

# Uisce Faoi Thalamh

## An Investigation Into the Online Mis- and Disinformation Ecosystem in Ireland

**Report 3 of 3** Topic analysis

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## About the research

This report is part of Uisce Faoi Thalamh, ISD's investigation into the online mis- and disinformation ecosystem in Ireland and is part of a broader research project that analyses the most prominent actors, topics and online platforms central to this ecosystem.

The research project contains three reports. The first is the Summary Report which includes an introduction, key findings and recommendations arising from the research project, as well as a literature review, glossary and methodology. The second is Platforms which examines how online platforms are used to produce, promote and contribute to the circulation of mis- and disinformation in Ireland. The third is this report, Topics, which presents in-depth narrative analysis of the leading topics of discussions within this mis- and disinformation ecosystem.

## About ISD

ISD is a fiercely independent 'think and action tank' dedicated to safeguarding democracy and reversing the rising global tide of hate, extremism and disinformation in all its forms. We combine 18 years of sector-leading expertise in weaponised hate, disinformation and extremism with state-of-the art digital research methods and bespoke technologies, keeping ISD consistently ahead of the curve in understanding and responding to the fast evolving, hybridised threat landscape, on- and offline. We use the threat intelligence and insights derived from our research to innovate and deliver proven models for action, and to provide agenda-setting evidence and support to policy makers. ISD's cross-harms focus on a range of 'hybridised' online threats, means it has unique insights on the intersection of disinformation, conspiracy movements and extremism.

Since 2020, ISD has researched and analysed extremism, disinformation and hate online in Ireland. This has resulted in the publication of a number of reports and engagement by ISD with civil society organisations, academia and governmental departments. Most recently, in early 2023, ISD was invited by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to be a member of a multi-stakeholder working group to help develop Ireland's National Counter Disinformation Strategy.<sup>1</sup>

## Funding and partners

This project was funded by the European Media and Information Fund through the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The sole responsibility for any content supported by the European Media and Information Fund lies with the author(s) and it may not necessarily reflect the positions of the EMIF and the Fund Partners, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the European University Institute.<sup>2</sup>

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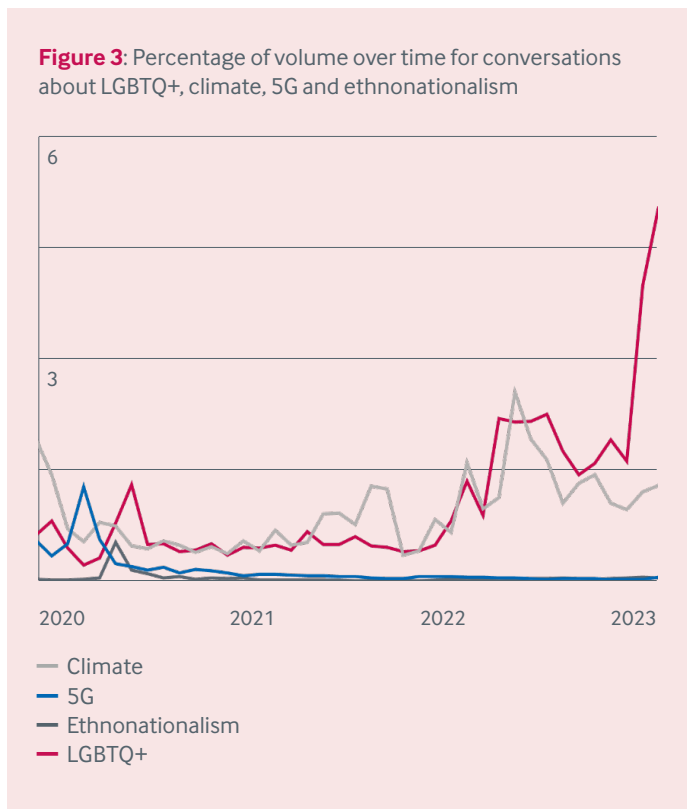
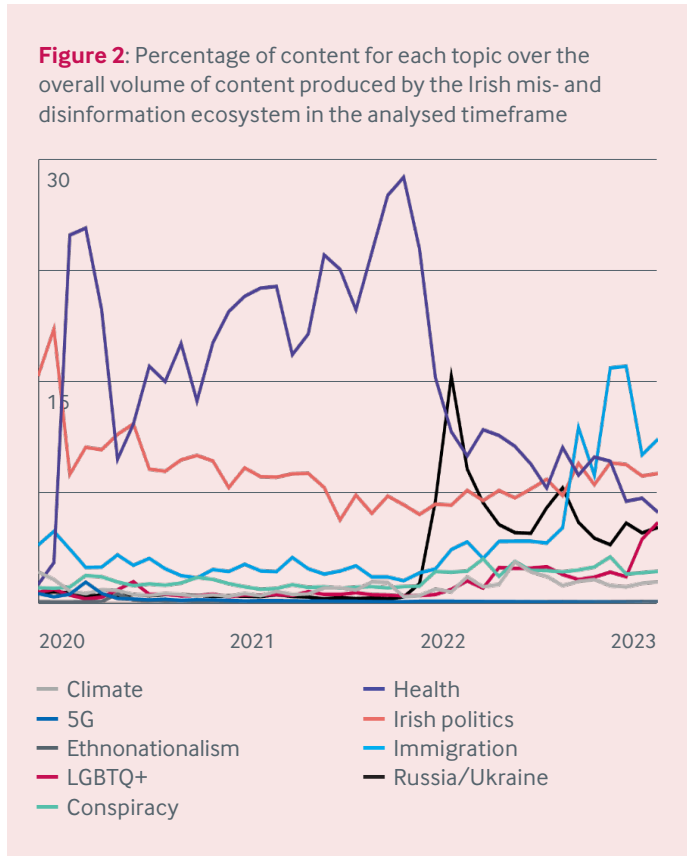
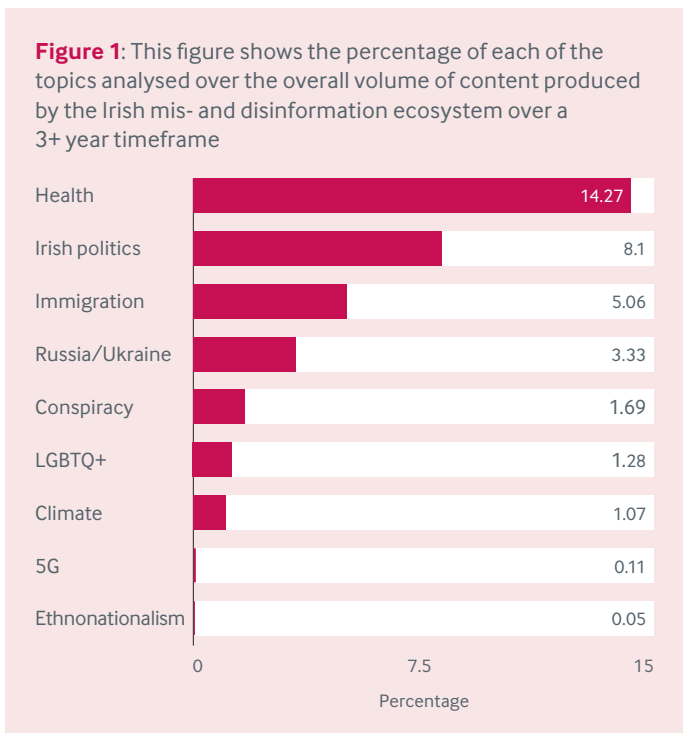
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# Overview of Topics

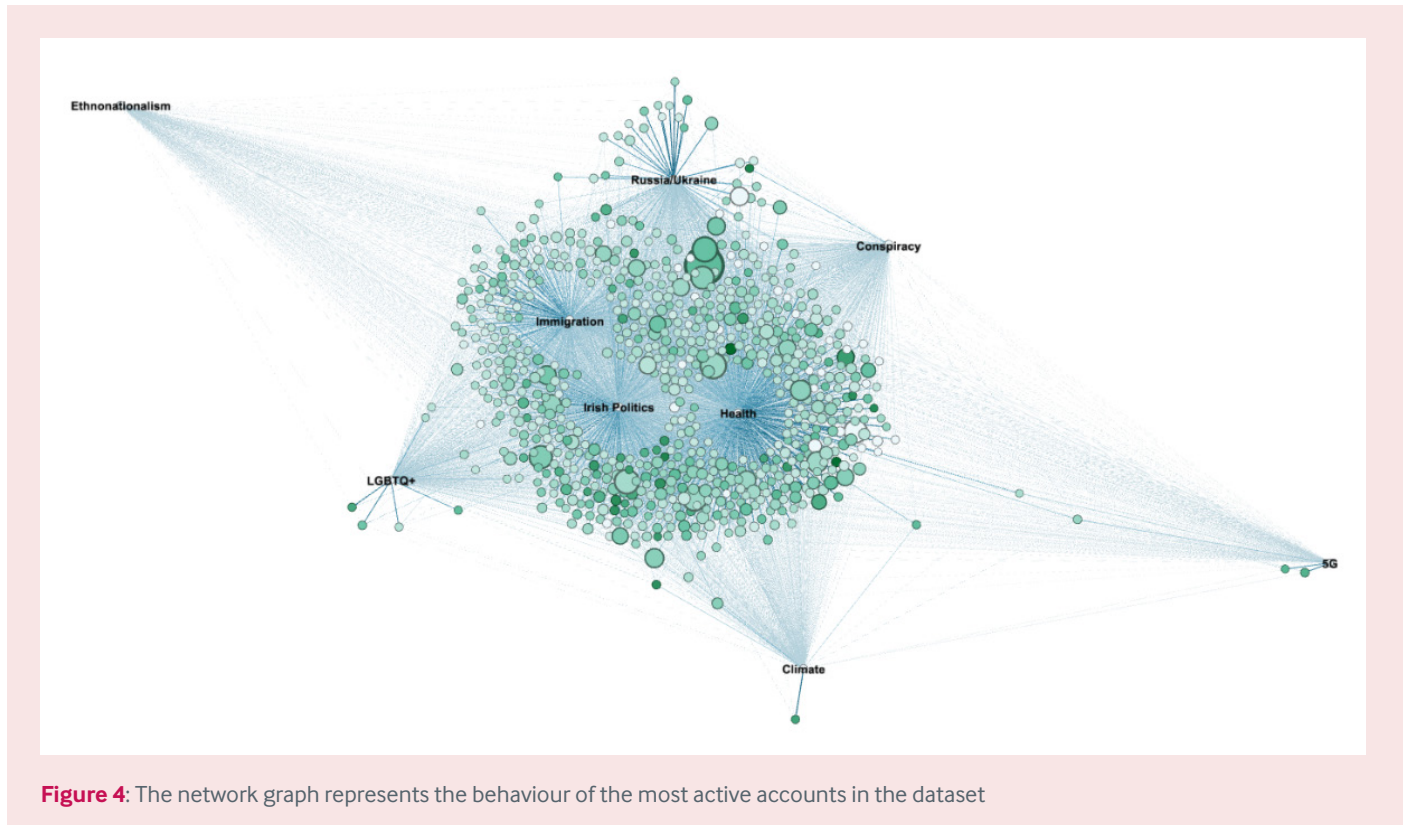
In this report, ISD analysed how nine topics were discussed within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem between 1 January 2020 and 3 April 2023. The following sections are based on quantitative analysis of data from Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram, Telegram and YouTube (see methodology for further details). The topics examined were: conspiracies, ethnonationalism, Irish politics, immigration, health, climate, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, LGBTQ+ issues and 5G. This report contains separate analysis of each.

Health was the most mentioned topic and represented 14.27% of the content produced within this ecosystem in the period analysed. Irish politics followed with 8.1%, immigration with 5.06%, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict with 3.33%. Discussions about conspiracies, LGBTQ+ issues, climate, 5G and ethnonationalism represented less than 2% of the content produced by the Irish ecosystem, however, their popularity varied throughout the timeframe analysed. These shifts are better demonstrated in Figure 3 and further explained in the corresponding topic sections below.

What is clear from this analysis is that following the lifting of pandemic restrictions, the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem turned its attention to other topics, namely







**Figure 4:** The network graph represents the behaviour of the most active accounts in the dataset

the Russia-Ukraine conflict and, later in 2022 and 2023, immigration and LGBTQ+ issues.

### Topic Overlap

Numerous topics were also found to overlap with each other. Posts containing conspiratorial narratives for example often mention keywords connected with health, Irish politics and immigration. The percentage each topic overlapped with others can be observed in table 1 and is further explained in the corresponding section.

Table 1 should be read vertically first and then horizontally. The first column represents the percentages of overlap between topics in the conspiracy topic. For example, out of all posts about conspiracies, 0.23% of posts also referenced the ethnonationalism topic and 0.35% of posts also referenced the 5G topic while 8.56% of posts also referenced Irish politics, and so on.

### Topic Interconnections

The network graph in Figure 4 represents the behaviour of the most active accounts in the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem and the content they produced during the time frame. Accounts are represented by the

nodes (circles), and their size is proportional to the number of posts they have published in the period analysed. Only accounts that had published more than 1,000 posts in at least one of the nine topics analysed were included in the graph, totalling 736 accounts.

The intensity of the green colour of the nodes represents the number of followers of a specific account. The darker the node, the more followers that account has. This feature applies to accounts from all platforms except for Telegram which does not support this analysis, meaning that all Telegram accounts will appear white in the graph. The edges (the line segments that connect a node to a topic) represent the relationship of the accounts to each topic. The thickness and colour of the line to a topic indicates how much a specific account has posted about that topic. The thicker the line, and the darker the colour, the more that account has posted about a specific topic. The position of a node in relation to the topic represents the connection of an account to a topic. For example, if an account has been posting primarily about 5G, its node will appear closer to the 5G topic. The distance between topics shows the interconnection between them.

**Table 1:** This table shows the percentage of overlap between topics. The table should be read vertically first and then horizontally

	Conspiracy	Ethno nationalism	5G	Irish Politics	Health	Immigration	Climate	Russia/ Ukraine	LGBTQ+
Conspiracy	100	7.56	5.22	1.78	2.90	2.26	8.28	2.53	1.89
Ethnonationalism	0.23	100	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.08	0.07	0.05	0.10
5G	0.35	0.07	100	0.04	0.17	0.04	0.77	0.04	0.05
Irish Politics	8.56	4.29	2.63	100	6.41	13.68	12.27	4.97	9.62
Health	24.49	7.22	21.18	11.29	100	5.27	12.52	3.90	5.01
Immigration	6.76	7.37	1.80	8.54	1.87	100	4.02	8.95	4.10
Climate	5.24	1.45	7.29	1.62	0.94	0.85	100	0.83	1.09
Russia/Ukraine	4.99	2.90	1.16	2.04	0.91	5.90	2.59	100	1.22
LGBTQ+	1.43	2.45	0.54	1.52	0.45	1.04	1.30	0.47	100

Irish politics, health, and immigration appear at the centre of the graph, showing that conversations about these three topics were heavily interconnected. Topics are closer to one another when accounts have mutual connections with those topics. For example, the proximity between Irish politics and immigration is due to the large number of accounts that have posted content about the two topics. Ethnonationalism and 5G, the two least popular topics in the dataset, were also the least interconnected. Ethnonationalism appears to be most connected to immigration, and 5G appears to be most connected to health.

A number of very prolific accounts that posted about the Russia-Ukraine conflict appear on the outer side of the graph. This indicates that although the topic was overall very interconnected with immigration, Irish politics, and to a lesser degree health, these accounts almost exclusively posted about the Russia-Ukraine conflict and did not involve themselves in conversations on other topics.

### Media Shares Among Topics in the Irish Mis- and Disinformation Ecosystem

Table 2 shows the most shared media outlets (including alternative media) within this ecosystem and illustrates the popularity of specific sources across different topics. While legacy media organisations dominated the list, taking eight of the top ten slots, they only made up 53% of the total combined shares. The remaining 47% came from just two alternative media outlets, Gript and TheLiberal.ie, with Gript receiving 30% of all shares. These two media outlets and their contributions to

conversations regarding these topics are explored in more depth below.

Table 2 should be read horizontally first and then vertically. For example, the first row notes the number of shares for each media outlet within the conspiracy topic. Within this topic, Gript's domain was shared 811 times by users within the ecosystem, The Irish Times' domain shared 424 times, and so on.

### Gript

Gript has emerged as a prominent entity within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem, with their posts consistently gaining some of the highest interactions within the topics analysed. The site was also the most shared media platform for seven out of the nine topics analysed.<sup>3</sup> Please see the appendix for Gript's response to the claims made in this report.

Gript was set up in 2018 and describes itself as an outlet that believes in "facilitating debate and challenging the consensus." One of its directors, Niamh Uí Bhriain, was a founding member of the anti-abortion group Youth Defence. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Youth Defence engaged in protests outside of hospitals and the homes of politicians, often using aggressive tactics. At one such protest outside the home of Roisin Shortall TD (Teachta Dála, a member of Dáil Éireann and equivalent to an MP) in 1997, neighbours described the group chanting "murderer" and carrying placards showing aborted fetuses while Ms Shortall's children were home.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 2:** The most shared media organisation per topic within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem. (The number of posts mentioned in the table includes both original posts and shares/retweets published within this ecosystem.)

	Gript	Irish Times	The Liberal.ie	Irish Independent	Irish Examiner	RTÉ	Daily Mail	The Guardian	The Journal.ie	Telegraph (UK)
Conspiracy	811	424	132	421	135	267	369	268	123	114
Ethnonationalism	24.00	16.00	35.00	10.00	16.00	4	13	3	5	2
5G	1	40	40	31	14	16	32	33	15	14
Irish politics	19,123	9,965	3,939	11,832	8,044	4,812	624	676	2,818	181
Health	25,812	13,302	14,054	8,733	6,672	9,563	6,192	5,236	2,735	5,628
Immigration	17,623	8,222	10,844	4,998	4,644	3,730	1,205	1,076	1,921	655
Climate	3,901	785	270	927	406	638	592	539	149	360
Russia-Ukraine	3,910	2,137	3,302	1,360	1,318	1,333	431	862	355	322
LGBTQ+	7,322	843	983	1,681	396	571	979	260	159	770
<b>Total (combined shares, not unique shares)</b>	<b>78,527</b>	<b>35,734</b>	<b>33,599</b>	<b>29,993</b>	<b>21,645</b>	<b>20,934</b>	<b>10,437</b>	<b>8,953</b>	<b>8,280</b>	<b>8,046</b>

Gript lists its offices at an address on Gardiner Street in Dublin, which is also home to the Life Institute, an anti-abortion lobbying group also founded by Úi Bhriain. The website for Youth Defence currently redirects to the website for the Life Institute.

Gript's editor is John McGuirk, who was the spokesperson for the Life Institute's anti-abortion Save The 8th campaign during Ireland's 2018 abortion referendum. In the years before taking this position at Gript, he made several attempts at a political career. McGuirk was a member of Ógra Fianna Fáil but left the party amid allegations that he had been behind a series of anonymous emails sent to The Phoenix magazine. McGuirk subsequently joined Fine Gael but also left that party amid claims that he sent a press release criticising a position taken by then party leader Enda Kenny against the party's wishes (McGuirk claimed he was given permission to send the press release).<sup>5</sup> In the 2011 general election, he ran unsuccessfully as a candidate for the independent alliance party New Vision.

Gript has been the subject of at least two fact-checks by TheJournal.ie.<sup>6</sup> In April 2023, the Press Ombudsman upheld a complaint regarding the site's reporting on an article about abortion and Down Syndrome, saying "The Press Ombudsman finds that Gript.ie's article has not adhered to Principle 1 of the Code of Practice which requires a publication to strive for truth and accuracy."<sup>7</sup>

### TheLiberal.ie

TheLiberal.ie is a media website that publishes news content usually aggregated or sourced from other news organisations and was founded by Leo Sherlock, a web designer and entrepreneur. Leo Sherlock is the brother of Cora Sherlock, a solicitor and the deputy chairperson of the Pro-Life Campaign.<sup>8</sup>

TheLiberal.ie has faced legal action for copyright infringement against two Irish news organisations in the past.<sup>9</sup> The outlet has also routinely been subject to fact check articles for spreading false, misleading or nonsensical claims about COVID-19, immigration, Muslims and other topics.<sup>10</sup> See the ethnonationalism analysis section of this report for further details on claims made by TheLiberal.ie.

An investigation by the Dublin Inquirer in 2017 found that a Facebook page called Pretty.ie, which was linked to a site of the same name registered to Leo Sherlock, was running bogus competitions in breach of Facebook's rules in order to attract page likes.<sup>11</sup> Subsequent investigations by online users alleged that a similar operation was being run on TheLiberal.ie's Facebook page.<sup>12</sup>

With over 575K Facebook followers, as well as around 40K subscribers and followers on Twitter (X), YouTube and Instagram, and the popularity of content from TheLiberal.ie

on immigration and ethnonationalism, it is clear TheLiberal.ie is a prominent voice within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem.

### Social Media Shares Among Topics in the Irish Mis- and Disinformation Ecosystem

Table 3 shows the most shared social media platforms across topics and illustrates that, despite the use of social media platforms with looser regulations, users in this dataset still predominantly shared links to mainstream platforms. Twitter (X), Facebook and YouTube ranked as the three most shared platforms across all nine topics.

Twitter (X) was the most shared platform for all topics except 5G, where Facebook and YouTube dominated. For the Russia-Ukraine conflict topic, the Russian social media platform VK also appeared among the most shared social media platforms in sixth place, after Twitter (X), YouTube, Facebook, Telegram and Rumble. Links to VK were shared a total of 239 times, making it the 13th most shared platform overall. However, these shares were mostly linked to discussions about the Russia-Ukraine conflict with 197 shares, while the remaining shares included keywords connected to health (17 shares), immigration (5 shares), Irish politics and climate (2 shares each).

Table 3 should be read horizontally first and then vertically. For example, the first row notes the number of shares for each social media platform within the conspiracy topic. Within this topic, content on Twitter (X) was shared 28,539 times by users within this ecosystem, content on Facebook shared 3,956 times, and so on.

**Table 3:** The most shared social media platform per topic within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem. (The number of posts mentioned in the table includes both original posts and shares/retweets published within this ecosystem.)

	Twitter (X)	Facebook	YouTube	Rumble	BitChute	Telegram	Odysee	Instagram	TikTok	Gettr
Conspiracy	28,539	3,956	3,251	1,076	1,063	743	286	48	80	85
Ethnonationalism	1,136	61	39		4	30	13	4	1	2
5G	363	2,755	419	85	105	53	23	2	5	1
Irish politics	134,948	18,493	7,193	873	515	418	178	124	266	45
Health	198,457	31,175	16,434	6,876	4,442	3,537	1,779	519	242	458
Immigration	102,671	9,305	6,089	371	300	943	169	126	141	67
Climate	13,682	6,207	1,465	190	197	245	70	11	21	8
Russia-Ukraine	47,868	3,487	7,073	718	146	1,921	172	71	146	52
LGBTQ+	21,549	1,681	1,596	132	119	213	53	20	16	11
<b>Total (combined shares, not unique shares)</b>	<b>652,551</b>	<b>79,751</b>	<b>71,813</b>	<b>10,321</b>	<b>9,419</b>	<b>8,103</b>	<b>2,743</b>	<b>925</b>	<b>918</b>	<b>729</b>



# Health Topic Analysis

Mis- and disinformation related to health is not new, but since the COVID-19 pandemic its spread and impact have become much more apparent. In February 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared that, as well as fighting the COVID-19 virus, the world was also battling an “infodemic,” as false information and rumours about the virus grabbed people’s attention online.<sup>13</sup>

As the virus spread around the world and people isolated in their homes, many were seeking answers online and began to ‘do their own research’. Like other forms of false information, mis- and disinformation related to health plays on a lack of general knowledge of the topics being discussed. Because fully understanding issues around health involves being able to correctly interpret scientific research, which requires years of education, it is easy for people without that knowledge to misinterpret claims about health and be susceptible to poor scientific analysis.

Several common themes emerge within health and science mis- and disinformation more broadly. This includes cherry-picking pieces of research that confirm one position, while ignoring the evidence that goes against it (such as ignoring the body of evidence that shows vaccines are safe) or demanding impossibly high expectations of scientific research (demanding that vaccines/medical treatments are proven to be 100% safe and risk free).

‘Bad experts’ are often used to make similar points or interpret medical evidence; these are usually people who have scientific or medical qualifications that add a veneer of credibility to false or misleading claims. Another common theme is the use of conspiracy theories to explain why the “truth” is being hidden, which often invokes a large-scale international cover up between pharmaceutical companies, healthcare professionals, the media and political figures.

A belief in health mis- and disinformation can lead to people avoiding life-saving medical treatments, such as vaccines, or taking action that could harm other people’s health, such as avoiding wearing masks or social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>14</sup>

During the pandemic years, Ireland had one of the longest lockdowns in the world. The introduction of vaccine passports, which prevented unvaccinated people from being able to attend certain events and venues,

was also a widespread source of anger and frustration. In between the legitimate discussions and criticisms about government policies and restrictions on freedom grew a movement bound by belief in false information and conspiracy theories.

## Key Findings

ISD aimed to examine the conversations that took place within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem related to COVID-19, vaccines and several other health-related topics. The analysis found:

- Conversations about health comprised 14.3% of the total discussions within this ecosystem, making it the most popular topic among those analysed.
- Health conversations overlapped the most with Irish politics (6.4%), followed by conspiracy (2.9%) and immigration (1.9%).
- Some of the most shared Facebook posts mentioning health within ISD’s dataset contained fact checking labels for false information. These posts contained videos that were viewed a total of 1.2 million times.
- Videos of abusive, confrontational and sometimes violent interactions that were related to a belief in false information about the COVID-19 pandemic received some of highest engagement and a total of over 5.3 million views.
- Misinterpretations of scientific documents or communications were common among the top posts, with highly engaged posts spreading false claims about COVID-19 vaccines or PCR tests to large audiences as a result.

## Key Stats

**Table 4:** Total records and accounts talking about health within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem

Platform	Total records	Total accounts
Facebook	77,900	136
Instagram	3,175	23
Twitter (X)	1,676,836	1,148
Telegram	116,526	108
YouTube	594	34
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,875,031</b>	<b>1,449</b>

**Trends in Topic Discussion Over Time**

Analysis of the volume of posts about health over time indicates that discussions about this topic were very much tied to the news cycle during the pandemic and were reactive to different developments and announcements throughout. As both figure 5 and figure 6 show, an initial spike in the volume of posts related to health can be seen in March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, and lockdowns and other restrictions were put in place in Ireland and throughout the world.

At this time, conversations about health made up almost 25% of the total conversation within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem. The next spike in post volume in October 2020 coincided with the second lockdown, which was announced on 19 October.

Discussions then continued to increase from the beginning of December 2020 when a third lockdown was announced. An easing of restrictions was announced in April 2021 and conversations were seen to decrease again at this time. However, the topic became more popular again as the vaccine rollout continued and vaccine passports came into use, and again when booster vaccines were offered in December 2021.

The largest spike, seen at the beginning of December 2021, also coincides with a protest in Dublin against mask and vaccine mandates in schools. At this time, health conversations reached their peak within this ecosystem, making up 28% of all conversations.

All pandemic restrictions were lifted on 22 January 2022 and a drop in discussions was observed almost immediately in line with this date, although conversation about health matters remained steady throughout 2022.

**Analysis  
Top Facebook Posts Contain Verifiably False Information**

Out of the top ten most-shared Facebook posts within the health topic, four contained fact checking labels for false information. All four of the posts were published by the same page and contained videos which were viewed a total of 1.2 million times.

There are multiple ways by which content may be flagged by Facebook, its users or fact-checking organisations for review.<sup>15</sup> Once flagged, fact-checking organisations review

**Figure 5:** Volume of posts within the health topic over time



**Figure 6:** Percentage of total posts mentioning health topic keywords (per month)



content, check facts and rate the accuracy of the content. If judged to be false, misleading or inaccurate, as was the case here, content is then labelled as misinformation and Facebook informs users about it with tags.

Two of the videos labelled for spreading false information feature Dr. Dolores Cahill, the former chairperson of the Irish Freedom Party, who was employed by University College Dublin (UCD) as a professor of translational science until September 2021. In the 18 months prior to her departure from UCD, Dr. Cahill had become an international figure within the COVID-sceptic movement,

speaking at anti-lockdown rallies across Europe, co-founding a travel agency to help people go on holidays during the pandemic, and spreading false claims about masks, vaccines and treatments for COVID-19.

