

# *Experiences in working life and the Attraction of the extreme right – empirical findings of a European Study*

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SUMMARY. There is a well-known phenomenon of extreme-right parties gaining support in many countries across Europe. An important question still outstanding is to what extent and of what kind is the socio-economic context a factor in this trend. The SIREN project has accordingly sought to analyse the perception of social and economic changes in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Switzerland. Presented here is a general summary of the Europe-wide project, which involved a literature review, qualitative interviews, a quantitative survey and an analysis of policy implications and dissemination activities.

## INTRODUCTION

It is often argued, though rarely on the basis of empirical research, that people who suffer from worsening employment conditions and labour market security are more likely to take, in their perceptions and political orientations, the extreme right's ideological and political outlook. In order to contribute to closing the research gap and to providing empirical evidence the European research project SIREN<sup>1</sup> analysed subjective perceptions of changes in working life and their consequences for political orientations in eight countries. The project thereby brought together two fields of research that have hardly been related up to now: research on changes in working life, labour market developments and social security on the one hand and, on the other, analyses of political orientations and right-wing populism and extremism.

The aim of the SIREN project was to analyse subjective perceptions of and individual reactions to recent socio-economic change and, in particu-

lar, changes in working life. The research also aimed to establish how experiences in working life influence political orientations and to what extent the threat of social decline and precarious living conditions contribute to the rise of right-wing populism and extremism in many European countries. Thus one of the main objectives was to assess whether, and to what extent, particular conditions and changes in the employment system and in working life make people receptive to xenophobia, nationalism and racism; thereby the project intended to contribute to an understanding of subjective views on, and the political reverberations of, recent transformations of the labour market and work organisation.

Focussing on the political subjectivity of people the project is concerned with the “demand side” of right-wing populism and extremism. In the project, this term right-wing populism and extremism is used to cover a wide variety of parties, movements and ideologies that have in common a restrictive notion of citizenship, anti-immigration rhetoric, anti-political system positions and often nationalism and authoritarianism. The use of the term is based on the view that right-wing extremism and right-wing or radical populism are not distinct phenomena but rather that the difference is one of degree.

## 1. QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research covered eight countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Switzerland. It was carried out in four phases: a literature review, qualitative interviews, a quantitative survey as well as an analysis of policy implications and dissemination activities (Poglia Miletì et al. 2002, Hentges et al. 2003, De Weerd et al. 2004, Flecker/Kirschenhofer 2004).

National *literature reviews* and a European synthesis report examined the available literature on changes in working life, right-wing populism

and extremism as well as the interrelations between these two areas of research.

In the *qualitative research phase*, the eight teams, between them, conducted a total of 313 qualitative interviews and analysed 279, on the basis of common interview guidelines. The samples in all countries encompassed different socio-economic situations and different political orientations (i.e. both people “receptive” to and “non-receptive” to right-wing populism and extremism).

For the selection of interviewees three categories of how people are affected by socio-economic change (objective situations) were constructed:

- *Advancement*: self-employed people and employees who have experienced an improvement in terms of occupational situation, income and labour market prospects.
- *(Threat of) decline*: people who are (still) in (long-term) employment but who are affected by worsening working conditions and/or increasing insecurity, such as company restructuring.
- *(Increasing) precariousness*: people working freelance who are unable to earn a secure long-term income on this basis; people in short-term employment with a high level of insecurity; and people in early retirement and unemployment.

The interviews were tape-recorded. An average interview lasted an hour and a half; a few lasted beyond two-and-a-half hours. The interpretation and analysis was conducted on the basis of common procedures and resulted in interview reports, country reports and a European synthesis report.

For the *quantitative phase of the research*, a structured questionnaire was developed on the basis of the literature review and the results of the qualitative research which aimed at interviewing a representative sample of workers in the eight different European countries. The questionnaire consisted of 71 questions, covering seven different areas. When available, reliable questions and scales developed in previous cross-national surveys were used. Data collection was executed by private survey institutes in each country, co-ordinated by the Eurisko agency in Milan. The telephone

survey was carried out between mid May and early July 2003. The duration of an average interview was 15 minutes. A total sample of 5,812 workers were interviewed. Except for the Swiss sample, which included 893 respondents, the other country samples each consisted of about 700 respondents. In each country, samples closely matched the working population, even though a slight under-representation of blue-collar workers, poorly educated respondents and extreme right-wing voters was noted, as is often the case in survey research. The country samples were weighted in terms of key demographics (regions, size of town, age and gender) in order to increase representativeness.

Finally, the *policy recommendations* phase included four workshops with policymakers at both national and EU level, including representatives from governmental institutions, trade unions, EU-level organisations and NGOs, held in Paris, Germany, Budapest and Brussels in Spring 2004, as well as a policy recommendations report.

## 2. VARIATIONS OF POLITICAL CONVERSION – THE MAIN FINDINGS OF THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The analysis of changes in working life and of politics from the vantage point of workers and citizens gave rise to conclusions on how experiences in the world of work may be transformed into potentials of political subjectivity. What can be inferred from our sample of more than 300 in-depth interviews is that socio-economic change is in fact an important factor in explaining the rise of right-wing populism and extremism in various European countries. Only rarely in the interpretation of interviews focusing on how people are affected by socio-economic change was this not a decisive factor in the understanding of the attraction of the extreme right. There are, however, also other issues, such as, for example, discontent with mainstream political parties, the crisis of political representation, especially of the working class, and family socialisation.

