

## Country Profile Germany. Group-focused enmity, right-wing populism and right-wing extremism - the situation in Germany

Beate Küpper

The functioning and quality of democracy and, at the other end of the spectrum, anti-democratic tendencies, especially those related to right-wing extremism, receive special attention both in and outside Germany due to the history of National Socialism. Accordingly, the uncovering of existing anti-democratic or even neo-Nazi/right-wing extremist tendencies in Germany, for example, is subject to a strange mix of bright excitement and horror, wilful ignorance and defensiveness, often accompanied by indignation in both directions: While some accuse politics, the judiciary, the police and the Bundeswehr (Federal Defence) of being "blind to the right" and demand a sharper look and more initiative against racism, anti-Semitism and right-wing extremism, others believe that the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949 or the end of the GDR in 1990 made the country democratic once and for all.

Germany's terrible historical legacy is cited as one reason for the rather delayed rise of right-wing populism in Germany compared to the rest of Europe. A culture of remembrance of the Holocaust is a matter of state policy, openly anti-Semitic statements are largely outlawed in public, blatant hate speech against ethnic-cultural minorities (incitement of the people) is prohibited by law. Conversely, many activities to promote democracy and against group-focused enmity etc. are supported by the state. Slowly, awareness is also growing in this country to also take into account the perspective of people who are directly affected by racism, anti-Semitism, group-focused enmity and right-wing extremism. At the same time, many observers see an increasing polarisation of society, as can be seen in the mood in opinion polls and not least in the electoral successes of the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). This has been openly broken open with the refugee movement of 2015/16 - a rift is running through the country between those who want to continue on the path of an open, liberal and diverse society and those citizens who long for a return to nationalist-authoritarian conditions, whereby they like to claim the comforts of modernity and the achievements of democracy for themselves and, with the longing for homogeneity and hierarchy, are more likely to locate themselves on the side of the powerful. This rift is at odds with the divisions of rich and poor, East and West, even though both are clearly evident in Germany and are related to the political divide, albeit more complex than sometimes assumed. The political polarisation of Europe is revealed in an exemplary way in Germany with its common legacy of National Socialism, but the different ways in which it has been dealt with, the different lengths of time it has taken for democratisation and the different experiences of transformation.

During the Corona pandemic, trust in politics and especially in the ruling Christian Democratic Party (CDU/CSU) has clearly increased again. A large majority of Germans support the measures to contain the pandemic or even call for stricter measures.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, since the summer of 2020, people from what at first glance appear to be very different milieus (incidentally, from both East and West Germany) have come together under the slogan "thinking outside the box" (Querdenken) to protest against the restrictions on containment against the Covid19 pandemic and, moreover, quite fundamentally "against the system" (although it remains unclear what is actually meant by this in concrete terms). In addition to peace-movement alternatives with rainbow flags and esotericists, this demonstration increasingly includes right-wing extremist groups with imperial war flags, while speakers spread wild (including anti-Semitic) conspiracy myths in connection with Corona and beyond. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution observes a decreasing inhibition threshold for mob violence against media representatives and the police.<sup>7</sup> The polarisation that has already been observed seems to be continuing, with populist and even right-wing extremist tendencies, now linked to the issue of Corona. Unlike in most other countries, this is not only present on the internet in Germany, but also on the street. In a large survey conducted by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in the late summer of 2020 (Roose 2020), 14% of respondents believed that the Corona virus was "just a pretext to oppress people", and around a quarter were convinced that "the world is controlled by secret powers"; AfD voters were particularly likely to make these assumptions.

The following is a brief summary of the situation in Germany with regard to group-focused enmity, right-wing populism and right-wing extremism. This is intended to provide readers from abroad in particular with an overview of the current state of affairs.