Previous research from ISD found that an organisation founded by Dr. Cahill, the World Doctors Alliance, had been able to double its reach on Facebook in the space of a year, despite the group consistently spreading false information and conspiracy theories about COVID-19.<sup>16</sup> Dr. Cahill’s own Facebook page was subsequently removed from the platform in December 2021 for spreading pandemic-related mis- and disinformation. The Telegram account for the World Doctors Alliance was also one of the most prolific users within ISD’s health topic dataset.

In both videos featuring Dr. Cahill, she makes numerous false claims about the pandemic, including saying that COVID-19 is seasonal and only causes illness between December and April; that there was no need for masks or social distancing; and that unproven treatments such as hydroxychloroquine could be used to treat the virus. She also falsely says that mRNA vaccines are dangerous. All of these claims have been thoroughly debunked by fact checkers.<sup>17</sup>

Another of the four posts contains a series of claims about Dr. Anthony Fauci, the former director for the National

Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) in the US, and a leading figure in the US response to the pandemic. The video refers to Dr. Fauci as an “absolute psychopath” and lists several false, unsupported or decontextualised claims about him in order to frame his work with the NIAID as being unethical, disturbing and cruel.<sup>18</sup> Dr. Fauci, the video says, is “just one old crook in a massive conspiracy that is aggressively pushing to inject everyone’s children with the new deadly and debilitating mRNA experimental jabs.” Comments under the video compare Dr. Fauci to Hitler, Nazi doctor Joseph Mengele, and Satan.

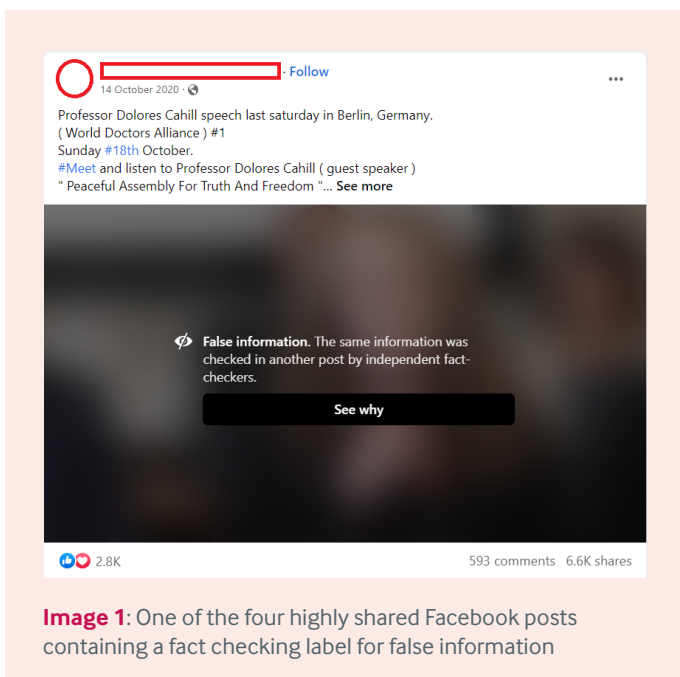
The last post with a fact-checking label is a 17-minute video featuring Thai-German microbiologist Dr. Sucharit Bhakdi, who, like Dr. Cahill above, began spreading false information about COVID-19 in the pandemic’s early months. Dr. Bhakdi claims in the video that people who became infected with COVID-19 would develop immunity from the virus because of their exposure to past coronaviruses. He then tells people not to avail of the COVID-19 vaccines, saying “your killer lymphocytes will try to kill you”. According to numerous fact-checks, Dr. Bhakdi’s claims are the result of poor scientific interpretation or are outright false.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that all four posts were posted by the same page and feature content and claims from prominent COVID-misinformation spreaders raises questions as to the adequacy of Facebook’s policy enforcement. All the posts contained fact-checking labels, yet still received very high engagement, which also raises questions as to the impact that such measures have on curtailing false information.

**Videos of Abusive, Violent and Confrontational Interactions Frequently Receive High Engagement**

A common mode of operation among individuals who take action in support of a belief in false information and conspiracy theories is to engage in confrontational interactions which can be recorded and shared online. This tactic was used widely during the pandemic, when people would confront Gardaí (national police service of Ireland), doctors, pharmacists, politicians or journalists about what they believed was their involvement in a large-scale cover-up related to the pandemic, or over a belief that COVID-19 was not real, or that the vaccines were lethal.

Three of the top ten Facebook posts in ISD’s health topic dataset contained this kind of content. The top post featured Gemma O’Doherty, a former journalist who



**Image 1:** One of the four highly shared Facebook posts containing a fact checking label for false information



**Image 2:** A clip from the top-shared Facebook video featuring Gemma O’Doherty aggressively confronting Gardaí

has a history of promoting false claims about COVID-19, far-right anti-immigrant narratives and explicit Holocaust denial, confronting Gardaí in April of 2020 during the first lockdown in Ireland.<sup>20</sup>

In a four-and-a-half-minute video shared by TheLiberal.ie (which describes O’Doherty as an investigative journalist), O’Doherty can be heard berating two members of the Gardaí who stopped her at a checkpoint in Dublin city centre. O’Doherty was travelling with John Waters, another former journalist who has taken to promoting conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and other topics. The pair were on their way to a High Court hearing (which they lost) to challenge the country’s COVID-19 restrictions.<sup>21</sup>

O’Doherty refuses to answer the Gardaí when they ask her what the purpose of her journey is, telling them: “It’s none of your business.” She continues by calling the Gardaí a “disgrace” for what she describes as “harassing and menacing law-abiding Irish citizens who pay your wages.” She says they will soon “be reminded who [their] masters” are and says that they will “be stripped of that uniform, and your pension and your job.” The video received over 2.5 million views.

A similar video livestreamed by The Irish Inquiry, an alternative media outlet, was the fifth most shared Facebook post and featured Dr. Dolores Cahill confronting Gardaí outside the count centre after the 2021 Dublin Bay South by-election. Dr. Cahill, who ran as an independent candidate and received 169 votes, was not allowed to enter the count centre because she refused to wear

a mask. Referencing pseudo-legal sovereign citizen beliefs, Dr. Cahill accuses the Gardaí present of “treason” and “impersonating a member of a Garda Síochána.”<sup>22</sup> She then attempts to make a “citizen’s arrest” of one officer under what she calls “common law”. She continues by falsely claiming that the COVID-19 vaccines are causing deaths and miscarriages. A video of the same confrontation appeared in the top Instagram posts, but this time showed Dr. Cahill attempting to physically push through the line of Gardaí.

Gardaí were also the target in a third abusive video within the top ten Facebook posts. In this video from May 2020, published by TheLiberal.ie, a man spends over 20 minutes at a Garda checkpoint where he frequently raises his voice and becomes aggressive. Similar to the pseudo-legal ideology referenced by Dr. Cahill in the video described above, the man demands to know whether the officer is a “legitimate member of the Gardaí.” When the Gardaí ask him for his name and details about where he is going, he accuses them of breaking their oath and infringing on his constitutional rights. He also refers to the COVID-19 pandemic as a “scamdemic” multiple times throughout the interaction. The video was viewed over 1.1 million times.

On YouTube, the most viewed video, with 768,000 views was shared by The Burkean, another alternative media outlet that has previously shared content that includes conspiracy theories, anti-LGBTQ+ narratives and anti-migrant sentiment.<sup>23</sup> The video showed an assault that took place during an anti-lockdown protest in Dublin in September 2020. LGBTQ+ rights activist Izzy Kamikaze was struck in the head with a plank of wood wrapped in an Irish tricolour by Michael Quinn, a member of the National Party. This is a minor far-right political party that has campaigned for the deportation of non-ethnic Irish people, called for the reinstatement of the death penalty, and frequently promoted anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-immigrant slurs and narratives.<sup>24</sup> Quinn was subsequently sentenced to three years in prison over the assault.

The video, which frames the violence as “Antifa” being “repelled by Irish anti-lockdown protesters,” shows the aftermath of the assault as the crowd chants “pedo scum off our streets” at Kamikaze and several other counter protesters.



A common trend among these videos is not just the abusive and often violent nature of the confrontations, but also that the videos gained large numbers of views after being reshared by alternative media organisations. The nature of the content – divisive, outrageous and shocking – appears to be conducive to it performing well algorithmically.

### Misinterpretation of Guidance and Documents Leads to False Claims

Health and science mis- and disinformation is often driven by the misinterpretation of scientific guidance or documents by those without the expertise to correctly understand what is being communicated. Several examples of this trend emerged within ISD's health topic dataset.

On Telegram, a post from Simone Gold, the founder of the COVID-sceptic anti-vaccination group America's Frontline Doctors, was shared three times in Irish chat communities. The post reported that the Center for Disease Control (CDC) was "withdrawing its standing request to the FDA to grant emergency use authorization for COVID-19 PCR tests". This, it was claimed, was evidence that "the CDC no longer approves of PCR tests as valid diagnostic methods for COVID-19". It went on to claim that the use of such tests was "fake 'science' but true fearmongering."

As explained by Full Fact, while the CDC did withdraw its request for emergency use authorisation for one specific type of PCR test, this was not due to the performance of the test.<sup>25</sup> Emergency use authorisation allows the use of unapproved products in the case of an emergency (such as a pandemic). A CDC spokesperson told Full Fact that faster, more efficient PCR tests had since been made available, which led to them withdrawing the emergency use authorisation for the specific PCR test in question.

Similar misinterpretation of scientific communications was also seen in highly engaged Twitter (X) posts related to the pharmaceutical and biotechnology corporation Pfizer. In January 2022, a district court in Texas required the Food and Drug Administration to release thousands of documents regarding its review of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine. Tens of thousands of pages of documents have since been released and published online, with little context or explanation around what the documents contained. This left them open for misinterpretation



**Image 3:** The top tweet in the health dataset which claims the Pfizer documents prove their vaccine wasn't effective.

among anti-vaccine and COVID-sceptic communities and the documents have been at the core of numerous false and misleading claims debunked by fact-checking organisations since.<sup>26</sup>

Within ISD's health dataset, the Pfizer documents were mentioned in three of the top ten most retweeted Twitter (X) posts. Among the claims made were that the documents proved that the vaccine wasn't effective, and that Pfizer was aware that it caused "serious side effects". These were both common claims circulating at the time but were found by fact checkers to be based on misreading the data in the documents.<sup>27</sup>

## Irish Politics Topic Analysis

Conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation often involve claims that allege that powerful, influential or elite figures are conducting a secret, sinister operation that might endanger, manipulate or exploit the public.

Politicians, by profession, are influential figures who make decisions that shape society and affect public opinion on a range of issues. Because of the prominent, public role they play in society, comments and decisions made by politicians can sometimes serve as a grain of truth around which grand conspiracy theories are developed and politicians themselves often feature at the core of mis- and disinformation narratives.

Mis- and disinformation about politics can threaten society in numerous ways including undermining trust in democratic institutions and the democratic process, fostering anger, and encouraging the targeting and harassment of politicians. This in turn can hinder effective decision making across government, undermine public health initiatives, exacerbate polarisation, and contribute to support for extremist ideologies.

ISD explored how Irish politicians were discussed within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem. There is a large degree of crossover with other topics explored in greater detail in subsequent topic sections, but the topic of Irish politics mainly focuses on discussions of politicians and political parties in Ireland as well as the Irish government.

### Key Findings

ISD aimed to examine the conversations that took place within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem related to Irish politics. The analysis found:

- Conversations about Irish politics constitute 8.1% of the total discussion within this ecosystem, making it the second most-popular topic within all of those analysed.
- Within the Irish politics topic, the most popular sub-topics were health (11.3%), immigration (8.2%) and the Russia-Ukraine conflict (2%)
- Twitter (X) was by far the most popular platform for discussion of Irish politics within this ecosystem, accounting for 95% of the sample for this topic.
- An early spike in discussions about Irish politics in early 2020 coincided with the 8 February general election.
- Regarding COVID-19 mis- and disinformation in the Irish politics topic, ISD observed posts accusing

the government of orchestrating a “sinister” cover up to prevent the use of unproven alternative treatments for the disease and claims that the government desired to “sign away” Ireland’s sovereignty by supporting the WHO’s ‘pandemic treaty.’

- Within this narrative, ISD also observed threatening and violent rhetoric aimed at Irish politicians in relation to the introduction of restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19, the arrival to Ireland of tens of thousands of refugees and asylum seekers from 2022 onwards and teaching children about LGBTQ+ issues.
- The most mentioned politicians within this topic between 2020 – 2023 were Leo Varadkar (43,435 mentions), Micheál Martin (22,301 mentions) and Stephen Donnelly (15,769 posts). All three served in senior roles in government during this period.

### Key Stats

**Table 5:** Total records and accounts talking about Irish politics within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem

Platform	Total records	Total accounts
Twitter (X)	1,012,058	1,150
Facebook	36,487	136
Telegram	14,000	104
Instagram	1,556	22
YouTube	304	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,064,405</b>	<b>1,436</b>

### Trends in Topic Discussion Over Time

The volume over time graph (figure 7) and percentage of overall discussion graph (figure 8) regarding the Irish politics topic illustrates two things. Firstly, there was a high level of discussions throughout the research period of 1 January 2020 – 3 April 2023. In 2020 there was an average of 607.6 posts per day referencing the Irish politics topic within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem. In 2021, this increased to an average of 771.9 posts per day and in 2022 this again increased to 1,054.9 posts per day. In 2023 (for the 93 days covered during the research period) there were an average of 1,884.3 posts per day.

Secondly, as evidenced by the year-on-year growth in the average number of posts per day, the level of discussion regarding Irish politics has consistently increased. So too has the number of accounts active in the discussion. In 2020, 700 actors within this ecosystem published posts referencing the Irish politics topic. In 2021, this increased to 943 accounts and again, in 2022, this increased to 1,313. For the 93 days of 2023, 1,287 accounts discussed this topic.

There was an early spike in discussions in 2020 which coincided with the 8 February general election while most of the other spikes were observed in late 2022 and early 2023. The largest number of posts in this topic was observed on 31 January 2023. On this date, users primarily discussed an article published by the Ditch news website which reported that Colm Burke, a Fine Gael TD, was found “guilty of misconduct in his practice as a solicitor” for misleading a client suing the state over illegal nursing home charges that is part of a long-running controversy surrounding public nursing home care and illegal charges over a 30-year-period.<sup>28</sup>

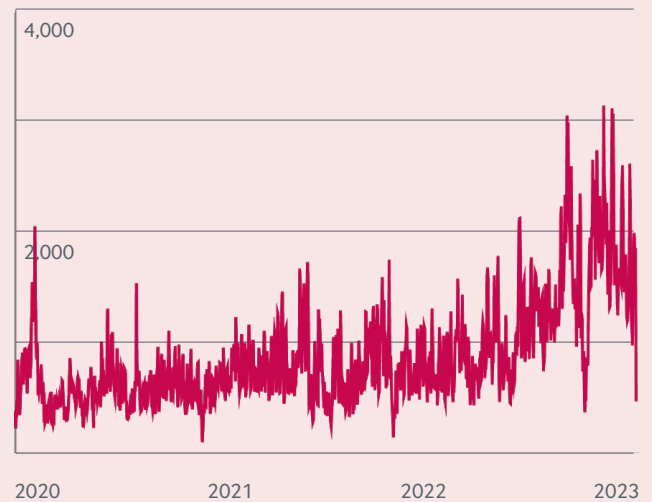
Another large spike in discussions was observed on 18 February 2023, which coincided with an “Ireland for All” rally in Dublin where tens of thousands of people, according to RTÉ News, marched through the city centre to support refugees and oppose racism.<sup>29</sup> Widely-shared posts within this ecosystem on this date labelled politicians who marched in the rally as “traitors.”

### Analysis

#### February 2020 General Election

Conversations about Irish politics within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem spiked during early 2020 when the country held a general election on 8 February.

**Figure 7:** Volume of posts within the Irish politics topic over time from 1 January 2020 - 3 April 2023



**Figure 8:** Percentage of discussions about Irish politics versus total content over time across all platforms



Within discussions about the general election, anti-government sentiment and criticism was a common theme both before and immediately after the election. The bulk of this centered on posts that expressed disapproving opinions about the performance of the government or leading parties like Fine Gael, Fianna Fail and Sinn Fein. Three of the top ten posts on Facebook within this topic referenced the election and featured criticism of Fianna Fail and Fine Gael and their leaders as they engaged in post-election negotiations over forming a coalition government.

This type of content does not equate to mis- or disinformation and is a regular component of political discourse in all democracies. However, ISD researchers also observed various instances of false, misleading and conspiratorial claims related to the election and issues like housing and immigration.

Within this topic, housing and immigration tended to be mentioned in the same posts, particularly in claims that the government were deliberately housing migrants, asylum seekers or refugees at the expense of the native Irish population. For example, two videos published by the National Party ahead of the election documented an interaction between James Reynolds and then-Taoiseach Leo Varadkar. (Reynolds was deputy leader during 2020 though, at the time of writing, owing to an internal party dispute involving bars of gold estimated to be worth around €400,000, it is unclear who is in charge of the party. Both Justin Barrett and James Reynolds have said they are the leader of the National Party.)<sup>30</sup>

In the footage, Reynolds confronted Varadkar and accused his government of using “policies of mass immigration to ruin rural towns” in Ireland. In one of these videos, Reynolds further claimed that the government wants to enact a “new plantation to fill this country with foreign nationals... and to make the Irish a minority.” Claims that the government is orchestrating a sinister campaign to import asylum seekers and migrants to replace local populations were popular within this ecosystem, as covered in greater detail in a separate section of this research report exploring the immigration topic.

### Discussions About Irish Politics and COVID-19

Discussions about COVID-19 were popular within the Irish politics topic. In particular, posts concentrated on critiquing the policies and performance of the government during this period. Such discussion was prevalent in Ireland in general during this period.

For example, the government launched numerous initiatives encouraging the uptake of COVID-19 vaccines during 2021 alongside measures that limited access to indoor hospitality for those who were not fully vaccinated or who had recovered from COVID-19 within the previous nine months. The use of vaccine passports was criticised for their infringement on human rights with all opposition TDs voting against their introduction and groups like the Irish

Council for Civil Liberties calling them “discriminatory” for restricting equality and bodily integrity.<sup>31</sup>

Such criticism was also reflected within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem. Three of the top ten posts on Facebook, three of the top ten tweets on Twitter (X), four of the top ten posts on Telegram, nine of the top ten posts on Instagram and five of the top ten videos on YouTube all referenced COVID-19 and the government’s handling of the pandemic response.

As noted in an earlier section, much of this content does not equate to false, misleading or conspiratorial discourse but there were also notable examples of such misleading content disseminated too.

A widely shared post within this topic featured a letter addressed to Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, penned by a doctor who advocated for the use of Ivermectin in treating COVID-19. The letter’s author claimed that there was a “sinister attempt” by the Irish College of General Practitioners, a professional body for general practitioners in Ireland, and the Health Information and Quality Authority, a government health agency, to block the use of Ivermectin in Ireland. During the pandemic, the antiparasitic drug was touted as a treatment for COVID-19 and attracted much attention from anti-vaccine activists despite a lack of evidence that it works against the disease.<sup>32</sup>



**Image 4:** Tweet linking to a letter directed at Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, advocating for the use of Ivermectin



In 2022, claims started to circulate that alleged that a 'pandemic treaty' would give the WHO the authority to control a country's policies during a designated pandemic to enforce the use of lockdowns, closures or mandate vaccine rollouts, at the expense of a country's own sovereignty. These claims were false.<sup>33</sup> As reported by the Associated Press, the voluntary treaty does not provide the WHO the authority to "overrule any nation's ability to pass individual pandemic-related policies" nor did the treaty mention lockdowns, closures or specific citizen surveillance systems.

Conversations within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem claimed that, by signing up to the treaty, Ireland was signing away its sovereignty. This false claim was boosted in offline comments by independent TD Mattie McGrath and his commentary was reported on by Gript.<sup>34</sup> This was one of the most popular posts within this topic.

Discussions about the treaty also gave rise to threatening content about Minister for Health Stephen Donnelly,

such as one post published on Telegram: "Stephen Donnelly needs to be arrested for his crimes of genocide [supporting the treaty] against the Irish." Separate research from ISD from 2021 highlighted how COVID-19 vaccine misinformation was giving rise to threatening discussions from online conspiracy communities targeting then-Taoiseach Micheál Martin and then-Tánaiste Leo Varadkar on social media platforms.<sup>35</sup>

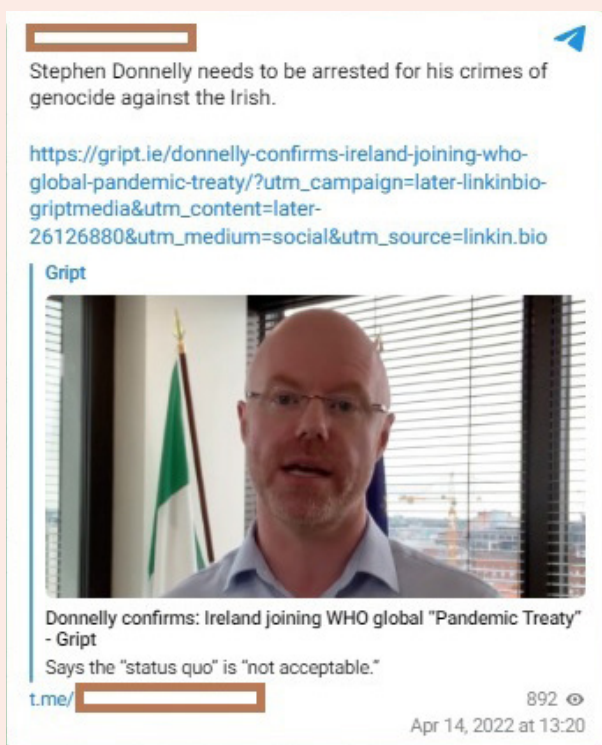
### Mentions of Politicians in Ireland

ISD measured mentions of TDs, Senators and other political figures in Ireland within this topic to examine the nature and scale of discussions regarding Irish politicians. The most mentioned politician within the Irish politics topic between 1 January 2020 – 3 April 2023, was Leo Varadkar with 43,435 mentions followed by Micheál Martin with 22,301 mentions. (See the full figures in table 6)

Both Varadkar and Martin were central figures in government during the research period with Varadkar serving as Taoiseach (Prime Minister) until June 2020 when Martin took over the role and Varadkar then served as Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister). Varadkar then returned as Taoiseach in December 2022 and Martin took over the role of Tánaiste as part of a power-sharing arrangement agreed between Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party after the 2020 general election.

Health and COVID-19 discussions in particular were responsible for the majority of mentions featuring Varadkar and Martin. Stephen Donnelly, Minister for Health, ranked third in the list. As explored in the above section on COVID-19, many of the most-popular posts within the Irish politics topic directly cited or tagged figures in government, helping drive mentions further.

Roderic O'Gorman, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, was mentioned 5,195 times during the research period. The majority of these mentions were related to a period in 2020 when O'Gorman was subjected to a homophobic smear campaign that claimed O'Gorman, a gay man, was unfit for his role as Minister for Children because of his sexuality and that he was a "paedophile apologist". ISD's 2021 report, *Layers of Lies*, covered this campaign in greater detail.<sup>36</sup> Mentions of O'Gorman, whose Integration portfolio gave him responsibility over the management of asylum seekers arriving to Ireland, also spiked in late 2022 during a surge in anti-immigration protests in Ireland.



**Image 5:** Telegram post calling for the arrest of Minister for Health Stephen Donnelly

Figures in government made up most of the top spots on the most-mentioned list. Notable exceptions include Mary Lou McDonald, leader of the opposition party Sinn Féin, who was mentioned 8,320 times; independent TD Mattie McGrath who was mentioned 6,104 times; and independent Senator Sharon Keogan who was mentioned 5,124 times.

Amongst the most-shared posts mentioning Keogan were posts that praised her for criticising a media-orchestrated “hate campaign against unvaccinated people” during the COVID-19 pandemic, posts that praised her for speaking about the supposed threat of “radical trans ideology” and posts that supported her for discussing and “exposing” the WHO pandemic treaty. The praise aimed at Keogan compared to the criticism aimed at other political figures in this narrative is noteworthy.

Across the dataset, politicians were the subject of ongoing threatening and violent rhetoric. ISD observed online posts that called for figures to be sent to the gallows and hanged. In response to a tweet featuring Minister for Education Norma Foley answering a question from a reporter about the teaching of “gender ideology” in schools, one online user said Foley needs “to be marched” to the gallows.

**Table 6:** Table showing the level of mentions of Irish politicians within the Irish politics topic

Name	No of Mentions
Leo Varadkar	43,435
Micheál Martin	22,301
Stephen Donnelly	15,769
Eamon Ryan	15,760
Simon Harris	9,546
Simon Coveney	8,914
Mary Lou McDonald	8,320
Mattie McGrath	6,104
Helen McEntee	5,525
Roderic O’Gorman	5,195
Sharon Keogan	5,124
Paul Murphy	4,810
Robert Troy	4,523
Paschal Donohoe	3,826
Katherine Zappone	3,724
Carol Nolan	3,083
Norma Foley	2,644
Darragh O’Brien	2,142
Peadar Tobin	2,135
Alan Kelly	2,074
Regina Doherty	1,996
Michael D. Higgins	1,845
Barry Cowen	1,797
Ivana Bacik	1,707
Ronan Mullen	1,691
Charlie Flanagan	1,660
Michael McGrath	1,590
Hazel Chu	1,527
Damien English	1,509
Michael McNamara	1,464



**Image 6:** Post mentioning Sharon Keogan and the WHO pandemic treaty

In response to an online post by Eamon Ryan, Minister for Transport, Climate, Environment & Communications, from his appearance at a conference regarding climate change, one user said Ryan will be “one of the first” for the gallows. Other figures to be the subject of such posts were Darragh O’Brien, Minister for Housing, and Helen McEntee, Minister for Justice.

Posts calling for the use of firing squads against specific members of the government, notably Leo Varadkar and Micheál Martin, were observed, while gender-specific slurs were used in abusive posts directed at figures like Regina Doherty, Holly Cairns, Jennifer Whitmore and McEntee, among others.

## Immigration Topic Analysis

The topic of immigration attracts interest from mis- and disinformation actors, conspiracy theorists and extremists as it is an effective vehicle for forwarding their agendas which are often rooted in xenophobia and nativism. Increases in immigration can influence political and public discourse and be used as a rhetorical tool by politicians and extremist groups who foster suspicious or anti-immigration policies in a bid for votes or to recruit or radicalise followers and seek financial support.

Conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation concerning immigrants have a long history of inspiring violence globally. For example, the person responsible for the mosque attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019 was influenced by the white nationalist Great Replacement conspiracy theory. This theory purports that, across the world, ethnically European populations are being systematically replaced by non-nationals and, specifically, people of colour by a sinister and shadowy group of global elites.<sup>37</sup>

Ireland experienced a surge in anti-immigration protests throughout the country in 2018 and 2019.<sup>38</sup> The topic then mostly faded from public consciousness for several years when other matters, like the COVID-19 pandemic, took center stage. Pandemic-related travel restrictions also impacted immigration into the country. 2020 saw a decrease of 71% in visa applications and a decrease of 67% in International Protection Office applications compared to 2019.<sup>39</sup>

By 2022, immigration applications began to increase again. With the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the arrival of tens of thousands of refugees to Ireland throughout the year, discussion about immigration increased again and, with it, the beginning of anti-immigration protests.

Since November 2022, Ireland has witnessed a wave of protests against asylum seekers and refugees coming to the country.<sup>40</sup> Speaking in May 2023, Minister Simon Harris said there had been 125 anti-immigration protests in Dublin in 2023 alone.<sup>41</sup> Many protests have been peaceful though protesters have obstructed traffic and blocked roads in different locations around Ireland. Some protests have become confrontational with journalists targeted and clashes between anti-immigrant protesters and counter protesters. Others have turned violent.

In January 2023 a building in north inner-city Dublin was set on fire after rumours circulated that the building was going to be used to house refugees.<sup>42</sup> In February a man was charged with dangerous driving after a person was knocked down during an anti-immigration protest in Dublin.<sup>43</sup> In May, a makeshift refugee camp was destroyed in a fire in Dublin after an earlier standoff between anti-immigrant protesters and counter protesters.<sup>44</sup>

Fuelled in part by a chronic housing shortage and a lack of action by government to increase basic services in certain areas, rumours and fearmongering circulating through social media platforms have given rise to a series of misleading, false and harmful narratives.

