



No. 1

Channeling Protests

How Anti-Democratic Actors Mobilise via Telegram

How and where do enemies of democracy in Germany mobilise? This question has become increasingly relevant ever since these groups were able to develop their own protest culture during the pandemic. In Germany, the messaging app Telegram has played a key role in this development. This policy brief seeks to uncover the regional differences that have emerged in this mobilisation, the role of ideological positions and shifts in focus issues over time.

In short:

- Since 2020, Germany has been witnessing an anti-democratic protest cycle that is exceptional in terms of its continuity and spread.
- Digital means of communication have replaced conventional forms of organisation and facilitated mobilisation in rural areas.
- The involved actors were able to create the impression that protests are large in scale using mass calls for action, thereby potentially inciting individuals to take part.

Database

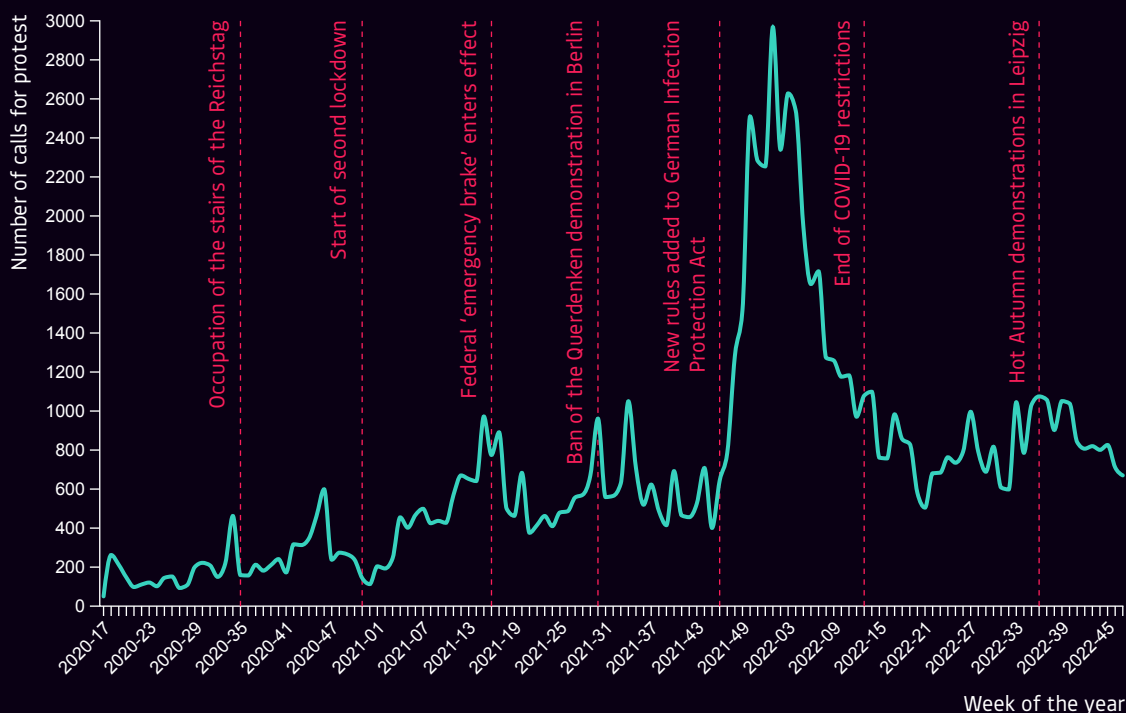
- We analysed around 10 million messages from across 1,500 channels between April 2020 and November 2022.
- A total of around 95,000 messages sent via the messaging service Telegram contained calls for offline protest.
- January 2022 represented the peak of this mobilisation, for which point we identified 3,000 calls for protest each week.

March 2020 was a watershed moment for the protest scene in Germany. A dizzying array of actors mobilised in Berlin this month to participate in the first “Hygiene Demonstration”, which would become a precursor for the Querdenken (lateral thinking) movement. In its wake, the movement unleashed onto the streets pent-up anger against the government’s COVID-19 policies held by many across Germany, including strong sentiments against vaccination. The protests that took place in large cities were also followed by manifestations in more rural areas colloquially referred to as Spaziergänge (strolls). These developments inspired actors of the far right to take advantage of the protest potential offered by the transpiring COVID-19 context. More recently, at the end of 2022, far-right actors (unsuccessfully) attempted to convert this potential into what they called the “Hot Autumn” or “Winter of Rage” with the aim of denouncing the German government’s stance towards Russia and its energy policies. Taken together, this protest cycle leaned heavily to the right – and was therefore a novelty in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany.

