

UNDERSTANDING THE PROTESTS AGAINST ANTI-COVID MEASURES IN EUROPE

Key findings of the Cultures of Rejection (CuRe) Research Group from Serbia, Croatia, Austria, Germany and Sweden

The Cultures of Rejection (CuRe) Research Group is a consortium of researchers from various disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, political science, and philosophy, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. In early 2019, CuRe began to investigate the social and cultural conditions in which authoritarian and far-right populist movements operate and thrive, conducting empirical research along the transnational space created by the migration movements in 2015 in Serbia, Croatia, Austria, Germany, and Sweden. Reacting to the **new circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic**, in 2021 the research group began to conduct in-depth studies of mobilizations, both online and offline, against anti-COVID measures, such as lockdowns, mandatory face masks and vaccinations, in all five countries.

In this executive summary, we present main insights of our research, shedding light on some key features of the protest movements from an international, comparative perspective. They can be briefly summarised in four statements:

- 1 | The protest movements have emerged on the fertile grounds of pre-existing “cultures of rejection”**
- 2 | The social and political composition of the protest movements varies significantly across different countries, and has shifted over the past year**
- 3 | There are some common characteristics of the protest movements: Hyper-individualism and hyper-personalised politics, a mixture of conspiracy thinking and spiritualism, and distrust and rejection of authorities**
- 4 | The protest movements against anti-COVID measures might have long-term political ramifications. They have produced collective experiences, social connections and organisational infrastructures that are likely to last beyond the pandemic**

1**The protest movements have emerged on the fertile grounds of pre-existing “cultures of rejection”**

In all of the countries covered by our research teams, large protests against anti-pandemic measures have taken place. In some cases, they have developed into full-fledged social movements. It is crucial to understand that protests against anti-COVID measures and vaccination did not emerge spontaneously in reaction to the lockdowns or vaccination campaigns. They have grown on the fertile grounds of widespread scepticism of political and social authorities, sentiments that **we have analysed as parts of “cultures of rejection”**, and which predate the pandemic. Across participating countries, our research revealed evaporating beliefs in political efficacy leading to either the explicit rejection of politicians or of politics as such, as well as a retreat into the private sphere and dissociation from political events. In many cases, perceptions prevailed that media institutions were not trustworthy or that free speech was threatened by censorship in established media, but also online. This latent crisis of authority has been catalysed by the crisis. Expert panels and scientific advisory boards have gained political power in largely unprecedented ways and broadcast media as well as social media platforms have become necessary to remain informed regarding the pandemic’s dynamic development. As sociologist Gil Eyal has pointed out, **an increasing “expertisation of politics” is accompanied by a “politicisation of expertise”**, i.e. more contestation of scientific and medical expertise. The protest movement radicalised such politicisation under the extraordinary circumstances of a global pandemic, in many cases drawing on the symbolic repertoires set up by far-right discourses in the past.

2**The social and political composition of the protest movements varies significantly across different countries, and has shifted over the past year**

In all five countries, protest movements against anti-COVID measures were characterised by a heterogeneous composition in social and political respects. At the beginning of our research in early 2021, we observed protesters from different social and cultural milieus coming together, unified by their opposition to the governmental interventions. While far-right groups and parties were present at most protests, in their early stages they represented only a fraction of the protesters. However, this gradually changed as the movement developed over time. Increasingly, protests were dominated by a combination of far-right conspiracy myths and the populist division between “the people” and “the elite”, lending them a stronger right-wing character. In some countries, especially in Austria and some parts of Germany, organised far-right groups and parties were able to take the lead and dominate the movement, openly propagating racist and

anti-migration ideology while claiming to defend “freedom, peace and democracy”. We also witnessed a tension within the protest movements between a desire for a return to “normality”, and an almost eschatological desire for a “big bang” which would get rid of all existing politicians and institutions. Far-right politicians and activists can and do speak to both, but there remains tension between them.

