

JULY 2020

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*Assessing Russian Influence  
In Germany*

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# Introduction

Germany's economic and political weight, as well as its centrality to the project of European integration, makes it one of the most important targets for Russian information operations in Europe. Compared to many of its neighbors, Germany has longstanding political, economic, and cultural ties to Russia—not to mention a streak of skepticism toward the United States that inclines parts of the German political class to sympathize with Russian views about the need for a less U.S.-centric international order. The depth of these connections helps explain one of the paradoxes of the German case, namely that Russian influence is comparatively strong even though Kremlin efforts at disruption have largely fallen flat.

As in other Western states, Russian information operations in Germany focus on exploiting political and cultural fissures, promoting fringe political actors, and amplifying Russia-friendly voices. Yet Germany's very familiarity with Russia, coupled with a political system that has proven less fragile than those of countries such as the United Kingdom (much less Italy or Hungary), has made it more resilient to efforts at disruption. Russian influence is nonetheless strong, even if it is exercised more through traditional political, business, and cultural channels than through the kinds of disinformation and disruption that have become Russian hallmarks in many other states.

Disinformation and disruption are hardly absent from Russia's tool kit, of course. Many of Russia's influence activities rely on tools familiar in other countries: state-owned or state-backed media outfits (both broadcast and online) promote officially approved narratives, which are then amplified by domestic enablers. Some of the Kremlin's enablers within Germany benefit from Russian largesse, but compared to countries such as France, Italy, or the United Kingdom, evidence of direct sponsorship of fringe parties and movements in Germany is sparse. Rather than provide financial support for parties or candidates, which German law sharply restricts, Moscow appears to emphasize coordinated online messaging, with Russian outlets and bots pushing messages that line up with those of fringe political parties, above all the far-right Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD). Though the effectiveness of Russian-backed media in Germany appears low, Moscow has taken steps to make its messaging more sophisticated, including through the developments of new online platforms that are not recognizably Russian and the diversification of its messaging for different audiences.

Moscow also takes advantage of the access provided by domestic groups and figures calling for better relations, particularly around the issue of the sanctions imposed after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine. Such figures include influential politicians in both mainstream and fringe parties as well as important business leaders. The prominence of so-called "Russia understanders (*Russlandversteher*)" in the German political and business elite is an important avenue for ongoing Russian influence, one that requires quiet cultivation rather than efforts at disruption. Some of these figures, most notoriously former Social Democratic chancellor Gerhard Schröder, have been recruited to the boards of Russian state companies. Others participate in various Kremlin-supported elite networks such as the German-Russian Forum.

Because of the pervasiveness of views sympathetic to Russia within mainstream institutions, elite capture in the classical sense is not always necessary. The leadership of both Chancellor Angela Merkel's center-right Christian Democratic Union (*Christlich Demokratische Union*, CDU) and the center-left Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD), which have governed Germany since 2013 in a grand coalition, consistently supports sanctions. Both of these big-tent "people's parties" (*Volksparteien*), though, include figures calling for a relaxation of sanctions and better German-Russian relations. The CDU's Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (*Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern*, CSU), and the classically liberal Free Democrats (*Freie Demokratische Partei*, FDP) are if anything more favorably disposed to Moscow, particularly (though not only) on the issue of sanctions.<sup>1</sup> Among mainstream parties, only the increasingly powerful Greens (*Die Grünen*) consistently oppose Russian influence—though some individual members advocate for closer ties with Moscow as well.

Several large companies similarly call for sanctions to be relaxed. While trade and investment with Russia comprise a marginal component of Germany's GDP, the concentration of Russia-related business among major companies, many with close ties to German politicians, gives their voices added weight. Big business has been instrumental in persuading Merkel's coalition to support the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia, which is strongly opposed by the United States and many smaller EU states worried about the consequences of deeper Russian-German cooperation. Ukraine, in particular, stands to lose billions of euros in transit revenue if gas currently shipped through pipelines across Ukraine is rerouted to Nord Stream 2 and similar offshore pipelines.

In seeking to influence German debates, Russia tailors its messaging to specific audiences. Apart from supporters of far right and left movements, Germany's comparatively large population of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, many of whom speak Russian and remain poorly integrated into mainstream German society, is a particular target. Disgruntled inhabitants of former East Germany (the German Democratic Republic, or GDR) provide another target for Russian influence activities. Many Easterners were

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1. "Söder besucht Putin – und grenzt sich von Seehofer ab," *Der Tagesspiegel*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/bayerns-ministerpraesident-im-kreml-soeder-besucht-putin-und-grenzt-sich-von-seehofer-ab/25487032.html>; "CSU und vbw: Abbau der Russland-Sanktionen," CSU, <https://www.csu.de/service/pressemitteilungen/2016/csu-und-vbw-abbau-der-russland-sanktionen/>; and "FDP für Aufrechterhaltung der Russland-Sanktionen und breiten Dialog," FDP, May 13, 2018, [https://www.fdp.de/ausenpolitik-europa\\_fdp-fuer-aufrechterhaltung-der-russland-sanktionen-und-breiten-dialog](https://www.fdp.de/ausenpolitik-europa_fdp-fuer-aufrechterhaltung-der-russland-sanktionen-und-breiten-dialog).

educated and socialized under Communism and have more favorable views of Russia overall. Former East Germans, like post-Soviet immigrants, are also less integrated and more alienated from a political system that remains dominated by Westerners. Many (especially those who remained in the eastern *Länder*, or states, after reunification) see themselves as left behind and ignored by mainstream politics. They vote in higher numbers for parties such as AfD and The Left (*Die Linke*), the successor to East Germany's ruling Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED). They also have proven more receptive to Russian-backed narratives around topics such as immigration.

Compared to many other European states, though, the reach and effectiveness of Russian information tools in Germany have been rather limited. The audience for Russian-backed media outlets remains modest, and the mainstream German media has for the most part resisted amplifying Russian narratives. Nor has the payoff for Russian support of nonmainstream political parties on both the left and the right been significant, even as Germany's main centrist parties struggle. Though influential voices in the business community support improved relations with Moscow and a relaxation of sanctions, they have been unable to challenge the post-Crimea consensus in favor of sanctions. The scale of Russian activity, in other words, has not been matched by the results. Berlin's ability to blunt the impact of Russian malign influence is in part the result of characteristics more or less unique to Germany that will be hard to replicate. At the same time, though, Germany's experience does offer lessons to other democratic states facing foreign-backed disinformation and disruption.



# Tactics

The tools and techniques employed as part of Russian information operations in Germany are in keeping with those it employs in other countries. They include disinformation propagated through both traditional and social media, support for Kremlin-friendly parties and movements, and elite capture. The balance among these tactics and techniques is shaped by Germany's distinct political and media culture as well as the nature of the broader Russo-German relationship. Russian tactics have also evolved over time, becoming more sophisticated as Berlin has become increasingly aware of the disruptive potential of Russian influence.

On the whole, efforts at disruption play a relatively peripheral role in sustaining Russian influence in Germany. Rather, Moscow focuses on cultivating elite support in an effort to promote policies conducive to Russian interests. These efforts cut across party lines. They also focus on big business, particularly in sectors (such as energy) that are both politically influential and economically intertwined with Russia. Of course, Russia also supports parties and movements seeking to disrupt the status quo, most notably the AfD. Many German interlocutors nonetheless suggest that Russia's cultivation of the AfD, *Die Linke*, and other nonmainstream political parties (such as the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party of Germany, *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* or NPD) is not only instrumental but also a hedge. In this view, Moscow would prefer to exert influence through mainstream channels, but the conflict in Ukraine and the imposition of sanctions impeded these traditional channels, encouraging Moscow to place greater emphasis on fringe groups.

Russia's general preference for persuasion—through elite capture and cultivation of supporters in mainstream political parties and big business—is in part a consequence of Germany's unique role in Europe. Unlike many countries to its east, the history of Russian/Soviet occupation in Germany is limited. The impact of the Soviet military presence in the GDR throughout the Cold War is mitigated by the GDR's incorporation into West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany or FRG) in 1990. For many East Germans, the abolition of the GDR and the loss of the distinct identity associated with it represents a more recent historical trauma, one that overshadows the legacy of Soviet occupation. Meanwhile, West Germans, who constitute the bulk of modern Germany's political and cultural elite, never experienced Soviet occupation. The “antibodies” to Russia and Russian influence visible in much of Central and Eastern Europe are thus largely absent in Germany.

Compared to its Western neighbors, moreover, Germany maintains deep-seated political, cultural, and economic ties to Russia. Since the launch of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* policy in the 1970s, Germany has pursued a cautious, pragmatic approach designed to gradually bring Russia onto a more European path (sometimes termed *Wandel durch Annäherung*, or "change through rapprochement"). The *Ostpolitik* tradition continues to influence political and economic elites' views of Russia. Most mainstream German politicians and analysts, moreover, believe that Europe's long-term peace and security depend on developing a *modus vivendi* with Russia.<sup>2</sup> For much of the post-Cold War era, Germany has been the leading "advocate of Russian interests in the European Union and strategic partner with regard to energy and economic cooperation."<sup>3</sup> Even though views have hardened since the onset of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, this history remains part of the German elites' intellectual scaffolding.

At the same time, Russia itself views Germany through a distinct lens. Moscow regards Germany, Europe's unquestioned economic heavyweight and by far the most influential player in the European Union, as an important prize to be cultivated rather than a target to be destabilized. Russian influence activities in Germany emphasize the activation of preexisting networks and ties to secure bilateral deals, even at the expense of Berlin's EU obligations or commitments to its smaller neighbors. To be sure, Moscow has been sharply critical of Angela Merkel's government, which has played a leading role in coordinating the European response to the Ukraine conflict, including maintaining EU consensus on sanctions. Coverage of Merkel on Russian and Russian-backed media outlets has been almost uniformly hostile. These portrayals contrast sharply with coverage of nonmainstream political parties—especially the AfD—in these same outlets. Many German observers nonetheless aver that Moscow's animus toward Merkel is situational, and that, all else being equal, the Kremlin would prefer to maintain channels of communication with the political mainstream in Germany. Many also assert that Moscow pivoted to the AfD and other extremist movements after 2014 in large part because they are the only actors willing to answer the phone in a political climate that remains profoundly shaped by the fallout over the Ukraine crisis.

## Disinformation

Russia's information tool kit in Germany is similar to that employed in other contexts. It relies primarily on disinformation spread by state-owned and state-backed media outlets, which are designed to be picked up and amplified by indigenous actors. Russian outlets such as the German incarnation of the RT television network (known as RT Deutsch) and the Sputnik radio and internet news agency have limited penetration, however, and their efforts to reach a broader audience have not succeeded. In response, the Kremlin has increasingly channeled resources to online platforms whose Russian pedigree is not immediately evident, and which are designed to target more discreet audiences. These online platforms promote a wide range of topics, many of which have only a tenuous connection to politics, but in the process seek to recruit new viewers who can then be exposed to more targeted political messaging. Russia also uses this online presence to

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2. Interview with an SPD-affiliated analyst, Washington, D.C., February 12, 2020.

3. Stefan Meister, *An Alienated Partnership: German-Russian Relations after Putin's Return* (Helsinki, Finland: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2012), <https://www.ciaonet.org/attachments/20735/uploads>.

harass and intimidate critics, including activists and analysts looking to shine a light on its information operations. The scale and effectiveness of these online activities are fiercely debated within Germany (lining up partially, but not entirely, along political lines).<sup>4</sup>

Russian officials play a role as catalysts for pro-Russian narratives, including disinformation. The Russian embassy in Berlin amplifies stories put out by these platforms by sharing them on social media. Figures such as President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov have at times weighed in to bolster Kremlin narratives, especially when German officials and media outlets have sought to push back. German officials regard the involvement of senior Russian officials in Moscow (as opposed to the Russian embassy in Berlin) as uncommon—but significant, in the sense of signaling that a particular messaging campaign is a matter of state policy and needs to be aggressively combatted. According to German observers, though, senior Russian officials' involvement in spreading disinformation more often sparks a backlash by raising awareness among the German elite about Russian disinformation.

RT Deutsch and Sputnik are the most visible platforms for promoting Russian-backed narratives in Germany. As in other markets where they operate, these outlets combine traditional news reporting with commentary that emphasizes viewpoints that align with Kremlin interests. RT Deutsch and Sputnik have been particularly critical of Chancellor Merkel's government and supportive of nonmainstream parties. Politicians from *Die Linke* and especially the AfD are regular guests on their programs, where they field questions designed to portray them in a favorable light.<sup>5</sup> Both RT Deutsch and Sputnik, however, suffer from limited viewership and widespread awareness within German society that they are mouthpieces of the Russian state.

Analysts regard RT's own viewership and online engagement figures as significantly exaggerated.<sup>6</sup> Their online audience appears comprised of a comparatively small core of dedicated followers whose reach is amplified by bots; RT Deutsch's German-language website receives about 130,000 visitors per day (compared to over 2 million for the mainstream *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, FAZ). While FAZ's Twitter followers outnumber those of RT Deutsch and Sputnik by an order of magnitude, the Russian outlets have a larger presence on Facebook and YouTube. The population segment widely perceived as most receptive to Russian information operations—the Russian-German community—appears to rely more on Russian domestic channels and platforms that broadcast in Russian. To the extent that platforms such as RT Deutsch and Sputnik have an impact, it lies in the ability of their stories to gain traction on social media or be picked up by mainstream outlets.

With the overall reach of RT Deutsch and Sputnik limited by both audience suspicion and Germany's more consolidated media market, the Russian outlets have sought to

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4. For an overview, see Ulrike Klinger, "Social Bots: Realität digitaler Öffentlichkeit," *Der Tagesspiegel Background*, June 6, 2019, <https://background.tagesspiegel.de/digitalisierung/social-bots-realitaet-digitaler-oeffentlichkeit>.

5. Camilla Kohrs, "Russische Propaganda für deutsche Zuschauer," *Correctiv*, January 4, 2017, <https://correctiv.org/aktuelles/neue-rechte/2017/01/04/russische-propaganda-fuer-deutsche-zuschauer>.

6. Monika L. Richter, *What We Know About RT (Russia Today) (Prague, Czech Republic: European Values Center for Security Policy, 2017)*, <https://www.europeanvalues.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/What-We-Know-about-RT-Russia-To-day-1.pdf>.

