# IMMUNISING AGAINST CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES ON NGOS

## PROACTIVE PROTECTION PROJECT

**INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR POLICY ADVOCACY | NOVEMBER 2024**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This **guide provides a narrative strategy and messaging that elicits a positive and constructive response on the role and contribution of NGOs** among harder to reach movable middle segments in Germany **and thus, serves to immunise these target groups against extremist conspiracy theories**. It is the result of ICPA's Proactive Protection project (2023-2024) that aimed to support NGOs in the diversity sector and allies to respond more effectively to attacks resulting from conspiracy thinking and narratives that limit NGOs ability to fulfil their democracy promotion role and undermine trust in the sector and democracy, more broadly.

*1.1 Background, challenges & responses*

As populism and authoritarian tendencies rise in Europe, trust in democracy and civil society is falling, and as a result, conspiracy narratives that vilify the civil society sector are spread more widely[1]. A prevalent conspiracy theory of the far right – The Great Replacement theory – is having a damning and chilling effect on **NGOs who are accused of being 'traitors' and 'enemies of the state' for supporting migrants and refugees and are alleged to be conspiring with globalists to drive the replacement of 'European' populations**[2]. NGOs are struggling to respond effectively to such attacks, and as a result go into defensive mode and are often less willing to be so public about their work. Recent studies by DeZIM[3] and Maecenata Stiftung[4] illustrate **the damaging impact of these attacks on NGOs in Germany** and serve as a strong call to action. The potential direct threat of the spread of this 'traitor' motif has had direct legal consequences in criminalising NGO workers who assist refugees in, for example, France, Greece, UK and Italy[5].

The Proactive Protection project focused on preventing the further mainstreaming of these damaging narratives about NGOs. More specifically, applying ICPA's empirically-tested and value-based narrative change approach, we found that **narrative change is a useful proactive instrument to help immunise the movable middle in Germany from taking on and spreading the set of harmful narratives about NGOs** that are pathways to the 'traitor' motif at the heart of the Great Replacement. Put simply, in a narrative immunisation approach, if we can reframe the public debate around NGOs and shift the needle for our target group so that more trust (or even just less strong doubt) about NGOs is achieved, we build a

barrier or obstacle for them taking on more extreme views about NGOs, i.e. we block the pathways to any further so-called "infection"[6] from the extreme 'traitor' narratives.

*1.2 Project approach & Key Results*

Building on the attitude segmentation of the population based on a broad range of issues by More in Common[7], **we focused on two segments of the population which are at the 'hard end' of the movable middle** and who are more susceptible to conspiracy thinking, i.e. **The Detached (16%) and The Disillusioned (14%)**.



*Figure 1: The Movable Middle in Germany & our target audience (Adapted from More in Common 2019[8])*

As mentioned above, the project was focused on primarily developing a narrative strategy that immunises these harder segments away from extreme conspiracy thinking on NGOs. It involved 3 main phases:

1. a mapping period to understand the current debate on NGOs and the relevant opinions and attitudes of the target segments;
2. and second a narrative development phase to put together a messaging response to immunise;
3. and third, a message testing phase to finalise the strategy.

The key elements of the work involved significant research and testing through the first and third phases as follows:

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| Mapping the landscape (2023) | | Testing the immunisation messaging (2024) | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Opinion polling | Focus Groups | Opinion polling | Focus Groups |
| National Survey (n =1000) run on IPSOS Fast Facts Panel | 4 x Focus groups Commissioned from IPSOS Germany | National Survey (n =1000) run on IPSOS Fast Facts Panel | 4 x Focus groups Commissioned from IPSOS Germany |

Figure 2: The research and testing stages of the project

It is worth noting that we chose to use the term "narrative immunisation", in contrast to the often-used term of inoculation in deradicalisation approaches[9]. Simply put inoculation is an approach that exposes audiences to an example of a specific conspiracy theory and the tactics used to deliver it before they see it and so, is a kind of "pre-bunking". The immunisation we are focused on assumes that our target segments have already been exposed to many of the anti-NGO pathway narratives that can lead to embracing conspiracy thinking, and so by reframing the NGO debate to rebuild trust in the sector along the key pathways, we immunise them from taking the next leap to a more extreme conspiracy like the 'traitor' element of The Great Replacement.

*1.3 Key results*

- We **developed a narrative strategy based on a community well-being message** that we have shown **moves the attitudes of The Detached** on key areas of doubt about NGOs and their general level of trust in the sector, **from a mean 'tend to disagree' or 'unsure' response to a 'tend to agree'** response, i.e. immunising them against more angry or extreme thinking [See Sections 5 and 6].

- The **3 pathway narratives that are key to shifting the attitude of the Detached on NGOs** and hence immunise them from the more extreme 'traitor' narrative are: **that NGOs are 1. Too political; 2. Too extreme** and **3. Wasteful & Incompetent** [See Section 5]. Indeed, the method of pathway identification and using this approach to immunise is also something new we developed and experimented with in this project.

- In the end, we decided to **focus on the Detached, rather than the Disillusioned** for this immunisation strategy. Through two national surveys and three focus groups in two years with the Disillusioned, we have significant doubts about the potential efficacy of a positively-focused, value-driven narrative approach with this group. Put simply, while they may react well initially to a positive NGO message, it doesn't last and quickly fall into deconstructing the messaging using a conspiracy mindset [See Section 5].

For this work, we drew on a decade of work in Germany on narrative change in the field of migration and six years' experience working on civic space narratives in Kazakhstan, as we're seeing the narrative tactics from authoritarian contexts being replicated in Europe and following quite a predictable playbook.

*1.4 What does the guide cover?*

In addition to detailing the immunising messaging approach, we also include key insights and resources from the mapping stage of the project, as follows:

|  | Section | Description |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Introduction | Background, Aim, Overview & Key Results |
| 2. | Why people adopt conspiracy thinking | Definition, Psychological factors & Levels of adoption |
| 3. | Key narrative pathways to Great Replacement | Frame map of pathway narratives to 'traitor' |
| 4. | Profiles of the Target Audience/Segments | Detached & Disillusioned views on NGOs, Democracy & Conspiracy mentality. |
| 5 | Reframing to immunise – approach & results | Conspiracy theory responses & project immunisation results |
| 6 | Community well-being reframe of the NGO sector | Tested messaging to immunise the middle |
| 7 | About the guide & project | Authors, Partners, Citation & Licencing |
|  | Annex 1 | Profiles of the Detached & Disillusioned |

*1.5 Who is it for?*

The guide is designed to support any actor interested in protecting and sustaining a vibrant civil society sector in Germany. More specifically and practically, the target is **NGOs, their supporters and allies who** work in the area of narrative change/strategic communications and **wish to develop publicly targeted messaging and projects that rebuild trust in the sector**.

## 2. WHY PEOPLE ADOPT CONSPIRACY THINKING

At the core of our project is a very pervasive conspiracy theory called the 'Great Replacement', in which NGOs - especially those supporting migrants and refugees - are accused of being 'traitors' to the state[10]. Therefore, it was very important to have **a clear understanding of what drives belief in this kind of conspiracy thinking**.

*2.1 What is a conspiracy theory?*

First, we need to recognise that conspiracies to secretly do something illegal or harmful happen and the initiative to find the evidence to uncover such plans is the positive motivating force behind investigative journalism and watchdogging. However, on the more negative side, it is specifically **theorising a conspiracy without sufficient proof and aggressively presenting it as truth that is our focus**[11]. This harmful side of conspiracy theories have an **established meta-narrative: nothing is as it seems, everything is connected, planned and fixed by a secret group of evil doers**[12]. Given the current level of the uptake of conspiracy thinking, it represents a serious threat to trust in institutions and democracy. With trust in institutions falling in Germany[13], finding practical steps to tackle the spread of conspiracy thinking could not be more important.

*2.2 Why do people believe conspiracy theories?*

There are important psychological explanations that help us to understand why people are prone to believing conspiracy theories. Conspiracy-driven stories of evil doers with an agenda seem to be very sticky for those seeking meaning and are said to fulfil some basic needs:

1. An epistemic motive **to explain complicated things in a simple way**;
2. An existential motive **to feel in control**;
3. A social motive **to feel good about being part of an ingroup who knows what's "really" going on** versus the 'naïve' general public[14].

