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The Battle for Bavaria

Online information campaigns in the 2018 Bavarian State Election

Institute for Strategic Dialogue

About this paper

This report presents the findings of a project investigating malign social media campaigns launched during the 2018 Bavarian state election. The research was conducted in a context where the norms guiding what is legitimate and illegitimate in political campaigning have been thrown into question. A host of new online technologies and tools have changed the nature of democratic electoral contests. ISD's research interrogates these new grey zones of influence in the Bavarian context, unearthing a suite of tactics deployed by international extremist networks to sway electoral audiences or to harass, threaten or undermine their opponents.

A combination of social media analysis, network mapping and investigative reporting demonstrate the international far-right community mobilising in this local election, primarily in favour of the AfD. The election also revealed new transnational far-right communities emerging in Europe and active in the Bavarian election, spreading conspiracy theories and disinformation in tandem with transatlantic allies. The report provides recommendations for steps that German and international policymakers, technology companies, media and civil society can take to build a proportional and effective response to malign influence efforts. The project was supported by the Foundation Open Society Institute, in cooperation with the OSIFE of the Open Society Foundations.

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1. Executive Summary

The norms that have guided what is legitimate and illegitimate in the context of democratic political campaigning have been thrown into question by the emergence of a host of new technologies and tools that make it possible to target voters and amplify messages with an altogether new scale and sophistication. An entire ecosystem of technology products has provided state and non-state actors alike with new levers of influence online and new forms of anonymity with which to cover their tracks. Elections, referendums, terrorist attacks, political scandals – all have emerged as rallying points for actors at home or abroad to deploy tactics that sow division, muddy the availability of accurate, transparent information, subvert democratic processes and spread exclusionary and extreme political agendas. Governments, electoral commissions and technology companies are all grappling with the implications of these new developments, while regulation has not yet caught up with the rapid advance of advertising, amplification and audience segmentation technologies.

A set of new practices in communication and political mobilisation is emerging far quicker than the framework for understanding or regulating it. Beyond the tactical changes enabled by particular technology products – bots or targeted advertising, for example – the social media ecosystem has revolutionised politicians' abilities to communicate with their constituents, rendering the political information space unrecognisable from the pre-internet age. However, the vast and swift potential reach afforded by social media has also meant that technology platforms have become a central part of the modern information warfare playbook, used for deceit, harm and the distortion of democracy. Some of these activities cross existing legal thresholds, such as online hate speech or harassment and trolling in many European countries. Some are newly regulated, such as disinformation identified during election periods in France. But most sit in a grey zone of acceptability – deceptive or distortive, they range from the production of disinformation to the micro-targeting of anonymous political advertising.

In this report, we examine what we have described as malign influence campaigns. In an area still sorely lacking clear legal boundaries or norms, definitions remain fluid and contested. Questions over intention and outcome matter deeply in delineating malign uses of technology from legitimate ones, yet these are often the hardest and most politically charged differences to adjudicate. The term malign influence is used here to describe campaigns that use online products, media systems or platforms with the outcome of deceiving audiences, distorting the available flow of information or conducting illegal activities. We see these malign campaigns waged frequently in the promotion of hate speech, hate crime, extremist recruitment or foreign influence efforts in elections, though similar tactics are used across an even broader range of potential harms online. Deceptive tactics include activities such as the creation or promotion of disinformation or the use of sockpuppet accounts. Distortive tactics include the use of bots or bot networks to disproportionately amplify content in online networks. Illegal activities differ across national legal contexts, but can include hate speech, harassment, defamation, or the provision of foreign in-kind support to domestic political parties in elections.

Following the emergence of foreign state influence operations across a series of recent elections, some progress is being made in mapping the tactics at play in this new context. From India to Brazil, researchers, governments and technology companies have begun to compile evidence detailing the concerted and often sophisticated attempts made by state or state-sponsored actors to dupe audiences, often promoting intolerance and outrage online through fake or anonymous accounts. Yet we remain largely in the dark about the scale and impact of these efforts on our democratic processes and information networks. Moreover, while attention has focused largely on the activities of state actors, notably the Kremlin and the emergent digital dealings of the Iranian state, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish foreign and domestic activity in the online world. Though elections are now watched with a nervous eye, less attention is being paid to the broad array of ongoing influence activities of non-state groups that are directed at promoting extremist agendas, undermining inter-community security and encouraging nationalist, exclusionary and closed societies.

It is against this ever more complex backdrop that the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) conducted research on social media influence activities in the 2018 Bavarian

state election. The Bavarian election, held every five years, has rarely drawn a great deal of attention on the international stage. Yet in October 2018 this regional election became a hotspot for activities directed by online networks connected to the US and pan-European far-right. The kind of international efforts intended to scare, sway or seduce voters seen in the US, Mexican, French and German elections were in full swing in this crucial corner of Germany in October 2018.

Foreign interest in the Bavarian election must be understood in the context of the relevant political tensions at the local, national and international levels. Bavaria has long been a bastion of conservative politics in Germany under the continuous leadership of the Christian Social Union (CSU) for 60 years. But the CSU's involvement in a federal governing coalition that is increasingly under pressure set the stage for a redrawing of the political map in Bavaria. Criticism of Merkel's governing coalition has been accompanied in Germany by steadily increasing support for the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD)[1], which was seeking representation for the first time in Bavaria[2]. Beyond German borders, far-right activists have been proactively mobilising support for parties and candidates sympathetic to their cause, helping to usher in a host of political opponents to Merkel's policies on the European stage.

Merkel's migration policy dominated political discourse in the months running up to the election. Events in Chemnitz set the stage for a tense climate of discussion around migration, crime and identity politics: the arrest of Iraqi and Syrian suspects for the stabbing of a Cuban–German man became the focal point for the organised mobilisation of far-right and anti-migration street protests in August and September 2018[3]. In a September poll asking Bavarian voters about the most important political issues in their region, 44% considered "refugees, migration and asylum policy" to be the most urgent political issue of the day, double the response level for the next most important issue.[4] However, in addition to the policy agenda around migration, a Tagesschau poll conducted in October 2018 points to the importance of the fraught relationship between the Bavarian local CSU leadership and the Merkel government in Berlin. When asked what were 'very important issues' before the election, 21% of respondents replied, "How the federal government of CDU [Christian Democratic Union], CSU and SPD [Social Democratic Party] is working together."[5]

The complexity of these local, national and international dynamics surrounding the state election provide critical context for understanding the regional election's importance to the international far-right community that mobilised essentially in favour of the AfD in October 2018.

What did we find?

- The research identified online tactics used by interconnected networks of international and domestic far-right activists to influence the Bavarian state election, largely directed towards the promotion of the AfD and the denigration of their opponents. Co-ordinated campaigns smeared opposition parties or candidates and mobilised a host of international networks to amplify pro-AfD messaging and undermine trust in the election process.

- We saw evidence that international actors were co-ordinating these efforts, using English language instruction manuals, meme banks and targeted trolling hit-lists. The playbook of tactics attempted in the election matched that seen in previous ISD research on national elections in Italy, Sweden and Germany.

- We came across new international far-right networks that are active in Germany, promoting the far-right's political and cultural agenda and attacking the AfD's political opponents. The US-based conspiracy network QAnon has emboldened a German version, linking violent and anti-democratic conspiracy theories across the Atlantic.

- There is a suite of new technology platforms used to mobilise and co-ordinate the far-right's efforts in Germany, which did not exist during the German federal election 2017. This 'alt tech' space includes technology platforms purpose-built for far-right communications, as well as small platforms hijacked by far-right groups. Currently, these are safe havens for international extremist mobilisation online. Malign influence campaigns often go beyond the most heavily publicised issues seen on sites such as Facebook, with activities identified on a suite of smaller sites and applications, including chat

forums, video hosting platforms and messaging apps. Our research determined that various factions within the German far-right – from supporters of the Identitarian movement through to white nationalists and neo-Nazis – now use a multiplicity of emerging platforms. To date, in comparison with far-right movements in the US and UK, use of these 'alt tech' sites does not appear to have gained as much traction in German circles, with the more traditional social media and image board sites remaining of critical strategic importance for their campaigning and mobilisation.

- Monitoring of social media content determined that the Russian state-funded media outlet Sputnik Deutschland provided a disproportionate platform for the AfD compared with other political parties during the election period. Yet, for the most part, Russian state-funded media focused on national and international issues only indirectly tied to the election, promoting one-sided but not false articles on issues such as migration, foreign policy and the war in Syria. This mirrors analysis of RT Deutsch and Sputnik Deutschland conducted in the 2017 German federal election.[6] Foreign states did not appear to be the most intent on interfering in the Bavarian context, with non-state networks of international far-right activists far more active in using all the tools at their disposal online to manipulate voters, media and to undermine trust in the election itself.

What does it mean?

The findings suggest that regional elections have made their way firmly onto the target list of state and non-state actors who have interests in co-opting foreign political processes. Both the international far-right and the Kremlin-sponsored media machine were active in the Bavarian case, each engaged in promoting communications in Germany to suit their own long-term agendas. While the state and non-state aspects of this challenge are distinct, the two are mutually connected by a shared interest in seeding and encouraging societal polarisation in strategically important European democracies, and often using similar online platforms and products. The election struck a blow to the CSU's long-standing political dominance, shattering the voting patterns tied to traditional political parties as a host of smaller, newer parties on all sides of the political spectrum emerged. The vote share of the centre-left SPD halved, while that of the environmentalist Green Party almost doubled. On the right there were significant gains for not only the AfD, but also the Bavarian Free Voters, a regional protest party now set to form a coalition government with the CSU. The CSU's own attempts to distance the party from Merkel's migration policy, with a drift towards a harder-line policy on immigration and identity politics, did not bear fruit, with the party losing voters to parties on both the left and right.[7]

> "There is a suite of new technology platforms used to mobilise and co-ordinate the far-right's efforts"

The election was a prime example of a wider phenomenon of political fragmentation seen across Europe over the past two years. Often narrowly labelled as a populist surge, this pattern represents a tectonic shift in the European political landscape. The growth of the far-right in Europe, and of sympathetic right-wing populist parties, is just one symptom of a much broader trend of political and cultural polarisation emerging across a host of core issue areas, hyper-charged by online campaigns that are intended to dupe and divide European audiences. As was the case after the Swedish election of September 2018, the increased support for small, previously fringe parties has seen them emerge as king-makers in newly fragmented political landscapes. Both the Sweden Democrats and the Bavarian Free Voters stand to wield disproportionate influence through their potential role in consolidating right-wing coalitions with centre-right parties.

It should be noted that limited access to social media data, outside Twitter, renders a complete assessment of the impact of these campaigns impossible, beyond

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somewhat rudimentary assessments of reach and engagement. Case studies do however demonstrate the vigour and impact of trolling or harassment of politicians, activists or journalists, and the reach of co-ordinated or deceptive meme campaigns organised by the international far-right can tell us something about their ability to build an audience in foreign countries. However, to answer the question of whether such campaigns changed voting decisions would require a much more sophisticated set of tools and methodologies, which have not as yet been deployed to that end.[8]

Nonetheless, the broader strategy of these international movements – to amplify and mainstream their political and cultural objectives – has already borne fruit. To some extent, their political objectives have already been realised across European democracies, where increased support for far-right populist parties is evidenced by their electoral successes across France, Sweden, Germany, Italy, Hungary and Austria over the past two years. The international far-right's online campaigns to limit or prevent migration into Europe have picked up mainstream traction, including the concerted and ongoing campaign to oppose the UN Global Migration Compact. Focusing too intricately on the impact of individual communications tactics misses the broader threat that is rapidly emerging, of a communications landscape and political climate welcoming to extremist viewpoints and weakening support for the protection of individual human rights across Europe.

What needs to happen in response?

While many of the influence efforts identified in the Bavarian election of 2018 used trolling, disinformation and distortion to promote the AfD and its candidates, other elections have witnessed the use of Russian-linked troll accounts or Kremlin-sponsored media to promote leftist candidates or movements as well as those on the right, for instance, imitating supporters of Black Lives Matter in the US[9] or praising Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France.[10] Any attempt to challenge the manipulation of online platforms for distortive, deceptive or illegal activity should seek to deal with the mechanisms of influence, rather than focus solely on individual pieces of content or communication. The scale of the issue demands a more holistic and sustainable response. It will be the standards and norms that emerge of political campaigning and online transparency writ large that will shape the kind of elections, societies and information ecosystems that we occupy in years to come.

The recommendations in this paper set out some suggested next steps in tackling the opaque field of online communications campaigns as we enter a year of elections in 2019 that are sure to be put to the test. The recommendations section of the report explores the following ideas:

1. **Transparent technologies: in order to protect fundamental rights, security and democracy, transparency should be at the heart of policy responses to deceptive and distortive uses of social media platforms, both within and outside election contexts.**

- Audiences are often unaware of why they are seeing the content that they are served online. Algorithms control what news, friends or media content is recommended to users, without any oversight of those models. Our ability to understand threats to free expression, security and democracy are all hindered by the opaqueness of technologies designed for advertising purposes to keep a user's attention for as long as possible, which essentially distort the level playing field of free speech by amplifying or driving a user to certain messaging or enabling the micro-targeting of content. While a culture of responsible development that seeks

to protect the users of products has emerged in physical engineering, we have not yet seen similar developments in the world of software engineering and technological development.

- Policymakers and legislators should consider ways in which to encourage algorithmic accountability in the design of new and existing technologies in order to help prevent their manipulation by actors seeking to do harm. Both security and free expression could be better protected by focusing on better understanding and therefore better responding to the technological means by which content is 'inorganically' amplified, recommended or filtered beyond the user's own control.

- Progress has been made in issues surrounding the transparency of political advertising over the past year, including through Facebook's new political advertising policy and public database. Yet advertising constitutes only one element of the playbook of influence campaigns directed by extremist groups online: attention should be paid in parallel to promoting transparency for users interacting with and using a wide range of products on online platforms.

2. A strategic framework for responding to malign influence online: instead of tactical barricades, democratic governments should develop coherent national or international strategies to set the legal limits for political campaigning in the age of social media.

- Governments across the globe have started to develop legislation on a raft of issues relating to disinformation, hate speech and extremist content. According to research by the Oxford Internet Institute, at least 43 countries have proposed or implemented regulations relevant to online influence campaigns.[11] Legislators in California and Ireland have drafted bills to penalise the use of bots in political campaigns online.[12] The Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz (Network Enforcement Act) in Germany places legal obligations on large social media platforms active in Germany to remove obviously illegal content within a 24-hour timeframe on receiving a complaint.[13]

Yet government responses across the board remain piecemeal and often rely on overly broad definitions that threaten to infringe on legitimate speech and behaviour online. Technology companies will struggle to create or amend products to prevent election interference without the establishment of clear legal guidelines by governments. A broader international conversation regarding the new norms of legitimate and illegitimate campaigning online is needed to help comprehensively challenge malicious uses of communications technology now and in the future, as well as to avoid hasty reactions that could infringe on human rights.

- The international community must work more cooperatively to start developing a shared understanding and response to what we have described as malign influence campaigns online. This range of distortive, deceptive or illegal uses of online technology and communications that is used to promote hate, extremism and to undermine democratic processes requires a full spectrum of responses. This might include legal regulation at its sharpest tip, but will also warrant support for civic mobilisation and education programming. The lines between legitimate and illegitimate will remain subjective in an area fraught with definitional challenges. As such, human rights and transparency must be prioritised across any framework for international responses to these kind of threats.

- Electoral commissions require rejuvenation to protect elections in the 21st century, and should

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countries have proposed or implemented regulations relevant to online influence campaigns

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hours within which large social media platforms active in Germany have to remove obviously illegal content after receiving a complaint

> Experts, policymakers and technologists need to work together to design ways to respond to the far-right's technological ecosystem

play a leading role in defining and protecting a new norm in digital political campaigning, with transparency at its centre. Legislators in the US, France and the UK have drafted proposals for the regulation of online campaigns, while social media companies have begun to develop their own proposals to meet the challenges, some of which have been discussed in this report. But election commissions will require a different set of capabilities and tools from those they traditionally rely on for their work to identify, understand and counter new kinds of threat to the integrity of electoral processes. Without a real-time online analysis capability, election commissions will struggle to meet the demands that the digital world brings to bear on their responsibilities. This kind of capability could take the form of co-operating with independent academics or researchers, or building analysis teams to ensure compliance with election law online and offline.

3. **The new extremist online ecosystem: experts, policymakers and technologists need to work together to design ways to respond to the far-right's technological ecosystem. We have seen the development of a set of norms for responding to extremist content on the largest social media platforms – Facebook, YouTube, Twitter. These combine a spectrum of content removal approaches, demonetisation and counter-narrative communications. These types of responses do not necessarily map well onto the new kinds of technology platforms used by the far-right, where we have increasingly seen a migration of activity to platforms that are smaller, often unmoderated and sometimes purpose-built, such as Gab, Wrongthink, Voat or Bitchute. Many of these sites do not have the resources or the will to moderate content to prevent the use of their platforms for hate or extremist mobilisation. Yet these spaces cannot be left unchallenged.**

- Research: better, consistent research is required to understand the range of technology platforms included in this new extremist ecosystem – their distinct uses, structures, audiences, any existing mechanisms to deal with malign information campaigns and the extent of their apparent willingness to co-operate with civil society in dealing with hateful, extremist or disinformation content.

- Collaboration on response: practitioners from different sectors, including civil society organisations, policymakers and technologists, should collaborate to develop new ideas for regulatory, market-driven, technological, communications or disruption-based responses that suit the specifics of each platform. For platforms that do not demonstrate a willingness to co-operate with other actors in dealing with the presence of disinformation, hate speech or extremist content on their sites, a different set of responses is required from the user-based flagging and artificial intelligence-driven content moderation adopted by Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Response in these cases may require proactive communication efforts, tailored to the different subcultures of the far-right that exist on different internet platforms.

4. **Research on the evolving threat: the EU has provided support for infrastructure and expertise on election monitoring from external threats such as Kremlin information warfare. There is now an urgent need to support electoral interference analysis of elections taking place within the EU and to incorporate a wider range of malign influence campaigns online.**

- There is a pressing need for research on information manipulation aimed at attacking electoral integrity from within Europe's own borders. State actors attempting to influence elections do not work in a vacuum, and thrive in environments where domestic extremist groups provide fertile content, networks and audiences for disinformation campaigns.

- Trends in the manipulation of information are constantly evolving. Governments and foundations should support ongoing, consistent analysis of these patterns in digital deception, instead of promoting a singular focus on specific election contexts. This longitudinal research could incorporate efforts to analyse broadcast media and social media together, seeking to understand the ecosystem of influence targeting specific audiences in a more comprehensive way.

5. **Proactive democratic integrity through digital citizenship: governments, including the German federal and state governments, should seek to build resilience in young generations to deceptive and distortive uses of technology, protecting them from a spectrum of potential harms online such as disinformation, hate speech, harassment, exploitation, cyberbullying and grooming.**

- Young people are increasingly growing up online, yet familiarity does not guarantee digital literacy. In order to build resilience among young people growing up in a world of increasing technological sophistication, governments and technology companies should support the development of programmes that go beyond online safeguarding. Such programmes should not only attempt to promote a strong understanding of the broad spectrum of harms and risks that online users are exposed to, but also equip young people with the capacities they need to push back against them.