Outlet	Twitter Followers (June 2020)	YouTube Subscribers (June 2020)
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	585,900	142,000
Die Zeit	2,200,000	15,700
Der Spiegel	2,600,000	818,000
Sueddeutsche Zeitung	1,600,000	5,570
Die Welt	1,400,00	583,000
Bild	1,700,000	513,000
RT Deutsch	48,400	366,600
Sputnik Deutschland	24,200	17,000
Ruptly	113,000	1,290,000
Redfish	105,000	32,200
In the Now	N/A	3,260

target their messaging more precisely by creating subsidiaries for the television, radio, and online markets that are less openly Kremlin-affiliated and more sophisticated in terms of their content. The major spinoffs of RT (Ruptly TV and its subsidiaries Redfish and Maffick Media) and Sputnik (SNA Radio) are careful to ensure that their design and branding do not betray an open Russian connection. One of Maffick Media’s main products, for example, is an online video channel called “In the Now,” which began as a program on RT before migrating online and dropping mentions of Russia or RT from its branding. SNA Radio, meanwhile, has established a foothold under the neutral-sounding name Mega Radio in several German states (*Länder*), whose leadership is presumably less focused on foreign influence than the federal authorities in Berlin.

The staff of these operations is multinational, though the senior editors tend to be Russian. They emphasize their editorial independence and appear to be organic parts of the German media landscape, though portraying themselves as an alternative to Germany’s sometimes staid mainstream media (in line with RT’s motto, “Question More”). Compared to RT Deutsch and Sputnik proper, their content is diversified and aimed at narrower audiences.

Ruptly TV broadcasts much of the same right-wing, populist fare associated with RT and Sputnik by giving a platform to voices from the AfD and the anti-immigrant movement PEGIDA (*Patriotische Europäer Gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*, Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident). Redfish, which is itself an online subsidiary of Ruptly TV, maintains a more left-leaning stance, emphasizing “a proven track record of both supporting and covering struggles which challenge the exploitative global system that enslaves humankind and is destroying our planet.”<sup>7</sup> Though portraying itself as a grassroots media collective, many of Redfish’s journalists have ties to RT, which is also the primary vehicle by which Redfish content is disseminated to a wider audience.<sup>8</sup> Ruptly TV and Redfish also engage in serious journalism, which helps obscure their role in state-backed information campaigns.

7. “About Us,” Redfish Media, <https://redfish.media/about-us/>.

8. Charles Davis, “‘Grassroots’ Media Startup Redfish Is Supported by the Kremlin,” *Daily Beast*, June 19, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/grassroots-media-startup-redfish-is-supported-by-the-kremlin>.

Some of their journalism, including Ruptly TV's coverage of the "yellow vest" (*gilets jaunes*) protests in France, was widely praised, even as French authorities accused these outlets of helping stoke the unrest.

Gauging the impact of these media outlets is difficult. Self-reported audience figures are considered unreliable, while the various brands affiliated with RT (Ruptly TV, Redfish, and Maffick Media) and Sputnik (SNA Radio/Mega Radio) have a mixed record in terms of gaining traction on social media. RT Deutsch and Sputnik proper each had fewer than 500,000 followers on Facebook as of mid-2019, though the Maffick Media-produced platform In the Now had just under 4 million.<sup>9</sup> Because of Germany's centrality to the overall European political landscape, these Russian outlets have sought to make Berlin into a hub for their European operations; however, amid apparent difficulty attracting staff and securing audience share, these plans appear to have been put on hold.

### *The Media and the State*

The most notable example of Russian-promoted disinformation in Germany is the so-called "Lisa case." On the evening of January 11, 2016, a 13-year-old Russian-German dual citizen named Lisa F. failed to return to her parents' house. When she resurfaced the following day, she claimed to have been abducted and raped by a group of migrants.<sup>10</sup> Investigators soon determined that the abduction story was a fabrication and that Lisa had lied to the police (and her parents) to avoid disclosing that she had spent the night at a male friend's house. In response to repeated online inquiries, Berlin police issued a statement on January 14 clarifying that "no abduction and no rape . . . occurred." Despite these attempts to calm the uproar, subsequent days saw attacks against Muslim immigrants seemingly perpetrated by Russian speakers.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Russian media outlets seized on the case to stoke anti-immigrant sentiment and mistrust of German authorities. On January 16, Russia's Channel 1, which has a sizeable following among Russian-Germans, ran a story falsely claiming that Austria was setting up border controls with Germany because "migrants began raping underage children. Citizens of [Germany] speak of lawlessness and license for criminals." The story further implied that German authorities were protecting the perpetrators and promised that "the Russian-speaking diaspora promises not to leave [the situation] without consequences."<sup>12</sup>

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9. Susanne Spahn, *Russian media in Germany: Independent journalism or political instrument?* (Fife, Scotland: Institute for Statecraft, 2019), <https://www.stopfake.org/en/russian-media-in-germany-independent-journalism-or-political-instrument>.

10. The "Lisa case" has been extensively analyzed. See especially Stefan Meister, "The 'Lisa case': Germany as a target of Russian disinformation," *NATO Review*, July 25, 2016, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2016/07/25/the-lisa-case-germany-as-a-target-of-russian-disinformation/index.html>; and Kaan Şahin, "Germany Confronts Russian Hybrid Warfare," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 26, 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/07/26/germany-confronts-russian-hybrid-warfare-pub-72636>.

11. For a timeline of events in the case, including the police statement, see "Der Fall Lisa (13): Mann (23) wegen sexuellen Misbrauchs angeklagt," *Berliner Zeitung*, February 28, 2017, <https://www.bz-berlin.de/berlin/marzahn-hellersdorf/der-fall-lisa-13-mann-23-wegen-sexuellen-missbrauchs-angeklagt>.

12. "Avtsriya vremenno priostanavlivaet deistvie Shengenskogo soglasheniya iz-za sluchaev nasiliya v Germanii," Pervyi Kanal, January 16, 2016, [https://www.1tv.ru/news/2016-01-16/3330-avtsriya\\_vremenno\\_priostanavlivaet\\_deystvie\\_shengenskogo\\_soglasheniya\\_iz\\_za\\_sluchaev\\_nasiliya\\_v\\_germanii](https://www.1tv.ru/news/2016-01-16/3330-avtsriya_vremenno_priostanavlivaet_deystvie_shengenskogo_soglasheniya_iz_za_sluchaev_nasiliya_v_germanii).

Within a week, protests broke out in Russian-German neighborhoods in Berlin and cities throughout the country, including a demonstration of around 700 people on January 23 in front of the chancellery.<sup>13</sup> While the Russian connection was initially indirect, on January 26, Foreign Minister Lavrov gave a press conference in Moscow calling on the German government not to “sweep under the rug” the allegations and ensuring that “these migration problems do not lead to a politically correct attempt to ‘varnish’ the truth on behalf of some domestic political goals.”<sup>14</sup> Lavrov’s commentary on the case was read in Berlin as a signal that the Russian state was directly seeking to use the case to manipulate German politics.

According to Ben Nimmo of the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRL), “pro-Kremlin media kept the story circulating long after it had been debunked, generating significant tension and anti-migrant feeling in Russian and far-right groups.”<sup>15</sup>

The “Lisa case” was a watershed in terms of Germany’s response to Russian disinformation, one that highlighted the country’s unique vulnerabilities as well as its sources of resilience. While German officials had tended to be sanguine about the potential for Russian-backed disruption, the “Lisa case” alerted them to the reality that Germany could be targeted by such attacks. It played on a particular vulnerability that officials had struggled to address. Just weeks earlier, New Year’s Eve celebrations in Cologne, Hamburg, and other cities had been marred by widespread attacks on German women by gangs of migrant men, which Merkel’s government was widely accused of downplaying and mishandling.<sup>16</sup> The initial accusations in the “Lisa case” were made only a week and a half after the New Year’s Eve attacks, when emotions were still raw and anti-migrant sentiment was high.<sup>17</sup>

Though nothing on a comparable scale to the “Lisa case” has occurred since 2016, Russian outlets and actors have continued pushing disinformation, which aims, in particular, at discrediting Merkel’s government, amplifying the voices of nonmainstream figures on both the left and the right, and weakening transatlantic unity, particularly on the issue of sanctions. Migration remains an important theme for Russian information operations; just as the “Lisa case” built on preexisting sensitivity about migration, subsequent online information campaigns around the 2017 election and the 2018 ratification of the Global Compact on Migration emphasized Merkel’s failure to control the influx of migrants. Some

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13. For a detailed account of the coverage and ensuing protests, see Jim Rutenberg, “RT, Sputnik, and Russia’s New Theory of War,” *New York Times Magazine*, September 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/magazine/rt-sputnik-and-russias-new-theory-of-war.html>.

14. “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy SMI Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v khode press-konferentsii po itogam deyatel’nosti rossiiskoi diplomatii v 2015 godu,” Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 26, 2016, [https://www.mid.ru/ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/asset\\_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2032328](https://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2032328).

15. Ben Nimmo, “Lisa 2.0: How pro-Kremlin media in Germany have been using a new fake to justify an old one,” DFR-Lab, March 14, 2017, <https://medium.com/@DFRLab/lisa-2-0-133d44e8acc7#.68glhuids>.

16. Georg Mascolo and Britta von der Heide, “1200 Frauen wurden Opfer von Silvester-Gewalt,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 10, 2016, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/uebergriffe-in-koeln-1200-frauen-wurden-opfer-von-silvester-gewalt-1.3072064>; and Rick Noack, “Leaked document says 2,000 men allegedly assaulted 1,200 German women on New Year’s Eve,” *Washington Post*, July 21, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/07/10/leaked-document-says-2000-men-allegedly-assaulted-1200-german-women-on-new-years-eve/>.

17. On the connection between the Cologne attacks and the Lisa case, see Alice Bota, “Das missbrauchte Mädchen,” *Die Zeit*, January 21, 2016, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2016-01/russland-propaganda-entfuehrung-maedchen-berlin>.

of the content from these campaigns, including memes, appeared to be copied directly from the Russian Internet Research Agency's activities during the 2016 U.S. elections.<sup>18</sup> The failure of such campaigns to gain significant traction, however, testifies to Germany's comparative resilience and the ability of the German authorities to adapt in the face of the evolving challenge.

German officials and observers grew increasingly worried about the disruptive effects of Russian disinformation campaigns, particularly with regard to the September 2017 Bundestag elections. Because the date for the election was set, unlike the "Lisa case," it presented an opportunity for Moscow to prepare its approach in advance. In the wake of the "Lisa case," Chancellor Merkel raised concerns about the election directly with President Putin during a meeting in Sochi a few months before the poll, promising "decisive action" should Moscow attempt to spread fake news around the election.<sup>19</sup> Officials from the domestic and foreign security services also confirmed that they were on guard for Russian-sponsored interference, particularly once it was discovered that Russian hackers had accessed large troves of documents from the leading political parties, raising the specter of a "hack and leak" operation like the one that had recently afflicted Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign in the United States.<sup>20</sup> While the run-up to the Bundestag elections saw an uptick in the circulation of false or misleading content online, the feared leak of confidential documents did not occur, for reasons that German observers still debate.

As with the "Lisa case," election-related information campaigns targeted specific segments of the population, including Russian-Germans as well as adherents of the far right and far left.<sup>21</sup> However, the scale of disinformation and misinformation around the election appeared limited compared, for instance, to the French presidential elections that occurred a few months earlier.<sup>22</sup> An analysis by the German cybersecurity firm Botswatch for the Bundestag found that around 23 percent of election-related tweets during the week of the vote were from bots, a slightly higher percentage than during the 2016 U.S. election.<sup>23</sup> However, a high percentage of false or misleading content related to the German election appeared to be of domestic origin. An in-depth investigation by the Foundation for New Responsibility (*Stiftung für Neue Verantwortung*, SNV) did not find "much fake news from Russia that gained significant public distribution."<sup>24</sup>

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18. Interview with a German tech entrepreneur, Washington, May 2020.

19. Darko Janjevic, "Chancellor Merkel faces President Putin in tense Sochi press conference," Deutsche Welle, May 2, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/chancellor-merkel-faces-president-putin-in-tense-sochi-press-conference/a-38664126>.

20. Constanze Stelzenmüller, "The impact of Russian interference on Germany's 2017 elections," Brookings Institution, June 28, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-impact-of-russian-interference-on-germanys-2017-elections/>.

21. Anne Appelbaum, Peter Pomerantsev, Melanie Smith, and Chloe Colliver, "Make Germany Great Again": *Kremlin, Alt-Right and International Influences in the 2017 German Elections* (London, England: Institute for Strategic Dialogue/LSE Institute of Global Affairs, December 2017) <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Make-Germany-Great-Again-ENG-081217.pdf>.

22. Ingrid Brodnig, "7 types of misinformation in the German election," First Draft News, November 7, 2017, <https://first-draftnews.org/latest/7-types-german-election>.

23. "Gutachten zu Social Bots," German Bundestag Commission on Artificial Intelligence, February 14, 2020, 23.

24. Alexander Sänglerlaub, Miriam Meier, and Wolf-Dieter Ruhl, "Fakten statt Fakes. Verursacher, Verbreitungswege und Wirkungen von Fake News im Bundestagswahlkampf 2017," Stiftung Neue Verantwortung, March 26, 2018, <https://www.stiftung-nv.de/de/publikation/fakten-statt-fakes-verursacher-verbreitungswege-und-wirkungen-von-fake-news-im>.

Russia also used disinformation in an effort to control the narrative surrounding the August 2019 assassination of the Kist (i.e., Georgian-Chechen) activist and former militant, Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, in Berlin's Tiergarten park. German authorities quickly arrested a Russian national who attempted to flee the scene on a bicycle for the killing. Subsequent investigation by the open-source intelligence agency Bellingcat and German press outlets determined that the suspect had received training and support from Russia's Federal Security Service (*Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti*, FSB), which had dispatched him to Germany under a fake identity.<sup>25</sup>

Both before and during the investigation, Russian media outlets nevertheless attempted to cast doubt on the German government's conduct of the investigation and to propagate alternative narratives absolving the Kremlin of responsibility for the killing. Russian outlets suggested that the killing was a gangland hit.<sup>26</sup> They also tried to play up Khangoshvili's terrorist bona fides, even though members of the Chechen diaspora argued that he had given up armed struggle at the end of the Second Chechen War.<sup>27</sup> Russian officials similarly weighed in; in response to a question from a German journalist, Putin termed Khangoshvili "an absolutely bloody murderer."<sup>28</sup>

While the Khangoshvili case represents another example of Russian disinformation in Germany, it belongs to a fundamentally different category than election-related or pro-AfD campaigns. Rather than seek political disruption or even policy change on the part of the German government, the disinformation campaign around Khangoshvili aimed to absolve Moscow in the court of public opinion (if not in the physical courtroom where the suspect would be tried) of participation in an assassination on foreign soil. However disingenuous the content, the campaign itself looks more like traditional public relations than any kind of offensive information or "hybrid" operation. Many foreign observers criticized the German government's response as weak compared, for instance, to London's handling of the botched assassination of FSB defector Sergey Skripal. In part, the difference can be explained by the different nature of the two cases: Khangoshvili was shot whereas Skripal (along with his daughter and a bystander) were exposed to an exotic (and banned) chemical weapon; the German police also arrested Khangoshvili's alleged killer, while the agents accused of poisoning the Skripals fled the country. The nature of the two countries' respective relationships with Moscow also mattered. For better or worse, Germany's preference for maintaining good relations and an open channel to Moscow argued against the kind of outspoken response taken by the United Kingdom.

