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Germany: The Far-Right Plot and Russian Malign Inspiration

Anton Shekhovtsov

Rather than have our women and children overrun by the Russians [...],
it would be better to post ourselves as traffic policemen,
spreading our arms so that the Russians
can find their way through Germany as quickly as possible.¹

*Otto Ernst Remer, a former Wehrmacht officer,
co-founder of the Socialist Reich Party (1949–1952) in West Germany*

Case Study 1: Patriotic Union

The anti-terrorist operation carried out by Germany’s Federal Criminal Police Office and other federal and regional agencies in the first half of December 2022 became the largest operation of this kind against what German prosecutors described as the “most brazen” plot in the country’s post-war history.² Between 3,000 and 5,000 security forces and police officers arrested 23 presumed co-conspirators in a massive raid across the country, and two more alleged plotters were arrested in Austria and Italy.³ During their raid, officers also seized legally and illegally owned firearms, stun guns, thousands of rounds of ammunition, night vision devices, bullet vests, and combat helmets in the homes of the arrested and other related suspects.⁴ German police believed that, under the leadership of the German far-right activist Heinrich XIII Prinz Reuß, the group of plotters who referred to themselves as the Patriotic Union planned to overthrow the German government, dismantle the country’s constitutional order, and establish a new form of a German state.⁵

To this end, the conspirators – who were also named the Reuß Group in the German media – “created organisational, hierarchical, and administrative structures with a ‘council’ as the central body and a ‘military arm’”.⁶ The plan was to have sixteen recruits with military, police, and security services background storm the Reichstag building during a plenary session of the Bundestag (German Parliament), arrest all the present members of the federal government, including Chancellor Olaf Scholz, tie them up, and show them to the German public on TV – that would allegedly convince other critics of the federal government across the offices and agencies to join the coup d’état.⁷ The group anticipated that the success of their plot would only be possible through violence, and they were prepared to kill people to achieve their goals.

In its preparations for the uprising, the Patriotic Union also sought foreign cooperation; moreover, foreign agency was one of the ideological foundations of the group that combined central myths of Reichsbürger and QAnon ideologies.⁸ Following those myths, the Reuß Group believed that the last time Germany was truly sovereign – and thus, genuinely legitimate in their eyes – was the German Reich (1871–1945). As the Allies defeated Nazi Germany in 1945, the Reich ceased to exist, and Germany’s territory came under the control of the Allies-administered trading construct called the Federal Republic of Germany. Presumably, as time passed, Germany became increasingly influenced by members of a so-called deep state, and the Patriotic Union imagined that the Alliance, “a technically superior secret society of governments, intelligence services, and military of various states, including the Russian Federation and the United States of America”, would imminently attack the deep state.⁹ The uprising that the Reuß Group planned to carry out was then seen as an act *accompanying* the attack of the Alliance against the deep state, and the leadership of the group confided that they had no influence on the “upcoming events”.¹⁰ What they, nevertheless, hoped for was that after the group helped the Alliance to take control over the German territory using a country-wide network of homeland security companies that would operate as police forces for the Alliance, they would establish a transitional government that would negotiate “a peace treaty” with the Alliance and finally restore the sovereignty of the German Reich.¹¹

While the imaginary Alliance included representatives of several countries, there was apparently no consensus in the Reuß Group as to the exact national composition of the “superior secret society of governments”. In 2019, before the creation of the Patriotic Union, Reuß appealed for a “peace treaty” to the US

president, and also noted that it had tried, unsuccessfully, to contact Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.¹² In May 2021, Reuß wrote a letter in Russian to Vladimir Putin in which he introduced himself as the ambassador of the German Reich and asked for cooperation; it is currently unknown whether the letter was delivered to the Kremlin.¹³

Russia played an increasingly important external role in the ideology of the group after its creation approximately in November 2021. The Patriotische Union was certain that Russia was definitely part of the Alliance, although they still envisaged that the Russian army would act together with the US Army in the “allied” attack against the “deep state”.¹⁴ Some in the group believed that the “Alliance” was not limited to the Russians and Americans and involved seventeen nations, including India, Iraq, and African countries, which had prepared more than a million soldiers to march on the “Federal Republic of Germany”.¹⁵ The Reuß Group had bizarre views on the “Alliance”, and, in one instance, Rüdiger von Pescatore, a former Bundeswehr officer and the military leader of the Patriotische Union, confided to his daughter in late September 2022 that several European countries declared martial law and that two million soldiers, including Russian army personnel, were standing on the border ready to invade Germany.¹⁶ However, despite variations in interpretations of the composition of the Alliance, the three separate charges brought by the German Federal Public Prosecutor General against 27 members of the Reuß Group on 12 December 2023 identified Russia as the sole central point of reference for the organisation.¹⁷

Pursuing his objectives to garner support from Russia, Reuß – together with Rüdiger von Pescatore – tried to meet Russian representatives in the Slovak capital Bratislava in February 2022,¹⁸ but the outcome of those attempts is unknown. Later that year, Reuß would apparently rely for Russian contacts on Vitalia Bondarenko, who was reported to be his life partner or assistant.¹⁹ Identified as simply Vitalia B. in the charges of the German Federal Public Prosecutor General, the Russian citizen Vitalia Bondarenko was the only foreign national who was arrested in the December 2022 raid and charged with “supporting the terrorist group and providing aid in the preparation of a highly treacherous enterprise”.²⁰ In particular, she helped Reuß, who had been mandated by the group to establish contacts with representatives of the Alliance, to get in touch with Russian diplomats.²¹ On 13 June 2022, Reuß visited the Russian Consulate General in Leipzig together with Bondarenko – apparently to celebrate the Russian National Day.²² Later, Bondarenko visited the same Consulate again,

but already without Reuß.²³ Although the details of Reuß and Bondarenko's talks with Russian diplomats are unknown, it is viable to suggest that Reuß wanted either to secure Russia's support for the planned uprising or, narrowly following the ideological line, find out the date of the attack of the Alliance against the Federal Republic of Germany. However, the German Federal Public Prosecutor General claimed they did not know how the Russian contact persons reacted to Reuß's requests.²⁴

