

Telling True Stories

JRN 449: International News: Migration Reporting
taught by Deborah Amos at Princeton University

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**EUROPEAN
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The European Democracy Institute publishes news reports written by students of Deborah Amos' journalism course "JRN 449: International News: Migration Reporting." The course blends policy analysis with intimate, on-the-ground reporting. After six weeks of studying the political, legal, and economic forces shaping migration, the class travels to Berlin over winter break to conduct interviews and to examine the European political landscape on democracy, participation, and immigration as well as the parallels with U.S. policies. Students return with reporter's notebooks full of interviews that challenge assumptions and deepen understanding of migration, culminating in a 2,500-word news report that weaves rigorous research, field interviews, and narrative craft.

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The Alluring Alternative; Why “Real Men” are Voting for the AfD

By Devon Rudolph

Christopher Tamm, 25, is an influencer for the far-right Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) party. He defines ‘real men’ in his social media posts. Often wearing a MAGA hat, sporting his coiffed short cut with a sharp side part, Tamm exudes a certain masculine aura through his social media that far right groups hope to employ to recruit similarly-minded young men.

In July, Tamm posted a photo of himself sitting on a couch, reading a book titled “Remigration,” a new and popular term used by the far-right from Europe to Washington to express support for state sanctioned mass deportation for immigrants, even, in some cases, citizens. In mid-September, Tamm is pictured at a vigil for Charlie Kirk and [Iryna Zarutska](#), with the caption #whitelivesmatter.

One of Tamm’s most popular posts, which has received over one million views, was published in late May. In this compilation video, several people introduce themselves with their pronouns including someone who describes themselves as a fox, followed by Tamm driving in sunglasses stating out the rolled down window that he is “male, white, German.”

Influencers like Tamm, who is in his mid twenties, have helped generate a new [wave](#) of AfD support primarily from young, white German men. For Tamm, he wears provocation as a badge of honor: “I like to be the provocateur.” Tamm approaches his social media posts like a “business” with his videos making fun of left wing beliefs. “If you want to be successful, you have to do something that nobody is doing, and you have to find a niche that isn't occupied. I found a niche with my provocative videos.”

His work seems to have paid off. Tamm’s following is relatively small, but several of his videos have views in the millions, as he grows his audience. Tamm is only one of many AfD influencers.

Jasmine, who is a graduate student studying politics in Berlin, noticed her younger brother has been pulled to the political right by his social media feed. Her brother, a 17-year-old who now lives in the US but was born in Germany, has been telling her that more deportations are needed and immigrants are going to “replace us in the culture.” She believes that social media algorithms can “indoctrinate you into [an] anti-migrant racist.”

Jasmine asked for her last name to be omitted as she did not want her comments to impact her career.

She also explained how the AfD made refugees “scapegoats” for a wide range of problems, as the party advertised that “if we stop the migrants coming in, then suddenly everything will be better.” And far too many, she believes, fell for this promise that she considers a trap.

The AfD party was formed in 2013 as a single-issue party against German policies that provided bailouts for struggling countries in the European Union during the global financial crisis. The AfD promoted beliefs of nationalism that have intensified over the years, with their focus shifting to immigration issues in 2015. Though the growth of the far-right movement worldwide undoubtedly has numerous contributing factors, the AfD grew in tandem with the influx of immigrants.

In 2015, the German government opened its doors to refugees seeking asylum from Syria. Many families were driven from their homes, as the Assad regime arrested thousands of protesters, torturing many who did not support the authoritarian regime. Almost 300,000 Syrian refugees [entered](#) Germany in 2015, with

an overall 46% migration increase from 2014. Amid this major immigration influx, the AfD shifted focus to anti-immigration politics and began dramatically increasing their party support.

Tamm identifies with key AfD messaging, specifically “remigration.” He feels that immigrants, especially Muslim practicing immigrants, do not belong in German society.

“If you're somebody who wants to wear a hijab, you don't fit into Germany,” he said.

Though Germany does not recognize any specific religion, many women are discriminated against for wearing a hijab, and certain states have banned women from wearing hijabs in government, public education, and clerical positions. While Tamm believes a hijab is a symbol of female suppression, many Muslim women [disagree](#).

Tamm also believes that immigrants should migrate to countries in which they are most culturally similar, and that leaving one’s country due to hardship was “weak.” For many Syrians, however, Germany offered the greatest promise of safety and opportunity, and leaving Syria was not a matter of choice, as they faced torture.

To Jasmine, it was the AfD following the lead from Trump’s rhetoric in his first term about Mexican immigrants causing crime, that made populism acceptable again in Germany.

In the US, the MAGA movement has been using similar strategies to attract younger male voters, as the Trump administration has continued a crackdown on illegal immigrants.

“I am totally not surprised that a party like the AfD that's still on its way up trying to take power, is going to try to learn everything it can from ideologues and activists in other countries who are singing from the same sheet of music,” one former Foreign Service Officer in the Department of State said, who asked to remain anonymous due to the sensitive nature of his job.

It is unsurprising, then, that over the past year, the two groups have shown signs of unity.

Back in early December 2024, Elon Musk posted on X that “Only the AfD can save Germany.” Though Musk’s relationship with the MAGA movement and Trump specifically has been tumultuous with his involvement in the White House cost cutting branch DOGE, at the time he had [endorsed](#) Trump in the election and poured [hundreds of millions](#) into the campaign.

Last February, Vice President JD Vance [spoke out](#) against the firewall that had formed in Germany against the AfD, stating that it was challenging free speech in the country. The firewall in Germany is an ongoing informal agreement between the other parties in Germany not to collaborate or form coalitions with the AfD, though it has been increasingly difficult to sustain in eastern areas where the AfD is most popular.

The spreading popularity of this movement was on full display following the assassination of social media influencer and far-right supporter Charlie Kirk on Sept. 10, as protests and gatherings drew large crowds [across](#) the [country](#) and in [Europe](#).

Country leaders and officials have posted reactions to Kirk's death, many of which are aligned with the far-right rhetoric. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán [described](#) the left as “hate mongering,” Santiago Abascal, a Congressman in Spain, [wrote](#) that the left “wanted this assassination,” and Germany’s Alice Weidel, co-leader of the AfD party, [posted](#) on X that “He was shot dead by a fanatic who hates our way of life.”

Since then, Deputy leader of the AfD Beatrix von Storch and AfD politician from western Germany Joachim Paul had a [meeting](#) in September with representatives of the national security council, the vice president's office, and the State Department. In early November, Alex Bruesewitz, Trump advisor overseeing the MAGA PAC's social media, [visited](#) Berlin and spoke with AfD leaders about their shared goals.

Trump has started to [adopt](#) the "remigration" term, a word that is already used throughout the European far-right groups, into America's vocabulary.

Most recently, many European leaders were shocked at the [US National Security Plan](#) released in late November that attacked countries for losing their identity. The document wrote that the "real and more stark prospect of civilizational erasure" faces European countries with migration policies that pose a "loss of national identities and self-confidence."

AfD politician Markus Frohnmaier had a [meeting](#) with U.S. Under Secretary of State Sarah Rogers where the Security Plan was discussed. Planning for further collaboration between the parties is already [in progress](#).

Even more surprising for European leaders was the embrace of Russia in the document, which notably did not classify the country as a foreign adversary to the US, and called to "reestablish strategic stability with Russia."

Right-wing groups world-wide have begun to realign themselves with Russia, endorsing more collaborative relationships.

In 2015, Russia began a bombing campaign in Syria that had the official mission of ending ISIS and other terrorist groups in the region. In reality, the air missions [targeted](#) opposition groups of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

"There were so many Syrians forced into European borders, essentially by collusion," the former Foreign Service Officer in the Department of State said. "Putin was trying to use forced migration as a tool to further undermine political stability in Europe."

"This pressure weakens left wing governments and strengthens the right wing populist movements."

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has similarly caused high levels of asylum seekers in Europe, with an [estimated](#) 6 million total Ukrainian refugees.

The extent to which this migration can be seen as an intended consequence by Russia is unclear, though they have demonstrated a history of destabilizing actions. [Reporting](#) shows concerns expressed by Norwegian officials that the Norway-Russia border was being exploited by Russian officials shepherding across immigrants from other countries. Additionally, [Finland and Belarus](#) have reported similar problems, and have since shut down their borders with Russia, though the problem seems to [persist](#).

Russian interference in migration is cause for concern in many eastern European countries, and there is additional unease in Germany, especially with regard to the military. In November, members of the Bundestag [accused](#) AfD politicians of leaking sensitive [defense information](#) to Russian intelligence. Plans for AfD officials to visit Russia have also [sparked](#) anger from other parties in government.

In early December, the *New York Times* [reported](#) that the AfD has continually attempted to publicise sensitive national security information that could serve to benefit Russia.

The AfD's position towards the Russia-Ukraine war is also mixed. Martin Kohler, creator of the youth wing for the AfD, told me in mid-October that he had conflicting opinions. "Maybe we have to build more pressure on the Russian side. When you are not interested in peace, then maybe we have to get more attention to this war and in supporting Ukraine... my opinion is that Zelensky is a bad president. There are many rumors about corruption."

Tamm, on the other hand, feels differently about German involvement in the war. "It's not [a] topic for Germany." He believes that German interests should come first, which requires the country "not to choose a side."

Tamm added that "we have to clear the problems in our country, and then we can talk [about] what's happening in the world."

Two former state department officials have told me that Germany is "soft on Russia," one describing a guilt complex some Germans have towards Russia as they were formerly part of the Soviet Union in East Germany during the Cold War. While the AfD's backing has risen across the country, popularity of the far-right is strongest in the former East Germany.

The rise of the AfD has shaken some minority populations in Germany.

Josef Schuster, President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, [spoke](#) about concerns for Jewish Germans due to increased AfD support. In November, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier [warned](#) about the dangers of extremism in a speech given on the anniversary of the Nazi Kristallnacht, warning against "co-operation with extremists."

Antisemitic rhetoric was recently a major news story in the US when chats from a Young Republicans' group chat were [published](#), causing major outrage.

The AfD youth group, Young Alternative, was [dissolved](#) in 2024 due to mounting pressure to avoid broader implications for the AfD party as it faced a potential ban by the German government. Because this group was not directly under control of the AfD party leadership, AfD leaders immediately began pushing for a new group to form for younger audiences.

"When you want to become a major party in the future, you need the youth because the youth is the future," Kohler said. "It's much easier for young people to do politics with other young people, because different age groups have different priorities. You are the only young girl or young boy among people over 50, then it's not that attractive for joining the party."

On Nov. 29, the AfD moved to officially create a new youth branch affiliated with the larger party in what became a weekend of mass protests against the far-right. [Reports](#) estimate that around 25,000 protesters took to the streets in various locations, attempting to delay the meeting in which AfD politicians would formalize the youth group.

"Generation Germany," as it will now be called, is the name of the youth organization. On Nov. 30, AfD party member Alexander Eichwald gave a speech at the founding meeting. The *Jerusalem Post* [reported](#) that the speech was "Hitler-like," and encouraged a devotion towards Germany.

Tamm told [France24](#) that he was "very happy" with the event.

Recently, Matthias Moosdorf, a member of parliament in Zwickau, was [accused](#) of making Hitler salute at the Reichstag.

Jasmine, who is studying politics, explained that nationalistic sentiment was “a little bit taboo after the Second World War, especially in Germany.” Strict national laws were written in their constitution banning hate speech and anti-constitutional groups.

“Now that it is an acceptable way of showing nationalism, but I think Germany first, France first, America first... it's just like a manifestation of nationalism in a very populist and very catchy way.”

For Jasmine, she feels it has been a failure of the more left wing parties to change the rhetoric about immigration.

“You can say ‘we're proud to be German,’ and that's why we're bringing in others. We're sharing our wealth, we're sharing our culture, and we are so proud [of] our culture that we're not scared.”

“I think the far-right plays on fear.”

Tamm was initially drawn to the AfD in 2022 after being discharged from the army for being deemed a security threat when the administration found out he had been living in Russia for more than half of the past five years.

In his company, Tamm remembered over half of the soldiers were from Afghan, Syrian, or Moroccan descent. Though many were proud to have been raised in Germany and held passports,

Tamm would not consider them German, and was especially upset they were allowed to continue serving while he was not.

“No matter how much you assimilate in a country, you cannot be 100% from that country.” Tamm believes that those of different ethnic backgrounds should not be classified as German, including children of immigrants in the second or third generations. Tamm distinguishes himself from people who have German passports but are not “real Germans.”

“That's the point where I didn't understand our security politics, and I decided to get politically active.” Tamm joined the youth organization JA which was still active at the time and has since worked as an AfD parliamentary group chairman and as a deputy district chairman.

Last week, Tamm announced on his Instagram that he is running to be deputy state chairman of Generation Germany in Brandenburg.

