not have to be. The latter will be discussed in detail in further analyses (the synthesis of the state of research) within the framework of the research project, and will be contrasted with the explanatory approaches outlined below. The statements of the popular media discourse mentioned in the results section of this paper are thus of a hypothesis-like nature, and will be empirically tested with other methods in the further course of the research project.



### 3 Search strategy and material corpus

In order to find as many popular media contributions as possible that are related to the research question in terms of content, I pursued two approaches to data collection. First, I used the search engine Google to find articles (primarily newspaper and magazine articles<sup>6</sup>) by keyword pair. These were 'AfD abgehängt' ('AfD left behind,' search date: 04/03/2018) and 'ländlich abgehängt' ('rural left behind,' search date: 04/18/2018). I chose these keywords because they address the core issue of being 'left behind' in the context of the 2017 election success of the AfD and rural areas, which is the main focus of this study. The first 100 Google result entries and references to other articles of the same newspaper were viewed, if thematically appropriate. Both newspaper articles in online format as well as television and radio reports were documented. The latter were transcribed. All thematically matching articles were included. These articles were published between 08/01/2014 and 04/13/2018, with the largest share being published in 2017.

Second, I looked at print media. Since it was not possible to focus directly on articles of a certain topic via an automatic search, it was necessary to narrow down the time period as well as the selection of newspapers before the search. I chose the federal elections 2017 as a starting point, because the debate about feelings of being 'left behind' and right-wing populism (in rural areas) was particularly intense in this context. To ensure that the research could be completed in a reasonable time frame, I limited the period of the articles from print media to half a year – from 07/01/2017 to 12/31/2017. Furthermore, only national daily and Sunday/weekly newspapers were considered. Thus, I included newspapers that appear five to six times a week nationwide (daily newspapers) and newspapers that appear once a week nationwide (Sunday/weekly newspapers).

The selection of the print media was based on each newspaper's 'hard' circulation; i.e., on the number of copies actually sold in individual sales and subscriptions. The five national daily and the five Sunday and weekly newspapers with the highest circulation<sup>7</sup> in the fourth quarter of 2017 were selected (see Figures 1 and 2). The five daily newspapers are the Bild/Fußballbild, the Süddeutsche Zeitung, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, the Welt und die Welt kompakt, and the Handelsblatt (DWDL 2018b). The five Sunday and weekly newspapers with the highest circulation are the Bild am Sonntag, die Zeit, Welt am Sonntag and Welt am Sonntag kompakt, the Frankfurter Allgemeine

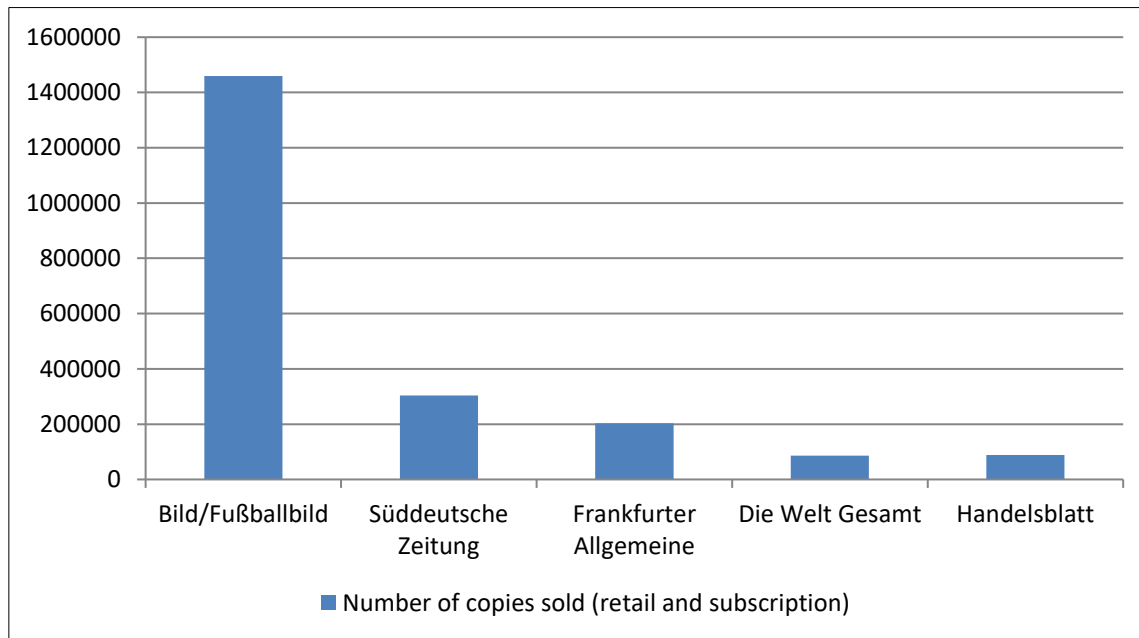
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<sup>6</sup> Here I am guided by the category into which the publishers themselves are divided at the Information Community for Determining the Distribution of Advertising Media (Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern e.V. 2018). Apparently, a distinction is usually made depending on the format of the newspapers, such as the Bild or the Süddeutsche Zeitung, which are printed on thinner paper, are unbound, and with larger paper sizes; and magazines, such as the Spiegel or the Focus, which are bound on thicker paper and printed with smaller paper sizes.

<sup>7</sup> The figures in the DWDL ranking refer to information provided by publishers to the Information Society to determine the distribution of advertising media. Some publishers combine several newspapers into one voucher unit. In this study, this applies to Bild und Fußballbild (here: Bild / Fußballbild), Welt und Welt kompakt (here: Die Welt Gesamt) and Welt am Sonntag and Welt am Sonntag kompakt (here: Welt am Sonntag Gesamt) (DWDL 2018a; DWDL 2018b; Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern e.V. 2018). Since there are no reliable, differentiated data available for the period of interest, I refer to the booking units indicated.

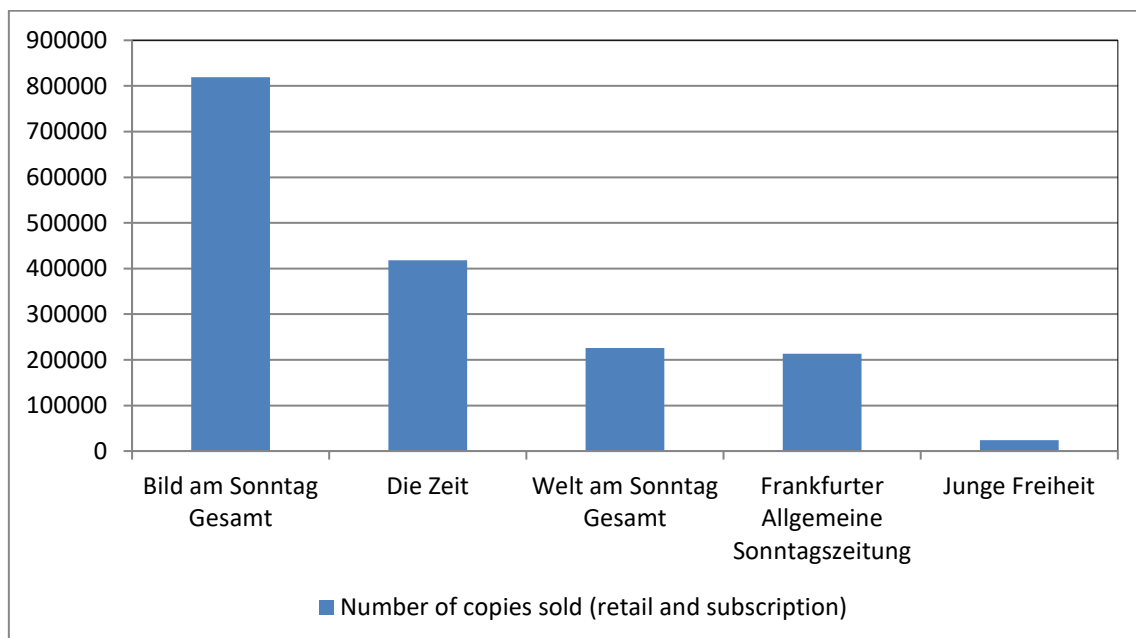
Sonntagszeitung, and Junge Freiheit (DWDL 2018a). The order of the newspapers does not change when compared to the ranking in the third quarter of 2017 (DWDL 2017a; DWDL 2017b).

**Figure 1:** Hard circulation of daily newspapers 4/2017



Source: Own illustration on the basis of DWDL 2018b.

**Figure 2:** Hard circulation of Sunday newspapers and weekly newspapers 4/2017



Source: Own illustration on the basis of DWDL 2018a.

The print media were accessed via the Frankfurt German National Library. A total of 1,045 newspaper editions were viewed, although some editions of certain newspapers were blocked for legal reasons, and were thus not accessible. Either the newspapers were digitized, which meant that the articles could be filtered by the keyword 'abgehängt' ('left behind') using the search function; or the newspapers were available in paper form, which meant that all published articles were viewed manually and checked for relevance.

The analysis of the *Fußballbild* (a paper about soccer) was omitted due to the lack of thematic focus on this medium. It became clear that not all newspapers focused equally intensively on the topic of being 'left behind.' The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* stood out among the daily newspapers and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* among the weekly newspapers for having a strong interest in the topic, while *Junge Freiheit* and *Bild* did not contribute any articles to the discourse of being 'left behind' in the period I have examined. Among the online sources, it was clearly *Deutschlandfunk* that reported most intensively about 'left behind' regions. The discourse of being 'left behind' is thus a discourse that is primarily conducted by the media of the educated middle classes – whether with a conservative perspective through the reporting of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine (Sonntags-)Zeitung*, or with a social-liberal perspective through the reporting of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Right-wing conservative media, such as *Junge Freiheit*, or media with bold and simplistic content, such as *Bild*, are less involved in the discourse (see Tables 2 and 3 in the appendix). In addition to media outlets such as *Die Welt*, which also reports from a bourgeois-conservative perspective, (left-wing) liberal perspectives have been represented over time, or, for example, through business-focused content via the *Handelsblatt*.

Following the search strategy described above, a material corpus of 92 online articles and 155 print articles from German-language media was compiled. The inclusion of online media proved to be fruitful, as it allowed the already broad spectrum of content to be expanded. These online reports came from sources ranging from well-known magazines, such as *Spiegel* and *Focus*; to public institutions, such as the *ARD*; to small local papers, such as the *Delmenhorster Kurier*. This methodically broad approach to collecting media content ensured that the content was as broad as possible.

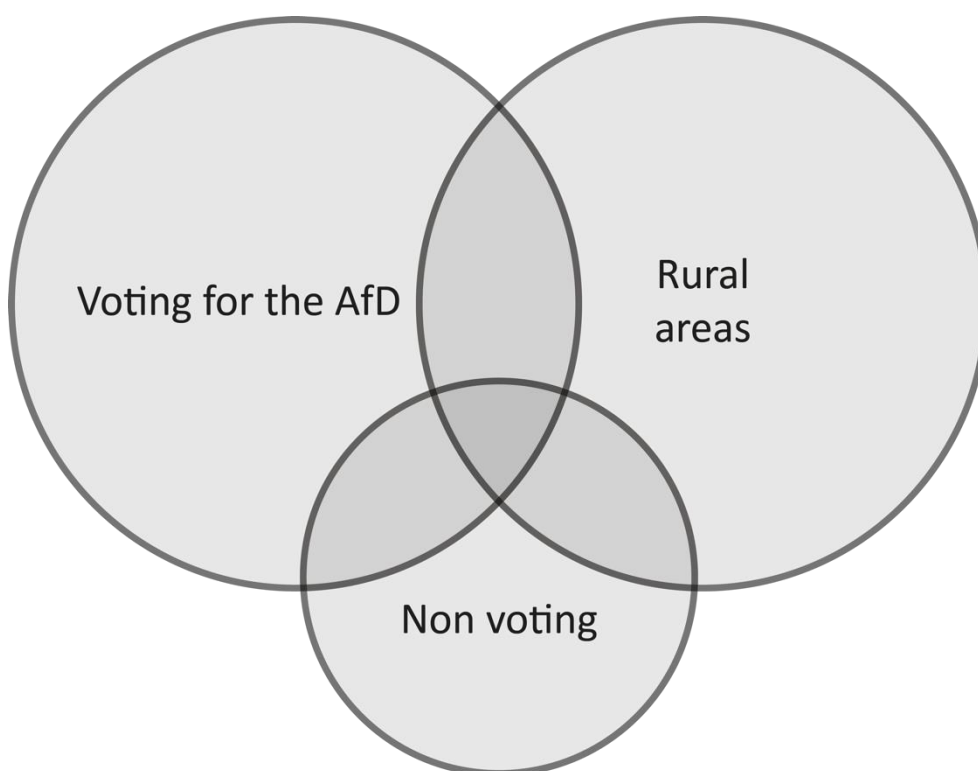


## 4 Results of the discourse analysis

### 4.1 Sub-areas of the discourse

The analysis of the empirical material shows that the discourse on being 'left behind' can be divided into three sub-discourses, each with a different focus: voting for the AfD, non voting, and rural areas (see Figure 3). Finally, however, there are also overlaps between the sub-discourses in the course of the concatenation of the statements. In particular, the sub-discourse that takes the vote for the AfD as its starting point also addresses the infrastructure conditions of rural areas, and vice versa. These two sub-discourses as well as the relationship between the vote for the AfD and rural areas that is opened up in the discourse, will be explained in more detail in the following. The partial discourse on the non-voters who were 'left behind' also refers in part to the vote for the AfD and rural areas, but is smaller overall – possibly due to the use of a search strategy that does not explicitly take non-voters into account. The general content of being 'left behind' from this realm of the discourse are included in the analysis. Since non-voting is not the focus of this project, it will not be pursued further here.

