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# Immigrant voters against their will: a focus group analysis of identities, political issues and party allegiances among German resettlers during the 2017 bundestag election campaign

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides an analysis of the political preferences of ethnic Germans who emigrated from the Soviet Union or its successor states. These resettlers (*Aussiedler*) and their descendants represent the biggest group of immigrant voters in Germany and reveal a rare combination of citizenship, ethnic identity and party support that makes it particularly interesting for applying existing approaches to immigrant voting behaviour. The analysis explores the link between identity, political issue and candidate orientations, and the (traditionally high) support of resettlers for the Christian Democrats. It also addresses the possibility of Germany's newest Radical Right Party – the Alternative for Germany – attracting this particular group of voters. Evidence for both of these trends can be identified based on a series of focus groups conducted in early 2017, pointing especially to the role of group identity and immigration policy preferences.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Germany; radical right parties; voting behaviour; migrants; identity

## 1. Introduction

Ethnic Germans who migrated from the Soviet Union and their descendants made up 2.4 out of 6.3 million German voters with an immigrant background<sup>1</sup> in 2015, making them the biggest group of immigrant voters in present-day Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis) 30.06.2017). However, these 'resettlers' (*Aussiedler*) or 'Russian-Germans' (*Russlanddeutsche*)<sup>2</sup> are an exceptional group of immigrant voters to study. On the one hand, resettlers had emigrated to Germany and therefore had to adjust, for example, to the German labour market and current social life. On the other hand, resettlers strongly regard themselves as being of German ethnicity, dating their ethnic origins back to their forefathers who emigrated from eighteenth century German lands to Russia. This assessment was also shared by the German state who granted resettlers citizenship status immediately upon arrival. Thus, concerning their political participation, these immigrants had no legal boundaries in terms of voting or standing for public office.

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As to voting behaviour, resettlers show just another deviation from what we would expect of the political preferences of immigrants. In the few existing studies (Wüst 2004), resettlers were shown to overwhelmingly vote for the Christian Democrats, i.e. parties of the mainstream right. Such support patterns are very unusual for immigrant voters who usually tend to support parties of the Left (Heath et al. 2013). Even more noteworthy are the results of several recent subnational elections, indicating that the strong affiliation of resettlers to the Christian Democrats is in decline and has been at least partly replaced by support for the *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) – a populist, radical-right party established in 2013. While existing survey data do not allow for an appropriate quantitative analysis of the relevance of this trend, an immigrant support for an openly anti-immigration party would be a very rare pattern calling for an explanation. Thus, more generally we ask: (1) What drives the German resettlers' support for the Christian Democrats? (2) Is this support in decline, and if so how can we explain this? and (3) Are resettlers turning to the Radical Right, instead?

We explore these questions by combining both general and migrant-specific approaches to voting behaviour with data gathered in focus group interviews with resettlers conducted in early 2017. While the flagship model of electoral research, the Michigan model (Campbell et al. 1960), with its focus on party identification, issue preferences, and candidate orientations, will serve as our theoretical starting point, we point to the role of ethnic identity for explaining the traditionally strong affiliation of resettlers to the Christian Democrats. Using this adapted model, we then explore the ways in which resettlers talk about their ethnic and party identities, the political issues that are salient to them, the political candidates, and their resulting support for political parties. We elaborate on how the members of our focus groups report a decline of the dominant allegiance to the Christian Democrats and a willingness to vote for the populist AfD.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 contextualises the political history of resettlers as German citizens and voters. Section 3 puts forward our theoretical framework, focusing on the Michigan model and ethnic identity patterns. Section 4 describes our data and methods. Section 5 presents the empirical results before we summarise our main findings in the concluding section and present derived hypotheses for testing in further research.

## 2. The political history of resettlers

Between 1987 and 1997, 1.5 million ethnic Germans migrated from the Soviet Union or its successor states to Germany (Hilkes and Stricker 1997). These 'resettlers' or 'Russian-Germans' are mostly the descendants of emigrants to tsarist Russia in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The large wave of migrants back then ensued after the official invitation of the Russian Empress Catherine the Great, who was herself a German-speaking princess, in 1763.

Once in Russia, the Germans settled in rural villages that were religiously and ethnically homogeneous. Villages were centred around – predominately Lutheran – churches that also ran the local schools. The inhabitants of these villages rarely intermarried with the majority population (Pinkus 1990). In 1926, almost 95 per cent of resettlers in Russia indicated German as their first language. In summary, life in these colonies was focused on maintaining an explicitly German culture with a set of German norms (Kiel 2009).

However, the privileges of the German colonies were reduced step-by-step by the Russian Tsar at the end of the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, forced re-settlement of Germans from Russia's western border towards the east began after the outbreak of World War I. With Stalin's rise to power, the Germans in the Soviet Union suffered from the forced collectivisation of their freehold farms and the prohibition of the free expression of religion – an important pillar of their identity. Increasing hostility towards them by the Soviet government sparked their feeling of shared identity with 85 per cent still speaking German as a first language in 1939 (Stricker 1997). During World War II, ethnic Germans suffered massive deportation to the more eastern parts of the Soviet Union and the reduction of their legal status to subjects with few rights in the new areas of settlement. Mandatory enrolment in labour camps with minimal subsistence plagued the majority of the working age population. The return to some kind of normality with more citizenship rights was not realised until 1955. However, German names, language and culture remained largely forbidden, forcing the families to maintain their German identity privately (Pinkus 1990; Stricker 1997).

