



Axel Salheiser and Christoph Richter

# The Profiteers of Fear?

Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis  
in Europe  
**Germany**

**EUROPA**

## EUROPA

### Europe needs social democracy!

Why do we really want Europe? Can we demonstrate to European citizens the opportunities offered by social politics and a strong social democracy in Europe? This is the aim of the new Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung project »Politics for Europe«. It shows that European integration can be done in a democratic, economic and socially balanced way and with a reliable foreign policy.

The following issues will be particularly important:

- Democratic Europe
- Social and ecological transformation
- Economic and social policy in Europe
- Foreign and security policy in Europe

We focus on these issues in our events and publications. We provide impetus and offer advice to decision-makers from politics and trade unions. Our aim is to drive the debate on the future of Europe forward and to develop specific proposals to shape central policy areas. With this publication series we want to engage you in the debate on the »Politics for Europe«!

### About this publication

Whilst the German rightwing populist party AfD faced a loss in support in the polls during the Corona-pandemic, rightwing populist views and extremist positions have nonetheless gained ground. There is considerable evidence that the protests against the COVID-19 restrictions have become a hotbed for these views, enabling their normalisation within the protest movement, and in the longer term within society as a whole. Large parts of the protest movement have adopted a rightwing populist, anti-elite and in parts an anti-democratic agenda.

### About the authors

**Axel Salheiser** and **Christoph Richter** are researchers at the Institute for Democracy and Civil Society in Jena (Institut für Demokratie und Zivilgesellschaft).

### Responsible for this publication within the FES

**Dr Philipp Fink**, head of FES in the Nordic Countries

**Dr Thomas Manz**, head of FES in France

**Dr Tobias Mörschel**, head of FES in Italy

# The Profiteers of Fear?

## Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe Germany

It is already clear that the global COVID-19 pandemic represents a historic turning-point. Since spring 2020, it has exposed the vulnerability of our highly globalised societies. The course in Germany has been comparatively moderate, but the long-term social, economic and political repercussions remain to be seen. By the end of August, approximately 240,000 cases had been reported in Germany, with more than 9,000 deaths attributed to the virus and associated complications (RKI 2020). After rising rapidly in March, daily reported new infections fell steadily from early April and were down to the low hundreds by May. Individual local hot-spots aside, the first wave of the pandemic had apparently been contained. From late July, however, the Robert-Koch-Institut (RKI), which leads official monitoring of the pandemic in Germany, reported a significant upturn in cases (RKI 2020).

Germany's economy was severely affected, with a strong reduction in external and internal demand (Belitz et al. 2020). The largest falls occurred in manufacturing, in the gastronomy, event and tourism sectors, and in retail; the German DAX share index plummeted in March, but subsequently recovered. By June unemployment in Germany had reached about 2.85 million, the highest figure since 2014. It is estimated that more than 600,000 were unemployed directly as a result of the corona crisis (BA 2020). In March and April about 10.7 million workers were in short-time working schemes; in June the figure was still about 350,000. On 3 June 2020 the German government announced a massive economic stimulus designed to cushion the blow of the pandemic and encourage forward-looking in areas including social infrastructure and health (BMF 2020).

### RIGHT-WING POPULIST STRATEGY: CRITICISING "DEFICIENT" GOVERNMENT POLICIES

The radical right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) quickly turned its attention to the issues raised by the COVID-19 pandemic, focussing on supposed deficiencies in the government's responses. The gist of early official statements by party leaders was that the comprehensive public health measures imposed on 23 March 2020 had come too late, above all that the government's policies to cushion the economic impacts were flawed and that an "exit strategy" for ending the restrictions was lacking. But in the Bundestag, and even more so in the federal states, the AfD initially sup-

ported the hygiene and health measures and frequently departed from its default stance of fundamental opposition. Party leaders found themselves having to justify their pragmatic conformism to their supporters on social media (Steffen 2020).

As the crisis unfolded, AfD politicians increasingly questioned the proportionality of the precautions, especially the general requirement to wear a face mask (Thorwarth 2020), which in Germany applies in particular public buildings, in trains, on public transport and in shops. In connection with the work of parliament itself, AfD deputies questioned whether there was really an "epidemic emergency" serious enough to reduce the number of parliamentarians participating in votes.<sup>1</sup> The AfD also criticised the restrictions on movement, the temporary closure of all shops and restaurants (with the exception of food retailers) and the strict hygiene requirements for manufacturing industry, which had led to partial closures and considerable loss of production. Occasionally the AfD took the opportunity to inject its older demands for rigorous border controls and mass deportations of asylum-seekers into the pandemic response discourse, by suggesting that the presence of migrants created an elevated risk of infection.<sup>2</sup>

The fundamental challenge for the AfD, however, was that a very large majority of the German population, according to representative surveys, consistently supported the health precautions and sometimes drastic restrictions on daily life imposed by national and state governments. Uncertainty in the face of a new and unknown threat narrowed the potential for division and left few openings for right-wing populist politicians to exploit. In fact, according to representative surveys many AfD voters fundamentally supported and observed the hygiene measures and health precautions – even if they were noticeably less satisfied than supporters of other parties with the government's crisis management and altogether significantly more critical of the measures (Kühne et al 2020). Although a regular representative survey on knowledge, risk perception, behaviour and trust during the pandemic found a noticeable decline in acceptance of heavily

<sup>1</sup> "Eklat um AfD: Partei widersetzt sich Corona-Beschränkungen – „Notsituation nicht existent“ in: Merkur, <https://www.merkur.de/politik/afd-coronavirus-bundestag-deutschland-beschraenkungen-umweltausschuss-berlin-pandemie-eklat-zr-13762104.html> [20 July 2020].

