



7.1 Country Brief: A social psychological perspective on trends of extremism in Germany

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About the Project

D.Rad is a comparative study of radicalisation and polarisation in Europe and beyond. It aims to identify the actors, networks, and broader social contexts driving radicalisation, particularly among young people in urban and peri-urban areas. D.Rad conceptualises this through the I-GAP spectrum (injustice-grievance-alienation-polarisation) to move towards measurable evaluations of de-radicalisation programmes. We intend to identify the building blocks of radicalisation, including a sense of being victimised, being thwarted or lacking agency in established legal and political structures and coming under the influence of “us vs them” identity formulations.

D.Rad benefits from an exceptional breadth of backgrounds. The project spans national contexts, including the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Finland, Slovenia, Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo, Israel, Turkey, Georgia, Austria, and several minority nationalisms. It bridges academic disciplines ranging from political science and cultural studies to social psychology and artificial intelligence. Dissemination methods include D.Rad labs, D.Rad hubs, policy papers, academic workshops, visual outputs and digital galleries. As such, D.Rad establishes a rigorous foundation to test practical interventions geared to prevention, inclusion and de-radicalisation.

With the possibility of capturing the trajectories of seventeen nations and several minority nations, the project will provide a unique evidence base for the comparative analysis of law and policy as nation-states adapt to new security challenges. Mapping these varieties and their link to national contexts is crucial in uncovering strengths and weaknesses in existing interventions. Furthermore, D.Rad accounts for the problem that radicalisation processes often occur in circumstances that escape the control and scrutiny of traditional national justice frameworks. The participation of AI professionals in modelling, analysing and devising solutions to online radicalisation is central to the project’s aims.

Executive Summary

This country brief summarises the survey findings for Germany. It then embeds the survey findings within a national and cultural context for each country. The aim of these summaries is to situate the findings within their respective sociopolitical and sociocultural contexts. The literature review and rationale for the proposed model, analysis of the full dataset, and discussion can be found in the full 7.1 report, which also contains the country briefs.

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1. Results

Given that 15.67% of participants in Germany did not know their political attitudes, this variable was removed from the model, and all participants were kept, resulting in a sample of $n = 300$.

Descriptives

Breakdown by age and sex.

Mean age (SD)	Sex					
	Male		Female		Other	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
23.44 (3.61)	137	45.67	163	54.33	0	0.00

Breakdown by religious affiliation.

	n	%
Christian	178	59.33
Agnostic/Atheist	47	15.67
Muslim	40	13.33
Other	29	9.67
Buddhist	6	2.00
Jewish	0	0.00
Bahá'í	0	0.00
Hindu	0	0.00
Sikh	0	0.00

Would you describe yourself as being a member of a group that is discriminated against in this country?

	n	%
Yes	74	24.67
No	202	67.33
Don't know	24	8.00

Breakdown of belonging to a group that is discriminated against.

On what grounds is your group discriminated against?

	n	%
Religion	25	33.78
Colour or race	21	28.38
Nationality	14	18.92
Language	12	16.22
Ethnic group	12	16.22
Sexuality	10	13.51
Other	9	12.16
Gender	8	10.81
Age	6	8.11
Disability	4	5.41

Note: participants were allowed to select multiple groups. As such, proportions will not necessarily add to 100%

Breakdown of different organizations participants reported being members of (active or inactive) or not.

	Active		Inactive		Not a member	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Church or religious organization	84	28.00	98	32.67	118	39.33
Sport or recreational organization	141	47.00	75	25.00	84	28.00
Art, music or educational organization	70	23.33	76	25.33	154	51.33
Labour union	59	19.67	72	24.00	169	56.33
Political party	34	11.33	57	19.00	209	69.67
Environmental organization	48	16.00	58	19.33	194	64.67
Professional association	35	11.67	65	21.67	200	66.67
Humanitarian or charitable organization	55	18.33	60	20.00	185	61.67
Consumer organization	32	10.67	75	25.00	193	64.33
Self-help group or mutual help group	49	16.33	61	20.33	190	63.33
Women's group	40	13.33	58	19.33	202	67.33
Other organization	21	7.00	35	11.67	244	81.33

Breakdown of different political actions participants reported taking in the last 12 months.

	Yes		No		Missing value	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Contacted a politician or government official	52	17.33	203	67.67	45	15.00
Worked in a political party or action group	29	9.67	235	78.33	36	12.00
Worked in another ideological organization	51	17.00	211	70.33	38	12.67
Displayed a campaign badge/sticker	47	15.67	215	71.67	38	12.67
Signed a petition	129	43.00	129	43.00	42	14.00
Took part in a lawful public demonstration	87	29.00	176	58.67	37	12.33
Boycotted certain products	109	36.33	149	49.67	42	14.00
Posted or shared anything about politics online	94	31.33	168	56.00	38	12.67

Predictors of realistic threat

Holding stronger beliefs about inherent group hierarchies (social dominance orientation) was associated with perceiving migrants as a greater threat to one's national ingroup and its

access to resources, welfare, and power. Perceiving that one's national ingroup was economically more deprived than migrants was also associated with perceiving migrants as a greater threat. Experiencing more anomie was linked with perceiving migrants as a greater threat. Although we did not predict a link between political ideology and perceiving migrants as a threat, populism was linked with perceiving migrants as less of a threat to one's national ingroup.

