ISD | Institute for Strategic Dialogue

Crisis and Loss of Control

German-Language Digital Extremism in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Jakob Guhl and Lea Gerster

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Overview

This report analyses the networks and narratives of German-speaking right-wing extremist, left-wing extremist and Islamist extremist actors on mainstream and alternative social media platforms and extremist websites in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our results show that extremists from Germany, Austria and Switzerland have been able to increase their reach since the introduction of the lockdown measures.

However, this growth is not evenly distributed across the different ideologies and platforms. During the crisis, right-wing extremists gained more followers than left-wing extremists and Islamists. The channels of far-right conspiracy theorists grew disproportionately on alternative platforms such as Telegram, especially in the two months immediately following the introduction of the lockdown measures.

The report shows that extremists interpret the COVID-19 pandemic along pre-existing ideological lines, and draw upon previous narratives and scapegoats and link these to the current crisis. Right-wing extremists use the crisis to mobilise against minorities and the government, left-wing extremists place the pandemic in an economic and anti-capitalist context, and Islamist extremists interpret the crisis primarily along religious lines.

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On the inclusion of the Alternative for Germany (AfD)

The classification of the AfD continues to be difficult due to internal party divisions and conflicts. In line with the distinction made by the Dutch political scientist and right-wing extremist expert Cas Mudde (see glossary), both radical right and extreme right actors can be found within the party. Due to its important role as a link between the various radical right and extreme right actors and the participation of AfD members in anti-lockdown demonstrations, ISD has decided to also include content from the AfD in this study.

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Glossary

Extremism
Extremism is the advocacy of a system of belief that claims the superiority and dominance of one identity-based 'in-group' over all 'out-groups', and promotes a dehumanising 'othering' mind-set that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of Human Rights. Extremist groups pursue and advocate a systemic political and societal change that reflects their world view. They may do this through non-violent and more subtle means, as well as through violent or explicit means. Extremism can be advocated by state and non-state actors alike.

Islamist extremism
Islamist extremism describes the advocacy of a system of belief that promotes the creation of an exclusionary and totalitarian Islamic state, within which those who do not subscribe to this vision are portrayed as an inferior 'out-group' and are subjected to implicit, explicit or violent means of subjugation and prejudice. Islamist extremists propagate a de-humanising 'othering' mind-set that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of human rights. Islamist extremist groups pursue and advocate a systemic political and societal change that reflects their worldview. They may do this through non-violent and more subtle means, as well as through violent or explicit means, including terrorism. Islamist extremism can be advocated by state and non-state actors alike.

Left-wing extremism
Both left-wing radicals and left-wing extremists are political actors who define themselves as left of social democracy and are influenced by communist and anarchist ideologies. Left-wing radicals aim at a systematic change of the capitalist system and do not explicitly oppose democracy, but often seek to strengthen direct and local forms of democratic decision-making. In contrast, left-wing extremism is characterised by opposition to liberal democracy, sympathies for authoritarian regimes and conspiracy theories spread by them that are directed against Western democracies. Left-wing extremists rely on the extra-parliamentary struggle against capitalism and refuse to compromise with political actors who advocate maintaining the status quo.[1]

Right-wing extremism
According to the right-wing extremism expert Cas Mudde, right-wing extremism is defined as an ideology that has at least three of the following five characteristics: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy or advocacy of a strong state.[2] The term "far-right" used by Mudde includes both radical right-wing and extreme right-wing actors. According to Mudde, both radical right-wing and extreme right-wing actors believe that "inequalities between people are natural and positive", but have different attitudes towards democracy.[3] While right-wing radicals reject certain aspects of liberal democracies (e.g. minority rights, independent institutions), they are not against democracy in principle, but instead advocate majority democracy led by their group. Right-wing extremist actors, on the other hand, reject democracy as a form of government in principle and favour authoritarian systems of rule.[4]

4chan
4chan is an image board that was originally founded to share anime images. Since the early 2010s, the /pol/ board in particular has become an important meeting point for right-wing extremist users.

Telegram
Telegram is a messenger that was founded by the Russian tech entrepreneur Pavel Durov. The messenger is designed to enable secure communication without observation by governments, especially in authoritarian states. Telegram is now also used by Islamists, far-right extremists and conspiracy theorists.

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to profound changes and great uncertainty in terms of health, social cohesion and the economy. For this reason, the crisis also represents an opportunity for extremists to benefit from this insecurity, as well as from the increase in internet consumption through temporary school closures and the increase of working from home.[5] Immediately after the beginning of the crisis, right-wing extremist groups began to blame political opponents or minorities for the outbreak of the pandemic and the spread of the virus.[6] The terrorist organisation Islamic State, on the other hand, claimed that the virus was a "soldier of God", which mainly affects "unbelieving" states like China, Iran or Western nations.[7]

This report analyses how the pandemic has affected German-speaking extremist communities on the internet. In the context of the pandemic, the research analysed the networks and narratives of right-wing, left-wing and Islamist extremist actors from Germany, Austria and Switzerland on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, 4chan and Telegram as well as on extremist websites.

The transnational focus of the study takes into account the technological and personal interdependence of extremist actors in the German-speaking region. In the online space, extremist communities are forming beyond national borders. Online, Martin Sellner, the co-leader of the Austrian far-right nationalist movement Identitäre Bewegung Österreich (Identitarian Movement Austria – IBÖ), is mobilising for the demonstrations against lockdown measures in Berlin, and the German neo-Nazi and Holocaust denier Nikolai Nerling gets paid to advertise for the Swiss daily newspaper *Express-Zeitung*.[8] For extremist actors in Austria and Switzerland, the larger online audience in neighbouring Germany provides a stage through which they can spread their messages. Therefore, it makes sense to analyse national extremist communities online not in isolation, but in the context of the broader German-speaking area, and to develop cross-border countermeasures in consultation with partners from government and civil society.

The report traces the growth, but also the differentiation of extremist groups on different platforms, and analyses how extremists across ideologies interpret the pandemic. Data gathered using social media analysis software such as Method52, CrowdTangle, 4cat, Social Blade and TGStat show that extremists increased their reach by 14% between the introduction of lockdown measures in March and the end of September 2020.[9 10 11 12 13]

However, this growth is not evenly distributed across different ideologies and platforms. Right-wing extremists in particular, who already operated more accounts, shared content more frequently and had a wider reach before the pandemic, were able to gain new followers during the crisis with 18% growth (in comparison: 10% for left-wing extremists; 6% for Islamists).

The fact that the governments of Germany, Austria and Switzerland were relatively successful in limiting the number of COVID-related deaths compared to other countries resulted in renewed trust in established politics, whereas approval of populist attitudes declined.[14] In Germany, the survey results for the AfD party are stagnating, which is the party most critical of the federal government's course.[15] Paradoxically, however, our analysis shows that there is also a growing demand for conspiracy theories on the internet. Especially in the two months immediately following the introduction of the lockdown measures, this led to a significant increase in the number of followers of right-wing extremist conspiracy theories on social media platforms.

On alternative platforms such as Telegram, it is almost impossible to distinguish clearly between these two increasingly overlapping communities due to the proximity of conspiracy theory and right-wing extremist content. Due to this technological and ideological convergence, right-wing extremist actors once again have access to a broader audience beyond their hardcore supporters, which they had partially lost in recent years due to account suspensions on platforms like Facebook and YouTube.[16]

On alternative platforms, these far-right conspiracy theorists are increasingly establishing themselves as parallel sources of supposedly trustworthy and factual information. In doing so, they seem to benefit from a latent scepticism towards established media, despite the widespread popular support for the COVID-measures of the respective governments. According to a survey by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 34% of Germans believe that political pressure is being exerted on the media to influence reporting on the pandemic and to suppress certain information.[17] According to a survey by the Market Institute, 32% of Austrians also believe that the media and politicians are concealing important information regarding the purpose of the lockdown measures.[18]

Although it is difficult to draw causal conclusions for offline mobilisation, the analysis of this content indicates that the effects of extremist discourse are not limited to the digital domain. For example, right-wing extremist actors in our samples repeatedly called for participation in two large demonstrations against the lockdown measures in August in Berlin. These demonstrations are protected by the right of assembly guaranteed by the German constitution. But, as in the digital world, these demonstrations brought together a broad spectrum of actors - conspiracy theorists, Reich citizens (far-right group which rejects the modern German state), QAnon supporters, anti-vaccination activists, AfD members, Austrian Identitarians and neo-Nazis. The demonstration on 29 August 2020 ended in chaos, when demonstrators broke through the police restrictions in front of the Reichstag and were able to wave the flag of the German Reich in front of the central symbol of German democracy, attracting major media attention.[19] Right-wing extremists also took part in significantly smaller demonstrations with a similarly broad composition in Vienna and anti-lockdown demonstrations in Bern.[20] [21] A candidate of the party Team HC Strache – Alliance for Austria (founded after the former vice-chancellor's expulsion from the Freedom Party of Austria – FPÖ) was filmed shouting "Soros must go, Rothschild must go" during an anti-lockdown demonstration.[22]

These events were not isolated incidents – even though not all of the demonstrators can be classified as extremists, according to RIAS (a civil society organisation that registers antisemitic incidents) 123 rallies and demonstrations related to the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany between 7 March and 17 June 2020 were accompanied by anti-Semitic statements.[23]

The findings in this report suggest that social crises can contribute to the digital dissemination of extremist world views and the demand for conspiracy theories. Future research should further explore how these overlapping phenomena, as well as related problems such as disinformation, are linked and how they affect public discourse. Also there is a need for an even better understanding of how moments of crisis increase receptivity to such narratives and how people's resilience to future crises can be strengthened. Although most citizens in Germany, Austria and Switzerland seem to have regained confidence in established politics, the following questions arise: What are the implications of the increasing importance of conspiracy theory thinking for our societies, and with what counter-strategies can we react to it? Are the networks of conspiracists gateways for extremist and anti-democratic mobilisation? How can we as a society deal with the fact that there is a minority of people who are genuinely disillusioned by political decision-making processes and established institutions? How can politics win back their trust in the democratic system? What messages are appropriate and successful in communicating with an increasingly radicalised minority and who can act as a credible messenger?

Although the present report cannot provide conclusive answers to all these questions, it aims to contribute to a better understanding of vulnerability to extremist and conspiracy ideologies in times of crisis and to show how extremist actors try to weaponise them to serve their goals.

Key findings

– **During the COVID-19 pandemic, German-speaking extremist actors were more popular than before and, on average, grew their followers on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube by almost 14%. However, this growth online is not distributed evenly between right-wing (18%), left-wing (10%) and Islamist (6%) extremists nor between different platforms.** Except for Facebook (where Islamist extremists have on average more followers), right-wing extremist accounts on all platforms have, on average, at least twice as many followers as Islamist extremists, and at least three times as many followers as left-wing extremists.

– **The growth of right-wing extremists is even greater on Telegram than on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. On the encrypted messenger service Telegram, the channels with the highest number of followers have grown by almost 350% since the beginning of the pandemic.** The extent of networking between various far-right actors and conspiracy theorists on Telegram is immense: almost 40% of all shared posts, videos and audio messages were forwarded by other channels.

– **Far-right conspiracy theorists gained a particularly large number of followers during the crisis, especially in the two months following the introduction of the lockdown measures.** During this period, the largest Telegram channel of the QAnon movement grew by 560% (from 18,000 to 120,000 followers). At the same time, the largest ethnonationalist channel (from 43,000 to 57,000 followers, +33%), the largest anti-Muslim channel (from 14,000 to 40,000 followers, +186%) and the largest neo-Nazi channel (from 11,000 to 27,000 followers, +145%) on Telegram also grew significantly, but still much less rapidly.

– **Extremists from all three countries interpret the COVID-19 pandemic along with pre-existing ideological patterns, drawing upon previous narratives and scapegoats and linking these to the current crisis.** Right-wing extremists use the crisis to mobilise against minorities and their respective governments, left-wing extremists place the pandemic in an economic and anti-capitalist context, and Islamist extremists interpret the crisis primarily along religious lines.

– **Through their content, right-wing extremists actively mobilise against representatives of the scientific community and government measures to contain the pandemic.** Opposition to the measures seems to be driven by a fundamental opposition to their governments. On mainstream platforms such as Facebook, right-wing extremists are using the crisis to mobilise against migrants. The government measures are generally interpreted as a sign that an authoritarian state is about to be established under the pretext of combatting the pandemic. On alternative platforms such as Telegram and 4chan, on the other hand, misinformation about the origin and risks of the virus mixes with anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, hatred of minorities and calls to push for the collapse of the current order and overthrow the democratic order.

– **Left-wing extremists, who want to eliminate liberal democracy and sometimes support the use of political violence to do so, publish content on the COVID-19 pandemic mostly on topics such as economic inequality, criticism of capitalism, migrants and refugees, which are not inherently extremist.** However, some of the analysed groups uncritically reproduce the propaganda of authoritarian anti-Western regimes such as China and Cuba. The analysed left-wing extremist content did not contain conspiracy theories regarding the origin and risks of the virus.