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25. "Suspected Assassin in Berlin Killing Used Fake Identity Documents," Bellingcat, August 30, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/08/30/suspected-assassin-in-the-berlin-killing-used-fake-identity-documents/>; and "V for 'Vympel': FSB's Secretive Department 'V' Behind Assassination of Georgian Asylum Seeker in Germany," Bellingcat, February 17, 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/02/17/v-like-vympel-fsbs-secretive-department-v-behind-assassination-of-zelimkhan-khangoshvili/>.

26. Georgii Dvali and Sergey Mashkin, "V Berlinskom parke razobralis' po-kavkazski," *Kommersant*, August 29, 2019, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4074431>.

27. "V Germanii sh'yut novoe 'delo Skripalya'. Fakty roli ne igrayut," RIA-Novosti, December 4, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20191204/1561978421.html>.

28. Konstantin Volkov, "Putin rasskazal ob ubitom v Germanii Zelimkhane Khangoshvili," *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, December 19, 2019, <https://rg.ru/2019/12/19/putin-rasskazal-ob-ubitom-v-germanii-zelimkhane-hangoshvili.html>.



# Elite Capture

Perhaps the most important element in Russian influence activities in Germany is efforts to recruit and cultivate members of the German elite to support specific policies (such as a relaxation of sanctions) as well as a general climate of good relations between Moscow and Berlin. The efficacy of elite capture is reinforced by the presence of a large cadre of *Russlandversteher* in German politics and business, who are an obvious target for Russian influence activities. Moscow attempts to cultivate and reward these figures through business deals, lucrative positions on corporate boards, and opportunities to participate in “informal and non-transparent networks [and] exchanges,” such as the German-Russian Forum.<sup>29</sup>

## *German Political Parties and Russia*

While the former SPD chancellor Gerhard Schröder has been roundly criticized by other mainstream German politicians and commentators for his role in the Russian energy industry, he is only the most prominent example of a relationship that is much deeper and wider. On the whole, both the CDU/CSU and the SPD are critical of what they view as Russian attempts to weaken transatlantic solidarity, undermine the European Union, and influence German domestic politics. Since the start of the conflict in Ukraine, the two *Volksparteien*, which since 2013 have ruled in a grand coalition, have pursued a generally hawkish position toward Moscow and have been consistent in emphasizing that EU sanctions should remain in place as long as Russia has not fulfilled its obligations under the Minsk ceasefire agreements.

Both, however, are divided on the question of the larger framework for relations with Russia and have influential *Russlandversteher* in their ranks. The arguments for pursuing better relations with Russia are varied; in general, pro-Russian voices in the CDU emphasize large companies’ (including energy companies) interest in trade with Russia, and the CSU is more supportive of improving German-Russian ties in general. Meanwhile, the legacy of *Ostpolitik*, which includes a degree of wariness about being overly dependent on the United States, remains important within the SPD. Many German observers credit Merkel for keeping the issue on the front burner and maintaining a unified front but worry that her departure from the chancellorship will create an opening for more Russia-friendly voices within the *Volksparteien*.

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29. Meister, “The Lisa Case.”



Source: ALEXEY DRUZHININ/AFP/Getty Images

Schröder's is the most prominent pro-Russia voice in the SPD, though even many SPD members see him as something of an embarrassment to the party.<sup>30</sup> Others note that his private views of Russia are more hawkish than his public statements would indicate.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, nostalgia for the era of *Ostpolitik* remains strong, especially among older SPD members. Moscow plays on these sentiments by appealing to the Cold War legacy, including the idea of Russia and Germany as countries sharing a unique responsibility for maintaining peace and security in Europe. It also appeals to the undercurrent of anti-Americanism that lingers within the more left-wing corners of the party. The SPD consequently faces something of a generational divide, with a younger cohort that does not romanticize the *Ostpolitik* tradition but also lacks its elders' interest and engagement on foreign and security policy issues.<sup>32</sup>

The divide within the CDU/CSU over Russia is equally stark though more complex. The CDU sees itself as the repository of Atlanticism, and figures within the party who handle foreign affairs tend to be quite hawkish on Russia, especially since 2014.<sup>33</sup> As the traditional party of big business, however, segments of the CDU are susceptible to arguments about the economic impact of sanctions. This argument carries particular weight with state-level CDU politicians from former East Germany, which is more exposed to trade with Russia and where pro-Russian sentiment in general is more pronounced (see below). The CDU also has its share of influential figures nostalgic for a better past, specifically the late Cold War era when CDU Chancellor Helmut Kohl negotiated German reunification with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. One of the CDU's most prominent *Russlandversteher* is Kohl's former foreign policy adviser Horst Teltschik, an outspoken critic of Merkel's approach to Russia and a frequent commentator on RT.<sup>34</sup> While on the whole its views line up with the larger CDU, the Bavarian CSU tends

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30. Interview with an SPD parliamentary staffer, Berlin, February 21, 2020.

31. Interview with an SPD-affiliated analyst, Washington, February 12, 2020.

32. Interview with a think-tank analyst, Berlin, February 18, 2020.

33. Interview with a CDU-affiliated analyst, Berlin, February 19, 2020.

34. Martin Knobbe and Klaus Weigrefe, "Putin fühlt sich von den Europäern weggestoßen," *Der Spiegel*, March 8,

to be more socially conservative, in line with the strong Catholic presence in Bavaria, and emphasizes Germany's "special role as a bridge-builder" for Russia to Europe.<sup>35</sup>

### *Fringe Targeting*

Despite strong ties with the *Volksparteien* and big business, Russia also cultivates extremist parties and movements, most notably the AfD, but also far-left elements of *Die Linke*, the grassroots anti-migration group PEGIDA, and other extreme nationalist groups such as the NPD. While both AfD and *Die Linke* encompass a range of foreign policy views, they are generally in favor of better relations with Moscow and hostile to some of the main pillars of German foreign policy: *Die Linke* opposes Germany's Atlanticist orientation, while the AfD is strongly Eurosceptic. Some polls have found that their members are more inclined to trust Putin than Merkel.<sup>36</sup>

Because of Germany's comparatively strict laws on party finance, evidence of direct financial support of the type extended to the *Front National* in France or *La Lega* in Italy is largely absent in the German case. Occasional scandals have nevertheless provided grist for opponents to whisper about more extensive covert support for the AfD. Evidence of coordinated messaging and online amplification of AfD messaging by Russian bots is stronger, though the overall impact is difficult to measure. Members of AfD and *Die Linke* have also been prominent among those invited on official junkets or to serve as "election observers" in occupied Crimea—though party leaders have for the most part been careful to avoid finding themselves invited to these events.<sup>37</sup>

As in other countries, fringe targeting in Germany aims at fracturing a political center that is—even if supportive in the abstract of better relations with Moscow—committed on principle to Atlanticism and keeping up sanctions on Russia as long as the conflict in Ukraine remains unresolved. Russian fringe targeting runs in parallel with efforts to cultivate mainstream support, offering Moscow an alternative lever for influencing political debate as well as a means of putting pressure on the government. Yet it also faces significant constraints. Not only are German party finance laws and disclosure requirements unusually strict, but the party landscape itself is more consolidated. Even within the AfD and *Die Linke*, views of Russia vary; even some pro-Russian voices in these parties appear motivated as much by a desire for media attention as by any political or ideological commitment.<sup>38</sup>

Nor do these parties have many prospects of taking power. Even at the state (*Land*) level, their prospects for growth are limited. Thuringia has been led by the center-left *Linke* politician Bodo Ramelow since 2014, but no other *Land* has had a *Linke* or AfD minister president, and

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2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/horst-teltschik-wladimir-putin-fuehlt-sich-von-den-europaeern-weggestossen-a-00000000-0002-0001-0000-000162787640>.

35. CSU, *Die Ordnung: Grundsatzprogramm der Christlich-Sozialen Union* (Munich, Germany: CSU, 2016), 40, <https://www.csu.de/common/download/Grundsatzprogramm-Beschluss-Parteitag.pdf>.

36. "Viele Anhänger von AfD und Die Linke vertrauen Putin mehr als Merkel," *Die Zeit*, August 31, 2016, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2016-08/wladimir-putin-deutschland-afd-anhaenger-vertrauen>.

37. Interview with a German journalist, Berlin, February 17, 2020; and European Platform for Democratic Elections, *Politically biased election observation—a threat to the integrity of international institutions* (Berlin, Germany: European Platform for Democratic Elections, 2018), <https://www.epde.org/en/documents/details/politically-biased-election-observation-a-threat-to-the-integrity-of-international-institutions.html>.

38. Interview with a German analyst, Berlin, February 18, 2020.

attempts by the Thuringian branch of the CDU to displace Ramelow with AfD support in early 2020 sparked a major political crisis and the resignation of Merkel's chosen successor as party leader.<sup>39</sup> German observers suggest that Moscow recognizes that the marginal benefit of aiding these parties too openly is insufficient to justify the risks and that the parties would suffer from being too closely identified with Russian interests.<sup>40</sup> Or as Constanze Stelzenmüller writes, Moscow struggles to find politicians who “fit the Kremlin mold *and* show a remote chance of winning elections.”<sup>41</sup>

Cold War legacies play an important role in Russian outreach to nonmainstream parties on both the left and the right. The left-wing *Die Linke* is the successor to East Germany's ruling Communist party, the SED. While *Die Linke* has broadened its base since unification, its strongholds remain in the former GDR, and many of its older members have a background in the East German *nomenklatura*. Attitudes and mindsets inherited from the Communist era have left *Die Linke* sympathetic to aspects of Russian messaging. The party, for instance, regards NATO as a Cold War anachronism whose eastward expansion helped precipitate the crisis in relations with Moscow.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, even younger members and supporters of *Die Linke* tend to be suspicious of the political mainstream. The combination of alienation and political naïveté can be an opening for Russian outreach. Sahra Wangeknecht, the former chairwoman of the *Linke* parliamentary group (who joined the SED in 1989, just months before the fall of the Berlin Wall), is frequently quoted in Russian-backed media.<sup>43</sup> Wangeknecht was criticized even by members of her own party for agreeing to sit for an interview with RT in December 2016 in which she criticized Merkel as a “very successful proponent of American policy” and defended the role of Russian-backed media in Europe.<sup>44</sup>

Russian efforts to promote the AfD are more consistent and pronounced, though like *Die Linke*, the AfD is an organic element of the German political landscape whose fortunes are largely independent of Russian support. Indeed, concern about illicit foreign support for the AfD has had less to do with Russia than with the group's ties to far-right parties and figures elsewhere in Europe and the United States.<sup>45</sup> While the AfD first coalesced in 2013 around opposition to the EU bailout of Greece, it was radicalized by Merkel's decision to welcome the over 1.5 million mostly Muslim refugees who have arrived in Germany since 2015. Like other European right-wing populist movements, opposition to immigration and an emphasis on “traditional” culture have moved to the center of the AfD's platform.<sup>46</sup> These positions align it closely

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39. Sam Denney and Constanze Stelzenmüller, “The government crisis in Germany's Thuringia is over—except it isn't,” Brookings Institution, March 16, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/16/the-government-crisis-in-germanys-thuringia-is-over-except-it-isnt/>.

40. Interview with a German analyst, Berlin, February 20, 2020.

41. Stelzenmüller, “The Impact of Russian Interference.”

42. “NATO: Themenpapier der Fraktion,” *Die Linke im Bundestag*, <https://www.linksfraktion.de/themen/a-z/detailansicht/nato/>.

43. Julian Röpcke, “#EUElections2019: How the Kremlin Exploits German Politics,” *DisinfoPortal*, May 1, 2019, <https://disinfoportal.org/euelections2019-how-kremlin-media-exploit-the-divided-german-political-landscape/>.

44. “Merkel has always acknowledged American hegemony—German Left party MP,” RT, December 5, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/shows/sophieco/369194-germany-merkel-public-discontent/>.

45. Interview with a German journalist, Berlin, 17 February 2020; “Streit um AfD-Spenden kommt vor Gericht,” *Die Zeit*, January 4, 2020, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2020-01/afd-spenden-afiaere-berlin-gerichtsverfahren-verwaltungsgericht-parteispenden-gericht>; and “Die rechte Internationale,” *Die Zeit*, May 25, 2016, <https://www.zeit.de/2016/23/rechtspopulismus-europa-oesterreich-wahl/komplettansicht>.

46. Jefferson Chase and Rina Goldberg, “AfD: What you need to know about Germany's far-right party,” *Deutsche Welle*,

with the Kremlin, which since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 positioned Russia as a bastion of "traditional" values as part of its geopolitical competition with the transatlantic West. The resulting ideological affinity makes the AfD a natural partner for Russian influence operations in Germany.

The nature and extent of Russian support for the AfD remain disputed and not entirely clear. Direct financial support, such as the soft loan extended to the French *Front National*, is prohibited by German law, while onerous disclosure requirements disincentivize individual donations. Nevertheless, occasional scandals suggest that Moscow views these restrictions as somewhat fungible. The most notable case for which evidence exists in the public domain centers on AfD Bundestag member Markus Frohnmaier. A longtime critic of EU sanctions who had made repeated visits to occupied Crimea and eastern Ukraine, Frohnmaier was already one of the most visible pro-Russia voices in the AfD when he announced his decision to run for a Bundestag seat in Baden-Württemberg in 2017.