These recognised psychological drivers inform the socio-economic patterns of **those who tend be open to this kind of conspiracy thinking: those who find it difficult to deal with times of change or uncertainty**. The names and demographics of the segments on the right in the More in Common 2019 study - the Detached, the Disillusioned and the Angry - are illustrative of such a mindset[15]. And indeed, in our own survey in 2023, we found higher levels of conspiracy mindedness in these segments (See the 2nd column on page 2 of their profiles in Annex 1). Antonio Amadeu Stiftung nicely bring to life the feeling of marginalisation held by these segments by explaining that those who readily take on conspiracy thinking are "**people who previously felt isolated, overtaxed, helpless, excluded, patronised,**

**commanded and ignored**', want to "have a ready solution to all problems" and "to find the culprits for one's own social misery"[16].

It is also worth noting the growing prevalence of conspiracy stories as a major narrative line for more and more fiction and documentaries to the point that the so-called "paranoid style" in viewing political motivation[17] has become the "paranoid lifestyle"[18]. So, **as we have become more and more immersed in this story pattern, it becomes more accessible, sticky and for many, more believable**.

*2.3 Different levels of usage & belief*

Maybe the most important finding from the literature for this project and confirmed in our focus groups was a finding that came from the anthropological study of conspiracy thinking[19]. In this work, they found an important difference in the level of belief and usage of conspiracy arguments between what they call "conspiracy theorists" and "conspiracy talkers". **Theorists are hardcore believers who virtually always explain the world using the 'nothing is at it seems' meta-narrative**, whereas there are many more **people who are talkers, i.e. not nearly as committed, but without different explanations available, use the line of argument to provide a simple explanation and to be seen as part of the ingroup**[20]. In contrast to theorists, we found in our focus groups that talkers are also people who are happy to use a rational evidence-based explanation, if they have it to hand. As you will see in Section 5, this is a very important insight in this project, as our 2 target segments more or less cleanly break out along these lines, with **the Detached acting more like talkers and the Disillusioned more like theorists**, **or as we prefer to call them 'conspiracy thinkers'**, i.e. they have very much embraced the theory for it to become the basis for their analysis of the world.
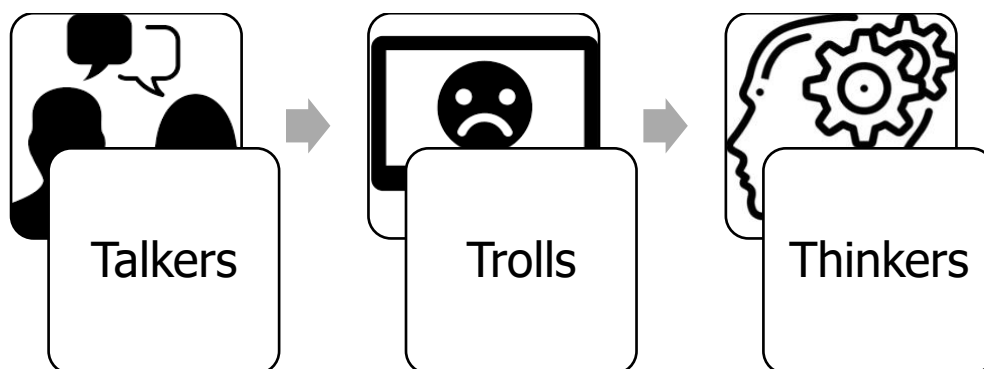


*Figure 3: Different levels of belief/usage of conspiracy theories*

In addition to thinkers and talkers, given the fact that much of the spread of conspiracy thinking happens online, we also thought it is useful add the 3rd category of 'Trolls'. "Trolling is when someone posts or comments online to 'bait' people, which means deliberately provoking an argument or emotional reaction"[21] and **the troll we are focused on is one who maliciously spreads conspiracy thinking just to get a reaction/attention and to act as click-bait which drives traffic**. So, while their level of belief is not clear, they are using conspiracy thinking in an instrumental way. This is a very important factor to consider in any attempt to reduce the expanding online presence of this kind of thinking.

## 3. THE GREAT REPLACEMENT & KEY PATHWAY NARRATIVES

As defined in the introduction, the focus of Proactive Protection project is on the threat of a dominant conspiracy theory: the Great Replacement. The **replacement process is said to be driven by nefarious globalists/foreign conspirators and supported by 'naïve' left-leaning cosmopolitans and NGOs who are portrayed as 'traitors'**[22]. Based on the very strong feelings such a frame evokes, NGOs constantly get attacked and vilified [23].

To unpack this debate in Germany, we first dug into literature, surveys and analysis on the issues of trust in democracy and institutions[24], debates on position and roles of NGOs and civic space, conspiracy thinking[25] and Great Replacement. This led us to **identifying that the 'traitor' narrative is more at the extreme end of the spectrum of attacks on NGOs, but that there are 5 repeated "pathway" narratives that are the dominant stories/positions in the negative discourse around NGOs** in Germany that act as the stepping stones to the more extreme position. Once we identified these narratives from the literature and media analysis, we also confirmed these patterns in consultation with multiple NGO partners and in a national survey in 2023 and focus groups in 2023 and 2024.

To be clear, it should be noted that there are also widely held positive narratives about civil society, but these more negative views are held more widely among those segments of society that are of interest for our project, i.e. those more disconnected, disenchanted and tend to be vulnerable to far-right thinking[26]. The following diagram and detailed table break down the narrative picture of these pathways:



*Figure 4: Overview of common pathways to the 'traitor' narrative*

They break down as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| **NGOs as Traitors** – NGOs are depicted as a left-leaning cosmopolitan elite and naïve do-gooders conspiring with foreigners to destabilize state traditions and demographics. | **Suspicion of NGO contact with terrorism** - NGOs are portrayed as fronts for breeding and funding extremism, Islamism, and terrorism, and must be monitored and brought to justice. |
| *Lines most often used in the frame:*<br><br>• Enemies undermining the state<br>• Undermining with refugees & gender issues<br>• Left, cosmopolitan, elitists<br>• Naïve 'Gutmensch (do-gooders)<br>• Foreign agents (e.g. Soros) | *Lines most often used in the frame:*<br><br>• Fake NGO's<br>• Spreading extremism & terrorism<br>• Naïve liberal supporters<br>• 'Kontakt Schuld' (guilt by association with radicals) |
| **NGOs promoting Open Borders** - Helping the needy is fine, but NGOs are depicted as naive liberals want to open borders to all refugees, overwhelming the country and taking social services and jobs from deserving Germans. | **NGOs as wasteful & incompetent** - The government must improve in addressing social issues and stop wasting taxpayer money on ineffective NGOs. |
| *Lines most often used in the frame:*<br><br>• Open borders to all refugees<br>• Sea rescue boats<br>• Naïve liberals overwhelm Germany<br>• Loss of control & more insecurity | *Lines most often used in the frame:*<br><br>• NGOs wasting taxpayer money<br>• Not effective<br>• Sometimes corrupt<br>• Useless government funding them |
| **NGOs as too political** - NGOs accused of breaking rules by engaging in politics should have their status revoked. | **NGOs as too radical & polarizing** - Organisations like Last Generation are accused of extreme protests, breaking laws, disrupting daily life and emergency services, and should face justice for their actions. |
| *Lines most often used in the frame:*<br><br>• NGOs crossing line into politics<br>• Questioning role of NGO sector<br>• Cases to remove non-profit status<br>• Chilling effect for NGOs | *Lines most often used in the frame:*<br><br>• Anger about "Klima Kleber" protests<br>• Protestors as criminals<br>• Obstructing everyday life/ambulances<br>• Heavy security responses & arrests |

*Figure 5: Detail of common pathway narratives and the 'traitor' narrative*

This 2023 frame map was a foundation for the project to have a better handle on narrative challenge and in the end, was also the route to finding the immunisation strategy, see Section 5.

It is worth noting how similar these narratives are to the playbook of narratives used more globally to shrink civic space (See the map of attack narratives in our guide: Safeguarding Civic Space).

