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Smearing Sweden

International Influence Campaigns in the 2018 Swedish Election

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About this paper

This report presents the findings of a project that investigated foreign attempts to influence the 2018 Swedish elections online. The project revealed the relative isolation of the Swedish far-right online, with few internationally coordinated efforts identified in the Swedish election information ecosystem. Online Scandinavian far-right networks made some attempts to seed disinformation and hate campaigns in Sweden through fringe platforms such as 4Chan and Discord, but these efforts were neither widespread or consistent. Internationally, the research unearthed a consistent and concerning information campaign targeting Sweden's reputation from far-right networks across the US, UK, France, Germany, Poland and Hungary. This campaign has also been promoted on an ongoing basis by Kremlin-sponsored media in various languages. The report provides recommendations for steps that can be taken by Swedish and international policymakers, media and civil society in order to build a proportional and effective response to these kind of influence efforts.

About the authors

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Research for this report was conducted by Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner.

The role of MSB

The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) funds research in the field of societal security. One area of research aims to increase awareness about foreign influence campaigns. The MSB has funded the report at hand in order to provide an external perspective to the possible interference of foreign influence campaigns during the Swedish national election in 2018. The London School of Economics and Institute for Strategic Dialogue project team has a strong record of analysing other elections and MSB therefore sees this research as a way of accumulating knowledge about election interference in a comparative international perspective. MSB encourages other agencies in other countries to continue this work. Together we can increase awareness and find effective methods to protect our elections from foreign influence.

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1 Executive Summary

Over the past three years, we have witnessed significant efforts by both state and non-state international actors to spread disinformation online in order to influence election outcomes. Through the deployment of bot and semi-automated accounts on social media sharing false and sensationalised stories, or ‘memetic warfare’ deployed from the chatrooms of 4chan, ‘alt-right’ and Kremlin-backed activists have sought to wage ‘malign influence’ election campaigns in the US, France, Germany and Italy in favour of xenophobic, nationalist parties. The Swedish election provided these international actors with an opportunity to wreak havoc in the heartland of Europe’s liberal, social democratic consensus.

In the months before the election, the nationalist, anti-immigrant party Sweden Democrats seemed poised to increase its parliamentary representation dramatically. Entering parliament for the first time in 2010 with 5.7% of the vote, the party grew in 2014 with 12.9% of the vote, and in the run-up to this year’s election was polling as high as 28.5%¹. Other fringe anti-immigration parties were also vying for votes, such as the newly formed Alternative for Sweden (Alternativ för Sverige; AfS), modelled after the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland; AfD) party in Germany. With concerns about immigration and integration driving increased support for these parties, it remained to be seen precisely if and how the international far-right – as well as states such as Russia – would attempt to interfere in the election and tip the balance towards anti-immigration, nationalist parties.

As with previous elections, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and LSE Arena² monitored the online information sphere in Sweden for international activity that sought to manipulate media and spread disinformation ahead of the Swedish election. We analysed whether Russian state-supported media and automated accounts, were spreading misinformation and disinformation in Sweden in order to influence the election in favour of the far-right parties SD and AfS. We analysed non-state actors, including the alt-right and other far-right groups in North America and Europe, and the extent to which they sought to deploy ‘meme warfare’ and other tactics. Finally, we analysed the extent to which these international actors were taking part in online information campaigns in English and other languages in an effort to tarnish Sweden’s reputation among international audiences.

Findings

International far-right and Russian state-sponsored media are attempting to smear Sweden’s reputation internationally

Propaganda efforts focused on smearing Sweden or presenting it as a country in demise were persistent and widespread in the run-up to the election and its aftermath. Russian state-supported media outlets such as *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) and *Sputnik* provided support to far-right groups in Sweden in their English, Russian, French and German language versions. *Red Ice TV* and *The Alex Jones Show* provided similar analysis to US and UK audiences through their YouTube channels and websites. Network mapping revealed that at the centre of the smear campaign network are international, mostly European, accounts from the far-right milieu mixing with Swedish right-wing and alt-right accounts, mostly linked to AfS or the alt-right online subcultures in Sweden. But these efforts are more focused on influencing international audiences rather than on directly influencing the election results.

Malign influence campaigns were discussed in alternative media spaces like 4chan and Discord

In previous elections in the US, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy, ISD researchers observed far-right activists planning ‘meme warfare’ tactics on niche and fringe social media platforms, and then deploying these tactics to ‘mainstream’ certain stories and narratives in order to influence voters. Ahead of the Swedish election, ISD and LSE researchers monitored far-right fringe sites like 4chan, 8chan as well as closed far-right forums on the Discord app in order to ascertain whether similar tactics were being discussed. Although similar activity is understood to take place on Facebook, ISD and LSE researchers were not able to obtain access to its closed, private groups. While discussions regarding election influence and ‘calls to action’ were observed in international far-right communities, particularly from users who appeared to be in Denmark, we observed little to no take up of these efforts. This may be because of the relatively isolated Swedish far-right media ecosystem, language issues and the fact that SD was already polling higher than expected.

Amplification tactics were observed, but there was no evidence that they were coordinated or internationally managed

Amplification tactics were used to promote fringe parties such as AfS online in the run-up to the election, as well as to increase the reach of highly biased and sensationalist media, often espousing pro-Sweden Democrat and anti-Sweden Democrat lines. We identified bot-like behaviour from 55 highly active accounts on mainstream social media platforms. While there were suspicious accounts active around these issues, likely to be at least partially automated, it remains unclear if these were coordinated or whether they were established by domestic or international actors. Only one of these accounts showed signs of prior deployment: the same account had changed its name and was highly active in the run-up to the US and French elections. No bots or amplification tactics that could be tied to the Kremlin were detected.

“ Our research identified a relatively isolated far-right network in Sweden ”

The most consistent disinformation campaign related to allegations of election fraud

The most concerted information campaigns came in the wake of the election, spreading the claim of election fraud designed to disenfranchise the far-right parties. This was promoted by a broad milieu of domestic and international groups and influencers, including Swedish, English, Danish and German language coverage. There were over 2,000 posts on Twitter that used the term ‘valfusk’ (election fraud) in the week preceding the election, suggesting that there was a coordinated campaign to seed the idea of a rigged election before the vote had even occurred. Similar tactics were employed by the far-right in elections in France and the referendum on the European Union (EU) in the UK.

The Swedish far-right is isolated from the European and US far-right and alt-right on major and fringe online platforms

Our research identified a relatively isolated far-right

network and media environment in Sweden, with clusters of the far-right relying heavily on a few small news magazines online for their political information, including *Fria Tider*, *Samhällsnytt* and *Nyheter Idag*. Anti-immigration, anti-establishment and anti-Muslim themes were the most common content produced and shared by these outlets. Researchers at the Oxford Internet Institute found that Sweden had one of the highest rates of ‘junk’ news consumption on social media compared with the UK, Germany and France and that eight out of ten ‘junk news’ sources were Swedish in origin.³

New actors in disinformation and election influence were observed

Russian and American alt-right activists on 4chan are not the only actors who are trying to spread disinformation and misinformation in order to influence elections. Nationalist, populist media outlets and politicians in Poland spread disinformation about the Swedish government and society both in Sweden itself and in English and Polish language media. The Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir targeted anti-voting and anti-democracy messages to Swedish Muslim communities. This underlines the potential cumulative impact of international far-right and Islamist groups can have on domestic politics and communities: far-right groups galvanising anti-Muslim and anti-migrant attitudes on the one hand, while Islamist groups exert malign influence to further isolate Muslim communities politically, socially and psychologically.

Recommendations

While international efforts to pursue malign influence campaigns were not executed at the same scale as observed in previous elections, there remains a large network of US and European right-nationalist and far-right groups working together with Swedish actors to present Sweden as a country on the brink of disintegration. Moreover, within Sweden the far-right continues to grow in popularity, supported by a new and worrying ‘junk news’ media ecosystem circulating highly sensationalised and biased articles on social media. Countering these trends will require a multi-pronged and coordinated response.

Revamp public diplomacy strategy for the 21st century

Consistent network monitoring of the smear campaign

against Sweden is needed, in order to identify how campaigns travel, which target audiences are being reached, and when this spills into more mainstream perceptions. Swedish government agencies and civil society organisations can then use this information to tailor messages to specific audiences, and communicate accurate information where misinformation is rife, initiating more evidence-based conversation about the country.

Promote pan-Scandinavian civil society networks to monitor, expose, and counter regional malign influence campaigns

Competition with malign actors needs to come from a new generation of coordinated civil society groups, who have the skills to monitor campaigns, anticipate and expose them in a strategic manner, and where necessary disrupt and launch counter-messaging. Such civil society groups need to coordinate with each other across borders, share research, have the capacity and skills to use digital research tools, and thoroughly understand target audiences.

Prioritise digital citizenship education in the Swedish national curriculum and for the adult population

To counter the malicious effect of disinformation and 'junk news' on Swedish society, digital citizenship education must become a top priority alongside implementing recent educational reforms in Sweden to make the country more competitive in the tech economy. There is an additional need for broader campaigns and awareness raising activities to ensure older generations outside formal education are not ignored.

Increase understanding of alienated audiences and impact of 'junk news'

Mainstream media in Sweden must develop a better understanding of how to deliver accurate information to alienated individuals online. If mainstream media provided more accurate and sensitive reporting on the challenges of immigration and integration it could undermine the influence of sensationalist 'junk news' media sources. Similarly, more research is needed into the impact that highly biased and sensationalised 'junk news' has on the opinions of people in Sweden.

Collaborate with the advertising sector to reduce financial incentives for disinformation

Media outlets should work with advertising brands and advertising analytics companies to help to demonetise disinformation sites. An example of this kind of collaboration can be seen in the Open Brand Safety Initiative launched by Moat, Storyful and the City University of New York School of Journalism.⁴

Transparency for social media company products and more data is needed to foster better understanding of the mechanisms of influence online

While companies have already provided more transparency relating to the enforcement of their content removal policies, and in some cases additional access to data for researchers, they should consider implementing greater transparency for elements of product design and algorithmic accountability. Similarly, the social media companies should continue to make data on disinformation operations and tactics available to researchers for analysis. This could help to mitigate the potential misuse of existing and emerging technologies for the purpose of spreading disinformation.

2 Background

The Swedish general election generated significant international attention, centring on the apparent crisis of the social democratic consensus and the parallel ‘rise of the far-right’. In a context of increasing fear about the potential for foreign interference in elections, Sweden’s liberal utopia became a test case for the stability of liberal democratic election processes. Would the Kremlin take the opportunity to meddle with the increasingly fragile Swedish liberal consensus? Would international far-right movements move from talking about the Swedish establishment’s apparent failures to instigating them?

This project

This research project was conducted to monitor two kinds of online influence campaigns. The first stream of research sought to identify international efforts to use the internet to target the Swedish election with coordinated influence campaigns. The second stream of research analysed the extent to which far-right and hostile states online and broadcast media discussed Sweden in highly negative terms that were more often than not highly misleading.

We used a comprehensive set of digital analysis methodologies to track online information flows into Sweden and relevant active networks, including on social media, fringe platforms, established and alternative news sites, including social media listening tools, network mapping and manual monitoring on forums and chat channels online, as outlined in Table 1. A full outline of our research methodology is given in Appendix 1.

Table 1 Summary of online research methods and data information sources undertaken for this research

Research Stream 1: Information campaigns targeting the Swedish election

- Social media analysis: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, VKontakte (VK)
- Twitter media URL analysis: collection and classification of URLs shared with the election hashtags on Twitter
- Monitoring fringe platforms: 4chan, 8chan, Discord, Gab, ai, Bitchute and Yilauta
- Network mapping: mapping networks on Swedish social media space (Twitter and YouTube)

Research Stream 2: International smear campaign about Sweden

- Social media analysis: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, VK, Odnoklassniki.ru
- Network mapping: mapping the international network interested in the smear campaign against Sweden (Twitter)
- Broadcast and online media analysis – Russian state-sponsored media: *RT* and *Sputnik* YouTube channels and websites in French, Russian, English and German
- Broadcast media analysis – international far-right: *Red Ice TV*, *Breitbart TV* and *The Alex Jones Show*

The Swedish political context

Political debate in Sweden has been dominated by the issue of immigration since 2015 when the migration crisis began. Concerns about the potential link between crime and immigration were high on the media and policy agenda approaching the election, taking prime place in many of the official party manifestos. Sweden's governing coalition has come under increasing public scrutiny in the past two years for its handling of issues surrounding immigration, integration, crime, law and order. While these subjects have received great attention, topics such as health and social care, the environment and education remain of high importance to Swedish voters.⁵

With the focus on immigration and integration, the far-right populist party SD has been building up a growing base of support. Despite having its roots in the neo-Nazi movement, the party has gradually distanced itself from its controversial past and softened its brand as it seeks broader public appeal and political representation.⁶ Entering parliament for the first time in 2010 with 5.7% of the vote, the party grew in 2014, gaining 12.9% of the vote. SD's platform now includes policies on care of the elderly, tougher sentencing on crime in addition to its core policy position against immigration. In the run-up to the 2018 election, SD was presented as the major threat to the incumbent establishment and the Swedish liberal consensus, polling at a high of 28.5% in YouGov's June poll for Metro.⁷ The party eventually saw only a small increase in 2018, with 17.5%.⁸ But with the potential make-up of Sweden's government still unclear the result could provide the far-right party with influence beyond their numbers in parliament.

In addition to the mainstreaming of SD, new parties and players in the Swedish far-right emerged during this election. Launched in March 2018 and headed by ex-Sverigedemokratisk Ungdom (Sweden Democratic Youth; SDU) chair Gustav Kasselstrand, AfS emerged as a more far-right alternative to SD. Despite a large social media following the party only amassed 0.31% of votes in the election to the Riksdag. The party's founding has its basis in a much-publicised conflict between SD and SDU in 2015, a conflict that culminated in SD breaking all ties with SDU.⁹ Central SDU individuals in this conflict are now key AfS members. With a platform heavily focused on repatriation (including a full asylum freeze), law and order, and reforms of the democratic

processes, AfS stands decidedly to the right of SD and has been accused of engaging with the Swedish white supremacy movement.¹⁰

Influence campaigns in national elections

In the wake of the US presidential election in 2016, governments, journalists and researchers remain on guard against the heightened risk of election interference from state and non-state actors. ISD and LSE's recent research on the Italian and German elections demonstrates the increasingly subtle ways in which international actors are attempting to seed division and extremism in societies in the run-up to national elections.¹¹ Not characterised by explicit disinformation stories, hacking or leaks, both the German and Italian examples showed how international influence attempts use nudge tactics and narrative warfare, amplifying wedge issues such as immigration to dominate the national debate and provide a platform for divisive voices. The Swedish case demonstrated a similar set of tactics at play.

It is in this context that the Swedish government has been vocal about its awareness of and efforts to protect against potential election interference in Sweden.¹² Work by researchers Martin Kragh and Sebastian Åsberg, which was disputed by some when it was published, highlighted the active measures directed at Sweden from Russian state-backed groups and media in recent years, including disinformation surrounding the submarine crisis of 2014–2015 and a forged letter fabricating cooperation between the Swedish government and Daesh.¹³

However, the Kremlin is not alone in its agenda to polarise European societies and increase support for populist, nationalist or fascist political parties and fringe groups. The international far-right has attempted to influence European elections through the opportunistic collaboration of the 'alt-right' and 'alt-light' of the US with 'counter-jihad' groups, Identitarians and neo-Nazi movements across Europe. Between elections, events such as the Charlottesville riot in August 2017 and demonstrations by the party Pro Chemnitz in September 2018 show the ability of ideologically and geographically divergent elements of the far-right to coalesce in mutual opposition to 'liberalism', the 'mainstream media', and ethnic or religious minorities.