– **Islamist extremists who want to replace liberal democracy with a totalitarian Islamic state also frequently publish content that is not inherently extremist. Instead, they interpret the COVID-19 pandemic theologically and, among other things, call for altruistic behaviour during the crisis.** At the same time, the content of Islamist extremists often contains pejorative descriptions of non-Muslims. Moreover, certain groups interpret the COVID-19 crisis as an example of an Islamic state being superior to a secular state. The analysed Islamist extremist content rarely contained conspiracy theories about the origin and risks of the virus.

Recommendations

The findings of this report should help to provide an effective, coordinated, cross-sector and ideally multilateral response to the mobilisation of extremist actors. As the findings show, moments of crisis can contribute to the growth of extremist movements and increase the demand for conspiracy theories. The current pandemic, which has had unprecedented consequences worldwide, is likely to be followed by new moments of crisis, but these are difficult to anticipate. However, the response to growing extremism cannot be retroactive to the next unforeseen shock. To be better prepared for subsequent moments of crisis, a comprehensive analysis of the weaknesses and gaps in the current fight against and prevention of extremist ideologies and conspiracy theories is needed.

– **To push back extremist actors, an infrastructure must be created that enables proportional and adequate civil society responses from the middle of society. The infrastructure must be based on three components:**
  1. **empirical data**
  2. **broad networks and alliances**
  3. **strategic mobilisation of pro-democracy actors.**

The empirical data of this pilot study indicate how crucial a deepened cooperation in the border triangle of Germany, Austria and Switzerland is to get a grip on the spread of disinformation and the associated normalisation of hate messages. It would be desirable if this study was used by the three governments concerned, as well as by civil society organisations in all three countries, as an opportunity to enable and consolidate in-depth research into cross-border radicalisation and to translate the results into concrete action.

ISD recommends the establishment of a data and research infrastructure to enable the continuous monitoring and analysis of the structures and dynamics of the threat posed by extremist movements in real-time, while at the same time evaluating the effectiveness of countermeasures implemented. Without this data and research infrastructure, a strategic vacuum is created by the lack of a common understanding of the risks. But it is only through a common understanding that coordinated action is possible.

On this basis, broad networks and alliances of civil society organisations, prevention agencies, religious institutions, trade unions, cultural institutions and employers can make strategic and proportional efforts to effectively undermine the spread of extremist ideas in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. This requires communication strategies as well as credible and authentic messengers for the targeted communication with hard-to-reach audiences. It is important to think beyond isolated measures and individual counter-narrative campaigns to develop a coherent, cross-sector, transnational and long-term strategy against the mobilisation and normalisation of extremist ideas.

– **The German and Austrian governments should review the extension of the German Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) and the planned Communication Platform Act in Austria to previously unregulated platforms such as Telegram. Also, the governments in Germany, Austria and Switzerland should examine proportional as well as risk-based regulatory approaches for social media platforms (e.g. a duty of care for platform operators) to reduce more effectively the distribution of legal harmful content such as conspiracy theories and disinformation, which present a major challenge in the context of the pandemic.**

The messenger service Telegram poses a particular risk for pandemic control due to the rapid spread of conspiracy theories and disinformation. Despite platform-like mechanisms, it still does not fall within the scope of the NetzDG because the provider is classified as a pure messenger service. The German federal government should examine whether the NetzDG can be extended to previously unregulated platforms such as Telegram. The Austrian federal government should also examine whether the planned Communication Platform Act inspired by the NetzDG can be applied to Telegram.

One possibility would be that, similar to Facebook, private messenger conversations are excluded, while the obligations laid down in the NetzDG are imposed on Telegram for the publicly visible part of the platform.

Moreover, the NetzDG and the planned Communications Platforms Act focus solely on combating illegal content. Conspiracy theories and disinformation about the origin and risks of the virus remain unaffected. Therefore, approaches are required that think beyond moderation decisions for specific content and take structural factors such as the technical architecture of the platforms and the design of certain platform products into account. An example of such a structural approach is the "duty of care" for platform operators proposed in the UK *Online Harms White Paper*.[24] A duty of care would transfer responsibility to the platform operators for the safety of users and for protecting them against foreseeable risks. This could mean that platform operators would no longer recommend extremist and conspiracy theory content about the pandemic through their algorithms. Also, as already practised by WhatsApp, the maximum size of private messenger channels and the speed at which content can be forwarded could be limited. A duty of care would create incentives for companies to design their platforms and products with a stronger focus on user safety and the reduction of social risks.

– **Education can make an important contribution to improving the resilience of citizens and users towards extremist and conspiracy theory messages. Here, the focus should be on strengthening digital citizenship education, deepening the understanding of extremist tactics and the social science education of citizens.**

Due to the increasing importance of the internet during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary to promote (digital) media literacy and critical thinking skills for users of all ages. Also, users need to be taught such skills and knowledge so that positive and resilient online communities can be built. Knowledge of digital phenomena such as disinformation, the effects of algorithms and extremist recruitment tactics must be improved.[25]

In addition to programmes that close educational gaps in the area of digital citizenship, the social science knowledge of citizens should be improved. Although our analyses document an increase in conspiracy theories during the pandemic, research on the historical development of the popularity of conspiracy theories has shown that in a longer-term perspective they are less widespread than they were in the middle of the last century.[26] According to studies, the dissemination of social science knowledge to the wider population through the expansion of access to universities played an important role in the relative marginalisation of conspiracy theories.[27] Social science approaches highlight the structural complexity of social processes. This can shed doubt on the assumption implicit in conspiracy theories that historical developments are foreseeable and controllable over a long period.[28]

1. Growing Online Extremism during the Pandemic

German-language extremist actors in Germany, Austria and Switzerland have grown their online audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this growth is neither evenly distributed between far-right, far-left and Islamist extremism nor between different platforms. Right-wing extremist actors have not only built up by far the greatest presence online, but have also grown most since the introduction of lockdown measures.

Since the beginning of the pandemic there has been a platform migration to right-wing extremist channels and groups on Telegram. Additionally, channels and groups which mainly spread conspiracy theories are growing even more rapidly than anti-Muslim, ethnonationalist and neo-Nazi channels and groups. Due to the high degree of networking between right-wing extremist channels, there is a risk on Telegram that new users, who are primarily interested in conspiracy theories, will quickly be confronted with increasingly extreme ideologies.[29]

Size and structure of extremist communities on the internet

For this report, ISD has compiled extensive lists of German far-right, far-left and Islamist extremist sites, groups, accounts, channels, and image boards on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, 4chan and Telegram as well as lists of extremist websites (see Annex 1).

The lists of German-language extremist actors that emerged from this process point to some interesting trends in terms of the size and structure of extremist communities online. As already mentioned, right-wing extremist actors have built up by far the largest presence online. Except for websites that are used more by left-wing extremists for communication, right-wing extremists consistently operate with more accounts, pages, groups and channels on the platforms studied than left-wing extremists and Islamists. These results are particularly remarkable in the context of account bans, which have been directed mainly against the far-right and Islamist terrorist groups in recent years. For Islamists, the video portal YouTube seems to be one of the central digital hubs. It is also noticeable that for left-wing extremist actors, the platforms YouTube or Telegram, which are popular with right-wing or Islamist extremists, play a subordinate role.

If we look at the average number of followers of the different ideologies as well as the accounts with the most followers, it becomes clear that right-wing extremist actors not only operate significantly more accounts, but also reach a multitude of users. Except for Facebook, where Islamist sites and groups on average have more followers, far-right accounts on all platforms studied have both more followers on average and individual accounts with the greatest reach. Also, except for Twitter, Islamist extremists have a significantly greater reach than left-wing extremist actors, especially on Facebook and YouTube. Overall, right-wing extremist accounts on all platforms have on average at least twice as many followers as Islamist extremists and at least three times as many followers as left-wing extremists (see Annex 1, Table 12).

The subdivision into various ideological subgroups (see Annex 1) within the three extremist movements shows that right-wing extremism has differentiated itself on different platforms. While Facebook remains central to the AfD, conspiracy theorists and neo-Nazis are mainly present on Telegram. More than a third (n=33) of the conspiracy theorists on Telegram explicitly belong to the QAnon movement.[30] Ethnonationalist and identitarian groups have created a wide presence for the communication of their contents across platforms.

Meanwhile, within online far-left extremism, the various subgroups are more evenly distributed on Facebook, Twitter and their own websites. Communist, post-autonomist and Antifa groups (see Annex 1) operate with a similar number of accounts on Facebook and Twitter. The presence of anarchist groups is much smaller.

Finally, with regards to the online presence of Islamist extremists such as political Salafists (the movement of the Sunni Muslim world) operate with many social media accounts. Especially on YouTube and Telegram, a large part of the identified Islamist extremist accounts can be attributed to this spectrum. Legalist Islamists, on the other hand, seem to rely more on their websites and the mainstream platform Facebook. This may be because these organisations have official structures, often organised under the German Law of Associations, compared to the more subculturally oriented Salafists.

Developments on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube

Using the social media analysis tools Crowdtangle (Facebook) and Social Blade (Twitter and YouTube) ISD analysed whether the extremist actors identified previously gained followers during the COVID-19 pandemic on mainstream platforms. To ensure comparability, the follower analysis is limited to the five accounts or channels with the widest reach on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, as the data is not always available for the sometimes very small left-wing extremist and Islamist extremist actors.

The analysis shows that between the beginning of March and the end of September 2020, right-wing extremists were able to achieve the greatest gains on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter - with an increase of 18% more followers; among left-wing extremists the figure was still 10%, among Islamist extremists 6%.

Among right-wing extremists, the number of YouTube subscribers and video views on Facebook rose in particular. The already low number of followers of left-wing extremist groups on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube stagnated. While Islamist-extremist actors on Facebook and YouTube recorded growth, the trajectory is similar to the months before the COVID-19 crisis – with the exception of the two months immediately after the introduction of the lockdown measures.

It is interesting to note that the number of followers of right-wing, left-wing and Islamist-extremist accounts on Twitter increased only very slowly over the last twelve months. Even in the two months after the introduction of the lockdown measures, when there was a rapid increase on several other platforms, no such trend can be observed on Twitter.

Table 1 Video views on extremist Facebook pages (CrowdTangle)

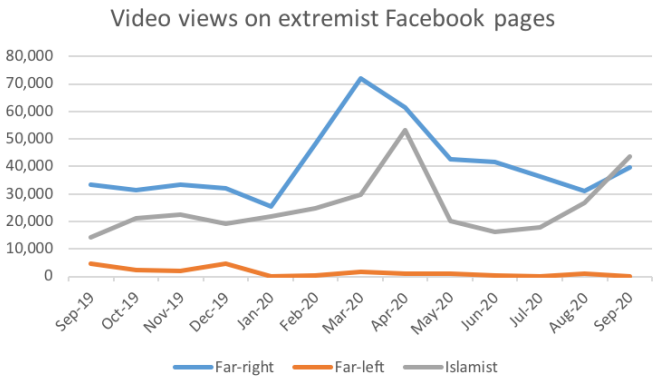


Table 2 Interactions on extremist Facebook pages (CrowdTangle)[31]

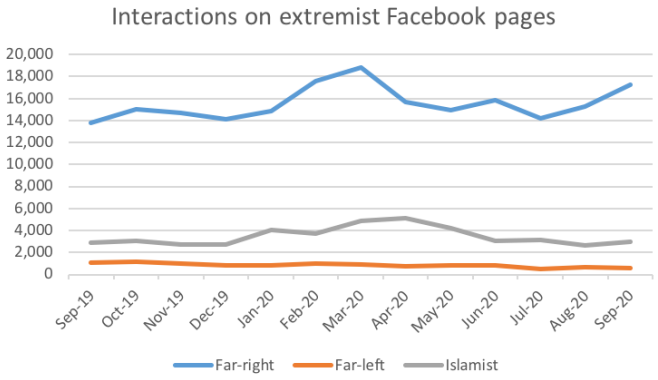


Table 3 Follower numbers of the five extremist Twitter accounts with the highest reach (Social Blade)

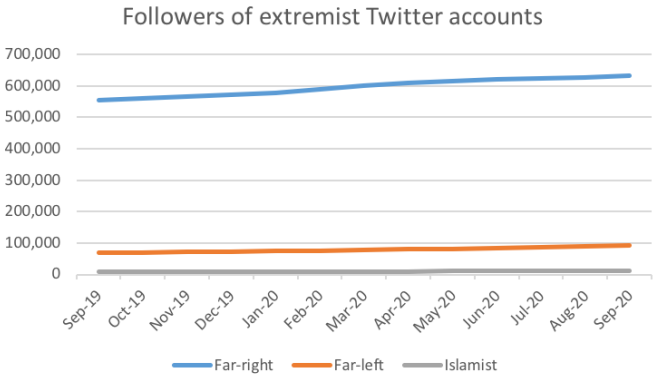


Table 4 Subscriber numbers of the five extremist YouTube channels with the highest reach (Social Blade)

