

FAR RIGHT POPULISM BEYOND BORDERS AND PARTY POLITICS

The German Identitarian Movement and its
transnational advocacy network

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Und meinem Bruder, auf den ich sehr, sehr stolz bin.

ABSTRACT

In 2017, the far right populist, transnational movement “Generation Identity” (GI) embarked on an activist “mission” in the Mediterranean Sea to stop non-European migrants from reaching the European continent. This paper presents a study of how GI was able to do so, analysing the empowering network of support that evolved during the movement’s “Defend Europe” campaign. Its relevance arises from the globally growing assertiveness of populist actors, cooperating and shaping international politics together. However, studies on party politics and international interactions prevail in research on global populism - this paper is the first one to raise the question of how far right populist social movements interact in transnational networks. Applying a resource mobilization approach and drawing on transnational advocacy theory, I attempt to answer this question with a single case study on the German GI-branch’s networking activities during the Defend Europe campaign. The relational data collected shows that far right populists, too, engage in transnational advocacy efforts, and it appears that their populism does not visibly determine how their networks function. Rather, GI’s activism in “defensive mode” seems decisive for the movement’s transnational networking practices, limiting its possibilities to gain in political and societal influence.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland
DE	Defend Europe
DiEM25	Democracy in Europe Movement 2025
EU	European Union
GI	Generation Identity
IBD	Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland (Generation Identity Germany)
IBÖ	Identitäre Bewegung Österreich (Generation Identity Austria)
IGO	International governmental organization
IR	International relations
KKK	Ku Klux Klan
MPM	Moviment Patrijotti Maltin (Maltese Patriots Movement)
ND	Nouvelle Droite
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SNA	Social network analysis
TAN	Transnational advocacy network
QCA	Qualitative content analysis
QNA	Qualitative network analysis
2G-TAN	Second-generation transnational advocacy network

1 INTRODUCTION

We demand a future for our peoples in their homelands. We want to end massive immigration and islamization to Europe. We want secure borders and re-migration of illegals. [...] As long as Europe's leaders refuse to protect the European borders, the youth will stand up to protect them. (Defend Europe - Generation Identity 2017a)

In 2017, a European transnational youth movement called “Generation Identity” (GI) launched a campaign that triggered a wave of outrage sweeping across Europe. Activists from four of the movement’s national branches boarded a ship to “defend Europe” from people fleeing their home countries within the Middle East and North Africa. The aim of the campaign was to reveal and stop non-government organizations (NGOs) supposedly smuggling refugees. In the end, GI did not reveal that, but its populist and nationalist network, transcending borders and party politics. This paper draws a first picture of that network and its political power, opening up a new research field in between global populism studies and social movement research.

1.1 An era of global populism?

Since 2020, GI is slowly dissolving due to several of its national branches being either forbidden or monitored by state organizations, and banned from various social media platforms on the ground of their anti-democratic and racist protest forms (Nissen 2022, p. 240-241). Yet, their objective of “defending Europe” can be found in the agendas of several right-wing populist parties (Klinger et al. 2022; HOPE not hate 2019).

Over and above, such parties are more successful than ever before – not only in Europe. The last decade’s “populist wave” makes scholars wonder if we have entered an “era of global populism”, characterized by the increasing assertiveness of populist actors (and their aspirations) in almost all parts of the world (Stengel, MacDonald, and Nabers 2019, p.1; Wajner 2022, p.353). Right-wing populist parties are not longer watching (inter)national decision-making processes, they take part in them, ever so often shaping policies that affect global cooperations between states (Wajner 2022, p. 353).

Hence, scholars are once more confronted with the question of how and why those actors were able to claim positions of power, albeit now, analyses of seemingly independent actors in regional contexts do not suffice for an answer. The simultaneity of populist phenomena all over the world suggests their connectedness: to each other, as well as to a broader, enabling context. Thus, a new research agenda began to form at the nexus between global political science and populism studies. However, up until now, “a gap exists in the systematized

examination of populism’s inter- and transnational aspects” – one which Stengel et al. claim to be “quite problematic” (Stengel, MacDonald, and Nabers 2019, p. 5).

Most scholars participating in the debate on the “era of global populism” neglect the impact of populist social movements like GI, focusing solely on nation-specific demand and supply sides for populism in party politics (Heinze 2022).¹ They do so despite the premise that “the success of populist parties and movements depends on [their] transnational interaction, that is, how various national parties and movements are connected to each other” (Stengel, MacDonald, and Nabers 2019, p. 8).

With this paper, I revive that premise by asking: **how do far right populist social movements interact in transnational networks?** In search for answers, I studied the network that evolved during GI’s “Defend Europe” campaign, focusing on the relationships of the movement’s branch in Germany (*Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland*, IBD).

1.2 Research endeavours and structure of this paper

The subsequent analysis should pave the way for future studies on how populist actors use such networks to enlarge their political influence. Such studies are long overdue, given the fact that Keck and Sikkink found out as early as 1999 that the political assertiveness of “progressive” societal actors (for example feminist activists) depends – at least partly – on their transnational alliances (Keck and Sikkink 2014). Scholars have pointed out that this is likely to be true for conservative or “right-wing” activist groups as well, but few have striven towards assessing this hypothesis empirically (Bob 2013).²

Against this backdrop, I consider the following sub-questions as guiding this paper’s research interest: how do networking practises affect IBD’s capacities for political influence (for example in lobbying states)? How does its network influence IBD’s populist agenda? How does IBD’s populist agenda influence its choices of network-partners?

Leading towards the analysis that I carried out with those questions in mind, my paper is structured as follows. Subsequent to the introduction, I situate my research subject theoretically by discussing the scientific literature linked to its common theme. Thereby, I explain why I chose the TAN-approach to analyse IBD’s network during the “Defend Europe” campaign. The ensuing third chapter describes the methodological tools I chose to carry out my research in practise, referring to and touching upon several obstacles that I

¹ Within the relatively new discourse of global populism, most conducted studies thematise either “populist foreign policy” or populist leaders’ cooperation (Wajner 2022, p. 355).

² For few exceptions, see

encountered due to my focus on a far right movement. The subsequent analysis is divided into two main parts, the first one describing how IBD formed a, in parts populist, network by receiving and exchanging a plethora of resources during DE. In the analysis' second part, I illustrate the characteristics that are specific to this network, offering some explanations for its heterogeneous structure. The conclusion reconnects my findings with the discussed literature, presenting new research prospects that, as I will argue, deserve global populism scholars' full attention.

Before I dive deeper into explaining which relevant theoretical approaches and empirical insights my study draws on, I am going to briefly characterize IBD as a far right populist movement below, to provide background knowledge crucial for understanding the subsequent parts of this papers' study.

1.3 IBD – a nationalist, but transnational movement

The members of IBD, calling themselves “Identitarians”, describe their organization as a youth movement; this categorization has been prominent in most scientific accounts of its parent organization “Generation Identity” (GI) as well. In 2020, GI's existence was divided into 12 national branches, all founded separately and following their domestic agenda (Nissen 2020, p. 85). At the same time, GI's groups in France, Italy, Hungary, Germany, Austria (to name the ones that are most active) share an ideology, common aims and a transnational political space in which they cooperate and act together, as a unit. Put briefly, the GI manifests in the same networked structures as a social movement (Diani and McAdam 2009, p. 1), “in a sort of federation of entrenched local identities” (Zúquete 2018, p. 29).

This means that IBD, as well as the other GI-branches of GI, are “heirs to different national traditions” (Zúquete 2018, p. 37). Their key ideological stances reflect this interplay between regional and transnational organization. GI originated from the French *Nouvelle Droite* (ND) as its “direct-action arm” (Zúquete 2018, p. 27). The ND is considered a network itself, linking thinkers and associations aiming at “striking down the hegemonic western liberal-capitalist paradigm through cultural combat” (Zúquete 2018, p. 7), in favour of an *ethnopluralist* world. “Ethnopluralism” is GI's ideological foundation and the reality-concept that the movement's activists fight for. It purports that if peace is to be maintained, all people must stay in their ancestral countries, because they are too different to live side by side (Nissen 2020, p. 89). Against this backdrop, some scholars classified the GI-branches as neo-fascist and right-wing extremist organizations (Nissen 2022, pp. 90–91).

Like the ND, GI defines identity in a nationalistic sense, but the movement adds two more layers, one drawing attention to GI's local branches (regional identity), and another that pulls the movement back together (European identity) (Nissen 2020, p. 89). Therefore, Iden-

titarians conceive themselves as belonging to a region, nation and amalgamation of nations simultaneously, allowing them to follow, for example, different strategies while maintaining a common agenda (Dal 2022).

This agenda entails, next to its “ethnopluralist” core, white nationalist³, anti-Islam and populist elements. This is well illustrated by GI’s symbol, the Greek Lambda. GI chose this symbol in reference to the movie “300”, where it decorated the shields of Spartan soldiers fighting against a Persian army (Nissen 2020, p. 95). For the GI-branches, the Lambda represents their movement’s main cause: battling Islam in the name of “the majority of the Europeans”, who would otherwise be replaced (Nissen 2020, p. 95; Defend Europe - Generation Identity 2017b). In this sense, IBD is a nationalist, but transnational movement at the same time – deploying its activist (and as it turns out, populist) actions beyond borders and party politics.

3 In Hawleys words, “a white nationalist favors the complete separation of the races into separate states”, while often regarding “white people” as the “superior race” (Hawley 2017, p. 13).

2 RELEVANT THEORETICAL APPROACHES AND EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS

The interactions I am studying in this paper encompass three defining aspects: they feature actors beyond party politics (specifically social movements), transcend national borders and assume network-form(s). To my knowledge, no studies on populist political actors' interactions exist that tackle all of those aspects simultaneously. However, I identified research endeavours that reflect this paper's scientific problem partly, by including at least two of the above named aspects: how is populism transformed transnationally (Cleen, Moffitt, et al. 2020)? What is special about the transnational networks of far right social movements (Bob 2013)?

