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Pro–Russian Disinformation and Propaganda in Germany: Russia's full-scale Invasion of Ukraine

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Central findings

Disinformation accompanies the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine and also reaches a German audience. It serves to strengthen Russian propaganda and is apt to interfere with and negatively influence the ability of Germany and Europe to make decisions and take action related to the war. Between the spring and fall of 2022, levels of agreement with pro-Russian propaganda narratives increased significantly among the German population.

Since the Russian invasion began in February 2022, the landscape of disinformation spreaders has fragmented. While RT DE (Russia Today Deutsch) dominated this landscape at the start of the war, its shutdown by the EU in March 2022 made space for other actors. These include Russian embassies as well as so-called "alternative media" outlets and pro-Russian influencers.

Disinformation campaigns also take deliberate aim at Ukrainian refugees. Disinformation intended to corrode solidarity with Ukraine and with Ukrainian refugees is repeatedly being circulated in various forms. Common themes include, for example, false allegations related to misappropriation of relief aid or aggressive behavior by refugees, or portraying support for the beleaguered country as a threat to one's own basic needs. False claims about refugees from Ukraine do not just stay in digital spaces, but are also carried over into the analog world.

In the conspiracy-ideological milieu, the news of the Russian attack on Ukraine was met with a pro-Russian and anti-American stance that had already become well-established in the period since 2014. Accordingly, at the start of the war, almost all positions in this milieu were anti-Ukrainian, and Russia's war of aggression was downplayed or legitimized.

Mobilization against refugees is still present now as before. There was widespread concern particularly during the summer of 2022 about possible mobilizations in the coming fall and winter. Although pro-Russian demonstrations and protests against the energy crisis declined in numbers going to the winter months, anti-refugee agitation can be observed, especially in smaller towns and in eastern Germany.

Disinformation remains a long-term threat to democracies. In light of the ongoing war of aggression in Ukraine as well as the other crises faced by our society, we need a more comprehensive understanding of propaganda and disinformation as well as systematic approaches to intervention.

Introduction

On February 24, 2022, exactly one year ago, Russia launched its brutal war of aggression on Ukraine in violation of international law. Russia's militaristic attacks on Ukraine began back in 2014 with the illegal annexation of Crimea, among other actions. Since then, it is estimated that over 7,000 civilians have been killed as well as over 11,000 injured,[1] and over seven million people have been forced to flee within Ukraine and another eight million to the rest of Europe.[2] Russia is systematically committing war crimes[3] and crimes against humanity.[4] This, in addition to its consistent attacks on civilian critical infrastructure, has led to the country being declared a terrorist state by the European Parliament.[5]

In the course of Russia's militaristic actions, there has been increased discussion around the role of disinformation, including in Germany. While other countries had long since recognized the dangers, in Germany, the topic had long been neglected. This research paper highlights developments in the area of disinformation since the beginning of the Russian war of aggression in February 2022. This knowledge is important in order to develop meaningful possibilities for intervention. Here it is worth noting the challenges of capturing data on disinformation. For one, there is no clearly segregated space on the internet that is dominated by disinformation. Rather, it makes its way through a wide variety of public and private communication spaces in the digital realm. It is also often unclear from an outside perspective whether an inaccurate piece of information was disseminated intentionally (disinformation) or unintentionally (misinformation). Nevertheless, it is still possible to describe trends and patterns from which we can draw lessons as a society.

Since crises and conflicts will continue to accompany us, we need a resilient society that is able to recognize and to counter attempts at influencing the population.

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[1] Statista. (2023, February 8). *Number of civilian casualties in Ukraine during Russia's invasion.* https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293492/ukraine-war-casualties/

[2] RedaktionsNetzwerk Deutschland. (2023, February 7). *Ukraine-Flüchtlinge: Fast acht Millionen Menschen seit Kriegsbeginn geflohen.* RND.de. https://www.rnd.de/politik/ukraine-fluechtlinge-fast-acht-millionen-menschen-seit-kriegsbeginn-geflohen-T7XY5SAJIJSIIYSVOCCGVSIACE.html

[3] RedaktionsNetzwerk Deutschland. (2023, February 7). *Ukraine-Flüchtlinge: Fast acht Millionen Menschen seit Kriegsbeginn geflohen.* RND.de. https://www.rnd.de/politik/ukraine-fluechtlinge-fast-acht-millionen-menschen-seit-kriegsbeginn-geflohen-T7XY5SAJIJSIIYSVOCCGVSIACE.html

[4] Sachstand zur Frage, ob in der Ukraine ein Völkermord verübt wird. (2022, November). *Research Services of the German Bundestag.* https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/926154/f3461bc3aafb029560bc01251b143df8/WD-2-072-22-pdf-data.pdf

[5] Wergin, C. (2022, November 23). Ukraine-Krieg: EU-Parlament erklärt Russland zum Terror-Staat. *DIE WELT.* https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article242292881/Ukraine-Krieg-EU-Parlament-erklaert-Russland-zum-Terror-Staat.html

Disinformation as an Attack on Liberal Democracies

Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine was accompanied by an increase in Russian and pro-Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns which fell on fertile ground, including in Germany, at least among certain parts of the population. While other countries such as Taiwan or the Baltic states already boast years of experience in the fight against attempts at influencing the population, the debate and systematic confrontation with disinformation as a threat to society and democracy is comparatively new in Germany – despite the fact that there is a clear and present threat. In its 2022 report on the state of IT security in Germany, the German Federal Office for Information Security (BSI) wrote that the threat level in digital spaces – exacerbated by the Russian war of aggression – was higher than ever.[6]

Authoritarian states use various means to influence public opinion. This can occur through cultural events, exercising influence on politicians[7] or disinformation campaigns.[8] Disinformation also makes use of various methods such as:

- Falsified and manipulated content (e.g. deep fakes, fictitious photos or videos, fake websites)

- False contexts or associations (e.g. photos of other places or dates, linking to old news stories that take on new meaning at the time of publication)

- Subverting facts (for example, by using false or abbreviated quotes)

- Using unknown sources as alleged "evidence" for news information

- Appeal to fake experts (e.g. actors, persons from outside the field)

- Exaggerating or over-amplifying opinions (for example, through targeted campaigns and "troll armies")[9]

In the context of disinformation campaigns, a wide range of attempts are thus used to steer public opinion in a certain direction. In addition to these diverse methods, various target groups and actors can be defined. Not all people are equally receptive to disinformation campaigns, and so these campaigns are consistently aimed at various target groups.

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[6] German Federal Office for Information Security (BSI). (2022). Die Lage der IT-Sicherheit in Deutschland 2022. https://www.bsi.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/BSI/Publikationen/Lageberichte/Lagebericht2022.pdf

[7] Martin Laine (Eesti Ekspress), Cecilia Anesi (IrpiMedia), Lorenzo Bagnoli (IrpiMedia), and Tatiana Tkachenko. (n.d.). Kremlin-Linked Group Arranged Payments to European Politicians to Support Russia's Annexation of Crimea. *OCCRP.* https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/kremlin-linked-group-arranged-payments-to-european-politicians-to-support-russias-annexation-of-crimea

[8] Orr Bueno, C. (2023). Russia's Role in the Far-Right Truck Convoy. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, *5*(3), 1-22.

[9] Davydiuk, M. & Weise, C. (2021). Wie funktioniert Putins Propaganda?: Anmerkungen zum Informationskrieg des Kremls (Ukrainian Voices 18). ibidem.

Now as before, most people reject conspiracy narratives and pro-Russian disinformation surrounding Ukraine. Nevertheless, there are levels of agreement that require further investigation. In particular, the year 2022 showed a significant increase in levels of agreement in Germany between the spring and the fall/winter.[10]

Agreement with pro-Russian conspiracy narratives

🟧 Agree   ⬜ Partly agree, partly disagree   ⬛ Disagree

Putin is acting against a global elite that is pulling the strings behind the scene

April	12%	20%	68%
October	18%	26%	56%
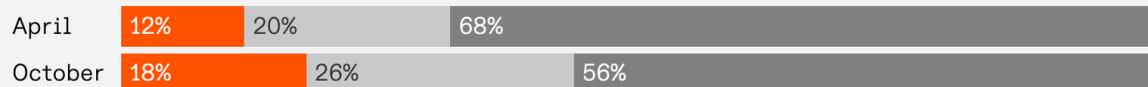
Ukraine operated secret bio labs for the production of biological weapons with US cooperation

April	7%	14%	79%
October	12%	21%	67%

The war in Ukraine is only being used to distract from the COVID-19 pandemic

April		8%	88%
October	8%	12%	80%

Online surveys of adults at least 18 years of age in Germany, representatively weighted according to age, federal state, and gender, carried out by Bilendi & respondi for CeMAS. At a confidence level of 95%, the error bars are ± 2%.
Field time April: 1-12 April 2022, N = 2031
Field time October: 3-11 October 2022, N = 2228

Ⓒ **CeMAS**

Figure 1: Agreement with pro-Russian conspiracy narratives.

In addition to the levels of direct agreement, the "partly agree, partly disagree" responses are also of particular importance. Even if these values cannot be interpreted as a direct consequence of receiving disinformation, since various factors come into play in this respect, disinformation is not just intended to convince, but also to generate doubt. Those who are not sure whether vaccines work are less likely to get

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[10] More information on the surveys and associated methodology can be found at https://cemas.io/publikationen/belastungsprobe-fuer-die-demokratie/2022-11-02_ResearchPaperUkraineKrieg.pdf

vaccinated. Those who are unsure whether NATO is actually to blame for the war are less likely to show clear support for sanctions.

Not all people demonstrate equal levels of agreement with pro-Russian propaganda. AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) voters are particularly likely to agree with conspiracy narratives concerning the war in Ukraine. The second-highest levels of agreement for all pro-Russian conspiracy narratives were found among voters of *Die Linke*. Voters of *Die Grünen*, the Green Party, were the least likely to agree with pro-Russian propaganda, followed by FDP (Free Democratic Party) voters. In addition, there are significant differences in levels of agreement between eastern and western Germany.

