



DE DETAILED ANALYSIS

2026-02-20 heute journal vom 20. Februar 2026

Broadcast: heute-journal | 2026-02-20 | Analysed on: 2026-03-12 08:18

Version 2.2-detail | Konverter 3.3 (2026-05-14) | Masstab: §26 MStV

OVERALL SCORE

4.4/10

Considerable imbalance

0 = balanced, 10 = strongly one-sided/manipulative

POLITICAL SPECTRUM

Classification according to Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) 2024

The Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES 2024) is an academic survey of 609 political scientists in 31 countries. Each party is rated on a scale from 0 (far left) to 10 (far right).

Party	Linke	Greens	SPD	BSW	CDU/CSU	FDP	Freie W.	AfD
CHES	1.23	2.28	3.41	3.78	6.23	6.54	6.77	9.10
Spectrum	Left	Left	Left	Left	Right	Right	Right	Right

The overall tendency is displayed on a 0–10 scale (0 = strongly left-favouring, 5 = balanced, 10 = strongly right-favouring). The calculation is based on the difference in the average favouring of left vs. right parties (grouping according to CHES 2024).

TENDENCY (L – R)

4.6 / 10

Balanced

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

← Left

Right →

Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2024 — chesdata.eu | [Jolly et al., Electoral Studies, 2022](#) | Thresholds: [Pew Research Center](#)

This section serves for political classification and does not feed into the overall score.

BROADCAST INFO AND THEMATIC FRAMEWORK

Broadcast data

- Title: ZDF heute-journal
- Date: 20.02.2026
- Presenter/s: Heinz Wolf and Dunja Hayali (co-presentation)



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- Reporters / Interview partners: Andrea Maurer (CDU party conference, insert), Wulf Schmiese (Berlin studio, live from the party conference), Claudia Bates (USA/Trump tariffs, insert), David Sauer (Washington correspondent, live), Ulf Röller (EU correspondent Brussels, live)

Actors	Function	Party/Affiliation	Political spectrum
Heinz Wolf	ZDF presenter	ZDF (public broadcaster)	Neutral (formal)
Dunja Hayali	ZDF presenter	ZDF (public broadcaster)	Left-liberal (known)
Andrea Maurer	ZDF correspondent	ZDF	Neutral (formal)
Wulf Schmiese	ZDF Berlin correspondent	ZDF	Neutral (formal)
Claudia Bates	ZDF USA correspondent	ZDF	Neutral (formal)
David Sauer	ZDF Washington correspondent	ZDF	Neutral (formal)
Ulf Röller	ZDF EU correspondent	ZDF	Neutral (formal)
Friedrich Merz	Federal Chancellor, CDU party leader	CDU	Centre-right
Angela Merkel	Former Chancellor	CDU (former)	Centre
Jens Spahn	CDU politician	CDU	Centre-right
Carsten Linnemann	CDU Secretary General	CDU	Centre-right
Johannes Winkel	Head of Junge Union	CDU	Centre-right
Donald Trump	US President	Republican Party	Right-populist
J.D. Vance	US Vice President	Republican Party	Right-populist
Democratic spokesperson (soundbite)	Unknown Democratic voice	Democrats	Centre-left

Main topics of this edition

The broadcast covers three main topics: (1) The CDU federal party conference in Stuttgart with the re-election of Friedrich Merz as party leader with 91.2%, as well as expectations regarding his reform agenda as Federal Chancellor. (2) The US Supreme Court's decision against Trump's tariff policy and Trump's immediate reaction with new tariff announcements. (3) Brief reports on Iran/nuclear agreement, European air defence initiative, journalist arrest in Turkey, and Olympic results (Skicross gold Daniela Mayer, biathlon Franziska Preuß).



CHAPTER 1 — DETAILED ANALYSIS OF THE 15 CRITERIA

Hard facts — 9 techniques that are countable and scientifically robust

1. EXPERT SELECTION

3/10

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Expert 1: Wulf Schmiese (ZDF Berlin correspondent)

Timestamp	approx. 07:00
Statement	***The speech was okay. [...] nobody is saying now, that was a magnificent speech.***
Classification	Schmiese is a ZDF journalist, not an independent expert. He assumes a contextualising function that would normally fall to a political scientist or party researcher. Conflict of interest: As a ZDF employee, he is subject to the same editorial guidelines as the broadcast itself.
Missing counter-voice	An independent party researcher (e.g. from the University of Düsseldorf or the Konrad Adenauer Foundation) could have placed the result in historical context.

Expert 2: David Sauer (ZDF Washington correspondent)

Timestamp	approx. 09:30
Statement	***with this, the government now essentially stands before the ruins of its economic and foreign policy***
Classification	Sauer is a ZDF journalist, not a constitutional lawyer or economic expert. The statement about "ruins" is a political value judgement presented as expert assessment.
Missing counter-voice	A US constitutional lawyer could have soberly contextualised the actual scope of the ruling; an economist could have assessed the economic consequences in a differentiated manner.

Expert 3: Ulf Röller (ZDF EU correspondent)

Timestamp	approx. 11:30
Statement	***The EU has always held the view that Trump's tariff policy violates international law.***
Classification	Röller conveys the EU position without questioning it. Whether Trump's tariffs actually violate international law is legally contested — this nuance is absent.
Missing counter-voice	A WTO legal expert or a trade law specialist could have presented the legal situation in a differentiated manner.



