Attitudes towards the Corona Crisis in the Police Force: Outcome of an employee survey in the German state of Saxony

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Abstract

What personal attitudes and perspectives shape police employees' view on the COVID-19 pandemic? How do they assess the dangerousness of the coronavirus as well as the handling of the pandemic by society and the media? What are their opinions on the measures to contain the pandemic — personally as well as concerning their official duties? And how does all this affect their level of mental stress? These questions are answered based on original data from a standardized survey among employees of the police in the German state of Saxon, carried out between October and November 2020. The results[2] indicate that the diversity of opinions among Saxon police employees essentially reflects the spectrum of views that was also evident in the state of Saxony and also for the German public in the region, during the survey period. At the same time, police-specific peculiarities are apparent and furthermore, the attitudes and perspectives towards the pandemic form consistent attitudinal patterns. Using cluster analysis, three different attitudinal types were found in the Saxon police: concerned interventionists, unconcerned sceptics, and hesitant conformists. These attitudinal types show consistent patterns of attitudes and perspectives on the pandemic. They also

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2   This manuscript is based on Meißelbach et al. (2022).

report different levels of mental stress in the performance of their duties. The outcome contributes to a deeper understanding of the police force under the conditions of crisis and polarization. As such, they have implications for leadership communication and organizational cultures in a democratic police force.

Keywords: *Police, COVID-19 pandemic, attitudes, mental stress, leadership*

The study: aims and research design

When the Corona pandemic hit Germany in spring 2020, it posed unprecedented challenges for the country's law enforcement agencies. Thus, the pandemic became a severe test for both, the police as an institution and its employees. The police organisation – including its leadership and staff – not only had to adapt to the circumstances of a massive crisis within a very short period of time, but the force's actions also were a crucial element of the drastic changes within social reality. At the same time, police employees experienced these developments not only as members of the police force but also as citizens of a democratic state. They developed individual ideas and attitudes towards the virus' significance for society as well as in regard to the political measures taken to combat the pandemic.

This situation has borne the potential for considerable internal tensions within the organisation and amongst its members. After all, police officers can have very different views on the rules they have to implement within the framework of their official duties. This was especially the case, since the police had to participate in drastic restrictions of fundamental rights that had been taken for granted. In addition, views on the appropriateness of such measures were controversially discussed by the public and even among experts. Furthermore, all this took place in the context of increasing polarisation and intensification of political disputes within society, putting under stress the legitimacy of the police organisation as well as its actions towards the citizens.

Against this background, it seems useful to examine personal attitudes towards the Corona crisis within the police. What personal attitudes and perspectives shape police employees' views of the pandemic? How do they assess the dangerousness of the virus as well as the handling of the pandemic by society and the media? What are their opinions on the measures to contain the pandemic – personally as well as concerning their official duties? And how does all this affect their level of mental stress?

These questions will be addressed in this article, based on data from a survey among employees of the police in the German state of Saxony. The data collection took place from

20 October to 17 November 2020 as an anonymous online survey.[3] A total of 2,829 of the almost 15,000 employees took part. In the end, 2,323 completed questionnaires were included in the evaluation, resulting in an effective response rate of 15 percent.[4] This level is clearly below the usual response rates for employee surveys, where respondents are usually contacted personally by email. In the present case, this was not feasible due to the high data protection standards within the police. Instead, calls for participation were published several times on the intranet of the Saxon police. Furthermore, the heads of all Saxon police directorates received an e-mail asking them to forward the call to their subordinates.

Table 1. Socio-demographic composition of population and survey sample

Variable	Characteristic	Saxon police force (n = approx. 15,000)	Survey sample (n = 2,323)
Sex	male	68.9 %	70.0 %
	female	31.1 %	30.0 %
Age	under 18	0.3 %	0.04 %
	18-24	9.7 %	6.1 %
	25-34	21.8 %	21.6 %
	35-44	23.4 %	29.5 %
	45-59	38.7 %	39.6 %
	60 and above	6.2 %	3.2 %
Career level	Career level 1 (e.g. intermediate service)	51.5 %	45.0 %
	Career level 2.1 & 2.2 (e.g. higher intermediate & higher service)	30.7 %	45.4 %
	other employees	17.8 %	9.6 %

Source: Own table based on own research (survey sample) and data kindly provided by the Saxon State Ministry of the Interior (population of the Saxon police).

Nevertheless, the survey data provide a reliable basis for drawing conclusions about the Saxon police as a whole. As Table 1 shows, the survey sample reflects the socio-demographic structure of the target population quite well by age, gender and career level. However, sample biases could not be completely avoided. Such biases were compensated for by adjustment weights based on objective data on the socio-demographic composition of the Saxon police. Last but not least, unavoidable biases were taken into

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3 During this time, Germany experienced its second wave of the Corona pandemic with the second lockdown beginning on 2nd November, followed by protests against the Corona measures by the "Querdenken" movement on 7th November in Leipzig.

4 The data set was cleaned of questionnaires with less than 75 percent of the questions answered or completed in an unrealistically short time (here: less than four and a half minutes).

account by interpreting the data carefully. For example, staff with frequent access to the internet at work (e.g. administrative staff) were more likely to be included in the sample. All in all, the results of our study turned out to be highly plausible. Wherever possible, they were compared with other studies. It can therefore be assumed that the attitudinal patterns and their distributions found in the data do exist in the whole population of the Saxon police as well.[5]

However, generalizations to other police forces in Germany and Europe should be made with caution for at least two reasons: Firstly, the results on political attitudes within the Saxon police force reflect the particularities of East Germany's political culture (Pickel 1998) which have persisted over 30 years since reunification (Dalton & Weldon 2010; Pickel & Pickel 2022). In fact, some findings suggest that political culture in East Germany might be even closer to other post-soviet countries in Eastern Europe than to the western part of Germany or even Western Europe (Pickel 2016; Rainer et al. 2018; Wike et al. 2019). Secondly, there is a lack of recent comparative research on politically relevant attitudes within police forces, especially about the Corona pandemic. Therefore, it is still an open question what the findings presented here tell us about the police force as a social phenomenon in general. Overall, police officers seem to be more conservative and traditionally oriented than the general public (Rokeach et al. 1971; LeCount 2017; Ashlock 2019). They are part of a distinctive occupational identity and police culture coined by police-specific common traditions, experiences and narratives (Reiner 2010; Crank 2014; Paoline & Gau 2018; Cenk Demirkol & Nalla 2020). Concerning the Corona pandemic, one important part of this unique perspective seems to be an unease regarding the police-specific task of imposing severe restrictions on fundamental rights (Grutzpalk et al. 2022). Thus, it seems plausible to assume that the perspectives of police staff on the pandemic differ systematically from those of the general public.