Fragmentation in disinformation spreaders over the course of the war

Disinformation has not just been a societally-relevant topic since February 24, 2022. Founded and financed by the Russian state, the international television program RT, formerly Russia Today, launched its operations in Germany back in 2014. RT DE achieved a comparatively large following, especially via social networks such as YouTube or Facebook. According to research by Belltower News, the propaganda medium RT DE had over 625,000 subscribers on Facebook and 608,000 on YouTube in 2021.[11] RT DE reported on the racist Pegida protests and the so-called "Lisa case".[12] Due to providing medical misinformation, RT DE was first temporarily banned from YouTube and then permanently banned from the video platform due to attempted circumvention in September 2021. This ban was accompanied by an increase in subscriber numbers on Telegram.

[11] Rafael, S. (2021, September 15). Bundestagswahl 2021: Wie einflussreich sind Desinformationen von „RT DE"?. *Belltower.News*. https://www.belltower.news/bundestagswahl-2021-wie-einflussreich-sind-desinformationen-von-rt-de-121111/

[12] Deutsche Welle (2017). Der „Fall Lisa" ein Jahr danach. War da was? DW.COM. https://www.dw.com/de/der-fall-lisa-ein-jahr-danach-war-da-was/a-37079923

Development of Telegram subscribers to RT DE

Feb. 24, 2022: Start of the
Russian invasion →

← Mar. 4, 2022: RT DE
restricted on Telegram

100K

80K

60K

Sept. 28, 2021: RT DE
removed from YouTube

40K

RT
DE

20K

0

Jul
2020   Oct   Jan
2021   Apr   Jul   Oct   Jan
2022   Apr   Jul   Oct   Jan
2023

CeMAS
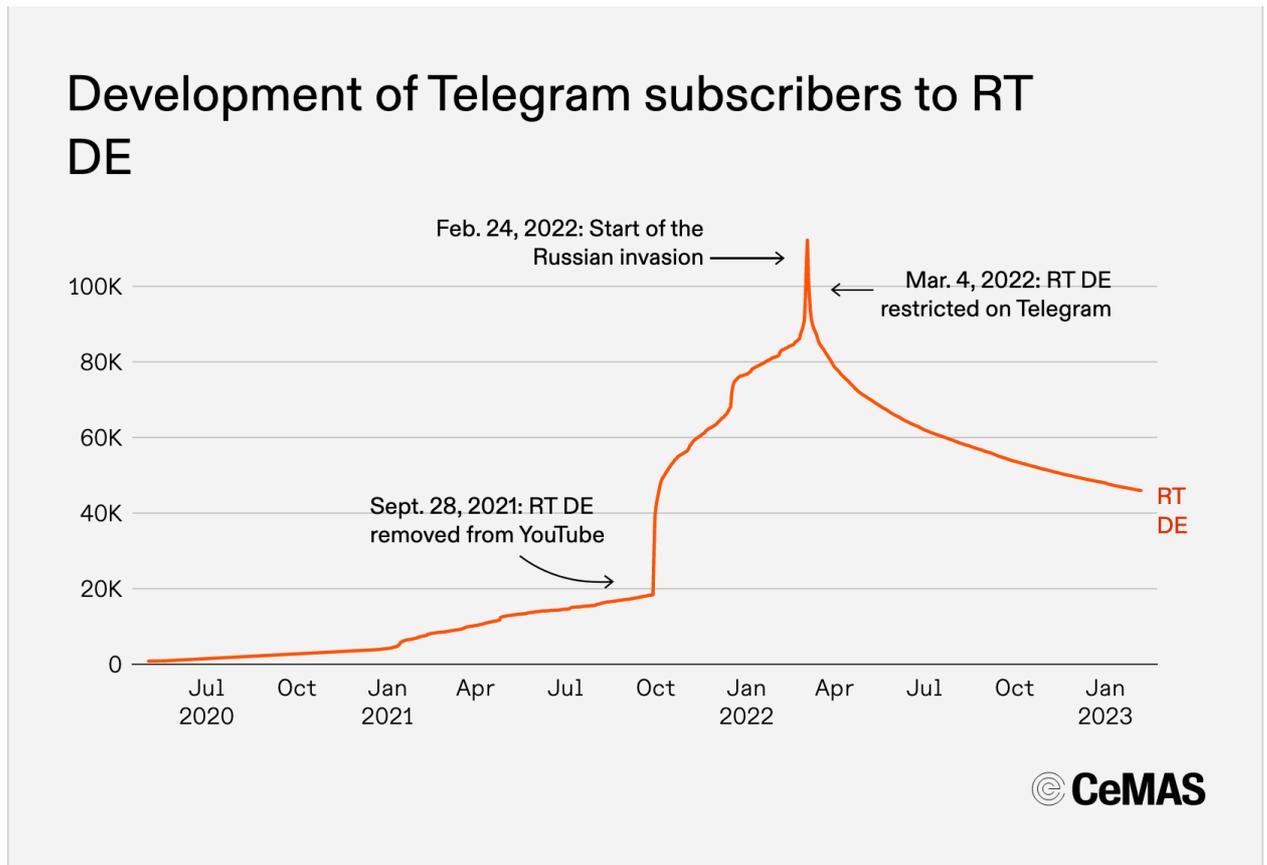
Figure 2: Development of Telegram subscribers to RT DE

Especially in the first week of the war, our analysis was able to show that RT DE was mostly shared in German-language conspiracy-ideological Telegram channels and groups and thus represented a relevant factor in the spread of Russian disinformation. Within RT DE's most-shared reports concerning the war against Ukraine, two made a connection to COVID-19. The most-shared article highlighted that after the start of the war of aggression, and in contrast to Russia and Belarus, Ukraine was no longer classified as a high-risk area by the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) "overnight". In addition, the German government had allegedly promised quick support for the reception of refugees. In this context, RT DE also referred to the low vaccination rate in Ukraine. The article invites the interpretation that the RKI arbitrarily determines its risk classifications according to political interest.[13]

The EU finally imposed sanctions on the broadcasting activities of the state-owned media RT and Sputnik within the EU in March 2022.[14] Telegram responded to these sanctions by permanently restricting the Russian state broadcaster's channel. Despite

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[13] Rathje, J., Dittrich, M. & Müller, M. (2022, March 18). Telegram-Analyse zum Ukraine-Krieg: RT DE dominant im verschwörungsideologischen Milieu. *CeMAS*. https://cemas.io/blog/telegram-rt-ukraine/
[14] European Council (2022, March 2). EU imposes sanctions on broadcasting activities of state-owned media RT/Russia Today and Sputnik in the EU. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rt-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/

the sanctions, however, alternative RT domains remain easy to locate, including via Google searches.

Figure 3: Twitter post by the Russian Embassy in Vienna on January 16, 2023. Citing the Press Secretary for the President of the Russian Federation, the tweet claims that Russian forces were not attacking residential buildings in Ukraine.

With the sanctions against RT and Sputnik came an increased fragmentation of disinformation actors in Europe. Russian embassies used their social media channels to actively spread disinformation and propaganda.[15] The Russian embassy in Spain, for example, published a video from RT that showed alleged Ukrainian attacks on civilians in the country's separatist republics, according to research by Politico. On January 16, 2023, the Russian embassy in Vienna posted the claim that Russian forces were not attacking Ukrainian residential buildings and social infrastructure – a clear lie, which was also shared by the Russian embassy in Germany on Twitter.

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[15] Pallaske, O., Pallaske, O., Reuter, M., Pallaske, O. & Pallaske, O. (2022, March 18). Falschinformationen: Wie Russland die Desinformationsregeln von Twitter umgeht. *netzpolitik.org*. https://netzpolitik.org/2022/falschinformationen-wie-russland-die-desinformationsregeln-von-twitter-umgeht/
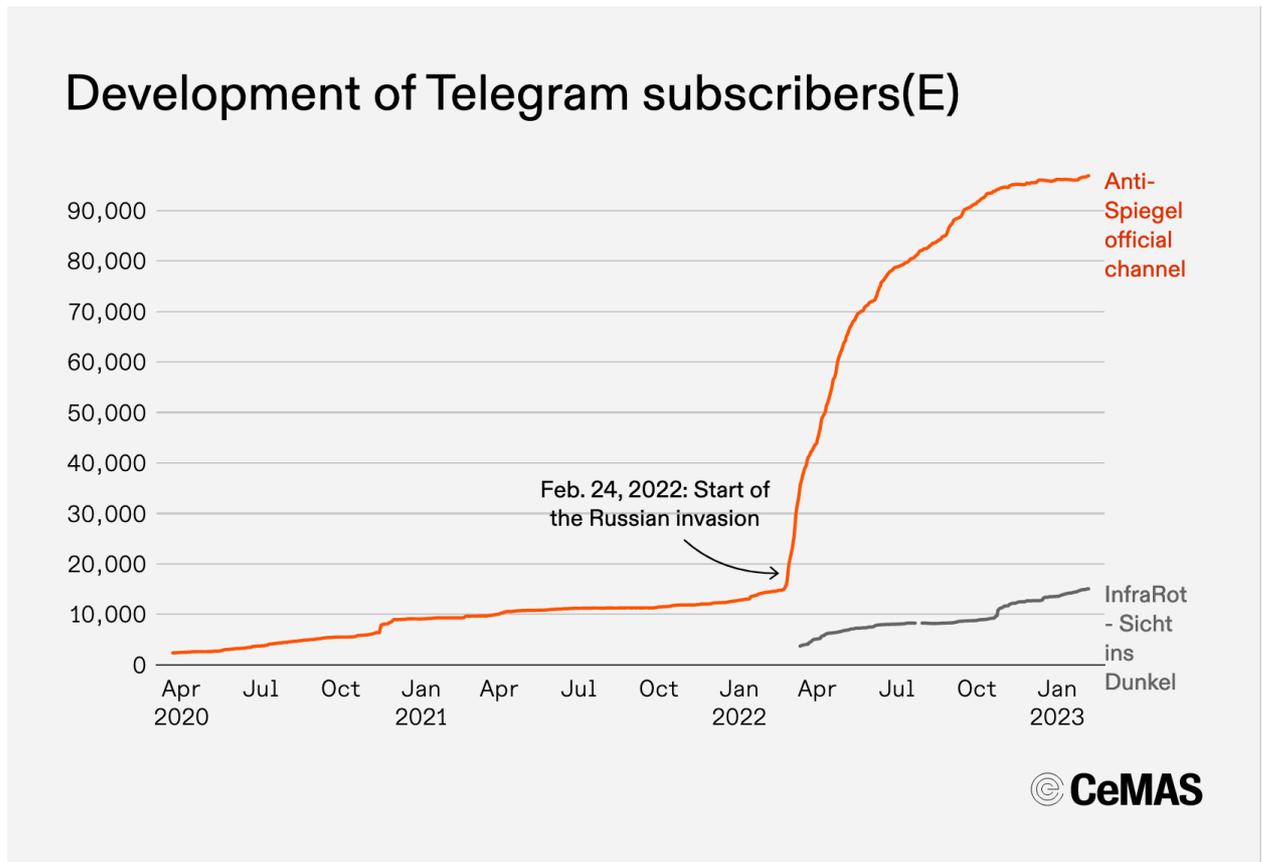
Figure 4: Development of Telegram subscribers

