

THE KREMLIN AND THE 2021 BUNDESTAG ELECTIONS

Attempts to Influence the Outcome
and Create Instability

FREE
RUSSIA



THE KREMLIN AND THE 2021 BUNDESTAG ELECTIONS

Attempts to Influence the Outcome
and Create Instability



FREE RUSSIA FOUNDATION
2021

Contents

Context	3
1) Campaign Against the Greens	4
2) Support of Right and Left	5
3) The “Understanding Putin” and Anti-Western Rhetoric	5
4) Hacker Attacks	6
5) Dubious Posters	7
6) Anti-Green Fake Posters	7
5) Fake Posters in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	8
6) RT as a Channel of Destabilization	8
7) Role of Social Media	9
In Lieu of a Conclusion	11

Editorial Group

Olga Gushchina

Sergei Doychman

Alexei Kozlov

Zhanna Kryomer

Context

Elections to the Bundestag, Germany's federal parliament, took place on September 26, 2021, and not surprisingly, attracted a great deal of attention. Their outcome determined not just the formation of a new ruling coalition of Europe's largest economy but changed the head of its government. Angela Merkel left the post of federal chancellor, which she had held since 2005; and Olaf Scholz of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) was elected in her place.

Over the past 18 months, COVID-19 pandemic presented the German government with a difficult challenge of finding a balance between maintaining the economy and slowing the spread of the new virus. For the first time in many years, Germany was confronted by a new protest movement of "dissidents" (Querdenker 711), people unhappy with the COVID restrictions and fearful of compulsory vaccination.

After the disastrous floods of July 2021 in the regions of Nordrhein-Westfalen and Rheinland-Pfalz, issues of climate change and the need for emergency measures in this area became came to the forefront of the domestic political discourse.

In August and September of 2020, Germany was dragged into Russian politics deeper than ever before. When Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny, poisoned by government agents, was brought to a Berlin clinic for treatment, interest in domestic Russian events was awakened and sparked a large number of publications

in the German press. Consequently, German politicians began to pay attention as well. Possible sanctions against a list of Russians involved in the poisoning prompted a discussion of Russian-German relations.

Respective positions of the political parties represented in the Bundestag has been fairly stable in regard to Russia. The populist right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the left-wing Die Linke (The Left) have long been scandalized by receiving subsidies from the Kremlin and have consistently advocated abolishing all sanctions against Russia and strengthening Russian-German cooperation. The liberals from the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Greens openly support broadening of the sanctions and a freeze on the Nord Stream 2 project in response to the intensification of authoritarian trends in Russia.

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), are oriented toward a conditional "majority," to find a balance with the formula "for everything good against everything bad." Realizing that they must respond to Russia's use of banned chemical warfare agents against the leader of the opposition, as well as to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the CDU and SDP above all have been guided by the interests of their voters. German citizens are concerned primarily with economic issues, including energy prices. Accordingly, Nord Stream 2 is positioned exclusively as an economic project, and, on the whole, Russia policy positions are very restrained. Notably, there is a great variation among

SDP deputies especially from the regions of East Germany, since historically, there have been more supporters of cooperation with Russia there.

If during the elections of 2017 the problem of Russia's interference in foreign elections and influence on politicians was relatively new, in its aftermath, there has been a great number of articles and studies on the topic.¹

German wariness regarding Russian media has also increased.²

During the period from May to August 2021, several vectors of attacks emerged in the German media with the potential of influencing the outcome of the elections:

1) Campaign Against the Greens

In the spring of 2021, surveys of public opinion indicated an increased approval of the Green Party. The likelihood of the victory of the Greens in the elections began to be seriously discussed, along with the formation of a ruling coalition headed by the first Green chancellor.

Considering the fairly hard line of the Green Party on sanctions of Russia as well as the use of Russian energy resources and the Nord Stream 2, such an election outcome in Germany seemed the most unfavorable for Putin's regime. Therefore, it was not surprising that Russian media and social networks actively joined the campaign against the Greens.

