

# The German Far Right Online.

## A Longitudinal Study

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## Editorial responsibility

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## Executive Summary

The past three years were shaped by manifold crises which defined political discussion in Germany. The COVID-19 pandemic and Russian invasion of Ukraine among other events resulted in economic crises marked by an increase in interest rates and inflation. Against this backdrop, the share of German citizens holding far-right and/or extremist views has increased, and trust in government institutions has declined.<sup>1</sup> Measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 were met with resistance among parts of the German population, giving rise to an anti-lockdown movement.<sup>2</sup> This study examines how members of the German far-right capitalised on these developments, focusing on their communication and distribution strategies on social media.

The research project “Countering Radicalisation in Right-Wing Extremist Online Subcultures” was funded by the German Federal Ministry of Justice (BMJ). In the context of this project, ISD examined the German far right’s use of alt-tech and other platforms, specifically, which platforms were used to avoid regulation under the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG), and how they were used for this purpose. The research team also analysed how far-right use of larger social media platforms, referring to those falling under the scope of the NetzDG and the EU’s Digital Services Act as designated very large online platforms (VLOPs),<sup>3</sup> changed over the duration of the project, including changes in far-right debate.

In this longitudinal study, ISD analysed data from Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, Instagram and Telegram, the latter of which has become a key pillar for the German far right. In total, **1,273,380 messages published by 225 far right and conspiracist Telegram channels** were gathered for content analysis, encompassing a period from 1 January 2021 until 31 March 2023. These messages were processed using the BERTopic model

*paraphrase-multilingual-mpnet-base-v2*. Further, we analysed activity, follower count and engagement of 461 Facebook accounts, 229 Telegram channels, 95 Instagram accounts, 159 X/Twitter accounts and 92 YouTube channels, thus covering **a total of 1,032 social media accounts** belonging to far-right extremists as well as accounts of far-right parties and media outlets, conspiracy theorists, sovereigntists and accounts associated with the anti-lockdown movement from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2022. Finally, **based on a total of 4,230,926 messages**, we examined changes in URL sharing behaviour of **849 Facebook, X/Twitter and Telegram accounts** over a period from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2022.

To understand the discussions of the far right on mostly unmoderated spaces, and to identify their communication strategies, the first section conducts a content analysis based on far-right and far-right adjacent Telegram messages. The aim of this analysis was to understand which themes were particularly widespread, how dissemination of individual topics developed over time, and which narratives were central to the discussions. Further, ISD analysed which VLOPs were relevant for far-right and far-right adjacent actors and their followers and how the role of individual platforms changed during the research period. In addition, changes to the far-right online milieu through bans and suspensions of accounts were traced where possible. Finally, to assess which other social media and alt-tech platforms are most relevant for the German-language far right and how this changed over the period of study, the third section examines changes in platform domain-sharing. Building on the findings of all three analytical sections, ISD drafted recommendations by connecting the dots between research and existing policy debates around the regulation and research of VLOPs, including expected changes brought about by the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) coming into effect.

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# Key Findings

## Content Analysis

- **Conspiracy theories served as a central heuristic in the world view of far-right online subcultures.** The worldview of these actors assumes that they and those they see as their “ingroup” are besieged by “dark forces”. Different conspiracy narratives are constantly adjusted to fit new developments. Members of the far right appear to believe society to be in decline and offer two strategies for remedying this situation: individualistic preparation, and collective action in the form of resistance or revolution.
- **Telegram was used in Germany both as a tool for external messaging and as a space for internal communication and ideological learning by the far-right online milieu.** Some messages were aimed at reaching the wider public, becoming part of an attempt at disseminating far-right messaging into broader political discourse. These messages were phrased in a more moderate tone to be palatable beyond the far-right online milieu. Others were intended to be shared among actors already adhering to far-right beliefs, containing inside jargon and references. Some of the topic areas researched in the content analysis can be clearly differentiated according to this dichotomy.
- **Far-right channels capitalised on news stories to spread their beliefs by disseminating specific interpretations of current events that match far-right thinking and ideology.** In this opportunistic approach, the actual content of news articles was secondary to the feasibility of spinning the story to match far-right sensibilities. Far-right channels exploited existing social conflicts as well as emerging crises. Multiple cases were observed in which political discourse prevalent in the far-right milieu intersected with discourses on the mainstream political stage.
- **Important political events like the COVID-19 pandemic or the Russian invasion in Ukraine were extensively discussed in the German far right’s Telegram discourse.** In their discussions of COVID-19, the far right attached itself to the anti-lockdown movement in Germany and spread disinformation and conspiracy theories concerning the pandemic.

In the case of the Russian attack on Ukraine, far-right Telegram channels furthered the spread of Russian war propaganda by disseminating content from sanctioned Russian state media outlets. The far-right online milieu thereby presented itself as a security risk due not only to its extremist ideology, but also its role as an ally to autocratic foreign powers.

- **Far-right discussions on Telegram were broad and encompassed a wide range of topics.** Beyond COVID-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, messages discussed international affairs with a special focus on US politics, food and lifestyle themes such as nutrition and survivalism, as well as the broader **political system with an emphasis on critique of the mainstream media. Racist and xenophobic posts, often focused on migration, were also widely shared, as were conspiracy theories, specifically those involving technology.**

## Account Activity

- **VLOPs remain important for far-right audiences.** Far-right accounts on VLOPs were able to expand their following and increase their user engagement. This correlates with an overall increase in support for far-right opinions in Germany in past years.
- **Bans and deletions impacted the far-right online milieu.** Some of the accounts banned by Telegram due to local regulation were well-known far-right actors. The share of accounts banned or deleted per platform ranges between 3% (YouTube) and 17% (Instagram), which partially explains an observed overall downward trend of posted messages across platforms.
- **Far-right actors are seemingly quick to return once the ‘mainstream’ platform environment becomes suitable for them again.** An increase in following on X/Twitter during the last quarter of 2022 may indicate that its appeal was increased for far-right users after changes in the platform’s ownership and moderation policies at that time.

## Platform Landscape

- **VLOPs are still highly relevant for German far-right content producers.** Enforcing content moderation on VLOPs is therefore still necessary to counter the dissemination of illegal content by far-right actors on these platforms. Monitoring of the far-right online milieu remains an important tool for detecting attempts and strategies to subvert moderation practices.
- **Telegram remains a key platform for the far-right exchange of ideas, including hateful messages.** Although anti-lockdown channels have published fewer messages over time, causing an overall decrease in Telegram messages published, both the content and link analysis show that far-right actors remain on the platform and are actively exchanging content including the dissemination of conspiracy theories and hateful messages.
- **A high volume of the shared URLs referred to content hosted on the same platform the URL was posted on (X/Twitter, Facebook or Telegram), rather than external domains.** This indicates that closed, platform-specific far-right online ecosystems exist on each platform.
- **After Telegram, Gettr was the most widely shared alt-tech platform in the researched dataset.** The number of shared URLs linking to the microblogging platform dropped sharply during the last quarter of 2022, correlating with changes to moderation practices at X/ Twitter. Further research is required to scrutinise whether this correlation denotes a larger trend for Gettr and for alt-tech microblogging services more broadly.
- **A notable increase in the volume of links to platforms other than X/Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram/Telegra.ph occurred following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.** This study found an increase from 6.73% of shared links in January 2021 to 9.59% in February 2021 and a peak of 12.3% in March 2022. The increase lasted until November 2022 at 9.55%. This trend was likely influenced by VLOPs' attempts to enforce EU sanctions against Russian war propaganda. Pro-Russian far-right actors might have sought out alt-tech platforms to read and share Russian state media content.
- **Audiovisual platforms made up the largest proportion of social media platforms shared.** Three out of the five most shared social media platforms on Facebook and X/Twitter, and four out of five on Telegram, were video-sharing platforms. In total, 15 out of the 18 most widely shared social media platforms were audiovisual sharing and streaming services. This is consistent with an observed increase in user engagement on YouTube and indicates the continued importance of video platforms for the German-speaking far right. Among all audiovisual social media platforms, Odysee was the most widely shared platform other than YouTube in the dataset.

## Glossary

**Anti-feminism:** Anti-feminist claims oppose or reject feminist concerns and positions and constitute a central way of thinking and ideology among the far-right.<sup>4</sup> Anti-feminism acts as a bridge to the centre of society, normalising far-right and anti-diversity attitudes and resentments, and thereby undermining democracy and weakening social cohesion.<sup>5</sup>

**Anti-Lockdown Movement:** During the COVID19-pandemic, opposition to the lockdown policies of the German government united a broad range of actors, ranging from far-right activists, influencers and media outlets to non-extremist actors which were not previously known to be involved in political activism.<sup>6</sup>

**Antisemitism:** Antisemitism is defined in line with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance as “a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred towards Jews”.<sup>7</sup> As such, “rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed towards Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, towards Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”<sup>8</sup>

**Alternative Media:** In line with Heft et al. (2019), alternative media outlets are understood here as outlets who self-identify as an “alternative” and “corrective to a perceived political and media mainstream”. While the focus of this report is on right-wing alternative media, alternative media outlets may express other political stances as well.<sup>9</sup>

**Alt-tech:** The term ‘alt-tech’ refers to both the far-right tech movement and the platforms it creates.

**Conspiracy theories:** A theory which seeks to explain a phenomenon by invoking a sinister plot orchestrated by powerful actors.<sup>10</sup> These conspiracies are painted as secret or esoteric, with adherents to a theory seeing themselves as the initiated few who have access to hidden knowledge. Adherents to conspiracy theories usually see themselves as in direct opposition to the powers who are orchestrating the plot.

**Far right/Far-right:** In line with academic and far right expert Cas Mudde, we define the far right as groups and individuals exhibiting at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy or strong state advocacy.<sup>11</sup> Far right is an umbrella term, which encapsulates both the ‘radical right’ and the ‘extreme right’. According to Mudde, the radical right and the extreme right both ‘believe that inequalities between people are natural and positive’, but they hold different positions on democracy.<sup>12</sup> While the radical right is opposed to certain aspects of liberal democracy (e.g. minority rights, independent institutions) it is not in principle against democracy, but favours a majoritarian democracy led by the in-group it identifies with. Extreme-right actors on the other hand are in principle opposed to democracy as a form of governance, instead favouring authoritarian rule.<sup>13</sup> According to ISD’s working definition, far-right extremism refers to a form of nationalism that is characterised by its reference to racial, ethnic or cultural supremacy.

**NetzDG:** The Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) is a German law that came into force on 1 October 2017 and was last amended in May 2021 with the aim of strengthening law enforcement on the internet. The aim of this act is to more effectively combat punishable hate speech and other punishable content on social networks. Its scope for the obligation to remove unlawful content includes platforms with at least two million registered users in Germany.

**Racism:** Racism is based on false assumptions of the existence of different human races according to which people of the same presumed “race” share certain characteristics.<sup>14</sup> Antisemitic beliefs are often rooted in racist assumptions.

**Reichsbürger & Sovereignists:** Reichsbürger constitute an extremist German movement whose ideology is similar to that of “Sovereign Citizens” in the USA, Canada and the United Kingdom.<sup>15</sup> Although the Reichsbürger movement encompasses various movements, they are united by the common conviction that the Federal Republic of Germany is not a sovereign state and that the laws and rules passed by the German state are therefore not binding.



# 1. Introduction

In 2017, the German Act to Improve Enforcement of the Law in Social Networks (Network Enforcement Act, commonly known as NetzDG), came into effect. Among other obligations, it compels large social media platforms with over two million users in Germany to remove “manifestly unlawful” content within 24 hours of being notified.<sup>16</sup> This new regulatory pressure was expected to have implications for the activities of German language far-right online subcultures, potentially leading to the deletion of content and the deplatforming<sup>17</sup> of actors.

In line with findings suggesting platform moderation efforts and deplatforming reduce the quantity and reach of hate speech online,<sup>18</sup> a pilot study into the law’s effect on X/Twitter suggests that the NetzDG did indeed reduce hate speech.<sup>19</sup> However, independent analyses on the effects of the NetzDG remain scarce and interviews with civil society organisations have pointed towards a lack of impact with regard to the prevalence or visibility of hate speech and the effectiveness of its reporting mechanisms in helping affected communities.<sup>20</sup> Simultaneously, efforts to increase online safety by platforms and governments were also shown to lead to user migration from large platforms to smaller platforms and a subsequent increase in activity on these platforms.<sup>21</sup> This indicates that legal obligations for larger platforms such as the duty to delete illegal content under §3 of the Network Enforcement Act<sup>22</sup> could make niche platforms more relevant for far-right actors.

To better understand if and how these trends manifested in the German far-right online ecosystem following the implementation of both NetzDG and its successor, the European Union’s Digital Services Act (DSA), the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD Germany gGmbH) conducted the project “Countering Radicalisation in Right-Wing Extremist Online Subcultures” from 2021 to 2023, funded by the German Federal Ministry of Justice. This project aimed to not only examine changes in the behaviour of those sharing far-right extremist content online, but also to present evidence-based recommendations for effective regulation.

During the first year of the project, ISD provided methodological and historical background on the development of the far right online<sup>23</sup> and examined which platforms far-right actors referred to from

established platforms.<sup>24</sup> Both research reports indicated the significance of Telegram for the German far right; a follow-up report focussed on the platform specifically, confirming its key role in far-right discourse.<sup>25</sup> The findings from year one were summarised in the “Detours and Diversions” report.<sup>26</sup>

In year two, ISD focused on smaller platforms to better understand their appeal and role in the German far right ecosystem, analysing “Gettr’s Failure to Launch in France and Germany”,<sup>27</sup> the role of the Blockchain-supported platform Odysee in monetisation,<sup>28</sup> and the German far right’s use of the decentralised PeerTube protocol.<sup>29</sup> These findings are summarised and discussed in the second summary report “Inside the Digital Labyrinth: Right-Wing Extremist Strategies of Decentralisation on the Internet & Possible Countermeasures”.<sup>30</sup>

Building on these theoretical foundations and individual pieces of analysis, the third year of the project identified long-term trends and effects of the Network Enforcement Act and its DSA successor. To examine the impact of regulatory pressure on online activities of German-language far-right actors, this study examines how their online user behaviour changed, which platforms they promoted over time, and what topics they discussed on Telegram from early 2021 to early 2023. Based on this research, ISD identified changes in strategies in German-language far-right social media use and derived recommendations for the governance of platforms.

During the research period, multiple crises have altered the dynamics of the German far right, which is reflected in the findings. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian war against Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis that ensued, new and recurring culture war issues<sup>31</sup> as well as one federal and several state elections were all co-opted for far-right campaigning in Germany.

At the same time, the dynamics on social media platforms also changed significantly. For example, the initial distinction between established, ‘mainstream’ platforms on the one side versus smaller, ‘alternative’ platforms on the other - which was largely based on respective moderation practices - can no longer easily be made. On the one hand, some ‘alternative platforms’ have begun to implement moderation efforts. BitChute,

for example, which has historically prided itself for a reserved approach to content moderation and presented itself as committed to freedom of expression,<sup>32</sup> has now pledged to increasing its moderation team and to enabling non-registered users to report content.<sup>33</sup> The changes came after UK regulatory body Ofcom raised concerns with the platform.<sup>34</sup> Further, Telegram has also banned some extremist accounts after pressure from the German Ministry of the Interior.<sup>35</sup> Although the platform is still reluctant to moderate content and only bans or geo-blocks accounts when put under pressure,<sup>36</sup> Telegram does not subscribe to the unambiguous free speech commitment its founder Pavel Durov claimed to support<sup>37</sup> and has in some cases accepted local laws as grounds for deplatforming.<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, X/Twitter which at the beginning of the study period was considered an established mainstream platform, has changed some of its policies which has enabled the return of extremist users,<sup>39</sup> and has become less strict in its moderation of disinformation content,<sup>40</sup> thus creating a permissive

environment usually found on 'alternative platforms'. This development, combined with the project's finding that a far-right online ecosystem is still active on established platforms, raises questions about the utility of the terms 'mainstream' and 'alternative' with regard to social media platforms.

The analysis in this study was based on lists of accounts from the German far-right and conspiracist spectrum that ISD analysts compiled at the beginning of the project in 2021. The lists comprised 461 Facebook accounts, 229 Telegram channels, 95 Instagram accounts, 159 X/Twitter accounts and 92 YouTube channels, totalling 1,032 accounts encompassing those who share far-right extremist content as well as accounts belonging to far-right parties and media outlets. Furthermore, conspiracy theorists, sovereigntists and accounts associated with the anti-lockdown movement were included due to their adoption of far-right conspiracy theories and their campaigns with members of the far right.<sup>41</sup>

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## 2. Content Analysis

To research far-right discourse and communication strategies, ISD analysed the thematic makeup of far-right discourse quantitatively. The guiding questions for this section were which themes were particularly widespread, how dissemination of individual topics developed, and which narratives were central to the discussions.

We analysed German-language content shared by far-right and far-right adjacent channels<sup>42</sup> from early 2021 to early 2023 using topic modelling. The results give an overview of key themes and changes in the volume of messages over time, as well as the strategies employed by actors on the far right for internal and external communication. Telegram posts were chosen for this analysis since prior research has shown that due to the platform's reluctance in moderating content,<sup>43</sup> German-language far-right actors that were banned from other platforms have adopted Telegram for networking.<sup>44</sup>

### 2.1 Methodology

To analyse changes in thematic discussions over time, all messages published by the surveyed accounts on Telegram were collected. Overall, 1,273,380 messages published by 225 far right and conspiracist Telegram channels over a period from 1 January 2021 until 31 March 2023 were gathered. The collected data was then processed using the BERTopic model *paraphrase-multilingual-mpnet-base-v2* to explore and reveal significant patterns and insights from clusters of messages (topics) generated by the model.

# of messages	% of dataset	Description
1,273,380	100.00%	Total number of messages processed by BERTopic model
597,764	46.94%	Number of messages that could not confidently be assigned by the model and which were removed <sup>45</sup>
377,591	29.65%	Number of messages labelled as relevant
220,173	17.29%	Number of messages labelled as irrelevant

Table 1: Number of messages processed during analysis in terms of totals and in terms of percentages.

Topic modelling is a powerful method for clustering "topics" of recurring themes (messages) in large-scale text data and detecting patterns in how these themes are used. Categorising and analysing these topic clusters entails an iterative process of assigning thematic labels to each message cluster, followed by multiple rounds of evaluation to ensure accuracy and relevance of both the topics and their constituent messages.

The following steps for thematic allocation and evaluation were taken:

#### Phase 1: Thematic allocation

Each topic was allocated an initial thematic label based on a review of 10 sample messages from each topic. Only topics where at least 7 of the 10 messages had a clear and coherent theme were assigned a theme and a subtheme label; otherwise, the topic was labelled as irrelevant and removed from the analysis. This approach favours precision (i.e. high confidence that a given topic consists of messages relevant to its assigned theme) over recall (i.e. capturing all possibly relevant messages to a given theme). As a result, quantifying message themes and trends across a dataset of this scale can be done with high confidence.<sup>46</sup> Out of a total of 235 initial topics, 137 were determined to be relevant to the study and were allocated a subtheme and a mastertheme. All other messages were disregarded from subsequent analysis. The following analysis is based on the topics labelled as relevant and comprises 377,591 messages.

#### Phase 2: Stratified sample evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation was to assess topic alignment with the assigned theme based on a sample of 50 messages from each topic.

- Step 1: a sample of 50 messages from each topic were manually evaluated to determine: a. the relevance of the message to the overall study; b. what subtheme the message belonged to.
- Step 2: a precision score for the theme was calculated based on the alignment between the manual decision from the analyst and the model's predicted decision (i.e. the proportion of messages in the sample that corresponds to the theme allocated to the topic).

### Phase 3: Master theme blind evaluation

This layer of evaluation assessed the accuracy of the model's topic assignments by comparing the model's classification with those made by human annotators.

- Step 1: Assessing the accuracy of the model's topic assignments by evaluating a random sample of 500 messages and labelling each message according to its relevance and master theme, this time without being prompted by the model's prediction annotation for each label.
- Step 2: Calculating the precision, recall, and the combined F1 score (see below) for the relevance and master theme labels based on the model's prediction and the analyst's decision.<sup>47</sup>

### Phase 4: Subtheme blind evaluation

The final layer of evaluation assessed the model's performance in categorising subthemes within a given master theme.

- Step 1: Assessing the accuracy of model's performance in categorising subthemes within a given master theme by evaluating a stratified sample of 100 messages per master theme and labelling each message according to its relevance and subtheme, without being prompted by the model's predicted annotation for each label.
- Step 2: Calculating the precision, recall, and the combined score (F1) for the relevance and subtheme labels based on the model's prediction and the analyst's decision, enabling meaningful within-theme comparisons.

## 2.2 Evaluation Scores

After the stratified sample evaluation, the classification accuracy for all topics except antisemitism was well above the desired threshold of at least 0.7, with accuracy scores ranging from 0.86 to 0.98. In order to increase the accuracy score of the antisemitism theme, which scored 0.56, a list of keywords was created to exclude messages that were not relevant to antisemitism and thereby increase the accuracy of this subtheme to 0.74.

Following the master theme evaluation (see table 2 below), the F1 scores for the master themes *antisemitism*, *digital technologies*, and *German politics & social issues* were below the desired threshold of 0.7. In the case of these themes, this was due to a high precision (0.91-1) but low recall score (0.5), which resulted in F1 scores ranging from 0.65-0.67. This means that posts attributed to either of these three themes by the model were labelled correctly with high precision, however analysts found a somewhat high number of posts belonging to these three themes that were attributed other labels. In terms of interpreting these scores, this means that the trend in posting behaviour can be derived from the data with high confidence, but the actual number of posts belonging to either of these master themes is less substantial. In the case of master themes *conspiracy theories*, *economy and political system*, both the precision (0.56-0.69) and recall score (0.26-0.50) were somewhat low, resulting in a combined F1 score below the 0.7 threshold (0.38-0.57). In the case of these three master themes, this means that both the overall trend as well as the number of posts should be interpreted with caution.

#	Master theme	Precision	Recall	F1
1	Anti-feminism	1.00	0.78	0.88
2	Antisemitism	1.00	0.50	0.67
3	Climate change	1.00	0.73	0.84
4	Conspiracy theories	0.69	0.26	0.38
5	COVID-19	0.95	0.63	0.76
6	Digital technologies	1.00	0.50	0.67
7	Economy	0.67	0.50	0.57
8	Energy politics	0.80	0.67	0.73
9	Food & lifestyle	0.79	0.65	0.71
10	German politics & social issues	0.91	0.50	0.65
11	International politics	0.96	0.79	0.87
12	Political system	0.56	0.54	0.55
13	Racism / Xenophobia	0.78	0.86	0.82
14	Social media	1.00	0.86	0.92

Table 2: Evaluation scores following the master theme evaluation.

In the third phase of evaluation (see table 3 below), 45 subthemes placed above the threshold of 0.7, suggesting that both the trends displayed, as well as the proportion of messages for these subthemes can be interpreted with confidence. A total of seven out of 52 subthemes were given a F1 score below 0.7. The subthemes *transphobia & homophobia*, *climate activists* and *EU politics* scored between 0.23 and 0.5 due to very low recall scores (0.13-0.33), which means that whilst for these topics an overall trend can be derived, the proportion of posts belonging to these subthemes is less conclusive. The subthemes *mixed anti-feminism*, *QAnon*, *nutrition*

and *housing* scored F1 scores below 0.7 (0.5-0.68) due to low precision scores (0.33-0.54), which means that a significant number of posts attributed to these subthemes by the model were attributed differently by the analysts. As mentioned previously, subthemes that overlapped with other subthemes (such as *transphobia & homophobia* and *mixed anti-feminism*) were expected to result in lower precision, recall and F1 scores, due to the single-choice functionality. Notably, the themes *antisemitism*, *economy* and *COVID-19* constitute both a mastertheme and a subtheme and underwent all layers of evaluation each.

#	Mastertheme	Subthemes	Precision	Recall	F1
1	Anti-feminism	Mixed anti-feminism	0.54	0.92	0.68
2	Anti-feminism	Anti-abortion & bodily autonomy	0.61	0.88	0.72
3	Anti-feminism	Transphobia & homophobia	0.75	0.26	0.38
4	Antisemitism	Antisemitism	0.81	1	0.9
5	Climate change	Climate activists	0.8	0.13	0.23
6	Climate change	Climate change	0.71	0.99	0.82
7	Conspiracy theories	Ukraine biolabs	0.8	1	0.89
8	Conspiracy theories	World Economic Forum	0.7	0.78	0.74
9	Conspiracy theories	Tech conspiracies	0.66	0.9	0.76
10	Conspiracy theories	Big-Pharma	0.83	1	0.91
11	Conspiracy theories	Paedophilia	0.83	0.83	0.83
12	Conspiracy theories	Bill & Melinda Gates	1	0.83	0.91
13	Conspiracy theories	9/11	1	1	1
14	Conspiracy theories	Satanism	0.86	0.86	0.86
15	Conspiracy theories	Conspiracy meta-discussions	1	0.83	0.91
16	Conspiracy theories	QAnon	0.33	1	0.5
17	Conspiracy theories	Aliens	0.67	1	0.8
18	COVID-19	COVID-19	0.92	1	0.96
19	Digital technologies	Digital currencies	0.76	0.95	0.84
20	Digital technologies	Cyber security	1	1	1
21	Digital technologies	Crypto	0.95	0.93	0.94
22	Economy	Economy	0.91	1	0.95
23	Energy politics	Nuclear energy	0.63	0.83	0.71

#	Mastertheme	Subthemes	Precision	Recall	F1
24	Energy politics	Gas energy	0.92	0.9	0.91
25	Energy politics	Renewable energy	0.84	0.81	0.82
26	Food & Lifestyle	Survivalism	1	0.79	0.88
27	Food & Lifestyle	Holistic health and spirituality	0.88	0.76	0.81
28	Food & Lifestyle	Holidays	0.83	0.71	0.77
29	Food & Lifestyle	Nutrition	0.52	0.94	0.67
30	Food & Lifestyle	Children & upbringing	0.88	1	0.93
31	German politics & social issues	(Domestic) politics	0.83	0.95	0.89
32	German politics & social issues	Agriculture	0.93	1	0.96
33	German politics & social issues	Angela Merkel	1	0.92	0.96
34	German politics & social issues	Green party	0.92	0.79	0.85
35	German politics & social issues	Housing	0.33	1	0.5
36	International politics	Afghanistan	1	1	1
37	International politics	Russia-Ukraine	0.84	0.93	0.88
38	International politics	China	0.9	0.69	0.78
39	International politics	US politics	0.81	0.85	0.83
40	International politics	EU politics	1	0.33	0.5
41	International politics	Hungary	1	1	1
42	International politics	France	1	1	1
43	International politics	Latin & South America	1	1	1
44	International politics	Poland	1	1	1
45	Racism & Xenophobia	Crime related racism/xenophobia	0.86	0.94	0.9
46	Racism & Xenophobia	Anti-Muslim racism	0.75	0.9	0.82
47	Racism & Xenophobia	Anti-migration	0.83	0.93	0.88
48	Racism & Xenophobia	Anti-BLM/woke	0.83	0.71	0.77
49	Social Media	X	0.81	1	0.89
50	Social Media	YouTube	0.6	1	0.75
51	Social Media	Telegram	0.94	0.83	0.88
52	Social Media	Facebook	0.94	0.89	0.91

Table 3: Evaluation scores following the blind subtheme evaluation.

A total 11 of the 63 subthemes did not show up in the blind evaluation. This is due to their tiny proportion in the entire dataset: each subtheme makes up for <1% of the entire dataset, with the exception of *anti-establishment*,

*mainstream media scepticism*, and *political leanings & extremism*, which each constitute less than 5% of the analysed data. For these subthemes, analysis was limited to qualitative insights only.

### 2.3 Limitations

To preserve analytic utility, each message was allocated to only one topic, even if they were relevant to multiple topics, as multiple thematic labels to individual messages are difficult to quantify and would make it challenging to accurately discern trends. However, messages inevitably are often about more than one theme (for example, a message might refer to a conspiracy theory and international politics, whilst also being antisemitic). When analysts were conducting the blind evaluations (i.e. where analysts decided what theme or subtheme a sample message belonged to, without seeing the model's prediction), they may have reasonably decided that a message was antisemitic, when the model assigned it to a conspiracy theory theme. While neither answer would technically be incorrect, this misalignment between analyst decision and model prediction would result in a lower precision or recall score.

In addition, it was challenging to strike a balance between creating differentiated labels for more nuanced findings and making sure that clusters were distinct enough to withstand blind coding. For example, the inclusion of more general clusters that were not focused on single issue areas resulted in a more accurate reflection of the overall number of messages regarding broader topics such as (*domestic*) *politics*. However, messages about *Angela Merkel* and the *German Green party* both warranted a standalone topic from the general subtheme (*domestic*) *politics* due to their stigmatisation as “enemies” by the German far right.<sup>48</sup> Including these clusters alongside the more general catch-all (*domestic*) *politics* subtheme risked lowering evaluation scores due to it being more difficult for analysts to discern which category best reflected the main focal point of the message. To mitigate these challenges, analysts were given up to three decision choices when conducting the blind evaluation steps in cases where a message could reasonably be about more than any one individual theme.

Due to the decision to favour precision by only including coherent clusters where at least 7 of the 10 sample messages had a clear and coherent theme and excluding others, some possibly relevant messages were excluded. In addition, by creating a list of terms to filter out predominantly non-antisemitic messages from

the *antisemitism* cluster, precision of the subtheme was increased but some antisemitic messages were inadvertently removed and are not reflected in the findings.

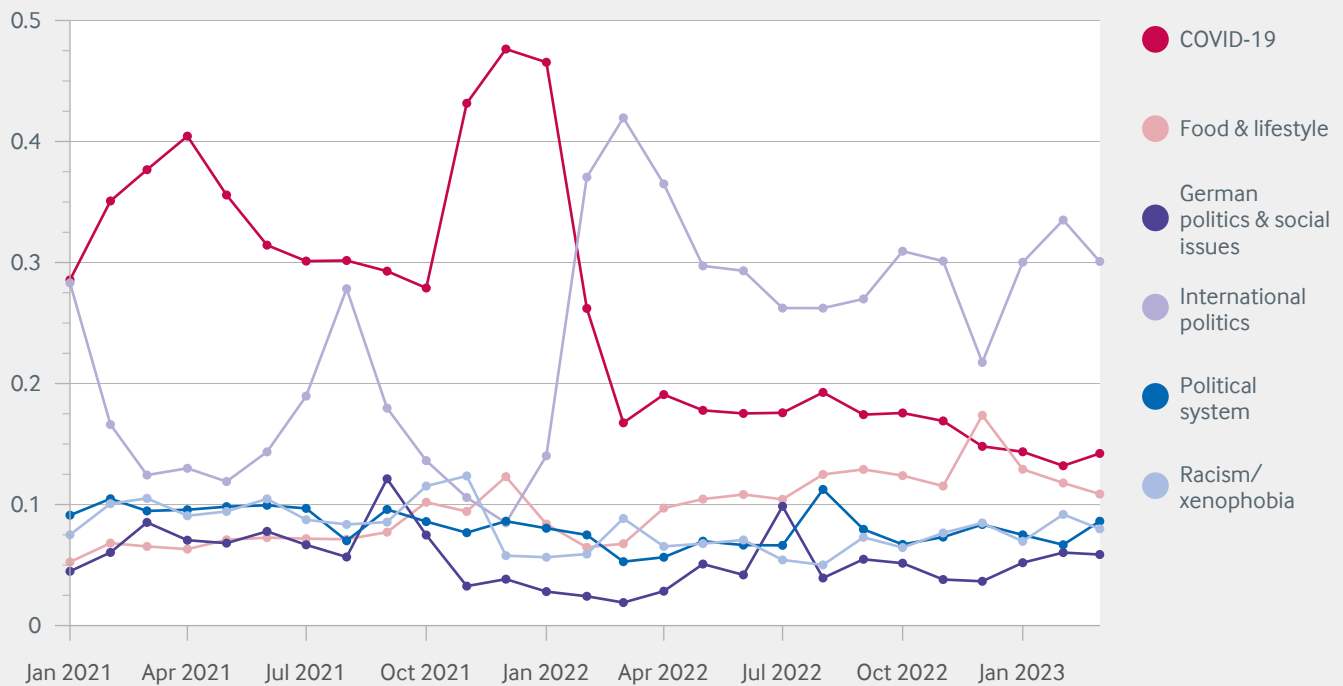
Finally, to address the significant class imbalance in theme sizes, each subtheme was evaluated within its mastertheme rather than across the entire dataset, as evaluating subthemes across the entire dataset would have required an impractical number of random messages for manual annotation. Consequently, comparisons of subtheme quantities and prominence can be made with high confidence within the same mastertheme but with lower confidence between subthemes from different masterthemes.