In the literature, the interrelation between changes in working life and support for right-wing populism and extremism is theorised in different ways (see also Flecker 2002): The erosion of norms and values leaves people with outdated normative orientations and tensions between their values and their actions. The dissolution of traditional social milieus and the recourse to allegedly natural categories such as race, gender and age form the prerequisites for a resurgence of right-wing extremism (Heitmeyer 2002). Focusing on the problem of increasing complexity and intensified contradictions in social life, populist messages and, in particular, scapegoat theories and authoritarian views can help individuals to create a subjective sense of consistency in their apprehension of social reality (cf. Zoll 1984). In a world where traditional institutions no longer provide orientation, views and concepts based on ethnicity, anti-elite sentiments or in-group/out-group distinctions may fill the gap. A related theoretical argument points out the damage to social and personal identity caused during periods of accelerated socio-economic change. In addressing imaginary ethnic or national communities, right-wing populism serves the need to compensate for lost certainties and offers opportunities for identification that may help to stabilise the self (Ottomeyer 2000; Dörre 2001).

According to the findings of the qualitative research within the SIREN project, granted that orientation and stabilising identities do of course play a certain role, they are not the only, or even the prevailing factors. Among the main patterns that emerged, other theoretical considerations seemed to be more helpful for the understanding of people's receptiveness to extreme-right ideologies. Other indications were found for theoretical views arguing that the individuals affected by far-reaching socio-economic change need to reconsider their position in the social world. In this respect the following key patterns emerged from the interpretation of interviews in all countries under investigation.

The first pattern involves strong feelings of injustice stemming from the frustration of legitimate expectations relating to various aspects of work, employment, social status or standard of living. Company restruc-

turing, redundancies, early retirement, new management styles, and intensified competition in the labour and housing markets devalue qualifications, acquired experience, previous hard work and sacrifices and may bring to nothing the expected rewards expected in return for the subordination to the demands of a pitiless world of work. Individual experiences differ widely, ranging from layoffs out of the blue and involuntary early retirement to the lack of recognition of professional experience and contributions. Such frustrations are often expressed as feelings of injustice: people refer to other social groups that do not subordinate themselves to the hardships of work to the same extent, who are taken much better care of by the state or who are able to arrange things for themselves illegally. These are, on the one hand, managers and politicians with high incomes, “golden handshakes” and generous pensions and, on the other hand, people living on welfare or refugees supported by the state. The core theme is that the “decent and hard working” and therefore morally superior people are being betrayed and that they have to realise that they were ill-advised to remain honest and loyal and to subordinate themselves to the exacting demands of an increasingly cruel world of work. It is for this reason that the political messages and ideologies of right-wing populism and extremism addressing the double demarcation of “the people” from the elites on the top and from the outcasts at the bottom of society have met with a certain response.

A second clear pattern in the mental processing of changes in working life has at its core the fear of *déclassement*, the insecurities and the feelings of powerlessness that are associated with industrial decline, precarious employment or the devaluation of skills and qualifications. The experience of being a plaything of economic trends or anonymous powers can be clearly linked to right-wing populists’ addressing the population as a passive victim of overpowering opponents. The same goes for nostalgic accounts of the good old (working) times, and populists’ glorification of traditional communities. In some cases, authoritarian reactions to insecurity and powerlessness were observed, while in others it was clear that a

lack of political representation contributes to the feeling of not being protected as workers. People attracted to the extreme right seem to be convinced that they can only count on themselves. Since social-democratic parties have shown less and less interest in the workers' world, the public recognition of the problems of social decline and precariousness seems to have become one of the competitive advantages of populist parties.

A third pattern was seen in people who experienced occupational advancement (e.g., through promotion within the company). As a consequence, some tend to identify very strongly with the company and its goals. In terms of work ethics, these people are highly performance orientated, leading them to place increasingly higher demands on their colleagues and subordinates. They tend to believe in the powers of the individual's abilities, internalise the rules of a neoliberal capitalist system and often even seem to share an ideology of Social Darwinism (i.e. the "survival of the fittest") in the (labour) market. Intense competition, which leads to long working hours, high workloads and an increase in the often repressed pains of work, seems to strengthen such views. It became obvious in the interpretation that the dominant ideologies of neoliberalism and competitive nationalism in combination with the experience of ubiquitous and enforced competition, both between companies and between people, may make people receptive to modern forms of right-wing extremism.

Although our research was primarily focused on extreme right-wing ideologies, it is important to stress that the negative consequences of socio-economic change, or the way they are perceived, by no means necessarily result in higher levels of receptiveness to right-wing populism and extremism. Rather, the study found a wide variety of interpretations of and political reactions to the changing world of work, which also included a strengthening of socialist, social-democratic or conservative world-views and convictions. At the same time, people are attracted to the extreme right for many different reasons, and we do not suggest that change in working life is the main one.

Differences between European countries result in part from different aspects of socio-economic change experienced at the time of the research, but also from the different agendas of the various right-wing populist or extremist parties. Regarding the competition in the labour market – but also in other fields such as housing – the consequences of the reunification and the immigration of ethnic Germans from central and eastern Europe played a major role in Germany, while in France it is the population, and, in particular, the youth, of north-African background, and in Austria refugees from the Balkans, that dominate the debates. In Hungary it is people's struggle with the consequences of transition combined with anti-Communist legacies and the condemnation of parliamentary democracy as a "puppet theatre", whereas in Switzerland economic difficulties coincide with the damage to the image of Switzerland and the vanishing of traditional Swiss particularities. While in Denmark and Belgium the deterioration of welfare provisions is strongly linked with the issue of immigration, the major issue in Italy seems to be the combination of high levels of insecurity and a deep distrust and disenchantment with politics. These different ways in which right-wing extremists and populists all take advantage of discontent are in fact variations on a common theme.

