

# ISD

Powering solutions  
to extremism  
and polarisation

2019 EU Elections

## Information

## Operations Analysis:

## Interim Briefing Paper

Institute for Strategic Dialogue





ABOUT THIS PAPER	<b>03</b>
WE'RE ALL RUSSIAN NOW	<b>04</b>
FROM INFORMATION WARFARE TO NARRATIVE COMPETITION	<b>06</b>
THE HATE SPEECH ELECTION	<b>09</b>
TECH COMPANY RESPONSES	<b>12</b>
THE LONG TERM PICTURE	<b>13</b>



# About this paper

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**This paper addresses the groups and parties behind the malign influence operations active in the 2019 EU elections and analyses the techniques they use. It also assesses the record of the tech companies in addressing these threats to electoral integrity. A full report is to be published in the coming weeks.**

What role do covert digital propaganda campaigns play in this European election? Who is behind malign influence operations, which techniques do they use and what are tech companies doing about them? Are we seeing a repeat of the 2016 US elections, or are new threats disrupting democracy?

During the election campaign ISD have employed a mix of social media mapping, undercover online reporting, media monitoring and policy analysis to track covert influence campaigns in the UK, Germany, Spain, France, Poland and Italy. Our analysis shows that new actors are taking advantage of the lawlessness of the internet, often aligned with hostile states such as Russia, as well as American special interests, but also creating their own, Pan-European campaigns.

Populist political parties, far-right cyber militias and religious groups are

adapting the tactics more notoriously used by states. These tactics are often brazen, crude and sometimes easy to detect. But at the same time, we see an evolution away from so-called 'fake news' towards an aggressive 'narrative competition', with the promoting of a 'culture war' dynamic around issues like migration, Muslims in Europe, family vs. progressive values and increasingly climate policy.

These digital campaigns play out in murky conditions where the precise connection between political parties and online content is often opaque, where actors can easily conceal their identities and the way content is targeted and amplified is not transparent. We also see considerable energies concentrated on personalized attacks and intimidation of opponents. Such efforts are part of an increasingly coherent right-populist playbook to gain and keep power, sow confusion, undermine faith in independent democratic institutions and promote extremist mindsets.

The digital dimension is a key part of this playbook - and our analysis shows that tech companies, despite their promises, are struggling to keep up with the range of tactics involved. The main trends and findings of the forthcoming report are listed in this interim briefing.



# We're All Russian Now

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**Perhaps a little inspired by the revelations about covert Kremlin campaigns in the US 2016 election, European actors have taken some pages out of the Putin playbook and are using deceptive and automated twitter accounts to boost their causes and attack their opponents. At the same time, they maintain enough distance between themselves and these forms of online information operations to claim deniability. It is not only Europeans at work: US neoliberal institutions have entered the European influence game, with some supporting climate denial campaigns and organisations within Europe's borders.**

## **Spain**

We found a coordinated network of Twitter accounts [boosting Anti-Islam hashtags and amplifying support for the right-populist party Vox](#) including a mixture of bots and inauthentic accounts. In the past year, over 4.4m of the posts from this network have concerned VOX, including over 460,000 mentions of leader Santiago Abascal. This activity represents 7.4 billion total potential impressions and an estimated value of media worth over \$500,000.<sup>1</sup> Vox have recently entered the Spanish parliament for the first time on a nationalist, anti-immigration, and 'pro-traditional-family' platform. Vox publicly deny any connection between their official party machine and the swarms of recently created automated online accounts that boost their campaigns and attack critics. In addition to these Twitter networks, [campaign group Avaaz identified three far-right networks on Facebook](#) comprised of about thirty pages and groups, with a total reach of 1,694,718 users. These networks were engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior intended to spread politically divisive and far-right content in Spain ahead of the general election in April.

<sup>1</sup>Total potential impressions are the total number of views possible i.e. how many times a tweet showed up in any timeline. Estimate of market value of media is based on industry standard of CPM of \$3.5.



