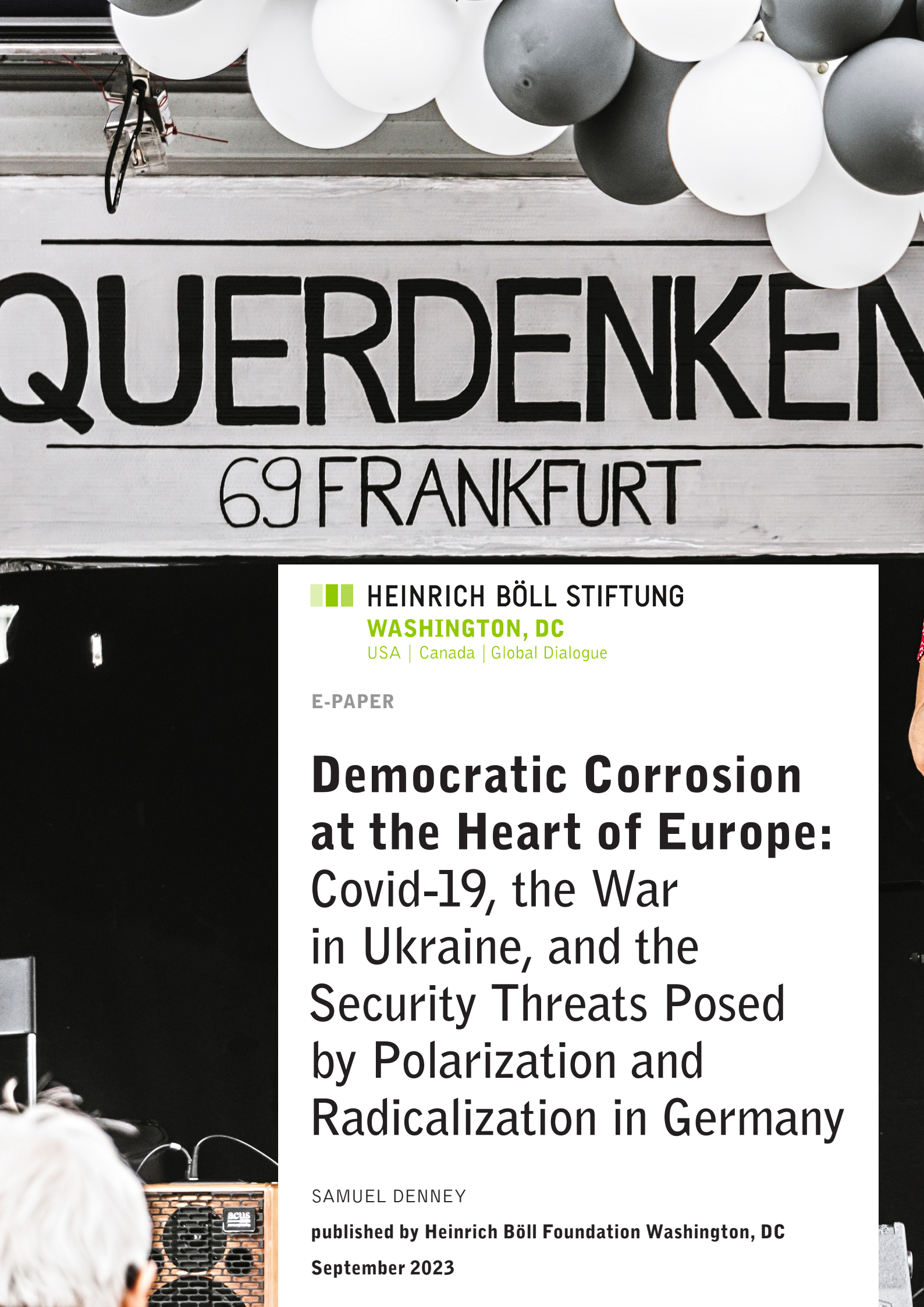




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Democratic Corrosion at the Heart of Europe: Covid-19, the War in Ukraine, and the Security Threats Posed by Polarization and Radicalization in Germany

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic crystalized the myriad challenges facing the modern world like few crises before it. Its impacts were so far reaching, its insights so diverse, that even the metaphors created to understand it spun off their own field of study.¹ It seems impossible to conceive of another event that revealed so much about the very nature of our globalized world, system of international relations, and forms of governance. Throughout history, “pandemics [have] expose[d] and exacerbate[d] the existing inequalities, divisions, and other fault lines of our society,” stated Brian Michael Jenkins, author of *Plagues and Their Aftermath: How Societies Recover from Pandemics* and a senior advisor to the RAND Corporation.² And Covid-19 was no different.

In Germany, Covid-19 and the measures introduced by the government to halt its spread sparked a nationwide protest movement that revealed a startling level of mistrust and skepticism towards democratic institutions. The anti-lockdown and subsequently anti-vaccine protests – elements of which bore the moniker “*Querdenker*” (“lateral thinker”) after their most successful chapter, the Stuttgart-based Querdenken 711 – waxed and waned between 2020 and 2022, mirroring the changing severity of government restrictions. While this period witnessed a shift from massive gatherings in cities like Berlin to spontaneous, localized “walks” taking place throughout Germany, protest in some form remained a constant.

As a diverse slice of the German population came together on the streets, the country’s far right, sensing an opportunity to attract new supporters and keen to exploit the energy of the protests, sought to coopt them. From 2020 to 2022, elements of the Covid-19 protest scene radicalized sharply. The protests – and the Telegram channels through which they were organized – served as touchpoints between middle-class Germans and various anti-democratic actors seeking to spread their worldviews and beliefs. Though the protest scene may not have given its wholesale support to the radical right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD), more Germans have now been exposed to corrosive, antisemitic conspiracy theories that serve as a pre-political accelerant for hard-right ideologies as a result of its efforts. Political discourse in Germany has roughened. The country’s citizens have come to view their society as deeply polarized around Covid-19, and many have lost faith in their government’s capacity to act. Random acts of violence, purported terrorist plots, and even a disturbing yet somewhat farcical alleged coup attempt have been connected to individuals associated with the protests.³

The dangers posed by the most radicalized elements of the protest movement and the sharp polarization that has accompanied it were thrown into sharp relief by the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Russia’s full-scale invasion, which occurred as the pandemic was beginning to wind down, re-energized a movement that had started to flag as more and more Covid-19 restrictions were dropped. Almost immediately after the invasion, Telegram groups that had spread conspiracy theories about Covid-19 began to incorporate conspiratorial, Russian-aligned explanations for the outbreak of the war .

That this shift was so seamless appears anything but coincidental. In psychological terms, those who believe in one conspiracy are more likely to believe in others.⁴ For many of the protestors, opposition to and criticism of the perceived mainstream were seen as fundamental goods. And politically, Russian state propaganda outlets such as *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) played an important role in supporting the protest movement's worldview, while anti-Ukrainian conspiracies began to flow into Covid-19 protest channels even before Russia launched its attempt to decapitate the Ukrainian government in February 2022. Actors who played a prominent role in the Covid-19 protests had also helped stoke pro-Russian sentiment at Pegida⁵ protests or during the Monday "vigils for peace" (*Montagsmahnwachen für den Frieden*) following the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. It is therefore unsurprising that researchers have identified a strong link between those who believe conspiracy theories about Covid-19 and those that subscribe to conspiracy-heavy defenses of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁶

In seeking to understand these developments, this paper first takes a closer look at the 2020-2022 Covid-19 protests in Germany and examines their domestic impacts in the context of a period rife with societal and geopolitical challenges, chief among them the ongoing war in Ukraine.

