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Becoming a young radical right activist: Biographical pathways of the members of radical right organisations in Poland and Germany

Janina Myrczik
Medical School Berlin, Germany

Justyna Kajta
SWPS University, Poland

Arthur Buckenleib
University of Basel, Switzerland

Mateusz Karolak
University of Wroclaw, Poland

Marius Liedtke
University of Salzburg, Austria

Adam Mrozowicki
University of Wroclaw, Poland

Vera Trappmann
University of Leeds, UK

Corresponding author:

Janina Myrczik, Department of Psychology, Medical School Berlin, Rüdesheimer Straße 50, 14197 Berlin, Germany. Email: janina.myrczik@medicalschool-berlin.de

Abstract

With the increasing popularity of the radical right, much research has tried to explain the motives of voters. Less attention has been paid to the motives of people to become radical right activists – specifically young people, a group with a high tendency to join right-wing parties. Within the context of the internationalisation of the radical right, this article draws on 28 narrative interviews between 2019 and 2021 with young radical right activists in Poland and Germany, two countries with considerably different political and discursive opportunity structures. We propose to recognise a new motive for becoming involved in political activism: career-oriented individual self-realisation in Germany, as opposed to fulfilling a duty to the nation in Poland. While we identify two different types

of radical activism within the different contexts – the *anti-establishment populist career* type in Germany and the *anti-political intellectualism/elitism* type in Poland – they both point to the normalisation of the radical right in the two countries.

Keywords

Biographical research, comparative analysis, nationalism, radical right, youth activism

Introduction

In recent decades, radical right parties and organisations have seen increasing popularity in many countries worldwide, especially among young people (Arzheimer, 2012; Bottos et al., 2014). Numerous pieces of research on this phenomenon have focused on explaining the relative electoral success of the radical right and the motivations of its voters. This has been considered accountable to socioeconomic deprivation, lack of work stability and security (Mrozowicki et al., 2019), lack of political representation (Szafraniec, 2012), fear of social descent (Nachtwey, 2018), and authoritarian and racist dispositions (Nachtwey and Heumann, 2019), rather than hatred (Tetrault, 2021), fear of globalisation and modernisation (Lengfeld, 2017), or disappointment with elites (Zick et al., 2021). However, much less attention has been paid to young people's (18–35 years old, cf. Miller-Idriss, 2018) motivations and experiences leading them to active involvement in radical right organisations (cf. Whiteley et al., 2021). This can partly be explained by the relative difficulty of accessing the field and interviewing radical right activists. Focusing on younger people is pertinent as lifelong values are shaped in their formative years with impact on their future political attitudes and actions. While young voters often turn to populist parties, and especially those of the radical right (Bottos et al., 2014), voters' characteristics vary across countries (Rooduijn, 2018), even with the international mainstreaming and normalisation of the radical right (Pytlas, 2018).

In Poland, support for right-wing populist parties among young voters (18–24 years) peaked at 33% in 2015, but has since declined to 21% in 2021 (Scovil, 2021). During the parliamentary elections in 2023, the radical right-wing Confederation could still attract 26% of men aged 18–29 years and 6% of women in the same age group (TVN, 2023). In Germany, among voters aged 18–29 years the tendency to vote for *Alternative für*

Deutschland (*AfD*) lies at 14% (NTV, 2023). Meanwhile, core dimensions of radical right ideology of racism and social Darwinism, as well as downplaying National Socialism, have increased alarmingly among 16- to 30-year-olds (Zick et al., 2021).

The prevalence of far-right attitudes among young adults has been interpreted as a strategy to deal with crises of meaning (Heitmeyer, 1989), as it is most noticeable in areas with high youth unemployment and employment insecurity (Zagórski et al., 2019).

The few existing studies on radical right activism among young people give a heterogeneous picture. The thesis of relative deprivation is contrasted with more nuanced explanations taking into consideration personal, cultural and political motives (Kajta, 2020; Klandermans and Mayer, 2009; Pasieka, 2022).

Drawing from Klandermans' (2004) typology of motives for social movement involvement (instrumentality, identity and ideology), our comparative and biographical research emphasises understanding young people's engagement in right-wing politics by considering their biographical experiences and the broader social, political and institutional settings. We argue that joining radical right movements and parties is not a one-off event, but that various biographical factors contribute to becoming active in the radical right. These need to be understood in the context of specific social, economic and political developments within the broader context of an 'internationalisation of nationalism' (Pankowski, 2018).

Thus, considering the relevance of different sociopolitical and cultural contexts for the radical right internationally, our analysis focuses on radical right activists in two countries (Poland and Germany), in which the radical right has considerably different political and discursive opportunity structures. We follow the minimal definition of the radical right with nativism at its core: 'an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ("the nation") and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nationstate' (Mudde, 2007: 19). Other features of the radical right such as 'authoritarianism' and 'populism' (Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2018) do not apply to every type of organisation of the radical right we studied.