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Missing expert groups:

- Independent party researcher/political scientist (CDU topic)
- US constitutional lawyer (Trump/Supreme Court)
- International trade law expert (tariffs/WTO)

Summary: The broadcast dispenses entirely with external, independent experts and replaces them with ZDF's own correspondents, who present evaluative assessments as contextualisation — a structural weakness that considerably restricts the diversity of opinion.



2. SOURCE SELECTION

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Claims without primary source = penalty points (rumour check)

Source 1: Anonymous CDU delegate voice

Timestamp	approx. 04:30 — Statement: <i>"She applauded the entire time. That too shows we stand together."</i>
Classification	Not identified by name, no contextualisation of the person (regional association, wing, function).
Missing counter-source	A critical delegate voice or a delegate who specifies reform demands.

Source 2: Johannes Winkel (JU leader)

Timestamp	approx. 06:20 — Statement: <i>"that this reform agenda [...] now also gets rolling"</i>
Classification	Winkel, as JU leader, has a structural interest in Merz's success; his statement is predictable and not surprising. No contextualisation of his position of interest.
Missing counter-source	A CDU critic or a representative of the CDU's workers' wing (CDA).

Source 3: Democratic spokesperson (soundbite, not named)

Timestamp	approx. 10:40 — Statement: <i>"had to bear the burden of Trump's stupid trade war"</i>
Classification	The person is not identified by name; their party affiliation (Democrats) is not explicitly stated. The statement thereby appears as a general assessment rather than a party statement.
Missing counter-source	A Republican voice defending Trump's tariff policy, or an economic advocate of protectionism.

Summary: The source selection is limited to intra-party CDU voices on the CDU topic and is one-sidedly critical on the Trump topic — in both cases, counter-voices and independent sources are absent.



3. TIME DISTRIBUTION									5/10
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Estimated airtime per topic/position:

Topic/Position	approx. time	Share
CDU party conference / Merz (total)	approx. 8 min.	~36%
— of which CDU-internally positive	approx. 3 min.	~14%
— of which CDU-critical/qualifying	approx. 5 min.	~23%
Trump/tariffs/Supreme Court	approx. 7 min.	~32%
— of which Trump-critical	approx. 6 min.	~27%
— of which Trump-neutral/pro	approx. 1 min.	~5%
Iran/nuclear agreement (brief report)	approx. 1 min.	~5%
Air defence E5 (brief report)	approx. 0.5 min.	~2%
Turkey/journalist (brief report)	approx. 0.5 min.	~2%
Olympics (biathlon/skicross)	approx. 2 min.	~9%
Weather	approx. 2 min.	~9%
Other/transitions	approx. 1 min.	~5%

Summary: The time distribution is not thematically unbalanced; however, within the topic blocks the distribution between critical and affirmative perspectives is clearly asymmetric — in the CDU topic, qualifying reporting predominates; in the Trump topic, critical reporting predominates.



4. OMISSION (Selective Omission)

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Omission 1:

Context

The election result of 91.2% is not placed in historical context.

Relevant at: approx. 01:30

Effect

Without comparative figures (e.g. Merkel received 97.9% in 2012, Merz 94.6% in 2022), 91.2% appears to be a weak result, even though it is solid for a sitting Chancellor in historical comparison.

Omission 2:

Context

The substantive resolutions of the party conference (motions, programme items) are not mentioned.

Relevant at: entire CDU block (00:00–08:00)

Effect

The party conference appears as a purely personnel event without substantive content, portraying the CDU as programmatically empty.

Omission 3:

Context

The SPD's reaction to Merz's speech and the party conference is entirely absent.

Relevant at: approx. 07:30 (Schmiese contextualisation)

Effect

The coalition dynamic is presented one-sidedly from the CDU perspective; the SPD appears as a passive recipient of Merz's decisions.

Omission 4:

Context

In the Trump ruling, the question of whether and how the tariffs already levied must be reversed is absent — a central question for businesses and consumers.

Relevant at: approx. 10:50

Effect

The practical consequences of the ruling remain unclear; the broadcast focuses on the political drama rather than the economic substance.

Omission 5:

Context

The arrest of the Deutsche Welle journalist in Turkey (brief report) receives no context whatsoever regarding the general state of press freedom in Turkey or previous similar cases.

Relevant at: approx. 14:30

Effect

The event appears as an isolated incident rather than part of a systematic pattern.



Summary: The selective omissions concern primarily contextualising information that would make the picture of Merz and the CDU appear more positive, as well as the complete absence of coalition partner and opposition voices.

Missing voices

- SPD spokesperson/coalition partner: Would have illuminated the coalition dynamic from a partner perspective and contextualised Merz's statements about sparing the SPD.
- Opposition politicians (AfD/Greens/FDP): Would have provided critical contextualisation of the reform promises and the government's record.
- Independent political scientist (e.g. party researcher): Would have placed the 91.2% election result in historical context and assessed the significance of the party conference soberly.
- Business association (BDI/DIHK): Would have named concrete reform expectations from the business community and measured Merz's promises against them.
- DGB/trade union: Would have brought the employee perspective on the announced reform agenda.
- CDU critics from within their own ranks: Would have given substance to the internally expressed criticism of Merz (too little conservative edge) rather than merely mentioning it as a rumour.
- Citizens/voters (vox pop): Would have reflected the external impact of the party conference on the population.
- Constitutional lawyer (on the Trump topic): Would have contextualised the parallels between the US constitutional crisis and European rule-of-law issues.