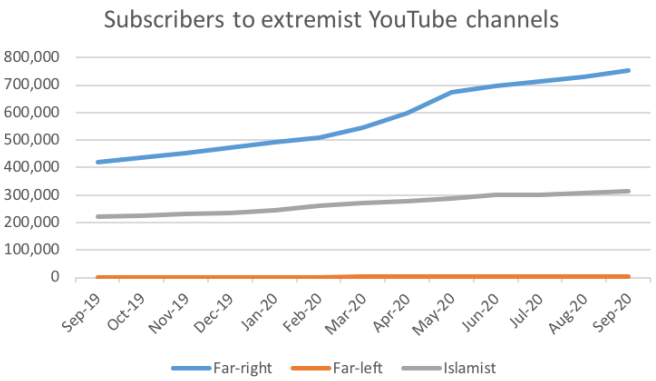


Table 5 Growth of an ethnonationalist channel since the beginning of the pandemic (TGStat)

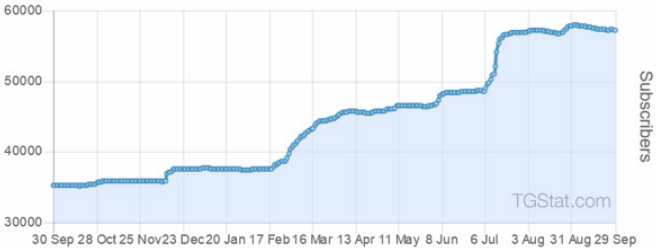
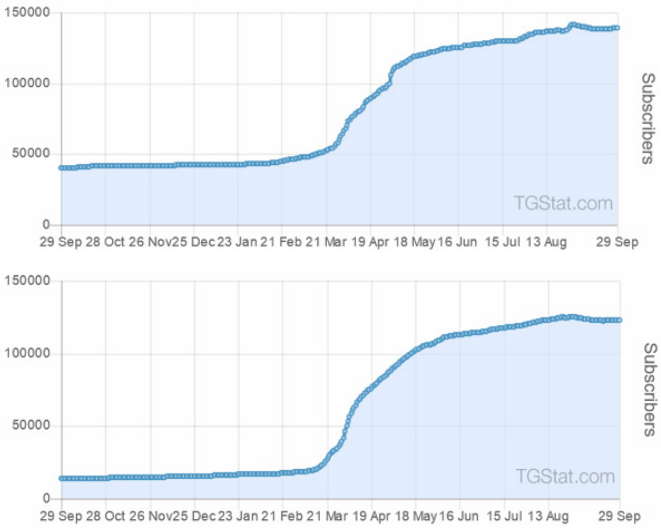


Table 6 Examples of the rapid growth of conspiracy theory channels since the beginning of the pandemic (TGStat)



The migration of conspiracy theorists to Telegram

ISD published a study on the online ecosystem of right-wing extremist actors in February 2020.[32] Already at that time, the analysis showed that Telegram is the most influential unregulated platform for German-speaking right-wing extremists. But while the largest channels had a little more than 40,000 followers at the time, the audience of right-wing extremist influencers on Telegram has multiplied since then. These channels have grown rapidly since the beginning of the pandemic and now have up to 140,000 followers each (+350%).

However, it is important to note that this growth is not evenly distributed across different far-right actors. While anti-Muslim, ethnonationalist and neo-Nazi channels also gained followers, far-right conspiracy theorists on Telegram gained even more.

In the two months after the introduction of the lock-down measures in mid-March, conspiracy theory channels grew particularly fast. The number of followers of the largest QAnon channel, which describes itself as a "Swiss blog about current QAnon Drops", for example, has risen since mid-March from almost 18,000 followers to over 120,000 (560%). In contrast, the follower numbers of the largest ethnonationalist channel (43,000 to 57,000 followers, +33%), the largest neo-Nazi channel (11,000 to 27,000 followers, +145%) and the largest anti-Muslim channel (14,000 to 40,000 followers, +186%) increased less – even though these also increased more significantly than in the months before the measures against the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, 17 of the 20 right-wing extremist channels with the most followers are mainly used to spread conspiracy theories, seven of which belong to the QAnon movement.

The results suggest that insecurity and far-reaching interventions into everyday life have led to a perceived loss of control. This may have increased the need for clear explanations. Conspiracy theories provide such clear explanations for developments that are difficult to understand, identify scapegoats and suggest simple solutions to the crisis. Through conspiracy theories, the feeling of being in control can be regained.[33]

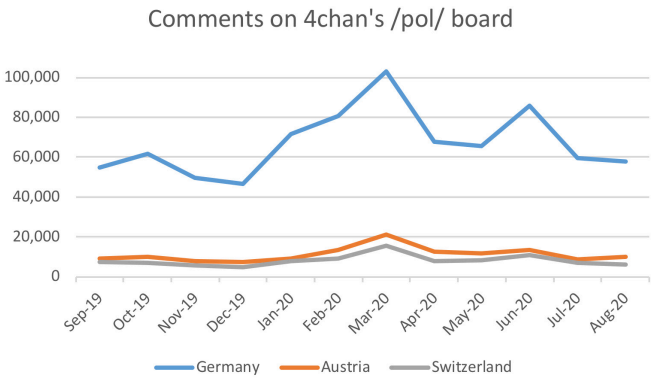
Thanks to these newly acquired followers, a larger group of users is now in close digital proximity to anti-Muslim, ethnonationalist and neo-Nazi actors. Previous ISD reports have found that within English-language white supremacist Telegram channels, 21.2% of all content was forwarded from other channels. This results in a dense network of far-right extremist and partly far-right terrorist channels. As a result, users are quickly confronted with increasingly extreme content.[34]

Our analysis of more than one million German-language right-wing extremist posts on the COVID-19 pandemic on Telegram, carried out using the software Method52, has shown that of the posts, videos and audio messages shared on these channels, as much as 39.6% were forwarded from other channels. The speed with which new users, which might be interested in conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic are confronted with increasingly extreme right-wing ideologies is even greater in the German-speaking context than in the English-speaking world. **This combination of right-wing extremism, conspiracy theories and the technological encryption of Telegram pose a considerable risk of radicalisation.**

Increase on 4chan

The /pol/ board on 4chan, which is very influential in the right-wing extremist online subculture, also recorded higher activity of German-speaking users during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Annex 1 for data collection). Although the growth is less exponential than on Telegram, the number of comments from users from German-speaking countries increased in the six months after the introduction of the lockdown measures. In Germany (from just under 365,000 to over 440,000, +20%) as well as in Austria (from 57,000 to over 77,000, +34%) and Switzerland (from 42,000 to over 55,000, +32%) the number of user comments rose on /pol/. The most significant increase here was in March with almost 140,000 comments from users in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

Table 7 Number of comments on 4chan's /pol/ board of users from Germany, Austria and Switzerland



2. Far-Right Narratives about the COVID-19 Pandemic

– **Many extreme right-wing actors are united in their rejection of their respective government's COVID-19 protection measures.**

– **Many of their posts and contributions are devoted to topics that are also otherwise important for the extreme right-wing spectrum: criticism of the government and media and the rejection of refugees and migrants.**

– **The dissemination of conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic plays a special role.**

Government criticism and rejection of lockdown measures

A large proportion of the posts and contributions of right-wing extremist actors to the COVID-19 crisis (see Annex 2 for a description of the methodological approach) are characterised by a hostile attitude towards the German federal government, the state governments and other politicians of the so-called "established parties". The political leaders are often accused of lying to the people.

At the beginning of the pandemic in winter 2019 and spring 2020, the AfD accused the German government of hesitant and inadequate action on infection control. On 18 March, the AfD party leader Jörg Meuthen complained on his Facebook page that Germany was lagging behind other European countries in introducing protective measures. It was the "time for consistent, courageous decisions".

After the introduction of infection control measures and the temporary closure of shops, restaurants and other facilities, the criticism of many right-wing extremist actors changed fundamentally within a few weeks. From this point, the criticism was no longer about not taking measures, but about maintaining them. For example, on 21 April 2020, the AfD parliamentary group in the German Bundestag (parliament) published a video of a press conference on Facebook in which several AfD members of parliament, including the parliamentary group leader Alice Weidel, called for an end to the COVID-19 restrictions on the economy.

The fundamental opposition of the AfD is clearly illustrated by another example. On 6 April 2020, Leif-Erik Holm, deputy leader of the AfD parliamentary group in the Bundestag, called for the introduction of a national COVID-19 immunity register in which citizens who have recovered from an infection should register voluntarily so that they are no longer bound by initial restrictions. About a month later, Weidel, leader of the AfD parliamentary group in the Bundestag, described a similar initiative by Federal Health Minister Jens Spahn to introduce a digital immunity card as an "assault on citizens' civil liberties and informational self-determination". "Such potentially totalitarian aspirations" would be strongly opposed by the AfD parliamentary group, Weidel said in a statement on her Facebook page.

Table 8 Narrative of far-right actors on different platforms and websites

	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Telegram	Websites
Anti-government measures	38% (204)	44% (160)	23% (67)	36% (137)	15% (95)
Anti-elites	15% (77)	34% (122)	38% (113)	29% (110)	43% (174)
Anti-minorities	11% (59)	12% (44)	6% (19)	11% (40)	9% (56)
Health misinformation	7% (34%)	0% (0)	11% (31)	23% (89)	11% (70)
Conspiracy theories	0% (0)	2% (6)	6% (17)	45% (173)	6% (38)
Economy	0% (0)	0% (0)	15% (43)	0% (0)	9% (54)
European Union	0% (0)	0% (0)	4% (11)	0% (0)	4% (23)
Factual information	0% (0)	9% (4)	2% (5)	22% (82)	0% (0)
Other	29% (113)	12% (45)	19% (55)	13% (49)	4% (28)

In Switzerland, resistance to the COVID-19 measures was interpreted as a "federal" duty in the fight against political tyranny of the elites, and the mask was presented as a symbol of submission. A cartoon to this effect was shared by the far-right Partei National Orientierter Schweizer (Swiss Nationalist Party – PNOS) on Facebook. The picture is a modern interpretation of the national folk hero Wilhelm Tell: while Alain Berset, a Federal Councillor of the Sozialdemokratische Partei der Schweiz (Social Democratic Party of Switzerland – SP) and current Head of the Federal Department of Home Affairs, is portrayed as Habsburg Bailiff Gessler, the Swiss freedom fighter and national hero Wilhelm Tell is presented as the opponent of masks.

Figure 1 Cartoon shared by the far-right PNOS

Trivialisation of COVID-19 and health misinformation

Some of the far-right actors justify the rejection of protection measures mainly based on the impact of the measures on the economy and society. For example, they warn of economic collapse and the social consequences of social distancing and school closures.

However, many actors also deny the dangers posed by COVID-19. The assessments of the majority of virologists and epidemiologists are often contradicted, and instead, the positions of individual dissenting voices are spread disproportionately. On 16 March 2020, the right-wing extremist portal Journalistenwatch reported on statements by the doctor and former SPD politician Wolfgang Wodarg under the headline "Doctor claims: Corona is just a hype virus".

There is no reason to panic, said Journalistenwatch, referring to Wodarg: "Statistically, we are experiencing a normal flu winter". On the website of the right-wing extremist Compact magazine, it was claimed on 10 April 2020 that a study in the district of Heinsberg in North Rhine-Westphalia gave the "all-clear for Germany". The death rate of the novel coronavirus was supposedly very low. "A disease that infects many but hardly kills anyone is hardly dangerous either". In a Facebook post of 30 June 2020, the AfD in the city of Wuppertal wrote that "coronavirus that has become a puppet, with its mortality rate of about 0.3 percent" and spoke of a "pandemic psychosis".

Figure 2 Trivialisation of COVID-19 in reference to the far-right slogan "It's okay to be white"

Individual right-wing extremist groups and alternative media, but above all a multitude of often anonymously operated channels and anonymous individual actors on Telegram not only play down the dangers of the novel coronavirus, but also deny the pandemic or even the existence of the virus itself. For example, a Telegram channel claimed in a message dated 7 March 2020 that there is not a single COVID-19 death in Germany. In a message from another right-wing extremist Telegram channel on 28 April 2020 it was claimed: "There was NEVER a coronavirus and nobody died of corona! It was a smoke screen to distract people from what is really coming!" Rather, there was a great conspiracy to establish a new world order.

Widespread in almost all subspheres of the right-wing extremist spectrum is the rejection of the obligation to wear masks, often combined with allegations of the alleged ineffectiveness of COVID-19 protection masks and alleged health damage caused by wearing them. "Enough with the muzzles – we want our freedom back," wrote the AfD Bayern, for example, on its Facebook page on 25 May 2020. "Never since the Federal Republic of Germany came into existence has there been a more massive encroachment on the civil liberties of its citizens. The government is forcing us to tie a piece of cloth over our mouths and noses," it continued. The obligation to wear masks is "pure symbolic politics, because viruses cannot be prevented from doing so". The AfD state association demanded that the "compulsory masks and other coercive measures be ended immediately". The AfD-linked news channel Deutschland Kurier (German courier) warned on 13 May 2020 in a now-deleted article on its website that the wearing of face masks could make people ill "to the point of blindness".