The findings are troubling, both for Germany specifically and regarding the national security risk posed by heightened polarization and anti-democratic radicalization. While Russian propaganda outlets sought to propagate conspiracies about Covid-19 and Ukraine in Germany, it was Germans themselves who created the audience for these narratives.

The Covid-19 protest scene has been referred to by experts as a "society of rejection" and a form of counter-Enlightenment. That this dynamic not only applies to domestic policy decisions but also permits the justification of a brutal attack on a nearby democracy should raise concern about the subterranean processes underway in German society.⁷

The German anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine protests marked neither a beginning nor an end, but rather a waypoint in a continuum of internal and external challenges faced by German democracy. At the domestic end of the spectrum, they reveal an existing, virulent anti-democratic sentiment that can be spread through the exploitation of various crises, to the detriment of German society. And in foreign and security policy terms, the growth of the protest movement marks the visible expansion of a diverse political scene that fundamentally rejects the basic tenets of German liberal democracy, thus serving as a useful tool for foreign adversaries seeking to influence the direction of German policy. As breaking German solidarity occupies a central place in Vladimir Putin's strategy to undermine sanctions and weapons support for Ukraine, this could have extremely dangerous consequences.⁸

1.1 No port in the storm: Germany, mid-2022

Before analyzing these developments, it is worth taking a look at the complex and interlocking domestic and foreign policy challenges faced by Germany under the twin strains of the pandemic and its repercussions and the war in Ukraine.

The Covid-19 protests, along with the broader German far right, punched well above their weight in setting the tone in German politics and creating the impression of deep divisions in society. According to polling released in July 2022, only 17 percent of respondents felt that there was a broad consensus on many issues in Germany, and 49 percent viewed differences of opinion on key issues as often irreconcilable. Despite the fact that the German government's Covid-19 policies enjoyed majority support, 62 percent of respondents perceived divisions over pandemic-related issues – and specifically vaccination status – to be the greatest dividing line in Germany, even more so than the difference between rich and poor (55 percent).⁹

And with rising energy prices and inflation stemming from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the crises multiplied. In a September 2022 interview with *Deutschlandfunk*, the director of NGO More in Common Germany compared the mood in the country at that time to an injured boxer entering the third round against a fresh opponent. Polling released in the same month revealed that only between 26 percent and 29 percent of respondents believed their government to be capable of fulfilling its obligations.¹⁰

While the Covid-19 protests largely faded into the background with the relaxing of restrictions in 2022, a hard core continued to organize weekly protests or *Spaziergänge* (“strolls”) throughout the country, also with a focus on the war in Ukraine and its economic consequences.¹¹ But while the movement's numbers may have faded, it continues to have significant reach and, given the polarization around the protests and the pandemic, a large well of potential supporters. According to polling carried out by German extremism monitoring agency the Center for Monitoring, Analysis, and Strategy (CeMAS) and published in February 2022, 4.3 percent of respondents admitted to having attended a Covid-19 protest, a further 11.1 percent said they were “definitely” or “somewhat” ready to participate in a protest, and 7.1 percent admitted to toying with the idea.¹² In North Rhine-Westphalia, the regional branch of Germany's domestic intelligence service, the *Verfassungsschutz*, estimated that between 50,000 and 100,000 people had been involved in the Covid-19 protest movement online.¹³

Finally, Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 shattered Germany's view of the world and upended an economic model once predicated upon the U.S. security guarantee, cheap energy from Russia, and exports to the Chinese market, as Constanze Stelzenmüller, an expert on German foreign and security policy at the Brookings Institution (and former colleague), has pithily phrased it.¹⁴ Three days later, Chancellor Olaf Scholz gave a speech to the Bundestag in which he described the invasion as a *Zeitenwende* (“historic turning point”) and announced that his government would significantly increase military spending and support Ukraine with German weapons shipments.¹⁵ While the speech was widely praised, both domestically and internationally, it unleashed a

reckoning with Germany's relationship with military force, its identity as a nation, and its past policy failures.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, this shift sparked vociferous and emotional debate, with prominent thinkers and celebrities exchanging open letters either calling for more support to Ukraine or opposing weapons deliveries out of a fear of escalation and a desire to see the war end as quickly as possible.¹⁷

As Putin throttled gas supplies to Germany and inflation rose, high-profile German politicians also called for an end to the sanctions and for the conflict to be "frozen".¹⁸ And the Covid-19 protest movement, which had been losing steam as the pandemic restrictions faded from public view, found new life in conspiracies around the war in Ukraine, calling for peace and spreading fear of economic ruin.¹⁹

Midway through 2022, growing concern about social unrest sparked by high energy prices and inflation was palpable. In a somewhat unguarded moment in late July, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock expressed her concern that German support for Ukraine could be undermined by "people's revolts" (*Volksaufstände*) should energy supplies run short. Writing in the New Right journal *Sezession* a month later, far-right ideologue Götz Kubitschek cast "the destruction of Germany's relations with Russia" as only the latest in a series of "corrosive waves" that Germany has had to endure, including the Covid-19 lockdown measures and the 2015 migration crisis. "An uprising is inevitable," he wrote.²⁰ Uwe Hück, a disenchanted former member of Pforzheim city council in western Germany, warned of a "popular uprising the likes of which the Federal Republic of Germany has never seen before" as temperatures dropped.²¹

In retrospect, it appears that Germany largely avoided this worst-case scenario. A massive government support plan consisting of financial support for energy providers and a price brake for energy consumers was created – referred to by Chancellor Scholz as the *Doppel-Wumms*.²² Full gas storage tanks prevented an energy supply crisis. And winter temperatures remained relatively mild. The feared, apocalyptic "winter of anger" (*Wutwinter*) was avoided.²³

2. The domestic security implications of the Covid-19 protests

When asked about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Germany in May 2022, Valentin Lippmann, deputy chair of the Greens in the state parliament of Saxony, stated that "the West is experiencing its 'Pegida moment'". "German democracy is facing its most grave crisis since the founding of the Federal Republic," he continued.²⁴

Lippmann's stark assessment of the situation in Germany is not universally shared. But ultimately, the "Pegida lens" is an incredibly useful tool for understanding the meaning of

the Covid-19 years and the relationship between the protests and the traditional German far right.

The Pegida protests that erupted in Germany in late 2014 in response to large numbers of refugees arriving from the Middle East served as a “transmission belt” for the AfD as a party.²⁵ By tying itself to the Islamophobic street movement, the party was able to exploit debates around identity and migration to achieve a shocking of 12.6 percent of the vote in 2017 and become leader of the opposition to Chancellor Angela Merkel’s government. In the same way, the Covid-19 protests provided an opportunity for various far-right groups to gain new supporters and spread their ideologies.