In **Germany**, protests are often merged under the term “Querdenker” (lateral thinkers), partly conflating the movements’ variegated character. The Querdenken-Initiative, founded in 2020 in Southwest Germany, is characterised by esoteric and spiritual traditions, alternative medicine, and a libertarian ethos. It draws on alternative experts in law, medicine, and technology. While the movement **is rooted in a regionally specific anthroposophic tradition**, its franchise-model has allowed countless Querdenken groups to emerge across the country. The right-wing populist party “Alternative für Deutschland” (AfD) as well as right-wing extremist groups, are present and tolerated at many protests, but they only take on active organising in a few select cases. After several failed attempts, core members of the movement have founded their own party, “Die Basis”. It focuses on principles of holism, political co-determination, and individual freedom, and draws on ideas of liquid democracy to formulate its positions. In the 2021 federal election, the party gathered less than 2 percent of the total vote, thus failing to enter parliament.

The movement has been described as **“coming from the left and moving to the right”**. However, this is a regionally specific diagnosis. In 2021, we have observed both a growing presence and influence of organised far-right groups, as well as accelerating processes of radicalization to the right among protesters. In contrast to large-scale events, smaller and more decentralised “Spaziergänge” (strolls) took place and physical violence against police and journalists, as well as explicit threats against politicians have become part of the movement’s activities. In the eastern province of Saxony, far-right extremists founded the party “Freie Sachsen” (“Free Saxonians”) in early 2021 and assumed a key role in the organisation of regional protests. The party promotes anti-migration policies and demands full Saxonian sovereignty from the German Federal State. In Germany, the protest movement against anti-COVID measures is thus characterised by geographical differences, drawing on specific regional conditions and histories. Protest events, however, appear to become more decentralised and more prone to physical violence as the movement’s political rhetoric is intensifying.

In **Austria**, protests against anti-COVID measures first emerged in April 2020. Smaller far-right groups were present at these events early on, but the protests failed to gather larger support at first. This changed significantly by the end of 2020, when protests grew from smaller gatherings to mass mobilisations, culminating in a series of mass demonstrations in Vienna in January 2021. While mobilizations tend to focus on the capital city of Vienna, the strongholds of the movement are found in the towns and smaller cities of the various rural provinces of Austria. In Upper Austria (which is also the province with the lowest vaccination rate), the new political party “Men-

schen – Freiheit – Grundrechte” (Humans – Freedom – Basic Rights), emerged in early 2021 from the protest movement and managed to enter the regional parliament in September 2021 with 6.2 percent of the vote.

Over the course of our study, we observed that far-right actors and talking points were present in the protest movement in both offline and online spaces. This became more drastic throughout 2021. The single most influential political actor in this process is the far-right “Freedom Party” (FPÖ). A well-established populist party, the FPÖ initially supported the government’s anti-pandemic measures in early 2020, but decided to fully back the emerging protest movement by the end of the same year. By 2021, the party had become the leading mobilising force in the large-scale “mega events”, while the smaller protest activities – “strolls”, vigils, sit-ins, and online protests – were mostly organised by local, grass-roots activists and smaller organisations. Of the latter, some are long standing, openly far-right and even neo-Nazi groups (“Die Identitären”, “Corona-Querfront”), while others were only founded recently and represent mixtures of libertarianism, esotericism and provincialism. Most recently, the Austrian government’s decision to introduce a vaccination mandate, which was supported by all parties represented in parliament except for the FPÖ, has fueled the movement.

In **Croatia**, the beginning of the pandemic was marked by high levels of support for the government’s COVID-19 coordinating body (Stožer) and the ensuing measures. However, for a number of reasons including economic insecurity, inconsistent or obviously flawed measures (e.g. store closing hours set one hour after the end of the common work day, which led to an increase, rather than a decrease, in crowds), insufficient public communication of the rationale of some measures and proliferation of contradictory and fake news, the trust in government and Stožer began to wane. Early protests in 2021 consisted of people with diverse motivations for opposing the measures – notably those who lost their jobs and businesses due to the crisis, those who distrusted the party in power, libertarians and conspiracy theorists. While some EU representatives and former members of parliament, all known followers of conspiracy theories, supported the protests, no party had fully endorsed the rejection of COVID-19 measures at that point.

