

SPECIAL SECTION: ANTI-GOVERNMENT EXTREMISM

From Anti-Measure Activism to Anti-State Extremism? The “Querdenker” Protest-Movement and Its Interrelation and Dynamics with the “Reichsbürger” in Germany and Austria

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Like most other countries Germany and Austria attempted to curtail the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic by taking unprecedented measures restricting public and private life. Discontent with these measures arose, and a network of groups and individuals calling themselves “Querdenker” established themselves as a major player in the emerging protest movement in both countries. While they were rather heterogeneous, some parts of the “Querdenker”—and especially several of the more prominent activists—were not only prone to conspiratorial thinking but even open to sovereignist ideas. They publicly used topics from the “Reichsbürger” and met representatives of that milieu. The “Reichsbürger” are a particular brand of German anti-state extremism, also present in Austria, that believes in the continued existence of the German Reich, and often claims to be the only real “state authority”. After many years of not being taken seriously, several recent incidents of violence have led to a debate about what level of threat the “Reichsbürger” anti-state extremism poses. This article describes and analyses the links and dynamics between the “Querdenker” movement and the Reichsbürger milieu. It looks at three of the most influential actors that connected the two groups and compares the developments in Austria and Germany, while also examining the role of traditional “protest parties”.

Keywords: Querdenker, Reichsbürger, sovereignism, anti-government extremism, Germany, Austria

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Introduction

In the early morning of 7 December 2022, a counter-terrorism operation of unprecedented scale took place across the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and even reached into Austria: 3,000 police and special forces personnel stormed 150 properties and arrested 25 people. Altogether 55¹ individuals came under investigation. According to officials, the operation aimed to thwart a plot by the self-proclaimed “Patriotische Union” [Patriotic Union] to overthrow not only the current sitting German government but its entire political system. The conspirators were driven by a mixture of narratives of the so-called Reichsbürger², which are more or less the mainstream of the sovereignist milieu in Germany, and the QAnon conspiracy ideas.³

The foiled plans for a coup d'état had their origins in November 2021, at the height of the second “Corona Winter” which saw massive polarisation and protests in Germany and Austria. The plot highlights the development of anti-state sentiment, carried by a wave of discontent and rejection of norms that was unprecedented in both societies. Discontent was voiced and organised to a large extent by the Querdenker, a loose network of people and groups arguing with and “fighting” against government measures to curtail the COVID-19 pandemic in both nations. Throughout 2020 and 2021, the Querdenker movement organised massive protests across Germany, with tens of thousands of people in attendance. Querdenker drew the attention not only of the public in general, but also of right-wing extremists and people from the Reichsbürger milieu. Soon a certain overlap of ideas, talking points, and actors could be observed. Given the success the “Corona-protests” had in mobilising a broad spectrum of people—notably those that until then had been nonpolitical and from the “centre of society”—these interrelations and dynamics with anti-state extremists are viewed with great concern by politicians, security services, and media alike. For some politicians, it looked as if the Reichsbürger tried to infiltrate the Querdenker protests.⁴

This article describes and analyses the development of the links and dynamics between Querdenker and the Reichsbürger milieu. It explores the interrelation of the two groups and why the Reichsbürger in particular seem to be especially well-suited to connect with the anti-state sentiment that carried the Querdenker protests. Special attention is given to certain actors within the Querdenker movement, who also propagated Reichsbürger narratives and ideas. Due to common language and cultural developments in Germany and Austria, they were linked to each other. Therefore, both countries have been taken into consideration and compared. This revealed the difference made by the involvement of traditional protest parties in Austria.

To better understand how novel these sentiments and forms of extremism are to both countries, a short backdrop of the development of German and Austrian society in the last few years is necessary.⁵ This is followed by an overview of the development of the Reichsbürger milieu since the end of World War II that introduces the readers to this special brand of German (and Austrian) sovereignism, and then a description of the rise of the Querdenker movement as a reaction to state measures to curtail the pandemic. Its most prominent activists, who also propagated (or at least “flirted” with) Reichsbürger ideas, are introduced in the next subsection, before the interaction and dynamics between the two groups are analysed. Here, a comparison

is provided between Austria and Germany regarding the canalisation of protests and its effect on anti-state sentiment. The article concludes with a summary of findings and potential for future research.

From a Consensus-Seeking Government to “Resisting” a Government “Without” Consent

After the Second World War (West) Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany—FRG) and Austria were transformed into rather stable western-style democracies. While both states had their brushes with political extremism⁶ as well as terrorism,⁷ the general agreement on their political systems was never in danger or even really questioned. Both societies were rather pacified, and their forms of government were built on variations and scales of concordance, or were (at least) consensus democracies. Both strove to include as many stakeholders as possible. These societal traits were reinforced by the then-recent past and the larger geopolitical situation. Both countries found themselves on the “front lines” of the Cold War, although in different roles. Austria, although officially neutral after the granting of a state treaty in 1955, became an important hub for intelligence activities and a place for diplomacy and trade between the western and Soviet blocks. The FRG was economically and militarily a core NATO ally. Unlike in Austria, the troops that arrived in (West) Germany as occupation forces never left, becoming allied defence forces during this period, and even stayed after the Cold War ended: a fact that becomes relevant in the German sovereignist milieu and its narratives.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, while the focus regarding extremists lay elsewhere,⁸ ideas which questioned and attacked the foundations of Germany’s and Austria’s statehood, as well as the societal order as a whole, emerged—amplified by the rise of the Internet—from a state of obscurantism.⁹ Some of the ideas evidently were imported (especially from the US); others were endemic and evolved around Germany’s and Austria’s international (legal) status as states after their absolute defeat in 1945. In particular, the independence and (full) sovereignty of the FRG were called into question, largely based on the fact that the Grundgesetz (Basic Law) was crafted while under occupation and due to the fact that Allied forces remained even after German reunification. Those sovereignists who believed that the old German state—the Reich, as framed by the Weimar Constitution—still existed legally, and “empowered” themselves to act on its behalf, became collectively known as Reichsbürger, which can be translated to “citizen of the empire”.

