

Review

The Religious Which Is Political: Revisiting Pnina Werbner's *Imagined Diasporas and Beyond*

Claudia Liebelt 

Department of Political and Social Sciences, Free University of Berlin, D-14195 Berlin, Germany;
claudia.liebelt@fu-berlin.de

Abstract: Dedicated to the memory of Pnina Werbner, this essay revisits Werbner's ethnographic and conceptual work on the relationship between diaspora and religion through a close reading of her book on *Imagined Diasporas among Manchester Muslims* and her later engagements with the concept of diaspora with respect to religion and the background of her work on African and Filipino labour diasporas in the West. It argues that many of Werbner's insights remain pertinent today, not least because in many European contexts Muslim-background citizens and non-citizens remain excluded from full belonging and are still forced to engage in constant perspectival manoeuvring similar to Werbner's earlier interlocutors. While the notion of diaspora has lost much of its earlier conceptual verve, in its Werbnerian reading, I argue, it may still offer a scholarly tool for analysing the multiple imaginations, belongings, and ambiguities of migrants' and religious minorities' self-representations and complex lives.

Keywords: diaspora; religious minorities; Islam; citizenship; belonging; labour migration; UK

1. Introduction

As a graduate student at the University of Halle in the early 2000s, I was part of a group called 'Diasporas, Migration, Transnationalism'. We discussed what since the 1980s had become major interdisciplinary buzzwords to describe peoples' movements and their sense of belonging beyond state boundaries. Among the works we discussed was Robin Cohen's *Global Diasporas* (Cohen 1997). According to Cohen, diasporas were communities with a strong ethnic group consciousness, who idealized their ancestral homes, formed return movements, and had an often troubled relationship with their host societies (Cohen 1997, p. 180). Analysing different types of diaspora and defining features for comparing them, Cohen suggested that religions provided an 'additional cement to bind a diasporic consciousness, but... do not constitute diasporas in and of themselves' (Cohen 1997, p. 189). Shortly thereafter, I moved to Manchester to work with Pnina Werbner as part of a project on the religious imagination and sociality in the Filipino diaspora¹ and encountered Werbner's radically different approach to the topic. Rather than encapsulated (religious) communities yearning for their homelands, for Werbner diasporas were most of all 'imagined', always already complex and multiple in their aspirations and social networks.

Influenced by the works of postcolonial thinkers such as Homi Bhabha (1994), Avtar Brah (1996), and Stuart Hall (1990), Pnina Werbner shared with them a commitment to disclaim essentialisms of all kinds in order to envisage a politics of inclusion. Like many of these authors, Werbner was an immigrant to Britain, having been born in South Africa in 1944 and raised in Israel, where she completed her MA in Anthropology at Tel Aviv University under the supervision of Emanuel Marx. Himself a prominent member of the Manchester School, Marx encouraged Werbner to continue her studies at the University of Manchester, the innovative and radical centre of urban anthropology at that time.² In her ensuing ethnographic fieldwork with Muslim South Asians in Britain and Pakistan, published in three monographs as the *Migration Trilogy* (Werbner 1990, 2002a, 2003), the



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notion of 'diaspora' helped her to reframe potentially essentializing notions such as identity, culture, and community, all subject to heated scholarly debates in the 1980s and 1990s. Analysing the affects, ethics, and dialogical encounters of religious actors in a 'diasporic public sphere', she was particularly interested in the moments when religious and devotional investments carried political meaning and were transformed into power. At times, these investments gave rise to social movements. This was the case when factional divisions among Manchester Muslims were overcome in the late 1980s by the global protests sparked by the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (Rushdie 1988).

In what follows, I will revisit Pnina Werbner's ethnographic and conceptual work on the relationship between diaspora and religion. Firstly, by revisiting her book on *Imagined Diasporas among Manchester Muslims* (Werbner 2002a), published against the background of the so-called global war on terrorism following the September 11 attacks and dealing prominently with what came to be known as the Rushdie affair. Secondly, I will outline Werbner's later engagements with the concept of diaspora in relation to religion and against the background of her manifold ethnographic work until her untimely death in early 2023.

