

National



POLICYBRIEF



PROMISE POLICY BRIEF: GERMANY (1 OF 2)

The Autonomists. Perceptions of societal change among radical left youth.

October 2018

INTRODUCTION

PROMISE explored the ways young people with a history of stigmatisation or conflict participate in society. In Germany, our research focussed on young people who are engaged in the 'extra-parliamentary left' or 'emancipatory left' scenes – in short, and more colloquially, named as 'the autonomists'.

This policy brief is concerned with the media portrayal and stigma of this group as a quintessentially violent or ready to use violence group, and tries to bring a different, multi-faceted perspective to the surface. The policy recommendations are directed towards policy makers and practitioners of youth work such as youth workers, teachers, social workers, and towards the police, particularly those policing demonstrations.

The aim of the recommendations is to give insights to the perceptions of societal change among a group of young people that, despite being referred to in the research as 'the autonomists', cannot be easily categorised as a single homogeneous group but belong to different regional scenes and groups.

They all share the eager wish to make the world a better place based on the principles of social cohesion, equality and justice. Within the groups and scenes exists a pervasive awareness of social inequality, discrimination and unequal treatment on the basis of skin colour, gender and other variables. The inevitable result of this is the guiding principle of solidarity with the disadvantaged and the repressed. The aim of their engagement is to lay the foundations for everyone to live in freedom and autonomously, without existential worries, and free from discrimination against skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, religion or lifestyle.

The interviewees (22 persons - 10 female, 12 male; median age 25.8 years - from different regions in North, South and East Germany) directly expressed a desire for 'world peace', 'justice' and 'independence from power relations'. On the other hand, interviewees felt 'mega restricted and powerless [...] against major powers, large entities, which tell you how to live' (Frauke, aged 25).

KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1) *Reduce the risks of criminalisation for young activists. Actions of the police appear to be arbitrary at demonstrations in particular*

The empirical material proves that there is a high risk of 'criminalisation' as soon as (young) people actively take part in actions and demonstrations on the so-called 'left-wing radical' spectrum. All of the interviewees had been subject to unjust, sometimes brutal treatment by the police and the legal authorities. Different kinds of injustice was felt and experienced by the interviewees including judicial hypocrisy and unequal treatment, police brutality, spying, surveillance, observation, criminalisation and attempted criminalisation. Negotiations with local authorities created a large gap between activists and the democratic social system.

Recommendation > It is crucial to give young people engaged in the 'extra-parliamentary left' the opportunity to protest for ideas and topics on the left political spectrum without treating them all under general suspicion of being black block stone throwers. De-escalating strategies instead of criminalising strategies should become a major police strategy.

2) *Media Portrayals are creating one sided, stigmatising pictures of the left activists. Reduce the apparently false and biased reportages about left demonstrations and actions*

The media focus on forms of militancy and the violent nature of left-wing groups dominated the thematic diversity in the scenes:

'it's often the case when you go to a demonstration as an anti-fascist that you are immediately judged to be part of the left-wing violent mob that's come to trash the place' (Tatjana, aged 26).

The research has shown the diversity of political issues, positions and actions and attempted to look at the extra-parliamentary left from a different angle.

The current media focus on militant phenomena in radical left-wing contexts reduces the extra-parliamentary left to only a few attributes, and reproduces a false and biased truth that already exists in the public's perception. In the self-perception of the autonomist scenes, violence and militancy are far less important. The views outlined in the research paint the picture of decidedly reflective individuals, scenes and groups, who intensively, discursively and through their actions, grapple with their own (internal) and external (in society) structures. At the same time, these groups see themselves subjected - in varying degrees - to intense stigmatisation, clear risks of criminalisation, and also to attacks from extreme right-wing groups.

Recommendation > Images projected by the media (who hold some responsibility), particularly in reports about demonstrations, that create stigmatising pictures should not be reproduced and multiplied.

3) *Accept the participation and outreach aims. Although not ostensible visible, there are numerous efforts and projects touching the issues of social and ethnical inequality targeting social cohesion. They deserve respect, acceptance and support.*

Means of participation and different forms of self-organised social work are implemented in the scenes. This relates to projects such neighbourhood work, which supports the effort to raise residents' awareness of their own political concerns by means of speeches and proposals that are of interest to them. Permanent

services, such as social advice and assistance services, exchange platforms or courses and sports activities, support and assistance as well as information and leisure time services could be set up and made available to interested residents of the respective neighbourhoods.

If anything, the interviewees were reluctant to speak about their participation intentions, as in the contexts of the street-based social work and the autonomous project work outlined above, where the protagonists are more concerned with reaching a wider segment of the population:

'in the meantime, I don't really want expand the scene any further [...], I really just want to do politics, yep, do politics [...], the problems this world is faced with, just sort of be involved in the discussions, tackle them, and, of course, simply to make the world a better place' (Gustav).

Recommendation > Projects and social work – no matter with what political intention, and independently of self-organisational characteristics – should be treated with the same respect and acceptance as similar ones carried out by 'professional' organisations supported in official funding schemes. The project and social work are targeting social cohesion in the broadest sense and can be conceptualised as grass root or self-organised local or 'real' policies. They are an expression of the (indirect) wish to participate and shape the society the young people are living in.

4) Recognise the informal learning processes for the activists and realise the enormous potential for individual empowerment.

The individual benefits that the interviewees generated from their social commitment and political pursuits are clearly evident. All of those we questioned spoke about their individual learning process that resulted from their activities and interactions both within their own structures, with people and institutions outside of them, and about how their experiences have empowered them personally. This personal development comes, for example, from managing pragmatic and organisational tasks, and from reflecting on occurrences and interactions within their own scenes. It also comes from analysing historical and everyday political events in local and (inter)national contexts, whilst correlating these with (system) critical theories.

The examination of (system) critical issues is perceived to be important. There does not seem to be the same possibilities for examining (system) critical issues with the corresponding thematic focus at the same depth outside of their own scenes and groups. All the activists who are so deeply involved in their projects unanimously expressed the feeling that they enjoyed these activities and that the activities gave them a sense of individual fulfilment and purpose.

Recommendation > Youth work should realise and support the individuation and individual empowerment of young people who are organising themselves in squatted houses, autonomous centres, self-organised youth centres and housing projects. This empowerment has positive effects on the well-being of these young people and their individuation. It is also a means and a form of encouragement to actively participate and shape the society these young people are living in.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Semi-structured individual and group interviews, participatory observation and secondary data analysis were the main sources of the empirical material that this policy brief is derived from. 16 interviews with 22 scene members, two expert interviews with a lawyer and a filmmaker, and 14 research diary entries that were written during the research and participation in various events. In addition, memos were written and records of participatory observations of scene-specific events as well as during occupations of properties, and during one major and one smaller demonstration. A radio broadcast by an Antifa group was also included in the analysis. Furthermore, we considered a programme broadcast by the German TV channel ZDF, which reported on the militancy of the autonomists in the wake of the G20 demonstrations; a film about anarchistic projects in Europe and a film on the topic of militant antifascism. Finally, photographs taken by the interviewees on the topic of 'political activity' were included in the analysis and coding of the data. The whole empirical phase lasted twelve months from April 2017 to April 2018.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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FURTHER READING	<p>Müller-Bachmann, E. 2018. Promise Case Studies. The Autonomists. Perceptions of societal change among radical left youth. http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/The-Autonomists-perceptions-of-societal-change-among-radical-left-youth.pdf</p> <p>Müller-Bachmann, E., Dähnke, I. 2018. National Context Report – Germany. http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/PROMISE-National-Context-Report-for-web.pdf</p>