*Diverse population:* The Federal Republic of Germany currently has about 83 million inhabitants, who are very diverse not only by gender, sexual orientation, and ability, as in any other country, but also by religion: about 29% belong to the Roman Catholic Church, 27% to the Protestant Church, 6% Muslim, 0.1% Jewish and other denominations; about one third have no denominational affiliation (most of them in former socialist East Germany). Even though the majority still belong to a denominational/faith community, only about half of Germans assign significance to religion in their everyday lives, and more do so in the West than in the East (Pickel 2013). Germany was and is a country of immigration: from time immemorial people have emigrated from and to Germany, even if this is not always present in the general consciousness. About a quarter of the population has a so-called "migration background"<sup>8</sup>,

---

<sup>6</sup> ARD Deutschlandtrend Extra of 12/17/2020, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend>, checked 01/11/2021.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/querdenker-gewaltbereitschaft-steigt-101.html>, checked 01/11/2021.

<sup>8</sup> The Federal Statistical Office (n.d.) defines this as follows: "A person has a migration background if he or she or at least one parent was not born with German citizenship."

and the diversity in terms of national and cultural origins is great, especially in the large cities in western Germany. About half of the people with a migration background have German citizenship, and of these, about half were already born in the country. Almost two thirds of the immigrants come from other European countries of the EU; the most common countries of origin are Turkey, Poland, and the countries of the former Soviet Union — a large proportion of the people who immigrated from countries of the former Eastern Bloc belonged to the former German minority in their countries and came to Germany with the status of late repatriates (Federal Statistical Office 2020). With the most recent large-scale flight movement from 2015/16 onwards, around 1.7 million people entered the country as asylum seekers, the vast majority from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan from civil war-like conditions.

*Realisation of democracy:* In a global comparison, Germany ranks similarly to its Western European neighbours (but not quite as well as the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries) in terms of realisation of political freedoms and quality of democracy. According to Freedom House, an NGO that measures political freedoms and the quality of democracies worldwide, Germany receives an overall score of 94 out of 100, with 0 for "least free" and 100 for "most free".<sup>9</sup> The scores cover free and fair elections, political pluralism and participation, governance and good government, freedom of the press, assembly and organisation, rule of law, and personal freedoms. According to the country report, Germany's representative democracy has a vibrant political culture and civil society, political rights and civil liberties are largely guaranteed, and the country's totalitarian past is constitutionally safeguarded against authoritarianism. At the same time, many people are confronted with group-focused enmity, which is not directed against them personally, but against them as an (assigned) member of a social group (because they are perceived as "different" or "foreign"), and which they can thus hardly escape. According to a representative survey commissioned by the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency in 2016, about one third of the people surveyed had experienced discrimination in the last 24 months in accordance with the General Equal Treatment Act (Antidiscrimination Act), i.e. e.g. on the basis of age, gender, sexual orientation or ethnic-cultural allocation (Beigang et al. 2016); respondents with a migration background reported experiencing discrimination particularly frequently. In a European comparison, Germany tends to lag behind in the fight against discrimination at the legal level. It took a long time for Germany to transpose the European Union's Amsterdam Declaration for Equal Opportunities and Against Discrimination into national law with the General Equal Treatment Act in

---

<https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Glossar/migrationshintergrund.html>, accessed 12/14/2020.

<sup>9</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/germany/freedom-world/2019>, checked 01/11/2021.

2006, and Germany was one of the last countries in Western Europe to legalise same-sex marriages (in Germany since 2017, in Catholic Spain since 2005).

