



# From the Crisis to the Reich Post-Pandemic Developments of “Reichsbürger” and Sovereignists in Germany

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**From the Crisis  
to the Reich**  
**Post-Pandemic  
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in Germany**

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DEM DEUTSCHEN

Das Reich  
kommt wieder



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## 6 Executive Summary

The milieu of “*Reichsbürger*” and other sovereignists expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic. The danger of this ideology was made clear in 2022 by the investigations into two suspected terrorist groups from this milieu. The phenomenon is defined below in this report as “conspiracy-ideological sovereignism”, as this term better describes the unique characteristics of this milieu in contrast to the common monikers of “*Reichsbürger*” (citizens of the Reich) and “*Selbstverwalter*” (self-administrators). Conspiracy-ideological sovereignism is understood as the effort to (re)establish individual or popular sovereignty and bring about a corresponding order, perceived by its adherents as being the natural order of things, over the existing social and political order, which they view as the means by which a global conspiracy aims to eliminate their ingroup.

This report highlights findings concerning this overall milieu that have been underrepresented in previous discussions of the subject. It also traces the particular developments in this milieu since the COVID-19 pandemic. The key findings are:

- **Conspiracy-ideological sovereignism is part of the extreme right in Germany.** The milieu has an extreme right-wing and antisemitic tradition that predates the Federal Republic of Germany. In addition, the milieu's concepts of political order are geared toward inequality, e.g. with respect to questions of German citizenship. It also shares antisemitic global conspiracy myths and revisionist ideas with the extreme right, e.g. in the area of territorial revisionism, where a German Reich is to be restored to power within the borders of a past era.
- **The resonance space for sovereignist content is larger than has been suggested by the count of 23,000 members (2022) from the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution.** A study by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation as well as the subscription numbers of major sovereignist Telegram channels point to a much larger milieu.
- **Using “alternative” media channels on Telegram, the central social media platform of the protests, “Reichsbürger” and other sovereignists were able to normalize their content during the pandemic.** Moreover, the channels offered them the opportunity to present their ideology as a framework for the non-sovereignist conspiracy narratives shared on the channels.

## 7 Executive Summary

- The central organization of the “*Querdenken*” protests against public health measures during the pandemic, *Querdenken 711 – Stuttgart*, disseminated sovereignist content. Sovereignists with a wide reach were part of its stage programs. Michael Ballweg himself spread a sovereignist dog whistle when he asked his audience to weigh in on a missing “peace treaty”. At the end of August 2020, the organization's protest camp in Berlin aimed to create a new constitution as a “constituent assembly”, since it considered Germany's Basic Law to constitute “occupation law”.
- “*Reichsbürger*” adapted and transformed Q-Anon conspiracy narratives. A separate current of Q-Anon “*Reichsbürger*” emerged and were able to achieve a very high reach with their social media channels. This allowed sovereignist content to be brought into the conspiracy-ideological Q-Anon milieu, which was gaining in popularity in Germany at the beginning of the pandemic.
- Since 2017, the number of violent acts with sovereignist motives has been on the rise. However, the majority of these offenses are classified as “unattributable” in German crime statistics, even though the ideology of this milieu can be categorized under the (extreme) right. During the COVID-19 pandemic, various acts of violence were committed by supporters of the “*Reichsbürger*” and other sovereignists. These ranged from clashes with police outside the Russian Embassy in August 2020 to serious incidents such as an attempted murder of a police officer and an exchange of gunfire with police involving an automatic rifle. Since 2021/22, the Federal Public Prosecutor General has been investigating two cases on suspicion of forming terrorist groups. The groups “*Vereinte Patrioten*” (United Patriots) and “*Patriotische Union*” (Patriotic Union) are accused of plotting a violent coup.
- Sovereignist milieus will continue to attempt to recruit through protests. Right-leaning conspiracy-ideological protests against a common enemy are particularly well-suited for agitation and recruitment.
- Sovereignist networks require greater attention. Since the pandemic, sovereignist networks have reached beyond

their own core milieu and offer their members opportunities to acquire new resources for the realization of their political goals.

- Investigative authorities and domestic intelligence services should adjust the classification of “Reichsbürger” and “Selbstverwalter” as an independent form of extremism and classify conspiracy-ideological sovereignism under right-wing extremism. The current classification obscures the close connection between the two milieus and results in a down-playing of conspiracy-ideological sovereignist phenomena.



On December 7, 2022, investigating authorities carried out what media reports referred to as the largest counter-terrorism operation in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany to date. Up to 3,000 police officers were deployed to conduct searches of more than 50 people in 120 properties in Germany, Austria, and Italy. The investigation concerned a suspected group of “Reichsbürger” and others who intended to set up underground paramilitary cells to carry out an armed coup and establish a military government led by a German nobleman to negotiate a peace treaty with Russia with the goal of ending all World Wars against Germany. The alleged members included “Reichsbürger”,<sup>1</sup> former and active soldiers and police officers, as well as a former member of the Bundestag from the far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD; Alternative for Germany) (Federal Public Prosecutor General, 2022; Götschenberg et al., 2022). As early as April 2022, investigating authorities had arrested other “Reichsbürger” trying to obtain illegal weapons, which they presumably intended to use for their own coup attempts. Prior to the 2022 searches, actions by “Reichsbürger” found their way into international news coverage when several hundred of them climbed the police barriers in front of the Reichstag building in Berlin on August 29, 2020, and occupied the stairs of the entrance area. Just three police officers prevented the crowd from entering the building under threat of force. After a few moments, the stairs were cleared by further police officers arriving on the scene, but the photos of black-white-red German imperial flags in front of the Bundestag went around the world (Rathje, 2021a).

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been increased movement within the milieu. “Reichsbürger” and others not only succeeded in becoming an integral part of the protests against public health measures aimed at containing the pandemic, but also had an impact on the protests themselves by influencing central actors and offering their ideology and forms of action as an option for those open to radicalize further.

This report traces these developments. It sheds light on the emergence of the conspiracy-ideological sovereignism of the “Reichsbürger” and others in Germany and argues that this range of phenomena can be categorized under the extreme right. The focus, however, is not on the past, but on developments since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have also led to the largest anti-terrorism operation in the Federal Republic of Germany.

1

The term “Reichsbürger” draws on the milieu’s own self-designation, even though it has become controversial within the overall milieu, especially since its use by domestic intelligence agencies from 2016 onwards. It describes individuals who believe, on the basis of various false claims, that a German “Reich” (empire) should be restored to power in place of the present Federal Republic of Germany, which is viewed as illegitimate and non-sovereign.

# 11 What is conspiracy-ideological sovereignty of “Reichsbürger” and others?

Previously, the term “Reichsbürger” or “Reichsbürger movement” was used to describe the milieu at the center of this report. Investigative authorities and domestic intelligence services in Germany classify the phenomenon under the terms “*Reichsbürger*” (lit. “imperial citizens” or “citizens of the Reich”) and “*Selbstverwalter*” (lit. “self-administrators”, i.e. “sovereign citizens”) (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, 2023, p. 104). These are based on common current and historical self-designations within the respective sociocultural milieus. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution defines the commonalities between “*Reichsbürger*” and “*Selbstverwalter*” as follows:

“Reichsbürger” and “self-administrators” are groups and individuals who, for various motives and on various grounds – including invoking the historical German Reich, conspiracy-theory patterns of argumentation, or a self-defined natural law – reject the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany and its legal system, deny the legitimacy of democratically elected representatives, or even define themselves in their entirety as standing outside the legal system, and who are therefore concerned that they are committing violations of the legal system.

– Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, 2023, p. 104

This definition is suitable for German authorities to capture the range of phenomena within the purpose of their mandate, but at the same time, it contains multiple inaccuracies and has certain drawbacks. One drawback is the use of specifically German manifestations as categorical terms, which makes transnational comparability more difficult. At their core, these definitions of “Reichsbürger” and “Selbstverwalter”, like the definitions of extremism commonly used by German investigative agencies, are based on the specific

## 12 What is conspiracy-ideological sovereignty of “Reichsbürger” and others?

constitutional order of the Federal Republic of Germany. However, similar groups and individuals can be found in other countries (such as Russia or the United States). The term “Reichsbürger” is thus insufficiently suitable for international comparability.

An alternative to this is the term *conspiracy-ideological sovereignty*.<sup>2</sup> This is understood as the effort to (re)establish individual or popular sovereignty and bring about a corresponding order, perceived by its adherents as being the natural order of things, over the existing social and political order, which they view as the means by which a global and foreign conspiracy aims to eliminate their ingroup (Rathje, 2021a). One advantage of this term is that it does not reduce the phenomena to national specifics (“Reichsbürger” and “Selbstverwalter”, Germany) or to extremism directed against the state (“anti-state connections”, Austria) or government (“anti-government extremism”, English-speaking countries). State and government are not categorically rejected by conspiracy-ideological sovereignist actors; rather, they only reject those that, for specific reasons, are seen as being part of a larger conspiracy. The term also offers the possibility to describe transnational, interconnected milieus in terms of ideology and the actions of their members. At the same time, it must be pointed out that the term conspiracy-ideological sovereignty is merely an approximation of the underlying phenomena. There is a need for further clarification, particularly with respect to the relationship between conspiracy ideologies, populism, and other types of sovereignty.

The conspiracy-ideological sovereignist milieu in Germany is highly heterogeneous and can be broadly divided into four sub-milieus (Rathje, 2017): a) traditionally organized National Socialists, neo-Nazis and right-wing extremists since 1945; b) “Reichsbürger” in the tradition of Wolfgang G. G. Ebel; c) individual, group, and secessionist sovereignists; and d) “New Right” sovereignists.

2

For ease of reading, the use of the term “sovereignism” in the following is always equated with conspiracy-ideological sovereignty. The term “conspiracy ideology” was introduced by extremism researcher Armin Pfahl-Traughber (2002), and the proposal to use the term “sovereignism” as a categorical term for the overall milieu was made by Susann Bischof.

	Traditionally organized right-wing extremists since May 8, 1945	“Reichsbürger” outside traditional right-wing extremist organizations	Individual, group, and secessionist sovereignists	“New Right” and other sovereignists
Core belief	○ Germany is dominated by a foreign power pulling the strings in the background.			
Central ideologemes	○ The Federal Republic of Germany is not a legal/ legitimate state. ○ A German Reich still exists.		○ The Federal Republic of Germany is not a legal/legitimate state.	○ “Germany is not sovereign.”
Antisemitism	○ Explicit and implicit ○ Holocaust denial	○ Implicit (codes and dog whistles) and partly explicit ○ Historical revisionism		
Examples	○ Socialist Reich Party ○ Parts of the National Democratic Party (NPD) ○ <i>Deutsches Kolleg</i> ○ <i>Europäische Aktion</i> ○ Nikolai Nerling	○ Commissarial Reich Government (KRR) ○ Other “Reich governments” ○ Q-Anon “Reichsbürger”: Hans-Joachim Müller, <i>SHAEF Groups</i>	○ <i>Königreich Deutschland</i> ○ “Free” municipalities ○ <i>Verfassungsgebende Versammlung/United Nation wenea</i> ○ Parts of the <i>Querdenken</i> protests ○ <i>Freie Sachsen</i>	○ <i>COMPACT Magazin</i> ○ Parts of the AfD ○ Parts of the <i>Querdenken</i> protests

Table 1  
Typology of the Conspiracy-Ideological Sovereignist Milieu in Germany.

