



Russian Media in Germany

How Russian information warfare and disinformation have affected Germany

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Abstract

Germany is the main focus of Russian disinformation campaigns in the EU. As intern documents of the Russian president's former adviser, Vladislav Surkov show the hybrid warfare is being organized by the Russian leadership as well as the control of the main media outlets including the foreign broadcaster RT. The Russian state media based in Berlin not only try to spread Russian narratives on controversial issues such as the Ukraine conflict but also influence elections on a regional, federal and European level. As documented below RT Deutsch und Sputnik continuously supported the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany and The Left. Members of Parliament of these party back Russian policy by travelling to hot spots of Russian interference in Syria and Ukraine. These travels are being covered by Russian state media extensively. This sort of media alliance helps to legitimate Russian foreign policy, whereas MPs try to increase their popularity among the German audience.

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Analysis

1 Information as a weapon

Information has always been used as a weapon to deceive the enemy during military or political conflicts. Deliberately misleading false information is called disinformation¹. Digitisation makes the spread of disinformation a global problem. It is attributed to concrete persons, media, or countries. While connections to American President Donald Trump and Fox News are often cited, countries like China, Iran and Russia are now becoming the focus of attention². In this article we will study the specifics of the disinformation spread by the Russian media in Germany.

The information policy of the Russian government is part of its hybrid warfare, which has a whole repertoire of methods. These subversive instruments are being used against Ukraine, against pro-Western former Soviet republics, and against the West in general. Thanks to discoveries by a Ukrainian group of hackers in the correspondence of Vladislav Surkov, a high-ranking official of the Russian presidency, we have learned about the methods of influencing foreign countries. These methods include media, soft power and PR, as well as economic pressure, protests, and military actions³. Russian tools in Western Europe include espionage, information warfare, cyberattacks, influence on elections, and the assassination of opponents of the regime, such as former KGB agent Alexander Litvinenko and the poisoning of Sergei Skripal in 2018⁴.

Russia's leadership is experiencing an ongoing Cold War, as President Vladimir Putin emphasized in his speech to Parliament in 2014⁵. The conflict in Ukraine has served as a spark to inflame new tensions with Western Europe over the Kremlin's conflict with international law. In order to steer public opinion abroad towards its interpretation of these events, a global media offensive by Sputnik International and RT was launched⁶. By examining this conflict, it became clear how Russia uses information and the media as weapons. Russia assesses Ukraine's association with the EU and cooperation with NATO as strongly undesirable. In the eyes of the Russian government, the United States and its allies have pursued a policy of separating Ukraine and other post-Soviet republics from Russia and placing the region under American influence. Just as the United States once wanted the destruction of the Soviet Union, now they want the disintegration of Russia, Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of the Russian Security Council, told Ruskaya Gazeta. Political changes in Ukraine are being interpreted as a "coup" with US support, said Patrushev in October 2014⁷.

Political decision makers in Russia have discussed strategies for this new phase of the information war since early 2013. The Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, spoke about the growing importance of non-military means, "which in many cases are more effective than military means". They are complemented by undercover military operations such as intelligence operations, special operations, and exploiting the proclivity to protest in the population⁸. The media occupy a particularly important place among non-military means. Abroad, the news are aimed primarily at US activities that call into question Russia's position as a world power. The RT channel should "break the monopoly of the Anglo-American media", according to Putin⁹. The international news agency Rossiya Segodnya and the RT channel represent the two pillars of Russian journalism abroad¹⁰ and have similar tasks. The Russian media abroad want to achieve in their sense "an objective perception in the world". At the same time, the influence on public opinion abroad is openly defined as a goal, as set out in the Concept for Russia's Foreign Policy in 2013¹¹. Leading media



figures emphasize that they are in state of media war: editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan of RT defines the media, which is run by the Kremlin's "Ministry of Defence", as a "weapon just like any other"¹².

This hybrid warfare is organised and controlled mainly by the presidential administration in Moscow. Detailed information about the operational side of this activity was revealed by the e-mails of President Putin's personal adviser Vladislav Surkov¹³, "intercepted" by the Ukrainian hacker group "Cyber Alliance" in 2016 and 2017. He has long been the ideologue of Russia's domestic policy and is considered the creator of the concept of "guided democracy". As the chief ideologue and "father of Russian PR" in the decades since 2000, he was considered the second most influential man in the country. He placed the leading Russian media under state control. After 2014, Surkov was also Putin's personal adviser on the occupied territories of Ukraine and Georgia. The Chechen-born political expert is believed to be the organiser of the invasion of eastern Ukraine. He personally monitored the separatists over the phone, as documented by Surkov's photo of fighters from Donbas¹⁴. As an "architect of Russian policy in Ukraine," he participated in the Normandy Format talks and accompanied Putin on visits to Western Europe, although he was on the list of people subjected to US and EU sanctions¹⁵.

The leak of emails from Surkov and his associates became known as the "Surkov Leaks". The authenticity of these emails has been confirmed by their recipients and verified by the Digital Forensic Research Lab of the American think tank Atlantic Council¹⁶. This hybrid warfare is related to the notorious "covert operations" of political military action during the Soviet era. These targeted operations are the KGB's attempts to discredit the enemy in the eyes of the international community. Disinformation was already used in Soviet times; the use of modern technologies is the only novelty. The leaked e-mails show in detail the project to destabilise Ukraine: Russian military intelligence officers, the GRU, and local pro-Russian forces are brought into position. With the help of the media, provocateurs, paid protesters, and violent actions, the entire south-eastern part of the country was destabilised. The aim was the Balkanization of Ukraine by its disintegration into many territories. Over time, only two "people's republics", namely Luhansk and Donetsk in Donbass, remained under Russian control¹⁷.

While Surkov conducted the hybrid war in Ukraine and Georgia, another confidant of Putin's presidential administration, Alexei Gromov, worked to control the major national media, in particular, the state television channels. Gromov has the reputation of being the "Head of Russian State Propaganda"¹⁸. His career began as a diplomat and head of the presidential office of the first Russian president, Boris Yeltsin. He later became Putin's spokesperson and participated in the destruction of the media holdings of the oligarchs who were criticizing the Kremlin regime. Since 2008, he has been the first deputy head of the presidential television administration and of the executive branch's media service. Gromov is known for his statement: "Things don't work out if you don't do everything yourself"¹⁹. The heads of the state and (formally) private televisions, as well as the editors-in-chief of the national newspapers, such as "Kommersant", meet every Thursday in Gromov's office, according to a former participant in these meetings who spoke to the Russian platform for investigative journalism, "Project"²⁰. The Project article documented how all leading media outlets, including media abroad such as RT and Rossiya Segodnya, are managed and controlled by the presidential administration²¹. Gromov discusses current events with editors-in-chief and gives instructions on how to report on them. Unwanted topics are ignored. Inside the country, journalistic coverage by state media is directed mainly against the opposition and dissidents. They are discredited through deliberate fake news²².



Gromov is also a key figure in international reporting. He founded the foreign channel RT in 2005, together with the then-Minister of Information Mikhail Lesin and directed that Margarita Simonyan be editor-in-chief of RT and Rossiya Segodnya. Simonyan also participates in the weekly meetings at the Kremlin and is an important confidant of Gromov. The editor-in-chief, her husband, and her sister lead important PR projects for the Russian state. Gromov, like Surkov, is on the EU's sanctions list. The EU document that justifies this states: "As the first deputy head of the presidential administration, he is responsible for instructing the Russian media to cover the separatists in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, thus maintaining destabilization in eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea"²³.

2 Russia's global media campaign

In a decree of 9 December 2013, Putin declared that state media would be re-organised. RIA Novosti – Russia's largest and most modern domestic agency – was merged with the Golos Rossii (Voice of Russia), which was directed abroad, to create the international media agency Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today). According to this decree, the agency's task was to represent, both at home and abroad, the state policy of the Russian Federation as well as Russian public life²⁴. The new media group was included in "the list of strategic organisations in Russia" that are of particular importance to the country's defence capability and security²⁵.