Other members of the Reuß Group tried to establish contacts with Russian diplomats too. During their investigation, German officers found a printed email exchange between three members of the group and the Russian Consulate General in Leipzig that began on 28 November 2022. The three Germans, including Christian Wendler and Frank R.,²⁵ introduced themselves as medium-sized entrepreneurs who were concerned about so-called one-sided media reporting on the Russian-Ukrainian war – reporting that “harmed the Russian Federation” as the country was “presented in the wrong light”.²⁶ The Germans wanted to discuss these issues personally with the Russian diplomats in Leipzig, and “an apparently high-ranking” Russian diplomat invited them for a brief personal meeting at the consulate on 8 December 2022. Their visit never happened as they were among those arrested by the German agencies the day before.²⁷

In November and December 2022, another member of the Patriotische Union, Johanna Findeisen-Juskowiak, who was a candidate of the minor Basisdemokratische Partei Deutschland (Grassroots Democratic Party of Germany, also known as Die Basis) in the 2021 Bodensee constituency elections, met with the representatives of the Russian Consulate General in Frankfurt and Baden-Baden “to promote the aims of the association”.²⁸ The outcome of those meetings is unknown. On 30 November 2022, Findeisen-Juskowiak reportedly called a member of the Reichsbürger movement and her fellow Die Basis party member Ralph Thomas Niemeyer and asked him whether he could establish contact with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov or President Putin. Responding to her question, Niemeyer said that “he was one of a group of 9999 selected people who had received a tap-proof satellite phone with a four-digit number that could be used to contact Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov and Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova directly”, but he, however, needed to have a “really very good reason” to use that special phone.²⁹ There were no reports on the existence of such a phone after the German police raided his residence in Munich in March 2023. Niemeyer, however, appears to be the main

source of our knowledge of the above-mentioned letter written by Reuß to Putin in May 2021. According to Niemeyer himself, he was approached on 5 December 2022 by a woman named “Svetlana” who handed him Reuß’s letter and asked to deliver it to the Kremlin. A few days later, Niemeyer reported the letter to the German domestic intelligence agency, known as the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution.³⁰

Available information on the Reuß Group suggests that Russia – as part of the fantasy about the all-powerful Alliance – constituted not only an important ideological reference for the group; the Russian military intervention was also a central practical component of the strategic planning of the coup. Since the uprising against the Federal Republic of Germany was seen only as an act complementing the expected attack on the *deep state* on the German territory, the uprising alone seemed to make little sense – at least for some members of the Patriotische Union. This assumption may help explain why the apparent lack of cooperation on the Russian part led to disputes within the Reuß Group.³¹ According to the German Federal Court of Justice, by the time of the arrests in December 2022, the group had already made all preparations for the actions that would lead, as the conspirators hoped, to the coup d’état. What was missing was a “trumpet call” from the Alliance, and the Patriotische Union tried to figure out what exactly they could, indeed, consider as such; “a possible stock market crash, the death of Queen Elizabeth II, an electromagnetic impulse from Vladimir Putin, natural disasters, or a large-scale power failure” were discussed within the group as potential signals from the Alliance.³²

There is currently no publicly available evidence that any Russian agency or stakeholder ordered or directed the Reuß Group’s practical preparations for the overthrow of the German constitutional order. However, this chapter argues that particular activities and phenomena that are directly linked or perceived to be linked to Russia functioned as external stimuli that inspired the actions of the Patriotische Union. This argument is theoretically based on the studies of inspiration as a psychological construct that involves both human agency and stimulus milieu. As Todd M. Thrash et al. argued:

First, inspiration is characterised by epistemic transcendence, meaning that the individual has gained an awareness of new or better possibilities. This aspect of inspiration is experienced vividly, as reflected in vision metaphors such as illumination, revelation, insight, and “seeing” possibilities one had not seen before. Second, inspiration is characterised

by evocation or receptivity; one is inspired by something in particular, and therefore, one does not attribute to oneself responsibility for becoming inspired, at least not full or direct responsibility. [...] Finally, inspiration involves approach motivation, such that one feels compelled to bring one's new idea or vision to fruition.³³

Employing the above-mentioned terminology, we assert the following:

- The Reuß Group was formed around a novel idea of overthrowing the German government for the benefit of the “Alliance” involving the Russian Federation.
- This idea was stimulated and sustained by external environment including, but not limited to, two types of developments:
 - (1) Russian activities in and around Ukraine since 2014: Moscow's support for pro-Russian politicians, the Kremlin's military backing of pro-Russian separatists, the direct Russian invasion of Ukraine, and Russia's corresponding sabre-rattling on the international arena;
 - (2) Russian cooperation with German anti-establishment movements and organisations, Russian information strategies in the German-language media space, and violent clandestine operations involving German pro-Russian activists.
- On the part of the leadership of the Reuß Group, these developments evoked the belief that Moscow was not only willing but actually preparing to act against official Berlin and that it was interested in having domestic German allies on the ground.
- The combination of the Reuß Group's agency (the radical anti-establishment thrust) and the stimulus milieu (Russia's real or perceived actions) compelled the group to move forward with the implementation of their idea of a coup d'état.

