



Bundesministerium
des Innern
und für Heimat

Frequently asked questions

Disinformation related to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine

Updated in February 2023

Contents

1. Why have these frequently asked questions been compiled?	3
2. What is disinformation?.....	3
3. Why do foreign governments use disinformation to exert illegitimate influence?	3
4. How does Russia spread disinformation?	4
5. What role does disinformation play in relation to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine?.....	4
6. What narratives is Russia spreading in connection with the war and how should they be categorised?	5
7. To what extent are actors within Germany spreading Russian disinformation?	7
8. What is the connection between Russian disinformation and propaganda and pro-Russian demonstrations in Germany?	8
9. Why has the distribution of RT and Sputnik content been prohibited in the EU?	8
10. What is the Federal Government doing about disinformation as an illegitimate way for foreign countries to exert influence?	9
11. How does the Federal Government respond to disinformation?.....	10
12. How can I recognise false or misleading information and protect myself against disinformation?.....	11
13. Where can I find out more about how to deal with disinformation?.....	12

1. Why have these frequently asked questions been compiled?

In the context of its attack on Ukraine in violation of international law, Russia is systematically spreading disinformation. Germany's Federal Government takes this threat very seriously. With the present document, the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community (BMI) intends to increase **awareness** and provide a **factual basis** for dealing with disinformation.

2. What is disinformation?

Disinformation is false or misleading information which is intentionally distributed. This distinguishes it from false or misleading information that emerges and is shared without an intent to deceive.

Distributors of disinformation seek to deceive their audience and encourage them to spread false and misleading information further. Non-state actors in Germany and abroad as well as foreign state-sponsored actors use disinformation for various reasons.

If a foreign government disseminates disinformation with the intent of exerting illegitimate influence on another country (or alliance of countries), this constitutes a hybrid threat. The intention is to confuse the public about the facts of a situation, to influence public opinion, to disguise and distract from their own activities, to make it difficult or impossible to discuss contentious topics in a rational manner, to increase tensions in society and/or to undermine trust in government institutions and action, with the aim of reinforcing their own position and pursuing their own interests.

3. Why do foreign governments use disinformation to exert illegitimate influence?

Free access to facts and an open exchange of views are the lifeblood of open, pluralist and democratic systems. Various actors exploit the possibilities offered by the freedom of expression in order to spread disinformation. In this way, they **seek to undermine public trust in government** and to use polarising issues to **provoke or widen divisions in society**. Some governments attempt to use disinformation to influence public opinion in other countries in their favour, or to manipulate or inhibit the development of political views to suit their own political agenda.

Global digital networks make it easier for foreign governments to spread precisely targeted disinformation and propaganda rapidly. For example, information is

manipulated or taken out of context for political motives, in order to influence public debates. The way social media services operate to enable sharing and distributing information easily also allows false and misleading information to spread quickly and reach a large audience. Users who share such information on a massive scale play a central role. There are also many fake user accounts which disseminate false or misleading information on different platforms. This can also be done automatically using computer programs known as bots.

Foreign governments can also use cyber attacks to prepare disinformation activities and provide ongoing support for them. For example, social media accounts can be hacked and data of elected officials can be stolen, in order to be manipulated or published in a deliberately misleading context.

4. How does Russia spread disinformation?

The Russian government has used its diplomatic channels, social media networks and state media for years to spread disinformation and propaganda, including in Germany. German media, including public service broadcasters, are models of independent journalism, and German law upholds the principle of government non-intervention in the media. In Russia, by contrast, broadcasting media are not independent of the government. Russian media companies such as Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik do not report editorially independent news; they are instead controlled by the Russian government and are used for disinformation activities. The Russian courts and the Russian system of regulating and organising the media do not ensure independent journalism. In addition, these Russian media often produce or purposely amplify false and misleading information that is already circulating in order to increase its reach, in particular via social media. ‘Troll factories’ such as the Internet Research Agency in St Petersburg play a key role in spreading disinformation.