Among this spectrum of far-right movements, Sweden has become a prominent target of narrative warfare and disinformation efforts. The concerted international smear campaign against Sweden, portraying it as a country in crisis, verging on civil and ethnic war, is perhaps unmatched by any other far-right smear campaign in its longevity and consistency. Sweden's struggle with issues of social welfare provision and integration in the wake of accepting more refugees per capita than any other OECD country¹⁴ has rendered it the perfect target for such efforts. International far-right figureheads and spokespeople from the European counter-jihad movement and the American alt-right regularly use Sweden as a talking point or as the basis for racist diatribes,¹⁵ to the extent that the country itself has become the subject of a range of mocking memes online.¹⁶ During the German Federal Election 2017, disinformation about Sweden's so-called 'no go zones' was used to promote anti-immigrant sentiment in

“ The Kremlin is not alone in its agenda to polarise European societies ”

Germany by *Sputnik Deutschland* and German fringe media alike.¹⁷ Donald Trump's now infamous reference to mysterious events 'last night in Sweden' during a speech in February 2017 demonstrates the meteoric rise of the smear campaign and its designation of Sweden as an exemplar of 'failing' liberal multiculturalism.¹⁸

Sweden and the international far-right

The international far-right engages with Sweden both as an abstract vision of idealised white culture and practically, building cross-border coalitions to promote its objectives in Sweden itself. At an ideological level, Sweden's largely ethnically homogenous society has traditionally made the country a paragon of whiteness in the eyes of international white supremacists, forming a cornerstone of mystic and neo-pagan far-right circles' imagining of the world.¹⁹ Practically, there have been a number of direct interactions where the international

far-right has connected with Swedish counterparts to provide support and collaborate on the creation of communications material.

Collaboration takes place across the ideological spectrum of the far-right. At the more radical end, members of the Nordic Resistance Movement host a regular English-language podcast on the *Daily Stormer*. In the 'alt-light' sphere, Swedish vlogger 'The Angry Foreigner' appears on alt-right activist and *InfoWars* editor Paul Joseph Watson's YouTube channel, including in the days before the Swedish election.

These ties can be seen offline as well as in digital media, for example through Arktos Media, a prominent distributor of far-right literature founded by Swede Daniel Friberg. Arktos Media has gained international prominence for reprinting National Socialist books and translating the works of leading new right figures such as Russian ideologue Alexander Dugin and French writer Alain de Benoist, who is the intellectual father of Generation Identity. Over the last few years, Arktos has become an international hub for the far-right, tying together British, European and American alt-right and identitarian groups.²⁰

The Nordic Alternative Right (Nordiska alternativhögern) is an amalgamation of Arktos Books, *Red Ice* and the National Policy Institute.²¹ Friberg has ties to the conservative think tank Motpol (<https://motpol.nu>) and was involved in creating the messaging platform Nordisk.ru, which was also used by Anders Breivik.²² In an interview, Friberg claimed that the Sweden Democrats can pave the way for identitarianism.²³ Friberg is also the co-founder and European editor of AltRight.com, the platform of Richard Spencer's National Policy Institute. In January 2017, Spencer founded the AltRight Corporation, with Arktos as a key partner, to unite the international alt-right.

In February 2017, Arktos Media hosted an international extreme-right conference in Stockholm, which was live streamed by *Red Ice TV* to a global audience.²⁴ On 7 April 2018, the third Scandza Forum in Stockholm brought together international white nationalist figureheads like American Renaissance editor Jared Taylor, Counter-Currents editor-in-chief Greg Johnson and Scottish alt-right blogger Millennial Woes. The topic was 'normalising nationalism'.²⁵

More recent attempts to build closer ties between the international and Swedish far-right have also been observed. Steve Bannon stated his plans to contact the SD in the run-up to the election, suggesting that he views Sweden as having a role in the trans-European 'movement' that he hopes to build. A meeting was ultimately turned down by the SD; however there is evidence that Bannon has contacted ex-SD representative Kent Ekeröth.²⁶

Swedes and the internet

The capacity of social media platforms to amplify the reach of disinformation content and information campaigns is now well documented. The Swedish Internet Foundation's report on Swedish internet usage and trust in political news and information online provides a useful context for understanding the potential reach and impact of online information campaigns in Sweden during the election or beyond.²⁷

The report's survey results show that 71% of Swedes obtain political news online. In 2014, this figure was just 47%, so the 2018 election is the first election for which a large majority of Swedes sought political information online. For first-time voters, the figure is higher, at 80%. However, Swedes still rank TV as their most important source of political information (73%), followed by paper magazines (57%), friends or family (56%), online newspapers (56%) and the radio (55%). Social media in particular is not perceived as an important source of information compared with traditional media or online news websites: Facebook (19%), Twitter (12%) and YouTube (9%) are all relied on less as sources of political information, although first-time voters value these sources much more highly than other groups.²⁸

There is also fairly high awareness of the risks of using online sources for political information or activism: 27% of those surveyed had refrained from expressing a political opinion online to avoid criticism, hate or threats in the past year, and only 40% believe that 'most' information online is reliable, less than the comparable 44% in 2017. Only 12% of Facebook users surveyed in Sweden think that most political information that they see on Facebook is reliable.²⁹

These statistics, while by no means conclusive, provide important context for discussing the potential risks posed by online information campaigns identified

before and after the election in Sweden. The internet was used as a platform for spreading misinformation, highly biased and sensationalised media. The Oxford Internet Institute released a report two days before the election showing that Sweden has a bigger issue with 'junk news' than any other European country they have studied in the run-up to an election to date.³⁰ Yet, despite the opportunity that this emerging context grants for sowing division in Swedish society, the findings explored in this report attest to the limited manipulation of these vulnerabilities by international actors during the 2018 election campaign.

3 Key findings: interference in the 2018 Swedish election

The international far-right and Russian state-sponsored media's campaign against Sweden

Our research found that international far-right and Russian state-supported media outlets are involved in efforts to smear Sweden's reputation internationally, galvanising xenophobia in North America and Europe, and undermining trust in electoral democracy. But these efforts did not appear to focus directly on influencing the election results.

In the 2017 German federal election we witnessed the use of bots on Twitter to amplify Kremlin messaging in Germany, largely supporting the AfD and criticising Merkel. We also saw the seeding of disinformation in German networks through Kremlin-linked outlets such as *Sputnik Deutschland*.³¹ In Sweden we saw no such activity in the election campaign period.

520

RT and *Sputnik* stories between 16 July and 8 September 2018 focused on or mentioned Sweden, with an increase in the last two weeks before elections

We identified examples of explicitly pro-Kremlin media in the Swedish online ecosystem, with niche blogs such as NewsVoice.se hosting a mixture of anti-western, pro-Kremlin propaganda, conspiracy theories and anti-NATO media. Sites such as *Newsvoice*, a small news blog with just 453 followers on Twitter and even fewer on other social media platforms, demonstrate the relatively limited infrastructure that exists online in Sweden to promote pro-Kremlin propaganda or to coordinate campaigns. Some of the online news magazines most popular with the far-right, such as *Nya Dagbaldet* and *Fria Tider*, promote narratives that are in line with the Kremlin agenda, but this does not equate to explicitly supporting the Kremlin and this could not be said to be their primary agenda in Sweden.

Sweden witnessed a peak in apparent Kremlin-backed information campaigns and active measures in 2015 and 2016, in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine

and in the context of the development of closer ties between Sweden and NATO, as charted in Martin Kragh and Sebastian Åsberg's January 2017 report.³² A lack of visible Kremlin online efforts to influence the election could be explained by changes in the geopolitical climate (the reduction in international attention directed at Russia's continuing invasion and annexation of Ukraine) as well as the seemingly organic momentum behind pro-Kremlin groups such as AfS in Sweden in the months and years preceding the election. The removal of all Nordic-language versions of *Sputnik* in 2016 also reduced opportunities for direct Kremlin messaging into Sweden in recent years. This should not be overstated, as the removal of Nordic-language *Sputnik* was due to very low audience numbers.³³

While efforts by Kremlin actors to influence the election directly were apparently limited, we did uncover ongoing efforts from Russian state-sponsored media to smear Sweden's reputation to international audiences. We worked with MEMO 98 – a specialist media monitoring organisation – to monitor Kremlin media accounts in the run-up to the election. We also worked with the company Graphika to map the social media networks engaged in sharing and disseminating false and highly sensationalised stories about Sweden as a 'failed state'.

Monitoring RT and Sputnik

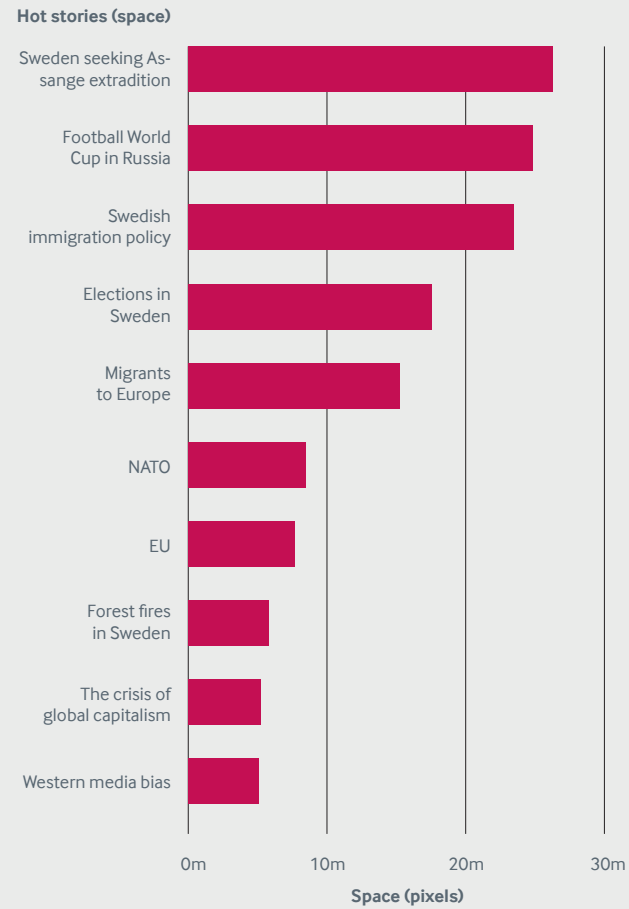
MEMO 98's monitoring of RT and *Sputnik* content between 16 July and 8 September 2018 identified more than 520 stories that focused on Sweden or mentioned the country, with a gradual increase in the stories and reports on Sweden, particularly in the last two weeks before elections.

The aggregated results of RT online versions (in English, French, German and Russian) show that the Pirate Party, the SD and the AfS were the only political parties to receive substantial coverage throughout the period under study (Figure 1). The tone of coverage of these parties was either neutral (Pirate Party and AfS) or positive and neutral (SD). By contrast, Sweden (as a country), the police, the government and the EU were mainly presented in a negative and neutral way.

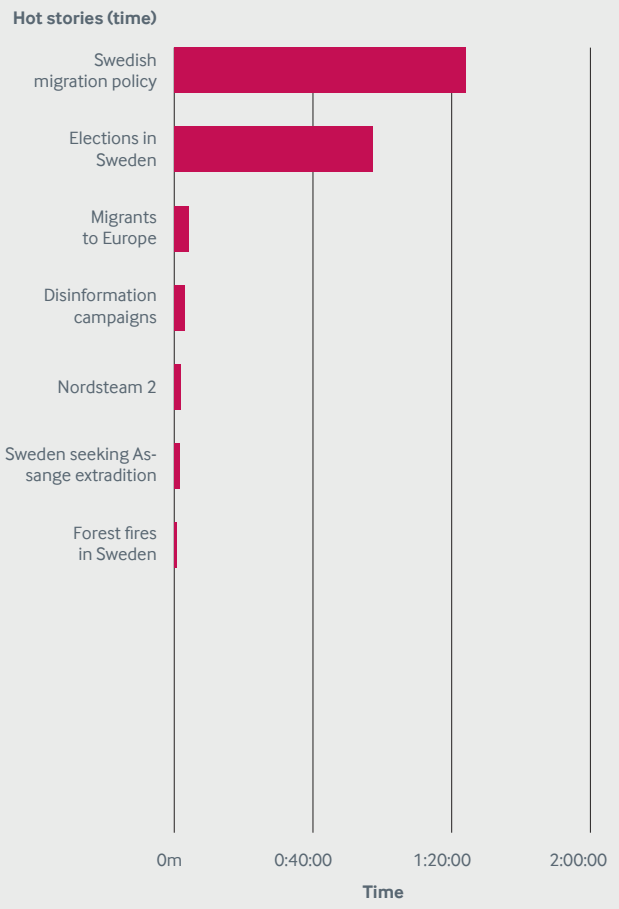
The topics that received the greatest attention from these media outlets were criticism of Sweden's migration policy and the apparent link between

Figure 1 Breakdown of coverage by RT from 16 July to 8 September 2018 ³⁴

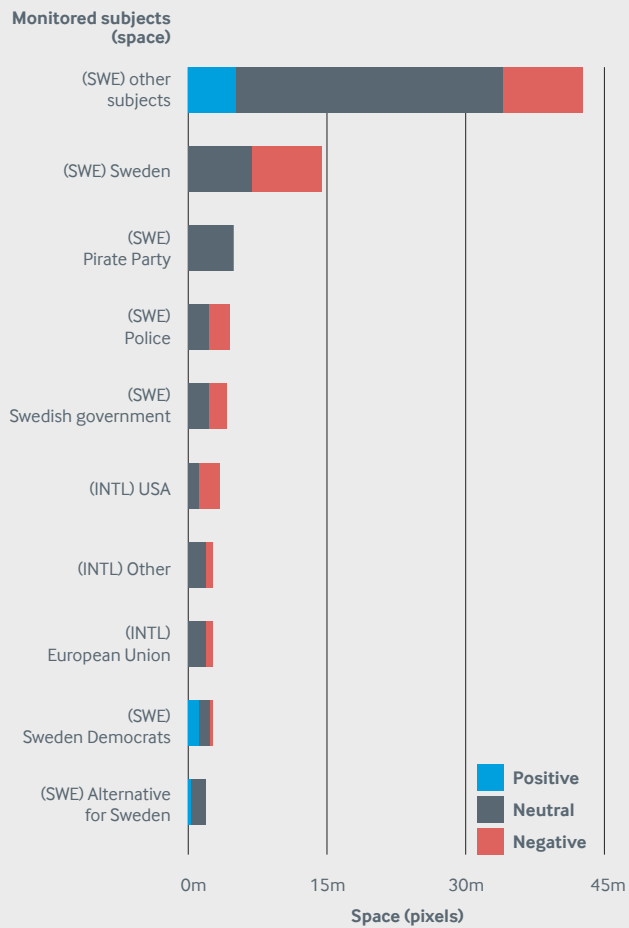
RT - All languages - Online (16.07.2018–08.09.2018)



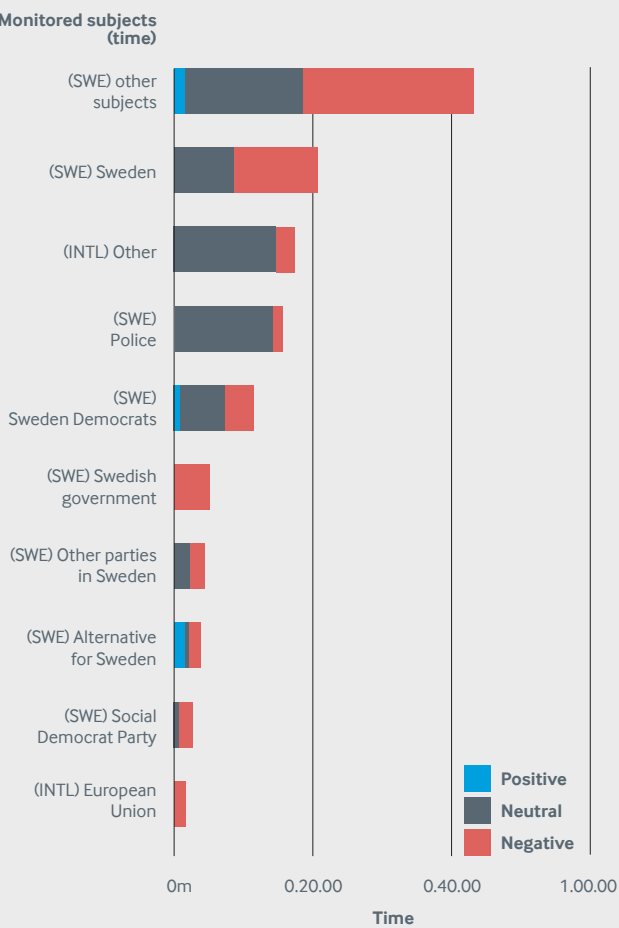
RT - All languages - Broadcast (16.07.2018–08.09.2018)



RT - All languages - Online (16.07.2018–08.09.2018)



RT - All languages - Broadcast (16.07.2018–08.09.2018)



migrants and crime in Sweden. Other topics mentioned concerning Sweden included its failed integration policy, ineffective deportation procedures, presentation of asylum seekers and the Swedish Muslim community as a potential threat for national and EU security, Julian Assange, Nordstream 2, forest fires and the Naftogaz-Gazprom argument.

