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REICHSBURGER: AN OLD GERMAN IDEOLOGY IN NEW CLOTHING?



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On December 7, 2022, thousands of police raided more than 150 properties in Germany in a large-scale raid. Twenty-five of the 54 suspected members and supporters of the *Patriotische Union* were arrested on charges of forming a terrorist organization that planned to carry out an armed coup against the constitutional order of the Federal Republic of Germany. German investigators came across the clandestine Patriotic Union network during arrests of members of a similar group in April 2022. Led by businessman Heinrich XIII, Prince Reuss, the conspirators—including soldiers, police officers, and a judge—aimed to forcibly replace the incumbent government with a new political system. These individuals share the ideological foundation of the so-called *Reichsbürger* (“citizens of the Reich”) ideology, as well as influences from QAnon.¹ The large-scale raid, as well as the network and its intent to stage a violent coup, were exceptional in Germany’s post-war history: the raid was the largest anti-terrorism operation in the history of the Federal Republic.²

There are only a few in-depth analyses of the German *Reichsbürger* movement. For this reason, this article includes my own observations of rallies and public *Reichsbürger* events, as well as my monitoring of the scene online and on social media. The relevance of an analysis of the *Reichsbürger* movement is illustrated by three emerging dynamics: 1) the increasing networking of the German extreme right since the beginning of the protests against governmental measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic; 2) the increasing influence and numerical growth of this extreme-right scene over approximately the last ten years; and 3) the simultaneous growth of comparable movements with similar ideologies around the world, especially in Austria and the US.

¹ “Festnahmen von 25 mutmaßlichen Mitgliedern und Unterstützern einer terroristischen Vereinigung sowie Durchsuchungsmaßnahmen in elf Bundesländern bei insgesamt 52 Beschuldigten,” Der Generalbundesanwalt beim Bundesgerichtshof, December 7, 2022, accessed January 2, 2023, <https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/aktuelle/Pressemitteilung-vom-07-12-2022.html?nn=478184>.

² Cristoph Koopman, “Sie nannten ihn nur den ‘Prinzen’,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 20, 2022, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/reichsbuerger-heinrich-xiii-prinz-reuss-bad-lobenstein-razzia-terror-1.5718467?reduced=true>.

History

The basic ideas behind the *Reichsbürger* ideology were developed more than 50 years ago. At that time, there were several actors who, partly on the basis of their experiences in the Third Reich, wanted to reintroduce National Socialism. In addition to their glorification of Hitler and Holocaust denial, from the 1970s they came to espouse the idea that there had been no peace treaty ending the Second World War, only an armistice. This view was early advocated by the jurist and right-wing extremist Manfred Roeder.³ In 1978, he appointed himself a representative of the government of the Third Reich, which in his opinion was still in force. Seven years later, the railroad worker Wolfgang Ebel founded the group *Kommissarische Reichsregierung* (KRR), which is often seen as the precursor to the *Reichsbürger* movement. His theses were based heavily on those of Roeder. Ebel appointed himself Reich Chancellor and sold fake identity documents he produced himself.⁴

Around the time of the reunification of Germany and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the New Right was on the rise across Europe. However, the *Reichsbürger*, who were still rather unknown at the time, usually distinguished themselves—as representatives of the old, National Socialist right wing—from the New Right, which officially worked within the political system rather than against it.⁵ The extent to which the *Reichsbürger* continued to be anchored in the neo-Nazi scene after the collapse of the Soviet Union is illustrated by the key extremist figure of Horst Mahler, who in 1994 founded the *Deutsches Kolleg* (German College) for the dissemination of anti-Semitic, racist, historical-revisionist, and *Reichsbürger* ideas. Mahler has been one of the leading propagators of *Reichsbürger* ideology since the turn of the millennium.

In 1995, another significant group with a similar outlook appeared on the scene: *Freistaat Preußen* (Free State of Prussia). Neither group is still active, although some of their initiators are. Until 2010, new groups were founded at a steady pace, and their ideology slowly began to gain a foothold outside the extreme-right-wing milieu, yet it remained rather unknown to the general public. In 2006, the first *Reichsbürger*-inspired political party, the Interim Party Germany, was founded. By 2010, there were growing reports of people proclaiming themselves “rulers” of the entire German empire or a small, often privately owned, area thereof. Thus, an increasing number of areas and buildings came to be demarcated as allegedly no longer on German state territory. One example is the Krampfer Mansion, which housed the so-called Principality of Germania in 2009 before being evicted by the police shortly afterwards. Although the Principality did not continue to operate, the ideology spread nationwide thanks to subsequent media coverage. The leading actors of the project also began to incorporate esoteric elements into their worldview, elements that would later become increasingly apparent in other groups as well.⁶

Therefore, there had been many legal proceedings against members of the *Reichsbürger*, but serious crimes had not been directly associated with the movement. As a result, the perpetrators were generally regarded by society at large as insane, but not necessarily dangerous.⁷ This assessment

³ Jan Rathje, *Reichsbürger, Selbstverwalter und Souveränisten* (Münster: Unrast Verlag, 2017).