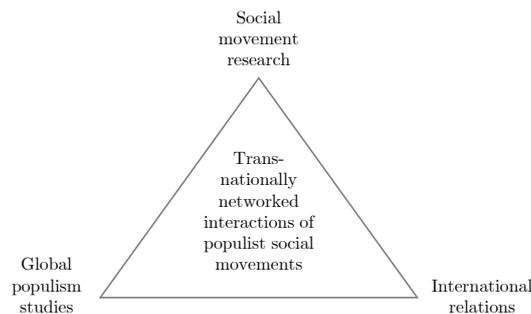


Figure 2.1: Theory triangle: positioning of research question

While the first question has been asked by scholars of global populism studies, the latter is situated in between research on social movements and international relations (IR). Figuratively speaking, my research subject lies in the midst of the triangular space those research fields build in connection to each other. Hence, I will draw from theoretical and empirical knowledge that has been produced in all of those fields for this paper's analysis.

In the following, I am going to discuss in detail how existing research on transnational populism and transnational networks of social movements structures my analysis. I do so in three steps: to begin, I am going to define populism for the purpose of my study, in order to bypass the analytical confusion that is linked to the term. Secondly, I will look at scholarly accounts of populism performed in transnational spaces. Thirdly, I will show that my paper's scientific problem is best understood in terms of the transnational advocacy network (TAN) approach. Thereby, I am going to discuss how researchers have studied TANs until now, focusing on resource mobilization theory and networking in digital spaces.

2.1 Populism as a discursive logic

After 130 years of discussions in- and outside academia, populism remains an “essentially contested concept”, being referred to as a discourse, ideology, style, strategy or syndrome (Mudde 2017, p. 27). Most differences left aside, scholars today can agree on populism’s core - its key quality which lets us identify phenomena as populist, whether they occur in the form of a politician’s strategy or a social movement’s agenda (Moffitt 2020, p. 10). In that sense, populists are those who construct two societal groups that are pitted against each other – a “people” and its repressive “elite” (Moffitt 2020, p. 28).

Throughout the academic struggle to find a common definition of populism beyond this core, the ideational approach has evolved as the most popular (Moffitt 2020, p. 12). Scholars who follow this approach understand populism as a “thin centered ideology” standing out by its flexibility, in that it can be combined with any other political tendency (Mudde 2017, p. 6). However, conceiving populism as an ideology alone steers the analytical focus away from its strategic, “as well as its material, performative and affective dimensions” (Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, p. 311). Since my research question relates to these dimensions more than to populism’s ideology, I am going to align my thesis’ analysis with Cleen’s and Stavrakakis’ definition of populism as a discursive and performative logic.

This approach strongly draws on its ideational counterpart in defining populism’s “minimal character” as the constructed power struggle between “people” and “elite” (Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, p. 311). However, instead of asking *what* characterizes this power struggle in specific cases, Cleen and Stavrakakis focus on *how* it is constructed and performed. Put briefly: populism as a discursive logic “is something that is done rather than a property of political actors” (Moffitt 2020, p. 24).¹ Thereby, the approach is especially applicable to my research aim – it enables me to analyse populist qualities regardless of the performing actors and their provenance, taking “a truly global set of cases into account” (Moffitt 2020, pp. 22–23).

Moreover, understanding populism as a discursive logic enables me to study my research question in a way that bypasses three biases within global populism research today. Firstly, the question of *how* actors construct a populist discourse includes the question of who (else) is involved in that process, encouraging scholars to look beyond actors within party politics. Overcoming the proceeding “electoralism” in populism research (Heinze 2022, p. 9) is overdue since “party system populism occasionally emerges as a corollary of its bottom-up

¹ For the sake of argumentative clarity, I still refer to “populists” when I mean actors that use populism “more or less in terms of frequency and intensity” (Moffitt 2020, p. 24).

incarnation”(Aslanidis 2017, p. 305) – the social movement.

Secondly, populism as a discursive logic can be clearly differentiated from other discursive elements like nationalism, by considering how their building blocks are articulated (Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, p. 314). As Cleen and Stavrakakis emphasize, populist discourses encompass vertical power relations (between “people” and “elite”), while national discourses evoke horizontal power relations (between “people” as nation and non-members of that nation) (Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, p. 312). Detaching populism from nationalism conceptually is a necessary first step to even consider the former’s relevance to the study of transnational phenomena. Empirically, this relevance has been proven. Studies on the Democracy in Europe Movement 2015 (DiEM25) show that populist discourses can be transnational themselves in that they are constructed around a, like in the case of DiEM25, “European people” (Moffitt 2020, pp. 17–18). Even if such a “move towards the transnational is not total, and [...] the national remains crucial” to how populist identities are discursively shaped, it opens up the way to acknowledge forms of populism that are transnationally performed.

Thirdly, while scholars often perceive populism as a fixed feature of an actor’s agenda or behaviour, Cleen’s and Stavrakakis’ definition lets room for exploring how populism changes and transforms in the global arena. For example, in the case of populist social movements interacting in transnational networks, several actors from various contexts might construct their perception of “the people” and “the elite” together, negotiating and changing the meanings of those identities.

This last point is especially relevant for this paper’s analysis because it implies that the way populist social movements interact transnationally is unique – that it affects, and is affected by, their populist discourse. Indeed, in their case-study of populist communication logics, Chatterje-Doody and Crilley found that “distinctions between ‘people’ and ‘elite’ are transnationally co-produced and circulated [...] amongst a range of actors” on media platforms – and thereby transformed (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley 2019, p. 74).

Taken together, the above discussed considerations on transnationally performed populist discourses enable me to concretise my research aim. The following questions, specific to my study’s case, arise: With what other kind of actors does IBD engage in a populist discourse and how? Does this discourse relate to domestic or transnational spaces or both? How do IBD’s constructions of “people” and “elite” and its network influence one another? And maybe most importantly: Are IBD’s interactions in a network beyond borders and party politics affected by a populist discourse at all? Clearly, answering these questions requires me to assess IBD’s networking activities first. In the following, I explain why I choose the TAN-approach to do so.

2.2 Transnational advocacy networks

So far, social science scholars have analysed networks either as structures or actors, the latter approach being the more prominent (Kahler 2009a, p. 5). Put briefly, networks-as-actors are “forms of coordinated or collective action aimed at changing international outcomes and national policies”(Kahler 2009b, p. 5). The agency ascribed to these types of networks allows for analyses of them as *intentional* structures. As argued above, my research question builds on the assumption that populist actors use transnational networks to assert political influence; hence, analysing IBD’s network as an actor fits the purpose of my research more than regarding it as mere incidental structure.

More so than other sub-fields of political science, research on IR has produced a broad catalogue of empirical analyses on networks-as-actors (Victor, Montgomery, and Lubell 2018, p.11), with one research strand reaching beyond party politics. Scholars studying human rights noticed that in “a very basic sense, human rights advocacy is networked advocacy” (Murdie and Polizzi 2018, p. 716). More concretely: advocates use alliances with other actors to exchange resources that then can be used to promote specific norms in the global arena (Murdie and Polizzi 2018, p. 716).

The political scientists Keck and Sikkink developed arguably the most influential work on how such advocates cooperate transnationally. In their book *Activists beyond Borders*, they describe how NGOs form transnational networks to promote specific causes, ideas and norms (Keck and Sikkink 2014, p. 8). Keck and Sikkink call those alliances transnational advocacy networks (TANs), and found empirical evidence for their political influence, arguing that activists use their transnational networks to “change the behavior of states and of international organizations” (Keck and Sikkink 2014, p. 2).

They do so, as Keck and Sikkink demonstrate, by using information – which can be powerful in that it alters the circumstances of policy making (Keck and Sikkink 2014, p. 16). For example, TANs might generate new information to make their claims morally relevant, or re-frame it to reach distant but influential, possible supporters (Keck and Sikkink 2014, p. 16). Other than how TANs work, Keck and Sikkink describe what makes them identifiable specifically as networks engaging in transnational advocacy. TANs, they argue, “participate in domestic and international politics simultaneously, drawing upon a variety of resources, as if they were part of an international society” (Keck and Sikkink 2014, p. 4). Finding out whether IBD is involved in a similar type of network could indicate if populist social movements actually use transnational alliances and their joint “soft power” to gain political influence (Acosta 2012, p. 166).

Even though Keck’s and Sikkink’s book has been cited more than 18.700 times in academia

alone², one apparently finds no empirical uptake of their TAN-approach in global populism research. Nevertheless, I find that TANs are forms of networked organisation that are especially beneficial for populist aspirations out of two reasons. Firstly, actors who promote populist ideas try to “interpellate and mobilise subjects, to formulate demands and contest existing regimes” (Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, p. 311). As TANs have been used for the exact same purposes, I appraise their formation within populist political tendencies as likely. Moreover, both populists and actors embedded in TANs claim “moral authority” – the belief that certain political claims have to be put into practice to ensure, for example, human well-being (Acosta 2012, p. 152).

Secondly, populist actors might feel the need to form transnational networks in order to pressure their governments “from outside” (Keck and Sikkink 2014, p. 12) by making use of their allies political influence, considering that they construct an “elite” that disregards the will of their “people”. This might even be the case if those identities are constructed to fit transnational contexts – in fact, actors might engage in TANs out of that exact reason, namely because they shape a populist discourse together.

Scholars might argue that a certain type of populist social movement is indeed likely to form TANs – a movement that combines populist discourse with a leftist (or rather “progressive”) ideology. After all, Keck and Sikkink exclusively studied TANs promoting human rights, environmental and women’s rights norms (Keck and Sikkink 2014, pp. 11–12). Far right movements have received little attention in connection with the TAN-approach in general (Bob 2013, p. 71).

