

Racism in Germany's Political Environment

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines differences in the public perception of Middle Eastern and Ukrainian refugees in Germany. Furthermore, this essay analyzes how these refugee groups contribute to domestic support for the conservative AfD party in Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig. By utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the study combines quantitative data on refugee inflows and federal election results with a qualitative analysis of media reporting and statements by politicians. This framework emphasizes the role of local context, historical migration experience, and domestic responses in shaping changing political policies on migration. The findings suggest that the above-mentioned refugee groups contributed to increased support for the controversial and conservative AfD party, although they were not the sole drivers of the improved electoral results. In Frankfurt, a diverse city with established integration structures, political shifts were mitigated despite large inflows of refugees in 2015 and 2016. Nonetheless, the AfD gained traction. In Leipzig, however, rapid demographic change coincided more strongly with gains for the AfD and greater polarization. Notably, residents' reactions varied depending on the refugees' origin. While Middle Eastern refugees were confronted with hostile reactions, especially those arriving in later waves, Ukrainians were welcomed with greater understanding and hospitality. Therefore, the comparison further highlights the importance of perceived origin and legal status.

Keywords: *Refugees, migration, public perception, far-right parties, AfD, Frankfurt am Main, Leipzig, Germany, electoral behavior*

RESEARCH QUESTION

How does the presence of refugees from different countries influence public attitudes and support for the conservative AfD party in Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig?

INTRODUCTION

Refugees in Germany

Over the last 40 years, Germany has become one of the most important destinations for refugees in Europe. Since the early 1980s, approximately 2.8 million refugees have requested protection status in Germany (Federal Statistical Office, 2022). While refugee arrivals have fluctuated over time, two periods stand out because of both their large scale and their political consequences: the refugee crisis of 2015/2016 and the ongoing displacement of Ukrainians caused by the war (Eurostat, 2026).

During the years 2015/2016, Germany saw a sudden spike in asylum applications (refugee protection), the majority of which came from Middle Eastern countries, namely Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq (Engler, 2016). The number of such applications rose sharply compared with previous years. This led to considerable strain on administrative capacity and local infrastructure (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2026).

Initially, Germany's response to the crisis was characterized by a bold commitment to accepting refugees, symbolized by then-Chancellor Angela Merkel's slogan "Wir schaffen das" (We can do it). However, it is now considered one of the most controversial topics in German politics (Herbert & Schönhagen, 2022). A second major refugee wave reached Germany after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The war caused millions of Ukrainians to flee the country for Western Europe and elsewhere in the hope of finding refuge. Compared with refugees in 2015/2016, Ukrainians were granted immediate temporary protection under EU law. This allowed them faster access to housing, social benefits, and the labor market in EU countries. Therefore, this new migration wave unfolded under greatly different legal, societal, and political conditions (Rinaldi, 2022).

For this research, refugees are defined as individuals forced to leave their country of origin due to armed conflict, violence, or persecution (UNHCR, n.d.).

Public Perception and Societal Reactions

The large-scale arrival of refugees over recent decades has significantly affected public perceptions of refugee movements into Germany and the EU. Following the 2015/2016 refugee crisis, growing parts of the German population expressed uneasiness. Their opinions were shaped by the perceived social and economic consequences of refugee arrivals. Fears of economic insecurity or social decline, as well as broader political change, contributed to the emergence of pessimistic attitudes toward refugees, with an emphasis on those from non-Western countries. Empirical studies and interviews suggest that an increasing number of Germans felt politically marginalized by many parties and believed that refugees received preferential treatment compared with citizens (Zschocke & Mullis, 2024).

Another frequently expressed issue in debates about social division relates to the integration of refugees. Critics argued that insufficient integration policies led to poor outcomes in linguistic, cultural, and economic integration. Attitudes were not distributed evenly across Germany, however, but varied

considerably by region. This suggests that regional context plays an important role in shaping attitudes toward refugees. Nevertheless, these differences contributed to perceptions of social division across Germany as a whole (Zschocke & Mullis, 2024).