As seen in Figure 1, the broadcast version of *RT* (all languages) adopted a similar approach, with only one subject – AfS – receiving roughly equal amounts of positive and negative coverage. By comparison, the ruling Social Democratic Party (Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti; SDP), the government and Sweden received mainly negative coverage. The most covered stories on the broadcast version of *RT* (all languages) were the Swedish migration policy, followed by elections in Sweden and migrants to Europe. *RT Deutsch's* online version openly supported SD. *RT Français's* online version devoted the bulk of its coverage to Sweden (as a country), followed by other subjects, the EU and the president. The tone of the coverage was mostly neutral or negative for both Sweden (as a country) and the EU. The broadcast version gave substantial coverage to the Swedish police, which was under heavy criticism. The SD was the only political party to receive some coverage, which was positive. The aggregated results of *Sputnik* website online versions (English, French and German) for all four periods show a clear tendency to portray the SD and AfS as the real alternative to the current establishment.

The international far-right and the smear campaign

*Sweden is set to be the first white country to commit suicide through immigration... The Islamic revolutions in Europe are going to be very painful, and they are going to be bloody, and I think that after one has taken place, the populations in the rest of Europe and in the diaspora will be ready for re-evaluating what we are doing to our countries and why we are doing it.*⁴⁰

The *Daily Stormer* has a long history of using Sweden as propaganda. In 2013, Andrew Anglin accused the Swedish government of calling for an ethnic genocide of Swedish whites (above). Evidence from social media and broadcast media demonstrates that the international far-right media uses Sweden as a false

exemplar of an Islamising, failing, crime-ridden state. Coverage of Sweden heavily emphasises apparent links between crime and immigration, in particular linking refugees and migrants to violent sexual crimes. In addition, Sweden is used as a proxy to paint a picture of 'Islamisation' in white societies.

Organisations and individuals involved in this smear campaign include activists in the UK such as Tommy Robinson, 'alt-light' vloggers such as Paul Joseph Watson (see case study 'Paul Joseph Watson on Sweden', below), AfD official channels on Russian chat forums Odnoklassniki (OK) and VK,⁴¹ as well as neo-Nazi platforms such as the *Daily Stormer*. These commentators cherry-pick stories about Sweden and skew them with a hyper-partisan bias to promote broader far-right talking points. Following the election, many of these sites focused on the election fraud theory, which is discussed further below.⁴²

As part of this research, the Media Diversity Institute monitored *Red Ice TV*, *Breitbart TV* and *The Alex Jones Show* during the election period. The findings exemplify the broader international far-right's use of Sweden as a narrative crux. Started in 2003 in Gothenburg, and describing itself as an alternative to mainstream media, *Red Ice* reports prolifically on Sweden, but exclusively in English. Coverage during the election period was heavily supportive of SD and AfS, and included stories on a supposed 'rape epidemic' in Sweden, censorship of AfS by the government and technology companies,⁴⁸ election meddling⁴⁹ and calls for the repatriation of all immigrants.

The Alex Jones Show, hosted on InfoWars, also discussed Sweden before the country's election. In line with Jones' own obsessions, coverage of Sweden focused on the alleged censorship of the right wing. On 3 September, Jones claimed that SD and AfS had been subjected to censorship amounting to 'election meddling', implicating Google in the conspiracy.

Many far-right groups have also found a home on Russian-language social media groups on OK and VK discussing Sweden and the Swedish elections. There are a handful of Russian-language groups on Russian platform such as VK and OK that host content promoting far-right or extremist agendas in Sweden. Most focus on amplifying anti-immigrant content,

Case study:**RT's documentary 'Testing Tolerance'**

In one of example of Russian state-sponsored media messaging, RT produced an English-language documentary, 'Testing Tolerance', which gave airtime to alt-right influencers. The documentary discusses the issues Sweden is experiencing with migration and integration, with a heavily biased slant supporting the voices of anti-immigrant parties and activists. Between 29 June and 18 July 2018 we collected social media posts from Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit and public Facebook pages that discussed or shared the RT documentary 'Testing Tolerance'. The video aired on 29 June 2018 on RT's YouTube channel; 1,267 posts about the documentary on public social media were identified.

The data shows there was engagement with the video on Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit and a number of fringe forums. Swedish site *Flashback* was identified as a prolific site for discussion, with one relevant channel discussing the video entitled, 'Is RT reporting objective or is there always a hidden agenda?'³⁵ The video was also shared on fringe Finnish forums such as Pakkotisto.com,³⁶ and international forums such as 4chan³⁷ and 8chan. The URLs most frequently cited in posts discussing the documentary led to copies or coverage of the video on YouTube, the RT website, French far-right outlet Fdesouche³⁸ and anti-migrant and the anti-Muslim Dutch blog, *EJ Bron*.³⁹

The most frequently used hashtags in the posts include the hashtag for a vigilante Swedish far-right group interviewed in the film, #SoldiersofOdin, and far-right terminology such as #Swedenstan, #WhiteGenocide and #NOGOZones. The election hashtag, #svpol was also frequently mentioned in conjunction with discussion of the documentary. The most frequently mentioned Twitter handles in the dataset include accounts of AfS representative Gustav Kassel (@gustavkassel), international far-right influencer Paul Joseph Watson (@PrisonPlanet) and Swedish far-right accounts for the Angry Foreigner (@ArgBlatteTalar) and Peter Sweden (@PeterSweden7).

The tweets about the documentary that received the most engagement were from anti-immigrant websites such as *Voice of Europe* (<https://voiceofeurope.com/>). However, only two of the top ten tweets are in Swedish, with English- and French-language content proving more viral. Taking only those posts with an identifiable location into account (670 posts), we can see that most engagement with the documentary came from the US (39%), followed by Sweden (13%), the UK (9%), Canada (6%) and France (5%).

sometimes supporting SD explicitly, focusing on the broader political debate rather than the election itself:

- The group Моя Швеция (My Sweden) has 22,000 followers and spreads anti-immigrant content and some explicitly pro-SD content. After the election, this channel hosted a significant amount of posts in Russian on the Swedish election results, many supportive of SD, and surrounded by a consistent swell of racist and homophobic comments.
- *Nordfront* has found a safe haven on VK, with channels such as Интернет-газета Северного движения сопротивления, the 'Net Newspaper of Nordic Resistance Movement', hosted on the site. The channel is used to link to Russian-language versions of *Nordfront.de* content, with some discussions. Many of the users are often openly neo-Nazi.

Russian-based platforms OK and VK also provide online homes to extremist movements such as the Nordic Resistance Movement, which has a platform on VK to promote Russian-language and international materials about Sweden and Nordic Resistance Movement's activities and goals in Sweden. Some examples of these groups include:

- Russian–Swedish group SVERIGE!!! ШВЕЦИЯ!!! on OK, which has around 4,000 participants, an unknown moderator, and 1–2 daily posts. The channel is used to spread anti-refugee, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant content in Russian and Swedish, but shows no direct support for a particular Swedish political party.
- On VK, Russian-language groups about Sweden include Sverigeklubben – Швеция/Стокгольм, which has 32,000 members and hosts anti-immigrant rhetoric in discussions under 'political news'.

“ Describing itself as an alternative to mainstream media, *Red Ice* reports prolifically on Sweden ”

- Among the most frequently cited articles on OK and VK sites about Sweden in the Russian language was an article from *RT* about the Dalai Lama's comments on a visit to Malmö, in which he urged migrants to return to their original homes when possible and described a 'Europe for Europeans'.

VK has also provided a home for Swedish-language extreme right-wing groups such as Swedish *Nordfront*, which has at least 1,000 followers. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of openly neo-Nazi Swedish accounts on VK. As VK's terms of service are not as strict in prohibiting hate speech or extremist content as those of Facebook, YouTube or Twitter, racist and extremist content proliferates more easily on the Russian platform. One example is the podcast and video project *Granskning Sverige*, which has 1,300 followers on VK. Anonymous people call journalists and politicians and ask 'politically incorrect' questions, mostly with an anti-immigrant slant. The troll-like behaviour is fronted by Fabian Fjälling, who has been active under the name Erik Johansson in pro-Kremlin Facebook groups on both the left and the right and is sympathetic with the Nordic Resistance Movement. The movement had its pages and accounts on Facebook and Twitter removed, but remains active on VK.

However, as with other elements of the disinformation campaign about Sweden, elections are not the primary topic on these channels, which are more focused on general anti-refugee politics and discussion of the disintegration of society in Sweden under the weight of immigration.

The smear campaign Twitter network

In order to uncover the key actors involved in the smear campaign against Sweden, we commissioned the social media analytics company Graphika to create a network map of those engaged in or exposed to the smear campaign against Sweden using public data from Twitter. The map produced to understand this network (Figure 2) is a butterfly shape: the centre of the map shows the accounts that are closely connected by their shared interest in the Sweden smear campaign; the corner clusters, on the other hand, are interest groups that have been pulled into the map through mutual follower relationships with the map's network, but have their own interests. These accounts are unlikely to be closely engaged in the smear campaign against Sweden



The Truth About the Swedish Election

284K views • 1 week ago

Case study:

Paul Joseph Watson on Sweden

Paul Joseph Watson is an English vlogger and internet personality associated with the alt-right, using his YouTube channel, Twitter and articles on various conspiracy theorist websites to promote a range of far-right talking points including criticism of migration, Islam, feminism and left-wing politics. Watson initiated his career as a conspiracy theorist, working closely with Alex Jones and is the editor of InfoWars.com. Watson has had an active YouTube account for seven years, with 647 videos. He has over 1,330,000 subscribers and the upper estimate for his monthly earnings from this account is £20,400.⁴³

Watson often discusses Sweden in his diatribes, perpetuating critical and divisive narratives about the country focused on the themes of migrant crime, issues around integration, the threat of terrorism and the role of feminism within Sweden. He has previously offered a prize of \$2,000 to 'any journalist claiming Sweden is safe' to spend a night in Malmö.⁴⁴ His involvement in the smear campaign against Sweden seems to have started in October 2016, when his first video focused on the issue – 'What They're Not Telling You About Sweden' – appeared on YouTube.⁴⁵

A video on 5 September 2018 shows a discussion between Watson and Swedish YouTube personality the Angry Foreigner.⁴⁶ Although the video is purported to be a discussion around the Swedish election, most of the discussion focuses more broadly on the decline of Swedish society as a potential explanation for an increase in support for SD. This is characteristic of the far-right smear campaign, a phenomenon largely separate from objectives about Sweden itself. The conversation revolves around the negative impact that migrant communities have on the economy through 'wage stagnation', violent crime committed by migrants, a recent report outlining convicted rapist statistics,⁴⁷ and supposed cultural displacement caused by a growing migrant population.

consistently but may be exposed to it through the accounts they follow. These corner clusters include 'UK Brexit support', 'US Trump support' and other European country-specific clusters such as 'AfD support'.

Analysing the accounts at the centre of the smear campaign network reveals international, mostly European, accounts from the far-right milieu mixing with Swedish right-wing and alt-right accounts, mostly linked to AfS or the alt-right online subcultures in Sweden.

The list is dominated by English-language far-right influencers but also includes Hungarian and Dutch accounts. Likely suspects, such as @SaveMySweden, British anti-Islam commentator @MarkACollett, pro-Kremlin commentator @Partisangirl and US alt-right stars such as Brittany Pettibone (@BrittPettibone) and the @getongab account mix with relative newcomers in the far-right field, such as @PolandDaily and Hungarian journalist Mariann Öry (@otmarianna).

Some of the smaller accounts at the centre of the Twitter network help shed more light on the kind of actors involved in discussing Sweden as a 'failed state': accounts from Belgium representing 'women against Islam'; anti-White Helmet, pro-Assad accounts; Italian nationalist accounts promoting Salvini; Irish anti-immigrant, anti-abortion activists; Macedonian alt-right amplifiers; and identitarian-linked accounts, such as that of the Gefira Foundation, a think tank on demographic change (see case study 'The Gefira Foundation', p19).

We also identified the accounts in the centre of the map shown in Figure 2 that are labelled as Swedish accounts, but are closely linked with the international smear campaign about Sweden. There are not many, but those that were recognised as active include official AfS candidate accounts, Swedish alt-right influencers and media. It is interesting to note that the accounts most embedded in the international network discussing Sweden abroad are not related to mainstream Swedish parties, but mostly represent fringe right-wing interest groups and media.

These efforts to smear Sweden's reputation amount to what appears to be a coordinated campaign supported by the international far-right and Russian state-

Case study: Paul Joseph Watson on Sweden (cont.)

In addition to this broader discussion, the video touches on several themes which are pertinent to the election: how the SDP's stance on migration has caused its popularity to fall, how the media works to disenfranchise and alienate potential SD supporters, and the possibility that migration is being orchestrated by the SDP to gain the party more votes from minority communities.

From 1 August to 15 September 2018 the peak in discussion about Sweden surrounding Watson's Twitter account was on 14 August, which coincides with the car arson attacks in Sweden. Despite a number of tweets around election day itself, the greater engagement with an issue linked to 'migrant crime' suggests that Watson's primary engagement with Sweden is to use it as an exemplar to reinforce his broader anti-migrant position, as opposed to any serious intent to promote propaganda in the run-up to the election.

sponsored media. However, our analysis suggests that the objectives of this campaign are disconnected from political objectives in Sweden itself. These efforts are instead geared towards the promotion of anti-liberal and anti-migrant sentiment in other European and North American societies.

Malign influence campaigns on 4chan and Discord

Malign influence campaigns were discussed in alternative media spaces like 4chan and Discord, and while there were calls to action by some international 'alt-right' activists to spread disinformation ahead of the Swedish election, we observed little to no take up of these activities.