**Figure 3:** Areas of the discourse around feelings of being 'left behind'



Source: Own illustration.

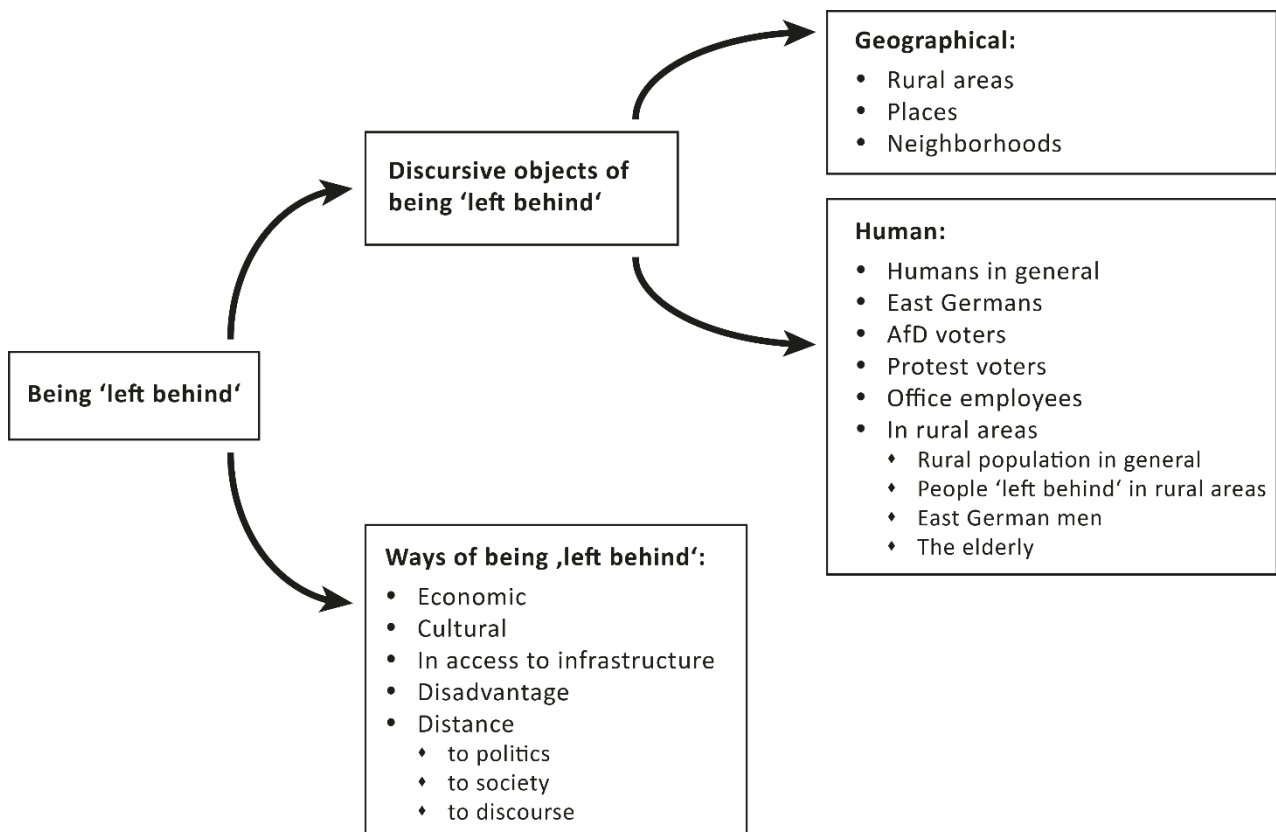
Based on the Grounded Theory approach, the following represents a first step toward formulating a theory generated from the discourse data on feelings/states of being 'left behind,' which are then translated into further research questions.

## 4.2 Forms of being 'left behind'

### 4.2.1 Subjective feeling or objective condition?

Before I discuss the various explanatory approaches and discursively identified connections related to the complex dynamics of how and why the feeling of being 'left behind' might come about, I will first look at the variety of meanings of being 'left behind' found in the material (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: The objects and forms of being 'left behind' named in the discourse**



Source: Own illustration.

Even the status of being 'left behind' is not always clearly defined in the popular media discourse. On the one hand, being 'left behind' is described as a state in which people find themselves, or have been brought into by themselves or by institutions (Süddeutsche.de 09/22/2017). On the other hand, being 'left behind' is also presented as a feeling: "Ramelow believes that the East Germans feel left behind" (ARD Mediathek 11/08/2017, own translation). In contrast to a description of a state of affairs, being 'left behind' is not only a description of a phenomenon in the realm of feelings, it is also based on a distinction made between subjective feelings and objective reality: "They [the established parties] must listen to the people again who feel left behind by society. And who also possibly are left behind" (Westdeutsche Zeitung.de 09/29/2017, own translation). And,



even more clearly: "The less people are objectively left behind, the less they will subjectively feel left behind" (Main Post.de 09/26/2017, own translation).<sup>8</sup>

Within the framework of the discourse, this subjective perception is regularly compared with statistical findings – the 'hard facts' – and critically examined with regard to their 'objective existence.' It is, for example, argued that "these people [AfD voters] feel they are losers due to modernization, but they are not losers in the economic sense" (Süddeutsche.de 09/22/2017, own translation). Another report observes:

*The tenor of the IW study was that the AfD supporters are not at all left behind, as is often falsely claimed, but actually earn slightly above average. The proportion of workers among AfD supporters was only 16 percent and the proportion of unemployed was three percent. (Telepolis 10/13/2017, own translation)*

The feeling of being 'left behind' is sometimes also made more plausible by the 'objective facts,' as in the case of poor infrastructure: "No supermarket – where rural regions are left behind" (ARD Mediathek 11/08/2017, own translation). And: "The feeling of being left behind played a role in a region where in many places there is no bus at the weekend and the next clinic is often far away" (Spiegel Online 10/29/2017, own translation).

All in all, it becomes clear that when we look at the content of being 'left behind,' it is not possible to differentiate between the feeling and the state of being 'left behind,' as there is a broad overlap in content: "There are people who feel culturally left behind" (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/25/2017, own translation). And, conversely: "AfD voters are not economically but culturally left behind" (Sputnik.com 09/27/2017, own translation).

#### 4.2.2 Being 'left behind' economically

At this point, it also becomes clear that the term being 'left behind' is discursively used in different ways. On the one hand, being 'left behind' is understood as an economic term that describes a person or an area with a precarious living situation (ntv.de 10/06/2017), a low standard of living (Radarmagazin.de n.d.), or poor living conditions (Deutschlandfunk.de 08/31/2017; Welt am Sonntag kompakt 10/01/2017c; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017).

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<sup>8</sup> More detailed here: "The reason is considered to be that many East Germans feel left behind. But are they really? A glance at the most important economic data shows a clearly positive picture [...] The new federal states are also doing well in terms of gross domestic product per employee [...] Wages in the east are growing faster than in the west, as are the gross values added in the economy and industrial production. At the same time, unemployment is falling faster than in the old federal states. [...] So is it possible that he exists only in his own imagination, the East German who has been left behind?" (Focus Online 09/27/2017, own translation).

Here, 'the left behind' is a term used to refer to "the poor [...] [and] 'socially weak'" (Telepolis 10/13/2017, own translation). To be 'left behind' can also mean not having benefited from the economic upswing, which may refer to certain populations, places, or regions: "While many of the once mouse-gray villages on the other side of the Elbe flourished, the Wendland remained left behind even after the fall of the Wall. The upswing passed by land and people" (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/21/2017, own translation, see as well Süddeutsche Zeitung 08/18/2017).

### 4.2.3 Being 'left behind' culturally

By contrast, being 'left behind' is explicitly separated from the economic form of being 'left behind': "[T]he Saxon population obviously feels culturally left behind, less socially. The resentments [...] are deeper than the fears of social cutbacks" (Frankfurter Rundschau.de 09/25/2017, own translation). It does not mean being poor or being 'left behind' economically, but is instead understood from a cultural perspective (Rheinische Post Online 09/26/2017; Süddeutsche.de 09/22/2017; Tagesschau.de 09/26/2017). To be 'left behind' culturally is expressed as the feeling of being "foreign in one's own country" (Rheinische Post Online 09/26/2017, own translation), having "resentment against fugitives and leftists" (Frankfurter Rundschau.de 09/25/2017, own translation), as well as being traditional rather than cosmopolitan. The term 'cosmopolitan' is defined here as a social ideal that advocates

*[t]hat people live in a world without borders, that we help people in need, no matter where they are, that we recognize different life plans – all this is rejected by AfD supporters. Instead, they want a nation state as protection against external threats, more cultural homogeneity, more traditional ways of life – and no Islam to go with it. (Süddeutsche.de 09/22/2017, own translation)*

Being 'left behind' culturally is also expressed in the "longing for a supposedly intact past world, because there everything was supposedly well-ordered" (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/25/2017, own translation). The 'left behind' "wanted to turn back globalization and wanted a purely German Germany back" (Deutsche Welle.com 10/01/2017, own translation). Such people, according to the discourse, have experienced a devaluation of their own cultural identity in the course of social modernization and opening processes. The decisive characteristics of this cultural identity are, for example, provincialism, tradition, and love of one's homeland, as well as smoking and eating meat (Der Sonntag.de 01/14/2018). These are the "simple people who have fallen by the wayside in the progress toward social differentiation" (Die Welt kompakt 08/25/2017, own translation).

#### 4.2.4 Being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure

Being 'left behind' also means not having access to certain forms of infrastructure (Bild 09/29/2017). In particular, the complete or near absence of local public transportation<sup>9</sup> and transportation network connections (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/20/2017) and of (fast) internet connections are emphasized: "The only factor is the internet, which is sometimes really too slow or not even available here. That's really being left behind, that's what it feels like" (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/21/2017, own translation). The lack of access to mobile radio, television reception (Märkische Online 10/02/2017), and stores that provide food and other everyday goods (Lausitzer Rundschau Online 12/19/2017a) are mentioned in this context. The lack of universities and other educational institutions (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/14/2017) or connections to metropolitan regions are also cited as markers of a region that has been 'left behind' (Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017). Being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure is ascribed to places, regions, or areas that lack cultural development (Deutschlandfunk.de 10/09/2017) or "cultural life" (Tagesspiegel.de 03/07/2017, own translation).

*The people who say: 'There's nothing going on here.' When you go to a restaurant, you are quite alone. If you go through the city at 5 pm, you are also alone. Not much buying power, so not much business. So those feel left behind.' (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/19/2017, own translation)*

#### 4.2.5 Other forms of being 'left behind'

Furthermore, being 'left behind' is also understood relationally, such as being disadvantaged in comparison with others (Märkische Online 10/02/2017); or being less developed than a city (Landwirtschaftliches Wochenblatt.de n.d.; Morgenpost.de n.d.; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017), another place (Märkische Online 10/02/2017), or the average (Deutschlandfunk.de 08/31/2017). Finally, being 'left behind' is also interpreted as having a lack of prospects or opportunities (Focus-Online 09/27/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017).

In addition, people are described as 'left behind' who "no longer see politics as a field of participation in our society" (Leipziger Internet Zeitung 09/28/2017, own translation). It is also possible to be 'left behind' by "big politics" (Handelsblatt.com 01/03/2018, own translation), as well as "by the discourse of the republic" (Zeit Online 09/27/2017, own translation), or simply "by society" (Westdeutsche Zeitung.de 09/29/2017, own translation). It is also said: "One feels forgotten and left behind by state and federal politics" (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/18/2017, own translation). And: "The displeasure of people who feel that they have been left behind by the politics and

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<sup>9</sup> Deutschlandfunk.de 09/14/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 10/09/2017; Lausitzer Rundschau Online 12/19/2017b; Märkische Allgemeine.de 10/27/2017; Spiegel Online 10/29/2017.

development of the country, far from the metropolises, could cause political drift" (Reuters.com 09/13/2017, own translation). At the same time, being 'left behind' is also understood as a state of being 'left behind' in the wake of current events. The following statement illustrates this discursive interpretation of being 'left behind' in the form of an objection to the thesis of the 'left behind East Germans:'