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

restrictive general measures since April, support for mask-wearing, restrictions on personal liberties, and stricter restrictions in especially affected regions remained constant through to the most recent survey (7 July 2020).<sup>3</sup>

## RIGHT-WING POPULISM UNPOPULAR

It is noteworthy that the AfD's national polling figures during the corona crisis have been at their lowest levels since the Bundestag election on 24 September 2017, where the party gained 12.6 percent of the votes and became the largest opposition group in parliament. Since early March 2020 its popularity has eroded significantly. All polling institutes have found significantly lower support for the AfD in the headline question of who the interviewee would vote for in a Bundestag election (between 9 and 11 percent) than it enjoyed in late 2019/early 2020 (15 percent). Most recently (22 August 2020), according to polling agency Forsa, it has been stuck in the single digits. At the same time the senior coalition partner (the twin Christian democratic parties CDU/CSU) is polling at 38 percent, about 5 percentage points above their result in the 2017 Bundestag election.<sup>4</sup> And public satisfaction with the German government is at record highs, as indicated for example by the monthly Politbarometer commissioned by the public broadcaster ZDF and Forschungsgruppe Wahlen.<sup>5</sup> This can be interpreted as approval of the state executive and broad support for its corona policies. In July 2020 for example 87 percent of those surveyed supported the nationwide requirement to wear a face mask in shops; this even included a small majority (58 percent) among AfD voters. The Deutschlandtrend survey published by public broadcaster ARD on 24 July 2020 found that 79 percent of those surveyed had become accustomed to mask-wearing and distancing. 19 percent said they found it hard to observe the rules; among AfD voters the figure was 43 percent.<sup>6</sup>

Recent months have also witnessed an internal leadership crisis within the AfD and a political feud at the national level. Many observers regard the disagreements as a power struggle and possibly a critical turning point in the party's history. The trigger was the response of the national executive committee (above all AfD national spokesperson Jörg Meuthen) to the threat of the party as a whole being placed under observation by the domestic security agency (BfV) and the forced dissolution of an influential extreme right-wing nationalist current that was already under observation (the "Flügel" or "wing"). The Flügel was an informal grouping of radical right-wingers led by Björn Höcke, AfD leader in the state of Thuringia. The BfV currently classifies the supporters of the Flügel and the members of the AfD's youth organisa-

tion – altogether about 7,000 individuals – as right-wing extremists (BMI 2020). On 15 May 2020 Andreas Kalbitz was expelled from the party at Meuthen's initiative, with the backing of the national executive committee. Kalbitz was AfD leader in Brandenburg and himself a member of the national executive committee. He was expelled for failing to report earlier membership of a neo-Nazi organisation when he joined the party. Kalbitz initially had the decision reversed by the administrative court in Berlin on the grounds that a party tribunal should have made the decision. On 25 July the AfD's national tribunal confirmed Kalbitz's expulsion (Leffers 2020). He took his case back to the administrative court in Berlin but lost this time (Balsler 2020). Some members of the national executive committee and many ordinary members of the party accuse Meuthen of sowing division and harming the party. Many prominent members of the AfD publicly declared their support for Kalbitz, who was regarded as an effective organiser within the party. In public interviews Meuthen continues to deny that the party has a problem with right-wing extremism and infiltration – which civil society observers and political scientists regard as undeniable (Funke 2020; Pfahl-Traughber 2019).

It would appear plausible to attribute the AfD's slump in support to the strength of approval of the German government and its policies in the corona crisis, which condemned the AfD to a passive opposition role. However it is equally plausible that the infighting over leadership and political direction and the impression this has left have contributed to the party's weakness in the polls. Whichever is the case, the AfD has been unable to profit from the corona crisis and its strategy of castigating the government's crisis response has been effective at most among the party's own base. However a Forsa survey published by the private broadcasters RTL and NTV on 18 July 2020 found the AfD attracting 19 percent in eastern Germany (27 percent among men, just 12 percent among women).<sup>7</sup> Support for the AfD has fallen only slightly in eastern Germany, where it remains – as in the state elections in Saxony and Thuringia in 2019 – the strongest party after the CDU.

A survey published on 4 October 2020 also indicates declining support for the AfD in eastern Germany (18 percent, compared to 24 percent a year earlier) (Emnid 2020). But the party remains relatively strong in that region, occupying third place behind the CDU and the Left Party.<sup>8</sup>

## VACILLATION – THE AfD IN THE BUNDESTAG AND IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA

In the Bundestag debate on the corona crisis on 25 March 2020, Alexander Gauland, spokesperson of the AfD group in the Bundestag and honorary chairman of the party, said:

3 COVID-19 Snapshot Monitoring (COSMO): <https://projekte.uni-erfurt.de/cosmo2020/web/> [20 July 2020].

4 Wahlrecht: Sonntagsfrage Bundestagswahl: <https://www.wahlrecht.de/umfragen/> [20 July 2020].

5 Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V.: Politbarometer Oktober II 2020: <https://www.forschungsgruppe.de/Aktuelles/Politbarometer/> [20 July 2020].

6 Tagesschau: Mehrheit hat sich an Maske gewöhnt: <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend-2277.html> [24 July 2020].

7 Ntv: Bei Ost-Männern liegt die AfD bei 27 Prozent: <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Bei-Ost-Maennern-liegt-die-AfD-bei-27-Prozent-article21918960.html> [20 July 2020].