This paper contributes to these research objectives with a case study of a democratic police force under the special conditions of the East-German socio-political context. The results indicate that the diversity of opinion among Saxon police employees essentially reflects the spectrum of views that was also evident in Saxony and among the German public during the survey period. At the same time, police-specific peculiarities are apparent. Furthermore, the attitudes and perspectives towards the pandemic form consistent attitudinal patterns. Using cluster analysis, three different attitudinal types were found in the Saxon police: concerned interventionists, unconcerned sceptics, and hesitant conformists. These attitudinal types show consistent patterns of attitudes and perspectives on the pandemic and report different levels of mental stress in the performance of their duties.

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5   For more detailed information on methods and research design of the study see (in German) Meißelbach et al. (2021).

The results contribute to a deeper understanding of the police force under the conditions of crisis and polarization. Furthermore, they have implications for leadership communication and organizational cultures in a democratic police force. The question of whether these attitudinal types and their frequencies are typical for police organizations in Germany, Western democracies, or even beyond, should be the subject of comparative research in the future.

The findings: Attitudes on coronavirus and the pandemic response

The attitudes: Assessment of measures, sanctions, the virus and societal reactions

Almost all police employees are directly or indirectly involved in the enforcement of the pandemic response measures. However, when asked whether the measures in place at the time of the survey in autumn 2020 were appropriate, respondents' opinions were mixed. One-third of them said that the measures in place were "just about right". However, another almost one-third thought the measures "went too far", while a quarter thought they "did not go far enough". Approximately one in ten said they could not judge.

Figure 1. Attitudes towards the Corona measures in the Saxon police and the German public

"All in all, are the current Corona measures in Saxony/Germany sufficient/adequate, do they go too far or do they not go far enough?"
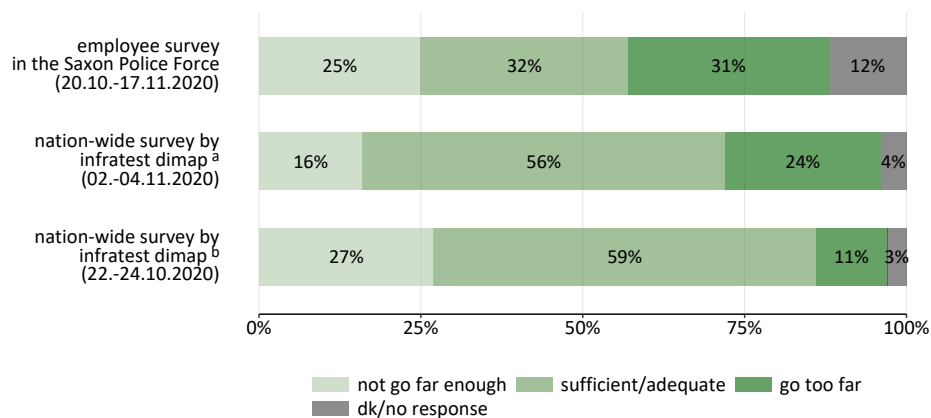
The illustration is based on the data of 2,323, (a) 1,002, and (b) 1,004 persons. Source: own representation based on (a) infratest dimap (2020c), (b) infratest dimap (2020b) and own research.

This diversity of opinion among Saxon police employees essentially reflects the spectrum of views that was also evident in Saxony and the German public during the survey

period.[6] As can be seen in Figure 1, attitudes on the appropriateness of the measures were more polarized in the Saxon police than in the population as a whole. While more than half of the respondents in Germany considered the pandemic response measures to be "appropriate" or "just about right", only one-third of the Saxon police did so. Consequently, the proportion of the two groups that felt that the measures did not go far enough, or already went too far, was higher in the Saxon police than in the population as a whole. However, in such comparative analyses, it must be kept in mind that attitudes to this topic vary greatly over time, especially since the policies in pandemic control changed repeatedly.

Moreover, it is not surprising that employees of the executive branch assess an issue so crucial for their (professional) life quite differently than 'normal' citizens. Many of the respondents were entrusted with the implementation of these measures, providing them with special insights into the practical limits of regulating public and private life. Some certainly also saw the police being put in a difficult position in relation to society and were worried about the damage to their public image and legitimacy. In any case, the findings indicate a higher level of uncertainty among the police compared to the population as a whole, as to whether the path taken to contain the pandemic was the right one. This is also indicated by the fact that in our sample a comparatively large number (namely twelve percent) of police employees stated that they were unable to assess this question.

Figure 2. Attitudes towards sanctions for violations in the Saxon police and the German public

"Overall, are the existing sanctions/punishments for violations of the applicable Corona measures sufficient, do they go too far or do they not go far enough?"
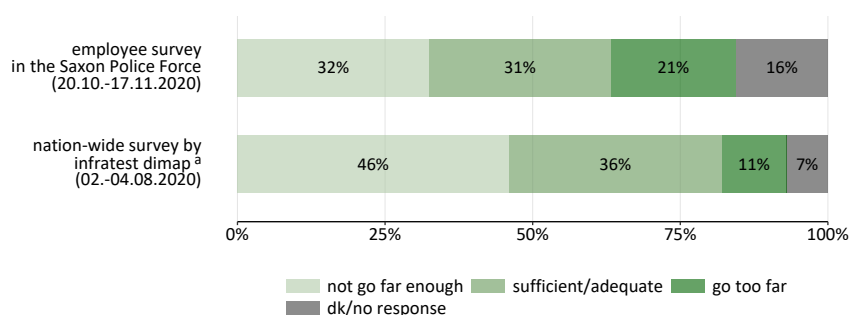
The illustration is based on the data of 2,323 and (a) 1,002 persons. Note: Where – as here – the percentages in figures do not add up to 100, this is due to rounding of the individual values. Source: own representation based on (a) infratest dimap (2020a) and own research.

6   The only data available for Saxony at the time of our survey fits well with the findings shown in Figure 1, but is not directly comparable due to a differently formulated question: In a survey by INSA (2020) at the beginning of November 2020, 38 percent of the Saxons surveyed considered the current Corona measures to be "overall appropriate" in view of the infection numbers. A further 16 percent thought they were "overall overblown", while 28 percent felt only "some" of the measures were overblown in view of the infection numbers; 13 percent thought the measures "should be further strengthened".

The attitudes towards sanctions for violations of pandemic control measures show similar patterns (Figure 2). Like the attitudes towards the measures themselves, they can be understood not only as an expression of comparatively great uncertainty about the right course of pandemic control but also as an indication of the practical limits to the enforcement of this course of action. The support for severe punishment was significantly less pronounced in the Saxon police than in the population as a whole during the survey period. The proportion of those who did not take a clear position on this question was also conspicuously higher in the police sample. Moreover, the share of those who found that the sanctions did not go far enough was bigger than in the case of the measures themselves. This means that even among those who felt that the measures were appropriate, some believed that they should be enforced more consistently.