As leader of the party's youth wing and an assistant to then-AfD leader Frauke Petry, Frohnmaier had met and developed relationships with figures such as former director of Russian Railways Vladimir Yakunin and neo-Eurasianist ideologue Aleksandr Dugin, both central players in the Kremlin's efforts to cultivate pro-Russian constituencies abroad.<sup>47</sup> As a sitting Bundestag member, Frohnmaier has continued voicing support for Russian positions, including stating in an April 2018 interview with RT that "It cannot be helped, Crimea is now Russian Crimea [*Es ist nun mal so, dass die Krim jetzt die russische Krim ist*]," and "this must be accepted."<sup>48</sup>

One of the main interlocutors in these efforts allegedly was Frohnmaier's parliamentary staffer Manuel Oschenreiter, who also edits the German far-right magazine *Zuerst!* and regularly contributes to the website for Katehon, the far-right Russian foundation established by oligarch Konstantin Malofeev.<sup>49</sup> Oschenreiter apparently arranged a meeting in early 2015 between then-AfD leader Alexander Gauland, Frohnmaier, and Dugin in St. Petersburg; the following year, Oschenreiter and Dugin cofounded a German Center for Eurasian Studies in Berlin. A third cofounder was listed as Mateusz Piskorski, head of a Polish far-right, pro-Russian party whom Polish authorities detained for three years on charges of spying for Russia and China (pictures taken during one of Frohnmaier's visits to Crimea show him meeting with Piskorski).<sup>50</sup>

Moscow recognized that these connections provided a unique opportunity when Frohnmaier decided to run for a seat in the Bundestag. According to a strategy paper emailed by a Russian operative in Germany to the presidential administration in Moscow—subsequently leaked to the Dossier Center (an information clearinghouse supported by exiled Russian oligarch

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October 28, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/afd-what-you-need-to-know-about-germanys-far-right-party/a-37208199>.

47. On Dugin's influence in Germany, see Andreas Umland, "Alexandr Dugin: Gegner Analyse," Zentrum Liberale Moderne, <https://gegneranalyse.libmod.de/personen/alexandr-dugin/>.

48. Quoted in "Der Fall Frohnmaier: Moskaus Strategie für politischen Einfluss," ZDF, April 5, 2019, <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/heute/afd-und-russland-104.html>.

49. "Manuel Oschenreiter," Katehon, <https://katehon.com/person/manuel-ochsenreiter>.

50. Melanie Amann, Stephan Heffner, Martin Knobbe, Ann-Katrin Müller, Jan Puhl, Marcel Rosenbach, Alexander Sarovic, Jörg Schmitt, Wolf Wiedmann-Schmidt and Anika Zeller, "Moskaus Marionetten," *Magazin Der Spiegel*, April 6, 2019, <https://magazin.spiegel.de/SP/2019/15/163282633/index.html>.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky) and reviewed by *Der Spiegel*, German television network ZDF, the BBC, and the Italian daily *La Repubblica*—the Kremlin should provide “material and media support” to Frohnmaier’s campaign in the expectation of gaining a member of the Bundestag who would “belong to us and be under our absolute control.”<sup>51</sup> The strategy paper encouraged the Kremlin to back Frohnmaier as part of a larger campaign to organize “demonstrations, vigils, and other protest actions;” encourage parliaments to pass resolutions critical of sanctions and recognize Russia’s annexation of Crimea; and discredit critical voices.<sup>52</sup>

While Frohnmaier himself denied knowledge of any Russian campaign on his behalf, a high-ranking intelligence source from an unnamed EU member state soon provided the BBC with a letter apparently written by Frohnmaier’s staffer Manuel Oschsenreiter containing an “action plan” for Russia to assist Frohnmaier’s campaign. According to the “action plan,” Frohnmaier needed material support and media support: “Any type of interviews, reports and opportunities to appear in the Russian media is helpful for us.” In return, Frohnmaier would emphasize “good relations with the Russian Federation: Sanctions, EU interference in Russian domestic politics” and emphasize his opposition to LGBTQ rights.<sup>53</sup> Frohnmaier won his election, and despite both a formal investigation and calls to resign from across the political spectrum when the allegations of Russian support were publicized, as of mid-2020, he retains his Bundestag seat.<sup>54</sup>

As a sitting Bundestag member, Frohnmaier’s name also appeared in connection with the February 2018 firebombing of a Hungarian cultural center in the western Ukrainian city of Uzhhorod, which was apparently a Russian-sponsored false-flag attack designed to discredit the Ukrainian government (which Moscow has long accused of turning a blind eye to extreme nationalists) and inflame tensions between Kyiv and Budapest. Three Poles with far-right connections were eventually convicted; Oschsenreiter’s far-right magazine *Zuerst!* was one of the first (and only) German publications to cover the original attack.<sup>55</sup> During the ensuing trial, one of the defendants, Michał Prokopowicz, testified that Oschsenreiter allegedly provided him with 1,500 euros and instructions on carrying out the attack. Oschsenreiter denied any connection to Prokopowicz, while Frohnmaier himself issued a statement that he “cannot imagine there is [any truth]” to the accusations against his staffer.<sup>56</sup> An independent

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51. Joachim Bartz, Johannes Hano, and Ulrich Stoll, “Der Fall Frohnmaier: Wie russische Strategen einen AfD-Politiker lenken wollten,” ZDF, April 9, 2019, <https://www.zdf.de/politik/frontal-21/der-fall-frohnmaier-100.html>; for a comprehensive account of the investigation and the connections between Frohnmaier and the Russian government, see Amann et al., “Moskaus Marionetten.”

52. “Russen setzen auf AfD-Abgeordneten Frohnmaier,” *Der Spiegel*, April 5, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/markus-frohnmaier-russen-setzen-auf-afd-abgeordneten-a-1261422.html>.

53. Quoted in Amann et al., “Moskaus Marionetten;” see also Gabriel Gatehouse, “German far-right MP ‘could be absolutely controlled by Russia;” BBC, April 5, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47822835>; and Austin Davis, “Calls for AfD lawmaker accused of Russia ties to resign,” Deutsche Welle, April 8, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/cdu-afd-markus-frohnmaier-russia/a-48254870>.

54. Matthias Gebauer, Ann-Katrin Müller, Severin Weiland, and Wolf Wiedmann-Schmidt, “Aufklärung unerwünscht!” *Der Spiegel*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/afd-kontakte-von-abgeordneten-nach-russland-aufklaerung-unerwuensch-a-00000000-0002-0001-0000-000163403851>.

55. Christian Fuchs and Daniel Müller, “AfD trennt sich nach Terrorvorwurf von Mitarbeiter,” *Die Zeit*, January 17, 2019, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2019-01/afd-politiker-manuel-ochsenreiter-brandanschlag-ukraine-terror-vorwurf>.

56. Sergii Stetsenko and Carl Schreck, “Far-Right German Journalist Implicated in Firebombing of Hungarian Cultural Center in Ukraine,” RFE/RL, January 14, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/far-right-german-journalist-implicated-in-fire-bombing-of-hungarian-center-in-ukraine/29708843.html>.

Russian journalist, however, soon tweeted out pictures of Oschsenreiter meeting with both Prokopowicz and Mateusz Piskorski.<sup>57</sup> While neither these photos nor evidence of connections between Frohnmaier's office and figures such as Yakunin and Dugin proves that Frohnmaier is a Russian agent, they suggest how the Kremlin seeks to develop ties with figures in the AfD and the German far-right circles more broadly as a tool of influence not just in Germany, but also in neighboring states.

As in other European states, Russia maintains ties to German right-wing organizations outside of party politics as well, though the extent and impact of these connections appear limited. The Dresden-based anti-immigration movement PEGIDA sometimes displays Russian flags and other symbols at demonstrations, and its platform calls for an end to “warmongering against Russia.”<sup>58</sup> Yet the movement has struggled to gain traction outside of Saxony or to translate its success at mobilizing demonstrators into political influence. The neo-Nazi NPD's role in organizing protests over the “Lisa case” suggests a possible Russian tie.<sup>59</sup> The pro-Kremlin motorcycle gang known as Night Wolves (*Nochnye Volki*) has a German chapter. Moscow also reportedly uses mixed martial arts clubs as a recruiting ground for agents and potential saboteurs.<sup>60</sup> According to the journalist Boris Reitschuster, around 250 to 300 men—mostly Russian-speaking German citizens—have allegedly been recruited from these clubs in Germany and sent to Russia for advanced training.<sup>61</sup>

A more subtle form of Russian support for the AfD takes place online, though, again, the exact nature of the relationship remains murky—at least in open sources. Such support consists of coordination and amplification of pro-AfD messages on social media by bots and trolls. One of the major actors in this effort is a domestic far-right troll network known as Reconquista Germanica. Established ahead of the 2017 election on the online gaming network known as Discord, Reconquista Germanica was responsible for creating a large number of fake (“sock puppet”) accounts on Twitter, YouTube, and other social media platforms to push far-right and pro-AfD content.<sup>62</sup> Though it has been de-platformed on several occasions, Reconquista Germanica still has several hundred active members organized in a quasi-military hierarchy, now operating primarily on YouTube.<sup>63</sup>

While Reconquista Germanica does not have a formal relationship with the AfD, much of the content it promotes lines up with AfD messaging and is supportive of AfD candidates.<sup>64</sup> In

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57. Ben Knight, “AfD worker accused of ordering arson attack in Ukraine,” Deutsche Welle, January 15, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/afd-worker-accused-of-ordering-arson-attack-in-ukraine/a-47093618>.

58. Sven Eichstädt, “Pegida-Anhänger ignorieren Strategiewechsel ihrer Spitze,” *Die Welt*, January 13, 2015, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article136303424/Pegida-Anhaenger-ignorieren-Strategiewechsel-ihrer-Spitze.html>.

59. Gustav Gressel, “Russia's hybrid interference in Germany's refugee policy,” European Council on Foreign Relations, February 4, 2016, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_russias\\_hybrid\\_interference\\_in\\_germanys\\_refugee\\_policy5084](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_russias_hybrid_interference_in_germanys_refugee_policy5084).

60. Michael Carpenter, “Russia Is Co-opting Angry Young Men,” *The Atlantic*, August 29, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/russia-is-co-opting-angry-young-men/568741/>.

61. “Putin's ‘secret sleepers’ waiting for a signal,” Deutsche Welle, April 18, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/putins-secret-sleepers-waiting-for-a-signal/a-19196685>.

62. Markus Reuter and Anna Biselli, “Getarnt als Gamer: Einblicke in eine rechtsradikale Troll-Armee,” Netzpolitik.org, February 5, 2018, <https://netzpolitik.org/2018/getarnt-als-gamer-einblicke-in-eine-rechtsradikale-troll-armee/>.

63. Daniel Köhler and Julia Ebner, “Strategies and tactics: communication strategies of jihadists and right-wing extremists,” in Johannes Baldauf, Julia Ebner, and Jakob Guhl, eds., *Hate Speech and Radicalisation Online*, (London, England: ISD, 2019), <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ISD-Hate-Speech-and-Radicalisation-Online-English-Draft-2.pdf>.

64. Interview with a German technology entrepreneur, Berlin, February 20, 2020.

the lead-up to the election, it helped hashtags such as *#Merkelmussweg* (“Merkel must go”) and *#TraudichDeutschland* (roughly “believe in yourself, Germany,” an AfD slogan) trend on Twitter.<sup>65</sup> The AfD youth wing’s regional chairman for Hannover, Lars Steinke, admitted in an interview that he was active on Reconquista Germanica under an assumed name and had helped organize one of the network’s “shitstorms” (i.e., online trolling of political opponents).<sup>66</sup>

The relationship between Reconquista Germanica and Moscow is even less clear, though, again, evidence of coordination and cooperation exists. Reconquista Germanica’s pseudonymous founder, Nikolai Alexander, has admitted that “without Russian support [Reconquista Germanica] would not be possible in this form” but declined to detail the precise nature of that support.<sup>67</sup> During the 2017 election, Reconquista Germanica amplified messages about electoral fraud that apparently originated in Russia. The Internet Institute at Oxford University found that pro-AfD content represented a disproportionate (relative to the party’s support) share of Twitter traffic in the weeks leading up to the 2017 election, suggesting that much of it was bot-generated.<sup>68</sup> One of the major themes was “electoral fraud” (*#Wahlbetrug*). Initially promoted by Russian bots, accusations of fraud were amplified by Reconquista Germanica in the weeks leading up to the election and were eventually picked up and reposted by senior figures within the AfD as well.<sup>69</sup> This three-way interaction among Russian content-generators, the far-right online ecosystem represented by Reconquista Germanica, and the AfD is emblematic of the pathway through which Russian disinformation touches German politics.

Germany’s security services have confirmed that they are keeping a close watch on Reconquista Germanica and other far-right groups, though they have little to say publicly about the group’s Russian ties.<sup>70</sup> Observers have noted a common mimetic language uniting the German far-right and Russian bots around a range of topics as well as evidence of coordination in their posting strategies. Some of these coordinated online campaigns appear to happen at the *Land* level, where the media and state security organs have historically trained less scrutiny than at the federal level.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, some of this coordination appears more or less organic, in the sense that far-right press outlets (e.g., *Junge Freiheit*) and loose online communities repost Russian content of their own accord. Assessing the impact of these online campaigns is, however, difficult. As DFRL’s Ben Nimmo notes, “it’s relatively easy to make a hashtag trend, but harder to turn it into an organic trend.”<sup>72</sup>

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65. Patrick Gensing and Lena Kampf, “Wie Trolle im Wahlkampf manipulierten,” *Tagesschau*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/inland/manipulation-wahlkampf-101.html>.

66. “AfD-Funktionär an Troll-Attacken beteiligt,” *Tagesschau*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/inland/manipulation-wahlkampf-103.html>.

67. *Ibid.*

68. Lisa-Maria Neudert, Bence Kollanyi, and Philip N. Howard, *Junk News and Bots During the German Parliamentary Election: What Are German Voters Sharing Over Twitter?* (Oxford, England: Oxford Internet Institute Computational Propaganda Project, 2017), <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/junk-news-and-bots-during-the-german-parliamentary-election-what-are-german-voters-sharing-over-twitter/>.

69. Ryan Broderick, “A Step-By-Step Guide To How Russian Bots Trick Far-Right Trolls Into Spreading Fake News,” *BuzzFeed News*, September 24, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanhatsthisa/a-step-by-step-guide-for-how-russian-bots-trick-far-trolls>.

70. Martin Knobbe and Wolf Wiedmann-Schmidt, “German Domestic Intelligence Chief on the New Wave of Hate,” *Spiegel International*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-domestic-intelligence-chief-on-hate-crimes-like-halle-a-1292535.html>.

71. Interview with a German technology entrepreneur, Berlin, February 20, 2020.

72. Quoted in Henk van Ess and Jane Lytvynenko, “This Russian Hacker Says His Twitter Bots Are Spreading Messages To Help Germany’s Far Right Party In The Election,” *Buzzfeed News*, September 24, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com>.



