



RETURN TO THE POLITICALLY ABANDONED

Conversations in right-wing populist strongholds in Germany and France

Johannes Hillje



**DAS
PROGRESSIVE
ZENTRUM**

Supported by



Federal Foreign Office

In cooperation with

**Liegey
Muller
Pons**

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	3
2. THE DEBATE AS IT STANDS	4
3. CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEBATE: LISTENING TO PEOPLE IN AFD AND FN STRONGHOLDS	6
4. RESULTS	8
5. SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS	22
6. THE AREAS IN WHICH ACTION NEEDS TO BE TAKEN	23
6.1 Solidarity with the resident population is essential if solidarity is to be expressed with newcomers	23
6.2 Infrastructure as a means of promoting equal opportunities	24
6.3 Strengthening structures through the presence of political parties at the local level	25
6.4 Make structural change compatible with society	25
6.5 Confidence and assertiveness in the face of right-wing populist narratives	26
7. CONCLUSION	27

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study is the first of its kind to have been undertaken on the elections that took place in 2017 in Germany and France. It demonstrates that many people who live in structurally weak regions with a high proportion of right-wing populist voters feel like they have been abandoned by politics. The 500 door-to-door interviews that were conducted for the study highlight the challenges that the respondents face in their everyday lives and demonstrate that current socio-political conditions – and not factors such as xenophobia – are often at the root of their anger and concerns about the future. This study uses the authentic views of the interviewees to decode the ways in which they think. The aim is to enable the views of this section of the population to be employed in the development of recommendations for action that would help regain their trust.

THE MOST IMPORTANT RESULTS FROM GERMANY AND FRANCE

There is a very large discrepancy between the issues that people view as the ‘biggest problems’ facing their country (which are immigration and the economy) and the challenges that they face in their everyday lives (precarious working conditions, worries about money and declining social infrastructure). Media and politics at the national level are criticised for not having properly adopted this ‘citizens’ agenda’. This problem also results in a sense of unfairness and disadvantage. As such, when people in these regions devalue others, especially migrants, they do so as a reaction to their own experiences of devaluation (this follows the ‘logic of comparative devaluation’). Importantly, the interviews demonstrated no intrinsic patterns of xenophobia.

The central narratives employed by the populists are far less prevalent in their strongholds than is generally assumed. When people are asked to describe political contexts in their own words, issues such as Islamisation, Euroscepticism, sweeping criticism of the media and the emphasis on national identity hardly ever crop up. Instead, more often than not the European Union, for example, tends to be viewed as part of the solution, not the problem.

Nationalist clamouring or demands that include a ‘Germany first!’ approach, are ultimately based on the view that politics sets the wrong priorities and focuses on issues that do not reflect the realities of people’s everyday lives. However, the interviewees did not necessarily view measures aimed at tackling the refugee crisis, or foreign policy commitments, as fundamentally wrong. Nevertheless, the interviewees often believed that a focus on immigration and foreign policy tended to result in less investment and fewer policy measures at the local level that would help tackle the tangible challenges that these people face in their everyday lives. This includes increased economic pressure faced by people on low incomes and the gaps in public services. Finally, many interviewees believe that politics has withdrawn from certain social and geographical areas. Importantly, this feeling has led to a strong sense of abandonment.

CONCLUSIONS

Areas now exist which are marked by ‘political abandonment’. In order to regain the trust of the people who live in these areas, it will be necessary to establish a local presence, provide recognition and resolve the problems that they face. This study outlines five relevant fields of action as a means of contributing towards this aim: solidarity with the resident population is essential if solidarity is to be expressed with newcomers; infrastructure as a means of promoting equal opportunities; strengthening structures through the presence of political parties at the local level; make structural change compatible with society; and confidence and assertiveness in the face of right-wing populist narratives..

ABOUT THE STUDY

Das Progressive Zentrum and its French partner Liegey Muller Pons conducted 500 door-to-door interviews in structurally weaker regions of Germany and France that are also characterised by a high proportion of right-wing populist voters. In line with ‘cultural intelligence’, the study is aimed at strengthening mutual understanding between Germany and France through social narratives as part of a pilot project. The interviews were conducted with people who are often spoken about but whose voice is rarely heard in public debates. They took place in three regions in eastern and western Germany and in northern and southern France. The respondents were asked general questions about their situation, their living and social environment and their country. This included questions such as ‘What is going well/badly in the area in which you live?’ and ‘What would you change if you went into politics?’. This open approach enabled a discourse analysis to be undertaken of the information gathered during the interviews with the aim of identifying the ways in which people genuinely think about their own lives and their country. The results contribute to the debate about the response to the shift to the right and offer a qualitative supplement to the representative studies that have been published elsewhere in this field.

1. Introduction

The 2017 presidential elections in France and the Bundestag elections in Germany are viewed as historical turning points for the political landscape in these countries. On the one hand, Emmanuel Macron was able to circumvent the established parties with his new movement En Marche, and the French Socialists, which had held power until this point, plunged into political wasteland. On the other hand, although Germany has yet to experience the rise of a game changer such as Macron, there are parallels between the rift in the political system that accompanied the German election results from 24 September 2017 and developments that have been on-going in France since the 1980s: both countries are witnessing the establishment of a right-wing populist force in their respective political party systems. In the last Bundestag election, Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany – AfD) gained 12.6% of the vote making it the third strongest force in the German Bundestag. On 23 April 2017, Marine Le Pen achieved the strongest result in Front National's (National Front – FN) history, gaining 21% in the first round of the French presidential elections.¹

The gains made by these right-wing populist parties were achieved in very different circumstances. To name just two, first, the unemployment rate in France (10.3%) was more than twice the rate found on the other side of the Rhine; second, Germany granted more than ten times as many people asylum than France in 2016.² Nevertheless, the election results emphasise the unenviable common ground that exists between the two partner countries: a divided society. Former Élysée member of staff, Christophe Pierrel, who went on a 'Tour de France' after the presidential elections and wrote a book about his experiences describes France as being split into two nations: the France of the 'winners' and

the 'losers' of globalisation.³ On German Unity Day in 2017, Germany's federal president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, described the divisions within German society as new 'walls' that ran 'between the city and countryside' and which constituted 'walls of alienation, disappointment and anger'. Many German readers might view the French philosopher Didier Eribon, who grew up in a working-class family, yet eventually became a university professor, as providing an explanation in his autobiographical social analysis *Return to Reims* for the rise of right-wing populism. The book, and its narrative of decay, depicts a society in which social security benefits are becoming increasingly meagre and sections of the French working-class are increasingly voting right-wing. *Return to Reims* was already well-known in France by 2009. However, it was not until 2016 that it became a blockbuster in Germany – the year in which the AfD achieved clear double-digit results at the election for the first time in the party's history. Eribon speaks about the distance between certain people and the rest of society and the alienation of entire sections of society from economic, social and cultural processes of change. Eribon's central accomplishment is expressed through a dialogue between him and his mother, who used to vote for the left, but today supports the right-wing populists. This section of the book enables readers to clearly understand the divisions that exist in French society. Moreover, the dialogue also highlights another dimension of this division: the fact that some people are able to speak, whereas others are only ever spoken about. The loss of the power to speak goes hand in hand with a loss of the power to interpret. The people whose voices go unheard are often labelled as 'the left behind', 'hate voters', 'the disappointed' or 'Les Oubliés'. However, this leads to or results in different ideas about issues such as immigration, or European and social policy being pigeonholed as vague forms of disaffection. Quite a few headlines have been published about the AfD's electoral success using these psychologising methods, including 'The late revenge of the East Germans' and 'Election winners' anger'.⁴

¹ On 11 March 2018, the party was renamed "Rassemblement national" (National Rally). www.lejdd.fr/politique/le-rassemblement-national-nouveau-nom-du-fn-pour-gouverner-3596597

² Eurostat (2017): Press release dated 26 April 2017, Asylentscheidungen in der EU. ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/8001720/3-26042017-AP-DE.pdf.

³ Pierrel's book was published by La Tengo on 8 November 2017 as *Ils votent Marine et il vous emmerdent!*

⁴ The first headline was printed in the taz, the second in the Berliner Kurier, both on 25 September 2017, the day after the 2017 Bundestag election.

As dialogue will certainly be needed if these divided societies are ever to be reunited, this project takes a first step in this direction by listening to people who are otherwise only ever spoken about. The study undertook 500 interviews in France and Germany in socio-economically disadvantaged regions where high proportions of right-wing populist voters live (in other words, in the strongholds of FN and the AfD). The interviewees were asked general and open questions (such as ‘What gives you hope for the future?’) to encourage them to tell their stories without being pushed into a particular direction. The aim was to understand the ways in which people think, interpret these issues and to find out which hopes they have for the future. This paper analyses and compares the results gained from the interviews that were undertaken in eastern and western Germany, and in northern and southern France. The purpose is to highlight the differences and similarities that exist between the two countries. The following section (Chapter 2) summarises the current debate about the relationship between structurally weak regions and right-wing populist election results. Chapter 3 explains where and how the interviews that were conducted for this project took place; and Chapter 4 describes the results that were obtained. This study concludes by presenting five fields of action in Chapter 5 where political decision-makers need to focus their work in order to counteract the problems and future concerns of the people who were interviewed.

2. The debate as it stands

After the ‘populist victories’ that characterised the Brexit referendum and the 2016 US presidential elections, German and French politicians began to realise that elections were now being won in structurally weak regions by voters who had actually been written off. In this context, ‘structurally weak’ is often equated with ‘rural’. A response from the German government to a parliamentary question posed by the Green parliamentary group about this topic in February 2017 shows that such views only pay lip service to this issue. The government’s response described living conditions in 28 (of a total of 361) districts in Germany as ‘very strongly’

or ‘severely’ below average.⁵ In addition to numerous rural areas in the new federal states (those that comprised East Germany), such as Prignitz in Brandenburg or Burgenland in Saxony Anhalt, however, they include five major towns and cities: Bremerhaven, Frankfurt am Oder, Gelsenkirchen, Herne and Oberhausen. The same can be said of France: ‘losers of globalisation’ also live in French urban areas. Although socio-economic inequalities are particularly high in France’s rural north and the eastern ‘rust belt’, the relevant social statistics are no better on the peripheries of metropolitan areas such as Paris or Marseilles and the infamous banlieues. Structural weakness, therefore, exists in urban and not just rural areas.

In answer to the Green party’s parliamentary question, the government explained that ‘there was a connection between the structural weakness of the economy, the exodus from these regions, high unemployment rates and populist electoral gains’. Now that the presidential elections in France and the German general election have taken place, it is possible to analyse the extent to which this relationship actually exists. When a map of Germany’s unemployment statistics is placed over a map of the AfD’s election results, initially, there seems to be a high degree of correlation between the two sets of figures. However, on closer inspection it soon becomes clear that although the clusters overlap, this does mean that a clear causal relationship exists. For example, the unemployment rate in and around Wilhelmshaven (Constituency 26) is 8.2%, which is well above the national average. However, the AfD gained just 9.1% of voter share in this district – a below average result. Similarly, Heilbronn has a slightly below-average rate of unemployment (5.3%) and the highest per capita income in Germany (€43,000). Despite this, the AfD gained 16.4% of the vote in the town.

