The background of the entire page is a photograph of a crowd of people at what appears to be a protest or rally. The image is heavily filtered with a red color. In the foreground, a man is captured in a moment of intense emotion, shouting with his mouth wide open. He is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved button-down shirt. Behind him, other individuals are visible, some holding up long poles or signs, though they are less distinct due to the red overlay and focus on the man in the foreground.

ISD

Powering new  
generations  
against extremism

# THE FRINGE INSURGENCY

Connectivity, Convergence  
and Mainstreaming of the  
Extreme Right

Jacob Davey

Julia Ebner

## About this paper

This report maps the ecosystem of the burgeoning 'new' extreme right across Europe and the US, which is characterised by its international outlook, technological sophistication, and overtures to groups outside of the traditional recruitment pool for the extreme-right. This movement is marked by its opportunistic pragmatism, seeing movements which hold seemingly contradictory ideologies share a bed for the sake of achieving common goals. It examines points of connectivity and collaboration between disparate groups and assesses the interplay between different extreme-right movements, key influencers and subcultures both online and offline.

## About the authors

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## Glossary

**/pol/** – the ‘politically incorrect’ discussion board on the 4chan website. It has become a popular place for the discussion of extreme-right ideology. Activists often coordinate on these pages before running information operations.

**Alt-light** – the ‘alt-light’, also known as ‘alt-lite’ or ‘new right’, has become an umbrella term for far-right groups and individuals who oppose globalism and social progressivism.

**Alt-right** – the ‘alt-right’ has become a catchall phrase for a loose group of extreme-right individuals and organisations who promote white nationalism.

**Counter-Jihadists** – The counter-jihad movement is a loose network of groups who share the fear that their native cultures are threatened by an Islamic takeover.

**Discord** – an online chat application. Developed for use by gamers, it now hosts a number of extreme-right channels.

**Daily Stormer** – a popular neo-Nazi hate-site and a key area for the dissemination of alt-right propaganda. Following a call to action by its founder Andrew Anglin the page became a platform from which activists launched information operations. Since the Charlottesville rally the page has been effectively removed from the internet due to hosts blocking its service. It retains a presence on the dark web.

**Extreme-right** – groups and individuals that exhibit at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy (in accordance with the definition provided by far-right expert Cas Mudde)

**Far-right** – politically active groups or individuals which fall at the far end of the left/right political spectrum. Their ideologies often include nationalist, xenophobic and/or extremely reactionary elements.

**Gab** – Gab.ai is a social media platform which functions in a similar fashion to Twitter. It was designed to promote freedom of speech and has loose terms of use. It has recently been heavily adopted by the extreme-right globally.

**Identitarian** – Identitarianism is a pan-European ethno-nationalist movement which focuses on the preservation of European culture and identity, drawing on inspiration of the French intellectual far-right movement Nouvelle Droite.

**Information operations** – Information operations involve the dissemination of communications material with the intention of achieving a competitive advantage over an opponent.

**Meme** – a concept coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976, a meme refers to a unit of transfer for cultural ideas. It is commonly used to refer to (often humorous) user-generated content which is rapidly spread socially throughout the internet.

**Redpilling** – In far- and extreme-right networks, red-pilling is commonly used as a metaphorical description of attitudinal change and the embracement of fringe ideologies. It is a reference to the Matrix film trilogy where individuals consume a ‘red pill’ to no longer live in an illusion (blue pill). The term has become a euphemism for the radicalisation process, where the consumption of a red pill (i.e. information pertinent to extreme-right ideology) causes the world-view of individuals to substantively change.

**Reddit** – Reddit is a popular content sharing and discussion site, divided into interest-based boards called ‘subreddits’. Although a majority are not related to extremism some subreddits have been associated with alt-right information operations, including the notorious ‘The\_Donald’ subreddit.

**SJWs** – short for social justice warriors, is a term used by far- and extreme-right activists to decry socially progressive individuals.

**Shilling** – In alt-right discourse shilling refers to the aggressive promotion of certain ideas. It is used both negatively for individuals promoting progressive ideas in alt-right fora, and positively to refer to efforts to promote their own ideology.

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## Executive Summary

**This report examines points of connectivity and collaboration between disparate groups and assesses the interplay between different extreme-right movements, key influencers and subcultures both online and offline.**

We spent three months undercover doing ethnographic research in previously unexplored forums, and analysed over 5,000 pieces of content gathered from across more than 50 different platforms. Through a case study analysis, this report examines specific instances of extreme-right collaboration across borders and between different ideological strands

and maps the nexus between them, as well as assessing the convergent goals and motivations of participants.

The goal of this report is to inform policy makers, practitioners and activists who want to understand and respond to new dynamics within the extreme right. By bringing clarity into this increasingly complex field, our research seeks to support the development of effective strategies to prevent the mainstreaming of extreme ideologies. Understanding the extent to which extreme right-wing networks cross geographic, linguistic and ideological barriers is a crucial step towards developing tools to prevent their proliferation.

### Key Findings

–Extreme-right groups across the globe are actively collaborating to achieve common goals, such as keeping refugees out of Europe, removing hate speech laws and getting far-right populist politicians to power.

–Campaigns around the Defend Europe mission in the Mediterranean and the Charlottesville rally received financial and operational support from numerous European and North American countries. Alternative online platforms, some created explicitly for use by the extreme right, provide mechanisms for transnational knowledge exchange, fundraising and coordinated information operations.

–Their strategic, tactical and operational convergence has allowed the extreme right to translate large-scale online mobilisation into real-world impact. Through coordinated grassroots activities, they have been able to influence elections, attract worldwide media attention and intimidate political opponents. Reconquista Germania, an extreme-right channel on the app Discord set up to disrupt the German election, counts over 5000 members from across the globe.

–High levels of opportunism characterise today's extreme right, as seen in the cooperation between ideologically disparate strands such as racially and culturally oriented nationalists. Extreme-right groups actively seek to overcome ideological and geographic divergences for the sake of expanding their influence, reach and impact. Their communication materials are tailored to different audiences and highlight topics ranging from white nationalist activism to freedom of speech protection.

–The most extreme fringe groups attempt to penetrate new audiences and mainstream their ideologies by using less extreme groups as strategic mouthpieces. Their aim is the creation of a ‘mass movement’<sup>i</sup> through the radicalisation of ‘the normies’ (average people who consume ‘mainstream’ media), in particular Generation Z.<sup>ii</sup>

–Extreme right networks use military and intelligence resources such as leaked strategic communication documents from the GCHQ and NATO to run campaigns against their own governments. By staging sophisticated operations in the style of military psychological operations (or ‘psy-ops’), they seek to disrupt democratic processes in Europe, as in the latest example during the German election where coordinated extreme-right efforts dictated social media conversations and the top trending hashtags for a period of two weeks.

## Recommendations

–Traditional counter-messaging campaigns are unlikely to have an impact on the cynical and tech-savvy alt-right. New measures that prevent and counter the emergence of extreme activities online and offline must match the sophistication of the extreme right. Positive alternative narratives have been ruthlessly mocked and assaulted by the extreme-right, and have the effect of reinforcing their narratives.<sup>iii</sup> In order to disrupt these groups we must understand both their psychological drivers and strategic directions.

–Researchers and practitioners should increase their awareness of the points of ideological convergence and divergence between these groups and leverage them to more effectively disrupt their efforts.

–Counter-hate efforts must mobilise across borders to match this global threat. Both policy and civil society-led responses to newly emerging global networks of extreme counter-cultures must be coordinated internationally, for example by modelling their approaches after worldwide initiatives against the Islamic State.

–Counter-speech measures must go beyond popular social media platforms. They must penetrate alternative platforms and burst extreme-right bubbles with campaigns that build on a thorough understanding of internet culture and counter-cultures.

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## Introduction

The past two years have seen the extreme right raise their profile globally.<sup>iv</sup> There have been protest rallies designed to intimidate, spikes in hate crime against minority communities, misinformation efforts to influence elections, and instances of large-scale campaigning and elaborate media stunts.<sup>v</sup> A number of successful and foiled terrorist plots - some involving members of national armed forces - were inspired by extreme-right ideologies.<sup>vi</sup>

In the aftermath of US elections and following the rise of the 'alt right', many academics and commentators argued that American and European extreme right movements have been emboldened.<sup>vii</sup> Campaigns such as the Identitarian's 'Defend Europe' mission to block NGOs from rescuing refugees in the Mediterranean and the Charlottesville rally have signalled a strategic expansion from online trolling to real-world activism. A deeper understanding of burgeoning movements such as the alt-right, Identitarians and counter-Jihadists, as well as their strategic coalition-building efforts, is increasingly vital.

Historically, the global right-wing extremist landscape has been fragmented, leaderless and multi-dimensional. Within the last decade, ideological and strategic disagreements within traditional far-right movements have given way to a highly adaptable new extreme right. As a result, academics and practitioners have struggled to pin down their emerging networks. While the formation of mainstream street protest movements such as the English Defence League (EDL) and PEGIDA seemed to signal a tendency towards higher membership numbers and lower engagement thresholds within far-right organisations, this trend has become more complex and we are seeing a return to smaller groups across the UK and Europe.<sup>viii</sup> However, this dispersal of traditional movements and disaggregation of its members has not disempowered the international extreme right. The internet has provided a melting pot for different sub-cultures and smaller movements, facilitating global exchange and cooperation with likeminded groups and opportunistic allies across the globe. In

the US, the catch-all phrase 'alt-right' has become a symptom of this phenomenon, whilst the Identitarian movement in Europe has seen increased connectivity across national borders.<sup>ix</sup>

The obscure, multi-faceted and fast-moving nature of today's extreme right has led to a significant shortage in academic research on this issue and reinforced worryingly slow and ineffectual policy responses. Attempts to map extreme-right landscapes have often been hindered by key influencers' rapidly changing online ecosystems and communication methods, as well as their outmanoeuvring of traditional communication channels. Increasingly, extreme-right movements create their own news networks, social media platforms, funding structures and chat applications.

There has been detailed and applicable research on the evolution of the extreme right. Benjamin Lee's research for the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST) made a substantial contribution to the analysis and categorisation of the far- and extremist right and highlighted the increasingly blurred lines between its different ideological strands.<sup>x</sup> Angela Nagle's book *Kill All Normies*<sup>xi</sup> is the first extensive investigation into the role that online sub-cultures played in the emergence of an organised alt-right movement. In 2017, the University of Amsterdam started an open source intelligence investigation into the alt-right<sup>xii</sup>, while the Data and Media Research Society analysed the extreme right's emerging tactics of deliberate media obfuscation and disinformation campaigns.<sup>xiii</sup> To date, Hope not Hate's report 'The International Alternative Right' is the most comprehensive study explaining the emergence, evolution and global network of the alt-right.<sup>xiv</sup>

Despite this growing research base on modern-day right-wing extremism, which increasingly explores online-offline links, strategic alliances between extreme right movements remain underexplored. There is little clarity about the scope and nature of the relationships, or connections and overlaps between different movements and their support bases. Many questions remain unanswered: Do the online echo chambers of different movements interact with each other? What are their dividing lines and what are their common causes? To what extent do they communicate and collaborate transnationally? What are their ideological, strategic and tactical nexus points and what is their potential for cross-fertilisation?

