



# GDI

**State of  
Disinformation:  
Germany**  
*June 2025*

## **Content Warning**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Key Features and Media Landscape</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Freedom of the Press</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Disinformation Risk Elements</b>	<b>6</b>
Key narrative clusters	6
<b>Policy and Legal Landscape</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Platform Compliance and Enforcement</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Audience Behaviour and Engagement</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Adversarial Narratives in Germany</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Civic Integrity</b>	<b>12</b>
Summary	12
Civic Integrity Narratives	12
Hate Speech and Bigotry	13
Summary	13
Hate Speech and Bigotry Narratives	13
<b>Conspiracy Theories</b>	<b>14</b>
Summary	14
Conspiracy Theory Narratives	14
<b>Environmentalism</b>	<b>14</b>
Summary	14
Environmentalism Narratives	14
<b>Foreign Influence and Narrative Engineering</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>China</b>	<b>15</b>
Type of state involvement	15
Narrative examples	16
Impact	16
Russia	17

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Type of state involvement	17
Narrative examples	18
Impact	19
Turkey	19
Type of State Involvement	19
Narrative examples	20
Impact	20
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>21</b>

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# Key Features and Media Landscape

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In 2023, Germany's digital advertising market was valued at 13.4 billion euros, representing 12.7 per cent of total advertising spend.<sup>1</sup> Television and print media still hold larger shares, but digital advertising is growing, especially programmatic advertising.<sup>2</sup> Germany ranks third in Western Europe in terms of its share of European digital ad spending. Telecommunication and food sectors were top spenders, with continued growth expected across retail, travel, and consumer goods.

Germany's media market is diverse, with a roughly 100 million audience reach. Regulatory oversight from the Commission on Concentration in the Media ensures no single actor exceeds 30 per cent market control. Major players include Bertelsmann, Burda Media, ARD, United Internet, and Axel Springer.<sup>3</sup> Print media consumption declined from 63 per cent in 2013 to 20 per cent in 2024, while news consumed on social media news rose from 18 per cent to 34 per cent. Despite this shift, publicly funded media like ARD and ZDF remain the most consumed and trusted news sources. Nonetheless, public trust in media declined from 60 per cent in 2015 to 43 per cent in 2024. Germans report feeling more worn out by news, which aligns with global trends.<sup>4</sup>

## Freedom of the Press

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Germany ranks high globally for press freedom, but went from 10 to 11th place in the Reporters Without Borders Index in 2025 due in part to increased violence against journalists.<sup>5</sup> Since the COVID-19 pandemic, attacks have risen, with 89 violent cases reported in 2024 compared to 41 in 2023.<sup>6</sup> Online harassment largely goes unpunished. Also, legal reforms, such as the BND

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<sup>1</sup> Statista. "Digital Share of Ad Spend in Germany 2020-2024," May 14, 2025.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/388699/digital-advertising-share-of-ad-spend-in-germany/>

<sup>2</sup> GTAI Germany Trade & Invest. 2025. "Advertising Industry Germany," 2025.

<https://www.gtai.de/en/invest/industries/digital-economy/advertising-industry>.

<sup>3</sup> Euromedia Ownership Monitor. "Germany - Euromedia Ownership Monitor," August 31, 2023.

<https://media-ownership.eu/findings/countries/germany/>.

<sup>4</sup> Newman, Nic, Richard Fletcher, Craig T. Robertson, Amy Ross Arguedas, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024." Reuters Institute, University of Oxford. 2024.

[https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ\\_DNR\\_2024\\_Digital\\_v10%20lr.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ_DNR_2024_Digital_v10%20lr.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Reporters Without Borders. "Germany." RSF. September 4, 2025. <https://rsf.org/en/country/germany>.

<sup>6</sup> Reporters Without Borders. "NAHAUFNAHME RSF-REPORT ZUR LAGE DER PRESSEFREIHEIT IN DEUTSCHLAND," 2025. RSF.

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Act, raised concerns over journalist surveillance and source confidentiality, prompting a complaint to the European Court of Human Rights by RSF and the GFF.<sup>7</sup>

## Disinformation Risk Elements

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A range of actors, both domestic and foreign, contribute to disinformation in Germany:

- Political leaders from the AfD and BSW promote narratives that extend beyond parliamentary norms.
- Far-left groups target institutions and the far right, sometimes promoting violence.
- Far-right outlets spread conspiracy content and nationalist rhetoric. The 2023 Potsdam meeting revealed links between far-right groups (including the identitarian movement) and AfD officials.<sup>8</sup>
- The anti-lockdown movement Querdenken spread disinformation and conspiracies (including QAnon), with ties to Reichsbürger ideology.
- Reichsbürger and Selbstverwalter groups reject the legitimacy of the German state, echoing the rhetoric of sovereign citizens movements in various geographies.<sup>9</sup>
- Foreign actors, particularly Russia, China, and Turkey, engage in influence operations targeting the German sphere. A prominent example of foreign influence campaigns is the Doppelgänger operation, deployed by the Kremlin, which aims, among other things, to shift German support away from Ukraine.

### Key narrative clusters

- **Elections:** Disinformation targets electoral integrity, with gendered attacks against female politicians like Annalena Baerbock.
- **COVID-19:** Persistent narratives question Germany's restrictions during the pandemic, promoting pseudoscience and conspiracy theories, including around the Robert Koch Institute files.

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<sup>7</sup> Reporters Without Borders. "RSF And GFF File Complaint Against Germany and Its Federal Intelligence Service Act at the European Court of Human Rights." RSF. March 11, 2025.

<https://rsf.org/en/rsf-and-gff-file-complaint-against-germany-and-its-federal-intelligence-service-act-european-court>.

<sup>8</sup> Shelton, Jon. "Germany: Report Shows Deeper AfD Ties to Potsdam Meeting." Dw.Com, January 31, 2024.