### The United Kingdom

Our research shows support for most major parties is being boosted by suspected bots on Twitter: 42% of the most active accounts supporting official party Twitter handles show signs of bot-like hyperactive posting rates. However, the [Brexit Party is well ahead of the pack](#) when it comes to benefiting from suspected inorganic amplification: Five of the top ten accounts mentioning the Brexit party on Twitter were producing over 144 Tweets per day (an average of one Tweet every 3.3 minutes for an eight-hour period).

### Poland

We found pro-government accounts posing as elderly pensioners spread the government's attacks on striking teachers via Facebook. The 'pensioners' create dozens of posts an hour, drawing on an archive of infographics and linking to anti-semitic youth-orientated sites. We have also seen activity by suspected covert Russian accounts on Polish Facebook, pushing anti-Ukrainian narratives. The Polish-language Russian state broadcaster, Sputnik Polska, is highly active providing anti-EU and anti-Ukrainian content. This is not only the case on Facebook: we found [suspected bots on Twitter that have been sharing anti-semitic websites and conspiracy theories](#) to Polish audiences. And most recently,

we have identified a much larger suspected coordinated network of pages, accounts and groups on Facebook used to promote nationalist party Konfederacja and to amplify anti-Semitic and pro-Kremlin content. This network includes 60 pages with a total of 194,675 followers, and 5 groups with a total of 23,187 members.

### Italy

[Avaaz research](#) identified and reported 23 Italian pages with a total of more than 2.46 million followers which were spreading "false information and divisive content" over issues such as migration and vaccines as well as anti-Semitism, with many of the since removed pages supporting either the 5-Star or the League.

### Germany

The [AfD dominated Facebook conversation around the elections](#) through hyperactive levels of activity and engagement. [Subsequent research, as highlighted in ZDF](#), has suggested the presence of a significant volume of highly networked and potentially inauthentic accounts lying behind these huge numbers.



# From Information Warfare to Narrative Competition

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**We see a shift away from 'information warfare' tactics as we saw in the 2016 US elections to 'narrative competition' around wedge issues that undermine arguments for multilateralism, spur polarization along 'culture war' lines, and erode trust in democratic institutions.**

## **Germany and France**

We are seeing concerted attacks on the reputation of professional media. In early May the AFD held the inaugural 'Congress of Free Media' at the Bundestag, with a guest appearance by US alt right influencer Milo Yiannopoulos. The event sought to connect "alternative media outlets" and improve cooperation between the AFD's parliamentary group and these newly "associated" outlets. ISD's research found that Identitarian groups used alt tech platforms to coordinate the promotion of far-right and anti-migrant outlets as part of their "Aktion Briefkasten" campaign: they claim to have printed 10,000 flyers for distribution in support of this new "Association of the Free Media". In France, parts of the Yellow Vest movement have promoted

alternative media channels, including Russian state broadcaster RT. During the elections **RT** and **Sputnik** have acted as a quasi-content factory for right-populist parties, creating a steady stream of stories that right-populist parties use in their campaigns.

## **Poland and Italy**

The leaders of the governing right-populist parties are launching attacks on the independence of the judiciary, who they accuse of ideological bias. These are part of a strategy we see right-populist parties use to undermine the pillars of a pluralistic democracy.

## **Germany**

The AFD have added anti-environmentalism to their existing anti-immigration focus. AFD official Facebook pages have long been used to claim that environmentalism is an irrational cult, but mentions of climate change increased by 300 percent between April 2018 and April 2019 compared to the previous year. A particular target of AFD ire is the teen green activist Greta Thunberg, who, AFD party pages' claim, is a child manipulated by "eco-fascists". French far-right networks have spread similar smears about



Above: Graphika network map of Twitter networks connected to official Kremlin-affiliated institutions, agencies, and media accounts that are based in EU member states or actively engage in European politics. This was used to help understand the flow of Kremlin-funded media content into European political audiences.