In addition to national variations, the forms of individual political conversions differed widely. There is, in our view, no such thing as one main path to right-wing populism and extremism. This reflects the programmatic and partly ideological openness and inconsistency of most right-wing populist and extremist parties and their forms of addressing widely varying population groups. As the following presentation of the varieties of political conversions shows, people in different social positions who have experienced socio-economic change differently are attracted to the extreme right for completely different reasons. This may explain the large potential of sympathisers and voters these parties have, a potential that seems to be considerably larger than voting intentions and voting behaviour show.



## Varieties of political conversion

The first variations of political conversions presented below relate more or less directly to experiences in working life. In the interpretation of these cases it became clear how frustrations, injuries, intensified competition or over-identification with the company contributed to particular political orientations and to the sympathy for right-wing populism and extremism. Other types of political conversions, which won't be dealt in this overview, refer to wider societal developments such as problems of the welfare state and, in particular, in care of the elderly, consequences of globalisation or the downsides of a multicultural society. Some of the patterns are typical of several if not all countries under investigation, while others are more country-specific and can be read as national particularities.

*I. "I cannot bear such injustice. . ." — the shock of unemployment or involuntary early retirement*

Those affected greatly by unemployment not only suffer from diminishing income and reduction in living standards, but also run the risk of developing ailments related to psychological or "psychosocial" stress (Kieselbach 1996). In our interviews it became clear that losing one's job may lead to severe shocks and social isolation. The experiences that all the efforts, achievements and sacrifices, partly of decades, no longer counted for anything nurture intense feelings of injustice. These, in turn, may induce a person to change party allegiance and, for want of another interpretation, to embrace the division between "nationals" and "immigrants" as a main structural principle and, consequently, to support the demand for national preferences.

It is not only unemployment which must be mentioned here. In each country we encountered such phenomena as psychosocial stress among civil servants, white-collar and blue-collar workers affected by some form of early retirement. In the course of privatisation, which has increased rapidly since the beginning of the 1990s, employees of former state enter-

prises (with a medical recommendation) were the first to be retired early receiving as they did their pension from the state. Similarly, in the declining industries (mining and steel), corporate management, together with the works councils, developed “social” plans. One avenue to reduce personnel was early retirement. While some of the early retirees shared in this decision and enjoy early retirement, others indicated that they did not retire voluntarily. This new situation (retirement as early as in the mid-forties) not only causes financial difficulties but also gives rise to enormous emotional stress – problems discussed only hesitantly.

*II. “At some point your body just won’t function anymore” – women workers in precarious living conditions*

The social integration of women takes place in both their family and reproductive capacities as well as in work in the market place. Women must do justice to such demands in different areas and combine reproductive and productive tasks, and thus become subject to a “dual societal role” (Becker-Schmidt 1987). These two social realms are not judged equally. Instead, market-generated work is considered “work” while family responsibilities are considered private matters. Coping with both stressful work and the double burden is often only possible for a limited period. Experiences lead to strong feelings of injustice and may make women particularly sensitive to the gap between politicians on the one hand and ordinary citizens on the other.

During the interviews it became obvious that the experiences of women could not be reduced to the realm of employment, because, along with reports of their vocational/professional experiences, the female interviewees include their daily life experiences against the background of their “dual societal role”. The necessary division between occupation and family became a subject of discussion along with questions of educational and school policies as well as neighbourhood conflicts. Some of the female interviewees complained of overly liberal immigration and asylum policies from their various governments. They also saw a threat posed by (female

and male) foreigners in the competition for employment and the social safety net. A particular variation of the right-wing extreme attitude of women is expressed by their observation that (female and male) foreigners from Islamic societies pose a threat to western women's emancipation.

III. *"You really do start to hate them" – the devaluation of subordination to norms of achievement and hard work*

The work ethic and the expectation that everyone should abide by the achievement principle are at the centre of the interviews which serve here as an example. The interviewees firmly identify with their status as blue-collar workers, see themselves as part of the hard working community, and disassociate themselves vehemently from so-called social scroungers. A thorough analysis of the interview material reveals that the "community of decent and hard-working people" has something in common, namely the deterioration of working conditions in recent years, or problems maintaining standards of living with the income they receive for their hard work.

Those who have not yet been affected by the processes of rationalisation and massive reduction of personnel and are still employed indicate that they suffer under increased work loads, stress, consolidation of work and a very high level of anxiety. Often it is as if the sword of Damocles hangs over their heads, which induces them to acquiesce and not to rebel or take to collective measures in self-defence. Some of the interviewees report health problems (digestive and heart troubles, as well as sleep disturbances) which they attribute to deteriorating working conditions. Suffering under the worsening working conditions – which is often mentioned only in passing – makes itself heard in other ways. Those who seem to succeed in withdrawing from the new work imperatives (e.g. foreign welfare recipients, the unemployed and, at present, even early retirees), are viewed adversely by working people who have internalised the "protestant work ethic". For the latter live and work according to the new rules and feel angered by those with alternatives. They demand that others should abide by the motto of paid employment: those who do no work, do not eat.

*IV. "Normally the socialists are the ones for the people" – working-class identity and pragmatic alliances transformed into right-wing populism*

We found examples of the renunciation of social democratic parties and a turn toward either right-wing populist or extreme parties in Austria, Denmark, France, Germany and Switzerland. Reports of the interviews emphasised either disappointment over the broken promises of social-democratic governments, or disillusionment with governments in which social democratic/socialist parties participated, as was also the case in France with the French Communist Party (PCF). The disappointment extends most often to the labour unions, which are no longer perceived as having the power to represent the interests of labour.

