Establishing and Strengthening Structures to Address Sovereignism in Germany

Policy Recommendations

1 Introduction

Movements that reject the legitimacy of the state pose a growing challenge to democratic societies. In Germany, the phenomenon commonly referred to as ***Reichsbürger*innen*** and ***Selbstverwalter*innen*** has gained significant public and political attention over the past decade. In this policy brief, the term ***sovereignism*** is used to capture the full scope of ideologies and behaviors marked by a fundamental distrust in, and perceived illegitimacy of, governments and public institutions of authority.

At its core, the ideology is shaped by a rejection of authority. It is closely linked to conspiratorial thinking and intersects with esoteric and spiritual beliefs. While the core narratives of sovereignism are clearly far-right, there are left-leaning elements that align with their themes of self-governance, self-sufficiency, and a desire for the common good. Sovereignist actors instrumentalize current events and societal crises to legitimize their worldview and disseminate their narratives. As a result, the scope of sovereignism is far broader than commonly acknowledged, affecting a wide range of sectors from law enforcement and public administrations to schools and healthcare institutions, each facing specific challenges when confronted with this phenomenon.

People are drawn to sovereignist beliefs for a mix of personal, social, and economic reasons. Feelings of frustration with politics, negative experiences with government systems, and a general distrust in institutions play a major role. Additionally, isolation and loneliness can push individuals to seek out connection, validation, and a sense of belonging. For example, individuals committing to sovereignist ideology can feel connected when becoming part of a community seeking to build their own independent structures of governance and organizing, and within this group they may find validation from like-minded individuals.

According to the German domestic intelligence service (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*), the sovereignist scene comprised approximately 25.000 individuals as of 2023, a number that has steadily increased in recent years. A growing subset of these adherents is considered prone to violence. Notably, several violent incidents and revealed plottings of coups have underscored the threat in the past years. All in all, the ideology contributes to the erosion of trust in democratic values and the destabilization of social cohesion and public order.

Considering these developments, there is an urgent need for a strategic, evidence-based, and proactive response. This policy brief draws on empirical findings from the project PreP-Ex (Preparing Professionals for the Rising Threat of Anti-Authority Extremism), which examined sovereignism and anti-authority extremism in Germany and Canada. It fosters a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and its ideological core across national contexts. It includes a variety of perspectives such as from experts, who interact with adherents as part of their profession, as well as from individuals holding sovereignist beliefs and their close contacts. Building on insights from these perspectives, the policy brief outlines key risks and challenges posed by sovereignism and formulates actionable recommendations to support policymakers and decision-makers in Germany in preventing, addressing, and mitigating its impact.

2 The Threats and Challenges of Sovereignism

Personal Harm and Public Danger

The risks associated with sovereignist ideologies are multifaceted and extend far beyond the threat of violence. While escalations or coup-like plots remain a concern in Germany, the most pervasive consequences manifest at the individual and social levels. Adherents often suffer significant psychological distress, social isolation, and financial ruin resulting from both the sovereignist worldview and the practical consequences of living in opposition to the state. For example, an adherent may refuse to pay taxes or other bills for many years, resulting in compounding fees and immense pressure from collection agencies or legal charges.

The impact on an individual's life regularly spills over into their social environment. Families and friends are faced with conflicts, strain on the relationship and economic hardships. In particular, children are highly vulnerable to the consequences of sovereignist beliefs held by parents or guardians. Their well-being may be endangered by behaviors such as school withdrawal or denial of medical care.

Sovereignist ideology often fosters hostility toward governmental and mainstream institutions, such as the media, public health authorities, and other official bodies. This increases the risk of confrontations, threats, or even physical aggression directed at individuals like police officers, civil servants, and elected representatives. Legal and administrative systems are increasingly obstructed by confrontation and interaction with adherents. Through the frequent misuse of formal procedures like paper floodings[1], proceedings are delayed, institutions are overwhelmed, and public services are strained which can result in weakening the effectiveness of democratic governance. The legal acquisition of land and property enables sovereignist actors to establish long-term, structured communities, which can foster ideological consolidation and present significant challenges for local governance and public safety, particularly in rural areas. On a broader scale, sovereignist ideology undermines democratic cohesion and contributes to societal polarization. It reinforces conspiracy beliefs, erodes trust in democratic values by fueling hate towards minorities through racist and antisemitic narratives. The ideology's gravitational pull draws in individuals with even mild anti-state sentiments and normalizes extremist ideas.