5. What role does disinformation play in relation to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine?

The war of aggression against the entire country of Ukraine began on 24 February 2022, at the command of the Russian government and in violation of international law. Russia had already annexed Crimea and started a violent conflict in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine in 2014. Since 24 February 2022, the Russian war of aggression has continued with unrelenting severity, causing enormous suffering and destruction in Ukraine. The exact number of victims is unknown. According to the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR, millions of people have fled Ukraine to seek

safety in neighbouring countries. And millions more have been displaced within Ukraine.

The EU member states and NATO allies have agreed on extensive sanctions against Russia and on measures to help Ukraine. These include comprehensive political, humanitarian, financial and military support for Ukraine. Like many other countries, Germany stands in solidarity with Ukraine.

As a result, Germany and its allies in the EU and NATO as well as other countries are targets of Russia's efforts to exert illegitimate influence, above all in the information space. Russia uses means including government-controlled media such as RT DE and social media channels to spread disinformation. In this way, the Russian government seeks to influence public opinion in Germany and elsewhere in its favour and to widen divisions in society. Russian disinformation is also intended to discredit Ukraine and the Western countries that support it.

At the same time, the Kremlin is directing its propaganda at its own citizens to justify the invasion and portray Western countries as aggressors. Such propaganda is intended to ensure strong public support in Russia for the Russian government's actions in Ukraine.

Since the start of the Russian war of aggression against the entire country of Ukraine, Germany's Federal Government has seen an increase in disinformation from official Russian sources, government-controlled and pro-Russia media, as well as from pro-Kremlin social media accounts. Sanctions have been imposed to restrict the reach of Russian pro-government media; since these sanctions went into effect, more and more pro-Russian disinformation and propaganda have been disseminated via social media accounts. Russian government bodies are increasingly operating as agents of disinformation, using all means of communication at their disposal, such as official press releases from Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, their own social media channels on platforms such as Telegram, and websites of the Russian embassies around the world. These channels are sometimes reinforced by official channels of other countries.

6. What narratives is Russia spreading in connection with the war and how should they be categorised?

Russia is striving to influence political and public opinion in Germany and elsewhere in its favour by spreading disinformation and propaganda along with using other ways to exert illegitimate influence. First of all, the Russian government wants to control the way its war of aggression on Ukraine is perceived. Secondly, the

Kremlin is working specifically to make the international community's response to the war and public support for Ukraine more difficult or impossible.

Agents of disinformation such as Russia typically use four techniques: dismiss, distort, distract and dismay.* These categories overlap to some extent, and many narratives use a combination of these techniques.

With the first technique, **dismiss**, agents of disinformation seek to **refute objective information that is unfavourable to them by using spurious arguments**, with the aim of undermining trust in the source and creating uncertainty. For example, the Russian government rejects all responsibility for the military escalation and instead asserts that it was forced to go to war. By doing so, Russia is attempting to portray itself as the victim rather than the aggressor and to fabricate arguments for the Russian invasion which are baseless and/or have already been disproved. Russia's claims that Ukraine has committed atrocities against its own people in the Donbas region have no basis in fact, as reports by the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) have proved. Nor is there any evidence to support claims of a threat to Russia emanating from Ukrainian territory. Russia also accuses Ukraine of developing weapons of mass destruction, supposedly with the help of Western countries. However, Ukraine has no nuclear, chemical or biological weapons programmes. Ukraine complies with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and, after the end of the Cold War, surrendered to Russia the nuclear weapons stationed by the Soviet Union on its territory. In return, Russia agreed to uphold Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Ukraine works closely with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and meets all of the Agency's requirements. No Western research institutes are now or have ever been located in Ukraine to develop nuclear, chemical or biological weapons.

With the second technique, **distort**, agents of disinformation attempt to **portray the facts in a different light**. An example is Russia's description of the war in Ukraine as a "special operation". The use of the word "war" in this context is prohibited in Russia. However, with far more than 100,000 troops deployed to invade Ukraine, accompanied by countless missile attacks, including attacks on civilian infrastructure, Russia is certainly fighting a war of aggression against Ukraine in violation of international law. The Russian government also claims that the U.S., with the help of the Europeans, is waging war on Russia. Official Russian sources even propose that Russia must defend itself against a fascist alliance – as in the Second World War. This is an especially gross distortion of the facts.