*V. "But there comes a time, when you've had enough" – white-collar workers and the threat of social decline*

A sense of insecurity owing to continuous restructuring or recurrent job-loss as well as the subjective feeling of threats to one's cultural identity and a sentimental turn to nostalgia can be detected in many interviews we conducted with white-collar workers and civil servants. Some of those interviewed have in common that they see themselves exposed to the danger of social decline although they still enjoy a relatively secure social status. An unfavourable management decision or an illness might mean that they could no longer afford their house or apartment, going on holidays, etc. Others have already lost occupational stability and, in order to maintain more or less their standard of living, they must be highly flexible, commute long distances and accept jobs widely deviating from their vocational identity. The frustrations are felt in suppressed anger, which may attach itself to foreigners, if these become a symbol for one's own social decline, or if they are seen to receive what they don't deserve.

*VI. "Transformation means torturing oneself" – Upwardly mobile employees paying a high price and over-identifying with the company*

Trying to understand sympathies for right-wing populism and extremism with a particular subset of the research sample, namely the "receptive"

part of the “advancement” category, often showed that the political conversion occurred in connection with an improvement of the occupational or professional position. Typical examples are promotions to management grades, for example in privatised companies that are in a constant process of restructuring. Partly, this promotion leads to status inconsistencies because those concerned have a relatively low education level. Surprisingly, the improvement of the social position contributes to the political conversion. One reason for this is the price these people pay for their occupational success: they not only suffer from long working hours, high workloads and stress, but in their sandwiched position, they also have a clear view of the worsening of overall working conditions (e.g., in the process of privatisation and restructuring). The second reason is that occupational advancement often heightens the identification not only with the job but also with the company. This, in turn, further strengthens performance orientation and the demands put on subordinates, colleagues and workers and citizens in general.

### 3. PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGE AND THE ROUTES TO THE EXTREME RIGHT — THE MAIN FINDINGS OF THE QUANTITATIVE SIREN SURVEY

The core concepts (and main research questions) of the quantitative survey are depicted below.

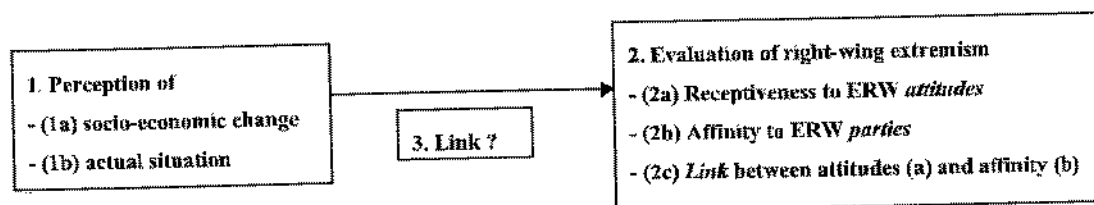


Figure 1: Overview of core concepts and main research questions.

The *first* research question related to the *perceptions of socio-economic change* (SEC). Did the respondents experience (positive or negative) socio-economic change during, say, the last five years? The survey results on socio-economic change in the eight European countries were rather mixed. On average, the amount of work performed by our respondents increased during the last five years (60.6% reported an increase), and their job security decreased somewhat (27% reported a decrease). Feelings of deprivation seem to prevail among a (small) majority of our interviewees (e.g., 57% stated that they did not get the appreciation they deserved). These negative aspects are counterbalanced, however, by an increase in job autonomy (44.7% of the respondents) and in the financial situation of the household (about 40% reports an increase). At the time of the survey, a large majority (89.2%) were not experiencing financial hardship, and only a minority felt insecure about their jobs (about 10%). No clear trend was apparent regarding the social atmosphere at work.

Gender differences in socio-economic change were rather limited. Older workers in particular reported negative changes (e.g., a decline in job autonomy, job security, family income and social atmosphere). The findings regarding occupational position and level of education suggest rather classic “social class” cleavages, with blue-collar workers occupying a less privileged position (e.g., lower income, less autonomy and more job insecurity), leading to higher levels of feelings of (relative) collective deprivation. Respondents from the public sector experienced the strongest increase in workload during the last five years, but reported the lowest level of job insecurity.

The *second* research question referred to the *evaluation of right-wing extremism*. Two components were distinguished: ‘*receptiveness*’ to extreme right-wing *attitudes* and the *affinity to extreme right-wing parties*.

In terms of the description of ‘*receptiveness*’ to right-wing populism and extremism, the literature had identified five relevant attitudes: prejudice against immigrants, nationalism, authoritarianism, social dominance orientation and political powerlessness (for overviews, see Billiet & De

Witte, 1995; Lubbers, 2001; Pratto, 1999). The results of our survey show that these five attitudes are clearly present among our respondents, though in varying magnitude. *Prejudice against immigrants* or 'everyday racism' (De Witte, 1999) refers to negative attitudes towards foreigners because they are perceived as an (economic or cultural) threat. On average, our respondents showed a rather positive attitude towards immigrants. This is witnessed by the rather low agreement with items such as "*Immigrants take away our jobs*" (16.9% agree) and "*Immigrants are a threat to our culture and customs*" (14.9% agree). A positive attitude towards the autochthonous group ('in-group') refers to *nationalism*. In this study, the concept of '*chauvinism*' was chosen, in order to measure nationalism (e.g., Coenders; 2001). About 40% agreed that "*Generally speaking, my country is a better country than most other countries*". Chauvinist feelings were not extreme, however, as witnessed by the fact that 'only' 22.7% agreed with the statement "*The world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like the citizens of my country*". Authoritarianism (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson & Sanford, 1950; Altemeyer, 1998) refers to conventionalism (rigid conformism to conventional norms and strict moral codes), authoritarian submission (uncritical and full submission to in-group authorities) and authoritarian aggression (fierce rejection and punishment of violators of conventional norms). On average, our respondents showed a moderate level of authoritarianism. 57.2% agreed with the statement "*Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn*", but only 32.1% endorsed the statement "*We need strong leaders who tell us what to do*". Next to authoritarianism, a rather recent theoretical approach was included as well: the concept of *social dominance orientation* (SDO). SDO is "a general attitudinal orientation toward inter-group relations, reflecting whether one generally prefers such relations to be equal, versus hierarchical" (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle, 1994). On average our respondents also showed a moderate level of SDO. No less than 49.5% agreed with the idea that "*Some people are just inferior to others*". This emphasis on inequality was somewhat counterbalanced by the strong endorsement of