In post-war Germany, the groups of Russian-Germans meanwhile played a unique role. After the integration of millions of refugees from formerly German regions in the 1940s and 1950s, ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union were considered to be the last group that had to be 'taken home' to the new republic. The relocation of the resettlers – considered by the (west) German state as both ethnic and legal Germans – to Germany was a strong objective of all post-war governments, but especially the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) government, engaged in a very strong relationship with resettlers, mainly driven by the conservative notion of citizenship by descent. This special interest was not only a matter of ideological stances but also reflected the fact that the Christian Democrats had integrated voters of the special-issue interest party of the GB/BHE (Gesamtdeutscher Block/ Bund der Heimatvertriebenen und Entrechteten) in the 1950s. Afterwards, they had taken on that party's special concern with those having to migrate westwards into the new Germany after World War II (Golova 2006). According to the citizenship view based on *ius sanguinis*, a person should be descended from a German family and characterised by German culture and language in order to be regarded as German. Applied to Russian-Germans, this political idea had to imply that the resettlers were not regarded as immigrants, but rather as ethnic Germans returning to their historical home (Joppke 2005).

The existence of major co-ethnic populations abroad is not a unique feature of Germany. Due to their colonial past or changing state territories, other European governments had to deal with the status of co-ethnic minorities (Groenendijk 2010; Jerónimo and Vink 2011). In-line with most of these countries, until the early 2000s Germany's citizenship regime was 'cultural affinity-based' (Waldrauch 2010), granting easy access to citizenship for the group of resettlers. However, unlike most European countries such as Greece, which granted a form reduced, quasi-citizenship status (Groenendijk 2010), ethnic Germans received full citizenship almost upon arrival leading to the feeling of holding a specialised group status among resettlers. Meanwhile, the German citizenship regime remained restrictive towards all non-ethnic Germans until 2000 (Joppke 2005).

Politically, the fact that many Russian-Germans were Christian was an important marker of their identity and naturally aligned this group with the Christian Democrats. Furthermore, resettlers' strong conservative stances on 'Germanness' due to their

socialisation as contested minority in the USSR as well as feelings of gratefulness (Golova 2006) drove them towards the Christian Democrats. Finally, the special relationship between the Christian Democrats and the Russian-Germans was personalised by chancellor Helmut Kohl, who made very clear statements about the unrestricted welcome of resettlers since the late 1980s. Not surprisingly, the Christian Democratic government was the greatest beneficiary of the resettler vote. While data for the 1990s is lacking, based on an accumulation of national survey data from 2002, Wüst (2004) reports that no less than 73 per cent of all naturalised citizens from the former Soviet Union showed a voting intention for the Christian Democrats.

However, as a reaction to the increased inflow of resettlers (400,000 alone in 1990) and to a more critical public opinion on immigration in general, the Kohl government finally changed its policy of unrestricted welcome. Already in 1992, as the result of an ‘asylum compromise’ with the Social Democrats, an annual ceiling of 226,000 resettlers allowed to enter Germany was introduced. In 1993, it was also made more difficult for citizens of non-Soviet Union countries to claim resettler status. Finally, with the beginning of the coalition of the Social Democrats and the Green Party in 1998, much harder language tests were introduced for immigrants claiming German citizenship as part of a general citizenship reform in 2000 (Wüst 2004). While this reform signalled that Germany had become a country of immigration – introducing elements of *ius soli* into German law, and for the first time also addressing questions of immigrant integration – it also made no exceptions for resettlers as far as mandatory language tests and questions of integration were concerned. Consequently, the emerging German integration regime decoupled ethnicity and citizenship and severely limited the once privileged legal status of resettler (Joppke 2005). This new policy approach, combined with the increasing opening up of Germany to all kinds of immigration from the early 2000s, led to resettlers and their political concerns being of limited importance in discussions about immigration and integration policy in Germany.

However, in 2015–16, this changed, and media coverage on Russian-Germans have increased sharply since. Now, the public interest lies in their electoral behaviour in the sub-national and federal elections of 2017, elections in which the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ having started in 2015 was the by far most important issue for both voters and parties. For voters, migration and integration had overwhelmingly become the most important problem in 2017 – compared with only being the 12th most important of problem in 2013 (*Berliner Morgenpost*, September 18, 2017). German political parties, most importantly the government coalition of CDU, CSU and Social Democrats, already reacted to the growing numbers of asylum seekers entering Germany by a set of restrictive policy measures. They included a refugee deal with Turkey, the declaration of ‘safe sending countries’ with limited chances for asylum in Germany, and tougher demands for immigrant assimilation.

During the election campaign, the governing parties CDU and SPD downplayed their own efforts as to restrictive immigration policy. Only the CSU focused on a more restrictive position and demanded a fixed upper limit for incoming refugees. This divided electoral appeal surely played in the hands of the AfD. Nearly exclusively addressing the issue of refugees in their populist anti-immigration campaign, the party was able to enter the new Bundestag with 12.6 per cent of all party-list votes.