Migration and Geopolitical Change: The Ukraine–Russia War

The Russian invasion of Ukraine initiated a fundamental turning point in German politics after the Cold War. In response to Russia's invasion and the possibility of further aggression, then-Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced a *Zeitenwende* (watershed moment). This caused a fundamental shift in Germany's defense and security policy that continues to the present day. The new political direction included increased military spending and stronger commitments to NATO. This was perceived as a turning point in Germany's traditionally cautious approach to military spending and engagement (Mello, 2024). Furthermore, the conflict also altered the political framing of European refugees, as Ukrainians were widely perceived by other European nations through a lens of solidarity and geopolitical responsibility rather than as a security threat (Rinaldi, 2022).

Political Consequences and Governmental Change

Migration-related fears have had grave political consequences. Following the refugee crisis in 2015/2016, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a political party formed in 2013, greatly improved its results in recent federal and state elections. Initially formed as a Eurosceptic party, the AfD underwent a transformation and repositioned itself as a strongly anti-immigration and patriotic party. The conservative party used public concerns about migration, integration, and cultural identity to gain traction. This shift enabled the party to move from the political margins to become a significant opposition force in the German Bundestag, the federal parliament (Dinnebier, 2024).

Unrest resulting from migration and other related problems increased political polarization. In Germany, the number of politically motivated crimes broke previous records. Many of these crimes were committed by conservative actors out of frustration cultivated by immigration and social change (Escritt, 2025). At the same time, well-established parties such as the CDU/CSU, SPD, Greens/Bündnis 90, and FDP faced increasing challenges in fulfilling their humanitarian obligations while addressing domestic problems related to housing shortages, education systems, and labor market integration (Schneider & Engler, 2021).

Changes in Voting Outcomes

This research analyzes changes in electoral outcomes and public perceptions in relation to refugee inflows through a comparative analysis of two major urban areas in Germany: Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig. Both cities operate under the same national migration framework, yet they differ substantially in their demographic composition, economic structure, and historical experience with migration.

Frankfurt am Main is in the state of Hessen in central-western Germany. It is one of the country's most important financial and transportation hubs. With a population of approximately 770,000 to 780,000 residents, one-third of whom are foreign nationals, Frankfurt has one of the highest proportions of foreign residents in Germany (Gerhold, 2025). Leipzig, by contrast, is in Eastern Germany in the state of Saxony and has a population of 620,000 to 630,000 inhabitants. Leipzig has emerged as an important industrial

location over recent decades, especially in automotive manufacturing and logistics. Major employers include Volkswagen, BMW, and Porsche. As part of the former German Democratic Republic, Leipzig experienced decades of relative ethnic homogeneity and has only more recently become a destination for migrants and refugees. Therefore, foreign nationals make up only ten percent of Leipzig's population (City of Leipzig, 2018).

These structural and historical differences provide a valuable basis for analyzing how varying local demographic contexts and histories of migration shape electoral responses to refugee inflows over time.

Research Significance and Research Question

This study is significant because it connects three questions often discussed separately: the scale of refugee arrivals, public perceptions of different refugee groups, and changes in support for the AfD. Existing research comparing Frankfurt and Leipzig has examined economic decline, cultural backlash, and authoritarian populism (Zschocke & Mullis, 2024), while broader research has often focused on national migration policy and integration debates (Schneider & Engler, 2021). This essay builds on those findings by comparing how two refugee movements, predominantly Middle Eastern refugees in 2015/2016 and Ukrainians after 2022, were perceived in the same two cities and how those perceptions coincided with local election trends. The comparison is useful because Frankfurt and Leipzig differ in their migration histories, demographic composition, and regional political contexts while operating under the same federal migration and electoral systems. The essay therefore synthesizes demographic data, election results, media reporting, and political statements across two periods. Its original contribution is a structured local comparison of how refugees' perceived origin and legal status, together with local context and political dissatisfaction, may shape different public and electoral responses. It does not claim direct causation, but identifies patterns that can guide further research.

This study therefore asks: How does the presence of refugees from different countries influence public attitudes and support for the AfD in Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig?

