

Whose Alternative? Analyzing potential factors behind the rise of Germany's far right

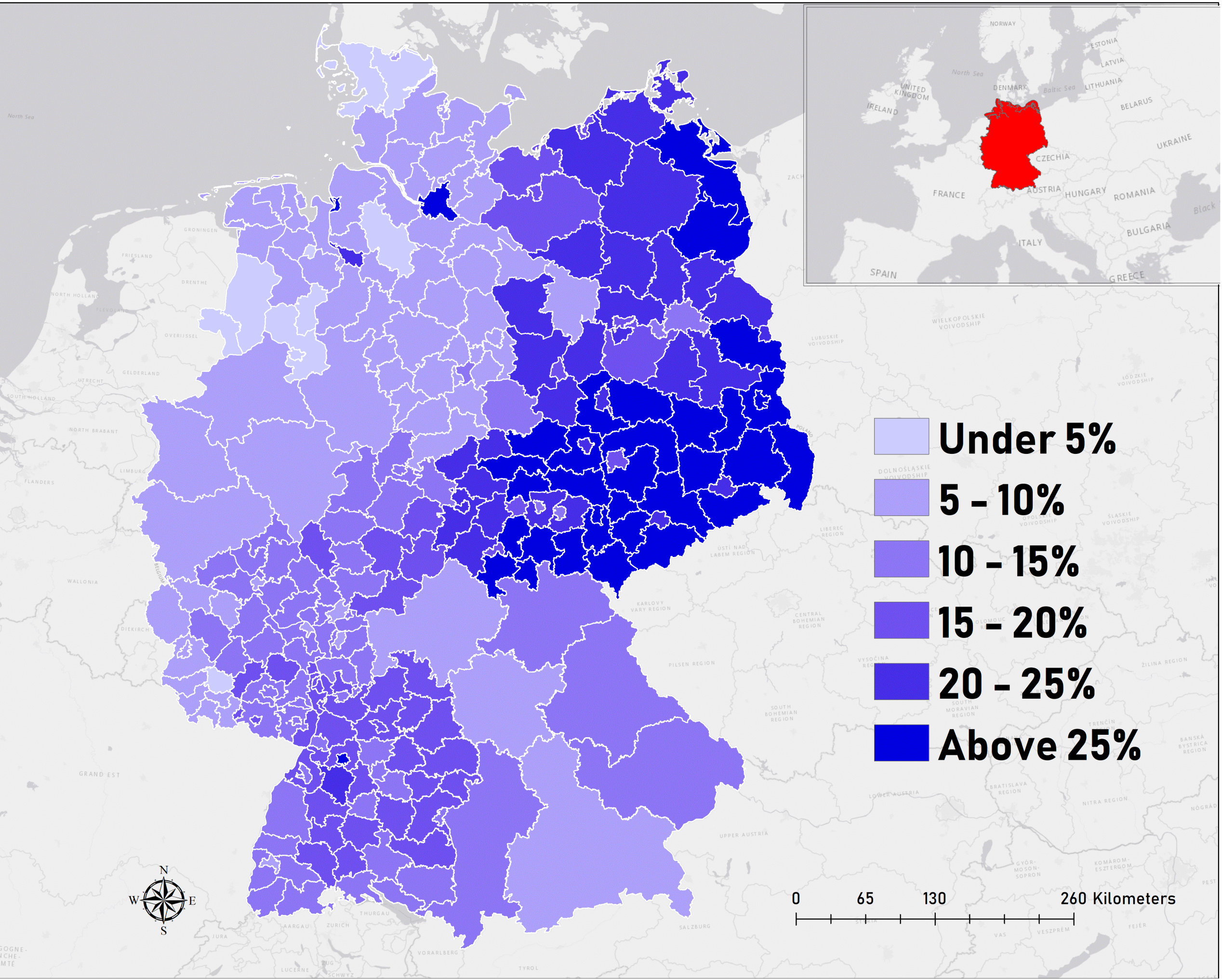
Introduction

In the past decade, many countries of the world have fallen victim to political polarization and far-right political extremism. Germany, one of the strongest democracies in the Western world, is a leading example of this trend, and has witnessed a dramatic rise in support for the anti-immigrant, nationalist party Alternative for Germany (AfD, *Alternative für Deutschland*). Initially envisioned as a Euro-sceptic movement, the AfD found a broader identity as a nationalist party following Angela Merkel's controversial decision in 2015 to allow over one million Syrian refugees to enter the country. The AfD has since undergone a metamorphosis from a fringe party to one that could severely challenge the current ruling coalition in the next parliamentary election in 2021. For the past several years, political scientists have studied the AfD's meteoric rise, including the factors which have driven voters away from the traditional parties in Germany. One interesting observation is that the presence of foreigners in a community is actually a negative indicator of AfD voting; that is to say, communities with a higher proportion of foreigners tend to provide less support for the AfD. Experts have pointed to a variety of political, economic, cultural, and psychological factors which could be behind this trend. This study considers 17 of these variables (IVs) and assesses their correlation with the decision to vote AfD in the most recent state election.

Methodology