While in Poland, the radical right faces little resistance and draws on widespread societal pride around right-wing history (cf. Zubrzycki, 2013), in Germany a *cordon*

sanitaire has been installed against radical right-wing parties and organisations, and positive interpretations of the country's radical right history are frowned upon (Berbuir et al., 2015).

Drawing on 28 biographical interviews with radical right activists aged 19–35 years in Germany and Poland, we identify the generative mechanisms compelling young people to get involved in radical right organisations. This exploration delves into countries with notably distinct political opportunity structures for the radical right. Thus, our study contributes empirically by examining an overlooked social cohort and theoretically by presenting a novel motive typology for radical right activism.

Motives for joining the radical right: literature review

Activists want to change their circumstances and influence the social and political environment (*instrumentality*); they search for belonging to manifest identification with a group (*identity*); they want to express their views (*ideology*) (Klandermans, 2004; Klandermans and Mayer, 2009). These motives are not mutually exclusive or competing, but appear differently depending on activists' individual needs or the particular nature of a given social movement's identity and aims. The decision to join as well as to stay in the movement is preceded by various life experiences. This decision can be considered a natural *continuity* of activists' previous political socialisation, a *conversion* meaning a break with the past, or a *compliance* 'when people enter activism, not owing to personal desires but because of circumstances they deemed were beyond their control' (Linden and Klandermans, 2007: 184). Moreover, the decision occurs in a particular historical time, that is, embedded in macro-social events and changes (Bertaux, 2012: 312). Hence, the broader socioeconomic, cultural and political contexts – including political and discursive opportunity structures – need to be taken into account when studying young people's pathways to radical right activism, a potentially high-risk/cost activism (McAdam, 1986).

Existing research shows a complex and heterogeneous picture of the reasons for membership of radical right parties or movements (cf. Blee, 2017; Miller-Idriss, 2018). Structural approaches, such as the relative deprivation thesis, claim that people turn towards the radical right as they feel economically or culturally threatened by processes

of modernisation (cf. Caiani, 2019). Yet there is growing evidence that radical nationalist milieus attract people from different social classes and that membership is driven by a variety of non-economic motives (Bosi, 2012; Goodwin, 2010; Klandermans and Mayer, 2009; Pasieka, 2022; Pirro and Róna, 2019).

Most radical right-wing discourses – ideological motives, in Klandermans' (2004) terms – centre on (ethnic) nationalism; nativism; religion; anti-migrant, anti-gender or anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes; and Euroscepticism. Depending on the national context and 'social moment', these components can be differently framed by the movement, and resonate (or not) among potential young participants (cf. Bosi, 2012). Studies emphasise the crucial role of the generational experience of (ethnic and religious) diversity in radical right mobilisation, with migrants often portrayed as unjustly prioritised over natives (Goodwin, 2010; Pasieka, 2022). In Poland, activists justify joining as a way to defend and promote values such as Catholicism, the traditional family and the ethno-cultural Polish nation against 'foreign' threats of liberal ideas (Pasieka, 2022). In Germany, diffuse racist attitudes as well as affinities towards other ideologies of inequality are typical for adolescents turning towards the radical right (see Glaser and Schlimbach, 2009). While the movement attracts people for whom there is at least some compatibility between their worldviews, moral values and political attitudes, and those of the party or movement (Jasper, 2007: 77), often, young members are radicalised within the movement without necessarily having been as radical prior to joining (Pasieka, 2022; Pirro and Róna, 2019).

Contrary to studies highlighting the particular importance of ideological motives, newer research focuses on identity-dominated motives. Activists often search for a community or reference to follow (Pasieka, 2022), loyalty and feelings of appreciation and self-worth (cf. Pilkington, 2016; Pirro and Róna, 2019). This is particularly relevant as radical right-wing activists seem to transnationally share a conviction of being stigmatised in a society (Caiani, 2019). The need for recognition can also refer to the broader, national community, wherein activism is perceived as defence of the (ethnic) nation (cf. Bosi, 2012; Goodwin, 2010). Instrumentality plays a significant role as well. A party's easy accessibility, visibility and organisational structure (Pirro and Róna, 2019) are pertinent for activists to become involved as well as to pursue a mission (Pasieka, 2022)

to bring about societal change (cf. Pirro and Róna, 2019).

Often the causes of radical right mobilisation have been studied separately. While the Klandermans (2004) classification of motives for joining radical right movements is convincing, allowing the integration of various approaches, it is less clear how these motives are shaped through biographical experiences in different national contexts. Joining the movement can be a natural continuity of family socialisation or exposure to traditional nationalist values during the activist's childhood (Bosi, 2012; Klandermans and Mayer, 2009). In Poland, family socialisation with a conservative, Catholic and patriotic core influences activists' worldviews, even when their parents do not share such nationalist attitudes. Furthermore, school and church are central institutions in which adolescents are introduced to nationalist activism by their peers alongside shared interests, values and attitudes (Kajta, 2020). In Germany, family, especially grandparents, play a major role as well for mobilisation into the radical right (Köttig, 2004). In families where right-extremist values were absent, activists actively distinguish themselves from the parent generation by joining the movement (Glaser and Schlimbach, 2009), which serves then as 'surrogate family' (cf. Köttig, 2004). However, due to historical and political reasons, educational contexts in Germany seem less favourable for promoting nationalistic attitudes compared with Poland.

