

## Solidarity and Political Narratives in Crises – Responses to Deviant Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic

**Kerstin WÜSTNER**

*HWR Berlin School of Economics and Law  
kerstin.wuestner@hwr-berlin.de*

### **Abstract**

*Solidarity is still important in modern societies, and it gains even more relevance during crises, such as ecological crises, health crises or during armed conflicts. This paper focuses on political narratives on solidarity and measures to overcome the crises during the COVID-19 pandemic. Referring to four examples, it describes cases that contradict or call political narratives into question. As a result, this paper demonstrates how strong political narratives can be. This goes along with a reduced acceptance of deviating communication and a desire to correct or sanction people whose statements deviate from political narratives. Finally, several social implications of this pressure to conform are discussed.*

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### **1. Solidarity – a multifaceted term**

Solidarity is a multifaceted construct that can be analyzed from a theoretical point of view as well as with respect to practical applications. For example, political theory and political philosophy as well as social theory often refer to a normative perspective in order to identify moral grounds for solidarity or to describe “*the right or wrong idea of solidarity*” (Kneuer *et al.*, 2021, p. 6). Solidarity can be understood as a bond to unite individuals (Durkheim, 1994, Evans, 1977; Bayertz, 1998). Constructs, such as community of solidarity, or legitimation of a welfare state can be associated with solidarity; or it is used as a slogan for fighting for rights (Bayertz, 1998). Under a social psychological perspective, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components of solidarity are important. Such approaches often emphasize the relevance of corresponding values, which in turn could promote prosocial behavior, helping, support and cooperation (Thome, 1998).

According to Durkheim, social solidarity is not directly measurable; therefore, he chose legal codes as indicators (Durkheim, 1994; Evans, 1977). Other authors refer to characteristics of solidarity in society, which could be a community, for example, in which members stand up for each other in the face of major life risks such as illness and social hardship. Solidarity means help from the stronger for the weaker who do not have the strength or the opportunity to help themselves (Ballstaedt, 2003). Arnsperger and Varoufakis (2003, p. 157) broaden the perspective and explain that solidarity also means that “*people are capable of responding sympathetically to (or empathising with) a condition afflicting ‘others’, irrespectively of who those others are or whether one cares*

*for them personally.*” Hence, solidarity can be reflected by legal codes, implemented by institutions, such as social security systems or labor unions, but also depend on social competences of people and the cultural anchoring of solidarity in society.

Further research is interested in the phenomenon of reduced or eroding solidarity. According to Kaufmann (1997), eroding solidarity can become apparent if a person or organization gains advantages at the expense of others, e.g. in the event of unjustified use of social benefits, tax evasion or undeclared work, or – in the case of organizations – illegal collusions. If solidarity-related values lose importance, this could reflect a cultural erosion of solidarity.

Anhut and Heitmeyer (2014) emphasize that eroding solidarity reveals non-cooperative behavior, which is harmful to the collective, but possibly positive for those exhibiting it. The authors also distinguish between a “hard” form of eroding solidarization, which leads to behavior that is harmful to the collective, and a “soft” form, which refers to corresponding attitudes. If people believe that the own group bears the main – or sole – burden, while another group does not take any costs, but only tries to secure benefits, this could motivate them to veer away from solidarity, too.

This paper follows Kneuer *et al.* (2021) in three ways: It looks at communication on solidarity in the “real world”. Solidarity is not used as an ethical-political or ethical-social concept but as a descriptive-analytical one. Further, this paper focuses on the “*understanding of solidarity reflected in the communication on solidarity rather than in the manifestation of a potential solidarity action*” (ibid., p. 3).

## **2. Social understanding of solidarities: social representations and narratives**

Social representation theory by Moscovici (1973, 2001) can contribute to describe social understanding of solidarity and communication about it. Social representations are “*a system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function: first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history*” (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii). They conventionalize, which means they ease the interpretation of information and help to “*know what stands for what*” (Moscovici, 2001, p. 22), and they are prescriptive, e.g. through tradition and culture. “*Individuals and groups create representations in the course of communication and cooperation*” (ibid., p. 23).

Social representations reflect the understanding of and communication about solidarity. Following Moscovici, they are supposed to provide orientation and guide communication, and finally influence collective behavior (de Rosa and Mannarini, 2020). Wallaschek (2020) emphasizes that solidarity is discursively constructed by actors on the meso-level. Any discursive reconstruction of solidarity “*is subject to permanent societal and political renegotiation*” (Kneuer *et al.* 2021, p. 3). Thus, social understanding of solidarity can differ between groups or over time.

The discursive process of generating or modifying social representations can involve narratives. Narratives are consolidated and repeatedly reproduced interpretations of

reality, they induce a relationship between the narrator, the public and the arguments. They can depend on religion or culture. Narratives can contribute to an agreement on arguments (Llanque, 2014). They reflect how certain issues or representations are communicated, and they can influence people's attitudes and behaviors (Kubin *et al.*, 2021). As conflicting social representations can exist, the way that they are communicated could bring along conflicting political narratives, too (Moon, 2012; Jing and Ahn, 2021).