However, this does not point to an empirical fact, but to another gap in current research on TANs. Indeed, on many global concerns, left-wing activists are confronted with opposition from right-wing activist networks (Bob 2013, p. 71). Bob explains the logic behind this “rivalry” within transnational advocacy as follows: as “one set of advocates promotes new solutions, those very solutions create problems for other groups, threatening to disrupt existing [...] values.” (Bob 2013, p. 78). Moreover, those “counter-movements” often use their enemies’ strategies to promote their causes (Bob 2013, p. 77). Therefore, I argue that far right populist movements can be expected to form TANs, too.

The question that remains unanswered (for both cases) is: in what way? Below, I debate this question from two perspectives, looking at how actors engage in transnational advocacy by exchanging resources and connecting digitally. Thereof, I derive the categories that structure my analysis of IBD’s transnational network.

² Number derived from the belonging search on Google Scholar.

2.2.1 TANs as resource mobilizers

At the heart of the TAN approach is the idea that the connections between the actors that make up TANs help improve advocacy outcomes. [... The] network provides resources for the actors involved that they would not have if they had not been connected. (Murdie and Polizzi 2018, pp. 718–719)

Put simply, Murdie’s and Polizzi’s argument means that resource exchanges are what TANs are good for – they are the reason actors engage in transnational advocacy together, and decisive for how influential those actors are in triggering political change, individually and as-networks. The argument belongs to the so-called resource mobilization approach, which arguably puts my research interest into focus best precisely because it enables me to analyse elements of IBD’s network that determine its political effects.

According to McCarthy and Zald, assessing how social movements gather resources encompasses three aspects: the “variety of resources [provided by organizations and individuals] that must be mobilized”, the “linkages of social movements to other groups”, and the “dependence of movements upon external support for success” (McCarthy and Zald 1977, pp. 1213–1220). Against this backdrop, I define network-ties for the purpose of this paper’s analysis as ties (or “linkages”) between actors that exist and persist through resource exchanges. Following McCarthy and Zald, I consider those network-ties as substantial only if the resources transferred are used in subsequent actions – if they “must be mobilized” for a movement to pursue its goals.

Looking at the types of resources flowing through networks of social movements, DeMars identified four as particularly relevant for transnational advocacy endeavours (and, subsequently, my study of those): normative frames, political responsibility, material resources and information (DeMars 2005, p. 51). One of them appears to be particularly important for the formation of a TAN-like network – constituting a focal point of this paper’s analysis. More concretely: with normative frames, DeMars refers to tactics and approaches to advocacy that are shared within a network to enhance its influence (Murdie and Polizzi 2018, p. 719). He argues that norms, as “aspirations for an imaginary future”, bring NGOs and other actors together when they could not be united otherwise – as constitutive forces (DeMars 2005, p. 51).

In other words: “If the network fails to achieve the aspirations, nevertheless the aspirations create the network”. This points to the fact that the network and its resource flows are constitutive of *each other*, bound in a twofold relationship that regards careful analytical consideration. For one thing, the resources exchanged determine the network’s included actors, its scope and depth (or rather the strength of its ties). On the other hand, the network itself – its structure – determines how those resources are mobilized. For example, a TAN with high density (a lot of “nodes”) might provide a social movement with more and

different resources than one with weak ties to only a few nodes.

The way how resources are mobilized in TANs has significantly changed since Keck and Sikkink published their book in 1998. Advocates today are able to use new communication technologies that emerged amidst intensifying globalization processes. (Bennett 2005, p. 213). In the following, I explain how scholars account for those changes, discussing what they discovered while studying digital networking activities of two GI-branches and how those findings reconnect to my research subject.

2.2.2 2G-TANs: networking in digital realms

Before I dive deeper into how digital communication has changed advocacy practises, it is important to note that the term *networking* has a particular meaning when used to describe activities in digital spaces: first and foremost, it refers to actors connecting via social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or Telegram. Those “globally accessible platforms” have changed our ways of communication (Klinger et al. 2022, p. 1) – so much so that Bennett questions if the TAN-approach of Keck and Sikkink is still applicable to today’s transnational advocacy practises. In short, he argues that due to online communication, a second generation of TANs (2G-TANs) emerged, organized from below, rather than build around an NGO as the network’s central benchmark. Derived thereof, Bennett understands 2G-TANs as more loosely organized than TANs.

His considerations are relevant for this paper’s research since the selected case study concerns a movement that came into existence on social media platforms (Speit 2018, p. 16); “GI’s online activism is key to understanding the spread of their messages and their attempts to gain attention”. Indeed, scholars found that IBD and the Austrian GI-branch (*Identitäre Bewegung Österreich*, IBÖ) use social media platforms to network, thereby revealing specific characteristics of how those networks operate. The results of their studies suggest that Bennett’s arguments are not only empirically accurate, but that they point to a type of TAN that enhances its political influence through online networking.

Thus, Klinger et al. discovered that the German right-wing populist party AfD adopted stances of IBD’s anti-immigration campaign despite its formal dissociation with the movement (Klinger et al. 2022, p. 13). Tracking content flows between media outlets and activist profiles on YouTube and Twitter, Klinger et al. argue that intermediary networks “concealed and disguised the extremist origins of the campaign and charged it with political legitimacy” (Klinger et al. 2022, p. 13). IBD and AfD did not need to communicate directly to exchange normative and ideological stances; instead, they used far right media outlets as “brokers and bridges” (Klinger et al. 2022, p. 14) to align their agendas. Hence, IBD increased its political influence by establishing hidden ties to a political party, that, in turn, emerged

from informal relationships to far right media sites (Klinger et al. 2022, p. 15). Those “intersecting networks [...] require little or no formal organization”(Klinger et al. 2022, p. 15). Hence, they resemble (at least partly) what Bennett refers to as second generation advocacy activism.

Similarly, Knüpfer et. al analysed the reach of GI Austria’s (*Identitäre Bewegung Österreich*, IBÖ) “120 decibels” campaign via the social media platform Twitter. They found evidence for not only national, but transnational network ties evolving with actors disseminating the campaign’s content. These ties, Knüpfer et al. observed, appeared between “influential individual nodes” of the far right in Germany, Austria, the US and UK (Knüpfer, Hoffmann, and Voskresenskii 2020, pp. 14–15), although not exclusively so. In fact, IBÖ’s “digitally enabled [...] and] transnationally networked framing” practises during the “120 decibels” campaign co-occurred with similar practises of progressive social movements (Knüpfer, Hoffmann, and Voskresenskii 2020, p. 1). Here, too, a GI-branch established rather loose relationships; these relationships, however, did not revolve around the movement as the center of a network, but its individual activists. In this way, the study of Knüpfer et al. relates back to Bennett’s conceptualization of 2G-TANs as well.

2.3 Theoretical takings at a glance

With regard to all of the above discussed literature, I was able to operationalise the central concepts that my research question entails. In sum, my thesis connects three fields of study: global populism research, social movement studies and international relations. While I derived my research question out of my interest to explore phenomena linked to the former, the latter provide this paper with a theoretical framework. The TAN-approach allows me to focus on the networking practises of populist actors beyond borders and party politics (rather than their international interactions). Because TANs are particularly complex research subjects, my paper’s first account of their conjunction with populism needs to address that complexity, rather than aiming at a “full” account that, in the end, is not that (Acosta 2012, p. 164). In this sense, the resource mobilization approach provides me with categories to structure and demarcate my analysis, while Bennett’s deliberations refine my understanding of the context my research subject is situated in. In the following, I explain in more detail how I utilized those two scholarly perspectives on the functions of TAN-like networks to carry out this paper’s study.

3 METHODOLOGY

Most scholars studying networks-as-actors use qualitative research designs to do so (Kahler 2009a, p. 6); accordingly, I conducted this paper’s single case study by means of a method called qualitative network analysis (QNA). In the following, I explain in detail why I chose to use QNA for assessing how far right social movements interact in transnational networks and how I did so in practice. Before, I will briefly justify why a (single) case study on IBD’s “Defend Europe” campaign fits the purpose of my research subject best.

3.1 Case study design and case selection

Complex interdependencies like the networked interactions I explore in this paper’s analysis are hard to grasp – but can be effectively tackled with a single case study design (Westle 2018, p. 176). Focusing on just one specific case allows me to assess IBD’s networking practises in detail, so that I reach a deeper understanding of them – enabling me, in turn, to generate new theoretical knowledge (Flick 2018, p. 107). Because my study is explorative in that it opens up a new research field, I do not aim at producing generalizable results. Hence, other than comparing several cases, I chose a single case to follow the logic of depth, “an intensive or particularizing research strategy” (Gschwend and Schimmelfennig 2007, p. 224).

To ensure my analysis targeting the actual research subject of this paper’s analysis, I selected a critical case “in which the relations to be studied become especially clear” (Flick 2018, p. 181). The IBD fulfills this criterion since it has already been identified as a populist NGO acting transnationally. Therefore, and because its activists’ internet presence makes it relatively easy to follow the movement’s activities, I selected it as the empirical point of reference for the subsequent analysis.

The idea to focus my analysis on the time-frame of the “Defend Europe” campaign stems from Keck’s and Sikkink’s study on TANs. As they explain, it is during a campaign that “members of a diffuse principled network [...] develop explicit, visible ties and mutually recognized roles in pursuit of a common goal” (Keck and Sikkink 2014, p. 6). Because DE has attracted much attention from media outlets and governmental and non-governmental organizations, I was able to draw on large amounts of data, constituting a strong foundation for this paper’s analysis.

3.2 Qualitative network analysis

The “methodological and conceptual toolbox” of choice for many scholars analysing relational structures like TANs has been social network analysis (SNA) (Caiani 2014, p. 368), since it allows for an understanding of actors as interdependent, rather than independent, units of analysis (Caiani 2014, pp. 368–369). Because my case study follows the logic of depth (rather than the logic of breadth), I collected and analysed my data according to the qualitative variant of SNA, qualitative network analysis (QNA).

