

Population
and Policy

Discussion
Paper

9.6²⁴
No 21
May 2024

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Author
Claudia Neu

Empowering instead of discouraging

Empowerment strategies for a resilient civil society

POPULATION
EUROPE



THE NETWORK OF EUROPE'S LEADING
DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH CENTRES

Imprint

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Funded by Stiftung Mercator as part of the project 'Regional population diversity and local social cohesion'.

STIFTUNG
MERCATOR

ISSN

2512-6172

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Copy Editing

translate24.de

Layout

The Brettinghams GmbH, Berlin, Germany
Karen Olze / Judith Miller

Printed by

Newprint blue GmbH
Berliner Str. 13, 10715 Berlin
www.newprint-blue.de

No 21 / May 2024

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Summary

The German population is being affected by 'multiple crises'. Negative feelings of insecurity and disappointment are coupled with growing scepticism about democratic institutions. According to election forecasts, the "Alternative for Germany" (AfD) is set to become the second largest party in the country. People react 'sensitively' when they do not see their expectations of economic prosperity and social participation being fulfilled, or when they feel that the 'implicit social contract' has been violated (Mau et al. 2023, p. 22). As such, both the demographic and socio-economic situation and the way that situation is interpreted play a crucial role in the consolidation of anti-democratic attitudes. Living, or perceiving to live, in a 'forgotten region' and being pushed to the margins of society can make people vulnerable to loneliness, resentment and anti-democratic attitudes. Right-wing populist and far-right narratives of a 'people betrayed by the elites', skilfully linked to offers of community-building activities, fit perfectly into these narratives of loss.

In order to counter the attacks from the right, social policy measures are needed alongside a clear commitment to democracy in order to avoid further exacerbating social and territorial inequality in Germany and thus filling the reservoir from which the far right party AfD draws its electoral success. The political guiding principle of 'equality of living conditions' must be consistently pursued. In addition to more policy-oriented measures, there needs to be a change in political and public communication that no longer serves the AfD's narratives of fear but is oriented towards the common interests of the population – climate change, democracy and cohesion. This includes raising awareness of the economic and social consequences of populist and extremist policies. Democratic civil society must be strengthened at the local level. This requires not only inclusive spaces for encounter and conflict negotiation, but also better (municipal) conflict management and the practice of communication strategies to counter right-wing attacks. A civil society strengthened in this way will be able to roll back right-wing gains in urban and rural areas.

Introduction

'The mass protests against the right have made it clear: many people no longer want to stand by and watch the far right gain in strength. They want a democratic society without ifs, ands or buts. The protests are more likely to mark a noisy beginning rather than the end of the conflict. After all, the developments and crises that provide fertile ground for the far-right remain. The awakening of civil society is both an opportunity and a challenge to politicians to find a different middle ground that breaks away from the right-wing narratives of "concerned citizens".'
Daniel Mullis 2024

Since mid-January 2024, an impressive number of people have taken to the streets to oppose the rise of right-wing populist and far-right forces in Germany

and to stand up for democracy and humanity – not only in large cities, but also in small towns and rural areas. The catalyst was an article by the media company CORRECTIV, which revealed at the beginning of 2024 that members of the AfD and other actors who could be classified as far-right had taken part in a private meeting in Potsdam in November of the previous year. At the centre of the meeting was the discussion of a 'Master Plan for Remigration', which ultimately aims to expel people with a migratory background and their descendants from Germany en masse. However, protest marches to strengthen democracy alone will not be enough to change the minds of misguided AfD voters or suddenly transform people with an entrenched right-wing world view into convinced democrats. The scale of the protests, which many political observers did not expect, is

certainly a hopeful start in encouraging democratic civil society, which sometimes seems asleep at the wheel, to take a stand against right-wing populist and far-right positions and activities. However, these civil-society actions also require clear signs of support from associations, clubs and political parties.

Germany, Europe and the world are facing a super election year. Weekly polls are already telling us that the AfD would be the second strongest party behind the CDU/CSU if the general election were held next Sunday. Do (East) German voters really just want to teach the government a lesson to hit back at its refugee policy, heating law and gender-neutral language? Or is the AfD merely 'fishing' for what appear to be the anti-democratic attitudes of East German citizens who are disappointed by transformation and harbour resentment, as Oliver Decker and co-authors (2023) explain? In any case, it is clear that scepticism towards democracy and distrust of institutions have been on the rise for some time. Only just under two thirds (65%) of young people still consider democracy to be the best form of government (Neu et al. 2023); in eastern Germany, the figure stands at less than half of adults (Decker et al. 2023, p.26). This goes hand in hand with the feeling of political deprivation: 55% of young people think that politics does not sufficiently address the issues relevant to their age group, and only a quarter believe they can actively influence politics (Neu et al. 2023, p.4). In eastern Germany, two thirds of the population even consider it 'pointless to get involved in politics, and hardly anyone believes they have any influence on the government' (Decker et al. 2023, p.26). Conspiracy theories and a growing acceptance of authoritarian leadership styles at home and abroad fuel anti-democratic sentiments, as does dissatisfaction with the perceived poor economic situation locally. Loneliness, understood as experienced social disconnection, can also make people susceptible to anti-democratic attitudes, especially conspiracy narratives (Neu / Küpper 2023; Neu et al. 2023). For many, the bond of cohesion between their own local area and society as a whole has been broken (Kersten

et al. 2022). How can this massive insecurity and resentment among the population be quelled? How can the observed deterioration of public debate, the inability to communicate and the unwillingness to engage with other people and opinions be overcome?

Polarization and the spread of anti-democratic attitudes have been discussed in the social sciences in Germany and abroad for many years. Explicitly for Germany, the *Mitte-Studien* (Societal Center Studies) of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (currently Zick et al. 2023) and the *Leipziger Autoritarismus-Studie* (Leipzig Authoritarianism Study) (currently Decker et al. 2022) deserve to be mentioned. Programmes initiated by the Federal Agency for Civic Education such as 'Demokratie leben' (Living Democracy), 'Miteinander reden' (Talking Together) and 'Zusammenhalt durch Teilhabe' (Cohesion through Participation), to name but a few, have for many years sought to strengthen the democratic forces of civil society. What have they achieved? What works? How can coexistence in local communities be strengthened?

This paper starts by examining how demographic change, regional population diversity and unease about democracy is linked with the rise of right-wing populist and far-right movements, especially in supposedly 'left-behind' regions. This is followed in part two by consideration of the special role of emotions (Illouz 2023), such as feeling a lack of self-efficacy and insecurity, low relevance for politics and society, isolation or resentful demarcation from other social groups, and anti-democratic attitudes. Stereotypes such as the urban-rural or east-west divide also need to be examined, particularly in relation to the electoral success of radical parties in different regions. In part three, the results of a total of ten interviews with experts¹ from academia, politics and civil society are presented with regard to their assessment not only of the issues of cohesion, diversity, polarization and extremism, but also of effective (counter-) measures. In addition, five examples of successful confrontation and defence against anti-democratic tendencies are presented.

¹ The names of the experts interviewed have been withheld for their protection.

Demography and democracy

Germany has become more diverse in recent decades, not only in terms of a significant increase in the overall age structure – which has led to the tendency to differentiate between different stages of old age, such as ‘young-old’ and ‘oldest-old’ – but also in terms of its ethnic composition, which has changed as a result of decades of migration. Today, around 24 million people in Germany have a migratory background (Destatis 2024a). The political landscape has also become more diverse: The AfD has been in the Bundestag since 2017; at the other end of the political spectrum, the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance was founded in January 2024. Demographic trends and social dynamics are briefly outlined below, showing that demographic, economic and spatial structural factors are linked to fears of downward mobility and a shift towards anti-democratic attitudes.

Demographic changes

Decades ago, a steady decline in population was predicted for Germany. This trend seems to have been averted; since 2015, the number of inhabitants in Germany has been rising again – to a current level of 84.6 million. It is clear that the high migration gains of the 2010s have counteracted the predicted population decline and also moderately increased the share of younger age groups in the total population. Future migration movements will play a decisive role in determining population growth or decline. Depending on the level of positive net migration – according to the 15th coordinated population projection of the Federal Statistical Office – the expected population for 2070 will be between 73.5 and 90.9 million (Destatis 2022).

However, population growth will only slow down the ageing process to a limited extent; the number of older people will continue to rise, and age groups with higher birth rates will only gradually catch up. After many years of low fertility, the birth rate rose significantly between 2012 and 2016 to 1.59 children per woman. The fertility rate was boosted by the high birth rate of immigrant women, especially those from

Syria, Iraq and south-eastern Europe. However, this increase remains well below the ‘replacement level’ of 2.1 children per woman, the level which ensures that the parent generation is maintained by the child generation. This figure is also subject to strong fluctuations: as soon as 2017, the fertility rate fell again to 1.53 children per woman due to a decrease in births among foreign women. Currently, the fertility rate has reached a low of 1.36 children per woman in 2023, probably also due to the tempo effects resulting from the pandemic and the polycrises. Using the average assumption of future fertility trends for the year 2070, a fertility rate of 1.55 children per woman is expected for the coming decades (Destatis 2022; Bujard/Andersson 2024).

Fertility, ageing and migration patterns have a direct impact on labour supply, health care and long-term care, but also on other welfare state services such as education and pensions. If the population changes very dynamically in the immediate area in which people live, this can have an impact on satisfaction with democracy, as will be shown below.

Ageing

Germany’s population is ageing considerably. The number of people aged 67 and over increased by 58% between 1990 and 2021, from 10.4 million to 16.4 million. It is already foreseeable that this figure will rise to at least 20.4 million by the end of the 2030s. This trend is also reflected in the increase in the average age of the population: in 1990, it was 39; in 2018, it was 44, five years higher. The baby boomers, who were aged between 20 and 35 in 1990, are ageing further and will retire over the next two decades. With 50% of the labour force already aged 45 and over, the potential labour force will start to shrink by the mid-2030s when the last cohorts of the so-called baby boomers retire. If there were no net immigration, once again according to population projections, the potential labour force would fall by around 9 million by 2040 alone. In order to at least compensate for this reduction in the available labour

force, around 490,000 people (net) aged between 20 and 66 would have to immigrate to Germany every year between 2022 and 2040 (Destatis 2022).

Diversity

The composition of a population is never static or homogeneous. War, flight, expulsion, natural disasters and the desire for a better life have always forced or encouraged people to leave their homeland. These migratory movements change not only the population composition of the country of origin, but also that of the country of destination. In 2022 alone, for example, the population of Germany increased by 1.1 million as a result of high immigration from Ukraine. In the following year, the migration from Ukraine slowed down considerably, with net immigration totalling around 700,000 people in 2023 (Destatis 2024b). However, the movement of war refugees from Ukraine is merely the peak so far of decades of immigration: since the 1960s, there were the 'guest workers', then ethnic German repatriates in the 1980s, and later refugees from Syria and those who arrived through labour migration from EU countries. The very heterogeneous nature of immigration over the decades has led to an increasing proportion of the population in Germany having a migratory background: it was 26% of the German population in 2019. This corresponds to about 21.2 million people, compared with 14.4 million in 2005, an increase of 47%. By contrast, the number of people without a migratory background fell by around 8% in the same period, from 66.1 million to 60.6 million (Destatis 2021, p. 31ff.). People with a migratory background mainly live in large cities, but there are sometimes significant differences between the federal states: For example, 34% of citizens have a migratory background in Hesse and Baden-Württemberg, but less than 8% in the eastern German federal states. At 35.6 years, people with a migratory background in 2019 were on average significantly younger than those without one (47.3 years). They are more often single, have lower educational and vocational qualifications and are more likely to live in poverty (Destatis, *ibid*).

However, Germany's increasing diversity is not only related to the ethnic origins of its citizens. The last

50 years have seen not only a pluralization of ways of living together, family models and lifestyles, but also a shift in values that has weakened the values of duty and acceptance and strengthened the values of self-development. Emancipation and the expansion of education have created opportunities for participation on an unprecedented scale for millions of people.

Space

Demographic trends vary greatly from region to region. Population growth between 2014 and 2019 took place mainly in cities. During this period, the population of cities with at least 100,000 inhabitants increased by 1 million to 26.3 million (+3.7%). In contrast, the population of cities with less than 100,000 inhabitants increased by only 1.8% (2019: 56.8 million). After reunification, 5.4 million more people lived in western Germany in 2019 (+8.8%) and 2.2 million fewer in eastern Germany (-15.8% since 1990) (Destatis 2021, p. 33ff.). Between 1999 and 2020, the population of the federal state of Bavaria increased by 17%, making it the frontrunner, followed by Baden-Württemberg and Hamburg with an increase of 15% each. Over the same period, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia shrank by 24% and 19% respectively. The 15th population projection expects a slowdown in regional population growth in the coming years, but no overall trend reversal; the eastern German federal states will continue to shrink (Destatis 2022). Germany continues to be strongly characterized by small and medium-sized towns: in 2019, 5% of the population lived in municipalities with less than 2,000 inhabitants, just over a third (35%) in municipalities with 2,000 to less than 20,000 inhabitants and 27% in municipalities with 20,000 to less than 100,000 inhabitants. By contrast, only 32% of the population lived in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants (Destatis 2021, p. 33ff.).

