MIGRANTS AS FLOATING SIGNIFIERS IN AND THROUGH RIGHT-WING POPULIST POLITICAL STYLE: THE CASE OF THE AFD[∗]

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Abstract

This article focuses on how and in which ways migrants are taken into the right-wing populist agendas, specifically analysing how migrants are represented in the right-populist style of Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) Party. At a time when populism studies have increased gradually and attained maturity, the impact and contribution of the populist actors by means of their discourse and style on the representation of certain groups should not be neglected. In addition to this, the ways migrants have been represented by the populist actors can be ranked among the subjects which need to be investigated not only for Turkey which hosts millions of migrants and people with Turkish heritage living in Europe but also for the Turkey-European Union (EU) relations in the long-term. The relevant literature suggests that migrants are represented in Europe within negative frameworks rather than positive. This study is designed to ascertain the contributions of the right-wing populist parties to the existent discourses and representations, accordingly, analysed how and through which representation strategies migrants have been in the right-wing populist style. For this study, the AfD and its representation strategies concerning migrants have been chosen and the party campaign visuals of the AfD posted between 2013-2021 have been considered and the ones which are overtly related to the migrants have been focused on to reach the argument of the article with primary coding for an initial analysis. The key findings of the article suggest that negative representation of migrants has been sustained by the right-wing populist party AfD and the existent pejorative representations have been reinforced, moreover migrants have been constructed as floating signifiers in and through right-wing populist style with strategic usages.

Keywords: Europe, Migrants, Right-wing populism, Alternative for Germany.

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SAĞ-POPÜLİST SİYASİ STİLDE BOŞ GÖSTEREN OLARAK GÖÇMENLER: AFD ÖRNEĞİ

Öz

Bu çalışma göçmenlerin Almanya için Alternatif partisinin (AfD) sağ-popülist stilinde nasıl temsil edildiği sorusundan hareketle göçmenlerin sağ-popülist ajandalarda nasıl yer aldığına odaklanmaktadır. Popülizm çalışmalarının giderek arttığı ve rüştünü ispatladığı bu günlerde, popülist partilerin söylem ve stillerinde çeşitli grup ve kimliklerin temsili gibi önemli mevzulara etki ve katkısı göz ardı edilmemelidir. Bunun yanında, çeşitli göçmen gruplarının popülist aktörler tarafından ele alınışı, başka bir deyişle temsili bulundurduğu göçmen nüfusu başta olmak üzere pek çok açıdan hem Türkiye hem Avrupa'da yaşayan Türkler hem de Türkiye-Avrupa Birliği ilişkileri açısından incelenmesi gereken konular arasında yer almaktadır. Yapılan çalışmalar, göçmen temsillerin olumludan ziyade olumsuz olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu çalışma da sağ popülist partilerin bu söylem ve temsillere olan katkısını ortaya çıkarmak için düzenlenmiş ve göçmenlerin söylemsel olarak nasıl ve hangi temsil stratejileri ile sağ popülist stilde yer aldığını bilimsel olarak incelemektedir. Almanya'nın AfD partisi ve göçmenleri temsil ediş stratejilerinin temel örnek vaka olarak seçildiği bu çalışmada, AfD'nin 2013-2021 yılları arasında kullandığı parti afişleri birincil kodlama ve ön-analiz için göz önünde bulundurulmuştur, bunların arasından direkt göçmenler ile ilgili olanlara odaklanılıp, çalışmanın argümanına bu data üzerinden varılmıştır. Analiz sonucunda, göçmenlerin negatif temsilinin sağ-popülist bir parti olan AfD tarafında devam ettirildiği, halihazırdaki olumsuz temsillere eklemlenerek bu olumsuz temsilin pekiştirildiği tespit edilmiş, göçmenlerin stratejik kullanımlarla boş gösteren olarak inşa edildiği sonucuna varılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Avrupa, Göçmenler, Sağ popülizm, Almanya için Alternatif Partisi.*

Introduction

Right-wing populists -leaders, parties, and performers- who are amplifying their voices for various causes all over the world play a performative role in the construction, transformation, and reinforcement of discourses and narratives about the represented protagonists in their communities. It can be argued that populist actors, whether in government or opposition or presenting themselves through various media channels, adopt a distinct discourse and style, primarily by catastrophizing problems and offering reductionist and radical solutions to these problems in order to make themselves preferable and visible to their

potential audiences. Demanding an immediate construction of border walls, the construction of barriers, or the deportation of "terrorists" are instances of drastic responses to issues that demand circulated pathways and more complete approaches to be dealt with. Furthermore, the populist style has a tremendous impact on collective meanings. Eco (2012: 80) claims that the meaning of a word is determined by our patterns of responding to stimulation or provocation. As a result, when stated in recurrent derogatory patterns, populists' distinctive style strengthens the possible negative implications in meanings given to specific discourses such as identity, culture, and danger in communities, which can have long-term negative repercussions. As stated in the remarks below, in the long run, this strategy may permit the occurrence of future challenges by establishing eternal opponents.