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1   Paper flooding refers to the common practice within the sovereignist movement of inundating authorities with an excessive amount of correspondence.

Obstacles and Challenges to Effective Prevention

Several institutional, structural and societal challenges hinder effective responses to the sovereignist movement in Germany. Following obstacles hinder effective prevention and intervention:

- **Stereotypical public perception of the movement**, often portrayed in a reductive and sensationalized manner in the media, focuses on fringe figures while neglecting the ideological variety across the phenomenon. This distorted view hinders adequate societal reaction and effective policymaking.

- **Limited knowledge and an unclear scope of the movement**, which remains under-researched in academia and by intelligence agencies, result in a lack of reliable information about the ideology and its adherents, making it difficult to assess the movement's reach and potential impact.

- **Societal crises**, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have accelerated public distrust in democratic institutions, creating fertile ground for anti-state narratives and potentially acting as a gateway to radicalization.

- I**nstitutional resource and coordination gaps**, as seen across public administration and law enforcement, often involve a lack of specialized resources, training, and structures such as inter-agency communication, limiting their ability to effectively respond to the movement.

- **The lack of institutional communication** is due to strict data protection laws and confidentiality obligations, which limit communication between law enforcement and non-governmental actors.

- **Lack of knowledge of the ideology by existing support and counselling services**, such as general social counselling, debt counselling, or youth welfare offices.

- **Insufficient P/CVE support structures** mean that counselling and psychosocial services for individuals drawn to sovereignist ideologies are limited, fragmented, and not available nationwide. Existing initiatives often lack long-term funding and institutional continuity, and there are few tailored interventions, particularly for older adults, that support individuals in distancing themselves from the ideology.

- **Limited access to adherents** arises from the fact that many involved in the movement do not seek out or actively reject any form of state-based or state-funded support services, resulting in few known cases of successful distancing.
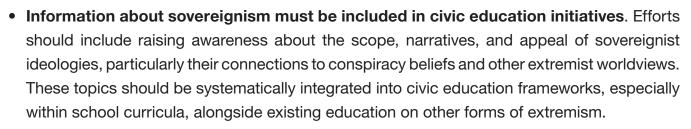
- **Delayed action on implementing prevention measures**, as current interventions often occur only after a significant degree of radicalization has taken place. This delayed, reactive approach by law enforcement and authorities frequently results in negative consequences for the individual pertaining to their livelihood and wellbeing, underscoring the need for upstream, prevention strategies, not led by law enforcement.

- **Social media acts as an accelerator**, with digital platforms such as Telegram and TikTok playing a central role in mobilizing, networking, and radicalizing adherents.

- **Isolation acts as a driver for radicalization**, with the reciprocal alienation between the movement and mainstream society deepening this process.

- **Sovereignist sympathizers within institutions**, including instances of sovereignist sympathies among public servants, poses a serious concern. If unrecognized or left unaddressed, such cases undermine internal security and institutional integrity.

- **The interpretation of state action by the movement** is often framed as confirmation of their conspiratorial worldview, potentially leading to further escalation of violence.

3 Policy Recommendations to Prevent and Counter Sovereignism

Recognizing and Naming the Democratic Risks

- **The ideological intersections and the spread of this movement must be monitored**, given its growing appeal and ideological interconnectedness, particularly its increasing co-optation by far-right actors. Sovereignism is frequently accompanied by antisemitic tropes, conspiracy beliefs, and pronounced anti-immigrant sentiments.

- **The movement must be understood within the context of global political trends**. This requires vigilance regarding the correlation between these ideological movements and broader developments, including the rise of populism, far-right parties, and libertarian authoritarianism.

- **The scope and impact of sovereignism must be assessed throughquantitative analysis**. This requires the development of tools for classification and analysis to situate the phenomenon within its societal context. This will enable a clearer understanding of the severity, scope, and potential risks posed to democratic structures.

