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CORONA PROTESTS IN GERMANY: INSIGHTS INTO A NEW MOVEMENT

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WORKING GROUP 2 – National and international policies for crisis management in comparative perspective

ABSTRACT

In August 2020, the German capital of Berlin became the stage for political manifestations organized by regional and relatively unknown groups of individuals with diverse political agendas. The German government and the public observed smaller and bigger agglomerations of up to 40.000 citizens of different backgrounds articulating themselves critically towards the political and legal measures taken by the government to address the crisis caused by COVID-19. The public perception of these newly identified networks and organizations and their diverging political agendas posed questions to traditional understandings of political mobilization. While policy makers, researchers, the media and the general public are often categorizing political groups or movements into specific sections including left, right, center and others, the newly growing so called “anti-corona” or “corona-sceptical” movement in Germany did not allow an easy categorization at first sight. This chapter will give an overview and a first insight into this newly evolving movement, its political agenda and into its mechanisms of political mobilization. It will be shown; how a heterogeneous mixture of middle class citizens, peace movement activists, right wing extremists, antisemitic conspiracy theorists and others joined a common platform strengthened by social media activism and so called alternative media channels.

Keywords: *Germany; COVID-19; manifestations; social media.*

INTRODUCTION

Traditional political movements are relatively easy to identify during political manifestations using political symbols or other forms of political articulation (including banners, slogans, outer appearance etc.). The newly appeared “corona-skeptical” movement in Germany, however, is uniting groups and individuals from several political spectra who in conventional moments were expected to enter into at least political if not physical confrontation. Observers of the so-called “corona-skeptical” movement identified individuals and groups from the radical right to the alternative left including so-called “citizens of the empire” (“Reichsbürger”). It also includes esoteric groups, middle class citizens and families, entrepreneurs, peace movement activists, social media activists and so called “alternative

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media” producers, public celebrities including pop musicians and athletes and representatives of the German populist party “Alternative for Germany” (AfD) besides many others. The objective of this chapter is to create an overview and a first insight into this newly developing movement, its political agenda and into its mechanisms of political mobilization. Recently published qualitative sources will be used to analyse political statements and objectives of this movement.

Early theories of political mobilization as developed mostly throughout the 20th century have addressed social movements and organizations that mobilized smaller or bigger numbers of people mostly around common political agendas that also reflected common social backgrounds or clearly identifiable political interests on a political spectrum from the left to the right. Although throughout history not all political movements under analysis were easily identifiable or classifiable into a specific spectrum, academia has often concentrated on those that were. Therefore, political scientists have developed research on clearly defined groups like workers movements, peace movements, human rights movements, reformer movements, agricultural movements, religious movements and others.

Academic debates regarding theoretical frameworks for political and social mobilization are often based on the works of DEUTSCH (1961), CAMERON (1974) and LIPSET (1981) who tried to understand processes and forces behind mobilization. A larger number of authors in the following decades concentrated on individual cases of mobilization. Among the latter are regionally focused but also topical studies like HO (2010), KÜHNLEIN (2014), VIERLING (2014), BRUNNBAUER & HASLINGER (2017), ZAMORA-KAPOOR et al (2017) and CRIADO et al (2018). Besides that, recent contributions also include new means of mobilization through digital communication as discussed by KRUEGER (2006), BEYER (2014), YAMAMOTO et al (2015) and JONES et al (2017).

On the following pages, an introduction will be given regarding COVID-19 in Germany and the reactions of the German government, followed by an analysis of the different regional streams that formed the newly appeared movement. In the end, the findings will be discussed in the concluding section.

COVID-19 IN GERMANY

In December 2019, the news agency Reuters reported about investigations in the Chinese city of Wuhan regarding the discovery of an unknown virus (REUTERS, 2019).

Following Reuters, information on social media in China indicated a possible relation to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which at that moment was not confirmed by Chinese officials. The Wuhan Municipal Health Commission confirmed on a social media channel that seven cases under investigation were categorized as critical while others were informed as stable. In early January 2020, the first German media outlets started reporting on the investigations in Wuhan. On January 3rd the German newspaper SZ published a first short article on a lung disease that was discovered in China (DEUBER, 2020). Following the article, the virus was identified on a local fish market in Wuhan. At that moment, the World Health Organization (WHO) had already set up a team to investigate the situation in Wuhan. In the following days, more newspapers reported on the new disease that at that moment did not have its own name. A few days later, the WHO confirmed the existence of what was then called a “novel coronavirus” (WHO, 2020b).