The Federal Republic of Germany is composed of 16 states, each of which holds regular state elections and collects data on its citizens. Election and demographic data were collected from each state's individual Statistical Office, as well as from the Federal Statistical Office. Data was collected primarily on the administrative district (*Landkreis*) level, however, due to the incongruity between the electoral and administrative districts of some states, the states of Bavaria and North-Rhein Westphalia are instead broken down into larger administrative regions (*Regierungsbezirke*). As a result, most statistics are standardized per population, as applicable. To identify the strength and direction each factor's correlation with the decision to vote AfD, I employed an Exploratory Regression (see Results). In addition, I conducted a Geographic Weighted Regression for each variable to determine geographic variability in its correlation with AfD voting.

Proportion of AfD Vote in the most recent statewide election (2016–2019)



Created by: William O'Neil, GIS 101 (Fall 2019)
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Data Sources: Federal Agency for Cartography and Geodesy; Statistical Offices of Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Berlin, Brandenburg, Bremen, Hamburg, Hesse, Lower Saxony, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, North-Rhein Westphalia, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saarland, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Schleswig-Holstein, and Thuringia; Federal Office of Statistics; Tufts M Drive; Wikipedia (AfD logo)

Coordinate System: ETRS_1989_UTM_Zone_32N



Potential Explanatory Variables

Results & Conclusion

The results of the Exploratory Regression are displayed on the right. “% Significant” indicates the percentage of tests in which the given variable was statistically significant. “% Negative” and “% Positive” show the directionality of the observed correlation; in cases where these percentages are similar, there is no cohesive country-wide trend.