### 3. Solidarity and communication in crises

As to Kneuer *et al.* (2021, p. 2) crises “regularly evoke the claim for solidarity, making it a ‘booking’ reference, solidarity can also be a kind of ‘soft power’ recipe for crisis management.” Attitudes on solidarity often arise or are modified during such phases. Mass emergencies influence social identity of those facing a common fate (Drury, 2018), and this social identity may have implications on solidarity (Federico *et al.*, 2021).

In this process, social representations can serve a stabilizing power, sometimes with the manifestation of hegemonic social representations and a rising pressure of conformity (Pizzaro *et al.*, 2020). This could imply the pressure to stick to mainstream or dominant narratives. Further, crises recurrently tempt people to call for strong authorities and leaders (Schwarz, 2021). Hence, political narratives can become extraordinarily important and powerful. People might need them for guidance, while politicians may use them for their own political strategies. Some authors state that political communication rather refers to general story lines or narratives than to logical reasoning (Haidt *et al.*, 2007; Jing and Ahn, 2021). Political narratives, in turn, have consequences for the effectiveness of political measures (Mintrom and O'Connor, 2020). In consideration of the power of political narratives, communication that is not in conformity with them could be assessed to be deviant communication.

This paper is interested in the question, how it comes to such deviant communication. Referring to the example of the COVID-19 pandemic, it aims to find out, what happened if statements were perceived to contradict or criticize political narratives.

### 4. Four examples of deviant communication in the COVID-19 crises

At first, it is important to describe relevant political narratives on solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic and measures to end it. Ng *et al.* (2021) analyze narratives during different phases of the pandemic, focusing mainly on topics reported in media in 20 countries.<sup>1</sup> They found out that narratives were first on the disease, testing, treatment, and public health initiatives, later they turned to social and economic concerns. Referring to measures how to conquer the crises, several studies confirm that solidarity is often socially represented as “*the main weapon in fighting COVID-19 by promoting movement and empowering communities* (Arora *et al.*, 2020, Meinzen-Dick, 2020, Valeriani *et al.* 2020)” (Muqsith *et al.*, 2021, p. 148). That is similar to political narratives in Germany.

For example, top politicians, such as the Federal President of Germany, Frank Walter Steinmeier<sup>2</sup>, former Chancellor Angela Merkel<sup>3</sup> and recent Chancellor Olaf Scholz<sup>4</sup>, former Federal Minister of Health Jens Spahn<sup>5</sup> or recent Federal Minister of Health Karl Lauterbach<sup>6</sup> repeatedly demanded solidarity. This included complying with hygiene measures, physical distancing and vaccination, while vaccination was explained to be the main tool to end the pandemic. The Federal Ministry of Health states on its website “zusammengecorona.de” that everyone should be vaccinated in order to achieve herd immunity: “*One for all, all for one – this principle of solidarity also plays a crucial role in fighting the pandemic. Because the more people are protected from infection and illness with the coronavirus by vaccination, the more often the virus affects people who are at significantly lower risk of becoming infected - and the harder it can spread. One can also call it community protection or herd immunity.*”<sup>7</sup> Hence, a dominant narrative was that solidarity was of utmost importance, and the pandemic can be ended by complying with COVID-19 prevention rules, administered by the government.

This paper focuses on two questions:

1. Which reactions can be observed, if communication interferes with political narratives?
2. Which consequences could result from the handling of deviant communication?

Four examples will be used, that caused much resonance in conventional and social media. Each example comes from a different social subsystem: the first from art, the second from the political system, the third from sports, and the fourth from the health sector. They will be presented in their chronological order. After a brief description of what happened, the focus turns to the questions how statements interfered with dominant narratives and which reactions occurred.

### ***Example 1: “allesdichtmachen”***

In April 2021, actors from Germany and Austria put their art project “allesdichtmachen” (“close everything”) online. It consisted of 53 short video clips, each about one minute length.<sup>8</sup> The clips took up assumed motives, implications and consequences of COVID-19 prevention measures, contents of political narratives and expected reactions to the art project. For example, some clips addressed doubts and anxieties. Others emphasized how important and satisfying it would be not to think for themselves anymore, but to follow the rules, not to contradict or critically reflect them, but to remain silent and to confirm the political narratives – labelled as truth. The key message is that people need to be told what they are allowed to do or what not. Some clips play with the association of parenting styles and educational sanctions. Other clips point to the political narrative, how important and good physical distancing would be for everybody, while safety through hygiene measures is associated with protection from other people – or society – in general. The problem of the pandemic is addressed to people who are irresponsible and lack solidarity. Some clips point to the desire for sanctions against those who do not show solidarity likewise – and they declare sanctions as a mean of solidarity. Further, some clips comment on language, the arbitrariness of interpretation (e.g. negative is positive, healthy is ill, loneliness is community) or they refer to recurrent changes in political narratives. One clip explains art to be dispensable. Others reflect on a meta-level rights, or the role of numbers, correlations or criteria for political decisions. Finally, some clips anticipate possible reactions, e.g. an attribution to “Querdenker”<sup>9</sup> or politically right wing,

the applause from the wrong side or one actor declares to distance himself from everything.