As I will argue, many of the insights of *Imagined Diasporas* remain pertinent today, not only because other so-called blasphemy cases since the Rushdie affair provoked global outrage among Muslims around the world, but also because in many European contexts Muslim immigrants and their children remain excluded from full citizenship, still being forced to engage in 'transversal politics' (Yuval-Davis 1997) that require constant perspectival manoeuvring, similar to Werbner's earlier interlocutors. While the notion of diaspora has lost much of its earlier conceptual prominence, in its Werbnerian reading it may still offer a scholarly tool for analysing the multiple imaginations, belongings, and ambiguities of migrants' and religious minorities' self-representations and complex lives.

2. Revisiting Imagined Diasporas among Manchester Muslims

Published as the second volume of the so-called Migration Trilogy, *Imagined Diasporas* (Werbner 2002a) is based on fieldwork conducted between 1986 and 1994. Alongside an article published in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (Werbner 2002b), *Imagined Diasporas* clearly outlines Werbner's approach to diasporas as 'critical' communities whose members share a sense of moral co-responsibility. Werbner herself calls the book a 'subaltern drama. . . of personal conflict and rivalry' (Werbner 2002a, p. 15), and indeed it is a twofold drama, first of the internal 'factional' politics of Manchester Muslims in the late 1980s and 1990s against the background of their changing place in British society, and secondly regarding the relationship between the anthropologist and the community under study. Thus, the book was published against the background of public debates on the 'failure of multiculturalism' and the 'non-integration' of Muslim minorities in the aftermath of racialized city riots in northern England in the late spring and summer of 2001, soon followed by the September 11 attacks. It prominently deals with another watershed moment for Muslims in Britain, the so-called Rushdie affair.

Conducting fieldwork in her own hometown of Manchester, Werbner writes that during much of her research, she was 'a single woman in public meetings composed entirely of men' and 'a Jew among Muslims' (Werbner 2002a, p. xii). She interprets the fact that she was 'always treated with the greatest respect' as in itself 'a tribute to the tolerance of British Muslims, especially so because the research was on hot political issues from the protagonists' point of view' (Werbner 2002a, p. xii). Starting out from a 'personal moment of crisis' (Werbner 2002a, p. 8), namely of disbelief and shock over calls for Salman Rushdie's death by people who for years had been 'not only the subject of my scholarly research, but close friends whom I trusted and esteemed,' she eventually decides to argue, rather than 'turning my back on them' (Werbner 2002a, p. 9). And indeed, in its dialogical style and critical reflection on the limits of liberal modernity, *Imagined Diasporas* is a highly constructed essay on her own complex subjectivity, apart from also being a rigorous, detailed ethnography.

In the footsteps of the Manchester School, Werbner pays close attention to the internal tensions, ‘factional’ micropolitics, and leadership structures of the community she studies. She is interested not in the marginal intellectuals, ‘the Salman Rushdies and Homi Bhabhas’ (Werbner 2002a, p. 6), but in the leaders of a seemingly encapsulated but in fact transnational religious community. These passionate leaders, whose carefully planned and dramatically delivered speeches are analysed in great detail throughout the book, play an important role ‘in articulating the political frustrations of ordinary Muslims’ (Werbner 2002a, p. 22). They become rivals in elections and form alliances within local struggles for power and honour. The book’s main argument is that diasporas are spaces of the *political* imagination and mobilization, constituted not merely by the novels, poems or films that postcolonial theorists have analysed, but also ‘by a compelling sense of *moral co-responsibility* and *embodied performance*, extended through and across national boundaries’ (Werbner 2002a, p. 11, italics in original). Imagined diasporas are thus always already in the plural, and they result from multiple, contested social spaces. Apart from the Islamic *umma*, a sacred space that is dominated by male elders, Werbner analyses a Pakistani-nationalist space and a South Asian space of consumption and ‘fun’ in which women and young people take central roles, challenging dominant structures of male authority. The diasporic public sphere that arises from their manifold celebrations, processions, elections, and protests functions as a kind of counterpublics (Frazer 1992) which remains largely invisible and marginal within wider British society.