While it must be noted that the Reichsbürger milieu is rather heterogenous, in nearly all cases certain ideas and traditions border on, overlap with, or are part of worldviews found on the (extreme) right. However, the philosophical and practical approaches of the sovereignists—and especially the Reichsbürger—were very different from other extremist groups seen previously in Austria and Germany. These were no longer classical “revolutionary” movements or parties that wanted to gain control of the levers of power, either by democratic means or by force. These were groups, or sometimes even only individuals, who denied the states’ sovereignty by declaring themselves more or less independent of the state. In a way, the phenomenon can be summed up as an (irrational) form of self-empowerment, which rejects the established state

order and wants to replace it with its own order—one that is often only applicable to a small number of individuals or very small geographical areas.

For the larger public, the formation of these ideas and groups became more visible in the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis after 2007, when people suffering economic hardship and substantial losses started to flock to them. The crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic (called the Corona pandemic in Germany and Austria)¹⁰ has led to a strong anti-state sentiment based largely on rejection of the measures taken by the state against the spread of the virus. This propelled the Reichsbürger from an obscure milieu of anti-state extremists to new heights, in public attention as well as in numbers.

The Reichsbürger: A Short Introduction to a Sovereignists' Milieu That Went from Obscurity to Deadly Notoriety

The idea of re-establishing (or more precisely, “continuing”) the Reich as the legitimate basis of government was present immediately after the end of World War II. The Sozialistische Reichspartei Deutschlands [Socialist Reich Party—SRP], founded in October of 1949, claimed that the Reich continued to exist. For them, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer was merely a puppet and Karl Dönitz was the last legitimate president of the German Reich, illegally hindered from fulfilling his duties.¹¹ Since the SRP saw itself as the heir of the NSDAP, given the proximity to the end of the Third Reich and its goal to overthrow the newly established state, this stance was not surprising. Consequently, the party was outlawed in 1952. Nevertheless, the basic idea did not die. In 1975 Manfred Roeder, a lawyer and activist of the extreme right, declared himself Reichsverweser [regent] and declared a “Reichstag zu Flensburg” [“Regime at Flensburg”].¹² He based his claim to be the regent on an answer Karl Dönitz had given him in a letter as part of their mutual correspondence. Roeder was prosecuted for his activities, in particular at the so-called Reichstag. After going underground and founding a terror cell that committed attacks, he eventually was arrested and jailed.¹³ Today he is seen as one of the two founding figures of the Reichsbürger movement. The other is Wolfgang Ebel, a former railway worker from East Germany. By then living in West Berlin, in 1985 Ebel declared that he had been commissioned by the Allied powers to lead an interim government. Like those before him, he claimed that the Reich had never ceased to exist, but was simply incapacitated due to the lack of officials acting on its behalf. Ebel's *Kommissarische Reichsregierung* [Provisional Government of the Reich—KRR] was a pseudo-state organisation which established a template for other *Reichsbürger* and has endured within certain elements of the milieu to the present day. In contrast to Roeder, Ebel explicitly distanced himself from neo-Nazis. These elements of the extreme right established their own *Reichsbürger* groups, starting in the mid-1990s under the leadership of (among others) Horst Mahler. Mahler, a cofounder of what would become the Red Army Faction, started out as a prominent Marxist-Leninist attorney and then drifted to the extreme right. Eventually he cofounded the *Deutsches Kolleg* training centre in 1994, which sought to foster a “Fourth Reich”.¹⁴

The new millennium brought new variations of these established themes. Peter Fitzek, the self-proclaimed “King of Germany”, founded a “Kingdom of Germany” at the city limits of Wittenberg in September 2012, where he was acclaimed as “highest sovereign” by 600 of his

“subjects”. The area was cleared by authorities in 2017.¹⁵ In another project, an association called NeuDeutschland (“NewGermany”) aimed to reestablish Germany within the borders that existed on 31 December 1937, and to create a new constitution. Even after being released from prison for several offences connected to his “state-establishing” activities, Fitzek continued. To create his own political system, he wants to acquire two castles in Saxony as a base for a Reichsbürger settlement, an effort that will be partly financed by some of his 4,400 followers.¹⁶

In general, as noted above, the milieu of the “Reichsbürger” is decentralised and heterogeneous and for a long time its proponents—if they were not at the same time far-right activists and/or terrorists like Röder and Mahler—were seen as “ridiculous conspiracy theorists”.¹⁷ Followers of KRRs in the vein of Ebel and Fitzek were sometimes even jokingly dubbed “paper terrorists”, since they tended to flood authorities with long texts which explained elaborate (pseudo-)legal theories. This changed on 19 October 2016, when the Reichsbürger Wolfgang Plan opened fire during a raid on his home in Bavaria. With one police officer killed and another severely wounded, the perspective of the authorities as well as the public on the Reichsbürger milieu changed fundamentally. The new perspective was that parts of the milieu posed a threat similar to that of other extremist movements.¹⁸

In Austria, a sovereignists’ milieu in general existed before the pandemic. But because of the previously mentioned different path of Austria’s history in the post-war and Cold War era, the shape of the scene was rather different. Since its independence from Germany had already been declared by Austrian politicians in late April 1945, the constitution of 1920 was reinstated, and a state treaty signed that formally ended occupation by handing back sovereignty to the Austrian government in 1955. Therefore, sovereignist narratives could not base their claim in the same way on a “continued occupation” and a “government not responsible to its people but the Allied Powers” argument. In Austria, narratives and ideas about the state being “merely a company” were for a long time much more prominent and visible among sovereignists. The “Staatenbund Österreich” [Austrian Commonwealth] might serve as an illustrative example. It was established in November 2015 and operated by using terminology from the “One People’s Public Trust” (OPPT) in the US. Lead by Monika Unger, a farmer from Styria, the Staatenbund argued that the Republic of Austria is merely a company. The real Austria, she claimed, was the Staatenbund, which therefore is the only legitimate subject of international law. In Unger’s narrative there is a conspiracy of the powerful elite against “little people” to keep them poor and downtrodden. Unger’s speeches sometimes attracted hundreds of people.¹⁹ The self-proclaimed President for Life was arrested with several others and sentenced for the founding of an association hostile to the state and for directing others to commit high treason.²⁰