This changed in the course of 2021, when “Most” (The Bridge), a right-wing populist party, made the rejection of anti-COVID measures their primary political agenda. “Most” opposes green passes, both a vaccine mandate and the promotion of vaccines, and a variety of other government interventions. Their public reasoning tends to rely on misrepresenting government policies (for instance, they insist on the lie that vaccines were falsely promoted as a perfect protection against COVID-19 infection and transmission), on a distrust of the governing party and on a concern for the encroachment on individual liberties. They do not make use of explicit far-right symbolism and skirt conspiracy theories, skillfully avoiding to endorse them. “Most” aims to become the face of the rejection of COVID-19 measures in an attempt to gain voters, and groups of far-right activists have become one of the loudest voices during the latest protests. However,

the movement remains diverse. Video recordings from recent demonstrations document explicit disagreement between participants: those circulating conspiracies about the media and making threats against journalists on one hand, and those distancing themselves from violent and conspiratorial positions on the other.

In **Serbia**, protests against lockdown measures started in late April and early May of 2020. They were initiated by opposition movements and parties and consisted of citizens banging their metal dishes, pots and pans on their windows every evening at 20:05. This was presented as a form of protest during the curfew, which started every day at 5pm and lasted till 5am on the next day. It was presented to citizens as a protest against unnecessarily strict lockdown measures which politicians of the opposition saw as a gesture of the government's power.

After anti-COVID measures were loosened in early May, a second wave of protests occurred in July of 2020 after the announcement that a curfew would be reintroduced. These were violent protests that occurred, in part, spontaneously with far-right elements present. The spontaneous demonstrations were motivated by the feeling that reintroducing the curfew was an arbitrary decision, seeing that the government had just held elections the week before. Far-right organisations and symbolism could be detected in violent groups who attended the events along with far-right politicians like Srđan Nogo, a former member of a conservative party "Dveri". These groups attempted to monopolise the demonstrations, proclaiming their concern that the government may recognize the independence of Kosovo. Since then, two smaller waves of protests have occurred in Serbia. In the spring of 2021, a shutdown without curfew was introduced, and vaccination efforts were increased. Protests involved a mixed attendance: Owners of restaurants, coffee shops or bars, independent musicians, free-lance photographers and far right-groups. While the first were protesting the lockdown, the last group was protesting the vaccination. Popular anti-vaccination Spokespeople like psychiatrist Jovana Stojković and Saša Radulović, the head of the far-right movement "Enough is Enough" actively participated, while oppositional politicians kept their distance. At present, the last wave of protests occurred in October 2021 in response to the newly introduced COVID pass, which bans unvaccinated people from entering restaurants, bars and coffee shops after 8pm. These gatherings were extremely small (no more than a few hundred people) attended neither by politicians nor notable anti-vaccination spokespeople.

In contrast to other European countries and their movements, **Sweden** might be considered a late bloomer. The first anti-restriction demonstration started during the autumn of 2020 and anti-restriction discourse has been widely spread on social media platforms. But it wasn't until March of 2021 that the movement "Freedom and Truth" was created and held its first demonstration in Stockholm against the pandemic law, which authorises rapid governmental interventions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 by way of enforceable restriction. The movement consists of a diverse group of people creating a space where both the left and right, spiritual and conspiratorial actors find meaning. This movement understands "Freedom and Truth" in largely

individualist and liberal terms, but there appears to be “room for everyone” in the movement, ranging from right-wingers, including supporters of the populist right-wing “Alternative for Sweden”, as well as members of “The Nordic Resistance Movement” (a neo-nazi/fascist organisation advocating violence), to leftists. Most prominently, however, the protests unite people who do not feel represented in the Swedish political landscape. This group advocates against COVID-19 restrictions, and for peace, freedom, truth, and love. Subsequently, it further strengthens the ties between alternative spiritualists and conspiratorial thinkers in their struggle against the “mainstream media”, politicians they do not feel represented by, big corporations and those deemed to be in power. In 2022, this movement gained more followers in their opposition to vaccine passports, expressing their dissent and rejection against politicians and authority in the light of the pandemic. In January of 2022, the organisation managed to mobilise around 10 000 people for one of their largest demonstrations in Stockholm, where several members of The Nordic Resistance Movement joined the event and handed out pamphlets to demonstrators.