This changed in the late 1980s when British Muslims, Mancunian Pakistanis prominently among them, became highly visible in spearheading a global social movement with their response to the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, demanding the author Salman Rushdie’s death even before the Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini’s *fatwa* against Rushdie. The British Muslim response to *The Satanic Verses* was not merely ‘moral’, Werbner argues, but affective — ‘a gut feeling of shock’ (Werbner 2002a, p. 115), a sense of deep offence against an already marginalized community. Among Werbner’s interlocutors, Rushdie’s novel was commonly seen as a Western conspiracy, written with the intention ‘to defame and mock Islam and its sacred symbols’ (Werbner 2002a, p. 236). The moral panic and rage that it inspired among them momentarily united a community otherwise divided by factional politics.

In an earlier article, Werbner (1996) interpreted the response to the publication of *The Satanic Verses* as a clash not between cultures or even civilizations, but between different aesthetic grammars, namely an Islamic aesthetic of the Sublime and a secular-modernist narrative style. In *Imagined Diasporas*, she devotes an entire chapter to the interpretation of the novel with the intent to shift the terms of the debate from political to ethical and aesthetic issues. While she herself calls her approach dialogical, her writing at this point becomes truly multi-perspectival in its attempt to analyse not just her interlocutors’ perspective, but also Rushdie’s, as distinct from the liberal public’s interests and response. Calling for a multiculturalist politics of recognition rather than a blind enforcement of freedom of speech, Werbner urges her readers to see that ‘aesthetic works do move people deeply’ (Werbner 1996, p. 112) and that Rushdie’s novel ‘compels Westerners to engage seriously with Islam’ (Werbner 1996, p. 152).

As is well known, the wider public’s response to Muslim anger was quite hostile, and at times xenophobic. Towards the end of her book, Werbner cites high rates of racially motivated crimes perpetrated against Muslims in Britain during the 1990s and the devastating effects of anti-Muslim racism in Britain and Western Europe that gave rise to further cycles of moral panic and violence. Whereas in their rhetorical performances diasporic actors self-essentialize to invoke an imagined community, in the wider society’s politics of race and Islamophobia, their communal identities are reified, with tragic effects. In conclusion, Werbner (2002a, p. 251) urges us to think of diasporas not as dispersed ethnic, religious, or national communities, but as spheres of public debate, ‘in large measure focused around... global news dramas’.

3. Werbner's Diasporas: Imagined, Chaordic, and Complex

While the ethnographic fieldwork published in *Imagined Diasporas* and its preceding articles laid the groundwork for her diaspora approach, Pnina Werbner continued to develop the notion further in relation to aesthetics, as well as the study of (other) religious minorities and social groups. For example, in 2007, alongside Mark Johnson as a Co-Investigator, Werbner received a large grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) to study the "Sociality, Caring, and the Religious Imagination in the Filipina Diaspora", a project in which I became her research assistant. The project's main aim was to go beyond the dominant trope in the literature of the Filipina 'maid to order', stressing the agentive aspects of migration to 'holy' places such as Jerusalem, Mecca or Medina (Johnson et al. 2010). The project proposal started from Werbner's view of diasporic belonging as created and maintained through aesthetic, sensual and embodied norms and codes, such as food, styles, taste and clothing.

As a project team, we read and discussed Thomas Tweed's *Our Lady of the Exile* (Tweed 1997), in which Cubans' attempts to re-centre themselves at a Catholic shrine in Miami are interpreted as a form of 'diasporic religion,' an engagement in devotional practices across multiple social spaces and an inscription of the sacred into the local language. In similar ways, Christian Filipinos, who were 'foreign domestic workers' in Israel, re-narrated their journeys as pilgrimages with a mission, claiming to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and hoping to convert their (Jewish) employers (Liebelt 2010, 2011). Tweed's finding that religious sociality functioned to create a home away from home—'intensify joy and confront suffering' (Tweed 2006, p. 54)—resonated with our own findings among Filipino domestic workers, who often socialized in churches, prayer or bible reading groups, or set out on pilgrimage tours during their days off work. As a project team, we wrote about the sacred journeys and diasporic lives of Filipinos in the Middle East (Johnson et al. 2010), focusing on diasporic Filipinos' moral imaginings, the role of religious practices and sociality in their everyday lives, and their sacralization of spaces in their destination countries, which they experienced as spiritually loaded for them.