In summary, existing research offers classifications of motives for joining radical right-wing movements. However, despite calls to combine different approaches and account for the specific historical time and internationalisation of the radical right, existing research usually concentrates on single issues or contexts. This study fills this gap by looking closer at the mechanism which underlies the formation of such motives, from a comparative, cross-country perspective. In order to understand the interplay of identity, instrumentality and ideology in creating the pathways that lead young people to radical right movements, the article proposes to analyse the biographical experiences of young activists in Poland and Germany, taking into account the specific sociopolitical opportunity structures. Such analysis will allow us to understand how specific contexts of socialisation, as well as macro-social contexts in both countries, combined with individual beliefs, concerns, ideologies and agency, influence decisions about radical right involvement.

The recent development of the radical right in Germany and Poland

Since political and institutional circumstances play an important role in the opportunities or constraints for radical right-wing involvement (cf. Muis and Immerzeel, 2017), we map out the political and societal structures that the respective organisations are embedded in.

As of 2022, the right-wing populist party Law and Justice had a majority in the Polish parliament, which it won in the 2015 (with 37.8% of votes) and 2019 (43.6% of votes) elections. The party has introduced some radical right ideas, such as ultra-conservatism, anti-liberalism, anti-feminism, and counter-European Union (EU) discourses, into governmental policies. As a result, radical right movements have to constantly compete with the governing right and propose even more extreme ideologies. By contrast, the opponents of the German radical right are governing centrist parties (conservative and socialdemocratic), which for decades maintained a *cordon sanitaire* against the presence of nationalistic forces in the political scene. The entry of *AfD* into the parliament (with 12.6% of votes in 2017 and 10.3% in 2021) represents a weakening of such policies. Nevertheless, unlike in Poland, in Germany radical right-wing ideas had not been challenged in public discourse and were not part of official governmental politics by 2021 when we conducted the analysis.

Germany

Post-war Germany has been characterised by an underlying societal consensus against any 'heir of National Socialism' (Berbuir et al., 2015: 160), hindering the radical right's political success. After repeated electoral failures, in the 1970s the radical right reorganised itself, creating a loose network of radical right actors known as *Neue Rechte* (New Right) and publicly distancing itself from National Socialism. Its key strategies consisted of delegitimising established political agents (Pfahl-Traughber, 2019) and a discursive shift to the right (Zick et al., 2021). The current right-wing scene in Germany is characterised by alliances and fluid transitions between several actors (Heitmeyer et al., 2020).

The *Neue Rechte* has increasingly tried to achieve 'cultural hegemony' in intellectual debates as well as through social movements (Salzborn, 2016: 52) such as the *Identitäre Bewegung* (*IB*, Identitarian Movement) and the *Pegida* movement (Patriotic Europeans

Against the Islamisation of the West) (Vorländer et al., 2016).

A pivotal moment in normalising the radical right in German society was the *AfD*'s electoral success: 12.6% in 2017 and 10.3% in 2021. The party, fragmented ideologically since its foundation in 2013, has quickly moved far to the right (Heitmeyer et al., 2020). This fragmentation needs to be understood as a 'new winning formula of the new rightwing parties' (Decker, 2016: 10). While its liberal–conservative faction leans on politically moderate and economically liberal, the increasingly influential *völkisch*-nationalist wing, *Der Flüge*l (The Wing), openly espouses nationalist views. *Der Flügel's key figure Björn Höcke has served as a kind of ideological father figure to the party*'s youth organisation *Junge Alternative* (*JA*, Young Alternatives), which has been observed by the German domestic intelligence service as a case of suspected extremism since 2019. Overall, Germany's radical right has managed to break through the *cordon sanitaire* by softening its message and changing its image. Moreover, its presence in parliament not only legitimises its actions and views translating into at least partial mainstreaming of the radical right.