On 22 January 2020, the German Ministry of Health was cited by SZ declaring the virus to be of low risk for the country (REUSS, 2020). Five days later on 27th January the first case of the new coronavirus was confirmed in Germany. Later investigations have shown that the virus was transmitted during a workshop at the German company Webasto located in the South of the country. During the workshop, another participant who shortly before had arrived from China (BÖHMER et al., 2020) transmitted the virus to at least one employee of the company. Further analysis showed that the arriving participant had received a family visit from Wuhan a few weeks before she travelled to Germany. While this was the first officially registered case of the coronavirus in Germany, there is a high probability that residents in other parts of the country were infected at the same time or before. Studies have shown that the virus was circulating in Europa already in September 2019 (APOLONE et al., 2020).

Data of the World Health Organization show that between late January and mid February 2020, the officially registered cases of infections in Germany were between zero and eight per week. These numbers increased in late February and reached their peak in late March when about 40.000 cases per week were officially registered. In the following weeks, the numbers decreased until they reached a lower level of 2300 -3700 infections per week over the months of June and July. In late July, an almost constant growth of confirmed infections could be observed that crossed the peak of March in late October and reached the level of 120.000-130.000 weekly infections in the month of November (WHO, 2020a).

Throughout this period, COVID-19 (officially named by the WHO on 11 February) had become a dominant factor in German politics and the media. The early perceptions of government representatives stated in January 2020, whereas the new virus would be of minor importance were quickly replaced by a number of measures to protect the population from what was then officially considered a pandemic.

In late February, the German Minister of Health Jens Spahn (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and the Minister of Interior Horst Seehofer (Christian Social Union, CSU) formed the first crisis management group to address the challenges that were about to come. In March, the organizers on a voluntary basis canceled the first larger cultural events in the country. In addition, an increasing number of schools were closed down. Although the infection rates in Germany were relatively low compared to other countries in the region, the German government decided to act and took restrictive measures to protect the population from the virus. Among the first measures was the implementation of stricter border controls to neighboring countries like Austria, Denmark, France, Luxembourg and Switzerland. While commuting and goods traffic remained allowed other forms of border traffic were prohibited (DW, 2020a). Meanwhile, growing parts of the German population started building private stocks of groceries and sanitary articles. Over the following weeks, numerous supermarkets in Germany reported difficulties to offer specific products to their clients. In a television speech on 18 March, Chancellor Angela Merkel declared the newly defined pandemic to be the biggest historical challenge for the country since World War II. Four days later, on 22 March, the government decided to issue further measures that included restrictions for the population to meet other individuals and the closing of gastronomy (ALEMANHA, 2020a). A number of businesses including hair cutters and tattoo studios were forced to temporarily close down. Although residents were still allowed to go to work a growing number of people moved professional activities to their home office. To partially compensate for the restrictive measures, the German government decided over the following months to provide financial support for companies, families and individuals. What was decided in Berlin, though, were mostly recommendations that required legal implementation by the regional governments of the federal states. Therefore, “corona measures”, as the provisions were called, started to differ between individual states. Nevertheless, there was a wide agreement throughout all political parties that measures had to be taken to address the pandemic. One exception was the populist right wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD) which frequently criticized governmental decisions in

parliament, on social media and partly on the streets. Different surveys have shown though, that a large majority of the German population supported the measures taken by the government throughout the year 2020 (STATISTA, 2020b; 2020c).

When towards the end of April officially registered infection numbers had decreased, the first federal state governments decided to reduce restrictions by opening schools and further institutions. Selected businesses that were forced to shut down before were allowed to resume their professional activities. Specific measures like protective facemasks remained obligatory especially inside retail stores. While parts of the population used the return to a relatively unrestricted public life to intensify their social contacts, representatives of the government and of the Robert-Koch-Institute for public health continued to send out frequent appeals to the population to refrain from such activities. Meanwhile, the German government continued with their efforts developing further measures to absorb economic deficits by providing financial support to companies and consumers. Berlin pushed the development of an application for mobile devices with the objective of identifying infections and transmissions of the virus. Financial investment was taken to support the development of a COVID-19 vaccine (ALEMANHA, 2020b; 2020c).

