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Defending Democracy Is an Ongoing Task

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PREFACE

In the early months of 2024, Germany saw an enormous wave of demonstrations against the far-right party AfD and for a pluralistic democracy. Triggered by Germany's investigative newsroom Corrective's report about a secret meeting in Potsdam in November 2023 that uncovered connections between politicians from the right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD), the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and other far-right actors, millions of people protested in big and smaller cities all over Germany. For our current issue, Dr. Daniel Kubiak from the Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration Research (BIM) at the Humboldt University Berlin and Dr. Mert Pekşen from the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies (IMIS) at Osnabrück University discuss reasons and effects of the large anti-right-wing demonstrations in relation to defending pluralistic democracy in Germany. Drawing on their first findings from the cooperative project of the German Center for Integration and Migration Research DeZIM research community Spaces of the Migration Society (Räume der Migration), the authors highlight the connections between right-wing ideologies, anti-migration policies, democracy, and protest culture in Germany. By arguing that defending democracy is an ongoing long-term project, they also stress the importance of strategies at a local level and working with people affected by right-wing and racist structures.

Warm regards,

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On January 10, 2024, the Correctiv, an investigative research network, published a lengthy report on a [secret meeting](#) that took place in November 2023 in Potsdam in the federal state of Brandenburg, not far from Berlin. The report revealed the links between some politicians from the right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD), the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and far-right actors such as the Identitarian Movement (Identitäre Bewegung – IB). In addition to many other themes of the meeting, the deportation plans, which were discussed under the term “remigration”, attracted a great deal of public attention. According to these plans as discussed in the meeting, a large share of the German population, including German citizens who has migration history in their families, would be deported as part of a long-term plan. Following the publication of the report, according to the daily newspaper [taz](#), around 1,800 demonstrations took place between January and March 2024. Around four million people came together in major German cities, as well as in many small and medium-sized towns, to demonstrate for a pluralistic democracy and the preservation of the Constitution (*Grundgesetz*).

The protests were primarily directed against the AfD, which would still be the second strongest party in the next federal elections with around 18% according to nationwide [polls](#). Protests, were also, among other things, against the rightward drift of German society, anti-migration policies, deportation plans, sexist theses and anti-queer statements, racism, anti-Semitism and misanthropy. Protesters also targeted the political developments that are evident in the current center-left government of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens (Die Grünen) and Liberal Democrats (FDP).

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With four million participants, they were the largest political protest movement in the German history. Other large demonstrations included the democracy protests in the GDR (German Democratic Republic) in 1989, the anti-Iraq-war demonstrations in 2003, the *unteilbar* (indivisible) movement in 2019, and the queer CSD (Pride) in Berlin. However, four million demonstrators nationwide in just a few weeks, decentralized and nationwide, is a new dimension. People were motivated to take part in these demonstrations in many different ways. The breadth of the movement and the diversity of the participating groups showed that the main motivation was the preservation of pluralistic democracy. Many of the large demonstrations were organized by the structures of the “Fridays for Future” movement and thus originated from the climate protection movement. We saw many so-called “grandmas against the right” (*Omas gegen rechts*) on the streets, older women who are concerned about democracy in Germany. Many initiatives from the left-wing spectrum took part, but also many people who had not previously been politically involved. In East Germany in particular, there were repeated reports of people who were at a political demonstration for the first time. At the same time, government representatives were also at these demonstrations themselves. In Aachen, the former candidate for chancellor and chairman of the CDU Armin Laschet also appeared as a speaker and a [two-minute snippet](#) of it was very successful on social media.

The degree of the right-wing and anti-democratic threat significantly varies for people who experience racism in the super-diverse big German cities like Berlin and rural areas in West Germany, as well as in East Germany. Depending on the location, participation in and organization of protests requires varying degrees of courage and planning, as we show below. The protests, as a result, had some impact on the level of support for the AfD and the party has lost of share of votes according to the current polls. However, the party is still polling around 17% in predictions for the next federal election in 2025. In addition to the protests, the upcoming elections in three East German states (Thuringia, Saxony and Brandenburg) also play an important role. Despite a slight decline in the support for the AfD on the federal level, the party is still expected to win the state elections (*Landtagswahl*) in 2024 and the federal elections in 2025 with a significant margin in the East German states.