## 4. PROFILES OF THE TARGET AUDIENCE/SEGMENTS

In addition to mapping out the broader debate around NGOs, we also needed to build an in-depth profile of the relevant attitudes of our specific target audience. Starting from the segmentation of the population based on a broad range of attitudes surveyed by More in Common over the last 5 years[27], and as this is an immunisation project, **we chose to focus on two segments of the population at the 'hard end' of the middle who are susceptible to conspiracy thinking, i.e. The Detached (16%)** and **The Disillusioned (14%).**
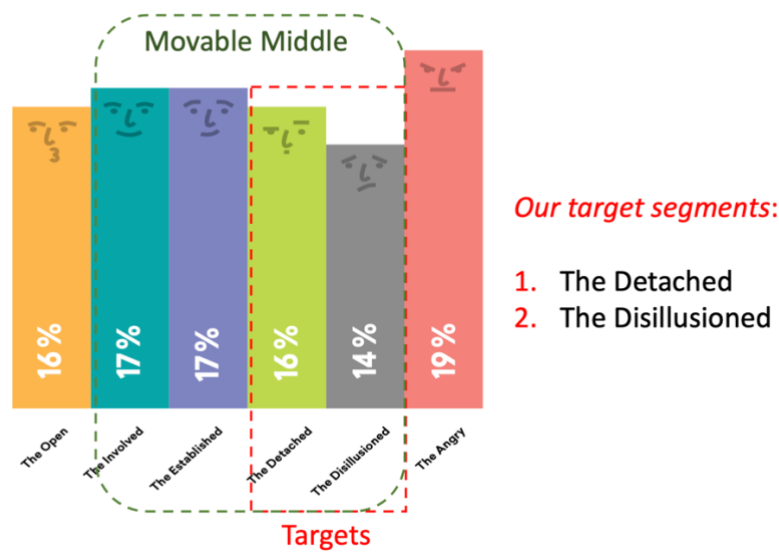


*Figure 6: The Movable Middle in Germany & our target segments (Adapted from More in Common 2019[28])*

While many of the previous surveys done on these segments provide useful a foundation into their attitudes to migration, demographics and general levels of institutional trust, belonging and agency, we needed to add to the following further insights to build functional profiles for this project:

- Attitudes and levels of trust towards NGOs
- Attitudes on the Great Replacement and the Pathway narratives on NGOs
- Levels of conspiracy mentality

And so through 2 national surveys in 2023 and 2024 and 4 focus groups in 2023, we put together in-depth profiles of the 2 segments under the following headings:

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| Attitudes to Great Replacement & pathway narratives on NGOs | Openness to Great Replacement based on attitudes to migration & Muslims | Anxieties on Belonging & Control | Demographics |
|---|---|---|---|
| Attitudes on NGOs | Conspiracy mindedness | Trust in Democracy & Institutions | |

*Figure 7: Main elements of segment descriptions*

The following table provides a short overview of the segments:

| **The Detached/Die Abgehängten** | **Disillusioned/Die Desillusionierten** |
|---|---|
| *Summary*:<br><br>• conspiracy talkers,<br>• split on many issues,<br>• unsure about NGOs,<br>• see themselves as migration losers,<br>• resist participation/rules,<br>• younger, self-reliant. | *Summary:*<br><br>• corruption-conspiracy thinkers,<br>• anti-migration,<br>• NGO-sceptical,<br>• democracy = welfare state,<br>• angry, lost, poor,<br>• older |
| *Qualitative Description:*<br><br>At the core, the Detached believe in a kind of "bootstraps", economic liberalism, where success and happiness come from independent self-reliance, with low level state intervention. But, they are not nearly libertarians and still expect the state to be there to provide services and security. Nevertheless, their focus is still firmly on how the state can support them as individuals, more than a broader societal view of its role….<br><br>See full description of the Detached | *Qualitative Description:*<br><br>The most striking thing about meeting this segment in focus groups is their mood – somewhere between lost and angry. They are the segment at the lowest economic and social status level in Germany and have been further hit economically by covid and inflation. The older ones talk nostalgically of times past ("The best days of Germany are behind us") and lost security (mostly economic) and the younger ones talk of promises undelivered ("I had to put away 90% of my dreams")….<br><br>See full description of the Disillusioned |

*Figure 8: Segment Summary Descriptions*

The linked full descriptions we developed comprise a 2-page overview of their attitudes under the headings listed above and also a 1-page qualitative description of the segments. (Also included at the end of this PDF as Annex 1)

**Overview of the Detached (DT) Segment**
based on data from surveys & *focus groups* & secondary sources
Nov 9, 2024

**Summary Description**: Split on issues, Unsure about NGOs, See themselves as migration losers, Resist participation/rules, Conspiracy talkers, Younger, Self-reliant.

| Attitudes to Great Replacement & pathway narratives on NGOs | Openness to GR based on attitudes to migration/Muslims | Anxieties on Belonging & Control | Demographics | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Great Replacement* <br><br> • Around 1/3 aware of GR <br> • Unsure whether to believe in the idea of the GR <br> • Tend to disagree GR is a deliberate plan by global elite <br> • Unsure if German liberal elite is aiding the GR global plan <br> • *didn't bring GR themselves in FGs* <br><br> *Traitor & Pathway narratives* <br> • Tend to agree that NGOs are too political <br> • Agree that the Klima Kleber are too radical/extremist <br> • Tend to agree with a humanitarian, open borders idea <br> • Tend to disagree that NGOs are wasteful and incompetent | *Attitudes to Migration & Integration* <br><br> • *Tend to see/mostly spending on refugees as a loss for them (on welfare, pensions etc. But those with good skills can come.* <br> • *Think continuing migration will lead to increasing conflict & loss of state control* <br> • Unsure if migrants try to integrate <br> • Tend to agree well-integrated guest workers can stay and especially 2nd or 3rd generations contribute equally <br> • Tend to agree refugees deserve asylum <br> • *Tends to think white population will become minority & that increasing migration threatens EU.* <br><br> *Attitudes to Muslims & Islam* | *Belonging (in & out group feelings)* <br><br> • Tend to feel valued <br> • Quite distrustful of others <br> • Tend to agree it's not important to meet new people <br> • Lower levels of belonging than other segments (same as DI) <br> • Highest level of loneliness (same as DI). <br> • *But quite proud of their self-sufficiency* <br><br> *Control (responsibility & ability to take action)* <br><br> • Tend to feel in control of their future <br> • Tend to think the world is changing too fast | • Youngest (56% 18-39) <br> • More suburban <br> • More Catholic <br> • Unsure who to vote for, but some Union, SPD & AfD supporters <br> • Most are parents with young/minor kids <br><br> *Prone to Conspiracy ideas* <br> • Most employed, incomes in low-mid range <br> • Tend to have average to lower levels of education <br> • Financial situation worsened during covid and inflation <br> • Highest proportion with migration background (1 in 5) | |

*Figure 9: Illustration of the Detailed profiles of each segment*

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## 5. REFRAMING TO IMMUNISE – APPROACH & RESULTS

The questions answered in this section are:

1. How do people respond to the threat of conspiracy thinking and what role **does narrative immunisation play in a broader response strategy**?
2. And more specifically, how have we used the approach in the Proactive Protection project and what were the outcomes?

*5.1 Responding to conspiracy theories*

The natural instinct on hearing a conspiracy theory is to question the evidence and/or present other evidence that undermines the position presented. What is particularly **challenging in responding to conspiracy thinking is the self-sealing quality of the argument**, **i.e. new evidence presented from established sources is just further evidence of the conspiracy to the believer**[29]. Also given the strong level of social attachment of certain groups to conspiracy theories, strong attacks on the argument can backfire to make those holding them even more committed[30]. Put simply, myth busting seldom works and can even backfire. So **in any direct engagement-led response like other narrative change processes, an emotionally-smart response is key**.

Looking more broadly, what are the established response practices? The *Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* provides a solid overview of the kinds of actions that are commonly used in response to the spread of conspiracy theories from the supply side (those who spread conspiracy thinking) to the demand side (those who consume them). On the supply side, the actions include taking down or blocking websites, downgrading sources spreading conspiracy thinking in the algorithm, marking or tagging websites, users and posts as conspiracy theorists, and factchecking projects[31].

The **focus our project is very much on the demand side and trying to directly engage people who are exposed to conspiracy thinking**. On this side, there are many ways to respond including prebunking/inoculation[32] and debunking/factchecking, longer term responses such as building media literacy and civic education and of course, more public information/campaigning responses like narrative change to immunise or reduce harm.