### 2.4 Overview

The study period from 1 January 2021 to 30 April 2023, was marked by multiple crises which influenced not only the broader public debate in Germany, but also significantly impacted the German-language far right. At the same time, the number of individuals considered far-right extremists according to the German Office for the Protection of the Constitution has increased significantly, from an estimated 33,900 far-right extremists in 2021 to an estimated 38,800 far-right extremists in 2022.<sup>49</sup>

In this study, the overall composition of German-language far-right debate on Telegram was found to be driven by current events which were consistently interpreted along the lines of ideological beliefs consonant with far-right thought. Themes collecting messages focussed on internal dissemination of ideological positions show that Telegram is also used as a site for far-right ideological learning.<sup>50</sup> Generally, Telegram seems to serve two main functions for this milieu: internal exchange, and propaganda messaging for a broader audience not confined to the far right. Sometimes, these functions can be differentiated along account categories. For example, most media outlets strike a rather moderate tone aimed at reaching a bigger audience, while far-right extremists might more freely use hateful language that might deter people who are not ideologically committed.

**Graph 1:** The proportion of messages assigned to masterthemes that made up a proportion of more than 1% of total messages at some time during the study period.



The long duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as controversial debates about vaccines and appropriate containment measures, have made COVID-19 a central topic in German-language far-right discourse during the entire study period. Consequently, in comparison to other issues analysed here, messages about COVID-19 make up the largest proportion (28.4%) of messages analysed. The second largest cluster of messages is concerned with *international politics* at a total share of 25% of messages. Within this cluster, *Russia-Ukraine* related messages made up the largest subtheme with 12.5% of total messages, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. The high volume of messages in these subthemes shows the importance of current affairs for far-right discourse.

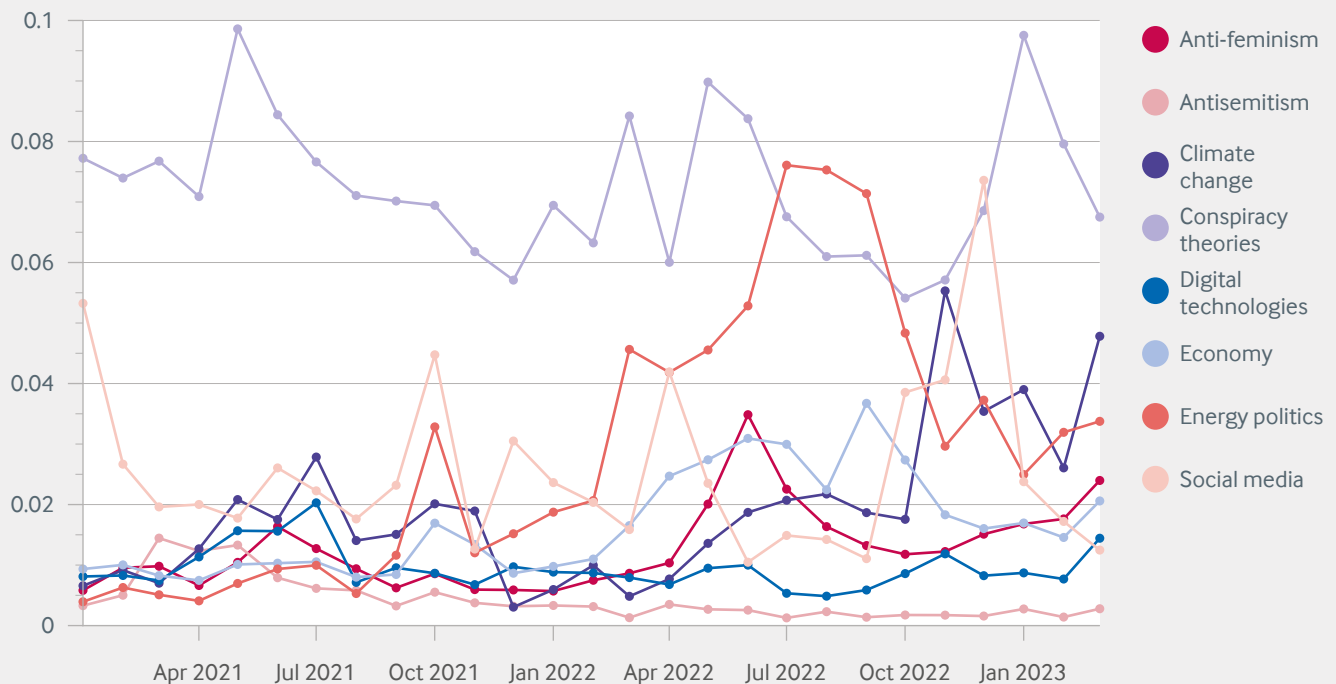
Critique of the *political system*, such as scepticism towards mainstream media outlets which is often prevalent among far right and conspiracy actors,<sup>51</sup> makes up 8.5% of total messages. A further 7.9% of messages were labelled *racist or xenophobic*. Racism, xenophobia, and white supremacy constitute persistent and structural

issues within Germany and are firmly embedded within Germany's far right.<sup>52</sup> Another significant part (6.8%) of far-right discourse is made up of a vast range of *conspiracy theories* including both some centuries-old conspiracy theories, as well as their more current interpretations. While these themes, which constitute an important part of far-right ideological exchange and discussion, do not match the volume of current affairs themes in the dataset, their volume shows that they are important parts of far-right discourse. In addition to *food and lifestyle* related messages, which constitute 5.8% of messages and are situated in a broader trend of far-right actors using influencer communication and lifestyle topics,<sup>53</sup> *German politics and social issues* make up 5.5% of messages.

Discussions on *energy politics* make up a total of 2.8% of messages. The proportion of messages about *energy politics* increased importantly in the context of the 2022 German gas crisis following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Like other themes, these three topics tie in personal concerns and experiences and thus highlight



**Graph 2:** The proportion of messages assigned to masterthemes that made up a proportion of less than 1% of total messages during the study period.



the importance of the discussion of individual realities of far-right actors. A further 2.5% of messages alone discuss regulation and alleged “censorship” on the *social media platforms* Facebook, Telegram, X, and YouTube, shining a light on the perception of persecution that is a prominent feature of far-right thinking.

A total of 1.9% of messages discuss and oppose measures to combat climate change as well as climate activism. Messages labelled *antisemitism* overall constitute 1.4% of total messages and spiked during the first half of 2021 due to messages published by Attila Hildmann, a public figure who describes himself as “ultra-right-wing” and as a German nationalist.<sup>54</sup> While antisemitic assertions were present in many subthemes, this theme collected messages containing explicit antisemitism. Messages on the (*German*) *economy* also make up a total of 1.4% of messages, with a significant increase in the overall proportion of messages during the second half of the study period due to inflation. The proportion of messages labelled *anti-feminism* over

time has increased with an overall reported increase in anti-feminist attitudes in Germany and constitutes a total of 1.3% of messages.<sup>55</sup> Discussions around *digital technologies* such as cryptocurrencies make up 0.9% of total messages.

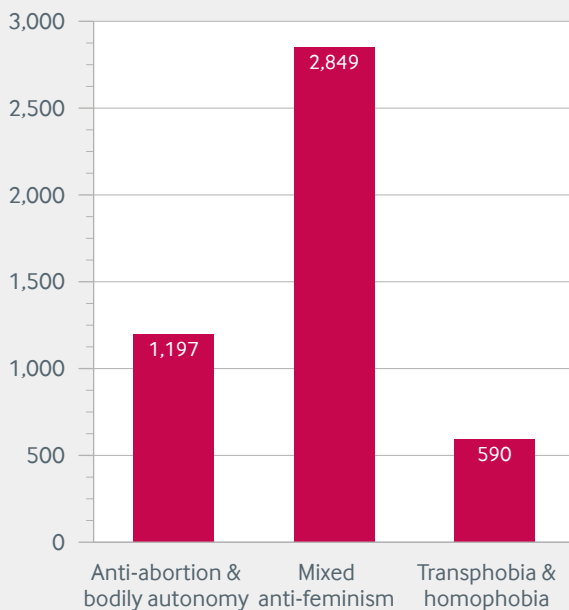
With its research of 63 different subthemes and their longitudinal development, this study is one of the most comprehensive quantitative analyses of German-language far-right discourse on Telegram. The following sections will provide more detailed insights into the overall debate, presenting a content analysis of the identified themes in the context of key issues across the study period (in alphabetical order).

## 2.5 Findings

### 2.5.1 Anti-feminism

The *mixed anti-feminism* subtheme consists of messages that are anti-feminist in nature. Many

**Graph 3:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *anti-abortion & bodily autonomy*, *mixed anti-feminism*, *transphobia & homophobia*.



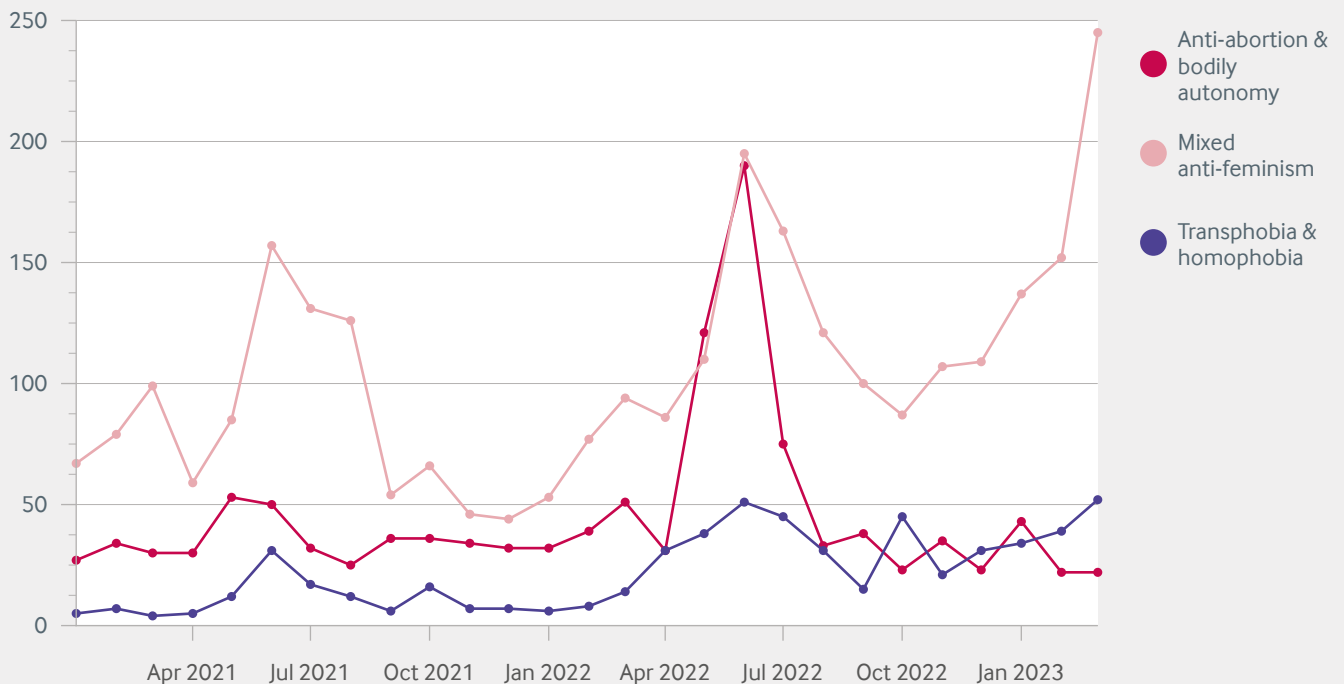
messages were hostile to progressive gender conversations and policy, with the majority being anti-trans or anti-LGBTQ+. Overall, feminism was often framed as part of an attack on the family and on traditional gender roles. Some posts were explicitly misogynist, others attacked feminism as a political movement, and others criticised gender-neutral language. The *anti-abortion & bodily autonomy* subtheme consists mostly of anti-abortion messages, but also includes other messages against bodily autonomy peripherally relevant to pregnancy or babies, such as IVF, “AI babies” or other stories about pregnant women. The subtheme *transphobia & homophobia* contains discussions of the impact of an alleged “gender ideology” or “-lunacy” or an LGBTQ+ or trans “-agenda” on children, conflating the discussion of trans- or LGBTQ+ issues with an alleged “sexualisation” of children or their ideological “indoctrination”. The alleged motivations for such an indoctrination range from paedophile grooming under the banner of sex education, to financial motives by medical actors.

Other users assume an ideologically motivated conspiracy driven either by a specific understanding of gender or a Jewish plot to destroy families and nations by turning children into transgender people or homosexuals.

Further discussions revolve around legal issues regarding the transition of adolescents, around puberty blockers, and on gender-affirming surgeries. These medical procedures were described in drastic language as “chemical castration” and “mutilation” respectively. As in other subthemes, sinister forces that aim to harm children were rhetorically juxtaposed with an imagined innocence and passivity of children, who suffer but have no individual agency. In this logic, an adolescent wanting to transition is necessarily the result of peer pressure or indoctrination, not of a genuine gender expression. This harmful understanding is embedded in a broader understanding of social decline brought about either by the ideological perversions of a left-green political leaning or by a conspiracy to destroy the family, society, and the nation. The subtheme features a lot of international stories from the UK and the US and demonstrates a transfer of harmful depictions from the English-speaking far right into German-language discourse, such as portrayals of members of the LGBTQ+ community as ‘groomers’<sup>56</sup> or negative narratives about “drag queen story hours”.<sup>57</sup> The adoption of these harmful portrayals constitutes further evidence for an observed transnationalisation of the far right via digital discourses and networks.<sup>58</sup>

The inclusion of the mixed *anti-feminism* subtheme as a diffuse topic area that also includes messages fitting the labels *anti-abortion & bodily autonomy* and *transphobia & homophobia* resulted in lower evaluation scores. Many posts that were labelled *mixed anti-feminism* by the model were instead labelled as belonging to the *transphobia & homophobia* subtheme by human researchers, which partly explains the low precision score for the former and the low recall score for the latter (see 2.2). For interpretation purposes, this means that whilst the overall increasing trend of transphobic and homophobic posts is valid, the actual number of such posts remains somewhat unclear, as the number of *transphobic & homophobic* posts is decidedly higher than the model accounted for.

**Graph 4:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *anti-abortion & bodily autonomy*, *mixed anti-feminism* and *transphobia & homophobia* over time.



Overall, a worrying increase of anti-feminist messages can be observed. A notable spike in message volume across all anti-feminist subthemes occurred following the 24 June 2022, “*Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*”-ruling by the US Supreme Court. The court’s decision overturned the “*Roe v. Wade*” ruling, which in 1973 legalised abortion across the US. Since the *Dobbs v. Jackson* ruling, abortion access in the US has been widely restricted,<sup>59</sup> disproportionately affecting black women, indigenous women, women of colour, trans men, and non-binary people.<sup>60</sup> Among the channels studied in this subset of the data, reception of the ruling was overwhelmingly positive. Notably, the *Dobbs v. Jackson* ruling fuelled not only *anti-abortion and bodily autonomy* messages, but also non-abortion related *anti-feminist* messages, further underscoring an alarming trend of conservative and far-right US actors capitalising on their success in restricting abortion rights by seeking further restrictions of reproductive rights and restrictions around gender identity and sexual orientation.<sup>61</sup> Although German discussions around abortion rights are mostly centred around

decriminalising abortions, a recent trend shows German conservative politicians praising and emulating far-right US politicians that are undermining democratic norms and are working to further restrict LGBTQ+ and bodily autonomy rights.<sup>62</sup>

Out of the top five most prolific accounts, three accounts were most prolific in sharing anti-abortion and anti-bodily autonomy content as well as transphobic and homophobic content, further indicating a general stance against all policies considered “leftist”, rather than against issue-specific standpoints. The other two channels were popular conspiracy channels, one of which is specifically dedicated to the QAnon conspiracy theory. Both channels also shared many antisemitic messages and were among the top three channels sharing most messages regarding a variety of conspiracy theories. The third channel was a popular information channel among the Reichsbürger movement, which has since been deleted by or from Telegram. Apart from these conspiracist channels, far-right extremist media outlets were prolific in sharing anti-feminist content.

## 2.5.2 Antisemitism

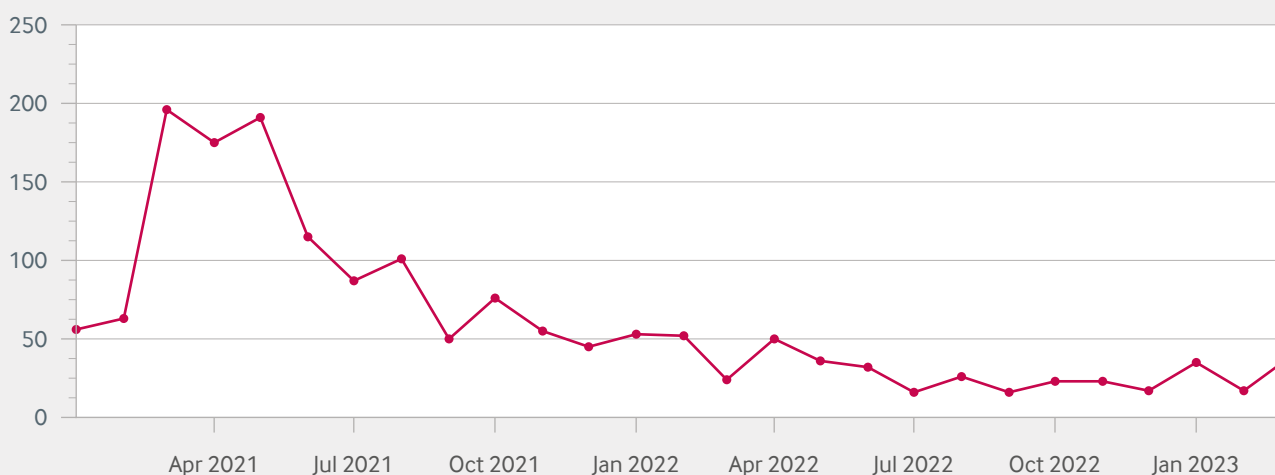
Antisemitic content in the studied subset of the data was not confined to messages labelled *antisemitism*. Rather, messages labelled as such mostly encompassed antisemitic claims which explicitly single out Jews as a group and portray them as scapegoats. Messages which wove antisemitic assertions into broader conspiracy theories were often assigned to other subthemes addressing these conspiracy theories specifically. For example, posts centred around George Soros, who was often referred to in antisemitic conspiracy theories, have been assigned their own distinct label (see below). The 1,667 messages labelled *antisemitism* range from historical revisionism and holocaust denial to antisemitic conspiracy theories and violent phantasies. In some cases, messages enter a meta-discussion of antisemitism or present a compartmentalised antisemitism. The latter claims to only oppose individual Jewish figures, subgroups, or groups that, as was claimed, were not actually Jewish (and thus those opposing them could not be accused of antisemitism), as was the case with the “Khazarian Mafia” conspiracy theory<sup>63</sup>, which was also found in the *antisemitism* subtheme.

As mentioned previously, some messages were excluded from the subtheme *antisemitism* to increase the phase 1 evaluation accuracy score. To create the list of excluded terms, researchers coded the sample, qualitatively checking each post that did not outright fit the label *antisemitism*. To ensure thorough coding, researchers

considered the entire context of a Telegram message, including the channel the message was published in, links and media outlets that were shared, as well as emoji reactions and comments or replies. Based on this analysis, the following list of words was excluded from data labelled *antisemitism*, due to overwhelming use in posts that did not fit the definition of antisemitism<sup>64</sup> used here: Israel\*, Antisemit\*, Muslim\*, Moslem\*, Palästina\*, Netanjahu, Hamas, IDF, Hezbollah\*, Hisbolla\*, liban\*, Jordanien, El-Hassan, palest\*. Although far-right Telegram messages about Israel are often antisemitic,<sup>65</sup> in the sample examined during phase 1 of the evaluation, the keyword was overwhelmingly mentioned in the context of news regarding the COVID-19 vaccine rollout in Israel. Messages about terrorist groups, Israel’s neighbouring states or the Israeli military mostly contained links to news stories about the Middle East that were posted without commentary and were not engaged with by followers. The keywords antisemit\*, muslim\*, moslem\*, palästina\* and palest\* had to be excluded as they overwhelmingly ascribed antisemitism to Muslims or the left but were not in themselves antisemitic.

This qualitative finding is in line with a known far-right strategy of focusing on an alleged “imported” antisemitism<sup>66</sup> propagated by (Arab) immigrants. In using this strategy, far-right actors propagate their anti-Muslim racist views and their anti-migration stance on the one hand and distract from the antisemitic views of “authentic Germans” and the far right itself on the

**Graph 5:** Total number of messages assigned to the subtheme *antisemitism* over time.



other, thereby fostering an image of a morally proper in-group. Although researchers question the concept of “imported antisemitism”,<sup>67</sup> it is also regularly cited to support anti-migration arguments beyond the extreme right, for example by head of CDU (Christian Democratic Union) Friedrich Merz who highlighted antisemitism of Muslims in Germany in the wake of the Hamas attacks on 7 October, 2023.

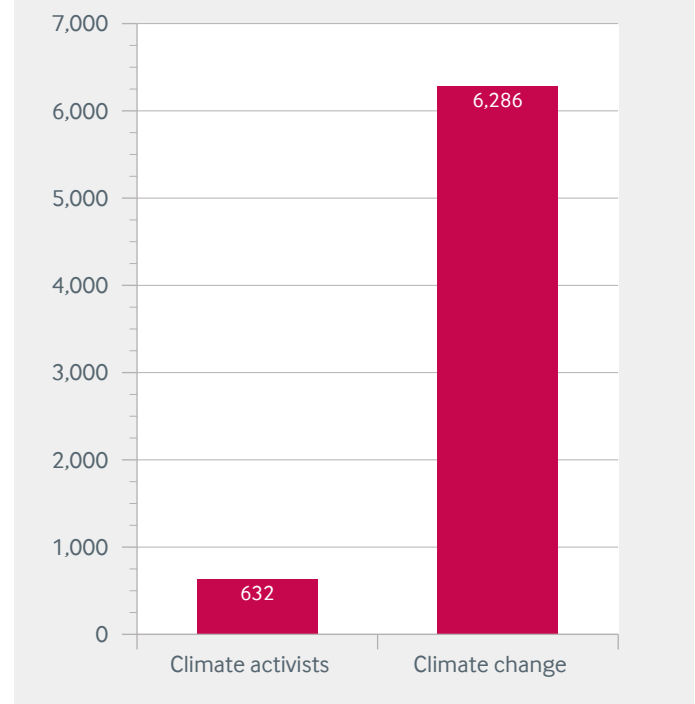
Explicitly antisemitic messages were most frequently posted during the beginning of the research period. A significant portion of messages was posted by the channel of one user, Attila Hildmann, whose main channel was blocked on Apple and Android Telegram apps in summer of 2021.<sup>68</sup> Later in the summer and autumn of 2021, a hacker group temporarily took over some of Hildmann’s channels and groups. In 2022, Hildmann’s main channels were geoblocked on Telegram, with the platform citing local laws as the reason for this step.<sup>69</sup> However, as of December 2023, Hildmann is still present on Telegram through other channels,<sup>70</sup> messages from one of which were collected throughout the research period.

Whilst Hildmann was responsible for sharing 64% of messages labelled *antisemitism* in March 2021, and for 26% messages in May 2021, messages published by his channel significantly declined over time. This partially explains the decline in explicitly antisemitic messages and may be indicative of Hildmann using a network of channels and groups to circumvent the blocking of his main channel in June 2021.<sup>71</sup> Hildmann not only stood out among others within the antisemitism subtheme due to the large proportion of messages published, but also due to his use of particularly explicit anti-Jewish messages.

### 2.5.3 Climate Change

In Germany, climate delayism<sup>72</sup> is not limited to a conspiratorial niche, but, like in the US, prevalent as a discourse in the wider public, including in content created and/or shared by media organisations, liberal and conservative political actors, and actors on the far right.<sup>73</sup> Apart from general discussions around Germany’s role in both causing and combatting climate change, current discussions around the phenomenon are largely centred around energy politics, social justice and climate activism.<sup>74</sup> A key part of debate also revolves

**Graph 6:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *climate change* and *climate activists*.

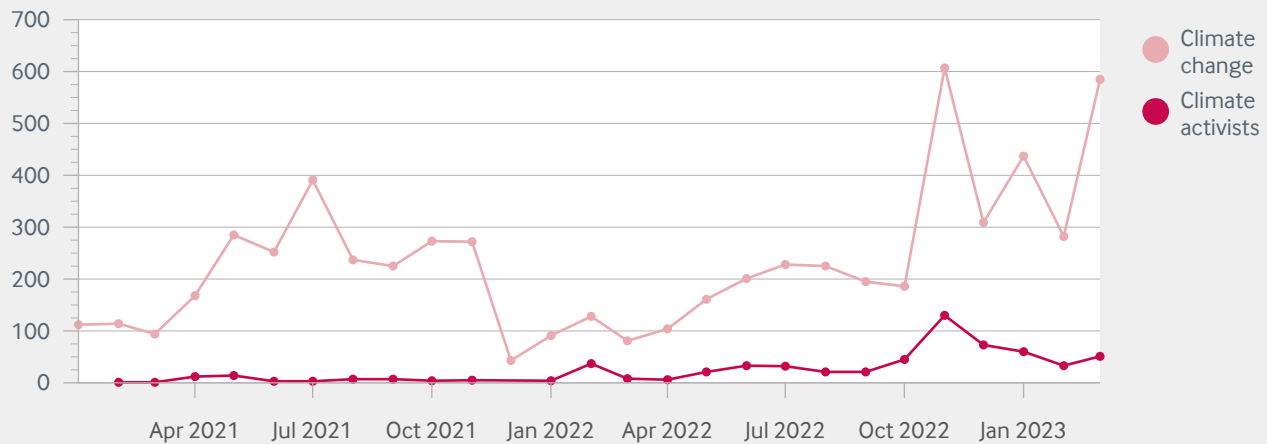


around the Green party, who, similar to climate activists, receive hate due to their overall social progressivism and are blamed for a cost-of-living crisis and a “politics of bans” (“Verbotspolitik”).

The majority of messages labelled *climate change* were clearly against climate action. Whereas some posts express doubts regarding the scientific consensus on global warming and its effects, other posts do not discuss climate change itself but rather focus on criticising measures to counter climate change as expensive, burdensome, or ineffective. Many accuse politicians or activists of hypocrisy, pointing out their means of travel or consumption behaviour.

As was observed in previous ISD studies, some posts compare climate action to measures in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that environmental actors aim to institute “climate lockdowns” similar to the lockdowns imposed to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus.<sup>75</sup> A spike in messages labelled *climate change* could be observed in July 2021 in the context of a flooding catastrophe in Rhineland-Palatinate

**Graph 7:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *climate change* and *climate activists* over time.<sup>76</sup>



and North-Rhine Westphalia which claimed a total of 189 lives. The flooding, which was one of the largest natural disasters in the history of Germany, was met with scepticism among the far right. Messages called into question the link between climate change and an increase in natural disasters and portrayed the catastrophe as “convenient” for the Green party.

Messages discussing *climate activists* primarily express strong opposition towards climate activists, often using derogatory and dismissive terms such as “climate terrorists” or “climate gluers”. A spike occurred in November following the death of a cyclist who was run over by a truck in Berlin. Two climate activists were charged with obstruction and failure to render assistance after a protest organised by Last Generation activists (Letzte Generation) slowed the arrival of a special ambulance called to the scene.<sup>77</sup> Following this incident, messages described the activists as “criminals”, “radicals” and “terrorists” - labels which were already popular among far-right actors to refer to climate activists prior to the accident.<sup>78</sup>

Messages further included reports about an interview by German Minister of Justice Marco Buschmann (FDP) with German tabloid BILD, during which Buschmann mentioned the possibility of jail sentences for activists delaying ambulances in the context of the accident.<sup>79</sup> This was taken up by, among other channels, a

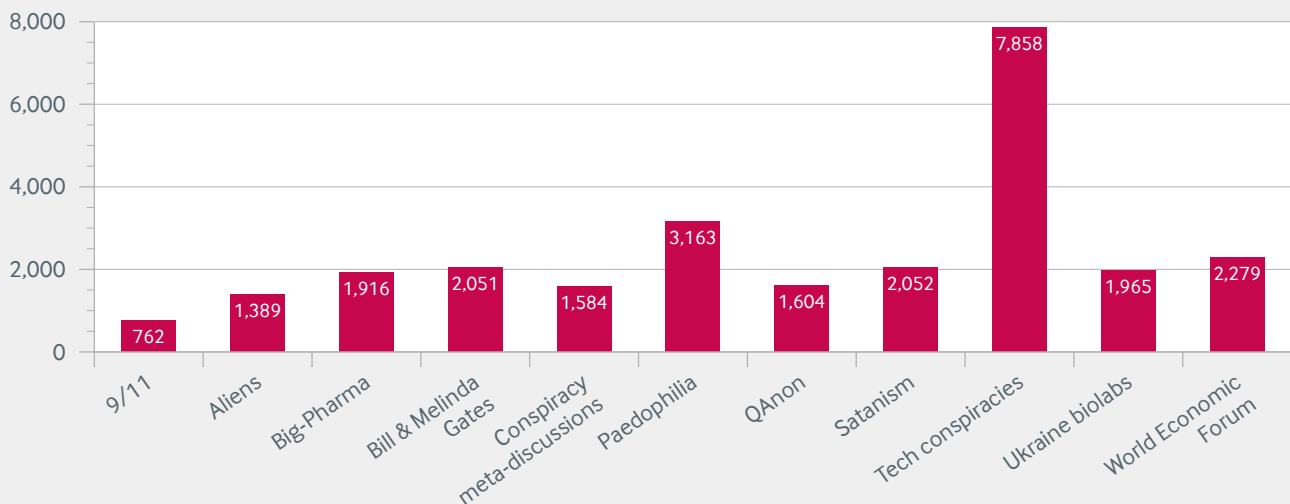
self-described “conservative” media outlet<sup>80</sup> shown to have become “unprecedentedly partisan with the establishment of the AfD”,<sup>81</sup> which shared their report of the interview with the caption “jail for climate gluers” (Gefängnis für Klimakleber), receiving celebratory reactions on Telegram. An investigation later showed that neither of the activists were responsible for the death of the cyclist and the charges were dropped.<sup>82</sup> The incident serves as an example where populist remarks on the mainstream political stage intersect – intended or not - with political discourse within the far-right milieu. In the context of the increasing mainstreaming of extremist positions, these feedback loops should be studied further to fully understand the mainstreaming effect of social media communication.

Most accounts that published a high number of messages in one climate-related subtheme also published a high share of messages regarding one of the other subthemes discussed here. For example, among the five most prolific accounts sharing *climate change* messages, four were also among the five most prolific accounts sharing messages labelled *renewable energy*, *nuclear energy*, *Green party*, *climate activists* or *climate change*.

#### 2.5.4 Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories claim the existence of malevolent secret groups or plots that aim at undermining the

**Graph 8:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes grouped under the mastertheme *conspiracy theories*.



common good, harming groups of people or specific individuals.<sup>83</sup> This core belief implies that democratic institutions cannot be trusted and entails an ongoing crisis that encompasses the whole political system. As proof for their claims, conspiracy theories often point to actual social problems and societal ills and embed these into a larger set of beliefs. The conspiratorial claims of plans to erect a totalitarian government often draw from examples of past human rights abuses by authoritarian states and liberal democracies alike.