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods research design that combines quantitative and qualitative data to analyze the relationship between refugee inflows, public perception, and electoral outcomes. The methodological approach allows for a comparative analysis that captures both measurable changes and discursive political and societal responses to migration and refugees.

Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data were used to analyze long-term trends in refugee presence and electoral outcomes. Data on the number and origin of refugees were collected primarily from **official governmental and municipal sources**, such as federal agencies and city-level statistical offices. These sources provided census data, refugee accommodation figures, and administrative records covering multiple time periods.

Electoral data were obtained from official government election websites. These include constituency-level results for federal elections over the past three decades. Where necessary, these data were supplemented by reputable news outlets that visualize election outcomes. Using official sources ensures a high level of reliability and comparability across cities and time periods. The analysis focused on vote shares of major political parties, with particular attention to shifts following major refugee inflows.

Qualitative Data Collection

To place quantitative trends in context and capture political and societal discourse, the study draws on qualitative data in the form of public statements and interviews with political officials, as well as media representations of public perception. Political statements were collected from YouTube using targeted search terms such as “Statements of political officials during and after the refugee crisis in 2015/16” and “Statements of political officials during the Ukraine war.” These searches yielded interviews, speeches, and panel discussions featuring federal-level politicians and officials addressing refugee policy, integration, and security concerns.

Public perceptions were assessed through news reports and televised or online interviews, also accessed via YouTube or digital news platforms. Local and national media sources were used to capture how refugee arrivals were discussed in public discourse, including expressions of support, concern, or opposition. Additionally, electoral outcomes were interpreted as an indirect indicator of public attitudes toward migration, particularly through the performance of parties with distinct positions on refugee policy.

Limitations

The study relies primarily on **secondary data**. Furthermore, public perception is inferred from media coverage and electoral outcomes rather than direct surveys or interviews with residents, which may not fully capture individual attitudes.

RESULTS

Amount and origin of refugees in Frankfurt in 2010

Germany experienced a significant spike in the number of asylum seekers, with 41,332 first-time applications filed nationwide. The country witnessed an increase of almost 50% compared with the previous year, mainly because of applicants from Afghanistan (5,905), Iraq (5,555), Serbia (4,978), and Iran (2,475), among others (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2011). While city-level refugee statistics for Frankfurt am Main in 2010 are not systematically published at the municipal level in the “Migration und Alter” report, the broader federal trend provides a basis for local interpretation. The national increase in asylum seekers can be used because, under the distribution system used by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, states such as Hessen (where Frankfurt is located) received a proportional share of these arrivals based on population and administrative capacity (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2022). In Frankfurt itself, the “Migration und Alter” analysis reveals the city’s role as an already established destination for different international populations and migrants of diverse

origins, indicating that refugees formed part of an already complex migrant milieu by 2010. Although the report focuses on long-term demographic patterns rather than specific asylum counts, its emphasis on Frankfurt's heterogeneous migrant population stresses that refugee inflows were already one component of the city's evolving diversity prior to the larger migration waves later in the decade (Barg et al., 2013).

Amount and origin of refugees in Frankfurt between 2011-2016

Over the five-year span from 2011 to 2016, Frankfurt am Main experienced a continuous increase in the number of refugees placed within the municipality. In 2011, the number of refugees was roughly 210, a relatively low figure compared with future years. This demonstrates the moderate intake of refugees before the escalation of Middle Eastern conflicts (City of Frankfurt am Main, 2024). This number rose in the following years, with 280 refugees in 2012, 430 in 2013, and 800 in 2014. The number peaked at 3,140 in 2015. Most refugees arriving in that period originated from Afghanistan, Iraq, or Syria. This movement across borders was consistent with ongoing conflicts in those regions. All these arrivals placed considerable pressure on local accommodation and integration resources. Even in 2016, arrivals decreased only slightly, to 2,256 new refugees in Frankfurt. Over this five-year period, it becomes evident that a shift from modest refugee intakes to large, crisis-driven arrivals occurred. Moreover, this progression highlights Frankfurt's growing role as a central destination for conflict-affected individuals (City of Frankfurt am Main, 2024).

