

Chinese and Russian spies in the crosshairs of Germany's secret services

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On 23 April, Jian Guo, a long-term assistant to Maximilian Krah, who tops the list of the AfD's candidates in the European Parliament (EP) elections, was arrested in Dresden on a charge of spying for China. During his career at the EP (since 2019) he reportedly passed information to Chinese intelligence and spied on Chinese opposition activists residing in Germany. Guo was born in China but holds German citizenship; before joining the AfD he had been a member of the SPD.

His arrest is the latest in a series of Germany's recent detentions on charges of spying for China or Russia. On 22 April three German nationals were arrested on charges of collecting information on dual-use technology (of the kind, for example, used in warships). They have also been accused of purchasing a specialist laser and transporting it illegally to China. On 17 April, two Germans who also hold Russian citizenship were apprehended on suspicion of spying for Russia. The public prosecutor's office has charged them with carrying out acts of espionage in the vicinity of military facilities, railway lines and other elements of critical infrastructure, as part of preparations for attacks on the Ukrainian military's supply routes. The facilities concerned belonged not only to the German state, but also to US troops stationed in Germany.

Commentary

- The accusations levelled against the AfD leader's assistant will weaken the party ahead of the EP elections this June. The remaining parties will use his arrest to attack the AfD, and will highlight its politicians' vulnerability to influence exerted by authoritarian regimes. The AfD, which in recent months has seen a decline in its level of support (at present it is running at 17–18%), needs to confront the charges of spying for both China and, most importantly, Russia. Several weeks ago the media accused Petr Bystron, who is second on the list of the AfD's candidates for the EP elections, of benefiting financially from spreading Russian propaganda regarding the war in Ukraine; the public prosecutor's office has opened an investigation into this matter. The AfD's approval rating also fell as a result of a series of rallies against it, which were held in late February and early March and were attended by several thousand individuals. These were organised in response to reports which exposed the proposals put forward by AfD members to expel individuals with immigrant backgrounds from Germany (who account for around 30% of Germany's population). Another reason for the drop in the AfD's level of support has been the emergence of a strong competitor in Sahra Wagenknecht's party (BSW, which according

to polls is supported by 7% of the respondents; see [‘Germany: the launch of the pro-Russian Wagenknecht party’](#)).

- For the Greens and the FDP, as well as for the Christian Democrats, the disclosure of the activity of Chinese agents is also an opportunity to criticise Chancellor Olaf Scholz for his excessively lenient attitude towards China. It is no coincidence that the spies were detained following his visit to Beijing. It is likely that the secret services delayed their operations in order not to disrupt last week’s trip, which was focused on developing economic cooperation (see [‘De-risking can wait. Scholz’s visit to China’](#)). The Greens and the FDP have demanded a more assertive approach to scientific and cultural cooperation with China (including a reduction in the activity of the Confucius Institutes). They also propose a further reduction in the utilisation of Chinese-made components in the roll-out of the German 5G network (see [‘Lex Huawei. Germany is tightening control over 5G’](#)).
- The recent arrests will boost the demands to strengthen the German secret services. In recent years, the German counter-intelligence office (BfV) was focused on economic issues and fighting extremists, in particular right-wing and Islamic suspects. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Russian intelligence services stepped up their pressure on Germany. In this context, some coalition politicians (including interior minister Nancy Faeser of the SPD and the head of the committee for secret services Konstantin von Notz of the Greens) have proposed increasing the German secret services’ funding and number of staff, and expanding their powers. This includes more effective operational activities (for example, by keeping the suspects under surveillance), increased access to information shared via online communicators, and more extensive powers to monitor financial flows.