*5.2 Narrative immunisation*

The basic assumptions about an immunising solution in this project is based on the idea that:

> "While certain personality traits, social status or minority status are difficult or impossible to change, reducing feelings of uncertainty, mistrust or powerlessness and

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lack of control, that are found to important factors that enhance conspiracy thinking, seem feasible" and "especially *interventions that reduce feelings of [dis]trust and lack of control seem feasible and work*" [33]

Following these principles in more practical terms, our project is based on the idea that *reframing the public debate around NGOs in a more positive direction based on shared values of community well-being will help to reduce distrust and uncertainty about civil society in our target segments*, and so *immunise them from more extreme ideas like the idea of NGOs as 'traitors'* central to the Great Replacement. Indeed, we have previously seen that narrative change approaches do work to rebuild trust in NGOs among movable middle audiences in our projects in Kazakhstan[34] and others also report success in this area[35].

*5.3 Project Result: Narrative immunisation will work with the Detached, and not the Disillusioned.*

As stated above, the basic assumptions about an immunising solution in this project is based on the idea that a positively-focused narrative approach can rebuild trust in the NGO sector. After the testing phase in 2024, *we decided based on the results that the Detached should be our main focus for the immunisation strategy* as it worked well with them, in comparison to the Disillusioned.

While the message testing survey data in 2024 didn't show much difference in response to the community well-being messaging between the 2 segments, what came out really clearly in the focus groups (in both 2023 and 2024), was that the *feelings of uncertainty, powerlessness and lack of control/agency were in fact much stronger in the Disillusioned than the Detached*. For example, when we tested positive NGO messaging in video content in the focus groups in 2023, it worked well with the Detached, whereas the conspiracy theorist-led responses of the Disillusioned groups meant that they initially liked the message, but very quickly began to question everything within a conspiracy/corruption frame. Our way to summarise this was that *the Disillusioned group couldn't handle the positivity*. So overall for the Disillusioned, there *can be a relatively wide range of opinions about NGO work in an initial response, but ultimately the group is quickly convinced by a conspiracy view* as the discussion unfolds, i.e. immunisation or rebuilding of trust doesn't happen.

Taking a broader view on the Disillusioned and to quote our NGO partners who also observed the 2023 focus groups: "they are aching for community". So, we really think that *more community-based, direct engagement and interaction is needed for this group to help them find some agency* to reduce their anxiety about their futures and more broadly, begin to rebuild more trust in institutions.

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*5.4 Project Result: Narrative Immunisation worked among the Detached*

The following key results that show immunisation against conspiracy thinking about NGOs using community well-being messaging was achieved among the Detached.

To build an immunisation strategy, we first identified the most influential pathway narratives which we need to positively shift opinion among the Detached to immunise them from the 'traitor' narrative. From the 5 pathway narratives we found in the opening narrative mapping phase, we identified **3 key pathway narratives**: **that NGOs 1. were too political, 2. too extreme** and **3. incompetent and wasteful**. The Detached held stronger negative opinions in the 2023 survey on these 3 narratives (in comparison to the other 2 pathways) and also, they brought up these 3 themselves (without prompting) in discussions about NGOs in the 2023 Focus groups.
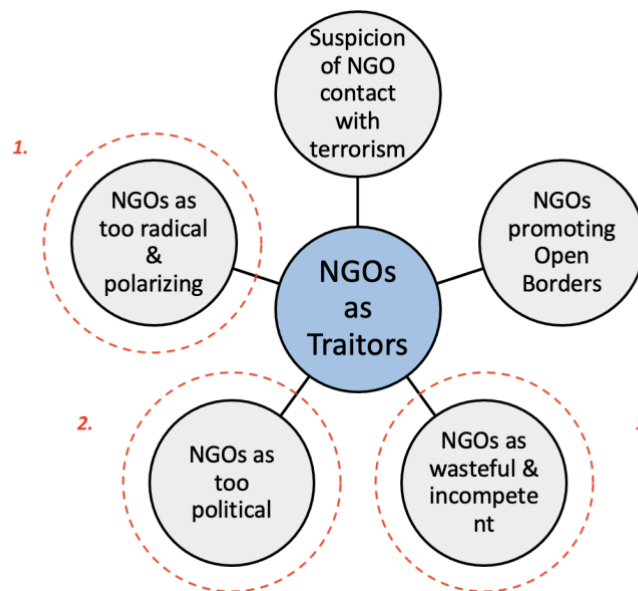


*Figure 10: Immunisation Strategy - 3 key pathway narratives to immunise the Detached*

Interestingly and more positively, there was significant support for the humanitarian message of saving people in trouble in the Mediterranean (The Open Borders pathway) and basically disagreement on the contact with terrorism pathway. They also did not bring up the traitor narrative at all in focus groups and also disagreed with it in the 2023 survey.

*5.5 Project Result: Community well-being messaging built more trust to immunise the Detached*

Using the community well-being messaging (in Section 6), we were **able to shift average attitudes on a positive wording of the 3 key pathway narratives and a trust statement on NGOs from 'tend to disagree/unsure' response range in 2023 to the 'tend to agree' response range in the 2024 survey**.

| Mean result from 10 point Likert scale | Coded Level of agreement |
|---|---|
| 1 | Strongly Disagree |
| 2 | Disagree |
| 3 | Disagree |
| 4 | Tend to Disagree |
| 5 | Divided/unsure |
| 6 | Tend to Agree |
| 7 | Agree |
| 8 | Agree |
| 9 | Strongly Agree |

Attitudes on 3 Key pathway narratives among Detached in 2023 Survey

Attitudes on 3 Key pathway narratives in response to Community Well-being messages in 2024

*Figure 11: Positive attitude shift in response to Community-Well Being messaging among the Detached on 3 Key Pathway Narratives from 2023 to 2024*

In addition, to confirm these overall results, we did a small experiment in the 2024 message testing survey, where we saw that **attitudes among the Detached shifted on the 3 key pathway narratives and a trust statement on average by 6% in the positive after being exposed to the community well-being messaging, in comparison to a Detached control group who were not exposed to it**.
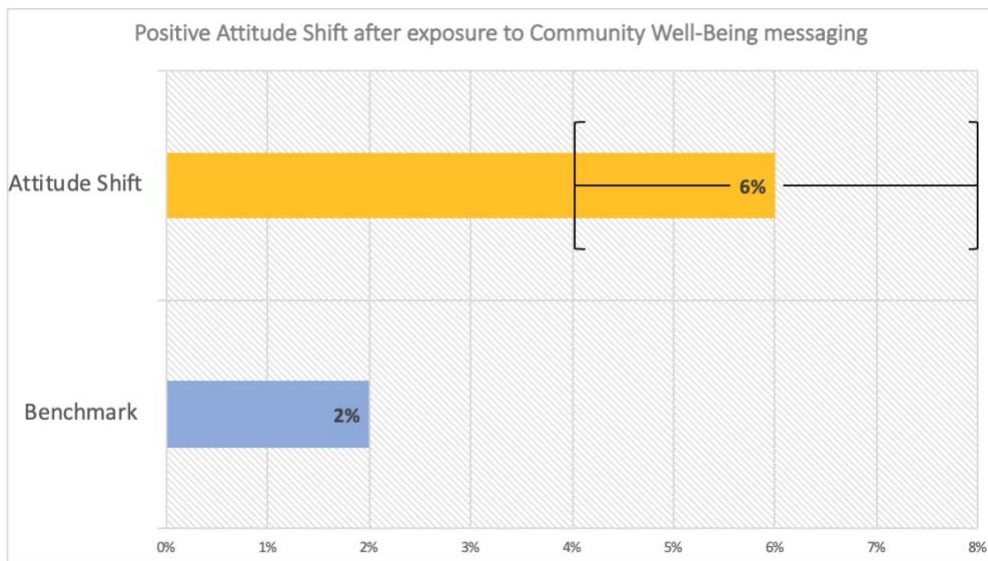
*Figure 12: Positive attitude shift on Key Pathway Narratives based on Experimental approach*

This experimental element certainly has its limitations and would need to be repeated with larger sample sizes (as we did in the #KommMit pilot), but it helps to triangulate and validate the attitude shift we see in the longer term immunisation result above.