At the same time, new "alternative media" outlets have been founded by former RT employees (among others) whose relationship to the Russian state is more difficult to prove than was the case with RT. The director behind the YouTube channel "InfraRot Medien - Sicht ins Dunkel" (*InfraRed Media - Light in the Dark*), for example, is Ivan Rodionov, who worked at the Russian broadcaster RT DE from 2014 until October 2021.[16] Currently, InfraRot Medien has 40,600 subscribers on YouTube and 14,702 on Telegram. Among its most popular videos is one uploaded in June 2022 featuring Bonn University professor Ulrike Guérot, which reached a total of 165,354 views.

In addition to "alternative media" outlets that are intertwined with the Russian state to varying degrees, pro-Russian influencers and bloggers have also reached large audiences[17] – such as the blog "Anti-Spiegel" by St. Petersburg-based Thomas Röper. The blog spreads Russian propaganda narratives and lies concerning the Russian war of aggression. Reports from Russian media are also translated and published for a German audience. Anti-Spiegel thus constitutes a direct amplifier of Russian propaganda. The Telegram channel currently has 96,410 subscribers, with 5,122

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[16] Schäfer, J. (2022, February 25). Youtube-Kanal „InfraRot": Tummelplatz für Putin-Fans. *FAZ.NET*. https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/der-youtube-kanal-infrarot-und-rt-de-17831037.html
[17] Ruhdorfer, I. (2022, June). Die Putinfluencer. *ZEIT ONLINE*. https://www.zeit.de/campus/2022-06/propaganda-social-media-influencer-russland

posts. The posts often refer to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but can also concern the pandemic or other social issues.
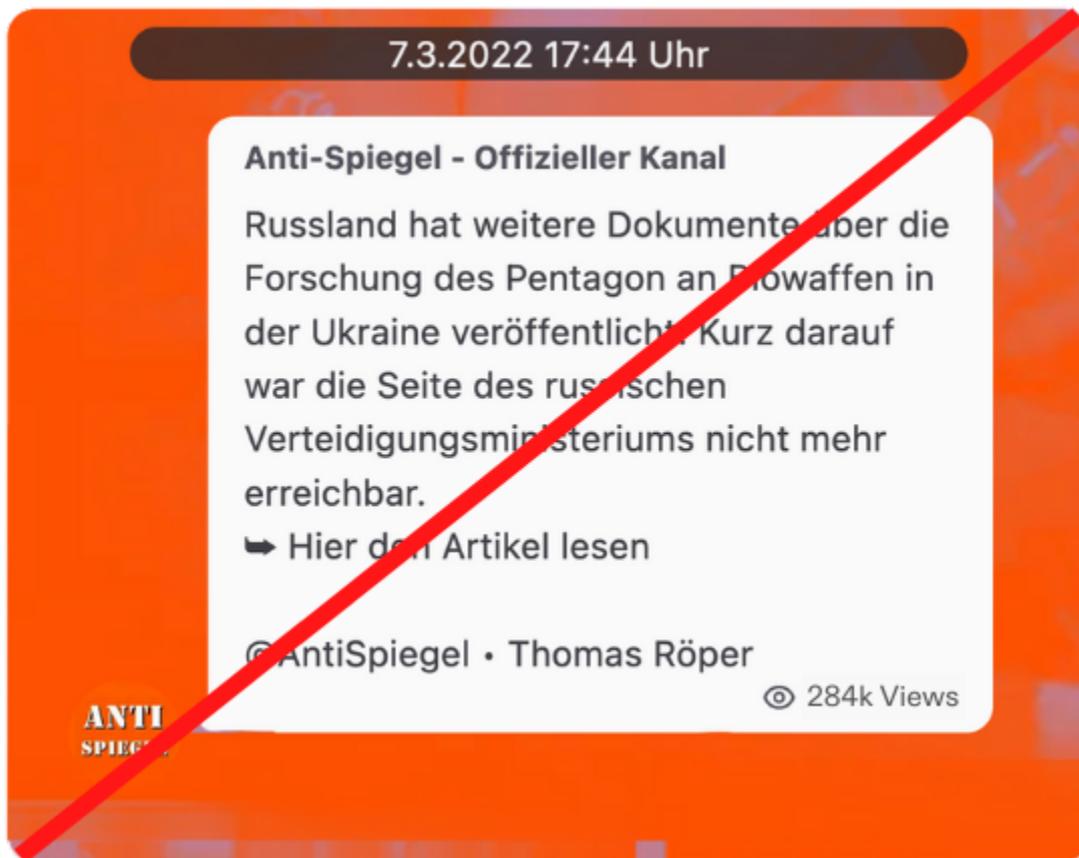
Figure 5: Post on Telegram from Anti-Spiegel, claiming Pentagon research into bioweapons in Ukraine.

Propaganda claims concerning alleged Ukrainian bioweapons reached more than 220,000 views on Telegram. Representative CeMAS surveys show that such attitudes find considerable reception in German society. In October, 12 percent of respondents said that Ukraine had operated secret bio labs with the United States to produce biological weapons. In April 2022, the level of agreement had been at seven percent.[18]

In Germany, Alina Lipp in particular plays an important role as a pro-Russian influencer and has become a mouthpiece for Russian propaganda. Even before February 24, Lipp was active on her YouTube channel "Glücklich auf der Krim" (Happy in Crimea). The channel currently has 4,650 subscribers, but has not been used in the last eleven months. Through her Telegram channel "Neues aus Russland" (News from Russia), however, she reaches over 182,000 subscribers. Her widest-reaching messages,

[18] Lamberty, P., Heuer, C. & Holnburger, J. (2022, November). Belastungsprobe für die Demokratie: Pro-russische Verschwörungserzählungen und Glaube an Desinformation in der Gesellschaft. *CeMAS Center For Monitoring, Analysis And Strategy*. https://cemas.io/publikationen/belastungsprobe-fuer-die-demokratie/2022-11-02_ResearchPaperUkraineKrieg.pdf

which she publishes in German and, since the summer of 2022, also in Russian, sometimes receive more than two million views.
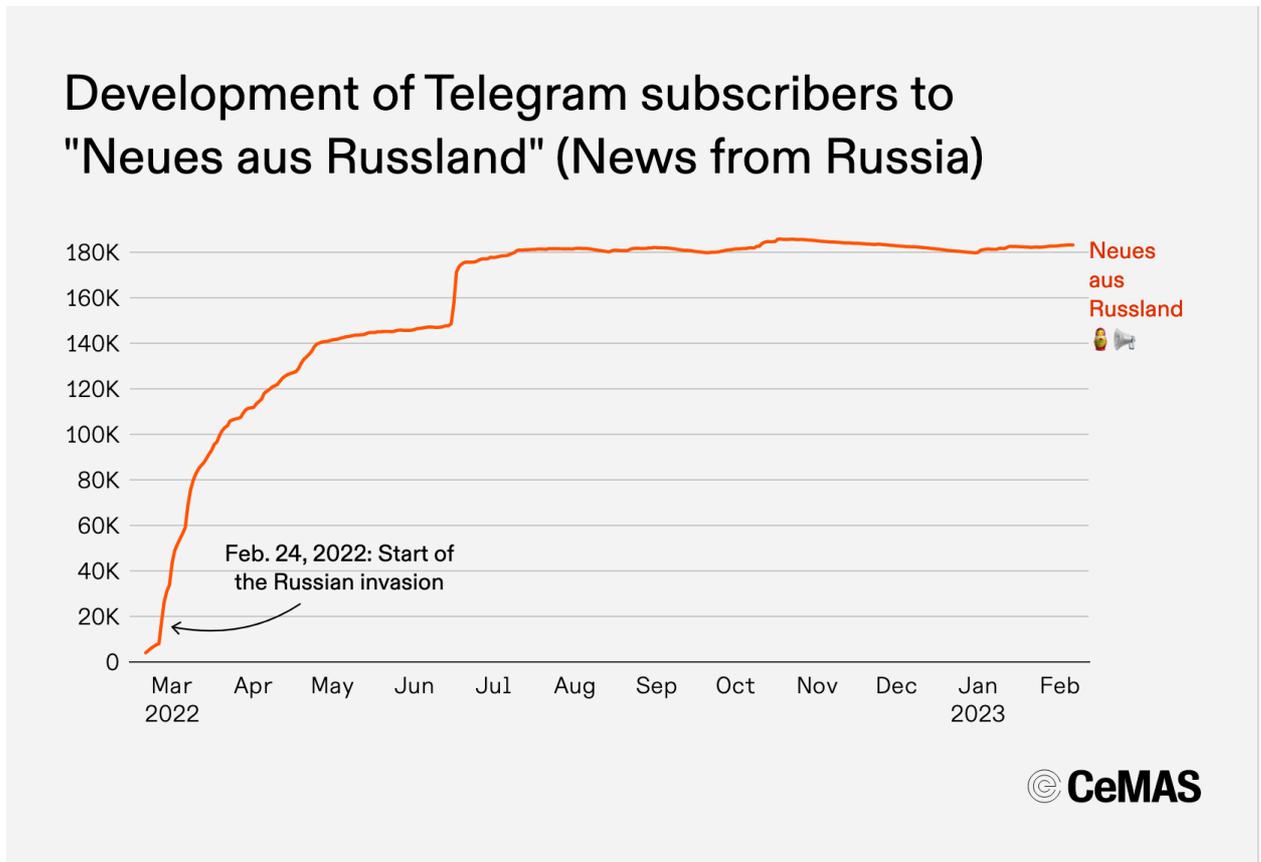
Figure 6: Development of Telegram subscribers to "Neues aus Russland"