3.2.1 Data collection

Following the principles of QNA, I collected relational, not attribute data to study IBD’s transnational networking activities (Caiani 2014, p. 369). I did so in two steps, as recommended by Caiani: to begin, I identified the actors (or rather “nodes”) of IBD’s network that evolved during the DE campaign. Applying the principles of the resource mobilization approach, I focused on finding those actors that (visibly) provided IBD with ideational and material resources during that time.

Since my analysis focuses on IBD as the “core” of a network, I focused on the movement’s relationships only. Thereby, I was able to avoid a methodological difficulty that scholars often face when engaging in network analyses: restricting the sampling process while every relation to every actor included in the network seems important (Caiani 2014, p. 379).

After determining which actors IBD formed a network with during DE, I searched for more detailed information about their ties to one another. I did so to fill my previously collected data with meaning – for example by looking at *how* resources were exchanged.

During both steps of my data collection, I encountered several obstacles, emerging due to this study’s focus on a far right populist movement. As Caiani argues aptly, “extremist groups are very difficult objects of empirical investigation” – IBD is no exception. Because I wanted to gain a profound understanding of the movement’s network, I relied on the knowledge of IBD-activists, or rather their “inner perspective” regarding the DE campaign, to find out which resources they received, from whom, and under which circumstances. This is why I aimed at conducting my data mostly through qualitative, problem-centered interviews.

However, it proved to be difficult to access the activists I aimed at interviewing – even after I established contact to a former representative of IBD, I was not able to find any more members of the German GI-branch that participated in DE and were willing to talk to me. In the end, I drew a large part of this analysis’ data from two more interviews containing important information, despite being conducted with an IBD-activist that joined the movement only after DE, and Martin Sellner, the Austrian GI-activist that developed

the idea for the campaign (Sellner 2022). Additionally, I retrieved relevant data from IBD’s and Sellner’s social media accounts (on the platforms Odysee, Telegram, and YouTube) and websites.

A second difficulty arose out of the matter that “the data published by right-wing groups and the information they provide during interview might be deliberately false or misleading” (Cusumano 2022, p. 488). To prevent my analysis from being biased, I triangulated the collected data with articles from newspapers and pro-migrant institutions like HOPE not Hate, Belltower News, and Southern Poverty Law Center. Furthermore, I conducted one other interview with the investigative researcher Christian Fuchs, who co-authored a critical book about the network of the New Right in Germany and Europe. In sum, the dataset for this paper consists of information extracted from interviews, newspaper-articles and “activist-based internet data” (Nissen 2022, p. 244).

3.2.2 Data analysis

Against the backdrop of my data collection with QNA, I chose to engage in a qualitative content analysis (QCA) to assess the gathered information. In this way, I was able to analyse several types of textual material, regardless if retrieved from articles or written down as interview-transcripts, by applying a “coding frame” to recognize and structure my findings (Flick 2018, pp. 482–483). I developed this coding frame on the basis of both theory- and data-based categories – linking my analysis back to the theory discussed above, without losing sight of my cases’ specificities. Thereby, the QCA methodology allowed me to change my coding framework several times, as required by the assessed data (Flick 2018, p. 483).

In the following sections, I present the results of my data analysis, arguing that IBD’s resource exchanges in face of the “Defend Europe” campaign can be viewed as establishing a TAN that is only in parts organized by the movement’s populist discourse. For contextualization, a brief illustration of IBD’s populist activism during DE precedes my analysis.

4 THE TRANSNATIONAL ADVOCACY NETWORK OF IBD

Of course our resources are limited. And we cannot create safe zones, or make contracts with Tunisia or Libya. But what we can do, and what we will do, is to document and overwatch [sic] the work of the NGOs. [...] We will also confront the NGOs on the open sea, and tell them what the majority of the Europeans thinks about their activities. And we will sink the abandoned trafficking vessels before they can be brought back to land. *Robert Timm, Defend Europe - Generation Identity 2017b*

In international contexts, as well as domestically, DE has been one of GI's greatest successes in terms of medial, societal and political attention. Its impact on political processes, however, has been fairly limited (Fuchs 2022). Politicians, societal actors and media outlets described DE rather mockingly as a “foolhardy charade” (Murdoch 2017), as GI pretended to have reached its aim of revealing alleged “smugglers” of non-European refugees, not presenting any reliable evidence, nor achieving any of DE's other aims (Cusumano 2022, p. 486; Defend Europe - Generation Identity 2017c).

Nevertheless, the campaign is an important example of how far right populist social movements build networks to carry out actions that would, otherwise, cease to happen. Overstating their political power would be a mistake; underestimating it would be worse. My analysis of IBD's network – and its political influence deriving thereof – counteracts such an underestimation, as it reveals that IBD established a plethora of relationships during DE, constituting a network of societal, political and financial support.

4.1 Populist activism in “defensive mode”

As a far right populist movement in a country that still processes the horrors of its Nazi past, the IBD has been up against political and societal forces fighting its “far right populist discourse” from the start. Recently, this fight became institutional: the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*) began to monitor the IBD in 2016, declaring it a possible threat against Germany's liberal-democratic constitution (Nissen 2022, p. 60; Speit 2018, p. 21).

Germany's awareness of and actions against the (populist) far-right, “combined with the mainstream's rejection of its claims, means that far-right extraparliamentary actors hardly have any opportunities to influence politics” (Nissen 2022, p. 61). Indeed, IBD's members have been acting in “defensive mode” ever since (Weber 2022; Zúquete 2018, p. 83). Literally so, although the “Defend Europe” campaign was not only initiated to defend GI, but the whole of its constructed European “people”.

The participating GI-branches visibly engaged in a populist discourse in the context of DE

– one that was transnationally performed in two ways. For one thing, the activists on board the C-Star declared their campaign as a “mission” to “confront the NGOs on the open sea, and tell them what the majority of Europeans think about their activities” (Defend Europe - Generation Identity 2017a). In that sense, the activists constructed a transnational “people”, following the populist logic of declaring themselves as this “peoples” true representative. Moreover, in stating that the C-Star “is a visible symbol of [the] people[s] power, against the power-holder and the migration lobby”, the GI-branches on site constructed an equally transnational “elite”, picturing it as violating its “people’s” needs (Defend Europe - Generation Identity 2017a).

On the other hand, GI’s populist discourse during DE was performed transnationally because activists from four different countries constructed their “people” and “elite” *together*. This is evident in the statements they issued jointly during the campaign – where every GI-branch participating was represented by at least one activist getting a chance to speak (Defend Europe - Generation Identity 2017a; Defend Europe - Generation Identity 2017c).

During their time on the C-Star, the GI-activists onboard had to deal with several setbacks due to their far right populist agenda. Those setbacks illustrate how IBD’s activism in “defensive mode” looked like in practise. NGOs and governments of countries where the activists wanted to dock with the C-Star organized initiatives that thwarted the campaign several times (Cusumano 2022, p. 494). For example, the C-Star was “blocked” from entering the Maltese harbour, from where the activists wanted to return home (Sellner 2022). At the same time, those hindrances called other actors to action, supporting the activists in following through with their plan.

In the next sections, I explain with whom the IBD build a network of cooperation during the *Defend Europe* campaign and how. I do so in two steps. Following the resource mobilization approach, I begin by assessing IBD’s ties to other actors within and beyond GI, tracing resources that the movement received and utilized for its DE campaign. Thereafter, I dive deeper into determining the specific characteristics of the network previously revealed, analysing its different types of ties. I argue that IBD indeed formed a TAN, but that this TAN is affected by the movements’ populism in only few ways. The following case study provides the empirical foundation for that argument.

4.2 “Defend Europe”: resources exchanged and actors involved

At the intersection between the theoretical approaches considered and the data analysed, I identified five resources that IBD exchanged with other actors to carry out the DE campaign:

normative frames¹, activist responsibility, reporting skills, political and societal purview, as well as material resources. I show below that a variety of different actors provided IBD with those resources, among them other GI-branches, think tanks, media outlets and personalities, political parties and other activist organizations.

4.2.1 Normative frames

From the start, IBD justified the DE campaign as a humanitarian mission, “despite its very dubious humanitarian credentials” (Cusumano 2022, p. 485). It did so by appropriating and re-framing discourses that are usually used by sea rescue NGOs (Cusumano 2022, p. 486). Instead of migrants, IBD argued, the European “people(s)” needed to be saved; European politicians advocating for open borders were not protecting refugees, but endangering the population they ought to represent (Defend Europe - Generation Identity 2017a).

As every other social movement, IBD used those normative frames to make its activism meaningful for a larger group of possible supporters (Caiani, Della Porta, and Wagemann 2012, p. 13). Hence, such framing-practises were vital for IBD’s wider aim to “circumvent the mainstream (pro-immigrant) discourse and the liberal ethos of European societies” (Nissen 2022, p. 58). The data analysed for this paper suggests that IBD utilized normative frames to substantiate DE by learning from actors of its network. In the following, I explain which ties became visible with these ideational exchanges.

It is important to note here that IBD learned and exchanged those normative frames not solely during the campaign. Therefore, in order to account for IBD’s network more comprehensively, I also consider actors in my analysis that were only indirectly involved in DE, but determined IBD’s use of frames during that time.

The ideological foundation IBD utilized to frame DE derived from the ND – a political tendency situated in a different time and space than IBD during DE (Nissen 2022, p. 179). To adapt their “ethnopluralist” worldview to the German context, and the DE campaign specifically, IBD relied on the support of three actors, namely IBÖ, a German far right think tank named *Institut für Staatspolitik* (IfS), and its publishing house *Antaios Verlag*.

