

TRIUMPH OF THE WOMEN?

*The Female Face of
Right-wing Populism
and Extremism*

01

*Case study Anti-feminism in Germany
during the Coronavirus Pandemic*
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EBERT
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TRIUMPH OF THE WOMEN? THE STUDY SERIES

All over the world, right-wing populist parties continue to grow stronger, as has been the case for a number of years – a development that is male-dominated in most countries, with right-wing populists principally elected by men. However, a new generation of women is also active in right-wing populist parties and movements – forming the female face of right-wing populism, so to speak. At the same time, these parties are rapidly closing the gap when it comes to support from female voters – a new phenomenon, for it was long believed that women tend to be rather immune to right-wing political propositions. Which gender and family policies underpin this and which societal trends play a part? Is it possible that women are coming out triumphant here?

That is a question that we already raised, admittedly playing devil's advocate, in the first volume of the publication, published in 2018 by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung *Triumph of the women? The Female Face of the Far Right in Europe*. We are now continuing this first volume with a series of detailed studies published at irregular intervals. This is partly in response to the enormous interest that this collection of research has aroused to date in the general public and in professional circles. As a foundation with roots in social democracy, from the outset one of our crucial concerns has been to monitor anti-democratic tendencies and developments, while also providing information about these, with a view to strengthening an open and democratic society thanks to these insights.

The *Triumph of the women?* study series adopts a specific perspective in this undertaking: The country-specific studies examine right-wing populist (and occasionally right-wing extremist) parties and their programmes concerning family and gender policy. The analysis highlights the question of which political propositions appeal to women voters, making parties in the right-wing spectrum seem electable in their eyes. How do antifeminist positions gain ground? In addition, individual gender policy topics are examined, the percentage of votes attained by these parties is analysed and the role of female leaders and counter-movements is addressed.

While the first volume of studies focused on countries within Europe, the new study adopts a broader view and analyses individual countries and topics worldwide. Where do right-wing populist parties manage to shift the focus of discourse or even shape debates on family and gender policy, in addition to defining the terms of engagement when dealing with issues relating to flight and migration? And do their propositions concerning social policy respond to the needs of broad swathes of the electorate for greater social welfare?

Whatever the answers to these questions, it is important to us that progressive stakeholders agree on these challenges and work together to combat the growing fragmentation and divisions within our societies.

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ANTI-FEMINISM IN GERMANY DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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// In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, gender, gender relations and anti-feminism play a major role on various levels. On the one hand, structural gender inequality in Germany has become particularly apparent as a result of the pandemic, as jobs done by key workers (described in Germany as »systemically relevant« staff),¹ such as nurses or supermarket cashiers, are primarily low-paid and traditionally viewed as »typical women's work«. Nationwide closures of school and child day-care centres meant that child care and, above all, home schooling had to be provided and organised, in addition to unpaid care work in the family, also predominantly carried out by women.² Initial studies confirm concerns that this would lead to retraditionalisation of gender relations in the private sphere.³ On the other hand, a tendency can be observed for inhumane ideologies and stereotypes about »the enemy«, that are widespread within society, to be exploited as a rallying point and used to build links to radicalised and extreme right-wing milieus, as a result of interpretations placed upon crises facing society (financial crisis,⁴ »refugee crisis«,⁵ coronavirus crisis). In this context, vociferous calls by proponents of anti-feminism for a return to classical gender relations and traditional roles in housework and care work in the family are worrying. In particular, the large-scale dissemination of anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives and their amalgamation with anti-feminist ideas is a serious cause for concern. In this text, we shall present debates on gender politics and anti-feminist mobilisations that have emerged in discussions on the coronavirus pandemic and protests against government regulations and measures aimed to contain the spread of novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19 in Germany. //

¹ The term »systemically relevant« has become widespread in Germany during the coronavirus pandemic. It refers to critical infrastructure, such as health care and organisations dealing with child/youth welfare, which must remain accessible and continue to function during a lockdown. By contrast, shops, cinemas and restaurants were closed in a partial lockdown from mid-March to the end of April and numerous employees worked from home. Since mid-April, masks have been compulsory on public transport, when travelling by plane and train, and in all shops and public institutions.