<https://www.dw.com/en/germany-report-shows-deeper-afd-ties-to-potsdam-meeting/a-68127057>.

<sup>9</sup> CeMAS. "From the Crisis to the Reich," December 5, 2023.

<https://cemas.io/en/publications/from-the-crisis-to-the-reich/>.

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- **Immigration:** Various actors, especially tied to the far-right, build on events like the 2015-2016 refugee crisis and 2015-2016 New Year's Cologne assaults, using femonationalist rhetoric to spread hateful and violent anti-immigrant rhetoric.

## Policy and Legal Landscape

Germany's legal framework enshrines freedom of expression under Article 5 of the Basic Law while explicitly permitting restrictions for incitement, defamation, and youth protection.<sup>10</sup> The 2017 Network Enforcement Act (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz, NetzDG)<sup>11</sup> pioneered platform accountability by requiring large social media services to remove illegal content, such as hate speech or calls for violence, within 24 hours of notification. Although NetzDG set a global example, it faced criticism from civil-rights groups and journalists for risking over-removal and shifting judicial functions onto private companies.<sup>12</sup>

In May 2024, Germany implemented the EU's Digital Services Act through the Digitale-Dienste-Gesetz (DDG)<sup>13</sup>, repealing significant portions of NetzDG in favour of a risk-based oversight regime.<sup>14</sup> Under the DDG, platforms must perform annual risk assessments, undergo regular audits, and ensure transparency in their moderation policies. The Federal Network Agency (Bundesnetzagentur, BNetzA) was designated as the national Digital Services Coordinator, empowered to enforce compliance, certify "trusted flaggers," and levy fines for systemic failures.

Germany's institutional responses to disinformation are dispersed across multiple agencies, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the threat and Germany's federal structure. Institutions like BNetzA, the Foreign Office, and BfV monitor disinformation, FIMI, and hybrid threats. To enhance coordination, the government founded the Central Office for the Detection of Foreign Information Manipulation (Zentrale Stelle zur Erkennung ausländischer

<sup>10</sup> Matte, Tobias. "The Challenge of Addressing Disinformation in Germany's Legal System." Fighting Fake News EU, FERMI Project, March 27, 2025.

<https://fighting-fake-news.eu/articles/challenge-addressing-disinformation-germanys-legal-system>.

<sup>11</sup> Federal Ministry of Justice. Act to Improve Enforcement of the Law in Social Networks (Network Enforcement Act, NetzDG) – Basic Information (2017). Bundesministerium der Justiz.

[https://www.bmj.de/DE/Themen/FokusThemen/NetzDG/NetzDG\\_EN\\_node.html](https://www.bmj.de/DE/Themen/FokusThemen/NetzDG/NetzDG_EN_node.html).

<sup>12</sup> Tworek, Heidi, and Paddy Leerssen. "An Analysis of Germany's NetzDG Law." Institute for Information Law (IViR), April 15, 2019. [https://www.ivir.nl/publicaties/download/NetzDG\\_Tworek\\_Leerssen\\_April\\_2019.pdf](https://www.ivir.nl/publicaties/download/NetzDG_Tworek_Leerssen_April_2019.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> European Commission. "The Digital Services Act." European Commission, March 2024.

[https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act_en).

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Gregor Schmid, LL.M. (Cambridge), Alexander Schmalenberger, LL.B., Dr. Thorsten Troge, and Nathalie Koch, LL.M. (UC Hastings), "DDG—Digital Services and Digital Markets: The New German Implementation Law," *Taylor Wessing*, May 2024, <https://www.taylorwessing.com/en/insights-and-events/insights/2024/05/ddg>.

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Informationsmanipulation, ZEAM)<sup>15</sup> in mid-2024. Although ZEAM promises unified oversight and real-time response, it currently operates with limited resources and will require sustained political support to fulfil its mandate.

## Platform Compliance and Enforcement

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Under NetzDG, major platforms faced significant penalties for non-compliance with content moderation requirements. In 2019, Meta was fined two million euros for underreporting user complaints and failing to establish adequate takedown mechanisms<sup>16</sup>, while in 2022, Telegram incurred a five million-euro penalty for lacking a legal representative and content reporting tools in Germany.<sup>17</sup> These fines demonstrated Germany's resolve to hold tech giants accountable, but also revealed the limitations of relying solely on ex-post enforcement to influence platform behaviour.

Despite these enforcement efforts, transparency in moderation practices remains limited. In response to concerns over opaque takedowns, the Federal Court of Justice ruled in 2021 that platforms must inform users when content is removed and provide a clear appeals process, thereby enhancing procedural protections and user rights.<sup>18</sup> This judicial intervention moved Germany beyond simply penalising platforms to ensuring fair treatment of individual users. Nonetheless, operational details of algorithms and decision-making processes continue to be closely guarded by companies.

The DSA and its German implementation have shifted the regulatory paradigm from reactive fines to proactive risk management. Under the DSA, Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) are now required to conduct annual risk assessments, publish transparency reports on content moderation and advertising algorithms, and implement measures to mitigate systemic risks such

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<sup>15</sup> Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat (BMI). 2024. "ZEAM: Zentrale Stelle zur Erkennung ausländischer Desinformation." Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat, July 2024.

<https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/schwerpunkte/DE/desinformation-bei-bt-wahl/zeam-artikel.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Escritt, Thomas. "Germany fines Facebook for under-reporting complaints." Reuters, July 2, 2019.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-facebook-germany-fine-idUKKCN1TX110/>.

<sup>17</sup> Counter Extremism Project. "Tech & Terrorism: Germany Fines Telegram for Failing to Comply With Online Content Moderation Law," October 21, 2022.

<https://www.counterextremism.com/press/tech-terrorism-germany-fines-telegram-failing-comply-online-content-moderation-law>.