Compared to all other GI-groups, IBÖ has been IBD’s closest ally (not only during DE); indeed, Fuchs claims that their way of cooperating makes it impossible to differentiate between IBD and IBÖ at all, legal issues left aside (Fuchs 2022). Evidence for their strong ties to each other can be found in how IBÖ introduced IBD to the ND’s far right philos-

¹ Adding to DeMars’ understanding, I define normative frames as “dominant world views that guide the behaviour of social movement groups [...]” and attribute meaning (Caiani, Della Porta, and Wagemann 2012, pp. 13–14).

ophy before the German GI-branch even existed as an organized movement. Thus, former IBD-representative Fabian Dal explained to me that early on, IBÖ-activists and interested individuals from Germany engaged in “a [joint] exchange of world views, of different theoretical frameworks [...] of the right after the Second World War” (Dal 2022)².

The German think tank IfS, founded by far right activist and publicist Götz Kubitschek, further supported IBD in adapting the ND’s ideology and developing normative frames fitting IBD’s activist interventions. For example, Kubitschek organized seminars on the New Right’s philosophy to guide IBD-activists in their ideological education (Nissen 2022, p. 179). Other than that, he published fundamental texts of the ND in translated versions, making them accessible for German-speaking Identitarians through the IfS’ publishing house *Antaios Verlag* (Nissen 2022, p. 179).

Against this backdrop, tracing how IBD came to the ideological stances it used to frame DE as humanitarian has shown something seemingly simple, yet important for this paper’s analysis. The German GI-branch did not think of the normative frames it used itself. Instead, it adapted them from a far right political tendency of another country with the help of at least two actors.

4.2.2 Activist responsibility

The visible part of IBD’s network encompasses many more nodes considering how the German GI-branch exchanged activist support for DE. The campaign was dedicated to a “European people” and supposed to reflect GI’s efforts as a transnational youth movement (Dal 2022). Consequently, DE’s scope differed from GI’s national protest forms (Nissen 2022, pp. 131–133); it required several GI-branches to join forces so that DE would appear as a European “mission”. Apart from that, the campaign’s elaborate design (activists were needed to plan, organize, document and carry out the mission, on land as well as on the Mediterranean Sea) made cooperation necessary.

IBD carried a large share of this activist responsibility. According to Sellner, the German GI-branch “was extremely important” for the campaign, in that it mobilized activists “who were fundamental, were on board, actually took the whole summer off for it” (Sellner 2022). With that, Sellner not only refers to their availability: at least half of the GI-activists on board the C-Star came from Germany (Martin Sellner Archiv 2017f), providing the most “manpower”, as Sellner calls it, for the “mission” (Sellner 2022). Other than that, IBD-

² The Interviews with “Fabian Dal” and IBD-activist “Philipp Weber” are anonymised due to safety reasons. Since I conducted all interviews in German, the quotes retrieved and presented in this paper are my translated versions.

activists helped IBÖ in preparing DE on land, and did so since the campaign started, even before Sellner had acquired the C-Star (Martin Sellner Archiv 2017c).

In total, four regional GI-branches participated in the DE campaign on the Mediterranean. Apart from IBD and IBÖ, activists from France and Italy joined the “mission” (Nissen 2022, p. 133).³ Due to their different tasks and responsibilities, IBD’s ties to the other GI-branches participating in the campaign were not merely replicates of each other. They differed in intensity and consistency and depended on the activist’s personal affiliations. Thus, according to Martin Sellner and his video blog-posts about DE, some activists stayed on land to prepare and organize the campaign’s activist actions, while others boarded the C-Star to carry them out (Sellner 2022; Martin Sellner Archiv 2017c; Martin Sellner Archiv 2017f).

In our interview, Sellner claimed that the campaign was his idea, and that IBÖ further developed its concept, initiating DE’s implementation (Sellner 2022). In fact, Sellner’s video blog-posts show that he organized DE’s test-run, mobilized a large part of the campaign’s financing and acquired its ship, the C-Star (Martin Sellner Archiv 2017c; Martin Sellner Archiv 2017d). Put briefly, Sellner’s efforts to make the “mission” happen created a juncture, connecting IBD with GI France and GI Italy.

Alongside IBÖ and IBD, GI France took on the third largest share of activist responsibility for DE, as measured by the number of activists participating in the campaign, as well as their tasks on board (Martin Sellner Archiv 2017f). The commitment of those three GI-branches during DE reflects their key position within the overall GI-network: “[a]s of 2017”, Fabian Dal told me, “these three European centres [...] emerged as flagships” of GI (Dal 2022).

Even though activist responsibility for DE was mostly shared by the participating GI-branches, IBD and its fellow groups established contact to two other actors, situated outside GI’s network, for activist support. One of those actors was Alexander Schleyer, the C-Star’s chief officer during the campaign. Since DE has been a “mission” on sea, the GI-activists involved needed someone with, in Sellner’s words, “previous maritime knowledge” to put their plans into practise.

As a German ex-marine, Schleyer could provide this knowledge: in a podcast recorded in a building of the IBD in Bonn, Schleyer explained that he planned the ship’s course, navigated it and was responsible for the administration and safety of the campaign (Schleyer 2018). And more than that: while he does not consider himself an activist, Schleyer said,

3 According to Sellner, members of GI Czechia also participated (Sellner 2022), but I found no evidence for them being directly involved in any tasks regarding DE.

he supports GI's agenda and acted as a "mediating link" between nautical and activist management (Schleyer 2018).

Unlike Schleyer, the Libyan "Coast Guard"⁴, depicted by Sellner as one of GI's greatest allies during DE, did not provide activist responsibility by joining the campaign officially. In fact, there is no empirical evidence that suggests the "Coast Guard" carried this responsibility knowingly. Rather, it became a symbol of GI's, and therefore IBD's, self-proclaimed power to prevent non-European refugees from crossing the Mediterranean Sea. The in DE participating GI-branches met the Libyan "Coast Guard" only one time, when the C-Star entered its action area. In one of his video diaries, Sellner portrayed their encounter as partner-like: "When we explained what we want, that we are also against these NGOs [...] they were suddenly insanely friendly, said they understand, that we have the same goals, fight against the same problems. [...] We offered to work with them [...] for which they were very thankful" (Martin Sellner Archiv 2017a).

Right after, the Libyan "Coast Guard" prevented the ship of an organization for refugee aid to further advance into Libyan waters, telling the crew to "never come back" (Martin Sellner Archiv 2017a). In their narration of these events later on, the GI-activists on the C-Star framed the "Coast Guard's" assertiveness as their own success. Sellner later stated in an interview that he strives towards establishing an official partnership between GI and the Libyan Coast Guard. Even though such a partnership was never implemented, Sellner's efforts show that the German-speaking GI-branches were actively looking to expand their network for activist support.

All in all, focusing on how IBD exchanged activist responsibility with actors within GI and beyond the movement points to three different qualities of the analysed network. Firstly, the dependence of IBÖ on IBD's activist support underlines Fuchs' argument that they act as a unit, even though they organize themselves in different countries. In analytical terms, this means that differentiating between the German-speaking GI-branches might conceal parts of IBD's network: ties that lead to IBÖ necessarily lead to IBD as well, due to the collective actors' personal intersections and close cooperation. Secondly, to make DE happen and ensure the feasibility of its activist missions, IBD relied on knowledge that could not be provided by any GI-branch. And lastly, the movement's activists actively aimed at cooperating with an assertive actor enhancing their power to change reality.

⁴ Being part of the Libyan marine, the Libyan Coast Guard collaborates with the EU to "manage" migration towards the European continent, but has been "known to be engaging in trafficking, slavery, torture, and other human rights violations" (Kalpouzos 2020, p. 586).

4.2.3 Reporting skills

It should have become evident by now that direct efforts to carry out the DE campaign stemmed almost exclusively from IBD, IBÖ and GI France, and to some extent from GI Italy. The network's part of responsible actors outside the transnational movement remained small according to the analysed data (see also Sellner 2022). This holds true for the ties that become visible when looking at how IBD (and the other GI-branches) cooperated with actors to intensify their political voice. Like in most of their activist actions before DE, IBD-activists used communication media to spread their political message, including websites, video platforms like YouTube and social media like Twitter and Telegram. To use such communication media as tools for introducing the DE campaign to its constructed German, as well as European "people(s)", IBD had to mobilize actors that could provide them with reporting skills – that were able to produce and edit engaging multimedia content with apt equipment. Those skills were needed as a resource in order to make the campaign visually and ideologically appealing. How important this resource has been for the campaign becomes apparent in Sellner's statement that the DE "mission ends, when the cameras are confiscated" (Martin Sellner Archiv 2017e).

First and foremost, IBD relied on its own activists to enhance the campaign's media presence. In our interview, Sellner explained that some members of IBD drew on their knowledge on how to photograph, film and cut video material that could be then uploaded to advertise DE (Sellner 2022; Martin Sellner Archiv 2017f). Activists of GI France, Sellner said, provided "style and stylistic advice" regarding the campaign's visual appearance (Sellner 2022). Alongside them, Sellner himself produced content relating to DE, specifically for his own social media accounts, where he documented the activist's journey on the C-Star (Martin Sellner Archiv 2017f).

Furthermore, Alexander Schleyer recounted his experiences on the C-Star by writing a book (in German), providing IBD with a tangible account of their actions. Besides him, Simon Kaupert went aboard the C-Star to report on DE professionally. Equipped with a video camera, Kaupert documented DE to produce content for the organization *Ein Prozent* (Neumann 2018). "Germany's biggest patriotic citizen-network", as *Ein Prozent* calls itself, pursues a similar agenda to IBD. On its website, the organization describes its populist raison d'être: "It is time, for that the voice of the people is heard again. We connect the resistance [against Germany's politics of mass immigration]" (Ein Prozent n.d.).