² All schools, kindergartens and child day-care centres throughout Germany were closed on 13.3.2020 (on 16.3.2020 in Baden-Württemberg). In early May, the facilities gradually began to reopen. Until the summer holidays, a mix of in-person teaching and distance learning was organised in the schools. After the summer holidays, regular operation was resumed with coronavirus hygiene and safety regulations in place.

³ A first statistical survey can be found here: https://www.boeckler.de/data/Boeckler-Impuls_2020_08_S4-5.pdf (last accessed on 22.8.2020)

⁴ This refers to the global financial crisis that began in 2008—initially as a real estate crisis in the USA—and had global economic ramifications. The crisis led to rising unemployment, social insecurity and affected impoverished individuals and countries in the Global South particularly severely.

⁵ The term is advisedly set within chevrons, as the term »crisis« can refer to various aspects in this context. (Extreme) right-wing forces regularly refer to a »flood of refugees«, invoking fear-inducing images of »Überfremdung« [Translator's note: Wikipedia defines this as »a German-language term used in politics to suggest an excess of immigration. The word is a nominalization compounded from »über« meaning »over« or »overly« and »fremd« meaning »foreign«]. We use the term »crisis« to indicate the heightened socio-political tensions around the refugee situation. Social polarisation has emerged in Germany, especially since 2015, in the light of the high numbers of people fleeing persecution, war and poverty. Some politicians and activists, especially on the right, agitated against the refugees and expressed resentment towards them, which even tipped over into violence. There has since been an enormous upsurge in extreme right-wing mobilisations and attacks on refugees, PoC and people who stand up against racism. In our view, the polarisation of society has led to a political crisis and the refugees' precarious situation can also be described as a crisis.

Anti-feminism as a Backlash against Feminist Developments

Recent decades have seen an unprecedented liberalisation of gender and family policy in Germany, while gender relations have also been brought up to date to a degree inconceivable just a few decades ago. Important policy demands relating to women and gender have also been implemented recently, such as the legalisation of marriage for same-sex couples (»marriage for all«) in 2017, the law introducing a third option when providing gender details on official forms,⁶ the Parity Act in Brandenburg⁷, or more stringent provisions concerning sexual offences that have been enshrined in legislation.⁸ Society is changing, with gender images growing less rigid and more diverse, while criticism of racist, sexist and other discriminatory behaviour is gaining resonance. However, societal modernisation and liberalisation processes have led to strong defensive reactions in some parts of society, often associated with anti-feminist mobilisation. Anti-feminism has always emerged in periods of change and crisis, especially when social routines and certainties are called into question. In the course of these changes, some people increasingly cling to purported social »truths« such as a supposed binary gender structure, as well as expressing opposition to diverse lifestyles (Blum 2019 112). Anti-feminist mobilisation can be found in various contexts. Right-wing populist and extreme right-wing forces tap into these to promote their own authoritarian, anti-democratic agenda in a »culture war initiated by the right«. Reactionary gender policies and anti-feminist ideologies are important elements in this context.

By anti-feminism, we mean the rejection of feminist and gender equality policies, with arguments based on a binary gender structure, heterosexuality and a traditional or reactionary gender order. Anti-feminism refers to social movements or societal, political,

⁶ Since January 2019, it has been possible to indicate »male«, »female« or »other« on the German identity card.

⁷ The Parity Act was adopted in January 2019 and stipulates that on lists of candidates for federal state elections in Brandenburg, an equal number of women and men will appear as candidates, with alternating allocation of places on the lists.

⁸ In July 2016, legislation on sexual offences became more stringent in Germany. Rape is held to have occurred not only if an individual has been coerced into sexual intercourse with violence or the threat of violence, but also if the perpetrator disregards the »recognisable wishes« of the person concerned.

religious and academic tendencies that, generally in an organised manner, oppose feminism, pro-women or equal opportunities policies, and advocates of these causes. Anti-feminism is directed against calls for emancipation and for sexual, gender and family diversity. Attacks may directly target feminists, LGBTQIA* persons, politicians, Internet activists, or equal opportunities officers (vgl. Rahner 2018 7).

