

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode: Becoming a young radical right activist

Speakers: Professor Vera Trappmann, Dr Janina Myrczik and Dr Justyna Kajta

[00:00:00] **Vera:** Welcome to the Research Innovation Podcast. I'm Professor Vera Trappmann and today I'm joined by my colleagues and co-authors Dr Janina Myrczik from Medical School Berlin and Dr Justyna Kajta from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw. Hello.

[00:00:21] **Janina:** Hi.

[00:00:22] **Justyna:** Hi. Thanks for having us.

[00:00:23] **Vera:** And today we'd like to discuss our recent paper published in Current Sociology about the radical right. It's called "Becoming a Young Radical Right Activist, Biographical Pathways of the Members of Radical Right Organizations in Poland and Germany."

Janina, would you tell us a little bit about the project? What was it about and, why did we decide to work on it?

[00:00:48] **Janina:** Yeah, sure. So the project originally examined supporters of the new right wing populist parties and movements in Poland and Germany from a sociological perspective. And we were interested in comparing discourses between the countries as well as biographical pathways into activism.

I guess everyone has seen this tendency since the financial market crisis, maybe of 2008, that in Western democracies, we have had this, there is a wave really of right wing populism where we saw features of more authoritarianism of xenophobia, et cetera.

I think we're all familiar with people such as Trump in the US or Nigel Farage in the UK or Orban in Hungary, Marine Le Pen in France, the same we have in Poland and Germany. So we do see globally similar features of this new right wing populism. It was something that is called internationalization of the new radical right.

So certain similar features, but also differences. So we were interested in also digging into the [00:02:00] differences between countries. And Poland and Germany were picked - I mean, of course we are from Poland and Germany, first of all - but they're interesting cases for comparison. They both have witnessed a trend since 2014. In Poland there was even a national conservative government with the Law and Justice party. And since 2015, the rule of law in Poland has really been transformed almost like an authoritarian democracy with restricted media, freedom, judiciary, and the work of the constitutional court. And so in Poland, the radical right, it has faced very little resistance. It's drawn on widespread societal pride around its right wing history.

In Germany, the situation is different mostly due to the history of national socialism and Hitler. And so there has been, or every positive interpretation of the country's radical right history has been frowned upon.

At least by the time we conducted the interviews and we did the analysis, it's changed. So since last year, even the liberal government in Germany has shifted discursively to the right, but we have different starting points.

[00:03:21] **Vera:** Yeah, thanks Janina.

Could we clarify for the audience what do we mean by radical right?

[00:03:28] **Justyna:** Yeah, yeah, sure. It's important to clarify this. We used so-called minimal definition of radical right that was suggested in the literature by Cas Mudde. And according to this definition, a key aspect of the radical right is nativism which basically says that a state should be inhabited only by people who are considered native to it, who belong to the nation, understood usually in ethno-cultural terms, and any non-native person or ideas, it can be, for example, [00:04:00] migrants, LGBT community, feminism, are seen as a threat to the unity of homogeneous nation state.

Of course, there are other characteristics linked in the literature with the radical right, such as authoritarianism or populism, but they don't necessarily apply to every type of organization of the radical right we studied.

And since I already referred to the studied organizations, I probably should briefly specify this. As Janina mentioned, we focus on Poland and Germany. We spoke with members of radical rights, social movement, organizations, and political parties. In Poland, there were two movements, the National Radical Camp and the All-Polish Youth, and one political party - Confederation, Liberty, and Independence.

In Germany, it was a political party - Alternative for Germany - and party youth organization, Young Alternatives. And our article is based on analysis of 28 interviews with members of those organizations which we conducted between 2019 and 2021.

[00:05:03] **Janina:** Maybe I can say also something a bit about young people when you just mentioned the parties. Because that's also changed a bit especially in, in Germany right now. And our topic has become more, even more current. And so in Poland, among young people that there were so young voters, we knew often turned to populist parties, often turned to radical right populist parties in Poland.