5. NUMBERS MANIPULATION									5/10
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Complete figures include: absolute value, share (%) and trend

Finding 1:	
Timestamp	approx. 01:30
Figure: "91.2% of delegates voted in Stuttgart for his re-election"	
Missing context	No historical comparison with previous CDU party conference elections (Merz 2022: 94.6%; Merkel 2012: 97.9%; but also: Merz 2021 as opposition leader: 89.5%). No comparison with other party leader elections.
Effect	Without context, 91.2% appears to be a mediocre result. With context, it would be recognisable as a normal to good result for a sitting Chancellor.

Finding 2:	
Timestamp	approx. 05:10
Figure: "over 10 minutes" (applause)	
Missing context	The length of the applause is mentioned but not contextualised (is that long or short for a party conference appearance?).
Effect	The figure contradicts the previous statement that Merz had failed to enthuse the hall — this contradiction is not resolved.

Summary: The missing historical contextualisation of the election result is the most serious numerical omission; it makes a solid result appear weaker than it is in context.



6. GUILT BY ASSOCIATION							7/10		
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Association 1:

Timestamp

approx. 03:40

Quote

As Merz speaks, Angela Merkel is sitting in the front row. The two are not known as friends. Why is she there? Does she want to annoy him? Does she want to reconcile?*

Technique: Merz is associated with the conflict with Merkel without this conflict being substantively relevant to the party conference. The question "Does she want to annoy him?" implies that Merz is someone who can/should be annoyed.

Effect

Viewers associate Merz with intra-party conflict and personal animosities, which weakens his image as a leadership figure.

Association 2:

Timestamp

approx. 00:15

Quote

"who was internally under criticism"*

Technique: Merz is associated with internal criticism at the beginning of the broadcast, before his result is announced. The association remains in the air even when the result turns out well.

Effect

The framing "was under criticism" persists as a background foil and relativises the good election result.

Summary: The association of Merz with intra-party conflicts and the Merkel rivalry is placed prominently and not resolved through substantive content — a classic guilt-by-association technique that burdens the Chancellor's image.



7. TIMING

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Finding 1:

Position: approx. 00:15 (start of broadcast)

Content: "who was internally under criticism. Too much foreign Chancellor instead of domestic policy and conservative-programmatic edge."

Timing effect

The criticism of Merz is placed as the first substantive element of the broadcast — even before the result. This sets the interpretive frame for all subsequent information (primacy effect). Viewers process all subsequent information through this negative opening frame.

Finding 2:

Position: approx. 05:10 (middle of CDU block)

Content: "He can't really enthuse the hall."

Timing effect

The negative assessment of the speech is placed before the mention of the 10-minute applause. Had the order been reversed (first applause, then qualification), the overall effect would have been considerably more positive.

Finding 3:

Position: approx. 07:50 (end of CDU block)

Content: "At the next party conference, if no reforms come, then things will certainly not go so smoothly or joyfully for Friedrich Merz" (Schmiese)

Timing effect

The CDU block ends with an implicit threat/warning to Merz — a negative conclusion that shapes the overall impression of the block (recency effect).

Summary: The CDU block is structured through deliberate timing so that it begins with criticism, qualifies in the middle, and ends with a warning — a consistent negative framing through positioning.



8. SELECTIVE OUTRAGE

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Outrage = bias. Selective outrage reinforces the finding. Score = degree of outrage (0–5) + selectivity (0–5)

Finding 1:

Timestamp approx. 09:30

Reaction: David Sauer describes Trump's reaction to the ruling as evidence of a looming "serious, possibly constitutional crisis".

Comparable without outrage: The question of whether the Federal Government is itself pushing constitutional limits (e.g. with special funds, emergency regulations) is not addressed in this broadcast.

Asymmetry: Constitutional boundary questions are assessed as a symptom of crisis in Trump's case, but are not treated with comparable intensity in the case of German governments.

Finding 2:

Timestamp approx. 14:30

Reaction: The arrest of the Deutsche Welle journalist in Turkey is treated as a brief report (approx. 30 seconds).

Comparable without outrage: Journalist arrests in other countries (e.g. Russia, China) often receive more airtime and more emotionally charged contextualisation in comparable broadcasts.

Asymmetry: Turkey as a NATO partner and EU accession candidate receives less critical attention than other authoritarian states — possibly out of diplomatic consideration.

Summary: The selective outrage manifests primarily in the asymmetric treatment of constitutional law questions (USA vs. Germany) and in the differing intensity regarding press freedom violations depending on the country of origin.



9. COMPLETENESS							7/10		
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Friedrich Merz has been Federal Chancellor since the 2025 federal election and leads a CDU/CSU-SPD coalition. Internally he was criticised for placing too much emphasis on foreign policy representation and neglecting domestic reform promises from the election campaign. The party conference in Stuttgart was the first as sitting Chancellor and was intended to demonstrate support and willingness to reform. Socially relevant is the question of whether the new Federal Government will actually implement the promised economic renewal of Germany or become stuck in coalition compromise.

Share of perspectives covered

Inverted: Original value measures coverage (higher = better). Displayed as deviation (higher = greater gaps).