Whether respondents found the measures and their sanctioning to be appropriate depended clearly on how dangerous they considered the coronavirus was (Figure 3). At least a quarter of the employees in the Saxon police assessed the statement that the coronavirus was no more dangerous than a normal flu as "rather" or "completely" true. Another fifth could not clearly position themselves ("undecided"). It is also striking that a comparatively large number of respondents (almost 16 percent) refused to answer ("cannot/do not want to answer"). This, once again, indicates a high uncertainty within the police organisation on how to deal with this socio-politically sensitive issue.

Nearly one third of respondents "rather" or "completely" held the opinion that the media exaggerates the health risk of an infection with coronavirus. Just as many had the impression that this was "rather not" or "not at all" the case. The response behaviour for questions related to infection concerns and to the assessment of the measures correlates in a quite plausible manner: Among respondents who considered the coronavirus to be of little danger, the concern about infection was also clearly lower and an assessment of the measures as too far reaching was also much more widespread.

Nearly one-third of the respondents in the Saxon police assessed the coronavirus as not being as dangerous as indicated by the central actors in science, politics and the media, at the time the survey. Once again, this reflects a diversity of opinion that also exists in German society. For the police, however, this situation is not unproblematic because this particular pattern of perceptions and attitudes is a potential root for the fundamental rejection of the pandemic response measures that they were obliged to implement. Not only would the public, that for the most part supports the pandemic measures, perceive it as disturbing if such attitudes were clearly overrepresented in the police force, but also, the personal willingness of police officers to enforce and comply with the Corona measures could suffer in the long term.

Figure 3. Attitudes towards the Corona pandemic

The representation is based on the information provided by 2,323 persons. Source: own representation.

However, the information provided by the respondents on their personal handling of the Corona measures does not indicate this (Figure 3). In fact, the Saxon police employees reveal a much higher degree of willingness to adhere to the rules ("compliance") than their personal attitudes would suggest. Nearly 80 percent of the respondents found it to be important to comply with the Corona measures themselves, while just 6 percent stated the opposite. Furthermore, a total of just under 15 percent of police employees said it was "rather" or "not at all" a personal concern for them to help enforce the implementation

of Corona measures. For all the rest of the respondents, this task was "fully" (26 percent), "rather" (32 percent) or at least "partly" (23 percent) a personal concern. A large majority of respondents also had no sympathy for demonstrations against Corona measures.

All in all, these attitude distributions indicate a pronounced professional ethos in the Saxon police. Many critics of the measures even managed to separate their political attitudes from their official duties. Anything else would be a serious problem, of course, since police officers are always faced with the task of enforcing rules regardless of their attitudes towards them. It is good news that this does not seem to be significantly different for the case of the Corona measures, which can be regarded as one of the focal points of intense ideological and political controversy in times of increasing polarisation and intensification of social conflicts.

This observation draws attention to respondents' perceptions of and experiences with the societal impact of police measures (Figure 3). For example, police officers could certainly be troubled if they were given negative feedback from their social environment because of their profession. However, almost two-thirds of the respondents stated that they did "rather not", or "not at all", have to justify police measures in their private environment. Nevertheless, at least one-fifth of the respondents had found themselves in such a situation. Yet, the respondents showed much more uncertainty regarding the acceptance of the police measures by society as a whole: more than half of them could not identify a clear tendency with regard to the question of whether citizens do accept police actions to enforce the Corona measures. A good quarter even said that this was "rather not" or "not at all" the case.

At the time of the survey, not even one-fifth of all the Saxon police employees believed that their professional activities in connection with the pandemic response had the public's understanding. Although the vast majority of respondents had not had any negative experiences in this regard in their private lives, their overall assessment of the social acceptance of police actions was much more ambivalent. There are probably at least two reasons for this: Firstly, perspectives on society as a whole are not obtained from personal experience but from the media. It is well known that media reporting tends towards negativity and dramatisation (Bednarek & Caple 2017; Bell 1991) – and the portrayal of pandemic measures in 2020 was not exempt from this. Secondly, police officers naturally have to deal a lot with people who do not comply with rules and who consequently have little sympathy for rule-enforcing actors.

The overall picture of the responses to all these attitudinal questions reveals a wide variety of perspectives on the Corona pandemic in the Saxon police. The appropriateness of Corona measures and sanctions, the dangerousness of the virus, as well as the societal perceptions of police action in connection with the Corona measures, were all assessed

very differently throughout the organisation. However, employees of the Saxon police, significantly more often than the German population as a whole, found the Corona measures and sanctions went too far. Regardless of this, the vast majority of police employees was intrinsically motivated to comply with these rules themselves. Only a small minority found themselves in deep inner opposition to their own professional duty to enforce pandemic control measures in society. These findings give no indication of serious problems with regard to an erosion of the professional police ethos. Nevertheless, they point to a considerable potential for socio-political tensions and dissatisfaction within the organisation.

Three groups of attitudinal types: Interventionists, conformists and sceptics

At this point, it is plausible to hypothetise about different types of employees in the Saxon police force, differing meaningfully with regard to their attitudes towards the coronavirus and the handling of the Corona pandemic. Many of the individual findings are closely related to each other: Those who do not consider the coronavirus to be much more dangerous than a normal flu also often finds the media's portrayal of the virus' health risks to be exaggerated. Those who think it is important to comply with pandemic control measures have less sympathy for people who demonstrate against the existing measures. And those who are not concerned about an infection may very likely not appreciate severe pandemic containment measures either. In short, there are patterns in the responses of the employees that point to consistent patterns of attitudes.

Such patterns were examined using cluster analysis, which aims to identify groups that differ as little as possible with regard to their attitudes. Specifically, we used a further development of the K-medoids or PAM algorithm (Kaufman & Rousseeuw 1990).[7] Because the answers to the survey items have an ordinal scale, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used for calculating distances between cases instead of the Euclidean distance measure. We determined the optimal number of clusters using the 'gap' statistic (Tibshirani et al. 2001) which favoured a cluster solution with three distinct groups.[8]

The cluster analysis was carried out on the basis of answers to a total of seven questions that were selected to capture three central components of attitudes towards the Corona pandemic: (1) the risk assessment regarding the dangerousness of the virus, (2) concerns about an infection, and (3) the intention to comply with the measures to combat the pandemic. Taken together, these three components paint a fairly accurate picture of a person's attitude towards the Corona pandemic.

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7   The R-Package *cluster* was used for calculations.

