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THE FUTURE OF EXTREMISM

ANTI-LOCKDOWN

ACTIVITY: GERMANY

COUNTRY PROFILE

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INTRODUCTION

Germany's relative success in limiting the number of COVID-related deaths during the first wave of the pandemic resulted in renewed trust in established politics, while approval for populist politics declined. Survey results for the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), the political party most critical of the federal government's lockdown policies, stagnated.ⁱ Despite these overall trends, Germany soon witnessed the emergence of a diverse, radical and energised anti-lockdown movement that was able to gain massive traction on social media and mobilise major numbers of protestors on the streets.

The opposition to the lockdown policies of the German government united a broad range of actors, some of which were not previously known to be involved in political activism. While known far-right activists, influencers and news outlets tried to gain traction by appealing to the widespread grievances articulated by the anti-lockdown movement, many of the protestors and groups are not extremists. Conspiracy theories about the origin and nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as larger conspiracy ideologies such as the QAnon and Reichsbürger movements played a major role as a connective tissue between different segments of the anti-lockdown movement in Germany.

This case study of the German anti-lockdown movement starts by introducing the key actors involved, documents a series of harmful and at times violent activities these groups have been involved in, looks at the responses from state authorities and tech-platforms and concludes with an outlook on the likely trajectory of the movement.

OVERVIEW OF THE ANTI-LOCKDOWN MOVEMENT

Querdenken

The Querdenken (lateral thinking) movement was founded in April 2020 in response to COVID restrictions, and organised some of the biggest anti-lockdown protests. Querdenken's manifesto demands an immediate halt to any COVID-related restrictions on basic rights outlined in the German constitution. While Querdenken has emphasised they do not deny the existence of COVID-19, they believe its risks have been overstated and that the measures to contain it are disproportionate, frequently citing unverifiedⁱⁱ

and at times false claimsⁱⁱⁱ by a number of controversial medics such as Wolfgang Wodarg, Sucharit Bhakdi and Bodo Schiffmann.^{iv}

Even though Querdenken's official manifesto states that they are opposed to extremism, the movement overlaps with the far-right both on a personal and narrative level. This manifests itself in an unwillingness to distance itself from right-wing extremists on the part of the organisers of the Querdenken protests. For example, Querdenken founder Michael Ballweg initially refused to condemn the neo-Nazi and Holocaust denier "Der Volkslehrer" who had spoken on stage at these anti-lockdown protests.^v In addition, meetings were held between Querdenken and representatives of the Reichsbürger movement (discussed below).^{vi} At the same time, Querdenken's calls for resistance against a supposedly authoritarian German state, its hostility towards political elites and the media and its support for implicitly antisemitic conspiracy theories that identify 'globalists' or Jewish individuals such as George Soros as the culprits for the pandemic are reminiscent of similar far-right narratives.^{vii}

The background of the Querdenken anti-lockdown protestors has been investigated by researchers at the University of Basel, whose survey found that the movement is united by alienation from the traditional political system, mainstream parties, academia (though many have university degrees) and the media. While 27% stated that they intend to vote for the far-right AfD, 61% intend to vote for fringe parties not represented in parliament, such as Basis2020 and Wir2020. These smaller parties were established during the pandemic, and are geared towards segments of the wider anti-lockdown movement interested in holistic lifestyles and alternative medicine, though these have also been accused of being too open to far-right ideas and individuals.^{viii}

Reichsbürger movement

The Reichsbürger movement believes the Federal German Republic is not legitimate, as the German Reich legally continues to exist. Adherents of the movement often try to separate themselves from official state structures through activities such as not paying taxes, not carrying ID's, and not taking part in the census.^{ix} During the protests against lockdown measures, Reichsbürger symbols were regularly spotted at marches. There is also a nexus between the Reichsbürger movement, the Querdenken anti-lockdown movement and QAnon communities. Querdenken's leader Michael Ballweg has used QAnon slogans such as "WWG1WGA" during protests.^x At the same time, Reichsbürger and QAnon conspiracy communities online have started to increasingly bleed into each other.^{xi}

QAnon supporters

Another constituent of anti-lockdown activity is the QAnon movement, which has steadily increased its reach in Germany in recent years. One of the early German QAnon-adherents is the YouTuber Oliver Janich, who had promoted QAnon from its early stages in 2017 onwards. Janich is a YouTuber who previously self-described as a libertarian but who has increasingly moved towards far-right conspiracy theories.^{xii} Resident in the Philippines, he is one of the key influencers in the COVID conspiracy space, with his Telegram channel growing to 157,000 followers by November 2021.