“Brandenburg needs a strong German youth,” he wrote in German. “Brandenburg is our homeland and will remain so—but only if we fight for it. And we will fight! At the same time, we will have to create framework conditions so that remigration becomes possible for all those who reject OUR values and permanently refuse and slander OUR way of living together.”

Prior to his latest announcement, he had already made a name for himself. He was [quoted](#) in a *New York Times* article at an AfD protest last January, telling a supporter who had his arm in a Hitler salute to “keep your arm up like this a little bit longer.”

Reporters Without Readers: Russian Journalists in Exile Struggle to be Heard

By Valerio Castellini

On the morning of March 31, 2025, Ekaterina Fomina waited anxiously in Berlin. She was expecting a message from her lawyer with an update on her case. It was only the fourth session, and the defence had not yet been allowed to present its case.

Then her phone flashed. It was not her lawyer, but a colleague. More notifications followed. Fomina's name began appearing across Russian media. Within half an hour, the Moscow court handling her case had sentenced her *in absentia* to eight and a half years in prison for "spreading fake news" about the Russian army, one of the [heaviest penalties under the law](#).

"I was crying a lot," she said. "Because it is not about committing a crime and receiving a fair sentence. It is about realizing that your country calls you a terrorist."

Fomina's sentence is part of the Kremlin's sweeping campaign to silence independent journalists since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, forcing the majority to flee the country. Berlin, where Fomina now lives, has become the informal capital of this fractured press in exile. Since the war began, hundreds of Russian journalists have relocated to the city, supported by a fragile network of advocacy groups and NGOs. They continue their reporting, but they struggle to find an audience.

Inside Russia, their work is banned, criminalized, or drowned out by a state-media ecosystem that has reshaped public opinion with relentless discipline. Outside of Russia, they also find themselves outside the systems that determine whose accounts are treated as credible. Western media institutions tend to privilege transparency and public attribution standards that journalists working in an authoritarian framework often cannot satisfy. The result is paradoxical: those who understand the system most intimately are producing some of the most detailed records of the war, yet remain among the least credited narrators of its violence.

The foundations of the paradox lie inside Russia itself. The prosecution of journalists like Fomina rests on a public narrative that has been cultivated for years, where dissent is treachery and alternative accounts of the war are foreign plots.

Political scientist Grigore Pop-Eleches, whose team at *Russia Watcher* has conducted [daily online surveys of Russian public opinion since May 2022](#), describes a landscape that has barely budged since the invasion began. "About 65% are in favour of the war... between 40 and 45% are strongly pro-war," he said. Supporters stay supporters, opponents withdraw from public view. Even major disruptions such as high casualties and criticism of the Ministry of Defense barely penetrate. "Putin is Teflon," he added.

Underlying this is a media diet that, for many Russians, has not changed in decades. "Between 80 and 90% of supporters watched state TV daily," Pop-Eleches explained.

Opponents consumed a mix of TV and online sources, but remained a minority. "Ultimately, even though these outlets cannot operate within Russia, Russians can relatively easily access these through VPNs," Pop-Eleches said. "But it's not clear that there is that much demand to hear that other side."

If and when exile journalism does reach readers inside Russia, it arrives already discredited. Years of official rhetoric have trained audiences to see reporters abroad as enemies or foreign agents, a frame that precedes any individual investigation. “Only those who before the war had political thinking still continue receiving news,” Fomina said. Accessing alternative reporting requires “mental space”—the capacity to seek out information while surviving economically and emotionally under authoritarian conditions. Many never do.

In April 2022, as images from the Kyiv suburb of Bucha began to circulate internationally, Russian state media dismissed the killings as a provocation, staged after the withdrawal of Russian troops. Inside Russia, the narrative hardened quickly. Outside it, Bucha became a symbol of mass violence against civilians.

At [IStories](#), a prominent independent outlet, Fomina [helped reconstruct what happened in Bucha](#), including on Yablonska Street, one of the sites where civilians were later found shot at close range. The investigation identified a unit of Russian paratroopers from Pskov who had occupied the area and, through a combination of open-source analysis and reporting, traced the presence of individual soldiers. One of them, Daniil Frolkin, 24, was linked to the killing of a local resident after his phone number appeared in stolen call logs taken from the victim’s house. When reached by Fomina, Frolkin [admitted to the shooting](#) in a recorded conversation, describing it as a mistake made under pressure.

The reporting was methodical and designed to withstand scrutiny. Internationally, the findings were widely cited. Inside Russia, they were inaccessible.

When Russian authorities opened a criminal case against Fomina months later, the contrast between the original reporting and the state’s response was stark. The indictment accused her of spreading “false information” about the army, but misstated basic details of the case. Bucha was misspelt. A voice in an audio clip was attributed to her, though it belonged to a man. The file did not engage with the substance of the investigation it purported to punish.

After the verdict, Fomina decided to [call one of the men](#) whose testimony had been used against her. “I decided to ask them personally,” she says in the transcript. “I managed to get through to Vyacheslav Fedorovich.” He hesitated: “I don’t really remember—Fomina, Fomina...I need to recall.” Pressed on what exactly he had watched, he admitted, “you watch a lot of these videos—hard to remember anything.”

Bucha has since become a defining case in the Ukrainian war, shaping how subsequent investigations are conducted and read. In its aftermath, other investigations followed a similar logic, though by different means.

Anastasia Korotkova, a twenty-six-year-old reporter now based in Berlin, has focused on Russian conduct in occupied southern Ukraine for the outlet [Verstka](#). In a recent investigation into life under occupation in the Zaporizhzhia region, she documented how Russian soldiers [established relationships with local teenage girls](#), often through money or promises of escape. “My specialisation now is mostly calling soldiers,” she explained. “Men are really lonely there.” Managing harassment and flirtation over text, she extracts testimony that would rarely surface

through official channels. The findings have drawn the attention of UN officials, with whom she now collaborates.

Korotkova writes under a pseudonym for security reasons. She also works as a researcher for *The New York Times*, but they don’t allow pseudonyms, leaving her uncredited. Western media institutions often demand

transparency and documentation in ways that Russian journalists, whose families and subjects remain inside the country, cannot provide. These standards are designed to ensure accountability, but in practice they can exclude precisely those reporters most exposed to retaliation, leaving critical investigations to circulate without bylines, or long-term institutional backing.

The social fabric of exile reflects the same tension. Berlin is full of Russian journalists, but the community is fractured. Competitive, anxious, wary of infiltration. “Any Russian independent media is still Russian,” Korotkova said. “If they want to ditch you, they will ditch you.” Rumours circulate quickly, and reputations stick. “There is no union. Nobody is fighting for our rights.”

And around them, a broader European public that often cannot distinguish between the Russian state and its opponents. “Locals could not understand me,” Fomina said. “Because of informational wars, I’m also kind of a very problematic person.”

If ordinary Europeans struggle to understand who these journalists are, state institutions often seem even more confused. Russians fleeing the regime arrive in systems with few tools to recognise them as dissidents or protect them as such. The result is a kind of bureaucratic violence: not overt persecution, but rules and omissions that make their lives precarious while never fully acknowledging what they risked to leave.

In Berlin, this begins with paperwork. Unlike Ukrainians, who received a clear temporary protection regime, anti-war Russians often arrive into what Danila Bedyayev, a former regional journalist from Yaroslavl, described as a system that “didn’t know what to do with us.”

Many staff in refugee agencies were themselves Ukrainian, carrying their own grief. For them, helping Russians, however opposed to the war, was emotionally fraught.

For Bedyayev and his family, this ambiguity became an eight-month legal limbo. They had reached Germany after a hurried escape through Egypt, following his wife’s [detention for an individual anti-war protest](#). As their visas neared expiration, they applied for protection but insisted on remaining in Berlin rather than being sent to a refugee camp. After months of negotiating, the immigration office’s response was a letter claiming that all of the family’s passports—Russian and even his young son’s American one—had been lost.

Pressure from lawyers and NGOs eventually forced the authorities to issue “grey passports” (travel documents for non-citizens) and a freelance residence permit. By then, they had spent months without documents or a clear category.

For younger reporters like Korotkova, the path is different but equally exposed. Ineligible for a humanitarian visa, she applied for a German freelance visa while already in the EU. Officials demanded €23,000 blocked in her bank account, money she would only receive back slowly as a pseudo-salary—a way to ensure she would “never apply for political asylum,” she explained. Lawyers later negotiated the amount down to €11,000, but the principle remained. She borrowed from friends, stacked fellowships, and convinced her part-time employer to pay a year’s salary in advance so she could briefly show the balance. “Technically, I had all the rights to go for political asylum,” she said, but feared being placed in refugee facilities and losing the ability to work.

The sense of not being seen is compounded by another, more intimate pressure: the fear that even in exile, they are still being watched. Fomina describes a social world in which stories circulate about

acquaintances later discovered to have been recruited by Russian security services. “There are so many open cases like this,” she said. “This makes you very closed and not trusting anyone.” Friends warn her that certain familiar faces were in fact working with the FSB. At a conference, she met a man who claimed to have read articles of hers published years earlier, before she became publicly known. “Maybe he’s really a fellow,” she recalled thinking, “but I can’t trust him, because I did not know him personally in advance.” Hence, many exiled Russians keep separate phones, separate chats, separate layers of themselves.

Yet their reporting does not stop.

At [TV Rain](#), Fomina began producing documentaries, shifting from written investigations to visual storytelling. “You can’t just describe the face of a person who recently lost her child by a terrorist attack,” she explained. “I saw a huge potential in producing documentaries.” Her latest film ‘[Neither Alive Nor Dead](#)’ followed mothers searching for missing sons and volunteers collecting bodies neglected by the government on the front lines. “From the Russian side, we talked to mothers... from the other side, we filmed volunteers collecting these bodies,” she said. The juxtapositions revealed the human cost of the war that official narratives tried to bury, and the growing realisation among families that the state was hiding the truth.

In Berlin, these methods overlap in unexpected ways. The city provides a kind of infrastructure made up of co-working spaces built by NGOs, legal advice, old colleagues who reappear. Safety comes with a different kind of constraint: distance. The very freedom that allows them to keep speaking also severs their connection to the country they are speaking about.

“You live in one country, one agenda, but all your work is concentrated on another,” Fomina said. “It’s like you’re living in two different worlds.”

Bedyayev sees the community from another angle. He no longer works in media officially—his job title is now “tech management and IT”—but he staffs the spaces where exiled journalists gather managed by the press freedom NGO [MiCT](#). He helps build recording studios, fix equipment, set up workstations. He sees the flow of people passing through: Ukrainians, Belarusians, Afghans, Syrians, Russians. “It’s a common story,” he said. His own life in Berlin is modest and rooted, but he still describes his experience as part of journalism. “I really want to make my story public one day,” he continued. “There are a lot of stories of exiled people that need to be shared.”

All of these reporters share the awareness that their work may reach no one who most needs to hear it.

Inside Russia, the space for dissent has constricted even further. According to Pop-Eleches, people who oppose the war are increasingly reluctant to discuss it even with friends. “They’re probably afraid even if you’re among friends,” he said. “It seems they’re starting to withdraw a little bit more from the social side of it.” Silence becomes a survival strategy, and in the repressive Russian context, it reinforces itself.

For reporters like Fomina, this dynamic extends into the personal. She remains in contact with families of Ukrainians killed in the war, building relationships that blur the lines between reporting and mourning. “Each journalist has its own cemetery,” she said. “I can’t even count how many people I buried distantly, remotely.” The brutal images sent by sources remain on her phone, unopened on days when she cannot face them. Her work is recognised abroad, yet to many Russians, her name has become shorthand for betrayal.

Korotkova worries less about audiences than about continuity. “Good journalists are leaving,” she said. “And where are we gonna get the new journalists from?” Many younger reporters now entering exile media have never worked inside Russia at all. They lack the everyday knowledge that once came from newsroom apprenticeship “They don’t know how it works inside,” she said. “And who’s gonna train them?”

For now, exiled Russian journalists continue to document a country that cannot hear them. But the absence of an immediate audience does not render their work inconsequential. Investigative reporting often acquires its force over time, as records are revisited and responsibility reassessed. That pattern is not new. It was the case in Argentina’s last military dictatorship, and later in the former Yugoslavia, where documentation assembled outside the country was later taken up in accountability processes once political conditions changed.

Whether or not their work reaches readers inside Russia today, these journalists are building a documentary foundation for a future reckoning. When silence eventually breaks, the story of how it was enforced will have already been written.

Baptists across borders: How Ukrainian and American evangelicals are reviving Christianity in Europe

What happens to Christianity when the citizens of Eastern Europe's Bible Belt are forced to move across the globe?

By Raphaela Gold



GUMMERSBACH, GERMANY — In a run-down theatre in Gummersbach, a small German town on the bank of the Rhine, a group of Americans and Ukrainians might seem out of place.