This art project led to massive medial responses. It was criticized for chintzy polemic, presenting only narratives of the “Querdenker”<sup>10</sup> and conspiracy thoughts,<sup>11</sup> denouncing the government, the media and science.<sup>12</sup> The actors would present themselves to be know it all; they would not intent to inspire a discussion but just to be right.<sup>13</sup> Others interpreted the clips mocking those who suffer from the pandemic, such as health care personnel, children, elderly people, relatives of people who died of COVID-19, or those who lost their jobs because of the pandemic. Therefore, the clips would be reckless. Those who took part in the project should not mourn, if they were overrun by a shitstorm.<sup>14</sup> They would have abused their publicity, but the majority of people would feel contempt and indignation.<sup>15</sup>

Criticism came from different groups, even from other actors,<sup>16</sup> who said they would be ashamed of their colleagues.<sup>17</sup> Referring to reciprocity it was argued that people who lack solidarity should not benefit from a system built on solidarity, thus these actors should be banned from roles in productions by public broadcasting.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, the protagonists also received positive feedback, even a candystorm. People who contributed positive comments were quickly classified as politically extreme right or “Querdenker”. It was further discussed, whether or which actors would be “Querdenker”, too.<sup>19</sup> Because of this attribution, the positive feedback turned to be negatively connoted in the public discussion.

Subsequently, most actors had withdrawn their clips,<sup>20</sup> however, all of them are still available on the internet,<sup>21</sup> because once spread there, they cannot be deleted easily. Some of the actors said they would withdraw their clips because of personal threat, others because the videos were interpreted as mockery of people affected by COVID-19 or maybe because of applause from the wrong side. Some actors plead for excuse that they took part in the art project.<sup>22</sup>

Members of the arts sector, who showed understanding for this art project, were criticized, too. For example, Winfried Nerdinger, president of the Bavarian academy of fine arts, defended the art project. In response to this, 20 members of the academy wrote a protest letter, six members resigned from the academy.<sup>23</sup>

It is interesting that criticism rarely made differences between the clips but resulted either in total applause or in total rejection. Moreover, they were not discussed with respect to art criteria.

Brühwiler (2021) explains the massive negative resonance by narrow limits of the permissible. Hence, an art project like this faces the problem that once someone questions political narratives, he or she is accused to neglect personal suffering of those affected by COVID-19 or he or she is seen in bad company. It turns out to be nearly impossible to make this dynamic transparent. Yet, Brühwiler was sure, the actors could have been able to explain their intention more clearly later, if they would have held firm.

The example of allesdichtmachen is informative because it plays with political narratives, by using exaggeration, irony and a play with words, while it propagates for accepting and complying with the rules. It has already foreseen the resonance, at least to some extent. This art project would have required the ability and openness to distance oneself for a critical reflection – and the acceptance of art even if it was provocative and did not match one’s taste in arts. Yet, this would have interfered with the attempt to regain security in

crises through conformity. Above, the statements ostensibly supported the political narratives, but because of their framing and exaggeration, they clearly questioned them.

Beyond that, it can be assumed that criticism was caused by strong emotions – anger about the supposed disparagement of policymakers and people who suffered from COVID-19, maybe also because of frustration and strain caused by an attempt to understand why the actors took part in the art project and what messages the clips are supposed to transport. Some clips explained people to be simple and obedient. Some spots doubted objectivity. Both messages could have caused personal discomfort. Perhaps the indignation was also due to the fact that such deviant communication was not up to actors who are usually admired in their roles. Yet, a counter argument would be that political cabaret enjoys great popularity, but in the example of “allesdichtmachen”, art crossed a limit, which was particularly narrow during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the end, the reactions to this art project remained on a communicative level. Brühwiler (2021) suggests that entertaining arguments turned out to be more important and that the audience liked to watch these actors, nevertheless. Whether people would share this view cannot be said, however.

### ***Example 2: The case of Hubert Aiwanger***

Hubert Aiwanger is the vice prime minister and minister for economic affairs in Bavaria. The Bavarian ministry of health shares the above-mentioned political narratives to the full extent, that solidarity – one for all, all for one – is central for normalizing live and vaccination is crucial to overcome the pandemic.<sup>24</sup>

During a press conference in June 2021 Aiwanger was – apparently spontaneously – prompted by Markus Söder, the Bavarian prime minister, to explain why he has not been vaccinated against COVID-19 yet. Aiwanger countered law would allow everyone to decide for or against vaccination by himself and he wished to be granted this right, too. He explained not to be against vaccination, but he would neither be euphoric about it also because of possible side effects. Thus, he had decided to postpone the decision.<sup>25</sup> Söder countered that vaccination would be the “*only true response*” to COVID-19.<sup>26</sup>

Aiwanger’s attitude was answered by harsh criticism.<sup>27</sup> As the Bavarian government urged all citizens to get vaccinated, Aiwanger’s hesitancy was assessed to be inadequate, lacking solidarity.<sup>28</sup> Media reported Aiwanger would be the only member of the Bavarian cabinet who was not vaccinated.<sup>29</sup> This emphasized that his attitude did not reflect the majority, instead he would be an – or the only - outsider. His arguments were ignored; instead, his hesitancy was attributed to an attempt of winning sympathy and votes from the right wing and the “Querdenker”.<sup>30</sup> Aiwanger on the other side warned of a hunt of unvaccinated and an “apartheid debate”,<sup>31</sup> for which he was rebuked immediately.<sup>32</sup> Aiwanger was labelled “the unvaccinated” who became a problem.<sup>33</sup> Political statements countered the pronounced individual decision on vaccination and stressed that vaccination would not be a personal decision because it protects other people. Vaccination would be the only mean to regain freedom.<sup>34</sup> On the contrary, counter arguments would reflect medieval believes.<sup>35</sup>