# 14 Conspiracy Ideological Sovereignism in Germany before the Pandemic

For historical reasons, conspiracy-ideological sovereignism in the Federal Republic of Germany is closely linked to neo-Nazism and right-wing extremism. National Socialists have been trying to restore the legal capacity of the German Reich since the Allied victory in 1945, the subsequent occupation, and the establishment of two German states – the German Democratic Republic (GDR, east) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, west) – in 1949. Like the neo-Nazis and right-wing extremists who followed them, they insinuated that the Federal Republic was an instrument of domination over the Germans under the control of foreign powers. This was due to the role of the Allies in the state's founding as well as the actual occupation by the Allied powers after the end of World War II, despite the gradual expansion of German sovereignty afterwards. A campaign to restore the German Reich ran within the extreme right of the FRG until the 1980s, but was subsequently displaced by other racist campaigns, such as those against asylum seekers (Stöss, 2010, p. 31-33). However, various individuals and groups continued to devote themselves to the Reich campaign. Revisionism, and especially Holocaust denial, developed within these *traditionally organized, right-wing extremist "Reichsbürger"* into the central field of action in the effort to restore the legal capacity of the German Reich. Manfred Roeder, who convened a "Reichstag" (imperial diet) in Flensburg in 1975, published Thies Christophersen's book *"Die Auschwitz-Lüge"* (The Auschwitz Lie) back in the early 1970s and contributed the foreword himself. In "exposing the Auschwitz lie", other right-wing extremist "Reichsbürger", such as Horst Mahler, saw a way to "overthrow Jewish foreign rule" over the Germans and the Reich.<sup>3</sup>

According to the present state of research, another submilieu of "Reichsbürger" emerged in the mid-1980s. The majority of its members had not previously held memberships in traditional right-wing extremist organizations. This development is particularly linked to the actions of Wolfgang Gerhard Günter Ebel, who, within the unique conditions of Berlin between 1949 and 1990, worked as a West Berliner for an East German company that had retained its name from the Weimar Republic: the *Deutsche Reichsbahn* (German Imperial Railways). As the result of a strike, Ebel was dismissed and subsequently filed several court cases in West-Berlin, in the course of which he claimed to be the "Plenipotentiary General of the German Reich", "Reich Minister of Transport", "President of the

3

For more information on the right-wing extremist and antisemitic tradition, see Rathje (2021b).

Imperial Court”, and “Chancellor of the Reich”.<sup>4</sup> Over the following decades, Ebel and his followers formed a *Kommissarische Reichsregierung* (KRR; Commissarial Reich Government), gave pseudo-legal seminars on the German Reich and the Federal Republic of Germany, and threatened state officials (Gessler, 2000). Former allies of Ebel repeatedly split off and founded competing “governments in exile” or “Reich governments”. However, an important difference between Ebel's KRR and the activities of the traditionally organized, right-wing extremist “Reichsbürger” can be seen in the legitimization of their own claims to power. Ebel tried to legitimize his actions – at least in the first years of his “reign” – through the Allies, i.e. he assumed a legitimate rule of the Allies over the Germans in that he seemingly attempted to have them confirm his intentions. For this, he was accused of treason by openly right-wing extremist “Reichsbürger”. In contrast to the explicit antisemitism of the traditionally organized, right-wing extremist “Reichsbürger”, Ebel and other members of this sub-milieu primarily used antisemitic codes and dog-whistles to imply that this foreign domination was supposedly Jewish. Since the early 2000s, however, there has also been evidence of collegial contacts between the traditionally organized right-wing extremist and the “Reichsbürger” in the tradition of Ebel. Thus, the two sub-milieus were not completely separated, but there were transitions between the two (Rathje, 2021b).

The emergence of *individual, group, and secessionist sovereignists* in Germany can be traced back to the 2000s. Within this emerging sub-milieu, the focus was no longer on the immediate restoration of the power and sovereignty of a German Reich. Rather, its members, some of whom also came over from other sub-milieus, sought sovereignty for themselves as individuals, as a group, or by the “secession” of their property or “state” from the Federal Republic of Germany. Individual, group, and secessionist sovereignists are influenced by both types of “Reichsbürger”, though esotericism and other conspiracy ideologies are more important to these groups than to the majority of the traditionally organized far-right “Reichsbürger”. Moreover, their forms of action are also influenced by Anglo-Saxon movements such as the *sovereign citizens*, *Freemen on the Land*, or supporters of the *One People's Public Trust* (Bergner, 2016; Pitcavage, 2012; Shay, 2003; Sinabell, 2015). Within this sovereignist sub-milieu, the conspiracy-ideological narrative that the Federal Republic of Germany is not a state but a corporation

4

For a detailed background on Wolfgang Ebel, his court cases, and his legal views, see Schönberger (2020).

In the German-speaking public, the conspiracy-ideological sovereignist milieu is mostly associated with the sub-milieu shaped by Ebel, which downplays their right-wing extremist origins.

was disseminated prominently under the reference “BRD GmbH” (Federal Republic of Germany, Ltd.). This perspective is also shared among *sovereign citizens* (Berger, 2016; Rathje, 2018).

*Sovereignists of the “New Right”* act as gateways between other right-wing extremists, reactionary, sovereignist, and conspiracy-ideological milieus. On the surface, they do not refer to the National Socialist German Reich, but lament the supposed lack of sovereignty of Germany, which is not necessarily identified with the Federal Republic. Early members of the “New Right” openly proclaimed the idea of establishing a new German Reich (Lower Saxony State Ministry of the Interior, 2001, p. 82-83).

### Conspiracy-ideological sovereignism as part of the extreme right

In the German-speaking public, the conspiracy-ideological sovereignist milieu is mostly associated with the sub-milieu shaped by Ebel, which downplays their right-wing extremist origins. The creation of a new extremist category of “Reichsbürger” and “Selbstverwalter” within German Offices for the Protection of the Constitution, which took place in response to the fatal shooting of a police officer by a sovereignist in Georgensgmünd, Bavaria, in October 2016, is also a contributing factor. Only two state offices (Lower Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia) classify the phenomena of “Reichsbürger” and “Selbstverwalter” under right-wing extremism.<sup>5</sup> The distinction is usually justified by the fact that elements of right-wing extremist ideology are not shared by the majority of the milieu (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, 2023, p. 105). This classification, however, undercuts the historical and contemporary far-right continuities present in conspiracy-ideological sovereignism.

Firstly, it can be stated that conspiracy-ideological sovereignism in the Federal Republic of Germany is historically part of a right-wing extremist and antisemitic tradition which began as early as the surrender of the National Socialist German Reich to the Allies, as explained above. However, the ideology of conspiracy-ideological sovereignism can also be attributed to the extreme right on the basis of its political conceptions of order. The Italian philosopher of law Norberto Bobbio proposed the dichotomy of equality and inequality as a central criterion for determining the political distinction

5

The State Office for the Protection of the Constitution of Hamburg now groups “Reichsbürger and Selbstverwalter” together with “delegitimization of the state with relevance for the protection of the constitution” under the category of “conspiracy-ideological extremism”.

between left and right. The political left strives for relative equality or a reduction of social and natural inequality, while the political right tends to accept such inequalities (Bobbio, 2006). In this sense, sovereignist ideas of order are not centrally focused on reducing inequality.

The reference to inequality becomes more clear when considering questions of nation-state affiliation, women's suffrage, or the rights of sexual minorities. Within the milieu, for example, positive references to the Imperial and National Citizenship Act (*Reichs- und Staatsangehörigkeitsgesetz, RuStAG*) of the German Reich from 1913 are widespread. Its adoption represented a particular success of ethnic politics in the German Reich at the time. At this point, imperial and national citizenship changed from a right based on place of birth to a right of descent. The Reich's conception of the nation was thus directed toward an ethnic nation, in contrast to the Western model of a state-nation. One of the aims of this amendment was to make it more difficult for foreigners to obtain citizenship (Botsch, 2012). Sovereignists and "Reichsbürger" who adhere to these ideas discriminate against all those who cannot show proof of ancestry in line with the *RuStAG* of 1913. The concept of the ethnic nation continues to prevail. A positive reference to the Imperial constitution of the German Reich is additionally problematic because it did not provide for full women's suffrage (Wolff, 2019). Even without a reference to past German law, however, sovereignists hold right-wing positions. For example, central groups and individuals reject the recognition of other gender identities. For them, the acceptance and representation of other gender identities is the means of an alleged conspiracy to destroy the supposedly natural order of the two sexes and thus to endanger the continued existence of the German people in the long term, since it would cause fewer Germans to reproduce.

Sovereignists also share other right-wing extremist political ideas. "Reichsbürger", who refer to a Germany in historical borders, follow right-wing extremist territorial revisionism by laying claim to parts of other states' territories. The myth of a "Jewish world conspiracy" and the political ideas of the sovereignist milieu derived from this myth also go back to the extreme right (Rathje, 2021b). For example, Wolfgang Ebel claimed that former chancellors Angela Merkel and Helmut Kohl were Jews or Israelis in order to imply that the Germans were being dominated by foreigners.

The exchange of ideas, forms of action, and materials takes place on the Internet via personal contacts or simple forwarding, without the participants necessarily having to know each other. In addition, there is also personal online and offline networking among sub-milieus. Some traditionally organized “Reichsbürger” and their immediate associates, such as Nikolai Nerling (“*Der Volkslehrer*”, the People's Teacher), maintain good contacts with the other sub-milieus.

### Measuring the size of the milieu

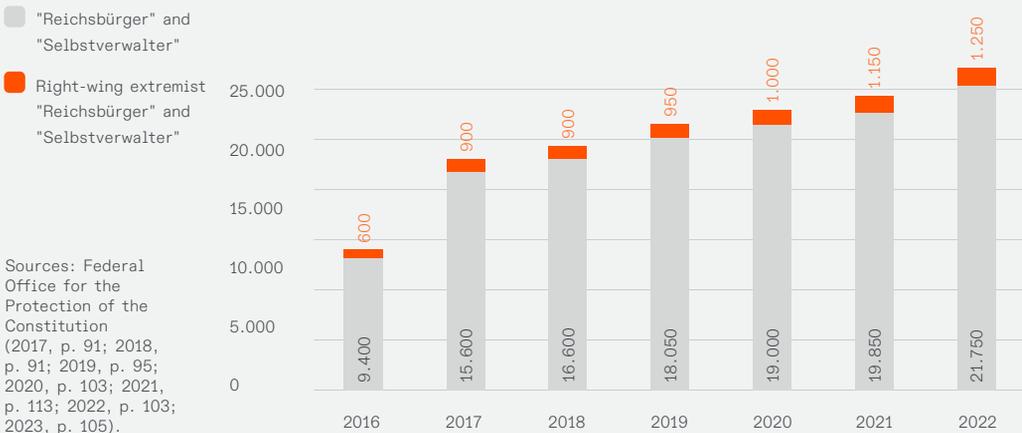
Obtaining a systematic overview of the size of the sovereignist milieu requires various access points. Only a combination of different data sources makes it possible to understand how large the milieu is, as well as the size of the resonance space for its ideology.

