



DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA, JOURNALISM
AND COMMUNICATION (JMG)

»CAUSA CAFFIER«: FAR-RIGHT CONNECTIONS IN GERMAN POLITICS AND SECURITY AGENCIES

Political Crisis Communication and its
Representation in Legacy News Media

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this case study is to add to research on crisis communication, accountability, and scandals in evaluating a German state Minister of Interior's exoneration strategies through their representation in news media. Additionally, it aims to offer insights on German legacy news media's treatment of a right-wing radicalist crisis and implications of its potential failures. The relevance of this study comes from its timeliness within the German *'Einzelfall'*-crisis, a series of publicized cases of right-wing radicalist affiliations in GED-agencies stylized as singular events, as well as from the lack of existing research on this topic.

Theory: Crisis Communication Theory, Image Repair Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis, Discursive News Value Analysis

Method: Critical Discourse Analysis, Qualitative Discourse Analysis

Result: Media representation of the scandal and crisis stages of this case successfully made 'Causa Caffier' a serious public issue. However, the individualization of the reporting—narrowed down just to Caffier—has to be regarded as a failure of journalism to depict structural and systemic issues. In a parallel to historic blind spots surrounding GED-agencies' (especially the police) entanglements with right-wing radicalist ideology and groups, German legacy news media, for the most part, represented the case as an individual moral transgression (i.e., a scandal) instead of a sign for a systemic crisis.

Keyword: Germany, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, right-wing radicalism, extremism, crisis communication, image repair, image restoration, political communication, CDU, Lorenz Caffier, Nordkreuz

Foreword

I could not have written this paper without my family's support: Danke, Mama und Papa! Besonders auch danke an meine Proofreader, Hed und Johannes, dafür, dass ihr dieses Dokument öffnetet, als ich es wirklich nie wieder sehen wollte.

To my supervisor Mats Ekström, thank you for your valuable feedback and for reigning me in when I inevitably tried to expand the scope of what I wanted to study beyond reality. Also thank you Orla, for giving a much-needed, related reminder: "This can't take your entire life."

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i. Introduction

It would almost be good news, though, if the problem was just incredibly botched communication¹.

In November 2020, at a press conference in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (MV), a *taz*² -journalist confronted the Minister of Interior, Lorenz Caffier, with his purchase of a gun two years prior. The weapons-dealer had been part of radical-right insurrectionist group *Nordkreuz*³, members of which came from across the German executive defense agency (GED⁴) spectrum, including many police and military officers. With multiple right-wing radicalist police chat groups exposed earlier in 2020, the situation had potential to become symbolic of structural ideological problems in GED-agencies and willful political ignorance about the issue. Over the course of five days, the situation went from mismanaged crisis communication to a full-blown scandal that culminated in the Minister's resignation.

This qualitative case study covers the active crisis stage—from the publication of the purchase to immediately after the resignation. The purpose is to add to research on crisis communication, accountability, and scandals in evaluating the Minister's exoneration strategies through their representation in legacy news media. Additionally, it aims to offer insights on German legacy news media's treatment of a right-wing radicalist crisis and implications of its potential failures. The relevance of this study comes from its timeliness within the German *'Einzelfall'*-crisis, a series of publicized cases of right-wing radicalist affiliations in GED-agencies stylized as singular events⁵.

1.1 Context

For obvious reasons, Germany has a unique relationship with right-wing radicalism (RWR). Historically, the stance on far-right ideology and its meaning for German identity has changed drastically since the end of WWII. De-Nazification during the post-war occupation notoriously failed to remove many NSDAP members from prominent positions in the two German states with repression as the preferred response to officials' implications in past crimes. While there

¹ Nordkurier Online, November 16th, 2020, on the 'Caffier affair'

² short for *Tageszeitung*, a Berlin-based independent daily newspaper. It describes itself as a left leaning 'counter public' (Tageszeitung, 2021).

³ Northern Cross Group, referred to as just Nordkreuz in most media and reporting

⁴ German executive defense agencies as a term aims to include a range of security agencies including federal and state police forces, the military, special and mobile police task forces, the domestic intelligence agency on the federal and state levels, and the federal and state criminal police forces.

⁵ Rhetorically, this argument is so similar as to be indistinguishable from the—increasingly contested—'bad-apple'-narratives surrounding cases of US-police brutality (see e.g., McCamman, 2021; Chalfin & Kaplan, 2021).

were differences between the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany regarding the reappraisal, the results of their de-Nazification processes were similarly unsuccessful. Gieseke describes the difference as that between official antifascism with a covert Nazi presence in the GDR and ‘integrative silence’ in the FRG (2010:83).

The much-quoted German ‘*Erinnerungskultur*’—remembrance culture, explicitly referring to memorialization of Nazi-regime horrors—was proclaimed as foundational to mainstream German political identity after the reunification. The Federal Agency for Civic Education⁶ proclaims that “*the responsibility derived from the past is now part of Germany's ‘reason of state’*” (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2008). This memory culture is contentious, being antithetical to palingenetic ultranationalism⁷, the fascist staple of a glorious national past. Therefore, the “*chosen trauma*” (Krause, 2008) draws frequent attacks from right-wing actors who argue that ‘excessive’ engagement with the past constitutes a wallowing in self-loathing for historical events that today’s generations are innocent of. These arguments are scandalous and trigger a mainstream backlash that consolidates collective cultural positioning (see Jacobsson & Löfmarck, 2008:205). For instance, when ex-AfD⁸-party leader Gauland minimized the NS-era by calling it a “*bird shit in German history*”, the democratic establishment collectively condemned the statement (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2018). Still, there is a downside to the mainstream unity on *Erinnerungskultur*. The long-standing misconception that memorializing Nazi crimes on set days each year inoculates Germany against contemporary RWR is arrogant and works to create a blind spot. One is that the immunity acquired from memorialization makes vigilance against RWR unnecessary. The other is that it leads to a very narrow conceptualization of what constitutes right-wing discourses, targets, and strategies with historical Nazis as the blueprint and only dangerous form of right-wing radicalism. Subsequently, this makes verbal disavowal of Nazism, a major New Right strategy (see Ma, 2021:3), highly effective in the German context.

The blind spot towards RWR violence also constitutes a historical parallel that can be traced back as far as to the Weimar Republic’s struggles to deal with the same issues. Weimar’s police forces were extremely conservative, riddled with officers who were “*hostile to the republic, longed for the return of the monarchy, or looked to some right-wing saviour*” (Richardson, 1972:286-287). In line with this, the majority of the genocidal Nazi paramilitary ‘Schutzstaffel’ “*identified themselves primarily as policemen*”, being made up majorly of pre-

⁶ Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, bpb

⁷ Further discussed in 3.1: Metapolitics, Mainstreaming & Mediatization

⁸ Alternative für Deutschland/Alternative for Germany, far-right populist party

Nazi German police force (Browder, 1997:1). Simultaneously, left-wing activities were criminalized and investigated to a much higher degree, which Browder explains through the left's higher drive to democratize and change police structures, arguing that "*police could see left-wing political orientations as contaminating their professionalism, while the right was less threatening*" (ibid:4). Conjointly, RWR violence was not taken seriously, with the "*German judicial system [...] notoriously biased toward right-wing forces from the inception of the Weimar Republic*" (Crim, 2007:56). Of course, it is difficult to draw direct continuities between pre-Nazi Germany and post-WWII society, but the historical bias of leniency towards RWR echoes in contemporary underestimations of its dangers.

In line with this, there is a hesitancy to admit to problems within GED-agencies, resulting in contested perceptions depending on the ideological point of departure. Leftist- and victim advocate groups have warned about a state of emergency since the so-called '*baseball bat years*⁹' in the 1990s (see Borges & Wiest, 2021). Meanwhile, right-leaning/conservative politicians and GED-internal spokespeople voiced concerns about smear campaigns against the police (see Wiese, 2018; Chrupalla & Meuthen, 2020). Historian Michael Sturm criticizes the "*siege mentality*", "*unconscious infallibility paradigm*," and a "*self-victimizing 'counter-discourse'*"¹⁰ fueled by police unions, aimed at shifting the discursive focus on left-wing radicalism, reminiscent of the discursive shift in the Weimar Republic (Sturm, 2018). Even though RWR groups in Germany are frequently lethal (depending on the criteria, far-right perpetrators have committed between 109 and 213 murders between 1989 and 2020 vs. none from radical left perpetrators), the focus of policing is often equally¹¹ turned on left-wing radicalism (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2021; Friederichs, 2015).

Despite regular violence from right-wing radicalists, it took the exposure of the RWR terrorist group National Socialist Underground (NSU) in 2011 to shatter the misconception of German immunity against RWR terrorism. Consisting of two men and one woman, the NSU nucleus committed multiple bank robberies, a nail bombing attack, and ten murders from 2000 to 2007. In 2011 they revealed themselves and the two men committed suicide. Despite all

⁹ ‚Baseballschlägerjahre‘, referring to an explosion of violence following the reunification, in which Neo-Nazis, often armed with baseball bats, attacked migrant workers and racialized Germans.

¹⁰“Wagenburgmentalität” (Sturm, 2018:113), “unbewusste[s] Unfehlbarkeitsparadigma” (Sturm, 2018:114), “selbstviktimsierende[r] ‚Gegendiskurs‘“ (Sturm, 2018:116)

¹¹ Equations of far-left and far-right radicalism are a staple of German public discourse and an example of what Benoit calls *differentiation*, which aims at making the offensive act committed by an organization seem less bad in comparison to other acts (Benoit, 2018:14). This discursive event, commonly referred to as ‘horseshoe theory’, imagines the political spectrum as a stable center with extremism on both sides, approaching each other (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2015). This simplified view on political radicalism is vital to understanding the context of discourses about ‘extremism’ in Germany (see Rhein & Uhlig, 2019).

members being known criminals since 1998, the police never apprehended them and “*the discovery that ethnic Germans were behind the crimes, motivated by their hate of non-White minorities and the political establishment, sent shockwaves through the country*” (Graef, 2020:509). Though the NSU had connections throughout Germany, including to chapters of the domestic intelligence agency¹², media and public discourse framing focused the narrative that the “*NSU and their networks may be **in** German society, but they are not **of** it*” (Graef, 2020:521; emphasis in original). Moral distancing, as in the *Erinnerungskultur*-fallacy, impedes the recognition of RWR ideology and makes publications of involvement from individuals continuously shocking, especially when perpetrators are employed by the state.

1.2 Nordkreuz

A prominent example for the revelation of a RWR chat-group containing members across the GED-agency-spectrum is Gruppe Nordkreuz, the focus of this study. Founded in 2016, the group with roughly 40 members was made public in 2017 through the witness testimony of a former member (see e.g., Schöler, 2022). In November 2020, *taz* publicized Nordkreuz-connections of military soldiers, police special task force officers, lawyers, and politicians in the state of Mecklenburg Western-Pomerania (MV) and beyond.

According to members, Nordkreuz understands itself as a ‘prepper’-network. ‘Prepper’, derived from ‘to be prepared’, refers to provision-making for a coming societal collapse. The ‘German prepper-society’¹³ summarizes expected future catastrophes as “*natural disasters, industrial disasters, wars, possible economic collapses*” (see Betz & Bosančić, 2021:10). While self-sufficiency in itself is harmless, ‘preppers’ frequently combine paranoid RWR-conspiracies with expected catastrophes. Preppers and RWR groups both connect mass immigration to an imminent societal collapse (see Betz & Bosančić, 2021:8). Radicalized prepper-networks not only await and prepare for a ‘Day X’, but they also aim to expedite its arrival (see Schmidt, 2021). There has been public criticism of press and police focusing the harmless aspects of prepper-culture with Nordkreuz, misperceiving serious threats (see Laabs, 2021). Nordkreuz members planned to round up political enemies, ordered body bags and quicklime (which can be used for disintegrating bodies), and curated ‘enemy lists’ with roughly 15,000-25,000 names (see Bennhold, 2021; Stern, 2019, Schöler, 2022). It was part of a Germany-wide network, coined *Hannibal* after its founder’s alias. Nordkreuz stands out among

¹² Verfassungsschutz (BfV, federal; and LfV, state-level)–the Office for the Protection of the Constitution

¹³ The term is also used as a self-description, e.g., by the German Prepper Gemeinschaft (<https://prepper.chayns.net/>)

other similar groups due to its high potential for violence. In MV, the closest links between the members of the inner circle of Nordkreuz implicate Frank T.'s shooting range 'Baltic Shooters' in Güstrow where multiple GED agencies booked trainings until roughly 2019 (see Erb, Schulz & Strothmann, 2021).

Taz journalists exposed connections between 'Baltic Shooters', Frank T., and then-Minister of Interior Lorenz Caffier (CDU) during a press conference on November 12th, 2020. Caffier presented the 2019 Constitutional Protection report on 'Extremism' which dealt with investigations into the MV-prepper scene and Nordkreuz in particular (Pubantz, 2020). At the end, he allowed for questions and was confronted with his 2018 purchase of a handgun from Frank T. (*Spiegel*, 2020). Instead of clarifying, Caffier blocked inquiries by calling it a 'private matter'. This event and its handling constituted a political crisis in and beyond MV. Following the NSU-scandal which foregrounded potential violence from RWR-groups, as well as the growing number of publicized GED-involvement in them, Caffier's gun purchase became symbolic of larger issues, specifically the lack of political awareness for right-wing radicalism in its own agencies and poor handling of its exposure. Therefore, this case with its multitude of connections throughout GED-agencies and politics on the level of one state provides an inductive approach into the wealth of discourses in the German context, meaning that the findings in this case can provide a starting point for larger thematic discussions on the relations between RWR, GED-agencies and politics.

1.3 Relevance

The exposure of Caffier's connections and the Nordkreuz network exemplifies structural problems within the political and policing system in Germany that have implications beyond this single case. This is in part because the hesitancy to confront RWR in GED-agencies is at odds with ideal communication in a normative deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy is built upon—as the name indicates—free deliberation and discussions among equal citizens expedited by the social and institutional conditions (Ramsey, 2010:82). From this perspective, discursive avoidance of the problem constitutes a lack of "*rationality, impartiality, intellectual honesty and equality among the participants*" (Strömbäck, 2005:336).

The last four years have seen a steadily rising number of German executive defense (GED) agencies' employees' involvement with RWR ideology being exposed (for an overview of cases just for 2020, see Graschl & Krenn, 2021). Most prevalent is membership in GED agency-internal chat groups disseminating radical-right content (see e.g., Tagesschau.de, 2021). Internal investigations following the first police chat-group scandal brought to light over 200

suspected cases in the police force of North-Rhine Westphalia alone (see Tagesspiegel, 2020). Considering this, the numbers published by the federal German domestic intelligence agency appear improbably low¹⁴. Following a series of instances where GED-agencies failed to consider RWR as a danger and subsequently did not investigate far-right crime (see Dossall, 2019; Sontheimer, 2021), police especially face accusations of systemic racism and unproductive error management (see Bruce-Jones, 2015; Rinn & Wehrheim, 2021; Kleffner & Meisner, 2019; Zschocke, 2019). The focus on individualizing cases is misguided since exposed instances almost always feature groups of police officers, indicating a lack of structural dissuasion from RWR-adjacent narratives and sympathies within police forces. Beyond theoretical threats from chat-groups, cases of personnel hoarding weapons and trying to expedite violent insurrections have been exposed (see Schmidt, 2020; Koehler, 2019). As such, the potential for politically motivated violence exhibited by Nordkreuz-group members on top of their close connections to different GED-agencies and state-level politics make it a timely and relevant item of study.

Conjointly, responses by institutional narrators¹⁵ have largely been insufficient in addressing the danger to the democratic integrity of law enforcement. The Nordkreuz-case serves as an example of what this blind spot can obscure on an individual, organizational and mediatization level. Hopefully, through this analysis, the case can serve as a paradigmatic illustration of individualizing systemic issues. Specifically, ‘Causa Caffier’ helps illustrate that ignorance towards RWR from above and within GED-agencies cannot be harmless even if it is not inherently maliciously intended. Within this single case, a wealth of entanglements in several state- and federal GED-agencies were exposed, indicating sympathies towards an explicitly anti-democratic ideology on a possibly much larger scale.

1.4 Research gap

In identifying the research gap for this case, it should be noted that a lot of relevant research surrounding pertinent issues exists. There is a rich and useful body of international research on scandals and crises, including on the role media plays in political accountability (see, e.g., Djerf-Pierre et al., 2013), which is applicable to Caffier’s crisis communication aimed at evading responsibility. Additionally, research on how politicians’ talk turns into crisis (see Ekström & Johansson, 2019) helps explain why his early crisis communication was objectively

¹⁴ 319 suspected cases between January 2017 and March 2020 in all of Germany (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, BfV, 2020)

¹⁵Legacy media, political establishment, lawmakers and opinion-makers, such as journalists and activists

unsuccessful in preventing the scandal from turning into a full-blown crisis. Further, research on the deliberate use of crisis to actively mainstream transgressive statements by RWR politicians (see Krzyżanowski, 2018; Patrona, 2020) is relevant in understanding the context of RWR-narrative strategies.

However, what has not been studied explicitly, is the specific case of the representation of exoneration attempts through crisis communication by a high-ranking politician accused of RWR-connections. Simultaneously, purposeful and strategic RWR-infiltration of security agencies is under-studied as is the political crisis communication when such cases are exposed. Similarly, reliable data on ideology, political alignment, and positioning towards/against the status quo within security agencies is scarce. According to Kopke, “*the last valid sociological studies on right-wing attitudes among police officers date from the 1990s*” (2019:42). The prevalent studies and discourses focus solely on the police, and even there, results are patchy, and discussions are instigated by critical counter-publics, rather than police-internal. Thus, the lack of studies on responses to RWR, especially in the German police force, is due partly to deliberate barriers that police and conservative politicians erect to deflect criticism. For instance, in the aftermath of several right-wing police chat-groups, federal Minister of Interior at the time, Horst Seehofer (CSU) stated that “...*there will be no study on the insinuations and accusations against the police, because the overwhelming majority of police officers, over 99%, are firmly grounded in the constitution*” (Seehofer, 2020). Playing into the aforementioned underestimation of RWR-threats, the assumption that swearing police officers in on the constitution is sufficient to dissuade RWR-sympathies stymies discourses before they begin. Technically, loyalty to the constitution is a job requirement for German police, but the wealth of RWR-cases proves that it does not, in fact, suffice to swear in officers on the constitution.

These barriers aggravate discussions about the ideological state of police and military personnel (Kempen, 2021:10-13). Involvement with RWR-groups by institutional actors from GED-agencies and politicians (excluding the AfD, where it no longer signifies a crisis) is increasingly considered a crisis for institutional trust and democratic integrity (see e.g., Dinauer & Müller-Lancé & Tausche, 2021). Since crises and scandals constitute disruptions in everyday politics and reveal the “*underlying societal norms that make up the moral fabric of society*” (Jacobsson & Löfmarck, 2008:205), they force politicians to react—either position themselves against RWR, or find explanations that evade responsibility for existing networks and connections. Moments of crisis following the publication of an RWR-incident thus provide opportunities to study reactions to RWR and its mediatization to process collective discursive responses.

1.5 Research aim

Using ‘Causa Caffier’, the aim of this study is to investigate political crisis communication and its representation in legacy news media to see how news media reproduces or reframes strategic political communication in an RWR-related crisis. Additionally, this helps illuminate institutional awareness of the scope and possible symbolic weight this crisis could signify. German legacy news media, for this study specifically online and print newspapers, are still vital opinion-makers: according to market-research company *Statista*, in 2021, 79.83% of Germans regularly read newspapers in their leisure time (Koptuyug, 2021).

Ignorance to an RWR-group by the actors and institutions meant to be democracy’s bulwark against anti-constitutional threats has implications for Germany’s capability of dealing with them. Likewise, public discourses following the uncovering of these connections are meaningful in judging how legacy news media recontextualizes the issues and which narratives remain prevalent. It also allows for insight in how far the case was discussed as an individual’s moral failing vs. a systemic issue for Caffier’s party/ministry/state/LKA¹⁶/LfV¹⁷. Caffier’s connection to the RWR-network Nordkreuz had spillover effects for several GED-agency branches due to his position as head of both the LKA and the LfV.

The research questions this study aims to answer is the following:

RQ: In the example of Caffier’s Nordkreuz connection, how did legacy news media and the afflicted actors¹⁸ respond to RWR in GED-agencies?

To specify this research question, it is divided into two parts to represent the action and reaction process of crisis communication between the primary actor (Caffier/IM-MV¹⁹) and the reaction (press representation of crisis communication):

RQ1: Which image repair strategies did Caffier/the IM-MV employ between the journalistic confrontation on the scandal and his resignation? What did the strategic choices aim at, and were they successful?

¹⁶Landeskriminalamt–state-specific bureau of investigation that connects the state police to the BKA (Bundeskriminalamt, federal criminal police office).

¹⁷Landesverfassungsschutz–state office for the protection of the constitution, Germany’s domestic intelligence agency, subordinate to the federal office for the protection of the constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, BfV).

¹⁸Caffier/the IM/MV

¹⁹Innenministerium Mecklenburg-Vorpommern–Ministry of the Interior Mecklenburg Western-Pomerania

RQ2: How did German legacy news media cover the crisis communication and influence the narrative meaning of the crisis through their construction of news values, representation of reported speech, and implied scope (individual failure/accountability vs. systemic issue)?