8   The fit statistics for measuring the clustering quality can be obtained from the authors.

Figure 4. Cluster analysis of attitudinal types in the Saxon police force
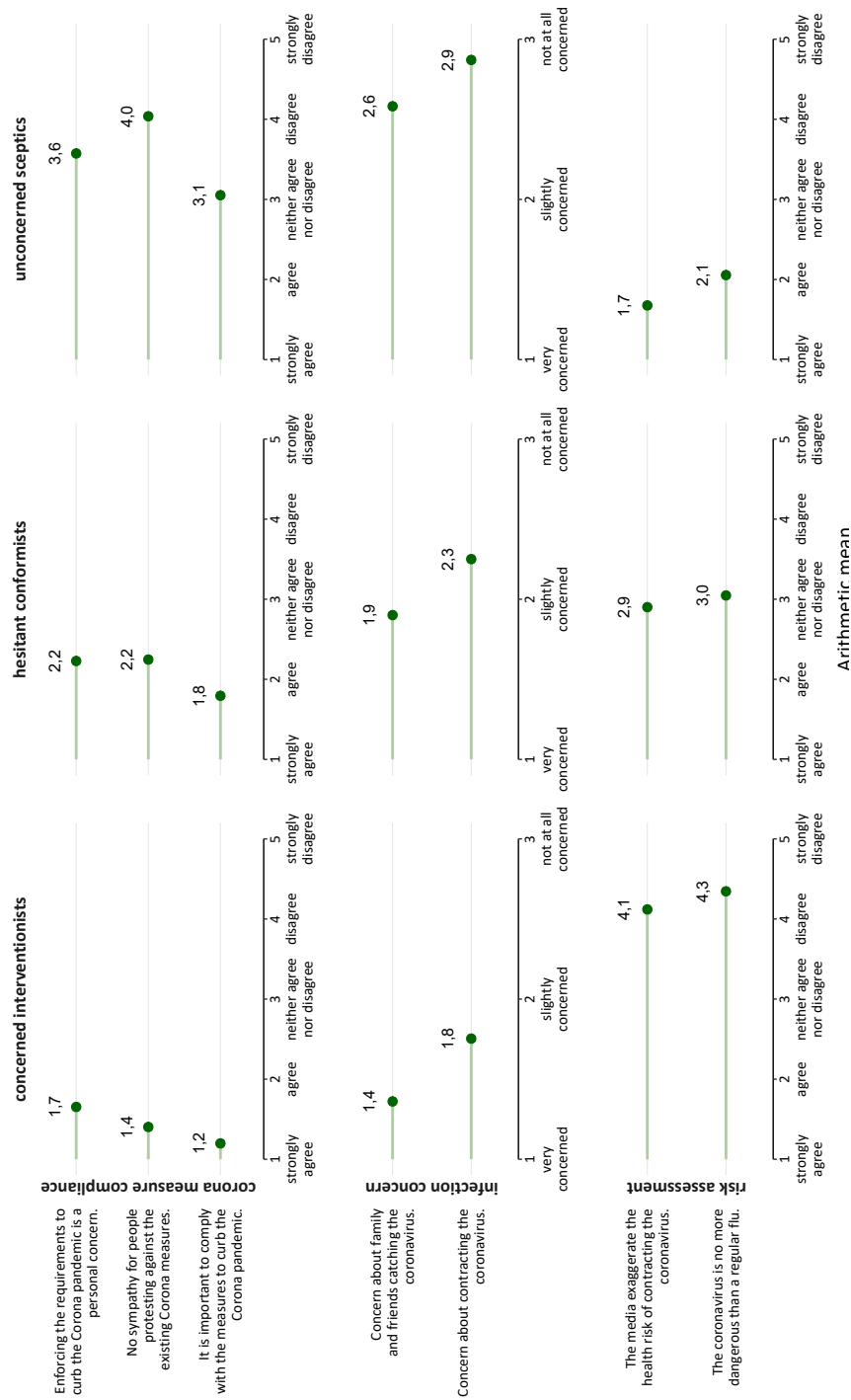
The depiction is based on a cluster analysis using information provided by 1,759 respondents who answered these seven questions in full. Source: own representation.

Figure 4 shows the results of the cluster analysis based on the mean response tendency in these questions. Three different attitudinal types with relatively consistent patterns of attitudes can be distinguished: 'concerned interventionists', 'unconcerned sceptics' and 'hesitant conformists'.[9] Figure 5 provides information on the approximate frequency distribution of these three types among the staff of the Saxon police in the survey period from mid-October to mid-November 2020.

Figure 5. Frequencies of the attitudinal types
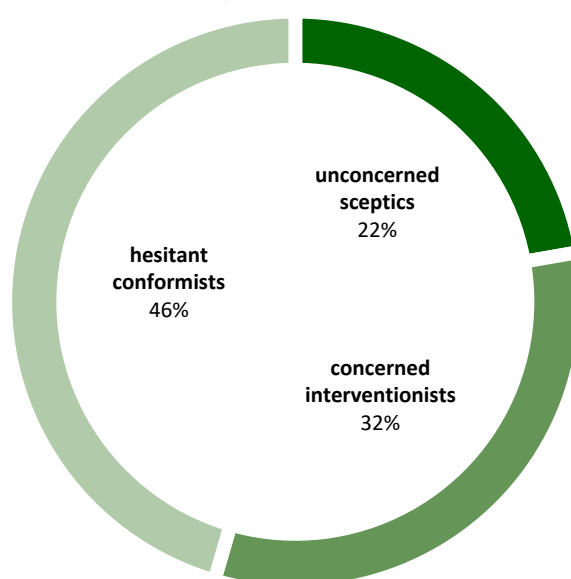
The illustration is based on information from 1,759 respondents. Source: own representation.

'**Concerned interventionists**' made up about one-third of the Saxon police workforce at that time. Employees of this type assess the danger of the coronavirus as very high and do not feel that the media exaggerates this danger. They are particularly concerned that people around them, or they themselves, could become infected with the virus. For concerned interventionists it is, therefore, not only very important to personally comply with the measures to contain the pandemic, but they are also personally motivated to enforce these measures in the performance of their duties. Employees of this type can hardly muster any understanding for protest rallies against the Corona measures.

Among this group of employees, clear support for an offensive political course in combating the pandemic is particularly widespread. The majority of concerned intervention-

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9   These terms should not be understood as exhaustive descriptions of the types. Rather, they serve as semantic distinctions and focus on characteristic properties.

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ists think that the Corona measures, and especially the sanctions for violations, do not go far enough. Hardly anyone amongst them feels that the measures and sanctions are too far-reaching. This is not surprising given their strong perception of danger and concerns about an infection. Furthermore, concerned interventionists inform themselves about the course of the Corona pandemic particularly frequently. They thereby rely on established sources of information for the most part, and use official government information websites to a greater extent than the other groups.

'***Unconcerned sceptics***' are of a completely different type. With a share of about one-fifth, they made up the smallest group within the Saxon police during the survey period. Compared to the other groups, employees of this type perceive the coronavirus as less dangerous and have a stronger impression that the threat is exaggerated in the media. They are also, on average, the least concerned about contagion and are much more sympathetic to people rallying against the Corona measures than the other groups. Enforcing these measures in the course of their professional activities tends not to be a personal concern for the unconcerned sceptics, and complying with these rules themselves, is most unimportant in this type compared to the others.