*Political polarisation and extreme right-wing radicalisation:* Openly anti-democratic and right-wing populist to extreme right-wing voices have also become louder in Germany in recent years, and a clear polarisation is emerging. The vast majority positions itself as liberal-democratic, in favour of diversity and equality of minorities, while a not entirely small, aggressive minority opposes this. At the same time, quite a few move in an ambivalent in-between field, in which they find democracy good and right on the surface, but at the same time devalue various ethnic-cultural, religious and social minorities underneath. This polarisation came to light in the course of the refugee movement in 2015/16. On the one hand, a "welcoming culture" was proclaimed and many people got involved (or still do) professionally or voluntarily in supporting refugees; in 2015/15, around 10% of the population did so, even three quarters declared their basic willingness to get involved (Ahrens 2017). On the other hand, hatred and agitation against refugees and their supporters was spread on the internet and social media, and was soon taken to the streets. In the so-called "walks" of Pegida — "Patriotic Europeans against an Islamisation of the Occident" (the populism is already revealed in the self-chosen name) — "normal citizens" demonstrated hand in hand with right-wing extremists recognisable to the layman, walked behind posters with gallows for politicians and suspected the "system" and the "lying press" of concealing and ignoring the "true will of the people" (or even the will of the true people). On the occasion of the "refugee crisis", the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution has identified a radicalisation process of the right-wing extremist scene into parts of the politically right-wing population beyond the extremist spectrum.<sup>10</sup> The mood provided the basis for a serious increase in hate crimes against refugee accommodation and refugees<sup>11</sup>, some of which were committed by perpetrators who had not previously attracted attention. This also led to vicious insults and threats against people, including politicians, who were committed to refugees or to democracy in general. In smaller municipalities where political work is done on a voluntary basis, it has become difficult to find anyone willing to run for mayor. Some politicians have already been victims of violence, such as the Kassel district president Walter Lübcke, who was murdered in June 2019, because he had positioned himself in favour of an open society. In this context, it is also important to remember the right-wing terrorist murder series of the self-proclaimed National Socialist Underground (NSU) of nine migrant small business owners and a policewoman between 2000 and 2006, which was only recognised as such

---

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/de/aktuelles/schlaglicht/schlaglicht-2015-12-radikalisierungstendenzen-anlaesslich-der-fluechtlingskrise>, accessed 01/02/2021.

<sup>11</sup> see the situation reports of the Federal Criminal Police Office on crime in the context of immigration: [https://www.bka.de/DE/AktuelleInformationen/StatistikenLagebilder/Lagebilder/KriminalitaetImKontextVonZuwanderung/KriminalitaetImKontextVonZuwanderung\\_node.html](https://www.bka.de/DE/AktuelleInformationen/StatistikenLagebilder/Lagebilder/KriminalitaetImKontextVonZuwanderung/KriminalitaetImKontextVonZuwanderung_node.html), checked 01/11/2021.

by chance in 2011, and about which there are still many unanswered questions. In Germany, the Halle attack, directed against Jews who had gathered in the synagogue for Yom Kippur in autumn 2019, received special attention in recent times; however, as the attacker was unsuccessful in trying to breach the door, he eventually shot two passers-by. This was followed shortly afterwards by the Hanau attack directed against Muslims, in which the perpetrator shot a total of ten people, including his sick mother. The assassins believed in the same conspiracy myths that can be found in heaps on the internet, but which — according to the publicly available findings — also circulated at the kitchen table. These acts are part of a worldwide series of hate crimes and right-wing terrorist attacks. In addition, there are the recently publicised cases of racist and right-wing extremist comments in chat groups of members of the police, as well as right-wing extremist structures in the Bundeswehr (Federal Defence) and in special task forces. Meanwhile, right-wing extremism is classified as the greatest current threat to democracy not only by left-wing NGOs, but also by the Ministry of the Interior and the new head of the Federal Intelligence Services. In autumn 2020, the cabinet committee "to combat right-wing extremism and racism" chaired by the Federal Chancellor decided on further measures.

*Political polarisation through parties:* Since the last federal parliament election in 2017, a party of the far right spectrum has been represented in it for the first time since the times of National Socialism: the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party, founded in 2013 and oscillating between right-wing populist and far-right, was the third strongest force after the CDU/CSU (32.9%) and the SPD (20.5%) with 12.6%, ahead of the FDP (10.7%), the Left (9.2%) and the Greens (8.9%). The AfD was also successful in almost all state elections. In the meantime, support for the AfD has fallen again (to around 9% voter share; as of December 2020).<sup>12</sup> It is debated to what extent the elevation to "suspect" of its völkisch wing and its youth organisation Junge Alternative (JA), which is likely to scare off potentially more moderate voters, and/or the Corona pandemic, in which the AfD has positioned itself unclearly<sup>13</sup>, are responsible for this. In addition, there are a number of smaller far-right parties - including, among others, the National Socialist Party of Germany (NPD), which was founded as early as the 1960s - that do not clear the 5% hurdle in federal elections in Germany, but have been able to achieve double-digit electoral success in several local parliaments and some state parliaments for decades. In recent years, the AfD has increasingly succeeded in winning votes from the NPD, but also in drawing from the reservoir of former non-voters, as well as winning over voters, especially from the conservatives, but also from almost all other parties. The party is not only elected by people from precarious milieus, but

