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## **Querdenker. New social movement under observation by German constitutional protection authorities in context of COVID-19 pandemic**

**Abstract**            The objective of this article is to bring a closer look into the processes of social radicalisation which are the concomitant of COVID-19 pandemics in Federal Republic of Germany. Furthermore, the author is trying to reconstruct the procedures of recon analytics taken by internal civil counterintelligence services in federal states of Germany. Nascent of grassroots movements united against COVID-19 restrictions, obligatory vaccination and general questioning of COVID-19 pandemic, has led to inscribe mentioned groups onto the official agenda of internal civil intelligence services ditto provide measures of operational reconnaissance related to these groups.

**Keywords**            Germany, The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Querdenker, COVID-19 social movements, discourse analysis.

The annual reports of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany (German Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, BfV) provide an overview of the statutory<sup>1</sup> areas of German counterintelligence

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<sup>1</sup> *Gesetz über die Zusammenarbeit des Bundes und der Länder in Angelegenheiten des Verfassungsschutzes und über das Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (Bundesverfassungsschutzgesetz - BVerfSchG),*

activity<sup>2</sup>, including the activity of foreign secret services within Germany, the activities of extremist organizations, terrorist threats and international organized crime. In addition to the federal body based in Cologne, each of the 16 states has its own land office for the protection of the constitution (German Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz, LfV) or specialized departments for the protection of the state's constitutional order functioning under the interior ministries, operating within the borders of a given state<sup>3</sup>. The first office to include information on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the security of a state in its annual report was the service from North Rhine-Westphalia. During the presentation of the 2020 report, state Interior Minister Herbert Reul stressed that the coronavirus pandemic poses a huge challenge to social cohesion<sup>4</sup>. He pointed out that as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the greater part of society (German: *gesellschaftliche Mitte* – the center of society) may feel threatened by attacks from extremist circles, those hitherto located on the margins of both the right and left sides of the political scene. The authors of the report note a disturbing trend related to the coronavirus pandemic. It is not only the extreme political groups' circles that are becoming increasingly active, as they look for ways to reach new supporters in the face of great uncertainty caused by the pandemic. The process of radicalization of increasingly broad social groups that

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Bundesministerium der Justiz, 20 XII 1990, <https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/bverfsgchg/BjNR029700990.html>, s. 1–20 [accessed: 11 III 2021].

- <sup>2</sup> The Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz is customarily referred to as the civilian counterintelligence service or domestic intelligence service to distinguish it from the civilian foreign intelligence service, the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND). The terms counterintelligence and domestic intelligence service will be used interchangeably in the text to distinguish them from foreign intelligence. The Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz has a much broader remit than protecting against foreign intelligence activity within Germany. Capacious terms describing the scope of this service's activities are: protection of the constitutional order or protection of the constitutional security of the German state. Discussions are currently underway, mainly in expert circles in Germany, about the wisdom of dividing the foreign and domestic services. Given the increasing blurring of boundaries in competency divisions, greater convergence of intelligence, counterintelligence, and especially cyber security services is being advocated. Cf. e.g. G. Schindler, *Wer hat Angst vorm BND? Warum wir mehr Mut beim Kampf gegen die Bedrohungen unseres Landes brauchen. Eine Streitschrift*, Berlin 2020.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. F. Schöningh, *Geheime Hüter der Verfassung. Von der Düsseldorfer Informationsstelle zum ersten Verfassungsschutz der Bundesrepublik (1947–1961)*, Paderborn 2004; A. Moroska-Bonkiewicz, „Urząd Ochrony Konstytucji” jako organ bezpieczeństwa ustrojowego RFN. Problematyka funkcjonowania w państwie demokratycznym, „Rocznik Bezpieczeństwa Międzynarodowego” 2013, vol. 7, p. 181 et seq.
- <sup>4</sup> *Minister Reul stellt Verfassungsschutzbericht und bundesweit erstes Corona-Lagebild vor 22. Juni 2021, Verfassungsschutzbericht und bundesweit erstes Corona-Lagebild*, Das Landesportal Wir in NRW, [https://www.im.nrw/system/files/media/document/file/VS\\_Bericht\\_NRW\\_2020.pdf](https://www.im.nrw/system/files/media/document/file/VS_Bericht_NRW_2020.pdf) [accessed: 23 VI 2021].

undermine the foundations of social consensus<sup>5</sup> was also considered to be of concern. Violations of the social contract would not only be understood as questioning the foundations of a democratic state under the rule of law, but also casting doubt on citizens' trust in the state, especially in the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government, or more broadly in health care, medicine and the role of science in society. Protests against further sanitary restrictions in the face of a unique multi-generational event like the COVID-19 pandemic are not in themselves a cause for concern. Of concern is the discourse led by opponents of anti-COVID regulation, anti-vaccination contesters and anti-epidemic public policy, aiming to deny legitimate state authority the legitimacy to act.

At the end of April 2021, it was made public that a new problem area had been created and that the BfV had placed under nationwide surveillance part of the milieu of the social movement opposing anti-COVID restrictions, known as the Querdenker movement (members of this movement describe themselves – freely translated – as nonconformists, thinking against the current, thinking across)<sup>6</sup>. The purpose of this article is to attempt to provide an overview of the phenomenon of social radicalization in Germany in the face of the coronavirus pandemic and to reconstruct the ways in which the domestic civilian intelligence services recognized the new sociopolitical phenomenon. The author of the article sought answers to the following research questions: 1 Could the new phenomenon of social radicalization created by the coronavirus pandemic be a real threat to Germany's internal security? 2 What threat to the constitutional order might radicalizing circles of coronasceptics pose, and are they merely ephemeral in nature dictated by the COVID-19 pandemic?

The research hypothesis is that the emergence of a spontaneous social movement of opponents of sanitary restrictions, anti-vaccinationists and denialists of the coronavirus pandemic is leading to the radicalization of increasingly broad social groups that have so far remained outside the interest of the secret services, and is affecting the level of Germany's internal security and social cohesion. This phenomenon has become a matter of statutory interest for the country's domestic intelligence services. Its direct implications for internal security have been identified

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Verfassungsschutzbericht des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen über das Jahr 2020*, Ministerium des Innern des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, [https://www.im.nrw/system/files/media/document/file/VS\\_Bericht\\_NRW\\_2020.pdf](https://www.im.nrw/system/files/media/document/file/VS_Bericht_NRW_2020.pdf), p. 48 et seq. [accessed: 10 VII 2021].

<sup>6</sup> M. Götschenberg, "Querdenker" werden nun bundesweit beobachtet, „Tagesschau“, 28 IV 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/verfassungsschutz-querdenker-103.html> [accessed: 4 V 2021]. There is no accepted single translation of the word *Querdenker*. In the article, a closely related term – nonconformists – will be used as its equivalent.

as (...) a constitutionally significant delegitimization of the state and its institutions<sup>7</sup>. More broadly, the problem of social radicalization in the pandemic era overlaps with the phenomenon of increasing social polarization. This is an issue of lesser interest to intelligence services, but the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that it can create conditions conducive to radicalization and lead to new forms of political extremism. Once it expires, the extent to which intelligence services will be able to quickly identify new (radical) social movements, increasingly unable to be clearly classified into existing binary matrices – the extreme left and the extreme right – will remain an open question. As the German experience so far has shown, social crises triggered by, among other things, natural disasters and natural phenomena affecting large parts of the population can provide fertile ground for violent outbreaks of social anxiety or discontent, and can also be directed against democratic forms of government.