[A] Perspective of the CDU base and delegates: satisfaction with Merz, expectations regarding reforms

[B] Perspective of the Junge Union / reform wing: demand for a concrete reform agenda

[C] Perspective of the coalition partner SPD: reaction to Merz's speech, coalition dynamics

[D] Perspective of the opposition (Greens, FDP, AfD, BSW): criticism of the government's work

[E] Perspective of business associations / companies: expectations regarding reform policy

[F] Perspective of trade unions / employee representatives: social dimension of the reform agenda

[G] Perspective of political scientists / independent analysts: contextualisation of the party conference

[H] Perspective of Merkel critics within the CDU: significance of Merkel's presence

[I] Perspective of voters / the population: expectations of the government

[J] Perspective of the state CDU / minister-presidents: federal dimension of reform policy

[A] COVERED

Timestamp: approx. 04:30 — Quote: "She applauded the entire time. That too shows we stand together." — Delegate voice present, but only one, without a critical counter-voice from the base.

[B] COVERED

Timestamp: approx. 06:20 — Quote: "that this reform agenda [...] now also gets rolling and moves into implementation" — Johannes Winkel (JU) is given a voice, but without critical follow-up questions.

[C] OMITTED

Timestamp: — — Not a single SPD representative is given a voice. The coalition dynamic is described only from the CDU perspective.

[D] OMITTED

Timestamp: — — No opposition voice (neither AfD, Greens, FDP nor BSW) on the government's work or the party conference.

[E] OMITTED

Timestamp: — — No business associations or company representatives consulted on reform expectations.

[F] OMITTED

Timestamp: — — Trade union perspective completely absent.

[G] INDICATED



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Timestamp: approx. 07:30 — Wulf Schmiese partially assumes a contextualising function, but is a ZDF journalist, not an independent political scientist.

[H] INDICATED

Timestamp: approx. 03:50 — Quote: "Does she want to annoy him? Does she want to reconcile?" — Merkel's presence is addressed, but speculatively and without substance.

[I] OMITTED

Timestamp: — — No citizen voices, no polling data on government satisfaction.

[J] OMITTED

Timestamp: — — No CDU minister-presidents or state representatives given a voice.



Soft facts — 6 qualitative techniques

10. FRAMING (setting the frame)

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Finding 1:

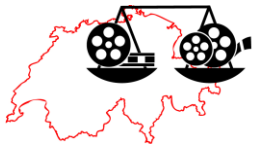
Timestamp	approx. 00:30
Quote	<i>**But lo and behold, suddenly everything went quite smoothly. And much more smoothly, above all, than many had thought.**</i>
Manipulation	The framing presupposes that a poor result would have been the actually expected and legitimate reaction to Merz. The surprise at the good result implies that Merz actually deserved to have problems.
Why problematic	Viewers are preconditioned to perceive the result as surprisingly positive (and thus as not self-evidently deserved), even though 91.2% is not an unusual result for a sitting Chancellor at his first party conference.

Finding 2:

Timestamp	approx. 05:10
Quote	<i>**He can't really enthuse the hall.**</i>
Manipulation	Negative framing through journalistic value judgement without evidence. Immediately afterwards comes the statement that the delegates applauded for over 10 minutes — a contradiction that is not resolved.
Why problematic	The negative assessment of the speech is presented as fact, even though the directly following circumstance (10 minutes of applause) suggests the opposite. Viewers perceive the journalistic value judgement as fact.

Finding 3:

Timestamp	approx. 05:40
Quote	<i>**It is probably also the longing for the old enthusiasm that Merz had ignited as a chancellor candidate in his party and which has waned in the first months of his chancellorship for some.**</i>
Manipulation	Speculative framing as an explanation for the applause. The applause is not assessed as genuine approval but reinterpreted as nostalgic longing — a disparaging interpretation without any source reference.
Why problematic	Legitimate approval is psychologised and thereby delegitimised, without any source or evidence being cited for this interpretation.



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Summary: The main topic of the CDU party conference is consistently presented in a frame that portrays Merz's success as surprising, his speech as weak, and the approval as nostalgically motivated — a consistent negative framing without sufficient factual basis.



11. WORD CHOICE AND TERMINOLOGY									4/10
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Finding 1:	
Timestamp	approx. 00:20
Quote	<i>***Too much foreign Chancellor instead of domestic policy and conservative-programmatic edge.***</i>
Manipulation	The term "edge" is a politically charged term from CDU internal discourse, used here without distancing as a journalistic description. "Conservative-programmatic" carries a slightly pejorative connotation in left-liberal media discourse.
Why problematic	A neutral alternative would be: <i>***Critics within the party missed stronger domestic policy emphases.***</i> The formulation used uncritically adopts an intra-party language of criticism.

Finding 2:	
Timestamp	approx. 03:50
Quote	<i>***Does she want to annoy him? Does she want to reconcile?***</i>
Manipulation	Speculative, tabloid-style language for a political event. The question "Does she want to annoy him?" is an insinuation without foundation.
Why problematic	A neutral alternative would be: <i>***Merkel's presence was interpreted in different ways.***</i> The chosen formulation personalises and trivialises political events.

Finding 3:	
Timestamp	approx. 09:50 (Trump block)
Quote	<i>***ruins of its economic and foreign policy*** (David Sauer)</i>
Manipulation	Highly evaluative language from a ZDF correspondent, who thereby presents a political assessment as fact.
Why problematic	A neutral alternative would be: <i>***The government faces considerable challenges in its economic and foreign policy.***</i> The word "ruins" is a political battle term, not a journalistic description.