# Vulnerabilities

Germany is on the whole less vulnerable to disruptive or malign Russian influence than many other European states. In part, this lack of vulnerability is the result of comparatively high levels of political and social cohesion. It is also, though, a result of Russia's own perception of Germany as an important country—one whose political elite has often sought good relations with Moscow—that ideally should be cultivated rather than disrupted. Germany's political and business elite have long had extensive ties with both the USSR and the Russian Federation—ties that have endured despite the escalating confrontation between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic West. Although Merkel has prioritized European and transatlantic solidarity vis-à-vis Russia and taken a leading role in coordinating the European Union's sanctions policy, many important figures in business and politics remain nostalgic for the spirit of amity that characterized relations with Moscow both before and after German reunification.

At least some German elites, moreover, continue to look forward to a post-sanctions return to normalcy. The ties of interest and sympathy that bind segments of the German elite to Russia represent an important avenue for Russian influence. The influence exercised through these *Russlandversteher* is qualitatively different from the attempts at disruption and polarization that are the usual focus of inquiry into Russian influence. It is not necessarily malign—though the role of nontransparent financial ties lends at least some of these relationships an unsavory air. Nevertheless, the importance of influence exercised *through* rather than *against* the political establishment is one of the distinguishing features of Russian influence in Germany, and one that is harder to combat than the more visible and disruptive tactics that receive the bulk of media attention.

Though Germany is in many ways less divided along cultural, socioeconomic, or ideological lines than many other Western states, its post-Cold War history has left it with some unique vulnerabilities for Russia to exploit. Two population groups, in particular, remain poorly integrated into German society and political life and open to Russian messaging: immigrants from the former Soviet Union and inhabitants of the six eastern *Länder* that once comprised the GDR. These groups share, albeit in somewhat different ways, an acculturation to and familiarity with Russia and Russian culture that other German citizens lack. They also remain underrepresented in the German business, cultural, and

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[com/article/henkvaness/these-russian-hackers-say-theyre-using-twitter-bots-to-help.](https://www.washingtonpost.com/article/henkvaness/these-russian-hackers-say-theyre-using-twitter-bots-to-help/)

political elite, and many consequently see themselves as left behind in post-unification Germany. As with disaffected populations in other democratic states, Moscow appeals to (and stokes) these groups' resentments, attempting to turn them against the centrist consensus that has long prevailed in Germany.

### *Russlandversteher*

In contrast to some other European states, pro-Russian views in Germany are common within the elite and spread across party lines. The most prominent example of a high-placed *Russlandversteher* is former SPD chancellor Gerhard Schröder. As chancellor, Schröder was vilified by his opponents for taking a soft line on Russia, in particular for failing to criticize Russia's military campaign in Chechnya and for referring to Putin as a "thorough democrat."<sup>73</sup> One of his major foreign policy achievements was negotiating the original Nord Stream pipeline deal, under which a consortium led by Russia's Gazprom and including the German energy companies Wintershall and E.ON would build a gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea. Designed to bring more Russian gas to Germany and strengthen Germany's role as a distribution hub in Europe, the project received widespread support within German business and political circles even though many other EU states, not to mention the United States, strongly opposed it.

Almost immediately after stepping down from the chancellorship in late 2005, Schröder was appointed chairman of the Nord Stream consortium shareholder's committee, to the consternation of much of the German political establishment. Schröder's ties to the Russian energy industry have only deepened in subsequent years. He served on the board of the TNK-BP joint venture until its 2013 acquisition by Russian state oil company Rosneft, and in 2017, Schröder became chairman of the boards of directors of both the Nord Stream-2 consortium and Rosneft itself—which was (and remains) subject to U.S. and EU sanctions. In announcing Schröder's appointment as chairman of the board, Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin described him as "the most loyal German leader to Russia."<sup>74</sup> Notably, Schröder had spoken out against the decision to sanction Rosneft and had been largely critical of U.S. and EU efforts to isolate Russia in the wake of the Ukraine conflict.

Though the project was intimately linked with Schröder, Merkel's CDU-led government strongly supported Nord Stream as well. This support was based on economic arguments, but also on the enduring idea of *Wandel durch Annäherung*. As Merkel noted at the ceremony inaugurating Nord Stream in November 2011, the pipeline would help cement a "safe, sustainable partnership with Russia" even as it ensured European consumers additional supplies of gas.<sup>75</sup>

Even as relations between Berlin and Moscow worsened following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the energy partnership has remained an important link and source of Russian influence. In 2015, with the conflict in Ukraine raging, several European energy

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73. Luke Harding, "Schröder faces growing scandal over job with Russian gas giant," *The Guardian*, December 12, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/dec/13/russia.germany>.

74. Henry Foy and Guy Chazan, "Gerhard Schröder appointed chairman of Rosneft," *Financial Times*, September 29, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/100db270-a518-11e7-9e4f-7f5e6a7c98a2>.

75. "Merkel and Medvedev Open Baltic Gas Pipeline," *Spiegel International*, November 8, 2011, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/controversial-project-launched-merkel-and-medvedev-open-baltic-gas-pipeline-a-796611.html>.

companies signed an agreement with Gazprom to build a second pipeline along the Nord Stream route—what would eventually become known as Nord Stream 2. More than its predecessor, Nord Stream 2 was criticized for its potential to boost European dependence on Russian gas, cement ties between Moscow and Berlin at the cost of intra-EU solidarity and eliminate Ukraine’s role as a transit state. Despite such criticism—some of it from within her own party—and the threat of U.S. sanctions, Merkel remained strongly in favor of completing the project.<sup>76</sup> Russian interlocutors and Russian-backed media, meanwhile, played on long-standing sensitivities to rally support for the project, notably that Washington was trying to stop Nord Stream 2 because it wanted to force Germany to buy (more expensive) American liquefied natural gas (LNG).<sup>77</sup>

### *Economic and Energy Links*

Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2 are the most prominent examples of the link between business interests and Russian influence. While many large German companies have an economic interest in Russia, the overall scale of the two countries’ economic relationship is modest (bilateral trade in 2018 was around 62 billion euros).<sup>78</sup> As in other countries, the scale of Russian investment in Germany is not entirely clear because much of it is conducted through nontransparent vehicles. It nevertheless appears to be growing as wealthy Russians seek new outlets for their money.<sup>79</sup> German observers suggest that while the scale of Russian investment in the Berlin real estate market is hardly comparable to that in London, New York, or Miami, the figures are potentially significant and potentially worrying because of the lack of transparency with which many deals are conducted.<sup>80</sup> One prominent example was the revelation in the Panama Papers that one of the main investors behind a large development project on the Kurfürstendamm in Berlin was a dual citizen who had previously been connected with the sanctioned Rotenberg brothers.<sup>81</sup>

Despite the comparatively low salience of Russia for the German economy as a whole, the centrality of a few large, politically connected firms doing business in Russia ensures those firms a prominent voice in debates on Russia policy. It is mostly these firms whose executives participate in the coterie of binational forums sponsored by the Russian government to build support for closer Russo-German ties, including the Petersburg Dialogue and the German-Russian Forum, and who participate in Kremlin-sponsored convenings such as the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF). The presence of figures such as Vladimir Yakunin, former minister of culture Mikhail Shvydkoi,

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76. Guy Chazan, “US envoys defends Nord Stream 2 sanctions as ‘pro-European,’” *Financial Times*, December 22, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/21535ebe-23dc-11ea-9a4f-963f0ec7e134>; on intra-CDU divides, see Daniel Brössler, Alexander Mühlauer, and Robert Roßmann, “Leitungsstörung,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/nord-stream-2-manfred-weber-gegen-angela-merkel-1.4420253>.

77. “US must prevent construction of Nord Stream 2 pipeline to counter Russia – Pompeo,” RT, May 8, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/news/458764-pompeo-russia-nord-stream/>.

78. “Germany exports, imports and trade balance By Country 2018,” World Bank World Integrated Trade Solutions, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/DEU/Year/LTST/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country>.

79. “Russian Investors Flock to German Real Estate,” *Moscow Times*, January 23, 2018, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/01/23/russian-investors-flock-into-german-real-estate-a60251>.

80. Interview with a German analyst, Berlin, February 20, 2020.

81. “Ku’damm-Karee ist zur Hälfte russisch,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, April 24, 2016, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/bezirke/charlottenburg-wilmersdorf/geheimnis-um-investor-in-berlin-gelueftet-kudamm-karee-ist-zur-haelfte-russisch/13492024.html>.

Federation Council member Konstantin Kosachev, and Minister of Agriculture Dmitry Patrushev (the son of Security Council Chairman and Putin confidante Nikolai Patrushev) on the boards of these groups suggests that the Kremlin remains closely involved with them. Nonetheless, many of the German participants have grown disillusioned, complaining that their Russian counterparts refuse to depart from pre-scripted talking points and have little influence with the Kremlin. Many are also frustrated with Moscow's increasingly harsh restrictions on civil society and "foreign agents" at home even as it seeks to promote groups such as the Petersburg Dialogue abroad.<sup>82</sup> In part for these reasons, the German government believes that the Petersburg Dialogue and similar forums are a rather ineffective vehicle for Russian influence.<sup>83</sup>

The most influential voice on Russia policy in the commercial sector is the Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations (*Ost-Ausschuss-Osteuropaverein der deutschen Wirtschaft*). Founded in 1952 at the height of the Cold War, the *Ost-Ausschuss* organizes events and lobbies on behalf of German businesses working across the post-Communist and post-Soviet region, with a particular emphasis today on Russia. It is supported by five of Germany's large industrial associations but includes small and medium-sized enterprises as well as large firms. The organization publicly supported sanctions imposed over the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH-17 by Russian-backed separatists but pushes for a broader reconciliation between Berlin and Moscow. *Ost-Ausschuss* President (and Petersburg Dialogue Vice Chair) Oliver Hermes noted that Europe needs strong economic relations with Russia lest the European economy "become a plaything for the Americans and Chinese" and strongly criticized the extraterritorial application of U.S. sanctions.<sup>84</sup> Journalist Susanne Spahn, a critic of Russian influence in Germany, charges the *Ost-Ausschuss* with providing "biased criticism of German government policy toward Russia and show[ing] strong and unquestioned support for Russian policy positions."<sup>85</sup> Government officials, however, are less categorical and generally do not see the *Ost-Ausschuss* as a stalking horse for Russian interests so much as a legitimate business lobby.<sup>86</sup>

## Post-Soviet Immigrants

Germany is host to a significant population of immigrants from Russia and other post-Soviet states. As of 2018, the Federal Statistics Office (*Statistisches Bundesamt*) estimated that approximately 3 million German citizens had a background in the former USSR (i.e., were immigrants or children of immigrants) out of a total population of around 83 million.<sup>87</sup> Though this figure represents no more than 3 to 4 percent of the population, it

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82. Claudia von Salzen, "Die Sanktionen gegen Russland sind nach wie vor richtig," *Der Tagesspiegel*, October 4, 2018, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/ronald-pofalla-im-interview-die-sanktionen-gegen-russland-sind-nach-wie-vor-richtig/23138814.html>.

83. Interview with a German official, Berlin, February 19, 2020.

84. Moritz Koch, Klaus Strattman, and Jens Münchrath, "Mit aller Macht gegen Nord Stream 2: Weitere US-Sanktionen drohen," *Handelsblatt*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/international/ostseepipeline-mit-aller-macht-gegen-nord-stream-2-weitere-us-sanktionen-drohen/25505860.html>.

85. Susanne Spahn, *The Network of the Russian Information Policy in Germany* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2019), <https://disinfoportal.org/the-network-of-the-russian-information-policy-in-germany/>.

86. Interview with a senior official, Berlin, February 19, 2020.

87. "Migration und Integration: Bevölkerung in Privathaushalten nach Migrationshintergrund im weiteren Sinn nach

makes the former Soviet Union the largest source of migrants to Germany. Most of them are *Russlanddeutsch*, or ethnic German immigrants whose ancestors settled in the Russian Empire from the reign of Catherine the Great.<sup>88</sup>

These groups occupy a liminal space between Russia and Germany/Europe and engage to varying degrees with Russian culture, politics, and media. This liminality makes them an important audience for Russian influence campaigns, particularly the *Russlanddeutsch*, who, on the whole, left the USSR/Russia for economic rather than political reasons. Many of the first generation *Russlanddeutsch*, moreover, live in self-contained communities and remain comparatively unintegrated into German society. They speak some combination of Russian and various “archaic” German dialects, but many do not speak *Hochdeutsch* (High German, which is the official language of Germany) fluently.<sup>89</sup> Despite doing reasonably well economically, the *Russlanddeutsch* remain on balance less well off than their native-born compatriots.

Their Soviet upbringing has also left the *Russlanddeutsch* community sharing aspects of a culture and outlook with their contemporaries inside Russia. These include a preference for connecting on Russia-based social media platforms such as VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, as opposed to Facebook or Instagram, and getting news from Russian state television (in Russian).

Compared to Germans as a whole, they are also less welcoming toward Muslims, LGBTQ people, and other minorities. Their views are thus more in line with those prevalent in post-Communist countries (including Russia) than with the German mainstream. As in post-Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the *Russlanddeutsch* community in Germany has therefore been receptive to Russian narratives emphasizing the dangers of immigration and homosexuality and of Europe’s slide into “decadence.”<sup>90</sup>

The *Russlanddeutsch* community’s self-perceived outsider status also manifests itself in high levels of support for nonmainstream parties, which have themselves been focal points for Russian influence. On the whole, the *Russlanddeutsch* population tends to support both the AfD and—even more—*Die Linke* at higher rates than the general population. Surveys conducted after the 2017 Bundestag election suggested that about 15 percent of first and second-generation immigrants from the former Soviet Union voted for the AfD, while 21 percent voted for *Die Linke* (nationwide, the AfD received 12.6 percent and *Die Linke* 9.2 percent of the total party list vote).<sup>91</sup> While these figures suggest only a

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ausgewählten Geburtsstaaten,” Statistisches Bundesamt, August 21, 2019, <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Tabellen/migrationshintergrund-staatsangehoerigkeit-staaten.html>.

88. *Russlanddeutsch* comprise about 2 million of those from a post-Soviet migrant background. The rest are generally either Soviet Jews who migrated to West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s and their children—a group that is generally hostile to the Kremlin—or residents of Russia and other post-Soviet states (especially Kazakhstan and Ukraine) who resettled in Germany after reunification, including ethnic Germans as well as Jews, Russians, Ukrainians, and others.

89. Peter Rosenburg, “Die Sprache der Deutschen in Russland,” North Dakota State University Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, September 7, 2001, <https://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/research/scholarly/bibliography/russland.html>.

90. Anastassia Boutsko, “Catherine the Great and the ‘Russian Germans,’” Deutsche Welle, July 21, 2013, <https://www.dw.com/en/catherine-the-great-and-the-russian-germans/a-16965100>; and interview with a German journalist, Berlin, February 17, 2020 [M. Thumann].