⁴ Jan Freitag and Michael Hüllen, *Entwicklung der Ideologie der “Reichsbürger”* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2017), 164.

⁵ Jan-Gerrit Keil, “Zur Abgrenzung des Milieus der “Reichsbürger” – Pathologisierung des Politischen und Politisierung des Pathologischen.” Bethesda: PubMed Central, 2021. In: *Nature Public Health Emergency Collection* Vol.15 Issue 3, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11757-021-00668-7>.

⁶ “Polizei löst ‘Fürstentum Germania’ auf,” *Morgenpost*, May 19, 2009, <https://www.morgenpost.de/brandenburg/article104144553/Polizei-loest-Fuerstentum-Germania-auf.html>.

⁷ Keil, 2021.

changed after members of the *Deutsche Polizei Hilfswerk* (German Police Relief Organization) attempted to tie up a bailiff during an eviction in 2013. Supporters of the group, which was later dissolved, were also considered to be trained in the use of weapons,⁸ and almost a quarter of a ton of illegal explosives were found at the home of a member of another group in the *Reichsbürger* movement.⁹

Around the same time, the Kingdom of Germany, which would be widely publicized through media reports, was founded by Peter Fitzek, who had crowned himself king. In addition to the classic conspiracy theories of the *Reichsbürger*, Fitzek holds strongly esoteric views. He became popular due to his dogged efforts to make himself and his followers completely independent from Federal Republic legislation. He managed to get his several hundred followers to deposit almost three million euros into his own bank account and set up several insurance-like structures. In addition, the organization occupied several buildings on a former hospital site before it was evicted in 2017.¹⁰

Even though the rhetoric used by *Reichsbürger* was already very radical, and massive threats of violence against state institutions and their representatives were often made, the first incident involving armed violence occurred only in August 2016. After a failed eviction from his house, *Reichsbürger* Adrian Ursache was seriously injured in an exchange of fire with the police officers who had been called in; he tried to shoot a police officer in the face, but the latter was not killed thanks to his protective gear. Many supporters gathered on Ursache's property, some of whom violently attacked the police.¹¹ One of those present was Wolfgang Plan, whose legal weapons were confiscated only a short time later. During the confiscation, he fatally shot one policeman through a door and injured three others.¹² These events brought the *Reichsbürger* into the public eye and prompted an increase in police and intelligence surveillance that continues to this day. Within the right-wing extremist and *Reichsbürger* scenes, both perpetrators were celebrated as genuine patriots and their actions were seen as justified self-defense. From that point on, the number of *Reichsbürger* began to increase steadily, even if the phenomenon rapidly disappeared from collective memory.

This collective amnesia lifted with the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Only a few weeks after the first lockdown began in early 2020, the first counter-demonstrations took place in several German cities. Over time, existing networks organized themselves and new ones were formed to protest the government's protective measures. Many of them came together under the collective term *Querdenker*, meaning lateral thinkers or contrarians. Various *Reichsbürger* groups quickly joined the protests, as evidenced, among other things, by the increasing number of Reich flags and corresponding signs visible at anti-lockdown or anti-mask protests. Once again, ideological elements were transferred to potentially susceptible people in the orbit of the *Querdenker* movement, some of

⁸ Jan Freitag, "'Reichsbürger.' Eine Bedrohung für die Demokratie oder lächerliche Verschwörungstheorie? Das Beispiel Brandenburgs." (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014) In: *Jahrbuch Extremismus & Demokratie*, Issue 26, 172, https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845260518_155.

⁹ "Chief chemist on the run," *taz*, July 23, 2013, <https://taz.de/Parallelwelt-der-Reichsbuerger!/5062608/>.

¹⁰ Jan Rathje, "*Wir sind wieder da*". *Die "Reichsbürger". Überzeugung, Gefahren und Handlungsstrategien* (Berlin: Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, 2014), https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/w/files/pdfs/reichsbuerger_web.pdf.

¹¹ "Wie aus 'Mister Germany' ein Reichsbürger wurde," *Stern TV*, December 14, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170507081755/http://www.stern.de/tv/der-fall-adrian-ursache--wie-aus-einem--mister-germany--ein-reichsbuerger-wurde--7238062.html>.

¹² "Reichsbürger erschießt SEK-Polizisten: So verlief der Einsatz," *Abendzeitung München*, October 20, 2016, <https://www.abendzeitung-muenchen.de/bayern/reichsbuerger-erschiesst-sek-polizisten-so-verlief-der-einsatz-art-365861>.

whom increasingly came to identify themselves as *Reichsbürger*.¹³ The preliminary climax was the storming of the staircase to the Reichstag, which clearly emanated from the *Reichsbürger* movement. An assault on the parliament had been advocated for years, but only the momentum of the crisis occasioned by the pandemic made such an attempt possible.