In the German-speaking world, the extreme right's anti-feminism is manifested on the one hand in attacks on and rhetoric directed at feminist achievements, gender equality policies, and educational schemes to raise awareness of gender and sexual diversity.⁹ On the other hand, right-wing populist and extreme right-wing forces present themselves as defenders of women's rights; however, this simply entails instrumentalisation of these issues, only emerging when racism or hostility towards refugees can be fomented through allegations of sexualised violence against women. Such cases are regularly exploited to demand more restrictive migration laws. It is noteworthy that some proponents of anti-feminism also adopt an anti-Semitic world view and that anti-feminism is regularly expressed through anti-Semitic codes, such as conspiracy narratives (Blum 2019: 115). Both anti-Semitism and anti-feminism view social diversity, liberalism and other aspects of modernity as threats, symbols of a detested decadence. Furthermore, feminists are held responsible for the fantasised notion of »population exchange«—a racist and anti-Semitic conspiracy narrative. The right-wing anti-Semitic terrorist attack in Halle on 9.10.2019 is one clear demonstration of this.¹⁰ In the view of

⁹ For example, anti-feminists regularly mobilise against curricula that aim to promote acceptance of sexual diversity. In this context, there were particularly large protests against the 2015/16 curriculum in Baden-Württemberg, in which the acceptance of sexual diversity was to be anchored as a cross-cutting issue. A petition against it collected 200,000 signatures and roughly 2,000 people protested against the curriculum at demonstrations.

¹⁰ During the terrorist attack on Yom Kippur in 2019, the perpetrator tried to force his way into the synagogue in Halle and shoot Jews. When this attempt failed, he shot a passer-by and killed another man in a kebab snack bar; in addition, three other people were seriously injured and numerous people were severely traumatised. The assassin filmed his crime and streamed it live on the Internet. One reason he gave for his attack was his conviction that feminism is to blame for the low birth rate of White people, which leads to mass immigration. He added to this conspiracy mind-set, stating »The Jews are to blame for this«. This attack clearly reveals the ideological intertwining of anti-Semitism, racism and anti-feminism (Blum 2020).

extreme right-wing anti-feminists, the purported »population exchange« must be prevented, if need be by force (Rahner 2020).

Mobilisation against Gender Studies and Gender-inclusive Language in the Coronavirus Crisis

At the start of the coronavirus pandemic, observers noted a growing tendency for attacks on people or organisations upholding democratic and anti-discrimination viewpoints, which took the form of anti-feminist mobilisations in authoritarian, anti-diversity and right-wing extremist circles. In publications and social media from these milieus, women's rights and instruments to promote equal opportunities were denigrated as addressing »luxury problems«. For example, Fabian Jacobi, Bundestag MP for the radical right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, proclaimed his demands in a classically anti-feminist vein in the Bundestag on 25.3.2020: »Today's measures will strain public finances for the foreseeable future to such an extent that non-essential expenditure will simply become impossible, be it the many millions for decadent gender professorships or the many billions for the asylum industry«. He went on to threaten: »This crisis will put an end to all that« (German Bundestag, 19th legislative period, minutes of the 154th session, p. 19155). Classic anti-gender-equality rhetoric also appears in statements from extreme right-wing politician Björn Höcke, who heads the AfD parliamentary group in Thuringia and founded the now officially disbanded AfD »faction«, which is subject to monitoring by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution: »The coronavirus pandemic shows us what is essential for our society. (...) One insight is perhaps new for the younger generation: »gender equality officers« apparently do not necessarily number among professions that play a significant infrastructural role.«¹¹ Beatrix von Storch, one of the radical right-wing AfD's best-known and most high-profile anti-feminist politicians, also exploits discussions on

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/Bjoern.Hoecke.AfD/photos/a.1424703574437591/2591710094403594/?theater> (last accessed on 6.9.2020).

coronavirus to spread her anti-equality views on Twitter: »Major crises also create clarity: we need nurses and not diversity consultants, scientists and not gender-blabla experts.«¹²

Although these anti-feminist positions with anti-gender-equality references are not new, they are currently being reintroduced into the public debate in connection with coronavirus. Numerous anti-feminist assertions are also being put forward as arguments through the prism of the coronavirus crisis outside the world of politics. For example, the *Verein deutsche Sprache e. V.* claimed that »in Germany, billions are spent on gender nonsense. That means a funding shortfall for hospitals or the natural science faculties of universities—for example for virus research.«¹³ With this assertion, the association seeks to play off the healthcare system against women's studies, gender equality work or gender studies, while instrumentalising the situation to promote the petition it has launched against gender-inclusive language—a central anti-feminist mobilisation topic—entitled »Stop gender nonsense.«¹⁴ The petition collected over 77,000 signatures and also received support from academia, the world of politics and the cultural sector. That reveals that anti-feminism is widespread rather than being a niche issue.