## Methodology

This report builds on a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis to explore the connectivity and convergence of the global extreme right. Based on our analysis of 5,000 pieces of content gathered from more than 50 platforms, this report maps the extreme-right eco-system, categorising different extreme-networks into ideological and geographic clusters.

With the help of commercial and proprietary social listening software and natural language processing algorithms, we determined the cross-ideological and cross-border meeting points resulting from shared platforms, ideologies and tactics. Based on this, we explored the scope and nature of explicit or inadvertent cooperation, communication and knowledge sharing between different movements. Systematic analyses of social media content was complemented with three months of undercover ethnographic research into other platforms where the extreme right congregate, including 4Chan, 8Chan, Reddit, Voat, Gab, Discord chat-channels and far-right forums.

The analysis used three case studies to examine the methods and implications of coordination within the extreme right:

- The 'Defend Europe' Campaign
- The 'Unite the Right' Rally
- The German Election

Building on existing research about the emergence of different movements and online communities, historic points of activation, convergence and divergence were used to analyse the evolution of the cross-fertilisation between different movements. After drawing conclusions about the nexus points exploited by today's extreme right, we provide recommendations for policy makers, practitioners and civil society actors.

## Definitions

There are no universal definitions for terms such as 'extremist', 'far-right' and 'alt-right'. While the British government describes extremism as the 'vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs', this is not a universally accepted definition.<sup>xv</sup> Inevitably, private sector definitions of harm relating to terms of service on social media platforms are becoming increasingly important when considering the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable values for online communities. Terminology used to describe ideological specifics of extreme right-wing movements

also differs widely across different countries, languages and contexts. For example, in German the term 'white supremacist' may be translated with 'Rassist' (= 'racist') or simply 'Rechtsextremist' (right-wing extremist) and a distinction between Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred - the former referring to the fear of the religion Islam, the latter to the loathing of its adherents - does not exist. In France, debates on the historic and cultural importance of its concept of 'laïcité' regularly shape the discourse on extremism of all forms. In the UK, popular counter-jihad groups such as the EDL, UK PEGIDA and Britain First are careful to self-define outside the remit of government definitions, and are pugnacious when referred to as 'far-right', 'extremist' or 'racist'.<sup>xvi</sup>

In order to avoid common definitional pitfalls, this report has adapted the quantitative approach that Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde provides in *The Ideology of the Extreme Right*. According to this definition, right-wing extremist movements are characterised by a combination of at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy.<sup>xvii</sup>

We classified extreme-right groups based on what grievances motivate them, their ideological markers, their activities, where they are active, and the extent of their online activity. Groups were then clustered and

mapped based on shared characteristics and points of ideological convergence in order to provide us with an overview of the contemporary extreme-right ecosystem (see p.25). As this report crosses different linguistic, cultural and political environments, this framework provides clear definitions and criteria for any categorisation and clustering used for the purpose of analysis.

This typology is useful as it allows for the swift identification of points of convergence between groups, and provides an easy-to-use framework which can be adapted as the extreme-right ecosystem shifts. However, we recognise its limitations when applied to individuals who engage with fluid online communities, the ideological convictions and motivations of which may differ widely. We are aware that when this report speaks about trends within certain social media channels, forums and message boards, or followers of certain online sub-cultures, our approach - like any system of political categorisation - may not do justice to every individual's political views and actions. This report's conclusions and judgements therefore only deal with wider trends in the manifestations, ideologies, goals and strategies of extreme right-wing movements, and reflect common narratives shared on platforms associated with the extreme right.

## Case study 1: Defend Europe

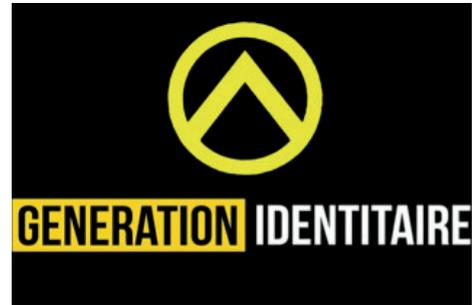
The Defend Europe campaign was launched in May 2017 by leading members of 'Generation Identitaire', a youth group associated with the French far-right intellectual movement 'Nouvelle Droite' (see box to the right). As part of the campaign, a group of Identitarian activists chartered a ship with the aim of disrupting the flow of migrants crossing from Libya, and interdicting NGO vessels.

The group summarised the ideological impetus for the mission as a reaction to the perceived threat posed by migrants: 'Every week, every day, every hour—ships packed with illegal immigrants are flooding into European waters... We are losing our safety and our way of life and there is a danger that we Europeans will become a minority in our own European homelands.' This narrative attracted significant support from right and extreme-right commentators and groups globally, with a diverse range of individuals expressing support for the mission ranging from the populist British journalist Katie Hopkins to David Duke, the former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

The activities of Defend Europe were promoted through a range of communications channels. The group produced its own website outlining the manifesto for the mission as well as a series of FAQ's providing its justification. The Defend Europe crew was accompanied by the 'alt-light' libertarian vlogger Lauren Southern who produced a series of videos outlining her experiences with the mission. In addition to this, the mission had its own Twitter handle which regularly posted updates in English, French, German and Italian.

### Cross-Border Mobilisation

The Defend Europe case study in particular illustrates well the extent of cross-ideological and cross-border



### Generation Identitaire

'Generation Identitaire' were founded as a youth splinter-group of the French 'Nouvelle Droite'. The group are part of a broader pan-European movement called Identitarianism, which focuses on the preservation of traditional values and European identity and culture. They can broadly be described as white-nationalists and are nativist, anti-immigration, anti-Islam, anti-liberal, and anti-left-wing. The Identitarian movement has spread throughout Europe with groups in Austria, Germany and Italy, and is starting to make headway in the United States. International figures and movements in the extreme right also have ties to Identitarianism, with Richard Spencer – the founder of the alt-right movement - subscribing to the ideology.

cooperation and mobilisation of the extreme right. For our research, we used social listening software to gather data related to the hashtag '#DefendEurope' from Twitter as well as event-related conversations across a range of platforms utilised by the extreme right, between May and September 2017. In total, we collected and analysed over 300,000 Defend Europe-related posts.

### Key findings

**International Collaboration:** The European extreme-right and American alt-right actively collaborated in mobilising a global support base, promotion and fundraising of the Defend Europe mission.

**Exploitation of Grievances:** The Identitarians used common grievances such as identity and mass immigration and shared goals to appeal to a wide range of audiences and cement a more cohesive ideology.

**Normalisation of Fringe Narratives:** Extreme fringes not officially affiliated to the Identitarians were able to benefit from and push their own agenda, using the media attention and worldwide mobilisation the campaign generated.

The mission itself saw an international pool of Identitarians engaging in operations, including representatives from Germany, France, Italy, Austria and the US. In addition to this, a number of individuals accompanied the group to document its progress, including Canadian 'alt-light' journalist Lauren Southern, American alt-right commentator and white nationalist Brittany Pettibone and British-Norwegian far-right vlogger and former Holocaust denier Peter Sweden. The group also drew online support from a global pool of activists. Our analysis of 50 extreme-right platforms found that a wide range of alt-right channels promoted the Defend Europe campaign. Alt-right commentators tended to agree with the mission but often conflated this with ideological narratives and actions which were more extreme than the public talking points of the mission. For example, some of them related the migrant crisis to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, used explicitly racist language to describe migrants, and used the platforms to tacitly and actively call for violence to be used against migrants.

Cross-border support is in part evidenced by the funding of the mission. An analysis of the Twitter traffic surrounding the event shows that the mission's crowdfunding page was promoted 16,876 times between 01/05/17 – 01/09/17; making it the most widely shared URL relating to the mission. The Defend Europe team was able to generate over \$200,000 from a global network of supporters through soliciting PayPal payments, as well as using the crowdfunding sites Wesearchr and Patreon, in order to purchase and supply their vessel. The Wesearchr page for the event showed that 3208 individuals had donated to the mission, and an analysis of contributor comments suggested that financial support came from the UK, Austria, France, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway, Italy and the USA.

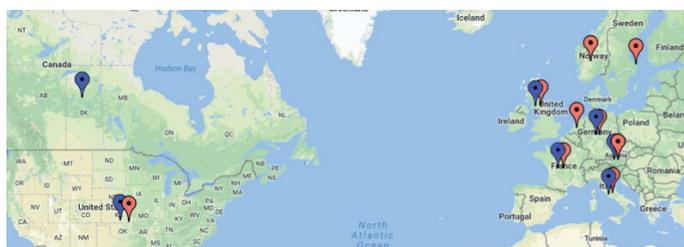


Figure 1: Country locations of funders (red) and participants (blue) of the Defend Europe mission

The geographic diversity of the mission's funders was matched by international support for the mission on social media. In contrast to the Unite the Right rally (discussed in Case Study 2), where a majority

of discussion of the event was based domestically, Defend Europe attracted support from a wide range of countries.

Analysis of geo-locatable Twitter traffic associated with favourable tweets shows that 18% of tweets relating to the event came from France, 18% from Germany, 15% from the USA, 10% from the UK, 6% from Italy, 5% from Spain and 4% from Switzerland, with the remainder coming from a range of other European and North American countries.

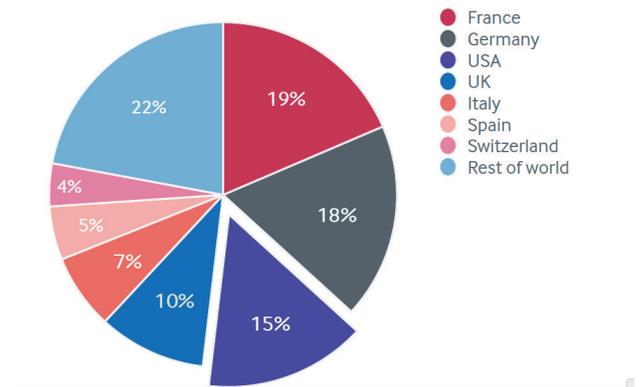


Figure 2: Locations of Tweets in Support of the Defend Europe Campaign

As Identitarianism is a pan-European movement, it is understandable that the group attracted support from France, Germany, Italy and Austria. However, of particular importance is support in messaging and finances from US based groups. It is important to note that Identitarians are largely motivated by cultural narratives, are not supportive of violence, and do not usually utilise explicitly racist or racialist language. Nonetheless, the Defend Europe campaign received support from key white supremacist figures in the US, such as former Grand Wizard of the KKK David Duke, who encouraged his Twitter followers to fund the mission and Andrew Anglin's Daily Stormer which directly correlated the mission with a race war ("The only thing that'll stop the shit-skins from flooding Europe, and remove the ones already here, are more actions like what the identitarians here have done, but on a massive scale, and with more and more radical means.").