The adopted research procedure mainly used tools from the area of so-called *desk research* and discourse analysis, the conceptual apparatus of which should be placed within the framework of reconstructive and qualitative sociological research, which is the foundation of the approach proposed below<sup>8</sup>. Unclassified documents, including, among others, official documents of the police and internal security services, were used as research material. In addition, reports and problem studies of constitutional protection offices, interior ministries and academic research units were analyzed. The material also includes newspaper articles and texts published in electronic media, which are part of a reconstruction of public discourse in Germany on the issue at hand. Normative acts are also cited that show the current state of the law in Germany in the context of the phenomenon in question. Ancillary to this, current German-language sociological literature was used, allowing the phenomenon of the pandemic denialist movement to be set against the broader background of the transformations taking place in German society and the associated challenges to state security and social cohesion. The exploratory and at the same time descriptive<sup>9</sup> nature of the analysis proposed in the article presupposes as open a way as possible of dealing with the available (unclassified) research material in order to give the reader an apparatus for understanding a new sociopolitical phenomenon. The article also has a design value and indicates an area

<sup>7</sup> *Neuer Phänomenbereich "Verfassungsschutzrelevante Delegitimierung des Staates"*, Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, <https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/kurzmeldungen/DE/2021/2021-04-29-querdenker.html> [accessed: 30 VII 2021].

<sup>8</sup> Cf. R. Bohnsack, *Rekonstruktive Sozialforschung. Einführung in Methodologie und Praxis qualitativer Forschung*, Wiesbaden 1999; K. Brinker (Hrsg.), *Text- und Gesprächslinguistik. Ein internationales Handbuch zeitgenössischer Forschung*, Berlin–New York 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. R. Mayntz, K. Holm, P. Hübner, *Introduction to the Methods of Empirical Sociology*, Warsaw 1985, p. 37 et seq.

for further interdisciplinary research on the relationship between transformations in the structure of post-industrial societies, including, among other things, processes of radicalization of worldviews and attitudes, and the broader issue of security.

In addition to the above introduction and summary, the article consists of two main analytical sections. The first part reconstructs how constitutional protection offices identify a new sociopolitical phenomenon by means of discourse analysis of cultural phenomena – the conversation of supporters of the nonconformist movement. This part of the article also briefly discusses the legal framework for intra-national intelligence activities. Evidence of the fulfillment of the constitutional prerequisites enabling operational control of the nonconformist movement was provided by the secured conversations of the movement's participants active in social media and their discursive analysis. The second part of the article is devoted to an attempt at a sociological analysis of the new social movement and showing the phenomenon against the background of reflections on the transformations taking place in post-industrial societies.

### **From conceptualization to operationalization of the concept of state delegitimization**

Why does the nonconformist social movement pose a challenge to state security and social cohesion, and why is it subject to operational control by Germany's domestic intelligence services? These questions seem legitimate not only from the perspective of purely cognitive inquisitiveness, but also because a new problem area, absent in the previous practice of German constitutional protection offices, is being covered by the secret services' reconnaissance. In fact, the political agenda of the nonconformist movement primarily targets the foundations of the state's monopoly on the establishment of order and security, as well as the legality and constitutionality of the actions of representative authorities. State institutions, especially the legislative and executive branches of government, are not only accused, at the very least, of ill-will to restrict the fundamental freedoms of citizens, but also denied in principle the legitimacy of counter-pandemic actions as contrary to the constitution<sup>10</sup>. Even when the judiciary authority conceded the right of citizens, especially in the case of the right to assemble or the need to undergo mandatory quarantine after crossing the state border, this was perceived not as an expression

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. O. Nachtwey, R. Schäfer, N. Frei, *Politische Soziologie der Corona-Proteste*, Universität Basel, 17 XII 2020, [https://edoc.unibas.ch/80835/1/20210118133822\\_6005813e51e0a.pdf](https://edoc.unibas.ch/80835/1/20210118133822_6005813e51e0a.pdf), [accessed: 28 VII 2021].

of a well-functioning *checks and balances* mechanism of state authorities, but on the contrary, it reinforced the belief of those involved in the Querdenker movement that the federal and state governments wanted to hijack basic civil rights.

The extension of observation and operational control of the movement first by the individual counterintelligence units of the federal states and eventually by the BfV gave rise to discussions regarding the legitimacy of establishing a new problem area for the intra-national intelligence services and applying operational control to the most active members and groups forming the movement. In a polemical article by Marcus Lutterbeck, a high-ranking official (German *Oberregierungsrat*) of the Ministry of the Interior and Municipal Affairs<sup>11</sup> of Thuringia, there are arguments pointing to the BfV's insufficiently precise definition of the problem area collectively defined as "the delegitimization of the state relevant to the protection of constitutional order", within which the nonconformist movement is placed<sup>12</sup>. The author argues that inadequate operationalization of the concept of delegitimization of the state, or, in fact its services, meaning too superficial translation of accurate conjectures and observations derived from OSINT (*open source intelligence*) into concrete indicators to capture phenomena within a new problem area, can undermine citizens' trust in the service and expose it to accusations of arbitrary action. According to Lutterbeck, the task of an intra-national social communication intelligence service is to translate legal and constitutional concepts clearly and precisely into observable phenomena. In the case of the nonconformist movement, the idea is to point out how the movement's narrative does not fit within the German constitutional order<sup>13</sup>.

At this point, it is necessary to briefly outline the current legal state of affairs, which provides the normative premise for possible intra-national intelligence activities involving a new problem area. At a conference of federal and state interior ministers in 2001, a definition system for politically motivated crimes was developed, which allows both statistical categorization of recorded torts and creates so-called problem areas (German *Phänomenbereich*) for intra-national intelligence services, enabling their recognition, analysis and, consequently, (possible) operational control. Politically motivated crime includes acts directed against the so-called free and democratic basic order, also referred to as the liberal democratic basic order (German: *freiheitliche demokratische Grundordnung*,

<sup>11</sup> Following the dissolution of the independent Land Office for the Protection of the Constitution in Thuringia in 2014, the office now functions as a separate department of the ministry.

<sup>12</sup> M. Lutterbeck, „Das Kind muss einen Namen haben!“ – Die Querdenker und die verfassungsschutzrelevante Delegitimierung des Staates, KSV Polizeipraxis, 27 X 2021, <https://ksv-polizeipraxis.de/das-kind-muss-einen-namen-haben-die-querdenker-und-die-verfassungsschutzrelevante-delegitimierung-des-staates/> [accessed: 1 XII 2021].

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

FDGO), formulated in the German Constitution of 1949 (German *Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland*). This order is included in at least several articles of the Constitution, including Articles art. 10 par. 2 pt. 2, art. 11 par. 2, art. 18 par. 1, art. 21 par. 2 and par. 3 pt. 1, art. 73 par. 1 pt. 10 lit. b), art. 87a par. 4 pt. 1 and art. 91 par. 1<sup>14</sup>. In addition, the concept of a free and democratic basic order has been clarified in the case law of the Federal Constitutional Tribunal (German Bundesverfassungsgericht) in 1952 and 2017. According to these interpretations, the democratic basic order is a constituted order with (...) the *exclusion of any violence and arbitrariness*, it introduces (...) the *rule of law within the framework of the law and order on the basis of the self-determination of the people in accordance with the will of the relevant majority*. (...) *The basic principles of this order include at least: respect for human rights as defined in the constitution, above all the individual's right to life and free development, the sovereignty of the people, the separation of powers, the accountability of the government, the legality of the administration, the independence of the courts*<sup>15</sup>.

