

Disinformation blizzard targets Germany before election

AFP- Stories of a pre-election state of emergency, police escorts for toddlers and forged ballot papers – a blizzard of online disinformation has targeted German voters ahead of Sunday's election.

Russia has been the main suspect, and the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) the main beneficiary, says Berlin.

On top of all that, Trump ally Elon Musk has weighed in, insulting German political leaders and strongly backing the Moscow-friendly AfD, mainly via his social media platform X.

Pointing directly to Russia at a time of soaring tensions over the Ukraine war, Germany on Friday said it had detected attempts to meddle in the campaign.

"The goal of these influence operations is to destroy confidence in democracy, to question the integrity of the electoral process," said interior ministry spokesman Maximilian Kall.

Security officials had reason to suspect the Kremlin-linked Storm-1516 network was behind some of the online campaigns, he told a Berlin news conference.

But Kall stressed that "the free electoral process in Germany is guaranteed, and we will continue to promptly refute relevant misinformation".

– Distortions –

Some recent posts have played on public fears after a spate of

attacks, including a stabbing spree targeting kindergarten toddlers that killed a two-year-old boy, with a 28-year-old Afghan man arrested at the scene.

Soon after, a photo began circulating on Facebook of a policewoman walking with a group of small children with the caption: “Kindergarten group needs police protection to go on an outing!”

An AfD politician shared the image with a similar claim.

Local police later confirmed the image was real but its context had been distorted. The picture was taken during a visit by a kindergarten group to a police station.

Many video and image posts have pushed the narrative of a government at pains to suppress the will of the people.

One recent false post claimed Chancellor Olaf Scholz had imposed a state of emergency so as to delay Sunday’s elections.

And a pro-AfD influencer wrongly claimed that President Frank-Walter Steinmeier had threatened “the annulment of the German elections”, despite him not having the power to do this.

Musk nevertheless replied to the post and branded Steinmeier an “anti-democratic tyrant”.

Other narratives which seek to sow doubt about the electoral process have also gained traction.

– Disinformation –

One post viewed more than 4,000 times on Telegram claimed that voting itself was illegal and encouraged readers to report people to the police for trying to cast their ballots.

This was based on a misinterpretation of a 2012 constitutional court decision, which threw out part of Germany’s electoral

law.

If there is one party that is often portrayed as the victim of alleged dark anti-democratic machinations, it is the AfD.

Polls give the party a record 20 percent, and some of its online supporters have made false or misleading allegations about attempts to suppress their vote share.

A video shared on several platforms showed fake ballot papers from the eastern city of Leipzig from which the AfD candidate was missing. However real ballots there indeed list the AfD.

Germany's interior ministry said it suspects the Leipzig video, and another one purporting to show votes for the AfD being shredded in Hamburg, originated with Storm-1516.

– ‘Shredded ballots’ –

Similarly, some users have shared poll results purporting to show the AfD in first place nationally – wrongly using surveys that date back to last year's eastern state elections.

Conservative election front-runners the CDU/CSU in January allowed a parliamentary motion demanding an immigration crackdown to be passed with AfD votes, sparking a wave of protests decrying the breach of a “firewall” meant to isolate the far-right party.

Online images from those protests – with doctored sound – were later presented as showing pro-AfD crowds, as was footage that in fact showed fans at a past concert of the rock band Coldplay.

If many posts have boosted the AfD, Germany's Greens party has been the frequent target of attacks or ridicule on right-leaning social media accounts.

One TikTok video shared thousands of times claimed Green party members could be seen storming the AfD's party congress in

December 2024.

While the video did show a disturbance from an AfD event, it was from 2018 and AFP was unable to find any evidence that those who disrupted it were Green party supporters.

Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock of the Greens this week warned that disinformation and online hate threatened to “break” democracy.

AFP