But unlike the Pegida protests, which had difficulty expanding out of eastern Germany, the protests against the Covid-19 restrictions would see “East and West united in protest,” although the phenomenon was, at times, somewhat more western German in character.²⁶ In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the protests revealed a wide variety of different groups in western Germany that are potentially weaponizable by either domestic- or foreign-based disinformation campaigns.

2.1 The protests in overview

The protests against the Covid-19 restrictions provide a window into how an anti-democratic movement might establish itself and gain traction, also in western Germany. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the protests was their sheer diversity. As opposed to being a singular phenomenon or even a singular movement, they took a variety of forms and their participants represented a range of socio-economic and political milieus. Even within a single protest event, participants often had completely different backgrounds, and at least some had truly legitimate grievances. But this heterogeneity was not uniformly distributed. In the east of the country, known right-wing extremists played a much more central role, setting the tone for the protests and even organizing them themselves. In western Germany, by contrast, far-right extremists were more of a fringe presence to avoid scaring away more mainstream protestors.²⁷

Furthermore, the nature of the protests – and the apparent strategies behind them – shifted over time. In the initial phase, the driving force was the western German “Querdenken” movement, which initially focused on large, centralized protests such as those in Berlin in August 2020. In this phase, software engineer Michael Ballweg was credited with giving the Querdenker – initially known as Querdenken 711 after the Stuttgart area code – the organizational ability to expand into a nationwide movement. A second phase began in October 2021, when the protests became more localized to specific regions, in particular around Saxony.²⁸ They took diverse forms, including large demonstrations in particular cities and around government buildings or vaccination centers, “Spaziergänge,” bike and car convoys, pamphleting, and candlelight vigils.

2.3 Key features

In western Germany in particular, Covid-19 protestors hailed from a broad and surprising range of social milieus. A common refrain was how “normal” many protestors appeared; they seemed to come from the very “middle” of German society. Social economist Andres Speit describes an alternative-inclined, vaguely left-wing, mostly well-educated, middle-class population with independent work schedules and very little experience of state intervention in their private or professional lives.²⁹ In their report on the Querdenken movement in Baden-Württemberg, sociologists Nadine Frei and Oliver Nachtwey identified the alternative and anthroposophical³⁰ circles as being the most important – though not the only – sources of protest. Yet alongside this frequently left-wing, alternative orientation, there was also an openness to the political right and a compatibility with people and groups on the far-right spectrum.³¹

This impression of “normality” was borne out by the statistics. According to figures from 2020, nearly 67 percent of the protestors surveyed classified themselves as either upper- or lower-middle class.³² The organizers of the protests also made use of the “middle of society” descriptor, presenting the movement as a rejection of the left-right divide and as a place where people could overcome societal divisions to “talk to each other again”.³³ The “normalness” of the protestors also worked to their advantage in terms of how law enforcement responded to them, as police are more hesitant to use force against people they perceived as “average citizens”. Taken at face value, the “middle of society” label thus provides multiple insights: into some of the perhaps less pleasant features of the German middle class and into the worldview propagated by the movement’s organizers, one in which German society is deeply divided.

Perhaps the central unifying factor of these protests was their participants’ general antipathy towards the rest of society and its key institutions, with Covid-19 providing an outlet to express these views. Already in May 2020, Dieter Rucht, a sociologist at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin, wrote that, while Covid-19 and the associated restrictions held the protests together, it was more a “general dissatisfaction with ‘the powers that be’, whose incapacity and immorality shows itself also in the handling of the corona crisis” that ultimately bound them.³⁴ Over a year later, Frei and Nachtwey would come to a similar conclusion in their seminal report on the Covid-19 protests in Baden-Württemberg.

Despite the heterogeneity of the demonstrators, they socialize over one abstract aspect: it is important for them to be against. They conceive of their protest as necessary resistance against the arrogance of a government that is abrogating democratic civil rights and liberties.³⁵

Over the course of the next two years, the general dissatisfaction expressed by the protests allowed them to move from targeting the Covid-19 measures to a much broader-based rejection of German society as a whole. By May 2021, the Interior Ministry of North Rhine-Westphalia wrote that the movement’s original focus on the Covid-19 restrictions was fading into

the background. Instead, the protests were increasingly used to make state institutions, media, politicians, and other prominent individuals into “object[s] of protest and hate.”³⁶

Along with antipathy towards state institutions and those in power, the protest movement was marked by a conspiratorial mindset – after all, its founding principle was the belief that Covid-19 was less dangerous than the authorities claimed, and that the severity of the measures was disproportionate to the threat posed by the virus. That conspiracy theories about Covid-19 spread is unsurprising; the uncertainty and loss of control caused by the pandemic created the ideal psychological conditions for such narratives to circulate.³⁷ This conspiratorial thinking was a perfect fit to the protests’ oppositional nature. In their survey of Covid-19 protestors, Frei and Nachtwey report that the former viewed themselves as “critical critics” who are privy to the truth about the pandemic and who have become “resistance fighters” in the face of overwhelming societal stigmatization and repression.³⁸ The steady radicalization of this resistance narrative was marked by protestors’ increasing emphasis on their own bravery. In their eyes, they were resisting a dictatorial regime similar to the Nazis, along with the “shadowy forces” that are pulling the strings. From the beginning, the theories driving the Covid-19 protests carried antisemitic overtones, a feature which only became more overt as members of the movement radicalized.

The Covid-19 protests were also marked by a strong online presence. Messaging app Telegram, and to a lesser extent Facebook and YouTube, facilitated deep networking between the movement’s leading figures and protesters. Protests were organized via Telegram groups, and anger towards the government, politicians, and scientific experts was continually stoked. Not only were official channels and pages created – like those of Querdenken 711 in western Germany and the Freie Sachsen in the east of the country – but also interconnected subchannels or regional channels. A wide variety of conspiracy theorists, celebrities like chef Attila Hildmann and singer Xavier Naidoo, and individuals including teachers and police officers formed their own channels, providing a conspiratorial offering for nearly every segment of society and further increasing the movement’s online reach, along with their own ability to make money off the scene.³⁹ All the while, observers identified an increasingly close relationship between online agitation and radicalization and physical protests and even violence, even in comparison to the protests that erupted during the 2015-2016 migration crisis.⁴⁰

2.4 An opportunity for the far right

In response to the emergence of this protest movement, the strategy adopted by the various strands of the German far right was neither complex nor novel.⁴¹ Sensing the opportunity presented by the heterogeneous mix of people that found itself on the streets, Germany’s far right sought to co-opt the movement to normalize its own belief system within a new segment of society and cast itself as representing the pure will of the people against an illegitimate government.⁴² The protests and the online forums that back them thus served as touch points between this estranged “middle of society” and Germany’s far right, facilitating networking between and within the various scenes.⁴³

Germany's far-right scene is complex and features many different groups, operating at times in parallel, and united only in their rejection of liberal democracy. *Reichsbürger* (literally "citizens of the Reich" who refuse to recognize the validity of the post-1945 German democratic government), neo-Nazis, Identitarians, and multiple far-right parties exist alongside a support network of ideologues and publications. Though they share ideological similarities, the groups differ in their strategies and their propensity to violence. Conspiracy theories play a central role within this scene, both online and offline, delegitimizing the government, strengthening a sense of friend and foe, and creating community and group conformity.⁴⁴ The further right one goes, the greater the conspiratorial mindset.⁴⁵

A useful way to understand the relationship between the different strands of the far right and their relationship to society is provided by renowned sociologist and conflict researcher Wilhelm Heitmeyer's "onion model". According to this approach, mainstream society and the far right are simply different points on a continuum, or successive layers of an onion. Each layer represents an escalation in extremism and a willingness to use violence, with latent group-oriented hostility residing on the outermost layer. Each successive layer supports the next and exists in a continuum with previous layers.⁴⁶ This lens is equally helpful for understanding the interactions between the various strands of the German far right and the Covid-19 protests: though each layer is different, they exist as part of a continuum of radicalization. Interaction with the German far right has helped to transport members of the protest movement deeper into this heart of darkness.