Sociodemographic data on the sovereignist milieu in the Federal Republic of Germany currently exists only in patchwork form. Existing studies are mostly focused on analyses of confrontations with state authorities, with most of the data coming from the investigative agencies themselves. A 2017 evaluation in the state of Brandenburg, for example, examined the backgrounds of “Reichsbürger” known to the police. The individuals were mostly male (80 percent), the average age was 50, and 70 percent had no prior criminal history (Keil, 2017). While this data offers insights, it does not provide a systematic understanding, as only those individuals with criminal convictions appear in the dataset.

The German federal and state Offices for the Protection of the Constitution have also surveyed the size of this milieu. In 2022, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution counted 23,000 people in this milieu, of whom only 1,250 were formally categorized as right-wing extremists (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, 2023). Since the underlying dataset of the Offices for the Protection of the Constitution is not or cannot be disclosed, it is difficult for external researchers to assess these exact categorizations.

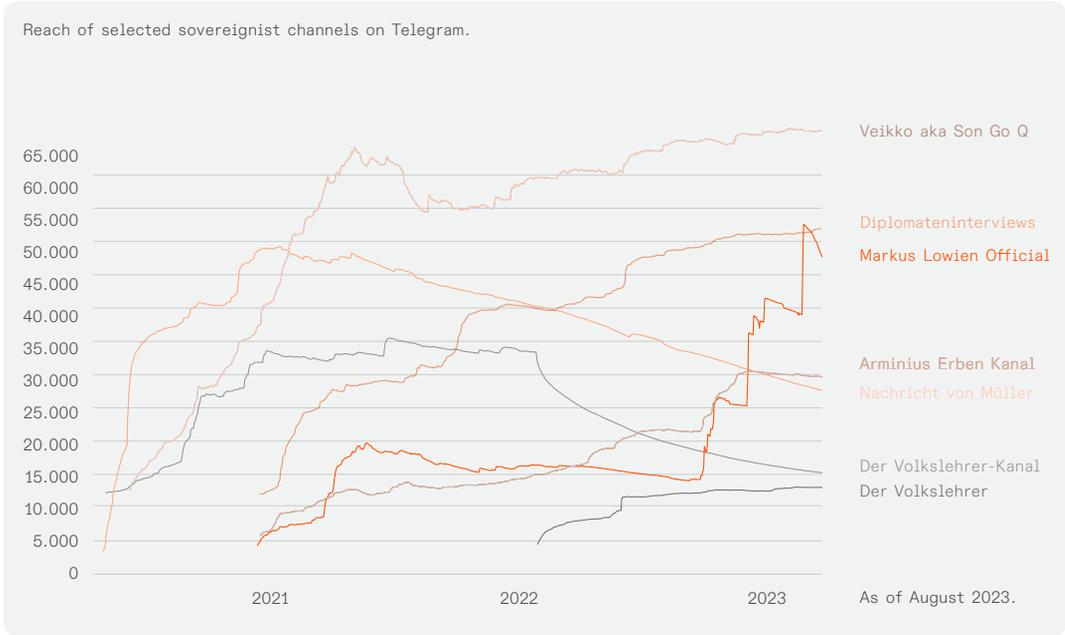
## 19 Conspiracy Ideological Sovereignism in Germany before the Pandemic

Number of "Reichsbürger," "Selbstverwalter" and right-wing extremists in the Federal Republic of Germany according to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution.



Another approach is quantitative opinion polls. Between December 2021 and early April 2022, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation conducted a survey on sovereignist attitudes in German society. The statement "Germany is still ruled by the occupying powers", which was used in the study to measure "Reichsbürger"-affiliated attitudes, found full agreement among 5 percent and partial agreement among 8 percent of the population (Hirndorf, 2023). These surveys cannot directly show how many people are associated with the sovereignist milieu; however, they do offer indications of how large the milieu's resonance space potentially is. They also allow for the assumption that there are significantly more people in Germany open to sovereignist ideas than the data from the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution suggests.

## 20 Conspiracy Ideological Sovereignism in Germany before the Pandemic



Another approach is to analyze the reach of relevant actors on social media. Telegram channels of sovereignists reach a significantly larger number of people and allow them to further disseminate their content. The channel *Veikko aka Son Go Q*, which belongs to the community of Q-Anon “Reichsbürger” [↗](#), has more than 66,000 subscribers (as of August 2023); the sovereignist channel *Diplomateninterviews* (Diplomat Interviews) has more than 50,000 (as of August 2023); and the openly right-wing extremist and antisemitic channel *Der Volkslehrer-Kanal* (The People’s Teacher Channel) reached more than 33,000 accounts before its suspension in April 2022. Another factor for sovereignist influence is represented by even larger channels that act as “alternative” media sources and use sovereignist codes and dog whistles, such as emojis in the black, white, and red pattern of the German Imperial flag (❤️👁️❤️), or channels which are operated by sovereignists. [↗](#) Again, subscription numbers do not equate to affiliation with the milieu, but they can indicate how the reach of conspiracy-ideological sovereignists has changed over the course of the pandemic. [↗](#)

Overall, it is important to combine different data sources when it comes to understanding the size of the sovereignist milieu and to

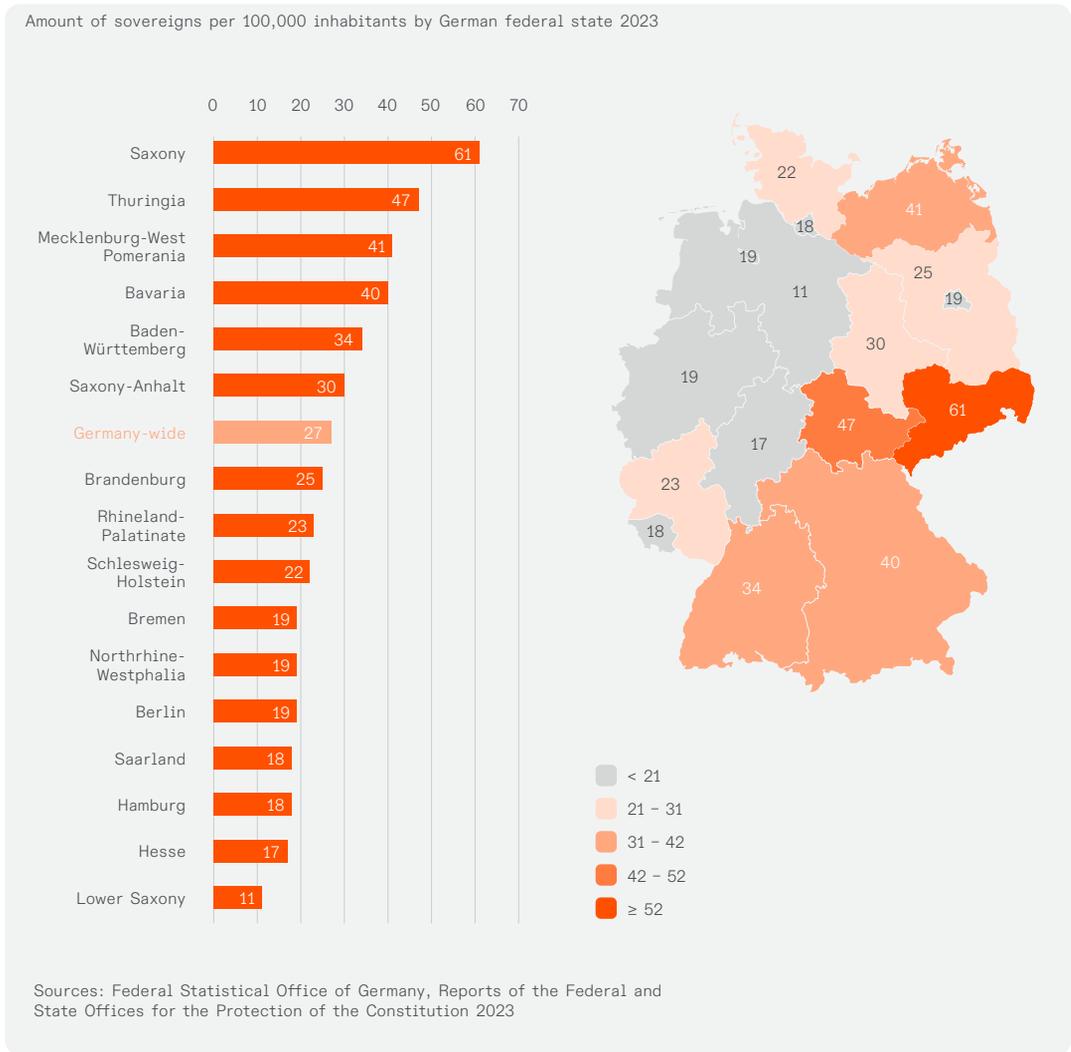
[↗ see p. 31](#)

[↗ see section Sovereignist “alternative” media actors, p. 24](#)

[↗ see section Sovereignism and the COVID-19 pandemic, p. 23](#)

## 21 Conspiracy Ideological Sovereignism in Germany before the Pandemic

analyze their potential reach in the broader society. Multiple data sources should be used for an informed discussion.





## 23 Sovereignism and the COVID-19 pandemic

When the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were felt in Germany in early 2020 and the German government set out its first measures to contain the virus, the sovereignist milieu was presented with a unique opportunity to spread its ideology. Conspiracy-ideological sovereignists have been seeking out demonstrations for years to recruit protesters for their goals and to explore the potential for overthrowing the system (Daphi et al., 2014; *Schärferes Vorgehen gefordert: Gefahr „Reichsbürger“*, 2016; Leber, 2019). This approach to the pandemic had clear parallels to the protests associated with the first phase of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in 2014/15. The *Monday Vigils for Peace* organized via social media at the time and held throughout Germany attracted a wide variety of individuals and groups from various milieus. The vigils were supposedly for peace and against the alleged influence of the US Federal Reserve System, which, according to organizer Lars Mährholz, had been responsible for all wars since 1914. In addition, the protests were also directed against established media, which were accused of biased reporting on Russia's aggressions against Ukraine (Daphi et al., 2014). For conspiracy-ideological sovereignists, it was advantageous that these Monday Vigils for Peace positioned themselves as being supposedly beyond the political left-right spectrum <sup>7</sup>, which was accompanied by an openness to far right and right-wing extremist speakers as well as conspiracy ideologies, anti-Americanism <sup>6</sup> and antisemitism. On- and offline, for example, participants included the sovereignists Peter Fitzek, “king” of the group “*Königreich Deutschland*” (Kingdom of Germany), Rüdiger Hoffmann of “*staatenlos.info*” (stateless.info), Heiko Schrang, and Jürgen Elsässer with his “*COMPACT Magazin für Souveränität*” (COMPACT Magazine for Sovereignty) (Lauer, 2014). On a *staatenlos.info* stage on October 3, 2014, the far-right singer Xavier Naidoo addressed the crowd of “Reichsbürger” and sovereignists (Jewish Forum for Democracy and against Antisemitism e.V., 2015), while participants offered the book “*Die 'BRD' GmbH*” (The Federal Republic of Germany, Ltd.) by Klaus Maurer, which is widely distributed within the milieu. Nikolai Nerling, who later appeared under the pseudonym *Der Volkslehrer* (The People's Teacher) as a right-wing extremist “alternative” video blogger and “Reichsbürger”, also stood on a stage at the vigils in Berlin back in 2015. At these vigils, members of the milieu were accepted for the first time as part of a protest movement and “alternative” counter-culture and were able to actively shape the program.