Focussing on Russian-German voters, the 2017 Bundestag election showed few visible actions by the political parties to directly address this group. The CDU made a late effort by introducing an additional network for resettlers within its party just a few weeks before the election and included a rise of pension payments in their manifesto for resettlers who had started paying into the German system late in their working lives (*Siebenbürgische Zeitung*, July 17, 2017). The LINKE specifically mentioned in their programme its wish for a better relationship towards Russia by ending the governmental sanctions introduced as a reaction to the Crimean annexation (DIE LINKE 2017). The AfD followed the LINKE in these demands but additionally – and as the only German party – offered a consistent and visible effort to target Russian-German voters in the election campaign. Not only did the party translate its election programme into Russian (*Berliner Zeitung*, June 29, 2016), it also emphasised that it has its own party network for ‘Russian-Germans in the AfD’ and targeted Russian-Germans specifically with election posters and social media campaigns. The AfD also nominated six candidates with a Russian-German background and confirmed at several campaign events that it saw Russian-Germans as ethnic Germans and therefore explicitly avoided referring to them as immigrants (*SPIEGEL*, September 9, 2017). Thus, after years of relative silence, Russian-Germans were clearly back on Germany’s political and electoral agenda.

### 3. Theoretical framework

The political history of resettlers from the Soviet Union leads to a rare combination of characteristics defining Germany’s largest group of immigrant voters. Not only did they consider themselves as ethnic Germans, they were also granted citizenship and voting rights immediately after their arrival. Finally, they played a special role in German electoral politics as they traditionally showed very high support for the Christian Democrats, instead of preferring left-wing parties as we would generally expect from immigrant voters (Bird, Saalfeld, and Wüst 2011).<sup>3</sup> While the few existing studies on the political preferences of resettlers already demonstrated a declining CDU/CSU affiliation among younger cohorts (Wüst 2004), there are first indications that this trend is now accelerating (Kroh and Tucci 2010; Sachverständigenrat für Integration und Migration 2016). The potential consequence is an increasing potential support for the AfD leading to the puzzling pattern that immigrants might support an openly anti-immigrant party. How can we make sense of these patterns? More precisely, how can we address the questions (1) What initially drove the support of Russian-Germans for the Christian Democrats? (2) Is this support in decline, and if so, why, and (3) Are the Russian-Germans turning to the Radical Right, and if so, why?

In order to answer these questions, we need a theoretical framework allowing us to analytically disentangle the vote choice of resettlers. Electoral research provides us with plenty of theoretical approaches, and in the following discussion we will focus on the most prominent among these: the *Michigan model*. According to this model, long-term party identification affects voter choice directly, as well as indirectly, through political issue and candidate orientations (Campbell et al. 1960). While the Michigan model has been applied to the study of native voters for decades, it is an open empirical question whether it is also useful for explaining the vote choice of immigrant voters.<sup>4</sup> Theoretically,

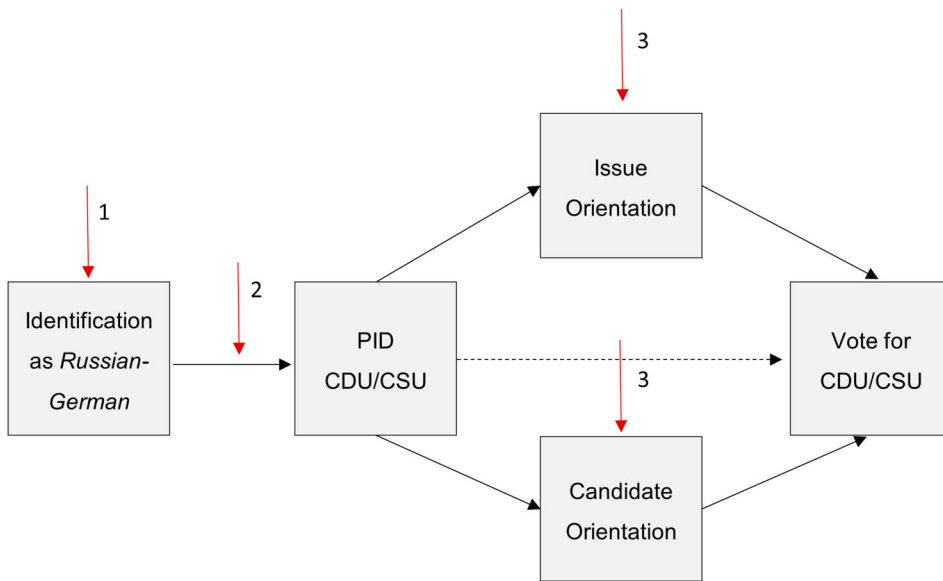
the application to immigrant voters seems less problematic for short-term political issues and candidate orientations. However, the application of the Michigan school's core theoretical concept – party identification – to the group of immigrant voters seems more problematic. Party identification is defined as a long-standing, relatively stable psychological bond with a political party, mainly acquired during primary socialisation and substantively transmitted within the family. It might therefore be asked how immigrants whose parents were not born and socialised in the new host country might develop party identification and pass it on to their children.

While previous studies have already shown that resettlers *did* have a strong party identification with the Christian Democrats at the millennial turn (see Wüst 2004), the reasons for this have rarely been analysed in a systematic way.. While personal experiences with German politics can be expected to play a role, we argue that the group experiences of resettlers are decisive for explaining their traditionally strong affiliation to the CDU/CSU (Schönwälder 2009). In this view, resettlers hold a strong group consciousness, motivated by a combination of their ethnic identity and common immigration experience. Not only had resettlers lived in quite isolated, ethnically defined enclaves in former Russia for decades, they also shared a common experience of being discriminated against by the government of the Russian and later Soviet Union *because* of their German ethnic identity. While such experiences are known to greatly increase group consciousness (Diehl and Blohm 2001) as well as traditional value-orientations (Inglehart and Baker 2000), first-generation resettlers specifically were exposed to them twice. Not only had they been discriminated against for being German in the Soviet Union, they were also regarded as being Russians by large parts of the native German population when they moved to Germany in the 1990s (Steinbach 2004). In both contexts, resettlers thus found themselves as being part of a minority and not (fully) accepted as being part of the ethnically defined majority population.

