Xenophobia in Germany is declining, but old resentments are paired with new radicalism

Xenophobia in Germany has decreased, but right-wing extremist attitudes remain high. There is also evidence of “radicalisation and disinhibition among those with far-right views”. These are key findings of the representative Leipzig Authoritarianism Study. Professors Oliver Decker and Elmar Brähler from the Competence Centre for Right-Wing Extremism and Democracy Research at Leipzig University presented the study results today (18 November) at the Federal Press Conference (BPK) in Berlin. The study, which also explores people’s belief in conspiracy theories, was conducted in cooperation with the Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Otto Brenner Foundation.

“This time we have some good news, but we must also point out that xenophobia and extreme right-wing attitudes are still at a high level – and that authoritarian and anti-democratic attitudes are a constant threat to our open, liberal society. What’s more, certain ideologies are becoming entrenched,” said Professor Oliver Decker.

According to the study, the percentage of people with “manifestly xenophobic” attitudes has fallen from 23.4 to 16.5 per cent compared to 2018. “What is striking here is the difference in this decline between western and eastern Germany,” said Decker. In the west, the share dropped from 21.5 to 13.7 per cent, and in the east only from 30.7 to 27.8 per cent. Overall, 28.4 per cent (two years ago: 36 per cent) of respondents agreed with the statement that “foreigners only come here to take advantage of the welfare state” (east: 43.9 per cent, west: 24.5 per cent). Around 26 per cent of those surveyed consider the Federal Republic of Germany to be “dangerously swamped by foreigners” – a drop of ten percentage points. While the proportion of people with firmly right-wing attitudes continued to fall in western Germany (to 3 per cent), it rose again in eastern Germany. Almost one in ten people questioned there had a narrow, extremely right-wing world view.

The current study also shows that acceptance of traditional anti-Semitism has declined slightly nationwide, as has prejudice against Muslims. “But we must not delude ourselves, we are still seeing an alarmingly high level of agreement on some issues,” said Professor Elmar Brähler. More than one in four respondents agreed with the statement that Muslims should be banned from immigrating to Germany. More than half of the people who took part in the study agreed with the statement that Sinti and Roma tend to commit crimes. Some 47 per cent of those surveyed claimed that they sometimes felt like foreigners in their own country because of large numbers of Muslims (2018: 55 per cent). The situation is similar for certain manifestations of anti-Semitism. For example, ten per cent of those surveyed were understanding of the fact that “some people have something against Jews” and 41 per cent believed that “the payment of reparations merely serves a Holocaust industry” (2018: 36 per cent).

Right-wing extremist attitudes and bridges to far-right ideology

The researchers found that 4.3 per cent of respondents had “manifest right-wing extremist attitudes” (9.5 per cent in the east, 3 per cent in the west) – with a slight increase in the east and a slight decrease in the west. In the researchers’
view, authoritarianism as a personality trait is one of the main causes of right-wing extremist attitudes. “People with an authoritarian character tend to have rigid ideologies that allow them to simultaneously submit to authority, share in its power, and promote prejudice against others in the name of that system,” said Elmar Brähler. “Around a third of Germans display authoritarian-type characteristics.”

The tenth round of the study also includes an analysis of how the results have changed over time. “It has become apparent that over the years we have shifted the focus of our authoritarianism studies, away from right-wing extremism and towards a study of anti-modern milieus that are not necessarily manifestly far-right, but are always anti-democratic,” said Oliver Decker. “Furthermore, elements of the extreme right-wing world view are shared. And there we see that such shared motifs act like a bridge, even between different cultural and social milieus. These include anti-feminism, anti-Semitism that focuses on Israel, and the belief in conspiracy theories. It is these bridges that constitute the danger to democracy.”

Conspiracy theories, including about COVID-19

The topic of conspiracy theories was included in the Leipzig study for the fifth time, and this time also with questions related to the coronavirus pandemic. Levels of agreement with the statement “The coronavirus crisis has been blown out of proportion so that a few people could benefit from it” were 33 per cent (”very strong”) and 15.4 per cent (“strong”), while agreement with the statement “The reasons behind the coronavirus pandemic will never come to light” was at 47.8 per cent (“very strong”) and 14.6 per cent (“strong”). “Our survey has shown that belief in conspiracy theories has increased among the population since 2018. We would also say that this can act as a kind of gateway drug for an anti-modern world view,” said Professor Decker.

About the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study

Since 2002, researchers at Leipzig University have been observing changes in authoritarian and far-right attitudes in Germany. From 2006 until 2012, the so-called “Mitte” Studies were carried out in cooperation with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. The Leipzig studies are now published in cooperation with the Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Otto Brenner Foundation.

In the tenth wave, 2503 people were surveyed nationwide between 2 May 2020 and 19 June 2020 using a paper-and-pencil method. The respondents filled out a paper questionnaire themselves. The data was thus collected during the phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in which the severe restrictions to protect against infection were gradually relaxed. Social distancing and hygiene rules were observed during the interviews. Participants were selected using stratified sampling. As with the previous surveys in the series, this year’s survey was also conducted by the Berlin market research institute USUMA on behalf of Leipzig University. The questionnaire used for the study consisted of two parts. In the first part, respondents were asked to provide socio-demographic information about themselves and their household in accordance with the demographic standards of the Federal Statistical Office. Afterwards, the respondents were given the second, main part of the questionnaire, which they were asked to answer on their own due to the at times highly personal information requested.

All of the results from this new authoritarianism study have now been published in the book Autoritäre Dynamiken. Alte Ressentiments – neue Radikalität (“Authoritarian dynamics. Old resentments – new radicality”), which is available from the publishing house Psychosozial-Verlag. Detailed information on the methodology is provided in the second chapter (p. 27 ff.).

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