The Defend Europe case demonstrates how groups and individuals are prepared to put aside ideological differences which have previously caused divisions and ruptures in the extreme-right ecosystem and instead focus on commonality. This preparedness to compromise was recognised by Andrew Anglin when he wrote:

“ The only thing that’ll stop the shit-skins from flooding Europe, and remove the ones already here, are more actions like what the Identitarians here have done, but on a massive scale, and with more and more radical means. ”

suggesting that those on the extreme fringe see mobilisation behind (relatively) more moderate causes as a gateway to more extreme action.

Coordination amongst extreme-right activists to support activity was apparently encouraged by the organisers of the mission. They made direct calls to alt-right activists globally to provide actionable intelligence for the mission,<sup>xviii</sup> mirroring recent trends which have seen the alt-right coordinate to attempt to influence American, French and Dutch elections.<sup>xix</sup>

### Ideological Convergence

78%

Tweets surrounding event were supportive of the mission

instances of support for the mission, instances of condemnation, and neutral media coverage, and clustered them into the categories ‘supportive’ ‘condemning’ and ‘neutral’. The algorithm suggested that 78% of tweets surrounding the event were supportive of the mission.

In order to assess the ideological drivers which caused individuals to engage with the Defend Europe campaign we trained a natural language processing algorithm to analyse Twitter traffic surrounding the event.

The algorithm recognised

At the height of the mission in mid-July, commonly used hashtags included:

**#DefendEurope, #Identitarian, #Gstar, #WhiteGenocide, #Sorosforprison, #Trumparmy, #ngosstoppen, #maga, #mega, #Fluechlingskriminalitaet, #StopTheInvasion, #DefendTheWest and #Multiculturalism.**

Once the algorithm had been run, the top 10,000 words most used in conversation surrounding the campaign were then gathered, with keywords which expressed ideological motivators being analysed based on the number of occurrences.

These motivating factors were:

- **Anti-left-wing:** anti-left wing attitudes (e.g. ‘smashculturalmarxism’)
- **Conspiracy theories:** conspiracy theories relating to the migrant crisis (usually anti-Semitic in nature) (e.g. Sorosforprison);
- **Cultural preservation:** the perceived cultural threat posed by migrant populations; (discussion of ‘heritage’ and ‘culture’);
- **Cultural preservation:** the perceived cultural threat posed by migrant populations; (discussion of ‘heritage’ and ‘culture’);
- **Anti-establishment:** discussion of the establishment’s complicity in and support for the migrant crisis (e.g. ‘defeattheelite’);
- **General anti-migrant:** sentiments of fear, frustration or anger towards migrants and refugees (e.g. ‘Invasion’);
- **Sexual threat:** discussion of the perceived sexual threat posed by migrants (often in discussion of sex crimes committed by migrants); (e.g. ‘rapefugee’);
- **Terror threat:** the idea that migrant populations increase the likelihood of terror attacks in Europe; (e.g. ‘Manchesterattack’);
- **White displacement:** the fear that migrant populations will completely erode the ethnic homogeneity of Europe (e.g. ‘whitegenocide’);

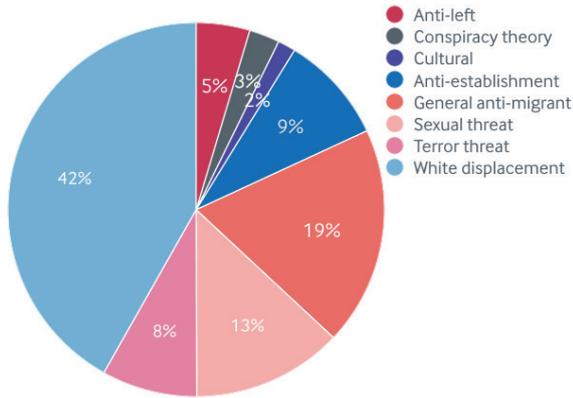


Figure 3: Grievances Revealed in Tweets of Defend Europe Supporters

The diversity of expressed grievances demonstrates how the Defend Europe mission was adopted and supported by individuals with a range of different ideological motivators, and served as a rallying point around which the extreme-right globally could coalesce.

By far the most common grievance expressed was the fear that white populations would be displaced by migrants. This is particularly interesting as it explicitly

ties a racial element to the mission, whilst Identitarians have traditionally avoided explicit use of extremist and racist language.<sup>xx</sup> It is likely that this skew can be related to the increased engagement by US based alt-right groups with Defend Europe, shifting the parameters of the conversation.

The Defend Europe mission demonstrates the increasing connectivity of the extreme and far-right online, and how this can manifest into real world action. In much the same way as Islamic State, the extreme right are able to draw on an international supporter-base for resourcing and operational support. Events happening on the other side of the world are broadcast to cement a more cohesive ideology. The mission also shows us how a wide range of actors from across the ideological spectrum of the far-right are focusing on common goals. By projecting their own ideological motivators and grievances onto the same events, these groups and individuals are able to generate the sense of a global political community. This dynamic presents a serious threat: more mainstream individuals attracted to the missions (for example those with an anti-migrant sentiment), may start adopting the discourse and arguments of the fringe.

## Case study 2: Unite the Right

The Charlottesville rally took place on 12 August 2017 and was initiated to protest the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee. The event was organised by Jason Kessler, an alt-right journalist and member of the all-male, nationalist group Proud Boys. The rally was advertised under the banners 'Unite the Right Rally' and 'Freedom of Speech Rally', and attracted a broad-church of individuals and groups ranging from libertarians to militant neo-Nazis. The rally ended in the murder of civil rights activist Heather Hayes and the injuring of 19 other counter-protesters in a vehicle attack carried out by white-supremacist James Alex Fields Jr.

The rally was part of a series of events organised in the summer of 2017 across the US. At least twelve extreme right-wing events took place between July and September 2017. With event names ranging from 'Americans against Genocide' in Jacksonville, 'No to Marxism in America' in Berkeley, 'Summer of Conservatism' in Anaheim, 'Free Speech Rally' in Boston and 'Save the Confederate Monument' in San Antonio, factions of the extreme right converged at these public events. All of these marches were promoted across different extreme right-wing channels and announced on the /pol/ Happenings Discord server, which brings together a wide range of alt-right sympathisers. As Alt-right blogger Hunter Wallace wrote on the site a few days before the Charlottesville rally, 'We're in the earliest stages of a mass movement which is gestating in the real world and social media around the issues of identity, heritage, free speech, freedom of assembly and ending political correctness'.<sup>xxi</sup>

### Cross-Ideological Mobilisation

The Unite the Right rally is a particularly important case as it demonstrates the mobilisation of a range



### Unite the Right

The Daily Stormer is a popular neo-Nazi website and forum, founded in 2013 by Andrew Anglin. It heavily promoted the Unite the Right rally, and attracted considerable attention after it mocked Heather Heyer following her death, resulting in a successful campaign to shut down the site's hosting. The site actively associates with the alt-right, and is known for the online activism of its supporters. Anglin has written numerous times about his intentions to "weaponize internet culture" in order to radicalise young white men.

of different groups from across the extreme-right spectrum. It marked a turning point for the American extreme-right, causing a huge amount of publicity. Representatives of the alt-right movement described it as a 'historic moment', as it was one of the first real-world events that brought together many loosely affiliated far right communities of different ideological leanings.

This mobilisation can be linked to heavy promotion across a number of different fora and channels by a diverse group of activists. The event was promoted

### Key findings

**From Online to Offline Mobilisation:** The rally was among the first real-world events that brought together many loosely affiliated far right communities of different ideological leanings.

**Opportunistic Coalition-building:** The rally organisers bridged ideological difference between sub-movements by tailoring their communications efforts to different target audiences and by highlighting the benefits of cross-fertilisation and collaboration.

**Mainstreaming of the Fringe:** White supremacist movements managed to penetrate the mainstream by strategically framing their fringe narratives through socially more acceptable lens of freedom of speech and criticism of multiculturalism, the globalist elites and political correctness.

widely across Facebook, Twitter, 4Chan, Reddit, and multiple alt-right Discord channels as well as extreme right-wing webpages and forums. An analysis of the 'Unite the Right' propaganda output revealed that the narratives and incentives provided to encourage participation varied widely across different platforms, demonstrating the organisers' attempt to tailor their communications efforts to different target audiences. Their declared goal was to shift the Overton window – the consensus boundaries of what constitutes acceptable public discourse – further to the right, according to internal instructions on the organisers' official Alt-Right Discord server, which was closed down shortly after the rally. The administrators of the channel strategized on how to best 'redpill the normies' - in other words by carrying out mass radicalisation.

Our ethnographic deep-dive into these platforms revealed proactive efforts to reach a wide range of audiences and lure users on popular social media into embracing their causes. To reach 'the normies', the rally organisers ran targeted communication campaigns that addressed the grievances of different right-wing communities. Part of their strategy was to tone down their rhetoric and to use less extreme right-wing figureheads, such as Infowars editor-at-large Paul Joseph Watson, whose Twitter and Facebook pages jointly count over 1,200,000 followers, as their mouthpieces to mainstream their fringe ideologies.

58%

Of white male students between 14-18 would have voted for trump

21%

Would have chosen not to vote in the US election

In particular Generation Z, digital natives born between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, have been targeted by extreme-right campaigns. A study by the Hispanic Heritage Foundation found that 58% of white male students between 14 and 18 would have voted for Trump and 21% would have chosen to not vote in the US election.<sup>xxii</sup> 'Let's reach these people with our National Alliance message', an essay in the white nationalist National Vanguard said in early August 2017.<sup>xxiii</sup> The Daily Stormer called these post-millennials 'Generation Zyklon' in reference to the cyanide-based poison Zyklon B which was used in gas chambers during the Holocaust.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Based on our discourse analysis of roughly 10,000 posts and 200 pieces of propaganda on webpages ranging from popular, open-access social media platforms to fringe forums and encrypted apps, we found the following communicative differences between the Charlottesville sub-campaigns:

#### Public Messaging:

The official 'Unite the Right' trailer<sup>xxv</sup> stressed the threat of a white genocide, linking the destruction of cultural symbols such as General Lee's statue to a wider conspiracy theory, arguing that 'the international Jewish system, the capitalist system and the forces of globalism' seek to erase the European people through mass immigration, hate speech laws and the removal of cultural heritage.