Before discussing the external environment that evoked the Reuß Group's Russia-related perceptions, beliefs, and actions, three important caveats must be taken into consideration. First, this chapter discusses only the second type of developments in the external environment that stimulated and sustained the efforts of the Patriotische Union, namely the developments that have a direct relationship to Germany. Second, in the absence (at the time of the writing) of facts indicating any degree of Russia's operational authority over Vitalia Bondarenko, this chapter considers her Russian origin and citizenship to be, at

the most, a factor influencing Reuß's personal attitudes towards Russia and a factor potentially facilitating communications with Russian diplomats. Should the relevant facts emerge in the future, Bondarenko's role in the plot needs to be reconsidered.

Third, the question of inspiration coming from external environments other than those linked to Russia remains outside of the research scope of this chapter. The existence of the other external environments is, however, obvious: as argued above, the Reuß Group's ideology included central myths of the QAnon conspiracy theory that originated in the US. Moreover, towards the end of the Trump presidency in the US, some activists of the German Reichsbürger movement, from which the Patriotische Union would later emerge, came to believe that the Defender Europe 2020 NATO military exercise was a covert Trump-led military operation aiming "to liberate Germany from Chancellor Angela Merkel's government", and that Merkel had to use "a fake COVID-19 pandemic" to thwart the operation³⁴. This belief clearly contributed to the development of the Reuß Group's idea of the Alliance gearing up for striking against the Federal Republic of Germany. However, with Donald Trump's failure to get re-elected and the arrival of the Biden Administration that was sceptical of Russia, the prominence of the US in the ideology of the Patriotische Union seemed to wane, and there is no publicly available evidence that the Reuß Group made attempts to establish contacts with American representatives of the Alliance. Nevertheless, the question of the US-linked developments stimulating and sustaining the actions of the German Reichsbürger movement, in general, and the Patriotische Union, in particular, merits further academic inquiry.

Case Study 2: Alternative for Germany - from Soft Euroscepticism to the pro-Russian Radical Right

One of the high-ranking members of the Reuß Group arrested in December 2022 was Birgit Malsack-Winkemann. At the time of the arrest, she worked as a judge at the Berlin District Court—a job she had started in 1993 and interrupted between 2017–2021 while she was a member of the Bundestag representing the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD). After losing the re-election to the German Parliament, Malsack-Winkemann remained a member of the AfD's Federal Court of Arbitration.³⁵

As a former politician in the Bundestag, Malsack-Winkemann had a pass card allowing her to access the parliamentary building and take up to six guests with her. In September 2022, she took several members of the Patriotische Union for a tour in the Bundestag where they, as part of their preparations for the coup, took photos and recorded videos of the halls of offices and boardrooms, underground passages to other buildings, and the interior of the plenary hall of the parliament.³⁶ In the transitional government that the Reuß Group planned to establish after the coup, Malsack-Winkemann would hold the post of justice minister.³⁷

At least two other persons connected to the Patriotische Union and arrested in December 2022 had relationships with the AfD – Ruth Hildegard Leiding, who was employed by Malsack-Winkemann during her Bundestag term as a personal astrologist,³⁸ and Christian Wendler, a former Olbernhau city councillor for the AfD.³⁹ After the arrests, the AfD promptly distanced from the Reuß Group and the entire Reichsbürger movement, and the party leader Tino Chrupalla declared that anyone who was “committed to the Reichsbürger scene” had no place in the AfD.⁴⁰

It is, indeed, highly unlikely that the AfD, as a party, was involved in the Reuß Group’s conspiracy to overthrow the German government. However, the AfD’s well-known amicable relations with Russia appear to represent a potent, albeit hardly singular, source of the conspirators’ idea about the Alliance and expectations of Russia’s involvement in German domestic politics. The AfD was founded by a group of disaffected members of the centre-right Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) Alexander Gauland, Bernd Lucke, and Konrad Adam in 2013 as a moderately Eurosceptic party that opposed Germany’s participation in the Eurozone and its role in bailing out European countries, especially Greece, that were hit hard by the 2007/2008 financial crisis.⁴¹ In its early years (2013–2015), the AfD primarily consisted of two ideological groups: the economically liberal bloc led by Lucke and the national-conservative bloc led by Gauland. In terms of foreign policy orientations, the economically liberal bloc expressed pro-Atlanticist positions, while the national-conservatives showed a certain degree of sympathy towards Russia – sympathy that was apparently shared by the majority of the AfD’s rank and file.⁴²

As early as April 2014, Gauland suggested separating eastern Ukraine, which he believed was predominantly Russian-influenced, from the rest of the country⁴³ – a position that echoed Moscow’s justifications of its aggression against Ukraine that started with Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and

invasion of Ukraine's eastern regions later in spring that year. Also in 2014, Gauland also took part in a meeting called *Freedom with Russia – for a sovereign Europe* organised by the German far-right magazine *Compact*.⁴⁴ Although the event was dominated by German participants, it also had a prominent Russian element, as it was attended by Vladimir Yakunin, a former KGB officer and then the CEO of Russian Railways who was close to Putin since the early 1990s and who was active in advancing Russian foreign policy interests internationally through the workings of the Dialogue of Civilisations Forum.⁴⁵

The differences in foreign policy orientations between the two blocs of the AfD were also reflected in voting behaviour of the AfD's Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). For example, Lucke's group largely abstained on European Parliament's resolutions that criticised Russia's aggression against Ukraine, while the AfD's national-conservative MEPs voted against them.⁴⁶ However, even if they voted differently on Russia-related resolutions, Lucke's opinions on Ukraine sometimes correlated with those of Gauland. For example, during the debates in the European Parliament in September 2014, Lucke condemned "the illegal annexation of Crimea and any covert or overt support for violent attempts at secession". And yet – echoing Gauland's suggestions about partition of Ukraine – argued that Ukraine's borders were "inviolable" but not "immutable", and that "ethnic groups should be able to decide on their citizenship in fair, free, democratic self-determination".⁴⁷