At various points, far-right figures have been central to producing or amplifying such narratives and promoting offline protests.<sup>45</sup> Narratives have included claims of “military aged males” entering the county en masse; crimes perpetrated by asylum seekers and migrants against Irish woman and children; and claims that the increase of asylum seekers in Ireland is a new form of plantation that is forcibly removing and replacing local indigenous populations.<sup>46</sup> The topic of plantations has deep historical connotations in Ireland and the use of this term in the context of discussions about immigration is explored in greater detail below.

This section contains volume over time analysis exploring discussion of immigration within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem; an examination of the use of the term “plantation”; an investigation into how mis- and disinformation fueled anti-immigrant anger in one Dublin suburb in late January; and analysis exploring the role of alternative media outlets in this topic.

### Key Findings

ISD aimed to examine the conversations that took place within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem related to immigration. The analysis found:

- Conversations discussing immigration comprised 5.1% of the total discussions within this ecosystem, making it the third most-popular topic within all of those analysed.
- Within the immigration topic, the most-popular sub-topics were Irish politics (13.7%), Russia-Ukraine conflict (5.9%) and health (5.3%).
- Discussions about immigration more than tripled



in response to the outbreak of protests against the housing of asylum seekers nationwide. In January and February 2023, immigration occupied more than 15 per cent of the entire discussion in this ecosystem.

- ISD identified up to 20 individuals with a history of promoting and campaigning in support of far-right ideologies active in the online discussion about immigration.
- Usage of the term “plantation” in reference to immigration exploded from November 2022 onwards peaking in January 2023. Analysis suggests that the term was also used as a recruitment tool for groups and political parties.
- Claims of migrant-perpetrated sexual violence surged from January 2023 onwards. This trope is popular among anti-immigration activists and ISD has previously tracked its use internationally, including in countries like Sweden and Germany. The Finglas case study examines in detail how this trope was exploited in the Irish context.
- Alternative media outlets that often traffic in false, misleading coverage regarding immigration and encourage distrust of the mainstream media are highly popular within this ecosystem. See the Finglas and alternative media case studies for more details.

### Key Stats

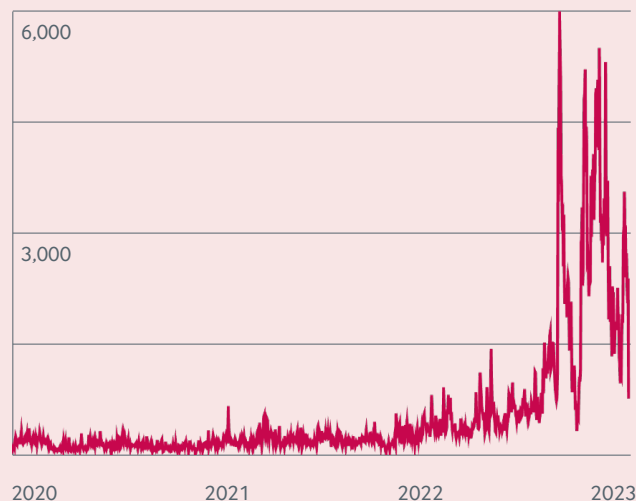
**Table 7:** Total records and accounts talking about immigration within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem

Platform	Total records	Total accounts
Twitter (X)	619,927	1,155
Telegram	22,196	106
Facebook	20,651	141
Instagram	1,314	20
YouTube	345	29
<b>Total</b>	<b>664,433</b>	<b>1,451</b>

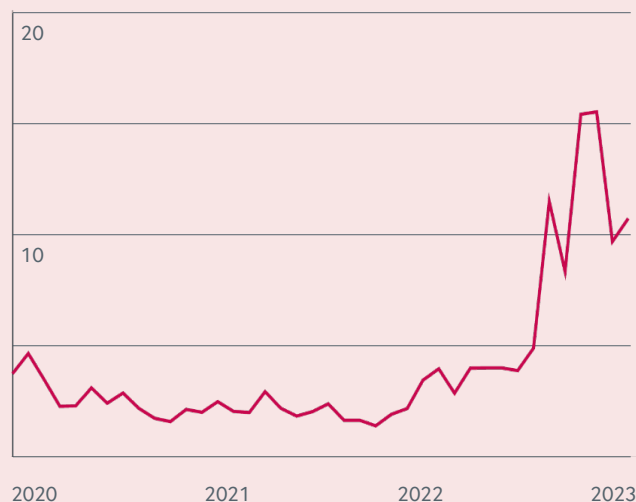
### Trends in Topic Discussion Over Time

The volume over time and percentage of overall discussion graphs for the immigration topic illustrates how, for much of 2020 and 2021, discussion of this topic remained consistently low with marginal increases seen in early 2022. The conversation then exploded in the final quarter of 2022 and into 2023. For most of 2022, immigration

**Figure 9:** Volume of posts within the immigration topic over time from January 2020 - April 2023



**Figure 10:** Percentage of discussions about immigration versus total content over time across all platforms



occupied less than five per cent of the entire discussion in the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem and this more than tripled in 2023 when, for January and February, immigration occupied over 15 per cent.

This reflects the wider situation in the country during this period. Through 2020 and 2021, Ireland grappled with the spread of COVID-19 and, as observed in other topics such as health, discussions within this ecosystem were largely concentrated on the pandemic and its associated topics.

**Table 8:** Yearly figures for the number of posts and accounts active in the immigration topic

Platform	2020	2021	2022	2023*
Total number of posts	55,426	78,297	263,250	267,460
Total shares of all posts	15,956,486	15,297,190	106,914,516	46,158,678
Average number of posts per day	151	215	721	2,876
Number of accounts active	636	893	1,339	1,336

\* Data collection ended on 3 April 2023, so these figures only relate to the 1 January 2020 – 3 April 2023 period.

Table 8 clearly illustrates that, year on year, the volume of discussions, daily average number of posts and the number of accounts active in discussions about immigration in this ecosystem steadily increased over time.

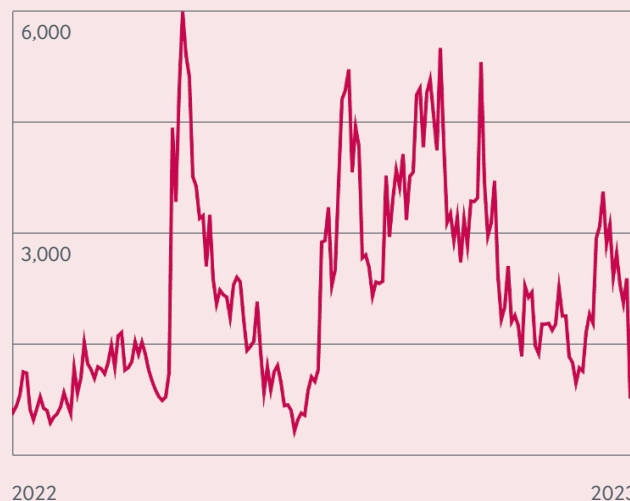
As is clear from table 8 and the graph in figure 10, discussion of immigration within this mis- and disinformation ecosystem significantly increased in late 2022 and then exploded in 2023 when, for the 93 days included in this analysis, there were an average of 2,876 posts per day. This trend continued into 2023. ISD’s data collection period for this study ended on 3 April, meaning just 93 days of data for this year were collected. Despite this, these 93 days of activity resulted in over 267,000 posts, more than the total of 2022.

The average number of posts published per day within this ecosystem was 2,876 posts and roughly four times the 2022 figure. This can be attributed to a surge in anti-immigration discussions and related offline protests that have taken place around the country in response to the housing of asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland.

From 1 November 2022 onwards, the level of discussion began to increase significantly and all the largest spikes on the volume over time graph were recorded from here on. This is illustrated in greater detail in the graph in figure 11.

The volume over time graph for discussion of immigration within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem during the five-month period between November 2022 and April 2023 includes a number of spikes that coincided

**Figure 11:** Volume of posts within the immigration topic over time from October 2022 - April 2023



with offline events. The biggest spike in discussions during the entire immigration topic occurred on 22 November 2022, where there were 5,977 posts published within this ecosystem.

This increase in discussions occurred during a series of protests in East Wall, in north inner-city Dublin, against the housing of asylum seekers in the area. This effectively marked the beginning of this period of anti-immigration demonstrations.<sup>47</sup>

The next spike observed in discussions occurred on 10 January 2023, when there were 5,196 posts published referencing the immigration topic. This date coincided with the organisation of anti-immigration protests in Ballymun, north Dublin, against the housing of asylum seekers in a Travelodge hotel in the area.<sup>48</sup>

The second-largest spike in this discussion occurred on 6 February, when there were 5,484 posts published referencing the immigration topic. This date coincided with an anti-immigration protest held in Dublin where over 1,000 people, according to the Irish Times, marched through the city centre and past the offices of news organisations like the Irish Times, Irish Independent, Newstalk and TodayFM before moving to government buildings.<sup>49</sup>

The final spike in this discussion occurred on 18 February, when there were 5,296 posts published that referenced

the immigration topic. This date coincided with an "Ireland for All" rally in Dublin where tens of thousands of people, according to RTÉ News, marched through the city centre to support refugees and oppose racism.<sup>50</sup> Within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem, discussions on this date contained numerous posts that targeted and mocked those in attendance at the rally including politicians like Tánaiste Micheál Martin who was labelled a "traitor" by one Telegram channel.



**Image 7:** Telegram post describing Tánaiste Micheál Martin as a "traitor" for marching in an anti-racism rally in February 2023

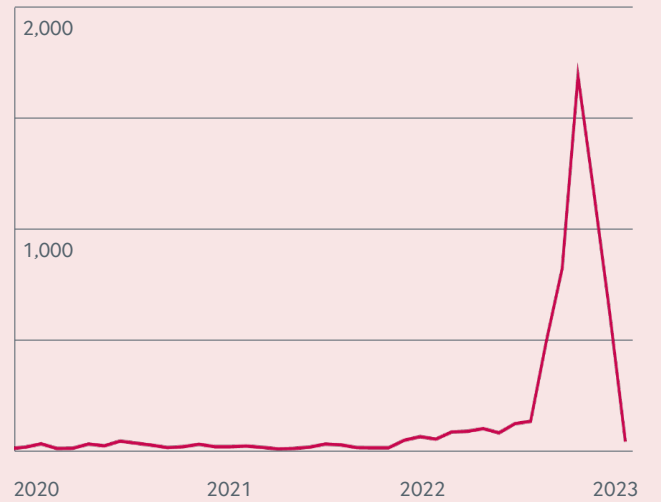
**Analysis**

**Discussions Likening Asylum Seekers to a New 'Plantation'**

Between 1 January 2020 – 3 April 2023, 622 different accounts within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem published 6,348 original posts mentioning the term "plantation." Alongside similar terms like "invasion" and "replacement," these terms are commonly used to describe the arrival of asylum seekers to Ireland and frame this as inherently harmful to the country. These terms are used by anti-immigrant figures to conjure up images of an enemy force that is working to threaten, endanger or eradicate locals.

Plantations have deep historical connotations in Ireland. In the 16th and 17th century, when Ireland was governed

**Figure 12:** Volume of posts mentioning "plantation" within the immigration topic over time from January 2020 - April 2023



by the English Crown, indigenous Irish communities on different parts of the island were systematically removed from their locality and their lands were re-distributed to settlers from Scotland and England.<sup>51</sup>

Anti-immigrant activists who use the term today claim the Irish government, in lockstep with international partners in the European Union or the United Nations, are placing asylum seekers in communities in Ireland to remove or replace locals. In short, as researchers from ISD and elsewhere in Ireland have noted, it is a localised Irish conceptualisation of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory.<sup>52</sup>

Data shows how the term "plantation" has considerably grown in use within this ecosystem since 2020 (see the volume over time graph in figure 12 for more details.) From January 2020 to February 2022 in each month there were, on average, less than two posts published per day mentioning this term. From March 2022 onwards its usage increased. Then, in November 2022, as anti-immigration protests began in Dublin, usage of this term online exploded.

In November 2022, there were an average of 17 posts per day, in December this jumped to 27 posts per day mentioning the term "plantation" in the context of immigration. Then, in January 2023, usage of the term peaked at 54 posts published each day featuring this term. February and March data shows 42 posts and 20 posts published, on average, every day.

The term was used in a variety of ways. The Irish Freedom Party, a minor political party, published a video in December 2022 from a “plantation centre” showing its leader Hermann Kelly standing outside an asylum seeker accommodation centre in Louth. The Irish Freedom Party has repeatedly promoted anti-immigration “plantation” and far-right replacement claims in online posts and Kelly has previously claimed that leading Irish political parties want to “kill Irish kids and replace them with every nationality”.<sup>53</sup>

The Irish Freedom Party also published a video in November 2022 showing asylum seekers arriving in East Wall, Dublin, which it described as the “East Wall plantation with hundreds [of] military-aged males.” These two posts ranked among the most shared Facebook posts within the entire immigration topic, as did a handful of other “plantation” posts.



**Image 8:** Irish Freedom Party post describing the arrival of asylum seekers to Ireland as a “plantation”

Analysis of the most shared URLs referencing “plantation” suggest that the term was also used as a recruitment tool for groups and political parties. 48 posts published during this period that featured the term also included a signup link for Síol na hEireann (Seed of Ireland), an ethnonationalist campaigning group who describe themselves as a Christian nationalist party.<sup>54</sup> 21 such posts included signup links for the National Party and one post warned of the “plantation of your country by military aged, dangerous single males” and encouraged people to visit the website for the Ireland First group to donate or sign up as members.

As an effective byword for “replacement,” use of the term “plantation” serves as a dog whistle to promote white nationalist perspectives within immigration discussions in Ireland and it was used widely by many actors within the

Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem. Yet as analysis here shows, it was particularly useful for groups and political parties, highlighting how these entities use false and misleading claims about asylum seekers to capitalise on anti-immigration sentiment for their own gain.

## Finglas: Case Study Examining the Spread of Anti-Asylum Seeker Disinformation

In late January and early February 2023, as the immigration topic peaked in activity, discussions within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem focused on claims - often based on hearsay and rumours - of sexual violence and gender-based violence carried out by male asylum seekers and migrants against women and children in different localities. Numerous claims citing different locations around the country, explicitly accusing asylum seekers and migrants of acts of violence and criminality, or even just acting seemingly suspicious, proliferated online.

Exploiting the perceived threat of sexual violence posed by male refugees or migrants is a popular trope among anti-immigration groups and activists and ISD has previously tracked its use internationally, including in countries like Sweden and Germany.<sup>55</sup> The adoption and adaptation of this trope within Ireland is unsurprising though no less concerning.

In Ireland, these claims were successful in mobilising relatively large groups of locals in various parts of the country to protest. They were also used to accuse the media, the Gardaí, and the government of covering up these alleged crimes and encouraged and justified calls for violence against asylum seekers and migrants. In various instances, far-right figures played an influential role in helping disseminate and amplify such claims and encouraging further action. One such period in Finglas serves as an illustrative case study for this.

During the week of 27 January – 3 February, Finglas played host to several protests centered at the local Garda station concerning allegations that two asylum seekers or migrants sexually assaulted a white Irish woman. The allegations were fueled by disinformation whereby a false narrative was produced and disseminated across the web by influential online actors.

Gardaí released a statement saying they were looking for a “white Irish male suspect and “not migrants or refugees.” The Gardaí also noted that there was a “significant volume of misinformation and disinformation” in circulation regarding the incident and both they and the media were accused of a cover up as extremists capitalised on the incident to further their own nativist agendas.<sup>56</sup> Calls-to-action for further anti-immigration protests and suspicion and fear towards asylum seekers and migrants were encouraged.<sup>57</sup>

### A: Reports of a Sexual Assault Fuel False Claims

In the early hours of Friday, 27 January, a woman was sexually assaulted in Finglas, according to the Irish Sun, which was the first news organisation to report on the incident a day later.<sup>58</sup> The earliest public social media post identified by ISD that referenced the attack was published on Facebook at 4pm on 27 January. This post, shared with the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem, contained an explicit claim incriminating someone and said “news of a young girl raped... [in] Finglas by 2 forien [sic] nationals last night why is it not in the news or media.”



**Image 9:** Screenshot of 27 January Facebook post about the sexual assault in Finglas

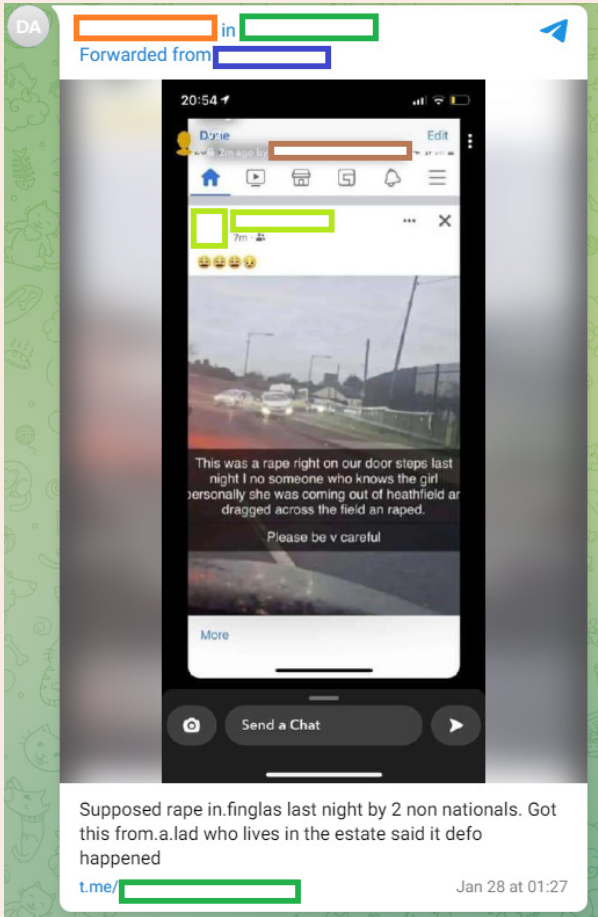
Later that evening a Finglas local, Graham Carey, published a video showing himself driving around the area “trying,” in his own words, “to get information on the rape of a 20-year-old girl last night.”<sup>59</sup> Carey is a supporter and organiser of anti-immigration protests who has a history of posting content online in support of conspiracy theories about COVID-19, asylum seekers and migrants, and promoting far-right ideologies.<sup>60</sup>

During the video, Carey can be heard saying action would be taken against asylum seekers, linking them to the attack. He said “the Irish ain’t gonna take it, they’re gonna kill someone”; “we’re not having you [asylum seekers] in our towns, we’re going to run you out”; and described how the influx of asylum seekers to the area had made it “prime hunting ground for these predators.”

In the same video, Carey blamed the Gardaí for the attack, repeatedly referred to them as pigs and said “when we get yee, the uniform is getting ripped off your back. That’s what’s gonna happen to the Gardaí.”

On the same evening (27 January), social media posts featuring a screenshot taken from a Snapchat post circulated. The Snapchat post referenced the alleged





**Image 10:** Post forwarded within an Irish Telegram chat group that includes the Snapchat screenshot and promotes the claim “two non-nationals” were responsible for the attack

sexual assault and said, “it’s only going to get worse.” Though it did not specifically link the incident to asylum seekers, subsequent posts from other online users did, including Carey who shared this post and simultaneously called for a protest on the evening of 1 February. On the morning of 1 February, Carey was arrested at his home by Gardaí and, on 3 February, he was subsequently charged with incitement to hatred.<sup>61</sup>

Telegram accounts captured in our dataset started to circulate the Snapchat screenshot, alongside claims attributing the attack to “non-nationals”, in the early hours of 28 January. They also promoted the proposed February 1 protest. Over the course of the next seven days, 2,586 posts were published within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem referencing Finglas.

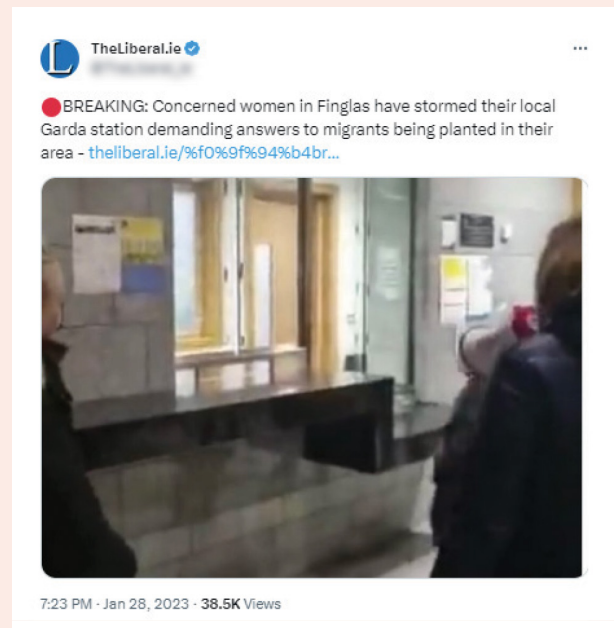
### B: Local Protests and Alternative Media Coverage

On the evening of Saturday, 28 January, groups of protesters gathered outside, and eventually inside, Finglas Garda station seeking information about the attack. Video from the protest captured one attendee saying “we want a female Garda to speak to us now. We want answers.”

Within our dataset, one widely shared post from this event was originally published on Telegram and subsequently shared by 15 other actors across the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem on multiple platforms. The post said: “Rumours have been circulating that a woman was raped in the Finglas area two nights ago which the women are inquiring about. Nothing has been confirmed.”

Footage from the protest was used by alternative media outlets to promote fears about asylum seekers in the area. One such outlet, TheLiberal.ie, published an article stating “concerned women in Finglas have stormed their local Garda station demanding answers to migrants being planted in their area,” adding “the fight back is growing.”

The article did not mention the attack nor make any claim about who was responsible, yet, when shared online by others, the article was used to support that claim. During



**Image 11:** Tweet from TheLiberal.ie linking to their 28 January article about a protest in Finglas Garda station

the week of 27 January – 3 February, this article was shared by 42 different actors within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem.

During the seven-day period, TheLiberal.ie published at least 12 posts on social media reporting on protests related to this incident, receiving over 4,200 shares within this ecosystem. A number of these posts were among the most shared posts in our dataset on numerous days and the activity of TheLiberal.ie, alongside other alternative media outlets that provided ongoing coverage of these protests, all with considerable reach online, amplified support for the protests and contributed to anti-immigrant sentiment being fostered on social media.

Coverage from such outlets, who often position themselves as alternative sources of news which are purportedly more truthful or honest than mainstream media outlets, can help fuel perceptions that mainstream outlets are purposefully not reporting on a story or are deliberately withholding information as part of an orchestrated plan between the media and the state.

### C: A Cover Up and an Information Vacuum

The Irish Sun was the first newspaper to publish a report on this attack late on January 28 and, like the coverage in alternative outlets, this article did not mention anything about a suspect. It is routine journalistic practice for news organisations to not publish details about crime suspects and to typically wait until official communication from police organisations to release information about any suspects under investigation. Yet, within an online ecosystem where false and misleading claims are circulating, this can result in an information vacuum that contributes to suspicion and anger taking hold as evidenced in this instance.

As the Irish Sun article began to circulate within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem, from 28 January and into 29 January, the lack of information about a suspect was interpreted as evidence of a cover up. The article was first shared on Telegram where a channel wrote there were “no arrests and no description” and this post was subsequently shared by four other channels within this dataset. Hermann Kelly of the Irish Freedom Party shared the article on Twitter (X) and said “No description of perpetrators. No wonder local community is upset and angry.”

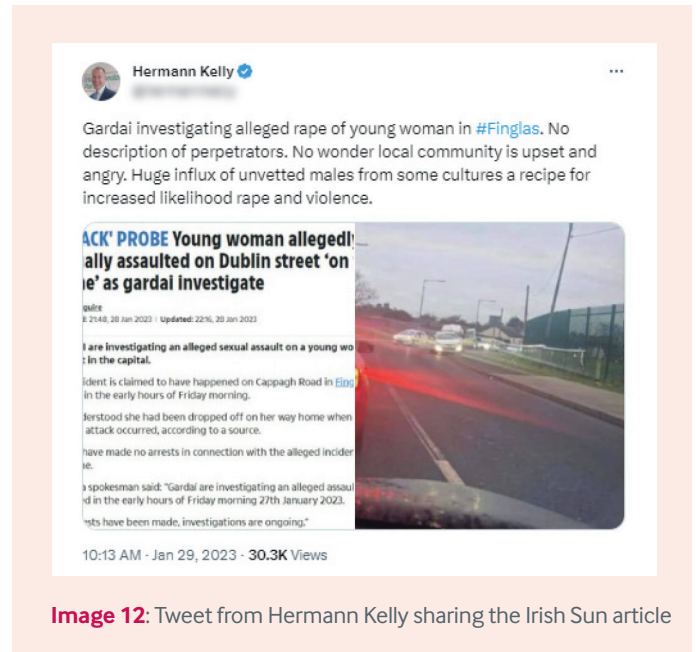


Image 12: Tweet from Hermann Kelly sharing the Irish Sun article



Image 13: Tweet linking to Irish Sun article and attributing the attack to “foreign men”

Others shared the article and used it to support their claim that other news organisations were deliberately not reporting on the attack to avoid identifying an asylum seeker or migrant as the suspect. One such tweet captured in this dataset claimed there was “a news blackout” regarding the incident while another tweet tagged journalists from RTÉ and TheJournal.ie and berated them for not reporting on the attack.

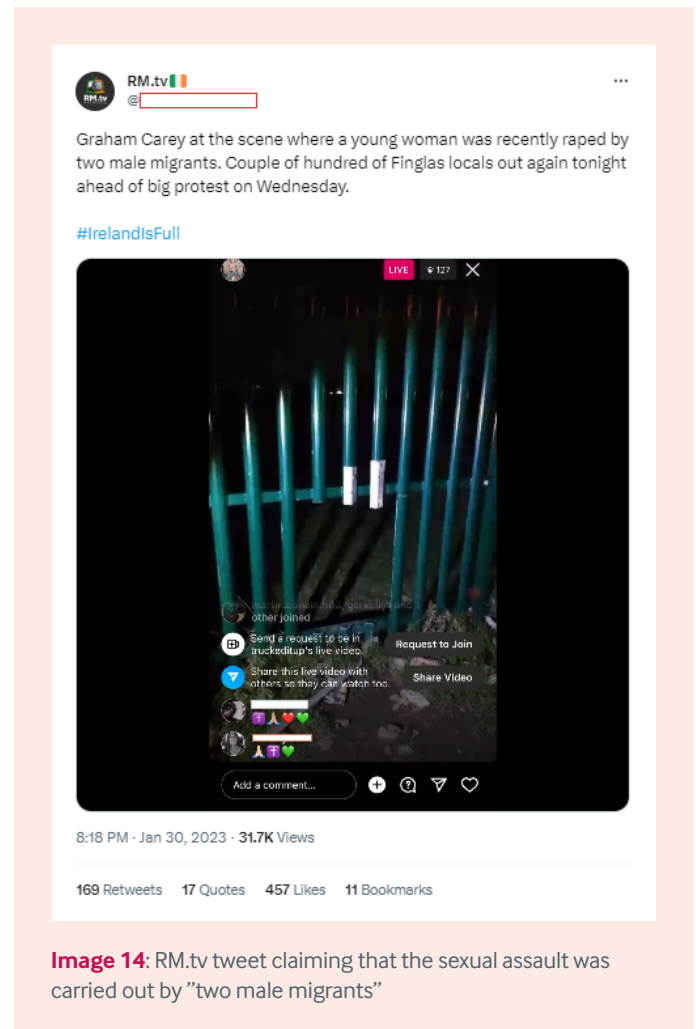
The lack of details about a suspect was also used to make explicit claims about the involvement of migrants in this attack. One prominent actor, with a history of promoting far-right ideologies, posted that “a local girl was reportedly beaten and sexually assaulted by “foreign men”” and another account claimed that “two black men each raped her.” In total, the Irish Sun article was shared by 60 actors within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem.

Allegations of a cover up also followed the publication of an Irish Examiner article on 31 January which confirmed that Gardaí were seeking a “white Irish male” suspect and “not migrants or refugees.”<sup>62</sup> An accompanying Gardaí statement noted that there was a “significant volume of misinformation and disinformation in circulation with regards to this ongoing investigation.”<sup>63</sup> In response, one online user wrote that “the gardaí have helped cover up many crimes in this country, they are not beyond doing the same here.” Crucial to this “significant volume” of false and misleading claims about the attack was how it was amplified online.

### D: Amplification

There are several actors within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem that operate mainly as content aggregators. This means that, rather than belonging to a named identifiable person, group or organisation that produces and publishes original content, they instead remain anonymous and typically post content from others, often using this anonymity to share explicitly false, misleading and harmful claims. Over time, aggregator accounts can build up sizeable followings across platforms and become a highly effective amplification machine within mis- and disinformation ecosystems.