THE FORMATION OF A PROTEST MOVEMENT

When possible restrictions of basic rights were set on the agenda of the German government, political opposition movements appeared on the streets in different cities of the country whose principal aim was to articulate dissatisfaction with the measures taken by the government to address the pandemic. Over a period of about four months, these movements evolved mostly on a regional level until the first nationwide manifestation of about 20.000 people brought them together near the German parliament in Berlin. In the following paragraphs three of these movements will be discussed in order to understand the different characteristics that later influenced the new comprehensive movement and its perception by the public.

THE BERLIN MOVEMENT

In March 2020, a newly founded group of activists called Communication Spot Democratic Resistance (Kommunikationsstelle Demokratischer Widerstand) started

organizing the first of so called hygiene manifestations that were about to take place in front of the Volksbühne theatre in Berlin Mitte using the slogan “Not without us” (“Nicht ohne uns”). A free newspaper called Democratic Resistance was issued and citizens were publicly addressed by group members on the Berlin metro, where copies of the German Basic Law were handed out to passengers. The initial message of this small group of politically left oriented individuals with diverse professional backgrounds including journalism and art was to protect basic rights in Germany which they considered to be jeopardized through the official measures taken to address the pandemic (PETER, 2020). In this context, the right of assembly, which was restricted by the official measures, played an important role. After the first manifestation on 28 March received about 40 participants, the group continued with their efforts through online mobilization and reached a wider audience over the following weeks. In April, at least one subsequent event at the same location received about 1000 participants of different political and spiritual spectra (DW, 2020b). Among the participants of the demonstrations in April were a number of online activists and producers of so-called alternative media channels. Parts of these channels were run by well-known proponents of political ideas indicating control of the population and the government through external forces. Conclusions assuming the exercise of power over the population of a country or beyond through financially strong individuals, small groups of individuals or companies became frequently repeated conceptions of substantial parts of the anti-corona movement in Germany. Therefore, governments were often designated as string puppets of what was called “the international financial capital”. As a reaction to the growing influence of right wing and antisemitic activists and demonstrators at the hygiene manifestations in Berlin, the Volksbühne theatre decided to cover parts of their facade with black banners (KIESEL, 2020). At the same time, left wing demonstrators met on the Rosa Luxemburg Square in front of the theatre to prevent right wing demonstrators from using it for their own events. Besides the occurrences in front of the Volksbühne theatre, additional manifestations were taking place in different locations of Berlin. Throughout April and May, several registered and unregistered manifestations could be observed in the city (in Germany, political manifestations need to be registered with the public administration in advance although spontaneous registrations on the spot are possible as well). The political spectrum of participants was wide including politically organized individuals, social media activists and groups from the political right, anti-vaccinationists, conspiracy theorists, esoteric individuals, followers of the German peace movement and left wing alternative

people plus a number of not politically or socially organized citizens dissatisfied with the current legal restrictions.

THE EASTERN MOVEMENT

On May 2nd, a number of smaller manifestations took place in several cities in the state of Thuringia. Between 50 to 300 people met on public squares in the cities of Gera, Weimar, Jena and Erfurt to demand amongst other things the protection of basic rights as guaranteed in the German constitution and the permission to visit relatives that was temporarily restricted by the corona measures. Following media reports, a network called “Not with us” (“Nicht mit uns”) officially registered some of the manifestations. At the same time in other cities like Magdeburg and Halle, a group called “Resistance2020” (“Widerstand2020”) organized street protests against legal restrictions caused by the official corona measures. Similar small protests took place on the streets of other cities throughout the country (MDR, 2020a; 2020b).