<sup>18</sup> Etteldorf, Christina. "DEDEDE Federal Supreme Court Finds Facebook Terms of Use Ineffective in Relation to Hate Speech." IRIS Merlin. <https://merlin.obs.coe.int/article/9273>.

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as disinformation and hate speech. Formal investigations into X<sup>19</sup> and TikTok<sup>20</sup> by the European Commission demonstrate that enforcement challenges persist, as regulators work to ensure compliance across diverse platforms.

German politicians have increasingly resorted to legal recourse to combat online abuse. High-profile figures, such as Economics Minister Robert Habeck<sup>21</sup> and MEP Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann<sup>22</sup>, have filed lawsuits against individuals posting threats and defamatory content, sending a signal that personal accountability extends to digital spaces. Authorities have also taken action against extremist publications, although judicial reviews are ongoing.<sup>23</sup>

Although Germany pioneered stringent measures against disinformation and foreign influence, evolving digital threats demand greater policy coherence and institutional integration. To transition from reactive enforcement to a truly anticipatory posture, decision-makers should further empower the ZEAM with stable funding and a clearly defined mandate prioritising agility, real-time monitoring, and public communication. Expanding digital literacy campaigns and embedding empirical impact assessments into policy design will be crucial to safeguarding democratic discourse without eroding fundamental freedoms.

## Audience Behaviour and Engagement

### Audience behaviour: signs of engagement shift amid persistent reach

Over the past year, websites on GDI's Dynamic Exclusion List averaged 22,200 unique monthly visitors from Germany, based on IP addresses. The number of unique visitors decreased at the end of 2024, possibly due to a decline in political activity following the U.S. election. While there was a slight increase in the first quarter of 2025, possibly related to the German election campaign, visitor numbers did not reach the levels seen in the third quarter of the previous year.

<sup>19</sup> Miller, Garrett. "EU Tests DSA with Investigative Proceedings Against Musk's X." Tech Policy Press, December 18, 2023. <https://www.techpolicy.press/eu-tests-dsa-with-investigative-proceedings-against-musks>.

<sup>20</sup> European Commission. "DSA: Commission Opens Formal Proceedings against TikTok." European Commission, February 19, 2024. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_24\\_926](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_926).

<sup>21</sup> ZDF. "Habeck stellt Strafantrag nach Beleidigung als 'Schwachkopf'." ZDFheute, November 15, 2024.

<https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/deutschland/habeck-beleidigung-plattform-x-ermittlungen-100.html>.

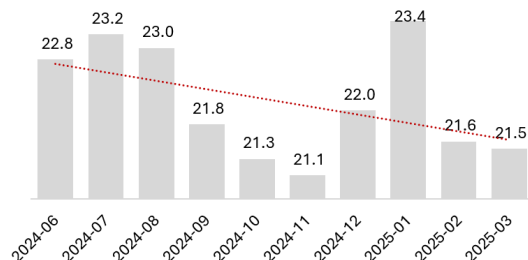
<sup>22</sup> Gilles, Katharina. "Strack-Zimmermann zeigt fast 1900 Beleidigungen an." Rheinische Post, September 24, 2024. <https://rp-online.de>.

<sup>23</sup> Müller-Neuhof, Jost. "Publizist gewinnt Rechtsstreit: Faeser darf Broder nicht als islamfeindlich hinstellen lassen." Der Tagesspiegel, February 5, 2024. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/publizist-gewinnt-rechtsstreit-faeser-darf-broder-nicht-als-islamfeindlich-hinstellen-lassen-11160424.html>.

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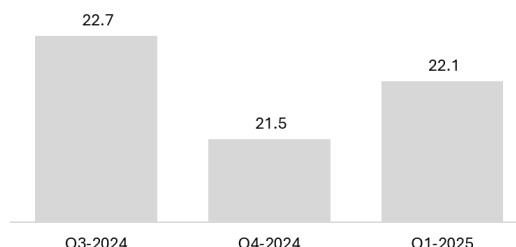
### Unique Visitors from German IP Addresses

Average, # in thousands, MoM



### Unique Visitors from German IP Addresses

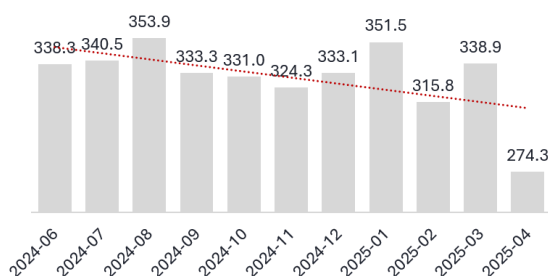
Average, # in thousands, QoQ



Despite a decline in the number of unique monthly visitors, GDI-flagged disinformation websites maintained a substantial reach in 2024, collectively generating approximately 3.6 billion page views from Germany, averaging 330 million page views per month. This substantial volume of traffic indicates a persistent threat.

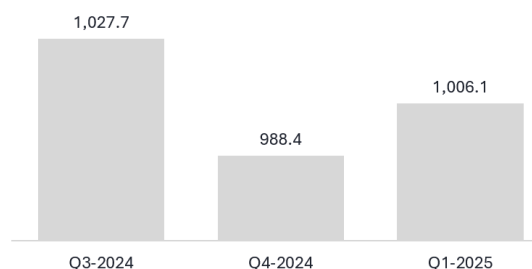
### Total Page Views from German IP Addresses

Average, # in millions, MoM



### Total Page Views from German IP Addresses

Average, # in millions, QoQ

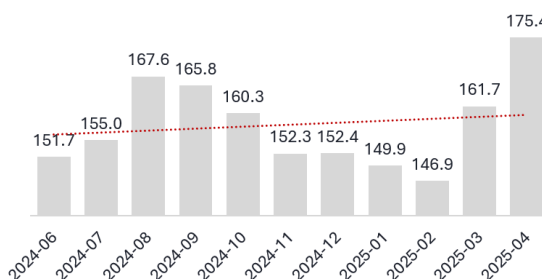


## Users spend more time on disinformation domains

German users spend more time on disinformation websites, reversing a previous trend of shorter visits. The recent increase in engagement duration, observed in March and April 2025, is likely due to the German election campaign and its aftermath.