In the run-up to the Bavarian state elections in 2018, ISD also started monitoring Facebook groups and Discord channels adopting the slogans and symbols of the QAnon movement.^{xiii} While the movement grew slowly but steadily in Germany until early 2020, there was a major spike of German QAnon followers from March 2020 onwards. For example, the Qlobal-Change [sic] Telegram channel grew from around 10k followers at the beginning of 2020 to more than 146k in November 2021.

The spikes in QAnon in Germany in March 2020 did not just coincide with the introduction of the lockdown-measures, but also with “Defender-Europe 2020,” a large-scale NATO exercise. When the exercise was scaled back because of the COVID-19, QAnon followers started claiming that Angela Merkel had used a “fake pandemic” to destroy a secret plan that would “liberate” the German people from her regime.^{xiv} QAnon’s growth was partially fuelled by the endorsements it received by a range of German celebrities, most famously singer Xavier Naidoo and vegan cook Attila Hildmann.

Far-right extremists

While the anti-lockdown movement in Germany is not dominated by established far-right groups, ethno-nationalist groups like the Identitäre Bewegung, the far-right conspiracy magazine Compact and Neo-Nazi parties such as Der III. Weg, Die Rechte and the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD) have all tried to feed off the momentum of the broader anti-lockdown movement and regularly participate in anti-lockdown protests.

ISD research on digital extremism in Germany in the context of COVID-19 showed that on Telegram, channels dedicated to conspiracy theories gained more followers than “traditional far-right” channels focused on ethno-nationalist, Nazi and anti-Muslim content. However, the far-right was also able to significantly increase its reach: during the first six months of the pandemic, the largest ethnonationalist channel on Telegram gained 33% more followers, the largest neo-Nazi channel more than doubled its reach (+145%) and the largest anti-Muslim channel grew by 186%.^{xv}



Figure 1: Qlobal-Change channel expressing doubts NATO Defender-Europe would have been cancelled over a “harmless flu”

HARMFUL ACTIVITY

Anti-lockdown activists engage in a number of harmful activities, the most important of which are outlined in the following sections. These activities include the promotion of conspiracy theories targeting public figures as well as misinformation about COVID-19 or lockdown measures, hate speech connected with COVID-related conspiracy theories and violent protests as well as attacks.

Promoting conspiracy theories targeting public figures

One of the most prevalent harmful activities which anti-lockdown movements engage in is the promotion of conspiracy theories, commonly targeting policy-makers, medical professionals and journalists. International figures such as Bill Gates or George Soros, who were frequently portrayed as the malign force behind the lockdown, have also been targeted by these activities. One of the key individuals involved in promoting conspiracy theories is Ken Jebsen, who published a popular video accusing Bill Gates of causing the pandemic in May 2020. Ken Jebsen was a radio moderator for the German state broadcaster 'Radio Fritz', but was fired in 2011 following antisemitic comments about the Holocaust having been "invented for PR purposes." Jebsen continued to enjoy great popularity on YouTube (512,000 followers), where he hosted his show 'KenFM', mainly focused on conspiracy theories. In July 2020, 'KenFM' was in the top-10 of the most downloaded apps in Germany from Google's 'Play' store.^{xvi}

Jebsen has many views more aligned with the political left, and has at times positioned himself against anti-refugee and Muslim sentiment. In January 2021, YouTube banned him for COVID disinformation, but he remains active on Telegram (119,000 followers as of November 2021).^{xvii} In May 2021, the Berlin Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Berlin's state-level domestic intelligence service, announced that they had placed Jebsen under observation as a potential threat to the constitutional order. They argued that by spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories about the pandemic, he was a radicalising influence on the Querdenken movement.^{xviii}



Figure 2: Ken Jebsen's video that alleged Bill Gates was behind the pandemic


Promoting disinformation about COVID-19 or lockdown measures


Other prominent figures from the German anti-lockdown movement have engaged in the promotion of similar harmful conspiracy theories and spread disinformation about the origins and nature of the virus as well as the lockdown measures. These include the famous soul-singer Xavier Naidoo, the Schlager music star Michael Wendler and Eva Herman, a former journalist for the German state broadcaster. Naidoo, who had been increasingly concerned about supposed child-abuse rings connected to the Rothschilds and had claimed that Germany was still an “occupied country” (a Reichsbürger slogan) portrayed the lockdown measures as a plot “to kill Germany” in the early stages of the pandemic.^{xix}