8 In 2019 the AfD came second – after the CDU – in the state parliament election in Saxony; in the state of Thuringia it came second behind the Left Party.

“Standing together is now the duty of every citizen” and indicated support for the German government’s measures. Tellingly, he praised the government’s policies for “insights we share”, meaning in the first place the ability to “protect the borders”, even if this was happening much too late. This alluded to the myth propagated by the AfD that the German government had opened the internal EU border to Austria in 2015 to admit the asylum-seekers. Gauland’s implicit analogy between migration/asylum and the events of the pandemic was explicitly underlined by other representatives of the AfD during the corona crisis. Gauland went on to emphasise the importance of the “democratic nation state and its ability to act autonomously”. He criticised the lack of a government master plan for the corona crisis, in the sense of a “strategy covering more than the next two or three months” and capable of allaying the citizens’ justified fears. AfD deputy Peter Boehringer concretised the parliamentary group’s criticisms of the shutdown measures: “Closing down an entire country quickly has consequences for many people and businesses, some of which are irreversible: the psychological stresses of restrictions and closures, the financial woes of redundancy, not to speak of the interference with civil and property rights.” (Deutscher Bundestag 25.03.2020).

The AfD’s attempt to appear politically constructive and vigilant through its appeal for regular review and adaptation of the crisis strategy was bolstered by its suggestion that there had been a complete “lockdown” of the private sector and “unbearable collateral damage” – even though such a complete “lockdown” never in fact occurred in Germany. Although shops and restaurants were closed temporarily in March and April 2020, manufacturing and many other sectors of the economy continued to operate. Arrangements like short time and teleworking were based on voluntary decisions by businesses and were often not actually applied. At no point was a comprehensive curfew imposed. From the perspective of the AfD, the successive lifting of restrictions in June 2020 (including the complete reopening of shops and restaurants) came too late. On 2 July AfD Bundestag deputy Boehringer denied that there had been any medical necessity for the government’s measures. He relativised the COVID-19 pandemic, comparing it to a “common flu” and described the effects of the virus as “mostly completely unproblematic”. The German government, he said, was hiding these “facts” from the public and pursuing “anti-social” and “highly ideological policies on behalf of left-green interest groups” with its economic rescue package (Deutscher Bundestag 2.07.2020).

During the corona crisis leading figures in the AfD made prolific use of their social media channels. Their attention-grabbing slogans and simplistic demands exhibit great vacillation over time and represent rather unconvincing and sometimes belated attempts by the party to say what appeared opportune in a fast-moving crisis. For example, on 10 March AfD national spokesperson Meuthen announced via Facebook and Twitter: “It will be a disaster. Here comes Merkel’s massive economic crisis.” Alice Weidel, Gauland’s co-chair of the AfD group in the Bundestag, tweeted on 12 March 2020: “Denmark, Czech Republic, Italy and other EU countries are reacting: Practically closing down public life. Only in Germany

can #COVID19 spread unhindered. The consequences will be fatal! The government must finally take appropriate action! #coronadeutschland”. Meuthen viewed matters similarly: “Germany is facing disaster. Shutdown now!” Just six weeks later, however, on 30 April 2020, Weidel wrote: “#Economy must be restarted IMMEDIATELY, #Restaurants must reopen before the #weekend. People must be permitted to earn their living, instead of having to hope they get something from the disastrous chaos policies of the #government! #labour market #CoronaVirusDE.”

This shift in the party’s strategy, now interpreting the rigorous prioritisation of public health almost exclusively as repression of the population and unnecessary harm to private business and broader economic interests correlates noticeably with the decline in new infections. Here the AfD was apparently exploiting the “prevention paradox” noted and criticised by epidemiological experts, where a successful minimisation of health risks can encourage parts of the population to believe that necessary measures had been exaggerated or even superfluous, and had instead created negative side effects.

## RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND THE “HYGIENE PROTESTS”

It is obvious that the AfD’s positions in the corona crisis were designed to co-opt the public protest potential that had surfaced by the end of April in social media and public demonstrations, as citizens expressed their dissatisfaction, discontent and disbelief about supposedly “undemocratic” hygiene measures and restrictions on public life.<sup>9</sup> Around mid/late March individuals and groups in Germany began holding protests against the containment measures. The first so-called “hygiene demonstrations” occurred in Berlin on the last weekend of March and were initiated by a formerly left-wing capitalism-critical collective. The newly founded “Kommunikationsstelle demokratischer Widerstand” (Communication Centre for Democratic Resistance, motto “Not Without Us”) protested against the lockdown measures imposed by the Bundestag, which they compared to Adolf Hitler’s Enabling Act. They relativised the deadly effects of the corona pandemic and called for the defence of liberty and constitutional rights. Although they formally distanced themselves from radical right-wing ideas, the proportion of right-wing populist and right-wing extremist actors and supporters in their demonstrations grew unopposed and there were even instances of cooperation between organisers and right-wing populist conspiracy theorists, such as the former radio presenter Ken Jebsen.