Two days before the election, the Oxford Internet Institute reported that domestic 'junk news' circulated widely throughout the Swedish election campaign.⁵³ Their analysis revealed that levels of 'junk news' consumption were higher in Sweden than in the UK, France or Germany, and were more consistent with levels seen in the run-up to the US election.

Swedish-language disinformation was created and promoted by far-right media outlets, a range of political parties across the ideological spectrum,⁵⁴ and fringe blogs and forums promoting pro-Kremlin policy. The

Figure 2 Network map of those engaged in or exposed to the smear campaign against Sweden using public data from Twitter⁵⁰



	Group/segment name	Fraction of Map	Members	Power
■	Europe Right-Wing	8%	761	3
■	UK Right-Wing	10%	951	5
■	SV Right-Wing	11%	1.06k	5
■	SV Centre/Establishment	3%	265	4
■	US CA Right-Wing	26%	2.43k	5
■	INT Media	4%	375	2
■	INT White Identity	29%	2.7k	4
■	INT Other	5%	482	3

context was ripe for international actors seeking to disrupt the election from outside.

Despite this, our research identified very few international attempts to influence the Swedish election through online platforms, disinformation, coordinated amplification tactics or harassment campaigns. While activities could have been conducted on closed groups and encrypted channels that lie outside the realm of our research, the public information space was not targeted by significant foreign campaigns.

We did identify examples of international far-right activists attempting to galvanise groups to get involved in coordinated online campaigns on fringe forums 4chan and Discord, just as we have seen in previous elections in the US, Italy and Germany.⁵⁵ What we did not see was any significant evidence of these instructions being adhered to or acted on by international far-right activists, with no examples of coordinated activity on major social media platforms that could obviously be traced to efforts on 4chan or Discord. The case studies of coordination described below demonstrate the relatively sporadic and insignificant scale of the coordination identified in the election period, and the limited uptake of instructions for activity provided by international far-right activists.

Calls to action on 4chan go unheeded

During Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, large online communities associated with the emerging alt-right became increasingly involved in digital campaigning, disseminating memes and conspiracy theories and harassing political opponents online. Much of this activity was coordinated from the 'politically incorrect' (/pol/) board on 4chan. Notable examples of this include the promotion of the leaked Hillary Clinton emails and the generation and dissemination of the 'pizzagate' conspiracy theory.⁵⁶ Following Trump's election these activists sought to replicate what they perceived to be a successful campaign through similar actions in the support of far-right candidates in the Dutch, German, French and Italian elections. While it is extremely difficult to determine the success of these campaigns in having an impact on the election, they were arguably successful in pushing particular talking points and content onto large social media platforms and to achieve significant amplification on these sites.⁵⁷

In order to examine the extent to which users of 4chan's /pol/ board sought to influence the Swedish election, all threads posted between 6 August and 10 September 2018 that mentioned the terms 'Swede', 'Sweden' or 'Swedish' in the first post were archived and analysed (Figure 3).

Case study: The Gefira Foundation

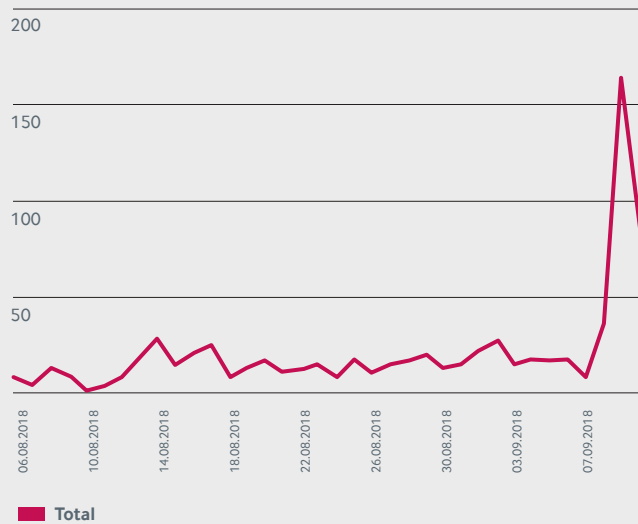
The Gefira Foundation, which frames itself as a European think tank 'focused on current demographic changes and the consequence on geopolitical and financial development', is based in Nijmegen in the Netherlands. It publishes articles in English, German, Polish and Italian and has recently covered demographic change and migration issues in Sweden extensively.

In a similar vein to the European far-right group Generation Identity, it spreads theories linked to 'The Great Replacement', arguing that native Europeans are gradually being wiped out through the welcoming policies of their governments, especially in countries like Germany and Sweden. One of their reports and campaigns about demographic change and migration is called 'Sweden will remain Sweden, but just in name'. In the report, Gefira suggests that the Swedish government deliberately distorts demographic change data and argues that it is 'pursuing a systematic re-population policy... to compensate for the low birth rate'.⁵¹

To back up their claims that the official population forecasts made by the Swedish government are inaccurate, the Gefira Foundation uses Cerberus 2.0, software designed for demographic calculations and population simulations. Cerberus 2.0 claims to show with precision 'that the replacement of the European society has started, and within 50 years it will be visible and irreversible'. The report concludes:

The forecast made by the Swedish authorities is rather a blueprint or plan for the future than a prediction. Comparing the projection made by Cerberus 2.0 and those made by the state planners, the Gefira report expects the Swedish to be a minority by 2066, i.e. by the end of this century only one-third of the population will be of Swedish descent, which means almost a total re-population.⁵²

Figure 3 The number of posts referencing 'Swede', 'Sweden' or 'Swedish' on 4chan's /pol/ board, 6 August to 10 September 2018



An examination of the number of unique posts discussing Sweden demonstrates there was a significant spike in conversation on the day of the election, with the volume of conversation in the month preceding the election remaining stable. While the election itself garnered the attention of the users of 4chan's /pol/ board, there was not a rise in interest in the period leading up to the election that could point to increasing interest or activity directed at the Swedish election. Analysis of these conversations demonstrates that the election was the most widely discussed topic in this period, with 319 of the 713 (44%) threads analysed mentioning the topic. Of these threads 56 (17%) contained a call to action, inviting individuals to directly engage in activity to disrupt or influence the election. Threads that explicitly called for action ranged from general requests for individuals to share a piece of content on social media to more organised Swedish Election General (SWEG) threads, which mirror the format and layout of similar discussions that took place on 4chan in the run-up to the German and French elections.

However, there was notable infighting and tense discussion on these threads about whether support should be given to the SD or AfS, with a number of

international users suggesting that SD were watered down ideologically ('cuckservatives') and that AfS were more ideologically aligned with white supremacist ideology. This indecision does not suggest the presence of a clear and concerted strategy for international mobilisation to affect the election.

To better understand the potential coordination behind the SWEG campaign, we analysed a feature of the /pol/ board through which the flag of the country of origin of a post appears. This feature can be manipulated through the use of a proxy or virtual private network, so results cannot be treated as definite markers for the geographical hubs of the 4chan Swedish campaign. However, it is interesting to note that 44% of all SWEG threads appear to originate from Denmark.


Another trend which was observed in the Italian and German elections was the posting of links to closed chat channels on Discord or WhatsApp, where activists could more effectively organise their activity.⁵⁸ With one exception, this tactic has not been observed in the Swedish case.

There are examples of the 4chan milieu attempting to amplify their messaging to wider audiences on large social media platforms, but these are few and far between, and exemplify the limited reach of efforts generated from these chat forums in Sweden itself. Accounts such as YouTube channel MemGrossisten post alt-right memes promoted by activists on the 4chan SWEG chats, including the Swedish children's show muppet-turned-alt-right symbol Skurt. Yet their reach is limited, with comments on videos mostly from accounts clearly already involved in the alt-right milieu in Sweden.

We did not observe a trajectory of activity from 4chan discussions about election interference onto major social media platforms, outside individual accounts and small-scale meme production. These efforts did not appear to be coordinated in any broad sense, nor to have gained traction outside a small, existing far-right community. In fact, discussion on 4chan after the election blamed the lack of electoral success for the AfS and SD on the international far-right's inability to engage in effective communications campaigns.

Figure 4 Example of a SWEG thread using the distinctive Danish format

File: [1534421862560.png](#) (129 KB, 671x671)



☐ /SWEG/ Sweden election general - we made the news edition Anonymous (ID: nldAGJk6)
 08/17/18(Fri)05:41:37 No.182549482 >>182552027 >>182552385 >>182552926 >>182553767 >>182554130 >>182554181 >>182560801 >>182562863 >>182565653 >>182569521 >>182571553 >>182573012 >>182573854 >>182579653 >>182581222

Ok /pol/ the official election campaign has now begun in sweden. We have little over a mnth left of meme making and online campaigns left. Let's make it fucking count, and not sit around on our asses! Let's fucking save Sweden!

Danish fake news media just wrote and article about us! They are getting scared! The article includes hillarius statemnts such a "What is a meme" "What is a hatefact" and "The movement is foreign and lead by a Englishman". It also features several juicy skurt memes

We have grown to the point that the mainstream is writing about us. Keep it going lads!

NEWS
 >Danish fake news media write a hit piece about how "right wing radicals" use Jonatan Spang as propaganda. He responds by saying he dosen't pick sides and encouraged people to "Vote for me as comedian of the year if you like radical nazi humor"

/ourguy/ confirmed
<https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/udland/hoerjeradikale-bruger-jonatan-spang-i-svensk-valgkamp>

>Danish fake news media write hitpiece about /SWEG/ - <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/udland/internetrolde-proever-paavirke-det-svenske-valg-med-hadpropaganda>

>Sweden democrats publish a video digging up the social democrats dark past, to give them a taste of their own medicine - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W56ZKUVECWs> [Embed] [Open] [Embed]

>Swedish politicians admit to colude with Facebook to "combat misinformation" up to the coming election. Establishment politicians are literally working with private companies to censor dissent - <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/udland/racebiologi-og-joedehad-svenske-socialdemokrater-angribes-i-valgfilm>

>Jonatan Spang, the Based Dane, did a interview with a (((Swedish))) youtuber. References memes and 4chan lingo: <https://youtu.be/E2vnMAytzis> [Embed]

SWEG on Discord: failing to inspire

We've got three campaigns going at the minute – one pushing to make Swexit an election issue, one exposing the mainstream parties & one gathering info to create redpills we can leave in public spaces.⁵⁹

A SWEG channel was also identified on the gaming chat app Discord in the run-up to the election. Like the 4chan example, attempts to coordinate activity in Swedish appear to have been limited in their scale and unsuccessful in reaching wider audiences online.

Users on the SWEG channel discussed potential tactics to influence the election, including:

- direct messaging well-known far-right influencers such as The Golden One⁶⁰ to promote their Discord channel and their objectives
- creating spam accounts on sites like Twitter
- 'spamming' a live opinion show on *Sveriges Television* (SVT), the Swedish public broadcast channel
- promoting the campaign insinuating election fraud, with suggestions that SWEG channel members should sign up to be election officers

- creating general memes, and discussing ordering stickers to put in public places around Sweden.

Overall, while the tactics are recognisable from other international campaigns to interfere in elections, the scale and sophistication of the efforts coordinated from Discord SWEG seem to be minimal. As SWEG member 'LeSwede' commented, 'it feels like there are only around seven people writing in the channel, and the rest might as well be people from *Expressen*'.

Amplification tactics to promote AfS

Amplification tactics to promote AfS in the run-up to the election were observed, but there was little to no evidence that they were coordinated, inorganic or internationally managed. No Kremlin-backed bots or amplification tactics were detected.

In previous elections, we have seen bots and cyborgs used to promote political party propaganda, hashtags and campaigns. The same automation has been shown to promote fringe news sources and disinformation on major social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook in the run-up to the elections and referendums. In Sweden, we identified suspicious, likely automated

accounts promoting fringe far-right party AfS being active throughout the campaign period, but only one of these accounts appeared to show any clear signs of international coordination. Furthermore, while we also identified highly active, likely bot accounts promoting fringe far-right media, there were no signs to suggest they were managed from outside Sweden, and they did not act in a manner that was significantly different from accounts pushing content from larger, traditional media outlets such as *SVT* or *Expressen*.

AfS: amplifier accounts

As reported throughout the election campaign, a range of political parties' propaganda and messaging was amplified on social media by bot accounts, as well as highly suspicious anonymised, single-issue, prolific accounts on Twitter and Facebook.⁶¹ In line with these findings, our Twitter analysis identified at least 55 highly anonymised, single-issue, highly active accounts supporting AfS in the weeks before the election. Many of these seem likely to be automated accounts, though the patterns of their behaviour are certainly less obviously mechanised than bot accounts seen in previous elections, such as the German or French elections in 2017.

These were found by analysing accounts surrounding the official @AfS_riks Twitter handle and AfS candidates' Twitter handles. We analysed the past behaviour of accounts to identify any potential 'repeat offenders', in one case finding an account that had previously been active in supporting Donald Trump in the 2016 US election and Marine Le Pen in the 2017 French election. The account had different names in each instance, though the handle stayed the same, thus allowing us to track its activity over the last two years. Many accounts were 'created' many years ago but have not been active until 2018, often activating for the first time in spring 2018, around the time of the AfS official launch, or August 2018, nearing the election itself. This Twitter analysis matches the Facebook research of Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) on pro-AfS accounts, which identified accounts with 'high levels of engagement by AfS, which is an indicator — but not a definitive one — of false accounts for amplification'.⁶² Figure 5 shows the activity patterns of two bot accounts uncovered when analysing pro-AfS Twitter profiles.

While many bots were found supporting other parties,⁶⁴ the volume of amplification around AfS was disproportionate to its level of offline support, as demonstrated by the party's limited election success. The level of activity of these suspicious accounts surged in August 2018, nearing the election itself. A number of these pro-AfS amplifier accounts switched allegiance in the aftermath of the election, instead promoting the conspiracy theory of 'election fraud' against SD.