Current amount and origin of refugees in Frankfurt

As of mid-2024, Frankfurt am Main still hosts a considerable refugee population. Approximately 5,600 refugees were staying within city-managed emergency and transitional housing accommodations. These figures refer exclusively to refugees sheltered by municipal authorities and therefore exclude individuals who have already moved into private housing within the city (City of Frankfurt am Main, 2024).

The composition of Frankfurt's refugee population reflects multiple contemporary displacement crises. Refugees from Afghanistan form the largest group in the system, accounting for roughly 30% of all refugees housed by the city. Refugees from Ukraine represent the second-largest group, comprising approximately 25%. Additional significant countries of origin include Eritrea, Syria, Ethiopia, and Turkey, each contributing smaller shares to the overall refugee population. Taken together, refugees from Middle Eastern and African countries form the majority of Frankfurt's refugee residents. Municipal data further indicate that Frankfurt continues to receive new refugee arrivals through state allocation mechanisms, suggesting that refugee numbers remain dynamic rather than static over time ("Situation in Frankfurt," 2026).

Amount and origin of refugees in Leipzig in 2010

At the end of 2010, Leipzig's migrant population was still relatively small compared to many western German cities, but it was growing steadily. About 8.4 % of the city's total population had a migration

background, a category that encompasses naturalized foreigners, non-German citizens, and refugee-related migrants who sought protection in Germany. Local data indicate that Leipzig's migrant population included individuals from over 160 countries, with the largest shares from the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and Vietnam, as well as smaller numbers from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Turkey. For instance, persons from the Russian Federation accounted for more than 5,000 residents with a migration background, followed by Ukrainians (approximately 3,000) and Vietnamese (around 2,800). Refugee-related migrants from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Turkey were smaller in number but were a visible component of Leipzig's evolving foreign population (Schmidt, 2009).

Amount and origin of refugees in Leipzig between 2011-2016

Between 2011 and 2016, Leipzig experienced a noticeable increase in the number of refugees arriving in the city, closely following broader national asylum trends. According to city administrative data, in 2011 only 285 asylum seekers were assigned to Leipzig, a relatively low number that reflected pre-crisis conditions in Europe and Germany. By 2012 and 2013, annual assignments remained modest but began to rise as conflict-driven displacement from the Middle East and North Africa intensified. By 2014, the city received 1,243 asylum seekers, more than four times the 2011 level. The escalation of the European refugee crisis in 2015 dramatically increased refugee assignments. Leipzig took in 4,230 asylum seekers, with municipal facilities and community accommodations strained by the sudden spike. Administrative reports from this period note that these refugees originated from at least 25 countries, with the largest groups coming from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, followed by smaller numbers from countries such as Libya, Iran, and Lebanon. In 2016, although assignment rates began to moderate compared with the peak year, the city continued to accommodate a substantial number of refugees, with approximately 1,789 newly arrived asylum seekers by late 2016 and several thousand refugees receiving services and shelter through city programs. These figures illustrate a transition from low refugee intake in the early 2010s to a significant municipal responsibility for people seeking protection during the peak of the European refugee crisis (City of Leipzig Social Office data, 2016).

Current amount and origin of refugees in Leipzig

In 2025, the number of refugees and asylum seekers being received and housed in Leipzig and the broader state of Saxony had declined substantially compared with the peak years of the mid-2010s. According to reporting based on information from the Saxon state directorate, the initial reception facilities in Leipzig, Chemnitz, and Dresden had about 1,800 occupants out of a total capacity of roughly 4,600 at the beginning of July 2025. The majority were asylum seekers, and approximately 290 people from Ukraine were also accommodated in the facilities (DieSachsen News, 2025).

Electoral results in Frankfurt during the last 3 decades

The city of Frankfurt is divided into two voting districts because of its population size. Therefore, both voting districts are considered when comparing the voting outcomes (Federal Returning Officer, 2025).