Politically motivated crime thus includes the entire range of torts against statehood set out in the German Criminal Code (German *Starfgesetzbuch*), as of 1998<sup>16</sup>, including but not limited to: treason, treason against the country, preparation of an attack war, election offenses, formation of organized terrorist and criminal groups. In addition, the conceptual scope of this type of crime includes common crimes, when circumstances emerge in the course of the investigation indicating that the act was committed with political motives and fulfills the prerequisites of violating the liberal-democratic basic order. Also included in this conceptual scope are crimes directed against individuals and groups on the basis of their proclaimed views, ethnicity, national origin, race, color, religion, sexual orientation and others.<sup>17</sup>

In the practice of federal police and intra-national intelligence services, politically motivated crime is captured in the problem areas already mentioned. Problem areas should be understood as complex sociopolitical phenomena that provide a subsoil for the radicalization processes of specific social groups and

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<sup>14</sup> *Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Bundesministerium der Justiz, 23 V 1949, <https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/gg/BJNR000010949.html> [accessed: 2 XII 2021].

<sup>15</sup> Bundesverfassungsgericht, Urteil vom 23. Oktober 1952, 1 BvB 1/51, *Neue Juristische Wochenschrift* (NJW) 1952, 1407, Leitsatz 2; zuletzt bestätigt mit Urteil vom 17. Januar 2017, 2 BvB 1/13, NJW 2017, 611, Rn. 531. Quoted from: „*Politisch motivierte Kriminalität*“ – *Begriffserklärungen*, Deutscher Bundestag, Wissenschaftliche Dienste (WD), 7 IX 2018, <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/579832/%C3%89/WD-7-194-18-pdf-data.pdf>, s. 4 [accessed: 11 XII 2021].

<sup>16</sup> Last revision in 2021.

<sup>17</sup> „*Politisch motivierte Kriminalität*“..., p. 6.

individuals and can lead to political extremism, as well as violence directed against the constitutional order of a democratic state under the rule of law. Federal Bureau of Investigation (German Bundeskriminalamt) since 2017 has distinguished four problem areas of politically motivated crime, which can be attributed to circles representing the extreme right or extreme left, so-called foreign ideologies, and religiously motivated ideologies<sup>18</sup>.

Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the BfV covered the four problem areas of politically motivated crime mentioned above with monitoring. A subcategory of this type of crime relevant to domestic intelligence services is political extremism. While there is no single, consistent definition of political extremism, it is assumed in German terms to be efforts to dismantle the FDGO and the state or its institutions based on the values and norms of the German Constitution. Extremism thus seeks to replace the existing axionormative order with its own arbitrary idea of legal, political and social order<sup>19</sup>. An important distinction in the practice of German intelligence services is the separation of extremism from political radicalism and the gradation of these terms. Political radicalism is uncompromising claims that can be articulated, for example, in the form of intransigent criticism of the prevailing political, social or economic system. Radical attitudes and claims remain legal as long as they do not exceed the accepted norms of accepting worldview pluralism and do not violate the FDGO<sup>20</sup>.

The early stage of recognition of a new sociopolitical phenomenon by the special services is a process at the intersection of social science methodology, quantitative and qualitative analysis of the phenomenon in question. The analytical process with standardized testing procedures should enable the classification of risks and their assignment to the existing legal framework – FDGO and the BfV Act<sup>21</sup>. The publicly available BfV justification for establishing a new problem area is about 3,000

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Politisch motivierte Kriminalität*, Bundeskriminalamt, [https://www.bka.de/DE/UnsereAufgaben/Deliktbereiche/PMK/pm\\_k\\_node.html](https://www.bka.de/DE/UnsereAufgaben/Deliktbereiche/PMK/pm_k_node.html) [accessed: 27 XII 2021]; *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2018*, Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat, [https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/publikationen/themen/sicherheit/vsb-2018-gesamt.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=10](https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/publikationen/themen/sicherheit/vsb-2018-gesamt.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=10), p. 23 et seq. [accessed: 28 XII 2021].

<sup>19</sup> „*Politisch motivierte Kriminalität*“ ..., p. 8–9.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz Bremen (Freie Hansestadt Bremen), Begriffserklärungen, <https://www.verfassungsschutz.bremen.de/ueber-uns/haeufig-gestellte-fragen-12276> [accessed: 28 XII 2021].

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Gesetz über die Zusammenarbeit des Bundes und der Länder in Angelegenheiten des Verfassungsschutzes...*, s. 2. Paragraph 4(1,2) of the BfV Act contains both conceptual definitions and indicates the prerequisites upon fulfillment of which the office is obliged to take action.



characters in standardized typescript long<sup>22</sup>. Against this background, the procedure of the service from North Rhine-Westphalia should be considered exemplary. In an extraordinary report by the state's Interior Ministry on the issue of conspiracy theories and the nonconformist movement in the face of the coronavirus pandemic, the justification alone for the national intelligence service's coverage of the movement takes up more than a few dozen pages<sup>23</sup>. The published document does not indicate which specific analytical technique or data analysis software was used, it only hinted that discourse analysis was used in developing the background material. However, based on the available excerpt from the report, it is possible to reconstruct a pattern of analytical handling of the found material. Regardless of the research tools used in the discourse analysis by the service from North Rhine-Westphalia, the public was presented with the structured result of observing the communication channels of the nonconformist movement on the Telegram platform between April and May 2021. The discourse analysis provided a look at the movement, which does not have well-developed and institutionalized structures acting on its behalf, but conducts intensive communication through social media. The analysis was based on the assumption that the discourse of nonconformists creates a specific framework of meaning and thus group-specific constructions and definitions of social and political reality relating to the coronavirus pandemic in Germany. This discourse generates both a worldview field and concrete proposals for defining the situation and sets of more-or-less abstract proposals for action for social actors<sup>24</sup>. Under the assumption that discourse exists as an actual use of language and materializes in certain enduring dispositions that reinforce and objectify intersubjectively shared worldviews, there is the possibility of controlled insight into a given discourse<sup>25</sup>. The reconstruction of nonconformist narratives should therefore lead to both an explication of the worldviews shared in the formation and their categorization<sup>26</sup> according to accepted FDGO norms. The authors of the study point out that the discourse analyzed cannot be taken as representative of the movement as a whole and of all nonconformist sympathizers and opponents of sanitation restrictions, but is emblematic of the opinion formers setting the tone for debates within the movement itself.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Neuer Phänomenbereich "Verfassungsschutzrelevante Delegitimierung des Staates"...*

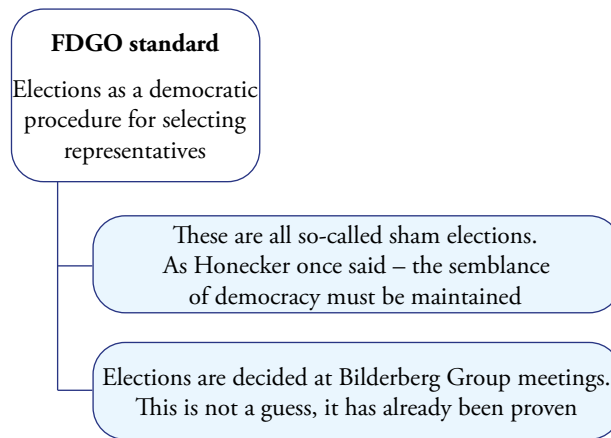
<sup>23</sup> *Sonderbericht zu Verschwörungsmethoden und „Corona-Leugnern“*, Ministerium des Innern des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, May 2021, [https://www.im.nrw/system/files/media/document/file/Sonderbericht\\_2021\\_Verschwoerungsmethoden\\_und\\_Corona-Leugner.pdf](https://www.im.nrw/system/files/media/document/file/Sonderbericht_2021_Verschwoerungsmethoden_und_Corona-Leugner.pdf) [accessed: 11 VI 2021].

