

A REUTERS SPECIAL REPORT

Pro-Putin operatives in Germany work to turn Berlin against Ukraine

REUTERS/Stringer. Illustration by Eve Watling

In Germany some are clamouring for a change in course on Ukraine. Key figures in the campaign have links to the Russian state or far right, a Reuters investigation has found.

By [Polina Nikolskaya](#), [Mari Saito](#), [Maria Tsvetkova](#) and [Anton Zverev](#) | Filed Jan. 3, 2023, noon GMT

COLOGNE, Germany

In a square beneath the twin spires of Cologne's gothic cathedral, around 2,000 protesters gathered in September to urge Germany's government to break with the Western coalition backing Ukraine and make peace with Russia.

"We must stop being vassals of the Americans," right-wing German politician Markus Beisicht said from a makeshift stage on the back of a truck. The crowd clapped and waved Russian and German flags.

A lean man in camouflage trousers stood at the side of the stage, obscured from the crowd by a tarpaulin. A few metres away, a burly man in dark sunglasses stood guard. The rally's organisers did not welcome questions. Most declined to speak when approached by a Reuters reporter. One protester tried to persuade a police officer to arrest the reporter as a Ukrainian spy.

The rally was just one of many occasions - online and on the streets - where people have clamoured that Berlin should reconsider its support for Ukraine. That message taps into deep connections between Germany and Russia, with several million Russian speakers living in Germany, a legacy of Soviet ties to Communist east Germany, and decades of German dependency on Russian gas.



Elena Kolbasnikova (centre) is the public face of some anti-war protests. REUTERS/Maria Tsvetkova

The stakes are high: if Germany, the European Union’s biggest economy, turns its back on Kyiv, European unity over the war will fracture.

Through interviews and a review of social media posts and other publicly available information, Reuters has established the identities of key figures involved in pushing a pro-Moscow stance inside Germany since the war began, including the two men hovering near the stage in Cologne.

The lean man is a Russian former air force officer. Originally called Rostislav Teslyuk, he changed his name to Max Schlund after settling in Germany a decade ago. In recent months, he travelled to Russian-controlled east Ukraine. More recently, a Russian government agency paid for his plane ticket to Moscow for a conference where President Vladimir Putin was the keynote speaker. The agency, Rossotrudnichestvo, is under EU sanctions for running a network of “agents of influence” spreading Kremlin narratives. Its head has branded the sanctions, imposed in July, as “insane.”

Schlund’s burly neighbour near the stage, a man called Andrei Kharkovsky, pledges allegiance to a Cossack society that is supporting Moscow’s military campaign in Ukraine. Schlund and Kharkovsky didn’t answer detailed questions for this article. In a WhatsApp exchange, Schlund wrote: “Eff off!” and “Glory to Russia!”

Reuters found that some of the loudest agitators for a change in German policy have two faces. Some use aliases, and have undisclosed ties to Russia and Russian entities under international sanctions, or to far-right organisations.



Right-wing German politician Markus Beisicht is pictured at an anti-war demonstration in Cologne last year. REUTERS/Stringer

German authorities have linked one of the people identified by Reuters to a far-right ideology. Some of its proponents were accused by police in December of plotting to overthrow the state. He runs a German-language social media channel called the “Putin Fanclub” and, in an echo of the alleged plot, called on social media early last year for the storming of the German parliament.

Another is a Berlin construction company executive who used to be an officer in Russia’s military intelligence. He is acquainted with one of three Russian men recently convicted by a Dutch court for helping supply the missile that downed a Malaysian passenger plane over Ukraine in 2014.

A third man is a motorcycle enthusiast who posts online alleging atrocities by Ukraine’s army and has raised money for a Russian biker gang that is under U.S. and EU sanctions for backing Putin’s war.

Germany has so far earmarked more than 1 billion euros in humanitarian aid to Ukraine and neighbouring countries, plus military equipment including advanced air defence systems. The majority of Germans still support Ukraine, but after a steep rise in energy costs, polls show fewer are keen on expanding military support.