Why did the results of the Correctiv research trigger such great attention in German society? What was new in the research and what was well-known? How should we understand the large anti-AfD and anti-right-wing demonstrations in January-March 2024? How resilient will the democratic system of the Federal Republic of Germany prove to be? In this short reflection, we want to put the debates about protests, “remigration” and right-wing violence and ideologies in a broader historical and social context and highlight the connections between right-wing ideologies, anti-migration policies, democracy and protest culture.

The rise of the anti-migration discourse

Although the results of Correctiv's research have shocked many people, the term "remigration", as used by the participants of the meeting, has long been utilized repeatedly on right-wing social media accounts, at demonstrations and in publications. Especially since the arrival of Syrian refugees in 2015/16, the topic of remigration has been increasingly discussed on social media and the concept has found its way into right-wing rhetoric. The Identitarian Movement in Germany and Austria has already used the term in several of their publications and demonstrations. The right-wing (particularly the AfD) has been propagating so-called "remigration instead of integration" (*Remigration statt Integration*). The "Junge Alternative" (JA), the youth organization of the AfD, often carries banners with the slogan "remigration" at its demonstrations. In other countries such as France, Austria, the USA, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and Turkey, these or similar concepts have also been expressed several times: either as far-right statements or as part of party programs to deport or push back people.

The politics surrounding the concept of deportation plans is actually about a broader ideological program of the right for a restrictive migration policy. It is about tightening asylum procedures. It is about making the borders more violent and deporting or pushing back more illegalized people. It is about creating a rhetoric that constantly associates migration and migrants with criminality, illegality, deviance, laziness, religious extremism and so-called parallel societies. Such framing of migration and migrants regularly feeds right-wing and anti-migrant discourse into public discourse. As a result, various political issues are not discussed outside the framework of migration and beyond these trigger points. This leads to under-complex discussions and no real political solutions. At the same time, it creates a discursive exclusion of migrants and migrantized people, which leads to real physical exclusion, as manifested by the increase in deportations, pushbacks and racist violence.

Right-wing narratives that used to be taboo are being normalized in the current political context and are strongly influencing the current debates on migration. Similar anti-migrant and anti-migration sentiments are also expressed by many politicians with different formulations: the Chancellor Olaf Scholz [speaks](#) of more deportations "on a grand scale". The leader of the opposition party Friedrich Merz speaks of migrant children as "[little pashas](#)" and also that the [super-diverse Berlin district Kreuzberg is not part of Germany](#). The Minister of the Interior Nancy Faeser has tightened the asylum law in the course of the vote on the CEAS (Common European Asylum System) at the European level, which [was passed in the European Parliament just a few days ago](#). The reform will make European borders even more deadly and significantly restrict the right to asylum. Although most of the protests were in fact directed against the AfD's policies and the rightward shift in society, the protests can also be seen as a wake-up call for other parties whose narratives and actions have drifted to the right. There was, therefore, the paradoxical situation that high-ranking politicians from the governing parties and the

CDU (including Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock) took part in the demonstrations while their respective parties were also criticized for their policies.

In our research project Spaces of Migration Society (Räume der Migrationsgesellschaft – RäuMig)³, we explore with the continuities of right-wing violence, racism in West and East Germany and the German culture of remembrance. According to the Amadeu Antonio Foundation in Berlin, [at least 219 people have been murdered by right-wing violence](#) since reunification, and there are at least other sixteen suspected cases. Hoyerswerda, Solingen, Rostock, Mölln, NSU, Hanau, Halle and Munich are just the best-known cases. This kind of violence happens in a democratic context. Civil society in Germany has dealt intensively with these issues in recent years. Every year, numerous demonstrations and memorial events are organized to commemorate the victims of the attacks, to demand consequences and changes, and to highlight the failure of state institutions in handling the situation during and after the attacks. Armin Kurtović, the father of Hamza Kurtović, who was murdered in Hanau, said in a podcast that there was not even a proper apology from the Hessian Minister of the Interior for the failures in Hanau, but above all it hurts that there are no changes in the structures. This [leads Kurtović to say](#): “If apologies don't bring any change, then they are manipulation.”