Since then, there have been an increasing number of cases of people from the *Reichsbürger* movement deliberately trying to infiltrate and influence the organizational structures of *Querdenker* groups. This has led to some internal conflicts, as many *Querdenker* have more moderate views and do not want to support the extremist positions of some *Reichsbürger* or fear public disrepute because of these ties. However, there are many instances of cooperation, as well as meetings of *Querdenker* coordinators with such esoteric and conspiratorial *Reichsbürger* groups as the *Königreich Deutschland*.¹⁴ In September 2021, there was a case involving an “independent” *Querdenker* school in southern Bavaria that was shut down for lacking an official license. Although in this case the symbolic country of reference was not the former German empire but the current Russian Federation, it can also be considered part of the extended *Reichsbürger* movement, since German constitutional power was not recognized.¹⁵

The ongoing globalization of extreme-right ideologies does not stop in Germany. Due to partially compatible segments of its ideology, QAnon has been able to gain a foothold among *Reichsbürger* and *Querdenker*. The German Amadeu Antonio Foundation published a detailed report in 2020 that pointed out early on the links between QAnon and local right-wing extremist movements, especially *Reichsbürger*.¹⁶ An example of the overlap was the major NATO exercise “DEFENDER-Europe 20” planned for 2020, which then-U.S. President Donald Trump alleged was a secret operation to free Germany from what he called the “Merkel dictatorship.” The pandemic-related cancellation of the exercise was interpreted in the United States as reflecting an internal power struggle. This conspiratorial narrative was shared by prominent *Reichsbürger* activists such as Attila Hildmann and actors from the *Querdenker* movement.¹⁷ Frequently, at demonstrations against pandemic protection measures, one could see such QAnon symbolism as the hashtag #WWG1WGA (“Where we go one, we go all”) or simply the letter “Q.”

There were also violent incidents committed by suspected *Reichsbürger* in 2022. These included a case in which a police officer was injured by a gunshot during an eviction,¹⁸ one where a police officer

¹³ Frederik Schindler, “Reichsbürger infiltrieren Querdenker-Szene mit rechtsextremen Ideen,” *Welt*, September 9, 2021, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article233697240/Reichsbuerger-infiltrieren-Querdenker-Szene-mit-rechtsextremen-Ideen.html>.

¹⁴ Wulf Rohwedder, “‘Querdenker’ im ‘Königreich,’” *Tagesschau*, November 19, 2020, <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/querdenken-reichsbuerger-101.html>.

¹⁵ Behörden schließen mutmaßliche “Querdenker”- Schule in Oberbayern, *Zeit Online*, September 23, 2021, Accessed January 21, 2023, https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2021-09/rosenheim-schechen-oberbayern-illegale-schule-schliessung-querdenker-reichsbuerger?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F.

¹⁶ “QAnon in Germany,” Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, 2020, accessed January 2, 2023, https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/DeHate-QAnon-Englisch-210409-Wigwam_AAS_dehate_QAnon_engl-FINAL.pdf.

¹⁷ Katrin Bennhold, “QAnon is thriving in Germany. The extreme right is delighted,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/11/world/europe/qanon-is-thriving-in-germany-the-extreme-right-is-delighted.html>.

¹⁸ Olaf Przybilla, “Zwischen Wahn und Tatverantwortlichkeit,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, September 23, 2022, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/bayern/coburg-reichsbuerger-oberbuergermeister-brandanschlag-1.5662530>.

was struck by a car driven by a suspected *Reichsbürger*,¹⁹ and one where a (fake) bomb and arson attack was allegedly directed against the mayor of a city.²⁰ As of mid-2022, figures from the German domestic intelligence service point to the spread of the *Reichsbürger* movement. Whereas ten years ago, the number of *Reichsbürger* was guessed at a few thousand, by 2021 there were already 21,000. In 2020–21, a growth of about 1,000 individuals was recorded. In 2020, the following crimes were attributed to *Reichsbürger*: 148 coercions and threats; 125 violent offenses; 78 extortion offenses; 30 resistance offences; and 218 others.²¹ Since 2017, the total number of offenses has decreased slightly, but compared to previous years, an exceptional increase in crimes committed by the movement (totaling over 1,000) was recorded in 2021. Since intensified monitoring began in 2016, 1,050 arms licenses have been revoked, but 500 *Reichsbürger* are still authorized to possess weapons.²²

As indicated in the introduction to this article, the *Patriotische Union*, its coup plans, and the major raid on December 7, 2022, are remarkable events for Germany. According to an ongoing investigation, a detachment of active and former soldiers was supposed to storm the German parliament and kidnap or assassinate specific politicians. Afterwards, conspirators designated to occupy specific political posts were to be installed and a new army was to be built up. Due to their numerical inferiority, the conspirators believed that at the moment of their attack on parliament, they were supported by a secret organization called “Alliance,” which was composed of intelligence services and armies from other countries (among those mentioned in the report of the attorney general are Russia and the US).²³ Members of the group underwent privately organized combat and survival training and constantly sought to acquire additional weapons and military equipment. During searches in December 2022, 93 weapons were found (of which only about 10 were illegal), as well as thousands of rounds of ammunition. In addition, gold and silver worth millions of euros were seized.

