



Policy Brief

Fragile democracy? Flashpoints of tension and conflict in the present state of affairs

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The global situation is more fragile than it has been in decades, with everyday life dominated by crises on multiple fronts. The Russian war of aggression in Ukraine has shifted the global security situation. Overall, the number of armed, global conflicts is increasing worldwide. More people live in authoritarian systems than in democracies – and even in stable democracies such as the United States or Hungary and Poland, authoritarian tendencies are increasingly coming to the forefront. The climate crisis is becoming an ever more urgent problem, but one that is increasingly relegated to the background in the face of simultaneous crises and catastrophes. The COVID-19 pandemic, too, is not yet behind us, but has dropped off society's collective radar despite healthcare professionals continuing to sound the alarm.

In this social climate, the political system faces enormous challenges. The coming fall and winter offer a particularly high potential for escalation: COVID-19 case numbers may rise again, additional public health measures may be needed, the energy crisis will make itself more sharply felt, and economic well-being will contract. All of this offers a strong potential for the mobilization of anti-democratic forces.

Potential areas of mobilization for right-wing extremist and conspiracy-ideological groups

It is difficult to predict with certainty which themes will be successfully exploited for mobilization in the coming months, especially in this fragile and constantly-shifting global context. Individual events as yet unforeseen can potentially result in sudden mobilizations.

Nevertheless, it is already apparent that the right-wing extremist / conspiracy-ideological scene is making use of various themes to determine where a future mobilization could be successful. For this reason, it is important to engage with potential areas of conflict at an early stage and to continue to evaluate them on an ongoing basis.

COVID-19 and public health measures

Many experts assume that case numbers will continue to rise through the winter. Presently, it is not yet clear at what point public health measures will be reintroduced, as healthcare facilities are already complaining about staff shortages. At the same time, it is clear that social cohesion has become increasingly fragile during the course of the pandemic. Particularly if the current energy crisis leads to shortages, a further burdening and weakening of society due to a resurgence in pandemic conditions would create an additional risk factor.

Although protest activity has waned during the summer, the situation can quickly change in the fall and winter to the extent that mobilization around the pandemic continues to appear successful for the conspiracy-ideological right-wing extremist scene. This theme can also be linked to other areas of mobilization such as Russia's war of aggression or the climate crisis.

Mobilization due to the Russian war of aggression and its consequences

The current uncertainties resulting from the Russian war of aggression with respect to the war itself and its effects on supply chains and inflation are a source of concern for many people. According to a recent survey by the insurance company Allianz, 57 percent of Germans considered inflation to be the issue that concerned them most.¹

During the pandemic, a potential 10-15 percent of the population consistently indicated that they would be willing to join protests against COVID-19 measures. According to the results of our representative survey, 5 percent reported that they had actually been out on the streets protesting.² If supply problems and inflation worsen, this threatens to generate social tensions that could become even greater than those seen in the protests against COVID-19 measures.