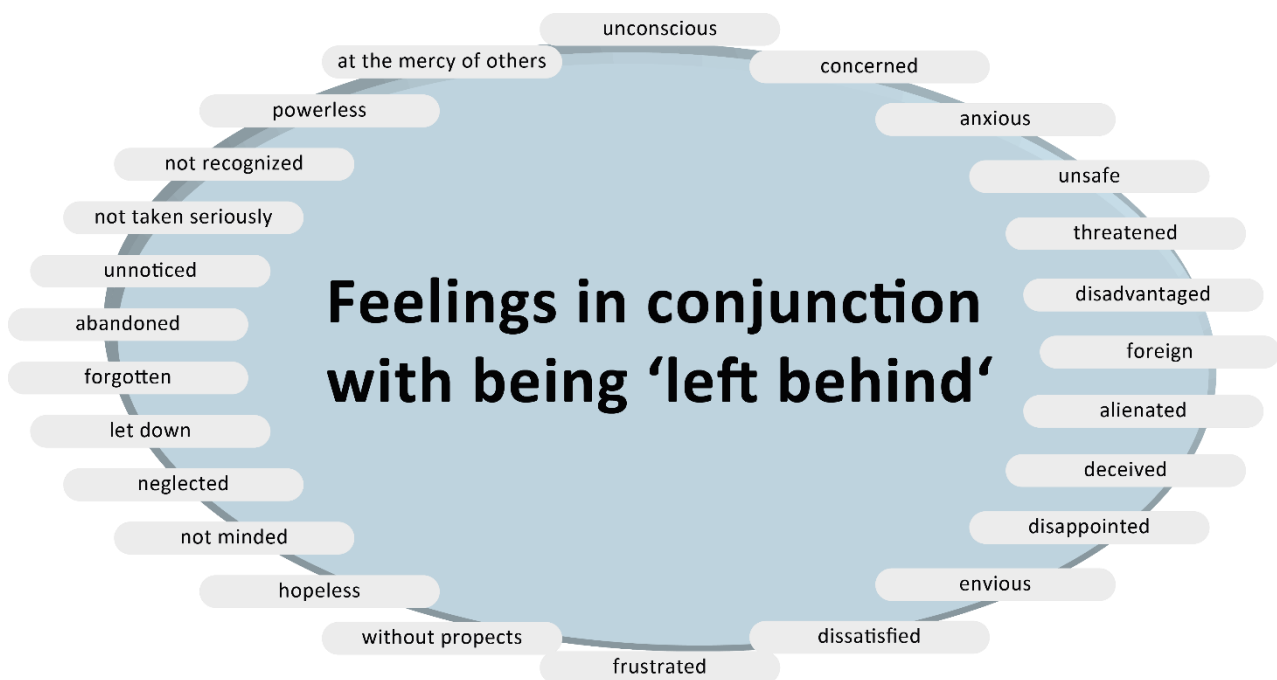
*There can be no talk of workers in the new federal states being generally left behind. 27 years after reunification, regions in the East are anticipating problems that Germany could soon be facing on a much larger scale. (Die Welt kompakt 10/04/2017a, own translation)*

### 4.3 Feelings in conjunction with being 'left behind'

Regardless of whether people are being 'left behind' because of their economic conditions, cultural attitudes, or access to infrastructure, all forms of being 'left behind' that have been mentioned are associated in the discourse with a certain conglomerate of feelings (see Figure 5). These feelings include perceptions of threat, fear, and insecurity, which can be related to various specific forms of anxiety, such as the fear of strangers (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 10/02/2017); concerns about poverty in old age, as well as about the future financial security of one's children;<sup>10</sup> and worries not having access to adequate local supply infrastructure in the future (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/07/2017; Reuters.com 09/13/2017; Thüringer Allgemeine.de 12/14/2017; Welt.de 05/29/2017).

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<sup>10</sup> Bayerischer Rundfunk 11/08/2017; Bell Tower.news 02/26/2018; Handelsblatt 08/10/2017; Handelsblatt 10/05/2017; Main Post.de 09/26/2017; Schwäbische.de 08/09/2017.

**Figure 5: Feelings in conjunction with being 'left behind' identified in the discourse**

Source: Own illustration.

Feelings of cultural alienation<sup>11</sup> and of being disadvantaged<sup>12</sup> are also mentioned. It is observed that the 'left behind' feel that something has been denied them that is their right, but that may be given to others. It is also reported that in addition to feeling frustration and dissatisfaction with their current life conditions (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/07/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/14/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/18/2017; Neue Rhein/Ruhr Zeitung.de 05/15/2017), these people perceive politics as inadequate,<sup>13</sup> or even call into question the democratic system itself (Schwäbische.de 08/09/2017; Tagesschau.de 09/26/2017; Zeit Online 09/27/2017). The lack of prospects and feeling hopelessness among the 'left behind' are also mentioned (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/15/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/18/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/20/2017; Spiegel Online 07/31/2016).

For people in eastern Germany, their sense of dissatisfaction may be compounded by a lack of recognition of their life achievements, which is also reflected in their lower pensions. It is reported that the improvements in political and living conditions after reunification did not meet the

<sup>11</sup> Deutsche Welle.com 10/01/2017; Frankfurter Rundschau.de 09/25/2017; pro Christliches Medienmagazin.de 09/23/2017; Rheinische Post Online 09/26/2017; Sputnik.com 09/27/2017; Tagesschau.de 09/26/2017; Telepolis 10/13/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017.

<sup>12</sup> Bayerischer Rundfunk 11/08/2017; die Zeit 09/28/2017; Handelsblatt 09/29/2017; Spiegel Online 10/29/2017; Spiegel.TV n.d.; Süddeutsche Zeitung 09/29/2017; Süddeutsche Zeitung 10/28/2017, Süddeutsche.de 09/22/2017; The European.de 09/24/2017.

<sup>13</sup> Bayerischer Rundfunk 11/08/2017; Deutsche Welle.com 10/01/2017; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 09/27/2017; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.net 08/19/2014; Märkische Allgemeine.de 10/27/2017; pro Christliches Medienmagazin.de 09/23/2017; Spiegel Online 10/29/2017; Sputnik.com 09/27/2017; Stuttgarter-Zeitung.de 09/27/2017; Welt.de 11/15/2016; Zeit Online 09/27/2017.

expectations of East Germans, which has led them to an emotional state of disappointed hope.<sup>14</sup> Some East Germans, according to the discourse, even feel deceived, or "led astray" (taz.die tageszeitung.de 09/25/2017, own translation).

Feelings of not being taken seriously or of not being seen by state institutions or politicians (established parties), and of instead being forgotten and neglected, are also central to all of the narratives, regardless of the region or state.<sup>15</sup> According to the discourse, those who feel 'left behind,' see themselves as powerless and at the mercy of others, and as lacking influence (Berliner Zeitung.de 09/21/2016; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/15/2017; Schwäbische.de 08/09/2017; Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen.de 09/17/2017). This emotional situation, it is argued, eventually led to rebellion, which was expressed in the (protest) election – or "frustration election" (Märkische Online 10/02/2017, own translation) – of right-wing populist parties.<sup>16</sup>

In the following chapters, which focus on the individual narratives, these feelings will appear again and again in different contexts, and will prove to be decisive for explaining the relationship of the so-called 'left behind' to democracy or the AfD.

#### 4.4 Who or what is being or feels 'left behind'?

Just as being 'left behind' can take on different forms in the discourse, the object that is 'left behind' can become or feel 'left behind' in a variety of discursive ways. This can occur among "East Germans" (ARD Mediathek 09/24/2017, own translation, see also Focus-Online 09/27/2017; Thüringer Allgemeine.de 09/24/2017), AfD voters (Deutsche Welle.com 10/01/2017; Schwäbische.de 08/09/2017; Lausitzer Rundschau Online 09/26/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017), protest voters (Evangeliums-Rundfunk.de 09/25/2017), certain social groups (Süddeutsche Zeitung 10/28/2017), office employees (Märkische Online 10/02/2017), and people in general (Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg 24 10/04/2017; Welt.de 05/29/2017). Moreover, neighborhoods, places (Die Welt kompakt 10/04/2017b; Neues Deutschland.de 01/27/2018; Süddeutsche Zeitung 10/13/2017b), rural areas (heise.de 04/08/2018; Morgenpost.de n.d.), and regions (Süddeutsche Zeitung 09/30/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017) become 'left behind' objects of discourse. Finally, the 'left behind' objects of this discourse include people who are 'left behind' in

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<sup>14</sup> Deutschlandfunk.de 09/15/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/18/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 10/03/2017; Handelsblatt 10/23/2017; Leipziger Internet Zeitung 09/28/2017; Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg 24.de 10/05/2017; Stuttgarter-Zeitung.de 09/27/2017; Süddeutsche.de 09/22/2017; taz.die tageszeitung.de 09/25/2017; Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen.de 09/17/2017.

<sup>15</sup> Bayerischer Rundfunk 11/08/2017; da Hog'n.de 09/25/2017; Der Sonntag.de 01/14/2018; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/01/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/15/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/18/2017; Die Welt 10/20/2017; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 12/01/2017; Märkische Online 10/02/2017; Radarmagazin.de n.d.; Spiegel.TV n.d.; Spiegel Online 10/29/2017; Süddeutsche.de 09/22/2017; taz.die tageszeitung.de 09/25/2017; Telepolis 10/13/2017; Westdeutsche Zeitung.de 09/29/2017; Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen.de 09/17/2017.

<sup>16</sup> da Hog'n.de 09/25/2017; Evangeliums-Rundfunk.de 09/25/2017; Focus-Online 09/27/2017; Neues Deutschland.de 01/27/2018; Spiegel.TV n.d.; Tagesschau.de 09/26/2017; Zeit Online 09/27/2017.

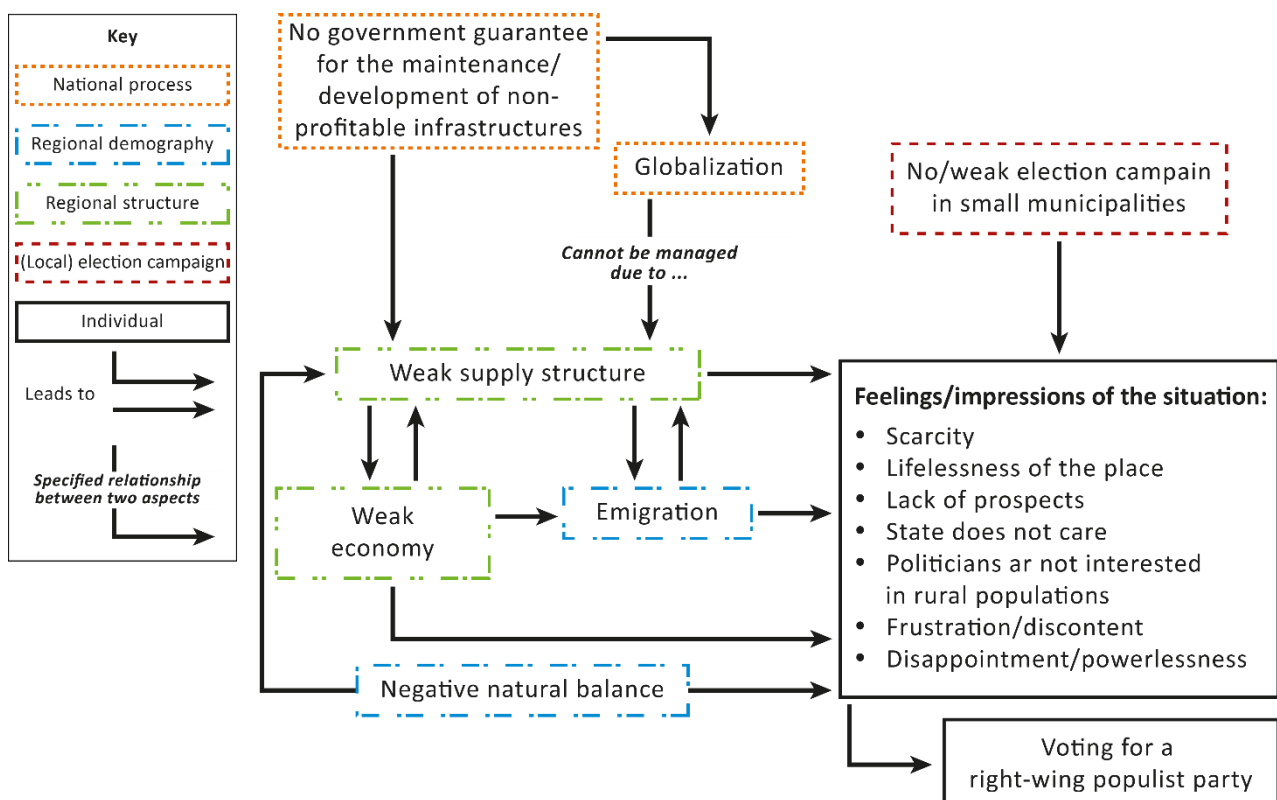
rural areas (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/25/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017), East German men (Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017), elderly people (Leipziger Volkszeitung.de 03/11/2018), and people in rural areas in general (Deutschlandfunk.de 10/09/2017; Handelsblatt.com 01/03/2018).

## 4.5 Narrative 1: being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure

### 4.5.1 Being 'left behind' – when infrastructures are no longer profitable enough

The various forms and objects of being 'left behind' outlined above are each embedded in specific narratives of the discourse on being 'left behind,' which provide different approaches to explaining the success of the AfD in the 2017 federal elections. I will explain these narratives in the following, starting with the narrative of being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6:** Infrastructure interrelationships of 'left behind' rural areas identified in the discourse



Source: Own illustration.



At the beginning of this narrative is an infrastructure policy – which has been characterized as neoliberal<sup>17</sup> (Leipziger Internet Zeitung 09/28/2017; Neues Deutschland.de 09/30/2017) – that is, designed to ensure that the construction or maintenance of infrastructure is only undertaken by companies if it is profitable enough to do so. According to reports, this policy has affected access to food and health care (ARD Mediathek 11/08/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/05/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/12/2017; Schwäbische.de 08/30/2017).

*As an example, she cites a grocery store in Vietlütbe which, according to her, had to close again after only a good five years because the turnover was not sufficient. Not even a sales van still drives through the municipality. (Zeitungsverlag Schwerin.de 11/22/2017, own translation)*

*The Johanniter simply say that the hospital is too expensive. They would lose one million euros, which is why they pulled the emergency brake. The Johanniter had originally planned to close the hospital Genthin at the end of 2019, but now it is already happening early next year: (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/12/2017, own translation)*

Moreover, it has been reported that some municipalities lack access to adequate mobility and internet services (Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung 11/05/2017; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.net 08/19/2014).