Among the accused are a wealthy real estate businessman, several ex-commanders of the German Armed Forces, active soldiers and police officers, a lawyer and a former Member of Parliament of the right-wing German party *Alternative für Deutschland* (“Alternative for Germany”), and a current judge from Berlin. Also arrested was a Russian citizen suspected of having established contact with representatives of the Russian Federation.²⁴ In addition to elements of classic *Reichsbürger* ideology, the prosecutor's office also reports strong esoteric beliefs and QAnon conspiracy narratives. For example, members of the group believed that the highest members of government and society performed pedophilic and satanic rites and drank children's blood to rejuvenate themselves. Other similarities with QAnon include the belief in Donald Trump as a savior,²⁵ claims of contact with

¹⁹ “Reichsbürger’ von Boxberg hortete zig Waffen und NS-Gegenstände,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 21, 2022, accessed October 9, 2022, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/gesellschaft/kriminalitaet/boxberg-reichsbuerger-hortete-waffen-und-ns-gegenstaende-17971035.html>.

²⁰ “Anklage gegen ‘Reichsbürger’ wegen versuchten Mordes,” *swr aktuell*, September 12, 2022, accessed October 9, 2022, <https://www.swr.de/swraktuell/baden-wuerttemberg/suedbaden/mord-anklage-nach-polizisten-attacke-efringen-kirchen-100.html>.

²¹ “Zahlen und Fakten,” Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2021, accessed October 9, 2022, https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/DE/themen/reichsbuerger-und-selbstverwalter/zahlen-und-fakten/zahlen-und-fakten_node.html.

²² “Zahlen und Fakten,” Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2021, accessed October 9, 2022, https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/DE/themen/reichsbuerger-und-selbstverwalter/zahlen-und-fakten/zahlen-und-fakten_node.html.

²³ “Festnahmen von 25 mutmaßlichen Mitgliedern und Unterstützern.”

²⁴ “Reichsbürger-Prinz soll im russischen Konsulat gefeiert haben,” *Focus*, December 13, 2022, accessed January 3, 2023, https://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/reichsbuerger-sollen-kontakte-nach-russland-gehabt-haben_id_180452329.html.

²⁵ “Die Umstürzler von nebenan,” *taz*, December 9, 2022, <https://taz.de/Razzia-gegen-Reichsbuerger/!5898636/>.

extraterrestrials and “Reptiloids,” and the propagation of stories about the supposed rule of the “Deep State.”²⁶

Ideological and Sociological Structure

The *Reichsbürger* are by definition not a single movement, as the term is more of a collective concept for heterogeneous individuals and groups of people who are often only very loosely in contact and do not have a uniform worldview or a shared agenda. Nor does the movement have a designated umbrella organization. Only about 10 percent are even considered to belong to an organized group.²⁷ Moreover, they often do not refer to themselves as *Reichsbürger*, but rather as *Staatenlose* (stateless persons), *Natürliche Personen* (self-governing persons), or *Bürger des Freistaates Preußen* (citizens of the free state of Prussia).

Nevertheless, *Reichsbürger* always propagate one or more of the following assumptions that are central to their ideological worldview. Basically, they claim that the Federal Republic of Germany, whose German name is *Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (BRD), does not exist as a legitimate and sovereign state. Instead, the laws, the form of government, and the borders of the German Empire are said to still be valid, since they were not legitimately abolished after 1945.²⁸ The political scientist Jan Rathje distinguishes three strands of *Reichsbürger* historical revisionism: those who believe the BRD is not legal or legitimate and the German Reich continues to exist; those who do not believe in the Reich’s continued existence, but still consider the BRD to be illegal; and those who take the more moderate view that the BRD legally exists but is not democratically legitimate.²⁹

In all versions, the alleged lack of a peace treaty after the end of the Second World War is repeatedly referenced to claim that the BRD is merely a private company in the legal form of a limited liability company without the right to exercise its own state power.³⁰ This statement is often supported by false evidence. One example of this is the official name of the German identification card, which is called *Personalausweis*. Since *Personal* translates to “personnel,” this supposedly proves that the people living in Germany are only employees and not citizens. The company, and thus Germany, is allegedly ruled by secret powers that are mostly located in the United States.³¹ This belief in secret rulers pulling strings in the background unites all individual groups in the *Reichsbürger* scene and creates links to other radical worldviews. As a solution, the *Reichsbürger* either form allegedly sovereign mini-kingdoms or place themselves in the line of succession of the old imperial rulers.

Some also try to isolate themselves as much as possible and seek independence from state institutions. For this purpose, they create or acquire fictitious and invalid license plates, driver’s licenses, and identification documents and try to govern their private property independently from

²⁶ Lars Wienand, “Sie hofften auf Hilfe von Außerirdischen,” *t-online*, December 16, 2022, https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/innenpolitik/id_100096496/mutmassliche-terrorgruppe-hoffte-auf-hilfe-von-aliens.html.

