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## Fears of Third Reich revival in Germany. Connections with far-right extremists

In one of the largest law enforcement operations to date in Germany against extremist neo-Nazi-groups, police officers arrested 25 suspected members and supporters of the so-called Reichsbürger group - the so-called Reich Citizens movement – whose aim is to reinstate the Third Reich. They are suspected of planning to overthrow the constitutional political system of united Germany. Suspects were also arrested in Italy (Italian law enforcement officials confirm that the German citizen arrested in a hotel in the town of Ponte San Giovanni is a former officer of a special German army division whose extradition request is under way) and in Austria. According to Germany's Attorney General Peter Frank in Karlsruhe, they are all charged with forming a terrorist organisation intent on using armed force to instate a new government. The specific characteristics of some of those arrested also cause concern. They include judge Birgit Malsack-Winkemann, a former parliamentary deputy for populist right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD); a soldier from the German army's special unit, along with businessman Heinrich XIII Prince Reuss of Hesse, accused of being a leader of the organisation, designated by its members to serve as leader of the reborn Third Reich. The Federal Government defined the Reichsbürger as an "extremely dangerous" organisation. "We're talking about an association that, based on what we know so far, planned the joint elimination of our democratic constitutional state," government spokesman Steffen Hebestreit said in Berlin, referring to the group's plans of "an armed attack on the Bundestag", Germany's home intelligence agency Verfassungsschutz had been monitoring the Reichsbürger movement since 2016, shortly after one of its members killed a policeman during a raid on his home. The Verfassungsschutz estimated that approximately 21,000 people are currently affiliated to the Reichsbürger. Of these, over 3,000 are allegedly far-right extremists, prepared to resort to violence to achieve their goals. According to the agency's 2021 annual report, members include several military officers. "Our investigations," a spokesman for the Military Counter-Intelligence Service (MaD) reported in Cologne, "are directed at one operative soldier and several reservists, among others." This important piece of news, which should not be underestimated, caused apprehension and shock throughout Germany. "The Reichsbürger threats and planned violence against government officials are particularly worrying. - said Martin Hochholzer, consultant for sectarian and ideological affairs at the Catholic Office for Missionary Pastoral Care (Kamp) in Erfurt. "They carried out not only threatening shootings, but also attempts to intimidate administrative staff, bailiffs and judges with whom Reichsbürger came into contact, perhaps regarding driving fines and more serious matters". For Hochholzer, "the uncovered incidents could nonetheless be seen as signs of large-scale social upheavals and challenges of a more global nature. I therefore believe that the Reichsbürger is a focal point that brings together and unites various facets." SIR discussed these disturbing findings with lawyer **Carlo Augusto Melis Costa**, international politics expert and member of the International Association of Lawyers for Democracy. According to Melis Costa "the historical memories of Nazism, apparently processed in West Germany, became part of a legendary past in some cases after reunification. The former hostility between Rhineland culture and Prussian culture, the latter being much more susceptible to militarist appeal, plays an important role. Likewise, the dramatic wealth gap between former East and West Germany is an equally relevant factor." "The elements that have been revealed thanks to this operation," continues Melis Costa, who also serves as lawyer for the families of the victims of the Moby Prince disaster, "highlight the difficulties faced by the Eastern Länder when it came to breaking away from authoritarian and state-based mentality. It is no coincidence that East German iconography was widely depicted in the Third Reich, even in military uniforms. From the ideological point of view, it is worth mentioning the case of Thomas Mann (as well as that of Berthold Brecht), who had initially embraced the German Democratic Republic but subsequently distanced himself from it precisely because of its authoritarian aspects. Mann was certainly not the only intellectual to

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perceive this authoritarian continuity - far more evident than in Federal Germany." "Undoubtedly, the disastrous economic situation in East Germany played a major role in this process." "I recall having witnessed the first neo-Nazi riots (though actually involving former DDR sympathisers) in Rostock in 1992." Commenting on the alarming statements by Nancy Faeser, Federal Minister of the Interior, according to whom "the terrorist organisation was motivated by conspiracy theories and plans to overthrow the government with violence", Melis Costa pointed out: "German secret services have a long tradition of democracy and transparency. In my opinion, the shady use of intelligence is very rare among them. Admittedly, the growth of right-wing populist political party Alternative für Deutschland's (AfD), whose connections with far-right extremism are, however, yet to be investigated, has caused great alarm in the establishment raised in former West German culture." "I personally believe" Melis Costa concluded, "that the alarm is justified, and that even in Germany, which processed its historical past in an exemplary way, revanchist drives do exist, instrumentally manipulated by anti-European groups, the origin of which, however, remains unclear."

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