Likewise, in Switzerland the obligation to wear masks was interpreted by right-wing extremists as an intrusion into human dignity. In an article on its website, the PNOS rhetorically asked whether the mask was a "symbol of our enslavement". In the opinion of many Swiss right-wing extremists, the obligation to wear a mask does not serve to protect the population, but as a means of humiliating and silencing responsible citizens. For example, a Swiss right-wing extremist activist claimed on Telegram and Twitter that "70% of positive Covid cases" were related to people who had worn a mask and that the government's COVID-19 measures are therefore not suitable for combating the pandemic.

In some of the contributions, especially on the messenger platform Telegram, false information was spread about the effectiveness and supposed dangers of vaccinations. In some cases, ineffective or dangerous "alternative medicine" products against COVID-19 were advertised.

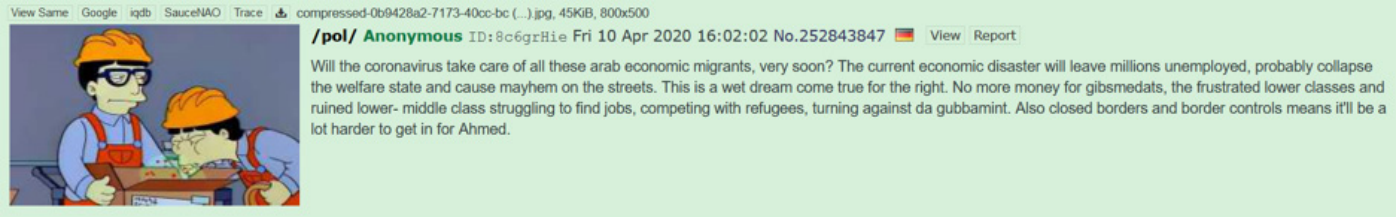
Warnings of a "corona dictatorship"

Right-wing extremist actors often justify their rejection of state COVID-19 protection measures by saying that they are authoritarian and even an expression of a "corona dictatorship". For example, an article on the website of the Compact magazine of 1 May 2020 stated that the basic law is "out of force, civil rights are severely restricted", that the protection of the mouth and nose is a "sign of public submission" and that the "destruction of the country's economy and culture" is in full swing. The right-wing extremist website anonymousnews.ru claimed in an article of 22 April 2020, which was distributed in various Telegram groups and channels, that basic rights in Berlin had been "officially abolished" by the protection measures, which also provided for assembly bans, and that the federal state was "officially turning into a dictatorship". It was wrongly propagated that the governing mayor, Michael Müller, "now rules on the basis of emergency laws and can take brutal action against any citizen as in a dictatorship". "In the slipstream of Corona" a left-wing green dictatorship is establishing itself in the federal republic "starting from Berlin". In a YouTube video of 6 August 2020, it was claimed that "in the shadow of Corona crisis, climate hysteria, EU and Hate Speech" a totalitarian state is being built in Germany.

Rejection of EU measures

During the COVID-19 crisis, many right-wing extremist actors are calling for a return to nation rather than supranational cooperation. Apart from government measures to combat the pandemic, far-right actors reject, above all, European measures for the economic and financial management of the COVID-19 crisis. The AfD, for example, spoke out against the Euro Bonds programme of the European Central Bank (ECB). On 17 June 2020, the AfD parliamentary group announced on its Facebook page that it intends to file a lawsuit with the Federal Constitutional Court against the "ECB money printing works".

Figure 3 Anti-refugee comment about the COVID-19 pandemic on 4chan



Rejection of migration and refugee admission and anti-Muslim hostility

In addition to criticism and rejection of the European Union (EU), the rejection of open borders, migration and refugee admission and, in some cases, hostility towards Muslims can be found in many of the posts and contributions on the COVID-19 pandemic by right-wing extremist actors.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, right-wing extremists have been demanding the closure or strict control of national external borders. They justify this with the danger of the uncontrolled cross-border spread of COVID-19. In some contributions, the federal government has been accused of alleged mistakes in border security in recent years. The pandemic appears to be merely a justification for demands for border closure that have been made for years.

This is also the case with widespread calls for a halt to refugee admission and the prevention of migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the far-right Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (National Democratic Party of Germany – NPD) in North Rhine-Westphalia wrote on 26 March 2020 that it was "idiotic and, moreover, dangerous to impose exit restrictions on Germans while at the same time allowing migrants to continue to enter the country".

On its Facebook page on 9 April 2020, the AfD criticised the decision of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees not to issue negative asylum decisions for a short period of time during the COVID-19 pandemic because the opportunities for refugees to seek legal advice were limited.

The decision was "a fatal signal to the world", wrote the AfD, and: "We want our rights back!" Shortly before, on 31 March 2020, the AfD in Lower Saxony criticised the willingness of the Berlin state government to accept up to 1,500 refugees from the overcrowded refugee camp Moria on the Greek island of Lesbos.

Some of the right-wing extremist actors also warned of an alleged Islamisation in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the anti-Muslim blog Philosophia Perennis published on 3 May 2020 a text on the exemptions granted in several German municipalities to the public call to prayer in the month of Ramadan during the lockdown. It was said there that "one need not be a prophet to assume that after this special Ramadan during Corona times the calls will not end". The muezzin call was "not an evening or morning prayer, but a battle cry". "Every minaret from which a muezzin calls out stands symbolically (and in fact) as a conquering base of a totalitarian ideology of violence".

Similar anti-Muslim conspiracy theories were also found within right-wing extremist Austrian Telegram channels, according to which the compulsory wearing of masks was only a preliminary stage to the introduction of a "burqa compulsion". A similar weaponising of anti-Muslim fears was also observed in more prominent circles. For example, at a demonstration in Vienna on 20 May 2020, the FPÖ party leader and deputy Mayor of Vienna, Dominik Nepp, described the mouth and nose protection as a "government burqa" and "mask puppet theatre" and called Federal Chancellor Kurz a "gravedigger".

Figure 4 Conspiracy theory on the compulsory wearing of masks as a preliminary stage of a "burqa compulsion"

Von Maskenpflicht zur Burka? Wenn's nach Gutdünken der auf links und grün gewaschenen kranken Hirne ginge, solle dies so in Deutschland aussehen. Aber nicht mit uns! Das wird **nicht** passieren!

In contrast to the German AfD, the far-right Schweizerische Nationale Aktionsfront (Swiss National Action Front – NAF) did not warn of the danger of Islamisation, but interpreted the pandemic as a confirmation of its far-right world view and the dangers of the "dogma[s] of a global humanism". The NAF wrote on its website that "the globalised world with its mass exodus of people from south to north... is now taking its toll in the form of the horror of a pandemic".

Criticism of established media

Criticism of the mainstream media also plays a major role for many right-wing extremist actors during the COVID-19 pandemic. One Telegram channel commented on an article in the German tabloid newspaper *Bild* about a US veteran who died of COVID-19 and who had previously come out as an opponent of masks with the words: "Propaganda on steroids. Wouldn't surprise me if they deliberately killed him". In a YouTube video of the AfD parliamentary group of 26 May 2020, the media is accused of boycotting the AfD during the pandemic and of not having responded to enquiries and laws drafted by the party.

A particular enemy in right-wing extremist circles is the state media. For example, Journalistenwatch described a journalist from *Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk* (German public broadcaster) who had called for an end to the debate on loosening restrictions as a "lackey of the government" in an article on 13 April 2020. The journalist's statements showed "that the SED [Socialist Unity Party, the former ruling party of the German Democratic Republic] still has a mental home in the minds of some public-service journalists".

Calls for anti-lockdown demonstrations

The displeasure about the COVID-19 protection measures adopted by federal, state and cantonal governments, in particular about restrictions on public life, spread from the internet to the streets as early as spring 2020. Soon right-wing extremists and supporters of conspiracy theorists were visible at the demonstrations. Far-right actors also called for participation in such protests on social media and their websites. Two large-scale demonstrations in Berlin in August attracted tens of thousands of participants and attention both in society as a whole and across the far-right political spectrum.

For example, Martin Sellner of the far-right extremist IBÖ drew attention to an "Against Corona Madness" demonstration by the FPÖ on 15 May 2020 via his Telegram Channel and called on all Austrians to participate. Sellner also celebrated similar protests in Berlin as a "liberation strike" and a "protest that was not staged and controlled by the globalists". These demonstrations showed "that there is a gigantic mass of demonstrators who tend to be open to patriotic issues and who are not afraid to show themselves on the streets with patriots". Sellner himself took part in the demonstration in Berlin at the end of August.

A right-wing extremist Facebook page endorsed the corona demonstrations in a post dated 12 May 2020. The "rulers" were getting nervous about the protests, it said. And: "When system politicians and the media get a breath of fresh air because suddenly "conspiracy theorists", anti-globalisation and anti-vaccination activists come together, then something is really going on".

The AfD also supported and promoted the protests in some places. In a YouTube video of the Saxon AfD state parliament faction of 4 June 2020, it was stated that the anti-lockdown protests were important "because it is about our basic rights". In the video description, the AfD faction stated that the AfD was the only political force "behind all peaceful demonstrators". In some places, the AfD even organised its protests, for example on 16 May 2020 in Aachen. On 18 May 2020, the AfD North Rhine-Westphalia published pictures of the demonstration on its Facebook page and wrote that it was a "demonstration in defence of our freedom and fundamental rights". It said: "We will continue to campaign for a complete end to corona restrictions and for a committee of enquiry into the corona crisis."

The right-wing extremist Compact magazine also followed the protests intensively since spring and took part in the mobilisation for the large-scale demonstrations of the Querdenken group in Berlin in August. In an article from 15 August 2020 Compact spread false and excessive numbers of participants in the demonstration on 1 August 2020. Compact reported 500.000 Demonstrators - according to police reports only up to 30,000 people participated. [35]

Conspiracy theories

Various conspiracy theories have received a massive boost during the pandemic. This development can be observed both in German-speaking countries and internationally. Right-wing extremist actors have been involved in the dissemination of such conspiracy theories. The messenger platform Telegram plays a special role. In contrast to established social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, there is almost no platform moderation. And so many right-wing extremist and conspiracy theory actors praise Telegram as a "censorship-free" alternative. In 15.3% of the examined contributions on Telegram, there are references to QAnon and similar pro-Trump conspiracy theories. Of the examined articles, 16.6% contain conspiracy theories and speculations about the origins and characteristics of SARS-CoV-2. 13% of the recorded messages propagate further conspiracy theories, for example about the mobile phone standard 5G or the *Black Lives Matter* campaign.

Figure 5 Conspiracy theories about Bill Gates and George Soros as the alleged originators of the pandemic

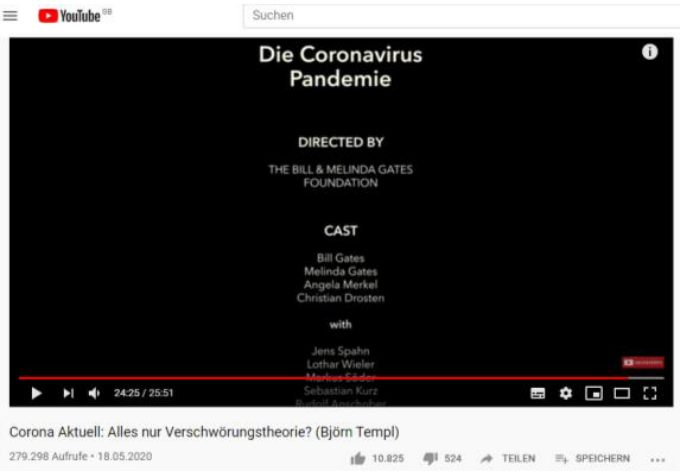
A Telegram channel published on 25 March 2020 the claim that "Bill Gates and George Soros are behind the coronavirus to kill the world population in a bizarre conspiracy theory with a poisoned antidote". Microsoft founder Bill Gates became a major target for conspiracy theories through his commitment to the development and distribution of vaccines. In June 2020, Compact magazine even dedicated a magazine title to Gates: "The vaccination dictator: How dangerous is Bill Gates?" In its Telegram channel, the magazine wrote on 2 June 2020: "Corona has made the oligarch even more powerful: Now he wants to vaccinate seven billion people and is striving for pharmacological world domination, regardless of losses".

The Swiss *Express-Zeitung* also portrayed Bill Gates as the puppet master of global health policy, who, together with the World Health Organization, the UN, Johns Hopkins University and China, had planned a "pandemic campaign" to achieve "different financial and geopolitical goals". As "evidence" of the attacks on Bill Gates, the lucrative "vaccination business" was cited, as well as the unreliability of PCR tests and the numerous pre-existing conditions related to COVID-19 deaths.