In our various research sites in Israel, the Philippines, the UK, and Saudi Arabia, we encountered Christian Filipino converts to Islam sending money home for the building of a mosque in their hometown (Johnson et al. 2010, p. 220); Catholic block rosary groups in Israel doing the same to build a church, while also sacralizing a marginalized Tel Aviv neighbourhood with their weekly processions (Liebelt 2013); and Filipino diaspora activists claiming that 'We are the Jews of today' (Liebelt 2008). In Filipino domestic workers' projects of migration, religion on the one hand operated as a paradoxical symbolic resource that reinforced dominant structures by a stress on endurance and self-sacrifice, and on the other hand facilitated networks and mobilization against exploitation (Johnson et al. 2010, p. 221). Similar to what Pnina Werbner had analysed in her earlier research among Manchester Muslims, in this research the boundaries between religious and political activism were difficult to draw because religious discourses often functioned as an aspect of migrants' political positionings and demands for inclusion. For example, this occurred when Filipino migrants or their children protested against their deportation and demanded legal citizenship by referring to their knowledge of Judaism and the 'Holy Land,' as well as their moral and religious investments (see also Willen 2019).

Towards the end of this project, Werbner (2010) wrote a critical review of the notion of diaspora in which she summarized her conceptual approach by identifying the following four 'widely accepted and often repeatedly rediscovered' generalizations: (i) diasporas' social heterogeneity, not just 'hybridity', as was assumed in earlier writings on late modern diasporas; (ii) their dynamic and historical formation, characterized by both diasporic agents' political mobilization and rather predictable structural long-term patterns—a tension she had called 'chaordic' in an earlier article (Werbner 2002b); (iii) their dual orientation towards the struggle for citizenship and rights in the places where they lived, often in alliance with other immigrant groups, and, on the other hand, a transnational orientation and loyalty; and finally, Werbner analyses (iv) the deep ideological and material implica-

tions in the nationalist projects of their homelands, with global media and communication technologies playing a major role in the process. She proposed that pop cultural mass production had made diasporas so complex that the limits of the diaspora concept came clearly into view. Werbner's way out was to offer the concept of 'complex' or 'segmented diasporas' to reflect the fact 'that similar cultural preoccupations, tastes, cuisines, music, sport, poetry, fashion and popular cinema are widely enjoyed across vast geographical regions encompassing several post-colonial nation-states in a globalizing world' (Werbner 2010, p. 76). With diasporas being 'both ethnic-parochial *and* cosmopolitan', it was the researcher's task 'to disclose how the tension between these two tendencies is played out in actual situations' (Werbner 2010, p. 75, emphasis added).

Following up on this, in her later work on diasporas that emerged from both the Filipino diaspora project and a parallel project on 'New African Migrants in the Gateway City',³ a major focus was placed on the aesthetics of diaspora. In a special issue with Mattia Fumanti (Werbner and Fumanti 2013), diaspora figures as an 'alien place of non-ownership', a 'site of exile', which gives rise to its own aesthetics, emerging from 'social worlds of literary art or celebration' (Werbner and Fumanti 2013, p. 149). The aim was a theory of diaspora 'which focuses on participatory celebration and sensuous pleasure' (Werbner and Fumanti 2013, p. 157). Drawing on the insights of postcolonial theory, especially Paul Gilroy's insight (Gilroy 1993) that 'the hybrid works of diasporic artists and intellectuals make claims to ownership' (Werbner and Fumanti 2013, p. 155), diasporic aesthetic performances are interpreted as claims to full belonging and citizenship by marginalized groups. Both African and Filipino diasporans, Werbner and Fumanti showed, created spaces of 'multiple sensorial experiences,' even 'multisensorial ambiance' (Werbner and Fumanti 2013, p. 156), with religion figuring strongly in this process.

4. Conclusions

Throughout her academic career, Pnina Werbner produced a multitude of critical and dialogical texts that continue to be relevant for thinking about the relation between diaspora and religion. Focusing on religious minorities' claims and struggles for inclusion, she often narrated these as social or, in the case of the Rushdie affair, political 'dramas' centring around questions of what it means to be othered, as well as on the affective contestations resulting from it, what is sacrosanct, so to speak. Rather than dwell on the sufferings of diasporans and religious minorities, Werbner emphasised their immense and often joyful investments in sociality, their embodied ritual and aesthetic performances, and their transnational political mobilization for rights, citizenship, and belonging. In her reading, 'The place which is diaspora'—to quote the title of one of her widely read articles (Werbner 2002a)—is entangled with both religion and politics, a (counter-) public sphere that is existential and utterly compelling for its members due to being the place where basic aesthetic and moral sensibilities are created as the outcome of intersectional debates, as well as both factional and transversal politics.