> The friend-enemy scheme constructs scapegoats, typically minorities, that are presented as the cause of society's ills and social problems. The inclusive form of the friend-enemy scheme argues for the inferiority of the enemy group in order to exploit it. The exclusive form constructs the enemy as inferior for the purpose of deportation, imprisonment or extermination. (Fuchs, 2018: 5)

This creation of binary oppositions may be unravelled by asking questions such as how these oppositions are portrayed and what role certain discourse strategies play in this presentation. Aras and Sağıroğlu (2020: 48) put forward that these parties produce discourses in accordance with the "disturbance" their "people" and community have been experiencing, which can be quite detrimental in the long run. Moreover, Balta (2021) defines populist character as "flexible and shapeshifting throughout, driven by the governing elite's opportunistic adaptation to changing international and regional dynamics, domestic constraints". These attributions apply to the Alternative for Germany Party (AfD) as well. Moreover, the relevant literature suggests that migrants are unfairly stigmatized in negative contexts rather than positively in Europe (Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017; Kaya and Tecmen, 2019; Doerr, 2021). This study is designed to demonstrate the contributions of right-wing populist parties to the existing negative discourses and representations, and as a consequence, it assessed how and by which representation practices migrants have been in the right-wing populist style.

To respond to this argument, this article is designed to have three parts. The first part, after briefly touching upon the background of the concept of populism from a historical perspective, presents the main approaches towards it, and particularly refers to the approach which considers right-wing populism as a political style. Subsequently, the second part touches upon the issue of right-

wing populism as a performative political style and representation of migrants[1] as others in this style while the final part of the article regards the migrants as nomenclatures that are constructed as free-floating signifiers for strategic usages by right-wing populists. All in all, within this context, the article sets out to contribute to the literature with new theoretical and conceptual discussions regarding populism and its strategic usage of the concepts of migrant, refugee, and asylum seekers in the party campaign visuals of a right-wing populist party, the AfD. As for the reason why Germany and therefore the AfD is chosen, the relatively huge number of the refugees the country hosted since 2015 can be put forward. As a basis of the preliminary analysis, this article takes 4088 party campaign visuals that have been archived and analysed for the PhD thesis this article builds upon, and among which 1035 visuals are referring to migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers from different countries. This article and its theoretical-conceptual discussion take this unstructured data-set for primary findings. The article takes the unstructured data, categorizes it, and situates the ones overtly mentioning migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in a context in which they are considered and observed as free-floating signifiers which can be furthered with various in-depth analysis in future studies.

On Populism and Right-Wing Populism

The political roots of populism may be traced back to the 19th-century Russian *Narodnichestvo* movement or America's 1890s People's Party in the United States (Canovan, 1981: 5-6). By pointing to these two populist stereotypes, it is stated that until the mid-1950s, populism was regarded as a positive force and as "merely a label to identify two separate historical phenomena," and that "there was no wider significance attached to the word" (Allcock, 1971: 372). It can be safely argued that the connection of these groups was their support for an agricultural agenda in which the peasants were viewed as the foundational element of not only the society but also the economy (Mudde, 2002: 219).

From the beginning, it should be highlighted that while the Russian[2] and American[3] situations are placed under the same roof when discussing the

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[1] The concepts "refugee," "asylum seeker," and "migrant" refer to persons who are on the move, who have fled their home nations and crossed borders. According to the Amnesty International, a refugee is "a person who has fled their own country because they are at risk of serious human rights violations and persecution there" while an "asylum-seeker is a person who has left their country and is seeking protection from persecution and serious human rights violations in another country, but who hasn't yet been legally recognized as a refugee". And "there is no internationally accepted legal definition of a migrant" (Amnesty International, 2021).

[2] For a brief history of the Russian Populism see: Kalaycıoğlu (2021).