6. **Regional and local infrastructure to protect regional elections: governments should support regional and local authorities in developing the infrastructure and expertise to deal with threats to local electoral processes and to promote free and open political debate among their communities online and offline.**

- This should include giving increased support for regional and city authorities to understand the available modes of monitoring local threats to elections or public safety, as well as equipping cities with the tools to respond adequately if they find themselves targeted online or offline.

> "There is a pressing need for research on information manipulation aimed at attacking electoral integrity"

2. Glossary

Bot
A social media account run by a piece of software instead of a human being.

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

Disinformation
Messages or media that intentionally provide false information.

Extremism
ISD defines extremism as:

> The advocacy of a system of belief that posits the superiority and dominance of one 'in-group' over all 'out-groups', propagating a dehumanising 'othering' mind-set that is antithetical to the universal application of human rights. Extremist groups advocate, through explicit and more subtle means, a systemic change in society that reflects their world view.

Far-right
Groups or individuals that exhibit at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy. This definition is based on the criteria outlined by far-right expert Cas Mudde, associate professor at the University of Georgia and researcher at Oslo University's Centre for Research on Extremism.14

Hate speech
Speech that directly attacks people on the basis of their attributes – race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, caste, sex, gender or gender identity, or serious disabilities or diseases. In some countries the law identifies protected groups according to their characteristics.

Identitarianism
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.

Malign influence campaign
In this report, the term is used to describe a campaign using online products, media systems or platforms to deceive audiences, to distort the available flow of information or to conduct illegal activities, with the aim of promoting hate speech, hate crime, extremism, or foreign influence in elections. 'Deceptive' tactics eluded to in this definition might include: the creation or promotion of disinformation or the use of sockpuppet accounts. 'Distortive' tactics eluded to in this definition might include: the use of bots or bot networks to disproportionately amplify content in online networks.15 'Illegal' activities eluded to in this definition differ across national legal contexts, and can include: hate speech, harassment, defamation, or the provision of foreign in-kind support to domestic political parties in elections.

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.

Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz (Network Enforcement Act)
The Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) laws place a legal obligation on large social media platforms active in Germany to remove obviously illegal content within a 24-hour timeframe on receiving a complaint. For systemic non-compliance with the law, companies face fines of up to €50 million.

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 co-ordinate on these pages before running information operations.

Populism
The expert Cas Mudde defines this as follows:

> Populism is an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', and argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.[16]

Red pilling
In far-right networks, red pilling is commonly used as a metaphorical description of attitudinal change that leads to the acceptance of what are described by such groups as free-thinking ideologies, whose advocates reject the apparent ignorance and comfort of conventional world views. The term is a reference to the Matrix film trilogy, where individuals consume a 'red pill' to no longer live in an illusion of ignorance and comfort ('blue pill'). The term has become a euphemism for far-right online recruitment tactics, used to win over new supporters, where the consumption of a red pill (information pertinent to far-right ideology) causes the world view of individuals to change substantively.

3. Introduction

In 2018, election integrity continues to be under threat across democratic societies. Since revelations about the Russian Internet Research Agency's social media activities in the run-up to the US presidential election of 2016 began to emerge, research organisations, government committees and journalists have scrambled to provide evidence, sewing together a picture of state and non-state networks that use social media and internet platforms to undermine the transparency and credibility of information and electoral processes. Disinformation and 'junk news' have been shown to proliferate throughout national election and referendum campaigns. Cyber-hacks and respective leaks have been used to target individual political candidates and parties, alongside smear campaigns and troll armies.

How far are these same tools weaponised to affect regional or local elections? To date, there has been little to no research examining the resilience of regional and local election processes and audiences to this range of online tactics. ISD sought to answer this question in the context of the Bavarian state election of October 2018, analysing online information ecosystems to understand whether international or domestic actors were exploiting technology platforms to misinform, mislead or manipulate Bavarians in the run-up to or wake of the election.

The Bavarian Context

The 2018 Bavarian state election took place on 14 October 2018 to elect the 180 members of the Landtag of Bavaria. The parties of the federal government grand coalition, the Christian Social Union (CSU – sister party of CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), suffered significant losses in the final result, with each losing more than 10 percentage points on their 2013 results. The Alternative for Germany (AfD), the right-wing populist party competing for the first time in Bavaria, made large gains to win 10.2% of the vote. The left-leaning environmentalist Green Party gained 8.9% to finish as the second strongest party with 17.6% of the vote, and the non-affiliated group the Bavarian Free Voters finished third (11.6%). The CSU won the most votes (37.2%). The results revealed a fragmented citizenry, rejecting the long-standing dominance of the CSU and SPD in Bavarian politics.[17] While the results marked a significant turning point in Bavarian politics, shifts in sentiment were not completely unforeseen: in 2008, the CSU failed to win a majority of seats in Bavaria for the first time in 46 years.[18]

As a long-term conservative stronghold and economic powerhouse in Germany, Bavaria holds a uniquely powerful position in the national political picture. As part of Merkel's federal coalition, the CSU's position running into the election became increasingly fragile as attacks on Merkel and her government continued to build in the media and within the Bundestag. ISD's analysis confirmed that discussions around the election in Bavaria were dominated by federal political concerns, not local ones, with the debate over the coalition's effectiveness notably pertinent in social media discourse and broadcast media coverage of the election. Coverage focused on issues around the government's handling of migration and the scandal surrounding Hans-Georg Maaßen, in which Maaßen was removed as head of Germany's domestic intelligence agency after accusations that his comments about the Chemnitz protests supported far-right groups' interpretations of the event.[19]

International Influences in Elections

Research into the Bavarian election of 2018 revealed a potent cocktail of disinformation, hate speech and harassment. ISD has identified all of these elements in examinations of previous national election campaigns, including the Swedish, German and Italian elections of 2017 and 2018. In the same month that Bavarians went to the polls, the US Midterm Election campaigns were in full swing on the other side of the Atlantic. Battles for Senate, House and Governor positions were fiercely contended in an environment filled with 'junk news', defined by the Oxford Internet Institute within a framework of professionalism, style, credibility, bias and counterfeit.[20]

Kremlin-sponsored media outlets active in Europe, including RT, Sputnik News and their affiliates, have been involved in attempts in Europe and the US to support political parties and candidates conducive to Russian state interests.[21] ISD's analysis of RT Deutsch and Sputnik Deutschland output in the German federal election of 2017 demonstrated this pattern through its monitoring of Sputnik Deutschland in particular, but this is far from the only example. Online militia of non-affiliated troll accounts and fake profiles have

been identified as active in international election and referendum contexts, many linked back to a St Petersburg-based organisation, the Internet Research Agency, as well as networks linked to other states, including Iran.[22]

In the Bavarian context, RT Deutsch, Redfish and In the Now all provided examples of Kremlin-backed media channels promoting divisive and outrage-inducing content in German and English, most of which never cross the threshold into disinformation or what we might label as deceptive, distortive or malign influence attempts. The content of this spectrum of foreign-language Kremlin-funded media, playing to both left and right-wing talking points,[23] was most often not directed at supporting anyone, but at "dividing everyone".[24] Sputnik Deutschland provides a slight outlier, however, through its provision of a disproportionate volume of coverage for the AfD in the run-up to the Bavarian election online. ISD's analysis of Sputnik and RT content in Germany can be found later in this report; it shows that Sputnik's German outlet provided a greater proportion of its coverage to the AfD than to any of the other parties competing for the vote in the two weeks before the Bavarian election. A careful and consistent analysis of the different elements of Kremlin foreign media and social media strategies is critical in order to avoid creating simplistic narratives of there being Russian influence in elections and therefore helping to mount appropriate and effective responses.[25] Foreign states did not appear to be the most intent on interfering in the Bavarian context, with non-state networks of international far-right activists far more active in using all the tools at their disposal online to manipulate voters, media and to undermine trust in the election itself.

The Far-right and the German Online Ecosystem

In Germany, far-right online networks and troll armies are particularly sophisticated and have a track record of election interference campaigns. In autumn 2017, the operations launched by the trolling armies Reconquista Germanica and Infokrieg arguably helped to shift the online climate and political discourse on Twitter in the run-up to the federal election, with seven of the hashtags explicitly pushed by members of the Reconquista Germanica reaching the top 20 trending hashtags in Germany two weeks before the election. Thousands of activists created fake accounts and agreed on times and hashtags for their campaigns to trick the algorithms and catapult their themes into the top trends on social media.[26]

In 2018, the landscape of the far-right online in Germany has changed, in part through the introduction of the Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz (NetzDG), the Network Enforcement Act, passed in summer 2017.[27] The introduction of the legislation is one of the biggest steps taken in intermediary liability law in recent years, intended to make illegal hate speech content less accessible to German social media users and the largest social media platforms a hostile environment for such activity by imposing fines on them if there is a systematic failure to remove specifically flagged content within 24 hours of it being reported. Proponents and critics of the law continue to debate its efficacy, with no comprehensive research yet conducted on the overall impact of the law on the prevalence or accessibility of hate speech or extremist content on German social media. Many human rights groups have criticised the law for encouraging companies to over-block content out of concern for financial penalties and for encouraging private-sector companies to make decisions on the legality of content.[28]

Large social media companies such as Facebook and YouTube have had to adapt their content moderation processes in order to deal with the new legislation. Transparency reports specific to NetzDG requests

> "In Germany, far-right online networks and troll armies are particularly sophisticated and have a track record of election interference campaigns"

for content removal from these large technology companies have provided some sense of the scale of content moderation that has been compelled by the new law,[29] but there remains a serious dearth of accessible data or research to help policymakers or human rights groups understand the impact of the changes on the availability of illegal content online or the potential side-effects for legal expression.

The German online ecosystem has also witnessed the emergence of civic counter-trolling initiatives such as Reconquista Internet, a German online community designed to counter hate speech. The network was established in the wake of a show by German comedian Jan Böhmermann, in which he called for a counter troll army to oppose Reconquista Germanica, the online trolling group active in the 2017 federal election in Germany. The Reconquista Internet community now measures over 60,000 people, though some of the group's counter-tactics remain controversial.[30] The number of trolls active in the Reconquista Germanica group itself has indeed dropped from 7,000 to 300 people, though such changes cannot be solely linked to the counter-efforts of Reconquista Internet.

While this particular trolling group appears to have lost its share of voice online, loose networks of far-right activists have continued to form across Telegram, Discord and YouTube, and on image boards. Brand-cleansed versions of these networks still use larger platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to promote far-right content and influencers to broader audiences, often carefully treading the line to avoid violations of company terms of service concerning hate speech or extremist content.

4. Key Findings

Key Finding 1: The International Far-Right's Election Playbook is in Full Swing in Bavaria

ISD identified four tactics deployed by the international and German far-right online in the Bavarian election 2018, which had previously been identified in ISD research conducted in national elections across Europe. Since the 2016 US election, the international alt-right has developed and refined its playbook for online influence campaigns. We observed far-right actors mobilise in the national elections in France and Germany in 2017 and Italy in 2018 to shift the attitudes of voters in favour of far-right and right-wing populist parties by using psy-ops-style campaigning techniques.[31]

In the weeks preceding the Bavarian state election, we identified attempts to galvanise users from across the world to participate in co-ordinated online campaigns to boost pro-AfD content, discredit centrist and left-wing parties, and intimidate journalists from media outlets unsympathetic to the far-right. This evidence points to the continued roll-out of a playbook of election influence efforts by international far-right activists, almost always co-ordinating in English language across these different elections and using a mixture of established and new technology platforms to communicate, co-ordinate and distribute their campaign materials.

4chan as a Mobilisation Point for Meme Warfare and Election Intimidation Campaigns

On 4chan's Kraut/pol/[32], Germany's equivalent of the alt-right /pol board, readers were encouraged in English to help boost AfD Bavaria and Hesse campaigns. Following a familiar pattern, the thread calls on its readers to "Create memes & Spread memes on social media. Join at least one of the following: AfD, IB [the Identitarian Movement], Einprozent to counter subversion. Get fit & stay well hydrated. Spread flyers and stickers in your city". The thread uses the alt-right's tactical playbook, with terms such as 'memetic warfare' and 'redpilling'. It includes links to memes collections, pieces of disinformation and misleading statistics, AfD campaign materials and far-right YouTube channels. The 4chan thread also links to a Pastebin document, which contains more detailed instructions in English on how to support the AfD state election campaigns on social media.[33]

Activists seeking to influence the outcome of the Bavarian state election used the alt-right's tactical playbook and translated social media subversion instructions into German, including guides on how to create bots and fake accounts. They also repurposed visual materials such as anti-establishment memes and adopted the vocabulary of the alt-right, including terms like 'memetic warfare', 'redpilling' and 'triggering'. The 4chan board on the Bavarian election also linked to memes collections, pieces of disinformation and misleading statistics, AfD campaign materials and far-right YouTube channels. A separate Pastebin document called 'AfD party program – list of contents' provided AfD party lines that had been translated into English. Another Pastebin document called 'Kraut/pol/& AfD General OP' gave detailed instructions in English on how to support the AfD on social media.

Figure 1 Example of a 4chan threat calling to boost AfD Bavaria and Hesse campaigns

Figure 2 Detailed instructions for different far-right activism roles (to boost AfD campaigns in Bavaria and Hesse) on Pastebin

ISD identified meme databanks that were created for the international far-right's pro-AfD campaigning efforts (Figures 1 and 2). While some memes used symbols of the American alt-right like Pepe the Frog shown supporting glorified AfD politicians, others were discrediting other political parties. Many of the visual contents contained racist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic elements.

International Far-Right Mobilising Harassment Campaigns Online

From 4chan Kraut/pol/ board and other online hubs of far-right communication, such as closed Discord channels, international and German far-right activists co-ordinated online harassment campaigns to target individuals. These targets included candidates from centrist and leftist political parties, journalists[34] and social equality and anti-racism activists. This tactic may be designed to intimidate opponents of the far-right, to discourage them from speaking out against the far-right, and to showcase the apparent power and reach of the far-right's online activist community.

Target 1: Activists

One example of this tactic can be seen on the 4chan Kraut/pol/ website, where English language activists call on the group's members to attack campaigns mounted by various political opponents of the AfD.[35] Among the declared 'targets of opportunity' for their 'memewar' is the German anti-racist YouTuber Tarik Tesfu. Users shared a link to his video, Tarik's AfD-Krise,[36] which was published on 23 May 2018 (Figure 3). The video became the target of a YouTube raid and hate campaign in the wake of the 4chan instructions being posted. The video received 899 dislikes (as opposed to 202 likes) and its comment thread hosts a wave of hateful comments. Among the most uprated posts in the comment section are openly racist and anti-LGBT comments, such as: "Mulatte, IQ von 85, erklärt einiges" ("Mulatto, IQ of 85, explains a lot"), "Warum hab ich bei dem Satz 'Was für ein brauner Bullshit' an Tarik denken müssen?" ("Why did the sentence 'what a brown bullshit' make me think of Tarik?") and "Wegen dir wähle ich AfD du Schwulette" ("Due to you faggot I'm voting AfD"). Moreover, two YouTube videos were created to directly criticise and mock the activist. These videos do not promote violence or include extremist content, but host comment threads that include hate speech against migrants and ethnic minorities.[37]

> "International and German far-right activists co-ordinated online harassment campaigns to target individuals"

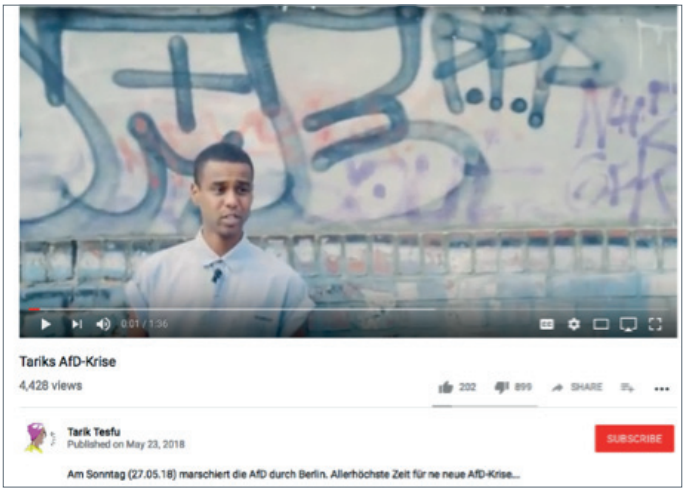


Figure 3 Target of Opportunity – Tesfu's video Tarik's AfD-Krise on YouTube, published on 23 May 2018

Following the Green Party's increased share of support in polls running up to the election on 14 October, and its strong showing in the election itself, it emerged as a target for reputational smear campaigns and trolling by far-right online media outlets, blogs and international far-right activists on chat forums and large social media platforms (Figures 4 and 5). Individual Green Party candidates were singled out as the subjects of the far-right's outrage, with several cases of harassment and defamation identified in the campaign period. An example of an online personal attack was levelled at Green Party candidate Sebastian Müller, who called for a protest against the AfD for their apparent exploitation of a group rape incident,[38] and was later attacked on YouTube and media sites sympathetic to anti-Islam ideas, such as Philosophia Perennis, for

apparent "insensitivity" towards the "victims of mass immigration in Germany... which suffer the most from the Islamisation of our country, which is inseparable from immigration".[39]

Green Party candidate Katharina Schulze was arguably the target of the most consistent attacks from the international far-right. On 4chan, the trolling of Schulze included requests to use memewar against the candidate, calls to 'find dirt' to discredit her, insults, defamation and even calls for sexual violence and rape (Figures 6 and 7).[42] There were memes and altered photos of the candidate, showing her happily giving the middle finger or even giving a Hitler salute. The caption of this final meme is, "Schulze declares Machtergreifung [seizure of power] at election party." Five anti-Schulze videos were identified on YouTube, all posted by accounts demonstrating consistent support for far-right or right-wing populist influencers in Germany and abroad, including supporters of the AfD and Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, among others.[43]

It was not only the Green Party that became a target of smear campaigns and troll attacks during the election. On 4chan, the international far-right community engaged in a specific campaign called 'Psy-Op: SPD jetzt Vollgas geben' ('Psy-Op: Grilling SPD'). Activists were provided with an arsenal of photo-shopped and edited campaign posters from SPD and were encouraged to upload their own versions to smear, discredit and ridicule SPD on larger social media sites (Figure 8). Many examples were also created and provided to discredit CDU and Die Linke.

As explored in detail below, these harassment tactics were often co-ordinated, deployed and promoted across a newly broad range of online platforms, apps and blogs in the Bavarian 2018 election. The nature of use of some of these new and emerging platforms is discussed in Finding 2.