These perceptions and attitudes are typically accompanied by a pronounced critical attitude towards the Corona measures and sanctions: the vast majority of unconcerned sceptics feel that the measures and sanctions are too far-reaching; virtually no one in this group thinks they still don't go far enough. At the same time, sceptics do not completely refuse to enforce the rules in the performance of their duties and to comply with them personally. However, this does not seem to be motivated by an inner conviction or even fear of the virus. This is also reflected by the fact that unconcerned sceptics inform themselves about the Corona pandemic much less frequently than the other groups. Furthermore, they are the least likely to use a combination of public media, websites of public institutions and online services of established media providers. In contrast, the proportion of people using 'alternative media' such as social media, blogs and forums as sources of information is particularly high among unconcerned sceptics.

'Hesitant conformists' formed by far the largest group within the Saxon police in autumn 2020, making up almost half of the employees. Unlike the other two groups, they do not show a clear stance on how dangerous the virus is and whether this danger is exaggerated in the media. On average, they are certainly concerned about a possible infection with the coronavirus, but this concern is much less pronounced than among the concerned interventionists. In terms of their conformity in following and enforcing the measures to contain the Corona pandemic, this group is much closer to the interventionists than to the sceptics: conformists are, on average, quite motivated to follow the rules themselves as well as enforce them in their service. They also show little sympathy for people who take part in demonstration rallies against the measures.

This is particularly notable because the range of attitudes towards the Corona measures and sanctions is significantly wider among conformists than in the other groups: The measures go too far for just under a third of them, they don't go far enough for just under a quarter, and the remaining half consider the measures and sanctions to be just right. Thus, the approval of the status quo of Corona policies is not nearly as high as it is in the other attitudinal types. This ambivalent overall picture indicates that in general, unlike sceptics and interventionists, the group of hesitant conformists cannot or does not show a consistent position in the public controversy around this topic, while still adhering to the applicable rules to contain the pandemic.

This comparative characterization of the three groups should not serve as a template for stereotypical thinking and clichéd generalisations. There is a considerable degree of diversity within the groups. Group delimitations and descriptions are made using differences between means and distribution patterns, not by grouping respondents with completely identical characteristics. Nevertheless, all three attitudinal types have specific characteristics that make them distinguishable from each other. In order to obtain an overall picture of the respective characteristics and differences, it is therefore worthwhile to take a further comparative look at the group-specific manifestations of various characteristics.

Figure 6. Assessment of the Corona measures by attitudinal types

"All in all, are the current Corona measures in Saxony/Germany sufficient/adequate, do they go too far or do they not go far enough?"
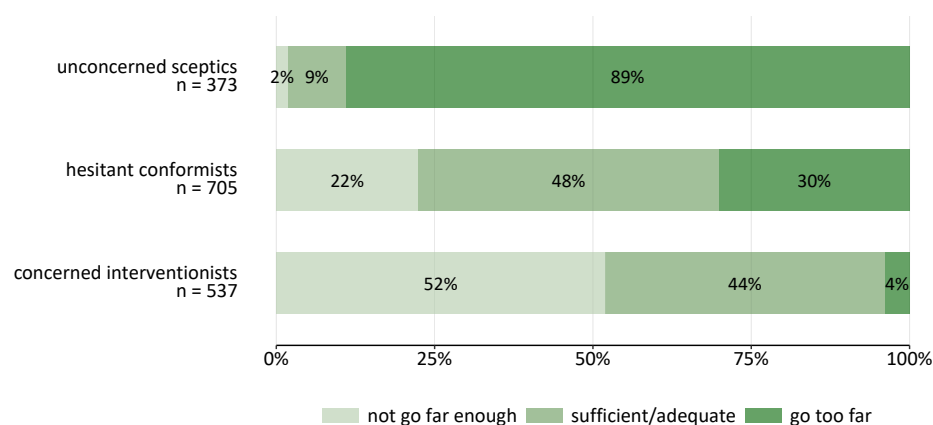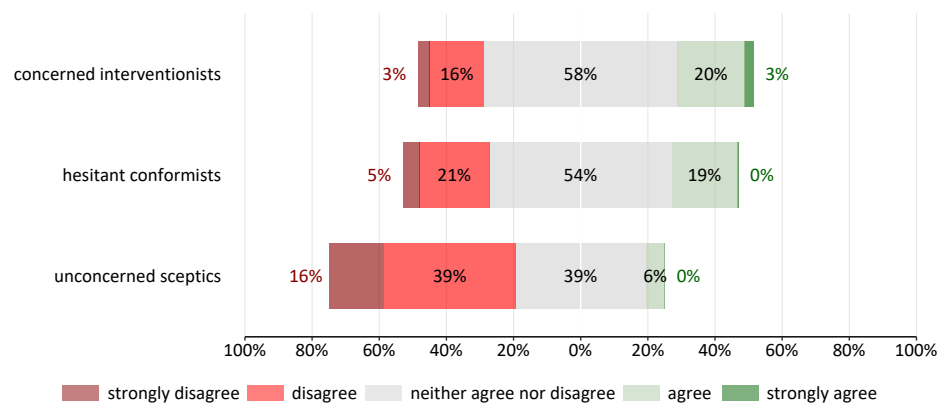

The illustration is based on the data of 1,601 respondents. Source: own representation.

Interventionists, conformists and sceptics show meaningful differences also in other attitudes and perceptions. As described above, the three groups show pronounced and

plausible differences in terms of their assessments of the Corona measures (see Figure 6). Similar differences can be found in the respondents' assessments of how enforcing Corona measures impacts the police's image within the public. Only about one in five of the conformists and interventionists stated that they had to justify the police's role in tackling the pandemic in their private lives in recent months. Among sceptics, however, almost one in three saw themselves under such a pressure to justify. Furthermore, unlike the other two groups, the majority of sceptics had the impression that the police measures do not obtain the population's understanding (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Assessment of the public understanding for police action by attitudinal types

"From my point of view, the police measures to enforce the Corona measures are met with understanding by the citizens."
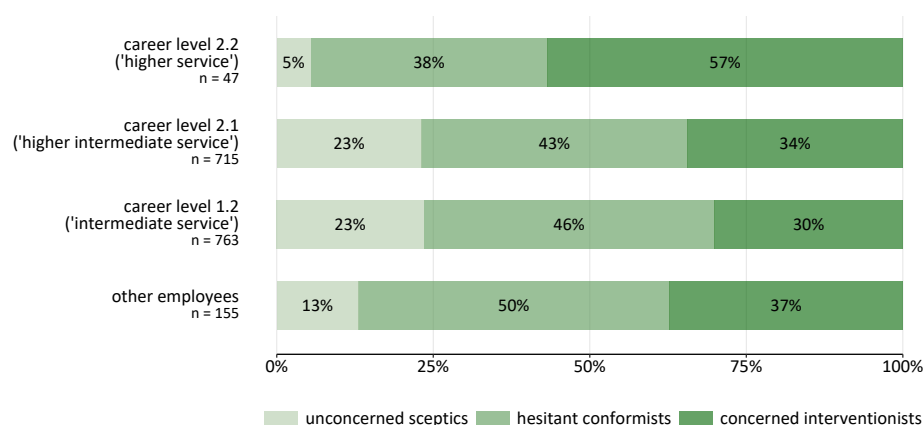

The illustration is based on the data of 1,679 respondents. Source: own representation.