<sup>7</sup> see section *Conspiracy-ideological sovereignism as part of the extreme right*, p. 16

### 6

Anti-Americanism refers to ideas in which the US and “Americans” are held centrally responsible for the negative sides of modern societal processes (Beyer & Liebe, 2010).

The sovereignist milieu was able to exert even more influence on the *Querdenken* (lit. lateral-thinking) protests that began to form in the spring of 2020. In addition to a general lack of willingness on the part of protesters to consistently distance themselves from the extreme right (Teune, 2021), several causal factors may have played a role here:

1. The emergence of Telegram as the central communication platform for the protests, through which sovereignists and “Reichsbürger” were able to reach a new audience as “*alternative*” content creators;
2. the close connections of sovereignists and their ideology to leaders of the central organization *Querdenken 711* – Stuttgart in the first year of the protests;
3. the Reich-ideological adaptation and transformation of the Q-Anon conspiracy ideology, which was gaining significant popularity in the German-speaking world at the same time.

These factors sometimes mutually reinforced each other, such as when Q-Anon “Reichsbürger” were able to present their conspiracy narratives to a wider audience on Telegram.

### 1. Sovereignist “alternative” media actors

Like other political groups, conspiracy-ideological sovereignists make extensive use of the Internet to disseminate their beliefs, to recruit, and to communicate among themselves. To this end, the milieu uses its own websites and, since their proliferation, social media platforms.



Figure 1 Screenshot of the website of the "Reich Chancellor" Wolfgang Ebel from 2006.

For years, sovereignist groups and individuals were able to reach a wider audience online, especially on large platforms, than would have otherwise been possible through offline events or individual websites. At the same time, with its possibility for loose networking, social media corresponded particularly well to the heterogeneous degree of organization of the sovereignist milieu and its tendency to gather around individuals, groups, or ideologemes. During the 2010s, however, the action taken by major platforms against accounts that violated their respective user policies intensified, which in some cases resulted in suspensions and deletions (Fielitz & Schwarz, 2020). Since then, those (with the potential to be) affected by these restrictions have increasingly turned to platforms that do not systematically block and remove content, which has given them a space for more explicit messaging. At the same time, this evasion effectively reduced the overall reach of these individuals and groups, as not all of their followers also moved to those other platforms. Individuals and groups affected by this “de-platforming” switched to niche platforms such as Gab and Bitchute,

or platforms that are hardly used in Germany, such as the Russian platform vkontakte. However, this fragmentation was counteracted to a large extent by developments in 2020. With the pandemic, various platforms tightened their content moderation.<sup>7</sup> During this time, a centralization of conspiracy ideology digital communication took place in the German-speaking world – the previously fragmented milieu was now predominantly focused on Telegram (Holnburger, 2023). This messenger service, which has itself become a social media platform, offered itself as a place for “alternative” real and presumed stigmatized knowledge, particularly for opponents of the government’s pandemic control measures.<sup>8</sup>

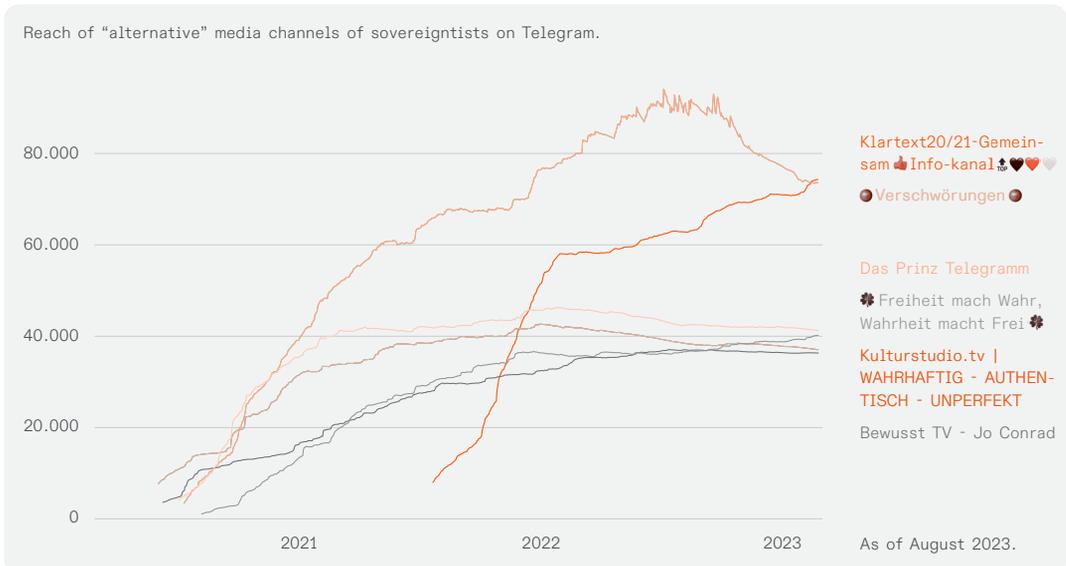
This development also benefited sovereignists, who had already been presenting themselves as “alternative” media sources, video bloggers, and content creators for years. They used the desire for stigmatized knowledge, fed by the distrust of established media and academia as well as of the German government and its institutions, to spread a variety of conspiracy narratives through their channels. Along the way, these “alternative” media channels normalized sovereignist content for a wider audience.

7

During the first year of the pandemic, major platforms increasingly cracked down on accounts that spread disinformation and conspiracy narratives, which included far right and conspiracy-ideological actors.

8

The term “stigmatized knowledge” is used below in the sense described by Michael Barkun. It refers to bodies of knowledge that have been ignored or rejected by institutions that societies rely on for its verification (such as universities, academia, government agencies, media, etc.) (Barkun, 2016).



This procedure can be exemplified by the channel *Verschwörungen* (Conspiracies). It is one of the most successful channels

run by sovereignists, which presents itself superficially and through the content of most of its posts as an “alternative” media source. At its peak in late 2022, *Verschwörungen* reached more than 94,000 subscribers; however, trends from October 2022 to February 2023 indicate non-organic growth. Thematically, the channel publishes various conspiracy narratives, esotericism, and antisemitic and right-wing extremist content, as well as positive reporting on the far right AfD Party. Sovereignist content is not among the top five posts of *Verschwörungen* in terms of reach (as of July 2023), but the channel repeatedly disseminates implicit and explicit “Reichsbürger” content. From the beginning of April 2020 at the latest until the end of November 2021, the channel ended a large number of its posts with a signature containing heart emojis in the black, white, and red colors of the imperial flag.

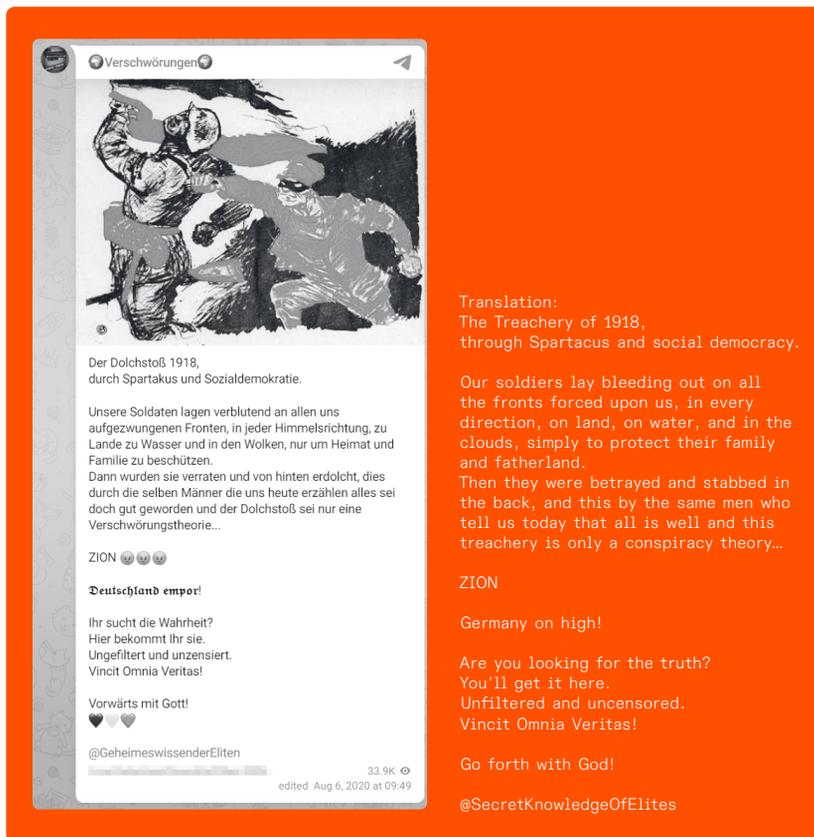


Figure 2  
 Screenshot of a conspiracy-ideological and antisemitic post of the *Verschwörungen* channel with heart emojis in the colors of the black-white-red imperial flag. Source: Telegram.

Michael B. can be identified as one of the operators of this channel until the end of April 2022. For at least some period of time, he counted himself as a member of the “Reichsbürger” group *Bismarcks Erben/Ewiger Bund* (Bismark’s Heirs/Eternal Covenant). In June 2020, B. openly promoted joining its sub-organization “*Vaterländischer Hilfsdienst*” (Aid for the Fatherland), which aimed to build local “Reichsbürger” structures. On January 18, 2021, the 150th anniversary of the founding of the historical German Reich, B. shared a document on *Verschwörungen* in which he presented his own 33-point program for restoring the legal capacity of the German Reich.

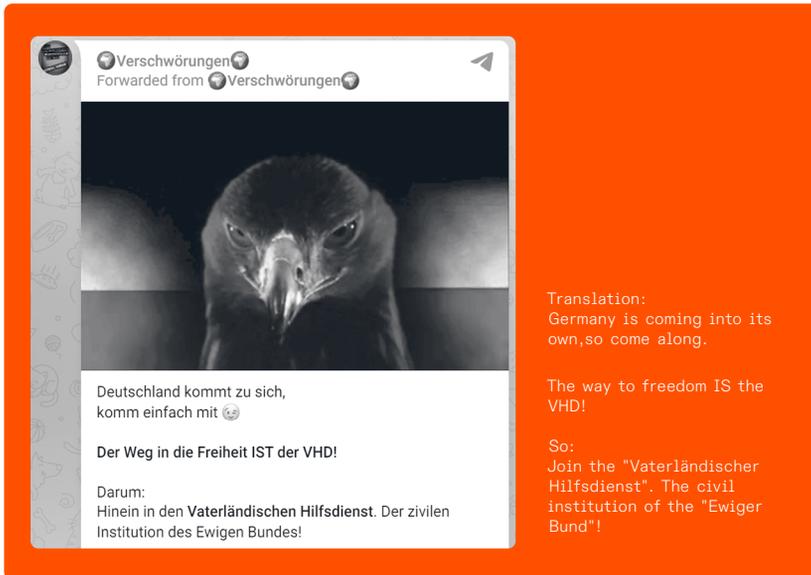


Figure 3  
The Telegram channel *Conspiracies* posts a call to join the “Reichsbürger” group *Vaterländischer Hilfsdienst*. Source: Telegram.

Translation:  
Germany is coming into its own,so come along.

The way to freedom IS the VHD!