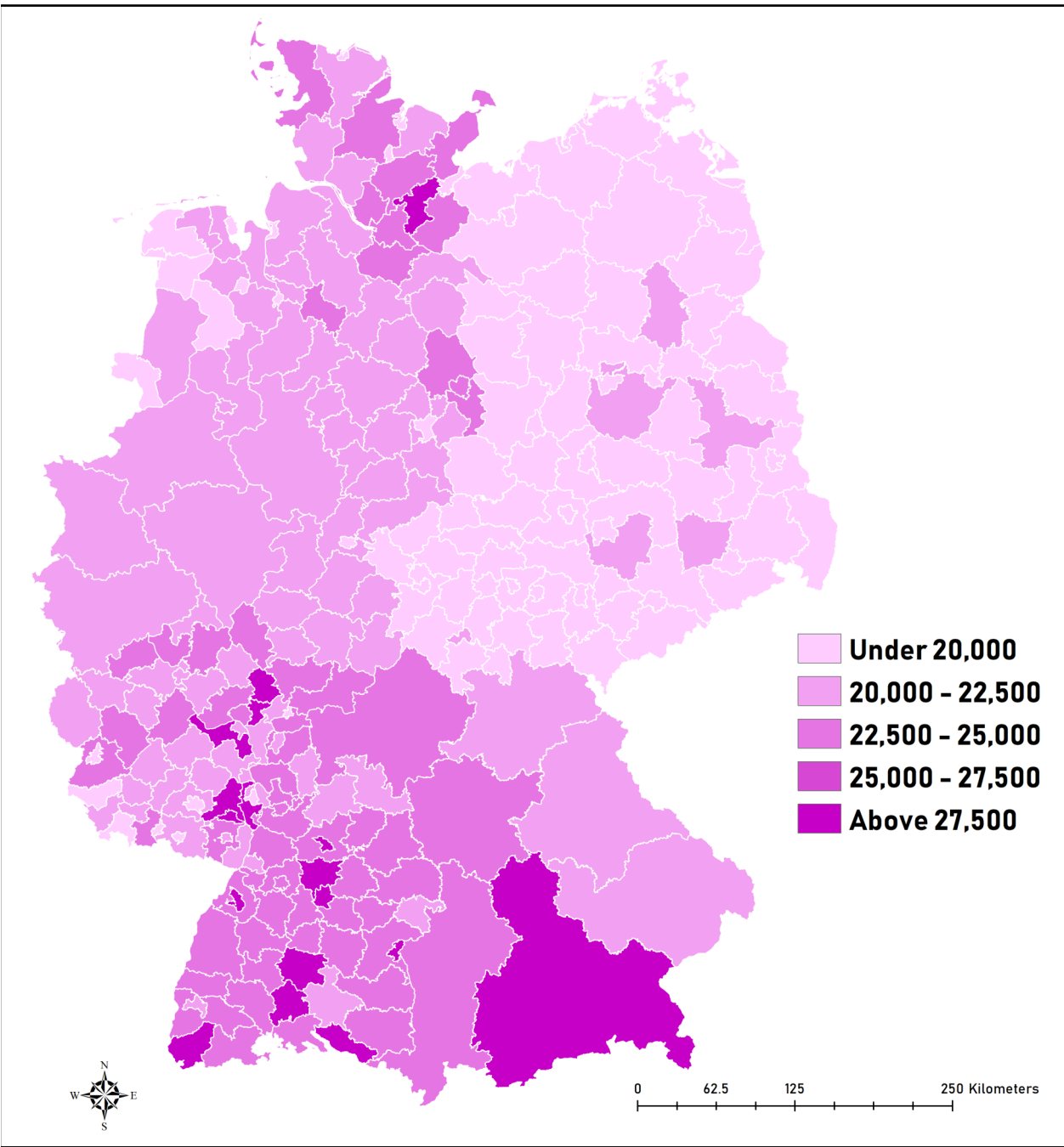
Only three variables out of the 17 considered were statistically significant in more than 95% of the tests. These included: proportion of centrist party votes (inversely related), unemployment rate and foreigners with residency in Germany under two years (both positively correlated with AfD voting). Interestingly, while the proportion of asylum seekers in a district was negatively correlated with AfD voting (indicating that communities with higher proportions of asylum seekers show less support for the AfD), the proportion of foreigners, non-EU foreigners, and Syrian foreigners in a district showed neither a strong positive nor negative correlation with AfD voting.

Further analysis of these variables using a Geographically Weighted Regression demonstrated that the directionality of the association can be regional: for example, the proportion of non-EU foreigners in a district is negatively correlated with AfD electoral support in Eastern Germany, but positively correlated in Northwest Germany. However, neither of these variables were statistically significant enough from the regression to draw any conclusions from the analysis. In addition, neither economic nor cultural factors dominated in significance, indicating that voters' decisions are likely not based on just one (category of) factor, but rather a contextually-specific combination of perceptions of life and society around them.

Variable	% Significant	% Negative	% Positive
Proportion of Traditional Centrist Party Votes (% 2016–2019)	100.00	100.00	0.00
Unemployment Rate (Overall, 2016)	99.79	0.00	100.00
Foreigners, Residency <2 yrs. (% of all foreigners, 2018)	96.86	0.00	100.00
Asylum Seekers (% total population, 2018)	86.60	99.23	0.77
Foreigners in an Int. Course (% of all foreigners, 2017)	84.44	1.24	98.76
Foreigners, Residency >10 yrs. (% of all foreigners, 2018)	73.11	85.37	14.63
Average Disposable Income (Annual, in Euros, 2016)	55.49	91.34	8.66
Islamic Terrorism (Recorded acts, 1970–2017)	55.30	9.15	90.85
Unemployment Rate (Foreigners, 2018)	45.90	55.28	44.72
Foreigners (% of total population, 2018)	44.93	58.48	41.52
Non-EU Foreigners (% of total population, 2018)	39.21	55.95	44.05
Syrian Foreigners (% of total population, 2018)	34.57	62.60	37.40
Population 30–35 with a University Degree (% of total population, 2017)	30.04	80.47	19.53