One reason for the high quantity of small street protests in early May was the occurrence of the Labor Day holiday (May 1st) which is used in Germany by organizations, groups and movements of different political orientations to articulate political and social agendas, mostly related to labor and social rights. Over the past three decades, a political shift could be observed in this context. While between the 1950s and the 1980s Labor Day was celebrated mostly by left wing organizations in West Germany (including unions and radical autonomous movements) and by official government bodies in East Germany, the 1990s opened the stage for a growing number of movements and political parties of the radical right. Although these organizations had existed also before the 1990s, the social transformations that took place especially in Eastern Germany after the end of the East-West conflict opened up new space for these actors. They were able to establish themselves in rural areas and small or midsize cities where they managed to conquer sympathy among parts of the younger population. Others tried to address adults and families through cultural activities that were and still are rare in many rural areas. At the same time, the lack of organized left wing groups comparable to those in larger cities let them consolidate their political work in these regions. Over the years, nationalists and neo-Nazi groups became a common trend or form of political protest among many younger people in the region. Since then, Germany is frequently discussing why (or if) racist violence and other forms of right

wing extremist attacks are occurring more often in Eastern Germany than in the West. The topic became very sensitive over the years since economic and social differences between East and West Germany continue to be visible even 30 years after the union of Eastern Germany and the West. Three decades after the signing of the German Reunification Treaty, 77% of the residents in East Germany claim that former citizens of the East German state still suffer from lack of recognition regarding their performance and accomplishments before 1990 (STATISTA, 2019). Although a majority in East Germany is happy or content with the unification of the two German states, a growing number is claiming to be discontent. Besides that, 49% of the population in East Germany is less content or unhappy with the functioning of democracy itself (STATISTA, 2020a).

Over the years, the high level of fundamental dissatisfaction reflected in these numbers was partly channeled into political protest movements and parties on the right. Xenophobic organizations like Pegida and similar groups that gained attention especially in 2014 and 2015 were able to mobilize several thousands of people on a weekly basis in different cities mostly in the East to demonstrate against immigration and cultural diversity (DOSTAL, 2015; COURY, 2016). By taking up historical characteristics like frequencies and slogans of the East German protest movements of the late 1980s, these groups managed to create platforms for middle class citizens. On that, nationalist and racist individuals used elements of East German identity politics and movements to create a common objective of “defending” the country against what were considered external but also internal threats. Parts of such internal threats were identified as the ruling parties in Berlin, Chancellor Angela Merkel herself, most of the political opposition in parliament and representatives of the media. In this context, social media and so-called alternative media channels were considered valid sources of information. Political mobilization of such groups therefore took place particularly through online channels. At the same time, traditional media outlets were verbally labeled during street protests and on the Internet as “lying press” (“Lügenpresse”) (DOSTAL, 2015, p. 525). Conservatives, nationalists and anti-Semites have used the expression since the early 19th century to disqualify critical writers and publicists of different kinds. The expression was also used before and during the Nazi regime in the early 20th century to point out so-called enemies of the people undermining national morals through critical or non-conform publications (DENNER; PETER, 2017; PROBST, 2017). Independently of the historical epoch, these accusations were frequently accompanied by the idea that Jewish conspirators were controlling the media as part of a “plan” to control

“the world”. Such anti-Semitic stereotypes are clearly existing within parts of these East German protest movements although few participants are openly and deliberately arguing in such a manner. The transmission of such stereotypes is rather taking place on an unconscious level that facilitates its dissemination. When the first protest movements against the corona measures of the German government were taking place, the same stereotypes used by Pegida and similar movements could be observed.

THE SOUTHERN MOVEMENT

The third actor that will be presented in this chapter is the Querdenken initiative that was founded in the South of Germany (KHAMIS; ROHRMEIER, 2020). Since its early appearance in April 2020 in the city of Stuttgart, more than 70 regional initiatives have been founded in different parts of the country. Especially in its original chapter in the South, Querdenken followers are to a large degree middle and upper middle class citizens, families, employees and entrepreneurs. The initiative is supported by a number of social media activists from the same social spectrum that is an important reason for its rapid expansion. Besides that, the mostly conservative and civic values transported by the initiative contributed as well to its growth. Differently than the artistic and partly “alternative” origins of the Berlin initiative or the partially aggressive and racist attitudes attributed to recent protest movements in some Eastern states, the Southern initiative transported, also through their organizers, an image of a more or less wealthy middle class rooted in Christian or spiritual beliefs. That includes a strong support for private initiatives and the rule of law, the defense of the German Basic Law and a public appearance in which values like peace and tolerance are frequently emphasized. While the first Berlin protests were enabled through an almost improvisational or rebellious attitude of the organizers, the Stuttgart initiative went through all necessary levels of jurisdiction up to the Federal Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe to legalize their first event (SZ, 2020). After this initial manifestation with 50 participants had taken place on 18 April 2020, the initiative received feedback from individuals in other parts of the country who started to set up their own groups under the same name. Local Querdenken manifestations and open-air events had very similar characteristics independently of the city they were happening. A middle class audience listening to a number of speakers on an open-air stage visited the events. Reports by observers and live recordings from different events show that among the speakers were