It is thus understandable that questions of ethnic identity have a very special meaning for resettlers. It is very important to them to be accepted as Germans, and not as Russians now living in Germany – and more than any other party, the Christian Democrats under Helmut Kohl put forward this view by stressing the role of German descent in being regarded as a German citizen. We thus suspect that the issues surrounding their German identity and descent – *ius sanguinis*, the policy of unrestricted welcome in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the granting of immediate citizenship status – are the foundations of the strong emotional attachment of resettlers to the Christian Democrats as expressed by party identity. At the same time, we expect that short-term issues touching questions of ethnicity were very salient to resettlers. Also, we expect that resettlers were aware of political candidates from their own group, as they might expect these candidates to be more motivated to represent their group's political interests. Taken together, we have thus arrived at a refined version of the Michigan model ready for the analysis of resettlers. This model is presented in Figure 1.

The adapted model covers the core aspects of the standard Michigan model: short-term issues and candidate orientations as well as long-term party identification and identification with the social group of resettlers. Addressing the first of our research questions, we relate each of these factors to the resettlers' vote choice for the Christian Democrats. Addressing potential changes in party support among the group of resettlers – away





**Figure 1.** Updated Michigan model as applied to resettlers' vote choice for the CDU/CSU.

from the Christian Democrats and (maybe) towards the AfD – we see three possible places for this in the causal chain.

Firstly, and in the case that identification as resettlers is such an important driver of party affiliation as we expect, this *group identification might be in decline*. In a way, the strong identification with ethnic Germanness was probably dying out as cohorts of first generation resettlers, for whom this identification was part of their defense strategy in the Soviet Union, are themselves passing away. For those still alive, we expect identification as resettlers or Russian-Germans to be much more pronounced in older voters with their own immigration experience but to be of less relevance for resettlers who migrated at a very young age (1.5th generation).<sup>5</sup> Young resettlers are partly or even completely socialised in Germany and might thus view themselves as being Germans much more than viewing themselves as being Russian-Germans. At the same time, and only very recently, Russian-Germans are back on the media agenda and their arrival is often compared with the recent inflow of refugees, starting in 2015 (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 11, 2016). Such framing might well result in a more salient identification as resettlers or Russian-Germans among both older and younger cohorts. Thus, we will be very attentive to whether our interviewees indeed compare themselves to recent refugees and asylum seekers in order to construct themselves as a group.

Secondly, there is the possibility that *group identification is still alive but becomes less relevant as a linkage to the Christian Democrats*. The immigration experiences of most resettlers are now more than two decades old, making any kind of gratitude to the CDU/CSU for its policies of the 1990s much less relevant. While older, first generation resettlers might still reward today's CDU/CSU for the politics of welcome of the (early) Kohl governments, those who came of political age later might have become less enchanted with the Christian Democrats. Also, resettlers might be aware of the far less welcoming policies of the later Kohl governments, the limited role of ethnicity and



descent for today's Christian Democrats' immigration policy, or the fact that the CDU/CSU now shows little effort to acknowledge resettlers as a distinct voter group. All of this might have limited the traditional role of the CDU/CSU as the group party for Russian-Germans. At the same time, voters strongly identifying as Russian-Germans might be more open to a political party explicitly addressing them and still highlighting their once special group status based on their German ethnicity, strictly separating them from guest workers and the recently arrived asylum seekers. As we have seen, the AfD showed great efforts at doing exactly that. We will thus pay attention to any evidence that our interviewed Russian-Germans are aware and open for this strategy.

Thirdly, *short-term factors such as issue and candidate orientations might explain the party support of resettlers*. While we will make use of our exploratory approach and let our interviewees themselves state the issues most important to them, we will also be very aware of issues related to their status as resettlers. These issues might be Germany's immigration and integration policy, anti-immigrant sentiments, discrimination, or the recent inflow of refugees into Germany – i.e. issues considered to have a predominantly cultural connotation (Ignazi 1992). The 'refugee crisis' has been by far the most salient political issue in German politics recently and has also played a decisive role in the rise of the AfD, which follows a strategy of strictly closed borders. If we see any support for this party among our interviewed resettlers, we will thus try to determine whether this support is driven less by questions of identity or more by anti-immigration policy preferences in the group of resettlers who are driven by concerns about the effects of recent immigration. Even if party identification towards the CDU/CSU is still present, resettlers might deviate from this long-term affiliation and temporarily turn to the AfD as this party better accommodates their immigration-critical preferences. Finally, we are interested in any candidate-related evaluations. While we are open to any statements here, we are especially interested in those relating to Angela Merkel (being not only the chancellor but also the party leader of the CDU). We are also interested whether our interviewees were aware of any Russian-German candidates or whether they were upset about the fact that in the then-sitting German parliament there was only one representative of this origin, compared to 11 candidates with a Turkish migration background (Hoffmann, Pross, and Ataman 2013).