Nevertheless, in 2015, Lucke eventually lost the internal struggle in the party to the national conservatives and was displaced as the leader of the party by Frauke Petry. Lucke and several other prominent members of the AfD left the party, and Lucke referred to rising xenophobic, anti-Western, and pro-Russian leanings in the party as the reason for his departure.⁴⁸ Indeed, under Petry, the AfD "quickly radicalised. Xenophobic and populist positions that had before been at least controversial within the party became mainstream. [...] Even openly racist statements and attempts to minimise the Holocaust by party leaders were no longer beyond the pale".⁴⁹

According to the hacked and leaked emails belonging to Sargis Mirzakhian, a minor official at the Central Office of the State Duma and one of many Russian operatives who advanced Russian foreign policy interests in Europe,⁵⁰ his group started cooperating with members and activists of the AfD in January 2016.⁵¹ Moreover, Mirzakhian's group claimed that it had spearheaded Frauke Petry's letter addressed to Putin, in which she – if the letter existed – allegedly expressed

her criticism of “the Berlin sanctions policies [sic] towards Moscow” and asked for a personal meeting with the Russian leader to discuss how the AfD could “contribute to the normalisation of the Russian-German relations”.⁵² In June 2016, Russian operatives from Mirzakhania’s group also discussed Petry’s visit to Moscow, and a note coming from their internal communications claimed that the AfD leader wanted to meet the Russian president and the State Duma Chairman Sergey Naryshkin, and to hold talks with Russian officials who dealt with foreign policy issues.⁵³

Whether Mirzakhania’s group played a decisive role in its preparations or not, Petry’s visit to Moscow took place in February 2017. During her Russian trip, Petry was accompanied by AfD’s members Marcus Pretzell and Julian Flak, and she met with Naryshkin’s successor as the State Duma chairman, Vyacheslav Volodin, his deputy Pyotr Tolstoy, the now late leader of the far-right, misleadingly named Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the head of the State Duma foreign affairs committee, Leonid Slutsky, and the head of the State Duma committee on energy, Pavel Zavalny.⁵⁴ According to the official Russian report, Petry and Volodin discussed “cooperation between regional parliaments, cross-party cooperation, and developing contacts between youth organisations”.⁵⁵ While the contents of other discussions are unknown, particular details about the logistics of the AfD’s Moscow trip imply that Russians valued the visit of Petry and her fellow party members: according to one investigative report, Russian stakeholders booked a private jet for the AfD delegation and paid €25,000 for their trip.⁵⁶

Shortly after Petry’s visit to Moscow, in April 2017, the AfD published its manifesto in the run-up to the 2017 federal elections to the Bundestag. The manifesto, which appeared in three languages (German, English, and Russian) declared that “a détente in relations with Russia [was] a prerequisite for a lasting peace in Europe”, and that “it [was] in Germany’s interests to integrate Russia into an overall security policy structure”.⁵⁷ The manifesto also advocated lifting of the sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia for its aggression against Ukraine and called for the intensification of economic cooperation with Moscow.⁵⁸ Individual members of the AfD had been involved in various pro-Russian activities as early as in 2015 and 2016, but Petry’s visit to Moscow in early 2017 marked the beginning of extensive, multidirectional cooperation between AfD party members and Russian stakeholders. By November 2021, when the Reiß

Group was formed, AfD members had been involved in a wide range of pro-Kremlin efforts that could be categorised as follows:

- pushing resolutions criticising “anti-Russian sanctions” in regional parliaments;
- participating in conferences, roundtables, meetings, and other events aimed at advancing Russian foreign policy interests;
- taking part in politically biased international election observation missions in Russia and Russia-occupied territories of Ukraine;
- providing pro-Kremlin commentary to the Russian media; and
- voting against parliamentary resolutions criticising and/or condemning the Kremlin domestic or international actions.⁵⁹

Manuel Ochsenreiter: from AfD-Russia Networking to False Flag Terrorism

One of the figures who played an important role in advancing and strengthening the pro-Kremlin stances of the AfD was late German far-right journalist Manuel Ochsenreiter.⁶⁰ He had been active in German far-right circles since the 1990s. In 2011, he became an editor-in-chief of the German far-right magazine *Zuerst!*, which – in the words of its editorial staff (probably Ochsenreiter himself) – was “committed only to the life and survival interests of the German people and the precious heritage of our European culture”.⁶¹ Ochsenreiter reportedly expressed no pro-Kremlin views until 2012,⁶² but it was probably his journalistic interest in the Syrian civil war, in which he supported Bashar al-Assad’s forces, that led him to the encounter with the works of the Russian fascist ideologue Alexander Dugin.⁶³ Dugin, following the official Russian line, also supported Assad. Ochsenreiter and Dugin met in 2012, and their meeting most likely shaped not only Ochsenreiter’s long-standing infatuation for Dugin’s ideology, but also his pro-Kremlin orientations. It was likely through Dugin that Ochsenreiter got in contact with Mateusz Piskorski, arguably the most active agent of Russian malign influence in Poland at that time.⁶⁴ Piskorski organised an international monitoring mission at the illegitimate referendum in Russia-occupied Crimea in March 2014, and Ochsenreiter was the only Western journalist present at that referendum.