*If the citizens of Eisleben had not committed themselves, the Mansfelder Land district region would have been cut off in the truest sense of the word: There would no longer be a traditional railway station. Too unprofitable for the Deutsche Bahn, too lousy the financial situation of the city. Not an isolated case in Saxony-Anhalt. (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/08/2017, own translation)*

*Both the country and the east are disadvantaged by large distances and sparse settlement. To connect a remote settlement to fast internet services, expensive earthworks are necessary to lay cables. The greater the distance, the higher the costs for the investors. The cable network provider must first earn this money back – it passes the costs on to the customers. If the potential customer base is too small, the investment is not worthwhile. (Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk.de 08/24/2017, own translation)*

The state has been called upon to promote fast internet access by providing support for such infrastructure, and has come under pressure to act. It has been argued that the federal government should follow words with deeds (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.net 08/19/2014).

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<sup>17</sup> Neoliberalism is characterized by a decentralization of responsibility for economic development and planning. The responsibility is transferred from the state to (local) businesses. Instead of state planning interventions in the market, the principle of (regional) competitiveness is the main factor controlling economic processes. For municipalities, this means that they have to master problems (for example, economic problems – in this case, problems related to infrastructure) with little state support, see Young (2016).



*The subsidy report of the federal government reported an increase in subsidies – precisely because the federal government is increasingly financing the expansion of broadband in areas that are being left out by the telecommunications companies due to a lack of profitability. (Reuters.com 09/13/2017, own translation)*

While economically strong rural regions and urban centers continue to develop their infrastructure, certain rural areas are "literally left behind" (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/14/2017, own translation)<sup>18</sup> in access to infrastructure.

## 4.5.2 Facets of the deterioration of infrastructure in rural areas

The deterioration or the absence of infrastructure in rural areas is frequently mentioned in the discourse. It is important to note that the development of each form of infrastructure can be considered individually, and in conjunction with the development of other forms of infrastructure. In some cases, however, the development of one form of infrastructure can fill the functional gap left by the dismantling of another. Against this background, I will summarize below the statements on the main forms of infrastructure mentioned in the discourse: namely, internet, mobility, and health care services. When reported, I will also state the connections between the individual forms of infrastructure.

In the popular media discourse on being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure, a primary theme is that internet connections are slow or non-existent.<sup>19</sup> For example, "only every third household in rural areas has a fast internet connection" (Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk.de 08/24/2017, own translation). "I'm always the one who is drowning in video conferences" (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.net 08/19/2014, own translation). Even the development of certain regions has, according to the discourse, hardly progressed: "The white spots from 1994 are still the same" (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.net 08/19/2014, own translation). And the Morgenpost (n.d.) describes the status quo in a nutshell: "The more rural a region is, the worse the broadband supply, as a rule" (own translation).

There is also criticism that the bus and train mobility services in rural areas are insufficient or on the verge of being eliminated.<sup>20</sup> For example, people in rural areas often feel they need a car to

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<sup>18</sup> See also ARD Mediathek 11/08/2017; heise.de 04/08/2018; Landwirtschaftliches Wochenblatt.de n.d.; Marktkorb.de 04/12/2017; Morgenpost.de n.d.; Süddeutsche.de 10/20/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017.

<sup>19</sup> Deutschlandfunk.de 09/06/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/07/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/14/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/19/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/20/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/21/2017; Handelsblatt.com 01/03/2018; Landwirtschaftliches Wochenblatt.de n.d.; Süddeutsche.de 10/20/2017; Süddeutsche Zeitung 12/21/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017.

<sup>20</sup> Deutschlandfunk.de 09/07/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/12/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/14/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/18/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 10/09/2017; Lausitzer Rundschau Online 12/19/2017a; Leipziger

cover longer distances, which may not align with their personal mobility preferences, and thus makes life in rural areas unattractive for some of them: "I simply don't feel like spending half my life in a car. To be honest, the rural idyll stands and falls with mobility" (Thüringer Allgemeine.de 14/12/2017, own translation). For some people this means that their mobility options are very limited: "When there are no buses, citizens who do not have their own car really feel left behind" (Lausitzer Rundschau Online 12/19/2017b, own translation).

In addition, when looking at the infrastructure challenges facing (rural) municipalities as a whole, mobility infrastructure becomes one of the central components, because as well as being important on its own, it provides access to other forms of infrastructure that are not accessible on foot, such as health care facilities (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/20/2017).

*Two ladies moaning at the market place become sarcastic. Because anyone who wants to drive the 40 kilometers to Stendal to the hospital in the future will have to make the extremely arduous journey of one and a half to two hours. 'This small train that used to go to Stendal is gone. But now we have a cycle path for it.' Cycle path instead of train, it sounds incredible. Sure, there's a bus every now and then, they say. (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/12/2017, own translation)*

Access to health care services is also a problem in rural areas. Doctors retire and cannot find anyone to take their place (Deutschlandfunk.de 01/13/2018; Schwäbische.de 08/30/2017). Surgeries may be closed or are too few in number, which makes it difficult for people in rural areas to access health care services.<sup>21</sup> In some cases, rural regions are described as "[l]eft behind by medical care" (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/12/2017, own translation).

Like mobility infrastructure, internet infrastructure is important. By enabling decentralized communication, internet access could help to offset the decline in other infrastructure services:

*The more it is possible to deal with visits to authorities, educational events, sales talks, team meetings, or medical diagnoses in virtual rooms, the more the physical transport of people into the city becomes unnecessary. (Schwäbische.de 08/30/2017, own translation)*

However, the dangers of allowing remote health care diagnoses (in this case by telephone) are also pointed out:

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Volkszeitung.de 03/11/2018; Märkische Allgemeine.de 10/27/2017; Reuters.com 09/13/2017; Spiegel Online 07/31/2016; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017; Zeitungsverlag Schwerin.de 11/22/2017.

<sup>21</sup> Deutschlandfunk.de 09/05/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/19/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/20/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 10/09/2017; Landwirtschaftliches Wochenblatt.de n.d.; Lausitzer Rundschau Online 12/19/2017a; Morgenpost.de n.d.; Spiegel Online 07/31/2016; Tagesspiegel.de 03/07/2017; Zeitungsverlag Schwerin.de 11/22/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017.

*The doctor is called in the city, who inadvertently gives the wrong advice because he is talking to someone who can no longer distinguish between left and right, or because the caller is not describing things clearly/perhaps not at all, even though the caller's life is threatened? (Zeitungsverlag Schwerin.de 11/22/2017, own translation)*

The discourse here clearly paints a picture of a network of diverse forms of infrastructure that can influence each other, and are, thus, interdependent. For example, poor health care in certain rural regions is also caused by the lack of child care and educational facilities, which makes rural life unattractive for families (Deutschlandfunk.de 10/09/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 01/13/2018).<sup>22</sup> If the central pillars of one structure are weakened, other structures will be affected. In some cases, many nodes of the network threaten to disintegrate at the same time, which can further accelerate the process of deterioration.

In addition, a lack of cultural and leisure facilities is reported. For example, some municipalities have few or no restaurants, houses of culture, or sports facilities.<sup>23</sup>

*Once evening falls, it's getting dark in the countryside – especially when it comes to the number of cinemas, clubs, and pubs. The cultural attractions are limited. And I don't mind being called picky, but I don't want to have to choose between funfair and funfair for the weekend. (Thüringer Allgemeine.de 12/14/2017, own translation)*

This state of affairs can affect the emotional tenor of entire areas: "Villages feel left behind when cultural life is lost there" (Tagesspiegel.de 03/07/2017, own translation).

It is also reported that the post office (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/12/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017), (food) markets (Thüringer Allgemeine.de 12/14/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017), and bank branches<sup>24</sup> cannot continue to provide services in every rural region. State institutions, such as the police and citizens offices, are also sparsely distributed in rural areas – not least due to the municipal area reform (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/19/2017; Thüringer Allgemeine.de 12/14/2017; Die Welt 07/08/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017). "The visibility of the constitutional state also suffers when the district court is moved to the district town 50 kilometers away and the police patrol needs 45 minutes to reach the scene" (Tagesspiegel.de 03/07/2017, own translation).

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<sup>22</sup> Regarding the lack of educational institutions, see also Deutschlandfunk.de 10/09/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/12/2017; Lausitzer Rundschau Online 12/19/2017a; Spiegel Online 07/31/2016; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017.

<sup>23</sup> Deutschlandfunk.de 01/13/2018; Deutschlandfunk.de 10/09/2017; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 12/02/2017; Lausitzer Rundschau Online 12/19/2017a; Süddeutsche.de 10/20/2017.

<sup>24</sup> Deutschlandfunk.de 09/12/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 10/09/2017; Lausitzer Rundschau Online 12/19/2017a; Leipziger Volkszeitung.de 03/11/2018; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017.

*But here, for example, also all finances and social welfare offices and so on. So if old people have something on their mind, they have to get on the bus, if they don't have a car, and be on the road half the day. It used to be just like that, everything was central here. And that's the problem that most people have. That's why they say, 'Yes, we are, we are being neglected.' (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/19/2017, own translation, see also Welt am Sonntag 10/29/2017)*

The lack of such services also make it difficult for people in rural areas to communicate directly with state authorities about their needs:

*There is nothing left in the village. Everything is taken away. And even if you want something from the city administration, you always have to drive. The small things are all abolished that one could complain or achieve something. (Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017, own translation)*

**Table 2: Overview of the forms of infrastructure mentioned in the discourse**

Category of infrastructure		Infrastructures
Mobility		Bus & train
		Streets
Health care		Pharmacies
		Medical offices
		Hospitals
Communication		Post
		Internet
		Mobile radio
Child care		Child care facilities
		Schools
Education		Universities
Culture/leisure		Cultural centers, cinemas, & theaters
		Pubs & discotheques
		Sports facilities
State	Security	Police
		Fire department
	Administration	Tax office
		Social welfare office
		Citizens office
Supply with (everyday) goods		Supermarkets
		Bank branches

Source: Own illustration.

### 4.5.3 'Bleeding, decline, village death' – the interrelation between migration and infrastructure decay

In addition to the weaknesses in infrastructure described above, (certain) rural regions are also burdened by out-migration, according to the discourse on being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure.<sup>25</sup> Young people in particular are attracted to the cities (Deutschlandfunk.de 10/09/2017; Morgenpost.de n.d.; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017; Welt.de 05/29/2017) to pursue educational opportunities (Schwäbische.de 08/30/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017).

*The young and younger people who live there, who have finished their school education, who have graduated from high school, are looking for their happiness elsewhere, because of their studies or because of their training. (Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017, own translation)*

*So some people actually speak of a migration of people, and that would be the first one that is led by women in the history of mankind. It is mainly women who leave the country, which of course results in a surplus of men in the country. (Deutschlandfunk.de 01/13/2018, own translation)*

"This means that young people migrate and do not come back" (Deutschlandfunk.de 01/13/2018, own translation). The picture drawn here discursively goes beyond a merely negative outlook for the future. The demographic processes are described in morbid terms. In addition to emigration, a negative natural balance<sup>26</sup> is also being created by the demographic processes, which is associated with a slow, painful death. Some have called this "village death" (Süddeutsche.de 10/20/2017, own translation, see also Bayerischer Rundfunk 11/08/2017), or the 'bleeding out' (Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017) or the "decline" (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/12/2017, own translation) of small towns and villages. There are also already calls for a "scrapping premium for dying villages" (Welt am Sonntag.de 10/29/2017, own translation), which would give structurally weak villages an incentive to resettle their residents with state support.

The processes of infrastructure decay and migration are interdependent. As the population dwindles, the infrastructure, which is usually already endangered, decays further (Deutschlandfunk.de 08/31/2017). "Another railway line should already be discontinued [...]. Because if the region loses people, at some point there will be a shortage of passengers" (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/07/2017, own translation). At the same time, people tend to migrate to places with attractive infrastructure, which are, in turn, further strengthened by the increasing demand: "The group of 18- to 25-year-olds is still weakly represented in the region. Those who aspire to higher education are migrating

<sup>25</sup> Deutschlandfunk.de 09/14/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 10/09/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 01/13/2018; Morgenpost.de n.d.; Neues Deutschland.de 09/30/2017; Welt.de 11/15/2016.

<sup>26</sup> A negative natural balance means here that there are more deaths than births. With regard to the narrative of being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure, see Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017.

to places where there are day care centers, cinemas, and pubs" (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/21/2017, own translation, see also Welt am Sonntag kompakt 10/01/2017a).

*According to regional experts, hospitals as well as primary schools or mom-and-pop shops are highly important for population stabilization. A source of identity for the attractiveness of small towns and villages, and are immensely important for young families. In contrast, for municipalities – that no longer have these facilities – this can be a decisive reason for decline. (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/12/2017, own translation)*

This relationship between infrastructure and demographic is described as a one-way negative process. There is talk of 'decline,' "a cycle that is difficult to stop" (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/18/2017, own translation) or a "downward spiral" (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/14/2017, own translation, see also Deutschlandfunk.de 09/12/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017). "And at some point there was basically nothing left. The people were gone, too" (Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017, own translation).

#### **4.5.4 "Without new jobs, things will continue to go downhill in the countryside" – The connection between economic power and infrastructure decay**

The popular media discourse about being 'left behind' raises other issues in addition to the above-mentioned connections between the demographic and infrastructure development of a region. According to the discourse, both the offer of further training opportunities and the local supply of jobs influence migration movements (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/19/2017; Neues Deutschland.de 09/30/2017; Süddeutsche.de 10/20/2017; Thüringer Allgemeine.de 12/14/2017).