#### 4. Data and methods

Guided by our propositions, we conducted several focus group interviews with resettlers in early 2017. Focus group objectives are to bring together participants to talk about a topic of interest to the researchers. The participants must be selected such that they can talk together using the same language, concepts or social codes (Barbour 2007). This means that there must be some form of similarity within the group. In our case, this similarity stems most importantly from all participants being German citizens who have migrated from the Soviet Union or one of its successor states. For each single group, we also selected participants according to their age. The group's composition thus facilitates easier communication around specific experiences (Bohnsack, Przyborski, and Schäffer 2006).

Compared to standardised random-sample surveys, focus groups have the advantage that researchers can be much more confident about the validity of what they are measuring as they can flexibly adjust their moderation behaviour to suit specific group dynamics.

Compared to semi-structured or narrative single interviews, focus groups benefit from the multiple stimuli that participants are exposed to over the course of the discussion. Also, focus groups allow not only the measurement of what people think, but also how their thinking and verbalisation depend on the group dynamics. The fluidity, ambivalence, non-attitudes and complexity of individuals and their political minds are easier to measure in focus groups than in single interviews. Therefore, this qualitative technique is often used either for exploration or for process tracing to gain a better understanding of a certain causal chain. Their collection is part of an inductive strategy that puts a new theoretical model with some testable implications as the final desirable outcome.

For this study, the data stem from transcripts of four focus groups of five to six participants that were conducted between February and June 2017 in the cities of Duisburg and Cologne (for descriptive statistics of the 22 participants see the Online-Appendix, Table A1). Three of the groups were artificially composed, meaning that the participants had not known each other before the discussion. One group consisted of participants aged 60 and older (focus group 3) who were members of an amateur choir and who regularly saw each other for choir practice. All participants had migrated to Germany themselves, some as adults (1st generation), some as adolescents, and about two thirds of all participants did so at age 12 or younger (1.5th generation). The participants had migrated from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. All were of ethnic German descent and held German citizenship; about 20 per cent held dual citizenship. The participants were recruited in a multitude of ways, such as various advertisements and postings, and also by word of mouth, in both German and Russian. Volunteers could take part in a German-speaking or a Russian-speaking focus group, but all chose the former over the latter. The focus group participants filled out a questionnaire before they took part in a conversation of between 80 and 100 minutes. As expected, the participants were not representative of the population of Germans of Soviet descent. Most importantly, females were over-represented and participants were better educated, younger and politically more interested than the group as a whole. The focus group participants covered a broad range of ages from 20 to 79 years, with a median age of 27. Religious affiliation also varied, and included people without religious affiliation, as well as Protestants and Christian Orthodox.

The discussions were moderated by the first two authors of this article. We used a series of stimuli to efficiently guide the discussion. The stimuli were revised and adapted after each focus group to take advantage of our updated knowledge. Among the stimuli were: a graph with actual data comparing the levels of party identification of resettlers with those of native voters; an exercise in which participants had to sort statements about the meaning of 'being German' from most to least important; a fictitious vignette of a politically disenchanted resettler voter; and questions on the participants' assessment of parties and politicians in Germany.

The discussions were audio- and video-taped and later transcribed. We quote the participants' anonymised answers and provide information on gender and a five-year age-range. We employ qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012) on this textual material and inductively developed a catalogue of code categories from it. When we noticed a certain level of saturation, we stopped developing further codes and consolidated a code-book of 28 codes (see the Online-Appendix, Table A2). Once the coding was finished, we conducted the code-based analysis, requiring us to carefully read through the codings in

their inner context (the immediate episode of the discussion) to concentrate on the essence of the group's discussion that we present in the empirical section.

## 5. Empirical analysis

### 5.1. Group identification

We begin our analyses with statements related to group identification, for which we differentiate between the self-description of being 'German' in contrast to identifying with the group of 'resettlers', 'Russian-Germans', or the respective country of origin. In all four groups, specific parts of resettler history were mentioned as being formative of a common identity: the offer of Katharina II to come to Russia; how they continued speaking German within their community; the Russification in the Soviet Union after World War II, and the transmission within the family that Germany is their historical home. This learned history clearly constitutes today's identification as being a resettler.

Concerning a specific resettler lifestyle or resettler values and beliefs, participants mentioned language first and foremost. With other resettlers in our discussions, they frequently changed between Russian and German or used certain phrases that exist in Russian but cannot be properly translated into German. One participant (IV.3, Woman, 20–24 years) described her own ineptitude to express certain images and puns in German despite her fluency in the language. As most resettlers in Germany were socialised in the Soviet Union or its successor states, participants mentioned that, compared to native Germans, other values dominated their education and that many '*still live the values from over there [Russia]*' (I.3, Woman, 30–34 years). In addition, cultural differences between resettlers and native Germans were also mentioned, even if these were rarely stated in a detailed way and might not be instantly understood by Germans:

[There are] cultural differences between Germans and Russian-Germans. I have, for example, when I talk with friends, with Russian-German friends about some things that happen in the family, they know what I mean. These are the same things. (I.3, Woman, 30–34 years)

Other participants mentioned that it is especially important to their parents to live in a way they regard as German, which seems different from their perception of the way they lived in their countries of origin: '*[my mother] lives in a very German way and does not like it if you behave otherwise or do not want to assimilate*' (II.2, Woman, 25–29 years).