This has been at, 33%. In 2015, it went down a bit to around 20% in Germany. So for the AfD, for this Alternative for Germany as they call themselves the young people voted or had the tendency to vote at 14% last year, and now it's the most popular party among the youth in Germany. So just recently a youth publication came out. So this is really the [00:06:00] trend among youth in Germany right now.

[00:06:02] **Vera:** Yeah, that is a very worrying tendency. And I guess our research can really maybe help understanding some of those motivations. Could we explain why did we go for biographical interviews with young people then?

[00:06:19] **Justyna:** Yeah, yeah, sure. So on the one hand, the literature discussing the processes present and successes of the radical right has been recently growing.

On the other hand, we observed that it often concerned electoral choices, votes, support, rather than actual involvement in the movements or in the parties. Besides, despite calls to combine different approaches and account for the specific historical time and internationalizations mentioned by Janina, existing studies usually concentrate on single issues or a single context.

And also researchers tend to avoid interviewing representatives of the radical right circles. And having it in mind, we had two main assumptions. Firstly, we thought 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, and we wanted to know more about it.

And secondly, we assume that we need to take into account broader social, political, and institutional settings in which this becoming happens. Meaning families, school, other institutions, which can influence individuals' experiences and worldview, as well as broader cultural and political context in a given time and in a given state.

Hence the idea was to collect life stories to explore more why and how people join radical right organizations. How do they understand the involvement? What it gives them? What makes them stay? If they are supported by their relatives, [00:08:00] friends, institutions, and finally, what we can say about those analysed processes when we take into account comparative cross-country perspective with two countries having different socio political contexts.

So, of course, we were aware of challenges with the fieldwork, but we decided to collect those interviews to be able to answer our research questions and elaborate more on the processes of being attracted by radical ideas and initiatives.

[00:08:28] **Vera:** Could you tell us a little bit about how we found our interviewees and how the process of making contact and the agreement of interviewees, how that evolved?

[00:08:41] **Justyna:** Yeah, the process was quite complicated, and I think it was different for each country. In Poland, we based a little bit on our previous research, so we tried to use the already established networks and usually informal contacts worked quite well. So we contacted the members of those organizations via their emails, Facebook profiles.

But mostly snowball sampling worked the best. So we tried to get access to new people via those with whom we already spoke. I think in Germany, it was more complicated. Maybe Janina could tell us more about it.

[00:09:26] **Janina:** Yeah, so it was a bit more complicated. We contacted mainly different organizations.

We contacted the political party and the youth organization through the websites. They had some contacts back then on the website, so we could, we were able to do this. We got some replies from them. We did a bit of snowball sampling as well. We also contacted YouTubers, right wing YouTubers, and people from the Identitarian movement.

They refused to be interviewed. And [00:10:00] then we also went to some marches and rallies and interviewed people.

[00:10:05] **Vera:** Yeah, and I think it's important to say that everyone gave consent to be interviewed and was happy with the interview and that it's published. Could you tell us some of the main results that we found, and maybe also go into the differences between the countries that we found?

[00:10:23] **Janina:** Yeah, yeah, sure. So we found some similarities. So first of all, as Justyna said, we were looking into families and friends, etc. So we saw in both countries a continuity of values. So there was no break with the past or nothing completely new in their lives with this activism.

So there was support or indifference by the family towards the political involvement. There was limited critique of the radical right by the families. Basically, they passed down their values, their ideologies. They feared a bit that their children would get into trouble. So they would face disadvantages by the activism both countries, both activists from both countries shared this.

When it comes to a feeling of belonging and finding like-minded people in the organization, that was also the same. So there was this sense of, you know, being among peers. When it comes to mobilization, repression, it was also similar, so, the mobilization happened a lot through demonstrations, the, you know, emotions being in the demonstration doing something with your peers, and the repressions by the majority society and the stigmas attached to being a member even strengthened the participation for both countries.

