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Amplifying Far-Right Voices

**A Case Study on Inauthentic Tactics
Used by the Eric Zemmour Campaign**

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About this publication

This report presents the findings of an investigation looking at a specific online and coordinated operation led by the Zemmour campaign team, in the French 2022 presidential and legislative elections. This specific campaign consisted of twelve petitions all created by the support organisation Les Amis d'Eric Zemmour. ISD has identified signs of inauthentic behaviour orchestrated by the Zemmour campaign team in the sharing pattern of these petitions on Twitter in 2021 and 2022. Furthermore, despite data access restrictions, ISD has found signs this was a multi-platform effort, with signs of CIB identified on Facebook as well. Both platforms have policies in place regulating coordinated activity. Facebook prohibits in its community standards inauthentic coordinated behaviour. Twitter has several policies regulating coordinated activity on its platform.

The aim of this investigation is to understand the various strategies deployed before and throughout the campaign period by the Zemmour campaign team. Additionally, this study seeks to understand to what extent the sharing patterns of these petitions may violate the terms of service/ community guidelines of Twitter and Facebook.



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About ISD

Founded in 2006 in the UK, ISD is now the leading global “think and do” tank dedicated to understanding and innovating real-world responses to the rising tide of polarisation, hate and extremism of all forms in the digital era. We combine anthropological research, expertise in international extremist movements and an advanced digital analysis capability that tracks hate, disinformation and extremism online, with policy advisory support and training to governments and cities around the world. We also work to empower youth and community influencers internationally through our pioneering education, technology and communications programmes.

In France, ISD has been advising key policy stakeholders for over a decade in the challenging contexts of the Islamist terrorist attacks, the rise of the Identitarian movement, the Yellow Vest movement², the Covid-19 infodemic, the French elections, the ever-growing influence of the far right and the recent war in Ukraine. ISD is notably a member of the Regular Authority for Audiovisual and Digital Communication's (ARCOM) Online Hate Observatory and expert group on information manipulations. ISD has also been delivering pioneering research and programming in the fields of online hate, disinformation and extremism and set up ISD France in the form of a French association in 2020.

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Introduction

In the 18 months leading up to the 2022 French presidential elections, there was considerable speculation within the French public sphere regarding the candidacy of Eric Zemmour, the notorious polemicist and journalist¹. The potential candidacy of Zemmour was omnipresent in the French media ahead of the election cycle especially from September 2021. As highlighted by Action Critique Médias (or Acrimed), in September 2021, Zemmour was mentioned 4,167 times in French media (139 mentions per day).² Zemmour, who has been convicted for multiple offences under French hate speech laws, ran on a platform espousing traditional far-right and Identitarian themes.³ As demonstrated by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) in a previous investigation, his candidacy was widely supported by members of the French Identitarian movement,⁴ and certain Identitarian figures joined his campaign team, for example, Damien Rieu.⁵

After announcing his candidacy in November 2021, Eric Zemmour and central themes of his campaign like the “great replacement”⁶ remained omnipresent in the French media space.⁷ The far-right candidate reached 14% in the polls in January 2022.⁸ The outcomes of the presidential and legislative elections clearly contrast with the disproportionate representation of the Zemmour campaign both in traditional media as well as social media, as the far-right candidate obtained just 7% of votes in the first round of the presidential election and failed to qualify for the second round of the legislative elections.⁹ Moreover, his party, Reconquête, failed to gain any seats in the legislative elections. There is a clear discrepancy between the scale of coverage Eric Zemmour received in the media and on social media, and the actual support for his candidacy by the French population at the ballot box.

Previous investigations¹⁰ have highlighted certain suspicious digital strategies deployed by the Zemmour campaign team on social media. Some of these online strategies violate platforms’ rules/community standards, for example, “astroturfing”. This is a tactic often noted in information operations whereby social media accounts repetitively share the same message in apparently close coordination with each other, in order to feign grassroots mobilisation.¹¹ Recent research has revealed that the Zemmour campaign team invested in large-scale astroturfing throughout the campaign, with the most active accounts of the Zemmour campaign team taking part in 3,000 astroturfing operations.¹² Furthermore, Vincent Bresson, an undercover journalist who infiltrated the Zemmour campaign’s digital team, revealed other strategies deployed, including an operation focusing on Wikipedia¹³ and the prolific posting of Zemmour activists in various Facebook groups.¹⁴

This investigation covers a specific online and coordinated campaign led by the Zemmour campaign team, consisting of petitionsⁱ all created by the support organisation Les Amis d’Eric Zemmour. ISD has identified signs of inauthentic behaviour orchestrated by the Zemmour campaign team in the sharing pattern of these petitions on social media in 2021 and 2022 on Facebook and Twitter. Both platforms have policies in place regulating coordinated activity. Facebook prohibits in its community standards inauthentic coordinated behaviour, defined in broad terms as “assets” working together “to engage in inauthentic behaviour”¹⁵. Twitter has several policies regulating coordinated activity on its platform. Under Twitter’s Coordinated harmful activity policy¹⁶, Twitter forbids “technical coordination” which is “the use of specific, detectable techniques of platform manipulation to engage in the artificial inflation or propagation of a message or narrative”¹⁷. The aim of this investigation is to understand the various strategies deployed before and throughout the campaign period by the Zemmour campaign team. Additionally, this study seeks to understand to what extent the sharing patterns of these petitions may violate the terms of service/community guidelines of Twitter and Facebook.

i All petitions were set up as websites.

Main Findings

- ISD has identified 12 petitions, which were all created by the same organisation, Les Amis d'Eric Zemmour, between 26 January 2021 and 5 June 2022. Only two of these petitions openly mention their affiliation to this organisation that operated within the scope of the Zemmour campaign. A majority of these petitions were created in 2022 with a particular concentration around the presidential election period (though the strategy continued well into the legislative election period too).
- Signs of inauthentic behaviour were identified in the sharing of all 12 petitions on Twitter. 20,205 out of the 30,650 original tweets (excluding re-tweets) that shared at least one of the 11 petitions were identified as potential cross-posts, a signal of coordinated inauthentic behaviour (in fact, 32% of original tweets shared one of the petitions within 15 seconds of another tweet containing the same link). Similar sharing behaviours observed across petitions serve as further evidence of coordinated inauthentic behaviour.
- This strategy, deployed by the Zemmour campaign team, peaked in March and April 2022, close to the first and second rounds of the presidential elections. Three of the petitions that were created closest to the presidential elections were among the most shared (in terms of the number of original posts that shared them) and demonstrated the highest levels of cross-posting. Further analysis indicates inauthentic behaviour, perhaps with the aim of increasing the candidate's visibility online, particularly closer to the dates of the votes.
- The deployment of these petitions was strategically timed to best fit the agenda of the Zemmour campaign team or key moments of the presidential campaign. On several occasions, petitions were re-purposed and shared on Twitter in a coordinated way at a strategic time for the Zemmour campaign. For instance, ISD's analysis indicates that Zemmour's campaign team may have inauthentically promoted a petition about the McKinsey affair days before the debate between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen, potentially attempting to rally anti-Macron supporters.¹⁸
- Notably, one petition calling for the union of the right for the legislative elections was set up on 24 April and shared (with signs of inauthentic behaviour) by the Zemmour campaign team minutes before the outcome of the second round was officially announced.
- Very few accounts were responsible for the majority of original tweets containing at least one petition. Just 0.57% of accounts posted 50% of the original tweets, and four accounts were responsible for sharing over 21% of the original tweets. The account of Samuel Lafont, head of digital strategy for the Zemmour campaign, was the most active account sharing these petitions (his was behind 10% of original tweets).
- On top of Les Amis d'Eric Zemmour creating all 12 petitions, the Zemmour campaign team was at the very core of spreading these petitions, using inauthentic behaviour techniques. Over half of the petitions were first shared on Twitter by an account of the Zemmour campaign team or member of Reconquête, while most petitions weren't openly affiliated to the Zemmour campaign. Among the accounts that shared at least ten petitions, a third were part of the Zemmour campaign team or Reconquête.
- Sharing patterns indicate that the petitions were used to reach audiences outside of Zemmour's typical supporters. One of the strategies deployed by the Zemmour campaign team was to post petitions in reply to tweets from actors outside the Zemmour online sphere in order to gain visibility and potentially rally new support within other online communities. For the petitions shared closer to the presidential election, ISD has found that accounts dedicated to sharing anti-vax, anti-sanitary restrictions and/or anti-Macron rhetoric were also involved in their sharing.
- Many Twitter accounts that were active in sharing these petitions were created in December 2021 and January 2022. Among the ten most active of these accounts, ISD has observed that at least half match the definition of political bots; however, ISD cannot ascertain who was responsible for setting up these accounts.

- There is a clear multi-platform aspect to the sharing of these petitions, as ISD has found signs of coordinated inauthentic behaviour in their sharing on Facebook as well. This is particularly the case in the run-up to the presidential elections and includes official pages of Zemmour's party, Reconquête. Moreover, ISD has observed one example of potential coordinated inauthentic behaviour orchestrated by actors affiliated with the Zemmour campaign team across Twitter and Facebook less than two weeks before the first round of the presidential elections.
- Many of the behaviours identified in this investigation violate Twitter and Facebook's rules/community standards. Given the potential harms caused by inauthentic behaviour and coordinated inauthentic behaviour, especially in an electoral context, ISD offers a set of recommendations for platforms and governments to improve implementation of rules/community standards and to ensure action is taken against actors or networks engaging in inauthentic behaviour.

Glossary

Coordinated behaviour: A set of online entities (e.g. individual accounts, groups or pages) operating together towards a shared goal or purpose; they can (but do not have to be) managed by the same actor(s).

Coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB): This is a term used by Facebook to define collections of pages, groups or accounts that work together covertly to mislead users about who they are or what they are doing. The platform's definition of CIB requires this activity to involve a collection of more than one affiliated social media entity (individual accounts, channels, groups, pages) that is exhibiting a set of characteristics of inauthentic identity and behaviour, managed together by one actor or set of actors.

Inauthentic behaviour: A set of behaviours suggesting an online entity might be operating under a false or misleading identity. These behaviours might include: a mismatch between geolocation and topic; poor use of stated language (e.g. misspellings and grammar mistakes); little or no evidence of human activity in photos; profile photos or interactions; stock photographs used for profile photos; sudden dramatic changes in posting volume; topic or language or both without explanation; and/or repetitive posting or sharing patterns¹⁹. Signals used to detect potential inauthentic behaviour are constantly evolving due to the changing tactics of actors using such approaches to deceive audiences online.

Astroturfing: Astroturfing is the practice of masking the sponsors of a message or organisation (e.g. political, advertising, religious or public relations) to make it appear as though it originates from and is supported by grassroots participants.

Disinformation: Disinformation is false, misleading or manipulated content presented as fact, that is intended to deceive or harm. Producers of disinformation typically have political, financial, psychological or social motivations.

Far-right: In line with the conceptualisations established by Dutch political scientist and right-wing-extremist expert Cas Mudde and UK-based academic Dr Elisabeth Carter, ISD defines far right as a system of beliefs typically marked by several of the following characteristics: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and strong-state advocacy and authoritarianism.