Another approach is the mass utilization of fake accounts. In August 2022, t-online published research on a network of hundreds of fake accounts that posted links to fake news sites in comments.[19] Much of the fake news is directed at the sanctions against Russia.[20] In addition to Germany, this campaign also covered the UK, France, Italy and Ukraine, among other countries.[21] According to research by t-online, these websites were registered anonymously, and storage space and computing power were initially booked with a provider in the Netherlands. In September 2022, Meta published a report on these activities that clearly linked them to Russia. Meta attributed over 60 fake news sites to this network. The company describes the

[19] Wienand, L., Loelke, S. & Krüger, A. (2022, August 30). Ukraine-Krieg | Prorussische Kampagne: Das steckt hinter den Fake-Artikeln. *www.t-online.de*. https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/gesellschaft/id_100042596/ukraine-krieg-prorussi-sche-kampagne-das-steckt-hinter-den-fake-artikeln.html

[20] Klein, O. (2022, August 29). Massenweise falsche News-Seiten enttarnt. *Pro-russische Propaganda: Fake-News-Seiten enttarnt - ZDFheute*. https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/desinformation-kam-pagne-facebook-ukraine-krieg-russland-100.html

[21] Alaphilippe, A., Machado, G., Miguel, R., Poldi, F. EU DisinfoLab. (2022, September 27). Doppelgan-ger - Media clones serving Russian propaganda. *EU DisinfoLab*. https://www.disinfo.eu/doppelganger

campaign as the "largest and most complex operation of Russian origin" since February 24, 2022.[22] Despite these assessments, while Facebook did delete massive numbers of accounts, based on research by Lars Wienand, it did not shut down the network.[23]
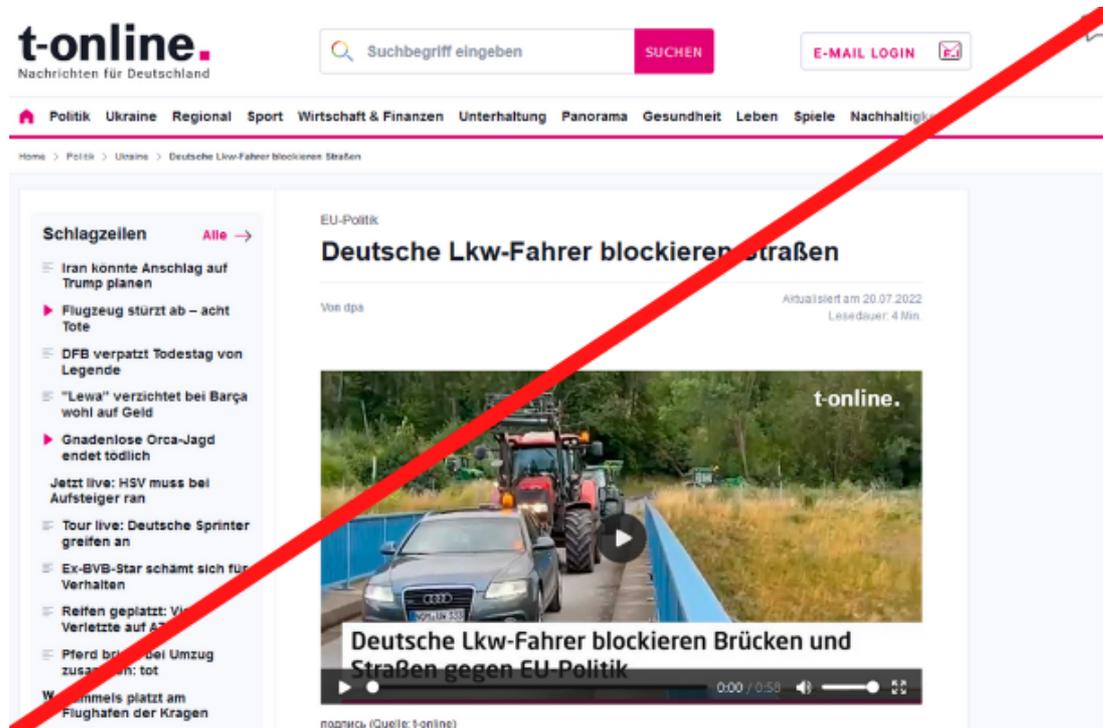

Figure 7: Screenshot of a fake t-online site[24], copying the layout of the original.

Overall, in recent years, a growing industry of disinformation providers has emerged in order to deliberately spread false information by proxy in an attempt to influence democratic processes, as shown in research by various media outlets such as *Der Spiegel*, *The Guardian* and *DIE ZEIT*.[25]

Disinformation is not just spread by "troll factories" and Russian-funded actors, but is also used by other anti-democratic actors and institutions to spread false information deliberately and with harmful intent.

[22] Nimmo, B. & Torrey, M. (2022, September). Taking down coordinated inauthentic behavior from Russia and China. *Meta*. https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CIB-Report_-China-Russia_Sept-2022-1-1.pdf

[23] Wienand, L. (2022, October 14). Die große Facebook-Lüge. www.*t-online.de*. https://www.t-online.de/digital/internet-sicherheit/sicherheit/id_100062836/russische-trolle-auf-facebook-meta-scheitert-im-kampf-gegen-russische-propaganda.html

[24] https://web.archive.org/web/20220724210851/https://www-t-online-de.tonline.cfd/deutsche-lkw-fahrer-blockieren-straben.html

[25] Christoph, M., Diehl, J., Hoppenstedt, M., Lehberger, R., Obermaier, F., Obermayer, B. & Rosenbach, M. (2023, February 14). So funktioniert das System der Lügenindustrie. *DER SPIEGEL, Hamburg, Germany*. https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/storykillers-so-funktioniert-das-system-von-fakenews-und-hetze-a-6614b088-8d2b-40d8-b08a-50fb3d2aa805?sara_ecid

Another reason for believing in and spreading propaganda content is to strengthen and reaffirm one's own worldview. When harmful intent is absent, this is referred to as "misinformation". Accordingly, Russian propaganda and disinformation is spread not just by actors close to the Kremlin, but also by people who consider these pro-Russian propaganda narratives to be credible. Especially in cases where such people benefit from a higher social status and, for example, access to a media public (e.g. talk shows), this also influences the public debate.

Disinformation to undermine solidarity with Ukraine

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 with a massive deployment of troops, many people around the world have shown their opposition to this war and their solidarity with Ukraine. They demonstrate and demand sanctions and more political consequences for Russia. Donations are collected for the people of Ukraine and refugee families are welcomed. The German Federal Ministry of the Interior and Homeland Affairs (BMI) sees Germany's solidarity-based perspective as a reason for increased Russian disinformation efforts since February 24, 2022, which are intended to reinforce existing lines of social division and break down the unity shown by the international community.[26]

And yet, with respect to this particular invasion, the question of guilt is clear: the Russian invasion is illegal under international law, and Russia is the clear aggressor. Those who are perceived to be the aggressor in a conflict usually do not enjoy the support of those who follow and evaluate the conflict from the outside. Resources that may be central to the parties at war can depend on the sympathy of outsiders. But part of the observed disinformation seems to be aimed at precisely this sympathy and its effect on acts of solidarity.[27]

Examples include deliveries of relief aid or weapons, or the imposition of sanctions. Those who want access to these resources attempt to secure the sympathy of the wider public. Those who are perpetrators not infrequently try to portray themselves as victims, or to shift the responsibility, in this case onto besieged Ukraine.

A common means of reversing the roles of victim and perpetrator in the narrative of a conflict or war is the insinuation of prior injustice on the part of the victim. In the case of Ukraine, this is a narrative that accuses Ukraine of atrocities in order to rehabilitate Russia in the eyes of the public and present the illegal attack on Ukraine as a justified

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[26] FAQ - Desinformation im Kontext des russischen Angriffskrieges gegen die Ukraine. (2022, July 21). *German Federal Ministry of the Interior and Homeland.* https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/faqs/DE/themen/heimat/desinformation/faq-liste-desinformation.html

[27] Morris, L. & Oremus, W. (2022, December 8). Russian disinformation is demonizing Ukrainian refugees. *The Washington Post.* https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/12/08/russian-disinfo-ukrainian-refugees-germany/

intervention. Such disinformation narratives have repeatedly been visible in the debate surrounding the war in Ukraine.