Table 1. Frankfurt am Main I

	2025	2021	2017	2013	2009	2005	2002	1998	1994
CDU	23.5%	18%	26%	33.5%	35.2%	29.5%	33.5%	32.8%	43.6%
Grüne	18.1%	23.5%	13.6%	13.3%	12.1%	15.6%	17.5%	36.5%	9.8%
SPD	17.1%	22.6%	20.8%	26.8%	30.1%	31.1%	34.8%	36.5%	31.1%
Die Linke	15.4%	7.2%	12%	8.9%	9.2%	7%	-	-	-
AfD	10.8%	5.5%	9.3%	-	-	-	-	-	-
FDP	6.6%	14.9%	14%	7%	9.9%	12.8%	8.1%	8.4%	9.5%
BSW	5.2%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 2. Frankfurt am Main II

	2025	2021	2017	2013	2009	2005	2002	1998	1994
CDU	24.9%	18.2%	26.8%	33.9%	28%	29.2%	32.7%	32.7%	39.5%
Grüne	20.7%	25.6%	15.5%	15.4%	18.2%	17.5%	19.4%	15.4%	15.7%
SPD	17.2%	22.3%	19.6%	26.3%	21.5%	29.8%	33.9%	34.6%	28%
Die Linke	13.5%	6.9%	11.7%	8.1%	10%	6.5%	-	-	-
AfD	9.3%	4.7%	8%	-	-	-	-	-	-
FDP	6.6%	14.7%	14.3%	7%	17.5%	13.8%	8.7%	9.1%	10.2%
BSW	4.5%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The voting outcomes in Frankfurt am Main I and Frankfurt am Main II reveal several trends. Although the voting outcomes do not perfectly match, all results are close to each other, indicating broadly similar political preferences across the two constituencies. One of the most striking trends is the long-term decline of the CDU, which dominated both districts in the 1990s and early 2000s. For example, in 1994 the CDU achieved over 40% in Frankfurt I and close to 40% in Frankfurt II. By 2025, its vote share had fallen to around 23–25%. Once the central conservative party in the republic, the CDU began to lose the trust of voters throughout Germany. This decline exemplifies the diminishing vote shares of established parties in Germany (Federal Returning Officer, 2025).

A similar downward trend is visible for the SPD, which reached its strongest results in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with vote shares exceeding 30% in both districts. Over time, support for the SPD declined markedly, reaching roughly 17% in both Frankfurt I and II by 2025. This parallel development underscores a broader shift away from traditional “catch-all” parties (Federal Returning Officer, 2025).

In contrast, the Greens (Grüne) display a long-term upward trend. While their results fluctuated over time, they gained significant strength after 2009 and reached particularly high levels in 2021, exceeding 23% in

both districts. Although their share declined slightly by 2025, they remain a central political force in Frankfurt, reflecting the city's increasingly progressive and urban electorate (Federal Returning Officer, 2025).

The emergence of Die Linke since the mid-2000s adds another layer to Frankfurt's political transformation. After initially modest results, the party achieved double-digit shares in both districts by 2017 and again in 2025. Meanwhile, the AfD, absent from ballots before 2017, entered both constituencies with moderate but noticeable support, peaking in 2017 and remaining present through 2025 (Federal Returning Officer, 2025).

Overall, Frankfurt am Main I and II show highly comparable voting patterns, characterized by declining support for traditional parties, rising strength of progressive forces, and the emergence of newer political actors (Federal Returning Officer, 2025).

Electoral results in Leipzig during the last 3 decades

The city of Leipzig is also divided into two voting districts because of its size and population. Therefore, both voting districts are considered when comparing the voting outcomes (Federal Returning Officer, 2025).