Wendler also started engaging in COVID-19 conspiracy theories from the start of the pandemic, and built a 155,000 user following on Telegram. He has shared a wide range of conspiracy theories from “plandemic” (planned pandemic) to QAnon, at times also amplifying explicitly far-right outlets such as Compact or individuals such as Martin Sellner (the leader of the ethno-nationalist Identitäre Bewegung). In February 2021, Instagram banned Wendler’s account after the singer had compared life under the German COVID-restrictions to life in the German concentration camps during World War II.^{xx}

MICHAEL WENDLER 

Forwarded from **COMPACT-Magazin**

 **Hammer: Martin Sellner mit Theorie über Corona und Trump!**

 COMPACT-Kolumnist Martin Sellner mit einer Theorie zu Corona und Trump.

Sellner: „Kann es sein, dass Corona gar nicht zum globalen Great Reset führt, sondern lediglich ein Anschlag auf Trumps Präsidentschaft war?“

[Übrigens ausführlicher hier!](#)

Eva Herman originally lost her broadcasting job following public comments praising family policies during the Third Reich. Her Telegram channel had more than 179,000 subscribers in November 2021 and mainly focuses on false claims downplaying the health risks of COVID-19 and conspiracy theories that the pandemic was a pretext to create a “New World Order.” Herman has reportedly established a colony with several hundred German supporters in the Nova Scotia, Canada.^{xxi}

In the run-up to the 2021 German Federal elections, Querdenken and AfD pages on Facebook shared articles and videos that warned of supposed election fraud. AfD supporters online also speculated that there could be discrimination against the unvaccinated, who could be refused access to polling stations.^{xxii} Other content alleged that ballot boxes could easily be opened without removing the seal, using a photo of a broken ballot box, which had already been circulated in connection with the Thuringian state elections in October 2019. Despite fact-checks confirming that the case had been investigated and it had been determined that no electoral fraud had taken place, the image was shared to amplify election fraud narratives.^{xxiii} While election fraud narratives did not have a major impact beyond the far-right and conspiracy theorists, ISD has previously argued that such narratives may have a negative long-term effect on trust in democratic institutions.^{xxiv}

Figure 3: Michael Wendler sharing an article of Martin Sellner in Compact magazine alleging that COVID-19 was a plot to end the presidency of Donald Trump

Harassment of public figures and their institutions

According to a study published by ISD, the individuals most frequently attacked by lockdown-opponents and vaccination sceptics were medical professionals and their institutions such as Christian Drosten (a virologist advising the German government), federal health minister Karl Lauterbach, former federal health minister Jens Spahn, and Lothar Wieler, the president of the Robert-Koch-Institut. International figures and organisations such as the WHO and Anthony Fauci were regular targets of these attacks as well.^{xxv}

Some of this harassment has also taken place in the offline world. In the lead up to the discussions of the “Law on the Protection of the Population in the Event of an Epidemic Situation of National Significance” in November 2018 for example, AfD MPs invited anti-lockdown activists to the Bundestag, where they harassed MPs who were about to join the debates about the proposed law.^{xxvi}



Figure 4: Oliver Janich comparing virologist Drosten to Auschwitz doctor Josef Mengele (left) and Eva Herman claiming that COVID-19 was a means to establish the “New World Order”

Hate Speech

In some cases, individuals and groups were also disparaged by members of the anti-lockdown movement based on characteristics such as sexuality, religion or ethnicity. Attila Hildmann, who was previously mainly known as the author of a series of best-selling vegan cooking books, played a particularly crucial role in this regard.^{xxvii} In March 2020, Hildmann became a COVID-19 truther, and expressed support for conspiracy theories relating the origins and danger of the virus. He increasingly adopted antisemitic conspiracy theories, for example accusing George Soros, Mark Zuckerberg and the Rothschilds of planning a “global genocide”. Hildmann began to use dehumanising language in reference to Jews and made frequent and overt calls for violence against Jews over the course of the pandemic.^{xxviii} During a demonstration in July 2020, Hildmann also gave a speech in which he promised that if he were to become “chancellor of the Reich” he would reintroduce the death sentence so the Green politician Volker Beck (whom he had described on his Telegram channel using homophobic hate-speech) could be kicked to death in a public square.^{xxix} In October 2020, Hildmann shared a video supportive of Ursula Haverbeck, who has repeatedly been sentenced for Holocaust denial.^{xxx} Hildmann went underground in February 2020, and now believed to reside in Turkey to avoid an arrest warrant for incitement of the people, insult, threats and public incitement to commit criminal offences.^{xxxi}