[3] For the history of the American Populism see: Kazin (1995).

concept's historical foundations, these two experiences were extremely different. To begin with, the United States Populist Party was a mass movement enacted by farmers demanding a radical change in the political system (Hofstadter, 1965), whereas the Russian *Narodnichestvo* was a group of middle-class intellectuals attempting to pursue a romanticized perspective of rural life by simply educating the farmers, i.e., it was a top-down process (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969; Moffitt, 2016; Kalaycıoğlu, 2021). It is rather customary to add others to these two initial experiences, particularly the peasant movements that erupted in various regions of Eastern Europe and the Balkans during the interwar years. (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969). As it can be observed from the below-cited figure, the number of works in English has been tremendously on increase, and since the 1950s, both theoretical and methodological studies have been conducted for specific populist cases. Even in 2017, the number of books in English including the concepts of "populism" or "populist" in the title has been paramount and some studies show the perpetual increase in populism studies (Kaltwasser, et.al., 2017: 9).

Populists have joined the government in a number of states across Europe, both in alliances with other parties, as in Poland, and on their own, as in the case of Austria (Fallend, 2012). Furthermore, some of them have had a substantial effect on domestic and intra-European politics, such as the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which is fundamentally a right-wing populist party (Abedi and Lundberg, 2009; Bossetta, 2017). Following the 2016 UK referendum on EU membership, in which British voters voted to leave, some have celebrated Brexit as a populist success, encouraging populist political groups to call for referendums in other EU states (Jasiewicz, 2008). These developments regarding the content and nature of the concept, have resulted in more studies on populism from various angles.

As for the various conceptualizations, Canovan (1981) conceives populism as "a family of related concepts rather than as a single concept in itself" (cited in Anselmi, 2018: 6). In addition to these, four crucial, distinct but interrelated, populist properties are listed by Ben Stanley as (2008: 102):

● the existence of two homogeneous units of analysis: "the people" and "the elite".

● the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite.

● the idea of popular sovereignty.

● the positive valorisation of "the people" and denigration of "the elite".

According to some, the difficulty in defining the term arises in part from the fact that it has been used to express "political movements, parties, ideologies, and leaders across geographical, historical, and ideological contexts" (Gidron

and Bonikowski, 2013: 3). There are studies that concisely outline the concepts, units of analysis, and potential approaches for populist research. There have been numerous approaches to populism and its characteristics (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013: 17) and moreover, relatively new ways of studying populism have been offered recently (Yılmaz and Morieson, 2021: 4).

Table 1. Ways of studying populism (Yılmaz and Morieson, 2021: 4).

Categories of Populism	Definitions	Limitation
Ideational	An ideology (or set of ideas) that divides the society into two homogenous and antagonistic groups. 'The people' versus 'the elite.'	- Too dichotomous in its understanding of the two groups - Based on Western and European case studies and instances - Does not account for sporadic or occasional use of populist rhetoric by a leader
Strategy	Viewed as a tool in the hands of a personalistic leader who uses populism to wield power through an unorganised voter bank.	- Viewed only as a movement versus - Mostly based on Latin American cases
Discourse	A discourse that pits 'the people' against 'the elite' or 'the oligarchy', and which is adhered to one or multiple ideologies, e.g., neo-liberalism, religion, globalisation, and migration.	- Does not easily discern between populists and non-populists - Ignores the populist ideologies present in a number of populist parties in Europe
Style	Focuses on style of the leader such as their 'bad manners' and their performance style for 'the people' which also confronts 'the elite'.	- Ignores the ideologies of populist parties and movements. New and relatively untested

It might be argued that, unlike the other approaches to the concept, populism as a stylistic approach has not been well examined and is thus "relatively untested," as the above-mentioned table shows (Yılmaz and Morieson, 2021: 4). Moreover, indeed, "there is general agreement in the comparative literature that populism is confrontational, chameleonic, culture-bound and context-dependent" (Arter, 2010: 490). While there is no commonly agreed-upon definition of populism, there is virtually universal agreement on who may be labelled as populists and what can be considered as populism. An appeal to the masses is one of the three fundamental elements to consider while employing the populist approach: There is an appeal to "the people" confronting "an elite" who propels crisis and corruption; "bad manners", namely a coarsening of recognized styles of discourse that appeals to "the people's" common sense; and populists' nesting on "crisis, breakdown and threat" (Moffitt, 2016: 43). These three elements appeared at various degrees of accommodation. Considering populism as a distinct mode of expression "securitisation style" Kurylo (2020) applies this approach to securitisation process. In terms of the applicability of the concept, this study serves as a relevant primary example. Vogel (2020) analyses the populist style of Pegida with Moffitt's approach.