Since coming more into focus for the authorities and the public at large, anti-state endeavours have posed completely new challenges to the established legal order. A lot of the legal definition and classification used by security services, as well as the courts, did not apply to their activities. Therefore, new categories for this kind of anti-state extremism were created in both countries and the criminal codes amended: groups are now being classified as “staatsfeindlich” (hostile to the state) in Austria or “staatsverweigernd” (state-rejectionist) in Germany. The latter, in response to the developments during the pandemic, added a new category that addresses “delegitimization of the state relevant to domestic intelligence” [“Verfassungsschutzrelevante

Delegitimierung des Staates”]. This new category has been criticised by some as being too broad and ill defined.²¹

State Measures against the Pandemic: Galvanising Anti-State Sentiment among the Population

As a response to the largest global public health emergency in a century, the governments of Germany and Austria—like most others worldwide—took measures that would have been unthinkable even just weeks before. Life became extremely restricted, especially during the lockdowns. While this was met with acceptance by most citizens, especially during the first lockdown in March 2020, protests against these measures soon emerged.²² Some protestors feared their income, liberty, and even their lives were not so much threatened by the virus, but by an overreaching state. Consequently, different forms of protest developed, ranging from small individual signs of disapproval to huge demonstrations that mobilised thousands in both countries.²³ One especially noteworthy form of protest arose early on, defying bans on demonstrations and public gatherings that were issued during the first weeks of the pandemic: so-called “walks”, in which people gathered—largely organised over social media and other online communication channels—to perform a permitted activity (taking a walk) in a way that actually constituted a currently forbidden activity (gathering in public and protesting). As well as undercutting government orders in general, at times a portion of the participants sought confrontation with the police.²⁴

When authorities reacted to those acts of defiance, and further attempted gatherings were prohibited, a new network of protest groups emerged. The Querdenker [literal translation: lateral or unconventional thinkers] established themselves first in Germany and then in Austria.²⁵ Their use of the term as self-identification was seen by some as a sort of appropriation. Previously, Querdenker had simply referred to someone who thinks originally and outside the box, and had positive connotations.²⁶ The newly proclaimed Querdenker quickly developed ties to the existing anti-Corona protest groups all over Germany.

A distinction is made by Grande et al.²⁷ between three waves of anti-measure protests. During the first lockdown in mid-March 2020, signs of protest included silent actions like setting up chairs in public spaces (to protest against the closure of restaurants) and online petitions, as well as street protests (which were initially banned but later allowed under restrictive conditions). Among these early street protestors were the first Querdenker groups. This first wave peaked in mid-May 2020. In the summer of the same year, the first mass demonstration of the Querdenker movement started a second phase of mobilisation, peaking in August. In late fall, another lockdown triggered the third wave. In all these waves, a wide range of actors were mobilised. Especially during the second wave, when (protest) gatherings were no longer banned in principle, Querdenker activities dominated the protest arena in Germany.

What gave the Querdenker an advantage in shaping public discourse was the fact that they managed to obtain significant public attention and media coverage early on. They did so by using aggressive and provocative rhetoric, often comparing government measures to curtail the

spread of the disease to actions taken by the regime of the Third Reich. This became something of a pattern during the protests, since it proved to be highly effective in gathering attention. It grossly violated societal taboos that are observed (especially by the political elite, journalists, and academics). One instance is particularly illustrative: when the debate about mandatory vaccination was raging, some protestors used symbols which looked like the Star of David patches that Jews were forced to wear on their clothing during the Third Reich. But instead of “Jude” [Jew], the patch read “Ungeimpft” [Unvaccinated]. The use of the symbolism alone caused an immense outcry, as well as criminal prosecution.²⁸ It is impossible to determine how much of these actions reminiscing the Third Reich were driven by pure tactic, banking on media and societal reaction, and how much they were based on a genuine feeling that there was a new totalitarian state in the making. But it is very likely that several of the protesters and activists who made this comparison and used that kind of imagery really believed that their analogy was correct and necessary to “inform” the wider public.

Other acts challenged the established democratic order on a symbolic level. During a major demonstration in Berlin organised by the founder of the Querdenker Michael Ballweg (see below), a group of Reichsbürger broke through police barriers and stormed the steps of the Reichstag. On the steps of the building that houses the German Parliament, they proceeded to wave the war flag of the old German state.²⁹ Parts of the group proceeded to the Russian Embassy to seek protection by Russian President Vladimir Putin.³⁰

However, it must be noted that, contrary to the broadly held view, the Querdenker are not all oriented towards the right. Some parts of the movement see themselves as progressive.³¹ Actors of the old “Friedensbewegung” [“peace movement”] as well as former left-wing movements can be found among prominent Querdenker. A group called “Freie Linke” [“Free Left”] appeared at numerous gatherings.³² While those progressive individuals were part of the Querdenker, they were clearly in the minority. After the storming of the Reichstag, when it became evident that Reichsbürger and QAnon ideologists were gaining momentum among the Querdenker, the network lost nearly all support from left-leaning organisations.³³

Interestingly enough, in Germany it was the Querdenker movement that also spawned “classical” political parties (although with a strong bend towards esoteric concepts). Their names suggested a stance against “the establishment” and “the system”: “Widerstand 2020” [“Resistance 2020”], its successors “Die Basis” [“The Base”] and “Wir 2020” [“Us 2020”]. In both Widerstand 2020 and Wir 2020, Bodo Schiffmann, one of the most noteworthy Querdenker activists (see below), was a leading figure at the beginning. Undoubtedly, there was a proximity to conspiracy thinking in these political organisations. The programs had very much centred around one issue, denying the dangers of the pandemic and the efficacy of vaccination.³⁴ They ran electoral campaigns, but unlike in Austria, these German protest parties were not successful. This was in part because of internal clashes and rivalries that existed from the start.³⁵ In the end, their attempt to form the political representation of the critics and sceptics in legislative bodies failed.

