
Disinformative trends during the German Federal Election

EU DisinfoLab's Annual Conference #DISINFO2021
“Understanding Disinformation Across Europe”

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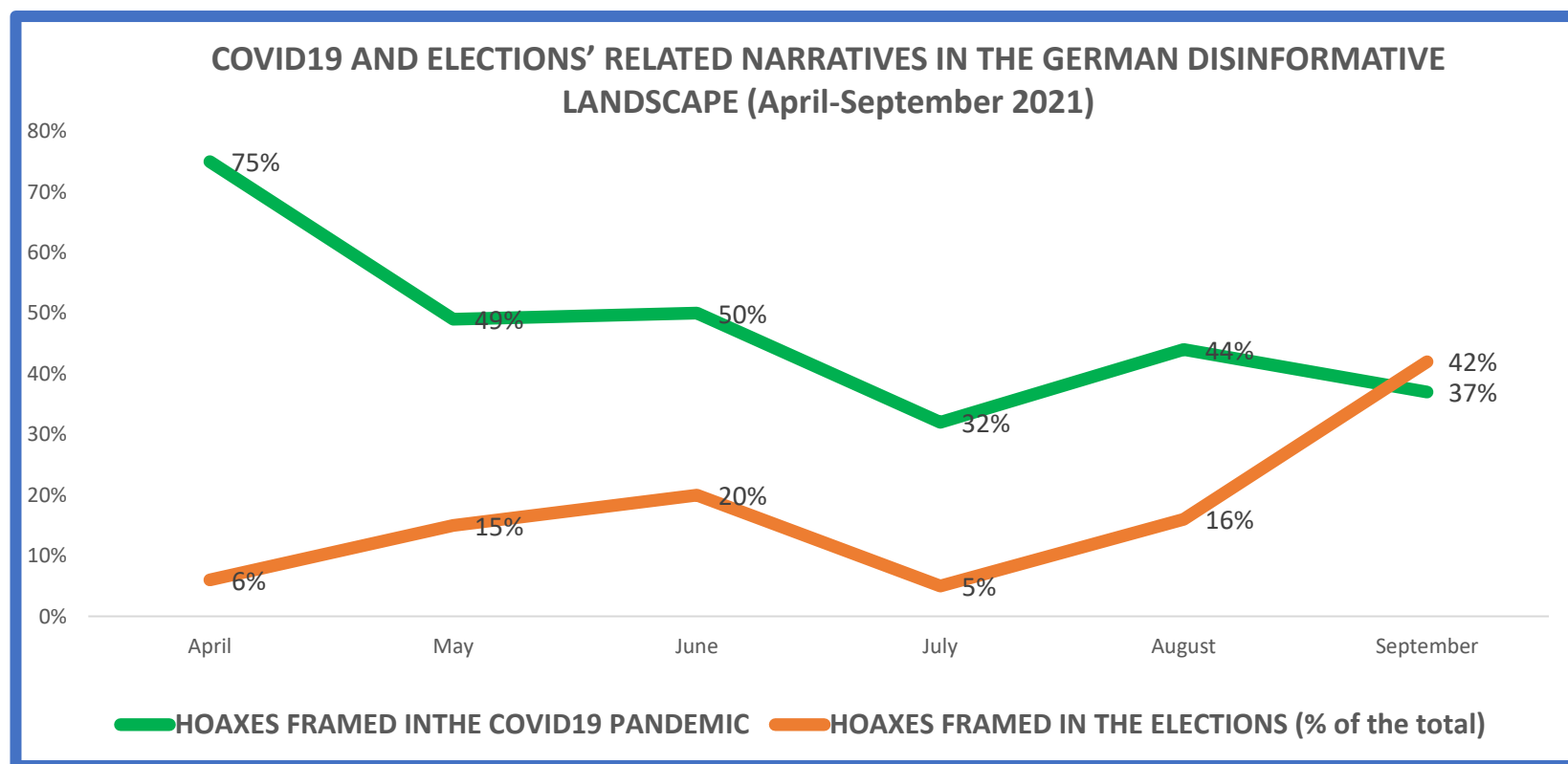