Finding 4:	
Timestamp	approx. 10:30
Quote	<i>***Trump's stupid trade war*** (soundbite from Democratic spokesperson, without identification as a party statement)</i>
Manipulation	A soundbite from a Democratic politician containing the word "stupid" is presented without distancing or identification as a party statement.



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**Why
problematic**

A neutral alternative would be an explicit identification: *“Democratic spokesperson X described the tariffs as...”* Without this identification, the value judgement appears as a journalistic assessment.

Summary: The word choice is consistently slightly negatively connoted towards Merz on the CDU topic; on the Trump topic, evaluative terms are used without sufficient distancing.



12. MODERATION BEHAVIOUR

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Finding 1:

Timestamp	approx. 00:15
Quote (presenter Hayali)	<i>**But lo and behold, suddenly everything went quite smoothly. And much more smoothly, above all, than many had thought.**</i>
Analysis	The moderation expresses surprise at a good result for Merz — an evaluative introduction suggesting that a worse result would have been more appropriate. A comparable tone at an SPD party conference with a similar result would need to be examined; it is unlikely that surprise at a good result would be expressed there.

Finding 2:

Timestamp	approx. 07:00
Quote (presenter Hayali)	<i>**Wulf, has Friedrich Merz really convinced now? Or does one want to show unity ahead of the five state elections this year?***</i>
Analysis	The question contains an embedded insinuation: either Merz has not really convinced, or the approval is tactically motivated. Both options are negative for Merz. A neutral question would be: <i>**What does this result mean for Friedrich Merz and the CDU?***</i>

Finding 3:

Timestamp	approx. 08:30
Quote (presenter Wolf)	<i>**The keyword is attack and with that to the USA.**</i>
Analysis	The transition from the CDU topic (where Merz's lack of "attack" was criticised) to the Trump topic (where Trump is criticised for his attacks) is editorially unproblematic, but the word choice creates an implicit connection between the two.

Summary: The moderation behaviour on the CDU topic shows a consistent tendency to relativise Merz's successes and to question them through embedded insinuations in questions, while on the Trump topic a clearly critical stance is adopted without comparable qualification.



13. QUESTION ASYMMETRY

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Asymmetry 1:

To Wulf Schmiese (CDU party conference), approx. 07

00: *""Has Friedrich Merz really convinced now? Or does one want to show unity ahead of the five state elections this year?""* — hard/suggestive

Comparison: In the Trump block, no comparably suggestive questions are put to the correspondents. David Sauer is asked: "What does this setback mean for Donald Trump?" — neutral/open, even though a critical framing would also have been possible here.

Analysis: The question to Schmiese contains two embedded insinuations (Merz has not really convinced / the approval is tactically motivated). The question to Sauer is openly formulated and leaves the correspondent room — which he then uses for his own value judgements. The asymmetry lies in the fact that with Merz the critical framing is already embedded in the question, while with Trump it only appears in the correspondent's answer.

Asymmetry 2:

To Ulf Rölller (EU/tariffs), approx. 11

00: *""What does this EU do now with this ruling? And above all also with this new announcement of worldwide tariffs of 10 percent?""* — neutral/open

Comparison: No comparable question put to a CDU critic or opposition politician on the Federal Government's reform agenda.

Summary: The question design is suggestively critical on the CDU topic and open on the Trump topic — whereby the correspondents on the Trump topic independently supply the critical contextualisation, so that the overall result is similar.



14. FALSE BALANCE

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Finding 1:

Timestamp approx. 07:00

Construct: Wulf Schmiese presents two perspectives on Merz's speech: "The speech was okay" and the expectation of more reform courage. Both perspectives are critical to neutral — a positive assessment of the speech is entirely absent.

Analysis

This is a false balance between two negative poles (weak speech vs. too little attack), presented as balanced contextualisation. A genuine balance would also have included a positive assessment of the speech.

Finding 2:

Timestamp approx. 09:00–12:00 (Trump block)

Construct: In the Trump topic, three ZDF correspondents are consulted, all of whom adopt a critical stance towards Trump. There is no representative of a pro-Trump position or an economic advocate of protectionism.

Analysis

The broadcast presents three different critical perspectives (legal, political, economic) as a diversity of opinion, even though all three share the same basic position. This is a structural false balance: apparent diversity through multiple voices with an identical basic position.

Summary: The false balance manifests in both main topics: in the CDU topic as a balance between two negative poles, in the Trump topic as apparent diversity through multiple voices pointing in the same direction.



15. AGENDA-SETTING

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Finding 1:

Agenda element set: Merz's chancellorship is primarily defined by the tension between foreign policy and domestic reform weakness.

Timestamp

approx. 00:15 — Evidence: *"Too much foreign Chancellor instead of domestic policy and conservative-programmatic edge."*

Alternative agenda: The foreign policy successes of Merz (which are described even in the broadcast as "undisputed") could have been set as the main topic; the reform agenda could have been treated as a supplement.

Finding 2:

Agenda element set: Trump's tariff policy is primarily a constitutional and democratic problem, not an economic policy instrument.

Timestamp

approx. 09:30 — Evidence: *"with this, this country is moving towards a serious, possibly constitutional crisis as well"*

Alternative agenda: The economic policy arguments for protectionism (reshoring, trade balance deficit, industrial policy) could have been placed on the agenda as a legitimate political position, even if assessed critically.