<sup>24</sup> Cf. R. Keller, *Wissenssoziologische Diskursanalyse. Grundlegung eines Forschungsprogramms*, ed. 3, Wiesbaden 2011, p. 265.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. P. Mayring, *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Grundlagen und Techniken*, ed. 12, Weinheim, Basel 2015, p. 15–16.

The statements secured by the service from participants in conversations on Telegram platform channels were then categorized according to FDGO's concept key. The report thus identifies areas where the movement's narrative harms the democratic and constitutional axionormative order. Of the more than a dozen categories listed, it is worth noting those of the first order, that is, those derived directly from the norms of the constitution. At the top of the hierarchy was placed electoral law as a pillar of representative democracy. The election procedure itself is not questioned, but the discourse reveals conspiracy tendencies, expressed in statements about the impossibility of holding fair parliamentary elections.



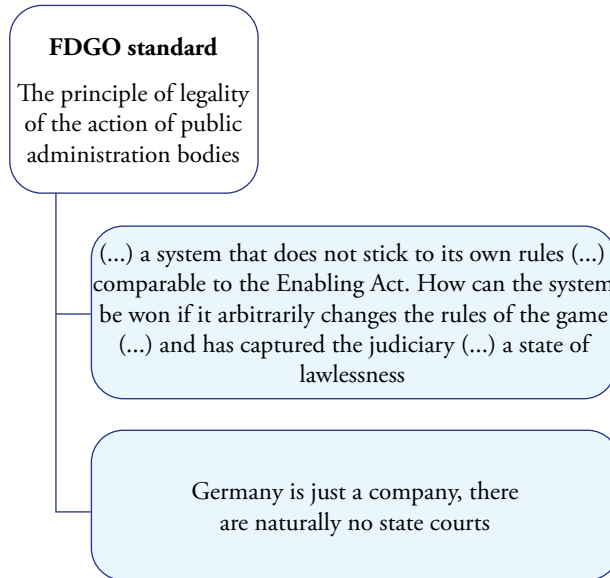
**Diagram 1.** Sample excerpts from conversations of nonconformist traffic channel users on Telegram platform – April 13, 2021.

Source: Compiled in-house based on: *Sonderbericht zu Verschwörungsmethoden und „Corona-Leugnern“*, Ministerium des Innern des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, May 2021, [https://www.im.nrw/system/files/media/document/file/Sonderbericht\\_2021\\_Verschwoerungsmethoden\\_und\\_Corona-Leugner.pdf](https://www.im.nrw/system/files/media/document/file/Sonderbericht_2021_Verschwoerungsmethoden_und_Corona-Leugner.pdf), p. 71, 72 [accessed: 12 VI 2021].

Diagram 1 shows an example of the categorization scheme of secured conversations of the most active chat users of the nonconformist movement. In the darker boxes of the diagram are quotes from forum members, and in the upper part is the assigned FDGO standard to which the quote refers. The authors of the study also point to frequent references among conversation participants to terms used in the rhetoric of the so-called “Reich Citizens” (German: Reichsbürger)<sup>27</sup>. According to this

<sup>27</sup> An ultra-right-wing milieu with diverse ideologies, including noenazi, anti-Semitic, esoteric, which is united by a lack of recognition of the statehood of the Federal Republic of Germany and a belief in the continuity of the German Reich within the 1937 borders. The movement has been under BfV surveillance since 2016. Cf. <https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/DE/themen/reichsbuerger-und->

rhetoric, Germany is not a fully sovereign state, and German citizens are purely a staff (German: *Personal*) of the German company *Firma BRD* or *BRD GmbH*)<sup>28</sup>. The principle of legality of the actions of public administration bodies (German: *Prinzip der Gesetzbindung*) in the narrative of the nonconformists is undermined with statements about the lack of rule of law, the arbitrariness of the government and the arbitrariness of its decisions. Users of the forums are particularly critical of the judiciary (Diagram 2).



**Diagram 2.** Sample excerpts from conversations of nonconformist traffic channel users on Telegram platform – April 13, 2021.

Source: Compiled in-house based on: *Sonderbericht zu Verschwörungsmythen und „Corona-Leugnern“*, Ministerium des Innern des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, May 2021, [https://www.im.nrw/system/files/media/document/file/Sonderbericht\\_2021\\_Verschwuerungsmythen\\_und\\_Corona-Leugner.pdf](https://www.im.nrw/system/files/media/document/file/Sonderbericht_2021_Verschwuerungsmythen_und_Corona-Leugner.pdf), p. 74 [accessed: 12 VI 2021].

The inadvertent references to the 1933 Enabling Act (German: *Ermächtigungsgesetz vom 24. März 1933*), which allows the Reich government to pass laws without requiring the approval of the Reichstag, are meant to indicate the totalitarian inclinations of those in power and to be evidence of the unauthorized domination of the executive over the legislative. In the following sections of the study

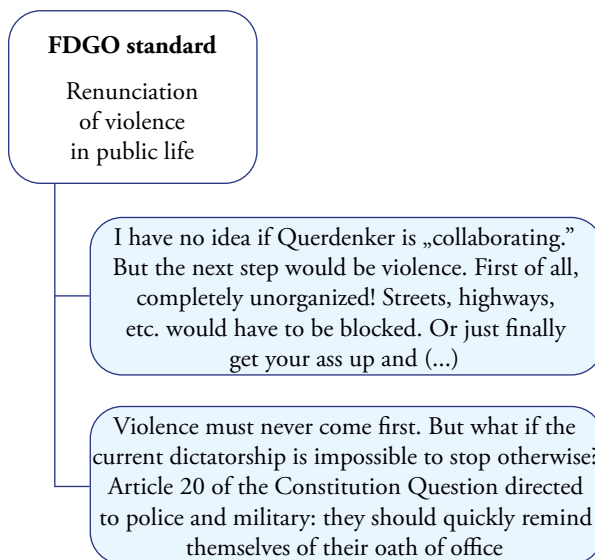
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[selbstverwalter/reichsbuerger-und-selbstverwalter\\_node.html](#) [accessed: 11 XII 2021].

<sup>28</sup> *Sonderbericht zu Verschwörungsmythen...*, p. 71.

under review, elements of discourse detrimental to the FDGO are identified, which derive indirectly from the democratic order of the rule of law and relate, among other things, to the prohibition of the death penalty, hate speech against public officials, including those holding a representative mandate, the right of citizens to information and access to information by the public media. This collection also includes anti-Semitic and relativizing themes of the National Socialist period taken up by supporters of the movement.

The legitimization of violence against symbolic representations of the state, including, among others, police officers, often finds an outlet in abstract fantasies about the necessity of using force and making a radical transformation of the oppressive – in the opinion of the movement’s sympathizers – socio-political system of Germany, whose oppressiveness was to reach unprecedented proportions during the pandemic. The stability of the German political scene is seen as a deliberate, rational process of petrification of political life, aimed at appropriating civil liberties and the state for a narrow political elite. Diagram 3 shows selected conversations containing insinuations of possible violence.