* Based on the 4D model described by the researcher Ben Nimmo.

With the third technique, **distract**, Russia is using **false information to try to shift the focus away from information unfavourable to itself**. For example, the Russian government is portraying Ukraine as the aggressor and claims that Ukraine is an unjust regime controlled by neo-Nazis. This is intended to distract public attention from the fact that, in violation of international law, Russia has attacked a democratic state whose president is of Jewish descent. Russia is also attempting to cover up its own war crimes by claiming among other things that Ukraine itself staged the massacres on the outskirts of Kyiv. According to reports by independent media, there is extensive evidence of Russian war crimes in Ukraine, especially against civilians. Numerous cases of rape and torture by Russian troops as well as arbitrary and targeted killings of civilians have been documented in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine.

The fourth technique, **dismay**, is used to **create a climate of fear** in the countries targeted and restrict their ability to act. As part of this technique, the Russian government is threatening further escalation, including a possible nuclear attack against countries which are working to enforce international law. And Russian government-controlled media and pro-Kremlin social media accounts continually warn of the imminent consequences of an energy and economic crisis in Germany. Such warnings are intended to arouse fears among the German public of economic decline. However, such threats have not weakened the political resolve of Germany and its allies in NATO and the EU to respond to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine with severe sanctions and other measures. Russia claims that the international community's response to Russia's attack on Ukraine is motivated by "Russophobia". This is intended to distract attention from Russia's blatant violation of international law. The Russian government also claims that all Western societies fear and hate Russia, and that people of Russian origin are no longer safe there. However, the overwhelming majority of people in Germany are quite capable of distinguishing between the views and actions of the Russian government on the one hand and Russian nationals and Germans of Russian descent on the other. And there have only been a relatively small number of punishable offences directed at Russian institutions or people of Russian descent in Germany. The Federal Government places a high priority on combating all forms of discrimination.

7. To what extent are actors within Germany spreading Russian disinformation?

Russian government-controlled media specifically target actors within Germany and in other countries. The broadcaster RT DE, social media and government or private institutes play major roles. The Russian government funds "alternative media" which

are used by right-wing extremists, “Reichsbürger” and “Selbstverwalter” and other elements in Germany that deny the legitimacy of Germany’s government. Russian disinformation narratives are also circulating in related Telegram forums. **Some elements of the movement that emerged out of protests against COVID-19 prevention measures are receptive to Russian disinformation and propaganda, which they share with others.** And some left-wing extremist groups may agree with the Russian narratives.

Reactions among the different groups vary: most are pro-Russian, but some support the Ukrainian side.

It can safely be assumed that those who believe conspiracy theories will continue to share pro-Russian narratives. Russian media operating in Germany specifically target such audiences via their social media channels by using particular vocabulary.

8. What is the connection between Russian disinformation and propaganda and pro-Russian demonstrations in Germany?

Some segments of the population have generally favourable attitudes towards Russia based on tradition and ideology. Such attitudes are fed by ignorance of the actual situation in Russia and by a general lack of acceptance of Western values, in particular pluralist democracy. These groups are blind to the fact that the propaganda spread by the Russian government is full of lies. On the contrary: **these groups uncritically accept the Russian narratives and show their strong support for them in public,** for example at pro-Russian demonstrations in a number of German cities.

9. Why has the distribution of RT and Sputnik content been prohibited in the EU?

The EU **suspended** the broadcasting activities in the EU of the Russian media outlets **RT and Sputnik**, effective 2 March 2022, because these outlets are directly or indirectly controlled by the Russian government and have played a **major role in supporting the military aggression against Ukraine** and destabilising its neighbours. These sanctions will apply until Russia ends its aggression against Ukraine and stops its propaganda campaign targeting the EU and its member states. This **prohibition on broadcasting activities** is binding in all the EU member states, without the need for national legislation, and is widely obeyed in Germany. The EU has suspended the licences of these media outlets as well, although the suspension of licences has little impact on Germany, where they have no licences. The suspension does not affect activities in the

EU other than broadcasting; RT and Sputnik journalists may continue to research and conduct interviews.