citizens reporting about their individual perceptions of the official corona restrictions and how daily routines have changed for them. In addition, invited speakers to participate, whose publicly known viewpoints included assumptions that, although common in specific niches of the Internet, never reached the attention of a wider audience (FIEDLER; STARZMANN, 2020). Some of these statements included beliefs whereas Microsoft founder Bill Gates was responsible for the development or spreading of the coronavirus with the unique interest of forcing the world population to buy vaccinations for his personal financial benefit. Since the emergence of COVID-19, similar narratives involving Gates have spread over the Internet (REUTERS, 2020; THOMAS; ZHANG, 2020). Besides that, pharmaceutical companies were suspected to be involved in such conspiracies whereas the German government was compared with fascist regimes or with string puppets in the hands of external forces. Following journalist reports and live recordings, such messages were received well by the audience where banners were carried confirming those or similar conspiratorial thoughts. In May 2020, about 10.000 people from different parts of the country participated in a Querdenken event in Stuttgart. Among them representatives of the right wing populist party Alternative for Germany who, different from other parties from parliament, tried to connect to Querdenken in a supportive and participating manner. Following local newspaper reports, some of the speakers (including at least one medical doctor) were openly questioning the existence of the coronavirus or risks related to it. Comparisons were made to the 1930s when the Nazi regime ended democracy in Germany (BOSCH; BILGER, 2020). Since Querdenken and their principal actors and founders were unknown to the public, political analysts and journalists tried to study and categorize the movement over the following weeks. It became clear that Querdenken events were visited by a wide spectrum of people who on the one side were strict defenders of personal freedoms and the German Basic Law but who on the other side were often defending positions that can be described as irrational and obscure and which often reach into anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. Frequently appearing positions were the assumptions; Germany had turned into a de facto dictatorship, a fascist regime or a country secretly governed by external forces. Among these forces, large enterprises were mentioned including the financial sector and the pharmaceutical industry. Later events of the Querdenken initiative attracted a growing number of openly acting extremists from the political right who were well received during the events. Following the positions of the organizers, Querdenken tried to disregard political classifications like left and right. During the following weeks, however,

it became clear that those who accepted this invitation were mostly right wing extremists while anti-racist and anti-fascist groups frequently gathered to protest against Querdenken events throughout the country.

The first nationwide manifestation of the Querdenken initiative from Stuttgart took place in Berlin on August 1th, 2020. Following official numbers, about 20.000 people participated in the event. Organizers and associated social media activists propagated a number of 1.3 million participants through their online channels. Professional media outlets offering calculations based on aerial photography (BOVERMANN, 2020) challenged this number. A second similar manifestation was taking place in the city on August 29 bringing together about 38.000 people. Although both events were officially registered by Querdenken Stuttgart (partly organized in cooperation with other actors) they can be considered events bringing together many of the smaller groups and initiatives that had organized local protests in several parts of the country since March.