Thunberg, also claiming that she is a puppet of George Soros and mocking her Asperger's syndrome. Attacks on the climate change movement appear to be connected with actors across the Atlantic. A joint investigation by ISD and [Greenpeace's Unearthed](#) revealed that German climate change denial advocacy group European Institute for Climate and Energy (EIKE) run and co-sponsor climate change denial conferences with the neoliberal Heartland Institute in the U.S., which was previously funded by the fossil fuel industry.

'Remigration' is the 'polite' word used for a campaign to send 'home' not only recently arrived refugees but potentially all non-White immigrants who have lived in Europe for generations. Originally

pushed by the far right Identitarian movement, 'remigration' is now being popularised by the AFD, **Germany's** largest opposition party. It is an example of how the far right has in many ways succeeded in setting the election agenda, making migration central to political debate and public discourse irrespective of the fact that it does not feature in the top concerns of voters in [recent polls](#). As an extension to their attempt to troll the [UN Migration Compact campaign in late 2018](#), Identitarians have succeeded in mainstreaming this racist, extreme concept of 'remigration' into the European Election campaign in Germany. In our sample of 328 official AFD pages on Facebook, the term remigration has been used in waves, but increasingly



frequently in March, when the term appeared in the AFD's official election programme. On Twitter there were 20,899 "Remigration" tweets in 2016, a number that rose to 47,353 in 2017 and reached its peak to date with 55,013 tweets in 2018. The Identitarians had almost a monopoly on the top tweets containing the word remigration until the end of 2017. However, from 2018 onwards, the lists of the most shared remigration tweets have included official AFD accounts claiming that Syrian refugees should be deported, and that for "Turks" who "do not want to integrate", "remigration" might be the best option.

### France

The term "remigration" is coupled with other hashtags such as [#GiletsJaunes](#) that help to boost its amplification on social media. In the course of two weeks during the election campaign, over 1,500 tweets in France contained the hashtag #remigration, potentially reaching over two million users.





# The Hate Speech Election

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**Anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim hate speech, misogyny, racism... these have long been a prominent and ugly side of digital discourse. But now they are being weaponised in targeted and coordinated ways during elections, online mobs instigated by one party against another- with evidence of automated digital militias specially programmed to spew anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic messages.**

Solely through attempts to identify coordinated online interference efforts in five European countries, ISD has identified over 365 pages, accounts and groups on Facebook, over 1,350 accounts on Twitter and over 100 channels and videos on YouTube that promote hate speech, disinformation or extremist content.

## **ISD's research finds:**

Concerted efforts by far-right groups to harass female politicians and journalists, driven by a combination of far-right trolls, populist right wing print media, extremist influencers, and political parties.

## **France**

Far-right trolls and right-wing populist influencers launched harassment campaigns following the nomination of Sibeth Ndiaye (who has dual Senegalese-French citizenship) as government spokesperson.

## **Italy**

Matteo Salvini picks on critical female journalists who then become the victims of hate-storms of online abuse.

## **Spain**

The female head of Cuididanos in Catalonia is the focus of gender-based abuse from separatists online.

## **Germany**

A mix of trolls, alternative media and AFD Facebook pages incite abuse against the female leader of the Green Party in Bavaria and an SPD politician of Palestinian descent. In the latter case, mentions of Sawsan Chebli's name at the time of the harassment were 1,000% more common on AFD Facebook pages than on those of all other party's combined.



Anti-LGBT rhetoric is also becoming common place among political parties, from more extreme attacks by the nationalist Konfederacja Party in Poland, through more mild 'family values' campaigns by Spain's Vox.

### **Poland**

Our research revealed a network of 803 'sock-puppet' accounts (accounts that fabricate their identity to fit into a community) and suspected bots that spread anti-semitic and pro-Russian messages. The network has put out over 92,000 anti-semitic messages over the last year. A lot of these focused on disinformation about Jewish 'crimes' in WWII, including claims the Soviet Army's slaughter of Polish soldiers in Katyn was actually perpetrated by Jews. The same network also spread pro-Russian narratives, especially aimed at inciting enmity between Poland and Ukraine around WWII ethnic cleansings.