Alt-right webpages such as AltRight.com, VDARE and The Right Stuff featured Charlottesville-related announcements and articles. Even more explicit in its anti-Semitism, the Daily Stormer promoted the rally as an event 'to end Jewish influence in America'. On Stormfront, the Nationalist Socialist Movement and different Ku Klux Klan divisions encouraged participation and coordinated logistics.

The tone of the official 'Unite the Right' Facebook event page was subtler than in the above-discussed alt-right forums: its announcement framed the rally as an event to defend 'the First Amendment rights of conservatives and right-wing activists' from a 'totalitarian communist crackdown'. The event organiser Jason Kessler urged everyone on the right to take part in a unified response to preserve the heritage of Southerners and secure the rights of white people.

#### Fringe Discussion:

4Chan's /pol and the /The\_Donald subreddit hosted various threats that endorsed the event: the discussions between users from across the ideological spectrum were instructive for understanding the reasoning and appeal of coalition building projects such as Charlottesville. A tendency to stress common grounds and downplay differences between different movements crystallised. For example, one user on /The\_Donald urged others to participate despite his disagreement with National Socialism and ethno-nationalism.

#### Private Discussion:

In the closed chat rooms of the messaging application Discord, hate posts and calls for violence against Jews, Blacks and anti-fascists (Anti-Fa) were common. Charlottesville was the primary discussion topic of the

official Alt-Right Discord server, which hosted Andrew Anglin and Baked Alaska as VIPs. The rally was also promoted in the Anticom and /pol Happenings Discord servers.

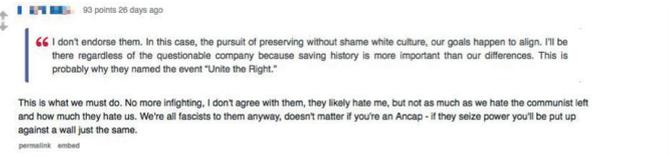


Figure 4: Discussion of Unite the Right on Reddit

Due to the multi-faceted promotion of the event, various audiences began discussing and engaging with it. The official Alt-Right Discord channel passed the 4,000 members mark in the week preceding the rally. A few days prior to the event, over 600 people had clicked on 'attending' and over 1000 others had announced their interest before the event page was removed. Participating individuals were connected to groups and media outlets including The League of the South, the Traditionalist Workers Party, The Daily Stormer, Vanguard America, Identity Evropa and The Right Stuff. Even individuals who may not usually mingle with the anti-Semitic extreme right, such as followers of Libertarian Senate candidate Augustus Invictus, alt-light groups such as The Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights (FOAK) and the Proud Boys announced their attendance. An official post of FOAK encouraged its members to attend the rally to 'preserve the basic freedoms we as Americans are granted'. Rebel Media and Infowars representatives sympathetically covered the event and jumped on the 'unite the right' bandwagon: four days before the event, Paul Joseph Watson tweeted that:

Everyone on the right needs to get over their petty grudges & personality clashes and realize we are all being targeted. Time to unite.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Rebel media's Faith Goldy attended the rally to 'explain things to the alt-light'. The reporter who had previously written about a 'white genocide in Canada'<sup>xxvii</sup> is seen on a livestream from the rally, rationalising what she refers to as 'a rising in white racial consciousness'<sup>xxviii</sup>.



Figure 5: Alt-right mouthpieces discuss Unite the Right

To better understand the drivers behind online users' rising susceptibility for extreme right-wing radicalisation and the mainstreaming of alt-right ideologies, cross-ideological common grounds were explored. A convergence of both grievances and interests was detected on the basis of open source intelligence gathered from Twitter and analysed with Crimson Hexagon.

### Points of Convergence

#### Converging grievances

Our analysis of the Twitter traffic around the #UniteTheRight hashtag in the run-up to the rally suggests that the rally organisers were successful in exploiting a diverse set of grievances to attract individuals from across the ideological spectrum. We collected all supportive tweets used in combination with Charlottesville-related hashtags (in total over 30,000 tweets) to analyse the motivations of protestors and online supporters of the rally.

The most frequently used keywords included:

*antifa communist left leftists multiculturalism sjws amendment freedom free speech heritage monument southern #whitepeople anti-white diversity identity immigration jew white*



We then filtered and categorised all identified keywords according to the grievances and ideological triggers they revealed. Our analysis found that just under a third (27%) of expressed grievances focused on race – with keywords such as ‘white genocide’, ‘white people’, ‘immigration’ and ‘anti-white’ featuring high. Meanwhile, just over a quarter (33%) revealed grievances against the left, frequently denouncing Anti-Fa and communists. This was followed by frustration around freedom of speech (18%), Southern heritage (11%) and the establishment (12%). This suggests that the rally’s organisers were able to reach groups and individuals from across the far-right ideological spectrum by addressing a wide range of political grievances.

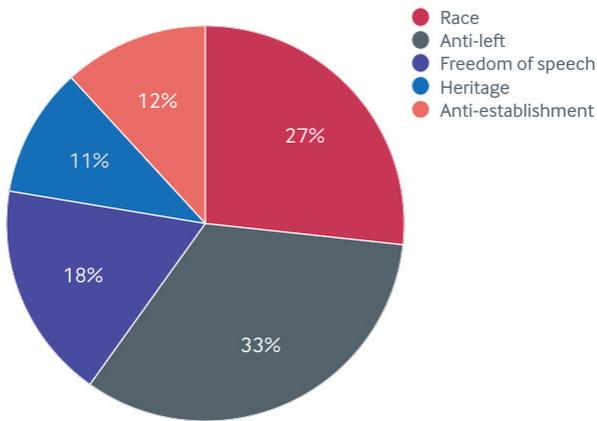


Figure 6: Grievances of Unite the Right Supporters

**Converging Interests**

Our analysis of a random sample of close to 10,000 supportive posts in relation to Charlottesville suggested that their alt-right accounts had distinctive political and socio-economic grievances, political leanings and news sources. This analysis was based on an algorithm that combines an assessment of the individuals/ organisations that Twitter users engage with and the topics that they raise into a metric we will call ‘interests’. The analysis showed that ‘Unite the Right’ supporters were significantly more likely to express interest in a range of topics that can provide an insight into their political leanings, political grievances, socio-economic grievances and news sources.

Expressed Interest:	...more likely than the average Twitter user:	Indicative of:
British National Party	198 times	Political leaning
Libertarian	108 times	Political leaning
Tea Party	24 times	Political leaning
Progressive Politics	34 times	Political grievance
Feminism	33 times	Political grievance
Immigration	32 times	Political grievance
Climate Change	19 times	Political grievance
Occupy Wall Street	60 times	Socio-economic grievance
Affordable Care Act	41 times	Socio-economic grievance
Fox News	50 times	News sources
Wikileaks	45 times	News sources

These echo chambers - convergences of political leanings, grievances and news sources - facilitate targeted communication campaigns by external actors, including extreme-right activists. These have the potential to resonate with different sub-movements through the strategic positioning of arguments, allowing for radicalising influences to reach their targeted audiences.

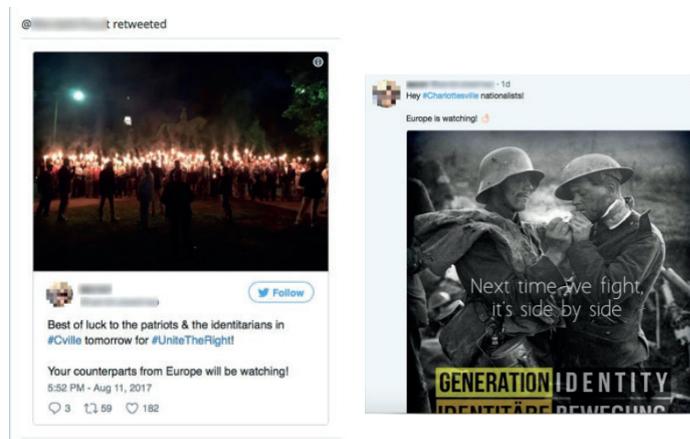


Figure 7: Identitarian support for Unite the Right on social media

Although the rally was primarily an American event, European Identitarians expressed their solidarity with the protestors on Twitter and other public platforms. The British-Norwegian Identitarian journalist Peter Sweden who interviewed Hunter Wallace called it ‘a milestone for the alt-right’.<sup>xxix</sup> On multiple 4Chan threads, European users announced their support for the rally. Some even stated their desire to see similar events in Europe. As one user commented: ‘

“ Beautiful. I hope it spreads big time to Europe too’ and ‘I’m jealous that these rallies are not near my place. ”

### Findings

The wide-ranging mobilisation in the run-up to the Charlottesville rally showcased the overall surge of cross-fertilisation and collaboration between different ideological fronts on the extreme right. As a result of overlapping grievances, interests and goals, different sub-movements coalesced around similar topics. The

alt-right has been successful in exploiting such points of convergence and meeting points to further their cause. White nationalist movements such as the National Vanguard and the Daily Stormer view more moderate far-right activists as effective agents of change and strategic allies to mainstream their ideologies. Despite profound ideological divergences (e.g. biological vs. cultural racism), alt-light activists, free speech warriors, Southern rights advocates and libertarians play an instrumental role in mainstreaming white supremacist and even neo-Nazi thought. They are at the heart of the cross-pollination that allows for the normalisation of fringe ideologies, as a result of their framing through the more socially acceptable lenses of freedom of speech, criticism of multiculturalism, the globalist elites and political correctness.

## Case study 3: The German Elections

On 24 September 2017, AfD shocked the world by taking the third place in the German Federal elections with 13.3% of the votes, becoming the first far-right party to enter the Bundestag since the Second World War.

Trump's victory in the US presidential elections of November 2016 unleashed excitement and enthusiasm among extreme right-wing activists who carried out online information and disinformation campaigns and psychological operations to promote his campaigns and to shift the public's attitude in his favour.<sup>xxx</sup> Since then alt-right activists proactively sought to expand their influence beyond their borders. Under the official motto 'Make Europe Great Again', they attempted to galvanise their European counter-parts into mobilising for coordinated grassroots operations to manipulate elections on the other side of the Atlantic.

The elections in France, the Netherlands and most recently Germany demonstrated increased trans-Atlantic cooperation and information exchange between extreme right-wing activists on the web. Supporters of Dutch Freedom Party's leader Geert Wilders and the French Front National's presidential candidate Marine Le Pen borrowed tactics employed by the alt-right in the US elections.<sup>xxxi</sup> These included the organised use of trolling armies, fake accounts and social media bots to spread memes, disinformation, and engage in a range of psychological operations.