The following theses began to originate in the Russian media in the vein of traditional anti-American and populist rhetoric: "if the Greens win, Germany will end up in a

cabal with the US"; "the Greens are prepared to sacrifice Germany to the Atlanticists."³

Targeting the audiences of central Russian television, the Ukrainian line surfaced once again. In late May, a number of news outlets including RIA Novosti, published detailed materials on the visit of representatives of the Greens to Ukraine, claiming that "Kyiv essentially joined the election campaign in Germany."⁴ An important indication of the origin of the Ukrainian narrative was the commentary of Alexander Rahr, a German political scientist (and close friend of the Kremlin) on Merkel's departure⁵ – he claimed it was due to Ukraine fatigue.

The narratives evoking the threat of American influence and the role of Ukraine in German politics spawned off a conspiracy theory that "[Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelensky's campaign against Merkel is sanctioned by Washington."⁶ The "analysis" consisted of click-bait headlines from media owned by Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, aimed at the reader without basic media literacy.

Russian media has also amplified the campaign against Green candidate Annalena Baerbock (now the Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs). It has reprinted and cited the German press, promoting materials focused on Ms. Baerbock's mistakes and blunders, and misconstruing her statements as hostile to Russia and harmful for Germany. Discreditation of the Green leaders was initiated by the interested parties in Germany, and the Russian wave of press was likely only secondary, although it successfully did the job of conveying to Russian-language readers the idea that the candidate Baerbock was a failure.

1 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/russian-medias-reach-german-perspective-dr-susanne-spahn>
<https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-influence-operations-germany-and-their-effect>
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47822835>
<https://www.handelsblatt.com/english/politics/russian-collusion-russia-trip-exposes-afd-ties-to-moscow/23582296.html?ticket=ST-5596707-UfeURJ1Sjx7pYF9crcZt-ap4>
<https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/documents-link-afd-parliamentarian-to-moscow-a-1261509.html>
<https://www.dw.com/en/are-russian-germans-the-backbone-of-the-populist-afd/a-48321687>
<https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-far-right-afd-lawmakers-visit-moscow/a-56829773>
<https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/kontraste/putin-koch-101.html>

2 <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/rt-germany-berlin-fears-growing-influence-of-russian-propaganda-platform-a-b62cb977-fc1a-4d66-8c7c-9859d8d00315>

3 <https://riafan.ru/1464058-elena-panina-v-sluchae-pobedy-zelenykh-germaniya-popadet-v-kabalu-k-ssha>
<https://ria.ru/20210508/germaniya-1731427339.html>

4 <https://ria.ru/20210528/ukraina-1734468220.html>

5 <https://nation-news.ru/632959-nemeckii-poliitolog-rar-obyasnil-uhod-merkel-ee-ustalostyu-ot-ukrainy>

6 <https://news-front.info/2021/06/08/kampaniya-zelenskogo-protiv-merkel-sanktsionirovana-iz-vashingtona/>

2) Support of the Right and the Left

Besides the Greens who are not shying away from confrontations in Russian-German relations, there are political forces in Germany supported and promoted by the pro-Kremlin media. The AfD and the Leftists are Russia's "main friends" in Germany, and their opinion is often depicted as the consensus within the German political establishment.

"There are calls in Germany to improve relations with Russia"⁷ – this statement from an AfD deputy is passed off as the opinion of all German politicians. "The Bundestag has announced Germany's preparation for war with Russia"⁸ – suddenly the opinion of a "peace-loving deputy from the Leftists" is presented as the official German policy position. "The Bundestag has said that Europe is inconceivable without Russia"⁹ – and once again, the opinion of an AfD deputy is portrayed as the national consensus. (Incidentally, the reference here is in fact to Putin's Russia and the USSR, the latter because it made possible the reunification of Germany.) Most of the publications of this type were timed to the historic World War II dates of 9 May and 22 June; thus, in general, their appearance fits quite plausibly into the general trend.

Important insights emerge from examination of the message purveyors as well. Sevim Dağdelen, the Bundestag deputy from the Leftists is the party rapporteur on issues of foreign policy, and regularly makes statements on the issue of Russian-German relations. In the spring of 2021, Dağdelen did not miss an opportunity when Amnesty International stripped Alexey Navalny of the status of "prisoner of conscience," which they had previously granted him. She posted tendentious comments on social media and her personal web site.¹⁰ The subsequent apologies from Amnesty, as well as reinstatement of the status previously granted the Russian politician was of no interest to Dağdelen. Such attention to Navalny in particular during the election campaign, as well as the involvement of West German citizens of Turkish

origin in an event related to the role of the USSR during World War II and the issue of Russian-German friendship compel us to question her motivations.

