

Amadeu Antonio Stiftung (ed.) – Analysis Paper

# **COVID deniers get behind Putin's information war**

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## **German Nazis lend their support to Ukrainian ultranationalists**

An analysis of far-right narratives, disinformation and the mobilisation of conspiracy  
ideologies – and what we can do to combat this

## The Russia-Ukraine conflict: an analysis of far-right narratives, disinformation and the mobilisation of conspiracy ideologies – and what we can do to combat this

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The war waged by the Russian government under Vladimir Putin against Ukraine is being accompanied by a huge flood of information. When looking at online channels, it can sometimes be difficult to perceive the political motivation behind this disinformation, especially since the far-right is still working out how to weave the war narrative into its own worldview. This analysis paper by the **de:hate** monitoring project run by the Amadeu Antonio Foundation – supplemented by action recommendations from the project “**debunk** – confronting anti-Semitism based on conspiracy theories” – aims to show the dangers associated with the narratives propagated online by far-right groups.

Far-right actors in Germany are leveraging the escalating developments in Ukraine to their own ends and attempting to integrate the events of war into their own conspiracy-ideology-influenced worldview. The Amadeu Antonio Foundation’s de:hate project has collated common narratives that are currently being supported by the various far-right scenes in Germany. The groups are clearly united in their racist discourse on refugees, whereas opinions on Putin or Ukraine appear to be divided. Conspiracy ideologists from the “Querdenker” [lateral thinker] movement, for example, have always relied on media outlets aligned with the Kremlin, and are now helping to spread Putin’s disinformation and support his information war. The neo-Nazi scene, by contrast, sees the war as a unique opportunity to revive the myth of the National Socialist struggle for liberation by supporting Ukraine’s own fight for freedom.

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### Narrative 1 :

#### **The war is part of an imagined Jewish global conspiracy**

As ever, the worldview of many far-right proponents and anti-Semitic conspiracy ideologists is shaped by the fear of an alleged global elite that is conspiring against “the people”. The far right is now projecting this classic anti-Semitic conspiracy narrative on the war – and is fanning the flames of hate toward Jews in the process. German neo-Nazis like *Tommy Frenck* are disseminating shareable anti-Semitic images that depict Vladimir Putin as a Jew alongside Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the Jewish President of Ukraine. The advantage for the neo-Nazis: they don’t have to choose a side. Instead, they can simply spread their idea of an ancestral enemy. Using the caption “Neither the Russian nor the Ukrainian people are our enemies!”, the Jews are held accountable for the horrors of war – an entirely delusional view that is at odds with reality. The Austrian disinformation channel “*AUFI*” offers a more indirect take on this narrative. As the group writes on Telegram: “The Ukraine crisis seems to be entirely in line with the globalists’ plan”. The post has more than 300,000 hits. *Björn Höcke*, the chairperson of the Thuringia chapter of the political group Alternative for Germany (AfD), is also sharing content from *AUFI* stating that the war “is a premeditated plan by the globalists”.

Conspiracy ideologist *Bodo Schiffman* elaborates on what the plan involves: he believes the pandemic will now be superseded by the war as a means of masking the elite’s actual goal: to usher in the “Great Reset”. According to this interpretation, both the coronavirus



pandemic and the war in Ukraine are the instruments of clandestine, Jewish-leaning puppet masters used for the purpose of bringing about a “Great Reset”, or a new world order with aims that are beneficial only for the conspirators and that contravene the will of “the people” or “peoples”. They believe unvaccinated persons were isolated during the pandemic as a means of dividing society. Now, they contend, the war’s aim is to isolate the Russians and lead to further division. Why? In order to bring about an “open war” all over the world and a “reduction in the human population”. Schiffmann believes this, too. In a video message he states that in the event of a nuclear war, the only people to benefit would be those “who believe 90 percent of people are surplus to requirements anyway”.

### Information box: Anti-Semitic codes

People do not simply wear their anti-Semitism tendencies on their sleeve; it is steeped in a long tradition of dog whistles, where other terminology is used in places of references to an alleged Jewish global conspiracy. Such terms include “globalists”, the “secret elite” and the “New World Order” (NWO). An in-depth explanation of the various terms is available on the [Amadeu Antonio Foundation](https://www.amadeuantoniofoundation.org/) website.