Furthermore, it is not possible to explain the level of support gained by the AfD in regions such as Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria in terms of regional economic weakness or high unemployment as they are ‘structurally strong’ federal states. Therefore, in cases such as these, a popular thesis comes into play that focuses on ‘cultural reasons’, such as the fear of

⁵ The answer by the German government to the Green Party’s parliamentary request can be found here (in German): dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/18/112/1811263.pdf.

being inundated by foreigners, and endogenous social change such as the legalisation of same-sex marriages; these issues are said to have resulted in electoral gains for the AfD in these regions. The Sinus Milieu Test uses both socio-economic criteria and socio-cultural characteristics (values, lifestyles and people's attitudes, such as their concerns about the future) to differentiate between social groups. Importantly, the Bertelsmann Foundation argues that the correlation between cultural issues and right-wing electoral gains is even more strongly pronounced when society is structured in this manner. Shortly after the Bundestag election, the Bertelsmann Foundation argued that 'The more precarious the situation is in a particular constituency, the better the AfD will fare, and the stronger the gains it will make'.⁶ Interestingly, the fact that the AfD was able to mobilise voters in constituencies with a higher level of precarity in 2017 actually narrowed the divisions between social groups on voter turnout for the first time since 1998.

A similar pattern emerges in France: although an association seems to exist between structural weakness and the electoral success of the FN, it would be hard to describe this association as a causal link. On the one hand, Marine Le Pen was able to defend her party's dominance in the 2017 presidential elections in the rural north, the eastern 'rust belt' and in southeastern France on the Mediterranean coast. Moreover, although Le Pen also achieved above-average support in the urban districts of Marseille and Calais, her greatest level of support came from outside of the big cities, in areas such as the northern town of Tournehem-sur-la-Hem (41.2%) and Marignane in the south east (42%).⁷ In view of the fact that structurally weak regions in France and Germany often vote for (right-wing) populism, it is hardly surprising that these parties gain a considerable section of their voters from economically weaker social groups. The AfD received a disproportionate level of support from people in work and the unemployed, people with *mittlerer Reife* (general

secondary education), people aged between 35 and 44 years-old and male voters.⁸ Be this as it may, it is still not particularly easy to identify a 'typical AfD voter', as the party also achieved a 12% result among people in employment and the self-employed, a figure that coincides with the party's overall result. Even before the election, the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) had shown that although the majority of AfD supporters are on below-average incomes, 'a substantial minority are doing very well'.⁹

In research, the right-wing populist electoral constituency consisting of the 'losers of globalisation' is usually expanded to include people who have been 'culturally abandoned', in other words, people who reject the idea of a cosmopolitan society.

In keeping with her party's tradition, Marine Le Pen achieved her best results among working people, as well as among people on the lowest incomes and those with the lowest levels of education.¹⁰ However, the 2017 election confirmed that women and young people now also view the FN as a possible choice at the ballot box – Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine Le Pen's father and predecessor as party leader, was rarely able to reach this section of the electorate.

However, it is not just objectively measurable socio-economic factors that are important when surveying the people who vote for the AfD or the FN; rather, their subjective views about their own situations also need to be taken into account. For example, in the beginning of 2017, the Hans Böckler Foundation found that AfD supporters were more likely to view their social situation as being under threat than people who voted for other parties. Furthermore, they were also more likely to be worried about losing their current social and

6 Bertelsmann Foundation (2017), *Populäre Wahlen. Mobilisierung und Gegenmobilisierung der sozialen Milieus bei der Bundestagswahl 2017*.

7 These figures refer to the first round of the presidential elections that took place on 23 April 2017: [www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/electresult__presidentielle-2017/\(path\)/presidentielle-2017/index.html](http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/electresult__presidentielle-2017/(path)/presidentielle-2017/index.html).

8 These figures were collected by Infratest Dimap for ARD.

9 The article *Wählerschaft der Parteien* was published in DIW Wochenbericht 29/2017.

10 These figures are from IPSOS and can be viewed here: www.ipsos.com/fr-fr/1er-tour-presidentielle-2017-sociologie-de-lelectorat.

economic status and concerned about the future.¹¹ In short, AfD voters believe that their generation is worse off than that of their parents, and are worried about their children's future. FN voters are also quite negative about their prospects for social mobility (their chances of improving their social and economic situation).¹² In 2017, Le Pen, who gained 25% of the vote, was the first choice for people who believed that the next generation would have a worse future than the last, and, by a large margin (30%), for people who believed that their profession was on the way out.

The electoral slogans used by the FN explicitly address feelings of being on the losing side of the social division ('a France from above and a France from below'). AfD and FN voters also share a similar attitude when it comes to democracy. Whereas only a minority (40%) of AfD supporters believe that Germany is truly democratic; Daniel Stockemer, a political scientist, argues that the best way to predict whether a French voter will vote for the right is to study their views on the state of democracy.¹³

In short, although there is no watertight correlation between regional structural weakness and right-wing populist election results, both the FN and the AfD gain a significant proportion of their voters from areas facing high levels of socio-economic disadvantage. In order to develop a better understanding of the social division that emerged (at the latest) after the last election results were announced in France and Germany, therefore, it is essential to recognise the ways in which people in these regions think and their opinions about these issues.

11 Hans Böckler Stiftung (2017): 'Einstellung und soziale Lebenslage. Eine Spurensuche nach Gründen für rechtspopulistische Orientierung, auch unter Gewerkschaftsmitgliedern', in Working Paper Forschungsförderung, Number 44, August 2017.

12 Luc Rouban (2016): L'effet électoral du déclassement social. www.enef.fr/app/download/14088176725/LA_NOTE%2324_vague5.pdf?t=1468919916.

13 Daniel Stockemer (2017). The Front National in France. Continuity and Change under Jean-Marie Le Pen and Marine Le Pen.

3. Contribution to the debate: listening to people in AfD and FN strongholds

Many of the studies previously quoted about right-wing populist voters' attitudes were based on a large number of cases which meant they could be used to make representative statements about the people voting for these parties at the time the data were collected. One disadvantage of such large-scale research is its standardised design. The respondents were asked about specific topics and were provided with standardised responses and, therefore, specific interpretive patterns. For instance, this would have occurred when they were asked questions such as whether they agreed with the statement that 'foreigners are prioritised in Germany and Germans are disadvantaged'. Qualitative approaches, therefore, provide a useful addition to studies devised using a quantitative methodology. Qualitative approaches are aimed at 'describing living environments "from the inside out" and doing so from the perspective of the people involved'.¹⁴ Although they cannot make generalised statements about population groups, they can nevertheless reveal the attitudes of representatives of these group in a more profound and authentic manner. Open questioning makes it possible to explore people's interpretive patterns using own their statements instead of answers to pre-conceived questions. This study revolves around this point in particular. Its purpose is to better understand the opinions, attitudes, concerns and hopes of people living in socially and economically weaker regions in France and Germany where right-wing populist parties have an above-average share of the vote. Nevertheless, respondents were not selected because they were AfD or FN voters, but because they lived in one of these party's strongholds.¹⁵ To this end, two regions were selected in France – Nord-Pas-de-Calais in the north, and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur in the south – and in Germany– the

14 Flick, Uwe, Kardoff, Ernst von, Steinke, Ines (2010): Qualitative Forschung. Ein Handbuch, p.14.

15 This article uses 'stronghold' to refer to an electoral district in which right-wing populist parties have received a higher share of the vote than for the average throughout the country.

The most important facts about the 500 interviews

Location where the interview took place

The AfD's or the FN's result for the voting district in question at the last election is provided in parentheses.^a

Germany

East^b:

Berlin Marzahn-Hellersdorf	(28.3%; 27.7%)
Eisenhüttenstadt	(25.1%; 24.1%)
Fürstenwalde-Molkenberg	(23.0%)

West:

Duisburg-Neumühl	(30.4%; 29.7%; 27.2%)
Gelsenkirchen-Ost	(28.8%; 26.2%; 25.6%)
Datteln-Meckinghoven	(17.0%; 15.8%)

France

North:

Calais-Matisse-Toulouse-Lautrec	(37.0%)
Loon-Plage-Les Kempes	(42.5%)
Tournehem-sur-la-Hem	(41.2%)

South:

Marseille 14-Centre Urbain	(27.0%)
Marignane-La Calagovière-Parc Camoin	(42.0%)
Arles-Mas-Thibert	(29.0%)

Average duration of the discussion:	25.6 minutes
Average Age of the respondents:	48.8 years-of-age
Gender distribution:	52% men, 48% women
Survey period:	05 - 14 September 2017 (Germany), 25 - 29 September 2017 (France)

^a The election results relate to the second vote in the parliamentary elections (Bundestag) in Germany in 2017 and to the 2017 French presidential election. As the survey was carried out before the parliamentary elections, the locations were selected using the results from the last state election (Landtag).

^b The locations are listed in the following order: urban, suburban areas and small towns, and rural areas.

area around Duisburg and Gelsenkirchen in the west, and Berlin and Brandenburg in the east. These areas were chosen because a multidimensional index demonstrated that they had large socially and economically disadvantaged populations.¹⁶ A second criterion for the selection was a large share of the vote for the AfD or FN in the last few local or presidential elections. Despite these commonalities, this step also involved mapping out a variance between the regions. In this way, the areas selected flag up key social and economic differences – for instance, in the development of population structures when the Ruhr area is compared with

the regions which belonged to East Germany. In order to incorporate an additional level of variety in terms of people's social realities, the surveys were carried in urban, suburban and small towns ('medium-sized centres') and rural areas. 125 interviews were conducted in each of the four regions, resulting in a data pool consisting of a total of 500 conversations. As the participants were not surveyed according to their party preference, and absolutely no personal data over and above their gender and age were gathered, this project cannot be recognised as a study of voters, but as a study of voters' milieus. The aim is to explore the interpretive patterns of people from a disadvantaged background in areas where right-wing populist parties have a large share of the vote.

The surveys were carried out in Germany in the weeks before the 2017 parliamentary elections and in France shortly afterwards. The particular method used by the study led the project team to knock on people's doors

¹⁶ The index of social and economic disadvantage that was developed for this project is based on the model drawn up by the *Institut für Arbeitsmarkt und Berufsforschung* (see: doku.iab.de/kurzber/2013/kb2213.pdf) and work by Pampalon and Raymond (in *Santé, société et solidarité*, 2(1), pp.191–208). The index covers four dimensions: family structure, education, unemployment and income. The various dimensions of disadvantage were integrated into the index using principal component analysis.

in order to carry out face-to-face interviews. This has the advantage that people who are harder to access using other survey techniques (such as online panels) could be reached and – providing they were willing – interviewed. The surveys were carried out over the course of several weekdays between 4pm and 8pm in order to avoid ruling out any population groups as much as possible (such as people who worked during the day). The interviewees were asked a total of eleven open questions and the responses were recorded by the interviewers using a smartphone application. The interviews lasted on average around 25 minutes. A text of more than 55,000 words emerged, which would correspond to a book of around 200 pages. The text freely records the information provided by the people who were surveyed.