**Diagram 3.** Sample excerpts from conversations of nonconformist traffic channel users on Telegram platform – April 13, 2021.

Source: Compiled in-house based on: *Sonderbericht zu Verschwörungsmmythen und „Corona-Leugnern“*, Ministerium des Innern des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, May 2021, [https://www.im.nrw/system/files/media/document/file/Sonderbericht\\_2021\\_Verschwoerungsmmythen\\_und\\_Corona-Leugner.pdf](https://www.im.nrw/system/files/media/document/file/Sonderbericht_2021_Verschwoerungsmmythen_und_Corona-Leugner.pdf), p. 93, 99 [accessed: 12 VI 2021].

The diagrams presented in the article are for illustrative purposes and show the analytical procedure scheme in the qualitative data processing method adopted. What the reader sees as a structured summary is the result of categorizing sample outputs (text samples), i.e., conversations secured over a given time period. Reading all the conversation quotes selected by the North Rhine-Westphalia Constitutional Protection Service and categorizing them led the domestic intelligence service to believe that further observation was warranted and that the most radical circles in the movement could be subjected to operational control. The incoherent structure of the movement, the lack of a coherent (extremist) political agenda, the influx of radical ideologies previously in the field of observation of the domestic intelligence services (extreme right, extreme left) were not considered a rationale for excluding the newly formed social movement from the field of interest of the services. A structured analysis of the narratives of sympathizers and entertainers of the nonconformist movement has shown that the discourse of at least some supporters is shaped by hostility to the rudimentary norms and values of the German Constitution.

Researchers observing German society in the era of the pandemic trace the sources of social radicalization much deeper than the temporary eruption of social discontent caused by the state of uncertainty and chaos prevailing at the time. It is difficult to make definitive statements about the extent to which the pandemic has been a direct cause or catalyst for the growing rift between the anti-pandemic efforts of state institutions and public perception of both the coronavirus pandemic itself as a sociobiological phenomenon and the temporary restrictions on certain civil liberties and restrictions on public life introduced during it.

### **An attempt at a sociological description of the Querdenker movement**

With the gradual tightening of public life during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, a heterogeneous social movement opposed to federal and state sanitary regulations began to form within Germany between March and April 2020. Restrictions on freedom of movement and assembly in particular raised doubts among some citizens, which were seen as an unwarranted attack by state institutions on basic freedoms and civil liberties. The relatively rapid development and deployment of effective vaccines against Sars-CoV-2 and the mass vaccination campaign have resulted in an influx of people in the movement who are skeptical or hostile to the alleged “untested preparations”.

The Querdenker movement, whose supporters, as mentioned, describe themselves as nonconformists, can be identified with all those who (allegedly) do

not succumb to herd thinking about the dangers of the coronavirus pandemic. The term *Querdenker*, as a term for a social group, also contains a verb element (German: verb. *querdenken* or noun. verb. *Querdenken*), which would be close to the concept of *lateral thinking*, i.e. thinking based on creativity, breaking out of established patterns, remaining in opposition to familiar and routinized ways of reasoning. The first nonconformist group was founded by Stuttgart-based social activist Michael Ballweg in April 2020 and operates under the name Querdenken-711<sup>29</sup>. During the first and second waves of the pandemic in Germany, the movement gained more and more supporters. Significantly, Querdenker does not have a unified institutionalized core or cores, such as the neo-Nazi or far-left movements, which form themselves into associations or have their own (legal or not) political parties<sup>30</sup>. Rather, the movement resembles loosely affiliated groups with often conflicting political affiliations, and there are some that do not articulate any political slogans, but appeal primarily to the traditions of civil and social disobedience. These groups go by different names depending on the state and are often ephemeral in nature.

Currently, there is no accurate sociometric data on this movement. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution refrains from making public even an estimate of its numbers. The difficulty in compiling a full sociological cross-section of the nonconformist movement lies in its aforementioned noninstitutionalized nature and its high degree of dispersion and diversity of worldviews. The movement is a conglomeration of incoherent groups and milieus, i.e. grassroots movements, extreme neo-Nazi groups, anti-Semitic groups, groups adhering to the QAnon pseudo-theory<sup>31</sup>, conspiracy theory proponents, esoteric movements, anti-vaccinationists. Among the movement's active and prominent supporters and participants in anti-COVID protests are also natural medicine practitioners, environmentalists,

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<sup>29</sup> The numerical part of the name comes from the area code for Stuttgart; other groups also use the area codes of the cities in which they are founded. For example, a group in Hanover has adopted the name Querdenken-511. Cf. <https://querdenken-711.de/> [accessed: 4 IX 2021]; <https://querdenken-511.de/> [accessed: 4 IX 2021].

<sup>30</sup> Despite their high degree of fragmentation and often clandestine activities, both neo-Nazi groups and those associated with the extreme left have institutionalized oversight organizations (so-called roof organizations, German: *Dachorganisation*), financial or advocacy background. The disconnection of small groups and their operation in a hermetic environment remains a worrying phenomenon for police and counterintelligence services. A good example to illustrate the problem is the activities of the National Socialist Underground (German: Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund, NSU), a neo-Nazi terrorist group in Germany. Cf. Ch. Scheuermann, *Der braune Virus*, „Der Spiegel” 2011, No. 51, p. 63 et seq.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Was ist QAnon?*, „Tagesschau”, 4 VIII 2020, <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/qanon-faq-101.html> [accessed: 8 IX 2020].

low-cost publishers and alter-globalists<sup>32</sup>. An important role in the formation of the movement, its activation and spread is played by the Internet and the social media platforms operating within it, such as Facebook and YouTube. For the mobilization of the movement and the exchange of world views, the free communication platform Telegram, created by a Russian-born entrepreneur<sup>33</sup>, is of great importance. There are 2,500 channels in Telegram messenger associated with the movement; the Querdenken-711 group's channel was watched by 60,000 users at the end of June 2021, and more than 100,000 people at the peak of popularity in 2020<sup>34</sup>. According to available data, the movement is credited with organizing more than 100 protests across the country. Large gatherings occurred in Frankfurt am Main, Regensburg, Wiesbaden and Düsseldorf. The demonstrations were attended by several hundred to over a thousand people. So far, the largest gathering related to the movement was held in Berlin on August 29, 2020. It was attended by about 40,000 people. Some demonstrators tried to force their way into the Federal Parliament building, the historic home of the Reichstag. The demonstration was disbanded by the police.

The Land Office for the Protection of the Constitution of Baden-Württemberg in December 2020 received approval for operational control of the Querdenken-711 movement, and from April 2021 the BfV placed the entire movement under observation, including the possibility of operational control of its most active representatives<sup>35</sup>. As emphasized by Bavarian Interior Minister Joachim Herrmann (Christian Social Union in Bavaria, German: Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern e.V., CSU), the nonconformist movement is a very heterogeneous collection of individuals whose worldview ranges from citizens who wish to emphasize the importance of basic constitutional rights, such as freedom of assembly, to fanatical anti-vaccinationists and those who challenge the democratic order of the state and the legitimacy of state power<sup>36</sup>. In addition, the movement, through its networked nature, as well as its apparent rhetoric targeting anti-pandemic restrictions in the first

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. M. Butter, *Die neue Querfront*, „Der Spiegel“ 2021, No. 2, s. 40–41; W. Benz (Hrsg.), *Querdenken. Protestbewegung zwischen Demokratieverachtung, Hass und Aufruhr*, Berlin 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. M. Hoppenstedt, *Was die Politik gegen Telegram unternehmen kann*, „Der Spiegel“, 14 XII 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/telegram-was-die-politik-gegen-die-gefaehrliche-chat-app-unternehmen-kann-a-7245e6fd-b057-41b9-9b50-69095458cd54> [accessed: 15 XII 2021].