German leftists discussion of Navalny's poisoning has also had a curious bent to it. "There was no poisoning of Navalny," the infamous storyteller Mariya Zakharova of Russia's Foreign Ministry informed us (in a somewhat more elaborate form), gleefully pointing out a mistake in the date of the initial report from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).¹¹

The far-left German publication *Junge Welt* (Young World) echoed the Russian-language media broadcasting Mariya Zakharova.¹² This ideological publication once again picked up German-language publications of Russia Today (RT) on the topic of Navalny. "Imagine, Germany has simply fooled the international community!" trumpeted the many voices of fake news.

3) The "Understanding Putin" and Anti-Western Rhetoric

Publications of the *Putinversteh'er* (the "Putin-understanders") stand in a category of their own. In this genre, articles periodically appear explaining the state of relations between Russia and the West as due to the hostile policy of the later. Columnist Franziska Augstein writes about this in mid-June 2021 in *Der Spiegel*.¹³ Her interest in Russia arose in 2015, and although she claims not to be a friend of Russia, her articles describe the situation in Eastern Ukraine as "civil war."

On June 26, 2021 *Die Zeit* has published an article by Vladimir Putin in full, without cuts or commentary. The article drew a lot of attention from readers (more than 900 comments), including some that were critical, but the material seemed propagandistic and contained a number of distortions of reality. Three days later, *Die Zeit* released an article headed "The Myths of Putin"¹⁴ with a breakdown of the facts of deliberate disinformation and a general analysis of Putin's piece.

7 <https://iz.ru/1182595/2021-06-22/v-germanii-prizvali-nalazhivat-otnosheniia-s-rossiei>

8 <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2021/06/23/875208-podgotovke-germanii-voine-rossiei>

9 https://ria.ru/20210609/germaniya-1736339201.html?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop

10 <https://www.sevimdagdelen.de/einstufung-von-alexey-nawalny-durch-amnesty-international/>

11 <https://theins.ru/antifake/243443>

12 <https://www.jungewelt.de/artikel/406263.und-wieder-nawalny-berliner-theater-um-nawalny.html>

13 <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/wladimir-putins-wahres-gesicht-kolumne-a-949edda7-d20a-448d-ae48-3c4b7e601127>

14 <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2021-06/wladimir-putin-angriff-sowjetunion-martin-schulze-wessel>

4) Hacker Attacks

More alarming reports have been reported in the news in July 2021 – anticipated interference by the Kremlin materialized in form of hacker attacks on commercial organizations and government agencies attributed to Russia.¹⁵ As a consequence, there were fears in Germany that state agencies and even parties could be subjected to such attacks once again.¹⁶

Closer to the elections, it became clear that it would be dangerous to go on ignoring repeated phishing attempts and computer breaches. The German prosecutor's office conducted an investigation and in early September confirmed that in the opinion of investigators, "Russian military intelligence, the GRU, was behind the hackers."¹⁷ Primarily politicians from the CDU/CSU bloc of Christian parties and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SDP) were targeted by the hacker group Ghostwriter. Despite a number of warnings made in direct talks with Russia, cyberactivity has only intensified recently. Therefore, on September 6, Germany's Foreign Ministry issued an unusually stern public statement. "The Federal government urgently calls on the Russian government to immediately cease this impermissible cyberactivity," a Foreign Ministry representative said in Berlin. For the first time, the Foreign Ministry openly named the party responsible for the cyberattacks – the Russian GRU, which back in 2015 hacked the IT network of the Bundestag. "The Government of the FRG views these impermissible actions as a threat to the security of the Federal Republic of Germany and the democratic process of expression of will."¹⁸