Elements of the German far right were either an integral part of the Covid-19 protest movement from its early days, or recognized the opportunity provided by the protests almost immediately. Referring to the Covid-19 protests, neo-Nazi Michael Brück exhorted supporters to "use every opportunity to spread our worldview" in May 2020, while the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) declared that the protests offered an unparalleled opportunity to address the "German soul."⁴⁷

The Querdenken movement has been connected with the Reichsbürger scene practically since its inception. Prominent Reichsbürger Frank Schreibmüller claims to have introduced Michael Ballweg to Telegram; the latter went on to identify the platform as the key to the movement's success. Schreibmüller is one of the greatest online networkers of the German far-right scene, first on Facebook and then on Telegram, where he is involved in up to 4,000 channels and groups.⁴⁸ And Stephan Bergmann, a one-time Querdenken 711 press spokesperson who now lives in Mexico, was under observation for years by the Verfassungsschutz as an alleged far-right extremist and Reichsbürger. From this perspective, the fact that a meeting took place in November 2020 between Michael Ballweg and Peter Fitzek – another prominent Reichsbürger who has referred to himself as "His Royal Highness Peter the First" since 2012 – to discuss "scout[ing] around for new possibilities and other strategies" is unsurprising. Yet already two months before this meeting, the influence of the Reichsbürger ideology could be seen in statements made by Ballweg, Bergmann, and others.⁴⁹

For its part, the AfD was initially hesitant about the burgeoning protest movement and how to position itself regarding Covid-19. At first, significant support existed among AfD

supporters for the institution of a mask mandate in the Bundestag.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the propensity for Reichsbürger and neo-Nazis to make prominent appearances in the protests initially proved problematic for the party.

Yet the AfD leadership's initial support of the government's measures led to discomfort among the party faithful, as revealed by discussions within an AfD Telegram group containing most of the party's Bavarian members of the Bundestag, its members of the Bavarian state parliament, and sympathizers.⁵¹ Following a strategy meeting on November 3, 2020, the national AfD finally decided to become the "political arm" of the protests and to seek out potential new voters on the streets. The party recognized that the protestors hailed from traditionally AfD-skeptical circles and were primarily driven by a fear of financial ruin.⁵² Only weeks later, AfD members of the Bundestag would sneak protesters into parliament to harass their colleagues as they made their way to vote on an update to Germany's epidemic regulations.

2.5 Impacts

Into 2021 and then 2022, the various strands of Germany's far-right scene attempted to coopt the waxing and waning protest movement. If measured by election results, the far right's attempt to speak to new voters did not succeed. Regional elections in three German states in the first half of 2022 saw the AfD lose support and even fail to cross the 5 percent hurdle required for representation in parliament in Schleswig-Holstein. On a national level, various polls put the AfD at roughly 10-14 percent, around the level of support the party received in the 2017 and 2021 federal elections. The German security services appeared to share this assessment: in its 2021 report, the Verfassungsschutz wrote that the "closing of ranks with the bourgeois-democratic protestors failed".⁵³

Beyond the AfD, the Covid-19 protest movement has thus far failed to produce a viable political force. Despite the movement's claim to represent a broad swath of the German population, the party that grew out of the protests, dieBasis, received only 1.4 percent of the vote in the 2021 federal elections. Yet while the protests may not have had much of an impact on German party politics, the radicalization of the protest movement within German society was not unimportant. According to Thuringia's Interior Minister Georg Maier, the AfD increasingly became the driver of radical Covid-19 protests in eastern Germany, even going so far as to give out tips on how to disguise illegal demonstrations and "play cat and mouse" with the police.⁵⁴ And known right-wing extremists played an important qualitative role in the protests, even if their numbers were still few in western Germany. The fact that far-right ideas and terms such as "*Lügenpresse*"⁵⁵ entered the lexicon of the protest movement counts as a success for the far right according to Martin Steurer, parliamentary advisor to the Greens in the state parliament of Baden-Württemberg. "More people are closer to conspiracy theories than before," he continued.⁵⁶ At an event in February 2022 organized by the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in

Baden-Württemberg, Vedran Džihic, a senior researcher at the Austrian Institute for International Affairs, warned that such Covid-19-skeptic movements may even represent a form of counter-Enlightenment, a “society of rejection”.⁵⁷

This increased sympathy for conspiracy theories is important for two reasons: firstly because of the relationship between conspiracy theories and the far right, and secondly because this tendency can be exploited by foreign actors – a trend which will be explored in more detail in the paper’s second section. In their 2020 book *Fake Facts*, CeMAS co-founder and social psychologist Pia Lamberty and social commentator Katharina Nocun state that conspiracy theories function as an “integral and immensely dangerous component of right-wing extremist ideologies” and help facilitate a radicalization to violence.⁵⁸ Within the German conspiratorial scene, awash with the idea that the media works to obscure the truth, there is a particular affinity for Russian state propaganda outlet *RT*.⁵⁹ And the Covid-19 protest movement was no different. An analysis conducted by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, an anti-extremism think tank, in 2021 revealed *RT DE*, *RT*’s German-language branch, to be one of the most popular sources within right-wing extremist and conspiracist Telegram groups and even “an organic component” of the online Covid-19 protest scene.⁶⁰

As radicalization increased, the threshold for acts of violence originating from the Covid-19 protests and its online scene dropped markedly. In February 2022, the German security services warned of a growing militancy in the Telegram discussion groups that acted as the movement’s organizational center. Demonstrations became more aggressive, inhibitions for threatening behavior decreased.⁶¹ An investigation by journalists from the weekly *Die Zeit* revealed that more than 300 acts of violence were committed in 2021 in connection with Covid-19 protection measures like the requirement to wear face masks on trains and public transit.⁶² This is not without precedent; pandemic-triggered random violence can be traced back as far as the Black Death in the 1300s.⁶³

In addition to random acts of violence, people associated with the Covid-19 protest movement, or who have radicalized through it, apparently planned to assassinate or kidnap prominent politicians such as Minister-President of Saxony Michael Kretschmer and Federal Minister of Health Karl Lauterbach.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, a torch-lit protest – a favorite of the Nazi regime in the 1930s – was held in front of the private home of Saxony Health Minister Petra Köpping, and a video was published of the staged kidnapping of Vice-Chancellor Robert Habeck.⁶⁵