Direct predictors of extremism

Holding stronger beliefs about inherent group hierarchies (social dominance orientation) was also associated with increased endorsement of extremist attitudes. Perceiving one's ingroup to be superior to other social groups (collective narcissism) was associated with increased endorsement of extremist attitudes. Regarding political ideology, holding more populist beliefs was associated with greater extremism. In terms of vulnerability, experiencing more social alienation and lower social cohesion were associated with greater support for extremist attitudes.

Indirect predictors on extremism

A stronger online group identity indirectly predicted increased support for extremist attitudes via increased collective narcissism and increased social alienation. Oppositely, a stronger online group identity predicted increased feelings of social cohesion, and these subsequently predicted decreased support for extremist attitudes. Despite the two indirect effects predicting both an increase (via greater collective narcissism and social alienation) and a decrease (via increased social cohesion) in extremist attitudes, the total indirect effect, which is the sum of all indirect relationships, was positive, meaning that online group identity was associated with greater support for extremist attitudes via three variables.

Predictors of attitudes towards Russian culture, Russian and Ukrainian migrants

Endorsing more extremist attitudes and holding more political trust in the German system of governance were both linked with more negative attitudes towards Russia. In terms of attitudes towards Russian migrants, perceiving that one's economic situation was more deprived relative to migrants in general and holding more populist attitudes were both separately associated with a worsening attitude towards Russian migrants in the past year. In contrast, having more extremist attitudes was linked with an improved attitude towards Russian migrants in the past year.

Regarding attitudes towards Ukrainian migrants, perceiving that one's national ingroup was more economically deprived relative to migrants in general and holding more populist attitudes were both separately linked with worsening attitudes towards Ukrainian migrants in the past year.

Figure 8. Respecified model for Germany.



2. Situating the findings within the German context

This chapter contextualises the D.Rad Survey findings for Germany. It situates the findings in a country context where right-wing populists have entered the federal parliament and all regional (federal states) parliaments in the late 2010s. The AfD – to name the most important right-wing populist force – entered the federal Parliament with 12,6 % of the national vote in 2017 and is the strongest party in the federal states of Thuringia and Saxony, where roughly one-quarter of the voters support it. It represents the anti-immigration and anti-establishment face of extremism in Germany and is home to a far-right faction called *Der Flügel* (“The Wing”). Although officially disbanded by court order in 2021, the faction is still highly influential and credited with controlling most of the party. The AfD and other far-right parties and groups have also led the protests against COVID-19 measures such as lockdowns, mandatory masks and vaccination programs, and since 2022, also against the country’s support for Ukraine. The AfD receives support from a vocal yet marginalised press segment of similar – far-right – political orientation, with minor to no support in mainstream media. In politics and media, centrist actors have formed a *cordon sanitaire* against the AfD and associated media outlets. Although usually associated with an East German male electorate aged 35-59, the AfD increasingly attracts also younger voters and first voters, in particular, if fearing job loss and economic deprivation (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Mitsch, 2020; Kroh and Wittenberg, 2016; Pesthy et al., 2021). It is in this context that we interpret survey findings as follows.

The survey shows a robust correlation between populism and extremism and found only a weak correlation between populism and threat perceptions around immigration. These findings seem contradictory since most European populist parties and voters tend to be right-wing, and the right-wing opposes immigration (Arzheimer & Bering, 2019; Hutter and Kriesi, 2022). While research has shown that AfD voters tend to cast their vote because of identifying

with the AfD's anti-immigration attitudes more than with its populism (Arzheimer & Bering, 2019), the survey results might indicate a so far politically uncaptured potential for extremism.

Relevant in this context is the finding that right-wing political attitudes predicted feeling more economically deprived compared to nationals but not compared to migrants. This makes sense from the perspective of inner-German "East-West" tensions: The AfD's right-wing populism builds not only on anti-immigrant sentiment but also on East-versus-West resentment, the opposition between the former German Democratic Republic states (GDR or Eastern Germany) and the old federal states of West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany). Ever since the mid-2010s, it is the AfD that has sought to channel the discontent in the former GDR over the GDR-FRG reunification (Pesthy et al., 2021). Given that the AfD builds on resentment vis-a-vis western federal states, it is likely that AfD supporters in states corresponding to former East Germany compare themselves with West Germans (and consider that they are treated worse) and less with immigrants. The latter are grossly underrepresented in the East German federal states: 96% of immigrants live in West German federal states, and in the five East German federal states, immigrants ("naturalised" individuals holding German citizenship and residents without German citizenship) only make up around 5% of the population, as opposed to 28% in the West-German federal state of Hessen, for instance (Schmitz & Heinz, 2017).