*Yes, so that- the rural exodus started there quite a while ago, right? Immediately after reunification when there was this almost area-wide deindustrialization and jobs in the tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands were lost. In the small town where I grew up, there was the center of- the headquarters of a combine for, for agricultural machinery. 5,000 people worked there, in a town of 12,000 inhabitants. And it went down to zero in a very short time. Today the city has halved its population. (Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017, own translation)*

Accordingly, the economic power of a place is decisive for its overall performance. A supply of jobs creates prospects, and thus attracts workers and other people, which, in turn, creates a stable basis of demand for local infrastructure that supports its maintenance. Accordingly, a lack of economic power is also described as a decisive factor for rural development: "Without new jobs, things will continue to go downhill in the countryside" (Lausitzer Rundschau Online 12/19/2017a, own translation). It has also been noted that (certain) rural regions in particular tend to have low levels of economic power (Morgenpost.de n.d.; Tagesspiegel.de 03/07/2017). Today, metropolises

and cities are the places of competitiveness and innovation, while rural areas have difficulties keeping up with the competition for investors – for example due to insufficient infrastructure (Neues Deutschland.de 09/30/2017). Weak, albeit business-relevant, forms of infrastructure also have a detrimental effect on existing companies based in rural areas (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/20/2017; Handelsblatt 07/10/2017; Handelsblatt 11/09/2017).

*70 to 80 percent of the campers [here: the customers] complained about the slow internet speed or broken connections. Occasionally, booking via the internet does not work either. This is an enormous economic disadvantage. (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.net 08/19/2014, own translation)*

The availability of high-quality infrastructure is, therefore, crucial for the economic success and survival of companies (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/06/2017; heise.de 04/08/2018; Thüringer Allgemeine.de 12/14/2017), which certainly are located in rural areas, too.<sup>27</sup>

*Just under half of Germany's gross value added is generated in rural areas and almost two-thirds of the employees in the manufacturing industry and the skilled trades have their jobs there, (heise.de 04/08/2018, own translation)*

*In Germany, there is an economic structure with many centers, and there are quite a few unknown world market leaders in rural areas, too. This is another reason why the formula of rural equals being left behind does not apply here. (Schwäbische.de 08/30/2017, own translation)*

According to the discourse, providing rural areas in particular with fast broadband internet service is crucial not only for the competitiveness of existing local companies, but also for the establishment of new companies. Thus, internet access can affect the development prospects of a region, and, ultimately, its independence from larger cities (Morgenpost.de n.d.; Zeitungsverlag Schwerin.de 11/22/2017). It has also been pointed out that "reasonable transportation connections are the basic prerequisite for positive economic development" (Märkische Allgemeine.de 10/27/2017, own translation). However, "[i]n sparsely populated rural areas [...] it becomes increasingly difficult to provide basic infrastructure at all" (Spiegel Online 07/31/2016, own translation) and thus "to halt the decline of the regions" (ibid., own translation).

In short: "Youth gone, savings bank closed, bus cancelled – in many rural regions people feel 'left behind'" (Deutschlandfunk.de 10/09/2017, own translation). This is the case even though "the Basic Law [stipulates] the equality of living conditions throughout Germany" (Reuters.com 09/13/2017, own translation, see also Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 09/07/2017; Marktkorb.de 04/12/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017; WirtschaftsWoche.de 02/21/2018).

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<sup>27</sup> Deutschlandfunk.de 09/06/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/15/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 01/13/2018; Die Welt kompakt 11/15/2017; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 10/25/2017; Welt.de 11/15/2016.



Furthermore, rural areas are characterized as 'left behind' relative to urban areas and other places because they are seen as backward in their level of development.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4.5.5 Uncertainty, powerlessness, frustration, and dissatisfaction – feelings around being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure

The discourse on being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure goes beyond the structural connections described in the previous chapters. The state of being 'left behind' is said to be accompanied by various feelings. People may be concerned or feel insecure about the (future) stability of services in their municipalities, such as public transport, the internet, or health care (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/07/2017; Reuters.com 09/13/2017).

*The young are moving to the cities. The old stay behind alone and worry: How do I get to the nearest doctor? Who will take care of me? Who will help me when I feel helpless? This creates a feeling of insecurity. (Welt.de 05/29/2017, own translation)*

*I have seen women over age 80 in the Weimarer Land region riding rickety bicycles in the fog in the middle of the country road to get to the department store because there is nothing left to buy locally – and public transportation has been cut back. And yes, that's why I am afraid. (Thüringer Allgemeine.de 12/14/2017, own translation)*

This is followed by the perception that nothing can be done about the process of decay in certain rural regions: "The senior has been following the development intensively and has been interested in it for decades. Even if some villages are doing well: 'It's sad, but nobody can stop this development.'" (Lausitzer Rundschau Online 12/19/2017a, own translation). There is also talk of powerlessness as well as a lack of prospects and hope (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/15/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/18/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/20/2017; Spiegel Online 07/31/2016). "Many simply feel forgotten by the politicians, those responsible" (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/01/2017, own translation, see also Deutschlandfunk.de 09/15/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/18/2017; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 02/017). The people who are affected by the deterioration of their municipalities feel unnoticed, abandoned, 'left behind' (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/18/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017), and disappointed by politics (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/12/2017; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.net 08/19/2014; Märkische Allgemeine.de 10/27/2017). Feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction are said to be spreading (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/07/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/14/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/18/2017).

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<sup>28</sup> Deutschlandfunk.de 08/31/2017; Landwirtschaftliches Wochenblatt.de n.d.; Märkische Online 10/02/2017; Morgenpost.de n.d.; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017.



#### 4.5.6 The relationship between politics and being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure

The discursive chain of statements about being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure begins with infrastructure policies characterized as neoliberal, then moves to the abovementioned dimensions of infrastructure weaknesses in certain rural areas, then shifts to emerging feelings about being 'left behind,' and, finally, addresses the relationship between regions that are 'left behind' in access to infrastructure and politics. In the discourse, the question of who is to blame for the infrastructure conditions of certain rural areas is raised, and the topic of the support for right-wing populism is addressed.

With regard to the question of responsibility, state and federal policies are mentioned (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/14/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/18/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/21/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 01/13/2018). It is asserted that politicians do not care (enough) about the interests of (certain, structurally weak) rural regions.<sup>29</sup> The decline in infrastructure is even attributed to an entity that is not defined: "There is nothing left in the village. Everything is taken away" (Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017, own translation). While the responsibility of the individual clearly recedes into the background, it is, nevertheless, sometimes mentioned:

*I wouldn't go along with the idea of shifting the responsibility for these changes exclusively on to the politicians, that they have no answers to them. It is very important that we ourselves, as consumers, should also take on a role, in other words take responsibility for this development. Take the mom-and-pop shop, for example. I know many villages that have reopened their mom-and-pop shop. Some had to close again. And the difference was that the local population was not sensitive enough to perceive that they had to buy the things they really need every day in this mom-and-pop shop and not just the things they forgot to buy on their way to work or at the supermarket. So basically we have to develop a sensitivity for the fact that we are responsible for our own quality of life to a certain extent. (Deutschlandfunk.de 01/13/2018, own translation)*

In discussing who should be held responsible for this challenging situation, the popular media discourse clearly emphasizes that (certain) rural regions or the people living there are becoming or feeling 'left behind,'<sup>30</sup> while also observing that "[w]here people in the countryside feel left behind,

<sup>29</sup> Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.net 08/19/2014; Lausitzer Rundschau Online 12/19/2017a; Lausitzer Rundschau Online 12/19/2017b; Märkische Allgemeine.de 10/27/2017; Märkische Oderzeitung.de 04/13/2018; Reuters.com 09/13/2017; Welt.de 11/15/2016.

<sup>30</sup> baden online 03/14/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/12/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/14/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/15/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/18/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/19/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/21/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 10/09/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 01/13/2018; heise.de 04/08/2018; Landwirtschaftliches Wochenblatt.de n.d.; Lausitzer Rundschau Online 12/19/2017b; Leipziger Volkszeitung.de 03/11/2018; Märkische Oderzeitung.de 04/13/2018; Neues Deutschland.de 09/30/2017; Thüringer Allgemeine.de 12/14/2017; Welt.de 05/29/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017; Zeitungsverlag Schwerin.de 11/22/2017.

populism has a clear path" (Welt.de 11/15/2016, own translation). Thus, it is argued that weakening economic power, emigration, and infrastructure decay are apparent not only in the structural changes of a region, but make themselves "politically noticeable" (Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017, own translation). "Villagers" (ibid., own translation) or "[t]he ones who stayed behind felt increasingly left behind, left alone by the state – and in their resignation often turned to right-wing populist parties" (Neues Deutschland.de 09/30/2017, own translation).<sup>31</sup>

AfD voters are mainly located in rural areas,<sup>32</sup> which tend to have infrastructure weaknesses.<sup>33</sup> In addition, demographic changes and migration movements are creating the impression that rural places are aging and lifeless (Bell Tower.news 02/26/2018; Leipziger Internet Zeitung 09/28/2017; Märkische Online 10/02/2017; Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg 24.de 10/05/2017). Accordingly, interpersonal exchanges and social participation in everyday village life are limited. It has been reported that politicians are not (or no longer) interested in rural areas (Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg 24.de 10/05/2017).

*At the beginning, there were Bundestag candidates, and, and state parliament candidates, and so on; they always came shortly before the elections, for 14 days, three weeks, or (I don't know). They also came to Hirschfeld and did events in the restaurant and so on. But now before the last election nothing happens at all, nobody comes, nobody asks, nobody is interested anymore. There are only 1,000 votes anyway... (Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg 24 10/04/2017, own translation)*

## 4.6 Narrative 2: being 'left behind' economically

### 4.6.1 Being 'left behind' – when the individual can no longer compete

There is, however, another narrative that connects feelings of being 'left behind' to right-wing populist electoral decisions. In the following, I will focus on being 'left behind' economically. Against the background of neoliberal politics (Leipziger Internet Zeitung 09/28/2017; Sputnik.com 09/27/2017), the discourse argues that jobs are endangered by the processes of globalization (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/25/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017). This manifests itself concretely in, for example, technological changes in work processes, the expansion of competition,

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<sup>31</sup> See also Handelsblatt 10/26/2017; Handelsblatt 11/22/2017; Handelsblatt.com 01/03/2018; Reuters.com 09/13/2017; Spiegel Online 07/31/2016; Welt.de 05/29/2017.

<sup>32</sup> Bell Tower.news 02/26/2018; da Hog'n.de 09/25/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 10/03/2017; Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg 24.de 10/05/2017; Lausitzer Rundschau Online 09/26/2017; Märkische Online 10/02/2017; Spiegel Online 10/29/2017; Stuttgarter-Zeitung.de 09/27/2017.

<sup>33</sup> Deutschlandfunk.de 10/03/2017; Leipziger Internet Zeitung 09/28/2017; Märkische Online 10/02/2017; Radarmagazin.de n.d.; Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg 24.de 10/05/2017; Spiegel.TV n.d.; Sputnik.com 09/27/2017; Stuttgarter-Zeitung.de 09/27/2017; Süddeutsche.de 09/22/2017; Tagesspiegel.de 09/26/2017.

and the lack of infrastructure (such as internet connections) that meets the standards of the market:

*Low-paid jobs in particular are at risk of being eliminated by means of advancing technology. Or one's own job is relocated to a low-wage country for reasons of cost. Or the cheaper labor comes to my own country and does my job. Or your own small business can no longer withstand the pressure of global competition. (da Hog'n.de 09/25/2017, own translation)*

*For those who, so to speak, work purely for the internal market in Germany in handicraft or other businesses, in processing industries, the construction industry or something like that, these impositions are of course all a threat to them. Of course, you have to somehow concentrate on the tenders via the internet in order to get any contracts at all. Then the internet in Brandenburg does not really work in the villages. So, and then the tenders will only be electronic in future, then from the EU also in English and so on and so on. And for such people, globalization will naturally appear as a threat. (Sputnik.com 09/27/2017, own translation)*

This increase in competition and new requirements for companies are dealt with in the following sections. The popularity of the AfD is attributed to people's emotional reactions – namely, the fear of social decline – and to the relationship of those who feel 'left behind' economically to the state. It is reported, for example, that many people in comparatively poor economic situations chose the AfD or did not even vote (Die Welt 07/20/2017; Süddeutsche Zeitung 10/07/2017).

#### 4.6.2 The fear of social decline

In contrast to the real and acute danger of job loss outlined in the previous chapter (4.6.1), the *fear* of social decline is said to be the most salient for the middle class. According to the discursive explanations, it is primarily this fear of social decline that leads people to vote for right-wing populists (Bell Tower.news 02/26/2018; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.net 11/30/2016). In addition, these people are said to be concerned about their security in old age and about the financial prospects of their children.<sup>34</sup> It is reported that such people have a lack of understanding of and feel dissatisfied with their personal financial situations (Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg 24.de 10/05/2017; Stuttgarter-Zeitung.de 09/27/2017; Süddeutsche Zeitung 10/13/2017a; Telepolis 10/13/2017). Thus, it becomes clear that poverty or the fear of poverty are the central themes in the narrative about the economically 'left behind.'