Due to the presence of extremist factions and views within the Querdenker network, the German Federal Agency for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesverfassungsschutz; BfV) started

to monitor regional parts of the movement—especially the founding group in Stuttgart—in December 2020 and nationwide in April 2021.

With their methods the Querdenker found success south of the border too, although not on the same level. In Austria, where protest likewise was widespread, they established themselves but never reached the same media dominance as in Germany. This was primarily because protests in Austria were supported by the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Austrian Freedom Party, FPÖ), the third-largest party in Austria's parliament.³⁶ While the protestors in Germany found some support among parties that hold mandates, especially from Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD),³⁷ the FPÖ is much more established and involved in governing. Herbert Kickl, its current leader, placed himself at the head of anti-measure and anti-government protests. Additionally—as opposed to Germany—a small new party was founded, called “Menschen – Freiheit – Grundrechte” [Humans– Freedom – Basic rights, MFG], and managed to win seats in the regional state parliament of Upper Austria.

One demonstration in Vienna in December 2021 initiated by Kickl and the FPÖ gathered 44,000 protestors from all over the country. It involved not only Querdenker, whose leaders spoke next to Kickl and other FPÖ politicians on the stage, but was attended by members of the Identitarian Movement and other right-wing extremists as well.³⁸ Kickl, himself the former minister of the interior, but then in opposition, warned against the establishment of an “Apartheid system” and a “medical caste system” in Austria.³⁹ This highlights the fact that in both countries demonstrations and gatherings were in part directed against a presumed “Coronadiktatur” (“Corona dictatorship”). This trope implied that the (sometimes indeed far-reaching) state measures were an infringement on citizens' or human rights and presumably not temporary but “here to stay”.

These generalised fears present in parts of the population were subsequently reinforced and channelled into new directions by those anti-measure activists and Querdenker who were prone to a variety of conspiracy ideas.⁴⁰ Members of the Querdenker and others cast doubt that the virus really existed and, if it did, questioned the level of danger it posed. Vaccination, especially if compulsory, was rejected and seen as the “real” danger. In a narrative found throughout the West, it was claimed that the vaccines—especially those based on mRNA technologies—were meant to eradicate a large part of humanity, or (simultaneously or alternatively) that microchips would be implanted through the inoculation.⁴¹ This was connected to the idea that the “global elites” were using the pandemic to turn the world into one common dictatorship. In its most prominent version this revolved around interpretations of the “Great Reset”, which the World Economic Forum and its head Klaus Schwab had advertised.

The unequivocal articulation of antisemitic conspiracy theories, primarily related to the US investor George Soros, could also be observed. Other by now well-known conspiracy theories about the role and “plans” of Bill Gates in relation to the pandemic were also often mentioned.⁴² Many of those theories, or variations of them, were already part of the worldview of the Reichsbürger milieu even before the pandemic hit. Therefore, it is not surprising that certain activists of Querdenker⁴³ connected the anti-measure, anti-state sentiment that had arisen with the Reichsbürger narrative.

Propagating the Reich: The Role of Activists for the Dynamics between Parts of the Reichsbürger Milieu and the Querdenker Movement

The state measures against COVID-19 brought together a number of very different individuals. Those discussed here not only gathered large amounts of media attention, but likewise combined a prominent role in Querdenker with the propagation of, or at least “flirtation” with, explicitly Reichsbürger ideas. It is noteworthy that no figure with such profile and prominence arose in Austria. The reasons for this will be discussed below.

One of the best illustrative examples of the German phenomenon is Michael Ballweg. A businessman running an IT firm in Stuttgart and never politically active before the pandemic, he started to hold “Vigils for the Basic Law” in March 2020. Within days he founded “Querdenken 711– Stuttgart”, the number referring to the local telephone code of the city. It is seen as the original Querdenker group. Ballweg’s rallies became a focal point for thousands of protestors. At this point they attracted people from different backgrounds critical of or unsatisfied with how the pandemic was handled. But soon Ballweg, who from the beginning had close ties to right-wing esotericism,⁴⁴ cooperated with renowned figures from the conspiracy realm, inviting them as speakers. His events were then endorsed by proponents of the extreme right as well. These developments led to criticisms and some of the people originally attracted turning away. Over the course of summer 2020, Ballweg not only ventured further into the QAnon conspiracies⁴⁵ but also into sovereignist thought: he said he would look into a peace treaty for Germany, and declared a large rally on 29 August to be a “Constituent Assembly” that should develop a new constitution.⁴⁶ In November 2020, Ballweg and Peter Fitzek had a conspirative meeting with several of their supporters in order to “find new strategies”.⁴⁷ It didn’t end there: Ballweg opened a bank account for his “kingdom” which caused internal criticism.⁴⁸ The gathering was ended by authorities because it violated hygiene regulations, but from then on Ballweg and his group were under surveillance by domestic intelligence. At times, the former businessman seemed to try to distance himself from the extreme right, as well as Reichsbürger and sovereignists, but never did so conclusively.⁴⁹ Media research indicated that he tried to “cash-in” on the movement, using donations for the events, as well as profits from merchandise, to enrich himself.⁵⁰ Authorities came to the same conclusion and arrested Ballweg in the summer of 2022 under the suspicion of fraud and money laundering.⁵¹