Raising Awareness

- **Information about sovereignism must be included in civic education initiatives**. Efforts should include raising awareness about the scope, narratives, and appeal of sovereignist ideologies, particularly their connections to conspiracy beliefs and other extremist worldviews. These topics should be systematically integrated into civic education frameworks, especially within school curricula, alongside existing education on other forms of extremism.

- **Knowledge of and trust in democracy must be strengthened across educational settings**. This involves expanding education on democracy beyond institutional knowledge to include the underlying values, principles, and participatory logic of democratic systems. It also includes teaching about the German Basic Law (Grundgesetz), the importance of active and responsible citizenship, and the ability to critically engage with democratic processes. At the same time, learners should be encouraged to reflect on current challenges and imperfections within democratic systems, fostering both commitment and critical thinking.

- **Media literacy must be cultivated** as a core democratic competence in the digital age from an early age through formal education, reinforced by lifelong learning opportunities. Individuals must be equipped to critically assess information, recognize disinformation and manipulation, and navigate complex media environments responsibly.

- **Media must be supported in offering nuanced coverage**, as media outlets play a key role in shaping public understanding of sovereignist ideologies. It is vital to move beyond one-dimensional portrayals, such as the stereotypical image of the 'Reichsbürger', and instead highlight the full spectrum of sovereignist beliefs and their intersections with other ideologies.

Collaboration and Exchange between Actors

- **Networking structures** must be established. While federal infrastructures are an important development, sovereignism as a cross-cutting ideology requires even more flexible and interconnected structures. To ensure effective prevention, existing initiatives, such as those addressing conspiracy beliefs or right-wing extremism should be expanded to allow for broader, cross-phenomenon exchange and collaboration. Formalized platforms for regular exchange between practitioners, law enforcement and security agencies, researchers, and civil society organizations are needed. These platforms, such as interdisciplinary roundtables, national and regional working groups, and international forums, can enable the sharing of knowledge, case studies, and both promising and failed practices in dealing with sovereignist ideologies and related phenomena.

- **Interagency exchange must be encouraged**, which involves facilitating systematic cooperation and knowledge transfer between institutions and authorities, including across federal states and administrative levels.

Improvement of Capacities and Processes

- **Training and capacity-building measures must be expanded**, which should involve offering targeted training programs, and networking opportunities for professionals across sectors. These programs should focus on emerging ideological trends, risk assessment, prevention strategies, and approaches to dealing with sovereignist actors. Additionally, training should aim to raise awareness and improve the handling of sovereignist individuals within authorities.
- **Adequate resources must be available for authorities** to respond to sovereignist ideologies and practices. This includes sufficient staffing and access to practical tools such as guidelines and manuals. Support offers, such as supervision or psychological counselling can be helpful to deal with emotional and psychological stress that may arise from dealing with sovereignist individuals.
- **Administrative and judicial proceedings related to the movement must be accelerated**. Swift action demonstrates the state's ability to act in a consistent and credible manner. Timely decisions and prosecutions ensure that sovereignist actions are met with consequences.
- **Bureaucratic barriers and failures must be critically examined** to build broad-based societal trust in public institutions. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, inaccessible and complex procedures, or administrative errors can create frustration and alienation, especially among those already disillusioned with the system.

Expanding Research and Praxis

- **Additional funding is needed to expand psychosocial support and other relevant services** specifically addressing sovereignist ideologies, including specialized counselling services. The focus must be on families and close contacts as stabilizing forces, and support measures should help prevent social division, strengthen family dynamics, and assist adherents in distancing processes with low-threshold and long-term psychosocial support. Existing services must be strengthened, the support landscape stabilized, and new services developed. Successful implementation requires sufficient resources and long-term funding.
- **The visibility and accessibility of existing support structures must be improved** through nationwide coordination and effective PR and advertising. Services should be communicated in an accessible, approachable way, and tailored to different audiences.

- **Older age groups must be addressed by tailored prevention projects**, particularly those 50+ years of age, to e.g. strengthen critical media consumption and resilience against disinformation, as well as coping during times of crisis and transition periods, such as unemployment or bankruptcy.

