

DGAP COMMENTARY

Assessing China and Russia's Influence on the German Parliamentary Elections



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China and Russia want to maintain Germany's political status quo: Centrist, at times mercantilist policies, have often worked in their favor. Now, with the Green Party ascendant and public opinion shifting, neither Russia nor China can be sure that classic "centrism" will emerge after September. Russia and China will increase their influence and interference efforts in the run-up to the election and beyond, using informational, political, and cyber tactics, and economic and political networks.

For the first time in 16 years, German federal elections in September will deliver a new leader when Chancellor Angela Merkel steps down. The change of leadership takes place amid a shifting global power balance caused first and foremost by the rise of China. While most German voters may not think much about China's impact on their daily lives, China's Communist Party (CCP) continuously seeks to expand its efforts to influence the decision-making of German businesses and political leaders.

Russia, too, has paid close attention to China's rise over the past decade and has sought partnership and alignment in key policy areas where it serves the wider political objectives of maintaining and expanding Russian power in its neighborhood and beyond. Already, overt collaboration between China and

Russia on military and economic projects is a cause for concern among foreign policy planners in the West.

But China and Russia are also drawing closer in the realm of influence operations, an "authoritarian learning" trend that bodes ill for the future. Their shared objective? Weakening the credibility and functionality of liberal democratic systems. Russia intends to generate chaos and expand its role as an international spoiler, whereas China would like to see democracy lose legitimacy in order to protect its own system from internal and external challenges and bring other governments more in line with its economic and political interests. Both countries have shown they have the means and willingness to influence the outcome of elections in other countries. Germany will not be an exception.

STRATEGY, TACTICS, EXECUTION: RUSSIA'S AND CHINA'S ELECTION INFLUENCE OPERATIONS

Russia

Russia's influence strategy is characterized by the systematic exploitation of existing social and political cleavages within democratic societies. In the context of the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections, Russian-based or -steered operatives thus focused on further polarizing the country's population around questions of race, inequality, and religion, in addition to highlighting existing divisions in the party-political landscape using a series

es, including intellectual and human capital, diplomatic, informational, intelligence, cyber, economic, and other tools, to understanding and influencing German politics. Few people are more deeply versed in the power broker role that Germany can play than President Putin himself, who as a former KGB operative in East Germany feels personally invested in advancing Russia's interests in Germany.

Putin's Russia has a well-developed information apparatus at work in Germany and in the German language, including Russia Today and [Ruptly](#), a highly active, Berlin-based global video channel. Russia also publishes a German edition of Sputnik News and

Moscow's tactics are not limited to soft approaches or the shaping of public opinion. Both the 2015 cyberattack on the Bundestag and the March 2021 [hack of German parliamentarians' email accounts](#) show that Russia has the means and the will to target German politicians ahead of critical regional elections. [As was attempted in other countries](#), information acquired through hacks could end up with political opponents and help their campaigns, unless media, politics and civil society are sufficiently aware and resilient. Russia has also been known to market data mined via Russia's sprawling information apparatus to exert pressure via leaks, fake content, or by making false allegations.

China

China's strategic influence objectives are more targeted. It aims to deliver concrete benefits to its own industry and infrastructure, and sway political and economic decision-makers in its favor. It has used the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), industrial espionage, and intellectual property (IP) theft, as well as selective investments in European markets to further this goal strategically and buy influence on the local, regional, and national level. In addition, it has – more recently – deployed cyber interference as a tool at scale: On July 19, [EU leaders disclosed](#) that hackers in China were behind a massive [March 2019 hack](#) launched via the Microsoft Exchange server, known as the Hanfium attack, targeting tens of thousands of companies in Germany alone. These were “malicious cyber activities that significantly affected our economy, security, democracy, and society,” the EU Council said in a statement, without naming China's Ministry of State Security as the main culprit, unlike the US and UK. In addition, advanced persistent threat (APT) groups 40 and 31 have “targeted government institutions and political organizations in the EU and member states, as well

Russia has a well-developed information apparatus at work in Germany

of hybrid tactics. Across Europe and the Western Balkans, Russia has employed similar strategies to weaken internal European solidarity and amplify structural tensions both within target countries and between the EU and NATO, using direct and covert financial support to right-wing or nationalist parties (including parties in [France](#), Italy, generally Atlanticist [Poland](#), and beyond the EU in [Moldova](#), Ukraine, and even [Madagascar](#)) alongside large-scale, sophisticated information operations and hacking attacks. It has [targeted critical infrastructure](#) and industrial giants, in part merely to prove that it can.

Moscow has a rich history of involvement in German politics, including elections, dating back to Soviet times. It has dedicated significant resourc-

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At home and abroad, Russia-affiliated media outlets regularly opine negatively on German politics and conduct smear campaigns against Chancellor Angela Merkel. One of the most infamous campaigns, the “Lisa Case” in January 2016, involved publishing and virally sharing a fake news story about the kidnapping of a Russian-German girl, to provoke unrest. RT and Sputnik seek to amplify stories around Germany's failures to integrate its immigrants and both outlets are openly supportive of the [Alternative for Germany](#) (AfD), [a party Russia favors](#) even over the CDU.

as key European industries," according to the EU.