As Ochsenreiter deepened his relations with Dugin and Piskorski, he became involved in a wide range of pro-Russian activities, some of which were coordinated by one of his Russian handlers, Sargis Mirzakhian. Malign influence operations that Ochsenreiter was involved in ranged from participating in fake election observation missions and providing anti-US and anti-NATO

commentary for Russian state-controlled media through coordinating pro-Kremlin resolutions and statements of European far-right politicians to organising pro-Russian events in Germany.

In particular, in May 2016, Ochsenreiter – in cooperation with a regional AfD politician Udo Stein, and in coordination with Mirzakhania's group – authored a so-called small question (*kleine Anfrage*) of the AfD faction in the Baden-Württemberg regional parliament to the state authorities, in which the party criticised the anti-Russian sanctions for the alleged damage to the regional economy. Moreover, in July 2017, Ochsenreiter published a special issue of *Zuerst!* specifically attacking anti-Russian sanctions, and Mirzakhania's leaked communications suggest that his team was involved in Ochsenreiter's efforts. A Russian account on the issue found in the communications of Mirzakhania's group described *Zuerst!* as a magazine “popular among European German-speaking opposition politicians and public figures” and claimed that copies of the printed version of the magazine were sent to all members of the Bundestag, to all offices of the AfD, and to the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). The Russian account on the special issue also highlighted three particular features, namely interviews with the AfD MEP Marcus Pretzell,⁶⁵ the AfD member of the Saxony state parliament Jörg Urban,⁶⁶ and the FPÖ member Johann Gudenus⁶⁷ – all criticising anti-Russian sanctions.

Ochsenreiter was evidently well-networked in the AfD milieu, and, in particular, was close to Markus Frohnmaier who founded the AfD's youth wing in Baden-Württemberg. In March 2016, Ochsenreiter and Piskorski introduced Frohnmaier to Mirzakhania, as they wanted to advance his career in Germany and introduce even more pro-Russian influence in the AfD. After his introduction to the Russian operatives, Frohnmaier was immediately invited to take part in the Second Yalta International Economic Forum that took place in Russia-annexed Crimea and was run by Mirzakhania's boss Andrey Nazarov. In Yalta, Frohnmaier was joined by several other European politicians invited by Mirzakhania's team: Pretzell, the FPÖ MPs Axel Kassegger and Barbara Rosenkranz, Czech far-left MEP Jaromir Kohlíček, and Italian regional far-right politician Stefano Valdegamberi.⁶⁸

In April 2017, as Germany was heading to the Bundestag elections in September that year, Ochsenreiter and Mirzakhania's group came up with an initiative to ask Russian officials for support for Frohnmaier's election campaign, as his membership of the Bundestag would presumably benefit Russian foreign policy interests in Germany. As the authors of the conceptual paper on Frohnmaier's

candidacy put it, the aim of the endeavour was simple: “We will have our own [i.e. Russian] absolutely controlled MP in the Bundestag”.⁶⁹ While it is currently unknown whether Frohnmaier received any support from Russia, he was elected a member of the Bundestag in September 2017. Ochsenreiter would later start working for Frohnmaier in the Bundestag.

In early 2018, Ochsenreiter instructed members of the Polish neo-fascist Falanga group – he knew their representatives through Piskorski since at least 2015 – to carry out an attack against the Hungarian Cultural Centre in the Ukrainian city of Uzhhorod.⁷⁰ The objective was to present the action as an attack of Ukrainian neo-Nazis in order to sour relations between Hungary and Ukraine.⁷¹ Ukrainian law enforcement identified the Polish perpetrators,⁷² and the Polish security services arrested them on 22 February 2018. During the investigation, the Polish organiser of the attack, Michał Prokopowicz, confessed that Ochsenreiter paid him €500 in advance, while the rest was paid after the execution of the operation at a restaurant in the Tegel airport area where the two met on 7 February 2018.⁷³

The story about Ochsenreiter’s involvement in the false flag operation in Ukraine became known to the German media in January 2019. He expectedly denied his involvement in the arson attack in Ukraine, but, due to the scandal, Frohnmaier was compelled to terminate the employment contract with Ochsenreiter, who had worked for Frohnmaier in his Bundestag office since early September 2018.⁷⁴ In January 2019, the Berlin Public Prosecutor’s Office opened an investigation into incitement to serious arson against Ochsenreiter. The latter, however, managed to flee Germany, and since then lived mostly in Moscow.⁷⁵ In August 2020, the German Federal Prosecutor’s Office took over the investigation from Berlin and issued an arrest warrant; the investigation suspected Ochsenreiter of terrorist financing in combination with incitement to arson.⁷⁶ On 19 August 2021, the Russian authorities informed the German Embassy in Moscow that Ochsenreiter had died the day before.⁷⁷ *Zuerst!* confirmed Ochsenreiter’s death on 21 August 2021.⁷⁸ In December of that year, the Federal Prosecutor’s Office stopped the proceedings against Ochsenreiter.

Russian Anti-Establishment Eco-System in Germany

As demonstrated in the two previous sections, many in the German far-right milieu expressed interest in cooperating with the Kremlin and other Russian stakeholders and were actively engaged in facilitating Russian malign influence

in Germany and other European countries. In some cases, in exchange for their services, representatives of the German far-right received political support from, and were encouraged by, their Russian contacts.

However, beyond this cooperation, a complex combination of developments, activities, efforts, perceptions, and events, which were directly and indirectly linked to Russian structures, companies, and individuals, has evoked a special image of Russia in the anti-establishment circles in Germany over the recent years. That special image of Russia is that of a state that openly and persistently challenged the established liberal-democratic order of the West – an image of the leader of the populist resistance against the mainstream political, media, and IT elites. In this section, we will review three major elements of the Russian anti-establishment ecosystem in Germany: (1) Russian state-controlled media targeting German speakers, (2) Russian messaging platform Telegram, and (3) Russian-speaking groups in Germany.