These exemplary studies show that there are plenty of gaps and areas to touch upon in the field.

It can be argued that from the populist vantage point, exclusion is considered as natural and, most of the time, necessary for the welfare and well-being of the ordinary people by populists. In this regard, nativism develops as a populist aspect and "should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ("the nation") and those non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state" (Mudde, 2007: 19). From a wider perspective

> This idea of Europe and its preoccupation with a natural, rational and homogenous self in relation to an inferior other constitutes the basis for arguing that the European imaginary is based on contesting ideas of a symbolic space bordered by "shared stories". This has produced hegemonic stories about the nation, the national and Europe as well as counter-stories of imaginary others; the outsiders, the colonial and the marginalized (Kinnvall, 2013: 155).

To put it another way, this version of Europe is predicated on anti-immigrant impulses and a sense of national identity, and it has shown itself culturally and institutionally through political parties and government factions (Kinnvall, 2013: 155). Europe's beliefs about its fictitious other have an impact on the colonized, immigrants, and Muslims (Kinnvall, 2013: 157). Even Russian-Germans, who are also migrants and benefit from German social aid, vote for the AfD and when asked "why AfD", they respond by pointing out the migrants and neither this status nor the migrant situation of this group has been verbalized by the AfD (Özcan, 2018: 120).

Right-Wing Populism as a Performative Political Style and Representation of the "Others"

The term populism, which has been more popular during the 1990s, is a nebulous and contentious idea. There is antagonism between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" in practically every incidence of populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). It has three basic senses over "the people" including "the people as sovereign; peoples as nations, and the 'common people' as opposed to the ruling elite" (Canovan, 2004: 247-248). It has gained some conceptual clarity as a result of recent research. However, when populism is paired with ideologies like left and right, liberal, or illiberal, it is still difficult to draw boundaries regarding the degrees of populism because these notions all have their own history. As Vural (2005: 23) underlines nationalism, ethnocentrism, anti-communism, anti-parliamentarism, anti-pluralism, militarism, the focus on law and order, a yearning for a strong leader, and cultural pessimism are among the qualities assigned to the (extreme) right. Another issue with populism is that the adjectives and traits attributed and attested to it are likewise called into

question, making their presence hazier. As a result, it appears that labelling politics as "populist" is becoming increasingly popular. Furthermore, populism is rife with theoretical, philosophical, and definitional ambiguity. It is also feasible to argue that the definitions of populism vary from country to country and case to case. However, the difficulty of identifying the "other" is important within this framework since it is contentious who does not count as a member of "the people". For Pelinka

> At the beginning of modern democracy, the defining other was the ancient regime, the pre-revolutionary power of monarchs and aristocrats. When, in 1776, in Philadelphia, Americans declared "We, the People of the United States", the defining other was the British king and a political order designed on the other side of the Atlantic. This moment was anti-aristocratic and, in its historical context, revolutionary" (Pelinka, 2013: 6).

Right-wing populist parties in Europe and abroad have their own idiosyncrasies, traditions, and qualities, therefore as put forward by Wodak, these parties construct "different nationalist pasts in the form of identity narratives and emphasize a range of different issues in everyday politics" (Wodak, 2015: 2). In the case of Germany, they amplify and exaggerate the threat posed by migrants and Islam, but in the case of the United Kingdom, they limit their propaganda to a perceived threat to national identities posed by ethnic minorities and migrants. In any event, Wodak contends that most right-wing populist parties use different techniques depending on the audience and the situation, and that they seem to have similar traits.

> All right-wing populist parties instrumentalize some kind of ethnic/religious/linguistic/political minority as a scapegoat for most if not all current woes and subsequently construe the respective group as dangerous and a threat "to us", to "our" nation; this phenomenon manifests itself as a "politics of fear"; and all right-wing populist parties seem to endorse what can be recognized as the "arrogance of ignorance"; appeals to common-sense and anti-intellectualism mark a return to premodernist or pre-Enlightenment thinking (Wodak, 2015: 2).

There are several stages for that dynamic articulated by Wodak as she calls "the right-wing populist perpetuum mobile"; and she claims that such parties and leaders have evolved discursive and rhetorical methods that mix contradictory realities, make misleading claims, seem innocent, enable denying the apparent, speak the "unspeakable", and go beyond the bounds of what is permitted. They usually get away with it without being punished, and if they do have to apologize, they do it in a premeditated and ambiguous manner. They seldom have to resign, and even when they do, some of them manage to "bounce back" rather rapidly (Wodak, 2015: 19).