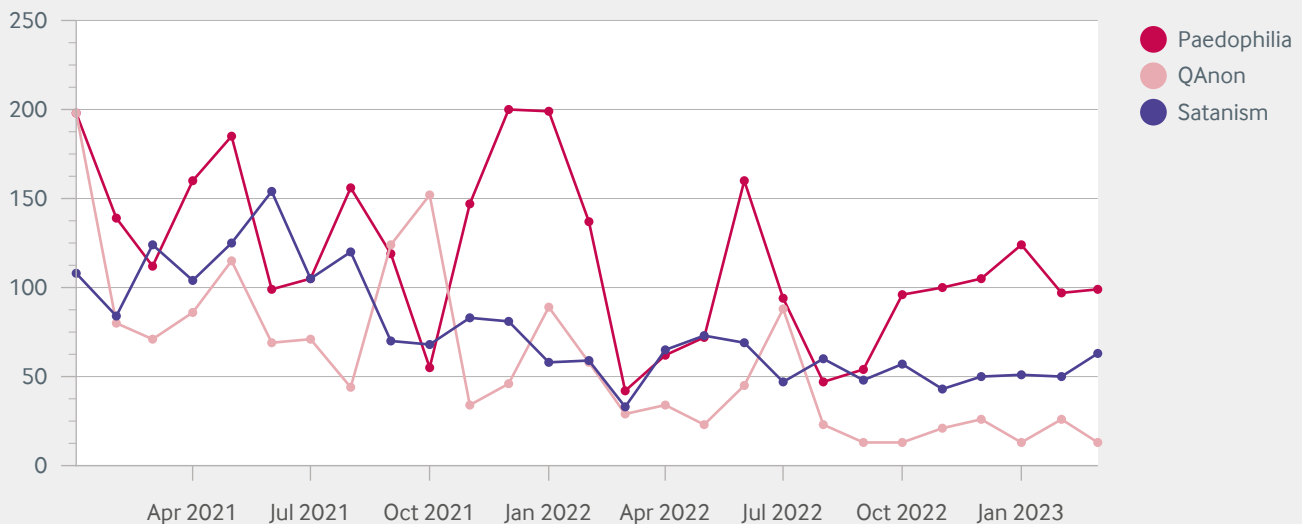
Some conspiracy theories carry within them a kernel of truth,<sup>84</sup> a factual base which they then distort into a story about deceit and violence. The fact itself might be harmless and banal, like the existence of a business relation or the mere association of a person with a group. It might, however, also be an actual scandal, or an actual instance of misconduct, that is then generalised to accuse a larger group of this behaviour. The conspiratorial diagnosis of social ills contains an authoritarian solution: according to several studies, belief in conspiracy theories correlates with support for political violence.<sup>85</sup> This can mean a violent military overthrow (as is the case for QAnon believers) or other violent actions to rid oneself of the imagined evil cabal.

Rather than being connected to one specific political ideology, it can be argued that conspiracy theories constitute their own thin ideology.<sup>86</sup> Conspiratorial

thinking correlates with antisemitism<sup>87</sup> and modern antisemitism has a conspiratorial strand.<sup>88</sup> Accordingly, conspiracy theories in this dataset were interwoven with older, specifically anti-Jewish conspiracy theories.<sup>89</sup> Given the conspiratorial element of antisemitism and the implications of authoritarian solutions, conspiracy theories fit in well with far-right world views and are often a constitutive part of extreme far-right ideologies. As part of an extreme right historiography, conspiracy theories help to explain how a system of political and legal equality could arise despite the inherent inequality between humans that far-right extremists assume. Furthermore, the idea of a society besieged by an evil scheme fits with the political paranoia that is at the centre of many strands of far-right thought.

The significance of conspiracy theories explains their presence in nearly every subtheme analysed in this study. Conspiracy theories were present not only in the specific conspiracy subthemes, but also in far-right discussions of COVID-19, energy policy, domestic and international politics, climate change, technology, economy, migration, and LGBTQ+-issues. In the context of these topics, the far-right online milieu claims to identify the malign influence of conspiracies and explains nearly every aspect of social life, societal and political change, and economic development through the presumed evil actions of a suspected powerful group of malign actors.

**Graph 9:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *paedophilia*, *QAnon* and *satanism* over time.



The most prolific conspiracy theories in this subset of the data all reference paedophilia. This ideological significance is both linked to a current trend<sup>90</sup> and to a long history of the far right identifying as 'defenders of the morally pure and innocent', using threats to this purity as fodder for political campaigns.<sup>91</sup> The imagination of purity underlies the portrayal of the nation as threatened and to be rescued by heroic defenders.<sup>92</sup> Given that children are universally recognised as innocent and in need of protection, they represent the ideal projection surface for far-right revenge fantasies. Drawing from this, the fear of organised gangs or strangers abducting and molesting children is widespread in far-right circles.

In this subset of the data, messages discuss allegations connected to a range of conspiracy theories, as well as actual cases of paedophilia such as the Jeffrey Epstein criminal case, cases among members of the Catholic Church or news stories about the discovery of child sexual abuse material. The volume of messages labelled *paedophilia* fluctuated in line with related news stories and has overall decreased.

Paedophilia is also central to the *QAnon* conspiracy lore, in which an imaginary paedophilic scheme is being fought. *QAnon* followers believe a version of the blood libel myth<sup>93</sup> and are convinced, that a "paedophilic cabal" drinks the blood of their victims to stay young and

healthy. The *QAnon* conspiracy theory first developed online in the context of the "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory, according to which members of the US Democratic Party are guilty of paedophilia and child murder. Since then, the conspiracy theory has branched into a broader set of theories that some researchers liken to a religion or cult.<sup>94</sup> In Germany, *QAnon* found a following early on and grew significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>95</sup> *QAnon* conspiracy theories are also often combined with Reichsbürger or Sovereignist thinking. In messages labelled *QAnon*, world events are interpreted through the heuristic of Q-beliefs. They feature many US- and Donald Trump- centred messages as well as messages from 'Q' (so called 'Q-drops'). A notable peak occurred in January 2021, with messages centred around the January 6th riots, Donald Trump leaving office and Joe Biden being sworn in. A second peak in October 2021 mostly consisted of messages containing voice messages about *QAnon*.

Messages labelled *satanism* claimed that satanists ritualistically abuse, kill, and eat children and that they have infiltrated positions of power and are working towards the end of the world. In addition, they also feature fear of paedophiles, often overlapping with *QAnon* beliefs and channels. For example, they were suspect of the movie industry, which was referred to in some posts as "pedowood". *QAnon* followers



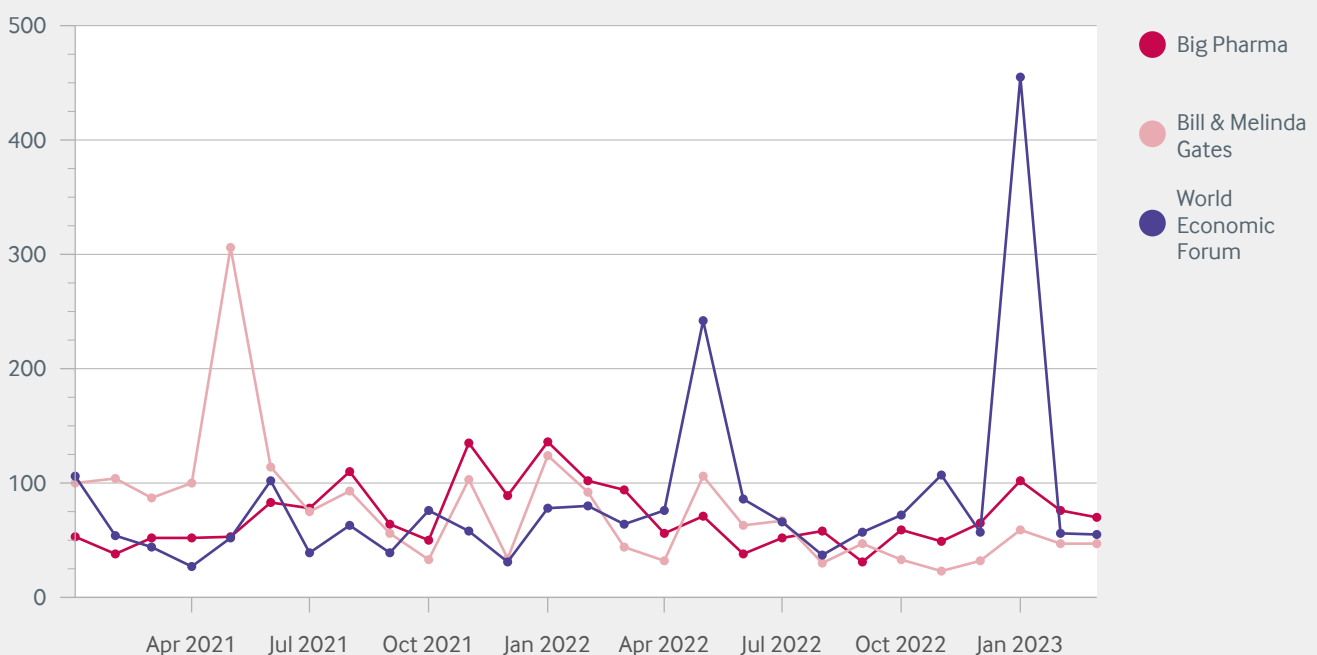
understand themselves as digital soldiers, which is also reflected in this subset of the data.<sup>96</sup> One QAnon-related channel was among the five most prolific channels in 43 of 63 subthemes. This channel was also the most prolific channel in the subthemes *QAnon* (29.18%), *Paedophilia* (17.89%) and *Satanism* (17.61%). Among the most active channels across all analysed subthemes were others sharing QAnon messages.

Like antisemitism, allegations of paedophilia are found across a broad range of subthemes. For example, far-right actors often promulgate the allegation that paedophilia is used by some (minority) groups to serve a political purpose. Specifically, they are convinced that grooming white children into the LGBTQIA+ community is a means to reduce *white*<sup>97</sup> populations, as part of the alleged “Great Replacement”<sup>98</sup> plot. Aside from ideological convictions, the discussion of paedophilia likely serves tactical purpose. Paedophiles are generally reviled, making it socially acceptable to express aggression and hate against them in ways that would be unacceptable in the context of other groups. Drawing on this dynamic, accusations of paedophilia<sup>99</sup> are strategically employed against the LGBTQ+-community to further trans- and homophobia.

In addition to more diffuse scapegoats such as Jewish people and the LGBTQ+ community, a more specific group of people and actors is recurrently referenced by far-right actors to have alleged control over world events. For example, the *World Economic Forum*’s (WEF) reform initiative “Great Reset”<sup>100</sup> is at the centre of numerous conspiracy theories. Measures to stop COVID-19 were often interpreted along the lines of this “Great Reset” and were thereby perceived as tools to further a move towards a totalitarian society, described in one message as a worldwide “fascist, transhumanist eco-dictatorship”. In addition, it is often assumed that the ‘Great Reset’ aims to steal people’s money through the revaluation of currencies or through their digitisation. Messages labelled *World Economic Forum* spiked in May 2022 in the context of a WEF meeting in Davos and in January 2023, when the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum took place.

One person at the centre of many conspiracy theories surrounding the *WEF* is the organisation’s chair, Klaus Schwab, who was usually portrayed as a sinister mastermind. As such, he competes with *George Soros*, a Jewish billionaire and philanthropist, whose financial power, identity and liberal-leaning politics make him a

**Graph 10:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *Big-Pharma*, *Bill & Melinda Gates* and *World Economic Forum* over time.



villain in the far-right imagination. Soros was portrayed as a warmonger who controls the media and political parties. Many posts discussing Soros were openly antisemitic, for example titling a documentary on Soros, “The Eternal Soros” in reference to the Nazi propaganda movie “The Eternal Jew”. However, not all messages referencing Soros were labelled *George Soros*. Many messages across other subthemes such as *digital technology* refer to Soros but were labelled differently due to their thematic focal points. The volume of messages spiked in the context of multiple events, for example in March 2021, when the military dictatorship in Myanmar seized the bank accounts of Soros’ Open Society Foundations and arrested a staff member. Another increase in messages in March 2022 consisted mostly of insinuations that George Soros was to blame for the war in Ukraine and that Russia had issued a warrant for his arrest. In January 2023, Soros-related messages increased in the context of critical coverage of Soros in conservative US media outlets.

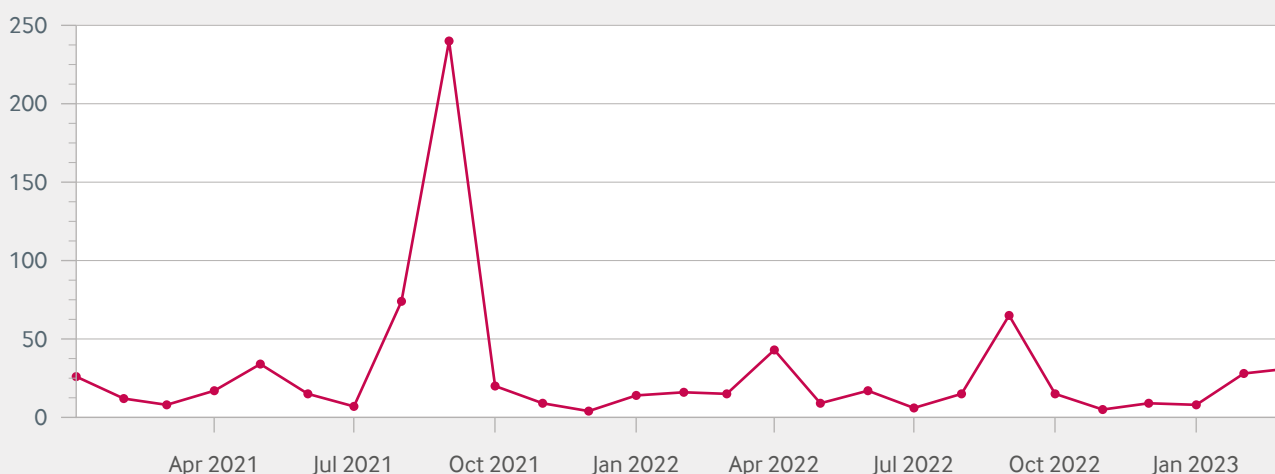
Other public figures often referenced as villainous were *Bill and Melinda Gates*, as well as a more diffuse *Big Pharma* conglomerate. Due to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s link to the World Health Organization (WHO), they, alongside *Big Pharma*, were often mentioned in the context of COVID-19 pandemic-related conspiracy theories. In addition to mentions across a range of other subthemes, messages discussing either *Bill or Melinda Gates* were prolific enough to constitute

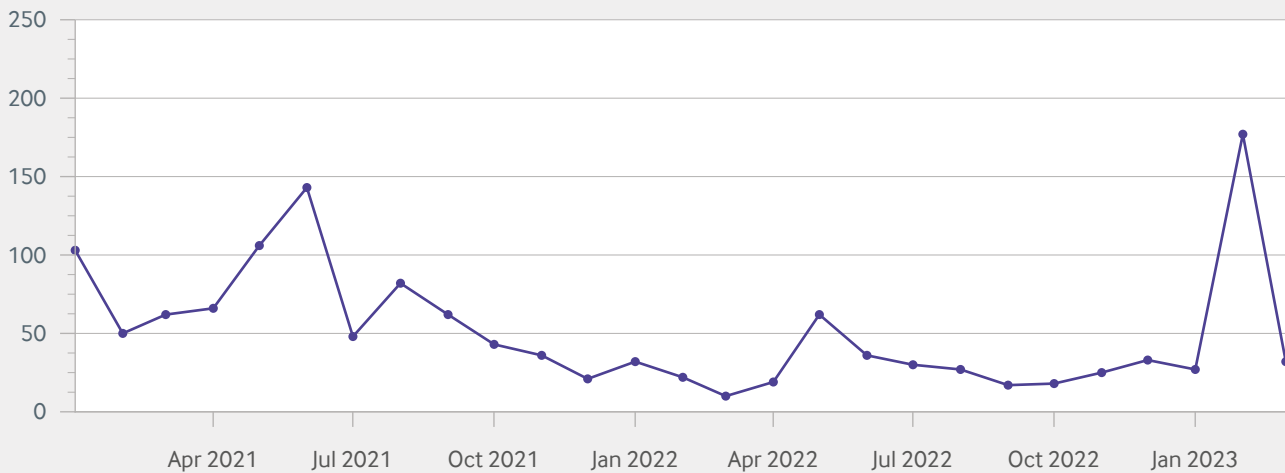
a standalone cluster, grouping mostly health-related conspiracy theories, but also other claims about Gates’ alleged efforts towards a world dictatorship or a New World Order (NWO). Messages labelled *Bill and Melinda Gates* peaked in May 2021 following news of their divorce. During this peak, many messages discussed a connection<sup>101</sup> between Bill Gates and convicted paedophile Jeffrey Epstein.

Alongside the aforementioned “Great Reset” conspiracy theory, an alleged “deep state” was also often referenced. The term originated in Türkiye (formerly Turkey), where it was used to refer to a secret government within the government.<sup>102</sup> The term has become especially popular among QAnon followers, who use it to refer to an allegedly existing democratically unaccountable elite secretly running governments. This “deep state” was also accused of culpability for the 9/11-terrorist attack in messages, often also referencing the Iraq War. This conspiracy theory was particularly prolific during anniversaries of the 2001 September 11 attack.

Messages labelled *Tech Conspiracies* discuss a variety of technologies including artificial intelligence (AI), 5G-technology, vaccines, surveillance technology and body altering (nano-) technology. Overall, most messages were sceptical about technological developments, fearing censorship and surveillance in the form of “digital dictatorship” and cover a wide range of conspiracy theories, such as plans to implant humans

**Graph 11:** Total number of messages assigned to the subtheme *9/11* over time.

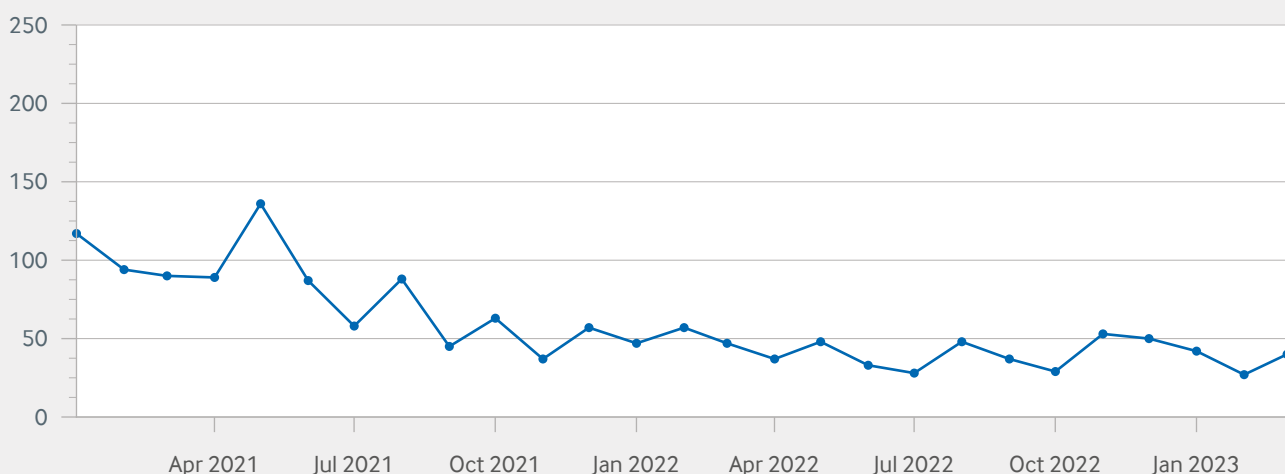


**Graph 12:** Total number of messages assigned to the subtheme *aliens* over time.

with micro-chips or an alleged causal relation between airplane condensation trails and global warming. During a peak in messages in July 2021, topics such as nanobots, 5G and surveillance, as well as a conspiracy that the anti-COVID vaccines would contain graphite oxide,<sup>103</sup> were widely discussed.

Alongside some discussion of extraterrestrial life, messages labelled *aliens* mostly dismiss reports of Unknown Flying Objects (UFOs) as distractions or psychological operations (“Psyops”) used by

governments in order to mislead the general public. Among messages agreeing on UFO sightings to be red herrings, the subject of distraction ranged from a Pentagon-internal secret war between “blackhats” and “whitehats”<sup>104</sup> suspected by QAnon followers, to revelations about Hunter Biden; an incident of a derailed train in East Palestine, Ohio; the war in Ukraine; “biolabs” in Ukraine; or the Nord Stream Two incident. Some users feared a fake alien invasion as part of the older “Project Blue Beam” conspiracy theory.<sup>105</sup> A spike in messages labelled *aliens* occurred in June 2021,

**Graph 13:** Total number of messages assigned to the subtheme *conspiracy meta-discussions* over time.

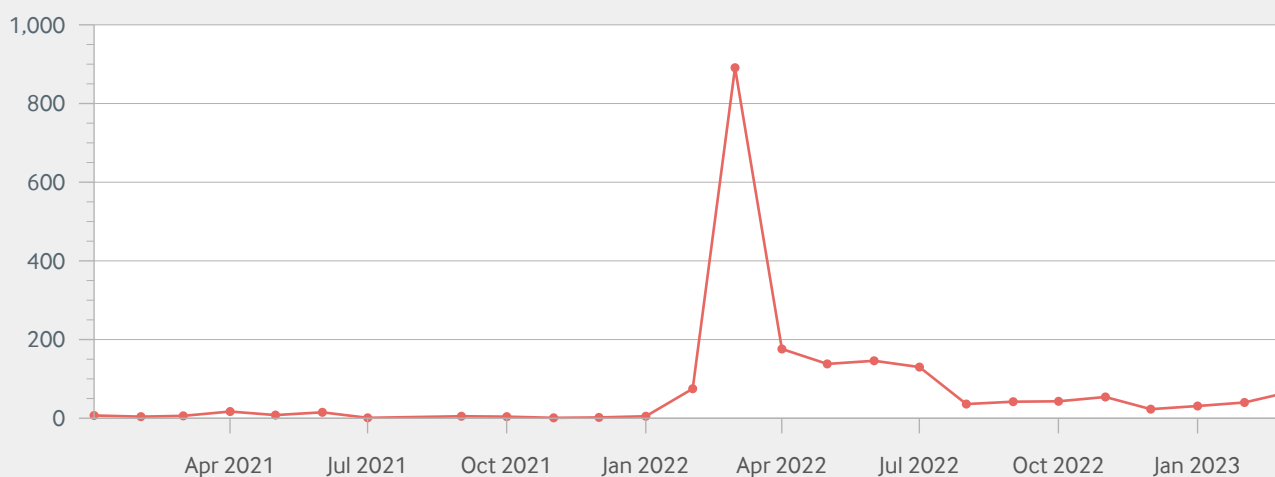
when the “Preliminary Assessment: Unidentified Aerial Phenomena” (“Pentagon UFO Report”) by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence was released. Another spike occurred in February 2023, in the context of the Chinese Spy balloon incident in the USA.<sup>106</sup>

Messages labelled *conspiracy meta-discussions* were mostly published in conversations aiming to validate conspiracy theories. Rather than providing factual verification, messages often include blanket statements claiming to explain how certain conspiracy theories (often written in parentheses) came true or point to (unrelated) news stories as proof of their statements. Continuous and reciprocal reassurance on the verity of the deeper truths that the community has allegedly uncovered play an important role across the conspiratorial and far right spectrum, especially for those subscribing to conspiracy beliefs who have become socially isolated. The affirmation of shared beliefs serves a function of community building and care.

Before the Russian attack on Ukraine, messages grouped under the *biolabs conspiracy* label mostly discussed biological research laboratories (“biolabs”) in the context of the COVID-19 virus, which was claimed to have been created in a laboratory and then released through a “lab leak”, causing the start of the pandemic in 2019. Another thematic focal point were alleged human experiments in US-run laboratories in Georgia. Similar allegations about US bioweapon production in

Georgia have constituted a Russian propaganda tool dating back several years.<sup>107</sup> In the beginning of 2022, still prior to the invasion, the first messages mentioning Ukraine as an alleged site of US biolabs were shared. On the day of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, channels in the dataset started specifically using the term “US biolabs in Ukraine”, adapting previous iterations of biolab conspiracies to fit the context of Ukraine, for example by claiming that COVID-19 originated from US-laboratories based in Ukraine. In a similar vein, QAnon-adjacent channels claimed the destruction of US-biolabs in Ukraine as the true reason for the Russian military operation and described it as a “White Hat” operation against the deep state. Over time, the conspiracy was continually adapted to fit newer developments, claiming for example the existence of biolabs in Mariupol following the seizure of the city by Russian troops. As described in previous research by ISD,<sup>108</sup> the spread of the Ukraine biolabs conspiracy theory was also aided by Russian officials, who “confirmed” claims about bioweapon laboratories in Ukraine and thereby increased their perceived credibility. After an initial spike following the invasion, the volume of biolabs-related messages dropped significantly and since slightly increased over time. Given the Russian-propaganda strategy of building onto an ever-so-slightly changing set of conspiracy theories, the biolabs conspiracy theory is likely to reappear in future.

**Graph 14:** Total number of messages assigned to the subtheme *Ukraine biolabs conspiracy* over time.



### 2.5.5 COVID-19

With a share of 28.4% of labelled messages, posts discussing the COVID-19 pandemic made up the largest coherent topic across the study period (100,788 posts in total). From early 2020, issues such as the origins of the virus, appropriate response measures and vaccine efficacy dominated public debate.

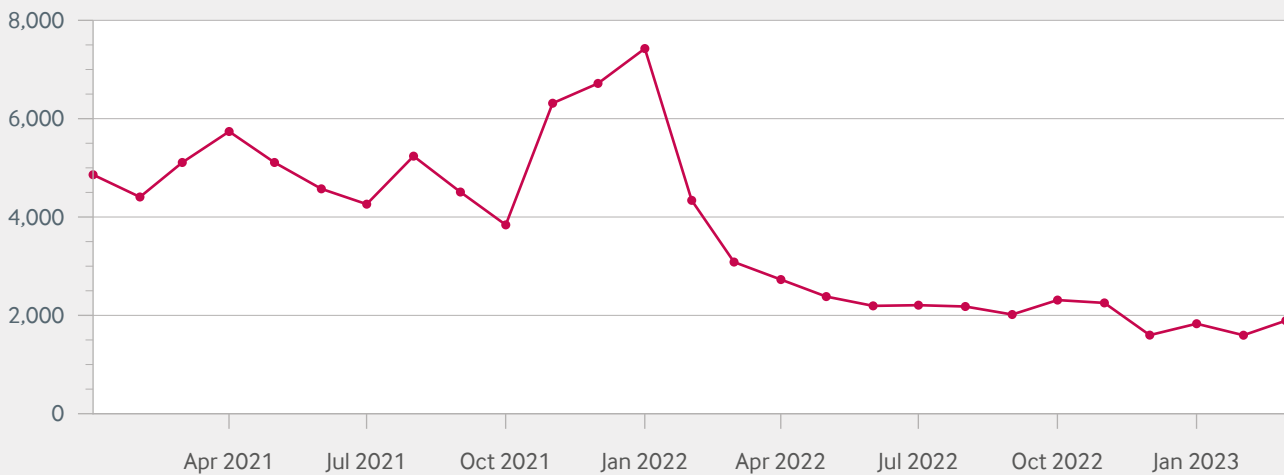
Far-right extremists in Germany tried to influence the discussion and interpreted the pandemic through their respective ideological lenses from early on.<sup>109</sup> Measures to stop the spread of the disease were rejected by some, giving birth to the anti-lockdown movement that became a gateway to reach and success for vaccine sceptics.<sup>110</sup> The impact of this movement was also observed in this subset of the data. Messages included advertising for protests and unauthorised assemblies characterised by the participants as “strolls” (COVID-Spaziergänge), as well as reports and footage from these protests. They also contained criticism of official anti-COVID measures, calls for resistance against the German Infection Protection Act (Infektionsschutzgesetz) and scepticism towards the medical establishment’s handling of COVID-19. Furthermore, expressions of doubts about the effectiveness of masks and PCR tests were widespread among those posting.

Initially created out of protest in response to measures introduced by governments to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the anti-lockdown movement quickly began to adopt and disseminate a broad range of conspiracy theories.<sup>111</sup> This, again, was reflected among messages labelled *COVID-19*, which contained conspiracy narratives surrounding vaccines and COVID-related deaths, as well as messages mentioning Bill Gates- or technology-focused conspiracies, e.g. regarding 5G. Other posts discussed alleged negative impacts of vaccines on pregnancy, adverse vaccine side-effects, and distrust towards certain vaccines. Messages concerning the countermeasures generally portrayed them either as naïve or as part of a plot to create a totalitarian or authoritarian political system. The measures were portrayed as useless or even harmful. Although mainstream platforms in some cases failed to tackle COVID-19 related misinformation and were also used to share such content,<sup>112</sup> Telegram emerged as a central platform for the anti-lockdown movement early on.<sup>113</sup>

Some messages targeted individual health officials like Anthony Fauci and Karl Lauterbach, or spread conspiracy theories surrounding the World Health Organisation, e.g. concerning the International Treaty on Fighting Pandemics, or on the WHO’s connection to Bill Gates. Different theories were shared within the dataset about the origin of COVID-19, with some messages promoting the “lab leak” hypothesis, according to which COVID-19 was artificially created in the Wuhan Institute of Virology and escaped the lab either through accident or through a deliberate spread. COVID-19 also led to a significant increase in antisemitism in general<sup>114</sup> and online.<sup>115</sup> The rejection of anti-COVID measures was also taken up by Russian state media outlet RT, whose reporting was widely shared by the anti-lockdown movement in Germany.<sup>116</sup> Russian state media establishing itself as a popular news source for the anti-lockdown movement also contributed to the amplification of Russian propaganda in the far-right online milieu, specifically propaganda regarding the Russian War on Ukraine (2.5.12).

Conspiracy theories connected to COVID-19 were later adapted and introduced into the discussion around monkeypox<sup>117</sup> and the climate debate through warnings of a planned “climate lockdown”.<sup>118</sup> Similarly, some messages labelled *COVID-19* warned of an impending “mega-lockdown”, calling to object to the measures in the name of freedom. A widespread narrative in the dataset portrayed democratic governments, medical institutions and international organisations trying to fight the pandemic as authoritarian forces, portraying the anti-lockdown movement as freedom fighters. Some openly extreme-right actors denounced the anti-COVID measures as a form of fascism, which they claimed to oppose. The assumptions of an authoritarian state, which constitute an underlying element of rhetoric against measures to combat COVID-19, correlate with the assumptions found in messages labelled *political system*, which also in part discuss anti-COVID measures. This points to the existence of a larger ideological pattern.