The analysed data does not give information about how the involved IBD-activists were able to use the multimedia content that Kaupert produced on and off the C-Star. Nevertheless, him being involved in DE on-site suggests that IBD and IBÖ, as GI-branches in the German-

speaking region, are affiliated in some way with *Ein Prozent* and its “citizen-network” beyond DE. In any case, IBD profited from its ties to the populist organization, if not directly through Kaupert’s reporting skills, then by accessing another resource vital to the envisaged success of DE.

4.2.4 Political and societal purview

The use of communication media made IBD’s involvement in DE, as well as the campaign’s agenda, public. However, posting videos, texts, and pictures about DE on social media sites did not guarantee that people would become aware of the campaign, let alone become convinced that IBD’s efforts were worth supporting. For their publicity to take effect in terms of political and societal change, the activists depended on their actions’ purview – their ability to reach a lot of people. In the following, I show that IBD established many of its ties to actors outside GI because it depended on this resource.

As implied above, *Ein Prozent* provided IBD with such purview in its “patriotic citizen-network” – not only by sending Kaupert to document DE. Before the activists boarded the C-Star, the organization published self-proclaimed “investigative research” on NGOs aiding refugees in crossing the Mediterranean Sea (Neumann 2018), using the same normative frames as IBD to necessitate and justify far right populist activism.⁵ After DE officially started, *Ein Prozent* published Kaupert’s photos and videos about the campaign alongside text in the format of a “travel diary” on their website (Ein Prozent 2017b). In the year following the campaign, Kaupert went to Malta (where the IBD-activists had left the C-Star) and produced a film about, as *Ein Prozent* writes, “the disastrous consequences of mass immigration” (Ein Prozent 2019). In accordance to the campaign on the Mediterranean, the film was called “Defend Malta”.

In this way, *Ein Prozent* functioned like an amplifier for IBD’s outward communication, widening its purview to the organization’s own “citizen-network”. The organization did so by not only informing about IBD’s efforts, but promoting them. Additionally, *Ein Prozent* supplied its readers with an undergirding assessment of the context in which DE took place – reproducing the biased beliefs with which IBD wants to induce political and societal change.

Apart from Simon Kaupert, two other actors not officially involved in any GI-branch joined the activists during DE, on land, as well as aboard the C-Star: Brittany Pettibone⁶ and Lauren Southern. Both of them are known social media personalities of the North American

⁵ See their blog-post about “Libya: Gateway to Europe” (Ein Prozent 2017a).

⁶ Pettibone is now called Sellner, since she married the Austrian activist after DE took place. To avoid confusion, I will refer to Pettibone with her birth name.

alt-right – a movement that consists of a variety of far right and right-wing populist actors promoting white supremacy in digital spaces (Hawley 2017, p. 18).⁷

Most importantly, Southern and Pettibone tied IBD and the other GI-branches involved in the campaign to their own social media “followers”. Southern joined DE as a self-proclaimed Canadian journalist before Sellner had acquired the C-Star; early on, she published video-blogs on her YouTube-account to introduce the campaign to other alt-right actors active on social media platforms (Sellner 2022). Pettibone, as Southern’s US-American counterpart, disseminated information about the activist’s activities on her own, as well as the official DE social media sites (Sellner 2022). The thereby gained purview of DE’s contents and operations in the North American context proved to be vital for implementing the campaign, as I argue below.

Several other actors aided IBD in gaining purview for their agenda and activities during DE. The *Antaios Verlag* published Schleyer’s book about his experiences as the C-Star’s chief officer, selling it to people interested in the ideology and philosophy of the New Right. The British columnist Katie Hopkins, who once stated in the tabloid newspaper *The Sun* that she would “use gunships to stop migrants” (Brown and Del Crookes 21.04.2015), visited the activists on the C-Star briefly, all the while praising DE on various social media sites (Broderick 25.07.2017). Similarly, the US-american neo-Nazi website *Daily Stormer* published an encouraging comment about DE, calling it a “great initiative” (Southern Poverty Law Center 2017).

And the list goes on: favourable articles about DE and the participating IBD-activists in particular can be found in the Austrian magazine *Info-DIREKT*⁸, the web-blog *PI-News* (short for “politically incorrect news”)⁹, and the magazine of the AfD’s youth organization, *Junge Freiheit*¹⁰. The German channel of *Russia Today* aired a 20 minute interview with Martin Sellner about DE, as part of their series “The missing part” (Martin Sellner Archiv 2017b).

All of the above named actors providing IBD with societal and political purview during DE advocate an agenda that (at least partly) fits the movement’s ideology. Nevertheless, it is important to note here that not only far right populist and far right nationalist actors

⁷ In some ways, the North-American alt-right is comparable to the New Right in Europe. For a more elaborated definition, including similarities between the two movements, see (Taylor 2021).

⁸ The magazine even covered the test-run of DE, see Info-Direkt 6.8.2017.

⁹ While commenting DE, PI-News also advertised books of Sellner and the IBD-activist Mario Müller, see (PI-News 2017).

¹⁰ On its website, *Junge Freiheit* published an interview with one of the IBD-members on board the C-Star, see Steinwandter 1.8.2017.

generated publicity that “elevated Sellner and Generation Identity to a new level. More than 50 large mainstream newspapers and television news outlets in Europe, Canada, and the United States published or broadcast[ed] stories” about the campaign (Southern Poverty Law Center 2017). Even the television programme “Good Morning Britain” granted Sellner a live-interview (Southern Poverty Law Center 2017). The resulting reports on DE might have been critical (up to condemning) about what IBD and the other participating GI-branches attempted to do in the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, several of them introduced IBD, as well as their agenda, to a larger group of people who would not have been aware of their activities otherwise.

Looking at all of the actors that provided IBD with purview during DE, it becomes clear that the German GI-branch relied heavily on resources mobilized outside its movement’s network. Yet, the “inner” perspective and persuasiveness of some activists sharing their DE-experiences on social media platforms proved to be invaluable. Sellner himself used his social media presence to make more people, especially in German-speaking regions, aware of what IBÖ and IBD wanted to achieve with DE.¹¹ His popularity among German-speaking people interested in or convinced of the New Right’s agenda not only provided IBD with a widened societal attention to their efforts. Resulting from the gained purview, IBD found new members willing to support its activism subsequent to DE.

Phillip Weber, for example, discovered IBD as his preferred way of being politically active through Sellner’s video blog. “These are patriots who really make a difference”, Weber told me what he thought after watching Sellner’s reports on the C-Star, “who make a difference peacefully, and without violence, that impressed me immensely, and I thought ... This is exactly the right way to go in today’s society. Simply through educational work” (Weber 2022). Right after the campaign ended, Weber joined the IBD. Furthermore, the movement’s, as Sellner stated, “boost in publicity, [and] popularity” also widened IBD’s circle of supporters “incapable” of carrying activist responsibility – providing the movement with another resource: money (Sellner 2022).

4.2.5 Material resources

The C-Star, its fuel, the arrival of the activists on board, food and water, the crew’s payment, the accommodations for supporting actors on land: the GI-activists involved in DE could not pay for the campaign’s costs by themselves – they had to mobilize financial resources to

¹¹ Even after Sellner was prohibited to upload videos on the social media platforms Facebook, Instagram and Youtube, he continued to reach a wider audience by setting up a “channel” on the messenger Telegram, where around 62 thousand people follow his news-like entries today.

implement DE. The money flows towards the campaign were, in many cases, intransparent. However, journalists identified some actors of DE's supporting network.

They were able to do so because the financing of DE was organized through a public crowdfunding account on the platform *wesearchr*, known for advertising far right projects (Lauer 2017). By clicking on its assigned hyperlink, anyone was able to support DE financially, even with small amounts. This detail is decisive for my analysis, because it points to the fact that, again, the anticipated success of the campaign depended on purview – on the number of people that would become aware of DE as a crowdfunding campaign in digital spaces.

As it were, enough did: in the end, IBÖ collected 178,000 Dollars, about three times of the amount Sellner declared as necessary to carry out DE (Southern Poverty Law Center 2017). Journalists traced the campaign's high revenue back to the fact that several media outlets and prominent figures of far right organizations advertised DE's crowdfunding, including *altright.com*, David Duke and Jared Taylor.

Altright.com, for example, published an article about DE on its website, describing it as “encouraging news” (Diez 2017) and ending with a reference to the DE's crowdfunding site. Similarly, Duke, a former leader of the terrorist hate group *Ku Klux Klan* (KKK)¹² posted the crowdfunding's hyperlink on Twitter, commenting with “Donate now! #DefendEurope” (Lawrence 2017). And so did Taylor, a “prominent voice” of white nationalists in the US since the 1990s (Hawley 2017, p. 26)¹³, motivating his social media followers to support the campaign by financing it (Southern Poverty Law Center 2017). The question that remains unanswered is who actually did so.

Similarly, little is known about how and why Sellner was able to acquire the C-Star as the seaworthy ship big enough to transport at least ten activists (besides the crew). According to *HOPE not hate*, the Swedish entrepreneur Sven Tomas Egerstrom offered Sellner to use the C-Star for DE's “mission” (Murdoch 2017). Egerstrom confirmed that “he was aware of Defend Europe's intentions when he allowed it to charter the ship”, calling the campaign “legal research” (Murdoch 2017). Egerstrom's generosity and benevolence towards DE suggest that he supported the campaign out of ideological reasons, but any information about how exactly he cooperated with Sellner is missing.

Considering all essential material resources IBD received during DE, an especially interesting

12 “The KKK is the first group that typically comes to mind”, political science scholar Hawley writes, when “thinking about the history of white racial movements in the United States” (Hawley 2017, p. 23)

13 As of 2017, when the DE campaign launched, Taylor was a spokesman of the *Council of Conservative Citizens* (CCC). The organization represents racist beliefs, arguing that “[m]ixing the races is rebelliousness against God” (Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.).

node of the movement’s network manifests: the Maltese Patriots Movement (*Moviment Patrijotti Maltin*, MPM), a right-wing populist party. Members of that party supplied the GI-activists on the C-Star with water and food when the ship was not allowed to dock at the Maltese harbour (Yannick Pace 2017). Martin Sellner explained to me that Pettibone arranged their cooperation: because she was sharing information about DE on social media, MPM took notice of GI’s “embargo” and offered help (Sellner 2022). Pettibone then reached out to them, coordinating their efforts (Sellner 2022).