To be clear, it is unrealistic to expect to turn the Detached in unabashed NGO supporters through one narrative intervention. However, **this result of a 6 to 10-point shift in the key pathway narratives is enough to keep the 'traitor' narrative in the category of unacceptable/extremist thinking for them**, i.e. serving the immunising goal at the heart of our project.

## 6. COMMUNITY WELL-BEING REFRAME OF THE NGO SECTOR

Building on the mapping stage (of the debate in Section 3 and the target audiences in Section 4) and a narrative development and testing process (following the approach detailed in our toolkit), we developed a messaging approach that successfully immunises the Detached segment against extremist conspiracy thinking about NGOs (See Section 5). This chapter details the community well-being reframe of the NGO sector that is the immunising messaging approach.

*6.1 The key drivers of the reframing/messaging approach*

| a. Build on unifying value appeals | b. Build on recognisable community challenges, responses & aspirations | c. Expand understanding of the role of NGOs |
|---|---|---|
| d. Explain the NGO sector roles in metaphors | e. Introduce the term NGOs to act as a stepping stone to an expanded view of the sector | f. Bring the values to life through authentic storytelling |

*Figure 13: Drivers of the reframing approach*

Breaking these down:

*a. Unifying Value Appeals*

The **value appeals** that underpin the messaging approach are as follows:



Community Well-Being

Practicality & Common sense

Responsibility, contribution & dependability

Accountability & Fairness

*Figure 14: Value appeals driving the community well-being messaging*

Quoting from our [#KommMit toolbox on a value-based approach](): "effective communication with the goal of changing attitudes is never just about facts on the issue; rather, finding value appeals that mobilise and open the door to a constructive debate with various audiences is key". **We can't understate the importance of this set of value appeals, as they become the guide or NorthStar for all the comms** that follow. It's important to point out this set of value appeals is the bridge that unifies the Detached and what we have assumed that NGOs will feel happy also to message on.

*b. Building on shared challenges and aspirations that resonate*

From the focus groups, we were able to identify the most common challenges that came up from the target groups and **identify the shared challenges that need to be overcome to deliver well-being at the core of the messaging**. As with the values, we are not trying just to please the audience, but also find those challenges we also agree need to be tackled and are felt at the community level. The challenges we identified are:

- Rising rents
- Employment
- Caring for elderly relatives
- Pension planning/security
- School life after the pandemic
- And a more general challenge: getting off the hamster wheel from everyday stress and social media bubbles.

*c. Expanding the role of NGOs & Civil Society*

One of the main challenges we could see in the mapping period was a reductive view of NGOs where providing support and charity is considered good and playing roles in politics is seen as bad, close to 'lobbyism' and a type of corrupt self-interest. Therefore, **a key part of the reframing was to widen out the understanding of the variety of NGOs and civil society organisations fulfilling a wide range of roles** beyond this limited perspective. The following diagram illustrates the expanded roles that underpin the messaging approach:
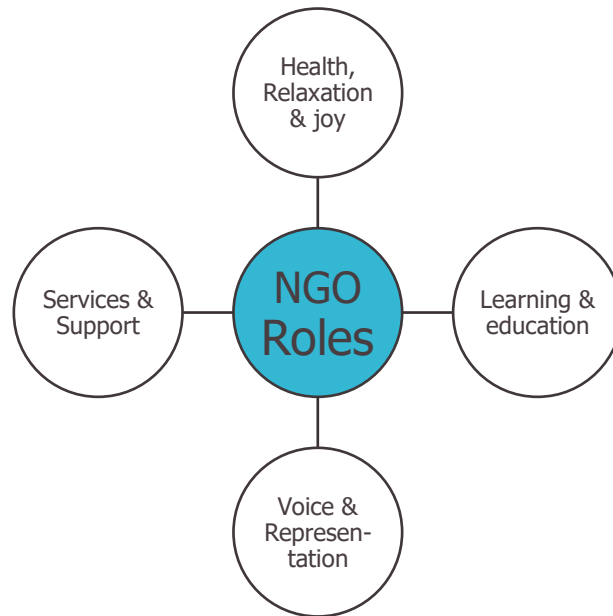
Figure 15: Expanded roles of NGOs in the messaging approach

*d. Explaining the NGO sector in metaphors*

As the concept of NGOs and civil society is quite blurry for the target segments, we also tested a number of explanatory metaphors. Frameworks Institute use a metaphorical approach and explain that **metaphors help compare something abstract to something familiar which opens a door to understanding**[36]. Building on a number of sources that have messaged in this space, the metaphors that we used and worked are as follows:

1. **Construction**: NGOs acting to build, protect and maintain community well-being[37]
2. **Bridge**: NGOs as an important pathway for community action on issues of concern
3. **Choir**: NGOs as the organiser to empower the community to express their position in unison[38]

*e. Introducing the term NGO – a stepping stone to an expanded view of the sector*

Through all stages of the project, it was clear that the target middle segments have very vague notions about civil society and its role in a democracy, and indeed are challenged when discussing such conceptual notions. The more common German term is NPO (non-profit), but this term tends to trigger a whole negative discussion around funding, trust and corruption. In addition, these segments don't tend to see big charities, associations/clubs and other types of NGOs as part of the same group. So, **we needed a new term to bring these organisations together under one umbrella and give the new expanded view a name**. Although the term NGO is more of an English term and is not so well known, we saw

in the focus groups that it can function as a pillar of meaning making, a stepping stone into the expanded view the sector that included all types of organisations and the expanded roles listed above.

*f. Bring the values to life through authentic storytelling*

In this resource, we have worked on a set of tested messaging to guide those wishing to immunise those on the right against conspiracy thinking about NGOs. However, a follow up step is needed: the **built out of stories to illustrate and bring the values in the messaging to life in an authentic and engaging way**. Following a value-based approach, this is an essential element and as we always say, the stories are the connective tissue between the values and the issue discussion we are targeting. See examples of effective civic space story telling in our Safeguarding Civic Space Guide.

*6.2 The messages that reframe the NGO sector around community well-being*

The topline/guiding messages that worked are as follows:

- **NGOs work to maximise community well-being** and human potential through the stages of life
- **We can count on NGOs to work well for all**

Taking these topline messages and building on all the drivers above, we develop a set of detailed and tested messaging that works to immunise the Detached. The set of messages includes:

- 2 that speak to an expanded overall view of the sector and;
- then 3 messages that focus on 3 more specific roles for NGOs that test well.

This section introduces the messaging, explains why they work, and details the evidence to support our claims and the risks/adaptations that might be needed. These messages could be used or adapted for campaigning and project work, and even more everyday face-to-face, explaining or pitching the work of an NGO to similar sceptical audiences.

22

*Expanded overall NGO roles messaging*

| 1 | **Expansive role of NGOs** | For decades NGOs such as charities, immigrant support associations, youth and sports clubs run by dedicated community members have been supporting our communities. They give us a voice when issues arise and create opportunities for learning, growth, health and relaxation. | *Value appeals*<br><br>• Community well-being<br>• Practicality & common sense<br>• Responsibility, contribution & dependability<br>• Accountability & fairness |
|---|---|---|---|

*Why this works?*

- Shows the expansive and long-term roles played by the sector in protecting and promoting community well-being (including, but not limited to supporting the needy).
- Good balance of resonance in the grounded, community aspirations and also adding the potentially more dissonant ideas of giving voice when issues arise (i.e. more political) and including immigrant support organisations alongside other types of organisations
- Explains and illustrates the expanded view of the sector with a wide variety of recognisable organisations
- Appeals to the idea that local people with practical knowledge are at the heart of the work, i.e. how the Detached view competency.

*Evidence*

- *Message Testing Survey*: This statement got a mean response of 6,5 among the Detached and 6,6 from the all respondents, i.e. strongly in the 'Tend to Agree' level of agreement.
- *Focus Groups*: This statement brought responses that discussed community support, tolerance, cohesion and praise for committed community members giving their time and bringing their expertise.