- **(Applied) research must be expanded** that aims at generating actionable knowledge for practical work with sovereignist adherents. Key focus areas should include:

  - Strategies for gaining access to and engaging with adherents.

  - Qualitative analysis of motivations for involvement and factors supporting distancing based on data from primary sources, with attention to age and gender dynamics.

  - Comparative research that embeds findings in a broader international context for transferable knowledge sharing.

Countering Sovereignist Settlements and Land Purchases

- **Taking targeted action is needed against sovereignist settlements and land purchases**, which undermine social cohesion in rural communities and pose a threat to democratic values.

- **Local civil society must be strengthened and supported**, especially in rural areas, by empowering residents to recognize, address, and counter such developments. To achieve this, it's important to create spaces for dialogue and engagement that enable people to address these issues and take action against them. Existing structures, such as community associations or clubs, can serve as effective platforms for this.

- **It is important to critically examine conditions in rural regions** that allow these settlements to establish themselves and develop strategies to prevent their spread.

4 Outlook

A comprehensive approach to preventing sovereignism must go beyond the policy recommendations mentioned. It needs to address underlying societal structures, the understanding of democracy, and prioritize the wellbeing of society. Being involved in sovereignism should not be seen merely as an individual's personal failure or responsibility, but rather as a phenomenon shaped by social causes and structural factors that must also be taken into account.

This means critically examining state, economic, and social systems. Research shows that personal hardships, such as financial difficulties, can contribute to involvement in sovereignist ideologies. A society and state system that supports people in times of crisis and reduces inequality plays an important role in prevention. At the same time, society must be willing and able to reintegrate individuals who distance themselves from sovereignist beliefs and offer them pathways for (re)participation.

In the long term, strengthening democratic resilience is essential. This requires fostering a democratic culture grounded in transparency, responsiveness, and inclusion. Key to this is improving political communication and promoting a culture of accountability and the willingness to learn from mistakes. At the same time, countering political frustration is crucial, by enabling participation and fostering a sense of agency among citizens. Sovereignist beliefs often flourish where individuals feel excluded from decision-making and disempowered by seemingly distant or inaccessible institutions. Clearly communicating that disagreement and debate are fundamental principles of liberal democracy, and highlighting the democratic value of pluralism, can help build a society that is more resilient to division and less vulnerable to polarizing anti-democratic ideologies like sovereignism.

Addressing sovereignism requires more than immediate or reactive interventions. It demands long-term, society-wide efforts that accompany individuals throughout their lives. From an early age, individuals should be supported in developing democratic values, critical thinking, and media literacy skills. Equally, it must be ensured that people of all ages have continued access to education and opportunities for social and democratic participation. It is also important not to forget those targeted by sovereignist ideologies through antisemitic, antifeminist, racist and queerphobic sentiments. They must be given adequate protection and support.

Addressing sovereignism in a comprehensive way is not only a security issue but also crucial for protecting democratic values, social solidarity as well as individual wellbeing. To achieve this, it is important to remain aware of global developments and to recognize sovereignism as a phenomenon that transcends national borders and requires transnational cooperations.

About the Project

This policy brief was developed as part of the project PreP-Ex (Preparing Professionals for the Rising Threat of Anti-Authority Extremism), which examined sovereignism in Germany and anti-authority extremism in Canada. The research included interviews with experts from diverse backgrounds including psychosocial professionals, authorities, and law enforcement. To ensure a variety of perspectives, individuals who believe in sovereignist ideas were also interviewed, and a survey was conducted with family, friends and close contacts.

This policy brief outlines the risks and dangers posed by sovereignism and the challenges it presents. Based on the empirical findings of the project, it formulates recommendations for policymakers to help prevent and counteract the phenomenon in the German context.

This policy brief is complemented by two additional resources:

- A _research report_ provides an in-depth analysis of the diversity and complexity of this phenomenon within each national context, its commonalities and differences, exploring its ideology, motivations for involvement and distancing as well as risks and dangers.
- A _manual_ is available to inform and share knowledge on ways to communicate with adherents. It is specifically designed for psychosocial professionals such - as counsellors, social workers - authorities, and law enforcement.

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