Next to specific values, discrimination experiences are an integral part of the resettler identity. These experiences were shared by both older and younger interviewees and were related to both their country of origin and to Germany. The older participants mentioned how negatively they had been perceived as being Germans in the Soviet Union, stressing that these experiences are still relevant to them and seeing this as a line of demarcation between resettlers and native Germans: '*This is the reason why another German might not understand us. Because a German in Russia was always – in the subconscious – of a Russian a negative example. A negative subject*' (III.3, Man, 65–69 years). Once they arrived in Germany discrimination did not end. Both older and younger participants referred to episodes in their lives when they had not been accepted as Germans by the native population. Here, older participants pointed to experiences during their immigration and already compared this to today's immigrants: '*we had huge problems entering the*

country. And other people have it really easy. They are simply waved through' (III.3, Man, 65–69 years). Furthermore, their job and training qualifications as well as university degrees had often not been officially acknowledged, and some participants had to work in lower-level jobs because of this (*'It is a pity that learned and studied people have to work as cleaners. And I know a lot of academics that work as cleaners'*, III.2, Woman, 60–64 years), whereas the situation of acknowledging degrees had become much more standardised since. In addition, younger participants pointed to discrimination experiences in school: *'in elementary school I was ... always the Russian. Back in Kazakhstan we were always the Germans'* (I.3, Woman, 30–34 years), *'and then you come to Germany, where you think, yes, now I am a German and then they say that you are a foreigner'*, (IV.1, Woman, 25–29 years). This unique situation – being perceived as foreigners both in their country of origin and then also in Germany – is seen as an important part of resettlers' group identity:

We are neither Germans in the sense of the native German that was born here and raised since generations. Neither are we Russians. That were born there, but never fully had the mentality and have it. We are something third. Something between. We are a symbiosis of two cultures. (III.3, Man, 65–69 years)

To sum up, we can see that identifying as a resettler or a Russian-German prevailed in our groups and was traced back to a shared history, common values, and discrimination experiences. Such references were made by both older and younger participants and seemed to reflect a common group identity. However, there were seemingly also cohort differences in the degree and nature of ethnic identification among our participants. Among the participants of our oldest focus group aged 60 and older, every interviewee expressed a strong identification as feeling German compared with less than half of the participants in the other three groups who refer to themselves mainly as Russian-Germans, some even feeling that they were Russians/Ukrainians/Kazakhs etc. While this might seem counter-intuitive, we explain the older resettlers' strong sense of feeling German as a result of their experiences in the Soviet Union and as an integral part of their lifelong identity, which they held on to even in a context in which being German meant facing significant disadvantages. For younger resettlers, discrimination experiences in Germany worked in a different direction, making them identify more strongly as being Russian-Germans who are not fully accepted as being part of the majority population.

In any case, reactions both by older and younger participants lead us to conclude that resettlers' group identity is still alive – maybe even stronger in the younger cohorts. Therefore, we would refrain from putting forward the proposition of a declining group identity as an explanation for changing political preferences for a test beyond our participant group.

## 5.2. Group identity as a linkage to political parties

Previous studies showed a high share of Christian-Democrat partisans and corresponding vote choice for the CDU/CSU among resettlers. Indeed, when asked to recall their voting decision in 2013, nearly all of the older participants reported voting for one of the Christian Democratic parties. However, only 5 out of 16 younger participants stated feeling

close to the CDU/CSU nowadays. Thus, as with group identity, we observe cohort differences between older and younger resettlers.

We had suspected that the linkage between resettlers and the Christian Democrats might be founded on a general feeling of gratitude for the chance to immigrate to Germany. Indeed, when we talked about this, especially participants of the older focus group mentioned that they were grateful to the CDU/CSU, and to the then-chancellor Helmut Kohl in particular:

I think, the Russian-Germans, why they are in favour of the CDU/CSU, because it was also Helmut Kohl at the top, in power, when the Russian-Germans ... , [when] the border was opened. And then the Russian-Germans could come to Germany. And that counts. (III.3, Man, 65–69 years)

Younger participants corroborate such reasons of gratitude for their parents and older relations, e.g. *'my great-aunt once said, Kohl, he brought us to Germany ... [I] have not experienced that myself, but we have relatives [...], they have a sense of gratefulness'* (IV.1, Woman, 25–29 years). However, at the same time they denied these feelings for themselves: *'Therefore I am really glad that I am here. But I am not of the opinion that I have to be grateful towards the CDU'* (IV.3, Woman, 20–24 years). Quite the contrary, younger participants assume that this founding moment for the relationship between resettlers and the Christian Democrats might also be traced back to chance and they speculated that if another party had been in government at that time, resettlers might well feel close to that party nowadays:

But I mean, the programme [re-immigration process] could have been from the SPD or the Greens or from Lilac/Purple [any other party, the authors], whatever. And then you would probably feel connected to this party. (IV.2, Woman, 25–29 years)

To sum up, we observe a strong feeling of gratitude among these resettlers that still links them to the Christian Democrats. This linkage is still strong among older resettlers who remember their own immigration and – while not shared – it also not forgotten among younger participants. However, younger resettlers see little reason to thank the Christian Democrats for policies of the past. Thus, while we see that the emotional attachment of resettlers towards the Christian Democrats is declining among younger participants, it is noteworthy to add that we observed no statements in our interviews in which there was any form of emotional attachment towards the AfD. However, we found such evidence for short-term orientations, to which we turn next.