*Risks/Adjustments*

- This messaging will get stronger positive responses if supported with authentic and recognisable stories of NGO work in this area that bring the values to life. For example, in the focus groups with the Detached, organisations like Sozialverband (National social support agency), Lohnsteuerhilfeverein (tax advising associations), Sports clubs, Meterschutzverein (tenants associations) were brought up as good examples as part of this discussion.

| 2 | Weather the storms | These days, many of us are facing similar challenges: rising rents, school life after the pandemic, caring for elderly relatives or planning for retirement. NGOs advise and support us to weather these storms so that we can fulfil our potential by promoting education, solidarity and better access to services. | *Value appeals*<br><br>• Community well-being<br>• Responsibility, contribution & dependability |
|---|---|---|---|

*Why this works?*

- Builds resonance on recognised shared challenges among the Detached
- Expands understanding of the roles played by the sector in supporting well-being, though education, solidarity and access to services towards a brighter future.
- *Help for self-help* – providing advice and guidance to people to have agency and help themselves is a recognisable role of the sector by the Detached and also fits into their notions of the importance of self-reliance and independent action.
- The construction/shelter metaphor around help to 'weathering storms' provides an accessible explanation of the role of NGOs.

*Evidence*

- *Message Testing Survey*: This statement got a mean response of 6,1 among the Detached and 6,2 from the all respondents, i.e. just over the border into the 'Tend to Agree' level of agreement.
- *Focus Groups*: This statement brought responses that discussed community support and solidarity, protection and safe zones and volunteers helping out, filling gaps and NGOs providing valued guidance.

*Risks/Adjustments*

- The list of challenges at the start could be adjusted to suit the intended age group/stage of life. For example, the current ones work well for more middle aged and older groups.
- This messaging will get stronger positive responses if supported with authentic and recognisable stories of NGO work in this area that bring the values to life. Some questioned whether the level of support provided from the sector, so these illustrative and engaging stories are very important.

| 3 | **Health & Relaxation** | Sometimes we need a break from the stress of everyday life, the hamster wheel and social media bubbles. Whether youth clubs, choirs, sports clubs or hiking groups, they offer a chance to get back to simple things, relaxing, exercising, being creative and simply chatting with our friends and neighbours. These e.V.s are all NGOs that have long promoted the well-being of our communities and remain important building blocks for this. | *Value appeals*<br><br>• Community well-being<br>• Responsibility, contribution & dependability |
|---|---|---|---|

*Why this works?*

- Triggers feelings of warmth through community and brings out many positive memories.
- Switching off from social media and finding the time for an 'innerlife' are seen as important aspirations.
- Expands understanding of the roles played by the sector in being the facilitator and protector of valued individual and community targets of health, exercise and relaxation. This link is a very positive association.
- The nostalgia appeal of getting back to the simpler things in life also brings out strong positive stories and feelings.

*Evidence*

- *Message Testing Survey*: This statement got a mean response of 6,2 among the Detached and 6,2 from the all respondents, i.e. into the 'Tend to Agree' level of agreement.
- *Focus Groups*: This statement brought responses on the importance of taking a break from everyday stress and the importance of NGOs role in providing these opportunities. In addition, it triggered stories of positive nostalgic stories of having the chance to talk to friends and neighbours and enjoy outdoor life in many ways.

*Risks/Adjustments*

- We tried this statement out with an exclusive focus on allotment gardens and this split opinion, with many seeing them as places of strict rules and community competition. So, adjusting the list of types of groups detailed in the message based on your knowledge of the target may be useful.
- This messaging will get stronger positive responses, if supported with authentic and recognisable stories of NGO work in this area that bring the values to life.

| 4 | **Services & Support** | Whether children, elderly people, the disabled, refugees or the homeless - NGOs such as charities and associations are there with guidance and support for individuals, families and communities, as they navigate through the tough times to building the foundations of a stable future. | Value appeals<br><br>• Community well-being<br>• Responsibility, contribution & dependability<br>• Practicality & Common Sense |
|---|---|---|---|

*Why this works?*

- This is the recognised positive role for civil society among the Detached and this message gets positive responses in the sectors role in helping the needy.
- Expands understanding of the role played by the sector even in this support role with its focus beyond the individual to the community and also beyond just filling a gap in basic needs to being a guide to the first steps to a better/more stable future.
- *Help for self-help* – by focusing guidance through the tough time to a better future, there is a recognised and positive view of the role of NGOs providing consultation to help people to help themselves. This fits into the Detached notions of the importance of self-reliance and independent action.

*Evidence*

- *Message Testing Survey*: This statement got a mean response of 6,2 among the Detached and 6,4 from the all respondents, i.e. into the 'Tend to Agree' level of agreement.
- *Focus Groups*: This statement brought responses on the need to support those in need and the good work done by the sector in this regard at community level. There was also a focus in the discussion on the value of guidance and expertise to help people take the next steps.

*Risks/Adjustments*

- This messaging will get stronger positive responses if supported with authentic and recognisable stories of NGO work in this area that bring the values to life. And especially important with this message, as they do question how much of this support work is done by NGOs. For example, the Kinderschutzbund[39] was brought up as a good example in focus groups.

| 5 | **Right to Protest** | We need to tell our politicians what moves our communities, whether it's about jobs, pensions or rising rents. | *Value appeals* |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | That's why we value the right to protest in Germany. NGOs often serve as a bridge to pool these concerns and unite our voices, so that decision makers will listen and take responsibility to act in the interests of the community. | • Accountability & Fairness<br>• Community well-being<br>• Responsibility, contribution & dependability |

*Why this works?*

- Brings out a positive reaction on the use of protest to push for accountability.
- Good balance of resonance in the recognisable everyday challenges and the aspirations for voice and also adding the more dissonant ideas of public protest (i.e. more political).
- Successfully reframes protest as a long-held tradition in Germany to push for accountability and away from broad scale anger at what these segments call 'extremism' of recent protests by environmentalists like the 'Klima Kleber' and around Covid.
- Elicits a positive role for NGOs as valued and informed organisers and uniters in responding to community concerns
- The bridge metaphor works well to explain this NGO role as a conduit from the people to the politicians.

*Evidence*

- *Message Testing Survey*: This statement got a mean response of 6,0 among the Detached and 6,3 from the all respondents, i.e. on the border of the 'Tend to Agree' level of agreement.
- *Focus Groups*: This statement brought responses on being stronger together and the value of **protest to tell politicians they are going in the wrong direction, when they are not aware**. And also stories of stronger protest organisations in Germany like trade unions and pride in the tradition of protest.

*Risks/Adjustments*

- The Detached see the protests around Covid and environmental protests by Fridays for Future and 'Klima Kleber' (environmental protests led by the Last Generation) negatively and examples of more extremist behaviour. These examples can backfire.
- The language of 'pressure' and 'demands' for accountability seems too aggressive for the Detached and can also bring negative responses, whereas the idea of opening dialogue towards consultation with political leaders works well.
- This messaging will get stronger positive responses if supported by authentic and recognisable stories of NGO work in this area that bring the values to life.

## 7. ABOUT THE GUIDE & PROACTIVE PROTECTION PROJECT

This Immunising Conspiracy Narratives guide was developed as the capstone resource from the Proactive Protection project. The aim of the Proactive Protection project (2023-2024) is to support NGOs in the diversity sector to respond more effectively to attacks resulting from conspiracy thinking and narratives that limit their ability to fulfil their democracy promotion role and undermine trust in the sector and more broadly, in democracy. **The project involved an extensive mapping of the public debate on NGOs and the target segments, a narrative development and testing process, as well as ongoing consultation and outreach to NGO partners though the main stages**. The main support provided to the broader community of democratic and NGO allies is the messaging strategy that can be used in multiple ways from public campaigning, framing the everyday work of NGOs in communities, civic education to the simple day-to-day interactions of NGOs with sceptical publics.

**Guide Credits**

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The International Centre for Policy Advocacy (ICPA) develops and supports advocacy initiatives designed to promote and safeguard democratic principles and open society values. We are an advocacy support organisation based in Berlin and working in Germany and internationally to provide capacity development and mentoring support and practical resources in the areas of policy advocacy, strategic communications and narrative change.