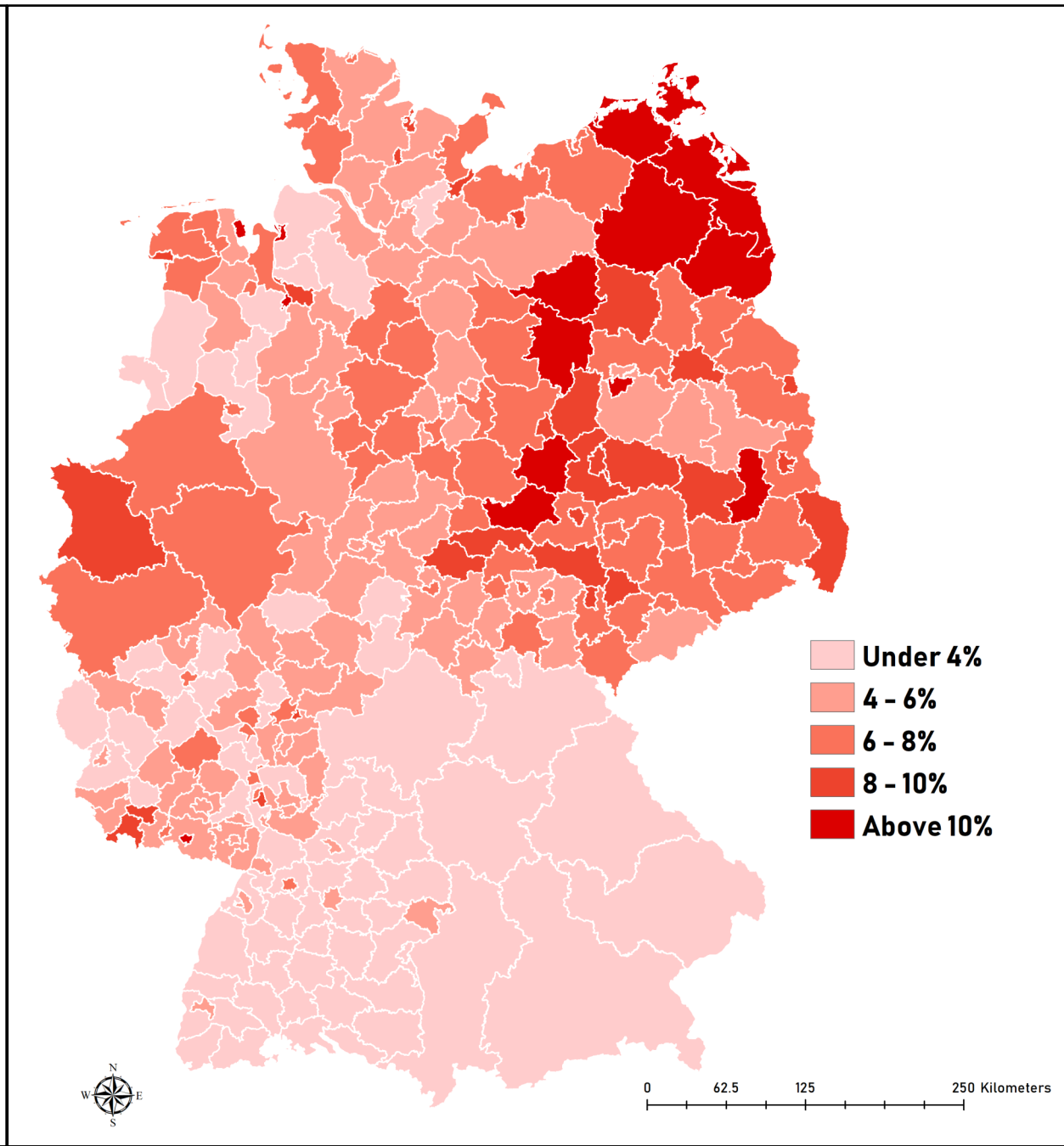
Average Disposable Income

Annual, in Euros, 2016



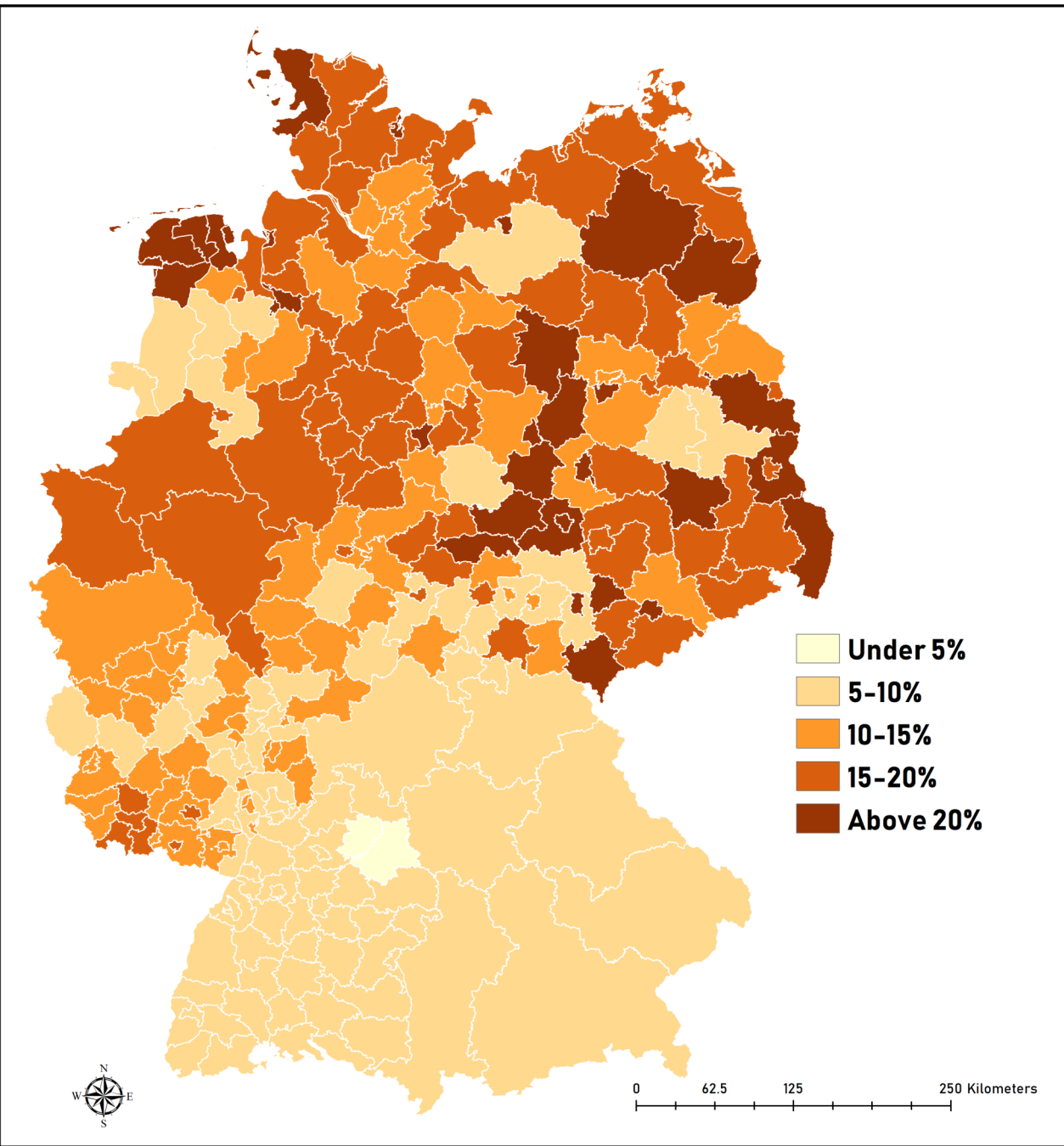
