

CASE COMPETITION

Mis- and Disinformation in Germany:

Disinformation Dynamics, the
far-right, and Russian Information
Warfare



Practical Information

This document contains important information that you will need to know in order to participate in the competition and it does provide an overview of the specifics of the case itself. The specific problem question or challenge that you will be addressing will be provided at the start of the competition and will be the foundation for your analysis and proposed solutions. So keep an eye out for the case information and make sure to review it carefully before starting your analysis.

Make sure you have a clear understanding of the competition format, timeline, and rules. This information will be provided to you at the beginning of the competition and it's important that you familiarize yourself with it as soon as possible. Pay attention to any specific guidelines on how to structure your presentation. Make sure to ask any questions you may have in advance to avoid any confusion during the competition.

Be prepared to work efficiently and collaboratively with your team. Effective communication and teamwork are key to success in this competition. Use your time wisely and delegate tasks based on each team member's strengths. Don't be afraid to ask for help if you're struggling with a particular aspect of the case. Remember, you're all in this together and your success depends on how well you work as a team.

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INTRODUCTION

Exposure to dis- and misinformation presents several challenges not only for individuals but for the entire liberal democratic system. Indeed, the spread of fake news has been identified as one of the top perils in contemporary democracies (World Economic Forum, 2014). A growing body of research has linked exposure to disinformation with the promotion of right-wing extremism (see Hollewell & Longpré, 2022; Scrivens, 2022; Monsees, 2020; Caiani & Parenti, 2009); an increase in distrust in democratic institutions and journalism (see Monsees, 2023; Azzimonti & Fernandes, 2022; Tandoc Jr. et al., 2021); exacerbation of polarisation (see Au et al., 2022; Azzimonti & Fernandes, 2022); and even public health risks and dangers, as observed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nelson et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be said that dis- and misinformation constitute a threat to national and international security (Sarts, 2021). Moreover, this challenge has reached a global scale rather than being simply a localized phenomenon, and it has been intensified by the rising presence, influence, and institutionalization of far-right parties across the world (see Monsees, 2023; Hof, 2022).

Furthermore, it should be noted that dis- and misinformation plays a significant role in digital propaganda and hybrid warfare. More specifically, Russia has been using fake news as a weapon, spreading disinformation through platforms like Facebook and Sputnik to undermine liberal democracies and support far-right parties and organizations (see Elshehawy et al., 2022; Lohmann, 2019; Juhász & Szicherle, 2017). This is particularly important in the context of the war in Ukraine, in which Russia has already started disseminating propaganda that questions the role of the EU and its allies in Ukraine (Monsees, 2023).

Having briefly introduced the contemporary challenges posed by mis- and disinformation dynamics, let us narrow down the scope to a single case that can be found at the heart of Europe. Germany is considered to be a key player in both the political and economic spheres of Europe. Politically, it is the largest and most populous member state of the European Union, and its leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the direction and policies of the EU. Economically, Germany is the largest economy in Europe and one of the largest in the world, with a highly developed and export-oriented manufacturing sector (World Bank, 2022), making it also a significant contributor to the EU budget.

Nonetheless, Germany's crucial role in the international arena has not prevented the country from undergoing significant domestic challenges, some of them posed by the rising popularity of far-right political parties, such as AfD, along with the increasing radicalization and violence among the population (see Decker et al., 2022). Moreover, Germany has not been exempted from suffering Russia's interference in its domestic affairs, as was observed in the "Lisa Case" or during the 2017 German elections (Elshehawy et al., 2022; Juhász & Szicherle, 2017), where Russia disseminated fake news, conspiracy theories, and antiliberal propaganda that fueled the rise of the AfD and which have been considered as a strategy used by Russia to destabilize the whole European Union (Elshehawy et al., 2022).