The content of the conversations was analysed in two steps: first, the responses were coded according to topics and aspects to develop an overview as to which themes dominated the responses to the individual questions. The topics that were identified were then ranked as were their sub-aspects. In the second step, a discourse analysis was used to assess which topics were the most prominent. The aim was to work out people's interpretive patterns, sound out how respondents had dealt with specific topics and make them plausible (e.g. by identifying the cause and effect of individual problems). Finally, the intention was also to find out how individual topic areas were entangled or interlinked with one another. These discourse analytical tools made it possible to understand how the interviewees perceived their own situation and the circumstances in their immediate and also wider environment and how political meaningfulness arises from this perception.

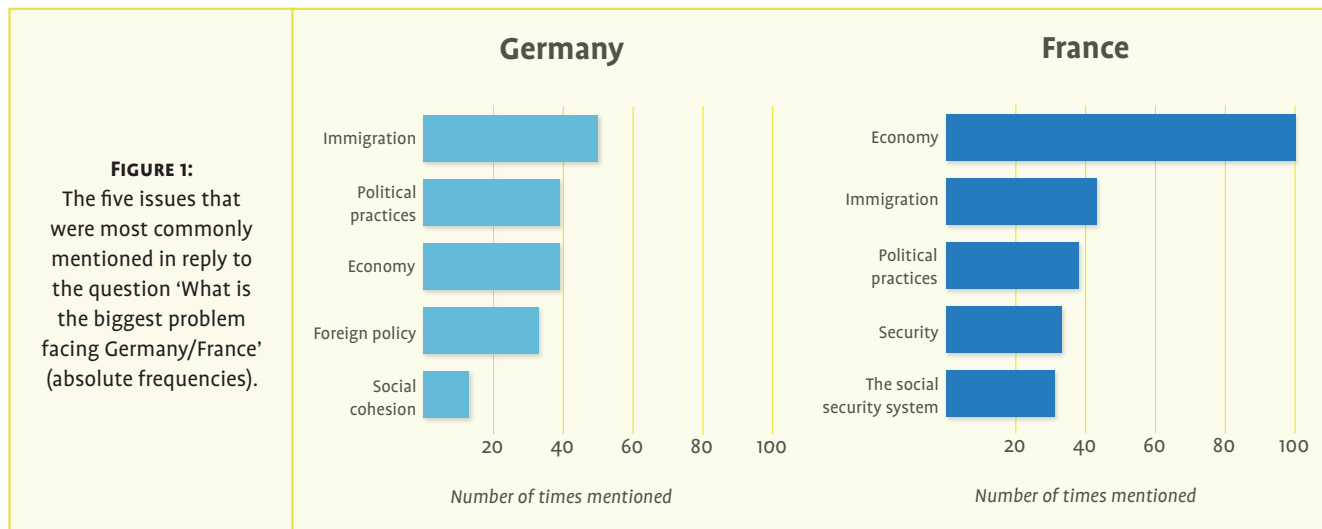
4. Results

The following section describes the results of the interviews by dividing them into four subject areas that focus on people's opinions and attitudes about 1) their country, 2) their local area (the city or district where they live), 3) their everyday life, and 4) their future. It begins by describing and then comparing the most prominent patterns in people's ways of thinking in terms of these subject areas among the responses in France and Germany. In many cases, interviewees are quoted in order to better illustrate a point. This is followed by a more in-depth analysis that compares the responses provided by people living in eastern and western Germany, and northern and southern France; as well as across three spatial categories (city, mid-sized town and rural area) and a number of age groups. This section also highlights the interesting differences and similarities that were found between the German and French dataset. Finally, a discourse analysis is used to present a core interpretative summary of the central ways of thinking that characterise each particular subject area.

People's opinions about their own country

Respondents in AfD and FN strongholds were quite negative about their country's current state of affairs. When asked which things were going well in their country, most respondents in both countries concluded that nothing or very little was going well. In fact, this was the most common response to this question among the French. In Germany, many respondents stressed the positive nature of the safety net provided by social security benefits, the labour-market situation and the rule of law. In France, certain economic sectors were said to be doing well – this issue came in second place, and was followed by democracy, civil rights and the high relative level of security in the country. Nevertheless, the respondents needed twice as much time to speak about the negative aspects of their country than about the things that they thought were going well.

People living in the AfD's strongholds view immigration as Germany's biggest problem. In France, this issue ranks second only to the economy and unemployment



(Figure 1). As such, it is worthwhile taking a closer look at the debate about immigration: initially, it seems that German respondents viewed the high number of migrants as the central problem. However, the interviewees chose an interesting way of (not) making an issue out of the extent of immigration: most often, the respondents believed that immigration was Germany's biggest problem because of the costs and the financial disadvantages that it is said to cause the German population. The following quote exemplifies this view in stark terms:

'The funding spent on foreigners comes at our expense. I'm not xenophobic, but they simply get a higher level of funding.'

76-year-old woman, Eisenhüttenstadt

In the AfD's strongholds, the second most prominent discursive strand in terms of migration is that of crime and the perception that it increases when migrants arrive. Some interviewees suggested that an influx of migrants was linked to a rise in 'IS terrorism', 'break-ins' and 'sexual abuse'. In these statements,

the respondents often employed – what in reality are – untenable sweeping generalisations that label all immigrants as terrorists and criminals. These views were often supported by what the interviewees had seen or heard 'on the news'. Therefore, their opinions also reflect the fact that their fears are linked to concerns about what might happen rather than to direct experiences of crimes that have actually been committed by foreigners. However, a majority of the respondents provides a more differentiated view of this issue and refrains from tarring all immigrants with the same brush. Nevertheless, the respondents criticised the way in which migrant offenders are said to be dealt with. The view of a 41-year-old man from Berlin's Marzahn-Hellersdorf district is representative of those of other interviewees: 'I don't think that it's right that they are not deported afterwards.' Importantly, only very few respondents dealt with this issue through a cultural lens such as by focusing on a fear of being overwhelmed by foreigners. This applies equally to respondents from eastern and western Germany. Overall, it would be fair to say that most respondents were not intrinsically racist when it comes to the issue of immigration; they do not view migrants themselves as the problem, nor is the problem due to the fact that migrants come from a foreign country or a foreign culture. Rather, the respondents expressed various forms of resentment, which, although they certainly contain racist traits (such as the generalisations within the discourse of crime), are primarily reflections of the logic of comparative devaluation. In summary, most respondents believe that

more is being done for foreigners than for them, and this leads to a feeling of being devalued which, in turn, leads them to devalue foreigners.

In addition to the criticism expressed about the government's crisis management, especially in the Calais area, there are other parallels between the responses provided in France and Germany: the French also compare the new migrants to the resident population. On the one hand, they link the issue of unemployment to immigration and therefore view the influx of migrants as worsening the competition for jobs. On the other hand, they complain that the state provides migrants with preferential treatment, as illustrated by the following representative statement:

'Migrants receive preferential treatment – especially when it comes to housing and social benefits.'

68-year-old man, Tournehem-sur-la-Hem

In addition to the preferential treatment they are said to receive, some French respondents accuse migrants of exploiting the social security system. As was the case with German respondents, the French also link security discourse to the issue of immigration: some respondents were concerned about increasing levels of crime in certain neighbourhoods, which they view as being caused by migrants. However, as France has taken on a relatively small number of refugees, the French responses – more so than those provided by the Germans – refer to past patterns of migration and to different forms of immigration to those that have taken place in Germany. It is also important to realise that some respondents actually viewed racism as the primary problem facing France at the current time. Moreover, as was the case with the German respondents, it would be wrong to accuse the majority of French respondents of xenophobia, as they are primarily projecting expressions of their disappointment.

German respondents highlighted an issue that could be summarised as 'political praxis' as the second biggest problem facing their country; this issue was ranked third in France at the national level. It involves both criticism of the way in which politics is done today and the behaviour of the politicians themselves. Politicians are often characterised as dishonest or selfish, and as 'too distant from the people'.

'The total lack of understanding between the government and the people.'

64-year-old man, Calais

Many respondents were unhappy about the influence that they believe business and lobbyists have over politics. This was often summed up in both countries with the view that 'Business decides; not the politicians'. As the following quote makes clear, the respondents also criticised the gridlock in politics, as well as politicians' lack of problem-solving skills:

'The only thing they do about the gridlock in politics is to talk about it; this applies from a certain level to the federal government and the party. They pretend to implement a few measures, but they don't improve anything.'

39-year-old man, Gelsenkirchen-Ost

A notable section of German respondents emphasised foreign policy and the gap between rich and poor – which also endangers social relationships – as important problem areas. They often mentioned specific foreign policy conflicts, such as those with Turkey, but also particularly criticised the German government for caring too much about foreign policy and thus too little about domestic affairs. Interestingly, the French were unconcerned about the supposed preference for foreign policy issues, possibly because they have a more self-confident understanding of their country's role in the world, or because of the smaller number of migrants that the country has taken in in recent years. Finally, French respondents also rarely mentioned the European dimension, neither in a negative nor a positive sense. However, they were often mistrustful of the government at the time.

When the opinions that were commonly expressed by the respondents in Germany and France are compared, a superordinate interpretive pattern develops that can be pointedly summed up in the following manner: 'When politicians tackle problems, they focus on issues that do not concern me, and they do so in a way that is not in my interest'. On the one hand, the respondents believe that politicians are focused on the problems of migrants and those of other countries; on the other, they believe their own problems are not being taken seriously enough. Moreover, when their problems are addressed, the solutions that are proposed to them seem to be driven by economic interests and not by the goal of improving social cohesion. This leads to a feeling of political disadvantage. This feeling, which is based on a lack of recognition and the implementation of spurious solutions to the problems that people face in their everyday lives, simmers beneath the surface until it is expressed when certain events occur, such as the refusal to accept large numbers of migrants.

However, there is good news for democracy: respondents in France and Germany most commonly cited state institutions and political actors by far as most likely to solve the problems facing their countries. In France, the state and administration (such as the municipalities) are top of the list of the potential problem-solvers, followed by 'politics' (in this context, this primarily refers to political parties and individual

politicians).¹⁷ In Germany, the order is reversed, with party political actors emphasised as having the potential to solve problems before those of the state and administration. However, it is also important to realise exactly which actors the respondents were talking about. A good proportion of interviewees believed that the established parties were unable to solve their problems and instead look to 'other politicians' and 'other parties' to do so. A 52-year-old from Tournehem-sur-la-Hem believed that 'someone who lives as we do; someone who could put themselves into our position' would be able to solve the problems she faced. In addition, an 80-year-old person? from Eisenhüttenstadt argued that 'a Social Democratic party that returns to its roots might be able to do so'. These views also reflect the fact that a notable proportion of the respondents answered the question as to who could solve their problems by speaking about the political actors that they believed would not be able to do so.