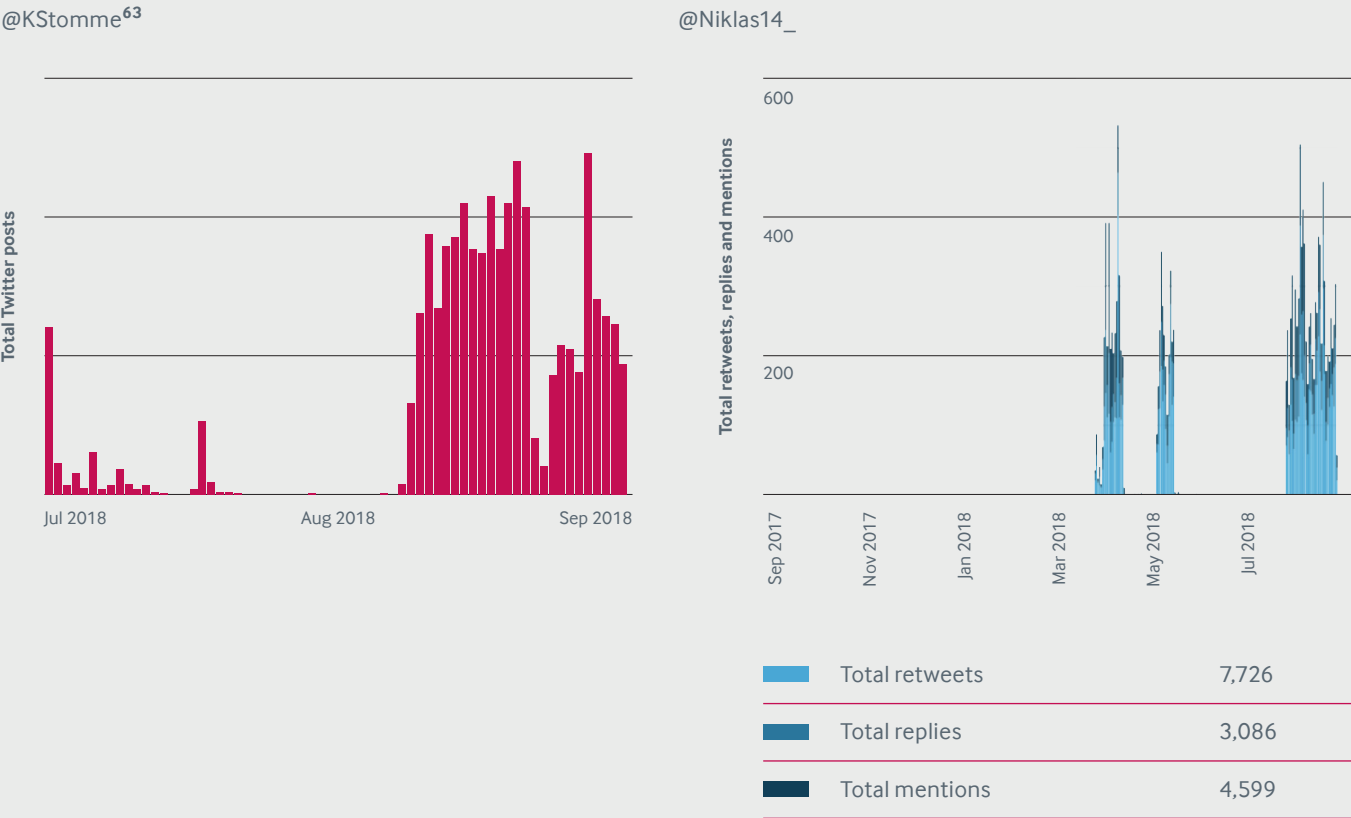
Media amplification

Bot-like behaviour was identified in the promotion of both far-right and mainstream media relating to the election on Twitter and was particularly visible in anti-SDP and pro-SD content.

Through our analysis of media shared using the election hashtags #svpol and #val2018 on Twitter, we identified accounts that were highly active, posting over 50 times a day on average over their lifespan. We calculated the proportion of classified tweets that were shared by these 'highly active' accounts (using a Twitter Potential Influencer or 'TPI' count) compared with non-suspicious accounts (non-TPI count).⁶⁵ Figure 6 shows that all of the commonly used media outlets in the Swedish election conversation on Twitter had some promotion from highly active accounts. Alternative media websites such as FriaTider.se and Samnytt.se show slightly higher proportions, but there is distribution across the whole spectrum of media.

For articles that were labelled as mentioning a political party, the proportion of 'highly active' accounts promoting the stories were also fairly evenly distributed across all parties discussed. However, when considering the stance of articles 'for' or 'against' the party mentioned, we can see that 'highly active' accounts were particularly prevalent in promoting anti-SDP and pro-SD media on Twitter. About 15% of the retweets of anti-SPD media and 14% of the retweets of pro-SD media were from these 'highly active' accounts. Again, there were not obvious signals of international affiliation for these accounts, which suggests that this activity was most likely directed from within Sweden.

Figure 5 Unusual activity patterns from two suspected bot accounts uncovered in the analysis of pro-AfS Twitter accounts (@KStomme, left, and @Niklas14_, right)



Disinformation to undermine democracy: election fraud stories

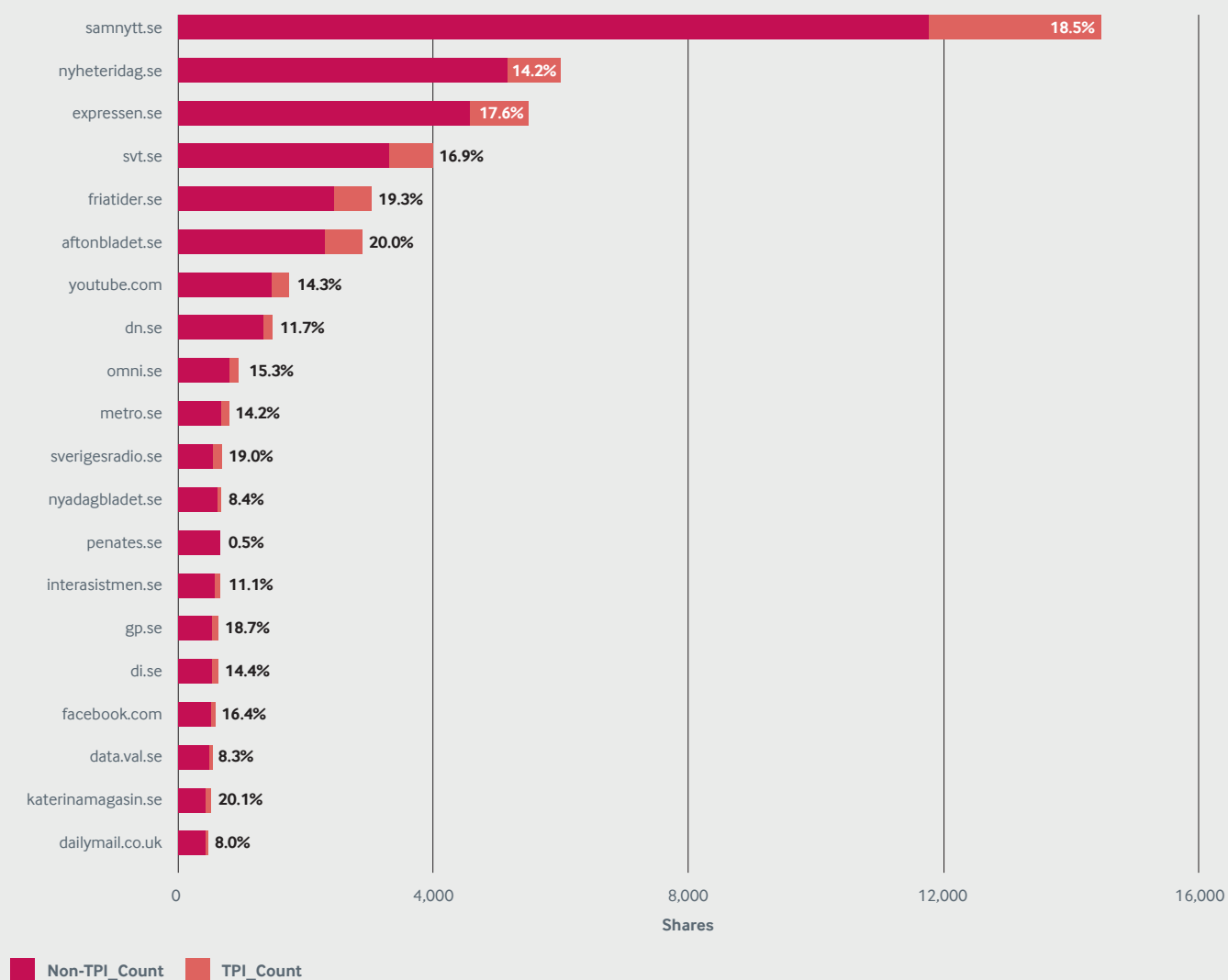
The most consistent disinformation campaign identified relating to the election was Swedish and international far-right networks promoting stories about election fraud in the run-up to and in the wake of the election to undermine the credibility of the result. It took place (mostly) after the votes had been cast: the Swedish far-right, soon supported by the international far-right, spread stories claiming that the Swedish electoral system is rigged against SD and that election fraud occurred in the establishment’s attempts to prevent SD from achieving more influence. The idea that the Swedish election was fraudulent spread quickly both in far-right news sources and blogs and on alternative social media channels such as Gab and VK. While the international far-right was heavily involved in promoting this claim, its content was largely directed

at international audiences (in the English or German language, for example) and was more of a follow-up than a precursor to the Swedish far-right’s adoption of this campaign.

Examples of the stories involved in the broad campaign to insinuate purposeful fraud in the Swedish election include: SD party ballot papers placed in separate areas at polling stations; missing ballot papers; the official election authority website failure during vote counting; family voting or ‘tribal’ voting; missing or delayed postal votes; ‘incorrect’ instructions on how to seal vote envelopes at some polling stations; and claims of voters’ names already being ticked off when arriving to vote.

Most disinformation and misinformation relating to election fraud used real cases of mistakes or discrepancies in the election process, but amplified, sensationalised and altered the meaning of these

Figure 6 The top 20 domains shared on Twitter in relation to the 2018 Swedish election hashtags, with TPI counts⁶⁶



events to the extent that they were framed as purposeful acts in a conspiracy to deny SD power. There were also examples of fully unsubstantiated events mixed in with these exaggerated stories, which were spread online by representatives of SD, AfS and Medborgerlig Samling, and many of their supporters, but also by international allies in the far-right, including *Breitbart London* and German website *Compact*.

Started in Sweden: preparing for 'valfusk!'

SD prepared the ground for its campaign claiming 'election fraud' even before the election process had

been concluded on 9 September. In the weeks before the vote, the party set up a Facebook group, requesting that users post examples of apparent election fraud, and called for reports of apparent election fraud and sabotaging via a dedicated site.⁶⁷ Coordination was very much driven from Swedish sources.

Alt-right YouTube influencers in Sweden primed the ground for claims of election fraud. The Angry Foreigner (real name En Arg Blatte Talar) is a Bosnian–Swedish YouTuber who vlogs about social issues in Sweden, in a mixture of English

and Swedish. His videos align with the narrative perpetuated by the international far-right, and he has featured as a guest on Paul Joseph Watson's YouTube channel. On 24 August he released a Swedish-language video on YouTube promoting a conspiracy theory about potential election fraud in the upcoming Swedish election.⁶⁸ Viewers were provided with a number of examples of fraud that might occur in the September election, as well as tips for how they could help to prevent fraud against SD on election day.

We analysed the use of the terms 'valfusk', 'valfusk2018', '#valfusk' and '#valfusk2018' by public Facebook pages and public groups and by users on Twitter to identify any international coordination of this campaign. The following findings corroborate the argument that the campaign was led by Swedish actors, before being picked up by the international far-right:

- On Twitter, use of the various terms peaked on 10 September, with 13,558 posts on that day alone. In total, the different variations on terms were used just over 42,000 times on Twitter from 2 to 28 September inclusive.
- Variations of these terms were only used consistently on Twitter between 8 and 16 September, but there were over 2,000 posts using them from 2 September until election day, suggesting that there was a coordinated attempt to seed the terminology of election fraud even before the results were known.
- Accounts that had previously been identified as suspicious, potentially automated accounts dedicated to the promotion of AfS in the run-up to the election were then prominent in promoting the terms about election fraud on Twitter and appear in the top ten accounts using the terms. This list includes the account described above that was previously active in the US and French elections, which used the 'valfusk' terms 185 times in the period under study. This is the one example of a likely international account involved in promoting the election fraud campaign in Sweden itself.
- The domains most frequently linked to by accounts on Twitter when using the hashtag or terms about election fraud show a mixture of traditional media such as svt.se (linked to 1,306

times) and far-right news sites and blogs, including KaterinaMagasin.se (linked to 1,219 times) and nyadagbladet.se (linked to 1,025 times). This is a further demonstration of the far-right's tactic of using legitimately reported events as a basis for making biased, sensationalised or falsified claims, using established media outlets' reporting about election-related discrepancies or mistakes as part of their narrative of uncovering broader, coordinated 'fraud'. However, the list of domains did not prominently include international far-right sites, which supports the idea that Swedish content and movements were driving the campaign online.

- One domain of interest is democracyvolunteers.org, which was linked to 512 times in this dataset. Democracy Volunteers is a London-based election monitoring charity that sent volunteers to monitor the Swedish election. Their report characterised the election as 'generally well run'. However, it states that the organisation witnessed or was informed of family voting in 46% of the polling stations. Democracy Volunteers' report, which largely supports the Swedish election system as credible and well managed, was jumped on as a source for the 'valfusk' narrative, because of its discussion of family voting.⁶⁹ However, this is an example of Swedish activists exploiting a foreign source for their own agenda, not an example of international influence directed with an agenda at the Swedish audience.

The far-right follow-up: international amplification of the campaign outside Sweden

International networks were heavily involved in spreading the idea of there having been a fraudulent election in Sweden. However, these claims were not directed at Swedish audiences, but instead directed at English, German, Danish and Russian audiences. In some cases, Swedish media recycled this international content to support their existing narrative of election fraud, but the main thrust of the international effort was directed at undermining Sweden's credibility to outside audiences.

Far-right actors picked up the election fraud narrative and promoted it on YouTube, Gab, VK and other hubs of international far-right mobilisation. Far-right news outlets also promoted the story in the wake of the election, but did so on channels directed at non-Swedish audiences.

YouTube

On 11 September 2018, Angry Foreigner shared a blog post 'Was there election fraud in Sweden?' and a video in which he is interviewed by prominent YouTuber and conspiracy theorist Paul Joseph Watson.⁷⁰ A few days before the election, Watson had himself penned a piece for InfoWars, which labelled the Swedish election the 'most important election in years',⁷¹ accusing YouTube of election meddling for 'deleting right-wing contents'.⁷² Angry Foreigner also admits that he started sharing the hashtag #valfusk2018, which means #electionfraud2018, before the election, claiming that it was already trending the day after the election.