Russian State-Controlled Media in Germany

In its 2018 annual report, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, wrote:

In the interests of exerting influence, the Russian state is expanding its media presence in Germany. State-owned companies are disguised as independent media in order to conceal their affiliation with the Russian state and to subtly influence the public. The most important players here are the internet broadcaster RT Deutsch and the news agency Sputnik.⁷⁹

The Russian state-funded RT project was originally founded as Russia Today in 2005 and was renamed into RT in 2009;⁸⁰ the German edition of RT (RT Deutsch/RT DE) was launched in 2014. In its turn, the Russian state-funded Sputnik website succeeded the Russian international radio broadcasting service Voice of Russia which operated between 1993 and 2014 and had had the German version since its foundation.

RT DE and Sputnik DE (rebranded as SNA News in 2020) first rose to distinctive notoriety in summer 2017, in the run-up to the 2017 Bundestag elections. Following Chancellor Angela Merkel's controversial approach to allow more than one million refugees to enter Germany during the 2015/2016 refugee crisis,⁸¹ RT DE and Sputnik DE:

were consistently negative in their coverage of German officials and institutions; the AfD was the only exception. Sputnik regularly presented the AfD as a mainstream party that has been treated badly by the current establishment due to its opposition to Merkel's migration policy. [...] There was almost no coverage of the scandals surrounding Frauke Petry. The channel argued that if AfD were to win, it would lift the Russian sanctions and recognize the annexation of Crimea.⁸²

Moreover, during the same campaign, German-language editions of the Russian media and pro-Kremlin bots pushed a message that the AfD would become a victim of electoral fraud.⁸³ The initial wave of these allegations emerged in May 2017 when the AfD reported on the alleged electoral misconduct during the North Rhine-Westphalia state elections, in which the centre-right CDU significantly triumphed over its competitors. The second wave of controversy came just two days before the elections when a Twitter account, supposedly run by a young left-wing woman, claimed that "she" would be working at a polling station and intended to discard votes for the AfD. Both Russian and Western far-right social media users widely shared, and commented on, those claims creating a Twitter storm using a hashtag #Wahlbetrug, i.e. electoral fraud, implying that the upcoming elections would be manipulated by the German political establishment.⁸⁴

In 2020 and 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, RT DE, Sputnik and Ruptly (the Berlin-based Russian state-owned video news agency) reported widely on the protests of a network of groups and individuals who called themselves the Querdenker (lateral thinking) and mobilised against the German government's policies on COVID-19 safety measures and coronavirus vaccinations.⁸⁵ As Alexandra Yatsyk put it, "RT DE presented the issue of mass vaccination as impinging on basic human rights. This was done by the promotion of the Querdenken agenda, including anti-vaccine sentiments, and undergirding them conspiracy theories".⁸⁶ Moreover, to strengthen the appeal of the Querdenken, "RT DE gave the floor to politicians from both left and right who refused to vaccinate and justified doing so by their 'personal right to freedom'".⁸⁷ In its turn, as Silvia Stöber observed, Ruptly often edited video clips showing the Querdenken protests "to highlight footage of police violence against protesters" and produce a perception of the "lack of democracy in Germany and other EU countries".⁸⁸

The fact that the Russian state-funded media advanced the Querdenken agenda in the German information space contributed to the perceptions of the Russian state

as a foreign actor working directly to undermine the German liberal-democratic order. It is even more important against the background of our discussion because the German anti-government protests, which were predominantly organised by the Querdenken, gave a strong boost to the development of the Reichsbürger movement, with which the Querdenken partly overlapped in terms of ideology, organisation, and membership. As Florian Hartleb et al. argued,

certain influencers that shaped the Querdenker acted as a catalyst for [the transition from beliefs in conspiracy theories to forms of nonnormative political engagement or even criminal behaviour] and built bridges to the Reichsbürger milieu, which in turn was especially well-suited to absorb the anger that built up during the pandemic.⁸⁹

Telegram, the Anti-Establishment “Safe Space” on the Internet

The Telegram Messenger app was first launched in 2013 by the Russian businessman Pavel Durov, the founder and, until 2014, the director of the popular Russian social networking site VK. In 2014, as the Kremlin tightened its grip over the internet, it took over VK,⁹⁰ and shortly afterwards Durov fled Russia in fear of repressions against him.⁹¹ Durov’s troubles in Russia, and, especially, his privacy concerns about online communications, led him to focus on making Telegram a secure messenger that also developed into an original social network. In 2018, as the Telegram management refused to provide encryption keys from user correspondence to the Russian Federal Security Service, the Russian communications regulator Roskomnadzor tried to block Telegram in Russia, but to no avail.⁹² Since its victory against the Russian government, Telegram came to be increasingly associated with successful resistance against state pressure and political censorship. After both democratic and authoritarian governments obliged major social networking websites (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, VK) and photo/video-sharing services (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok) to crack down on content they deemed harmful, Telegram – with its loose moderation policy – became a safe space for political, often deplatformed activism of all ideological persuasions, ranging from Belarusian antiauthoritarian pro-democratic opposition groups⁹³ to American violent right-wing extremists.⁹⁴

In Germany, Telegram emerged as an infrastructure for the Querdenken protest movement, “as the central space for unifying activism, protest, conspiracy theories, far-right ideology, and COVID-19 scepticism”.⁹⁵ A study by Maximilian Zehring and Emese Domahidi that analysed more than six million messages from