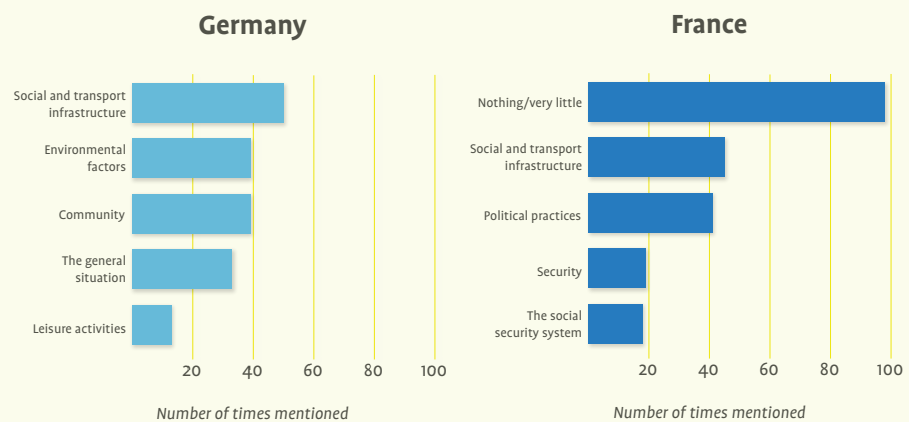
Nevertheless, many respondents viewed the politicians who are currently in power as potential problem-solvers. In contrast, neither the AfD nor the FN seems to be viewed as having any particular problem-solving skills, at least not very often. Views such as these are typical of protest voters who vote for a party not out of conviction, but as a means of rejecting another political party. The respondents were also not particularly enthusiastic about the AfD's and the FN's calls for more direct democracy. They also rarely believed that 'the people' had the capacity to solve problems. In France, the word 'revolution' was mentioned more often than in Germany, but this can easily be explained by the country's history.

People's opinions about their local area

As was the case with the situation facing their country, respondents in Germany and France tended to more strongly emphasise the negative aspects about their town or district. Once again, the French were unhappier than the Germans (Figure 2). Almost half of French respondents argued that little or nothing was going well in their local area. This view was particularly pronounced

¹⁷ Although the distinction made between state and politics is not very clear here, 'the state' refers to the state's formal institutions as well as the administration and party political actors.

FIGURE 2:
The five issues that were most commonly mentioned in reply to the question 'What is going well in your town/usual place of residence?'



in Calais: not one single respondent felt that something was going well in their town. In Germany, the interviewees were most happy with public transport and social infrastructure (such as shopping facilities), local environmental conditions (such as quiet or green spaces) and the community (the local neighbourhood).

In Germany, there were large differences between people's views depending on the area in which they live. In the countryside, tranquillity and nature seem to improve people's quality of life, whereas people in urban areas praise social infrastructure such as schools, nurseries and shopping facilities much more frequently. The same can be said of the French, as the following statement illustrates:

'Everything is either just around the corner, or you can get there quickly by bus; chemists, doctors, shops and so on.'

25-year-old man, Marseille's 14th district

social infrastructure. However, there are clear differences between the two countries when it comes to the second and third most important problems: in France, local unemployment was the second most frequently stated issue followed by local politics. In Germany, immigration comes second at the local level, followed by poor environmental conditions (such as rubbish and air pollution).

As the respondents emphasised immigration as the biggest problem facing Germany at the national level, it needs to be examined here in more detail here: crime committed by foreigners is once again a central aspect of this issue. Although the respondents focused on specific crimes committed by migrants, this issue is also partly founded on 'hearsay'. Moreover, the respondents regularly speak about their fear of crime in their local neighbourhood without referring to migrants. As such, it would be wrong to describe their views as undifferentiated or to assume that they entangle the discourses of migration and crime. Furthermore, the respondents highlighted integration when discussing the issue of immigration at the local level – an aspect that is hardly mentioned at the national level in this context. Thus, the respondents criticised the existence of language barriers and the fact that too little was being done in general to promote integration.

In general, when the French and German respondents were asked which things were not going well in their local area, they most frequently cited transport and

The ways in which this issue can affect people's lives at the local level is illustrated by the following quote:

'There is no social cohesion here because 70% of the people are foreigners. Some of them are really nice, but they can't speak German. So we can't communicate.'

64-year-old man, Duisburg-Neumühl

Although German respondents cited immigration as the most important problem facing the country – regardless of where they live – only urban respondents held the same view when it came to the problems facing their local area (Figure 3). When they were asked which things were not going well at the local level, people from rural areas, small towns and the suburbs criticised the lack of public transport and social infrastructure such as shopping facilities, medical care, schools and nurseries. The following comments summarises several issues that were repeatedly broached by the respondents:

'Bus connections are terrible; during the week there is only one bus an hour. On Saturday you can't even get out of the area after 3pm. Many elderly women would like to do something in the afternoon, but it's just not possible. The post box has been taken down; the only one that is still here is at the other end of the town, and it's not even within walking distance for many people. In winter, the roads not are cleared of snow and ice; they've been designated with the lowest possible level of importance by the Department of Transport; so they are only cleared if an ambulance can't get through.'

54-year-old woman, Gelsenkirchen-Ost

FIGURE 3:
The issues that were most commonly mentioned in reply to the question 'What is going badly in your town/ usual place of residence?' (Arranged according to spatial categories in Germany).'

Number of times mentioned

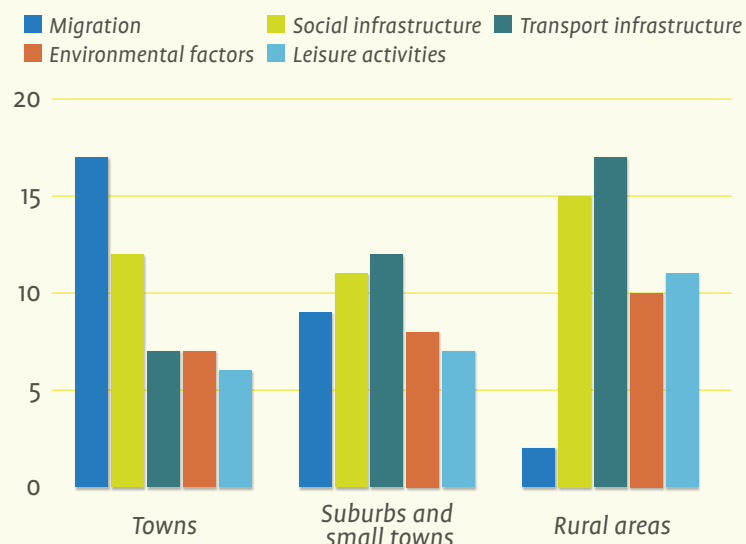
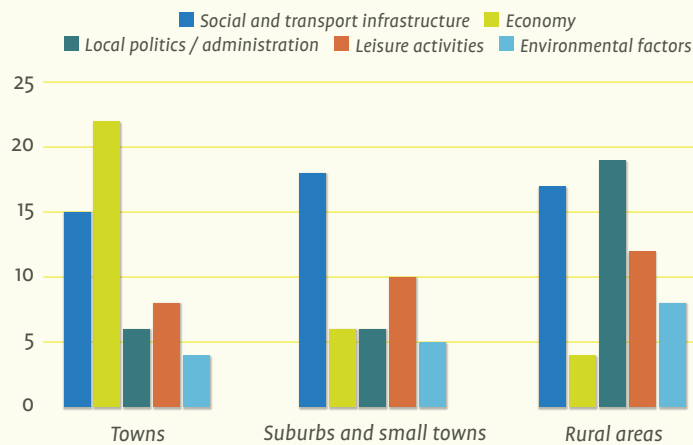


FIGURE 4:
The issues that were most commonly mentioned in reply to the question ‘What is going badly in your town/ usual place of residence?’ (Arranged according to spatial categories in France).

Number of times mentioned



In rural areas, respondents also often criticised the lack of leisure facilities; in particular, cultural events and events for young people. The views of people who live outside of cities in Germany can be summed up as follows: ‘People tend to develop a sense of “abandonment” when they witness infrastructure such as long-established butchers’ shops or post boxes disappearing from their local area’. Although certain regions are described as ‘structurally weak’ in political debates, the interviews suggest that it would be more appropriate to call these areas ‘structurally weakened’. Their current, precarious situation is not a natural phenomenon; these regions have been abandoned and left without economic, social and public infrastructure. This feeling of abandonment is also expressed by interviewees in France, where the problems caused by the economic crisis surface once again: the French are particularly unhappy about the closure of small shops in their local areas. Municipal budget cuts always have a direct impact on the everyday lives of the people living in these areas, and so they particularly criticise the lack of cultural and leisure activities, especially those available to young people.

The French respondents strongly emphasised crime (‘mafia’, including benefit fraud). As such, and this was also the case in Germany, the issues of migration and crime are entangled in some regions of France. Furthermore, the housing situation is also viewed as partly linked to the immigration crisis. Nevertheless, the arguments differ between northern and southern France:

alongside a person’s economic situation, people in the north view migration as worsening competition for affordable housing. In contrast, people in the south increasingly criticise spatial segregation and social inequalities. Furthermore, and this is also the case with Germany, the French answers differ depending on the type of area in which they live (Figure 4). People who live in rural areas tend to focus on the lack of leisure facilities and to criticise local politics: an 82-year-old woman from Tournehem-sur-la-Hem stated that ‘There are far fewer events taking place; sometimes I wonder whether we even have a mayor.’ Just as in Germany, rural French respondents criticised the lack of transport and social infrastructure, as illustrated by the following quote:

‘We have to pay high taxes for nothing. There are no shops, no chemists; we’ve got a doctor, but he’s leaving.’

29-year-old man, Arles-Mas Thibert

People's opinions about everyday life

In the light of the results so far, it may seem contradictory that, when the French and German respondents were asked about the problems that they faced in their everyday life, a slight majority answered that 'they don't have any problems'. On the one hand, some respondents may have been reluctant to talk to a foreign interviewer about everyday life. On the other hand, many of the respondents were indeed happy to speak about very personal issues, such as financial difficulties or problems coping with stress as well as competitive pressure in the workplace. As such, it is also possible that the issues that some respondents viewed as the greatest challenges facing their country (immigration and political practices) have very little impact on their daily lives.

When it came to everyday problems, the French respondents mentioned financial difficulties associated with rent, pensions and taxes, followed by issues linked to work – primarily unemployment. The following statement illustrates the problems that the French face in their everyday life:

'It's my social situation – the closure of the factory, the sale of my house, moving to a run-down area. My neighbours haven't got any money; they are all on welfare.'

45-year-old man, Calais

Work was the biggest issue mentioned by German respondents followed by local transport and social infrastructure. Comparing the German and French responses once again highlights the worse situation on the French labour market: whereas French respondents primarily pointed to unemployment as their largest problem, Germans focused on the conditions they faced in the workplace. This includes a high level of

stress, insecurity caused by temporary work, the poor compatibility of family and working life, and – the most frequently cited problem – that wages are not high enough to cover the costs of living.

With regard to transport and social infrastructure, topics such as public transport connections and ticket prices as well as the lack of childcare and health services make everyday life more difficult for German respondents. People living in eastern and western Germany mentioned the same five problems and even ranked them in the same order. There are, however, subtle differences between these issues: whereas people living in western Germany tended to criticise working conditions much more strongly (and low salaries in particular), more often than not, the respondents in eastern Germany focused on poor medical care. Nevertheless, a comparison between urban and rural areas shows that the differences within these regions are somewhat greater than those between eastern and western Germany (Figure 5). The urban population tended to view working conditions (wages and stress) as their most important everyday problem. In rural areas, transport infrastructure (public transport and dilapidated roads), were said to be the most important problems that affected people's everyday life.