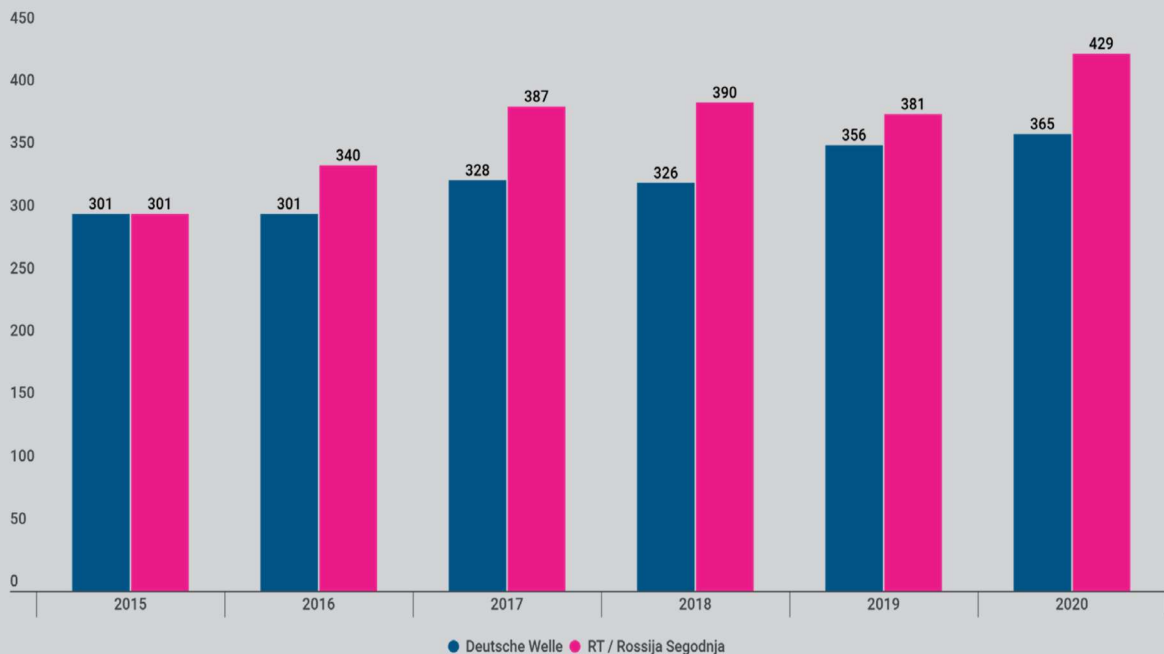
In November 2014 Rossiya Segodnya launched a global media project entitled "Sputnik International", led by its general director, Dimitri Kiselov, who is also the host of the weekly programme "News of the Week" on the state television channel Russia 1²⁶. There, Kiselov has discussed how the media covered the annexation of Crimea and questioned Ukraine's independence. Rossiya Segodnya had planned to broadcast to 130 cities in 34 countries and in 30 languages by 2015. In 2014, Rossiya Segodnya's correspondent network included 40 local offices around the world. In accordance with the plans of Sputnik International, Rossiya Segodnya was supposed to at least triple the number of its correspondent offices. It remains unclear whether this goal has been fulfilled. Sputnik's website lists eight main offices (Moscow, Washington, Beijing, Berlin, Paris, Cairo, London, Edinburgh): otherwise, it only refers to having offices around the world²⁷.

The most important role abroad is played by the TV channel RT – this is evident from its funding. At the end of 2014, RT had 22 offices in 19 countries²⁸. Contrary to popular belief, the RT channel is not part of Rossiya Segodnya, but is managed by an independent, non-commercial television, TV-Novosti²⁹. RT Deutsch entered the German media market in November 2014 with an online portal. Its television channel was scheduled to launch in 2015 but this is still just a project. Even in the beginning of 2015, it was questionable whether this global media campaign could be implemented according to plan. Moreover, the decline of the Russian ruble shrank the 2015 budget of RT and Rossiya Segodnya by one-third to 301 million euros³⁰.

The Russian leadership has been steadily increasing the budgets of RT and Rossiya Segodnya (Chart 1) and in 2020 it reached a record amount of almost 430 million euros (or 30.5 billion rubles at the exchange rate of 12/2/2019)³¹. By comparison, Deutsche Welle's budget, though recently increased, is only 366 million euros, far below its Russian counterpart.³² This generous funding underscores the importance the Kremlin attaches to foreign media policy. Representatives of the Russian media, such as the director of Rossiya Segodnya in Berlin, Andrey Ivanovskiy³³ and the editor-in-chief of RT Deutsch, Ivan Rodionov, confirm that their activities are funded by the Russian state³⁴.

RT, with a budget of 324 million euros (23 billion rubles at the exchange rate of 3 December 2019) for 2020, is the state channel with the second largest funding in Russia³⁵ and is constantly expanding both its broadcast languages and its correspondent network. In 2005, RT launched an English-language programme in Moscow, which was broadcast via satellite in the United Kingdom and in some EU states. The programmes in Arabic (2007) and Spanish (2009) are produced in Russia as well. In 2010, RT America opened a second studio in Washington³⁶. The Maidan protests in Ukraine boosted this expansion; in 2014, a studio for RT UK was opened in London and RT Deutsch launched an online portal in Berlin. A year later, the internet portal RT en Français online was launched³⁷. On the occasion of the French presidential election in 2017, RT strengthened its position by opening a studio in Paris offering a French-language television programme³⁸.

Chart 1 | Budget of RT/Rossija Segodnja and Deutsche Welle in millions of Euros



Sources: Vedomosti, RBK, RG.ru, Rambler.ru, DWDL.de, Vesti Ekonomika, medienkorrespondenz.de, The Insider, meedia.de

There RT is developing successfully, with 1.5 million followers in social networks. True to the motto "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" RT sympathizes with the movement of the yellow vests and criticizes the French government³⁹ – this strategy has also been observed in Germany (see chapter 5.2.).

Rossija Segodnja's Sputnik news portal, meanwhile, is available on all continents in 31 languages, including the occupied territories of Georgia (Ossetia and Abkhazia)⁴⁰. However, the expansion of the Russian state media was not well received everywhere. In some Scandinavian and Baltic countries, Sputnik news is strongly opposed. In March 2016, Sputnik shut down its portal in Swedish following public criticism⁴¹. Similarly, in



November 2019, Sputnik was forced to withdraw 35 of its employees from Estonia after four years because Estonian banks refused to make salary payments since General Director Kiselov was on the EU sanctions list⁴².

3 Main focus: Germany

Germany is an important focus of Russia's media offensive. Russia's state leadership is looking for allies in Western Europe for its political course. The aim is to drive a wedge into the relations between the USA and Europe and to isolate countries critical of Russia, such as Poland and the Baltic states⁴³. Russian media's constant criticism of NATO and the EU aims to question the necessity for these organisations. Their journalistic coverage of the German media is also criticized for concealing the truth. An example of this is the news programme "Der fehlende Part" (The Missing Part), which broadcasts from the website of RT Deutsch. RT Deutsch and Sputnik claim to offer "an alternative source of information, outside the mainstream". "Our goal is to show the other point of view, as well as to expose media manipulation", writes the website of RT Deutsch⁴⁴. Sputnik Deutschland describes itself thusly: "Sputnik provides information about what others are silent"⁴⁵.

A very negative image of Germany is shown: the government is allegedly a puppet of the United States, its democracy is defective, and its media are manipulated. Existing doubts in society, such as Euroscepticism, dissatisfaction with the media, or anti-American sentiments, are skilfully taken up and instrumentalised. The aim is to deepen existing conflicts, especially over migrant issues, and thus to divide society. At the same time, Russia's advocates are receiving media support to expand Russia's position.

RT Deutsch articles are polarizing and make a clear distinction between friends and enemies, the criterion for this being the attitude to the government of President Putin. Accordingly, politicians from Alternative for Germany (AfD), die Linken (The Left), some liberals, and especially some social democrats are reflected in a positive light. However, the government, especially Chancellor Merkel, and those public groups critical of Putin are stylized as enemies and described as "Russophobes and "Cold War defenders" (see Chapter 5.2.).

In general, media pluralism is a positive thing. However, there is a problem when there is a political agenda behind these media that have nothing in common with truly independent journalism. Russian media news abroad is often biased and even manipulative and does not contribute to the diversity of views. They incite confusion and distrust. While news in authoritarian Russia are largely controlled, the Russian government uses free and open societies such as Germany's to pursue its own political goals through the media⁴⁶. Russia not only seeks to impose its own interpretation on controversial topics, but also to exert targeted influence on domestic and foreign policy. This became particularly clear after examining the reporting done before the federal elections in Germany in 2017 and the European elections in 2019 (Chapter 5.2, 5.5.).

4 The actors of the Russian media

4.1 RT Deutsch and Ruptly TV

Ruptly TV, a subsidiary of RT, is headquartered in Berlin and has operated since 2013. According to sources in Berlin, Ruptly has more than 25 correspondent offices around the world and a multinational team of 24 employees⁴⁷. At first the Berlin branch was managed by Ivan Rodionov, at the moment the director is Dinara



Toktosunova⁴⁸. In early November 2014, the news portal RT Deutsch was launched, originally from the same address as Ruptly but later moved to a studio in Berlin-Adlershof⁴⁹.

Rodionov, now Editor-in-chief, is a sought after public interlocutor in the German media. Prior to the creation of Ruptly in 2013, Rodionov was the executive editor of RT's Berlin office and headed the German bureau of the Russian channel RTR⁵⁰. RT apparently selects young people for its staff. The host of the show "Der fehlende Part" (The Missing Part), Jasmin Kosubek, has a degree in economics and, according to her, her position in RT is her first permanent job⁵¹. RT Deutsch has 30 permanent employees, including editors and technical staff. Most editors have no journalistic education, according to an undercover journalist investigation by the programme "Extra"⁵². What is more, RT journalists have openly stated that they adhered to the line of Russian state media and spread propaganda. However, an official statement from the editorial board says that their journalistic coverage is not dependent on the Russian government or other state institutions⁵³.