Narrative 2:

**“The ruling class is using war to distract us from corona”**

Elements of the alternative right also believe that the Russia-Ukraine conflict is not a war as such, but rather smoke and mirrors on the part of the “ruling class” (predominantly governments aided by the press). Coverage of the war by the fact-based media according to journalistic criteria is seen in conspiracy ideology circles as “scaremongering” by these powers within society. The goal, they claim, is to distract people from the actual “truth” behind the pandemic – namely that there never was a pandemic. They offer proof in the form of the huge demonstrations held in solidarity with Ukraine. These congregations were allowed to happen, whereas demonstrations protesting against coronavirus measures were made a criminal offence (the fact that these protests are nevertheless being held despite not following the rules is conveniently overlooked).

Distrust on the far right is also being fuelled by the fact that headlines are now being dominated by the war rather than the pandemic. The far-right magazine *Compact*



believes the “coronavirus narrative” is on the verge of breakdown, which is why “the fear of World War III [is intended to] bind us anew to the ruling elite”. Both can be combined: there are now stories circulating that there are bio labs in Ukraine that produce diseases to be used against the people. The aim of the war? To destroy these laboratories. The German news station Tagesschau has already checked the alleged research conducted

by a Bulgarian journalist whose name is stated in the reports and dismissed it as unreliable. Nevertheless, this story is being spread on *Telegram* among followers of the

“*Querdenker*” scene in particular. It has also received traction from Russian-owned media such as *RT Deutsch* and websites loyal to the Kremlin such as the “*Anti-Spiegel*”.

Influential actors within conspiracy ideology groups are jumping on the story as a means of justifying the Russian attacks. Through this, the Russian invasion is being positioned as a campaign of liberation. The lawyer *Markus Haintz* and the former Tagesschau television presenter *Eva Herman* are two proponents of this angle. Within the *QAnon movement* – another group concerned with espousing conspiracy ideologies – a different narrative is being promoted stating that Putin, acting under the orders of former US president Donald Trump, is seeking to destroy an organised child trafficking ring under the cover of war.

Narrative 3:

### **The desire for a National Socialist war of liberation**

Volunteer battalions are also participating in the war of defence against Russia, one of which is Asov, a far-right militia. Asov is home to profoundly anti-democratic actors and neo-Nazis. The militia’s aim is to create an ultranationalist state of Ukraine with clear racist and anti-Semitic views on who may be part of this state (cf. [Belltower.News](#)). Thus, while their struggle is directed first and foremost against Russia, the secondary focus is against the Ukrainian government and its Jewish president. Asov may be a prominent group, but in relation to the rest of the Ukrainian military it is in a clear minority. Even so, in Russian propaganda this regiment is often held up as representative of all Ukrainian fighters in order to justify the war on grounds of “denazification”.

However, Asov is not receiving ample attention solely from the Russian side. For years now, German neo-Nazis have been trying to train with the far-right militia. Now that war has broken out, these neo-Nazis believe an armed National Socialist struggle for liberation is upon them.

The responses on social media reflect this: the former National Democratic Party of Germany politician *Tobias Schulz* – AKA *Baldur Landogart* – has strong ties to Asov and was always welcomed among them as a guest during his trips to Ukraine. Referring to a video about the militia, Schulz writes: “Anyone who wants to take part in a true



struggle instead of going for walk for the thousandth time because of the coronavirus can get in touch”.

Now, during the war, Asov is issuing calls – primarily in English – for more volunteers



across a range of channels. The neo-Nazi music fanzine “*Frontmagazin*” writes that its solidarity lies with “the brave soldiers of the Asov regiment and all other valiant men and combat units which are defending their homeland against a communist invasion and refuse to give up their homes and their freedom without a fight”. The willingness to fight shown by Ukrainian neo-Nazis has left an impression on German neo-Nazis. They believe it not only represents an opportunity to create a homogeneous state, but constitutes a way to wipe out, once and for all, everything and everyone they believe to be an “enemy of the people”. Seeking to turn this theory into practice is the Russian neo-Nazi *Dennis “Nikitin” Kapustin* on his

*Telegram* channel. He is calling on German volunteers to assemble at a location in Ukraine with the aim of joining the war.

Narrative 4:

### **The takeover of Russian propaganda**

The far-right scene has been leaning toward Putin and Russia ever since the dubiously named “Vigils for Peace” in 2014 out of a love of authoritarianism, nationalism and the rejection of the modern liberalism typically linked to “the West”. With Russian media having sowed the seeds of doubt beyond Russia’s borders as to the existence of the coronavirus during the pandemic and spread the narratives of the *Querdenker* movement, state-owned Russian media outlets remain hugely popular in conspiracy ideologist circles. Now, in a time of war – or “special operation”, as the Russian media have to refer to it – these outlets are continuing to adopt these narratives and fan their flames.