Aiwanger’s statement contradicted neither law nor (at least to some extent) scientific data, but clearly the dominant political narrative. For example, the free decision for or against vaccination is ensured by the Basic Law of Germany, and there is no general obligation for vaccination against COVID-19 in Germany.<sup>36</sup> Further, the mentioned side effects are rare, but not impossible. This was documented by the vaccine approval studies and by

data collected during the vaccination campaign by the Paul-Ehrlich-Institute (PEI), responsible for pharmacovigilance.<sup>37</sup> Aiwanger's statement was in contrast to the social representation of solidarity and the political narrative that everyone should get vaccinated for the benefit of all with a safe vaccine.<sup>38</sup> Reactions to his deviant communication included the exclusion from the majority by communicative means, as he was categorized as "the unvaccinated", others demanded his resignation.<sup>39</sup> Yet, Aiwanger did not resign. The discussion abated after he got vaccinated in November 2021.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Example 3: The case of Joshua Kimmich***

Joshua Kimmich is a prominent active soccer player of FC Bayern München, and he is in the German national football team, too. Directly after one soccer match in October 2021, where only fully vaccinated or recovered fans were allowed in the arena, a reporter asked him whether he would be vaccinated against COVID-19. Kimmich answered this question, starting to mention he would not deny the existence of COVID-19, but he had some doubts about the vaccines because of missing long-term studies. That would be why he had not decided for a vaccination yet.<sup>41</sup> This statement caused an immense resonance. Kimmich was one of the very few prominent figures who openly confessed not to have chosen a COVID-19 vaccine.

Following media reports and statements clearly revealed the desire for sanctions. The newspaper Frankfurter Rundschau called Kimmich's statement "devastating"<sup>42</sup>, because his hesitancy would strengthen "Querdenker", people who are against vaccination or "tin foil hat" wearers. Kilchenstein, the author of this article, concludes that Kimmich suggests that the vaccination could involve a risk, but that would be "nonsense. *There are no scientific arguments that would speak against vaccination. Long-term effects are almost unknown. Vaccination protects from severe courses of the illness.*" The "problem" would be that Kimmich would be "intelligent" and he could set an example. He was made responsible not only for "himself and soccer", but also for others. Above, Kimmich should not expect sympathy for his position, because it would be driven by unrealistic fears. Finally, the author mentions a reinforcing effect of Kimmich's statement on the halting vaccination campaign. This could result in rising death numbers. Although not explicitly stated, the remark could awake the association that Kimmich might also be – to some part – responsible for those deaths.

The Hamburger Morgenpost<sup>43</sup> also explains vaccination would not be up to Kimmich's personal decision, because of his extraordinary position. Kimmich would also be part of the initiative "we kick Corona", a fundraising initiative co-founded by him for charity. The author deduces, Kimmich would make himself untrustworthy and he would endanger the fight against the virus. Albrecht, the author of this newspaper comment, demands that Kimmich should not be allowed to play as long as he got not vaccinated.

Paul Breitner, a famous former soccer player, criticized Kimmich's statement, too. He explained there would be no need for any discussion on vaccinations, because there would be just the decision for it. That is why he had "zero-tolerance" for Kimmich.<sup>44</sup>

Shortly after that policymakers discussed to enact an order which allowed only fully vaccinated professional athletes to take part at games.<sup>45</sup> Even Angela Merkel, the last Chancellor, commented on Kimmich, that he might re-think his decision,<sup>46</sup> and Karl Lauterbach, recent Federal Minister of Health, offered to give Kimmich medical advice and inoculate him by himself. Several politicians commented Kimmich's statement, some of them condemning it<sup>47</sup>, others uttering sympathy<sup>48</sup>. Alena Buyx, Chair of German

Ethical Council, explained Kimmich's decision to base on false information and bad advice.<sup>49</sup>

Similar to example 2 Kimmich's statement contradicted the social representation of solidarity and the political narrative on vaccination. Although Kimmich is an athlete, his statement reinforced a debate on mandatory vaccination of professional footballers.<sup>50</sup> The person Kimmich drifts into the background and he is taken the right to decide for himself, similar to Aiwanger. Instead, solidarity was expected to do the same as the fans who needed vaccination or recovery to be able to watch the match in the arena, or as all citizens who were urged to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Again, criticism does not differentiate between the profession and private person nor between different acts of solidarity. His engagement in fundraising, which resulted in collecting more than 6 million Euro for charity,<sup>51</sup> was described as untrustworthy, because his vaccination hesitancy was not in accordance with the dominant political narrative and the appeal to get vaccinated. Above, Kimmich's concerns about missing knowledge on long-term effects were disposed, although the Robert-Koch-Institute, Federal Center for Health Education, mentions in its official "vaccination booklet for everyone" possible long-term effects: "*It takes a lot longer to observe potential long-term effects. Of course, with a new vaccine that has only been in use for a matter of a few months, it's impossible to know whether and what long-term effects will occur years down the line.*"<sup>52</sup> The same argument uttered by a football player in the public, is declared to reflect "Querdenker" or conspiracy thoughts and he would not have been informed well. Finally, the discussion faded away as Kimmich first fell ill of COVID-19 in November 2021<sup>53</sup> and later it was reported that he got vaccinated at last.<sup>54</sup>