A Swede Speaks, a full-time English-language YouTuber with 5,000 subscribers, released a video entitled 'Was there election fraud in Sweden?' a few days after the election.⁷³ His complaints about the flawed Swedish election system were based on a mixture of founded and unfounded statements and soon shared across the subreddit r/Sweden.⁷⁴

Far-right media sites

Breitbart shared pieces about 'election fraud', including on the investigation of bribery allegations around a mosque in Botkyrka.⁷⁵ *Voice of Europe* released an article that claimed that the 'results are suspicious', as 'Sweden's election had no control mechanism to prevent voter fraud'.⁷⁶ The piece suggested that the Swedish political mainstream was complicit in the 'election fraud'. The German language blog *Journalistenwatch.com*, which is known for its anti-establishment, anti-immigration and anti-mainstream-media pieces, ran the headline 'Election fraud uncovered: Sweden Democrats receive one additional mandate'.⁷⁷

Gab, Minds and VK

Users shared links and quotations from news outlets such as *Breitbart* and *Journalistenwatch* about election fraud on Gab and VK. Accounts connected explicitly to the Nordic Resistance Movement were particularly proactive in sharing posts related to election fraud on VK, Gab and Minds.⁷⁸

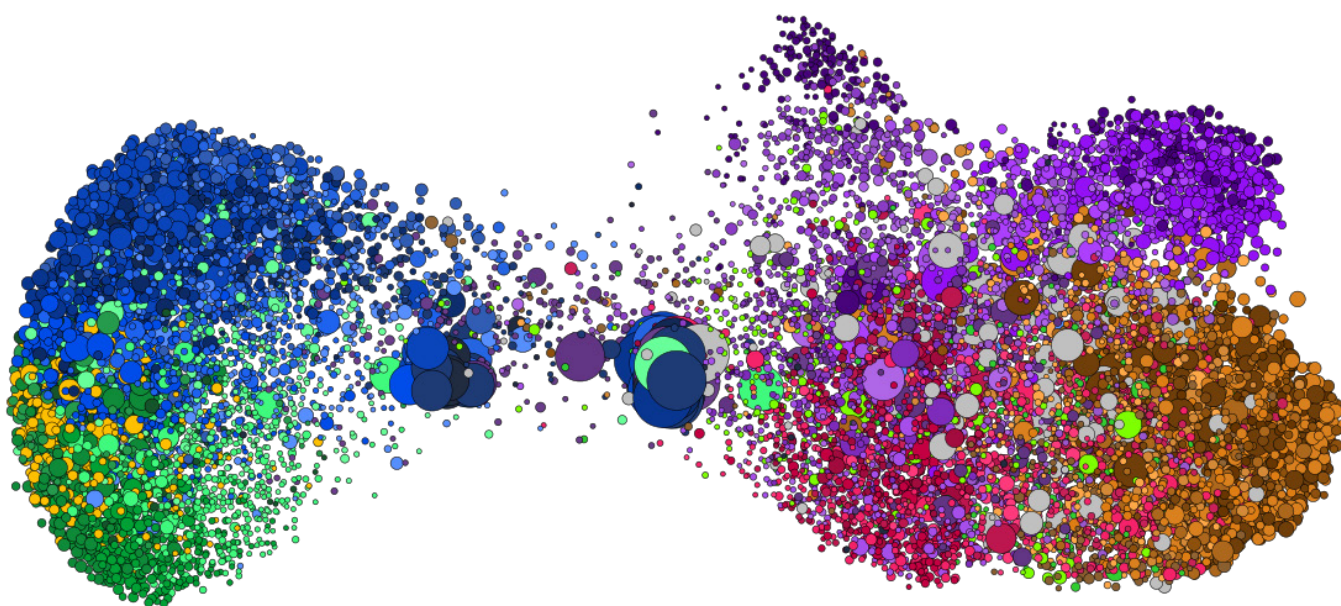
The relatively isolated Swedish far-right

The Swedish far-right is isolated from the European and US far-right and alt-right on major and fringe online platforms, with a distinct far-right media ecosystem that disseminates 'junk news' stories about the political establishment, migration, criminality and foreign policy but is only very loosely connected with international media outlets.

The domestic far-right in Sweden is remarkably isolated in its relationships with equivalent European and American movements on Twitter. This supports the analysis of fringe platforms like 4chan and Discord noted above, which demonstrated the minimal operational coordination between Swedish far-right activists and broader international actors. The structure differs from other European networks studied on Twitter and fringe networks, where German, French, UK and US groups mingle on major and fringe internet platforms.

On 4chan, we saw how Danish accounts may have been most active in trying to build connections between international far-right activists and Sweden during the election period. Analysing the shape of the Twitter network of the Swedish far-right reveals the importance of broader Nordic communities in connecting Swedish far-right groups with the international far-right community online. It is these groups, not western European or American networks, that connect the Swedish online far-right community with potential international allies. As we argue in the recommendations in the next chapter, these Nordic networks could be the point of entry for international actors wishing to intervene in the Swedish far-right information space online.

Figure 7 shows that while the Swedish 'clusters' sit almost exclusively on the left-hand side of the map, and the international far-right group on the right-hand side, the nodes in the middle are those that have follower relationships with both Swedish accounts and international far-right accounts. These central accounts are largely from the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) and white identity clusters in the map (Figure 8). This shows that they are the only clusters with significant network links to both the Swedish group and the international group on Twitter in this network.

Figure 7 Network map of the Swedish far-right and connected accounts using public data from Twitter⁷⁹

	Group/segment name	Fraction of Map	Members	Power
■	SV Right-Wing	20%	2.83k	5
■	US Right-Wing	15%	2.09k	4
■	SV Culture & Media	12%	1.67k	5
■	SV Traditional Political Parties	2%	292	5
■	INT Right-Wing	25%	3.54k	5
■	INT Pro-Russia/Pro-Kremlin	2%	291	4
■	US Trump Support	21%	2.87k	5

We used the Swedish far-right Twitter network map to analyse the media consumption of international accounts linked to the Swedish network on Twitter. We analysed the 100 most-shared media URLs in the 'international right wing' and 'international pro-Russia | pro-Kremlin' groups in the map between 4 August and 4 September.

The international cluster most interested in news about Sweden is the cluster labelled 'Nordic / International Conservatives | alt right', which includes many Nordic alt-right accounts. The 'INT neo-Nazi | white supremacy' and 'INT white identity | white supremacy' clusters also show comparatively high interest in media relating to Sweden, which ties in with the international smear campaign discussed above.

Through monitoring the Swedish information ecosystem for potential international influence campaigns, we gathered a lot of data on the use of different media outlets to share content about the election in Sweden. This revealed that, in line with similar developments in countries like Germany and the US, Sweden has developed a relatively isolated far-right media ecosystem, with its own news sites, chat forums and video channels. Content shared about the election in Sweden relied heavily on Swedish news magazines and media outlets, not on international news sources. This supports the idea of there being a segregated far-right ecosystem in Sweden – one relatively disconnected from potential international allies in the US and Europe.

Central to the new far-right information network online in Sweden are outlets such as *Nyheter Idag*, *Samhällsnytt* and *Fria Tider*. *Nyheter Idag* is an online magazine popular among Sweden Democrat supporters and conservatives in Sweden. Run by Chang Frick, a Sweden Democrat turned libertarian who also works for *RT*, the magazine had connections in its early days to Kent Ekeröth, infamous former SD member, as well as Jeppe Juhl, founder of Denmark's infamous disinformation blog *NewSpeak*.⁸¹ The company behind the magazine is owned by Ilan Sade, party leader of right-wing party *Medborgerlig Samling*.

Samhällsnytt is an online magazine closely tied to SD, founded and supported by Kent Ekeröth. Previously called *Politiskt Inkorrekt* and *Avpixlat*, it has recently

taken a more neutral name. Egor Putilov writes frequently for the magazine. Putilov is a Russian writer who has been at the centre of continual scandals around his real identity since he moved to Sweden in 2007, with questions raised over his links to criminal Russian businessmen, suspicious name changes and his removal from SD as a security risk.⁸²

One site with more of an international network is *Fria Tider*, an online magazine registered in Estonia that focuses on immigrant 'criminality'. The site is also available in Germany as *freizeiten.net*.

Analysing the Swedish media ecosystem via Twitter links

We analysed tweets that use the Swedish election hashtags #val2018 and #svpol to identify what media was being shared on the election on Twitter (see Appendix 1 for details). There were no international outlets in the top 20 domains linked to Twitter discussions using the election hashtags. Among the 282 unique host domains used in tweets about the election, the most common domain by articles and shares was *Samnytt.se*. In comparison, public broadcaster SVT.se was the third most common domain by number of articles and fourth by number of shares. *Nyheteridag.se* had the highest ratio of shares to articles.

From the classifications run on this content, we saw that the most common themes shared in media linking to the election hashtags were anti-immigration, anti-establishment and anti-Muslim. Anti-immigration was the most common theme by articles as well as shares. Anti-establishment content had the highest shares per article ratio.

Working from the labelling of specific parties mentioned in media content, the SD and the SDP were the parties mentioned most frequently in the dataset, with similar numbers of articles and shares relating to each. Taking into consideration articles which had a clear stance for or against a party, there were more articles and shares for anti-SDP content than any other kind of party agenda, with pro-SD content coming a close second.

The pattern that emerged while classifying the articles shared on Twitter using the election hashtags was that almost all information was based on actual events,

and did not include outright or explicit disinformation. The content was manipulated, quite subtly at times, by media outlets as well as social media users in order to direct events or stories towards a specific agenda and fit them into a set narrative.

Audiences for fringe media in Sweden

The analysis above shows which media outlets shared most prolifically on Twitter in the run-up to the election, all of which are Swedish domestic media outlets. The following analysis helps us to understand

which audiences were consuming different kinds of media and topics. Using the Graphika Twitter map based on the network relationships of the Swedish far-right, we analysed the top media outlets used by different clusters of the Swedish far-right network, as represented by the URLs that they share on Twitter.

First, using the 50 links with the highest shares in each audience cluster between 4 August and 4 September 2018, we calculated the three most frequently shared media outlets in each cluster. All of the outlets used most commonly across the far-

Figure 8 Clusters of accounts linking the Swedish far-right on Twitter with the international far-right on Twitter⁸⁰

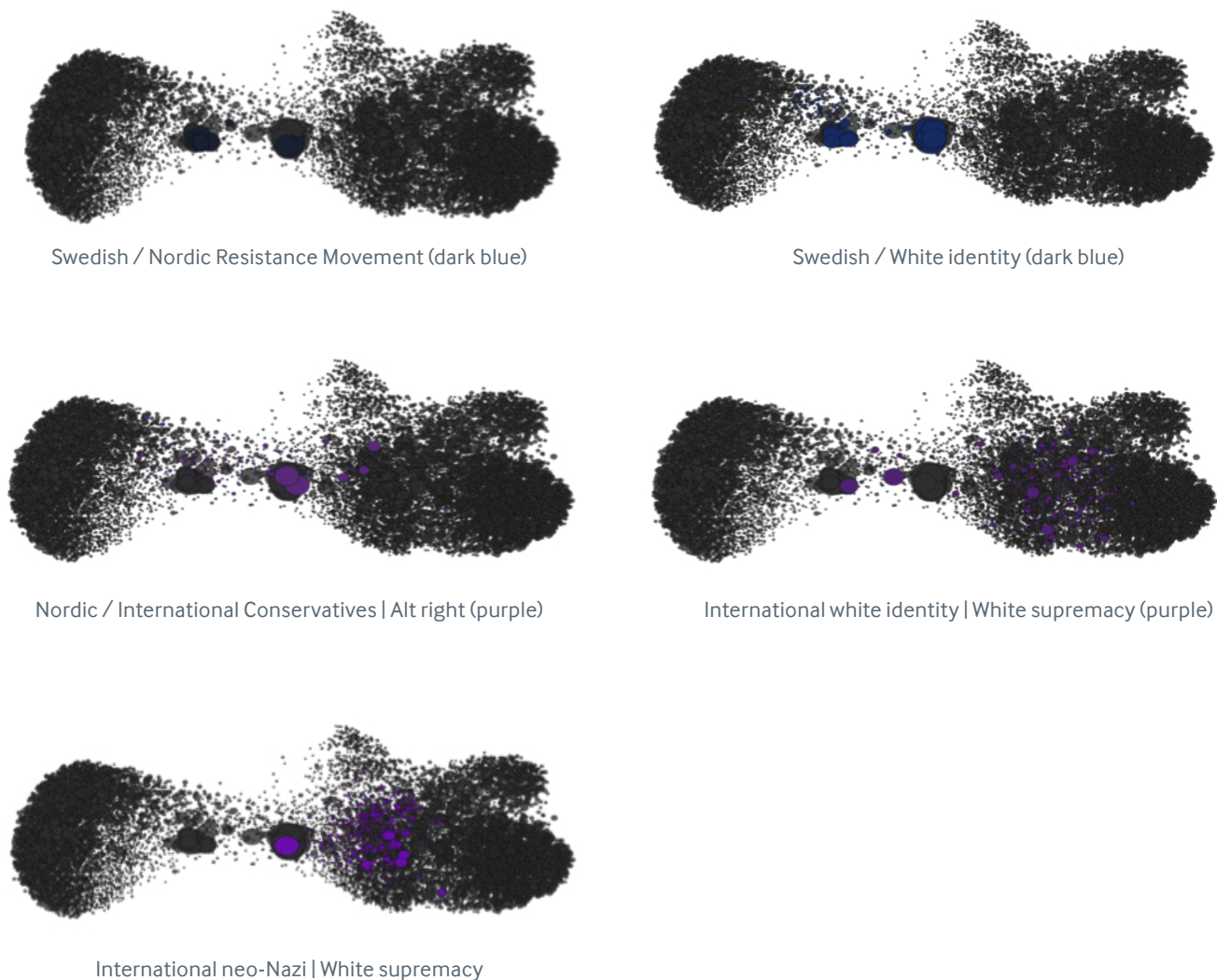
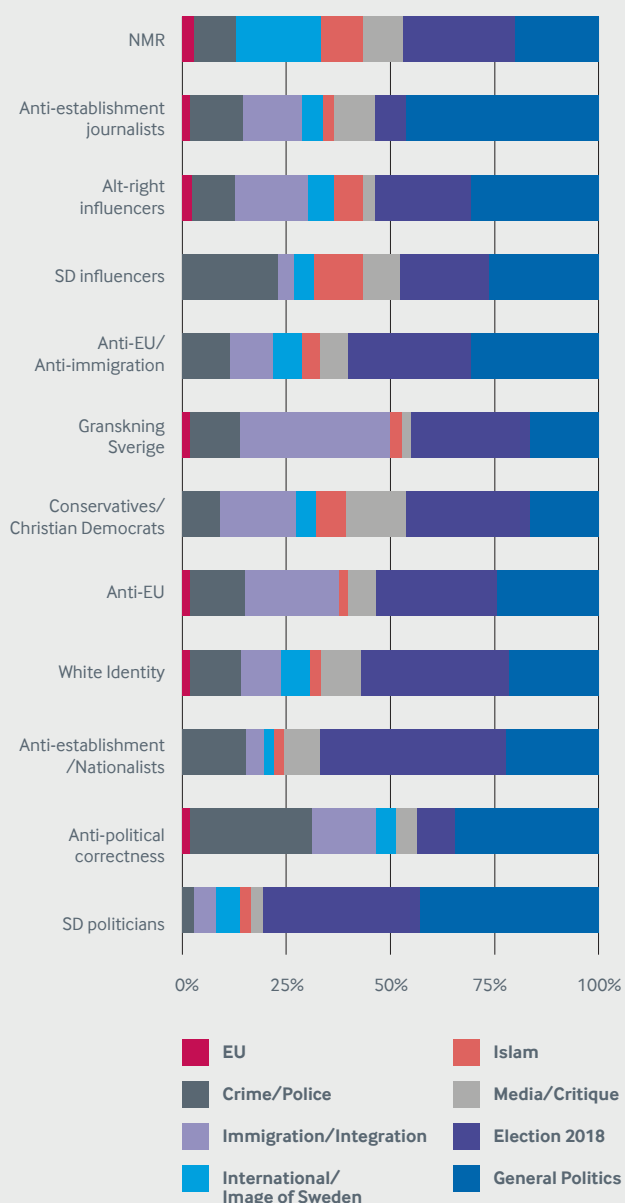


Figure 9 Topical distribution of the 50 most shared media outlets between 4 August and 4 September



right in Sweden are Swedish outlets, even '*Nordfront*', which represented a broader Nordic perspective being consumed in Swedish language (see Table 2).

The 'neo-Nazi' and 'white identity' clusters share content from *Svegot* and *Nordfront*, which are outlets not used prominently by any other cluster in the Swedish far-right. *Nordfront* is the outlet of the neo-Nazi party Nordic Resistance Movement, and *Svegot* is a far-right outlet that was previously connected to Ingrid Carlqvist, now a writer for populist European outlet *Voice of Europe*, and a prominent Swedish far-right figure.⁸³ The media consumption patterns on display here show the reliance on domestic Swedish media outlets from the emerging far-right media milieu, and no real engagement with international media content.

Topical distribution

Finally, we coded the top 50 articles shared in each cluster to understand the different themes of news that each cluster is most interested in (Figure 9). Across all clusters, articles about the election were shared most frequently, and articles about general politics and political parties were also popular. The 'Granskning Sverige' cluster focuses most heavily on issues of immigration, to an extent not seen in any other cluster. Overall, topical distribution does not vary greatly across these elements of the Swedish far-right.