However, in the discourse, the thesis of the economically 'left behind' AfD voters is challenged by the assertion that the majority of AfD voters are actually "not at all left behind, as is often falsely claimed, but even earn slightly above average" (Telepolis 10/13/2017, own translation); or that

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<sup>34</sup> Bayerischer Rundfunk 11/08/2017; Bell Tower.news 02/26/2018; Handelsblatt 08/10/2017; Handelsblatt 10/05/2017; Main Post.de 09/26/2017; Schwäbische.de 08/09/2017.

they are "predominantly not in a financially precarious situation" (Schwäbische.de 08/09/2017, own translation).<sup>35</sup> Not the unemployed, but mainly the self-employed and people who are employed vote for the AfD (Telepolis 10/13/2017, for a somewhat more nuanced view, see also Handelsblatt 09/22/2017). Furthermore, it is noted that "[a]t such a low unemployment rate [...] actually there is no reason for exaggerated fears" (Main Post.de 09/26/2017, own translation, see also ARD Mediathek 09/24/2017; Bayerischer Rundfunk 11/08/2017; Bell Tower.news 02/26/2018; Süddeutsche Zeitung 10/13/2017b).

Regardless of the actual individual and structural economic conditions, there are reports of emerging fears of being poor or socially marginalized: "The fears of marginalization are most pronounced among people with low income" (Bell Tower.news 02/26/2018, own translation). Among the economically 'left behind,' the fear of losing their job and of being unemployed is great, which causes them to feel socially insecure (Bell Tower.news 02/26/2018; Schwäbische.de 08/09/2017).

Whether justified or not, one thing is certain, according to the discourse, the fear of being 'left behind' economically is widespread, and is a central factor in the decision to vote for the AfD.<sup>36</sup> In this context, the subjective perception of one's own social situation as well as the comparison of one's own position with that of the social environment are of particular relevance. Thus, "AfD voters rank themselves low in society regardless of their actual income, and experienced a social decline compared to their parents" (Schwäbische.de 08/09/2017, own translation). Thus, the AfD electorate perceives globalization primarily as a threat (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.net 11/30/2016; Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk.de 09/30/2017; Radarmagazin.de n.d.; Sputnik.com 09/27/2017).

### 4.6.3 Migrants as competitors for state services

In addition to the expansion of the competitive situation described in chapters 4.6.1 and 4.6.2, there is also the impression that migration (especially the 'wave of refugees') increases the threat to prosperity; to the "little we have" (Evangeliums-Rundfunk.de 09/25/2017, own translation, see also Radarmagazin.de). Social envy is spreading,<sup>37</sup> as the following racist statement makes particularly clear: "Meanwhile, in the pub in Brannenburg, the two regulars were talking in a rage. [...] 'The negroes get everything up their ass'" (Radarmagazin.de, own translation). According to this perspective, Germans, by contrast, have to work hard for little money, or to fight for every social

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<sup>35</sup> See also Abendzeitung München.de 04/10/2017; Deutsche Welle.com 10/01/2017; Main Post.de 09/26/2017; pro Christliches Medienmagazin.de 09/23/2017; Rheinische Post Online 09/26/2017; Sputnik.com 09/27/2017; Süddeutsche.de 09/22/2017.

<sup>36</sup> Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.net 11/30/2016; Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk.de 09/30/2017; Radarmagazin.de n.d.; Spiegel Online 10/29/2017; Süddeutsche Zeitung 08/10/2017.

<sup>37</sup> Bayerischer Rundfunk 11/08/2017; die Zeit 09/28/2017; Handelsblatt 09/29/2017; Spiegel Online 10/29/2017; Spiegel.TV n.d.; Süddeutsche Zeitung 10/28/2017; Süddeutsche.de 09/22/2017; The European.de 09/24/2017.

benefit.<sup>38</sup> It is also argued that the benefits refugees receive should instead be made available to needy Germans (Delmenhorster Kurier.de 10/16/2017).

*There is the 61-year-old who is upset that apartments are being built for refugees, while in the district the schools are falling apart and not even the sidewalks are being cleaned properly anymore. (Berliner Zeitung.de 09/21/2016, own translation)*

## 4.7 Narrative 3: being 'left behind' culturally

### 4.7.1 Being 'left behind' – when people feel like strangers in their own country

A further explanation for the success of AfD is the narrative of being 'left behind' culturally, which is also a counter-narrative to the thesis of financial or material threats to an individual's life chances: "AfD voters are not economically but culturally left behind" (Süddeutsche.de 09/22/2017, own translation). According to the discourse, globalization is accompanied by cosmopolitan values and world views such as multiculturalism, the acceptance of different sexual orientations and ways of life, and the questioning of traditional gender relations in society. These values are rejected by AfD voters, who feel culturally alienated by these broader trends in society.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, as migration has increased the pressure on Germans to actively accept and to put into practice these world views, immigrants are often perceived as a cultural threat (da Hog'n.de 09/25/2017). Fear of the foreign in itself, but also anxiety about threats linked to foreigners, such as terrorist attacks and other crimes, are spreading.<sup>40</sup> The spectrum of discursive evaluations of the attitudes of AfD voters range from conservative (and authoritarian) to classic right (extreme).<sup>41</sup>

However, the narrative of being 'left behind' culturally appears not only as a counter-narrative to the narrative of being 'left behind' economically, but is also interpreted as an attitude in combination with a reaction to perceived powerlessness: "This means that we have traditionalists [...] who long for a supposedly intact world, because everything was supposedly ordered there" (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/25/2017, own translation).

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<sup>38</sup> Evangeliums-Rundfunk.de 09/25/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/11/2017; Focus-Online 09/27/2017; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 09/30/2017; Spiegel.TV n.d.

<sup>39</sup> Deutsche Welle.com 10/01/2017; Frankfurter Rundschau.de 09/25/2017; pro Christliches Medienmagazin.de 09/23/2017; Rheinische Post Online 09/26/2017; Sputnik.com 09/27/2017; Tagesschau.de 09/26/2017; Telepolis 10/13/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017.

<sup>40</sup> Bayerischer Rundfunk 11/08/2017; da Hog'n.de 09/25/2017; lokalkompass.de n.d.; Radarmagazin.de n.d.; Stuttgarter Zeitung.de 09/27/2017; The European.de 09/24/2017.

<sup>41</sup> Der Sonntag.de 01/14/2018; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/25/2017; Focus-Online 09/27/2017; Neues Deutschland.de 01/27/2018; Telepolis 10/13/2017.

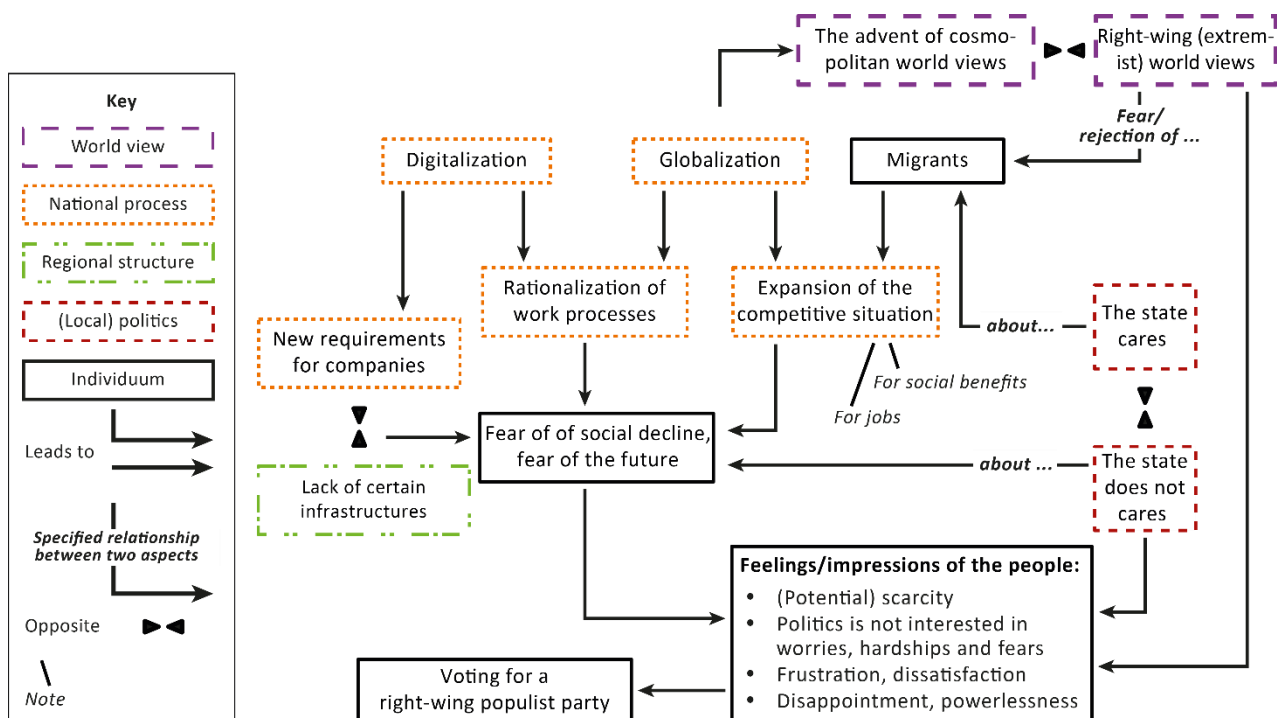
*And the only thing that can eliminate this feeling of powerlessness is a return to the tried and tested – to something that will give you stability again in times when nothing seems safe. To tradition, culture, language, national borders. Firm social bonds, a tightly woven family network, the mother as a housewife, the father as a breadwinner. Anyone who feels threatened from the outside, shuts himself off from the outside – there is nothing irrational about that. (da Hog'n.de 09/25/2017, own translation, emphasis in original)*

## 4.8 Narratives 2 and 3: the difficult relationship between the economically and culturally 'left behind' and politics

### 4.8.1 A state that does not care and a population that feels forgotten

The economic connections of the second narrative about being 'left behind' and the cultural connections of the third narrative both lead to a narrative about the relationship between the 'left behind' and politics (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7:** Economic and cultural interrelationships of being 'left behind' identified in the discourse



Source: Own illustration.

Similar to the narrative about the decay of infrastructure and the downward spiral in rural areas, the narratives of being 'left behind' economically and culturally also give rise to the feeling that the state, or the established parties, are not interested in the worries and needs of the population, but

instead ignore them or do not perceive them at all.<sup>42</sup> "One feels abandoned by the established parties, which one could vote for for decades in good conscience" (da Hog'n.de 09/25/2017, own translation, see also Spiegel.TV n.d.). It is assumed that the parties would not have listened to the 'left behind' or taken them seriously (Bayerischer Rundfunk 11/08/2017; Die Welt 10/20/2017; Spiegel Online 10/29/2017; Westdeutsche Zeitung.de 09/29/2017).

*The problem is not the foreigners, because they do not exist here. The problem is the financial hardships. Those of the citizens, but also those of the municipality. [...] 'We have been forgotten by the great political force,' complains the father of five and owner of a craft company. (Stuttgarter-Zeitung.de 09/27/2017, own translation)*

In contrast, it is argued that the state is aware of the dire situations of outsiders and took care of them, but does not take care of its own population: "Quite a few people here had the feeling that a lot was being done for the refugees and nothing for us" (Spiegel Online 10/29/2017, own translation).

Accordingly, the 'left behind' are "dissatisfied with the state of democratic representation and decision-making" (Schwäbische.de 08/09/2017, own translation); i.e., with the democratic system itself (Tagesschau.de 09/26/2017; Zeit Online 09/27/2017). In their opinion, politics does not ensure social justice (Stuttgarter-Zeitung.de 09/27/2017; Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen.de 09/17/2017). The state's pension policy is also criticized for no longer providing people with a secure existence in old age (Leipziger Internet Zeitung 09/28/2017; Spiegel Online 10/29/2017). "'The SPD has been in power for years, but nothing has happened in terms of social justice. Who else should she have voted for but the AfD,' she [a pensioner] asks" (Stuttgarter-Zeitung.de 09/27/2017, own translation).

*Anyone who feels poor and left behind in NRW cities votes for the party of the frustrated – even as a person with a migration background. The AfD does not catch those who love their homeland. It is strong where the old social democratic promise 'Your children will have it better one day' is no longer kept. (Neue Rhine/Ruhr Zeitung.de 05/15/2017, own translation)*

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<sup>42</sup> Bayerischer Rundfunk 11/08/2017; Der Sonntag.de 01/14/2018; Märkische Online 10/02/2017; Radarmagazin.de n.d.; Spiegel.TV n.d.; Süddeutsche.de 09/22/2017; taz.die tageszeitung.de 09/25/2017; Telepolis 10/13/2017; Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen.de 09/17/2017.



### 4.8.2 Asylum policy, unease, and the fear of the foreign(ers)

According to the discourse, the government's asylum policy is causing unease and dissatisfaction among the population, is also a central theme in discussions of the relationship between the so-called 'left behind' and politics.<sup>43</sup>

*Many Germans now believe that it was irresponsible of Angela Merkel to let thousands of refugees into the country without registering. How many terrorists have reached us illegally and are now waiting calmly as sleepers in the underground before they strike at us. (lo-kalkompass.de n.d., own translation)*

There are various statements about having direct contact with people with a migration background (respectively foreigners or refugees). On the one hand, the discourse argues that it is precisely in the places where there are few people with a migration background that the level of support for the AfD is highest.<sup>44</sup> "One is particularly afraid of the foreign as long as it is foreign" (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 10/02/2017, own translation). In this context, regional distinctions are made. It is, for example, pointed out that West Germany is better able to live with migrants due to the experiences made because it recruited southern Europeans to work in the country starting in the 1950s. By contrast, East Germany, has, according to the discourse, "had this experience only after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and also to a much lesser extent" (Tagesschau.de 09/26/2017, own translation).

