

# Countering right-wing extremism and Protect human dignity and mental health - - Open letter from psychologists and psychotherapists -

In view of the upcoming European and state elections, we psychologists and psychotherapists would like to draw attention to the dangers to democracy and mental health posed by right-wing populism and right-wing extremism. These political movements promote a social atmosphere that is characterized by fear, hatred and resentment and endangers human dignity. This is illustrated, for example, by the latest declarations by the employers' association and IG-Metall (both in North Rhine-Westphalia), which describe the AfD as unelectable.

Our professional experience shows that right-wing extremist ideologies exacerbate the emotional distress of many people through exclusionary and misanthropic rhetoric and actions. Right-wing populists work with "friend-enemy stereotypes" and pursue a nationalist-racist world view that promotes exclusion and contempt for humanity. These ideologies destabilize mental health by reinforcing feelings of powerlessness and helplessness, which undermines mental health and resilience. In times of crisis, many people already feel vulnerable and search for identity and security, making them susceptible to the manipulative messages of the far-right.

Right-wing extremists use this emotional vulnerability to conjure up an ethnic-nationalist group affiliation that is intended to create a feeling of superiority and effectiveness. This recently became clear in the scandal surrounding the song "Deutschland den Deutschen – Ausländer raus!" at a party in Sylt. Such incidents show how right-wing extremist ideologies can appear in supposedly harmless forms. The remnants of a democratic conscience are overridden by a rousing atmosphere in the group and inhumane beer tent or party humor.

We emphasize that the concept of identity intended by right-wing extremists and distorted by the "Identitarian movement" represents a danger. In contrast, the psychological concept of identity according to E. Erikson is based on a constant psychosocial exchange that supports and promotes the experience of sameness and continuity over time: "I am if you are too". The positive form of identity, which is based on the recognition of others even in their differences, is perverted by right-wing extremist ideologies into an exclusionary and destructive "I am when you are not".

A promising approach to better understand the psychology of right-wing extremism is the concept of "epistemic trust or distrust". This type of trust refers to the belief that others (people and sources) can correctly explain relevant social and cultural contexts. This trust is closely related to the ability to mentalize - the ability to empathize with the inner world of others and reflect on one's own inner world. A lack of this mutual empathy leads to misunderstandings and conflicts, which are exploited by right-wing populists to stir up mistrust and fear.

Politics and society must take this psychological condition seriously and develop strategies to reach people emotionally and cognitively. The media play an important role in this by emphasizing the importance of emotionality and psychology in right-wing extremism and thus contributing to a better understanding.

We see it as our responsibility to warn against the threat to democracy and health posed by the AfD and other far-right groups. We also want to actively contribute to shaping this process and offer our

expertise through editorial contributions, commentaries, interviews and blog posts. Not only that: we also plan concrete activities within the scope of our personal possibilities.

Only together can we combat the psychological and social effects of right-wing extremism and promote a democratic and healthy society.

The open letter was initiated by:

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