

BALL BEARING - EU regional policy as a tool against right-wing extremism?



Background - right-wing extremism in structurally disadvantaged regions

Right-wing and far-right parties are gaining more and more support in many European countries as well as in the EU Parliament. Politicians and academics are therefore discussing the **reasons for the uprise of the right** and, consequently, what can be done to prevent them from gaining further ground. After all, right-wing extremism is a threat to democracy.

Some argue that **economic crises in particular increase public support for right-wing positions**. Economic crises increase economic disparities within the population, as was evident during the coronavirus crisis: Rich people were able to increase their wealth, while those who already didn't have much money got worse off as a result of the crisis. If people's financial situation gets worse, this can be a reason for them to become frustrated with politics and vote for the party that presents itself as opposed to the government - and this is exactly what far-right parties do.

What applies to individuals also **applies to regions**. Structurally underdeveloped places where wages are low, where there are fewer or smaller businesses, will be further left behind by an economic crisis. These regions are particularly exposed to right-wing extremism.

EU regional policy addresses these regions. **Regional policy** is an EU policy area. All regions and cities in the member states benefit from the money and the programs that are financed through it, but to varying degrees. After all, regional policy, also known as cohesion policy, is primarily **intended to benefit structurally weak parts of the EU** so that they can converge with the already economically strong parts. The idea is that all EU citizens have an equal right to an economically and socially good and stable life. Under these circumstances, this raises the question:

Is EU regional policy a useful tool in order to fight right-wing extremism?

This question is not easy to answer, since although EU regional policy particularly supports structurally weak regions, the underlying procedures are relatively complex and many people are not even aware of the EU being active in their area. The Brexit vote, for example, showed that those regions receiving most EU funding were nevertheless the ones with the largest share of people voting to leave the EU.

Furthermore, while regional policy can strengthen the infrastructure in a region and thus make it more attractive for people and companies, it has no influence at all on many other economic factors to combat inequality, such as taxes.

So, is EU regional policy a useful tool against extremism because it strengthens precisely those regions that are most susceptible to far-right parties? Or does this statement overestimate EU regional policy, which may be relevant in other ways, but is not a suitable instrument against right-wing extremism?