On the other hand, it is argued that the popularity of the AfD in certain regions has to do with the direct spatial proximity to people with a migration background in general (Delmenhorster Kurier.de 10/16/2017) as well as with refugees, either via migration routes or reception camps. If it is explained at all, this connection is then either attributed to the perception that the presence of large numbers of refugees in the local area demonstrates the loss of control of the state (in the sense that large numbers of refugees are accepted without registration), or to the perception of acute threat that is fed by resentment of the refugees.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Bayerischer Rundfunk 11/08/2017; Deutsche Welle.com 10/01/2017; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 09/27/2017; pro Christliches Medienmagazin.de 09/23/2017; Spiegel Online 10/29/2017; Sputnik.com 09/27/2017; Stuttgarter-Zeitung.de 09/27/2017; Zeit Online 09/27/2017.

<sup>44</sup> Bayerischer Rundfunk 11/08/2017; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 09/14/2017; Spiegel.TV n.d.; Stuttgarter-Zeitung.de 09/27/2017; Tagesspiegel.de 09/26/2017.

<sup>45</sup> Bayerischer Rundfunk 11/08/2017; Deutsche Welle.com 10/01/2017; Die Welt 10/06/2017; Radarmagazin.de n.d.; Spiegel Online 10/29/2017.



### 4.8.3 Loss of confidence, disappointment, and dissatisfaction with the democratic system

The experience of being 'left behind' or an individual's self-assessment as (potentially) being 'left behind' – whether through the threat of personal financial insecurity or through cultural feelings of alienation – is, ultimately, connected to the relationship between the so-called 'left behind' and democracy. The citizens, it is reported, have lost confidence in the established parties,<sup>46</sup> in part due to their individual sensitivities: "The feeling of being left behind eroded trust in the established parties" (Bell Tower.news 26/02/2018, own translation). The individual feels that she or he is at the mercy of the overall situation, and almost politically powerless.<sup>47</sup> Thus, people perceive that they have been 'left behind' by big politics:

*Over the years many [here: East Germans] have developed the feeling that in the end it's those up there who decide anyway, you don't have to make an effort, you can hand over responsibility right away (Berliner Zeitung.de 09/21/2016, own translation)*

In the case of East Germany, the real biographical ruptures that many East Germans experienced with the fall of the Berlin Wall are relevant in this context. Many people lost their jobs and livelihoods overnight, and never found their way back to their former professions.<sup>48</sup> Hopes for a new and good life in a united Germany were disappointed. Instead, East Germans experienced the social uncertainties associated with being in a competitive, free market society, and with having lower pensions and wages than their counterparts in the West. Subsequently, many said they feel that their life's work was not recognized.<sup>49</sup>

*Horst Kühn has worked all his life in the Filmfabrik Wolfen. He knows the psychological devastation, he says. In 1990, when tens of thousands of people became unemployed in one fell swoop.*

*'They were thrown out overnight. For the people there are these interrupted biographies, which then have an effect on their pensions and all the things they have shortages of today.'*

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<sup>46</sup> ARD Mediathek 09/24/2017; Bayerischer Rundfunk 11/08/2017; Cicero.de 02/21/2018; Leipziger Internet Zeitung 09/28/2017; Radarmagazin.de n.d.

<sup>47</sup> Abendzeitung München.de 04/10/2017; da Hog'n.de 09/25/2017; Die Welt 09/26/2017; Märkische Online 10/02/2017; Schwäbische.de 08/09/2017; Telepolis 10/13/2017; Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen.de 09/17/2017.

<sup>48</sup> Deutschlandfunk.de 09/18/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 10/03/2017; Evangeliums-Rundfunk.de 09/25/2017; Focus-Online 09/27/2017; Süddeutsche Zeitung 11/03/2017.

<sup>49</sup> Deutschlandfunk.de 09/15/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/18/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 10/03/2017; Handelsblatt 10/23/2017; Leipziger Internet Zeitung 09/28/2017; Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg 24.de 10/05/2017; Stuttgarter-Zeitung.de 09/27/2017; Süddeutsche.de 09/22/2017; taz.die tageszeitung.de 09/25/2017; Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen.de 09/17/2017.

*Reasons why people in the Bitterfeld-Wolfen region have great sympathy for the right-wing populists from the AfD, suspects the chemical engineer Horst Kühn. (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/15/2017, own translation)*

*The East Germans feel they have been led astray. The great freedom they had dreamed of after the end of the SED dictatorship, the hope of being heard, does not exist for many. (taz.die tageszeitung.de 09/25/2017, own translation)*

Dissatisfaction with the functioning of the democratic system, decision-making and representation (Schwäbische.de 08/09/2017; Tagesschau.de 09/26/2017; Zeit Online 09/27/2017), and distrust of the established parties (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/25/2017; Deutsche Welle.com 10/01/2017; Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk.de 09/30/2017; Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen.de 09/17/2017) tilt into protest, which eventually leads to the election of right-wing populist parties.<sup>50</sup> With reference to the third narrative, it is reported that the anger of the 'left behind' AfD voters "is fed by cultural disappointment" (Süddeutsche.de 09/22/2017, own translation). In general, it is said: "[T]he feeling of being left behind [becomes] a vote of no confidence in politics" (Leipziger Internet Zeitung 09/28/2017, own translation) – even if they do not agree with (all of) the party's views: "Right-wing – no, one is not, say the people in Bitterfeld. And shake their heads vigorously. One feels forgotten" (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/15/2017, own translation).<sup>51</sup>

## 4.9 The spatiality of being 'left behind'

Spatiality plays a role in all three narratives in different ways. First, the discursively identified urban-rural differences stand out, whereby the term 'rural' can refer to spatial categories ranging from the small town to the village, and from the so-called 'rural area' to certain rural places and federal states. In the first narrative, rural areas are clearly associated with weaknesses in or the dismantling of infrastructure. In this narrative, the discourse also paints a picture of rural regions characterized by low levels of economic power, emigration, and aging. Accordingly, in many cases rural areas are categorically constructed as 'left behind' in comparison to the city, in the sense of lagging behind urban development in several dimensions. Cities, on the other hand, are described as places that are characterized by competitiveness, diverse cultural offerings, and in-migration of young people – in short: by prosperity.

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<sup>50</sup> Delmenhorster Kurier.de 10/16/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 10/03/2017; Die Welt 09/20/2017; Evangeliums-Rundfunk.de 09/25/2017; Focus-Online 09/27/2017; Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg 24.de 10/05/2017; Tagesschau.de 09/26/2017; taz.die tageszeitung.de 09/25/2017. Even if the interpretation that voting for the AfD is a protest vote is common in the discourse, it has also been argued that it is not a protest vote, but rather a conscious and unambiguous commitment to the electoral program of the AfD, see Welt am Sonntag kompakt 10/01/2017b.

<sup>51</sup> See also Focus-Online 09/27/2017; Handelsblatt 10/04/2017; Leipziger Internet Zeitung 09/28/2017; Märkische Online 10/02/2017; Spiegel Online 10/29/2017.

Furthermore, the urban-rural differences are manifested in the question of who bears responsibility for the conditions of the 'left behind' rural areas. While the central hotspots are located in rural regions, the popular media discourse argues that those who are responsible – in this case, federal politicians – are in the city: "'Don't just chat, but also do,' is what they should do in Berlin, it says in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania" (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.net 08/19/2014, own translation, emphasis by author). At the same time, it is reported that certain rural areas feel spatially distant from state institutions; i.e., places where complaints can be filed. Frustration about the acute lack of infrastructure vital to their living conditions, dissatisfaction with (federal) politics, and, finally, feelings of powerlessness at not being able to personally reverse the process of decay are constructed in this narrative as being specifically rural feelings. The decision to vote for right-wing populist parties is also associated with the rurality of being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure. AfD voters are thus primarily located in rural areas, especially in areas with weak infrastructure.

Furthermore, the first and second narratives, which are devoted to being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure and economically, distinguish between East and West Germany. In both narratives, the economic weakness of East Germany is cited in contrast to the economic strength of West Germany. East Germany is not always described as consisting exclusively of economically weak regions, and certain West German regions are also identified as being economically weak. However, the economic situation in East Germany is perceived as being more problematic, and, in contrast to West Germany, as being weak overall. "East Germany is 'a large, contiguous, structurally weak area, while in the West, there are rather individual structurally weak islands'" (WirtschaftsWoche.de 02/21/2018, own translation).

*Inadequate internet service in rural areas is not just an East German problem. Slow or unstable internet connections also occur in the Wetterau in Hesse, the Rhön, the Eifel, and even in some parts of Berlin, but especially in rural areas in Lower Saxony, Bavaria, and Baden-Württemberg, not to mention the other East German states. (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.net 08/19/2014, own translation, emphasis by author)*

As well as the economic and demographic inequality between East and West, differences between North and South are also cited, albeit less frequently, and with less focus. For example, differences in economic productivity and financial power, as well as in migration balances, are pointed out: "It is still the case that the West-East divide is greater than the South-North divide" (WirtschaftsWoche.de 02/21/2018, own translation). Another example is the differentiation of the East-West and North-South differences in the success of the AfD in elections:

*We must take note that West and East Germany tick differently. And then there are also differences between North and South. In Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, too, the CDU/CSU parties have lost a great deal and the AfD is also very strong. (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/25/2017, own translation)*

In the discourse, the economic-demographic level of the East-West differences is placed on top of the urban-rural differences, so that the spatiality of being 'left behind' takes on two dimensions.<sup>52</sup>

*And one must simply say that the settlement structure in East Germany – few large cities, few conurbations, but a great deal of rural area, a great deal of sparsely populated rural area, is much more clear than in West Germany. This is a fact that of course has an aggravating effect on East Germany. And it is precisely the structurally weak rural areas in eastern Germany that have not been able to offset the effects of reunification, the dismantling of industry, and the rapid restructuring of agriculture, with anything else. (Deutschlandfunk.de 08/31/2017, own translation, emphasis by author)*

In addition, a further spatially differentiated aspect of being 'left behind' is opened up in the first two narratives: gender. In addition to the urban-rural and the East-West differences, the male-female difference is also cited as relevant. The discourse speaks above all of the 'left behind' *East German man*, and paints the picture of a loser, a single man who is left behind by East German women on their way up, both geographically and in terms of their position:

*In stark contrast to the consistently capable, ambitious, educated, and mobile women of the East, he [the East German man] can't cope with the demands of the globalized world and refuses to see that he simply has to work harder to secure a place in the sun. Instead, he whines, the East German man, dreams of order and leadership, and lets out his hatred of refugees, 'many of them also male, single.' (Telepolis 2017, own translation)*

In addition, feelings of being 'left behind' are reported to be especially strong in East Germany. East Germans, it is said, often feel poor, frustrated, and politically powerless due to their poor economic conditions and infrastructure. In this context, the fall of the Berlin Wall plays a central role, and is said to be accompanied by disappointed hopes – in part concerning political opportunities. There is extensive talk of an "East German disappointment society" (Berliner Zeitung.de 09/21/2016, own translation). It is further observed that specific *East German interests* are not represented politically. Thus, the feeling of not being noticed by politicians is often – although not exclusively – attributed to East Germans in particular. It is against this background that the loss of confidence in the democratic system ascribed to the people 'left behind' should be considered on a region-specific basis. The discourse suggests that, due to their past as GDR citizens and the impact of the transition following reunification, the kind of political distrust East Germans feel is different than that felt by West Germans.

In addition to noting these general feelings of being 'left behind' among the East Germans, the third narrative shows a further, more abstract kind of spatiality: the inside and the outside. Being 'left behind' culturally takes place on the level of antagonistic world views, with the so-called

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<sup>52</sup> The North-South difference is not explained in this context, but is conceivable as a further level.

culturally 'left behind' people being attributed a conservative or even right-wing (extreme) world view, which stands in contrast to a cosmopolitan perspective. The emphasis on traditional values is also described as a reaction to an external threat.

This statement can be interpreted in different ways, such as in terms of an individual's inside and outside world. For example, it is suggested that external conditions, such as economic circumstances, can pose a threat to the security of a person's own financial situation. The individual's response may be to retreat into a personal, internal world that focuses on cultural values, orientations, and moralities.

Another way of interpreting this statement is as a form of interpersonal separation. It is argued that the threatening outside world represents the group of others who, through cultural differences, separate themselves from the inside world, which is made up of the small circle of familiar people with the same values. In this context, the others can be members of other nationalities and/or other cultures, as well as communities with different values from which the culturally 'left behind' separate themselves. It is conceivable that this demarcation can also manifest itself geographically; i.e., that people from certain areas demarcate themselves from people from other areas.

Thus, it becomes clear that being 'left behind' is spatially differentiated along the dualisms of city-country, as well as East-West, and, partly North-South and inside-outside. The aspects of economic power and gender are added. In particular, rural areas of East Germany that are structurally and economically weak, as well as people, and especially men, who live in these areas are considered to be 'left behind.' Therefore, in the further course of the research project, it is advisable to pay special attention to the interactions between spatial aspects, economic power, and gender categories.

#### 4.10 Being 'left behind'? – relativization of a negative narrative

In conclusion, it should be noted that the discourse about being 'left behind' (in rural areas) is often a negatively connotated narrative. It should not be assumed that all the theoretical connections derived from the discourse are empirically proven by social science, or apply to every rural region. In addition to individuals – including AfD voters – who describe AfD voters as having not been 'left behind' (Bild 09/28/2017; Die Welt 09/27/2017; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 10/09/2017), references are also made to East Germans who managed to succeed after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Süddeutsche Zeitung 11/03/2017), and there are voices that report on more positive situations in rural areas (Die Welt kompakt 11/15/2017; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 10/13/2017; Süddeutsche Zeitung 11/10/2017; Welt am Sonntag 10/29/2017). For example, population inflow is predicted for certain rural regions, such as the Emsland or the region around Lake Constance (Süddeutsche.de 10/20/2017). In addition, civil society engagement in some places has enabled alternative forms of infrastructure to be built and adequate supplies for the rural population to be

provided in the local area.<sup>53</sup> In short: "[T]he formula of rural equals being left behind does not apply here" (Schwäbische.de 08/30/2017, own translation).