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1. METHODOLOGY

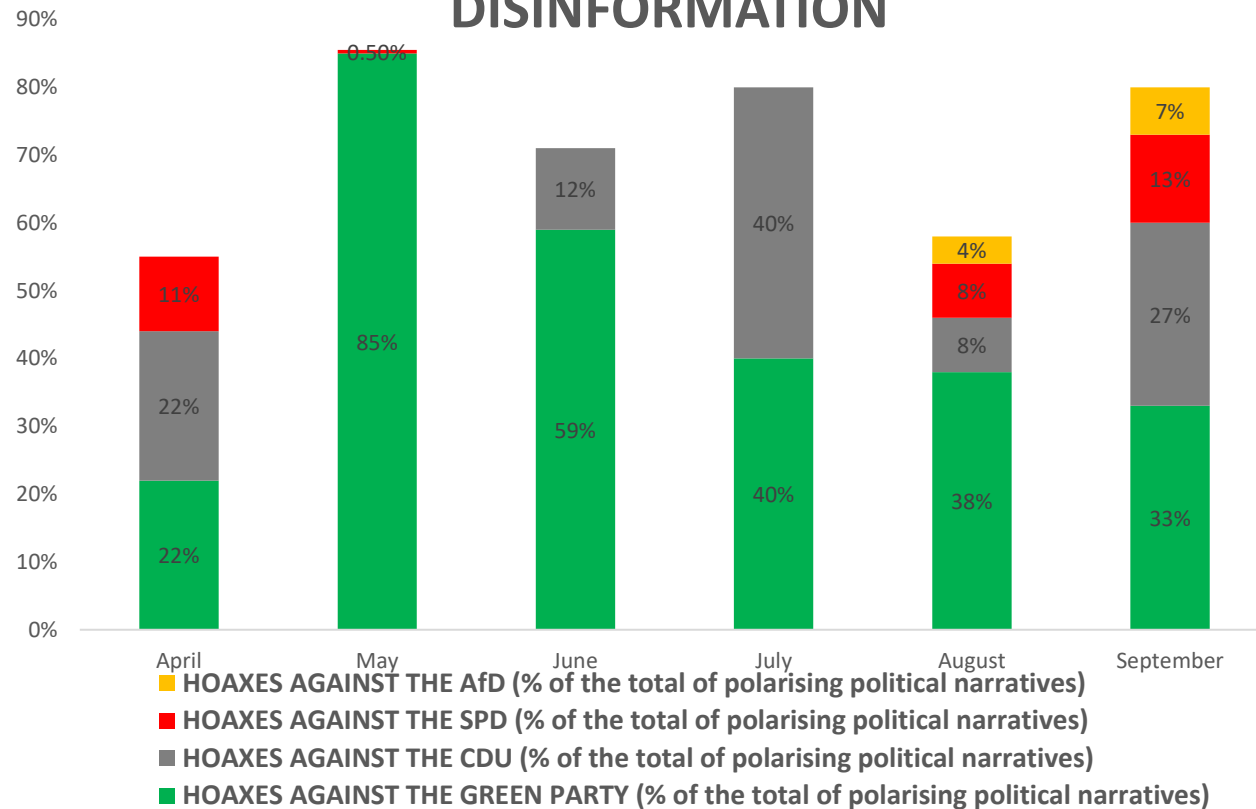
1. **Time frame:** April-September (monitoring ongoing)
2. **Basis of our monitoring:** debunking by German fact-checkers
3. **EU DisinfoLab own methodology:** individual analysis of disinformative items
4. **A broad scope** of disinformation monitoring: beyond the elections