Notably, when delving into the articles themselves, the Nordic Resistance Movement cluster has by some way the largest concentration of foreign language (largely English) articles about Sweden, as well as other far-right content in English, unrelated to Sweden. This tallies neatly with the group's network position, at the centre of the map, sitting between international far-right groups online and the Swedish far-right ecosystem.

New actors on the disinformation and election influence scene

Our research revealed a range of additional actors on the disinformation and election influence scene: Polish state-sponsored media, Danish far-right activists and the Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir, are a few examples.

Russia state-sponsored media and US alt-right activists on 4chan are not the only actors who are trying to

Table 2 Top three shared media outlets per network cluster between 4 August and 4 September 2018

Cluster	NMR	Anti-establishment journalists	Alt-right influencers	SD influencers	Anti-Eu and anti-immigration	Granskning Sverige
Most shared media outlets	<i>Svegot</i>	GP	<i>Nyheter Idag</i>	Expressen	Expressen	<i>Fria Tider</i>
	<i>Fria Tider</i>	Expressen	<i>Samhällsnytt</i>	<i>Samhällsnytt</i>	<i>Samhällsnytt</i>	<i>Samhällsnytt</i>
	N/A	SvD	Ledarsidorna.se	SVT	SVT	<i>Nyheter Idag/Aftonbladet</i>
Cluster	Conservatives Chr.Dem MED	Anti-EU	White identity	Anti-establishment & nationalists	Anti-political correctness	SD politicians
Most shared media outlets	Expressen	Expressen	<i>Svegot</i>	SVT	Expressen	<i>Nyheter Idag</i>
	<i>Samhällsnytt</i>	<i>Samhällsnytt</i>	<i>Fria Tider</i>	Expressen	<i>Nyheter Idag</i>	Expressen
	SVT	SVT	<i>Nordfront</i>	<i>Nyheter Idag</i>	SVT	<i>Fria Tider</i>

spread disinformation and misinformation in order to influence elections. Our research revealed a range of actors intent on malign influence campaigns. As seen above, we identified likely Danish far-right activists attempting to coordinate 'calls to action' for malign influence in the Sweden election. Additionally, we identified a significant amount of content emanating from Polish media, as well as efforts by the Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir to discourage Swedish Muslims from voting, underscoring the dangerous cumulative impact of far-right and Islamist campaigns to further isolate and stigmatise Muslim communities.

Poland and Sweden's war of words

Throughout the monitoring, we observed activity from nationalist and populist media and politicians in Poland, both in Sweden and in English-language media content spread internationally.

Poland Daily is an arm of TV Republika, a private media company supported by advertising and sponsorship from Polish state companies and ministries.⁸⁴ It is an English-language TV and social media channel disseminating a populist line in support of the Polish government and antagonistic to multiculturalism, globalisation and leftist politics. Between 1 July and 1 October 2018, we

collected all the original tweets from @PolandDaily Twitter account, as well as any users' retweets or replies to the @PolandDaily account. We found that 7,091 out of a total 60,477 posts (12%) collected contain the words 'Sweden', 'Swedish' or 'Swedes'. Included in this are stories produced by Poland Daily about Swedish forest fires, car fire attacks and gang violence in Malmo. The outlet also shares far-right, fringe media outlets' coverage that is critical of Sweden and the Swedish government.⁸⁵

Poland Daily is embedded in an online network that includes influential voices in the Swedish smear campaign. Within the audience that engages with (replies, mentions or retweets) @PolandDaily on Twitter, the most commonly followed or mentioned accounts include a swathe of populist and far-right influencers, politicians and parties: @D_Tarczynski, @BasedPoland, @Fundacja_PFN, @realDonaldTrump, @AfD, @matteosalvinimi, @PeterSweden7, @Ojdadana and @Ricottaan. Poland Daily often promotes the content of influencers in the smear campaign against Sweden, for example sharing a link to *Voice of Europe's* coverage of the Sweden car fires, which received the second-highest engagement of any URL that @PolandDaily shared on Twitter during this period. The URL with the highest number of shares was also about Sweden.

TV Republika, the Polish language company within which Poland Daily sits, has also actively participated in the smear campaign against Sweden. Its Twitter account, @RepublikaTV, tweeted about 'Szwecja' (Sweden) eight times between July and mid-September 2018.⁸⁶ While not as prolific as its English-language counterpart, these tweets were equally, if not more, aggressive in their condemnation of the Swedish establishment and negative in their presentation of the country as a whole. Translated examples include: 'If Sweden does not wake up, it will be the first fully Islamised country in Europe' and 'How will Sweden deal with the effects of the "open door" policy? Individual groups create ghettos, they do not assimilate.'⁸⁷ The accounts that are most active in promoting TV Republika's content about Sweden on Twitter include bots that mix in the same network as known smear campaign promoters such as @SaveMySweden.

The English-language far-right outlet *Voice of Europe* has been a prominent purveyor of heavily biased and sensationalist media about Sweden throughout the election period. In keeping with this trend, the outlet promoted an interview given by Polish MP Dominik Tarczyński to far-right newspaper *Nyheter Idag* in Sweden, in which he calls for Sweden's 'vikings' to act in the current 'war of civilisations': 'Det är ett civilisationernas krig'. He calls for a change of government at the election and, in an English-language video section, calls on 'Swedish Vikings' to show their 'strength' and pride in a context of 'riots' by 'illegal immigrants'. Tarczyński also spoke out against the Swedish government at the time of the forest fires, which was also covered in *Nyheter Idag*.⁸⁸

Smear campaign in action: Gothenburg car fires

On the evening of 13 August 2018, 89 cars were either burnt out or damaged in what appeared to be coordinated attacks by masked individuals in and around Gothenburg. The police deemed it unlikely that the same individuals had started all the attacks,⁸⁹ which happened in different locations, but nevertheless believed there could have been some coordination via social media.⁹⁰ A few individuals were later arrested, one of them on the Turkish border. It was reported that most of the culprits had been known by the police before the incidents.

Clips of the happenings, largely filmed by local residents, received large circulation online. Soon after the news broke in Sweden, a clip by a Swedish Twitter user was shared by British far-right commentator Katie Hopkins with a caption stating that 'migrants' were 'busy torching cars', even though no evidence had been released about the suspects at the time.⁹¹ An English-language article from smear campaign site SaveMySweden insinuated that the situation in Trollhättan was happening in Gothenburg, and further stated that 'law and order broke down' on the evening of the attacks.⁹² An article from *Breitbart* noted that 100 cars had been burnt in Swedish 'no-go zones',⁹³ even though 'no-go zones' do not exist in Swedish legal or policing designations and have been explicitly rejected as terms by the police in Sweden.⁹⁴ Mixed-language bots were involved in re-tweeting the international far-right's coverage of the car fires, including accounts such as @AegisBridge, which posts in German, Italian and Swedish and promotes far-right, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim content in each.⁹⁵

The unsubstantiated speculation about the culprits before any evidence was released is a classic example of the international far-right's sensationalism in relating Swedish news. The story about car arson attacks was more of a peak in international conversations about Sweden than the election. In the international network map covering the Swedish smear campaign, the use of hashtags for the word 'Sweden' in English, German, Dutch and French peaked around 14 August; these hashtags were used much less around 9 September. This substantiates the argument that the smear campaign is a distinct phenomenon, unconcerned with interference in Swedish domestic politics.

Hizb ut-Tahrir: the risk of cumulative impact

Hizb ut-Tahrir is an international Islamist group that advocates for the creation of an Islamic Caliphate. Banned in many countries in the Middle East, as well as in Germany, Hizb ut-Tahrir has active chapters in Scandinavian countries including Denmark and Sweden.

During the course of our monitoring for malign influence campaigns against the election, researchers observed the Swedish wing of Hizb ut-Tahrir using Facebook videos to try to dissuade Muslims in Sweden from voting in the election. The video in question has

over 10,000 views on Facebook but was not shared widely on Facebook or Twitter, with the only public Facebook pages or Twitter accounts re-posting the video doing so in a critical manner, and only 73 individual users on Facebook sharing the video.

Facebook was also used to promote offline events, where Hizb ut-Tahrir's anti-democratic ideology could be promoted to Swedish audiences. Hizb ut-Tahrir has strong networks in other areas of Scandinavia, notably Denmark, where similar anti-democratic campaigns have been launched.⁹⁶

The potential impact of anti-voting campaigns from Islamist groups, alongside far-right anti-migrant propaganda efforts, to further isolate Muslim communities socially and politically cannot be ignored.

4 Recommendations

Our monitoring has shown how a range of actors, including Norwegian, Danish and sometimes Polish right-nationalist and far-right groups, are working together with Swedish far-right actors to coordinate and pursue malign influence campaigns that present Sweden as the paradigmatic example of multi-culturalism gone wrong. We have seen English and American alt-right actors discuss, share and amplify such campaigns, and even if they did not execute them this election cycle there is a reasonable chance they will in the future.

The reasons for the lack of international coordination efforts seen on the scale of previous elections in France, US, Germany and Italy are unclear. First and foremost it is important to recognise the limited capacity of international groups to embark on campaigns in Swedish. Moreover, while Sweden is a prominent figure in the conversation topics of the international far-right, it may still remain a relatively unknown political environment for most outside Scandinavia, and interest in or understanding of the Swedish political systems and its election audience is still relatively limited. We also observed some infighting within far-right milieus between supporters of SD and Afs, which could have affected the ability to galvanise action with a coherent strategy. In a more pessimistic reading, the apparently organic momentum and high polling estimates for the Swedish far-right may have reduced the sense of urgency for international far-right groups to launch campaigns to support them from outside.

Nonetheless, our research uncovered a number of worrying trends – including the existence of a relatively isolated far-right media ecosystem actively disseminating false and sensationalised ‘junk news’ that is highly xenophobic. This machinery will no doubt continue to operate unceasingly, spreading stories and content that support a strongly anti-migrant and anti-establishment far-right agenda. While often covert and deceptive, these malign influence campaigns are not illegal, nor do they necessarily involve the use of blatant disinformation, often merely presenting real facts in tendentious ways, or amplifying political messages with similar techniques to those used by marketing companies. Tackling these challenges requires new approaches to public diplomacy, civil society mobilisation and digital citizenship education.

Public diplomacy for the 21st century

Our research shows there has been a consistent and wide-ranging effort to smear Sweden internationally, with hostile state actors and a wide variety of US and European alt-right media activists accusing the country of being on the edge of civil war, submerged by migrant crime. This campaign is amplified by mainstream figures, including the US president. It exists largely in a separate information space from domestic Swedish debates, and its peaks can be unrelated to major political events in Sweden. Essentially there is an alternative reality image of Sweden 2, which exists as a symbolic punching bag for right-nationalist causes across the world, and from which Swedish voices pushing back are absent.

This alternative image of Sweden can ultimately negatively influence the real Sweden by making investment or tourism into the country less attractive, or by undermining the international causes Sweden promotes such as gender and minority rights. Other effects might be more subtle; for example this alternative image of Sweden might initiate a general shift away from Sweden’s benign international reputation. By allowing itself to become the object of others’ narratives, without having a voice in this discussion, Sweden is no longer in control of how it is perceived.

This calls for an updating of Sweden’s public diplomacy international communication strategies.

To start off this will require consistent network mapping and monitoring of the smear campaign against Sweden, in order to identify how the campaign travels, which target audiences it is reaching, and when the campaign spills into more mainstream perceptions. Then it could involve identifying ways to tailor messages to specific audiences, and to communicate accurate information where misinformation is rife. It will be necessary to find relevant communicators who can engage diverse audiences over social media, initiating more evidence-based conversation about the country. Whichever strategy is adopted, Sweden has to become involved in the conversations about itself or risk becoming a passive bystander to the attacks on its reputation.

Perhaps migration, the very topic on which attacks on Sweden focus, could be turned into a subject where Sweden leads the discussion internationally, initiating

an international conversation on the subject, which doesn't sweep the challenges under the carpet, but approaches them in a fair and balanced way and pioneers solutions that will be relevant not just to Sweden but across Europe.

Promote pan-Scandinavian civil society networks to monitor, expose, anticipate and counter regional malign influence campaigns

While agencies such as the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap; MSB) have a role to play in monitoring and raising public awareness around international malign influence campaigns, there are obvious limits to which they should involve themselves in political debate.

“ Competition with
malign actors needs
to come from a
new generation ”

Mainstream media has a role to play in exposing such campaigns, but does not have the dedicated resources to follow such slow stories. Moreover media often reports these issues in sensationalist ways, which can inadvertently strengthen malign influence campaigns eager to gain attention. Finally, mainstream media is unlikely to reach the often marginal audiences most vulnerable to campaigns.

Ultimately competition with malign actors needs to come from a new generation of coordinated civil society groups, who have the skills to monitor campaigns, anticipate and expose them in a strategic manner, and where necessary disrupt and launch counter-messaging. Such civil society groups need to coordinate with each other across borders, share research, and have the capacity and skills to use digital research tools and a thorough understanding of target audiences. They also need to be able to work with tech companies, government and media.

Some initial initiatives, including ISD and Facebook's Online Civil Courage Initiative (OCCI), can serve as pioneering models.

The OCCI is a partnership between ISD and Facebook to combine technology, communications, marketing and academic expertise to upskill and upscale the civic response to online hate and extremism. The project combines five modules to mount a cross-sector and agile response to online hate campaigns:

1. **Research:** OCCI insight reports equip non-governmental organisation (NGO) partners with in-depth, data-driven insights into the fast evolving landscape of extremist propaganda, narratives and networks so they have the knowledge needed to develop effective campaigns.
2. **Ad grants:** OCCI in-kind advertising grants support NGOs conducting counter-speech campaigns in Germany, France and the UK. Grants are accompanied by guidance on the design, delivery and evaluation of the campaigns, increasing their potential impact.
3. **The OCCI community:** the OCCI community provides a secure and collaborative online space for organisations and activists to share their campaigns, experiences, advice and challenges with like-minded and similarly inspirational people.
4. **Training:** OCCI counter-speech labs and conferences help NGOs understand, design and deliver effective counter-speech campaigns. They bring together non-profit practitioners and activists, researchers, content creators and marketing experts or policy makers, to bridge sectorial gaps and upskill the potential of counter-speech campaigners.
5. **Support:** OCCI help desk staff connect practitioners with experts able to answer questions and provide guidance on how to develop, manage and measure effective counter-speech.

It is worth noting that there are plans afoot among donors to provide funding and training on ethics, legal issues and skills to a network of existing European NGOs whose staff already work to counteract hostile state digital media campaigns. The plan is to coordinate their research and action, give them access to digital research tools and install a grants mechanism to further their work.

Sweden and its regional partners need to pioneer a similar process in Scandinavia, and then connect to pan-European efforts. Ultimately it needs to be part of a web of civil society actors uniting anti-corruption, counter-radicalisation and counter-disinformation initiatives.

Integrate 'digital citizenship' into the Swedish national curriculum

The Oxford Internet Institute found that Sweden had the highest consumption levels of 'junk news' compared with the UK, France and Germany. The overwhelming majority of these sources share false or highly sensationalised stories about migrants, crime and 'establishment' politicians. To counter the potential malicious effect of disinformation and 'junk news' on Swedish society, digital citizenship education must be prioritised.

Hate speech, disinformation and extremism online have evolved rapidly over a short space of time, in part due to the new tools that technology provides to amplify and target content in new and scaled ways. In order to build resilience among young people growing up in a world of increasing technological sophistication, governments and technology companies should support the development of programmes that teach safeguarding online and promote understanding of the increasingly broad spectrum of harms and risks that young people are exposed to online.