'Demography is relentless'

The demographic composition of the population is constantly changing. But these changes go mostly unnoticed, even if the number of centenarians (100+ year olds) in the municipal register is increasing

while the number of births is clearly decreasing. Across Europe, regionally divergent age and gender proportions are well documented. Since German reunification at the latest, it has been observed that young women of childbearing age in particular have left (peripheral) rural areas to seek greener pastures elsewhere. This has led to strong local gender imbalances that disadvantage men. At the end of the 2000s, many eastern German districts had more than 25 per cent more male than female inhabitants in the 18–24 and 25–29 age groups. The young women who had moved away were missing not only as potential partners but also as future mothers. The reasons for this gender-selective migration behaviour are the higher expectations of young women in terms of education and employment, as well as what they perceive as a higher quality of life in cities (Kühntopf/Stedtfeld 2012).

Declining birth rates, high levels of young people moving away, ageing and gender inequality are thus accumulating in a particular way in some regions of Germany, creating a unique demographic situation. Using the example of Thuringia, the Berlin sociologist Katja Salomo (2019) shows that this is a

unique demographic situation worldwide. Japan has even more ageing rural regions; China and India have even more skewed gender relations that disadvantage women; and South Korea has even fewer young people – but the phenomenon of all these factors occurring at the same time is unique to eastern Germany. And the last of the baby boomers have not even reached full retirement age. To make matters worse, immigrants and refugees are also leaving these demographically and infrastructurally depleted regions for the cities. As a result, the demographic homogeneity of the population 'left behind' is increasing. Salomo (2019) fears that these demographic dynamics will have a similar effect to adverse economic developments: they create local fears of downward mobility and a sense of being disadvantaged that can threaten democracy. Solomon is pessimistic: 'But I think demography is relentless. You can simply give people money to affect economic change. Demographic processes are much harder to contain. And it's a downstream effect: Even if you made eastern Germany a very attractive place for young people now, it would probably take some time to make up for the loss of young people' (DER SPIEGEL 2019).

Social dynamics

'History as a whole becomes sedimented, including in the form of social inequalities, which in turn are closely linked to the directions people's lives take and their voting decisions.'

Raj Kollmorgen in DER SPIEGEL, 6. December 2023

The current social challenges seem enormous to many citizens: the socio-environmental transformation, the war in Europe, democracy under pressure. Even if the majority of the German population lives in secure circumstances and does not feel personally threatened by crises, the majority's diagnosis for the country is much more pessimistic: cohesion seems to be endangered, social peace threatened and Germany weakened by multiple crises. However, the way people perceive crises is not entirely divorced from their socio-economic situation and the regions in which they live. Residents of less prosperous regions and people in less favourable circumstances are less satisfied with the functioning of democracy. Yet right-wing populists and those on the far-right find their supporters not only among the 'hardworking and overburdened', but also among those thoroughly in the mainstream of society. This is where the narratives of threat and downward mobility become intertwined.

Prosperity for all?

According to the ARD-Deutschland-Trend survey conducted in August 2023, the majority of respondents (83%) believe that wealth in Germany is not fairly distributed. By contrast, only 13% of respondents described the distribution of wealth in German society as fair (Henrich 2024).

There is empirical evidence to support this assessment: a comparison of income trends since the late 1990s shows that income inequality has increased. There is also evidence that this inequality has been

exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic and is currently at a high level. In 1999, the Gini coefficient² was 0.26, but ten years later (2010) it was significantly higher at 0.29. The Gini coefficient remained stable at this high level throughout the 2010s, then increased slightly to 0.30 in 2020 and has remained at that level since. Looking at the ratio of the richest to the poorest income quintile, the income of the richest 20% was 4.3 times higher than that of the lowest quintile in the 2010-2019 period. This figure increases from 2020 onwards: 4.5 in 2020, 4.7 in 2021 and 4.6 in 2022. Both values – the Gini coefficient and the ratios between income quintiles – indicate a worsening of income inequality in recent years (Brülle/Spannagel 2023).

An increase in poverty rates can also be observed over the same period. In 2010, 14.6% of people in Germany lived in poverty, with less than 60% of the median income available to them. In the same year, 7.7% of people in Germany lived in extreme poverty, i.e., they received less than 50% of the median income. For 2022, the Hans Böckler Foundation's Institute of Economic and Social Research calculated a poverty rate of 16.7%. 10.1% of people in Germany live in extreme poverty. The (long-term) unemployed, single parents, people living alone, immigrants and the poorly educated are particularly affected by poverty (Brülle/Spannagel 2023).

In addition to disposable income, living situations also depend on the local cost of living. There are considerable regional differences in this respect in Germany: new calculations by the German Economic Institute (IW) on price-adjusted disposable income per capita (purchasing power) show that the relationship between poor and rich regions does not change even when prices are adjusted. Despite the high cost of living, people in Starnberg can afford the most: they have an average disposable income of €33,000 per year. In Herne or Gelsenkirchen, the situation is exactly the opposite. Although the cost of living is low,

² The Gini coefficient is a measure of income distribution: a value of 0 means that everyone has the same income; a value of 1 means that one person has everything and everyone else has nothing.

residents can still afford the least: Gelsenkirchen residents only have a disposable income of €19,000 per year, which is 22.5% below the national average (Schröder/Wendt 2023).

Having little or no income means experiencing hardship on a daily basis, falling behind others and worrying about one's economic situation. Almost a third (31%) of the very poor are very worried about their situation, compared with just 3% of those with a high income. Just under a quarter (24%) of those experiencing persistent poverty feel that people look down on them. Slightly fewer (14%) of the temporarily poor (< 5 years in poverty) feel degraded. Among the middle class, only 8% say that they feel this way. People's financial situation is also reflected in their attitudes towards democratic institutions: the persistently poor trust the legal system and the police,

as well as politicians and political parties, far less than people in the middle and upper income brackets (see Fig. 1) (Brülle/Spannagel 2023).

Unequal living conditions

Accessibility to public goods and services is crucial for coping with daily life and participating in society. If the bus only runs on school days in rural areas, it becomes difficult to run errands or visit the doctor without a car. Is the post office in the neighbourhood or in the next district town? Can children walk to the primary school, or is it more than 30 minutes by bus? Is there still a meeting place, a pub or a community centre? A lack of public services has a corresponding impact on satisfaction with people's environment.

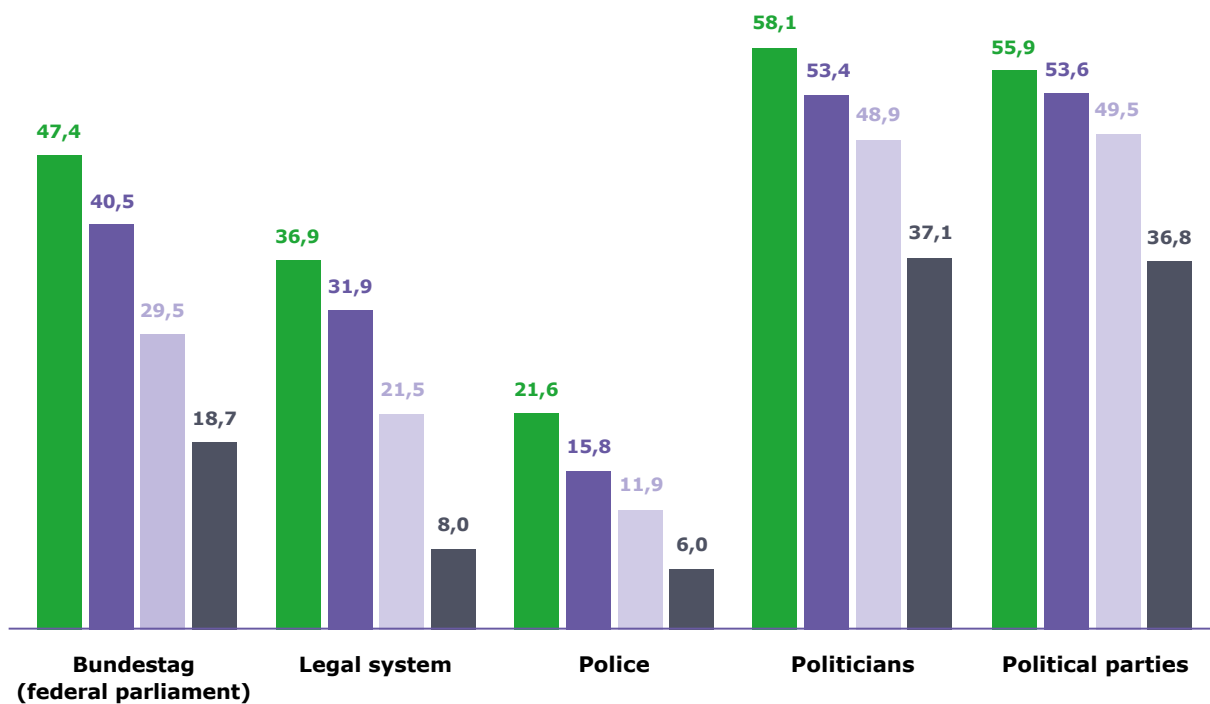
Figure 1: Low trust in institutions by income group, 2021

Values 0–4 on a scale from 0 'Do not trust at all' to 10 'Trust completely'.

Figures in %

Source: Brülle/Spannagel 2023, S.16

- **Persistently poor:** disposable income consistently below 60 % of median income between 2017 and 2021.
- **Temporarily poor:** disposable income below 60 % of median income in 2021, but not consistently since 2017.
- **Middle income:** disposable income between 60 and 200 % of median income in 2021.
- **Wealthy:** disposable income above 200 % of median income in 2021.



According to the latest Deutschland Monitor '23, Germans are generally satisfied with the services in their place of residence, with some services standing out positively or negatively. The majority of Germans rate the supply of everyday products as good (Deutschland Monitor 2024, p. 64ff.): More than three quarters (81%) are (very) satisfied with these services. However, satisfaction with the accessibility of daily shopping facilities is significantly lower in small municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants than in larger ones. Only 59%, though, are (very) satisfied with general practitioner services. When asked about the availability of specialists, satisfaction drops to 44%. In cities, citizens perceive medical care to be significantly better than in smaller municipalities. This also applies to the accessibility of cultural and leisure facilities: satisfaction with these decreases with increasing rurality, especially in rural areas with a poorer socio-economic situation. This may also reflect the financial constraints of many small municipalities, which have little 'spare cash' to support cultural and leisure activities. The opposite is true for access to childcare and nursing care facilities: smaller towns and rural areas score better than cities. In summary, it can be said that looking only at individual indicators of public services, no clear urban-rural or east-west patterns can be discerned. Neither are all rural areas disadvantaged, nor is eastern Germany as a whole deprived. However, when the various public services are aggregated, patterns of prosperous and less prosperous regions emerge, indicating unequal living conditions. Using a cluster analysis that takes into account different public services as well as regional economic and financial strength and demographics, it has been possible to show that a good range of infrastructure and public services often goes hand in hand with favourable economic conditions: In districts with a higher per capita income, access to public services was generally better; this was particularly the case in urban districts (Neu et al. 2020, p. 139–148). The third Disparities Report of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Gohla/Hennicke 2023) (see Fig. 2) also underlines the continuing divergence of regional living conditions in Germany. The majority of the population lives in the 'solid mainstream', i.e., in secure socio-economic circumstances. However, as

in previous years, housing, working and living conditions in the south of the country, especially in rural areas, are above average. Yet regional winners and losers cannot simply be identified along the lines of urban-rural or east-west. Many of the structurally weak regions have managed to catch up in recent years: median incomes have risen and outward migration has levelled off. High rents and land prices in city centres, the coronavirus pandemic with its trend towards working from home and the unbroken desire for a healthy life close to nature have made rural areas (close to cities) attractive residential locations once again in recent years. Municipalities on the outskirts of Leipzig, for example, have experienced strong growth. Peripheral areas, however, are not benefiting from this retreat to the countryside to the same degree as extended urban fringes.

The accessibility of public services is subject not only to geographic but also to social disparities. The '6. Armuts- und Reichtumsbericht' (6th Report on Poverty and Wealth) showed that low-income households on average spend more time travelling to public services such as kindergartens, schools, health facilities and cultural and leisure services. Although the differences are usually only a few minutes per journey, this adds up to a significant extra time burden over the course of a year.³ Households that have to travel longer distances to reach public services would like to see more investment in these public services and at the same time express less satisfaction with the environment in which they live (Neu et al. 2020, p. 154–173; idem 2021).