In May 2022, the German Interior Ministry revealed that the number of politically motivated crimes committed in 2021 had increased by more than 23 percent in comparison to their previous high in 2020.⁶⁶ While the number of right-wing crimes actually went down 7 percent, crimes that did not correspond to either the traditional right or left⁶⁷ made up almost 40 percent of the total number; a third of these “unclassifiable” crimes were directly associated with the pandemic. From the perspective of the state office of the Verfassungsschutz in Stuttgart, lone actors who are radicalized to violence by the heated atmosphere and rhetoric coming from leaders of the Querdenken movement are one of the greatest dangers facing German democracy after two years of the pandemic.⁶⁸

2.6 Unfinished work

None of these developments occurred in a vacuum. It is possible to trace back the beginnings of the Covid-19 protest movement to the “Monday vigils for peace” that began in Berlin in 2014 in reaction to the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia. Many of the conspiracists who occupied prominent roles in these “peace vigils”, including former radio host Ken Jebsen, resurfaced during the Covid-19 protests. And like the Covid-19 protests, these “peace protests” represented an attempt to spread a conspiratorial, antisemitic, and anti-Western mindset on the streets of Germany.⁶⁹

The coronavirus protests can therefore be seen as part of a larger process characterized by the exposure and weaponization of the underlying antipathies and divisions in German society. Each successive shock that the country has faced – from Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014 to the 2015 migration crisis to the Covid-19 pandemic – has seen the activation of different elements of German society, both in the east and the west of the country. Kubitschek’s classification of the pandemic and the “destruction of German relations with Russia” as being only the latest in a series of “corrosive” events is therefore both an admission of the far right’s strategy and a description of reality. This “unification in protest” reveals the surprising depths of the democratic challenges faced by Germany as a whole – not just in the more AfD-friendly eastern states.

That a protest movement centered around conspiracy theories enjoyed such success in Germany is also unsurprising. A main prerequisite for belief in conspiracy theories is a pre-existing conspiratorial mindset.⁷⁰ A variety of somewhat conflicting data exists for just how widespread conspiracy theory belief is in Germany. A 2020 study conducted by the Else-Frenkel-Brunswik Institut at the Universität Leipzig revealed that at least 20 percent of the voters for all parties, from the AfD to Die Linke, believed conspiracy theories about Covid-19, albeit with non-voters (56 percent) and AfD-voters (68 percent) exhibiting the strongest level of belief. YouGov polling conducted as part of the Globalism Project in August and September 2021 revealed that 23 percent of Germans (compared to 31 percent of Americans and 28 percent of French) believed that a single group of people control world events regardless of who is officially in charge. Another poll from the University of Leipzig, conducted as part of the 2022 Leipzig Authoritarianism Study, actually showed that between 2020 and 2022, the number of people who exhibited conspiratorial thinking decreased from 38 percent to 25 percent.⁷¹

That a movement with openly antisemitic strands such as the Covid-19 protests could attract members of the German middle class is at first blush deeply shocking, especially to an outsider. Yet here, too, there is much work to be done. In its report on politically motivated criminality, the German interior ministry found that antisemitic crimes had increased nearly 29 percent between 2020 and 2021. Around half of the overall number of antisemitic crimes were committed in connection to Covid-19.⁷² When asked how antisemitism could find such a broad audience in Germany, Dr. Michael Blume, the special representative for combating antisemitism for the state of Baden-Württemberg, explained that this

is tied to the fact that there is relatively little contact between Jewish and non-Jewish Germans today. As a result, many non-Jewish Germans only know Jewish people from black and white photographs. “You can’t just have compassion,” he emphasized, “you have to have both: education and encounters.”⁷³

Furthermore, there is significant potential for hostility to perceived outsiders in Germany – a sentiment that can be mobilized. The 2022 edition of Leipzig Authoritarianism Study also found that in both east and west Germany a significant number of people possess ethnocentric views. For example, 26 percent of Germans (38 percent in the east and 23 percent in the west) “manifestly” agreed that the country was being overwhelmed by foreigners. Interestingly, the German interior ministry reported that the number of hate crimes committed against foreigners decreased by nearly 11 percent in 2021 compared to 2020 despite the authors’ of the Leipzig study’s warning that overall hate against all those perceived as “other” had increased in Germany.⁷⁴ Oliver Hildenbrand, deputy leader of the Greens in the state parliament of Baden-Württemberg, views the anti-LGBTQ “Demo für Alle” protests that broke out in 2014 in response to proposed sexual education reforms in Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria as an antecedent for the Querdenken movement and even Pegida. Though the protests clearly had a different goal, they employed the tactics that would later be seen in 2015 and during the pandemic.⁷⁵

Overall, nativist and conspiratorial sentiments persist in Germany that influence each other and ultimately negatively affect perceptions of the legitimacy German democracy. But Germany in the age of Covid-19 presents a final important conundrum. Despite Germans’ pessimism regarding their democracy and the divisions in their society, the vast majority support the parties of the democratic middle and the government’s Covid-19 policies. In polling conducted at the beginning of 2023, 72 percent of Germans supported either the CDU, SPD, Greens, or FDP, while only 20 percent supported either the AfD or Die Linke. And despite Covid-19 no longer being viewed as a top 10 political problem, 69 percent of Germans viewed the existing government policies to combat its spread – like mandatory isolation for infected or masking requirements in trains or public transit – as either appropriate or not going far enough.⁷⁶

Ultimately, then, while German democracy appears firmly anchored, it seems uniquely anxious. Yet these various lingering resentments in German society not only hinder the country’s progress towards a more tolerant, pluralist future. They are also potent wedges in the hands of foreign adversaries who might use them to worsen domestic divisions and undermine German stability.

3. The foreign and security policy implications of the Covid-19 protests

Next to the ramifications of the Covid-19 protests for German domestic policy, the movement's exposure and exacerbation of society-wide divides also presents Germany with a foreign policy and national security problem. Namely, that the deep polarization surrounding this heterogeneous but now nationwide "society of rejection" constitutes a useful lever with which to influence German internal stability and foreign policy. Analysts Edward Hunter Christie and Kristine Berzina write that "[t]he ability of societies to withstand and adapt in crises and emergencies is an essential element of national security and defense".⁷⁷ The expansion of the anti-democratic spectrum in Germany through the Covid-19 protests and the ability of these groups to spread conspiracy theories and propaganda in equal measure surely corrodes Germany's resilience, compromising its ability to act in the face of difficult challenges and to adapt to a new era in international affairs.

The foreign policy and national security implications of phenomena like the Covid-19 protest movement are complex. Grasping them requires an understanding of information warfare, especially as practiced first by the Soviet Union and later Russia.