#### ***Example 4: The case of Andreas Schöfbeck***

Andreas Schöfbeck was chairman of a health insurance organization (BKK ProVita). In February 2022, he wrote an open letter to the PEI, because he suspected side effects of COVID-19 vaccinations to be underreported. He argued that the PEI had recorded 244,576 suspected cases of side effects of COVID-19 vaccinations in 2021. He extrapolates his data analysis of about 11 million insured persons and assumes that 2.5 up to 3 million people in Germany might have needed medical treatment after a COVID-19 vaccination. That would be about 4-5% of all vaccinated people. He explained the noticeable difference in numbers by the immense efforts physicians would have if they declared suspected cases of side effects. Therefore, Schöfbeck pleaded for data collection and further enquiries.<sup>55</sup> This open letter was placed on the BKK's homepage, and several media reported on it, too.

This news also caused resonance. It was insinuated that Schöfbeck would be a "Schwurbler"<sup>56</sup> or "Querdenker".<sup>57</sup> His data analysis was said to be "*more than dubious*" and he was accused of willful intention to deceive the public.<sup>58</sup> For example, it was criticized that he did not distinguish the ICD-10 code for general side effects, from unexpected side effects exceeding the "expected". Only the latter need to be declared to the PEI.<sup>59</sup>

As stated above, political narratives repeatedly assure the safety of the vaccines against COVID-19, referring to sound approval studies and pharmacovigilance. These arguments are also used when the public is asked to show solidarity and get vaccinated. Schöfbeck's letter interfered with that. Different to the former examples, he argues based on health data. This could endanger the belief in the dominant narrative. Interestingly, there was no intense public discussion on the data or analytical methods, but Schöfbeck was sacked

some days after his open letter.<sup>60</sup> The open letter and all press releases were removed from the BKK's homepage.<sup>61</sup>

## 5. Conclusion: The pressure of communicative conformity and its possible consequences

COVID-19 became a public concern all over the world, and presumably, everybody wished the pandemic to end, policymakers and citizens as well as experts and laypersons. Policymakers installed measures and people tried to cope with the pandemic and new challenges that came with it. In this process, hegemonic social representations prevailed and increased "*pressure to conform, creating a collective ethos of social rejection of anyone who behaves or thinks differently. In this way, a majority opinion is created that reduces uncertainty, provides a solution to a problem, and strengthens social cohesion and collective solidarity*" (Páez and Pérez, 2020, p. 1.2). Political narratives, that evolved during the crises and were used for communication with the public, could aim conformity and compliance, too. As described above, solidarity was proclaimed crucial to conquer the crises. This addressed responsibility to each person and society as a whole. The four examples illustrated communicative reactions subsequent to deviant communication. Next, some possible consequences of this handling of deviant communication are enlightened.

The first source of conflicts could lie in the fact that solidarity is not a fixed term, but it depends on its definition and representation. Stock *et al.* (2021) describe, for example, intergenerational, global and intergroup solidarity. Berrocal *et al.* (2021) distinguish four forms of solidarity: nationhood, exclusionary solidarity against rule-breakers, social relationships, and transnational solidarity. Hence, it depends on social understanding, what solidarity with whom means. Further, the attempt to act in accordance with one form of solidarity could interfere with another one. For example, this conflict was discussed during the pandemic, too, when it came to national and international distributions of vaccines. A study by Basaure *et al.* (2021) points to several paradoxes and conflicts of solidarities, caused by measures installed to fight the pandemic.

The second source of conflicts could be ambiguous political narratives. According to Mintrom and O'Connor (2020), political narratives need to be clear in order to avoid misunderstanding and confusion. The examples described above, do not reveal the problem of ambiguous narratives. Instead, they presented a consistent and clear message. It might be different under a long-term view. For example, statements on masks or vaccination recommendations changed during the pandemic several times.

The next aspect to consider is the fit of political narratives and narratives shared by the public. For example, Moss and Sandbakken's (2021) describe meta narratives by the government and relate them to personal narratives. They emphasize how important balanced narratives are for the success of fighting the pandemic, such as "*freedom up against restrictions, hope against fear, and individualism against solidarity*" (ibid., p. 1). Personal narratives often resonated with the government meta-narratives, especially for the narrative of solidarity. In contrast, a study by Mogambi Moinani and Nasambu Barasa (2021) compares the dominant narrative of COVID-19 by the government with the social representation shared among the public. For Kenya, they describe two contrary representations, with the political narrative of the pandemic as war whereas the public

viewed it as falsehood, hence non-existent. If narratives are not compatible, the attempt to influence the public by political narratives is likely to fail. On the other hand, a tight fit could go along with strong conformity and a feeling of security.

The chosen examples of this paper address to risks that could come with a tight fit. The first problem is that it could lead to a social understanding *who* is allowed to contribute statements that do not fit the political narrative. The examples described above could let us assume that people who are not scientific/health experts, are not allowed to take a critical view on political narratives established during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was probably the case for the actors, the footballer, and the politician. An exception might have been the member of the health insurance organization, whereat after his statement he was not classified as the chair of a health insurance company anymore but labelled to be a “Querdenker”.