Another of the influencers that combined Querdenken with the Reichsbürger narrative came from a field related more closely to the crisis: Bodo Schiffmann, a medical doctor running his own private practice, became influential with the start of the pandemic. His YouTube channel, which he had run before on more common medical themes, acquired more than 130,000 followers.⁵² He organised a “Coronavirus info tour” that saw him travelling on a bus across Germany and speaking at demonstrations that were organised by the Querdenker.⁵³ Schiffmann used his professional credentials to give his arguments weight and an aura of authority. He used QAnon talking points and announced his support for Ballweg’s approach to get in closer touch with “Reichsbürger” such as Fitzek. In some of his videos, he relativises the Holocaust by making comparisons between doctors who administer vaccinations with Josef Mengele, the notorious doctor of Auschwitz.⁵⁴ Generally, Schiffmann “opened the door” to create a network with

right-wing extremists.⁵⁵ Schiffmann has now moved to Tanzania but still warns against “plans of the elites” on the Internet. He clearly makes efforts to bolster his network even after leaving Europe. Schiffman says he is willing to return to take part in a trial related to the accusation that he forged medical exemptions for not wearing masks, as well as for demagoguery.⁵⁶

Attila Hildmann also had a well-established career before he engaged with Querdenker demonstrations and became a figurehead of the protest movement: he was a well-known vegan chef who authored several cookbooks.⁵⁷ Hildmann consequently already had a large platform before he started to speak against the government’s anti-Corona measures.⁵⁸ In the summer of 2020, Corona protests in Germany attended by Hildmann featured SS and Nazi symbols.⁵⁹ At the demonstration where the steps of the Reichstag were stormed, Hildmann demanded in speeches in front of the building that the barrier gates be removed and that demonstrators be allowed through to the building, which “is dedicated to the German people.”⁶⁰ He was seen as a key driver of the protest movement and managed to canvas support on the messenger platform Telegram.⁶¹ Private chat groups not only discussed apocalyptic scenarios, but in addition called for violence and the death of politicians and scientists.⁶² Since several of his statements led to criminal investigations, Hildmann has escaped to Turkey, which currently does not seem willing to arrest and extradite him.⁶³

Popular Discontent, the Querdenker, and the Road to Anti-State Extremism

Survey data show that Corona protests in Germany had a considerable, relatively stable ‘mobilisation potential’ which is socially heterogeneous and ideologically diffuse. While Grande et al.⁶⁴ find that more than 60 percent of sympathisers (not necessarily protestors) see themselves in the political centre, the political extremes (especially on the right) are strongly represented; 12.5 percent identify themselves on the extreme fringe, most of them (7.5 percent) on the extreme right. A large proportion does not feel represented by the established parties of the political centre and is generally suspicious of the state and its institutions. Since parts of this ‘distrustful middle’ are prone to conspiracy theories, Grande et al. see “considerable potential for further political radicalisation.”⁶⁵

Given this feeling of not being represented, which in Germany obviously could not be completely addressed by classical “protest parties” like the AfD⁶⁶, the Querdenker concept and activities found fertile ground. Because several of the original Querdenker also propagated conspiracy thinking and were at least prone to Reichsbürger ideas, an interrelation between the two milieus was established early on. In hindsight, this dynamic is hardly surprising given the fact that measures by the state were the reason for much of the anger and the discontent that fuelled the Corona protests in the first place. A narrative and worldview like that of the Reichsbürger, propagated with an established “practical” approach that fully negates the established state in the form of the FRG and therefore renders all of its action illegitimate *per se*, ultimately was the perfect fit for this situation. The Reichsbürger template, like all sovereignist narratives, is based on the idea of a (global) conspiracy that victimises the common people and hides the “truth” (and sometimes wealth, full human potential, etc.). Consequently, it could easily be connected

and brought in alignment with other conspiratorial beliefs regarding the pandemic: that it was planned, that it was a stepping stone for a world government, and that it would serve the purpose of depopulation.

The Reichsbürger narrative in the German context was the right seed for the fields of discontent. It is noteworthy that the QAnon line of argumentation and conspiratorial thinking is very compatible with the Reichsbürger narrative. As mentioned above, several of the more important actors as well as the plotters of the “Patriotische Union” integrated QAnon aspects into the Reichsbürger narrative and developed an eclectic meta narrative. Given the common elements, it could connect with ideas about the pandemic being planned, or at least that it was used to reach nefarious goals. This made a triangle possible that brought in alignment Querdenker discontent, Reichsbürger sovereignist ideas, and QAnon conspiratorial thinking, all consequently reinforcing each other. All three aspects were even open to other meta conspiracy theories that could bind them together further, especially antisemitic ones. Protestors from all walks of life who until then were not exposed to conspiratorial thinking were therefore confronted with several different avenues to similar ideas. This opened them up for radicalisation into these forms of anti-state extremism.

However, attention should be given to regional differences. There is the recurring theme of the east-west divide, with protests being more marked in parts of eastern Germany.⁶⁷ For example, a representative survey conducted in Thuringia in eastern Germany in autumn 2020 shows a strong and significant link between far-right political attitudes and COVID-19 scepticism.⁶⁸ This was not true for the west, where it was observed early on that the cradle of the Querdenker, which is Baden-Württemberg and Stuttgart, normally was associated with progressive and green ideas in recent years.⁶⁹ It therefore can be concluded that the protest movement was based on a network of esoteric, conspiracy-minded and sometimes (in their worldview) rather diffuse actors in western Germany,⁷⁰ whereas they were carried by experienced neo-Nazis and parts of the AfD sympathetic to the movement in eastern Germany.⁷¹