items such as “*All humans should be treated equally*” and “*Economic equality should be stressed*” (respectively 86.9% and 77.9% agreement). The vote for an extreme right wing party is sometimes considered as an expression of protest against the political ‘establishment’ and political powerlessness (‘protest vote’, see e.g., Van den Brug, Fennema & Tillie, 2000). On average, our respondents exhibited a rather high level of powerlessness and dissatisfaction. About 57.6% endorsed “*People like me have no influence on what the government does*”, and no less than 71.4% agreed with “*The people we elect as members of parliament very quickly lose touch with their voters*”.

*Affinity to extreme right-wing parties* was measured with a question regarding their evaluation of the most representative extreme right-wing party in their country. The results showed that extreme right-wing parties do have a following: About 18.6% of the interviewees were in favour of the local extreme right-wing party, whereas 47.4% of them were against. When comparing the current evaluation with the evaluation from five years ago, 18.2% said that they were more in favour nowadays than five years ago, whereas 18% indicated that they had become less in favour. The results of the development thus suggest that the adherence to an extreme right-wing party seems to be somewhat variable.

Gender, age and sector were not very important as determinants of receptiveness or affinity. The effects of educational level and occupational position were generally more pronounced. A higher level of education is associated with lower authoritarian attitudes, lower political powerlessness and less prejudice against immigrants and a less favourable evaluation of the local extreme right-wing party. Blue-collar workers (and to a lesser extent low ranking white-collar workers) are more authoritarian, more prejudiced and feel more politically powerless. A small effect on prejudice, authoritarianism and powerlessness is also noted for the entrepreneurs and the self-employed (traders, craftsmen, etc.).

A final analysis showed that all five receptiveness attitudes are associated with an affinity to an extreme right-wing party. Prejudice against immigrants clearly stands out as the most important factor leading to a



preference for an extreme right-wing party, and authoritarian attitudes played an additional moderate role. All other attitudes (such as chauvinism and political powerlessness) played only a minor role.

The link between changes in working life and the affinity to the extreme right: two psychological routes to extreme right-wing party affinity

Our *third* and final research question related to the *link* between the *perceptions of socio-economic change* and the *evaluation of right-wing extremism*. Is it true that respondents who experienced socio-economic change are more attracted to extreme right-wing attitudes and similar parties? Our research identified two different psychological routes that may lead from a perceived change in job conditions to right-wing populism and extremism. In what we have called the “winners’ route”, people tend to believe that those who may be an obstacle to this process should be put aside. The same people are also likely to share the typical organisational goal of remaining competitive, and defeating as many competitors as possible. In what we have defined as the “losers’ route”, people are deeply aware of their discomfort, due to negative change at work, but do not feel competent or strong enough to cope with it. The outcome is an attraction towards the extreme right, very likely an attraction towards a strong leader, someone to whom individuals may delegate the solution of their own problems. This process is depicted in Figure 2.

Thus, our results suggest that both positive and negative change at work may increase perceived uncertainty. Change and the necessity for all workers to adapt to the ever-changing requirements of working life are dominant principles in the current work environment. But to what extent can people cope with continuous change, which also implies palpable uncertainty and a lack of control over the world around them? Two opposite reactions seem likely to arise, and they both seem somewhat “pathological”. The first is the one we found in the winners’ group. It is a sort