The German government didn’t respond to detailed questions for this article but the Interior Ministry said it takes “very seriously” any attempts by foreign states or individuals to exert influence, especially “in the context of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine.” The Kremlin didn’t answer questions from Reuters. Beisicht, the politician who spoke at the Cologne rally, told Reuters he has worked closely with the protest’s organisers. He didn’t address Reuters findings about their associations.

Ties between Germany and Russia stretch back centuries. Empress Catherine the Great invited her German compatriots to emigrate to Russia in the 18th century. Between 1992 and 2002, around 1.5 million of these settlers' descendants moved back to Germany, taking advantage of laws that allowed people of German ancestry to claim citizenship. German government research shows that this community votes more heavily for the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party than other groups. It wants to tighten immigration controls and limit Islam’s influence in Germany.

Oleg Eremenko
An executive of a Berlin construction company, who formerly worked for Russian military intelligence.

**Max Schlund/
Rostislav Teslyuk**
Now an organizer of pro-Russia rallies, Schlund is a former Russian air force officer.

**Wjatcheslaw
Seewald**
Seewald runs a popular Putin Fanclub Telegram account.

Jan Riedel
Riedel is the president of German-Russian Souls, an organization that raises funds for Donbas.

**Andrei
Kharkovsky**
Participates in Russian Cossack gatherings and serves as a steward at pro-Russia rallies.

**Elena
Kolbasnikova**
Along with Schlund, Kolbasnikova organizes and leads pro-Russia rallies.

Dual identity

The public face of the Cologne protest was Schlund's romantic partner, Elena Kolbasnikova, originally from Ukraine and now living in Germany. She led the crowd in a chant of "Peace. Freedom. Self-determination!" in her slightly accented German. Using flyers and social media, she and Schlund organised the demonstration and a series of other pro-Russian events.

Kolbasnikova acquired celebrity status in some anti-establishment circles in Germany last year after saying she was fired from her nursing job because of "Russophobia" - an account that Reuters couldn't independently verify. When addressing supporters, she stops short of explicitly supporting Russia's invasion and instead focuses on the conflict's impact on Germans worried about rising heating bills.

Schlund's VKontakte social media profile says he studied at the Zhukovsky military academy, best known for training Russian cosmonauts. He appears in photos posted by fellow students. In pictures, including some posted by Kolbasnikova, he is shown wearing a military uniform. Kolbasnikova's brother told Reuters that Schlund served as a senior lieutenant in the Russian Air Force. Reuters could not independently verify these details.



zhanmoroshnikov



Elena Kolbasnikova and Max Schlund (Rostislav Teslyuk) appear on a relative's Instagram

From around 2007, Schlund worked for private security firms, employment records show. In 2010, a Moscow court handed a one year suspended jail sentence for assault to a person with the same name and date of birth, according to police records. Schlund moved to Germany in 2012 to live with his then wife, a Russian of German descent, according to a person who knows him.

They have since separated. Kolbasnikova's brother, who still lives in Ukraine, told Reuters Kolbasnikova's pro-Russia stance on the war has hardened a family rift: "She may be my blood sister, but what she's doing is not really right."

Schlund completed a transaction to buy an apartment in Moscow in early 2022, Russia's property registry shows.

Over the summer, Schlund and Kolbasnikova sent a message on Telegram inviting “like-minded people” to a day of music, food and sport in Duesseldorf in June. The venue, a banquet hall, was adorned with flags of Chechen leader and Putin loyalist Ramzan Kadyrov, whose fighters are part of Russia’s offensive in Ukraine. A minister in Kadyrov’s government, Akhmed Dudayev, posted pictures of the event on Telegram and praised Kolbasnikova and Schlund as “ambassadors of goodwill” who are “on the side of truth.” Chechnya’s Ministry of Information, headed by Dudayev, said in a statement to Reuters it had nothing to do with organising the event.

Also in 2022, the couple travelled to Donbas, the area of eastern Ukraine largely controlled by Russia. A pro-Kremlin media outlet, Tsargrad, posted a YouTube video of the trip in October. It shows Schlund and Kolbasnikova distributing aid, including tent heaters for pro-Moscow forces. The couple credit an organisation called the People’s Front for providing some of the aid and helping to organise the trip. The People’s Front, which did not comment for this article, is a coalition of Russian civil society groups and its leader is Putin, according to the organisation’s website. It too posted a video of the trip to social media.

