IPS

INTERVIEWS 05.10.2021

'The struggle against extremism is unrelenting'

Hasnain Kazim on how hate speech inspires real violence and the need to stand up to radical right-wing forces in Germany

The far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) suffered losses across the country in last week's German elections. But in Saxony it emerged as the strongest party. Has the AfD peaked at national level and is just a regional phenomenon now?

The AfD is still polling double figures. And even if it failed to get into parliament, extreme right-wing attitudes still exist, more or less concealed in other parties. The struggle against extremism is unrelenting. We can't let up just because the AfD has lost a couple of percentage points. What is particularly worrying is that in some regionsright-wing extremists are now the strongest force.

Around 5 million people cast their votes for the AfD. You have consistently refused to share a podium with representatives of the AfD. What is the AfD's place as an elected party in Germany's political system and how should we be deal with them?

I like to refrain from vilifying other views. We don't have to like them or share them, but we do have to tolerate them. However, there have to be limits on what is permissible in civilised interaction. When someone says 'I can't get on with Muslims', it doesn't truly bother me. But when someone says, 'They should all be shot', that's unacceptable. We must be clear about where to draw the line. This isn't set in stone; it requires negotiation in the community.

But there are certain principles that are crystal clear and not up for discussion. For example, we can't take a vote on whether to execute someone. The AfD breaches the limits of acceptability – deliberately, testing them out – so often that it is partly responsible for the dangerous shift we're experiencing in our society. There are situations in which you can talk to AfD representatives. But I have no intention

of offering them a platform or acting as if their opinions were perfectly acceptable and legitimate, and represented a voice on the democratic spectrum. They do not.

In the run-up to the elections the murder of a Petrol station worker in Idar-Oberstein by a customer asked to wear a mask sent shock waves around the country. Does this represent a trend in Germany? Is hate speech increasingly leading to violence?

In fact, the murder shows that there has been a shift in recent years. People are becoming more and more radical, and words may lead to actions. So-called mavericks and conspiracy theorists aren't just harmless individuals talking rubbish. Their speech can result in physical violence. In the aftermath of the murder of conservative politician Walter Lübcke, too, some people tried to play it down. They tried to portray stirring up hatred as 'expression of opinion', as if its perpetrators can't help it if it leads to actual violence. This brings it home in the most terrifying fashion that we need to watch what we say.

What happened in Idar-Oberstein has been celebrated in some online fora. What can we do, what must we do to stop such things?

We mustn't accept this kind of thing. We can't just let it pass under the guise of freedom of expression. Naturally, people are free to say what they like. But they also must take responsibility for their words. And if people run around talking about 'dictatorship' and challenge democracy and the right to existence of elected authorities, we have to stand up and say 'no'.

For me, certain utterances are unacceptable. After the murder in Idar-Oberstein,Friedrich Merz wrote about the pandemic restrictions on Twitter: 'We can see how much social dissent the measures are causing.' He's right, they are. But you can't say that in the middle of a debate about a murder. As if it was just an expression of 'social dissent'. Language like this normalises violence. It puts such deeds in the realm of normal, acceptable interaction. That is wrong. We have to do something about it.

Besides racism, opposition to measures to combat Covid-19 has become a dominant aspect of hate speech on the internet. How do these things intersect?

It was astonishing to see what kinds of people turned up to Covid-19 demonstrations. At the start, I kept hearing people say 'but I'm not on the right!' And indeed, many people simply wanted to air their grievances. A whole range of grievances converged – against

restrictions, against immigration. What unites the different groups is their anger against those in power. It's a feeling of impotence: other people deciding to do something that doesn't suit us. That is why the Greens, for example, have encountered so much opposition in some quarters to many of their proposals. Suddenly, it seems as if they want to ban everything: now they want to take our meat away or to ban domestic flights! Any kind of alternative view is taken as an assault on people's personal freedom, on their ability to decide for themselves. That can very easily tilt towards 'us versus them', even though this 'us' is pretty heterogeneous.

According to a recent study by the Bosch Stiftung, 65 per cent of those asked stated that they often worry about the state of democracy in Germany. Does that apply to you, too?

I can sympathise with that. Basically, I believe – and hope – that we have a stable democracy that functions pretty well. If I compare it with other countries I've lived in – such as Turkey and Pakistan – I'm not worried that democracy is likely to fail here overnight. But when I hear how much scorn some people have for the state or 'the system', and how much agreement such views encounter I do begin to doubt. It underlines the fact that democracy and civil liberties cannot be taken for granted. They have to be fought for, over and over again. It's a bit like reading and writing. People learn how to do it, but then more children come along who have to learn it, too. Similarly, every new generation has to relearn democracy.

In the same study, 20 per cent of those interviewed declared that under some circumstances dictatorship is a better form of government. Is Germany under threat from increasing authoritarian tendencies?

I am afraid of that. This tendency to believe that crisis situations call for a strong hand – usually a 'strong man' – is found worldwide. In Turkey, Erdogan has thrived on it. At one time or another the death penalty, for example, would have won majority support in Germany, even though the Constitution clearly forbids it. In any case, a civilised country can lock people up but it doesn't execute them. This yearning for authoritarianism keeps coming back. That's why I don't like referendums. Many of society's problems are so complex. They can't be compressed into a yes or no question. The risk that authoritarian tendencies could exploit this and gain influence is very high. The example of Brexit – a total catastrophe for the UK – shows how badly wrong things can go.

It sounds like a contradiction: on one hand, people are afraid there'll be too many restrictions, while on the other, they want a strong hand.

It definitely is contradictory, but that is human nature. These people don't have anything against banning things and getting tough, as long as it's their interests being served. If someone said 'we're going to ban immigration', they'd be ecstatic. But as soon as someone says 'we want to ban domestic flights', they start to complain about the curtailment of their personal freedom. A civilised society must be regulated in such a way that there's a balance of interests. The goal must be that everyone can say, more or less, 'I can live with that'. It isn't easy. That's the main challenge facing politics.

This interview was conducted by Anja Wehler-Schöck. It is a condensed form of the original interview in German.



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