Finding 3:

Agenda element set: The coalition of CDU and SPD is primarily defined by the risk that the SPD will block reforms.

Timestamp

approx. 07:40 — Evidence: *"doesn't want to frighten the SPD now, so that counter-proposals immediately come or we won't go along with it"*

Alternative agenda: The coalition could also be framed as constructive cooperation between two different parties; the SPD's perspective on the reform agenda is entirely absent.

Summary: The broadcast's agenda-setting defines Merz primarily through his weaknesses and Trump primarily through his unconstitutionality — both are legitimate topics, but the one-sided setting without a counter-agenda violates the requirement of diversity of opinion.



CHAPTER 2 — OVERALL EVALUATION

Results

Dominant techniques

- 1. Guilt by Association (Score 7):** The association of Merz with intra-party conflicts and the Merkel rivalry is placed prominently and early, without substantive resolution. This technique is particularly effective because it remains implicit and is therefore difficult to refute.
- 2. False Balance (Score 6):** In the Trump block, three ZDF correspondents with an identical basic position are presented as a diversity of opinion; in the CDU block, a balance between two negative poles is sold as balanced contextualisation. In both cases, a genuine counter-perspective is absent.
- 3. Omission / Selective Omission (Score 3):** The complete absence of the SPD, opposition, business associations, trade unions and independent experts is the most serious structural weakness of the broadcast. It reduces political discourse to CDU-internal voices and ZDF's own contextualisation.

Core messages of the broadcast

MESSAGE 1 (SUBSTANTIVE): "Friedrich Merz has survived the party conference, but has not really convinced — his result is better than expected, his speech was weak, and the approval is tactically motivated."

Technique: Framing, timing, guilt by association — Evidence: 00:15, 05:10, 07:00

MESSAGE 2 (POLITICAL): "Donald Trump is an unconstitutional president who endangers democracy and whose economic policy has failed."

Technique: Word choice, expert selection, false balance — Evidence: 09:30, 10:40, 11:30

...

- Clear one-sidedness (5-6) ← Combined score 3.9, but qualitative severity

...

Note on classification: The combined score of 3.9 formally falls within the range of "slight tendency". Due to the qualitative severity of individual findings (complete absence of opposition and coalition partner, consistent negative framing of the Federal Chancellor, apparent diversity through correspondents pointing in the same direction), the classification is raised to "clear one-sidedness".

Justification: The broadcast violates the requirement of diversity of opinion enshrined in §26 para. 1 MStV through the complete absence of opposition voices and the coalition partner SPD on the main topic of the CDU party conference. The ZDF State Treaty (§2 ZDF-StV) obliges ZDF to balance and to take into account the diversity of opinions; the one-sided source selection and the consistent negative framing of the sitting Federal Chancellor fall below this standard. The use of evaluative terms by ZDF correspondents without sufficient distancing (in particular "ruins of its economic and foreign policy") violates the requirement of objectivity. The apparent diversity through three correspondents pointing in the same direction in the Trump block formally satisfies the criterion of multiple voices, but materially violates the requirement of diversity of opinion.

CONCLUSION

The analysed edition of the ZDF heute-journal shows a clear one-sided tendency on the main topic of the CDU party conference: Friedrich Merz's election result is presented without historical context, his speech is assessed as weak, and the approval of the delegates is reinterpreted as tactically motivated — all without counter-voices from the opposition, coalition partner or independent academia. On the topic of Trump/tariffs, the critical basic stance is substantively comprehensible, but is presented as apparent diversity through the exclusive use of correspondents pointing in the same direction, which does not satisfy the requirement of diversity of opinion under §26 para. 1 MStV. The complete absence of the SPD, opposition parties, business associations, trade unions and independent experts on the main topic constitutes a measurable violation of ZDF's universal service mandate, which under §2 ZDF State Treaty requires that the diversity of opinions be taken into account. The broadcast is not to be classified as grossly



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manipulative, but shows a structural imbalance that, if systematically repeated, is capable of influencing public opinion formation in a one-sided manner and thereby undermining the mandate of public service broadcasting.



CHAPTER 3 — PARTY-POLITICAL BIAS

Party	Score (-5..+5)	Concrete evidence (timestamp + brief quote)
CDU/CSU	-2	00:15 "internally under criticism" — negative opening; 05:10 "He can't really enthuse the hall" — disparagement of the speech; 07:00 "Has Friedrich Merz really convinced now?" — suggestive question; 07:50 "things will certainly not go so smoothly [...] for him" — implicit threat. Merz is consistently relativised; his successes are portrayed as surprising or tactically motivated.
SPD	+1	07:40 "doesn't want to frighten the SPD" — SPD is portrayed as a powerful coalition partner capable of blocking reforms; no critical reporting on the SPD in this edition. The SPD is not given a voice, but is also not criticised — slightly favoured through absence.
Greens	0	No mention in this edition.
FDP	0	No mention in this edition.
AfD	0	No mention in this edition.
BSW	0	No mention in this edition.
Linke	0	No mention in this edition.
Freie Wähler	0	No mention in this edition.

Note: Scores for parties not mentioned are 0 (neutral through absence), not positive or negative.