Modern information warfare dates back to the early 20th century. After the Second World War, it was initially employed on both sides of the Iron Curtain, though the West would later abandon the field to the Soviet Union. Over the decades, information warfare became increasingly professionalized and scientific. Digitalization and online communication have in turn made influence operations "more active and less measured" as the internet opened up societies to disinformation that could be more easily spread by automated accounts and algorithms.⁷⁸

Viewed from a strategic perspective, Russia's modern information warfare strategy could be seen as a cynical inversion of Western democracy promotion efforts, which the Kremlin views as an offensive effort conducted to topple the Putin regime. The aim of Russian disinformation is to both shape thinking in and undermine the resolve of its geopolitical opponents, in particular through the creation of "controlled chaos" by inflaming the debate, raising protest potential in society, and thus undermining internal stability. Vladimir Putin's move to cast Russia as a defender of "traditional" values by propagating anti-LGBTQ and ethno-nationalist views also allows for a type of soft power projection vis-à-vis like-minded far-right groups in the West, creating a network of potential illiberal allies.⁷⁹

3.1 The real threat is us

Disinformation directly attacks the foundations of liberal democracy by undermining the concept of fact-based truth. In the words of political scientist Thomas Rid, it seeks

to “engineer division by putting emotion over analysis, division over unity, conflict over consensus, the particular over the universal.” This approach also plays directly into post-modern philosophical trends, which posit that facts are constructed via culture, language, collective perceptions, and other particular factors rather than being inalterable and universal.⁸⁰

Manipulating and widening domestic societal divisions are key to successful disinformation operations. Local actors, along with their real fears and beliefs, are both the target and vector of disinformation. Once a piece of disinformation is absorbed by its target audience, it becomes the basis for their reality. Its onward spread is then validated by domestic actors. Who, then is more dangerous: the creator of a piece of disinformation or the (often “innocent” person who believes it and takes action accordingly, thus legitimating and spreading it further? But worse still, disinformation also deepens these divisions by making distinguishing between a genuine activist and “an exploited asset” very difficult and perhaps even irrelevant.⁸¹ Thus in addition to spreading a chosen narrative, disinformation works to further divide a society by freighting what might at other times be viewed as free and open debate with traitorous overtones.

A persuasive example of the dangers posed by the domestic amplifiers of disinformation is provided by Russian information warfare efforts in relation to the U.S. elections. Writing in *The New York Times* in the run up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Fiona Hill, a former senior U.S. National Security Council official and current senior fellow at the Brookings Institution (and former colleague, summed up the matter succinctly:

Russian operatives did not invent our crude tribal politics; they invented internet personas to whip them up. American politicians reduced the country to red and blue states; Russian operatives purchased online ads to target voters on both sides of the domestic divide. American commentators pinned vitriolic labels on our national leaders; Russian bots spread the offensive comments around.⁸²

Russian disinformation efforts succeeded because different groups of Americans were so willing to pick up and use the weapons available to them in a domestic political battle. Thus, as Hill wrote, “the biggest danger to [the 2020] election is not Russia [...] It’s us”.⁸³

Unfortunately, this very phenomenon is also the weak spot in liberal democracies’ response to foreign influence operations. According to Gavin Wilde, a Russia and disinformation expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (and current colleague, disinformation experts in general are more inclined to focus on the quantifiable aspects of disinformation. This tendency then leads to cohesive responses to disinformation being “unmoored from the sociological, economic, and political contexts that enable disinformation to thrive in the first place.”⁸⁴ Thus, whether people are primed to believe disinformation in

the first place by the wider societal conditions in which they exist appears to be the bigger issue, one for which liberal democracies have no easy solution.

3.2 From the “corona dictatorship” to the war in Ukraine

Germany has long been a prominent target for Russian (and previously, Soviet) influence efforts. Since 2014, the Russian government has covertly invested at least 300 million U.S. dollars in European political parties. This investment has been pragmatic, spread between far-left and far-right political groups, and aimed at appealing to European discontent. By harnessing European grievances, Russia has essentially sought to buy its way out of the sanctions imposed on it by the United States and Europe and subvert European politics.⁸⁵

Russia has sought to cultivate support among elite figures and networks across the German political spectrum. Parties like Die Linke or the AfD or individuals like the now disgraced former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who became a lobbyist for Russian energy interests, appear prominently in this context. Yet as the non-profit investigative journalist organization Correctiv has shown, Russia’s elite political and economic influence efforts in Germany are much more complex and further reaching than these groups and politicians.⁸⁶

Yet for Germany, 2014 also marked the first public appearance of the heterogenous conspiracist scene that would resurface within Pegida and the Covid-19 protests – in the form of anti-NATO “peace marches” following Russia’s invasion of Crimea. That these groups all adopted pro-Russian positions may not be entirely coincidental, either. German officials now describe *Compact* magazine, a far-right publication whose editor-in-chief, Jürgen Elsässer, played a role in the 2014 “peace marches,” as a Russian propaganda outlet.⁸⁷ As with the German far right’s exploitation of the various crises of the past decade, a blurry continuum begins to come into view – one that will undoubtedly occupy some aspect of Germany’s post-Zeitenwende reckoning with its past relationship with Russia.

The Covid-19 protests and their vast online architecture provided a radicalization machine capable of transforming citizens into self-proclaimed “resistance fighters” against an alleged autocratic regime. The protests therefore had the potential to move these citizens from a fact-based reality to one based on subjective truths and conspiracies about Western governments, international organizations, and pharmaceutical companies. The prevalence of conspiracy theories in these groups was to the direct benefit of propaganda outlets like *RT* and thus authoritarian actors such as Russia. Prominent Covid-19 skeptics like vegan chef Attila Hildmann served as “superspreaders” for propagandists by broad-casting their content to their many followers and fans, increasing the range of disinformation to people that may never have encountered it otherwise. Fandom in turn served to validate this disinformation and its sources among these new audiences.⁸⁸

The switch by Covid-19 skeptic groups to protesting Western military support for the war in Ukraine provided renewed proof for how quickly and easily such groups can [be] redirect[ed]. In some cases, the groundwork may have been laid before the February 24

invasion. A conspiracy theory about U.S. bioweapons laboratories in Ukraine – a classic Russian propaganda trope used against many of its neighboring states – first appeared on February 21 on a Russian Telegram channel and had already spread to Germany – with the help of former journalist and anti-lockdown activist Eva Herman – by February 24. It has since been repeated by various figures on the American far right including [now former] Fox News host Tucker Carlson.⁸⁹ The war also gave these groups a new lease of life as the Covid-19 restrictions began to fall away.

A March 2022 investigation by center-left daily the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* confirmed this near-instantaneous switch, and discovered that the war-related content circulated within these channels and pages was even more conspiratorial in nature than that related to Covid-19. While there are some differences in their exact positioning vis-à-vis Russia and the war in Ukraine, the groups share a fear of the economic impacts of the war and the Western sanctions on Russia, as well as a skepticism towards pluralistic, liberal democracies. What extends their reach into the realm of foreign policy is their belief in an overarching global conspiracy, within which the West is often held responsible for the war.⁹⁰

The origin story of the Twitter hashtag #IchbereueDieImpfung (“I regret getting vaccinated”) provides another troubling example of the exploitation of domestic political divisions for geopolitical ends. The hashtag, which was shared tens of thousands of times and was for a time the most discussed item on Twitter in Germany, was launched in March 2022 by a Twitter account branded with German and Russian flags and featuring anti-Western conspiracy theories. This account was created just days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁹¹

Polls released by CeMAS in April and November 2022 show both the strong connection between those protesting Germany’s Covid-19 protection measures and its support for Ukraine. They also show that receptivity to pro-Russian conspiracy theories within the German population increased over this period.