The couple and their supporters marched through the streets of Cologne again one Sunday in early December, attended by police officers and a noisy counter-demonstration. Shortly after, they planned to take part in a forum for civil society activists in Moscow that was co-organised by the Russian government. In the end, Kolbasnikova told supporters, they missed their flight. In a post in an online chatroom she said the “sponsor” for the plane tickets was Russky Dom, a Russian cultural promotion body. Russky Dom is part of Rossotrudnichestvo, the government agency that is under EU sanctions. Grigory Mikhitaryants, an official at Russky Dom in Berlin, told Reuters his organisation obtained tickets for two people to travel to the Moscow event but declined to give their names. Rossotrudnichestvo said in a statement it “has no relation to the financial and organisational arrangements,” of the couple.

Schlund and Kolbasnikova declined to answer detailed questions. In a WhatsApp exchange, Schlund wrote to a Reuters reporter: “It’s better for you, stupid cow, if you stay out of my sight.”



Schlund, Kolbasnikova and supporters marched in Cologne on in early December. REUTERS/Stringer



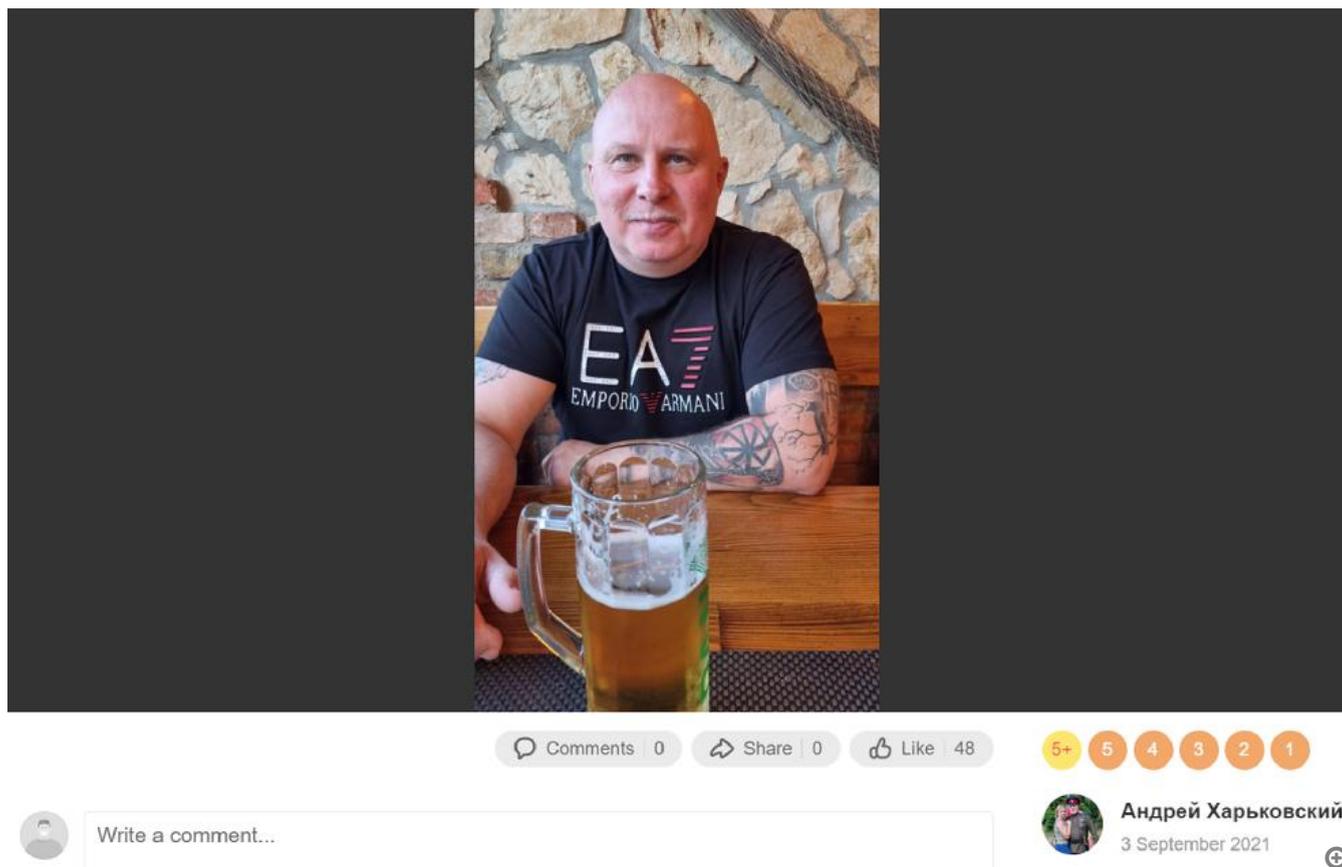
The march was heavily guarded by police and faced a counter demonstration. REUTERS/Stringer