The Austrian right-wing extremist Martin Lichtmesz also shared a YouTube video on 19 May 2020, which presents a compilation of alleged facts about the pandemic by an architect from the city of Graz. Conspiracy theories about the development of the vaccine and the alleged self-interest of Bill Gates were spread. In the eyes of Lichtmesz and his followers, the pandemic is a "plandemic". The video also attacks German politicians such as Federal Health Minister Jens Spahn as well as the virologist Professor Dr Christian Drosten, among others.

Other widespread conspiracy theories assume that the coronavirus is a man-made bioweapon or that the virus does not exist at all and that the symptoms are caused by the new 5G mobile phone technology. Many supporters of such conspiracy theories assume that the COVID-19 pandemic is merely a pretext for the oppression of the population and the abolition of civil liberties.

Figure 6 Conspiracy theory about the alleged planned pandemic



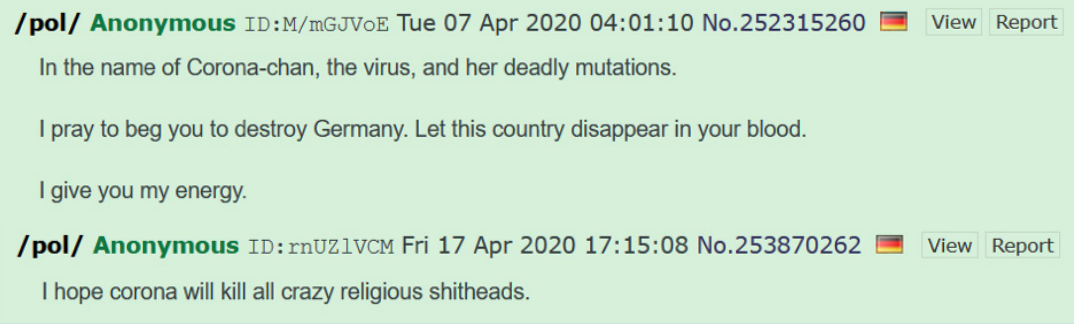
The QAnon conspiracy theory experienced a major rise during the COVID-19 pandemic. This theory claims that the US President Donald Trump is in a fight against a secretly operating "deep state" made up by Democrats and global elites – and says there is a worldwide child abuse ring to extract a rejuvenating substance called adrenochrome from the blood of tortured and murdered children. Through partly contradictory claims that the pandemic was either triggered by this "deep state" or that it was a means in the fight against the "deep state", QAnon has gained a large number of new followers in the US and Germany since spring 2020. This was also evident on Telegram – there, German-speaking QAnon groups and channels have gained tens of thousands of new members and subscribers since March 2020. In many cases, both original QAnon content as well as Reich citizens' ideology are distributed. Smaller channels of the QAnon movement on Telegram also focus specifically on the situation in Austria and Switzerland. An Austrian QAnon channel shared a YouTube video on 1 August 2020, which presents the COVID-19 pandemic as the final step in the establishment of a "New World Order: CORONA = Crown". Stating "World Economic Forum pandemic to bring the world into the digital sphere with Corona".

The special case of 4chan

The platform 4chan is an outlier among the platforms analysed for the present study. On the image board, users post anonymously. Instead of organisations or other identifiable right-wing extremist actors, unidentifiable individuals are active. The content of the contributions is moderated to a much lesser extent than on established social media platforms, although 4chan is not fundamentally an extreme right-wing platform. However, the basic trend on 4chan and especially on the /pol/ forum examined here combines right-wing extremism, and often deeply racist, anti-Semitic and misanthropic ideas.

The threads and posts on the COVID-19 pandemic show a great interest of many users in the pandemic, in current developments in global infection rates and the current state of research. However, factual information is often mixed with conspiracy theories, a trivialisation of the pandemic and openly expressed misanthropic attitudes.

Figure 7 Racist and cynical comments on 4chan



In 14.2% of the examined posts, conspiracy theories around the COVID-19 pandemic were spread. In a few individual posts explicit reference was made to the QAnon conspiracy theory.

In many of the examined discussion strands, there is a glorification and anthropomorphic portrayal of COVID-19. The virus is called "Corona-Chan" and is humanised in the form of an anime drawing of a young woman, who is supposed to represent a Chinese woman. The glorification of the virus is accompanied in some posts by hopes of a more severe pandemic with higher infection rates and a social upheaval triggered by the pandemic. Some of these posts can be understood as expressions of generalised misanthropy. In other posts the pandemic was seen as a possible transformative element that could lead to a global crisis and the collapse of existing social orders.

Many of the strands of discussion examined are characterised by the explicit expression of racist and anti-Semitic attitudes. Racist statements were found in 8% of posts and anti-Semitic statements in 5.1%. For example, discussions of COVID-19 advocated a supposedly higher mortality rate among black people, used racist slurs against black and Chinese people, and declared Jews to be the puppet masters behind the pandemic or financial capitalism.

Conclusion

The narratives of various far-right actors on the COVID-19 pandemic do differ in their focus. Nevertheless, there are several aspects on which the extreme right-wing spectrum is in agreement. These include fundamental criticism of federal, state and cantonal governments and, to a large extent, the rejection of state COVID-19 protection measures. There is also widespread agreement on the closure or strict control of national external borders and the restriction or termination of refugee admission and migration in the pandemic.

There is varying degrees of agreement on and dissemination of conspiracy theories among actors of different ideological persuasions and also on the various platforms studied. An overall increase in conspiracy theories can be observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The increase in supporters of the QAnon conspiracy theory since spring 2020 is remarkable. It can also be observed how much more radical the far-right acts on largely unregulated platforms such as Telegram and 4chan.

3. Far-Left Narratives about the COVID-19 Pandemic

– **Left-wing extremist actors see the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as closely linked to capitalism.**

– **They are united in their solidarity with migrants and refugees in the pandemic.**

– **Some of the actors studied seek proximity to authoritarian regimes during the crisis.**

The left-wing extremist actors studied (see Annex 2 for a description of the methodological approach) aim to replace liberal democracy with communist or anarchist social orders. While some of the left-wing extremists analysed want to achieve this exclusively through non-violent political activities, many others consider political violence and violent protests to be legitimate.

In their contributions on the platforms and websites analysed, left-wing extremist actors show a range of reactions to the global COVID-19 crisis. The relevant themes and narratives of these contributions are constitutive for the actors and their political spectrums even outside the crisis: the fight against capitalism and right-wing extremism, for example, or the commitment to migrants and refugees. In many cases, the contributions reveal a fundamental criticism of political measures to combat the pandemic, especially bans on demonstrations. While the protagonists of the various left-wing ideological groups agree on certain basic issues, the study also reveals striking differences – for example, when referring to the authoritarian regimes of China and Cuba.

The COVID-19 crisis and capitalism

A connection between the COVID-19 pandemic, the governmental pandemic response and the capitalist economic system is seen in many of the contributions examined. About 35% of the 277 articles on left-wing extremist websites deal with economic grievances. Of the 345 Facebook posts examined, 37% deal with existing inequalities in society, which tended to increase during the crisis.

The outbreak of the pandemic, but above all its social and economic effects, are understood by left-wing extremist actors as a consequence of capitalism. They assume that the crisis could have been better managed in a socialist or communist society. In 5% of the examined articles on far-left websites, the authors call for the creation of a socialist planned economy or the expropriation of pharmaceutical companies and 4% of the articles either attribute the emergence of the virus directly to the market economy or claim that economic system directly contributed to its spread. A smaller proportion of the articles (2%) also argue that capitalism has morally corrupted people, which is why they reacted rather individualistically to the outbreak of the epidemic. Under capitalist production conditions, individuals would have to pursue their interests "as a rule not cooperatively with each other, but competitively against each other", according to the website of a left-wing extremist daily newspaper *Junge Welt* on 1 April 2020.

Table 9 Narratives of far-left actors on various platforms and websites

	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Telegram	Websites
Economic inequality	37% (131)	31% (129)	14% (2)	45% (61)	35% (95)
Anti-fascism	18% (62)	10% (42)	7% (1)	11% (15)	35% (95)
Activism	15% (53)	17% (73)	36% (5)	19% (25)	28% (77)
Rejection of status quo	56% (192)	11% (46)	0% (0)	0% (0)	36% (98)
Anti-imperialism	20% (68)	2% (8)	0% (0)	0% (0)	26% (72)
Health policies	0% (0)	19% (80)	14% (2)	19% (25)	0% (0)
Migration & asylum	0% (0)	7% (31)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Gender	0% (0)	1% (3)	7% (1)	6% (8)	0% (0)
Other	19% (64)	1% (6)	21% (3)	0% (0)	26% (72)

In a text published on 14 June 2020, the association Interventionistische Linke Lübeck (Interventionist Left – IL) described the COVID-19 crisis (as well as the climate crisis) as a "crisis of capitalism" and called for a demonstration under the motto "not on our backs – in solidarity against the crisis". The call for the demonstration said that COVID-19 was only a drop in the ocean. "An economic crisis has been looming for some time now and already last year, when nobody knew anything about Corona, the stock markets trembled every few months and corporations prepared for the crisis with waves of redundancies," the group said.

Even the alliance ...ums Ganze!, which consists of anti-national and communist groups from Germany and Austria, wrote in a statement on its website on 29 March 2020: "The economy was not plunged into crisis by the virus as such – it is only the trigger to which the immanently crisis-ridden capitalism with its latent financial bubble, industrial over-accumulation and fragile supply chains is now reacting with a sensitive interruption of production." And in a letter commemorating the 150th birthday of Vladimir Lenin, the Kommunistische Jugend Schweiz (Communist youth Switzerland) wrote about the COVID-19 crisis that "at times like these, when the corona pandemic is exposing the contradictions of capitalism, it is important to show a way out of this antisocial and parasitic system". The article adds: "From socialism to communism! #LeninLives."

Figure 8 Anti-capitalist interpretation of the COVID-19 crisis

In some of the comments examined, the criticism of capitalism was also linked to a concrete criticism of the actions of individual companies. For example, the Tönnies meat company, whose site in the Gütersloh district was the site of a major COVID-19 outbreak in June 2020. The case proved their anti-capitalist activism right, wrote the Sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterjugend (Socialist German Workers Youth – SDAJ) on Facebook on 4 August 2020: "Tönnies is by no means an isolated case, but rather an example of what is everyday life and is systemic under capitalism: The short-term realisation of ever-higher profits is the only thing that counts for capitalists." On 20 July 2020, an Antifa group also shared on Facebook a text of the campaign "Shutdown Pig System", which called for activism against Tönnies. The campaign wanted to "continue to damage the image of Tönnies and the pig system as such in the coming days and weeks and express solidarity with the workers". In left-wing extremist circles, the term "pig system" usually refers to capitalism.

Privatisation and profit-orientation in the health system were also often criticised by left-wing extremist actors. The Interventionistische Linke Hamburg, for example, called for participation in protest rallies in front of several hospitals on its Telegram channel and its website. "Our health and social system have fallen ill with capitalism and the victims are the patients, their relatives and the employees," the group wrote on its website, and continued: "Profit-oriented hospitals do not protect us from pandemics!"

In the data examined, the rejection of the market economy is often accompanied by a rejection of social elites. In most cases, economic elites and the "people" are contrasted with each other as antagonists. Such narratives can be found in about a quarter of the examined contributions of left-wing extremist actors on Facebook. There is a widespread claim that the pandemic and its economic consequences are being carried out on the back of the "working class".

Rescue packages for companies and state support for people threatened with the loss of work and income are not in the interest of the people, but only serve to maintain "neoliberalism" and should therefore be rejected. Sometimes left-wing politicians and trade unions were also attacked when they supported the economic policy measures of the federal government. The state, the alliance ...ums Ganze! claims fighting the virus out of self-interest, "because dead citizens question the sovereignty of the state".

Left-wing extremist actors often reject not only the economic policy measures of the federal government in the COVID-19 crisis, but also the adopted EU measures. For example, the Trotskyist Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party – SGP) wrote on Twitter on 29 July 2020 that the EU rescue package was "a trillion-dollar gift to the rich", and continued: "In order to pay it back, the EU now wants to implement the same measures as in 2008 in Greece throughout Europe."

Anti-fascism

The political fight against right-wing extremism is also of outstanding importance for many left-wing extremist actors in the COVID-19 crisis.

In a discussion podcast published on YouTube on 11 May 2020, the Interventionistische Linke warned that the COVID-19 crisis as a state of emergency not only aggravates social inequalities, but is also "a scenario for which conspiracy ideologists, preppers and Nazis organised in right-wing terrorist networks have long been waiting. The pandemic raises their hopes for the expected "Day X" – a civil war to establish a right-wing social system". It states in the video description that in the pandemic, right-wing extremist actors remained relatively calm at first. The "fascist threat that was so present in February with the attack in Hanau" but has "fallen into oblivion and the Antifa apparently went on a corona holiday".