So:  
Join the “Vaterländischer Hilfsdienst”. The civil institution of the “Ewiger Bund”!

In addition to normalizing sovereignist content, these “alternative” media channels run by sovereignists also systematized the conspiracy narratives disseminated under sovereignist auspices. The channels thus offered an explanation, for example, for why the government of the Federal Republic of Germany enacted restrictions on fundamental rights in the context of COVID-19 prevention against the will of part of the population: because it was part of a century-long foreign domination of the Germans, the ultimate aim of which was to annihilate the German people. In addition, they offered their subscribers sovereignist options to take

action during periods when there were no (large) protests, e.g. by engaging in sovereignist groups or by studying sovereignist claims for individual altercations with the Federal Republic.

However, “alternative” media actors were not the only ones to disseminate sovereignist content within the Querdenken protests; other key actors also contributed.

## 2. Sovereignism and Querdenken 711 – Stuttgart

As with the *Monday Vigils for Peace*, a new person who had not previously been known for their political activities took a prominent organizational position in the Querdenken protests against public health measures during the pandemic. In the Querdenken context, this was the software entrepreneur and private citizen Michael Ballweg and his organization *Querdenken 711 – Stuttgart*. Ballweg began organizing rallies against the pandemic containment measures in Stuttgart in the spring of 2020, which he was able to enforce before the Federal Constitutional Court in April 2020 despite a city ban on rallies. After that, the number of demonstrators increased from 50 at the first demonstration to 20,000 at the beginning of May, but then declined once more to 150 at the end of May 2020 (Teune, 2022). Ballweg and *Querdenken 711* were also responsible for organizing two central rallies in Berlin on August 1 and 29, 2020, which resulted in mobilizations nationwide and beyond Germany's borders.

From this point on, at the latest, the connections between Ballweg, *Querdenken 711* and conspiracy-ideological sovereignism become publicly visible. The organization had early personnel connections with “Reichsbürger” and conspiracy ideologues spreading sovereignist claims. For example, the stage program on August 1, 2020, included (Rathje, 2021c):

- Oliver Janich, right-wing libertarian conspiracy ideologue and author of articles with sovereignist content in the “New Right” and sovereignist *COMPACT Magazin*;
- Heiko Schrang, author of the book “*Die Souveränitätsslüge*” (The Sovereignty Lie); and
- Thorsten “Silberjunge” Schulte, author of the book “*Fremdbestimmt. 120 Jahre Lügen und Täuschung*” (Controlled By a Foreign Power. 120 Years of Lies and Deception).

In addition, Ballweg and the then-spokesperson for *Querdenken 711*, Stephan Bergmann, maintained close contact with Nikolai Nerling,

who reported on the protests. Bergmann greeted the right-wing extremist and antisemitic vlogger and “Reichsbürger” in front of the stage with a hug (Endstation Rechts, 2020). According to media reports, Ballweg also conversed with Nerling on several occasions: that same evening at a barbecue party (Garbe & Kalisch, 2020) and the following day on the sidelines of the “Querdenken” demonstration. In a speech on the stage of the sovereignist group *staatenlos.info* in front of the Reichstag building at the “Querdenken” demonstration on August 29, 2020, Nerling reported that Ballweg had asked him questions about German history and asked him to promise not to make the meeting public (*Querdenker und Rechtsextreme: Grillparty mit einem Holocaustleugner*, December 10, 2020). Only when it was pointed out to Ballweg in early September 2020 that Nerling had also thanked Ballweg in the same speech for bringing “six million” people onto the streets – a reference to the number of Jews murdered in Europe during Nazi rule – did he distance himself from Nerling (*Corona-Demos: Wie rechts tickt Querdenken?*, September 10, 2020).

However, this did not stop Ballweg from meeting with Peter Fitzek – “king” of the “*Königreich Deutschland*” (Kingdom of Germany) since 2012 – in a restaurant belonging to the latter’s supposed “territory” in Thuringia on November 15, 2020. The organization justified the move in a press release, stating that other venues would not have been suitable for a meeting due to COVID-19 measures. In the same communication, *Querdenken 711* dissociated itself from “the ideology of the Reichsbürger” and claimed that Fitzek was not among its adherents. These were not Ballweg’s only connections to Fitzek. The head of *Querdenken 711* maintained an account with Fitzek’s “Gemeinwohllkasse” (lit. “Bank for the Common Good”) in Ulm until the beginning of August 2021. He claimed that he was testing it in his search for alternatives to the existing banking system, but had then reportedly switched to Bitcoin.

*Querdenken 711* is not just connected to conspiracy-ideological sovereignism through its associates; its leaders have also spread sovereignist content themselves. Stephan Bergmann, for a time the organization’s press spokesman, had already publicly shared racist and sovereignist posts on Facebook in 2015/2016 during the heyday of the “Pegida” (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes/Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West) movement (*Dokumentation: Der Hass, den Stephan*

*Bergmann im Netz verbreitete*, July 31, 2020). For Michael Ballweg, public statements and activities in this regard can be demonstrated from at least August 8, 2020, one week after the first large-scale rally in Berlin. On that day, he addressed a *Querdenken 711* rally in Stuttgart with an account of his experience and told the audience to Google “peace treaty”. This is a reference to central conspiracy narratives from the sovereignist milieu, i.e. that Germany requires a peace treaty to end the First or Second World War against the Allies in order to become sovereign.<sup>9</sup>

Ballweg did not stop at these calls for protesters to engage with sovereignist conspiracy narratives. The protest camp organized by *Querdenken 711*, which accompanied and outlasted the large-scale rally on August 29, 2020, declared the organization to be a “constitutional assembly”. In an interview with the “alternative” journalist Boris Reitschuster, Stephan Bergmann explained their mission with reference to sovereignist and other conspiracy narratives. He stated that pursuant to Article 146 of the Basic Law, the German people, in exercising their freedom of self-determination, would draw up a new constitution in the protest camp, since the Basic Law did not provide sufficient protection against encroachments on fundamental rights and also constituted “occupation law”.

### 3. “Reichsbürger”, Q-Anon and SHAEF

A particular development took place before, but most notably during, the COVID-19 pandemic. In this period, “Reichsbürger” in the tradition of Ebel as well as other sovereignists adapted and transformed elements of the Q-Anon conspiracy ideology originating in the United States of America to varying degrees, forming a new current within the sovereignist milieu.<sup>10</sup>

Q-Anon is a conspiracy ideology whose origins can be traced to two conspiracy narratives in the second half of the 2010s. According to the first of these narratives, *Pizzagate*, which emerged around the time of the 2016 US presidential election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, a pedophile ring of leading Democratic Party politicians had allegedly been holding children captive in the basement of a pizzeria in the US capital. The second original conspiracy narrative stems from posts made on the image-board *4chan* in late October 2017. In these posts, an account called “Q” or “Q Clearance Patriot” purported to leak supposedly classified

9

This view is wrong. For a comprehensive debunking, see Research Services of the German Bundestag (2013).

10

The extent to which this current will constitute its own sub-milieu cannot be clearly judged at this point.

information from the Trump administration that Trump was taking action against an evil cabal of pedophile Satanists and the “Deep State”. The name “Q-Anon” is a combination of the pseudonym “Q” and the standard reference to unregistered users on imageboards as “Anonymous”.<sup>11</sup>

11

For detailed information on these developments, please refer to the CeMAS report “Q Vadis”, Holnburger et al. (2022).

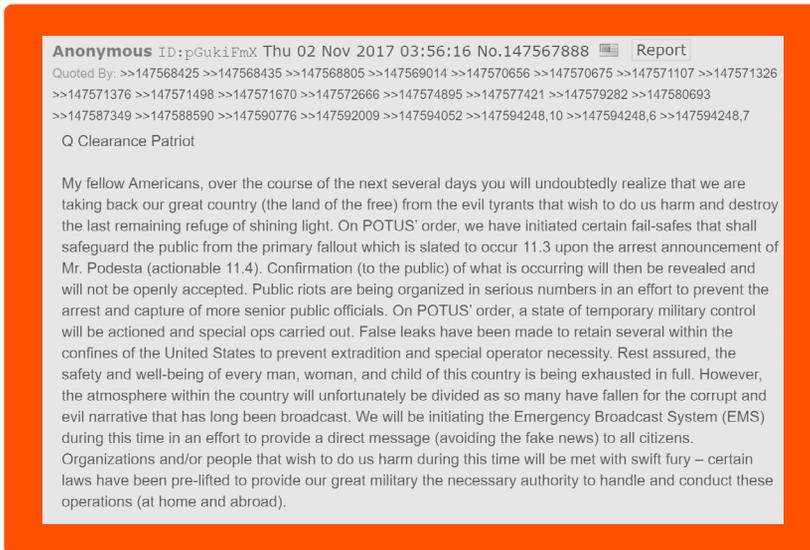


Figure 4  
Example of post by “Q” on 4chan from November 2, 2017.

In addition to Q-Anon-specific actors, individuals and groups who had previously disseminated “Reichsbürger” content played an important role in the spread of Q-Anon in Germany.

### QAnon-„Reichsbürger“

Die Verbindung von Reichsideologie und QAnon ist im deutschen The connection between “Reichsbürger” ideology and Q-Anon in the German-speaking world is primarily associated with Hans-Joachim Müller from Leipzig. By his own account, Müller was an oppositionist in the former German Democratic Republic, a spokesman for the *Neues Forum Leipzig* (New Forum Leipzig), and a speaker at Pegida and Legida. In the second half of the 2010s, Müller spread lengthy racist, antisemitic, conspiracy-ideological and increasingly sovereignist postings on Facebook under the title *Post von Müller* (Dispatch from Müller). After his Facebook account was suspended, he became mainly active on the Russian network vkontakte.

By February 2018 at the latest, he began posting Q-Anon content there both openly and in codes and dog whistles. In the process, it became apparent that Müller's disappointment over the AfD's lack of influence was being replaced by hopes of liberation through Q, Trump, and Putin. Eventually, Müller achieved greater success with a series of YouTube videos starting in November 2019, shortly before the outbreak of the pandemic, in which he gave a general introduction to world events from the perspective of a Q-Anon "Reichsbürger". A network of supporters then produced a daily broadcast with Hans-Joachim Müller which was distributed via various social media, including the gaming platform Twitch. By the time the channel was removed from YouTube in April 2021, Müller's main channel had reached 110,000 subscribers (Social Blade, n.d.).

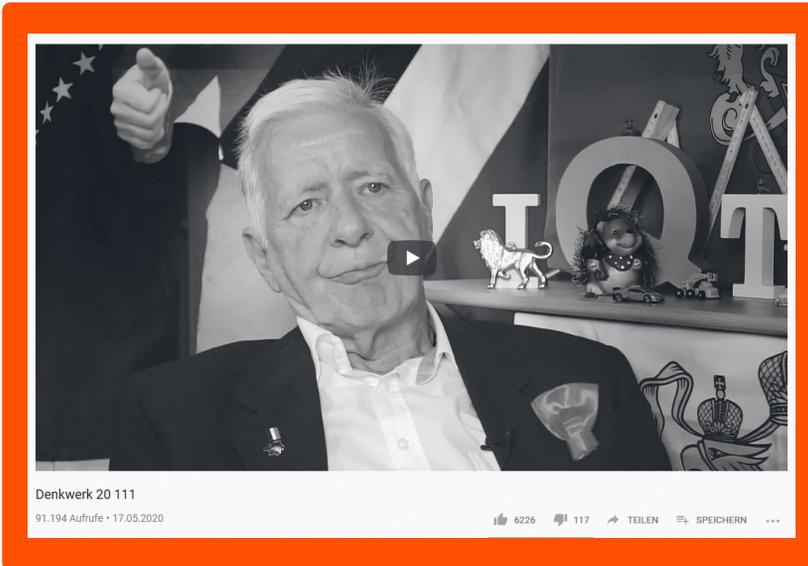


Figure 5  
Screenshot of YouTube  
video of Hans-Joachim  
Müller with Q-Anon  
and "Reichsbürger"  
symbolism.