Context: the petitions/websites set up by Les Amis d'Eric Zemmour

ISD has identified a total of 12 petitions set up by the organisation Les Amis d'Eric Zemmour (or "The Friends of Eric Zemmour"). Officially created in May 2021, this organisation campaigned for the candidacy of Eric Zemmour throughout 2021, and some of its members later joined his official campaign team.²⁰ Like the youth organisation Generation Z, this association did not operate independently of the Zemmour campaign team. Indeed, it was recognised by the National Committee of campaign funding as a political entity involved in the presidential campaign.²¹ This organisation launched several online actions ahead of the 2022 elections cycle during 2021 to grow support for Zemmour.²²

These petitions were set up from 26 January 2021 to 5 June 2022. Only the first petition, set up on 26 January 2021, and the second petition, set up on 7 July 2021, are openly affiliated to Les Amis d'Eric Zemmour; none of the other petitions openly state they are affiliated to the Zemmour campaign team (in fact, there is no mention whatsoever of Les Amis d'Eric Zemmour in the other petitions). However, ISD has identified they were all created by this organisation, by using a domain database tool to identify the actors who had registered the domain of each of these petitions as well as the date. For all 12 petitions, it was Les Amis d'Eric Zemmour who had registered the domain of the link.

Over half of these petitions (eight in total) were created in 2022, the year of the presidential election. There was a greater concentration nearer to the date of the vote for the presidential election, with five petitions created and shared on social media in March and April 2022. Seven of the eight petitions created in 2022 have similar branding, format and tone. In addition, the petition strategy deployed by the Zemmour campaign appears to have continued beyond the presidential election; while conducting this analysis, ISD identified a new petition created on 5 June 2022 ahead of the legislative elections. This petition, which was related to the events at the Union of European Football Associations (or UEFA) Champions League Final at Stade de France, was integrated to a limited extent in ISD's analysis.


Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 Examples of petitions all set up in 2022. The first is a screenshot of the petition “Stop Censure”, the second “Scandale Macron–McKinsey”, the third “Soutien Agriculteur” and the fourth “Chaos au Stade de France”. All four petitions have the same format.

[illegible][illegible][illegible]

PÉTITION : Dénonsez le Scandale Macron-McKinsey

☐ Je n'ai pas de compte LinkedIn

☐ Je n'ai pas de compte Facebook



LE SCANDALE MCKINSEY

Signez la pétition maintenant !

Scandale d'État : Macron a renvoyé l'ascenseur à ses copains de McKinsey, sur le dos des Français. Signez la pétition !

Initiative, Initiative,

Le scandale d'État !

Pendant que les Français se soucient du caduc, l'arçonne arçonne ses copains avec une impunité !

Voici un rappel des faits.

Macron a démissionné de son poste de ministre de l'Économie en 2017, en ne démissionnant pas le conseil d'administration - du cabinet de conseil McKinsey.

En effet, un candidat ne peut démissionner d'un poste de ministre pour se consacrer à son entreprise, pour le moins l'entreprise de son conjoint. Si l'on n'a pas d'entreprise, on ne peut pas démissionner d'un poste de ministre pour se consacrer à son entreprise.

Macron ne l'a pas fait.

Et c'est légal.

Voici à présent, le résumé d'ensemble de l'affaire :

Macron a pu démissionner de son poste de ministre de l'Économie, en ne démissionnant pas le conseil d'administration - du cabinet de conseil McKinsey.

Et McKinsey a continué de travailler avec l'État.

Qu'en 2017, McKinsey est devenu le premier cabinet de conseil en stratégie de l'État. Il a été le premier à être nommé par le président de la République.

Des quantités astronomiques de données personnelles concernant la santé des Français ont été fournies par cette entreprise américaine.

Ces données ont été utilisées pour le compte des fonctionnaires à qui l'État aurait pu confier le travail.

Et pour couronner le tout, cette entreprise refuse de payer ses impôts en France...

Cette utilisation du pouvoir à des fins personnelles est scandaleuse !

Qui peut nous aider à signer la pétition ?

Comment expliquer le silence des médias pendant des jours et des jours ?

Table 1 A table that summarises the main features of the 12 petitions.

Petition link and name (as it appears in this report)	Name	Date of creation	Summary of petition
https://www.jesignepourzemmour.fr/ "Je Signe pour Zemmour"	Je veux la candidature d'Eric Zemmour pour 2022	26/01/2021	The first petition set up. It is openly signed by Reconquête and requests the candidacy of Eric Zemmour in the 2022 French presidential election.
https://jesoutienszemmour.fr/ "Je Soutiens Zemmour"	PÉTITION : JE SOUTIENS ERIC ZEMMOUR ! #STOPCENSURE	07/07/2021	This petition aims to support Zemmour while accusing both the French judicial system and Twitter of censoring him. It uses the freedom of expression angle to denounce different legal cases against Zemmour.
https://www.petition-permis-a-points.fr/ "Permis à Point"	Permis à point	24/10/2021	This petition advocates for a change in the driver licence policy. It seems like this petition targets particularly a younger audience.
https://www.petition-allocations-etrangers.fr/ "Allocations Etrangères"	Pétition : moins d'allocs pour les étrangers, plus d'argent pour les Français !	03/11/2021	This petition advocates against the allocation of benefits distributed by the French state to non-French people and is tied to one of the main themes of the Zemmour campaign (anti-immigration rhetoric).
https://www.500parrainages.fr/ "500 Parrainages"	500 parrainages	02/01/2022	This petition advocates for Zemmour to get the 500 signatures from local officials to be able to run for president. This issue was centrally discussed until the deadline (early March 2022) because it was uncertain if Zemmour would be able to get the signatures necessary to run for president.
https://www.union-des-droites.fr/ "Union des Droites"	PÉTITION : Soutenez l'Union des droites pour la victoire en 2022	13/01/2022	This petition calls for the union of the French right. It was launched as Zemmour was gaining in the polls while Marine Le Pen was dropping. As they were getting closer, Pécresse was doing well in the polls and was projected to qualify for the second round of the election. ²³ This petition advocates for the union of the right, presenting Eric Zemmour as the only candidate that would be able to lead this coalition.
https://www.twitterstopcensure.fr/ "Stop Censure"	PÉTITION : Stop censure !	04/03/2022	This petition responds to the suppression of certain Twitter accounts associated with the Zemmour campaign in early March 2022. It denounces the supposed censorship by Twitter.
https://www.petition-defense-excusable.fr/ "Défense Excusable"	PÉTITION : Pour que les victimes puissent se défendre	30/03/2022	This petition advocates for "défense excusable" (or, in English, excusable defence), reacting to the same story as in the "Soutien Agriculteur" petition.
https://www.soutien-agriculteur-charente.fr/ "Soutien Agriculteur"	PÉTITION : Soutien à l'agriculteur cambriolé	30/03/2022	This petition was launched in reaction to the case of a farmer in Charente killing a burglar in his house, which occurred on the night of 25 March. ²⁴ The petition uses this case to advocate for the right to self-defence.

https://www.scandale-macron.fr/ "Scandale Macron–McKinsey"	PÉTITION : Dénoncez le Scandale Macron-McKinsey	01/04/2022	This petition is one of the most shared ones launched by Les Amis d'Eric Zemmour and was created less than two weeks before the first round of the French presidential elections. It references the McKinsey affair, the revelation that the Macron administration paid the consultancy firm about one billion euros for services during his five years in office. ²⁵
https://www.union-nationale-legislative.fr/ "Union Nationale Législatives"	PÉTITION : Soutenez l'Union nationale pour les élections législa- tives	24/04/2022	This petition was created the day of the second round of the presidential election at 14:19, a couple of hours before the outcome of the election was officially announced. This petition was targeting the legislative elections, calling for the union of the right to obtain a majority of seats in the French National Assembly.
https://www.mensonges-stade-de-france.fr "Chaos au Stade de France"	Chaos au Stade de France : STOP aux mensonges !	05/06/2022	This petition reacts to the chaos at Stade de France during the UEFA Champions League Final. It promotes anti-Macron rhetoric and calls for Minister of the Interior Gérald Darmanin to resign.

Methodology

Research questions

During ISD's regular monitoring of social media leading up to and throughout the French election cycle, analysts identified several petitions that had similar sharing patterns, many of which were explicitly organised by the Zemmour campaign team. Some of the accounts and sharing patterns indicated potential coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB). As such, the primary research questions for this investigation were:

- Can any inauthentic behaviour or CIB be observed in the sharing of these petitions on social media?
- What is the scale of dissemination of these petitions?
- Who are the actors taking part in the diffusion of these petitions? What, if any, are the ties between these actors, and are the same actors involved in the diffusion of all petitions?
- What are the strategies deployed to amplify the visibility of these petitions on social media, and to what extent have they been successful?
- In what ways does this violate platforms' terms of service?
- To what extent have these campaigns enabled the issues promoted by these petitions to reach a more mainstream audience?

Data collection

To answer these questions, all posts containing links to at least one of the 11 petitions were collected from Twitter and Facebook. Data was collected from Twitter using the platform's application programming interface (API) for academic research, and data from Facebook was collected using the CrowdTangle API. The date range for collection was 26 January 2021 (the date of creation for the first petition) to 26 April 2022.

The resulting collections contained 108,456 tweets from 19,876 unique accounts on Twitter and 1,204 posts from 385 unique public groups or pages on Facebook. The Twitter dataset was filtered to include only original tweets (excluding retweets) for certain analyses; this dataset of original tweets contained 30,650 tweets from 7,840 unique accounts.

Quantitative analysis

Quantitative analysis was conducted using Beam, an analytical system developed by the Center for the Analysis of Social Media (CASM Technology) and ISD. Initial quantitative analysis processed the data to identify when each petition was initially shared, the sharing volume over time of each petition and the accounts most active in sharing the petitions. The number of unique petitions shared by each account was also tabulated.

Subsequent analysis aimed to determine whether and to what extent sharing of these petitions constituted CIB. Firstly, accounts sharing the petitions were organised by creation date in order to understand whether they might have been created in a coordinated manner. Secondly, posts sharing the petitions were analysed for cross-posting; for this report, this is defined as when a post containing a link (in this case, a petition) is shared at a short-distance (within one minute) of at least one other post containing the same link, which may also indicate coordinated activity. To ensure organic retweets were excluded from this analysis, only the dataset of original tweets (thus excluding retweets) was used.

Finally, network analysis was conducted to understand the relationships between the different accounts sharing the petitions. For this analysis, each account and each petition were set as nodes in a network, and edges were defined as an account sharing a link to a petition. This analysis was also only conducted on the original tweet dataset in order to exclude organic retweets.

Qualitative analysis

To better understand the character of posts sharing these petitions on social media, a randomly-selected sample of those that shared each of the 11 petitions was analysed qualitatively. The most active accounts in the full dataset of original tweets, as well as the most active accounts sharing particular petitions, were also analysed qualitatively to understand any commonalities these accounts shared.

After the data collection was conducted, ISD identified another petition that fit the same profile as the petitions that make up the focus of this study. This petition, "Chaos au Stade de France", was not included retrospectively in the large-scale data collection, but its sharing on social media was analysed separately.

All times listed in this report are in local French time.

Section 1: Activity on Twitter

Understanding the activity behind these petitions

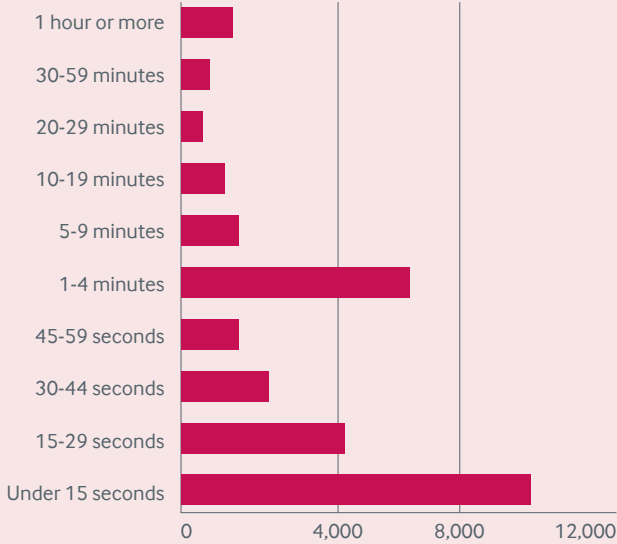
Similar sharing patterns were observed for the 12 petitions that were set up by the Zemmour campaign team in 2021 and 2022 on Twitter. ISD has found petitions were shared repetitively in a very short time frame, suggesting inauthentic behaviour orchestrated by the Zemmour campaign team.ⁱⁱ There are strong indications that these petitions were promoted inorganically to provide Eric Zemmour with greater visibility, making it seem as though there was widespread support for his campaign. This strategy was deployed particularly on dates in March and April 2022 just before the presidential election rounds. In addition, another petition was created in June 2022 after the presidential elections but just ahead of the French legislative elections.