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*This publication does not express the opinions of BMFSFJ or BAFzA. The authors are solely responsible for the content of the publication.*

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## Overview of the Detached (DT) Segment[1]
### based on data from surveys & *focus groups* & secondary sources
### Nov 9, 2024

**Summary Description**: Split on issues, Unsure about NGOs, See themselves as migration losers, Resist participation/rules, Conspiracy talkers, Younger, Self-reliant.

| *Attitudes to Great Replacement & pathway narratives on NGOs* | *Openness to GR based on attitudes to migration/Muslims* | *Anxieties on Belonging & Control* | *Demographics* |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Great Replacement* <br><br> • Around 1/3 aware of GR <br> • Unsure whether to believe in the idea of the GR <br> • Tend to disagree GR is a deliberate plan by global elite <br> • Unsure if German liberal elite is aiding the GR global plan <br> • *didn't bring GR themselves in FGs* <br><br> *Traitor & Pathway narratives* <br><br> • Tend to agree that NGOs are too political <br> • Agree that the Klima Kleber are too radical/extremist <br> • Tend to agree with a humanitarian, open borders idea <br> • Tend to disagree that NGOs are wasteful and incompetent | *Attitudes to Migration & Integration* <br><br> • *Tend to see/mostly spending on refugees as a loss for them (on welfare, pensions etc. But those with good skills can come.* <br> • Think continuing migration will lead to increasing conflict & loss of state control <br> • Unsure if migrants try to integrate <br> • Tend to agree well-integrated guest workers can stay and especially 2nd or 3rd generations contribute equally <br> • Tend to agree refugees deserve asylum <br> • Tends to think white population will become minority & that increasing migration threatens EU. <br><br> *Attitudes to Muslims & Islam* | *Belonging (in & out group feelings)* <br><br> • Tend to feel valued <br> • Quite distrustful of others <br> • Tend to agree it's not important to meet new people <br> • Lower levels of belonging than other segments (same as DI) <br> • Highest level of loneliness (same as DI). <br> • But quite proud of their self sufficency <br><br> *Control (responsibility & ability to take action)* <br><br> • Tend to feel in control of their future <br> • Tend to think the world is changing too fast | • Youngest (56% 18-39) <br> • More suburban <br> • More Catholic <br> • Unsure who to vote for, but some Union, SPD & AfD supporters <br> • Most are parents with young/minor kids <br><br> *Prone to Conspiracy ideas* <br><br> • Most employed, incomes in low-mid range <br> • Tend to have average to lower levels of education <br> • Financial situation worsened during covid and inflation <br> • Highest proportion with migration background (1 in 5) |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| • *4 pathway narratives above came up in the focus groups – not 2 below*<br><br>• Tend to disagree that NGOs are traitors acting in the interest of foreign actors<br>• Tend to disagree that NGOs are a front for terrorism | • On balance, think Islam & Germany society are incompatible<br>• Unsure if Muslims are part of the community<br>• Disagree Muslims hold similar values to them | • Feeling gradually more economically marginalized (*through covid & inflation*)<br>• Strong resistance to participate or support institutions or less willing than others to follow rules (*like covid*)<br>• Agree that "people look after themselves" vs each other | |
| ***Attitudes on NGOs*** | ***Conspiracy mindedness*** | ***Trust in Democracy & Institutions*** | |
| • Tend not to trust NGOs<br>• 47% have knowledge of the sector<br><br>• *But back and forth on positive/negative views of the sector*<br>• *Limited view about different types of NGOs*<br>• *"Good ones" perform charitable/helping the needy functions*<br>• *"Bad ones" involved in 'lobbyism' and trying to influence public opinion*<br>• *NGO people often focused on own interests/corruption (specifics on wasteful and some allusion to acting for others interest too)*<br>• *See NGOs often as idealistic & impractical (specifics on incompetent idea)* | • 2/3 hold a conspiracy-minded world view<br>• Unsure if secret orgs influence political decisions & events are the result of secret activities<br>• Unsure about government & media conspiracies around covid<br>• *Spilt on trusting scientists - adding knowledge vs suspicion on doing the work for money and fulfilling an agenda* | • Divided over their satisfaction with democracy<br>• *No real insight into what democracy means*<br>• Tend not to trust politicians, the federal government & media<br>• *See politicians as not qualified and lacking common sense*<br>• *Frustrated with the traffic-light coalition*<br>• Disagree it's very important to live in a democratic country<br>• Unsure about EU membership<br>• Tend to agree that working with international institutions to solve things like covid or climate change is good<br>• Have some Authoritarian tendencies & tend to agree, in emergencies we need a strong leader willing to break the rules. | *Sources:* This profile was built mainly on data from 2 national surveys (n = 1000) conducted by ICPA using IPSOS Fast Facts panel in 2023 & 2024. In addition, the profile was confirmed, adjusted and some new data points added based on 2 focus groups with the Detached run in November 2023. The foundation of this segmentation profile comes from More in Common study in 2019. It was updated with insights on this segment from More in Common papers from 2020, 2021, 2023, 2024 and a Bosch & More in Common paper from 2021. Insights from the OSF Barometer and FES Middle Study from 2023 also fed in. |

At the core, the Detached believe in a kind of "bootstraps", economic liberalism, where success and happiness come from independent self-reliance, with low level state intervention. But, they are not nearly libertarians and still *expect* the state to be there to provide services and security. Nevertheless, their focus is still firmly on how the state can support them as individuals, more than a broader societal view of its role.

"Democracy is fuzzy and non-binding for them"[1] and when asked about democracy in the abstract will return quickly to their dissatisfaction with national politicians (especially the 2023/24 traffic light coalition), who they claim are putting their benefits and security at risk. With their firm focus on self-reliance, they are not big participators or associators and with "weaker anchors of identity"[2] than other segments have less interest or drive for more community. In fact, they are the segment that was the least committed to following Covid rules and also are the least supportive segment on big government change agenda items like Universal Basic Income or a Green New Deal[3].

When it comes to their attitudes on issues such as migration and NGOs, there is a back and forth (*Hin und herr*) in the group with some holding more liberal ideas and others not – meaning they are often categorised as 'unsure' on issues in survey results, but unsure with a relatively large distribution of opinion either side. However, the one thing they do seem to agree on is that, while they are supportive of humanitarian efforts on asylum, they see themselves as economic losers over the last 10 years of accepting refugees in Germany, and the use of the competition/deprivation narrative is widespread and acceptable in the group, i.e. supporting refugee populations is said to be done at the expense of their own economic security.

On NGOs, they have a limited charity-oriented view of the sector focused on those organisations that are helping the needy in society. They see these types of NGOs and humanitarian organisations helping refugees and others as the good ones, with those more involved in politics and trying to shape public opinion as the bad/illegitimate side of the sector. They fear that those on the bad side are often involved in 'lobbyism' and just looking after their own interests. They are against the youth environmental protest movements like Fridays For Future and Last Generation (often referred to as the 'Klima Kleber'). They also view the role of NGOs not as a safety net, but more providing help and advice for people to help themselves, i.e. back to their ideas of self reliance. They also have competency doubts about NGOs seeing them many as wasteful and inefficient. Overall, they tend not to trust the sector. But they don't support or didn't bring up the more extreme 'traitor' narrative around NGOs that is associated with the Great Replacement.

They are one of the segments that are one of the loneliest (along with the Disillusioned). Interestingly their low levels of social bonding and independence is viewed with pride by some in the segment and so, overall come across as quietly confident about the future. However, this confidence is at risk as they have become more economically marginalised though the covid and inflation periods[4]

As a segment they are "more inclined to believe in narratives of distrust[5]" around institutions and most are open to using or entertaining conspiracy thinking. However, they are definitely more conspiracy talkers rather than conspiracy thinkers, i.e. their whole world view is not based on conspiracy thinking. In fact, given their more pragmatic nature, they just need an answer that works and this seemingly can be something on a continuum from an evidence-based answer to a conspiracy. However, they did not bring up the more extreme ideas like Great Replacement themselves in focus groups and never spoke about a global conspiracy dimension around these issues.

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[1] More in Common & Robert Bosch Stiftung (2021) It's Complicated. People and Their Democracy in Germany, France, Britain, Poland, and the United States

[2] More in Common (2019) Die andere deutsche Teilung: Zustand und Zukunftsfähigkeit unserer Gesellschaft

[3] More in Common (2021) Vertrauen, Demokratie, Zusammenhalt: wie unterschiedlich Menschen in Deutschland die Corona-Pandemie erleben

[4] More in Common (2021) Vertrauen, Demokratie, Zusammenhalt: wie unterschiedlich Menschen in Deutschland die Corona-Pandemie erleben; More in Common (2023) Zukunft, Demokratie, Miteinander: Was die deutsche Gesellschaft nach einem Jahr Preiskrise umtreibt.