In Austria, the developments were similar in their structure, but different regarding the actors involved, which had an effect on which narratives and ideas were spread. The Reichsbürger narrative was not as prominent or even present among them as in Germany. While Querdenker were well established and made up a part of the media discourse in Austria, they did not gain the same media dominance as in their country of origin. Instead, a lot of the protest was carried by two “classical” political parties (FPÖ and MFG), who in turn also held a lot of the public’s attention. In particular, the aforementioned FPÖ head, Herbert Kickl, established himself as a major opponent of the government’s anti-Corona policies. Like the main proponents of Querdenker in Germany, he often provoked strong reaction by symbolic acts like appearing on stage at a demonstration without a mask (although mandatory), advocating the study as well as the use of Ivermectin on public television, and by his use of aggressive rhetoric,⁷² such as referencing the motives of an overreaching authoritarian state and invoking the idea of a “Corona dictatorship”. However, Kickl and the FPÖ—while they have a relationship with controversies surrounding such topics—largely stayed away from making comparisons to the Third Reich. The involvement of a major opposition party might explain why Reichsbürger and sovereignist ideas were not as important in Austria: along with the historically different situation regarding

the legal basis of the second Austrian Republic described above, Kickl and the FPÖ are part of the established political system. The MFG clearly wants to join it. As their representatives are members of parliament and hold public office, spreading sovereignist narratives of the Reichsbürger variety would be counterproductive. Firstly, it would do enormous harm in the political realm and lead to criminal prosecution. Secondly, the politicians involved would undermine their own credibility, because they basically would state that they willingly participate in an “illegitimate system” that exploits its people. This most likely “reined in” the Austrian Querdenker, because their prominent representatives, like Martin Rutter, spoke on the same stage and even directly before the appearance of Kickl. Had they ventured too deeply into the conspiracy realm, and especially sovereignist and Reichsbürger themes, this most likely would have ended their participation in the very successful demonstrations organised by the FPÖ.

This observation, however, does not mean that these themes were completely absent among protesters in Austria. But it can be observed clearly that other forms of conspiratorial thinking had more traction. However, a growth of the Reichsbürger milieu can be observed in Austria too,⁷³ a circumstance that implies that although not central, its rationale was still able to spread among the disaffected. Here more data are needed, since the phenomenon of sovereignists in Austria in general is not yet well documented and researched.

The comparison between Germany and Austria in the influence and development of the Querdenker in regards to Reichsbürger narratives shows that the involvement of politicians and classical protest parties curtailed this particular brand of anti-state extremism. While still polarising, sometimes provocative and sometimes venturing to the extreme, sovereignist ideas could not get the same exposure and traction in Austria as they did in Germany, since the protests were channelled by groups and individuals working within the established system. This is not true for other conspiracy theories. Their spread, however, could be observed in many Western countries. Other aspects and circumstances of the protests in Germany and Austria were similar: like in Germany, it was noticed early on that in Austria well-known, sometimes notorious members of the extreme right were participating in the protests—and, therefore, it can be concluded that the protests tapped the same potential.⁷⁴

Conspiracy thinking in both countries was spread by influencers like Hildmann and Schiffmann on their personal social media channels. This could be done across the border, although here more research is needed into the interaction between Austrian and German influencers and followers in the digital realm. Social media provided a tool for mobilisation and activism, and their provocations received intense coverage by mainstream media in both countries. When the larger sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram cracked down on conspiracists, other means—the online messenger service Telegram in particular—were utilised. And while not all Telegram groups were filled with xenophobic right-wing extremist content, a tendency towards the far right was clearly visible within the movement.⁷⁵ It can be argued that while banned on other social media platforms, Telegram actors, especially the German ones discussed here, could still reach the masses and thereby influence them.⁷⁶ As Tyson Barker observed: “Germany’s disinformation landscape is evolving—and metastasising—rapidly. In recent months, Querdenken has developed connective tissue with the Reichsbürger, Hildmann, and the growing German following of the QAnon cult of conspiracy.”⁷⁷ By now, all three of the main influenc-

ers mentioned above are under prosecution for different offences, often related to hate speech and demagoguery, but also for crimes that imply a financial interest. While Ballweg was arrested, Hildmann and Schiffmann left the country.⁷⁸ They try to keep their influence by utilising the Internet, but with the lifting of more and more restrictions and the arrival of new themes like the Russian war against Ukraine, it has clearly waned. This might explain why several of these actors moved on and are now involved in other topics like climate change and the Russian war on Ukraine. Obviously, their anti-state sentiment persists, but to continue their engagement with their audience (and to enlarge it) they need new talking points.

In analysing the social movement of the Querdenker and their interrelation with the Reichsbürger, it is easy to see that there is a complex mix of radicalism, conspiracy theories, and extremism, especially of the anti-state variety.⁷⁹ An interesting aspect is the potential for what researchers have described as “stochastic violence, even terrorism.”⁸⁰ While it should be mentioned that no terror attack has occurred that had its origins in the interrelation and dynamics between Querdenker and Reichsbürger, troubling events include the discovery of the aforementioned plans for a coup d'état, and some violent incidents that even led to death. With the pandemic “largely over”, terrorist attacks seem less likely. But it remains to be seen whether the dynamics and networks that developed during the acute health crisis will bear any violent fruit in the (near) future.

Conclusion

While Corona-related activism and protest in Germany and Austria had many facets and actors, the activities of the Querdenker have seen the greatest successes in mobilisation⁸¹ and had a major impact on the protest scene, particularly in Germany. The Querdenker cut across many classes and niches of society. Indeed, neither the far right nor the far left could really take ownership of it, but the far right made considerable inroads into the German as well as the Austrian movement. In Germany, of all groups monitored by domestic intelligence, officials conclude that the anti-system far right has succeeded most in tapping COVID-19 deniers.⁸² This is made more achievable by the heterogeneity of the Querdenken movement⁸³ as well as its character as a loose network of many single actors, with top influencers playing a crucial role.

While the impact of the COVID-19 measures was the only concern for many involved in the protests, the developments suggest that some participants have become more radical and more ready to engage in acts of violence or sabotage. They joined the ranks of anti-state extremism and most likely will remain there. This is in line with research that implies that belief in conspiracy theories may lead to forms of nonnormative political engagement or even criminal behaviour.⁸⁴ Certain influencers that shaped the Querdenker acted as a catalyst for this development and built bridges to the Reichsbürger milieu, which in turn was especially well-suited to absorb the anger that built up during the pandemic. Evidently, there is a link between the pandemic-related conspiracy thinking of Querdenker and a general affinity towards conspiracy theories among Reichsbürger, with their respective antisemitism and rejection of the established liberal and democratic order.