Cossack connection

Using photos on social media, Reuters identified three of the security stewards at the Cologne protest. All have taken part in multiple Cossack gatherings in Germany, this reporting showed. In imperial Russia, the Cossacks pledged allegiance to the tsars. Now the main Russian Cossack organisations are loyal to Putin, and they are fighting alongside Russia's forces in Ukraine.

The main Cossack body, endorsed by the Kremlin, is the Union of Cossack Warriors of Russia and Abroad, which has dozens of chapters in Russia and abroad. It does not reveal the source of its funding. In Germany, Cossacks affiliated to the Union lay wreaths on the graves of Red Army soldiers and have provided security at events run by the Russian embassy.

The burly man by the stage at the Cologne rally, Kharkovsky, is originally from Siberia's Tomsk region. He now lives in Troisdorf, southeast of Cologne, and has run a small trucking business, according to posts on Kharkovsky's OK social media account. He is regularly pictured on his and other social media pages at Cossack gatherings, often wearing Cossack military uniform. Tattooed on his arm is an eight-pointed symbol that has been adopted by the far right in Russia and other countries.



Andrei Kharkovsky is pictured on his ok.ru social media profile

Two of Kharkovsky's fellow stewards have also attended Cossack meetings - a martial arts enthusiast called Vladimir Felk and a man who identifies himself on social media as Sergei Schneider. Felk has worked as a security guard and has run a logistics firm, according to posts on Felk's OK social media account.

In pictures Kharkovsky posted from annual gatherings in recent years, the three men are joined by a security guard and nightclub bouncer called Grigory Kramer. Kramer is a representative of the Union of Cossack Warriors of Russia and Abroad. A long-time former head of the Union, Viktor Vodolatsky is under EU and U.S. sanctions for backing Russian actions in Ukraine.

The 2022 gathering, in Hanover, welcomed Russian diplomats from the consulate in Hamburg, according to an account of the event the Russian Orthodox Church published on its website. A greeting was read out from the acting leader of the Great Don Army, a Cossack organisation involved in recruiting soldiers and fighting in Russia's military campaign in Ukraine. Photos shared by Kharkovsky on social media show him and other participants standing in front of a Great Don Army flag.

Kharkovsky put down the phone when Reuters contacted him. In a subsequent exchange on a messaging app, he confirmed he provided security at protests organised by Schlund and Kolbasnikova but didn't answer detailed questions. Kramer declined to be interviewed. Felk, Schneider, and the Great Don Army did not respond to requests for comment. The Union of Cossack Warriors declined to comment.



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On the photo – Андрей Харьковский



Андрей Харьковский
26 September 2021



A Cossack gathering in Hanover in 2021. Kharkovsky (2nd from left), Felk (4th from left), Kramer (6th from left), Schneider, (far right). Picture from Kharkovsky's ok.ru account

Russian military intelligence

When the German Communist Party held a “peace and solidarity” festival in Berlin at the end of August, it included a panel discussion titled “Peace with Russia.” Among the panellists was Oleg Eremenko, a Russian-German businessman who argued that Ukrainian youths are being taught to hate Russia. Eremenko has long been active in the Russian German community. He runs a construction business in Berlin. Clients listed on its website include the Russian Orthodox Church in Berlin. The Church said it had no record of its contractors.