In dividing the research questions and data sets between the actors producing crisis communication and its subsequent mediatization, the crisis can be represented more complexly. Additionally, the division represents the theoretical framework: RQ1 is best answered using Crisis Communication Theory (CCT), whereas RQ2 aims at context and power relations and is best suited to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Drawing mainly on Dunn & Eble, CCT, specifically Image Repair Theory (IRT), is applied to the statements, interviews, and reactions by the afflicted party: Lorenz Caffier and, under his lead, the IM-MV, LKA and LfV. Dunn & Eble suggest that IRT alone does not illuminate surrounding media discourses sufficiently since CCT focuses solely on the afflicted party. It only considers reactions for strategy-success evaluations and thus cannot scrutinize the wealth of press responses and mediatization.

Therefore, RQ2 explicitly investigates the latter: beyond immediate crisis communication, there are larger discourses—ideology in state agencies, RWR-threats, the handling of politicians' associations or ignorance of the former. CDA enables a broader perspective on the discursive construction of crisis through the systematic analysis of how speech by the afflicted is mediatized, recontextualized, and which news values are foregrounded.

Both research questions are connected, as primary statements by Caffier shape the media response as several newspapers simply re-publish crisis communication without re-framing. CDA is primarily interested in power relations and the Minister's influence on media reactions means that in a part of coverage, his narrative shapes the prevalent discourse. According to Fairclough,

... if an organization can use discourse to achieve power, then that organization's message is disseminated throughout the social structure, and becomes a "common sense" assumption that the community adopts and reproduces (Dunn & Eble, 2015:720).

The combination of IRT and CDA is fruitful for a complete view of this crisis as it emerged because it enables scrutiny of the primary crisis communication and also its dissemination and media representation to evaluate the scope and role of the crisis in public discourse.

ii. Literature Review

As discussed in the introduction, communication research on RWR in agencies is severely lacking. However, there are countless studies on politicians, defensive communication, apologia, scandals and discursive shifts in the realm of RWR which provide valuable insights and frameworks.

2.1 Metapolitics, mainstreaming & mediatization

In contextualizing ‘Causa Caffier’ further, the role and strategies of RWR-actors, groups, and politicians are vital to understanding why and how media can play into their goals. Populist figures with polarizing RWR ideologies have become highly visible players in international politics in recent years. RWR-actors’ deliberate movement towards mainstream positions dates to at least the 1960s with the formation of the *Nouvelle Droite*—the French New Right (see Strobl, 2021:20). Since then, a new strategy, ‘metapolitics’, was adopted by offshoots of the New Right internationally, including the US Alt-Right, Identitarian movements in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and their European counterparts in France, Austria, Germany, the UK, Italy, Croatia, Belgium, and the Netherlands (see Hermansson et al., 2020:11-41). The *Manifesto of the French New Right in the Year 2000* defines metapolitics as

... neither a strategy to impose intellectual hegemony, nor an attempt to discredit other possible attitudes or agendas. It rests solely on the premise that ideas play a fundamental role in collective consciousness, and, more generally, in human history... (De Benoist & Champetier, 2000 in Hermansson et al., 2020:14).

Inspired by Gramsci’s writings on political hegemony, New Right movements dropped explicit references to Nazi Germany and fascism, concentrating instead on building broad support for their positions in the ‘pre-political’ space (Strobl, 2021:22). An important aspect of this strategy is emphasizing the alleged sensible mainstreamness of their positions and political aims, constructing a veneer of reasonability for RWR positions that simultaneously labels anyone who disagrees as an alarmist who is out of touch with the majority population’s concerns (see Ekström & Johansson, 2008:187). To illustrate, in 2021, the radical-right *Alternative for Germany*’s (AfD) used the election slogan “*Germany, but normal*”²⁰. The slogan is not in itself problematic and taking offense with it seems excessive. However, considering the AfD’s perceived issues, there are logical propositions underlying this basic statement (see Patrona,

²⁰ „Deutschland, aber normal“, <https://www.afd.de/aufbruch-deutschland-aber-normal/>

2020:173)–immigration, gender expression, religious diversity and Islam generally are malicious and detrimental for Germany–their call for a return to ‘normal Germany’ inherently builds on racism, islamophobia, and rigid gender roles. In accordance with other New Right ideologies, the AfD constructs and idealizes a simplified past without modern ‘issues’ like gender equality and religious and ethnic/cultural diversity. The simple slogan essentially represents the latest rendition of what Roger Griffin defines as the ‘core myth of generic fascism’: palingenetic ultranationalism. He argues that fascist mentality emanates from the perception of being in a heroic fight against degeneration. This battle aims at the return to a glorious past and depends upon the creation of a strong national community (in Berghaus, 1996:12-13). The fabled past is an idealized construct, but it appeals to discontented white populations fearing an economic and/or status decline in the wake of the economic and humanitarian crises in 2008 and 2015 respectively. Creating an ‘us versus them’ dichotomy with “...*the presentation of an imagined homogeneous, victimised in-group... and the justification for the exclusion of out-groups*” (Åkerlund, 2020:615) is central to the (re)production of RWR discourse.

Another strategy involves routine transgressions of widely agreed upon values and norms to reduce the shock values that traditionally accompany them (see Ekström et al., 2021). RWR populist party strategies, characterized by “*uncivility, dogmatic politicisation and ideologization as well as fact denial and norm-breaking*” (Krzyżanowski, 2020:432) impact larger discourses by normalizing these behaviors and utterances. Krzyżanowski describes normalization as

a set of simultaneous or subsequent discursive strategies which gradually introduce and/or perpetuate in public discourse some new – and in most cases often uncivil or untrue – patterns of representing social actors, processes and issues. Importantly, these discursive strategies are initiated and recontextualised as part and parcel of wider – and in most cases pre-determined – forms of social, political and economic action designed to not only change the norms of social conduct but also to gain legitimacy from such a change and from the introduction of a related, “new” normative order (Krzyżanowski, 2020:432).

Purposeful normalization creates a ‘specific borderline discourse’ built upon what is allowed or civil in public discourses to disseminate ‘uncivil ideas’, i.e., discrimination and racism as legitimate and/or acceptable (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017:573). Relatedly, RWR populist groups use normalization in an attempt at mainstreaming their ideology. Mainstreaming involves the move of formerly transgressive utterances to the center, the mainstream, of public discourse. Whether normalization and mainstreaming are successful depends on both political frame and on the media system/public spheres’ positioning in response to offensive statements.

In particular, the mediatization of transgressive utterances depends on the handling by democratic political parties. Ekström et al. find that when mainstream parties treat populist parties as deviants and hold on to a cordon sanitaire, “*news media tend to be particularly restrictive in making populist actors visible in media content (gatekeeping), as well as more negative in their interpretations of populist actors and their statements*” (2021:4).

Connectedly, mediatization influences the reception of offensive statements in the mainstream and in public opinion generally. Continued normalization of RWR populist positions has enabled alliances, predominantly with conservative parties. Simultaneously, conservative parties in some countries are moving further right, two developments that Strobl summarizes as ‘radicalized conservatism’ (see 2021:30). According to Walter (2014), media environments that ‘reward’ transgressive utterances with neutral-leaning news coverage might encourage other parties to adopt populist strategies: if RWR transgressions are considered neutrally and newsworthy, other parties tend to adapt to the given mass media standards to remain relevant (see 2014:45). Therefore, the discursive role of news media in influencing RWR-statements’ reception and news value should not be overlooked. As the political establishment has a strong influence on the success of RWR discourses in news media and public discourse at large, the connections between RWR fringe groups and high-ranking democratic politicians are worrisome beyond the specific cases, like the Nordkreuz example.

2.2 Ideology and positionality towards security agencies

Since the crisis communication in this case study comes from the MV-CDU, a conservative party, the role of ideology on positionality to GED-agencies like the police is interesting. Research shows that ideology and positionality cannot be conflated, but there is a general consensus that ideology plays a role in positionality on many political issues (see e.g., belief in partisan conspiracy theories; Hallin, 2019). For instance, political ideologies have been shown to affect positionality towards law-and-order ideals. A German study on police officer’s political ideology suggests linkages between the conservative CDU/CSU’s positive stance on policing, and police officers’ preference for these parties (see Tepe & Vanhuyse, 2013:172-174). The AfD did not exist in 2013, but judging from older far-right parties and the exceptionally high number of police officers who are members of the federal parliament for the AfD²¹, their linkages are likely even closer (Neumann & Hock, 2020). There is also evidence that “*political conservatism, punitiveness, and strict legalism correlate with a perception that*

²¹ 7.7% vs. less than 2% in all other parties (Neumann & Hock, 2020).

police are procedurally just” (Roché & Roux, 2017:524). This indicates that conservatism, on top of indicating positive stances towards more policing, coincides with the belief that the police are a just entity, which could impede openness to criticism.

A notable example of research on ideology within the police is the 1996 research project ‘Xenophobia in the Police?’²² by today's German Police University²³. The title is misleading though, as what they call xenophobia not only targets foreigners, but also individuals that had been living in Germany for decades. It also made a questionable distinction between citizens and ‘foreigners,’ pointing to the racial profiling aspect of this. Presumably, not all ‘foreigners’ (non-citizens) face discrimination by the police, but only those that can be visibly racialized. Supplementing research on racism in the police, political scientist Hans-Gerd Jaschke introduced the enduring ‘*Einzelfall*’–bad apple–hypothesis (Kopke, 2019:37). By 2019, the term *Einzelfall* had, ironically, become synonymous with its very opposite. The hypothesis states that the police, as a mirror of society, can include cases of individual radicalism, but cannot be systemically flawed (see Kopke, 2019:38). This narrative endures in conservative circles, though evidence suggests otherwise.

The police are more conservative than the population at large, while left-wing positions are underrepresented (see Monecke & Singelstein, 2019). Rafael Behr, sociologist and Police Academy professor, called the bad-apple narrative a hindrance to honest discourse about structural problems, stating that “*an alliance of professional associations and conservatives ... have again and again tried this myth of the Einzelfall and have again and again immediately fended off criticism of the police with "too sweeping", "general mistrust", "hostility to the police", "general suspicion"*”²⁴ (see May & Behr, 2020). Questionably, most research on the police is done by the police. There is, for instance, a BfV²⁵ status report on right-wing extremism in GED-agencies (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2020) which shows another issue–ambiguity of terms like ‘*right-wing extremism*’, ‘*institutional racism*’, ‘*radicalism*’. The report is also based on voluntary, public numbers from the respective states, meaning it gives an overview of known cases, but does not aim at uncovering transgressions. Additionally, the

²² Kuratorium der Polizei-Führungsakademie (Hrsg.), *Fremdenfeindlichkeit in der Polizei?*, Lübeck 1996; in Kopke, 2019:37.

²³ Deutsche Hochschule der Polizei (DHPol) then called the Police Leadership Academy, Polizei-Führungsakademie (PFA)

²⁴ „Weil tatsächlich ein Verbund von Berufsvertretungen und konservativen Politikern, Innenministern, Ministerpräsidenten immer wieder diese Mär des Einzelfalls bemüht haben und immer wieder die Kritik an der Polizei sofort abgewehrt haben mit „ist zu pauschal“, „ist generelles Misstrauen“, „ist Polizeifeindlichkeit“, „ist Generalverdacht““ (May & Behr, 2020).

²⁵ Bundesverfassungsschutz, federal domestic intelligence service

states collect data differently, which makes meaningful comparisons difficult, if not impossible. Considering most of the publicized right-wing radicalist police chat groups were exposed coincidentally, the numbers in the status report are likely not representative (see also Armbrüster & Milahic, 2020).

The German researcher who introduced the aforementioned *Einzelfall*-hypothesis, for instance, also accused the media of defaming the police's image by manipulating and overblowing reports about instances of racism and far-right ideology (Jaschke, 1996; in Kopke, 2019:38). This narrative endures in conservative circles (see Seehofer, 2020; Reul, 2020), even though the mirror-of-society hypothesis has been disproven. A consensus exists on the fact that, in Germany, the police

are not a representative of society... value-conservative sentiments are particularly prevalent in the police force, and it is the case that order-philes are more likely to join the police force. Left-wing positions, on the other hand, are rarely represented in the police force (Monecke & Singelstein, 2019).²⁶

Stronger identification with police from the party base and politicians further suggests they may experience accusations of RWR involvement more personally (see e.g., Reul and Seehofer's statements in 2020). Connectedly, there have also been attempts at defining the personality traits that play into making a person more authoritative, i.e., likely to opt for “*submission to authority-, desire for a strong leader, subservience of the individual to the state, and so forth*” (Adorno et al., 1950:231). Though concepts like the F-scale²⁷ remain contested, they offer an enduring approach towards predicting individual alignment towards authoritarianism by investigating factors such as belief in hierarchy, subordination of the individual to social demands, value of obedience and belief in sanctioned authority, which are all potentially beneficial in a hierarchical environment like military or police training. Of course, the question remains whether more conservative or authoritarian personalities are drawn to policing initially, or if and how time spent in these agencies affects increasing authoritarianism.

2.3 Scandals and accountability

Considering the quick development of ‘Causa Caffier’ from a morally questionable transgression, i.e., a potential scandal, to a full crisis, the nuances between the concepts need to

²⁶ My translation.

²⁷ Developed in 1947, the F (-fascism) scale is a questionnaire designed to predict/capture a person's tendencies towards authoritarianism.

be reviewed. The concept of scandal closely relates to crisis. Crisis and scandal are similar, but not fully interchangeable. While crises can be accidental–natural disasters, technical issues that lead to crashes etc.–scandals always have a moral component (see Johansson & Vigsø, 2020:458). According to Jacobsson & Löfmarck, scandals signify the temporary disruption of the social order, revealing the “*underlying societal norms that make up the moral fabric of society*” (2008:205), shaking up the ‘collective conscience’. Coombs et al. (2018) posit that a crisis is the consequence of poor scandal management, occurring when

1. the behaviours in question are considered morally offensive;
2. the offensive behaviours appear to be intentional;
3. the behaviours are linked to highly controversial social issues; and
4. there is public awareness of the behaviours. (182; in Johansson & Vigsø, 2020:468)

Scandals can be defined as “*social ritual[s] that serve the purpose of updating normative moral models in a society and that, through communication, contribute to a collective difference and identity formation*” (Burkenhardt, 2018:21; in *ibid*:457).

The Caffier case meets the definition for a personal political scandal, which focuses on “*politicians’ personal norm transgressions, both as political leaders and in their more private activities.*” (Allern & Pollack 2012:14). The importance placed upon politicians’ private acts and character is explained by what Thompson (2000) calls the ‘politics of trust’ (in Johansson & Vigsø, 2020:462). Therefore, he argues that scandals are “*struggles over symbolic power in which reputation and trust are at stake*” (245; in *ibid*:462). The issue with viewing this case as a simple moral failing from a high-ranking politician is that it obscures the systemic issues that underlie the transgression.

Conjointly, the question of accountability plays a vital role in the mediatization and opinion-making regarding crisis responses. Accountability here means “*the relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgment, and the actor may face consequences*” (Bovens, 2007:450). Similarly, Djerf-Pierre et al. (2014) define accountability as the “*principle that elected politicians should be answerable, i.e., that they must inform, explain and justify their actions to the public, and that they can be held to account for their actions is fundamental in a democratic society*” (321). Accountability impacts the mediatization of scandals and crises as well, with journalists often aiming at getting the individuals or organizations at the center of a scandal to admit responsibility and take accountability for their actions. As scandals and crises intersect, image repair strategies can overlap with accountability, with *mortification* and *corrective action*, for instance, essentially

signifying the acceptance of accountability by the afflicted party. Boin et al. refer to accountability processes started by crises as “a ‘*contest of explanations*’. *The accountability process constitutes the arena in which [...] corporations, politicians, investigators, and change advocates try to obtain or preserve position and clout*” (2017:111). Boin also argues that timing plays an important role in the perception of apologies, with statements that come after the afflicted party has tried to evade responsibility as less influential in shaping a positive reception (2017:120). As such, accountability also offers a chance at ending a crisis: as sincere apologies are valenced positively (Ferguson et al., 2018:266), especially in cases where the blame attribution was low (ibid:255), taking accountability and apologizing can be beneficial to end a crisis quickly and definitively.

iii. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

The theoretical framework for this study is informed by two main theories, reflected in the specified research questions. It follows the argumentation laid out by Dunn & Eble for the merits of combining CCT and CDA. They posit that the theoretical points of departure “*seem to be on opposite ends of the philosophical spectrum*” (2015:718), since CCT focuses on the communication itself, i.e., the organization it originates with, while CDA contextualizes and spotlights the discourses of power surrounding the communication. According to Dunn & Eble, the narrow focus of crisis communication research on successes or failures of organizational strategies results in the consideration of communication in a vacuum. This leads to a disregard for the community and affected groups outside of the organization’s immediate shareholders (ibid:718). In this study, as in Dunn & Eble’s, the organization and actors whose communication is scrutinized are powerful within their respective community. The community impact of crisis communication is embedded in power structures, in this case with a high-ranking politician as an influential originator. Therefore, CDA is well-suited to filling the analytical gap left by a purely crisis communication-oriented approach. Primary crisis communication is powerful when it comes from elite actors, as it directly shapes the following discourses with much of the early coverage purely reactive and reproducing existing statements. Fairclough argues that the power to use discourse can lead to an organization’s control over what is accepted within a community (see Fairclough, in ibid:720). This illustrates the solidifying power imbedded in political crisis communication. According to Fairclough,

the powerful group controls and frames the discourse, and silences the non-powerful groups. Even the media, often viewed as an objective "watchdog" in capitalist societies, may serve to reinforce the dominant ideology (ibid:720).

Since RWR clashes with the moral values of deliberative democracy and thus with both the interests of the public and GED agencies, considering the perspectives of communicator *and* audience is vital. Additionally, there are no comprehensive case studies using either crisis communication or CDA regarding GED-agencies or other institutional actors in the German context.

3.2 Crisis Communication Theory (CCT)

To start out, crisis or scandal are inevitably preceded by a 'risk' (the pre-crisis stage). Heath defines 'risk' as "*an occurrence that can have positive or negative consequences of varying magnitudes [...]*" with the adage that "*a crisis is a risk manifested*" (2006:245), meaning, simply, that risk can be understood as crisis potential. Noticing and identifying risks is integral for correctly limiting the damage. CCT, as well as crisis management, is heavily concerned with the conception that a crisis can be turned around, or even prevented by proper crisis communication. Coombs defines 'crisis' as an "*event that is an unpredictable major threat that can have a negative impact on the organization industry or stakeholder **if handled improperly***"²⁸ (1999:2; in Frandsen & Johansen, 2017:37). He also identifies three crisis stages that require different strategic communication:

- (1) the pre-crisis stage—(signal detection, prevention, and preparation);
- (2) the crisis stage (focal incident stage/trans-crisis stage)—(recognition, containment, and restitution); and
- (3) the post-crisis stage—(evaluation, institutional/ memory and post-crisis actions) (see Coombs, 2015; in Frandsen & Johansen, 2017:57/70).

There are multiple earlier crisis stage models, including Fink's (1986) 'anatomy of a crisis' and Mitroff's (1994) expansion of the model into five stages. For this paper, Coomb's crisis stages provide a sufficient framework. Crisis communication is most often cited in corporate crisis management cases, but it is useful for political crises as well, as a political party, as well as a government coalition or even an entire legislature can constitute an organization struck by a crisis, depending on the blame attribution in a certain case. According to Frandsen & Johansen,

²⁸ Emphasis added.

an organizational crisis is a low-probability, high-impact situation that is perceived by critical stakeholders to threaten the viability of the organization and that is subjectively experienced by these individuals as personally and socially threatening (2020:2).

In the context of politics, political public relations (PBR) coincide closely with crisis management. Crisis communication, then is simply the response to a crisis: Fearn-Banks therefore defines crisis communication as a dialogue between organizations and their publics (1996; in Frandsen & Johansen, 2017:89). Strömbäck & Kioussis define PBR as the “*process by which an actor for political purposes, through communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with key publics and stakeholders to help support its mission and achieve its goals*” (2011b:8). Coombs points out that crisis communication is constituted by multiple related phenomena, including the managing of meaning and information in terms of people’s perceptions both within and outside the afflicted organization (2015; in Frandsen & Johansen, 2017:91).

Further, discussions of crisis communication responses by institutional actors must account for framing. Gamson & Modigliani understood frames as “*a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events ... [suggesting] what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue*” (1987:143 in Cacciatore et al., 2016:10). According to Coombs, three crisis frames exist in political public relations: denial, threat, and opportunity (2020:215). For ‘Causa Caffier’, crisis frames differ drastically depending on actors’ involvement. Caffier ignoring how his gun purchase would be perceived in the contemporary discourse on Nordkreuz—i.e., as a first-order transgression—constituted denial of the crisis, signifying “*an ineffective response to a crisis (second-order transgression)*” which arguably turned the event into a combined scandal and crisis—a scansis (De Maria, 2010; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; in Coombs, 2020:222).