Meanwhile Spanish and Polish right-populist parties have taken to comparing their low-migration countries favourably to the more multi-cultural France and Germany, and in Poland far-right pro-Kremlin sites attack Ukrainian migrants who have entered the country in another attempt to sow division between Poland and Ukraine.

Coordinated far-right groups on 4Chan attempted to 'weaponise' the Notre Dame fire against minorities, asking far-right members to compile 'pictures of smiling Muslims near Notre Dame' to spread disinformation about the cause of the fire. QAnon accounts were involved in promoting these conspiracy theories directed at Muslims in the wake of the tragedy, along with far-right online networks on Twitter, YouTube and Facebook in France, Spain, Germany and the UK.

### **Across Europe**

Work by campaign group Avaaz has exposed over 500 Facebook accounts spreading white supremacist and hateful content to millions of users, based on a network of disinformation, false pages and false profiles amplifying hate.



# Tech Company Responses

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Over the last year the EU and member states have passed or proposed new regulation to curb viral deception and hate speech, and tech platforms have been keen to show that they are taking measures to mitigate the more egregious behavior. Prior to the European Elections, companies signed up to an EU Code of Practice on Disinformation<sup>2</sup>, outlining commitments made to identify and respond to a range of weaponized tactics on their platforms. ISD is evaluating the enforcement of these commitments, measuring how effectively violations are acted on, if at all.

The European Elections are showing up deficiencies in both the regulatory and self-regulatory approaches, with platforms simultaneously putting freedom of speech at risk with over-zealous and misguided censorship- while being unable to keep up with many malign campaigns and tactics.

ISD is not alone in having identified content, accounts and pages that transgress the terms of service of YouTube, Facebook and Twitter throughout the election campaign. Just in the context of our own research, we have identified over

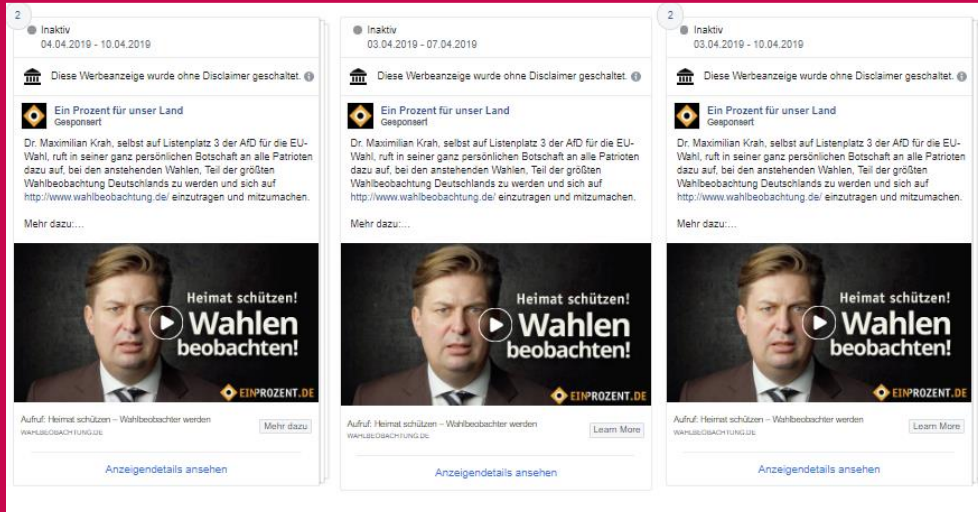
365 pages, accounts and groups on Facebook, over 1,350 accounts on Twitter and over 100 channels and videos on YouTube.

ISD has reported transgressions and is monitoring any action taken by platforms in response, including the speed and transparency with which any response was launched. To date, the only response received has been from Twitter and it is, as yet, unclear what level of action has been taken.

