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The Case of Germany

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11 Kalavryton Street,
Alimos, 17456, Athens, Greece
Tel/Fax: +30-210-991-1214 (Europe)
++1-423-742-1627 (United States)
Email: rieasinfo@gmail.com

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About the Author

Dr. Stephan Blancke is a political scientist whose research focuses on the intelligence and clandestine activities of North Korea and China. Previously he worked in an Intelligence and Analysis Unit in the United Kingdom Home Office and was a researcher at King's College in London. He is a contributor to Jane's Intelligence Review, Intelligence Online, NK News and others. Since 2022, he has been an Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in London. Dr Blancke may be contacted through his personal website, which is available at stephan.blancke.de/.

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RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE AND THE DELEGITIMIZATION OF THE STATE

The Case of Germany

Introduction

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, protests against the restrictive measures taken by the authorities to contain the spread of the virus occurred in many European Union (EU) countries from spring 2020 onwards. The protests attracted ordinary citizens as well as a diverse crowd of conspiracy theorists, esotericists and extremists. The declared ‘enemy’—primarily politicians and virologists—were massively vilified, approached at their homes and threatened with murder. In addition to arson attacks that damaged property, some individuals were murdered. However, law enforcement authorities were unable to assign some of the violent actors to a demarcated political ideology.

The German domestic intelligence service, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), provides more details about these protests on its website¹. The BfV explains that “[i]n some cases” these demonstrations were not legitimate and “crossed the line of legitimate protests, with factual indications of anti-constitutional activity”. The goal of the responsible actors was to “shake confidence in the state system and impair its ability to function”.

Therefore, a new field of work has been established in the BfV with the title “Anti-constitutional delegitimization of the state”². This step, which was implemented in April 2021, has led to controversial discussions in Germany and beyond, for the definition of the term seems vague and impracticable to scholars and experts.

¹ https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/DE/themen/verfassungsschutzrelevante-delegitimierung-des-staates/begriff-und-erscheinungsformen/begriff-und-erscheinungsformen_artikel.html#doc1260196bodyText1

² <https://bit.ly/3dgQqZu>

A New Threat?

Protests by specific occupational groups particularly affected by the state measures —such as caterers, event industry or caring professions employees— took place at an early stage of the pandemic. These protests increasingly overlapped with groups and individuals who were particularly concerned with the temporary and local restrictions imposed on certain fundamental rights, such as freedom of assembly. State measures were seen by the demonstrators as a gradual, deliberate abolition of democracy by an ominous elite with global ambitions. Especially in eastern Germany, many of the protests were organized and registered by known rightwing extremists. They skilfully juxtaposed positively connoted concepts, such as fundamental rights or freedom of movement, with other, negatively perceived topics, such as compulsory masks or compulsory vaccinations. This appealed to a wider audience of previously apolitical people and led to a situation where extremely diverse groups became involved in the protests together and largely without reservations. In addition to affected occupational groups, conventional anti-vaxxers and alternative physicians, well-known anti-Semites and rightwing extremist conspiracy theorists marched together. Furthermore, pseudo-religious and evangelical groups began to hold regular vigils and ‘church services’ in front of public buildings, such as the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. A clear distancing of the protesters from extremist positions was largely rejected by both the organizers and the participants. On the contrary, there was even sporadic collusion of a strategic nature.

A categorization by the author of the participants of these demonstrations shows a very different degree of radicalism:

Actors	Degree of Radicalism
Occupational groups particularly affected by state measures	None or low
Conventional anti-vaxxers	Low
Esotericists and supporters of alternative medicine	Low
Religiously motivated individuals	Low
Conspiracy theorists	Medium
Rightwing extremists	High
Leftwing extremists	High

These very different actors found a common denominator in fighting against and eliminating ‘the system’. Protest leaders explicitly referred to the state and its institutions and its employees —such as members of the government and parliament, police officers, vaccination staff or virologists— as “henchmen”. In this respect, the BfV’s statement that these activities were anti-government is justified.