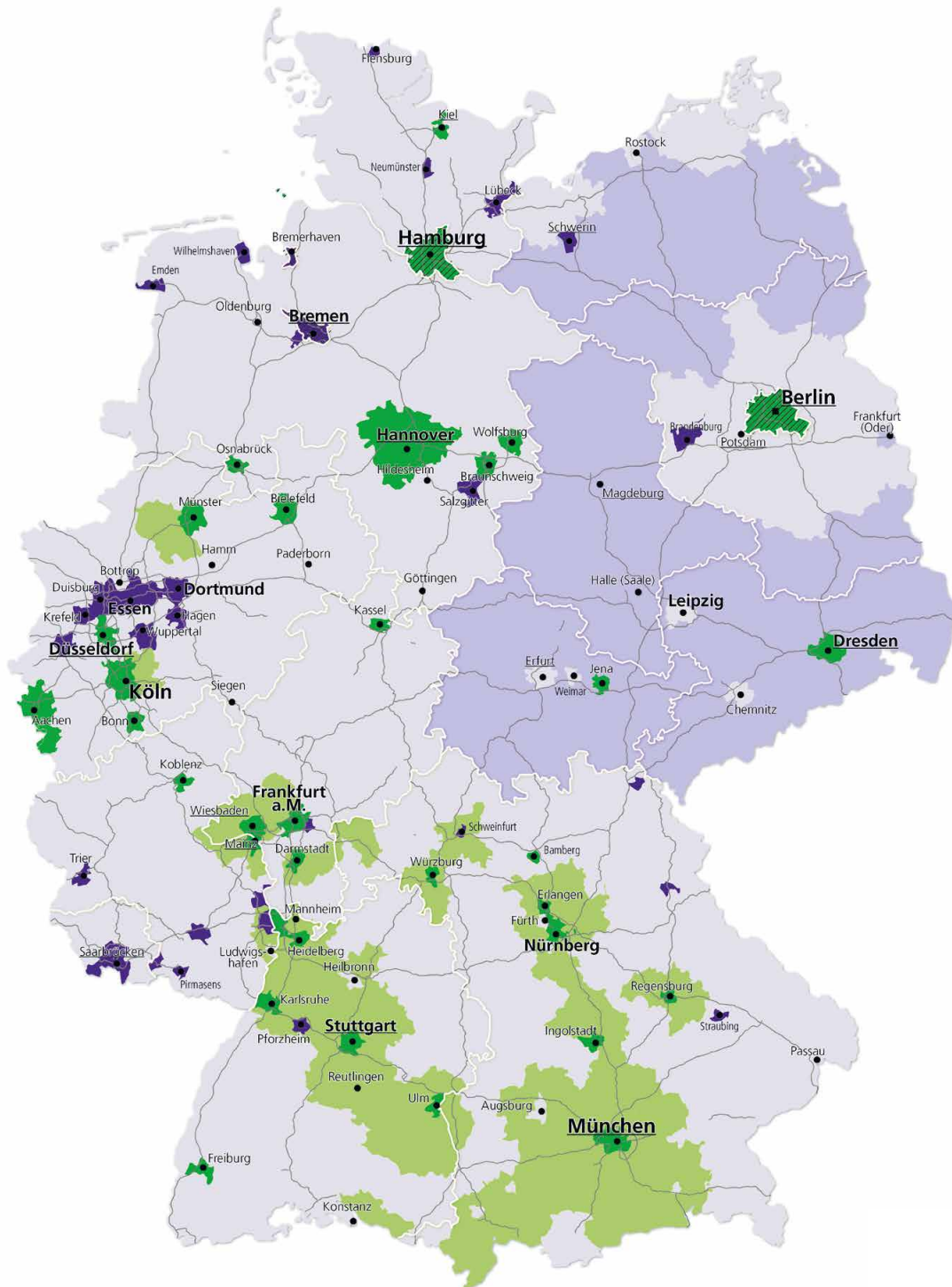
(Dis-)satisfaction with democracy

Much has been said in recent weeks about Germans' dissatisfaction with the 'traffic light coalition' (coalition government of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and Alliance 90/The Greens), about a loss of confidence in democratic institutions and about a growing distance from democracy. On closer inspection, however, these refer to different dimensions by which

³ The finding of longer commutes for poorer households holds even after controlling for municipality size and other factors (such as household composition).

Figure 2: The regional disparities map 2023

Source: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, www.fes.de/ungleiches-deutschland



Cluster types:

- Germany's solid centre
- Dynamic cities with increased risk of exclusion
- Prosperous (surrounding) countryside
- Old industrialised cities undergoing structural challenges
- Structurally weak areas with upward trends
- City states Berlin, Hamburg, Bremen (without data for municipal finances)

50 km

democracy can be assessed: Deutschland Monitor '23 measures the three dimensions 'agreement with the idea of democracy', 'satisfaction with the constitution' and 'satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Germany' separately (see Fig. 3). Contrary to widespread assumptions, the vast majority of Germans are fundamentally in favour of the *idea of democracy*: 73% are strongly in favour of democracy, 24% are 'somewhat' in favour. Only 2% are not in favour. The difference between eastern and western Germany is almost insignificant in terms of basic agreement with the idea of democracy, although in eastern Germany only 60% are clearly in favour of democracy and 4% reject this form of government altogether. When asked about their *satisfaction with the constitution*, Germans are less positive: in Germany as a whole, 77% are (very) satisfied with the constitution; a good fifth (22%) are not very or not at all satisfied. Here too, satisfaction in eastern Germany (66% (very) satisfied with the constitution) is lower than in western Germany (79%).

It is particularly striking – and worrying – that in Germany as a whole only 6% are very satisfied with the *functioning of democracy* (3% in eastern Germany, 7% in western Germany). Just over half are satisfied (51%), but just under a third are dissatisfied and as many as 10% are very dissatisfied (9% in western Germany, 16% in eastern Germany). Education, income and place of residence have a direct influence on the assessment of the performance of democracy: low levels of formal education, low income, middle age or a place of residence in a structurally weak rural area lead to a drop in satisfaction with the functioning of democracy (Deutschland Monitor 2024). The authors conclude: 'People who are middle-aged, have few material and immaterial resources and sympathize with the anti-establishment right-wing fringe are most likely to be dissatisfied with the performance of democracy.' (ibid, p. 148). Identification with democracy therefore also depends on regional and social opportunities in life.

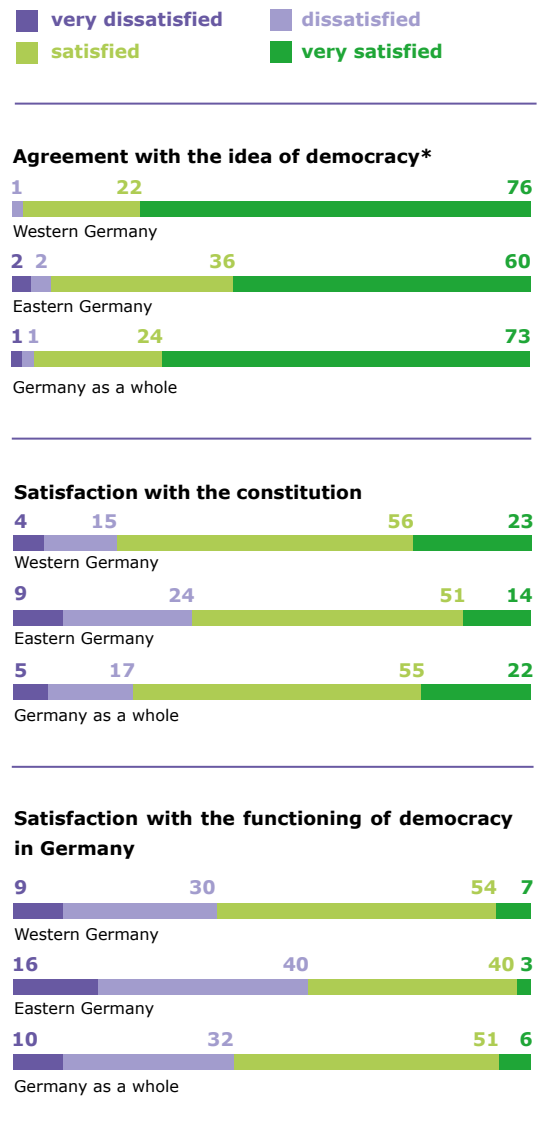
A lurch to the right?

Right-wing populist parties are currently on the rise in Europe and Germany. From Austria, Hungary and Slovakia to Finland, Sweden and now the Nether-

Figure 3: Attitudes towards democracy

Figures in %

Source: Deutschland-Monitor '23



*Response categories were 'strongly in favour of democracy' (very satisfied), 'somewhat in favour of democracy' (satisfied), 'somewhat opposed to democracy' (dissatisfied), 'strongly opposed to democracy' (very dissatisfied); these have been aligned for the purposes of this presentation.

lands, the populist-nationalist far right seems to have become a permanent fixture of European political life. In Germany, the AfD won a historic victory in the state elections on 8 October 2023: it became the second-strongest party in Hesse and the third-strongest in Bavaria, two relatively prosperous former West German states. According to election forecasts, if elections were held next week, the AfD would probably be the second strongest party behind

the CDU/CSU (30%) with around 18% (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, wahlrecht.de, 8 March 2024).

This makes it clear that the rise of the AfD is not an isolated East German phenomenon (especially considering that the radical right was also widespread in the old Federal Republic) present only on the fringes of society. The study 'Die distanzierte Mitte' (The Distanced Center) (Zick et al. 2023) published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in September 2023 also shows that far-right attitudes have risen sharply in the last two years and have moved further towards the mainstream of society. At 8%, the proportion of respondents in the Mitte-Studie 2022/23 with a clear far-right orientation has risen considerably compared to the level of just under 2 to 3% in previous years. It remains to be seen whether this is a one-off 'outlier' due to special circumstances, such as exhaustion from 'multiple crises', and whether the figures will fall again in the foreseeable future. In line with the findings of the long-term study 'Deutsche Zustände' (German Conditions) (Heitmeyer 2002–2011), the experts interviewed (see below) also assume that anti-democratic attitudes and bigotry have been observed in the mainstream of society in recent decades. However, it was not until the AfD was founded that these positions were translated into a political voice and electoral success. The radicalisation of the AfD may have deterred some potential voters, but its narrative of fear (e.g. of the 'other' and of losing 'one's own') was in many ways in line with the feelings of whole sections of the population (Biskamp 2016) (see chapter 'Undemocratic feelings', p.19). Individual fears of downward mobility, terrorism or 'foreigners', by contrast, remain largely politically inconsequential unless they are synchronized by a party like the AfD and directed at specific enemies: 'the elite', politicians or immigrants. This controlled synchronization of individual concerns was recently well illustrated by the farmers' protests.

The New Right – populism – radical right – far right

The terms 'New Right', 'populism', 'radical right' (or 'right-wing radicalism') and 'far right' (or 'right-wing extremism') are often not clearly defined and tend to be used synonymously. It has become customary to speak of the 'right' or 'right-wingers' as a collective

term, even when people are aware of the differences between and particularities of each phenomenon. Although this practice is followed in this booklet, it is worth taking a brief look at the individual movements.

The *New Right* is primarily to be understood as a more intellectual movement whose aim is the 'intellectual renewal' of the far right. In terms of argumentation, a clear distinction is made in opposition to the 'Old Right' and National Socialism, although individualism, liberalism, parliamentarianism and diversity are rejected. The goal is no longer to destroy ethnic or national groups, but 'only' to prevent them from mixing. Instead of a democratic form of government, an ethnically homogeneous, elitist or authoritarian state is to be established, for which the use of political violence is sanctioned. The New Right is primarily concerned with changing discourses and embedding them in society. Their mainly journalistic activities (the weekly *Junge Freiheit* or the publications of Götz Kubischek's Antaios publishing house) aim above all to establish a connection between the conservative middle classes and the far right across milieus (Küpper et al. 2023, p.96; Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung n.d.).

Populism is generally understood as 'telling people what they want to hear'. The narrative of a 'righteous people' betrayed by 'corrupt elites' (anti-elitism) is central. *Right-wing populism* is characterized by the addition of anti-pluralism to anti-elitism – not only 'the people versus the elites', but also 'homogeneous us versus the foreign others' as an axis of conflict. In contrast to the far right, right-wing populism tends to operate within the constitutional framework – even if the establishment is criticized and attacked both journalistically and politically. Populists often advocate elements of direct democracy to supposedly help 'the people' realize their rights. The *far right* (or right-wing extremists), by contrast, fundamentally reject the concept of liberal democracy and seek to (violently) overthrow it. The central dimensions of far-right ideology include the trivialization of Nazi ideology; social Darwinism, which assumes a 'natural' hierarchy and selection among human beings; xenophobia and anti-Semitism.

Specific criteria for distinguishing between the *radical right* and the *far right* lie in attitudes towards the constitution and violence: with increasing mani-

festation of right-wing ideology, the closed right-wing world view becomes more firmly established; radicalization towards extremism takes place with increasing rejection of the free democratic constitutional order and increasing approval of and affinity for violence (Küpper et al. 2023; Schröder et al. 2022). However, these definitional demarcations should not obscure the fact that the boundaries are fluid and the levels of escalation are cascading. Ultimately, as their lowest common denominator, right-wing phenomena are united by the ideology that humans are not created equal.

In recent years, the far right has undergone a major transformation, reflected not least in its move towards the mainstream. 'Reichsbürger' ('Reich citizens' – anti-constitutional revisionists), 'Querdenker' (anti-establishment conspiracy theorists), Covid-deniers, 'concerned citizens', 'Monday walkers' and protesting farmers are flanked by far-right actors who take up and reinforce their narratives, ultimately to win over a new clientele. New alliances have been formed with non-extremist citizens: members of the far right occupy positions in parents' associations, sports clubs and municipal administrations in order to exercise their democracy-destroying power from those places (Zick/Mokros 2023, p. 55f.).

Sociodemographic characteristics of extremists

According to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the number of potential far-right supporters has continued to grow, amounting to 38,800 in 2022 (2021: 33,900). 14,000 people are estimated to be violent far-right supporters (2021: 13,500). The number of 'Reichsbürger' and 'Selbstverwalter' ('sovereign citizens') also increased from 21,000 to 23,000 in 2022, of which 2,300 are estimated to be violent (2021: 2,100). In this segment, the increases in 2022 were in part still due to the Covid-19 protests, but also to the war in Ukraine. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution estimates that the potential number of far-left supporters is almost as high as that of the far right, accounting for 36,500 people (2021: 34,700). More than one in four far-left supporters are considered to be violent (Bundesministerium des Inneren und für Heimat 2023). In 2021, the Baden-Württemberg

Office for the Protection of the Constitution provided information on the gender and age of far-right supporters. In Baden-Württemberg, the potential number of far-right supporters in that year was 1,900; significantly more, namely 3,000 people, were classified as 'Reichsbürger' and 'Selbstverwalter', of whom 3% hold clear far-right positions. Women make up an estimated 20% of the far right and 29% of the 'Reichsbürger'/'Selbstverwalter'.