Back in 2015, RT Deutsch was supposed to launch as a TV channel, but currently only the Internet platform and YouTube channel are operational. In early 2019, German media reported that former MDR editor-in-chief Wolfgang Kenntemich was working as a lobbyist for RT and was arranging a TV channel license. However, the prospects for this are not good, because state-funded televisions are not legally entitled to a license in Germany. RT International is registered in the United Kingdom and transmits from there via satellite to EU member states⁵⁴. The German Federation of Journalists (DJV) has warned media authorities in the provinces not to issue it a license. According to a statement by DJV, RT is a Kremlin propaganda tool. In doing so, DJV referred to a study by this author on Russian media in Germany⁵⁵.

After leaving her post as editor of RT Deutsch, Lea Frings warned in an interview for Zapp magazine that the loss of trust the German press leads people to so-called alternative media, such as RT Deutsch⁵⁶. "They believe that they will be able to hear an alternative opinion, which will definitely not happen." Initially, she saw in RT Deutsch an opportunity to give "a new impetus to journalism in Germany". In practice, the opposite is happening at RT Deutsch, says Frings. "Skilful propaganda is disseminated in a very subtle way. The whole picture is not shown." Frings also noticed a turn to the right in journalistic coverage. In the beginning, there were neither left nor right positions. Gradually, however, the channel turned entirely to a target group of right-wing viewers. RT Deutsch interviews right-wing populists and lets them speak unhindered. "This is not journalism," Lea Frings told Zapp. An analysis of the journalistic coverage in RT Deutsch confirms this assessment (see Chapter 5.2., 5.5.).

4.2 Maffick and Redfish media

In 2018 Ruptly TV founded two subsidiaries that are active in the social media sector – Redfish Ltd and Maffick Media Ltd. Both are headquartered in the capital and broadcast Redfish channels as well as In the Now, Waste-Ed, and Soapbox, which can be found on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube⁵⁷.

New social media fill a void for the left-wing audience. Redfish focuses on social issues as a "platform for the people", according to their website⁵⁸. Redfish is a 100 percent subsidiary of Ruptly and just like its motto "against the mainstream", it is supposed to offer an alternative⁵⁹. The Director of Redfish, Lizzie Phelan, describes it as a channel that publishes "ground-breaking grassroots reports". She explains that its target group "includes anyone who is fed up with the mainstream media industry, which is one of the world's most



exclusive industries and hires journalists who often have closer contacts with the powerful of the day than with the people, which our profession should serve"⁶⁰.

The Now channel, run by Maffick, shows mostly highly entertaining, non-political video content. Initially, In the Now was a RT America broadcast programme hosted by Anissa Naouai. Naouai is an American who worked as an actress in Moscow, where the future editor-in-chief of RT, Margarita Simonyan, hired her as a correspondent for Russian television⁶¹. Naouai is now a host and the managing director of Maffick Media Ltd; she owns 49% of the shares, while the controlling package is owned by Ruptly. Maffick Media has recently become famous for trying to present itself as an ethical educator. Their opening page reads: "We connect ethical brands with ethical people", while the Facebook page of In the Now shows the motto "Kindness is dope". The acronym ITN of In the Now imitates a famous British news channel with the same initials⁶².

The Russian narrative is intertwined imperceptibly in its programming. The European analysis block "EU vs Disinfo" describes RT's recipe for reaching young and international audiences as follows: "Start an online project called "In the Now", find English-speaking presenters, create entertainment content and sprinkle it with content that reflects the Russian point of view"⁶³. In 2018, Maffick Media went online with the new channels Back Then and Waste-Ed online. The Back Then channel, which focuses on historical topics, has since been suspended, instead the Soapbox page allegedly presents alternative views under the motto "Unpopular opinions expressed loudly"⁶⁴. Waste-Ed is aimed at an audience of environmentalists and criticizes environmental pollution⁶⁵.

These two new digital companies, Maffick Media and Redfish, present themselves as independent media. That is why, in their Facebook channels, Redfish and In the Now hide their funding from Russia, and in neither of their statements of ownership (legally mandated in Germany and called *Impressum*) nor in their presentations do they mention their connection with their parent companies, Ruptly and RT. A Green Party member of the Bundestag, Canan Bayram, gave an interview to Redfish without knowing that it belongs to Ruptly. She then criticised the company, saying that it had deceived her and emphasised that she does not want to have anything to do with Ruptly or RT⁶⁶.

Due to their lack of transparency, Facebook closed Maffick Media's pages in February 2019. This came after a report by CNN that revealed the company's ties to the Kremlin. RT director Simonyan said this was a "scandal" and called CNN "NATO's right hand"⁶⁷. Ever since Russia was associated with undue interference in the US presidential election in 2016, social media has been under pressure. Facebook stated that it will require the management of the Maffick pages to provide information about their parent company. Redfish was spared because its *Impressum* cites its affiliation with Redfish Ltd⁶⁸.

Interestingly, though most of Maffick Media's employees work in the United States, the company is based in Germany. This avoids having to register as a "foreign agent" in the US. This is how lobbyists who represent the interests of foreign countries are referred to in the United States. On this basis, RT and Sputnik are listed by the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). Initially, Maffick Media was trying to keep its ties with Russia secret. General Director J. Ray Sparks told CNN that it is "standard business practice" to not name the owners of a Facebook page and that the public is not interested in such information⁶⁹.

Nevertheless, Maffick Media was forced to react to their blocking in Facebook by temporarily acknowledging their connections with RT and Ruptly. Their Facebook pages, In the Now and Waste-Ed, went online again in August 2019⁷⁰. However, in the beginning of 2020, this information was again removed from the Facebook



pages of Maffick Media. Their *Impressum* and contact information use an American address in Los Angeles and create the belief that these are American companies. The Berlin headquarters is mentioned vaguely in the general text, and the parent company Ruptly is no longer mentioned at all. Thus, consumers are left with the illusion that this media is independent. Redfish mentions Ruptly on its website but emphasizes that it "has 100 percent editorial independence"⁷¹.

4.3 Rossiya Segodnya together with Sputnik Deutschland and SNA-Radio

Since the beginning of 2014, the international news agency Rossiya Segodnya has been offering news and radio programmes under the Sputniknews label. Their predecessor organisations were the news agency RIA Novosti and the radio "Voice of Russia", which at the end of 2013 merged into Rossiya Segodnya⁷². After the founding of Rossiya Segodnya, the "Voice of Russia" was first renamed Radio Sputnik. In December 2014, it was renamed SNA Radio; SNA is an abbreviation of Sputnik News Agency⁷³. SNA Radio can be listened to through the Sputnik Deutschland webpage⁷⁴.

The director of the Berlin bureau of Rossiya Segodnya is Andrey Ivanovskiy, former head of the German office of RIA Novosti and a contributor to the Austrian magazine Profil in Moscow⁷⁵. As he explained in an interview, the Berlin office of Rossiya Segodnya employs 12 radio journalists from the former Voice of Russia radio station⁷⁶. The page receives assistance directly from Moscow, where there is a large editorial office with about 20 journalists who write only for Sputnik Deutschland⁷⁷.

Ivanovskiy says that the most important topics are determined by the editorial board in Moscow; though the Berlin office makes proposals, "At least 90 percent of the content on Sputnik's German page comes from Moscow", Ivanovskiy says. "Sputnik Deutschland presents about 80 content pieces per day, including audio content and photos. In Berlin, we focus mainly on radio news." The director of the Berlin bureau clearly states that both funding and much of the content comes from Moscow. However, the website of Sputnik Deutschland states that the editors are free to choose their own topics and that Moscow only directs their attention to technical errors. Sputnik reported on Facebook that "Russian civil servants are prohibited by law from influencing editorial policy". In view of the control exercised by the presidential administration (see Chapter 1), it can be assumed that this information is false. There are other examples of how editorial independence is simulated⁷⁸.

SNA-Radio or Mega Radio, as the Russian radio station is called in some federal provinces, also present themselves as alternative and independent media. Their Russian origin is disguised by the abbreviation SNA and the neutral name "Mega". Mega Radio is broadcast to Hessen and Bavaria via DAB+ digital radio. Mega Radio Bayern is promoted on its website as "the best music and the latest news", but nowhere, not even in its *Impressum*, is there any information that the abbreviation SNA means "Sputnik News Agency" and that this is a Russian state media⁷⁹.

A court decision in March 2019 stopped Mega Radio in Berlin and Brandenburg. The Court of Appeal (Oberlandesgericht) and the Federal Administrative Court thus upheld the decision by the Berlin-Brandenburg Electronic Media Council (Medienanstalt Berlin-Brandenburg - MABB) to reject its application to broadcast via DAB+. The judges expressed "doubts about Mega Radio's ownership because the channel is largely financially dependent on the state-owned Russian media group Rossiya Segodnya", as MABB director Anja Zimmer asserted⁸⁰. Each day, Rossiya Segodnya gives Mega Radio 12 hours of content and a payment to broadcast it. Yet, the channel does not give up so quickly. In Hessen, Mega Radio applied for a national license⁸¹.