It's an unusual cast of characters. There are the eight Americans, who signed up for a mission trip with First Baptist Church, a megachurch in Hendersonville, Tennessee (FBCH). And there are the 20-or-so Ukrainians affiliated with Almaz Church, a congregation once based in Kyiv, who have shown up on this dreary Wednesday to help. They are all here to transform an abandoned, cavernous theatre — still displaying signs for Indiana Jones 4, 2008, in its ticket booth — into a church.

Upstairs, four college students sift through a pile of wooden planks and rubbery strips of wallpaper, occasionally landing on relics of the past: a sooty matchbox, a crinkled movie poster, a *Hello Dolly* vinyl, a half-full liquor bottle. Dust fills the cold, dank air. Downstairs, people of all ages drill holes and haul branches into large containers in the front yard.

Among them is Almaz's leader Pastor Nikolas Skopych, an unassuming man with a wiry salt-and-pepper beard. In the wreckage, you might find him wielding a sparking electric floor-grinder, or else quietly circulating to ensure everyone has a task.

He spent a year searching — and praying — for a sprawling space like this to replace the cramped office they had previously used. "I believe that God gave us [a] unique opportunity to buy this cinema," he said.

The new property, which includes the theatre and a set of apartments, will serve the community of Ukrainian refugees now residing in Gummersbach, which numbers upwards of 3,000 individuals, Skopych estimates. This is just one of 64 Ukrainian Churches that have sprung up in Germany since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. In total, 152 Ukrainian churches have been established across Europe, according to [Almaz' website](#).

Now, some American missionaries are hopeful they will launch a greater religious awakening on a continent where religiosity has been [declining for decades](#). Michael McClanahan, head of missions at FBCH, wants the new Almaz location to become “a central training hub.”

And he believes these efforts will go beyond the expansion of Ukrainian churches. “I feel that this is the beginning of a revival of Christianity in Europe,” he said.

Many see Ukraine itself as their biggest opportunity. American evangelicals have [flip-flopped](#) in their views throughout the war, often echoing U.S. President Donald Trump’s America-first stances but recently [becoming more supportive](#) of Ukrainian independence as Ukrainian pastors appeal to their Christian sensibilities. In the U.S., American Baptists have welcomed Ukrainian refugees into their churches. But they don’t plan to stop at home. Some have already begun to make arrangements to dramatically scale up missions to Ukraine when the war ends.

“EUROPE NEEDS NEW MISSIONS AND NEW CHURCHES,” reads the bolded text on one slide of a Ukrainian Missional Movement PowerPoint. Skopych delivered the presentation last April to the FBCH congregation on his visit to Tennessee, urging members to help establish and expand Baptist churches across Europe.

Skopych grew up in Kyiv, Ukraine, born to parents who, he said, did not believe in God. At 18, feeling disillusioned and aimless, he stumbled across American evangelical missionaries on the street who were distributing brochures about Christianity.

“I took [the brochures] because we didn’t have literature about Christianity. It was impossible to have the Bible, or New Testament,” Skopych explained.

Before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, American evangelicals had [already](#) been smuggling religious literature across the Iron Curtain and lobbying for greater religious freedom in the U.S.S.R. Ukraine is now known as the Bible belt of eastern Europe, but at the time, religion was systematically suppressed in the USSR, including in Ukraine, as it conflicted with the state’s communist-atheist ideology. When the Iron Curtain fell in 1989, American evangelical missionaries flocked to cities across Ukraine.

These missionaries changed the trajectory of Skopych’s life. “I [took] this brochure, and read it, and [thought] about life. I [understood] that the very high meaning of life, I can only find with God,” he said. “It helped me.”

When Catherine Wanner, Professor of History, Anthropology, and Religious Studies at Penn State, travelled to Ukraine for dissertation research in the early 1990s, she was stunned by the ubiquity of American evangelism in Ukraine.

“Every single place I looked, I was sitting next to some missionary who was coming to Ukraine to engage in church planting,” she recalled.

Church planting is the process of establishing a new Christian congregation in a region, often involving the physical construction of a church building with the goal that it will eventually operate independently. In

the 18th century, American Baptists and Methodists often engaged in church planting, [fueling](#) the growth of early religious movements in the U.S.

Wanner described how many American missionaries, unable to speak Ukrainian or Russian, spent their holidays traveling to post-Soviet Ukraine, where they would publicly mime scenes from the Bible.

According to Wanner, Baptists were demonized during the Soviet period as bearers of American values and capitalism, which Soviet propaganda condemned, but there has now been a shift. “[Missionaries are] now associated with democracy and the provision of humanitarian aid,” she explained.

The Baptists who proselytized in Ukraine during the 1990s thought that former Soviet citizens had been deprived of religion and were “godless,” Wanner said. But the Soviet anti-religion agenda [failed](#) to achieve its atheist aims in the long-term.

Now, an estimated two to four percent of the Ukrainian population identifies as Baptist, while the vast [majority](#) are members of the Orthodox Church. But though small in number, they are a powerful force. “Those 4% are very influential, very visible, and they have a significant impact on political and social policy,” Wanner noted.

Skopych has become one of these influential Ukrainian Baptists. He attended seminary and became a pastor of Almaz church in Ukraine, which did not have its own building, but rented space in Kyiv. It was only by chance that the new Almaz church now sits in a small town in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany.

In February 2022, Pastor Nickolas was visiting a friend in Gummersbach. But a few days into this visit, Russia invaded Ukraine. Skopych and his family suddenly became stranded in Germany.

As the war continued, hundreds of Almaz congregants joined Skopych, bringing friends and family. Marina Zadoian, who was a member of Almaz in Kyiv, came to Germany in 2022. “I did not choose Gummersbach or Germany. I see that God provided me with that opportunity,” she said.

Before the war, Zadoian had been studying architecture. She said her parents did not allow her to practice religion growing up, but she attended a Christian camp in Ukraine called [World of Life](#) – which also has several branches in the U.S. “These camps were like islands where I could find this relationship with God,” Zadoian said.

Fleeing Ukraine changed this relationship. “My old dream was to have a nice career, to study at architecture university, to become a good architect or teacher in university,” she said. Now, she has a new dream: “To spend more time in the Almaz mission or ministry.”

Skopych and his family helped Ukrainian refugees gain German citizenship and settle into lives drastically different from the ones they left behind. As a community, they faced the challenges of learning German, living in small apartments, and leaving family in Ukraine.

“We were really tired of this immigration process,” said Martin Skopych, the pastor’s son, “But we put our life on pause and tried to help other people.”

In March, 2025, Skopych met Bruce Chesser, the senior pastor of FBCH. Chesser went to Germany seeking a “native, German-speaking church” with which to collaborate on a future mission. But when he met Skopych, he was so moved by the pastor’s story that he changed course.

A year later, eight Americans from FBCH ended up in Gummersbach, stripping down the walls of an abandoned theatre.

“For me, it’s like a miracle from God,” said Martin Skopych. “It’s encouragement that we are on [the] right way and doing everything great.”

The FBCH mission stayed in Gummersbach for eight days. They demolished floors, sorted the debris, and cleared trash. During breaks, they shared bountiful lunches of potato salad, tomatoes and cold cuts, finishing it off with fresh Ukrainian cream puffs. One evening, the American college students trekked a few miles just for McDonalds, but most of their time was spent together, in work or in prayer.

By the end of the week, the theatre was unrecognizable from the hovel it had been. Still, Almaz has a long way to go before it brings to life its blueprint, which boasts a grand hall, cafe, meeting room, office space, and more miscellaneous rooms to come.

Skopych hopes that this future space, with all its bells and whistles, will allow Almaz to grow. The church runs a telegram group with 1,381 members, where it sends out Ukrainian lunch invitations and shares stories, job opportunities, and more. Though these efforts are currently focused on Ukrainian Christian community-building, Skopych rejects insularity in the long-run.

“We share things like this,” Skopych said. “It’s not only for churches; it is for society.”

One reason American evangelicals are committed to helping their Ukrainian counterparts is that they know them, in some cases, intimately.

Michael Bible, an FBCH congregant who was on the mission trip to Gummersbach, has sponsored four Ukrainians to come to America through Uniting for Ukraine (U4U), a Biden administration [initiative](#) meant to streamline the process of entering the U.S. for fleeing Ukrainians. When the Trump administration entered office in January 2025, the program was put on pause. In August, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration services [resumed](#) processing renewal applications, but the program remains suspended for potential newcomers.

Bible, a self-identified conservative Republican, expressed his disappointment at the Trump administration’s policy change. “The one thing that I was always very supportive of in the former administration was that their policy on Ukraine was absolutely right,” he said, adding, “It’s a different animal when you know these people.”

The Ukrainian cause is close to Bible’s heart. His brother-in-law, Richard Matheny, had made several trips to Ukraine prior to 2022, when he married a Ukrainian woman. Matheny was waiting in a town near Kyiv for his wife to get a visa to come to the U.S. when the war broke out. From afar, Bible helped them escape over the border to Poland, following the route on Google Earth to offer updates on where guards were least likely to be stationed.

For many years, Bible worked as a hospital administrator, so he had practice with tedious documents. “When Richard got home, he was the one that said, ‘We need to start sponsoring these folks,’” Bible explained. “I said, ‘Well, I’m already up to my eyeballs in forms anyway, so let me fill them out.’”

Tetiana “Tanya” Kravchuk and her husband, Serhii Kravchuk, who had known Matheny in Ukraine, became the first to join Bible’s family in Tennessee. Tanya was almost nine months pregnant when she arrived. “I

think if I hadn't been pregnant, I wouldn't have gone anywhere," she said. "I just wanted to be safe somewhere, and I didn't have anybody in Europe."

Kravchuck and the rest of her family have since joined her, sponsored by Matheny. Bible sponsored Tanya's parents, her cousin, and Kravchuck's mother.

FBCH is not the only U.S. church to have made the journey to Gummersbach. Oak Ridge Baptist Church (ORBC), based in Texas, [ran](#) a baseball camp there in the summer of 2024. Lania Cooper, Head of Missions at ORBC, explained that the church uses sports "as an introduction to the gospel of Jesus Christ." Some Ukrainians have also joined ORBC in Texas since the start of the war.

With so many Baptist pastors having fled Ukraine, however, Ukraine itself is dwindling in Christian leadership. Now, some American Baptists are making plans to support Ukrainian Baptists through the end of the war and beyond.

At the general conference of the state's Baptist churches in November, when approximately 5,500 churches convened in Abilene, Texas, Ukrainian and Texan churches signed an agreement.

"We believe that now is the time for the global Body of Christ to bring healing, truth, and love to a wounded nation," reads the text of the agreement.

Though currently only 36 Texas Baptist churches have committed to the partnership, the leaders intend to reach 50 by mid-December, to be paired with churches in Ukraine for the provision of religious solidarity and humanitarian aid.

Pastor Brent Gentzel of First Baptist Church (FBCK) in Kaufman, Texas, emphasized that this is just the beginning. "That's where we'll start," he said. "We kind of see these as pilot churches."

The agreement outlines four phases of partnership, beginning with the 50 church-to-church and pastor-to-pastor partnerships, and aiming to grow to 100 churches by phase four, alongside camps, counseling, and more church planting.

The initiative also aims to match the churches based on shared characteristics. Texan panhandle churches, for example, might be matched with churches in regions of Ukraine where farming is abundant. "They'll share some common life experiences," Gentzel explained.

Until the war is over, the partnerships will likely remain virtual, but Gentzel hopes to send in-person missions to Ukraine when the war ends to respond to churches' needs on the ground.

These needs range from pastoral to psychological care. "We are witnessing ongoing persecution of churches in the occupied territories," said Valerii Antonyuk, Head of the All-Ukrainian Union of the Churches of Evangelical Baptists. "Most of our pastors have been compelled to leave these areas."

"Texas Baptist mental health professionals are in the process of preparing to step forward to help once the war wraps up," said Gentzel. "As far as all that goes, we're in the process of trying to put ourselves in a place to help those churches that need handicap access."

Gentzel, and both ORBC and FBCH affiliates involved with mission planning, stressed that they do not see their involvement in the Ukrainian cause as political.

"We have no political agenda at all," Cooper said. "We're very Jesus-centered."

Jeremiah Williams, the leader of FBCH's mission trip in Gummersbach, also sees missions as a strictly religious project. He cited Matthew 28 from the Bible, which [states](#), "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

For Antoniuk, however, America's status as a democratic nation makes it a particularly important partner for Ukraine. "The United States was founded as a nation of free people," he said. "Ukraine is being built as a democratic nation, and our partners in the United States can help us develop precisely such a country."

Ukraine's Orthodox Dioceses Resist Russian Authority in Diaspora

By Cora LeCates

Before 2022, December evenings in Kreuzberg, Berlin were characteristically quiet, as locals retreated into their homes for the winter. Lately, however, the nights are lit up by an energetic crowd of people of all ages—Christmas carolers, in groups of 20 to 30, from a new Ukrainian Orthodox church in the neighborhood. The singers are recent migrants from Ukraine, navigating a set of unfamiliar streets with the hope of finding a new sense of normalcy in a foreign country.