With regard to the age of far-right actors, the rule of thumb is that they tend to be young (up to 39 years old) and that the number of supporters decreases with age. However, in recent years there has been an increase in all age groups, especially those under 20. It is possible that the right-wing scene has been able to mobilize a particularly large number of young people. These findings are also consistent with the data from the current *Mitte-Studie*: younger people in particular (12.3%) have a firm right-wing world view, whereas this attitude declines significantly in middle age (8.1%) and stands at 4.4% from the age of 65 on (Zick/Mokros 2023, p.76). However, the age of 'Reichsbürger' and 'Selbstverwalter' is significantly higher, with the 50–59 age group being the most strongly represented (Verfassungsschutz Baden-Württemberg 2021).

Causes unclear!

In the social sciences, there are two main lines of research into the causes of the (re-)strengthening of populist-nationalist extremist parties. There is broad agreement on the influence of globalization, neo-liberalization and the associated downward social mobility (of entire regions, classes and social groups, such as skilled workers in the automotive industry and farmers) as well as processes of precarisation and impoverishment (e.g. Dörre 2029, Pieper 2023). The fear and uncertainty of economic decline and the feeling of being affected by crises reach far into the mainstream of society (Zick et al. 2023). Alongside socio-economic explanations, there are other more cultural or identity-based approaches: the starting point for researchers is the assumption that sympathisers with right-wing interpretations of the world are trying to fend off the impositions of an increasingly diverse, plural and multi-ethnic world. To put it bluntly, they reject gender equality policies, the

climate movement and the mobility transition as unrealistic and hostile ideas imposed by urban and/or 'green' elites and 'hipsters'. As a counter-reaction, those who feel insecure or resentful in this way increasingly turn to tradition, and significant parts of the population thus remain attached to a canon of values geared towards security, conformity and the willingness to follow (Norris/Inglehardt 2019; Mau et al. 2023, p.13). However, localized studies (e.g., Hochschild 2017 for the United States, Mau 2019 among others for Germany) show that socio-economic and cultural factors cannot be separated and are closely interlinked in everyday life. For some time now, a third strand of research has been investigating the influence of socio-spatial factors, such as the urban-rural and east-west divides, or the lack of public services on anti-democratic attitudes and populist electoral success (e.g., Neu 2022; Deppisch 2019; Deppisch et al. 2019).

Composition effects – context effects

In this context, explaining the regionally differentiated electoral success of the AfD is of particular interest. There are two possible explanations: (1) The electoral success is the result of traditional cultural values, norms and customs of the place and its inhabitants (composition effect); or (2) it is rooted in the demographic, social, environmental and infrastructural conditions in the local context (contextual factors).

For example, historical contexts and path dependencies, such as the 'inheritance' of voting behaviour (Rees et al. 2021), as well as political and cultural influences, can affect the likelihood of voting for right-wing populist or far-right parties. Lukas Haffert (2021), for instance, examines how Otto von Bismarck's suppression of German Catholics in the 19th century still influences political support for the AfD today. He can show that in Catholic regions, especially in the territory of the former state of Prussia,

where repression was particularly intense, a strong Catholic milieu with lay organizations and a clear attitude of distance towards state institutions and the clergy emerged. To this day, these Catholic regions show less support for the AfD than the southern German regions, which were less affected by repression. Larissa Deppisch (Deppisch et al. 2023) also demonstrates the influence of political cultures on the AfD's electoral success: the AfD can score points in (more) rural regions when dissatisfaction with living conditions is accompanied by a locally dominant right-wing conservative culture. However, if the local political culture is more socially liberal, the AfD is unable to gain ground despite high levels of dissatisfaction with the region's infrastructure. Conversely, in structurally strong rural areas, there is a high level of satisfaction with local living conditions and the AfD can hardly make any electoral gains despite a locally dominant right-wing conservative culture.

Nonetheless, it cannot be assumed that composition effects alone are decisive for the AfD vote. Rather, composition effects and context effects, i.e., effects that can be attributed to economic, demographic, natural and social (living) conditions, complement each other. Is there any evidence to support the assumption that people living in economically disadvantaged and infrastructurally deprived areas are particularly inclined towards the AfD? Similar to the Green party, the AfD's electoral successes show regional patterns, with the Greens remaining the party of the cities and the prosperous south, while the AfD is more successful in rural areas and in eastern Germany. On the one hand, the AfD's electoral success does not follow a straight line dividing urban and rural areas, and it is not primarily peripheral rural areas that appear to be susceptible to right-wing attitudes, but rather, less rural ones: the districts in Saxony, for example, where the AfD won a particularly large number of party-list votes in the 2021 federal election, tended to be less rural. However, in contrast to the 2017 federal election, the AfD won slightly

⁴ The study used the so-called Thünen typology: on the one hand, the dimension of rurality is used to distinguish rural from non-rural regions and, within this spatial category, to differentiate between somewhat rural and very rural areas (Deppisch et al. 2023, p.1f.).

⁵ In a multivariate analysis calculated by Stroppe/Jungmann (east/west, rurality, distance to public services, median income), only the factor of eastern Germany remains significant, i.e., living in eastern Germany is associated with a higher probability of voting for the AfD. All other factors are no longer significant, possibly because rurality, public services and income are strongly intercorrelated (Stroppe/Jungmann 2022, p.54).

more votes in very rural municipalities in western Germany in the 2021 federal election⁴ (Stroppe/Jungmann 2022; Deppisch et al. 2023; Deppisch 2019). There is also evidence to support the assumption that the AfD is most likely to be voted for where access to public services is poor, but not necessarily in small and rural municipalities (Diermeier 2020).⁵ It can therefore be argued that it is not only the urban-rural divide that is decisive for the AfD's electoral success, but also perceptions of the facilities available where people live, residency in eastern Germany or socialization in eastern Germany (Zick / Mokros 2023, p. 81–83) that favour the AfD's electoral success.

'When people live in a district characterized by high rurality, low middle income or poor access to infrastructure facilities, this correlates with an increased likelihood of voting for the AfD.'
Stroppe / Jungmann 2022, p. 57

Cohesion at risk?

The question of social cohesion is particularly relevant in times of profound change. However, a look at the current discourse quickly makes it clear that cohesion can be understood in very different ways: sometimes as the cement of society that binds people together in solidarity, and other times as a feeling of connectedness that creates a bond between cultures and identities. But conflict can also have a cohesive effect by creating new positions and representations, recognition and participation through negotiation. Cohesion is strongly understood in normative terms – as something good and desirable. Yet we know that cohesion is particularly strong when it is directed against others. Just think of football fans in a stadium.

The emphasis on social cohesion has also become a permanent feature of public and political life. This may be primarily because social cohesion is perceived to be particularly at risk in times of multiple crises. Germans have a very low opinion of the current state of social cohesion: In a survey conducted by Infratest dimap for the ARD theme week 'Wir gesucht' (Looking for 'Us') (2022), 65% of respondents thought cohesion was (somewhat) poor, 32% thought it was somewhat good and only 1% thought it was very good. Eastern German respondents rated the sense

of togetherness even worse, with 74% considering cohesion to be (rather) poor. Three quarters (73%) of younger respondents (aged 18–34) were also critical in this respect. However, while social cohesion at the national level is seen as particularly at risk, social interaction at the level of family and community is viewed to be in a much stronger state. Cohesion within the family and among friends is seen as particularly strong: nine out of ten respondents agree (Schwenk 2022). Social interaction in the neighbourhood, among colleagues and in the local municipality is rated as slightly less positive, but still good (Schwenk 2022; Teichler et al. 2023, p. 71; Kersten et al. 2022). However, people with higher levels of education and income are more likely than other respondent groups to experience positive cohesion in their family, neighbourhood or workplace (Teichler et al. 2023, p. 71). According to the respondents, clubs and cultural and leisure facilities play an important role in community life, as indicated by 76% of them. By contrast, politics and political parties (28%) and churches (27%) are no longer perceived as key drivers of integration (Schwenk 2022).

Conflicts serve to promote cohesion, as people in Germany generally have the positive experience that solutions can be found in such disputes. However, this attitude is significantly more common among educated and wealthy citizens (Teichler et al. 2023, p. 71, 78). Regardless of the constructive conflict culture in their immediate social environment, Germans believe that fault lines of social conflict run primarily between rich and poor. Differing attitudes towards Covid-19 measures were still seen as a threat to cohesion in 2022. Just under two thirds (62%) see major conflicts between the native population and immigrants (Schwenk 2022). However, social segregation – whether in cities (Helbig/Jähnen 2018), homogeneous groups of acquaintances (Teichler et al. 2023) or filter bubbles on social media (Schwenk 2022) – poses a particular challenge in overcoming these divides, as it hinders cross-milieu contact and conflict.

Civil society under threat?

Germany is a nation of active people: according to the results of the Freiwilligen survey (Volunteer Survey) (Simonson et al. 2022), 66% of Germans aged

14 and over were active in the community in 2019, for example, as members of a voluntary fire brigade, singing in a choir or playing tennis in a club. Of these active people, 38% carried out at least one voluntary activity, i.e., they also took on a role such as youth coach or choir leader. Civic engagement is defined here as participation in activities that are 'voluntary and community-based, take place in the public sphere and are not aimed at material gain' (ibid.).

For many years there has been talk of a change in the function of civil society. This means that the more institutionalized and formalized commitment and volunteer work found in traditional associations, churches and trade unions is increasingly being complemented by less formalized or independent groups and initiatives. These independent groups include a colourful range of activities, such as women's running groups, handicraft groups and species protection initiatives. The decisive factor is that there are no statutes or by-laws (Neu/Nikolic 2024).

Civic engagement is consistently associated with the 'good' and the 'community'. People who are engaged go beyond simply playing sport or making music; their activities complement the provision of public services; they create cohesion or work across generations on issues relevant to the future (Neu 2023).

However, the strong normative charge of engagement and volunteering often ignores the 'dark side' of some activities. If we assume that AfD voters are just as civically engaged as voters of other parties, this implies that those who are engaged also sympathize with the far right to a not inconsiderable extent (see Delto et al. 2023 for sports clubs). How should one deal with the fact that the guy they meet up with to play cards is a right-wing populist, the coach of the youth football team has a personal problem with immigration, and the chairwoman of the primary school's parents' association holds arch-conservative views on family and society? Civil society has no one controlling access to it: no gatekeepers who only allow those who think along the lines of democracy, human rights and European integration to join up. Engagement and volunteering are in themselves areas of society that should be self-organized and free from state intervention (Strachwitz 2023, p.4f.). But what happens when right-wing ideas spread in civil society, when pre-

viously unspeakable taboos are suddenly proclaimed out in the open, and when one part of the population sympathizes with extremist ideas and the other remains silent (Neu/Nikolic 2024)? Yet right-wing populist and far-right activities are not only spreading within existing structures of engagement, but are also building their own political networks, clubs and leisure activities in order to have a direct impact on civil society. What happens when the volunteer mayor is a member of the AfD? What if far-right concerts find particularly favourable opportunities in peripheral rural areas precisely because democratic civil society is weak (Deppisch et al. 2023)? When this is the case, it is difficult and perhaps even dangerous to rely on engagement structures to self-regulate. Indeed, in some municipalities an anti-democratic public (counter-)sphere has already emerged, which in turn offers leisure and community-building activities (Naumann 2021).

In Italy at the moment, it is easy to see what happens to 'unwanted' staff in public broadcasting, museums and other public institutions when there is a change of government. They are dismissed on a large scale and their positions are filled by party members of the Fratelli d'Italia. It doesn't take much imagination to imagine what could happen after an AfD victory at state or local level: anti-democratic forces will continue to delegitimize civil-society actors who do not fit into their right-wing world view. Moreover, they will limit the (financial) scope of action of the civil-society public opposition that stands up for diversity and inclusion. This makes it all the more regrettable that individual politicians, though clearly distancing themselves from the AfD, are still using its tone. We can already see how the actions of 'The Last Generation' are being disavowed by politicians and the media as an enemy and part of an elite project. CSU regional leader Alexander Dobrindt has also warned of the emergence of a 'Climate RAF'. Chancellor Olaf Scholz called the actions of 'The Last Generation' 'completely mad', and Berlin's Senator for Justice speculated that it was a criminal organization. As usual, the Bild newspaper was not squeamish either, describing the climate activists as 'climate chaotics', 'climate extremists' and 'climate criminals' (Schönborn 2024). But it has long been clear that this AfD 'talk' only brings additional electoral success to the right and not to the mainstream parties.

Undemocratic feelings

'Only feelings have the power to deny empirical evidence, to determine our motivation, to overshadow our own interests, and at the same time to provide answers to concrete social situations.'