However, the spread of Q-Anon content in Germany, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, was not just due to Müller. The NATO exercise *Defender Europe 20*, which was planned to occur from February to May 2020 and included the deployment of more than 20,000 US soldiers in Europe, but which had to be canceled due to the pandemic outbreak in March 2020 (EUCOM, 2020), also created a buzz. Within the conspiracy-ideological milieu, the exercise was initially interpreted from an anti-NATO and/

or pro-Russian perspective to be a provocation of Russia. From January 2020, or at the latest from the beginning of February, Q-Anon adherents and “Reichsbürger” shared a positive interpretation of *Defender Europe 20* on Telegram, claiming that Trump’s troops had come to liberate the German people from the “Deep State” of the Federal Republic.

One Telegram group is of particular importance in this context: *Defender / SHAEF 2Q2Q*. It was created in early March 2020 together with an information channel by the Q-Anon “Reichsbürger” Stephan “Into the Light” Niemann, who is very active on Telegram. The group did not just combine Q-Anon narratives with those of the “Reichsbürger”, but was also at times the second largest German-language Q-Anon Telegram group. By the time it was deleted by Telegram for violations of its terms of service on January 12, 2022, it counted more than 23,000 members (Holnburger et al., 2022, p. 20). Even among the earliest messages, anti-semitic conspiracy myths were shared in connection with Q-Anon and “Reichsbürger” narratives by conspiracy ideologue Michael Ronald Gehlken, who has spent years spreading antisemitic and sovereignist “Reichsbürger” content online.

### SHAEF

A sovereignist narrative that had previously played only a subordinate role in guiding the milieu’s action also developed its own dynamic: the positive reference to the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) or the historic “SHAEF laws” (Dittrich, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, SHAEF and its laws were cited within the milieu as evidence of the continued occupation of the German Reich, although it was dissolved immediately after World War II and its laws were replaced by German federal law after the founding of the Federal Republic (Caspar & Neubauer, 2015, p. 115-116; Schumacher, 2015, p. 133-134). The reference to SHAEF and its laws thus presupposes the sovereignist assumption that the laws of the Federal Republic of Germany have no validity. Even Wolfgang Ebel, who founded his own tradition of “Reichsbürger” ↗, had drawn the legitimation of his rule from a presumed agreement of the Allies with his supposed government action and the SHAEF laws. However, unlike Ebel, who focused on civilian rule with the establishment of his supposed “*Kommissarische Reichsregierung*”

↗ see section  
Conspiracy Ideological  
Sovereignism in Germany  
before the Pandemic,  
p. 16

(Commissarial Reich Government), Q-Anon “Reichsbürger” who fixate on SHAEF seek closer proximity to the US military, which is supposedly still acting as an occupying force. They are not primarily concerned with enforcing their own laws, but the SHAEF laws. A central figure in this context was Thorsten Gerhard Jansen, who referred to himself as the “SHAEF Commander”. Beginning in the spring of 2020, he disseminated allegations that certain public figures were violating SHAEF laws and as well as death threats against politicians on several now-blocked Telegram channels, some of which had a reach of nearly 12,000 subscribers. Jansen stood trial for his threats in 2022, but the court found him not guilty due to his delusions and committed him to a psychiatric hospital, where he died in mid-March 2023 (Koller, 2023). Within milieus ranging from Q-Anon to the “Reichsbürger”, Jansen’s activities and exclusive focus on SHAEF and a US military liberation were controversial (de:hate, 2021).

### *Interim Conclusion on the Q-Anon “Reichsbürger”*

In general, it can be stated that the connection between Q-Anon and the sovereignist milieu in Germany is hindered by the anti-Americanism that is widespread in the sovereignist milieu. This is particularly evident in the negative perception of US-led foreign domination over the Germans, as prominently represented, for example, by *COMPACT Magazin* through Jürgen Elsässer’s “Ami go home” slogan. A radical shift from rejection to approval enabled the acceptance of the core elements of Q-Anon, in which Donald Trump’s role in the fight against the “Deep State” removed him from the continuity of negatively perceived American rule and made him a symbol of a different, far-right and anti-global conspiracy America. Individual Q-Anon narratives could thus be adapted particularly well by “Reichsbürger” groups who were willing to refer positively to an Allied state of occupation under Trump’s leadership and hoped for salvation from the “Deep State” Federal Republic of Germany by the former US president and his military (Rathje, 2020).

The adaptation and transformation of Q-Anon narratives by “Reichsbürger” as outlined above was facilitated by several factors. The first commonalities concern their respective perception of the enemy. Q-Anon supporters and “Reichsbürger” are directed against liberal and democratic states, which they perceive

as being controlled by a conspiracy (“Deep State”). Using antisemitic codes and dog whistles, both groups identify liberal “elites” in particular as being part of the conspiracy against the common people. Parallels also exist in the promises of salvation made by these conspiracy ideologies. Both believe in a salvation in the form of a nation-state that can be achieved by overcoming the Federal Republic/“Deep State” conspiracy against the people. To achieve this goal, powerful men play an important role – especially Donald Trump, but also Vladimir Putin. Finally, the fantasies shared in both conspiracy ideologies of punishing the enemies after their victory, for example through military tribunals, can be further seen as a unifying element bringing together the perceptions of the enemy and promises of salvation.

The adaptation and transformation of Q-Anon narratives opened up another conspiracy-ideological sub-milieu for the sovereignist milieu in Germany, which offered its own ideology as a deepening of the conspiracy and a form of national specification. From this mixture of Q-Anon “Reichsbürger” circles, groups and networks were formed from the end of 2021 which the Federal Public Prosecutor General is currently investigating on suspicion of forming terrorist associations with the aim of a violent overthrow of the political system ↗.<sup>12</sup>

↗ see section *Suspicious of terrorism*, p. 42

12

As of the time of writing (October 9, 2023).



## 38 Sovereignist violence and suspicions of terrorism since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic

Since 2016, when a sovereignist shot and killed a police officer and injured others in Georgensgmünd, Bavaria, crimes from the sovereignist milieu in Germany have been systematically recorded by the Federal Criminal Police Office under the subject area of “Reichsbürger” and “Selbstverwalter” within the statistics for politically motivated crime (PMC). The crimes registered in these statistics are attributed to a subject area based on the motives for committing the crime and circumstances of the crime, and further attributed to a phenomenal domain (left-wing, right-wing, foreign ideology, religious ideology, and unattributed) on the basis of their ideological affiliation or the circumstances of the crime. In the PMC statistics, a distinction is made between “right-wing” and “right-wing extremist” crimes.

The essential characteristic of a “right-wing” ideology is the assumption of an inequality or inequivalence between people. Crimes in which references to nationalism, racism, Social Darwinism or National Socialism were wholly or partly responsible for the commission of the crime are generally to be classified as right-wing extremist

—Federal Criminal Police Office n.d.

It is problematic that a large part of all registered crimes (86 percent) under the category “Reichsbürger/Selbstverwalter” are not attributed to the right-wing phenomenal domain, but are instead categorized as “unattributable” (Federal Criminal Police Office, 2023, p. 25). This conceals the ideological affiliation and depoliticizes the crimes. An act would be considered “right-wing extremist” if there were indications that it was directed against the free democratic basic order of the Federal Republic of Germany, i.e. that it was intended, for example, to suspend the power of the state in elections or the independence of the courts (Federal Criminal Police Office, n.d.). Although there are different currents of conspiracy-ideological sovereignism, they are all united by the idea that the current state is not legitimate or does not exist. Accordingly,

they reject a democratic society and – at least in parts – demand the reinstatement of a German Reich. Some “Reichsbürger” refer in their rejection of the Basic Law exclusively to the law of a historical German Reich; Wolfgang Ebel immediately set up a “Commissarial Reich Government” to enact his own laws; and the secessionist “king” Peter Fitzek believes he can break away from the Federal Republic and the Basic Law with his “*Königreich Deutschland*”. The group of Heinrich XIII Prinz Reuß even planned a violent overthrow. Nevertheless, as late as the beginning of 2023, the case was not classified as “right-wing extremist” (Litschko, 2023). To the extent that attitudes and ideologies are assumed to guide action, these statistics should be re-evaluated. “Reichsbürger” and other sovereignists are, as a whole, to be assigned at least to the political right; a classification as “right-wing extremist” would reflect the political ideology much more accurately than is currently the case. ↗<sup>13</sup> Especially with the upsurge in conspiracy-ideological sovereignism during the pandemic and related terror plots, its relevance is increasing. A correct classification is not simply an abstract question of statistics, but has direct consequences for the state’s engagement with the extreme right.

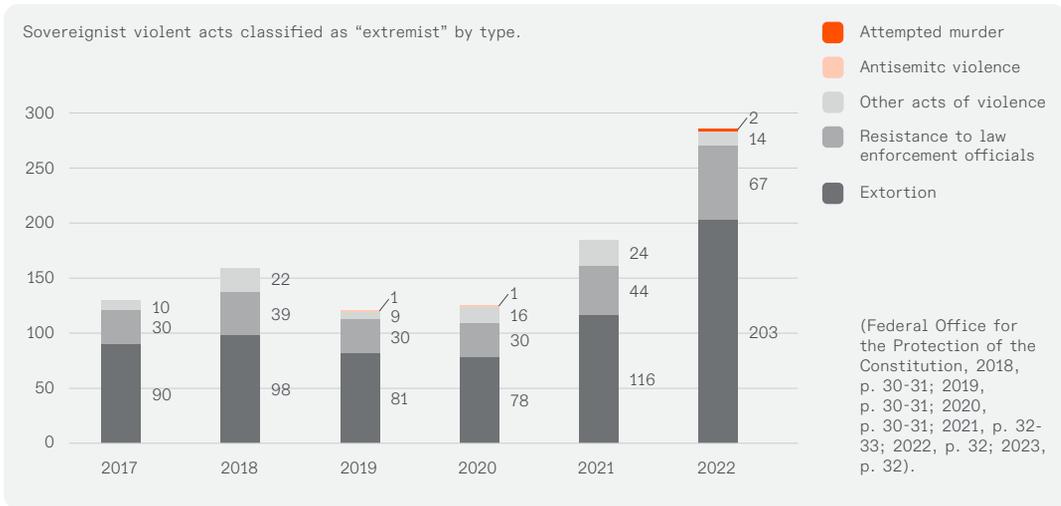
An evaluation of crimes classified as “extremist” is also published within the annual reports of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, which includes a more detailed breakdown of the acts. Among the violent acts classified as extremist, most cases registered by the federal agency concerned extortion/coercion and resistance to law enforcement officials. The statistics also show that violent acts by the sovereignist milieu have increased since the beginning of the pandemic.