Ukraine's alleged repression of the Donbas is a classic example of Russian perpetrator-victim reversal. This refers to the claim that Ukraine is oppressing and targeting the people of the Donbas. Individual comments – based on the justifications of Russian President Vladimir Putin – allege, for example, that Russia is acting in self-defense, or imply a pending genocide by Ukraine against the population of the Donbas. These allegations do not stand up to scrutiny.[28,29] However, they are fit to sway public opinion in Russia's favor, since within this narrative, Russia is heroically intervening to save lives. However, this is in blatant contradiction with the actual motives and events of the invasion and annexation of Ukrainian territories in violation of international law. The following examples are emblematic of statements that aim to achieve this perpetrator-victim reversal in the context of the war in Ukraine. These include claims of an alleged genocide in the Donbas, or the presentation of the illegal Russian war of aggression in Ukraine as an act of self-defense.
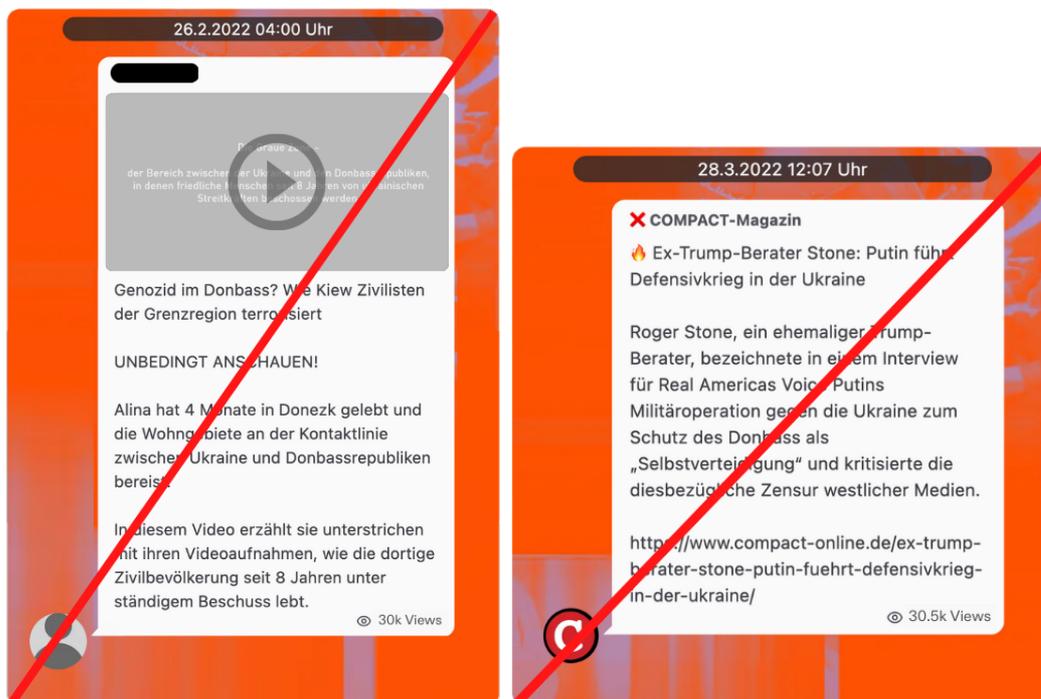

Figure 8: Telegram messages intended to legitimize the Russian attack on Ukraine. Both posts were viewed around 30,000 times.

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[28] Köckl, U. (2022, March 3). Ukraine-Konflikt: Völkermord im Donbass? *Frankfurter Rundschau.* https://www.fr.de/politik/ukraine-krise-konflikt-russland-putin-genozid-voelkermord-donbass-fakten-check-91361283.html

[29] Rath, C. (2022, February 24). Warum sich Russlands Invasion völkerrechtlich nicht rechtfertigen lässt. (2022, February 2). *Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland.* https://www.rnd.de/politik/krieg-gegen-ukraine-warum-sich-russlands-invasion-voelkerrechtlich-nicht-rechtfertigen-laesst-NTG5V3AOMRB75KYQGAUUMM47IE.html

On social media, these claims are widely circulated. On Telegram, for example, the far-right COMPACT magazine posted that Russia was waging a defensive war in Ukraine, implying that Russia, not Ukraine, is defending itself against hostile forces. This is another example of perpetrator-victim reversal.

Another strand of propaganda that is repeatedly used to justify the illegal attack on Ukraine revolves around a supposedly fascist Ukrainian government. Under this narrative, it is alleged that Nazis exert decisive influence in the country or outright rule Ukraine. In right-wing extremist and conspiracy-ideological channels on Telegram, these claims are seen again and again.

Mentions of "Ukraine" and "Nazis" in far-right and conspiracy-ideological channels on Telegram

Feb. 24, 2022: Start of the Russian invasion
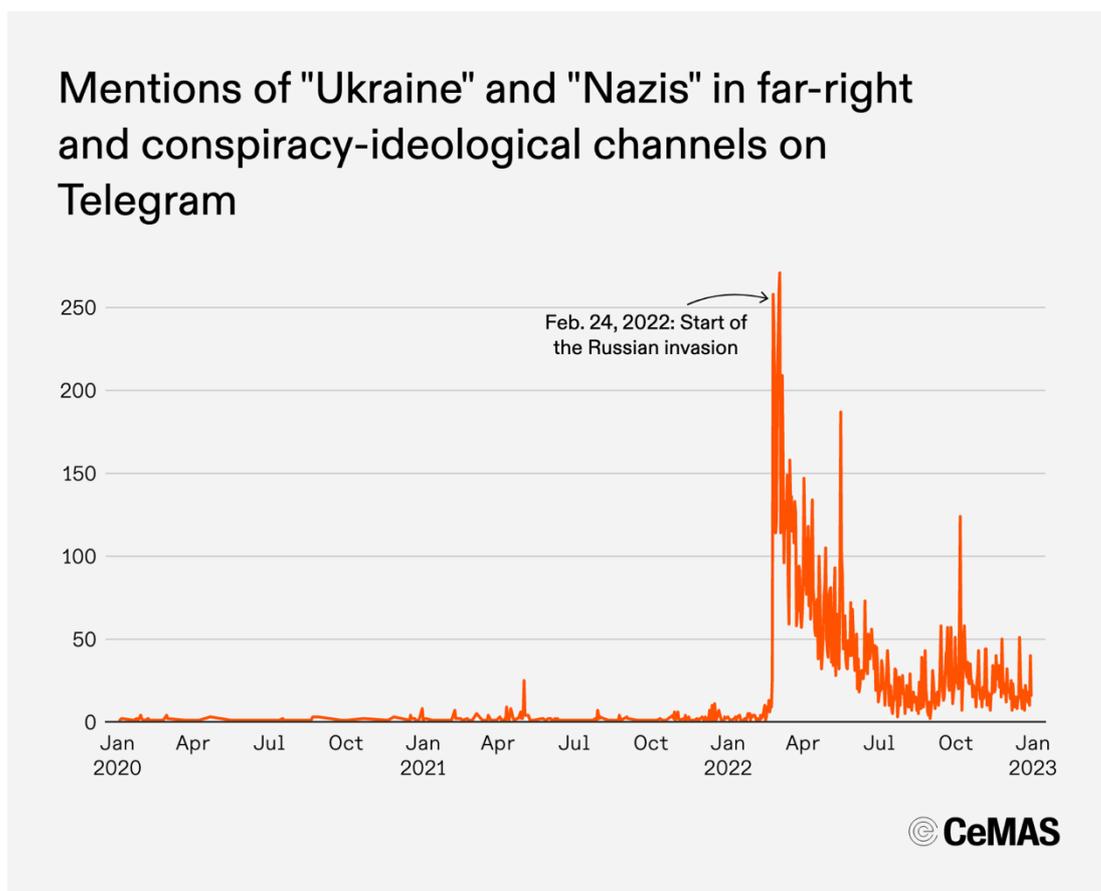
Figure 9: Frequency of posts in far-right and conspiracy ideology Telegram channels that include both the term "Ukraine" and "Nazis".

Looking at the occurrence of such statements over a longer period of time, one fact is striking: despite its supposedly explosive nature, this issue lived a mere shadowy existence for years and was barely mentioned. One day that all changed, and the issue suddenly jumped in importance. That was February 24, 2022 – the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Individual comments of this kind can be found, for example, in conspiracy-ideological, pro-Russian "alternative media" outlets such as Anti-Spiegel:
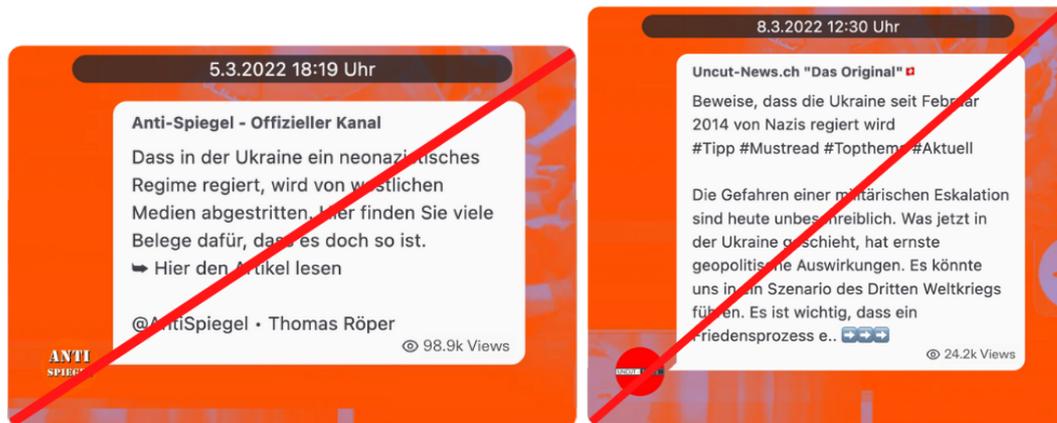
Figure 10: Telegram posts by self-proclaimed "alternative media" outlets falsely portraying the Ukrainian government as a Nazi regime.