The ongoing escalation in Belgium also shows that individuals within this ideologically diverse scene continue to pose an extreme danger to public security: on 28 September 2022, Yannick Verdyck was shot dead by police in Antwerp after he opening fire during a house search. Searches were carried out in several Belgian locations against a group alleged to

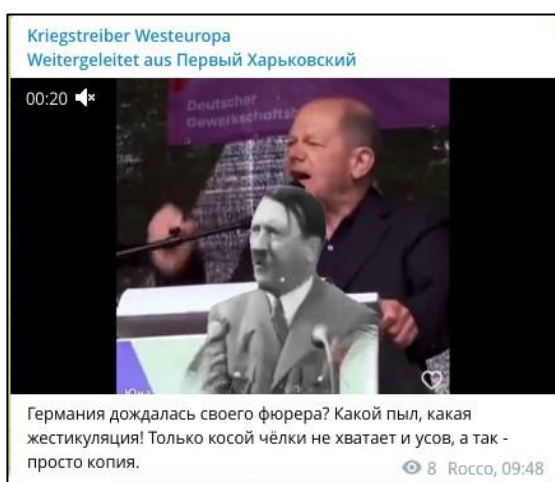
have planned a terrorist attack and with which Verdyck, who was known as a militaria collector and conspiracy theorist, was connected. On 13 October 2021, Verdyck had claimed in his Facebook account, which showed a silver cartridge as a profile photo: “This society, this political order, is making people sick and unhappy on a large scale. Our political system is the problem, not the solution” and he called for people to unite against it. On 30 November 2021, he noted that “with all the attention Covid is garbling, we are almost forgetting that there are other things that are seriously wrong with our society”.

Russia Time and Again

According to security officials, the protest scene that formed during the demonstrations against the COVID-19 measures had already recognized these “other things” that Verdyck had referenced in his social media post as a new source of irritation. At the same time, the protests had clearly lost momentum after the relaxation of the measures against the pandemic. With the war in Ukraine and the sanctions against Russia, the organizers of the protests were able to successfully place a new narrative on their political agenda: that was the idea of a prolonged conspiracy by the West against Russia, with the latter seen as having the right to defend itself against provocations by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In doing so, the promoters of this theory were able to capitalize on the affinity that many protesters have had for years with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russia in general. In the online domain, Russian trolls repeatedly steered discussions toward certain emotive topics, such as migration and later the vaccination debates. “Putin hilf!” (“Putin, help!”) was not only seen on banners

carried at demonstrations, but also repeatedly chanted as a battle cry by many of the demonstrators.

In this sense, the Russian war on Ukraine represents an ideal opportunity to communicate the Kremlin’s narrative once again, this time with renewed intensity, in the streets of Western capitals or in numerous social media and messaging platforms. The tactic described by the BfV as delegitimization can be recognized in the aggressive combination of obvious fake news, combined with aggressive defamations



of the parliamentary system, as well as insults hurled against individual politicians. As an example, the following screenshot from a graphics interchange format (GIF) file that was posted on 4 May 2022 on the channel named “Kriegstreiber Westeuropa” (“Warmonger Western Europe”) in the Telegraph social media platform. The Russian subtitle explains, among other things: “The only thing missing is a weird fringe and a moustache, otherwise it’s just a copy”³ (author’s translation).

³ <https://t.me/kriegstreibereurozohne>

In these and numerous other Telegram channels, absurd parallels are drawn —sometimes directly, other times indirectly— calling for the elimination of all “culpable warmongers”. From the sheer mass of channels and postings of this kind, it can be seen that Telegram continues to be the primary social media platform for propaganda and fake news of all kinds. Through its channels, the West is not only portrayed as decadent, but also as a dictatorial system whose elimination is a legitimate necessity for the popular liberation. In this respect, a confused yet thoroughly militant hostility to the system can be discerned. Various actors, whose channels have been deleted from YouTube, for example, take refuge on additional platforms such as Odysee —which calls itself a “libertarian alternative” to mainstream social media. Under the keyword “warmongers”, there are countless videos —similarly to those on the platform Gettr— in which the West, NATO, etc., are criticized and Western politicians are defamed. Conversely, critical discussion of the Russian invasion are rarities.