Image Repair Theory (IRT)

First conceptualized by William L. Benoit in 1995, IRT draws on rhetorical theory and its supplements like apologia (see Frandsen & Johansen, 2020:43). IRT posits two base assumptions: that communication is goal-oriented and that it fundamentally aims at the maintenance of a positive reputation (see Benoit, 2018:12-13). According to Benoit, “*image repair discourse is a response to actual or anticipated threats to the face*” (ibid:12). To constitute a threat, an event or act must fulfill two conditions: a) be considered offensive by stakeholders, and b) be clearly attributed to the afflicted organization or actor (ibid:13). Benoit identifies five general strategies and 14 strategies altogether (ibid:14).

TABLE 1 Typology of Image Repair Strategies

Strategy	Definitions	Example
Denial		
Simple denial	did not commit act; act is not harmful	Tylenol did not poison capsules
Shift blame	another committed the offense capsules	madman poisoned
Evade Responsibility		
Provocation	offensive act just a response to an earlier offense	firm left state because of new taxes
Defeasibility	lack of information or ability	executive not informed of new meeting time
Accident	mishap	tree fell on tracks, causing train wreck
Good Intentions	meant well	company believed changes would help consumers
Reduce Offensiveness		
Bolstering	stress defendant's good traits or acts	Exxon claimed "swift and competent oil spill cleanup"
Minimization	offense less serious than it appears	few harmed by water pollution
Differentiation	act less offensive than other, similar acts	Sears repairs were preventive maintenance, not fraud
Transcendence	act justified by more important values	research uses animals to help create drugs for people
Attack accuser	reduce credibility of accuser; suggest victim deserved offense; shift audience attention from act	Pepsi owns restaurants and competes for your customers
Corrective Action	fix problem or prevent recurrence billions to improve service	AT&T promises to spend
Mortification	apologize	AT&T apologized for service interruption

(See Benoit, 2018:14)

IRT aims to present a comprehensive framework of individual actors or organizations' possible reactions to image-threats while attempting to be perceived as positively as possible.

The first two main strategies focus on blame reduction: denial and evading responsibility. **Denial** contains two sub-strategies. The first (*simple denial*) is self-explanatory: the afflicted party does not admit fault or insists that the act was not harmful. This can be successful if they are innocent (as in the Tylenol example). The second (*shift blame*) involves the shift of accountability from the afflicted party to someone else. **Evading responsibility**, the

second strategy, has four sub-strategies beginning with *provocation*—claiming the offense was provoked by something/someone else and thus the afflicted is not responsible. *Defeasibility*, the second sub-strategy, is built on the claim that the afflicted party did not have relevant information at the time of the transgression, and therefore cannot be responsible for its offensiveness. The latter sub-strategies, *accident* and *good intentions*, both argue from intent. In an accident, the offense is unplanned and not malevolent, therefore the responsibility is not fully on the afflicted.

The third strategy, **reducing offensiveness**, aims at making the transgression seem less severe, it deals with the ‘unpleasantness’ of the offensive act (see Benoit, 2013:437). First, *bolstering*, the act of stressing the afflicted party’s good acts and their positive traits, shifting the focus away from the negative accusations. Second, *minimization*, similar to *simple denial*, aims at making the transgression seem less serious. In line with this, *differentiation* shifts the focus to other, maybe related acts, which are more severe. *Transcendence* essentially argues that while the act was committed, it was for good reasons. *Attack accuser*, also self-explanatory, aims at shifting the focus and making the accuser seem less trustworthy.

Lastly, according to Benoit, **corrective action**, “*can address offensiveness (by repairing damage) or blame (by taking action to prevent the offensive act in the future)*” (ibid:238). Further, the last strategy is to openly admit responsibility and apologize. Thus, **mortification** does not attempt the reduction of offensiveness, but aims at public/stakeholder forgiveness (ibid:439).

Additionally, Lazare identifies eight characteristics of ‘pseudo apologies’, including vague or incomplete acknowledgments of the offensive act, use of the passive voice, conditional apologies, questioning of harm done, minimizing, emphatic “*I am sorry (you were offended)*”, apologizing to the wrong party or for the wrong offense (see Eisinger, 2011:137). In turn, some of these characteristics can be framed using image repair strategies. For instance, conditional apologies often fall under the *minimization* strategy.

In IRT, *mortification* covers apologies. Benoit does not allow for the ambiguities that insincere apologies provide. As such, these alternative conceptualizations of apologia theories can lend additional insight. The fact that they work as add-ons to IRT instead of contradictions also proves its endurance. Benoit suggested in 1995 that *mortification*, apologizing for the offense committed or blamed on the afflicted actor, provided the best chance of restoring one’s reputation. In accordance with these statements, Eriksson & Eriksson also find evidence that mortification, “*often in combination with corrective action and/or bolstering, is more successful in repairing a tarnished image than other strategies, such as denial and/or shifting blame*”

(ibid:265). Johnson, however, argues that taking responsibility can backfire: “*conceding that scandalous information is true and taking responsibility to make things right in the future leaves no room for doubt in the minds of citizens who may not be certain how to evaluate a politician associated with scandal*” (2018:219). Therefore, Johnson posits that denial can be beneficial regarding trait evaluation for politicians (ibid:222). However, a 2018 survey on perceptions of image repair strategy success found that denial is consistently viewed as extremely negatively. Ferguson et al. found salient differences in terms of the effectiveness of IRT strategies

Three strategies consistently occupy the positively valenced tier one category (correction action, compensation, and mortification), across types of crisis. All other strategies were viewed negatively, at least in some circumstances. For negatively perceived rhetorical strategies, high consistencies were also found between this study and the two studies previously mentioned. Defeasibility, minimization, and differentiation consistently occupy the negatively valenced tier two category. Viewed in the extremely negative category (tier three) were provocation, blameshift, silence, and denial (Ferguson et al., 2018:266).

This study further indicated that the choice of image repair strategy used by crisis communication leaders depends on the comparison of the strategies with each other, and less on the type of crisis (see Ferguson et al., 2018:265). Thus, the preference for certain strategies remained stable even if the crisis scenario changed.

Eriksson & Eriksson’s study on managing political crises uses an interactional approach to find which image repair strategies are successful in repairing the accused’s reputation during question-and-answer sessions. According to Smith (1999:93), these are “*the heart of press conferences analysis*” (in Eriksson & Eriksson, 2012:265). Using Conversation Analysis (CA)—detailed, empirical observations of the interactions between participants in a conversation (for instance talking over one another, silences, emphasising certain words etc.)—Eriksson & Eriksson study press conferences and the image repair strategies that dominate in them (see Ekström, 2007:965; in ibid:267).

Relatedly, Benoit’s own 2018 study applied image repair strategies to the United Airlines scandal related to dragging passengers off an already boarded flight. Benoit finds that social media had accelerated the emergence and phases of the crisis to ‘hyperspeed’, forcing the company to adapt their strategies quickly (2018:22). He also points out that “*...it is not enough to apologize for something—one must apologize for the perceived offense*” (2018:22). Attempting to minimize the transgression by making it seem less offensive—denying the use of violence, and instead calling it ‘re-accomodation’—did not work in United Airlines’ favor (ibid).

Useful additions to IRT in the past thirty years also include Coombs’ Situational Crisis Theory (SCCT), which differentiates between three clusters (types) of crises depending on the

perceived attribution of blame for the afflicted party and the resulting threat: the victim cluster (weak attribution = mild reputational threat), the accidental cluster (minimal attribution = moderate reputational threat), and the preventable cluster (strong attribution = severe reputational threat) (Ferguson et al., 2018:255).

Likewise, Kampf (2009) studied strategies of minimizing responsibility, focusing on apologies as a type of excuse or justification to restore one's image in a situation which also constitutes a credibility test (see 2009:2558-9). He defines credibility tests as emerging when reports on a public person's transgression, mostly backstage behavior, is at odds with their public perception. Kampf argues that "[t]he inconsistency between the two spheres causes public scandals and requires the transgressor to exercise means for saving his face in order to maintain his former status or sometimes even survive in the public arena" (Olshtain, 1989; Thompson, 2000; in *ibid*:2259).

3.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Broadly defined, CDA is a theoretical and methodological approach to uncover and analyze the power relations that underlie discourses. While 'discourse'- definitions differ depending on disciplines and language traditions, van Dijk's definition of discourse as '*text in context*' is helpful (1990; in Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2008:5). In his framework for newspaper analysis, Richardson defines CDA as a theory and method, an interpretative, contextual and constructivist approach (2007:15). Further, Richardson posits that it offers interpretations of a text's meaning, the ability to situate and contextualize its content, and argue the construction of the textual meaning (see Richardson, 2007:15). CDA also follows Foucault and constructionist theory in

identifying discourse as the practices of power diffused outside formal political institutions, making use of seemingly neutral categories of knowledge and expertise to control others as well as to construct the self as a political actor (Ferreer et al., 2002:307).

According to Dunn & Eble, CDA is "*specifically concerned with how texts work to oppress people within social communities*" (2015:719). Importantly, CDA is emancipatory in its objectives, focusing socially and/or economically disadvantaged groups (see Wodak & Meyer, 2001:125). It builds on the notion that the narratives societies employ to define themselves are inherently connected to the ideological underpinnings of their discourses—meaning that underlying power relations manifest themselves in discourse and can then be legitimized or challenged (see Gu, 2019:207). As Foucault put it, "*there can be no possible exercise of power*

without a certain economy of discourses of truth” (1980:93; in Gu, 2019:206). Distinguishing itself from other theoretical frameworks, CDA also contains a moral stance, which makes its use for scandal-research particularly fitting, since many scandal definitions tie into perceptions of transgressed morality (see Johansson & Vigsø, 2020:457). Huckin (1995) suggests that CDA “ultimately aims at improving society through taking an ethical stance on social issues” (in Alawadh, 2014:35). As such, the researcher’s own positionality must be considered, both positively—through cultural knowledge and dimensions linked to it—and negatively, through possible blind spots due to ideological biases (see e.g., Alawadh, 2014:64). In terms of its application, there are different approaches to CDA. Fairclough’s five-step analytical model, for instance, explicitly includes a step for critical reflection to uncover and problematize shortcomings.

1. Focus upon a social problem which has a semiotic aspect.
2. Identify obstacles to it being tackled, through analysis of
 - a. the network of practices it is located within
 - b. the relationship of semiosis to other elements within the particular practice(s) concerned
 - c. the discourse (the semiosis itself)
 - i. structural analysis: the order of discourse
 - ii. interactional analysis
 - iii. interdiscursive analysis
 - iv. linguistic and semiotic analysis.
3. Consider whether the social order (network of practices) in a sense ‘needs’ the problem.
4. Identify possible ways past the obstacles.
5. Reflect critically on the analysis (1-4) (Fairclough, 2001:125)

The theoretical framework for applying CDA to this case study following Fairclough’s model could look like this (inspired by Dunn & Eble, 2015):

- 1. Focus on a social problem with a semiotic aspect:**
 - i. *Problem:* Institutional blindness to RWR in GED agencies, insufficient reporting on systemic issues
 - ii. *Semiotic aspect:* Institutional inability to discursively confront transgressions, media complacency in reproducing official narratives and framing
- 2. Identify obstacles to tackling the social problem:**
 - i. Power of institutions/institutional actors in government and agencies to control discourses and block meaningful research (through refusing funding, classifying information, etc.)
 - ii. Unwillingness to change status quo
- 3. Consider whether the social order needs the problem:**
 - i. Civil society is unable to control right-wing radicalist ideologies in GED agencies
 - ii. Institutional actors are the only ones with authority to study security agencies from the inside, but they benefit from non-action (reputation) up to the acute crisis stage
- 4. Ways past the obstacle:**

- i. Raise awareness
- ii. Problematize lack of insight/danger for civil society
- iii. Consequences for actors/involved parties

5. Critical reflection on the analysis

- i. Limitations, possible shortcomings, further research plans

Additionally, Richardson (2007) offers a linguistic textual analysis framework for newspapers. These are important developments since they provide successful models turning CDA from theory to methodology regarding news analysis, shaping CDA's use for RQ2.

The wide range of applications and approaches in CDA denotes differing methodologies. One approach, used in Alawadh (2014), Makamani & Mutasa (2017), Carvalho (2008) and Richardson (2007) is textual analysis, a detailed linguistic approach to discourse led by lexical, syntactical and word-based factors within the chosen material and is employed in this case study. Textual analysis in CDA enables the gathering of a solid, congruent data set based on fixed conditions. Patrona's work on the mediatization of far-right talk from Greek parliamentary discourse is also helpful for this study's framework, as she looks at the *"linguistic and rhetorical design of the original scandalous utterance—The journalistic framing of scandalous talk in its subsequent recontextualisations in the online press as evidenced in the reporting language used and overall journalistic evaluation"* (2020:164). Combined with Richardson's guidelines on applying CDA to reported speech (2007:102-105), this provides a functional approach to analyzing news media. Krzyżanowski also focuses on discursive shifts, explorations of how

various macro-level, transnational frames of imagining society (e.g. populism, neoliberalism, radicalisation, securitisation etc.), otherwise known as "discursive change" (Fairclough 1992), are recontextualised in actor- and context-specific discourses of various public, and in particular political and media actors (2020:508).

Generally, the field of CDA has been moving towards a more diverse conceptualization of its applications. There is, however, still no consensus on *how* to apply CDA. Existing frameworks by Patrona, Fairclough, Richardson, Carvalho, and Caple & Bednarek, for instance, provide solid starting points and the freedom inherent in the width of CDA makes it a versatile theory and method for analysis.

Discursive News Value Analysis (DNVA)

A sub-category of analysis within CDA is DNVA, for which Caple & Bednarek provide a framework for identifying eleven news values. DNVA draws heavily from Fairclough and Foucault and assigns texts significant power in shaping discourses, and, subsequently, society. Caple & Bednarek “*assume that material events are endowed with newsworthiness by the media, for example, by emphasizing or de-emphasizing certain news values in texts*” (2017:51). As such, news values are a shortcut to analyzing how a crisis, for instance, is represented in the media and what aspects are foregrounded in discussions about it. This makes DNVA a useful tool in the analysis for this case study.

Table 3.3 News values and their definitions in DNVA

<i>News value</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Aesthetic Appeal	The event is discursively constructed as beautiful (visuals only)
Consonance	The event is discursively constructed as (stereo)typical (limited here to news actors, social groups, organizations, or countries/ nations)
Eliteness	The event is discursively constructed as of high status or fame (including but not limited to the people, countries, or institutions involved)
Impact	The event is discursively constructed as having significant effects or consequences (not necessarily limited to impact on the target audience)
Negativity	The event is discursively constructed as negative, for example, as a disaster, conflict, controversy, criminal act
Personalization	The event is discursively constructed as having a personal or ‘human’ face (involving non-elite actors, including eyewitnesses)
Positivity	The event is discursively constructed as positive, for example, as a scientific breakthrough or heroic act
Proximity	The event is discursively constructed as geographically or culturally near (in relation to the publication location/target audience)
Superlativeness	The event is discursively constructed as being of high intensity or large scope/scale
Timeliness	The event is discursively constructed as timely in relation to the publication date: as new, recent, ongoing, about to happen, or otherwise relevant to the immediate situation/time (current or seasonal)
Unexpectedness	The event is discursively constructed as unexpected, for example, as unusual, strange, rare

(See Caple & Bednarek, 2017:55)

iv. Methodology

4.1 Data selection

As a result of the different foci of the research questions, there are two related data sources: the primary crisis communication on the one side for RQ1 and coverage of the crisis in legacy news media on the other for RQ2.

As the transgression became public knowledge at the press conference on November 12th, 2020, this is the logical starting point. Media reports connect closely to the primary communication meaning that the analysis can be structured into four rough sub-corpora, or phases, along the lines of official crisis communication. Coverage of the first press conference mainly deals with objections to Caffier's utterance that the purchase was a 'private matter', echoed with objections to the same narrative in Caffier's interview the following day. The third phase consists of the reactions to the press statement by the IM-MV claiming they had had no relevant information on Frank T. by the time of the purchase and the debunking of this claim, combined with requests for Caffier's resignation. The resignation and reactions to it constitute the last phase in this crisis.

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Crisis communication</i>	<i>Publication time</i>
1	Press conference	November 12, 2020–6pm
2	<i>Spiegel</i> Interview	November 13, 2020–4:16pm
3	Press statement IM-MV	November 16, 2020–5:54pm
4	Resignation statement	November 17, 2020~4pm

As the discourse analysis aims at providing a full picture of these discussions and reactions, the search frame covered included the month following the first press conference (12/11/2020-12/12/2020). This left two weeks after Caffier's resignation on November 17th, 2020, to analyze possible shifts after consequences had been drawn. However, relevant coverage of crisis communication abated already on November 18th and coverage effectively ended with the appointment of Caffier's successor on November 23rd. The bulk of coverage happened the day after the initial press conference and again when Caffier announced his resignation.

To collect a comprehensive overview of the media reactions in German legacy news media, searches for different terms were conducted within the Dow-Jones databank Factiva. Factiva contains all relevant regional newspapers, as well as the opinion-leading newspapers in Germany. Following “*established protocol in corpus studies of news discourse on a given*

topic”, Factiva was used to compile a corpus of articles related to this specific crisis (Bednarek & Caple, 2017:138). The search phrases used to collect news articles were *CAFFIER -and- WAFFENKAUF*²⁹; as well as *CAFFIER -and- NORDKREUZ*.

In total, there were 580 results for the search phrases in the chosen time frame. Of those, 348 were exact duplicates, meaning they shared identical headlines, mostly designating very short news updates based on news agency snippets and excluded from the corpus on that basis. These were timed majorly after Caffier admitted to buying the gun, and then after his resignation statement was published. This left 232 mostly original articles, though preliminary analysis showed that three additional articles were duplicates. Additionally, four search results were simply headlines linking to the main articles, leaving a corpus of 225 articles for the analysis. The corpus was further delimited by sighting the articles manually and choosing relevant articles based on length and originality of the text. Originality here refers to the framing of press agency copies, as some articles do not recontextualize the copies sufficiently to constitute a new unit of analysis. Based on this, seven articles were chosen for phase 1, ten (including the interview) for phase 2, likewise ten (including the IM-MV press statement) for phase 3, and, finally, eleven (including the resignation statement) articles for phase 4.

4.2 Analytical framework

Following the division of the Research question into RQ1 and RQ2, the analysis is also divided into two parts in each phase. RQ1 is answered by applying the theoretical framework of IRT to the crisis communication: coding IRT-strategies in qualitative analysis program NVivo and evaluating the frequency and logic behind the development of strategy use systematically in all crisis communication pieces.

1. Denial

1. Simple denial
2. Shift blame

2. Evade Responsibility

1. Provocation
2. Defeasibility
3. Accident
4. Good Intentions

3. Reduce Offensiveness

1. Bolstering

²⁹ Weapon purchase

2. Minimization
3. Differentiation
4. Transcendence
5. Attack accuser

4. Corrective Action

5. Mortification

(See Benoit, 2018:14)

This methodology ensures that the theoretical framework is firmly incorporated in answering RQ1, while empirically analyzing the actual use of IRT-strategies.

For RQ2, the chosen articles are evaluated from a CDA-perspective. The analysis is focused on the discursive construction of news values to study which aspects are foregrounded in the news articles. This will help illuminate the positionality of the news items towards Caffier, and allow for conclusions to be drawn regarding their interpretation of what constitutes the actual crisis. The analysis also follows the reported speech concepts laid out by Richardson for using CDA in newspaper analysis (primarily *direct quotation*, *strategic quotation*, *indirect quotation*, Richardson, 2007:102-105). Direct quotations represent room for the quoted person to disseminate a complete thought, which can denote sympathy to the speaker, while strategic quotations work with more (re-)framing and often represent changes to the intended message. As such, the use and framing of reported speech constitutes a useful shortcut in evaluating media representation of the primary crisis communication. Therefore, the chosen articles are systematically analyzed in terms of reported speech to allow for drawing conclusions for who holds discursive power in the representation of the crisis—the crisis communication originator (Caffier/IM-MV) or others. Supplementing RQ2 are a few specifying sub-questions that lead the analysis, starting out with—

RQ2.1: How is reported speech used in the articles? Is the focus on crisis communication or other actors? Are quotes represented without frame-changes from the crisis communication and if not, how are they re-contextualized?

Following Richardson in focusing on reported speech adds a set unit for analysis for this case study. Relatedly, another factor in focus of the analysis is identifying the primary news values in the chosen articles, using the framework laid out by Caple & Bednarek for DNVA. Since the crisis deals primarily with the involvement of elite actors and political institutions in unconstitutional contexts, the main news values expected are *eliteness*, *impact*, *negativity*, and *unexpectedness* and *proximity* for local news media. DNVA helps to analyze the representation

of the crisis in the news media, especially for RQ2. The following sub-questions help further clarify the application of DNVA:

RQ2.2: Which news values are discursively constructed to be the focus of reporting during the crisis stages and what does this imply for the reception of the crisis in public discourse?

RQ2.3: Do the articles follow the meaning of the crisis constructed by the crisis communication? I.e., is the crisis represented as signifying an accident by a well-meaning actor or does the reporting change the scope to systemic issues?