---

<sup>12</sup> ARD Deutschlandtrend 12/11/2020, Sunday Survey: <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend-2447.html>, checked 01/11/2021.

<sup>13</sup> First the AfD demanded stricter measures to contain the pandemic, then leading heads of the party showed solidarity with the conspiracy-theory anti-Corona demonstrations and demonstratively refused to wear protective masks in the German Bundestag.

also by the middle classes, and achieves its strongest results above all in the eastern states of Germany. Its voters are conspicuous for their high approval rate of group-focused enmity and right-wing extremist attitudes (Zick/Küpper/Berghan 2019; Decker/Brähler 2020).

*Right-wing groups:* There are a large number of right-wing populist to radical and extremist groups, organisations and other actors. The spectrum has become very diverse and difficult to survey. Again and again (and more so recently) individual organisations are banned, which are then often re-established under a different name. The boundaries between right-wing parties, extreme right-wing groups, and movements of the New Right are becoming increasingly blurred. Among the best known are the violent groups of the Autonomous Nationalists and the Blood & Honour network, which is active throughout Europe (officially banned in Germany since 2000, but still active underground); another relatively new phenomenon is that of the so called "Reichsbürger", quite a few of whom also have an affinity for weapons. Some of these groups deny the legitimacy of the Federal Republic of Germany, refer to the German Reich within the borders of 1937 under the National Socialists and strive for a New World Order (NWO). For some years now, the Identitarian movement has also been active in Germany; in Germany, it is closely linked to the self-described "Institute for State Policy" in Schnellroda, which presents itself as an intellectual think tank of the so-called "New Right", and which repeatedly succeeds in obtaining a forum even in bourgeois circles.<sup>14</sup> Many right-wing extremist actors have close ties to parties of the far right, including the AfD. They are networked with each other at home and abroad and increasingly appear together at right-wing extremist actions (especially at xenophobic demonstrations such as the one in Chemnitz in autumn 2018).

*Antidemocratic and right-wing extremist attitudes in the population:* The vast majority in Germany positions itself democratically and supports democracy. For example, only 4% of respondents in a representative survey conducted by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in 2019 reject democracy (New 2019; the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's Mitte Study 2018/19 also comes to a similar conclusion; Zick/Küpper/Berghan 2019). Overall, trust in democracy in Germany is mainly expressed on a general and abstract level; every second respondent shows trust in the functioning of democracy and its institutions, but less trust in federal politicians (ibid.). Pluralism, including the protection of minorities, is also supported by the vast majority. Thus 83% of respondents say: "I think it is good when people stand up against the agitation against minorities" (Zick/Küpper/Berghan 2019). At the same time, however, a not entirely small minority of around 20% hold attitudes that contradict liberal democracy and the dignity and equality of all people enshrined in the constitution, including attitudes that must

---

<sup>14</sup> For example, a "citizens' dialogue" on "freedom of opinion" organised by the Dresden Capital of Culture Office in Dresden on 9 March 2018; <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/literatur/2018-03/dresden-uwe-tellkamp-durs-gruenbein-afd-pegida/seite-2>, accessed 01/02/2021.