A Bit of War, a Bit of Fun

Other Telegram channels demonstrate less proximity to the Kremlin and are more adept at engaging people who are attracted to pacifist and discourse-oriented topics. Here, traditionally leftwing positions easily tie in with the theses of rightwing conspiracy theorists who believe they are subjects of a dictatorship of globalists. Such proponents, who present themselves as middle-class, also propagate clear anti-systemic policies aimed at overcoming the existing political system. For example, a channel with the positive-sounding name “Citizens’ Initiative for Peace” distributes photographs and videos of successful Russian and failed Ukrainian war operations and of captured or destroyed Western military technology⁴. Other coverage includes official footage of Putin’s speeches, laughing Russian military recruits and diagrams showing the stable rates of the Russian ruble. These are supplemented by footage of protests in Western capitals against the “Ukrainian aggression” and alleged repressive measures by the police against pacifists. Serious debates, for example on ceasefire negotiations or humanitarian aspects, are not to be found in these channels.

Various channels post more or less silly everyday memes, tasteless innuendos and repeatedly one-sided —i.e. pro-Russian— reports from Ukraine, as well as relatively unexpected conspiracy theories, statements of political disenchantment and skeptical comments about the government and its representatives. An characteristic example of this approach can be seen above.



⁴ <https://t.me/BifFidU>

On 9 October 2022, a video first appeared on a self-described ‘humorous’ Telegram channel, talking about the “war propaganda against Russia” and the “morally drunken propaganda” in favor of NATO⁵. The speaker featured in the video is Tim Schnitger, a controversial member of the Christian Democratic Union, a mainstream center-right German political party. Immediately following, accompanied by a photo of a well-known actor, the banal-looking question asks: “You have an internet-enabled device and believe what the government tells you?” Every message on this channel is subtitled “Galgenhumor, Wissenswertes und News in der demokratischen Endzeit” —“gallows humor, trivia and news from the end of the democratic age”.

The Cross-Front Marches

The reasons for the analytical challenge of the investigating authorities relate not only to the wide range of numerous esoteric or pseudo-religious opponents of the system, but also to the merging, and in some cases joint action, of two diametrically opposed political movements. This phenomenon, which has been recurring over several decades, is called a “cross-front” and usually subsides when the ideological opposites eventually prove to be irreconcilable.

The motto of an ongoing vigil that is regularly held in Berlin illustrates this phenomenon. The vigil provides a meeting point for practically all types of extremism by mixing different keywords and creating a common denominator across ideological barriers. The aforementioned vigil declares: “We stand for resignation and sanctions for those responsible for Coronavirus politics. Reappraisal and reparation of the mismanagement and corruption of the past years that violated human rights, neutral and comprehensive reporting and an immediate end to all war propaganda. We say no to transhumanism and Great Reset of the WEF [World Economic Forum]. No to digital surveillance. No to the self-destructive handling of the crisis in our country”⁶ (author’s translation).

On traditionally leftwing extremist portals, an “anti-authoritarian bloc”⁷ has been promoted for some time now. Most recently it organized a protest under the slogan “That’s enough —we won’t freeze for profits”. The anti-authoritarian struggle is claimed by extremists and militants of all sentiments, albeit with different objectives.



⁵ <https://t.me/nichtmehralle>

⁶ <https://www.berlin.de/polizei/service/versammlungsbehoerde/versammlungen-aufzuege/>

⁷ <https://kontrapolis.info/8314/>

Although the organizers of the leftwing portal explicitly distance themselves from rightwing groups, reality often proves the opposite. According to the security authorities' expectations for the coming winter, the situation Western societies currently find themselves in is at risk of deteriorating further. We can already see an increase in collective protests against rising energy bills and cost of living expenses, the cause of which many protest organizers see in the "tactical West" and its unjustified measures against Russia, but also in the profit interests of a global industry. Many people's concerns about a cold winter provide an ideal interface where rightwing and leftwing extremists can congregate. For example, the call of the leftwing extremist organization Interventionistische Linke (Interventionist Left), which is monitored by the domestic intelligence service BfV, calls for "activist and militant actions against the prevailing crisis policy and its profiteers" (author's translation). This culminates in the warning: "So there is a lot to do in the next few months. Being both a fire bucket and an accelerant will not be easy. We should dare [...]. Otherwise the winter will be damn cold and long. Let's start building fires!"⁸ (author's translation).