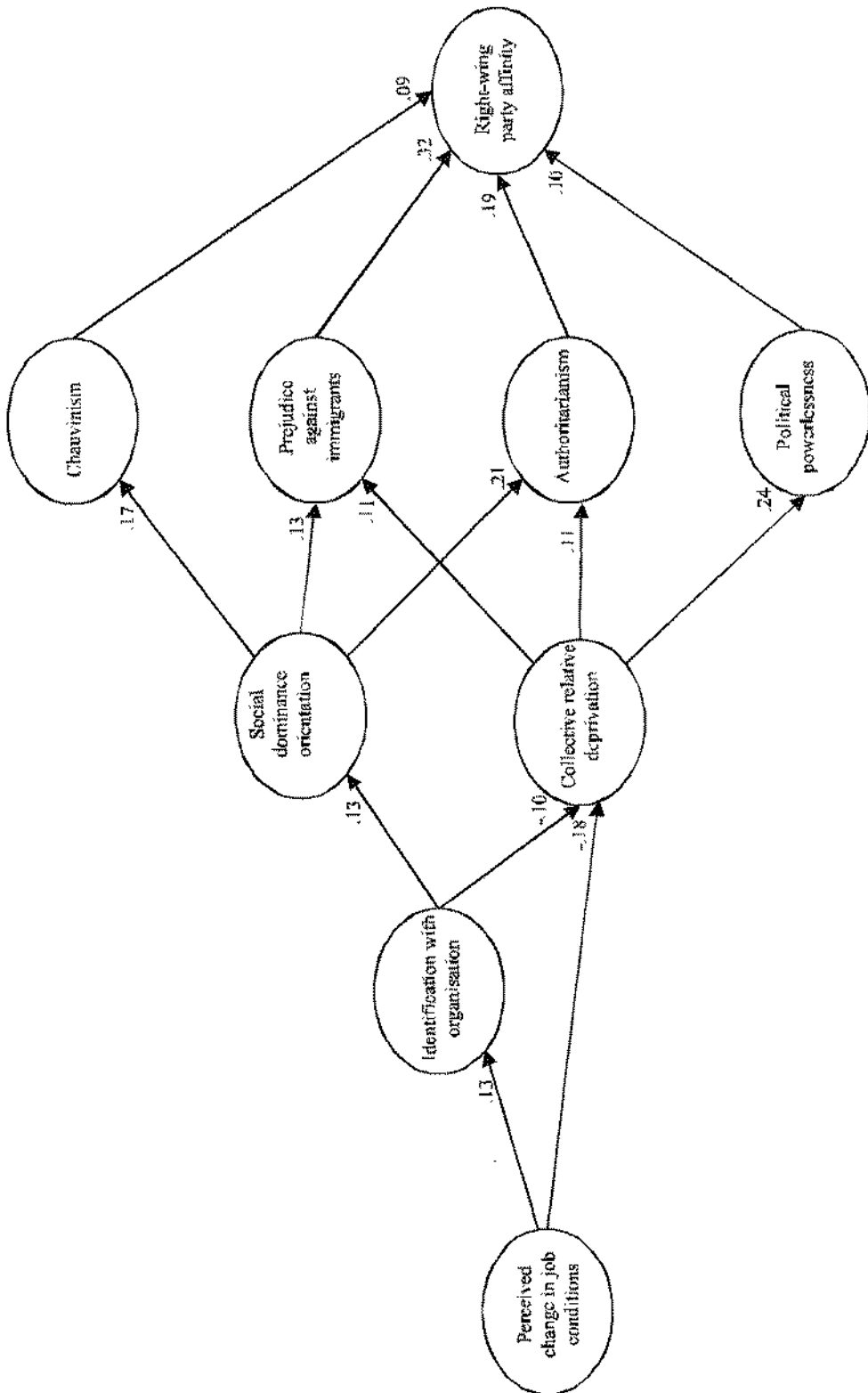


Figure 2

of *manic* reaction: Workers tend to feel that some categories of people, including themselves, are simply superior to others, more capable of dealing with the uncertainties but also with the challenges that characterise contemporary working life. The second reaction is the one we found in the losers' group. It is a sort of *depressive* reaction: People lose self-esteem, feel powerless faced with a work reality that appears completely out of control.

Prejudice against immigrants has been shown to play a highly significant role in both psychological routes from a perceived change at work to an affinity with right-wing populism and extremism, suggesting that uncertain workers may easily focus on a clear-cut and easy-to-identify out-group (e.g., immigrants), in order to reduce uncertainty. Foreigners may be taken as scapegoats, held responsible for what is wrong in the work environment, and the process of uncertainty ends up leading to displaced aggressiveness.

Even though our research was mainly focused on highlighting conditions that may favour an attraction towards the extreme right, our data offer some insights into the conditions under which people may cope with positive or negative changes at work without developing extreme right-wing attitudes. For example, we have observed that a strong identification with the work group may be positively related to a perception of change at work without leading to extreme right-wing attitudes. Identification with a lower-order category, such as the work group, is the most likely to fulfil adequately the basic need for belonging (Ashforth and Johnson 2001). In a context of change, such a need may become very urgent as people look for psychological protection as well as for models on how to think and behave under conditions they have never had to cope with before (Hogg 2000). It is hence conceivable that workers who can depend on a strong identification with a lower-order group may be more psychologically equipped to face up to uncertainty that is related to change, and thus be less likely to develop ethnocentric and authoritarian attitudes.

To conclude, the present research has demonstrated the presence of a meaningful link between psychological reactions to changes in job conditions and right-wing populism and extremism. Although the existence of such a link has been often hypothesised in the past, an empirical demonstration of this by a large-scale European survey had so far been lacking.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The research findings have important implications for various policy areas and issues, mainly for labour organisation, social protection, older workers, migration and political representation.

##### The organisation of labour and working conditions

The analysis of the interviews clearly showed that stressful working conditions and health and safety problems are still very much part and parcel of modern workplaces. Often, blue collar workers reported that work has become more repetitious, and many interviewees pointed to increased workloads and pressures at work. In the private sector, but even more so in the public services, restructuring and organisational change at the workplace level have become continuous features of working life. One consequence of restructuring that was felt by many interviewees is the devaluation of qualifications and work-related values.