Figure 4 (left) 'Our Vision for Bavaria'– fake, satirical Green Party campaign poster smearing the Greens.[40] **Figure 5** (right) Fake, satirical Green Party campaign poster smearing the Greens.[41]

Figure 6 Request to discredit Green Party candidate Katharina Schulze on 4chan

Figure 7 Call for memes on Green Party candidate Katharina Schulze on 4chan[44]

Figure 8 Fake SPD campaign poster showing the newly opened Cologne Central Mosque[45]

Case study
Online to offline harassment in Lenggries

The case of Lenggries, a small town in Bavaria, illustrates the impact co-ordinated online harassment can have on individuals and events in the real world. It is also an example of where efforts to scare, harass or troll activists and political parties come together, with both local volunteers and the Green Party serving as targets for campaigns in this instance. These efforts were mobilised and promoted across a broad range of online platforms and apps, including VK (VKontakte), Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, the Daily Stormer and a range of conspiracy theory blogs and media sites supportive of the far-right in Germany, demonstrating the broad ecosystem of online mechanisms available to the far-right.

The volunteering co-ordinator Annette Ehrhart had the idea of hosting a 'Meet and Greet' event in the local youth centre of Lenggries to improve integration and provide opportunity for building new friendships between locals and refugees. She planned a format similar to 'speed dating' – participants would talk to one other attendee for five minutes before switching to talk to the next, but with no intended romantic connotation attached to the event. This was originally reported in the local press:

> After some consideration, volunteer co-ordinator Annette Ehrhart came up with an idea on how to bring both sides together: via speed dating. Unlike in the classical sense, however, this Wednesday is not about getting to know the partner for life. Under the motto 'Meet and Greet', Germans and refugees are supposed to talk to each other casually and reduce their reservations. At best, friendships are created.[46]

The initial article covering the event by Munich newspaper Merkur did not discuss the gender or sex of the participants; according to the Süddeutsche Zeitung only young local men and male asylum seekers between the ages of 18 and 25 had signed up. No women were expected to be involved in the event.[47]

Online, the far-right quickly began to create and promote disinformation that misrepresented the intentions and scope of the event through articles posted on several blogs and media outlets that host content promoting anti-refugee sentiment, including PI-NEWS, Anonymousnews.ru and Journalistenwatch.[48] ISD identified misleading and sensationalised reporting about the event on 24 online platforms, media outlets and blogs, including posts hosted on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter.[49] Many of the articles on media sites and blogs attempted to misrepresent the event by picking up on the use of the term 'speed dating' to portray the event as one designed to 'hand over' under-aged German girls to be raped and killed by adult male refugees.[50] AfD Bayern's official Facebook page shared a post stating,

Figure 9 Facebook post by AfD Bayern using the event in Lenggries for their Bavaria campaign[52]

> In #Bayern, in the municipality #Lenggries, do-gooders now offer a 'speed dating with illegal #migrants'. What else has to happen until the last one notices that they are ILLEGAL here & should be expelled? Only #AfD.[51]

Case study
Online to offline harassment in Lenggries (continued)

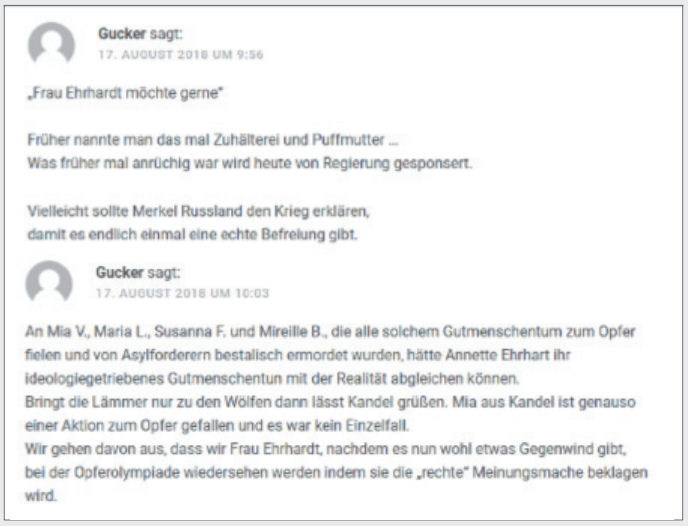


Figure 10 Comment section underneath blogpost on Lenggries event on Vitzli's Neuer[53]

Figure 11 Facebook group Allianz Europa – Russland propagating Green Party involvement in the Lenggries event

Online activity also included trolling of the event organiser herself, in some instances leading to direct threats of physical violence. The comment sections on articles about the Lenggries event contained explicit hate speech about refugees in Lenggries and Annette Ehrhart, including descriptions of her as a 'brothel mother' (Figure 10).

There were also efforts to link the event to the Green Party, though there was no evidence that they were connected. Neither the organiser of the event nor the mayor of Lenggries are affiliated with the Green Party. Despite this, a number of media outlets and channels posted content that insinuated that the event was planned by the Green Party. For example, the group Freies Europa Free Europe stated,

> The GREENS were trying to organise a 'speed dating' in Lenggries. This way, young male asylum seekers should meet German young girls, all with the motto 'diversity in the [garden] bed and in the bed'. The GREENS realise that the girls might have to pay with their lives for the 'diversity in bed'.[54]

Facebook groups were used to spread misleading and false information about the event, including public groups like Allianz Europa – Russland, which hosts a mixture of anti-refugee,[55] pro-Putin and conspiracy theory content.[56] The administrators of this group shared nine posts mentioning Lenggries, one of which states, "Greens are embarrassing themselves with a planned 'Refugee Speed Dating' in Lenggries on 16.8.2018. After harsh protests the tragedy was cancelled" (Figure 11). This post has since been removed.

These efforts were not isolated to the realm of the internet. Both regional and national AfD and Pegida affiliates used this online mobilisation to promote a protest in the town itself,[57] led by the far-right initiative Kandel ist Überall.[58] The event was also promoted on the QDeutschland site Qlobal-Change and appeared on 48 public posts on VK.[59] The protest was attended by roughly 40 people, among them far-right and conspiracy theorist YouTubers, who reported from the event. In the wake of these co-ordination efforts, the event itself was cancelled. Its organiser claimed to have received 'hundreds of threatening emails', and the CSU Mayor of Lenggries, Werner Weindl, stated that he was worried about what might happen should they follow through with the event.[60]

On YouTube, videos about the Lenggries event did not contain direct calls for violence or support for violence, but the comment sections below such videos hosted explicit examples of hate speech and even contained threats of physical harm. Content about Lenggries identified on forums, blogs and in the comment sections underneath blog and media outlet content, trolling and threats of violence were explicit and direct, aimed at individuals such as the event organiser and minority communities such as Muslims living in Germany.[61]

Election Fraud Campaign

The 2016 'Brexit' Referendum, the 2017 German federal election, the 2018 Swedish election and 2018 US Midterm elections are all examples of instances in which far-right networks have promoted campaigns alleging overarching 'election fraud' in order to undermine the credibility of democratic election processes.[62] Some of these examples have witnessed both far-right and Islamist groups campaigning to stop citizens from casting votes or undermining faith in the fairness or integrity of voting processes through online campaigns.[63]

The Bavarian case was no different. In the run-up to the Bavarian state elections, the far-right initiative Ein Prozent, which is closely connected to the German Identitarians, called on voters to become 'election observers' in order to combat alleged 'electoral fraud', which was argued to be targeted against the AfD. Ein Prozent conducted a similar campaign before the 2017 German Federal Elections.[64]

In the registration form connected to the Ein Prozent post, aspiring supporters of the campaign were asked to provide an address in order to plan for a 'comprehensive observation' to be organised across the region. Justifying the need for their campaign, Ein Prozent explained:

> In times when more and more leftist extremists, politicians and red-green anti-Democrats think they can to take the election results into their own hands, we cannot count on the smooth running of these elections.[65]

Overall, the link to the 'election observation' page of Ein Prozent was posted 65 times by other public groups and public pages on Facebook. These posts where cumulatively shared 1,009 times by Facebook users.

This campaign, seeking to sow doubt on the integrity of the election process, was also spread on fringe far-right message boards, such as the Kraut/pol threads on 4chan. The board hosted a link to the campaign Wahlbeobachtung of Ein Prozent for the state election in Bavaria and the same resource for the state election in Hesse. In these 4chan threads, the invitation to register as an election observer was specifically directed at non-Jews ('goys').[66] Ein Prozent advised their supporters to be present when the public voted and when the votes were counted in order to watch for irregularities. Such irregularities were stated to potentially include incorrectly 'invalidated' ballots, miscounted votes, suspicious numbers of invalid votes, election advertising near polling stations, or the temporary closure of polling stations while ballots were still being cast.[67]

In the weeks leading up to the election, a number of online blogs and news magazines published stories claiming overarching 'election fraud' based on distorted or sensationalised evidence. For example, two weeks before the election, the Halle-Leaks blog claimed that there would be election fraud regarding Bavarian postal voting in favour of the Green Party in an article entitled, 'Missing postal votes will be counted for the Greens'.[68] The article references a Focus article that reported on an issue with postal voting in Bernau, a city in Bavaria. However, the Focus article does not mention the Green Party, nor election fraud. In the two weeks leading up to the elections, the Halle-Leaks article was shared 27 times by far-right groups and pages on Facebook, which have a combined audience of 101,081 followers.[69]

27

times the Halle-Leaks article was shared by far-right groups and pages on Facebook, which have a combined audience of 101,081 followers

65

times public groups and pages shared the link to the 'election observation' page of Ein Prozent

While the campaign by far-right groups in Germany to undermine the credibility of the election and to allege systematic 'election fraud' never appears to have reached large audiences online, the topic gained some limited traction in the week before the Bavarian election. On the day of the election itself, ISD identified just under 500 tweets that used both the word 'Wahlbetrug' (election fraud) and 'Bayern' (Bavaria) in the same message (see Figure 12).

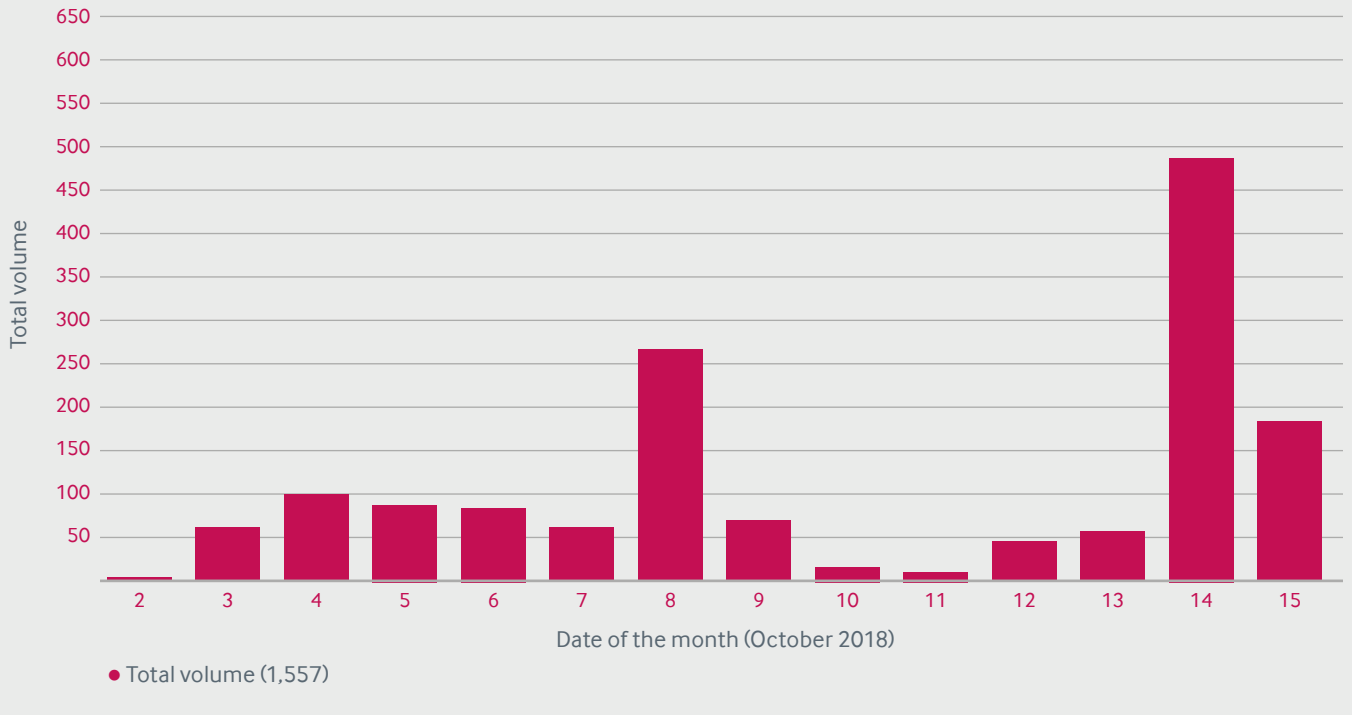
In the wake of the election, allegations of election fraud did not stop, possibly fuelled by the surprisingly strong results of the left-leaning Green Party. Far-right conspiracy theorists with large YouTube followings promoted allegations of election fraud through their channels after the election was conducted.[70] One such video on election fraud reached 162,000 views on YouTube and was shared 86 times on VK. One conspiracy theorist alone published four videos about supposed election fraud on YouTube, which were each viewed between 43,000 and 86,000 times. The four videos together were shared on VK 314 times, and were accompanied with accusations that philanthropist George Soros had orchestrated a coup against the CSU by rigging the elections.

While it remains unclear to what extent this kind of election fraud campaigns might affect voting decisions or even lead voters to abstain from voting at all, it is nevertheless a concerning tactic, clearly intended to undermine trust in the integrity of democratic electoral processes. If even a small number of citizens begin to believe that their vote will not make a difference because the outcomes of elections have been rigged by elites, political apathy may increase, as might support for extreme movements.

While these allegations did not gain significant traction online either in the Bavarian context or in last year's German federal election,[71] the danger of such unfounded information campaigns should not be underestimated. They are also not confined to far-right movements. During the 2017 federal elections in Germany, ISD identified groups such as Generation Islam, an Islamist group affiliated with Hizb ut-Tahrir, trying to persuade Muslims not to cast their vote. The group claimed that taking part in democratic elections was going against religious principles.[72] The same sort of campaign was seen in this year's Swedish election, with Hizb ut-Tahrir using both online Facebook campaigns and offline events to spread anti-voting materials to Muslims in Sweden.[73]

Extremist groups of all ideological persuasions are using online platforms to call for non-participation in elections, seeking to undermine one of the key institutions of liberal democracy. Such campaigns could lead targeted audiences to feel disconnected from

Figure 12 'Wahlbetrug' and 'Bayern': Volume from 10/02/18 to 10/15/18



political processes and decision-making and hence cut off from their democratic rights. This would present an immense challenge to societal cohesion and could fuel the radicalisation of supporters of such groups.

International Network Building: Hashtag Pairing

On social media, the strategy of hashtag pairing was used to unite the international, national and local networks and talking points of the far-right. By combining AfD campaign hashtags with international conspiracy theory hashtags, the party's right-wing, populist political messages were carried beyond their traditional audiences and received more traction globally.

The term 'hashtag pairing' refers to a tactic whereby two or more topics are linked together through the simultaneous use of multiple hashtags, usually on Twitter. The University of Amsterdam's Alt-Right Open Intelligence Initiative, which coined the term 'hashtag pairing' for this kind of usage, notes that this tactic is frequently used by the alt-right and Kremlin-linked bot accounts.[74]

ISD has identified this tactic used in previous elections and far-right mobilisation events, such as the 2017 German federal election, where pro-AfD and anti-Merkel hashtags were shared in combination with more general trending hashtags, as well as during the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville.[75] ISD uncovered this tactic during the Bavarian election in 2018 by examining keywords and hashtags frequently used in combination with pro-AfD Bayern messages on Twitter. ISD set up a Crimson Hexagon monitor to analyse activity around the following hashtags on Twitter: #afdwirkt, #afdbayern, #traudichbayern, #ausgesoedert, #mutzurwahrheit, #holdirdeinlandzurück, #afdwählen and #merkelmussweg.

Between 1 September and 18 October 2018, over 100,200 tweets contained at least one of these hashtags. Pro-AfD support using them came mostly from German social media users; almost 83% of the geo-locatable posts that included at least one of the hashtags originated from within Germany. However, this study identified over 4,500 geo-locatable tweets sent from locations outside Germany, signalling international attempts to promote AfD hashtags on Twitter in the Bavarian election campaign period. In particular, Twitter accounts apparently based in Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the UK and the US helped to amplify pro-AfD hashtag campaigns (Table 1).[76]

Table 1 Distribution of geo-locatable tweets in the AfD hashtag dataset between 1 September and 18 October 2018

Country	Geo-locatable Twitter posts	Total geo-locatable Twitter posts in dataset
Germany	37,987	82.78%
US	1,508	3.29%
Switzerland	1,033	2.25%
Austria	1,016	2.21%
Netherlands	812	1.77%
UK	563	1.23%

In the dataset as a whole, 1,738 (1.7%) of the posts using at least one of these hashtags also contained the hashtag #QAnon and 1,299 (1.3%) also contained the hashtag #Q. Both relate to a widespread US far-right conspiracy theory network, which is attempting to continue to promote conspiracy theories such as #Pizzagate. Direct German translations of known English language QAnon hashtags, such as #DasGrosseErwachen (#TheGreatAwakening) and #DerSturm (#TheStorm), were also shared in combination with pro-AfD hashtags. The hashtags #QAnon and #qlobalchange can be seen in the word cloud showing the most frequently used terms in the dataset examining activity on eight pro-AfD hashtags in September 2018 (Figure 13).

Accounts spreading QAnon conspiracy theory content boosted pro-AfD campaign hashtags simultaneously (Figures 13 and 14). For example, some accounts using hashtags such as #DrainTheSwamp, #HilaryForPrison and #DrainTheDeepState were also found to systematically boost pro-AfD hashtags such as #linksliegenlassen, #MerkelMussWeg, #AfD and #AfDwirkt – often in the same tweet.

The account @qlobalchange was the fifth most prolific Twitter account using at least one of the monitored hashtags in this time period (Figure 15). The account name is a reference to Q, the leader of the QAnon conspiracy theory community,

Figure 13 Word cloud showing the terms used most frequently in the dataset examining activity around the eight pro-AfD hashtags discussed above (1–27 September 2018)

which was removed by Reddit but remains active on platforms like Twitter and Gab.

Key Finding 2: New Developments in the International Far-right's Activities in Germany

The QDeutschland movement in Germany is one example of a new online sub-culture and network that is deepening links between the international far-right and the German far-right online; this was not present a year ago when the German federal election took place. The German Discord group QDeutschland, which is part of the international conspiracy theory community QAnon, spread disinformation on social media and image boards linking the global conspiracy theory to the German context, and discouraged users from voting. The online scope of this new QDeutschland network is explored briefly below.

QAnon Mobilisation: The International Network in Germany

Having uncovered material on Twitter that suggested that there was an emerging German interest in the QAnon conspiracy theory network, ISD sought to understand the breadth and intensity of this new trend. In the first instance, ISD identified a German Discord group, QDeutschland, which counts over 100 members (Figure 16).[78] Apart from 'evidence gathering' activities, members also collect and spread disinformation and memes to promote on other social media platforms, including Facebook. Recurring themes in these communication materials are hostile and toxic narratives about minority communities, in particular migrants and the LGBT community.