### Communication and Coordination Strategies

This case study focuses on the German election and extreme right-wing efforts to boost public support for AfD's general elections candidate Alice Weidel. The German election saw months of preparation in American alt-right and European extreme right forums



### Reconquista Germania

With close to 5,000 members Reconquista Germania calls itself the 'biggest patriotic German-language Discord channel'. The server was set up by Nikolai Alexander, a German far-right activist whose Youtube channel Reconquista Germania counts over 33,000 subscribers. The declared goal of his Discord channel is to 'ensure the strongest possible showing for the AfD in the Bundestag'. It is managed according to clear hierarchical structures using a mixture of military language and alt-right insider vocabulary. Moving to higher 'army ranks' is only possible through special recruiting procedures including several interviews; successful users are then divided up into groups according to their geographic region. .

to plan out their communication and coordination strategies. Considering that AfD managed to achieve all its stipulated election goals, its conquest of the online space is an important case that illustrates the collective learning capabilities, 'best practice' exchange and explicit collaboration between like-minded far-right activists from across the world.

### Key findings

**Radicalising Generation Z:** The weaponisation of internet culture is deliberately used by extreme-right influencers to bring about attitude and behavioural change, in particular among the younger generations.

**Tactical Convergence:** Extreme-right networks are developing common tactical playbooks with which to manipulate the public and disrupt democratic processes.

**Military Strategies:** Many of the extreme right's sophisticated and coordinated media disruption techniques and psy-ops are based on military guides such as leaked GCHQ and NATO's strategic communication documents.

Based on social media analysis and several weeks of undercover research into the extreme right’s internal conversations on message boards and in closed chatrooms, we were able to develop insights into the extent and nature of international extreme right-wing coordination to influence the outcome of the German election. This part assesses the strategy behind their targeted information and disinformation campaigns and the impact of these psychological operations.



Figure 8: Weev discusses alt-right information operations

We were able to infiltrate a community of activists who were seeking to influence the German elections. To date, there is not enough evidence to prove centralised funding or coordination structures behind these pro-AfD campaigns. However, our research suggests connections to the alt-right hacker and troll Andrew Auenheimer (aka. Weev) and the Daily Stormer, both of whom have also been linked to the French election hacking and the associated #MacronLeaks campaigns.<sup>xxxii</sup> Our data shows that the Daily Stormer website is the domain that makes the fourth most frequent use of the hashtag #MGGA (short for Make Germany Great Again) worldwide. Auenheimer reached out to French and German native speakers to build troll armies that could help to manipulate European elections. Likewise, the Daily Stormer called on its readers to make contact with PEGIDA, Identitarians and AfD and to support their campaigns by creating German-language meme collections.

AfD’s sharing of content and platforms suggests a wider recognition of, and tactical promotion of, the activities by AfD party members. The official AfD Television Youtube channel, which is managed by a member of AfD Bavaria, counts over 16,000 subscribers. Two weeks prior to the elections, it shared a video<sup>xxxiii</sup> of Austrian Identitarian Martin Sellner that included links to the Discord channels Infokrieg and Reconquista Germania. Both of these channels have been set up by far-right extremists for the purpose of manipulating the elections in AfD’s favour. Furthermore, the high presence of AfD party members and regional factions on the alt-right Twitter equivalent Gab and the Russian Facebook substitute VK.com – both of which were used by the extreme right for campaign coordination and

mobilisation – implies an awareness of, and interest in, the extreme right’s ongoing trolling and mobilisation activities.

Coordinated grassroots efforts to influence the elections first took shape on nexus platforms such as 4Chan, 8Chan and Reddit. The in-depth planning, however, soon moved to more intimate Discord chatrooms that were set up specifically for the German election.

**Message Boards:**

On 4Chan’s /pol board, instructions from the US-elections on how to<sup>xxxiv</sup> obfuscate and manipulate the media space were recycled and adopted to a German audience: this included memetic warfare albums such as ‘normie memes’, and psychological operations resources, such as a ‘step by step how to manipulate narratives’ that links to GCHQ online deception and disruption playbooks.<sup>xxxv</sup> They allocated tasks, ranging from the creation of German-language memes to the circulation of fake news. A list of tasks included the following instructions: ‘gather lurkers’, ‘make memes’, ‘spell-check memes’, ‘spread memes’, ‘come up with new ideas’ and ‘ignore the shills’. Mobilisation on 4Chan started in December 2016 when a user wrote ‘The election of the German chancellor is an upcoming target for kek.<sup>xxxvi</sup> German bros when do we start shilling, what do we shill and how do we harness the meme magic in Germany?’ Similarly, 8Chan’s /pol featured several bilingual threads, where German and English speaking users shared news, fake news, conspiracy theories, memes, videos and recommendations. In early 2017, users on Reddit’s /The\_Donald, a major meeting point for pro-Trump campaigners and online activists, discussed the creation of a German equivalent for AfD.<sup>xxxviii</sup> As a result, Die\_Alternative (initially named /The\_Frauke)<sup>xxxix</sup> was created to help attract more support for AfD through coordinated social media campaigns, using ‘English and German posts and spicy memes’ on mainstream platforms.

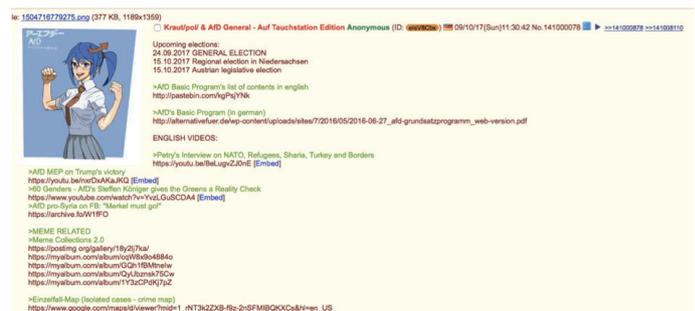
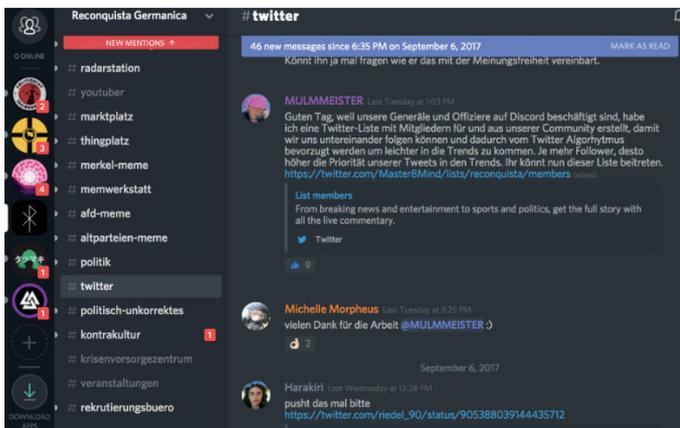


Figure 9: Thread on /pol/ discussing information operations

### Discord Channels:

On Discord, the channels Reconquista Germania and #Infokrieg were set up to coordinate large-scale social media campaigns and to encourage the use of a range of psychological operations and disinformation tactics. Both channels have vetting procedures that include identity verification and a social media background check of all members to ensure that only trusted individuals gain access to internal conversations, strategic documents and guidelines on information warfare tactics. Inside the #Infokrieg and Reconquista Germania channels, members of the Identitarian movement and sympathisers of the American alt-right plan their communication strategies, share resources and create content.



### Reconquista Germania:

Reconquista Germania's chatrooms range from 'radar station', 'daily orders' and 'meme workshops' to 'politics' and 'events'. The categories 'counter-culture' and 'politically incorrect' contain anti-Semitic, Holocaust denial, anti-Muslim and racist contents. For example, members shared the neo-Nazi video 'Take back our future - a message from the alt-right' as well as Nazi supporter Reinhold Leidenfrost's sympathetic reports of the 'real life' under Hitler.<sup>x1</sup> One of the channel's chatrooms is called 'crisis foresight centre', where members prepare for 'Day X' in the case of a war or a breakdown of the public order. Members share comprehensive survival guides, including lists of emergency stocks and instructions on where to buy knives, how to build electro shockers and how to use weapons such as the German FG 42, which was used by the Nazis during WWII.

### #Infokrieg:

The channel #Infokrieg ('Info War'), which is much smaller than Reconquista Germania, is run by a German Identitarian who goes by the name Firelord Pepe on Twitter. The #Infokrieg server includes chat rooms for

the creation of memes, the sharing of Twitter accounts as well as a section where the administrator asks members to make donations via Patreon or bitcoins links. The #Infokrieg group coordinates its meme campaigns according to geographic focus: it runs sub-chats for different German regions as well as for Austria and Switzerland.

As a result of the proactive transatlantic exchange of information, know-how and experience on message boards and in Discord channels, the tactics employed by European far-right activists mirror those used by the American alt-right. Their tactics, many of which were explicitly discussed on Discord, include:



*Organisational quasi-military hierarchy for the Reconquista Germania Discord channel*

### Memetic warfare:

Reconquista Germania runs sub-chats such as 'meme factory', 'Merkel memes', 'AfD memes', 'old party memes', and 'counter-culture', where offensive, funny and disturbing memes are generated for public distribution on Twitter and Facebook. #Infokrieg uses a separate application called Lamda Meme Manager to facilitate and accelerate the creation and dissemination of memes. Lamda Meme Manager allows members to upload and download memes. Glorifying and supportive memes can be found in the categories 'Trump', 'Putin' and 'AfD', while the categories 'Fakenews', 'Islam', 'EU' and 'CDU' feature mocking and condemning memes. The official instructions call on all users to refrain from any posts and memes that could convey a negative image of the Identitarian movement, in particular any language and references that might make them appear violent or illegal. The goal is to act

'according to the principle of the smallest common denominator' by concentrating on the topics of mass migration, Islamisation, identity, freedom and tradition, demonstrating the way these groups seek to distance themselves from potentially self-damaging narratives and focus on the manipulation of more commonly held grievances.



Twitter, Facebook and Youtube raids: Members used a targeted and coordinated hijacking of social media trends, using a Trending Topic Discord Bot. They discussed tactics to coordinate their campaigns include a daily routine of scheduling a time each evening, agreeing on hashtags and creating a range of anti-Merkel and anti-old party memes on Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms. Raids regularly included coordinated trolling of 'old party' politicians, 'mainstream' media outlets or leftist activists on Twitter. On Youtube and Facebook, they spammed the comments' sections of political opponents' videos and posts with negative or offensive comments and coordinated 'dislike' campaigns to denounce their critics and political opponents.