Additionally, to ensure consistency in the news media analysis, the following factors will be taken into consideration: naming, reference and predication (see Richardson, 2007:49-54), as well as rhetorical tropes (especially metonymy; *ibid*:64-71).

4.3 Limitations

CDA necessitates the focus on discourses by the powerful: here, this is the political establishment, meaning the afflicted party, and legacy news media. There are other, simultaneous and rich discourses, for instance on social media, alternative media platforms or in the comment sections of news articles. These could add insights into the general mood in the readership and, say, whether they agree with the framing in their respective local newspaper. However, these discourses are purposefully excluded to focus traditional opinion-making media. Considering their importance in the German context, the focus helps highlight the initial narratives. Likewise, the lack of images provided on Factiva combined with the fact that the paywalls around many of the news media websites means no reliable full access to imagery led to its exclusion from the analysis, as limited access would make the results non-representational. As such, this study excludes layout and structural organization of what Carvalho calls ‘surface’ elements

such as the section in which the article was published, the page number, the size of the article, and whether it was accompanied by visual elements (photographs, graphics or others), say something about the valuation and categorization of the issue by a given news outlet, with implications for the audience’s perception (Carvalho, 2008:167).

Instead, the focus is solely on the textual level and the narrative structure, which are more relevant to answering the research questions. A purely text-based analysis also means that the

data sources (interview, news articles, press statements) are more comparable and the focus remains tightly on the narrative level.

A factor that cannot be removed is authorial bias in the translation of German text for the English analysis. Wherever possible, official translations were used, but in much of the actual text, there are different options as to the chosen translation. The choice of words carries slightly different connotations.

4.4 Generalizability

As a qualitative case study, this study's findings are necessarily somewhat limited. Still, according to Hoon (2013), "*case study research has its strength in producing novel theoretical insight stemming from case-specific contextualized findings*" (2013:522). As academic research on RWR ideologies in executive defense agencies is rare, in Germany and beyond, this case is a starting point for further research into the public/media response to RWR-connections in GED-agencies and mainstream politics.

An empirical study aimed at finding whether institutional racism constitutes a 'stable phenomenon' in the German police force points to another issue (Hunold et al. 2010; qtd. in Kopke, 2019:39). Police officers consistently stated that no discrimination was knowingly or maliciously committed. This does not preclude discrimination, which the study concluded. The narratives around this study point to the moral conflation of racist or discriminatory behavior with evil character in German discourse. Turning discriminatory acts (including unwitting ones) into a moral, rather than a social problem makes criticism of occurrences personally offensive to the perpetrator (see Ogette, 2017). While results of German studies cannot congruently apply to other countries, analogous issues exist in many police forces due to the ideological underpinnings of increasing policing and law and order narratives (see e.g., the AfD's 2017 electoral program; in Ahmed & Pisiu, 2021:235).

One agency that has come under systematic focus in recent years is the US police force. Coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, protests against police murders of Black Americans sparked international solidarity movements. As a result, there are several investigations and studies into RWR ideologies in US-policing. Often, transgressions are similar to the chat-group scandals in Germany—an investigation into police membership in racist, antisemitic and Islamophobic Facebook groups describes humor and narratives that are very similar to the content found in German police chat-groups (see Carless & Corey, 2019). These also point to comparable issues with RWR dissemination from employees of a democracy's executive force. Research into decision-making processes indicates that separation of biases in radicalist groups

from real-world actions is at best highly unlikely (ibid). The US, like Germany, is not transparent when it comes to police misconduct, encumbering research in both countries.

Therefore, results from the media and political responses to a crisis based on RWR in executive defense agencies has the potential to provide meaningful results beyond the narrow German context. For instance, a 2020 study on police responses to the August 2017 *Unite the Right Rally*, a white supremacist demonstration in Charlottesville, Virginia, finds that police authorities continuously minimized the threat of RWR mobilization in the community (Castle, 2020:222). As such, results from this analysis of media treatment for apologies and rationalizations of RWR involvement in security agencies can add to the literature on similar issues in an international context. Additionally, the findings from this study should add to the research body on political accountability and the media representations of both scandals and crisis.

v. Analysis

5.1 Phase 1

CDA – Media analysis

The first phase contains the smallest sub-corpus, covering the evening of November 12th, after the initial press conference to the *Spiegel* interview on the next day. Since there was no live coverage of the press conference and the news value of the conference³⁰ was proximity-based, few non-regional journalists were present. Factiva provides only nine articles for this time period, of which two were excluded to avoid repetitiveness. Three articles, unsurprisingly, came from local newspapers, two from Schwerin-based *Ostsee Zeitung (OZ)*, one from *Nordkurier*. One article each from *Schaumburger Nachrichten*, *Neue Presse Online*, and *Wolfsburger Allgemeine/Aller Zeitung Online* and a final one from *Tagesspiegel*. *Schaumburger Nachrichten*, *Neue Presse Online* and *Wolfsburger Allgemeine* belong to the Madsack Media Group, which also owns the Editor Network Germany (RND³¹), a joint corporate newsroom. Their largest limited partner is the German Printing and Publishing Company³², which is fully owned by the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the biggest competitor of Caffier's CDU in MV. This underlying political motivation might explain why so many

³⁰ Presenting the 2019 Constitutional Protection report on 'Extremism' in MV

³¹ Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland

³² Deutsche Druck- und Verlagsgesellschaft

RND-associated newspapers covered the press conference, when not even all regional newspapers in MV did. As the longest reigning Minister of Interior in any German state, Caffier had a reputation for sitting out crises and evading a question at a press conference did not alarm local news much. However, the *Tagesspiegel* coverage on the next day may well have played into Caffier’s decision to address the questions. While the coverage is critical of the purchase and the connection it signifies, the press mainly took umbrage with Caffier’s avoidance of required dialogue. Discussions focused the limits of politicians’ privacy. In this first phase, there was little direct speech to report so most quotations were indirect, meaning the sub-questions in focus for in the first phase are RQ2.2 on the foregrounded news value construction, and RQ2.3, focusing the crisis construction.

This early in the narrative, reliance on reported speech also means that the first four articles pick up Caffier’s self-description of being a hunter (‘*Jäger*’) as explanation for his gun purchase. Lack of information also explains similarities in syntax and transitivity within the first three articles. *Schaumburger Nachrichten* refers to *OZ* directly and the same sequence of verbs is used to describe Caffier’s purchase (*acquired, purchased, received*³³), ending with the same direct quote.

Newspaper; length, date–time	Headline
Ostseezeitung (OZ); 253 words, 12 November 2020–6:50pm	<i>Caffier evades question about own weapon: "Private matter remains private matter"</i>
Schaumburger Nachrichten; 185 words, 12 November 2020–9:53pm	<i>State Minister Caffier evades question about own weapon; Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania</i>

These two short articles are the only material from November 12th. From the headlines it is clear that the first coverage criticizes Caffier’s conduct: *OZ* and *Schaumburger Nachrichten* refer to his avoidance of answering the question with the same phrasing³⁴. *OZ* supplements the title with a strategic Caffier quotation—“*Private matter remains private matter*”. According to Richardson, the use of scare quotes often “*indicate[s] their contentious nature*” (2007:102), and the tone of the article is critical, pairing Caffier’s avoidance of accountability with indirect quotes by the journalist confronting him and unnamed experts that are ‘highly critical’ of the connections between Baltic Shooters and the police. The focus on Caffier’s attempts to block out the public highlights that his strategies of avoidance are odds with journalistic and democratic ideals for communication.

³³ Erworben, gekauft, erhalten

³⁴ “...weicht Frage nach eigener Waffe aus”—evades question about own weapon.

Hanover-based *Schaumburger Nachrichten* refers to Caffier by name and title, thus locating him in MV, as their audience is less familiar. They also use the term ‘private matter’ in scare quotes and refer to the events as “*incendiary*”, the same word choice as *OZ*, indicating that these are breakout-news that will become very relevant. Therefore, word choice and imagery construct timeliness as the main news value.

Ostseezeitung (OZ) ; 203 words, 13 November 2020– n/a	<i>Extremism - Caffier's weapon - a private matter?</i>
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Published the morning after, this article shifts the narrative from avoidance of a journalistic enquiry and a discussion about public servants’ privacy, to include extremism and thereby, a potentially anti-democratic threat. *OZ* does not mention what kind of extremism is relevant in their headline. The article uses parts of the *OZ*-article from the day before verbatim to set the scene, but the language becomes more intense, going from an ‘*incendiary press conference*’ to ‘*political dynamite*’. This imagery focuses on the immediacy of the goings-on, constructing timeliness as the main news value. There is a direct quote by Caffier claiming he did not get benefits from Baltic Shooters in an official capacity. The article ends with an indirect quote–‘*More would be none of the public's business*’–that does not contain a verb, making for an abrupt end of the article, echoing Caffier’s communication as similarly unfinished.

Neue Presse Online (NPO) ; 288 words, 13 November 2020–10:06am	<i>FDP and Greens demand clarification in Caffier case; right-wing extremism</i>
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NPO explicitly refers to right-wing extremism in its headline. Without prior knowledge–which few had then–their headline reads as if Caffier himself was accused of being a right-wing radicalist ideologue. Caffier is quoted indirectly as ‘saying it was a private matter’. The verb choice ‘says’ indicates neutrality (see Richardson, 2007:102), but the article immediately moves to detractors of Caffier’s position with direct quotes by federal Green and Liberal party politicians Milahic and Strasser requesting clarification from the Minister. *NPO* only quotes Caffier indirectly apart from the strategic quote “*private sphere*”, again indicating contention (see *ibid*). The events are framed as a realpolitik conflict, where the opposition is giving more space to explain criticism than Caffier is. Additionally, Strasser is quoted referring to Caffier as ‘*chief of police*’ implicating the systemic problems arising from Caffier’s suspected connections to the RWR scene. The main news value is the eliteness of the actors and the unexpectedness of the event.

Wolfsburger Allgemeine/Aller-Zeitung Online (WA/AZ); 285 words, 13 November 2020–1:54pm

Weapons purchase: If Caffier remains silent, he must go; commentary

The *WA/AZ* commentary is the first to call for Caffier’s resignation. The headline, however, does not mention the actual issue: a weapon purchase in itself does not constitute a crisis. The piece spends some time on the threats RWR poses and on the ‘astonishing’ events at the press conference, where Caffier ‘*said that right-wing extremism remains the main challenge in the field of internal security*’. The article uses a neutral reporting verb, but counterposes it immediately with the contradiction of Caffier’s own connections. The main news values this piece constructs in its framing are negativity and impact. This works mainly through arguing that the normative requirements for a high-ranking politician are honesty and distance from RWR. The article claims that through Caffier’s action’s, “*the state’s claim to enlightenment becomes a caricature*”, foregrounding the negative impact, but simultaneously indicating that the issues can be solved through individual consequences for Caffier.

Tagesspiegel; 588 words, 13 November 2020–n/a

Did Caffier obtain a weapon from right-wing radicals?

The longest piece is by Berlin’s highest-circulation daily newspaper, *Tagesspiegel*. It questions Caffier’s knowledge of his weapons dealer’s connections and details the GED connections of many of Nordkreuz’s members. There are several direct and paragraph-long quotes by the *taz*, which are quite critical of Caffier’s conduct. Through linking open-ended questions about his awareness (“*Are [his connections] coincidence, an oversight, or intentional?... could he have known more?*”) to the violence planned by Nordkreuz, *Tagesspiegel* moves away from the etiquette transgression that is evading a question, and towards a systemic problem: an RWR group with links to GED agencies and a high-ranking politician. The main news value is negativity as the text foregrounds the potential for violence and the threats emerging from Nordkreuz.

Nordkurier; 349 words, 13 November 2020–10:17am

Stir around alleged purchase of weapons in the right-wing milieu

The last article, from local newspaper *Nordkurier*, takes a step back in calling the purchase ‘alleged’, after e.g., *WA/AZ* already took it as a secure fact. *Nordkurier* predicts that the “*public pressure through the reporting will force Caffier in the next days or even hours to answer the question in public after all...*”. It was published shortly before Caffier gave the

interview in *Spiegel*. The passive headline does not assign fault to the politician, going so far as to leaving out a verb completely and not even naming the Minister as the center of the controversy. There are several mentions of the fact that there has been no confirmation by Caffier yet, indicating that the media coverage has moved too fast to condemnation. Mentions to the other local news coverage and the focus of the initial press conference on MV foreground the regional factors of the events, thus constructing proximity as the main news value.

5.2 Phase 2

IRT – Caffier’s first interview

Following the press conference, news coverage was consistently negative, indicative of an emerging crisis. Caffier’s first actual crisis communication, an interview given to *Spiegel Online*, the digital version of a weekly high-circulation news magazine on November 12th, starts the second phase: It was not featured in that week’s print version, as that came out early on the 13th, and Caffier is not discussed in the following week’s print magazine either. With *Spiegel*, Caffier chose a magazine known for investigative journalism which framed his policies against RWR positively in the past. The interview, titled “*Minister of the Interior Caffier on the purchase of weapons: ‘I am a hunter, so handguns are part of my normal equipment’*” is only available in text form and—apart from a short introduction and pull quotes from the answers—there is no commentary.

The interview is analyzed regarding the use of Benoit’s image repair strategies to answer RQ1, which focuses the afflicted party’s reactions to the crisis. Early on, the crisis scope was difficult to estimate but as there were many unanswered questions, control of the narrative was—*theoretically*—achievable. A base crisis response to retain narrative control is providing and adjusting information according to one’s own best interest (see Coombs, 2007 in Ferguson et al., 2017:255). This interview is a classic question-and-answer session, and thus fits the ‘interactional approach’ description, which stresses that for politicians, “...*image repair actions are carried out in interaction with journalists, i.e., image repair work essentially takes place in interviews occurring in news programmes or in press conferences*” (Eriksson & Eriksson, 2012:265). The interview will be presented here unabridged and continuously.

The transgression at the center of this interaction is the gun purchase from a radical-right actor, seen as a “*transgression of norms in the public sphere*” (see Ekström & Johansson, 2019:186). German politicians are not supposed to interact with RWR ideology or persons. The first question factually sets the scene and asks for the rumors to be confirmed. This falls under what Ekström et al. define as accountability questions, which “*ask for justifications and assume*

that the interviewee has responsibilities for the policies, actions, or non-actions that are to be justified” (2016:984).

SPIEGEL: For days, journalists and the public have been wondering whether Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania's interior minister bought a gun from the CEO of the company Baltic Shooters, which is linked to the right-wing extremist network "Nordkreuz." Did you?

Caffier: Yes, I did. A short-barreled weapon. At the beginning of 2018, on the basis of legal grounds and at a time when the man was not yet under suspicion and was considered a reliable training partner for the police at home and abroad. Since 2009, special forces from Thuringia, Lower Saxony, Baden-Württemberg, and North Rhine-Westphalia, among others, have trained at his training grounds near Güstrow. The Austrian Federal Police and officers from Switzerland also practiced there. No one suspected Frank T. of possible contacts with right-wing extremists.

Caffier admits it right away and takes responsibility. He also employs his first image repair strategy (strategy 2: evade responsibility, sub-strategy 4: defeasibility). *Defeasibility* relies on the afflicted actor claiming a lack of necessary information during the transgression, which relieves him of the full responsibility for it. Caffier argues that the act was not initially transgressive by emphasizing the lack of information on the weapons dealer he had in 2018. Caffier stresses the legality of his purchase, the dealer's good, and the long-standing relationship with several police special task forces all of whom did not suspect RWR contacts. By highlighting other state-sponsored actors and their connections, Caffier lines himself up with others who failed to uncover Frank T.'s underlying ideology, minimizing his own deficiency (strategy 3: reduce offensiveness, sub-strategy 8: minimization).

SPIEGEL: As early as August 2017, there were searches by the BKA³⁵ at the home of Marko G., who, as a member of a special task force of the MV-LKA³⁶, worked as an instructor at the Baltic Shooters firing range.

Caffier: My authorities and I had no suspicious facts about the company at the beginning of 2018. Therefore, I was also unsuspecting at the time of purchase... At the beginning of 2019, at the urging of the Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania LKA, the BKA transmitted the first documents on the "Nordkreuz" complex, so that we could also begin regional investigations. These investigations brought to light several incidents with a right-wing extremist connection at the SEK³⁷, about which I informed the public in mid-2019. These involved contacts with Marko. G. and the environment at the Güstrow firing range. As a result, I

³⁵ Federal Criminal Police Office

³⁶ State Criminal Police Office Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania

³⁷ Special task force

immediately stopped the LKA cooperation with the company Baltic Shooters...

While the journalist asks no question, his comment counterargues Caffier's narrative and warrants an answer, since it expresses distrust. While the Minister cannot deny investigations happened in 2017, he claims his authorities remained uninformed, reiterating that this explains why he was unsuspecting (strategy 2: evade responsibility, sub-strategy 4: defeasibility). Simultaneously, Caffier implies that the BKA is to blame, as they did not sufficiently inform the IM-MV. This serves to again limit his own responsibility and deny that fault lay at the state level (strategy 1: denial, sub-strategy 2: shift blame). Caffier alleges that the BKA only delivered the documents "at the insistence of the [LKA]"³⁸, adding that state-level investigations, reliant on the BKA-documents, uncovered more cases (strategy 3: reduce offensiveness, sub-strategy 7: bolstering). *Bolstering* as a strategy aims at shifting the focus away from the offensive action and to positive traits and actions related to the afflicted actor. Here, Caffier's insistence on the LKA-successes reflect positively on him. He also stresses that he informed the public about the cases immediately and subsequently ended the LKA-Baltic Shooters collaboration, bolstering his own traits, as well as illustrating corrective action already taken (strategy 4: corrective action). Caffier ends by stating:

...With the knowledge of 2019, of course, I would not have purchased a weapon there.

This distances him from the offensive act, painting it as an unforeseeable mishap (strategy 2: evade responsibility, sub-strategy 5: accident/sub-strategy 6: good intentions). This is an example of simultaneous image repair strategies. By saying that he bought the gun because he did not know better at the time, Caffier implies both that he had good intentions when buying it, and, connectedly, that it was an accident based on his well-meaning ignorance. Both sub-strategies belong in the evading-responsibility strategy. Additionally, this argumentation again relies on the established defeasibility.

The journalist shifts tracks and asks why Caffier would even need the weapon. Germany has no mainstream weapon-owning scene. Therefore, a confrontative question presupposing the needlessness likely echoes public perceptions. While aggressive in the implication of bad choices, the open-ended question leaves room for explanations. Caffier's answer is the quote picked for the headline:

³⁸ Which he runs.

SPIEGEL: Why do they need a gun anyway? As Minister of the Interior, you have armed bodyguards, don't you?

Caffier: I've been a hunter for 40 years, so handguns are part of my normal equipment. And I carry them exclusively for hunting.

This stresses his responsibility and aims at making the purchase a reasonable act, thereby reducing its offensiveness. The journalist, however, brings the focus back to what made the act offensive—the RWR dealer—asking why Caffier did not simply go into a weapons store to purchase a handgun.

SPIEGEL: Why didn't you just go to a gun store and buy the handgun there?

Caffier: I did. Frank T. was an officially licensed arms dealer, still is, by the way. And since I was also there on business because our special units also trained with him and I could shoot the weapon there, this was an obvious decision.

Caffier responds by denying the offensiveness, stressing again that Frank T. was legitimate and the collaboration with the LKA made it a logical choice (strategy 3: reduce offensiveness, sub-strategy 8: minimization). The journalist accepts this answer as Caffier keeps reiterating the same points, instead shifting to the press conference.

SPIEGEL: You blocked inquiries from "taz" journalists about the weapon purchase for months. Then you said they could ask you privately. Did you really believe that the matter was your private affair, given the serious suspicions against Frank T.? You are the Minister of Interior!

Caffier: Stupid as it may sound, yes, I did. But now I must take note of the fact that I am apparently being accused of being close to "Nordkreuz" or the "Nordkreuz" environment. That is complete nonsense and defamatory.

This questions Caffier's judgement, and condemns the lack of transparency with the media. Caffier responds in the positive, as he must. Due to the structure of the question, denying his own naivete would entail admitting to awareness of the act's offensiveness and deliberately keeping the public in the dark. By claiming he genuinely did not think it was an issue, he seems naïve, but well-intentioned (strategy 2: evade responsibility, sub-strategy 6: good intentions). The answer therefore stresses that he might have acted 'stupid', but quickly moves to emphasize that suspicions about his connections to Nordkreuz are absurd (strategy 3: reduce offensiveness, sub-strategy 11: attack accuser). The journalist points out that this would have been avoided,

had Caffier laid the interaction open in early 2019. Caffier responds with the only expression of regret in the interview:

SPIEGEL: You could have avoided this as early as the beginning of 2019 with an on-duty declaration on the purchase of weapons.

Caffier: Yes, that would have been correct and important. Not to have done so was a mistake that I regret...

Notably, he only apologizes (strategy 5: mortification) for the botched communication. At no point does he express regret for the purchase from Baltic Shooters—the actual reason for the interview. This is an example of Lazare's aforementioned 'pseudo apologies', wherein the afflicted party offers vague or incomplete acknowledgments of the offensive act (see Eisinger, 2011:137). Caffier continues:

...But I had other worries at the time; after all, a member of our special forces was also in charge of "Nordkreuz." We had to take disciplinary action, we set up an investigative commission, we restructured our SEK...