With the nationwide emergence of conspiracy theorists protesting with right-wing extremist participation in spring and summer 2020, the rejection of this protest movement and the organisation of counter-protests played a role for many left-wing extremist actors.

Antifa groups in particular, but also other actors, used their websites and social media channels to inform about "corona demos" and the participation of right-wing extremist groups and individuals and to mobilise for counter-protests. In this context, a left-wing extremist group in Vienna also criticised on Twitter that leading Austrian right-wing extremists such as Sellner took part in the anti-lockdown protests.

Accusations of authoritarianism against governments

In the assessment of government measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, the contributions of left-wing extremist actors show a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, social distancing practices, compulsory masks and other hygiene measures are advocated. Many actors even accuse the federal government and other states of having ended shutdown measures in the economy, and also schools too early at the expense of the population and especially the workers. At the same time, however, left-wing extremist actors of various ideological currents oppose restrictions on freedom of assembly and accuse the state of resorting to authoritarian measures in the fight against the pandemic.

Figure 9 Accusations of authoritarianism against the federal government

For example, 10% of the articles examined on left-wing extremist websites claim that federal, state and cantonal governments are taking advantage of the COVID-19 crisis to reduce fundamental rights and promote the establishment of a surveillance state.

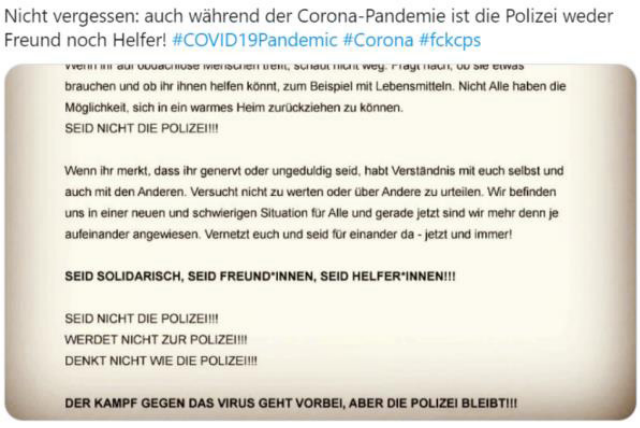
Bans on demonstrations and assembly are interpreted as preventive measures to combat insurgency at a time of declining prosperity and social discontent. The communist group Antikapitalistische Linke München (Anti-capitalist Left– AKL) published on 17 April 2020 a mobilisation text for protests on 1 May on its website. It states: "The argument of virus containment must be used for many things at present, including massive restrictions on basic rights such as freedom of assembly." Nevertheless, it sends a clear signal on 1 May: "We will respond to the capitalist crisis shifting of state and capital with organisation and class struggle from below."

Even after Labour Day, left-wing extremists mobilised for rallies in Switzerland. The group Revolutionärer Aufbau Schweiz (revolutionary buildup Switzerland – RAS) called for a day of action in Zurich on 11 July 2020. As a justification, the group writes on its website: "In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis, the exploitation of the majority of the population is increasing. Meanwhile, systemic violence is used in an increasingly open way to defend the status quo." With the organisation of left-wing extremist networks, "an alternative is offered to this total shit [total shit here refers to a political and economic system perceived as oppressive] and self-determination is regained". The rally in Zurich was intended to help unify these struggles, because "only together can we develop the clout to overcome the existing system". The Swiss website barrikade.info actively supported the riots and advocated the attacks on institutions supposedly responsible for the Corona crisis. Company buildings, the Zurich Police and Justice Centre and the Brazilian Consulate were attacked. Describing the worldwide police reactions to the demonstrations, the website commented: "Beating and shooting cops, prison cells filling up, fascist mobilisation of the most reactionary elements of society: in many places the exploitative order of the ruling classes can only be maintained by brute force". The article concludes with the demand: "Peace to the shacks, war to the palaces – fire and flame to all jails!"

The alliance ...ums Ganze! Also accuses the federal government of sinister ulterior motives behind the COVID-19 protection measures. In a text dated 29 March 2020, the alliance's website states that the protection of epidemics has always been the area "where the nation state could demonstrate to its citizens that it is indispensable. What is now being democratically implemented is a dream for all fans of authoritarian politics – and all too often has little to do with health policy". Examples of allegedly authoritarian measures include "border closures, curfews, contact bans, police deployment of the Bundeswehr at home, a stop to humanitarian refugee reception and soon compulsory work for asylum seekers".

The situation is similar with statements by Austrian left-wing extremists who mobilised against the state penal measures in the context of violations of the curfew. Another example was the tweet of an Austrian Antifa group according to which "even during the Corona pandemic [...] the police are neither friend nor helper" and therefore quarantine breaches should not be reported to the police.

Figure 10 Far-left tweet against cooperation with the police during the COVID-19 pandemic



Die Rote Fahne (The Red Flag), the membership magazine of the Stalinist Marxistisch–Leninistische Partei Deutschlands (Marxist–Leninist Party of Germany – MLPD), uses conspiracy theories to justify its criticism of the state's pandemic control. It says that the federal government and leading media would deliberately confuse the population and either play down the dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic or spread panic. In an article published on Twitter on 29 April 2020, the Rote Fahne ccuses the Federal Ministry of the Interior of spreading panic "in order to establish the acceptance of the masses against all restrictions of freedom by the government". A confused population "is easier to keep in check and distract itself from the nature of the crisis under capitalism", the article continues. Furthermore, it speaks of a "synchronisation of the bourgeois "leading media" – terminology that is otherwise used by right-wing extremist actors. In another article of the Rote Fahne on 22 April 2020, the federal government is accused of dismantling "civil democratic rights and freedoms and increasing fascist turn of the state apparatus".

A left-wing extremist group from Zurich made similar accusations against the Swiss authorities in a Facebook post of 26 March 2020. According to the group, "in the name of general health, everything is currently allowed" and that "angry citizens" [German: Wutbürger, a term referring to supporters of populist and far-right move-ments] would "denounce [report]" young people to the "cops".

From this they conclude that "the current emergency situation wants people to be allowed to work together, but to spend their free time in isolation as much as possible".

Although many left-wing extremist actors opposed state measures such as assembly bans and continued to mobilise protests during the COVID-19 crisis, the majority of them emphasised the importance of social distancing rules and the obligation to wear masks and declared that they wanted to adhere to such restrictions. For example, on 17 July 2020, a Swiss far-left website published an article saying: "The virus is real, the conspiracy theorists are wrong, and therefore we disassociate ourselves from them decisively". The state lockdown rules were nevertheless described as "authoritarian measures of the government". And that is why they demanded: "Let us survive the second wave without the state!"

Anti-Western attitudes and promotion of authoritarian regimes

Many left-wing extremist actors are linked by their rejection of European and Western alliances such as the EU. There is a major difference between actors of different ideological persuasions in their attitude towards authoritarian and at least nominally socialist regimes.

Figure 11 Far-left propaganda for authoritarian regimes

Dem Volke dienen – Seuchenbekämpfung im Sozialismus

Im Sozialismus würde der Kampf gegen eine Pandemie wirklich breit, solidarisch und voller Initiative von den Massen entwickelt werden

Von (gb)
Mittwoch, 25.03.2020, 13:24 Uhr

1. Mai: Internationale Solidarität mit Kuba

Some of the actors, which are aligned with the anti-imperialist left, clearly show solidarity with states and governments that are perceived as actively opposing Western powers like the US, and they tend to spread state propaganda of these countries uncritically.

Junge Welt writes in a review of the political journal Marxistische Blätter (Marxist Papers) on 6 July 2020 that "under socialist auspices the population in China, Vietnam and Cuba, but also in the Indian state of Kerala, was better protected against the virus than in other states". The Trotskyist Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei defends China in a whole series of articles on its website and on Twitter. The site accuses European media of a "propaganda campaign against China" in an article of 8 May 2020. The statements of European government representatives would show "that the European ruling class is becoming increasingly criminal in the face of the pandemic. Their propaganda campaign against China is not based on medical or scientific evidence, but on their plans for trade wars and military conflicts".

An extreme left-wing group from Switzerland used the alleged superiority of socialist regimes in the fight against the pandemic to attack European states. On 20 April 2020, this group shared an article on Facebook in which it argued that it was "indicative of the state of the EU that the greatest international aid does not come from the other European states but from China and Cuba. The Communist Partei der Arbeit der Schweiz (Swiss Party of Labour - PdA) is even calling for the Nobel Peace Prize for Cuba's medical brigades as well as the suspension of the US from the UN.

Several *Junge Welt* articles on the COVID-19 crisis oppose international sanctions for regimes such as the ones in Syria, Iran or Venezuela. An article on 17 April 2020 states that Syria is in a "stranglehold". Western sanctions prevented the "necessary pandemic equipment". In a Facebook post on 26 March 2020, the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands in Brandenburg (German Communist Party – KPD) also calls for an end to the sanctions against Cuba, Venezuela and the Russian Federation – and, beyond that, closer cooperation with China. The DKP also argues here with the impact of the sanctions on the fight against the pandemic.

Conclusion

The publications of left-wing extremist actors on the COVID-19 crisis are characterised by topics that are also otherwise important for this political spectrum. In particular, anti-capitalist rhetoric and viewpoints, which during the pandemic led to the accusation that profit-oriented healthcare systems were inadequate and couldn't respond to the COVID-19 crisis, which led to the overburdening and exploitation of medical staff. Demands for the admission of refugees and opposition to right-wing extremist positions and groups are also constitutive for left-wing extremist politics. Mistrust and hostility against the "bourgeois state", which results in the rejection of some state measures to combat the pandemic, are characteristic of left-wing extremist actors. However, the publications on the pandemic also reveal otherwise visible ideological differences in the heterogeneous far-left spectrum. While anarchists, many autonomous and undogmatic left-wing extremists in their criticism of the state are directed equally against western states and authoritarian anti-Western states, some socialist and above all orthodox-communist groups express their solidarity with socialist states such as Venezuela or Cuba, but also with anti-Western states such as Russia. This is reflected in the consider--ation of measures to combat the pandemic.

4. Islamist Narratives about the COVID-19 Pandemic

– **Many posts and contributions by Islamist actors on the COVID-19 pandemic focus on religious interpretations of the events and theological directives.**

– **Many Islamists state their rejection of Western, liberal and secular societies and claim the superiority of Islamic states in the fight against the pandemic.**

– **Surprisingly, parts of the German-speaking Islamist scene speaks out against the spread of conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic.**

The Islamist extremist actors analysed (see Annex 2 for a description of the methodological approach) aim to replace liberal democracy with a totalitarian Islamic state. However, the actors analysed did not directly call for political violence. When the lists of actors were compiled, Facebook pages and channels on YouTube and Telegram were identified, which shared the content of jihadist preachers, declared solidarity with banned organisations or called for support for arrested jihadists. However, since these did not actively call for violence, they were not coded in this study as Salafist-Jihadists (using violence to implement a Salafist interpretation of Islamic law in the Sunni Muslim world).[36]

The COVID-19 pandemic has also been a defining issue for German-speaking Islamists since spring 2020. The majority of the examined posts, articles and videos by Islamist actors illuminate the pandemic from a fundamentalist religious perspective.

Many posts show a rejection of liberal and secular societies, but the various actors within a spectrum ranging from legalist Islamism (using political activism to establish an Islamic state) to supporters of accused suspected members of the terrorist militia Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are divided in their attitude towards government measures to combat the pandemic.

Religious interpretations of the COVID-19 pandemic

In many of the posts, articles and videos of Islamist actors examined, the COVID-19 pandemic is interpreted through a religious lens. Such religious interpretations are found in 70% of the YouTube videos analysed, 45% of the Facebook posts and 28% of the articles on Islamist websites. The pandemic is often used as proof of divine omnipotence – only God was powerful enough to create the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). According to this logic, the pandemic is following divine will.

There are different theological explanations for why God caused the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the contributions examined interpret the pandemic as a test for believers who should appreciate the gifts of God. The closure of mosques in the lockdown phase and the ban on contact were sometimes seen as a warning that Muslims should not take their everyday life for granted and should return more to their religion. In a smaller proportion of the contributions examined, the lockdown was seen as an opportunity – after all, "sinful" places such as bars, clubs and brothels were also affected by the closures.

Table 10 Narratives of Islamist actors on various platforms and websites.

