

# Impact of Russian Disinformation in Germany

It is no secret that disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) pose long-term threats to liberal democracies. Since the start of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, Russian propaganda in the West and in Germany has taken on a different dimension. It aims to undermine Western democracy, stir up fear, and weaken the support for Ukraine.

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There is no question that an institutional defense mechanism against propaganda should be strengthened to boost the resilience of societies and the state. Unfortunately, in the past, the dangers of Russian propaganda have not been taken seriously enough in Germany, both among the population and in politics. This article describes the main instruments of Russian propaganda in Germany, their impact on society and politics, and the strategies Berlin is pursuing to combat disinformation and FIMI.

## Means and Methods of Russian Propaganda in Germany

Russian propaganda has various methods and instruments to influence public opinion in Germany. Russian propaganda has been systematically pursued in Germany, particularly since the start of the war of aggression against Ukraine.

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# Far-right AfD makes big gains in German regional elections

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co-leader of the AfD, said the gains were a breakthrough moment, showing that "AfD is no longer an extremist phenomenon, but a mainstream party."

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cultural associations, oligarchs, foundations, and think tanks. The narratives and disinformation mainly focus on allegations, stereotypes, texts, and videos with content in line with Russia's propaganda message box, which aims to convince, scare, and alarm the German public.

The Russian state's foreign television channel, [Russia Today \(RT\)](#), has proven to be a particularly successful player since the start of the Russian invasion in 2014. In March 2022, the European Union [decided](#) to ban RT across Europe for distorting facts and attempts at destabilization. Nevertheless, the broadcaster can still be accessed as RT DE provided its users with detailed information on how to circumvent the restrictions. In February 2023, the online content was [available](#) on six pages with different URLs. Interview guests and guest authors who regularly published on RT DE can still be found on "alternative media," such as the YouTube channel *InfraRot Medien - Sicht ins Dunkel* and the blog *Anti-Spiegel*, as well as Alina Lipp's *Neues aus Russland*. All of these actors are Putin supporters who justify the war in Ukraine.

Crisis topics are also trendy: refugees, energy, and inflation. The German government is notoriously portrayed as incompetent, and a lot of attention is [given](#) to anti-NATO and anti-American narratives. According to the [study](#) conducted in 2022, almost one in five people surveyed in Germany agreed with the statement that the Russian war of aggression was a reaction by Russia to a provocation by NATO, while 21% partially agreed. In total, almost 40% of those surveyed agreed with the Russian version either fully or partially.

Another influential instrument of Russian propaganda in Germany is "fake accounts," which deliberately [spread](#) false information about Ukraine and attempt to influence domestic politics. Fake links often [use](#) the logos of German and international online magazines (Spiegel, Welt, Bild, and Daily Mail) while spreading pro-Russian propa-

ganda. With such coordinated influence campaigns, Russia is attempting to manipulate German society's opinion and influence political decisions in the Kremlin's interests.

In January 2024, the German Foreign Ministry [uncovered](#) a massive Russian campaign of lies on the X platform. In September 2023, a [tweet](#) was allegedly spread by German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock that "the war in Ukraine will be over in three months." It is estimated that over 50,000 fake accounts and one million tweets in the German language are used by Russian propaganda channels to manipulate public opinion. There is also evidence of the use of artificial intelligence. With the European elections and three state elections in eastern Germany coming up, where the pro-Putin and right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) is expected to receive a significant number of votes (according to the latest polls, around 30%), there is a high risk that Russia could intervene in the election campaigns to distort the electoral results.

## German Domestic Politics and Russian Propaganda

Russian propaganda often relies on open letters, petitions, and calls for peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, which the West allegedly prevents. The left-wing politician Sahra Wagenknecht often uses the distorted statements of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, or Western politicians, which are usually taken out of context and proliferated by Russian propaganda media. Wagenknecht has repeatedly claimed that the Ukrainian president is against peace negotiations and publicly [advocated](#) stopping all arms exports to Ukraine to push it to the negotiation table. Her party - *Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance - Reason and Justice*, founded in January 2024, already has 6% nationwide, which indicates that it could be [elected](#) to the Bundestag in 2025 and the Europe-

an Parliament in June 2024. The European elections manifesto of Wagenknecht's party rejects Ukraine's accession to the EU and emphasizes that the war in Ukraine is a bloody proxy war between NATO and Russia.

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The Manifesto for Peace in Ukraine, [written](#) by Wagenknecht and supported by one of the leaders of the right-wing populist AfD, also advocates for suspending military support to Ukraine. On 25 February 2023, the manifesto drew over 13,000 persons near the Brandenburg Gate, causing intense debates in the German media and political spectrum. Such manifestos and similar undertakings are successfully used by the alternative press against Ukraine and the West to scare the population with the possibility of a nuclear war with Russia. It is clear that anti-Western narratives and the message that the West is to blame for the war, spearheaded by the Russian propaganda machine, are finding fertile ground among the radical right and left electorate in Germany.