Poland

The Polish context contrasts sharply as radical right ideologies have long been ingrained in politics and public discourse. The growing popularity of nationalist discourses and movements, as observed by Płatek and Płucienniczak (2017), started with the initial marginalisation (1989–2000) followed by the institutionalisation (2001–2006) of the nationalist movement, and its radicalisation during the liberal government (2007–2012). The two most noticeable extra-parliamentary radical organisations had been active in the interwar period: *Młodzież Wszechpolska* (*MW*, All-Polish Youth) and *Obóz Narodowo Radykalny* (*ONR*, National Radical Camp). While they were originally rooted in the skinhead scene and mostly marginalised in civil society and institutional politics, this situation changed when *MW* started to cooperate with *Liga Polskich Rodzin* (*LPR*, League of Polish Families) which was voted into parliament in 2001, leading to a wave of professionalisation within the radical right. Since 2007, these groups intensified their radicalism and sought new avenues, positioning themselves as anti-system entities by criticising the ruling party, *Platforma Obywatelska* (the Civic Platform). Post-2012, *MW*

and *ONR* have notably orchestrated Independence Day Marches and established a new party, *Ruch Narodowy* (National Movement). The Marches have drawn tens of thousands, particularly young participants.

The newest radical right party in Poland *Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość* (Confederation of Liberty and Independence) was formed in 2018, currently being a federation of the National Movement party, the conservative-liberal *KORWiN* party, and smaller initiatives associated with right-wing milieus. In the parliamentary election in 2019, *Konfederacja* obtained 6.81% of the votes and introduced 11 MPs. As of 2022, the right-wing populist party, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice), has the majority in the parliament in Poland with 43.6% of votes. Considering Law and Justice's ideological stances, radical right movements must constantly compete with the governing right and propose even more extreme ideologies.

Overall, in the past decade, Poland has witnessed a striking development of the illiberal side of civil society, including conservative, Catholic, patriotic and informal groups. These milieus have enjoyed more favourable positions, including funding opportunities, since Law and Justice started to govern in 2015 (Guasti and Bustikova, 2022). Given the rule of an illiberal, right-wing coalition for the last two terms in Poland, the process of mainstreaming the radical right is much more advanced than in Germany.

Methodology

The article is based on the analysis of 28 biographical narrative interviews conducted with members of radical right organisations in Poland (13 interviews) and Germany (15 interviews) between 2019 and 2021.

The qualitative research design enabled the study of different motives among an understudied social group to join the radical right, taking into account biographical pathways to activism within two national contexts.

Similar to other research on the radical right (cf. Klandermans, 2021), in our case field access was challenging. Following theoretical sampling, we were guided by the landscape of the right-wing organisations in both countries. In Germany, we contacted members of the *AfD* and *JA* through contact information on the respective organisations' websites, as well as members of the Identitarian Movement and radical right YouTube

influencers through their social media channels. The two latter groups refused to be interviewed. We further attended election campaign events of the *AfD* to establish contact with the people present. Finally, we approached people who had exited radical right organisations through non-governmental organisations supporting dropouts. In Poland, we addressed people linked with *ONR*, *MW* and *Konfederacja* via e-mail and phone, relying on contacts established in the framework of previous research projects. We recruited additional interviewees through social media outlets and snowballing techniques, which turned out to be the most successful as our credibility was confirmed among the potential interviewees. The interviews were conducted in German and Polish. All interviews were transcribed, and 16 of them were translated into English for a joint analysis.

Our German sample consisted primarily of high-ranking members of the *AfD* and *JA*. Three interviewees were only active in the *AfD* in the city council, three further interviewees were only active in the *JA* as (vice) chairperson, two working as employees of *AfD* members of the state/national parliament. Seven interviewees were members of city councils and state parliaments for the *AfD* as well as (vice) chairperson of the *JA* at state and/or national level. Of the two former members interviewees, one had been a state chairperson of the *JA*, the other had been a member of a neo-Nazi subgroup.

In our Polish sample, four interviewees held leading positions in local structures of the *ONR*, one was a local leader in the *MW*. Four narrators were active in *Konfederacja*, of which one had a strategic position in the party on the national level. Another member of Konfederacja was previously active in one of the coalition branches, KORWiN. Finally, there were three former members of *ONR*, *MW* and/or less known initiatives – two of them had locally leading positions, and one was a regular member.

All our interviewees were between 19 and 35 years of age, and seven of them identified as female (two in Germany, five in Poland).

Being interested in the interviewees' life stories, the interviews followed an adapted technique proposed by Fritz Schütze (1992) and started with an open question about the interviewee's life story ('Could you please tell the story of your life, from childhood till now?'). Focusing on transitions in their lives, it was followed by a series of problemdriven questions around values, networks, friends and political attitudes. Narrative interviews

facilitated analysing biographical processes, and further gave interviewees – acknowleging their potential distrust towards academia – enough space to narrate how they joined the organisation without feeling the need to defend their radical right involvement (Klandermans, 2021). Polish activists more openly shared their involvement and worldview, but employed different strategies of denial of being dangerous radicals, that is, by presenting themselves as defenders of the nation, or focusing on charity actions initiated by the organisation. In the case of German activists, sharing their worldview took more time, often revealing explicit right-extremist references only towards the interviews' end. Taking into account the discrepancies between the researchers' and narrators' worldview, both the interviews and analysis involved emotional labour and reflexivity. Against this backdrop, joint research seminars constituted the space of mutual support and discussions.