²⁷ “Reichsbürger im Tatort und die Realität in Bayern,” *Bayerischer Rundfunk* 24, June 3, 2018, <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/reichsbuerger-im-tatort-und-die-realitaet-in-bayern,QtuYvNm>.

²⁸ “Zwischen Verschwörungsmmythen, Esoterik und Holocaustleugnung – die Reichsideologie,” *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, October 14, 2015, <https://www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtsextremismus/210330/zwischen-verschwoerungsmmythen-esoterik-und-holocaustleugnung-die-reichsideologie>.

²⁹ Rathje, *Reichsbürger*.

³⁰ “Reichsbürger und kein Ende,” Gewerkschaft der Polizei, accessed September 9, 2021, https://www.gdp.de/gdp/gdpls/nsf/id/DE_Reichsbuerger.

³¹ Gerhard Schumacher, *Vorwärts in die Vergangenheit–Durchblick durch einige reichsideologische Nebelwände* (Hannover: JMB-Verlag, 2016).

the BRD. They also try to evade government measures, avoid paying fines and taxes, refuse to show up for court hearings, and avoid obligatory appointments with the public administration. Instead, they try to live according to an arbitrarily defined natural right.³²

Some actors are repeatedly observed to be grifters, in Germany sometimes referred to as “milieu managers.”³³ They earn money by spreading ideologies or otherwise profiting from their dissemination and support. In the case of the *Reichsbürger*, some of them give seminars on how to avoid taxes and evade the authorities. Some also act as sellers of often-overpriced and invalid documents and certificates.³⁴ In order to increase their sales, they usually try to pass themselves off as problem-solvers while simultaneously dramatizing the problem and the overall situation. Well-connected and skilled in activating and promoting anxieties, they often work in the sector of alleged and far-too-expensive esoteric cures and miracle treatments that are supposed to help with all kinds of ailments and issues.³⁵

In addition to in-person direct communication, *Reichsbürger*—like their counterparts across the extreme-right scene—have made intensive use of the Internet.³⁶ Furthermore, through targeted searches and automated algorithms, the internet and social media make it relatively easy to get trapped in a *Reichsbürger* ideological echo chamber or bubble, which functions as a parallel world promoting radicalization.³⁷ There are also online marketplaces specifically geared toward the *Reichsbürger* milieu. Payments are often made with small amounts of real gold and silver, or sometimes with cryptocurrencies, as there is generally little trust in established institutions such as banks, the media, and security agencies—and, by extension, in fiat currencies. In addition to utilizing alternative means of payment, some groups produce their own media as alternatives to the mainstream ones.³⁸

Despite the *Reichsbürger* movement’s rejection of the BRD and its security organs, there have been repeated dismissals of civil service officials for sympathies therewith. Such cases, especially in the German police, have become more numerous since about 2010, when the scene increasingly became the subject of public discussion. By 2019, there were about 24 cases in which *Reichsbürger* allegations had been accepted as legally valid by public officials. Many other suspected cases are still being investigated and there are currently dismissals from the police service every few months due to *Reichsbürger* commitments.³⁹

Similar cases, often mixed with other right-wing extremist beliefs, have been reported among civilian and military employees of the German armed forces. To date, those dismissed have mostly been relatively isolated in their jobs and have not been part of a larger known *Reichsbürger* network within

³² “Begriff und Erscheinungsformen,” Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, accessed September 9, 2021, https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/DE/themen/reichsbuerger-und-selbstverwalter/begriff-und-erscheinungsformen/begriff-und-erscheinungsformen_node.html.

³³ Keil, 2021.

³⁴ “*Reichsbürger*”: *Fragen und Antworten*, Amadeu-Antonio-Stiftung, September 2018, https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/aas_lpb_broschuere-reichsbuerger.pdf.

³⁵ Keil, 2021.

³⁶ Rathje, *Reichsbürger, Selbstverwalter und Souveränisten*.

³⁷ Amy Ross Arguedas et al., *Echo Chambers, Filter Bubbles, and Polarisation: A Literature Review*, January 19, 2022, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/echo-chambers-filter-bubbles-and-polarisation-literature-review>.

³⁸ This is a personal observation, following online and public discourse amongst *Reichsbürger* actors.

³⁹ “Reichsbürger bei der Polizei: Extremisten im Staatsdienst,” Frankfurter Rundschau, October 26, 2019, <https://www.fr.de/politik/reichsbuerger-reihen-polizei-disziplinarverfahren-gegen-extremisten-staatsdienst-13166960.html>.

government agencies. In some cases, the *Reichsbürger* prefer their own civil defense groups and self-armament over cooperation with the police.⁴⁰ For example, the *Deutsches Polizei Hilfswerk*, which existed from 2012 to 2013, was not founded by a police officer, but refers to a vigilante group with invented uniforms that espoused *Reichsbürger* theories.⁴¹

There are also a small number of prominent individuals who actively represent and propagate elements of the *Reichsbürger* ideology. By far the best known is the successful musician Xavier Naidoo, who is now largely isolated from the mainstream musical scene. Another is the former “Mr. Germany” Adrian Ursache, who founded the bogus state of Ur in 2014. Other celebrities who spread content from the *Reichsbürger* scene, including different conspiracy theories, are the successful German singer and reality star Michael Wendler and the vegan chef Attila Hildmann. The latter two radicalized during the COVID-19 pandemic and are mainly active on the *Querdenker* spectrum.