The QAnon community shares international 'Q' videos[79] on the German Discord and 4chan boards,

Figure 14 Example of account promoting QAnon and the AfD through hashtag pairing on Twitter.[77]

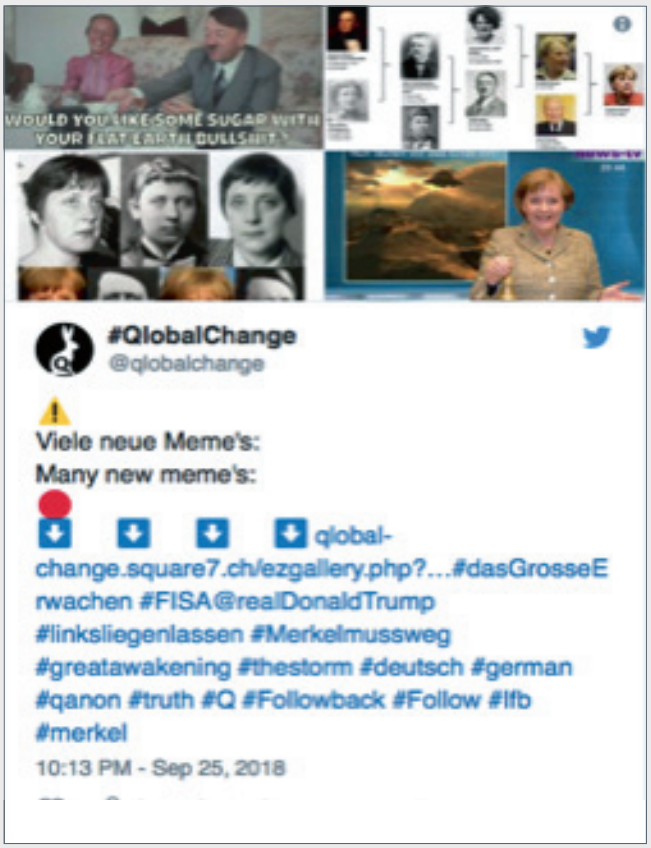


Figure 15 Example of Twitter account #QlobalChange using hashtag pairing to promote new memes

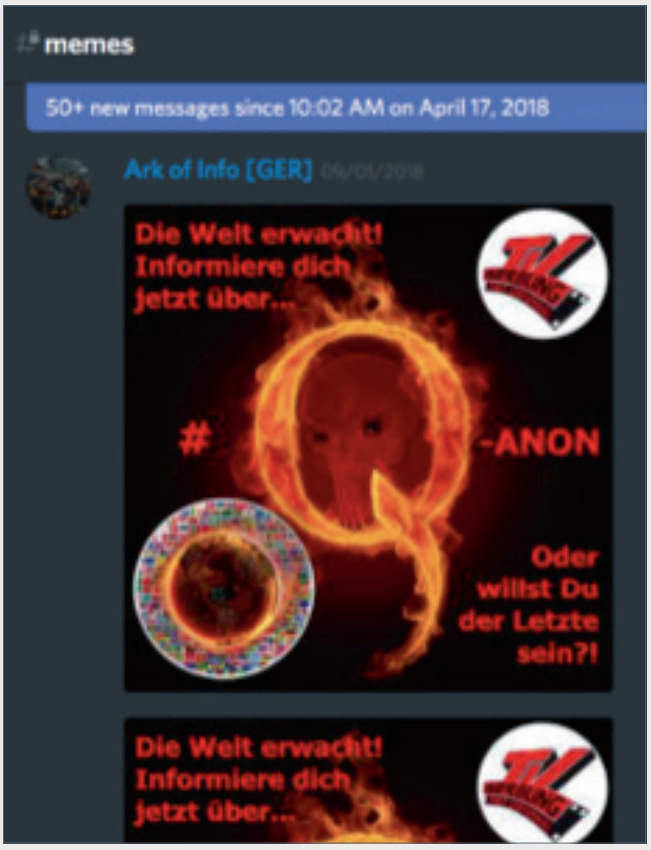


Figure 16 Meme collection in German language Discord group QDeutschland

Figure 17 QAnon Deutsch Facebook group Anti-Voting Calls

linking the overall English language conspriacy to the German context. Their conspiracy theories include material about Angela Merkel (Figure 17), Heiko Maas, Thomasde Maizière, Peter Altmayer, Horst Seehofer and other leading German politicians. For example, they would argue that these policymakers, the security forces and the mainstream media are all complicit in the destabilisation of Germany, that Merz and Merkel conspired against Putin,[80] or that all of these leaders are political puppets run by five powerful families.[81] Conspiracy theories posted on the channels sometimes link migration plans to vaccination conspiracy theories, natural disasters, robotics and cover-ups by the political elites. Some of the most active QAnon members on the Discord and 4chan groups are sympathisers of the Reichsbürger (German sovereign citizen) movement.[82] Some of them even link to videos that denounce the German state as illlegitimate and criminal.[83]

Evidence from these QDeutschland platforms shows that some members of the network share materials and campaigns of the ethno-nationalist Identitäre Bewegung (Generation Identity). A range of international far-right and conspiracy theory groups appeared in the list of QAnon Deutschland's partner channels. The majority of media articles shared in the QAnon Deutshland group on Discord are from either Kremlin-sponsored news outlets such as RT Deutsch and Sputnik Deutschland, or German online news magazines and blogs that promote conspriacy theories and are sympathetic to far-right groups. These magazines would fall within the Oxford Internet Institute's definition of 'junk news' based on classifications of bias and professionalism.[84]

As evidenced above, ISD identified a variety of far-right and Islamist attempts to reduce participation and faith in the election process during this election. Over the weekend of the Bavarian election, the QAnon network in Germany demonstrated another example of this sort of campaign. A rift emerged among members of the QAnon conspiracy theory communities on Discord and 4chan: while some members recommended voting for AfD or Freie Wähler (Free Voters), others tried to push for a 'no-vote'. One user wrote, "The elections are invalid since 1956, if you want something new you should not vote and AfD are the Trojan horse" and "The voters are the idiots. They support the system."

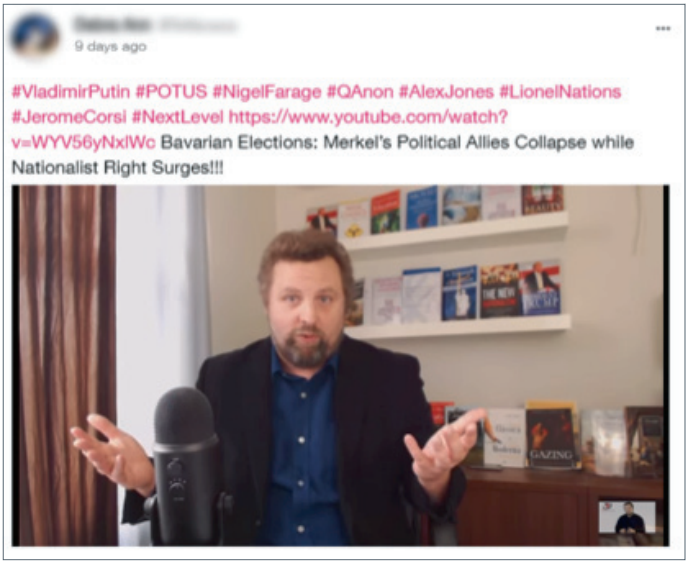


Figure 18 Example of a post on Gab combining QAnon and Bavarian election keywords, as well as hashtags for right-wing populist leaders outside Germany.

New Online Platforms used by the International and German Far-right

In addition to the development of a German language QAnon network, another element of the online ecosystem of the far-right in Germany has evolved since the research conducted during the German federal election of 2017. During the Bavarian election campaign in 2018 we identified and monitored a number of new online platforms and apps used by the German and international far-right, which have emerged as forums for online communication and co-ordination. We sought to understand the scale and importance of these new sites for online activists who co-ordinated campaigns aimed at influencing the election.

Overall, our research determined that while there is a multiplicity of platforms emerging that are now used by various factions within the far-right, from supporters of the Identitarian movement through to white nationalists and neo-Nazis, these sites do not appear to have overtaken the more traditional social media and image board sites in their strategic importance for online campaigning and mobilisation in Germany. This differs somewhat from other international settings, where some new platforms and apps have become critical hubs for content and co-ordination among the far-right, for example in the US and the UK.

This new realm of platforms, some of which were purpose-built to help users to avoid online content moderation and some of which are neutral or libertarian platforms hijacked by more extreme movements, have begun to provide refuge online for individuals who have been removed from larger social media platforms and safe spaces for individuals to share extremist material imperviously.[85] They mostly share an international user-base, though these kinds of groups also employ country- and region-specific platforms. Many of these platforms do not have terms of service or community standards to regulate hate speech or extremist content. Some of them require users to sign up to abide by community standards or terms of service that include such provisions, but do not enforce standards widely or consistently across their platforms.[86]

One of the more well known of these platforms is Gab, which was created as an alternative for social media users who had been removed or felt restricted by larger sites such as Twitter and as a platform that "put... free speech first".[87] Gab functions very similarly to Twitter, as users can write messages (called 'Gabs'), which use up to 300 characters. The platform has been criticised for hosting far-right, white supremacist and neo-Nazi supporters.[88] In late October 2018, the platform was temporarily removed by its hosting provider, Joyent, after it emerged that the anti-Semitic shooter who killed 11 people in a Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, had engaged with and promoted anti-Semitic and anti-refugee conspiracy theories on the Gab platform.[89]

The Bavarian election result sparked intense anti-Merkel sentiment on the platform, from both German and international users.[90] However, compared with the centrality of Gab to the alt-right and violent far-right in the US in 2018, its use in the context of the Bavarian election in Germany appears to have been small. One specific German Gab community, 'Gab Deutsch', counts 287 members. Almost all of the contents shared in the community focus on three of the key themes of the German far-right: criticism of migration, opposition to Merkel (Figure 19) and distrust of the 'mainstream media'. Gab was also used in the election campaign period to promote smear campaigns against progressive political candidates, such as Katharina Schulz, and hosted content that supported the 'election fraud' argument made by a number of online magazines and conspiracy theory blogs.

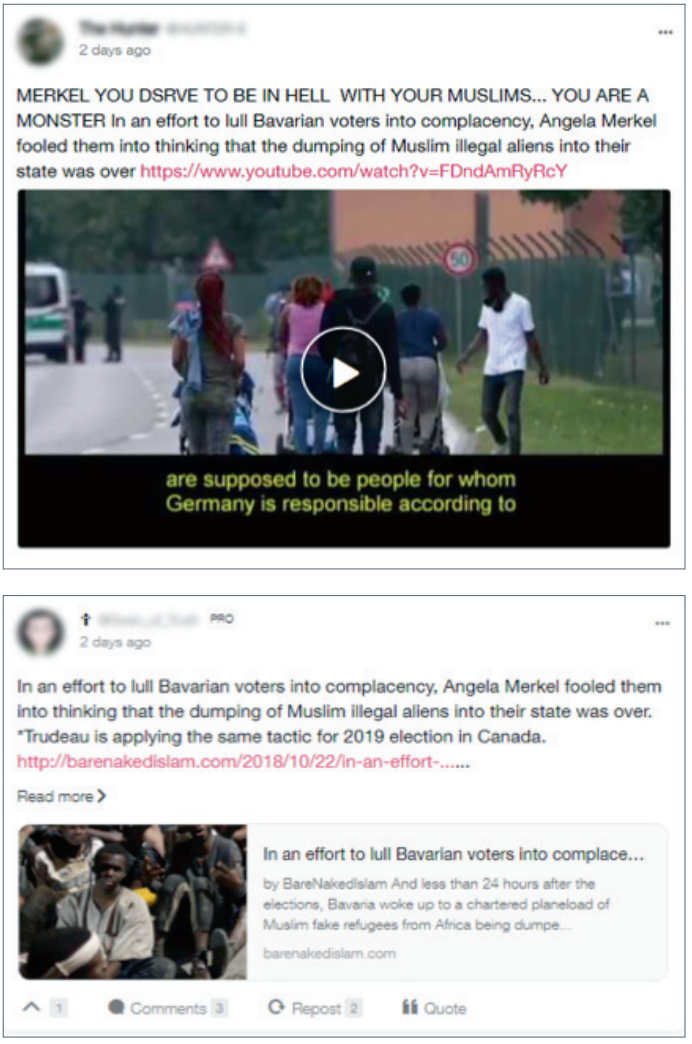


Figure 19 Examples of accounts spreading disinformation and anti-migrant content on Gab, including linking the Bavarian case to the upcoming Canadian election'

Minds, which has been described as an alternative to Facebook,[91] is an example of a platform designed to support free expression.[92] In this vein, the platform's terms of service do not mention any moderation concerning hate speech, but do preclude doxing, inciting violence or harassing other users directly.[93] The site has relatively few users, with roughly 110,000 active users a month, and features a large variety of content and user communities. However, its less restrictive terms of service have prompted some far-right communities and influencers to take up the platform as a safe haven. Minds did not feature prominently as a platform in the Bavarian election specifically, but broader German far-right activity was identified on the platform throughout the research

period. Influencers associated or formerly associated with far-right groups including Pegida have created profiles on the site, and German language content found included examples of disinformation circulating about the events in Chemnitz, which have been fact-checked by media outlets such as Buzzfeed and stated as false.[94] However, it is important to note that these efforts appeared small in scale and potential traction across the internet ecosystem when compared with those that used more popular social media platforms.

In a similar vein, sites such as BitChute have sprung up as alternatives to YouTube for video hosting. BitChute was used in the run-up to promote videos from various influencers in the far-right ecosystem in Germany, including promotion content for the notorious trolling army Reconquista Germanica. BitChute was used in the run-up to the election by the organiser of Reconquista Germanica, Nikolai Alexander.[95] However, the video posted did not provide instructions for activity, rather it announced a strategic shift in the group's approach and tactics following the drop in membership since the 2017 federal election. Alexander states that Reconquista Germanica has dropped from having 10,000 members to 300 since the 2017 election campaign, and notes that there have been episodes of splintering and infighting among them. Alexander's video states that Reconquista Germanica will step up its campaigning efforts again not by recruiting thousands of new members, but by trying to improve the performance of its campaigns.[96]

Alexander's own lamentation in this video that all of his social media channels have been removed on the larger platforms (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) explains his call for supporters to engage on platforms like BitChute and Discord instead. However, it is unclear whether this message has been taken up, and Reconquista Germanica's now diminished membership is testament to the obstacles provided for far-right trolling efforts by content moderation enforcement on major technology platforms. While content such as this Reconquista Germanica update is available on BitChute, the number of views is considerably lower than seen when similar or identical versions of videos remain accessible on YouTube, despite the platform's efforts to remove hate speech and extremist content under the enforcement of its community standards.

While we have observed this emergence of fringe platforms, there has been a stagnation in user growth, level of activity or user enthusiasm on some of these platforms. Since the Pittsburgh attack and its significant ramifications for Gab's stability as an online platform, general users on the site have already started to complain about an increase in 'purges' and account removals due to the enforcement of the site's terms of service, and some have suggested moving off the site or, even, back to Twitter (Figure 20).[97]

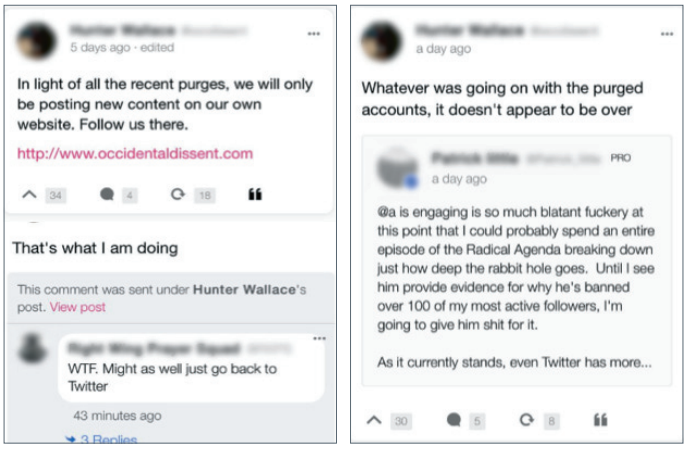


Figure 20 Examples of Gab accounts discussing leaving the platform because there was stricter content moderation in October 2018

Furthermore, the number of users on these platforms still pales in comparison to platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. There will likely always remain an important strategic purpose for groups seeking to reach new audiences with malign influence campaigns in maintaining a presence on larger platforms.

In addition to joining alternative-tech platforms such as Gab, Minds and VK, German far-right groups have increasingly formed networked channels on the encrypted messaging apps Telegram and Discord. Different influencers and groups are highly interconnected and often share each other's posts and media content, and promote each other's calls to action. This has led to a chain reaction of viral disinformation on these platforms, which can lead to rapid, co-ordinated reactions to political events in the real world, as was seen in the case of the Chemnitz protests and the calls to action to stand against the UN Migration Pact.

These shifts have important implications for policy, technological and civic responses to far-right activity online, including around elections. Those realms of the internet that consistently provide safe havens for users planning and seeding disinformation, harassment and trolling campaigns – including some image boards, encrypted chat channels and purpose-built far-right sites – require a different set of responses from those recently developed and then rolled out on online platforms that actively attempt to remove such behaviour when it is identified. The recommendations section of this paper explores some options that might be feasible in dealing with different kinds of internet platform used for this kind of activity.