Polling from April 2022 revealed that roughly 56 percent of respondents who were unvaccinated believed “ideologically conspiratorial attempts to explain” the war in Ukraine – for instance, that “NATO had provoked Russia for so long that it had to go to war” or that “Putin is taking action against a global elite which is pulling the strings in the background”. Similarly, 56 percent of respondents who said they were “very ready” to protest the German government’s Covid-19 restrictions also “rather assumed a conspiracy behind the war against Ukraine.” Follow-up polling revealed that the number of respondents who fully believed NATO had provoked Russia increased from 12 percent in April to 19 percent in October, while the number who partially agreed rose from 17 percent to 21 percent. The number of those who saw Putin as acting against a global elite increased to a similar degree, with 18 percent fully and 26 percent partially supporting a myth in October that only 12 percent and 20 percent gave full or partial credence to in April.⁹²

A contributing factor to the willingness to believe all manner of falsehoods about a group’s domestic political opponents, and about the world in general, is whether the falsehood “resonated with emotions, with collectively held views in the targeted community, and whether it managed to exacerbate existing tensions.”⁹³ Thus political polarization,

or even just the perception of polarization around particular issues, plays an important role. The pandemic-related protests contributed to a growth in polarization within German society and a collapse in public trust, an ominous combination for the sitting government. Polling by the Allensbach Institute released in July 2022 revealed that 49 percent of respondents were convinced that society is deeply divided, and that opinions on many issues are irreconcilable. Covid-19, migration, and support for Ukraine were seen as the most controversial topics.⁹⁴

The collision of crises has also had an effect on how Germans view their government. Separate polls by NGO More in Common and civil service association the Deutscher Beamtenbund released in September 2022 revealed that only a third of respondents viewed the German state as capable of an adequate response to the challenges it faces, down from 45 percent in 2021 and 56 percent in 2020. A September 2022 poll conducted by market research and opinion polling company Forsa revealed that 61 percent of respondents did not trust any of Germany's political parties to adequately address the problems facing the country.⁹⁵

Whether the protest movement – which continued its efforts into 2023, organizing an “Uprising for Peace” in Berlin on February 25 that attracted 10,000 participants – will ultimately shake German support for Ukraine remains unclear. What does seem certain, however, is that the German far right and various conspiracy theorists are aiming to keep the protests alive in some form in order to provide a ready outlet for Germans' fears – fears that Vladimir Putin, with his energy war against the European Union and threats to use nuclear weapons, is more than happy to inflame.

3.3 Sand in the gears of the Zeitenwende

Stepping back from the immediate challenges posed by the war in Ukraine, the existence of a homegrown political force with little regard for democratic institutions may also pose longer-term challenges for German foreign policy. The apparent expansion of a “society of rejection” – which could be viewed as an expression of a “fundamental legitimization crisis of modern society”⁹⁶ – over the course of the last decade may bode ill for a country confronting both a significantly more challenging global environment and an identity crisis. Just the ability of German society to produce such a movement raises questions about the country's resilience to shocks of all kinds.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine marked a turning point for Germany and its identity, both as a nation and as a foreign policy actor. For a nation that built a significant part of its identity on seeking to avoid war and a deep belief in the post-Cold War “end of history”, the act of sending weapons to Ukraine for use against Russian soldiers affected far more than just its mystical or even “romantic” relationship with Russia.⁹⁷ It required a near complete reevaluation of the world and Germany's role in it and posed a direct threat to the German business model, which was predicated in part upon cheap Russian energy. The highly

emotional debates and protests around the Zeitenwende, sanctions on Russia, weapons for Ukraine, and the stability of Germany's economy all point to the difficulty of this transition. And present psychological weaknesses to be exploited.

The paradoxical relationship between the actual size of the "society of rejection" and its perceived societal influence is troubling. Despite the AfD's popularity at national level remaining more or less constant for years and the fact that Germany's Covid-19 restrictions were supported by roughly two thirds of the population, Germans perceive their society as highly divided on pandemic-related issues. They also see their government as largely incapable of meaningfully addressing current challenges. Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's concern about popular uprisings and the multiple financial support packages aimed at lessening the impact of high energy prices and inflation indicate the level of unease present within the German government on this issue. Thus, from the perspective of a hostile foreign adversary, these groups appear to be an incredibly efficient and comparatively low-cost means to influence German government policy.

In short, the success enjoyed by the Covid-19 protest movement, its spread of conspiracy theories and propaganda, and the polarization and loss of trust within German society that it furthered all served to undermine Germany's "psychological defense." Defined by Hunter Christie and Berzina as a population's morale, its willingness to contribute to national defense or volunteer in other ways, and its resilience to disinformation,⁹⁸ psychological defense depends greatly on societal cohesion and citizens' views of each other and of their government. As a result of the Covid-19 protest movement, it is likely that more Germans – though not nearly a majority – would balk at making sacrifices in the context of a national security crisis because they either reject the premises of German democracy outright or because they subscribe to a conspiratorial view of the world. And conversely, that parts of German society then might view this protest movement in all its various forms as "useful idiots" of an authoritarian regime only serves to further undermine this resilience regardless of the veracity of this assessment.

Overall, the Covid-19 pandemic is but one of a series of crises that have been exploited to drive wedges into German society. And while Russia may currently be the main benefactor of these divisions, the antipathies that fueled this polarization and the key "wedge-drivers" are decidedly German.

4. Conclusion

It will take years to come to grips with the full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on German society. This report is just the opening of a discussion, a first examination of the unique confluence of forces and events that enabled the rise of a national movement that chipped away at the democratic consensus in Europe's largest economy. Nevertheless, looking back on the two plus years of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is possible to sketch out some of the primary dynamics.

The strident protest movement against the German government's Covid-19 measures clearly served as a very public engine of radicalization. The protests helped facilitate the wider spread of conspiracy theories, created the conditions for new alliances between Germany's far right and alternative scenes, and contributed to lowering the threshold for spontaneous violence by its most radical elements. The ability of its members to radicalize online in an endless series of Telegram networks posed a problem for the German security and law enforcement services hoping to prevent random lone acts of political terrorism such as the kidnapping or assassination of prominent officials. Forms of "unclassifiable" politically motivated crime increased, even as indisputable right-wing crimes decreased. Public debate in Germany has roughened significantly, and, in spite of the country's internationally acclaimed efforts to reckon with the crimes of Nazism, a movement arose whose members cast themselves as being persecuted in similar fashion to Jews during the Holocaust.