4.4 Special weapon: Trolls / Internet Research Agency

Paid activists on the Internet are called "trolls". In Russia, the Internet Research Agency hires such activists to manipulate the Internet on behalf of the state. Through this, public opinion in online forums and commentary blocks is manipulated in accordance with the interests of the Russian government⁸². The agency was officially registered in 2013 in St. Petersburg⁸³. A year later, it was registered as the Private Limited Company "Internet Research" (OOO "Internet issledovaniya"). The general director is Michail Bystrov, a former police colonel in St. Petersburg⁸⁴.

The Internet Research Agency, the so-called "Troll Factory", is funded by oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin. Prigozhin has been dubbed "Putin's cook" because his company, Concord, is responsible for the food catering for the Kremlin and other government agencies. The agency gained international notoriety for its interference in the 2016 US elections, which was documented by the Mueller Commission. According to the US Treasury Department, "millions of people"⁸⁵ were deceived through fake Facebook profiles. In addition, the Troll Factory's posts were mass political advertising that concealed its Russian origins. Prigozhin, his companies, and twelve Troll Factory employees have been sanctioned by Washington for meddling in the U.S. election⁸⁶.

The most important revelations about the Troll Factory come from the Russian newspapers "Moy Rayon" and "Novaya Gazeta", because their journalists were able to investigate inside the Agency. According to an article in "Moy Rayon", in the beginning the agency had 400 employees⁸⁷. In 2015, the monthly budget was EUR 250,000. According to interviews with former employees, a video was broadcast directly from the agency's premises and the prerequisite for employment was a positive attitude towards the government and to lesser extent occupational qualification, the newspaper reports⁸⁸. All employees had to sign a privacy statement and there is video surveillance in the office⁸⁹. The work norm is 150 pro-government comments per shift, according to a former employee, Marat Burkhard. He earned EUR 600 a month; English-speaking employees made over EUR 1,000⁹⁰.

The "technical instructions" for the selection of topics, as well as the explanation of the topics were also revealed. Employees were given lists with the exact sequence of topics⁹¹. In addition, precise instructions were given on how to create the content, e.g., on the topic of "opposition"⁹². Work is arranged in shifts of 12 hours each. There are different departments – some comment on news, others create caricatures of politicians from the Russian opposition, such as Aleksei Navalny, while others are devoted to blogging⁹³.

Additional information about the activities of the Internet Research Agency was provided by Twitter, which published in 2018 an archive of 10 million published tweets. With this step, Twitter wanted to give researchers the opportunity to get a clearer picture of how trolls work. Most of these 5,000 accounts in the archive came from Russia⁹⁴. Trolls are most active when social polarization is strong, such as before the 2017 federal elections in Germany. In this regard, their most used hashtags in Twitter were #Merkel and #refugees⁹⁵. By doing so, trolls were supporting the campaign against Chancellor Merkel (see Chapter 5.2.). Public debate is influenced by activists on the Internet expressing extreme positions for or against something. The goal is to divide society into irreconcilably opposed camps. This method of polarization is used worldwide, as shown by the study of Darren Linvill and Patrick Warren of Clemson University on the methods of work of Russian Internet activists in the United States⁹⁶. Researchers have concluded that the winning concept is "a kind of Psycho-PR", which uses to its advantage the fact that people more often believe something that is in accordance with their worldview and are rarely ready to question it. Professional disinformation is carried out not only by profiles whose position they oppose, but also by profiles with whose position the users are likely



to agree. They would rarely check these messages from their own media bubble before retweeting. "They have studied us. They understand how to use our prejudices and our hashtags for their own purposes", write the researchers from Clemson University⁹⁷.

5 Examples of distorted media coverage

5.1 Selective presentation of the facts and fake news: Ukraine

The conflict in Ukraine is a particularly good example of the use of selective facts and misinterpretation as means of manipulating public opinion. Russia's role in violating international law through the annexation of Crimea and the military invasion of eastern Ukraine is presented in diametrically opposite terms: according to them, Russia is the victim. In order to legitimize the Russian invasion, Ukraine is usually presented as a fascist regime that tramples on the rights of its Russian-speaking population.

For example, during the presidential elections in Ukraine, RT Deutsch, in the article "Red card for war and nationalism", blamed Ukraine for the war in the eastern part of the country and thus diverted attention away from Russia's aggression⁹⁸. Under a photograph of a Ukrainian fighter, there is the caption: "Under Poroshenko in Ukraine fascism thrives again"⁹⁹. The stereotype of a nationalist and fascist Ukraine is asserted through constant repetition. The Russian media linked this to the hostile image of the "Ukrainian fascists" created by Soviet propaganda, which once served to combat Ukraine's desire for independence¹⁰⁰. This is happening despite the fact that the nationalist forces in Ukraine were unable to succeed in either the 2014 or 2019 parliamentary and presidential elections. The radical right could not cross the 5% barrier in 2014 and thus disappeared from the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament)¹⁰¹. Nevertheless, the image of a fascist coup in Kyiv continues to be spread to justify Russian intervention in Ukraine¹⁰².

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine in the Sea of Azov in November 2018 is a clear example of how the Russian media presents Ukraine as an aggressor and Russia as a victim. Two Ukrainian patrol ships and one barge approached the waterway to Kerch to head for the Ukrainian port Mariupol. In response, Russian ships fired on the Ukrainian ships, pushed one aside and surrounded the remaining three. 24 sailors were arrested and many were injured. A Russian cargo ship then blocked the Kerch Strait for some time¹⁰³. Putin's spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, called this a provocation by Ukraine, that they had entered Russian territorial waters illegally and refused to respond to instructions from the border police. According to him, Russia's actions were lawful¹⁰⁴.

This statement is contrary to bilateral and international treaties. In the 2003 Russian-Ukrainian treaty, the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait were declared inland waters of both the Russian Federation and Ukraine. The treaty says that merchant, military, and civilian ships under the flag of either country have the right to free passage¹⁰⁵. Passage is also regulated in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea on Free Transit through the Kerch Strait¹⁰⁶. In May 2019, The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea in Hamburg reaffirmed Ukraine's position and demanded that Russia release the sailors and ships¹⁰⁷.

However, the Russian media, for their part, see Ukraine as the cause of the crisis. Sputnik echoed a statement by a Kremlin spokesperson that Ukrainian ships had "illegally" entered Russian territorial waters. It was a "pre-planned provocation" by which Ukrainian President Poroshenko wants to divert attention from his low approval ratings before the elections, as Sputnik quoted the Russian President Vladimir Putin¹⁰⁸. In addition,



Russia's foreign minister Sergey Lavrov accused the United States of using this "provocation" as pretext to sabotage the planned Putin-Trump summit as part of the G20 summit¹⁰⁹.

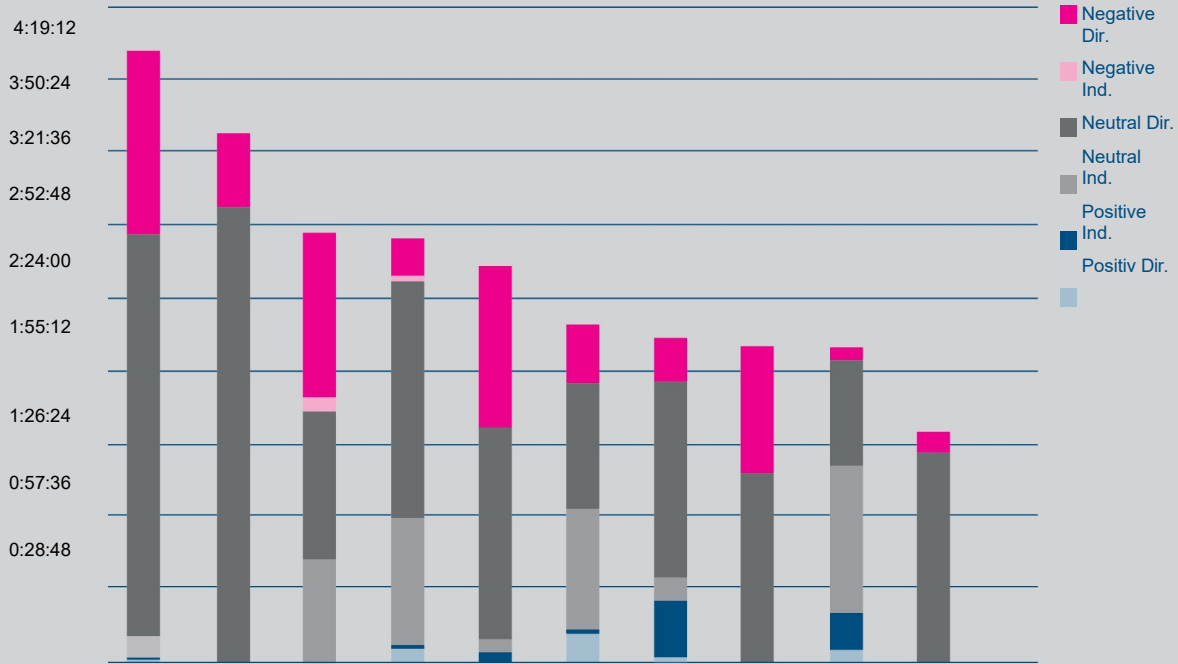
It is noteworthy how coverage by the Russian state media in Germany and Russia continues to overlap. Rossiya Segodnya CEO Dmitriy Kiselyov said on Rossiya 1's "News of the Week" that Poroshenko provoked "aggression at sea" to distract from his low ratings¹¹⁰. "As long as Poroshenko is in power, there will be no peace", Kiselyov said. The United States has incited the Ukrainian president to this provocation in order to avert Putin's meeting with Trump¹¹¹. This example shows that the flow of information comes from Moscow to Berlin, another proof that supports the statement of the Chief Editor of Sputnik Deutschland Ivanovskiy that 90 percent of the content comes from Moscow.

