

GROWTH OF REICHSBÜRGER MOVEMENT IN GERMANY TRIGGERS INCREASING SECURITY CONCERNS

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Recent years have seen an increase in **attacks against state representatives**, notably the police, across Germany. Some perpetrators of those attacks have been found to represent an ideology that opposes the state and its representatives and, more specifically, considers the modern German state to be illegitimate. Since the deadly shooting of a police officer by a so-called Reichsbürger in 2016, the movement has not only attracted media attention but also triggered **increased monitoring by security authorities**. This briefing aims to give insight into the phenomenon of the Reich citizen movement. The first section of the briefing provides an overall description of the movement, including a definition of the term 'Reichsbürger' and key data provided by German security authorities. The second part reviews the incidents that involved members of the said movement.

In broad terms, the term **Reichsbürger movement refers to people who reject the legitimacy of the modern Federal Republic of Germany, including its laws and institutions**. Some Reich citizens (or Reichsbürger in German, a term that is both singular and plural) believe in the German Reich with its 1937 borders or the Prussian empire of 1971, while others have declared their own micro-states and thus consider themselves to be self-governing. **The term movement may be somewhat misleading, for Reichsbürger lack a centralized and coherent leadership**. With regards to political orientation, Reich citizens cover a broad political spectrum and the movement does not adhere to a particular political approach, although most members of the movement endorse right-wing ideologies.

The term Reichsbürger consists of two German nouns – 'Reich' and 'Bürger'. The word 'Reich' translates as realm or state; the term is, however, best known in connection with the Third Reich or the German Reich, meaning the period from 1933 to 1945. The word 'Bürger' means citizen. Hence, the term Reichsbürger technically denotes a citizen of the "First" Reich (the Holy Roman Empire from 800-1806), the "Second" Reich (the German Empire from 1871-1918) or the Third Reich (Nazi Germany from 1933-1945).

Reichsbürger use different arguments to sustain their claim that the modern German state is illegitimate. **A frequently used argument is based on a selective reading of a 1973 decision of the Federal Constitutional Court concerning the Basic Treaty between West and East Germany**. Based on the 1973 decision, some Reichsbürger claim that **the Third Reich never ceased to exist because it was not formally abolished**. The Federal Constitutional Court, however, ruled in 1973 that the Federal Republic of Germany is not the legal successor of the Reich; instead, the Federal Republic of Germany is, as a West German state at that time partially, and today fully, identical to it. **Hence, the Reich did not have to be abolished, for it was reorganized into the modern German state**. Although the constitution that was in effect from 1919 to 1945, along with all its provisions and institutions, technically still constitutes the de jure German state, **the Third Reich cannot function due to lacking institutions and organizations**. Another argument is that the German Federal Republic is illegitimate because it lacks a constitution and only has a basic law. However, a number of countries, including Norway and Denmark, call their basic law a constitution. **Therefore, a state does not need to have a separate constitution to be considered a state**.

With respect to the number of members of the movement, the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz) **has identified 16'500 Reichsbürger or**

self-governing individuals, as of December 31, 2017. 900 of them have additionally been identified as right-wing extremists. Around 350 firearms licenses belonging to Reich citizens were revoked before December 31, 2017; some 1100 Reichsbürger still are in possession of a firearms license, however.

Newspaper Tagesspiegel reported on March 28, 2018, that security authorities in Berlin have identified more Reichsbürger than hitherto known. The article states that there are 500 Reichsbürger in Germany's capital, 120 of them are also considered to be right-wing extremists. A Bavarian newspaper wrote on February 28, 2018, that **3850 Reich citizens have been identified in the state of Bavaria**, which is slightly more than previously indicated by security authorities. Interior Minister Joachim Herrmann outlined that 18 cases of police officers who are members of the Reichsbürger are currently being investigated.

Security authorities have warned that the Reichsbürger movement might inspire more violent attacks carried out by its members, and possibly increase illegal weapons trafficking. Due to the high number of Reich citizens who have a weapon license and also own weapons, security authorities assert that the risk posed by Reichsbürger can potentially be significant. Moreover, some Reichsbürger engage in activities related to financial crime. For instance, they might offer training or legal advice to people in financial hardship and might thereby sell them expensive documents, such as fake identity documents. Most Reichsbürger burn their passports and carry instead self-made identity papers, some even create their own currency. Cases of Reichsbürger who blackmail officials into paying them money have also been reported.

After having outlined a definition of the movement, their main arguments and the key figures available, the following section provides an overview of incidents involving Reichsbürger, that occurred in recent years.