One of the most prominent examples of this in the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem is RM.tv (which also goes by Real Message Eire) which has a presence on Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram and Telegram, and has a



**Image 14:** RM.tv tweet claiming that the sexual assault was carried out by “two male migrants”

combined following of just under 50,000 followers. During 27 January – 3 February, this account published 26 posts about Finglas that were shared by a subsequent 551 actors within this ecosystem. (RM.tv was popular across the entire immigration topic as well. It had one of the top performing Facebook posts and occupied all of the top performing posts on Instagram within this topic.)

On 30 January, for example, as groups gathered in Finglas to protest the attack, RM.tv shared a video from the scene and promoted the claim that footage showed “where a young woman was recently raped by two male migrants.” On the same date, the account published four other posts repeating this claim amplifying this false narrative across platforms. As the week progressed, RM.tv repeatedly shared posters and calls-to-action for various anti-immigration protests in Dublin and nationwide.



Aggregator accounts such as this play an influential role in boosting content that is misleading, lacking context or is completely false. They then typically use such content/claims to incite suspicion and hatred against asylum seekers and migrants and call for protests and further action. Accounts trafficking in sensationalist claims are popular. Beyond the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem, metrics for post views taken directly from Twitter (X), Facebook and Instagram show RM.tv’s 26 Finglas-related posts during 27 January – 3 February received a collective 489,126 views.

International figures can also play a pivotal role in amplifying mis- or disinformation. During this week, four separate posts referencing Finglas and published by Stephen Yaxley Lennon (aka Tommy Robinson), the founder of the English Defence League and a former member of the British National Party and various other far-right groups, were shared within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem.<sup>64</sup>

### E: Far-Right Involvement

At home and abroad, Finglas captured the attention of a range of far-right entities. Most of the figures identified by ISD focused on producing or promoting claims online about the supposed migrant-perpetrated sexual assault in Finglas. They used this incident to propagate wider anti-immigration narratives and protests. Finglas was not an outlier either. These same figures routinely disseminated claims about other incidents of alleged migrant-involved sexual violence and harassment against Irish women and children across Ireland in 2023.

A small number of figures who attended protests in Finglas self-style as “citizen journalists” and used the backdrop of these protests to promote misleading claims and conspiracy theories concerning immigration. In one instance, one such individual, Philip Dwyer, broadcast a video outside Finglas Garda station on 1 February and spoke about “military aged males” flooding the country. Dwyer, who is a former candidate for the National Party, has previously claimed that the government is made up of “globalist shells” who are “actively seeking to replace” Irish people.<sup>65</sup> In his video, Dwyer described how asylum seekers and migrants in Ireland want, in his words, to “breed us out of existence” and claimed that “men [are] being



**Image 15:** RM.tv tweet promoting anti-immigration protests in early February



**Image 16:** National Party tweet encouraging people to join the party to “end the plantation”



**Image 17:** Facebook post claiming that a “Muslim Jihadi” was responsible for the attack in Finglas

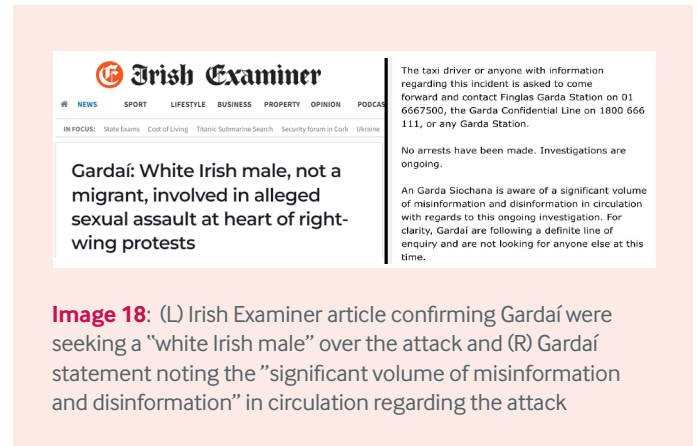
shipped in for a reason” as part of a sinister “replacement migration” plan by the “government running the country on behalf of the World Economic Forum.”

Political parties were also active in the discussion. The Irish Freedom Party shared the Irish Sun article and stated it included “no descriptions” of the suspect. The National Party also shared Finglas-tagged content alongside signup links encouraging people to join the party to “end the plantation.”<sup>66</sup>

Interestingly, it appears the Finglas attack was even used to spread hateful anti-Muslim narratives by far-right accounts in other regions of the world. Early on 29 January, Hindu ethnonationalist accounts online began circulating a post that claimed that police in Ireland were investigating a “Muslim Jihadi suspect” for the sexual assault of a woman in Finglas, adding that protests against the “Muslim migrant “plantation”” were spreading across Ireland.

## F: Culmination

After a peak in this discussion on 1 February, the number of posts referencing the attack in Finglas began to decrease. While it’s difficult to pinpoint a reason for this decrease, the



**Image 18:** (L) Irish Examiner article confirming Gardaí were seeking a “white Irish male” over the attack and (R) Gardaí statement noting the “significant volume of misinformation and disinformation” in circulation regarding the attack

publication of the Irish Examiner’s article that confirmed Gardaí were seeking a “white Irish male” in relation to the attack quite possibly played a role in curbing the spread of explicit asylum seeker and migrant-related claims about the ethnicity of the suspect.

It’s also notable that after 1 February most of the alternative media outlets, content aggregator accounts and far-right entities active in the discussion did not post content referencing the attack. Rather, they shifted attention away from Finglas and towards promoting upcoming anti-immigration protests in other parts of Dublin and across the country.

## Role of Alternative Media: Gript, TheLiberal.ie and the Irish Inquiry

Alternative media outlets are at the core of the immigration topic. Such outlets typically produce content featuring commentary, reporting and investigations that promote nativism. This can take the form of supportive coverage of anti-immigration protests and speaking to locals in an area over their concerns about asylum seekers, but it can also often veer into conspiratorial, polarising and fearmongering coverage. Such outlets are highly adept at operating online and creating content that is often widely shared by supporters.

Since the beginning of the anti-immigration protests in November 2022, Gript has published an average of 48 posts per week across Facebook, Twitter (X), YouTube, Telegram and Instagram that reference this topic. Four of the ten most-shared URLs within the immigration topic linked to articles from Gript and five of the most-viewed YouTube videos within this topic were published by Gript.



Analysis of the most shared domains within the immigration topic (see table 2 above) illustrates the popularity of alternative media content within these discussions. Gript and TheLiberal.ie received 17.6k and 10.8k shares respectively placing them ahead of news organisations like the Irish Times (8.2k), The Irish Independent (5k) and the RTÉ (3.7k). This shows that when actors within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem discussed or engaged with media content about immigration, they often opted for Gript or TheLiberal.ie over mainstream news outlets.

Gript's taglines across different social media platforms describes itself as a source of "uncomfortable reading" and "unfiltered" news that seeks to "challenge the consensus." A review of its immigration coverage during this period found that, in offering what is described as "unfiltered" content, Gript has published and failed to correct the record on false and misleading content, as evidenced in the Dungarvan and East Wall examples below.

Gript's most popular article, shared in 196 different posts within our dataset, concerned an alleged sexual assault in Dungarvan in February 2023. The article described how the family of the victim were upset that Gardaí allegedly "asked them to take down a social media post informing other women that foreign nationals had been involved."

In the article, the family described the alleged assault as a "vicious attack" by a "gang" and said they had found the response of the Gardaí to be "very upsetting." However, in March, Gardaí arrested a woman for allegedly "knowingly making a false report" to Gardaí following an allegation of an attempted assault in Dungarvan in February. Gardaí said they are not aware of any "spate of attacks by foreign nationals as suggested" and, like the earlier incident in Finglas, Gardaí said there was a "significant volume of misinformation, disinformation and fake news in circulation in relation" to this incident.<sup>67</sup>

Before it was the subject of coverage by Gript, the claim was first published on Facebook and was then shared across Telegram communities associated with regularly disseminating anti-immigrant content. From there it was picked up far-right activists and then featured in coverage from Gript and other alternative media outlets like TheLiberal.ie and the Irish Inquiry.



**Image 19:** Gript's Dungarvan article shared on Telegram on 22 February in a post claiming Gardaí were "suppressing the truth about foreign national crimes, attacks and sexual assaults in our country"

Gript later published an article in March reporting on the arrest of a woman for making a "false report" yet did not reference their February report in this article nor did they add an update or correction to the original February article.<sup>68</sup>

The Irish Inquiry produced content in February supporting the initial claim that was shared within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem. In a 21 February video published online, the Irish Inquiry said "there was an attempted gang rape of a young lady [in Dungarvan] by four migrant men. We're fairly confident that these [suspects] are four foreign migrant men and I ask the question why aren't the Gardaí putting out a description of these men so they can be identified to prevent any incidents like this occurring again."

Gript's second most-popular article, shared in 184 posts within our dataset, was published on 22 November during the first set of anti-immigrant protests in East Wall, Dublin. The article was an opinion piece in which editor John McGuirk described how the "establishment in Ireland" was attempting to shame working class communities in the area for protesting and claimed that they ignored the concerns of locals. McGuirk wrote that the protests "received basically no mainstream media coverage in Ireland. Certainly, they have mostly

escaped the attention of the national broadcaster [RTÉ], and the country's paper of record [Irish Times]. Why is that?"

McGuirk's framing portrayed a "chattering class" media who looked down on locals and, were, in his view, not interested in hearing from them. Except this claim is misleading.<sup>69</sup> Rather than no coverage from the "country's paper of record," a term commonly used for the Irish Times, this newspaper in fact did report from the protests and published an article on 20 November.<sup>70</sup>

Similarly, before Gript published McGuirk's opinion piece on 22 November, RTÉ News published an online article from the first days of the East Wall protests on 19 November; included coverage from the same protests on its main evening TV news broadcast at 9pm on 19 November; featured two news packages on its flagship current affairs radio programmes, Morning Ireland and Drivetime, on RTÉ Radio 1 on 21 November.<sup>71</sup>

Gript is immensely popular within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem especially amongst those discussing immigration. However, as this analysis has demonstrated, Gript has published and failed to correct the record on false and misleading content as evidenced in the Dungarvan and East Wall examples detailed above. Although Gript is not responsible for how their content is shared online, nor the commentary of others in relation to their content, shares of these two stories included comments which promoted hostility towards asylum seekers and migrants, and distrust in the media.

### Protest held over housing of asylum seekers in Dublin

Updated / Saturday, 19 Nov 2022 18:40



A group of between 200 and 300 people, many local residents, stopped traffic on the road during the protest

**Image 20:** RTÉ online news article reporting on East Wall, published 19 November 2022

# Russia-Ukraine Conflict Topic Analysis

Extremists from across the political spectrum have long been easy targets for deception by pro-Kremlin information operations. Since its rebranding in 2009, Russian state media outlet RT (formerly Russia Today) has repeatedly used conspiracy theories as a tool of public diplomacy, attracting international mis- and/or disinformation and conspiratorial communities and positioning itself as an alternative to mainstream and local media among anti-establishment groups. It's therefore not surprising that pro-Kremlin narratives are often found among such groups in various countries.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led pro-Kremlin actors to intensify their efforts to spread alternative narratives, seeking to foster international support for the invasion. In the following 15 months of war, ISD identified numerous false narratives circulating among mis- and/or disinformation communities that contribute to creating and reinforcing negative stereotypes about Ukrainians and the current government.<sup>72</sup> These narratives seek to blame the US, NATO, or the West in general for the current conflict and often deny, deflect or downplay evidence of atrocities committed by Russian forces.<sup>73</sup>

## Key Findings

ISD aimed to examine the conversations that took place within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The analysis found:

- Conversations about the Russia-Ukraine conflict were the fourth most popular topic in the period analysed, accounting for 3.3% of all content posted within this ecosystem.
- Twitter (X) was the preferred social media platform for discussions about the war in Ukraine. In the timeframe analysed, 396.8k posts out of 437.5k were posted on Twitter (X), i.e. 90% of the content about the Russia-Ukraine conflict came from Twitter (X).
- Discussions about the Russia-Ukraine conflict spiked in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, and after an initial decline, increased again in November 2022 with the onset of the protests against asylum seekers in Ireland - especially in discussions about Ukrainian refugees.
- Analysis of the most shared domains in discussions about the war found that the website for Russian

- state media outlet RT was the fourth most shared domain in the dataset, despite the media outlet being sanctioned and blocked in the EU since March 2022.
- Popular narratives about the war in Ukraine largely echo pro-Kremlin talking points regarding the supposed role of Nazis in governing the country and the alleged responsibility of NATO and the West in instigating the conflict. However, these narratives also aim to downplay the severity of the war and fuel animosity towards Ukrainian refugees by suggesting they receive preferential treatment over the local population.

## Key Stats

**Table 9:** Total records and accounts mentioning the Russia-Ukraine conflict within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem

Platform	Total records	Total accounts
Facebook	8,458	120
Instagram	371	16
Twitter (X)	396,878	1,137
Telegram	31,791	99
YouTube	105	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>437,603</b>	<b>1,388</b>

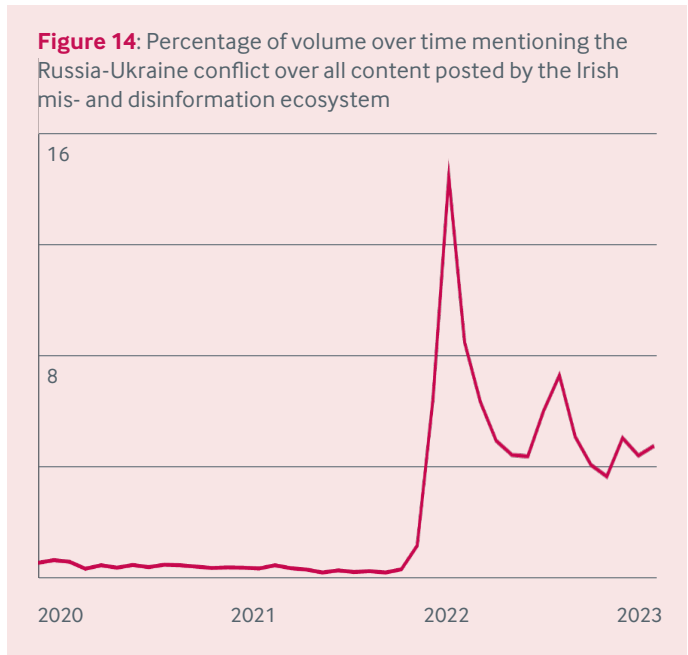
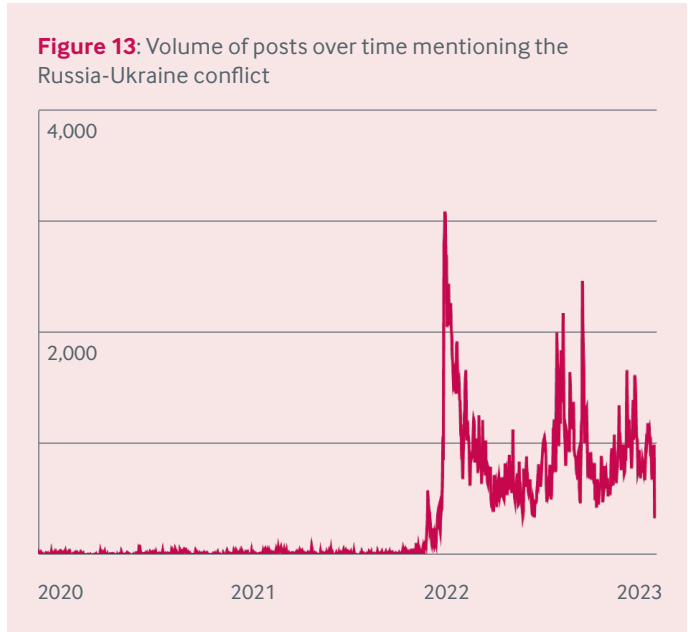
### Trends in Topic Discussion Over Time

Conversations about the Russia-Ukraine conflict immediately spiked after Russia's invasion on 24 February 2022, when content referencing the Russia-Ukraine conflict related keywords reached 15% of the total volume of content produced within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem. Given the dominance of events in Ukraine during this period, it is unsurprising that users within this ecosystem were discussing the topic at such high volume.

The immediate unified outrage expressed by Western governments and institutions against the Russian invasion instantly compelled anti-establishment and mis- and/or disinformation groups and actors to take an opposing view. Early reactions contained a mixture of narratives parroting Kremlin talking points about alleged neo-Nazi forces killing ethnic Russians in Ukraine. This was accompanied by criticism of Western double standards and the difference in the outrage expressed towards the invasion of Ukraine and perceived silence on other injustices, in particular human rights abuses in Palestine.



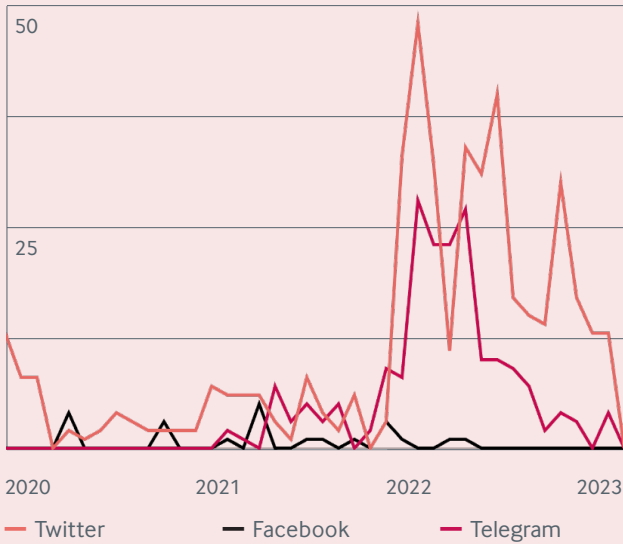
Analysis of the most shared online media outlets in the Russia-Ukraine conflict topic found that the Russian state media RT was among the most shared. It is worth



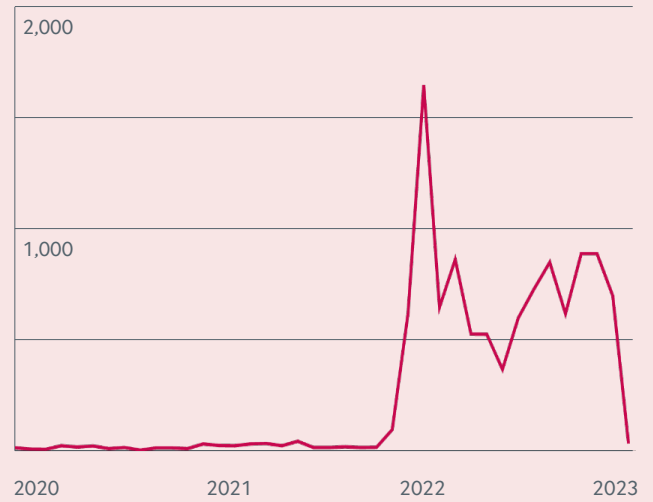
noting that RT was sanctioned in the European Union in March 2022, forcing the outlet to suspend its broadcasting activities in the jurisdiction. However, links to the domain were still shared by the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem on Twitter (X) and Telegram (and to a lesser degree on Facebook) after the website was officially blocked in Ireland (see figure 15).<sup>74</sup>

Besides being mentioned in discussions about the war in Ukraine, analysis of the most mentioned media outlets across all topics identified RT as the 36th most

**Figure 15:** Mention of the RT domain in original posts from 1 January 2020 to 3 April 2023



**Figure 16:** Volume over time of conversations including both Russia-Ukraine conflict’s related keywords and conspiracy keywords (monthly)



shared, with 3,670 mentions in total. Among these, 2,075 shares were to content related to the health topic, 1,099 to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and 229 to the conspiracy topic. This indicates that, during this research period, RT was used within this ecosystem as a reference point for a wider range of topics than just the war in Ukraine.

**Analysis**

**Conspiracies Theories about the Invasion of Ukraine**

The aftermath of the invasion was a key moment in the emergence of new conspiracies surrounding the war. An analysis of a combination of both Ukraine-related keywords and conspiracy theory-related keywords revealed a spike in content in March 2022, in the immediate aftermath of the invasion.

The most viewed posts published in the aftermath of the invasion on Telegram sought to give an alternative explanation on the war. A post that garnered over 324K views presents a series of screenshots featuring the statements of US political figures denouncing the invasion of Ukraine. The statements were presented as proof that “deep state players” were protecting the interests of Ukraine. Another post published on the day after the invasion which garnered 21k views links to an article posted by disinformation website Activist Post<sup>75</sup> titled “Order Out Of Chaos: How The Ukraine Conflict

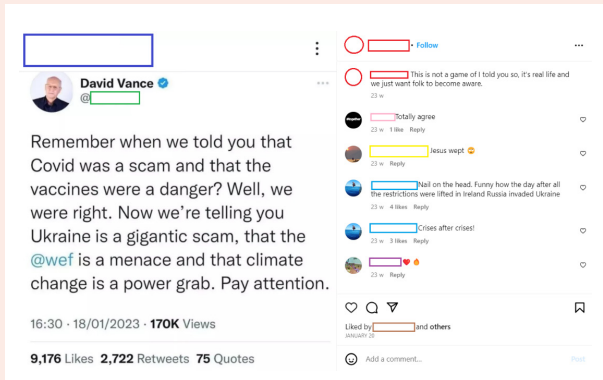


**Image 22:** A tweet claims that the war in Ukraine is a “big lie” orchestrated by “the elites and mass media”

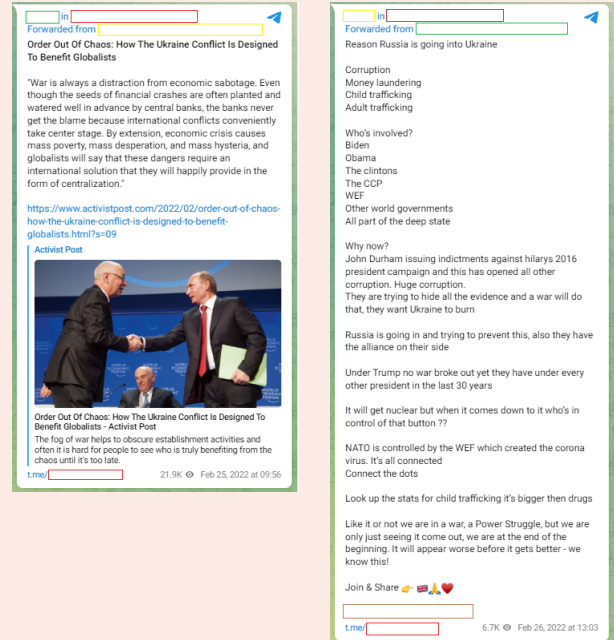
Is Designed To Benefit Globalists” which argues that “conflicts between the East and the West are engineered” to allegedly give rise to a ‘new world order’.

Other prominent content about the war in Ukraine sought to minimise and raise scepticism about the gravity of the conflict. The most popular tweet about the conflict, which received over 7K retweets and over 18K likes, featured a video of young people partying in Kyiv with the mocking comment “#Ukraine war zone. My heart bleeds for the suffering in Kiev.” Another highly retweeted post on Twitter (X) posted in May 2022 reads: “Can anyone tell me why

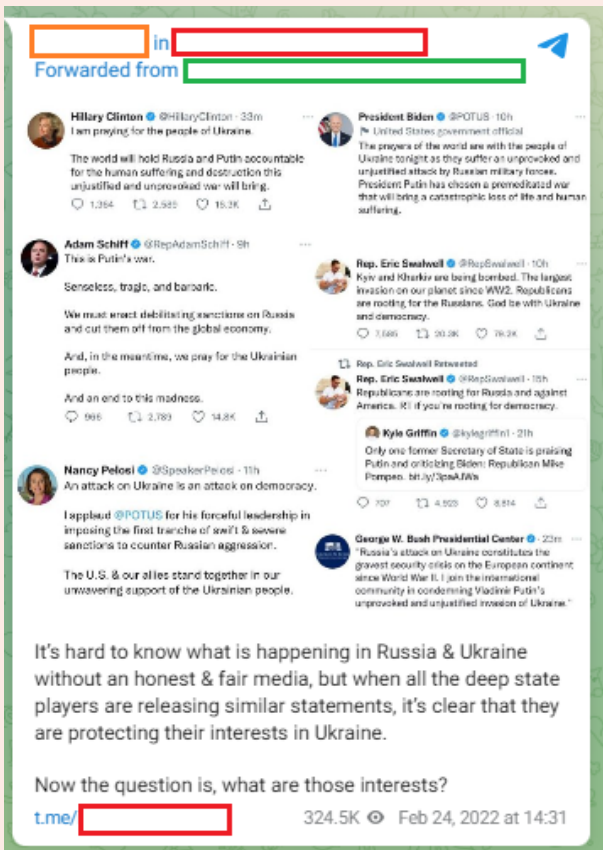




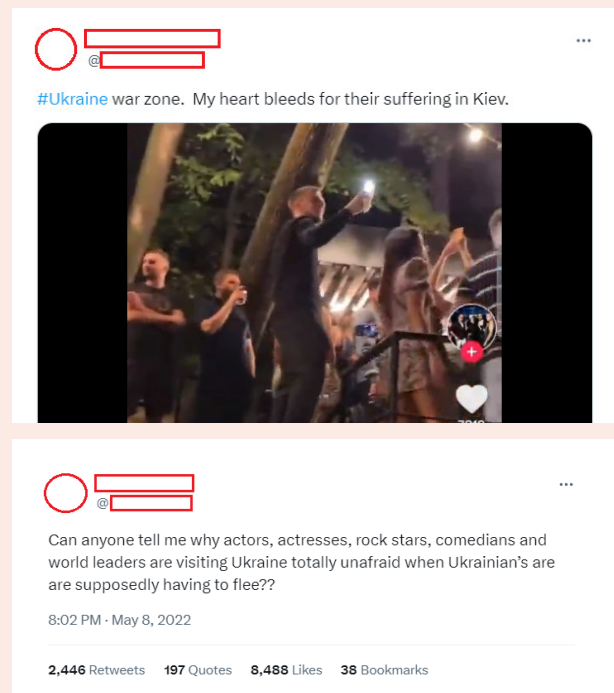
**Image 23:** A post on Instagram supporting a conspiracy theory which claims that “Ukraine is a gigantic scam”.



**Image 25:** Two prominent Telegram posts that claim the Ukraine conflict was designed to benefit specific interests



**Image 24:** A post that received over 320K views on Telegram claims that “the deep state players” are protecting their interests in Ukraine



**Image 26:** Two Twitter (X) posts that minimise the severity of the war in Ukraine

actors, actresses, rock stars, comedians and world leaders are visiting Ukraine totally unafraid when Ukrainian's are are [sic] supposedly having to flee??".

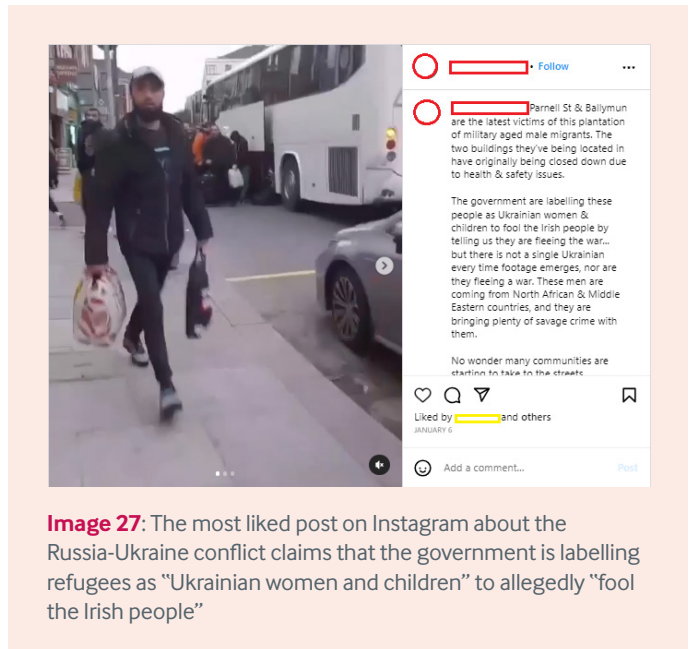
### Ukraine and Immigration

After a decline in discussions about the war among the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem just a few months after the full-scale invasion, the topic of Ukraine regained importance with the onset of protests against the housing of asylum seekers in Ireland in November 2022. Of the ten most viewed YouTube videos about the Russia-Ukraine conflict, seven revolved around immigration, in particular Ireland's decision to welcome Ukrainian refugees. Of these, three videos were produced and published by Derek Blighe, an anti-immigration activist and founder of the political party Ireland First. Blighe has previously promoted far-right "plantation" narratives and claimed in online posts that "third world" migrants are replacing Irish people.<sup>76</sup> These videos appear to aim to stoke resentment against Ukrainian refugees by highlighting their alleged preferential treatment and contrasting this with the perceived neglect of the Irish population by the government.