This case also shows their typical pattern of argument: Ukraine is responsible for the war, but it is only a puppet of the United States, which stands as a mastermind behind Ukraine in the geopolitical conflict with Russia.

5.2 Biased journalism: Elections for the Bundestag in 2017 and elections for the Landtag in Bavaria in 2018

Russian media focusses on Chancellor Angela Merkel mainly because she supports the sanctions against Russia resulting from the annexation of Crimea. Since the beginning of 2017, a series of articles have been published that discredit Merkel's personality and present her politics as one-sided in a negative way. Rossiya Segodnya director Dmitriy Kiselyov, in the programme "News of the Week", repeated this topic. He made unobjective points about the Chancellor's personality, attributing to Ms Merkel a supposed affinity for the concept of a national socialist "living environment" and suggesting that Germany wants to "swallow" Ukraine¹¹². "In Germany, these topics were in turn taken over by RT Deutsch and Sputniknews, e.g., in a report on how protesters greeted Ms Merkel with shouts of "Heil Merkel"¹¹³. The first edition of the present research published in 2018 documented in detail the anti-Merkel campaign of the Russian media¹¹⁴.

Chart 2 | RT YouTube Channel, Sputnik, RTVD – media oriented to Germany (08.07.2017 - 22.09.2017)



Source: ISD (Institute for Strategic Dialogue) /LSE Arena, Institute of Global Affairs, FN.115

A brief overview now will be enough to make clear how this scheme is repeated in the media prior to all elections: Opponents are discredited and slandered through unverified allegations while far-left and right-wing parties receive media support. This is clearly shown in a computer analysis by the London Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and the Arena Institute of Global Affairs of the London School of Economics (LSE). An analysis of Sputnik and RT's reports between 8th July and 22nd September shows that the Alternative for Germany and Die Linke were the parties mostly positively portrayed. However, coverage about Chancellor Merkel and the German government was mostly negative¹¹⁵.

Prior to the Landtag elections in Bavaria, this trend continued with some nuances. The analysis by ISD and LSE of the reporting of the Russian state media showed that, this time, RT Deutsch – unlike 2017 – did not favour any party. The German RT branch was again focusing on polarizing topics such as migrant policy and the so-called Establishment Agenda. The elections in Bavaria were not the focus, they were interpreted as a referendum on Merkel's policies. "The focus was shifted to a concentrated anti-Merkel narrative", write the British researchers – a continuation of the media coverage of the Bundestag elections¹¹⁶.

Sputnik, on the other hand, was taking the side of the Alternative for Germany and, to a lesser extent, that of Die Linke, before the Bundestag elections. This is proved by the analysis of the 387 content pieces published by Sputnik in the first two weeks of October in the run-up to the elections¹¹⁷.

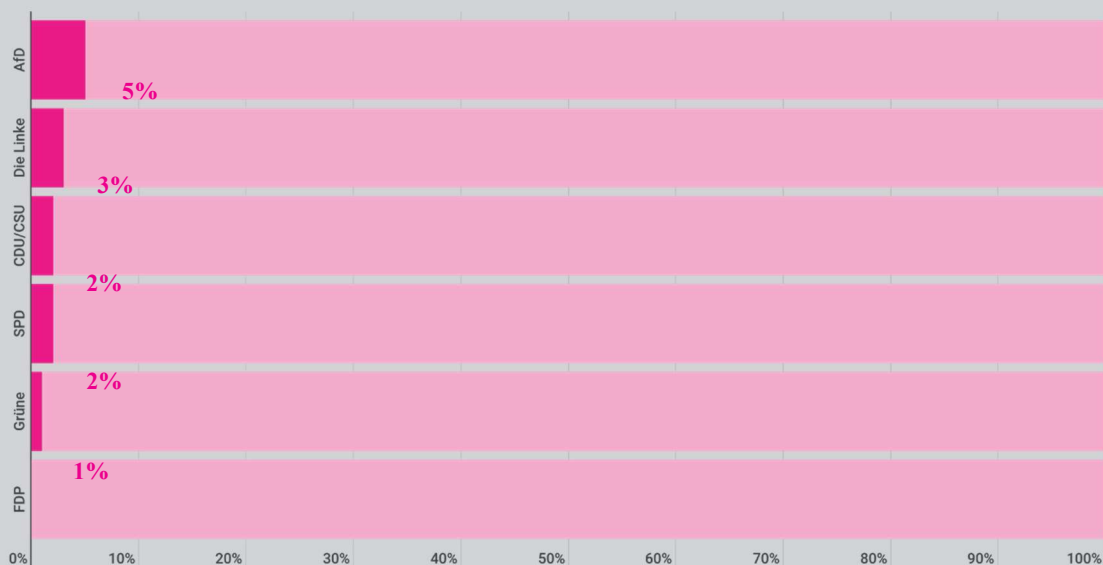


The only detailed information about political programmes that Sputnik provided were from Katrin Ebner-Steiner, chairwoman of the Alternative for Germany faction in Bavarian Landtag, and the party's Federal spokesperson, Jörg Meuthen. That political parties were scarcely mentioned can be explained by the fact that the elections in Bavaria were rather a side issue. Articles on the topic of "migration" were also analysed. Here, ISD researchers found that "23 of Sputnik's 26 articles present migrants or Islam in a negative light or as a problem"¹¹⁸.

5.3 Russian media and the travels abroad of politicians from Alternative for Germany

Syria, Donbass, Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia – the diplomatic travel of German MPs from Alternative for Germany has been developing intensively since 2014. These travels were regularly covered in the Russian media. The goals of the German MPs and those of the Russian media complement each other: The presence of German members of parliament in these territories and zones of conflict not recognized by international law gave their unrecognized or ostracised regimes an apparent legitimacy, a Russian foreign policy goal. The Russian media provided these actors with a stage on which to present themselves as politicians of international importance.

Chart 3 | Share of articles on Sputnik Deutschland which mention a political party (from 30 September to 14 October 2018)



Source: ISD (Institute for Strategic Dialogue) /LSE Arena, Institute of Global Affairs, FN.117

The example of Syria

Five MPs from Alternative for Germany visited Syria in November 2019 and held talks with representatives of the Assad regime, with press coverage provided by Ruptly, the RT-related media company. As Russian and Syrian warplanes bombed Idlib province, Bundestag member Waldemar Herdt claimed that the situation was "absolutely peaceful and secure". His colleague Steffen Kotré assured Ruptly that the war was "almost



over"¹¹⁹. Ruptly's film about the journey of Alternative to Germany was published on their own platform¹²⁰ and distributed by its German desks.

RT Deutsch reported on Alternative for Germany's second trip to Syria and quoted the head of the delegation, Frank Pasemann, who, regarding the Syrian refugees in Germany, claimed that "the guests are going home again" and that the sanctions against Syria were about to come to an end¹²¹. This article was complemented by a Ruptly video that showed Alternative for Germany politicians talking to Assad's associates¹²². The subsequent Alternative for Germany press conference in Berlin was also documented in detail: Alternative for Germany attested to the federal government's political failures. Sputnik dedicated three reports to the visit to Syria, in which the politicians from Alternative for Germany addressed their messages. One report quoted MP Udo Hemmelgarn, who gave the following advice: "You can go on holiday in Syria today"¹²³. This recommendation contradicted the Federal Foreign Ministry's travel warning, which urged all German citizens to leave the country immediately¹²⁴.

In January 2020, the Foreign Ministry condemned the offensive by the government's army and their Russian allies in Idlib province as a "blatant violation of international humanitarian law". Again, there were attacks on civilians and on civilian targets such as hospitals. The humanitarian situation in Idlib is "catastrophic," the Foreign Ministry said¹²⁵. However, against the context of the actual situation of the civil war, the Russian media spread the cynical statements of Alternative for Germany politicians without any verification or a presentation of facts. More important was the message: Alternative for Germany gave legitimacy to Russian politics through imaginary peace because Moscow has been an important ally of the Assad regime and, since 2015, has been involved in the war, carrying out air strikes¹²⁶.

The Alternative for Germany politicians could also profit: their criticism of migration policy was covered by the media. The media offensive targeted the common enemy of the Alternative for Germany and the Russian media – the federal government.