↗ see section *Conspiracy-ideological sovereignism as part of the extreme right*, p. 16

### 13

This is not the only criticism of PMC. For criticism of the recording of right-wing extremist crimes, see for example Kleffner (2019).

## 40 Sovereignist violence and suspicions of terrorism since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic



Acts of violence from the sovereignist milieu take place regularly in the Federal Republic of Germany. Violence is already inherent in the ideology as it contains Manichean structural elements, meaning sovereignists believe that a final decisive battle is taking place between the forces of good and evil, at the end of which will stand either the salvation or destruction of their own group. This is accompanied within the milieu by exaggerated victim narratives of a war of extermination against the German people and a demonization of the presumed enemy, whereby violence can be morally legitimized as a last resort in the confrontation with evil (Rathje, 2022).

A necessary conflict with state officials and civil servants also results from the milieu's recommendations to refuse to pay debts, taxes, and duties, and not to identify oneself using FRG-documents in traffic stops. Conflicts also arise when members are required to be stripped of their weapons on the basis of their membership in the milieu. Since the beginning of the pandemic, several violent crimes have been committed by "Reichsbürger".

### Conflicts between Sovereignists and the Police

"Reichsbürger" and Q-Anon "Reichsbürger" attracted greater attention on August 29, 2020, when they gathered in front of the US and Russian embassies as part of the "Querdenken" demonstrations in

Berlin and called for a peace treaty. There were clashes with the police that afternoon in front of the Russian embassy after the right-wing extremist “Reichsbürger” and antisemite Attila Hildmann was arrested after giving a speech. However, the occupation of the stairs of the Reichstag building in the early evening made headlines around the world. Parallel to the large-scale rally of *Querdenken 711*, the sovereignist group *staatenlos.info* had set up its own stage in front of the Bundestag, which served as a contact point for “Reichsbürger” groups and individuals in addition to the US and Russian embassies. The last to speak from this stage was Tamara Kirschbaum, who in the past had translated content for the central Q-Anon group *Qlobal-Change* and who had already spoken the day before at a rally of the “Reichsbürger” group *Gelbe-Westen-Berlin* (Yellow Jackets Berlin) in front of the Russian embassy. She had announced the dissolution of the Federal Republic for the following day and called on the bystanders to demand a peace treaty in front of the embassies (Wienand, 2020). In her speech in front of the Reichstag building the following day, she claimed that Donald Trump was in Berlin and then called for people to cross police barriers and peacefully occupy the Reichstag steps (volksfahraeder, 2020). The occupation of the Reichstag steps was meant to serve as a signal to Trump that the German people would be ready for an intervention by the US military as a perceived occupying power. Hundreds of protesters responded to this call.

In early February 2022, a violent conflict occurred between a “Reichsbürger” and the police during a traffic stop in Efringen-Kirchen. The 61-year-old man was initially stopped by police for speeding, but then ran over a police officer with his car, seriously injuring him. He was eventually wounded by police gunfire and stood down. The Stuttgart Higher Regional Court sentenced the “Reichsbürger” to ten years in prison for attempted murder (*Versuchter Mord: „Reichsbürger” zu zehn Jahren Haft verurteilt*, March 24, 2023).

Another case occurred on April 20, 2022, in Bobstadt in the state of Baden-Württemberg. On that day, a search was to be carried out at Ingo K.’s home with the aim of confiscating a pistol which K., as a “Reichsbürger”, was no longer allowed to possess by court order. When the police officers arrived and asked him to leave the building, K. began to shoot at the officers through locked shutters with an automatic rifle. Two officers received minor injuries. K.

finally surrendered after two hours. During the subsequent search, the police seized three fully automatic rifles, two submachine guns and more than 5,000 rounds of ammunition that K. had obtained illegally. Due to the particular seriousness of the case, the investigation was taken over by the Federal Public Prosecutor General (Federal Public Prosecutor General, 2023a). The trial against K. for multiple attempted murder charges has been running at the Stuttgart Higher Regional Court since the beginning of April 2023.<sup>14</sup>

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At the time of writing (October 9, 2023), no verdict had yet been reached.

### Suspicious of terrorism

As far as presently known, there have been no successful terrorist attacks from the sovereignist milieu since the outbreak of the pandemic in Germany. Investigating authorities prevented two such efforts in cases that occurred in April and December 2022. Two groups had formed out of the Querdenken protests, and according to the Federal Public Prosecutor General, they had not only prepared attacks but also planned to overthrow the political system of the Federal Republic of Germany (Federal Public Prosecutor General, 2022, 2023b). These groups were the *Vereinte Patrioten* (United Patriots) and the *Patriotische Union* (Patriotic Union), which are briefly presented below.

#### *Vereinte Patrioten (United Patriots)*

The group *Vereinte Patrioten*, formed around the circle of Sven Georg B., Thomas K., Thomas O., Elisabeth R., and Michael H., met for the first time in person in mid-December 2021. Their alleged goal was reportedly to create one or more blackouts by attacking critical infrastructure and then to kidnap Federal Health Minister Karl Lauterbach. This was intended to lead to civil-war-like conditions in which the group would then, as part of a false flag operation, use actors to publicly proclaim the resignation of the federal government and restore the validity of the Constitution of 1871. Finally, a “constituent assembly” was to convene in Berlin, from which the new government of Germany would emerge (Federal Public Prosecutor General, 2023b).

Authorities intervened when Thomas O. attempted to purchase two automatic rifles and four pistols, along with ammunition, from an undercover agent in April 2021. This was followed by police

searches, during which the investigators became aware of another group of conspirators (Wienand, 2023a).

### *Patriotische Union (Patriotic Union)*

Parallel to the group around B. and R., the *Patriotische Union* group is said to have formed around the “Reichsbürger” Heinrich XIII Prinz Reuß in November 2021. They are accused by the Federal Public Prosecutor General (2022) of preparing a military coup, after which a military transitional government was to be formed in order to subsequently negotiate a peace treaty with Russia. Members of its military arm selectively recruited soldiers and police to set up “homeland security companies” to strike at the local level (Federal Public Prosecutor General, 2022). The group itself includes former soldiers, some of them from the Special Forces Command (KSK) of the German Armed Forces. The *Patriotische Union* is also accused of having planned to forcefully enter the German federal parliament, the Bundestag, with a small number of armed men (Federal Public Prosecutor General, 2022). The project was supposedly to have benefited from the fact that Birgit Malsack-Winkemann, a judge and former AfD member of the Bundestag, was also a member of the group, which would facilitate access to parliament (Fischermann et al., 2023).

On December 7, 2022, one of the largest police raids in the history of the Federal Republic took place against this group with searches conducted in Germany, Austria and Italy. Among other things, the authorities found pistols and rifles, more than 149,000 rounds of ammunition – some of which is said to have come from the German armed forces –, an enemies list, and satellite phones, as well as gold valued at six million euros and 420,000 euros in cash (Baumgärtner et al., 2022; Fischermann et al., 2023). Nearly 70 people are being investigated as accused members or supporters of the group.<sup>15</sup>

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As of the time of writing (October 9, 2023).

### *Special features of current efforts within the sovereignist milieu under suspicion of terrorism*

Violent acts within the sovereignist milieu, including terrorism, can be traced back as early as 1980. Traditionally organized, right-wing extremist “Reichsbürger” not only provided ideological foundations

for German conspiracy-ideological sovereignism, but also used acts of violence to achieve their goals. Manfred Roeder, who was appointed “Reichsverweser” (Reich Administrator) on May 23, 1978, by his group, the *Freiheitsbewegung Deutsches Reich* (German Reich Freedom Movement), went underground from 1978 onward because he no longer saw any legal means of restoring the German Reich to power (Dudek, 1985, p. 188). In 1980, he joined the right-wing terrorist group *Deutsche Aktionsgruppen* (German Action Groups), which was responsible for seven arson and explosive attacks that fatally injured two Vietnamese refugees. Other targets included an exhibition on the Auschwitz concentration camp and a Jewish school (Bauerschmidt et al., 1996; *Manfred Roeder*, 2002). In the same year, he was arrested by the police and sentenced to ten years in prison. From 1990 onwards, Roeder was active in settling Germans in the Russian city of Kaliningrad (formerly Königsberg), spreading Reich-ideological claims, and denying the Holocaust. Training and networking events have been held at his estate in Hesse since 1975.<sup>16</sup>

The developments of parts of the sovereignist milieu associated with right-wing terrorist efforts since the pandemic is concerning due to several factors. Firstly, the particular efforts with which these groups sought to break the Federal Republic's monopoly on the use of force should be emphasized. To this end, they relied not only on the accumulation of weapons and ammunition, which is widespread within the milieu (Janz & Speit, 2017), but also on the recruitment of people who know how to handle these weapons, i.e. former and active soldiers. Sven Georg B. of the group *Vereinte Patrioten* was a central figure within *Veteran Pool* groups and channels on Telegram. He had allegedly been attempting to recruit members for the *Vereinte Patrioten* on the social platform since October 2021 (Federal Public Prosecutor General, 2023b). The *Patriotische Union* involved several former soldiers who recruited each other and maintained links with the Special Forces Command, the elite unit of the German armed forces. The group also included two police officers (Diehl et al., 2022) and several sport-shooters. It even tried to poach members of the *Vereinte Patrioten* (Wienand, 2023b).

Another worrying factor is the influence of traditionally organized, right-wing extremist “Reichsbürger” and Q-Anon narratives on militant aspirations within the milieu, especially from the *Europäische Aktion* (European Action, *EA*) group, which officially

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For a detailed account of the development of conspiracy-ideological sovereignism in the Federal Republic of Germany and its relation to antisemitism, see Rathje (2021b).

dissolved itself in 2017. The *EA* was founded by Bernhard Schaub in 2008/2009, initially in Switzerland, as an unofficial successor to several revisionist organizations of Holocaust deniers that were banned in 2008 (*Collegium Humanum, Association for the rehabilitation of those persecuted for Holocaust denial*) under the name *Bund freies Europa* (Free Europe Association). One of the *EA*'s goals was to establish a European confederation in place of the allegedly foreign-dominated European Union with a German Reich at its core. Ideologically, the *EA* followed the antisemitic, racist, and volkish traditions of the organizations from which its members came (Begrich & Speit, 2017). To achieve its goals, the *EA* was to be given a flexible structure; at the lowest level, which comprised bases of three to seven people, the members were known only to their elected leader. The organization generally did not maintain membership lists in order to prevent repression by the state.

The group's activities included seminars, demonstrations, and paramilitary drills (Begrich & Speit, 2017). The regional leader of the *EA* for Thuringia, Axel Schlimper, allegedly also mentioned firearms training with Hungarian neo-Nazis to members of the *EA* Austria in Vienna in June 2014 (*Dismissal of Basic Rights Appeal, 14 Os 2/18b (Supreme Court of the Republic of Austria, January 15, 2018)*). On June 23, 2017, the Thuringia State Criminal Police Office conducted several searches at the *EA* on suspicion of forming a criminal organization, during which several weapons were found (Thuringia State Criminal Police Office, 2017a, 2017b). Previously, in a livestream of the Thuringia National Democratic Party (NPD) on June 10, 2017, Axel Schlimper had announced the decision of the *EA*'s German leader, Rigolf Hennig, to dissolve the *EA*. The dissolved organization wrote on its website in September 2017 that its members should pursue the goals of the organization on their own, as their motto – “Reconquer or perish!” – still applied. However, there are doubts as to whether the organization was in fact dissolved; Axel Schlimper, for example, continued to be active under the name of the organization (element investigate, 2019).