Eva Illouz 2023, p. 15

Today's far right no longer loudly promotes racial theory or 'blood and soil' ideology, although these ideas do still occasionally appear, as has been the case with the 'völkische Siedler' ('völkisch settlers') and the 'remigration plans' that have recently come to light. Instead, right-wing actors mobilize their supporters by appealing to emotions, staging threats and creating insecurity. Discourses about greater gender equality are reinterpreted as discrimination campaigns against men, 'political correctness' mutates into a threat to freedom of expression, and the cargo bike becomes a symbol of the paternalism of urban 'hipsters' over the rural population. Actions and social movements that are actually intended to combat inequality, such as anti-discrimination campaigns and gender-neutral language, are discursively reinterpreted by right-wing actors into threat scenarios for the established middle-class mainstream. These narratives are thus directly linked to the diffuse perception of crisis and feelings of threat and rejection among many people (Kersten et al. 2024). Simon Strick calls this phenomenon 'reflexive fascism' because the new far-right ideologies do not appear exclusively revisionist or traditional, but have adapted perfectly to the neoliberal flexibilization of late capitalist societies – especially in their analogue and digital forms of communication (Strick 2021, p. 127ff.). 'These effective right-wing sentiments and their obvious attractiveness lead to the assumption that the reflexive fascists are not exclusively recruited from the ranks of incorrigible superiority fanatics and authority-obsessed totalitarians. Their subjects are appealed to through "affectedness" in a different way than conventional explanations of totalitarianism and ideology imply [...]' (Strick 2021, p. 129). In this way, citizens addressed by the right can ignore its hateful ideologies and do not have to take a stand on them, especially since they feel addressed and understood in their insecurity, their 'being left behind', their iso-

lation, their resentment and their anger. Such feelings can easily be refuted with good arguments and scientific expertise, as the lonely, insecure, left behind and resentful long for community, contact and appreciation (Kersten et al. 2024). Right-wing populist and far-right parties promise their (potential) voters social cohesion without diversity and appeal to the need for stability and order. Being part of this community evokes feelings of political self-efficacy, because nothing attracts attention today like being a 'neo-Nazi' (Neu et al. 2023).

Insecure

'In times of crisis, democracies have to be particularly careful in dealing with strain when things are "teetering on the brink". Ideally, democracy can be seen as a successful crisis regulator because it is characterized by the elements of debate and conflict and is capable of managing crises and, in the best case, emerging stronger after having done so.'

Andreas Zick und Elif Sandal-Önal 2023, p. 219

'Multiple crises' are also reflected in the lives and political satisfaction of many citizens. The climate crisis, the wars in Europe and the Middle East, the challenges of the energy transition, the economic slump and the ongoing outward migration from certain regions lead many people to believe that Germany is in a permanent downward spiral. A recent study by the rheingold Institut (2021, pp. 7–9), 'Orientierung in der Krisenpermanenz' (Orientation in a Permanent Crisis), shows that the pandemic was experienced as the starting point of a cascade of crises. Personal insecurity and fear of loss of wealth and downward social mobility can be the consequences of a crisis perceived as being permanent. More than 60% of respondents in the rheingold study reported feeling very exhausted and even seeing no way out of these crises (ibid.).

Even in the winter of 2022–23, the various crises still had people firmly in their grip, as the current

Mitte-Studie shows (Zick / Sandal-Önal 2023, p.227f.): Only a quarter (24 %) of respondents saw themselves as (somewhat) crisis-resistant, the majority (42 %) as (somewhat) crisis-insecure and some 34 % as crisis-ambivalent. Only just under a third of respondents (31 %) considered themselves to be severely affected by the crises. At the same time, however, 39 % of respondents felt that people like them were (somewhat) strongly threatened by the crises. In contrast to being personally affected, more than half of respondents (55 %) believe that Germany as a whole is (somewhat) strongly affected by crises.

Perceptions of crises vary greatly according to economic prosperity and region: in structurally weak regions, residents perceive the crises more strongly than in structurally stronger ones (Zick/Sandal-Önal 2023, p.240). Residents of western German regions also see the reality of the crisis, but express less urgency, emotion and excitement about possible fears over the future and downward mobility than respondents in eastern German regions. In western Germany, this is mainly due to the perception that the level of prosperity is still very high compared to other European countries. Regardless of the prosperity of a region, fears of loss are experienced much more emotionally and vehemently in eastern Germany. This may be due to the (negative) transformation experiences people there have gone through in the past decades. For many people, reunification brought not only new consumer opportunities, but also failed dreams and career paths. Moreover, despite considerable economic harmonization, differences in wages and wealth persist to this day. East Germans are therefore much more sensitive to (perceived) losses in prosperity (Deutschland Monitor 2024, p.210). The subjective perception of crisis thus correlates with objective living conditions.

So how do people deal with these 'multiple crises'? In the above-mentioned rheingold study (2021, p.9), three quarters of respondents (74 %) feel 'passively at the mercy' of the crises, while only 24 % see the crises as an opportunity to actively shape their lives. What social strategies do people prefer in crisis situations? Are they more likely to close ranks with 'their kind', or do they prefer cohesion and solidarity with those in need? The current Mitte-Studie shows that, overall, respondents tend to favour inclusive or open crisis management, i.e., they think it is impor-

tant for people to stick together in crises, for society to show solidarity with the weakest and to listen to the advice of experts and scientists. The more insecure respondents felt about crisis, the more likely they were to favour the 'closure' mode, e.g., tighter border controls, reviving old virtues or the 'German people' demonstrating their strength (Zick/Sandal-Önal 2023, p.230). Uncertainty about crisis also goes hand in hand with far-right attitudes: 'Crisis uncertainty leads people to advocate far-right views when they think that crises are a threat to them and the country, and they opt for a closed mode of crisis management' (ibid., p.234). Conversely, the low level of subjective crisis impact among respondents leads to a stronger approval of crisis management by opening up society towards more cohesion and solidarity. What is not surprising is that those who opt for this type of openness are more democratically inclined (ibid., p.236).

Left behind

'The feeling that the area in which one lives is disadvantaged has an impact on political attitudes. Those who feel "left behind" are more likely to have populist attitudes. And those who strongly feel "left behind" tend to be very dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy.'

Deutschland Monitor Kurzbericht 2024, p.4

In recent years, there has been an increasing number of stories about disappointed ideas of justice, marginalization and cultural devaluation of entire population groups or regions. In her highly acclaimed book 'Strangers in Their Own Land' (2017), Arlie Russell Hochschild vividly describes the unbroken belief in progress, pride and work ethic in the Deep South of the US, but also the experience of devaluation, anger and fear of globalization that drove many voters into the arms of the ultra-conservative Tea Party and made Trump's election as president possible. Hochschild describes a polarized US society in which it is not knowledge and information that determines people's perspectives and positions, but rather an emotionally charged perception of the world that determines how they feel about economic development, globalization and politics, and what political consequences they draw from it.

Hochschild summarizes these conservative narratives in a 'deep story' of everyday world views that 'feel like the actual truth for many people' (Hochschild 2017, p. 27). These 'deep stories' can also be told in Germany. Workers who lean towards right-wing populist parties, as well as farmers concerned about the future of their farms, report the downgrading and marginalization of their work and lifestyles (Neu 2022; Dörre 2019; Pieper 2023).

Using a comprehensive discourse analysis, Larissa Deppisch (2019) has shown that three different narratives of 'being left behind' are circulating in the public sphere: People feel left behind (1) infrastructurally, due to outward migration, ageing and the associated thinning out of public services; (2) economically, due to unemployment, unmanaged structural change or a less favourable regional economic situation; and finally, (3) culturally, according to the discourse, in the case of people who lead traditional conservative lifestyles and reject cosmopolitan modern attitudes such as openness to diversity and same-sex marriage. What these narratives have in common is that those who are supposedly 'left behind' do not feel that their fears and concerns are being taken seriously by the governing parties.

As Hochschild points out, in this country, too, much attention has been paid to the link between the sense of being left behind and the electoral success of populist and far-right parties, especially in remote rural areas. But how many people actually experience this feeling of their region being 'left behind'? Deutschland Monitor '23 concludes that 21% of Germans feel that their region is left behind, and 6% feel this very strongly. When the economic prosperity of a region is taken into account, there are clear differences: people living in less prosperous regions are more likely to feel left behind than those living in economically strong ones. Compared with western Germany (8%), more than twice as many people in eastern Germany feel left behind (19%); even in the prosperous regions of eastern Germany, the figures are significantly higher than in the prosperous re-

gions of the west (Deutschland Monitor 2024, p. 89). It should be noted, however, that the vast majority of Germans do not consider themselves to be regionally disadvantaged.

These results should be treated with caution, though, as neither the entire east is economically deprived, nor are all rural areas left behind. Nevertheless, feelings of regional decline are fed by the experience of dynamic demographic change (ageing and migration), deindustrialization and the dismantling of infrastructure. Those who are dissatisfied with the infrastructure in their place of residence, do not perceive the economic development of the region as positive and fear downward social mobility are more likely to feel 'left behind'. The perception of oneself being disadvantaged is then reflected in political attitudes. People who feel left behind are also more likely to have populist attitudes and to be dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy. It is hardly surprising that AfD supporters in particular see themselves as regionally disadvantaged (Deutschland Monitor 2024, p. 92). However, as already explained above, Larissa Deppisch (Deppisch et al. 2023) has been able to show in her studies that even in the case of high dissatisfaction with infrastructure in (more) rural regions, the AfD was only able to achieve electoral success in places where a right-wing conservative political culture was present.

Lonely

The Covid-19 pandemic made loneliness more tangible for many people. Loneliness is understood as the feeling that one's social networks are not sufficient in quality or quantity for one's well-being (Perlman/Peplau 1981). The negative feeling of loneliness is difficult to distinguish from the voluntary choice to be alone. In Germany, according to calculations based on the European Social Survey, only about 5% of the population suffered (very) often from loneliness before the pandemic. In a European comparison,

⁶ The values are based on an average index composed of four sub-dimensions of being left behind: (1) politically representative ('Politicians in Berlin are not interested in my region'), (2) cultural ('People in the rest of Germany do not respect how people in our region live'), (3) economically distributive ('Politicians have done too little to improve the situation in my region') and finally (4) the economic dimension ('My region is economically less developed than other regions').

these figures were on the low side. The Scandinavian countries had even lower levels in the 2010s, while significantly more people were affected in south-eastern European countries (d’Hombres et al. 2021). Evaluations with the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) show slightly higher figures for Germany over the same period: in 2013 and 2017, around 10% of respondents often or very often suffered from loneliness, while 14% said they sometimes felt lonely. This changed fundamentally with the Covid-19 pandemic, during which many people felt lonely – perhaps for the first time in their lives. This is also reflected in the SOEP data: during the first and second lockdowns, 40–42% of respondents reported that they were sometimes lonely (Entringer 2022). And although the period of social isolation was some time ago, there is increasing evidence that the prevalence of loneliness has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. In a recent survey by the Allensbach Institute, 26% of respondents said they sometimes felt lonely or very alone (Petersen 2023). Recent research also shows that teenagers and young adults continue to struggle with the effects of the pandemic. The study ‘Extrem einsam?’ (Extremely lonely?) shows that 55% of a representative sample of adolescents and young adults aged 16 to 23 miss the company of other people at least some of the time (Neu et al. 2023).

The causes of loneliness are manifold. On the one hand, it is well established that individual factors such as health, disability, unemployment, migratory background and living alone increase the risk of loneliness (Hawkey et al. 2022). The role of socio-demographic, social and spatial structural factors has only been explored in recent years. A lack of freely accessible amenities such as parks and leisure activities can increase the risk of loneliness (Bücker et al. 2020; Lyu/Forsyth 2022). At the same time, lonely people perceive their environment as darker, more unpleasant and less safe. Both young people and adults who experience loneliness tend to know fewer comfortable places and feel more uncomfortable in almost all places than non-lonely people. These ‘uncomfortable places’ are not only public spaces such as school, university and work, but also more private spaces including people’s own homes (Neu et al. 2023; Neu/Küpper 2023). Loneliness not only clouds people’s view of their surroundings, but also reduces trust in other people, institutions and even

the proper conduct of elections (Schobin 2020). Lonely people are more hostile to stressful situations (Cacioppo/Cacioppo 2018), less likely to vote and less likely to engage in political participation than non-lonely people (Langenkamp/Bienstman 2022).

At the same time, lonely people have a weaker feeling of political self-efficacy – again compared to non-lonely people. As a result, they are more likely to feel politically voiceless and politically powerless. Lonely people are more likely to support populist candidates and parties (Bender 2021). They are more likely to believe in conspiracy narratives (Neu et al. 2023), which are directed ‘against the elites’ and ‘the corrupt establishment’, but also against ‘the others’ and in the worst case against supposed ‘enemies of the people’, and which can often have anti-Semitic overtones (Kersten et al. 2024). The Mitte-Studie 2023 shows that lonely people also see themselves as victims of discrimination more often than non-lonely people (40% of lonely people vs 9% of non-lonely people). At the same time, however, lonely people are significantly more likely to devalue other social groups than non-lonely people (Neu/Küpper 2023, p. 346ff.). Loneliness is therefore not just an individual problem, but can also develop a power to undermine democracy.

Resentful

People who carry resentment also feel emotionally detached from society. However, the predominant emotional state is less sad and withdrawn, but rather glum and reproachful. Resentful people have experienced a psychological injury or emotional rejection that they cannot reject or process, but only accept powerlessly. This powerless suppression of instincts results in the resentful person emotionally reliving their humiliation over and over again. They bury this hostile affect within themselves until bitterness and self-poisoning gain the upper hand (Kersten et al. 2024; Scheler 1978; Fleury 2023).