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mariya Zakharova was exceptionally abrasive in denying the accusations. "Despite our repeated appeals through diplomatic channels, our partners in Germany have

never provided any proof of the Russian Federation's involvement in these attacks. We are confident that the case of the hacker attacks referenced is entirely motivated by foreign policy, given analogous groundless accusations against us made by the U.S. [...] Therefore, we regard the subsequent statements as a desire by certain German politicians to show their main ally, toward which this lobby is oriented, that they supposedly keep the Russians at bay and will not allow cracks in trans-Atlantic solidarity," Zakharova emphasized. "And once again, evidently, to publish the absolutely threadbare 'threat from the East' on the eve of elections to the Bundestag. We recommend our Berlin partners to return to the path of civilized election campaigning without any insinuations or groundless accusations against foreign states, and if you are going to condemn them, and make accusations and complaints, then be so kind as to show at least some sort of facts, although facts are disliked in Berlin."¹⁹

Not surprisingly, as a result of such an "effective" exchange of statements, on the eve of the elections, the issue of unscrupulous cyberactivity from Russia was elevated on the EU's agenda to take further measures.²⁰

Espionage scandals are another perennial issue surfacing in Germany now and then,²¹ and with the increase in Moscow's "activity" on German territory, echoes of the Cold War are increasingly clearly heard.²²

We can surmise that aside from the policy of fake news and trolls, Russia is going back to the old, well-known methods of the Soviet era. It is possible that during an active election campaign in the State Duma, the main resources are activated inside the country. Or what is more likely, the German authorities have begun to follow more closely and expose suspicious activity – beliefs in the purity of intentions and good neighborly relations have serious diminished.

15 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/solarwinds-hack-russia-cyberattack-60-minutes-2021-07-04/>

16 <https://www.dw.com/ru/mvd-frg-usililis-ataki-kiberagentov-iz-rf-na-partii-i-fondy-v-germanii/a-57914547>

17 <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-germanii-rassledujut-masshtabnuju-hakerskuju-kampaniju-rossii/a-59137784>

18 <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/cyberangriffe-auf-politiker-generalbundesanwalt-ermittelt-gegen-putins-hacker-a-5337c6a0-aaec-4966-a7d1-c2f84c88b485>

19 <https://tass.ru/politika/12343983>

20 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/09/24/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-respect-for-the-eu-s-democratic-processes/>

21 <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-germanii-arestovan-rossijanin-po-podozreniju-v-shpionazhe/a-57978786?fbclid=IwAR3oi-KevR1JL-zo5hFftKelftUMhn7yC7aR9hfRB8IOM7tCq53BPXmS15E>

22 <https://www.zeit.de/campus/2021-06/russischer-geheimdienst-spionage-verdacht-universitaet-augsburg>

5) Dubious Posters

In August 2021, the Bundestag election campaign went into a higher gear. Interviews with Party leaders were broadcast on television with higher frequency, and the candidates in the single-mandate districts began work in the voting districts.

6) Anti-Green Fake Posters

On August 8, billboards appeared in dozens of German cities mimicking the style of the Greens. In fact, this was a campaign aimed against the Green Party – the voter was intimidated with eco-dictatorship, bans, increased taxes, and terror.

David Bendels, who is well known as the founder of the Association to Preserve the Rule of Law and Civil Liberties (Verein zur Erhaltung der Rechtsstaatlichkeit und der bürgerlichen Freiheiten) was behind the campaign, commissioned by the Hamburg Conservare Communication GmbH.

During the election campaigns of 2016-2017 (seven regional and federal), Bendels organized the distribution of campaign materials for the AfD. At that time, the campaign came under criticism not only by the rest of the political parties, but by OSCE observers. According to estimates by experts, in 2017, the campaign budget was about one million euros (US \$1,130,380). Unlike the official funding of election campaigns, these funds were not reported by the parties and the persons who financed them remained unknown.

In 2021, a similar scheme was used with one small difference: it cannot be claimed for certain that the campaign against the Greens brought additional voices to the AfD per se. Alternative for Germany, the target audience, really disliked the Greens and would not have voted for them. Did this campaign compel the passive supporters of the AfD to take part in the elections, people who had not gone to the polls previously, or who voted, for example for Die Basis, which launched an anti-vaccination agenda?

Some of the undecided voters could have switched to other parties, more moderate on issues of the environment or proposing alternative options for solving environmental problems, such as the Free Democratic Party. And

certainly, this campaign did not influence the core voters of the Greens.

What, then, was the goal of a campaign that cost more than one million euros? If we proceed from the fact that this was the slogan of the 2017 campaign, aimed at raising the AfD's rating, then not the most effective method was chosen.