The table overleaf (Table 3) summaries statistics regarding the sharing patterns of each petition on Twitter. It provides the scale of each petition’s reach, including the number of posts which include a petition, the number of original posts (which excludes retweets) and the level of cross-posting. For instance, the petition “Je Soutiens Zemmour” was shared in 30,870 tweets, of which 7,393 were original posts (excluding retweets). The level of cross-posting for original tweets was 65%, meaning that 65% of tweets (excluding retweets) that included a link to the “Je Soutiens Zemmour” petition were shared less than a minute after another tweet that did the same. Such a finding is particularly noteworthy in the context of this petition as it was shared throughout 2021 (see Figure 5 below).

A high level of cross-posting

From an analysis of 11 petitions, ISD has found there were 30,650 original tweets that contained at least one of the petitions.ⁱⁱⁱ Among this dataset of original posts, 20,205 tweets were identified as potential cross-posts. In addition, for all 11 petitions, the rate of suspected cross-posting was above 50%, a further indication there was inauthentic behaviour. Moreover, as indicated in Table 2, about 32% of original posts were shared less than 15 seconds after a tweet including the same link. While these quantitative metrics can indicate inauthentic behaviour, further qualitative analysis of the

Table 2 A graph showing the time gap between original posts (thus excluding retweets) with the same link.



sharing pattern for each petition is necessary to confirm inauthentic behaviour.

Another trend illuminated by the table above is that the level of cross-posting for original tweets is greater for petitions set up in March and April 2022 just before the presidential election.^{iv} The “Scandale Macron–McKinsey”, “Soutien Agriculteur” and “Union Nationale Législatives” petitions were the most widely shared among original tweets (5,363 tweets, 3,156 tweets and 2,271 tweets respectively^v). These March and April 2022 petitions also have the highest cross-posting rates (75% for “Scandale Macron–McKinsey”, 74% for “Soutien Agriculteur” and 73% for “Union Nationale Législatives” respectively). This may be indicative of a strategy employed particularly during the official campaign period; the Zemmour campaign team may have deployed these petitions on Twitter in order to gain more visibility on social media closer to the date of the vote.

ⁱⁱ By Zemmour campaign team, ISD means individuals who hold a position in Eric Zemmour’s campaign team for the presidential and/or legislative elections. In the context of this report, this would particularly refer to the team that oversees social media activities for the campaign.
ⁱⁱⁱ Excluding the “Chaos au Stade de France” petition set up on 5 June 2022; see the Methodology section for further information.

^{iv} The first round of the French presidential election took place on 10 April 2022 and the second round on 24 April 2022.
^v The only other petitions shared in as many original posts were the first two petitions set up in January and July 2021 (“Je Signe pour Zemmour” and “Je Soutiens Zemmour” respectively) and promoted at multiple occasions during the pre-campaign period. (See Figure 5).

Table 3 A table summarising information for the 12 petitions.

Petition	Number of posts which contain this petition	Number of original posts	Number of accounts which shared each link (original posts only)	Level of cross-posting (based on original tweets) ^{vi}	Date petition was created	First account to share the petition ^{vii}
"Je Signe pour Zemmour"	12,331	4,627	1,007	51%	26/01/2021	Account 1 (a pro-Zemmour account)
"Je Soutiens Zemmour"	30,870	7,939	1,709	65%	07/07/2021	@Samuel_Lafont
"Permis à Point"	3,348	691	135	79%	24/10/2021	@Samuel_Lafont
"Allocations Etrangers"	4,415	990	221	71%	03/11/2021	Account 2
"500 Parrainges"	3,818	564	259	57%	02/01/2022	Account 3 (a pro-Zemmour account)
"Union des Droites"	1,851	869	179	69%	13/01/2022	@EleonoreLP
"Stop Censure"	6,242	655	226	65%	04/03/2022	@Samuel_Lafont
"Soutien Agriculteur"	14,469	3,156	2,340	74%	30/03/2022	Account 4 (self-identifies as a Reconquête member in their Twitter bio)
"Défense Excusable"	1,637	427	267	67%	30/03/2022	Account 5 (self-identifies as a Reconquête member)
"Scandale Macron–McKinsey"	24,383	5,363	3,291	75%	01/04/2022	@Samuel_Lafont
"Union Nationale Législatives"	5,330	2,271	1,852	73%	24/04/2022	@Samuel_Lafont
"Chaos au Stade de France"					05/06/2022	@Samuel_Lafont

vi "Cross-posting" should be understood as posts that have been shared at a short distance (within a minute) from another message containing the same link.

vii The accounts in the following table (and other tables of this piece) that didn't belong to public figures were anonymised for privacy reasons.

Actors involved

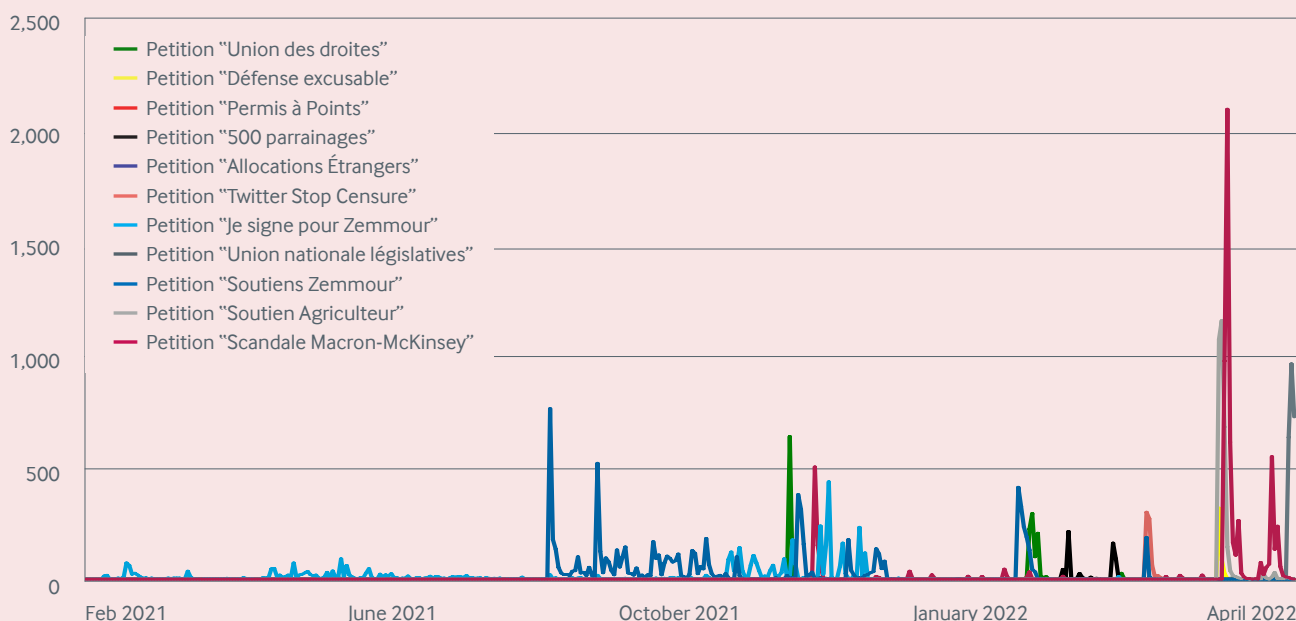
As detailed in Table 3, the first account to share each petition is another indicator of the Zemmour campaign team's involvement in the sharing of these petitions online. In seven instances, the first account to share a petition was a senior member of the Zemmour campaign's digital team (six times by Samuel Lafont, once by Eléonore Lhéritier). Moreover, two accounts that were the first to share a petition self-identified in their Twitter bios as Reconquête members. In total, over half of the petitions were first shared by an account of the Zemmour campaign team or a member of Reconquête.

Petition sharing over time – looking at the trajectory of petitions

Figure 5 here shows the posting activity of all petitions on Twitter (originals and retweets). A trend observed by ISD is that peaks tend to occur in the hours or days immediately after a petition was created by Les Amis d'Eric Zemmour. For instance, the peak on 5 November 2021 was the result of the "Allocations Etrangers" petition being shared, with 491 original posts including the link on this day. This was again the case with the peak observed on 5 March, which was the result of the promotion of petition "Stop Censure" that was created on 4 March 2022. Again, the peak observed on 2 April 2022 (2,056 original posts shared) was the result of the dissemination of the petition "Scandale Macron–McKinsey" which was created the day before. In most cases, petitions are directly tied to or in response to a specific event in the news cycle, explaining their rapid peaks; this was the case for "Stop Censure" petition or the "Soutien Agriculteur" petition. Further analysis on the inauthentic behaviour identified in the sharing activity of both petitions, especially during these peaks, is available in the case studies below.

In certain instances, the Zemmour campaign team re-purposed former petitions, apparently in an attempt to inject the agenda promoted by Zemmour back into

Figure 5 A graph showing the volume over time for each petition.



French public debate. The “Je Signe pour Zemmour” petition, the first created, is a good example of a petition being re-purposed on multiple occasions ahead of the presidential campaign to rally support around the Zemmour candidacy. The Zemmour campaign team initially created this petition on 26 January 2021. In an early instance of coordinated activity, on 5 May 2021 (one of the first peaks), there were multiple instances of very similar posts being shared by different accounts only seconds apart. For example, four different local factions of the youth movement Generation Z posted tweets with very similar text, including the link to this petition, only minutes apart (17:11–17:18).