The three attitudinal types show typical information behaviour as well. They clearly differ in how often they informed themselves about the pandemic, i.e. how much importance they attached to the topic. Half of the unconcerned sceptics informed themselves about the topic at least once a day during the survey period. Among the hesitant conformists, however, two-thirds did so, and among the concerned interventionists, even about 80 percent. Furthermore, while one in six sceptics stated that they informed themselves about the pandemic less frequently or never, almost no one in the other groups did so.

Comparing the respective preferred information sources provides insights into the different living environments of the three attitudinal types. Only just under one in five among the interventionists and conformists used social media to attain information about the Corona pandemic. Among the sceptics, however, no less than one-third resorted to these sources. And while alternative media such as internet blogs, forums and podcasts only served as a source of information for three to four percent of the other respondents,

almost one in six sceptics used them. Fittingly, public media and official government sources were much less important among sceptics than among interventionists and conformists during the survey period. Furthermore, sceptics obtained their information from private contacts more often than the others. Just as in the general public (see Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007), the information behaviour and media choice of police staff seems to fit and reinforce pre-existing political attitudes in a plausible manner – leading to distinct 'epistemic communities' especially among people with critical attitudes towards established media and scepticism towards mainstream politics (Fuchs 2010; Holt 2018; on alternative media framing of COVID-19 risks see Rooke 2021).

Figure 8. Distribution of the attitudinal types by career levels
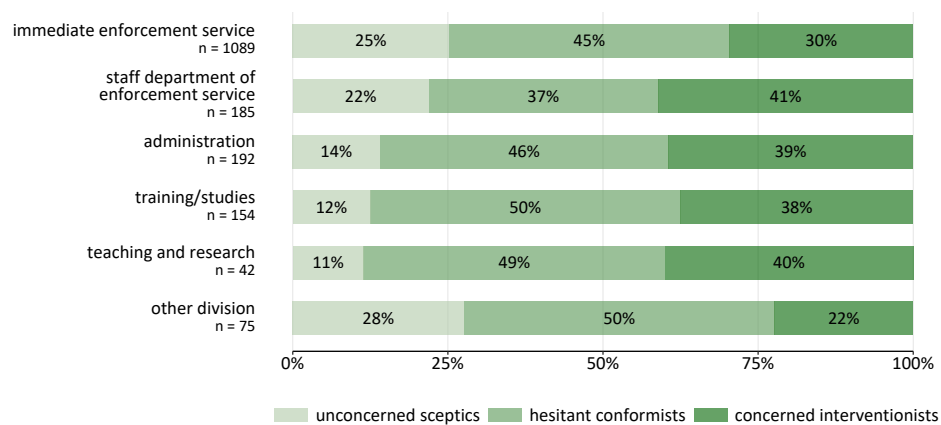

The illustration is based on the data of 1,680 respondents. Source: own representation.

The three attitudinal types are distributed differently among the three career levels in the Saxon police (Figure 8). The proportion of hesitant conformists in autumn 2020 was relatively similar on all career levels, with only slightly smaller shares on higher levels. For the other two attitudinal types, the differences were much more dramatic. Concerned interventionists not only made up the majority on the highest career level with just under 60 percent, but they were also represented there almost twice as often as on the other two career levels. On the other hand, only one out of twenty members of the highest career level was an unconcerned sceptic. In the other two groups, almost one in four belonged to this type of attitude.

The distribution in different divisions of the Saxon police (Figure 9) suggests that other factors play a role as well. The overall pattern can be summarised as follows: The more the employees are practically involved in the actual implementation of applicable rules (and

thus also of Corona measures), the larger the proportion of unconcerned sceptics among them. And the further away the respondents' area of operation is from the fulfilment of these tasks, the greater the proportion of concerned interventionists. Therefore, concrete experiences in connection with the enforcement of the pandemic response could be responsible for the differences between the employee and career groups – such as internal moral conflicts, a lack of acceptance on the side of the citizens or practical problems in the implementation of Corona measures 'in the street'.

Figure 9. Distribution of attitudinal types in different divisions of the Saxon police

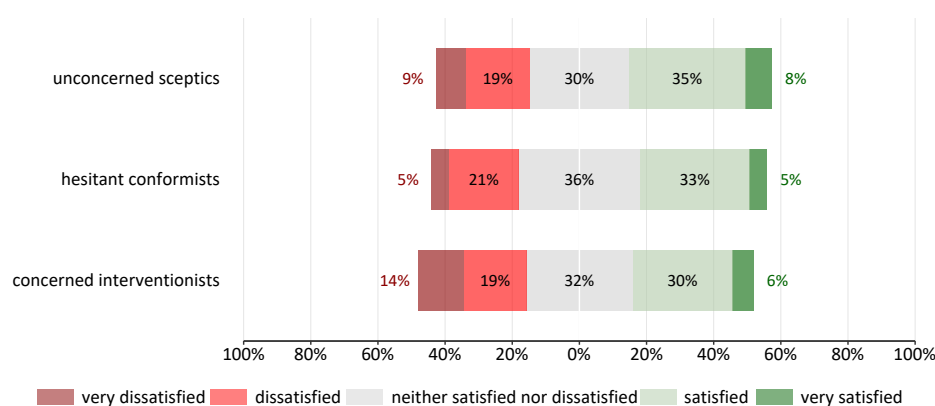The illustration is based on the data of 1,737 respondents. Source: own representation.

In sum, our study has revealed three distinctive attitudinal types in the Saxon police force: concerned interventionists, hesitant conformists and unconcerned sceptics differ markedly in terms of their concerns about a contagion with the coronavirus, their perception of its dangerousness, and their attitudes towards following and enforcing Corona rules. Furthermore, these types vary with regards to various other attitudes toward the pandemic as well as their information behaviour, and it is not far-fetched to assume that these patterns of attitudes are also linked to other ideological views. In different areas of the Saxon police, the three types occur in different proportions, whereby on 'upper' levels the Corona pandemic is on the average taken much more seriously than 'below', at the level of the pandemic response's immediate enforcement.