Suppose that the lowering of the Greens' rating was the purpose in itself – for or example, as punishment for their hard position on Nord Stream 2 and anti-Russian sanctions. This is only a hypothesis, but several arguments can be cited in support of it:

a) The funding of Bendels' organization, which was behind the 2017 and 2021 campaigns remains entirely opaque. The law does not require disclosure of the names of donors for non-commercial organizations. According to information from Lobbycontrol,²³ which conducted an investigation into the activity and funding of the Association, not a single name of a major donor was given. There have been only guesses and hints. For its part, the Association announced a rapid growth of supporters and donors in 2016-2017 which has not been confirmed, however, by the activity of supporters. Thus, it is hard to believe that private donations enabled this organizations to pay the expenses of a campaign worth more than one million euros each.

Most likely, the Association performs the function of a front operation which enables funding to be obtained from pro-Kremlin entities.

b) It is known that Bendels actively collaborates not only with the AfD but with the Swiss People's Party and the Freedom Party of Austria, which have also been spotted collaborating with the Kremlin administration; that is, it technically had the opportunity to establish contacts with Moscow influencers through right-wing populist parties.

c) The style of the campaigns conducted are not typical of German political traditions – skirting the law on funding of parties, using dirty methods of political fighting and outright fakes – what political consultants close to Prigozhin's organizations happily teach. The German media discussed the similarity of the campaign against the Greens with American elections, in particular Donald Trump's campaign. The possibility of a Russian fingerprint has not been mentioned. It is possible those with radical

23 https://lobbypedia.de/wiki/Verein_zur_Erhaltung_der_Rechtsstaatlichkeit_und_der_b%C3%BCrgerlichen_Freiheiten

right-wing views themselves study and implement dubious practices for running election campaigns. But the campaign in support of the AfD in 2017 and the campaign to smear the Greens, however, aligned perfectly with Moscow's interests. It is simply that to promote the AfD in 2021, more effective tools had to be found.

d) Bendel's posters against the Greens remained on the streets of Germany for about 7-10 days. Some of them were changed to campaigning for the AfD; however, no obvious echo of the messaging was observed, so accordingly there is no basis for claiming that these actions were coordinated. Thus, this indirectly confirms the idea of Bendel's work against the Greens in pure form.

5) Fake Posters in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern

Another poster issue took place in the north of Germany in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, where, aside from the federal elections, a regional election campaign took place.

In various cities of the region on August 23, historical posters from the parties of the CDU, the CSU, the SDP, and the FDP which they had used in the 1949 elections appeared on the streets. The posters depicted a map of Germany with the pre- World War II borders.

This excess could be ascribed to a prank by a group of radical nationalists which no one would have noticed except actually the regional divisions of the parties affected and the police. But this news was disseminated by Russian media with the very eloquent headline, "Election Posters Have Appeared in Germany with Kaliningrad Region as Part of the Country."²⁴

This incident was deemed so significant by the Kremlin, that Dmitry Peskov, Russian presidential press secretary who often says he is "not aware" of far more momentous processes and events inside Russia, commented on it. Moreover, if he had limited himself to the official phrase, that "this has no relationship to Berlin's official position, and of course official Berlin has not cast doubt on the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation," then there would be no need to pay any attention to this

news story.

But more importantly, according to Peskov, "this situation has shown which territorial aspirations German political forces have." He did not specify which forces he meant, but left a wide scope for interpretation. Next, a deputy of the State Duma said that "Russia does not approve such actions on the part of Germany."²⁵ Thus, in three iterations, we go from the pranks of a group of marginals to the unfavorable actions of a state.

The question arises: who benefited from this, and did these posters in fact appear just for the purpose of getting commentary from Moscow? The investigation by the prosecutor's office of the city of Rostock is not yet completed, and it is not known if it will lead to any result. But the statements about the political forces of Germany hostile to Russia were made a month before the elections at a high level.

6) RT as a Channel of Destabilization

RT has been broadcasting in the German language for the last seven years, offering television viewers an alternative perspective on events. In 2021, however, RT attempted to solidify its status as an officially registered media outlet in Germany. The editors announced their intention to "provide an alternative to the one-sided and biased mainstream" in Germany. The goal is the creation of a "counter public in Germany,"²⁶ which clearly goes beyond the bounds of notions about journalism. This attempt could not succeed, since in Germany, it is against the law to distribute programming if the television channels are funded by foreign states. Furthermore, on February 26 2021, the German Commerzbank send a written notice of the closure of the bank accounts of the news agencies Russia Today in Germany and Ruptly, and on the blocking of access to financial operations starting May 31 2021.