Besides benefiting from the dissemination of fake news and illiberal propaganda by third parties (e.g., Russia), the AfD has been found to also play a very active role in broadcasting and sharing fake and junk news and illiberal propaganda distributed over social media platforms (see Neudert et al., 2017). Moreover, such fake news disseminated by AfD and its radical supporters targets political opponents and democratic processes, as well as racial minorities, leading to a significant decline of public trust in media along with an increase of distrust in politicians and a general diminishing faith in public institutions, among others (Edelman, 2022; Yerlikaya & Toker Aslan, 2020; Mason et al., 2018).

THE CASE

On the 7th of December 2022, twenty-five far-right extremists were arrested for an attempted coup d'état in the Reichstag. The organizing group, the Patriotic Union, is a part of a broader movement to reinstate a monarchist government in Germany and return to the tradition of the German Empire. This movement includes a variety of far-right actors such as former AfD members, aristocracy, and military and police personnel. Upon inspecting the motives of the terrorists, investigators discovered a widespread belief in right-wing and deep state conspiracy theories on Reichsbuerger, QAnon, COVID-19, the Holocaust. The amalgamation of these beliefs and theories has driven this group to believe that modern-day Germany is illegitimate and under military occupation and that they must take a stand against the so-called nefarious German government.

Exploring how mis- and disinformation are disseminated is essential for understanding how these extremist movements grow and manifest. When it comes to Germany, social media and alternative forms of information websites and software are particularly important to consider. Russia Today (RT), for instance, circumvents its EU-wide ban in Germany by having its articles be distributed through large Telegram chat groups - which does keep the misinformation insular to the circles which used the software, but still spreadable. Telegram and other chat group software have also been important in permitting extremist far-right groups to coordinate, assemble, and attempt actions like the 7th December coup-attempt. While we understand that the flow of information happens on clandestine and unmoderated platforms such as Signal, Telegram, and 4chan, it is difficult to infiltrate these groups and penalize false news as they can swiftly leave the group, platform, or account. Rather, we'd like to focus on the bodies that instrumentalize this information for their own purposes.

We consider the following three sources to be feeding into popular disinformation that leads to undemocratic backlash such as the December coup attempt in the Reichstag. The first being AfD as a far-right political party; the second being German conspiracy and neo-Nazi parties/groups; and the third being Russia and its information warfare strategy which are present in both online spheres and on the ground with rallies and demonstrations. These three strands intersect and interact on multiple levels, with the dis- and misinformation that they regurgitate usually being used by the other on some other medium or format. In the following section we outline each group's specific themes, messages, target audience, and communication tactics in addition to their relationship with the coup attempt in December 2022.

Alternativ für Deutschland (AfD)

Alternative for Germany (AfD) is the most prominent and successful far-right populist party in Germany. They entered the political stage in 2013 and have had varied electoral success since winning 94 seats in the 2017 federal election and 81 in the 2021 federal election. Today, they are the fifth largest party, represented in 15 out of 16 state parliaments and enjoy 13% overall voter support (Witting, 2023). Their voter base is made up of people who are typically older, unemployed, less educated, religious and living in rural areas (Wolff & Roth, 2017). The party membership is 80% male and concentrated in the Eastern part of Germany.

AfD runs on a platform of nationalism and conservative socio-economic policies and aims to protect Western identity and German culture. They oppose migration, European integration, same-sex marriage, and cultural pluralism and champion nativism and neoliberalism. AfD has become an outlet for a variety of political actors looking to rebel against the liberal centre-right establishment. The party suffers from frequent leadership changes and fictionalization. A radical off-shoot of the party, Der Flügel (The Wing), has even been determined as an extremist party in court and therefore can be placed under surveillance (Witting, 2023).

In the face of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, AfD leadership has come out with support towards Putin. In addition to this, AfD lawmakers have backed this support by resolutely opposing military support, such as arms deliveries, for Ukraine (Jackson, 2022).