91. Achim Goerres, Dennis C. Spies, and Sabrina J. Mayer, *How Did Immigrant Voters Vote at the 2017 Bundestag Elections? First Results from the Immigrant German Election Study (IMGES)* (Essen, Germany: University of Duisburg Essen,

modestly higher level of support for the AfD, the surveys found that *Russlanddeutsch* living in more insular communities where Russian media is the primary source of information tended to support the AfD at much higher levels.<sup>92</sup> The AfD has made outreach to the *Russlanddeutsch* community a priority; it is the only major party to produce Russian-language campaign materials, and in 2017, six of its candidates for the Bundestag were natives of the former Soviet Union.<sup>93</sup>

Nonetheless, community activists are eager to emphasize that the *Russlanddeutsch* are not a Kremlin “fifth column.”<sup>94</sup> Support for the AfD and opposition to Muslim immigration are hardly unique to the *Russlanddeutsch*. Nor do Russian-Germans unfailingly support Moscow’s actions, even when the Kremlin seeks to mobilize them. Notably, Russian media efforts to encourage the *Russlanddeutsch* to protest against sanctions related to the war in Ukraine got little traction.<sup>95</sup>

On the other hand, the *Russlanddeutsch* were at the center of the protests and online tempest sparked by the “Lisa case,” which tapped into preexisting concerns about migration, personal security, and mistrust of the German authorities. The girl whose overnight disappearance sparked the whole affair was from a Russian-German family in a neighborhood of Berlin with a large *Russlanddeutsch* population called Marzahn-Hellersdorf.<sup>96</sup> Her story of abduction at the hands of migrants and the perception that “political correctness” toward Muslims had prevented the authorities from responding more aggressively or forthrightly dovetailed with frustrations already simmering in the community.<sup>97</sup> The initial allegations of abduction and rape spread on social media and through chain emails within the *Russlanddeutsch* community before being picked up by the Russian media.

The result was a kind of feedback loop, where coverage by Russia’s NTV and Channel One reinforced existing anger and encouraged members of the community to organize demonstrations that, in turn, provided grist for further media coverage.<sup>98</sup> The role played by the *Russlanddeutsch* community in the “Lisa case” suggests that their vulnerability to Russian influence stems largely from mistrust toward the authorities and a belief that their legitimate concerns are not taken seriously, rather than an ideological or political affinity with Moscow. Therefore, countering Russian influence among this community

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2018), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3133559>.

92. Nikita Jolkver, “Are Russian Germans the Backbone of the populist AfD?,” Deutsche Welle, April 14, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/are-russian-germans-the-backbone-of-the-populist-afd/a-48321687>.

93. Andrey Gurkov, “Ethnic Germans from Russia in open letter: ‘We are not the AfD!’” Deutsche Welle, September 7, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/ethnic-germans-from-russia-in-open-letter-we-are-not-the-afd/a-40549269>.

94. Ibid.

95. Medina Schaubert, “‘Der Fall Lisa’ – Entwicklung in Berlin Hellersdorf-Marzahn,” Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, September 10, 2018, <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/russlanddeutsche/271945/der-fall-lisa-entwicklung-in-berlin-hellersdorf-marzahn>.

96. On Marzahn, see Hannes Heine, “Marzahn legt eine neue Platte auf – auf Russisch,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, September 13, 2014, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/ein-teil-von-berlin-feiert-geburtstag-marzahn-legt-eine-neue-platte-auf-auf-russisch/10695270.html>.

97. Nik Afanasjew and Claudia von Salzen, “Warum der ‘Fall Lisa’ Russlanddeutsch emphört,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, February 18, 2016, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/themen/reportage/integration-in-berlin-warum-der-fall-lisa-russlanddeutsche-empoert/12946014.html>.

98. Interview with German analysts, Berlin, February 19, 2020.

requires, above all, greater efforts on the part of the German state at integration and communication with a population that still struggles to find its place in German society.

### *Eastern Länder*

In the three decades since reunification, the six *Länder* comprising the former GDR (the city-state of Berlin plus Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia) have retained a distinct political, economic, and cultural identity. While Berlin and cities such as Dresden, Jena, Leipzig, and Weimar have prospered, many smaller towns and rural areas have suffered severe dislocation from industrial decline and out-migration. Despite progress in recent years, the eastern *Länder* continue to have higher rates of unemployment and lower per capita income than the ten *Länder* of former West Germany. The East's remaining population is older, less educated, and less prosperous than their western compatriots.

## Germany 1945-90



Source: AdobeStock

Many eastern Germans feel left behind in modern Germany, their voices unrepresented by mainstream parties or media outlets, which in turn makes them more receptive to Russian narratives hostile to the European Union and to Germany's centrist consensus. As most of this population grew up in the Communist era, eastern Germany's political culture also converges in important ways with those of Russia and the post-Communist states of Central and Eastern Europe. Surveys suggest that inhabitants of the former GDR

are more skeptical of the European Union, more hostile to ethnic and religious minorities, and less optimistic about the future.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, all of Germany's largest companies, as well as most of its political, cultural, and economic elite, are from the former West Germany (the Brandenburger Angela Merkel is the most prominent exception—though she has always been more popular in the west than in the east).<sup>100</sup> Coupled with the east's lower standard of living, the domination of westerners has left some eastern Germans resentful or at least ambivalent about the changes that have taken place since unification in 1990.

As in much of post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe, eastern Germany has been fertile ground for populist, nativist, and Euroskeptic movements. The AfD, *Die Linke*, and more extreme groups such as the NPD all have a larger presence in the east than in the west, as do grassroots populist movements such as PEGIDA, whose stronghold is in Saxony. This combination of alienation and convergence with the rest of the post-Communist world makes the population of the former GDR particularly susceptible to Russian influence. As with the *Russlanddeutsch*, most eastern Germans speak at least some Russian as a result of a Communist-era education. Today, eastern Germans' distinctiveness manifests not only in a distinct post-Communist political culture but also in a kind of residual sympathy with Moscow. In part, this sympathy has an economic basis, as the eastern *Länder* are more dependent economically on trade with and investment from Russia—and thus are more impacted by sanctions.<sup>101</sup> At the same time, some observers suggest that pro-Russian views have a kind of symbolic importance, as a way for eastern Germans to differentiate themselves from their western counterparts. Anecdotally, easterners appear to be a central component of the audience for Russian media in Germany, though good numbers are lacking.<sup>102</sup>

Even the *Volksparteien* have to take account of these considerations. In 2017, the CDU minister president of Saxony, Michael Kretschmer, campaigned for reelection on a platform of improving Russo-German relations, including dropping sanctions. Kretschmer attended the SPIEF that year and invited Putin to visit Saxony—where he had been stationed as a young KGB officer in the 1980s. Kretschmer also coordinated an open letter calling for sanctions to be lifted signed by the other eastern ministers president (from the CDU, SPD, and *Die Linke*). The resonance of Kretschmer's appeal and the prominence of Russia as a state-level campaign issue in the former *Länder* of the GDR suggests the extent of the east-west divide in twenty-first century Germany. Similarly, the SPD-led state government in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern has lobbied strongly for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which would come ashore on the state's coast.

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99. John Gramlich, "How the attitudes of West and East Germans compare, 30 years after fall of Berlin Wall," Pew Research, October 18, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/18/how-the-attitudes-of-west-and-east-germans-compare-30-years-after-fall-of-berlin-wall/>.

100. John Gramlich, "East Germany has narrowed economic gap with West Germany since fall of Communism, but still lags," Pew Research Center, November 6, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/11/06/east-germany-has-narrowed-economic-gap-with-west-germany-since-fall-of-communism-but-still-lags/>.

101. "Darum ist die Nachsicht mit Putin in Ostdeutschland so groß," *Der Tagesspiegel*, June 11, 2019, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/ende-der-russland-sanktionen-darum-ist-die-nachsicht-mit-putin-in-ostdeutschland-so-gross/24445430.html>.

102. Interview with a German journalist, Berlin, February 19, 2020. Officials from RT Deutsch, for instance, acknowledge that eastern Germans (along with young men) represent the platform's most important audience.



Here, even politicians from the CDU and SPD believe they need to set themselves apart from their parties' federal leadership and steal the thunder of candidates from the less mainstream parties by adopting a nonconfrontational position vis-à-vis Russia.<sup>103</sup>

Many eastern Germans also view the Communist era and the events surrounding German reunification in a different light, often in ways that overlap with Russian narratives. In February 2020, an eastern German couple named Silke and Holger Friedrich purchased the publishing house Berliner Verlag. The publisher's titles include the *Berliner Zeitung*, a daily newspaper originally founded in the GDR that the Friedrichs sought to restore to prominence. The Friedrichs soon announced that they had received offers of assistance "including from China and Russia."<sup>104</sup> Under their direction, *Berliner Zeitung* became the first German paper to run wire stories from Russia's TASS and China's Xinhua news agencies alongside those from the Associated Press and other Western services, a decision that critics charged, at a minimum, provides a mainstream platform for state-sponsored propaganda. The mainstream backlash grew when it was discovered that Holger Friedrich had been an informant for the *Stasi*, the East German secret police, in the 1980s.<sup>105</sup>

Part of the Friedrichs' appeal centered on the fact that none of the major German media outlets or publishing houses were led by former citizens of East Germany. The Friedrichs claimed to offer an opportunity to reassess some of the received wisdom about Germany's postwar history, including efforts to rehabilitate aspects of the GDR that many western Germans found distasteful (such as praising Egon Krenz, the last GDR leader, for limiting bloodshed as the GDR collapsed).<sup>106</sup> Their first editorial suggested that, if the GDR was an "illegitimate state" for keeping its citizens trapped behind militarized borders, future generations might consider the European Union equally illegitimate for using military force to keep refugees away from its borders.<sup>107</sup> They also took the opportunity to question the way in which the West had dealt with Russia since the end of the Cold War, noting that "The Russian arms build-up of the last ten years, Crimea and Donezk [sic], are all the results of something, they simply did not fall from the sky."<sup>108</sup>

The *Berliner Zeitung* furor provided a stark example of how eastern Germany's political culture provides openings for Russian influence that goes beyond the populist backlash in the east's rustbelt towns. The Friedrichs were technology entrepreneurs who became enormously rich and successful in the reunified Germany. Yet, as their first *Berliner Zeitung* editorial made clear, they do not share much of what passes for the conventional wisdom about Germany's history.

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103. Christiane Hoffman, Timo Lehmann, Veit Medick, and Ralf Neukirch, "Relations with Moscow Emerge as German Election Issue," *Spiegel International*, July 29, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/east-german-politicians-see-advantage-in-pro-putin-views-a-1279231.html>.

104. Ulrike Simon, "Jetzt auch mit Staatspropaganda direct aus dem Kreml," *Horizont*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.horizont.net/medien/nachrichten/Berliner-zeitung-jetzt-auch-mit-staatspropaganda-direkt-us-dem-kreml-180830>.

105. Uwe Müller and Christian Meier, "Neuer Besitzer des Berliner Verlags spitzelte als IM für die Stasi," *Die Welt*, November 15, 2019, <https://www.welt.de/kultur/medien/article203493762/Holger-Friedrich-Besitzer-der-Berliner-Zeitung-war-Stasi-IM.html>.

106. Christopher F. Scheutze, "Exposed as Stasi Spy, a Newspaper Owner Tries to Reclaim his Story," *New York Times*, December 15, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/15/world/europe/berliner-zeitung-stasi.html>.

107. Silke Friedrich and Holger Friedrich, "What We Want," *Berliner Zeitung*, November 8, 2019, <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/en/english-what-we-want-li.842>.

108. Ibid.

Nor are they alone among eastern Germans in maintaining a degree of nostalgia (sometimes termed “*Ostalgie*,” from the word *ost*, or east) for the GDR. Even if few eastern Germans would support a return to Communist rule, the sense of loss that accompanied the collapse of the GDR and the lingering sense of being outsiders in their own country remain sources of dissatisfaction.<sup>109</sup> That dissatisfaction, in turn, fuels not only the success of parties such as the AfD and *Die Linke* that call for systemic change but also the Friedrichs’ calls to view the Communist era and the GDR as legitimate components of Germany’s history. Such calls to rethink the place of the GDR in historical memory almost inevitably have implications for how Germany thinks about its relationship with Russia, which has undergone a similar process of historical reimagination and rehabilitation of its Soviet past in recent years.

### *Lack of a “Security Culture”*

Several experts and officials suggested that among the biggest challenges Berlin faces in combatting illicit Russian influence is the lack of what some described as a “security culture” among both the government and the public. As a country that has prospered from the emergence of the European Union as a “post-historical” space where the power politics of an earlier age have no purchase, Germany has struggled to adapt to the more confrontational neighborhood now surrounding Europe, one that includes a revanchist Russia among many other challenges. Even for many who remember the Cold War, the idea that the Federal Republic could be a bridge between east and west, enjoying a special relationship with Moscow despite its membership in NATO (a status that always depended on having strong relations with the United States, including the security provided by the NATO umbrella), retains some attraction. Cross-party belief in the principle of *Wandel durch Annäherung* (i.e., that outreach and engagement would eventually produce a more “Europeanized” Russia) has left much of the German elite—not to mention the German public—unprepared for dealing with a more hostile Russia, one whose foreign policy objectives came to center on dismantling the European project central to Germany’s post-1945 success.

The prevalence of *Russlandversteher* within the German establishment is itself a product of this mindset, as German-Russian relations have for the past three decades largely been perceived inside Germany as a positive-sum affair. While the invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing confrontation with Moscow came as an unwelcome shock to many German politicians, businesspeople, and ordinary citizens, swathes of German public and elite opinion continue to bristle at the idea that Germany (or Europe) is engaged in a strategic confrontation with Russia that requires severing ties or taking risks. A more “securitized” view of Russia has taken hold within the security services and much of the federal bureaucracy since the start of the Ukraine conflict, but according to interviews with German analysts and officials, that same perception has not spread more widely, and even some of the leadership of the main political parties remains reluctant to see Russia as a threat.<sup>110</sup> Critics contend that this unwillingness to perceive activities that promote Russian influence as security challenges provides

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109. Wolfgang Dick, “Ostalgia: Romanticizing the GDR,” Deutsche Welle, October 3, 2014, <https://www.dw.com/en/ostalgia-romanticizing-the-gdr/a-17959366>.