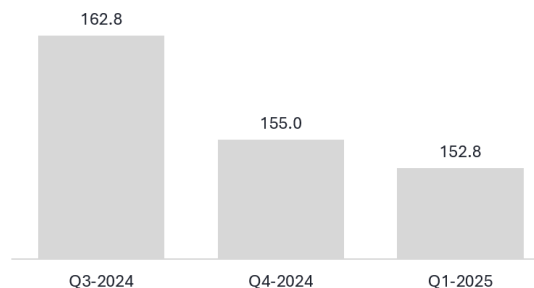
### Visit Duration from German IP Addresses

Average, # in seconds, MoM



### Visit Duration from German IP Addresses

Average, # in seconds, QoQ



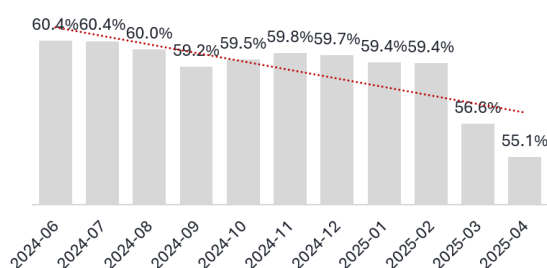
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## Bounce rate decreases, indicating higher retention

The slight but steady decrease in bounce rates in Germany (the percentage of website visitors who leave after viewing only one page) during the first quarter of 2025, from 59.7% to 58.5%, indicates that more visitors are staying on these websites and viewing more than just one page. This, along with the longer time spent on these sites, suggests that audiences were more engaged with the content during the early part of 2025. This engagement was likely driven by interest in narratives about the German election, as well as high-profile events, including US Vice President JD Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference and the February 2025 attack in Munich.

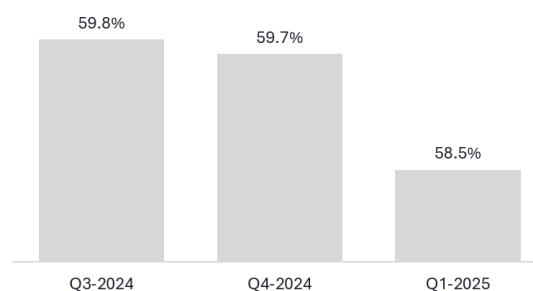
**Average Bounce Rate for from German IP Addresses**

Average, %, MoM



**Average Bounce Rate for from German IP Addresses**

Average, %, QoQ



## Adversarial Narratives in Germany

GDI tracks over 4,000 disinformation domains, generating 13.7 billion monthly views globally, with 270 million from Germany. Of 275 German-language domains, 96.9 million views come from within Germany. Two sites receive over 11 million views each. Top disinformation sites receive over 60 per cent of traffic among German-language disinformation platforms.

The following narratives represent prevalent adversarial narratives in the German online environment. Civic integrity, hate speech and bigotry, conspiracy theories, and environmentalism are recurring themes that shape public perception, influence political discourse, and undermine trust in German institutions. By analysing these narratives, we aim to highlight their impact and the mechanisms through which they spread, offering insights into the broader disinformation landscape in Germany. These sites amplify narratives that erode civic trust and fuel polarisation.

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# Civic Integrity

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## Summary

Germany's democratic process and civil society face adversarial narratives that discourage open debate and portray those with different views as enemies. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) party plays a significant role in the disinformation landscape, acting as a source and amplifier of disinformation and at times as a target of such narratives. Its aggressive rhetoric is widely spread and intensified online by supporters,<sup>24</sup> contributing to a hostile climate that has led to threats and violence against politicians from across the political spectrum, including members of the Greens, the SPD, and the AfD itself.<sup>25</sup> Sahra Wagenknecht, leader of the pro-Russian Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), has spread claims similar to those of the AfD on immigration and has cast doubts on the credibility of the recent federal elections by claiming there had been "numerous mistakes and irregularities".<sup>26</sup>

## Civic Integrity Narratives

- Germany is no longer a democracy.
- The state seeks to ban or suppress the AfD.
- Freedom of opinion is under threat.
- Mainstream media are tools of power.

# Hate Speech and Bigotry

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## Summary

The German online sphere includes both foreign and domestic actors who target marginalised groups. This analysis focuses on anti-immigration, Islamophobic, and anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric due to the scale and frequency of such attacks in the German sphere. It's worth noting that hate

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<sup>24</sup> Jürgs, Alexander. "AfD Und Social Media: Warum Die Rechtspopulisten Die Sozialen Netzwerke Dominieren." FAZ.NET, February 16, 2025.  
<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/rhein-main/region-und-hessen/afd-und-social-media-warum-die-rechtspopulisten-die-sozialen-netzwerke-dominieren-110296909.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Konrad Litschko, "Wenn die AfD zur Gewalt greift," May 8, 2023.  
<https://taz.de/Angriffe-auf-Andersdenkende/!5930301/>

<sup>26</sup> Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht. "Zahlreiche Unregelmäßigkeiten Bei Der Bundestagswahl 2025," March 11, 2025.  
<https://bsw-vg.de/zahlreiche-unregelmaessigkeiten-bei-der-bundestagswahl-2025/>.