Exercising police service: Attitudinal types, leadership satisfaction and mental stress

Since interventionists, conformists and sceptics are characterised by specific patterns of attitudes not only towards the pandemic itself, it is reasonable to suspect that the three

types experience and assess their everyday police work during the Corona crisis quite differently. Therefore, it might be instructive to conclude with a brief comparative look at leadership satisfaction as well as mental stress in the performance of duty.

**Figure 10.** Satisfaction with leadership performance of superiors by attitudinal type

The illustration is based on the data of 1,636 respondents. Source: own representation.

The differences in the respondents' assessments of their supervisors' leadership performance during the spring 2020 lockdown are small but reveal a remarkable pattern (Figure 10). Among concerned interventionists, the proportion of those who were satisfied with their supervisors' leadership performance was the highest compared to the other two types. The average satisfaction of hesitant conformists was almost as high as that of the interventionists. However, the conformists were the least likely to be explicitly dissatisfied while showing the highest proportion of those who were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Unconcerned sceptics showed the least satisfaction with the leadership performance of their superiors with a particularly high rate of "very dissatisfied". All this must be seen before the background of the situation in spring 2020, when the pandemic and political situation often changed quite dramatically and unforeseeably, and as police forces still had to find a viable course of action.

These overall pictures point to a certain polarisation of perspectives between the three attitudinal types. While hesitant conformists seem willing to accept more ambiguity and unpredictability, the groups with distinctive profiles of political attitude – namely interventionists and sceptics – seem to prefer a clearer course. The dilemma here, of course, is that they can't both be pleased at the same time. But it should be possible to address their respective expectations and assessment horizons in leadership communication: for example, wishes for tougher action in the case of the interventionists, doubts about the

sense and benefit of the measures in the case of sceptics. All in all, the unconcerned sceptics type is likely to pose the greatest challenge of all the three groups in this regard.

Figure 11. Mental stress by attitudinal types
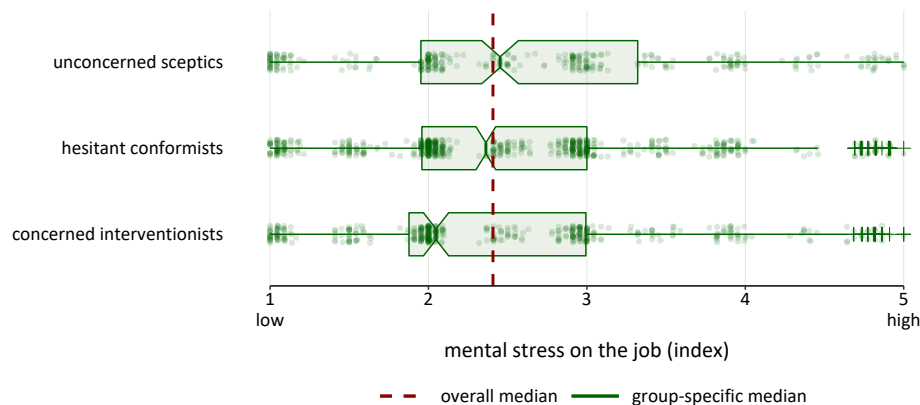
The illustration shows an index of the combined answers to the following two questions: "I find the performance of my official duties ... particularly strenuous / ... particularly stressful". (Response options: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree). Source: own representation.

The differences in mental stress in the performance of official duties between the three attitudinal types are also not particularly significant (Figure 11).[10] However, the pattern is again quite illuminating. Contrary to plausible expectations, the average level of mental stress was not particularly high among those who had a pronounced perception of dangerousness and great concerns about contagion with regard to the coronavirus. The opposite is the case: mental stress was lowest among the concerned interventionists. Apparently, the clear conviction to be part of an important and necessary endeavour, e.g. implementing measures to contain the pandemic, more than outweighs their mental stress caused by fears and worries.

This interpretation is also supported by the fact that unconcerned sceptics showed the comparatively highest average mental stress level, also reflected in the lowest average confidence to act in service (Meißelbach et al. 2021, 57f.) Thus, the sceptics' low perception of danger and worries about contagion do not seem to have made their daily work easier in the first year of the pandemic. Conversely, the problem behind their rather high stress level could be the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957): Unconcerned sceptics are confronted with the problem that the performance of their duties re-

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10 Mental stress was measured as one component of confidence to act based on an operationalisation by Rau (1996). The ranking of the three groups in the second component of activity-related confidence to act was similar, but with less pronounced differences.

quires actions that conflict particularly often and particularly strongly with their personal convictions. The sceptics type is, therefore, not the only group that presents the police leadership with particularly great challenges — their police work during the Corona pandemic was also relatively mentally challenging for themselves.

The hesitant conformists, who made up almost half of the police force and were thus the largest group at the time of the survey, are again more similar to the sceptics than to the interventionists: they showed a degree of mental stress that was hardly lower than that of the sceptics. Their ambivalent standpoints on the appropriate way to deal with the pandemic obviously did not make it any easier for them to navigate through their daily work. The most conspicuous group is clearly the interventionists: In this third of the Saxon police employees, a pronounced perception of danger and a comprehensive will to implement measures to combat the pandemic were combined with a particularly low level of mental stress in the performance of their duties.

The overall picture shows plausible differences between the three attitudinal types in the Saxon police force: Among concerned interventionists, leadership satisfaction is highest and mental stress is lowest. Unconcerned sceptics, on the other hand, have the greatest difficulties in the performance of duty. This difference is likely to be quite momentous in everyday work routines, especially with regard to group dynamics in teams and leadership communication. However, the differences between such politically diverse groups are not nearly as great as one would intuitively expect. This in turn makes two things clear: firstly, mental stress and leadership satisfaction of employees seem to depend much less on individual attitudes than on service-related factors such as actual leadership performance and satisfaction with the police as a whole (see Meißelbach et al. 2021, p. 27ff). And secondly, the small group differences again point to the fact that apparently large parts of the Saxon police are united by a common professional ethos, even across political lines of conflict. This is, indeed, good news in times of growing polarization and deepening societal conflicts.

Outlook: Diversity of attitudes as an opportunity and a challenge

This study aimed to gain insights into police employees' attitudes and perspectives on the Corona pandemic and the related containment measures. The analysis was carried out based on data from an employee survey of the police force in the German state of Saxony in autumn 2020.

The main finding is that the Saxon police is not an ideologically homogeneous organisation. Concrete evidence for that was presented for the case of issues concerning the Corona pandemic. But several findings indicate that the different perspectives in the Sax-

on police are connected with underlying patterns of general socio-political perceptions and attitudes. Some of these patterns may differ in their specific form from those of the population as a whole. In essence, however, the opinions among members of the Saxon police force seem to be an echo of the polarisation and diversity of viewpoints in public debates about the Corona pandemic and other relevant topics in Germany. This is particularly true for East Germany, where more than thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall a significant part of the population is highly sceptical about modern democracy and the political elites (Pickel & Pickel 2022).