In Germany Twitter's attempts to enable speedy reporting of disinformation appears to have been gamed by far-right networks, resulting in overzealous takedowns of legitimate political and media content. This included removal of or suspension of the accounts of anti-AFD activists and Jewish-interest newspapers, as well as the victims of harassment (rather than the perpetrators).

Facebook has created a repository of all political and issue-based ads on their platform and the amount spent on them for each EU member state. While this is a welcome move, ISD's work has demonstrated that it is also full of shortcomings. Its classification of ads is often

<sup>2</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/code-practice-disinformation>



Above: Adverts from AfD support pages and Identitarian groups were missing from the German political ads library.

Investigations into coordinated computation propaganda in the election campaign have been limited by the lack of access to accurate and large-scale data for research organisations, particularly on Facebook. It is nigh-on impossible to get under the bonnet of unsuspecting activity or to attempt to understand attribution of malicious activity online as the situation stands. It is yet to be seen how these limitations will be taken into account in upcoming legislative moves in the UK, France, Germany and the EU.



# The Long Term Picture

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**The European Elections reinforce a longer term pattern ISD has been tracking in our analysis of viral campaigns and tactics over several years.**

Far-right movements, often in tandem with foreign states, have made long-term investments to undermine trust in democratic systems and professional media, now making use of digital platforms to broadcast far and wide. These investments to breed confusion and mistrust in representative democracy have opened the door to an engineered cultural shift towards extremism and authoritarianism in Europe, and are deployed in the service of a long-running transnational effort to undermine liberal democratic institutions in Europe. It should not be forgotten that their practitioners, by and large, aim to weaken or eliminate checks and balances, the rule of law and minority rights, in order to replace liberal democracy with crude, majoritarian, “illiberal” regimes in which incumbents hold on to power through unfair elections. Their aim is to take control of their societies’ information space;

then to capture state institutions and tilt them in favour of the government of the day. They do this first by distorting the political debate through the promotion of outrage, amplified by social media (often inorganically) and exploiting the traditional media’s desire to appear impartial to seize the agenda. Thus, Vox in Spain and the AfD in Germany use the publicity generated by deliberately outrageous immigration policies to get their message to a wider audience.

Then they build up their own highly partisan media channels, like Il Giornale in Italy or Gazeta Polska in Poland that supply media output with little or no pretence at objectivity. Once in power, as in Poland or, increasingly in Italy, they turn public service television and radio into mouthpieces of the ruling party, and squeeze out private media too, as Orban has done in Hungary and Strache was videoed proposing in Austria. They take aim at the courts, forcing judges to retire early as in Poland and Hungary and pack the courts with compliant officers. Public officials that don’t toe the new regime’s line are sidelined



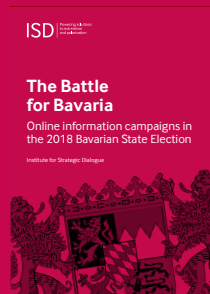
or replaced; if high profile, their replacement is preceded by campaigns of smearing and intimidation, as happened to the Hungarian central bank governor – a tactic Jacob Rees Mogg unsuccessfully deployed against Mark Carney in the UK.

Our research has uncovered common patterns across the countries in our study that go beyond the copying of the latest electronic tactics and which together constitute a “playbook” for a full-scale campaign against constitutional democracy. What is also clear from our research is that tech companies have not managed to stop the constant roundabout of tactics and perpetrators, and there is mounting evidence that they are failing to fulfill their many promises to safeguard the integrity of elections.

## About the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)

For over a decade **ISD** has been at the forefront of forging innovative real-world solutions to the rising challenge of extremist movements and the ideologies that underpin them. By innovating, trailing and distributing data-driven solutions, **ISD** is mounting a soft power strategy to match the influence and impact of the increasingly sophisticated propaganda recruitment machineries of populist and extremist groups.

The work surrounding the European Elections builds on previous research and analysis that **ISD** has done to identify online disinformation campaigns over the last two years in Europe, including analysis of the **2017 German Federal Election**, the **2018 Swedish Election** and the **2018 Bavarian State Election**.



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