RT is now under the investigation by the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, since the channel attempts to erode the people's faith in democratic institutions, says German intelligence. The office has tracked the close connection of the channel with enemies of the constitution and conspiracy-theory ideologues. For German intelligence, it is clear that RT is

24 <https://ria.ru/20210827/plakaty-1747448590.html>

25 <https://info24.ru/news/peskov-vyskazalsya-o-nemeckih-plakatah-s-kaliningradom-v-sostave-frg.html>

26 <https://newizv.ru/news/politics/28-02-2021/rasha-tudey-v-germanii-planov-gromadie-no-litsenzii-na-veschanie-nikto-ne-ob-eschaet?yrwinfo=1634292230508855-3401862302043929810-sas3-0641-7f2-sas-l7-balancer-8080-BAL-2065>

producing content that is an integral part of the campaign of disinformation.

In the last year, RT Germany has become a domestic platform for the COVID-19 skeptics' movement. RT continuously reported on demonstrations against the government's measures to battle the pandemic, with streams provided by the Russian agency Ruptly.

Since March 2021, RT Germany has concentrated its propaganda on anti-virus fears, the COVID-19 pandemic and support of the AfD. According to research by the US German Marshall Fund, a Washington-based think tank, its combined efforts resulted in 22.7 million interactions on Facebook in the form of comments, likes and shares. These figures put the Kremlin-supported RT in first place on the list of leaders of social media compared with the main German publications such as *Bild* and *Deutsche Welle*.²⁷

The purpose of the Russian government's anti-vax campaign is not completely clear. Was the main task to sow fear and distrust in the health care system among residents of Germany or was this a deliberate means of promoting Russian vaccines to the European market? And if among Russian speakers, especially in East Germany, rumors were actively spread about the numerous tragic cases after inoculation with European vaccines and the wish to have only the Sputnik V vaccine, then the flip side of this campaign was the mass distrust toward any vaccines from Russia itself.

Aside from the conspiracy theories related to COVID-19, RT contributed to the surge of disinformation related to the elections, mainly disseminated by domestic conspiracy theorists and extremist groups which borrowed the tactic from their American colleagues, in order to sow distrust to the forthcoming election, especially regarding mail-in ballots.

Right before the start of the mail voting, the AfD placed a paid advertisement on Facebook and Instagram, hinting that mailed ballots were particularly vulnerable to manipulation. For several weeks before the elections themselves, the official accounts of the AfD and candidates from the AfD placed materials calling for observation of the elections. Such calls were always accompanied by statements that there was no assurance that the elections would be fair and secure, and that "trust is good," but

"monitoring is better."²⁸

Right before the elections, on September 20, 2021, Maria Zakharova, the official spokesperson of the Russian Foreign Ministry, published a report on Telegram that only four OSCE observers would monitor the federal elections in Germany. Zakharova made use of this fact in order to refute criticism by the EU regarding the elections to the State Duma in Russia, where neither the professional observers from ODHIR or the parliamentarians of OSCE were able to come. RT Germany wrote about Zakharova's report and raised the question about the "four OSCE observers" at a federal press conference. The size of the group of OSCE experts sent to Germany has changed minimally in recent years. But RT Germany's video and article indicate that the number of OSCE observers this year were insufficient. Both reports were disseminated on Telegram, Facebook, Vkontake and Twitter, often accompanied by doubts regarding the security of the federal elections.

Immediately after the elections, YouTube removed RT's German language programs and the mirror channel Der Fehlende Part without the right to reinstatement for violation of the terms of use of video hosting by posting false information about COVID-19. This was a serious blow to the work of Kremlin propagandists who had managed to get tens of millions of views on their page.

7) Role of Social Media

Monitoring of Russian social media in the summer and fall of 2021 preceding the elections in Germany have turned up a great deal of activity by the pro-Putin anti-democratic forces on the Russian social media site Odnoklassniki [Classmates], especially in the group Russian Germany. There are very few independent posts in this group, but there are regular links to news media and bloggers of a certain line. It is worth noting separately that the names of the moderators of the group are hidden and it is impossible to learn them.