<sup>34</sup> L. Jakobi, *Politologe: „Querdenker“ suchen sich neue Themen*, mdr Aktuell, 17 VI 2021, <https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/deutschland/gesellschaft/corona-querdenken-bewegung-ende-100.html> [accessed: 20 VI 2021].

<sup>35</sup> M. Götschenberg, *„Querdenker“ werden nun bundesweit beobachtet...* [accessed: 25 IV 2021].

<sup>36</sup> B. Oswald, *Querdenker: Wer sie sind - und wie sich die Bewegung entwickelt*, BR24, 7 II 2021, <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/deutschland-welt/die-querdenker-eine-heterogene-protestbewegung,SO9TvdX> [accessed: 8 IV 2021].

place, is the perfect platform for extremists to access a segment of society that is not politically active outside of democratic norms of participation. A similar view is held by Baden-Württemberg Interior Minister Thomas Strobl, who, in justifying the LfB's inclusion of the movement under observation, noted in December 2020 that most of the participants in the protests could not be considered extremists, and that the Querdenken-711 movement and its regional annexes, as well as the extremists who appear around them, should be subject to observation<sup>37</sup>.

The Querdenker movement poses a public order challenge to be faced by the federal police and the states' police services, and remains a test case for effectively identifying and selectively separating citizens exercising their right to demonstrate and articulate their views from the radical and extremist movements that are part of the nonconformist movement. The agenda turned against state institutions within the nonconformist movement was particularly actively promoted by extreme right-wing circles, which tried to use the movement's slogans for their own political purposes<sup>38</sup>. There is also clear regional variation for the most active groupings of the movement. In Germany's eastern states (Saxony), the most dynamic groups come from neo-Nazi circles and Reich Citizens, while in Germany's southwestern states (Baden-Württemberg) circles of leftist provenance are becoming visible, including former activists of alternative environmental movements and Western Communists<sup>39</sup>.

A team of sociologists from the University of Basel conducted an empirical study under the direction of Professor Oliver Nachtwey among participants in anti-COVID demonstrations and users of the nonconformist movement's information exchange channels on Telegram. German-speaking countries – Germany, Austria and Switzerland – were covered. The main part of the survey was carried out via the Internet. The survey form, to which the researchers posted a link in communication channels, was filled out by 1150 people. The data obtained cannot be considered representative due to limited knowledge of the movement's population and difficult access to its sympathizers, as well as due to the researchers' capture of respondents' projections, which aimed to portray the movement only in a positive light<sup>40</sup>. However, they provide a good deal of material for further

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> „Querdenker“ im Südwesten entstammen linksalternativem Milieu, „Der Tagesspiegel“, 22 XI 2021, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/studie-sieht-klare-unterschiede-zu-sachsen-querdenker-im-suedwesten-entstammen-linksalternativem-milieu/27824108.html> [accessed: 22 XI 2021].

<sup>40</sup> O. Nachtwey, R. Schäfer, N. Frei, *Politische Soziologie...*, p. 4 et seq.



quantitative and qualitative research and give interesting insights into the habitual patterns of worldview orientations of participants and supporters of the movement.

From the results, a rough picture of the social structure of those who support the movement emerges. Supporters are middle-aged (average age 47), with 75 percent of those surveyed falling into the 38+ range. There are more women (60 percent) than men (38 percent) in the group. Of those surveyed, 31 percent have at least a high school diploma, and 34 percent have a university degree, which is less than twice the German national average (18.5 percent of the population has a university degree)<sup>41</sup>. As a combined category of people with secondary and higher education, this group is dominant (65 percent). Respondents overwhelmingly include those in permanent gainful employment – full-time (35 percent), part-time (22 percent) and freelancers (25 percent). Retirees make up 9 percent of respondents, housewives 6 percent, and the unemployed only 3 percent<sup>42</sup>.

Answers to questions about self-defining class affiliation and political affiliations provide interesting data. More than 66 percent of respondents describe themselves as belonging to the middle class, with 32 percent in the upper middle class and 34 percent in the lower middle class. The working class, according to the declaration, belongs to just over 8 percent of respondents, and the upper class to just 0.89 percent.<sup>43</sup> The electoral preferences of those surveyed were inversely proportional to the configuration of the ruling coalition at the federal level in Germany at the time. When asked which party you chose in the last parliamentary elections, 10 percent said they voted for the Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU), while 6 percent said they voted for the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). The traditional so-called people's parties (CDU/CSU, SPD)<sup>44</sup> are second on the list to groups that were in parliamentary opposition at the time. Twenty-three percent of respondents said they would vote for the Greens (German: Die Grünen), 18 percent for the Left (German: Die Linke), and 15 percent for Alternative for Germany (German: Alternative für Deutschland). Smaller political groups received their votes from 21 percent of those surveyed, such as the Party

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 7, 51.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> A people's party (German: *Volkspartei*) in the German context should be understood as a party that does not represent the interests of one or more social groups, such as socialist parties, which were limited to representing the interests of the working class exclusively. People's parties in Germany include all sectors of society in their program and address it as broadly as possible.

(German: Die Partei) with 4 percent, and the Animal Protection Party (German: Die Partei Mensch Umwelt Tierschutz) with 1 percent<sup>45</sup>.

A declarative characteristic inherent in the movement's supporters is a high level of alienation from the institutions of the democratic state, the mainstream media (public media, high-circulation press, major news portals) and expert knowledge. Of the 1150 respondents, more than 36 percent of those surveyed indicated that they were very dissatisfied with the state of democracy in Germany. The remaining 30 percent are distributed on a scale in successive ranges of dissatisfaction after the most extreme negative response<sup>46</sup>. Respondents showed even more skepticism when asked about the reliability of media reporting of protests against sanitation restrictions. More than 85 percent of those surveyed indicated that the traditional media are deliberately distorting the image of the protests, and more than 63 percent of respondents fully agree with the statement that the tone in the coronavirus debate is set by false experts (German: *falsche Experten*). There is also a great deal of skepticism in assessing the federal government's counter-pandemic efforts. The claim that the pandemic narrative is being dramatized and exaggerated by the government is fully agreed with by more than 76 percent of respondents, and the claim that the government is creating unnecessary fear among citizens is fully supported by more than 86 percent of respondents<sup>47</sup>.

Like political scientists observing and commenting on the phenomenon of social protests against pandemic restrictions, researchers at the University of Basel also point out the movement's enormous social and worldview diversity. They claim that (...) *we are dealing not with one, but with multiple, often incompatible groups*<sup>48</sup>. Contrary to popular opinion about the low social status of the movement's participants and supporters, the survey data seems to contradict such claims. Nor would past electoral preferences indicate an alarming share of extreme political groups, such as the National Democratic Party of Germany – The People's Union (German: Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands – Die Volksunion) or the German Communist Party (German: Deutsche Kommunistische Partei) in declared sympathies.