Relationship to the Coup Attempt

Birgit Malsack-Winkemann, an established politician in the AfD, was one of the key figures in the Patriotic Union's coup attempt and has since been arrested. Malsack-Winkemann, a former judge, has been a member of the AfD since 2013 and has grown through the party ranks, even acting as a member in the Bundestag from 2017-2021. It has been reported that Malsack-Winkemann would have become justice minister under the regime of Heinrich XIII Prinz Reuss if the coup had succeeded (Chambers & Marsh, 2022). Since her arrest, the AfD has criticized Malsack-Winkemann's involvement in the coup and distanced itself from her, however, this was not the first time she showed tendencies for conspiracies. During the pandemic, Malsack-Winkemann played into those protesting the anti-COVID measures, even going as far as claiming that a 13-year-old girl collapsed while on a bus because she was wearing a mask (Reuters, 2023).

There are other indications that there is an overlap between AfD politicians and dangerous conspiracy theories. AfD lawmaker, Johannes Huber, has allegedly been active in Telegram groups discussing conspiracy theories related to those that fueled the ideology of the Patriotic Union (Lawton, 2020). Relative to other established German political parties, AfD reveals an environment more conducive to conspiracy thinking and radical ideologies that muddle truth and threaten democracy, endangering credibility in democratic institutions.

Relationship to Disinformation

AfD as a party does not explicitly promote conspiracy theories, but rather the party employs an anti-establishment rhetoric that sows doubt and fear amongst the public that feeds the legitimacy of conspiracy theories promoted by their far-right extremist counterparts. AfD aims to promote claims of political corruption, bias, and crime to instigate instability and raise their profile as a party that speaks out for ‘the normal people’.

Examples of this are AfD’s attempts at spreading fear around mail-in ballots during the 2021 election. This tactic, similar to that of former US President Trump, implied that there were powerful actors who were looking to manipulate electoral outcomes (Jaursch, 2021; Colliver et al., 2021). Furthermore, AfD politicians amplified fears of election fraud by reposting anonymous claims of in-person ballot tampering in Twitter, despite the Tweet using a photo of a U.S. polling station. Overall, during the 2021 federal election a wave of disinformation regarding electoral fraud was spread at high rates and particularly in circles of AfD voters (Scott, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, like many far-right parties, the AfD criticized the German government’s lockdown response as hysteria which promoted their party to all those denying the existence or danger of the COVID-19 virus (Cain, 2021). While these may be regarded as smaller infractions by AfD politicians their involvement gives credence to the claims of more extreme and right-wing groups and influencers in Germany.

German Conspiracy & Neo-Nazi Groups

While these groups are inherently hard to define due to their clandestine organization strategies, we shall consider them around the conspiracy theories related to QAnon, Reichsbuerger, The Great Replacement theory and COVID-19. They share a belief of deep state secrets and corruption and cite migration and feminism as key issues of our time. These groups find themselves almost entirely online, using websites and messaging software like Discord, 4chan, and Gab to discuss and disseminate their beliefs. These messaging and forum services usually have reduced monitoring and moderating, which allows for these extremist groups to spread their conspiracy theories, anti-minority beliefs, and calls to violent actions unchecked and without supervision.

Relationship to the Coup Attempt

The Reichsbuerger (Patriotic Union) - the group behind the coup attempt in December 2022 - is known for having borrowed heavily from ideas and theories touted by QAnon, the lead American conspiracy group. Much of the group’s organization and planning is noted to have been online, where anonymous adherents number in the tens of thousands. Peter Neumann finds that while before the pandemic these different extremist, conspiracist, and Neo-Nazi groups may have operated in separate circles, the pandemic blurred the lines and started a merging process of views and ideas. Opposition to the lockdown appears to have united them to an extent, which materialized with the 2022 coup attempt. While they may still be objectively separate groups, they have meshed together far more than in the past, making it difficult for government services to see where one group ends and another begins.