Table 3. Leipzig I

	2025	2021	2017	2013	2009	2005	2002	1998	1994
CDU	17.4%	15%	23.5%	36.9%	30%	25.7%	25.2%	25.1%	35.7%
Grüne	10.8%	15.5%	7.1%	6.9%	8.9%	6.5%	6.5%	5.7%	6.3%
SPD	10.1%	20.9%	12.9%	18.5%	18%	32%	39.8%	36.2%	31.4%
Die Linke	21.1%	12.5%	19.5%	21.3%	25.5%	22.5%	-	-	-
AfD	25.3%	15.6%	20.8%	-	-	-	-	-	-
FDP	3.2%	10.6%	8.5%	2.9%	12.8%	8.1%	17.6%	21.9%	3.6%
BSW	7.8%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 4. Leipzig II

	2025	2021	2017	2013	2009	2005	2002	1998	1994
CDU	15.8%	13.1%	21.9%	32.6%	26.1%	23.2%	22.7%	24.1%	34.8%
Grüne	16.2%	21.3%	10.4%	11.2%	14.7%	10%	9.1%	6.9%	7%
SPD	11.2%	20.9%	13.1%	18.9%	18.3%	32.5%	40.6%	36.5%	30.6%
Die Linke	23.9%	14.7%	22.5%	22.5%	25.5%	22.5%	-	-	-
AfD	18.7%	11.2%	16%	-	-	-	-	-	-
FDP	3.1%	9.7%	8.6%	3%	11.9%	7.5%	6.5%	3.4%	3.9%
BSW	7.1%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The voting outcomes in Leipzig I and Leipzig II display long-term transformations that differ considerably from those observed in Frankfurt, while still showing strong similarities between the two Leipzig constituencies themselves. Although the voting outcomes do not perfectly match, all results remain close to each other, indicating that both districts follow a shared political trajectory shaped by similar social and historical conditions. One of the most notable trends is the sharp decline of the CDU, which dominated Leipzig in the 1990s and early 2000s. In 1994, the CDU achieved over 35% in both Leipzig I and II, but its vote share steadily decreased over time, falling to around 15–17% by 2025. This decline reflects a long-term weakening of conservative appeal in Leipzig's urban electorate (Federal Returning Officer, 2025).

The SPD exhibits an even more dramatic loss of support. While it was the leading party in the late 1990s and early 2000s, reaching nearly 40% in both districts in 2002, the SPD's vote share declined sharply after 2005. By 2025, it captured only about 10–11%, signaling a substantial erosion of social democratic dominance in Leipzig (Federal Returning Officer, 2025).

In contrast, Die Linke has played a central role in Leipzig's political landscape since the mid-2000s. After emerging as a major force, it consistently achieved results above 20% in both districts for much of the period and remained one of the strongest parties in 2025, particularly in Leipzig II. This stresses the enduring strength of left-wing politics in eastern German urban contexts. At the same time, the AfD's rise represents a major shift: it entered the electoral scene after 2013 and rapidly gained support. By 2025, the AfD had become the single strongest party in Leipzig I and maintained a substantial presence in Leipzig II, highlighting the growing influence of conservative politics alongside continued left-wing support (Federal Returning Officer, 2025).

The Greens demonstrate a gradual but clear upward trend, especially after 2017. Their results peaked in 2021 and remained relatively strong in 2025, particularly in Leipzig II, reflecting changing urban priorities toward environmental and progressive issues. Meanwhile, the FDP shows fluctuating but generally declining support over the long term, with modest recoveries in certain election years. The appearance of BSW in 2025 adds another layer of fragmentation, drawing noticeable support in both districts (Federal Returning Officer, 2025).

Overall, Leipzig I and II exhibit highly comparable voting patterns, characterized by the decline of traditional mainstream parties, the persistence of strong left-wing support, and the simultaneous rise of conservative politics, revealing a polarized and competitive political landscape (Federal Returning Officer, 2025).