The quantitative research was complemented by ethnographic (participatory) observations. A group of researchers took part in two legal gatherings called by the nonconformist movement – on October 4, 2020, a demonstration in Constance was observed by 14 researchers, and on November 7, 2020, 9 researchers were

<sup>45</sup> O. Nachtwey, R. Schäfer, N. Frei, , *Politische Soziologie...*, p. 10 et seq.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 38. The question adopts a ten-point scale, where: 0 – very dissatisfied, 10 – very satisfied.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 12–14.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 51.

sent to Leipzig<sup>49</sup>. What emerges from the observations is a picture of the agenda of the movement's leaders and those participating in the demonstrations. An important component of the discourse is the perception of reality in dichotomous categories – us vs. them. In addition to integrating the group, the collective “we” plays an important identity role, in which there is an elitization of the shared worldview of people who “see more,” who do not succumb to collective panic and government narratives about pandemics. “They” constitute a conformist majority and, above all, a ruling class that does not fulfill its representative function, and the government's oppressive actions against its own citizens are dictated by the unconstitutional and arbitrarily imposed will of the executive branch, reinforced by the alleged situation of a “permanent state of emergency.”<sup>50</sup> Significantly, the discourse of the movement's supporters breaks with the role of victim and readily presents committed supporters as the de facto guardians of the German Constitution.

Some “barometric” and contextual clues to the sources of the deepening polarization, which is increasingly evolving into spontaneous, violent and heterogeneous in its sociometric structure expressions of social discontent, are provided by both empirical studies conducted by the Federal Police and university research units, as well as somewhat more theoretical analyses of the last few years attracting public attention in Germany. Almost a year ago, an article by Dirk Kurbjuweit, one of the leading columnists at the Hamburg-based magazine, appeared in the widely read and opinionated German socio-political weekly *Der Spiegel*. Its author described the phenomenon of ephemeral and unexpected outbreaks of public discontent, mainly against the public policies of the federal government and the states<sup>51</sup>. The spontaneous and sometimes violent protests by thousands of German citizens against further restrictions on public life in the era of the coronavirus pandemic have served the publicist to ask questions about the deeper sources of social frustration and who is the so-called *Wutbürger* (freely translated – angry citizen), a participant in anti-COVID protests and demonstrations, who is not necessarily recruited from far-right or far-left circles, and until recently remained on the electoral spectrum of the parties present in parliament. Kurbjuweit and other keen observers of German public life seek answers to the questions that have been bothering them in a widely discussed publication by German sociologist

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 55.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *ibid*, p. 57 et seq.; V. Weiss, *Verschwörungsglaube in der Pandemie*, “Soziale Probleme” 2021, No. 32, p. 183-192 – manuscript of a lecture delivered on November 8, 2021 at the Free University of Berlin as part of the series “Andere als Gefahr – die Gefährdung des Anderen. Die Pandemie als gesellschaftliches Problem”. Record in possession of the author of the article.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. D. Kurbjuweit, *Das Jahrzehnt des Wutbürgers*, „Der Spiegel” 2020, No. 42, p. 46–47.

and cultural studies scholar Andreas Reckwitz entitled *Das Ende der Illusionen. Politik, Ökonomie und Kultur in der Spätmoderne*, previously known mainly in academic circles. Published in 2019, the analysis of modern societies provides an in-depth diagnosis of the transformations that the sociologist believes are about to take place in Western post-industrial societies. While rapid industrialization and the entrenchment of the welfare state, particularly in Western Europe in the first four post-war decades of the 20th century, brought stable economic growth and relative prosperity, observed social inequality was still defined in the traditional vocabulary of sociology by terms such as class, social stratification, and social conflict. The source of tensions was said to be the unequal distribution of wealth in society, inevitably leading to stratification, which becomes a hotbed of social conflict<sup>52</sup>. Reckwitz notes that in Western societies today, more than class conflict, there is a fracture in the social structure, the dynamics of which are shaped not so much by deepening economic stratification, but by conflicts centered around values, identity or the scope of civil liberties. In his analysis, Reckwitz takes a look at the class, which he sees as a stabilizer of Western liberal democracies and the social consensus, according to which the violent articulation of social discontent was usually canalized on the margins of political life. The German sociologist argues that this - until recently stable - majority “middle” is eroding and disintegrating into increasingly atomized groups that do not represent collective interests, but increasingly heterogeneous worldviews and attitudes. Symptomatic of the described transformation is to be, among other things, the breaking of political ties between traditional parties and their electorate. This leads to a lack of political representation for increasingly large segments of society and a progressive exodus of citizens from the center toward more radical circles that offer easy solutions to increasingly complex social problems<sup>53</sup>. It is worth recalling at this point the words of Minister Reul, cited at the beginning of this article, in which he expressed concern that the coronavirus pandemic is a challenge not only to public health, but also to state security and social cohesion and solidarity. As ad hoc studies conducted by researchers at the University of Basel have also shown, the influx of the middle class – the representative of the democratic consensus to date and the stabilizer of the political order in Germany – into radical circles may raise legitimate concerns. In the short term, the problem of social order in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is undoubtedly a challenge for law

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<sup>52</sup> A. Reckwitz, *Das Ende der Illusionen. Politik, Ökonomie und Kultur in der Spätmoderne*, Berlin 2020, p. 63 et seq.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90 et seq. Cf. also: R. Lukenda, *Verdrängt, vernachlässigt und vergessen? Die classes populaires als neue/alte „Paragesellschaft“?*, in: T. Hiergeist et al., *Paragesellschaften. Imaginationen – Inszenierungen – Interaktionen in den Gegenwartskulturen*, Berlin 2021, p. 25 et seq.

enforcement agencies. Pent-up emotions and public sentiment in the face of high uncertainty caused by the pandemic create favorable conditions for radicalization. In the long term, the described phenomenon of the nonconformist movement is likely to weaken with the end of the pandemic, but it may also evolve in an unexpected direction, shifting the focus to another element of socio-political reality. Political extremism itself and its extreme form – politically motivated terrorism – are no strangers to the recent history of German statehood<sup>54</sup>. However, the mechanism of social delegitimization of the democratic institutions of the state, the deepening distrust not so much of politics, but of the principals of democratic order, the tripartite division of power, or even suspicion of the informational role of the media are becoming an attractive narrative for increasingly broader social groups that have so far advocated the maintenance of social homeostasis, which is most fully expressed in the acceptance of the democratic rules of the rule of law.

## Summary

As Katja Gloger and Georg Mascolo rightly point out in their book *Ausbruch. Innenansichten einer Pandemie*<sup>55</sup>, an attempt to reconstruct the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the German state and its society, this unique event in recent German history (and beyond) is also a kind of stress test for states' organizational capabilities in times of crisis and rapid adaptation to changing conditions that determine state security. It's no secret that Germany's federal government and state governments have been expecting attacks on critical infrastructure, healthcare computer systems or the financial sector, among others. It was here that the "soft underbelly" of the state was seen, which could be vulnerable to criminal organizations or other states seeking competitive advantages in areas of interest. The social impact of the pandemic crisis seemed completely unpredictable. Internal security and public order have focused most of the German public's attention. This is not much of a surprise, given that the pandemic has affected almost every aspect of daily life. The need to maintain a high degree of discipline and social solidarity in the face of a pandemic has intensified waves of protests directed against the regulatory policies of governments at the land and federal levels. The emergence

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<sup>54</sup> After 1945, both West Germany and GFR (after reunification) faced at least several waves of political terrorism. Since the 1930s, at least three generations of terrorist networks linked to the far-left ideology of the Red Army Faction (German: Rote Armee Fraktion) have been active, and in recent decades the most notorious acts of terror have been carried out by the neo-Nazi group NSU.