The long duration of the pandemic and accompanying containment measures have made COVID-19 a central topic in far-right discourse in Germany across the entire study period.<sup>119</sup> Following final major peak during policy debates on proposals to make the COVID-19 vaccine compulsory for German citizens, which eventually failed,

**Graph 15:** Total number of messages assigned to the subtheme *COVID-19* over time.

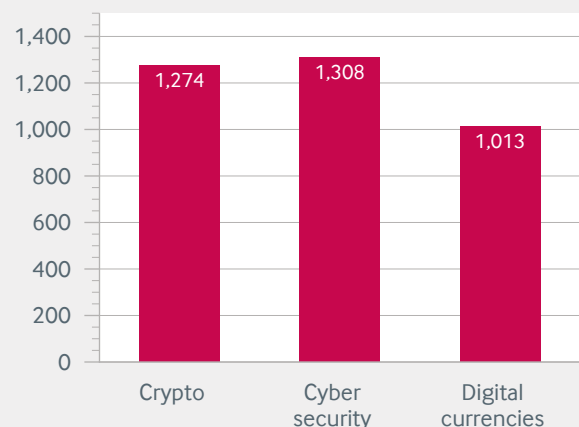
messages referencing COVID-19 declined significantly. In accordance with the decline in messages labelled *COVID-19*, channels associated with the anti-lockdown movement published significantly fewer posts over time. Although the topic of COVID-19 is not as central to the debate as it was during the height of the pandemic, the emergence of the organised anti-lockdown movement and an entire host of new or adapted conspiracy theories have had a lasting impact on the online-spheres of the German-speaking far right. While extremists in other countries also took up COVID-19 as a topic,<sup>120</sup> the broader anti-lockdown movement in Germany developed into a particularly radical one<sup>121</sup> compared to movements in other countries. The German anti-lockdown movement for example helped to facilitate the growth of the QAnon conspiracy movement in Germany.<sup>122</sup> Even though the anti-lockdown movement was not fully ideologically congruent with the far right, it acted as a gateway by carrying extremist beliefs from the fringe towards a broader audience, thereby extending its network and influence.<sup>123</sup>

### 2.5.6 Digital Technologies

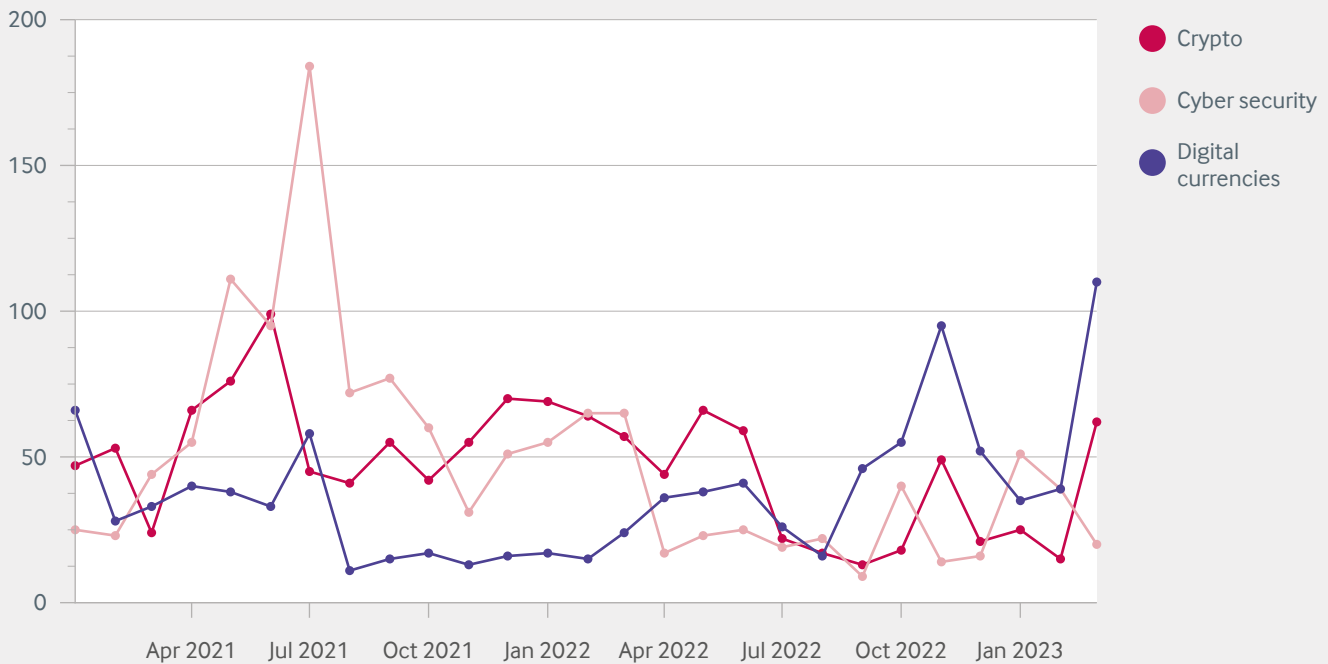
The far right has a well-documented affinity for new and emerging technologies.<sup>124</sup> This affinity towards technological innovation is not limited to the realm of social media but also encompasses other technologies such as cryptocurrencies and encryption, *cyber security* more broadly and *digital currencies* such as the Digital

Euro. As with most other themes discussed in this study, far-right actors interpret these topics along the lines of their own ideology, often portraying such technologies as either a rescue from censorship or sensing sinister intentions behind them. Messages labelled *tech conspiracies* often overlap with either of the standalone topics, but also cover technologies such as 5G or weather-controlling devices.

Given the ideological link between cryptocurrencies and the far right through their underlying ideals of

**Graph 16:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *crypto*, *cyber security* and *digital currencies*.

**Graph 17:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *crypto*, *cyber security* and *digital currencies* over time.



cyberlibertarianism<sup>125</sup> and the lack of regulation around them, it is unsurprising that many US-based far-right extremists have adopted the payment method to raise funds and conduct other business.<sup>126</sup> Whilst this affinity for cryptotechnology is reflected in this subset of the data through news stories and commentary regarding cryptocurrencies, appeals for donations in cryptocurrencies by activists, advertisements for crypto-seminars and a general portrayal of cryptocurrencies and decentralised alternatives as censorship-resistant, some users were sceptical of the technology, doubting its functionality and sharing conspiracy theories surrounding its origins. Among the different anti-crypto conspiracy theories was the claim that Bitcoin was developed either by the NSA or the CIA, which is based on a conjectured translation of the Bitcoin founder's pseudonym "Satoshi Nakamoto" into "Central Intelligence".<sup>127</sup> Other culprits suspected by users include the World Economic Forum (WEF), George Soros, Freemasons and the "Hochfinanzeliten", which is a long-standing antisemitic dog whistle among the German-speaking far right literally translating to the "elites of high finance." The biggest peak in volume for the subtheme occurred in June 2021, when El Salvador

introduced Bitcoin as legal tender and the exchange rate for the currency sank.

Another niche topic of interest for the far right and conspiracy theorists was that of cyberattacks. Messages labelled *cyber security* encompass news stories and conspiracy theories connected to cyberattacks that have happened or that were predicted to happen at a future date. One central role in these conspiracy theories was played by the World Economic Forum. For example, discussions around the "Cyber Polygon" conference in July 2021, a yearly event centred around cybersecurity, led to a peak in messages claiming that a prior iteration of the event sparked the COVID-19 pandemic and speculating that it would be used to conduct cyberattacks as part of devious plans connected to the WEF-initiative "Great Reset".

Messages labelled *digital currencies* feature news stories about the rise of digital currencies and the potential end of cash as a form of payment. Interestingly, far-right interpretations often celebrate cryptocurrencies but reject digital currencies such as the digital Euro at the same time. This ostensible

contradiction can be explained along the lines of a specific interpretation of “metallism”, according to which cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin are embraced as a new “digital gold”,<sup>128</sup> whereas concepts such as the digital Euro are rejected based on fears around an end to cash payments and a resulting increase in surveillance, coupled with a variety of conspiracy theories. Accordingly, many messages fear total control of the economy by central banks, a computer based “Quantum Financial System” (QFS) that would replace a corrupt “Cabal Banking System” or speculate that the introduction of digital currencies as a ploy to dispossess the citizens. Besides the WEF and the EU, those suspected of being behind the alleged digital currency conspiracies include the US Federal Reserve, “globalists” and the European Central Bank. The temporal distribution of messages labelled *digital currencies* correlates with messages labelled *crypto*, however little to no thematic overlap was observed between messages.

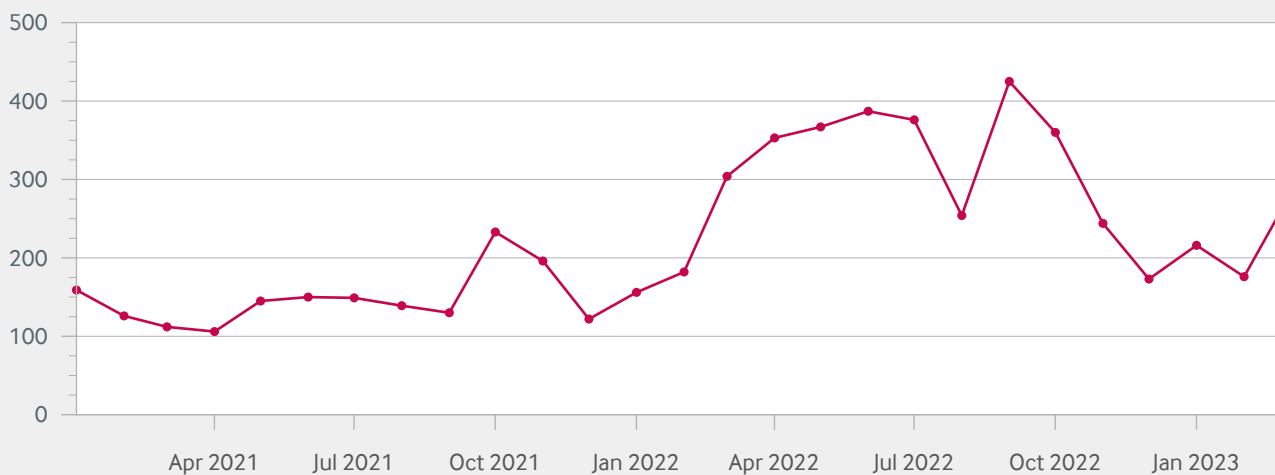
The accounts posting the most messages in the subthemes belonging to the *digital technology* mastertheme and in the *tech conspiracy* subtheme were mostly congruent with the top posting accounts overall. With the exception of one Sovereignist/Reichsbürger channel, all other channels belonged to conspiracy theorists.

### 2.5.7 Economy

Rather than discussing far-right conceptualisations of economic programs, the 6,014 messages labelled *economy* were centred around criticising central banks and governments, linking to broader far right accounts of a perceived economic and social decline.<sup>129</sup> Such narratives of decline play a key part in far-right strategy and ideology, according to which liberal society is doomed to fail and is constantly getting weaker.<sup>130</sup> Moreover, they play an important part in far-right propaganda and recruitment strategies, undermining trust in democratic institutions and simultaneously increasing acceptance for extremist positions. As a previous study has shown, perceived threats of voters’ social decline are effective in increasing the likelihood of them supporting far-right ideology.<sup>131</sup> Notably, the study found that the determining factor was the threat of decline rather than actual deprivation, further cementing the effectiveness of far-right fearmongering. Accordingly, messages in this theme mostly discuss economic crises, the ongoing recession in Germany, food shortages and food insecurity, as well as news about insolvencies and bankruptcies of (German) businesses.

Overall, in line with a string of economic crises in Germany,<sup>132</sup> a significant increase in messages labelled *economy* was observed over the study period. Notable

**Graph 18:** Total number of messages assigned to the subtheme *economy* over time.



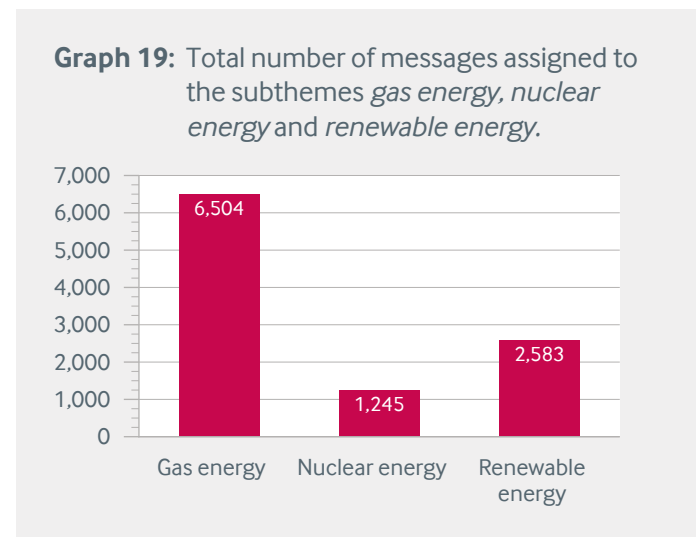


peaks occurred in October 2021, June 2022, September 2022, and March 2023, in the context of an overall significant rise in inflation, with messages discussing the European Central Bank's (ECB) role as well as decision-making and raising fears around an impending economic crisis, food shortages and price hikes for food products, particularly vegetables and meat. Some users interpret these events in the context of the previously described WEF "Great Reset" conspiracy or allege that hunger and food shortages would be used as weapons to install a world government. Alongside this strategy of framing and embedding news and events into conspiracy theories to fit a far-right worldview, opinions of mainstream economists were reproduced whenever they problematised inflation and were suitable for strategies of fearmongering.

The most prolific actors publishing economy-related messages belonged in the conspiracy spectrum. Among the most active posters was one channel belonging to the Reichsbürger and Sovereigntist movement as well as a far-right media outlet.

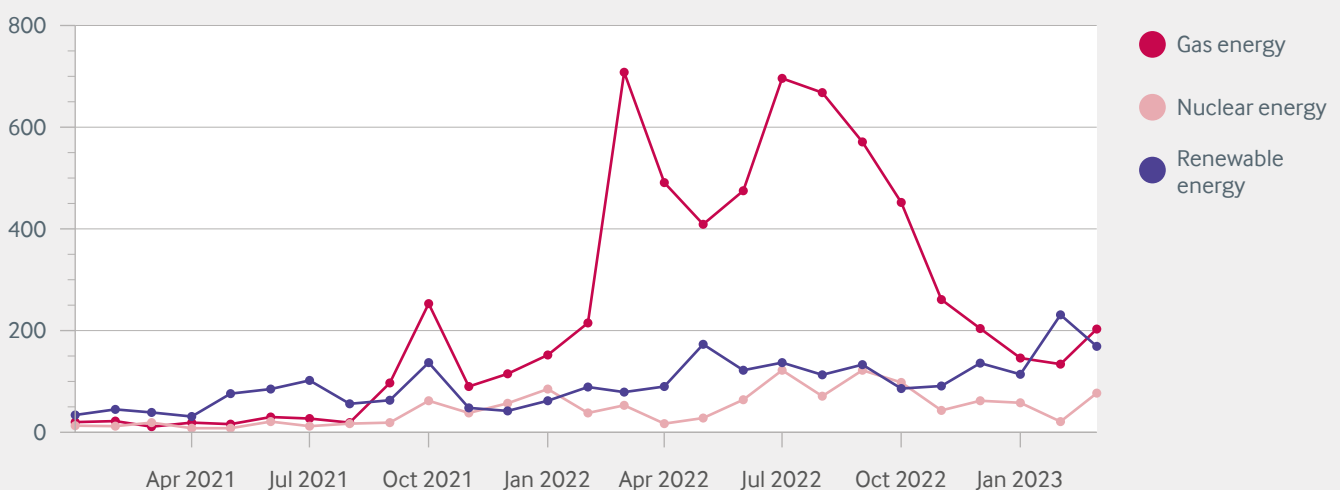
### 2.5.8 Energy politics

As mentioned above, energy politics plays a key part in debates around climate policy. Messages labelled *nuclear energy* portray nuclear power favourably, attributing to the energy source amongst other



things an alleged climate neutrality or environmental friendliness. Subsequently, messages were highly critical of the discontinuation of the last three remaining nuclear power plants in Germany, fearing blackouts and blaming the ideological delusion of the government, the Greens, or the Social Democrats for this "misstep". On the other hand, messages discussing *renewable energy* were decidedly critical, questioning the efficiency and benefit of electric cars, solar power, and wind power, with wind turbines being an especially contested topic often referenced in the context of conspiracy theories.

**Graph 20:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *nuclear energy*, *renewable energy* and *gas energy* over time.



Both messages discussing *nuclear energy* and those discussing *renewable energy* overall increased in prevalence in the study period. This is unsurprising given that energy transition remains one of the key mechanisms to slow climate change and is therefore a constant topic of political debate. Considering that no new nuclear plants are being built in Germany and the last three ceased operations in April 2023, it remains to be seen whether nuclear energy will continue to be hailed as a solution or whether the topic will become less prevalent over time.

Messages labelled *gas energy* were centred around natural gas as well as gasoline and diesel, mostly in the context of price hikes, such as during the first spike in messages in October 2021. Discussions around energy dependency were also used to argue against environmental policies. However, for most of the study period, messages on gas energy were focused on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent increases in natural gas prices, as well as issues regarding the natural gas supply to Germany from Russia. The largest spike in message volume occurred in March 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, due to users discussing an increase in natural gas prices and opposition to sanctions against Russia. A second spike in July 2022 occurred in the context of maintenance on Nord Stream 1, which was both speculated to cause blackouts by

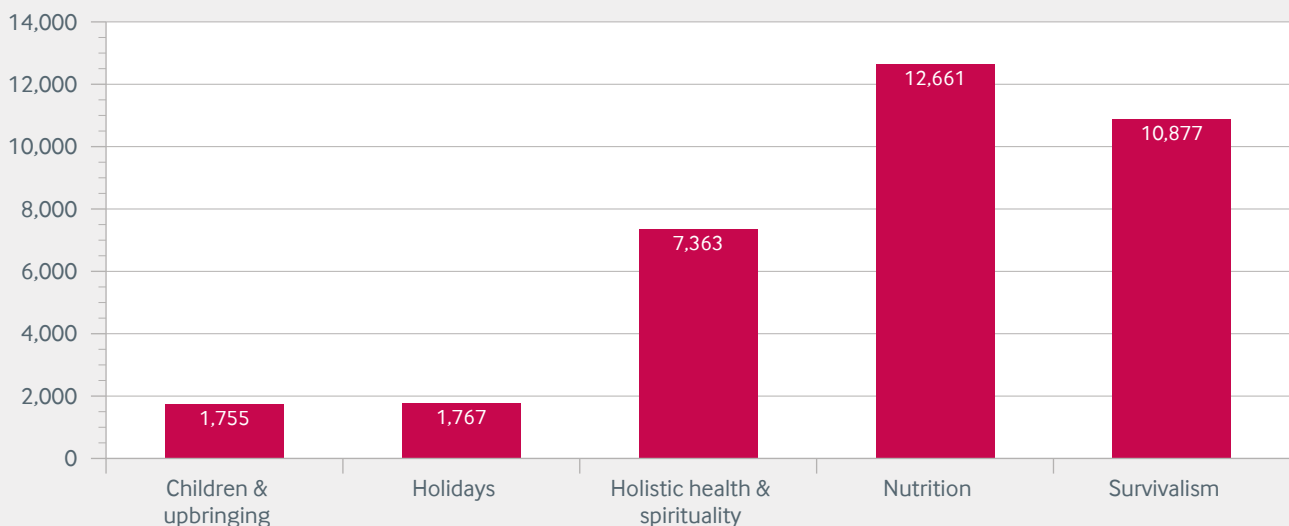
some users, as well as used as an opportunity to declare “trust” in Russia by others. The drop in message volume in the autumn and winter months of 2022 correlates with failed attempts to turn economic grievances into far-right mass protests in Germany.<sup>133</sup>

### 2.5.9 Food & lifestyle

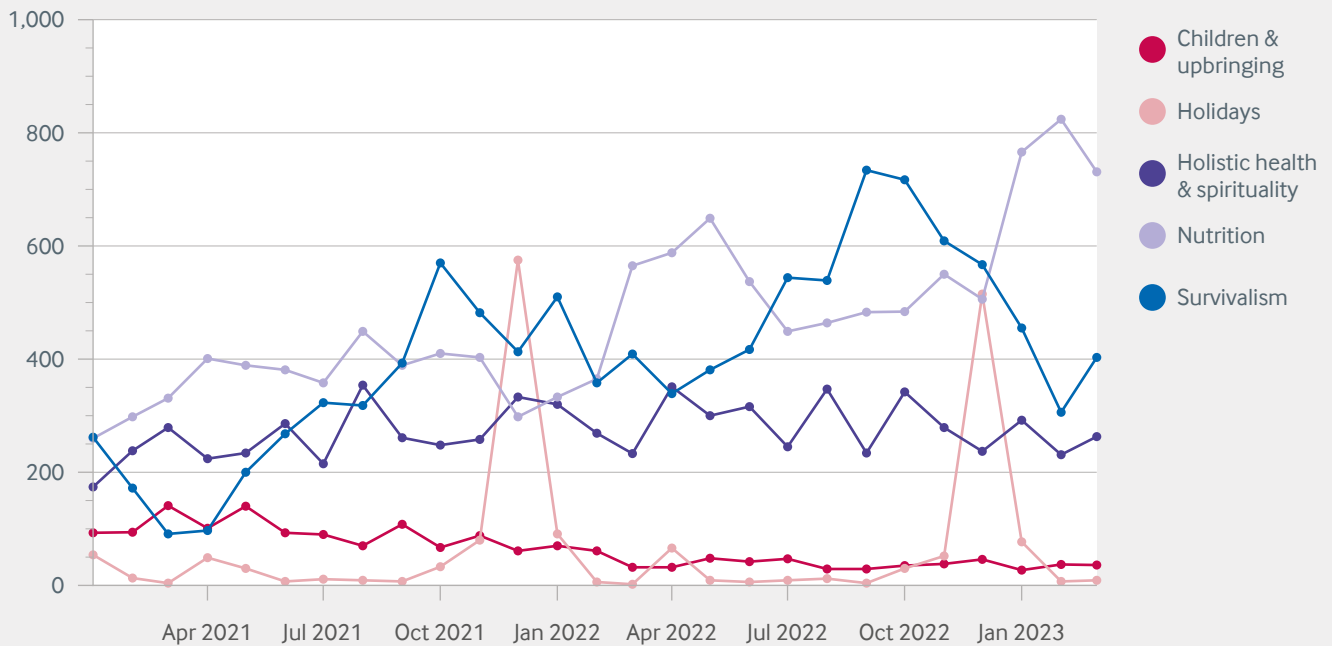
In recent years, far-right actors have increasingly turned to covering lifestyle topics in their online-communication, carefully coding their ideology to appeal to an audience that might otherwise be put off. This strategy includes the use of terms such as “culture” rather than “race”, as well as a focus on topics perceived as “harmless”.<sup>134</sup> This trend is also reflected in other subthemes, especially in a significant increase in messages about *survivalism* and *nutrition* and a slight increase in messages on *holistic health & spirituality*.

Messages on *nutrition* feature discussions on allegedly unhealthy foods and “healthier” recipes. A lot of posts also advertise food-related products or alternative health remedies. The most prolific channel within the subtheme, a channel with more than 180,000 subscribers as of December 2023, published 41% of all messages labelled *nutrition*, many of which contain advertisements for food products sold via the publishing house Kopp. The publishing company distributes a range

**Graph 21:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *children & upbringing*, *holidays*, *holistic health & spirituality*, *nutrition* and *survivalism*.



**Graph 22:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *cannabis, children & upbringing, holidays, holistic health & spirituality, nutrition* and *survivalism* over time.



of books and products linked to conspiracy theories and has well-established links among the German far right.<sup>135</sup> The growing volume of food-related messages suggests not only an increasing interest in alternative food products, but also the anticipation of a growing market for alternative food products among the German conspiracist and far-right milieus.

Members of the German far right observe natural disasters and other catastrophes with a mixture of fear and thrill and often turns to *survivalism* in response. In this context, general fears of societal decline and collapse were paired with individualistic strategies of self-protection and self-preservation. In messages labelled *survivalism*, users speculated about potential reasons for blackouts such as cyber-attacks, energy shortages or solar storms, and possible consequences, such as civil unrest described in one post as “ethnic distribution battles”. Messages on *survivalism* also demonstrated the German far right’s known affinity to “prepper” culture, referring to the hoarding of resources to be prepared in case of a catastrophe or other apocalyptic event.<sup>136</sup> Many messages advertised “essentials to survivalism”, such as ceramic ovens, backpacks, rescue tools or weapons.

Although the high share of adverts made it difficult to derive a clear thematic trend, a qualitative assessment of the dataset suggests that channels sharing messages on *survivalism* seemed to perceive an increasing market potential for survivalist products.

Messages labelled *holistic health & spirituality* featured discussions of New Age medical approaches, ‘miracle cures’ and the effects of society and the psyche on health. A significant number of messages consisted of advertisements for water filters and forwarded messages from New Age channels. The subtheme was strongly influenced by conspiracy ideologues and New Age anti-vaxxers.

Religion plays a central role in the German far right’s identity politics.<sup>137</sup> For example, Islam is commonly used as a threat to “western” and “Christian” values.<sup>138</sup> Furthermore, neopagan religions, occultism and Germanic Mythology are long-standing topics of significance for the German far right.<sup>139</sup> This is also reflected through messages labelled *holidays*, which were centred around Christian holidays and New Year’s Eve, as well as pagan Germanic holidays like Yule, and

which spiked in December 2021 and December 2022 accordingly.

Messages about *cannabis* were mostly critical of the German government's plans to legalise its recreational use and spiked in the context of the publication of the coalition government treaty in October 2021, which manifested the legalisation of cannabis as a set aim for the coalition. In contrast, messages mostly made by conspiracy theorists advertised tools for Cannabis growth. This suggests heterogeneous attitudes towards the drug among the actor set researched in this study.

In far-right thinking, children are discussed through the lens of a dichotomy according to which they must either be protected from an evil outside world or hardened to dominate in the savagery of society. This dichotomy was only partly reflected in the dataset. Whereas some messages labelled *children & upbringing* criticised children growing 'soft' due to flawed education in schools or by 'feminist' parents with incorrect approaches to upbringing, most posts idealised children as pure beings, honest and closer to esoteric truths which adults have forgotten, who must be protected at all costs. Further, many users criticised public education in general as "indoctrination" or as a "nationalisation" of children and warn against paedophile grooming tactics or express concerns about paedophiles more broadly. In the

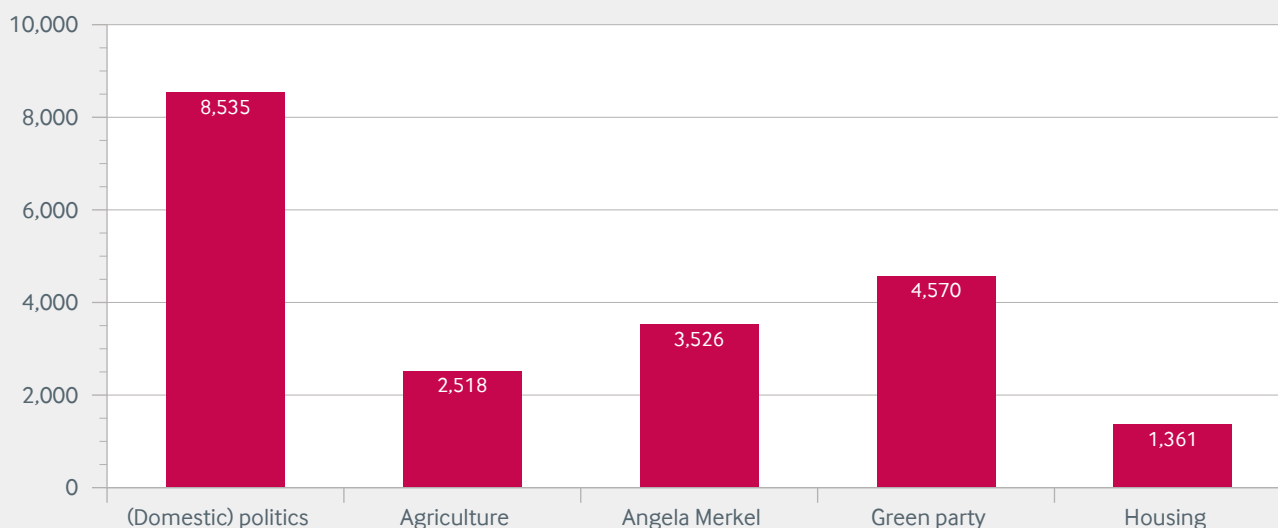
context of COVID-19, many users oppose vaccinations or other measures ostensibly due to worries about their effects on child development. Overall, messages labelled *children & upbringing* decreased over the studied period.

Lifestyle discussions were strongly influenced by spiritual and New Age affinities of conspiracy believer channels within the dataset. Their discussions of health and nutrition, as well as children, upbringing and survival reveal a deep distrust in society and 'mainstream' institutions, such as healthcare facilities and higher education. This distrust was monetised by some actors who market a range of products such as 'alternative' medicine. However, the affinity for lifestyle topics appears to be not solely profit-driven. Sharing recipes and recommending products also serves the function of community building, through which an image of a tightly knit and caring community was portrayed in contrast to the ongoing existing and imagined societal crises.

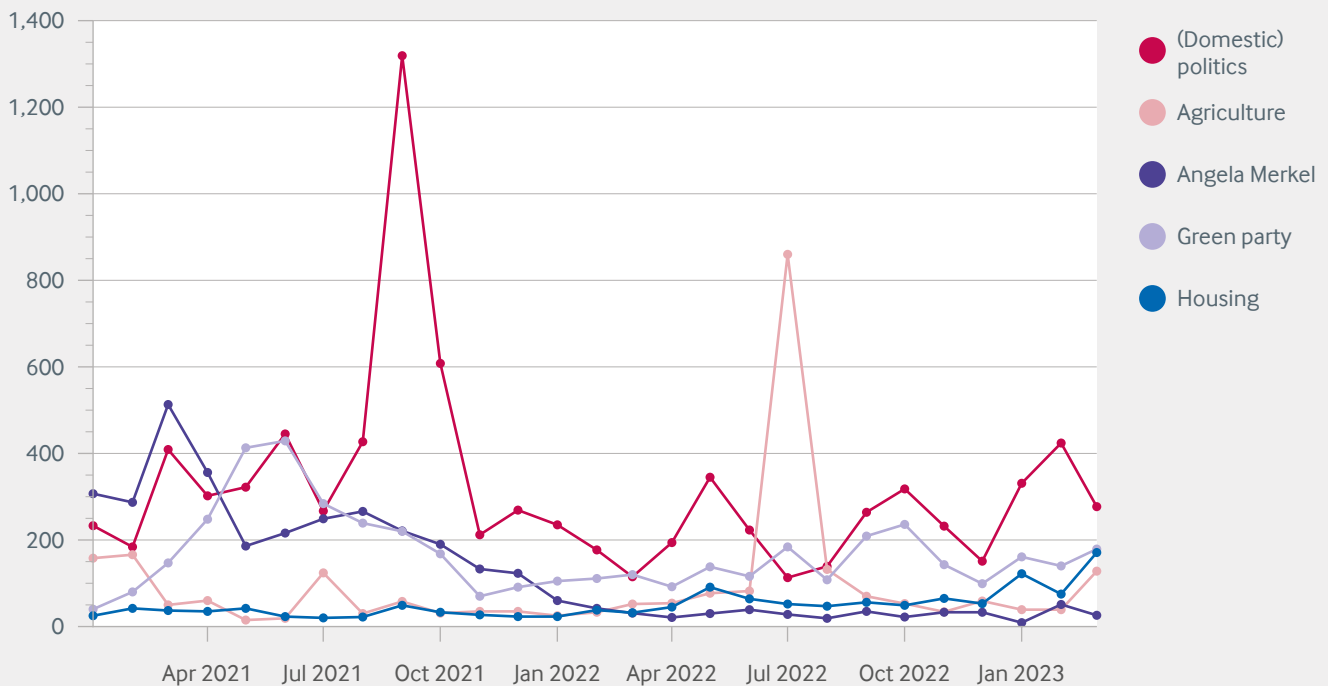
#### 2.5.10 German politics & social issues

In German far-right online discourse, domestic politics play an important role, as current events and issues are often framed specifically to justify the milieu's rejection of the German government and underline their narratives of social and political decline. Messages labelled *(domestic) politics* discussed issues and events specific

**Graph 23:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *(domestic) politics, agriculture, Angela Merkel, green party and housing*.



**Graph 24:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes (*domestic*) politics, agriculture, Angela Merkel, green party and housing over time.



mostly to the German context, with some messages also discussing Austrian politics. The messages were critical of democratic parties and politicians and often praised far-right politicians and parties like the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)<sup>140</sup> or Freie Sachsen (“Free Saxons”).<sup>141</sup>

A spike in messages labelled (*domestic*) politics occurred in September 2021 in the context of the German Federal Parliamentary Elections. Overall, politicians from most parties were portrayed as incompetent and/or malicious, and mainstream politicians, parties and the broader political system were likened to authoritarian regimes. Another spike in messages occurred in February 2023 in the context of the Berlin state election rerun.

Apart from the broader (*domestic*) politics category, the largest subtheme concerning German politics & social issues revolves around former chancellor *Angela Merkel*. In line with a general dislike among the German far right over the 16-year span of her chancellorship,<sup>142</sup> accounts in the dataset framed her mostly negatively, accusing Merkel of having destroyed Germany, of having stolen from the state and of accepting campaign

funds from convicted paedophile Jeffrey Epstein. Some messages in the subtheme contained explicitly antisemitic conspiracy theories, claiming that Angela Merkel was either a “deep state” agent working for NATO and Mossad or that she was a Polish Jew who goes by the name of “Aniela Kazmierczak” and was alleged to work for Jewish Organisation B’nai B’rith. Messages mentioning Merkel spiked in March 2021 in the context of fears of a COVID-19 lockdown during the Easter holiday, and steadily declined after the 2021 parliamentary elections.

Messages labelled *agriculture* were centred around news and political measures concerning farmers and farming. Farmers were generally portrayed favourably and as a group besieged by politics through anti-COVID and environmental regulations. Some messages also claimed that the World Economic Forum (WEF) was trying to expropriate farmer’s land. A significant spike occurred in July 2022 in the context of farmer protests in the Netherlands and Germany. The German far right actively tried to exploit the momentum of the protests by mobilising their supporters and framing the

protests along the lines of their own goal of preventing or abolishing environmental protection regulations.<sup>143</sup> Apart from this spike, messages on agriculture were low in volume.