The quantitative results indicate an increase in the amount of work as well as an increase in job autonomy. Perceived job security has decreased in five out of eight countries. The work climate has also deteriorated on average: Only three countries have seen an improvement in social atmosphere; and, in all countries, older workers have experienced deterioration. Regarding the relation between changes in work and political orientation, no simple relation emerged from the survey data: No clear correlation

could be found between negative changes and attraction to right-wing populism. Interestingly, both among the “winners” and “losers” in recent changes, affinity to the extreme right could be found. The analysis shows two different psychological routes to extreme right-wing affinity: The “winners” turned out to be very competitive, to strongly identify with their company, to be attracted by individualistic views and hold the conviction that some social groups should dominate over others. The “losers” harboured strong feelings of injustice and held the conviction that people like themselves are not sufficiently rewarded for the work they do. This tended to foster a displaced aggressive reaction, leading to prejudice against immigrants and minorities and authoritarian attitudes. The research findings on work organisation and working conditions lead to the following policy recommendations:

- Legitimate forms of expression are needed for grievances in work, public recognition of related problems, and of course sincere efforts to improve working conditions.
- Effective regulations of working hours and workloads need to be developed that are sensitive to the diversity of employment relations, vocational identities and living situations.
- Workplace development programmes need to be generalised, with the required adaptations to different societal conditions throughout the European Union, and policies aimed at improving the work-life balance have to be implemented.
- Opening up, instead of narrowing, options for safeguarding material existence outside paid work, and giving workers a strong voice in restructuring and organisational change may be both a lever for improving working conditions and a measure against feelings of powerlessness.
- Regarding the “winners” in recent socio-economic changes who have become attracted to right-wing populism, further research is needed as to how trade unions and companies can act against unitary organisational cultures fixated on competitiveness and denying a multiplicity of interests and organisational goals, because these nurture undemocratic and exclusionist stances. At the societal level this would mean preventing competitiveness from becoming a dominant value. This in turn might make it necessary to tame the ferocious economic competition between individuals, companies and countries.

## Work and employment: Insecurity and inequality

Many of the perceived negative consequences of socio-economic change and, in particular, change in work can be subsumed under the headings of insecurity and inequality.

Relating to *job and employment insecurity*, corporate restructuring and continuous change at the workplace level lead to a general feeling of insecurity which is aggravated by the fact that people have hardly any voice in the changes. The spread of non-standard forms of employment strongly contributes to insecurity.

*Income insecurity* is on the increase due to the spread of precarious work, low wage jobs and non-standard employment as well as through continuous restructuring. The situation is exacerbated by reductions in, and limited access to, social security benefits.

*Skill-reproduction insecurity* is particularly sharply felt by many blue- and white-collar workers. Some interviewees with low-level education complained that in working life more and more theoretical knowledge is needed and employers are looking for better-educated workers for almost every job. Others are concerned that the changes in work are devaluing their knowledge, skills and competencies or their cultural capital more widely.

The interpretation of the qualitative material also showed that growing *social inequality* is a key issue for many citizens and, in particular, for those in precarious living conditions and those threatened by social decline. Some expressed anxiety regarding their social position through the observation that there is hardly any middle class in society any more and that the gap between rich and poor is widening. What is crucial in our context is that the inequality, in the view of many respondents, is no longer legitimate because it deviates too strongly from distributional patterns based on meritocracy.

Growing inequality in particular affects women. With regard to perceived insecurities and feelings of injustice most of the qualitative

research showed that their perspectives were decidedly different from men's: many of our female interviewees were deeply aware of the double disadvantage they suffer as (blue-collar) workers and as women.

The quantitative findings regarding insecurity and injustice in general indicate that the basic material dimensions of change (job security, income) seem less problematic than the psychological and symbolic ones (perceived insecurity, social atmosphere): While most people in work in the eight countries consider the chance of losing their jobs or having to close down their business rather small, a large minority (27%) have experienced a decrease of job security in recent years (compared to only 18% who have experienced an increase). On average an improvement in family income in seven out of eight countries (except Germany) was reported. Interviewees who have seen their family income decrease over the last five years show a stronger feeling of political powerlessness.

In view of our research findings, old-age pensions are of paramount importance in the area of social protection. Withholding the rewards for a long life of hard work and denying access to early retirement with an acceptable income for those who have sacrificed their health at work provokes particularly strong feelings of injustice.

The most important policy implication of these findings seem to be the following:

- The SIREN research once more points out the need to strengthen initiatives for equal pay for women and men at the level of legislation, collective agreements and companies' human resource management. The expansion of a low-wage sector as a means of fighting unemployment obviously entails high psychological, social and political costs.
- It seems to be crucial to restore security and calculability after a period of pension reforms, and to reconsider the introduction of financial disincentives to early retirement as a means to raise the actual retirement age.
- The research findings once more underline the need to adapt social protection to the spread of flexible labour and to increased female participation in the labour market.

## Older workers

The empirical results of the SIREN project indicate that the far-reaching changes in working life experienced by many workers have a more severe impact on older workers. This relates in particular to the frequent experience of breaches of implicit contracts: workers have the impression that their performance orientation, actual performance and the fact that they have sacrificed their health go unrecognised or unrewarded. For older workers this obviously takes on more weight as they look back on a working lifetime or decades of hard work and loyalty to one (or several) companies. Aspects of such perceived breaches of implicit contracts include the exposure to increasing insecurities, the devaluation of qualifications and work-related values as well as layoffs and forced early retirement.

Age seems to be the most relevant variable with regard to perceived changes in job security: under 35-year-olds report no clear decrease in job security. Interestingly, it is not necessarily the over 55-year-olds who report the strongest decrease in job security, but the category of people aged between 45 and 54. This is alarming given the time period this age group still needs to stay in the employment system – and in view of the meagre chances of finding a new job once unemployed.

In the light of the SIREN results, age does not appear to be a significant factor influencing an affinity towards right-wing extremism, excepting Hungary, where a significant effect of age on extreme right-wing party affinity can be found.

In terms of policy implications we may draw the following conclusions:

- The policy of introducing disincentives to early retirement may aggravate the situation because it increases the loss of income. A more sensitive approach seems to be needed to counter companies' strategies to externalise the cost of workforce reduction.
- It seems crucial to improve working conditions, to fight age discrimination and to provide employment for older workers and thus create the preconditions for raising the actual retirement age. For some groups of workers it seems questionable to try to keep people in



employment longer while working conditions are still deteriorating and health conditions are worsening.