A rightwing extremist group which calls itself the "antidote to the 'Great Reset'" (author's translation) —the conspiracy theory centered on a global power elite planning to control people with forced vaccinations and digital data collection— takes almost identical positions on its Telegram channel:

"The regime's cold calculation promises to unleash hot protests in autumn and winter [...]. Green climate ideology and foreign domination stand in the way of a solid Germany [...]. The people's uprising needs a broad base. Right-left games and the division of the media must not be tolerated this winter. Only together we will succeed in turning the tide"⁹ (author's translation).

Various other calls for action issued by this group —one of many micro-organizations— are also posted on Instagram, which is evidence that even mainstream platforms continue to struggle with extremist propaganda. This includes blatant calls, such as: "How can we overcome this #regime? Or at least weaken its position?"¹⁰ (author's translation). In addition to the notion of the so-called rage winter ("Wutwinter"), the idea of overthrowing the system plays a major role among both rightwing and leftwing extremist groups. On a blog popular in the leftwing extremist scene, a post bluntly states under the title "Revolt": "Democracy and dictatorship are two sides of the same coin", they are merely "two different administrative forms of the state"¹¹ (author's translation).

When Words Become Deeds

The result of this permanent agitation at both ends of extremism leads to recognizable blurring and overlapping on the extremist fringe and even to immediate action on the streets. On 5 September 2022, there was a large protest in Leipzig, eastern Germany, where rightwing and leftwing extremists marched in parallel and gathered at a common location. One of the

⁸ <https://interventionistische-linke.org/beitrag/winter-coming-zeit-feuer-zu-machen-0>

⁹ <https://t.me/Gegengift2022>

¹⁰ <https://www.instagram.com/p/ChUwqLgDNu1/>

¹¹ <https://revolte.blackblogs.org/revolte-nr-10-oktober-2016/freiheit-oder-diktatur/>

speakers, a rightwing extremist¹² known to the authorities and leader of a very active rightwing extremist micro-party called “Free Saxony”, told those gathered there that for the first time in a long time “conservative forces and leftists” were taking to the streets over the same issue¹³. In his opinion, it was positive that people were “taking off their blinkers” and taking to the streets in “hundreds of thousands” like “in other countries” (author’s translation).

The event was held under the motto “Getrennt marschieren – vereint schlagen” (“March separately – strike united”) and began by old leftwing battle songs blaring through loudspeakers. One can and must attack the “madness” of the federal government “from different sides” (author’s translation), was one of the speakers’ explicit appeal. He went on to call for an end to the sanctions against Russia. The speaker’s slogan, “Protest instead of freezing”, links back to the left spectrum’s demands, which in parts have been worded identically and with the same content by leading representatives of the Left Party in the German Bundestag. At the same event, Jürgen Elsässer, one of the most well-known publishers from today’s rightwing extremist spectrum and formerly a leftwing extremist activist, declared: “It’s no longer about ideology, it’s about brute survival” (author’s translation).

Militancy and Terrorism: What and Who Delegitimizes the State?

Criticism of the concept of state delegitimization, as instituted by the BfV, is oriented toward two questions: what is new about this phenomenon at all? Also, is it practicable and feasible for intelligence services and security forces, such as the police, to work with this concept?

Both rightwing and leftwing extremist activities have always been monitored in Germany, because they aim to discredit and abolish the democratic system. For some time now, organizers from the Islamist space have also posed a clear and present danger to the democratic state and have therefore been under observation. Furthermore, authorities have been confronted with the aforementioned combination of individuals and micro-groups, as well as groups of esoteric or evangelical Christian activists. Many of these groups not only spread conspiracy theories, frequently of an anti-Semitic orientation, but openly declare their rejection of parliamentary democracy. They do so, for example, by decrying political decision-making processes and substituting state authorities with religious symbols or deities. The leader of one of these micro-groups, Christen im Widerstan (Christians in Resistance), explains in a speech published on the group’s Telegram channel on 6 October 2022 that during the COVID-19 crisis, the people had denied the real king, namely God. Only God must be obeyed, or else one is “a dead man” (05:43). Moreover, “the 2020/2021 test —by which the speaker refers to the COVID-19 pandemic— led to the fact that he would trust “99.9% of neither headmasters, judges, nor policemen” (28:00)¹⁴ (author’s translation). These and other groups see themselves in a situation where they have to assert themselves as so-called “overcomers” of ungodly worldly decisions and “get through the End Times victoriously” (“siegreich durch die Endzeit”) —the name of one of their Telegram channels.