### 5.3. Political issues and candidate orientations

Finally, we explore whether short-term factors may affect the linkage between resettlers and the Christian Democrats. We start with political issues. In response to an open-ended question about the most important problems facing Germany today, the three most cited topics were immigration (9), right-wing populism (5) and German foreign policy towards Russia (3). Only very few (2) put forward (rising) social inequality as a problem. Thus, we see that immigration policy was a very important topic for our participants. Whereas we can expect the majority of the population to view similar topics as salient, the relationship with Russia was likely to be more specific to the resettler group.

The resettlers' interest in Russia dominated over the interest in any other post-Soviet state; even those with roots in Kazakhstan hardly had an interest in Kazakh politics. This seems to be due to the political domination of Russia in the region and its arguably stronger importance for German politics.

Participants in our focus groups made several statements about the problem they see as the most important, i.e. immigration, and especially the number of asylum seekers. Most of these statements reflected skepticism. Interestingly, when talking about recent immigration to Germany, both older and younger participants referred to their identification as Russian-Germans, contrasting themselves with refugees from Syria, Iraq, Eritrea, etc. Thus, the issue of immigration triggered a reaction in terms of identity. When comparing their own immigration process to Germany with that of current refugees, participants referred to differences and sometimes mentioned that these differences are judged as being unfair by some (III.3, Man, 65–69 years).

Resettlers also provided several reasons why they saw themselves as different from other migrants and especially from Muslim refugees. First, they were convinced that they integrated much more easily into German society, due to their mostly Christian denomination: (*'but still, we are Christians, and for sure we are closer to Germans.'* IV.5, Woman, 25–29 years). When comparing themselves to recent immigrants, they also believed that their own mentality was closer to the native German population, and that they could not be told apart physically from other Germans (I.3, Woman, 30–34 years). They also protested about being called 'refugees' themselves. To compare themselves to today's refugees, they often refer to their roots, that they were invited back to Germany, that they had German ancestry and therefore had much more legitimate reasons for being in Germany (*'somehow a legitimate reason, why you come from abroad to Germany.'* II.1, Man, 35–39 years). This line of reasoning closely resembles the long-dominant *ius sanguinis* approach of German immigration policy, which seemed to be of special importance to the participants. Furthermore, because of their German roots, our interviewees believed that they had a specific, culturally-based reason for immigrating to Germany – contrary to recent, mostly Muslim refugees. Furthermore, a sense of envy was reported that voiced concerns that today's refugees got so many resources on arrival whereas resettlers were treated differently (*'Of my circle of Russian-German acquaintances that is not really into the AfD, a lot say that the refugees nowadays get a lot of things which we didn't.'* II.4, Woman, 20–24 years).

Participants also referred to the importance of a good relationship between Germany and Russia under stress after the Crimean crisis in 2014 when Germany had backed the European Union sanctions. Especially older participants found this development hurtful (*'I feel so sorry that Russians and Germans move apart. Both countries had this historical connection and now ... this hurts'*, III.2, Woman, 60–64 years), but also younger participants referred to this as important for the group of resettlers (*'very important how the German politic acts towards Russia'*, II.1, Man, 35–39 years).

Linking the recent immigration policies of the German government to their own vote intention, several participants mentioned not being sure whether the CDU/CSU was still their party of choice anymore. This uncertainty can be traced back to Angela Merkel's decision in 2015 when she agreed to grant refugees waiting on the border to Hungary entry to Germany: (*'Only what happened in 2015, has rather shaken my security, my personal belief in politics, Merkel especially.'* (III.3, Man, 65–69 years). This led to a feeling



of uncertainty about whether the CDU/CSU was still the right party to vote for in the 2017 German federal election, both among older and younger resettlers: *'But until today, I have voted for the CDU. This year, I do not know whom to vote for. And whether to vote at all or not. I am not sure,'* (III.6, Woman, 70–74 years), *'[ ... ] I was for the CDU. Have voted for it. [ ... ] But ... but there are so many buts.'* (IV.5, Woman, 25–29 years).

Disappointment with Angela Merkel's handling of the refugee crisis was also referred to something that led a lot of voters towards the AfD (I.1, Woman, 45–49 years), because this party was seen as the only one that opted for a much more restrictive handling of the situation (I.3, Woman, 30–34 years). According to some of our participants, the AfD's openly nationalistic programme appealed to resettlers because they had often been educated to hold patriotic views (I.1, Woman, 45–49 years) and were used to give support to their German identity (III.3, Man, 65–69 years). Also, the AfD's position towards an improvement of the foreign relationship with Russia, and the party's objective to end the economic sanctions against Russia, were both noticed and regarded as something that distinguished the AfD from the other German parties (IV.3, Woman, 20–24 years).

Candidates and their evaluation did not come up in our discussions as another potential short-term factor. Of the then-members of the Bundestag (2013–2017) only one was a resettler, and this candidate (a backbencher of the CDU) was only correctly identified by the older participants. With the exception of Angela Merkel, the younger participants did not mention any specific candidates. They also agreed that they would not vote for a party simply because one or several of their candidates had the same migration background. Participants of the older group mentioned that they would like to see a better representation by MPs with their background, especially as other migrant groups were seen as being represented better in the national parliament (III.2, Woman, 60–64 years). However, they also made clear that simply having the same origin as themselves would not be enough to vote for a candidate.