578 public Telegram channels that belong or are related to the Querdenken sphere demonstrates a significant overlap between COVID-19 denial and anti-vaccination content, QAnon topics, and far-right discourses.⁹⁶ Moreover, in their study based on the analysis of 4,500 messages posted to nine Telegram channels related to QAnon, Identitarian movement, and the Querdenken in the period between March 2020 and February 2021, Heidi Schulze et al. found that communications within the Querdenken channels “presented the steepest increase in the prevalence of conspiracy narratives, anti-elitism and calls for activism. [...] Particularly noteworthy, the prevalence of support for violence increased over the study period”.⁹⁷

Despite its international standing and the fact that the Telegram company has been based in Dubai since 2017, it is still generally considered – because of its history and ownership – a Russian company. Thus, it seems viable to suggest that the highly questionable association of Telegram with Russia, on the one hand, and, on the other, Telegram’s relaxed moderation strategies that often tolerate content that is perceived as dangerous and harmful by the authorities in Western democracies produce an impression that Russia openly challenges the liberal-democratic order by offering to anti-establishment and anti-government activists technological capabilities to bend the rules imposed by Western elites.

Russian-Speaking Groups in Germany

Germany’s “Russian world” is a disparate Russian-speaking community consisting primarily of three major groups of people:

- (1) The so-called Russian-Germans (Russlanddeutsche). These are ethnic Germans who were born in the Soviet Union or its successor states but later moved, as so-called re-settlers, to Germany. Since the mid-1980s, approximately 2.3 million Russlanddeutsche have entered Germany where they were granted German citizenship.⁹⁸
- (2) Russian citizens residing in Germany. Out of all EU member states, Germany is home to the largest number of people holding Russian citizenship—in 2020, their number amounted to 233,918 people.⁹⁹
- (3) Russian-speaking German citizens with immigrant, non-German ethnic background – their number is unknown, but, to a certain degree, this group slightly overlaps with the second group because of the people holding dual (German and Russian) citizenship.

In her study of right-wing populist narratives among Russian-speaking internet users in Germany, Liliia Sablina observed that Russian-speakers often referred to Germans as “weak,” “incapable of making decisions,” and “torturing themselves with the sense of guilt” for the crimes of the Third Reich.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, however, those “weak Germans” needed support, and Russian speakers “put themselves in a position of ‘defenders’ of the German culture who [could] clearly see the ‘real picture’ and ‘[were] not infected with multiculturalism’”.¹⁰¹

In political terms, this defence of German culture has been often expressed through support for the AfD, and voting preferences of the German Russian world became a topic of hot discussion after the 2017 elections to the Bundestag when the AfD secured 12.64 percent of the vote – its best electoral result since the party’s first participation in the federal elections.¹⁰² As seen from observations of Russian-speaking internet fora in Germany, their users tend to consider the AfD as “the only political alternative to the ‘mass disorder’ that is happening in Germany”.¹⁰³ In its turn, the AfD not only welcomes the support coming from the German Russian world, but actively fosters it as well. As Sablina argues, “the AfD became the first political party in Germany that incorporated mobilizing practices toward the Russian-speaking communities”.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, as Dennis Christopher Spies et al. noted, while stressing the significance of *Germanness* and advocating “a pronounced anti-immigration and highly assimilationist integration policy approach”, the AfD espouses the Russian element of Germany’s Russian world through efforts such as “the founding of a specific network for Russian-Germans in the AfD, making use of Russian-language party programs as well as offering policy positions that appeal to Russian-German voters”.¹⁰⁵

These and other interactions between particular Germany-based Russian speakers and the AfD has generated a sense of synergy between the Russian world and antiestablishment movements in Germany. Public perceptions of such a synergy – strengthened by the German mainstream media – likely constituted yet another external stimulus that contributed to the Reuß Group’s beliefs that Russia was willing to act against the German establishment or the Federal Republic of Germany.

Conclusion

The classical image of poetic inspiration portrays a scene in which the muse – typically a beautiful and ethereal female figure – is leaning close to the poet or whispering into his ear, while the poet himself is either deep in thought or writing. Referring to the psychological studies of inspiration,¹⁰⁶ this portrayal features three distinct elements: (1) the poet is aware of a new idea, (2) something in the external environment awoke him to that idea, and (3) the combination of the two compels him to put the idea into writing. There is hardly any doubt that German activists who formed the Patriotische Union (Reuß Group) held antiestablishment views and were disaffected with the sociopolitical order in Germany. Their disaffection led them to embrace a theory that Germany was not truly sovereign and, instead, was just a trading construct founded by the Allies who defeated the Third Reich in 1945 called Federal Republic of Germany (or BRD GmbH, as some in the Reichsbürger movement call it).

It is also hardly a coincidence that the formation of the Reuß Group took place during the COVID-19 pandemic – a period that saw the radicalisation of German anti-establishment groups against the background of the government introducing strict measures to contain the virus. The proliferation of different conspiracy theories that accompanied the radicalisation of those groups led to the emergence of their extravagant combinations. But would the Reuß Group risk taking on the German government alone? Judging from what we have learnt about the group so far, the answer is negative. As conspiracy theories multiplied, mutated, and conjugated, the Patriotische Union was awoken to the idea of the Alliance, a secret political-military society that included Russian armed forces and was poised to attack the deep state in Germany. The Reuß Group would then carry out a coup d'état simultaneously with the Allied attack.