Key Finding 3: Kremlin-sponsored Media Used Social Media to Promote an Agenda Favourable to the AfD in the Bavarian State Election, but did not Employ Malign Campaigning Tactics, such as those used by the Far-Right

It is not only the international far-right that has a strategic interest in the outcome of regional German elections. As discussed in ISD's 2017 paper, 'Make Germany Great Again', the Kremlin has long-standing interests in influencing domestic German political outcomes to promote voices that support a friendlier stance towards the Kremlin and its interests.[98] There are Russian interests specific to Bavaria. Maintaining a friendly political leadership in the state is certainly beneficial to the sustainability of 1,500 of the 6,000 German companies in Russia that come from Bavaria. "As far as trade is concerned, Bavaria is of course ranked first among the German states," stated Putin himself at a meeting with Horst Seehofer in Spring 2017.[99]

Achieving a political environment conducive to friendlier Russian policies in Germany may not be all that difficult a task in the circumstances: according to a recent poll by the institute Forsa, 79% of Germans claim that the greatest threat to world peace is from US President Donald Trump, while only 13% believe that Putin represents a threat to the world. Significant support for Putin can be found on the left and the right of the political spectrum in many regions in Germany.[100]

> "Sputnik's German language output during that election promoted the AfD"

79%

of Germans claim that the greatest threat to world peace is from US President Donald Trump

13%

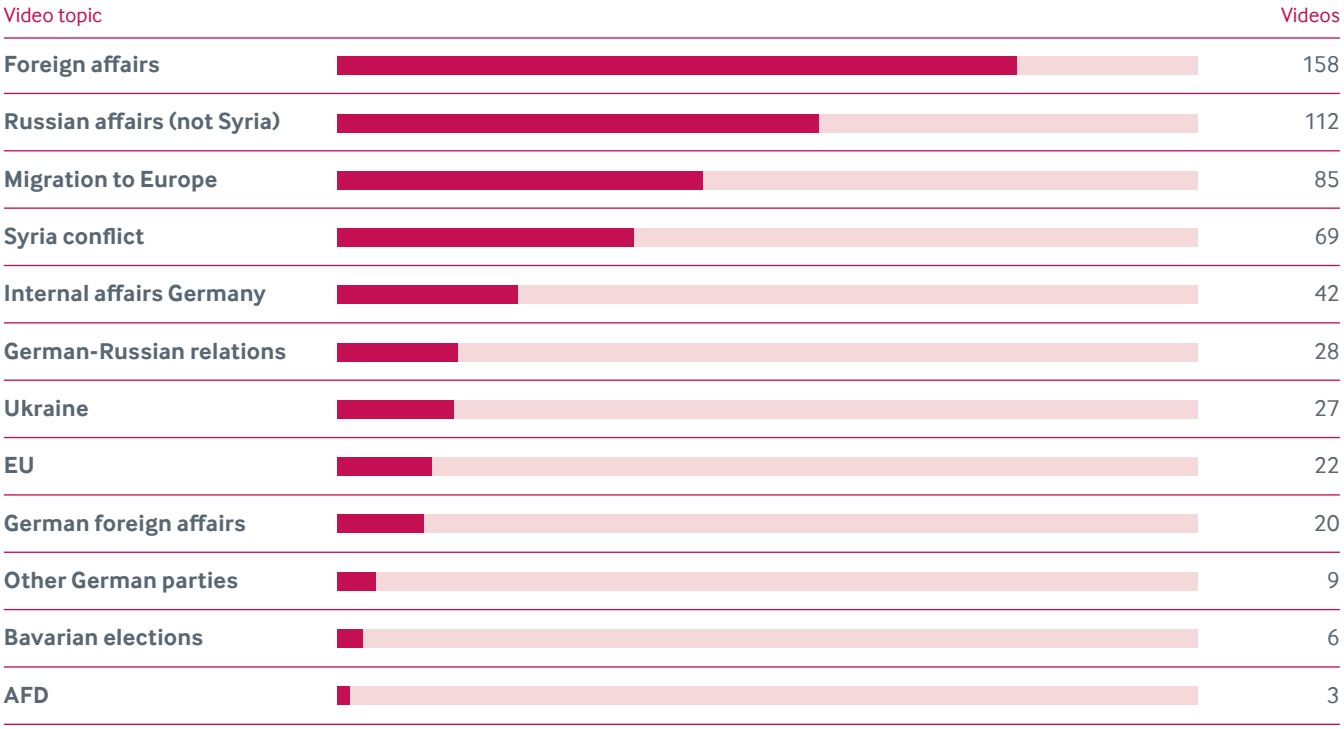
of Germans believe that Vladimir Putin represents a threat to the world

However, ISD's research determined that Russian state-funded media apparatus in Germany is not employing the same malign means to influence voters as far-right campaigns, instead relying on more traditional media influence mechanisms and existing political grievances to reach German audiences on the left and right. While Sputnik Deutschland provided proportionally more coverage for the AfD than any other party in the run-up to the Bavarian election, the nature of the coverage was biased and occasionally sensationalist, but the outlet did not promote disinformation.

RT Deutsch Coverage: Merkel and Migrants

As part of ISD's research into international influences during the German federal election in 2017, we worked with media analysis organisation Memo98 to understand the topics and tone of Kremlin-sponsored German language news coverage. This research demonstrated that Sputnik's German language output during that election promoted the AfD and criticised other political parties.[101] RT Deutsch provided a more neutral stance and focused more on issues concerning international politics and migration. As part of ISD's research into campaigns attempting to influence the Bavarian election process and outcome, ISD sought to establish whether the focus and nature of Kremlin-backed news coverage in Germany during the Bavarian state election was similar to the efforts seen a year before during the federal election.

Figure 21 The most frequently covered topics by RT Deutsch on its YouTube videos between 15 August and 14 October 2018



ISD analysed all RT Deutsch content posted on its official YouTube channel for two months running up to the election on 14 October 2018. Each video was coded independently by two fluent German language analysts at ISD using a framework of the following nine topics in order to determine the proportion of coverage devoted to each by RT Deutsch during this period:

- **Foreign affairs:** videos focusing on foreign affairs that do not relate to Germany, Russia or Syria
- **Russian affairs (not Syria)**: videos focusing on activities of the Russian government not related to Germany or Syria
- **Migration to Europe**: videos focusing on migration to Europe, including crime committed by migrants in Europe
- **Syria conflict**: videos focusing on the conflict in Syria
- **Internal affairs Germany:** videos focusing on other internal affairs in Germany, with the exception of migration or specific coverage of political parties in Germany
- **German–Russian relations**: videos focusing on engagement between Russia and Germany
- **Other German parties**: videos focusing on German political parties other than the AfD
- **Bavarian elections**:[102] videos focusing on the Bavarian state election
- **AfD**: videos focusing on AfD

Case Study
Kremlin-sponsored Media Give a Platform for New-Right Voices on Immigration

RT Deutsch ran an article in its 'Europe' section in October 2018 interviewing Dr. Erik Lehnert, who works for MP Harald Weyel of the AfD. RT stated up front that Lehnert self-identifies as Neurechter (new-right). Noteworthy about this article is the interviewer's use of far-right talking points and the language of 'migrant crime' promoted by far-right influencers. For example, the RT interviewer asks Lehnert,

About every fifth person in Germany has a migration background. Is Germany abolishing itself, as Thilo Sarrazin predicted a few years ago? Or does it matter less how many people emigrate to Germany but rather where they come from?

Lehnert replied,

> Of course, Germany is abolishing itself... Apart from that, there are of course no problems with immigrating Norwegians, Swedes or Finns, whereas Tunisians, Algerians and Moroccans lead the crime statistics.

There is no data provided to back up this claim, either by Lehnert or the RT Deutsch interviewer. The statement itself is an opinion, and is presented as such in the piece, but provides an example of how Kremlin-sponsored media in Germany provide a platform for voices that are antagonistic to immigrants from certain backgrounds. RT provides no context or balance to the argument provided here about migration from non-European countries and the apparent link with crime convictions and no alternative views are provided apart from those of the self-confessed 'new-right' advocate in this piece.[104]

Our analysis revealed that foreign affairs, Russian foreign affairs and migration were the most frequently covered topics by RT Deutsch on its YouTube channel over this period, which fits with the usual nature of RT's international coverage (Figure 21). However, what was not covered is as interesting as what was:

- The Bavarian election was not a major focus.
- RT Deutsch was not used as a platform for parties.
- RT Deutsch focused on wedge issues.

The Bavarian Election Was Not a Major Focus
RT Deutsch did not pursue a major focus on the Bavarian election of 2018 itself. Where the election was mentioned directly, RT Deutsch framed it as a referendum on Merkel, elevating its importance to the national level and shifting focus onto a concerted anti-Merkel narrative and away from local issues.

RT Deutsch was not Used as a Platform for Parties
Specific parties and politicians were not explicitly supported or denigrated relating to the Bavarian state election. This marks another crucial difference from the results of monitoring conducted on international RT and Sputnik outlets in the German federal election 2017, as well as the result of similar monitoring conducted during the Swedish Election 2018 on Kremlin-sponsored media outlets.[103] Outright support was not provided for the AfD by RT Deutsch in this instance, in contrast to the disproportionate platform provided for AfD policies and spokespeople in the 2017 Election by Sputnik Deutschland and, to a limited extent, by Sputnik in the Bavarian context in 2018 (explored below).

Focus on Wedge Issues
Despite the lack of focus on the Bavarian elections themselves, RT's selection of topics and focus on particular controversial issues during the months leading up to the elections reveal a focus on wedge issues and the promotion through this coverage of an anti-establishment agenda regarding the political, media and security institutions in Germany. Wedge issues are defined here as political issues that have a particularly divisive or polarising effect in the given context. In the current political landscape, following the influx of more than one million refugees into Germany since 2015, migration is arguably the key wedge issue in Germany.

It is hence unsurprising that this is a particular focus of Kremlin-sponsored media outlets seeking to influence political discourse in Germany. While this in and of itself is no different from most journalism covering political controversies and debates, RT Deutsch's coverage of these issues provided slanted perspectives on topics such as migration through providing a platform for far-right or right-wing populist influencers critical of migration without any alternative opinions. An example of this kind of content is shown in the case study (left).

RT Deutsch Coverage: In Line With AfD on German Policy in Syria

Another key topic that receives prolific attention on RT Deutsch is the war in Syria. RT Deutsch YouTube content portrays the situation in Syria as one of imminent victory for the Russian-backed government forces. The AfD, in turn, criticises the German state's supposed lack of co-operation with the Russian and Syrian governments in ending the war and rebuilding Syria,[105] focusing on two points as it suggests:

- if Germany were to co-operate with the Russian and Syrian forces, Syrian refugees currently living in Germany could return to their home country[106]
- support for anti-Assad groups on the ground from Western forces has purposefully undermined rebuilding efforts and prolonged the war.[107]

The AfD's position, which is not supported by any other parliamentary party, is to seek the re-establishment of German diplomatic relations with the Assad regime in order to return refugees currently hosted in Germany to Syria. In March 2018, a number of AfD representatives visited Syria and met Assad officials.[108] Subsequently, representatives stated that Syrian refugees no longer had a legal reason to stay in Germany, as growing parts of Syria were being returned to the Assad regime, which they proposed now constituted a "safe country of origin".[109] While the RT and AfD narratives are not explicitly connected, RT's presentation of a strengthening Assad regime and an impending victory against anti-Assad forces in Syria falls in line with the AfD's domestic political demands regarding re-migration in Germany, which are not promoted by any other party represented in the Bundestag. It is, however, impossible to determine whether this is a case of the AfD promoting a line friendlier to the Russian political strategy, of RT Deutsch promoting domestic policies in Germany sympathetic to the AfD, or of a coincidental alignment in policy objectives.

Sputnik Deutschland Coverage

While RT appears to have avoided providing an explicit political platform in the Bavarian case, another German language media outlet run by government-owned news agency Rossiya Segodnya was less balanced in its presentation of content relating to the election or German political developments. Sputnik Deutschland, as well as the Sputnik International English language arm, provided positive coverage of AfD candidates and policies beyond all other candidates or parties, many of which were covered negatively.

ISD coded all articles published by Sputnik Deutschland on its public Facebook page in the two weeks running up to the Bavarian election. Coders analysed the content of the stories to determine whether the major focus of the article was on a political party or any of the party-affiliated candidates running in Bavaria. They coded 387 articles from the first two weeks of October (Table 2).

Table 2 The proportion of Sputnik Deutschland articles mentioning a political party between 30 September and 14 October 2018

Party	Articles
AfD	5%
Die Linke	3%
CSU	2%
SPD	2%
Green Party	1%
FDP	0%

None of the parties were covered by more than 5% of Sputnik's articles throughout this time, but there were almost double the number of articles about the AfD as about the next most discussed party, Die Linke. These are two examples of the platform that Sputnik Deutschland provided for the AfD and criticism of other political parties and candidates:

- AfD spokespeople on the Bavarian election: a Sputnik International article of 12 October 2018 about the Bavarian election and its possible outcomes focused mainly on the AfD and its expected electoral success. It quoted two AfD spokespeople, Ebner-Steiner and Meuthen, while no other candidates or representatives from other parties were given a platform for their views. The other two individuals quoted in the article are political scientists, not political candidates.[110]

- The benefits of an AfD win for Russia: on 10 October 2018, Sputnik International published an article in the 'Europe' section commenting on how the AfD would help Russian–German relations. Again, the article contained almost exclusively quotations from AfD candidates and representatives.[111]

As part of the coding exercise the proportion of Sputnik's coverage that discussed issues to do with migration was analysed. Coders found that 26 articles (7% of the total) focused directly on this issue. Of these, 23 presented migrants or Islam in a negative light or as problematic. While the proportion of Sputnik's coverage discussing migration is therefore unremarkable, the presentation of the issue, heavily weighted towards only negative aspects or consequences of both migration and Islam in Germany, provides an imbalanced perspective on the topic for German audiences.

Hosting Content Presenting Islam as both an anti-European Threat and a Historic Bastion of Nazi Support

In an article hosted on Sputnik Deutschland at the beginning of August 2018 – 'Already under Hitler, Islam brought Europe to its knees – the Fuehrer was glad' – the news outlet provides its readers with content that manages simultaneously to suggest that Muslim immigrant communities in Europe could be destructive for 'European culture', and that they were once firm supporters of the German Nazi Party.[112] The article is hosted in the 'Newspapers' section of Sputnik Deutschland, as the original is in Russian and published by Russian online newspaper Lenta.ru.[113] The article presents a historical interpretation of Muslim immigrant communities in early 20th-century Germany as consistent supporters of Hitler and the Nazis. The tone of the article is provocative, opening with the statement:

'Black hordes' of aggressive men who 'destroy' European culture, impose their Sharia rules on the 'Old World' and cut heads – that is how European right-wing extremists usually portray Muslim refugees. Yet Islam was once a dear friend of the National Socialist Germany.

In its introduction, the article states,

> This position regarding Islamic danger is gradually emerging from the fog of marginalisation: right-wing politicians are increasingly coming to power in European countries, and the issue of 'warding off the Islamic invasion' is becoming increasingly acute for their fellow citizens.

Sputnik provides a disclaimer that its editorial team do not necessarily agree with the views of the original article, but hosts the content without comment or critique on its German site.

Ruptly and Redfish: a Broad Influence Ecosystem

Two topics that also received attention on RT and the media outlet's subsidiary channels are police violence and environmentalism. Contrary to RT's content about migration, which runs in line with domestic political groups on the political right, coverage of these two topics is largely consistent with anti-establishment sentiment that is prominent on the political left in Germany.

Shortly after the Bavarian elections an investigation in Germany revealed that a video showing supposedly disproportionate police violence in Berlin had originated with a media outlet called Redfish. It is based in Berlin and funded by the Russian video news outlet Ruptly, a news channel owned by RT.[114] Redfish media channel, which posts content in English despite its base being

23

of 26 Sputnik articles presented migrants or Islam in a negative light or as problematic

in Berlin, has been active in criticising governments in the wake of events such as the Grenfell Tower fire in London in 2017 and the Gilets Jaunes protests in France in 2018.[115] It also promotes a sympathetic line on migrants trying to enter Europe, in contrast to the great proportion of RT and Sputnik reporting on the issue.[116] Taking into account the breadth of the Kremlin-funded media machinery in Europe is critical in understanding its broader strategy, using legitimate grievance issues as subject matter to "inspire social and economic change", in the words of the Redfish site.[117]

> Taking into account the breadth of the Kremlin-funded media machinery in Europe is critical in understanding its broader strategy

In its coverage of environmental matters, in 2018 RT itself published nine YouTube videos on the protests at Hambacher Forst, a forest in North-Rhine Westphalia due to be cleared in order to create an industrial coal mine. The forest has been the site of tense protests by environment activists. RT-owned video outlet Ruptly is the main financial source for In the Now, a Berlin-based channel specifically designed to engage a young, environmentalist audience.[118] Issue-driven channels on social media such as In the Now show the breadth of the Kremlin's media empire in Europe and the lack of transparency employed in attempts to promote both left-wing and right-wing discontent and outrage through sensational video content online. However, they fall in a different category of content altogether from the far-right campaigns explored above, instead representing a much broader pattern of involvement in flashpoint politics and the associated media inflammation that is hyper-charged by social media mechanisms.

Outlets such as Ruptly and Redfish are not promoting malign influence campaigns like those from the far-right explored earlier in this report. As a number of the research reports into IRA (Internet Research Agency) troll accounts in the 2016 US election have found, the broader strategy focuses on pushing existing division points and politically sensitive issues in target constituencies.[119] This requires a very different set of responses from those made to the hate campaigns and disinformation promoted by the far-right, though both would be served well by an increase in technology platform transparency. The website of Redfish media is not transparent about its relationship to RT. In a comment to The Times newspaper, Redfish stated that it was "100 per cent editorially independent" and denied hiding the connection to RT and the Russian government.[120] The information about this connection is not available on its website however.[121] Like Redfish, In the Now does not state on its Facebook page from where it derives its funding.[122]

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Researchers, government committees and journalists have built the beginnings of an evidence base that demonstrates the threat posed to democratic elections from co-ordinated and concerted efforts to co-opt information and electoral processes. These efforts are increasingly endorsing political parties and non-state groups that share an aim to promote populist right-wing and far-right world views.

Across the board, the line between what is a legitimate or illegitimate use of technology to influence audiences remains unclear. The raft of new information channels, amplification and targeting mechanisms available to states, activists and political parties has posed as yet unanswered questions about the new norms of political campaigning. The boundaries of foreign and domestic are now blurred on a political stage that is hyper-connected by technology.

1. Transparent Technologies

In order to protect fundamental rights, security and democracy, transparency should be at the heart of policy responses to deceptive and distortive uses of social media platforms, both within and outside election contexts.

Audiences are often unaware why they are seeing the content they are served online. Algorithms control what news, friends or media content is recommended to users, without any oversight on the intricacies of those models. Our ability to understand threats to free expression, security and democracy are all hindered by the opaqueness of technologies designed for advertising purposes to keep a user's attention for as long as possible; they distort the level playing field of free speech by amplifying or driving a user to certain messaging or enabling the micro-targeting of content. While in physical engineering we have witnessed the emergence of a culture and practices of responsible development that seeks to protect the users of those products, we have not yet seen similar developments in the world of software engineering and technological development.

Policymakers and legislators should consider ways in which to encourage algorithmic accountability in the design of new and existing technologies in order to help prevent their manipulation by actors seeking to do harm. Both security and free expression could be better protected by focusing on better understanding and therefore better responding to the technological means by which content is inorganically amplified, recommended or filtered beyond the user's control.

Extremist groups currently exploit elements of the information architecture and infrastructure online to not only post extremist content, but amplify and target it to broader audiences than would otherwise be possible. While having limited access to application programming interfaces [API] makes research into the effects of technology products and algorithms difficult, small-scale research has suggested that search and recommendation algorithms on technology platforms are biased to promote sensationalist or outrage-inducing content more frequently than other content.[123] Further research is needed to better understand the impact of algorithms on the spread of extremist content online, given the small datasets currently available to conduct analysis. There is no more than anecdotal knowledge of existing studies, reinforcing the importance of having sufficient access to data for research on these issues.

Researchers, human rights groups and academics have begun to discuss creative ways to simultaneously protect competitive technological innovation and the users of technology products from the unintended consequences of algorithms. This work is connected to a burgeoning field of research on algorithmic bias and the potential benefits of algorithmic accountability or transparency for those affected by such biases. For example, the Shorenstein Center at Harvard University has developed a forum for policy experts and academics to contribute ideas on the future of fair algorithms – 'The Ethical Machine'.[124]

Is there a gold standard for algorithmic accountability that could provide a voluntary, incentivised model for existing and emerging technology companies? Could there be a voluntary code of practice for small and emerging tech companies on responsible algorithmic design and transparency, which would prevent the stifling of innovation and fair competition but protect users from bias, discrimination or distorted access to information online? There is an urgent need to think outside the box in designing incentives for algorithmic accountability that protect both innovation and user rights.