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speech and targeted hate are often intersectional, with individuals targeted for multiple aspects of their identities. The German Muslim community has become a frequent target of right-wing and far-right groups, especially in connection with anti-immigrant discourse. A surge in hate followed the 2024 terrorist attacks in Germany, with police reporting sharp increases in Islamophobic and racist or xenophobic hate crimes.<sup>27</sup> This rise in offline violence reflects a strong connection with online narratives. The LGBTQIA+ community has also faced growing hostility online, with consequences extending into offline settings. German police recorded a steep rise in anti-LGBTQIA+ hate crimes, showing a 270 per cent increase between 2021 and 2023.<sup>28</sup> These trends mirror developments in other geographies, where anti-LGBTQIA+ narratives have led to increased targeting and, in some cases, a rollback of rights, particularly for transgender people.<sup>29</sup> Also, foreign actors such as the Kremlin spread anti-LGBTQIA+ discourse to amplify polarisation within German society. This tactic, weaponising domestic wedge issues including LGBTQIA+ rights, is regularly used by the Kremlin.

### Hate Speech and Bigotry Narratives

- Islamophobic claims portray Muslim communities as a threat to Germany, often conflating Islam and terrorism.
- Anti-immigrant rhetoric linking crime to migration, more specifically, spreading femonationalist rhetoric overwhelmingly portraying gender-based violence in Germany as the result of immigration.
- Anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric portrays LGBTQIA+ people, especially transgender individuals, as a threat to Western societies, using hate speech, conspiracy theories and pseudoscience to vilify LGBTQIA+ people and advocate against their rights (including access to gender-affirming care).

<sup>27</sup> OSCE. "Germany | HCRW," n.d., <https://hatecrime.osce.org/germany?year=2023>.

<sup>28</sup> OSCE. "Germany | HCRW," n.d., <https://hatecrime.osce.org/germany?year=2023>.

<sup>29</sup> American Civil Liberties Union. "Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislatures in 2025," aclu.org, January 15, 2025, <https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights-2025>.

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# Conspiracy Theories

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## Summary

German conspiracy theorists draw their inspiration from a constant international flow of online content. This includes the full range of globally prevalent COVID-19 conspiracy theories, but also anti-immigration conspiracies such as the Great Replacement theory, which holds that a shady international elite is trying to use mass illegal immigration as part of a plan to take total power. The narrative of shady elites allegedly orchestrating Germany's problems can appear in many forms, including the WEF, UN, NATO, the European Commission, the Bilderberg conference, or antisemitic conspiracy theories involving the Rothschild family.

## Conspiracy Theory Narratives

- COVID-19 as a tool for surveillance.
- Replacement of the German population with immigrants.
- Antisemitic conspiracies featuring global elites.

# Environmentalism

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## Summary

Concerns about deindustrialisation and high household electricity prices are key factors driving adversarial narratives about climate change and the environment in Germany. Numerous narratives present climate policy as diametrically opposed to Germany's economic well-being. These narratives do not always deny the existence of man-made climate change, but do often present zero-emission policies as fundamentally incompatible with the preservation of a wealthy middle-class society in Germany.

## Environmentalism Narratives

- Climate change denial or downplaying of human influence.
- Green policies are portrayed as harmful and elitist.

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# Foreign Influence and Narrative Engineering

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## China

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### Type of state involvement

The People's Republic of China has used a range of FIMI tactics in Germany, aiming to shape the information environment in ways that support Beijing's strategic interests. These tactics involve covert, overt, and coercive methods carried out by state organs, including the Ministry of State Security, the United Front Work Department, and state-controlled media.<sup>30</sup> Elite networking groups provide informal access to prominent German figures in politics, business, and academia.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, initiatives such as the "China Reporter" project have aimed to cultivate a more sympathetic media landscape by encouraging German corporate funding for pro-Beijing content.<sup>32</sup> Covert strategies include information laundering through public relations firms and fake media outlets. The "Paperwall" campaign, for example, involved over 100 fake news sites presenting as local media, embedding pro-China content to conceal bias.<sup>33</sup> Other campaigns have promoted pro-Beijing narratives and attacked Western policies and critics.<sup>34</sup> Chinese diplomats have actively pushed official messaging through aggressive rhetoric and social media, and have reportedly sought German endorsement of China's positions on COVID-19 and Hong Kong.<sup>35</sup> Reports of unofficial Chinese police stations in Germany have raised concerns about covert surveillance and intimidation of diaspora communities and dissidents.

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<sup>30</sup> Charon, Paul, Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer. 2021. Chinese Influence Operations: A Machiavellian Moment. Paris: Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire (IRSEM). <https://www.irsem.fr/report.html>.

<sup>31</sup> DGAP. "Assessing China and Russia's Influence in German Parliamentary Elections." 2021. <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/assessing-china-and-russias-influence-german-parliamentary-elections>.

<sup>32</sup> German Marshall Fund. "Outgoing Chinese Ambassador Writes Letter to German Companies Soliciting Funds for Pro-Beijing Media Project." Alliance for Securing Democracy, March 11, 2021. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/incident/outgoing-chinese-ambassador-writes-letter-to-german-companies-solicit-ing-funds-for-pro-beijing-media-project/>.

<sup>33</sup> Citizen Lab. "Paperwall: Chinese Websites Posing as Local News Outlets with Pro-Beijing Content." February 7, 2024. <https://citizenlab.ca/2024/02/paperwall-chinese-websites-posing-as-local-news-outlets-with-pro-beijing-content/>.

<sup>34</sup> Mandiant. "HaiEnergy Information Operations Campaign | Inauthentic News," Google Cloud Blog, August 4, 2022, <https://cloud.google.com/blog/topics/threat-intelligence/pro-prc-information-operations-campaign-haienergy>.

<sup>35</sup> DGAP. "Assessing China and Russia's Influence". Op. Cit.