The interviews were coded following the guidelines of the grounded theory methodology. We applied open coding to generate categories, and axial coding to build relationships between them, before integrating them into one cohesive theory with selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We compared the codes across all interviews, tracing the pathways to radical right activism along the established dimensions, including the roles of family, political socialisation and motives for involvement. We used the concepts of *ideology*, *identity* and *instrumentality* discussed by Klandermans (2004) and Klandermans and Mayer (2009) as sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1954). Memos were created both for individual case analysis, and cross-case and cross-country comparisons. Core cases were discussed during joint analytical workshops with the entire team. As a result, we created a common coding matrix (see Table 1 with the core dimensions).

Table 1. Biographical pathways to radical right activism in Poland and Germany: selected comparative dimensions and the overall type.

Table 1. Biographical pathways to radical right activism in Poland and Germany: selected comparative dimensions and the overall type.

Role of the family	
Poland	Germany
Support or indifference towards political involvement Limited critique of radical right ideologies by parents Fear of getting into trouble by children	
Limited political involvement of parents	Parents more often politically involved

⇔

Political socialisation	
Poland	Germany
Radical right mobilisation, demonstrations, actions Repressions and stigmas strengthening participation	
The role of patriotic NGOs, church, reconstruction groups	Direct encounters with political leaders symbolising racist anti-establishment and/or authority, religious indifference

⇩

Motives for involvement	
Poland	Germany
Identity: Feeling of belonging and finding like-minded people in organisations	
Ideology: Ethnocentric nationality, patriotism, traditions, Catholicism, cultural anti-liberalism and anti-Communism; historical injustice in Poland	*Ideology*: Idyllic German popular culture, anti-systemic and anti-immigration ideas; social injustice
Instrumentality: protecting the nation and its identity	*Instrumentality*: Bringing about ideological change
Individual self-realisation: Emphasis on citizen's duties	*Individual self-realisation*: Emphasis on political career

⇩

Type of biographical pathways to activism	
Poland	Germany
Anti-political intellectualism	Anti-establishment populist career

Klandermans and Mayer (2009) as sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1954). Memos were created both for individual case analysis, and cross-case and cross-country comparisons. Core cases were discussed during joint analytical workshops with the entire team. As a result, we created a common coding matrix (see Table 1 with the core dimensions).

Becoming a radical right activist

Systematic cross-case and cross-country analysis made it possible to reconstruct several dimensions and categories, which were used to explore the biographical pathways and motives of right-wing activism in each country. Table 1 illustrates the country-specific

differences and similarities along the core dimensions of the pathways (family and political socialisation) and motives. This led us to the reconstruction of two context-specific ideal types of radical right activism, namely (nationalist*) anti-political intellectualism/ elitism in Poland*, and *(nationalist) anti-establishment populist career* in Germany.

The role of family

Most interviewees reported good relationships with their parents, often maintaining close contact even after leaving home. Polish narrators, in particular, portrayed their political activism as rooted in family-taught values like Catholicism, patriotism, traditionalism or anti-Communism (cf. Kajta, 2020). Some emphasised being patriots or religious due to a strong 'moral backbone' at home, or linking this to intergenerational continuity, mentioning grandparents involved in World War II or anti-Communist efforts. Even if parents were not activists themselves, they did not oppose their children's activism. Contrastingly, few German interviewees explicitly linked family values to their political engagement. However, most interviewees normalised their beliefs as part of the German mainstream, describing their upbringing as 'liberal-conservative'. In two cases parents – as actively involved in the *AfD* prior to their children – facilitated the interviewees' engagement by providing personal contacts. Similar to the Polish sample, parents of the German narrators rarely outright criticised their children's political involvement. If they did, the critique focused on the party's public image as part of the radical right, not the advocated political positions. The continuity of values within *JA* and *AfD* activists' families contrasts with previous research on young German radical right activists often opposing their parents' generation (Glaser and Schlimbach, 2009; Köttig, 2004).

Another cross-country similarity is the interviewees' insistence on the autonomy of their decisions to join the organisations. The German interviewees even highlighted their upbringing as untainted by ideological convictions; rather, they presented themselves as being raised as critical thinkers against common thinking (cf. Rommelspacher, 2006).

Political socialisation

Next to the family values, the political socialisation of German interviewees occurred through demonstrations, actions and encounters with influential political figures. These

politicians – associated not only with the radical right but also with mainstream parties – were portrayed as symbolising authority, anti-establishment sentiment but simultaneously as (contrary to most politicians) approachable and open. Established parties seemed ideologically unattractive, hindering young activists' participation in decision-making, whereas radical right organisations provided a sense of efficacy, a key factor in collective action (Hornsey et al., 2006). In Poland, political and ideological socialisation occurred often in associations linked with the church, historical or patriotic milieus, as well as football fan clubs. Similar to social movements, student Catholic ministries or historical reconstruction groups served both as important sources of values and as social networks. Moreover, also in Poland, young activists pointed to the important role of face-to-face meetings with prominent figures of the radical right, which, however, often occurred only after joining the movement, and were particularly crucial for those who adopted radical right values only after joining the organisation.