¹² The name of this individual is on file with the author.

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=elw1M1yiPOc>

¹⁴ The name of this pastor is on file with the author. Quotes from the speech were taken from the Telegram channel <https://t.me/ChristenimWiderstand>.

However, it should be noted that even in this sensitive area, where freedom of religion is guaranteed by law in Western states, the state has successfully taken a clear stance. Specifically, one may cite case of the observation of the Scientology sect, whose system — as the BfV correctly put it in July 2022— “of a sole ruling Scientological government [...] is not compatible with the principle of democracy of the Basic Law”¹⁵ (Grundgesetz) (author’s translation). This reasoning can also be applied to similar groups, as in their striving for the autocracy of God they also aim to “suspend essential constitutional principles [...] publicly deny their [state organs] legitimacy and call for ignoring official or judicial orders and decisions”¹⁶ (author’s translation). The BfV’s justification for the creation of the new field of work mentioned at the beginning of this article seems contradictory in this regard: The endeavors of this “new” movement are to be observed regardless of “whether the ideological orientation behind it can be clearly assigned to an already known extremist phenomenon”¹⁷ (author’s translation). However, this is usually the case. Other instances are also to be observed, “insofar as they cannot be clearly assigned to another phenomenon area”¹⁸. When analyzing the actors, however, it can be concluded that the previous fields of work in which intelligence and security services have been active are ample. Indeed, there are sufficient legal means to facilitate the monitoring both of extremists and non-political perpetrators of violence. All other groups, such as those that are supposedly or actually religiously motivated, are among the legitimate forms of protest, as long as they do not intend to eliminate parliamentary democracy. In that case, however, they can be targeted by the authorities without further ado.

Ultimately, this contradiction is also pointed out in the statement of an authority that is directly confronted with this scene: on 11 October 2022, the German Federal Police (Bundespolizei) told this author that its work was exclusively guided by the “police’s common definition system of ‘Politically Motivated Crime’ (PMK) as established in the federal and state governments” (author’s translation). There is no equivalent within this authority for the newly created field of work, but its employees are required to make a corresponding categorization when arresting protesters. The authoritative definition of PMK unambiguously refers to “politically motivated crime -left, -right, -foreign ideology as well as -religious ideology” (author’s translation) and thereby does cover all movements that participate in the current protests¹⁹.

Forecasting

Despite ambiguities in definition, the concept of delegitimization of the state points to a development that will present authorities in Western countries with major challenges, including socio-political ones. Important ongoing and future challenges, such as environmental protection or energy supply, serve as catalysts for individual groups that are antithetical to the democratic discourse. Militant actions by groups such as “Extinction Rebellion”, “Last Generation”, “Ende

¹⁵ <https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/publikationen/DE/allgemein/2022-08-18-faq.pdf>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