Knowing about the AfD's efforts to attract voters from this group, we exposed our focus group participants to a variety of stimuli and questions about this party. Because our group discussions were held in German, and therefore required a high level of language proficiency, the AfD approach to offer manifestos written in Russian was recognised but was also regarded as being of little help to the participants themselves. However, when they referred to other relatives, our interviewees stated that this might be helpful for some resettlers: *'But this is a language [Russian], that the party offers, which is understood to 100 per cent by them, and they can talk about the contents with their people in their environment,'* IV.3, Woman, 20–24 years. In addition, this might also lead to a sense of feeling appreciated by the AfD: *'[a] rather important point, that you feel valued and regarded by a party,'* (II.3, Man, 20–24 years). At the same time, our participants did not mention any of the AfD's candidates with a Russian-German background by name, except for the older group that could provide us with the name of a Russian-German candidate from the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. Thus, no attractive party leader or candidate seems to be relevant for the vote choice of our group, and we see no evidence that candidate orientations would be able to affect their vote.

Summing up the short-term factors, we see some evidence of a reorientation of resettlers away from the Christian Democrats. This is mainly caused by a critical assessment of the current government's migration policies and especially its handling of the recent refugee situation. In general, the resettlers named refugees as the most important



problem facing the country, which resembles the pattern for native voters. However, specific to resettlers are the comparisons of recent refugees with their own immigration experiences, pointing to things like appearance, personal history and cultural customs. In general, these comparisons led to the widespread view among our participants that refugees, especially Muslim refugees, were not as justified coming to Germany as the group of resettlers were. This critical stance towards recent immigration plays a role in the reorientation of some resettlers towards the AfD.

## 6. Conclusions

This article puts forward a qualitative content analysis of four focus groups that were carried out in the first half of 2017 among resettlers – ethnic Germans from the Soviet Union or its successor states. This exploratory analysis focused on group identities, political issues and candidate orientations in order to analyse the potential decline in the traditionally strong alignment of Russian-German voters with the Christian Democrats. It also asked if this decline might be replaced by a stronger affiliation towards Germany's newest party of the Radical Right, the AfD, as indicated by recent subnational election results.

Analytically distinguishing between these long- and short-term factors, we find no evidence for a declining resettler group identity. To the contrary, our participants report a strong sense of belonging to the group of resettlers or Russian-Germans. If anything, there is evidence for a stronger sense of feeling Russian-German among younger participants. Therefore, we rule out a declining group identity as an explanation for changing political preferences. In a representative survey study, we would hypothesise that ethnic identification as Germans rather than dual identification or Russian identification stagnates in younger, second-generation Russian-Germans. This would be a pattern that – in the long run – would run against a general trend towards assimilation.

However, the effect of this strong group identity on their personal vote intention seems weaker for younger than for older cohorts. While first generation resettlers are still grateful to the CDU and its policy of unrestricted welcome in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this emotional attachment seems to weaken for younger resettlers. Even if these younger cohorts still assess German politics through the lenses of their own group identity as Russian-Germans, this should make them more open towards political alternatives. We would expect the distribution of votes among the Russian-Germans is more similar now to the native voters than the old estimates suggested.

Regarding short-term factors, we find only very limited evidence for the expectation that candidates are of special importance for the vote choice of Russian-Germans. In contrast, both the salience of political issues as well as policy orientations play a role for the resettler vote, and here immigration and asylum policies are seen as by far the most important political issues. Foremost, the CDU/CSU's unpredictable handling of the refugee crisis in 2015 severely challenges the resettlers' emotional attachment to the Christian Democrats. Such a reaction can be identified for native German voters as well, but our participants furthermore draw a very sharp line of separation between themselves and recent refugees, seeing the latter as less justified to come and live in Germany. We would propose that the extent of anti-immigrant sentiments is higher among Russian-Germans than among native voters. In this context, the AfD seems to be regarded as a

suitable political alternative for some Russian-Germans, especially so as the party clearly addresses them as a relevant voter group and proposes to relax Germany's foreign policy towards Russia. While we still have to see how enduring this policy-motivated decline in support for the Christian Democrats will be (it could be a short-term effect or a long-lasting re-alignment of allegiances), xenophobia among immigrant voters thus appears to be a relevant area for further research. We would thus hypothesise that the share of the AfD would be higher among Russian-Germans than among native voters.

There are two obvious extensions of this line of research. The first is to conduct a quantitative survey with a randomly drawn sample from the group of Russian-Germans to test the hypotheses that we alluded at. This would allow us not only to explore potential causal mechanisms and get a sense of the heterogeneity of thinking among this group, but also of the magnitude of effects. The second is to replicate our analysis of Russian-Germans for other immigrant groups in Germany, especially for ethnic Germans from Romania or Poland. For them, a more conservative outlook than normally found among immigrants has been shown and could define the starting point for analysing whether the same or other mechanisms determine their allegiances to German right-wing parties. Since we are not aware of any special targeting by the AfD for these other groups, they would form a quasi-experimental control group 'as if the AfD treatment would not have occurred'.<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

1. We define voters with an immigrant background as those having German citizenship (the necessary condition to vote in national elections) but who have either immigrated on their own or who have at least one immigrant parent.
2. In contrast to 'resettler', which is a legal status in German law, the now more familiar 'Russian-Germans' is not a legal term.
3. One prominent explanation for the high support for left-wing parties among immigrants is their comparatively low socio-economic status. For Russian-Germans, previous studies indicate that this status is higher than for other immigrant groups but still significantly lower compared with the native German population (Worbs et al. 2013).
4. The studies by Wüst (2004) already point to the usefulness of the Michigan model to analyse immigrant voters in the German context.
5. For the concept of the 1.5 generation see Heath et al. (2013).
6. We thank one anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

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