	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Telegram	Websites
Religious interpretation of the pandemic	45% (191)	34% (32)	70% (205)	26% (51)	28% (4)
Rejection of status quo	13% (55)	0% (0)	27% (79)	19% (21)	14% (2)
Grievances	13% (54)	46% (44)	0% (0)	0% (0)	66% (8)
Altruism	12% (52)	0% (0)	10% (29)	19% (21)	0% (0)
Factual	24% (104)	20% (20)	7% (20)	25% (28)	0% (0)
Criticism of anti-COVID measures	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	10% (11)	0% (0)
Other	1% (3)	0% (0)	16% (47)	0% (0)	0% (0)

Some actors interpreted the COVID-19 pandemic as God's punishment for the sins of humankind. An Austrian Islamist YouTube channel claims that unbelievers were warned of God's omnipotence by the pandemic. A post on an Islamist extremist Facebook page on 8 April 2020 also states that the pandemic is a punishment for the evil "the capitalists and their images have caused in the world". "Thus the rulers of America, China, Russia, Europe and others are the cause of all misery on earth and also of the misery of their own peoples". The virus first broke out in China because the Chinese are "pagan idolaters" and eat "shameful" food (meaning the meat of animals forbidden in Islam). Even the self-declared "prisoners' helpers" of the Al-Asraa Association, who among other things declare their solidarity with the imprisoned Austrian ISIS recruiter Ebu Tejma, announced on Telegram that they consider only repentance and subsequent conversion to Islam as a way out of the pandemic for unbelievers.[37]

In a video published on YouTube on 2 May 2020, a former left-wing terrorist turned Islamist also addresses the question of why God is punishing not only the "infidels" but also Muslims with the pandemic. The fact that not only places like discos and brothels but also mosques were closed down should "really open the eyes of those who call themselves Muslims in Germany". God was angry at Muslims in Germany who did not show solidarity with imprisoned Islamists. The Islamist recorded his video lecture in support of Abu Walaa, who is accused of being a suspected ISIS recruiter, in front of the high-security courtroom of the Celle Higher Regional Court. However, there are also Islamist extremists who reject the interpretation of the virus as divine punishment. A member of the Islamischer Zentralrat Schweiz (Islamic Central Council of Switzerland – IZRS) described this interpretation in a Facebook livestream on 28 February 2020, even before the actual period of investigation of this analysis, as "nonsense" and "backward punitive theology, which is stuck somewhere in the Middle Ages".

Theological directives and information

In addition to the religious interpretation of the COVID-19 pandemic, information about the pandemic events and the theological instruction of believers on how to behave in the pandemic plays a major role for many Islamist preachers and other actors. For practising Muslims, religious life changed drastically during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mosques were temporarily closed and during Ramadan – the month of fasting – attendance also fell in April and May during the period of pandemic-related contact restrictions. Comments on religious life during the lockdown accounted for 34% of the Islamist contributions on Twitter.

For example, a revolutionary Islamist group recommended a reflection on the Islamic family during Ramadan on 29 April 2020. A similarly minded Facebook page called on Muslims in a post on 26 March 2020 to use the isolation during the lockdown "to come closer to Allah's good pleasure". The Furkan Gemeinschaft Dortmund (Furkan community in Dortmund) wrote in a Facebook post on 18 March 2020: "Our Creator teaches us that nothing happens without reason. We should use the present time of withdrawal and quarantine of those affected to think deeply about life in this world and the meaning of our existence."

A Salafi Facebook page and the accompanying YouTube channel published a video of a political Salafi preacher on 17 March 2020, in which he recommended a prayer of supplication for the time of the pandemic: "You say that three times in the morning and three times in the evening. If you say this, not only Allah will protect you from what is happening on earth, what even comes down from heaven". Other posts and contributions also called for regular prayer, especially to observe the five daily prayers.

A debate arose within the Muslim communities in Germany about fasting during Ramadan during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (not part of the list of actors) recommended that not only sick people but also Muslims belonging to high risk groups should stop fasting in 2020. Islamist extremist circles criticised this recommendation. A revolutionary Islamist group wrote on Facebook on 10 April 2020: "Dear brothers and sisters, this statement is hard to beat in terms of irresponsibility. In the first place, it is irrelevant who made this statement. The fact is that it has no basis in Islamic law! Only God alone can determine who is obliged to fast, which is why Ramadan during the Corona pandemic must be treated in the same way as in any other year."

The action of a church and a mosque in Berlin-Neukölln, which had coordinated church bells and a call to prayer as a sign of interreligious solidarity, also received criticism from Islamists. In a Facebook video on 5 April 2020, two Swiss Islamists criticised this gesture as "equalising" religions in a secular state. Instead, they argued, the focus should be on the differences between the religions, such as the supposed polytheism of Christians.

Alleged superiority of Islam

The recommendations for action during the COVID-19 pandemic issued by Islamist actors largely refer to religious sources, the Koran and the traditional words of the prophet Mohammed. They said that Islam is better equipped to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic than secular societies because of its rules on hygiene and disease control. An Austrian Islamist extremist channel claims that the scientific recommendations on pandemic protection merely reproduce the contents of the Ahādīth (sayings and deeds) of the prophet Mohammed on how to deal with pandemics.

Many of the posts and contributions examined reveal not only an asserted superiority of Islam, but also a direct rejection of Western, secular and liberal societies. The Facebook page Generation Islam writes in a post on 25 April 2020 that the symbolic images of empty supermarket shelves and full shopping trolleys during the COVID-19 pandemic "stand for the failure of the capitalist system [...]".

Figure 12 Emphasis on the superiority of an Islamic state in combating the pandemic

Der Islam zieht sowohl den Staat als auch das einzelne Individuum in die Pflicht. Der islamische Staat muss Maßnahmen treffen, um seine Bürger im Falle einer Epidemie zu schützen. Seine Ausgangssituation hierzu ist jedoch eine ganz andere als die eines kapitalistischen Staates, weil die Aufgabe des Kalifen als Staatsoberhaupt grundsätzlich darin besteht, die Angelegenheiten seiner Bürger wahrzunehmen. Bricht eine Epidemie aus, steht das Kalifat beispielsweise nicht vor einem maroden Gesundheitssystem, bei dem es an allem fehlt. Denn der islamische Staat ist dazu verpflichtet, für die medizinische Versorgung seiner Bürger aufzukommen. Ihre medizinische Versorgung und der Zugang dazu hängen nicht von irgendeiner Krankenversicherung und wirtschaftlichen Faktoren ab. Im kapitalistischen Staat ist ein Krankenhaus ein Unternehmen, das rein wirtschaftlich arbeitet und von Kürzungen und Einsparungen geprägt ist, im islamischen Staat nicht. Der islamische Staat darf sich wirtschaftlich auch nicht von anderen Staaten abhängig machen, indem er die Produktion in andere Länder verlagert, um billiger produzieren zu können, so dass er gar nicht erst in die Situation kommt, dass im Falle einer Pandemie Mundschutz oder Desinfektionsmittel fehlen. Das Kalifat ist eine Staatsform, die die islamische Vorgabe hat, politisch und wirtschaftlich unabhängig zu sein. Wie wichtig das ist, zeigt sich am Beispiel Deutschlands, das nicht einmal in der Lage ist, seine Landwirtschaft aufrechtzuerhalten, ohne Erntehelfer aus dem Ausland einzufliegen. Ohne die Hilfe von außen wäre angesichts der Corona-Krise die Lebensmittelversorgung in Deutschland ernsthaft gefährdet. Der islamische

The individualism of western societies leads to problems in the fight against COVID-19. Only "the creator of man" is capable of "regulating individual needs and solving problems". The solution to all social problems and needs lies "in the worship of Allah and in the observance of his laws and instructions".

An Islamist Facebook page also wrote in an article of 26 March 2020 that the spread of the virus and its consequences revealed "massive systemic weaknesses of capitalism and the liberal social order", and further: "Muslims call on the German people to use this threshold event for an ideological stocktaking". As a solution to all social problems, an Islamic state of God is propagated: "It is Islam that united whole peoples and granted them economic and regulatory stability for 1300 years through the caliphate."

Figure 13 Speculation about the introduction of an authoritarian state during the pandemic

Split stances on state protection measures

The Islamist actors on various platforms and websites examined reveal a sometimes ambivalent relationship to the state-imposed COVID-19 protection measures. There is a fundamental approval of the measures, which is often based on religious grounds by quoting statements of the prophet Mohammed on behaviour during pandemics.

In a Facebook post on 20 March 2020, an Islamist preacher asked why mosques in both the Muslim and non-Muslim world were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic even though this had not happened even during the plague. He justified this with scientific progress. In the times of the Prophet, a sick person was only recognised by his symptoms. One did not have the necessary knowledge about viruses. Today, however, we know that even people with no symptoms can be infectious. He said: "For this reason, contemporary scholars have declared that mosques can be closed if there is a high probability of infection." The common hygiene measures also meet with high approval in many Islamist contributions. And many mosques published hygiene rules when they reopened.

Nonetheless, some of the contributions examined reveal scepticism about government measures and a fundamental distrust of the German state. A minority of actors speculated that measures such as contact restrictions could be used to introduce an authoritarian system.

A small minority of the clerics and channels examined declared the closure of mosques and the suspension of common prayers to be inadmissible despite the risk of infection. In a post dated 8 April 2020, an Islamist extremist Facebook page expressed the opinion that Friday and community prayers should not be generally suspended even in the event of a pandemic: "For in the Islamic law evidence relating to Friday and community prayers, there is no evidence of a permanent suspension of these prayers." In a caliphate, the Friday or community prayer would not be suspended. A state which closes mosques and thereby forbids community prayers is committing a grave sin. This is why the website also voiced massive criticism of majority Muslim states.

On 19 March 2020, an Islamist extremist Telegram channel not only spoke out against closing mosques, but also played down the dangers posed by COVID-19. One did not have to be an expert to realise "that this virus is half as bad, and that only people who are very old and have countless other health problems at that age die from it". Muslims "who jump on the panic train, equating the virus with many a plague from the early days, and even before any orders from above come to close the mosques, or even try to legitimise the closure of Masājid [mosques] with sham arguments" are all the more astonishing. The article closes with the wish: "May Allāh save Muslims from all evil and take revenge on the unbelievers."

Divided relationship to conspiracy theories

Among Islamist extremists, there is no consistent line on the dissemination of conspiracy theories around the COVID-19 pandemic in the examined posts and contributions. It is striking, however, that especially prominent preachers and authorities of the German-speaking Islamist scene clearly oppose conspiracy theories.

Several videos by a Salafi preacher who has repeatedly and clearly opposed the spread of conspiracy theories stand out in this respect. In a video livestream on Facebook on 16 March 2020, the preacher responded to a viewer commentary and said: "If you think there is no virus, brother, then I feel sorry for you. Then you are unfortunately someone who lives far away from reality, who is very naïve." In another Facebook post on 20 March 2020, the same preacher wrote that a conspiracy needs "a plausible motive and so far nobody has been able to conjure up even the slightest plausible motive".

However, conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic are not rejected equally by all Islamist actors. In a video published on a YouTube channel on 1 April 2020, an Islamist preacher living in the UK said that he could not say of every conspiracy theory that it was wrong: "It may be that people like the Zionists, like the Freemasons, have their fingers in the pie". He went on to say that wars or major social crises, such as the attacks of 11 September 2001, offer governments the chance to make changes to the constitution without expected resistance. In the same video, the preacher explained that he believes that COVID-19 is slightly more dangerous than the flu, but nothing more. After all, it would mainly kill old people or those with pre-existing health conditions, and people would die all the time for other reasons too.

Oppression of and discrimination against Muslims

During the COVID-19 pandemic, various Islamist actors pointed to the oppression of Muslims worldwide and to actual or perceived hostility towards Muslims in Germany and other Western countries.

Many posts and contributions dealt with the oppression of the Uyghur Muslim minority in China. For example, an Islamist Facebook page wrote on 2 March 2020: "After the assimilation programmes to separate them from Islam, the Muslims held in concentration camps are now being sent across the country in corona-contaminated China to slave away as work slaves for, among others, German companies". The site criticised German companies which, according to weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel,* profit from forced labour by Uyghurs.[38] Several articles examined also referred to the systematic discrimination of Muslims by the government and Hindu nationalists in India.

In a Facebook post of 20 April 2020, the group Realität Islam (Reality Islam) reported an attack on a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf in Hameln, Lower Saxony. In times of COVID-19, anti-Muslim attacks continued in Germany, the cause being "inflammatory arguments of the assimilation policy", which had been "even further expanded" in the pandemic. Realität Islam understands this to mean debates about possible headscarf bans, but also discussions about fasting during Ramadan during the pandemic. In another post on 14 April 2020, Realität Islam wrote that "some statements made by German politicians about us Muslims in relation to the coronavirus" reminded them of the beginnings of the Holocaust. Both posts, as well as others on these topics, are marked with the hashtag #NoToTheDictatorshipOfValues. In these posts, there is not only a criticism of anti-Muslim hatred but also a rejection of the prevailing integration policy.

Conclusion

The spectrum of Islamist actors studied is broad, and the relationship between individual groups and platforms is sometimes characterised more by mutual demarcation than by common ground. For example, they differ in their attitude towards the liberal state and in the degree of their rejection of liberal and secular societies. These differences are also evident during the pandemic. While some call for the state to follow the state's guidelines for fighting COVID-19, others criticised all state measures and declared that only divine law could help in the pandemic.

The attitudes of some Islamist actors also differ on the religious duties of Muslims during the pandemic such as fasting during Ramadan or communal Friday prayers.