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## Narrative examples

- Chinese influence campaigns in Germany use coordinated strategies across media, politics, academia, and culture to promote Beijing's interests, discredit critics, and build elite networks.
- A key narrative is the denial of human rights abuses in Xinjiang. A German influencer promoted pro-Beijing messaging after a state-sponsored tour.<sup>36</sup>
- Chinese media partners with German publications to publish advertising designed to resemble journalism, using supplements that blur editorial boundaries.<sup>37</sup>
- Covert efforts include disinformation from networks that align with state narratives while presenting themselves as independent, creating confusion in German digital spaces.<sup>38</sup>
- Initiatives such as elite networking groups and media funding proposals give Beijing informal access to German political, academic, and business circles.<sup>39</sup>
- In academia, Germany ranks high in terms of PRC influence. Partnerships with Chinese institutions, including those linked to the military, raise concerns about research ethics and security.<sup>40</sup>
- Beijing also promotes pro-China content through youth initiatives and diaspora media that reflect state-aligned narratives.<sup>41</sup>
- Chinese narratives appear in fringe German-language platforms, echoing themes shared with other authoritarian regimes, including criticism of NATO and the West.<sup>42</sup>
- These efforts reflect a broad strategy to shape public opinion, policymaking, and media discourse in Germany.

## Impact

China's influence operations in Germany are systemic and aim to reshape the information environment in ways that serve Beijing's strategic interests. These activities blur the line between journalism and propaganda, compromise academic integrity through sensitive research

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<sup>36</sup> Friedrich Naumann Foundation. "China's Influence in Germany: Academia and Media Are Achilles Heel." 2023. <https://www.freiheit.org/chinas-influence-germany-academia-and-media-are-achilles-heel>.

<sup>37</sup> "Chinese State Media Bolster CCP Narratives to Potentially Unaware Audiences in Germany," Alliance for Securing Democracy, n.d., <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/incident/chinese-state-media-bolster-ccp-narratives-to-potentially-unaware-audiences-in-germany/>.

<sup>38</sup> Graphika. Ants in a Web: Inside the Network of Online Anti-CCP Actors. 2021. [https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika\\_report\\_ants\\_in\\_a\\_web.pdf](https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_report_ants_in_a_web.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> DGAP. "Assessing China and Russia's Influence". Op. Cit.

<sup>40</sup> Doublethink Lab. "China Index." 2023. <https://china-index.io>

<sup>41</sup> DGAP. "Assessing China and Russia's Influence". Op. Cit.

<sup>42</sup> European Policy Centre (EPC). "Hybrid Storm Rising: Russia and China's Axis Against Democracy." 2024. <https://epc.eu/publication/Hybrid-storm-rising-Russia-and-Chinas-axis-against-democracy-64b158/>

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partnerships, and create opaque channels of political influence. By embedding messaging in trusted institutions and intimidating critics, China undermines democratic discourse, erodes trust in the media and academia, and seeks to shift German policy on key issues, such as technology, foreign investment, and human rights.

## Russia

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### Type of state involvement

Russia conducts ongoing influence and intelligence operations in Germany using a broad hybrid warfare strategy. This includes espionage, cyberattacks, a targeted assassination,<sup>43</sup> sabotage of military and civilian infrastructure, and drone surveillance. Political interference has escalated since Germany supported Ukraine, with Russian intelligence leaking intercepted military communications<sup>44</sup> and planning attacks on cargo flights<sup>45</sup> and naval assets.<sup>46</sup> Russia also works to shape public opinion by partnering with extremist political groups and foreign influencers, using networks like RED to spread pro-Hamas and anti-Israel narratives. Prominent figures such as Alina Lipp and Thomas Röper promote pro-Russian disinformation in German online spaces.<sup>47</sup>

The most visible influence channel remains disinformation websites, especially RT Deutsch, which continues to reach German audiences through mirror sites and platforms like Odyssee despite EU sanctions. Its content portrays German democracy as broken, frames enforcement as censorship, and justifies Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Russia also runs targeted online disinformation campaigns in German through several named operations. *Doppelganger* mimics mainstream media sites to spread pro-Russian narratives.<sup>48</sup> *Portal Kombat* republishes content from Telegram and Russian sources to influence social media and train AI models.<sup>49</sup> *Storm 1516*

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<sup>43</sup> Stöber, Silvia. "Auftragsmörder Krassikow - Kaltblütig Und Professionell," tagesschau.de, March 26, 2025, <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/russland-auftragsmord-tiergarten-berlin-krassikow-100.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Leali, Giorgio. "Leaked Audio Shows Germany Discussed Possible Taurus Missiles Delivery to Ukraine: Reports," POLITICO, March 2, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-taurus-missiles-ukraine-war-russia-leaked-audio/>.

<sup>45</sup> ZDFheute. "Ukrainer Festgenommen: Versuch, 'Deutschland Zu Stören,'" ZDFheute, May 14, 2025, <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/deutschland/spionage-agenten-russland-deutschland-100.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Milling, Palina. "Sabotage-Akte an Kriegsschiffen Der Marine," tagesschau.de, February 21, 2025, <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/ndr-wdr/sabotage-marine-ostsee-102.html>.

<sup>47</sup> European Union. "Decision - CFSP - 2025/966 - EN - EUR-Lex," May 20, 2025, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:L\\_202500966](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:L_202500966).

<sup>48</sup> "What Is the Doppelganger Operation? List of Resources - EU DisinfoLab," EU DisinfoLab, n.d., <https://www.disinfo.eu/doppelganger-operation/>.

<sup>49</sup> "PORTAL KOMBAT: A Structured and Coordinated pro-Russian Propaganda Network," SGDSN - Secrétariat Général De La Défense Et De La Sécurité Nationale, February 2024, [https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/20240212\\_NP\\_SGDSN\\_VIGINUM\\_PORTAL-KOMBAT-NETWORK\\_ENG\\_VF.pdf](https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/20240212_NP_SGDSN_VIGINUM_PORTAL-KOMBAT-NETWORK_ENG_VF.pdf).