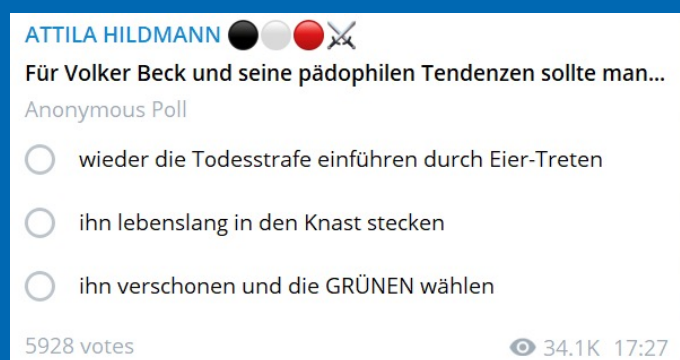


Figure 5: Attila Hildmann asking his followers whether what should be done to Volker Beck, the options being a) death sentence by kicking his balls b) lifelong jail c) sparing him and voting for the Greens

Hildman’s hateful rhetoric is not an isolated case: according to RIAS (a civil society organisation that registers antisemitic incidents), antisemitic statements were made at 284 rallies and demonstrations related to the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany between 17 March 2020 and the end of the year.^{xxxii}

Violent protests

Even though there were demonstrations against the lockdown measures across Germany during the early stages of the pandemic, they rarely attracted more than 10,000 protestors until August 2020. In that month, two major anti-lockdown demonstrations took place in Germany's capital Berlin, the larger of which was attended by approximately 40,000 people.^{xxxiii} The demonstration was attended by a wide spectrum of groups, ranging from supporters of the AfD, the extreme right Identitäre Bewegung, Neo-Nazis, QAnon-believers, the Reichsbürger movement, believers in alternative medicine, different spiritual and esoteric communities and vaccine opponents and sceptics. During one of the demonstrations held on this day, a group of several hundred protestors including known extremists broke through police barriers and celebrated in front of the German parliament, waving the flag of the German Reich.^{xxxiv} German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier described the events as "unbearable", adding that "we will not tolerate any anti-democratic vilification of the Federal Republic of Germany" and condemned those who did not distance themselves from far-right protestors marching alongside them.^{xxxv}



Figure 6: Anti-lockdown protestors waving Reich flags in front of the German parliament

Other protests of significant size over the latter half of 2020 and 2021 were held in Stuttgart, Munich, Kassel and Leipzig. During these protests, participants often refused to socially distance or wear masks, and in several instances engaged in physical confrontations with the police, or threatened journalists who reported about the demonstrations.^{xxxvi}

Violent rhetoric and attacks

It is worth noting that even though the anti-lockdown movement in Germany is not clearly extremist in its entirety, there is a worrying tendency towards violent rhetoric. Oliver Janich and Attila Hildmann, two of the influencers with the biggest reach, have called for violence against conspirators, traitors and journalists. Hildmann in particular makes frequent and concrete calls for violence against specific individuals as well as Jews.^{xxxvii}

There have been small-scale explosive attacks against institutions connected to COVID-research and the lockdown restrictions, such as the Robert-Koch-Institut and the Leibniz-Gemeinschaft. Those taking responsibility for the explosions demanded the immediate cessation of all COVID restrictions, the resignation of the federal government and new elections.^{xxxviii}

The threat posed by the increasingly radicalised Querdenken movement became a major topic following the killing of a 20-year-old clerk in the western German town of Idar-Oberstein in Rhineland-Palatinate on 18 September.^{xxxix} The clerk had asked a customer to wear a mask inside the store, as required by COVID restrictions. The customer returned 30 minutes after the dispute and shot the young man with an unregistered firearm. As documented by the German research group CEMAS, the shooter had made posts online supportive of conspiracy theories, climate change denial, former US president Trump, the far-right AfD and other German figures open to the far-right, and speculated about a coming civil war.^{xl} As of 22 December, it had not been publicly confirmed whether the perpetrator was a member of Querdenken or had merely been influenced by the wider online discourse of lockdown opponents and conspiracy theorists.