To summarise, we have witnessed two parallel processes. On the one hand existing far-right and right-wing populist movements or parties are using the protest movements to expand their influence, gain wider audiences and strengthen their organisations. On the other hand, a specific ideological mixture of hyper-individualism, conspiracy thinking, spiritualism and a strong rejection of institutions of authority has emerged within the movements. These processes are fundamentally enabled by the digital infrastructures of established, as well as alternative social media channels. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter provide central channels for communication among participants in all countries. However, alternative media environments grew in opposition to traditional social media channels tightening their regulations of disinformation in 2020. In almost all cases, the messaging service Telegram is a central organisational tool, but so are Twitter-clones such as Gab and Gettr, alternative streaming services and social networks for self-proclaimed dissidents.

3

There are some common characteristics of the protest movements: Hyper-individualism and hyper-personalised politics, a mixture of conspiracy thinking and spiritualism, and distrust and rejection of authorities

In all countries, the movements exhibit a kind of political mobilisation strongly centred on specific individuals. Most mobilisations follow the logic of an influencer event, where important figures of the movement come together for their common cause and mobilise their followers. Many key actors within the movement do not have a larger organisational background or a political history, but instead emerged as **movement entrepreneurs**, representing their personal political brand. Often, this personalised style goes hand in hand with a cult-like, sometimes even messi-

anic rhetoric, but also with rather profane commercial interests. In the latter case, movement leaders either collect donations directly, sell merchandise or tickets for transportation to protest events, or advertise products for commissioning fees.

The Croatian right-wing populist party “Most” counts as one example of this **hyper-personalization**. A majority of their leading members had been public figures before joining the party. They were either local politicians or media personalities, and their rhetoric frequently purports to represent all Croatian people, and not their political party. The two most prominent figures, Marin Miletić and Marija Selak Raspudić, a social media influencer and a television pundit respectively, joined “Most” before the last elections, and swiftly rose through party ranks in its aftermath. Marin Miletić, a former religious studies school teacher, is highly skilled in social media and public communication and makes use of his standing in the Christian community for political purposes. Simultaneously, he fosters the image of a modern, athletic and stylish character, notably different from the traditional Croatian image of a right-wing politician. His rhetoric is messianic, presenting himself as a conduit for the general will of the Croatian people. He writes distinctively, mixing everyday experiences and common street talk with sermon-like moralistic poetics, fashioning himself into both an everyman and a preacher. More recently, he has been advocating to his Facebook followers to join him on alternative social media platforms Telegram and Gettr to “talk freely”, further personalising his political brand.

The hyper-personalised style of politics that we find in the protest movements corresponds with a general notion of **hyper-individualism** among protesters. Demands to end anti-COVID-19 measures and the rejection of vaccinations are articulated in the name of a personal, individual freedom that ignores the social and collective dynamics of a pandemic. In its most radical form, this leads to an implicitly social darwinist worldview in which the price that society has to pay for the protection of individual freedom is the demise of those deemed too old, too ill or unfit for survival.