The production of a popular subjectivity is only conceivable through the indirect discursive formation of an empty signifier like poverty (Panizza, 2005: 40). It is possible to talk about populism only when "a series of politico-discursive practices constructing a popular subject" exists and the precondition of the creation of such a subject is predicated on "the building up of an internal frontier dividing the social space into two camps" (Panizza, 2005: 43). As in the case of Wodak's above-referred perpetuum, Panizza also provides a logical sequence for the division as such:

> But the logic of that division is dictated, as we know, by the creation of an equivalential chain between a series of social demands in which the equivalential moment prevails over the differential nature of the demands. Finally, the equivalential chain cannot be the result of a purely fortuitous coincidence but has to be consolidated through the emergence of an element which gives coherence to the chain by signifying it as a totality. This element is what we have called empty signifier (Panizza, 2005: 43-44).

The AfD constitutes a relevant example for analysing the use of the term migrant as an empty/floating signifier by populist parties in Europe. The AFD was founded in 2013 with a critical anti-Euro position and only subsequently became recognized for anti-Islam and anti-migration agendas, adding Germany to the list of countries where right-wing populist parties have an impact on politics. This article intends to fill a vacuum in empirical research of right-wing populism by examining how right-wing populism in Germany creates and depicts a social actor as "the other", namely Turkey and individuals of Turkish ancestry, and using narratives about them as the "other" discursively. As a result, the fundamental concern here is how right-wing populism in Germany develops and depicts "the other" in their political campaigns. Here, it should be underlined that populism is more than just a problem of representation, in which individuals abandon their old identities in anticipation of the new "popular" one as Panizza (2005) argues. Moreover,

> It is also about the beginning of representation, allowing those who have never been represented because of their class, religion, ethnicity or geographical location, to be acknowledged as political actors. Populist leaders appeal to both the never-enfranchised and the newly disenfranchised, but there is no populist leadership unless there is a successful constitution of new identities and of a representative link with those identities (Panizza, 2005: 11).

According to this viewpoint "new relations of representation" is of concern that becomes possible "because of dislocations of the existing political order" (Panizza, 2005: 11). The majority of the party campaigns of the AfD demonstrate "the fear that is strategically and intentionally triggered by the constructed danger to 'our' Western culture through Muslim dress

conventions". This is also articulated by Wodak (2015: xiii) for the The Austrian Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs – FPÖ) case. According to her, "national as well as ethnic and racialized identities are discursively constructed to create an imaginary of nativist (essentialized) and quasi-natural borders between 'Us' and 'Them'" (Wodak, 2015: 9). As a result, the denial of distinctions has allowed "the people" to be perceived as a very homogeneous entity. As a result, populists try to mobilize people in order to form *demos* which "exist above and beyond the divides and diversities of social class and religion, gender and generation" (Wodak, 2015: 9). In the same line, Panizza draws attention to the "political battles between the 'us and them' of populist politics" which "involve struggles to fix and unhinge the divides that constitute populist identities and set up new political frontiers" by further stipulating that these confrontations are fought as often against the "other" of the people who impede popular identity from reaching its full potential as they are against the foe inside who desire to split the popular field or establish rival claims to represent the people (Panizza, 2005: 17). Moreover, according to him,

> But when the political frontier between the people and their "other" breaks down, the previous dichotomist division of the political space ceases to operate, and a number of alternatives become possible: a system of differences may develop within which a plurality of identities becomes institutionalised in a renewed pluralist political system; alternatively, a redefinition of the populist antagonism can also emerge along different lines (Panizza, 2005: 17).

All in all, this situation might render "dissolution of populist identities" possible paving the way for "the atomisation of social identities and a collapse of all relations of representation" (Panizza, 2005: 17). To reiterate, this notion renders the populist cases crucial to study. To sum up, "populism is not a matter of a specific psychological cast, a particular class, or simplistic policies. Neither is it just a question of style" (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014). Populism is not just any mobilization strategy that appeals to "the people" (Jansen, 2011). Populism employs a very specific kind of language, a very peculiar kind of style. Populists do not just criticize elites; they also claim that only they and only they represent the true people. Whether someone speaks that language or not is not a matter of subjective impressions. It is also possible to be able to speak about the degrees of populism (Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2010). To be able to spot the populist rhetoric is crucial (Müller, 2017) and in the case of the AfD, it is spottable since, although it was disputable whether it is populist or not, in the following time with the "tactical method" it adopted (Franzmann, 2016) it became possible to consider the party as a populist one.