110. Interview with CDU-affiliated analysts, Berlin, February 19, 2020.

an excuse for Berlin to avoid taking actions that would be controversial or require new resource commitments.<sup>111</sup>

The perception of Russia through a de-securitized lens even at a time of rising confrontation has been particularly notable on the issue of energy and the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. The German establishment as a whole continues to view Nord Stream 2 as an essentially economic project, despite the objections voiced by several Central and Eastern European states as well as the United States about the project's inherently geopolitical objectives. Even Merkel, who is otherwise known for pushing back against Russian efforts to weaken intra-European and transatlantic solidarity, gives Nord Stream 2 a pass on economic grounds.<sup>112</sup> Across the mainstream political spectrum, Cold War-era Soviet-German energy cooperation remains a source of pride, with contemporary leaders aspiring for Germany to fulfill a similar role today and downplaying concerns about the politicization of Russian gas supplies.

This view also extends to issues of digital disruption, where even activists and analysts who focus on fighting disinformation often do not see Russia as a major vector. Civil society groups dedicated to fighting disinformation tend to see domestic actors and loose international far-right networks as a bigger challenge than Russia or other state actors.<sup>113</sup> This view is consistent with a perception, rooted in the post-World War II era, that Germany's biggest threats are internal—namely a revival of the hatreds that drove the rise of Nazism—and that external challenges can be best managed through economic engagement and the progressive “Europeanization” of the surrounding region. Some critics at home and abroad nevertheless argue that the absence of a security culture in post-1989 Germany is overstated and often invoked as an excuse by politicians for failing to make difficult or unpopular decisions.

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111. Interview with a German analyst, Berlin, February 19, 2020.

112. Christoph B. Schlitz, “Merkel freut sich zu früh über die Pipeline,” *Die Welt*, February 8, 2019, <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article188484971/Nord-Stream-2-Angela-Merkel- freut-sich-zu-frueh- ueber-die-Pipeline.html>.

113. Interview with a German activist, Berlin, February 21, 2020.

# Responses

## *Limited Pushback*

While Merkel's grand coalition has consistently supported sanctions and transatlantic solidarity against Russian attempts at disruption, it has taken a lower profile than some of its neighbors when it comes to speaking out against the role of Russian media outlets, online influence campaigns, and other efforts to shape German public opinion. Rather than hitting back at Russian-sponsored disinformation, Berlin's approach centers on pushing out a counter-narrative that emphasizes factual information and highlights German successes—an approach that benefits from the fact that Germans generally believe what their government says.<sup>114</sup>

Above all, Germany's response to disinformation emphasizes transparency rather than debunking. It reflects a conscious strategy of nonengagement, based on the dual calculation that (1) Germany is stable enough to live with some level of disinformation and (2) that seeking to refute every piece of nonsense pushed out or amplified by Russian sources would only provide additional attention to dubious sources of limited reach. This lower profile response also avoids replicating steps taken by bodies associated with the European Union or NATO such as the EU vs. Disinfo initiative or NATO's StratCom Center of Excellence, which Berlin also supports out of a belief that an active strategy for countering disinformation is more effective if pursued at the European or transatlantic level.

German officials, however, draw a sharp distinction between the ubiquitous disinformation that circulates online or in the media and the less numerous instances of disinformation being openly pushed by foreign officials. In these cases, Berlin has pushed back firmly and publicly. The most prominent examples include the "Lisa case," where Berlin decided that Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's intervention made the case a diplomatic issue that required public, high-level pushback, and a similar 2017 disinformation campaign aiming to stir up mistrust in Lithuania against German troops deployed to the country as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence, when Russian agents planted a false story alleging drunken German soldiers had raped a Lithuanian schoolgirl.<sup>115</sup> In other instances though, Berlin is generally content to leave the work of

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114. Interview with an SPD parliamentarian, Berlin, February 21, 2020.

115. Teri Schultz, "Why the 'fake rape' story against German NATO forces fell flat in Lithuania," Deutsche Welle,

fact-checking and debunking to civil society organizations, some of which receive funding from the German government. These include research institutes and think tanks such as the fact-checking group Correctiv and the Foundation for a New Responsibility (*Stiftung für Neue Verantwortung*), which aims to “strengthen the competencies of ministries and authorities in dealing with disinformation.”<sup>116</sup>

Meanwhile, the government itself emphasizes telling its own story and providing factual information instead of engaging with misleading stories. Rather than respond to every piece of fake news, the Foreign Ministry’s Office for Strategic Communication seeks to “provide reliable information . . . above all in the digital space . . . to ensure [our] own foreign policy values and interests remain visible.”<sup>117</sup> Germany pursues a similar approach outside its borders; among its other tasks, the Foreign Ministry carries out capacity-building efforts in partner states in Central and Eastern Europe and works with the government-sponsored Deutsche Welle platform to encourage the development of independent media outlets.<sup>118</sup>

The German government has also taken steps to boost its ability to respond to other kinds of state-sponsored disruption. Notably, German officials focus on developing these capabilities without specifically focusing on Russia (an acknowledgment that other state and non-state actors use similar tools).<sup>119</sup> The military’s 2016 white paper, adopted under the leadership of then-defense minister Ursula von der Leyen, called for developing “a hybrid analytical capability as well as corresponding defence readiness and capabilities,” including early warning mechanisms, “protection of critical infrastructure, reduced vulnerabilities in the energy sector, civil defence and disaster control issues, effective border controls, law and order ensured by the police, and rapidly deployable and operationally ready military forces.”<sup>120</sup> In 2016, Berlin also adopted a new cyber security strategy that, among other recommendations, called for establishing a national cyber response center under the Ministry of Interior’s Office for Information Security (*Bundesamt für Sicherheit in der Informationstechnik*, or BSI).<sup>121</sup> The following year, Berlin set up a new Cyber and Information Space Command as a full-fledged military service.<sup>122</sup> More recently, the BSI has been given a coordinating role within the government, though critics point out that its mandate emphasizes responding to cyber threats (such as hacking) rather than information security per se, and its ability to work with the military remains hobbled by long-standing German concerns about giving

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February 23, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/why-the-fake-rape-story-against-german-nato-forces-fell-flat-in-lithuania/a-37694870>.

116. Christina la Cour, “Governments Countering Disinformation: The Case of Germany,” Disinfo Portal, October 1, 2019, <https://disinfoportal.org/governments-countering-disinformation-the-case-of-germany/>.

117. “Außenpolitik strategisch kommunizieren: Werte und Interessen gezielter vermissen,” Germany Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 25, 2018, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/themen/-/2089138>.

118. Interview with officials from German Foreign Ministry, Berlin, February 20, 2020.

119. Ibid.

120. German Federal Government, *White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr* (Berlin, Germany: German Federal Government, 2016), <http://www.gmfus.org/file/8970/download>.

121. “Cyber Security Strategy for Germany,” German Ministry of the Interior, November 7, 2016, <https://www.enisa.europa.eu/topics/national-cyber-security-strategies/ncss-map/national-cyber-security-strategies-interactive-map/strategies/cyber-security-strategy-for-germany>.

122. Nina Werkhäuser, “German army launches new cyber command,” Deutsche Welle, April 1, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-army-launches-new-cyber-command/a-38246517>.

security agencies too much power.<sup>123</sup> All of these steps suggest an effort to develop new capabilities and greater coordination across agencies, even if the bulk of the work occurs out of the public eye and focuses on building resilience over the longer term rather than countering individual campaigns.

## *Social Media Regulation*

One of Germany's most distinctive and controversial responses to harmful online content is the so-called Network Enforcement Act (*Gesetz zur Verbesserung der Rechtsdurchsetzung in sozialen Netzwerken*, known as NetzDG), adopted by the Bundestag in June 2017. Among the most stringent social media regulations on the books in any Western state, NetzDG requires social media platforms with more than 2 million users to self-police by taking down extremist content or "junk news" within 24 hours or face potentially steep fines (up to 50 million euros). Companies that receive more than 100 complaints regarding unlawful content in a year must then publish biannual reports on their steps taken to comply with the law.<sup>124</sup>

NetzDG requires social media platforms to remove at least 20 varieties of content that is already considered illegal under German law (much of which would be permitted in other European states or the United States), including insults, defamation, incitement to criminal activity or hatred, and depictions of violence. As the legal scholar Stefan Theil points out, NetzDG merely provides a mechanism to enforce preexisting obligations to remove illegal content.<sup>125</sup> The law, however, requires social media companies themselves to make a determination as to whether specific content is illegal, a determination which is often not straightforward in a purely legal sense.<sup>126</sup> German authorities have also been discussing further amendments that would compel social media companies to not only remove illegal content but also alert law enforcement agencies of and potentially provide them with passwords for accounts from which such information is posted.<sup>127</sup>

Among democratic states, Germany is something of an outlier in its ability and willingness to regulate online content through measures such as NetzDG. Ever since the foundation of the Federal Republic in the wake of World War II, Germany has maintained strict prohibitions on hate speech and defamation, with few analogues in Western democracies.<sup>128</sup> It is this type of content rather than disinformation as such that NetzDG targets.

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123. Interview with German tech entrepreneur, Berlin, February 20, 2020.

124. Amélie Heldt, "Reading between the lines and the numbers: an analysis of the first NetzDG reports," *Internet Policy Review* 8, no. 2 (June 12, 2019), <https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/reading-between-lines-and-numbers-analysis-first-netzdg-reports>.

125. Stefan Theil, "The German NetzDG: A Risk Worth Taking?" *Verfassungsblog on Matters Constitutional*, February 8, 2018, <https://verfassungsblog.de/the-german-netzdg-a-risk-worth-taking/>.

126. Jannis Brühl and Caspar von Au, "Was das NetzDG mit Deutschland macht," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 27, 2018, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/digital/bilanz-was-das-netzdg-mit-deutschland-macht-1.4072480>.

127. "Da ist Deutschland nicht ganz unschuldig," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/digital/netz-dg-internetzensur-facebook-1.4840302>.

128. For an overview of these restrictions, see "Straftat Volksverhetzung: Ist Deutschland besonders streng?" BR24, December 19, 2019, <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/deutschland-welt/straftat-volksverhetzung-ist-deutschland- besonders-streng>.

Only if a specific piece of disinformation falls under one of the existing legal categories is a social media platform obliged to take it down. Consequently, it is unclear to what extent the law will make a meaningful impact on the propagation of Russian or other disinformation. German officials suggest that regulations specifically targeting online dissemination of disinformation should be adopted EU-wide, even if they remain uncertain how such regulations would work.<sup>129</sup>

The NetzDG specifically and the larger approach behind it have been the subject of much criticism from social media companies and civil society groups, both over the transfer of responsibility for content moderation to the companies themselves and for the potentially chilling effects on free speech.<sup>130</sup> Supporters, conversely, argue that NetzDG represents a reasonable compromise between a laissez-faire approach and blanket prohibitions and will “contribute to more inclusive debates by giving the loud and radical voices less prominence.”<sup>131</sup>

In the six months following the law’s adoption, social media companies received a large volume of requests to remove objectionable content, most of them focusing on hate speech or extremist content. Twitter received the largest number, 265,000, followed by YouTube with 215,000. Of those complaints, YouTube eventually removed 27 percent and Twitter only 10 percent.<sup>132</sup> While the impact of NetzDG and similar measures inside Germany remains disputed, the law has served as an inspiration for other states’ efforts to regulate social media, including, ironically, Russia itself, where the State Duma adopted a law with text directly copied from Germany’s NetzDG in the summer of 2017.<sup>133</sup> Other authoritarian rulers have pointed to the NetzDG to justify their own crackdowns on social media companies or new restrictions on content. The demonstration effect of the German law in other countries, particularly those with less developed rule of law systems, remains a source of unease within the German political establishment, even among officials who otherwise support the idea of regulating online content.

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129. Interview with officials from German Interior Ministry, Berlin, February 20, 2020.

130. “Germany: Flawed Social Media Law,” Human Rights Watch, February 14, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/14/germany-flawed-social-media-law>.

131. Theil, “The German NetzDG.”

132. Dorothee Bauman-Pauly, “German Companies Report on Implementation of New Hate Speech Law,” NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights, August 7, 2018, <https://bhr.stern.nyu.edu/blogs/2018/8/7/german-companies-report-on-the-implementation-of-new-hate-speech-law>.

133. “Russian bill is copy-and-paste of Germany’s hate speech law,” Reporters Without Borders, July 19, 2017, <https://rsf.org/en/news/russian-bill-copy-and-paste-germanys-hate-speech-law>.

# Resilience

The effects of Russian information and influence activities appear on the whole less pronounced in Germany than in many other states, including the United States. While Russia has pursued elite capture, cultivation of fringe groups, and disinformation tactics, German political cohesion is comparatively high, while support for nonmainstream groups is comparatively low, despite the niches that the AfD and *Die Linke* have carved out for themselves. Germany has high levels of social trust, an export-oriented economy that has not seen a large-scale outflow of blue-collar jobs, a strong social safety net, and a political landscape that has remained reasonably resistant to populism. The government is also generally trusted to act in the public interest. That political and social cohesion extends to the media environment. Compared to many other European states (not to mention the United States), traditional mainstream media outlets remain the primary sources of information for a high percentage of Germans, while reliance on social media is somewhat lower.<sup>134</sup>

Germany's relatively high levels of social and political cohesion leave fewer cleavages for Russia or other hostile actors to exploit. At the same time, the prevalence of support for good relations with Russia among much of the German political and business elite reduces the salience of disinformation and disruption as tools of influence. Germany, in other words, is resilient to many of the tactics that Moscow uses in weaker or more divided states but remains subject to Russian influence exercised through more traditional channels that are harder for any German government to disrupt.