Christmas caroling is a cherished tradition in the Ukrainian Orthodox community. In the shadow of the war and the consequent diaspora of Ukrainians across Europe, it has become even more important—especially as the Ukrainian Orthodox faith is politicized amidst the conflict. For these Ukrainians from the Parish of St. Igor of Chernihiv in Berlin, their faith community seems even more important in Germany than it had been in Ukraine.

“Here... you can feel the spirit of the caroling sharply, and more deeply,” said Ruslam Vakariuk, a parishioner from St. Igor. “We count on our church to keep us in touch with our traditions, our language, our culture. Caroling in Berlin during my first winter, I felt like I could hear the Kiev I left behind again.”

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, more than 1.2 million Ukrainians have migrated to Germany. A huge share has settled in Berlin, which received as many as 10,000 refugees per day at the peak of the 2022 influx. Seeking community in an unfamiliar setting, many Ukrainian migrants are turning to their faith for support.

“The church is forming close relations between different Ukrainian clubs, organizations, and societies here in Berlin that weren’t interacting before,” says Vakariuk, “For many of us it is the single organization we can rely on to keep the heartbeat of Ukraine close here.”

New parishes—most of them Ukrainian Orthodox, like more than two-thirds of Ukraine’s population before the war—are appearing throughout Europe and North America. In these parishes, religious leaders are finding their faith-based work transformed. The transplantation of their religious community in a new setting has given rise to significant new challenges— but has also allowed parishes to serve their faithful culturally and politically, as well as spiritually. For members of St. Igor, the church has been, as Varakiruk puts it, “a lifeline abroad.”

Importantly, parishioners at St. Igor are also concerned with combating the politicization of their church in their foreign setting. According to Vakariuk, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has always been a war of faith. For centuries— and especially in recent decades, as national tensions have escalated since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991— the Russian Orthodox church has exerted control over Ukrainian Orthodox parishes in order to undermine the Ukrainian national identity. Moreover, faith has been used to justify the war in Ukraine to Russians by political and religious leaders alike.

“The church itself has become essentially weaponized,” explains Nicholas Denysenko, a Ukrainian Orthodox priest and a professor of religion at Valparaiso University. “Russian authorities frame the war against Ukraine as the war of good against evil, of God against the devil. The Ukrainian Orthodox faith is attacked as a symbol of the Ukrainian country.”

While the war has upended the lives of Ukrainian Orthodox parishioners, the diaspora of their church has enabled parishes to advocate for their faith on the international stage—distant from their Russian Orthodox dissenters.

Priesthood as Patriotism

In the years leading up to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and indeed since, the traditions and beliefs of the Ukrainian Orthodox church have been contested by their Russian counterpart. For Father Oleg Kovalenko, the founder and head priest of the Parish of St. Igor of Chernihiv, faith has played an integral role in clarifying and strengthening his Ukrainian identity—especially following his migration. Kovalenko takes the politics of the Orthodox church as representative of the tensions between Russia and Ukraine.

Russia, which has the largest number of Orthodox believers and views itself as the leader of the Orthodox world, has long attempted to exert symbolic control over Ukraine by means of the Orthodox church. Tensions escalated notably during Russia's invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014, with Ukrainian Orthodox leaders calling for a symbolic severance of their church's ties to Russia.

“As the Russian Orthodox church has been revived, Putin has manipulated it and brought it close to the state, so it's truly an extension of the government. The Russian Orthodox authorities claim that the Ukrainian Orthodox church is schismatic, illegitimate, and false,” says Knox Thames, a Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the U.S. Department of State and director of the Program on Global Faith and Inclusive Societies at Pepperdine University.

Since the major escalation of the conflict in 2022, Russia's attacks on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church have taken violent shape. “Over 500 cultural and historic sites have been bombed, 30% of which are religious in nature. That's not an accident,” says Thames.

The creation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in January 2019—distinct from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which has its patriarchate based in Moscow—marked Ukraine's formal theological separation from Russian authority. Following the full-scale invasion in 2022, the Ukrainian Orthodox church declared its full independence from the Moscow Patriarchate. The separation of the Ukrainian Orthodox church from its Russian governing bodies has since been codified in Ukrainian law. Following instances of Russian informants operating through Ukrainian Orthodox churches, the Moscow Patriarchate was formally banned in Ukraine as of August 2024.

“What began as something that was about the countries Ukraine and Russia has really spilled over into the public sphere and into the church,” says Professor Nicholas Denysenko. “The issue of religious freedom in Ukraine will exist as a scar of this war in ways we can't yet predict.”

That prayer should be spoken in one's native language is a core tenet of the Ukrainian Orthodox faith. It is also among the most contested aspects of the church according to the Russian Orthodox camp. By contrast, the Russian Orthodox church uses Church Slavonic (an ancient Slavic language) for its liturgical services.

“When you understand in your native language and can read the praise in your native language, this is central to the power of the faith. Prayer is not the same in a language that is not your native tongue,” Kovalenko argues. “Prayer must be in the vernacular language.”

After migrating to Berlin with his wife and three sons in 2022, Kovalenko immediately began looking for a parish where he could preach in his native Ukrainian. As there was no existing Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Berlin, he arranged to share a church space with an existing Evangelical Parish, and founded St. Igor of Chiernihiv on October 2, 2022.

“It was starting from zero, we had nothing here. The diaspora felt total,” said Kovalenko. “Our parish in Berlin is nothing like the one in Kiev. Of course, our life is nothing like the one in Kiev. Not better or worse, but it serves a different purpose.”

The existence of a Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Berlin was unprecedented; while some Ukrainian Orthodox groups settled in Bavaria in the late 1940s, the sect lacked any meaningful ancestry in Germany. Ukrainian-language liturgical materials needed to be sourced and imported, while Kovalenko and his family attempted to spread news of St. Igor to as many of their fellow migrants as possible on Facebook and via word of mouth.

In Germany, Kovalenko takes the mission of the Parish of St. Igor— and its success— as one highly entangled with its Ukrainian identity. Moreover, his profession as a priest has been transformed, as he takes on additional responsibilities due to his foreign setting.

“I feel I have a mission to build a bridge between Ukrainian people and German people. And a mission to unite the Ukrainians who are here together,” Kovalenko says.

An International Trend

Across the Atlantic in New Jersey, USA, other Ukrainian migrants are encountering similar changes. At the Ukrainian Orthodox Holy Ascension Cathedral in Clifton, NJ, parishioners are turning to their faith community to reconnect with their culture— and as a means of providing symbolic support to Ukraine abroad.

Marina Sultchouk, a schoolteacher and mother of two who migrated from Poltava, Ukraine in 2016, is a board member of the Holy Ascension parish and a devoted follower of the Ukrainian Orthodox faith— a role she could never have imagined for herself before her migration.

“I was not religious at all in Ukraine. I was Ukrainian Orthodox officially, yes, but I never went to church or knew my priest. To hear that now I am a part of my church board would have been unthinkable to me,” Sultchouk says. “Being here in the United States, I feel called to church for spiritual, emotional, political, cultural reasons. And I do it for my children— I want them to know the Ukrainian language, the Ukrainian way of thinking.”

Sultchouk’s daughters, Anastasia and Katerina, are 12 and 6. Anastasia was born in Ukraine, but Katerina was born in the United States. For the Sultchouk family, Holy Ascension has provided a point of contact for Ukrainian culture abroad— a “home base,” as Marina describes it. While Marina Sultchouk had not planned on raising her children with a strong sense of religion, the circumstance of migration— and the Russian Orthodox church’s attacks on Ukrainian Orthodoxy— led her to reconsider. Now, she believes the church should be a central part of her daughters’ lives.

“It has changed the way I think about my faith. I want my daughters to understand the Bible, to know they are Ukrainian, and Ukrainian Orthodox,” Sultchouk explains.

Father Oleksii Holchuk, the current head priest at Holy Ascension, also feels that his faith has transformed since his migration. Holchuk moved to Clifton, New Jersey in 2016 to escape the war. He left behind the parish he founded in Western Ukraine and, with the approval of church leadership, moved directly to Holy Ascension. He was met with the challenge of preaching to several different generations of Ukrainians—many of them recent migrants, like himself, but some having emigrated to New Jersey decades earlier.

“Each wave of Ukrainians who came to the United States has different views. It’s like a plant that grows into many branches from a single root,” says Holchuk. “And the way I see it, it’s important to refresh our views. More recent migrants from Ukraine are essential because they are ‘fresh blood,’ you might say. They keep us in touch with the Ukraine of now, of today.”

While Father Kovalenko’s church in Berlin has few connections in Germany, the Ukrainian Orthodox faith has a long history on the United States’ East Coast, where Ukrainians have migrated in large groups since the late 19th century. Beginning in the 1870s and continuing until the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Ukrainians moved to New Jersey in increasing numbers. As of 2025, an estimated 73 thousand Ukrainian-Americans reside in New Jersey. For Holy Ascension, which was founded in 1925, the development of the war in Ukraine in the past decade marks only the latest stage in the history of Ukrainian migration to the Clifton area.

“The church is changing all the time. When you’re a stranger, from a different country, you just need to feel surrounded by people who are the same way of thinking, the same way of talking, the same way of views as you,” says Helen Priadka, a migrant from Ukraine who has been a member of the parish for more than 50 years. “This new generation is not so religious. The people who come to the church now are not religious people. It’s not like it used to be. But they still help us because they are Ukrainian, they represent our Ukrainian Orthodox faith, they participate in our culture.”

Unlike the Parish of St. Igor in Berlin, where most parishioners are recent migrants who have resided in Germany for five years or less, Holy Ascension contains a range of migrant generations. However, like its peer church in Berlin, Holy Ascension has risen to the challenges of war-time and diaspora to meet the needs of its newest parishioners.

“Being a priest here in the United States is not just being a priest. You are much more than that. Sometimes I feel like a cultural director, sometimes I feel like an administrator for Ukrainians. Church here works as well as a center for the diaspora,” explains Father Holchuk. “I’m working for God, serving for Ukrainians. I’m serving God through Ukrainians.”

For Father Holchuk, the diaspora of the Ukrainian Orthodox church also presents an opportunity for him to advocate for his faith, combating what he understands to be an existential threat posed by Russian Orthodox leadership.

“The relationship between the Ukrainian Church and Russian Orthodox church always was tough. They say that we are not canonical, that we are a cancer. For my entire life the Russian Orthodox priests have made fun of me, calling me a fake priest, calling me blasphemous...That the Ukrainian language is not a language we can use for praying, and that it should be destroyed, because God does not accept the Ukrainian language when you pray,” says Father Holchuk. “Being a priest is tough especially in Ukraine because you always need to fight for your survival.”

With the geographical and political distance afforded by migration to the United States, Father Holchuk argues there is an opportunity for the Ukrainian Orthodox church to solidify its identity. For parishioners at

Holy Ascension, the war has taken them away from their homeland— yet, it may also have brought them closer to their religious community, and to the mission of preserving the Ukrainian Orthodox faith on an international stage.

After the weekly liturgy on Sunday, November 30th, generations of Ukrainian-Americans gather in the basement of the Ukrainian Orthodox Holy Ascension Cathedral for their typical coffee hour. Trays of toast, jam, cookies, and Syrnyky (a Ukrainian pancake dish made of cottage cheese) line one wall. Across the room, children run to a play area equipped with coloring books and building blocks after their Sunday school meeting. The parishioners brunch, talking and laughing in Ukrainian. Some peel off after a few minutes for practice with the cathedral's choir; others linger for several hours and stay behind to help decorate the space for Christmas.

“This is why we have the church,” says Father Holchuk as he hangs Christmas wreaths in the cathedral's entryway. “It is not the way my parish was in Ukraine. But here in New Jersey, strangely, we feel secure.”

On Christmas Eve in 2023, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced for the first time that Ukraine would celebrate Christmas on December 25th. Traditionally, the holiday was celebrated on Jan. 6-7 in alignment with the Julian calendar— the same date the Russian Orthodox church uses. With this gesture, Holchuk explains, Zelenskyy expressed independence from the control of the Russian Orthodox authority and Moscow Patriarchate as it operated in Ukraine: “We're different, we're an independent people. We're not proto-Russians. We're Ukrainians.”

At Holy Ascension in Clifton, as in Ukrainian Orthodox Churches around the world, Christmas is now celebrated on the 25th.

As the Far Right Gains Ground, German Football Grapples with Racism and Inclusion... Again

By Justus K. Wilhoit

At ten years old, while kicking a soccer ball on a field in Berlin, Nabil Rayk could already sense he was the "other." The opposing team's parents, "the Proper Germans" as he puts it, would shout insults from the sidelines. "Kick that Arab, kick that N-word" he recalled.

"For them," Nabil said, "sport is a replacement for war."

Now, hostility can be felt within the sports world again.