Such an approach was of course far removed from scholars who, like Robin Cohen (1997) mentioned at the beginning of the article, emphasised ethnic group consciousness, ancestral homes, and return movements as characteristic elements of a diaspora. Drawing on postcolonial theory, Werbner's approach was part of a critical re-appropriation of the term in the late 1980s and early 1990s that used the notion to describe interstitial spaces or hybrid cultural formations beyond the boundaries of the nation state. For some, this broadened the term too much. Thus, in a review of the literature on religion and diaspora, Steven Vertovec (2004) criticized the 'talk... about the "Muslim diaspora", "Catholic diaspora"', etc., given that these were instead 'world traditions that span many ethnic groups and nationalities' (Vertovec 2004, p. 281). Admitting that speaking of the Muslim ummah as a late modern diaspora seemed far stretched, Werbner (2015) nevertheless contended that the issue was a definitional one. According to her, 'the global Muslim dispersion can [indeed] be described as a diaspora', not per se and always, but in particular situations, for example, when British Pakistani Muslims mobilised for Palestine (Werbner 2015, p. 49).

Against the background of ongoing geopolitical conflicts and the increasing relevance of social media, Pnina Werbner's legacy is timely for thinking about diasporic public spheres as sites of mediated dramas. In recent decades, Europe has seen a number of highly mediated 'blasphemy' cases since the Rushdie affair, such as the global protests sparked by the publication of the so-called 'Muhammad cartoons', published by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005 and the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2016. Similar to what Werbner has analysed for the late 1980s and 1990s, in the European public sphere these global news dramas and the resulting bloodshed—e.g., the attack on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* following the publication of the cartoons killed twelve—led to a further essentialization and exclusion of Muslim immigrants in Western Europe, sparking affirmations of the freedom of press and free speech, rather than profound engagements with the reasons behind the outrage.

The fact that the notion of diaspora continues to be invoked by many migrants and religious minorities to describe their own feelings of exile, (non-)belonging, aspirations and desires continues to call for analysis. In their Werbnerian reading, diasporas are always already in the plural and far from perpetuating an essentializing ethnic lens or focusing on questions of return to a far-away homeland. Thus they may still serve to grasp the contradictions and ambiguities of building one's life in an ethical way and in an increasingly global, but at the same time often parochial, vernacular, and precarious world.

5. Epilogue

In May 2023, I was reminded of the setting of *Imagined Diasporas* when images circulated in the mass media in Germany of cheering crowds in the industrial metropolises of the German Ruhr Area waving Turkish national flags, chanting slogans, creating motorcades, and celebrating the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan after his re-election in the Turkish presidential election. Against the celebrants' declaration of their 'love' for Erdoğan and their hopes for a strong Turkey in the years to come, news reporters seemed at a loss for words, and many news headlines stated the obvious in a rather generalizing tone, namely that 'Turks celebrate Erdogan' (e.g., [WDR \(2023\)](#)).⁴ In the run-up to the election, Erdoğan had been widely portrayed as an autocrat and an enemy of democracy and accordingly an often-repeated paradox, posed in the form of a question by a German state television Channel 2 reporter on the day of the election, was: 'Why would one vote for an autocrat while being able to enjoy the advantages of living in a democracy?' ([Santina 2023](#)). What would a Werbnerian, systematic re-telling of these events within a contested diasporic sphere and from an anthropological perspective look like?