The group is also highlighted separately, since it collates materials from other radical Russian social networks and media such as the Voice of Germany and Germania.one.

27 <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-russia-social-media-distrust-election-vladimir-putin/>

28 https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/an-overview-of-the-electoral-fraud-narratives-used-to-undermine-the-2021-german-federal-election/

The main trends reflected in the group on the eve of the elections were as follows:

Discreditation of Annalena Baerbock, Green Party Candidate for Chancellor

Practically every day, negative rhetoric against the candidate was posted. At first, there were claims of plagiarism in her dissertation. Then her quotations from various meetings and speeches were regularly wrenched out of context and portrayed in a negative light. On the eve of the elections, the authors of the posts openly insulted Baerbock, calling her “stupid.”

- <https://ok.ru/russkaja.germania/topic/152144435893581>
- <https://ok.ru/russkaja.germania/topic/153393207006541>

Discreditation of Armin Laschet, CDU/CSU Candidate

Although there was less negativity than with Baerbock, Laschet’s statements were recalled in support of accepting thousands of refugees from Afghanistan into Germany, and also his visit of flood-stricken areas of Germany, and he was also insulted and called a “clown.”

- <https://ok.ru/russkaja.germania/topic/153678079350093>
- <https://ok.ru/russkaja.germania/topic/153820612678989>

Anti-Migrant Rhetoric

Material was regularly published about the growing level of crime in Germany amid the increase in the number of migrants. Generally, the emphasis was on how the German government has ruined its migration policy as a whole by the admission of refugees into the country, thus proving its inability to solve serious state problems.

<https://ok.ru/russkaja.germania/topic/153558687176013>

Merkel’s government was accused of preferring to discuss climate problems rather than the issue of migrants’ crime.

<https://ok.ru/russkaja.germania/topic/153884902839629>

The posters also took glee in cases of rapes and murders committed by refugees.

<https://ok.ru/russkaja.germania/topic/153581895570765>

COVID-19

Separate mention should be made of the anti-COVID rhetoric. Merkel’s government was accused of excessive and irrelevant measures to prevent the spread of the virus. Articles were regularly published about people dying from Western vaccines.

<https://ok.ru/russkaja.germania/topic/153673993114957>

Also, mention was made of the supposed forcible vaccination of citizens amid the unwillingness of some politicians to get vaccinated.

<https://ok.ru/russkaja.germania/topic/153559811642701>

Parallel to this, articles were published about the effectiveness and safety of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V.

<https://ok.ru/russkaja.germania/topic/153587215521101>

Direct Support to the Alternative for Germany Party

The group actively supports the party’s policy, publishing the speeches of its representatives and citing individual statements. The party is depicted as the only sane political force in Germany capable of solving problems in the country. Furthermore, the claim is made regularly that the party is supported by a far larger number of German citizens than official statistics indicate.

- <https://ok.ru/russkaja.germania/topic/153876676695373>
- <https://ok.ru/russkaja.germania/topic/153429624771917>

In Lieu of a Conclusion

Analyzing the results of the elections as a whole, it is hard to determine reliably the scale of influence of the Russian propaganda machine or their outcome. The chief target – the Green Party – strengthened their positions, while the AfD and the Leftists lost voters and came in with a lower-than-expected results. In fact, for the Leftists, the losses turned out to be critical: only by a miracle were they able to form a faction (thanks to three direct mandates) but they lost their chance to join the red-red-green coalition.

Comparative studies of the populist parties establish the following trend: after successes in the national elections and clearance of the parliamentary barrier, both the right-wing and the left-wing parties suffer a reversal.²⁹ Protest voters are disenchanted and in the next elections, will prefer not to give away their vote to radicals who have achieved no result during their parliamentary term. In that sense, we could expect losses of more than 2.3 percentage points for the AfD.

We can assume that the active work by Russian forces in promoting the AfD enabled the party to keep its high results in the regions of East Germany where voters have not formed persistent electoral preferences, and also in the economically disadvantaged voting districts. Undoubtedly as well, without the coronavirus pandemic, the Kremlin propagandists would have found it far more difficult to construct and promote their destabilizing agenda.