Respondents in suburban areas and small towns were more concerned about the loss of social infrastructure than those in other areas. As the following quote makes clear, the closure of local businesses is not just a rural phenomenon, it also happens in small towns with around 30,000 inhabitants:

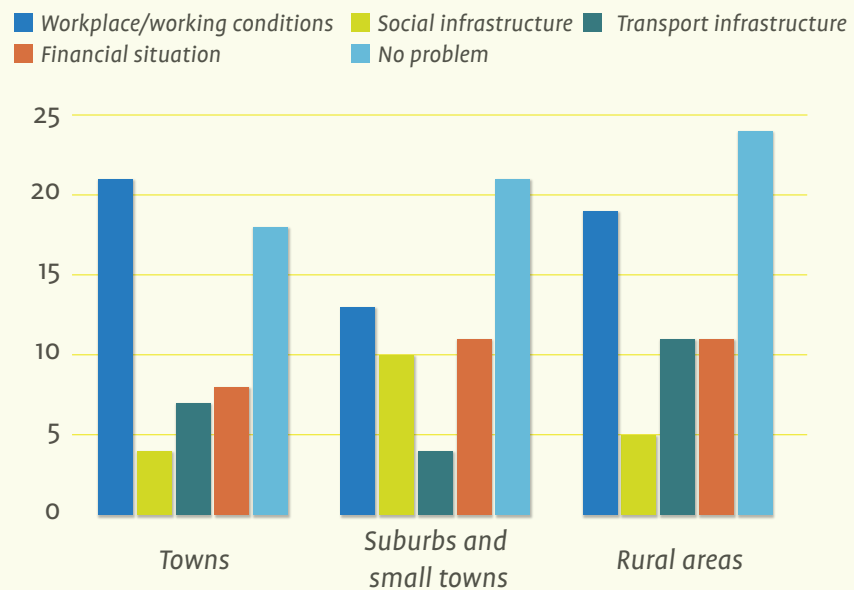
'Now there are only large central shopping centres, and these are far away. There are only three shops in the area, and this creates an impossible situation for the elderly. It makes me scared to get old.'

74-year-old man, Eisenhüttenstadt

FIGURE 5:

The issues that were most commonly mentioned in reply to the question 'What is the biggest problem that you have in your everyday life?' (Arranged according to spatial categories in Germany).

Number of times mentioned



In France too, responses vary by region: in southern France, social problems such as security, rudeness and traffic problems crop up more often than in the north of the country (Figure 6).

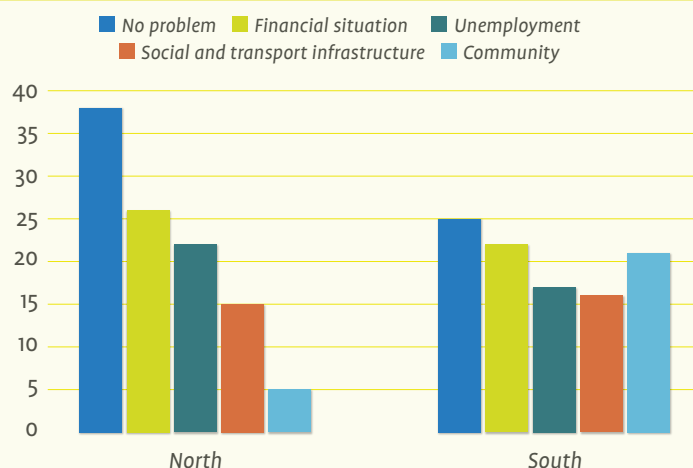
In summary, the greatest problems the respondents living in the strongholds of the FN and the AfD face in their everyday lives are of an economic nature or are related to gaps in local services. However, there is an interesting difference in the way in which these problems are described at the social level (country/place of residence) and the personal level (everyday life): although the issue of immigration is viewed as a major (if not the biggest) problem that both countries face at the national level and a key burden on people's local area, migrants are not perceived as causing problems

in people's everyday lives. Once again, this suggests a particular way of thinking: people view the lack of economic and social infrastructure as making their everyday lives more difficult. This includes problems such as wages that have stagnated for years no longer covering the costs of living, and the fact that local buses are only available sporadically. The state could at least partially solve these problems through increased investment and by implementing legal measures. However, because people's lives remain difficult and many believe that the state is making the lives of migrants 'easier', instead of pointing to the (mostly) socio-political causes of their everyday problems, these people shift the blame onto a social group that they believe receives preferential treatment.

FIGURE 6:

The issues that were most commonly mentioned in reply to the question 'What is the biggest problem that you have in your everyday life?' (Northern and southern France).

Number of times mentioned



The interviewees were also asked who they thought could best solve their everyday problems. Although the French and Germans raised socio-political rather than private issues, they have different views about who could solve their problems: the French tend to regard themselves and the people in their own social settings as in the best position to solve their everyday problems. People in France, it seems, place less trust in politics or the state when it comes to finding solutions to the country's problems. The situation is different in Germany, where significantly more respondents believe that politics and the state are better able to solve their everyday problems than they or their social environment could. No differences were identified between the views of people living in eastern or western Germany. Statements such as 'Politicians need to implement policies that provide normal people with more money in their pockets at the end of the month' by a 55-year-old woman from Datteln are representative of many such responses. In Germany and southern France, the respondents also regularly pointed to local politics as having the capacity to solve problems. In contrast, it was very rare for either the AfD or the FN to be viewed as being in a position to solve people's problems.

People's opinions about the future

Before they were asked to speak about the future, the interviewees were invited to take part in a short thought experiment. They were asked to pretend that they wanted to become a politician, before describing what their most important promises to voters would be. They were also told that they could only make promises that they could actually fulfil. Once again, a comparison of German and French responses confirms the now well-established pattern: the French prioritised economic policy and job creation, followed by improvements to social infrastructure, and security. The Germans concentrated primarily on social policy measures aimed at closing the gaps in social inequalities. Some interviewees even suggested implementing classic policies of redistribution, with many highly concerned about the need for a stronger social security system:

'Make sure that the welfare state treats everyone fairly. This means work without exploitation, but also calling on people to take responsibility for their own lives. It won't work otherwise. But the welfare state needs to act as a safety net for anyone who needs it'

40-year-old man, Gelsenkirchen-Ost

It is striking that respondents in Germany viewed migration as the biggest problem facing the country, yet if they were in the position to implement political change, they would primarily focus on socio-political issues. In fact, German interviewees regularly mentioned policies such as a 'minimum pension', a 'higher minimum wage', an 'unconditional basic income' and 'providing support to single parents' in their manifestos. Their understanding of social justice could be summarised as 'Nobody should be allowed to fall through the net'.

The second most frequent 'election promise' made by German respondents was a change to political practices. The issues mentioned above with regard to the criticism of current politics led them to promise 'to do things differently'. They would act independently of lobbyists, work closely with the people, and emphasised honesty. One promise that was made again and again is summed up by the words of a 50-year-old man from Gelsenkirchen-Ost: 'Remain true to yourself. Focus on transparency and present the arguments. Don't use any catch phrases in political discourse at all'. At the same time, the fact that many people did not want to make any electoral promises at all also reflects the calls for a different type of politics. It is important to realise that it was not that these respondents could not think of any ideas that stopped them from making any promises; it was because they feared that political reality would prevent them from keeping their promises. Therefore, they argued, it made more sense 'to act

step-by-step, without a visions, and without false promises,' as a 79-year-old from Fürstenwalde put it. Immigration policy also played a key role in the electoral promises, but it came in fourth place. Around the same proportion of people called for stronger integration as those who demanded limits to immigration.

However, it is clear that a feeling of being disadvantaged when it comes to refugees was translated into calls for measures that echoed a 'Germany first!' policy. The opinion of a 50-year-old woman from Duisburg-Neumühl is illustrative of this way of thinking: 'Do more for hard-working Germans, before doing things for migrants'. Interestingly, similar demands for a 'France first!' policy are hardly reflected in the French responses, despite Front National making clear statements in this respect. Instead, the French tend to call for assistance to be provided to disadvantaged groups, regardless of their origin:

'Improve social diversity. There is less and less of a social mix, particularly in schools where all the children are similar.'

25 year-old man, Marseille's 14th district

This study was particularly aimed at finding out how people describe their own concerns and hopes for the future. First and foremost, it is clear that people had a stronger need to talk about the negative aspects of their lives than what was going well. Their comments about their concerns for the future – measured in terms of the number of minutes they spoke about these issues during the interviews – were about one third longer than the time they spent speaking about their hopes. This applies equally to France and Germany. Once again, the answers provided by the French were even more pessimistic than those of the Germans. Almost half of the French respondents stated they had little or no hope for the future. This negative view is distributed fairly equally between urban and rural areas. The second and third most common areas

in which the French were hopeful were 'personal relations' (especially with their family), and 'society', with young people particularly providing them with hope for the future. Personal aspects that affect a person's attitudes, such as optimism and self-confidence, ranked fifth. In contrast, most Germans placed these issues high on the list of things that gave them hope. On the one hand, optimism leads to hope due to the belief in oneself ('tackling problems yourself/not waiting for others') but also in terms of a person's working conditions ('that I'll continue to climb up the job ladder'). In addition, respondents in AfD strongholds regularly mentioned that they hoped for political change. Many of these people also placed high hopes on the Bundestag election, which was imminent at the time the interviews were undertaken, as the following statement illustrates:

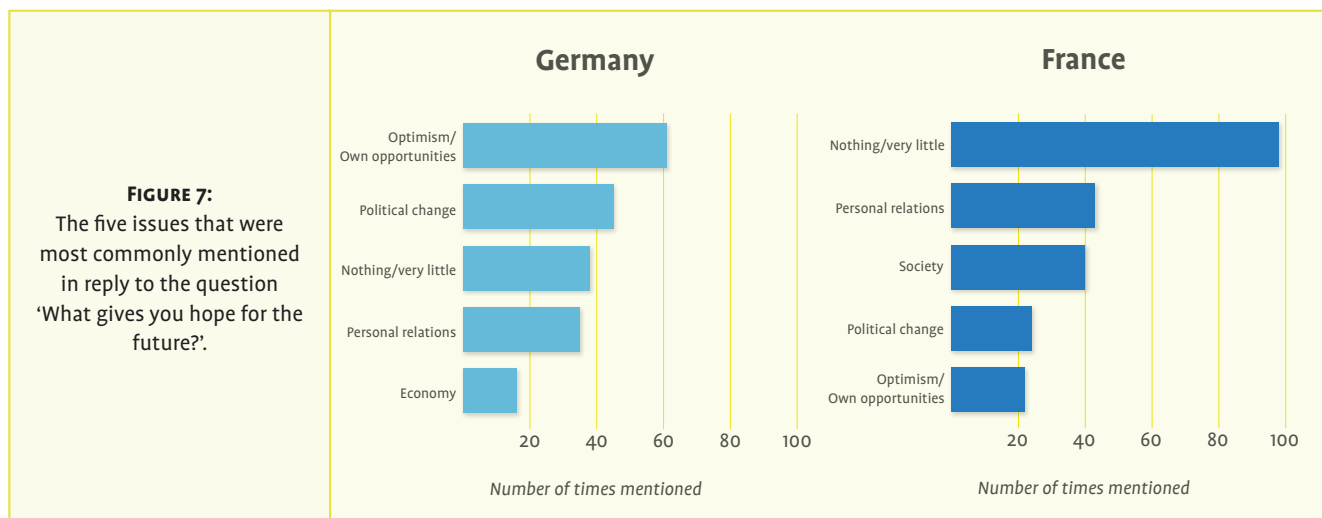
'The fact that the elections are coming makes me a bit hopeful, not much, but a bit. There's no perfect party, but I'm already a bit hopeful.'