## *A Comparatively Strong Political Center*

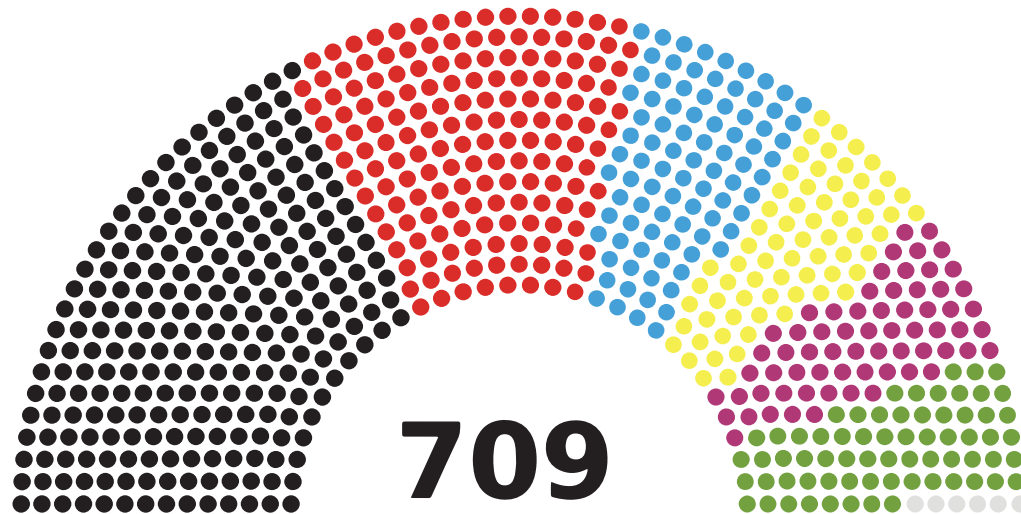
With a strong social safety net, an electoral system that mixes proportional representation and single-member districts, and a tradition of political compromise, Germany has avoided the worst of the polarization and surge of populism that has afflicted many other Western democracies since the start of the global financial crisis. While the two *Volksparteien* are no longer as dominant as they were in the post-World War II era, the center of the political spectrum remains strong relative to many other democratic states in Europe, Asia, and North America. The CDU/CSU and SPD have ruled in a grand coalition since 2013; between them, they currently control 399 of the 709 seats in the Bundestag. Nevertheless,

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134. Interview with a German analyst, Washington, January 27, 2020.



the share of the vote for both of the *Volksparteien* has declined precipitously over the past decade, and in particular since the 2015 refugee crisis. The main beneficiaries thus far have been the parties on the far right and far left of the political spectrum, AfD (with 94 seats) and Die Linke (69 seats), respectively. To maintain their standing in this environment, the CDU/CSU has moved further to the right and the SPD further to the left, leading some longtime elected officials with experience of compromise to contemplate retirement and opening the field to further polarization within and between the *Volksparteien* themselves.<sup>135</sup>



- Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union: 246 seats
- Social Democratic Party of Germany: 152 Seats
- Alternative for Germany: 89 Seats
- Free Democratic Party: 80 Seats
- The Left: 69 Seats
- The Greens: 67 Seats
- Independents: 6 Seats

Source: Public Domain via Wikipedia Commons

While real, the scale of such polarization should not be overstated, as the impact of populism in Germany has been comparatively modest, and neither AfD nor *Die Linke* is poised for a political breakthrough that would threaten wider instability. First, both of these parties have struggled to expand their support beyond core constituencies, especially in the western Länder. While the AfD sometimes polls around 20 percent in the east, most observers suggest its ceiling is not much higher than 10 percent in the more populous west, where even the 2015 refugee crisis did not cause its support to spike significantly (recently, support for the AfD has declined further in the wake of some high-profile attacks by far-right extremists).<sup>136</sup> As the other parties regard the AfD in its current form as radioactive, it seems clear they will not accept it as a coalition partner at the national level or—following the February 2020 debacle in Thuringia—at the state level.

Unlike the AfD, *Die Linke* has a more centrist wing that has helped the party gain some mainstream acceptance; one indicator of the shift is the party’s rising poll numbers

135. Interview with an SPD parliamentarian, Berlin, February 21, 2020.

136. Interview with a German scholar, Berlin, February 18, 2020; “Support for far-right AfD falls after Hanau attack in Germany,” Deutsche Welle, February 23, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/support-for-far-right-afd-falls-after-hanau-attack-in-germany/a-52485645>.

in the western Länder even as it has lost support in the east to the AfD. While the two Volksparteien have continued to ostracize it at the federal level, Die Linke (and its predecessor) have participated in state-level coalitions with the SPD in Berlin, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, and Brandenburg, while Bodo Ramelow has been a successful and popular minister president in Thuringia.<sup>137</sup> Even the CDU has raised the possibility of forming state-level coalitions with Die Linke in cases where the only other possible partner would be the AfD.<sup>138</sup> Politicians from the Volksparteien generally recognize that Die Linke, unlike the AfD, is not a threat to the constitutional order and that at some point they may need to accept it as a coalition partner at the federal level as well. In the meantime, they insist that mainstream acceptance requires Die Linke to abandon some stances that its potential mainstream partners regard as objectionable, such as opposition to NATO.<sup>139</sup>

The erosion of support for the Volksparteien has opened up space not only around the extremes but closer to the center of the political spectrum as well. As the SPD's share of the vote has declined across the country—as with traditional center-left parties across Europe—a kind of post-industrial center-left has consolidated around the Green Party, which as of early 2020 was outpolling the SPD (though its numbers have since fallen), suggesting it could play a role in a governing coalition after the next election.<sup>140</sup>

With a platform emphasizing environmental issues and a base drawn primarily from white-collar professionals, the Greens occupy a different niche than the traditionally working-class SPD. Their vigor has nonetheless prevented the complete fragmentation of the center-left that has cleared the deck for the rise of right-wing populists elsewhere. In addition to its strong commitment to environmental issues—including accelerating the shift to a post-carbon economy—the Greens' support for transparency, democratic values, and economic justice have made them the most consistently hostile to Russian influence of the major parties.

As with Emmanuel Macron's En Marche in France, the Greens have had some success reshaping and reconsolidating a political center outside the traditional left-right divide. Coupled with the thus-far partial "domestication" of Die Linke, the rise of the Greens suggests that Germany's transition from a two-party to a multiparty system may be able to avoid the extreme fragmentation and collapse of the center afflicting countries such as Italy, Poland, or Hungary—or even the United Kingdom. That less fragmented political space, where trust in mainstream politicians and institutions remains comparatively high, is one of Germany's most important sources of resilience against malign foreign influence.

### *The Prevalence of Mainstream Media*

The vigor of mainstream institutions in Germany extends to the media as well. In contrast to the United Kingdom or the United States, Germany's media market is notable for the

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137. Ben Knight, "Things to know about Germany's Left party," Deutsche Welle, August 9, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/things-to-know-about-germanys-left-party/a-40013805>.

138. Guy Chazan, "Germany's CDU considers regional talks with leftwing Die Linke," *Financial Times*, October 28, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/23d2a458-f964-11e9-a354-36acbbb0d9b6>.

139. Interview with an SPD parliamentarian, Berlin, February 21, 2020.

140. "German political poll tracker," *Financial Times*, <https://ig.ft.com/germany-poll-tracker/>.

reach and durability of traditional newspaper and broadcast outlets. While these outlets—especially the print media—advance a range of political views, including on relations with Moscow, they for the most part remain committed to the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Federal Republic’s Basic Law.

Nor has their market share been eroded by alternative and online media to the same degree as in many Western countries. The continued dominance of mainstream media in Germany acts as a check on the spread of disinformation and misinformation—though its gate-keeping role means that it can become an unwitting megaphone for disinformation that its fact checkers fail to root out.

Though their market share has been eroding over the past decade, Germany’s traditional newspapers (including their online platforms) remain in a comparatively strong position. The largest circulation newspapers include the tabloid *Bild*, along with *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), *Handelsblatt*, *Tagesszeitung*, and *Die Welt*. The weekly *Die Zeit* and the magazine *Der Spiegel* are also influential. While some papers have a moderate ideological leaning (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*’s editorial line places it close to the CDU, while *Die Zeit* is more aligned with the SPD), they do not have formal links to any party.<sup>141</sup> Levels of trust in mainstream media are generally high, though a high-profile scandal at *Der Spiegel* in 2018 coincided with an overall drop in trust figures.<sup>142</sup> Several of the leading outlets, including FAZ, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*, and *Der Spiegel* have Moscow bureaus. They are consequently able to publish first-hand reporting about Russia, which some argue also helps them resist falling prey to Russian-sponsored disinformation. Indeed, these papers’ have largely taken an editorial line critical of Russia’s wars in Ukraine and Syria and supportive of sanctions.<sup>143</sup>

The dominance of traditional media is especially pronounced on television, where, unlike in the United States, a large percentage of the population continues to turn to the state-run networks ARD and ZDF for news, which is delivered in a straightforward, politically neutral way. Close to one-third of Germans watch ARD’s evening news program *Tagesschau*.<sup>144</sup> Most of Germany’s 16 Länder also have their own state-run television and radio networks. With a less fragmented and more centrist-dominated media environment, Germany is a harder target for Russian (and other) disinformation campaigns—with the important exception of groups such as Russian-Germans and Turkish Gastarbeiter who get their news from non-German language sources.

Of course, Germany does have a vigorous alternative media landscape, one that includes far right, far left, and other perspectives. Alternative outlets of all stripes are gradually whittling away the market share of the traditional media, much as they have in other

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141. Barbara Thomaß and Christine Horz, “Germany,” *Media Landscapes*, <https://medialandscapes.org/country/germany/media/print>.

142. Nic Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2019* (Oxford, England: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2019), 86-87, [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/DNR\\_2019\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/DNR_2019_FINAL.pdf); on the Spiegel scandal, see Christopher F. Schuetze, “Der Spiegel to Press Charges Against Reporter Who Made Up Stories,” *New York Times*, December 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/23/world/europe/germany-der-spiegel-claas-relotius.html>.

143. Interview with a German journalist, Berlin, February 17, 2020.

144. “‘Tagesschau’ liegt auch 2015 bei den Zuschauern von,” *Digital Fernsehen*, December 30, 2015, <https://www.digitalfernsehen.de/news/medien-news/maerkte/tagesschau-liegt-auch-2015-bei-den-zuschauern-vorn-425584/>.

European countries and the United States. The far right is particularly well represented, with outlets such as Oschsenreiter's Zuerst! and the weekly Junge Freiheit occupying a secure niche, not to mention a plethora of blogs, chat rooms, and other online communications portals. Some of these outlets have been more willing to voice Russian narratives, whether from ideological-political or opportunistic reasons.<sup>145</sup> They have also played a large role in efforts to discredit the mainstream press—in part as a way of boosting their own profile and in part by being critical of the way traditional outlets have covered the war in Ukraine and Russia more generally. Still, their overall circulation is relatively small, and they have little cachet within the elite. Their ability to affect public opinion depends in large part on getting more influential outlets to pick up information or stories they have run. Indeed, one reason the “Lisa case” gained as much traction as it did in Germany was that mainstream outlets repeated some of the Russian accusations about the inadequacy of Berlin's response.

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145. Interview with a German activist, Berlin, February 21, 2020.

# Conclusions

Germany owes its comparative resilience in the face of Russian information operations to relatively high levels of social and political cohesion (including an unusually consolidated media environment) and a political leadership at once willing to take concrete steps to blunt the impact of Russian-backed information operations and wary of overreacting in ways that amplify the effects of disruption. At the same time, disruption plays a less prominent role in the Russian influence tool kit precisely because Moscow has other levers for influencing German politics and foreign policy, including members of the political elite who support closer relations and a web of business ties that build in interdependence.

The German model will be difficult for many other countries facing Russian influence activities to replicate. Germany's political and societal resilience result not from a single policy or even a coherent political strategy so much as from enduring institutional and cultural factors. A centrist political consensus and trust in mainstream media cannot be simply conjured into existence. Germany's geographic setting and legacy of acting as a bridge for Russian influence in Europe are also in many ways *sui generis*. More than with many other European countries, Moscow itself has a stake in maintaining good relations with Berlin, especially since large swathes of the German political establishment support at the very least a reduction of tensions, if not full normalization. As the Khangoshvili case demonstrated, the obverse of this interest in maintaining channels to Moscow is that when disruption does occur, Germany is more constrained in its ability to push back than a country such as the United Kingdom, which sees itself as having less at stake in the relationship, would be.

Germany is also approaching a crossroads, with its party system undergoing its most extensive transformation in the post-World War II era and Chancellor Merkel planning to step down before the end of 2021. The resulting uncertainty may open up new opportunities for Russian influence, including through information operations. Merkel's long chancellorship has provided not only continuity but also a principled opposition to Russian malign influence at home and the growth of Russian power in Europe (including Ukraine). For biographical and political reasons, Merkel stands apart from much of the prevailing discourse on Russia in German politics. While that discourse has hardened to a significant degree since 2014, the underlying belief in the importance of maintaining working relations with Moscow still endures. With Merkel's departure (and the spectacular collapse of Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer's campaign to replace her following the debacle

in Thuringia), a less assertive voice is likely to take over the CDU, which remains the most popular party in opinion polls and most likely will provide the next chancellor as well. Apart from the Greens, the other major parties will also, at the very least, not oppose efforts to restore Russian-German relations to a more stable footing. Developments in the United States will matter, too, as tensions with the Trump administration and growing questions about the durability of Washington's commitment to the transatlantic relationship reinforce arguments for improving relations with Moscow.

Germany's inflection point goes beyond Merkel's planned departure though. Germany too is experiencing the erosion of its post-World War II political consensus, if more languidly than in much of the rest of Europe. Declining support for the *Volksparteien* and the growth of a populist fringe on both the left and the right is the clearest evidence of this shift. Though not to the extent seen in the United States or United Kingdom, mistrust in Germany's mainstream media outlets is also growing. Perhaps most worryingly is an upsurge in political violence, especially targeting Muslims and immigrants. These developments suggest that many of the assumptions guiding German politics, which have contributed to Germany's resilience in the face of Russian influence activities, are in a state of flux.

A future Germany with a less consolidated political center is one where angst about topics such as immigration, the burden of caring for an aging population, and fiscal outlays to help other European countries cope with the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic all provide points of entry for disinformation. As it has elsewhere, Russia is likely to try taking advantage of the opportunities such epistemic fragmentation presents, even as it continues working through long-established channels of influence. On the other hand, Russian influence is far from the greatest danger that a more polarized, politically volatile Germany would face.

## About the Author

**Jeffrey Mankoff** is a non-resident associate of the CSIS Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program. His areas of expertise include international security, Russian foreign policy, regional security in Eurasia, ethnic conflict, and energy security. Mankoff is the author of *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009, 2011). His forthcoming book, *Empires of Eurasia: How Imperial Legacies Shape International Security* (Yale, 2021), examines the impact of the imperial past on Chinese, Iranian, Russian, and Turkish politics and foreign policy. He also writes frequently for *Foreign Affairs*, *War on the Rocks*, CNN, and other outlets.

Until May 2020, Mankoff was a senior fellow with the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program. He previously served as an adviser on U.S.-Russia relations at the U.S. Department of State as a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow, and was from 2008 to 2010 associate director of International Security Studies at Yale University and an adjunct fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. He also held the John M. Olin National Security Fellowship at Harvard University (2006-07) and the Henry Chauncey Fellowship at Yale University (2007-08). Mankoff received BA degrees in international studies and Russian from the University of Oklahoma, and an MA, MPhil, and PhD in diplomatic history from Yale University. He is a Truman National Security Fellow and a past Term Member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

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