Members of Germany's Green party were portrayed as either elitist hypocrites who were alleged to enjoy luxuries while subjugating the German people to hardships through their policies, or as enemies of the state who hate Germany and the German people and who are working towards sinister secret agendas such as the "Great Reset". In some messages, they were also portrayed as paedophiles or secret communists. Posts about the Green party focus on their political program, their role in the German Federal Government and on individual high-level politicians, for instance Federal Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock or Robert Habeck, the Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, both of whom are often targets of hateful messages. During the spike in messages labelled *Green party* in May and June 2021, messages mainly discussed the Greens' election campaign for the 2021 Federal Parliamentary election in Germany. The Greens' candidate for chancellor, Annalena Baerbock was heavily criticised and portrayed as stupid and incompetent. This tendency for derogatory speech is consistent with findings from other ISD studies.<sup>144</sup> Vague segments on Baerbock's CV, which were widely discussed in German news, were taken as evidence for her alleged lack of intellectual ability and used to portray her as a fraud. Additionally, stories about a late reporting of Baerbock's secondary income were cited as proof of a lack of integrity.

While many posts focus on Baerbock, some of the messages also attack prominent Green party politician Robert Habeck or argue that the Greens as a party would be Germany's downfall. A peak of over 400 messages in June 2021 came on the heels of an unprecedented success for the Greens in election polling: in eight opinion polls on voting intentions between 28 April 2021 and 10 May 2021, the Green party was leading<sup>145</sup> and projected to become the biggest party in German parliament, taking the lead from the conservative CDU. In three further polls, the Greens were on par with the CDU. This was likely seen as a threat by the far right, who as a result intensely discussed this trend on Telegram. With Green support in surveys declining in the following weeks, interest in the party from the far-right online milieu wavered as well.

Messages labelled *housing* were centred around rising prices for housing and rent. Whereas real estate owners were portrayed as potential victims of government policies, blame for the crisis was placed on regulation, taxes, and migration, claiming that shortages in the housing market were caused due to migration and Germany's acceptance of refugees. Migrants, as was claimed in some posts, would be allocated all available newly built flats. Political promises of measures aimed at lowering rents were suspected to be tricks to lure people into a state planned economy. An increase in messages was observed towards the end of the study period, due to a reform of the real estate tax in Germany in January 2023 and a controversial EU Parliament decision on the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD), which included a duty to redevelop energy inefficient houses, in March 2023.

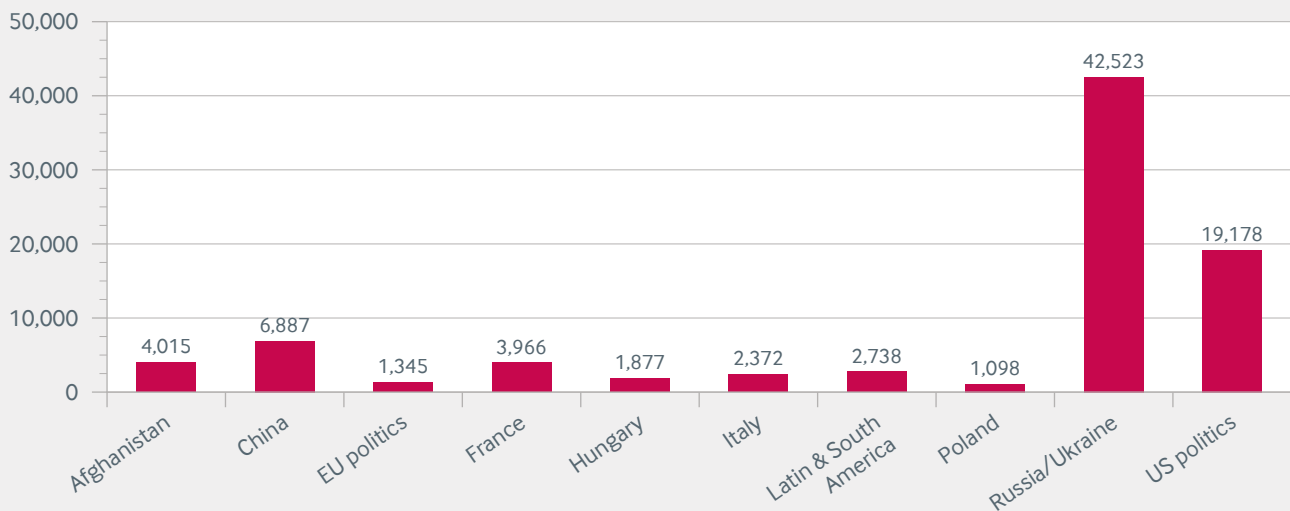
Among the five most prolific accounts, most channels posted a substantial number of messages across almost all topics and subthemes examined here. At the same time, some accounts posted prolifically on other subthemes, such as *George Soros*.

### 2.5.11 International politics

The observed transnationalisation of far-right discourse<sup>146</sup> that is evident in the carryover of conspiracy theories like QAnon, the Great Reset or the Great Replacement theory goes hand in hand with an interest of the German far right in international affairs and other countries domestic politics. The volume of messages regarding specific countries and regions strongly depended on whether events and news from the respective countries fit the worldview of the German far right and how easily they could be exploited for political campaigns.

For example, messages labelled *Afghanistan* spiked abruptly in August 2021, with 2,426 published messages compared to an average of 55 messages in the seven months prior, following a military offensive by the Taliban. The insurgency led to the Taliban's takeover of the Afghan government and the end of the nearly 20-year war in Afghanistan. Users mostly shared news stories about the takeover with some expressing negative feelings about the military offensive and its consequences. Following the Taliban takeover, the economic situation in Afghanistan significantly worsened, the health care system deteriorated, and women's rights were curtailed.<sup>147</sup>

**Graph 25:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes grouped under the mastertheme *international politics*.



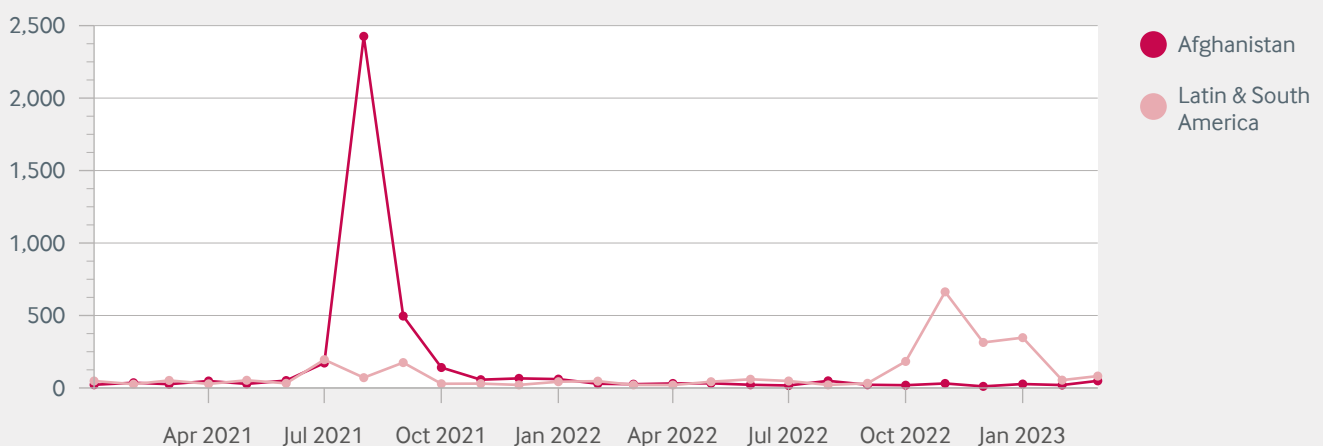
However, outside of the peak during which messages were mainly concerned with evacuation efforts and worries about a potential influx of refugees, news about the situation in Afghanistan was shared only sparingly.

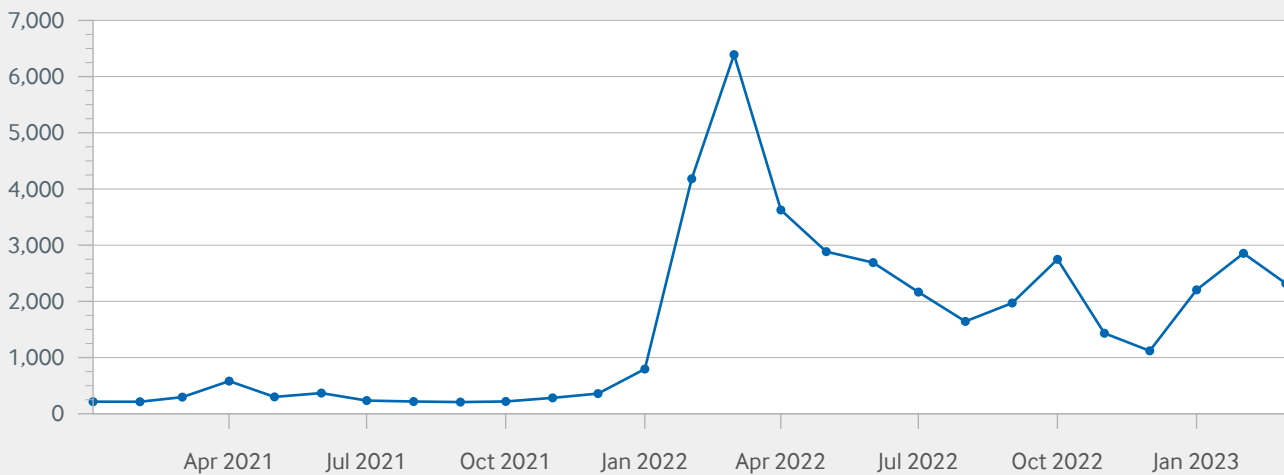
A similar dynamic is observable regarding messages about *Canada*. During Canadian trucker protests against vaccine mandates in January 2022, Canada-related messages increased significantly, reaching a peak of 850 messages in February 2022, compared to an average

of 22 messages per month in the 12 months prior. As the protests ended, interest in Canadian politics rapidly waned. Whereas the protests initially became a rallying point for the far right across the globe, including efforts to latch onto the protest in Germany through expressions of support and calls for donations, the failure of the protests quickly made the far right lose interest.

With a total of 42,523 messages, *Russia-Ukraine* constitutes the second largest cluster of messages

**Graph 26:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *Afghanistan* and *Latin & South America* over time.



**Graph 27:** Total number of messages assigned to the subtheme *Russia/Ukraine*.

within the dataset after *COVID-19*. This reflects both the overall impact of the war on a global scale, as well as the significance of the topic, which constitutes ideological focal points and has become a key subject for far-right campaigns.

Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, messages labelled *Russia-Ukraine* mostly echoed Russian government positions on world events or news about Russian domestic politics. Users discussed sanctions against Nord Stream 2, NATO manoeuvres and anti-government protests in Belarus, interpreting them as expressions of Western aggression against Russia and sharing conspiracy theories about Joe Biden's election as part of a NATO plot to attack Russia, as well as Biden's alleged connections to Ukraine. Some messages reshared speeches by Vladimir Putin, who was portrayed as an enemy of "globalism" and of the Great Reset agenda. In line with Russia's communication strategy, messages also contained content from Russian state media outlets who claimed that the military build-up prior to the invasion was unrelated to a potential war on Ukraine.<sup>148</sup>

Leading up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian propaganda efforts already established the interpretative framework through which large parts of the far right would later view the attack. According to this framework, Russia was portrayed as a country defending itself against aggression rather than an

aggressor itself and thereby tied in with existing far-right beliefs of necessary defence against intrusion. In February 2022, messages alleged that Ukrainian troops were planning an invasion of the Donbass region to continue furthering the "Great Reset" by means of an economic crisis, presumably intentionally brought about by the *COVID-19* pandemic.

Other justifications for the Russian attack included the defence of the regions Donetsk and Luhansk and the role of the Ukrainian government as part of a global conspiracy. Following the initial invasion, messages about *Russia-Ukraine* spiked significantly, increasing from an average of 291 messages per month in 2021 to a total of 6,390 messages in March 2022. Few channels criticised the attack, denouncing both Russia and "the West". Many channels repeated and echoed Russian state propaganda, including denials of the Bucha Massacre or sharing claims blaming the Ukrainian military for the atrocity. Further spikes occurred in October 2022 in the context of the Nord Stream 2 bombings on 26 September 2022, which were speculated by users to be carried out by US-actors, and in February 2023 in the context of public debate over German arms shipments to Ukraine.

In the context of *Latin & South America*, messages spiked in the context of the July 2021 Cuban protests, which were brutally struck down,<sup>149</sup> and during the pro-Bolsonaro rallies in September 2021.<sup>150</sup> The German far



right's affinity for Bolsonaro, especially among believers of the QAnon conspiracy ideology, was also the reason for a larger spike in messages from October 2022 until January 2023. Following the 2022 Brazilian general election after which incumbent Bolsonaro was replaced by former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, accusations of election fraud were sparked among the global far right, including German far-right actors.<sup>151</sup> In the months following Bolsonaro's defeat, there was an increase in speculation about voter fraud and news about protests by Bolsonaro's followers, as well as rumours about an imminent military coup against Lula da Silva. Channels also shared messages concerning the attack on the Brazilian congress that took place on 8 January 2023, which mirrored the 6 January 2021 attacks on the US Capitol. The prolonged interest of the German far right in Brazilian politics reflects Jair Bolsonaro's status as a key figure of the global far right.<sup>152</sup>

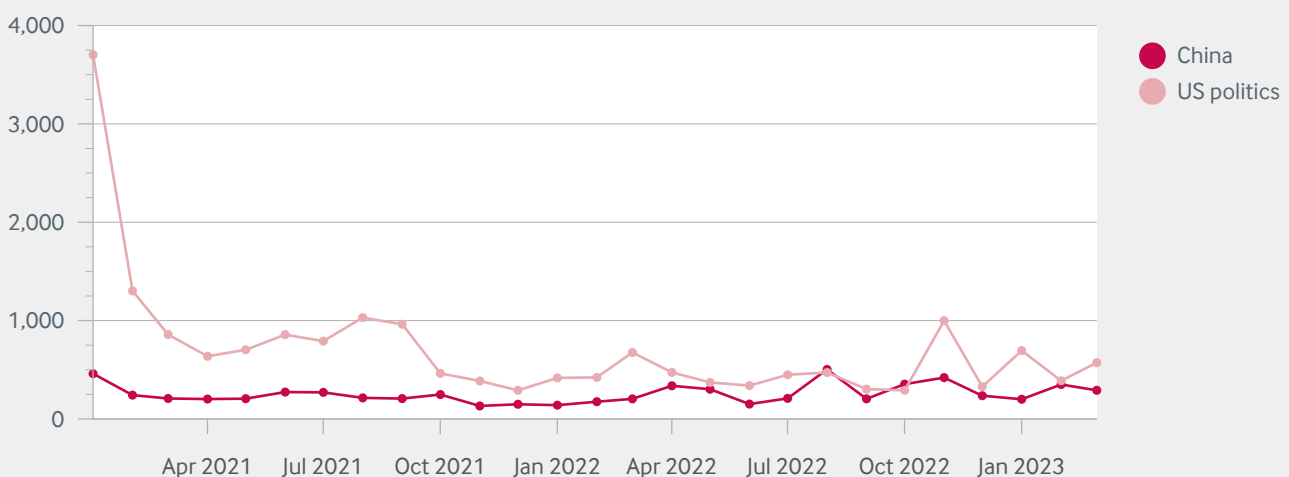
Messages about *Australia and New Zealand* increased between July 2021 and February 2022, in the context of some of the world's strictest COVID-19 measures.<sup>153</sup> German far-right and anti-lockdown channels likened measures such as remote quarantine facilities in Australia to concentration camps and declared solidarity with "freedom rallies" in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and other cities. Overall, Australia and New Zealand were portrayed in the dataset as "worst case scenarios" and used as case studies for the New World Order conspiracy to be warned against, including some calls

to free Australian and New Zealander people from their "oppressive governments".

Messages regarding *Türkiye* remained at a low volume across the study period. Apart from commentary on news stories and events, some messages also link *Türkiye* to conspiracy theories like QAnon. Overall, the reception of *Türkiye* and its president Erdogan was mixed. Whereas some users praised the politician as a bulwark against "globalism" and Zionism, others were sceptical of *Türkiye's* own geopolitical ambitions, sharing racist messages that denigrate German Turks and Turkish migrants in Germany. This dichotomy reflects both Erdogan's popularity among far-right voters in *Türkiye* and the accordance of his positions with far-right thinking,<sup>154</sup> as well as the history of Turkish-German migration and institutional and far-right racism in Germany.<sup>155</sup>

*China* was a consistently reoccurring topic among the studied channels and the second largest international politics subtheme by volume of messages. China was discussed both in the context of conspiracy theories, as well as in the context of events regarding China and criticism of Chinese policies. A peak in messages occurred in August 2022, when Nancy Pelosi, then speaker of the US House of Representatives visited Taiwan. The continual interest in China can partially be explained by the country's geopolitical and economic importance in world politics but was also linked to one specific channel

**Graph 28:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *US politics* and *China* over time.



belonging to the German edition of the international media outlet Epoch Times<sup>156</sup> (epochtimesde), which has published right-wing conspiracist and disinformation content in the past. The German edition of the media outlet published articles which included anti-migration narratives<sup>157</sup> or speculating about connections between the Jewish Rothschild family and the “asylum industry”.<sup>158</sup> Furthermore, the Epoch Times livestreamed protests by the far-right PEGIDA movement.<sup>159</sup> The outlet shared 13% (919 messages) of all messages labelled *China*.

Among all messages regarding international politics, most messages were concerned with *US Politics*, owing both to the USA’s significant role in world politics, as well as to the German far right’s admiration for former US president Donald Trump. In the context of Trump’s rising prominence at anti-lockdown rallies, extremism expert Matthias Quent already described a “Trumpification of the German far right” in 2020.<sup>160</sup>

QAnon believers in particular idolise former president Trump, who has become a messianic figure in their conspiracy theory. Consequently, the eight most prolific channels posting US politics related messages all constitute part of the conspiracy spectrum and either belong to QAnon followers or share QAnon beliefs among other conspiracy theories they promulgate. These eight channels posted a total 62% of the messages in the subtheme and, together with other QAnon-adjacent channels in the dataset, were the authors of a majority of messages in the *US politics* theme.

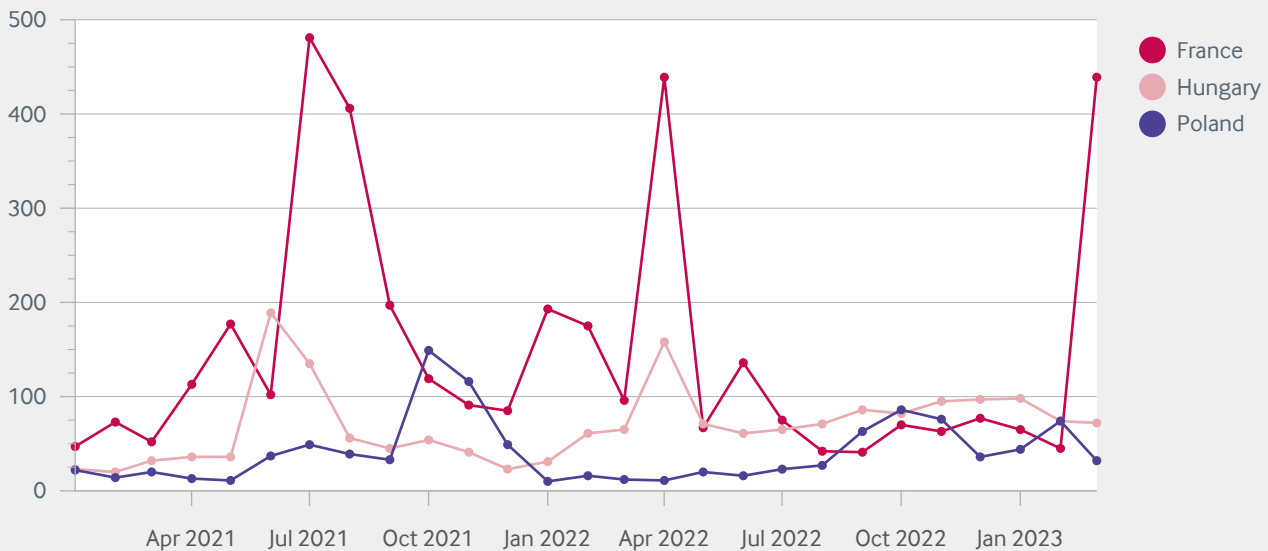
Spikes occurred around larger political events, such as the transition of power from Trump to Biden in January 2021, the first month of the Russian invasion in Ukraine in March 2022, and the US Midterm Elections in November 2022. During the spike in messages in January 2021, many messages contained conspiracy theories about election fraud and alleged plots against Donald Trump. On 6 January alone, when a pro-Trump rally in Washington DC turned into a riot at the US Capitol and protesters stormed the building, 457 messages were shared. During the attack, which led to the deaths of five people, users commented and spun the events into conspiracy theories in real time. In the context of Russia’s attack on Ukraine, users in March 2022 discussed connections of president Bidens son Hunter to Ukraine and linked his business affiliations to conspiracy theories regarding the Russian invasion. When the US Midterm

elections took place in November 2022, they were widely discussed with euphoric messages dominating. Overall, interest in US politics among the German far right was particularly high in comparison with other countries mentioned across the dataset. Apart from the role of the US as an important ally for Germany in global politics, this might reflect a transnational solidarity with the US far right, facilitated through shared beliefs in conspiracy theories like QAnon, as well as Donald Trump’s image as a saviour<sup>161</sup> which is also prevalent among far-right actors.

In addition to former US-president Donald Trump and former Brazil president Jair Bolsonaro who are both admired from afar, the German and global far right also have many role models within Europe. In contrast to higher thresholds in communicating with their role models across the Atlantic, which mostly occurs via social media and some irregular meetings, the European far right constitutes its own parliamentary group within the EU parliament and regularly organises Europe-wide networking events.

Despite Europe and the European Union’s institutions being an arena for political influence and participation for far-right actors, the EU itself is seen unfavourably by the far right. Messages labelled *EU politics* were therefore mostly critical, claiming the EU would be antithetical to democracy and accusing EU institutions of working on creating a European superstate. This stance also drove peaks in message volume, for example in May 2022, when a conference on the future of the EU was alleged by posters to be a “scheme to dissolve nation states” and a “fake-conference” used by an illegitimate “EU-monster” for empowerment. Similarly, in September of the same year, fears about an “EU superstate” or the EU taking over industrial production were repeatedly shared by posters. Overall, the data provided examples of far-right actors capitalising on common and widespread criticisms of a perceived “democratic deficit” in the EU, and some reframed these issues to juxtapose ethnically homogeneous national states - portrayed as “bastions of true democracy” - against a “globalist” structure in the form of the EU.

This strategy is also reflected in discussions around individual European states within the dataset. For example, the conflict between the Polish constitutional court and the European Court of Justice in October 2021 led to a spike in messages labelled *Poland*. The

**Graph 29:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *France*, *Hungary*, and *Poland* over time.

Polish constitutional court's decision that a primacy of EU law would violate the constitution was celebrated as a self-assertion of national sovereignty. Similarly, the resignation of Mario Draghi in July 2022 and the election of Georgia Meloni in September 2022 were lauded as triumphs of popular sovereignty over EU and WEF-adjacent "globalism", both of which led to an increase in messages labelled *Italy*. Whereas some users expressed hope that Meloni's election could harm the EU and end the "Great Reset", others cautioned their readers, claiming that Meloni had become a "transatlanticist". These warnings occurred in the context of a rift within the Italian far-right milieu over the Russian invasion of Ukraine,<sup>162</sup> where Meloni has taken a pro-Ukrainian stance.<sup>163</sup> Further, messages labelled *France* peaked in the context of France's presidential elections in April 2022. Here, Germany's far right rooted for Marine Le Pen, whom they identified as the candidate standing against "globalist" influence in the form of Emmanuel Macron, who was portrayed as a puppet of the World Economic Forum.

Among the political figures discussed here, few reach the popularity of Victor Orbán among the German far right. The Hungarian elections in April 2022 thus caused a notable spike in messages labelled *Hungary*, with many users expressing their hopes for Orbán's re-election and a joyous response to the election results. Both Orbán's

position regarding Russia and his anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-immigration stances are very popular among the far right. For example, reception of an at-the-time newly-passed Hungarian law restricting youth access to information about same-sex couples and gender affirming care was overwhelmingly positive and led to a spike in messages in June 2021. This particular law is part of a wider effort led by Orbán since 2018 that has since resulted in a continuous infringement on LGBTQ+ rights and safety in Hungary.<sup>164</sup> Another point of contention among users arose in the context of the Hungary-Germany EM-match in June 2021, during which organisers planned to light the Munich football stadium in which the game took place in rainbow colours in support of LGBTQ+ rights.<sup>165</sup> In this context, Hungary was portrayed by far-right users as victim of an alleged "rainbow mafia" and painted as merely wanting to protect the concept of a "traditional family" against an insidious "gender ideology". Notably, the football association UEFA prohibited Munich's planned symbol of solidarity under the premise of "political neutrality".<sup>166</sup>

In general, marches such as the protests regarding pension reform in *France* in March 2023 were a reoccurring topic of interest. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, news on anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests in European countries, such as the rallies against mandatory vaccines in July 2021 in *France*

and protests against anti-COVID-19 measures in *Italy* in October 2021, attracted a lot of interest and declarations of solidarity.

The German far-right discourse on European politics analysed here demonstrates both the links among the global and European far right across borders, as well as the short-lived and sometimes transient nature of far-right alliances. The latter was illustrated for example by reactions to a demand for World War II reparations from Germany by the Polish government in October 2022, which was starkly rejected by German far-right accounts, many of whom used the request as an opportunity to accuse Polish people of war crimes during or after the World Wars, thereby deflecting or offsetting accusations of German guilt.

These nationalist conflicts show the limitations of transnational far-right solidarity. The Polish government and the Polish people, who are otherwise presented as bulwarks against globalism, were immediately described by far-right German users as enemies of the German people who could hypothetically overrun Germany with their army. Further, messages published during a second spike in February 2023 (which were prompted by debate on the issue of reparations), discussed allegations of a campaign by the Polish press and the Polish government against the far-right magazine "Compact".<sup>167</sup> Consequently, the concept of a "Nationalist International" which far-right politicians have been aspiring to since the 1930s - and which is similar to current concepts of the New Right such as a "Europe of sovereign nations"<sup>168</sup> - still appears to be superficial, at least as far as the German far right on Telegram is concerned.

### 2.5.12 Political System

The far right's sceptical stance toward so called established "mainstream" media, including their efforts to establish their own set of "alternative" media sources, is a well-documented constitutive element of far-right thought.<sup>169</sup> Messages labelled *mainstream media scepticism* make up the third largest subtheme in the dataset, which mirrors the central role of mainstream media outlets as perceived manipulators and facilitators of cover-ups in many far-right conspiracy theories. Among messages labelled *mainstream media scepticism*, Germany's public broadcasting stations ARD and ZDF were portrayed as

biased rather than independent and as manipulative tools of state propaganda. Furthermore, users critiqued individual journalists and their work, rejected mandatory broadcasting fees in Germany, discussed media scandals, and engaged in meta-discussion about the role of media in propaganda.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, established media outlets were accused of discrediting anti-lockdown protesters and spreading disinformation. Apart from some actors who are part of "alternative" media outlets and some former journalists who have left mainstream media, journalists were mostly portrayed as either ideologically deluded or corrupt. A spike in October 2021 was driven partly by news about the dismissal of then editor-in-chief of tabloid Bild, Julian Reichelt. The dismissal was predominantly seen as a negative, with some users expressing sympathy for him. Some users speculated, that his dismissal was due to his political reporting or due to powerful enemies, and not due to allegations of misconduct.<sup>170</sup> Another spike in August of 2022 among other messages contained posts regarding an expenses scandal involving the director of state public broadcaster RBB, Patricia Schlesinger.<sup>171</sup> In contrast to Reichelt, messages regarding Schlesinger were not sympathetic. The scandal was rather interpreted as "proof" that the whole system of public broadcasting in Germany was corrupt and would lavishly spend "coerced broadcasting fees" ("Zwangsgebühren").

Messages labelled *elections* increased during the period of the 2021 German Federal Election and in the context of the US midterm elections in November 2022. Notably, delegitimising democratic institutions has often constituted a part of far-right strategy but the recent success of the rhetoric about "rigged" or "stolen" elections as seen in the context of the 2020 US presidential election is unprecedented. Although less successful, German actors were observed to copy these strategies in the context of the 2021 German Federal Election.<sup>172</sup> Within the dataset analysed, messages mostly shared news regarding the electoral process and election outcomes, rejected the concept of a democratic vote, or questioned the integrity of the German Federal elections. Relatively few messages encouraged people to vote for the candidates of far-right parties. In general, most messages reflected a deep distrust in or even rejection of democratic processes in line with far-right attitudes.

Messages on *political leanings and extremism* mostly discussed and denounced leftist extremism, left-wing radicals, or the left more broadly. Notably, several messages claimed that some left-wing extremists were wrongly categorised as far-right, thereby falsely increasing the official number of far-right extremists. Many messages alleged that the German or US governments would work together with or were infiltrated by left-wing extremists. For example, in February 2022 some messages claimed that Germany's Minister of the Interior, Nancy Faeser, was either entangled with left-wing extremists or was a left-wing extremist herself, citing an article the minister wrote in the magazine 'Antifa'. Before February 2022, messages were centred around the publication of official statistics on politically-motivated violence and around the publication of an antifa-themed special issue of a far-right magazine. In February 2023, messages mostly referred to violent left-wing extremist attacks in Hungary. Overall, messages mostly supported the far-right self-perception as a constantly besieged and persecuted group falsely accused of extremism by groups who are themselves extremists.

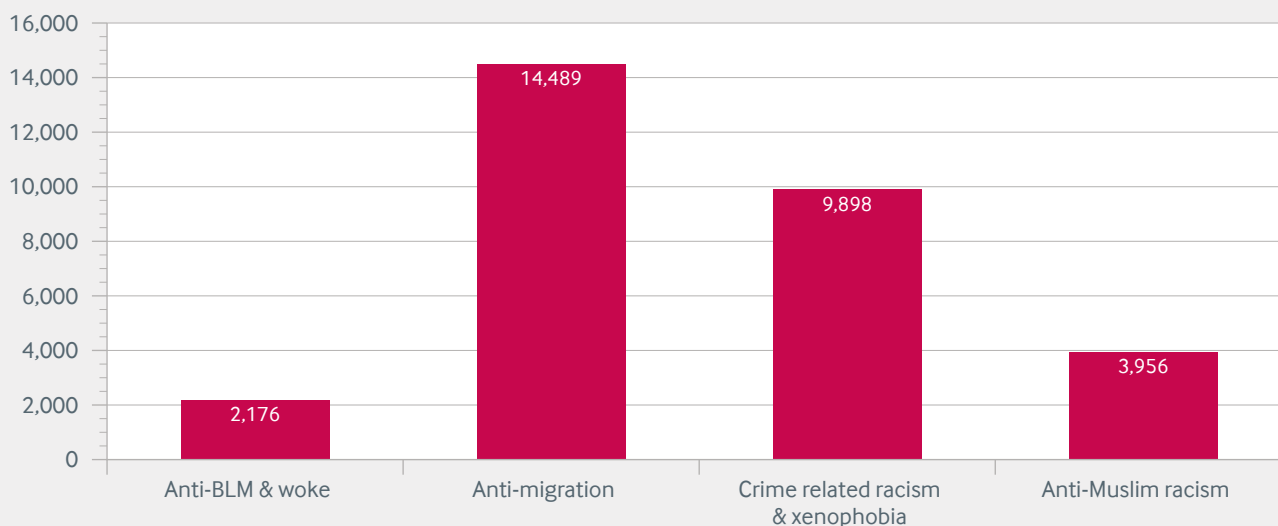
Whereas the concepts of socialism and communism are invoked by the global far right as ways of attacking their political enemies on the left,<sup>173</sup> this strategy was less profound among the German far right. Messages

on *communism/socialism* were comparatively low in volume and did not follow discernible trends. Users discussed socialism, Marxism, and communism, including expressions of fierce opposition, as well as statements including conspiracy theories about alleged secret socialist/communist affinities of politicians or parties and claims of a socialist/communist involvement in plots regarding world political events. In some posts, communism was portrayed as a scheme conjured by freemasons, Jewish people, or as an ideological expression of Judaism. Messages were published mostly independently from news events and appeared to predominantly serve the function of ideological consolidation within the milieu rather than the aim of recruiting new followers.