28-year-old man, Duisburg-Neumühl

The fact that the interviewees placed their hopes on political change and opportunities for participation can be understood as a sign of a good understanding of democracy. However, a small section tended to hope that change would come 'from below' rather than from mainstream political actors:

'I hope that some people will wake up and shake things up politically. I hope people will become more involved.'

72-year-old man, Berlin Marzahn-Hellersdorf



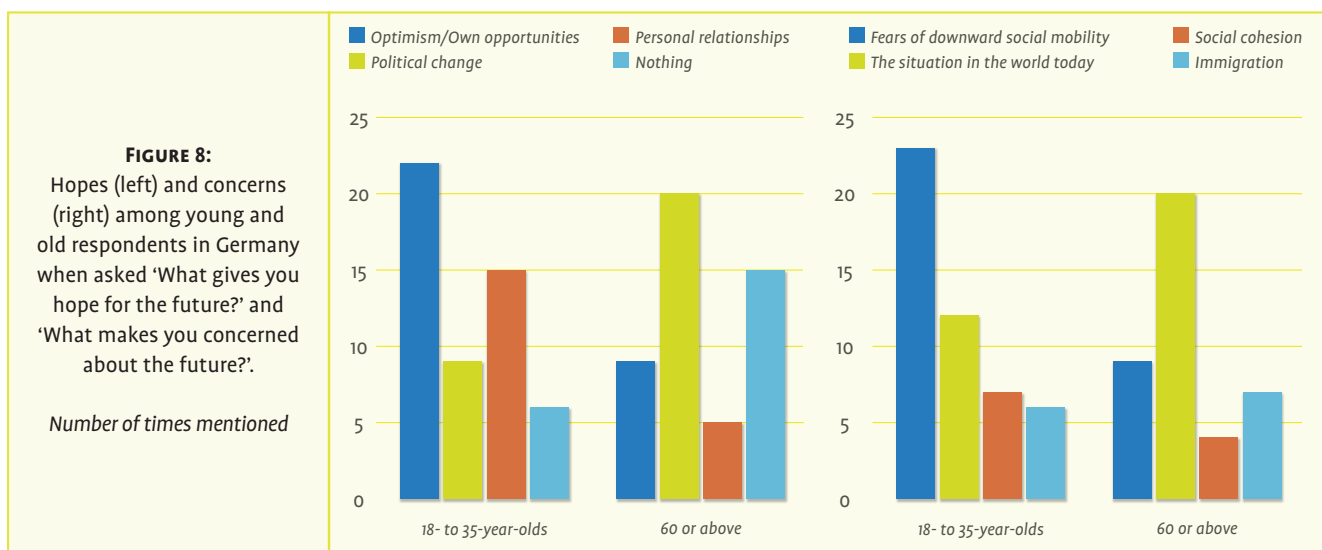
The third issue that German respondents raised most often was the pessimistic view that there was little or no hope for the future. This was followed by personal relationships, above all their family, and society. As in France, Germans regularly placed their hopes on young people. It is interesting to see that the 'bearers of hope' are very much alike in the various regions and in eastern and western Germany. The only small difference is that respondents in eastern Germany placed more hope on their personal relationships than people did in western Germany.

'It's mostly personal things that give me hope. The things that you have to work for yourself. I don't expect much from politics.'

22-year-old woman, Gelsenkirchen-Ost

Nevertheless, very interesting differences arise when different age groups are compared (Figure 8). These differences are most noticeable between younger respondents (18- to 35 year-olds) and respondents aged 60 or over. The younger respondents tended to set high hopes on themselves and expect very little positive change from politics. This attitude is exemplified by the following statement:

The situation is very different among older respondents: most of them placed their hopes on politicians, although one significant section of this age group also had no hope at all and another placed their hope on society, above all on young people.



The following response is exemplary of this latter view among the older generation:

‘Young people with sensible views, who also want to get on in life, and don’t just want to assert their own interests.’

74-year-old woman, Marzahn in Berlin

‘The lack of jobs for young people; my son hanging around on the streets... crime.’

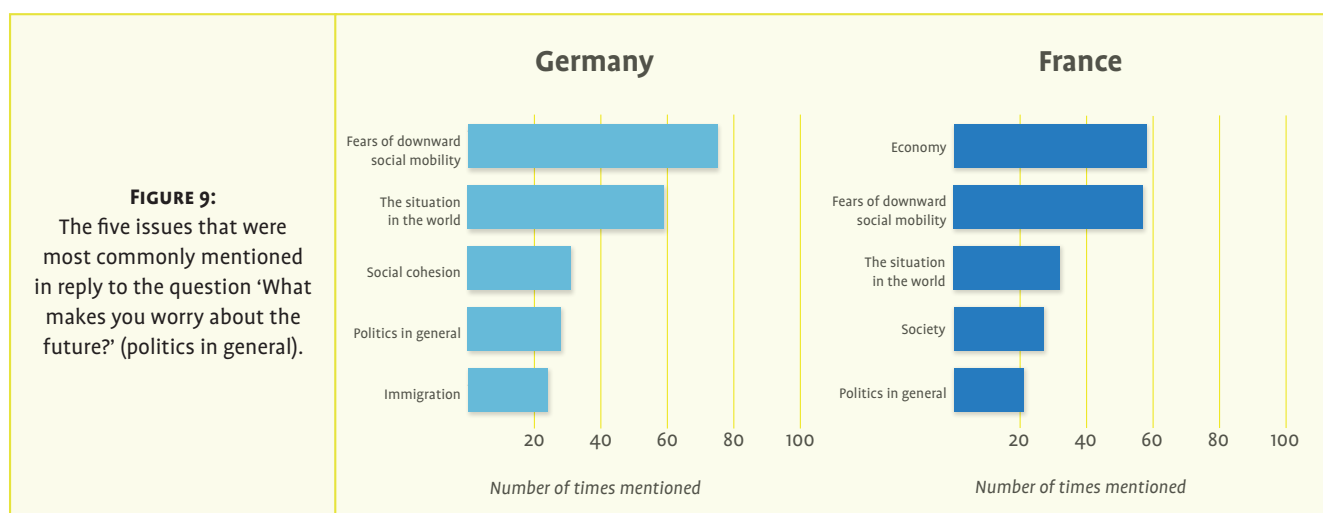
58-year-old woman, Arles-Mas-Thibert

For the Germans, their worries tend to stem from fears about their children’s future and downward social mobility. The latter is illustrated by the following quote:

‘I worry about poverty in old age. I go to work every day and I know I won’t be able to pay my rent and I’ll have to go on benefits, even though I’ve worked really hard.’

39-year-old woman, Duisburg-Neumühl

When it comes to people’s concerns (Figure 9), a Franco-German comparison reflects the two countries’ different economic conditions. The French, more than anything else, are worried about their country’s economic situation. This is followed by worries about their future and that of the children as well as the current state of the world (especially a potential war with North Korea). The following statement illustrates several of the more common concerns:



The second most common concern among German respondents is the current state of the world. Germans emphasise Turkey, Donald Trump and North Korea as the main factors linked to uncertainty and crisis. Many of the respondents are specifically worried that a new war could break out. A 77-year-old man from Fürstenwalde summarised the point: 'Trump, Erdogan and North Korea. I'm worried that there could be a war soon'. Once again, this demonstrates an important link: although the respondents criticise the state for being more concerned with other countries than its own citizens, this is because they are unhappy about the priority being set on foreign policy issues, not because they lack an understanding of world affairs.

Social cohesion is the third most common concern, with German respondents worried about the pension system and the gap between the rich and poor. It is interesting to note that, when it comes to politics in general (the fourth most common concern), in the AfD's strongholds concerns are repeatedly expressed about the failure of politics to change its course, and about the shift to the right. Ultimately, however, a notable proportion of the respondents is also concerned about immigration. Again, they focus on the number of refugees and the associated costs, as the following quote illustrates:

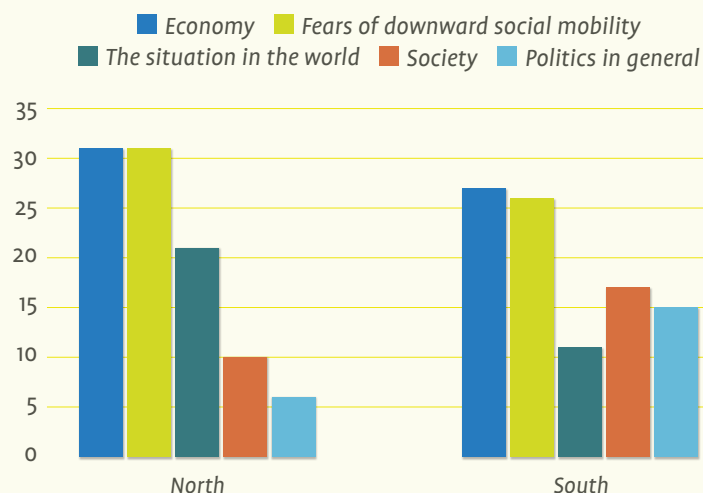
'I'm worried about refugee policy. More and more refugees are going to come. Humanitarian assistance is important; war refugees should always be allowed to stay. But it's different when it comes to other countries. Immigration from countries such as Romania will always be immigration to the social security system. And social security benefits have to be funded – but that's just not possible. And integration doesn't work either: Lebanese gangs are in charge in [Berlin in the districts of] Neukölln and Wedding.'

64-year-old man, Marzahn in Berlin

FIGURE 10:

The five issues that were most commonly mentioned in reply to the question 'What makes you worry about the future?' (northern and southern France).

Number of times mentioned



A comparison of the different age groups demonstrates that old-age poverty is mentioned most often by younger respondents as an issue that causes them concern, in particular due to its links to downward social mobility. At the same time, however, younger Germans also believe that their children will be worse off than they are, or doubt that they will ever be able to afford children at all. Overall, the respondents ranked the issues that caused them concern for the future differently according to age: whereas 18- to 35-year-olds are more worried that they may experience downward social mobility due to the current state of the world and society (once again it is interesting that the pension system is emphasised here); respondents aged 60 or above are more concerned about the situation in the world, and then about downward social mobility and immigration.