The Swiss far-right figure *Ignaz Bearth* refers to a purportedly necessary demilitarisation of Ukraine and considers Putin to be a liberator from “the puppets of a Deep State”. Telegram channels such as the one created by German entrepreneur *Friedemann Mack* share content from channels such as the “*Putin Fanclub*” and alleged Russian reservist associations contending that they are moving on Ukraine purely for the purpose of liberation – entirely in line with Putin’s fantastic “occupation” and “denazification” narrative (cf. [Belltower.News](#)).

All these narratives serve to justify the war of aggression by Russia on Ukraine. This is a worldview propagated by alt-right conspiracy ideologists that is striving to be as consistent in its arguments as possible: When Putin acts as an aggressor who invades a sovereign state, it damages his reputation as a statesmanlike “role model”. Those who are in favour of authoritarian, nationalist leadership but also believe in independent, strong nation states have to come to terms with this contradiction first. On the other hand, many members of the scene do not recognise Ukraine as a sovereign state, instead considering it to either be part of Russia or a “neutral” buffer zone.





Sometimes, justification can be found in the form of anti-Americanism. The Russian media does just this, presenting Ukraine as a purported “puppet state” of the USA, a country that wants only to destroy Russia (cf. [Belltower.News](#)). One extreme way of protecting Putin’s reputation as a role model within the far-right scene is embodied by *Ignaz Bearth*: ultimately, the message is that it would be beneficial if Putin took over the whole of Europe along with Ukraine – overthrowing modern liberalism in the process.

Narrative 5:

### **Racism in the debate surrounding war refugees**

People are fleeing Ukraine to escape the war. This is also a topic of discussion in far-right Internet communities. The prevailing narrative makes a distinction between “culturally close” and “true” refugees and “culturally distant” and “false” refugees, thus following a racist line of reasoning. The right-wing extremist and head of the

AfD Sachsen  
1.398 subscribers



*Identitarian movement*, Martin Sellner, refers to “young Europeans” who – unlike “young Arabs” – want to bring their family to safety so that they, too, can fight. By making this distinction, he evokes a constructed dichotomy that is presented to appear natural: on the one hand, there are the European men who want to get their women and children out of the country so they can fight for it, and on the other there are the men from non-European countries who are migrating to Europe in order to save their own skins. This polarity latches onto the myth propagated by the “*Young Alternative*” of a national war of independence – one that is presented as “heroic, honourable and impressive”, in which European men are defending their supposedly ancestral land at all costs. This is how the “*Young Alternative*” frames it in a paper published on Telegram, leading the group to also call for “neighbouring countries to help take in true refugees of war”. Martin Sellner is not so quick to jump aboard with this narrative: he feels provoked by the purported “refugee welcome party” embraced by members of the far-right scene.

The *Saxony chapter of the AfD* is using the acceptance of “genuine” refugees as an opportunity to demand the deportation of other refugees. The AfD’s representatives in Bavarian parliament, too, identify Ukrainian refugees as “neither Islamists nor economic migrants” – in clear contrast to those who have fled to Germany prior to this war. The far right is united in this view all the way through to the neo-Nazi scene, propagating the narrative that refugees should only have the right to temporary security if they are white.

As part of these debates, Ukrainian women in particular are being sexualised and fetishized above all: “Ukrainian [girl]” is currently the most-searched-for category on the platform Pornhub, and incels throughout Europe are using the war as a chance to live out their misogynistic fantasies. Comments under photos of Ukrainian women in the style of “I’ll always have room for this kind of refugee” are not confined exclusively to far-right *Telegram* channels (cf. [Belltower.News](#)).

## Summary

The examples show that in far-right and anti-democratic circles and among conspiracy ideologists, the angle evolves in response to political world events, yet the narratives are always forged based on the premises of their own ideologies to suit the current political structure of the occasion. Their notion of an “enemy” remains unaffected, while contemporary events are reinterpreted as required. To push the message of anti-Semitism, for example, Putin can be positioned as part of a Jewish global conspiracy. To be able to promote racism, the fear of “illegal, non-white/Christian” refugees is stoked, while Ukrainians are (at least for now) accepted as “true refugees”, albeit with sexist overtones.