The claim that Ukraine is ruled by a neo-Nazi regime is based on pro-Russian disinformation concerning the change of government that occurred in Ukraine in 2014.[30] As a result of the pro-European Euromaidan protests at the time, the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Yanukovych was forced to leave office. Those who had campaigned against Yanukovych were portrayed by Russia across the board as fascists. This narrative draws on a historically well-established "bogeyman" among the population and assigns clear roles: pro-European forces in Ukraine become the "bad guys", while Russia is the "good guy". Today, Russia continues to use this narrative in order to justify its illegal war of aggression in Ukraine. There are indeed right-wing extremists in Ukraine – as there are in many other countries. However, they play a much less influential role in Ukrainian society than is claimed by the Russian camp and its associated disinformation.[31] Additionally, for Russia, it is not about fighting right-wing extremism, but about fomenting and solidifying a clear concept of the enemy.

Direct acts of solidarity on the part of the international public are also targets of disinformation. For example, there have repeatedly been misleading or fabricated allegations of supposed misappropriation of relief aid or financial support intended to benefit Ukraine. What the individual examples have in common is an underlying narrative targeting a presumed audience in the largely solidaric international community: "Don't support Ukraine, they don't deserve your help." The allegations undermine the impression that support is needed and paint a picture of ingratitude. Such depictions are intended to cause antipathy and make the population turn their backs on Ukraine. The following examples reached a large audience with this message; together, the two misleading posts received over 790,000 views.

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[30] Osteuropa-Historiker Philipp Ther über den Krieg in der Ukraine. (2022, March 3). *Norddeutscher Rundfunk.* https://www.ndr.de/kultur/Angebliche-Nazis-in-der-Ukraine-Russisches-Narrativ-seit-2014,philippther100.html

[31] Jonas, U. (2022, May 5). Asow, Bandera und Co.: Was steckt hinter Putins Narrativ von „Nazis" in der Ukraine? (2022, May 5). *Correctiv.* https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/hintergrund/2022/05/05/asow-bandera-und-co-was-steckt-hinter-putins-narrativ-von-nazis-in-der-ukraine/
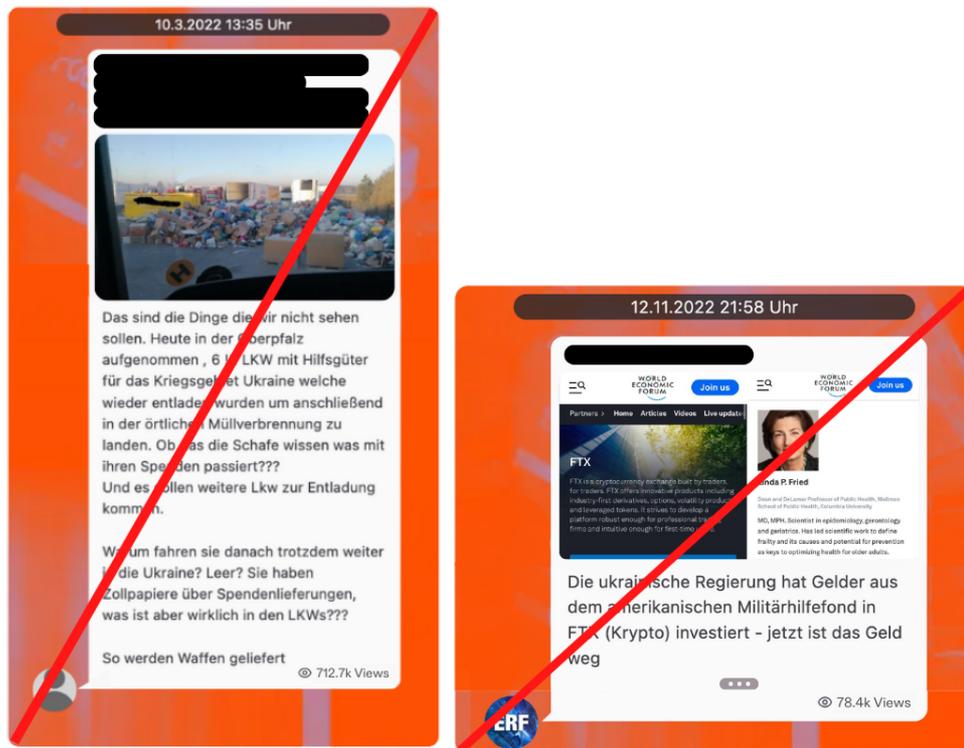
Figure 11: These Telegram posts make false claims about misappropriated aid or payments. The first post was viewed particularly often, with over 700,000 views.

Also striking were false reports and tendentious commentary that took advantage of public fears surrounding the energy crisis. These painted an overly-simplified picture in which the population had to choose between solidarity with Ukraine and meeting their own basic needs – a false dilemma intended to make it more difficult for the audience to lend support to beleaguered Ukraine.

In concrete terms, this dynamic manifested itself, for example, in a series of false reports spread via Facebook on alleged closures of various companies in Germany.[32] Fear-mongering comments on energy and heating also stood out, linking a conjured-up nightmare scenario to solidarity with Ukraine. In this narrative, it was Ukraine's fault that Germans would have to freeze.

The following Telegram messages exemplify how solidarity with Ukraine is portrayed as a threat to meeting basic needs:

[32] Echtermann, A. (2022, December 8). Fake-Kampagne: Werke von BASF, Siemens oder VW werden nicht wegen Energiekrise geschlossen. *Correctiv.* https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/2022/12/08/fake-kampagne-werke-von-basf-siemens-oder-vw-werden-nicht-wegen-energiekrise-geschlossen/
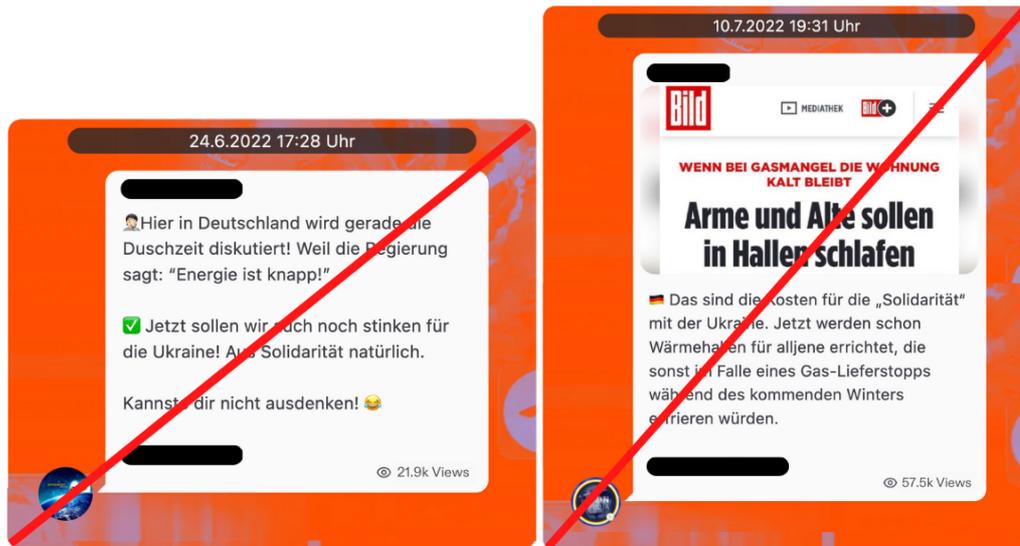
Figure 12: These Telegram messages portray support for Ukraine as a threat to the basic needs of the German population.

Those who accept this under-complex portrayal and view support for Ukraine as a zero-sum game will find it difficult to show solidarity; precisely this effect is presumed to be the underlying strategy. By presenting the audience with a false choice – either us or them – the associated policy debates can quickly become emotional. Those who believe that a German government position of solidarity with Ukraine would existentially threaten the fulfillment of their own basic needs may develop anger and anxiety. Those who follow the debate through this lens may also be more receptive to anti-democratic narratives, which are prevalent in conspiracy-ideological and far-right Telegram channels in any case.

Disinformation and agitation against Ukrainian refugees

People fleeing Ukraine as a result of Russia's attack are also affected by disinformation narratives in Germany.[33] Individual reports claim, for example, that Ukrainian refugees are given preferential treatment by the German pension system, or that they collect unemployment benefits and then return to the Ukraine, or are accommodated in hotels. Concrete statements of this kind can look like this:

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[33] Echtermann, A. (2022, December 23). Jahresrückblick 2022: Die hartnäckigsten Falschmeldungen und meistgelesenen Faktenchecks. *Correctiv*.
https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/hintergrund/2022/12/23/jahresrueckblick-2022-die-hartnaeckigsten-falschmeldungen-und-meistgelesenen-faktenchecks/
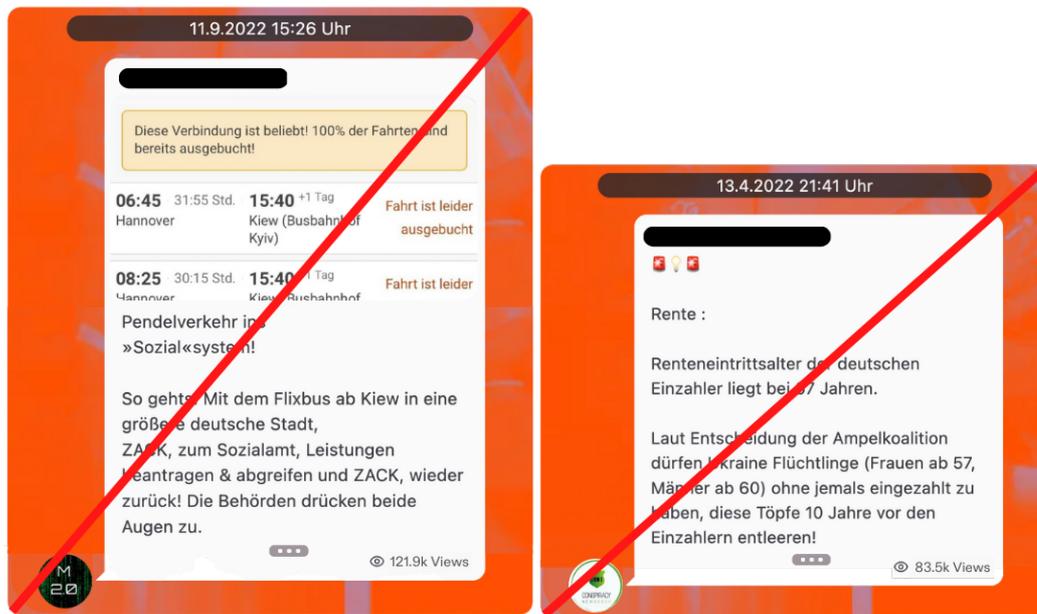
Figure 13: These Telegram posts accuse Ukrainian refugees of welfare fraud or unfair benefits in the German pension system.