The right-wing conservative *Werteunion*¹⁵ has also found ways to spread anti-feminist ideas in connection with the coronavirus pandemic: »I hope that this terrible time will make it clear to absolutely everyone that professors of medicine, chemistry or biology are much more important than professors of »gender studies.«¹⁶ An almost verbatim tweet was also posted by the

¹² https://twitter.com/Beatrix_vStorch/status/1242164879106154499 (last accessed on 6.9.2020).

¹³ <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/politik-gesellschaft/verein-macht-gender-studien-fuer-fehlende-finanzmittel-bei-virusforschung-verantwortlich-1.79789> (last accessed on 30.7.2020).

¹⁴ <https://vds-ev.de/gegenwartsdeutsch/gendersprache/gendersprache-unterschriften/schluss-mit-dem-gender-unfug/> (last accessed on 30.7.2020).

¹⁵ The *Werteunion* was founded in March 2017 by members of the CDU and CSU. It represents strictly conservative positions and calls for the CDU and CSU to steer in a different direction. The *Werteunion* is controversial within the CDU. In policy terms, the *Werteunion* stance is close to some of the AfD's demands. Its leadership includes party officials with AfD backgrounds (see <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2020-02/alexander-mitsch-cdu-werteunion-afd-spenden-rechtspopulismus> (last accessed on 6.9.2020)).

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/WerteUnion/status/1243624037475135488> (last accessed on 6.9.2020).

mentioned *Verein Deutsche Sprache e. V.*, indicating how closely inter-connected anti-feminist protagonists are in Germany. The inverted commas around gender studies in both statements should be interpreted as a populist distancing and delegitimisation strategy adopted by anti-feminists to deny the utility and scholarly status of women's studies and gender studies.

Retraditionalisation, Family Policy and Anti-feminism

Some reactionary, familistic¹⁷ and extreme right-wing circles viewed the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to attain their goal of retraditionalisation of family and gender relations and seized this as a political opportunity. AfD Honorary President Alexander Gauland proclaimed: »The virus has also taught the EU a lesson. It has literally shown the Union its limits. In a crisis, people withdraw into solid, familiar structures. On a small scale, that means the family; on a large scale, it means the nation state« (German Bundestag, 19th parliamentary term, minutes of the 156th session, p. 19301). Gauland thus establishes connections between the principal AfD narratives that are most appealing to voters and the coronavirus crisis: closing borders to migrants, securing and strengthening the nation vis-à-vis the hated European Union, and a view of the family as meriting protection as the »nucleus« of the German people. Christina Baum, Social Policy Spokesperson and Baden-Württemberg AfD Chair, also views the retreat into the domestic sphere, caused by coronavirus, as an opportunity to »return to approaches that have been tried and tested for centuries«,¹⁸ by which she means the heterosexual nuclear family in particular. She clearly ignores threats within society, such as increased domestic violence, the exacerbation of social inequalities and children's unequal access to educational opportunities in home schooling.

¹⁷ Gisela Notz describes familism as an ideology that regards the bourgeois nuclear family as the normative form of family structure. Such a family (father—mother—children) constitutes the cornerstone of all social organisation in familistic societies. In the private sphere, the traditional distribution of roles prevails (Notz 2015: 16).

¹⁸ <https://www.afd-fraktion-bw.de/aktuelles/3095/Dr.+Christina+Baum+Mdl%3A+Chance+zur+R+%C3%BCckbesinnung+auf+seit+Jahrtausenden+Bew%3%A4hrtes+--+die+Familie> (last accessed 30.7.2020).