RESPONSE FROM GOVERNMENT AND TECHNOLOGY PLATFORMS

The increasing radicalisation of the anti-lockdown movement and its overlap with the extreme right eventually caught the attention of the German security services. From December 2020 onwards, it was announced that various state domestic intelligence services were officially considering the anti-lockdown Querdenken movement a potential case of extremism.^{xli} This meant that the intelligence services could use covert observation techniques and advanced surveillance to monitor the group.

In April 2021, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), Germany's major domestic intelligence service, stated that it would continuously monitor these anti-democratic groups that delegitimise the state and may pose a security threat. This new phenomenon is referred to as the "Delegitimation of the State Relevant to the Protection of the Constitution", and now sits alongside Islamist extremism, the extreme right, the extreme left and foreign extremism beyond Islamist extremism being monitored as a potential threat to Germany's democratic order. The BfV argued that "in many cases, it is not possible to assign the relevant groups of people or individuals to an existing object of observation or to one of the phenomenon areas without restrictions."^{xlii}

While these communities are united by the opposition to the government's lockdown policies, there is not a comprehensive shared political agenda that underlies the wider movement. Nevertheless, the federal German intelligence argues that among the anti-lockdown movement "democratic decision-making processes and the corresponding institutions of the legislature, executive and judiciary are delegitimised and made contemptible in a way that endangers security" while ignoring the state's authority and monopoly of violence.^{xliii}

The rise of the anti-lockdown Querdenken also forced major tech platforms to take action: ten days ahead of the Federal Election, on 16 September, Facebook announced that it removed almost 150 accounts and pages linked to the movement in Germany under a new policy focused on preventing "coordinated social harm". Facebook said multiple accounts used both individual and duplicate accounts to spread content that violated Facebook's rules on COVID-19 misinformation, hate speech, bullying and incitement of violence.^{xliv}

CONCLUSION

The sharp rise in the following of conspiracy theories whose audiences overlap with far-right extremists and the rapid radicalisation of these communities should be a major cause for concern. Attacks on science, distrust in institutions and processes that are critical for the functioning of democracy and an increasing readiness to use violence can be widely found among the diverse anti-lockdown movement. The loss of control that people experienced following the social, economic and political uncertainty of the pandemic has led people to increasingly view developments through a conspiratorial lens, dividing the world into good and evil. Research into the demographics of the supporters of the Querdenken movement, as well as the sheer numbers of people who followed relevant channels on previously obscure platforms such as Telegram, strongly suggest that a much wider section of the population became receptive to such narratives than “traditional” extremist groups had previously been able to reach.^{xlv}

Going forward, it might be expected that some of the more casual followers of conspiracy channels that are repulsed by the far-right and pro-violence elements within the anti-lockdown movement could distance themselves from the wider movement. In the context of a slowly but steadily advancing vaccination program and the gradual easing of lockdown restrictions in Germany, the Querdenken movement has struggled to mobilise the same type of numbers for demonstrations as in the fall of 2020. While demonstrations at this scale have yet to return, new restrictions impacting the unvaccinated since November 2021 (“2G and 2G plus” rules) and the debate around vaccination mandates have resulted in an aggressive backlash from the anti-lockdown movement. This has included protests of various sizes in a wide range of cities across Germany, with up to 8,000 protestors gathering in Hamburg in early December.^{xlvi} Even more concerning are recent smaller protests clearly designed to intimidate politicians, such as a torch-march in front of the house of Petra Köpping, the Health Minister of Saxony.^{xlvii} These trends suggest that there is an increasingly radicalised core group of anti-lockdown activists in a political climate in which more wide-reaching measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic such as vaccination mandates seem like a realistic plausibility. While they remain a relatively small minority in Germany in absolute terms, the quick rise and radicalisation of the anti-lockdown movement has demonstrated how societal crises and uncertainty can be exploited to advance dangerous conspiracy theories that not only risk efforts to combat the pandemic but ultimately become a security threat.

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A thick, white, horizontal brushstroke graphic with irregular, feathered edges, serving as a background for the title text.

THE FUTURE OF EXTREMISM