

## Germany: arrests on suspicion of mounting a coup

Lidia Gibadło , Michał Kędzierski

On 7 December, the Federal Prosecutor's Office in Germany issued an arrest warrant for 22 alleged members and three supporters of a terrorist organisation, and searched buildings in eleven states. The organisation was founded in November 2021, and is ideologically linked to the QAnon and Reich Citizens (*Reichsbürger*) movements. Members of the latter movement – estimated to number over 20,000 – do not recognise the statehood of Germany, claiming that the Reich still exists within the 1937 borders.

The organisation's 'military wing' was aiming to carry out a coup d'état in Germany involving all levels of government. It intended to form a transitional military government that would negotiate a new regime with the victorious World War II powers. According to the federal prosecutor, one of the defendants had contacted Russian representatives in Germany to discuss this matter, but the Russians apparently rejected his proposals. German counterintelligence confirms that strong pro-Russian sympathies are noticeable within the *Reichsbürger* movement. According to the prosecutor's office, the main targets of the organisation's recruitment were active members of the *Bundeswehr* and police officers.

### Commentary

- From the information provided by the public prosecutor's office on the intentions of those detained, it appears that preparations were underway to try and take power by force of arms and make far-reaching changes to the constitutional order of the state – something unprecedented in post-war German history. Both the scale and scope of the planned activities and the successful recruitment of former members of the army and law enforcement forces to the organisation are disturbing. At the same time, however, the group's chances of achieving their stated goals should be assessed as illusory.
- The extensive action taken by the police and the special services (3000 officers were involved) should be viewed as a success. The scale of the operations carried out is noteworthy (130 sites in 11 German *Länder* were searched simultaneously, and arrests were made in two locations in Austria and Italy), as well as the extensive information that was given to the public shortly after the arrests were completed. This may indicate that the German services have been keeping a close eye on the *Reichsbürger* community for some time (the group itself has been under counterintelligence surveillance since 2016). The most important task now facing the German special services will be to establish whether and how much connection the conspirators have, if any, with the current structures and personnel of the *Bundeswehr*, the police, political parties and pro-Russian circles.

- The conspirators' actions are one element of a growing trend in Germany over recent years of rising political extremism. This has been particularly evident in far-right circles, and has increasingly manifested itself in physically violent crimes (3900 in 2021) and even politically motivated assassination attempts (14 attempts were recorded in 2021, five of which were successful). Right-wing extremists, including those from the *Reichsbürger* movement, have contributed to the increase in numbers and importance of protests against measures taken to combat the COVID pandemic. The Interior Ministry estimates that there are around 13,000 right-wing extremists ready to perpetrate violence in Germany (around 1500 of whom have permits to bear arms).
- The spectacular police operation against the plotters is part of a policy undertaken by Interior Minister Nancy Faeser (SPD) to combat political extremism (particularly from the right-wing) in Germany. Right at the beginning of her term, she proposed a package of changes including the possibility to dismiss an employee of the public administration if such a person is linked to right-wing radicals. Strengthening political education and the digital competence of children and young people is another important component of these changes. Some of the solutions presented are an extension of the package proposed by the German government following the October 2019 terrorist attack in Halle.
- The German state's action will be used to improve the image of both the minister herself – according to media reports she is considering running for prime minister of Hesse next year – and the SPD-Green-FDP government as a whole, whose ratings have recently been lukewarm (according to a recent DeutschlandTrend poll, only 30% of respondents expressed a positive opinion of the government's work, while 68% were negative).