Anti-feminist commentator Birgit Kelle expresses a similar view on the blog *DemoFuerAlle*, the cornerstone of anti-feminist mobilisation against school curricula. In her article »Die ersetzbare Mutter – Ein Mythos hat Pause«,¹⁹ she identifies the current coronavirus situation as an opportunity to return to traditional visions of the family: »Millions of families are currently realising that the family and, indeed, the mother, becomes the focus of the household once again when the state is not available to play nanny«. Kelle's blogpost also reveals that familism and anti-feminism are linked to hostility towards LGBTQIA*. She takes the view that there should be a 50:50 gender ratio for parents, which is her way of making clear that she only recognises heterosexual couples as parents. Furthermore, she alleges that her assertion that non-binary gender identities are not profound phenomena is supported by coronavirus mortality statistics, for these only list data for women and men, without mentioning any non-binary individuals. That is, however, not in any way proof that multiple gender identities are not real or are unimportant. Rather, times of crisis, such as the coronavirus crisis, make it clear that social structures are still oriented towards binary gender norms. It sounds outright malicious when Kelle asserts »The question of whether I am addressed with the right personal pronoun as a self-proclaimed »gender-queer« becomes less relevant when I am struggling to survive in an intensive care unit«.

Children as a Mobilisation Topic of Anti-feminist Milieus

As well as tapping into family policy issues, anti-feminists are also exploiting the issue of children and purported threats to children's well-being for anti-feminist mobilisation during the coronavirus crisis. According to the influential radical right-wing Internet blog *Journalistenwatch* (which calls itself *JouWatch*),²⁰ the coronavirus pandemic is being used to further »re-educate« society. In early May, for example, an article was published

¹⁹ <https://demofueralle.blog/2020/04/29/die-ersetzbare-mutter-ein-mythos-hat-pause/> (last accessed on 30.7.2020).

²⁰ The blog mainly features AfD politicians, comments favourably on the anti-constitutional *Identitäre Bewegung* and makes use of enormously racist myths about sexualised violence by non-German men against White German women.

claiming that »in the slipstream of coronavirus, all those social transformers are still highly active on the gender mainstreaming and climate hysterics front«. Various children's books currently in print are cited as evidence and described as »a range on offer that simply leaves you speechless«. The article claims that one particular children's book teaches children aged four years and above »tolerance with a crowbar«. It further alleges that another children's book dealing with homosexuality shows that »even 20 years ago certain authors had no compunction whatsoever about dumping little children's souls full of their gender mainstreaming rubbish«. ²¹ Gender researcher Imke Schmincke sums up this argumentation pattern, which is regularly used by anti-feminists: »The argument ›children's welfare/›concern for children‹ always works. It ensures attention, lends credibility and above all adds moral weight. Children are referenced here as innocent and piteous« (Schmincke 2015: 93).

Enrico Komning, AfD Bundestag MP and Chief Whip, who is said to have declared in 2016 that his goal is abolition of parliamentary democracy and the party system, also instrumentalises children's purported well-being to mobilise anti-feminist support. In Berlin on 29.8.2020, at the largest demonstration ever organised by the »Querdenken« initiative against restrictions to combat coronavirus, he walked around with a poster of his party bearing the slogan »Hands off our children«. ²² This popular AfD slogan is used both in the context of the party's denigration of pro-diversity educational content in schools and child day-care facilities and, more recently, to agitate against measures to contain the coronavirus pandemic. For example, the local chapter of the AfD in Stuttgart circulated the myth of »coronavirus insanity: threat of CHILD REMOVAL« ²³ and insinuated that the state, as the AfD put it, would take children away from their parents—as during the GDR. This slogan, »Hands off our children«, originated with the extreme-right Na-

tional Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). ²⁴ The NPD has long sought to use this kind of assertion to reach out to the middle class, for example campaigning for »tougher punishments for child molesters«.