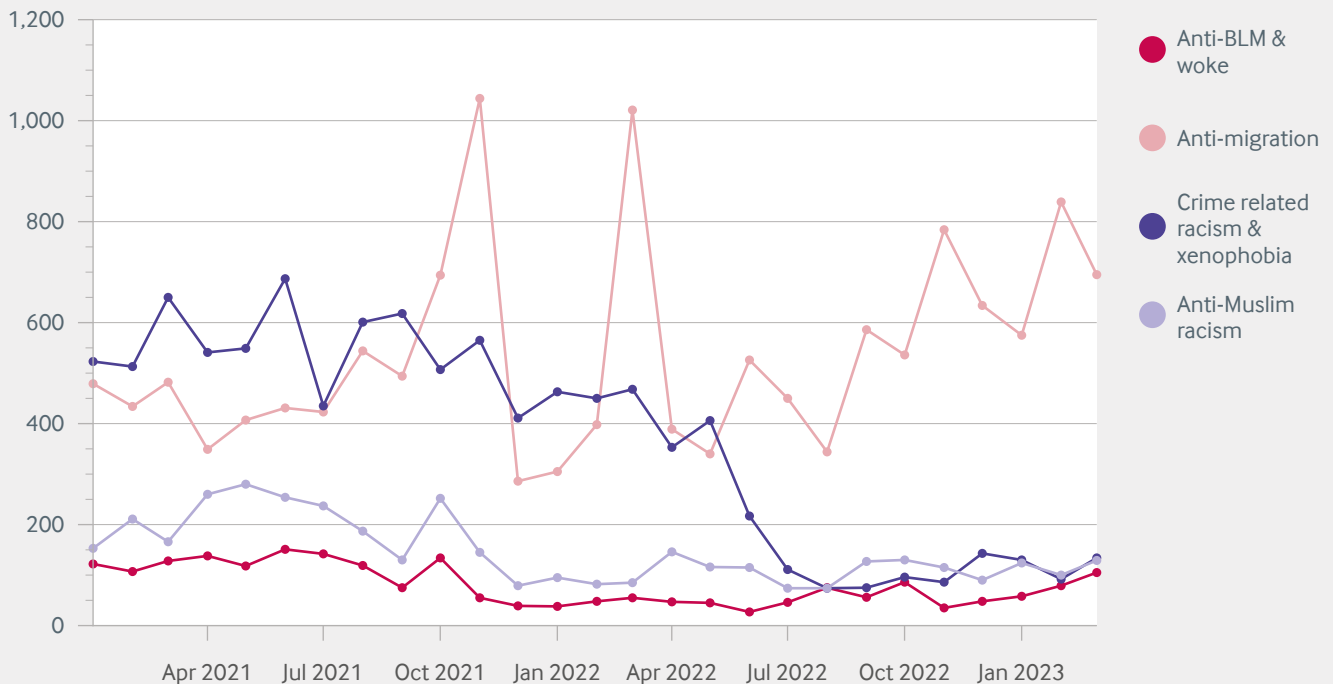
### 2.5.13 Racism & Xenophobia

The proportion of messages allocated to each subtheme reflects the dynamics of German far-right racist discourse, as migration is a large and continuously recurring part of German public debate, and a topic the far right exploits quite successfully.<sup>174</sup> The debate about migration is historically marked by xenophobia and racism<sup>175</sup>, especially anti-black<sup>176</sup> and anti-Muslim<sup>177</sup> racism. Another key part of the debate related to but less centred on anti-migration sentiment is the anti-BLM & woke movement.

**Graph 30:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *anti-BLM & woke*, *anti-migration*, *crime related racism & xenophobia* and *anti-Muslim racism*.



**Graph 31:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *anti-BLM & woke*, *anti-migration*, *crime related racism & xenophobia* and *anti-Muslim racism* over time.



Messages labelled *anti-migration* included both explicitly and implicitly xenophobic and racist messages. During the study period, a worrying increase in such messages was recorded, overall rising from 479 messages in January 2021 to 695 messages in March 2023. In these messages, people who migrate to Germany were generally portrayed as a threat and/or a drain on German resources. For example, the subtheme contains posts juxtaposing the support provided to people moving to Germany with the lack of care for homeless people, suggesting a zero-sum relationship between assistance for each group. This long-observed strategy plays off different minority groups against each other, which is convenient to actors who are not interested in helping either group.<sup>178</sup>

Apart from the overall increase, two event-specific peaks in message volume stood out. In November 2021, the Belarus-European Union border crisis intensified when Belarusian authorities allegedly used false promises to lure refugees from countries such as Iraq and Syria to Belarus, where they were then

forced by Belarusian security forces to attack Polish border guards.<sup>179</sup> The incidents were widely discussed among the far-right channels in this dataset and caused an influx of racist and conspiracist messages, including content spreading the “Great Replacement” (“Großer Austausch”/“Umvolkung”) conspiracy, according to which malign forces are plotting to replace white citizens of western countries with non-white immigrants.<sup>180</sup> A second peak was recorded during March 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In this context, far-right channels in the dataset spoke of “mass movements”, questioning the capacity of German municipal governments to deal with their arrival. They were likewise hostile toward Ukrainian refugees, suggesting that they could be “infected with disease”. Further, some messages suggested “a loss of control at the borders” and shared racist speculations of non-white refugees allegedly exploiting the situation to enter Germany “uncontrolled”. As has been the case in the aftermath of the 2015 “migration crisis”, where centre-right and conservative parties could be observed to adapt both policy and rhetoric in response to far-right incitement,<sup>181,182</sup> the far-right incitement

regarding refugees from Ukraine after March 2022 has influenced the rhetoric of conservative politicians in Germany.<sup>183</sup>

Much racist discourse in Germany and among the far right is intended to further *anti-migration* sentiment. The same mechanism can be observed with messages labelled *crime-related racism & xenophobia*, which centre a presumed “race” and nationality of the alleged perpetrators of crimes. By emphasising crimes committed by people they perceive as “not belonging to Germany”, the studied accounts suggest a connection between migration and crime, thereby associating migration with danger. In total, 62.59% of messages labelled *crime-related racism & xenophobia* were published by a channel whose name is a play on the German term for “isolated case”. This name suggests an apparent attempt by the channel to highlight crimes committed by racialised perpetrators, insinuating a pattern of migrant crime that is purposefully omitted by authorities and the media. The significant drop in messages labelled *crime-related racism & xenophobia* can in part be explained due to this particular channel ceasing to post altogether after June 11, 2022.

Another topic closely tied to anti-migration sentiment is anti-Muslim racism. Messages labelled as *anti-Muslim racism* often correlated with the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory and claimed an “Islamisation” of Germany or of Europe, based on specific news stories or demographics. Overall, Islam was portrayed as a foreign and dangerous force and the presence of Muslims in Germany was portrayed as a threat. An average of 196 messages labelled *anti-Muslim racism* were published in 2021. In 2022, this number was significantly lower at an average of 104 messages per month. During the first three months of 2023, an increase to an average of 118 anti-Muslim messages per month was recorded. Some were concerned with Islamism and Islamist terror, while others contained generalised anti-Muslim sentiment, associating Muslims with misogyny and antisemitism. Sometimes, these messages were connected to news stories, in other cases a connection was simply claimed without reference. News reports featuring crimes committed by Muslims were part of the data set, as were stories pointing to an alleged preferential treatment of Muslims on religious grounds, such as the right to celebrate religious ceremonies during COVID-19. Still other messages claimed an “Islamisation” of Germany

or of Europe, pointing to specific news stories or to demographic developments. Assertions of an alleged Islamisation correlated with the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory. The few posts that named groups or people responsible for Islamisation blamed, among others, George Soros, or left and Green politicians who in one post were accused of planning the creation of an Islamic caliphate. Overall, anti-Muslim rhetoric was overwhelmingly used to make anti-migrant arguments.

Germany has its own longstanding history with anti-Black racism.<sup>184</sup> Nevertheless, discussions regarding racism and anti-racism are influenced by US discourse on concepts of “race”, which became apparent with the large attendance at Black Lives Matter protests in Germany in June 2020, following the killing of George Floyd.<sup>185</sup> The Black Lives Matter movement underwent a process of transnationalisation<sup>186</sup>, which brought with it a transnationalisation<sup>187</sup> of the backlash against the movement and terms such as “woke” associated with it. This also led to many of the messages labelled *anti-BLM & woke* containing arguments emulating the American far right. Most messages labelled anti-BLM were published in 2021, with an average of 111 messages per month. In 2022, message volume decreased significantly to an average of 51 messages per month. However, message volume increased in the first months of 2023 to an average of 81 posts from January until March 2023. Overall, no event-specific peaks were identified. Rather, messages covered a range of topics, accusing the Black Lives Matter movement and “woke” sentiments of covertly spreading “cultural Marxism” aimed at destroying society from within, mocking anti-racist activism and portraying victims of racism as overly sensitive.

A significant number of messages aimed at distorting the discourse around critical race theory by accusing anti-racist groups of “anti-white racism” or accusing groups and individuals of being “anti-white”. Actors thereby aimed to delegitimise anti-racist work by portraying anti-racist actors as violent (e.g. by calling BLM terrorists) or claiming that they follow a sinister hidden agenda. This claim strategically shifts discussions away from racist violence and presents the far right not as perpetrators or offenders, but as people defending themselves against an imagined “White Genocide”, thereby constituting a reversal of perpetrator and victim, a popular and effective strategy by actors spreading online hate.<sup>188</sup>

Some messages in the subtheme were openly racist or antisemitic, connecting anti-woke sentiment to anti-Jewish conspiracy theories. Since the most prolific channel publishing posts labelled *anti-BLM woke* reduced the number of posts it published over time (101 in 2021, 29 in 2022, 5 from January to March 2023), this partly explains the decline in BLM-related posts. Consequently, the increase in posts at the end of the study period seems to be caused by an increase in interest across a broader range of actors.

Most channels that were among the five most prolific accounts for either of the subthemes posted a substantial number of messages across all *racism & xenophobia* related topics. For instance, two far-right accounts were both among the top five most prolific accounts for the subthemes *anti-BLM/woke*, *anti-migration* and *crime-related racism*. One media outlet was among the top five most prolific channels for the subthemes *anti-BLM/woke*, *anti-migration* and *islamophobia*. One far-right channel which published 13.85% of messages labelled *anti-Muslim racism* was also among the top five channels for the subthemes *George Soros*, *Angela Merkel* and *YouTube*, and also published a significant number of messages labelled *transphobia & homophobia* (3%). Finally, one channel considered one of the largest and most popular German far-right and conspiracist channels,<sup>189</sup> published more *anti-BLM* labelled messages than any other channel in the dataset and published roughly four times as many

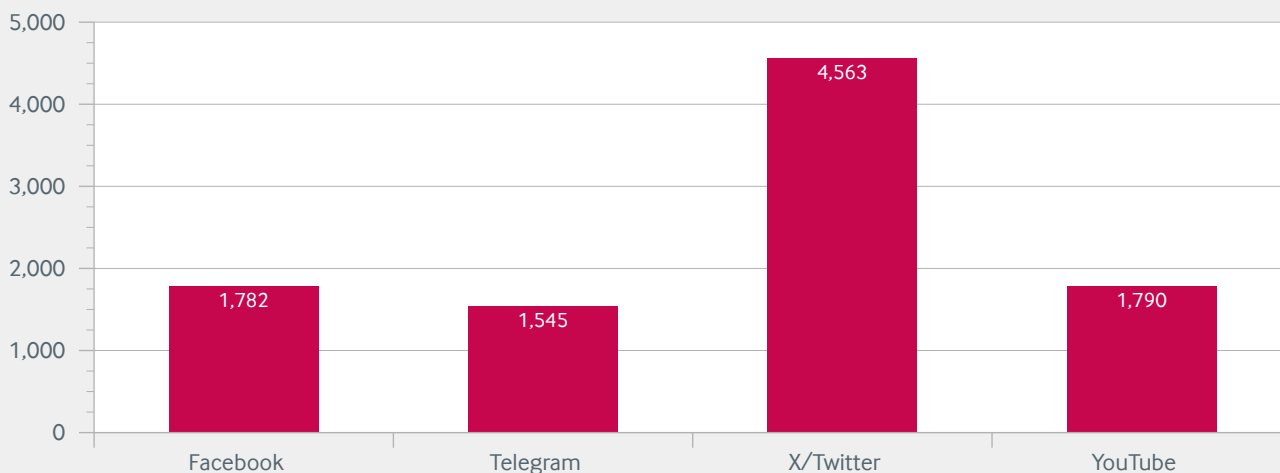
*anti-migration* posts, yet it was only the eighth most prolific account for that particular subtheme.

### 2.5.14 Social Media

As early adopters, far-right actors regularly utilise new technological developments to circumvent social, physical and legal restrictions to spread their ideologies, including racism and antisemitism.<sup>190</sup> This became especially apparent when social media platforms began to adapt or enforce their terms of service to deal with far-right content after the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville 2017.<sup>191</sup> In the wake of the deadly march, the pressure to do so became more apparent as the companies previously failed to monitor and deplatform known white supremacist accounts which were then suspended.<sup>192</sup>

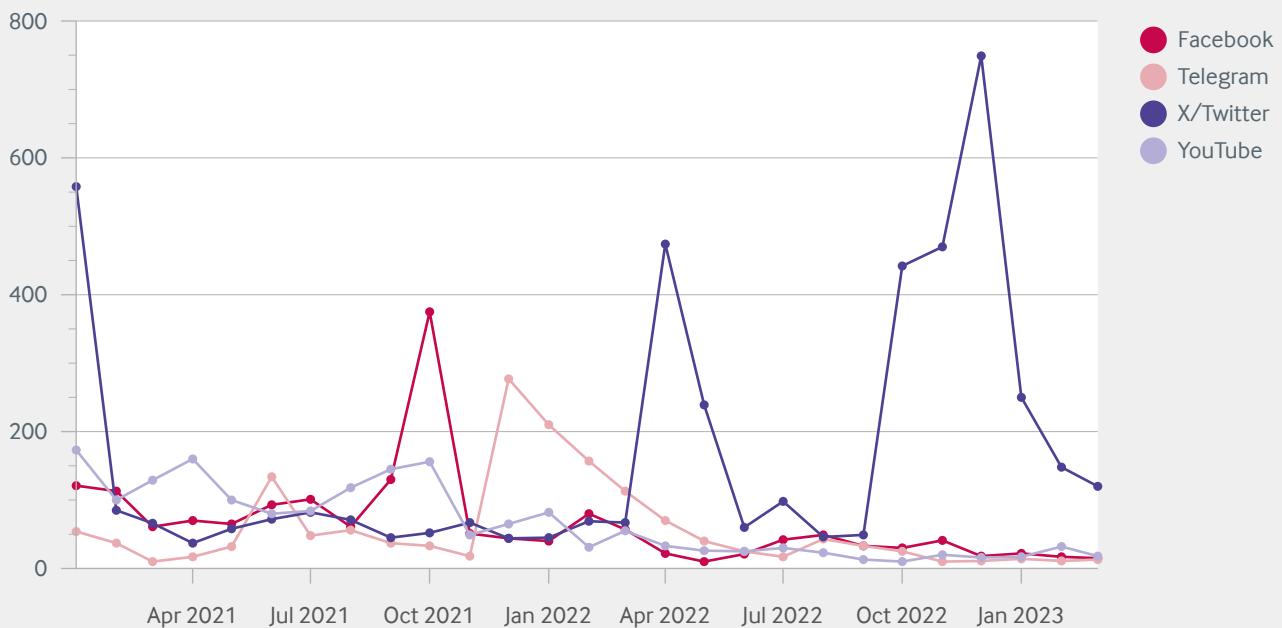
The impression of being censored on mainstream platforms caused far-right users to join platforms known under the umbrella term 'alt-tech', which promote their sites with the promise of little to no content moderation under the banner of "free speech absolutism".<sup>193</sup> Therefore, alt-tech platforms like Gab are seen by their users as a safe space against "censorship" by "Big Tech". While far-right actors still want to use large platforms to spread their messages, they largely dislike these platforms as expressions of a societal order they reject. These attitudes were also reflected in messages labelled social media. Telegram, as a platform the far

**Graph 32:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *Facebook*, *Telegram*, *X/Twitter* and *YouTube*.





**Graph 33:** Total number of messages assigned to the subthemes *Facebook*, *Telegram*, *X/Twitter* and *YouTube* over time.



right mostly trusts, was discussed more favourably than other large platforms, despite existing fears that the platform could be affected by regulation and thereby made to “censor” content or that it would start moderating content of its own volition. This ambiguous relationship to social media exemplifies the far right’s relationship to technology more broadly: seen as a remedy to social ills in some cases, for instance in the case of cryptocurrencies; otherwise perceived as a threat and instrument of oppression, especially those technologies associated with big social media platforms, digital currencies, or 5G technology.

Alleged “censorship” and “surveillance” remain two of the key talking points among the far right regarding social media platforms and other technologies, which is also reflected in this subtheme. Whereas Facebook, Telegram and YouTube make up a relatively equal share of the debate, discussions around X/Twitter dominated this subset of the data, in part due to widespread discussion on the controversial takeover of the company by Elon Musk.

This is also reflected in the temporal distribution of posts labelled X/Twitter, with clear spikes in the context

of Musk’s offer to buy Twitter in April 2022, the official takeover in October 2022 and the so-called “Twitter files”, which were published starting in December 2022 and which - according to far-right discussion in the dataset - confirmed the platform’s “left-leaning bias”.

As previous studies have shown, Telegram has become a key platform used by actors on the German far right.<sup>194</sup> Discussions mostly centred around worries of possible censorship on Telegram. Subsequently, messages contained suggestions on how to circumvent censorship on the platform, e.g. by downloading it through a website rather than an app store, or by using proxy servers. At the same time, violent crimes planned on the platform, such as the thwarted attempt to kill Saxony’s prime minister Michael Kretschmer, were downplayed as either entrapment by law enforcement or the harmless musings of unintelligent people. Some posts delight in what they perceive as Kretschmer’s fear after the plot became known, while one user argued that politicians would only be targeted by terrorists because they do not do their job in the interest of the people.

Censorship discussions offer different culprits: while some speculated that “Big Tech”, specifically Apple and

Google, were behind an alleged censorship of Telegram, others claimed the German state would try to censor the platform, aided by a media campaign. Aims to counter hate speech and criminal activities on the platform were seen as a mere pretence to censor “the truth” or other alternative viewpoints.

In a similar vein, a spike in messages about Facebook in October 2021 was mostly centred around the whistleblower Frances Haugen. Users in this subset of the data were generally critical towards her, with some portraying her as a “Soros-puppet” and others speculating about a possible connection between the whistleblower and a six-hour global outage of Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram in October 2021.

## 2.6 Discussion

This research was conducted against a backdrop of multiple crises. During 2021 and 2022, both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine set the agenda for public debate in Germany. Subsequently, these events also dominated far-right political messaging on Telegram and constituted the focal points of the two biggest clusters of messages in the dataset. However, the impact of these events was not limited to the clusters *COVID-19* and *Russia-Ukraine* but was prominent across the entire dataset, as both crises sparked, revived, and fuelled numerous conspiracy theories touching upon all areas of life. This wide adoption of conspiracy theories was convenient for far-right actors, serving as an important heuristic in their worldview. Far-right actors feel encircled by hostile forces and explain political developments they disagree with either through personalising approaches (declaring politicians as incompetent or stupid), or through conspiracy theories involving ‘evil cabals’. The individual conspiracy theories are often evolving and are quickly changing in the light of new developments, as was also evident in the context of this study.

Generally, the channels analysed in this study had an opportunistic relationship to current events. The far right quickly latched on to news stories to frame and exploit them. The content of these stories was relatively unimportant if they could be interpreted within the framework of far-right theories. Far-right accounts

wove in new strands into existing conspiracy theories to explain news in light of their ideology (e.g. COVID-19 as test run for a “climate lockdown”; COVID-19 having been developed in Ukrainian labs; the Russian attack on Ukraine as a part of the Q-plan). Conspiracy theories are not only quickly developed, but content is also shared and forwarded internationally.<sup>195</sup> This transnational exchange of far-right discourse leads among other things to the inclusion of harmful portrayals developed in the UK or the US, such as the “groomer” narrative<sup>196</sup> which was found among German-language anti-LGBTQ+ messages. Furthermore, ‘Q drops’ were translated verbatim or used as a baseline for the interpretation of world events. In addition, users shared calls for solidarity by other conspiracy ideologues across the world, and messages by and about other far-right movements. For the German far right online milieu, Telegram was therefore found to serve as a platform for international networking and exchange.

In some cases, the far right used Telegram differently depending on whether they were communicating within their own community or attempting to disseminate their messaging further. Whereas messages labelled *Ukraine-Russia* were designed to be spread both within the far-right milieu and beyond its boundaries, some conspiracy theories such as the “Ukraine Biolabs” theory were designed to reach many people and influence public opinion. Messages about other conspiracy theories like QAnon were more focussed on developing and sharing beliefs within an already largely convinced group, being difficult to understand for people not versed in QAnon lore. Overall, this analysis further demonstrated Telegram’s significance as a tool for far-right networking and ideological learning as well as for the dissemination of far-right and Russian propaganda.

Throughout the dataset, messages across a variety of different subthemes were hateful and prejudiced. Such messages were categorised under the labels *anti-feminism*, *antisemitism* and *racism & xenophobia*. Messages with these labels often overlapped in terms of topics discussed and were often also interwoven in terms of beliefs and structure. For example, racist and xenophobic messages were also found to use anti-feminist and sexist arguments, e.g. pointing to Iranian feminist activism to claim that German feminists are entitled; or

blaming support for refugees on unintelligent, naïve women. Further, anti-feminist messages often blamed misogyny solely on migrant men and accused feminists of conflating German men with misogynist migrants. They also claimed that the right to abortion was a tool of the “Great Replacement”, aimed at an alleged “genocide of the race”. In addition, some antisemitic messages claimed that Jews were orchestrated the LGBTQ+ community<sup>197</sup> and the BLM (Black Lives Matter) movement.

Some mainstream policies correspond to political aspirations shared in the data analysed here. For example, the German coalition government’s plans to tighten rules on migration are not only perceived by experts as a political triumph for the far right<sup>198</sup>, but they also fulfil demands expressed in the dataset. Hessen’s state coalition government with its declared goal to ban the use of gender inclusive language<sup>199</sup> might be not only unconstitutional,<sup>200</sup> but also the preferred response of far-right actors discussing “gender language” (“Gendersprache”). While it remains difficult to establish a causal relationship between far-right messaging on Telegram and mainstream policy shifts, it is notable that the communication channels

of extremist actors contain policy positions that are later adopted by mainstream parties, reflecting existing research on the feedback loops between the radical right and the mainstream.<sup>201</sup>

At the same time, the far right was found to hold on to narratives of decline. Influenced by a perception of their own deprivation,<sup>202</sup> they portrayed the political system they live in as oppressive and offered two main strategies to counter this oppression. One strategy, mostly prevalent in messages labelled *food and lifestyle* and *digital technologies* was an individual or communal preparation for collapse. Using technological solutions like cryptocurrency or platforms like Telegram, far-right actors hope to avoid the pitfalls of society and its potential cessation. An individualist remedy is offered in the form of adverts for blackout preparation weapons and survivalist equipment. A similar dynamic was observed in the context of alternative medicine. With a focus on the upbringing of one’s children against societal trends, the solution to collective problems once more was sought in individual retreat. A second strategy was collective resistance, ranging from the joining of rallies, to boycotting anti-COVID-19 measures, to posting itself.

## 3. Trends in Account Activity

### 3.1 Methodology

For a general overview of the developments within the German far-right online subculture, changes in account activity and reach as well as follower count and engagement from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2022 were examined. Specifically, the research team scrutinised which platforms were relevant for far-right actors and their followers and how the role of individual platforms changed during the research period. Where

possible, analysts observed changes in the far-right online milieu through bans and suspensions of accounts.

To examine the broader trends within the far-right online milieu, a range of metrics were collected from the aggregated accounts from different ideological tendencies that all belong to the broader online subculture of the German far right (See table 4 below).

	Follower Count	Post Volume	Follower Engagement/ Views	Inactive Accounts
<b>Facebook</b>	Number of followers at the time of posting a message (noting the highest number of followers in the case of multiple records in one day)	Number of posts published by the monitored accounts and channels over time	Like count, comment count, share count and other reaction count at time of message collection <sup>203</sup>	Number of accounts that were completely inactive, number of accounts that were (partly) unavailable, number of accounts that were banned or deleted
<b>Instagram</b>	See above	See above	Favourite count and comment count at time of data collection	See above
<b>X/Twitter</b>	See above	See above	Favourite count and retweet count at time of data collection	See above
<b>YouTube</b>	–	–	Number of comments made on the channel's videos at time of data collection	See above
<b>Telegram</b>	–	See above	Number of views of messages published in a channel at the time of data collection	See above

Table 4: Metrics collected for analysis per social media platform.

### 3.2 Limitations

Since not all examined platforms use or provide the same metrics for follower count and engagement, these can only be compared across platforms to a limited extent. At the time of data collection, Telegram did not allow for collection of the number of channel subscribers or the number of reactions via its Application Programming Interface (API). Due to further API-related limitations on data collection, volume over time of messages posted, post engagement and follower counts for X/Twitter are only available for the timeframe of 12 May 2021 to 31 December 2022 and view counts for Telegram are only available for the timeframe of 20 May 2021 to 31 December 2022.

In addition to these metrics, the number of accounts that had become inactive was recorded. Analysts differentiated between accounts that were originally listed but never posted during the period examined (1 January 2021 to 31 December 2022) and accounts that were active at some point during that period but had not posted in the last three months of the examined period (1 October 2022 to 31 December 2022). However, most platforms do not specify whether a page or channel is not available because it has been deleted by the person or people who set it up, or whether it was deleted or banned by the platform for reasons such as violating community guidelines. Furthermore, it is not possible to retrace whether a given account has previously been suspended and reinstated, or to determine on a large scale whether a person or people behind an account “migrated” to a different platform, as this requires a qualitative “matching” of accounts across platforms. Where possible, ISD analysts reviewed inactive accounts qualitatively to differentiate between accounts which had become inactive and accounts that had been banned or deleted.

Finally, to map longitudinal changes in reach, followership, and account activity consistently, the original account sample put together in 2021 had to remain unchanged. New accounts created after curating this original seed list are therefore not included. This also means that accounts set up by actors in the original dataset to evade bans during the research period are not included.

### 3.3 Findings

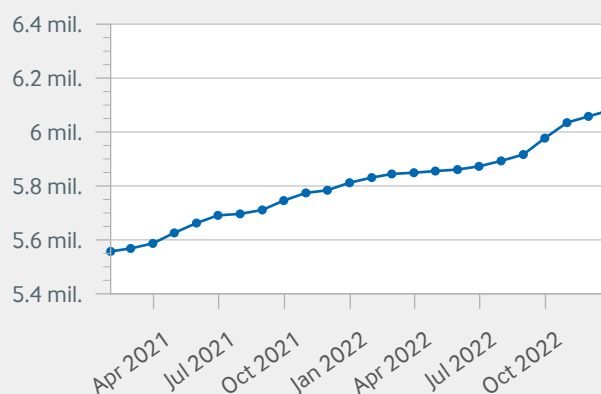
#### 3.3.1 Facebook

The German far right uses Facebook for networking, political campaigning,<sup>204</sup> and monetisation.<sup>205</sup> The importance of Facebook as the social media platform with the biggest market share in Germany<sup>206</sup> has also been seized by far-right party AfD, who dominated political messaging on the site during both the 2017<sup>207</sup> and in the 2021<sup>208</sup> General Federal Election campaigns.

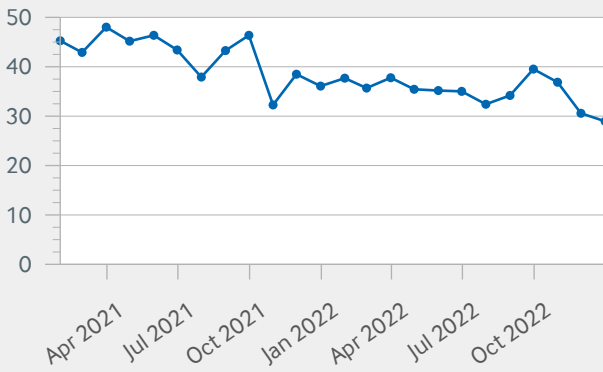
On Facebook, the total number of users following the accounts in the dataset has increased from 5,549,309 followers on 1 January 2021 to 6,088,740 followers on 31 December 2022. The rise in followers was relatively steady between April 2021 and the end of December 2021 (1.3% average increase), plateaued in the first and second quarter of 2022 (0.63% average increase) and rose from a 1.12% follower increase in the period from 1 July 2022 to 30 September 2022, to a 2.19% follower increase in the period from 1 October 2022 to 31 December 2022.

At the same time, account activity in terms of the average number of messages published per account overall decreased from 45 posts in January 2021 to 29 posts in December 2022. Over the same time period, the average engagement count per post in terms of likes, comments, shares and other message reactions has fluctuated heavily.

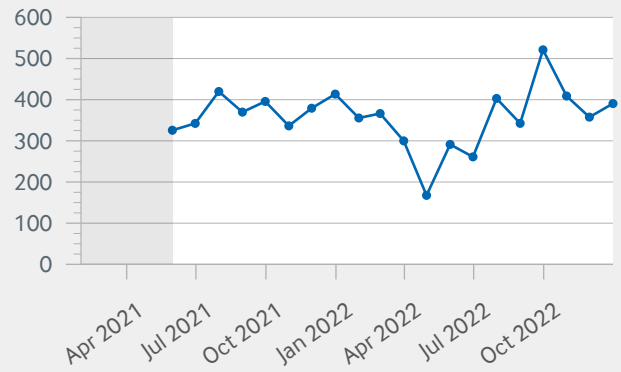
**Graph 34:** Total number of account followers over time on Facebook (per month).



**Graph 35:** Average number of messages per active Facebook account by month.



**Graph 36:** Average engagement count per post, comprising likes, comments, shares and other reactions to messages published by month.



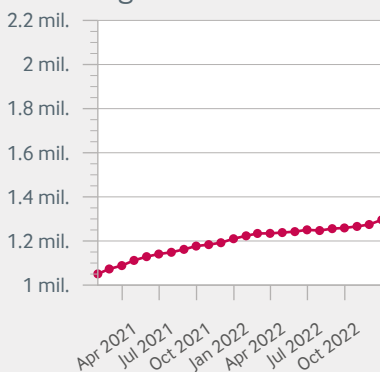
### 3.3.2 Instagram

As other research has shown, the far right uses Instagram for recruitment strategies that are often gendered and make use of issues that at first appear non-political.<sup>209</sup> The German far right has also been shown to utilise the platform to aim at younger audiences specifically.<sup>210</sup>

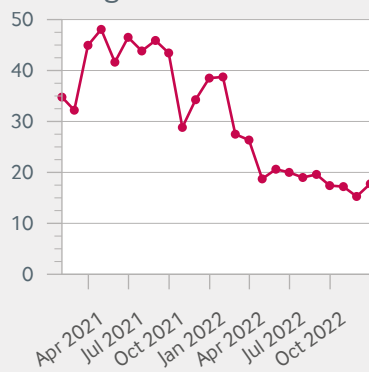
On Instagram, the total number of followers steadily increased from 1,041,203 followers on 1 January 2021, to 1,298,478 on 31 December 2022. The rise in followers was relatively steady between April 2021 and

end of June 2022, but rose more steeply from a 0.83% follower increase in the period from 1 July 2022 to 30 September 2022, to a 1.98% follower increase in the period from 1 October 2022 to 31 December 2022. However, the average number of posts published per account dropped significantly from 35 (of 2,052 total posts) in January 2021 to 18 posts (of 835 total posts) in December 2022. At the same time, analysts observed a rise in average engagement count per post from 319 favourites and comments per post in May 2021 to 457 favourites and comments per post in December 2022.

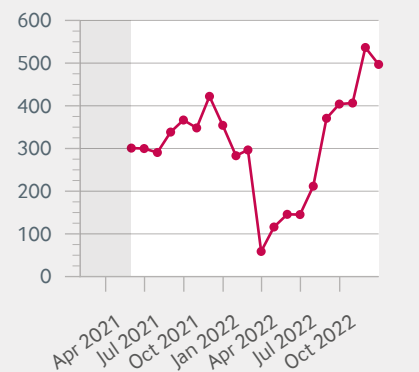
**Graph 37:** Total number of account followers over time on Instagram.