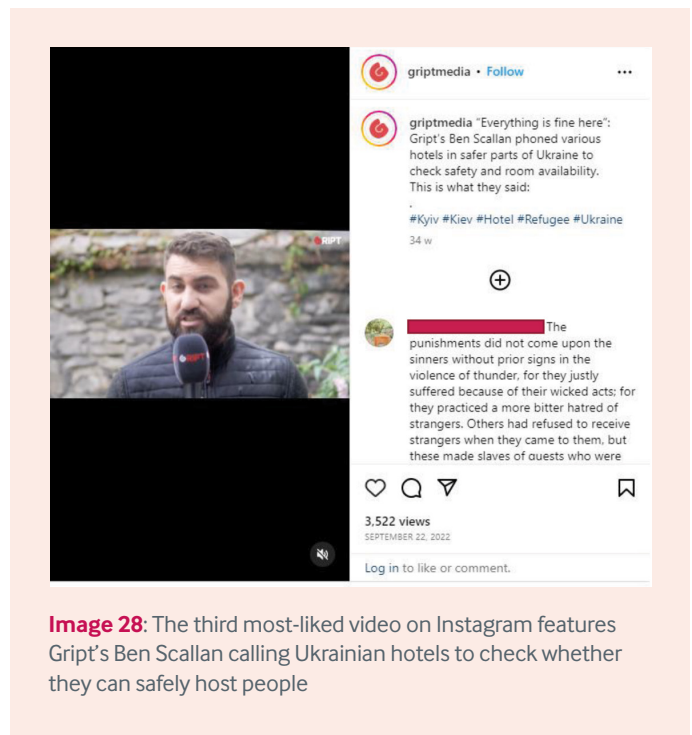
Blighe's most watched video, with over 28K views, is a livestream featuring him approaching a group of people at a pro-Ukraine event. During the event, Blighe confronts the participants, including some Ukrainians, about Ukrainians supposedly having "more rights" than the local Irish population. Fragments of this video were subsequently shared on TikTok, along with images of participants at the event, who were doxxed and accused of "assaulting" Blighe.

Blighe shared two more videos on YouTube, which included information about his fundraising campaign to send Irish homeless people to affordable hotels in western Ukraine. The underlying theme in most of Blighe's videos is the alleged discrimination suffered by the Irish population for the benefit of asylum seekers or refugees. In one video, which garnered over 4K views, Blighe enters a donation centre for Ukrainians and steals a hat and a pair of gloves, allegedly for his children, and complains about the centre discriminating against the local population. Blighe was later charged with theft.<sup>77</sup>

Prominent posts on other social media platforms complained about the large presence of Ukrainian men



**Image 27:** The most liked post on Instagram about the Russia-Ukraine conflict claims that the government is labelling refugees as "Ukrainian women and children" to allegedly "fool the Irish people"



**Image 28:** The third most-liked video on Instagram features Gript's Ben Scallan calling Ukrainian hotels to check whether they can safely host people

among the new wave of refugees, while also alleging that many refugees are entering Ireland with fake Ukrainian passports. The most liked video on Instagram about the war claimed that the government is labelling refugees as Ukrainian women and children “to fool the Irish people” and alleged that no Ukrainians can be seen from footage of refugees arriving in Ireland.

Discussions about Ireland’s housing crisis also featured prominently in content related to Ukrainian refugees. This content often criticised the renovation of hotels to accommodate Ukrainian refugees while Irish people struggle to afford housing. On Instagram, the third most liked post included a video posted by Gript. In the video Ben Scallan, a Gript host and former election candidate for the Irish Freedom Party, called hotels in Ukraine to inquire about safety and argued that refugees in Ireland should be hosted in western Ukraine instead.<sup>78</sup>

## Conspiracy Topic Analysis

Conspiracy theories are explanations for events or phenomena that invoke a sinister plot orchestrated by powerful actors. While not every conspiracy theory can be dismissed as nonsense, the ones discussed in this report, and the ones that tend to be the most popular within mis- and disinformation communities, portray an unrealistic version of reality. They usually describe schemes involving impossible levels of coordination between elites and institutions and are based on speculation as opposed to solid evidence. Those who subscribe to conspiratorial beliefs tend to identify patterns and intentionality where they don't exist and therefore believe in a world where everything is connected, nothing happens by accident, and nothing is as it seems.<sup>79</sup>

Conspiracy theories play a crucial role within mis- and disinformation communities. Powered by people's lack of trust in elites and institutions, they often act as the connective tissue to tie various false claims together into an intriguing narrative. For example, the conspiratorial narrative that the entire pandemic was a part of a sinister agenda to take away people's rights or depopulate the world makes it easier to believe standalone false claims, such as those claiming that vaccines are unsafe or masks are useless. In this case, belief in conspiracy theories can contribute to people's decisions to dismiss lifesaving medical treatments.

Similarly, they play a key role within extremist movements of all kinds and are often used to scapegoat minority communities, encourage hate, and radicalise people towards violence. The white nationalist Great Replacement conspiracy theory, for example, claims that there is a deliberate plot in place to replace the native populations of Western or predominantly white countries with migrants.<sup>80</sup> This theory was a key radicalising force for several mass shootings in recent years targeting migrants, Muslims and people of colour – notably in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019 and Buffalo, New York in 2022.<sup>81,82</sup>

Conspiracy theories are a powerful force as they are usually based on a grain of truth that can be used to distort reality. For example, the Great Replacement theory points to the changing demographics in Western countries, but instead of explaining this as being the result of complex social, political and economic conditions that contribute

towards people leaving or fleeing their homelands, the conspiratorial narrative presents these changes as being intentional and part of a larger plot to disenfranchise white and native populations.

As the so-called connective tissue within movements, conspiracy theories tend to transcend subject matters and ideologies and can be used to explain issues related to health, politics and immigration all at the same time.

### Key Findings

ISD aimed to examine the conversations that took place within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem related to conspiracy theories. The analysis found:

- Conversations about conspiracies constitute 1.7% of the total discussion within this ecosystem.
- Conspiracy discussions overlapped the most with health (24.5%) and Irish politics (8.6%), followed by immigration (6.8%).
- Conspiracy narratives referencing the World Economic Forum and its Great Reset initiative were the most popular within ISD's dataset, mentioned in highly performing posts across platforms.
- Immigration was commonly referred to as part of a "globalist" conspiracy, with this narrative becoming particularly popular in January and February 2023 as protests were forming across Ireland against asylum seekers and refugees.
- There is evidence of extremist conspiracy narratives within ISD's dataset, namely mentions of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory and the related Kalergi Plan conspiracy theory. ISD also found over 100 instances where neo-Nazi propaganda films were shared and discussed.
- QAnon was found to be particularly popular on Telegram, with six of the top-viewed posts within the conspiracy topic directly referencing the conspiracy movement. Explicit mentions of QAnon were also noted from some influential figures.

## Key Stats

**Table 10:** Total records and accounts within the conspiracy topic

Platform	Total records	Total accounts
Facebook	8,478	127
Instagram	255	17
Twitter (X)	196,193	1,103
Telegram	17,076	103
YouTube	75	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>222,077</b>	<b>1,370</b>

## Trends in Topic Discussion Over Time

The volume over time graph (figure 17) tells an interesting story about the conspiracy topic within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem. Although discussions of the conspiracy topic were steady throughout the pandemic, hovering between 1-1.5% of the total conversation within this ecosystem, the largest increase was seen from the beginning of 2022 onwards – when pandemic restrictions were lifted. A closer examination of the types of discussions at this time reveals that conversations related to the Great Reset and the World Economic Forum dominated mentions (see more on this below).

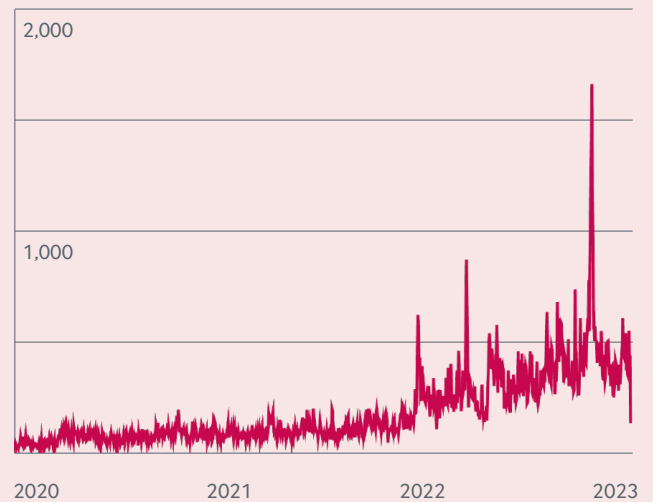
Conspiracy narratives were also used when discussing immigration. The large spike seen in the middle of January 2023 coincides with the World Economic Forum’s annual meeting in Davos, and the day Taoiseach Leo Varadkar attended the meeting. At this point, conspiracy conversations made up 3% of the total posts within this ecosystem – the highest at any point.

## Analysis

### Global Conspiracy Narratives

Global conspiracy theories are those that claim that a small group of people are engaging in a plot to change the entire world. This supposed plot has been given different names, been ascribed to different groups and linked to various sinister goals over the years. Centuries ago, these plots were blamed on the Illuminati and the Freemasons. In the early 20th century, the Jews were at the centre of these plans. Since then, it has come to be referred to as the New World Order and the plan for a one world government.<sup>83</sup> At other times it is linked to United Nations sustainability plans such as Agenda 21

**Figure 17:** Volume of posts discussing the conspiracy topic over time



**Figure 18:** Percentage of total conversation mentioning conspiracy keywords (per month)



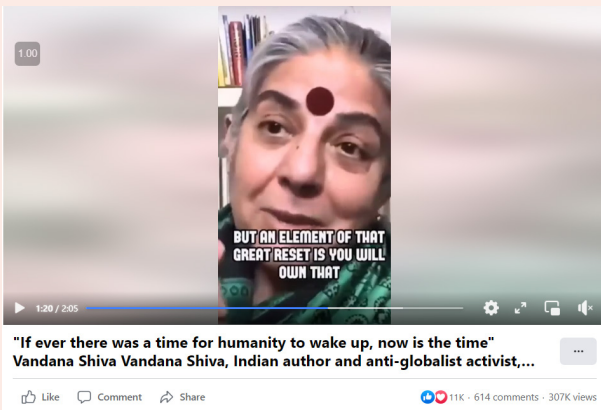
or Agenda 2030 and claimed to be part of a fake “green agenda”.

In more recent years, it is the World Economic Forum (WEF), the forum’s founder Klaus Schwab and its Great Reset initiative that have taken the leading role within these supposed conspiracies, where they are blamed for planning the COVID-19 pandemic, or being part of a global plot for a totalitarian socialist scheme which will strip people of their rights.<sup>84</sup>



On Facebook, four of the top ten most-shared posts within the conspiracy topic dataset directly mention either the Great Reset or the WEF. The top Facebook post, from August 2022, featured a video of Indian environmental activist Vandana Shiva speaking about supposed plans to create a Chinese-style social credit system, which she links to Klaus Schwab and the Great Reset (see image 29).

The fifth most-shared Facebook post contained similar sentiments, but were this time expressed by Malcolm Roberts, an Australian Senator who has promoted denial about climate change.<sup>85</sup> Roberts claimed that the Great Reset will lead to people “[dying] with nothing”. Combined, both of these videos had over 350,000 views. Another video, the sixth-most-shared post on Facebook, puts forward the idea that the WEF is planning a major global cyberattack.



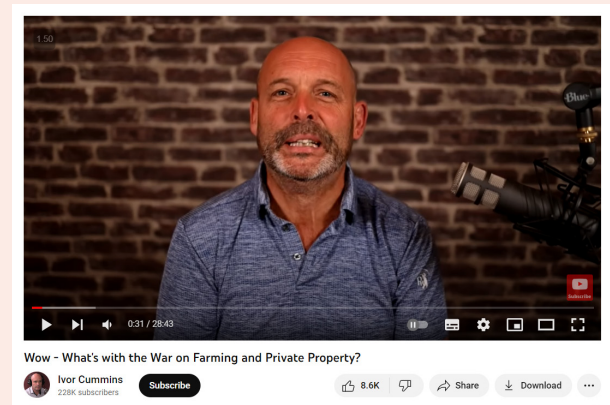
**Image 29:** The top-shared post on Facebook in the conspiracy topic

The WEF and the Great Reset also feature heavily in the top-viewed videos on YouTube in the conspiracy topic. The top video (see image 30), with over 80,000 views, is one in which Ivor Cummins discusses an article originally published by the Epoch Times, a media organisation believed to be linked to the Falun Gong religious movement. The Epoch Times has become known both for its opposition to the Chinese Communist Party, and for its dissemination of misinformation and conspiracy theories.<sup>86</sup>

The article quotes several people working for organisations that oppose the scientific consensus on climate change

and presents an elaborate conspiracy narrative that links Agenda 2030, the WEF and the Chinese Communist Party to a so-called “war on farmers” that aims to seize control over the world’s food production.

Three other videos in the top ten YouTube posts also mentioned varying types of conspiracies involving the WEF and the Great Reset, as did four out of the top ten most-shared posts on Twitter (X), making this the most popular conspiracy narrative in ISD’s dataset.

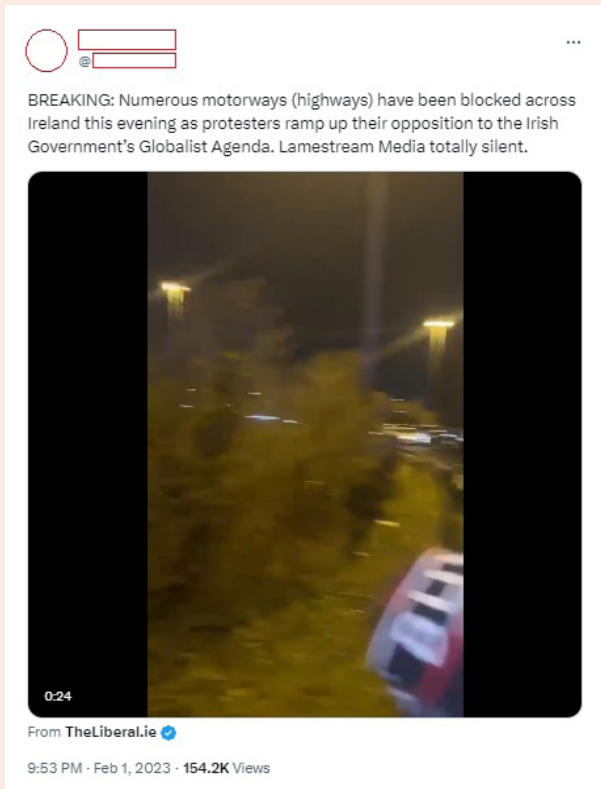


**Image 30:** The top-viewed video on YouTube in the conspiracy topic

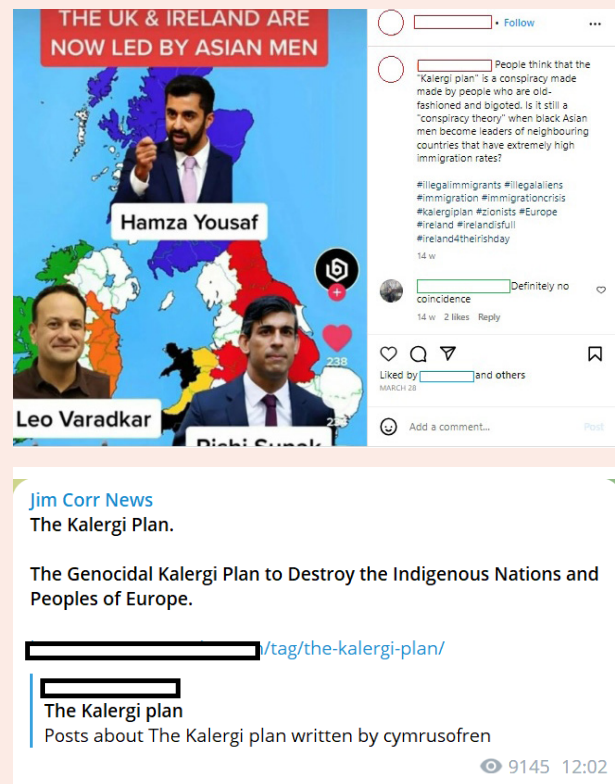
### Extremist Conspiracy Narratives

The term “globalists” is often used as a catch-all to describe those orchestrating sinister agendas around the world. In ISD’s dataset, the word was largely used to describe supposed plots linked to mass immigration. Within the top ten most-shared posts on Twitter (X), for example, seven referred to some form of “globalist agenda” that was claimed to be responsible for the influx of asylum seekers and refugees to Ireland. Of these seven posts, all were posted in the last week of January and first week of February 2023, when anti-asylum seeker mobilisation was at a peak across the country (see figure 18).

References to “globalism” also featured prominently in highly engaged posts from the National Party on both Instagram and YouTube. In an April 2020 Instagram post, the National Party blamed “globalism” for the COVID-19 pandemic, while a propaganda video posted by the party on YouTube in 2023 said “globalism” was to blame for a “demographic war upon our people.”



**Image 31:** The second most-shared post on Twitter (X) in the conspiracy topic



**Image 32:** Posts on Instagram and Telegram referring to the Kalgari Plan conspiracy theory

Outside of the use of dog whistle terms like “globalists” to describe agendas related to immigration, there was also evidence of more explicit references to extremist conspiracy theories. The Great Replacement conspiracy theory received a mention within the top Twitter (X) posts, while the related, but more extreme and antisemitic narrative, the Kalgari Plan conspiracy theory was referenced over 110 times across platforms.<sup>87</sup>

Also worthy of note within this topic analysis was the presence of references to neo-Nazi propaganda films. These films, which ISD is not naming in order to prevent the further spread of hateful or extremist content, present a warped version of 20th century history where Jews were the cause of both World Wars and Hitler is presented as a saviour trying to save Germany and the West. These films are often used to lure people into supporting antisemitic beliefs, neo-Nazism and Holocaust denial. ISD found over 100 references to these films, including many that contain direct links to watch them.

### QAnon Conspiracy Narratives

QAnon’s popularity exploded in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic and evolved again during the summer of 2020 into the more mainstream Save The Children movement (which has no relation to the international NGO Save The Children).<sup>88</sup> Following action taken by social media companies to curb its popularity following the storming of the US Capitol in Washington on 6 January 2021, QAnon splintered, but its influence amongst communities prone to discussing and promoting mis- and disinformation has been long lasting.

Within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem, remnants of this influence are obvious, especially on Telegram, where six of the top ten most-viewed posts within the conspiracy topic made direct mention to an aspect of QAnon or its precursor ‘Pizzagate’.<sup>89</sup> Four of these six posts came from a Telegram group for Irish “parents and teachers”. The top viewed post on Telegram used the QAnon phrase “The Great Awakening” to describe

discovering the “truth” about ivermectin – a drug that was falsely claimed to be a miracle drug against COVID-19.<sup>90</sup>

Three other top-viewed Telegram posts contained links to dozens of QAnon propaganda films. In two other top-viewed posts, QAnon talking points, namely the mentions of adrenochrome and child trafficking, were linked to a conspiracy theory about the War in Ukraine (see image 33). Adrenochrome is a substance that followers of QAnon believe is extracted from children during violent rituals and used as an anti-aging substance.

Several posts explicitly referencing QAnon also appeared in ISD’s Twitter (X) dataset. Jim Corr posed the question “What is Adrenochrome?” in March 2020 and three months later posted about his belief in Pizzagate (see image 34). John Bowler, a former candidate for the Irish Freedom Party, also used the QAnon-related hashtag #WWG1WGA (Where We Go One, We Go All) in a 7 May 2020 tweet.<sup>91</sup>

Ukraine, keep in mind that Joe and Hunter Biden have assets located next to Eastern Europe’s second longest tunnel system through which drugs, weapons, children, people and adrenochrome are trafficked.  
Odessa (Ukraine) -> Belarus -> Lithuania -> Latvia -> Estonia -> Finland -> Sweden  
Now do you know why Biden Joe has land there?  
  
32,000 miles of D.U.M.B.S.  
  
Now you understand why the Russian bear wants to conquer Europe.

**Image 33:** A post utilising QAnon themes to outline a conspiracy theory about the war in Ukraine

The image shows three screenshots of tweets from Twitter (X). The first tweet is from Jim Corr (@jimcorr) dated March 23, 2020, at 1:38 PM. The text reads: "Superstar Robbie Williams believes #Pizzagate 'conspiracy theory' is true. So do most people including myself who took the time to look into it. But not one arrest has been made, nor a proper investigation conducted. #pedogate #wikileaks". The second tweet is also from Jim Corr (@jimcorr) dated March 23, 2020, at 1:38 PM. The text reads: "What is Adrenochrome?". The third tweet is from the Irish Freedom Party (KERRY) - John Bowler (@irishfreedomparty) dated May 7, 2020, at 8:26 PM. The text reads: "BOOYAH!!!!!! Justice is finally served!! The corrupt DOJ, the corrupt FBI, and the corrupt Mueller investigative team are ALL being exposed! Now, let the REAL prosecutions begin!!! The drain plug has been pulled on the swamp! WWG1WGA!!!!!!". A quote tweet from AP The Associated Press (@AP) dated May 7, 2020, at 8:26 PM is also visible, with the text: "BREAKING: Justice Department is dropping criminal case against ex-Trump adviser Michael Flynn, according to court filing obtained by AP. The prosecution has been a rallying cry for the president in attacking FBI Russia investigation. apne.ws/8iuVvMN".

**Image 34:** Posts from Jim Corr and the Irish Freedom Party’s John Bowler mentioning explicit QAnon references

## LGBTQ+ Topic Analysis

Over the past two decades, there has been significant progress in advancing LGBTQ+ rights globally, accompanied by increased attention given to gender issues. In May 2015, Ireland achieved a significant milestone by becoming the first country to legalise same-sex marriage through a popular vote. Two months later, the Irish government further demonstrated its commitment to transgender rights by accepting trans people's self-declaration of their gender. However, despite these advancements, there has been a recent global backlash against LGBTQ+ rights, spearheaded by increasingly organised opposition movements aiming to repeal and undermine the progress that has been made.

From Russia and Uganda to the United States, legislation has been introduced to restrict the freedom and visibility of LGBTQ+ communities, relying heavily on mis- or disinformation and conspiratorial narratives to garner support.<sup>92, 93</sup> In the United States, numerous states have proposed and passed bills specifically targeting transgender communities.<sup>94</sup> As a result, online and offline debates have witnessed a surge in misconceptions and falsehoods about transgender people.

Popular narratives often employ scare tactics, stoking fears about the alleged dangers posed by transgender individuals in women's spaces. Additionally, doubts and misconceptions are propagated regarding the risks associated with gender-affirming healthcare, while opposition to comprehensive sexual and gender education in schools remains prevalent.

Ireland has not been immune to these concerning trends. In recent years, there has been an increase in mobilisation against LGBTQ+ rights, accompanied by the dissemination of various mis- and disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories. The analysis presented below aims to provide an in-depth examination of the volume of content and narratives discussing LGBTQ+ issues that have proliferated within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem over the past three years.

### Key Findings

ISD aimed to examine the conversations that took place within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem related to LGBTQ+ issues. The analysis found:

- Content including keywords related to the LGBTQ+ topic made up 1.28% of the total volume of content produced within this ecosystem in the period analysed, making it the sixth most prominent topic among the nine topics analysed.
- A year-on-year analysis of the volume of content produced shows that the average number of posts per day in the LGBTQ+ topic increased by 1571.5% in the period from 2020 to 2023 and by 154% from 2022 to 2023, indicating that this ecosystem has increasingly turned its attention towards commenting on LGBTQ+ issues.
- The LGBTQ+ topic was found to overlap with four other topics, namely: Irish politics (9.6%), health (5%), immigration (4.1%) and conspiracy (1.89%). While the overlap with Irish politics indicates an increasing politicisation of discussions about LGBTQ+ rights, the overlap with health and immigration is mainly due to the framing of LGBTQ+ rights as part of an ideological agenda which goes hand in hand with support for COVID-19 restrictions and support for immigration. Similarly, overlap between LGBTQ+ and conspiracy is mostly due to discussions that frame the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights as part of a sinister "agenda".
- A prominent theme identified in LGBTQ+ related discussions was the portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community as a threat to children. The word "groomer" which seeks to frame LGBTQ+ people as paedophiles was mentioned in 3,544 posts which obtained more than 2.58 million shares.
- Rather than focusing solely on local issues, opposition to and discussions about the LGBTQ+ community largely relied on international trends, news, figures, and scandals, which illustrate how anti-LGBTQ+ movements strengthen and affect each other across borders.

**Key Stats**

**Table 11:** Total posts and accounts talking about the LGBTQ+ topic within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem

Platform	Total records	Total accounts
Facebook	3978	123
Instagram	665	15
Twitter (X)	154244	1128
Telegram	8861	100
YouTube	114	22
<b>Total</b>	<b>167862</b>	<b>1388</b>

**Trends in Topic Discussion Over Time**

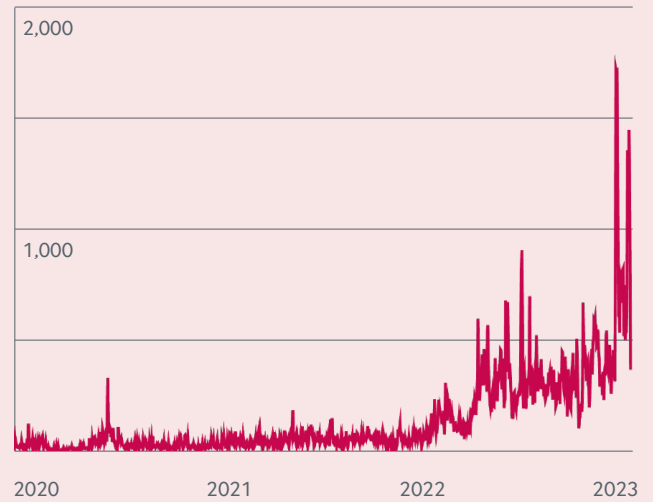
An analysis of the volume over time of discussions about LGBTQ+ issues shows that attention towards the topic has seen a significant increase since 2020. The topic received a monthly combined volume of fewer than 3,000 posts from January 2020 until March 2022 and started receiving increased attention from June 2022 onwards shifting from 3,197 monthly posts in March to 8,859 in June. The greatest spike in content occurred in March 2023 with 26,371 posts in a single month. Out of these posts, 94% (24,903 posts) came from Twitter (X) and were largely driven by local protests against LGBTQ+ books in schools and local libraries.

The rate of increase in discussions about LGBTQ+ issues is particularly visible when looking at the percentage of discussions compared to all content posted within the mis- and disinformation ecosystem (Figure 20). In fact, while the proportion of content about this topic ranged between 1 and 2% from 2020 to 2022, it climbed to 4% in March 2023 and surpassed 5% in the first days of April 2023.

A year-on-year analysis of the volume of content produced shows that the average number of posts per day under the LGBTQ+ topic increased by 1571.5% in the period from 2020 to 2023 and by 154% from 2022 to 2023.