What we saw in differences we found, or we constructed ideal types and in Poland, we called it the anti-political intellectualism, which basically meant they are opposed to the political establishment and [00:12:00] they feel that they're kind of an intellectual elite.

And in Germany that was different. We found an anti, what we called an anti-establishment political career so they're against the establishment, they're against the elites, or what they perceive as elites, and they found also something, something like a political career. That was not why they wanted to go into the organization, but it's something they received.

So in Germany, we had a lot of occupational or educational setbacks in their biographies, and they received immediately something by being a member. So they got an opportunity for financial stability. They got social recognition because they quickly rose through the ranks. That was a major difference.

And we could also observe a tension between being anti-establishment, but also really longing to be establishment because they know they can bring only change or they feel they can only bring about change by being part of the establishment and as well as receiving some kind of career. So there's opportunity for financial stability, and social recognition is what we call political career.

In Poland, this more anti-political intellectualism is, we see it as very ideology driven in Poland, much more than in Germany. Right, we remember it's more established, so we have established institutionalized socialization, so we have spaces such as the church or football clubs where radicalization takes place.

And Polish activists, they perceive their activism kind of as a moral duty to protect the nation, which we don't have in Germany, which is connected to the stronghold of the radical rights, the less repression by majority society.

[00:14:00] So what we saw next to motives that we're already familiar on research of having these values of being with like-minded people and to know that you can bring about a change is what we call individual self-realization. So, in Poland, we have this that you want to have this moral duty as a citizen to the conscious citizen to bring about a change. And in Germany, it's also having this political career as individual self-realization.

So that was basically, yeah, the similarities, but also differences in the country. So we see a mainstreaming of the radical right, but we also see clearly the differences in the socio political context between the countries.

[00:14:44] **Vera:** Thanks. As you said, it's a while ago that we conducted the interviews and the political context has changed dramatically to an extent that we probably wouldn't have assumed when we started doing the interviews. We were kind of thinking we are looking into an outlier phenomenon. What do you think is next politically and for research?

[00:15:05] **Justyna:** Maybe it doesn't sound very optimistic for many of us, but surely there is still a lot to research regarding the radical right. And when we look at the current socio-political context, as you mentioned, Vera, it's very dynamic and marked by crises and uncertainty.

So it's clear that further studies are needed to observe the relationship between those macro changes and the development of radical right, including potential further internationalization of it. And I think that coming elections in Germany, but also in other countries are also relevant in this context, that we should follow this and we should probably continue researching biographies but also discourses and see it as a whole picture and interlinks between micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

[00:15:59] **Janina:** Yeah, maybe an [00:16:00] update from Germany. So what you just entered to the elections the polls are very positive for the radical right party in Germany.

It's not among, very popular among youth, but we have more than 30 or 35, in some states percent for the Alternative for Germany. So we will have more mainstreaming, more institutionalization. So we might see even more of this career motive, but also see more a tendency towards the ideology. So, you know, being more established already in some spaces than what we had some years ago.

And we see some more women also in politics, not a lot. But we do see some, so that would also be something to research.

[00:16:50] **Vera:** Okay, thanks. Thanks both for giving this really good overview and insights. The data was conducted almost five years ago. So I think we need to keep that in mind when we see this

as it was at the time. It would probably be different if we did the study today, but I think it just shows that we need more research in this space and that is really important.

[00:17:13] **Justyna:** I would just add that, of course, today we're focusing on the most important findings, but in the paper we go into more detail about how different factors affect young radical right activists' biographical paths.

If anyone wants to know more, we invite you to read the whole article published in *The Current Sociology*.

[00:17:34] **Vera:** yeah, the link of the paper will be available in the show notes.

Thanks for coming.

[00:17:39] **Janina:** Thank you, Vera.

[00:17:40] **Justyna:** Thank you.

[00:17:41] **Vera:** And thank you for listening, and if you want, you can subscribe to the Research and Innovation podcast.

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