By immediately shifting the attention to worse offenses, Caffier makes his own transgressions seem negligible (strategy 3: reduce offensiveness, sub-strategy 8: minimization/sub-strategy 9: differentiation). Minimization and differentiation work together here to both trivialize his unwitting purchase from a RWR actor, shifts the focus onto others. Combinedly, stressing simultaneous offenses that he regards as more serious makes Caffier appear well-intentioned again (strategy 2: evade responsibility, sub-strategy 6: good intentions). Describing how corrective action was taken illustrates that he took issues seriously. It also implies that his own transgressions were harmless and therefore less deserving of the same scrutiny (strategy 3: reduce offensiveness, sub-strategy 8: minimization). The journalist responds by trying to get a clear answer on the same issue once more, asking:

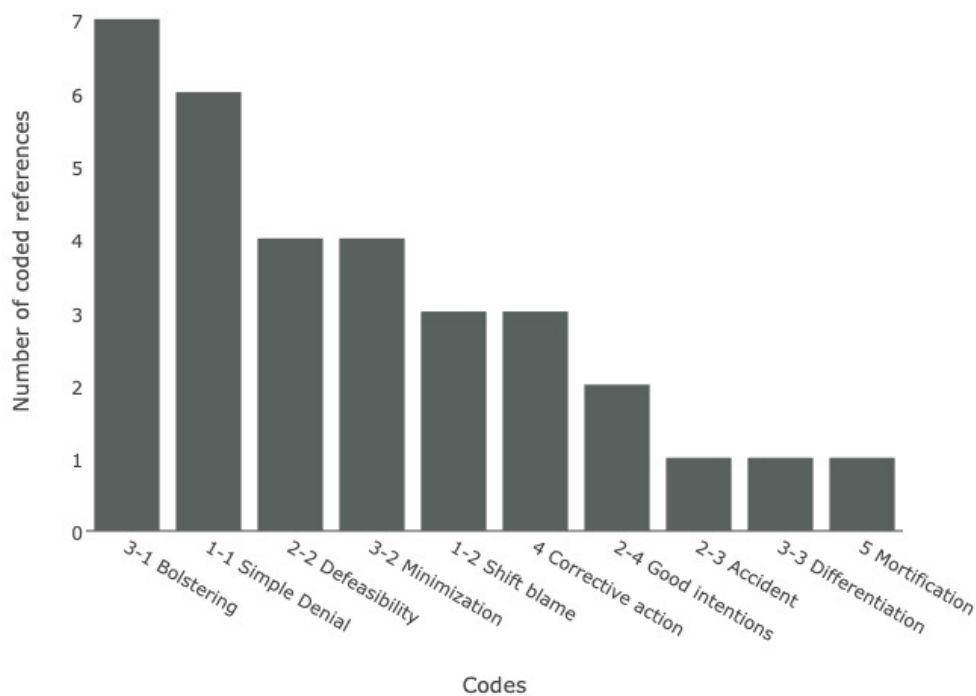
SPIEGEL: ... and it never occurred to you that in this context the purchase of this gun could become a problem for you?

Caffier: No. You might think that's naive, but it was the case. As I said: At the time of the purchase, Frank T. was considered a blameless top expert. And there was never any doubt about my commitment against right-wing extremism. As early as 2008, SPIEGEL magazine attested to my leading role in the fight against right-wing extremist comradeships, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, with me as Minister of the Interior, has always been at the forefront. And we are also the first to want to

reintroduce the standard inquiry with the Office for the Protection of the Constitution for applicants for police service.

This is the same point he was making when strongly insinuating that the Minister should have known better than to think this a private matter before. Through accusing him of willful ignorance about the obvious issues with the purchase from this dealer, the journalist gives Caffier two options: He can either continue to claim naivete, making himself seem disconnected from RWR threats. Or, he has to admit awareness that this act would be seen as a serious transgression with the publication of Frank T.'s connections. Since Caffier's strategy throughout this interview has heavily featured *defeasibility*, switching gears now is impossible. Instead, he must argue convincingly that he was aware of far-right threats while maintaining ignorance of Baltic Shooters' entanglements. Caffier must double down on the naivete, as this is the base of his defense, yet he has to make clear that he has been successful in both seeing and counteracting RWR from early on (strategy 3: reduce offensiveness, sub-strategy 7: bolstering). He also defends himself by bringing up that *Spiegel* had agreed with his positioning before. It is likely that earlier counteractions of RWR made Caffier believe he was above suspicions of radical-right connections. This would explain why he failed to realize that the gun could become a real personal crisis. While Caffier believes the emerging crisis is the result of a misunderstanding and that he should be able to salvage trust through explanations, the journalist aims at establishing his motives and awareness of its offensiveness.

Coding for the image repair strategies employed by Caffier and visualizing the result shows that the main strategy is Benoit's third: Reduce offensiveness, with sub-strategy 1, *bolstering*. The next main strategy is *denial*, since Caffier refuses to accept that the act he committed was offensive in the first place, explained by the third-most frequent strategy, *evade responsibility* with the sub-strategy *defeasibility*. Some text units have been double-coded in cases where a statement by Caffier fit into more than one strategy at once.



Graphic 1: Spiegel interview, 13/11

CDA – Media analysis

The high number of regional and national coverage that followed the *Spiegel* interview necessitates a delimitation of material. Pre-analysis led to the choice of the following nine articles, plus the interview itself to cover the journalistic aspects. Compared to phase 1, the articles in phase 2 have more material to work with: more extensive quotes, background information, and other reports on the situation. Therefore, the articles in this phase are longer, more detailed, and contain more reported speech. In answering RQ2 and the sub-questions specified in the analytical framework, RQ2.1 is especially relevant as the coverage of reported speech from the crisis communication, but also from opposing actors in the crisis arena were the focus of many articles. Additionally, the news value construction (RQ2.2) changes between the first and the second phase, showing a shift from mostly timeliness-focused coverage towards a more impact and negativity-focused news value.

Newspaper; length, date–time	Headline
Der Spiegel ; 686 words, 13 November 2020–4:16pm	<i>Minister of the Interior Caffier on the purchase of weapons: I'm a hunter, so handguns are part of my normal equipment.</i>

The point of departure for phase 2 is Caffier's *Spiegel* interview. While the image repair strategies he employed were analyzed in the last section, the journalistic approach to the

interview is interesting in itself. The title of the interview consists of two parts. The first, “*Minister of Interior on weapon purchase*” designates the offensive act: the purchase itself. The second, a quote by Caffier, “*I am a hunter, handguns are part of my normal equipment*” indicates that the Minister does not agree with the political relevance that is being assigned to what he still views as a private act. For Caffier, the interview is damage control, a response to critical coverage he received after the press conference. Its timing indicates urgency and public interest on both the media and the politician’s side. Further, the set-up is mutually beneficial: Caffier gains an image-repair platform and *Spiegel* gets exclusive content with high news values: timeliness, impact, eliteness. This may explain why the questions Caffier faces are not as aggressive as they could be. For instance, in the first question, the journalist asks Caffier “*Did you [buy a gun from a RWR actor]?*” This gets at the core of the controversy as it is constructed in the interview; it is the question that Caffier avoided before.

Still, it is a tame question without moral judgement and the journalist gives Caffier space to explain. The interview questions the connections, but the journalist never accuses Caffier of sympathizing with RWR ideology or purposely ignoring it at Baltic Shooters. He makes it clear that he is suspicious of Caffier’s lack of knowledge (“*As early as August 2017, there were searches by the Federal Criminal Police...*”) but the main issue remains Caffier’s botched communication. The journalist does not fundamentally question the Minister’s moral or ideological positions, and, most importantly, he does not bring up the potential conflict of interest: As Minister of Interior, Caffier heads the police units in charge of handling RWR threats in MV. If he is involved with questionable actors, it could impede investigations. Generally, the interview is not as uncomfortable for the Minister as it could have been. There is ample room for Caffier to narrate his own story and he is only put on the spot for his lack of communication. The main news value that is constructed through the questions about Caffier’s misconceptions of what his transgression would signify is impact, though aimed mostly at personal consequences.

Wolfsburger Allgemeine/Aller Zeitung Online (WA/AZ); 672 words, 13 November 2020–4:28pm	<i>MV Interior Minister Caffier admits buying weapons from right-wing extremist; right-wing extremism</i>
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Within fifteen minutes after the interview, three articles on the topic were published, by *WA/AZ* and two local newspapers: *Nordkurier* and *OZ*. The first article includes an add-on at the beginning, mentioning the interview in which Caffier admitted to the purchase. The main text, however, was written prior to the interview, as it refers to the ‘alleged’ purchase. It focuses

on contextualizing the situation by including longer direct quotes from representatives of MV's democratic parties (FDP, Greens, Left Party), like Strasser 'requesting clarifications' by directly contradicting Caffier's narrative by saying "as the country's top police chief, there can be no hint of suspicion that he, too, has wires into the far-right scene. This is not a private matter". Additionally, Left-party faction-leader Bartsch is quoted saying, "...if the accusations turn out to be truthful, there is only one conclusion: Resignation." This indicates that the quotes were recorded before Caffier's latest communication. The focus on critical statements by opposing voices who are all high-ranking politicians in their own right constructs eliteness as a main news value. Through the content of the quotes, the potential negative impact on the political scene in MV is also emphasized.

Nordkurier Online; 424 words, 13 November 2020–4:28pm	Lorenz Caffier explains himself on weapons allegations
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Local newspaper *Nordkurier* is the first to explicitly cover the interview. The headline refers to the Minister by name without title as it assumes the audience's familiarity. The reporting verb choice (explain) indicates neutrality (see Richardson, 2007:102), implying that the crisis is based on lack of information. It frames Caffier's choice to do the interview as a reaction to "increasing media pressure" and summarizes previous events shortly (the purchase, avoiding the press conference question). Connectedly, the main news value is timeliness as it reports the interview in large parts verbatim, aiming to inform its audience of its exact content.

Nordkurier extensively quotes Caffier directly from the interview, including four (out of seven) almost complete paragraphs of his answers. It appreciates Caffier's "self-reflection"—the recognition of sub-par communication—and ends on the direct quote that calls accusations that he has close ties to the Nordkreuz environment "complete nonsense and defamatory". Closing on this statement by Caffier, introduced through the indirect quote that "he also said, now he had to take note of [the fact that people think he has connections to Nordkreuz]" follows the idea that accusing him of something that has already partly been proven as true is somehow absurd. Thereby, *Nordkurier* does not question or recontextualize these statements, reproducing Caffier's image repair strategies 1:1. There is also a lack of context on Nordkreuz, or on what Frank T. is actually accused of, minimizing the offensiveness of Caffier's actions and connections. It seems that for *Nordkurier*, the interview's explanations have concluded the crisis as they frame it as a communication issue.

Ostseezeitung Online (OZ); 375 words, 13 November 2020–4:28pm

Caffier admits buying weapons from "Nordkreuz" man; extremism

Simultaneously, *OZ* published their own response to the interview. The headline refers to unspecified ‘extremism’, keeping the content vague. The verb choice (admit) also indicates guilt more plainly than *Nordkurier*’s ‘explain’. The article begins by stating that Caffier bought the gun in 2018 and mentions that the Left Party has asked MV’s Prime Minister, Manuela Schwesig (SPD), to fire Caffier. It also refers to “*massive public pressure*” as the motivation for the interview. Similar to *WA/AZ*, *OZ* chronicles the reactions by other politicians before the interview. A consensus emerges from the direct and strategic quotes before the interview: “*right-wing extremist network Nordkreuz is no private matter*” (Left Party); “[*if he has purchased the gun*] *he will no longer be a trustworthy Minister of Interior*” (FDP); “*absolutely unacceptable*” (Green Party). *OZ* also includes a quote by an AfD MP—“*weapon ownership is inherently a private matter*”—implying that the democratic spectrum is critical, but the far-right supportive. In terms of predication, *OZ* refers to Caffier either by name or as “*the CDU-man*”, personifying the party through its crisis-laden Minister. *OZ* ends on the ominous statement that ‘*reviewers take a very critical view of the collaboration [between police special task forces and Baltic Shooters]*’. Here, the main news value are the eliteness of the conflict since so much of the article emphasizes the direct connections to seemingly all of MV’s prominent political actors.

Göttinger Tagesblatt/Eichsfelder Tageblatt Online (GT/ETO); 1029 words, 13 November 2020–4:46pm

MV Interior Minister Caffier admits buying weapons from "Nordkreuz" milieu; right-wing extremism

The second-longest article of this sub-corpus is by *GT/ETO*, with the same verb choice as *OZ* in the headline, and contains the most detailed account so far of the Nordkreuz network and its actors. The article differentiates more than others between actual and alleged connections, and it is the first to refer to Nordkreuz as a right-wing-terrorist cell. *GT/ETO* uses the same strategic quotation by Frank T. from weapons magazine *Caliber* in which he described Caffier as always having “*a sympathetic ear*”. The article follows the connections between T., G., and Nordkreuz, Caffier ending his patronage of the special forces workshop at Baltic Shooters in 2019, and shows inconsistencies between Caffier’s account and other official sources. *GT/ETO* frames Caffier as a purposeful liar, contrasting a strategic quote of him saying he was “*unsuspecting at the time of the purchase*” with the fact that the federal prosecutor has been investigating Nordkreuz members since 2017. Once at the beginning of the text and once

as the last sentence, the article states “[t]he connection to Güstrow was known from the beginning”. Güstrow, where the shooting range Baltic Shooters is located, is metonymic for the RWR network.

Like the previous article, *GT/ETO* establishes a democratic consensus for Caffier to comprehensively clarify all open questions. Chairman of the FDP parliamentary group in the Committee on Internal Affairs, Benjamin Strasser, for example, is quoted saying “[a]s the country’s top police chief, there must not be even a hint of suspicion that he, too, has wires into the far-right scene. This is not a private matter.” Here, systemic callouts of the problems accompanying the Minister’s connections and possible blind spots are being raised. Simultaneously, quotes from Caffier himself are few. The main news value being emphasized is the negative impact of Caffier’s actions and their relevance based on the timeliness illustrated by the many quotes from elite actors who were compelled to comment on the proceedings.

Focus Online ; 199 words, 13 November 2020–5:25pm	<i>Interior policy; MV Interior Minister clarifies background to weapons purchase</i>
Focus Online ; 520 words, 13 November 2020–5:42pm	<i>Tumult in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania; "One can find this naive": CDU politician Caffier defends arms purchase</i>

The first short article by *Focus* summarizes the situation, includes a longer direct quote from the beginning of the interview (“*Yes, I did. A short-barreled weapon...*”) and no direct or indirect quotes from other actors in MV. Most of the summary is written in subjunctive, linguistically distancing *Focus* from the claims. The text presents only Caffier’s narrative and does not include information given by the journalist in the interview that contradicts the Minister’s statements. The article refers to Caffier as “*the 65-year-old*”, humanizing the politician in removing him from the party association and title, which makes him seem more like an individual with a right to privacy. As one of the highest-circulation news sources in Germany, *Focus*’ framing of the situation is interesting.

Seventeen minutes after the first *Focus* article, a slightly longer piece with a significantly different headline was published. Instead of ‘clarifying’ the purchase in the interior policy section as in the first article, which implies a simple misunderstanding with no-one at fault, Caffier now ‘defends’ his choices as his state is in ‘tumult’. The first phrasing sounds rational and calm, the second headline evokes chaos. The metaphor used in the beginning heightens this image: Caffier is “*in the crossfire of politics and media*”. Now, *Focus* also quotes local politicians, using the same direct quote given to RND by Green politician Milahic asking for clarification as the *Tagesspiegel*, *GT/ETO* and *Wolfsburger Allgemeine*. *Focus* also uses

strategic quotes from Caffier throughout which it does not recontextualize or question, allowing his own words to end the article and focus his engagement against RWR over the years. Thus, while the headline and imagery differ, the discursive framing does not. Considering *Focus*' traditional closeness to libertarian ideals, their decision on personalization and timeliness as the main news values opposed to impact and negativity of Caffier's 'private' acts are unsurprising.

Süddeutsche Zeitung Online (SZ) ; 564 words, 13 November 2020–6:28pm	<i>Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania; One weapon and many question marks</i>
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Another nation-wide publication, *SZ* published an op-ed piece two hours after the interview. Referring to Caffier as “*the Minister*” for the most part, the article follows the first press conference and describes how “*supraregional attention*” brought “*difficulties of explanation*”, focusing on his slow reaction to the emerging crisis. The headline does is passive and does not assign blame. *SZ* also picks up Caffier's self-description as a ‘hunter’ and quotes him directly defending the act's inoffensiveness—“*[Frank T.] was not yet under suspicion*”. Differently to *Focus*, *SZ* points out that Nordkreuz was exposed in 2017 and contextualizes the threats it posed. The piece also links Caffier's patronage of the Baltic Shooters workshop to his simultaneous heading of the expert commission for the investigation of the special task forces³⁹, making the strategic quote that “*[he] would not have purchased a weapon there*” with knowledge from 2019 seem disingenuous. The article directly quotes critical SPD and Left party politicians from MV, ending with a twitter statement by a Left party MP calling out larger issues: “*The question is whether the completely insufficient clarification of the right-wing Nordkreuz network is connected with the fact that the Minister of the Interior bought a weapon from a member of this network.*” Especially by leaving the article to end on this very critical statement that implies that the truth has not been uncovered, *SZ* emphasizes the negative implications of Caffier's conduct, making it the main news value.

WELT online ; 361 words, 13 November 2020–n/a	<i>Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania; CDU interior minister admits to buying weapon from right-wing extremist milieu</i>
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WELT's coverage begins by recounting preceding events, including an indirect quote by Caffier alleging defeasibility about his dealer's contacts in the introductory paragraph. The language used is conciliatory and non-exciting: Caffier provides clarity when he admits to

³⁹ Expertenkommission zur Untersuchung der Spezialeinheiten

buying the gun after ‘prompts’ by other parties in parliament. He had ‘*answered evasively*’ before, not refused to answer a legitimate enquiry. There are several direct, indirect and strategic quotes by Caffier, including his statement that suspecting a closeness to the Nordkreuz milieu would be “*complete nonsense and defamatory*”. The article does not comment on these statements, and frames them as reluctant, but not necessarily offensive through linguistic choices: Caffier ‘acknowledges’, ‘says’, ‘states’. There are no explicitly distancing verb choices that could constitute reframing. *WELT* mentions the Left party faction-leader’s calls for resignation, but following the overall framing, the calls seem hyperbolic. Conjointly, *WELT*, an Axel Springer publication, frequently aligns itself with the CDU’s conservative positions. The main news value in this piece is the involvement of an elite actor and the timeliness of this coverage.

Tageszeitung (Taz) ; 1327 words, 14 November 2020–n/a	<i>Not heard the warning shot</i>
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Finally, the last and longest article in phase 2 comes from *taz*-journalists Christina Schmidt⁴⁰ and Sebastian Erb. The headline uses a war metaphor, the warning shot, framing the situation as a crisis from the start. The lead paragraph asks whether Caffier bought the gun, and what privacy measures apply. In terms of predication, it uses a funnel method in the second paragraph, from ‘*the state’s interior minister*’ to ‘*the CDU-politician*’ and then ‘*Lorenz Caffier*’. Then it details Nordkreuz’s threats, its nation-wide linkages, its GED-agency members. *Taz* questions Caffier and his IM-MV’s integrity for their reluctance to speak about Nordkreuz, their downplaying of the threats and refusal to inform those whose names ended up on the enemy lists and the leak of private information from the police to Nordkreuz. *Taz* includes direct quotes from the press conference to illustrate Caffier’s refusal to talk to them: “*You are welcome to ask me about my private life, privately. Everything else remains in the private sphere. There are no statements on this at the point.*”

The article further illustrates journalistic investigation leading up to the press conference, introducing principal Nordkreuz actors, their connection to Caffier, the IM-MV, their continued silence, quotes from requests for comments, either directly quoting or indirectly summarizing the non-answers. The interview is not mentioned until the last two paragraphs. Schmidt and Erb are openly critical of Caffier’s narrative, calling out his statement that MV received the first files in 2019 as factually wrong: a federal government reply to a Left-party

⁴⁰ Schmidt confronted Caffier on November 12th

request proves that the MV-LKA received the information from the BKA in March 2018—shortly after he purchased the gun. The emphasis put on the threats emanating from Nordkreuz constructs its dangers as prevalent to Caffier’s personal failings. Therefore, the article constructs the negative impact of the connections as the main news value, of which the purchase is a symptom.

5.3 Phase 3

IRT – Press Statement IM-MV

Press coverage following Caffier’s interview made it clear that his crisis communication failed to limit critical media reports or change the perception that his reactions had been insufficient. As a result, the IM-MV press statement is unusually long at almost 1300 words and focuses on giving a lot of exonerating information to distance Caffier⁴¹ from moral guilt. The tone is rational, consisting mainly of short main clauses listing dates and facts. It constitutes a base crisis response, concerned with simply providing and adjusting information (see Coombs, 2007 in Ferguson et al., 2017:255). The title (*“IM-MV: At the time of the purchase of the weapon, there were no reliable grounds for suspicion against the seller”*) doubles down on the base of Caffier’s interview strategy: *defeasibility*, claiming insufficient information at the time of the transgression to evade blame (strategy 2: evade responsibility, sub-strategy 4). This is the primary strategy to absolve Caffier from guilt.