MPM issued their own social media campaign to collect donations for GI, supporting DE with comparatively high effort. Norman Saliba, secretary general of the party, stated that not only members of Malta’s Nationalist parties followed the call, but also politicians of the Maltese Labour Party (Yannick Pace 2017). After handing the donations over to GI, MPM members also helped the activists leave the C-Star to get to the Maltese airport (Sellner 2022). Their actions were short-termed, yet decisive for the campaign – giving IBD the opportunity to present their set-back in front of Malta as an opportunity for establishing a politically meaningful cooperation.

Analysing the ties that IBD formed with actors in its attempts to acquire material resources during DE has revealed two important characteristics of the movement’s network. Firstly, IBD received some of its resources for DE indirectly, in that they were directed at the campaign as a united effort of several GI-branches. In some instances, an intermediary actor facilitated this process by connecting the activists to their supporters. Secondly, my analysis so far has shown that IBD, indeed, formed a network beyond borders and party politics (visualized in figure 4.1); however, through the GI-activists’ cooperation with MPM, this network is not detached from party politics, but entangled with it.

4.3 A populist TAN?

In figure 4.1, all above mentioned actors cooperating with IBD during DE are shown in connection with the resources they provided for the campaign. The larger circle in the middle depicts IBD and IBÖ as formally separate, but indeed united actors, carrying most of the activist responsibility for DE while being directly supported by activists from GI France and GI Italy. Since IBD and mainstream media outlets formed no intentional ties to each other during DE, the latter is positioned outside the network.

Overall, tracing resource flows towards IBD during DE did not reveal all the actors the German branch of the movement cooperated with during that time. As I have argued before, my analysis is confined to the empirical data available, and especially in terms of information concerning interactions that only the involved activists are aware of, the data collected is only fragmentary. Still, my analysis has led me to consider the following points

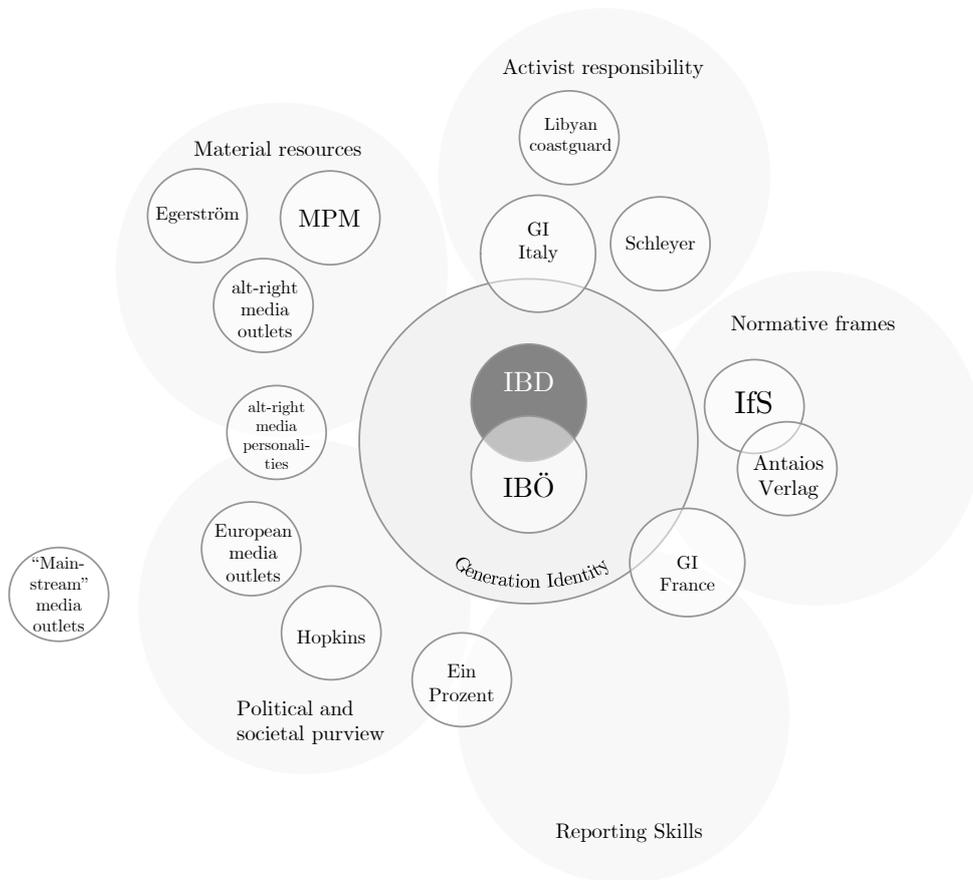


Figure 4.1: “Defend Europe”: resources exchanged and actors involved

that, taken together, can be understood as empirical evidence for a TAN forming around a far right, but not necessarily populist discourse.

1. During the “Defend Europe” campaign, IBD received and exchanged a variety of resources that connected the movement to domestic and international political action areas. The thereof evolving network encompasses actors from at least nine countries, three of them non-European.
2. IBD then used the resources it received strategically to pressure the EU’s governments and international organizations to adapt a “no-way” immigration policy in accordance with the movement’s white nationalist and populist norms. It did so not by itself, but in cooperation with, first and foremost, IBÖ, GI France and GI Italy as a network-as-actor.
3. Not all other actors tied to IBD engaged in the movement’s populist discourse, but the whole network advocated for a united effort, “defend[ing] a cause or proposition” (Keck

and Sikkink 2014, p. 8) quite literally: Europe as a white continent, claimed by its people(s) to secure their homes from the constructed threat of a “great replacement”.

My analysis has, therefore, shown that IBD’s network entails the three “main ingredients” of a TAN in terms of Keck’s and Sikkink’s understanding: its actors participate collectively in domestic as well as international politics, advocating a set of normative causes, and do so to change how states behave. Hence, the network depicted in figure 4.1 could be described as a TAN – although not all of its parts engage in advocating both white nationalist and populist norms. In fact, IBD’s TAN in toto cannot be called populist in terms of its discursive construction of a European “people” and “elite”, since only a fraction of actors participated in negotiating these categories for the campaign’s purpose. Yet, all actors of the network share IBD’s white nationalist agenda. Apart from that, the data assessed suggests that IBD’s TAN is just that, a network revolving around the NGO in its center.

In short, this paper’s preceding analysis has paved the way for understanding IBD’s resource exchanges during the DE campaign as flows between actors constituting and sustaining a TAN that resembles first generation, more so than second generation, advocacy efforts beyond borders and party politics. Having determined that this TAN (as a whole) aims at strengthening white nationalist norms rather than populist ones, one question raised earlier remains unanswered: do IBD’s constructions of “people” and “elite” influence *how* its TAN is organized?

In the following, I dive deeper into the analysis of IBD’s TAN, exploring its unique features to find indications that allow me to tackle the question posed above. I argue that seven different and contrasting types of ties constitute IBD’s network – and that most of them evolve as such through the movement’s activism in “defensive mode”.

4.4 Types of ties in IBD’s network

By comparing the ties of IBD’s TAN, I was able to identify similarities between certain “groups” of nodes. Where actors supported the “Defend Europe” campaign with similar resources under similar circumstances, like Jared Taylor and David Duke, or Info-Direkt and PI-News, ties looked alike. At the same time, inconsistencies appeared. Not all relationships IBD formed in preparation, during and in the aftermath of DE rest upon reciprocal resource exchanges. Some evolved through resource flows towards IBD only, others represent one-time resource transfers rather than continuous flows. Moreover, IBD used both offline and online communication to mobilize resources; some of its network ties exist only in digital spaces. Lastly, many of the above discussed actors cooperated informally with IBD – either by interacting with representatives of IBD that were, at the same time, deeply involved in the German GI-branch; or, as I will show, by IBD-activists not acknowledging them as

network nodes at all. Below, I offer some explanations of how and why those inconsistencies emerged.

4.4.1 Collaborative and superficial ties

The most prominent inconsistencies in IBD’s TAN arose in how contact was established (direct or indirect), how long it presumed (ongoing or one-time), and in which direction resources flowed (mutual exchange or one-sided flow). In terms of the resource mobilization approach – and my definition of network ties – I define IBD’s direct and persisting relationships, constituted by mutual resource exchanges, as collaborative ties. I regard their counterpart as indirect, one-time and one-sided resource flows, calling them superficial ties.

Some collaborative ties within IBD’s TAN are already visible in figure 4.1 – the in DE participating GI-branches organized the campaign together, exchanged activist responsibility throughout the “mission” and shared all other resources in order to carry out their actions on the C-Star.

Similar, but less profound ties evolved between IBD, Lauren Southern and Brittany Pettibone, considering that they supported the campaign from its start to the end by providing, above all, purview in digital spaces. Schleyer also formed a collaborative tie to IBD by acting as chief officer of the C-Star. Importantly, all three actors received resources from IBD themselves, profiting by supporting DE. Southern and Pettibone were able to generate engaging content for their accounts on social media platforms by documenting the campaign; Schleyer was, as he said himself, able to engage in “meaningful” work (Schleyer 2018).

The relationships between IBD and IfS, *Antaios Verlag* and *Ein Prozent* also appear to have been collaborative during DE in that they went on (even after the campaign ended) and consisted of mutual resource exchanges. The think tank, its belonging publishing house and the citizen-network utilized DE and information provided by IBD to create multi-media content for websites, a commercial book and an advertising movie.