Yet clear successes from the past two years for the various groups seeking to undermine the German state appear few. The new political party that arose out of the Covid-19 protests, dieBasis, may now boast over 34,000 members – around 5,000 more than the AfD⁹⁹ – but received only 1.6 percent of the vote in the 2021 federal elections. In the state-level elections in 2022, the party scored even lower, with a high of 1.4 percent in Saarland in March 2022. Similarly, the AfD, for all its efforts to become the political arm of the Covid-19 protests and attract new voters, polled at roughly the same level nationally in fall 2022 (15 percent) as it did at the end of December 2019, before the pandemic hit (13 percent). Overall, the movement never represented anything more than a minority, albeit one with a potential for anti-democratic extremism. Broad public support existed throughout the pandemic for the measures imposed by the German government and has continued even as the challenge posed by the pandemic faded in importance for Germans.

Yet, when surveyed in mid-2022, Germans nevertheless perceived their country as highly polarized around issues to do with the pandemic and expressed little faith in the ability of their government to handle the challenges it faces. In the context of an ongoing economic and information war with Russia, the expansion of a subset of the German population that may reject many of the basic premises of democracy, as well as demonstrating a vulnerability to Russian influence operations, is a worrying trend. As Germany seeks to navigate a profound reassessment of its relationship with Russia, the latest expansion of a conspiratorial, seemingly Moscow-aligned scene to new audiences and the suspicions this will

engender in the rest of German society will likely continue to dog Germany's longer-term foreign and security policy (re)development.

Looking back, what should be made of the two years marked by the Covid-19 pandemic and the return of large-scale war to the European continent? In a September 2022 interview, Christoph Becker of pro-democracy think tank Zentrum Liberale Moderne summarized that "the Querdenken movement fed on a fundamental skepticism and mistrust towards democratic institutions and their representatives, the media, science, and the economy. The movement made such mistrust perceptible, also in western Germany, and opened the door for anti-democratic radicalization in the so-called societal middle."¹⁰⁰ Though the protestors may not have flocked to the far right in droves, they failed to flee from it when drawn together by common purpose. And given the relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and support for extreme-right positions, what was planted during the Covid-19 protests may still bear fruit.

As the war in Ukraine continues, these fears about the inability of the German government and the decay of German society are also a boon to Vladimir Putin. After all, "Vladimir Putin is a master at manipulating fear [...] He knows fear's value as a political commodity," as Fiona Hill noted in a 2022 BBC lecture.¹⁰¹ Fear can paralyze a population and has been exploited by populists and would-be strongmen throughout history. Overcoming it requires access to knowledge and a clear understanding of the truth.¹⁰² Distorting the truth, through myths about COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, or one's fellow citizens is a necessary step in this process. As Germany seeks to navigate a profound reassessment of its relationship with Russia, overcoming these fears and combatting the spread of disinformation will likely continue to be a challenge.

The fact that the Covid-19 protest scene was able to segue effortlessly from opposing German pandemic measures to criticizing the country's support for Ukraine and spreading Russian disinformation reveals both the nature of these groups' opposition to the rest of society and the national security risk they pose. It is clear that, rather than simply opposing lockdowns or vaccinations, the key figures of the Covid-19 protest scene were driven by a more fundamental hostility to democracy that can seamlessly incorporate both downplaying Russia's war crimes and spreading its propaganda.¹⁰³ Tracing the apparent origins of some of the conspiratorial narratives around Ukraine that have circulated within this scene provides yet another indication of Russia's intent to steer such polarized groupings. In this context, Germans' perception of stark differences of opinion within society – especially on issues on which a seemingly large majority agreed – in addition to their lack of faith in the government to respond appropriately to crises are markers of success.

The success enjoyed by the far right, and by the AfD in particular, in former East Germany points to the existence of significant lingering structural and political problems that are fueling anti-democratic sentiment. The question posed by Nachtwey, Schäfer, and Frei in December 2020 – "What sort of society gives rise to such movements, [and] what are their structural prerequisites?" – therefore remains as urgent as ever.¹⁰⁴ And not only in relation to Germany's eastern states. The success of the Covid-19 protest movement in more

prosperous western Germany, and the fundamental hostility to democracy within its ranks, reveals that this question might also be asked further west of the Elbe. The future of not only Germany's democratic integrity and resilience but also its foreign policy lies in the response.

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- ^{3.} See More in Common Germany (2022). *Navigieren im Ungewissen: Impulse zur Zukunft der Gesellschaft: #1: Was macht die Pandemie mit dem gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt?*. March 2022. Available at: https://www.moreincommon.de/media/loceahag/moreincommon_navigierenimungewissen_1.pdf, Michael Kretschmer, see Arndt Ginzel, Henrik Merker & Christian Rohde (2021). "Mordpläne gegen Kretschmer auf Telegram". *ZDF*. December 7, 2021. Available at: <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/corona-leugner-sachsen-kretschmer-mordplaene-telegram-100.html>, and Sam Denney (2022). "A Foiled Coup Attempt in Germany and the Danger of Conspiracy Theories". *Lawfare*. December 12, 2022. Available at: <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/foiled-coup-attempt-germany-and-danger-conspiracy-theories>.
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- ^{11.} The word *Spaziergang* was appropriated by the Querdenker and other Covid-19 protestors. It refers to unregistered protests organized at short notice, seemingly to best defy the German security and law enforcement services and avoid counter protests. That this format does not require the organizers to take a clear position and thus risk alienating participants is another advantage.
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 - ^{13.} Quoted in Frank Jansen (2022). "Bis zu 100.000 Querdenker in NRW im Internet". *Der Tagesspiegel*. January 21, 2022. Available at: <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/bis-zu-100-000-querdenker-in-nrw-im-internet-verfassungsschutz-sieht-riesengrosse-virtuelle-szene/27996552.html>.
 - ^{14.} Constanze Stelzenmüller, quoted in "The war in Ukraine is going to change geopolitics profoundly". *The Economist*. March 5, 2022. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2022/03/05/the-war-in-ukraine-is-going-to-change-geopolitics-profoundly>.
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- ⁵⁴. Quoted in "Verfassungsschützer sehen AfD als Treiber radikaler Coronaproteste". *Der Spiegel*. December 23, 2021. Available at: <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/corona-radikale-proteste-verfassungsschuetzer-sehen-afd-als-treiber-a-e74c734e-0503-4813-bb8e-6b34abd9adb5>.
- ⁵⁵. *Lügenpresse* (lit. "press of lies") is a disparaging propagandist term for the mass media dating back to the 19th century. It saw heavy usage during the Nazi period.

- ⁵⁶. Interviewed by the author on June 23, 2022. Interview conducted in German; responses translated by the author.
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- ⁵⁸. Lamberty & Nocun, *Fake Facts* (p. 178).
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- ⁶⁶. Die Bundesregierung (2022). "Politisch motivierte Kriminalität erreicht neuen Höchststand". May 11, 2022. Available at: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/kriminalitaetsstatistik-pmk-2016140>.
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- ⁶⁹. Sebastian Leber (2021). "Ein Angstsszenario nach dem anderen: Die Mahnwachbewegung als Wiege der Coronaleugner-Szene", in Heike Kleffner & Matthias Meissner (eds). *Fehlender Mindestabstand: Die Coronakrise und die Netzwerke der Demokratiefinde*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder.
- ⁷⁰. See Casey A. Klostad et al. (2019). "What drives people to believe in Zika conspiracy theories?". *Palgrave Communications*, 5(36). Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-019-0243-8#Sec9>.
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