Following Werbner, one might ask whether the celebrating crowds had created a counter-public in which their political passion allowed them to reach out *not* to the majority population, but to a wider Muslim, Turkish, perhaps even—following the rhetoric of the Turkish government—'anti-imperialist' audience. To explain the processual unfolding of the celebrations over many years, one would investigate local 'communities' divisions and alliances, as well as their members' hosting of Turkish politicians in Germany, including of Erdoğan himself, as well as their speeches. More specifically, one would engage in a careful analysis of Erdoğan's and other Turkish government officials' rhetoric of themselves as marginalized subjects on the frontline of a fight against global Islamophobia, European arrogance, and Western imperialism. Such an analysis would certainly also profit from investigating earlier news dramas in Germany, such as the so-called 'Böhmermann affair' in 2014, following the comedian Jan Böhmermann's reading of a 'smear poem' against the Turkish president on state television in what was a collection of racist slurs. Similar to what Werbner described in relation to the Rushdie affair, this incident prompted much debate about the legal aspects, such as the freedom of speech and artistic freedom, but little critical engagement with the actual content and the racist archive on which it drew ([Şenol 2022](#)). One would also have to investigate the many contradictions and multiplicities of an *imagined* 'Turkish' diaspora in Germany and beyond, as well as its alternative publics ([Mandel 2008](#)).⁵

Such an alternative public emerges from Esra Özyürek's recent study (Özyürek 2023) on the entry of Muslim-background Germans (both Arab and Turkish) into German Holocaust memory politics. Özyürek shows how Muslim-background Germans form transversal alliances against racism and antisemitism in Germany, organizing prevention programs, visiting memorial sites, and more generally becoming *Subcontractors of [German] Guilt*. Building on Özyürek's analysis, which regards German post-war memory politics as a 'civil religion,' one is prompted to ask: What happens when a religious minority engages with the host society's 'religion,' from which it is discursively excluded? Can and should such an engagement be read as a desire to move away from diaspora, or, as Özyürek does, to be 'properly accepted members of Germany society' (Özyürek 2023, p. 22)? Finally, this also raises the question of when we stop talking about a diaspora. Thus, in contrast to Mandel, Özyürek does not use the term 'diaspora'. Like 'identity,' in the anthropological study of migration 'diaspora' lost much of its popularity as a conceptual tool, with questions of citizenship and belonging coming to the fore, even in Pnina Werbner's later work.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to analyse the impact of the Hamas-led attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the resulting Israel-Hamas war on Muslim-background immigrants in Western Europe, their mobilization during large-scale demonstrations that have taken place in support of Palestinians and the mainstream political reactions to their public performances have brought to the fore questions of diasporic belonging and moral co-responsibility amidst ongoing exclusion once more. Thus, in Germany, especially in Berlin, police have cracked down on these demonstrations on the grounds of alleged anti-Semitic incitement, alongside political demands that Muslims, in the words of the Vice-Chancellor, Robert Habeck, should 'clearly distance themselves from antisemitism so as not to undermine their own right to tolerance' (quoted from Gessen (2024)). Other politicians demanded a commitment to Israel as part of the naturalization process or the facilitation of deportation proceedings.

What do such statements and the policies they give rise to mean for Muslim immigrants' sense of belonging? It is amidst such global political events and indeed, dramas that the insights generated by Werbner's research and the wider debate on diaspora and religion remain timely tools of analysis today.

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Notes

- ¹ Titled 'In the Footsteps of Jesus and the Prophet: Sociality, Caring, and the Religious Imagination in the Filipina Diaspora', the project was directed by Pnina Werbner (Principal Investigator) and Mark Johnson (Co-Investigator) and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) UK, within the framework of the Diaspora, Migration and Identities Research Programme (grant AH/E508790/1/APPID: 123592).
- ² According to her husband Richard Werbner, Manchester's cutting-edge studies of networks came to attract her to the point that, under Clyde Mitchell's influence, she accomplished a remarkably detailed fieldwork on interpersonal relations that served the making of integral matrices for mathematical analysis (personal communication).
- ³ Research grant awarded by the ESRC under grant no. RES-000-23-1243; running time: 2006-8.
- ⁴ Indeed, a vast majority of over 65 percent out of the 1.5 million Turkish citizens in Germany eligible to vote (out of app. 2.8 million persons of Turkish migration background living in Germany) supported Erdogan in the 2023 presidential election, increasing slightly from 64.8 percent in the previous election in 2018 (Lisovenko 2023).

- ⁵ Turkish is in quotation marks due to its shifting significance as a socio-cultural category (in Germany) and as marked by the relation to the original nation state or “homeland”.

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