Interestingly, IBD’s ties to far right media outlets and alt-right “celebrities” that promoted DE remained superficial, despite their relevance for the campaign, attracting funders and providing IBD with political and societal purview. Assuming that all ties of a network-as-actor are intentional, the question arises why IBD did not even attempt to form a closer cooperation with those actors (like it did in the case of the Libyan “Coast Guard”).

Three possible explanations arise in consideration of the analysed data and existing studies. For one thing, IBD might refrain from seeking closer relations to certain actors when the movement views them as politically insignificant. As Fabian Dal stated in our interview, IBD has made such a strategic decision before, not “intensifying the focus” of its activist

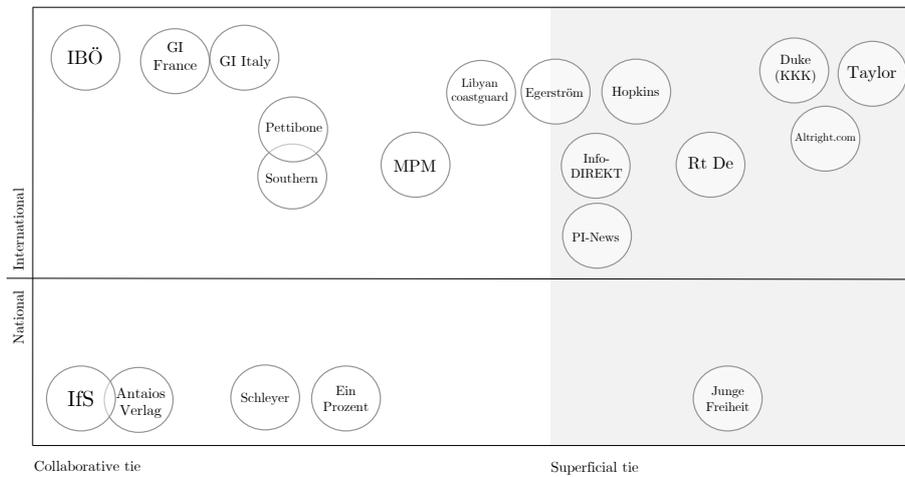


Figure 4.2: IBD's TAN: collaborative and superficial ties depending on actors' provenance

cooperations on Generation Identity Denmark although this GI-branch proved to be a “particularly strong group” (Dal 2022). Dal justified this decision by arguing that the group's link to (the small country) Denmark limits its political meaning – making it a less influential ally in the German, or rather European arena, than, for example, GI France.

Similarly, IBD might have assessed the impact of far right media platforms and personalities (especially from the U.S.) on German and European politics as not great enough to pursue stronger relationships with them. Figure 4.2 shows that many identified superficial ties, indeed, lead to non-European contexts.

On the other hand, superficial ties in IBD's TAN might persist because most media outlets and personalities provided IBD with resources of *other* actors – their money, awareness and willingness to disseminate DE's aims and “achievements” further. In this sense, Taylor, Russia Today Germany, and Hopkins, among others, supported IBD as intermediary networks in online spaces. As such, they might have been mere means to an end – replaceable through any other actor providing political and societal purview.

A third explanation for the differences between the TAN's ties regarding their strength can be found in IBD's ambition to control its discourse. Thus, Fabian Dal told me that the movement's contact to US-American groups was intentionally minimised.

Here in Europe, it was possible to understand the political context to some extent, how the individual groups work together, in which political environments they operate, how the right-wing structures in the individual countries function beyond that. In the USA we couldn't do that, that's why we never started anything there, although there were attempts again and again, simply because the American right is hardly controllable from our point of view. (Dal 2022)

For a diminishing far right youth movement, it seems unlikely to reject offers of cooperation

with like-minded organizations; yet, IBD decided to keep its action area constrained to Europe. In that sense, the superficial ties of IBD’s TAN might be a product of the movement’s aim to keep its discourse straight – and linked back to “European” identities. Further elaborations are needed to grasp this indirect correlation between IBD’s populist discourse and the operational structure of its network.

4.4.2 Online and offline ties

Exploring how profound the individual ties of IBD’s TAN are reveals another inconsistency: most superficial relationships were exclusively formed in digital spaces, while the above discussed collaborative ties evolved through direct and real-world interactions. Hence, the actors shaping IBD’s TAN needed to cooperate with the movement in close proximity – a loose, digital affiliation was not sufficient.

At the same time, IBD profited immensely from the digitally formed intermediary networks that connected the movement to DE’s funders and ideological supporters. What is more, the movement and its closest allies, for example IBÖ, placed a great part of their communication prior to DE and during the campaign in online forums and platforms. Thus, Dal explained that activists of IBD and IBÖ began to discuss the normative frames of GI’s ideology using the Chat software *Discord* (Dal 2022). Only after, some of them met in person, consolidating their political relationships. Moreover, Sellner stated that in preparation of DE, the activists tried “to focus the crucial communication on verbal communication” because of their fear to be monitored by European secret services (Sellner 2022).

Therefore, the possibility of communicating online granted IBD easy access to the DE campaign’s funding, purview, and, at least in the beginning, to its populist discourse. Yet, the activists used online spaces with reservations, in order to ensure DE’s smooth execution.

4.4.3 Formal, informal and hidden ties

Strikingly, the activists from IBD and IBÖ that I interviewed for this paper emphasized on DE being a united, yet sole effort of the participating GI-branches. They did so despite the evidence that proves otherwise. For example, Sellner did neither mention that Kaupert went onboard the C-Star to document DE in the name of *Ein Prozent*, nor that the campaign’s first crowdfunding site was published under Southern’s name (Farrell 19.08.2017). Sellner and Dal both denied that IBD and IBÖ cooperated with any other organization beyond GI, before, during, and after DE took place (Dal 2022; Sellner 2022). “We didn’t want it to be a cooperation [between other] organisations that we didn’t need”, Sellner said. “We carried it out ourselves, like all GI actions.” (Sellner 2022).

Put briefly: most of the relationships constituting IBD's TAN, including its ties to domestic actors, are not formally acknowledged by the movement's activists themselves. As shown above, some ties appear to be hidden completely. Thus, I could find no information about who, explicitly, donated money that enabled IBD and IBÖ to carry out DE.

The opaqueness of IBD's TAN is reflected in the movement's tactic of "clean communication". According to Dal, IBD generally aimed at sending one particular message "as a kind of European youth", and did not want to engage in a lot of other issues that play into it (Dal 2022). For example, even though voters of the German far right party "Third Way" (*Dritter Weg*) wanted to support IBD's agenda by participating in the movement's demonstrations, IBD activists prevented them from showing their affiliations with the party by prohibiting them from carrying their own flags (Dal 2022) (which does not conceal the fact that IBD still profited from their activist support).

Similarly, IBD might have intentionally hidden its cooperation with donors of DE if it assessed them as too radical. Relations to such actors would have contradicted the campaign's appearance IBD aimed at cultivating: a legitimate, patriotic effort to protect the European "people". Out of this perspective, any actor considered "too right" and known for collaborating with IBD might have thwarted its way towards affecting the public discourse about migration. At the same time, IBD needed those actors' resources, influence and purview within the New Right (and alt-right). This might explain why some ties in IBD's TAN seem hidden and others are visible but denied – especially in digital spaces, cooperation is hard to disguise as such.

5 CONCLUSION

Before I provide a summary of this paper’s research and results, I want to use this chapter to briefly bring parts of the previous analysis and discussed theory together – as IBD’s TAN appears to be too heterogeneous to be described in few sentences.

Applying a resource mobilization approach and drawing on transnational advocacy theory, my analysis has shown that Keck’s and Sikkink’s knowledge about progressive TANs is, in parts, assignable to populist actors’ interactions beyond borders and party politics. Like social movements advocating for women’s rights norms or environmental protection, IBD formed a network of like-minded actors revolving around itself, utilizing its allies’ resources to pressure governments and international organizations.

However, considering Bennett’s reasoned objection that TAN’s function differently today due to intensified globalization processes, some of IBD’s network-ties appear to diverge from Keck’s and Sikkink’s conceptualization. Especially those of the movement’s relationships that are solely situated in online spaces seem to build on rather loosely structured cooperation. Nevertheless, IBD’s TAN is not, as Bennett suggests for second generation advocacy activism, organized “from below”. Its agenda exclusively stems from GI’s normative aspirations and it was not adapted nor altered due to the influence of individual network-nodes.

Interestingly, not the populist elements of GI’s agenda appear to have determined the operational structure of IBD’s TAN. Neither did the movement’s white nationalist norms prevent IBD from seeking close contact with actors like the Libyan “Coast Guard”. Rather, the TAN that became visible with this paper’s analysis seems to be organized around IBD’s activism in “defensive” mode: the movement aimed at presenting itself as strong and independent, and did therefore not acknowledge parts of its supporting network, engaging in informal and superficial relationships. Moreover, IBD strove towards keeping control of the public discourse about its activities, refraining from openly cooperating with organizations “too” radical (or, for that matter, too open about their neo-fascist ideology).

In the end, IBD was not able to pressure European governments into adopting a “no-way” policy regarding immigration from the Middle East and North Africa. Neither did the movement prevent NGOs from aiding refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Its aspired cooperation with the Libyan “Coast Guard” was never implemented and few years later, IBD’s public presence had diminished substantially (Fuchs 2022).

Nevertheless, the movement’s populist and white nationalist call for “defending Europe” has

made it into the programmes of several European political parties (HOPE not hate 2019). This is where my study reconnects with the guiding question posed in the beginning of this paper: have IBD's networking practises affected the movement's capacities for political influence? I argue that they have, enhancing its political and societal purview and enabling it to carry out the "Defend Europe" campaign in the first place. Yet, further studies are needed to assess if this correlation is, indeed, a causality. The previous analysis has paved the way for those studies on far right populist advocacy efforts in transnational spaces, encouraging scholars to find out what I could not.

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