The first third of the statement focuses on Caffier personally, the last two on the Nordkreuz group and the timeline of investigations. In the beginning, it goes into (somewhat unnecessary) detail on hunting guns and Caffier’s ownership rights.

Lorenz Caffier acquired the handgun in January 2018, the entry in the gun ownership card is dated January 4, 2018. Lorenz Caffier has been a hunter for 40 years and is therefore allowed to carry weapons. As a hunter, he is entitled to own three long guns and two short guns for hunting. Hunters use the short gun for the targeting of shot game. In 2017, Caffier decided to replace his Walther PPK short gun with a Glock 19 short gun due to age.

This aims to differentiate Caffier from irresponsible gun owners and minimize the offensiveness of the gun purchase itself (strategy 3: reduce offensiveness, sub-strategy 8: minimization). The statement then stresses Frank T.’s (still) active license and lists all the agencies that allegedly

⁴¹ And, by association, the IM-MV

lacked information about his connections: the IM-MV, LKA, LfV⁴², the Secretary of the Interior and the Minister. The strategy is *differentiation* (strategy 3: reduce offensiveness, sub-strategy 9), as it focuses how other official agencies were in the same position and reacted no better. It then quotes Caffier's interview answer:

My authorities and I had no suspicious facts about the company at the beginning of 2018. Therefore, I was also unsuspecting at the time of purchase... With the knowledge of 2019, of course, I would not have purchased a weapon there.

The statement also quotes Caffier's regret of not having disclosed the purchase earlier (strategy 5: mortification), but then supplements the interview quotes with sentences that express anger at himself and attack the media:

I am annoyed beyond measure that I purchased the gun from T. and not from another licensed gun dealer... I find it completely unacceptable that this connection is being suggested in numerous media, although it should be clear to all concerned how absurd this is.

The emotion Caffier links to his transgression is annoyance, which is interesting since he stressed before how seriously he is taking RWR-threats. Apart from the distraction, this strategy aims at making the media seem unreasonable, reducing their credibility (strategy 3: reduce offensiveness, sub-strategy 11: attack accuser). Additionally, the attack is another example of *differentiation*, implicating that the media's treatment of Caffier were worse than his transgression. Allegedly, the media *know* they are being absurd, while Caffier bought the gun from a RWR actor unwittingly. Thus, the press statement reproduces and strengthens Caffier's strategy of *defeasibility*. Three paragraphs are structured identically, listing investigations by BKA and LKA, their results, and ending with the same sentence⁴³:

Following multiple requests [...] the LKA was provided with file components from the searches on September 6, 2017 [...] **No indications of T.'s or his companies' involvement emerged from this.**

In October and November 2017, the BKA sent parts of the weapons and ammunition so that the LKA could evaluate these evidence items on its own authority [...] **No indications of T.'s or his companies' involvement emerged from this.**

Furthermore, in February 2018, parts of the investigation file kept at the JCC (regarding the presumably illegal and improperly stored ammunition found on G.

⁴² State intelligence agency

⁴³ My emphasis

during the search) were sent to the Schwerin public prosecutor's office [...] **No indications of T.'s or his companies' involvement emerged from this.**

It also repeats the statement that the IM-MV only found out about T.'s RWR 'aspirations'⁴⁴ in May 2019, and why the communication between the agencies had been impeded by legal concerns. Likewise, a large part of the press statement is devoted to detailing the background communications within the MV state agencies with dates and responsibilities starting in September 2017. This aims at providing evidence that they did not have sufficient information in 2018 to distance themselves from Baltic Shooters (strategy 2: evade responsibility, sub-strategy 4: defeasibility).

Further, the statement employs *differentiation* extensively, blaming the decreased pace of information primarily on the federal agencies (strategy 1: denial, sub-strategy 2: shift blame. This focus on how other agencies impeded on the investigations aims to take the blame off the IM-MV and Caffier:

[...] the federal authorities were requested several times to send all investigative documents to the Schwerin public prosecutor's office and the LKA so that further investigations could be carried out [...] The insistence of the state authorities finally led to the BKA transmitting evaluation reports, evidence objects and findings in January and February 2019.

Right after, the statement describes the efforts taken by the state agencies and their successes, moving the focus onto positive traits and actions by the afflicted party (strategy 3: reduce offensiveness, sub-strategy 7: bolstering). There is a focus on the swiftness of the MV agencies and their transparency in communicating findings to the public and different councils in the parliament (strategy 2: evade responsibility, sub-strategy 6: good intentions). It is also paramount to stress the open communication in the past as reluctance to explain and disclose information is at the heart of the current crisis. The statement mentions efforts Caffier made to investigate further once evidence for threats had been established (strategy 4: corrective action).

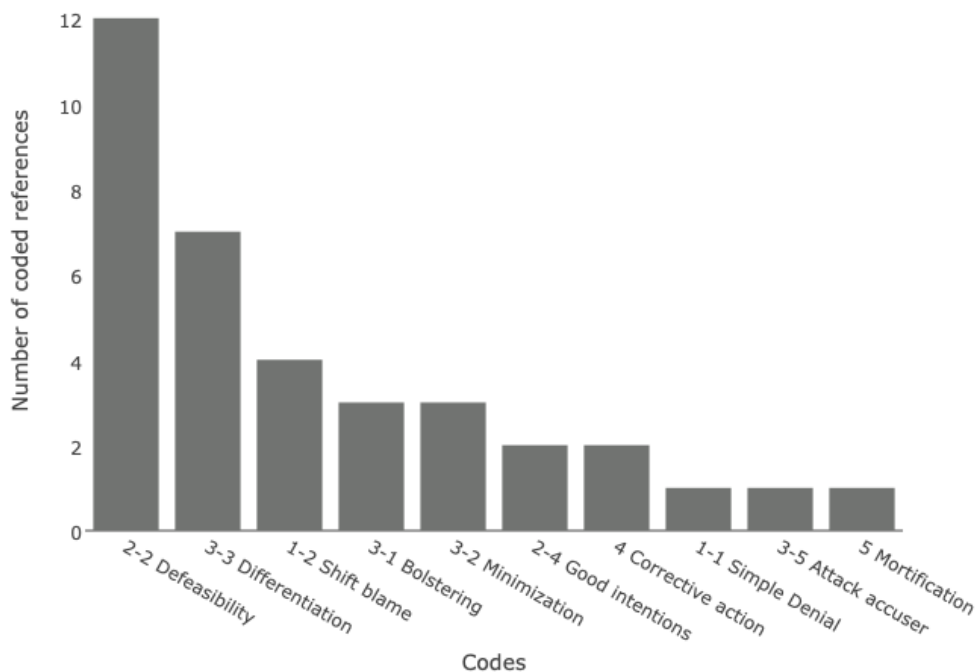
Further, there is a paragraph solely on why the LKA was not authorized to access information known to the LfV, an example of shifting the blame to the federal level (strategy 1: denial, sub-strategy 2: shift blame):

The documents were sent by the BfV with the indication that they were subject to the forwarding reservation of the state attorney. The LfV was therefore not entitled to forward the documents to the LKA or even to inform the LKA that these documents were available to the LfV.

⁴⁴ Bestrebungen

The final part of the press statement deals with the Special Forces Workshop that had been detrimental to Caffier’s and the involved agencies’ image. Here, like in the interview, there is a list of all the other agencies and police forces that used the Baltic Shooters range, thus shifting the focus away from the MV-GED agencies exclusively (strategy 3: reduce offensiveness, sub-strategy 9: differentiation).

Conclusively, the IM-MV press statement echoes the same strategies as Caffier’s interview with differing distribution. Here, there is less bolstering, as it is not officially from Caffier as an individual who is defending himself. The one instance of mortification from both cases is represented by the same quote, though the press statement supplements it with an attack on the media. This statement is a lot longer and fact-oriented, battling the initial lack of information by Caffier with detailed accounts.



Graphic 2: Press statement IM-MV, 16/11

CDA – Media analysis

There is a somewhat surprising lack of coverage on the IM-MV press statement. It may be explained by the fact that Caffier resigned less than 24 hours (November 17th, ~4pm) after its publication (November 16th, ~6pm) which had higher news values country-wide. Additionally, the reported speech by Caffier in the statement majorly comes from the *Spiegel* interview, which most newspapers had already used, therefore its news values were

comparatively low. As such, the bulk of coverage comes from local newspaper *Nordkurier* with four articles, but there are two articles by nationally relevant publications (*Focus*, *ZEIT*) as well. All available articles from Factiva were analyzed.

The coverage is more negative and critical generally than it was after the interview, but there is also a consensus in several pieces that while Caffier is unacceptable as a Minister, it does not follow that he will step down. This is also shown in considering RQ.2.2 and the change in news values that the articles choose to foreground—the coverage is more focused on negativity as the main news value, while timeliness is used less in the very active crisis stage. Considering RQ2.1, reported speech from the IM-MV statement is not a focus in any of the articles.

<p>Press Statement IM-MV; 1280 words, 16 November 2020–5:54pm</p>	<p><i>IM-MV: At the time of the purchase of the weapon, there were no reliable grounds for suspicion against the seller.</i></p>
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In light of increasing criticism against the Minister and the IM-MV, the choice to recycle quotes (apart from the add-ons expressing anger and attacking the media) is interesting, as it indicates that the IM-MV and Caffier himself did not aim for them to be widely distributed. Its factual, dry tone is also not designed to be picked up in more sensationalist news outlets.

In terms of predication, the press statement refers to the Minister as ‘Lorenz Caffier’ in the lead paragraph when discussing his gun purchase, thereby stressing that this act pertains to him as a private individual. The only time Caffier is referred to with his title is in a list with all the agencies that did not know about Frank T.’s contacts: “*the Ministry of the Interior, the Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania State Criminal Police Office (LKA), the Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania State Office for the Protection of the Constitution (LfV), the State Secretary of the Interior, and the Minister of the Interior [...]*”. Afterwards, the title is not mentioned again until his correct handling of the communication is chronicled. Caffier’s name, likewise, only comes up in the first four paragraphs in connection with direct quotes: self-defense, attacking the media for their treatment, and expressing regret. The statement openly sympathizes with and reproduces Caffier’s narrative, interpreting his actions charitably for the audience, for instance by stating “*Caffier self-critically stressed that he should have issued a statement on the weapons purchase when he had the LKA's investigation results in May 2019. ‘Not having done so was a mistake that I regret’ [...]*”. Combining the direct quote with a positive evaluation of Caffier’s conduct—his awareness that his actions were non-ideal and the fact that he ‘stresses’ this—make it seem like he is the driving force behind the reckoning.

At no point in the beginning of the press statement does it clarify the accusations against Caffier. It lists the timeline and then chronicles when which agency was unaware. The aim is to take the wind out of the accusation completely without even spelling it out. The rest of the text linguistically removes the Minister as an actor. The main news value is the timeliness of the event, as the statement stresses that the negative impact has been counteracted by motivated investigations and corrective action by the agencies and the Minister.

Nordkurier Online ; 652 words, 16 November 2020–6:12pm	<i>Caffier's agency knew of tip off about Frank T. since 2017.</i>
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Referring to the Minister by name, *Nordkurier's* lead paragraph stresses that Caffier is not yet “*off the hook*”⁴⁵, while metonymically referring to the IM-MV as “*his house*”. This predication strategy defines the ministry as intrinsically connected to Caffier as a person, putting the responsibility to know of every goings-on directly on him. The article quotes directly from the “*very detailed press release*”, but delineates doubt about the official narratives, for instance through formulating that the BfV ‘allegedly’ was not allowed to inform its own Minister. It is also the first piece to quote Frank T., outside of the *Caliber*-statement, using a strategic quote where he calls reports about his own (proven) Nordkreuz connections “*character assassination*” and indirectly quoting his statement saying if he really was a right-wing extremist, he surely would not be allowed to sell weapons.

In the final paragraph, *Nordkurier* states that Caffier “*obviously sees the allegations against his person cleared up with the statement*”, directly quoting the interview and press statement, ending on his attack: “*I find it completely unacceptable that this connection is being suggested in numerous media, although it should be clear to all concerned how absurd this is.*” While the article suggests that the crisis is not over, it ends conciliatory, leaving Caffier’s strong words as the last impression. The main news value is the timeliness of new information about the event, to keep readers invested that are bound by proximity to care for the developments and Caffier’s statements.

Tagesspiegel Online ; 711 words, 16 November 2020 –6:39pm	<i>Caffier's arms purchase affair jeopardizes stability of Schwesig government</i>
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⁴⁵ “Aus dem Schneider”

Berlin-based *Tagesspiegel* published an op-ed on the arms-purchase-affair shortly after the press release. It refers to Caffier as “*an experienced interior minister—also in the fight against right-wing extremism*”, and questions what the consequences of his “*faltering*” might be for others, focusing the impact of the transgression as the main news value. The piece emphasizes the consequences Caffier’s conduct has for the rest of the state government, making the immediate impact the focus of coverage. The piece summarizes the situation, strategically quoting from either the press release or the interview (“*complete nonsense and defamatory*”). It quotes Left-party politicians, local and federal level, who call for Caffier’s resignation, directly and indirectly. These requests challenge the narrative that everything is cleared up and the crisis is over. It also calls out inconsistencies in the statements by the IM-MV and Caffier. *Tagesspiegel* requested information from the ministry and was told that “*the timeline [would] be ‘meticulously processed’*”, thus shedding further doubt on their credibility. The piece explicitly calls out Caffier’s crisis communication policy as “*surprisingly unfocused for a veteran minister.*”

Further, the piece strategically quotes SPD-politician Brodkorb, described as “*known nationwide as an activist against right-wing extremism*”, who came out in support of Caffier. It ends with an outlook on the threatened balance in MV regarding the upcoming elections.

ZEIT online; 613 words, 16 November 2020–9:05pm

Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania; Interior Minister Caffier admits mistakes after weapons purchase

One of the few publications with nation-wide relevance that commented on the evening after the press statement was *ZEIT*. The headline indicates Caffier’s guilt through the verb choice (admits). The article refers to Caffier by his full name, title, and party affiliation and chronicles the events up to this point in the crisis, starting with the initial press conference and quoting strategically from the interview and the press statement (“*completely unacceptable*“, “*complete nonsense and defamatory*”). The first half of the article is based on indirect quotes by Caffier and from the press release to follow the information situation at the IM-MV. There are mentions of MV’s Prime Minister requesting clarification and Caffier’s subsequent supplementation of information, which highlights the hesitant communication on Caffier’s part.

The piece directly and strategically quotes federal Left-party chairman Riexinger requesting Caffier’s resignation: “*Such an interior minister is unacceptable*”, continuing to summarize his criticisms. “*Instead of dismantling right-wing networks, Caffier bought a gun from them [he said], ‘if he doesn’t give up his post of his own accord, Ms. Schwesig should*

dismiss him". Finally, *ZEIT* reiterates Caffier's statements of defeasibility, but after the strong language by adversaries, this seems unconvincing. Through stressing strong negative evaluations of the events and giving the majority of room in reporting to opposition, while simultaneously pointing out Caffier's communication mistakes, the piece constructs the negative impact of the gun purchase as the main news value.

Nordkurier Online; 401 words, 17 November 2020–5:57am

Why Caffier must go - but will stay

The first piece on the next morning, an op-ed, was again published by local paper *Nordkurier*. It is highly critical of the Minister, referring to him by his full name throughout. It problematizes especially his power over citizens' information. The author problematizes Caffier's apparent entanglements and his failed communication stating that "[i]nvestigators cannot earn this trust as long as Lorenz Caffier is their boss. Because Lorenz Caffier has deliberately not told the truth". He further delineates how Caffier failed to clarify the purchase not only in 2019, but then also aimed to mislead journalists in 2020, calling it "a character failure that now deprives Caffier of what is most important for an interior minister: his personal integrity". The op-ed explicitly calls for Caffier to step down or even be fired, but resignedly states that this will not happen because of strategic concerns on other politicians' and party concerns, ending with a metaphor referencing ancient Rome: "*Manuela Schwesig won't be giving Lorenz Caffier the thumbs down - even though she should*"⁴⁶. The cynical evaluation that Caffier will not resign even though, according to the author, he should, stresses the dysfunctionality of the MV government. The author's prediction that Caffier will ignore the will of the public constructs negativity as the main news value.

Nordkurier Online; 285 words, 17 November 2020–11:11am

Left: Was Caffier deceived by his own people?

Next is a relatively short update, also by *Nordkurier*. It puts forth a new theory as to why Caffier's statements of his knowledge do not add up with his agencies' information—deliberate misinformation or silence on the side of the agencies. There are strategic and indirect quotes by Left-party local politician Ritter, stating that "[Caffier's communication] was more an attempt ... to convey that he had not known and if he had known, he would have done everything differently". Ritter also criticized the fact that the statement was disseminated

⁴⁶ As the author means to express that Schwesig will not fire Caffier, correctly he should have used "thumbs down" here.

without being forwarded to the Interior Committee. Three-thirds of the article are dedicated to Ritter’s criticisms challenging Caffier’s narrative of being in control, making negativity the main news value of this short piece.

<p>Nordkurier Online; 525 words, 17 November 2020– n/a</p>	<p><i>Weapons purchase affair: Caffier's staff did possess intelligence</i></p>
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The third *Nordkurier* piece is difficult to place timewise, as it is not labelled on Factiva or on their own archive. It begins by shortly summarizing the press release and directly quoting several date-related facts from it. They refer to the situation as a ‘political scandal’ caused by Caffier’s reluctance to answer without immense pressure and having misled journalists. The formulation *Nordkurier* uses in this piece to introduce a direct quote from the press statement is telling: “*In the press release of yesterday evening, which is several pages long, Caffier's office also struggles to explain why the BfV did not even pass on the tip about T. within the house.*” Obvious skepticism colors this piece and the IM-MV and Caffier are openly challenged by the local news media as this phrasing indicates that even over several pages, they cannot convincingly defend themselves.

It agrees, however, with the article published the night before that Caffier believes that “*this explanation obviously cleared up the reproaches against his person*”. This article also ends with a direct quote by Caffier about his lack of suspicion in 2018, and strategic quotes on the “*complete nonsense*” of believing he has connections to Nordkreuz, and how this is “*defamatory*”. The main news value, again, is negativity, constructed through the emphasis on the betrayals of trust and unconvincing communication from political actors and institutions in MV. As these issues are more important for the readership of the local newspaper, proximity is also a main news value.

<p>Focus Online; 235 words, 17 November 2020– 10:21am</p>	<p><i>Domestic policy; Left party fraction: Open questions after declaration on arms purchase</i></p>
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Focus, like the second *Nordkurier* article, focuses on quotes by Left-party chairman Ritter, using the same statement he gave to the German press agency (dpa), both pieces seem to be based on the same news copy. The headline is carefully neutral, it neither includes a verb nor an action, and does not assign symbolic importance to the transgression. *Focus* ends the short piece by summarizing the press statement’s explanations on lack of information, reproducing Caffier’s *defeasibility* strategy. Still, as the article gives more room to Ritter’s

challenges than Caffier’s statements, and only quotes the former, the positioning is significantly more critical than earlier *Focus* pieces. The emphasis on criticism means that the main news values are timeliness and negativity.

Leipziger Volkszeitung (LVZ) ; 172 words, 17 November 2020–n/a	<i>Harsh criticism of Caffier</i>
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The *LVZ* piece is very short and bases its coverage less on the press statement, and mainly on ‘political scientist and right-wing extremism expert’ Hajo Funke, who called for further clarification. *LVZ* quotes Funke’s statement to RND directly and indirectly, in which Funke calls Caffier “*irresponsible. The infiltration of the security authorities by right-wing extremists is one of the greatest challenges to the rule of law. This has the character of infiltrating democracy to overthrow it.*” Further, they directly quote a federal Green politician accusing the MV-CDU and Prime Minister Schwesig of a “*loud silence*” on the subject. *LVZ* does not reproduce Caffier’s image repair narratives or any speech from the press statement or the interview. Interestingly, it does not even report that Caffier’s excuse for the transgression is to claim ignorance. The main news value is negativity.

Neue Westfälische (NW) ; 195 words, 17 November 2020–n/a	<i>Weapons purchase by Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania's interior minister; There was more resignation in the past⁴⁷</i>
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The final piece for phase 3 is an op-ed from North-Rhine Westphalia-based newspaper *NW*, which takes the approach of comparing the 1992 resignation of the State Minister of Social Affairs in Thuringia over his theft of dog shampoo to the Caffier affair. It makes the point that there used to be more political consequences for private actions ‘back in the day’. The author criticizes that, in his opinion, there is no uproar about Caffier’s actions and lists other politicians he believes should step down over known scandals, claiming that this “*harms democracy*”. Here, again, the main news value is negativity.