clearly be described as right-wing extremist, as demonstrated at regular intervals in representative opinion polls, comprehensively in the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's Mitte Study (FES; most recently *ibid.*) and the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study (most recently Decker/Brähler 2020).<sup>15</sup> For example, one third of respondents to the 2018 FES Mitte Study agreed with the statement: "In the national interest, we cannot grant everyone the same rights". While only a small proportion in Germany openly hold a closed far-right worldview, some facets of right-wing ideology are more widespread. This is especially true of national chauvinism, which demands that Germany demonstrate more strength. Here, East and West Germany are increasingly diverging — while fewer and fewer people in the West have openly held far-right positions in recent years, the proportion in the East is increasing. For example, almost 29% of respondents in East Germany and 14% in West Germany held the view: "What Germany needs now is a single strong party that embodies the community of the Volk as a whole." (Decker/Brähler 2020). Softer right-wing populist attitudes are held by about one-fifth of the population. Negative attitudes towards immigrants, asylum seekers, Muslims as well as Roma, but also ethnic racism in connection with the demand for established privileges as well as the devaluation of homeless and long-term unemployed people are clearly more widespread or are now (again) openly and loudly expressed. Anti-Semitism, sexism, and homophobia (openly expressed sexism and homophobia have decreased significantly in Germany) are also somewhat less prevalent or are more quiet and subtle (Zick/Küpper/Berghan 2019; see also the 10-year long-term study on group-focused enmity, Heitmeyer 2002-2011). For example, around one in four respondents to the FES Centre Study 2918/19 demand *pars pro toto* — as is typical of prejudice — and say: "With the policies Israel is making, I can well understand why you have something against Jews." One in five respondents demand: "Muslims should be banned from immigrating to Germany," and one in ten believes: "Whites rightly lead the world." 38% of respondents call for privileges for the established, agreeing with the statement: "Those who have always lived here should have more rights than those who moved here later." Several other respondents agree at least partly with these and similar statements.

*Opposition and resistance to right-wing radicalisation:* In Germany, many activities for democracy and prevention/intervention against group-focused enmity and right-wing extremism (as well as against Islamism and, more recently, against left-wing extremism) are state-funded at the federal, state, and local levels. These include, above all, the Federal Centre and the State Centres for Political Education, which provide constantly updated texts and materials on various topics in the field of populism/radicalisation free of charge for a broad readership. In addition, there are remembrance and education centres at Holocaust memorial sites, which now almost always also convey the transfer to

---

<sup>15</sup> Both studies provide a comprehensive picture of the mood in Germany and its development; the original publications contain many further findings, as well as information on the sample and survey method.

today. The federal government has also launched a number of programmes to promote democracy and social cohesion, in particular the federal programme "Demokratie leben!" with a funding volume of over 100 million euros in this legislative period and projects throughout Germany. Since 1981 there has been a Federal Government Commissioner for the Affairs of Persons with Disabilities, and since 2018 there has been a Commissioner for Anti-Semitism for the whole of Germany and in almost all of the federal states. However, there is currently no one with responsibility for the issues or with a special focus on the devaluation and discrimination of Roma or Muslims. In addition, there are mobile counselling centres against right-wing extremism nationwide and in many federal states/regions (although not nationwide) also counselling centres for victims of right-wing violence and furthermore anti-discrimination counselling centres, which are financed by public funds — however, often neither permanently nor sufficiently. In addition, a number of civil society organisations support both studies and projects for democracy and against misanthropy (e.g. the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, which is close to practice and is often one of the first to recognise new challenges and develop innovative approaches); this includes many offers from trade unions and churches, as well as party-related, business-related and other foundations and initiatives. Germany thus has a comparatively well-positioned infrastructure of political education and democracy promotion. However, many of these measures have so far been designed as projects, with a correspondingly limited duration and funding, and are not anchored in regular structures. The topic is surprisingly scarce in schools, vocational training and higher education. For example, the share of political education in the regular lessons that children and young people receive in the course of their schooling is less than five percent, and it is not uncommon for other subjects to be taught instead in the time designated in the timetable (Gökbudak/Hedtke, 2019). These issues are only marginally addressed, if at all, in the standard teacher training programme. At the same time, civil society resistance against racism and right-wing radicalism is lively and diverse. There are many initiatives and projects against group-focused enmity and right-wing extremism, often run on a voluntary basis by committed citizens, supported by professional forces. In addition to many small local activities, especially in schools (e.g. through the label "School without Racism - School with Courage", although this is always dependent on individual local activists), there are many adult education programmes and micro-projects that on the one hand raise awareness of everyday racism, and on the other hand see themselves as contact persons for those who are discriminated against. Marches by right-wing extremist groups are regularly accompanied by counter-events and demonstrations, albeit with regional differences<sup>16</sup>. Committed citizens, left-wing and middle-class parties, trade unions, welfare organisations, NGOs and anti-fascist groups are often