[5] More in Common & Robert Bosch Stiftung (2021) It's Complicated. People and Their Democracy in Germany, France, Britain, Poland, and the United States

## Overview of the Disillusioned (DI) Segment
based on data from surveys & *focus Groups* & secondary sources[1]
Nov 19, 2024

**Summary Description**: Anti-migration, NGO-sceptical, democracy = welfare state, corruption-conspiracy thinkers, angry, lost, poor, older

| *Attitudes to Great Replacement & pathway narratives on NGOs* | *Openness to GR based on attitudes to migration/muslims* | *Anxieties on Belonging & Control* | *Demographics* |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Great Replacement (GR)*<br><br>• Around 1/3 aware of GR<br>• Tend to believe in the idea of the GR<br>• Unsure if GR is a deliberate plan by global elite<br>• Unsure if German liberal elite is aiding the GR global plan<br>• *GR was brought up in focus groups*<br><br>*Traitor & pathway narratives*<br><br>• Strongly agree that the Klima Kleber are too radical/extremist<br>• Tend to agree that NGOs are too political<br>• Agree that NGOs are wasteful and incompetent<br>• Unsure on the humanitarian, open borders idea<br>• *The 4 pathway narratives above came up in the focus groups* | *Attitudes to Migration & Integration*<br><br>• *Angry about spending on refugees over germans*<br>• Think continuing migration will lead to increasing conflict & loss of state control<br>• On balance, disagree migrants try to integrate.<br>• Agree well-integrated guest workers can stay and especially 2nd or 3rd generations contribute equally<br>• Think refugees deserve asylum<br>• Agrees the white population will become minority & that increasing migration threatens EU<br><br>*Attitudes to Muslims & Islam*<br><br>• Think Islam & Germany society are incompatible | *Belonging (in or out group identity)*<br><br>• Feel undervalued/Lowest rung in society<br>• Distrustful of others (went down in Covid)<br>• Lower levels of belonging than other segments (same as DT)<br>• Highest level of loneliness (same as DT)<br><br>*Control (responsibility & ability to take action)*<br><br>• Some feel in control of their future<br>• Think the world changing too fast & becoming more dangerous<br>• Feel even more economically marginalized *(through covid and inflation)*<br>• Agree that "people look after themselves" vs each other | • Middle-aged to older age groups<br>• More female<br>• More rural<br>• More female<br>• More with no religious affiliation<br>• Non-voting or don't know, some AfD & Linke<br><br><br>*Prone to CT*<br><br>• Lower income & education<br>• Financial situation significantly worsened in covid and inflation & say they are "slipping further within German society" |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| • Unsure that NGOs are traitors acting in the interest of foreign actors<br>• Tend to disagree that NGOs are a front for terrorism | • Don't think Muslims are part of the community<br>• Disagree Muslims hold similar values to them | • Disagree that citizens can change society<br>• Most follow the news closely | |
| **Attitudes on NGOs** | **Conspiracy mindedness** | **Trust in Democracy & Institutions** | |
| • Don't trust NGOs<br>• 52% have knowledge of the sector, so unsure if they know the sector<br><br>• *Mixed knowledge about different types of NGOs*<br>• *Really angry about environmental protest groups, calling them 'illegal'*<br>• *Better ones perform charitable work, but their work is what the government should be doing*<br>• *Most NGOs focus on own interests/corruption and agenda/'lobbyism'*<br>• *Criticism of DUH & scandals around AWO came up.* | • *Committed to a corruption-driven, conspiracy meta-narrative*<br>• 2/3 tend to agree on a conspiracy oriented world view<br>• Tend to agree that secret orgs influence political decisions & that politicians are 'puppets of the powers behind them'<br>• Unsure if events are the result of secret activities<br>• Tend to agree government & media conspiracies around covid<br>• *Little trust in scientists & see them as paid actors.* | • Support the ideal of democracy, but not satisfied in practice.<br>• Strongly agree democracy must take care of its people, but tend to disagree the system delivers<br>• Don't trust politicians – especially national ones & strongly agree politicians don't care about folks like me (worsened during covid)<br>• *Angry about government pressure on vaccination and shutdown in covid time & removal of choice*<br>• Unsure about EU membership<br>• Mostly agree that working more closely with international institutions to solve things like covid or climate is good.<br>• Some authoritarian tendencies & tend to agree that in emergencies, we need a strong leader willing to break the rules. | *Sources:* This profile was built mainly on data from 2 national surveys (n = 1000) conducted by ICPA using IPSOS Fast Facts panel in 2023 & 2024.. In addition, the profile was confirmed, adjusted and some new data points added based on 2 focus groups with the Disillusioned run in November 2023. The foundation of this segmentation profile comes from More in Common study in 2019. It was updated with insights on this segment from More in Common papers from 2020, 2021, 2023, 2024 and a Bosch & More in Common paper from 2021. Insights from the OSF Barometer and FES Middle Study from 2023 also fed in. |

The most striking thing about meeting this segment in focus groups is their mood – somewhere between lost and angry. They are the segment at the lowest economic and social status level in Germany and have been further hit economically by covid and inflation. The older ones talk nostalgically of times past ("The best days of Germany are behind us"[1]) and lost security (mostly economic) and the younger ones talk of promises undelivered ("I had to put away 90% of my dreams"). The notions of marginalisation come up and they use metaphors like we are "sliding down the embankment". With low levels of engagement, they can hold quite diffuse opinions on core issues with some in the group reading like angry far-right voters and others more moderate.

While they agree in principle with the idea of democracy, their own pressing needs is what immediately what comes up in these discussions, so they are looking for a "democracy that prioritizes community and security, built on a foundation of a strong state"[2]. This focus on the need for a strong welfare state that is the scaffolding through life to ensure security underpins their views and their top priority is for the state to be 'more fair' in this regard. But they have lost faith in this system and especially don't trust the national governments of the past decade – reacting especially negatively to covid lock downs & vaccine pressure – and open to voting for more populist parties, like Afd & BSW.

They strongly oppose migration as a zero sum game, where their security and welfare is traded off for that of refugees. They disagree that Islam and Germany society are compatible and also say they feel less safe in their neighbourhoods in the last decade due to increasing migrant populations. They also tend to believe in migration conspiracy ideas like the Great Replacement and brought it up themselves in our focus groups. However, they still feel that it is Germany's obligation to provide asylum to those fleeing conflict and also think that longer term migrant populations contribute equally.

They hold limited and polarised views of the role of NGOs, seeing those who provide help to the marginalised like refugees and homeless as good and those who speak out on issues as as too political, working in "lobbyism" and mostly protecting their own interests in a corrupt manner. They also think NGOs are wasteful and incompetent, thinking the funding could be better spent by government. They see volunteering as a way to get free labour, which undermines the jobs of professionals, e.g. nurses in the care field. They are strongly against environmental protestors like FFF or KK, with some even proposing the need for violent responses to the protests. Overall, they don't trust NGOs.

The majority hold a conspiracy mindset and have little trust in science and think politicians are 'puppets of the powers behind them', with some feeling that the state is monitoring them at every move. So they are definitely conspiracy thinkers, but are aware of the social stigma around conspiracy thinking and tended to introduce it in focus groups with leading questions like: "Well, what else could it be?".

Along with the Detached, they are the segment who say they are the most lonely and have the lowest levels of belonging. This combination of isolation and marginalisation does not drive much community action or engagement. However, a key insight that was evident in our focus groups was: "This passivity is not, however, an arbitrary decision stemming from indolence – it arises from a deep insecurity regarding their own agency"[3].

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[1] All quotes from ICPA Focus groups in this paragraph
[2] More in Common (2021) Vertrauen, Demokratie, Zusammenhalt: wie unterschiedlich Menschen in Deutschland die Corona-Pandemie erleben
[3] More in Common & Robert Bosch Stiftung (2021) It's Complicated. People and Their Democracy in Germany, France, Britain, Poland, and the United States