In March 2017, the Swedish government approved reforms to the national curriculum with the aim of strengthening 'pupils' digital competency'.⁹⁷ The national curriculum now states that schools have a responsibility to 'contribute to pupils developing an understanding for how digitalisation affects the individual and society's development' and that pupils 'shall be given the possibility to develop a critical and responsible approach to digital technology, in order to be able to see possibilities and understand risks, as well as to be able to rate information'.⁹⁸

However, while the curriculum mentions critical thinking with regards to sources, no dedicated subject has been created for the broader set of knowledge and skills which have been referred to as digital citizenship or digital resilience. This includes traditional critical thinking skills – questioning authorial bias, triangulating data sources, and using information

selectively – alongside more specific knowledge about how the internet works and how online content can be manipulated. Topics include identifying fake news, learning about the impact of algorithms in creating echo chambers and what filter bubbles are, and finding out what to do if you encounter hate speech or extremist content online.

The necessity to incorporate digital citizenship education into formal education in Sweden is amplified by the proportion of Swedish youth who are active on social media or information-sharing platforms: the report *Swedes and the Internet 2017* claims that most youth under age 25 use YouTube daily, for example.⁹⁹ The report further states that most children in Sweden use the internet to search for information by the age of eight – children can therefore be exposed to a world of information and misinformation without systems in place to teach them how to differentiate between the two.

While safeguarding education is important to help protect young people from exposure to malicious uses of technology platforms, education projects in this domain should consider engaging youth in a more positive conversation about their internet behaviour and communities. Given how embedded the internet and technology platforms are in the lives of many young people, programmes should promote positive and proactive digital citizenship among young people. Helping the next generation to understand the ways in which they can contribute to building an internet that meets the values of decency, security and openness discussed above is of vital importance if we are to preserve the internet as a force for freedom and connectivity long into the future.

ISD runs a series of digital citizenship and resilience programmes, including our digital resilience curriculum in technical colleges in the Netherlands, the Young Digital Leaders initiative with students and parents in Sweden, Italy and Romania, and our programmes *Be Internet Citizens* with YouTube for teenage young people and *Be Internet Legends* for younger age groups. Curriculum outlines for these programmes and early evaluation studies are available at www.isdglobal.org.

Estonia provides a good example of a country that has been successful in introducing digital citizenship into its national curriculum. The Republic of Estonia's Ministry of Education and Research has incorporated a digital component in its Lifelong Learning Strategy

2020, in which education curricula will continue to include lessons on digital competence. While this primarily addresses practical and efficient use of digital technology and the internet, the definition of digital competence employed by the Ministry suggests that online citizenship is another component of this education strategy: 'Digital competence means readiness to use digital technology to cope in a rapidly changing knowledge-based society when working, studying, acting and communicating as a citizen.'¹⁰⁰

Similarly, the national curriculum for upper secondary schools contains language that reflects the core goals of digital citizenship and resilience – in its section on cross-curricular topics, the curriculum addresses the 'information environment' as a subject under this, and defines its aim as developing students into 'information-conscious' individuals who are aware of their 'surrounding information environment' and are taught the ability to approach this critically with the aims of their 'society's communication ethics' in mind.¹⁰¹

While the education system should inevitably play a central role in this area, there is an additional need for broader campaigns and awareness-raising activities to ensure older generations outside formal education are not ignored. One example of such an approach is the French NGO Renaissance Numérique's tool Seriously, a user-friendly online resource which fact-checks, contextualises and provides a list of 'dos and don'ts' for recognising misinformation and responding to hate speech.¹⁰² The circulation and marketing of fact-checking tools is important to ensure all age groups are aware of potential online harms and how to mitigate risks in the digital world. Further to this, Estonia's forward-thinking approach, for example, of adding digital culture into its Lifelong Learning Strategy and accommodating the digital needs of older generations, has received international commendation and encouraged other governments to view the country's strategy as a model for facilitating egalitarian, productive and inclusive education.¹⁰³

Increase understanding of alienated audiences and the impact of 'junk news'

As recommended in ISD and LSE's previous report on the German context, mainstream media in Sweden need to develop a better understanding of how to deliver

accurate information to alienated individuals online. This can be achieved through providing academic experts and civil society organisations with more resources to undertake research projects that analyse the cognitive and narrative patterns in heavily partisan echo chambers. For example, a project organised by LSE Arena is working with Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* and data scientists to analyse different ways to cover the issue of immigration with a view to reducing polarisation, seeing what sort of genres help engage a wide-range of audiences and foster an evidence-based, constructive discourse. Further research is also needed to explore the impact of highly sensationalised and biased media on the opinion formation of individuals. One approach to doing this could be to conduct research with individuals who previously believed in a range of conspiracy theories, but who then developed a more critical and discerning view towards engaging with online content. Additional factors should be explored to consider audiences and communities that may be more susceptible to highly biased and sensationalised media, including age, education and geographical location (for example those living in ethnically homogenous or heterogeneous areas). This can help to target both online and offline interventions that aim to mitigate the impact of biased and sensationalist media.

Collaborate with the advertising sector to reduce financial incentives for disinformation

Sensationalism is good for business: there are often financial incentives for media outlets to spread more and more conspiratorial and sensationalist content. Media outlets in Sweden should work with advertising brands and advertising analytics companies to help to demonetise disinformation sites. One example of such an initiative is the Open Brand Safety Initiative launched by the brand analytics company Moat, social media intelligence agency Storyful and the City University of New York (CUNY) School of Journalism in May 2017. The aim of the project is to create a database of websites that consistently circulates disinformation, highly biased and sensationalised content in order to help advertisers and companies make better decisions about where they want their advertising to appear. CUNY Professor Jeff Jarvis, who leads the Open Brand Safety Initiative, outlined in his Medium blog how this work builds on a range of similar new initiatives from consumers,

including Sleeping Giants and #grabyourwallet, as well as announcements by social media companies to focus their algorithms on 'quality' and 'authority'.¹⁰⁴ While these initiatives are only just beginning, and there remains a long way to go in making progress, they are nonetheless very positive developments that relevant Swedish partners should investigate.

Companies should provide greater transparency for products and policies and more data

Current policies and discussions focus on content, and are often less likely to consider the means and methods by which content is served to audiences online. The impact of specific platform products and algorithms should be considered when developing policy responses to hate and extremism online. Malicious organisations are already using emerging technologies to find new ways to recruit and instil fear, including inorganic amplification and targeting capabilities provided by some social media products. While companies have already provided more transparency on enforcing their content removal policies, they should consider also making elements of product design and algorithmic accountability more transparent, in addition to the methods and tactics of how malign influencers are using products and platforms. This could help to mitigate the potential misuse of existing and emerging technologies for hateful and malign purposes. Similarly, companies need to continue to provide more data on disinformation operations. Both Facebook and more recently Twitter have taken steps to make data available to researchers. In the week this report went to print, Twitter released the complete archives of tweets, accounts and media that they have identified as connected to state-backed operations on their platform. The database includes over 3,800 accounts affiliated with Russia's Internet Research Agency and 770 accounts that they believe have potentially originated in Iran. By making this database open to researchers and academics globally, Twitter has greatly contributed to furthering our understanding of how their platform is used to generate malign influence online.

5 Appendix: Research method

Research stream 1: Information campaigns targeting the Swedish election

Social media analysis

ISD uses a combination of off-the-shelf and purpose-built social listening tools to monitor trends in narratives, media consumption and potential coordinated or inorganic online activity using public social media data. For this project, we used social listening tools Crimson Hexagon and CrowdTangle.¹⁰⁵ Identifying and understanding information flows and disinformation campaigns is not a precise art: it requires a mixture of close, iterative monitoring, data science and, at all stages, expert subject matter insights. Social media listening tools were used to monitor known topics of interest to far-right and pro-Kremlin groups, such as immigration, integration, NATO and 'Swexit'. When potential opportunities for information campaigns emerged, such as the forest fires or car arson attacks, ISD established monitors to collect relevant information flows to analyse the data for examples of disinformation or coordinated media manipulation. We also tracked election hashtags, political party social media accounts and those of key election candidates to identify any suspicious activity.

Twitter media URL analysis

In addition to consistent monitoring of social media, ISD collected public tweets that used the election hashtags and keywords '#svpol', 'svpol', '#val2018' or 'val2018' between 9 July and 23 September 2018. In order to understand the media ecosystem relied on for political debate on Twitter around the election, we classified every URL that was shared 30 times or more.

“ Far-right groups have established and exploited a selection of alternative platforms and messaging applications ”

The classifications included categories for 'theme' and mentions of a specific political party, along with whether the article portrayed a positive or negative stance towards that party.

The thematic classifications were decided on before the labelling process began, according to topics considered to be potential targets for purveyors of dis- or misinformation in Sweden and beyond.¹⁰⁶ These were: anti-immigrant, anti-establishment, anti-Muslim, anti-EU, anti-NATO and Other. The information quality classifications are: disinformation, misinformation, biased, sensationalist, opinion and unbiased. These are defined as follows:

Disinformation: content with intent to deceive

Misinformation: accidental sharing of disinformation

Biased: reportage (represented as true) which isn't representative that attempts to legitimise alternative narratives; this may include:

- Sensationalism, e.g hyperbole to justify alternative narrative
- Emotionalism, playing to emotions to personalise issues
- Misrepresentation, co-opting mainstream news or people to legitimise alternative narratives

Opinion: articles which are not necessarily represented as true or factual but as personally held opinions

Unbiased: journalism that abides by traditional practices of fact-checking and unbiased presentation of facts.

We also earmarked the media outlets, topics and party-relevant content that was shared by highly active Twitter accounts. These were defined as accounts that have an average tweet per day ratio of 50 or more.¹⁰⁷ This process was used to ascertain the kinds of media and subject matter that are most likely to be amplified by 'highly active accounts' on Twitter, which likely include some cyborgs and bots.

Monitoring fringe platforms

International far-right groups have established and exploited a selection of alternative platforms and messaging applications in attempts to avoid the content removal policies of large social media platforms. This has enabled them to foster an online ecosystem in

which sympathisers are able to network closely and openly with like-minded individuals. Forums like 8chan and messaging apps like Gab.ai provide platforms for the far-right's racist and hateful messaging. Sites originally set up for alternative purposes have been exploited by the far-right for similar purposes, such as gamer chat platform Discord.

ISD's research team monitored known and new channels on these sites to identify any coordination targeted at the Swedish election by international groups or users. Relevant data from 4chan was coded by topic to help us understand shifts in interest in Sweden and the election among international far-right audiences and conversation specific to interference efforts.

Network mapping

Working with data science company Graphika, ISD built three maps that use public YouTube and Twitter data to understand the potential vectors of influence between international networks and Swedish networks online. Understanding which international online communities were most closely linked into the Swedish far-right online enabled ISD to monitor these interest groups for potential disinformation relating to the election.

The map-building process includes the algorithmic identification of interest groups based on accounts' network relationships and the language of their public content. The maps enable ISD to see the content, websites, terms and hashtags shared most frequently from these communities on Twitter, or the most watched videos on YouTube over time. This can help to track the journey of misinformation across different communities online.¹⁰⁸

Research stream 2: International smear campaign about Sweden

Broadcast and online media analysis – Russian state-sponsored media

Between 16 July and 8 September 2018, MEMO 98, a Slovak non-profit specialist media-monitoring organisation, monitored two Russian state-sponsored media outlets with international audiences, *RT* and *Sputnik*. The monitoring included quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. The main goal was to evaluate how *RT* and *Sputnik* report on the 2018 Swedish election and related topics. The monitoring

focused on information conveyed about Sweden, including the country's political subjects and the context surrounding the elections. *RT*'s websites and *RT* YouTube channels in Russian, English, French and German were monitored for the project, as well as the international, French and German versions of the *Sputnik* website.

“ Forums like 8chan and messaging apps like Gab.ai provide platforms for the far-right ”

Broadcast and online media analysis – the international far-right

Between 20 August and 14 September 2018, ISD worked with Media Diversity Institute to monitor international far-right media narratives about Sweden on three influential YouTube and TV channels. The monitoring focused on any information concerning Sweden, notably its political subjects, as well as the context in which other Sweden-related topics were conveyed ahead of and following the elections. The outcome of the monitoring was detailed weekly for each of the monitored channels. *Red Ice TV*'s YouTube channel, *Breitbart TV*'s YouTube channel and *The Alex Jones Show* on the InfoWars website were monitored before and after the election.¹⁰⁹

Network mapping

As well as mapping the Swedish information ecosystem on Twitter and YouTube, ISD worked with Graphika to map the international network interested in the smear campaign against Sweden. We set out to understand the network that was active in spreading disinformation and smear campaigns about Sweden in English, French and German, and the accounts connected to or interested in that network on Twitter. As the network interested in the campaign was truly international, this map ended up also exposing interested communities from the populist right and far-right in Poland and the Netherlands, among others.

To create the map, we developed a small, manually researched seed list of non-Swedish accounts prolific in posting disinformation or heavily biased content about Sweden, such as Save My Sweden (@SaveMySweden), *Voice of Europe* (@V_of_Europe) and Peter Sweden (@PeterSweden7). This seed list included 16 Twitter handles, 2 hashtags and 2 keywords. Accounts that have follower relationships with the seed accounts listed were then included in the network map, as were those accounts that follow these seed accounts and their followers. This snowball effect built a broad network of accounts exposed to or interested in the smear campaign against Sweden. In addition, to ensure as much relevancy as possible to the Sweden-specific narrative, we included two hashtags and two keywords in the seeding process, to prioritise those accounts that use the terms 'Swedistan' or 'Swexit'.¹¹⁰

Social media analysis

We analysed mentions of Sweden across a range of social media platforms, including: VK, Odnoklassniki.ru, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Bitchute. We used social media listening tools to understand who was dominating the conversation about Sweden on public parts of online platforms and to estimate the location and languages of the audiences for the international smear campaign, by analysing the locations and reactions of those engaged with smear campaign content and influencers. This analysis was conducted alongside manual research conducted on public groups, pages and channels on sites like VK and Odnoklassniki.ru, where the subjects of disinformation about Sweden and the amplifiers of such content were monitored.

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- 107 For the purpose of standardised reporting, these 'highly active accounts' were classified by examining an account's ratio of total number of posts (including retweets) to the number of days the account has existed. If this ratio was greater or equal to 50, the account was classified as highly active at the Twitter platform level.
- 108 It is important to note that these clusters' labels are merely indicative of their members' interests online, and not an affiliation. For example, a cluster labelled 'Alternative for Sweden' does not solely consist of the accounts of AfS members, but includes accounts whose owners are consistently interested in AfS, to the extent it is a defining

feature of their behaviour as identified by an algorithm.

109 *Monitors followed all programmes included on the channels in the timeframes specified but analysed only those stories that mentioned Sweden. For those stories monitoring identified mentions of Sweden, themes discussed relating to Sweden, any Swedish political parties or candidates discussed, and tone of discussion about any of these political parties or candidates.*

110 *The major challenge in identifying this network is the embedded and integral nature of the 'Sweden' narrative within the broader populist, far-right and extreme right worldview. This renders it hard to distinguish general far-right influencers – and their networks – from those particularly interested in the Swedish case. To address this issue we selected an unusually precise and small seed list of accounts, keywords and hashtags to refine the map, excluding some very large media accounts and influencers that are active in the smear campaign, such as RT, Sputnik and Tommy Robinson.*

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