Policy-oriented initiatives regarding working conditions, employment, social security and older workers would be incomplete if they only related to labour market regulation without also addressing policies that deal with the formation and organisation of markets (e.g., for public services). “Liberalisation” policies, but of course also the single market and EMU, have triggered many of the current waves of restructuring. The ensuing problems of the employment, in particular of older workers, therefore need to be addressed at this level and in these areas of policy making too.

### Migration

Immigration is currently the most important political issue of the extreme right in nearly all countries under investigation. The qualitative research of the SIREN project showed that, in a process termed “double demarcation”, some workers direct their frustrations and feelings of injustice against “those up there” (politicians, managers) or those “further down” (long-term unemployed, immigrants, asylum seekers). The emotions involved cannot be understood without reference to the travails of work, the physical and psychological strains that people have to accept while often living in rather precarious circumstances.

Resentment and prejudice against “foreigners” have different causes: first, there are workers who, because of their position on the labour market, see “foreigners” as direct competitors for jobs. Second, intense feelings of injustice lead to aggression, which, under the influence of dominant ideologies and parts of the media, is directed at social groups that are perceived as benefiting from society without contributing to it, among whom asylum seekers are often designated. These are seen as being taken care of while respondents themselves often feel neglected. Third, for some white-collar, middle-class workers immigrants in a symbolic way

stand for societal change perceived negatively as threatening them with symbolic *déclassement* — “foreigners” in their neighbourhood or in their children’s schools for them symbolise social decline.

In the quantitative results, prejudice against immigrants, defined as a rejection of immigrants for economic and cultural reasons, turned out to be the strongest indicator of right-wing extremist affinity. Perceived positive change in job conditions seems to assuage prejudice against immigrants. People who saw their family income decrease in the last five years show higher levels of prejudice against immigrants, as compared to people who have experienced an improvement of their family’s financial situation during the same period.

The SIREN research findings show that a number of different social groups show similar levels of xenophobia and of attraction to right-wing populism. These are both blue-collar workers and the self-employed, in particular the category of “traders, farmers and craftspeople”.

- The first conclusion to be drawn from the research is that there is a need for recognising problems caused by social inequality and socio-economic change. In doing so, trade unions and policy makers should stress similarities instead of differences between the various groups of workers and, in particular, between the national population and “foreigners”.
- Granting migrants the same civic, social and economic rights as those enjoyed by Union citizens seems an important precondition for more solidarity with migrant workers. Enabling refugees and asylum seekers to work would help to avoid “scapegoating”. The prescription of ethical codes for employers with regard to the employment of migrants and the enforcement of rules regarding terms and conditions of all workers could be effective measures.
- It seems important that trade unions are supported in their initiatives and mainly that other interest groups, such as chambers of commerce and farmers’ associations, follow the example of the trade unions and start initiatives against racism and xenophobia.
- At a European level, politicians and journalists should be issued with guidelines and recommendations (like those from the German Press Council) on how to deal with the topic of migrants in a non-discriminatory way; measures such as self-obligations not to use discriminating stereo-

types in words and deeds and not to mention the nationality of perpetrators when reporting crimes are substantial steps in the right direction.

### Politics and political representation

In general, the qualitative interviews identified a rather negative relationship of many interviewees with politics: experiences and disappointments include observations of, and conflicts with, undemocratic structures; the perception that politicians are unable or unwilling to promote changes in favour of workers; or accusations against shop stewards and trade unions of having changed sides and playing the role of co-managers.

The SIREN research shows that the disqualification of the traditional “game” of politics, in the eyes of many interviewees, rests notably on the disappearance of the workers’ world from the political scene and the national media. Workers’ apparent lack of interest in politics can be put down to politicians’ lack of interest in workers’ problems.

Against this background, the public acknowledgement of people’s problems and, in recent years, the political interest in the workers’ world appear to be among the right-wing populists’ strong points. Some working class interviewees showed themselves to be pragmatic: while they are convinced that the right-wing populist or extremist parties are on the side of the “bosses”, they explain their votes as the most powerful means they possess to annoy the political establishment.

Last but not least, anti-EU attitudes were very strong among many of those who showed strong affinity with right-wing populism and extremism. Partly, such orientations came up when people presented themselves and their country as the passive victims of overwhelming, anonymous powers, partly in the context of a loss of national identity, and partly respondents accused the European Union of corruption and a lack of democracy. Some interviewees who were concerned about EU enlargement had especially virulent fears about the effects on their job prospects.

While right-wing populists are rightly seen as a threat to representative democracy, the reasons for their success can partly be found in undemocratic conditions of contemporary European societies at local, regional and national levels, and also at the level of the European Union. With many interview partners, the impression arises that they see themselves as merely the powerless objects, rather than the subjects of politics.

The survey findings indicate that feelings of political powerlessness are a relevant factor enforcing extreme-right party affinity in Austria, Belgium, France, and Switzerland, even though the effect of other receptiveness variables (e.g., prejudice against immigrants or authoritarian attitudes) is much stronger. The path analyses dealing with the links between the perception of changes within working life, social identity, and extreme right-wing party affinity, includes “political powerlessness” as one relevant factor on the “losers” pathway to right-wing extremist party affinity.

Making the various spheres of life - including companies - more democratic, and actively searching for ways to enhance the control people have over their lives by empowering them directly to influence conditions that impact on their living situations seems to be crucial in this respect. Consequently, the impact assessment of European-level policies should include a consideration of their effect on the actual scope of policy-making at local, regional and national level.

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## NOTES

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