Unemployment Rate

Overall, 2016



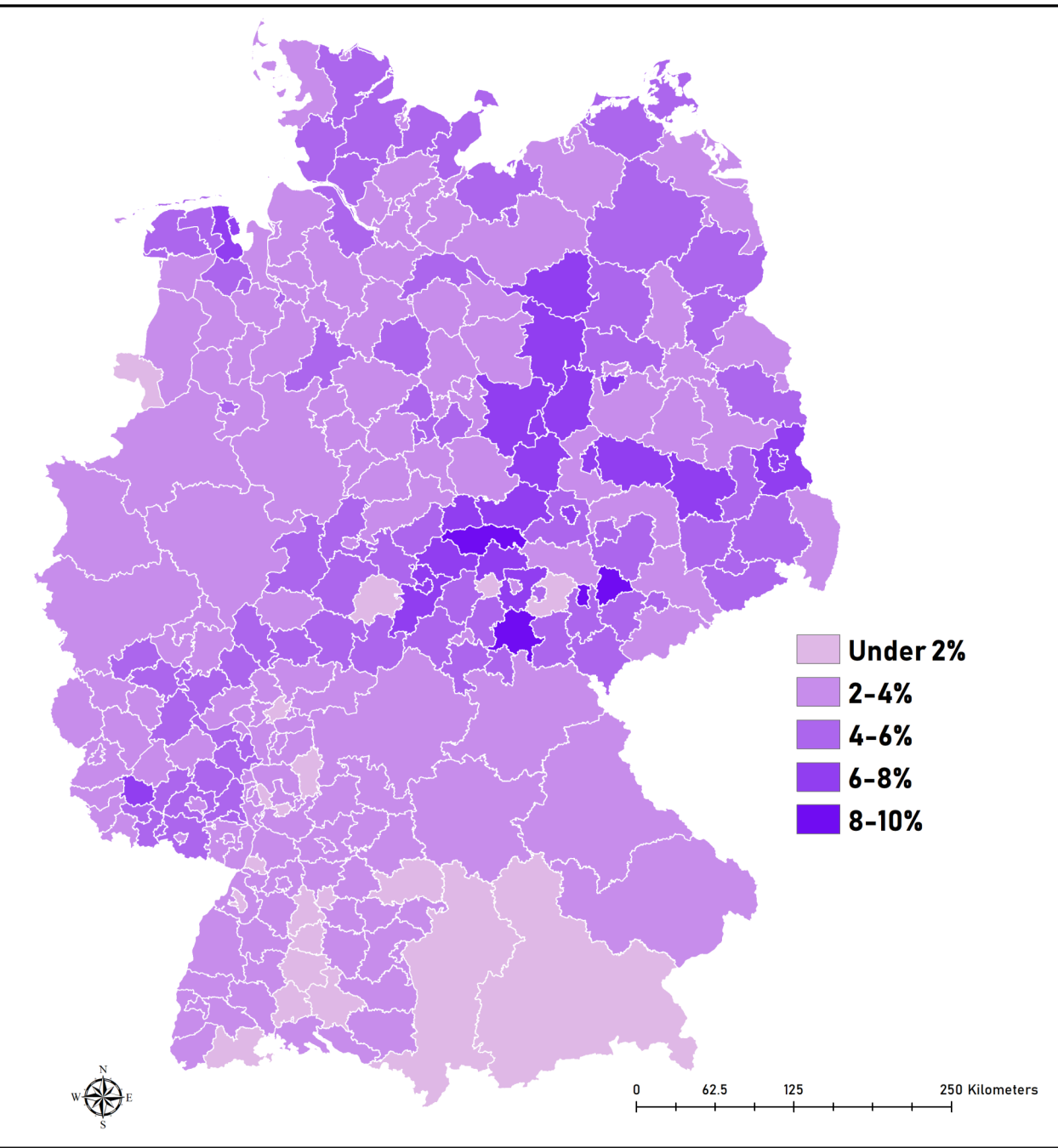
Unemployment Rate