Independently of the EU sanctions, the media authority for Berlin and Brandenburg, Medienanstalt Berlin-Brandenburg (MABB), found that RT DE has no licence to broadcast in Germany. As a result, an order prohibiting RT DE from broadcasting was issued without influence from the Federal Government even before the EU sanctions were imposed.

10. What is the Federal Government doing about disinformation as an illegitimate way for foreign countries to exert influence?

Shortly after the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine began, a special task force of the interministerial working group on hybrid threats was formed under the lead of the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community to focus on the situation in Russia and Ukraine. The task force ensures **ongoing communication among the federal ministries and agencies to identify and avert hybrid threats, in particular disinformation, related to Russia's war in Ukraine**. This task force on disinformation focuses on ways to identify Russian narratives, reinforce fact-based communication and increase public resilience against threats entering from the information space.

The Federal Foreign Office, the Press and Information Office of the Federal Government, and the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community and its executive agencies are carefully monitoring the information space with regard to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine for false and misleading information. They regularly share their findings with other ministries and government agencies at federal and state level.

The emphasis is always on proactive, fact-based communication tailored to the target group, to provide information on the current situation and the government response.

In addition to appropriate reactive measures such as correcting false information, prevention is important, as are measures to **increase resilience of the entire state and society**. Measures to increase public awareness of the issue of disinformation and to encourage a more critical approach to information and sources, particularly those in social media, are an integral part of this task, which is the responsibility of society as a whole. Media and information literacy among all age groups must be promoted and increased. To achieve that, the Federal Government supports various projects aimed at improving media literacy and at protecting and strengthening independent journalism. Independent media play a very important and valuable role, among other

things by providing fact-checking. The Federal Government expressly welcomes fact-checking by independent research institutes and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well.

In addition, the Federal Government is providing further assistance, including in the form of emergency aid for media professionals who have fled Ukraine, Russia or Belarus. This aid is intended to support exile media which actively counter disinformation, provide critical and independent reporting on their home countries and often serve as an especially reliable source of information.

Along with these whole-of-society efforts to resist illegitimate influence by foreign governments, another important component is cooperation with partner countries and in international networks such as the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM). Cooperation with and within the EU is especially important: EU initiatives such as the website euvsdisinfo.eu, which is run by the EAST StratCom Task Force of the European External Action Service, support efforts at national level. And the Federal Government actively contributes to the work at EU level, in particular in the Council Working Party on countering hybrid threats.

Maintaining networks among the federal, state and local governments and security authorities is equally important in order to deal effectively with disinformation.

All levels of government must pursue viable approaches to fight disinformation effectively and establish the necessary structures to have an impact on all of society. To do so, good practices that have proved useful in other countries can be applied and modified as needed. Germany can set an example in some areas.

Providers of social media also have a key role in possible measures to stop the spread of false or misleading information. Transparent rules that are strictly enforced by social media providers are very important. The Federal Government regularly communicates with social media providers concerning this issue.

11. How does the Federal Government respond to disinformation?

In order to avoid drawing even more attention to disinformation, the Federal Government takes the view that not every single item of false or misleading information must be actively corrected. To decide whether and how to respond, each item of false or misleading information must be analysed with the help of the following criteria, among others: what exactly is the information? Whom does it concern/who is responsible for responding? Is it false or misleading information that is intentionally distributed, i.e. disinformation? What is the source? Where was it

published? How much of a potential threat does it represent: is it likely to be widely shared, for example?

In general, **the greater the potential threat, the more important it is to respond quickly and decisively to counter it.** In such cases, the Federal Government may decide to actively debunk, or rebut, false or misleading information.