As early as the turn of the last century, Max Scheler dealt with the ‘phenomenology and sociology of resentment’ in his monograph ‘Das Ressentiment im Aufbau der Moralen’ (1978 [1912], translated into English under the title ‘Ressentiment’). Schel-

er outlined a kind of escalating spiral of resentment, or 'ressentiment', including the stages of projection expansion, reality shift, value illusion, victim ambivalence and the contagiousness of the resentment. Resentment can therefore not only be seen as individual suffering, because these strong negative feelings, as in the case of loneliness, not only change perception (reality shift), but also spread to other areas of life (projection expansion). The blame for the personal offence is then no longer placed on the person who caused it, but on society as a whole. Resentful people see the world only from the perspective of their emotional offence and live within their own rationality (value illusion). The question of guilt always lies with others, so compensation is expected for the suffering incurred. If this balance is not achieved, self-victimization either increases or is transferred to bystanders who become victims themselves (victim ambivalence). Finally, resentment is highly contagious. Scheler speaks of resentment as a 'tremendously contagious poison' that turns into a socially and politically contagious vicious circle of 'self-poisoning of the mind' of an entire society (Scheler 1978, p. 4–7; in detail, see also Kersten et al. 2024).

There is probably little that can be done to counteract individual experiences of offence in people's personal lives. But are we currently observing signs of collective resentment? As we have seen above, residents of less affluent regions certainly do experience the lagging behind of their home region compared to other areas as a personal offence. The low level of satisfaction with the environment in which they live then spills over into dissatisfaction with democracy. A kind of collective bitterness takes hold, which is detrimental to democracy. In the spirit of Scheler's 'projection expansion', people no longer blame their

supposedly unjust situation on individual grievances, but directly reject the system as such. Social media provides an unprecedented machinery for accelerating and disseminating resentment. Grudges, hatred and lies can be spread around the world unfiltered and assembled into new realities that serve every conceivable victim discourse and merge into a self-contained world view. Once the 'fake news' is perfectly prepared, it can be fed directly back into the public discourse by interested parties in order to undermine and divide democratic societies. Thomas Lux, Steffen Mau and Linus Westheuser (2023, p. 375) use the term 'polarization entrepreneurs' to refer to this type of actor who capitalize on the spread of resentment, 'whose profiling is primarily based on the generation and capitalization of polarized debate' (ibid., p. 376). They wait 'in the style of political highwaymen' to 'capitalize on resentment and dissatisfaction, collect voters "without a [political] home" and integrate emotionally charged issues into their personal portfolio' (ibid.). Legacy media and traditional party politics, which strive for information and objectivity, too often try to keep up with this flood of hatred, conspiracy and misinformation, but they have great trouble succeeding, as the 'polarization entrepreneurs' are already targeting the next 'enemies of the people'. With their fixed canon of themes and stereotypes, especially with regard to immigration, they do not even have to vary their discourse much to make use of resentment-charged antagonisms: here are the culprits, there are the victims (Kersten et al. 2024). It would probably make more sense to confront the 'polarization entrepreneurs' with their lies and conspiracies, rather than chasing their never-ending tirades of hate. CORRECTIV has recently demonstrated this successfully.

Being able to handle society

'We should still do, with renewed vigour, what we have always needed to do: to answer bad speech with better speech, to counter false narratives with better narratives, to answer hate with love, and to believe that the truth can still succeed even in an age of lies.'

Salman Rushdie, acceptance speech at the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade 2023

The protests against the radical right in Germany in January 2024 are a clear sign that many people are not prepared to leave the field to right-wing populists and the far right. However, recent studies also show that anti-democratic and misanthropic attitudes have long since seeped deep into the mainstream of society (Zick et al. 2023; Decker et al. 2022); moreover, the far right has been able to gain ground in recent decades, especially in areas where civil society and the political public sphere have been weak and sometimes helpless in their counter-reactions. This year's federal state and European elections must therefore also be viewed with concern, as right-wing populist to far-right parties are poised to become the strongest or second-strongest force in many European countries.

In addition to the above considerations, the results of the expert interviews are summarized below, and promising strategies to counter right-wing actors are presented.

Creating equal living conditions

Although Germany has weathered the recent years of crisis well, with many eastern regions catching up with the west, 'equal living conditions' remains a key challenge for our society. Citizens residing in less prosperous regions are more dissatisfied with their living environment. This applies equally to eastern and western Germany, although the level of dissatisfaction is significantly higher in the east. Both real and perceived regional living conditions are also reflected in satisfaction with and trust in democratic institutions. Those who feel left behind have less trust in democracy (Deutschland Monitor 2024). Achieving

equal living conditions must therefore remain a political priority now and in the future. The effects of socio-economic structural change and demographic change on public services have been analysed and tested in various (pilot) projects over the past twenty years. However, a consistent approach to dealing with divergent regional developments (simultaneous shrinkage and growth) has not yet emerged. At times, one gets the impression that the policy solutions proposed hardly go beyond traditional and individually valuable approaches, such as the 'citizens' bus', the 'car-sharing bench' and the 'citizens' swimming pool'. A redefinition or reorganization of public services – including in the face of new crises and threats – has so far failed. The fact that these failures also have political consequences has not yet been recognized in certain political and societal spheres.

The power of emotions – replacing narratives of fear

Negative emotions of disappointment and mistrust, insecurity, 'being left behind', loneliness and resentment are booming. Contrary to the rhetoric of mistrust, division and polarization, Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux and Linus Westhäuser (2023) and the authors of the 'Zusammenhaltsbericht' (Cohesion Report) (Teichler et al. 2023), for example, see no evidence of a fundamental social divide or the formation of opposing camps. Large sections of the population share an awareness of the major social challenges such as climate change, the energy and mobility transition and the threat to democracy, even if there is currently no consensus on how to tackle the 'multi-crisis'. Nevertheless, narratives could focus on what we have in common – overcoming climate change or opposition to democracy in society as a whole – rather than on what divides us. The experts interviewed also repeatedly stressed the importance of communicating what we have in common – both in everyday life and in large-scale politics. However, politics is becoming less and less oriented towards the interests of society as a whole or towards balancing those interests; instead, patronage politics is

being pursued, which reinforces the boundaries between population groups.

It is by no means easy to 'overwrite' negative or threatening narratives, as our brains are evolutionarily programmed to perceive bad news. However, this should not stop us from telling 'good' stories about what we want to stand *for* and not what we want to stand *against* (Urner 2021). The aim is not to find the 'right' narrative, but to generate narratives that are relevant to people and therefore relatable and sustainable (Brandt et al. 2020, p. 233). Communicative methods, such as those used in the selected examples of 'demoSlam' and 'Sag was!' (Say Something!) and in 'bridging rhetoric' (Lloyd 2020), emphasize common ground and do not seek to persuade, but

rather to bring together people who disagree. According to Lloyd, there are two basic rhetorical approaches: 'bonding rhetoric' is used to bring a group of like-minded people together for a common cause. 'Bridging rhetoric', by contrast, is used to appeal to those who do not belong to one's group and who do not share one's perspectives or motives. It is a way of arguing that focuses on collective action and the benefits to the community. Speakers use analogies to reinforce both the speaker's and the 'other's' point of view, while focusing their arguments on jointly developing solutions that will benefit both sides, or the community as a whole. The 'bridging rhetoric method' has so far been used mainly where strong ethnic, religious, philosophical and political differences need to be bridged, such as in India (Lloyd 2020).

Understanding without agreeing – 'demoSlam': a format for understanding

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many people found that even among their friends and families, there were very different attitudes to pandemic-related measures. In some cases, a lack of understanding between parties continued even

long after the pandemic was over. Arguments did not lead to an objective rapprochement; instead, positions hardened. People were exhausted, and conversations were broken off with no prospect of being resumed. Frustration and resignation





remained on both sides. But how do we find our way back together? How do we resume dialogue?

Disputes with people who think differently often push us to our argumentative limits. This is where the demoSlam discussion format, developed by Evgeniya Sayko of the 'Magnet Werkstatt für Verständigung' (Magnet Workshop for Understanding), comes in. As part of the MITEINANDER REDEN (Talking Together) programme of the Federal Agency for Civic Education, demoSlam has been further tested ('Sachsen im Dialog', 2021–2023) and is now being used in various contexts. The initial question is: how do we overcome mutual misunderstanding? How do we negotiate positions and conflicts – beyond filter bubbles and waves of indignation? demoSlam brings people with differing opinions together in an entertaining way to discuss issues relevant to everyday life. It is explicitly not a classic debate format, where the aim is to convince the other side of your argument, but rather a format for exchange. The other panellist is not an opponent but a partner in conversation. The aim is to present one's opinion in such a way that the other party

becomes curious about the 'dissenting' opinion: 'understand without having to agree', as it says on the website. In this way, demoSlam not only provides a framework for exchanging views on controversial topics, but also teaches rhetorical tools that can be used for this challenging form of communication.

How does it work in practice? The 'slammers', i.e., the panellists, get to know each other in workshops lasting from several hours to several days and choose topics that the participants find controversial (e.g., topics such as 'Feminism and Catholicism' or 'Extinction Rebellion versus AfD'). Pairs are then formed to discuss their topic and prepare a presentation. It is crucial that there is no 'muzzling': everything can be said. The aim, initially, is even to stick to one's own position and strengthen it. Since none of this is easy, this phase is intensively supervised by the demoSlam trainers. The pairs then give ten-minute presentations, not traditional ones at a lectern in front of an audience, but as creatively as possible, using photos or props. As mentioned above, the goal is not to persuade, but to start a conversation and listen to other people's

opinions – in as relaxed a way as possible. Another important point is the final exchange with the audience, where the two positions presented can be supplemented with additional views from the listeners to allow for a colourful range of different social positions.

Doing all of this requires effort, and it takes time and energy to engage in this exchange. It is certainly harder than posting something to your ‘filter bubble’. So why is it worth the effort? Founder Evgeniya Sayko says in an interview with open-Transfer that societies have long been based on

consensus as an ideal, but now divisions are becoming more visible. All citizens are faced with the task of allowing dissent, recognizing the mosaic of views and integrating differences. The main thing is to keep the conversation going. This also seems to have been successful beyond the scope of the actual events, with some of the slammers having announced that they want to become trainers for demoSlam in the future.

www.demoslam.org

www.opentransfer.de/demoslam-verstehen-ohne-einverstanden-zu-sein

Providing information about right-wing actors

An uncertain economic situation fuels fears of downward mobility and increases the risk of adopting anti-democratic attitudes. But the reverse is also true: if right-wing populist and far-right attitudes grow among the population, the economy will go into a tailspin. In recent weeks, representatives from the German business community, industry, academia and the service sector have warned about a rise of the far right. They fear that a rising far right will scare off much-needed workers and specialists, and that the economic situation in Germany will worsen. The supermarket chain EDEKA showed a video of one of its stores with almost empty shelves, with only products made exclusively in Germany. Marcel Fratzscher, president of the German Institute for Economic Research, published a piece in the weekly newspaper DIE ZEIT arguing objectively against the AfD’s election promises and policies. He pointed out that their voters would be among the biggest financial losers. Tax breaks for the rich, the centralization of the economy and public services, and hindering the environmental transition would be particularly damaging to less well-off voters in rural areas (Fratzscher 2024).

In a longitudinal analysis, three researchers from the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick and Christoph Trebesch (2024), show that countries with populist regimes on average experience a significant decline in real GDP per capita.

In particular, they identify the erosion of democratic norms as a key factor in the disastrous economic consequences of populism. Not only do stable democratic institutions strengthen economic prosperity, but, conversely, social division and uncertainty deter investors and lead to capital flight and brain drain. As one interviewee said: ‘The aim must therefore be to put the competence attributed to the AfD – in almost all areas of life – to the test and to increasingly ask about its constructive contribution to solving social challenges.’ ‘We must do more to show why democracy is a good idea. But of course we also need to make people more aware that democracy is not just the responsibility of politicians. It’s everyone’s responsibility,’ emphasized another interviewee. In Hungary, and previously in Poland, it has been easy to see how populist forces gradually restricted the independence of the judiciary and the media and discredited civil society. The example of Poland also shows that populist and extremist forces can be pushed back.

Managing conflicts – establishing crisis and conflict management

Acts of hate and violence against local politicians have been on the rise across Germany for several years. In Lower Saxony alone, the number of politically motivated crimes against local officials and elected representatives more than doubled between 2019 and 2022 (Kommunal Akademie 2024). In interviews with representatives of churches and large

civil society associations involved in volunteer work, it was reported that the ranks of staff in principal employment have so far been little or not at all infiltrated by right-wing actors. However, in some associations and church groups, sympathisers with right-wing populist and far-right attitudes are now confidently speaking out in governing bodies with involved parties and actively trying to change the agenda according to their wishes or raise polarizing issues. The institutions interviewed, at least, do not have their own 'contingency plans' on how to respond appropriately to far-right attacks (e.g. in the event of online backlash). Responses end up being more situational, if there is a response at all. Wolfgang Schröder and colleagues (2022, p.295) also come to this conclusion in their study 'Einfallstor für rechts? Zivilgesellschaft und Rechtspopulismus in Deutschland' (Gateway for the right? Civil society and right-wing populism in Germany): 'Overall, organized civil society appears to have only a limited capacity to be independent, proactive and willing and able to act. The frequent

lack of documentation of right-wing incidents, the lack of human and financial resources and the low priority given to the issue within organizations speak for themselves.' In the expert interviews, it was often reported that municipalities were overwhelmed and helpless in the face of the challenge posed by the right; sometimes there is simply a lack of resistance or interest in pushing back anti-democratic actors in the public sphere. Or worse, that 'democracy' is already discredited as a dirty word by some in the public sphere. All too often, day-to-day politics takes precedence, and questions about successful democracy, open civil society or a sustainable future require time and energy that are seldom available in local government. Municipal academies, the Federal Agency for Civic Education and, most recently, the ConflictA conflict academy in Bielefeld are developing handouts and seminar formats to enable local politicians to exchange experiences, practise dealing with hate and violence and prepare concrete crisis interventions (see interview with Beate Küpper).