Throughout 2021, this petition was shared multiple times, especially in the second half of 2021 ahead of Zemmour announcing his candidacy for the presidential election. Indeed, the main peaks of activity relating to this petition occurred in October and November 2021 (see Figure 5), just weeks before Zemmour would officially announce he was running for president (on 30 November 2021).²⁶

The main peak of this petition took place on 10 November 2021. ISD has found 427 original tweets linking this petition, all from 26 accounts (including members of the Zemmour campaign like Lafont and Lhéritier, and accounts run by Reconquête and Generation Z). In several instances, the same account shared the exact

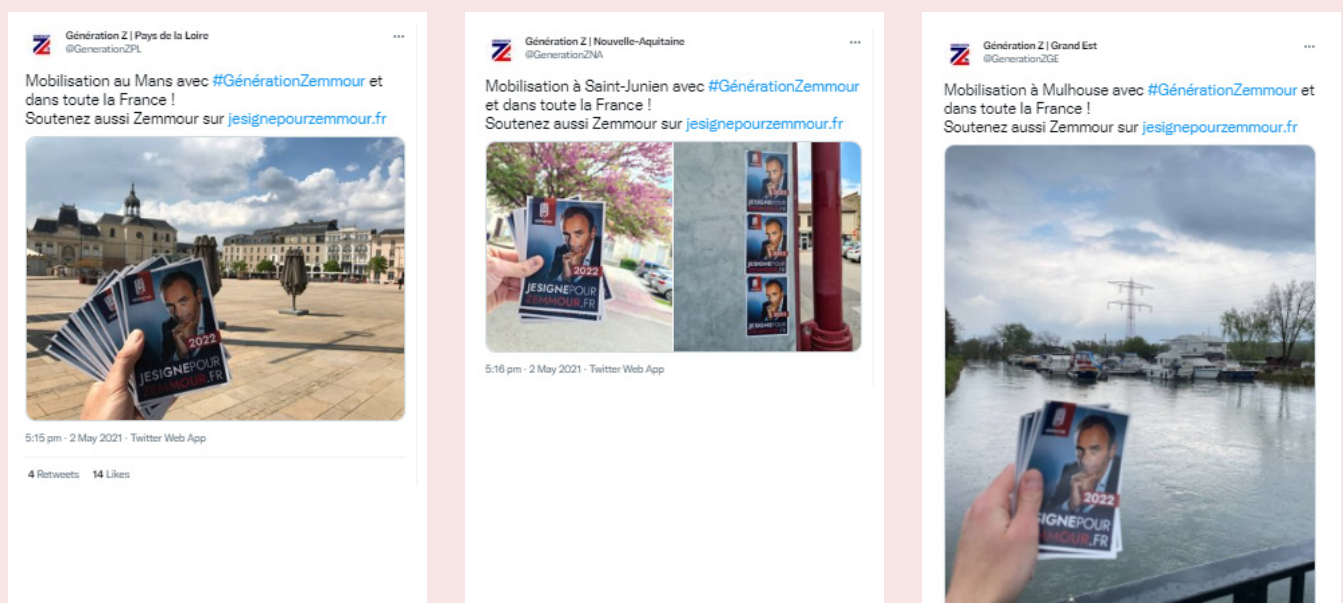
same post only seconds or minutes apart. For example, one account shared the same post 45 times in less than ten minutes. Later in the day, this same account again shared the exact same text 116 times in a span of 40 minutes and then a further 29 times within five minutes (see screenshots in Figures 9–12).

Sharing pattern deployed across different petitions

ISD has found similar sharing patterns and signs of inauthentic behaviour across all 12 petitions. More specifically, ISD has observed all petitions were shared repetitively (indicating inauthentic or automated behaviour) to amplify their visibility online. Three types of behaviours were identified across the sharing pattern of these 12 petitions; these are summarised here, with examples below.

- **Behaviour one:** The same account repetitively shares the exact same post within a limited period (i.e. seconds or minutes apart).
- **Behaviour two:** Different accounts share the exact same or very similar content within a limited period (i.e. seconds or minutes apart).
- **Behaviour three:** One or several accounts share the exact same content in replies to tweets from other

Figures 6, 7 and 8 Examples of posts shared by three different Reconquête accounts in a limited time frame and using very similar language.



accounts. This was mostly the case for accounts that are either far-right aligned or owned by French public figures/mainstream media in order to reach a wider audience.^{viii}

Examples of behaviour one

For the petition “Défense Excusable”, ISD has observed that the same account was responsible for sharing the exact same post (containing the petition) only seconds or minutes apart. One account shared the same post 13 times in less than a minute (see Figures 13 and 14). The activity of this account matches ISD’s definition of bot-like behaviour.²⁷

Similarly, for the “Allocations Etrangers” petition, one account shared the exact same post containing this petition 44 times within 11 minutes on 5 November 2021. Based on the Twitter bio, this account is owned by a member of the Reconquête campaign.

Figures 9, 10, 11 and 12 Examples of tweets which were shared by the same account with the exact same message at 12:47:17, 12:47:22, 12:47:28 and 12:47:34 respectively.



viii Far-right aligned here means far-right public figures, far-right activists or accounts dedicated to spreading far-right narratives.

Figures 13 and 14 Examples of posts shared only seconds apart at 17:15:46 and 17:15:51 respectively on 30 March 2022.



Figures 15 and 16 Examples of posts shared by the same account only seconds apart at 09:12:05 and 09:12:12 respectively.



Examples of behaviour two

The petition “Je Soutiens Zemmour” was shared in 7,939 original posts; the peak of shares took place on 2 August with 746 posts containing this link. Out of these 746 posts, 191 contained the exact same text shared by 187 unique accounts.

Figures 17 and 18 Examples of tweets with the exact same content shared by two different accounts less than a minute apart (at 08:58:50 and 08:59:31 respectively on 2 August 2021).



Examples of behaviour three

All original tweets linking to the petition “Union des Droites” were shared between 21 January 14:07:25 and 22 January 16:52:10. The account highlighted in Figures 19 and 20 was responsible for 14% of all original tweets linking to this petition (123 of 869). The majority of these posts (71) were all shared within less than an hour. This account only shared the petition in reply to other tweets, in certain instances tagging other accounts. As the petition was calling for the union of the right under the Zemmour candidacy, the petition was shared in response to tweets from the official account of Les Républicains (LR) candidate Valérie Pécresse (44 times) as well as Rassemblement National (RN) candidate Marine Le Pen (13 times). In multiple instances, this account also replied to or tagged other political figures, such as Laurent Wauquiez of LR and Jordan Bardella of RN, as well as Twitter accounts of media, such as CNews or La Chaîne Info (LCI).

Figures 19 and 20 Tweets including the same petition which were shared at 13:09:12 and 13:09:06 respectively on 21 January 2022. The same account is here sharing the petition in reply to two different tweets of LR presidential candidate Valérie Pécresse.



Election case studies

As noted previously, the level of cross-posting was the highest closest to the date of the presidential election. The petition calling for the union of the right created on 24 April is the petition with the highest percentage of cross-posting. This petition was set up on the day of the second round of the presidential election, hours before the announcement of the outcome of the elections. This indicates that the Zemmour campaign team continued to use this strategy beyond the presidential campaign. They have since deployed it during the legislative elections, further evidenced by the creation of a new petition, “Chaos au Stade de France”, on 5 June, shared in posts that mention the legislative election.

ISD has identified several signs that the deployment of this digital strategy by the Zemmour campaign team became more systematised closer to the election and especially in March and April 2022. Indeed, all petitions created in March and April 2022 were designed in the same format, and both their tone and language are very similar.

Case study one: the “Scandale Macron–McKinsey” petition

The “Scandale Macron-McKinsey” petition, created on 1 April, less than two weeks before the first round of the presidential elections, is one of the most shared petitions. This petition references “the McKinsey affair”, which focused on revelations that the Macron administration paid the firm about one billion euros for consultancy services during his five years in office.²⁸ ISD found in a previous investigation that this petition was the most shared link among fringe communities during the presidential campaign.²⁹ The highest peak of original posts including this petition took place on 2 April, with 2,056 original tweets shared on the day (excluding retweets).

This petition was created on 1 April at 14:19, and the first Twitter account to share it was Samuel Lafont’s only hours later at 18:28. The exact same text used in Lafont’s first post was then shared 100 times in original posts (excluding retweets) by 100 different accounts between 18:28 and 19:05 on 1 April.

Accounts either posted the petition directly or shared it in reply to other far-right accounts and those outside of the far-right Twitter ecosystem. It is likely this strategy was employed to penetrate the non-fringe ecosystem and reach a wider audience, including French media. The petition was shared under posts that mentioned the McKinsey affair but also unrelated posts and, in certain instances; posts that were not even political (see Figures 25 and 26).

Figures 21, 22, 23 and 24 The first four tweets which shared the “Scandale Macron–McKinsey” petition, including Lafont’s tweet; these all use the exact same text. These posts were published at 18:29:59, 18:29:56, 18:29:34 and 18:28:33 respectively on 1 April.



Figures 25 and 26 Examples of tweets which replied to posts with a link to the “Scandale Macron–McKinsey” petition. Both replies were posted by Samuel Lafont; one reacts to a tweet posted by Zemmour-supporter Philippe de Villiers, the other to a tweet from the account of Le Figaro.



Figures 27, 28 and 29 Posts from Samuel Lafont which include the “Scandale Macron–McKinsey” petition. These were shared in reply to tweets from a pro-Zemmour account, sovereigntist figure Florian Philippot and LFI candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon.



Over the month of April, 5,363 original posts containing this link have been identified by ISD. Out of these original posts, 3,190 used the same text as the first tweet from Samuel Lafont (see Table 4).^{ix} This petition was shared again between the two rounds of the election, especially ahead of the debate between Macron and Marine Le Pen that took place on 20 April.

Table 4 A table detailing the number of tweets in April 2022 that shared the “Scandale Macron–McKinsey” petition using Samuel Lafont’s text.

Date	Number of tweets which use the same text as Samuel Lafont’s tweet (only includes original posts)
01/04	838
02/04	1,275
03/04	404
04/04	113
05/04	45
06/04	125
18/04	159
19/04	54
20/04	78
21/04	14
22/04	8
23/04	4
24/04	5

A potential explanation for this investment before the debate could be that the Zemmour campaign team was trying to ensure the McKinsey affair was a topic of discussion during the presidential debate. On 18 April, there were 537 original tweets that included the “Scandale Macron–McKinsey” petition, with 337 accounts responsible for these posts. Several signs of inauthentic behaviour were observed in the activity of this day. In multiple instances, ISD has found accounts sharing the petition in response to multiple tweets only seconds apart. Moreover, ISD has observed multiple posts with the exact same text shared by accounts within a short time frame. For example, nine accounts posted the same text only seconds/minutes apart (see Table 5). All accounts except one were members of the Zemmour campaign team or accounts of the local faction of Zemmour’s party/youth movement.

This digital strategy operated by the Zemmour campaign team continued closer to the debate. On the day of the second round, 20 April, the account of Samuel Lafont shared this petition 24 times in less than five minutes. In this instance, Lafont shared the petition in reply to accounts affiliated with sovereigntist figure Florian Philippot as well as La France Insoumise (LFI) candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon. He also tagged both Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon in several comments, which could suggest Zemmour’s campaign was attempting to rally all anti-Macron supporters on both sides of the political spectrum ahead of the presidential debate.

^{ix} Several small variations were observed (e.g. an emoji added).

Table 5 A table setting out examples of original tweets that shared the “Scandale Macron–McKinsey” petition on 18 April 2022 using the exact same language. It features multiple accounts of the Zemmour campaign team or from Reconquête/Generation Z.

Account handle	Time of post	Text of tweet	Identity
@EleonoreLP	2022-04-18 10:28:35	URGENT : Signez la pétition pour que Macron rende des comptes sur le scandale McKinsey https://scandale-macron.fr #MacronBenVoyons #McKinseyGate	Member of the Zemmour campaign in charge of “social media mobilisation”.
@tomcwz_	2022-04-18 10:29:33	URGENT : Signez la pétition pour que Macron rende des comptes sur le scandale McKinsey https://scandale-macron.fr #MacronBenVoyons #McKinseyGate	National leader of Generation Z, member of the digital unit of Reconquête.
@GenerationZ_30	2022-04-18 10:29:40	URGENT : Signez la pétition pour que Macron rende des comptes sur le scandale McKinsey https://scandale-macron.fr #MacronBenVoyons #McKinseyGate	Local faction of the Zemmour youth movement, Generation Z.
@GenerationZOc	2022-04-18 10:29:46	URGENT : Signez la pétition pour que Macron rende des comptes sur le scandale McKinsey https://scandale-macron.fr #MacronBenVoyons #McKinseyGate	Local faction of the Zemmour youth movement, Generation Z.
@GenerationZ-PACA	2022-04-18 10:29:52	URGENT : Signez la pétition pour que Macron rende des comptes sur le scandale McKinsey https://scandale-macron.fr #MacronBenVoyons #McKinseyGate	Local faction of the Zemmour youth movement, Generation Z.
Account 7	2022-04-18 10:29:54	URGENT : Signez la pétition pour que Macron rende des comptes sur le scandale McKinsey https://scandale-macron.fr #MacronBenVoyons #McKinseyGate	A suspicious account, created in February 2022, which fits ISD’s definition of a bot. The majority of its activity is spreading pro-Zemmour content.
@GenerationZ_off	2022-04-18 10:29:58.	URGENT : Signez la pétition pour que Macron rende des comptes sur le scandale McKinsey https://scandale-macron.fr #MacronBenVoyons #McKinseyGate	The Zemmour youth movement.
Account 8	2022-04-18 10:31:01.	A partager : URGENT : Signez la pétition pour que Macron rende des comptes sur le scandale McKinsey https://scandale-macron.fr #MacronBenVoyons #McKinseyGate	Self-identifies as a Generation Z militant. During the legislative elections, he was involved in the campaign of Jérémie Piano, former generation identity activist. He has been convicted under French hate speech laws ³⁰ .
@ReconqueteRUS	2022-04-18 10:32:04	URGENT : Signez la pétition pour que Macron rende des comptes sur le scandale McKinsey https://scandale-macron.fr #MacronBenVoyons #McKinseyGate	Reconquête account from the Russian faction of the party.