The question of enforcement must also be carefully considered: who gets to look under the bonnet on algorithmic accountability? There could be interesting models to consider that rely on an independent academic research body or multi-stakeholder body to review algorithmic design and conduct testing on fairness and equality, while protecting competition. There will be a host of different ways to encourage risk foresight in product design for emerging technology companies and in the product design teams of existing, established technology companies. This will be central if we are to instil a culture of responsible development in software design, similar to that which can be seen in physical engineering.

While the progress made on political advertising is one example of the potential for increased transparency in political targeting online, it deals with just one small piece of the tactical playbook employed by malign actors seeking to disrupt information ecosystems and democratic processes online. There is much work still to be done on ensuring the accountability and transparency of social media products that are relied on by millions of users around the globe. Transparency can help to mitigate a whole range of behaviours relating to digital deceit, from child grooming to disinformation ecosystems. It should undergird all approaches to digital policy in future.

2. A Strategic Framework for Responding to Malign Influence Online

Instead of tactical barricades, democratic governments should develop coherent national or international strategies to set the legal limits for political campaigning in the age of social media.

Experts across the public and private sectors are now consistently engaged in work to push back against the exploitation of technology by extremists or foreign

Case Study
Political Advertising

Technology companies and legislators have demonstrated their ability to co-ordinate on improved transparency through recent changes to the political advertising landscape, helping to provide users with greater access and improving accountability for political advertising on social media platforms. Facebook has started to develop a political advertising database, which aims to provide users with information on the financial contributions to and organisational affiliations connected with advertising on political issues.[125]

Within Facebook's new system, any advertiser running election-related or issue-based advertising located or targeting people in the designated countries must go through an authorisation process with Facebook, with the exception of news publishers specially identified by Facebook. According to the new guidelines, this includes any adverts:

- made by, on behalf of, or about a current or former candidate for public office, a political party, a political action committee or advocates for the outcome of an election to public office
- relating to any election, referendum or ballot initiative, including 'get out the vote' or election information campaigns
- relating to any national legislative issue of public importance in any place where the ad is being run
- regulated as political advertising.

Facebook is also developing an online archive, showing previous ads that have been listed through the system, with rough advertising spends and audiences listed. The archive can be searched by anyone. In a blog about the new advertising policy, Facebook states that the roll-out has been successful in the US and Brazil, but admits that the system is not able to cut out abuse in its entirety: "We're up against smart and well-funded adversaries who change their tactics as we spot abuse."[126]

states during elections. However, these efforts have largely relied on two approaches:

- 'technological solutionism' – tweaks to technology products promising digital solutions to big, real-world problems[127]
- hasty legislation directed at specific forms of content identified as posing a risk to election integrity.

While the intention behind both is to challenge misuse and exploitation, they each look set to miss the mark in tackling the evolving threat of malign uses of social media in elections. Furthermore, they could set precedents that infringe on rights to expression and free information.

Governments across the globe have started to develop legislation on a raft of issues relating to disinformation, hate speech and extremist content.[128] Legislators in California and Ireland have drafted bills to penalise the use of bots in political campaigns online.[129] The Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz (Network Enforcement Act) in Germany places legal obligations on large social media platforms active in Germany to remove obviously illegal content within a 24-hour timeframe on receiving a complaint.[130] Yet government responses across the board remain piecemeal and often rely on overly broad definitions that threaten to infringe on legitimate speech and behaviour online.

In place of these tactical barricades, democratic governments should develop coherent national or international strategies to set the legal limits for political campaigning in the age of social media. Technology companies will struggle to create or amend products to prevent election interference without establishing clear legal guidelines from governments. These rules are better developed in some regions and on some issues than others. For example, laws around financial contributions to election campaigns are well developed in most EU countries and can be applied relatively readily to the online context. Other aspects of political campaigning remain cloudy: micro-targeting, in-kind campaign contributions and data privacy regulations for online personal data.

In thinking about the balance of rights and risks around elections, there is an urgent need for governments to democratise the discussion of what should be legitimate or illegal in their national or regional political context. Polls and surveys can help governments establish what sort of transparency, regulation and data privacy their electorate is comfortable with. In addition, more consideration should be given to how existing laws and regulations, which were crafted for the offline world, could or should inform the development of rules and regulations for the online domain. In the world of advertising for instance, established codes and regulations exist in many countries, which set standards about accuracy and honesty as well as the mechanisms by which to enforce such standards.[131]

> "Electoral commissions also have a role to play in working with technology companies to understand how best to protect elections and democratic processes"

Electoral commissions also have a role to play in working with technology companies to understand how best to protect elections and democratic processes in a sustainable way, within the legal framework relevant to their domain. Electoral commissions' role covers political financing, rendering them important institutions in defining the new norm in digital political campaigning. Legislators in the US, France and the UK have drafted proposals for the regulation of online campaigns, while social media companies have begun to develop their own proposals to meet the challenges, some of which have been discussed in this report. But for election commissions, identifying, understanding and countering new kinds of threat to the integrity of electoral processes requires a different set of capabilities and tools from those traditionally relied on for their work. This might include online analysis capabilities and transparent and agile mechanisms for

collaborating with technology companies to understand emerging threats in election contexts.

The role of an electoral commission extends beyond the financial realm, and often includes the duty to protect public confidence in electoral processes. One of the tactics identified in research on the elections in Germany, Sweden, the US and Bavaria is the promotion of disinformation campaigns alleging overarching election fraud, with the aim to discredit faith in democratic processes and election results. Without a real-time online analysis capability, election commissions will struggle to meet the demands that the digital world brings to bear on their responsibilities. This kind of capability could take the form of co-operating with independent academics or researchers, or developing analysis teams to ensure compliance with election law online and offline.

3. The New Extremist Ecosystem

Experts, policymakers and technologists need to work together to design ways to respond to the far-right's technological ecosystem.

We have started to see norms develop for dealing with extremist content on the largest social media platforms – Facebook, YouTube, Twitter. These combine a spectrum of responses, including content removals, demonetisation and counter-narrative communications. These types of response do not map well onto the new kinds of technology platforms used by the far-right. Many do not have the resources or will to implement moderation to prevent the use of their platforms for hate or extremist mobilisation. These spaces cannot be left unchallenged, however. And the spectrum of platforms either created or exploited by the international far-right is broad: the purposes and uses of each of these sites or apps differ, and require nuanced responses in each circumstance.

Research the Ecosystem

Better and ongoing research is required to understand the range of technology platforms included in this new extremist ecosystem: their distinct uses, structures, audiences, existing mechanisms to deal with illegal, deceptive or distortive information campaigns and the extent of their apparent willingness to co-operate with civil society in dealing with hateful, extremist or disinformation content. This is a critical first step

> "Larger technology companies have acknowledged the 'valuable role' they have to play in 'supporting other, smaller tech companies'"

in any efforts to inform intervention, disruption and counterspeech efforts. While there are potential pitfalls and risks associated with government funding for response work on these kinds of platforms, there could be scope for governments, as well as public or private foundations, to fund pure research.

In one example of a novel attempt to monitor the use of alternative sites that spread disinformation, researchers at the Federal University of Minas Gerais in Brazil developed a system for monitoring content on WhatsApp during the Brazilian election in 2018. It respected end-to-end encryption but helped to understand the type of disinformation being used to manipulate voters. It pulled data from public political groups and displayed them in an online dashboard that fact-checkers and journalists could access.[132] Similar initiatives on smaller platforms would help responders to design effective interventions, systems or response capabilities for this kind of content. ISD is working with MIT's Center for Civic Media to design research tools for these smaller platforms used to spread far-right communications and to plan campaigns for larger social media platforms in 2019.

Collaborate on Response

This kind of research would enable practitioners from different sectors, including civil society organisations, policymakers and technologists, to collaborate on the development of distinct ideas for regulatory, market-driven, technological, communications-based or disruption responses that suit the specifics of each platform. For example, initiatives like the UNCTED/Tech Against Terrorism initiative provide a model for work

that could support smaller sites that are inadvertently exploited or taken over by these kind of groups and are willing to collaborate with institutions and experts to try to prevent the use of their platforms for harm. Such initiatives could help to provide technological tools such as hashing technology, which could help to scale up the identification of the most egregious examples of threatening or false content across a wide range of platforms. An example of this cross-company collaboration can be seen in the sharing of the terrorist-related hashing database developed by Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Microsoft within the remit of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism. The database has now been shared with a number of smaller technology sites including ASKfm, Cloudinary, Instagram, JustPaste.it, LinkedIn, Oath and Snapchat owner Snap.

Larger technology companies have acknowledged the 'valuable role' they have to play 'in supporting other, smaller tech companies' who may not have the same level of resources to deal with harmful material such as terrorist content.[133] Similar support could be envisaged in the near future for issues concerning disinformation, foreign influence campaigns during elections and conspiracy theory networks.

Finally, a broad coalition of technology companies, beyond social media platforms, might play a role in protecting users from disinformation, hate speech or extremist content that is hosted on new kinds of sites or applications. App stores such as Apple's App Store and Google Play have started to enforce their own terms of service, which can lead to temporary or permanent bans for applications that host content that is "offensive, insensitive, upsetting, intended to disgust, or in exceptionally poor taste" in Apple's case.[134] The App Store's guidelines also note,

> Apps with user-generated content or services that end up being used primarily for pornographic content, objectification of real people... making physical threats, or bullying do not belong on the App Store and may be removed without notice.[135]

Such terms have been used recently to temporarily ban apps that have been identified as continually hosting terrorist content or pornographic material.[136] Given the array of new applications that are being exploited by the far-right for communications purposes, these types of reactions might provide impetus for some form of content moderation on such platforms to remove the most egregious of material.

Provide New Ideas

A different set of responses is required for platforms that do not demonstrate a willingness to co-operate with other actors in dealing with the presence of disinformation, hate speech or extremist content on their sites. These may require proactive communication efforts. However, the traditional format of 'counter-narratives', most frequently video content, which is often attempted as a response to Islamist terrorist and extremist communications online, not only has a 'hit and miss' impact and is largely under-evaluated, but seems poorly conceived in relation to the nature of the far-right online. The pace and tone of far-right meme warfare, harassment and trolling operations require equally agile and iterative responses: measures need to be tailored to the different sub-cultures on these platforms, to respond to their specific political or cultural grievances and to adopt linguistic and cultural elements that are appealing to them. The challenge demands a more concerted and scaled effort, which could co-ordinate a range of agile and nimble responses to disinformation, trolling and harassment campaigns.

A new set of actors should be involved in developing these ideas for interventions or communications responses, as traditional civil society organisations are not set up to reach these kinds of constituencies with the credibility needed to effect attitudinal or behavioural change. Influencers from the world of culture – sport, music, gaming – should be engaged to both inform and potentially participate in efforts to undermine or disrupt hate campaigns or influence operations, as well as to build resilience in potential target audiences of these campaigns. The Innovation Fund, a programme of work delivered in partnership by Google.org and ISD, demonstrates the broad range of actors that are already working to fight back against hate and extremism in their communities, from non-traditional settings. Many of these groups need support and resources to do that work in a better, bigger and more strategic way.

The ISD Innovation Fund has been created following a partnership between Google.org and ISD to deliver a

£1 million fund to counter hate and extremism in the UK. The fund supports innovative projects, online and offline, that seek to disrupt, undermine, counter or provide positive alternatives to hate and extremism. Recipients of grants include boxing clubs and parent networks, and projects use everything from virtual reality technology to prose, poems and photography. The Innovation Fund is designed to support new approaches, laying the foundations for a more effective, innovative and cohesive civil society response to hate and extremism in the future.

4. Research on the Evolving Threat

The EU has provided support for infrastructure and expertise on election monitoring from external threats such as Kremlin information warfare. There is now a need for an electoral interference monitor of elections taking place within the EU and to incorporate a wider range of malign influence campaigns online.

The European External Action Service has supported various bodies to monitor disinformation threats coming into East Europe, the Western Balkans and Southern Europe from foreign actors since 2015. In the new EU Commission Action Plan on Disinformation, further support is pledged for these resources.[137] However, elections are at risk not just from foreign, extra-European states. There is an urgent need to support research on information manipulation aimed at attacking electoral integrity from within Europe's borders. State actors attempting to influence elections do not work in a vacuum, and thrive in environments where domestic extremist groups provide fertile content, networks and audiences for disinformation campaigns.

> "Building resilience to deceptive and distortive uses of technology is critical in protecting young generations from a spectrum of potential harms"

Trends in the manipulation of information are constantly evolving. Governments and foundations should support ongoing, consistent analysis of these patterns in digital deception, instead of promoting a singular focus on specific election contexts. This longitudinal research could incorporate efforts to analyse broadcast media and social media together, seeking to understand the ecosystem of influence targeting specific audiences in a more comprehensive way.

Research Audiences

Researchers and practitioners in civil society require much more sophisticated understanding of the audiences vulnerable to media manipulation and disinformation online in order to better protect society from these threats. New kinds of audience analysis should be encouraged, through work with leading private-sector experts, to understand what is driving engagement with hateful and false narratives across the far-right spectrum in Europe.

A genuine mapping of the ecosystem in which disinformation, extremist content and conspiracy theories exist is more necessary than ever for challenging the narratives that underlie that material. These efforts should seek to use online and offline data to understand attitudes and grievances longitudinally. More In Common's report Hidden Tribes and Hope Not Hate's Fear, Hope and Loss are examples of research that integrates long-term analysis with data-driven insights to better map the spectrum of audiences sympathetic to far-right fear-mongering.[138] An equivalent mapping process for the online space would provide civil society activists with useful insights to build resilience in audiences that are targeted by far-right campaigns.

Data Provision and Funding

More research and real-time observations are required to fully understand where disinformation and manipulation campaigns originate, and if and how they spread among or across different audiences. Foundations have started to support long-term work in this area, including through the Election Research Commission launched in partnership with Facebook in 2018, supported by the Laura and John Arnold

Foundation, the Democracy Fund, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Charles Koch Foundation, the Omidyar Network and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.[139] This initiative demonstrates the ability of technology companies to provide more comprehensive data for expert, vetted researchers to work with in understanding the nature of these information campaigns. In October 2018, Twitter shared a database of all the accounts and related content "associated with potential information operations" found on their service since 2016.[140] Companies should continue to explore ways in which to share data safely and transparently with researchers, with all appropriate measures taken to protect privacy and user rights.

5. Proactive Democratic Integrity: Digital Citizenship
Europe should be a trailblazer in building digital civic education programmes to build resilience against online threats to safety, security and expression.

Building resilience to deceptive and distortive uses of technology is critical in protecting young generations from a spectrum of potential harms online, including disinformation, hate speech, harassment, exploitation, cyberbullying or grooming. Young people are increasingly growing up online, yet familiarity does not guarantee digital literacy. In order to build resilience among young people growing up in a world of increasing technological sophistication, governments and technology companies should support the development of programmes that go beyond online safeguarding.

Such programmes should not only attempt to promote a strong understanding of the broad spectrum of harms and risks that online users are exposed to, but also equip young people with the capacities they need to push back against them. Youth are often the strongest voices for activism and social change, but are often ill equipped to do so. Providing critical thinking and media literacy education and promoting practical digital citizenship and active democracy skills must be a cornerstone of our efforts to build and maintain positive, safe civic online spaces.

Confronting this challenge requires action from government, civil society and technology companies. For the past three years, ISD has been developing and testing pedagogical approaches and building scalable models for schools and other informal youth settings to teach digital citizenship in an engaging and effective manner. With the support of Google and national governments, ISD has trialled a range of approaches in Europe that have shown the potential role that digital citizenship education programmes can have in building a population that is resilient to established and emerging threats to democracy, free and accurate information, and online safety. These include a digital resilience curriculum for technical colleges in The Netherlands, the Young Digital Leaders initiative with students and parents in Sweden, Italy and Romania, and Be Internet Citizens with YouTube in the UK.[141] Through rigorous evaluations (including Randomised Control Trials), ISD has been able to establish the efficacy of such approaches and would encourage all governments to consider whether sufficient capacity and expertise exists within their education systems to effectively deliver in this crucial area.

In the German context, there are few comprehensive digital citizenship initiatives from Federal, State, or non-governmental sectors. Some specific programmes have looked to increase knowledge of internet skills as a whole, such as the 'klicksafe' project of the Central Authority for Media and Communication Rhineland-Palatinate (LMK).[142] The project was commissioned by the European Union as part of its Safer Internet Programme, aimed at raising the level of Internet skills among EU citizens. Niedersachsen's State Education Ministry provides some online resources for teachers and educators about 'fake news'.[143] But these efforts are generally small, specific and focused purely on safeguarding. There is an urgent need for more holistic digital citizenship programming across Germany.

There are a number of models from government work that could also serve as examples. In March 2017, the Swedish government approved reforms to the national curriculum with the aim of strengthening pupils' 'digital competency'.[144] The national curriculum now states that schools have a responsibility to 'contribute to pupils developing an understanding for how digitalisation affects the individual and society's development' and that pupils 'shall be given the possibility to develop a critical and responsible approach to digital technology, in order to be able to see possibilities and understand risks, as well as to be able to rate information'. [145]

However, while the curriculum mentions critical thinking with regards to sources, no dedicated subject has been created for the broader set of knowledge and skills which have been referred to as digital citizenship or digital resilience.

Estonia provides an example of a country that has instilled digital citizenship in the national curriculum. The Republic of Estonia's Ministry of Education and Research has incorporated a digital component in its Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020, in which education curricula will continue to include lessons on digital competence. While this primarily addresses practical and efficient use of digital technology and the internet, the definition of digital competence employed by the Ministry suggests that online citizenship is another component of this education strategy: 'Digital competence means readiness to use digital technology to cope in a rapidly changing knowledge-based society when working, studying, acting and communicating as a citizen.'[146]

The French government is pioneering an experimental approach in the classroom, working with journalists and educators to combat the spread of online misinformation. The new strategy is one of the world's largest national media and internet literacy efforts, which aims to teach students how to spot false or manipulated information online. The effort includes training teachers specifically on these topics, and the French Ministry of Culture has doubled the annual budget for courses to €6 million.[147] French NGO Rennaissance Numérique has also developed a specific set of tools relating to fact-checking, the contextualising of online data and recommendations for recognising misinformation and responding to hate speech online, in a package of work called 'Seriously'.[148]

As the digital world becomes increasingly central to our lives as citizens, European governments are adjusting their citizenship education approaches to consider citizens in an online context. Yet the scale of the response is still too small, too dependent on inconsistent delivery by civil society actors, and too focused on digital safety skills rather than attitudinal and behavioural transformation regarding the role of citizens in the online space. Additionally, while the examples outlined above seek to protect youth from the potential pitfalls of the online world, there is a distinct lack of programming that reaches out to older generations that lack basic digital knowledge and skills with the same kind of support. A recent study conducted by researchers at Princeton University and New York University suggested that on average, Facebook users over the age of 65 share nearly seven times as many articles from 'fake news domains' as the youngest age group.[149] Workplaces, both public and private, could represent useful forums for training adults in basic digital literacy and citizenship skills.

6. Regional and Local Infrastructure to Protect Regional Elections

Governments should support regional and local authorities in developing the infrastructure and expertise to deal with threats to local electoral processes and to support free and open political debate among their communities online and offline.