There have been repeated attempts to found political parties, including under the names *Die Germanen* (The Germanic People), *Freie Wählergemeinschaft Einiges Deutschland* (Free Voters’ Association United Germany), and *Interimpartei Deutschland* (Interim Party of Germany). Although these parties play no role in the political process, they certainly contribute to the increased politicization of the *Reichsbürger* milieu. Overall, party politics are a controversial issue, since some argue that the founding of a party contradicts the essential *Reichsbürger* view that the BRD is controlled not by established politics but by unknown entities.

Influence of—and on—Neighboring Ideologies

As already mentioned, there is no homogeneous ideology among the *Reichsbürger*, only shared ideological elements. There are also overlaps with related or overarching ideologies. By and large, most of the groups can be described as anti-democratic, right-wing, and monarchist. Although not that widespread, there are a few larger groups that have developed a strong personality cult around their leader.⁴² Probably the best-known example is Peter Fitzek, the self-proclaimed sovereign of the *Königreich Deutschland* that he founded. His Telegram newsletter was followed by over 10,000 people at the beginning of January 2023.⁴³ A networking meeting between representatives of a *Querdenken* group and representatives of the *Königreich Deutschland* in November 2020 was attended by about 100 people. Several hundred people are believed to be in the entourage of the *Königreich Deutschland*, which makes it one of the largest such projects in Germany.⁴⁴

In addition to an authoritarian orientation, there are also elements of libertarianism. Indeed, it is not always clear whether the goal of a given *Reichsbürger* tendency is an authoritarian or monarchist leadership of the country comparable to the old empire or maximum individual independence from any state-like structures. One element that can also be found among libertarian groups and individuals is an affinity for weapons to be used in self-defense against people perceived as criminals and for protection against the intervention of state power, which is perceived as repressive.

⁴⁰ Jan Rathje, “Verschwörungsmythen, Esoterik und Holocaustleugnung—die Reichsideologie” Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, October 14, 2015, <https://www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtsextremismus/210330/zwischen-verschwoerungsmythen-esoterik-und-holocaustleugnung-die-reichsideologie>.

⁴¹ Falko Grimmendorf, “Im Netzwerk der Reichsbürger: das Deutsche Polizei Hilfswerk,” *der rechte rand* Issue 165 (2017).

⁴² Keil, 2021.

⁴³ Guido Berg, “Wie ‘König Peter I’. Querdenken-Vertreter in Saalfeld trifft,” *Östthüringer Zeitung*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.otz.de/regionen/saalfeld/koenig-peter-i-peter-fitzek-traf-querdenken-vertreter-michael-ballweg-in-saalfeld-id230927214.html>.

⁴⁴ Königreich Deutschland, accessed January 2, 2023, <https://koenigreichdeutschland.org/de/>.

Reichsbürger are also linked to libertarianism by the idea of *prepping*, i.e., the greatest possible self-sufficiency and preparation for a catastrophic event. These contradictory stances—desiring the greatest possible individual freedom and independence while simultaneously preferring autocratic leadership—can be found in several variations of the New Right in Europe and in the United States.

Some groups seem to set themselves up as farmers in rural regions and consciously renounce modern urban life. The journalist Andreas Speit writes that, particularly in areas from which more and more people are moving away, these groups are having ever-greater success at influencing the remaining population. Often the villagers cannot recognize the right-wing and racist ideology of the so-called settlers because they blend their worldview with environmentalism and classic conservative resentments. Whereas such right-wing rural communities used to live on isolated farms, they are now opening up more and actively trying to influence village communities.⁴⁵ *Reichsbürger* tend to prefer a more secluded life in order to protect and isolate themselves from the grip of government power and, more broadly, from the outside world, which they often reject. In larger groups, life in a community of like-minded people in a sealed-off area is preferred. In some cases, this is explicitly desired by the leaders to prevent too much contact with the outside world and to present their own form of community organization as superior—a frequent phenomenon in cult-like organizations.

In addition to anti-democratic monarchism, right-wing extremist ideologies, and libertarian elements, the worldviews of *Reichsbürger* groups may or may not include other unifying elements. These include historical revisionism, anti-Semitism, racism, conspiracy narratives, and esotericism.⁴⁶

As is often the case with extreme world views, a kind of parallel reality is created in which the German imperial era—and, in some cases, the Nazi era—is portrayed as an idealized world that stands in contrast to today's allegedly depraved world. *Reichsbürger* associate the old world with all kinds of attributes that are lacking in today's much more liberal reality. For them, the old world is synonymous with law and order, strength and national pride, industriousness and tradition, a traditional role for women, higher value placed on religion and community, and a more homogeneous society. There is also often a desire for a simpler life, as opposed to the complexity of today's world; this is expressed in a vehement rejection of state bureaucracy or a left-leaning, more progressive image of a pluralistic society.⁴⁷

One example is compulsory vaccination, introduced in 1874 by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, whereby all citizens of the empire were required to undergo mandatory vaccination under threat of punishment. Today's *Reichsbürger*, bearing Reich flags, participate in protests vaccination, even though vaccination against COVID-19 is not currently mandatory in Germany. This demonstrates that most *Reichsbürger* are selective in their perception of history, glorifying a historical government that actually made vaccination obligatory. Beyond simply making false statements about German history, the *Reichsbürger* also propagate a historically inaccurate and romanticized picture of the German Reich.

