Bundesministerium
des Innern
und für Heimat

FAQ

Disinformation related to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine

Contents

1. Why has the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community compiled these frequently asked questions?

In connection with Russia's attack on Ukraine in violation of international law, **targeted disinformation from Russia plays a key and potentially destabilising role.** The Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community (BMI) takes this threat very seriously. This document is intended to increase **awareness** and provide **a factual basis** for dealing with disinformation.

2. What is disinformation?

Disinformation is false or misleading information which is <u>intentionally</u> distributed. This distinguishes it from false or misleading information which 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.

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 **ignite or fan the flames of social conflict**. 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 disinformation and propaganda. For example, information is manipulated or taken

out of context for political motives, in order to influence public debates. Thanks to algorithms in social media, false and misleading information can spread rapidly and reach large numbers of people. 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, in other countries, social media accounts have been hacked and data have been stolen from elected officials, to be manipulated or published in a deliberately misleading context.

4. How does Russia spread disinformation?

The Russian government has used 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 purposely amplify false and misleading information that is already circulating in order to increase its reach, in particular via social media.

5. What is the role of disinformation in the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine?

Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022 at the command of the Russian government and in violation of international law. Since then, the Russian war of aggression has continued at the same high level of intensity, 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, while an even higher number are estimated to be internally displaced within Ukraine. The EU member states and NATO allies have agreed on extensive sanctions against Russia and on measures to help Ukraine. Like many other countries, Germany stands in solidarity with Ukraine.

As a result, Germany and its partners 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, for instance, 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 our society. It also hopes to discredit the West and undermine consensus in the international community.

At the same time, the Kremlin is directing its propaganda at its own citizens to justify the invasion and portray Western countries as weak. 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 Ukraine, the Federal Government has seen an **increase in disinformation from Russian government-controlled media and pro-Russia websites, as well as official diplomatic and pro-Kremlin Twitter 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.

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 as well as in other ways. Firstly, the Russian government wants to control the way its war of aggression on Ukraine is perceived. Secondly, the Kremlin is also working specifically to make the international community's response to the war and public support for Ukraine more difficult or impossible.

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

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

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, Russia is certainly fighting a war of aggression against Ukraine in violation of international law.

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 or as an unjust state and claims that Ukraine is controlled by a neo-Nazi regime. 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. However, such threats have not weakened the resolve of Germany and its partners 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 able to distinguish between the views and actions of the Russian government on the one hand and Russian nationals and Germans of Russian descent on the other. Moreover, 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. Are COVID deniers spreading Russian disinformation?

Russian state-controlled media specifically target actors within Germany and in other countries. The Russian government has turned RT DE into an "alternative" medium which is also consulted by COVID deniers and other segments of the movement protesting against government measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic in German-speaking countries. Russian disinformation narratives are also circulating in related Telegram forums. **In German-speaking regions, some segments of the movement opposed to government measures to contain the pandemic, other COVID deniers and people opposed to vaccinations are open to Russian disinformation and propaganda and share it with others.** People opposed to Germany's Constitution who seek to undermine the legitimacy of the government, along with right-wing extremist and left-wing extremist groups, may also be receptive to Russian narratives.

But reactions among the different groups of COVID deniers vary: most are pro-Russian, but some support the Ukrainian side.

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 or by gathering in vehicle convoys in a number of German cities.

In this context, a number of federal states have announced plans to make the public display of the "Z" symbol a criminal offence as public support for Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. In Russia, the "Z" has become a symbol of support for the Russian army and government. Many Russian military vehicles in Ukraine are marked with a "Z".

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 being widely complied with 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 of broadcasting 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?

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.

Led by the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, there is an intensive exchange among ministries and agencies concerning measures to counter disinformation related to the war. The question of whether additional measures are needed is regularly addressed.

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**. The Federal Government plans further action to increase public awareness of the issue of disinformation and to promote media literacy to encourage a more critical approach to information and sources, particularly those in social media. 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. Fact-checking by independent research institutes and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is definitely welcome as well.

Beyond that, 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**, Germany's federal, state and local governments have formed networks to work with each other and with foreign partner countries, which is another important way to fight disinformation effectively.

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 urgent cases of disinformation?

In order to avoid drawing even more attention to disinformation, it is generally not advisable to actively correct every single item of false or misleading information. 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 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 public service news media and reputable daily and weekly newspapers and magazines. Many reputable 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 war in Ukraine on the official websites and social media channels of government institutions, for example at 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 individual false news items and correct them. One such organisation is the independent research institute Correctiv, which documents and analyses disinformation about the war in Ukraine which is 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 war in 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 (in German): https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/topthemen/DE/topthema-desinformation/artikel-desinformation-hybride-bedrohung.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/

The BpB has also set up a separate web page on the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine which brings together articles by independent journalists and scholars (in German): https://www.bpb.de/themen/europa/krieg-in-der-ukraine/.

Through the federal programme "Demokratie leben!" (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 war in 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 (in German): 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/category/ukraine-page/ Some texts are also available in German: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/de/

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