During regional elections, local political leaders and practitioners can find themselves at the forefront of disinformation and harassment campaigns, through both far-right online campaigns and offline mobilisation in their local communities. Lenggries is one example of such a town, as explored in this report, where a local community became the centre of a co-ordinated campaign by the German far-right.

As policymakers, people in civil society and staff in technology companies build out their initial efforts to stem attacks on elections, attention should be paid to not only the national but also the local level of political leaders and relevant practitioners. These actors, often at the forefront of community conflict and scandals, could be supported to deal with far-right online and offline mobilisation that risks affecting both city institutions and their citizens. This should include giving increased support for regional and city authorities to understand the available modes of monitoring local threats to elections or public safety, as well as equipping cities with the tools to respond adequately if they find themselves targeted online or offline.

Support Access to the Digital Tools and Knowledge to Monitor Trends and Local Threats Online

Regional and local authorities lack the tools and knowledge to monitor far-right tactics, narratives and mobilisation online. To provide them with this support and access to relevant data, funders and foundations

> Regional and local authorities lack the tools and knowledge to monitor far-right tactics, narratives and mobilisation online

should promote grants for city-level research, which could include methods of collaboration between experts and municipality leaders, particularly in vulnerable areas. Researchers should also consider the need to support cities in mapping far-right dynamics between local groups and the broader national and international far-right ecosystem.

Develop Strategic Communications and post Incidence Response Support

Regional and local authorities require support for better local communication plans when they find themselves targeted. Private-sector partners could provide local leaders with the tools to help them respond to incidents in a way that does not polarise local communities and reaches across online audiences through ad tech marketing, communications and content creation support.

Resources and best practices: Networks like ISD's Strong Cities Network (SCN) can be leveraged to promote training and tactical recommendations on how to respond to disinformation or smear campaigns at the local level. Other SCN toolkits could serve as templates for such a resource. Networks like SCN could also be used as exchange forums for cities to connect the dots on best practices in dealing with these threats to regional democratic processes and community cohesion, with other national or international cities.

Connect Local Leaders with Local Media and Support Accurate Reporting on Local Events and Incidents

In an evolving technological landscape, traditional local journalism is on the decline. However, evidence-based local reporting plays a role in supporting cohesion and conflict prevention in local settings, and providing a source for accurate information to interested parties nationally or internationally. This can help to provide an alternative to any misinformation and disinformation circulating about local incidents, which we have often seen picked up by far-right or Kremlin-sponsored media outlets to push a broader agenda. In order to try to prevent the misrepresentation of local level incidents at the national or international level, communication and collaboration between local leaders and any remaining local media institutions on the ground should be sought where possible. Initiatives to support local journalism should include training on disinformation and media manipulation in order to bolster resilience to groups that seek to manipulate local incidents for broader national or international narratives.

Endnotes

1 *See September 2018 polls, in which AfD are estimated at 18% of the vote, and therefore the second-largest party; see https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend-1381.html.*

2 *The AfD is often noted to have both 'moderate' and 'far-right' wings, the latter of which include representatives who have expressed racist and xenophobic comments. See https://www.thelocal.de/20160927/how-far-right-are-the-afd. The term far-right in this report is used in reference to groups or individuals that exhibit at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy. This definition is based on the criteria outlined by far-right expert Cas Mudde, associate professor at the University of Georgia and researcher at Oslo University's Centre for Research on Extremism. This can be found in Cas Mudde, 'Right□wing extremism analysed: A comparative analysis of the ideologies of three alleged right□wing extremist parties', European Journal of Political Research, 27(2), 1995, pp. 218-219. Party-branded materials from the AfD in 2018 can be seen to fall within the first three of these categories including the party's own statements on immigration on the official website: "Der Islam gehort nicht zu Deutschland." Cas Mudde stated in an interview in German news outlet The Local in September 2016 that the AfD fell within his academic definition of far-right: "Yes, I think the AfD is part of the far-right... More specifically, the populist radical right, which combines nativism, authoritarianism, and populism." The quotation is taken from Emma Anderson, 'The AfD - is it fair to call them a far-right party?', The Local, 27 September 2016, https://www.thelocal.de/20160927/how-far-right-are-the-afd. However, ISD does not state that the AfD party as a whole represents far-right views, as the party represents a broad spectrum of right-wing to far-right policies and representatives.*

3 *Coverage of the stabbing and the subsequent protests can be found at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-45328477 and https://www.dw.com/en/violence-in-chemnitz-a-timeline-of-events/a-45262531.*

4 *See https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/657808/umfrage/umfrage-zur-den-wichtigsten-politischen-problemen-in-bayern/.*

5 *See https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/wahl-bayern-analyse-101.html.*

6 *A. Applebaum, P. Pomerantsev, M. Smith and C Colliver, '"Make Germany Great Again": Kremlin, Alt-Right and International Influences in the 2017 German Elections', ISD and LSE Arena, 2017, pp. 12–13.*

7 *https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/14/bavaria-poll-humiliation-for-angela-merkel-conservative-allies.*

8 *There would be (albeit imperfect) ways to understand better the contributing factors to voting patterns in the age of social media campaigning. Polling companies already undertake post-election analysis on why people voted in certain ways, largely seeking to understand the issues most crucial in dictating voter behaviour. Such models could be reoriented to find out the information sources fundamental to those decisions, enabling some understanding of the prescience of online content and, potentially, disinformation on electoral outcomes.*

9 *See https://faculty.washington.edu/kstarbi/examining-trolls-polarization.pdf, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/sep/10/russian-trolls-tweets-cited-in-more-than-100-uk-news-articles and https://www.vox.com/2018/10/19/17990946/twitter-russian-trolls-bots-election-tampering.*

10 *See https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/12/russian-influence-looms-over-french-election.*

11 *Samantha Bradshaw, Lisa-Maria Neudert, Philip N. Howard, 'Government Responses to Malicious Uses of Social Media', NATO STRATCOM COE, 2018, p. 4. Also see Daniel Funke, "A Guide to Anti-Misinformation Actions around the World," Poynter, 31 October 2018, https://www.poynter.org/news/guide-anti-misinformationactions-around-world.*

12 *For the Irish Online Advertising and Social Media (Transparency) Bill 2017, see https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/bill/2017/150/. For California Senate Bill No. 1001, see https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180SB1001.*

13 *For the German Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz law, see https://www.bmjv.de/SharedDocs/Gesetzgebungsverfahren/DE/NetzDG.html.*

14 *Cas Mudde, 'Right-wing extremism analysed: A comparative analysis of the ideologies of three alleged right-wing extremist parties', European Journal of Political Research, 27(2), 1995, pp. 218-219.*

15 *For recent research examining online traffic manipulation, see Ben Nimmo, 'Measuring Traffic Manipulation on Twitter', Working Paper, Project on Computational Propaganda, 2018, https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/01/Manipulating-Twitter-Traffic.pdf.*

16 *Cas Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist', Government and Opposition, 39 (4), 2004, pp. 541–563.*

17 *See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bavarian_state_election,_2018#Election_result.*

18 *See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landtag_of_Bavaria#Election_results_1946%E2%80%932018.*

19 *For summaries of the scandal surrounding Maaßen and his departure from the BfV, see https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/verfassungsschutzpraesident-maassen-wird-zum-staatssekretaer-befoerdert/23083190.html, https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2018-09/hans-georg-maassen-bericht-desinformation-antifa-zeckenbiss, https://edition.cnn.com/2018/09/18/europe/germany-spy-chief-removed-from-post-grm-intl/index.html and https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/18/germanys-domestic-spy-chief-hans-georg-maassen-chemnitz.*

20 *Research from the Oxford Internet Institute showed that approximately 25% of shared content related to the midterm elections can be classified as 'junk news', compared with 19% of shared content that is created by professional news outlets. Less than 5% of shared content came from government agencies, experts or the candidates themselves in the dataset of Twitter and Facebook messages under study. See https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/11/midterms-cover.jpg. For details of the definitions, see https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/11/midterms_supplement.pdf.*

21 *On the German Federal Election 2017, see Applebaum et al., '"Make Germany Great Again"', op. cit., p. 12. On the French Presidential Election 2017, see Ben Nimmo, 'The Kremlin's Audience in France', Medium, 14 April 2017, https://medium.com/dfrlab/the-kremlins-audience-in-france-884a80515f8b. On the US Presidential Election 2016, see US District Court for the District of Columbia, 'Internet Research Agency Indictment', 2018, p. 4.*

22 *For example, Facebook discovered information campaigns linked to Iran in August 2018; see Financial Times, 22 August 2018, https://www.ft.com/content/387df03c-a5a1-11e8-8ecf-a7ae1beff35b.*

23 *According to investigations by German news outlet T-Online, which interviewed Redfish boss Lizzie Phelan, "Redfish is part of the state-run Russian media company Rossiya Sewodnja… it is a wholly owned subsidiary of video agency Ruptly, which in turn belongs to RT, formerly Russia Today", https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/gesellschaft/id_84584050/mitten-in-berlin-russlands-heimliche-medienzentrale-in-europa.html. On a blog on the company's own site, the owner makes this relationship clear: "Yes, redfish's funding comes from Ruptly, a news agency owned by RT", 14 February 2018, https://redfish.media/the-journey-begins/. Some staff at the media outlet also previously worked for RT, as demonstrated by journalism conducted by The Daily Beast; see https://www.thedailybeast.com/grassroots-media-startup-redfish-is-supported-by-the-kremlin. The Times also published evidence of Redfish's Russian state support at https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/company-behind-grenfell-youtube-film-has-links-to-kremlin-k9bqlk6mf. As NBC reported in April 2018, In the Now is also a subsidiary of RT: "In the Now, an imitation of popular startup NowThis News that has its own section of RT.com, stripped all of its RT branding from its channels in 2016. It also registered its website, InTheNow.Media, using RT's domain registration address in 2016. On Twitter, In the Now changed its username from @InTheNowRT to @InTheNow_Tweet in June of 2016. Its pages make no reference of the media brand's ties to the Russian government." See https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/russian-propaganda-evades-youtube-s-flagging-system-buzzfeed-style-knockoffs-n867431. Buzzfeed also published the link between In The Now and RT in reporting in December 2016: https://www.buzzfeed.com/ishmaeldaro/quirky-viral-video-channel-is-funded-by-the-russian-govt.*

24 *Quotation taken from a Twitter thread by Ben Nimmo, commenting on analysis of suspected Internet Research Agency accounts active in the US midterm elections online that were removed by Facebook; see https://twitter.com/benimmo/status/1062416441406828545?s=20.*

25 *On the German Federal Election 2017, see Applebaum et al., '"Make Germany Great Again"', op. cit., p. 12. On the French Presidential Election 2017, see Nimmo, 'The Kremlin's Audience in France', op. cit. On the US Presidential Election 2016, see US District Court for the District of Columbia, 'Internet Research Agency Indictment', 2018, p. 4.*

26 *See Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner, 'The Fringe Insurgency: Connectivity, Convergence and Mainstreaming of the Extreme Right', London: ISD, 2017, p. 22; Philip Kreißel, Julia Ebner et al., 'Hass auf Knopfdruck: Trollfabriken und das Ökosystem koordinierter Hasskampagnen im Netz', London: ISD, 2018.*

27 *Germany passed a law – the Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz or Network Enforcement Act – in June 2017, enacted in January 2018, mandating fines of up to €50 million for commercial social networks online with over 2 million users that systemically fail to take down content deemed illegal under national German law within 24 hours of being identified.*

28 *For example, see 'Germany: The Act to Improve Enforcement of the Law in Social Networks', Article 19, August 2017, https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/170901-Legal-Analysis-German-NetzDG-Act.pdf, and 'Germany: Flawed Social Media Law', Human Rights Watch, 14 February 2018, https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/14/germany-flawed-social-media-law.*

29 *For Facebook see https://fbnewsroomus.files.wordpress.com/2018/07/facebook_netzdg_july_2018_english-1.pdf; for Google see https://transparencyreport.google.com/netzdg/youtube.*

30 *See https://www.tagesspiegel.de/medien/reconquista-internet-jan-boehmermanns-liebestrolle-und-ihr-kampf-gegen-hass/22862580.html.*

31 *Psy-Ops is short for psychological operations, a form of psychological warfare, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as, 'A noncombative military operation intended to influence the morale or attitude of one's opponent'. On the German Federal Election 2017, see Applebaum et al., '"Make Germany Great Again"', op. cit. On the Italian election, see 'Mainstreaming Mussolini: How the Extreme Right Attempted to "Make Italy Great Again" in the 2018 Italian Election', ISD, 2018, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Mainstreaming-Mussolini-Report-28.03.18.pdf. On the French election, see Ben Nimmo, '"Macron Antoinette": Alt-Right Targets France: How Nationalist Internet Users Are Going International', DFR Lab, Medium, 29 April 2017, https://medium.com/dfrlab/macron-antoinette-alt-right-targets-france-f5e5dcee5cfe.*

32 *See https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/167922831/.*

33 *See https://pastebin.com/raw/jpBzKTq8. Pastebin is a website where you can store and share text online anonymously, and is mainly used by programmers to store pieces of sources code or configuration information.*

34 *Karolin Schwarz, 'Diese AfD-Spitzenkandidatin macht auf Facebook Werbung mit einem Angriff auf einen Journalisten', Buzzfeed, 12 October 2018, https://www.buzzfeed.com/de/karolinschwarz/afd-katrin-ebner-steiner-angriff-journalisten-niederbayern.*

35 *See https://pastebin.com/raw/jpBzKTq8.*

36 *Tesfu, Tarik, 'Tarik's AfD-Krise', YouTube, 23 May 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t10Q6LrWcEo.*

37 *'Tariks AFD-Krise I Und das Deutsche VOLK Existiert DOCH Tarik!', Eulenfeder Blickpunkt, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQxFVt0R3nc. In this first example, the account that created the video explicitly asks users to refrain from hate speech and states that such comments will be deleted, yet the comments section contains mostly comments that would constitute hate speech against migrants and ethnic minorities. Examples include: "Es ist Tarik, er braucht keine Argumente um Fördergelder ab zu sahnen xd" ("It's Tarik, he does not need [to bring forward] arguments to skim aid money"), "Wer hat dem Tarik ins Gehirn geschissen. Ein brauner erzählt was von braunen. Nur Scheiße in der Birne" ("Who has shat into Tarik's brain. A brown one talks about brown ones. Only shit in his head"), "Bei dem Typen kann*

man nur zum Nazi werden" ("With this guy, one has no choice but become a Nazi") and "Weißt du Migrant ohne Charakter und Anstand, daß die Vorfahren der Deutschen, Germanen und Kelten waren, die seit mehr als 2000 Jahren hier Leben? Es waren eben keine Turkmenen/Araber/Ägypter/Juden/Afrikaner/Inder/ Chinesen die hier Gesiedelt haben!! Der Deutschen Vorfahren waren WEISS und nicht Vielfarbig!!!!!!!!!!" ("Do you know, migrant without character and decency, that the ancestors of the Germans were Germanic and Celts who have been living here for more than 2000 years? They were not Turkmen/Arabs/Egyptians/Jews/ Africans/Indians/Chinese who have settled here!! The German ancestors were WHITE and not Multicoloured !!!!!!!!!!"). The second video can be found at https:// www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfG_1UOSvMM.

38 *Müller posted the following on Twitter, alongside his call to join the anti-AfD protest: "My horror is no justification for your hatred. I'm tired of the fact that again and again there are groups, in Freiburg and elsewhere, who try to politically exploit our grief and horror over terrible crimes", https://twitter.com/sbamueller/ status/1055944884543217664. The case under questions consists of the trial of currently ten suspects, initially eight, seven of them from Syria, for the alleged group rape of an 18-year-old girl; see https://www.zeit. de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2018-10/freiburg-demonstrationen-afd-vergewaltigung-polizei and https://www.augsburger-allgemeine.de/panorama/ Polizei-sucht-nach-Gruppen-Vergewaltigung-weitere-Verdaechtige-id52595556.html.*

39 *See https://philosophia-perennis.com/2018/10/27/ sebastian-mueller-freiburg/: "Auch dass er seinen Aufzug auf dem Platz der Alten Synagoge plant, zeigt, wie unsensibel er den Opfern der Massen-Immigration gegenüber ist: Gehören doch die Juden – neben Homo- und Transsexuellen, Frauen und Ex- Muslimen – zu den Opfergruppen, die unter der mit der Immigration untrennbar verbundenen Islamisierung unseres Landes am meisten leiden." There are details of these articles from blog Philosophia Perennis and YouTube videos in the fact-check article from Faktenfinder: https:// faktenfinder.tagesschau.de/inland/fakes-ueber-gruene-101.html.*

40 *Note: This was shared by Jens Eckleben, Deputy in the District Council North of the AfD in Hamburg, with the caption '#GrüneVersenken (#SinkTheGreens)… #BMW statt Rikscha. Bikini statt #Burka' ('#BMW instead of rickshaw. Bikini instead of #burqa') the day of the Bavarian elections; see https://twitter.com/Eckleben/ status/1051408917706788866/photo/1.*

41 *Translation: "Love doesn't know age. Union '68 the paedophiles'."*

42 *Examples of rape threats and sexual threats have not been provided given their graphic nature.*

43 *These channels include Sergeant Meinungsfrei2 at https://www.youtube.com/channel/ UCdOgr75R7yPH8yu982JwpXw, HYPERION at https:// www.youtube.com/channel/UCh40LgKPHICxnUk-o86Eetw/videos and Pantoffelheld at https://www. youtube.com/channel/UClhu3XcgiqGj3kr5BoaDloA.*

44 *Translation: "Why do you like Katharina Schulze from the GREENS? Are there any more memes? Dish the dirt, Krauts! See for yourselves."*

45 *Translation: "SPD THE WE DECIDES – WE FOR EUROPE"; FAZ article on president of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the grand opening of the Cologne Central Mosque, http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ inland/ditib-erdogan-eroeffnet-zentralmoschee-in-koeln-15795184.html.*

46 *The article mentioned 'Germans' or 'Lenggrieser' and 'refugees' as the target groups. It stated, "Ten to 15 young men from Syria, Eritrea and Afghanistan have so far registered for the event. Ehrhart expects a total of 30 to 40 participants between 18 and 25 years"; see https://www.merkur.de/lokales/bad-toelz/ lenggries-ort28977/innovative-idee-speed-dating-mit-fluechtlingen-und-jungen-lenggriesern-10111334.html.*

47 *https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/ wolfratshausen/shitstorm-in-lenggries-afd-attackiert-buergermeister-1.4099400. From the context of the article, it is suggested that this information came from the mayor of Lenggries himself.*

48 *There were several stories on these sites about what happened at Lenggries, for example: http://www. pi-news.net/2018/08/lenggries-speed-dating-zwischen-fluechtlingen-und-deutschen/, http://www. anonymousnews.ru/2018/08/14/pervers-asylhelfer-fordern-deutsche-maedchen-zum-speed-dating-mit-illegalen-auf/ and https://www.journalistenwatch. com/2018/08/17/protest-speed-dating/. These sites each host examples of anti-refugee content, for example: http://www.pi-news.net/2018/08/*

nackter-schwarzer-errichtet-strassensperre-in-thalham-bei-holzkirchen/, http://www.pi-news.net/2019/01/muslimische-babyboomer-sorgen-fuer-gesellschaftlichen-radikalumbau/, http://www.pi-news.net/2018/12/marrakesch-merkel-besiegelt-deutschlands-ende/, http://www.anonymousnews.ru/2019/01/11/ueber-40-000-deutsche-opfer-pro-jahr-kriminalstatistik-legt-straftaten-von-zuwanderern-offen/, http://www.anonymousnews.ru/2019/01/09/gruener-wahnsinn-fluechtlinge-sollen-fuer-2-100-euro-monatlich-zuege-in-baden-wuerttemberg-fahren/, http://www.anonymousnews.ru/2018/12/15/bundesregierung-wir-wollen-bis-ende-des-jahres-so-viele-migranten-wie-moeglich-nach-deutschland-holen/, https://www.journalistenwatch.com/2019/01/15/die-helfer-massenmigration/, https://www.journalistenwatch.com/2019/01/15/siegen-fluechtlinge-hartziv/, and https://www.journalistenwatch.com/2019/01/06/migranten-auf-brautschau/.