These divisions are not new to European football, but its reemergence reflects the growing influence of far-right parties across Europe, largely through their anti-immigrant rhetoric.

In 2024, when Germany hosted the UEFA European Championships, Alternative for Deutschland (AfD), a far-right party in Germany criticized the German team for being too woke, too diverse, and not German enough.

Maximilian Krah, a member of the party described the team as a "politically correct mercenary troop." "It's the rainbow team. The pride team," he said. "We can ignore it."

For many immigrants and people of color, this rhetoric is forcing their ethnic, religious, or racial identities into the [spotlight](#). It leaves them questioning whether Germany truly sees them as part of the nation or as outsiders.

"Football is tradition in Germany," said Stenny Bamer, a social worker for the fans of BFC Dynamo, a football club based in East Berlin, at Fan Project for Sports Youth Berlin. "It's really hard to change something here in the football system."

Fan Project is an independent initiative created by the Berlin Sports Organization to engage football fans aged 14 to 27 whose home teams are either BFC Dynamo, known for its conservative history or its left-leaning counterpart Hertha BSC, another club based in Berlin. It hopes to foster inclusion, anti-discrimination, and a sense of community through football culture.

"I see a change in the fan scenes. They are getting more conservative, more right-wing. There is a real influence of the AfD policy on the football fans," Bamer added.

That influence has become incredibly visible. At a match between two German clubs known for far-right fan bases earlier this year, supporters used banners to [spread](#) anti-transgender messages, including one stating "there are only two genders, even a blind person can see that."

Months later, another club backed its players by threatening possible legal action over online abuse from fans. The club [released](#) screenshots of racist messages targeting French player Arnaud Nordin, who is Black, and sexist, xenophobic insults aimed at the mother of German player Nadiem Amiri, who is of Afghan heritage.

In Germany, a football club's reputation often carries political significance, and fans play a major role in shaping it. Eastern clubs like Dynamo have traditionally been linked to right-leaning politics, while many

Western clubs are seen as more left-leaning.

Prior to meeting Bamer, when I mentioned to Ronny Blaschke, a German sports journalist I interviewed for this story that I planned to attend a BFC Dynamo match for this story, he warned me not to go as a person of color, as it might not be safe.

Bamer agreed. “I would never say to an immigrant person, go to a BFC Dynamo game because there are a lot of far-right extremists.” Bamer said.

He wants the atmosphere to change. Journalists, NGO workers, and club officials interviewed for this story echoed that goal, though they varied on how change happens. Some see it coming from club leadership. Others point to pressure from supporters themselves.

“In some clubs, it [change] can come from the top down. But in others, like St. Pauli, it came from the fans themselves,” Bamer said.

St. Pauli, unlike Dynamo, is a liberal stronghold shaped by fan activism. During the 1980s and 90s, as neo-Nazi hooliganism spread through European football, more left-wing activists settled in Hamburg’s St. Pauli district and [publicly](#) stood against fascist values in the stadium, rejecting racism and extremism.

Their pressure led the club to become the first in Germany to [ban](#) right-wing nationalist displays inside the stadium.

Today, St. Pauli remains committed to equality and diversity, and was one of 12 German clubs to [publicly condemn](#) the AfD earlier this year.

Dynamo did not.

At Dynamo, the shift towards inclusion has been slower. Anti-immigrant sentiment and nostalgia for old identities sometimes coexist with loyalty. Bamer recalls how Solomon Okoronkwo, a

Nigerian player, whom fans renamed “Ojoko” because they could not pronounce his last name. “Everybody loved him,” he said, “but I always had the feeling it was also a little bit of making a joke out of his name.” In Igbo, Okoronkwo’s language, “ojoko” refers to plantain.

The tension reflects a broader contradiction within German society: immigration is essential to the country’s demographic and economic future, yet full social acceptance remains uneven, particularly in football.

“When they have a black player on their team, when you play good, it’s like “nice,” but if you play bad, it’s like,” he mimicked monkey noises. “They call you an ape. They throw bananas,” Rayk said.

That lack of acceptance becomes visible in the contrast between those on the field and those in the stands. Germany’s population stands at roughly 84 million, with nearly 25 million people having an immigrant background. Berlin alone is nearly 30 percent immigrant. While immigrant players are indispensable to success on the field, the stands paint a different picture of society and remain overwhelmingly white, male, and heterosexual.

Bamer claims that this divide is rooted in unequal exposure to migration. For players, migration is routine, often a prerequisite for success. “If you want to play in a high-end good club, you change from Germany to England and so on,” he said.

Fans, by contrast, are not exposed to the same mobility or cultural exchange.

“If you watch nearly 100 percent of the fan blocs in Germany,” he said, “they don’t give a proper view of our society,” Bamer said.

The mismatch is particularly striking in Berlin, one of Europe’s most diverse cities.

“You will not find 30 percent of immigrants at Hertha, at Bayern, and especially not at BFC Dynamo,” he added.

Conflicting interests between players and supporters often influence how clubs engage or stay silent on social and political issues.

Like Dynamo, FC Union Berlin, another Berlin-based football club, did not publicly oppose the AfD.

Union does not define itself as a political club in the same way St. Pauli does. It avoids overt political messaging inside the stadium, aiming instead to create a space where supporters from different backgrounds can come together.

“I think we're in a pretty good position in our lack of outward political statements. There is an inherent political statement,” said Jacob Sweetman, the lead for FC Union Berlin's English communications.

“But what the club does very well and never tells anyone about is actually what they do on a ground level.”

Union’s supporter culture is central to its identity. In 2008, more than 2,000 fans volunteered hundreds of thousands of hours to rebuild the club’s stadium themselves, a fact commemorated by a memorial outside the grounds. During the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis, the club provided housing for refugees, later doing the same for those [fleeing](#) Ukraine in 2022. That same collective dedication has propelled Union’s women’s team to record-breaking attendance, the highest in Germany, and made Union Berlin the only club to host both their men’s and women’s teams in the same stadium.

The club’s silence on political and social issues is frequently linked to its origins in former East Germany, a region long marked by narratives that portray the East as particularly susceptible to far-right politics.

With an older, smaller population and weaker economic conditions, former East Germany has become a stronghold for far-right parties. In the February 2025 federal elections, the AfD [doubled](#) its vote share from 10.4% in 2021 to 20.8%, emerging as the country’s second-largest party and the leading force in the East.

Despite the AfD’s strength in the East, Sweetman warned against oversimplifying the narrative. “There are a lot of gray areas,” he said. “A lot of this misses the point that the right wing is also incredibly strong in West Germany as well.” To suggest that racism is only an East German problem is an easy way of deflecting.”

Sweetman acknowledged that AfD supporters are almost certainly present among Union’s fans.

“If you look at the amount of people in Berlin who voted for the AfD, it’s impossible that they’re not here,” he said. “Their voices will not get heard within the club. It won't happen,” Sweetman said.

While the club has often remained politically quiet, it is not entirely silent when it comes to racist

incidents. Sweetman recalled earlier this year, during a training camp in Nuremberg, a fan made racist monkey gestures toward a Black player. The fan was expelled, and the club issued a statement condemning the behavior.

Yet even at Union, questions about immigration linger. Nearly ten years after the influx of Syrian refugees, many clubs have scaled back outreach efforts that once dominated headlines. Bamer recalls how engaged clubs were in 2015. “If I watch the last five years,” he said, “no one of the big clubs is really taking care anymore.”

Ronny Blaschke, a journalist who has spent years documenting racism in football, argues that the most damaging forms of exclusion today are structural rather than spectacular. “It’s easy to scandalize monkey chants,” he said. “But if there is a boardroom with only one Black person, who talks about it?”

Blaschke points to persistent patterns in player recruitment and representation. Creative midfield roles remain disproportionately white, while physically demanding positions are more often filled by Black players. Meanwhile, coaching staffs, executive boards, and sports media remain overwhelmingly homogeneous. “It’s like the old colonial pattern,” he said. “The labor is diverse. The power is not.”

Symbolic gestures, he argues, often obscure this imbalance. Anti-racism banners and themed matchdays create the appearance of progress without redistributing authority or resources. “The symbolic level is very often a distraction,” Blaschke said.

Sweetman agrees. He recounted how in recent years numerous clubs have illuminated their stadiums in rainbow colors to signal opposition to homophobia, a move Union Berlin deliberately chose not to make.

“The reason we didn’t was because we actively say that every single person is welcome within our football stadium, and we will punish those who go against it,” Sweetman said. “People will be locked out, they will have their season tickets taken away for breaching that within the stadium.”

He questioned the sincerity of other clubs’ messaging, pointing to leadership structures across German football that remain overwhelmingly white and male.

“If you look at the board members of any, football club, these same old white men who are suddenly for one day of the year against homophobia yet would never countenance having a person of color or homosexual on the f***** board. That level of hypocrisy is astonishing.”

Rico Noack, chairman of *Gesellschaftsspiele* (“social games”), an organization of football fans that helps promote an inclusive society shares that frustration. “Clubs have their own responsibility,” he said. “And very often we get the feeling they don’t use it.”

Noack acknowledged the pressures clubs face, particularly concerns about alienating supporters or sponsors. He claims that some may avoid explicitly opposing the AfD out of fear of losing parts of their fan base, choosing instead to present themselves as politically neutral - as FC Union Berlin has done.

“Some clubs wouldn’t mention that they are against AfD because they would think that they would lose some supporters. So, they try to be very apolitical,” Noack said.

However, for Noack as a leader of an NGO, he is able to operate under different constraints. Unlike clubs, the organization does not have to worry about sponsorships or ticket sales, giving it greater freedom to address issues clubs often sidestep, including masculinity in stadium culture, police behavior, ticket

affordability, and who gets excluded when football becomes a business first and a community second.

“We can do what we want,” he said. “We’re an NGO. We’re anti-fascist. And we don’t care what they say.”

Whether football can reform itself remains an open question. Blaschke is skeptical. He believes political pressure from leagues, federations, and government bodies will be necessary to force meaningful change. Without it, clubs will continue to default to neutrality, even when neutrality preserves exclusion.

Rayk warns that when exclusion goes unchallenged, football makes space for something darker. When political power or social dominance feels threatened, football offers a sanctioned outlet for aggression.

“We can’t kick them out of the country, it’s too complicated,” he said, describing what he believes was the mindset of the “Proper Germans” he encountered as a child. “But we can fuck them today. We can scream at them. We can win against them.”

For Nabil, the cruelty of grown adults yelling racial slurs at a ten-year-old still lingers, not because it was shocking, but because it was normalized. “I’m ten. You are forty,” he said. “And you behave like that?” Over time, he developed humor as a defense mechanism. When classmates mocked his skin tone, he joked back. “I say your mother goes to the sun studio to get my skin,” he said. “So shut the f*** up.”

However, resilience does not erase the damage. It only helps you survive it.

Racism in German football is often framed as a problem of the past, linked to neo-Nazi hooliganism of the 1990s or infamous incidents such as the 1992 arson attack on a building housing asylum seekers and a residence occupied primarily by Vietnamese people who had worked as foreign contract workers in former East Germany.

In [one match](#), spectators in the stands can be heard shouting *Juden-Schweine*, meaning “Jewish pigs.” At [another game](#), fans chanted *Arbeit macht frei – Babelsberg 03*, which translates to “work makes you free – Babelsberg 03.” Babelsberg 03 is a German football club located on the outskirts of Berlin, and the phrase is infamously associated with [the entrance of Auschwitz](#) and other Nazi concentration camps.

“This right shit was here before,” he said. The faces and tactics may have changed, but the ideology has not disappeared.

What has changed is how it manifests. Open Hitler salutes and swastikas are rarer now, but hostility has become more coded, more institutional, and in some ways more difficult to confront. Monkey noises, banana throwing, and online harassment persist. So does the subtle segregation of power: players of color dominate physically demanding positions on the field, while leadership roles: coaching staffs, boardrooms, and sports journalists remain overwhelmingly white.

As Bamer put it, migration is not an anomaly but a constant. “Immigration will always be part of humanity,” he said. “To accept this and to show that it’s normal should also be one of the big values of the clubs.”

For now, German football remains a site of contradiction. It showcases diversity on the field while limiting it in the stands. It celebrates unity while tolerating silence. It reflects a society still grappling with who belongs, who decides, and who is allowed to feel at home when the crowd begins to chant.

The ball keeps rolling. The stadiums keep filling. However, the question remains not just for football, but for Germany itself, who gets to be part of the “we” when it matters the most?

What Afghanistan Sacrifices by Driving Its Brightest Women Away

By Amna Cestic

By the time Tahmina Ataei arrived at Bard College Berlin, she had already studied under three education systems and learned three languages. But the opportunity that once made her journey possible has disappeared for nearly all Afghan girls, as the door that once led to education and brighter futures is being forcibly shut.