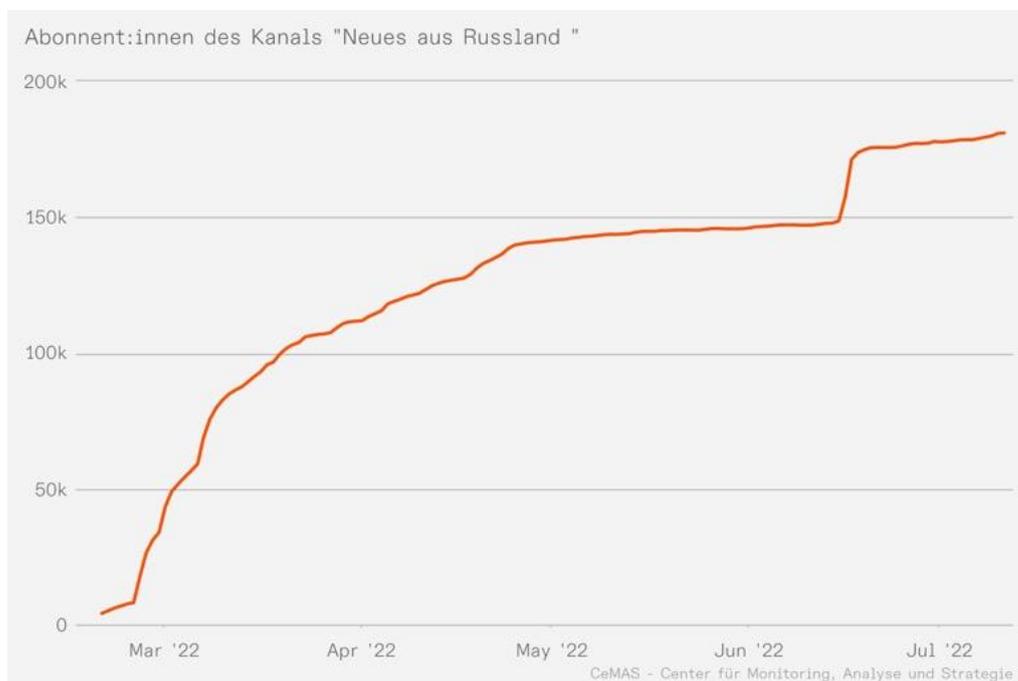


Figure 1: Subscribers of the Telegram channel "Neues aus Russland" (News from Russia) by Alina Lipp

While German society showed a large degree of solidarity, especially at the beginning of the conflict, this solidarity may increasingly crumble as the war drags on. On the one hand, this could mean waning social support for Ukraine, but it could also result in direct attacks against Ukrainian refugees. Accordingly, Russian disinformation is repeatedly aimed at undermining social cohesion and fomenting anti-refugee sentiment. This was already evident in 2014 – for example, in the often uncritical coverage of PEGIDA by Russia Today Germany as well as in the "Lisa case".³

¹ <https://www.rnd.de/politik/umfrage-inflation-besorgt-die-menschen-am-meisten-nicht-nur-in-deutschland-7S4X3Z5BHCDZLEHMSHBIIYK4KBM.html> (link in German)

² <https://cemas.io/blog/protestpotential/> (link in German)

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criminal_case_of_Lisa_F.

Especially at a time when economic well-being is increasingly under threat, it is likely that such mobilizations could once again gain a foothold in society.

There is a possibility that certain parts of the "peace movement" could become increasingly interconnected with the conspiracy-ideological scene and that larger waves of protest may occur in the fall.⁴

Incitement against LGBTIQ+ and women

Recent weeks and months have shown (in the US among other places) targeted mobilization efforts against the rights to bodily autonomy of women and LGBTIQ+. This tendency has also been permeating the right-wing extremist scene in Germany and has combined with existing resentments in certain parts of society. Attacks against queer people and queer gatherings are happening not just in the US, but also in the center of Europe.



Figure 2: A very high-reach message on the topic of alleged "early sexualization." The post has been viewed over 141,000 times.⁵

⁴ <https://www.daserste.de/information/politik-weltgeschehen/kontraste/videosextern/fragwuerdiges-friedensbuendnis-102.html> (link in German)

⁵ Translation: The Prinz Telegram/ 10 EU countries support Hungary's new laws against early sexualization. / "The EU Commission under Ursula von der Leyen continues to agitate against

This particular form of agitation has the potential to link up with other themes as well. The issue of "overpopulation" has been reinterpreted in racist ideology as an alleged *Volkstod*, i.e., the dying-out of the "white race". Muslims and People of Color (PoC) are blamed for the climate crisis in such narratives, and queer families are portrayed as the reason why white birth rates are apparently dropping. Dangerous conspiracy narratives of a so-called "replacement theory" are presented as justification for various terrorist attacks and are integrated into both racist and anti-Semitic worldviews.

Studies and opinion polls from before the pandemic show that such narratives have support in certain parts of society. According to a 2018 representative survey by the pollster *YouGov*, 20 percent of the German population believed that the migration of Muslims was part of a larger plan to make Muslims the majority in society. Males (23 percent) and older respondents over 55 (26 percent) agreed more strongly with these statements.

Mobilization against climate change mitigation measures

The climate crisis poses enormous challenges for humanity and requires fundamental changes in lifestyle. Particularly with respect to the multiple burdens present in the current crisis period, certain groups of the population will view the necessary measures with a critical eye.