The »Rettet die Kinder« association in Fürstenwalde also adopted a similar stance at the demonstration against the measures to contain coronavirus. The association claims to be committed to children's well-being, employs right-wing populist narratives against »the powers that be«, agitates against public broadcasters and imagines that Germany is governed by a »regime«. At the demonstration, the association was represented with its own large truck, displaying a panoply of erroneous assertions related to the coronavirus pandemic, jumbled up with conspiracy theories and typical anti-feminist narratives (»precocious sexual awareness«, »indoctrination« aka »re-education«). ²⁵ This also included the assertion that the association opposes »forced media indoctrination, forced vaccination, forced insertion of chips, forced precocious sexual awareness and forced mask-wearing«. In this context it again becomes apparent how anti-feminism is inter-linked with hostility to LGBTQIA*, as the association regularly disseminates anti-homosexual and anti-feminist narratives. On its Telegram channel (6,300 followers), for example, a newspaper article is captioned with the statement »The whole of Germany is infiltrated by paedo-criminals«. The article, with a classical anti-feminist slant and lurid tone, warns against »gender ideology« and »precocious sexual awareness« if teachers talk to pupils about homosexuality.

The Querdenken initiative's coronavirus demonstration in Vienna, in early September, is the dismal apogee in instrumentalisation of children and linkage of anti-feminism with adultist claims to hold the sole right to represent minors. The rainbow flag was ripped to shreds on the main stage, to thunderous

²⁴ The NPD is an extreme right-wing micro-party. In 2017, the Federal Constitutional Court ruled that the party was clearly anti-constitutional and similar in character to historical National Socialism. However, the party was not banned because, in the view of the Federal Constitutional Court, it did not represent a concrete threat to the fundamental liberal democratic order due to its current insignificance in the political arena.

²⁵ Antifeminists regularly claim that sexual education, which, for example, aims to prevent sexual assaults on children leads to »precocious sexual awareness«. In addition, many anti-feminists imagine that measures to promote the acceptance of sexual diversity conceal overpowering feminism that aims to re-educate children (Blum 2019: 85).

²¹ <https://www.journalistenwatch.com/2020/05/03/der-irrsinn-kinderbuch/> (last accessed on 6.9.2020).

²² For example, to advertise an event by AfD Bundestag MP Nicole Höchst, who has repeatedly agitated against feminism in her speeches in the Bundestag: <https://www.afd-vulkaneifel.de/2017/08/10/buergerstammtisch-und-vortrag-mit-nicole-hoehchst-31-08-2017/> (last accessed on 6.9.2020).

²³ <https://twitter.com/AfDStuttgart/status/1292670407074623489/photo/1> (last accessed on 6.9.2020).

applause, accompanied by assertions that the flag was a symbol of »child molesters« and claims that homosexuals were not welcome in society. ²⁶ Equating homosexuality and paedophilia is a typical anti-feminist motif that is repeatedly spread in various contexts (Blum 2019: 85). Both the aggression and thematic thrust of the action in Vienna provide a drastic demonstration that anti-feminist, anti-diversity agitators are not interested in expressing legitimate criticism of government measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. They are instead attempting to bolster mainstream acceptance of their anti-democratic and anti-feminist ideas by instrumentalising protests against those measures. The large number of participants from the most diverse milieus at these protests facilitates broader dissemination of the (extreme) right-wing and anti-feminist interpretations presented there.

Anti-feminism and Conspiracy Narratives during the Coronavirus Pandemic

In times of crisis, conspiracy narratives also thrive. It is currently possible to observe in real time how conspiracy narratives and ideologies are gaining ground dramatically in dark social media or messenger services during the coronavirus pandemic, and the extent to which people are becoming increasingly radicalised. Anti-feminist motifs, such as outrage expressed over abortions and demands to restrict women's reproductive rights, are also coming to the fore in combination with conspiracy narratives.

Joseph Wilhelm, Managing Director of the organic brands Rapunzel and Zwergenwiese, adopted a supposedly subtle stance, trivialising the novel coronavirus as a harmless influenza and expressing his conviction that the measures taken to contain the coronavirus pandemic were based on »underlying commercial motivations that offer scope to do excellent business, having triggered a fear of dying«. ²⁷ He subsequently linked this statement with the counter-argument that in his view the around 12 million abortions in »modern«

²⁶ <https://twitter.com/pressewien/status/1302228298970337281?s=12> (last accessed on 6.9.2020).