5.4 Phase 4

The sub-corpus following Caffier’s resignation is the largest of the four phases. This is partly due to the high news values of a high-ranking politician (eliteness) surprisingly stepping down (unexpectedness, timeliness) during a crisis (negativity), and partly because his emotional

⁴⁷ The original headline, “früher war mehr Rücktritt“, is a reference to a famous line from popular 1976 TV sketch *Weihnachten bei Hoppenstedts* by German comedian Loriot.

resignation statement (personalization) provided several angles to report from. The richness of this corpus made delimitation necessary but difficult. Speed-reading of the corpus enabled a choice of relevant, representative media pieces to reflect the narratives in this period.

IRT – Resignation statement

Around 4pm on November 17th, 2020, the IM-MV released a video statement by Lorenz Caffier on their Facebook-page, along with a transcript that was sent to news agencies. Caffier begins by stressing the length of his term and the challenges he and his employees met during it, and complimenting the work of the police agencies.

I have been Minister of the Interior of the state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania for 14 years, making me the longest-serving Minister of the Interior in Germany. During this time, my staff, my environment and I have experienced many highs and lows [...]it was great to see how professionally and organized one of the smallest state police forces in the republic mastered this extremely difficult operation.

Praising agencies that are under his control is the first utilization of bolstering in the statement, but it is the main strategy throughout (strategy 3: reduce offensiveness, sub-strategy 7: bolstering). Caffier goes on to list his successes and efforts, always referring to “we”, which aims to include all citizens of MV and create a sense of unity:

[W]e have introduced countless laws and regulations. Billions flowed into the municipalities and into an unbelievable number of projects, which often also support voluntary work.

Together, we overcame the consequences of the 2008/2009 financial crisis.

Together, we successfully fended off the Elbe floods in 2013 [...] and the country's biggest challenge to date, the refugee crisis in 2015 [...]

As the decision to step down has been reached, Caffier aims at moving the focus from the specific scandal to the big picture—his over a decade long career in the IM-MV and his good intentions throughout. He does not mention the current crisis until the 7th paragraph. Before, he focuses how he knew that preventing the spread of RWR ideology has been important to him since he came into office in 2006:

A particular focus of my work has been the fight against extremism and, in particular, the fight against right-wing extremism. When I took office in 2006, it was already clear to me: we have to do something here. I campaigned for more staff, better equipment and more powers for investigators [...]

Here, Caffier takes considerate space in the statement to bolster his own actions to fight RWR. Convincingly expressing his years-long efforts is an important part in reducing the offensiveness of his final transgression as it stresses his good intentions (strategy 2: evade responsibility, sub-strategy 6). After stressing his consistent opposition of extremism, Caffier moves to a strategy that is not included in Benoit's image repair strategies, but is central to this statement, and has been supplemented as strategy 6: self-victimization: Instead of apologizing or further explaining the previous events, Caffier deflects blame and discursively constructs himself as the victim of a media campaign against him. He begins by stating that he never identified with any office as much as he did with Minister of Interior, linking his core identity to the office that he is now losing because of malicious reporting. He continues to emphasize how thankless the job was (this office is anything but a pleasure tax"), and how he dealt criticism over the years ("Someone has to sweep up the mess. That's what I did. There was rarely any applause for it"). This is where the statement becomes overtly emotional. Caffier states that "[He] too [has] limits". before moving on to explicitly attack the media over what he considers 'unspeakable', and even criminal offenses (strategy 3: reduce offensiveness, sub-strategy 11: attack accuser).

The unspeakable reporting about my vacation home on Usedom still fails to provide any proof that I have done anything wrong. Documents belonging to me, which are subject to the tax secret, are spread with a lot of obvious criminal energy. The only goal is to produce headlines with my name. My family suffered and still suffers immensely from these completely groundless accusations and the photos of our private property. Two years ago, I already had the feeling that I had to relieve my family by withdrawing.

Here, another reason for his stepping down is addressed: the tax evasion and illegal building accusations about Caffier's holiday home on a nearby island. Accusing the media of 'criminal energy' constitutes an escalation from his prior assessment of the media discourse ("*I find it completely unacceptable that this connection is being suggested in numerous media, although it should be clear to all concerned how absurd this is*"; IM-MV statement). It also shifts the focus for offensive actions to a different outlet than his own transgression (strategy 1: denial, sub-strategy 2: shift blame). Caffier escalates further by stating that while the Usedom-coverage signified 'criminal' energy, the coverage about the weapon purchase is "reaching a completely different dimension", implying that the criticism he received for the latest transgression constitutes personal, criminal malice aimed at him. He, again, takes responsibility for the act

itself, but denies that it was offensive (strategy 2: evade responsibility, sub-strategy 4: defeasibility).

I acquired a weapon from someone from whom I should not have acquired it from today's perspective.

By immediately adding that it was a mistake 'from today's perspective', Caffier distances himself from the offensiveness. Then he outright denies that it was wrong at all, before moving to the only explicit apology for the current crisis in the statement.

It was not the acquisition that was a mistake, but my handling of it. I apologize for that.

Essentially, this is identical to his strategy in the first interview: he acknowledges that he committed the offensive act, but a) claims that it was not offensive or harmful (strategy 1: denial, sub-strategy 1: simple denial), because he did not know it was (strategy 2: evade responsibility, sub-strategy 4: defeasibility), and b) apologizes for another act—the botched communication (strategy 5: mortification). It is interesting that Caffier chose not to change his narrative at all since the success of his interview and the IM-MV statement is debatable and did not deter media criticism on a larger scale.

After this apology, he returns to distancing himself from RWR and blame the media for forcing his hand in stepping down, claiming to have lost the 'necessary authority' for being Minister of Interior due to their coverage.

However, it hurts me deeply and is an extremely great burden for me that any proximity to right-wing circles is suggested in the reporting. I can only reject this accusation in the strongest possible terms. It is simply absurd. However, the media business is merciless and unfortunately all too often undifferentiated. The headlines have burned themselves into people's heads.

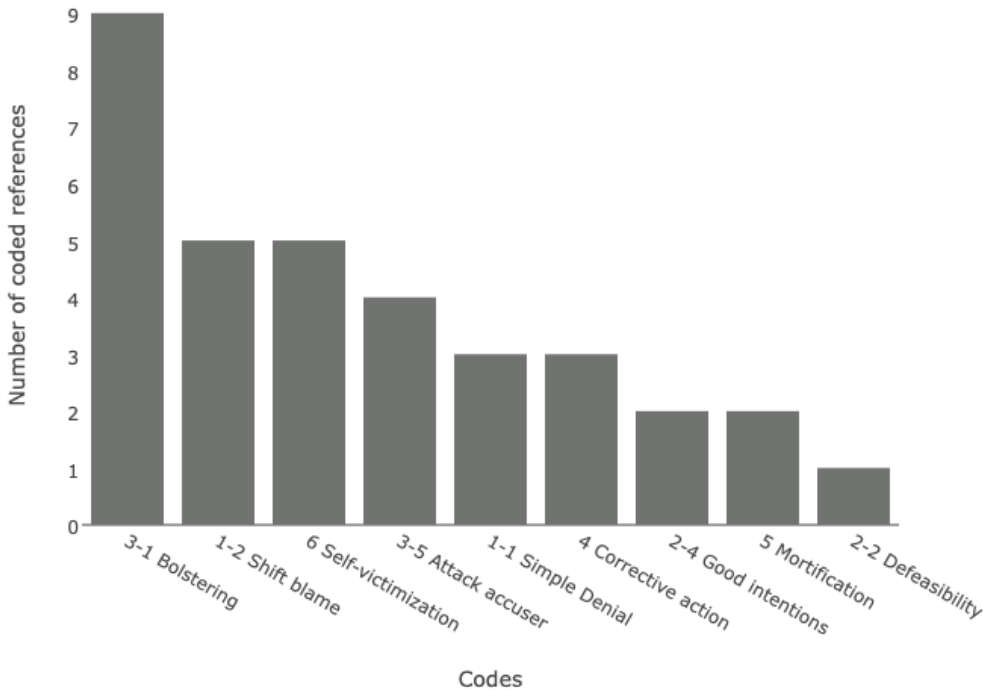
The rest of the statement focuses more on how hurt he is personally (strategy 6: self-victimization) and aims for sympathy from the audience. He details the pressure on his family and states that he will keep 'advocating for the issues on the ground' in his constituency. The end of the statement again stresses his good intentions and the emotional bonds he has to the people in MV (strategy 2: evade responsibility, sub-strategy 6: good intentions).

I have been incredibly happy to serve my homeland, the state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. It has been a great honor to make my contribution to the well-being of the people and the development of the state.

There is a second apology in the last paragraphs, where he expresses regret over not being able to continue as Minister, despite people supporting him and asking him to:

Many people encouraged me to continue. I am sorry that I can no longer fulfill this wish as Minister of the Interior.

However, this apology also does not address the systemic issues much of the criticism has pointed out, and therefore does not get to the core of the issues with Caffier’s contacts. The statement generally focuses on Caffier’s successes as Minister and the bonds he claims to have with this ‘homeland’, stressing the good he has done in his time in office.



Graphic 3: Resignation statement, 17/11

CDA – Media analysis

The bulk of relevant news was published on November 17th and the morning of November 18th. Starting later on the 18th, coverage quickly shifted to Caffier’s sick leave which meant that he would not appear in the Interior Committee of the State Parliament on Thursday the 19th to answer questions about his purchase. Therefore, especially local news reported on his lack of forthcoming communication, quoting that “many open questions remain” (Ritter, Left party; e.g., OZ, Nov. 18th:13:12; Nordkurier, OZ, Nov 18th, 16:53). A much-used metaphor for the crisis is accident-related: Caffier is seen as ‘stumbling’, ‘falling’, ‘brought to fall’ by the

weapon purchase in a lot of the coverage. The implication is that the botched communication, which is often accepted as the main transgression, is no more than a mishap.

IM-MV (Script in Nordkurier); 807 words, 17
November 2020–4:00pm

*Personal statement by Minister of the Interior Lorenz
Caffier*

The statement is carefully crafted as a personal and emotional appeal. Caffier makes it a priority to stress his personal bonds with the state, the ministry, his employees and the citizens. He discursively links his own efforts and successes (failures are not mentioned until the scandal) to the collective—

And full of conviction, I pushed ahead with the NPD ban proceedings before the Federal Constitutional Court [...] With each battle we fought together, the bond between the Ministry of Interior, its staff, and me grew stronger.

The switch from first-person singular when describing his goals and good intentions, to the collective first-person plural helps to integrate the Minister with his team. The generous praise he heaps upon his employees also makes him sympathetic, as does the regret he expresses.

The direct attacks on the media may be understandable from his vantage point as an individual that feels unjustly attacked in what he perceives as his private space—essentially two purchases, the house on Usedom and the gun from Frank T. However, as the Minister of Interior in an official statement under that title, it sends a questionable message. Especially since the media analysis of the previous phases has not found any article directly suggesting that Caffier is an RWR ideologue. Considering the volatility of such accusations in the German context, the implication alone explains Caffier’s personal, and possibly genuine, offense—“However, it hurts me deeply and is an extremely great burden for me that any proximity to right-wing circles is suggested in the reporting.” Still, it is absolutely necessary and correct that the media did report the connection when it came out and as a public servant, especially one in charge of the agencies charged with controlling RWR activities in his state, there are more transgressions than just the botched communication that he apologized for. The main news value of the resignation statement is personalization.

Ostseezeitung (OZ); 291 words, 17 November 2020–4:21pm

After weapons purchase: Interior Minister Lorenz-Caffier (CDU) resigns; affair

One of the first reactions to Caffier’s resignation comes from local newspaper *OZ*. It refers to Caffier with reference to both his age and the length of his time in office, and the decision as a ‘*Paukenschlag*’, literally drumbeat, but figuratively used as synonymous to a scandal, implying surprise at the decision. *OZ* refers to Caffier’s decision as ‘drawing consequences’ for the contested gun purchase, framing the resignation as a reasonable choice. There are multiple strategic and direct quotes from the statement, focused on his justification for his stepping down, summarized as “*the public handling of his person and privacy in relation to his controversial vacation home on Usedom and a pistol he had purchased from a former member of the right-wing terrorist network Nordkreuz*”. *OZ* does not contest Caffier’s framing. The quotes used represent Caffier’s emotions, consternation at the accusations and the personal impact on his family (i.e.: “*My family suffered and is suffering immensely*”). In the last paragraph, the article points out that it has only been a few days since the criticisms began. The main news values are proximity and timeliness.

Nordkurier; 550 words, 17 November 2020–4:53pm

Will CDU state leader Sack now become interior minister?

Another local news source is *Nordkurier*, which published five pieces on the evening after the resignation—only *OZ* had more immediate coverage. Their first article, interestingly, deals directly with the consequences within the parliament, listing possible replacements. They directly quote Michael Sack, the top-pick positively discussing Caffier, but calling his resignation ‘reasonable’. Another direct quote, from an AfD-MP formulates a CDU-led conspiracy to heighten their chances in the upcoming election. The article gives two paragraphs to Left-party leader Ritter, He acknowledges the resignation, but points out that Caffier’s resignation cannot be the conclusion due to systemic issues: “*We were not only concerned with Caffier’s acquisition of weapons, but also with the role of the authorities and services in the state and the federal government in dealing with Nordkreuz.*” The final paragraph is a longer conciliatory direct quote by SPD-fraction leader (and coalition partner) Krüger, expressing admiration for Caffier’s long career, but calling the resignation ‘a consistent step’.

There are no direct quotes by Caffier, and no mentions of his justifications or grievances. The main news value is the impact of his resignation on the MV political landscape, which is

constructed through the foregrounding of criticisms concerning the implications of Caffier's conduct.

BILD.de; 277 words, 17 November 2020–4:44pm

*After controversial weapons purchase; Meck-Pomm:
Interior Minister Caffier resigns*

Nation-wide tabloid BILD published a short piece on the resignation less than an hour after it happened. It consists mainly of indirect quotes from the statement and a direct quote from the Spiegel-interview (“*Yes, I did. A handgun. At the beginning of 2018, based on the legal basis...*”). The second and last paragraph summarizes Caffier's/IM-MV's statements on the events in the subjunctive. It quotes Caffier's justification for the resignation—that the past few days had been an “*unbearable strain*”. The reporting verbs are neutral, Caffier ‘acknowledges’ his transgression, and the article frames his hesitations as stemming from a wish to ‘*protect his family*’, though the article does not spell out from what. This implies that the attacks Caffier was confronted with prior to his resignation were too harsh and maybe even unwarranted. Thereby, the piece reproduces Caffier's narratives uncritically. Since the resignation has a high news value in the hour following its announcement, the main news value is timeliness.

Ostseezeitung (OZ); 988 words, 17
November 2020–6:57pm

*Vacation home, weapons purchase, SEK scandal - this is why
Lorenz Caffier was criticized; resignation of the interior minister*

The longest piece in this sub-corpus is by OZ, and it covers Caffier's political trajectory beyond the weapons-scandal. Like in their earlier coverage, local politician Caffier is initially referred to formally: age, full name, length of stay in office, party affiliation, full title. Later referencing changes to just his last name. The article chronicles other crises in Caffier's time as Minister that have not been mentioned in the bulk of coverage outside of MV, even though Caffier himself identifies the media response to it as one of the reasons for his resignation: the holiday home on nearby island Usedom and possible tax evasion connected to it. OZ lists the exact numbers for how much taxes Caffier did not pay, and Caffier's silence to their questions. Six critical paragraphs are dedicated to the details of the Usedom house. Two paragraphs toward the end cover the weapon purchase. There is only one strategic quote by Caffier, the now infamous ‘private matter’. OZ links to the IM-MV Facebook channel for the video statement, but it does not quote any of Caffier's grievances.

The final paragraph, titled “[t]he SEK scandal - how did Caffier deal with it?”, covers the accusations against the LKA-SEK⁴⁸ and Marco G., a Nordkreuz-member. Despite the headline, it does not give a value judgement on Caffier’s handling of the scandal. The main news value is negativity, which the article discursively constructs through stacking Caffier’s controversies on one another.

SPIEGEL Online ; 557 words, 17 November 2020–10:12pm	<i>A tragic case</i>
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The journalist who did the interview with Caffier after the press conference covers his subsequent resignation under the headline ‘A tragic case’. It refers to Caffier as the “*longest serving interior minister of the federal republic*”, focusing his long career and states that “[p]oliticians don’t usually stumble over their mistakes, but over the way they deal with them”. This framing reproduces Caffier’s narrative that not the act itself was a mistake, but his handling of it. The article argues that Caffier has consistently positioned himself against RWR tendencies and organizations, listing his efforts against the NPD⁴⁹ as an example. It also posits that the AfD’s strength in MV is ironically partly Caffier’s fault as he refused to move his CDU to the right. It directly quotes the resignation statement: “*It hurts me deeply and is an extremely big burden for me that any proximity to right-wing circles is suggested in the reporting*”.

Spiegel further sharply criticizes the response to the crisis, and expressing sympathy for Caffier’s reluctance to disclose his purchase ‘*out of concern*’ of how his adversaries would spin it. Using direct and strategic quotes by exclusively left-party politicians, the article frames their accusations as “unspeakable”. This is contrasted with an MV SPD-politician who strongly condemns the response as well, who is quoted strategically as calling it “*shabby*” and “*a spectacle of partisan unsavoriness*”. In turn, *Spiegel* credits the latter with rare decency.

This article is one of a line of coverage that expresses regret and sympathy for Caffier, essentially reproducing his grievances about the media and discursively constructing the main news value as negativity, though not in reference to the main actor’s transgression, but the reactions to it. Pieces like this one imply that the real issue with the political sphere lies not in the actual failure, but in media treatment of the actors involved and other politicians’ willingness to put each other down.

⁴⁸ State criminal police special task force

⁴⁹ Nationalistische Partei Deutschlands, a German Neo-Nazi nationalist party

Dpa-AFX is an internationally networked business news service, affiliated with the German and Austrian Press Agencies. The article uses a common metaphor in this phase, that of *'stumbling'*, implying that the weapon-purchase and subsequent communicative failure was, essentially, an accident. The lead paragraph humanizes Caffier, describing the deep lines on his forehead and how shaken he looks during his statement. As many pieces now, it refers to him as Germany's "*longest serving state interior minister*". The article then directly quotes Caffier's resignation statement: "*It wasn't the acquisition that was a mistake, it was my handling of it. For that, I apologize*".

The article then chronicles the Nordkreuz-connection, mentioning the discrepancies between Caffier's statements and information available to the ministry in 2017. It refers to the network as a *'mushroom'* which has *'mycelium'* reaching the different GED agencies. This metaphor implies that no part of MV's security agencies has remained uncontaminated. In another metaphor, AFX states that Caffier had *'tried to drain the swamp'*, and indirectly quotes his expressions of hurt from the statement, ending with a direct quote ("*I can only reject this accusation in the strongest possible terms*"). The article ends with reporting the criticisms of the LfV-MV and its failure to investigate the information they had in 2017. As the article mainly reproduces Caffier's narratives without asking critical questions or significantly repurposing any statements, the main news value is timeliness.

Nordkurier's chief editor expresses regret at Caffier's resignation, claiming "*many meanwhile even thought that he was appointed directly by the good Lord*" in reference to Caffier's longevity in office. Rich in metaphors (Caffier as an oak, now bothered by squirrels), the article is heavy in nostalgia for the stability of Caffier's terms. The main news value is constructed as personalization, since the focus is not on the negative impact, or anything outside of Caffier's individual consequences from the crisis.

Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ); 186 words, 18 November 2020–n/a

Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania: Overdue resignation

In a short piece on the day after the resignation, *SZ* expresses indignation at Caffier’s narrative with strategic quotes: “‘*Completely uninhibited*’ is not the reporting, as Lorenz Caffier thinks about his resignation as Minister of the Interior of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. *Unspeakable* was the way he reacted to questions about this weapon”. It recounts the events shortly, then points out inconsistencies between Caffier’s claim of ignorance and the 2017 information situation at the IM-MV. It also suggests that the claim being true would not be favorable either, as he should be in the loop as the ‘*the principal of the security agencies*’. The short piece discursively constructs negativity as the main news value, focusing the incompetence of the ex-Minister and questioning his narratives.

taz; 525 words, 18 November 2020–4:16pm

MV-Interior Minister Lorenz Caffier resigns

Published the day after Caffier’s resignation, the journalists who broke the story, focus less on Caffier as a person and more on the still-under researched systemic issues in MV. The piece recounts the events, the lack of communication from the IM-MV, and the lack of criticism from other actors in the MV political scene. It includes three strategic quotes, one from the resignation statement and one each from an SPD and Left party politician. The focus is then on the ongoing systemic issues and Nordkreuz’s connections to GED agencies. The main news value this piece constructs is the impact, less of the resignation itself, but of Nordkreuz on a larger scale.

taz; 505 words, 19 November 2020–n/a

After Caffier's resignation: Still plenty to be cleared up

Two days after the resignation, the journalists who broke the story about the weapons affair cover suggestions about Caffier’s successor. Referring to Caffier as the “*central pillar of the state association*”, and “*not just anyone*”. This predication discursively constructs and stresses his importance for the state of MV and the impact of his contacts. The article further focuses on the impact of Caffier’s resignation, explaining the consequences it has for the MV-CDU considering upcoming elections. It then lists the Nordkreuz issues, and how the IM-MV is just now starting with the reconnaissance of the SEK-scandal. In the final paragraph, it again mentions how Caffier is blocking these efforts by classifying a 2019 external report on right-wing extremist incidents within the SEK and riot police forces as secret.

vi. Conclusion

As there are two theoretical frameworks and two sets of data, there must be two (related) evaluations to answer both research questions: one for the primary crisis communication by Caffier and his IM-MV, and one for the media representation.