Disinformation about the alleged welfare fraud of Ukrainian refugees does not stay in radical spaces on Telegram, but is carried over into the wider society. A particularly prominent example was the statement by CDU (Christian Democratic Union) leader Friedrich Merz, who spoke of "welfare tourism" by Ukrainian refugees in September 2022. According to research by the tagesschau, this false claim was set off by a voice message on Telegram which talked about people from Ukraine regularly traveling to Ukraine with a bus company. Friedrich Merz's statement was then in turn taken up by Russian media and pro-Russian actors and positively received as supposed proof.[34] In addition to targeted disinformation campaigns, the social discourse also includes unintentionally-disseminated misinformation and downplaying of Russian aggression, as spread, for example, in the context of various "open letters" or petitions. Such positions are then often taken up by Russia and used for its own propaganda.[35]

In addition to allegations of supposed exploitation of the welfare system, there is disinformation circulating around that portrays Ukrainian refugees as aggressive and dangerous. Such posts appeal directly to a need for security and create the impression that one should be afraid of war refugees from Ukraine and that they should not be supported. The following examples are apt to fuel rejection as well as fear and mistrust of refugees from Ukraine:

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[34] Kordes, H. & Straatmann, L. (2022, October 6). Wie Merz Kreml-Propaganda verbreitete. *tagesschau.de.* https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/merz-sozialtourismus-101.html

[35] Der Tagesspiegel. (2023, February 10). „Manifest für Frieden" in der Ukraine: AfD-Co-Chef schließt sich Petition von Wagenknecht und Schwarzer an. *Tagesspiegel.* https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/manifest-fur-frieden-irritiert-wagenknecht-und-schwarzer-fordern-ein-ende-der-waffenlieferungen-9329168.html
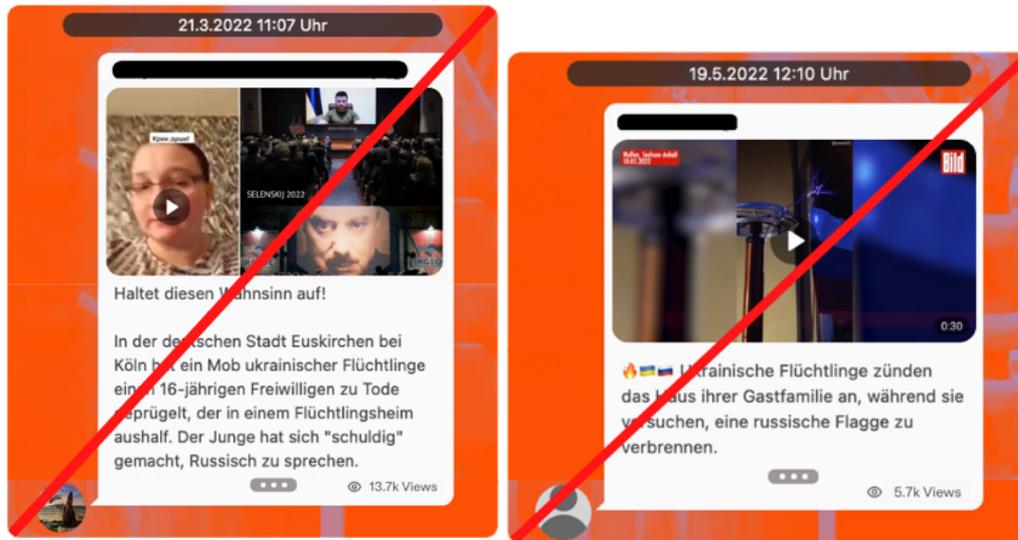
Figure 14: These Telegram posts use disinformation to create the impression that Ukrainian refugees are dangerous.

Supplementing such debunked reports, the far-right and conspiracy-ideological milieu on Telegram contains predominantly negative posts as far as Ukraine as concerned, which contributes to the devaluation of Ukrainian refugees. Considering the possible effects of such comments – whether invented or merely tendentious – one conclusion is obvious: they are apt to stir up resentment, anger and even envy towards Ukrainian refugees.

In doing so, these comments tie in with resentments against refugees that were already present in the social discourse and which had already been spread on a massive scale, especially since the migration crisis of 2015/16. Such posts also reinforce Anti-Slavic racism. Ultimately, this too is about breaking down solidarity with the victims of the Russian attack on Ukraine.

When parts of the population distance themselves from the prevailing solidarity with Ukraine and with Ukrainian refugees, this has a direct impact on the people affected as well as on political decisions. If the majority of the population is behind aid deliveries and support for Ukrainian refugees, political decisions for corresponding pledges are made more likely and more quickly. If social opinion is divided, the situation looks different. While the authorship of the disseminated posts cannot usually be clearly attributed, it is certainly possible to identify overlaps between their effects and the interests of the parties at war. Disinformation that is apt to promote de-solidarization with Ukraine thus plays directly into the hands of Russian interests.

Where there is less solidarity with Ukraine, the country receives less support – and has correspondingly less with which to counter the Russian attack. Where Russia is seen as less of a clear aggressor, sanctions are less likely. Both are clear advantages for Russia's ability to act in pursuit of its (geopolitical) interests.

From the Internet to the Streets: Pro-Russian Mobilization in Germany

Since the beginning of Russian aggression against Ukraine back in 2014, so-called "vigils for peace" popped up in reaction within Germany. These protests were conspiracy-ideological, anti-Semitic, and anti-American in nature – in many cases whitewashing Russia's actions. During this period, conspiracy-ideological networks were formed and expanded which can since be classified as ideological precursors of the later Querdenken (anti-Corona) protests. At the vigils, a sympathetic audience was found for conspiracy theorists such as Kayvan Soufi-Siavash (Ken Jebsen/KenFM/apolut), Jürgen Elsässer (COMPACT Magazin), Andreas Popp and Eva Herman (Wissensmanufaktur), Heiko Schrang, the band Die Bandbreite, or Dieter Dehm, who were later - and still are - active in the Querdenken movement. Other actors in the current protests made their first major public appearances as part of the Monday vigils, such as the far-right Reichsbürger and the anti-Semite Nikolai Nerling (*Der Volkslehrer*, lit. "the People's Teacher").[36] In light of this early positioning within the conspiracy-ideological milieu, it is no wonder that even with the start of the Russian invasion in 2022, this milieu distinguished itself by downplaying Russian aggression and instead repeatedly spreading Russian propaganda.

After February 24, 2022, parts of the so-called "anti-Corona protests" incorporated the Russian invasion as an additional theme in their mobilization. There was repeated downplaying of the Russian war of aggression, up to and including direct advocacy for the war through the use of the "Z" symbol, as well as attacks against Ukrainian refugees. As early as April 2022, there were more than a hundred investigative proceedings in Germany for the use of the Russian propaganda sign "Z".[37]

[36] Rathje, J. (2022, March 11). Verschwörungsideologische Positionierungen zum russischen Angriffs-krieg gegen die Ukraine. *CeMAS*. https://cemas.io/blog/positionen-ukraine/

[37] Schäfer, K. (2022, April 18). Immer mehr Ermittlungsverfahren wegen Z-Symbol in Deutschland. *Frankfurter Rundschau*. https://www.fr.de/politik/z-symbol-pro-russland-ukraine-krieg-putin-propa-ganda-zeichen-polizei-ermittlungsverfahren-zr-91484950.html
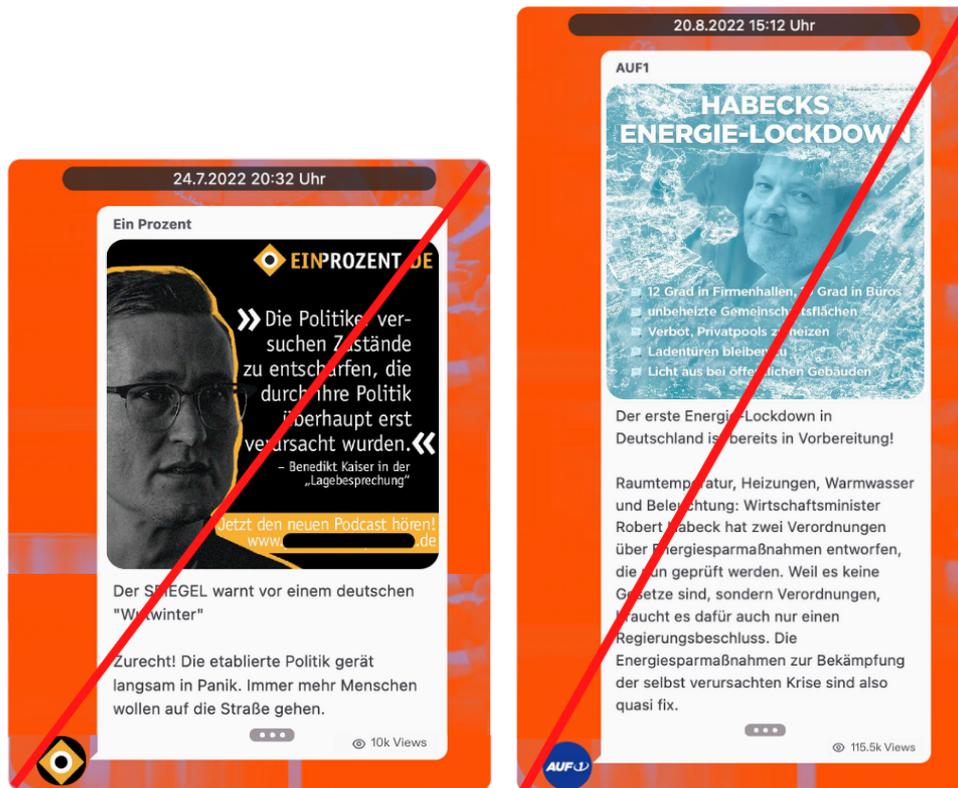
Figure 15: Telegram posts on the alleged "Winter of Rage".