Over the past two decades, a generation of Afghan women proved what was possible when educational doors were open. As Afghan sociologist Abdul Wahid Gulrani explains, the transformation of women's education after 2001 was not simply academic. "Girls who grew up in dusty courtyards and unsafe neighborhoods suddenly entered classrooms, universities, and public life. They became teachers, journalists, and community leaders," he said. For women like Tahmina, it meant the chance to imagine a different future.

Today, Afghanistan stands out tragically as the only country in the world where secondary and higher education are forbidden to girls and women, according to UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. The agency estimates in 2025 that nearly 2.2 million girls are now banned from attending school "beyond the primary level," a reality UNESCO warns almost wiped out two decades of progress for education in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, "women have been banned from universities" since December 2022, cutting off one of the few pathways for higher learning, UNESCO reports. The consequences of these actions are profound. UNESCO estimates the "suspension of women's higher education alone" is expected to cost the country up to US\$9.6 billion in lost potential by 2066.

Notably, following the Taliban's 2021 takeover, schooling for many Afghan girls has not disappeared but has instead been driven into hiding. According to an article NPR published in 2022, some teenage girls started attending secret tutoring centers hidden in basements and private homes, where they study English, the Quran, and high-school level subjects. As Gulrani now observes, "education in Afghanistan is not dead, it has gone underground." "Across the country, girls continue to study secretly in homes, basements, and informal community classes. Some are taking online courses through their phones and laptops. Mothers are teaching daughters at home," Gulrani said. This quiet but resilient movement, he says, shows that "while the Taliban can close schools, they cannot extinguish the will to learn."

In this landscape of shrinking horizons, stories like Tahmina Ataei's stand out as a glimpse of the talent and ambition now at risk. In Kabul, her education reflected the mix of schools that emerged after 2001, when private, international, and public institutions expanded opportunities for girls. She first attended a global private school, then an all-girls Turkish high school where, as she put it, "we had to learn everything twice, once in Persian and once in English." She even enrolled in an American university in Kabul before her education was disrupted by the Taliban takeover.

Ataei's path is not unusual for her generation. She is part of a generation of Afghan women whose lives were shaped by two decades of expanded access to education. Between 2001 and 2021, millions of girls entered classrooms for the first time as private and international schools opened alongside a growing public system. Many of those students later left the country, some as refugees and others on

scholarships; however, their education enabled them to build new futures abroad.

Still, national progress often masked the realities inside individual classrooms. For Atae, the experience looked very different from many of her peers. In Kabul, her classmates were often the daughters of politicians and businessmen, while she was the only Hazara ethnic minority student in her grade. The difference, she said, wasn't only social. "They put a lot of emphasis on religion and like religious practice," she said. "We even had a mosque inside the school. That was uncommon."

Religious expectations felt unfamiliar to her. "I have not grown up to be like that," she said. "My dad is a very, very non-religious person. My mom has had a bit of a background, but she's also chill." Yet pressure to conform was constant. "It's also not peer pressure, but I guess it is, because they'd be like, oh, it's lunch break, we have an hour-long lunch, and I would go eat first, but they're like, no, we have to go pray," she said. "I wouldn't call it brainwash, but I was also traumatized, so I would call it that."

At home, faith mattered less than education. Her father, who worked for a German nonprofit in Afghanistan, encouraged her to focus on learning. Among Hazara families, this emphasis on education was common. "Not only just my family but friends I know and also relatives, they put a lot of emphasis on education," she said. "They always like push their kids to study."

Tahmina's education was interrupted when the Taliban captured Kabul in August 2021. "We had to leave everything behind," she said. "We used to live in a flat, and then everything we owned was gone. I don't have that sort of attachment to materials anymore." With help from her father's German employer, her family left Afghanistan, first to Pakistan and then to Germany. "We were one of the first families they got out," she said.

Arriving in Germany, Tahmina recalled, "it was a bit chaotic when we got here as well, because they thought we were undocumented or, like, illegally entering, which was not the case." They spent their first weeks in quarantine camps, navigating new rules and procedures. "It was scary because you don't know what's going to happen," she said. "One day they'd wake you up to do blood tests or like very procedural things, but like to us, I was like, what are we doing?"

As they settled, Tahmina continued her studies online. Before leaving Afghanistan, she had been enrolled "in an American school," she said. "Then, because of the whole takeover, they were

like, okay, our current students can continue their studies online without any tuition, so that's how I was able to do two semesters while I was in Germany."

When the university reopened a branch in Qatar, she realized she could not continue there because attending would require her to be in Qatar. "I was like, this is not going to happen because I'd have to be there," she said. "My brother was like, oh, there's a branch here, you can apply." At the time, she was learning German and preparing to apply to a local university. "Everyone had the same sort of plan," she said. "You study German, get to university level, and then apply to a German school. That was my idea of how it's going to be." Ultimately, Bard College Berlin offered a different path. "I applied and I checked and I was like, oh, okay, I guess I got accepted," she said, laughing.

Now at Bard, Tahmina is excelling academically, consistently earning good grades. She is also channeling her experience into research on Afghanistan's brain drain, investigating why the country's brightest students and professionals leave and how the loss of educated women affects Afghan society.

“I’m trying to understand how the talent that was built in the country can be sustained, there is not a lot of research on it,” she said.

Tahmina said the past few months have been a period of intense transition. “It has been quite a chaotic month as I’ve been finishing my senior project,” she said. Completing her bachelor’s degree, she added, feels like “one of my biggest academic achievements so far.” She has also stayed involved with Ejaad Berlin, an initiative that financially supports Afghan women through embroidery. “I haven’t held a formal leadership role,” she explained, “but being part of it has helped me strengthen my reporting and communication skills.” Beyond that, she has taken on several jobs over the past few years, including two and a half years as an Orientation Leader and a position as a German tutor. Since July, she has also been working with the examination department at another private university. “All in all, these experiences, big or small, have made me feel proud of how far I’ve come,” she said.

For Tahmina, her education is deeply important. The barriers she faced in Afghanistan, and the millions of girls whose education is now stifled, inform her understanding of what is at stake. Her work highlights both the potential of educated women and the societal cost when that potential is denied. She hopes her future job will do more than study the problem, as she hopes to do work that helps people.

While Tahmina’s departure marked a significant loss for Afghanistan, she is not the only young Afghan woman whose education has been disrupted by the Taliban. Madina Sarabi, another student from Kabul, also had to leave her home country to continue her studies.

Madina grew up in Kabul, attending school in Afghanistan until 10th grade. She said she loved her school, describing it as a place that helped students “grow academically and grow socially” and offered extracurricular activities such as drawing and painting classes. Her family, she explained, “really prioritized education” and invested in courses and programs to help her and her siblings succeed.

Her education, however, was abruptly halted in 2021 when the Taliban regained control. Madina recalled leaving school during a history exam as staff and security guards told all students to evacuate. While boys eventually returned, girls were barred indefinitely. She described this period as one filled with fear, “fear was always there...if I didn’t follow the rules, I could get arrested.” Despite the risks, she continued participating in school programs and cultural events wherever possible.

Madina was determined to continue her education abroad, but obtaining a student visa proved challenging. Because Afghanistan had no functioning embassies, she first had to travel to Iran to process her Italian visa. “It was risky because if the Taliban would know that I was going out of the country,” “they would not allow me,” she said. She eventually secured the visa and traveled alone to Italy to complete the International Baccalaureate at UWC Adriatic, a two-year pre-university program.

In Italy, Madina adapted to a new academic system taught in English, which she described as “one of the hardest educational systems in the world.” She also took part in social initiatives, volunteering at a women’s shelter and participating in arts and crafts programs for women facing domestic violence.

Madina is now a student at Bard College Berlin, studying politics, economics, and social thought in a seminar-based program. She participates in Afghan student initiatives, including the Afghan Development Academy, and engages in student-led projects and discussions. She said Bard has provided “a lot of opportunities and spaces to get educated in every topic” and that it also allows students to start their own initiatives.

Madina's journey highlights what Afghanistan has lost due to the Taliban's restrictions on education. Her intelligence, leadership, and dedication to learning, which could have contributed to her home country, are now being realized abroad. Reflecting on her peers still in Afghanistan, she said, "they are so brave, they are so courageous, and they're so resilient...if I made it out, I was no better than them. They all can do it."

Afghanistan's loss is visible not only in the students forced abroad, but also in the women who went on to build influential careers overseas after being pushed from home, women like Zulaikha Aziz.

Zulaikha Aziz immigrated to the United States as a child, and the path she built for herself was shaped by an unwavering belief in education. She went on to earn a bachelor's degree from McGill University, a Master of Science from the London School of Economics, and a law degree from the University of California, Berkeley School of Law. After completing her studies, she

returned to Afghanistan in 2002 to work on development projects, focusing intensely on expanding opportunities for women in rural areas. "A lot of my focus [is] integrating women into our activities," she recalled, describing the early post-Taliban years when rebuilding the country meant ensuring women could once again participate in public life.

During her work, however, she began to see the limitations of development without law. "None of the work that we were doing would make a lasting impact if there weren't legal structures... guaranteeing people's rights and... a way to enforce those rights," she said. Motivated by that realization, she shifted paths, embracing legal education and human-rights advocacy, eventually working with international organizations on governance and legal-rights projects.

After many years in law and human-rights work, Aziz found herself drawn back to an earlier passion, jewelry. Jewelry had been "the only tangible thing that my family was able to bring out," she said, heirlooms handed down by her grandmother that were now symbols of culture, memory, and identity. Burnout and the weight of conflict pushed her to reconsider her path. "I was so burnt out on my last assignment in Afghanistan that I was like, okay, I'm going to take some time to really explore my creative side," she recalled.

Back in the United States in 2019, she enrolled in the Gemological Institute of America (GIA) in California, a move that would mark the birth of her new vision. By March 2021, she launched Mazahri, naming it after her grandmother. The brand revived traditional Afghan motifs and embedded them within fine jewelry made from 18-karat gold, ethically sourced gemstones, and carefully crafted designs.

From the beginning, ethical sourcing and social responsibility were non-negotiable for Aziz. She insisted that all pieces use only certified materials like fairmined gold, traceable stones where possible, and production by small, fairly treated workshops. She said she was "adamant that the materials I use had to be materials that were not causing more harm to people or the environment."

The reception to Mazahri was strong and immediate. Clients responded not just to the craftsmanship, but to the story behind the jewelry. Her pieces attracted attention and sales. Online customers began to place orders.

Running a jewelry business is never easy, she admits, but for Zulaikha, it is a labor of love. Her legal training helps her navigate the practical side of business, while her cultural heritage shapes the vision

and meaning behind each piece. From the very beginning, she built her company with a purpose beyond profit, supporting Afghan women and girls.

As she explained, “profits from sales go to helping women's rights or girls' rights. So we partnered with Women for Afghan Women our first few years. And then this year, we are

partnering with Malala Fund to support their Afghanistan initiative.” The new collection, she added, was “inspired by Afghan girls and their fighting for their right to equal access of education.”

Through Mazahri, Aziz transformed hardship into a story of creativity, ethics, and success. Her journey shows what happens when education, identity, and determination converge. Afghanistan may have lost her. But the world gained a steward of its heritage, a champion for ethical craftsmanship, and a tangible reminder of the talent that a country lost when so many were forced to leave.

The stories of Tahmina Atae, Madina Sarabi, and Zulaikha Aziz highlight both the talent Afghanistan has lost and the resilience its women continue to show. Forced abroad by the Taliban's restrictions, they have turned education, creativity, and determination into paths for impact. While their country has been deprived of their full potential, their achievements abroad serve as a testament to what Afghan women can accomplish when given the opportunity.

How the AfD Plans to Take On Berlin

By Alex Norbrook

As Martin Kohler strolled down Sonnenallee, the main drag of the Berlin borough of Neukölln, he expressed his dismay to the camera. Along the street, kebab shops sizzled, sending the aroma of roasting meat drifting through the cold winter air. Shoppers in heavy coats browsed clothing outlets advertising headscarves and perused grocery stores that boasted halal meat. Kohler's reaction was blunt: "No integration," he said in English.

Kohler spoke about how immigrant communities like the one in Neukölln were cropping up across the city, bemoaning how they were ruining the city's character. His companion on the street, an up-and-coming conservative YouTuber from England recording Kohler, asked him with concern whether the average German wanted this expansion in a city like Berlin. Without missing a beat, Kohler replied, "No. Absolutely not."

At least, that is what Kohler hoped to convey to the 270,000 viewers of the [video](#) his colleague produced. The reality in Berlin is a little more complicated.

Kohler, a tall man with bright blue eyes and close-cropped brown hair, is a rising voice in Germany's far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party, which is notorious for its hardline policies on immigration and ties to extremist organizations. Despite these associations, or perhaps because of them, support for AfD has surged. It now boasts of being the most [popular](#) party in the country.