Regarding the Corona issue, three attitudinal types can be found in the Saxon police: 'Hesitant conformists' tend to waver in their assessment of the situation but are nevertheless willing to make the sacrifices demanded of them in the context of pandemic control. This majority is situated between two groups with opposing views on the topic, leaning more towards the direction of the 'concerned interventionists', who are highly alarmed about the coronavirus and are, therefore, clear advocates of a strict and far-reaching pandemic containment policy. The third group of 'unconcerned sceptics' is characterized by a low danger assessment and critical perspectives of strict Corona measures as well as an, in their view, exaggerated media coverage. Compared to the two other groups, they have a pronouncedly different media diet, relying much more on alternative media and private networks, and a higher level of reported mental stress in the performance of their duty.

This diversity should not necessarily be seen as a problem. It has at least two advantages. Firstly, pluralism of perspectives and opinions opens up possibilities for institutional learning. It forces an organisation to deal with uncomfortable views and unwelcome facts. Secondly, ideological diversity encourages the police to continuously practise a lively culture of democratic debate and cultivate a climate of mutual tolerance. For this reason, the existence of two groups of people with opposing perspectives on the Corona pandemic confronting each other in the Saxon police force should not be seen as a negative symptom per se. This is especially true since the majority in between demonstrates a need to hear plausible arguments from both sides weighed against each other in a differentiated manner.

The majority of Saxon police employees are also united by a high level of professional ethics and a clear commitment to their duty. Although the measures themselves and their political assessment have been drastic at times, only a few question the police's task of enforcing the legal regulations to contain the pandemic. Even among unconcerned sceptics who clearly doubt the sense and appropriateness of such severe restrictions, only a minority is not at all personally motivated to enforce the Corona measures as part of their official duties. Conversely, even in the case of such a topic that is a focal point of fierce societal polarisation, police employees have so far succeeded in doing what they

routinely have to do anyway: differentiate between the private freedom of opinion of responsible citizens and the professional mandate of employees of the executive.

Of course, ideological diversity in such a controversial topic also poses challenges to a police organisation. Because the Corona pandemic has a strong impact on everyday work, conflicts about the appropriateness of pandemic measures and the role of the police in their enforcement are almost inevitable. Because different attitudes and behaviours are also associated with different degrees of concern about contagion and risk perception, such conflicts carry the potential to become very fundamental and put a lot of mental stress on those involved. On the one hand, this can cause negative group dynamics in ideologically diverse teams and ultimately reduce the organisation's ability to act. On the other hand, it can lead to very difficult situations between superiors and subordinates: Some staff members with great concerns about the pandemic suffer under superiors who attach little importance to hygiene rules – and vice versa. Therefore, a central challenge in everyday work will be to maintain professional and collegial cooperation despite very different personal views.[11]

Because the different patterns of attitudes are not evenly distributed across the career levels, there is also a risk of systematic communication difficulties, especially between higher management levels and the personnel working in the immediate enforcement service. There are almost twice as many concerned interventionists in the highest career level as in the other two groups – and almost six times fewer unconcerned sceptics. As in other parts of society, there is a potential of a solidification of increasingly divergent lifeworlds and ideological world views, thus jeopardizing constructive dialogue and a professional ethos supported by a sense of community. To counter this problem, senior executives need to be willing to deal with diversity of opinion open-mindedly and to respond with well-considered leadership communication. A culture of open discussion is more likely to be successful than patronizing appeals or uncontextualised service instructions.

This is all the more true because it is precisely employees with very pointed perceptions and opinions that pose challenges not only for the Saxon police, but for executive organisations in democratic societies as a whole. At the time of the survey, about a quarter of the Saxon police force doubted the particular dangerousness of the coronavirus and therefore rejected the measures to contain it. This is likely to be reflected not only in reduced motivation to work and a low willingness to be vaccinated. Finding such attitude patterns in the executive branch of government, of all people, also provides fertile ground for negative media coverage, critical public debate and a loss of trust in the police.

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11 Hints on these social dynamics were found in free text comments given by many respondents at the end of the survey (see Meißelbach et al. 2021: 59 f.).

This situation poses difficult demands and great expectations onto leadership communication in the police force of Saxony. Concerned interventionists will be easily motivated to conscientiously enforce the pandemic containment policies. While on the one hand, the reference to the common good should be appealing to many of them, on the other hand, they also want their employers to act in a way that is geared towards infection control and crisis management for mere personal reasons. Thus, organisational failures in this field of action are a source of frustration and discomfort for them. However, such an approach in leadership communication might trigger defensive reflexes especially among unconcerned sceptics. For those employees who are critical of the Corona policy, it is precisely the enforcement of the measures that holds a great potential for frustration, and the cognitive dissonance between personal views and official duties can become a real mental burden for them. Among hesitant conformists, in turn, quite a few might probably feel that they are 'sitting on the fence' and therefore would welcome opportunities to gain orientation out of reasonable and differentiated discourses.

In such a situation, differentiated leadership communication and responsible action are needed to likewise 'take along' different attitudinal types in the workforce. This is a challenge not only for top management but also for middle and lower-level supervisors – and it will not go away with the end of the Corona pandemic. The implications of the presented findings ought to be applicable to other political and geographical contexts. Especially regarding highly politicised and contested topics, it might be necessary to approach different types of police employees, each with their own specific perceptions, attitudes and motivations, in a way that is both ideologically balanced and comprehensive in terms of leadership and clarity. Setting up the workforce and especially management personnel for such tasks in future times of crisis or politically tense situations will remain an important task. If such target group-adequate leadership communication fails repeatedly, it can lead to growing dissatisfaction among the staff – with corresponding consequences for the quality of the fulfilment of police tasks.

One possible reaction to this situation would be to launch broad campaigns and open discussion formats. Those would not only provide channels for the distribution of expert knowledge and leadership perspectives throughout the organisation, thus growing orientation and transparency, but it would also open up opportunities for critical questions and controversial debates. On the one hand, critical groups of employees (like the 'unconcerned sceptics' found here) would feel that their respective assessments of the situation were being taken seriously, treated with respect and not simply treated with contempt. This would be a desirable step forward from many socio-political debates from a perspective of democratic theory. On the other hand, such formats would also allow the participants to engage with the ambiguities and pitfalls of standpoints that seem unquestionably true or morally right to them. For example, concerned interventionists might be sensitised to goal conflicts and ethical dilemmas in the political handling of the

Corona pandemic, which may be more obvious to unconcerned sceptics and hesitant conformists – and vice versa. Such intra-organisational exchange will not be belated even after the 'hot phase' of this Corona crisis. On the contrary: with some distance to immediate trigger events, even better chances may open up to conduct controversial debates on the police's role in larger socio-political contexts.

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