Attending events like *Pegida* rallies, party meetings of the *AfD* in a climate of societal debate around increased migration as 'migration crisis' after 2015 in Germany, or the Independence Day Marches in Poland, provided the interviewees with emotional reassurance. Their interest in radical right politics grew through alternative online media, often sparked by initial exposure on platforms like YouTube. Over time, they sought offline involvement. To summarise, radical right ideologies were almost inevitably present in the lives of the young members of the radical right, given their easy access to radical right-wing social institutions, particularly in Poland. In Germany, the entry point into more radical ideology occurred as critical events in less established social spaces at the time.

Motives for joining radical right organisations

Although family, social groups and institutions emerged as favourable milieus for radical right ideas, the analysis points to further, often interlinked, triggers that made young people join organisations in which they could find a 'political home'.

In the name of values and beliefs

For Polish activists, joining radical right organisations was driven primarily by ideologyoriented and community-seeking motives. They emphasised attachment to values like the Polish nation, religion, patriotism and traditional family, aligning with nationalist

discourses (Kajta, 2020). Notably, the nation was defined ethnically and culturally, with Catholicism seen as a defining characteristic of Polish identity (Zubrzycki, 2013). Thus, nationalist involvement served as protection for a homogeneous vision of the nation, perceived as threatened by liberals, LGBT groups, migrants or abstract enemies like the EU or 'LGBT ideology'.

For some, being in the movement meant 'doing something', defending values important to them (instrumentality) and actively supporting the respective grassroots organisations. They ultimately perceived themselves to be fulfilling their duty to defend the Polish sovereignty allegedly threatened by liberalism, 'LGBTQ ideology' and immigration. In the collected narratives this was often linked to historical times, when Poland had been deprived of its sovereignty. As Barbara from *Konfederacja* stated:

Well, I am acting, I believe in it. I believe that we need to get involved in defending our civilisation. I see threats. I see threats from different sides. I want to oppose ideologies that destroy families, that destroy our values that I believe in: excessive fiscalism, oppression by authority.

Simultaneously, joining the movement was also a result of identity-based motives (Klandermans and Mayer, 2009); that is, looking for like-minded people. In some cases, activism was portrayed as something that made the individuals' lives more meaningful by doing social and educational work. In this sense, activism emerged as a value itself, a space that – contrary to professional work or studies – offered fulfilment and opportunities to pursue passions, mainly for history.

Similar to the Polish interviewees, values and beliefs played a major role in the German sample, while community-seeking motives were of less importance. In contrast to the Polish interviews, religion proved to be irrelevant in the German interviewees' lives, and issues on LGBTQ groups were not brought up. Rarely, sovereignty in relation to the EU was discussed.

Like the Polish interviewees, they believed their party involvement allowed them to 'do something' (instrumentality) for social justice, fostering anti-migrant and anti-establishment stances. While the interviewees had previously had an interest in joining other political parties, their values did not align. Favouring an ethno-pluralist nation, the radical right participants perceived migrants as threats to national security and culture, not

adhering to the law, creating social conflict. The political establishment and liberals were perceived as acting against the majority's interests. German culture was framed by interviewees as idyllic, associating it positively with provinciality, where people support each other and peace reigns (cf. Belina, 2022).

There was an overall tension in the interviews of being (racist) anti-establishment at the same time as maintaining a discourse of conformity and conventionality (Nachtwey and Heumann, 2019) in contrast to members of the radical right subculture, where rebellion and violence plays a major role (cf. Shoshan, 2016). Identifying as politically right, they distanced themselves from being labelled as part of the radical right, concomitantly emphasising their ideological proximity to the leader of the nationalist *Flügel*, Björn Höcke, downplaying his racist rhetoric. One interviewee used terminology derived from National Socialism (*kulturfremd*, *Ehestandsdarlehen*), explicitly identifying as nationalist. Several interviewees identified with radical right youth publications or with radical right campaign networks, such as *Ein Prozent*, which was classified by the German domestic intelligence service in 2023 as rightwing extremist.

This resulted in a tension between racist anti-establishment sentiment, and acting as part of the establishment. For example, Thomas, a member of *AfD* and *JA*, explained: Sympathies are there for certain activist youth movements, such as *Ein Prozent*. I engage myself mainly here in the *AfD* and the *JA*. If you want to achieve something, you must commit to the evil of parliamentarism or otherwise we would have conditions, which no one wants to have for good reasons.

Values can also lead to clashes: two former Polish members left disillusioned (Bjorgo, 2011). The former *MW* member's conservative values clashed with the racist agenda of the organisation, whereas another narrator perceived too much hypocrisy among other members and in the organisation ideology.