This hyper-individualism forms a central contradiction at the heart of the protest movements, which often combine libertarian and ethno-conservative or nationalist elements. On one hand, they demand freedom from restrictions imposed by the government in the name of personal liberty and in fear of an authoritarian state. At the same time, far-right political parties, movements or individuals whose rhetoric is saturated with calls for national unity, ethno-nationalist and illiberal ideas are regular participants. Protests frequently oscillate between positions of minorization and majorization. Many movement activists claim to speak for a silent majority that includes the whole of “humanity”, the country, or “the people” who are subjugated by powerful elites. Simultaneously they draw on a position as discriminated outcasts, persecuted minorities or as excluded “free” thinkers. In Germany and Austria, the latter process of **self-minorization** employs historical references from the era of national socialism, such as persecuted jews, or antifascist resistance fighters. This stance trivialises the crimes of National Socialism, associating

present governments with fascist dictatorship and purports that protesters are the persecuted victims of a totalitarian government. It implies antagonisms both between the protesters and the political authorities, as well as between the protesters and the adherents of the ruling powers. The latter are seen not only as obedient followers, but as passive supporters of a violent and dictatorial regime. In combination with the belief in a secretive and malicious power that rules the world this self-victimisation, follows an antisemitic ideological structure.

Significant segments of the protest movements go well beyond a critique of the measures introduced to curb the pandemic, calling for an “awakening” that would reconnect humanity with nature and a holistic way of living. A prominent feature in all mobilizations we observed is the peculiar **combination of conspiratorial and spiritual thinking**. This seemingly odd mixture has been described as **“Conspiritoriality”** before the pandemic by sociologists Charlotte Ward and David Voas. Conspiritoriality is founded on the core convictions that “a secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order”, and that “humanity is undergoing a ‘paradigm shift’ in consciousness”. The global scope of the COVID-19 pandemic, which simultaneously impacts people in the most intimate ways, makes bodies and their immune systems into an object of intense political debate and governance. This situation has acted as a catalyst for conspiritoriality as a politico-spiritual philosophy, and is giving rise to many of the supposedly irrational phenomena displayed in the protest movements.

Underlying conspiritoriality and the rejection of vaccines in particular is a general element of distrust. Superficially, this distrust can be seen as directed against “science”. Our research suggests a more complicated picture. Participants in protest movements do not necessarily reject science or medical expertise as such, but scientific institutions, authorities, and their representatives. Participants regularly draw on certain scientific or investigatory practises. They gather data to process their own studies about COVID-19, they encourage others to “do their own research” and they employ medical “counter-experts”. The **rejection of established authorities**, including scientific experts, political and state authorities and established media institutions is thus a central feature of the movements against the pandemic measures. This implies, in certain situations, openly hostile and violent attitudes toward journalists and the media. The strong presence of conspiracy myths in the movements, which rely strongly on perceptions that established media is manipulative and dishonest, catalyses this rejection. It is worth mentioning that coverage of the protests did in some cases obscure the complexity of their composition and focused exclusively on statements and action of its most extreme and eccentric members.

The protest movements against anti-COVID measures might have long-term political ramifications

In all countries where we conducted research, a significant number of people have been participating in protest activities on a regular basis. Even where they haven't managed to mobilise large numbers of protesters physically, the movements represent significant minorities in their respective countries. Their long-term ramifications have to be taken into account, for several reasons. The demonstrations constitute crucial events during an unprecedented crisis, which will mark the biographical narratives of countless people. In contrast to the manifold restrictions on personal contacts and social life, the often spectacular and emotional quality of the demonstrations are well-suited to inscribe themselves into these narratives. Beyond the immediate experiences, demonstrators have additionally created social connections and organisational infrastructures suited to last beyond the pandemic. Especially the expansion of digital communication channels appears to have reached people not previously active or aware of "alternative" media environments. Lastly, these protests catalyse "cultures of rejection" present before the pandemic – for example those protesting migration – in ways that might be crucial for the political crises to come and as socio-ecological disasters may rise in frequency. The protest may thus have lasting effects on the political landscapes in all countries, but it remains too early to fully outline in which ways exactly. The situation remains volatile, with protests ebbing and flowing depending on the political responses enacted in all countries analysed. If and how they are able to change the political landscape in Europe will ultimately depend on the ways in which governments, but also civil society, and media institutions choose to deal with these movements in the near future.

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