#### Obfuscation:

To facilitate the dissemination of politically sensitive materials, the administrators of Reconquista Germania circulate guides on how to hide IP addresses, how to automate Twitter accounts or how to avoid getting them shut down.

#### Fake Accounts:

To avoid detection and maximise communication campaign successes, #Infokrieg called on all members to create multiple fake Twitter accounts, including at least one account outside of their own filter bubbles. The use of the programme 'Ghostbrowser' is recommended for simultaneous tweeting from different accounts. Users were urged to tweet about different topics such as cars and football, to build a decent followership on each of these accounts to avoid suspicion, and to keep their weekends free for Twitter raids.

#### Parody Accounts:

Multiple far-right activists also spoke about setting up parody accounts on Facebook and Twitter to mock and troll establishment politicians and left-leaning activists or to cause confusion about their ideological leanings. For instance, one member of the Reconquista Germania group created a parody account for Austria's Foreign minister and conservative frontrunner in the general election.<sup>xli</sup>

### The Impact of the Influence Operations

#### Hashtags Rankings:

In the two weeks leading up to the election pro-AfD hashtags reached the top 5 trending hashtags in Germany multiple times. Our analysis shows that this is largely due to extreme right-wing activists' coordinated action and the exchange of social media account details. Simultaneous posting and mutual amplification activities helped them to trick the Twitter algorithms into prioritising their hashtags. The activists illustrated a sustained effort to keep their hashtags trending across different social media platforms. On 9 September 2017, fifteen days before the German election, seven of the hashtags defined by users of Reconquista Germania, including #nichtmeinekanzlerin, #reconquista and #merkelmussweg, reached the top 20 trending hashtags in Germany. The #AfD hashtag fluctuated between first and second rank over the entire two weeks-period leading up to the elections. #Traudichdeutschland was overall the second most successful hashtag that Reconquista Germania actively pushed. As seen in the graphic below, #Traudichdeutschland continuously climbed up the German Twitter trend ranks over the 2-weeks run-up to the election.<sup>xlii</sup>

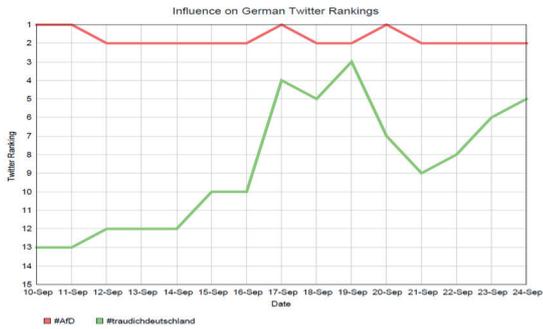


Figure 10: Effects of influence campaigns on German Twitter rankings

Reach and Mainstreaming: Based on our exclusive access to a list of 70 Twitter accounts shared in the Reconquista Germania Discord we were able to map the reach of the centrally planned influence operations. A network analysis of all identified election manipulators and their followers shows that disparate individuals coordinating on private channels quickly come together to form communities of information influencers. Our network analysis explains how these extreme right-wing influencers managed to carry their materials into other echo chambers and, as a result, penetrate the mainstream. It illustrates that the official account of Nikolai Alexander, founder of Reconquista Germania, was the key influencer behind a close-knit community of activists who follow and interact with one-another, and coordinate to amplify information operations on Twitter.

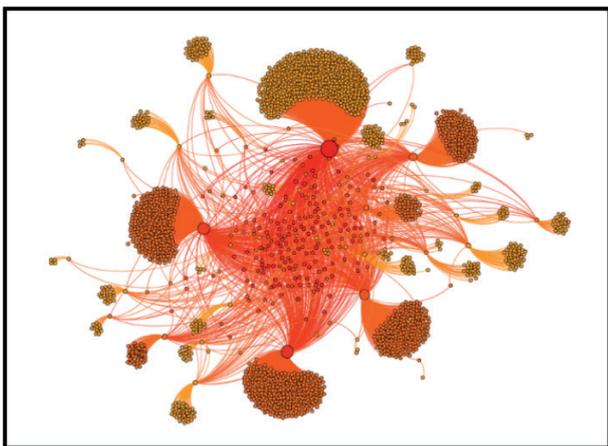
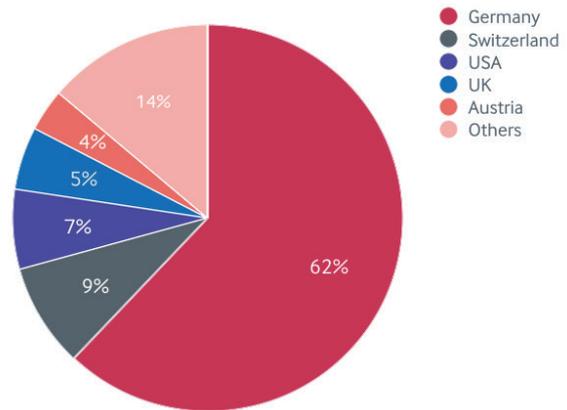


Figure 11: Network map of extreme-right influencers on Twitter, showing connectivity between activists and their own follower pools

**Monitoring and Evaluation:**

The Discord groups were monitoring and evaluating their social media impact every day. To improve their reach, they circulated detailed Twitter analytics

internally with recommendations for the next operation. For example the following graphics were shared with the comment that it will be possible 'to catapult AfD to the top ranks by infiltrating the hashtags of SPD and CDU and by using punchy memes'.



**International Operations:**

An analysis of the #Merkelmussweg ('Merkel has to go') hashtag, which was commonly used by both official AfD accounts and Reconquista trolls, revealed that geo-locatable tweets using the hashtag came from across the world. While 62% of the tweets were traced back to Germany, 8.7% were from Switzerland, 6.8% from the US, over 5.3% from the UK and 3.5% from Austria. Other frequent locations included France, Spain, the Netherlands, Russia, Indonesia, Poland and Canada.

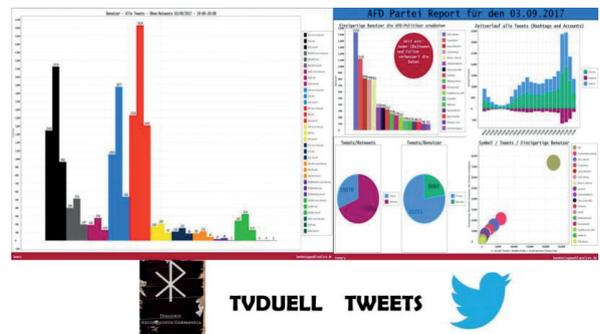


Figure 12: Extreme-right efforts to measure and evaluate their Twitter campaigns

**Findings**

This case study demonstrated that the weaponisation of internet culture to bring about attitudinal and behavioural change is a growing tactic used by the extreme-right. In the hope of influencing the outcome of the election, German activists used similar media manipulation techniques to those used by the alt-right in the US. Extreme right-wing grassroots explicitly declared an 'Infokrieg' ('info war'), mobilised across a range of message boards and encrypted apps, and

exchanged know-how with the American alt-right. While there is no evidence that any oversight or leadership activities were undertaken by AfD itself, the party displayed awareness of and tactical support for the psychological operations carried out in their favour.

This shows how extreme right activists are starting to develop common tactical playbooks with which to manipulate the public and disrupt democratic processes. Although it is difficult to correlate the use of these techniques with behavioural change, we can nevertheless track the immediate impact of their use. In particular this has significant ramifications for counter-extremism practitioners. The development of sophisticated and coordinated tactics for the delivery

of information operations is a new phenomenon in the extremist field, and the efforts of these groups are more reminiscent of state-led psychological operations than that of terrorist groups. Accordingly, it is necessary that new counter-measures are developed which recognise, map, and better the strategies developed by the extreme-right.

**A joint research project by the ISD and Arena at LSE looks deeper into foreign attempts to impact the German elections. It's findings will be published in December 2017 and will include more details about the narratives and tactics used to influence the far-left, the far-right and the Russian-speaking communities in Germany.**

## Convergence and nexus points

The three case studies illustrate that extreme right-wing groups are increasingly building bridges across geographic and ideological divisions to leverage their online and offline activities and penetrate new audiences. In order to explain the success of these efforts it is worth looking at points of convergence and nexus points that are being exploited for the sake of mass radicalisation.

Our analysis of the extreme right ecosystem allowed us to identify platform convergence as well as ideological and tactical windows of opportunity that were used for collaboration. Specifically the analysis focused on:

- **Platform convergence:** online meeting points and new collaboration opportunities arising from alternative platforms;
- **Ideological convergence:** the exploitation of common grievances and the leveraging of common goals;
- **Tactical convergence:** efforts to incentivise disparate extreme right-wing movements to join forces for the attainment of common goals.

In order to map these convergences across different extreme right-movements, we created a framework to identify nexus points which connected different groups on the basis of (1) the grievances that they exploited in their messaging, (2) the ideological elements which they utilised to construct their world-view, and (3) the tactics these groups used to reach their goals.

Based on expert consultation, we identified a sample of 50 different networks - online, offline and hybrids – active in Europe and North America that spread extreme-right rhetoric (in accordance with Cas Mudde’s definition). Our narrative analysis of over 5,000 individual pieces of contents published by these platforms allowed us to identify points of convergence and divergence between groups, looking at motivating factors and activities. We developed an algorithm to map these groups by looking at convergence of these factors and to calculate the degree of similarity. Based on this we generated the following graphic, illustrating the convergences of the global extreme-right spectrum.

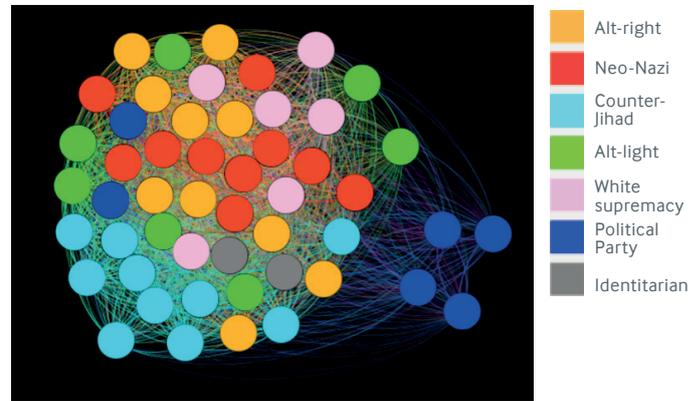


Figure 13: The Spectrum of the Global Extreme Right

This graphic illustrates how extreme-right groups cluster around world view, grievances and activity. It demonstrates how the alt-light and alt-right provide a bridge which connects European identitarian and counter-jihad groups with neo-Nazis and traditional white supremacist movements. This supports the findings of our case studies, which showed that shared tactics and grievances among alt-right, Identitarian and alt-light networks have led to high levels of cooperation between these ideologically diverging groups to achieve common goals. The culturally oriented alt-light in turn provides the link to counter-jihad groups based on shared ideological elements.