It is remarkable that several Islamist preachers reject conspiracy theories about the pandemic. While conspiracy theories about the pandemic are certainly being spread in German-speaking Islamist circles, prominent German-speaking Islamists are very clearly opposed to them.

Above all, many actors agree on religious issues: the pandemic is seen as proof of divine omnipotence and often as a test and divine punishment for Muslims and non-Muslims.

Annex 1: Data Collection

Platforms

For the analysis of the narratives and networks of German-speaking extremists in Germany, Austria and Switzerland in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, ISD has concentrated on a number of social media platforms and websites of extremist actors. Besides mainstream platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, extremist content and networks on influential alternative platforms such as 4chan and Telegram as well as the websites of German-speaking extremists were analysed.

The 4chan image board represents an outlier within the analysis. On 4chan, ISD could not identify any left-wing extremist or Islamist extremist communities during the preliminary research. Therefore, only right-wing extremist communication was downloaded here. Moreover, 4chan is a forum where users can discuss and share contents anonymously. In contrast to the other platforms and websites examined, the content cannot be assigned to specific extremist groups.

Also, 4chan communicates almost exclusively in English. However, the analysis software 4cat allows the collection of all posts made on 4chan by users who have indicated their country of origin as Germany, Austria or Switzerland or who have been assigned to one of these countries by 4chan on the basis of their IP address.[39 40 41] The location of the respective users is displayed on 4chan in a flag in the posts. In principle, it is possible for users to modify their flag by using a virtual private network. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that individual users who do not live in Germany, Austria or Switzerland may impersonate such users. Nevertheless, assuming that most users do not pretend to be of a false nationality, this data can be used for country-specific analyses.

Lists of actors

Based on the annual reports of Germany's domestic security agency, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) and ISD's previous research work on extremist communities in the German-speaking world, extensive lists of right-wing extremist, left-wing extremist and Islamist actors were created, first with relevant keywords and then with the help of a snowball procedure.[42] These lists of actors served as a basis for the following steps in data collection.

ISD researchers selected sites, groups, accounts, channels, boards or websites that either belong to known extremist groups, have affirmatively shared the content of extremist groups at least five times or have published content that clearly falls within the definitions of right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism and Islamist extremism used by ISD (see glossary). Organisations that are mentioned in the BfV reports but do not meet these criteria were not included in the analysis.

Ideological subgroups

There are considerable tactical differences within far-right, far-left and Islamist extremism. Within all three ideologies, the question of the legitimacy of political violence is particularly controversial. However, there is also considerable heterogeneity in ideological issues.

For example, various extreme right-wing actors have diverging views on whether a culturally or ethnically defined group of its own should form the foundation of a nation. Attitudes towards Judaism or Islam also differ, sometimes considerably, between bourgeois-nationalist, anti-Muslim activists, identitarians and neo-Nazis.

Table 11 Number of far-right, far-left and Islamist actors per platform

Number per platform[43]	Far-right	Far-left	Islamist
Facebook	372	122	71
Twitter	135	95	20
YouTube	76	13	67
Telegram	205	3	28
4chan	1	-	-
Websites	77	126	22

Table 12 Followers of far-right, far-left and Islamist actors per platform

Far-right – number of followers per platform

Platform	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Telegram
Average	13,851	10,826	29,353	9,557
most followers	528,882	274,999	252,000	141,300

Far-left – number of followers per platform

Platform	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Telegram
Average	3,524	3,058	396	472
most followers	74,817	31,331	2,300	776

Islamist – number of followers per platform

Platform	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Telegram
Average	17,010	2,136	11,540	856
most followers	319,912	4,744	129,000	2,484

Within left-wing extremism and Islamist extremism, there is a similarly wide ideological diversity.

To gain insight into how prominent the respective subgroups within right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism and Islamist extremism are on the various platforms, the list of actors were coded into the following ideological subcategories[44]:

Right-wing extremism:

1. **AfD:**
   Only official accounts of the AfD or AfD politicians were classified as AfD.

2. **Anti-Muslim:**
   Right-wing extremist actors for whom the rejection of Islam as a backward, homogeneous, static and unreformable threat to peaceful coexistence in Western societies is a central issue and who legitimise rejection of and discrimination against Muslims on this basis were classified as anti-Muslim. This is not meant to imply that hostility towards Muslims does not also play a major role within other currents of right-wing extremism.[45]

3. **Ethnonationalism/identitarianism:**
   Actors for who ethnicity is a central characteristic of belonging to a nation were counted as ethnonationalist or identitarian.

4. **Conspiracy theorists:**
   Conspiracy theorists included actors who claimed that a group operating in secrecy was trying to control social processes out of self-interest against the common good. Reich citizens and supporters of the QAnon movement were also coded as conspiracy theorists. Of course, not all conspiracy theories or conspiracy theorists have a right-wing extremist background. However, a growing overlap between conspiracy theorists and right-wing extremists can now be observed online.

5. **Neo-Nazis:**
   Open support for National Socialism.

6. **Others:**
   Included extreme right-wing libertarians, anti-LGBT groups and adherents of neo-Eurasianism influenced by the Russian political analyst and strategist Aleksandr Dugin.

Left-wing extremism:

1. **Communism:**
   Open support for communism.

2. **Anarchism:**
   Open support for anarchism.

3. **Post-autonomist:**
   Groups were classified as post-autonomist if they distinguish themselves from more subcultural-oriented autonomist left-wing extremist groups – and often by entering into pragmatic-tactical alliances with actors outside left-wing extremist structures and subcultures to influence social protest movements from the far left. This is intended to prevent left-wing extremist actors from isolating themselves from broader movements because of the need for ideological purity.[46]

4. **Antifa:**
   These included actors who call themselves Antifa, but could not be assigned to any organised communist, anarchist or post-autonomist group. This does not mean that other left-wing extremist actors investigated do not possibly identify themselves with the Antifa label.

Islamist extremism:

1. **Legalist Islamism:**
   Actors were classified as legalist Islamists who attempt to use political activism to systematically change society and, in the long term, to establish a totalitarian Islamic state, but who do not use violence to achieve these goals.

2. **Revolutionary Islamism:**
   Actors were counted as "revolutionary Islamists" if, according to the assessment of security authorities and researchers, they are influenced by the Islamist movement Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is banned in Germany (but not in Austria and Switzerland). Hizb ut-Tahrir's goal is to establish a totalitarian and expansionist Islamic caliphate that is supposed to unite Muslims worldwide and wants to annex all other states.[47]

3. **Political Salafism:**
   Actors were classified as political Salafists who advocate actively for the political transformation of society and the establishment of a totalitarian Islamic state according to their interpretation of the practices of the first three generations of Muslims (the "salaf" or "ancestors").[48]

4. **Shiite-Islamic extremism:**
   Followers of the Iranian regime were classified as Shiite-Islamic extremists.

Scraping and keyword filters

The content of these actors was downloaded using the social media analysis software programs CrowdTangle (Facebook), 4cat and Method52 (Twitter, YouTube and Telegram). The investigation period was set from 1 March-15 August 2020.

However, the amount of content cannot be compared between different platforms without reservations because data access and technical structure differ too much. The number is more accurate for platforms such as Twitter and Telegram, which offer comprehensive data access. On Facebook or YouTube, the comments are missing. If all comments (which cannot be systematically downloaded due to CrowdTangle's limited data access) are included among the 98,974 posts on Facebook, the number of content for Facebook increases to 4,224,059.

Table 13 Number of ideological subgroups within right-wing extremism per platform

Subgroup per platform	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Telegram	Websites
AfD	285	34	16	5	8
Anti-Muslim	12	20	9	21	12
Ethnonationalist/Identitarianism	26	49	35	30	24
Conspiracy theorist	1	3	9	90	3
Neo-Nazi	44	26	7	59	24
Other	2	3	0	0	3

Table 14 Number of ideological subgroups within left-wing extremism per platform

Subgroup per platform	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Telegram	Websites
Communism	39	28	6	0	41
Anarchism	16	15	2	0	30
Post-autonomous	45	40	4	3	47
Antifa	45	26	1	0	16

Table 15 Number of ideological subgroups within Islamist extremism per platform

Subgroup per platform	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Telegram	Websites
Legalist Islamism	23	12	8	0	10
Revolutionary Islamism	9	2	2	1	2
Political Salafism	38	5	57	25	7
Shiite-Islamic extremism	3	1	0	2	3

Table 16 Number of far-right, far-left and Islamist extremist contents

Content per platform[49]	Far-right	Far-left	Islamism
Facebook	98.974	11.121	6.150
Twitter[50]	70.656	26.501	2.997
YouTube	6.035	53	302
Telegram	10.359.395	144	3.942
4chan	410.946	-	-
Websites	6.910	3.155	26

The next step was to filter the contents by keywords related to the COVID-19 pandemic.[51] This resulted in 16 data sets with extremist content about the pandemic from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, 4chan and extremist websites.

Table 17 Number of far-right, far-left and Islamist extremist content about the COVID-19 pandemic (sample in brackets)

Content on COVID-19	Far-right	Far-left	Islamism
Facebook	31.781 (380)	3.337 (345)	457 (all)
Twitter[40]	6.799 (364)	2.059 (324)	517 (221)
YouTube	294 (all)	19 (all)	112 (all)
Telegram	1.258.533 (385)	50 (all)	105 (all)
4chan	14.824 (374)	-	-
Websites	3.369 (345)	971 (275)	12 (all)

Sampling

Data sets with less than 500 contents were fully coded. For the larger data sets, randomised samples were created in Excel in proportion to the data sets.[52] An online tool was used to calculate guidelines for the size of the samples.[53] A total of 4,342 contents from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, 4chan and extremist websites were manually coded to analyse German-language extremist narratives.

Since the downloaded data is unstructured text, the distribution of different elements within a sample may not correspond to the actual distribution within the population. It is therefore difficult to guarantee that the larger data sets, such as the far-right content on Telegram, are representative samples. Nevertheless, randomised sampling has ensured that posts, comments, videos and articles representing a random cross-section of digital extremist communication about the pandemic have been selected for content analysis.

Annex 2: Methodology

Grounded Theory

Some of the data sets obtained contain too many entries to be manually coded by researchers. There are different approaches to analyse such large digital data sets. Keywords can be used to determine the frequency of narratives before the analysis. However, keywords are initially based on researchers' assumptions about which topics are particularly relevant within the overall data. This risks distorting the results from these assumptions and overlooking counterintuitive narratives, which actually play a prominent role in the data.

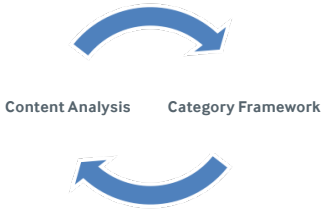
Alternatively, automated analysis approaches such as Topic Modelling can be used to identify hidden structures within large amounts of text and to discover "abstract" or "latent" topics.[54] However, these approaches have their limitations, as the identified topics may suggest the broad lines within a data set, but do not go into depth.

To gain a comprehensive insight into the downloaded data and to analyse the content as freely as possible from the researchers' pre-assumptions, the samples were randomised during data collection. A grounded theory approach was then chosen for the analysis. In grounded theory approaches, qualitative data, in this case social media content, is coded into specific categories on the basis of which the further data is analysed. This is intended to develop data-based theories instead of imposing theoretical assumptions on the empirical analysis. The aim of grounded theory approaches is to make the subjective views of certain actors comprehensible, in this case German-speaking extremists.[55]

Coding process

During the coding process, relatively precise categories are first inductively created, which describe the content of the posts, tweets, videos, comments and articles in our data sets. Whenever new categories were added that confused the previous category system, posts that had already been coded were rechecked. This was to determine whether the content was still assigned to the appropriate category given the updated category system. This created an iterative process between content analysis and category creation. Once no new categories were added and the category system was "saturated", the entire sample could be coded.

Figure 14 Iterative process between content analysis and category framework.



Meta-categories

In addition to the mere description of the individual contents, the aim of this analysis is also to identify overarching themes of extremist movements in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. For this purpose, the categories resulting from the coding process within the far-right, far-left and Islamist extremist data sets were examined for commonalities and combined into meta-categories. This made it possible to abstract from individual categories in the Islamist extremist data sets such as "Corona as God's punishment", "Corona as God's test" and "theological references to pandemics" and to form a meta-category "religious interpretation of the pandemic". Similarly, the categories "anti-capitalism", "criticism of the capitalist healthcare system" and "rising rents" assigned to the left-wing extremist actors were combined to form the meta-category "economic inequality".

Figure 15 Analysis process – from the coding of content in categories to the creation of meta-categories

Endnotes

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49. *Depending on the platform, the number here refers to the posts of public pages and groups (Facebook), tweets (Twitter), videos (YouTube), posts and comments (Telegram and 4chan) or articles (websites).*

50. *Data access via Twitter's Application Programming Interface (API) is limited to the last 3,600 tweets of an account. If there are highly active extremist users who have published more than 3,600 tweets since 1 March 2020, it is possible that not all relevant tweets on the COVID-19 pandemic are included in our data set.*

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