If people’s statements are not conformed to the dominant political narrative, they are classified as politically extreme right winged, “Querdenker” or “a problem”. This process demonstrates typical social psychological processes of categorization and stereotyping as a reaction to non-conforming statements. It can attach a label to the person and produce prejudices.

In turn, non-conforming arguments could easily be qualified as nonsense, not worth to discuss. Of course, incorrect information and conspiracy thoughts can spread in media and especially in social media (e.g. analyzed by Chen *et al.*, 2020; Khan *et al.*, 2020; Calvo *et al.*, 2022; Villar-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2022), but an automatism, which attributes critical thoughts to that, produce an implicit understanding of *what* is accepted to be said. This confines the chance for critical reflection, controversial discussion and enhancements.

In the worst case, limiting the “who” and “what” of communication could evoke a “*culture of 'censorship, intimidation and indoctrination' that leads our society into 'spiritual bondage', causing us to conform to 'the apparent majority' out of 'fear of isolation' (Bolz, 2017), others speak of 'language bans' and an 'opinion dictatorship' that promote the 'division of society' (Ullrich and Diefenbach, 2017)*” (Stefanowitsch, 2020). The pressure to conform does not only produce unanimity but can also lead to a generalized absence of criticism (Pizzaro *et al.*, 2020), and this tendency could eventually cause an authority bias (Milgram, 1975).

As stated above, German politicians counted strongly on solidarity. This could address to the moral duty of the individual and enhance social pressure and social control. Amalgamating different values (social and health values) can promote intended behavior. Cappelen *et al.* (2021, p. 1) made experiments which revealed that a reminder about the COVID-19 crises made experimentees more “*willing to prioritize society’s problems over their own problems*” and more accepting of inequalities. If we take into account other studies (e.g. de Vries *et al.*, 2021), the success of implementing solidarity in political narratives might show only rather short-termed effects. The study by Kaup *et al.* (2022) describes for Germany a decrease of received and demonstrated solidarity in the phase of the second lockdown. In their study, Muqsith *et al.* (2021) enlighten the role of online communication in the crises. The authors found out that people used social media to raise solidarity as well as for a call for prevention. Again, social solidarity, encouraged by social media, did not last long. Instead, social solidarity was a “*target for some people to create a hoax and gain benefit*” (Muqsith *et al.*, 2021, p. 156).

The focus on solidarity and people in roles can reduce individuality and even curtail individual rights. The examples described above show how the private person vanishes and is substituted by a role, while the influence linked to the role is greatly exaggerated. This could aggravate social pressure on the “public person” to act in accordance to social expectations.

It is risky if conformity with narratives is more important than (new) scientific facts. The examples described in this paper hint how strong conformity to the mainstream political narrative is. Politicians and other people stick to it even if it represents outdated assumptions or simplifications, sacrificing the complexity of scientific knowledge. The chosen examples show that even arguments, that reflect information also provided by state authorities, are disposed if they do not fit to the mainstream narrative. On the one hand, this could protect people from possibly inconsistent information or a feeling of insecurity. On the other hand, it disregards people’s ability to process information and to cope with complexity.

Reactions to all four cases reveal punitive attitudes. People wish to correct or sanction behavior or to exclude the troublemaker from their organizational or professional context. In the case of positive resonance the candystorm was transformed in a “storm of sour candies”, which can be interpreted as another form of sanction.

Mintrom and O’Connor (2020) assume that political narratives played an important role in coping with COVID-19. For example, it depends on whether social representations described COVID-19 either as a global threat or as a minor health problem (Greer *et al.* 2020). Jing and Ahn (2021) who also point to polarized narratives mention that narratives communicated by the “anti-mask” and “anti-vaccine” side might have been responsible for hundreds or thousands of deaths. At the same time, conformity on mainstream political narratives could endanger the effectiveness of political measures, when it limits the openness of communication and reflection as well as the creativity for new approaches. Conformity to share the hegemonic social representation and to stick to the dominant political narrative seems to stimulate attempts to silence voices that contradict the dominant narrative. In that respect, solidarity entails the expectation to communicate in line with the dominant narrative. Thus, it is maintained and strengthened. Some parts of society could lose trust in health policy and political communication, if they felt their voices are silenced. If political decisions followed dominant political narratives that partly do not reflect scientific knowledge as well, this could finally endanger the efficacy of policy measures.

### **Limitations**

This paper focused on the question in what way the chosen statements interfered with political narratives. The results are bound the chosen examples and therefore some limitations need to be taken into account:

The described reactions might be influenced by the fact that all persons (actors, football player, politician and chairman) were to some extent in a prominent position. It is probable that media response was accordingly intensive. It remains an open question whether similar social mechanisms can be expected when it comes to people without that social context, who are neither role models nor decision-makers.

The focus of this paper was set on resonance reported on media (television and newspapers). An analysis of responses in social media could enlarge the picture. For example, in the case of Aiwanger, the massive negative resonance lead to solidarity avowals in social media (e.g. #IchBinAiwanger; I am Aiwanger). This confirms that

several forms of solidarities exist; they can reflect contradicting representations of solidarities in different, partly contrary groups. Moreover, this paper does not enlighten the perspective of people, to which extent they share the dominant political narrative, if they assess the examples as deviant communication or if they follow the criticism and share punitive attitudes.