Populist parties such as the AfD sit on the outskirts of the graphic, as they are tactically detached from the other extreme-right networks, yet are connected to all networks based on their Islamophobic and anti-immigrant elements. This is in line with our case studies, which found that these elements became the lowest common denominator exploited by all sides to encourage cooperation. The ultra-nationalist BNP and pro-NRW political parties sit on the other side of the graphic, as they have more shared ideological elements with the spectrum of extremist groups mapped. The following sections will further elaborate on convergence and nexus points of the extreme right based on our analysis of 5,000 contents across the 50 mapped extreme-right platforms.

### Platform Convergence

Our research illustrates how extreme right-wing groups congregate increasingly on a range of platforms upon which they mobilise to discuss their world-views,

coordinate activity, disseminate their messaging and attempt to disrupt public discourse. Mainstream platforms such as Twitter provide the battlegrounds where these groups deliver information operations, whilst groups utilise crowd-funding technology to finance their operations. Such activity can be disrupted through the removal or blocking of content and accounts which breach terms of use; however this has resulted in the adoption of increasingly fringe fora and alternative platforms which do not actively police potentially harmful elements of their communities. For instance, the alt-right Twitter equivalent Gab.ai and the Russian Facebook alternative VK.com have been adopted in place of Twitter and Facebook, while Hatreon has become the alt-right’s replacement for the crowdsourcing platform Patreon.

These platforms in which these groups congregate have become melting pots for a range of extreme-right activists and groups. Gab.ai sees populist political candidates, Identitarians, neo-Nazis and alt-right trolls mingle, allowing for the transfer of ideas which leads to a more cohesive ideology. Without the development of novel counter-strategies it is likely that the extreme-right will continue to flourish on these platforms, creating more cohesive communities which collaborate to support coordinated online raids which disseminate extremist content to mainstream platforms and high-profile offline activism.

In many cases the forced migration to alternative platforms has accelerated the online convergence of extreme right-wing groups, which are sharing common grievances and victimhood narratives.

**59%**  
Use Gab because of perceived freedom of speech infringements on other platforms

**28%**  
Of Gab users identified frustration over Twitter & Facebook’s crackdown on extremists

To analyse the grievances and motivations present among users of alternative platforms, we collected over 700 replies posted to the Gab poll entitled ‘I’m on Gab because...’, which was created by Gab founder Andrew Torba in August 2017. Our linguistic analysis of the poll results reveals that just under two thirds of Gab account holders (59%) are active on the platform due to perceived freedom of speech infringements on other platforms. Furthermore, one in every four (28%)

identified grievance keywords and revealed frustration and disappointment over Twitter, Facebook, and Google for their policies to crackdown on the use of their platforms by extremist groups and individuals that use violent language and imagery. Roughly 4% mentioned racial and religious identity as a motivator, using terms such as ‘race’, ‘white’, ‘Jews’, ‘Muslim’ or ‘Nigger’. Furthermore, many Gab users indicated grievances about mainstream media, the political establishment and the Left as key motivators.

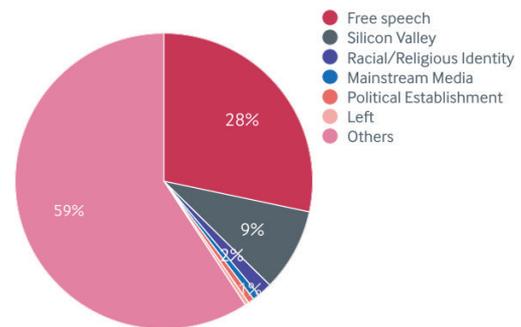


Figure 14: Grievances expressed by Gab users

Increasing convergence on alternative platforms facilitates the exploitation of overlapping grievances and common ideological elements and goals. Platform migration has also made it increasingly difficult to disrupt the extreme right online. Following Charlottesville, a number of Discord channels were used to plan the event were shut down, whilst the Daily Stormer hate-site was denied service by a number of hosts following an article which attacked Heather Heyer, the activist who was murdered at the rally. It remains questionable whether these activities effectively combat the online presence of extreme-right activists. The German election demonstrates that there remain a large number of alt-right channels on Discord, whilst the Daily Stormer retains an online presence through the dark-net and by hopping domains.

**Ideological Convergence**

We identified the following nexus points that were universally shared across all groups:

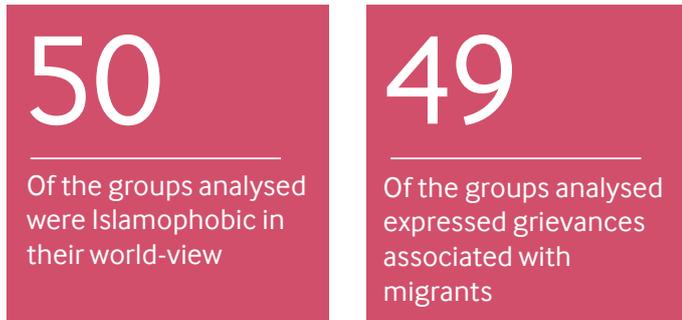
*Grievances:*

–**Migration:** 49 out of the 50 analysed organisations expressed grievances associated with migrants and refugees (e.g. “migrants are not capable of integration”, “young men flooding Europe are a security threat”).

–**Cultural Displacement:** 50 out of the 50 organisations expressed grievances associated with

the disruption of the cultural paradigm of society, (e.g. “an Islamic invasion of the West”, “Muslims destroying European society”).

–**Terrorism:** 47 out of the 50 organisations expressed grievances associated with the threat of terrorism (e.g. “Islamic terrorism will kill us all”, “we need to stop Muslim terrorists”).

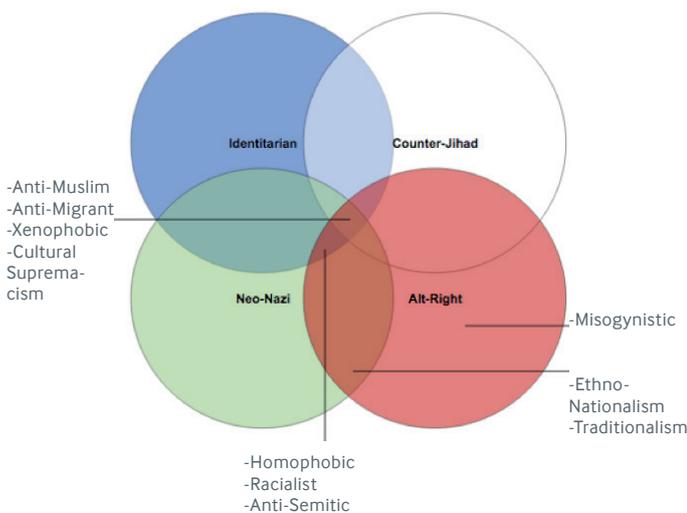


*World-view:*

–**Xenophobic:** All of the 50 groups assessed were xenophobic in their world view (e.g. “Pakistani rapists”, “African terrorists”).

–**Islamophobia:** 50 out of the 50 groups were Islamophobic in their world-view (e.g. “Muslim grooming gangs”, “Islam is a cancer”).

–**Nativist:** 48 out of the 50 groups were nativist in their world-view (e.g. “we have to protect traditional European values from immigrants and cultural Marxists”).



*Figure 15: Ideological Convergence Points of the Extreme Right*

This illustrates how extreme-right groups are

converging to agitate on two of the most pressing domestic and foreign policy issues which are currently facing North America and Europe - terrorism and the migrant crisis – to promote their movements. These grievances are then utilised to promote an ideology which actively targets Muslims and promotes nativism. This would also suggest that the paradigm through which extreme-right groups promote their ideology is increasingly becoming one of culture rather than race.

Donald Trump and mainstream European far-right political parties which we examined here – AfD, Front National, and the Freedom Party of Austria - played on fears of migration and Islam in their election campaigns, whilst avoiding racist and racialist rhetoric associated with the extreme-right. Support for these political movements and their campaigns has therefore provided a nexus point that united fringe groups of different ideological backgrounds and grievance combinations. This has given fringe movements new opportunities to strategically instil their ideologies into the mainstream by building on shared grievances and worldview elements.

Ideological hallmarks traditionally associated with the extreme-right such as anti-Semitism, racialism and white supremacy were only present among half of the 50 examined groups’ officially communicated ideologies. Overt anti-Semitic rhetoric was observed in 26 groups, and racist and racialist elements were found in 25 movements. As open support for these ideological markers tends to come at a high social cost in most Western democracies, groups with views which are overwhelmingly perceived as unpalatable and extremist may be actively seeking to leverage more commonly held grievances to increase their appeal. Their emphasis on anti-Muslim and anti-immigration rhetoric has allowed them to fill the vacuum between traditional white supremacist movements and mainstream political parties.

It should also be noted that a majority of the groups who had been identified using violent action to achieve their aims adopted these ‘traditional extremist’ world-views, and all groups which were classified as terrorist held them, highlighting a potential link between more deeply entrenched extremist views, and violent-extremist action.

Attitudes towards gender and sexuality also provide dividing lines between different extreme-right communities. Anti-LGBTQ sentiment is apparent in neo-Nazi movements and groups which fall under the bracket of the ‘alt-right’. However neo-Nazi movements

tend to be less misogynistic than their alt-right counterparts, whilst 11 out of the 14 alt-right platforms and groups assessed expressed misogynistic attitudes. This ideological tendency can be linked to the advent of the alt-right, which was closely interlinked with the 'men's rights movement' and the gamergate scandal which saw the online harassment of many women in the gaming industry.

Local conspiracy theories are common in counter-jihad movements such as the EDL and PEGIDA, while white supremacist groups tend to adopt global conspiracy theories that often build on local ones. Islamophobic and anti-immigrant groups have repeatedly expressed the belief that local authorities, media outlets and security forces are complicit in the cover up of sex-crimes by Muslim communities. Alt-right and neo-Nazi groups tend to take these conspiracy theories one step further and believe that these crimes are the expression of a global Jewish conspiracy to bring about a white genocide.