(or *CopyCop*) uses AI-generated German-language content to erode civic trust.<sup>50</sup> *RRN* targets sympathy for Russia and spreads disinformation using websites with misleading names and fake social media accounts.<sup>51</sup> Together, these efforts form a sophisticated, multi-pronged attempt to undermine German institutions, polarise public discourse, and weaken support for Ukraine.

### Narrative examples

- Russian disinformation platforms portray Germany as no longer a democracy, claiming elections are meaningless and that all parties, including the AfD, support policies that maintain a failing system. Narratives use charged terms like *Gleichschaltung* to suggest authoritarian control and societal collapse.<sup>52</sup>
- These platforms accuse the government of manipulating protests, funding NGOs to silence critics, and suppressing dissent through media control and intelligence services, presenting an image of coordinated repression.<sup>53</sup>
- Russian outlets promote the AfD both directly and indirectly, embedding party ads, amplifying its narratives, and portraying public broadcasters as state-controlled, undermining trust in media independence.<sup>54</sup>
- Disinformation campaigns discredit mainstream political figures seen as unfavourable to Russian interests, including false personal attacks on leaders to erode public confidence.<sup>55</sup>
- Russian channels seek to weaken support for Ukraine by framing military aid as dangerous, economically ruinous, and ideologically driven. They claim German policies escalate tensions and provoke Russian retaliation.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> NewsGuard. "Russian Propaganda Campaign Targets France With AI-Fabricated Scandals, Drawing 55 Million Views on Social Media - NewsGuard," April 17, 2025, <https://newsguardtech.com/special-reports/russian-propaganda-campaign-targets-france-with-ai-fabricated-scandals/>.

<sup>51</sup> "RRN: A Complex and Persistent Information Manipulation Campaign," SGDSN - Secrétariat Général De La Défense Et De La Sécurité Nationale, July 19, 2023.

<sup>52</sup> RT DE. "Gleichgeschaltete Krisenverwaltung: Nuanciert Neoliberal in Die Bundestagswahl," RT DE, December 21, 2024, <https://freedert.online/meinung/229972-gleichgeschaltete-krisenverwaltung-nuanciert-neoliberal-in/>.

<sup>53</sup> RT DE. "Faesers 'Demokratiefördergesetz': Der Ring, sie alle zu knechten," n.d., <https://web.archive.org/web/20240207040446/https://de.rt.com/meinung/195309-faesers-demokratiefoerdergesetz-ring-sie-alle/>.

<sup>54</sup> Stolzfoedit. "Von Unabhängigkeit Der Medien in Deutschland Keine Spur - Stolzvolk," Stolzvolk, May 13, 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250515055646/https://stolzvolk.ac/von-unabhangigkeit-der-medien-in-deutschland-keine-spur/>.

<sup>55</sup> "Psychiater: 2017 Unternahm Friedrich Merz Einen Selbstmordversuch – Unmittelbar," n.d., <https://web.archive.org/web/20250310164538/https://unmittelbar-medien.de/psychiater-2017-unternahm-friedrich-merz-einen-selbstmordversuch>.

<sup>56</sup> RT DE. "Deutschland Und EU Planen Einen Krieg Gegen Russland," RT DE, March 25, 2025, <https://de.rt.com/international/240278-eu-plant-krieg-gegen-russland/>.

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- These narratives assert that Germany is ignoring peace proposals and intentionally prolonging the war,<sup>57</sup> casting Russia as the reasonable actor and Germany as obstructing a diplomatic resolution.

## Impact

The impact of Russian FIMI operations in Germany is difficult to measure, but German authorities view it as a growing threat.<sup>58</sup> Warnings were issued ahead of the most recent election, and intelligence reports suggest Russia has tried to boost the AfD through disinformation.<sup>59</sup> While this has not prevented free and fair elections or brought pro-Russian leaders to power, Russia's efforts are large-scale and ongoing across websites, social media, and covert channels. Outlets like RT Deutsch are central to Germany's disinformation ecosystem, amplifying both Russian and domestic narratives that erode trust in democracy, institutions, and science. These operations support an online environment that fosters division and, potentially, far-right violence. As with China, Russia's approach is long-term, aiming to shape public discourse, reinforce opinion bubbles, and engage groups seen as sympathetic, including Russian Germans and other German nationals with ties to Russia.

## Turkey

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### Type of State Involvement

Turkey's influence efforts in Germany leverage its large diaspora community, which includes over 3 million people of Turkish origin and more than 1.5 million Turkish citizens.<sup>60</sup> While no conclusive evidence of coordinated disinformation campaigns has been made public, German<sup>61</sup> and EU<sup>62</sup> Authorities have repeatedly flagged Turkey's foreign influence and surveillance activities, particularly through its intelligence service (MIT), religious institutions, and nationalist networks. Key tools include the Diyanet and its affiliate DITIB, which oversee hundreds of mosques and have been linked to surveillance of critics, especially Gülen supporters and

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<sup>57</sup> RT DE. "Die Angst Deutschlands Vor Frieden," RT DE, May 2, 2025, <https://de.rt.com/meinung/243801-angst-deutschlands-vor-frieden/>.

<sup>58</sup> "Spionage- Und Proliferationsabwehr," Bundesamt fuer Verfassungsschutz, n.d., <https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/hintergruende/DE/spionage-und-proliferationsabwehr/gefaehrung-russische-spionage-sabotage-desinformation.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Christina Nagel, Demian Von Osten, and Christina Nagel, "Bundesregierung Warnt Vor Russischer Desinformation," tagesschau.de, February 7, 2025, <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/kontext/russland-desinformation-110.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Deutsche Welle. "Germany: Citizenship Law Could Prompt 50,000 Turks to Apply," DW, January 20, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-citizenship-law-could-prompt-50000-turks-to-apply/a-68040515>.