Relationship to Disinformation

What is most interesting is the level of dissemination of QAnon theories in Germany over the past decade. “The second most used language in QAnon chat rooms on Telegram is German. The second most translated language of QAnon videos and documents is German,” says Peter Neumann, a specialist in conspiracy-theories in the US and Germany. The spread of QAnon in the German-speaking world is something that has increasingly caught the attention of specialists and German authorities alike. Many extremist groups in the country either share the same circles as QAnon or borrow heavily ideologically from the conspiracists, thus making German society particularly exposed to mis- and disinformation flows in the aforementioned platform.

Russian Information Warfare (since 2014)

“Russian information warfare” is a type of warfare that involves the use of propaganda, disinformation, and other deceptive tactics to manipulate public opinion and advance Russia's geopolitical interests. This tactic has been employed by the Russian government for decades but has become more prominent in recent years with the widespread use of social media and digital technologies. The Russian government uses a variety of methods in its information warfare, such as spreading false or misleading news stories, creating fake social media accounts to amplify pro-Russian narratives, hacking and leaking sensitive information, and using trolls to influence public opinion. The goal of Russian information warfare is to sow discord and confusion among Western countries, undermine confidence in democratic institutions, and promote pro-Russian sentiment both domestically and internationally (Lohmann, 2019).

In the context of the War in Ukraine, the Russian government has been promoting conspiracy theories blaming Ukraine and the West for the Ukraine war, and downplaying Russia's involvement. For instance, Russia Today (RT), a state media outlet with a large international audience, spreads this type of narrative. In Germany, RT DE, a major source of Russian disinformation within the conspiracy-ideological milieu in Germany, has been using its Telegram channel to share stories portraying Ukraine and the West negatively and Russia as a victim of aggression, raising concerns about Russian propaganda and influencing public opinion (Rathje et al., 2022).

Despite the European Union has taken various measures to restrict the reach of RT and its subsidiaries due to concerns about its editorial independence and its role in spreading disinformation, RT DE has continued to operate by circumventing these bans through different strategies, such as registering its website in countries outside the EU, using social media platforms to distribute its content, collaborating with other media outlets to distribute its content indirectly, or using mirror sites to circumvent EU bans (EDMO, 2022).

Relationship to the Coup Attempt

Although no empirical evidence linking Russia with the failed coup carried out in Germany in December last year exists, some links between the plotters and the Kremlin have been identified. For instance, the alleged plotters, who were adherents of the far-right Reichsbürger movement, have been found to be in contact with Russian representatives in both Russia and Germany to seek support for their coup plot against the German government (ISD, 2022). Furthermore, [Jakob Guhl](#), ISD Research Manager, explained that while the German extreme far-right has a divided view of the Russian government, conspiracy theorists such as Reichsbürger and QAnon are generally pro-Kremlin. More specifically, among the 25 arrested was Birgit Malsack-Winkemann, a former member of the German parliament for the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which has some factions that support Vladimir Putin as a strong Christian traditional ruler who is standing up to liberalism.

Relationship to Disinformation

It is believed that Russia has been using misinformation and disinformation tactics to influence public opinion, sow discord, and undermine trust in democratic institutions in Germany. Specifically, there have been allegations that Russia has been involved in spreading fake news and propaganda through social media and other online platforms. In 2015, a Russian propaganda news outlet falsely claimed that a 13-year-old Russian-German girl had been abducted and raped by Muslim migrants in Berlin, sparking a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment and protests in Germany (Juhász & Szicherle, 2017). In order to illustrate this, the following cases can be used as examples:



In 2016, the German government accused Russia of being behind a cyberattack on the German parliament, which led to the theft of confidential documents and data (see Meister, 2016).



In 2016, a report by the German intelligence warned that Russia was using disinformation to influence public opinion, including through the use of social media bots and fake news stories (see [EUROACTIV, 2016](#)).