<sup>55</sup> K. Gloger, G. Mascolo, *Ausbruch. Innenansichten einer Pandemie*, München 2021.

of a new social movement preaching radical slogans was considered a significant phenomenon from the point of view of protecting the state's constitutional order. Both the heterogeneous social structure of the movement and the lack of a coherent political agenda cause difficulties in accurately defining the phenomenon and thus in precisely delineating the problem area for the secret services. What distinguishes the movement is its rather negative definition of the current state system and social order, with a mix of different kinds of affects, ranging from deep disillusionment with the electrified political scene, through frustrations stemming from intersubjectively shared inconsistencies between one's own judgments and assessments of reality and the actions of representative authorities, to the open expression of more radical emotions, such as hostility and hatred towards the symbols of the democratic state, including elected representatives or public officials.

This phenomenon is one of the social phenomena of the pandemic period in Germany and has implications for state security and social cohesion<sup>56</sup>. For the moment, it seems that the main risk factor for internal security in Germany in the context of the described phenomenon is the possible conversion of social frustration into violence and actions of a terrorist nature against representatives of legally elected state authorities. The first major warning sign was a series of arrests of participants in the "Dresden Offline-Vernetzung" channel on the Telegram platform, which followed a journalistic investigation by public broadcaster ZDF in early December 2021. The group of active users of the Dresden chat room numbered about 100. From among this group, a radicalized member began to emerge, exchanging information about plans to assassinate Saxon Prime Minister Michael Kretschmer. A notable phenomenon in the disclosed correspondence is the process of inspiring and motivating each other to take increasingly radical steps. The group's administrator, appearing under the pseudonym "Daniel," called on the forum to be uncompromising and, as a last resort, to use weapons. In addition to online fantasies of violence, the core of the group held clandestine meetings in one of Dresden's parks. After the group's meeting, one of the participants ascertained the arrangements for plans to "cut off" (German: *absägen*) the prime minister of the state<sup>57</sup>. Searches in Dresden and Heidenau revealed both white weapons (crossbows) and firearms, their components and ammunition. In response to press inquiries, a spokesman for the Saxony State Investigation Office (German: *Landeskriminalamt*) indicated

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. e.g. U. Beck, *Spółeczeństwo ryzyka. W drodze do innej nowoczesności*, tłum. S. Cieřła, Warszawa 2004; A. Reckwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten. Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne*, Berlin 2017.

<sup>57</sup> A. Ginzel, H. Merker, Ch. Rohde, *Mordpläne gegen Kretschmer auf Telegram*, ZDF, 7 XII 2021, <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/corona-leugner-sachsen-kretschmer-mordplaene-telegram-100.html> [accessed: 8 XII 2021].

that the ongoing operations against the detainees are related to suspected planning of a grave crime threatening the state<sup>58</sup>. This is the most serious incident so far, and it stems from the radicalization process of the most active actors in the nonconformist movement.

The dynamics of the movement are likely to weaken as the pandemic stabilizes and the coronavirus evolves into an endemic phenomenon. The official end of the pandemic will cause a natural disintegration of the environment of the adventurously consolidated around the subject. Social radicalization in the face of a pandemic is not just a specifically German phenomenon, but rather a multifactorial process, increasingly encountered in so-called consolidated democracies<sup>59</sup>, with local differences and conditions. The common ground for the crystallization of this phenomenon is largely due to society's experience of a state of great uncertainty and permanent risk, including epidemics, armed conflicts, environmental disaster, the financial collapse of global capital markets, stratifying social tensions, accompanied by the structural transformation of post-industrial societies signaled in the text.

When looking for arguments to support the research hypothesis posed at the beginning of the article, it is worth noting the more enduring element of radicalization processes, which was also signaled by researchers from the University of Basel. The high level of alienation from political life in Germany among the movement's supporters indicates a growing distance from the democratic state and its institutions and the current form of representative democracy. In the long term, this state of affairs may lead to an affective transfer of frustrations stemming from a sense of vacuum in political representation to elected representatives or symbols of current statehood. An outlet for such attitudes and worldviews may be provided by more-or-less coordinated acts of violence, which will evolve from the alienated group's notions of the "right" social and political order, which it does not believe to be realized. This may be a long-term process of radicalization that will be difficult for the country's intelligence services, especially in the initial phases, to properly identify and categorize and distinguish from the forms of criticism of the democratic axionormative order that are well-established and acceptable in German political culture.

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. *Razzia bei Telegram-Gruppe in Dresden - mehrere Waffen gefunden*, mdr, 15 XII 2021, <https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/sachsen/razzia-dresden-mordplaene-kretschmer-100.html> [accessed: 16 XII 2021].

<sup>59</sup> Cf. J.J. Linz, A. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore 1996.

As the example of the nonconformist movement has shown, a major analytical challenge for Germany's domestic intelligence services will remain the effective identification of ephemeral social movements using radical discourse and creating favorable conditions for new forms of political extremism, not to mention the potential for other state and non-state actors to influence pent-up public emotions. According to data from the East StratCom task force (part of the European External Action Service), which works on countering disinformation in addition to strategic communications, more than 110 disinformative messages related to the coronavirus pandemic spread on social media during the initial period of the pandemic in Europe (until the end of March 2020). According to the researchers, the sources of the disinformation noted at the time lead to the Russian Federation<sup>60</sup>. The Chinese narrative also resonates in Europe, especially that relating to the PRC's international standing and its successes in fighting the pandemic<sup>61</sup>. Coronasceptics' communication channels can easily be used to multiply both disinformation and propaganda. A good example are the channels run by journalists, columnists and bloggers respected by members of the Querdenker movement – Boris Reitschuster (300,000 subscribers to the channel on the Telegram platform), Bodo Schiffmann and Ken Jebsens. Not only do they mediate information about the virus through the Russian broadcaster Russia Today's media platform, which functioned until recently, but they have also been incorporating the Russian narrative about the war in Ukraine into their own communications on platforms dedicated to the pandemic since the beginning of the Russian invasion. In addition, it is presented as source knowledge, legitimizing an "alternative" view of commonly held views<sup>62</sup>. The methods and content of communication in the coronasceptic movement, the methods of social engineering used by foreign actors to shape public opinion in the face of a pandemic and, as the Russian invasion in Ukraine shows, the methods of propaganda used during armed conflicts deserve a separate study.

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. U. Hottel, *Woher stammen die Falschnachrichten zum Coronavirus?*, „Die Zeit“, 20 III 2020, <https://www.zeit.de/digital/internet/2020-03/fake-news-covid-19-vorwurf-russland-usa> [accessed: 25 IV 2021]; *The Virus to Liberate us from Freedom*, EU vs Disinfo, 19 III 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-virus-to-liberate-us-from-freedom/> [accessed: 25 IV 2021].

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Ch. Johnson, W. Marcellino, *Reining in COVID-19 Disinformation from China, Russia, and Elsewhere*, RAND Corporation, 19 XI 2021, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/11/reining-in-covid-19-disinformation-from-china-russia.html> [accessed: 12 II 2022].

<sup>62</sup> Cf. L. Kirschbaum, *Putins Plattformprediger*, „Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung“, 17 III 2022, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/russische-propaganda-in-telegram-gruppen-von-corona-leugnern-17885654.html> [accessed: 18 III 2022].



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