In the Netherlands, there have already been protests by farmers against environmental regulations, which have even resulted in police shootings. These protests have been taken up by the German conspiracy-ideological scene and are seen as a model for action. In this respect, and with a view towards the fall, there is potential for similar mobilizations in Germany. As early as 2020, right-wing extremists have tried to hijack the farmer protests for themselves.⁶

Hungary. But not all countries are on board."/ In addition to Hungary, currently Portugal, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, Cyprus and Malta are also opposed to the early sexualization of children. / Read more: [URL]

⁶ <https://www.rnd.de/politik/die-bauern-und-die-nazis-mit-welchen-tricks-rechtsradikale-die-trecker-proteste-fur-sich-nutzen-wollen-5R3YHXTU3VGSXI7KYECEPIMBRQ.html> (link in German)



Figure 3: Widely-viewed reaction to the farmer protests in the Netherlands shared in a QAnon Channel. The post has been viewed over 138,000 times.⁷

Right-wing extremists have already tried in the past to present themselves in the industry as a voice of the people. One example of these attempts to exert influence is the right-wing trade union "Zentrum" (formerly "Zentrum Automobil").⁸ Especially if even greater cutbacks become necessary, endangering people's economic well-being and employment, this could present another gateway for mobilization by right-wing extremists.

In addition to nationwide mobilizations, local protests may also occur under this theme. In eastern Germany in particular, there is a combination of (at least locally) greater dependence on Russian gas, e.g. in Schwedt, other ties to Russia, and greater influence by far-right forces.

⁷ Translation: Farmer protests in the Netherlands intensify/ "The Dutch police... announced that they would use force to break through protest lines if protesters blockade the streets. Defense Minister Kasja Ollongren has said that the military is prepared to step in if necessary." / It's not just in Germany that the government is taking action against its own people. After politicians decided to close and even expropriate many farms (in cases of non-compliance) in order to implement the absurd EU regulations against nitrogen pollution, the angry farmers posed an ultimatum to the government and are already assembling to block ports and airports starting Monday. The EU and the Dutch government are threatening not just the livelihoods of many farmers with their decisions, but are also deliberately threatening the security of the country's supply chains. Of course, there's almost nothing to be seen or read about it in our state media. / Article:[URL]

⁸ <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/zentrum-automobil-rechte-gewerkschaft-fordert-ig-metall-heraus-17834052.html> (link in German)

Mobilization against refugees

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reports that the number of refugees is reaching an all-time high. Currently, more than 100 million people worldwide have had to flee their homes – a trend that will certainly increase as parts of the earth become uninhabitable due to the consequences of the climate crisis.

This trend is also evident in Germany: according to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, a total of 81,784 people applied for asylum in Germany between January and May 2022. This represents an increase of 20.9 percent compared to the previous year.⁹

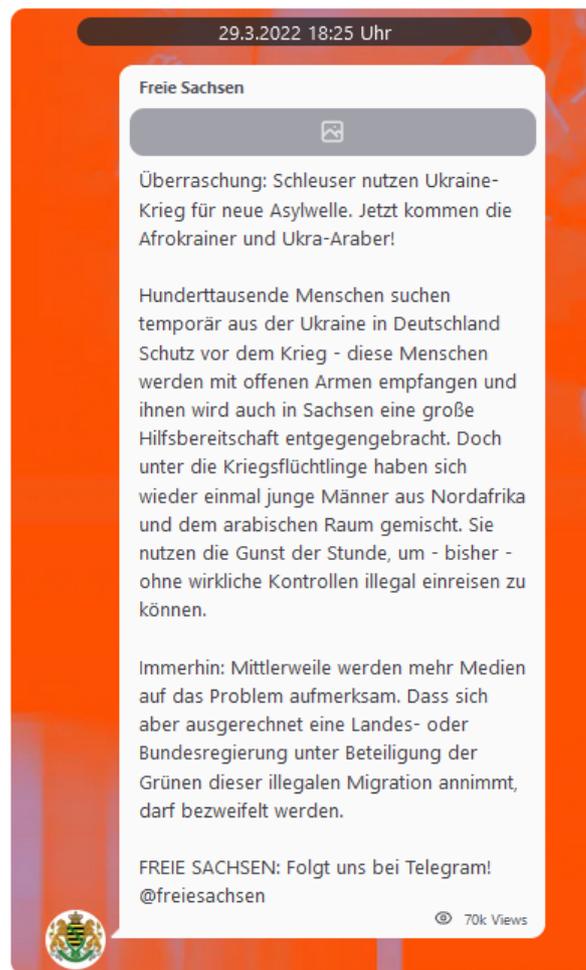


Figure 4: Post on refugees from the so-called "Freie Sachsen" (Free Saxons).¹⁰

⁹ <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Meldungen/DE/2022/220608-asylgeschaeftsstatistik-mai-2022.html> (link in German)