### **Tactical Convergence**

Our case studies showed that media stunts such as the Defend Europe and the Charlottesville rally as well as psychological operations such as the German election manipulation campaigns have become instances of extreme right-wing tactical convergence. Our case study results combined with our analysis of activities employed by the 50 groups in our framework illustrates an increasingly pro-active encouragement and instrumentalisation of overlapping tactics to launch joint operations. Those groups which engaged in information operations shared a few converging grievances and world-views. Equally, however, the degree of ideological diversity found among supporters of the Defend Europe mission, the Charlottesville march and the German election manipulation campaigns suggests that increasingly groups may band together for promotional purposes.

There is evidence that groups have overcome ideological differences for the sake of opportunistic collaboration and promotional purposes, as the achievement of common goals comes to the fore. Tactics that seek to instrumentalise traditional and new media such as online activism and media stunts have increasingly been adopted by groups across the ideological spectrum. These activities have therefore brought together groups that would have previously been unlikely to cooperate.

This can be explained by three factors:

–**Visible Successes:** Online activism and information operations render immediate and tangible results that can be seen in both traditional media coverage and social media statistics. These highly visible successes attract new members and gain the support of less extreme movements.

–**Entertainment:** Extreme right-wing influencers have stressed the entertainment value of these novel activities to incentivise participation: The use of gaming apps such as Discord, in-group jokes and memes, cultural references and military vocabulary exemplify this. Campaign and information operation leaders' instructions are almost military in structure: by stating concrete targets, giving precise orders and equipping participants with the 'weapons', these tactics resonate with many young online users looking for a challenge.

–**Anonymity:** The anonymity of obscure online operations has led to a situation where collaboration with more extreme groups in order to discredit, intimidate or bully common political opponents, media stunts comes at little or no social cost.

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## Conclusions

**The extreme right strategically focuses on grievances and goals that unite the international right and allow them to maximise their impact.**

Extreme right-wing movements across the world increasingly exploit the motivational, ideological and tactical convergence of different constituents that are sympathetic to their overall vision. This approach is used to mainstream fringe ideologies by building strategic bridges that connect the entire far-right spectrum ranging from neo-Nazis to mainstream populists. By exploiting synergies, exchanging best practices and encouraging collective learning, the fringes have been able to rapidly expand their sphere of influence, appeal to legitimate social and societal grievances and make efforts to manipulate the mainstream.

**Far-right groups are instrumentalised by extreme-right influencers, as they serve as strategic mouthpieces to mainstream fringe ideologies.**

By scrutinising key events where extreme-right groups globally have collaborated, we have revealed an increasingly connected and self-aware far-right ecosystem. Although different groups appeal to a range of societal and ideological motivations to mobilise and recruit, they are starting to moderate their tone in order to appeal to a broad support-base. This is exemplified by the concerted efforts around the Charlottesville March to 'radicalise the normies', and can also be seen in the Defend Europe mission where white supremacist and ethno-nationalist narratives were repackaged to capitalise on concerns surrounding the migrant crisis.

**Technologically sophisticated and culturally sensitive techniques are used to radicalise the younger generations.** Extreme-right groups are increasingly launching sophisticated and coordinated information operations in attempts to disrupt the democratic process. Here they are realising neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin's desire to 'weaponise internet culture', and are recruiting a range of trolls and content creators who share platforms with the alt-right to their cause, further aiding their radicalisation process by directing them to echo chambers where highly extreme views are held.

**Ideological pragmatism increasingly blurs the lines between traditionally separate movements.**

As these groups continue to converge and cooperate we should maintain an awareness of what connects them and where they differ. Groupings such as 'alt-right', 'alt-light', 'counter-jihadist' and 'neo-Nazi' provide useful classifications here, but they fail to illustrate where groups share common grievances and world-views, and thus may seek to collaborate on actions. Identifying these points of convergence is important as it helps to shine a light on areas where groups may seek to mobilise in the future, and allow for counter-extremism practitioners to prepare strategies to disrupt these movements. Equally, identifying points of divergence may highlight pressure points which can be leveraged to disrupt their actions.

## Recommendations

Our analysis illustrated that the extreme right is currently ahead of the curve on at least three levels:

- The early adoption and effective use of new technologies
- The exploitation of international synergies and tactical convergences
- The weaponsiation of youth culture and strategic communications

In order to provide effective responses which prevent radicalisation, raise awareness of the threat, and engage with the extreme-right it is imperative that

counter-strategies are developed which match the sophistication of the extreme right on a technological, cultural and communications level. Policy makers, technology companies, practitioners and activists need to work closely together to challenge the extreme-right through internationally coordinated, proportionate and effectively targeted counter-measures.

The following recommendations range from required research to suggestions for education programming. In many instances the suggestions are broad and should be adopted by a range of key stakeholders.

What?	How?	Who?
Network Building and Infrastructure	<b>International coalitions of key stakeholders are necessary to match the global threat of the extreme right.</b> Counter-hate efforts need to mobilise across borders to disrupt international online coordination activities which lead to local, offline action. Both policy and civil society-led responses to newly emerging global networks of extreme counter-cultures must be coordinated internationally. Models for coordinated counter-strategies can draw inspiration from existing worldwide initiatives such as the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, led by Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube, which has designated one of its three work streams for building capacity among startups and small technology platforms to prevent their exploitation by terrorist or extremist groups.	Policy Makers / Tech-Sector / Practitioners / Civil-Society
Research and Development	<b>More investment in trend prediction and awareness raising about extreme-right activities are needed.</b> Policymakers need to help researchers and practitioners to step up international collaboration on sharing knowledge and experience about points of ideological and tactical convergence and divergence between these groups. A better understanding of the ecosystems and strategic trajectories of extreme-right networks will be necessary to predict future trends and avoid a time lag in the response to new extremist tactics.	Practitioners
Education and Prevention	<b>Digital literacy programmes can protect young people from extreme-right disinformation and manipulation operations.</b> Policy makers should invest heavily in educational programmes that teach critical thinking skills and digital citizenship. Digital citizenship initiatives and public awareness raising campaigns about the tactics used by the extreme right are needed to help internet users to identify bots, disinformation and manipulation techniques.	Political leaning

<p>Intervention and Counter-speech</p>	<p><b>Counter-speech campaigns that understand the extreme-right ecosystem and counter-culture dynamics are key.</b> Counter-speech measures must go beyond popular social media platforms to penetrate alternative platforms and burst bubbles that have formed in extreme-right echo chambers. Effective campaigns will have to build on a thorough understanding of internet culture, including the extreme-right’s vocabulary, pop culture references, insider jokes and counter-culture dynamics. Counter-communications also need to take the grievances that extreme-right groups tap into seriously, encourage an open debate and offer alternative narratives to the ones provided by extremists.</p>	<p>Practitioners/ Civil-Society</p>
<p>Intervention and Counter-speech</p>	<p><b>Policy makers and practitioners should support credible counter-voices.</b> Future policy should focus on empowering NGOs and activists, and on equipping them with the knowledge and tools to launch campaigns that resonate with their target audiences and are effective in countering online hate. Programmes such as the Online Civil Courage Initiative (OCCI) can be powerful amplifiers for organic grassroots-level efforts aimed at disrupting and challenging the media influence operations launched by extremists.</p>	<p>Policy Makers/Tech Sector</p>

**More advice needed?**

Given the high flexibility the extreme right has demonstrated in adapting to legal and societal changes, we will not outline more specific policy recommendations in this report. The tendency of extreme-right online networks to develop strategies that exploit the loopholes and weaknesses of policy-led

and civil society-led countermeasures could render any publicly shared counter-strategy recommendation ineffective or even counter-productive. If you would like to receive more specific advice or help with the design or implementation of targeted campaigns, educational initiatives, and other counter-measures, please reach out to [info@isdglobal.org](mailto:info@isdglobal.org).

## Endnotes

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- ii. Andrew Anglin, the founder of the neo-Nazi webpage Daily Stormer spoke of a 'Generation Zyklon', in reference to the cyanide-based pesticide Zyklon B which was used in gas chambers during the Holocaust.
- iii. For example the More than a Refugee campaign which saw protracted raids by users of 4chan and Reddit (see [https://www.reddit.com/r/OutOfTheLoop/comments/6if8cr/why\\_is\\_the\\_morethanarefugee\\_youtube\\_spotlight](https://www.reddit.com/r/OutOfTheLoop/comments/6if8cr/why_is_the_morethanarefugee_youtube_spotlight))
- iv. In accordance with Cas Mudde's definition of right-wing extremism, we classify all violent and non-violent movements that exhibit to at least three of the following five features as extreme right: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy.
- v. Examples of this such as the Defend Europe campaign, the Charlottesville rally and the German election disruption efforts will be explored and analysed in this report's case studies.
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- vii. See for example Simon Shuster, 'European Politics are Swinging to the Right', Time (22 September 2016). Available at <http://time.com/4504010/europe-politics-swing-right/> and Audrey Sheehy, 'The Rise of the Far Right', Harvard Political Review (11 February 2017). Available at <http://harvardpolitics.com/world/rise-of-far-right>
- viii. Daniel Koehler, 'Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in Europe: Current Developments and Issues for the Future', Prism, Vol.6, No.2 (July 2016)
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- xi. Angela Nagle, Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan to Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right, (London: Zero Books, 2017)
- xii. Alt-Right Open Intelligence Initiative, Mapping the Alt-Right: The US Alternative Right across the Atlantic, University of Amsterdam (2017). Available at <https://wiki.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/AltRightOpenIntelligenceInitiative>
- xiii. Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online", Data and Society Research Institute (May 2017). Available at [https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety\\_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf](https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf)
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- xv. HM Government, 'The Prevent Duty: Departmental Advice for Schools and Childcare Providers', Department of Education (June 2015). Available at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/439598/prevent-duty-departmental-advice-v6.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/439598/prevent-duty-departmental-advice-v6.pdf)
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- xxxiv. See <https://pastebin.com/eKuavhHu>
- xxxv. See <http://cryptome.org/2012/07/gent-forum-spies.htm>
- xxxvi. Kek is a reference to the fictional alt-right land of Kekistan. The term 'kek' originated as of 'lol' in the multi-player computer game 'World of Warcraft', it is also a frog-headed ancient Egyptian god. In the cult of kek, a satirical religion developed in alt-right forums Kek became the father, Pepe the holy spirit and Trump the son.
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- xxxviii. [https://www.reddit.com/r/The\\_Donald/comments/5fmhp0/this\\_is\\_frauke\\_petry\\_she\\_is\\_hated\\_by\\_cucks\\_in/](https://www.reddit.com/r/The_Donald/comments/5fmhp0/this_is_frauke_petry_she_is_hated_by_cucks_in/)
- xxxix. See [https://www.reddit.com/r/Die\\_Alternative/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Die_Alternative/)
- xl. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYFjRH-vxGg>
- xli. The parody account name is 'Gottkaiser Kurz' (@Gattamellata), <https://twitter.com/Gattamellata>.
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