**Graph 38:** Average number of messages per active account on Instagram.



**Graph 39:** Average engagement count per post, comprising favourites and comments on posts.

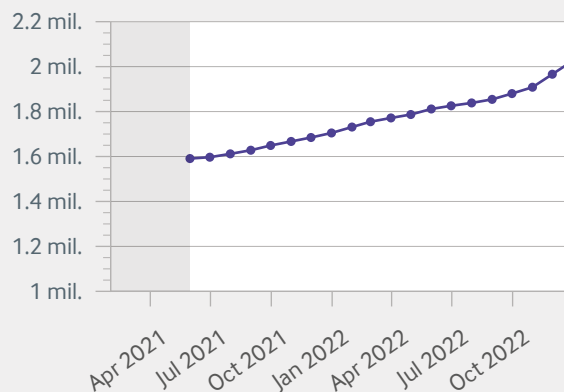


### 3.3.3 X/Twitter

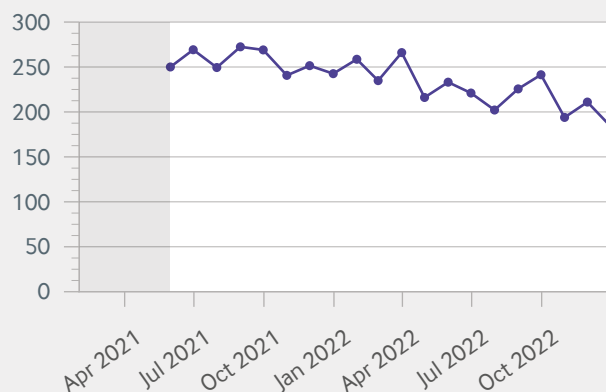
As with Facebook, the German far-right party AfD dominated political discourse on X/Twitter during the 2017 General Election campaign.<sup>211</sup> One strategy employed by the party to spread its messages via X/Twitter is so called 'hashjacking', meaning "strategic use of someone else's hashtag to promote their own social media page, product or agenda."<sup>212</sup> Other strategies of far-right communication on X/Twitter include coordinated campaigns like the 2023 "Stolzmonat".<sup>213</sup> As researchers have discovered, the frames of German far right actors classified as extreme, New Right and populist converge on X.<sup>214</sup>

On X/Twitter, the number of followers rose from 1,589,828 on 12 May 2021, to 2,048,808 on 31 December 2022. The rise in followers was relatively steady between July 2021 and the end of September 2022, but the number rose more steeply from a 2.72% follower increase in the period from July 1, 2022, to September 30, 2022, to a 5.9% follower increase in the period from October 1, 2022, to December 31, 2022. The timing of this increase coincided with Elon Musk's official takeover as CEO on October 27, 2022.<sup>215</sup> Given the international far right's excitement<sup>216</sup> about the takeover since Musk announced plans to purchase the platform, the takeover may have influenced this increase. Whereas the average message volume decreased from 250 posts (from a total of 27,754 posts) at the end of May 2021 to 184 posts (from a total of 17,437 posts) in December 2022, the average user engagement per post rose from 101 average favourites and retweets per tweet in May 2021 to 215 average favourites and retweets per tweet in December 2022.

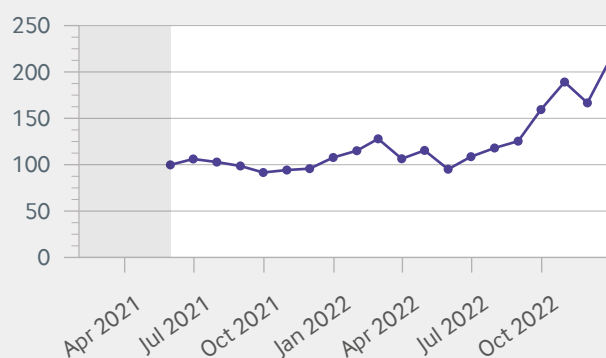
**Graph 40:** Total number of account followers over time on X/Twitter.



**Graph 41:** Average number of messages per active accounts on X/Twitter.



**Graph 42:** Average engagement count per post, comprising of the favourite count and the retweet count.

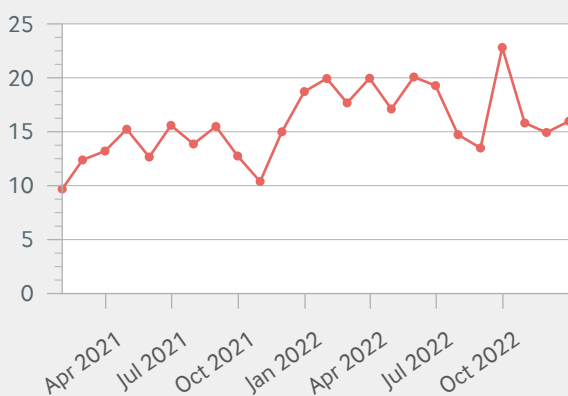


### 3.3.4 YouTube

Like Instagram, many German far-right actors have adopted YouTube to modernise their image and broaden their appeal.<sup>217</sup> Research conducted in 2020 shows a thematic convergence of far-right accounts around the so-called refugee crisis as well as the network of far-right users getting denser.<sup>218</sup> The research in this study confirms a further growth in relevance of the platform.

During the research period, user engagement with the videos posted by channels in the dataset increased. The average number of comments posted to each video rose from 9.69 in January 2021 to 15.98 in December 2022. While this metric shows some fluctuation, it ultimately indicates an upwards trend in user engagement. Although constraints in the YouTube API did not allow us to collect all videos posted by the monitored accounts and thus to comment on the relevance of the platform for far-right actors, the increase in user engagement on YouTube suggests that the platform is gaining relevance in German far-right online subcultures. This is consistent with the findings of earlier research reports in this project<sup>219</sup> as well as with a general trend towards audiovisual platforms.

**Graph 43:** Average number of comments per video.

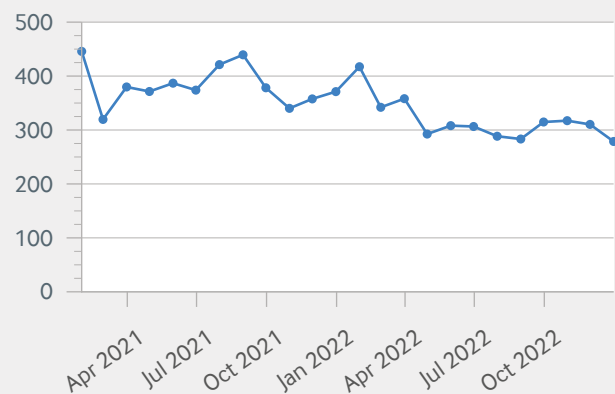


### 3.3.5 Telegram

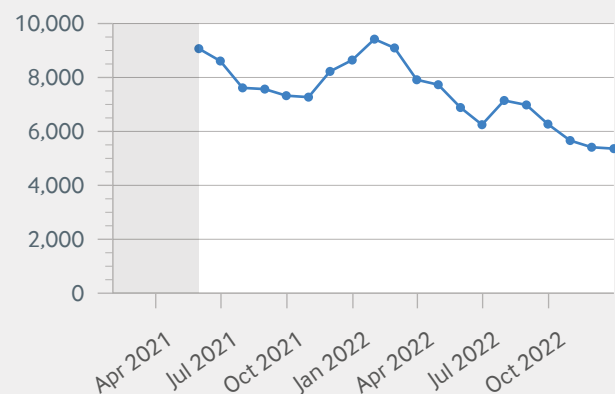
As previous ISD studies have shown, the German far right uses Telegram to network within their community and beyond.<sup>220</sup> Telegram's functionalities as both a messenger service and a social media platform lower the threshold for reaching new audiences on the platform and thus makes it a useful tool for politicised messaging.

On Telegram, the average number of messages per channel has decreased overall, from an average of 446 messages per account in January 2021 to an average of 279 messages per account in December 2022. At the same time, the average number of views per post has decreased from 9,068 in May 2021 to 5,360 in December 2022.

**Graph 44:** Average number of messages published per Telegram channel.



**Graph 45:** Average number of views per message.





### 3.4 Discussion

#### 3.4.1 Banned, Deleted and Inactive Accounts

	Total number of accounts	Banned or deleted	Recently inactive
Facebook	461	32 (7%)	51 (11%)
Instagram	95	16 (17%)	9 (9%)
X/Twitter	159	7 (4%)	9 (6%)
YouTube	88	3 (3%)	11 (13%)
Telegram	229	15 (7%)	20 (10%)

Table 5: Total number of accounts examined per platform; number of accounts that were completely inactive, banned or deleted; number of accounts deemed recently inactive (did not publish content in the period from 1 October 2022 to 31 December 2022) per platform.

Based on the share of banned or deleted channels, platform regulation through the Network Enforcement Act and through platforms' terms of service likely impacted the makeup of the far-right online milieu. Overall, 6-13% of accounts per platform had not published content during the last three months of the study period (1 October 2022 to 31 October 2022) and 3-17% of accounts per platform were banned or deleted, which partially explains the decline in the total number of messages published across platforms. Only two platforms, YouTube and X/Twitter, reliably specified whether an account was banned by the platform. For X/Twitter, one account was deleted and six suspended by the platform. For YouTube, three accounts were terminated by YouTube for violating the platform's Community Guidelines. In addition to this, an initiative by the German Federal Office of Justice resulted in a total of 64 channels being blocked for German users in February 2022, some of which were also included in this dataset.<sup>221</sup> For Telegram, this is consistent with Telegram's reluctance to comply with regulation, which led to proceedings by the German Federal Office of Justice.<sup>222</sup> A detailed assessment of whether the number of banned users is due to accounts mostly complying with the Network Enforcement Act and terms of service, or is due to violations not being reported or due to problems in enforcement, cannot be offered. For this, it

would be necessary to qualitatively assess the legality of the content posted by the accounts in the dataset, which is beyond the scope of this study.

One factor in assessing the relevance of platforms for a user group is their posting behaviour. Therefore, the volume of messages over time for this study's sample was analysed. Based on the overall decline in the average number of messages per active account published by month, we observed a decrease in interest from the monitored accounts to publish on Facebook, Instagram, X/Twitter, and Telegram. This may be due to increased platform moderation as a result of increased regulatory pressure. Furthermore, on Telegram, a comparison between the message volume per channel during the first 6 months of the study period with the message volume per channel in the last 6 months of the study period showed a decline in message volume for 152 of the 225 channels surveyed and an increase in published content for 72 of them.

Apart from banned and deleted channels, the reduction in message volume could in part be traced back to some previously very active channels that are posting less. For instance, a channel related to the QAnon conspiracy theory that overall published 177,979 posts in the studied period published 18.86% fewer posts at the end of the study period, compared to the first six months. Notably, the channels with an increase in the number of posts published were mostly far-right media outlets. Channels that published fewer posts were often related to the Querdenken<sup>223</sup> movement which was born out of resistance to COVID-19 containment measures. This is in line with both the fact that during the last six months of the study period most COVID measures in Germany were already repealed, and an overall political swing toward the far right among German voters.<sup>224</sup>

Yet the overall decline in the number of messages published could also be linked to the study's limitation in working with a fixed set of actors that were popular at the beginning of the study period in 2021. Since then, several new far-right and conspiracist actors have become popular and might have superseded some of the activity examined here. An example of this is

the Austrian alternative media outlet AUF1, which was founded in May 2021 (and therefore not included in this study) and has since become the largest German-language alternative media outlet in terms of followers on Telegram (ca. 250,000 channel subscribers as of October 2023).<sup>225</sup>

### 3.4.2 Followership & Engagement

Over the study period, the far-right accounts surveyed were able to expand their followership and increase their user engagement on all platforms except Telegram. The context of the multiple crises in recent years and the progressing mainstreaming of extremist positions might explain this increased “demand” for extremist content on social media observed here. The increase in user engagement on YouTube further indicates a rise in popularity of audiovisual content.

While the average number of messages per active user was declining on X/Twitter, a rise in followers and user engagement coincided with Elon Musk’s takeover of the platform. This could have multiple reasons: First, the wide and controversial discussion of the takeover could have attracted more users to the platform. Additionally, changes in X/Twitter’s algorithm could have made the

accounts’ content more visible to a larger audience. Multiple studies have commented on the changed approach to platform moderation after October 2022 resulting in an increase in hate speech and far-right content on the platform.<sup>226</sup> In addition, the platform also announced re-admission of some previously banned accounts,<sup>227</sup> which could have driven further engagement.

On Telegram, the decrease in viewership per message can in part be explained by the significant number of accounts that were banned, deleted or stopped posting, considering that some of these had a very large number of followers. For example, before the deletion of his main channels in the context of the initiative by the German Federal Office of Justice, self-described “ultra-right wing”<sup>228</sup> Attila Hildmann published up to 500 messages per week in one of his channels with nearly 120,000 followers at the time.<sup>229</sup> Considering that these messages consistently generated a high number of views, this in part explains the significant drop in average viewership among the surveyed channels. In addition to this, the overall decline in viewership could also be linked to the limitation of working with a fixed set of channels, meaning that subscribers could have moved on to other Telegram channels not included in this dataset.

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## 4. Platform Landscape

### 4.1 Methodology

To further assess which social media platforms are the most relevant for the German-language far right and how this changed over the period of study, changes in platform domain-sharing by 849 Facebook, X/Twitter, and Telegram accounts (see section 2.1) were examined over the period from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2022. YouTube and Instagram accounts were not analysed in this section, as only a few URLs were shared in Instagram posts or YouTube comments.

Overall, a total of 4,230,926 messages were analysed across all platforms.<sup>230</sup> The data was collected and processed according to the following steps:

- All shared URLs were collected and reduced to domain level;
- Domains which were shared more than 500 times across the studied period were inductively categorised (ie: codes derived by the data) by two researchers;
- Values for domains relating to the same platform (e.g. facebook.com and fb.com) were combined under the platform's name.

Among the 500 most shared domains, 23 social media platforms were found and examined more closely in this section. To assess the extent to which the far-right online ecosystem on either source platform was closed off (e.g. where a network of actors existed that continuously exchanged ideas within a platform's eco-system rather than sharing URLs that went beyond this platform), domain sharing trends were observed considering both URLs that linked back to the source platform they were shared on, as well as URLs linking to platforms other than the source platforms.

Additionally, differences in the sharing of domains among the three source platforms were compared. Furthermore, to compare the popularity of platform alternatives with that of the three source platforms, the share of URLs linking to platform alternative URLs of the total number of social media URLs was calculated and plotted over time. Finally, the five most popular platform alternatives per source platform (a total of 9 platforms due to overlap) were examined more closely in terms of background and popularity both over time and across the examined userbase.

### 4.2 Limitations

Given the overall decline of published messages, the number of published URLs also declined over time, making it more difficult to assess platform popularity in absolute terms. To address this, rather than total numbers, the share of a given platform alternative domain of the total number of social media platform URLs was analysed.

### 4.3 Facebook, X/Twitter, Telegram, Instagram, and YouTube

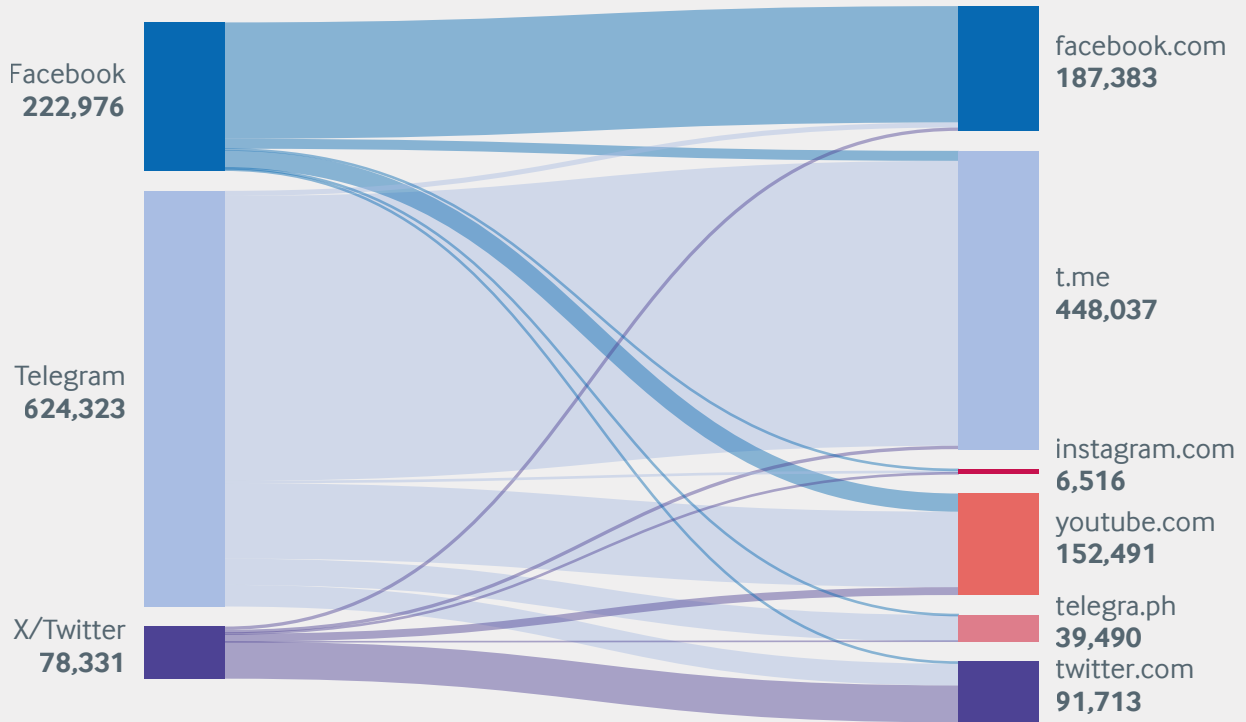
Overall, most URLs published by German far-right users on Facebook, X/Twitter and Telegram were internal platform links, as well as links to YouTube and Instagram.

In total, 77% of links shared on Facebook were Facebook URLs; 61% of links shared on Telegram were Telegram URLs (another 6% were Telegra.ph URLs);<sup>231</sup> and 62% of links shared on X/Twitter were X/Twitter URLs. The large share of internal platform links across all source platforms indicates a fairly closed platform-specific far-right online ecosystem, in which accounts communicate and interact. Within these platform-specific ecosystems, messages are reposted between accounts and groups of the same platform and outbound links are rarer. Notably, with the exception of Telegram, such ecosystems are often further fostered by ranking algorithms which prioritize posts with internal links over those containing outbound links, thereby incentivising posting internal links. This also shows that a lot of far-right content is still being exchanged on very large online platforms falling under the purview of the DSA. The exception here again is Telegram, which during the research period did not fall under the VLOP category established by the DSA.

Notably, a total of 16% of platform URLs shared on Telegram, 13% of platform URLs shared on X/Twitter and 12% of platform URLs shared on Facebook linked to YouTube. The overall high volume of YouTube URLs across all platforms (152,491) strongly indicates the importance of the audiovisual platform for the German far right, a finding also corroborated by other ISD research.<sup>232</sup>

Only 1% of platform URLs shared on X/Twitter and Facebook and 0.5% of platform URLs shared on Telegram linked to Instagram. The comparatively low total

**Graph 46:** Links shared on Facebook, Telegram and X that link to Facebook, X/Twitter, Telegram, YouTube or Instagram, including URLs that link back to their source platform.

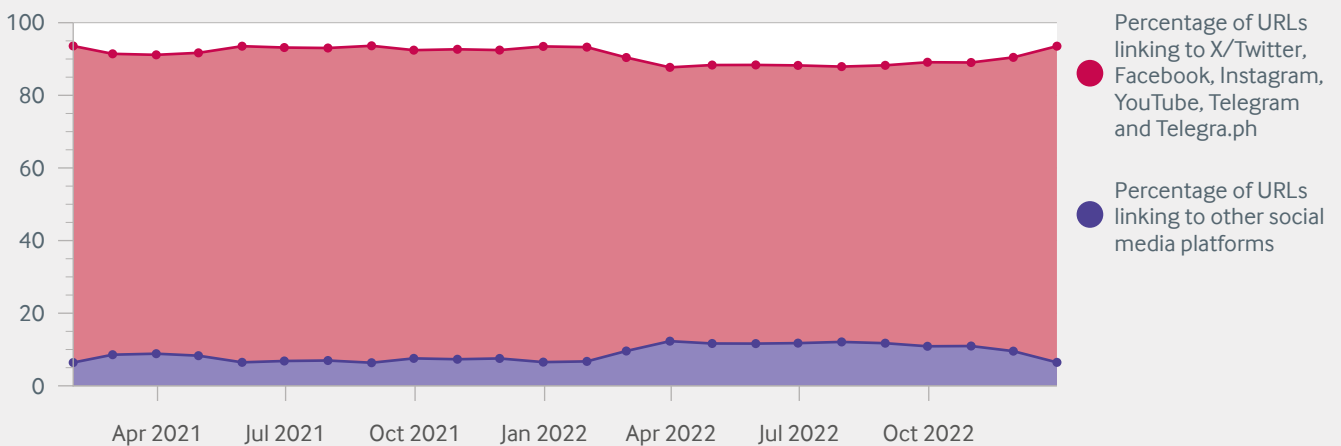


number of 6,516 links to the platform indicates a limited relevance of the picture and video-focused platform for the accounts examined here, which was instead outperformed by Gettr (25,391) and Odysee (20,766), as well as DLive (8,169) and Rumble (7,356). However, research shows that although the platform is seemingly less relevant for the more overtly political accounts studied here, there is evidence of an active network of influencers through which German far-right actors recruit on Instagram using lifestyle content.<sup>233</sup>

#### 4.4 Platform Migration

In the first half of the study period, the share of traffic sent from Telegram, Facebook and X/Twitter to other platforms remained relatively steady between 6-9% of messages with a link to a social media platform. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in a significant uptick in the number of other platform links shared, with an increase from 6.73% of shared social media links in January 2021 to 9.59% in February 2021

**Graph 47:** Percentage of URLs linking to X/Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram and Telegra.ph, in relation to URLs linking to other social media platforms.



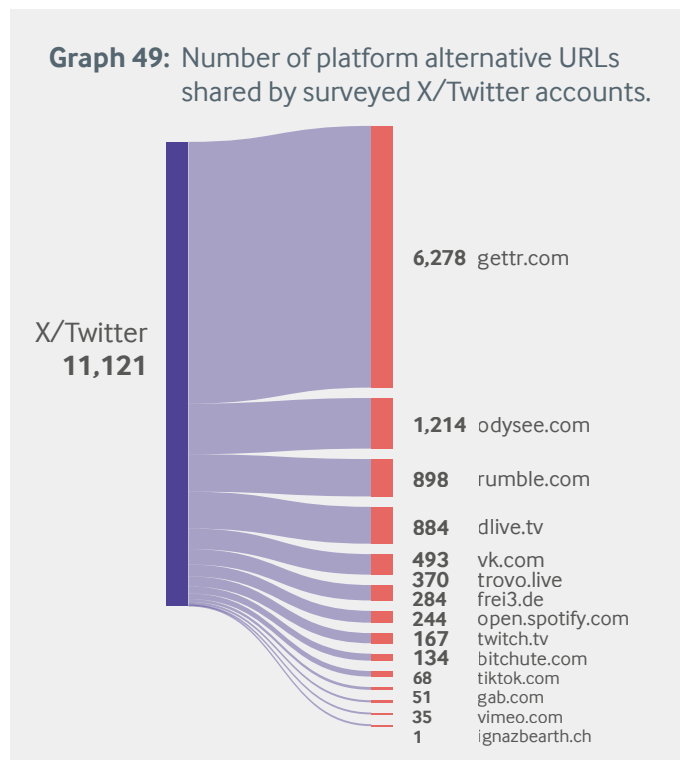
and a peak of 12.3% in March 2022. This uptick resulted in a lasting increase until November 2022 at 9.55%, before dropping to 6.46% in December 2022, a level similar to that prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These findings support the theory of a link between crises and a resulting increase in alternative media consumption, especially among users who are already inclined towards far-right viewpoints.<sup>234</sup> In the case of the German far right, EU sanctions against Russian war propaganda, and the attempts by mainstream platforms to enforce these sanctions through content moderation might have contributed to this trend.<sup>235</sup> While these efforts by big platforms showed some limited success in the first months of Russia’s attack on Ukraine,<sup>236</sup> later reports show that Russian propaganda outlets managed to evade content restrictions.<sup>237</sup> Yet a significant increase in shared URLs linking to the Russian network VK following the RT/Sputnik ban in Europe shows that initial bans seemed to have driven at least some online traffic towards other platforms in the first months of the war (see 3.5.6).

### 4.5 Other Social Media Platforms

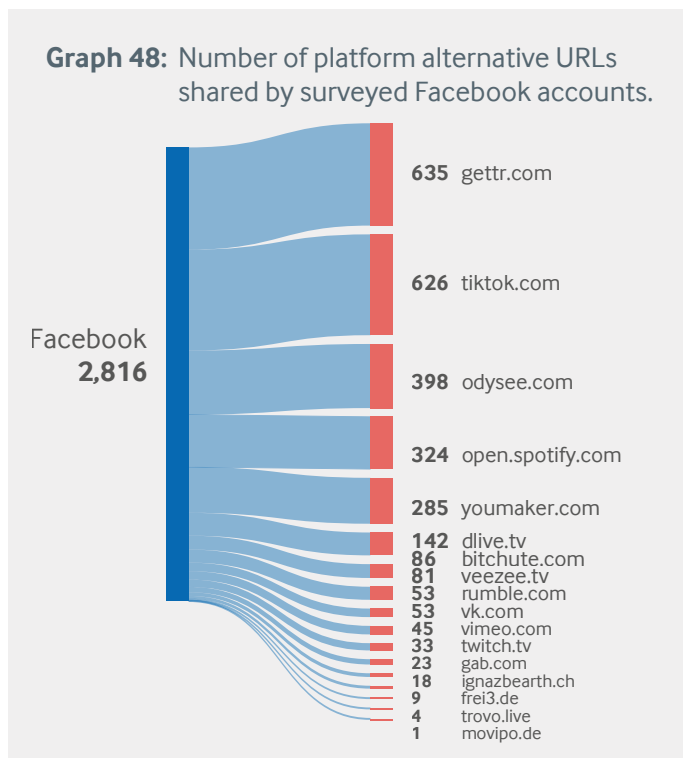
The following sections provide a closer look on the nine most popular social media platforms (other than X/Twitter, Facebook, Instagram Telegram and

Telegra.ph) within this dataset, based on the top five most shared domains per source platform (X, Telegram & Facebook).

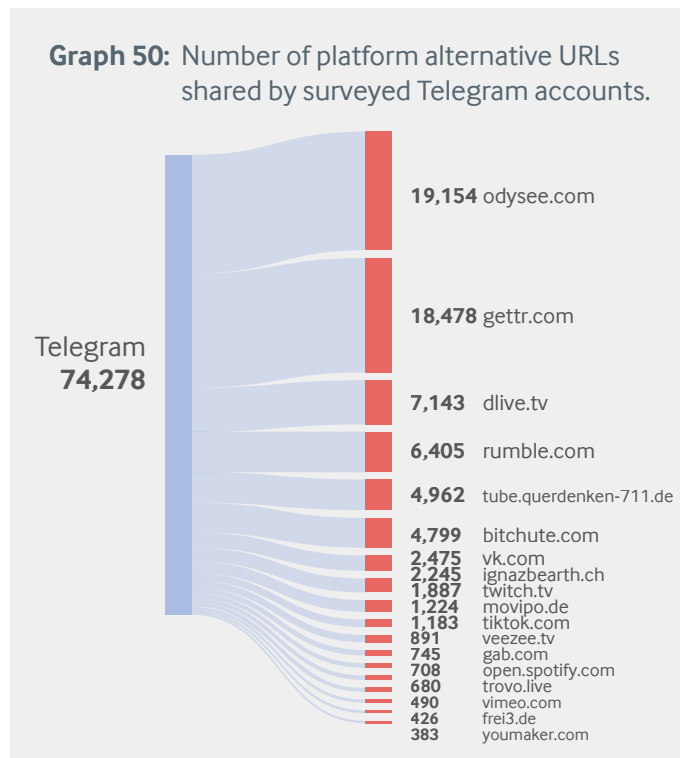
**Graph 49:** Number of platform alternative URLs shared by surveyed X/Twitter accounts.



**Graph 48:** Number of platform alternative URLs shared by surveyed Facebook accounts.



**Graph 50:** Number of platform alternative URLs shared by surveyed Telegram accounts.



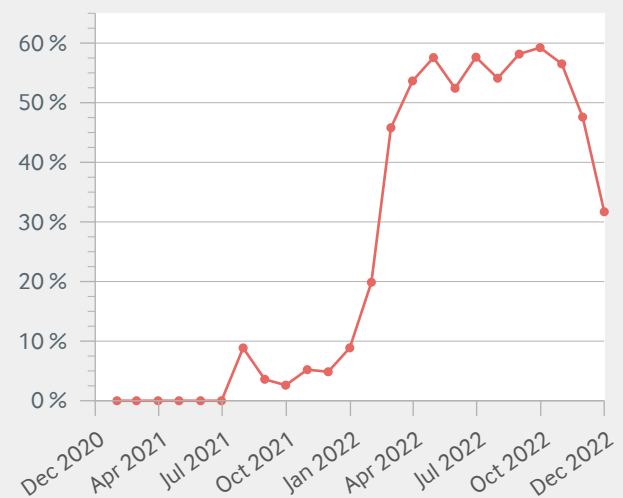
#### 4.5.1 Gettr

Gettr started in July 2021 as a microblogging service similar to X/Twitter at the time. Upon its launch, the platform described its mission statement as “fighting cancel culture, promoting common sense, defending free speech, challenging social media monopolies” and portrayed itself as a free speech platform looking to foster a “true marketplace of ideas”.<sup>238</sup> Founded by Donald Trump’s former communication advisor Jason Miller, the platform is now run by CEO Ken Huang. It mainly attracts conservative and far-right users.<sup>239</sup> Among other alternative microblogging platforms seemingly modelled after X/Twitter such as Gab, Parler and Truth Social (launched by Donald Trump in 2022), Gettr competes in a crowded market. Since its launch, the platform failed to offer easy X/Twitter synchronization as initially promised to users and has been criticised for displaying the number of X/Twitter followers in addition to their Gettr followers, rather than showing just the number of actual followers on Gettr.<sup>240</sup> Following Twitter’s acquisition by Elon Musk and subsequent laxer moderation practices on X/Twitter, Gettr now faces increased competition from the platform it was originally created to replace.

According to Gettr, the platform’s popularity in Germany increased, when prominent users like Boris Reitschuster joined the platform and advertised it on their own websites. Reitschuster, a popular journalist in the anti-lockdown movement, is credited by Gettr with having fostered an influx of users.<sup>241</sup> The platform also reportedly networked with far-right parties<sup>242</sup> and ran ads on alternative news outlets to increase their user base. Other prominent users, such as far-right content creators, lawmakers from the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), or the former head of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Hans-Georg Maaßen, might have helped to further boost the platform’s user numbers.<sup>243</sup>

Despite an overall increase in users, a 2022 ISD analysis of German-language content on Gettr found low organic engagement on the platform.<sup>244</sup> The findings suggest that Gettr is mostly used as a backup platform by users who fear suspension of their X/Twitter accounts and as part of a multi-platform strategy for users who are looking to increase their reach by disseminating their content on a wide variety of platforms.

**Graph 51:** Percentage of Gettr URLs in relation to social media platform URLs other than Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram/Telegra.ph aggregated.



Since going public in June 2021, links to Gettr initially started at 8.86% of other social media platform links<sup>245</sup> in July 2021, sharply rose to 57.57% in April 2022 and remained relatively high until October 2022 (56.52%). Following a slight drop in November 2022 (47.59%), the share of Gettr links fell to 31.70% in December 2022. Despite this drop, Gettr was still the most widely shared non-monitored social media platform in December 2022.

In total, 255 of the surveyed channels published 25,391 links to Gettr posts and profiles, including accounts that belong to the Querdenken (*Lateral Thinkers*) movement, alternative media outlets, far-right extremists and 95 AfD-related accounts. However, only 0.04% of shared Gettr URLs can be attributed to AfD channels, whereas 20% of Gettr links in this dataset were shared by an online platform that is part of the “Reichsbürger” movement.<sup>246</sup> Their X/Twitter account also pinned a post published on 13 February 2022, advertising their Gettr profile and inviting users to “switch to Gettr” with them. Another 14% of Gettr links were shared by a Telegram channel belonging to prominent Swiss user Ignaz Bearth,<sup>247</sup> who shared multiple Gettr links per day linking to his own profile or posts on the platform. Bearth has previously campaigned for multiple far-right parties (PNOS and

Jobbik) and was also speaker for PEGIDA Schweiz and involved with Identitäre Bewegung.<sup>248</sup> Further, a total of 12% of Gettr URLs were shared by Epoch Times' Facebook and Telegram channels, as Epoch Times have posted a message linking to their Gettr profile daily since the profile's launch on 28 December 2021. Gettr was also the most popular alternative social media platform among alternative and far-right media channels, who mostly linked to their own Gettr profiles and posts. In fact, self-promotion appeared to be the main reason for sharing Gettr links, not only for the three accounts that shared 46% of Gettr links, but also for other channels, as at least 66% of Gettr URLs linked to a user profile mostly associated with the account who shared the URL.