On both days, several other groups officially registered manifestations in the city. Consequently, a larger number of registered and unregistered events were taking place simultaneously in different parts of Berlin partly resulting in confusion among journalists and the public trying to capture the essence of the different protests. During the events, social media activists transmitted backstage interviews with prominent figures of the Querdenken movement giving insights into their individual motivations. Similar to other events in the foregoing months, the recurring arguments were a mixture of general dissatisfaction with the restriction of basic rights caused by the official corona measures combined with assumptions of living in a country on the edge of a totalitarian or fascist regime in which the media was controlled by a small number of individuals. During these days, the Querdenken events attracted not just the customary middle class audience, anti-vaccination activists, anti-media conspirators, QAnon followers and AfD representatives, also different groups of neo-Nazis, holocaust deniers and reactionaries joined the protests and added their own assemblies to the scenario. During one of the side events on 29 August, about 200 people were arrested in front of the Russian Embassy where up to 3000 right wing extremists and so called "citizens of the empire" ("Reichsbürger") gathered requesting Russia to negotiate a peace treaty to end WWII which following their beliefs was still ongoing. On the same day, more than 100 people broke through barriers in front of the German parliament (Reichstag) and occupied the stairs of the institution. Among them, several people carried historical flags of the German empire temporarily used by

different types of neo-Nazi groups (HEIDTMANN, 2020). Although the police ended the situation very soon a political debate was taking place in parliament during the following days to improve protection of the institution.

FINAL REMARKS

The anti-corona movement that appeared on the streets of several cities in Germany and on the Internet since March 2020 is a heterogeneous accumulation of individuals and groups from different regions in the country. Some parts of this movement were mobilized and became politically active during and because of the pandemic, other parts are politically experienced and used the new movement as a platform to spread their individual messages. Looking from a geographic perspective it is possible to identify regional characteristics that in some cases have developed in the context of before going protest movements over the past few years. One example is the patriotic and xenophobic if not racist Pegida movement from Eastern Germany that started spreading anti-democratic and anti-media attitudes in a very aggressive manner five years before COVID-19 was discovered in Germany. Their typical slogans, partly adopted from the 1989 protests in the same region (“We are the people”), partly directed against Chancellor Angela Merkel due to her position on immigration policies (“Merkel must go”) and partly against the media (“lying press”) became widespread also during corona protests. Very different, though, the original slogans from the Southern German movement of Querdenken whose supporters chose less aggressive shouts like “Freedom, Freedom, Freedom” or “Peace, Freedom, Democracy” expressing their support for the political system (while at the same time questioning it) and the rule of law. However, also the Southern groups started using additional expressions like “lying press” to express their attitudes towards the media. A rejection of professional journalism and established media outlets is evident in several groups and among individuals who became part of the new movement. At the same time, so called alternative media channels and social media are used as supposedly reliable sources. In some cases, this general rejection of the press was further elaborated through the depiction of media controlled by a small number of individuals or families willing to manipulate “the world”. Such elements of conspiracy theories are recurring in other statements as well.

When it comes to general political positions there is widespread support in the Querdenken movement (and especially in its original chapter) to defend basic rights and

economic freedoms. Participants of the early events frequently articulated their concerns regarding political and legal restrictions through the official corona measures. A motivation that could also be found among the organizers of the original Berlin protests at the Volksbühne theatre. The Berlin activists, though, identified themselves in a left wing artistic and media oriented environment, while the Southern activists are more conservative middle class and partly career oriented. There is a certain tendency towards direct democracy and less state regulation among parts of the movement. This is combined with the idea of having global economic enterprises controlling governments and the population. Frequent examples are international financial actors, the pharmaceutical industry and the media. In all cases, a general concern of being manipulated by such actors is a driving factor for political mobilization. Anti-Semitic stereotypes of individuals or families trying to manipulate and to rule the world are omnipresent. Names like Soros, Bilderberg and Bill Gates (as a financially strong actor involved in health care and vaccination) are often used by these groups as a prove of their ideas and positions.

The widespread imagination of being under control of influential and secret or unreachable third parties connects middle class entrepreneurs, anti-pharmacy and anti-vaccination activists with right wing extremists like the German “citizens of the empire” who believe Germany is an occupied entity controlled by external forces. Their request to develop a constitution for a new upcoming sovereign German state is an element that Querdenken has also adopted as an official item on the agenda. Therefore, Querdenken planned the establishment of a constitutional assembly for the end of August 2020.

Subsequent to the August manifestations in Berlin, Querdenken chapters continued to organize local protest events in several parts of the country. Some of those events received 50-100 participants; others like a manifestation in Leipzig in November mobilized about 45.000 people and ended in clashes with the police. A new nationwide manifestation is planned for 31 December 2020 in Berlin.

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