Our research project also shows that there is a significant correlation between the intensity of anti-migration discourses and the level of violence against migrants and racialized people. For instance, the racist pogroms in Rostock-Lichtenhagen in 1992 and the racist arson attack in Solingen in 1993 took place against the backdrop of a heated asylum debate. We seem to be at that point again. Today, the number of attacks on refugees, asylum seekers and their accommodation has risen significantly according to police statistics. [More than 1600 cases](#) were registered in 2023. In some federal states, [the number of right-wing incidents](#) has doubled in one year. The increase in dangerous bodily harm is particularly alarming. Racism is once again the most common motive for such violent acts.

While the deadly attacks are receiving more attention in the media and public debates, the [National Discrimination and Racism Monitor \(NaDiRa\)](#) of DeZIM Institute in Berlin shows that everyday forms of racism and right-wing violence and discrimination are highly present in Germany. Migrant communities and racialized people experience forms of right-wing and racist violence and racism on a daily basis. Our research project also shows how in some cities the public space is significantly dominated by right-wing groups: Right-wing stickers and graffiti are more visible in public space than ever before. Right-wing groups are threatening people and organizing demonstrations on various

³ "Räume der Migrationsgesellschaft (RäuMig)" is a cooperative project of the DeZIM research community at the Institute for Conflict and Violence Research at Bielefeld University (IKG), the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies at the University of Osnabrück (IMIS) and the Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration Research at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (BIM). It examines how spaces change through migration and how migration and integration processes change through spaces.

topics, and creating new networks - locally, nationally and internationally. Against this background, the remigration debates, for example, are not shocking for those who are often affected by racism and already feel threatened on a daily basis

Is it enough to protest against right-wing politics and violence? The protests in Hanau in the federal state of Hessen in the last four years give us an interesting insight. On February 19, 2020, a racist murdered nine people in Hanau with racist motivations. Thousands of people travel to Hanau every year to commemorate the victims of this attack and to protest against right-wing politics and violence. At the same time, protests and commemorative events are held simultaneously in [over a hundred locations in Germany](#). It is astonishing, however, to observe that, despite the protests and immense public attention to the case in Hanau, support for the right-wing parties has not completely waned. In the 2023 state election, the AfD increased its vote by 5.3% in Hessen, receiving 18.4% of the votes and becoming the second-strongest party after the CDU. In Hanau, the party's direct elected candidate has achieved to receive 19.2% of the votes in the city. How do we make sense of this situation? The threat to Germany's migration society described above and the associated threat to pluralist democracy indicate that democracy is an ongoing task that needs to be worked on regularly. The demonstrations, including the ones in Hanau and the ones that took place this year between January and March, have so far led to little structural change. The history of democracy in post-war Germany shows that democracy was always under threat. The struggles and achievements of the civil society in the GDR helps us to understand the fragility of this democracy and also what people can achieve to defend it.

The fragility of democratic structures and the culture of protest in Germany

The Federal Republic of Germany is celebrating seventy-five years of the *Grundgesetz* this year. On May 23, 1949, this *Grundgesetz* was passed in the western part of post-war Germany, thereby implementing many modern democratic standards in law. The newly founded republic was not able to become a fully democratic society immediately. Democracy came from above. The Western Allies invested a great deal of know-how and economic resources to turn a society that had voted for world conflagration just sixteen years earlier into convinced democrats. However, celebrating seventy-five years of the *Grundgesetz* also means that some Germans have only been part of this *Grundgesetz* for a good thirty-five years. In the eastern part, in the Soviet occupation zone, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was founded on October 7, 1949. It had "democratic" in its name and elections were also held, but it was much more of an authoritarian one-party state without free elections, a free press and a deadly border that imprisoned its inhabitants. Democratic transformation had become a task that would be accomplished through the struggle of the people.

Democracy in East Germany did not come to the people from above but had to be fought for. Motivated by the events in Poland, where courageous people had been building a

democratic trade union structure with Solidarność since 1980 and developed the idea of the Round Table in 1989, more and more people in the GDR also decided to get involved in the struggles for democracy transition. First conspiratorially in environmental libraries, feminist women's groups or by monitoring elections and then, from the fall of 1989, through demonstrations that were not permitted by the state. The high point was reached on October 9, 1989, in Leipzig, when 70,000 people took to the streets on a Monday, even though the state had announced that it would use violence against this unauthorized demonstration. The people of Leipzig walked once around the Old Town Circle street and demonstrated their absolute will to live in a more democratic society from now on. The state did not use violence and so the path to change was paved. The following dates still seem like a miracle today: on November 4, 1989, the first permitted large-scale demonstration with several hundred thousand people took place on Alexanderplatz in Berlin. On November 9, 1989, the new travel law came into force and the Berlin Wall was opened. On March 18, 1990, the first free elections were held in the GDR and on October 3, 1990, the East German new states also joined the German Grundgesetz and thus a democratic, pluralistic state. Democracy was fought for in East Germany over a long period of time and the process is still not complete thirty-five years later, as current developments show.