It would be further interesting to analyse changes over time or in respect to other issues. Social representations and political narratives change as well as problems perceived by society. As soon as new issues gain relevance, like nowadays the war in Ukraine, strong emotions formerly addressed to the last issue can alleviate, and this might influence responses to deviant communication, too.

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<sup>1</sup> Two countries from Europe were included: the UK and Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dw.com/de/steinmeier-ruft-zu-impfbereitschaft-auf/a-56011292> (accessed 05/19/2022).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.donaukurier.de/archiv/coronavirus-kanzlerin-merkel-ruft-alle-zur-solidaritaet-auf-2105079> (accessed 01/01/2023).

- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.stern.de/politik/corona--olaf-scholz-zur-aktuellen-lage---deutliche-worte-an-ungeimpfte-31396436.html> (accessed 05/19/2022).
- <sup>5</sup> [https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2020-11/corona-pandemie-jens-spahn-regierung-buerger-herausforderung-gesundheitsminister?utm\\_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.de%2F](https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2020-11/corona-pandemie-jens-spahn-regierung-buerger-herausforderung-gesundheitsminister?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.de%2F); <https://www1.wdr.de/nachrichten/themen/coronavirus/impfbeginn-impfstoff-corona-100.html>; <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/corona-krise-jens-spahn-ruft-zu-solidaritaet-und-unterstuetzung-von-helfern-auf-a-4bebf7d4-0d4b-4302-8a20-7e8b0350a408> (accessed 05/19/2022).
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.bundesgesundheitsministerium.de/presse/reden/rede/bundestag-130122.html> (accessed 05/19/2022).
- <sup>7</sup> <https://www.zusammengengencorona.de/impfen/aufklaerung-zum-impftermin/gemeinschaftsschutz-solidaritaet-in-der-coronavirus-pandemie/> (accessed 03/02/2022); translated by the author.
- <sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5QhW0Bcd-E> (accessed 05/17/2022).
- <sup>9</sup> While “Querdenker” had been a term which could also include positive attributes some years ago, such as innovative, the connotation has changed immensely during the last two years. The “Duden“, which is an established German spell dictionary, describes “Querdenker” either as a “male person, who thinks independently and originally and whose ideas and views are often not understood or accepted” or as a “follower, sympathizer of the political Querdenker-movement, which is addressed particularly against government measures to contain the corona pandemic, against vaccinations, etc. (and also spreads conspiracy stories).” <https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Querdenker>, (accessed 05/16/2022). The astonishing limitation of the positive interpretation to only male creative thinkers could us let expect that this is an outdated description, yet the second facet confirms the topicality, as it already picks up the movement against COVID-19 measures.
- <sup>10</sup> <https://ladenkino.de/programm/offenerbrief/> (accessed 04/30/2022).
- <sup>11</sup> <https://www.derstandard.de/story/2000126123317/kritik-an-netzaktion-allesdichtmachen-ist-schuetzenhilfe-fuer-querdenker> (accessed 04/30/2022).
- <sup>12</sup> <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/konstantin-kuhle-fdp-zu-allesdichtmachen-nicht-jeder-100.html> (accessed 04/30/2022).
- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.br.de/kultur/allesdichtmachen-warum-die-ironie-eine-taeschung-ist-100.html> (accessed 05/03/2022).
- <sup>14</sup> Shitstorms, candystorms and cascades of outrage have become attributes to describe communicative dynamics in social media (Lünenborg et al., 2020).
- <sup>15</sup> <https://www.br.de/kultur/allesdichtmachen-warum-die-ironie-eine-taeschung-ist-100.html>; <https://ladenkino.de/programm/offenerbrief/> (accessed 04/30/2022).
- <sup>16</sup> [https://www.allgaeuer-zeitung.de/welt/panorama/allesdichtmachen-schauspieler-sorgen-mit-protest-clips-fuer-aufsehen\\_arid-287818](https://www.allgaeuer-zeitung.de/welt/panorama/allesdichtmachen-schauspieler-sorgen-mit-protest-clips-fuer-aufsehen_arid-287818) (accessed 05/16/2022).
- <sup>17</sup> <https://www.welt.de/vermischtes/article230597739/allesdichtmachen-Schauspieler-zerreissen-Corona-Kritik-ihrer-Kollegen.html> (accessed 05/16/2022).
- <sup>18</sup> [https://www.allgaeuer-zeitung.de/welt/panorama/allesdichtmachen-schauspieler-sorgen-mit-protest-clips-fuer-aufsehen\\_arid-287818](https://www.allgaeuer-zeitung.de/welt/panorama/allesdichtmachen-schauspieler-sorgen-mit-protest-clips-fuer-aufsehen_arid-287818); <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allesdichtmachen>. In Germany, everyone is obliged to pay a fee to finance public broadcasting. “The licence fee is a legally prescribed contribution for citizens, companies and institutions as well as for public interest bodies. For private households, the current fee is 18.36 euros per month.” [https://www.rundfunkbeitrag.de/welcome/englisch/index\\_ger.html](https://www.rundfunkbeitrag.de/welcome/englisch/index_ger.html) (accessed 05/16/2022).
- <sup>19</sup> <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/medien/video-aktion-corona-pandemie-allesdichtmachen-dietrich-brueggemann-felix-bruch-paul-brandenburg-1.5281901> (accessed 05/18/2022).
- <sup>20</sup> <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allesdichtmachen> (accessed 05/16/2022).
- <sup>21</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5QhW0Bcd-E> (accessed 05/17/2022).
- <sup>22</sup> <https://www.br.de/kultur/allesdichtmachen-warum-die-ironie-eine-taeschung-ist-100.html> (accessed 05/16/2022).
- <sup>23</sup> <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/bayerische-akademie-der-schoenen-kuenste-winfried-nerdinger-austritt-1.5304940> (accessed 05/16/2022).