Case study two: the “Soutien Agriculteur” petition

This “Soutien Agriculteur” petition was launched on 30 March, reacting to the case of a farmer in Charente killing a burglar in his house on the night of 25 March.³¹ The petition uses this case to advocate for the right to self-defence but likely aims to occupy the news cycle more broadly with security, and law and order narratives, which were central to Zemmour’s campaign.³² This petition was created on 30 March at 15:06. Less than two hours later, it was shared by pro-Zemmour accounts, again with a majority using the same text. The first post identified by ISD sharing a link to this petition was at 16:48:14 on 30 March; the

owner of this account describes themselves in their bio as a Reconquête activist. In the same minute, Samuel Lafont and two different Generation Z Twitter accounts also shared this petition (using the same text). Out of the 3,156 original posts with link to this petition, 288 used the same text, including the first 29 posts that were shared in a span of less than 15 minutes (over half were posted by Lafont’s account). Again, this petition was often shared in reply to other tweets, responding to far-right actors as well as to accounts outside of far-right ecosystems like the account of LFI political figure François Ruffin (see Figure 30).

Figures 30 and 31 Examples of tweets from Samuel Lafont sharing a link to the “Soutien Agriculteur” petition in reply to tweets by accounts from opposite sides of the ideological spectrum. These tweets were shared at 16:51:27 and 16:51:35 respectively on 30 March 2022.



Case study 3: the “Union Nationale Législatives” petition

The “Union Nationale Législatives” petition was created on 24 April 2022 at 14:19, only a couple of hours before the outcome of the second round of the French presidential election was officially announced to the public. This petition already referenced the legislative election, calling for the union of the right to obtain a majority of seats in the French National Assembly. The first post sharing this petition was shared by the account of Samuel Lafont at 19:54:33 (local time), minutes before the results were announced; however, the outcome of the election and Marine Le Pen’s defeat had already been shared in other francophone countries (e.g. Switzerland and Belgium).^x

In total, 2,271 original posts with a link to this petition were found between 24 and 26 April. Out of these original posts, 1,731 (76%) used the exact same text (see Figures 33 and 34). This was particularly the case on the night when the outcome of the second round of the French presidential election was announced; 394 out of 610 tweets (64%) shared on 24 April between 19:55:54 and 23:59:22 used the exact same text.

Figures 32 A screenshot of the first tweet by Samuel Lafont including the “Union Nationale Législatives” petition.



Figures 33 and 34 Examples of tweets with the same text that were shared at 19:55:54 and 19:56:06 respectively on 24 April 2022.



^x Under French law, French media cannot share the outcome of elections before 8:00pm; this regulation does not apply to other francophone countries that usually share initial trends prior to 8:00pm. For further information please see the following: *Présidentielle 2022 : pourquoi les médias belges et suisses peuvent-ils donner les résultats avant 20h ?* | TF1 INFO

Account analysis

The following section aims to understand the type of actors on Twitter who were active in spreading these petitions. This analysis is based on the dataset of accounts (a total of 7,840 accounts) that shared at least one of the first 11 petitions in an original tweet (i.e. excluding accounts that retweeted a post including a petition).

An initial observation is that very few accounts were responsible for sharing most of the original tweets. Of the total number of accounts, 0.57% posted 50% of the original tweets. Four accounts were responsible for a large portion of the original tweets, 21.5% or 5,992 out of the 27,876 original tweets. A further 30 accounts posted 40% of all original tweets of this dataset.

Table 6 A table listing the four accounts that were responsible for over 20% of the original tweets sharing the 11 petitions.

Account handle	Description	Author of % of original tweets in set
@Samuel_Lafont	Head of digital strategy for the Zemmour campaign team.	9.88%
Account 1	Account dedicated to sharing anti-Macron and pro-Zemmour content.	3.65%
Account A ^{xi}	Member of Generation Z, with an overall high level of posting, potentially indicative of bot-like behaviour.	3.49%
Account B	Self-identifies as a member of the Reconquête campaign team in charge of making content for social media.	8.60%

Among these four accounts, three are part of the Zemmour ecosystem, two claim to be members of Reconquête or Generation Z, and one is owned by Samuel Lafont. In addition, two of these accounts (@Samuel_Lafont and account A) were among the four accounts that shared all 11 petitions.

A small number of accounts boosted these petitions through large scale re-tweeting, with about 80,854 retweets by 15,898 unique accounts. Notably, two out of the aforementioned four most active accounts were also among the most prolific re-tweeters (Account A and Account B).

Table 7 A table detailing the numbers of accounts that shared different numbers of petitions.

Number of petitions shared by an account	Number of accounts that shared the specific number of petitions (tweets and retweets)	Number of accounts that shared the specific number of petitions (original tweets only)
1	11,535	5,536
2	3,715	1,366
3	1,819	497
4	1,035	194
5	681	73
6	401	42
7	238	16
8	163	7
9	110	8
10	66	5
11	37	4

As demonstrated by Table 6, four accounts shared all 11 petitions (in the original posts dataset), and five accounts shared ten petitions. The table below (Table 8) provides further information on these nine accounts which were at the core of sharing the petitions.

^{xi} Accounts which appear multiple times in the account analysis section were named with letters, and will be referenced as such throughout the section.

Table 8 A list of the nine accounts that shared all petitions (11 out of 11) or ten petitions (10 out of 11).

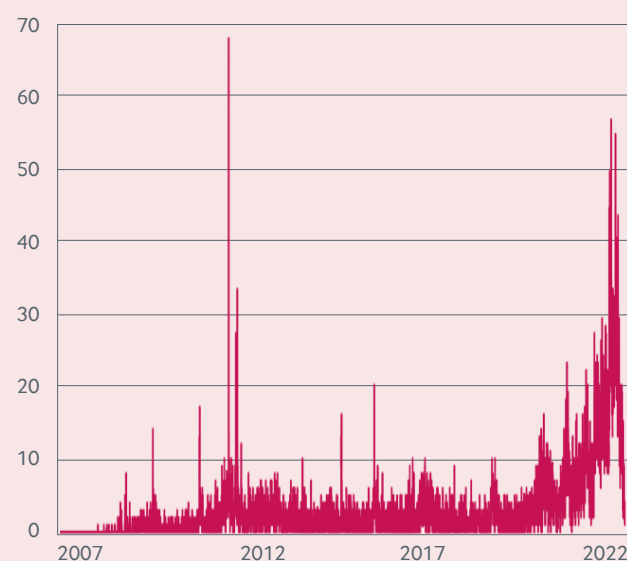
Account handle	Description	Number of petitions shared by this account
Account 1	A “conseiller municipal”. They self-identify in their bio as a supporter of Zemmour.	11
@EleonoreLP	A member of the Reconquête campaign team, in charge of social media mobilisation.	11
@Samuel_Lafont	The head of digital strategy for the Zemmour campaign team.	11
Account A	A member of Generation Z. The overall high level of posting is potentially indicative of bot-like behaviour.	11
Account 5	This account is dedicated to sharing pro-Zemmour content. The overall high level of posting is potentially indicative of bot-like behaviour.	10
Account 6	An account suspended for violating Twitter’s terms of service.	10
Account 7	They self-identify as a Zemmour supporter and share pro-Zemmour material. Also a royalist account and Catholic conservative.	10
Account 8	An account set up in September 2021 that is dedicated to sharing pro-Zemmour content.	10
@ReconqueteRUS	This is the local account of the Russian branch of Reconquête. The activity of this account is mostly dedicated to sharing updates of Zemmour and Reconquête for French expats in Russia.	10

Through an analysis of the profile of the accounts above, ISD has established that the core accounts involved in the petition-sharing strategy are affiliated to the Zemmour campaign. Two out of the four accounts which have shared all 11 petitions are key members of the Zemmour campaign’s digital team (Samuel Lafont and Eléonore Lhéritier). Another account, Account A self-identifies in their Twitter bio as a member of the Zemmour youth movement, Generation Z, and the account fits ISD’s definition of bot-like activity, meaning it may be partly or fully automated³³.

When were the accounts created?

Another way to better understand the type of accounts sharing the petitions is to look at their creation dates. Accounts being created at or around the same time serve as a further indication of potential coordination. The graph in Figure 35 indicates the date of creation (by day) for Twitter accounts that shared at least one petition. The first peak occurred on 15 February 2012 with 68 accounts opened. The second main peak took place over a longer period, December 2021 to January 2022, a few months before the French presidential election cycle. The periods which stand out over this peak occurred on 17–18 December 2021 (99 accounts opened) and 28 January 2022 (55 accounts opened).

Figure 35 A graph showing the date of creation for Twitter accounts which shared at least one of the 11 petitions.



In the following analysis, ISD has tried to establish if any of the accounts, especially those created closer to the election, were political bots or otherwise inauthentic accounts. There is no unanimous definition of bot-like activity, and demonstrating the authenticity of an account can be a challenging task. For this research, ISD has used the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) definition, adopting the three criteria outlined in their work to establish whether an account is suspected of being a political bot.³⁴ The three indicators are as follows:

- **Activity:** political bot accounts will exhibit a high level of activity.³⁵
- **Amplification:** political bot accounts are dedicated to amplifying the message of one specific side.
- **Anonymity:** as per the DFRLab definition, 'political bots can be found in their identities, or lack thereof. As a rule of thumb, the more impersonal an account's handle, screen name, bio and avatar, the more likely it is to be a fake.'³⁶

As noted before, the highest peak in account creation among all those which shared at least one petition occurred on 15 February 2012; in total, 68 accounts were created on this day. 15 February 2012 is when then president Nicolas Sarkozy opened his Twitter account and announced he was running for a second term in the 2012 presidential elections (in which he would ultimately be defeated by François Hollande). It is important to acknowledge during important political events (such as elections) it is common to observe an increase in the number of accounts created on Twitter for multiple reasons (access information, engage in the conversation). A detailed analysis of the Twitter bios of these 68 accounts has enabled ISD to establish that 11 accounts either openly demonstrated their support for Sarkozy or used right-wing rhetoric. Additionally 16 accounts contained rhetoric in support of Zemmour in their bio. Among the 30 tweets that were posted by these 68 accounts on 15 February 2012, over half supported Sarkozy as he announced he was running for second term. There was a peak in the activity of these accounts over the month of March 2022, just ahead of the 2022 French presidential elections. Among the 20 most shared tweets, over half openly supported the Zemmour candidacy while several posts were critical of the LR candidate, Valérie Pécresse. The analysis of the

ten most active accounts has enabled ISD to establish these accounts were likely not political bots.