In contrast, only minor differences exist between the regions in terms of age. However, there are differences between eastern and western Germans. Respondents from eastern Germany most often cited the situation in the world and the conflict between the US and North Korea as their biggest concerns, whereas western Germans were most worried about losing their social and economic position and only then about the state of the world. In France, responses also varied according to region: in the north, the French were predominantly concerned about the immigration crisis, financial hardship and a worsening local environment; in the south, respondents were more worried about crime, ethnic-social segregation and economic decline (Figure 10).

5. Summary of the results

The following section summarises the most prominent ways of thinking that were identified from the interviews before outlining the areas in which action needs to be taken to solve the problems that the interviewees face in their everyday life. At this point, it is important to note that the results focus on the most important topics and ways of thinking that were identified from the interviews. As such, if topics such as educational policy, a culture of remembrance or climate change do not appear among the top-ranked issues, this does not necessarily mean that they were not addressed. It simply means that they were not among the most frequently discussed topics.

Three central ways of thinking that shape people's perception of their social and individual conditions were identified from the 500 interviews undertaken in socio-economically disadvantaged regions in France and Germany.

First, the criticism and refusal to accept a large number of migrants was founded on a logic of comparative devaluation: people felt devalued because they believed that they were being denied support from the state, whereas refugees were viewed as receiving help. This situation caused the people in the strongholds of the AfD and the FN to devalue migrants. Migrants were seen as competitors for social security benefits (and, in France, for jobs) and this led them to be construed as a problem. People in these regions feel disadvantaged, and assume that fewer migrants would lead to better services for the resident population.

Second, the people in these areas believe that very few improvements are being made to many of the situations that they face because politics refuses to acknowledge their problems. The disquiet about the lack of political recognition of people's everyday problems, such as the fact that wages no longer cover the costs of living, is intensified in Germany by the additional view that too much priority is being placed on foreign policy issues. The lack of character shown by politicians and the strong influence of economic interests is said to engender a form of politics that no longer serves the

interests of the people. This results in demands for a new form of politics and for political change; the view that politics focuses on the problems of ‘others’, therefore, results in a nationalist line, albeit one which could not be described in völkisch terms.

Third, people from rural, but also from small and sub-urban areas, believe that social and transport infrastructure has fallen apart in their areas. When people see that their local area is being structurally weakened, whether this occurs through the removal of a post box or the closure of bus lines, they tend to feel devalued. These ways of thinking result in very widespread concerns about the future because people in these areas expect to face downward social mobility – above all through job losses and poverty in old age – but also believe that their children’s generation will be worse off than they are. This is reflected in people’s hope for political change.

6. The areas in which action needs to be taken

The following section outlines the areas in which action needs to be taken if the challenges faced by people in structurally weakened regions are to be addressed. It sets out five complementary factors, each of which provides food for thought.¹⁸

6.1 SOLIDARITY AMONG THE RESIDENT POPULATION IS ESSENTIAL IF SOLIDARITY IS TO BE EXPRESSED WITH FOREIGNERS

When Angela Merkel claimed, ‘We can do it,’ many of the people interviewed may have thought, ‘I won’t be able to.’ People in these regions believe that they are likely to experience downward social mobility. They notice that it is not easy to make ends meet today and expect that it will become even more difficult in the future. The individual descriptions of in-work poverty or fears about losing their jobs certainly correspond to findings at the macro level: in early 2017, the DIW calculated that real incomes have risen by eight per cent or more since 1991 for middle and high income groups, but that ‘the lowest-income groups have had to accept income losses in real terms’.¹⁹ Furthermore, an internal paper drawn up by the Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs and Energy in the summer of 2017 stated that ‘Germany (still) has a wage problem’.²⁰ Consequently, the wages paid to the poorest 40% of the population have less purchasing power today than they did twenty years ago. In addition, the numbers of people in part-time employment and ‘mini-jobs’, which are associated with increased risk of poverty, are increasing

¹⁸ The proposals are based on a ‘theoretical generalisation’ common to qualitative approaches. Statistical generalizability cannot be claimed for a non-representative sample of 500 interviews.

¹⁹ The article on developments in incomes in real terms was published in DIW Wochenbericht 4/2017.

²⁰ The Süddeutsche Zeitung reported about the paper drawn up by the Federal Ministry of Economics and Energy on 22 September 2017. See: www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/ungleiche-loehne-in-deutschland-deutschland-has-a-wage-problem-1.3634993.

sharply, and collective bargaining is declining. Poverty in old-age is a realistic possibility for people in this situation. The French continue to be most vehemently concerned about the consequences of the economic crisis, so they worry less about working conditions, and more about unemployment, irrespective of whether they currently have a job. As other studies have shown, right-wing populist voters tend to share a fear of downward social mobility and this was clearly noticeable among the participants in this survey. This fear also seems to have been the driving force behind the refusal to accept so many (but not necessarily all!) migrants. Despite the emergence of group-focused misanthropy, which, according to the ‘centre studies’ undertaken by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, reaches deep into the core of society, the fear of downward social mobility may have been the greatest obstacle to accepting large numbers of new arrivals to Germany.²¹ A society that is deeply divided rather than balanced may lack the capacity to show the degree of humanity that was expected of it and imposed ‘from above’ in autumn 2015. Moreover, the decision-makers who were calling for solidarity with foreigners were also the ones who had weakened solidarity between the resident populations. Consequently, the balancing act that was involved was doomed to failure. Ultimately, the interviews show that people who are concerned about their own and their families’ future only have limited possibilities to help other people. As such, a society that is open to the outside world and which is called on to demonstrate solidarity with others needs to be based on strong internal relations and express just as much solidarity with its own population.

6.2 INFRASTRUCTURE AS A MEANS OF PROMOTING EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Article 72, Section 2 of the German constitution is often quoted in the debate about ‘abandoned regions’ due to its aims to establish ‘equivalent living conditions’ throughout Germany. In many ways, Article 72 is toyed with in political debates, due to the lack of a definition of what ‘equivalent living conditions’ actually means. Even in his capacity as Brandenburg’s minister

president, Matthias Platzeck argued that ‘equivalent’ need not mean ‘the same’.²² When speaking in general, this is probably correct, as different lifestyles and living areas per se give rise to unequal living conditions. However, a situation in which a shortage of essential goods and services not only leads to unequal living conditions but also to unequal opportunities in life goes against socio-political goals. Digitisation is the most recent example. If entrepreneurs in rural areas are faced with a lack of a proper broadband access they may have far fewer business opportunities than similarly positioned entrepreneurs from areas with better networks. Broadband access is only just being understood as a public sector service.²³ However, it is precisely this form of public infrastructure, as well as transport, shopping and childcare, which has been cut or has disappeared completely from the areas in which the interviewees live. It is not just individual opportunities in life, but also the possibilities to participate in society, the structure of people’s day-to-day life and quality of life that are strongly coupled with the existence of public services. Nevertheless, it is not enough for public services merely to be available, it is crucial that the costs, such as the price of a bus ticket, are also affordable. Public services, therefore, have the power to integrate people into society: if public services crumble or become a luxury, society begins to fall apart. The descriptions from Gelsenkirchen-Ost, where a post box was no longer reachable by foot or where no bus services are available on Saturdays after 3pm, show that even in suburban areas a minimum level of public services is no longer being provided. At the beginning of 2018, the coalition agreement between the CDU/CSU (Christian democratic Union parties) and the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) stipulated that an Equivalent Living Conditions Committee be established to develop proposals to combat structural weakness. In view of the results of this study, it seems essential that the commission develop a holistic approach to ensure that a minimum level of public services is provided in all regions, whether through mobile medical services or a minimum level of public transport. In France, too,

²¹ An overview of the ‘Centre studies’ conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung between 2006 and 2016 can be found here: www.fes.de/forum-berlin/gegen-rechtsextremismus/publikationen/studiengutachten.

²² Press release by the Brandenburg State Chancellery dated 31 May 2004: *Wie weiter mit dem Aufbau Ost? Platzeck legt konkrete Vorschläge vor.*

²³ Press release by Deutschen Städte- und Gemeindebunds dated 24 June 2017: *Digitalisierung der Daseinsvorsorge braucht eine nationale Strategie.*

there have been numerous, often ineffective, initiatives aimed at solving the problems of peripheral areas and neighbourhoods. Thus, the current government must make this issue a priority.

6.3 STRENGTHENING STRUCTURES THROUGH THE PRESENCE OF POLITICAL PARTIES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Political parties can tackle ‘structural weakening’ at the local level – which has been vividly described by the interviewees – by structurally strengthening their presence. Political parties are often only represented by an office at the local level from which they send a representative to the Bundestag or (less often) to the local parliament. The most important effect that more offices would have is that they would reduce the distance between ‘the represented’ and ‘the representatives’. As a rule, politicians with busy diaries only visit such areas when invited – invitations are often sent out by the party’s local or district association. As such, areas without a local association will probably never receive a visit by a politician. Personal contact, as election campaign research shows, is an effective way of strengthening trust in parties and politicians. This involves much more than just communication. In the past, the major parties used to ‘provide a use’ at the local level by establishing local structures – in sports clubs, trades unions and as part of the church. The civil society bond that developed between citizens and political parties has been weakened in many regions, if not completely torn apart. Classified as far-right and ultranationalist, the NPD (National Democratic Party of Germany) has also been able to exploit these political vacuums by providing advice to people on unemployment benefits and support to youth centres in the peripheries of Brandenburg and Saxony. This helped it portray itself as a ‘party that acts and cares’ in areas where other parties and institutions did not seem to act or care at all.²⁴ In a sense, the feelings of ‘political abandonment’ caused by other parties that have withdrawn from or never even been present in these areas provides new populist actors with their greatest opportunity to gain a sustainable footing. If other political

parties remain weak at the local level, populists can fill the vacuum and remain unchallenged.

The major parties must return to these areas, especially by opening offices in places where they lost a lot of ground in the recent Bundestag election. This is the only way in which they will be able to recover – what is literally – political terrain. However, modern major parties should not only ‘care and act’, in other words, solve specific problems at the local level, but also bring together ‘networkers’ and, for example, people involved in the self-organised village shops or citizens’ buses mentioned above. Moreover, targeted campaigns need to be set up with the aim of reaching these people and informing them about the projects run by the state and its institutions, especially at the local level. This would help ensure that initiatives such as ‘Generation contracts’ launched in France in 2013 could have real benefits. Digital communication channels should also play a role here.

6.4 MAKE STRUCTURAL CHANGE COMPATIBLE WITH SOCIETY

What is summarised in many studies about the attitudes of right-wing populist voters as disaffection with the state of democracy, crops up in this survey as disquiet about political practices. On the one hand, this disquiet was expressed in the impression that politics is controlled by lobbying. This could be countered with more transparency about the influence of lobbyist associations on legislative processes. There are already specific suggestions for this such as the ‘legislative footprint’, which is to record the interest-lead influences on the development of a law in the interests of transparency.²⁵ On the other hand, disaffection – and there is no specific countermeasure for this – is also based on the impression that politics is simply ignoring the tangible problems that people face in their everyday lives. Politicians who take clichéd assurances, problems or concerns seriously will hardly help to attenuate this fundamental disappointment. However, such assertions still betray the fact that politicians themselves admit that they overlooked certain issues

²⁴ See, ‘Die braune Seite der Zivilgesellschaft: rechtsextreme Sozialraumstrategien’ by Stephan Bundschuh in *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 18–19/2012. The article is certainly worth reading.