¹⁰ Translation: Freie Sachsen (Free Saxons) / What a surprise: human traffickers are using the war in Ukraine for a new wave of asylum-seekers. Here come the Afrokrainians and Ukr-Arabs! / Hundreds of thousands of people from Ukraine are in Germany looking for temporary protection from the war – these people will be welcomed with open arms and greeted by people eager to help, including in Saxony. But young men from North Africa and the Arab countries have once again mixed themselves in with the war refugees. They are using this moment of opportunity to enter the country illegally and – so far – without any real border controls. / Nevertheless: by now, more media sources have become aware of the problem. But whether a state or federal government that

Currently, the topic of migration and displacement (outside of the war in Ukraine) is not subject to much discussion. However, this can always change as conflicts intensify and as a result of increased displacement due to famine. This would create another possible mobilization factor for right-wing extremist actors.

Accelerationism or so-called "Siege" ideology

Accelerationism is a strategy adapted by right-wing extremists to accelerate the disintegration of society and thus the overthrow of the system.¹¹ One tactic that is being used strategically in this respect is terrorist attacks, which are on the increase, particularly in Western countries, as has unfortunately been seen in various locations in the US as well as in Oslo. Attacks on infrastructure are also part of the accelerationist repertoire.

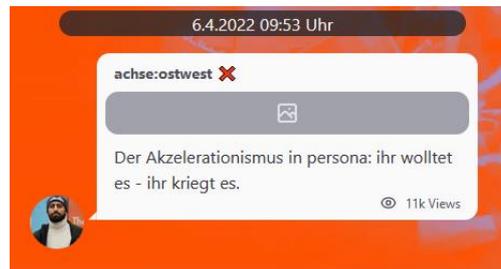


Figure 5: Comment on accelerationism from April 2022. The same account in April 2021 spoke of how "only accelerationism can save us now" and concluded, "so take every iceberg with you."

includes the Green Party will actually deal with this illegal migration is doubtful. / FREE SAXONS: Follow us on Telegram!

¹¹ <https://www.belltower.news/akzelerationismus-schneller-in-den-untergang-94829/> (link in German)

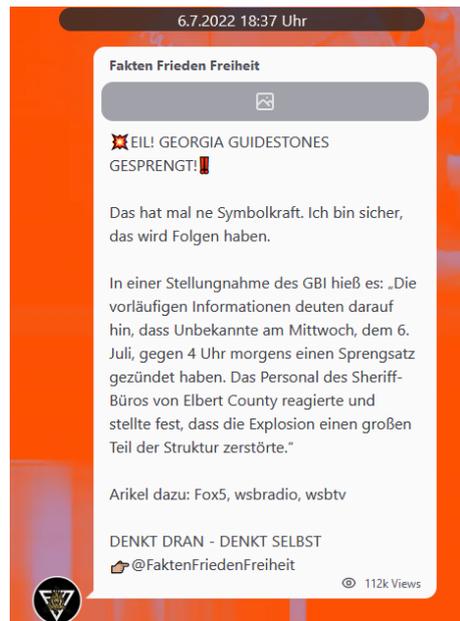


Figure 6: Post on the bombing of the so-called Georgia Guidestones, which were seen as a symbol of a supposed New World Order.¹²

Even in the case of alleged individual perpetrators, terrorist attacks never occur in a vacuum, but are understood in the right-wing extremist scene to be a model for future action. Looking at the various right-wing terrorists over the last few years, one repeatedly sees references to the criminal plans or contents of published manifestos.