Another main peak in account creation took place on 17–18 December 2021, with 99 accounts created during these two days. ISD has analysed the ten most active accounts created during this period (measuring activity from their date of creation until 1 June 2022) and determined that over half (six out of ten) match the definition outlined above for political bots. The activity of these accounts fits at least two out of three of the criteria outlined above, with four of these accounts dedicated to amplifying specifically pro-Zemmour content.

The last peak in terms of account creation was observed on 28 January 2022, with 56 accounts created on this day. ISD has again analysed the ten most active accounts (measuring activity from their date of creation until 1 June 2022) and determined that half are potentially political bots, matching at least two out of the three DFRLab criteria (in all cases high levels of posting and signs of anonymity).

Network analysis

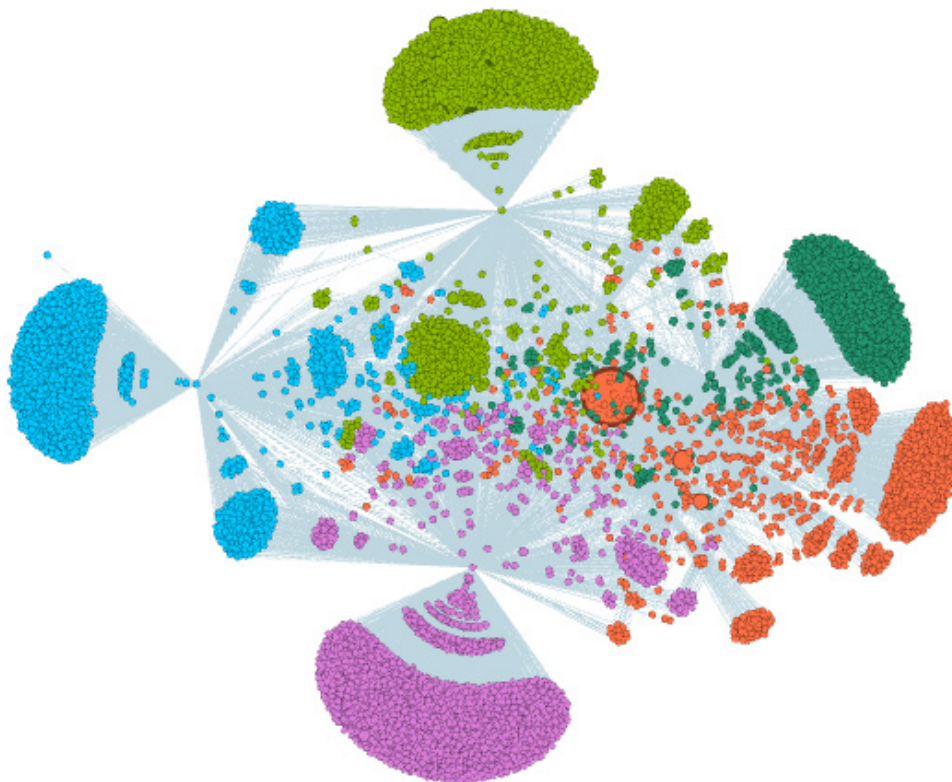
The network map below demonstrates ties between the different actors that were involved in sharing of least one of the 11 petitions. It includes the Twitter accounts that relate to all original posts (excluding retweets) which shared at least one of the 11 petitions (i.e. excluding the last, “Chaos au Stade de France” petition). Each node^{xii} (dot on the graph) represents either a Twitter account or a petition link. Each edge (line on the graph) indicates a Twitter account sharing a petition link in an original tweet. Clustering and colour-coding is based upon which accounts shared similar petitions.

Five main clusters appear on this network map, and each main cluster is tied to one particular petition except for the orange and light green clusters.

The classification of the clusters is as follows:

- The purple cluster (28.38% of accounts) is linked to the “Scandale Macron–McKinsey” petition.
- The blue cluster (18.72% of accounts) is linked to the “Union Nationale Législatives” petition.
- The light green cluster (24.04% of accounts) is linked to the “Soutien Agriculteur” and the “Défense Excusable” petitions. These two petitions were created days apart and reference the same event.
- The dark green cluster (13.29% of accounts) is linked to the “Je Soutiens Zemmour” petition.

Figure 36 A network map of accounts that shared at least one of the 11 petitions (in original posts).



^{xii} The size of a node on Figure 36 reflects the number of followers of each account.

- The orange cluster (15.38% of accounts) is linked primarily to the first petition set up, “Je Signe pour Zemmour”. This community was also mainly responsible for sharing the remaining petitions.

The analysis of this network map has enabled ISD to better understand the ties between the accounts responsible for sharing at least one of the 11 petitions. The orange cluster holds core pro-Zemmour accounts as well as the accounts of key members of the Zemmour campaign. The large dot in the orange cluster in the middle of the network map represents the official account of Eric Zemmour. In addition, Samuel Lafont and Eléonore Lhéritier, both of whom shared all 11 petitions as key figures in the digital team of the Zemmour campaign, are part of the orange cluster. Moreover, all accounts that shared all 11 petitions are part of the orange cluster, along with all accounts (except one) that were responsible for 20% of all original posts. The accounts in this cluster all shared the first petition which was set up by Les Amis d’Eric Zemmour in January 2021. The accounts in this cluster were also the main accounts to share the following petitions created in the second half of 2021 and early 2022, all of which primarily focused on themes of the Zemmour campaign or aimed to build support for his candidacy. Despite signs of inauthentic behaviour, these petitions were the least widely shared, likely because they were primarily shared by a limited group of actors quite embedded in the online Reconquête ecosystem.

The purple, blue and light green clusters, which are the three largest, are tied to petitions set up closer to the French presidential elections.

In the purple cluster consists, 1,792 accounts only shared the “Scandale Macron–McKinsey” petition. To further understand the profile of these accounts, ISD has analysed the ten with the most followers. Among these ten, there were two public figures of the right-wing conservative movement (Paul-Marie Coûteaux and Christine Boutin, both of whom supported Zemmour during the campaign); three far-right accounts; three accounts dedicated to sharing disinformation, anti-sanitary restriction content and COVID-19 conspiracies with a strong anti-Macron sentiment; one suspended account; and one account that posted about non-related topics.

In the blue cluster, 869 accounts only shared the “Union Nationale Législatives” petition. Again, ISD has analysed the ten accounts with the most followers; among these, eight were dedicated to sharing far-right content with a pro-Zemmour stance, while the other two accounts shared anti-Macron content (one of these further demonstrated bot-like behaviour).

In the light green cluster, 1,206 accounts only shared the “Soutien Agriculteur” petition. Among the ten accounts with the most followers, two were far-right accounts formerly associated with Marine Le Pen that joined Reconquête (Marion Maréchal-Le Pen and Stéphane Ravier). In addition, there were three other pro-Zemmour accounts; one account dedicated to sharing far-right content; two accounts sharing anti-Macron and anti-sanitary restriction content; and two accounts sharing content about non-related topics.

To a certain extent, pro-Zemmour accounts were not the only ones responsible for sharing these petitions set up just before the presidential elections. Indeed, accounts dedicated to spreading anti-Macron and anti-sanitary restrictions content were also involved in the spread of these petitions, which means that **the Zemmour campaign team successfully penetrated online spheres beyond the pro-Zemmour ecosystems on social media.** ISD’s analysis indicates that this was especially the case with the petition related to the McKinsey affair, which attracted attention from accounts invested in anti-Macron and anti-sanitary restriction discussions ahead of the presidential elections. Further analysis would be required to establish the scale of this trend.

Section 2: Activity on Facebook

ISD has found that this petition-sharing strategy was deployed across Facebook as well, with 1,204 posts identified sharing at least one of the 11 petitions. At first, the scale of this phenomenon on Facebook appears to be quite limited when compared to Twitter; however, this number should be read cautiously due to Facebook's data access limitations. As researchers only have access to posts shared by pages and in public groups, instances in which these petitions were shared in the comment section are not possible to analyse programmatically.

What are the types of entities active in spreading these petitions on Facebook?

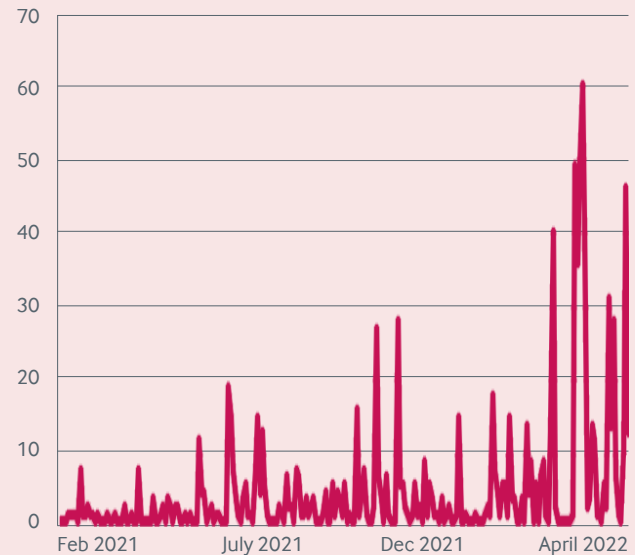
A total of 385 Facebook pages (184) and public groups (201) were responsible for sharing at least one petition. Roughly 26% of the public groups or pages contained Zemmour and/or Reconquête in their name. ISD has reviewed the 54 entities that included "Zemmour" in their name and established that over half (about 57%) were created in 2021. There was no clear peak identifiable in terms of date of creation throughout 2021; however, October and December 2021 were the months during which the most entities were created (out of the 31 entities created in 2021, six were set up in October and a further six in December). It is clear that a support base for Eric Zemmour existed on Facebook before he launched his campaign as certain entities within this sample were created as early as 2010, and many shared at least one petition.

Among the other entities active in sharing at least one petition, ISD has analysed a random sample of 20 in order to better understand the types of other content shared in this ecosystem. A majority participated in sharing far-right content (e.g. opposition to multiculturalism, anti-Islam, Eurosceptic and anti-refugee discourse). Two of these accounts were dedicated to sharing anti-Macron content.

Activity of these actors

As in the analysis conducted on Twitter, the following observations are based on original posts (excluding reposts); this is for the same reasons as outlined in the Twitter section. For the 11 petitions, 334 out of 1,127 original posts (about 30%) that contained a petition were cross-posted. This could be an indicator of potential inauthentic behaviour. Nonetheless, as indicated in the first section of this report looking at Twitter, further qualitative analysis is necessary to understand if these petitions were shared inauthentically on Facebook.

Figure 37 A graph showing volume over time of posts including a petition on Facebook.



The graph in Figure 37 represents the number of posts sharing at least one petition during 2021 and 2022. An increase is visible starting at the end of February 2022, and the three main peaks of this dataset occurred in March and April 2022 (taking place on 5 March, 2 April and 25 April). As also observed on Twitter, the graph above demonstrates a greater mobilisation closer to the date of the 2022 French presidential election. These peaks of discussion are each tied to one specific petition, which was created just beforehand. These three petitions are also three of the petitions which were the most shared on Twitter and exhibit the greatest levels of cross-posting on Twitter.