Furthermore, it is reported that people feel a strong sense of well-being in the countryside. Above all, the tranquility, the ease of life, and the opportunity to have one's own garden in the countryside are appreciated (Deutschlandfunk.de 09/05/2017; Welt.de 11/15/2016; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017). "Structural weakness does not mean that people do not like living there" (Deutschlandfunk.de 08/31/2017, own translation). It is also said that the state does take care of the concerns of the population in rural areas through, for example, the direct expansion of specific forms of infrastructure or by providing subsidies.<sup>54</sup>

Accordingly, while the feelings of being 'left behind' are strongly and negatively associated with rural areas, they do not fully represent the conditions of rural areas. In the discourse, as well, the stigmatization of *the* 'rural area' is addressed, and the diversity of rural areas is strongly emphasized.<sup>55</sup>

*[S]ocial discourses [...] [would be] currently conducted in a rather 'city-friendly' manner [...], while the rural area is being 'devalued.' The metropolises are regarded as cool, the village as fast asleep, left behind, and dead. The city dweller who reads 'Landlust' likes to visit it, but only if he goes home in the evening. (Neues Deutschland.de 09/30/2017, own translation)*

"But what exactly is the situation in the area? Answer: very different" (Lausitzer Rundschau Online 12/19/2017a, own translation).

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<sup>53</sup> Deutschlandfunk.de 09/06/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/08/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 09/21/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 10/09/2017; Süddeutsche.de 10/20/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017.

<sup>54</sup> Lausitzer Rundschau Online 12/19/2017b; Märkische Oderzeitung.de 04/13/2018; Ostsee Zeitung.de 02/09/2018; Welt.de 05/29/2017; Welt.de 11/15/2016.

<sup>55</sup> Deutschlandfunk.de 09/19/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 10/09/2017; Deutschlandfunk.de 01/13/2018; Hannoversche Allgemeine.de 01/03/2017; Schwäbische.de 08/30/2017; Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de 11/05/2017.

## 5 Conclusion

In the popular media discourse, feelings of being 'left behind,' are associated with rural areas and with the electoral success of the AfD in the 2017 federal elections. In this analysis, I have examined the question what is meant by being 'left behind' in this context, and in which social interrelations this perception arises. The question of what the feeling or condition of being 'left behind' actually is cannot be answered with the help of an existing scientific consensus on the definition of being 'left behind,' since there is no such detailed sociological debate on this term. Therefore, I have used a Grounded Theory approach to investigate the popular media discourse around the feelings of being 'left behind.' The Grounded Theory approach proved to be a suitable method here, as it allowed me to derive theoretical explanations from the data without having to rely on a differentiated state of research. At the same time, this approach enables to use an explorative approach that is open to a diversity of content on being 'left behind,' and thus avoids the problem that certain contexts of meaning might be missed by subjective settings that preceded the analysis.

The analysis of the popular media discourse<sup>56</sup> provides a varied, data-supported explanation of the various formations of the term. Three narratives about the context of being 'left behind' in rural areas and the success of the AfD in the 2017 federal elections are of central importance: the narratives of being 'left behind' (1) in access to infrastructure, (2) economically, and (3) culturally.

(1) Being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure is reflected in reports indicating that the local populations of certain places or regions no longer have access to specific services of general interest, such as mobility or communication infrastructure. According to the results of the analysis, the dismantling of state contact points also contributes to the feeling of being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure. (2) The feeling of being 'left behind' economically is attributed to people who have lost their social status due to unemployment, or who, as low-wage earners, are not able to advance socially. In addition to the feeling of currently being 'left behind' economically, there is a growing fear of being 'left behind' economically in the future. (3) Being 'left behind' culturally is primarily understood to be an intrinsic state that is expressed in a discrepancy between the values of the 'left behind' and the values of the rest of the population. According to the discourse, culturally 'left behind' people hold on to conservative or right-wing (extreme) values and lifestyles, and are also disturbed by the spread of cosmopolitan, modern attitudes, such as the advocacy of multiculturalism or same-sex marriage.

Various categories of individuals are described as being 'left behind.' Apart from the German population in general, East Germans and/or AfD voters are mentioned in particular, and, more specifically, East German men and older people. Furthermore, the populations of rural areas are

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<sup>56</sup> With reference to Foucault (see Chapter 2), I understand a discourse to be the totality of all statements recognized as true at a given time. The discourse considered here is popular media (and not, for example, the scientific discourse). Accordingly, I have primarily included contributions from daily and weekly newspapers and magazines.

highlighted in this discussion. In the discourse, whole categories of space are said to be 'left behind' entities. Specific places and neighborhoods, or explicitly rural spaces and areas, may be mentioned.

The condition or feelings of being 'left behind' are attributed to various political processes or entities. According to the discourse, globalization is among the trends that contribute to an intensification of the competition between companies and between employees. At the same time, it is reported, the social security system is becoming less generous, and the state does not guarantee that the infrastructure of services of general interest will be maintained or developed. These processes are seen as political-structural aspects that contribute to being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure and economically. Moreover, the return of cosmopolitan world views is placed in the context of the globalization process, which is assumed to play a central role in the feeling of being 'left behind' culturally.

In reports of being 'left behind' in access to infrastructure, weak economic power, migration, and demographic change are also cited as aspects that weaken infrastructures. In the discussions of being 'left behind' economically, among the additional contributing factors that are cited are the process of digitalization, which is accompanied by growing demands on companies and employees; infrastructure weaknesses, which make it difficult for businesses to adapt to these new requirements; and, finally, immigration, which gives people the impression that the competition for jobs is intensifying.

The various stories of being 'left behind' have one thing in common: accusations are always made against the politicians of certain (so-called established) parties or local or federal politicians. The impression is that these politicians do not care about the fears, worries, and needs of the population or of people in rural areas in general, and instead prioritize the living conditions of migrants. Thus, the idea that migrants are better taken care of than the German population is mentioned.

According to the discourse, a conglomeration of feelings results from the specific life situations of people who feel that they are being 'left behind' or who fear that they will be 'left behind' in the future, as well as from their assessments of politics. People who are 'left behind' in access to infrastructure or economically are said to be worried and uncertain about their current or future situations – be it financial security in old age, or the availability of services of general interest in their local area. It is suggested that these individuals may feel threatened by people of other cultures, and feel politically disadvantaged relative to those of other cultures. It is argued that the culturally 'left behind' are left alone with their values, and that they feel alienated from society. It has also been reported that regardless of in what ways these people perceive themselves as being 'left behind,' they feel ignored, unrecognized, or not taken seriously by politics, and instead feel that they are forgotten, neglected, or abandoned. Many are, according to the discourse, disappointed by politics. It is reported that this perception leads people to feel frustrated and dissatisfied with their current life situation and with politics, to have feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness, and to be worried about a lack of prospects.



In addition to describing people's individual life circumstances as problematic, the discourse argues that people's feelings of being 'left behind' that result from their political views also have political consequences. It is, for example, reported that those who have been 'left behind' have lost confidence in politics or even in the democratic system, and therefore vote for right-wing, populist parties in elections, possibly as a form of protest.

In the further course of the research project *'Feelings of being left behind' in rural areas?*, the interrelations and questions raised in this analysis will be used to narrow down the state of research in terms of content. Given the discursive forms and interrelations of being 'left behind' that have been described, there is a need to examine not just recent scientific findings regarding the access to infrastructure and the economic conditions of rural areas, but also to seek to explain the success of right-wing populism in the 2017 federal elections. In doing so, the infrastructure, the economic, and the cultural dimension, as well as the connections to the right-wing populism, should be considered.

In addition to the infrastructure, economic, and cultural interrelations mentioned above, *feelings of being 'left behind'* will be of particular interest for the research project as it progresses. Accordingly, questions of how people in so-called 'left behind' regions feel about their current living situations, and of why they feel that way, arise. In addition to focusing on the discursive meaning of being 'left behind' that is elaborated in this paper, it will be of interest to look at how the people in 'left behind' regions assess their infrastructure, economic, and cultural conditions, and whether this assessment – which may be linked to certain feelings – plays a decisive role in their relationship to politics and democratic structures. It will also be of interest to examine what influence the people in 'left behind' regions believe they have, and how they would change their living conditions if they could. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the feelings of being 'left behind,' to the extent that such feelings exist: i.e., what aspects contribute to these feelings, where they come from, how they relate to the spatiality of rural regions, and what they mean for the stability and level of acceptance of the democratic system.

The results of this discourse analysis also suggest that theories and empirical studies that consider feelings as an explanatory approach to social processes should be included in future research. Given the feelings of envy and of being disadvantaged and disappointed that have been observed, Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, which conceives of social struggles as struggles for recognition (Honneth 1994), or Sigward Neckel's work on collective feelings and social structure (Neckel 1999), may be especially useful in this context. Erich Fromm's reflections on the state of powerlessness (especially in connection with authoritarian ideologies) from a social-psychological perspective (Fromm 1937) may also be of interest. Furthermore, contributions from the field of the sociology of emotions can help to explain these feelings. For example, Jonathan Turner explains the translation of suppressed individual shame into anger toward others, or into a reduced sense of obligation toward the dominant social structures (Turner 2009).

The research questions that are derived can also be used to develop guidelines for qualitative-empirical phases. This would not have been possible with the use of the term being 'left behind' alone, as it has not been scientifically defined (see Chapter 1). In this sense, the previous observations also represent an operationalization of being 'left behind,' which was derived from the discourse. In contrast to shorter definitions based on a subjective understanding (such as Lengfeld's or Milbert's), a broad spectrum of meanings could be systematically recorded in this analysis. This approach has the advantage of ensuring that additional levels of meaning identified in the course of further investigations and data collection will not be neglected.

The discourse analysis has shown that feelings of being 'left behind' exist as a discursive phenomenon, which is accompanied by a broad popular media debate. Various narratives are spun around feelings of being 'left behind,' which range from infrastructure, economic, and cultural problems to the support for right-wing populism. The question of the extent to which feelings of being 'left behind' can be found beyond their discursive existence, and which of the complex discursively raised connections to the rightward shift in the politics of certain rural regions can be proven in from a socio-empirical perspective, will be the subject of further investigations in the research project *'Feelings of being left behind' in rural areas?*<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> For example, we examined the relation between rurality and AfD election results (Deppisch et al. 2019).

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# Appendix



## Appendix 1

**Table 3: Number of issues viewed and articles included in the analysis by source (print)**

Source	Issues viewed <sup>58</sup>	Articles included
Bild	130	3
Bild am Sonntag	27	0
Die Welt	157	20
Die Welt am Sonntag	25	10
Die Welt am Sonntag kompakt	24	4
Die Welt kompakt	130	9
Die Zeit	27	3
Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung	27	11
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	157	33
Handelsblatt	157	26
Junge Freiheit	27	0
Süddeutsche Zeitung	157	36
<b>Sum</b>	<b>1045</b>	<b>155</b>

Source: Own data.

<sup>58</sup> The sporadically blocked issues are subtracted.



## Appendix 2

**Table 4: Number of articles included in the analysis by source (online)**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Articles included</b>
Abendzeitung München.de	1
ARD Mediathek	2
Baden Online	1
Bayerischer Rundfunk	1
Bell Tower.news	1
Berliner Zeitung.de	1
Cicero.de	1
Da Hog'n.de	1
Delmenhorster Kurier.de	1
Der Sonntag	1
Deutsche Welle.com	1
Deutschlandfunk.de	19
Evangeliums-Rundfunk.de	1
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.net	2
Frankfurter Rundschau.de	1
Focus Online	1
haGalil.com	1
Handelsblatt.com	1
Hannoversche Allgemeine.de	1
Heise.de	1
Landwirtschaftliches Wochenblatt.de	1
Lausitzer Rundschau Online	3
Leipziger Internet Zeitung	1
Leipziger Volkszeitung.de	1
Lokalkompass.de	1
Main Post.de	1
Marktkorb.de	1
Märkische Allgemeine.de	1
Märkische Online	1
Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk.de	2
Morgenpost.de	1
Märkische Oderzeitung.de	1
Neues Deutschland.de	2
Neue Rhein/Ruhr Zeitung.de	1
Ntv.de	1
Ostsee Zeitung.de	1
Pro Christliches Medienmagazin.de	1

Radarmagazin.de	1
Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg 24.de	2
Reuters.com	1
Rheinische Post Online	1
Schwäbische.de	2
Spiegel Online	2
Spiegel.TV	1
Sputnik.com	1
Stuttgarter Zeitung.de	1
Süddeutsche.de	2
Tagesschau.de	1
Tagesspiegel.de	2
Taz.die tageszeitung.de	1
Telepolis	1
The European.de	1
Thüringer Allgemeine.de	2
Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung.de	1
Westdeutscher Rundfunk.de	1
Welt.de	2
Westdeutsche Zeitung.de	1
WirtschaftsWoche.de	1
Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen.de	1
Zeit Online	1
Zeitungsverlag Schwerin.de	1
<b>Sum</b>	<b>92</b>

Source: Own data.

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