What *muse* evoked the idea of the Alliance involving Russian troops and gearing up to take control over the Federal Republic of Germany? Or, in other words, what developments in the external environment stimulated and sustained that idea and compelled the far-right activists to act upon it? This chapter argued that a significant part of those developments was directly associated or perceived to be associated with Russia. In particular, those developments included:

- Russian support for pro-Kremlin politicians in Ukraine;

- Russian military support for pro-Russian separatists and anti-government elements in Ukraine;
- Russian occupation of Crimea and Sevastopol, as well as parts of eastern Ukraine;
- Russian aggressive rhetoric towards Western allies of Ukraine, including Germany;
- pro-Kremlin stances of Germany's most successful far-right party, the AfD;
- involvement of particular German far-right activists in violent pro-Russian operations;
- Russian media support for the AfD;
- secure and censorship-free technological capabilities associated with Russia; and
- support for the AfD from certain Russian-speaking groups in Germany.

These developments constituted Russian malign inspiration for the conspirators of the far-right Reuß Group, who believed that the Russian army, possibly with the assistance of troops from other countries, would invade Germany and – after the Reuß Group formed a transitional government – would negotiate the restoration of the sovereignty of the German Reich

Recommendations

For German and European Policymakers

1. Create rapid-response strategic communication units. Policymakers are advised to establish dedicated rapid-response Strategic Communication units tasked with promptly disseminating accurate information to the public during medical, economic, political, and other crises. The swift relay of facts is critical to pre-empt the spread of disinformation by conspiracy theorists and other malign actors who may exploit such situations to further their illiberal agendas. The strategy of pre-bunking, which entails anticipating and counteracting disinformation before it takes hold, should be an integral part of these units' methodology.

2. Demand regulation of social media algorithms. European governments should assertively require social media platforms, including Facebook and X (former Twitter), to modify algorithms that disproportionately amplify divisive

content, foster social polarisation, and exploit user emotions for financial gain. It is crucial for regulations to mandate transparency in algorithmic processes and ensure that these algorithms do not incentivise or reward content that undermines social cohesion. Measures may include the implementation of oversight mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the ethical implications of algorithmic decision-making, the establishment of clear standards for responsible content amplification, and the requirement for platforms to demonstrate efforts to promote unity and constructive discourse.

3. Establish a dialogue with Telegram. Policymakers should actively seek to establish a dialogue with the management of platforms like Telegram, which advocate for nearly absolute freedom of speech. Given the complex challenges associated with censorship and the platform’s significant role in the free flow of information, it is essential for German authorities to engage constructively with Telegram to address concerns specific to disinformation that targets German society. This engagement should aim to foster a collaborative environment where mutual understanding and respect for Telegram’s ethos can coexist with the imperative to protect the public from harmful disinformation campaigns.

4. Tackle illegal migration. The German government should prioritise addressing illegal migration as it reflects one of the major concerns of German society. It is imperative to recognise the multifaceted impact of this issue, including its detrimental effects on local communities and the obstruction it poses to the resettlement opportunities for the most vulnerable refugees. Efforts to combat this challenge must be strategic, compassionate, and aligned with the country’s commitment to justice and human rights.

5. Empower civil society. Policymakers should invest in comprehensive education and training programs to equip civil society members with the skills to effectively detect, expose, and counteract malign influence operations orchestrated by Russian entities and other adversarial actors.

For Media

1. Adopt a balanced approach in reporting on Russian malign influence. When reporting on the activities of Russian malign actors in Europe, instead of predominantly highlighting their successes, which may inadvertently amplify their perceived influence and power, media should also focus on the many instances where Russian attempts to sway decision-making have failed. By

reporting on the effective countermeasures and the resilience of European countries, media can help demystify the might of the Russian state and diminish its potential to inspire illiberal actors within Europe to act against the liberal-democratic order.

2. Expose journalistic corruption. Media organisations should enforce rigorous internal oversight and support investigative journalism to uncover and bring to light any corruption among journalists who may be collaborating with, or are incentivised by, pro-Kremlin stakeholders to present a distorted portrayal of Russian policies and actions.

For Civil Society

1. Promote media literacy. Civil society organisations should prioritise the promotion of media literacy and critical thinking among the public to combat polarisation incited by old and new media. They can do this by developing educational programs, creating accessible materials that explain media's role in social polarisation, and fostering public dialogues. Collaborations with educational institutions for curriculum integration, research publications, and advocacy for ethical media standards are also key.

2. Foster a culture of active citizenship. Civil society organisations should cultivate empowerment within local communities by promoting activities that underscore the value of civic participation: platforms for community decision-making, volunteer programs tailored to diverse interests, support for local entrepreneurs, networking events, public recognition of community efforts, etc. These activities shall reinforce the message that the state and individual involvement are both pivotal in fostering thriving communities.

¹ Quoted in Tete H. Tetens, *The New Germany and the Old Nazis* (New York: Random House, 1961), 78.

² Katrin Bennhold, “Germany Arrests 25 Suspected of Planning to Overthrow Government,” *New York Times*, 7 December 2022.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/07/world/europe/germany-coup-arrests.html>.

³ “Festnahmen von 25 mutmaßlichen Mitgliedern und Unterstützern einer terroristischen Vereinigung sowie Durchsuchungsmaßnahmen in elf Bundesländern bei insgesamt 52 Beschuldigten” [Arrests of 25 suspected members and supporters of a terrorist organisation and search measures in eleven federal states for a total of 52 suspects], Der Gener³ Quoted in Tete H. Tetens, *The New Germany and the Old Nazis* (New York: Random House, 1961), 78.

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¹⁷ “Anklage gegen zehn Personen u.a. wegen Mitgliedschaft in oder Unterstützung einer terroristischen Vereinigung und Vorbereitung eines hochverräterischen Unternehmens vor dem Oberlandesgericht Frankfurt erhoben [Charges brought against ten persons before the Frankfurt Higher Regional Court for membership in or support of a terrorist organisation and preparation of a treasonable enterprise, among other things],” Der Generalbundesanwalt beim Bundesgerichtshof, 12 December 2023.

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