The peak of discussion on 5 March is tied to the petition "Stop Censure", which was launched by the Zemmour campaign team hours after Twitter took down the accounts of members of both Zemmour and Marine Le Pen's campaign teams.^{xiii} On 5 March, 40 posts were shared containing the "Stop Censure" petition. Even though the number of posts is limited, ISD has observed

^{xiii} ISD has observed that, when this incident occurred, Twitter accounts from the Zemmour campaign team condemned the French government and Twitter, denouncing the supposed censorship of Zemmour voices. As suspended Zemmour team accounts were re-activated, these accounts continued to spread this censorship narrative for several days. For more information, see 'Des comptes Twitter militant pour Eric Zemmour et Marine Le Pen suspendus « par erreur »', Le Monde, 4 March 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2022/03/04/des-comptes-twitter-militant-pour-eric-zemmour-suspendus-par-erreur_6116217_4408996.html.

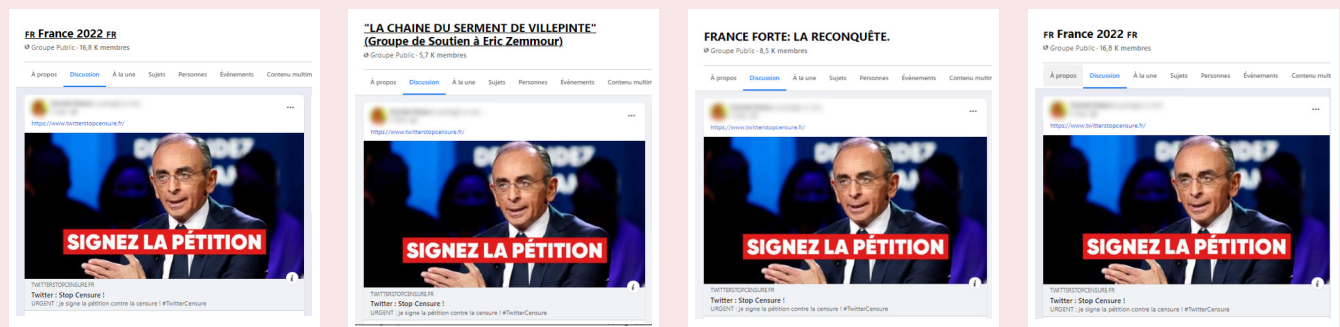
signs of CIB, with several accounts spreading the exact same post across different groups only minutes apart. For example, within seven minutes, the private account in Figures 38–41 shared the same post in eight different public groups, most of them openly supporting Zemmour and/or posting far-right content.

The second main peak of discussion occurred on 30 March, with 48 original posts shared on this day. All posts included either the “Soutien Agriculteur” petition (31 in total) or the “Défense Excusable” petition (17 in total) which were both set up on the same day and reference the same event. ISD has identified signs of CIB in the promotion of the “Soutien Agriculteur” petition. Among the 31 posts which include this link shared on 30 March, 12 use the exact same text. One account was responsible for 11 of these posts, a majority of which (nine posts) were shared within less than hour (and some only seconds apart). The exact same post was also shared only seconds apart by the local page of Reconquête in Ain (see Figure 45). This account shared the petition in different groups that were not tied to the Zemmour ecosystem, mostly

farmer groups, yellow vest groups and even one Marine Le Pen support group. It is possible that this strategy was implemented to rally supporters (and potential voters) for Eric Zemmour among communities that were likely to adhere to his message. Furthermore, this account engaged in this strategy on multiple occasions, sharing Reconquête/Zemmour campaign material across these groups numerous times between mid-March and early April (see examples in Figures 42–44 and 46–48).

Another peak of discussion occurred 1–3 April with 149 posts shared over these three days. It was tied to the “Soutien Agriculteur” and “Scandale Macron–McKinsey” petitions. Similar to the above peak of discussion, ISD has identified clear signs of inauthentic activity in the sharing pattern of both petitions. For instance, on 1 April, the same individual account (that was also involved in inauthentically sharing other petitions) posted the same post eight times in a minute, only changing the associated image; the posts all contained very similar language that targeted Macron and presented Zemmour as the law-and-order candidate (see Figures 49–51). This

Figures 38, 39, 40 and 41 Examples of the same account sharing the same petition in different groups on Facebook within a limited timeframe.



Figures 42, 43, 44 and 45 Examples of posts with the exact same text from 30 March. The first three were posted by the same account to different groups at 17:09:10, 17:45:11 and 17:45:39 respectively. The last was posted by the page of the local faction of Reconquête in Ain at 17:09:07.



strategy, using the same text and only changing the picture of a post, was used by the Zemmour campaign team on Twitter as well in posts that also present signs of inauthentic behaviour. The individual account on Facebook presents potential signs of inauthenticity.

On 1 April, potential CIB was also identified in the sharing pattern of the petition “Scandale Macron–McKinsey”. As established in the earlier sections of this investigation, this petition was first shared on Twitter by Samuel Lafont at 18:28:33 on 1 April 2022. Strong signs of inauthentic behaviour orchestrated by the Zemmour campaign team were found in the sharing pattern of this petition on

Twitter, as 805 out of 916 original tweets that shared this petition used the exact same text as Lafont’s first tweet and were all shared in a very limited time frame. ISD has found that this petition started being shared around the same time on Facebook, with the first post including this link published at 18:38:31.^{xiv} In fact, the first nine posts sharing this petition on Facebook, all published within a one-hour time frame, all contained this exact same text (i.e. that of the first tweet, Samuel Lafont sharing the petition). All nine posts were cross-posts, with four of them shared in less than one minute. Among the actors that shared this petition on Facebook using the same text, there were two local Reconquête pages (“Reconquête -

Figures 46, 47 and 48 Examples of Zemmour campaign promotion material shared by the same individual account as in Figures 42–44. These examples were posted in the same groups on the same day (6 April, only a few days before the first round of the presidential election).



Figures 49, 50 and 51 Examples of posts with the petition “Soutien Agriculteur”; all posts were shared within a minute of each other using the same text (only the graphic differs from one post to another).



xiv Again, this is with the caveat that this was first post within public groups/pages.

Haute-Marne” and “Reconquête Haute-Garonne”). This indicates strong signs of potential CIB conducted by the Zemmour campaign team and could ultimately suggest a concerted multi-platform deployment of this strategy.

For the “Scandale Macron–McKinsey” petition, one account also shared this petition in Senegalese groups which were pro-Sonko³⁷ and shared anti-French/anti-Macron rhetoric. This represents another instance in which the Zemmour campaign managed to penetrate and share petitions among other online ecosystems beyond pro-Zemmour and French far-right ones.

The peak on 25 April was the result of 46 posts, all containing the same petition calling for the union of the right in the legislative elections. As mentioned previously, ISD has observed in several instances the same account sharing in a short time frame (i.e. minutes

apart) the same message including the link to this petition across different groups. For example, the same account, which also took part in the sharing of other petitions on Facebook, re-posted the same post four times in different groups in less than a minute.

Across the analysis of the sharing pattern of multiple petitions on Facebook, ISD has found in several instances the same accounts were involved in this strategy. For instance, one individual account was responsible for sharing several petitions (including the “Chaos au Stade de France” and “Soutien Agriculteur” petitions) in different groups within a short time frame.

The Zemmour campaign team continued to operate this strategy during the legislative elections; the “Chaos au Stade de France” petition was shared 23 times in less than 24 hours (just after the petition was set up). All posts

Figures 52, 53, 54 and 55 Examples of posts that shared the “Scandale Macron–McKinsey” petition on 1 April.



Figures 56, 57 and 58 Examples of the same account sharing the “Scandale Macron–McKinsey” petition in three different groups within a limited time frame.



sharing this petition on 6 and 7 June used very similar text. In several instances, the same account shared the exact same post seconds/minutes apart in multiple groups.

Despite data access restrictions on Facebook, ISD has identified several signs that the petition-sharing strategy implemented by the Zemmour campaign was a multi-platform effort.

Figures 59 and 60 Examples of posts shared minutes apart by the same account sharing the same link with very similar text.



Section 3: Digital Policy Implications

On Twitter

Among several other policies, the activity outlined in this investigation violates Twitter's Platform manipulation and spam policy. The company's definition of platform manipulation is 'to engage in bulk, aggressive, or deceptive activity that misleads others and/or disrupts their experience.'³⁸ Twitter defines the list of prohibited behaviours that fall under platform manipulation as follows (quoted):

- Commercially-motivated spam, that typically aims to drive traffic or attention from a conversation on Twitter to accounts, websites, products, services or initiatives;
- Inauthentic engagements that attempt to make accounts of content appear more popular or active than they are;
- Coordinated activity, that attempts to artificially influence conversations through the use of multiple accounts, fake accounts, automation and/or scripting; and
- Coordinated harmful activity that encourages or promotes behaviour which violates the Twitter Rules.³⁹

Twitter's rules provide a clear definition of coordination, which should be understood as 'creating multiple accounts to post duplicative content or create fake engagement'. According to Twitter, these behaviours include (quoted):

- Posting identical or substantially similar Tweets or hashtags from multiple accounts you operate;
- Engaging (Retweets, Likes, mentions, Twitter Poll votes) repeatedly with the same Tweets or accounts from multiple accounts that you operate;
- Coordinating with or compensating others to engage in artificial engagement or amplification, even if the people involved use only one account;
- Coordinating with others to engage in or promote violations of the Twitter Rules, including violations of our abusive behavior policy.⁴⁰

ISD has found in this investigation that the Zemmour campaign has coordinated with accounts from the Zemmour ecosystem, amplifying the petitions set up by Les Amis d'Eric Zemmour in a potentially automated way. In multiple instances, the Zemmour campaign team has also taken part in inauthentic engagement by repetitively sharing petitions in the replies of multiple accounts in order to artificially give greater visibility to these petitions.

Fake accounts (political bots) have promoted petitions; however, even though these accounts strongly supported Zemmour and previous investigations have demonstrated the Zemmour campaign team has created accounts to inauthentically promote content on Twitter,⁴¹ ISD cannot assert in this investigation that the political bots promoting these petitions were set up by the Zemmour campaign. Nonetheless, accounts set up and managed by the Zemmour campaign clearly took part in the inauthentic amplification of these petitions on Twitter (this was for instance the case of Reconquete accounts).

Moreover, the behaviour deployed by the Zemmour campaign team in the promotion of these petitions also violates Twitter's Coordinated harmful activity policy.⁴² In these community standards, Twitter defines two forms of coordination 'technical coordination' and 'social coordination'. Activity that falls under the definition of the former is prohibited by Twitter, but not all social coordination is a violation of Twitter's rules. ISD believes the behaviour outlined above matches the definition of technical coordination, which 'refers to the use of specific, detectable techniques of platform manipulation to engage in the artificial inflation or propagation of a message or narrative on Twitter.'⁴³ Furthermore, the definition of technical coordination references the rules established in the Platform manipulation and spam policy, stating that technical coordination entails the prohibited forms of coordination outlined in that policy.⁴⁴ As previously established, ISD believes that the rules on coordination which are described in the Platform manipulation and spam policy were breached by the Zemmour campaign team.

The harm element in the Coordinated harmful activity policy is defined in three forms: physical, psychological and informational. ISD believes that the activity tied to these petitions is a form of informational harm.⁴⁵ A strong

case for informational harm caused by the inauthentic coordination of these petitions can be made for those shared closer to the elections during which period higher levels of coordination were observed.

Several solutions are outlined in Twitter's rules: these are mostly removal of an account or suspension of a tweet.⁴⁶ Throughout this research, ISD has noted several instances where accounts were suspended for violating these terms of service.^{xv} Nonetheless, the accounts that were the most active in the amplification of these petitions are still very much active.