The example of Russia and Ukraine

Russia, Crimea, annexed by Russia in 2014, and the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk created by separatist fighters that same year, are a frequent destination for German MPs from Alternative for Germany. According to Tagesspiegel, in 2018 MPs from Alternative for Germany attended congresses or monitoring missions in these areas at least 12 times. The names of the MPs were repeated: from the Landtag these were Hugh Bronson, Gunnar Lindemann, Harald Laatsch, Roger Beckamp, and Olaf Kießling¹²⁷.

One of the activists is Gunnar Lindemann – an MP from Alternative for Germany in Berlin. According to information provided by him, from the beginning of 2018 to the middle of 2019, he was in Crimea five times. He paid special attention to the Donetsk People's Republic, where he was "definitely seven, eight or nine times"¹²⁸. In 2018 Lindemann was an observer of the elections in Donetsk, as reported by Russian media, at the invitation of the Electoral Commission of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic. He did not identify "any violations whatsoever". In Germany, Lindemann explained that "he was on a private holiday in Russia and visited friends in Donetsk"¹²⁹. Three days after the election, the Alternative for Germany politician congratulated its newly elected president, Denis Puschilin, "on winning the presidential election" and confirmed to the Russian media that the elections "met all European standards"¹³⁰.

For his frequent business in Donbass, Lindemann was decorated with an order, as announced on his Facebook page and documented with photos¹³¹. Lindemann did not limit himself to the Russian-occupied areas of



Ukraine. Last year, he travelled as an election observer to Abkhazia, which under international law belongs to Georgia. He joined a group of observers from Germany, Russia, and the republics of Donbass and Transnistria who assured the newly elected president of Abkhazia that the elections were free and democratic¹³².

At the federal level, Alexander Gauland, honorary chairman of Alternative for Germany, the federal spokesman Jörg Meuthen, the chairman of the Russian-German parliamentary committee Robby Schlund, as well as MPs Petr Bystron, Markus Frohnmaier, Waldemar Herdt, Stefan Keuter, Ulrich Oehme, Steffen Kotré, and MEP Beatrix von Storch are the politicians who have visited Russia and/or the annexed Crimea most often in conferences or talks with Russian politicians¹³³.

Markus Frohnmaier, Dietmar Friedhoff, Stefan Keuter, Steffen Kotré, Robby Schlund, Ulrich Oehme, Anton Friesen, and Waldemar Herdt visited Crimea and Russia in March 2018 for the presidential election. At the invitation of the Russian side, the visit was organised by the Chairman of the Russian Duma and the head of the Committee on International Affairs, Leonid Sluzki¹³⁴. "We can see that everything is fair and democratic", Frohnmaier wrote on Twitter, giving the impression that his evaluation of the conduct of the elections was predetermined¹³⁵. "There are no irregularities" the Bundestag MP from Alternative for Germany told Sputnik after the election: "A large number of voters went to the polls to elect Vladimir Putin, and they did. We have not noticed anything wrong"¹³⁶.

Frohnmaier is one of the most active MPs promoting rapprochement with Russia. At the start of his party career, as chairman of the youth section of Alternative for Germany, he held talks with youth organizations close to Putin to bring their countries' youth movements closer together and arranged a regular exchange¹³⁷. In Moscow, he was seen as a promising candidate to advocate for Russian interests in the Bundestag. A strategic document submitted to the presidential administration in April 2017 recommended supporting him: "He will be an MP in the Bundestag under absolute control." One week later, the strategic document was supplemented by an "action plan" for the elections campaign, drafted by the publicist Manuel Ochsenreiter. All this investigation by international media points to Russia's influence on Alternative for Germany¹³⁸.

In April 2018, Frohnmaier and his colleagues from the Bundestag (Herdt, Keuter, Oehme, and Schlund) travelled to an economic forum in Crimea. In an interview with RT, Deutsch Frohnmaier declared that the annexation of Crimea was normal: "Now things are so that Crimea is now Russian Crimea. Crimea will not be returned, and I think we should just accept that"¹³⁹.

5.4 Russian media and travels abroad by politicians from Die Linke party

The best-known example of a politician from The Left (Die Linke), who constantly travelled to Russia and the territories occupied by Russia in Ukraine, is the Bundestag member from Aachen in North Rhine-Westphalia – Andrey Hunko. Hunko, a controversial figure even in his own party, was elected as vice-chairman of the left-wing parliamentary group in February 2020¹⁴⁰. In February 2015, Hunko and his former parliamentary group colleague Wolfgang Gehrcke visited the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic. During the visit, Gehrcke served as a foreign policy spokesman and deputy chairman of the parliamentary group¹⁴¹. Hunko travelled to Moscow in May 2015 to publicise his fundraising campaign for areas in military conflict in Ukraine. There he gave a press conference and insisted on legitimizing the annexation of Crimea¹⁴². Hunko's visit to Moscow was even more significant, given the fact that a CDU Bundestag MP, Hans-Georg Wellmann, was at the same time denied permission to visit Russia. Hunko used this opportunity to demand the lifting of the ban on entry into the country, as well as the lifting of "sanctions on both sides"¹⁴³.



Hunko and Gehrcke's trip to Donbass coincided with talks in Minsk which were trying to reduce hostilities; their trip signalled their political solidarity with the separatists, who the two politicians called "insurgents". With this, Hunko and Gehrcke accepted the Russian interpretation of an uprising in the eastern provinces against an alleged nationalist subversion in Kiev¹⁴⁴. The two politicians from The Left posed for pictures with the separatist leader Alexander Zakharchenko and travelled in his SUV to the so-called Donetsk People's Republic.

Their trip was presented as a humanitarian act, but the politicians accompanied only one of the four aid trucks which were supposed to go to a local hospital. It is not clear whether the other trucks ever reached their alleged destination. The Embassy of Ukraine in Berlin protested: "support to terrorists is provided under the pretence of a sham humanitarian act", said Ambassador Andriy Melnyk. In addition, crossing the border from Russia violates Ukrainian law¹⁴⁵.

For the separatists, Hunko and Gehrcke's trip was a PR success. Numerous media covered "the first humanitarian mission with the involvement of EU representatives since the beginning of the hostilities", wrote the eastern Ukrainian media portal Noworossiia. A photo of Hunko and Gehrcke with the separatists was also published¹⁴⁶. The solidarity of the politicians from The Left with Donbass was also reflected by the Russian news agency TASS, which published an article entitled "German Bundestag MPs raise EUR 130,000 for the Donbass region"¹⁴⁷. Sputnik Deutschland published a lot of pieces about the visit. One of them underlined Hunko's political message: "MP from The Left: Crimea must gain legitimacy as part of Russia"¹⁴⁸. In an interview with Sputnik, Hunko denied that Russia was responsible for the war in Donbas¹⁴⁹. Also, Gehrcke criticized Ukrainian policy in Donbas in an interview with Sputnik, saying that Kyiv had practically isolated this eastern region from the country¹⁵⁰. In the German media, Hunko stated that the two politicians "only once were we forced to place ourselves under the care of those in power. The delivery of humanitarian aid was our top priority"¹⁵¹. He denies "creating closer political ties"¹⁵². Despite public criticism, Hunko and Gehrcke visited Donbass again in November 2015 – also for a "humanitarian" mission and a meeting with local authorities¹⁵³.

Politicians of The Left party are also active at the local level as self-proclaimed ambassadors of German-Russian friendship. An excellent example of this is Andreas Maurer, a member of the Quakenbrück municipal council in Lower Saxony. Maurer insisted that Osnabrück's district and regional councils (Stadtrat and Kreistag) pass a resolution recognising Crimea as part of Russia. Despite protests by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maurer visited Simferopol in Crimea twice in 2016, acts which Maurer calls "people's diplomacy"¹⁵⁴.

Andreas Maurer is active in many Russian media. In Russia, he is known for his television appearances on various talk-shows and for his meeting with Putin¹⁵⁵. Maurer told RIA Novosti that "Crimea surprises me with its pace of development" and that its numerous construction sites reminds him of Berlin in the 1990s¹⁵⁶. Maurer revealed to the news portal Politexpert how he avoided the "barrier of sanctions" during his travels to Crimea. The portal acknowledged him as "the first politician from the Federal Republic of Germany to visit Crimea after its annexation by Russia." Maurer is also a member of the international club "Friends of the Russian Crimea"¹⁵⁷. In an exclusive interview with the News Front portal, Maurer sharply criticized the German government. He also presented an "original letter from the CDU party", which made clear that the government will "block and control" Russian media like News Front and Sputnik. Maurer further claims that the government has allocated "more than USD 1 million to monitor the Russian-speaking population in Germany"¹⁵⁸. In March 2019, this politician was in Crimea to prepare for the visit of a "large German delegation." He told RIA Novosti that "the international community understands the irreversibility of the



integration of the peninsula" and that the statements of Ukrainian politicians about the return of Crimea "can no longer be taken seriously"¹⁵⁹.