What can be done? A strategic crisis management approach to dealing with threats to democracy

Despite the ominous global context and existing lines of social conflict, the majority do still act within the democratic system. One challenge, however, is that anti-democrats and right-wing extremists do not follow the "rules of the game" of democracy. This was especially evident during the pandemic. In Saxony, at times, only 10 people were allowed to gather at a single location to protest due to the COVID-19 regulations that were then in force. While the democratic majority largely adhered to these rules, right-wing extremists took advantage of the resulting democratic void and launched a new format, the so-called *Spaziergänge* (literally: "walks" or "strolls"), which has to be considered one of the most successful right-wing extremist

¹² BREAKING NEWS! GEORGIA GUIDESTONES DESTROYED BY EXPLOSION! / This has some symbolic power. I'm sure it will have consequences. / The FBI [Georgia Bureau of Investigation] issued a statement: "The preliminary information indicates that unknown individuals detonated an explosive device at around 4:00 a.m. on Wednesday, July 6th. Elbert County Sheriff's Office personnel responded to discover the explosion destroyed a large portion of the structure." / Related articles: Fox5, wsbradio, wsbtv / THINK ABOUT IT - THINK FOR YOURSELF

mobilizations in a long time. This example shows how anti-democrats and right-wing extremists exploit delicate situations for their own ends – not just on a regional scale, but on a global scale as well.

The "success" of anti-democratic efforts is however not just in the short-term, but often has long-term effects, as can be seen in the current decisions of the US Supreme Court and Russian disinformation campaigns. With regard to the mobilizations and the mobilization potential of right-wing extremist groups, an analysis that takes global interactions into account is indispensable. For example, when the storming of the Capitol occurred in the USA, it also had an effect on the success of QAnon in Germany.¹³

However, the danger to a democratic society arises not only from radical spaces themselves, but also from actors who "open the door" - i.e. who normalize these positions and shift political boundaries. This is precisely why a strategic long-term and forward-looking approach is essential.

The knowledge gained from the field of crisis management can therefore also be adapted – at least in part – for dealing with current threats. Right-wing extremist threats require ongoing confrontation. At the same time, acute crisis situations continue to pop up, as has been clearly demonstrated over the last two years.



Figure 7: Strategic crisis management (adapted from Töpfer (2014))

Problem analysis

An early warning system is needed in order to assess and identify potential conflict situations before they escalate. Mobilization themes that have successfully established themselves in radical spaces are also found, after some delay, in the rest of society. An early warning system

¹³ <https://cemas.io/publikationen/q-vadis-zur-verbretung-von-qanon-im-deutschsprachigen-raum/>
(link in German)

therefore includes digital monitoring as well as representative surveys that can identify dangers and shifts in mood at an early stage.¹⁴

Risk Management

Where the dangers are known, the goal is to minimize them. This can be accomplished through, for example, a brief clarification round with the press or security authorities before a fake news story is spread. But it can also involve warning local politicians about potential mobilizations and training them in how to respond.

Crisis preparation

If the situation comes to a head and, for example, mobilizations are immediately foreseeable, well-coordinated preparation is needed to contain the danger. This requires, for example, an exchange with local actors, who often enjoy greater trust in the local community.

Crisis management

When it comes to aggravation and escalation, the response is a matter of strengthening social norms of the democratic majority. This can mean, for example, opening up democratic spaces to allow for constructive exchange. The focus here should be on constructive exchange, which can only be ensured under certain circumstances (e.g. not during the protests). At the same time, it is important not to give any space to de-humanizing positions, as this would in turn have a negative impact on social norms.

Knowledge Management

The crisis management process always includes knowledge management in order to identify examples of best practice as well as possible mistakes. This in turn helps others who may be confronted with similar situations in the future.

Within the federal landscape, there is wide-ranging expertise on structures that endanger democracy and the means of addressing them. Scientists, journalists, think tanks and NGOs from civil society bring a significant amount of knowledge and experience in dealing with these problems. It is therefore essential to provide these actors with sufficient financial resources to meet these challenges. Precisely because it is difficult to anticipate the exact lines of mobilization, a certain flexibility is needed here in the allocation of funds in order for projects to be able to respond to the latest dynamics.