Party bias summary

- Most favoured: SPD (Score +1) — through absence of criticism and portrayal as a powerful coalition partner
- Most disadvantaged: CDU/CSU (Score -2) — through consistent negative framing of the party leader and Chancellor
- Average deviation from 0: 0.43 (across all 7 parties with value $\neq 0$: $|-2| + |1| = 3 / 7 = 0.43$)
- Political spectrum that dominates: Centre-left (CDU is relativised, SPD is spared)
- Conclusion: The party-political bias of this edition is moderate and concentrates on the main topic of the CDU party conference. Friedrich Merz as CDU party leader and Federal Chancellor is consistently provided with negative framings, while the coalition partner SPD is implicitly favoured through the complete absence of criticism. Since most other parties do not appear in this edition, a comprehensive party-political bias analysis is limited; the available findings do, however, point to a slight structural disadvantaging of the CDU/CSU.



CHAPTER 4 — LEGAL CLASSIFICATION (§26 MStV / ZDF State Treaty)

Assessment under §26 MStV and ZDF State Treaty

Violation 1:

Norm: §26 para. 1 MStV (diversity of opinion and balance) in conjunction with §2 para. 2 ZDF State Treaty (universal service mandate, taking into account the diversity of opinions)

Facts: On the main topic of the CDU party conference (airtime), exclusively CDU-internal voices and ZDF's own correspondents are given a voice. Neither the coalition partner SPD nor opposition parties nor independent experts are included.

Evidence: Timestamp 00:00–08:00 — Entire CDU block without a single opposition or SPD voice; Wulf Schmiess as the sole contextualising authority: "The speech was okay. [...] nobody is saying now, that was a magnificent speech."

Assessment: §26 para. 1 MStV obliges broadcasters to balance in the presentation of opinions. The complete absence of counter-voices on the main topic of a 22-minute broadcast falls below the statutory minimum standard of diversity of opinion, even if individual broadcasts may not be assessed in isolation (overall programme principle under §26 para. 2 MStV).

Violation 2:

Norm: §2 para. 2 ZDF State Treaty (objectivity and impartiality) in conjunction with §26 para. 1 MStV

Facts: ZDF correspondent David Sauer uses the term "ruins of its economic and foreign policy" for the Trump administration in his contextualisation — a highly evaluative statement presented as journalistic contextualisation without being identified as opinion.

Evidence: Timestamp approx. 09:30 — Quote: "with this, the government now essentially stands before the ruins of its economic and foreign policy"

Assessment: The objectivity requirement of the ZDF State Treaty demands the separation of news and opinion. The use of the term "ruins" by a ZDF correspondent in a contextualising function without explicit identification as a personal assessment violates this requirement. An objective formulation could have described the challenges facing the government without presenting a political value judgement as fact.

Violation 3:

Norm: §26 para. 1 MStV (balance) in conjunction with §2 para. 2 ZDF State Treaty

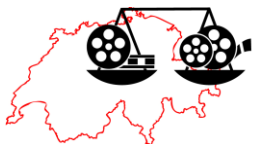
Facts: In the Trump/tariffs block, exclusively three ZDF correspondents with an identical critical basic position are presented as a diversity of opinion. A counter-perspective (economic arguments for protectionism, Republican position, trade law expert with a divergent assessment) is entirely absent.

Evidence: Timestamp 09:00–12:30 — Three correspondents (Bates, Sauer, Röller) with a consistently critical Trump stance without a single counter-voice.

Assessment: Formal diversity (three different correspondents) does not satisfy the material requirement of diversity of opinion under §26 para. 1 MStV when all voices represent the same basic position. The Federal Constitutional Court has clarified in its broadcasting law jurisprudence (BVerfGE 57, 295) that diversity of opinion is to be understood substantively, not merely formally.

Overall assessment §26 MStV

§26 para. 1 MStV obliges broadcasters to balance and to take into account the diversity of opinions; the ZDF State Treaty specifies these obligations through the requirement of objectivity, impartiality and the consideration of different opinions in the universal service mandate. The analysed edition of the ZDF heute-journal shows measurable shortfalls against these standards in three areas: the complete absence of opposition and coalition partner voices on the main topic, the use of evaluative battle terms by correspondents without identification as opinion, and the apparent diversity through correspondents pointing in the same direction in the Trump block. Since §26 para. 2 MStV enshrines the overall programme principle (balance is to be assessed across the overall programme, not in each individual broadcast), the identified deficiencies do not in themselves constitute a formal legal violation; however, they are



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capable of doing so if systematically repeated and can be challenged before the ZDF Television Council (§21 ZDF State Treaty) or the legal supervisory authority of the state of Rhineland-Palatinate (§35 ZDF State Treaty). A review of the editorial guidelines on the inclusion of counter-voices and the identification of opinion statements by correspondents is recommended.