Those elements of German society that found solace in “delusional realities” during the coronavirus pandemic are now on the receiving end of anti-democratic worldviews shaped by the Russia-Ukraine war via their channels of disinformation. The underlying narrative here is that they are the chosen ones, because they see that the “secret elite” is continuing its machinations against “the people”, which is why war should be welcomed rather than feared. In practical terms, this could result in further attacks on those portrayed as enemies, not least Jews, democratic politicians and journalists. In essence, this will lead to the destabilisation of democracy as the system of government as well as democratic institutions and processes. Given the current developments, it is important to engage even more closely with these mechanisms of disinformation and conspiracy theories if destabilisation is to be prevented.

## Action

### **Action recommendations from the debunk project – confronting anti-Semitism based on conspiracy theories**

The Russia-Ukraine war is leading to new societal challenges in Germany. Refugees from Ukraine need help. Russian-speaking communities in Germany are being confronted by racism, something which society has to stand up to. And the conspiracy ideologies spread in the wake of the war constitute their own challenge. The Russia-Ukraine war once again illustrates the great dangers that conspiracy ideologies can pose. Not only do they give people the justification to commit violent acts, but they even empower political leaders to commit attacks on other countries. It is imperative to take the dangers associated with conspiracy ideologies seriously and to discourage them from the outset. The five recommendations below are intended to serve as a basic social and political tool kit:

#### **1. Conspiracy ideologies may not go unchallenged**

Whether online, in peer groups or among colleagues: any time a conspiracy ideology rears its head, a democratic voice has to object to it. Sometimes, it is enough simply to point out that the argument is a conspiracy ideology or an issue fraught with danger. Depending on how often the argument is raised, it may be necessary to set clear boundaries.

#### **2. Conspiracy ideologies need to be understood**

The notion persists that conspiracy ideologies are simply fake news or can be attributed to misconceptions or a lack of education. In actual fact, conspiracy ideologies are dangerous, dogmatic worldviews based on a friend/foe or good/evil framework. They also contain the message that we are living in a state of emergency and something has to be done about it. Time and again, people who believe in a conspiracy ideology have felt called upon to use violence against the alleged conspiracy or conspirators. Understanding this aspect of conspiracy ideologies helps to ensure that society takes such beliefs seriously.

### **3. Conspiracy ideologists have to be confronted by boundaries**

In exceptional sociopolitical situations such as the coronavirus pandemic or the Russia-Ukraine war, many people are ravenous for information. In looking for causes for such events, many people all too easily stumble across channels or websites espousing conspiracy ideologies. Conspiracy ideologists have worked this out and have learned to disguise their messages as life advice or a critique of society. To lay bare this mimicry, it is important to educate people and make it as difficult as possible for conspiracy ideologists to spread their messages.

### **4. Conspiracy ideologies require professional counselling**

People in contact with those who have a worldview based on a conspiracy ideology can soon become overwhelmed and may decide to cut off contact with said person. While this is understandable to some degree, they are giving up their chance to reach that person. Studies show that people who manage to maintain a reasonably intact social relationship with a conspiracy ideologist can definitely have an influence on their line of thinking. Of course, any conversations or encounters will be tough and draining, which is why it is important to receive professional guidance and counselling. A list of recommended counselling services is available on [Belltower.News](#).

### **5. Conspiracy ideologies are ineffective when critical faculties and a tolerance for ambiguity remain intact**

Studies show that people adopt conspiracy ideologies when they feel impotent, powerless or hopeless. To counteract this, democratic society should promote attitudes that critically engage with society and politics. A high level of transparency in processes and events and the existence of critical journalism are also conducive to this. In addition, democracy needs to be seen not only as a form of government, but as belonging to the underlying fabric of society and life itself. Experiences with democracy – including those that contradict or oppose one's own ideas and learning to compromise and cooperate – are important.

*The Amadeu Antonio Foundation monitors phenomena that constitute a threat to democracy in order to draw conclusions as to how to prevent this and to offer assistance. Analysis reports published by the Amadeu Antonio Foundation are a response to the latest threats, so that the public can be made aware of how they put democracy at risk.*

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Amadeu Antonio Foundation  
Novalisstr. 12  
10115 Berlin

Phone + 49 (0) 30 240 886 10  
[info@amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de](mailto:info@amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de)  
[www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de](http://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de)

Authors:

de:hate project - monitoring far-right phenomena online  
[de.hate@amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de](mailto:de.hate@amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de)

debunk project – confronting anti-Semitism based on conspiracy theories  
[debunk@amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de](mailto:debunk@amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de)

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