For years, German far-right groups organised their street policies through events and campaigns. The anti-democratic movement finally managed to take centre stage in 2014 with the emergence of the PEGIDA movement (acronym for Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation

of the Occident), rising through the greater use of online channels to mobilise while establishing the idea of permanent protest. In October 2022, the movement celebrated its eighth anniversary, managing to organise over 240 demonstrations in those years. Nonetheless, PEGIDA largely remained a phenomenon relegated to the city of Dresden, despite the formation of various offshoot groups in other parts of the country. This geographic limitation has, however, become a thing of the past since the protest cycle starting in 2020. Thereafter, the country has witnessed waves of protest characterised by a high degree of territorial dispersion. More recently, the protest scene has even spread beyond locales with established far-right structures to places with hardly any bases for organisation.

This shift has been made possible by the spread of digital means of communication. Nowadays, it is rare to find mobilisations that make use of handing out fliers or placing posters in pedestrian areas – which requires available hands locally. Instead, calls for offline protest are primarily taking place online. As a mixture between a messaging service and a social media platform, the app Telegram, in particular, has turned into a machine for mobilisation: ever since the pandemic, groupings such as Querdenken, conspiracy theorists, esotericists and neo-Nazis have all increasingly used Telegram to call for protests. Given



Development of calls for protest aggregated per week of the year.

these developments, digital data collection and analysis have become crucial in order for researchers, observers and policymakers to maintain an overview of their dynamics.

Waves of mobilisation

For this study, we analysed around 10 million messages sent across 1,503 Telegram channels. The results allow us, for the very first time, to draw conclusions about when and where exactly in Germany protest calls took place between April 2020 and November 2022. Our analysis has shed light on one of the most critical dimensions of these protests: the willingness to mobilise. We should note that this does not necessarily tell us anything about the actual ability to mobilise or the ultimate scale of the protests themselves. Nevertheless, with this data, we can discern the networks that exist across these channels and identify how protests are “channelled” digitally, so to speak.

The intensity of calls for protest tends to fluctuate over time. We find the first peak in August 2020 when protesters stormed the parliamentary steps of the Reichstag in the context of a Querdenken demonstration. It was around this time that protests against measures aimed at combating the spread of COVID-19 hit a high point, with actors from across the nation mobilising in Berlin. These mobilisations soon receded on account of internal disputes that plagued the movement. Shortly thereafter, talk of a renewed lockdown in the autumn of 2020 led to a revival of activities, with organisers taking this as an opportunity to protest against an alleged “Corona dictatorship”.

The climax of this second wave was a mobilisation in Leipzig, where riots broke out in November of the same year. The protests subsided once again after this, presumably because of restrictions of mobility that loomed on account of the lockdown. This would once again change in early 2021, when COVID-19 demonstrations were invoked once again across large cities in Germany. The government’s threat of imposing a moratorium on protesting ended up inciting the willingness to mobilise, leading to mass demonstrations in the summer of 2021. The following November, the protests reached an all-new dimension: Following the introduction of the 3G rule (the requirement to be either vaccinated, recovered or tested: geimpft, genesen oder getestet) at the workplace, the Spaziergänge also reemerged in small cities. Mobilisations in the winter of 2021/2022 in response to talk of a possible law imple-

menting mandatory vaccinations marked the climax of this protest cycle.

“Many calls for protest originate from people or groups that only started to become active with the onset of the pandemic.”

After the eventual lapse of the anti-COVID-19 measures and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, starting in the spring of 2022, the focus of mobilisations shifted to the topic of energy. The peak of this “hot autumn” quickly passed after a demonstration in Leipzig in early September. While calls for protests have become consistently more intense ever since when compared to 2020, the patchwork movement characterising this protest cycle only really took root at the end of 2020 – which ends up skewing comparisons with this former period.