On the other hand, it can be claimed that meaning is generated by form and content, and that it can be understood and explained via various levels of contextual information – historical, socio-political, intertextual, and

interdiscursive, as well as situative knowledge (Wodak, 2015: xi). The depiction of "'white German women' as objects endangered by 'male Muslim migrants' against the backdrop of the 2015/16 Cologne New Year's Eve events" can be referred here as an example (Bertrand, 2018: 298). In the context of Brexit, Shilliam (2018: 6) observes that the English white working class was "introduced as a forgotten indigenous constituency, independent of colonial pasts and unfairly displaced by multicoloured newcomers".

Wodak lays certain patterns which show that right-wing populist parties cleverly manage to "set the agenda and frame media debates; other political parties and politicians, as well as the media, are, in turn, forced to react and respond continuously to ever new provocations" (Wodak, 2015: 20). At a time when "media touches upon all aspects of political life, where a sense of crisis is endemic and when populism appears in many disparate manifestations and contexts" and populism needs to be seen "as a political style that is performed, embodied, and enacted across a variety of political and cultural contexts" (Moffitt, 2016: 3). These contextual situations render each populist case[4] equally significant to study. Ben Stanley noted that "although the meaning of the term has proven controversial in the literature, the persistence with which it has recurred suggests the existence at least of an ineliminable core: that is, that it refers to a distinct pattern of ideas" (Stanley, 2008: 100). In the case of Germany and the AfD, although there is not a new relation of representation in terms of migrants and Muslims, the populist style of representation is relatively new.

Migrants as the Floating Signifiers in Right-Wing Populist Style

Used interchangeably, the terms "refugee," "asylum seeker," and "migrant" refer to persons who are on the move, who have fled their home nations and crossed borders. It may seem that, particularly in populist styles, the contents of certain terminology, concepts, or characters, such as the migrant, refugee, asylum seeker, or more broadly "the other", are indeed very volatile. This type of discursive activity determines who counts as the people and who does not, who can be lumped under the general tent of Islam and which social actors may be characterized as the "other". This practice might be considered to be a premeditated use of floating signifiers by right-wing populist parties, usually for strategic and pragmatic reasons.

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[4] The content analysis of political party television broadcasts in Belgium by Jagers and Walgrave (2007: 322-323) develops a measurable concept of populist style, distinguishing between a "thin" concept of populism as "a political communication style of political actors that refers to the people", and a "thick" concept of populism as "an explicit anti-establishment position and an exclusion of certain population categories".

To begin with, Saussure (2002) considers language to be a structured system of arbitrary signs, with each sign consisting of two parts that are mutually related. The signifier and the signified are these. Symbols, on the other hand, are not chosen at random. A symbol is a signifier, yet unlike a sign, it is never fully random. A symbol has a logical link to the thing that it represents. In semiotics and discourse analysis, a floating signifier, also known as an empty signifier, is a signifier that lacks a referent, such as a term that points to no physical thing and has no agreed-upon meaning. In this scenario, migrants might be a case in point. Coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss, a floating signifier is "to represent an undetermined quantity of signification, in itself void of meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning" (1987: 63). It may be claimed that the terms "migrant," "refugee," and "asylum seeker" are instances of notions that are prone to taking on any connotation ascribed to them by right-wing populists. Therefore, a "floating signifier" may mean an "unexplainable incoherence" (Mehlman, 1972: 25). Moreover, a floating signifier that has a "symbolic value zero" possibly "allows symbolic thought to operate despite the contradiction inherent in it" (Mehlman, 1972: 23). It should be underlined that on *Populist Reason*, Laclau (2005: 33) draws a line between an "empty signifier" and a "floating signifier"; while the former is related with "construction of a popular identity once the presence of a stable frontier is taken for granted", the latter refers to an attempt to "apprehend the logic of the displacements of that frontier". As it has been salient throughout the party campaign visuals, right-wing populists tend to overcloud the frontiers among the concepts of "migrant," "refugee," and "asylum seeker" to be able use them interchangeably in mostly pejorative contexts. It can be claimed that there is a deliberate preference to use these concepts interchangeably to pursue a displacement for their contents. For this reason, instead of empty signifier, the term floating signifier is preferred in this study.