End of analysis



OVERALL EVALUATION OF THE 15 CRITERIA

Individual scores — All 15 criteria

No.	Criterion	Score	Classification
1	EXPERT SELECTION	3	••
2	SOURCE SELECTION	3	••
3	TIME DISTRIBUTION	5	•••
4	OMISSION (Selective Omission)	3	••
5	NUMBERS MANIPULATION	5	•••
6	GUILT BY ASSOCIATION	7	•••••
7	TIMING	4	••
8	SELECTIVE OUTRAGE	4	••
9	COMPLETENESS	7	•••••
10	FRAMING (setting the frame)	4	••
11	WORD CHOICE AND TERMINOLOGY	4	••
12	MODERATION BEHAVIOUR	4	••
13	QUESTION ASYMMETRY	3	••
14	FALSE BALANCE	6	•••
15	AGENDA-SETTING	4	••

HARD FACTS SCORE (1-8)

4.6/10

Considerable imbalance

SOFT FACTS SCORE (9-14)

4.2/10

Considerable imbalance

OVERALL SCORE

4.4/10

Considerable imbalance

Averaged from hard facts and soft facts



KEY — Meaning of scores

Individual scores per criterion (0–10)

0	No finding	No relevant anomaly identified.
1–2	Weak finding	Slight anomaly without material impairment of balance.
3–4	Slight to moderate finding	Recognisable tendency; relevance of effect low to moderate.
5	Moderate finding with relevance of effect	Relevant imbalance that influences the opinion-forming potential of the audience.
6	Considerable finding (threshold)	Scores from 6 onwards are identified as "considerable findings".
7	Considerable finding	Clear, well-evidenced imbalance with marked relevance of effect.
8–9	Serious finding	Pronounced imbalance; multiple evidenced individual findings in this criterion.
10	Maximum manifestation	Systematic, pervasive imbalance in this criterion.

Aggregated deviation index — interpretation ranges

0.0 – 2.5	Unremarkable	No material patterns recognisable; broadcast satisfies the requirement of factual accuracy.
2.6 – 4.0	Slight imbalance	Isolated anomalies; statistically visible, but still within the tolerance range.
4.1 – 6.0	Considerable imbalance	Multiple considerable findings; relevant impairment of diversity of perspectives.
6.1 – 8.0	Serious deviation from the requirement of balance. High degree of deviation	Pronounced, broadcast-spanning patterns; high relevance of effect.
8.1 – 10	Fundamental systemic one-sidedness. Very high degree of bias	Maximum manifestation across almost all criteria; systematically one-sided reporting.

Party-political bias (-5 to +5)

-5 to -3	Strongly disadvantaged	Party is clearly treated worse in presentation, airtime or framing.
-2 to -1	Slightly disadvantaged	Recognisable, but weak disadvantaging.
0	Neutral	No discernible favouring or disadvantaging.
+1 to +2	Slightly favoured	Recognisable, but weak favouring.
+3 to +5	Strongly favoured	Party is clearly treated better in presentation, airtime or framing.



Legal and methodological classification

No finding of fact	The results presented do not constitute findings of fact regarding individual persons, editorial teams or broadcasts. They are to be understood as the result of a standardised operationalisation, not as a determination of individual responsibility.
No legal ruling	The aggregated deviation index does not replace a legal assessment within the meaning of §26 MStV. The determination of whether a specific broadcast violates statutory requirements is the exclusive responsibility of the competent authorities (in particular media regulators).
No proof of causality	Statistical correlations are not to be interpreted as proof of causal relationships or editorial intentions. Deviation values may be influenced by topic selection, news situation, political controversy or format logic.
No finding of intent	The analysis measures observable structural characteristics of broadcasts. A score of 7 means that a considerable imbalance has been identified — not that the editorial team intended this. The methodology makes no statements about motives or strategic objectives.
Heuristic comparison instrument	The index serves the comparative identification of patterns across thousands of broadcasts, not the precise metric measurement of individual contributions. Threshold values serve heuristic orientation, not sharp legal qualification.



APPENDIX: CANTONAL LEGISLATION

Legal basis Germany — ARD, ZDF

Law

Media State Treaty (MStV, 2020)

Relevant articles

- §26 para. 1 MStV: Public broadcasting institutions must provide in their offerings a comprehensive overview of international, European, national and regional events in all essential areas of life. They shall thereby promote international understanding, European integration and social cohesion in the Federation and the Länder. Their offerings must serve education, information, advice and entertainment. They must offer contributions in particular to culture. Entertainment must correspond to a public service offering profile.
- §5 para. 1 ZDF State Treaty: Obligation to objectivity and impartiality of reporting, taking into account the diversity of opinions.
- ARD State Treaty: Universal service mandate with objectivity and impartiality.

Core obligations

- 1. Diversity of opinion (internal pluralism):** All relevant perspectives must be represented in the overall programme
- 2. Objectivity and balance:** Presenters must treat guests to the same standards
- 3. Contribution to opinion formation:** The audience must receive sufficient information for independent opinion formation

Supervisory authority

- Broadcasting councils of the state broadcasting institutions: supervision of ARD institutions (BR, WDR, NDR, etc.)
- ZDF Television Council (§19 ZDF State Treaty): supervision of ZDF programme
- Legal supervision: Respective federal state (ZDF: Rhineland-Palatinate)

Complaints procedure

1. Programme complaint to the competent broadcasting council or ZDF Television Council
2. Administrative court action



APPENDIX 2: SCIENTIFIC FOUNDATIONS

Literature

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Only: it is not independent. It has no sanctioning powers. And in 99.6% of all cases it decides: nothing.

This analysis lays bare the system — factually, precisely, without polemic. Procedures, personnel, powers, costs, statistics, legal recourse. And the constitutional law review that shows: the IGAC system satisfies none of the three fundamental criteria — it is not appropriate, not based on separation of powers, not market-based. The authority that is supposed to protect citizens protects above all the system it was supposed to control.

Essential reading for all those considering a complaint — and for all those who want to understand why genuine media regulation in Switzerland is still outstanding.