6.1 Evaluation RQ1: Crisis Communication

For RQ1, the inquiry aimed at uncovering the quantitative use of image repair strategies during the different phases. Relatedly though, it is interesting to evaluate how successful they were in restoring his image. This can, of course, not be answered definitively, but the fact that Caffier stepped down only five days into the crisis indicates that the choice of image repair strategies was not ideal. This is supported by the fact that the coverage of his crisis communication was mostly negative (see evaluations of RQ2). This supports results by Ferguson et al. since the majority of Caffier's chosen image repair strategies fall in either negatively valenced or extremely negatively valenced categories—*“Defeasibility, minimization, and differentiation consistently occupy the negatively valenced tier two category. Viewed in the extremely negative category (tier three) were provocation, blameshift, silence, and denial”* (Ferguson et al., 2018:266).

Claiming that the offensiveness (the seller's ideology and connection) was unknown and the purchase from him, therefore, an accident, aims at the accidental cluster, when viewed through an SCCT-lens (Ferguson et al., 2018:255). The accidental cluster comes with minimal attribution of blame for the afflicted party, translating to only a moderate reputational threat. Caffier was dealing with two offenses at once (gun purchase and communication failure) and he fought to frame both as accidental through *defeasibility*, and claiming well-meaning naivete.

Considering the journalistic evidence that proves he refused to comment for months, the botched communication automatically fell into the preventable crisis cluster, which involves strong blame attribution and a severe reputational threat (Ferguson et al., 2018:255). Another aspect that comes up in successful accountability handling is timing, with Boin et al. arguing that apologies or explanations that come too late—i.e., *“well after an actor has first tried to ignore or deny responsibility”* (Boin et al., 2017:120)—lose force. Arguably, this is one of the main reasons as to why Caffier's handling was seen as insufficient, even after he took accountability. It could also be argued that Caffier's denial of fault constituted an attempt of *premature closure* of the crisis, which includes politicians underestimating *“the complexity and tenacity of the problems at hand [...] or misread[ing] the residual stress level existing in the*

affected community” (Boin et al., 2017:109). 2020 was a year in which many felt that new *Einzelfall*-incidents were uncovered weekly, which led to contentious perceptions of RWR-groups in the police. Caffier might well have underestimated both the public frustration with the handling of police scandals generally and criticisms of his minimization of the Nordkreuz-connection. The fact that even while the crisis continued, the Minister refused to meaningfully shift to different image repair strategies also signifies an enduring denial of fault on his part. There is no increase in the use of mortification between the phases, and the apologies he does offer fall under ‘pseudo-apologies’, where he apologizes for the wrong transgression (Lazare; in Eisinger, 2011:137).

Another reason for his resignation might well have been the shift in coverage to earlier crises he has been involved in, including the Usedom house and the tax evasion accusations. The longer the gun-crisis lasted, the more Usedom came up and his resignation statement shows this was a sore point. The minister might have decided that stepping down earlier was more beneficial to his reputation than staying in office until the coming election. Decreasing his eliteness as a former minister meant an accompanying decrease in news interest in his person, shown by the stark decline of coverage following the resignation.

6.2 Evaluation RQ2: Media representation

RQ2.1:

The use of reported speech is closely tied to the news values of certain quotes in the crisis communication. In the first phase, the only usable quote from the press conference is the ‘private matter’ statement, employed by the majority of news coverage following the publication of the transgression. The strategic quote is used as illustration, and its content is questioned multiple times, making it the starting point for several articles.

In phase 2, the interview gave a lot more material, there are attempts at balancing the longer quotes by Caffier with statements by other politicians and experts. Local news, though, initially fail to recontextualize the crisis communication. There are significant differences between newspapers according to their political stances in this phase: libertarian and conservative media, represented here by *WELT* (Nov 13th) and *Focus* (Nov 13th) reproduce Caffier’s crisis communication in direct, indirect and strategic quotes without reframing or using opposing or critical voices. Center-left *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Nov 13th), in contrast, uses only strategic quotes by Caffier, reframing the short snippets and using a significantly longer direct quote by a Left-party MP to balance. Likewise, *GT/ETO* (Nov 13th) only uses strategic

quotes by Caffier to show he has been lying. OZ (Nov 13th) also limits Caffier's quotes to strategic snippets, balancing them with strategic and direct quotes from across the political spectrum, framing Caffier as isolated in the MV political environment (apart from the AfD).

In phase 3, there is again less use of reported speech from the crisis communication, as the IM-MV press statement offered less usable quotes. This explains, in part, the reliance on other parties' quotes in this phase. *Nordkurier* (Nov 16th, 6:12pm), for instance, quotes Frank T., but also uses Caffier's attack on the media as a direct quote without recontextualizing or questioning it. Coverage in this phase is also based on opposing politician's criticisms in direct and strategic form (*Tagesspiegel*, Nov 16th; *ZEIT*, Nov 16th; *Focus*, Nov 17th). There are a range of articles that do not use any of the crisis communication as reported speech (*Nordkurier*, Nov 17th:5:57am; *Neue Westfälische*, Nov 17th; *LVZ*, Nov 17th). The reliance on other reported speech and move away from reproducing crisis communication also signifies a tonal change towards more critical coverage and shows that the low news value of the IM-MV statement constituted a failure of crisis communication since news media filled the quote-vacuum with critical voices instead.

In phase 4, the use of direct quotes from the resignation statement strongly indicates sympathy for Caffier. The articles that use longer reported speech from the final crisis communication piece (*OZ*, Nov 17th; *Spiegel*, Nov 17th). The majority of coverage in the last phase relies on strategic quotes, the more critical pieces do not quote Caffier even strategically, instead relying on other voices (*Nordkurier*, Nov 17th: 4:53pm; *Nordkurier*, Nov 18th; *taz*, Nov 19th). There are multiple strategic quotes from earlier crisis communication in this phase (e.g., *BILD*, Nov 17th; *OZ*, Nov 17th). There is also a move towards omitting Caffier completely as the news shift towards his replacement and political changes in MV (*Nordkurier*, Nov 17th: 4:53; *taz*, Nov 18th).

RQ2.2:

In terms of news values, there are shifts between the most-used value between the phases. While phase 1 is dominated by timeliness followed by negativity, phase 2 is almost equally divided between timeliness, eliteness, and impact. Of course, some articles combine two values in the discursive construction, e.g., negativity and impact, but generally, the articles in phase 2, as more information emerged, were more negative than in phase 1.

Phase 3, then, after the publication of the press statement, is by far the most negative in terms of news value construction, showing that the statement failed to change the discourse. In phase 4, finally, the main news values are negativity and impact, used equally. At no point does

the coverage change majorly towards personalization, proving that Caffier's attempts at stylizing himself as the victim of press attacks did not translate into the news coverage. The fact that the coverage became significantly less negative after his resignation does indicate that the move was seen as correct and as a fix by much of the news media, which is part of the issue discussed in RQ2.3.

RQ2.3:

Lastly, the representation of the crisis in media is relevant to evaluate the symbolic meaning that it is assigned—or is not assigned—in public discourse. Only two of the articles from the first phase (*Tagesspiegel*, Nov 13th; *WA/AZ*, Nov 13th) focus on the linkages of GED members in Nordkreuz and their implications, the rest simply report that Caffier apparently bought a gun from an RWR-involved actor and refused to answer questions about it at a press conference.

In phase 2, the journalist conducting the interview also fails at shifting the transgression away from Caffier's (alleged) naivete, keeping the focus on an individual politician's questionable choices instead of the anti-constitutional threat. The majority of coverage follows this narrative, with a barrage of quotes from other politicians calling for personal consequences for Caffier. Only three of the ten articles in phase 2 explicitly focus the Nordkreuz network and why being connected to it, even tangentially, is a problem (*GT/ETO*; Nov 13th: 4:46pm; *SZ*, Nov 13th; *taz*, Nov 14th).

In phase 3, the first article to shed doubt on Caffier's narrative of ignorance by implicating the information situation in the IM-MV and his duty to know what the ministry knows is the local *Nordkurier* (Nov 16th: 6:12pm). The only other piece to consider a larger scale in this phase is *LVZ* (Nov 17th), which relies on quotes by an expert on RWR. With just two articles that point to the larger scale issues brought to light by an interior Minister's lack of awareness about RWR in direct contact and within his own agencies, phase 3 is the most concerned with the personal failures of Caffier as a politician.

In phase 4, the formulations used to describe Caffier's resignation are often accident-related—stumbling, falling —, and his resignation is referred to as 'drawing consequences', implying that this solves the crisis (e.g., *OZ*, Nov 17th:4:21pm, *dpa-AFX*, Nov 17th). Else, they focus on the real-political consequences: who will follow Caffier in office (e.g., *Nordkurier*, Nov 17th:4:53pm) or what the emotional implications are for the man as an individual (*Spiegel*, Nov 17th:10:12pm). The decisive question to take from these events, however, would be how to stop the infiltration of GED agencies by groups like Nordkreuz and what is to change in the IM-MV to achieve this goal. Reports like the *taz*-article on how Caffier is still blocking vital

information on extremism, for instance in the riot police, are an exception. For the most part, the coverage follows Caffier's narrative of how hurt he is as an individual.

6.3 Discussion

This study primarily contributes to the research on accountability, scandal research, political crisis communication, and mediatization concerning especially RWR-scandals. With respect to the turn from scandal to crisis, the study shows that media representations of events and explanations matters for the scope they take in public discourse: the legacy news media in this case publicized the transgression in the first place and enabled broader conversations, thus fulfilling the "*function of journalism in political scandals*" – "*to transfer them into an arena for the evaluation and determination of the magnitude of their accusations of norm transgressions*" (Ekström & Johannsson, 2008:190). Arguably, this transfer did fall short in some ways. Caffier's ignorance of Frank T.'s connections is the basis of this exoneration strategy. It is, arguably, also the crux of the issue, and a question that not much of the media discourse picks up: is it excusable for a Minister of Interior and the institutions that surround him to miss RWR ideology when he personally interacts with persons implicated over years?

The root offense of 'Causa Caffier' were the ex-Minister's close ties to Frank T. This connection constituted a transgression, and the purchase was offensive mostly for this reason. Politicians interacting with radical-right actors in an uncritical manner in Germany, regardless of whether the interaction is private, or public signifies a "*transgression of norms in the public sphere*" (see Ekström & Johannsson, 2019:186). This act, in the charged atmosphere of other cases earlier in 2020 (see Graschl & Krenn, 2020) carried high crisis potential. Caffier's apparent ignorance about the perceived offensiveness of his actions is clear from the long time it took him to respond to the allegations (see Baetz & Schmidt, 2020). Urgency is part of most crisis definitions for a reason, and Caffier's failure to answer press requests for months leading up to the recognition of the crisis stage (see Coombs' three-staged approach, 1999 in Frandsen & Johansen, 2017:70).

The failure of the media reports at large is that they follow Caffier's narrative, even when critical. Caffier and the IM-MV base their justifications on *defeasibility*, which can be summarized as 1) he did not know the action was offensive 2) the action, therefore, was not offensive at the time. Limiting the media discussion around whether these statements are true or not keeps it revolving around a personal-political scandal: a moral failure from the politician in question. It is important, of course, to establish the facts surrounding the transgression, one of the media's responsibilities is fact-checking and truth-telling. Likewise, this constitutes

accountability mediatization, as it involves establishing where the fault lay and demands answers from the politician in question (see Ekström et al., 2016:984).

It is, however, not sufficient as general legacy media response to a violent RWR-network's presence at a shooting range that has been used by GED-agencies for years and whose head of staff has personally purchased a weapon from a member of said network. The question whether Caffier was or was not aware of Frank T.'s connections and beliefs is largely meaningless once the bigger picture is considered: Not only the IM-MV under Caffier and its LKA used the Baltic Shooters range for years, many other police and security agencies did as well. Caffier uses this fact as exoneration, and the media reports follow this idea—if Caffier was unaware, then he did nothing wrong. This is a fallacy. Instead, it points to the systemic issues discussed in the introduction regarding the blindness of GED-agencies towards RWR ideology. The entanglements of SEK, LKA and police officers in the Nordkreuz-chatgroup and its planned violence symbolizes dangerous sympathies in GED-agencies for this ideology.

Here again, the problem is the attribution of blame to different actors. Accountability is assigned solely to Caffier in most of the media representations. His attempts at implicating the BKA, for instance, do not take hold in the coverage. Limiting the accountability to a single actor also contains the scandal at the individual level. Considering the journalistic process, the individualization of blame makes sense as it is impossible media outlets to confront an entire institution, reflected also in Djerf-Pierre et al.'s definition of accountability as explicitly politician-focused: the "*principle that elected politicians should be answerable*" (2014:321). As with 'Causa Caffier', the issue in evaluating media treatment of the scandal is the wealth of interconnections that need to be considered.

After all, Frank T. was not the only individual at Baltic Shooters with Nordkreuz-ties. Another shooting range instructor, simultaneously an officer of the SEK-MV, has been linked to Nordkreuz' violent insurrection plans. Additionally, an ex-military soldier who was also a Nordkreuz-member was part of the same reservist association that Caffier worked with to investigate the 'Prepper'-scene in MV. It does not shine a favorable light on the MV's dealings with RWR if men with these ideologies can be trusted members of GED-adjacent spheres without anyone noticing. The fact is that Caffier *ought* to have known.

Drawing a connection back to the historical parallels surrounding RWR and institutional blindness towards the phenomenon, the implications of this case and its legacy news media treatment are worrisome. Essentially, the representations treat 'Causa Caffier' as an *Einzelfall*—a moral failure by an unfortunate, but singular actor (see Kopke, 2019:37). The individualization of the coverage was unhelpful, but the fact that personal consequences were

drawn must be judged positively—the scandal provided another opportunity for German society and media to consolidate public stances on RWR-connections. Arguably, ‘Causa Caffier’ had to play out in this manner to prevent the normalization of GED-agencies and politics having close ties. After all, scandals are “*social ritual[s] that serve the purpose of updating normative moral models in a society and that, through communication, contribute to a collective difference and identity formation*” (Burkenhardt 2018:21; in Johansson & Vigsø, 2020:457). To reiterate, Thompson’s argument on the politics of trust is based on the notion that scandals are “*struggles over symbolic power in which reputation and trust are at stake*” (Thompson 2000:245; in *ibid*:462). The weapon purchase turning into a scandal was necessary for the upkeep of RWR-groups’ ostracization.

6.4 Implications and Developments

In a longer work, a comparative study between institutional narration (by legacy news and political establishment) and alternative or social media would be interesting to see if and how the representation of the primary crisis communication changes with the re-contextualization and mediatization on these platforms. Likewise, this is only one small case in an environment that is rife with similar instances. Comparing, for instance, a case in which politicians from a different party family were involved in an RWR/GED-agency crisis might offer further insight in the role of ideology for crisis communication.

Individualized looks at crises like this one fall short because they cannot account for the systemic connections and networks between political scenes and GED-agency personnel. Nordkreuz-connections did have some more personal consequences for other actors as well: In April 2022, Saxony’s Minister of Interior Woeller (also CDU) was let go following a number of scandals. One of them was the MEK⁵⁰ Saxony’s involvement in training sessions at Baltic Shooters that were connected to the theft of 14,500 rounds of ammunition (*Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2022). Similarly, the Saxonian MEK was disassembled after the *taz* publicized their own connections in conjunction with stolen ammunition found at Nordkreuz members’ private properties (Schmidt, March 2021). Revelations of RWR-involvement generally only threaten the institution's viability when they get too large to ignore and cannot be pinned to a single perpetrator. This could be seen with the Frankfurt police special task force in 2020, where 18 police officers were under investigation for involvement with far-right ideology (Feldmann, 2021). As a result of the massive loss of public trust and intense public

⁵⁰ Mobiles Einsatzkommando—mobile task force

criticism leveled at police and the Hessian state, the SEK was dissolved and completely restructured in June 2021 (ibid).

Media interest in the Caffier affair subsided significantly immediately after his resignation as shown by the numerical decrease of articles published on him in phase 4. That changed briefly about a year after the original scandal broke: in December 2021, Caffier was fined €13,500 for the exercise of personal advantage as neither he himself nor Frank T. of Baltic Shooters could provide evidence that a purchase had taken place (*Nordkurier*, 2022). This exacerbates the accusations against Caffier in light of his defense strategy: that he did purchase the gun from a reputable seller to the best of his knowledge at the time. The disclosure that his relationship with Frank T. was apparently more personal than he had let on before makes the connection even more contentious.

However, more importantly, there are strong indications, from former and still active members, that Nordkreuz continues to exist (*Nordkurier*, 2021). While interest in ‘Causa Caffier’ has abated, the surrounding issues have not been solved by his resignation, indicating that the media discourses surrounding the scandal were ultimately ill-matched to communicate the systemic issues to the public. Neither Caffier’s entanglements nor the crimes planned and prepared by Nordkreuz have led to larger-scale discussions around RWR in security agencies and politics. Instead, the reactions, especially by conservative politicians and from within GED agencies follow the disproven *Einzelfall*-formula.

vii. Bibliography

7.1 Literature

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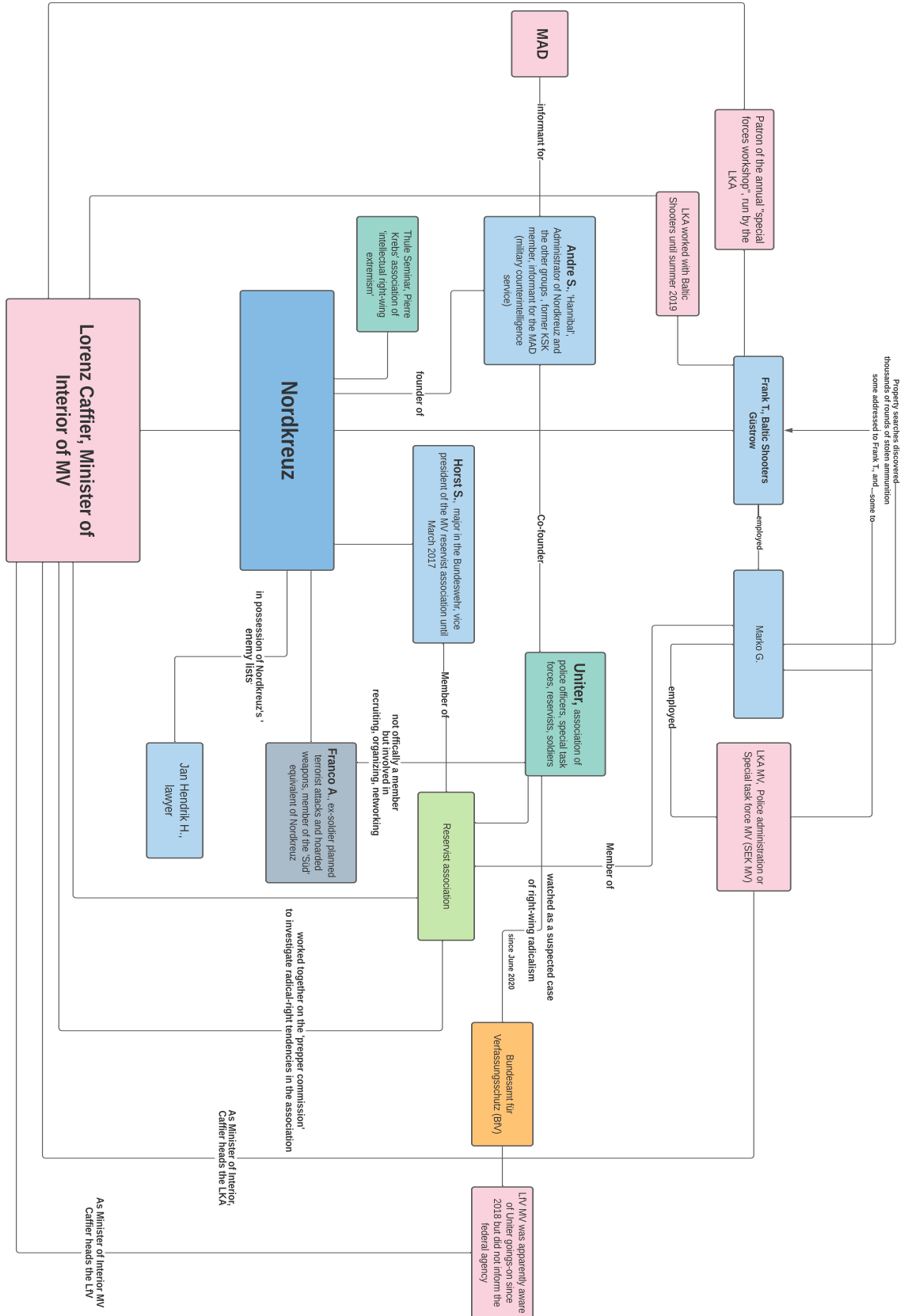
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viii. Appendix

8.1 Visualization Nordkreuz network



Nordkreuz network & Caffier connections 1

8.2 Visualization timeline