On Facebook

Meta references the concept of CIB in its community standards to restrict coordinated activity on its platforms. As mentioned in previous research led by ISD ahead of the US 2020 elections, this concept is ill-defined, and its understanding remains quite broad in practice.⁴⁷ Meta's community standards define inauthentic behaviour, which is also itself prohibited on the platform, as the use of Facebook or Instagram assets, to 'mislead' users about the following (quoted):

- About the identity, purpose, or origin of the entity that they represent.
- About the popularity of Facebook or Instagram content or assets.
- About the purpose of an audience or community.
- About the source or origin of content.
- To evade enforcement under our Community Standards.⁴⁸

CIB, which is prohibited by Meta, is defined as multiple 'assets [that work in] concert to engage in inauthentic behaviour', referencing the definition outlined above.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Meta's Head of Cybersecurity Policy, Nathaniel Gleicher, explained in 2018 that 'coordinated inauthentic behaviour is when groups of pages or people work together to mislead others about who they are or what they are doing.'⁵⁰

ISD believes that, despite data access restrictions, this investigation brings forward signs of inauthentic behaviour and CIB that breaches Facebook's community standards. Indeed, in several instances, ISD has found signs of inauthentic behaviour with actors amplifying the exact same content across multiple groups in a short period and with the same actors involved in deploying this strategy for multiple petitions. ISD has also found strong signs of CIB led by the Zemmour campaign team in the promotion of these petitions. This is particularly concerning as signs of potential CIB were found less than two weeks before the first round of the 2022 French presidential election.

xv It should, however, be noted that ISD cannot establish if these accounts were suspended for violating the terms of service in this instance or for other types of behaviour.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This investigation has uncovered multiple inauthentic behaviour efforts orchestrated by the team of far-right candidate Eric Zemmour's in the French 2022 elections cycle. For all 12 petitions identified by ISD, all set up by Les Amis d'Eric Zemmour, analysis found clear signs of inauthentic behaviour on Twitter. Multiple signs would indicate that this strategy was particularly deployed in the run-up to the presidential elections. Actors affiliated to the Zemmour campaign team, especially Samuel Lafont, the head of digital strategy, were at the very centre of the deployment of this online strategy. Furthermore, despite data access restrictions, ISD has found signs this was a multi-platform effort, with signs of CIB identified on Facebook as well.

Emphasising the problematic aspect of CIB and astroturfing by domestic actors can sometimes be seen as a very technical and hard-to-grasp issue, a distraction from the wider systemic discussions on online information manipulations. Nonetheless, it is key to shed light on these distortions within the online ecosystem, particularly those that threaten electoral integrity. This investigation is another example of the need to raise awareness among the public about inauthentic behaviours and other opaque amplification techniques online.

At first glance, as the Zemmour campaign ultimately struggled to mobilise a significant number of voters, this case study may sound like a relatively marginal issue. However, the 2022 French presidential election occurred in an extraordinary context and saw the rise of two far-right candidates. Eric Zemmour, the new so-called challenger, not only contributed to Marine Le Pen's success in this election cycle, but also managed to obtain more votes than two traditional parties (LR and Parti Socialiste [or PS]) of the French political landscape.⁵¹ More than ever, it is crucial to understand in more depth the tactics at the centre of France's brand-new populist party online playbook.

Moreover, one should highlight the systematic deployment of such inauthentic behaviours by political actors around and beyond elections. Although platforms have policies in place against inauthentic behaviours, it is problematic to see these behaviours remain tolerated by major social media platforms⁵². More efforts need to be deployed by platforms to enforce their community standards, as this investigation has highlighted clear violations of both Twitter and Facebook's terms without

finding any clear measures taken against the accounts that were instrumental in the deployment of inauthentic behaviour or CIB.

Over the past few years, as major foreign and domestic inauthentic behaviour or CIB campaigns have surfaced around elections, platforms have deployed more efforts to tackle coordinated inauthentic activity. The EU's Code of Practice on Disinformation^{xvi} has been instrumental in pushing for more accountability from tech companies. Nonetheless, these developments have largely been based on voluntary self-regulation and self-reporting, and companies' transparency efforts on inauthentic behaviour or CIB have notoriously been less scrutinised, robust and consistent than, for example, their efforts on political advertising.

Ahead of the 2022 French vote, Meta announced a series of measures⁵³ to protect the integrity of the elections and promote participation. One of them was the creation of a virtual operational centre on the elections⁵⁴. ISD has found no update on this initiative and its results since the plethora of articles in French media shared in February 2022. Meta had already confidently communicated about the lack of any major visible influence campaigns ahead of the French elections as of February, and their communication on this issue has been very limited since then. Twitter notoriously took down several accounts associated with both the Zemmour and Marine Le Pen campaigns for a few hours on 4 March, but quickly reactivated the banned accounts, citing a "technical issue". These examples illustrate the lack of meaningful transparency for proactive action taken by platforms as regards the identification of inauthentic networked activities, as well as the related question of the demotion of content and the banning of accounts.

Even though, multi-stakeholder cooperation has been increasing, and platforms have made public announcements about their election integrity initiatives transparency over coordinated inauthentic behaviour, more efforts are needed to foster meaningful cooperation with researchers, media, fact-checking or investigation organisations, and regulators. Several challenges remain to characterise inauthentic behaviour including the lack of access to online data, the absence of transparent, timely and exhaustive

xvi For further information please find :
Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation (europa.eu)

communication from social media platforms on their own detection efforts.

This suboptimal situation is crucially hampered by data access restrictions and the absence of genuine sanctions for non-compliance with terms of service on the issue of coordinated inauthentic activities. The absence of visibility and the minimal pressure on platforms to provide more transparency in this area are exacerbated by the public's lack of understanding for these highly technical issues. The potential impacts on both public debate and, subsequently, electoral results also remains unclear to the general public.

There needs to be a more ambitious and virtuous integration of these issues (inauthentic amplification activities and coordinated behaviour) with concerned stakeholders' current regulatory agenda. To this end, ISD proposes **three main recommendations**:

Deploy more means to sensitise the public about the issues of CIB in a non-sensationalist but pedagogic and empowering way.

Currently, the question of CIB online is primarily covered in a very siloed and rarely comprehensive way. It is discussed by governments focussing on foreign-state-affiliated influence operations; by platforms themselves, looking to report positively about their activities; or by the media, keen to shed light on fascinating yet opaque stories.

The public is still relatively unaware of deceptive digital campaign tactics to support or attack parties and/or politicians. This is the problem with this siloed approach – none of the content shared reflects on practical, societal approaches that would make such behaviours easier to grasp for the public, nor does it make it more difficult for malign actors to deploy those behaviours. Each stakeholder speaks to their own audience after these behaviours are deployed, and online users are still not able to easily identify or flag such activities.

Electoral commissions, such as the Commission nationale de contrôle de la campagne électorale en vue de l'élection présidentielle (CNCCEP) in France, can play a role in raising awareness among the public about amplification, micro-targeting and voter profiling tactics online.

Platforms should invest in internal campaigns to raise awareness on the issues of inauthentic behaviour. They should also design identification, flagging and labelling systems that are more transparent for the user.

In addition to including records of their identification activities in reports to the regulator as well as in self-editorialised narratives and numbers on their blogs, platforms should be audited by a coalition of third-party research organisations and the regulator (L'Autorité de régulation de la communication audiovisuelle et numérique [ARCOM] in France). These audits could focus on further cases identified by external organisations. This process could help to understand why these cases might have slipped through the cracks, and whether they actually constitute violations of platform policies.

With some support from the relevant ministries (Ministry of Digital Affairs, Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Education), ARCOM, and the Centre de liaison de l'enseignement et des médias d'information (or CLEMI), fact-checking and media literacy education organisations should also invest more in the creation of interactive resources and pedagogic videos to raise awareness on these issues.

Meaningfully invest in supporting independent collaborative research in order to build evidence and foster solutions, thereby increasing societal resilience to information manipulations.

The Digital Services Act (DSA) plans for a more systemic approach to the regulation of online harms and information manipulations as well as a clearer shift from self-regulatory approaches to a stricter regime of sanctions for non-compliance.

In this context, national (ARCOM) and regional European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA) regulatory bodies should work hand in hand to meaningfully foster a well-resourced and empowered coalition of experts led by civil society. This coalition could source and exchange timely evidence and warnings to better understand the scale and the changing nature of CIB online. This coalition could expose and mitigate risks to electoral integrity and threats to democracy associated with political astroturfing or other inauthentic behaviour campaigns in real time.

This international board of trustees, composed of leading academics, analysts and pedagogic experts working on issues related to the impact of technology on democracy, could build on the work and model of the European Digital Media Observatory (or EDMO)⁵⁵ and its existing programme. In addition to providing a European platform that would represent the work and needs of European civil society, and do important but under-resourced work on these issues, it would establish a tangible counter-power to lobbying efforts deployed by tech platforms at the European level.

Create a race-to-the-top for both national and regional regulatory arenas in order to transition their approach from passive observation of platforms' self-regulation to being the real instruments of the DSA in action.

In the next electoral cycles in particular, the regulatory bodies ARCOM⁵⁶ and CCNCEP⁵⁷ should put more pressure on platforms and candidates to more consistently report online harms. Furthermore, predetermined terms about representation of content related to candidates and parties on social media should be shared by regulators to facilitate the reporting process, as is the case for broadcast media. Although social media is not ruled under the same legal framework as traditional media, such investigations would give the public greater visibility and a better understanding of whether platforms or their algorithms are playing a role in the representation of harmful views online. It would also likely push platforms to be more proactive in testing and mitigating the risks associated with their recommender systems. The CCNCEP has in some instances forced electoral candidates that had accrued a large number of followers to create new dedicated social media handles for a new electoral campaign. Similarly, this body could invest more into efforts into scrutinising how social media platforms may be facilitating disproportionate representation of candidates.

To an extent, the European Code of Practice successfully gathered diverse platforms around the same table and pushed them to commit to terms in a relatively well-defined and contained scope. However, in practice, lack of data makes enforcement of these commitments extremely hard to track and evaluate for both governments and researchers. In the last European elections, the code struggled to spearhead meaningful

improvement in tech platforms' responses. The removal of inauthentic account networks and the detection of covert automated accounts were characterised by reactive and largely opaque processes, and little progress has been made on the transparency side of these detection operations between then and more recent national elections in Europe. Outside of Twitter's efforts at transparency for public social media data, which predated the code, no data has been made available for researchers studying disinformation. Furthermore, recent announcements by Meta about its CrowdTangle programme are a bad omen for researchers.⁵⁸

Despite this, the Code of Practice on Disinformation's redraft process, with its greater focus on measurement and evaluation, could mean this arena becomes a gold standard for pushing tech platforms to more accountability, transparency and cooperation on the issues of information manipulation, including CIB. Transition to this enhanced accountability status should start with pushing social media companies to adopt a more robust and consistent cross-platform cooperation regime on issues like astroturfing that typically affect multiple online spaces. As they have successfully implemented in sectors combatting terrorist or child sexual abuse content, tech platforms should tangibly and meaningfully demonstrate that they are working together to identify online networks involved in CIB on their services. This would ensure that the whole cross-platform CIB operation can be taken down. Research shows how CIB operations are typically deployed simultaneously across different platforms in order to maximise their scale, target different audiences and/or circumvent policy enforcement. In line with the spirit of the DSA, such cross-platform cooperation would ensure Very Large Online Platforms with more means also contribute to training and pushing smaller actors to account, ultimately making the whole ecosystem safer and more resilient.

Footnotes

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- 8 According to a poll conducted by Harris Interactive 14–17 January 2022. For full details see, 'Baromètre d'intentions de vote pour l'élection présidentielle de 2022 - Vague 29', Harris Interactive, 19 January 2022, https://harris-interactive.fr/opinion_polls/barometre-dintentions-de-vote-pour-lelection-presidentielle-de-2022-vague-29/.
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