The boost that Reichsbürger received, with over 23,000 Reichsbürger and sovereignists in 2022⁸⁵ (up from 19,000 in 2019⁸⁶), has to be considered as part of the development of radical right-wing politics. It can be placed in the context of a larger authoritarian-nationalist rebellion and increasingly polarised politico-cultural cleavages in Germany, Austria, and Europe. Many conspiracist patterns have become interchangeable and are transcending established borders, as the allusions by different key figures that are involved with the Reichsbürger and the QAnon movement demonstrate. The interrelations between QAnon and the Reichsbürger conspiracy theories in particular should be the focus of future research, since they obviously have been “fruitful” and therefore dangerous dynamics. This also applies to antisemitism and its tradition within these milieus as a meta-narrative, since it is a factor that connects not only different groups and actors in the present, but likewise with the larger antisemitic tradition of the past.

Beyond domestic security concerns, all of this has additional implications for both countries’ international standing. This could be seen when, in a recent speech, Vladimir Putin referenced political statements that Germany was not fully sovereign, and claimed that US troops there were still occupation forces—fully utilising the most basic Reichsbürger narrative.⁸⁷ This is only fitting, since parts of the protesting milieu have in the meantime turned to other issues, among them a clearly visible support for Russia.

In recent years, several assassinations by right-wing terrorists have been linked to misinformation and conspiracy theories⁸⁸—in Germany, for example, the lone-actor attacks in Munich, Halle, and Hanau,⁸⁹ and the plot by the “Patriotische Union” revealed in December 2022. The development of an “antidemocratic campaigning machine”⁹⁰ remains to be seen. But it became clear during the last three years that discontent channelled by protest movements like the Querdenker can these days lead directly to citizens turning away from the democratic state and into the arms of anti-state extremists like the Reichsbürger.

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Endnotes

1 The number still is growing, as of the end of January. Without Author, “Reichsbürger”-Razzia. Behörden ermitteln inzwischen gegen 55 Verdächtige,” *Der Standard* (January 30, 2023), <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000143061978/reichsbuerger-razzia-behoerden-ermitteln-inzwischen-gegen-55-verdaechtige>. Accessed on February 1, 2023.

2 Normally terms like Querdenker and Reichsbürger are used in quotation marks. However, since both are needed in this text so frequently, we refrained from doing so for the sake of readability.

3 Daniel Koehler, *Germany Targets One of Its Largest Far-Right Domestic Extremist Groups, 9th December, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (Den Hague 2022) <https://icct.nl/publication/germany-targets-far-right-domestic-extremist-group/>. Accessed on February 6, 2023; see also Lars Rensmann, *Authoritarian Rebels. The Reichsbürger Movement, the Far-Right, and the Growing Assault on German Democracy* (2023), <https://www.aicgs.org/2023/01/authoritarian-rebels/>. Accessed on February 6, 2023.

4 Frederik Schindler, “Reichsbürger infiltrieren Querdenker-Szene,” *Welt.de* (September 9, 2021), <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article233697240/Reichsbuerger-infiltrieren-Querdenker-Szene-mit-rechtsex-tremen-Ideen.html>. Accessed February 20, 2023.

5 See for example: Stefan Goertz, *Querdenker. Ein Überblick*, (Wiesbaden: Springer essentials, 2022). Goertz primarily delivers a description of the movement based on security and intelligence reports.

6 On German extremism, see: Uwe Backes and Cas Mudde, “Germany: Extremism without Successful Parties” *Parliamentary Affairs* 53, no. 3 (2000): 457–468, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/53.3.457>. On Austrian and German right-wing extremism see: Michael Minkenberg, “The Radical Right and Anti-Immigrant Politics in Liberal Democracies since World War II: Evolution of a Political and Research Field,” *Polity* 53, no. 3 (2021): 394–417, <https://doi.org/10.1086/714167>. On German right-wing extremism see: Samuel Salzborn, “Renaissance of the New Right in Germany? A Discussion of New Right Elements in German Right-Wing Extremism Today,” *German Politics and Society* 34, no. 2 (2016): 36–63. On European (including German) right-wing extremism in the post-WWII era see: Bernt Hagtvet “Right-Wing Extremism in Europe,” *Journal of Peace Research* 31, no. 3: 241–246, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343394031003001>. On post-war European (including German and Austrian) extremism see: Klaus von Beyme, “Right-Wing Extremism in Post-War Europe,” *West European Politics* 11, no. 2 (1988): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402388808424678>.

7 On left-wing extremism and terrorism in Germany see: Daniel Koehler, “Disengaging from Left-Wing Terrorism and Extremism: Field Experiences from Germany and Research Gaps,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1917639>. On left-wing terrorism in Germany see: Norman Siewert, “11.2 Linksterrorismus: Selbsternannte Avantgarde der Revolution,” in *Terrorismusforschung*, eds. Liane Rothenberger et al. (Baden-Baden: Nomos 2022). On right-wing extremism in Germany see: Sebastian Gräfe, *Rechtsterrorismus in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Baden-Baden: Nomos 2017). On Austrian terrorism see: Heinz Vetschera, “Terrorism in Austria: Experiences and Responses,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 4, no. 4 (1992): 210–233, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546559208427182>.

8 At first, after several incidents, on right-wing extremism and terrorism, and after 9/11 on those driven by extremist jihadi interpretations of Islam.

9 Jan Rathje “For Reich and Volksgemeinschaft—Against the World Conspiracy: Antisemitism and Sovereignism in the Federal Republic of Germany Since 1945,” *Antisemitism Studies* 5, no. 1 (2021): 100–138, <https://doi.org/10.2979/ANTISTUD.5.1.04>.