From the visual standpoint, Barthes's notions are significant. For him, the non-linguistic signs are widely open to interpretation in that they constitute a "floating chain of signifieds" (Barthes, 1977: 39). For example, the inclusion of a child in party campaign visuals of the right-wing populists and perceptions associated with it might change from context to context. If s/he is a German child s/he represents vulnerability, on the other hand, s/he might represent terrorism and/or poor integration issues if s/he is a migrant's child. Therefore, depending on the context, a child can carry either positive or negative significance.

To sum up, the notion of floating signifiers can be applied to the concepts such as terrorism (Beyribey, 2019), migrants (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018), and

even Islam[5] (Meret and Beyer Gregersen, 2019) as a way of instrumentalization where the concept may not be stable, but the word is according to the adopted and preferred context. However, it should be underlined again that these concepts are subject to the perpetual process of redefinitions and instrumentalizations *vis-a-vis* the purposeful usages.

As a performative political style, populism instrumentalises the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion between and among "the people" and represents certain social actors in certain ways. To reach this vantage point, the conceptual and methodological tools developed by van Leeuwen can be reshaped for the new uses of the methodological application in future studies. Adopting a performative political style, populist leaders or parties, especially when appealing to the "people", exclude certain social actors from the mostly vague span of "the people". Yet, they render this exclusion by including these social actors in their styles and representing these actors pejoratively. Here, to reiterate again, the article assumes that in Europe there has been a perpetual representation process regarding social actors like Muslims and the people with different ethnic and national backgrounds like migrants, and the article takes the right-wing populist contribution to this process seriously. Therefore, this part has tried to clarify how and through which methodological endeavour this assumption is reached with illustrative images cited below.

Image 1. 500 Asylum seekers daily![6]

Image 2. Daily in Germany: 43 Victims[7]

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[5]Because of its focus on right-wing populism and its discourse this piece can be read further, see: Meret and Gregersen (2019).

[6] The text in the image translates as such: Unchecked migration despite closed routes!500 asylum seekers Daily.

[7]The text in the image translates as such: sexual offences by asylum seekers Daily in Germany: 43 victims of sexual violence by refugees.

The text embedded in Image 1 both underlines the act of migration and the daily number of arrivals of asylum seekers although the two concepts refer to different groups legally. Moreover, consciously not mentioning the country of origin of these people but depicting them in masses while they are practicing prayer can be considered as a deliberate utilization of them as free-floating signifiers for right-wing populists in general, the AfD in particular to seek and provoke a wider audience. The text in the second image also presents similar vague usage of two different concepts, namely asylum seeker and refugee, therefore the viewers of the visuals have been exposed to crucial concepts in vague contents in dangerous and fearful contexts. Although it has been stated previously that the concepts of "refugee," "asylum seeker", and migrant" are distinct categories, nonetheless they are used in a replaceable way with each other to address a wider audience[8]. For the AfD, there is a pure German *volk*, and it should be protected from the "others" which are Muslims, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and, even the people with Turkish heritage living there for decades. During the migration crisis, the AfD perpetuated and reiterated its discriminatory approach towards the various ethnic groups ranging from Syrians to Eritreans sometimes by referring to their country of origins sometimes just referring to them with umbrella terms such as migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. After the crisis alleviated slightly, the AfD has continued this way of negative representation as its populist nature requires an enemy to blame, and an appeal to German people versus to the others.

Moreover, it can be argued that the "refugees are clustered into one single undifferentiated mass, and this act deprives them of their biographical specificity as historical beings" (Nyers, 1999; Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017: 3). During this process, denigrating and impersonating adjectives and labels have been used for them and moreover, they are defined in terms of their undesired existence in Germany, their associations with violent crimes and any other evil act which threats the Germans. Moreover, their assumed threat to Germany has been permanently underlined under various themes both in domestic politics and international politics (Özer and Kaçar-Aşcı, 2021).