49 *Articles and commentary about the Lenggries event that portrayed it as a threat to German girls' safety were identified on LesObservateurs.ch, DeutscheLobbyInfo.com, Diversity macht frei, Haunebu7's blog, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, VK, Gab, QlobalChange, Daily Stormer, PI-News, JournalistenWatch, Anonymous.ru, BRD-Schwindel.ru, Politikversagen.net, Freies Europa Free Europe, Bayern ist FREI, Vitzli's Neuer, Quotenqueen, Politisches Tagebuch von Dan Godan aka Karate Tiger, Abakus.News, Jürgen Damm Nachrichtenverteiler and Unzensuriert.at*

50 *From PI-News article, http://www.pi-news.net/2018/08/lenggries-speed-dating-zwischen-fluechtlingen-und-deutschen/: "This meat inspection for young, strength- and semen-brimming Mohammedans from Syria, Eritrea and Afghanistan takes place this evening from 8pm... How many more rapes and murders have to happen in Germany until such types as Ehrhart wake up?... This unscrupulous social experiment must be fought out by the young girls, who one can already feel sorry for. We all do not want to hope that a girl from Lenggries will have to 'enrich' this gallery in the near future" ("Diese Fleischbeschau für junge, kraft- und samenstrotzende Mohammedaner aus Syrien, Eritrea und Afghanistan findet heute Abend ab 20 Uhr statt... Wie viele Vergewaltigungen und Morde müssen eigentlich in Deutschland noch passieren, bis auch solche Typen wie Ehrhart aufwachen?... Ausbaden müssen dieses gewissenlose Gesellschafts-Experiment die jungen Mädchen, die einem schon jetzt leid tun können. Wir alle wollen nicht hoffen, dass demnächst ein Mädchen aus Lenggries diese Galerie 'bereichern' muss"). A blogpost on Politisches Tagebuch von Dan Godan aka Karate Tiger states: "Refugees in the Bavarian town of Lenggries want more contact with local youth. Despite the murders of Mia V. in Kandel, Maria L. in Freiburg, Susanna F. in Wiesbaden and Mireille B. in Flensburg by asylum seekers, welcome-drunk refugee helpers do not stop the highly dangerous coupling. Their insane idea: speed dating with refugees and young German girls."*

51 *See https://twitter.com/afd_bayern/status/1029033487653892096?lang=en.*

52 *https://www.facebook.com/afd.bayern/posts/1742050482579211. The AfD Bayern post links the event in Lenggries to the 2017 murder of Mia V. in Kandel.*

53 *Translation: "'Mrs. Ehrhardt [sic] would like to'... Previously called that pimping and Puffmutter... What used to be disreputable today is sponsored by the government. Perhaps Merkel should declare war on Russia, so that there will finally be a real liberation" and "Annette Ehrhart could have matched her ideology-driven 'do-gooderness' with the reality of Mia V., Maria L., Susanna F. and Mireille B., who all fell victim to such do-gooders and were murdered by asylum seekers. Just bring the lambs to the wolves, then Kandel will send its regards. Mia from Kandel fell victim to just this kind of initiative and it was not an isolated case. We assume that we will see Mrs. Ehrhardt [sic], now that there is some headwind, at the 'victim Olympics', complaining about the opinion of the 'right'."*

54 *See Volkslehrer video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pb8gxE2gakI&t=46s: "I just had to throw up. 'Diversity in the [garden] bed and in the bed'. The Greens – they don't shy away from anything do they? How stupid is this! No, actually it's super, it's wonderful and actually if we take this seriously then also the activity that will take place tonight is to be much appreciated. Because there will be a speed-dating in Lenggries", Freies Europa Free Europe blog post, http://karlmartell732.blogspot.com/2018/08/refugee-speed-dating-in-oberbayern-viel.html. Quotation used originally in German: "So so, ein 'speed dating' in Lenggries haben die GRÜNEN zu veranstalten versucht. Junge männliche Asylbewerber sollten damit auf deutsche junge Mädchen treffen, das ganze unter*

dem Motto 'Vielfalt im Bett und im Bett' Den GRÜNEN ist klar, dass die 'Vielfalt im Bett' unter Umständen von den jungen Mädchen mit dem Leben bezahlt werden könnte."

55 *For example, on 30 September 2018 the page administrators posted an article from the website www.rapefugees.net, https://www.facebook.com/groups/1533273136901356/permalink/2328819560680039.*

56 *One example of the conspiracy theory content hosted by the page is an article about the '70 year master plan for Europe' directed by the New World Order, which alleges that the UK is under 'martial law' and that 'thousands of soldiers are patrolling the street of Germany and Sweden' to deal with migrant crime. The article positions Putin as the critic of this New World Order masterplan; see https://deutschelobbyinfo.com/2018/09/21/putin-sagt-deutlich-ich-lasse-es-nicht-zu-das-meine-brueder-und-schwestern-in-deutschland-und-eu-wegen-einer-globalen-elite-abgeschlachtet-werden-durch-illegale-eindringlinge/. The article was posted by the group on Facebook on 22 September 2018, https://www.facebook.com/groups/1234837869/permalink/2324466914448637. Here is another example of content hosted by the group that is positive about Putin and his policies in Russia, which uses sources supported by Kremlin funding such as RT Deutschland and RT: https://www.facebook.com/groups/1533273136901356/permalink/2335957143299614.*

57 *AfD-branded content was used to promote the protest on Facebook, for example https://www.facebook.com/alternativefuerde/photos/a.542889462408064/2012809472082715/?type=3&theater&ifg=1. The Pegida Bayern page on Facebook hosted live coverage from the Kandel ist Überall protest in Lenggries; see https://www.facebook.com/pegidaevbayern/posts/d41d8cd9/2053116254706753/.*

58 *Event promotion included Facebook posts on the public page of Kandel ist Überall, advertised in August 2018: https://www.facebook.com/Kandelistueberall/photos/a.150428409634940 7/1728964407214707/?type=3&theater.*

59 *News about the Lenggries event was shared on the Qlobal-Change site at https://qlobal-change.blogspot.com/search?q=Lenggries. The term 'Lenggries Protest' had been mentioned in 48 public VK posts when measured on 24 October 2018.*

60 *See https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/wolfratshausen/shitstorm-in-lenggries-afd-attackiert-buergermeister-1.4099400.*

61 *These examples have not been included because of their graphic nature; they were aimed at numerous targets, including the Green Party, the organiser, refugees and Muslim women. Some hateful comments and threats included calls to action including, "Rise up, Germany!"*

62 *On conspiracy theories spread during the Brexit referendum campaign about rigged votes, see Graeme Demianyk, 'EU Referendum Conspiracy Theory Believed by Half of "Brexit" Supporters, Says YouGov Poll', Huffington Post, 21 June 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/eu-referendum-rigged_uk_57691efee4b01fb65864173f. On the US Midterm Elections, see Dune Lawrence, 'Twitter Study Finds Coordinated Pattern in Posts About Purported Voter Fraud', Washington Post, 3 November 2018, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-11-03/twitter-study-finds-coordinated-pattern-in-vote-fraud-messages. On the German Federal Election 2017, see p. 12.*

63 *For example, in the Swedish Election of September 2018, both far-right and Islamist groups produced content that sought to undermine election integrity by sewing doubt on the fairness of the processes or by trying to discourage citizens from voting. See C. Colliver, P. Pomerantsev, A. Applebaum and Jonathan Birdwell, Smearing Sweden, ISD, 2018, pp. 23–26.*

64 *The same website was used for the election fraud and election monitoring campaigns of 2017 as was used in the 2018 Bavarian and Hessen State Elections https://wahlbeobachtung.de/. Specific content relating to the 2017 Bundestagswahl efforts can be found online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nByMrn5xPBY.*

65 *See https://wahlbeobachtung.de/.*

66 *The explicit invitation of non-Jews can be found on 4chan, not on the 'election observation' website of Ein Prozent.*

67 See https://wahlbeobachtung.de/wahlbeobachtung/media/Leitfaden_zur_Wahlbeobachtung.pdf.

68 See https://blog.halle-leaks.de/2018/10/vorprogrammierter-wahlbetrug-in-bayern-fehlende-briefwahlstimmen-werden-mit-gruen-aufgefuellt/.

69 This article was shared by public Facebook groups including Politisches Chaos in Deutschland und Europa, Die Patriotische Vernetzung beginnt!!!!! and Völker dieser Welt erheben sich!!. Each hosts public content that includes xenophobic, racist and anti-Muslim sentiment.

70 Some of the recent conspiracy theories spread by Tim K. included that far-right protestors in Chemnitz were paid by the government as agent provocateurs and that George Soros was responsible for the migration crisis; see https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOQFfcGRc886dXP2Oyt5OEg/videos. One example of conspiracy theory content posted by Oliver Janich includes this discussion over whether the actor 'Q' in the QAnon conspiracy theory network might be John F. Kennedy Jr: https://www.youtube.com/user/OliverJanich/videos.

71 Applebaum et al., '"Make Germany Great Again"', op. cit., pp. 12–13.

72 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZjDhuplfoQ8.

73 Colliver et al., Smearing Sweden, op. cit., pp. 32–33.

74 See https://wiki.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/AltRightOpenIntelligenceInitiative.

75 Davey and Ebner, 'The Fringe Insurgency'.

76 For this research, ISD used Crimson Hexagon as a social media listening tool. Crimson Hexagon's location methodology can be found at https://help.crimsonhexagon.com/hc/en-us/articles/203952525. Crimson Hexagon included both geotagged posts (whereby users have chosen to share their location publicly for a specific post) and non-geotagged posts, for which Crimson Hexagon uses indicators such as profile location, time zones and language. This gives a level of 90% accuracy for estimating a country of origin of a piece of public social media content. When no match is found, the location filter does not make a prediction; the locations of such posts are labelled as 'unknown' and are excluded from the geographic data used in the analysis. However, users are able to use virtual private networks and other technology to mark their location as false, which should be taken into account as a caveat in any use of geolocation for social media analysis.

77 Translation: "Merkel must go. A great speech by Mr.Gauland."

78 Translation: "The world is waking up! Inform yourself now about QAnon – Or do you want to be the last one?!"

79 For example, members shared the following 'q-branded' video on the Discord and 4chan boards: 'Q – The Plan To Save The World, 26 June 2018, https://prepareforchange.net/2018/06/26/q-the-plan-to-save-the-world/.

80 For example, they shared the following video: 'Merkel & Merz gegen Putin? Deutschland & Russland die Opfer gleicher Täter. Die EU der Eliten', 23 October 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dR4Jk0oA890.

81 For example, links to the following videos were shared: 'Alcyon Pleyaden 72: Korrupte Politiker, Marionettenregierungen, weiche Staatsstreiche, Immigranten', 5 July 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFLUhDN2OAM&feature=share, and 'Wach auf | Heftiges Video | Die Wahrheit', 11 September 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgEkSGku_PM.

82 Members of the channel share links to Reichsbürger Rechschutzversicherung and speak about the illegitimacy of the 'criminal' German state.

83 Examples of content posted on the channel include: 'Reichsbürger Rechtschutzversicherung – was ist da los?', 26 June 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ed7Y-HGGfv0.

84 For example, the Discord group QAnon Deutschland often shares links to journalistenwatch.com, tichyseinblick.de and silberjunge.de.

85 Hatreon is an example of a tech platform built to support the aims of the far-right, in this example through supporting their crowd-funding efforts; see https://techcrunch.com/2017/12/12/how-hate-speech-crowdfunding-outfit-hatreon-crept-back-online/. Another example is Patriot Peer, a platform

currently in development by supporters of Generation Identity, https://patriot-peer.com/en/f-a-q/. Updates about the development of the Patriot Peer platform can be found on leader Martin Sellner's YouTube channel, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3T4ACEue_I. Another example of a purpose-built new tech platform is an app called QDrops, which provided updates on the QAnon conspiracy theory; it has now been removed from the Apple App Store for violating Apple's terms of service, see https://9to5mac.com/2018/07/16/apple-QAnon-conspiracy-theory-app/. On the other hand, some sites were not built with the intention of supporting such movements but have been taken up as tools nonetheless, for example libertarian micro-blog platform Gab, https://gab.ai/about/guidelines, or video hosting platform BitChute, https://www.bitchute.com/policy/guidelines/.

86 There are a number of reasons why there is limited enforcement of terms of service, some of which are capacity-related, some of which are expertise-related, and some of which may be related to maintaining users and traffic on sites. Coverage on some of these sites and their limited enforcement of terms of service includes examples related to Gab and 4chan: 'On Gab, an Extremist-Friendly Site, Pittsburgh Shooting Suspect Aired His Hatred in Full', The New York Times, 28 October 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/28/us/gab-robert-bowers-pittsburgh-synagogue-shootings.html; Buni, Catherine and Soraya Chemaly, 'The Secret Rules of the Internet', The Verge, 2016, https://www.theverge.com/2016/4/13/11387934/internet-moderator-history-youtube-facebook-reddit-censorship-free-speech; and Caitlin Dewey, 'Absolutely Everything You Need to Know to Understand 4chan, the Internet's Own Bogeyman', Washington Post, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/09/25/absolutely-everything-you-need-to-know-to-understand-4chan-the-internets-own-bogeyman/?utm_term=.ed74622b8787.

87 See https://gab.ai/about/guidelines.

88 Criticisms of the site have been published in articles such as: A. Ohlheiser and Ian Shapira, 'Gab, the White Supremacist Sanctuary Linked to the Pittsburgh Suspect, Goes Offline (for Now)', Washington Post, 29 October 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2018/10/28/how-gab-became-white-supremacist-sanctuary-before-it-was-linked-pittsburgh-suspect/, and Kevin Roose, 'On Gab, an Extremist-Friendly Site, Pittsburgh Shooting Suspect Aired His Hatred in Full', The New York Times, 28 October 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/28/us/gab-robert-bowers-pittsburgh-synagogue-shootings.html.

89 See Roose, 'On Gab, an Extremist-Friendly Site, Pittsburgh Shooting Suspect Aired His Hatred in Full'.

90 For example, one Gab user wrote: "ONE day after the lost election in Bavaria... the Merkel regime starts airlift transfer of ISIS/Alien – #Invaders from Greece to germany to KILL us, the culture, the nation and afterwards EUROPE! All men!!!!! KIllers? You wonder? WE WONDER?"

91 See https://www.wired.com/story/minds-anti-facebook/.

92 See Minds' terms of service: 'Minds software and services are designed to give you as much control and ownership over your social experience as possible and to encourage you to express yourself freely', https://www.minds.com/p/terms.

93 Minds, 'Terms of Service, 2 Responsibility of Registered Users', https://www.minds.com/p/terms.

94 See https://www.buzzfeed.com/de/karstenschmehl/fakes-desinformation-chemnitz-sachsen-afd-falschinformation?utm_term=.gdq41A8el#.jrjJP6lzM.

95 'Der Grosse Strategiewechsel', Reconquista Germanica, BitChute, 1 September 2018, https://www.bitchute.com/video/NoLWWhFN1gQV/.

96 Ibid., Reconquista Germanica, BitChute.

97 See https://twitter.com/emilygorcenski/status/1061042137020751874?s=12.

98 Applebaum et al., '"Make Germany Great Again"', op. cit., p. 8.

99 Peter Brinkmann, 'Seehofer in Moskau: Ein Netter Besuch, Mehr Aber Nicht', Russia Beyond the Headlines, 17 March 2017, https://de.rbth.com/deutschland_und_russland/politik_und_wirtschaft/2017/03/17/seehofer-in-moskau-ein-netterbesuch-mehr-aber-nicht_721941.

100 Simon Kaminski, 'Was finden die Deutschen nur an Putin?', Augsburger Allgemeine, 21 April 2018, https://www.augsburger-allgemeine.de/politik/Was-finden-die-Deutschen-nur-an-Putin-id50915266.html?fbclid=IwAR01T18Gk4g3-qDOdvx9X3BWwxpBs8TefGTK0DoGqXu-Wozio6Ef0wjcugA.

101 Applebaum et al., '"Make Germany Great Again"', op. cit., p. 35.

102 As some of these topics overlap in RT Deutsch content, we focused on what was ascertained as the primary topic of each piece of video content.

103 Colliver et al., Smearing Sweden, op. cit., pp. 12–14.

104 See https://deutsch.rt.com/europa/76930-naivitat-deutschen-behorden-macht-sprachlos/.

105 See https://www.afdbundestag.de/frohnmaier-die-bundesregierung-sabotiert-den-wiederaufbau-syriens/.

106 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnQji102CN0&t=4s.

107 See https://deutsch.rt.com/der-nahe-osten/75115-konfrontation-in-syrien-russische-marine/.

108 See https://www.dw.com/en/german-far-right-afd-politicians-travel-to-syria-in-effort-to-send-back-refugees/a-42846789.

109 See https://www.dw.com/en/syria-is-a-safe-country-say-german-afd-lawmakers-after-visit/a-43044220.

110 See https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201810121068829359-germany-bavarian-election-csu/.

111 Ibid.

112 See https://de.sputniknews.com/zeitungen/20180801321800238-islamisierung-europas-unter-hitler/.

113 See https://lenta.ru/articles/2018/07/31/islam_europe/.

114 See https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/gesellschaft/id_84584050/mitten-in-berlin-russlands-heimliche-medienzentrale-in-europa.html and https://www.thedailybeast.com/grassroots-media-startup-redfish-is-supported-by-the-kremlin and https://www.thedailybeast.com/grassroots-media-startup-redfish-is-supported-by-the-kremlin.

115 On the gilets jaunes, see https://www.facebook.com/Redfishstream/videos/1654480577986089/ and https://www.facebook.com/Redfishstream/videos/2275993926002906/. On Grenfell, see https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/company-behind-grenfell-youtube-film-has-links-to-kremlin-k9bqlk6mf and https://www.thedailybeast.com/grassroots-media-startup-redfish-is-supported-by-the-kremlin.

116 See https://www.facebook.com/Redfishstream/videos/2024183414336870/.

117 See https://www.facebook.com/pg/Redfishstream/about/?ref=page_internal.

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