---

<sup>16</sup> In the western part of Germany, the counter-demonstrations are usually much larger than the right-wing extremist marches, while in the east they are often opposed by only a small group of counter-demonstrators who are all the more courageous because of the personal threat.



united in loose alliances for democracy and against right-wing extremism at municipal and sometimes also at state level.

Despite this broad and diverse spectrum of engagement for democracy and against group-focused enmity and right-wing extremism, the situation in Germany is anything but rosy. There is a lack of bundling, structuring and sometimes professionalization of activities. In some places — especially where the mood in the population is by no means consistently democratic — they face growing obstacles or face threats from right-wing extremists. Moreover, the activities are not universally supported by politicians and even have to defend themselves against the suspicion of being "left-wing extremist" or "not politically neutral". What is needed here is a clear positioning and a clear self-understanding for an open, plural society, which is also reflected in action.

## Literature

Ahrens, Petra-Angela (2017). Skepsis und Zuversicht. Wie blickt Deutschland auf Flüchtlinge? In: SI Aktuell, published by the Social Science Institute of the Protestant Church in Germany.

Decker, Oliver/Brähler, Elmar (Eds.) (2020). Autoritäre Dynamiken. Alte Ressentiments – neue Radikalität. Leipzig Authoritarianism Study 2020. Gießen: Psychosozial Verlag.

Heitmeyer, Wilhelm (2002-2011) (Ed.). Deutsche Zustände. Episode 1-10. Frankfurt a. M./Berlin: Suhrkamp.

Federal Statistical Office (n.d.): Migrationshintergrund. Available online at <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Glossar/migrationshintergrund.html>, checked on 11/26/2020.

Statistisches Bundesamt 2020. Continuously updated figures online at: [https://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2020/07/PD20\\_279\\_12511.html](https://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2020/07/PD20_279_12511.html)

Gödbudak, Mahir/Hedtke, Reinhold (2019). Ranking Politische Bildung 2018: Politische Bildung an allgemeinbildenden Schulen der Sekundarstufe I im Bundesländervergleich. Bielefeld: Social Science Education.

Beigang, Steffen/Fetz, Karolina/Foroutan, Naika/Kalkum, Dorina/Otto, Magdalena (2016). Diskriminierungserfahrungen in Deutschland – Erste Ergebnisse einer repräsentativen Erhebung und einer Betroffenenbefragung. Berlin. Ed. by the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency.

Neu, Viola (2019). Niemand möchte die Demokratie abschaffen. Einstellungen zu Demokratie, Sozialstaat und Institutionen. In: Analysen & Argumente, No. 351, ed. by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

(Constitutional Protection Report 2017)

Pickel (2013). Religionsmonitor – verstehen, was verbindet. Religiosität im internationalen Vergleich. Published by the Bertelsmann Foundation.

Roose, Jochen (2020). Verschwörung in der Krise. Repräsentative Umfragen zum Glauben an Verschwörungstheorien vor und in der Corona-Krise. In: Forum empirische Sozialforschung, ed. by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

Zick, Andreas/Küpper, Beate/Berghan, Wilhelm (2019). Verlorene Mitte – Feindselige Zustände: Rechtsextreme Einstellungen in Deutschland 2018/19. Edited by Franziska Schröter for the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Bonn: Dietz.