Anti-Semitic views are also widespread, either as open anti-Semitism, which manifests itself as denial of the Holocaust and Nazi crimes, or in a more subliminal form, referring to the secret powers central to the ideology that pull the strings behind the scenes. The latter idea was already a central element of then-widespread conspiracy theories during the imperial period, the interwar period, and the Nazi

⁴⁵ "Aber die sehen doch aus wie Ökos!" Deutschlandfunk Kultur, June 26, 2019, https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/autor-andreas-speit-ueber-die-voelkische-landnahme-aber-die.1008.de.html?dram:article_id=452402.

⁴⁶ This is a personal observation, following online and public discourse amongst *Reichsbürger* actors.

⁴⁷ This is a personal observation, following online and public discourse amongst *Reichsbürger* actors.

era.⁴⁸ Unknown and often unnamed political, economic, and cultural elites, families, and secret societies like the Illuminati—usually located in America—are deemed to be at the levers of power. They are portrayed as ruthless, selfish, greedy for money and power, corrupt, and enemies of the traditional way of life and individual freedom. Just as they have been for hundreds of years, these supposed elites are often associated with Judaism. Sometimes this view is mixed with a rejection of capitalism, global banking, globalization, and imperialism. However, this is based not on a leftist self-understanding, but on a nationalist one. Along these lines, some *Reichsbürger* see themselves as victims of American imperialism and view globalization as a driver of bad influences in Germany.⁴⁹ They prefer intensive and local production over the work of multinational corporations.

Racism also makes up part of the worldview of many who belong to the *Reichsbürger* scene. In most cases, however, this is directed not against a specific ethnic or religious group, but against everything that is perceived as non-German. Historical reference to the German colonies during the imperial era is often a distinguishing factor. Many *Reichsbürger* feel that they and the German empire are superior to other cultures. In this nationalist worldview, only the former European empires are accepted as desirable historical models. Their demand for the reclamation of the former colonies is rather seldom heard. Much more often, demands are made to restore the German Reich to its old borders, such that, among other things, parts of present-day Poland and the Czech Republic would be annexed to the BRD.

In conjunction with the anti-Semitic and racist elements often found in the ideological complex of the *Reichsbürger*, conspiracy narratives are widespread. While Facebook and Instagram, as well as different online fora, were initially used heavily to spread these narratives, Telegram and WhatsApp chat groups are now among the most popular social media for this purpose.⁵⁰ The spread of conspiracies via the Internet and social media also explains why many *Reichsbürger*, who are often quite isolated, adhere to similar beliefs as those spread in the US. While QAnon did not have much influence on the German right-wing scene in its early days, this began to change during the Trump presidency. In 2015-2016, the German right was still very focused on the issue of migration flows; as these subsided, U.S. narratives and conspiracy theories began to spread. Since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, QAnon and other content originally from the US has become an integral part of the German political scene, where it is increasingly mixed with *Reichsbürger* narratives that focus purely on Germany.⁵¹ The preliminary culmination of this development is represented by the conspirators of the Patriotic Union, who combine “classic” German *Reichsbürger* narratives with U.S. QAnon theories such as the “Deep State,” as well as elite pedophilia and satanism.

This conspiracy theory relating to secret elites is that they are in league with the devil and practice satanic rituals to maintain power. They are also accused of kidnapping, torturing, and killing children to obtain a certain substance (adrenochrome) from the children’s blood that will keep the elites young and powerful. Fictional evidence that the elites are so-called reptiloids is also shared in some *Reichsbürger* circles. The depersonalization of the hated elites, who are responsible for their perceived discontent, fits well into the worldviews of some followers of the *Reichsbürger* ideology. The alleged goals of the elites are diverse, going beyond the preservation of their own power and self-

⁴⁸ Geschichte des Antisemitismus, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, accessed January 2, 2023, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/antisemitismus/dossier-antisemitismus/319011/geschichte-des-antisemitismus/>.

⁴⁹ This is a personal observation, following online and public discourse amongst *Reichsbürger* actors.

⁵⁰ This is a personal observation, following online and public discourse amongst *Reichsbürger* actors.

⁵¹ This is a personal observation, following online and public discourse amongst *Reichsbürger* actors.

enrichment.⁵² The *Reichsbürger* thus see themselves as the last line of resistance against excessive progressive change in society.