Public perception of refugees during and after the refugee crisis 2015/16 in Frankfurt

As refugees arrived in Germany, public perceptions in Frankfurt am Main were mixed. Part of the population welcomed the new arrivals with humanitarian solidarity, while others were concerned about capacity constraints. Local newspapers reported that many residents initially reacted positively to the arrivals, highlighting Frankfurt's self-image as an open and international city. Coverage of civic initiatives such as the public event "Frankfurt hilft" at the Paulskirche (a well-known church) highlighted strong

volunteer engagement and gestures of welcome from civil society and local politicians (rheinmainkultur.de, 2015). Meanwhile, local media also captured unease among city residents connected to housing shortages, the use of emergency accommodation, and the pressure on municipal infrastructure to house the new arrivals. Articles in the “Frankfurter Neue Presse” documented concerns from citizens living next to refugee accommodations and conflicts over the city’s preparedness to host all the newcomers in such a short period (Frankfurter Neue Presse, 2016). While public concerns in Frankfurt were not as pronounced as those reported in other regions, the media coverage depicts an ambivalent environment consisting of humanitarian support and growing anxiety about integration and urban capacity limits (RheinMainKultur, 2015; Frankfurter Neue Presse, 2016).

Public perception of refugees during and after the refugee crisis 2015/16 in Leipzig

As refugees arrived in Leipzig, reactions in the city were also mixed. Local media captured the diversity of the new residents’ countries of origin while also emphasizing the pressure placed on city resources (Leipziger Volkszeitung, 2025). In addition to measurable data points, local media illuminated contrasting positions and perceptions within the city. While many citizens and civic actors supported increased shelter capacity and integration efforts, there were also reported instances of suspicion and false rumors about crimes being committed by refugees, prompting police to publicly deny such claims (Bild.de, 2015).

Federal measurements promoting the refugee crisis in 2015/2016

By temporarily suspending the Dublin Regulation, displaced people were able to travel beyond the first EU country they entered (Citizens Information, 2025). As a result, many asylum seekers continued their journey along the Balkan route and sought protection in Germany rather than in the first country they had entered. Former Chancellor Merkel’s statement “Wir schaffen das” (We can do it) became symbolic of this period and Germany’s pioneering refugee policy (Citizens Information, 2025; Herbert & Schönhagen, 2022).

However, attitudes shifted notably following a series of highly consequential events. The assaults on New Year’s Eve 2015/2016 in Cologne, in which 600 women reported sexual assaults and a significant number of suspects were identified as North African refugees, resulted in widespread shock throughout the nation (NZZ, 2025). This led to growing criticism, which intensified after a terrorist attack in December 2016. A Tunisian man drove a truck into a Christmas market in Berlin, killing 12 people (NZZ, 2025). Both tragic incidents led to skepticism toward asylum seekers within German society (phoenix, 2016). Within the political sphere, this repositioning was driven by domestic security concerns and administrative pressure directly connected to the unprecedented number of asylum seekers (phoenix, 2016).

Public perception of refugees during the Ukraine war in Frankfurt

Public perceptions of Ukrainians in Frankfurt have been influenced by demographic shifts in the city’s population. Another notable factor was the number of resources directed to those fleeing the conflict. Various engagement networks were activated to support the integration of Ukrainian asylum seekers. The city’s social welfare offices and coordination centers directed refugees to language-learning programs and

integration assistance. These services were supported by volunteer networks and civic participation (Statistikportal Frankfurt, 2025). All this information suggests general solidarity among residents with the new arrivals and demonstrates a nuanced difference compared with responses to refugees a few years earlier (Statistikportal Frankfurt, 2025).

Public perception of refugees during the Ukraine war in Leipzig

Public perceptions of Ukrainian refugees in Leipzig went through multiple stages during the ongoing displacement caused by the war. According to official numbers, Ukrainians form a visible part of the city's population (Mitteldeutsche Zeitung, 2023). During the early phases of the conflict, Leipzig's government and civic organizations proactively supported refugees with welcome services. These included housing coordination and integration assistance through local programs designed to facilitate registration and access to services, signaling institutional commitment to inclusion (City of Leipzig, n.d.). Nevertheless, Leipzig's residents did not uniformly support the new refugees. Simultaneous protests in Leipzig included demonstrators verbally targeting Ukrainians, resulting in public denunciation by the city's mayor (Welt, 2022). Therefore, overall public perceptions of Ukrainian refugees appear divided. While considerable parts of the population support the refugees, they face opposition from dissatisfied citizens in Leipzig (Mitteldeutsche Zeitung, 2023; City of Leipzig, n.d.; Welt, 2022).