In 2012, the self-styled 'King of Germany', Peter F. proclaimed Germany (within its 1937 borders) as a kingdom and declared himself king. He created his own car registration plates and driver's license. Peter F. further set up his own bank and received a total of 2,79 million € from investors and supporters. The money disappeared (which is not necessarily surprising considering that the terms and conditions of Peter F.'s bank outline that the 'King of Germany' can claim any money entrusted to him for himself) and Peter F. received a prison sentence of 3 years and 8 months for illegal banking activities on March 15, 2017. Reportedly, many of his followers continuously support the self-styled 'King of Germany'.

On June 5, 2015, a mother and daughter attacked a police officer attempting to enter their home with the district chimney sweep, after the two women refused to let the chimney sweep check their chimney as decreed by the local council in Herzberg, Lower Saxony. The 30-year old daughter attacked the police officer with acid and then kicked and bit him when he tried to arrest her. The 68-year old mother also attacked the police officer. The daughter received an 18-months prison sentence, on probation, on October 24, 2017, by a court in Lower Saxony. The mother was acquitted.

Adrian Ursache, a Reichsbürger and former Mister Germany, is currently on trial for attempted murder. Due to private debts in the amount of 150'000 €, the house of Adrian Ursache was sold in a forced auction. On August 25, 2016, police officers together with a special force team of about 200 members arrived at the house to evict the family of Adrian Ursache. The Reichsbürger attempted to resist the eviction of the house however by claiming that the house was part of his own micro-state called 'Ur' and the police, therefore, had no authority on the micro-state. An exchange of fire followed, whereby Ursache and 2 police officers were injured. The trial for attempted murder began on October 9, 2017. Ursache claims that he could not have shot the police officers intentionally, for he was shot in the right hand before he could fire back. In addition, an eyewitness stated that it was the police officers who shot Ursache first. The trial is ongoing; Adrian Ursache is expected to be sentenced in summer/autumn 2018.

On October 19, 2016, in Georgensgmünd near Nuremberg, Reichsbürger Wolfgang P. fired on a special response unit of the Bavarian Police when they attempted to confiscate his 31 firearms. Three police officers were injured. One of them later died from his injuries. The weapons confiscation followed the revocation of the Reichsbürger's firearms permit and his repeated refusal to co-operate with local authorities. Following the incident, there were renewed calls for more serious measures against the movement, including revocation of firearms permits and seizure of their weapons; Wolfgang P. was found guilty of murder and two counts of attempted murder by the district court in Nürnberg-Fürth on October 23, 2017. He was sentenced to life in prison. A Bavarian police officer involved in the case of Wolfgang P. was suspended from his duties because of his connections to the Reichsbürger movement.

On October 21, 2016, a self-declared Reichsbürger attacked police officers in Salzwedel, in the state of Saxony-Anhalt, when he was asked to leave an office of the municipality. The man beat the police officers and his wife reportedly attacked the police officers too. During the scuffle, the 43-year old Reichsbürger sustained minor injuries.

On February 21, 2018, two Reichsbürger brothers aged 29 and 32 resisted a police control and instead drove away with their car. The police followed them which resulted in a car chase that was described as "very dangerous" by eyewitnesses. The brothers stopped in front of their apartment where one of them lightly injured a police officer, who tried to prevent them from closing the car doors. Following this incident, the mother of the two brothers sent a threatening letter to an employee of the Ministry of Justice. The mother was indicted on March 27, 2018, for having written a threatening letter. However, the woman did not appear in court. Instead, 35 Reichsbürger interrupted the trial, which forced the sitting judge to call the police to have the group of Reichsbürger removed from the court.

On March 6, 2018, police tried to arrest a 65-year-old Reichsbürger in Neuwied, state of Rhineland-Palatinate. The man fled by car to avoid the arrest. The police went after the man; a car chase on the motorway followed. Due to a traffic jam, the Reichsbürger was forced to stop his car, which allowed the police to arrest him.

On March 7, 2018, police carried out raids against Reich citizens in 6 German states. The Reichsbürger are suspected of having violated the insurance supervision law by having organized and operated a non-official health insurance company. During the raids, police seized documents and data storage medium. In North Rhine-Westphalia, the police additionally seized weapons and ammunition, as well as a white substance, which the police believe to be drugs but that has yet to be confirmed. A total of 200 police officers participated in the raids.

On March 8, 2018, police arrested a 35-year old Reichsbürger in Borken, North Rhine-Westphalia. During the drive to the police station, the arrested man seriously offended the police officers and attacked one of the police officers by hitting him on the head.

On March 15, 2018, the trial against a Reichsbürger started in Günzburg, state of Bavaria. The 58-year old man on trial is accused of attempting to extort 250'000 € from a judge, telling the judge that he owed money to an American tax office. The trial had to be adjourned for the accused refused to appear in court.

On March 16, 2018, a Reichsbürger in Hameln, state of Lower Saxony, injured 6 police officers with an animal repellent spray. The 35-year old man was also injured during the encounter and reportedly suffered a light knife wound. When the police attempted to arrest the man for refusing to pay a monetary fine, he barricaded himself in his car and used the animal repellent against the police officers. The police then broke the windows of the car and arrested the man.