Well prepared – local conflict management



Prof. Dr. Beate Küpper is Professor of Social Work in Groups and Conflict Situations at Niederrhein University of Applied Sciences and a co-opted member of the newly founded ConflictA conflict academy at Bielefeld University. She is one of the most renowned researchers on right-wing populism and the far right in Germany. Her work centres on far-right attitudes and anti-democratic radicalization of the mainstream, and on prejudice and discrimination, and diversity and integration. Since 2014, Beate Küpper has been an author of the FES Mitte-Studie, most recently 'Die distanzierte Mitte' (The Distanced Center) (Zick et al. 2023).

Claudia Neu: *Has the social climate become harsher? How do you measure this, Ms Küpper?*

Beate Küpper: Our studies lead us to the conclusion that more and more people are distancing themselves from democracy and condoning political violence. This is particularly true of those

who perceive that there are many social conflicts. In addition, different social camps are increasingly coming together to form joint protests. 'Concerned citizens' are joining forces with 'Querdenker', peace activists, esotericists and Russia-supporters across all milieus to form a kind of new indignation movement. Tradespeople are demonstrating together with farmers. Disillusionment with politics and a lack of political trust are the common breeding grounds. But times of crisis also play an important role, as they demand change from all of us. And that is not easy; sometimes people simply don't want to give up what they are used to. The challenges of climate change, globalization and the digital transformation are complex. And then there was the Covid pandemic, and now Russia's war against Ukraine and the renewed conflict in the Middle East. Right-wing populists and the far right have it easy. They send the simple and comfortable message that 'the corrupt elites are deceiving the people', taking advantage of the opportunity to put themselves at the forefront of the movement, to present themselves as 'one of us', and thus attempt to gain new followers at rallies and demonstrations. They use crises and conflicts to further their own agenda. Right-wing populists in this country and around the world create danger scenarios, spread conspiracy myths and incite conflicts – online and offline – that lead to anger and hate. It is difficult to respond constructively. Some of those who initially participated in the demonstrations against the pandemic-related measures for very different reasons that were not at all far-right have become radicalized in this way.

CN: *This potential for radicalization is probably what led the Office for the Protection of the Constitution to create the area of 'efforts to delegitimize the state' in 2023?*

BK: This mixed situation, which is not always easy to situate in terms of political ideology, gives rise to a great deal of acceptance for violence and criminal energy. And there is often a link with far-right, folkist ideology, even if this is not always clear to those involved. Their attacks sometimes escalate to include ambulance drivers, police officers and mayors. Scientists

are also subject to hate speech and threats, i.e. anyone who disagrees with their own right-wing populist to far-right interpretation of the world and is committed to liberal democracy. Or even those who simply do research on Covid-19.

CN: *This is a huge burden for civil servants and also for politicians working on a volunteer basis.*

BK: No one likes to be threatened, including local politicians, whether they work full-time or as volunteers, which is often the case, especially in smaller municipalities in rural areas. The same goes for civil society actors who actively support democracy. Those who are threatened often feel very alone after the attacks, partly because others move away for fear of being targeted themselves. For many people, the threat is also a signal not to let themselves be defeated by the enemies of democracy, true to the motto 'now more than ever'. Unfortunately, only recently has there been a greater awareness of this kind of threat, which also affects civil society. So far, civil society and the administration have often overlooked and sometimes trivialized the fact that 'concerned' citizens are becoming enemies of democracy. Local conflicts, especially in rural areas, are often not discussed openly.

CN: *How can local politicians protect themselves against this? What can municipalities do?*

BK: There is an urgent need for a crisis concept for dealing with threats to make sure that it is not up to the individual, but to ensure that the administration and institutions provide protection, solidarity and support. How stable and democratically consolidated our society will be in the future, i.e., how municipalities deal with conflicts and crises, will also depend on municipalities. And this includes the direct threat to people who are committed to democracy as elected representatives or in civil society or elsewhere, such as those in the administration who keep things running. The key social challenges of our time – such as threats to democracy, transformation and integration – need to be addressed at the local level. Many municipalities are not yet well positioned to do this. Local problems, such as the integration of refugees, are often

tackled with great commitment by a few full-time and volunteer staff and the administration, but are not always coordinated. Municipalities rarely have anything like early warning systems or plans for what exactly to do in the event of a crisis, such as demonstrations against a new refugee centre, which are exploited, fuelled or even initiated by the far right. What should you do or not do when the mayor is hit by an online backlash? While local crises and problems always have their own unique frameworks and histories, many places share very similar issues, patterns and conflict dynamics. That is why in the project 'Kommunales Konfliktmanagement (KoKo II) – Kommunen für Integration stärken' (Municipal Conflict Management (KoKo II) – Making Municipalities Fit for Integration), which I lead and which is funded by Stiftung Mercator and the North Rhine-Westphalia Ministry for Children, Families, Refugees and Integration, we are trying to better prepare municipal staff for crisis situations and to identify and assess conflicts as early as possible before they escalate. By networking with key local players, the aim is to make municipalities more crisis-proof, better able to moderate conflicts and ultimately to establish a functioning municipal conflict management system. In addition to the KoKo II project, we are offering a certificate course in 'Systemic Municipal Conflict Management for In-house Municipal Conflict Managers' at the Niederrhein University of Applied Sciences from June 2024. We will also be offering a short online information session in April for anyone interested. With this course, we want to support public administration specialists in further professionalizing their work by teaching them the basics and techniques of conflict analysis, dialogue and conflict management. They will be trained to set up their own conflict management system in their municipality, tailored to local conditions.

CN: *Conflict research is a broad field. But is it true that not much research has been done on negotiating and managing local conflicts?*

BK: There is a lot of knowledge from the international arena, for example from regions that

have experienced civil war. And there is experience from the practice of conflict counselling here in Germany. At Bielefeld University, we have set up a conflict academy, ConflictA for short, at the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence (IKG) under the management of Prof. Dr. Andreas Zick. ConflictA is intended to be a place where the various academic findings from conflict research and those from real-life practice are brought together in order to better understand social and local conflicts and to develop approaches to dealing with them.

CN: *Why is a conflict academy needed, and what is currently happening there?*

BK: We are still starting out with ConflictA; we have only just begun with some pilot projects. For example, we are looking at how conflicts between groups play out in a neighbourhood. The different perspectives of the people living there are very interesting: what some people see as a big conflict, others sometimes don't even notice. We are also testing how we can transfer academic knowledge to work on memorial sites. We are also trying out methods such as Walk & Talk, which are themed walks through the neighbourhood to see where conflicts lie in public space and whether and how they are negotiated between citizens. At the same time, ConflictA is currently providing scientific support for a dialogue training course developed by Mo Asumang. As a black German, she approaches people on the far right and talks to them; initially, they are very surprised. We are working on future education and training programmes, as well, to improve understanding and conflict management. And of course we also talk to politicians. We are trying to develop formats that also facilitate debates on conflict in society as a whole.

www.koko2.de

www.hs-niederrhein.de/weiterbildung/management-und-recht/systemisches-kommunales-konfliktmanagement

www.uni-bielefeld.de/zwe/ikg/projekte/conflicta

Meeting and communication

It will be a great challenge for politics and society to find answers to social alienation, bitterness and racism, and to reintegrate those who are supposedly disillusioned with democracy. How can we succeed in not denying tension and division, but recognizing the diversity of society? How can people be motivated to do something together, to set common goals? There are two possible starting points: people experience cohesion primarily in their neighbourhoods. At the same time, they experience conflict as part of a solution strategy along a common path (see chapter 'Cohesion at risk?', p. 17). However, such an open negotiation process requires physical spaces where people of different ages, backgrounds and milieus can negotiate how they want to live together. These inclusive communicative spaces do not come about by themselves; they need to be created by local actors, such as members of associations, administrators or other civil society actors, and opened up to citizens. Third places (Oldenburg 1989), such as cafés, pubs and swimming pools, are crucial for establishing everyday contact across social milieus. However, when it comes to a shared idea of living together and negotiating a local consensus, extended formats such as 'social places' (Kersten et al. 2022) or (future) workshops are needed to engage citizens in joint action and negotiation. Social places often arise from a perceived local lack of infrastructure or opportunities to meet. Various constellations of actors from civil society, public administration and/or companies join forces and establish a social place. What exactly this social place is depends on the respective needs of the local population. It could be a co-operative restaurant, a village

square redevelopment or an urban gardening project. The decisive factor is not that all citizens of the district, neighbourhood or village are involved, but that the offers and opportunities for participation are inclusive. After all, it's not just the doers who are needed, but also the people who bake cakes and pull out benches. This also provides opportunities for people who are lonely and driven by resentment to move a bit closer to the community while keeping somewhat of a distance. The existence of democratic opportunity structures thus makes a decisive contribution to the feeling of social cohesion and allows the local community to perceive itself as an active community.

Local (future) workshops make it possible to go one step further: under professional guidance, citizens can present their ideas and experiences of participation and cohesion in their specific municipality or community, if possible, across milieus and generations. This allows the participants' implicit knowledge to form the basis for jointly developed plans for the future. Experiences of division, devaluation and exclusion can and should be discussed to prevent participants from getting mired in normative concepts of participation or cohesion. For example, the discussion about (the lack of) inclusive spaces in the municipality can lead to participants asking themselves how these spaces should be designed, what hurdles there might be and how they could be overcome. Democracy and cohesion are not experienced by citizens as conflict-free, but as complex and (co-) designable (Brandt et al. 2020, p. 235ff.). The design of inclusive meeting spaces thus represents the exact opposite of 'right-wing spaces', 'as they are not about winners and losers of coexistence or "reconquering" an ethnically homogeneous space' (ibid., p. 237).

'Weimar', or learning democracy through games

Last autumn, Matthias Cramer's interactive and semi-cooperative board game 'Weimar: The Fight for Democracy' attracted a great deal of attention beyond the circle of game enthusiasts. As the name suggests, the players are transported back to the Weimar era and have to prevent the rise of the Nazi party (NSDAP) by forming coalitions

of different parties. The four players each take on a party: the SPD, the Christian Centre, the Communist Party (KPD) or the folk-monarchist German National People's Party (DNVP). The NSDAP itself cannot be played. Of course, the players know the outcome of the story, but the appeal of the strategy game lies in trying out



alternative political paths to prevent the NSDAP from coming to power. If they don't succeed, all the players lose. Defending democracy as a game makes complex history more tangible. But this game is not for the impatient: a 60-page manual has to be read, six hours of playing time have to be planned for, and four players are needed. But experienced players won't be put off!

With such a large community of gamers, one could be forgiven for thinking that digital games have replaced analogue ones such as card and board games, but this is not the case. Analogue games such as 'Settlers of Catan' and 'Carcassonne' remain popular, and new strategy games are being added every year, such as the cooperative parlour game 'Dorfromantik', which recently won Game of the Year. 'Analogue games teach social skills because the players have to work out the rules together in direct contact, but also interpret them creatively during the game. A lot of negotiation skills are required', says Christian Beiersdorf, advisor to the Game Designers Association (SAZ). However, the experience that the game can be shaped together and that every player has the opportunity to change the outcome is crucial for the fun of playing and for the democratic learning effect. Democracy doesn't always have to be written on the box, because

even well-known games like 'Mensch ärgere Dich nicht' can stir up emotions. 'Children can see their mother in a rage or full of malicious joy. These changes in roles are important for acquiring social skills for "real" life', explains Christian Beiersdorf. Playing games, including strategy games like Weimar, is less about imparting hard facts or knowledge about institutions, and more about practising a political culture or political action: opposition, complicity, (self-)control, defeat, victory, fairness and negotiation. For political didactics, these are the central skills that make up responsible, emancipated and self-reflective citizens (Ancuta/Preisinger 2021). Cooperative games pose particular challenges to players: coming into direct contact or even conflict with other players and having to endure and react to their emotions. It is therefore crucial that children and adults not only have access to a variety of games within their (middle-class) family and circle of friends, but that opportunities are offered such as gaming afternoons in libraries or intergenerational centres. This is a very low-threshold way of reaching children from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Finally, Christian Beiersdorf would like to see 'more analogue games used in schools to practise democratic behaviour. But in general, we need more social spaces where people can get together – and play games together'.