In 2018, a group of researchers published a study that found evidence of Russian interference in the German election through the use of fake news and propaganda on social media (see Brattberg & Maurer, 2018).

These efforts are thought to be part of Russia's broader campaign to undermine Western democracies and assert its influence on the world stage. However, it is important to note that the extent and impact of Russia's use of disinformation and misinformation in Germany is a subject of ongoing debate and investigation.

Social Media Platforms tie all Three Streams Together

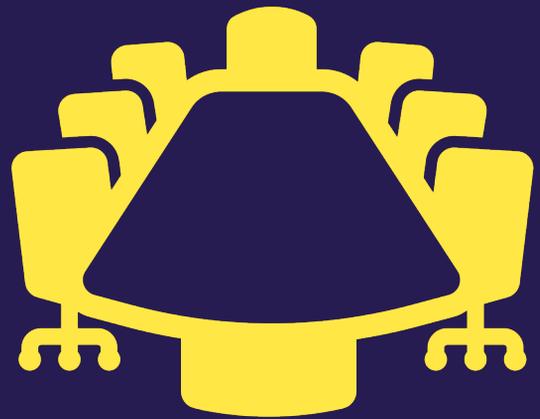
The streams of disinformation outlined above are distinct in their political purpose, yet frequently overlap and mix on online platforms. AfD supporters, neo-Nazi groups, and pro-Russian actors all find themselves affiliated with active online communities on alternative social media platforms, such as 4chan, 8chan, Telegram, Discord, and VK. These platforms have limited overhead moderation and have ample opportunity for anonymity making it a comfortable space to voice illiberal perspectives (Sarts, 2022). Currently, there are between 15 000 and 50 000 German speaking individuals that hold far-right beliefs interacting on these platforms. Here, they share news and theories in addition to “coordinating disinformation campaigns, harassment campaigns against female politicians and online content creation and meme campaigns to influence elections and political discourse” (Guhl et al., p. 7, 2020). While the majority of content spread on these platforms is categorized as non-violent and not obviously illegal, they spread dangerous ideas that can create motives for physical violence, such as the Patriotic Union coup attempt.

One notable issue with discussing and assessing these disinformation flows and their consequences is the difficulty to measure these flows empirically and accurately. As many of these sources' faucets are located on the dark-web and private chat/group software, it remains difficult to find relevant details which prove the linkages and intersections between the three aforementioned sources. While German lawmakers have started on policy interventions, such as the NetzDG bill, to stop online hate speech these are frequently criticized as draconian and censorship (Echikson & Knodt, 2018). Nevertheless, in a vacuum and based on the information we do have, it is easy to assume that these sources intersect, with (dis)information generated being shared between these strands and across the different platforms on which they are present.

Problem Statement

Think of yourself as an expert on mis- and disinformation dynamics as well as on the far-right and Russian information warfare. Due to increasing exposure to disinformation and after the tensions posed by the last coup attempted by the far-right last December, you have been invited to participate in a unique opportunity to be part of a multidisciplinary team that will provide advice to the government on how to tackle the rising risk of mis- and disinformation in Germany. Your expertise and diverse backgrounds are precisely what the government is looking for to help tackle this complex and multidimensional problem. As participants in this case competition, you will have the chance to work collaboratively with experts from a variety of fields and address one of the most pressing challenges of our time. We are confident that your contributions will make a significant impact and help the German Government navigate the challenges of mis- and disinformation in German society.

Hence, this **case competition** challenges participants to **develop multidisciplinary and innovative solutions** that address a **specific problem** which emerges from **mis- and disinformation**. As a participant, you and your team will be tasked with **designing strategies, technologies, or policies** that can effectively **combat fake news**, counteract **far-right ideology**, and **prevent foreign interference** in the democratic process. The competition will evaluate submissions based on their **effectiveness, feasibility, scalability**, and **originality**. The ultimate goal is to **identify and support promising solutions** that can **impact** this complex and **critical challenge**.



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