“Too much information will do no favours for the pro-Russian side ... The more names there are, the more information about our activities here, it will be very unhelpful for our reputation here, especially with the German authorities.”

Oleg Eremenko

The grandson of a Soviet war hero who was a member of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party until 1981, Eremenko is on the board of an organisation called “Desant”, which is made up of former Russian servicemen. He has appeared at events alongside Russian diplomats to commemorate the Soviet war dead buried in Germany and has been pictured with German politicians such as Manuela Schwesig, a member of the Social Democrats and state premier of the northern state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. In 2020, Eremenko was among a small group of people given citations for service to Russia by the country’s

ambassador to Germany. Schwesig did not respond to a request for comment.

His past is less public.

In a photograph dated 2016, Eremenko poses next to Igor Girkin, a former Russian intelligence officer recently convicted in absentia by a Dutch court of involvement in the downing of Malaysian airliner MH17 over Ukraine. The photo appears on a VKontakte account run by Girkin's organisation. Girkin, also known as Igor Strelkov, has denied any role in the shooting down of the plane. Contacted by Reuters for this story, Girkin said: "I don't give interviews to enemy media."



Олег Еременко, Игорь Стрелков. Москва, штаб ОД "Новороссия", декабрь 2016 г.



Comments cannot be left on this photo.



Eremenko (left) and Igor Girkin (Strelkov) are pictured in 2016 on a VKontakte social media account run by Strelkov's organisation

Six years ago, Eremenko took part in a Russian TV dating series called "Let's get married." A close associate of Girkin, appeared on stage as one of Eremenko's friends. Sitting at a table decorated with colourful flowers, Eremenko said that he was looking to marry a nice "Slavic girl" and have children.

Eremenko confirmed to Reuters that he worked for Russian military intelligence, the GRU. He said he served inside Russia but declined to give details. "I served, and that's it," he said. "I'm now in Germany in, let's say, a civilian status," promoting Russian culture and memorialising World War Two dead in conjunction with Russian officials.

Eremenko said he got to know Girkin when delivering humanitarian supplies to people in the Donbas region in 2014 and 2015. Declining to speak in detail, he said he and other Russian activists are under heightened scrutiny from German authorities. "Too much information will do no favours for the pro-Russian side," he said. "The more names there are, the more information about our activities here, it will be very unhelpful for our reputation here, especially with the German authorities." He said he had made no political statements backing either side in the war in Ukraine.



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, French President Emmanuel Macron, Italy's then Prime Minister Mario Draghi, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Romanian President Klaus Iohannis met in Kyiv in June. Ludovic Marin/Pool via REUTERS

Putin fan club

Some pro-Russian activists are spreading the Kremlin's message to the German-speaking public online.

A Reuters analysis of German language Telegram channels found at least 27 channels that consistently reshare and boost pro-Kremlin messages to a combined audience of about 1.5 million subscribers.



Putin Fanclub

35 753 subscribers

Der offizielle Putin Fanclub.
Hier werden Informationen über den besten
Präsidenten und Staatsmann der neueren
Geschichte veröffentlicht.

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A screenshot of the Putin Fanclub Telegram channel

One such account is “Putin Fanclub.” It regularly posts to its 36,000 subscribers photos of Putin, items about his public appearances and German translations of his speeches. A mocked-up video posted there shows Putin beating Joe Biden in an arm wrestle. Another post from Oct. 26 exhorts Germans to take seriously Putin’s warnings of a nuclear conflict.

The Telegram account provides no information about who owns or administers it. But a Reuters analysis of its posts and reposts led to a man named Wjatscheslaw Seewald living in Bavaria. Seewald acknowledged to Reuters that he is behind the channel, though he said he was one of several people.

