

Germany's conspiracy-fuelled coup plot shouldn't be laughed off

[ANDREW COYNE](#) – Globe and Mail Opinion

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The details of the coup attempt sound comical at first. A plot to replace the elected government of Germany with one centred on the person of Heinrich XIII, 71-year-old heir to the long-dormant throne of Reuss, a principality in what is now the bucolic state of Thuringia? To be carried out by members of the Reichsbürger cult, who believe that the modern federal republic of [Germany](#) is not a real country but a corporation formed by the occupying powers after the Second World War? This is a Marx Brothers movie, right?

It's when you read on that the whole thing starts to sound a little more chilling. Among the [alleged plotters arrested last week](#) were active or former members of the German military, including a parachute commander and a member of the elite Special Commando Forces. They had lots of money, large caches of weapons and had made what prosecutors called "concrete preparations" to storm the Reichstag, Germany's parliament building, and to shoot or take hostage many of its members.

Besides Prince Heinrich, the coup numbered a judge and former member of parliament for the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party among its leaders; she was apparently to be justice minister in the new government. The group had made attempts to contact Russian government officials, though the Putin regime was quick to deny any involvement.

That the plot had little chance of succeeding is not the point. The point, rather, is what this signals about the susceptibility of certain sections of the public to far-right conspiracy theories and the growing threat this poses, not just in Germany but across the democracies.

If the wild fantasies of the plotters sound familiar, after all, they should: some members of the group have links to the deranged QAnon cult. If they espouse some of the oldest tropes of the far right, notably the antisemitism, they have also glommed onto more modern virus-carriers of extremism, notably opposition to COVID-19 lockdowns and vaccine mandates. The lesson to be drawn from the attempted coup is not that the Reichsbürger group has legitimate grievances that the German government has failed to address. The lesson – again – is that, in the age of social media, large numbers of people can be made to believe literally anything.

These are not essentially rational, if misguided, people with explicable causes and intelligible demands. Neither are they, for the most part, insane, in the literal psychotic sense. They are, as I have written before, sane people who have been persuaded to believe entirely insane things.

This sort of mass delusion is not local in origin, but is part of a broader, borderless trend, the product of a broken process of the socialization of knowledge. Vast numbers of people, rather than absorbing their beliefs through traditional chains of transmission, are now "doing their own research" online, where they are prey to every kind of hustler, lunatic and fanatical ideologue – as well as hostile states.

This is anything but harmless, as the German experience shows. Neither is it confined to Germany. All of the key ingredients in the Reichsbürger plot – the manufactured grievances, the revolutionary ambitions, the violent fantasies, the paranoid fears of "deep state" actors, the involvement of

disaffected elements of the military and police – can be found in the Jan. 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol, and among the leadership of the Ottawa occupation.

If it were only a matter of mindless mobs, that would be one thing. But this kind of disaggregation of belief is made far worse by the willingness of political leaders and public figures to exploit it. Germany is lucky that the Reichsbürger plotters had not yet acquired significant political sponsors: not even the AfD is that extreme.

But the increasingly overt appeals to the QAnon cult by not only [Donald Trump](#) but much of the MAGA wing of the Republican Party – to say nothing of Elon Musk – is a hugely disturbing development. So, too, is the willingness of some political leaders in this country to traffic in bizarre conspiracy theories about “globalist” plots centred on the World Economic Forum, or to lend their support to the Ottawa occupationists, or to step outside the law themselves in the name of preposterous theories of federal illegitimacy. They may not intend to incite violence, but they cannot pretend not to know the sorts of people they are courting, or the risks they are taking.

Democratic societies learned, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, how easy it was for individuals to move up the curve of radicalization, from extremism to violence, in the name of Islamist ideology. They should be no less vigilant with regard to the threat of terrorism from the far right.