²⁷ https://twitter.com/Alert4_Alert4/status/1261930527617093634 (last accessed on 30.7.2020).

societies are tantamount to preventing life (ibid.). In the open letter »A CALL FOR THE CHURCH AND FOR THE WORLD, to Catholics and all people of good will«, ²⁸ coronavirus conspiracy narratives are combined with classical »pro-life« rhetoric, ²⁹ along with allegations that aborted fetuses are used to develop a coronavirus vaccine. For that reason, it is claimed that a coronavirus vaccine would be »morally unacceptable« for Catholics. Anti-Semitic allegations or suspicions are regularly circulated, using the coronavirus pandemic as cover, as in the aforementioned call from the bishops, with allegations, for example, that U.S. entrepreneur and Microsoft founder Bill Gates has spread the virus to market his vaccine. Attila Hildmann, a well-known vegan celebrity chef in Germany, in his social media posts has also referred several times to a popular conspiracy narrative that claims Bill Gates wants to reduce global population through vaccinations. Hildmann alleges that Bill Gates' membership, along with his father, on the board of U.S. non-profit organisation Planned Parenthood ³⁰ provides »proof« to support these claims. In this argumentation, too, classic anti-feminist issues become conflated with current societal developments and conspiracy narratives. All in all, Attila Hildmann's Telegram channel provides a striking illustration of radicalisation occurring within a very short time-frame and how people have drifted into worlds defined by conspiracy-based perspectives.

The depictions reveal striking parallels between anti-feminist mobilisation and protests against the coronavirus measures: Both phenomena are characterised by conspiracy narratives and close links with racism and especially anti-Semitism. In addition, both themes give rise to across-the-board mobilisations that can fall on sympathetic ears in a broad range of societal contexts, due, on the one hand, to widespread unease concerning feminist and equality issues, as well as unease about the measures to combat coronavirus, on the other hand.

²⁸ <https://veritasliberabitvos.info/aufruf/> (last accessed on 30.7.2020).

²⁹ »Pro-life« is the self-designation used by Christian fundamentalist opponents of abortions, who, for example, attend the annual so-called »Marches for Life«, present abortions as murder, and sometimes hold vigils outside counselling centres for pregnant women considering abortions.

³⁰ *Planned Parenthood* offers medical services in sexual medicine, gynaecology and family planning as well as abortion, making it one of the alt-right movement's preferred adversaries.

Women and Coronavirus Conspiracies

It has already been shown that women are drawing actively on discussions around the coronavirus crisis to advance anti-feminist ideas. Politicians such as Beatrix von Storch and Christina Baum or commentator Birgit Kelle have deliberately used the coronavirus pandemic as a means to showcase anti-feminist discourses or reactionary gender politics. Women also repeatedly play an extremely prominent part in disseminating conspiracy legends. One example is Eva Herman, a former newsreader and active anti-feminist, who regularly trivialises coronavirus on her various social media channels and disseminates a large number of conspiracy narratives. In May 2020, she also interviewed the popular R&B singer Xavier Naidoo on her YouTube channel »Wissensmanufaktur«. Naidoo is known for his proximity to the *Reichsbürger*³¹ milieu, and since the coronavirus pandemic, has become notorious for disseminating confused conspiracy myths. In this interview, the renowned musician spreads anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives, expresses fears about the creation of a »New World Order«—an extreme right-wing cipher—and warns that vaccinations are dangerous and lethal.³² This interview, like other posts by Eva Herman, was well-received in conspiracy-oriented milieus and received wide coverage on social media platforms. In addition, many women take part in demonstrations against state measures to combat coronavirus and also act as speakers and organisers for the demonstrations. They appear in supposedly harmless guises as »practitioners of alternative medicine« or »worried mothers« and can thus also reach out to the middle class. In this context, a non-medical health practitioner close to the *Reichsbürger* milieu attracted particular attention. From the stage at the Berlin demonstration, she called on demonstrators to »storm« the German parliament in the Reichstag building,³³ claiming that

American President Donald Trump was there and would free the German people from the »Merkel regime«—an extreme right-wing denigration of the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. Several hundred people responded to this call. They broke through the police barricades and brandished Reich flags, which are popular in right-wing extremist circles. This aggressive and symbolic act triggered a real wave of euphoria in the extreme right-wing scene and encouraged all those who dream of a long-awaited overthrow of the liberal democracy they detest (WDR 2020).