Among the 167,862 posts identified, 9.6% also included keywords connected to the topic of Irish politics, 5% overlapped with the health topic, 4.1% with the

**Figure 19:** Volume over time of original posts about LGBTQ+ across platforms



**Figure 20:** Percentage of volume over time about LGBTQ+ over all content posted by the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem





**Table 12:** Yearly figures for the number of posts and accounts active in the LGBTQ+ topic

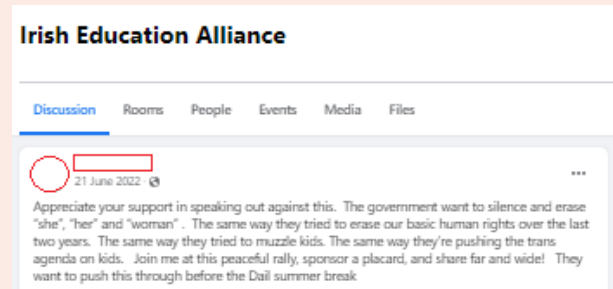
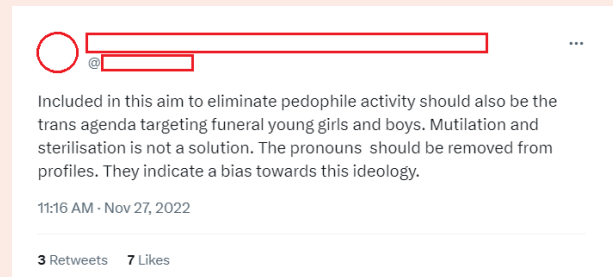
Platform	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total number of posts	12,604	19,613	82,683	52,962
Average number of posts per day	34.44	53.73	226.53	575.67
Number of accounts active	513	748	1,190	1,196

\* Data collection ended on April 3, 2023, so these figures only relate to the January 1 – April 3 period.

immigration topic and 1.89% with the conspiracy topic. The overlap between the LGBTQ+ topic and the Irish politics topic appears to be primarily attributed to the heightened politicisation of the topic. This is evident through posts that increasingly connect the LGBTQ+ topic with political developments. Overlapping posts included criticism against politicians and political parties that advanced LGBTQ+ friendly policies and the framing of LGBTQ+ rights as a “leftist” ideology.

Notably, the overlap between LGBTQ+ and health was mainly due to numerous posts where framing of support for COVID-19 policies and support for LGBTQ+ rights were portrayed as part of the same ideological agenda described as “communist bullshit,” totalitarian, and pseudoscientific. Similarly, the topics of LGBTQ+ and immigration were brought together in posts that were critical both of immigration and LGBTQ+ rights and that attacked both citizens and politicians that defended both communities. Finally, posts containing both LGBTQ+ and conspiracy keywords framed the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights as part of a hidden agenda by powerful forces, most notably the World Economic Forum (WEF). Out of the 3,176 posts mentioning both keywords, 538 mentioned a supposed “trans agenda” which was framed as a threat to both children and women.

An analysis of the top accounts that shared the most content in the LGBTQ+ topic found that the top 10 most-prolific accounts were responsible for over 20% of the total original content posted (13,077 posts out of 64,803 original posts including LGBTQ+ keywords).



**Image 35:** Examples of content from different users mentioning the “trans agenda”

## Analysis

### International Trends and Ireland's Response

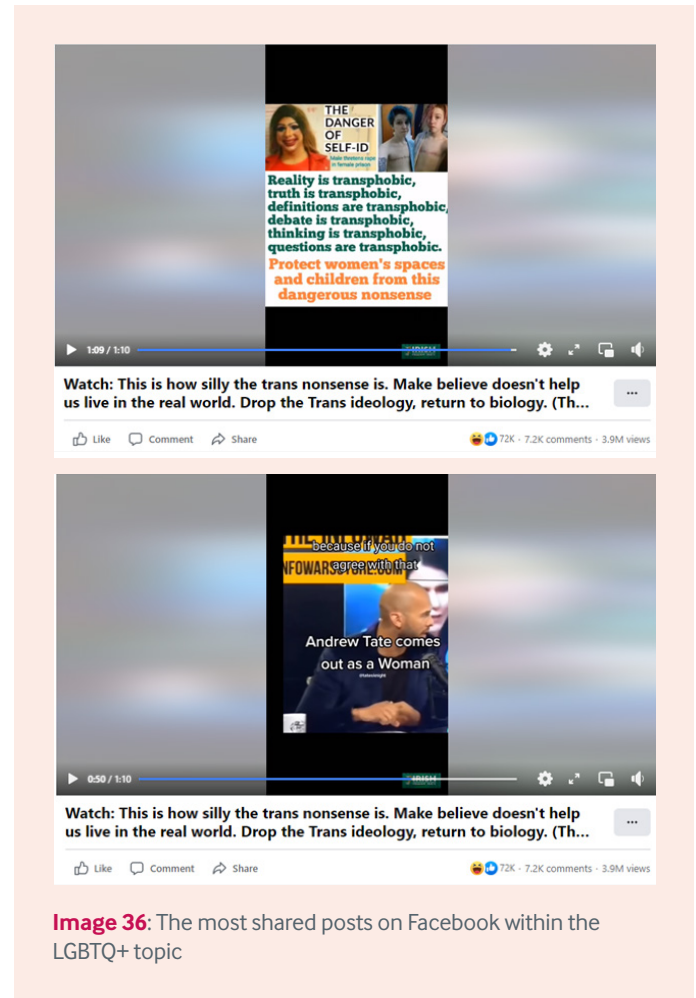
An analysis of the top content about LGBTQ+ issues across platforms shows the transnational nature of the discussions. International figures, scandals, issues and news concerning the LGBTQ+ community transcends borders, as do trends in mis- or disinformation and conspiracy theories. International news regarding backlash against LGBTQ+ rights has been widely disseminated and warmly received by the community.

For instance, on Twitter (X), two out of the top four most-retweeted posts in LGBTQ+ discussions were tweets celebrating Switzerland's decision to reject a proposal to introduce a no-gender option for official records. International stories discrediting the LGBTQ+ community or featuring prominent anti-LGBTQ+ politicians and influencers also garnered significant attention through large numbers of shares and likes.

On Facebook, the most shared post was a video published by the Irish Freedom Party, a minor political party with a history of promoting far-right anti-immigration and anti-LGBTQ narratives, opposing what they call "genital mutilation and trans ideology."<sup>95, 96</sup> The video featured British and American social media personality Andrew Tate, a self-proclaimed misogynist who is currently awaiting trial on charges of human trafficking, rape and forming a criminal gang to sexually exploit women.<sup>97</sup>

In the video, Tate mocks what is described as "trans nonsense," asserting that he now identifies as a woman and demands recognition as such stating that anyone who refuses to acknowledge him as a woman is "a bigot". The accompanying comment from the Irish Freedom Party states, "This is how silly the trans nonsense is. Make-believe doesn't help us live in the real world. Drop the Trans ideology, return to biology. (The guy in the video is having a bit of fun on a serious topic)." The post has garnered over 10,000 shares and more than 3.9 million views.

Another overseas-inspired movement that also gained momentum in Ireland is the war against LGBTQ+ friendly books. In the US, there has been a growing demand for the censorship of books containing gender themes, and Juno Dawson's "This Book Is Gay" has been among the most frequently requested for removal from US



**Image 36:** The most shared posts on Facebook within the LGBTQ+ topic

libraries in 2022.<sup>98</sup> This movement against books has also manifested in Ireland, with protesters in March 2023 calling for the removal of books that provide information on LGBTQ+ issues.<sup>99</sup> These protesters claim that the books sexualise, indoctrinate and groom young people.<sup>100</sup>

During this period, community posts urged parents to visit local libraries and search for specific books. The book "This Book Is Gay" was also mentioned in posts that accused it of normalising "sodomy by rape" and paedophilia. As a result of these campaigns, the book was removed from sexual education resources for Junior Cycle (age 12 – 15) students.<sup>101</sup>

The slur "groomer" in conversations about the LGBTQ+ community was used in a total of 3,544 posts which obtained more than 2.58 million combined shares.<sup>102</sup> The term, which has been widely used in anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric



**Image 37:** These posts urge people to approach their local library and search for books that include information about sex and gender

in the US, frames queer people as paedophiles and as a threat to children and is used to justify hate, discrimination and violence against the community.<sup>103</sup>

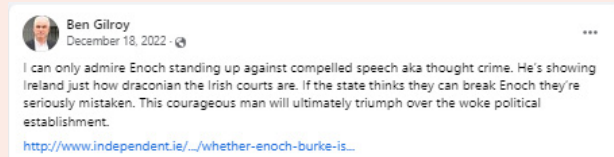
### Local Irish Issues

Besides discussions about international news and overseas-inspired movements, local issues concerning LGBTQ+ rights were also widely discussed. One of the most frequently mentioned individuals in LGBTQ+ discussions over the past three years has been Enoch Burke. Burke, who taught history and German in a secondary school in County Westmeath, was suspended from his post in 2022 pending the outcome of a disciplinary process after he allegedly intimidated and harassed a colleague, according to reports, in relation to his refusal to recognise a transgender student's preferred they/them pronouns.<sup>104</sup> Despite his suspension, Burke continued to show up to the school before he was eventually arrested and jailed for contempt of court. Burke was dismissed from his post in 2023.<sup>105</sup>

Burke's name appeared in a total of 723 original posts including among the top 10 posts on Instagram and

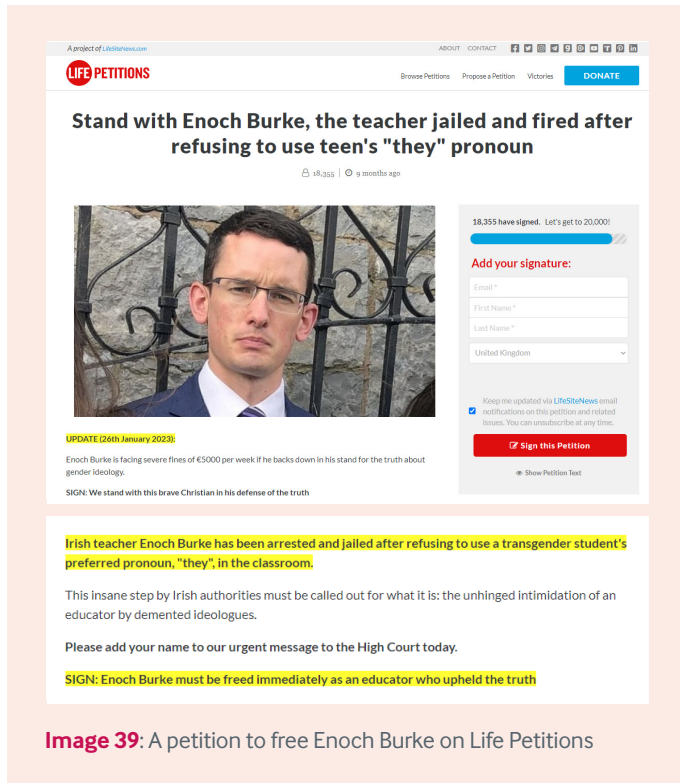


106 Retweets 3 Quotes 522 Likes 3 Bookmarks



**Image 38:** Examples of posts praising Enoch Burke





The screenshot shows a petition on the Life Petitions website. The title is "Stand with Enoch Burke, the teacher jailed and fired after refusing to use teen's 'they' pronoun". It has 18,355 signatures and was posted 9 months ago. The petition text includes an update from January 2023 stating that Enoch Burke is facing fines of €5000 per week for his stance on gender ideology. A sign-off reads: "SIGN: We stand with this brave Christian in his defense of the truth". Below the main text, there is a highlighted section: "Irish teacher Enoch Burke has been arrested and jailed after refusing to use a transgender student's preferred pronoun, 'they', in the classroom." This is followed by a paragraph stating that the step by Irish authorities is an example of intimidation and a call to add names to a message to the High Court. The sign-off for this section is: "SIGN: Enoch Burke must be freed immediately as an educator who upheld the truth".

Image 39: A petition to free Enoch Burke on Life Petitions

YouTube. Additionally, a petition on Life Petitions, a project of the Canadian Catholic conservative anti-abortion advocacy website LifeSiteNews, was among the most shared URLs in the dataset, with 42 shares from 28 unique accounts. The petition urged the High Court to free Burke immediately and garnered 18,355 signatures in total.

Posts mentioning Burke portrayed him as a hero and a victim of the system and his case was framed as an example of "intimidation of an educator by demented ideologues".

Another recurrent name in the dataset was Roderic O'Gorman, Ireland's Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. O'Gorman's name was mentioned a total of 665 times in original posts and content about him featured among the top 10 posts on Facebook, Instagram and Telegram.

Part of the campaign against O'Gorman originated from a 2018 picture showing the Minister alongside human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell during the Dublin Pride parade.<sup>106</sup> Tatchell had faced heavy criticism for a 1997 letter to the Guardian in which he defended

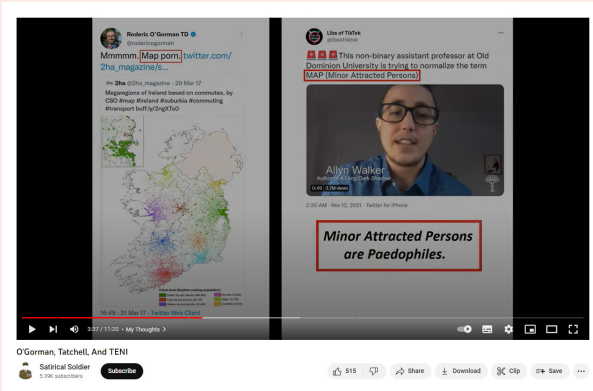


The screenshot shows a Facebook post from "Yellow Vest Ireland" dated July 7, 2020. The text of the post discusses the confusion for the planned "Hands off our Kids" protests and mentions that the event will now be held on the 11th of July at 2pm in Kildare Street, Dublin. It also mentions further revelations and a statement from the Minister for Children, Roderic O'Gorman, regarding the age of consent. The post includes a link to a video of Peter Tatchell. Below the text is a video thumbnail featuring John Connors, an Independent Speaker, with the text: "Hands Off Our Kids Rally", "Featuring: John Connors Independent Speaker", and "Saturday 11th, 2pm, Kildare Street Dublin". The Irish Freedom Party logo is visible in the top right corner of the video thumbnail.

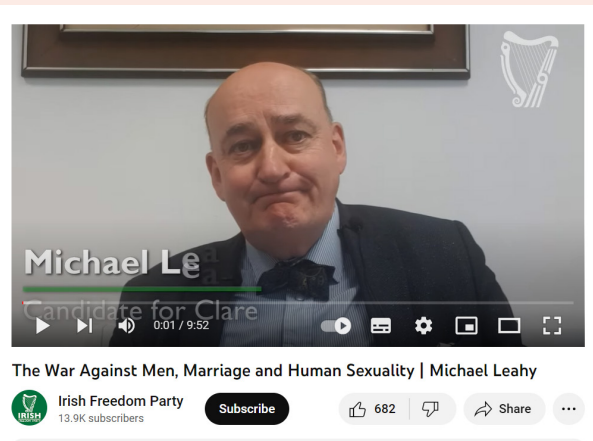
Image 40: One of the most liked posts on Facebook promotes a rally against Minister for Children Roderic O'Gorman

an academic book discussing "boy-love". Tatchell's statements led to accusations of alleged support for paedophilia and a picture of him with the Minister extended these accusations to O'Gorman as well. This sparked a social media campaign against O'Gorman, covered in previous research from ISD which involved prominent voices such as actor John Connors.<sup>107</sup> Connors later apologised for his statement, acknowledging he had been "politically naive."<sup>108</sup>

Another Facebook post among the top ten, published by Yellow Vest Ireland, promoted a rally outside the Dáil referencing many of these same claims against O'Gorman called "Hands Off Our Kids." The protest aimed to bring together parents concerned about the statements released by O'Gorman as well as sex education in schools and was attended by several groups including Renua, the Irish Freedom Party and the National Party.<sup>109</sup>



**Image 41:** A video on YouTube alleges O’Gorman’s support for paedophilia by taking one of his tweets out of context

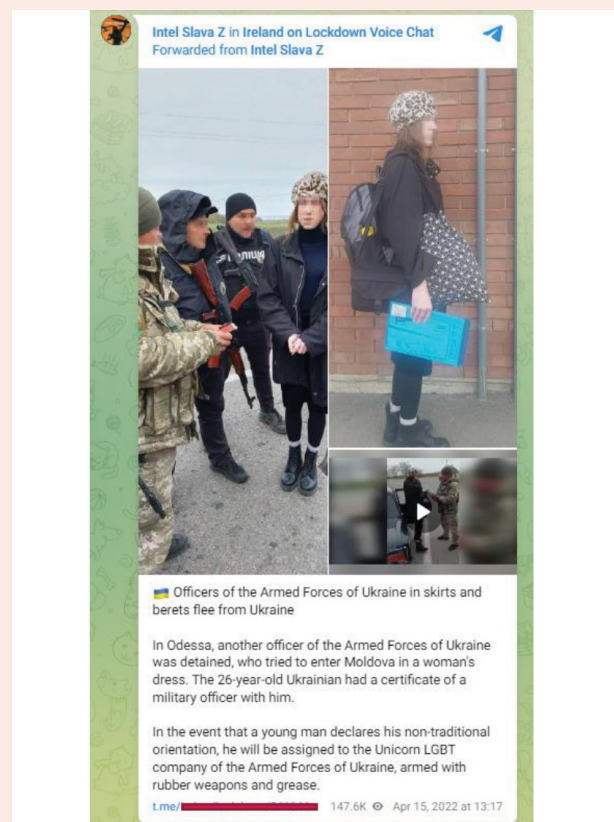


**Image 42:** A video posted by the Irish Freedom Party on YouTube speaks about a supposed “war against men, marriage and human sexuality” as a strategy promoted by the left.

On YouTube, a video that garnered 5.2k views was also aimed at discrediting O’Gorman. In the video, posted by Mike O’Connell (aka Satirical Soldier) a 2017 tweet by O’Gorman which contained the phrase “map porn” in reference to an intricate map of Ireland was taken as evidence of the Minister’s support for paedophilia.<sup>110</sup> The video claimed that the word ‘map’ in the tweet stood for “Minor Attracted Persons [a slang term for paedophiles],” portraying O’Gorman as a dangerous individual to have in politics and serving as Minister for Children.

Both local issues, together with the movement against LGBTQ+ books, highlight ongoing attempts to portray LGBTQ+ rights as a threat for children and mobilise concerned parents. On YouTube, a video posted by the Irish Freedom Party features a monologue by Vice Party Chairperson Michael Leahy where he speaks about an alleged “war against men, marriage and human sexuality” as a strategy promoted by the left to sow divisions in our nations.<sup>111</sup>

Another prominent post on Telegram which was viewed more than 147K times was forwarded by the Ireland on Lockdown Voice Chat from the pro-Kremlin channel Intel Slava Z and includes mocking of both the LGBTQ+ community and the Ukrainian army. The post claimed to show officers of the armed forces of Ukraine dressed in women’s clothing in an apparent attempt to flee Ukraine. It said: “In the event that a young man declares his non-traditional orientation, he will be assigned to the Unicorn LGBT company of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, armed with rubber weapons and grease.”



**Image 43:** The sixth most-forwarded post on Telegram features content from Intel Slava Z, one of the most popular pro-Kremlin disinformation aggregator accounts online



# Climate Topic Analysis

In recent years, a significant increase in awareness regarding the dangers of climate change has led to its growing significance as a major concern among the general population. However, as the topic has gained prominence in headlines, there has also been a surge in conspiracy theories and mis- and/or disinformation surrounding climate issues. Previous research conducted by ISD has revealed that climate mis- and/or disinformation has become increasingly intertwined with narratives about culture wars primarily fuelled by far-right communities.<sup>112</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories about alleged “climate lockdowns” began to circulate among communities opposing COVID-19 containment measures. Conservative US commentators such as Tucker Carlson, Ben Shapiro and Glenn Beck played a role in mainstreaming these theories.<sup>113</sup> Commonly, such theories allude to secret plans by shadowy elites to control the population and limit individual freedoms in the name of a “green agenda”. A typical catalyst for these theories is the implementation of new measures or plans aimed at reducing emissions which directly impact the population or specific communities.

Measures to control CO2 emissions in Europe, particularly in countries with strong agricultural sectors, faced vehement opposition among local populations. In the Netherlands, protests initiated by local farmers culminated in the formation of a new political party in 2019 known as the BoerBurgerBeweging (Farmer-Citizen Movement), which won the popular vote in the 2023 provincial elections, sending a strong message to similar movements throughout Europe. In April 2023, Caroline van der Plas, the leader of the Dutch Farmer-Citizen Movement, visited Ireland and encouraged Irish farmers to unite and establish a new political party to participate in the upcoming 2024 Irish elections.<sup>114</sup>

## Key Findings

ISD aimed to examine the conversations that took place within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem related to climate. The analysis found:

- Content about climate made up 1.07% of the total volume of content produced within this ecosystem, however, the popularity of this topic varied over time and increased to 2.67% in July 2022.
- Twitter (X) was found to be the most popular platform for climate-related discussions, with over 87% of the analysed content originating from this platform.
- Analysis of the volume of climate-related content over time revealed spikes during the United Nations climate change conference in 2021 and 2022 (COP26 / COP27), as well as when Ireland announced its Sectoral Emissions Ceilings for 2030 in July 2022.
- The most prominent climate-related discussions often framed climate change as part of a broader ‘culture war’, trivialising the issue, denying the scientific evidence behind it, and portraying it as a conspiracy to control the population.
- In an Irish context, the fight against climate change was portrayed as a battle against “rural Ireland” and Irish tradition and culture. Far-right political parties were particularly successful in exploiting this narrative to position themselves as the ‘true defenders’ of rural interests.

## Key Stats

**Table 13:** Total records and accounts talking about climate within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem

Platform	Total records	Total accounts
Facebook	10,643	128
Instagram	350	13
Twitter (X)	122,867	1,099
Telegram	6,652	98
YouTube	67	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>140,579</b>	<b>1,349</b>

### Trends in Topic Discussion Over Time

Twitter (X) was found to be the platform on which most of the climate-related discussions occurred. In total over 87% of the content analysed came from Twitter (X), 7.5% from Facebook, and 4.7% from Telegram. An analysis of the volume over time of content from 1 January 2020 to 3 April 2023 reveals that the topic has been increasingly discussed within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem.

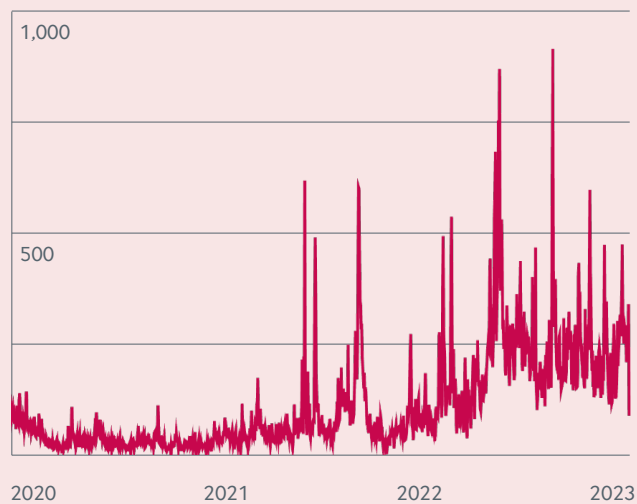
Spikes in volume of content were particularly visible around specific events. The largest spike in discussions was registered on 29 July 2022 (with 276 posts) and coincided with Ireland’s announcement of the sectoral emissions target for 2030. The second largest spike, on 8 November 2022, occurred during the COP27 conference and the third largest spike, on 2 November 2021, during the COP26 conference. These findings illustrate how real-life events and developments - particularly international summits - can function as catalysts for the spread of mis and/or disinformation online.

On 28 July 2022, the Irish government announced a new set of measures aimed at limiting greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>115</sup> The plan foresees the agriculture sector cutting 25% of its emissions, as well as reductions in electricity, transport, buildings and industry sectors. The measures sparked outrage online and an increase in discussions about climate.

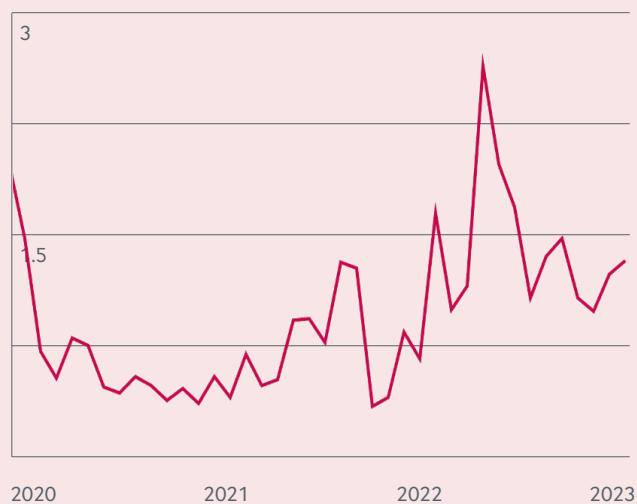
Popular posts published in the week following the announcement mocked the targets as ridiculous, stressing that reductions in emissions by small countries like Ireland were unlikely to make any difference, but would destroy livelihoods and the economy. Other posts dismissed climate science as a scam, pointing to the idea that increasing temperatures is a natural phenomenon. This strategy has commonly been used to minimise or deny human responsibility, however, scientific consensus indicates that Earth’s climate is warming, and human activities have affected the speed of the process.<sup>116</sup>

The most popular post in the week following the 2030 Sectoral Emissions Ceilings announcement was a tweet by Michael Brazil, who posts online as ‘The Irish Git’ (17k followers). The video showed similarly-worded headlines from different newspapers where temperatures in different countries were described as “rising faster than the rest of the world”. Brazil pointed to the similar wording

**Figure 21:** Volume of posts discussing the climate topic over time (daily)



**Figure 22:** Percentage of all content posted by the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem related to climate (monthly)



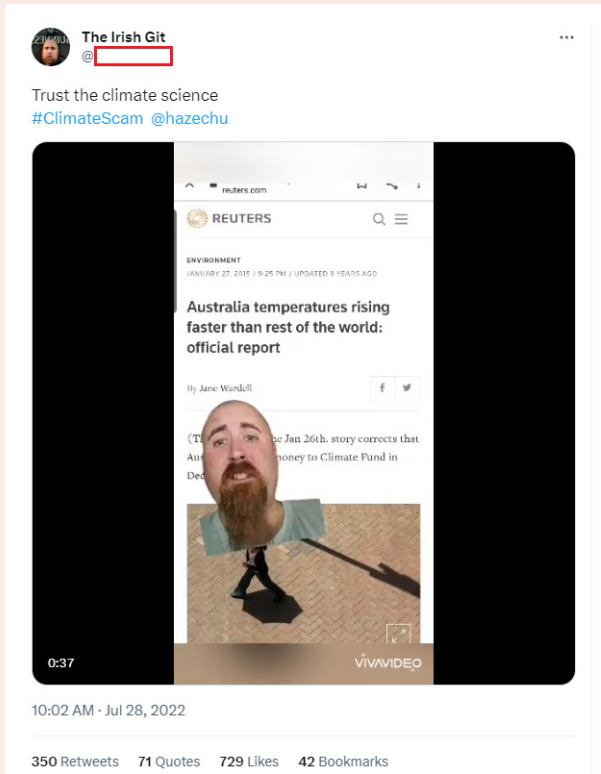


Image 44: Image 44: Most popular post in the week of 25 July

as evidence that something is “amiss in the reporting” presumably implying that mainstream media outlets are in cahoots to intentionally mislead the public on climate science. Brazil accompanied his video with the hashtag #ClimateScam.<sup>117</sup>

Popular content posted during the Climate Change Conference (COP27), held in Sharm el-Sheikh from 6 - 18 November 2022, was mostly a response to and criticism of different pieces of reporting about climate, most of which came from RTÉ. Other posts did not necessarily contain false information, but instead accused “globalist elites” of hypocrisy and criticised them for flying on private jets while at the same time warning about a climate emergency.

