

# Germany: Evolving Forms of Citizen Activism

Caroline Y. ROBERTSON-VON TROTHA, Swenja ZAREMBA and Marco IANNIELLO

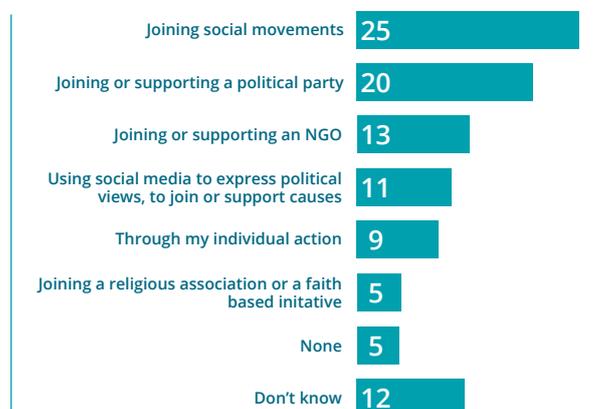
Germany has a significant tradition of association life, as evidenced in the latest Anna Lindh/Gallup survey findings. The authors argue that, nowadays, many people choose to support social movements based on more flexible working structures and often originating as a response to specific issues. Against a backdrop of increasing cross-border interest, but limited knowledge of the Mediterranean, the German Network of the Anna Lindh Foundation is tapping into civic engagement as a tool to broaden mutual understanding.

The year 2010 ended with a protest movement in Tunisia which would spread in the following months over most countries of Northern Africa and the Middle East. Further down the road, protesters all over the world demonstrated against the power of the banks and their role in the financial crisis, followed by protests against stringent cost-cutting measures implemented as political sanctions. It seems that since 2011, the global society has increasingly been in a state of mobilization. How does the German civil society fit into this pattern? What about its commitment? With a look into the Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll 2012, the German network of the Anna Lindh Foundation tries to find answers to these questions.

## Commitment in the German Civil Society

Associations can be regarded as a dominant form of organization in German civil society, a form of social commitment that has its origins in German history and as early as 1910, Max Weber stated that the people of his time were 'association people', with a ratio of one association per 100 citizens, or 20 family men, (Weber, 1988). Today, every year sees the founding of 15,000 new associations across Germany, and activism through associations accounts for approximately 50% of total civic engagement (Robertson von-Trotha, 2009). A fact also reflected in the Anna Lindh/Gallup Survey, when respondents rated the most efficient ways to contribute to solving problems in the country, with the three top positions in the ranking occupied by diverse forms of group participation: joining social movements (25%), joining or supporting a political party (20%), joining an NGO (13%). All of these rank higher than using social media to express political views, to join or to support causes (11%), a more modern form of participation. This may also reflect the older age structure of the German population. (Chart 20.1). While traditional associations show a strong focus on both the local context and the group as the center of activities, many of the more recent civil society organizations are more open. As a result, membership in traditional associations has

**Chart 20.1**  
Most efficient ways of solving problems in Germany



**Survey Question:** How do you think you could most efficiently contribute to solving the problems in your country? **Base:** % of all respondents (© Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

been declining, while the attractiveness of other groups based on the idea of voluntary work and cross-border cooperation has increased.

Thus Germans' preference for joining social movements suggests that many people do not intend to dedicate themselves to one group for a lifetime or even bequeath their membership. Instead they seem to wish to join a movement which meets the values and needs of their current situation at a given point in time – regardless of the fact that these movements tend to dissolve or change from their original course after a while, and are therefore not bound to offer lifelong orientation. While, according to German law, associations have to be long-termed, citizens' initiatives are based on flexible and fast reactions to actual political decisions. This is one of the possible reasons for the rise of citizens' initiatives founded in response to current events such as 'Stuttgart 21', in protest against a controversial railway project or the protests against the establishment of a national park in the Black Forest, to name only two. The role of the protesters is highly controversial. Their critics call them

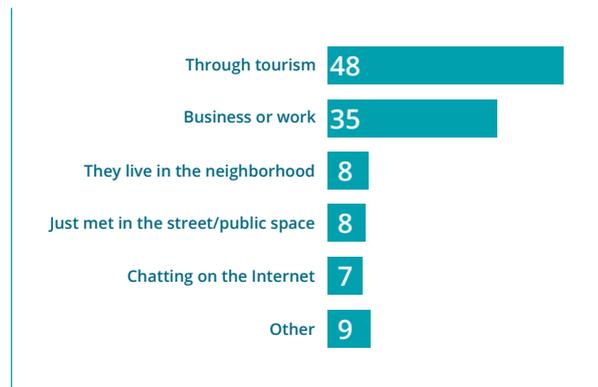
**Chart 20.2****Characteristics of the Mediterranean region for Germans**

**Survey Question:** I will read out a set of ideas/images that may come to the minds of different people, and please tell me, if you think these characterize the Mediterranean region strongly, somewhat or not at all? **Base:** % of all respondents, % of the sum of 'Strongly characterize' and 'Somewhat characterize' answers are shown (© Anna Lindh Foundation / Gallup Poll 2012).

Wutbürger /Kurbjuweit ('angry citizens') and accuse them of rigid thinking, anti-progressive action, and of ignoring fundamental democratic decision-making processes. Further accusations facing these initiatives include those that their interest is limited to local issues, and that they wish to preserve their private surroundings ('not in my backyard') while failing to take into consideration the greater social context. In contrast, supporters of these initiatives have dubbed their members Mutbürger ('courageous citizens') (Supp, 2010) and are speaking out for more civic participation, referendums, and more opportunities for civic involvement. The nature of such citizens' initiatives could offer a possible interpretation to the high agreement rate (88%) in the Survey question, asking whether 'people from different cultural, political or religious backgrounds should have the same rights or opportunities to participate in public life'.

### Understanding shared opportunities and challenges

The survey shows that in Germany the Mediterranean primarily carries connotations from the tourism sector, as it appears, by the first characteristics respondents ascribe to the Mediterranean: Mediterranean way of life and food (95%) as well as Hospitality (94%) (Chart 20.2). Furthermore, when thinking about the Mediterranean, Germans tend to associate it with the Northern Mediterranean countries. They have a strong tradition of dreaming of and – when affordable – of travelling to the European South, which practice has led to coining the notion of the so-called *Italiensehnsucht* ('desire for Italy') (Waetzoldt, 1927). Today, also the countries of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean shore are popular

**Chart 20.3****Method of interaction with people from SEM countries in Germany**

**Survey Question:** How did you meet or talk to that person? **Base:** % of those who talked to or met with persons from SEM countries, % of mentions (© Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

travel destinations. This fact is reflected in the

question about the main method of personal intercultural interaction for Germans, who answer: 'through tourism' (48%) (Chart 20.3)

In consequence, the German network of the Anna Lindh Foundation has set itself the objective of focusing its activities on spreading the knowledge and the visibility of this region among the German public, – be it about the shared cultural heritage, the current political situation of states and their interdependencies with others, or the particular situation of the region's youth – with all aspects involved: both challenges such as migration, poverty reduction or the consequences of the financial crises, as well as the considerable opportunities offered by intercultural dialogue across this area in a political, cultural, and civic respect.

**Caroline Y. ROBERTSON-VON TROTHA** is Coordinator of the Anna Lindh Foundation Network in Germany. **Swenja ZAREMBA** is Co-Coordinator of the Anna Lindh Network in Germany. **Marco IANNIELLO** is an editor at the ZAK - Centre for Cultural and General Studies at the Karlsruhe Institute.