Seewald maintains an active presence on YouTube. In 2011 he posted a photo of himself with Aleksandr Khinyevich, founder of a faith based on the “Slavic-Aryan race.” In a 2013 YouTube video, Seewald argued not all Swastikas should be covered by Germany’s ban on Nazi symbols, saying the original symbol predates Nazism by centuries and has nothing to do with the Third Reich.

Seewald has written online about his affinity for the far-right Alternative für Deutschland party. In 2017, he posted a selfie with Bjoern Hoecke, an AfD politician and co-leader of The Wing, a far-right faction within the party that has since been disbanded. A German court ruled in March that The Wing’s aims were at odds with the country’s constitution. The group’s goals included protecting the ethnic integrity of the German people and keeping out "foreigners." Hoecke told Reuters he does not know Seewald and it is impossible to vet the views of everyone he is photographed alongside.

In a post on his Telegram social media platform three days after Russia invaded Ukraine, Seewald wrote: “The Reichstag needs to be taken again” in a reference to the German parliament building. Seewald has caught the attention of German authorities. A 2021 report by Bavaria’s Office for the Protection of the Constitution, which is tasked with monitoring extremists, said Seewald publicly espouses anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and is influencing extremists who threaten democracy. German officials declined to comment about Seewald or any measures that resulted from the report.



A screengrab from the video Göttlich leben, aber wie? (How to live in a divine way) by Wjatscheslaw Seewald, via YouTube

The report also cited Seewald as an example of how members of the far-right Reichsbuerger movement moved their activity online during the pandemic. The movement does not recognize modern day Germany as a legitimate state; some followers believe it is under military occupation, and some espouse Nazi ideas. In December, German authorities detained dozens of individuals, including a Russian national, for allegedly plotting to overthrow the state. Investigators say they suspect some of the individuals had concrete plans to storm parliament. The investigation is ongoing.

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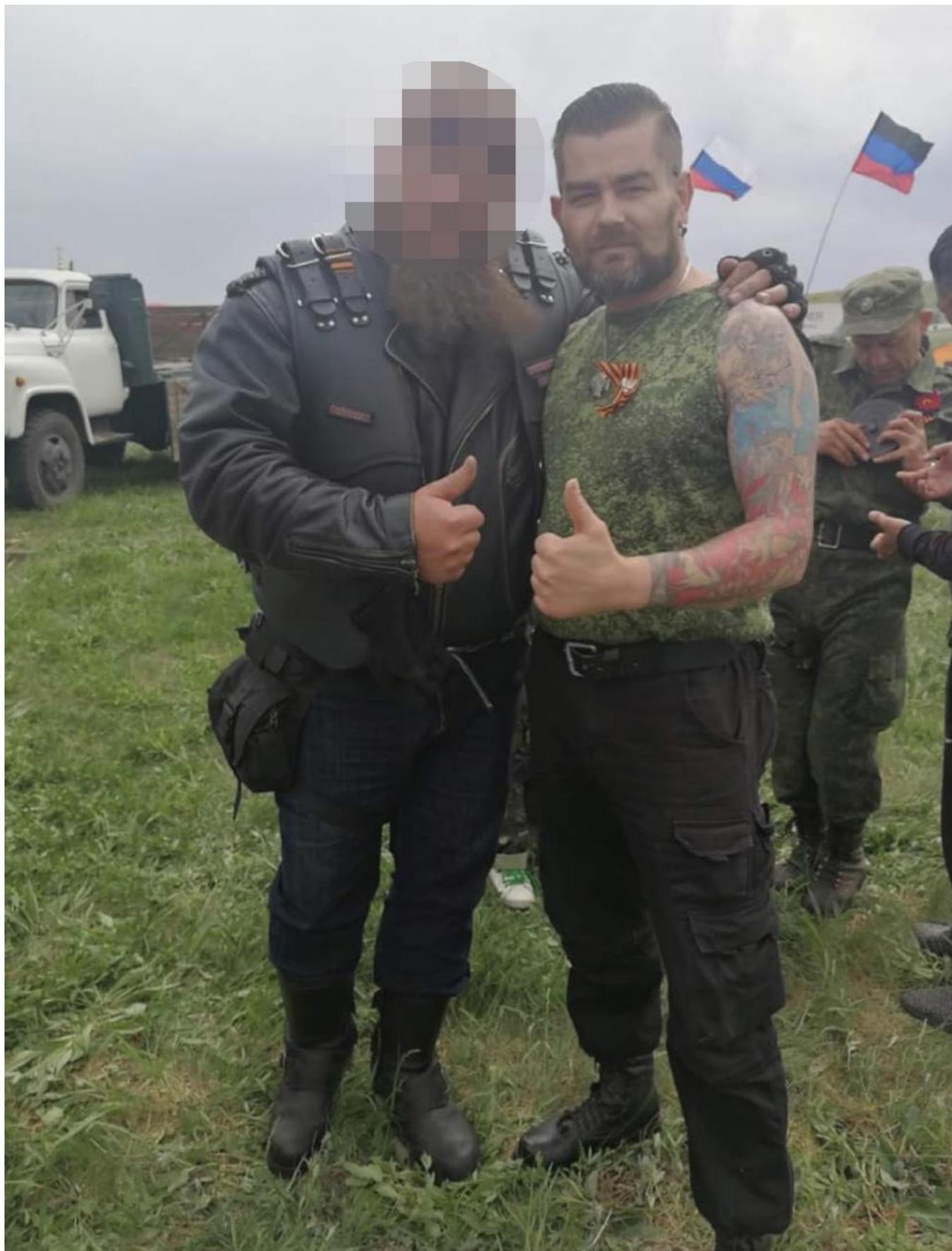
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Seewald confirmed his role in the Putin Fanclub but declined an interview request, saying he is not talking to the media because of “Russophobia” in Europe. He declined to respond to detailed written questions, except one, about the Swastika. “How can a Russian person support Hitler? Are you in your right mind?” he said.