This is similar to content that proved popular within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem related to COP26, which took place a year earlier in Glasgow, Scotland, and was analysed extensively by ISD in the first of our ‘Deny, Deceive, Delay’ reports in 2022.<sup>118</sup> Popular posts from this time also highlighted the ‘hypocrisy’ of global leaders and

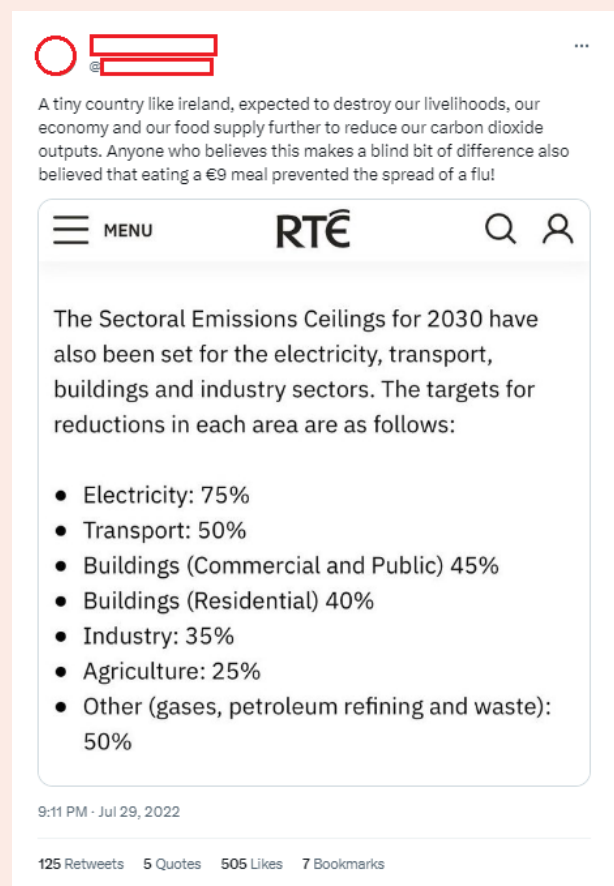


Image 45: A popular tweet posted on 29 July 2022 criticises Ireland’s sectoral emissions ceilings for 2030



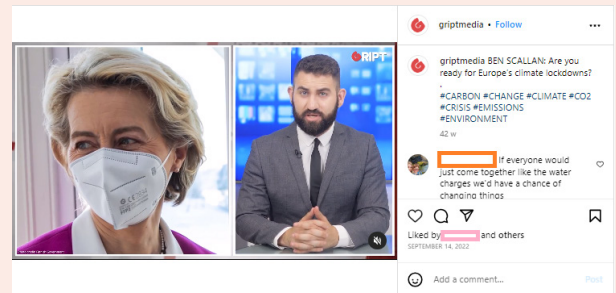
Image 46: A popular tweet posted on 28 July 2022 criticises Ireland’s sectoral emissions ceilings for 2030



**Image 47:** A popular post using the hashtag #COP27 and criticising “globalist elites”



**Image 48:** Most retweeted tweet on Twitter (X) about climate



**Image 49:** Popular posts about climate lockdowns on Instagram

raised concerns about politicians using private jets to travel to the conference. While this is a legitimate position to hold, many of these posts also included arguments suggesting that climate change is not caused by human activity, along with criticism of Ireland’s commitment to reduce emissions, framing it as “national self-harm”.

### Analysis

#### Climate Change and the Culture War

Prominent content referencing climate change often dismissed and downplayed increasing societal concerns by framing them as a passing fad. This was commonly done by trivialising the issue and comparing it to other topics that have attracted significant attention from liberal communities in recent years, such as LGBTQ+ rights or COVID-19 restrictions. For some users within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem, the prominence of these topics in the media and society were incorporated into larger conspiracy narratives, where public concern about these topics is supposedly being manufactured or orchestrated by ‘hidden forces’.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent measures deployed to curb the spread of the virus have contributed

to the popularity of conspiracies promoting an alleged plan to restrict freedoms and monitor the movements and actions of the population. As noted in an ISD Explainer on the topic, conspiracies about an alleged ‘climate lockdown’ and climate regulations being used as a means to control people argue that governments are using the “climate crisis as a pretext for restricting individual freedoms, akin to measures introduced in response to COVID-19. As the term ‘climate lockdown’ became associated with anti-elite tropes, it made an entry into wider public discourse and became tied with beliefs that climate action is primarily a means for elites to exert control and impose surveillance.”<sup>119</sup>

Such ‘climate lockdown’ conspiracy theories were found among the top ten posts on Instagram, YouTube and Twitter (X). The most popular post was a video of Gript host Ben Scallan discussing “climate lockdowns”. In the video Scallan described COVID-era lockdowns as an “unprecedented erosion of our most fundamental human and civil rights” and a “dystopian power grab and wealth transfer by the global business elite.”<sup>120</sup>

Scallan made comparisons between this description of COVID lockdowns and the notion of “climate





**Image 50:** The second most retweeted tweet on Twitter (X) mentioning 15-minute cities

lockdowns” when he said, earlier in the video, “let’s call a spade, these [proposals to reduce electricity usage] are climate lockdowns. After all, the last time the world heard the phrase “flatten the curve” from politicians we were promised a brief six-week disruption to our lives.” Please see appendix for Gript’s response to these claims, as well as a full transcript of the video in question.

Another popular topic linked to conspiracy theories has been that of 15-minute cities. The 15-minute cities plan refers to a proposal aimed at reducing city traffic by ensuring that all necessary amenities for residents are within a 15-minute walk or bike ride. However, conspiratorial communities have interpreted the plan as an effort to restrict freedom of movement and exert control over the population.<sup>121</sup>

In total, the phrase “15-minute cities” was mentioned 1,310 times across all platforms. One of the most popular tweets highlights this conspiratorial interpretation of the initiative, stating: “If the 15-minute cities are introduced, electric cars will automatically stop if you attempt to leave your designated area, and digital money will not be accepted outside your zone. Are you getting it yet?”

**Climate Change and Irish Identity**

In the Irish context, the culture war narrative around climate change has often been framed as a war against Irish tradition and heritage. The ban on selling smoky fuels, including turf, to cut carbon emissions was central in this narrative and has been widely exploited by right-wing and far-right political parties who have used turf as a symbol to represent rural Ireland. Turf, or peat, is a high carbon fuel that has played a historical role in Ireland’s economy which has, for years, relied on it for producing energy. However, the fuel has also proven to be a major



**Image 51:** Two popular Facebook posts against the Green Party



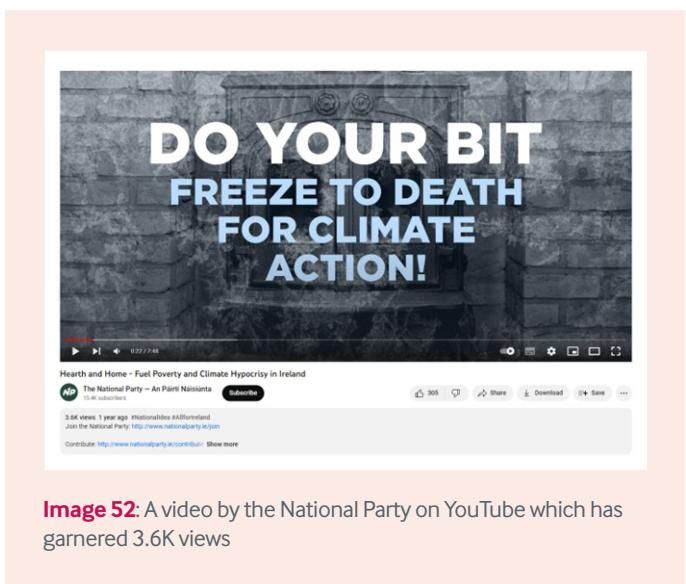
source of greenhouse gas emissions and the government has taken steps to abandon its use in favour of more sustainable sources of energy. This decision has been met with opposition and protests offline and sparked the rise of mis and/or disinformation online.<sup>122</sup>

The word “turf” was mentioned a total of 6,029 times across platforms. Discussions about turf were particularly popular on Facebook where five out of the top 10 most-shared posts in the climate topic mentioned the fuel.

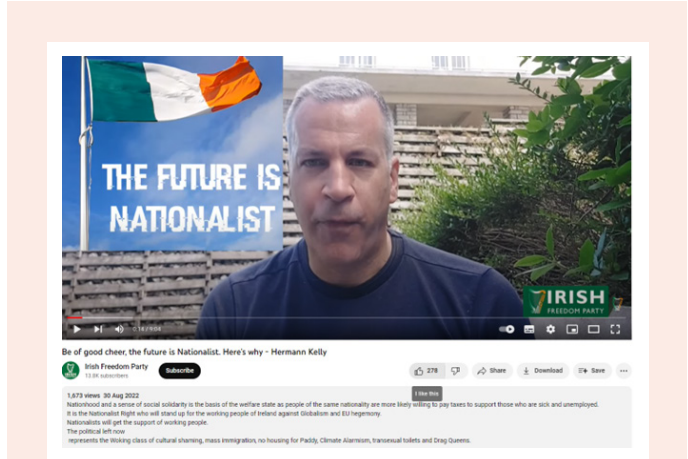
Two popular posts on Facebook, both shared by a group that advocates for continued burning of the fuel, expressed criticism towards the Green Party which it labelled as “Anti Rural Ireland” and accused of trying to abandon “tradition and heritage” in Ireland.

The framing of the ban on turf as a war on Irish rural identity has been heavily exploited by political parties with a history of promoting far-right ideologies, such as The National Party and the Irish Freedom Party.<sup>123, 124</sup>

One notable video, titled “Hearth and Home - Fuel Poverty and Climate Hypocrisy in Ireland,” was uploaded on YouTube by The National Party on 10 February 2022. This video condemns what it defines as “climate hypocrisy” and argues that the government’s decision to increase fuel prices until 2030 is an attack on vulnerable groups such as the elderly, disabled individuals, single parents and children, who are more susceptible to energy poverty.



**Image 52:** A video by the National Party on YouTube which has garnered 3.6K views



**Image 53:** A video posted by the Irish Freedom Party states: “It is the Nationalist Right who will stand up for the working people of Ireland against Globalism and EU hegemony. Nationalists will get the support of working people. The political left now represents the Working class of cultural shaming, mass immigration, no housing for Paddy, Climate Alarmism, transexual toilets and Drag Queens”

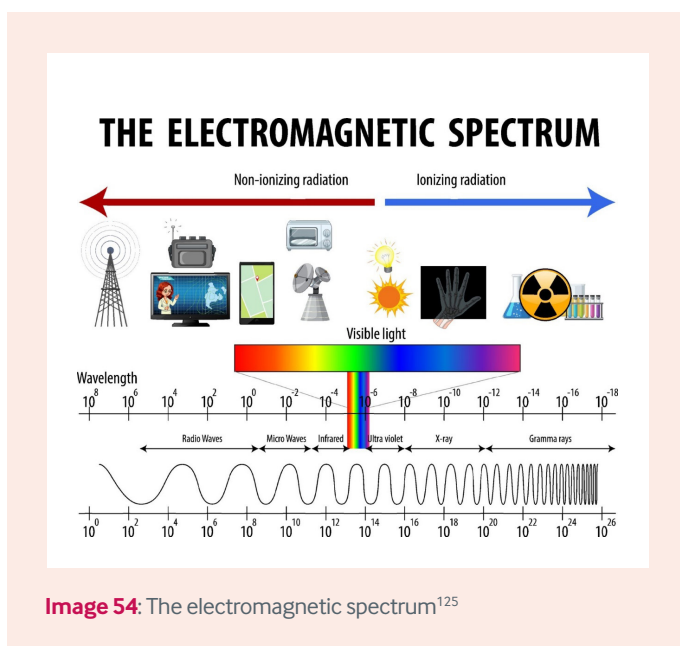
Throughout the video, there are suggestions that climate measures are not aimed at reducing emissions but rather controlling and restricting rural communities in Ireland.

The video specifically targets older generations, stating: “it is clear that the government is failing to protect the older generations. In fact, their actions would give you the impression that this generation of citizens who have worked their whole lives are no longer useful to the government and as a result they are wanted dead and out of the way of progress.”

By accusing the Green Party and the current government of being elitist, the National Party positions itself on the opposite side of the divide and closer to rural Ireland. Similarly, the Irish Freedom Party, led by Hermann Kelly, has also played a role in amplifying public demonstrations by turf cutters and seized the opportunity to promote itself as the defender of the working class and of “regular people.” In a video published by the Irish Freedom Party, the accompanying description states; “It is the Nationalist Right who will stand up for the working people of Ireland against Globalism and EU hegemony. Nationalists will get the support of working people. The political left now represents the Working class [sic] of cultural shaming, mass immigration, no housing for Paddy, Climate Alarmism, transexual toilets and Drag Queens.”

## 5G Topic Analysis

The development of new technologies is often a source of mis- or disinformation and conspiracy theories as they can understandably be a point of apprehension and fear over how the technology will change the world or impact our health. Technologies that are linked to the word “radiation” are often the source of such fears. However, much of this fear is often based on a misunderstanding of what constitutes harmful radiation.



Everything around us emits electromagnetic (EM) radiation, and all EM radiation has a frequency along the EM spectrum (see image 54). EM frequencies are divided into non-ionizing (everything below visible light including radio waves, microwaves and infrared) and ionizing (everything above visible light including ultraviolet light, x-rays and gamma rays). Critically, non-ionizing radiation does not have enough energy to damage cells or DNA, whereas ionising radiation does.

The technological developments that have often been the source of fear and falsehoods, including radio broadcasts, microwaves and mobile phones, all operate inside the safe zone of non-ionizing radiation. Fears about 5G are the newest iteration of an old fear and although 5G does use a higher frequency than 4G, it is still inside the safe zone.<sup>126</sup> Research conducted to date has found no evidence that 5G causes harm to humans.<sup>127</sup>

A common claim used to assert that 5G is dangerous is the fact that radiofrequency electromagnetic fields are listed as “possibly carcinogenic” by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). This, however, means that there is a lack of conclusive evidence that RF radiation causes cancer and no causal link between the two has been proven.<sup>128</sup> A lack of understanding of the nuances of IARC classifications can easily be misinterpreted and used to spread fear about 5G and other technologies.

### Key Findings

ISD aimed to examine the conversations that took place within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem related to 5G. The analysis found:

- Conversations about 5G constitute just 0.1% of the total discussion within this ecosystem.
- Conversations about 5G overlapped mostly with health (21.2%), followed by climate (7.3%) and conspiracy (5.2%).
- Facebook was the platform of choice for discussions about 5G, making up 66% of the total records found.
- The largest spike in 5G conversation took place in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when a multitude of false claims and conspiracy theories attempted to link the technology to the virus or claim that the virus was a ploy to distract the world while 5G technology was being installed.
- Posts encouraging people to take violent action, such as vandalism and arson, against telecom masts that they suspected of transmitting 5G were common in the replies to posts in the early months of the pandemic.
- False claims about 5G resurged in 2021 and 2022 as the COVID-19 vaccines were rolled out, with international conspiracy theory influencers spreading false claims that 5G would be used in conjunction with the vaccine to either kill people or take control of them.

**Key Stats**

**Table 14:** Total records and accounts talking about 5G within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem

Platform	Total records	Total accounts
Facebook	9882	76
Instagram	6	2
Twitter (X)	3549	451
Telegram	1425	58
YouTube	3	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>14,865</b>	<b>590</b>

**Trends in Topic Discussion Over Time**

Over half of all mentions of 5G were posted between 1 January and 31 December 2020, with the majority of these falling in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when discussions frequently tried to link 5G to the virus (see below for further analysis). At this point, mentions of 5G reached a peak of 1.3% of the conversations taking place in the entire Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem. Discussions about 5G reduced significantly in 2021 and 2022, but still remained steady, with both years amassing 21% of all 5G mentions, although never rising above 0.1% of the total conversation.

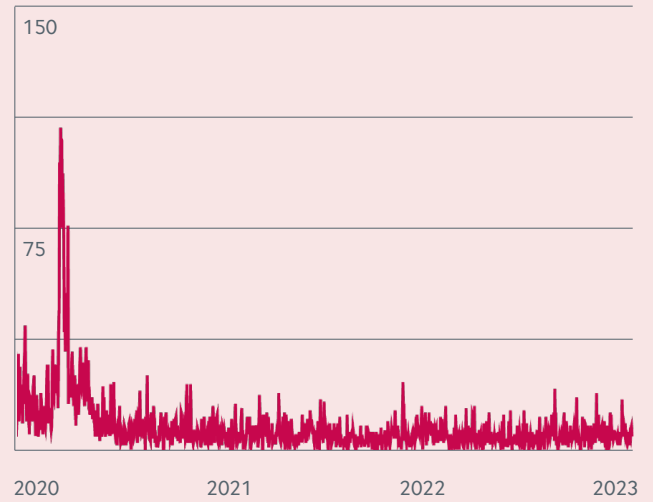
**Analysis**

**5G and Covid-19**

Conversations about 5G within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem reached a peak between March and June of 2020, coinciding with lockdowns and restrictions around the world to curb the spread of COVID-19. As the world was grappling to understand the unprecedented situation it was in, claims that falsely linked 5G to COVID-19 began circulating online. Although the claims varied, they were bound by a belief that 5G is inherently dangerous to people’s health.

The popularity of these discussions is evident from the fact that the top ten posts on both Facebook and Twitter (X) within ISD’s 5G dataset were all posted in the first five months of the COVID-19 pandemic between March and July 2020. At this time, membership of Irish 5G Facebook Groups also spiked, as did the interaction levels within these groups, indicating that people were joining and

**Figure 23:** Volume of posts referencing 5G over time



**Figure 24:** Percentage of the total conversation that mentioned 5G (monthly)



interacting within these communities at a level not seen before the pandemic (see figure 25).

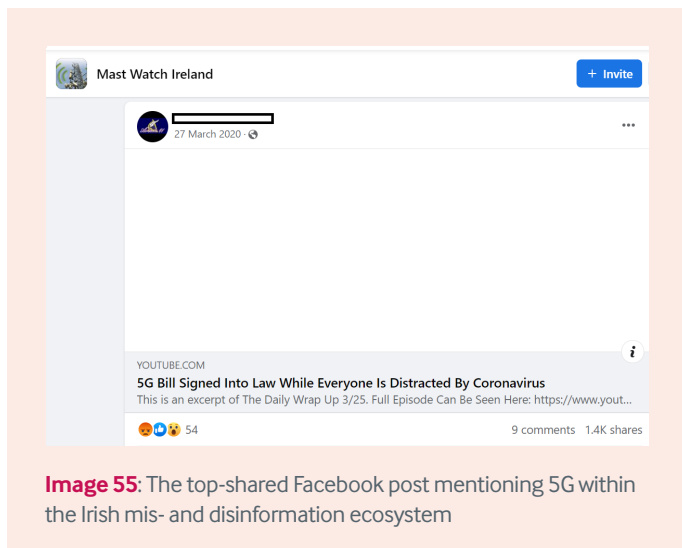
These top posts on Facebook and Twitter (X) followed trends that were observed internationally at the time. A number discussed legal challenges and petitions taken in countries around the world to stop the rollout of COVID-19, but many also contained evidence of mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories.

**Claims that Lockdowns and Other Pandemic Restrictions were a Distraction to Roll out 5G**

Telecom workers were listed as essential workers in both the UK and Ireland during the lockdowns and their presence on the streets conducting routine maintenance and/or installing new telecommunications equipment raised suspicions among anti-5G activists. In a number of cases, telecoms workers were harassed and abused while conducting their work, with the interactions posted online.<sup>129</sup>

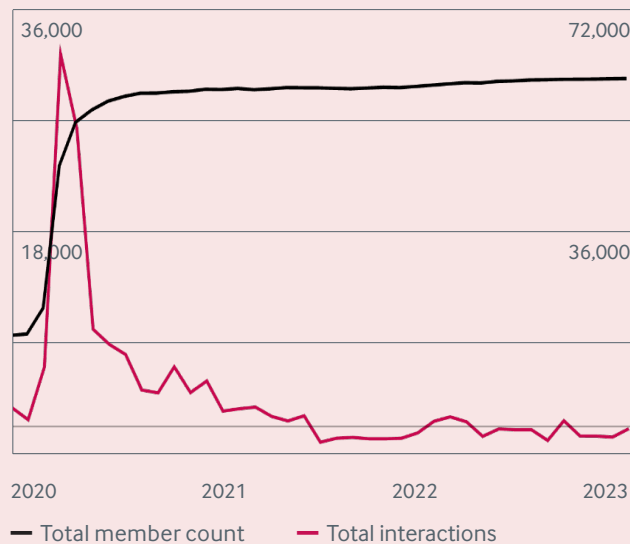
The top post (see image 55) on Facebook in ISD’s data set linked to a now-deleted YouTube video which gained traction internationally at the time. The video questioned the intentions of a bill signed by then-US President Donald Trump titled the “Secure 5G and Beyond Act of 2020” and claimed there was a sinister agenda in place to roll out 5G across the country while also falsely claiming that 5G caused major health damage.

Similar claims were seen in the top ten posts about 5G on Twitter (X), all of which were posted by Jim Corr,



**Image 55:** The top-shared Facebook post mentioning 5G within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem

**Figure 25:** Membership (left axis) and interactions (right axis) within Irish 5G Facebook Groups (source: Crowdtangle)



a member of the Irish band The Corrs who has frequently posted online about his belief in conspiracy theories.<sup>130</sup> Five of Corr’s top tweets about 5G discuss the rollout of technology in conspiratorial terms by linking it to COVID-19 and the lockdowns. The most popular of these posts, and the most popular tweet mentioning 5G within ISD’s dataset, quotes Robert F Kennedy Jr, a US politician known for his anti-vaccine and science denial beliefs.<sup>131</sup> Kennedy posits a conspiracy theory about 5G and links it to Bill Gates, Anthony Fauci and vaccines, concluding that Gates “wants us to cede all power to ‘benevolent’ dictatorship.”

**Calls to Burn Down or Vandalise Telecom Masts**

In April 2020, dozens of mobile phone masts were set alight in countries around the world as people who believed in false claims about 5G being dangerous, or linked to COVID-19, were driven to take real-world action. A report by Europol in November 2020 listed Ireland as one of the countries most affected by this kind of action.<sup>132</sup> Masts were burned in Donegal, Cork and Belfast. In many cases, the masts targeted were not transmitting 5G, but were used for 3G and 4G, and had been in use for years.

ISD found many replies to some of the most-shared Facebook posts about 5G contained comments encouraging people to either vandalise or burn down phone masts because of their belief in mis- and disinformation or conspiracy theories about the

[Redacted]  
Up to the people so too take this on ourselves  
Angle grinders and lighter and drop petrol an every 5G  
box or poll you know what to do..... 🌟🌟🌟 100 100 100

[Redacted]  
5G infrastructure can be destroyed quickly and easily.  
Here are some methods:  
1. If cables run up the outside of poles they can be chopped through using axes or machetes or similar.  
2. If the cables run inside poles a hole can be drilled and a flammable liquid can be poured through the hole and ignited.  
3. Antennae can be destroyed by impact. There are many ways to cause sufficient impact even from a distance.  
4. Sites can be accessed and the equipment can be destroyed using bats, hammers, clubs etc.  
5. Installations can be thrown from heights  
You really want rid of them?  
The biggest obstacle of all is your spine.

[Redacted] Author  
[Redacted] yep.. Belfast has the right idea. Burn them down

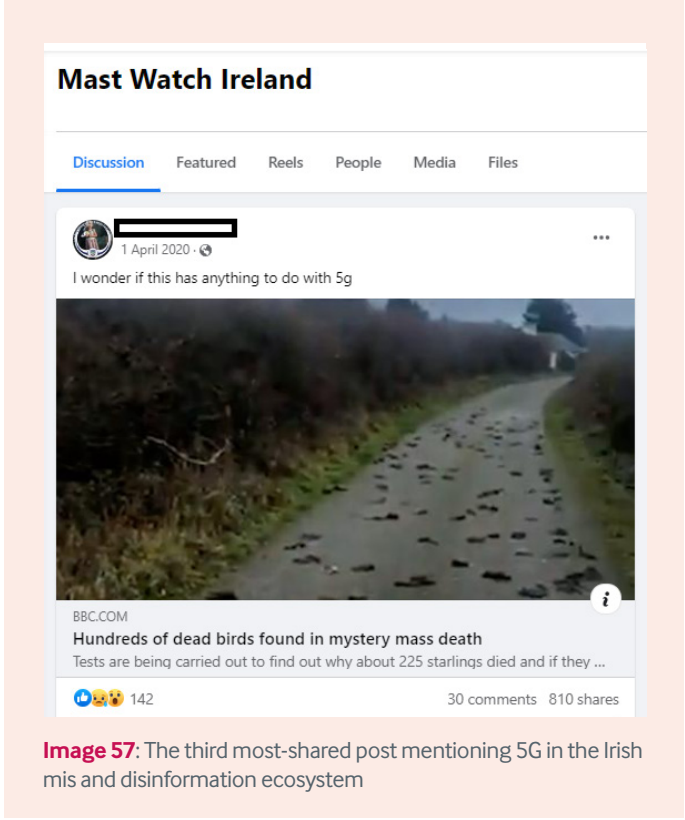
**Image 56:** Examples of comments on Facebook posts encouraging people to burn down or vandalise telecoms masts

technology (see image 56). In some cases, specific instructions were given along with different ways that the mast could be damaged.

### Claims that 5G is Killing Birds en Masse

The third-most shared Facebook post in ISD’s 5G dataset cited another common narrative about 5G safety that gained popularity in the early months of the pandemic – claims that 5G radiation and mobile phone towers have been the cause of mass bird deaths. This particular post (see image 57) linked to a BBC News article about the discovery of hundreds of dead starlings along a road in Wales in 2019 and questioned whether 5G played a role.<sup>133</sup>

Investigations into the incident in Wales concluded that the starlings died from striking the tarmac after the murmuration took a dive to avoid either severe weather



**Image 57:** The third most-shared post mentioning 5G in the Irish mis and disinformation ecosystem

or a predatory bird in the area, however comments on the post indicate widespread agreement that 5G was the cause.<sup>134</sup> Jim Corr also mentioned the apparent mass killing of birds at the hands of 5G in the third most-shared tweet in the dataset to mention 5G.

### 5G Claims Return with the COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout

Although the initial surge in conversations about 5G took place in the early months of the pandemic, claims about its dangers and links to COVID-19 began to surge again, specifically on Telegram in the aftermath of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout. As Telegram only became a popular platform within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem in 2021, the initial surge in 5G conversation at the beginning of the pandemic was not seen on the platform.

Within the top-viewed posts on Telegram discussing 5G, nine of them were posted between July 2021 and January 2022. The most common claims about 5G combined the fears of the technology with fears and false claims about the supposed dangers of COVID-19 vaccines. These posts also showed the international influence of these groups on Telegram, as seven of these posts contained links to

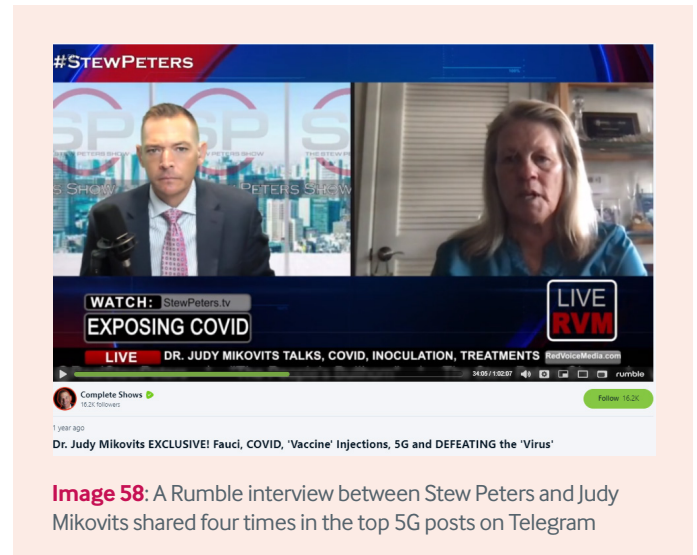


videos made by leading figures within the COVID-denial and anti-vaccine movement during the pandemic.

Four of the top posts on Telegram mentioning 5G link to the same video on Rumble (see image 58). This features a conversation between US-based conspiracy theorist Stew Peters and Dr. Judy Mikovits, the star of the viral conspiracy theory film *Plandemic*, which promoted the theory that COVID-19 was part of a sinister international agenda to depopulate the world with vaccines.<sup>135</sup>

During the hour-long discussion, Peters and Mikovits discussed countless false claims and conspiracy theories related to COVID-19, including the theory that the vaccines were “bioweapons being released to intentionally make people sick and kill them” and that disproven treatments such as ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine could make people “immune” from the virus. Mikovits also stated that 5G could activate nanoparticles in the vaccines which could be used to “change behaviour”, a claim that has no basis in fact.<sup>136</sup>

Another interview was shared three times within the top ten posts on Telegram discussing 5G. It featured a conversation between Dr. Lee Merritt, a US-based doctor who spread false information about COVID-19 and Dr. Reiner Feullmich, a German lawyer who promoted conspiracy theories about the pandemic.<sup>137</sup> In this interview, Dr. Merritt said that she suspected that COVID-19 was caused by radiation poisoning from electromagnetic frequencies and that graphene oxide in the vaccines was also reacting to these frequencies. Another post in the top-ten Telegram posts also contained this claim about graphene oxide in the vaccines, which is untrue – none of the COVID-19 vaccines contain graphene oxide.<sup>138</sup>



**Image 58:** A Rumble interview between Stew Peters and Judy Mikovits shared four times in the top 5G posts on Telegram

# Ethnonationalism Topic Analysis

Ethnonationalism is an extremist position that promotes a form of nationalism whereby the nation and nationality are solely determined by ethnicity. Central to ethnonationalism is the support among its proponents for nativist ideologies and political policies that seek to protect or prioritise members of their ethnic in-group at the expense of those perceived to be, in ethnic terms, outsiders to this group. In practice, ethnonationalists exhibit this support by rejecting multicultural diversity, targeting outsiders or opposing democratic or civic institutions that they perceive to support integration and diversity in society.