The election of a new parliament and the formation of a ruling coalition is the start of a new stage in German politics, and undoubtedly, Russia will use all available means to advance its interests. Unfortunately, the vector of these interests increasingly diverges from the values of cooperation, democracy, and human rights.

It should be anticipated that work will be continued in forming and developing groups of the population who have a critical attitude toward common European values, and in undermining trust in the democratic institutions of Germany. This is particularly because

Russian propagandists have managed to find a successful point of entry into Germany's media space: the theme of COVID-19, COVID dissidence, and distrust in vaccines and health care policy has become a gold mine for them. People far from politics are interested in their own health, restriction of rights, and freedom of choice. Contradictory measures, the absence of clarity, and insufficiently developed communication in this area cause citizens to turn to the Internet in search of alternative sources of information, where RT Germany, with its multi-million budgets to create and promote content, is among the top sites.

Now, when the threat has become clear, German government bodies have begun to take countermeasures, although for now they prefer to take the shortest route of imposing bans. Unfortunately, this route is unlikely to lead to the desired result in the medium and long-term. On the contrary, bans spark interest and create the image of people "persecuted for the truth."

Among the actions that could be effective against Russian interference, the following could be suggested:

1. Independent public television, funded directly by the public has been one of the pillars of German democracy for many years. Even so, it is necessary to consider the trend toward digitalization and the population's switch from traditional media to Internet sources, both the web versions of print media as well as new forms (YouTube, Telegram channels). Support should be provided to create and promote high-quality news content on the Internet, including among groups of the population with a migrant past.
2. Explanatory and educational work, teaching habits of critical thinking and checking the reliability of information. Unfortunately, or fortunately, we cannot control the media diet of a given country's residents. In conditions where knowingly false information is being deliberately disseminated, however, it is not enough to simply ban and block it. Fake news

29 Abedi A. "Challenges to Established Parties: The Effects of Party System Features on the Electoral Fortunes of the Anti-political-establishment Parties." *European Journal of Political Research* (41), 2002; Ivarsflaten E. "The Vulnerable Populist Right Parties: No Economic Realignment Fueling Their Electoral Success." *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 44, 2005. Гущина О.Н. Современные радикальные партии в странах Западной Европы. Сравнительный анализ. [O.N. Gushchina. *Modern Radical Parties in the Countries of Western Europe. A Comparative Analysis*]. LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2011.

about COVID and vaccines spread faster than is possible to purge posts on YouTube, especially on social media. Methodical work is needed to expose inaccurate information, the technique of its creation, and the channels of distribution, and this must be done ethically, without witch-hunts and stigmatizing.

3. Political and civic education, increase in work with migrant communities. The core target audience of Russia propaganda is the Russian-language residents of Germany – emigres from the post-Soviet region. A low level of political culture and trust in

the government is characteristic for this group. The development of civic and political public initiatives must be encouraged aimed at raising political culture and civic involvement in the Russian-language sphere.

4. Monitoring of the Kremlin’s media activity, an analysis of the topics, and news “drops” involving Russian-language activists who not only speak the language fluently but are oriented toward a relevant agenda, in collaboration with consultants from pro-democratic organizations and initiatives.

Free Russia Foundation is an international organization supporting civil society and democratic development in Russia.

Our vision is a free, democratic, peaceful and prosperous Russia, reintegrated into the international community as a constructive and positive actor.

Founded in 2014, Free Russia Foundation unites and coordinates the global efforts of activists, organizations and programs that share our vision.

We actively support political development and economic reforms, and defend democracies against autocratic threats— in countries neighboring Russia, throughout Europe, and worldwide— as we see the success of these processes directly linked with progress in Russia.

Our current programmatic geographies include Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, South Caucasus, Central Asia, Europe, North America.

We provide actionable analysis and in-depth expertise to the decision-makers in Europe, the US and Canada— in support of a smarter, sustainable Russia policy.

Free Russia Foundation is not affiliated with any government. We are a non-partisan and non-profit organization registered as a 501C3. Free Russia Foundation's work is supported by charitable giving of individuals and organizations, grants and volunteer work.

**FREE
RUSSIA**



4freerussia.org

Washington, DC, 2021