10 It has been noted that the English or international term for the pandemic is COVID-19. However, since a lot of the vocabulary in Austria and Germany, especially in the realm of protests, used Corona, the authors decided to stay with this term for this article.

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12 Richard Stöss, *Die extreme Rechte in der Bundesrepublik: Entwicklung – Ursachen – Gegenmaßnahmen* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag 1989), 163; Thomas Grumke and Bernd Wagner, *Handbuch Rechtsradikalismus: Personen – Organisationen – Netzwerke. Vom Neonazismus bis in die Mitte der Gesellschaft* (Opladen: Leske + Budrich 2002), 302.

13 Jan Rathje, “Driven by Conspiracies: The Justification of Violence among ‘Reichsbürger’ and Other Conspiracy-Ideological Sovereignists in Contemporary Germany” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (2022): 49–61, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185091>. Roeder is known for violent attacks on objects in the 1970s. Back then, his violent attacks focused on bombing pornographic cinemas and kiosks selling erotic magazines. Roeder called for the release of Rudolf Heß and denied the Holocaust for the first time in 1973.

14 Martin Jander, “Horst Mahler,” in *Die RAF und der linke Terrorismus, Vol. 1*, ed. Wolfgang Kraushaar (Hamburg:

Hamburger Edition 2006), 372–397.

15 Jan Rathje, “WIR SIND WIEDER DA: Die Reichsbürger: Überzeugungen, Gefahren und Handlungsstrategien” *Initiativen für Zivilgesellschaft und demokratische Kultur*, ed. Amadeu-Antonio-Stiftung 13.

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17 Jan Freitag, “Reichsbürger: Eine Bedrohung für die Demokratie oder lächerliche Verschwörungstheoretiker? Das Beispiel Brandenburgs,” in *Jahrbuch Extremismus & Demokratie*, vol. 26, eds. Uwe Backes et al. (Baden-Baden: Nomos 2014): 155–172.

18 Jan Rathje, “Driven by Conspiracies: The Justification of Violence among ‘Reichsbürger’ and Other Conspiracy-Ideological Sovereignists in Contemporary Germany,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (2022): 49–61.

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23 Without Author, “In Deutschland und Österreich: Tausende protestieren gegen Corona-Maßnahmen,” *Tagesspiegel* (December 11, 2021), <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/tausende-protestieren-gegen-corona-massnahmen-4295857.html>. Accessed on January 10, 2023.

24 “Spaziergänge” are still relevant in other contexts in eastern Germany. See: Thomas Datt et al. “Extremismus: Droht Ostdeutschland ein ‘heißer Herbst’?” *Tagesschau.de* (August 23, 2022), <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/herbst-proteste-103.html>. Accessed on January 10, 2023. These walks also loomed large in other parts of Germany during the pandemic. See: Without Author, “Corona-Maßnahmen: Proteste weiten sich auf das Münchner Umland aus” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (January 11, 2022), <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/muenchen-corona-proteste-demonstration-landkreis-1.5505372>. Accessed on January 10, 2023.

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26 The German standard dictionary Duden defined it as “a person who thinks independently and originally, and whose ideas and views are often not understood or accepted.” See: DUDEN, “Querdenker, der,” <https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Querdenker>. Accessed January 10, 2023; Similarly, the official Austrian dictionary: Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur, 39th edition (2001), “index word Querdenker” 467, left column. Technically, the part about ideas and views not being understood and accepted gives weight to the idea of self-deception. However, and not surprisingly, this sentiment was not shared by many outside the movement itself. See: Peter Strasser, “Die neuen Querdenker – ein Fall von Begriffsraub,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 1 (2021), <https://www.nzz.ch/meinung/die-neuen-querdenker-ein-fall-von-begriffsraub-ld.1602163?reduced=true>. Accessed on January 10, 2023.

27 Edgar Grande et al., *Alles Covidioten? Politische Potenziale des Corona-Protests in Deutschland* (Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin 2021), 3–6.

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29 Ministerium des Innern Nordrhein-Westfalen, *Sonderbericht zu Verschwörungsmmythen und "Corona-Leugnern,"* 117. Bundesministerium des Inneren, für Bauen und Heimat, *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2020* (2021) 60–61; Uwe Backes, "Organisationen 2021," in *Jahrbuch Extremismus & Demokratie, 34. Jahrgang*, eds. Uwe Backes et al. (Baden-Baden: Nomos 2022) 127–149, here 141–142; also William Callison and Quinn Slobodian "Coronapolitics from the Reichstag to the Capitol," *Boston Review* 12. <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/quinn-slobodian-toxic-politics-coronakspecticism/>. Accessed on January 11, 2023.

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31 Oliver Nachtwey et al., *Politische Soziologie der Corona-Protteste. Grundausswertung* (Basel: Universität Basel 2020).

32 Florian Hartleb, "Rechts- und Linksextremismus und die COVID-19-Pandemie," in *Europäische Werte, Sicherheit und Integration*, eds. Stefan Karner and Wilhelm Sandrisser (Graz: Leykam-Verlag 2023), 197–219.

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34 Nora Feline Pösl, "Von Verschwörungsideologien, Vernetzungsstrategien und Vernichtungsphantasien," in *Verschwörungsdenken Zwischen Populärkultur und politischer Mobilisierung, Verschwörungsdenken*, eds. Florian Hessel, Pradeep Chakkarath and Mischa Luy (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag), 215–238.

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36 Noteworthy is the fact that currently—opposed to much of its history—the FPÖ is not the largest opposition party according to mandates. Since conservative rule with the much-smaller Greens, this role currently falls to the social democrats.

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41 Oliver Nachtwey, Robert Schäfer and Nadine Frei *Politische Soziologie der Corona-Protteste. Grundausswertung* (Basel: Universität Basel 2020).

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48 See Uwe Backes, "Organisationen 2021," in *Jahrbuch Extremismus & Demokratie, 34. Jahrgang*, ed. Uwe Backes

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