Owing to this rejection of increasingly diverse populations, ethnonationalism is often a core ideological pillar for far-right groups, individuals and online communities. Ireland is no different in this respect and here ethnonationalism is best encapsulated by an “Ireland for the Irish” ideology whose adherents typically define Ireland as a monocultural nation for indigenous white Irish (usually Catholic) people only.

Ethnonationalism is often expressed as a form of hatred. While this research project did not focus in depth on hateful behaviour, hate speech or the promotion of hateful ideologies such as racial supremacy, ISD was still interested in exploring how ethnonationalism was discussed and promoted within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem. This section includes analyses of conversations discussing the White Lives Matter movement and the use of antisemitism and Islamophobia in support of ethnonationalism within this ecosystem.

## Key Findings

ISD aimed to examine the conversations that took place within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem related to ethnonationalism. The analysis found:

- Conversations about ethnonationalism constituted 0.1% of the total discussion within this ecosystem making it the least popular topic among all of those analysed. However, this should not be seen as a comprehensive overview of the presence of ethnonationalist discourse in Ireland, due to several caveats outlined in detail below.
- Within the ethnonationalism topic, the most popular sub-topics were conspiracy (7.6%), immigration (7.4%) and health (7.2%).
- Discussions directly promoting the white nationalist “White Lives Matter” movement were observed in this topic. However, content that referenced “White Lives Matter” and “All Lives Matter” as a means of discrediting or targeting racial equality protesters or people of colour was more widely shared.
- Ethnonationalism was observed in other topics, namely the immigration topic, where actors promoted claims that asylum seekers represented a new “plantation” of Ireland seeking to remove and replace indigenous Irish communities.
- Analysis of content supportive of ethnonationalism featured support for hateful ideologies including white supremacy, antisemitism and Islamophobia.

## Key Stats

**Table 15:** Total records and accounts talking about ethnonationalism within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem

Platform	Total records	Total accounts
Twitter (X)	6,058	693
Telegram	601	60
Facebook	145	50
Instagram	19	6
YouTube	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,825</b>	<b>810</b>

**Trends in Topic Discussion Over Time**

Figures 26 and 27 display multiple peaks referencing this topic within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem. The largest spike in discussions about this topic occurred in June 2020 and this can be attributed to mentions of “White Lives Matter” surging following an incident during a Premier League football game on 22 June.

Conversations about ethnonationalism constituted 0.1% of the total discussion within this ecosystem. This is a small figure in the context of the overall dataset though, as noted, this research project did not set out to analyse hateful behaviour, hate speech or the promotion of hateful ideologies in Ireland. For this topic analysis, ISD used a non-exhaustive list of keywords featuring explicit slurs and hateful terms that promote ethnonationalism. They are often used less in general on social media platforms as they may result in bans, strikes or suspensions against a user, so it is not unsurprising this topic constituted the smallest portion of the topic data.

This topic analysis does not capture the full breadth of support for ethnonationalism within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem or broader support for ethnonationalism amongst extremist actors in Ireland. For this topic analysis, ISD did not include keywords that could be used to implicitly advocate for ethnonationalism within Ireland such as, for example, “plantation.” Future research focused on online hate speech and hateful ideologies in Ireland should prioritise the analysis of implicit, veiled or coded terms to capture this nuance.

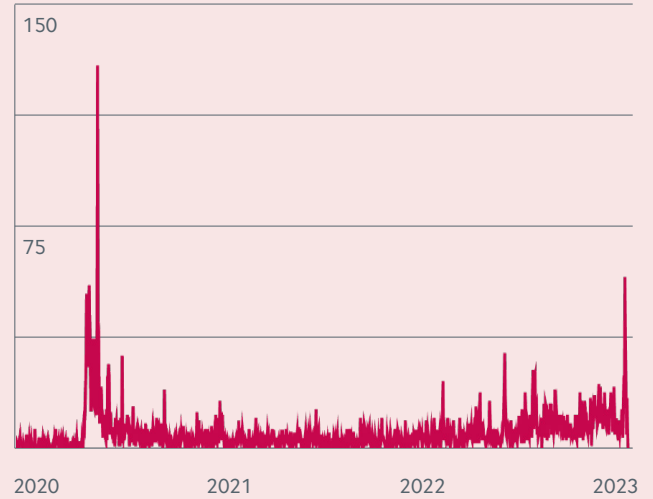
**Analysis**

**White Lives Matter**

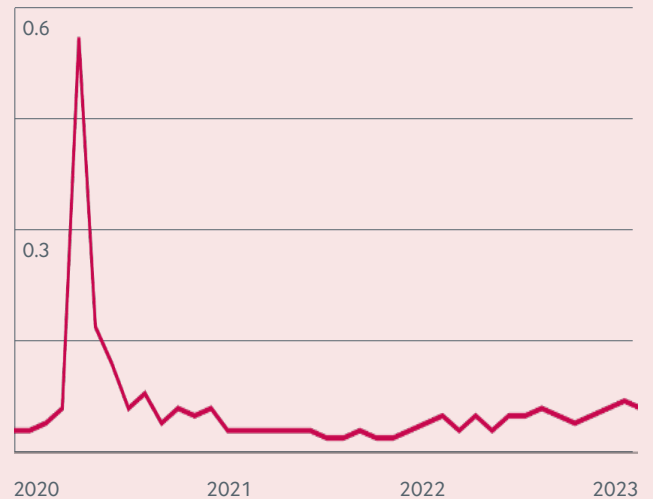
Conversations about ethnonationalism within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem spiked in June 2020 particularly with the use of phrases like “White Lives Matter” and “All Lives Matter,” after the murder of George Floyd, a Black man, by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota on 25 May 2020. The slogans grew in use as a response to the Black Lives Matter and wider racial justice and equality movements that resurged worldwide following Floyd’s death.

The two slogans “White Lives Matter” and “All Lives Matter” are often cited in false or misleading claims used to support reactionary and hateful campaigns against people of colour or highlight crimes against white

**Figure 26:** Volume of posts within the ethnonationalism topic over time



**Figure 27:** Percentage of discussions about ethnonationalism versus total content over time across all platforms



**Table 16:** Yearly figures for the number of posts and accounts active in the ethnonationalism topic

Platform	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total number of posts	2,309	1,177	2,205	1,134
Total shares of posts	1,362,265	425,533	725,667	194,394
Number of accounts	321	295	507	372

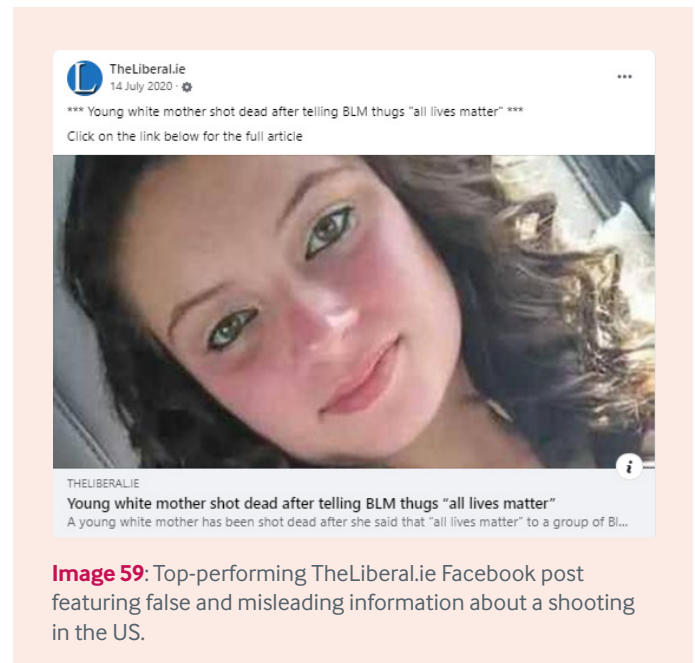
people. The context of how these slogans are used in online discussions is key. Taking account of this context and separating genuine discussions from content that attempts to create a false equivalence between these movements is an ongoing challenge for researchers. It is primarily that latter context that ISD researchers observed within this ecosystem.

The largest spike observed in this topic occurred in late June 2020 and was related to an increase in mentions of “White Lives Matter.” This was linked to an offline incident on 22 June during a Premier League football game between Manchester City and Burnley in the Etihad Stadium in Manchester. As players took the knee before kick-off in solidarity with racial justice protesters, a plane flew over the stadium carrying a banner that read “White Lives Matter Burnley.”<sup>139</sup> The incident was condemned by Burnley, football authorities and many others as racist and divisive yet it also generated much discussion and support from actors within this ecosystem.<sup>140</sup>

### Role of TheLiberal.ie

All ten of the most-shared posts on Facebook referencing this topic were published by the alternative media outlet TheLiberal.ie. Their top Facebook post linked to an article published on their website about a woman who was shot dead in Indianapolis, Indiana, in July 2020. The article stated that Jessica Doty Whitaker (whom TheLiberal.ie incorrectly named as “Dotty White”), a white woman, told a group of “Black Lives Matter terrorists” that “all lives matter” and claimed the “black supremacist demonstrators” shot Whitaker in a “racially motivated murder,” though this has never been confirmed as the shooting remains unsolved.<sup>141</sup>

By capitalising “Black Lives Matter,” TheLiberal.ie created the impression that the shooters were linked to the official Black Lives Matter movement when, again, there is no evidence that substantiates this. TheLiberal.ie further falsely claimed in their article that the incident “has largely been ignored by both the US and international media as have numerous other examples of racially motivated violence against white people both in America and elsewhere, including Ireland, over the last few months.” This is false as the incident was the subject of coverage within the US and abroad from outlets like Fox News and UK newspapers like The Sun and Daily Mirror.<sup>142</sup>



**Image 59:** Top-performing TheLiberal.ie Facebook post featuring false and misleading information about a shooting in the US.

Claims of a cover-up or deliberate media silence on reporting of crimes against white people by people of colour is a popular trope in ethnonationalist discussions, one which was repeated in other Facebook posts from TheLiberal.ie captured in our sample.

### Hateful Ideologies and Ethnonationalism

Anecdotally, during analysis of content and actors who promoted ethnonationalism within this ecosystem, ISD also observed content on multiple platforms that featured support for hateful ideologies including antisemitism and Islamophobia.

On Telegram, content creator Keith Woods, who frequently advocates for white nationalism, published numerous posts with a variety of antisemitic references that supported the international Jewish conspiracy theory that alleges Jewish people have undue influence over politics, media, financial and cultural institutions across the world.

On Instagram, numerous posts promoting Holocaust denial were published by a person whose name we are not publishing as we are unable to confirm if they are over 18 years old. Despite this person’s young age, they are among the most prolific users in the entire Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem and frequently post and promote content that supports a multitude

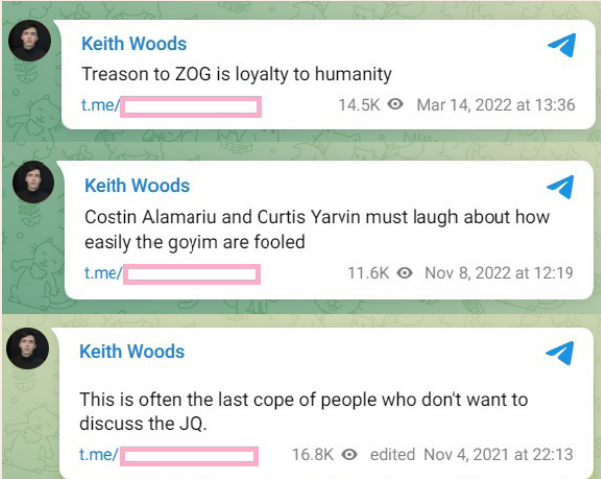


Image 60: A sample of Keith Woods' Telegram posts which feature antisemitic references<sup>143</sup>

of extremist positions including white supremacy, ethnonationalism and antisemitism.

On Twitter (X), the ethnonationalist campaigning group Síol na hÉireann targeted the Muslim community in Ireland for celebrating Eid in Croke Park, the home of Ireland's Gaelic Athletic Association, describing it as an "attack on our Christian culture," a "war on Christianity" and demanding it be banned to "stop the Islamisation of Ireland."<sup>144</sup> Philip Dwyer, an advocate for Irish ethnonationalism, has similarly posted about the Muslim community in Ireland suggesting they want to "blow you away."

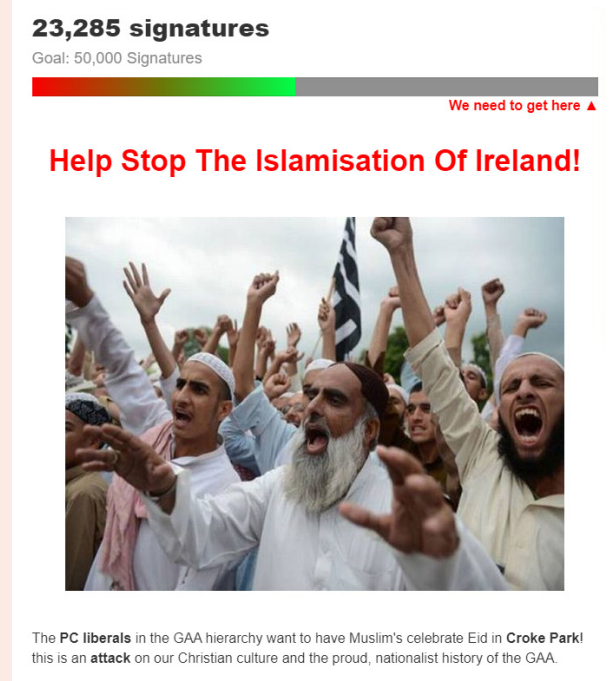


Image 61: Síol na hÉireann petition against the "Islamisation" of Ireland



Image 62: Philip Dwyer tweet suggesting Muslims will "blow you away"



## Appendix

ISD contacted every entity or individual mentioned in this report to provide opportunity for a right to reply. We did not receive responses from Keith Woods, the National Party, TheLiberal.ie, Hermann Kelly, Graham Carey, Dr Dolores Cahill, the World Doctors Alliance, Ben Gilroy, Tracey O'Mahony, Philip Dwyer, the Irish Inquiry, Dave Cullen, Rowan Croft, Gemma O'Doherty, Gerard Delaney, James Reynolds, Síol na hÉireann, Jim Corr, John Bowler, Mike Connell, Michael Leahy, Gavin Lowbridge or John McGuirk.

The following are the responses we did receive.

### **Ivor Cummins**

When offered a right of reply to comment on the claim that he has shared numerous false and misleading claims, Ivor Cummins replied: "I have since been proven correct on the overwhelming majority of the data and inferences that I discussed since March 2020. Most of the conceits incorrectly labelled as 'false and misleading' are since acknowledged to have indeed been correct, even in mainstream media - and I can send you all of the relevant published articles."

When contacted to comment on his part in the livestream with Dr Dolores Cahill, Ivor Cummins said: "I did not make any false statements, and simply took part in what was billed and published as a debate; Cahill's comments are hers alone, and I see only a 'guilt by association play' in the above statement."

### **Irish Freedom Party**

When offered a right of reply to comment on the statements made in the report, the Irish Freedom Party replied: "Fair reporting and globalist- funded propaganda machine ISD go together like a virgin and syphilis."

The Irish Freedom Party has opposed carbon tax from the day it was first floated because it is unnecessary and unjust penalisation of young people who drive to work and old people who need to heat their homes. Carbon tax penalises the poor and is extremely unjust. Secondly, why are we closing down peat power stations in the Midlands in order to import more electricity from nuclear- powered France? As well as curbing turf cutting to then import lignite from Lithuania? No joined up thinking from the Government.

The Q Anon movement does not exist except in the minds of globalist organisations like ISD which would have to invent it to provide employment opportunities for Looney Left losers such as themselves.

The Irish Freedom Party advocates personal freedom and responsibility as well as national sovereignty in an Ireland which is low tax to encourage work, enterprise and initiative. We want a cleaner, greener Ireland in which a well-educated Irish people use the natural resources we have at hand as well as technology to generate employment for Irish people who are sick of being Paddy Last in our own country. Therefore we advocate controlled borders and oppose the colonisation of Ireland. No country has a future without children therefore we are pro life, pro family and like to help young families have kids to build a bigger, better and stronger Irish society."

### **Derek Blighe**

When offered a right of reply to comment on ISD's claim that Blighe is a "supporter and organizer of anti-immigration protests", Blighe replied: "You are incorrect, I do not support an anti-immigration position, my wife is one, I support a sensible immigration position, Ireland is currently involved in reckless immigration practices that are unsustainable in terms of housing supply and the crime levels it had brought us."

When offered a right to reply on his role as founder of the political party Ireland First, Blighe replied: "I am the founder of Ireland First."

When offered a right to reply on Blighe's previous promotion of "plantation" narratives and his claims in online posts that "third world" migrants are replacing Irish people, he replied: "In respect of Irish people being replaced by third worlders, would you consider with ethnic Irish numbers declining due to low birth rates and high outward migration of our youth, yet our population grows due to inward migration mostly from the third world, would this reflect replacement of Irish population?"

When offered a right to reply on the underlying theme of his videos being the alleged discrimination suffered by the Irish population at the expense of asylum seekers and refugees, Blighe replied: "How many Ukrainians do you see struggling for housing or living in squalor compared to

ethnic Irish?” Blighe also referred to this reply when asked to comment on his claim that Ukrainians have “more rights” than the local population.

When offered a right to reply to a video taken at a demonstration in solidarity with Ukraine in which Blighe approached and harassed refugees and shamed them for not fighting for their country, Blighe replied: “Many thousands of military aged Ukrainian men are in Ireland contrary to the order imposed by the Ukrainian government that they stay and fight the war. Would you consider them war deserters and should they be deported back to Ukraine to face trial?”

When asked to comment on his claim that there was a “cover up” of an alleged sexual assault perpetrated by migrant men in Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, Blighe replied: “If it surfaces the Dungarvan woman in question was arrested & detained by Gardai for 12 hours, and coerced into signing a false confession under threat of being detained continuously, will your organisation publish the truth or continue to peddle a lie to reinforce your narrative?”

When asked to comment on Blighe being charged with theft after he entered a donation centre for Ukrainians stole a hat and pair of gloves, allegedly for this children and complained about the centre discriminating against the local population, Blighe replied: “ I entered an open shop, that was giving out items free of charge and picked up a tshirt and stepped outside the entrance, I was subsequently arrested for burglary because I was the wrong nationality, Is that not discrimination?”

Furthermore, Blighe also said: “You claim on your website that ISD is an independent think tank, yet you receive funding from Facebook, Google, Bill Gates and George Soros as well as multiple Western governments including the U.S and the UK, both have funded wars and murdered countless millions of people worldwide, and forced their citizens to pay the cost of such barbarism. I say that your organisation is the disinformation that you claim to fight against and when Ireland first and other nationalists take political power in Ireland, all funding to your crooked heist will be severed!”

### **The Burkean**

When offered a right of reply to comment on the

statements made in the report The Burkean replied: “Due to your organisation’s woeful record of spreading actual misinformation in backing the government’s pandemic response and asylum policies , our previous journalistic interactions during our undercover work in 2020, ISD’s established ties to the UK intelligence community in surveillance North of the border never mind the xenophobic attitudes of your founder Baron George Weidenfeld towards the plight of Palestinians we do not feel it justified in giving your “research” any credence and will respond to any defamatory remarks about our publication accordingly.”

### **Michael Brazil**

When offered a right of reply to comment on the statements made in the report Michael Brazil replied: “Cheers for the free publicity #Climatescam.”

### **John Waters**

When offered a right of reply to comment on the statements made in the report John Waters replied: “Just a brief note to alert you that the sentence ‘You [this refers to me, JW] are a former journalist who has taken to promoting conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and other topics’ contains multiple misstatements and is in fact itself a rather typical example of misinformation/disinformation. Should you wish to represent me correctly you might state the following: John Waters is a writer whose work can be found at [johnwaters.substack.com](http://johnwaters.substack.com). This will enable your readers to make up their own minds.”

### **Gript**

When Gript were contacted for a right to reply, they requested additional information which outlined the basis for which they were included in this project. ISD responded by stating that Gript is included in the project due to fitting within ISD’s project framework. The research framework (see methodology in the Summary Report for more detail) called for at least three pieces of evidence of an entity previously sharing false/misleading information or conspiracy theories, or of using hateful mis- or disinformation narratives to describe and/or target particular groups (such as the LGBTQ+ community or migrants).

The examples recorded in Gript’s case were:

A: John McGuirk, “Panti Bliss declares: These East Wall

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protests have “shamed the place”, 22 November 2022. Link: <https://gript.ie/panti-bliss-declares-these-east-wall-protests-have-shamed-the-place/>.

B: Gript, “Are you ready for Europe’s climate lockdowns?,” 14 September 2022. Link: <https://gript.ie/are-you-ready-for-europes-climate-lockdowns/>.

C: Gript, “Transgender woman leading women’s bike race around Ireland by 300KM,” 11 June 2023. Link: <https://gript.ie/transgender-woman-leading-womens-bike-race-around-ireland-by-300km/>.

When offered a right of reply on this rationale, Gript expressed its belief that ISD has not met the requirement under its own framework to include Gript in this project.

When offered a right of reply about being the subject of two fact-check articles by TheJournal.ie, Gript requested that ISD note that Gript rejects the findings of TheJournal.ie’s fact check concerning the cycle ride article and has published content calling into question the methodology of the TheJournal.ie’s fact checks in several instances. Gript asked ISD to further note that Gript currently has an active complaint against TheJournal.ie with the International Fact-Checking Network. Regarding the article concerning Eamon Ryan, shortly after the article was published, Gript removed it and posted a retraction and an apology. Gript, 5 May 2021. Link: <https://gript.ie/a-retraction-and-an-apology/>

At Gript’s request, ISD is including their note that this is the only time, to date, a complaint against Gript has been upheld. The Press Council’s most recent annual report available on its website, for the year of 2022, notes that in that year 260 complaints were received by the Press Council. Of these, 21 complaints were investigated by the Press Council. Of these 21 complaints, three were upheld, 14 were not upheld and, of the remaining four cases, sufficient remedial action offered by the publication to resolve the complaint. Press Council of Ireland, Annual Report 2022, October 2022. Link: <https://www.presscouncil.ie/fileupload/Annual%20Report%202022.pdf>

When offered a right of reply to the claims made about their reporting on the Dungarvan incident, Gript rejected ISD’s argument that its reporting was misleading. Gript said: “We reported the information as it was made known to us at the time, and after checking with Gardai

for confirmation of that information. The raw facts as reported remain true. A woman alleged she was sexually assaulted. I personally talked to this woman to confirm her story. She, to the best of my knowledge, stands over that claim. The family alleged that they were told particular things by police. They, to the best of my knowledge, stand over that claim. What exact part of the story is therefore false or misleading?”

ISD is comfortable in saying that Gript’s reporting was misleading as it failed to update its initial story and failed to reference its initial reporting in an article published in March about the false Garda report. Standard codes of practices and ethical processes in journalism call for false, inaccurate or misleading reporting to be corrected.

When offered a right of reply to the claim that John McGuirk’s opinion piece was misleading, Gript asserted that it was correct to say that the event was “mostly unreported” as the writer believes it was a story of legitimate national interest and therefore deserved a higher level of coverage. They also reiterated that the article was an opinion piece and that the author stands by what they said. Gript therefore rejects ISD’s argument that the claim was misleading. ISD considers five separate news items by RTÉ, including coverage broadcast on primetime TV and radio (Morning Ireland, Drivetime, Six One News and Nine O’Clock News), and reportage by the Irish Times, to be significant coverage, and so ISD maintains the opinion that describing coverage of the event as having “received basically no mainstream media coverage” and having “mostly escaped the attention of the national broadcaster” to be misleading.

Regarding the Gript video featuring Ben Scallan discussing “climate lockdowns”, Gript, speaking on behalf of Ben Scallan, rejected ISD’s analysis and said this video did not discuss “anything of a conspiratorial nature.” They continued by saying that “It would seem perfectly fair for a commentator to link upcoming policies with previous, particularly when those policies had been as deeply impactful as lockdowns had been, and it does not seem fair to label an instance of doing so to constitute a conspiratorial narrative.” A full transcript of this video is included below.

Gript also requested that it be noted that Gript has written critically about ISD and its staff in the past.

### Transcript of Gript 'Climate Lockdowns' video

"With EU officials saying that we need to flatten the curve of energy consumption, we may now be staring down the barrel of what effectively amounts to a climate lockdown. This is Ben Scallan and you're watching Gript media. Before we start the video if you want to support Gript on our work make sure to click like subscribe and comment even if you have absolutely nothing to say just comment if you will comply with energy rationing measures this winter because by liking, commenting and sharing this channel will get boosted in the algorithm and gets seen by more people. So if you want to see this channel grow just take two seconds right now to like, comment and do your part to support independent journalism and with that said on to the video. EU leaders can dress up the incoming winter energy restrictions with any fancy media spin they want but ultimately let's call a spade a spade, these are climate lockdowns. After all the last time the world heard the phrase "flatten the curve" from politicians we were promised a brief six-week disruption to our lives for the greater good. What we instead got was years of catastrophic damage to our economy and health-crushing state overreach and an unprecedented erosion of our most fundamental human and civil rights. What seemed to be a six-week inconvenience turned into a years-long dystopian power grab and wealth transfer by the global business and political elite. And now this year we hear that, there is yet another curve which needs to be flattened this time in regards to energy. As European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said last week the EU will propose a mandatory target for reducing electricity use at peak hours in order to quote "flatten the curve." [Von der Leyen] "So what we have to do is flatten the curve and avoid the peak demands. We will propose a mandatory target for reducing electricity use at peak hours and we will work very closely with the member states to achieve this." The key word there in case you missed it is "mandatory" you will not have an option but to cut your energy usage this winter, according to the EU. They intend to force you. Switzerland is already considering jailing people for up to three years if they heat their homes too much, referring to those who might hypothetically breach the regulations as "heat sinners." Some will probably try to convince you that this is necessary. They'll tell you that unless we give the government control over how much energy we all consume the power grid will simply not be able to keep up

with the demand. But these are the same leaders who are recently warning countries not to "backslide" into using quote "dirty fossil fuels like coal", even though coal is a viable and reliable source of energy with a proven track record. So in other words European leaders would rather control and curtail your right to use energy than jeopardise their so-called green agenda. There are potential solutions to the problem but they are apparently more concerned about climate change. And so when the energy cuts come this winter let's call them what they actually are, a climate lockdown. They can dress it up with whatever media spin they want and blame it on Russia till the cows come home, they can use whatever euphemisms they like but let's get real that's what it is. The energy crisis far predated the war and European energy independence has already been eroded by green policies for about a decade. This crisis was long in the making and not by Vladimir Putin. Over the last two years the media floated the idea of climate lockdowns on more than one occasion and now it's coming to fruition and in response Europeans are taking to the streets en masse in protest. Thousands of protesters in Germany, thousands of protesters in France, thousands in the Czech Republic and elsewhere. People are rising up against the cost of living crisis or its real name, the cost of lockdown crisis. Because that's ultimately what got us here, insane lockdown policies. It turns out that central banks printing cash like it's a sport while governments deliberately disrupt the global supply chain manufacturing a production with unnecessary restrictions might have had a negative impact on the economy down the line. Now who could have seen that one coming. Every one of these problems is a result of intentional policies and step one to ending this madness is to start being honest about what those policies are and who exactly is responsible. Before you go if we have given you a voice at all with this commentary please consider donating to Gript monthly via the link on screen to help us continue this vital work. With your help we can change the Irish media landscape for the better and bring a bit of reality back to the national conversation. Make sure to share this video with your friends and as always thanks for watching"

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Link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/04f9e-national-counter-disinformation-strategy-working-group/>
  2. European Media and Information Fund, "Disclaimer," 2022. Link: <https://gulbenkian.pt/emifund/disclaimer>
  3. Please see appendix for details on Gript's response to be included in this project.
  4. Irish Independent, "Residents terrified by Youth Defence protest," 5 December 1997.  
Link: <http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/residents-terrified-by-youth-defence-protest-26200526.html>
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Link: <https://www.thejournal.ie/2020/12/mcguirks-lack-of-goodwill-to-all-men/>
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Link: <https://www.thejournal.ie/transatlantic-way-womens-category-trans-athlete-6091804-Jun2023/>  
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