At this point, Paik's (2016) concept of "epistemological violence" can be referred in which it is stated that "in the name of politicising their case,

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[8] From the perspective of the AfD, the existence of groups of different "others" is a problem to be solved, even if it means immediate deportations. Yet, as the law requires not all of the migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are deportable. To appeal to its electorate, and to offer them radical and "quick" solutions, the AfD uses the concepts as free-floating signifiers. Why the AfD or right-wing populists resort to this strategy is not within the scope of this article, however, it only observes from the unstructured data that they are used strategically as free-floating signifiers, and this theoretical and conceptual perspective can be furthered in future studies with in-depth coding and more detailed discourse analysis.

marginalised groups are inevitably entangled with Western practices and discourses that ultimately perpetuate their own exclusion" (Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017: 9). Current literature tends to present the intrinsic features of national and regional populisms as negligible; then resulting in a generalizability problem. This article has aimed to clarify the distinction between the generalizable and non-generalizable aspects of populist styles through a specific utilization of migrants as free-floating signifiers as different-audience-addressed discourses might necessitate different styles. Within this context, it has presented (from a conceptual perspective) possible answers to the question of which specific discursive strategy has been used by a right-wing populist party (the AfD).

Concluding Remarks

From the standpoint of political science, the first populist movements can be traced back to the 19th century, when the Populist Party in the United States and the so-called *Narodniki* in Russia emerged, and since then, this most famously used concept has been used to enunciate a variety of political cases all over the world. Examined in the light of how the term "populism" has been employed in the British press, it appears that "any political actor who is in the news frequently for a substantial amount of time probably runs the risk of being labelled 'populist' sooner or later" (Bale, et. al., 2011: 121). This assumption can present the abundance of usage of the concept. Therefore, with an attempt to reach a conceptual clarity, first of all, the article touched upon the historical background of populism briefly and then it summarized the contemporary literature over it through different approaches brought to the understanding of the concept. It appears that there is still no consensual definition of populism across the world as it has an eclectic nature which can be easily juxtaposed with other ideologies, various actors, and a vast number of cases. Moreover, when appealing to people -a *sine qua non* of populism - perpetually nurtured insecurities surface and different enemies for different populists emerge as in the case of migrants.

Moreover, in this process, there are certain elements which are inherent in a substantial number of populist cases. When compared to the other approaches towards populism, Moffitt's (2016) approach in this respect can be adopted for several reasons and the most significant one is his consideration of the visual dimension of populism and the performance demonstrated by the populist. Defining populism as a performative political style and emphasizing an appeal to the people versus the elite, the accommodation of bad manners and enunciation of crisis, breakdowns, and threats as characteristics of this political style, Moffitt's conceptualization is useful in spotting tangible political situations of populists and peculiar discourses and styles within specific settings which can be applied to various populist cases across the world. Furthermore, it

should be underlined that "the discourse on Europe determines what can and cannot be said about Europe (e.g., a continent, an organization, an order, but not a company), who is European and who is not, and who can speak on Europe" (Aydın-Düzgit and Rumelili, 2018: 2). Moreover, in line with this statement, for future research discourse historical approach based on a critical discourse analysis which is "particularly distinguishable by its specific emphasis on identity construction, where the discursive construction of 'us' and 'them' is viewed as the basic fundament of discourses of identity and difference" can be conducted (Aydın-Düzgit and Rumelili, 2018: 9).

Overall, the regularity of utterances and recurrent imagery in populist political actors' discourses and styles are crucial in understanding how certain groups of people are represented and presented. This article has provided a framework for understanding how right-wing populism, which invests in certain public anxieties, may build and portray "the other", and employ narratives about them as "the other", especially in periods when pictures have circulated more than words and have a greater impact. The article has argued that as a right-wing populist party the AfD has maintained negative representations of migrants and reaffirmed existing negative connotations and representations regarding them; additionally, migrants have been structured as floating signifiers in and through right-wing populist style with strategic uses. The Syrians, Muslims, and the umbrella term "the migrants" possess distinct historical processes and patterns, yet they are melted in the same pot by right-wing populist parties. As stated earlier within the article, there are 1035 AfD visuals referring to migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers from different countries. For example, only 135 visuals are related overtly with Syrians while some directly refer to groups from Africa. This article and the theoretical-conceptual discussion it has suggested have taken this unstructured data-set for primary findings which suggest that the concept of migrant has been used as a free-floating signifier both semantically and visually. Moreover, considering the last German elections held in 2021, it can be safely argued that the AfD is in Germany to stay in the coming terms and has been utterly affecting both national and international relations of the country. In future studies, the data can be analysed more systematically and in an in-depth way to respond to questions such as in which contexts and policy areas the utilization of migrants and various migrant groups as free-floating signifiers appear. In this vein, the stances of other prominent right-wing populist parties in Europe such as the FPÖ and Nation Rally (formerly known as Front National until 2018) can be studied comparatively in future studies as well.

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