State elections 2024 in Thuringia, Saxony and Brandenburg

In 2024, the reunified Federal Republic of Germany is considered a society with good infrastructure, a free press, public safety, welfare state and the country is very high on the democracy index. At the same time, Germany has a long history of racist structures and racist violence. There is the classic double experience in a racist society. For some, everything seems fine, and others recognize the inadequacies of the political and social system much earlier. And yet, since the 2010s, this democracy has once again been challenged. This time by a party, whose youth association and state associations in the federal states of Thüringen, Sachsen and Brandenburg have been classified as definitely far-right. The AfD is ahead in the polls in precisely these three federal states for the state elections in the fall of 2024. There are AfD mayors in a few municipalities and a district administrator in the county of Sonneberg in Thüringen. The risk is high, especially in Thüringen, where the AfD expects to receive a third of the seats in parliament after the state elections and would then have a "blocking minority" and it will be uneasy to find a coalition beyond the participation of AfD. It would then not even have to co-govern and be able to prevent some projects. The founding of the left-conservative party "Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht" (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht – BSW) by the former long-time LINKE politician Sahra Wagenknecht might not be enough, because this alliance is drawing voters from both the left and the right, a classic "[Querfront](#)" project that could protect the democratic structures in Thüringen and at the same time challenge them anew.

The AfD has been active in Germany since 2013, entered the Bundestag in 2017 and is also represented in a large number (14 of 16) of state parliaments. The party's history has seen it evolve from a conservative-economic-liberal anti-euro party to a far-right party. This situation also means that in the regions where the AfD is so strong, democracy projects are more difficult to implement, cultural institutions fear for their funding and the right-wing discourse continues to create spaces of fear. We could see this also in the demonstrations in winter 2024. While it was relatively easy to register and take part in a large demonstration in the big cities - over 300,000 people took to the streets in Berlin and Munich - registering a demonstration by name in a small town in Eastern Germany is much more courageous. Here, too, several hundred people came together, but they showed their faces in a less anonymous society. There were reports that AfD sympathizers formed a guard in the small town of Wittstock (Brandenburg) and every person who wanted to take part in the demonstration on the market square had to walk through this trellis. Maybe this was an extraordinary situation, but in certain parts of Germany, especially in the rural areas and small towns of the former East German states, defending democracy in the public sphere requires a different kind of courage. It is therefore also important that the demonstrators in the [big cities show their solidarity with the democracy defenders in the small towns of Eastern Germany](#).

Acting for the permanent task?

The large demonstration movement that started after Correctiv's report waned in the spring. The AfD stands at 17% in the [latest Forsa poll](#), which is still well above the last result for the 2021 federal election, but lower than at the beginning of 2024. Should the demonstrations against the right give us hope for the future of German society? Protests have a function of making things more visible and expressing some dissatisfaction. But protests, including the protests earlier this year, need to be seen as just one part of a larger politics. Drawing on the results of our research project, we would like to offer a few suggestions on what can be done in this regard: 1) In the case of Germany, mobilizing only against the AfD would be incomplete in the struggle for the long-term strengthening of democracy. The democratic struggle and mobilization against the threat to democracy should be seen as an ongoing long-term project and democracy should not be understood as a single issue but as a phenomenon that requires a struggle on many social fault lines such as climate protection, migration, feminism, queer rights, mobility, and social inequality. Therefore, for politics that can bring about real transformations, it is necessary to connect bigger issues and create wider networks. 2) As our research at the local level shows, local organization of politics and local strengthening of democratic forces are of high importance. As we mentioned above, each local context has different capacities and needs, so for a lasting democratic struggle, local organizations should be strengthened and appropriate strategies should be developed for each locality. 3) Finally, people affected by right-wing and racist structures have a lot to say about the scale of the threat. Listening to people and groups fighting for democracy in difficult circumstances, as well

as those who live with anti-democratic and racist realities on a daily basis, and building a broader struggle with them, is perhaps one of the most important aspects for a more sustainable and stronger democracy.