But Berlin, which counts as a state in Germany's federal system, is different. The city is celebrated as the most progressive, multicultural, and migrant-friendly place in the country—the kind of place where, when Kohler approached a group of young people on the street in Neukölln, they flipped off the camera and cheered: "fuck AfD!" In Germany's federal elections this past February, when right-wing parties gained ground, Berlin bucked the trend—it [moved](#) left.

When I spoke with Kohler in mid-October, he told me that this challenging environment only makes him more determined. "As a patriot," he said, "if you give up the capital city, you can give up the whole project of getting in power and conquering your country back." With an election in Berlin coming later next year, this will be his party's project. What would it take for them to succeed?

The AfD has been on the rise since 2013, when the party burst onto Germany's political scene with a populist conservative program. Its founders lashed out against Angela Merkel's government for bailing out southern European countries during the Eurozone crisis. Two years later, Merkel began to welcome in Syrians fleeing civil war, uttering the famous phrase "Wir schaffen das" ("we can do this"). AfD rebutted, suggesting Germany couldn't—and shouldn't. The party unveiled its vehement opposition to migrants, especially to those coming from countries in the Middle East.

Since its founding, AfD has evolved with the times, attacking whatever party was in power. When Covid-19 hit Germany, party leaders [adopted](#) an anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine position, allying themselves with the far-right group [PEGIDA](#) (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West). When energy prices began to soar after the Russia-Ukraine war, AfD [blamed](#) the government for refusing to buy Russian gas and

[criticized](#) climate policies. Party members even began to [oppose](#) proposals to save fuel by placing speed limits on the Autobahn.

“They are really strategically clever crisis entrepreneurs,” said Manès Wiesskircher, a political scientist at the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB).

With these strategies, the party has surged in popularity to become one of the largest and most energetic political movements in the country. It shocked the country with its performance in the 2025 federal elections, [winning](#) 20.8 percent of the vote share in February. “We really are up and coming,” said Robert Eschricht, a state representative for Neukölln.

The AfD now [tops](#) opinion polls as the most favored party nationwide, [pulling](#) ahead of the Christian Democrats, Germany’s center-right ruling party.

But what is true for the country has not yet become a reality in Berlin. In the state parliament, a centrist coalition is firmly in power, and a left-wing bloc wields influence. Like at the national level, these parties have all shunned the AfD delegation as part of their “firewall” against the AfD. Berlin’s ruling coalition has [blocked](#) elected AfD representatives from joining sensitive parliamentary committees and routinely votes down their proposals. AfD is even excluded from an annual event where representatives read fairy tales to children, according to state party chair Kristin Brinker.

To Eschricht, other parties in parliament “play into us being a real danger to democracy, you know. Fascists, wolves in sheeps’ clothing, whatever, yada, yada, yada.”

“They think we are the devil,” Brinker said. As the 2026 federal elections approach, AfD’s mission in Berlin is to convince the public otherwise.

On a June evening in 2023, the noted far-right politician Peter Kurth hosted a [party](#) at his apartment and rooftop terrace in Berlin. A former Christian Democrat, Kurth has deep ties with the pan-European neo-fascist, white supremacist [Identitarian Movement](#). Invited to the event were the who’s who of Europe’s radical right. One partygoer’s [presence](#) was more of a surprise: Kristin Brinker.

The optics of Berlin’s head AfD politician appearing at a glitzy right-wing extremist event were less than ideal. When the story broke that Brinker attended the party, the scandal threatened to undermine the self-presentation she had worked hard to establish for herself and her state party.

Brinker joined the AfD in 2013. She possesses a calming demeanor and styles herself as what she calls “not the typical AfD politician,” with a more liberal bent than many in her party. An architect by trade, she is [referred](#) to as a “bridge-builder” between members of the state association.

Brinker became chair of AfD Berlin in 2021, after a fierce internal leadership competition between her and [Beatrix von Storch](#), a duchess and the maternal granddaughter of Adolf Hitler’s finance minister who is notorious for her incendiary Islamophobic remarks. In Berlin, von Storch lost to Brinker by two votes.

Since her victory, Brinker has attempted to moderate AfD’s image in Berlin, interacting with people on the street with smiles and handshakes, and forging closer relationships with mainstream media outlets that the AfD has traditionally [shunned](#). For the past two years, she has invited journalists to a parliamentary

conference in Copenhagen. “It shows the journalists that we are thinking in a normal way, [that] we are normal people,” she said.

According to Agnes Sundermeyer, a journalist who covers Berlin state politics, Brinker has made the state party stick to a coordinated messaging strategy to emphasize its moderation. For example, statements from national leaders on “[remigration](#),” or deporting migrants, are less commonly heard at the state level. “Under the leadership of Kristin Brinker, [the party] avoided appearing with radical or neo-right-wing positions,” Sundermeyer said.

To some commentators, though, Brinker’s personal image distracts from the more radical figures in the state party, including Russia [sympathizers](#) and Identitarian movement [allies](#). “You have this Brinker in the front for the serious masquerade, but in her back you have really tough guys,” said Robert Kiesel, a local political columnist. Her leadership draws attention away from these colleagues, he added.

If anything, Sundermeyer suggests that Brinker has tolerated or even fostered these right-wing elements in her state party, sending a message about what positions the state party is willing to accept. “She’s not saying, ‘this is *not* what I stand for,’” Kiesel said.

Standing in a plaza in the eastern district of Lichtenburg, Gottfried Curio, an AfD member of Germany’s federal parliament, riled up a crowd of supporters waving German flags and cheering. *Do you know how many Syrians there are in Germany?* he [asked](#) his 200-person audience. *One million! Even if 0.1 percent are criminals, that’s a thousand people—a thousand assassins. Do we want them in our country?*

The immediate target of Curio’s ire was a block of hotels in the neighborhood, which the Berlin state government was planning to rent out to shelter 1,200 migrants as part of its strategy for finding housing for the tens of thousands of immigrants who have settled in the city since 2015.

According to Kiesel, this strategy, which has included a slew of building conversions and shelter constructions, is inadequate to the scale of the housing crunch caused by the influx of migrants, creating an opportunity for attacks from the right.

Berlin’s AfD has used these shelters as political ammunition for its broader anti-migration mission, linking Berlin’s welcoming policy toward immigrants with its housing woes. “If you cannot see the consequence of illegal immigration for the housing market, you are an idiot,” said Ronald Gläser, a federal AfD representative for Berlin. “This is not racism.”

With the AfD, though, concerns about housing support for migrants soon blur into fears about how well foreign migrants “integrate” into German society. On Kohler’s tour through Berlin with the English influencer, he stopped by another building that was soon to be converted into new accommodations: 950 for asylum seekers, and 550 for students. He mentioned a question he had asked the district’s mayor: “Would you put your daughter, when she goes to university, into a house with 950 Afghans, Syrians?”

In cities like Berlin, the effectiveness of this strategy has been mixed, according to Katja Salomo, a research associate on far-right extremism at the Social Science Centre Berlin (WZB). Oftentimes, the people persuaded by anti-immigrant rhetoric are those who live in neighborhoods with low immigrant populations and who mostly hear about immigration through media platforms.

But when urban residents live among immigrant communities, they are more likely to interact with them, which studies show reduces stereotyping and fear. “Foreigners become neighbors,” Salomo said. In these cases, her research has found that support for AfD tends to weaken.

In Berlin’s economically disadvantaged boroughs in its east, though, Salomo claimed that the decline in AfD support is less pronounced, because their lower-income residents are drawn to the AfD’s populist economic messaging. “They are very, very dissatisfied with the economic outlook and the economic situation and are therefore more susceptible” to the AfD, Salomo said.

AfD support in Berlin is currently highest in these boroughs. Salomo’s research shows that if people support the AfD for economic concerns, then the party’s messaging on migration may be less effective than it believes.

That hasn’t changed the AfD’s strategy, though. The state party has bet on its housing and migration messaging to gain ground in these districts for the upcoming election, according to Kohler. “You have no more room for housing, so you have to get rid of the high demand,” he said. “We need remigration.”

Kohler’s online presence extends beyond tours with right-wing influencers. Last year, he acted in a [sketch video](#) as a young man bringing his girlfriend to a family Christmas dinner.

His parents, played by two twenty-somethings dressing older than their age, are AfD’s idea of ‘woke.’ They serve salad and teriyaki tofu, reminisce about throwing stones at protests, and shelter a “migrant” man dressed in all black and wearing sunglasses. So when Kohler says he needs to come clean about his identity, they are welcoming, gently asking him if he was gay or trans. “I am not gay,” Kohler says to them with feigned nervousness. “I am... conservative.”

As Kohler later put it, the left-wing parents “crash out.” They begin to shout at Kohler. The music in the background turns frantic; the camera shakes. Woke parents can tolerate everything except their conservative child: the punchline is crude, but it gets the point across.

Like most major political movements in Germany, AfD is dominated by older members. But by trying to engage younger audiences with efforts like this sketch, Kohler is part of a growing faction in the AfD trying to change that dynamic. “When you want to become a major party in the future, you need the youth, because the youth is the future,” he said.

Young people are becoming a more important part of AfD’s base, reflecting Gen Z’s changing political priorities in Germany. In this year’s federal election, AfD [won first place](#) among 18- to 24-year-olds, doubling its support from the previous election. Youth support for AfD in eastern Germany during the 2024 elections reached up to 38 percent. AfD’s *de facto* youth organization, Young Alternative (JA), has helped to grow this support through social media and targeted youth outreach, according to political researcher Timon Scheuer.

Kohler served as chair of JA’s Berlin chapter. Hosting social meetings for conservative youth, his goal was to cultivate a community of young conservatives, especially for university students who felt uncomfortable sharing their opinions in class. “People can come and also recognize that they are not alone,” he said.

Nationwide, Young Alternative grew to become more radical than the rest of the AfD, associating with extremist groups like the Identitarian movement. As a result, the Federal Office for the Protection of the

Constitution (BfV) [classified](#) the organization as a right-wing extremist group in 2023, opening the door for criminal investigations or even a ban of the organization. In February, the organization [dissolved](#) in response.

But the dissolution was never intended to be permanent. On November 29, 800 youth leaders [converged](#) in Giessen, a small city in central Germany. There, they founded a new youth wing more firmly connected with the party, making it harder to ban in the future. Kohler came up with the wing's new name: [Generation Deutschland](#). Headed by Jean-Pascal Hohm, a 28-year-old friend of Kohler's who [withdrew twice](#) from AfD posts because of his extremism, the organization now boasts 3,000 members.

Last Saturday, Kohler and other youth leaders sipped malted wine and discussed plans to found Generation Deutschland's chapter in Berlin. They settled on hosting their first meeting in late January, and began to plan how they can drive youth turnout in the next state elections.

Kohler said that the organization has already attracted a more mainstream crowd. "There's a new spirit," he added.

Berlin will hold state-level elections again in September 2026, and the AfD is expected to gain ground. Polls projected the party to [surge](#) from nine to 15 percent of the electorate, pulling ahead of the Green party. Kohler noted that the margin for error meant that a 23 percent AfD vote is possible. In the city's eastern districts, local party officials expect the AfD to win a quarter of the votes. This is around average for the country as a whole, but would be a major upset in Berlin.

In the lead-up to the elections, Berlin's AfD will try new tactics, borrowing a strategy from a left-wing party to canvas directly at peoples' doors, according to Eschricht, the Neukölln representative. And they will continue to challenge Berlin's migration and housing policies.

Kohler believes it will take a while for the AfD to become a ruling party in Berlin. But he does not plan to quit anytime soon. Quoting Max Weber, Kohler told me that "politics is the drilling of hard wood."

"You need to be concentrated and you need strength," he said. "But then in the long run, you can win."

Did the German moderates' 'welcoming culture' for Syrian refugees fall alongside the Syrian President?

By Siyeon Lee

The clock read 4:18 a.m. when Tareq Alaows and his friends felt their world tilt.

The gleam of three laptops illuminated Alaows' Berlin living room, spitting a flurry of words from German news channels. Overlapping audio streams made individual speakers incomprehensible to the inattentive ear. But that December night, Alaows and his three friends were paying close attention. Not a single person wanted to miss the moment that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's reign of terror would crumble to the ground.

"I saw it, and at first, I didn't believe it. I was too tired to do anything, so I slept for an hour right away," Alaows said. "[Afterwards,] I immediately ... started making social media statements. I knew right away [that] as a political voice here in Germany and ... an opponent of the Assad regime, there would be a lot of media inquiries coming my way."

Alaows, a Syrian refugee who arrived in Germany in 2015 after [fleeing](#) conscription in Syria, is a distinctive character. He was the first Syrian refugee to run for German Parliament, representing the left-leaning environmentalist Green Party in 2021. After withdrawing his candidacy due to racist threats, his work has focused on advising asylum seekers and supporting refugees for [ProAsyl](#), Germany's largest pro-immigration advocacy organization.