Germany's Interior Ministry, which oversees the police and the federal agency monitoring extremism, said it does not comment on the activities of specific individuals or groups.

Night Wolves

Some groups inside Germany have focused attention on a humanitarian crisis in Donbas caused, they say, by Ukrainian forces deliberately shelling civilian targets. That stance – which Kyiv and its allies say is untrue – echoes a narrative pushed by the Kremlin.



Deutsch-Russische Seelen

Timeline photos · Nov 7, 2021 · ⚙️



Motorcycle enthusiast Jan Riedel in Donetsk. Photo from the Facebook channel of Riedel's group "German-Russian Souls"

Jan Riedel, a motorcycle enthusiast from east Germany, is president of a group called “German-Russian Souls.” It takes part in pro-Russia events in Germany, sometimes alongside Russian diplomats, laying wreaths on the graves of Red Army soldiers killed in World War Two. Riedel and his group post images on their social media channels almost daily showing what they say is the aftermath of Ukrainian artillery attacks on apartment buildings and civilian infrastructure in the Donbas region. Riedel didn’t respond to requests for comment for this article.

Riedel’s group partners with an organisation called “Patriots of Novorossiya.” Novorossiya – which literally translates as New Russia – is the name that Russian nationalists give to the area of southern and eastern Ukraine that the Kremlin and its supporters say is rightfully Russian. Representatives of “Patriots of Novorossiya” declined to comment.

At public events, Riedel is usually dressed in a heavy-duty leather motorcycle jacket adorned with the Novorossiya flag and the number 1423. The number denotes the Night Wolves, a Russian biker club that is under U.S. sanctions for helping Russian forces seize Ukraine’s Crimea region in 2014 and recruiting separatist fighters in Donbas.

One of several visits Riedel made to Donbas was in 2019. A post on his group’s social media page announced a 10,000 rouble (\$165) donation to the Donbas chapter of Night Wolves. It said the money came from a fund-raising event in Germany. Vitaly Kishkinov, head of the Donbas Night Wolves chapter, told Reuters his group received the donation. He said it was a one-off donation and that the chapter and Riedel’s organisation were not working together.

Agents of Influence

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Russia's President Vladimir Putin leads the Night Wolves in Russian-occupied Crimea in 2019. Sputnik/Alexei Druzhinin/Kremlin

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