*Source: Elaborated by EU DisinfoLab

2. DISINFORMATION AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE ELECTORAL POLLS

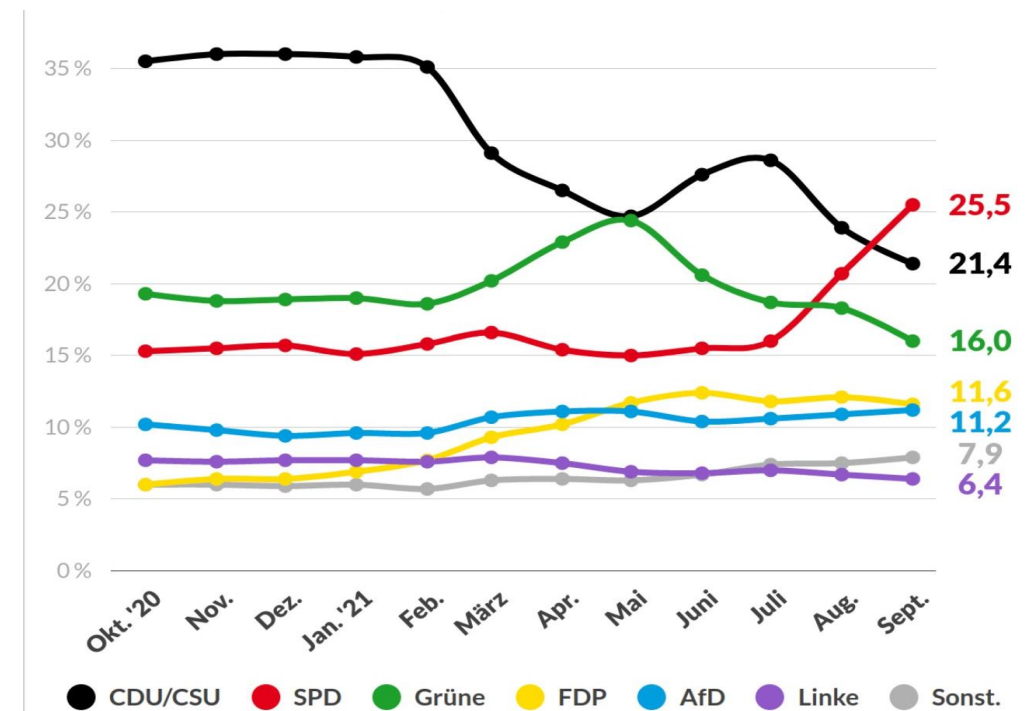
GERMAN PARTIES TARGETED BY DISINFORMATION



*Source: Elaborated by EU DisinfoLab.

Data source: Monitored fact-checked hoaxes from April to September 2021

ELECTORAL SURVEYS LEADING UP TO THE FEDERAL ELECTION 2021 Evolution of the polls during the 12 months before the election



*Monthly averages of all surveys of each month

Numbers on the right-hand side: average values in the current month (to 25 September 2021)

Data source: Wikipedia. Diagram: www.bundestagswahl-2021.de

The federal election took place on the 26th of September 2021

3. EXAMPLES OF DISINFORMATION TARGETING A POLITICAL PARTY: THE GREEN PARTY & ANNALENA BAERBOCK

- **Gendered and political disinformation narratives:**
 - ✓ Deliberate **sexualisation**: e.g. the alleged leak of Annalena Baerbock's fake nude pictures
 - ✓ Questioning Baerbock's **abilities**: e.g. claims that she did not complete her studies and deserved to be in a mental institution
 - ✓ Misrepresenting Baerbock's **political agenda**: e.g. accusation that she called for legalisation in support of paedophilia
- **Conspiracy narratives** calling Baerbock a "puppet" of George Soros
- Anti-Green party narratives fostering **nationalism, racism, and xenophobia**: e.g. claims that the Green party wants to destroy Germany, and benefit refugees at the expense of nationals.
- False claims were used to present the Green party as **authoritarian and wanting to ban everything** (barbecues, pets, cruises...)
- **Disinformation also appeared offline:**
 - ✓ Disinformative political ads published in the main German newspapers: Annalena Baerbock portrayed as Moses with the 10 commandments
 - ✓ **The "Grüner Mist" campaign**: ad-posters in 50 cities (and social media content) containing false claims