Foreigners, 2018



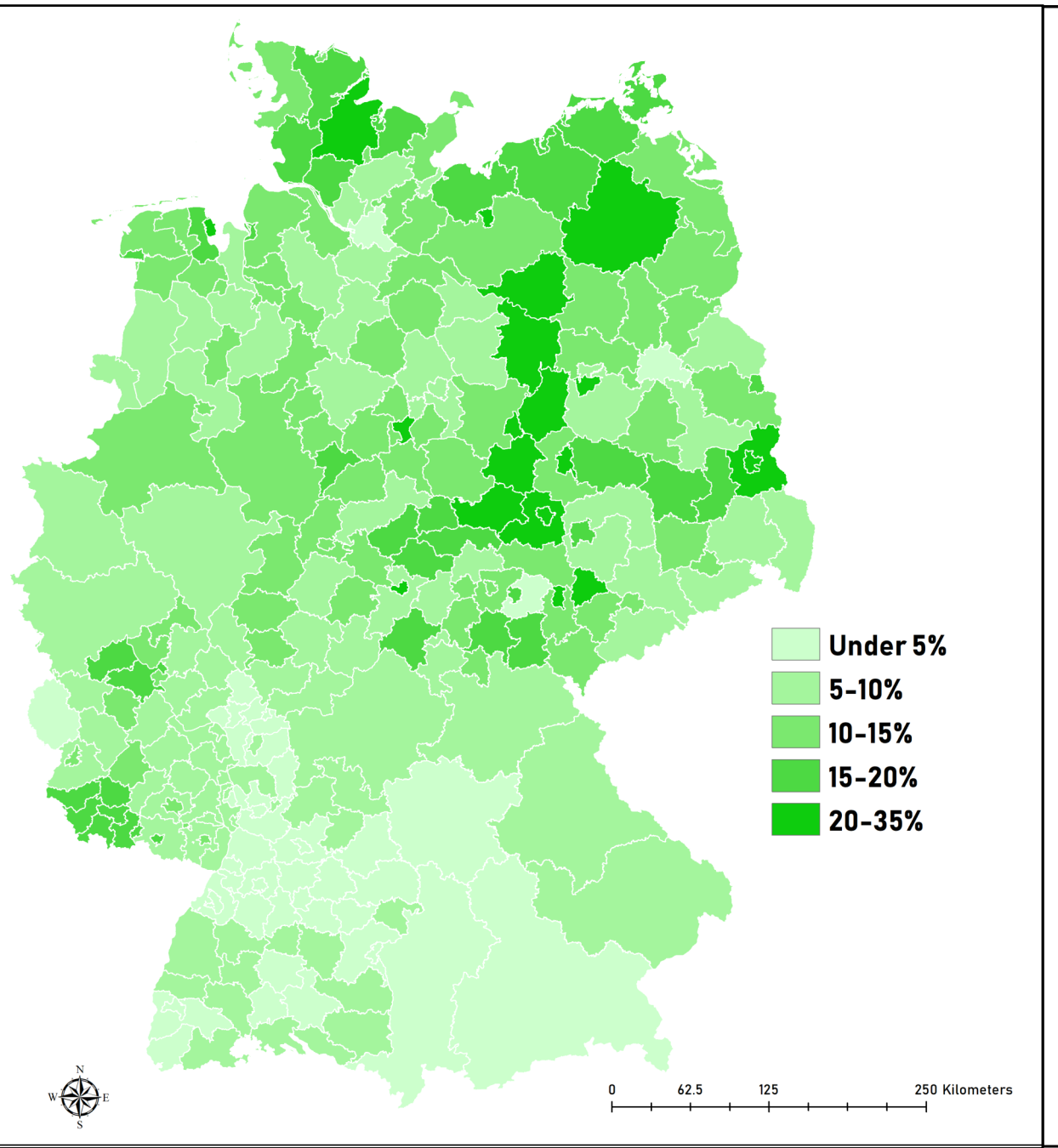
Foreigners in Integration Courses

% of all foreigners, 2017



Syrian Foreigners

% of all foreigners, 2018



Foreigners, Residency < 2 Years

% of all foreigners, 2018