Ideological geo-mapping

How are calls for protests distributed across Germany? In absolute terms, they tend to be more concentrated in large cities and metropolitan regions that have traditionally served as the venues for demonstrations. At the regional level, the federal state of Saxony stands out here, as a place where mid-sized cities serve as epicentres for mobilisation, as do the large cities of Dresden and Leipzig. Another phenomenon that is more notable in the state of Saxony is the inclusion of smaller towns within protests – or rather, the spread of protests to less urban areas.

When taking a step further to consider the ideological differences among calls for protest, we note that Saxony has the highest concentration of mobilisations among far-right groups, while the Querdenken movement is more pronounced in the state of Baden-Württemberg. Additionally, mobilisations have remained intense in Saxony even though they have significantly abated in other parts of the country after the winter of 2021/2022. The ideological milieus comprising the political spectrum of our research generally do not come into conflict with one another. We can, however, identify a regional division of labour among them, in which certain types of actors dominate particular issues, be it COVID-19 measures or energy policies.

This article is an abridged version of the topic focus from *Machine Against the Rage*, no. 1 (Winter 2023), which can be found in the “Focus” section.

Read more online, with interactive graphics, an annex outlining the methodology and additional analyses, including about the digital Reich Citizens’ Scene (in German only):

www.machine-vs-rage.net



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THE RAGE**



One noteworthy observation is that many calls for protest originate from people or groups that only started to become active with the onset of the pandemic. Some online activists without any links to a particular organisation have been able to quickly amass a group of followers, with which they can even generate revenue. This sort of political entrepreneurship that is prevalent among the upper echelons of the Querdenken movement takes advantage of the fact that Telegram has turned protest communications into a part of everyday life, functioning as a social bonding agent across different political lines.

Simulating movement

Another reason why mobilisation has remained fragile is that it lacks cohesive force due to an absence of individuals that assume central positions to bring together the highly decentralised array of actors. Overcoming this fragility was one of the political projects assumed by the extremist group Freie Sachsen (Free Saxons). Not only did the group manage to turn itself into a central actor in the state of Saxony, they also assumed a key role nationwide. With over 150,000 followers, the Freie Sachsen

Telegram channel has become an important hub for linking together local protests. However, the group also drains resources from other organisations, such as when they took over protests in regions that were initially aligned under the Querdenken banner.

The means pursued by Freie Sachsen is a successful model that has been imitated by other groups. These imitations have, however, largely remained artificial entities. Freshly created, many attempted to mobilise in full force but failed to draw on already established structures. The Freie Nordrhein-Westfalen, for one, emerge as an important actor in our data, but their impact hardly compares to that of the Freie Sachsen. Here, once again, the willingness to mobilise does not necessarily reflect the ability to mobilise. Nevertheless, actors are able to make use of digital means to feign scale and thereby actually have an impact on their sympathisers. As such, we cannot exclude the possibility that “digital simulations” practiced by a movement (“astroturfing”) may actually promote this movement in reality. This is a phenomenon that certainly deserves further investigation.

About the BAG

With the aim of designing measures to proactively and effectively counter digital hate, the Federal Association for Countering Online Hate supports civil society with resources for enabling research. To this end, BAG has an in-house research centre and also serves as a civil society forum that brings together different stakeholders. The research that the centre conducts provides civil society with knowledge for reflection, while also incorporating practical knowledge from civil society into its research. BAG is part of Das NETTZ – Networking Initiative against Online Hate.

About the Research Centre

Digitalisation itself provides us with the tools needed to better understand digital hate. The BAG research centre joins years of experience in researching extremism together with expertise in data and network analysis. This has created a monitoring system that allows practitioners to readily identify and better assess hate networks. External researchers also collaborate in the work pursued at the centre and evaluate the methods being applied. The research centre currently draws on the support of ten experts stemming from different disciplines.

About the Trendreport

The digital Trendreport is a quarterly publication through which BAG shares the results and analyses of its monitoring work. The online magazine Machine Against the Rage serves as the research centre’s main communication tool. This publication functions as a trend barometer allowing for the early identification of online activities as well as important shifts among right-wing extremists and other forms of anti-democratic discourse. Additionally, it documents and classifies critical changes in opinion across relevant online milieus.



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