For decades, China relied mostly on deeper techniques of persuasion, aiming at winning over German public opinion and, above all, elite constituencies in business and politics, thus building economic dependency. This process has deepened in recent years. In its [2020 annual report](#), Germany's domestic intelligence agency, the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV), said China's influence efforts were steadily increasing and had targeted, among others, "well-networked active and former German politicians as 'lobbyists' for Chinese interests."

The 2019 establishment of "China-Brücke" (China Bridge), an elite networking club, by Hans-Peter Friedrich, a vice-president of the Bundestag, is a vivid example. It is creating a significant "in" for Chinese interests among a select, but largely anonymous, group of highly influential people in politics, business, healthcare, digital economy, academia, and industry in Germany. Mirroring the secrecy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), only the identities of board members are public, while regular members' identities are kept anonymous. Overall, members are selected via unanimous agreement. China-Brücke's key liaison in China is Politburo member Wang Chen, a high-ranking former propaganda and internet official. Others include Li Zhanshu, one of seven men on the Politburo Standing Committee, and [Qian Hongshan](#), a deputy director of the International Department of the Communist Party of China. Outreach targets in Europe include current and former members of the Bundestag and European Parliament. Thus, China-Brücke represents a classic CCP influence and interference operation – similar to tactics deployed in Asia-Pacific and Australia – reaching deep into Germany's economy and politics.

As the German election approaches, China is developing new tactics and is likely to deploy them as part of an "influence mix," with more measurably "aggressive disinformation and propaganda campaigns in Germany's public media space," according to the BfV annual report. For instance, China's so-called "wolf warrior" diplomats aggressively pushed subjective coverage of the 2019 Hong Kong democracy protests, and privately contacted German

young Europeans, offering up to \$10,000 in prizes for candidates who successfully become "Media Challengers" – presenters, on-camera reporters, DJs and social media influencers – to "report and create content from all over the world," according to its website. CGTN already has a [network](#) of foreigners producing disinformation over controversial international issues, such as the treatment of China's Uighur population.

China is developing new tactics to deploy as part of an "influence mix"

officials requesting support spreading a victorious narrative of China's management of the COVID-19 pandemic that originated in China and swept the world. These tactics will only increase.

Like Russian traditional media efforts, Chinese state media continues to find a market for its propaganda supplements in major German media outlets, including business newspaper *Handelsblatt*. In March 2021, it took out a full-page advertisement in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that looked like an article about the CCP's achievements. The source given was an office address in Beijing. In addition, China's opaque domestic politics are spilling over into Germany via the German-language Himalaya Farm, the European arm of propaganda efforts by Guo Wengui, a controversial Chinese living in exile in the United States. For now, at least, its reach appears to be [small](#).

To support propaganda activities, China Global Television Network (CGTN) has launched a ["talent search"](#) among

HOW RUSSIA AND CHINA ARE LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

Often feeling at a disadvantage in connecting to Western audiences for cultural and linguistic reasons, Chinese propaganda officials have closely studied Russia Today, described as an "external propaganda aircraft carrier" in a 2014 article published in *People's Daily*. In parallel, China has expanded CGTN, the international wing of China Central Television (CCTV), the state-controlled broadcaster. Its stories and tone have become increasingly assertive in recent years. However, the longevity and ambition of the CCP's global propaganda efforts should not be underestimated, just because they have been more subtle than Russia's. In 1956, Mao Zedong called for CCP media to "manage the world"; today Xi Jinping exhorts it to "tell the China story well."

There are more indications of a converging Chinese and Russian information space. At the third meeting of the China-Russia Internet Media Cloud

Forum in Beijing, in December 2020, Zhou Shuchun, the publisher and editor-in-chief of *China Daily*, said, “in the future, the two countries’ medias will transmit authoritative and real information ... deepen their cooperation and jointly raise the discourse power of the two countries’ online media.”

WHY GERMANY MATTERS TO BOTH MOSCOW AND BEIJING

To realize its ambitious “Made in China 2025” plan, access to cutting-edge technology, innovation capabilities, machine-building, and engineering will continue to be vital to the Chinese government over the coming years. China revels in the codependency it has created with several key industri-

influence in Germany is perceived as a way for both countries to weaken the US alliance system to their advantage.

Over the course of her 16 years in office, Chancellor Merkel has positioned herself as a bridge-builder to Russia and China, pushing back diplomatically against egregious Russian overreach (the annexation of Crimea, military incursions in Ukraine and into NATO airspace, the human rights violations against Russian citizens on European soil, the suppression of democratic expression in Belarus, and the poisoning of Alexei Navalny), while continuing to seek dialogue, as evidenced most recently by the suggestion of a EU-Russia Summit to follow the Biden-Putin meeting in Geneva. On China, her policy stance has been described as mercantilist, advancing the interests of

benefit Russia, too. Laschet’s support for Nord Stream 2 remains unbroken and he has encouraged continuous exchange with Russia, at times displaying much-discussed [reticence to chastise the Putin regime](#) on human rights violations.