The group *Vereinte Patrioten* maintained direct contact with Rigolf Hennig, the former national leader of the *EA*. Hennig's career as a traditionally organized, right-wing extremist “Reichsbürger” began at the latest in 1995, when he founded a Reich-ideological organization called *Freistaat Preußen* (The Free State of Prussia) (Begrich & Speit, 2017). After the supposed self-dissolution of the *EA* and

during the pandemic, Hennig published six open letters to the UN, the US Congress, the Russian Federation, and others on September 9, 2021, together with professor of theology Elisabeth R., under the group name “*W.I.R. – WIR – Wilhelm Imperator Rex-Nachfahren – Bundesstaat Königreich Preußen – Präsidialstaat Deutsches Reich*” (W.I.R. – WIR [WE] – Descendants of Wilhelm Imperator Rex – Federal State of the Kingdom of Prussia – Presidential State of the German Reich). In these letters, they demanded the conclusion of a peace treaty to end a supposed Jewish war against the Germans which had been going on since 1914 and which also included the annihilation of the German people via anti-Covid lockdown measures. The letters contain Q-Anon references in addition to “Reichsbürger” ideology, and one letter is even addressed to a temporary hero of the Q-Anon milieu: Retired Gen. Michael Flynn, who briefly served as an adviser to Donald Trump. The collaboration of R. and Hennig was not limited to the publication of these letters. R., who was responsible for the ideological orientation within the *Vereinte Patrioten*, also involved Hennig in her other activities: the right-wing extremist “Reichsbürger” and Holocaust denier had been the *Vereinte Patrioten*’s intended head of state. Hennig was a good fit for the group; on the *EA*’s website, he had published an article in late 2016 which promoted the bombing of transmission towers and stated that he had carried out such attacks himself (Hamburg State Office for the Protection of the Constitution, 2016, p. 193). The group’s third clandestine meeting on February 20, 2022, reportedly took place directly in Hennig’s home. However, their hopes to appoint him as head of state were dashed by his death just a month later. Subsequently, despite resistance from R., the group sought contact with another prominent figure in the milieu who then attended the fourth meeting on April 9, 2022: Hans-Joachim Müller, one of the central disseminators of Q-Anon “Reichsbürger” ideology ↗. Müller is said to have been unimpressed by the meeting, however, and later distanced himself from the group (Wienand, 2023c).

The group surrounding Heinrich XIII Prinz Reuß also had links to Q-Anon and *Europäische Aktion*. According to the Federal Public Prosecutor General, the *Patriotische Union* is said to have assumed that an “alliance” of governments and military leaders would act against the German “Deep State” in the near future (Federal Public Prosecutor General, 2022). Several suspected members of the group were also members of the Q-Anon “Reichsbürger” telegram group *Defender / SHAEF 2Q2Q* ↗. Peter W., a suspected member

↗ see chapter QAnon-  
“Reichsbürger”, p. 31

↗ see chapter SHAEF,  
p. 34

of the senior staff of the *Patriotische Union's* military arm, shared a YouTube video on his website as early as March 2020 that he tagged with a series of conspiracy-ideological references, including “defender 2020”, “deep state”, and “Trump”. A little more than a year later, in May 2021, the right-wing extremist former officer of the Special Forces Command and survival trainer predicted in another video that a coup would occur within the next month, with the narrative showing strong parallels to the group’s plan – which, based on present knowledge, was only constituted later. W. not only referred to a “council” and an interim military government, but was also seen preparing his audience for the fact that foreign military will be involved in the establishment of a “proper German state”. On his website, he used right-wing extremist and Q-Anon references like “alliance” and “thousand-year Reich” for keywording. According to research by the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, W. is also said to have been active for the *Europäische Aktion* (Fischermann et al., 2023). The Federal Court of Justice also revealed that W. was able to enter the Bundestag in late summer 2021 at the invitation of the then-AfD politician and member of parliament Malsack-Winkemann and is alleged to have spied on the Bundestag for the “Day X” plans (Decision of the 3rd Criminal Panel from July 11, 2023, AK 35/23 [Federal Court of Justice, July 11, 2023]). Shortly after the December 2022 raid on the group, Axel Schlimper, the EA's former regional manager in Thuringia, came forward with a video statement on his Telegram channel in which he stated that he knew some of the suspected members personally and insisted that they posed no threat.

### *The trivialization problem*

These and other forms of trivialization in assessing these groups were also found in parts of the public. The sovereignist milieu plays down the potential for violence and terrorism; adjacent milieus on the extreme right allege the influence of Offices for the Protection of the Constitution (Martin Sellner) and downplay the groups’ potential – for example, by referencing the at times advanced age of suspected members – as a “rollator putsch” (Alice Weidel) or as a “Rentner Armee Fraktion” (Retiree Army Faction) (Martin Sellner) (Preuß, 2022). In the case of the AfD, this can be seen as a defensive strategy, since on one hand it presents itself for election by “Reichsbürger” and others through the sovereignist

The focus on the exotic, the bizarre and the reminiscent of satire among “Reichsbürger” and other sovereignists obscures a critical view of the real threat potential.

positioning of its individual state associations and members, while on the other hand it is required to implement an incompatibility resolution concerning “Reichsbürger” activity and party membership. Elisabeth R. was also downplayed in some of the established media as a “terrorist granny” despite her close contact with Rigolf Hennig (Goedert, 2023; Meyen, 2022; Walusius Daily, 2022). Parts of the sovereignist milieu pursue a strategy of self-trivialization, such as the traditionally organized, right-wing extremist “Reichsbürger” and antisemites Nikolai Nerling, Axel Schlimper, and Gerhard Ittner, who made a satirical video entitled “The *Volkslehrer* Exclusive: The Reichsbürger Army in the Thuringian Forest” less than a year after the raid on the *Europäische Aktion*. The focus on the exotic, the bizarre and the reminiscent of satire among “Reichsbürger” and other sovereignists obscures a critical view of the real threat potential. This is exemplified by the actions of the two alleged terrorist groups that became known in 2022. The groups had specifically recruited (elite) soldiers, planned attacks on critical infrastructure, prepared access to parliament, scouted the potential crime scene, and gathered a broad network of supporters. Unfortunately, this trivializing perspective on the sovereignist milieu was already evident in the earlier treatment of Manfred Roeder. In 1985, right-wing extremism researcher Peter Dudek wrote about the terrorist Roeder, “for years, his bizarre activities [had been] underestimated as the eccentricities of a far-right political clown. He should have been taken more seriously when, following Khomeini’s example, he began to prepare ‘the actual liberation of Germany.’” (Dudek, 1985, p. 189). While this has now been recognized by investigating authorities, the problem remains that they do not conceptualize the sovereignist milieu as part of the extreme right, and in doing so trivialize their threat potential.

## 49 Outlook and recommended course of actions

A number of important developmental steps can be traced within the sovereignist milieu surrounding the “Reichsbürger” and others since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The milieu has been able to successfully connect to a protest movement and update its ideology with Q-Anon elements, thus tapping into a new conspiracy-ideological milieu for recruitment. Members of the milieu will continue to attempt this strategy in future protest movements. Conspiracy-ideological protests with shared perceptions of the enemy that fail to dissociate from right-wing extremists and conspiracy-ideological sovereignists are particularly suitable for recruitment.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, a high degree of networking can be observed between central sovereignist actors and other protest milieus – not just on Telegram – which may improve access to resources in order to carry out their activities. This is exemplified by the *Patriotische Union* group, which was able – at least for a time (Fischermann et al., 2023) – to unite members from different sovereignist sub-milieus and social milieus under the leadership of a German nobleman, as well as to acquire a large number of weapons and ammunition and large amounts of cash and gold.

It remains to be seen what the verdicts will be in the court cases against the two alleged “Reichsbürger” terrorist groups. Even if the suspicion that concrete preparations were made by the two groups is not substantiated, the readiness within the milieu – especially among those who are unsatisfied by the results after long periods of protest, as in the cases of the *Vereinte Patrioten* and *Patriotische Union*, and aspire to militancy – to surround themselves with professionals in the use of weapons and to prepare for a “Day X” is evident. These efforts link them to activities within the extreme right, and not simply within the “Reichsbürger” milieu.

### Conspiracy-ideological sovereignist networks form a constant threat

The conspiracy-ideological sovereignist milieu is rightly described as highly heterogeneous. However, this does not mean that the groups and individuals should be considered in isolation. Rather, the unification of a variety of esoteric, religious, and ideological elements as is common in conspiracy-ideological sovereignism offers points of connection into other milieus. In practice, the integration of different knowledge elements enables a connection with other individuals and

groups on the basis of one, multiple, or all elements (esotericism, religion, aliens and UFOs, etc.). The emergence of networks is benefited by the internet and social networks, especially Telegram. The stability of these connections depends on many additional factors, but the example of the *Patriotische Union* group shows that such a connection can be established e.g. through a central leader with authority.

In order to assess the size and influence of the milieu, it is necessary to analyze not only the central, clearly identifiable sovereignist actors and groups and their social media channels, but also channels and groups that pose as “alternative” media and implicitly disseminate sovereignist content.

Moreover, it has been shown that some individuals have succeeded in at least partially unifying this highly heterogeneous milieu which is constantly affected by divisions. Against this background, the various elements (esotericism, UFOs, etc.) should not be perceived primarily as something divisive – or worse, something to be laughed at – but as a potential for acquiring additional resources.

### Changes in the classification of “Reichsbürger”/“Selbstverwalter” and right-wing extremism by security authorities

Investigative authorities and most domestic intelligence services have insisted for years on separating “Reichsbürger”/“Selbstverwalter” from right-wing extremism. Only a fraction of the crimes committed by Reichsbürger are recorded as right-wing politically motivated crimes (PMC), and the Office for the Protection of the Constitution also considers only a small number of “Reichsbürger” to be right-wing extremists. The creation of a new, separate category of extremism testifies to the fact that the authorities’ classification terms do not fully correspond to the present phenomena. This classification results in a de-politicization of ideological acts and thus to an under-estimation of the threat posed by right-wing extremism. The security authorities should therefore adjust the classification of “Reichsbürger” and “Selbstverwalter” as an independent form of extremism and classify conspiracy-ideological sovereignism as a form of right-wing extremism. This is already the case at some state-level authorities: The State Offices for the Protection of the Constitution in Lower Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia place “Reichsbürger” and “Selbstverwalter” within the phenomenal domain of right-wing extremism.



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The non-profit Center for Monitoring, Analysis and Strategy (CeMAS) aims to equip society to actively counter conspiracy ideologies, disinformation, anti-semitism, and right-wing extremism in the 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. 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. The Alfred Landecker Foundation recognized the importance of CeMAS' work early on, and we are therefore pleased to announce that CeMAS is being funded by the Alfred Landecker Foundation from 2021 to 2024.

# 57 About the Author and the Collaborator

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Jan Rathje is a political scientist. At CeMAS, he works as a senior researcher studying online far-right extremism and terrorism, conspiracy ideologies, antisemitism, and conspiracy-ideological sovereignism of the “Reichsbürger” and other groups.

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