- <sup>24</sup> Vaccination is said to be the best way to protect oneself from falling ill and from possible consequences. If 70% were vaccinated, the risk of transmission would be reduced that the pandemic will end. The political narrative alleges vaccinated persons are immune against COVID-19. The ministry also declares the vaccines to be safe, as studies for the vaccine licensing did not reveal frequent severe side effects, and long term effects are not known by now. [https://www.stmgp.bayern.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/leitfaden-fucc88r-patientinnen-und-bucc88rgerinnen-zur-corona-schutzimpfung\\_interaktiv.pdf](https://www.stmgp.bayern.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/leitfaden-fucc88r-patientinnen-und-bucc88rgerinnen-zur-corona-schutzimpfung_interaktiv.pdf) (accessed 05/17/2022).
- <sup>25</sup> <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/soeders-vize-aiwanger-will-keine-impfung-es-geht-ja-nicht-um-ein-gefuehl-sondern-um-objektive-fakten/27376518.html> (accessed 05/17/2022).
- <sup>26</sup> <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/soeders-vize-aiwanger-will-keine-impfung-es-geht-ja-nicht-um-ein-gefuehl-sondern-um-objektive-fakten/27376518.html> (accessed 05/17/2022).
- <sup>27</sup> <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kolumne/hubert-aiwanger-ungeimpft-mit-nebenwirkungen-1.5346767> (accessed 05/17/2022).
- <sup>28</sup> [https://www.zeit.de/politik/2021-07/hubert-aiwanger-vize-ministerpraesident-bayern-corona-impfung-skepsis?utm\\_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.de%2F](https://www.zeit.de/politik/2021-07/hubert-aiwanger-vize-ministerpraesident-bayern-corona-impfung-skepsis?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.de%2F) (accessed 05/17/2022).
- <sup>29</sup> <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/corona-impfung-hubert-aiwanger-zoegert-als-einziger-im-kabinett,SWjlmFh> (accessed 04/30/2022).
- <sup>30</sup> <https://www.rnd.de/politik/markus-soeder-ueber-hubert-aiwangers-impfablehnung-mache-mir-sorgen-um-ihn-5WW55IEPZ7VXDMW5KFXHCWV3RU.html>; <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/aiwanger-impfen-corona-csu-querdenker-100.html>; (accessed 05/17/2022).
- <sup>31</sup> <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/corona-impfung-muesse-laut-aiwanger-private-entscheidung-bleiben-17437197.html> (accessed 05/17/2022).
- <sup>32</sup> <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/verstoerend-soeder-ruegt-aiwanger-wegen-apartheids-aeusserung,SdR7yY3> (accessed 05/17/2022).
- <sup>33</sup> <https://www.stern.de/politik/deutschland/impfverweigerer-hubert-aiwanger-wird-zum-problem-fuer-markus-soeder-30639834.html> (accessed 01/01/2023).
- <sup>34</sup> <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/aiwanger-impfen-101.html> (accessed 05/17/2022).
- <sup>35</sup> <https://www.rnd.de/politik/markus-soeder-ueber-hubert-aiwangers-impfablehnung-mache-mir-sorgen-um-ihn-5WW55IEPZ7VXDMW5KFXHCWV3RU.html> (accessed 05/17/2022).
- <sup>36</sup> An attempt to enact a law on general mandatory vaccination against COVID-19 failed in April 2022, because it did not get the necessary votes in the German Bundestag.
- <sup>37</sup> The report relevant at that time stated that until end of May 2021 about 79,000 suspected side effects or complications were reported, basing on 50 million vaccinations. The notification rate was 1.6 per 1,000 vaccinations, severe reactions were 0.2 per 1,000. <https://www.pei.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/newsroom/dossiers/sicherheitsberichte/sicherheitsbericht-27-12-bis-31-05-21.pdf> (accessed 05/17/2022).
- <sup>38</sup> [https://www.stmgp.bayern.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/leitfaden-fucc88r-patientinnen-und-bucc88rgerinnen-zur-corona-schutzimpfung\\_interaktiv.pdf](https://www.stmgp.bayern.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/leitfaden-fucc88r-patientinnen-und-bucc88rgerinnen-zur-corona-schutzimpfung_interaktiv.pdf) (accessed 04/30/2022). The Federal Minister of Health twittered even that the vaccines would be side-effect-free ([https://twitter.com/karl\\_lauterbach/status/1426323236019650564](https://twitter.com/karl_lauterbach/status/1426323236019650564)).
- <sup>39</sup> <https://www.nordbayern.de/politik/bayern-bolsonaro-aiwanger-nach-impf-aussagen-zum-ruecktritt-aufgefordert-1.11252023>; <https://www.merkur.de/lokales/starnberg/feldafing-ort28672/hubert-aiwanger-starnberg-freie-waehler-kritik-ruecktritt-corona-impfung-90900161.html> (accessed 05/17/2022).
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