The weak relationship between right-wing attitudes and economic deprivation vis-à-vis immigrants receives support from the finding that a right-wing political orientation is also directly related to stronger perceptions that migrants pose a realistic threat to Germany; thus, right-wing supporters are critical of immigration but not due to felt economic deprivation. For instance, right-wing supporters might perceive immigration as threatening because they fear demographic change and a dilution of the ethnic majority, a standard far-right fear and argumentation going back to language and ideas used by the Nazis in the interwar period (Glathe and Varga, 2021).

Note that this perception of immigration does not seem to apply to the Ukrainians and Russians fleeing war and military conscription since 2022. Respondents tend to report improved attitudes to both Ukrainians and Russians, despite expectations in the media of the growing resentment vis-à-vis Ukrainians connected to the rising energy costs and inflation, which some expected that the public would blame Ukrainians for. Thus, media and politics predicted a "hot autumn" of AfD-driven protests against sanctions and associated increased energy bills in 2022, a "hot autumn" that did not materialise across the country. However, surveys indicated early on – around mid-2022 – that the Eastern German population is less likely to support sanctions if they make it worse off. Protests peaked on October 3, 2022, when 100,000 protesters demonstrated against the sanctions in former GDR federal states (dpa-infocom, 2022; infratest dimap, 2022). Noteworthy, the more "populist" the D.Rad-survey respondents were, the worse their reported attitude to both Ukrainians and Russians. They do not make any political distinction between these national categories, which may be interpreted as some general anti-migration or anti-refugee sentiment unrelated to felt economic deprivation (see discussion above). Extremism's impact on the attitudes towards Ukrainian and Russian refugees is quite puzzling. Reporting worsening attitudes towards Russia but improving attitudes towards refugees/migrants from Russia (most of whom flee now because

they oppose the war and conscription) would be rather typical for the centrist and left-liberal segments of the German public. These segments, corresponding to social democratic, Christian-democratic, liberal, and green parties, support sanctions against Russia (Infratest dimap, 2022) and possibly also welcome immigrants fleeing conscription in Russia.

While right-wing political attitudes predicted more perceived economic deprivation vis-a-vis nationals but not migrants and stronger threat perceptions vis-a-vis migrants, they did not predict stronger extremism. This indicates that publicly, right-wing discourse, as voiced by the AfD - and possibly adopted by respondents - rarely comes over as “extremist” (as captured by the “extremism”-measure used in the D.RAD-survey). This means that it rarely calls for the exclusion of other groups or for abolishing democracy. Instead, it claims that other groups – such as people practising Islam – are alien to Germany as they allegedly do not share the country’s culture and democratic values. They are also victimising Germans for allegedly not being able anymore to rule in their “own” country and calling for “better treatment” of their own supporters and ethnic group (Helstermann & Hoven, 2020; Lehmann and Zehnter, 2022).

Note that two measures of collective identification directly predict extremism, suggesting that extremism results from the strength of group identities and less from how respondents position themselves politically on the left-vs-right continuum: collective narcissism and social dominance orientation (SDO) are positively and directly related to extremism, for SDO with higher values for men. It is also important to note that online group identity also indirectly affects extremism via alienation and populism; this might indicate how online group identity impacts extremism by strengthening feelings of alienation and support for populist positions and calls for strong leaders. In contrast, the social cohesion measure attenuates the effect of strong online group identity on extremism. These findings possibly reflect arguments and findings in media and research emphasising that far-right parties in Germany reach supporters almost exclusively online - including for organising violent demonstrations offline (Krüger, 2018; Schelter & Kunegis, 2017).

The strong effects of SDO and collective narcissism on extremism, in turn, also reflect that far-right media usually mobilises by conjuring up the image of a threatened yet deserving collective (German) self. This image builds on beliefs that the ethnic and titular majority needs to “lead” in its “own” country, as its culture is deemed superior to those of immigrants (Glathe and Varga, 2021; Helstermann & Hoven, 2020). However, the extremism scale that the D.Rad survey uses might measure extremism from both right and left depending on what respondents perceive as problematic about the majority. For instance, it could also capture the societal mainstream critique coming from within younger generations and rejecting the lifestyles and attitudes of older generations. The former hold the latter accountable for various developments, from tolerating racism to facilitating climate crisis (a critique and rejection that mainstream media often amplifies by deriding younger people as “pupils”, “dreamers” etc; Bergmann and Ossewaarde, 2020).

The tentative conclusion highlights that the D.Rad survey on Germany strongly linked extremism to collective identification measures and less to political attitudes. We interpret this as a possible manifestation of the “culture wars” that Germany is also undergoing, in which one side perceives the majority as “alienated”, ‘infiltrated’ by immigrants and facing national

dissolution (that is, too far from a national-native utopia). The other side perceives the majority as still too 'native' and inherently superior, too close to a national-native dystopia. Furthermore, the strong impact of collective identification measures on extremism highlights the need to focus de-radicalisation efforts on encouraging people to question collective identification or to re-cast identities in ways that avoid hierarchies and feelings of superiority. In other words, such measures should show how belonging to groups or broader entities (subcultures, cultures, etc.) can work without equating belonging to superiority and exclusion (see Ghorashi, 2010).

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