Underlying motive of perceived historical or social injustice

In both countries, the political engagement of interviewees originated from a sense of injustice. Polish activists linked their involvement to deep historical grievances spanning the Partition of Poland, both World Wars, the era of the Polish People's Republic and the post-1989 Third Republic dominated by what they saw as corrupt liberals. Organisations

offered narratives countering these injustices and losses. Narrators also felt abstract injustices regarding Poland's 'unsovereign' position in the EU, framing nationalist activity as defending national interests and independence. The emotional resonance of historical injustices fueled their political motivation (Van Zomeren et al., 2004).

Unlike Polish interviewees, German activists focused on economic and social injustice, particularly perceiving their own group as discriminated against (Bosi, 2012; Nachtwey and Heumann, 2019). Biographical challenges were often linked to encounters with migrantised people, such as moving to new neighbourhoods, quitting jobs or attending schools with high proportions of migrantised peers. They believed migrantised individuals received undeserved societal recognition and support, contrary to the norms of meritocracy, which, in their view, had not been upheld in their own lives. Consequently, interviewees expressed authoritarian demands (Heitmeyer et al., 2020). As Sandra, employee of an *AfD* member of parliament and *JA* member, stated:

[P]eople who come here must accept our rules and must try to integrate and contribute something like that, otherwise it won't work, because you also endanger our internal security. You must worry first of all that our own citizens live safely and if this internal security is contracted by the immigration of people who do not accept the rule of law and the values, then it just doesn't work.

This feeling of being entitled to better treatment while experiencing individual setbacks was found in previous studies on militant right-extremist youth in Germany (Rommelspacher, 2006) as well as among Tea Party supporters in the United States (Hochshild, 2016). However, the phenomenon of group-based enmity, characterised by devaluation of other social groups, is also common in mainstream German society (Zick et al., 2021).

Looking for a career. The Polish interviewees reported feeling a sense of fulfilling their citizen's duty towards the nation in activism. As one of the activists, Igor, stated:

We believe that we have some kind of duty, which tells us that if you don't do it, then there can be no one who does it . . . it simply won't happen. And I have such an attitude that I don't want to regret my life . . . In the future I want to share that with my grandchildren. I also tried to do something here for my local community, for myself, because I also develop myself in this way, and also for our whole nation.

In comparison, German interviewees showed individual self-realisation by pursuing a political career. They perceived the *AfD* and *JA* as political actors with a low threshold for entry by new, particularly young, members. At a time in which the party gained their first major political success, they quickly rose through the ranks of the organisation, often building up the local organisational structures, gaining access to power and, in some cases, paid positions.

For some activists, grassroots work in the community continued to be relevant, yet holding a political position or working for the party became a motive for staying. Subsequently, it strengthened further the opportunity to co-create and shape the political agenda, alongside providing financial stability and social recognition. While they perceived the means of the authoritarian organisations to fit best their need to bring about a change to their individual and as well as national history as opposed, for example, to join an armed struggle (cf. Bosi, 2012), it provided them with the opportunity for a career previously deemed unlikely due to educational or occupational struggles and incongruent values with the German political sphere. Given the immediate effect of the career opportunity the activists were not concerned with possible consequences of their involvement for their future (cf. Fjellmann and Sundström, 2021). The narrators who left the organisations differed in the career-orientation the most. To illustrate, the former member of the neo-Nazi group found recognition in his professional life and began having sympathies for his migrantised co-workers, whereas the former *JA* member found recognition in a more established conservative party with less focus on migration.

In Poland, the career options were less of a factor, but it must be taken into consideration that most of the Polish interviewees were inside the structures of non-parliamentary organisations, which did not take part in elections. They saw their engagement as a value-oriented duty, openly dismissing those in parliamentary politics. Some held leadership roles in regional branches, finding it flattering despite increased responsibilities and duties – albeit without financial gain.

Discussion and conclusion

While previous studies have primarily been focused on young people's motives for voting radical right (Arzheimer, 2012; Bottos et al., 2014), we filled a gap by analysing the

biographical pathways of young activists into radical right organisations in Germany and Poland. This study shows the interlocking of various factors in the studied biographies (Goodwin, 2010; Klandermans, 2021; Klandermans and Mayer, 2009; Köttig, 2004; Pasieka, 2022), and stresses the role of the sociopolitical context (Bertaux, 2012) in shaping country-specific involvement motives. Highlighting the role of critical events and the anti-migrant rhetoric climate (Bosi, 2012; cf. Miller-Idriss, 2018), we contribute to studies on youth activist participation trajectories (Bosi and Lavizzari, 2023).