Over time the hygiene demonstration grew to up to 1,000 participants and numerous regional offshoots appeared. In April, the number of protests also rose outside Berlin and numerous new groups and networks emerged across the

<sup>9</sup> Gauland, Alexander: Meinungs- und Versammlungsfreiheit muss auch in Krisenzeiten gelten, in: AfD-Kompakt (12.5.2020), <https://afdKompakt.de/2020/05/12/meinungs-und-versammlungsfreiheit-muss-auch-in-krisenzeiten-gelten/> (20.07.2020).

country. Staged as “protest walks” on account of prohibitions on public assemblies (which were partially lifted by rulings of the Federal Constitutional Court of 15 and 17 April 2020), these protests gathered growing support especially in eastern Germany. The southern German city of Stuttgart emerged as another “hotspot”. Here thousands demonstrated under the slogan “Querdenken 711” (lateral thinking) against restrictions, for basic rights and for early Bundestag elections in October 2020. Munich also saw regular demonstrations in May with several thousand participants. During the first peak in early May the number of protests announced sometimes exceeded sixty in a day<sup>10</sup> and thousands – occasionally up to ten thousand – took to the streets in the movement’s hotspots. Leading figures in the protests announced the founding of various new parties (“WIR 2020”, “Basisdemokratische Partei Deutschland”, “Aufwachen 2020”), although it remains to be seen whether they can achieve long-term success or even survive.

A relatively clear regional pattern emerged in terms of issues and enthusiasm. The main centres of the anti-corona protests were in western cities (Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria), where thousands attended demonstrations and a broader spectrum of society was represented; the picture in the eastern states, however, was dominated from the outset by right-wing populist and right-wing extremist groups and actors (Virchow 2020), at demonstrations often tending to attract just a couple of hundred participants. The disparate melange of esotericists, anti-vaxxers, conspiracy theorists (including the American QAnon movement), individuals from the “Reichsbürger” scene and right-wing extremists from the neo-Nazi spectrum defies easy classification. After a lull in July, more than 20,000 people joined a national demonstration against the state corona measures in Berlin on the first weekend of August.<sup>11</sup>

The largest protest to date was on 29 August 2020, when about 40,000 people demonstrated in Berlin against the government’s corona policies. They included large numbers of AfD supporters and some of the party’s Bundestag deputies, members and sympathisers of other right-wing extremist parties, semi-organised neo-Nazi groups, and individuals associated with the hooligan and Reichsbürger scenes. The entire right-wing extremist spectrum had mobilised massively for the demonstration. Calls to storm the Bundestag and topple the government circulated on social media and – in association with an increasingly generalised anti-elite populism in the movement as a whole – generated a “day of reckoning” mood on social media. Deeds followed words at the demonstration. Right-wing extremist fought with the police in front of both the Russian and American embassies. At the Bundestag right-wing extremist demonstrators stormed

the barriers, occupied the entrance area and fought with the handful of police posted there. Images of right-wing extremists waving the black-white-red flag of the German Empire in front of the Bundestag triggered national dismay on account of the historical symbolism.<sup>12</sup>

The organisers of the large and overwhelmingly peaceful Querdenken demonstration subsequently distanced themselves from the violence. But a division into peaceful demonstrators on one side and violent right-wing extremists on the other obscures problematic aspects of commonality. As well as a broadly shared hostility to elites, which targets the media, experts and the government in general, conspiracy narratives such as those of the QAnon movement and the right-wing extremist Reichsbürger movement create a narrative connecting parts of the protest spectrum. These were not outliers, as demonstrated for example when one of the organisers greeted the enthusiastic crowd on 1 August with the slogan of the QAnon movement (“Where we go one, we go all”). The press spokesperson of the Querdenken movement – who incidentally has a history of racist posts<sup>13</sup> – justified the calls for a “constituent assembly” in the typical jargon of the right-wing extremist Reichsbürger movement, dismissing Germany’s Basic Law as “occupation law”.<sup>14</sup>

Local AfD functionaries often sought to take charge of these protests, which especially in eastern Germany were characterised by the very visible presence and participation of known neo-Nazi actors and their alliance with supposedly mainstream “concerned citizens”. Gauland defended the demonstrators: “Freedom of speech means tolerating opinions one does not agree with. It is not the demonstrations that cause the divisions in society that people are complaining about, but the sweeping defamation of the participants as right-wing extremists, cranks, and conspiracy theorists”.<sup>15</sup> Right-wing populist and right-wing extremist groups are using the pandemic in widely different and sometimes contradictory ways. While certain groups deny that the pandemic is real or treat it as a conspiracy against the German population, others welcome the outbreak and the associated social turmoil as the trigger for their radical agenda of overturning the existing system (Sold/Süß 2020). All the various currents agree that the conflict potential of the crisis should be exploited by a “strong migration-critical street movement” (Sellner 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Telegram channel “Demotermine” for weekend 8/9 May 2020.

<sup>11</sup> The so-called “Reichsbürger” movement spans a disparate collection of ideas, held together ideologically by a refusal to recognise the legal order and democratic institutions of the Federal Republic of Germany. Members typically insist that the pre-1945 German Reich still exists or call for its reinstatement. Significant parts of the movement are right-wing extremist and heavily influenced by conspiracy ideologies and anti-Semitism.

<sup>12</sup> Tagesschau: Entsetzen über Eskalation am Reichstagsgebäude (30.8.2020) <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/corona-demo-berlin-131.html> [3 September 2020].

<sup>13</sup> Tagesspiegel: Der Hass, den Stephan Bergmann im Netz verbreitete (31.7.2020) <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/dokumentation-der-hass-den-stephan-bergmann-im-netz-verbreitete/26054768.html> [3 September 2020].

<sup>14</sup> Reitschuster.live: Auflösung der Corona-Demo am 30.8., Querdenken-Sprecher Bergmann im Interview <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pA7feiCxXbw> [3 September 2020].