12. How can I recognise false or misleading information and protect myself against disinformation?

a) Ask critical questions instead of sharing

False or misleading news items or images are often shared by private individuals not because they want to cause harm, but because they are concerned. But such news items or images may help to spread uncertainty or create panic. The more emotional or dramatic the content, the more often it is shared. That is why it is so important to remain calm and not add to the confusion. That is why you shouldn't share content without checking it first. Don't share any content that seems questionable.

b) Check the information source and who sent it

It is always helpful to check questionable content against at least two other sources. Current news is available from the established news media and daily and weekly newspapers and magazines. Many media outlets have fact-checking departments which regularly examine the authenticity of photo and video material from the conflict regions as soon as it appears. You can also find up-to-date and reliable information about the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine on the official websites and social media channels of government institutions, for example at www.bundesregierung.de.

You should always check who published the photo, video or news content. Is it the same person who created the content, or has the content already been repeatedly reposted by others? If a social media account uses the account holder's real name, that can be an indication that the account is authentic. Platform providers may indicate whether individual accounts are independent or government-sponsored, which can also help in determining how reliable the content is. When using social media, rely on the verified accounts of official bodies and institutions, which display a blue check mark. Inspect websites' publication data: they should include a complete address, along with the name of the person responsible for the website content, and not just an anonymous email address, for example.

c) Use fact-checking services

Public service media and other independent organisations check false information and correct it. For example, the independent research institute Correctiv and news organisations such as the German Press Agency (dpa) document and analyse disinformation about the war in Ukraine currently in international circulation.

13. Where can I find out more about how to deal with disinformation?

The Press and Information Office of the Federal Government (BPA) has a web page where you can learn more about dealing with disinformation (in German):

<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/umgang-mit-desinformation>

The BPA also has a web page devoted to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine (in German): <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/krieg-in-der-ukraine>

The Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community has a web page focused on the current threat posed by disinformation as a means used by foreign governments to exert illegitimate influence, i.e. a hybrid threat:

<https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/topthemen/EN/toptopic-desinformation/article-desinformation-hybrid-threat.html>

The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) offers helpful information as well (in German):

<https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/hintergruende/DE/spionage-und-proliferationsabwehr/desinformation.html>.

You can also find a wide range of information about dealing with disinformation on the website of the Federal Agency for Civic Education (BpB) (in German):

<https://www.bpb.de/themen/medien-journalismus/desinformation/>

The BpB also offers a podcast on this topic (in German): <https://www.bpb.de/themen/medien-journalismus/digitale-desinformation/desinformation-der-globale-blick/>

And it has set up a separate web page on the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine which brings together related content, including articles by independent journalists and scholars (in German): <https://www.bpb.de/themen/europa/krieg-in-der-ukraine/>.

Through the federal programme “Live Democracy!”, the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) funds multiple projects focusing on disinformation and conspiracy ideologies. These are described at

<https://www.demokratie-leben.de/en/> The following projects are worth a special mention: “Gegneranalyse: Gegenmedien als Radikalisierungsmaschine” (Analysis of opponents: alternative media as a driver of radicalisation) of the Centre for Liberal Modernity (LibMod) analyses “alternative” media content, in particular with regard to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine (in German) at

<https://gegneranalyse.de/> The disinformation analysis tool created by betterplace-Lab/Das Netz uses an interactive map to explain how disinformation is produced and disseminated. For more information (in German), see <https://kompetenznetzwerk-hass-im-netz.de/infografik-desinformation/>.

The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) supports multiple research projects dealing with disinformation. You can find more information (in German) at <https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/shareddocs/kurzmeldungen/de/2022/02/fake-news-bekaempfen.html>.

Public broadcaster ARD checks the facts behind news stories (in German) at <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/>, as do public service broadcasters at state level, such as the Bavarian state broadcaster BR: <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/faktenfuchs-faktencheck>

The European External Action Service exposes current disinformation about the war in Ukraine on its English-language website EUvsDisinfo: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/ukraine/> Some texts are also available in German: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/de/> It also offers extensive information in other languages, including Russian and Ukrainian.

On this English-language web page, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) offers links to information in many languages about conspiracy theories and practical tips for countering disinformation: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/gced/thinkbeforesharing>