Conclusion: Anti-feminism and Retraditionalisation as a Consequence of the Coronavirus Pandemic

When the coronavirus pandemic began, a positive social trend could initially be observed: a turn away from radical right-wing parties and towards democratic parties, science and media engaged in good-quality journalism. Large sections of the population trusted in government action and supported government measures to contain the coronavirus pandemic. Right-wing populist and right-wing extremist protagonists initially failed to find an audience for their anti-democratic, anti-feminist or racist messages during the coronavirus pandemic. The topics they usually deploy to great effect to trigger mobilisation, such as migration, asylum, and the family, or classic right-wing populist topics, such as mistrust of »the powers that be«, hostility to the press, and science, apparently are not »appealing« during the coronavirus pandemic. The anti-feminist arguments of right-wing populist or extreme right-wing protagonists likewise initially failed to resonate and trigger mobilisation beyond the radical right-wing electorate. Retrograde gender policies were not picked up as an issue. The question is whether this occurs although the coronavirus crisis is exacerbating gender inequality or precisely because it is doing so. After all, up to 75 per cent of women are key workers, that is work in »systemically relevant« occupations, which at the same time represent typical low-paid »women's jobs«: nurses, geriatric nurses, kindergarten or primary-school teachers, and supermarket cashiers. To date there have been no socio-political initiatives to ensure structural improvements for these women. This lack of action

on these issues also applies to radical right-wing parties that claim in public to represent the »man in the street«—meaning workers—but clearly do not understand this as including the interests of the »woman in the street«. This tallies with the anti-feminist agenda of extreme right-wing parties in Germany, which propose only reactionary and retrograde gender and family policies as a response to the crisis.

In the course of the pandemic, however, inhumane ideologies, conspiracy myths and anti-democratic ideas have attracted enormous attention. A kind of counter public that adheres to conspiracy ideologies and is sceptical about democracy can now be observed on social media and on the streets; it is becoming increasingly radicalised and is abandoning democratic discourse. Lack of comprehension of government measures to contain the coronavirus pandemic is growing among a small but vocal and rapidly radicalising section of the German population. This mood is fuelled and driven by the campaign-style spread of disinformation and conspiracy myths by mainly right-wing extremist »alternative media« and right-wing extremists who see an opportunity for the radical transformation of the liberal society they despise.

The question will be to what extent right-wing extremist views and interpretations steeped in conspiracy ideologies can prevail as purported potential for creating identity and security in an increasingly uncertain society. The economic upheavals or rising unemployment levels that are to be feared in the further course of the pandemic can be expected to further augment the popularity of right-wing extremist interpretative propositions on managing the crisis. It is also not clear which political protagonists will in future head this sometimes obscure alliance of hard-core conspiracy thinking, esoteric interpretations of the world, anti-vaccination activists, naive families and right-wing extremists, nor how these protagonists will introduce »women's issues«, such as vaccination, health and above all child welfare, into the debate and how they will seek to politicise these topics.

³¹ *Reichsbürger* deny that Germany is a sovereign state. For the most part, they reject democracy. They can largely be considered to be on the extreme right and anti-Semitic and often believe in conspiracy narratives. In recent years there have been several violent attacks by *Reichsbürger* circles. In 2016 a member of the *Reichsbürger* murdered a police officer during a police operation in Georgsmünd near Nuremberg and seriously injured two other police officers.

³² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_fhcF15IZI (last accessed on 6.9.2020).

³³ <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/reichstag-berlin-sturm-fakenews-101.html> (last accessed on 6.9.2020).

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IMPRINT

2020

ISBN 978-3-96250-774-9

Published by:

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung • Forum Politik und Gesellschaft
Hiroshimastraße 17 • 10785 Berlin

Authors: Rebekka Blum, Judith Rahner

Editorial work: Kim Krach • Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Contact person: Kim Krach (*kim.krach@fes.de*)

Translation: Helen Ferguson

Design: Dominik Ziller • DZGN

Printed by: Druckerei Brandt GmbH, Bonn

Printed on EnviroPolar, 100 per cent recycled paper, awarded the Blauer Engel award.

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Forum Politik und Gesellschaft

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