Another conspiracy theory floating around in *Reichsbürger* circles that is also popular in other countries concerns so-called “chemtrails.” According to this theory, condensation trails in the sky are chemicals and metals emitted by airplanes, which slowly accumulate in the human body. Through mobile phone antennas, particularly those matching the 5G mobile standard, the substances deposited in the body are supposed to be activated, leading either to foreign control or to death. Such solutions as wearing aluminum hats or bathing in salt water are often said to help; as already mentioned, expensive miracle cures are also sold.⁵³

Another alleged method of mass control is vaccination. Here, proximity to and partial overlap with vaccination critics and conspiracy theorists without prior *Reichsbürger* beliefs can be observed. All three groups share a propagation of false facts mixed with partly real incidents, a belief in secret elites, and a rejection of scientific findings and methods. Due to this common basis, especially during the COVID-19 crisis, individual ideological elements are increasingly mixed.

The last area of overlap to merit discussion is esotericism. This is not widespread among *Reichsbürger* with close ties to neo-Nazism, but it is a central pillar of the ideology of other groups. Sometimes esotericism goes far beyond alleged healing methods and the abstract feeling of being chosen. In some cases, there are fictitious ministries that are supposed to make contact with angels and divine beings. Often, a lack of spirituality and a lack of closeness to nature feature in the *Reichsbürger* criticism of contemporary society and the economy. In some circles, astrology is also included in the daily life of a spiritual *Reichsbürger*. While traditional Christianity or Germanism and Nordic religions are in the foreground among non-esoteric, rather Nazi-oriented *Reichsbürger*, among more esoteric groups, one can find a heterogeneous mix of all kinds of supernatural beliefs. This testifies to a certain parallel world, not only politically, but also spiritually. As the real world loses its hold, various members of the *Reichsbürger* scene find refuge outside the realm of reality.⁵⁴

As mentioned at the beginning, it is important to see the *Reichsbürger* as a gathering of very different individuals and groups who are connected by a range of thought constructs, but who do not adhere to a homogeneous ideology. This is also evident from the fact that some elements of related ideologies and currents are found only in some *Reichsbürger* circles. Even though the views of the groups usually differ greatly, they can be roughly divided into “old” and “new” *Reichsbürger*. The “old” groups have more connections to Nazism, monarchism, autocracy, and the conservative community, while the “new” ones tend more in the direction of conspiracy theories, esotericism, freedom, and individualism. This division between Old Right and New Right, which is often not clearly identifiable, can also be found in the right-wing milieu, both in Germany and in other European countries.⁵⁵

⁵² Marcel Bubert et al., “Verschwörungstheorien als Elitenkritik: Über die langen Traditionen eines aktuellen Phänomens,” WWU Münster, accessed October 9, 2022, https://www.uni-muenster.de/Religion-und-Politik/aktuelles/schwerpunkte/epidemien/06_thema_verschwoerung.html.

⁵³ Dustin Tingley and Gernot Wagner, “Solar Geoengineering and the Chemtrail Conspiracy on Social Media,” *Nature* Vol. 3, October 31, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-017-0014-3>.

⁵⁴ “Das Milieu schürt Heilserwartungen,” Deutschlandfunk Kultur, August 29, 2017, accessed October 9, 2022, <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/reichsbuergerbewegung-und-esoterik-das-milieu-schuert-100.html>.

⁵⁵ Annelies Pauwels, *Contemporary manifestations of violent right-wing extremism in the EU: An overview of P/CVE practices* (Luxemburg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021), https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-04/ran_adhoc_cont_manif_vrwe_eu_overv_pcve_pract_2021_en.pdf.

Conclusion

In the Patriotic Union case, 25 suspected members and supporters have been arrested and 27 other suspects are currently under investigation as of early January 2023. Analysis of the seized documents and data is ongoing. As a result, it is not yet possible to draw any conclusions about the true size of the network. Nor is it yet possible to assess the impact of this major raid on the rest of the *Reichsbürger* scene. However, it is clear that the authorities' perception of the conspiracy theory and *Reichsbürger* spectrum has changed over the past ten years from an under-the-radar movement to a concrete and serious terrorist threat. It also seems that the attempted coup has transformed parts of the *Reichsbürger* movement from a largely individual/small-group activity into a conspiratorial network, as exemplified by the Patriotic Union. Some actors and groups no longer restrict themselves to pursuing *Reichsbürger* activities in their own circles or at the local level but are striving for an ideologically motivated violent change of government.

Whereas before the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories were mostly extreme outsider positions in German society, the pandemic brought these narratives into the mainstream. They were subject to extensive public discussion and in some cases gained widespread tolerance. As the figures show, the pandemic also boosted the numbers of *Reichsbürger*. All in all, conspiracy theories will likely continue to gain societal influence in the future. Even more remarkably, different streams—such as *Reichsbürger*, QAnon supporters, and esoterics—will continue to blend. This flexible ideology will continue to provide its own interpretation of real-world events to continue to exist and to evolve further. Indeed, in some circles, the focus is already shifting from the now largely abolished COVID-19 containment measures to the denial of Russian culpability in the ongoing war in Ukraine.