Alaows was euphoric at Assad's fall, but his joy fizzled quickly. A few hours after the announcement, Jens Spahn, a German politician and Bundestag (parliament) member of the major center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party, suggested that the German government hand Syrian nationals in Germany 1,000 euros to repatriate them to their Assad-free homeland.

"I thought, hey, an entire population is trying to understand what happened in the country, and the only thing Jens Spahn is interested in is that people can go straight back," Alaows said.

A decade ago, hardline resistance to Germany's progressive immigration and asylum reform lingered in the fringes of far-right politics. Today, it has moved decisively into the mainstream.

The AfD (Alternative für Deutschland), Germany's populist far-right party that openly [embraces](#) mass deportation policies and anti-Islam [views](#), is the second most powerful party in the Bundestag. The party is [regarded](#) positively by nearly 20% of the German population, up from 13% in 2016, and it became the first far-right party since 1945 — when the Nazis were in power — to win a German state election.

This broader cultural shift has reshaped not only the AfD but also Germany's moderates. The CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union) — the center-right political bloc that has long dominated the Bundestag — is being pulled rightward by the metastasizing anti-immigrant climate. In January's Bundestag elections, nearly 37% of German voters considered 'migration' to be [one](#) of the two most important 'political problems' that lawmakers need to address. Just ten years ago, Germany's CDU-led government allowed large numbers of asylum seekers into the country, buoyed by supportive

public sentiment. Now, they've taken a sharp right turn, its highest-ranking members espousing support for tighter limits on migration.

After a visit to Damascus, Syria, earlier this month, Germany's Foreign Minister and CDU member Johann Wadepuhl [said](#) in a statement to German news network Deutsche Welle that "hardly anyone can live here [in Syria] with dignity." He remarked that "Syria looked worse than postwar Germany" in parliament, irking other party colleagues. Germany's Chancellor Friedrich Merz, also a member of the CDU whose pointed remarks appeared to address Wadepuhl indirectly, said that "there is no longer any reason for [Syrian] asylum in Germany, and therefore, [Germany] can begin repatriations."

For now, voluntary repatriation and deportations of Syrians with criminal records remain at the forefront of the CDU's discussions on repatriation. But only 0.1% of Germany's Syrians have voluntarily returned to their homeland a year after Assad's fall, and the pressure of Germany's [climbing](#) anti-immigrant cultural sentiment remains, even as the number of asylum applications is falling.

Those who have already naturalized know that they are lucky. But to the [hundreds of thousands](#) of Syrians under more precarious circumstances — such as those with temporary residence permits or a subsidiary protection status — even small political shifts can feel potentially life-altering.

Since Assad's fall nearly one year ago, an anxious atmosphere has befallen many yet-to-be naturalized Syrians or Syrians under more temporary immigration statuses. In 2024, nearly [300,000 people](#) were granted naturalized German citizenship, a record for the nation. Many of them — over 80,000 — were Syrians.

In 2015, the general [path](#) to German naturalization for Syrian refugees required eight years of legal residence, an intermediate level of fluency in German, and the completion and passing of an integration course. A large number of Syrian refugees who arrived during former German Chancellor Angela Merkel's border openings in 2015-2016 became eligible for naturalization in 2024, approximately eight to nine years after their arrival.

"[Syrians] have high intentions to integrate and stay," said Jonas Wiedner, a German sociologist who studies social stratification and integration issues faced by immigrants. Since the fall of Assad, Wiedner explained that the share of returning Syrians increased slightly, but also that an "overwhelming majority" wanted to remain in Germany for the foreseeable future. "Germany has invested billions of euros in integrating, training, and schooling people from Syria," he added.

German politicians remain divided on the topic of repatriation. And Syrians, many of whom have lived in Germany for years but have yet to receive their citizenship, remain in judicial limbo. Many are [fearful](#) that anti-immigrant cultural shifts will translate to policy ones. In some ways, those shifts have already been realized elsewhere: Austria, for example, [suspended](#) family reunification for refugees that disproportionately impacted Syrians and [deported](#) a Syrian criminal for the first time in 15 years.

Wiedner noted that while there is some credence to the claim that Germany's rightward, anti-immigrant sentiment is a part of a broader shift observable in many Western countries today, Germany stands in a particularly unique historical position. He believes that the country's open-border policy and relationship to a large number of Syrian refugees specifically have played significantly "into the hands of the far right."

“The ... welcoming culture is no longer the dominant force in German political opinion,” he said. “There’s a large majority of people who want to see migration limited, and also want to see foreigners, particularly refugees, reduced in Germany.”

Kristin Brinker, Chair of the Berlin division of the AfD and member of the Berlin House of Representatives, agrees that “welcoming culture” no longer exists. But she doesn’t see this as a problem.

“If the war in a country has stopped, then the migrants have to go back,” she said. Tidily dressed and groomed, she gave a concerned frown at the end of each sentence, occasionally slipping German conjunctions in place of English ones.

Brinker — who self-identifies with a more moderate wing of the AfD — does not sound like her impassioned colleagues, some of whom emblazon ‘Make Europe Great Again’ slogans and orate passionately in social media-viral speeches. The AfD party’s leader, Alice Wiedel, notably aroused controversy after [declaring](#) that “burqas, headscarf girls, publicly-supported knife men, and other good-for-nothings will not secure our prosperity, economic growth, and the social state.” Brinker’s demeanor is tranquil in comparison.

“There are a lot of Syrians here. They live in our social system. They are young men, and they can work, go home, and rebuild their country,” Brinker said. “And that’s an important message for us.”

I’ve been sitting in an empty Zoom conference for 15 minutes when a pixelated apparition of Stephan Mayer’s round, doughy face emerges from the void. The flickering lights of German apartment buildings flash by in his car window. He mutters a sentence in German — I respond that I can only understand English. “Make it quick,” he says. “I only have a few minutes.”

Mayer, who has been a member of the German Bundestag since 2002, stepped down from his role as Secretary-General of Germany’s CSU party in early 2022 after making death threats to a [journalist](#) for reporting on his illegitimate child. Under Chancellor Angela Merkel, he served as the Parliamentary State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of the Interior from 2018 to 2021. Now, he is a ‘Spokesperson for Sports’ of the CDU/CSU party. As part of his former Parliamentary State Secretary position, Mayer said that determining the CDU/CSU’s stance on migration policy was one of the key aspects of his job.

“I followed the discussions about migration, and especially illegal migration, very intensively within the last decade,” he said. “I am deeply opposing the theory that there [has been] a shift in [Germany’s] Willkommenskultur [welcoming culture].”

Critical to the argument for Syrian repatriation — a policy Mayer remains a strong proponent of — is the notion that a post-Assad Syria is safe for return. “Fortunately, we now have quite [a] stable government in Syria,” Mayer said. “I just had a briefing with the Federal [Foreign Office], and they are very confident that the al-Sharaa [Syria’s new leader] government is stabilizing.” The meeting presumably included Johann Wadepuhl, Germany’s Foreign Minister, who opposed Syrian repatriation after making contentious comments about Syria’s safety after the fall of Assad.

But if Syria is truly safe for return, as Mayer and some of his CDU colleagues propose, what is holding Syrians back?

“The infrastructure [of Syria] just cannot take people in,” said Hesham Moamadani, a Syrian-German man who escaped the war in 2016 and received his German passport just days before the fall of Assad. He noted

that the rent in Damascus is almost as expensive as in Berlin, but that the annual income is significantly less.

Mada al-Zoabi, a Syrian-German student at Bard College Berlin, added that German politicians' haste in pushing Syrian repatriation rendered the Syrian community's joy – which defined the celebratory atmosphere around Assad's fall – as insignificant. "Syria has been liberated from the dictatorship, [and] within a matter of days, a certain narrative was being pushed, well, you have to go back," she said. "And so I think it's quite disrespectful ... it's like, can you let us enjoy the moment?"

There is precedent for successful migrant repatriations in Germany, well before the topic of Syrian repatriation ever entered the national debate. In the early 1990s, the [Yugoslav Wars](#) – a series of ethnic conflicts and insurgencies in the Balkan region that lasted over 10 years – sparked a major refugee and humanitarian crisis in Europe. Generous [estimates](#) put the number of refugees at nearly 1 million. Germany received a large number of refugees – around [700,000](#). Most, according to Wiedner, were repatriated after three to four years in Germany.

"Large repatriations can work," he said. "But of course, now the Syrians have been here for more than 10 years. That's a different story."

Only now are Germany's billions of euros in migrant integration investments – integration training, schooling, and education – bearing economic returns. "More and more people are in the labor market [and are] contributing to the social security system. To send people back now, after all of these investments, really seems unwise," Wiedner added.

Christiane Fröhlich, a Lead Research Fellow at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies, echoed Wiedner's concerns from a worker retention perspective. "If all of them return now, then the [medical] sector will collapse," she said.

Fröhlich noted that anti-migration policies now coming to the forefront of German politics are somewhat paradoxical to the needs the nation faces today. "Germany is dying out," she said. "We've had far too few births per family for decades now, so we desperately need immigration. You can see [the] CDU, CSU or FDP statements saying, [for example], we need more skilled migration from India."

But Bente Scheller, a political scientist who once worked for Damascus' German embassy, noted that though many Syrians are supporting specialized industries, policy changes – from fast-track citizenship [limitations](#) to repatriation policies – are most threatening for Syrians who occupy more "auxiliary, lower-income" positions. "If they lose their jobs, their chances of being deported are much higher," she said.

"It's a very vulnerable group that wants to be here. But [political] conditions are getting more limited every day."

There's an implied agency in the word "repatriation." Unlike "deportation," which often involves an involuntary removal and a cited violation of immigration law, "repatriation" does not indicate any kind of legal violation and, in some cases, presupposes a [voluntary return](#) – a free and informed decision for refugees to return to their home countries, in the absence of any legal coercion or pressure. But not all repatriations are voluntary, and not all involuntary repatriations involve a legal violation.

A repatriation, then, can become a practical equivalent to a deportation [without](#) legal basis.

Like the word repatriation, shifts in Germany's migration sentiment have been presented in feigned platitudes. Some, like Brinker, cite Germany's investment in Syria's reconstruction: their homeland calls for the return of their young and talented, and it's only right that Germany provides support. Others like Mayer cite a dubiously defined 'safety': of course Germany is a welcoming place for immigrants. But if 'home' is a great place to be in, why should they have to be here at all?

To some, these platitudes in German migration politics seem to hide something more sinister: a fundamental misunderstanding of life as a Syrian migrant in Germany. At the very least, that's how Tareq Alaows saw it in 2021, when he realized he could be the missing voice of Syrian authenticity in the German government.

That's what drove Alaows to run for the Bundestag in 2021. "I realized, even as a refugee who came to Germany in 2015, my perspective ... was missing in political debates about refugees," he said.

Alaows expected backlash. As the [first](#) Syrian refugee to ever attempt candidacy for the Bundestag and also as a member of the left-leaning Green Party, he knew that anti-refugee and racist social media posts were something he'd have to endure.

The hostility ranged in severity. Some said that as a Syrian, he could seek protection, but shouldn't run for a political position. Others sent death threats. "People [said] that they would look for me and, if they found me, would take me back to Syria to Assad so he could kill me."

But what he didn't expect was a physical altercation that would leave him fearing for his safety. One night on a Berlin subway ride, Alaows was accosted by a man who screamed at his face for nearly a minute straight. His family members also began [receiving](#) death threats, initially limited to his own inboxes. That was when he decided to retract his candidacy.

Alaows thinks that this anti-immigrant rhetoric, while pronounced after the fall of Assad, was a phenomenon already in the making through years of Germany's division on migration issues. "The debate about refugees shifted from being about 'asylum seekers' to so-called 'illegal migrants' in recent years. And this didn't just refer to refugees from Syria, but to all refugees coming to Germany," he said.

It's unmistakable, Alaows thinks, that Germany's moderates played a role. "I noticed that certain statements by AfD politicians in 2015, like 'we shoot people at the border'... [were limited] within far-right circles," he said. "Over time, it gradually became more socially acceptable and was even adopted by democratic parties."

(since Alaows's run – 3 Syrians have been elected – two as mayors of Germany cities – and the third as a member of a state parliament)

When I asked Herbert Brücker — the director of the Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration Research at Humboldt University — about the effectiveness of repatriation, he offered a blunt alternative: give migrants a legal status that allows them to return.

“People who have a chance to come back to the destination countries have a much higher probability to move away,” he said. That logic is rarely addressed in Germany’s current debate, where repatriation is presented as voluntary while legal protections for Syrians remain uncertain.

“[They’re] not consistent,” Scheller said in reference to Syrian-German relations and Germany’s repatriation efforts. “On one hand, they’re portraying [Syria’s] transitional government as a risk. [Just] not for Syrians they want to repatriate.”

For those like Stephan Mayer, though, the question is settled. “Now the Civil War, fortunately, is ended, and [asylum was given for a] certain time, for the time of the Civil War. And now [it] has ended,” he said. “It’s a natural development.”