3. EXAMPLES OF DISINFORMATION TARGETING A POLITICAL PARTY: THE CDU/CSU AND ARMIN LASCHET

Disinformation targeted CDU/CSU candidate Armin Laschet following the floods in Germany

- False claims that Laschet did a TV interview from a fake stage rather than from the scene of the floods
- Some of Laschet's answers during several TV appearances were misrepresented
- A cropped picture was used to suggest falsely that an umbrella was held out for Armin Laschet, while a flood victim stood under the rain.
- Unproven accusations were made that donations for flood victims would be used to fund Laschet's electoral campaign.

Disinformation also appeared offline:

- Satirical fake campaign posters were used by an activist group to target the CDU.



4. DISINFORMATION DURING THE ELECTION DAY

Some facts used to fuel disinformation: historical increase in postal votes, irregularities and loopholes during the election in Berlin, Armin Laschet's voting blunder on election day.

Main disinformation narratives during election day:

- **Political polarisation**
- Accusations of **voter suppression**, e.g. hoax that only people vaccinated for or recovered from COVID-19 would be allowed in the polling stations
- Allegations of **voter fraud**, e.g. strategies to manipulate the postal vote, invalidate votes, and prevent an AfD victory
- Sowing **distrust in the electoral system**, e.g. claims that ballot papers, ballot boxes, and the IT systems were untrustworthy
- Conspiracy theory that electoral results **were pre-determined** (as electoral projections mistakenly appeared as subtitles during a public TV broadcast)



5. FOREIGN INFLUENCE vs. HOAXES “MADE IN GERMANY”

FOREIGN INFLUENCE

- **Russia** was often accused of conducting disinformation campaigns in Germany:
 - EU’s disinformation watchdog: “Germany is the main target of Russian disinformation” (March 2021)
 - Germany denounced attempts to steal data from German lawmakers using phishing emails and attributed “to cyber-actors of the Russian state and, specifically, Russia’s GRU military intelligence service” and urged Moscow to end these cyberattacks. (September 2021)
 - Russian media in Germany include RT (Russia Today), SNA (Sputnik) and News Front

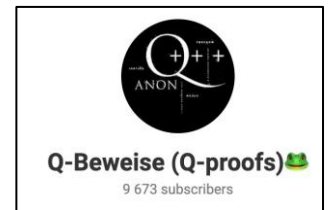
- Disinformative **Austrian** outlets.
- **QAnon**. Inspired by US voter fraud claims (very active on Telegram)

DOMESTIC ACTORS

- German Minister for Home Affairs Horst Seehofer emphasised the threats from inside the country.
 - ✓ AfD politicians’ accounts and regional Facebook pages.
 - ✓ *Ad hoc* Facebook groups (e.g. against the Green Party, or COVID-19 vaccines)
 - ✓ Far-right groups and “influencers”.
 - ✓ The COVID-19 denialist “Querdenker” movement, which contested elections with the party Die Basis.

DESINFORMATION MADE IN ÖSTERREICH

Wie österreichische Medien in den deutschen Wahlkampf eingreifen



6. THE BATTLE AGAINST ELECTORAL DISINFORMATION: ACTORS, INITIATIVES, AND TOOLS

- EU DisinfoLab compiled a list of the initiatives that were set up to counter disinformation, as well as cyberthreats and foreign interference attempts, during the German elections (held on September 26).
- A plurality of actors joined forces:
 - Government institutions prioritised cybersecurity;
 - Political parties focused on raising awareness and partisan debunking;
 - Media, social media platforms, and fact-checkers debunked hoaxes;
 - Academic institutions researched the proliferation of disinformative content around the elections.
- Some experts called for a large-scale media literacy strategy in Germany so that civil society can play a greater role in tackling disinformation and avoid contributing to its dissemination.
- Overall, initiatives to combat disinformation and foreign influence should not be limited to the election period but designed for the long term.

THANK YOU

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