<sup>15</sup> Gauland, Alexander: Meinungs- und Versammlungsfreiheit muss auch in Krisenzeiten gelten, in: AfD Kompakt (12.5.2020). <https://afdKompakt.de/2020/05/12/meinungs-und-versammlungsfreiheit-muss-auch-in-krisenzeiten-gelten/> [20 July 2020].

## RIGHT-WING CRITICISM OF “THE SYSTEM” AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CORONA CRISIS

Right-wing criticism of “the system” has been disseminated in the corona context in ways already observed in the course of the anti-refugee protests since 2015 (and still characteristic of the racist PEGIDA movement in Dresden today).<sup>16</sup> Attempts to bring together left-wing and right-wing protest potentials were observed, as seen in the past in the pro-Moscow “Monday demonstrations” that began in 2014 and in the attempts to transplant the French yellow vest protests to Germany in 2019. At that time, however, the success of such efforts was modest: the influence of conspiracy theorists and the right-wing extremist Reichsbürger movement were too obvious.<sup>17</sup> Central actors in those events, including Jürgen Elsässer, Ken Jebsen, Rüdiger Hoffmann and Andreas Popp, are also influential in the corona protests. What was new about the corona demonstrations was their size and their greater openness to a broad range of groups.

According to an unrepresentative survey in March and April 2020 belief in conspiracy theories associated with the COVID-19 virus and the pandemic grew significantly within the space of a few days, indicating rapid dissemination of corresponding narratives in the German population, especially via social media (IKG 2020). In particular between January and March a significant increase in disinformation and misinformation associated with Corona was witnessed in English-language contributions on social media (4 Chan, Telegram, Gab, Facebook, Instagram etc.), which also circulated in German-language online communities. The spectrum ranges from criticism of state-imposed restrictions through to grand conspiracy narratives drawing in places on right-wing populist, racist and anti-Semitic resentments. Especially at the beginning of the pandemic there was an increase in racist statements directed against migrants and persons of Asian origin as supposed vectors of disease (Velásquez et al 2020). Since February 2020 there has also been a worrying increase in real-life racist attacks and verbal abuse in Germany in this connection.<sup>18</sup> The central topics of the protest movement – such as esotericism, anti-vaccination, and scepticism towards experts, state institutions and public media – conflate with traditional conspiracy narratives about hidden forces and elites and become embedded in the pandemic discourse. The effect is to boost anti-Semitic hate speech and conspiracy myths. According to an internal report for the Israeli foreign ministry, Germany occupies third place for pan-

demic-related conspiracy narratives after the United States and France (Banse/Müller 2020).

Even if we apply due caution to the question of connections between social media and protest movements,<sup>19</sup> it can be said that social media in Germany currently play a relevant role in the mobilisation, networking and dissemination of disinformation and conspiracy narratives associated with the pandemic. Despite announcements of action and high-profile deletions by the major providers (Facebook, Twitter), certain individual so-called “superspreaders” (highly popular social media channels) reach between 600,000 (Twitter) and 1.5 million (Facebook) followers and users with disinformation and conspiracy myths.<sup>20</sup> YouTube features numerous contributions on the virus by right-wing conspiracy ideologists, whose most popular videos have been viewed millions of times.<sup>21</sup> Well-known actors like the musician Xavier Naidoo and the media platform RT Deutsch (the German-language offshoot of RT, classified by the BfV as right-wing extremist) are central to creating an audience for such content.

The relevance of the messenger service Telegram is also growing. Since 2017 it has been increasingly used by right-wing populist and right-wing extremist actors and groups as a “nerve centre for infowar”<sup>22</sup> and an “uncensored” alternative. According to its own figures, Telegram had more than 400 million regular users worldwide in April and daily growth of roughly 1.5 million.<sup>23</sup> Hundreds of groups use it to organise corona protests. Between March and early May prominent Telegram channels with corona-critical, right-wing populist and CT content witnessed strong growth in their daily views.<sup>24</sup> Disinformation and conspiracy narratives are shared using videos, images and text messages, in certain groups with an openly anti-Semitic and racist slant. Demonstrations are organised, mobilised and evaluated, members recruited for the new parties, petitions initiated, and practical advice and documents about evading the restrictions shared. Some

<sup>16</sup> Patriotiche Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes”.

<sup>17</sup> On the Monday demonstrations: <https://taz.de/Rechte-Montagsdemo-in-Berlin/15043804/> and <https://www.vice.com/de/article/9bvn95/antifa-gegen-hooligans-npd-reichsbuerger-montagsdemo-vier-zu-null-072> [10 August 2020]; On the yellow vest protests: <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/gekaperte-proteste-in-berlin-aussen-gelbweste-innen-reichsbuerger/23911796.html> and <https://www.belltower.news/gilets-jaunes-warum-feiert-die-neue-rechte-die-gelbwesten-proteste-in-frankreich-79065/> [10 August 2020].

<sup>18</sup> Verband der Beratungsstellen für Betroffene rechter, rassistischer und antisemitischer Gewalt e.V.(VBRG) <https://verband-brg.de/> [20 July 2020]

<sup>19</sup> See for example Kneuer, Marianne/Saskia Richter (2018): *Empörungsbewegungen: Der Einfluss von sozialen Medien auf die Protestbewegungen*. In: Remus, Nadine/Lars Rademacher (Ed.): *Handbuch NGO-Kommunikation*. Wiesbaden.