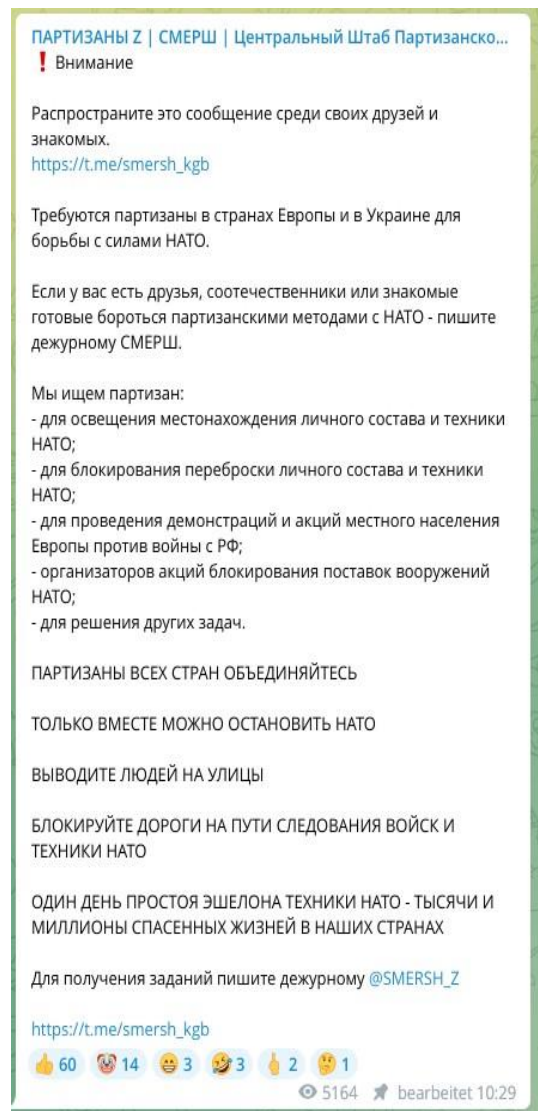
¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ E.g.: https://www.bka.de/DE/UnsereAufgaben/Deliktsbereiche/PMK/pmk_node.html;jsessionid=313051826E5B9508AB69ADF9FB4E86CB.live612#doc56976bodyText1

Gelände”, “Scientist Rebellion” and various others, delegitimize the state in their own way. Debates by these activists about whether or not an unwanted pipeline should be blown up, or whether the utilization of road blockades and damage to property are justified, make it difficult for law enforcement to draw a line between civil disobedience and endangering the state.

After rail traffic had to be suspended in large parts of Germany on 8 October 2022, due to coordinated sabotage of communication cables, the Office of the Federal Prosecutor initiated proceedings on suspicion of “anti-constitutional sabotage”, according to several media reports. Such attacks have been carried out by leftwing extremists several times in the past. However at the same time, the interests of foreign states that openly or discreetly support a delegitimization of the Western political system must also be taken into account. Cooperation between such actors, for instance between terrorists and the Soviet KGB during the Cold War, can no longer be ruled out in view of hybrid warfare. This also applies to the sabotage of important infrastructures. Hence, investigations into this phenomenon also lie in the area of counter-intelligence. We now have cases of German expatriates, such as the former politician Ralph Thomas Niemeyer, self-identify as members of a government-in-exile, regularly call for the removal of the government in Berlin via various media, and hold talks in Moscow with people sanctioned in the West. These actions can be classified as criminal intelligence operations against a foreign —in this case a hostile— government.

In view of existing threats by various groups and their state sponsors to eliminate elected governments, as well as other isolated incidents, calls for attacks must be taken seriously despite the potential risk being difficult to assess. On 3 October 2022, a pro-Russian Telegram channel called for partisan combat against NATO facilities in Europe, and called for volunteers to sign up through a contact that the author has rendered unidentifiable. Partisans were being sought “to highlight the location of NATO personnel and equipment”, to “organize demonstrations and actions by local European populations against the war with Russia” and “for other tasks”²⁰ (author’s translation).



²⁰ https://t.me/partizan_z_smersh_kgb

In the meantime, drones have already been detected over military installations in Germany and Norway, and authorities have arraigned Russian “tourists” for conducting observations in the vicinity of military barracks.

For European societies, the current developments demonstrate the establishment of what has been discussed for years as “hybrid warfare”. As early as 2002, Abram N. Shulsky and Gary J. Schmitt were explaining in detail that

many nonviolent techniques can be covertly employed to influence political behavior, events, and circumstances in foreign countries. But in addition to these activities, which make up the vast majority of covert action operations, there are also techniques that involve the supporting or use of violence.

One of these techniques is “specific acts of destruction or violence, including assassination”²¹. This is also reflected in the recent, public parliamentary statement of the German intelligence services of 17 October 2022, according to which, in addition to “further actions by Russia”, political assassinations are also factored in²².

²¹ Shulsky, Schmitt: *Silent Warfare. Understanding The World of Intelligence*, Brassey’s, Washington D.C. 2002.

²² Official YouTube channel for parliamentary events: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NFTGlc2Qbk>