This politician from The Left party is also interested in Donbass, where he arrived in November 2018 to observe the elections. He visited seven polling stations in Donetsk, where he found that "near universal joviality" reigned, and, as for possible irregularities, "he really did not find anything", Maurer told Sputnik¹⁶⁰. Maurer's role as an election observer is remarkable since four months before his trip, he was convicted by the Osnabrück District Court of rigging elections, which cost him his political mandate¹⁶¹. Maurer explained that he will continue with his "people's democracy"¹⁶². In June 2018, separatist leader Zakharchenko decorated the Kazakh-born Russian-German on the occasion of the Fourth anniversary of the Donetsk People's Republic with the "Order of Friendship between the Nations"¹⁶³.

5.5 Biased Journalism: European Parliament Elections in 2019

On the eve of the European Parliament elections, Russian state media did not launch their own campaign against the EU, as it did with its media coverage of Chancellor Merkel before the 2017 Bundestag elections. Rather, their long-standing disinformation about the EU has been intensified and updated to reflect its current agenda. The focus has shifted from the "Refugee Crisis" to Brexit and the Yellow vests movement. Also, British researchers from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and the London School of Economics describe in their EU-election report that there was a growing "shift to a narrative of competing wedge issues that would undermine the so-called multilateralism, increase the polarization along "cultural lines" and undermine trust in democratic institutions"¹⁶⁴.

The enduring narrative includes, first, that the EU has no future and that it will fall apart soon. Second that both the EU and the European elections are undemocratic and irrelevant. Third, that the EU is not a community of values, just politicians deceiving citizens with rhetoric about values¹⁶⁵. Selected negative facts are presented alongside misrepresentations.

1st Narrative: The EU has no future and will soon fall apart

RT Deutsch host Jasmin Kosubek interviews Markus Krall, a German economist, who claimed that European monetary policy is a "bomb" that will soon go off. He predicted a major financial crisis in 2020, which will lead to the breakup of the EU. The British were clever, said Krall, and were leaving the ship before it sank¹⁶⁶.

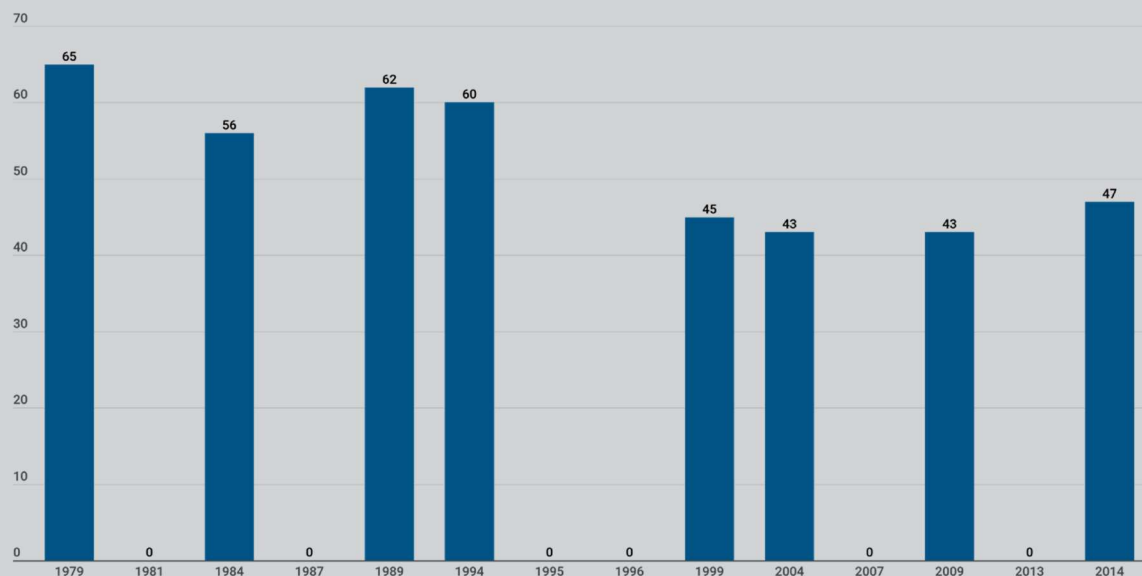
2nd/3rd Narrative: The EU and its elections make no difference, the rhetoric about a community of values is a farce

An RT reporter covers a pre-election event of CDU President Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer. The first sentence of the report: "Since 1979, there has been a steady decline in turnout for the European Parliament elections"¹⁶⁷.

The chart below (Chart 4) shows that this statement is false.



Chart 4 | Voter participation in Germany at European elections since 1979



Источник: TNS/ScytI и по данни на Европейския парламент / Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung¹⁶⁸

During the event, Ms Kramp-Karrenbauer called on the participants to stand up for "common values" at the elections. The RT reporter hints that the previous head of the CDU is not at all committed to the values she is talking about. As proof of this allegation, she points to the politician's refusal to give an interview to RT and answer critical questions. AKK was "unreliable" for her "lack of understanding of the world", inferred the RT reporter. The report concluded: "The federal government is not really doing anything to explain the importance of the European elections to its citizens"¹⁶⁸. This is a false statement because the chairwoman explained the importance of people to these elections, even if she refused to give an interview to RT Deutsch. In addition, Ms. Kramp-Karrenbauer became chairperson of the CDU in May 2019, but not a member of the federal government¹⁶⁹.

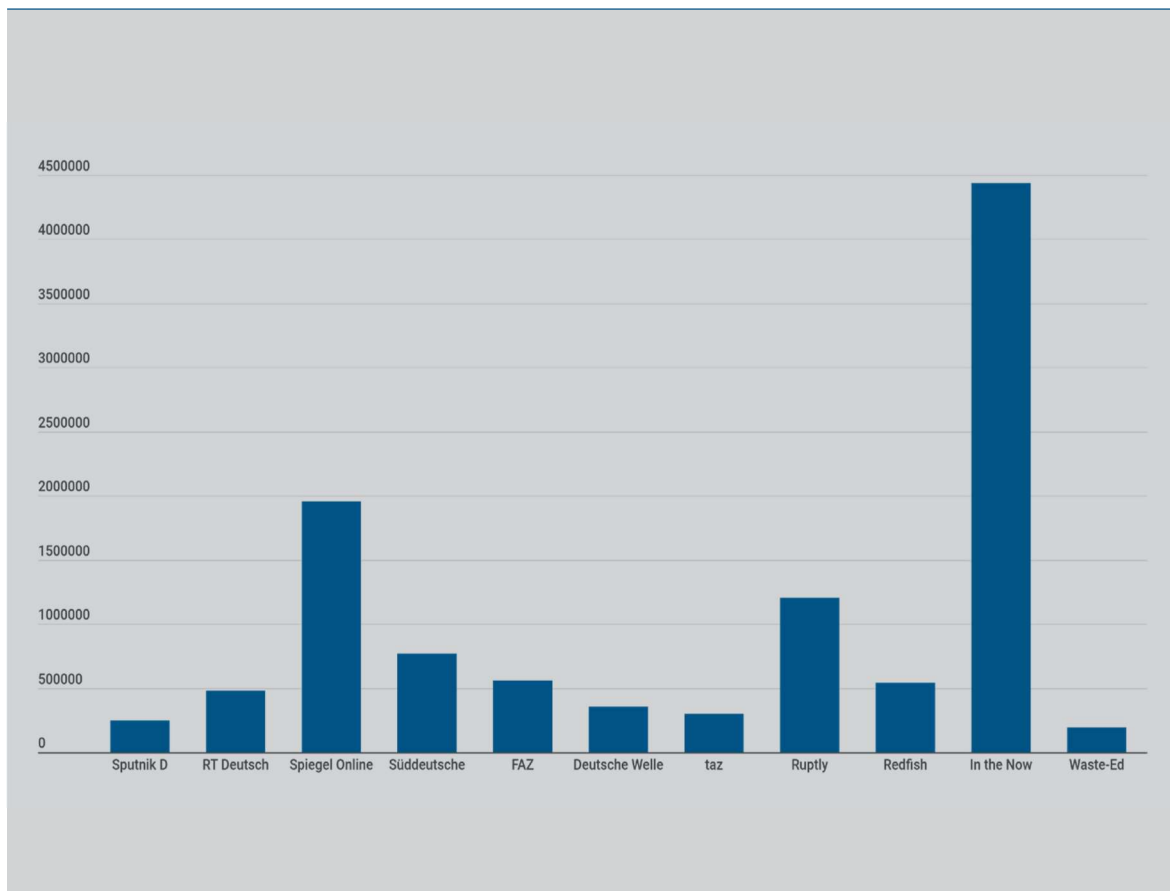
In another report, Sputnik explained the "true purpose" of European values: They serve to cover up the EU's expansionist aspirations¹⁷⁰.

"Arrogance" and "megalomania" was attributed to the EU. Under the pretext of exporting values, the EU is fuelling conflicts around the world, like the one in Ukraine. Instead of freedom and democracy, the EU brings "corruption, war, poverty. Is that what European values look like?" Sputnik asked. This is a distraction from the fact that Russia, not the EU, started the military conflict in Ukraine and is repeated in the media coverage about Ukraine.