<sup>20</sup> Richter, Marie; Labbé, Chine; Padovese, Virginia; McDonald, Kendrick (NewsGuard): *Die 16 populärsten Twitter-Accounts in Deutschland, Italien und Frankreich, die Falschinformationen über das neuartige Coronavirus verbreiten* (20.5.2020), <https://www.newsguardtech.com/de/twitter-superspreaders-europe/> [10 August 2020] and Richter, Marie; McDonald, Kendrick (NewsGuard): *Die elf populärsten Facebook-Seiten, die Falschinformationen über das neuartige Coronavirus verbreiten* (7.5.2020), <https://www.newsguardtech.com/de/superspreader-von-corona-falschinformationen/> [10 August 2020]

<sup>21</sup> For example a widely shared video by conspiracy theorist Ken Jebsen entitled “Gates kapert Deutschland” reached 3.3 million views (as of 12 August 2020).

<sup>22</sup> Hass im Netz.info: *Coronapandemie und rechtsextreme Onlinepropaganda*. <https://www.hass-im-netz.info/themen/artikel/corona-pandemie-und-rechtsextreme-onlinepropaganda> [10 August 2020].

<sup>23</sup> Singh, Manish (TechCrunch): *Telegram hits 400M monthly active users* (24.4.2020) <https://techcrunch.com/2020/04/24/telegram-hits-400-million-monthly-active-users/> [10 August 2020].

<sup>24</sup> Holnburger, Josef on Twitter: *Verschwörungserzählungen auf #Telegram. Ein Blick auf die Szene – als Thread. Mal wieder.* (22.6.2020) <https://twitter.com/holnburger/status/1274956380554825736> [27 August 2020]

of the publicly viewable groups knowingly disseminate hate speech and calls for violence against minorities and leading protagonists of the state responses.

## RIGHT-WING POPULISM VERSUS EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY

In the discussions about the EU's coronavirus recovery package (after Germany assumed the EU Council Presidency on 1 July 2020), the AfD reactivated its core brand of nationalistic and EU-critical fiscal policy, which it has cultivated since its founding in 2013 in its complaints about the violation of "German interests" and the "plundering of the German taxpayer". On 21 July 2020, after the Special European Council agreed an EU package with a total volume of Euro 1.8 trillion, including transfer payments and loans, AfD financial expert Weidel called Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron the "gravediggers of European democracy".<sup>25</sup> This alarmist reckoning is but a louder version of the AfD's permanent lament that Germany as a net payer has more to lose than gain from a common EU financial policy. They present financial assistance to economically weaker countries and above all the loan guarantee as "pilfering from German taxpayers" without mentioning how the German economy benefits from the European Union.

What we see here is essentially the AfD's efforts to focus its ire on Angela Merkel and her domestic policies to satisfy the neo-liberal and anti-EU sections of its base, after the prime right-wing populist issues of asylum, migration and integration had dropped down the political agenda. This is also underlined by statements by AfD national executive and Bundestag member Stephan Brandner, who asserted that Merkel's EU policy was "driving our country into certain disaster".<sup>26</sup> Beatrix von Storch, also AfD national executive and Bundestag member tweeted on 21 July 2020: "You can rely on Merkel for NOTHING – except the certainty that she will sell and betray us." The corona crisis and its consequences offer the AfD a welcome opportunity to update its blunt criticisms of the actions of the political elites and the performance of (national and supranational) democratic institutions with a nationally egotistic and ethnocentric framing that delegitimises intra-European solidarity as a threatening, "ideologically motivated" burden ("debt socialism") and "betrayal of the nation" by democratic politicians. Here again we see the AfD's efforts to profit from the corona crisis and its (anticipated) socio-economic consequences.

In questions of international economic policy the AfD takes a

<sup>25</sup> Weidel, Alice (AfD): Merkel und Macron sind die Totengräber der Demokratie in Europa (21.7.2020) <https://www.afd.de/alice-weidel-merkel-und-macron-sind-die-totengraeber-der-demokratie-in-europa/> [21 July 2020].

<sup>26</sup> Brandner, Stephan (AfD): Mit ihren EU Verschuldungs-Forderungen gibt sich Merkel der Lächerlichkeit preis (19.7.2020) <https://www.afd.de/stephan-brandner-mit-ihren-eu-verschuldungs-forderungen-gibt-sich-merkel-der-laecherlichkeit-preis/> [21 June 2020].

stance against "selling off German and European technology" and demands containment of Chinese investment.<sup>27</sup> In the corona crisis individual AfD functionaries revised their globalisation critique concerning excessive dependency on Asia, for example in relation to the purchase of masks.<sup>28</sup> In April 2020, in light of the corona pandemic, Martin Frohnmaier, the development policy spokesperson of the AfD group in the Bundestag, repeated his demand for German development assistance to China to cease immediately.<sup>29</sup> In the context of political developments in Hong Kong the AfD condemned the "colonialising tendencies" and "power strivings of the Chinese communists".<sup>30</sup> It is conspicuous that the AfD's official position towards Putin's Russia places much less weight on protectionism and economic sovereignty, and that its argumentation steers clear of basic democratic and human rights. The AfD opposes the EU's sanctions against Russia and supports completion of the NordStream 2 gas pipeline in the Baltic.<sup>31</sup>

## OUTLOOK

The parliamentary populist and extreme right in Germany have not – at least thus far – succeeded in transforming the potential for protest against pandemic containment into growing electoral support within the population. On the contrary, the governing parties have experienced strong approval for their crisis management and the overwhelming majority of the population in Germany takes a critical view of protests directed against it. Nevertheless, as the events of 29 August 2020 in Berlin demonstrated, the street protests offer right-wing extremist actors and groups opportunities for self-presentation and agitation, in a context where significant common ground exists with other parts of the protest movement. Here there is a danger of normalisation of right-wing extremist ideas and symbols within the protest movement, and in the longer term within society as a whole. Large parts of the protest movement have in the meantime moved visibly beyond the original issue – the corona-related restrictions – and adopted a (right-wing) populist, anti-elite and in parts anti-democratic agenda. This gives grounds for concern that a long-term democracy-sceptical protest potential could become established – regardless of the actual course of the pandemic.