Following Chancellor Olaf Scholz's public rejection of the delivery of Taurus missiles to Ukraine, the Russian media [published](#) a wiretapped recording of a Webex conversation of German military officers. Among other topics, the conversation discussed whether Taurus missiles would be technically capable of destroying the bridge built by Russia connecting the Russian mainland with the Crimean Peninsula. They also discussed whether Ukraine could manage the shelling without the involvement of the Bundeswehr, for example, in target programming. The recording also [revealed](#) that there is no green light at the polit-

ical level for the delivery of the cruise missiles to Ukraine.

It is clear that the Taurus affair demonstrated the Kremlin's power by showing that the FSB could listen to the German generals and their communication system. The question remains about where else and how deeply the FSB carries out such surveillance operations in Germany. Furthermore, it is certainly no coincidence that the recording was published a day after Navalny's funeral and the [revelations](#) about the Wirecard scandal. However, a major goal of this leak was to ensure that Taurus missiles would not be sent to Ukraine.

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The Kremlin has thus created an atmosphere in which the majority of the German population is even more opposed to the delivery of the Taurus missiles to Ukraine; according to recent [surveys](#), 59% of Germans are against it, and only 34% are in favor. In addition, the Taurus affair ensured that the Chancellor continued to categorically rule out the Taurus delivery despite increasing opposing opinions in the governing coalition and the CDU-CSU faction. The affair also reinforces Chancellor Scholz's fears that the missiles could be fired at targets in Russia without German control and that Germany would thus be drawn into the war. In doing so, he is, above all, signaling mistrust towards his Ukrainian partners. And sowing distrust between Ukraine and Germany is clearly a goal Russian propaganda aspires to achieve.

The Taurus affair demonstrated how pro-Russian forces in Germany embraced the Russian narrative that the German military was preparing for

a war of aggression against Russia. Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), Dietmar Bartsch (Linke), and Tino Chrupalla (AfD), despite different political platforms, gladly [embraced](#) this spin, which originated in Moscow from the Russian propaganda media. Russian propagandists, like Dmitrii Kiseliov, [threatened](#) to retaliate against Germany and hit such targets as the Fehmarnbelt Bridge, the Hohenzollern Bridge in Cologne, the Rugen Bridge, and the Magdeburg Water Bridge. When German politicians start repeating Russian propaganda's talking points, the disinformation proliferates and is a lot harder to counter.

## Institutional Response to Russian Propaganda

Since the beginning of 2022, the German government has expanded its efforts to combat disinformation at the institutional level. The Federal Foreign Office [plays](#) an important role in this, focusing on disinformation and FIMI originating from foreign states. The Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI) coordinates the detection of and defense against hybrid threats, particularly disinformation, across the departments. The BMI's activities include the Link to Factchecker on the federal government's website, regular press briefings on the topic, and outreach to the Parliament. The Minister of the Interior presented a strategy against right-wing extremism in February 2024, which, among other things, includes the establishment of an early detection unit of the federal government to identify foreign disinformation campaigns well in advance.

In February 2024, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock took a further step against Russian cyber propaganda with her French and Polish colleagues, Stéphane Séjourné and Radoslaw Sikorski. The three countries agreed on a joint early warning mechanism against Russian troll attacks.

During the European elections, the French government expects a massive increase in Russian activities aimed at disinformation and influencing popular opinions in multiple European countries. [According](#) to the French Ministry of Defense, we are “only at the beginning of a major wave of fake news.” Given the tense relationship between France and Germany over the Taurus issue, the public received the revival of the so-called “Weimar Triangle” positively.

There are encouraging signs at the state and civil society level, especially after 22 February 2022, that the threat of Russian propaganda is taken seriously in Germany. According to March 2024 [data](#), 82% of the German population considers Russia's attempts to influence politics in Germany with false information and intelligence activities to be very dangerous or dangerous. In addition to creating new strategies and coordination centers, increasing attention is paid to education in schools and universities aimed at strengthening media literacy. Prebunking is one of the most successful means of defusing disinformation. It provides an opportunity to take proactive action against false information before it is spread and to sensitize people and strengthen their resilience to propaganda content.

Nevertheless, more vigilance and political will from the democratic center would be desirable to educate people about the danger of Russian disinformation, objectively describe how the Kremlin is endangering the European security architecture, and explain what it would mean for Germany if Putin won the war in Ukraine.

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More courage is now required in politics, civil society, and the media to jointly combat Russia's hybrid war against the West and with long-term results. The campaign for the 2025 federal elections has already unofficially begun. The Taurus missile affair and the analysis of Russian propa-

ganda during the last two years show that the fear of being dragged into the war affects political decision-making and discourse in Germany. The German public appears just as vulnerable to Russian foreign information manipulation and interference as any other European nation ■