²⁵ The idea of a legislative footprint was first discussed by Transparency International and is described in detail here: www.transparency.de/themen/politik/?L=0/.

in the past. It seems that issues are not addressed if it seems impossible to solve them within a specific legislative period, particularly, if they cannot be resolved within the framework of the nation state. This perhaps includes the rapidly disappearing need for certain traditional forms of employment due to digitisation and automation. Occupations are being ‘digitalised away’ at an increasing pace – cashiers are being replaced by self-service check-outs in supermarkets or still only paid the minimum wage. Politics should not hold up technological and societal advancement, but if it conceals the fact that not everyone benefits from it, then it fails in its responsibility to organise social change in a manner that is compatible with current society. The current challenges cannot be overcome from one day to the next and not by one capital city alone – politics needs this much honesty. However, an honest and responsible political system would at least take the trouble to ensure that the unavoidable side effects of the processes of change are attenuated. Politics cannot actually solve each and every citizen’s individual problems, but it has to cushion the blow of problems resulting from the major global transformations for large swathes of society in order to prevent people from heading on a tough collision course to a new reality. Faced with the problems of our time, which will be hard to resolve, politics first has to find its voice again and then use its ability to act to protect its citizens.

6.5 CONFIDENCE AND ASSERTIVENESS IN THE FACE OF RIGHT-WING POPULIST NARRATIVES

After the Bundestag election, it was said that many people had voted for the right-wing populists for ‘cultural reasons’. They were assumed to have done so out of fear of being overrun by foreigners or Islamisation. Horst Seehofer, the chairman of the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU), quickly concluded that the way out of his party’s electoral defeat was enshrined in the motto ‘Germany must stay like Germany; and Bayern must stay like Bayern’.²⁶ Concern about the loss of culture only played a minor role in the interviews undertaken for this study. If at all, the cultural dimension appears to be triggered by the socio-economic

dimension. In other words, people cling to a cultural constant out of a fear of downward social mobility. Therefore, it would be wrong to describe the majority of the interviewees as holding strong views based on identity politics. A different result would have been rather surprising, because in western Germany, and in districts such as Marzahn-Hellersdorf in Berlin, foreign and German families have lived together in the same buildings for decades. They have even shared the same workplaces since guest workers were recruited in the 1950s. For these Germans, ‘multiculturalism’ and in many ways coexistence with Muslims constitutes an integral part of their daily life. Although it is not possible to generalise from the findings of this study, before politicians hastily call out the beginning of a new identity-political epoch, they should ask themselves who it is that regards society as culturally under threat. Anyone who primarily discusses the topic of immigration in its cultural dimension locates it in a discursive field that has largely been constituted and ordered by populists, and, at best, only reflects part of the challenges posed by immigration. The central problem posed by the integration of migrants into the social fabric, the labour market, the educational system, the language community, and the rule of law, in the stricter sense, are simply not covered by the cultural focus on identity, origin and nation.

The results of the interviews demonstrate that it is important to ask an even more general question: which populist narratives resonate with society and, therefore, need to be tackled by the major political parties? Interestingly, a number of theses have been brought into play by populist actors in recent years that other parties have reacted to, if not adopted. However, these issues were hardly mentioned by the respondents. They include the supposed excessive and overpowering bureaucracy of the EU, sweeping criticism of the media, the threat of Islamisation and political correctness as the fundamental evil behind numerous social developments. These narratives and understandings of the problems facing our time were hardly ever mentioned during the interviews. Even conspiracy theories were rarely spoken about, despite the fact that they are becoming increasingly common in right-wing populist circles. On the contrary, when it came to Europe, for

²⁶ Seehofer stated this during his statement on the election evening of the 2017 Bundestag election: www.csu.de/aktuell/meldungen/september-2017/es-gibt-nichts-schoenzureden/.

example, some respondents expressed quite a strong counter-position with Europe being viewed primarily as part of the solution, not the problem. What does this mean for other actors involved in political discourse? In short, it is important to analyse which positions and interpretive patterns populists are caught up in before panicking and adopting them as part of the public debate.

Moreover, it is essential to develop effective counter-narratives. The French president, Emmanuel Macron, often speaks of a ‘Europe, qui protège’, a Europe that protects its citizens – not only in the military sense, but also against the negative social effects of globalisation. This presents a positive narrative of Europe in which the continent acts as a bandage for the Achilles heel of the national welfare states. There is no need for ardent pro-Europeanism for people to be receptive to narratives such as these; a pinch of pragmatism may be all that is needed.

7. Conclusion

Over the last few years, politicians have repeatedly stated ‘We have to take the concerns of the people seriously’. In many cases, this has been a reaction to the growing popularity of right-wing populist parties. However, when making this point, politicians usually fail to include a more precise description of what the people’s concerns are and what they are based on. The 500 interviews that were carried out with people from socially and economically disadvantaged regions in France and Germany reveal three interpretive patterns that govern their perception and assessment of their social and personal circumstances: first, a logic of comparative devaluation with regard to the intake of migrants; second, a denial of the problem on the part of politics with regard to the tangible challenges facing people’s everyday lives; and third, a sense that social and transport infrastructure outside of urban areas has been abandoned. However, a significant discrepancy was identified between what the people identified as the ‘biggest problems’ facing the country

(immigration and the economy) and the difficulties they face in their everyday life (precarious working conditions, worries about money and declining social infrastructure). In this sense, the problems identified at the national level are similar to those discussed in the media and by politicians. However, this is not necessarily the case with people’s everyday problems. Rather, the ‘citizens’ agenda’ is inadequately reflected in the ‘media’s agenda’, and this could intensify the feeling of disadvantage. The devaluation of others, therefore, can be understood as a consequence of an experience of devaluation caused by a lack of recognition. Moreover, the ‘new nationalism’ à la ‘Germany first!’ is essentially based on the feeling that politics is setting the wrong priorities. The fact that foreign and European political initiatives serve the fulfilment of domestic political interests is often poorly communicated. Indeed, an impression prevails that if the government concerns itself with the problems of the outside world, the needs of its own citizens fall to the wayside. Most people’s concerns relate to the tangible challenges that they face in everyday life, such as the increasing economic pressure on people on low-incomes, and gaps in public services. Moreover, many interviewees believe that politics has withdrawn from certain social and geographical areas. Populist forces, therefore, are elbowing their way into areas that have been ‘political abandoned’. Other parties should fight back, and win the trust of the people in these areas once more by providing a local presence, recognition and by dealing with the problems that these people face.

The author



Johannes Hillje is a Policy Fellow at Das Progressive Zentrum. He works freelance providing advice on politics and communications for institutions, parties, politicians, companies and NGOs. During the 2014 European elections, he was an election campaign manager for the European Green Party. Prior to that, he worked in communications at the UN in New York, and as part of the editorial team for ZDF's *heute.de*. In 2017, he published a book entitled *Propaganda 4.0 – Wie rechte Populisten Politik machen*, which was published by Dietz Verlag. Hillje has a master's degree in politics and communication from the London School of Economics and in political science and journalism from the University of Mainz.

The project

Das Progressive Zentrum and its French partner Liegey Muller Pons conducted 500 door-to-door interviews in structurally weaker regions of Germany and France that are also characterised by a high proportion of right-wing populist voters. In line with 'cultural intelligence', the study is aimed at strengthening mutual understanding between Germany and France through social narratives as part of a pilot project. The interviews were conducted with people who are often spoken about but whose voice is rarely heard in public debates. They took place in three regions in eastern and western Germany and a further three in northern and southern France. The respondents were asked general questions about their situation, their living and social environment and their country. This included questions such as 'What is going well/badly in the area in which you live?' and 'What would you change if you went into politics?'. This open approach enabled a discourse analysis to be undertaken of the information gathered during the interviews with the aim of identifying the ways in which people genuinely think about their own lives and their country. The results contribute to the debate about the response to the shift to the right and offer a qualitative supplement to the representative studies that have been published elsewhere in this field.

Philipp Sälhoff, Head of International Relations at Das Progressive Zentrum, conceived and managed the project; he also supervised operations together with Liegey Muller Pons, the campaign technology company.

Please do not hesitate to contact Paulina Fröhlich for any further information, questions and queries: paulina.froehlich@progressives-zentrum.org.

Acknowledgements

As part of the preparation of the study, scientific experts such as Professor Wolfgang Schroeder, Professor Bernhard Weißels and Professor Sabine Ruß-Sattar from Das Progressive Zentrum's Scientific Council were also actively involved in an advisory capacity and we are exceedingly grateful to them for their valuable comments. Additional members of the project team included Vincent Venus, Paulina Fröhlich, Sophie Pornschlegel, Lucas Matray, Romy Hansum and Anni Michelle Deutsch.

We would particularly like to thank the Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft, who not only supported the short film that we made to accompany the study, but also helped with the translations of the texts into French and English and thus played an important part in improving the reach of the study across Europe. In addition, we would like to thank snice film production and the interviewer, Marie Maraval, for their important work. The film is available with English and French subtitles on our website: www.progressives-zentrum.org/die-verlassenen.

Finally, we would particularly like to thank the 500 people who took the time to speak to us and permitted us to listen to them.

Das Progressive Zentrum

Das Progressive Zentrum is an independent, not-for-profit think tank based in Berlin. The organisation aims to found new networks of progressive actors from diverse backgrounds and to develop robust policy that is capable of winning over a majority for economic and societal advancement. To this end, Das Progressive Zentrum includes young pioneering thinkers and decision-makers from Germany and Europe in progressive debates. Das Progressive Zentrum's publications are primarily aimed at political decision-makers and pre-decision-makers in ministries, parliaments and parties, but also at actors from the fields of science, economics and civil society. It is our intention to highlight new developments, confront right-wing populism and instigate new possibilities for forward-thinking, just policies and progressive debate in Germany and Europe as a whole.



Liegey Muller Pons

Liegey Muller Pons is a leading European campaign technology company with offices in Berlin, London and Paris. It has already supported more than 1,000 customers through data analyses and campaign software.



supported by



Federal Foreign Office

The short film of the project as well as the French and English versions of the study were kindly supported by:

**Alfred
Herrhausen
Gesellschaft**

This study provides a contribution to the debate as part of the project and merely reflects the opinion of the authors.

Publishing information

All rights reserved. Reproduction or similar use of works by Das Progressive Zentrum, even in excerpts, is only permitted with prior written permission.

© Das Progressive Zentrum e.V., 2018
Responsible under the terms of German media law:
Dominic Schwickert
c/o Das Progressive Zentrum e.V. Werftstraße 3, 10577 Berlin

Board of Directors: Dr. Tobias Dürr, Michael Miebach,
Katarina Niewiedzial
Executive Director: Dominic Schwickert

www.progressives-zentrum.org
mail@progressives-zentrum.org
www.facebook.com/dasprogressivezentrum
twitter: @DPZ_Berlin

Design: somethingcreative.agency, based on a design by 4S and Collet Concepts