<sup>27</sup> AfD: Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik <https://www.afd.de/aussen-sicherheitspolitik-aussenhandel-entwicklungshilfe/> [3 September 2020].

<sup>28</sup> Wölle, Carola (AfD): Warum kauft Baden-Württemberg Atemschutz in China, nicht im Ländle? (1.4.2020) <https://afdKompakt.de/2020/04/01/warum-kauft-baden-wuerttemberg-atemschutz-in-china-nicht-im-laendle/> [3 September 2020].

<sup>29</sup> Frohnmaier, Markus (AfD) on Facebook: Entwicklungshilfe für China ist wie Hartz IV für Bill Gates (1.7.2020) <https://www.facebook.com/frohnmaier/videos/640134653261676/> [3 September 2020].

<sup>30</sup> Hampel, Armin-Paulus (AfD): Chinas kalte Machtergreifung in Hong Kong (25.5.2020) <https://www.afdbundestag.de/hampel-chinas-kalte-machtergreifung-in-hong-kong/> [3 September 2020].

<sup>31</sup> AfD: Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik <https://www.afd.de/aussen-sicherheitspolitik-aussenhandel-entwicklungshilfe/> [3 September 2020].

# References

- Balsler, Markus** (2020): Kalbitz blitzt mit Eilantrag gegen AfD-Ausschluss ab, in: Süddeutsche Zeitung, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/kalbitz-afd-ausschluss-meuthen-1.5005897> (21.08.2020).
- Banse, Dirk ; Müller, Uwe** (2020): In Deutschland verbreiten sich antisemitische Verschwörungstheorien, in: Welt, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article207814673/Corona-Krise-Israel-warnt-vor-judenfeindlichen-Verschwörungstheorien.html> (07.05.2020).
- Belitz, Heike; Clemens, Marius; Fratzscher, Marcel; Gornig, Martin; Kemfert, Claudia; Kritikos, Alexander S.; Michelsen, Claus; Neuhoff, Karsten; Rieth, Malte; Spieß, C. Katharina** (2020): Mit Investitionen und Innovationen aus der Corona-Krise, DIW-Berlin, [https://www.diw.de/de/diw\\_01.c.791596.de/publikationen/wochenberichte/2020\\_24\\_5/mit\\_investitionen\\_und\\_innovationen\\_aus\\_der\\_corona-krise.html](https://www.diw.de/de/diw_01.c.791596.de/publikationen/wochenberichte/2020_24_5/mit_investitionen_und_innovationen_aus_der_corona-krise.html) (20.07.2020).
- Bundesagentur für Arbeit** (BA 2020): Statistiken aktuell, <https://statistik.arbeitsagentur.de> (20.07.2020).
- Bundesministerium der Finanzen** (BMF 2020): Eckpunkte des Konjunkturprogramms: Corona-Folgen bekämpfen, Wohlstand sichern, Zukunftsfähigkeit stärken <https://www.bundesfinanzministerium.de/Content/DE/Standardartikel/Themen/Schlaglichter/Konjunkturpaket/2020-06-03-eckpunktetpapier.pdf> (20.07.2020).
- Bundesministerium des Inneren, für Bau und Heimat** (BMI 2020): Verfassungsschutzbericht 2019, <https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/embed/vsbericht-2019.pdf> (20.07.2020).
- Deutscher Bundestag** (25.03.2020): Plenarprotokoll des Deutschen Bundestags – 19. Wahlperiode – 154. Sitzung. Berlin, Mittwoch, den 25. März 2020: <https://dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21/btp/19/19154.pdf> (17.07.2020).
- Deutscher Bundestag** (02.07.2020): Plenarprotokoll des Deutschen Bundestags – 19. Wahlperiode – 170. Sitzung. Berlin, Donnerstag, den 2. Juli 2020: <http://dipbt.bundestag.de/doc/btp/19/19170.pdf> (20.07.2020).
- Emnid, Kantar** (2020): AfD verliert im Osten Deutschlands deutlich an Zustimmung, in: Handelsblatt, Berlin, <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/deutschland/sonntagstrend-afd-verliert-im-osten-deutschlands-deutlich-an-zustimmung/26241588.html?ticket=ST-4857669-RAa2JmaqDaSbtFFQsXP-ap2> (04.10.2020).
- Funke, Hajo** (2020): Die Höcke-AfD: Vom gärrigen Haufen zur rechts-extremen »Flügel«-Partei: Eine Flugschrift, Hamburg.
- Institut für interdisziplinäre Konflikt- und Gewaltforschung** (IKG 2020): Erste Ergebnisse einer Online-Umfrage zur gesellschaftlichen Wahrnehmung des Umgangs mit der Corona-Pandemie in Deutschland, <https://pub.uni-bielefeld.de/download/2942930/2942931/Rees%20et%20al.%20Erste%20Ergebnisse%20einer%20Online-Umfrage%20zur%20gesellschaftlichen%20Wahrnehmung%20des%20Umgangs%20mit%20der%20Corona-Pandemie%20in%20Deutschland.pdf> (21.06.2020).
- Kühne, Simon; Kroh, Martin; Liebig, Stefan; Rees, Jonas; Zick, Andreas; Entringer, Theresa; Goebel, Jan; Grabka, Markus M.; Graeber, Daniel; Kröger, Hannes; Schröder, Carsten; Schupp, Jürgen; Seebauer, Johannes; Zinn, Sabine** (2020): Gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt in Zeiten von Corona: Eine Chance in der Krise?, SOEPpapers on Multidisciplinary Panel Data Research, DIW Berlin, [https://www.diw.de/documents/publikationen/73/diw\\_01.c.793201.de/diw\\_sp1091.pdf](https://www.diw.de/documents/publikationen/73/diw_01.c.793201.de/diw_sp1091.pdf) (21.07.2020).