Policy changes of political officials during the Ukraine-Russia war

During the Ukraine war, public statements by German political officials have played a significant role in shaping both national migration policy and perceptions of refugee support within Germany's federal system. Under former Chancellor Olaf Scholz, the government emphasized the integration of Ukrainians into German society. To accomplish that goal, the government employed language-learning and integration programs. Ukrainians present in the country were encouraged to take advantage of opportunities in the labor market and integrate rather than remain dependent on welfare programs (Eurointegration, 2024). Moreover, the government under Olaf Scholz promoted the EU Temporary Protection Directive, which grants Ukrainian refugees immediate residence, access to welfare benefits, and the right to work, thereby easing pressure on the national asylum system and clarifying Germany's stance on humanitarian protection across the EU (European Commission, 2024). Conversely, current Chancellor Friedrich Merz took a more differentiated stance by proposing adjustments to benefits for newly arrived Ukrainians. His government proposed this measure to promote employment and reduce the need for social payments to refugees while maintaining refugees' access to the labor market (Reuters, 2025). These two chancellors show how the German government adopted different positions toward Ukrainians over the course of the war. While remaining firmly supportive of Ukraine, the German government has gradually reduced preferential treatment for refugees from Ukraine (Eurointegration, 2024; European Commission, 2024; Reuters, 2025).

DISCUSSION

The quantitative data, considered in the context of corresponding events and public opinion, demonstrate that refugee numbers have mattered in political repositioning over the last two decades. Although the number of refugees itself was a secondary matter, public reaction and the pressure placed on the government were more influential. Residents who felt marginalized by their government gave the AfD a popular platform. Combining concerns about refugee numbers with perceptions of decline in other sectors in Germany led to the AfD becoming the second-largest parliamentary group in the German Bundestag (Federal Returning Officer, 2025; Zschocke & Mullis, 2024).

Considering the two cities, two notable differences emerge. While Frankfurt had substantial demographic diversity prior to the immigration waves, Leipzig lacked such experience because of its more homogeneous population. This might have led to greater moderation of the “AfD effect” described above in Frankfurt, while the effect may have been stronger in Leipzig. At the same time, the simultaneous rise of the AfD (politically right) and Die Linke (politically left) in Leipzig should be noted. This opposing pattern is highly intriguing because Leipzig I and Leipzig II represent the only two voting districts in Saxony that produced a left-wing majority. This further supports the point made in a previous paragraph about dissatisfaction in German society with the established parties (Federal Returning Officer, 2025).

Another aspect this discussion ought to address is residents’ varying reactions to different groups of refugees and their treatment. In both the political and societal spheres, European refugees enjoyed more privileges and trust than non-European refugees. While Ukrainians received immediate residence and were integrated into the German welfare system, non-European immigrants faced stricter regulations and fewer immediate benefits. Although both groups were supported by volunteer networks upon their arrival, public support decreased noticeably after multiple published claims of crimes committed by either North African or Middle Eastern foreigners (Rinaldi, 2022; European Commission, 2024; NZZ, 2025; phoenix, 2016).

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this essay, the study sought to analyze how refugees from different regions—especially European and non-European refugees—influence support for the AfD party in Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig. Based on the data, the findings suggest that refugees are not the sole factor behind rising AfD vote shares; rather, they are part of deeper structural concerns within Germany. Historically, migration—the movement of foreign people into another country—has long been controversial in Germany. The fear of losing traditions and being marginalized has often prevailed over potential benefits. The strategic repositioning of the AfD was a means of instrumentalizing fear of foreigners and employing it as the party’s main platform. Under this umbrella, the AfD achieved a strong electoral result in the last federal election. This result may be misleading, however. As already mentioned, the presence of refugees is not the sole driver of increased AfD support. While refugees serve as scapegoats, the increased vote share is in fact linked to broader voter dissatisfaction with the established parties (Federal Returning Officer, 2025; Zschocke & Mullis, 2024; Dinnebier, 2024).

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