Conversely, Annalena Baerbock, the Green Party Chancellor candidate presents a potential threat to Russian and Chinese interests. Her party’s political program highlights a commitment to “human rights driven foreign policy,” underscoring the impression that coalition participation by the Green Party could force a harder line against both countries. Their manifesto explicitly calls on China to end its [“blatant”](#) human rights abuses, singling out the treatment of Uighurs, Tibetans, and Hong Kong. Asked at the end of April if China was concerned the Greens would make China’s position in Europe more difficult, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin delivered a thinly-veiled warning: “China opposes wanton allegations based on lies and rumors and rejects politicizing normal trade, investment, and commercial cooperation.” State-approved media and social media warn the Greens “will follow the United States closely” and have “vowed to be a pawn in the global strategy of the US Democratic Party.” Most recently, Germany’s Minister of Interior issued a warning that Russia may influence the upcoming German elections through information and cyber means, and also [target Annalena Baerbock personally](#).

There are indications of a converging Chinese and Russian information space

al sectors across European countries, particularly in Germany. European consumers remain an important ingredient to China’s economic success. Its regional investments, including in the port city of Duisburg, have amplified the influence it hopes to have on all levels of policy making in Germany. For Russia, Germany is a crucial market for energy exports, particularly following the green-lighting of Nord Stream 2, and offers channels for Russia to shape EU and NATO policies through *Russlandverstehers*, politicians, journalists, and NGO actors who remain committed to dialogue and feel Russia has been disadvantaged in favor of an emphasis on transatlantic ties. Building

German business and concluding the Comprehensive Investment Agreement (CAI) between China and the European Union under Germany’s EU Council Presidency.

As a result, both Russia and China can agree that maintaining the political status quo in Germany – with the conservative CDU/CSU at the helm of a governing coalition – is of mutual interest. CDU/CSU Chancellor candidate Armin Laschet is seen as a “continuity candidate,” expected to pursue a version of Germany’s long-term *Wandel durch Handel* [change through trade] policy, giving China some certainty about where it stands, which could

RUSSIA AS A HURRICANE, CHINA AS CLIMATE CHANGE

The precise timing and means Russia and China deploy to attempt to influence Germany’s election may depend largely on predictions and early polling data about the outcome. However, neither are likely to be idle as cam-

paing enters its final stages. Should the CDU emerge strongly during the campaign, interference from Beijing and Moscow probably could remain minimal. However, should the Greens make up ground with their campaigning in the weeks before the election, with a chance of winning the chancellor, China and Russia will likely recalibrate their respective approaches and mount campaigns with structural similarities but distinct features based on their own interest mapping.

US and French intelligence and disinformation experts have [characterized the difference](#) between the two countries using the phrase “Russia as a hurricane, China as climate change”: short-termist Russia and long-termist, detrimental China. Is Germany ready for the stormy times ahead?

BETTER BE SAFE THAN SORRY: HOW GERMANY SHOULD PREPARE

The German political elite, media, and public need to be better prepared to anticipate, identify, and counteract potential influence operations ahead of the upcoming elections. Preparations need to include both precautionary as well as damage control measures, particularly considering the experience of earlier hacking attacks. Cyber security and cyber awareness should be strengthened to the maximum possible extent among politicians, their campaign teams, and the party apparatuses. Similarly, enhanced protection mechanisms for critical election infrastructure will be vital, given the recent global experience of Russian-based hacker collectives bearing down on critical infrastructure in the United States, for example.

Journalists and media executives need to be made aware that direct or indirect efforts from outside players to influence Germany's elections are not a distant, theoretical possibility, but may

well become a harsh reality. This will require keen journalistic judgement, including requisite investigative capacities to ensure a broader capacity to identify fake or inaccurate sources. Additional training, particularly in local newsrooms, might be necessary to support the critical assessment of leaked documents including possible fakes, as well as compromising information that may be circulated ahead of the elections. The recent flooding crisis in western Germany may be instrumentalized, turned into a narrative around fundamental failings of the government system – a narrative China's state media and some officials have already begun to pursue. Media watchdogs, both within the profession and NGOs, should track and share information around false or propagandistic reporting by Russia and China-affiliated media in Germany, and coordinated inauthentic behavior on social media such as Twitter, driven for example by the CCP's propaganda apparatus, a phenomenon that exploded during the Hong Kong demonstrations and deepened during the coronavirus pandemic.

Finally, German intelligence, law enforcement, and the political elite will need to cohesively and credibly message that interference efforts will be detected, publicly attributed, and adequately sanctioned. To serve as credible threats, political and economic counter-measures must be elaborated in advance, and be supported by concentrated communications measures aimed at deterring Moscow and Beijing.

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