Strengthening civil society – looking for allies

Germany is an engaged country. Clubs and leisure organizations are seen as the most important drivers of integration for social cohesion (Schwenk 2022). But civic engagement is not automatically democratic engagement. Mere coexistence or community experience is no guarantee of a vibrant democracy; worse still, conspiracy myths and marginalizing positions that threaten democracy are also good at bringing people together (Neu/Küpper 2023). The absence of protesting, few and weak civil society actors and inactive local politics – in short, a lack of a democratic counter-public – allows the far right to spread their strategy of normalization and to change what can be said, as silence can be interpreted as consent (Mobile Beratung 2023). Especially in rural areas, which are already characterized by a strong presence of the far right and neo-Nazis, these attitudes become socially acceptable and are therefore sometimes not even questioned; having an open critical discussion with a neighbour who espouses these attitudes can be dangerous. All too often, engaged people who publicly oppose far-right activities are not taken seriously (politically) and are treated with hostility and threatened. At the same time, rural areas that tolerate right-wing attitudes or have a weak civil society are attractive to people with such views ('völkische Siedler', neo-Nazi concerts) who see an opportunity to turn them into their 'space for action' (Deppisch et al. 2023).

An active, conflict-ready civil society that defends itself against right-wing actors gaining space is an effective means of pushing back far-right influence (Quent 2019; Freiheit et al. 2022). Groups of several actors in a town or village, such as schools, neighbourhoods or sports clubs, have proven to be particularly successful against right-wing activities. It is particularly effective when local multipliers such as mayors or club chairpersons are involved (Mobile Beratung 2023). Above all, democratic civil society needs to join forces and network, but it also needs a supportive public administration and local politics that offer protection if necessary. For clubs, volunteer fire brigades or choirs, it can be useful to seek external help in the event of conflicts or incidents of discrimination in order to maintain and organize positive coexistence on equal footing.

Organizing counter-protests

The nationwide demonstrations following the research by CORRECTIV in January 2024 have been the most significant stand taken by civil society in opposition of the far right – probably since the AfD was founded. At a local level, actors are constantly trying to prevent right-wing concerts, rallies and property purchases. After the election of the first AfD district administrator in June 2023, many people in Sonneberg too wanted to take a stand and invited the well-known punk band 'Feine Sahne Fischilet' from Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania to perform a concert in a club. An audience of 150 people enjoyed a free live performance at each of four consecutive mini-concerts. But many more watched the concert from outside. The band had come to show all those who had not voted for the AfD that they were not alone (MDR 7 July 2023). Rudolstadt in Thuringia also has a great deal of experience with neo-Nazis. In the early 1990s, 2,000 neo-Nazis marched there to mark the fifth anniversary of the death of Hitler's deputy Rudolf Hess. Today, the venerable Rudolstadt Theatre plays an important role in the public debate about democracy. Director Steffen Mensching creates theatre that appeals to a broad audience, facilitates dialogue and, of course, aims to entertain. 'I find Eisler's statement that over-politicization in art leads to barbarism in aesthetics very striking. We make art, and our attitude is in it. You don't have to stick it on top. The decision to consciously take a stand against Nazi marches is different. In that case, we're in the theatre in our role as citizens,' said Mensching in an interview with the weekly magazine DER FREITAG (29/2023).

It is clear that civil society is not powerless when it takes a public and vocal stand against the far right. It has often been possible to prevent halls from being hired for right-wing events and to organize counter-demonstrations against right-wing marches (Mobile Beratung 2023). Theatres and concert halls offer the opportunity to make a counter-public visible and to create a space for discourse.

At all political levels, it seems particularly important these days to take up the momentum of public protests against the far right and initiate a dialogue towards a democratic society in order to 'reposition the mainstream' (Mullis 2024, p.6).

Hitting back with their own methods... The 'Recht gegen rechts' (Using the law to combat the right) campaign

Intimidation, threats, warnings and lawsuits are common methods used by right-wing populists and the far right to silence unwanted opponents. Last year, the association 'Laut gegen Nazis e.V.', together with the Berlin agency 'Jung van Matt' and a Hamburg law firm, among others, turned the tables. They secured the trademark rights for the abbreviation 'VTRLND' (fatherland) and can now take action against the use of the term by issuing cease-and-desist letters. Until now, these code words could be printed without restriction on baby rompers, T-shirts and hoodies and sold in large volumes online or in neo-Nazi shops. This is because only a few explicitly national socialist messages and codes have been made illegal. Following a cease-and-desist from 'Laut gegen Nazis' and its allies, which refers to the time when the trademark rights were secured, the manufacturers are required to destroy their merchandise. The shops must also declare how many items have been sold since

then and how much money they have made from them. If this does not happen, the association can claim damages. The plan is to use the fines to secure further trademarks. As symbolic and successful as the 'Recht gegen rechts' (Using the law to combat the right) campaign is, it is understandably not easy to protect obvious neo-Nazi codes under trademark law. The trademark office wants to prevent numerical codes such as '18' for AH (= Adolf Hitler) and 'HKNKRZ' (swastika) from being protected. The neo-Nazi fashion business will certainly continue to flourish in the future, but the campaign is raising awareness that fashion is about more than just clothes, and that the law can be used to oppose these activities.

www.rechtgegenrechts.com

www.lautgegennazis.de

www.taz.de/Linker-Verein-gegen-Naziklamotten/!5965888



Taking the perspective of those affected

'If you say as a party that you're open to talking to the AfD and working with them, you are massively stabbing those affected and a pluralistic society in the back. The signal this sends out is: we are making common cause with a (far) right-wing party; you can't rely on us.'

Expert interview

One point was addressed several times in the expert interviews that tends to be less frequently discussed in the literature: what predominates is the search for the reasons why people turn to right-wing populist and far-right parties and organizations. In comparison, the perspective of those active against fighting the right and those affected by right-wing attacks is rarely taken into account. It is not uncommon for defamation and denigration of civil society engage-

ment to be trivialized, while attacks on social media and other places are downplayed. Many engaged people feel abandoned. This is particularly true in places 'where civil society is no longer to be found' and an anti-democratic counter-public has long since taken over. One interviewee said: 'There is no doubt that the majority of Germans are democratic, but in the decisive confrontation with right-wing actors, the crucial question often arises: does this society stand behind me in my engagement – or not?' Minorities in particular must be clearly protected from such attacks through legal means. Their experiences must not be trivialized, and the perpetrators must be prosecuted. At the same time, sensitivity and solidarity with those affected must be practised among friends and colleagues, in clubs and in public. Interactive (theatre) methods, such as those used by ProPalaver in public campaigns with confusing questions ('You don't want to turn right, do you?') and consistent political education in schools are at least a start.

'ProPalaver' – Debate instead of attack

Ali Wichmann and Kai Helm are dressed in smart blue security uniforms, and their large baseball caps are somewhat reminiscent of the characters in 'Mario Kart'. They approach some of the participants in the foyer of the MITEINANDER REDEN convention with a curious and attentive gaze. They ask surprising questions that confuse them and make them laugh. The two theatre makers rely on this element of surprise and confusion in their work to get people talking. Wichmann and Helm are experienced theatre makers who are as at home in street theatre as they are on the big stage. They both founded theatres in the 1980s: Helm the Brandungstheater in Altes Land, and Wichmann the Scharlatan Theater in Hamburg. 'We come from the street,' says Ali Wichmann, 'which means direct theatre practice: action and immediate reaction to what we experience.' Wichmann and Helm's interventions take them to places where you wouldn't expect to find theatre. Acting as security guards, they unexpectedly cordon off the market square with street

cones and engage passers-by in a political dialogue during a 'test of conviction'. If a passer-by tries to walk past the cones on the right-hand side, Wichmann and Helm ask the confusing question: 'Are you sure you want to walk on the right?' This creates a conversation about right-wing attitudes in public space with those who agree to take part. ProPalaver also has activities for village streets in its toolbox.

As part of the MITEINANDER REDEN programme, Wichmann and Helm, now as the duo ProPalaver, have dedicated themselves to using theatre methods to better equip people against right-wing populist patterns of argumentation and to practise other ways of reacting. In the 2021–23 funding period, they organized communicative workshops as part of the project 'Sag was! Nicht wegsehen, weghören, weggehen – Auseinandersetzungen anders bestehen' (Say something! Don't look away, don't cover your ears, don't walk away – approaching dis-

putes differently). In these workshops, everyday situations in which denigration, racism or xenophobia occur, and which many people tend to feel helpless against, are recreated in a playful way and alternative courses of action are practised. Ali Wichmann explains: 'The centrepiece is an interactive play about a fictitious conversation between a right-wing populist and a classic tag-along whose preference is to look away, cover their ears, run away, and if they say anything at all, it's guaranteed to be the wrong

thing. The participants can actively intervene in the scene, change it or add something new. In this way they learn more about their own attitudes and can change their behaviour and gain new experience'. But that's not all: ProPalaver are back in the 2022-24 funding period with a new interactive concept: 'Only those who speak up will be heard'. Once again, the aim is to use theatre formats and communicative strategies to motivate people to take an active role in society and thus strengthen democracy. Specifi-



cally, possible responses are worked on to everyday racist slogans such as 'Foreigners are all criminals and they're taking our jobs'. Methods such as asking questions, pausing and emphatic listening are practised together so that answers are ready to be put to use in real life. Ali Wichmann wants to 'put people in a position to counter racist and populist aggression without getting drowned out'.

www.miteinanderreden.net/projekteimdetail/sag-was-nicht-wegsehen-weghoeren-weggehen

www.miteinanderreden.net/projekteimdetail/propalaver-nur-wer-den-mund-aufmacht-wird-gehoert



First aid for racist and populist attacks

- Don't look away, don't cover your ears, don't walk away
- Keep your nerve, even when it's difficult
- Show your stance without being aggressive
- Ask questions and listen
- Avoid escalation and remain approachable

Taking a look at women

The role of girls and women in the right-wing scene is often underestimated. They are often perceived as apolitical or as tag-alongs. Yet women in particular play an important role in the right-wing populist party landscape in Europe – just think of Alice Weidel, Beatrice von Storch, Marine Le Pen or Giorgia Meloni, who clearly run counter to the image of women that often prevails in such circles. The latest Mitte-Studie also shows that even more women hold far-right views than men. In Germany as a whole, 8.3% of respondents have a manifestly far-right world view: 7.7% of men and 8.9% of women. The differences are particularly marked along two dimensions: men are slightly more likely to exhibit nationalist chauvinism (17.4%) than women (15.9%), while women are more xenophobic (women: 17.1%, men: 15.4%) (Zick/Mokros 2023, p. 75). The results of the 'Landfrauenstudie' (Study of Rural Women) also indicate that narratives of loss, defence and anti-democratic attitudes are widespread among women who work in agriculture or live on a farm (Pieper 2023). Last but not least, women generate and disseminate 'right-

wing' styles millions of times over on social media. Many female supporters of right-wing groups propagate backward-looking and hateful content that fantasizes about motherhood and the Nordic race. 'The apoliticization of generally understandable cultural styles, such as the knight's wife, the burgher or the crown princess, make up the toxic goods in which they deal. For it is only by looking closely, and thus automatically opening certain drawers of cultural common knowledge, that one can see the slight shifts in role models that these women conjure up'. (Sircar 2021, p. 171)

Women should no longer be ignored as supporters of the far right. They should be better understood in their various manifestations, not only to avoid stereotyping, but also to adequately assess their role in the radicalization process. It would be conceivable to develop a separate pro-democracy political strategy based on women's issues and lives. After all, many girls and women are attracted by the promise of a supposedly traditional model of life with clear gender roles, freed from all the demands of modernity, and self-esteem through motherhood.

Conclusion

Negative emotions of disappointment and mistrust, insecurity, 'being left behind', loneliness and resentment are booming. According to a Forsa survey for the Deutscher Beamtenbund (Federation of German Civil Servants) in 2023, only around a quarter (27 %) of the population believe that the state is able to fulfil its tasks. As many as 69% believe that the German state is overburdened (Klenner 2023). On the one hand, these feelings are fuelled by the experience of 'polycrises' such as the pandemic, war and inflation, to which some people feel helplessly exposed. On the other hand, loneliness, being 'left behind' and resentment can reinforce each other and make those affected more susceptible to anti-democratic attitudes. The AfD has thus been able to gain ground in two ways. On the one hand, the party has been able to further establish itself as the 'champion of the people' (Mullis 2024), and on the other, it has tapped into these negative feelings and argumentatively reinforced the level of threat. Politicians at the municipal, state and federal levels disagree on how to deal with the enemies of democracy and are not taking a unified stance against right-wing populism. Instead, they reinforce the fear narrative – 'the economic situation is dramatically poor' (according to Federal Minister for Economic Affairs Robert Habeck) – or sometimes even speak of 'migration crises' themselves.

Even if many citizens have the impression that German society is about to collapse, there is no empirical

evidence of a society completely divided into opposing camps (Mau et al. 2023; Teichler et al. 2023, p.103). Nevertheless, social segregation and living in one's own 'bubble', everyday decoupling and rigid political attitudes are making social coexistence more difficult. Different milieus rarely meet in the public sphere to argue and negotiate positions, attitudes and questions about the future. But this is exactly where we could start: no longer emphasizing what divides us, but what unites us. We need a change in communication which consistently informs people about the consequences of right-wing populist and far-right politics, which clearly distances itself from right-wing concepts and narratives, which unites rather than polarizes, which addresses issues that are relevant to citizens and which calls on them to stand up for democracy.

At the local level, civil society needs to be strengthened through networking and a clear stance against the right; citizens need to be involved in dialogue and negotiation processes; people engaged in working against the right must not be discredited; municipal politicians must be trained; better crisis management must be established; and the victims of right-wing violence must not be forgotten. There is also a need for social and economic policies that reduce social and territorial inequalities, thus depriving populism and the far right of the soil in which they can thrive.

The author



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