<sup>61</sup> German Federal Ministry of the Interior. "2017 Report on the Protection of the Constitution," January 2018.

<sup>62</sup> European Parliament. Report on Foreign Interference in All Democratic Processes in the European Union, Including Disinformation. Rapporteur: Sandra Kalniete. A9-0187/2023. June 1, 2023. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0187\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0187_EN.html).

Kurdish groups.<sup>63</sup> Germany has also raised concerns about diaspora mobilisation during elections and the use of community networks for ideological control.<sup>64</sup> Turkey's broader strategy includes cultural and religious outreach, political pressure, and potential illicit support for favoured candidates. Far-right diaspora groups like the Grey Wolves further amplify Ankara's messaging and have been identified as a domestic security threat.<sup>65</sup>

## Narrative examples

- Turkish influence efforts in Germany often take the form of narrative amplification rather than overt disinformation, promoting themes aligned with Ankara's political agenda.
- State-controlled outlets like TRT Deutsch and Anadolu Agency produce German-language content that portrays Western countries as Islamophobic, positions President Erdoğan as a defender of Muslim interests, and labels opposition groups such as the Gulen movement as foreign-backed threats.<sup>66</sup>
- Turkish media coverage of geopolitical events, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is used to depict German institutions and media as biased or hostile to Muslims, reinforcing broader anti-Western narratives.<sup>67</sup>
- Electoral periods have been key moments for influence, with President Erdoğan urging Turkish citizens in Germany to vote against major parties in 2017, prompting condemnation from the German government for interfering in democratic processes.<sup>68</sup>
- European institutions have warned that diaspora communities and foreign-funded organisations are being used to disseminate polarising narratives and exert political pressure in host countries, including Germany.<sup>69</sup>

## Impact

Assessing the impact of Turkish FIMI in Germany is challenging due to its indirect nature; however, German authorities regard it as a serious security concern. The Turkish intelligence

<sup>63</sup> Amelina, Anna and Faist, Thomas. "Turkish Migrant Associations in Germany: Between Integration Pressure and Transnational Linkages," *Revue Européenne Des Migrations Internationales* 24, no. vol. 24-n°2. November 1, 2008: 91–120, <https://doi.org/10.4000/remi.4542>.

<sup>64</sup> Sciences Po Grenoble. "La stratégie d'influence de la Turquie en Europe à travers sa diaspora." Sciences Po Grenoble Political Science Blog. April 6, 2024.

<https://en.sciencespo-grenoble.fr/blogs/la-strategie-dinfluence-de-la-turquie-en-europe-travers-sa-diaspora>.

<sup>65</sup> Institute of World Politics. "Turkish Influence and Intelligence Operations in Germany." January 6, 2021.

<https://www.iwp.edu/articles/2021/01/06/turkish-influence-and-intelligence-operations-in-germany/>

<sup>66</sup> Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. "Top-5 German Election Dashboard Takeaways," Securing Democracy. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/top-5-german-election-dashboard-takeaways/>.

<sup>67</sup> @Aksam. "Almanya medyası Gazze'yi nasıl aktardı?" (How Did the German Media Report Gaza?). X (formerly Twitter), May 18, 2021. <https://x.com/i/web/status/1394276514930126848>.

<sup>68</sup> Usta, B. 2017. 'Erdoğan Tells Turks in Germany to Vote against Merkel', Reuters. August 18, 2017. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-türkiye-idUSKCN1AY17Z>.

<sup>69</sup> European Parliament. Report on Foreign Interference in All Democratic Processes in the European Union, Including Disinformation. Op. Cit

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services monitor and target critics in Germany, focusing on groups deemed extremist by Ankara. Organisations like the Union of International Democrats play a key role in shaping political opinion among the diaspora, notably mobilising support during Turkish elections. Reports of surveillance, harassment, and coercion have raised concerns about freedom of expression within Turkish communities in Germany. These influence efforts contribute to broader polarisation on sensitive issues like migration and integration, while long-standing religious infrastructure tied to the Turkish state further complicates questions of community autonomy. Although Germany and Turkey maintain close strategic ties, German officials have increasingly voiced concerns over sovereignty and civil liberties, even as diplomatic considerations temper stronger public responses.

## Conclusion

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This report mapped the key actors and narratives shaping Germany's disinformation environment. Our analysis identified a wide range of domestic and foreign actors, spanning the political spectrum, who have contributed to the manipulation of the online information space. Domestic actors were found to produce large volumes of disinformation, including hate speech. Foreign actors were found to engage in coordinated influence operations to amplify domestic disinformation narratives and destabilise German democracy. Some foreign actors also used disinformation to attempt to control their nationals living in Germany.

Germany's experience demonstrates that online information manipulation and hybrid threats are not abstract risks but present clear dangers to democratic institutions. The narratives identified in this report, ranging from conspiracy theories and hate speech to election denialism, have had material consequences offline, threatening the legitimacy of institutions and the cohesion of civil society, as well as inspiring physical attacks against public figures. The arrest of several Reichsbürger on suspicion of planning to violently overthrow the federal government serves as another reminder of the degree to which extremist discourse can produce severe dangers to the democratic order.

These disinformation narratives continue to circulate despite the German federal government's efforts to fight online harms through legislation like the NetzDG Act and the implementation of the EU Digital Services Act, as well as anti-disinformation efforts by Germany's state-level governments. These dynamics make clear that combating online harms requires more than technical interventions. A sustainable, long-term solution must involve a whole-of-society approach, engaging policymakers, private companies, and civil society actors in efforts to promote media literacy, transparency, accountability, and institutional resilience. As Germany's case illustrates, the integrity of democracy in the digital age depends not only on defending

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against disinformation but on building societal structures that foster trust, civic engagement, and shared responsibility.

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