¹⁴ <https://cemas.io/publikationen/von-der-krise-zum-krieg-verschwoerungserzaehlungen-ueber-den-angriffskrieg-gegen-die-ukraine-in-der-gesellschaft/> (link in German)

Strengthen democratic resilience

Crises are characterized by the fact that the people experiencing them do not have sufficient resources to cope with the crisis on their own. In the pandemic and in the war, different stressors have come together:

- Objective threat and subjective evaluation of the threat
- Disruption of everyday routines and familiar processes
- Social isolation
- Fears related to the supply situation (hoarding, inflation)
- Economic fears and financial uncertainties
- Social injustice
- Dealing with grief and death
- Anxiety and mental illness
- Specific stressors for marginalized groups (e.g. anti-Semitism)¹⁵

Pandemics often act as a reflection of what is (not) working in a society. Historically, they have often been amplifiers of authoritarian desires, populism, and national isolation. Unfortunately, they often function as an ominous "pause" button for societal problems that can re-emerge even stronger after the pandemic is over.¹⁶

One challenge in crisis management is that at the beginning of a crisis there is a great deal of uncertainty in terms of information, but there is also often a great amount of solidarity and attention. As the crisis progresses, the state of information becomes clearer, but at the same time, solidarity and attention wane. The crisis fatigue that often sets in makes it difficult to win people over for democratic participation. While just under 20 percent of Germans said they were crisis-weary in October 2020, this figure had risen to 40 percent by March 2022.¹⁷

Particularly in the combination of the pandemic, war of aggression, and climate crisis, people may experience an intensification in at least partly apocalyptic ideas about an impending end of the world. This is often accompanied by escapism. At times when democratic engagement is urgently needed, this can lead to a retreat into the private sphere. It is therefore particularly important to develop strategies against crisis fatigue and to strengthen democratic resilience:

- **Understanding people:** Evidence-based, people-centered policy, interventions, and communications based on data
- **Providing an outlook:** Goal-oriented communication and strategic planning

¹⁵ Bavel, J. J. V., Baicker, K., Boggio, P. S., Capraro, V., Cichocka, A., Cikara, M., ... & Willer, R. (2020). Using social and behavioural science to support COVID-19 pandemic response. *Nature human behavior*, 4(5), 460-471.

¹⁶ Taylor, S. (2019). The psychology of pandemics: Preparing for the next global outbreak of infectious disease.

¹⁷ <https://projekte.uni-erfurt.de/cosmo2020/web/topic/fatigue-alter/10-fatigue/> (link in German)

- **Strengthening self-efficacy:** Counteracting the experience of loss of control by offering programs that strengthen the self-efficacy of citizens
- **Acknowledging stress:** Understanding and reducing psychological stress (ranging from psychosocial care to crisis-sensitive communication)
- **Living solidarity:** Social justice and fairness as key protective factors in crises

In the COVID-19 pandemic, too little attention was paid to opening democratic spaces at a time when previously familiar forms of participation were often not possible due to social distancing constraints. Right-wing extremists exploit this gap. In order to prevent this, it is important to give citizens opportunities for participation at an early stage.

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CeMAS Center for Monitoring, Analysis and Strategy

The nonprofit Center for Monitoring, Analysis, and Strategy (CeMAS) consolidates years of interdisciplinary expertise on the topics of conspiracy ideologies, disinformation, antisemitism, and right-wing extremism. CeMAS addresses current developments in the above-mentioned fields through systematic monitoring of central digital platforms and modern study designs in order to derive innovative analyses and recommendations for action. Furthermore, CeMAS advises decision makers from civil society, media and politics.

CeMAS mission is to equip society to actively counter conspiracy ideologies, disinformation, antisemitism and right-wing extremism in context of current challenges and future crises. To this end, anti-democratic tendencies are detected and analyzed at an early stage. As a non-profit organization, CeMAS offers its analysis to various social actors to enable them to constructively meet the challenges facing society.

The Center for Monitoring, Analysis and Strategy defines itself as being at the interface of science, journalism and society. Recent events such as the global COVID 19 pandemic have shown the importance of integrating societal and scientific perspectives. Our monitoring and research work is a hands-on approach, combining scientific, journalistic, and civil society insights.

CeMAS uses an interdisciplinary approach combining psychological, cognitive linguistic, and social science perspectives with modern data science and investigative journalistic methods. As a result, there is a continuous exchange of insights from various perspectives, which find practical expression in the areas of monitoring, analysis, and consulting.