On March 29, 2018, police arrested a 25-year old woman who was suspected to be a Reichsbürger. Two men aged 33 and 58 attempted to free the woman and thereby injured 3 police officers by using tear gas against them. The 2 attackers are also supporters of the Reichsbürger movement, who had been known to the police.

On April 8, 2018, the Attorney General issued a statement saying that police raids were carried out in several German cities against individuals who are suspected of having established a right-wing terrorist organization and are supporters of the Reichsbürger movement. The police searched the apartments of 8 suspects in Berlin, Brandenburg and Thuringia.

On April 10, 2018, German media reported that a group of Reichsbürger reportedly planned to create a 'partisan army'. The group supposedly tried to obtain weapons and food to create a 'partisan army'. Engineers and technicians have been reported to be among the group members. The group has been monitored by security service since the summer of 2017. The police raids outlined above are believed to have been targeting the partisan army group which had intended to have a group meeting on April 8.

On April 13, 2018, a joint report issued by the federal criminal office and the federal intelligence agency outlined that Reichsbürger committed more than 10'500 offences between 2015 and mid-2017. Within

the first 6 months of 2017, the police registered 59 cases of violent crime and 139 cases of coercion and threats.

On April 20, 2018, a Reichsbürger provoked a car chase with the police in the state of Bavaria. A 53-year old appeared in a local court in Ebersberg, Bavaria, and received a monetary fine for driving without a license, falsification of a document and improper exercise of proper functions. The man was identified as a supporter of the Reichsbürger movement and stated that he does not recognize the jurisdiction of the court. After the trial, the man got into his car next to the court building and intended to drive away, although he did not have a valid driver's license. When the police tried to prevent him from driving away, he lightly injured a police officer. A car chase with the police followed. Police patrol cars later stopped the man. His car was confiscated.

On April 21, 2018, Spiegel magazine reported that dozens of government employees are being investigated on suspicion of being supporters of the Reichsbürger movement, according to unconfirmed security sources. Reportedly, 11 police officers of Bavaria state police are currently being investigated on suspicion that they are 'Reich citizens'. Further, 7 members of the federal police and 5 members of the army are also being investigated for supporting the Reichsbürger movement. Additionally, investigations based on the same charges have been initiated against an employee of the federal intelligence agency. Official sources have not yet commented on the ongoing investigations.

On May 8, 2018, hundreds of federal police officers raided premises in different German states as part of an operation against a suspected people-smuggling ring. 800 federal police officers searched 21 offices and homes in the states of Hamburg, Bremen, Lower Saxony and Saxony Anhalt. At least 35 illegal immigrants were found at premises in Hamburg, while 3 main suspects — 2 Germans and a Russian — were arrested in Hamburg. The group was suspected of helping Moldovans to enter Germany and work in the country illegally, using fake Romanian identity documents. Further, the people smuggling group were suspected to have ties to the Reichsbürger movement in Saxony Anhalt.

On June 26, the weapon licence of a Reichsbürger in Giessen, state of Hesse, has been revoked by a local court due to the man's extremist ideology. The court decided to revoke the weapon licence on the grounds of the man's extremist ideology and 'untrustworthiness'. This verdict is significant because German politicians and security authorities have in the past asserted that weapon licence of extremists should be revoked as a preventive measure.

On July 5, 2018, a Reichsbürger friend of Adrian Ursache was sentenced to 11 months prison on probation for throwing a brick at a police officer during the eviction (August 25, 2016) of Ursache's house and biting police officers as he was being arrested.

To conclude, the above-mentioned incidents show that the **offences committed by Reichsbürger are diverse**. While some Reich citizens can best be described as troublemakers whose main goal is tax evasion, others show a clear **potential for violence**. The fact that most attacks perpetrated by Reichsbürger target representatives of the state does not diminish their risk potential as exemplified in the killing of a police officer in October 2016 in Georgensgmünd near Nuremberg. **A clear shift in attitude towards the Reichsbürger movement could be observed following the incidents in 2016** (the case of Adrian Ursache whose house eviction resulted in a shooting between himself and police officers, and the case of Wolfgang P. who fired on a special response unit and thereby killed one police officer). Whereas Reich citizens had previously been considered as mere malcontents who write frustrated letters, their risk potential had to be re-evaluated as a consequence of the 2016 shootings. Furthermore, the number of Reichsbürger has increased by 65 per cent within one year (2017) and German media have repeatedly reported about officials who were relieved of their duties because they were found to be members of the Reichsbürger movement, which demonstrates not only the increased awareness of authorities but also the heightened media interest in incidents involving Reichsbürger. **Thus, German security authorities monitor the Reichsbürger movement with growing concern and debates on the revocation of weapon licenses of Reich citizens are ongoing.**