Confirming prior findings on reasons behind joining high-risk/cost activism (McAdam, 1986), the article identifies new ones as well as explores the motives of staying within the organisations. Furthermore, it contributes to studies on the 'internationalisation of nationalism' (Pankowski, 2018). To our knowledge, it is the first article comparing young radical right activism in Poland, where radical right ideology has become part of official government politics, and Germany, where such views face challenges in public discourses, albeit with continuous attempts to penetrate the political establishment.

We reconstructed two ideal types of radical right activism in the two countries studied, namely (nationalist) *anti-political intellectualism/elitism* in Poland and (nationalist) *anti-establishment populist career* in Germany. Nationalist ideology (cf. Klandermans, 2004) played a major role in both countries, yet activists differed in their manifestations of it due to the different structures of political opportunity. While the Polish interviews centred on ethnocentric nationality, patriotism, traditions, and cultural anti-liberalism and anti-Communism, German interviews focused on idyllic German popular culture, and anti-establishment and anti-immigration values.

Although, similar to other studies (cf. Bosi, 2012; Goodwin, 2010; Pasieka, 2022), all the interviewees seemed to share the need to 'protect' the nation against external threats, German activists referred more to their experiences of personal injustice, and linked their educational and professional failures with the presence of migrantised people. In the German interviews, ideological motives were more oriented towards ethno-pluralism and populism, and concomitant downplaying of the rhetoric of the nationalist *Flügel* they admired. This needs to be interpreted within the context of a societal consensus against any 'heir of national socialism' (Berbuir et al., 2015).

In Poland, there was overall greater emphasis on ideology, which might be due to the

large rootedness and heterogeneity of radical right organisations and institutions in Poland, which allows people with such a worldview to find a place suited to their current needs. Notably, our analysis reflects suggestions to study various factors to understand the radical right other than those based solely on hatred (Tetrault, 2021) or rebellion (Shoshan, 2016).

In both countries, we observed continuity (Linden and Klandermans, 2007) with family values influencing children's political activism. Since the families were supportive or indifferent towards the involvement, it highlights the complex role of family in radical right socialisation (cf. Miller-Idriss, 2018). Moreover, interviewees in both countries shared identity (cf. Klandermans, 2004), and self-fulfilment motives, yet they were not central to their stories. We state that a sense of belonging significantly contributes to staying in the organisation (Blee, 2017). Beyond existing literature on involvement motives (ideology, identity and instrumentality) we propose adding an additional one, namely individual self-realisation. In Poland, this is linked to being a concerned and responsible citizen, serving the nation and thus acting on behalf of the imagined national community. In Germany, this motive is related to financial stability and social recognition, offering members security and a stable future perspective, countering socioeconomic insecurity (Siedler, 2011) and individual disappointment with the promise of meritocracy. Even for interviewees who were more interested in community-oriented motives, they were provided with social recognition (Decker and Brähler, 2018) and a stable opportunity to be part of the establishment – while holding on to anti-establishment attitudes. Given the career-orientation's immediate effect as opposed to perceiving their involvement as a useful resource for a later career (Weber, 2020), the activists were not concerned about negative career effects, unlike other young party members (Fjellmann and Sundström, 2021). Self-realisation, developing in the early phase post-joining, is secondary to participation (Fjellmann and Sundström, 2021), showcasing activism's transformative impact on individuals' biographical paths (Bjorgo, 2011; Blee, 2017).

The emergence of individual self-realisation as a motive confirms the normalisation of the radical right in Germany against the backdrop of the parliamentary presence of *AfD* (Pytlas, 2018). With the *AfD's entry into the national parliament, it gained vital resources and opened up new channels of social advancement for its young members. In*

Poland, the same normalisation has occurred, but it is indicated by the activists' interpretations of their involvement in terms of citizens' duties. Demonstrations or direct encounters with established political leaders known for their authoritarian and racist statements provided activists with feelings of approachability and emotional reassurance that what they do is correct, expected and socially valuable. Thus, despite the common features of an internalisation of the radical right, we found the sociopolitical contexts to be relevant (see Kajta et al., 2023; cf. Miller-Idriss, 2018).

Considering the growing institutionalisation of radical right organisations in both countries as manifested by the success of *AfD* in state and *Konfederacja* in parliamentary elections in 2023, further research is needed on right-wing activists and supporters. First, it could explore the presence and evolution of both ideal types (anti-political intellectualism/ elitism and anti-establishment populist career). Will career-oriented motives become dominant in the context of the normalisation of the radical right in both countries? Studying more organisations will help to understand the relevance of the motive of individual self-realisation as a financial motive linked to parliamentarism or social recognition.

While the number of former activists is small in our sample, we observe a heterogeneity of reasons behind leaving the radical right milieus, which would require further exploration. Moreover, activists of the radical right in the two countries need to be studied in the context of social media (an arena particularly known for its hate speech; see Caiani et al., 2021) as well as in other organisations, particularly in Germany. Finally, gender dynamics need to be studied more closely in recruiting activists (cf. Blee, 2017).

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