As with the coverage of the Bundestag elections, EU-critical parties from both the left and right ends of the spectrum were presented in a positive light in the media¹⁷¹. Their messages received a lot of attention, for example the Alternative for Germany leader Jörg Meuthen gave Sputnik an exclusive interview, where he professed a pro-Russian political outlook and did not rule it out a “Dexit”, i.e., that Germany might leave the EU¹⁷².

6 Scope of Russian media in Germany



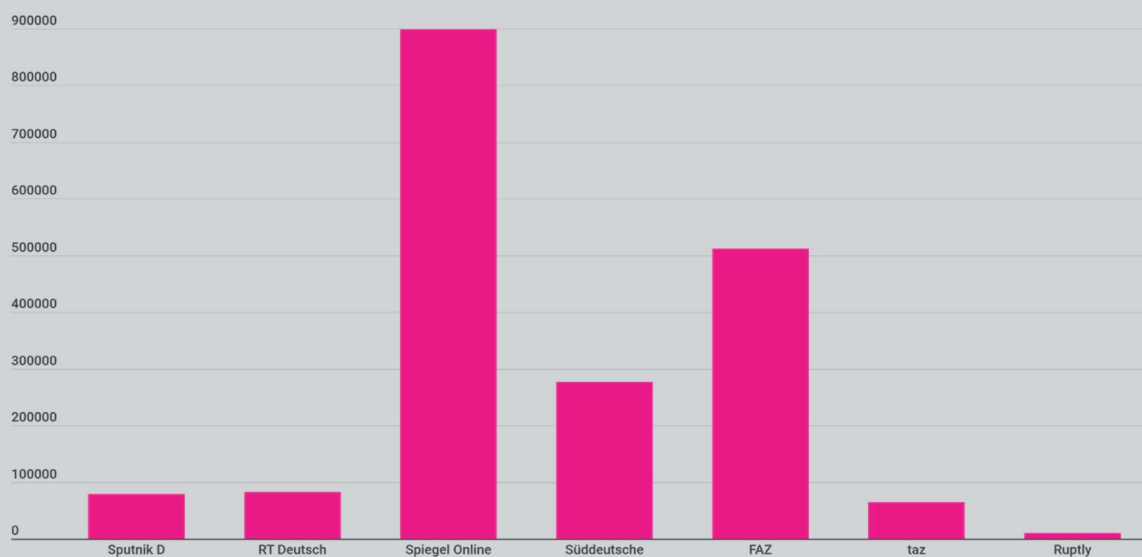
A look at Facebook subscribers reveals the reach of the Russian media.

The number of subscribers shows that Sputniknews, with almost 247,000 followers, is less successful than the well-known German online media, but RT Deutsch's audience is close to 481,000 users and is developing quite dynamically. They even surpass Deutsche Welle, which RT Deutsch likes to compare itself to. The newcomer, the digital channel In the Now, with its 4.4 million followers is developing extremely well. It should be borne in mind that In the Now is in English and is therefore aimed at an international audience.



In terms of number of users per day, Sputnik and RT Deutsch are approximately on the same level with about 80,000 and 82,000 users and are still at a considerable distance from most established media in Germany. This begs the question of how to explain the large discrepancy with the number of followers. It is uncertain whether the large number of Facebook users can be manipulated, for example by fake accounts. The anti-corruption foundation of Russian opposition activist Navalny found in an investigation that RT used Asian bots and linked RT to porn sites to increase traffic¹⁷³. Fake accounts are also used on Twitter, as proved by British researchers from the University of Cardiff.

Chart 6 | Users per day (as of 7 May 2020)



Source: Easy Counter

The Cardiff University Crime & Security Research Institute investigated the activities of the Internet Research Agency (see chapter. 4.4.) with regard to the elections and events in Europe from 2014 to 2016¹⁷⁴. The distribution of languages shows the following picture: With 71 accounts, English is the leader, with 62 German is in second place, followed by Russian with 50 accounts. In Spanish and French there are one profile each¹⁷⁵.

Tweets sent from Russia in German increased 35 times between 2014 and 2016 and amount to almost 15,000. Compared to other languages, German ranked third after English and Russian in 2016. German-speaking Twitter users are one of trolls' main targets¹⁷⁶. The British researchers pointed out that Russian internet activists were distributing content about candidates for the 2016 Landtag elections in three federal states and criticizing Merkel's migration policy¹⁷⁷. This is another proof that influencing elections was a major goal of the work of the Russian media in Germany (see Chapter 5.2 and 5.5).



Chart 8 | Tweets according to main language

Language	2014	2015	2016
Arabic	33	23.445	11.179
Bulgarian	28.393	17.092	3.483
English	368.636	1.056.750	834.305
Estonian	485	3.590	991
French	686	4.293	4.068
German	418	4.396	14.648
Italian	569	1.431	952
Romanian/Moldovan	313	45.675	611
Russian	1.813.975	1.847.880	473.123
Spanish/Catalan	1.724	5.204	2.589
Ukrainian	38.850	27.968	6.914

Source: Chart: Cardiff University Crime & Security Research Institute, FN.171

7 Summary

The conflict over Ukraine is the reason for Russia's global media offensive. Moscow considers the post-Soviet space as its exclusive sphere of influence and tries to prevent Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU. This "integration competition" with the EU fuels the Russian leadership's perception that this is a new Cold War with the West. Their media offensive is a part of their concept of information warfare as a component of hybrid warfare. Documents from the activities of two high-ranking presidential representatives, Surkov and Gromov, show that this global media campaign is centrally organized and controlled by Moscow.



In Germany, RT Deutsch, Sputnik with SNA-Radio, Ruptly, and the new internet companies Maffick Media and Redfish work to create a negative view in the society of the German media, which in their point of view are manipulated. As they do this, they present themselves as an independent alternative. But this does not correspond to the facts: these media are financed from the Russian state budget and are administratively integrated into the media network controlled by the Kremlin. They are Kremlin loudspeakers and spread its positions and narratives.

Reporting on Ukraine shows – documented here by the Sea of Azov conflict – that Russia is diverting public attention away from its aggressive foreign policy by presenting itself as a victim. However, Moscow not only wants the prerogative to interpret controversial issues, but also to actively influence politics. Examples are the Bundestag elections in 2017, the Bavarian elections in 2018, and the European Parliament elections in 2019 which show biased coverage and the use of fake news. Alleged opponents such as Chancellor Merkel and European institutions are presented only in a negative light, while pro-Russian parties on the left and right ends of the political spectrum are presented only in a positive light. In particular, with regard to the Alternative for Germany, it should be noted that the agenda of right-wing populists and the content of RT and Sputnik are very interlinked. This was confirmed by British researchers from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in their report on the EU elections: RT and Sputnik serve as a de facto content factory for right-wing populist parties by creating a constant stream of content that these parties use in their campaigns¹⁷⁸.

Members of the parties Alternative for Germany and The Left (Die Linke) are a favourite topic for reporting by RT and Sputnik, especially when they travel to crisis areas where, by means of "alternative" election observation, they legitimize Russian foreign policy. These politicians, for their part, are trying to attract voters by using the Russian agenda. These German MPs are happy to help Moscow when it comes to destabilising Europe and expanding Russian power.

Large sections of society are either unaware of the problem or believe that Russian disinformation is not a problem for Germany. For many, the fact that Russia is waging an information war seems too absurd to be true. Sceptics should be encouraged to read speeches by Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov¹⁷⁹ and the military historian Anatoly Streltsov, which are also available in German and English. The statements by the Editors-in-Chief of RT Margarita Simonyan and Ivan Rodonov, the former head of the office of Rossiya Segodnya – Dmitry Tultschin, and the CEO of Rossiya Segodnya – Dmitrii Kiselyov are also available mainly in German or English¹⁸⁰. The Dekoder¹⁸¹ platform can translate Russian media content. A look at the report on Disinformation Review¹⁸², published by the European East StratCom Task Force or the Stop Fake page of the Mohyla Akademie in Kyiv¹⁸³, helps one understand that Germany is not an isolated case, just another showplace of disinformation that Russia is spreading around the world – however one that is quite important.

Publicly, the federal government hardly speaks about the problem of hybrid warfare, although the 2015 Bundestag and the 2018 Federal Ministries "almost certainly"¹⁸⁴ have been the victims of cyberattacks by Russia's GRU secret services. In May 2020, an arrest warrant was issued for a Russian hacker who allegedly attacked the Bundestag's IT system on behalf of the GRU¹⁸⁵. Communication by some members of the government with the Russian state media has also been called into question. For example, SPD ministers, such as former Foreign Minister Siegmund Gabriel and former Minister of Justice Katarina Barley, gave exclusive interviews to RT Deutsch before the election, legitimizing RT as a journalistic media¹⁸⁶. In contrast, French President Macron clearly defined RT and Sputnik in 2017 as "agents of influence" who spread untruths¹⁸⁷.



The number of users of RT Deutsch and the social media platform In the Now show that their audiences are growing rapidly, surpassing some traditional online media. Also, for the Internet Research Agency (the "Troll Factory"), Germany is one of its most important targets. The Russian narrative is consumed daily by thousands of users in Germany. The above examples of biased and sometimes false media coverage prove that the Russian media serve as a weapon in an information war.

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