- Leffers, Jochen** (2020): Bundesschiedsgericht bestätigt Parteiausschluss von Kalbitz, in: Spiegel, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/andreas-kalbitz-bundesschiedsgericht-bestaetigt-parteiausschluss-von-brandenburger-afd-fraktionschef-a-03e30d90-13aa-4e99-ad4b-221259342ef6> (25.07.2020).
- Pfahl-Traugber, Armin** (2019): Die AfD und der Rechtsextremismus: Eine Analyse aus politikwissenschaftlicher Perspektive, Wiesbaden.
- Robert Koch-Institut** (RKI 2020): Information zu gestiegenen Fallzahlen in Deutschland [https://www.rki.de/DE/Content/InfAZ/N/Neuartiges\\_Coronavirus/Gestiegene\\_Fallzahlen.html](https://www.rki.de/DE/Content/InfAZ/N/Neuartiges_Coronavirus/Gestiegene_Fallzahlen.html) (25.07.2020).
- Sellner, Martin** (2020): Coronademos: Proxythema und „Lücke-Effekt“, in: Sezession, <https://sezession.de/63203/coronademos-proxythema-luecke-effekt> (04.08.2020).
- Sold, Manjana; Süß, Clara-Auguste** (2020): The Coronavirus as a Means to an End: Extremist Reinterpretations of the Pandemic, <https://blog.prif.org/2020/03/30/the-coronavirus-as-a-means-to-an-end-extremist-reinterpretations-of-the-pandemic/> (30.03.2020).
- Steffen, Tilman** (2020): Das Ende der alten Sicherheiten, in: Die Zeit, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2020-04/afd-coronavirus-strategie-krise-migranten-covid-19/komplettansicht> (20.07.2020).
- Thorwarth, Katja** (2020): Maske der „Freiheit“: Das blau-braune Corona-Chaos der AfD, in: Frankfurter Rundschau, <https://www.fr.de/meinung/afd-alice-weidel-coronavirus-maskenpflicht-schutzmaske-demo-corona-frankfurt-13786091.html> (20.07.2020).
- Velásquez, N.; Leahy R.; Johnson Restrepo N.; Lupu Y.; Sear R.; Gabriel N.; Jha O.; Goldberg B.; Johnson N.F.** (2020): Hate multiverse spreads malicious COVID-19 content online beyond individual platform control, <https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/2004/2004.00673.pdf> (10.08.2020).
- Virchow, Fabian** (2020): Corona-Demos: Pegida im neuen Gewand, in: ZEIT Online, [https://blog.zeit.de/stoerungsmelder/2020/06/03/corona-demos-pegida-im-neuen-gewand\\_29820](https://blog.zeit.de/stoerungsmelder/2020/06/03/corona-demos-pegida-im-neuen-gewand_29820) (03.06.2020).

## Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany with a rich tradition dating back to its foundation in 1925. Today, it remains loyal to the legacy of its namesake and campaigns for the core ideas and values of social democracy: freedom, justice and solidarity. It has a close connection to social democracy and free trade unions.

FES promotes the advancement of social democracy, in particular by:

- political educational work to strengthen civil society;
- think tanks;
- international cooperation with our international network of offices in more than 100 countries;
- support for talented young people;
- maintaining the collective memory of social democracy with archives, libraries and more.

## IMPRINT

© 2020

**FES Rom in cooperation with FES Paris.**

The statements and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the author and do not represent an official opinion of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

Front cover: ©Noé

Design concept: [www.bergsee-blau.de](http://www.bergsee-blau.de)

Layout: [www.zumweissenroessl.de](http://www.zumweissenroessl.de)

# EUROPA

## Right-wing populism and the COVID-19 crisis

In many countries the COVID-19 crisis had initially led to increased trust in government. The restrictions to personal freedoms, curfews, restrictions on social contacts, the closure of large segments of the economy as well as the widening of executive powers in many countries was largely accepted and supported by the public. However, frustration and distrust of government have been increasing the longer the restrictions have been in place. Some countries, such as Germany, witnessed large demonstrations against the counter measures. Moreover, the wide dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories are influencing the public debate on how to handle the pandemic.

Reports from Sweden, Finland, Italy, France, Spain, and Germany – all countries with large or growing right-wing populist movements and parties explore the question, if right-wing populism in Europe has been able to benefit from the Corona-crisis. A synopsis interprets and classifies the developments in the individual countries in a comparative perspective.

Further information on the project can be found here:

[fes.de/c19rex](https://fes.de/c19rex)