In the summer and early fall of 2022, there were fears that the energy crisis caused by Russia's war and its consequences would lead to massive mobilization by right-wing extremists. In right-wing extremist circles, the energy crisis in particular, but also the sanctions against Russia, were perceived as an opportunity for broad mobilization. Both in the media and in the conspiracy-ideological milieu, the so-called "Furious Fall" and "Winter of Rage" were discussed with anticipation.[38]

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[38] *Federal Working Group "Gegen Hass im Netz" (Against Online Hate)* (2022). Machine Against the Rage: Winter Is Coming - Eine Erzählung von Krise und Wut. https://machine-vs-rage.bag-gegen-hass.net/ausgaben/ausgabe-0/

Figure 16: Mentions of "blackout" in conspiracy-ideological and far-right channels on Telegram.

In the conspiracy-ideological scene, the topic of a "blackout" was relevant even prior to 2022 in so-called "prepper" circles, among others.[39] Especially during atypical circumstances and disruptions, fears of a blackout were stoked. With the uncertainty regarding the energy supply, particularly in the fall of 2022, the topic became much more prominent within the milieu. In the fall of 2022, the far-right party "Alternative for Germany" (AfD) published a "blackout detector" where citizens could report local blackouts.[40] On Telegram, the topic also became more prevalent among conspiracy-ideological and far-right channels in the fall of 2022.

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[39] Luy, M. (2022, December). Über den Tellerrand: Die Prepperszene und das rechtsextreme und ver-schwörungsideologische Milieu. CeMAS. https://cemas.io/blog/prepperszene/

[40] Gutjahr-Almaguer, C. (2022, November 9). Faktencheck: Gibt es in Deutschland flächendeckende Stromausfälle? MDR.DE. https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/deutschland/gesellschaft/faktencheck-blackout-karte-stromausfall-100.html

Participants in the Monday events from Summer 2022 onwards

Figure 17: Participants in the Monday events in Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia[41]

The hopes among the milieu for a broad "resistance" in society with associated mass protests did not materialize in this way. As of October 3, although there were more than 100,000 people participating in protests and rallies in eastern Germany,[42] protest numbers in many places around Germany have been steadily declining ever since, from summer to the fall and winter of 2022/23. Although there was no widespread mobilization, demonstrations still took place locally in the winter of 2022/23. In smaller towns in particular, this created spaces of fear that placed an additional burden on the everyday lives of marginalized people.[43]

Despite the trend of decreasing protest numbers, anti-refugee protests and attacks increased, especially from the fall of 2022 onwards. On October 20, an arson attack occurred at a refugee shelter in Groß Strömkendorf (in the state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania). On the next day, October 21, a group of youths in Hoyerswerda

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[41] Böckmann, N. & Grothe, L. (2022, November 29). Analyse zum „heißen Herbst": Kommt da noch was? *MDR.DE. https://www.*mdr.de/nachrichten/deutschland/gesellschaft/heisser-herbst-vorbei-wenig-teilnehmer-100.html

[42] Voigt, C. (2022, November 29). Proteste: Der „heiße Herbst" fällt eher lauwarm aus. *MDR.DE. https://www.*mdr.de/nachrichten/deutschland/politik/heisser-herbst-weniger-teilnehmer-proteste-demonstrationen-100.html

[43] InFranken.de (2023, February 7). Zapfendorf: „III. Weg" will Sorge um Asyl-Container nutzen - doch Aufmarsch geht mächtig schief. *inFranken.de*. https://www.infranken.de/lk/bamberg/zapfendorf-iii-weg-will-sorge-um-asyl-container-nutzen-doch-aufmarsch-geht-maechtig-schief-art-5636128

(Saxony) attacked women who had fled from Ukraine, slightly injuring two girls. In the following week, it became known that the district of Eichsfeld (Thuringia) withdrew the lease for a shelter for Ukrainian refugees in Leinefelde due to threatening anonymous letters. In the night of October 31 to November 1, unknown persons in Rostock (Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania) smeared swastikas on residential buildings where refugees from Ukraine also lived.

In the winter of 2023 as well, increased right-wing extremist agitation against refugees from Ukraine was evident.[44] On January 19, for example, a protest was held in Laußig in northern Saxony against a shelter for refugees – with the participation of the far-right "Free Saxons".[45] In the district of Dingolfing-Landau, arson attacks were carried out on tent accommodation for Ukrainian refugees in February 2023.[46] On January 26, 2023, about 700 people demonstrated against the establishment of a shelter for refugees in Grevesmühlen (Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania) in front of the conference building. An attempt was made to disrupt the vote by storming the meeting room. Mobilization came, among others, from the regional neo-Nazi scene.[47] In Strelln, Saxony, on January 31, about 200 people demonstrated against the planned accommodation of refugees in the community.[48] On February 1, 2023, in Bach an der Donau in the district of Regensburg (Bavaria), there was a demonstration of about 100 people against a planned emergency shelter for up to 200 asylum seekers. The AfD had campaigned against the shelter under the slogan "When is the boat full?".[49] These examples show once again that far-right agitation and Russian propaganda and disinformation must be understood to be intertwined. This propaganda does not simply stay online, but is taken out to the streets and can fuel acts of violence.

Conclusion

Disinformation is a fundamental challenge for democratic societies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, false claims about vaccination or masks led to reduced protective behavior and complicated the management of the pandemic as a whole.

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[44] Peikert, D. (2023, February 4). Rechtsextreme machen wieder gegen Flüchtlingsunterkünfte mobil. *RND.de*. https://www.rnd.de/politik/rechtsextreme-machen-wieder-gegen-fluechtlingsunterkuenfte-mobil-MOSR4IA3CRDQRHTNLDD5KXXH3Q.html

[45] Leipziger Volkszeitung. (2023, January 20). Laußig: Demo gegen Flüchtlingsunterkunft - Ortsrat distanziert sich. *LVZ - Leipziger Volkszeitung*. https://www.lvz.de/lokales/nordsachsen/delitzsch/laussig-demo-gegen-fluechtlingsunterkunft-ortsrat-distanziert-sich-L6GDT4CA57LUCZBDMQYMSO5TX4.html

[46] Kuntschner, P., Beham, S. & Dachs, A. (2023, February 2). Trotz Security: Zweiter Brandanschlag auf Flüchtlingszelt. *BR24*. https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/trotz-security-zweiter-brandanschlag-auf-fluechtlingszelt,TUgx5lv

[47] Von Salzen, C. (2023, January 29). Ausschreitungen bei Protest gegen Flüchtlingsheim: „Eine Attacke auf unseren Rechtsstaat". *Tagesspiegel*. https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/ausschreitungen-bei-protest-gegen-fluchtlingsheim-eine-attacke-auf-unseren-rechtsstaat-9258864.html

[48] Von Salzen, C. (2023, January 29). Ausschreitungen bei Protest gegen Flüchtlingsheim: „Eine Attacke auf unseren Rechtsstaat". *Tagesspiegel*. https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/ausschreitungen-bei-protest-gegen-fluchtlingsheim-eine-attacke-auf-unseren-rechtsstaat-9258864.html

[49] Balzer, M. & Buchner, M. (2023, February 2). Demos für und gegen das Schiff für Flüchtlinge in Bach. *BR24*. https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/demos-fuer-und-gegen-das-schiff-fuer-fluechtlinge-in-bach,TUgAVGZ

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, disinformation has been deliberately used as a propaganda tool to destabilize Western democracies and undermine solidarity with Ukraine.

Russian propaganda narratives focus on devaluing Ukraine, legitimizing its own military actions, and disrupting the international community's ability to respond. Anti-Ukrainian narratives are also combined with other pre-established narratives. For example, dramatic reports on the supposedly fatal COVID-19 vaccine or reports on immigration from the Arab region are conflated with the issue of Ukrainian refugees. Since these pre-established topics have negative undertones, this conflation further contributes to the negative coloring of the public perception of Ukrainian refugees.

The protests that had been feared in the summer months fell short of expectations. Nevertheless, a milieu has formed in many places across Germany that can be mobilized again in further moments of crisis. Presently, agitation is directed towards refugees, especially in smaller towns.

In light of the ongoing war of aggression in Ukraine and the other crises faced by our society, we need a more comprehensive understanding of propaganda and disinformation. A deeper sociopolitical debate is also needed on how to counter the rising tide of disinformation campaigns. While crises are acute stressors that challenge the resilience of societies and individuals and make them more susceptible to propaganda and attempts to influence the population, disinformation must be understood as a chronic stressor designed to shake liberal democracies to the core.[50]

Confronting propaganda and disinformation must go beyond so-called "debunking", i.e. simply compensating for the information deficit. Disinformation should not be understood merely as an information or security problem. It is an attack on democracy as a whole.

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[50] Lamberty, P. (2023, February 7). *Effektiv Desinformation und Verschwörungsideologien bekämpfen.* 49security. https://fourninesecurity.de/2023/02/07/effektiv-desinformation-und-verschwoerungsideologien-bekaempfen