#### 4.5.2 Odysee

Odysee is a video platform that enables users to monetise interactions on the platform through an integrated blockchain protocol (LBRY). The LBRY protocol, a decentralised filesharing network that incorporates blockchain and BitTorrent technologies, belongs to the company LBRY, which initially established Odysee before the platform became an independent company. Currently, Odysee is still connected to LBRY through the protocol but has its own CEO and company structure. After losing a lawsuit with the US Securities and

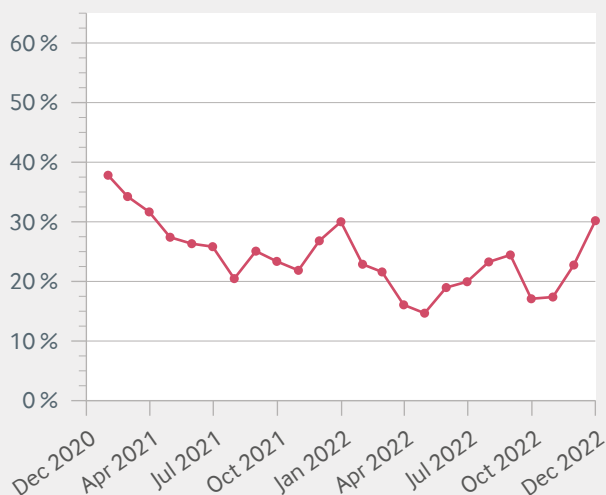
Exchange Commission (SEC), LBRY is reportedly planning to wind down business operations by the end of 2023.<sup>249</sup> At the time of writing of this study, the implications of this are not yet clear for Odysee.

Although Odysee can be used to share different kinds of data, including PDFs, audio and image files, the platform is predominantly used for distributing and watching video content and has marketed itself as an alternative to YouTube, offering a YouTube sync option that "automatically mirror[s] all past and future content".<sup>250</sup> Odysee is not inherently a far-right platform, yet it hosts many far-right creators who are drawn to it due to its lax moderation practices, which can be traced to the libertarian conviction of LBRY's CEO and Odysee founder Jeremy Kauffmann.<sup>251</sup> Furthermore, Odysee's integrated monetisation affordances make the platform attractive as a source of revenue, especially for users who have been deplatformed from larger social media sites. A 2022 ISD analysis found that content denying the Holocaust and videos of the 2022 Buffalo New York terror attack were easily accessible on the platform.<sup>252</sup>

Starting at 37.81% in January 2021, Odysee's share of non-monitored platform links decreased to a low of 14.67% in April 2022, but increased to 30.19% in December 2022, a clear upward trend from 17.38% in October 2022. Among the German-language far right, Odysee is one of the most popular YouTube alternatives, especially for content creators who have been banned. A total of 224 distinct accounts posted 20,766 links to the video-sharing platform, including at least 47 AfD channels. Among the accounts considered far-right extremist, Odysee was the most popular platform in this dataset, followed by Gettr and BitChute. Unlike Gettr, where a large share of links were attributed to just three accounts, the share of Odysee URLs was widely distributed among the accounts who shared Odysee links. This further indicates a wide adoption of the platform among the far-right user base.

The largest share of Odysee links at 8% was published by a far-right conspiracist Telegram channel which covers a wide range of topics including antisemitic conspiracy theories and climate change denial, as well as anti-feminist and xenophobic views. Notably, the channel does not publish its own videos on Odysee and only linked to the platform to share content published by other users from the far-right conspiracist scene. At 6%, a Telegram channel centred around QAnon shared

**Graph 52:** Percentage of Odysee URLs in relation to social media platform URLs other than Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram/Telegra.ph aggregated.



the second largest number of Odysee links. Among a wide range of conspiracy theories, the channel also publishes anti-lockdown rhetoric, COVID-related and climate denialist content. A further 6% of total Odysee URLs were shared by a Telegram channel from the Reichsbürger spectrum, 54% of which were apparently self-promotion. Notably, the corresponding X/Twitter channel posted 20% of the Gettr links in this dataset, which could indicate either internal discrepancies or a multi-platform strategy. The corresponding Telegram channel has since been banned or deleted.

#### 4.5.3 DLive

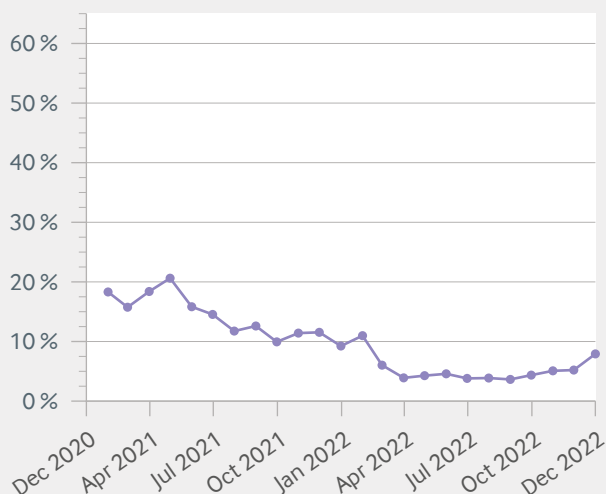
DLive is a video livestreaming platform offering very similar functionalities to the popular livestreaming platform Twitch.<sup>253</sup> The platform was founded in 2017 and utilises blockchain technologies for its servers and donation systems, offering monetary incentives for its use.<sup>254</sup> In addition, viewers can financially support live streamers with subscriptions and donations. The platform's lax moderation practices have increasingly drawn far-right extremists and conspiracy theorists to DLive, especially those whose content was removed from larger platforms.<sup>255</sup> According to a report in TIME magazine, in 2020, eight out of the top ten earners on DLive were far-right extremists or conspiracy theorists.<sup>256</sup>

According to calculations by the Southern Poverty Law Center, a US civil rights group that also reports on extremist activity, DLive has paid out hundreds of thousands of dollars to far-right streamers through their donation functionality.<sup>257</sup> For example, on 6 January 2021, Donald Trump supporters live streamed their storming of the US Congress on DLive and monetised footage of the attack through the platform.<sup>258</sup> In the aftermath of 6 January, members of the House of Representatives demanded an explanation from DLive on how the platform moderated content and prevented extremist actors from raising money through the donation feature. The company reported that it had deleted 100 streams and removed or limited 10 channels in connection with the attack on the US Congress.<sup>259</sup> However, a report by ISD and the Global Disinformation Index on funding for far-right groups in the US found a discrepancy between the platform's terms of use and its actual enforcement. Researchers identified three racist groups that were active and fundraising on DLive.<sup>260</sup> Other research by ISD found that DLive was used by far-right extremists as part of their multi-platform strategy and that moderation efforts by the platform seemed to have impacted extremist activity there.<sup>261</sup>

Over the course of the period studied in this dataset, DLive's popularity has steadily declined from a percentage of 18.31% in relation to all non-monitored social media platform URLs in January 2021 to 3.64% in August 2022, but has since increased slightly to 7.92% in December 2022. A total of 141 distinct accounts published 8,169 DLive links, including AfD accounts and alternative media channels, as well as extremist channels. The platform was especially popular among channels belonging to the Querdenken movement, as DLive URLs were shared by the highest number of Querdenken and anti-lockdown channels compared to other platforms.

Three actors published 48% of DLive URLs in the dataset. The self-defined "alternative media" site Digitaler Chronist published a combined 19% of DLive links on their Telegram channel and X/Twitter account, 94% of which were links to their own videos on DLive. Ignaz Bearth<sup>262</sup> published 18% of DLive URLs, almost exclusively linking to his own DLive profile (93%). A further 12% of DLive URLs were published by a self-defined Querdenken-Attorney ("Querdenkeranwalt") Telegram Channel, 78% of which linked to a conspiracist

**Graph 53:** Percentage of DLive URLs in relation to social media platform URLs other than Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram/Telegra.ph aggregated.





and anti-lockdown channel that regularly publishes live-streaming shows on DLive.

#### 4.5.4 Rumble

Rumble is a video sharing platform that offers similar functionalities as YouTube. The platform, which was founded in Canada in 2013, claims ideological neutrality. However, it also brands itself as a “Free Speech Alternative” to larger video hosting sites and Big Tech companies.<sup>263</sup> The platform also claims to be “immune to cancel culture”,<sup>264</sup> using rhetoric that appeals to a conservative and right-libertarian audience. The platform initially hosted mostly entertainment videos without clear political messages but has since changed to reflect mostly far-right and conservative political views, in part due to an influx of Donald Trump supporters and other users who were banned from platforms such as YouTube for spreading misinformation about COVID-19 in 2020.<sup>265</sup> Examples of content hosted on Rumble include conspiracy content connected to the QAnon conspiracy theory; election denialism; or conspiracy theories surrounding the World Economic Forum (WEF) initiative “Great Reset”.<sup>266</sup>

Since the platform’s launch, Rumble has built out its own cloud infrastructure and also hosts the website

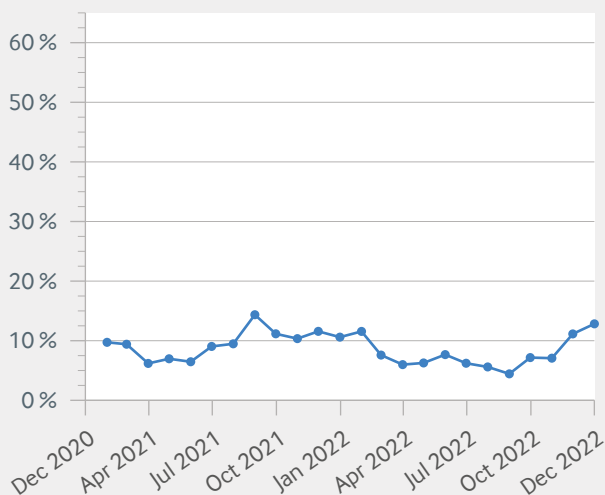
and mobile app of Donald Trump’s microblogging service “Truth Social”.<sup>267</sup> Rumble received investments from high-profile conservative investors like Peter Thiel and David Sacks and went public on the NASDAQ stock exchange via a Special Purpose Acquisition Company (SPAC). According to a Pew Center survey from December 2022, 20% of US adults have heard of the platform. However, only 2% regularly receive news from Rumble.<sup>268</sup> The popularity of the platform could increase in the future, as it was chosen as the video platform to exclusively livestream the first two debates of the republican candidates for the 2024 presidential election alongside TV channel Fox News.<sup>269</sup> In 2023, Rumble lost ad revenue due to its continued support for comedian and video creator Russell Brand who faced multiple allegations of sexual assault and rape.<sup>270</sup>

The share of Rumble URLs in relation to the total number of shared alternative social media URLs fluctuated heavily, starting at 9.73% in January 2021, peaking at 14.36% in August 2021 and overall increasing to 12.83% in December 2022. A total of 145 accounts shared 7,356 Rumble links. The platform was not particularly popular among either of the different ideological leanings studied. 21% of Rumble links were published by “alternative media” site Digitaler Chronist, who exclusively shared their own corresponding Rumble channel. A further 20% of Rumble links were published by two QAnon-centred Telegram channels, who shared a variety of far-right and conspiracist videos, many of which were English-language and centred around US-Politics.

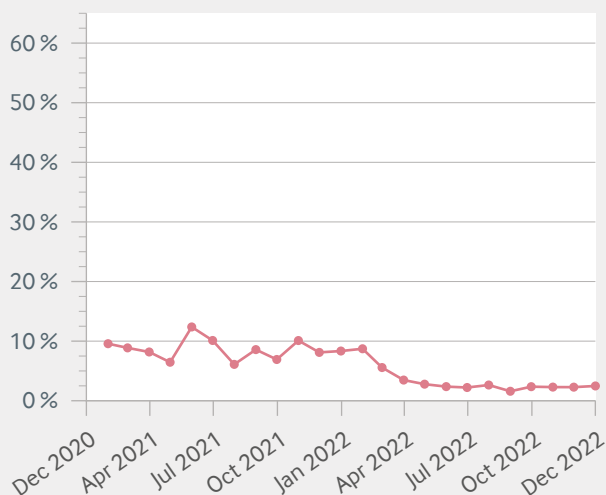
#### 4.5.5 BitChute

Launched in 2017, BitChute was one of the first peer-to-peer video sharing platforms intended to serve as a low moderation alternative to YouTube.<sup>271</sup> Like other alt-tech platforms, BitChute was quick to attract conspiracists who, as was found in a 2020 ISD study, “often elaborated in lengthy videos, alleging that evil hidden actors were conspiring against what the far right perceives to be the interests of their in-group”, often including “antisemitism, [...] revisionist interpretations of Germany’s history, Holocaust denial and open support for fascism”.<sup>272</sup> Unlike other early alt-tech platforms such as Voat and Minds, BitChute is still running, however its status as the “main alternative to YouTube”<sup>273</sup> has since been challenged by other alternative video platforms such as Rumble, DLive and Odysee.

**Graph 54:** Percentage of Rumble URLs in relation to social media platform URLs other than Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram/Telegra.ph aggregated.



**Graph 55:** Percentage of BitChute URLs in relation to social media platform URLs other than Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram/Telegra.ph aggregated.



Over the period studied in this dataset, the share of BitChute links among alternative social media links declined from a peak of 12.38% in May 2021 to a low of 1.59% in August 2022. Since then, the share of BitChute links has slightly increased to 2.48% but overall remained low. A total of 170 distinct accounts shared 5,019 BitChute links and ranked one of the most popular platforms among the Querdenken movement and the non-AfD far right based on the number of distinct accounts posting. The three accounts which were most prolific in sharing BitChute links were all also prolific in sharing links of other alternative video sharing platforms such as Odysee, DLive and Rumble. Together, the three accounts shared 64% fewer BitChute URLs in 2022 compared to 2021, which partly explains the overall drop in BitChute URLs. One of the channels frequently linking to the platform, has overall decreased its posting activity. Furthermore, BitChute according to data presented by the company itself had 15.8% fewer unique visitors in 2022 than in the year before<sup>274</sup>, thus, such a decline in inbound links would correspond with a general trend among users.

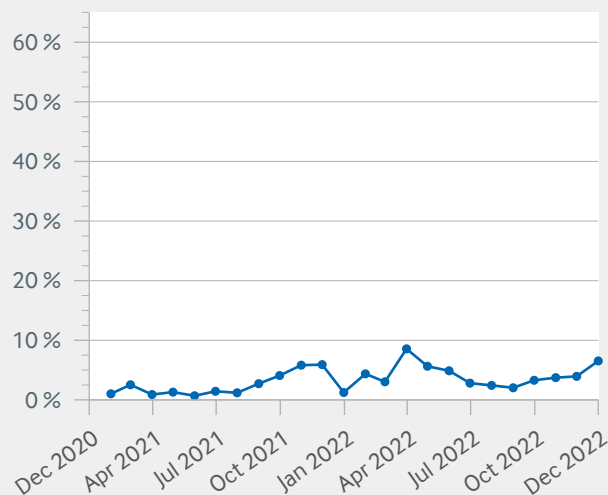
#### 4.5.6 VK

VK (formerly VKontakte) is a Russian social network that was founded in 2006 by the Durov brothers, Pavel and

Nikolai, who later also founded Telegram. The platform offers functionalities similar to Facebook and was opposed to content moderation early on. In 2011, the organisation of rallies against the Russian government by oppositional groups led to the Russian intelligence service FSB demanding VK to delete their profiles, which then-CEO Pavel Durov refused.<sup>275</sup> In 2014, the Durovs sold VK shares to companies with close ties to the Kremlin and Pavel Durov resigned as CEO. Allegedly, this conflict with the authorities spawned the idea for Telegram as an encrypted messenger service that could not be interfered with by governments.

While VK has been accused of supporting the Russian government's censorship<sup>276</sup> and persecution<sup>277</sup> efforts, the platform does not seem to moderate most far-right content and is therefore popular with the international far right.<sup>278</sup> In addition to its reputation as an unmoderated space, the fact that VK is a Russian platform might contribute to its popularity among the German far right, as in many far-right worldviews, the West is seen as uprooted, decadent and effeminate, whereas Russia is seen as the patriotic, masculine and traditionalist counterpart and is thus venerated.<sup>279</sup> In addition, some far-right parties and groups across Europe are pro-Russian and have established contacts with the Russian government.<sup>280</sup>

**Graph 56:** Percentage of VK URLs in relation to social media platform URLs other than Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram/Telegra.ph aggregated.



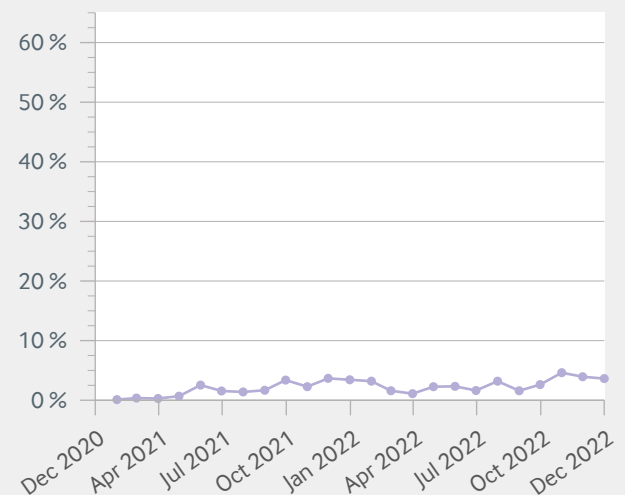
A total of 123 accounts published 3,021 VK URLs over the course of the study period, mostly consisting of alternative media; accounts belonging to the Querdenken movement; and far-right extremist channels. Overall, the share of VK links of the total number of alternative social media links shared has increased from 1.02% in January 2021 to 6.53% in December 2022. In between, the share of VK links fluctuated heavily, with a peak at 8.56% in March 2022 due to a QAnon channel sharing RT articles on VK following the EU's RT/Russia Today and Sputnik ban.<sup>281</sup> Posts shared by this channel make up a total of 11% of VK URLs shared, 48% of which were published in March 2022. Just four actors shared 58% of all VK URLs in the dataset studied. Digitaler Chronist shared 28% of VK links via their corresponding X and Telegram channels, 99% of which linked to their VK profile. A further 10% were shared by Ignaz Bearth<sup>282</sup> on Telegram, 96% of which linked to his own VK profile. Another 9% of VK URLs found in the dataset were shared by a Telegram channel grown out of the German-language anti-lockdown movement, which covers a wide range of content including anti-vax, "free speech", climate denialist and racist rhetoric. A total of 95% of VK links shared by this Telegram channel served to share RT DE content.

#### 4.5.7 TikTok

TikTok is a short-form video platform founded by ByteDance.<sup>283</sup> The Chinese company also owns Douyin, an app largely similar to TikTok which was launched in 2016 for the Chinese domestic market.<sup>284</sup> TikTok merged with Musical.ly, a lip-sync video social media service, and was made available for the global market except for mainland China in 2018.<sup>285</sup> The app was designed as a mobile-first platform and was widely adopted among social media users.<sup>286</sup> As of January 2023, TikTok is estimated to have over one billion users,<sup>287</sup> including approximately 19 million monthly users in Germany in early 2023.<sup>288</sup>

TikTok enables users to post and edit up to 10-minute-long videos with background music and visual effects. Among other entertainment categories, popular content posted on TikTok includes dance routines, pranks, fitness, home renovation and DIY videos, beauty, and skincare tips, as well as recipes.<sup>289</sup> Several viral

**Graph 57:** Percentage of TikTok URLs in relation to social media platform URLs other than Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram/Telegra.ph aggregated.



trends were launched from TikTok which led to other social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube adding functionalities for the upload of smaller videoclips produced with mobile phones similar to the functionalities offered by TikTok.<sup>290</sup>

Content on the platform is often specifically aimed at younger users and the app is particularly popular among this demographic.<sup>291</sup> Actors in the far-right milieu use TikTok to spread propaganda through short statements or stylised clips, e.g. praising far-right groups or individuals. For this, they sometimes use the "stitch" or "duet" functions of the platform that allow users to merge their own video content with other users' content, thereby enabling them to profit off the success of content produced by other creators to spread their own messages further.<sup>292</sup> Research conducted by ISD evidenced far-right extremist hate content on the platform<sup>293</sup>, as well as material praising far-right terrorists<sup>294</sup> and propaganda material for the terrorist group Islamic State (IS).<sup>295</sup> TikTok is also used by Russian state media outlets.<sup>296</sup> The platform has been criticised for its failure to remove hateful and climate change denial content.<sup>297</sup> Further, the platform is considered controversial based on fears regarding data protection and the potential influence of Chinese state actors.<sup>298</sup>

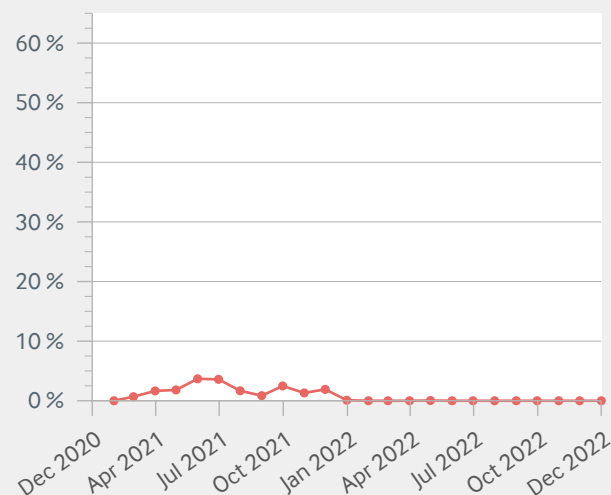
The share of TikTok URLs fluctuated over the course of the studied period but has increased overall, from 0.1% in January 2021 to 3.63% in December 2022. A total of 222 accounts shared 1,877 TikTok URLs, 112 of which were AfD accounts, which, in terms of distinct channels posting, makes TikTok the most popular platform among surveyed AfD accounts. This is in line with previous reports finding that TikTok plays a key role in AfD's online strategy and according to which the AfD is the most "successful" German party on TikTok.<sup>299</sup> AfD Munich's Facebook presence and the party's Baden-Württemberg state parliament group Facebook account AfD Fraktion BW accounted for 5% and 3% of total TikTok URLs respectively. In total, all 112 AfD accounts surveyed published 30% of TikTok URLs in the dataset. 17% of TikTok links shared were published by a QAnon Telegram channel linking to a broad spectrum of TikTok content from holistic health and motivational messages to conspiracist and racist content.

#### 4.5.8 Youmaker

Youmaker is another video platform with similar functions to YouTube. Based on qualitative impressions, the platform hosts political videos from conservative and far-right creators, such as former Trump advisor Steve Bannon and his "War Room" channel or the John Birch Society. Youmaker also hosts videos ranging from health tips to movies and music videos. At the time of observation, the most watched videos appeared to be far-right political commentary.

It remains unclear which entity or person(s) run or own Youmaker. The platform hosts content from the Epoch Times, a media outlet aligned with the Falun Gong spiritual movement which is widely considered to share far-right content.<sup>300</sup> According to the New York Times, Youmaker also disclosed a video partnership with the Epoch Media Group.<sup>301</sup> The Epoch Times also claimed that Youmaker was an independent business partner.<sup>302</sup> In contrast, the Epoch Media Groups LinkedIn page lists Youmaker as one of the company's products and describes Youmaker as "one of the first Chinese video-sharing and video library websites" which "has now expanded to be one of the premier Chinese video and audio sharing portals in the Asia-Pacific region".<sup>303</sup> Globally, the Epoch Times reports critically about the

**Graph 58:** Percentage of Youmaker URLs in relation to social media platform URLs other than Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram/Telegra.ph aggregated.



Chinese government and Chinese human rights abuses. Regarding US politics, the outlet supports former president Donald Trump and embraced the QAnon conspiracy theory.<sup>304</sup>

In the German context, the Epoch Times largely discusses refugees and migration, as well as the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and has consequently become popular in milieus close to the AfD.<sup>305</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Epoch Times focussed their reporting on topics related to the pandemic, often publishing anti-vaccine content. The outlet was ranked first in a 2023 NewsGuard ranking of untrustworthy websites because it spread falsehoods about COVID-19.<sup>306</sup> The newest German-language videos on Youmaker are mostly published by channels belonging to the Epoch Times Media Group, such as Epoch Times Deutsch and Epoch Radar.

The share of Youmaker links (668 in total) among non-monitored platform URLs fluctuated throughout 2021, with an initial increase from 0% in January 2021 to a peak of 3.68% in May 2021 and drop back to 0.09% in December 2021. From May 2022 to December 2022 no Youmaker links were shared. A total 95% of Youmaker links shared over the studied period were published

by the German-language Epoch Times channels on Facebook and Telegram. According to their Telegram channel, Epoch Times Deutsch launched their Gettr account on 28 December 2021, which correlates both with the stark decrease of Youmaker URLs shared and the significant increase of Gettr URLs shared.

#### 4.5.9 Spotify

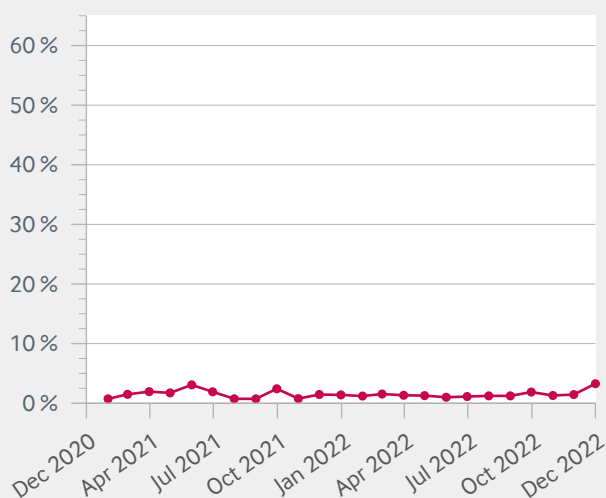
Spotify is an audio-streaming service founded by Daniel Ek and Martin Lorentzon in Sweden. The platform is widely considered the world's largest music streaming service, its biggest competitors being Apple Music and Amazon Music.<sup>307</sup> In recent years, audio-streaming services have become increasingly relevant for the far right. In 2021, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) published an in-depth analysis on the English-language far-right podcast eco-system, revealing "a network of over 800 hosts and guests who collaborated more than 4,000 times to record their hopes and plans for creating a white ethno-state, for promoting racist memes, for harassing racial, ethnic and religious minorities, and so on", distributed for free on platforms such as "Google, Apple, Spotify, Stitcher, Libsyn, Soundcloud and Spreaker".<sup>308</sup> In addition, a 2022 Anti-Defamation League

(ADL) report identified 40 white supremacist artists with a presence on Spotify and discovered that the platform's recommender algorithm promoted a "Fashwave Mix" playlist put together by the platform that included multiple white supremacist artists.<sup>309</sup>

The trend towards audio content has also permeated the German-language far right. Multiple actors who are under observation by the German authority for the protection of the constitution (Verfassungsschutz) such as Institut für Staatspolitik, Ein Prozent, Deutsche Stimme or Junge Nationalisten have released podcasts on the platform.<sup>310</sup>

The share of Spotify URLs among non-monitored platform URLs fluctuated over the period studied in the dataset, overall increasing from 0.73% in January 2021 to 3.27% in December 2022. A total of 182 distinct accounts published 1,216 Spotify URLs, with Spotify being the third most popular platform among AfD channels in terms of distinct accounts. Unlike many other non-monitored social media platforms, where a large share of links was attributed to just a few accounts, the share of Spotify URLs was relatively widely distributed among the accounts who shared Spotify links. The largest share of URLs at 12% can be attributed to the AfD's official X/Twitter and Facebook channels promoting their Spotify podcast, where they regularly published xenophobic and climate-denialist content, as well as verbal attacks against the current German administration and in specific Green party politicians. A further 8% of Spotify URLs were attributed to a conspiracist alternative media Telegram channel, 88% of which linked to their own Spotify podcast which discusses German politics and other current issues for those who "feel constricted by the Mainstream". The channel regularly publishes racist messaging, anti-feminist and conspiracist content, COVID-scepticism and climate denialism and hateful messages targeting politicians from the German Green party. A total 5% of Spotify URLs were published by a far-right Telegram channel sharing a range of far-right music and podcasts. Finally, another 5% of Spotify URLs can be attributed to the Telegram channel of Ein Prozent, a campaign considered far-right extremist by the German authority for the protection of the constitution,<sup>311</sup> promoting their podcast "Lagebesprechung".

**Graph 59:** Percentage of Spotify URLs in relation to social media platform URLs other than Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram/Telegra.ph aggregated.



## 4.6 Discussion

The high number of URLs referring back to the source platform they were published on indicates that fairly closed, platform-specific far-right online-ecosystems, in which accounts communicate and interact, exist on each of the source platforms. This finding supports prior ISD research which found that established platforms, alongside Telegram,<sup>312</sup> are still highly relevant for German far-right online subcultures,<sup>313</sup> despite efforts to counter online hate and extremism on large platforms. This indicates that a lot of far-right content is still being exchanged on very large online platforms falling under purview of the DSA, meaning that action regarding illegal content could in theory be more easily taken than in the context of smaller platforms. It is also likely that actors have to some extent adjusted to efforts to increase online safety, relying on codes, dog-whistles and other forms of subversive messaging to effectively circumvent moderation practices and thereby preserve their social media profiles on very large online platforms.

At the same time, most links to non-monitored platforms were shared to promote a given account's alternative social media profile. This can likely be attributed to a general fear of deplatforming among the far-right user base and a resulting multi-platform strategy, according to which actors try to develop profiles across a range of "backup" platforms as well as adapt their posting behaviour to mostly publishing "grey area content" on

very large online platforms and sharing more explicit content on low-moderation alt-tech platforms. In addition, all surveyed accounts belong to public figures, political organisations or media outlets, who have an inherent interest in self-promotion.

Overall, Gettr was the most widely shared non-monitored platform in December 2022, both in terms of distinct accounts sharing Gettr URLs and in terms of absolute number of URLs shared. However, Gettr's popularity among the German-language far right declined significantly in the last quarter of 2022 and it remains to be seen whether Gettr can retain popularity since the change in moderation practices on X/Twitter since the end of 2022.

Barring links to the large platforms discussed above, three out of the five most shared platform alternatives on Facebook and X/Twitter and four out of five on Telegram were video platforms. In total, 15<sup>314</sup> out of the 18 most widely shared alternative-platforms were audiovisual sharing and streaming services, which confirms that video platforms are an important medium for the German-speaking far right, which is consistent both with findings from previous ISD reports and research from other institutions.<sup>315</sup> This also confirms findings according to which video and audio formats, especially short-form videos and podcasts, are

Source Platform	Number of video platforms among the five most shared non-monitored platforms	Number of video or audio platforms among non-monitored platforms shared
Facebook	3/5	14/17
X/Twitter	3/5	11/16
Telegram	4/5	15/18

Table 6: The significance of audiovisual platforms among platform alternatives shared on Facebook, X/Twitter and Telegram.

rising in popularity among social media users across mainstream platforms. In addition to this, sharing video URLs offers multiple benefits for users, as it is easier than re-uploading videos and generates reach for the shared video channels, especially on text-focused platforms such as Telegram. Among all alternative video-sharing platforms, Odysee currently appears to be the most widely adopted service, based on both the number of Odysee URLs shared and the number of distinct accounts sharing Odysee URLs. Odysee is also the second most widely shared non-monitored platform overall.

Notably, some of the platform alternatives studied in this section are widely adopted “mainstream” platforms, such as Twitch, TikTok and Spotify, each of which have large established user bases across the entirety of the political spectrum and therefore offer much larger reach than far-right alternatives, both in terms of numbers, as well as potential “new-joiners”. This is consistent with a general trend wherein far-right movements creatively and innovatively adopt emerging or existing technologies and services in an effort to “hijack” them to further their political agenda.

## 5. Platform and Regulatory Developments and Policy Recommendations

This research project set out to examine the online ecosystem of the German far right in light of Germany's Network Enforcement Act in order to assess the extent to which far-right and conspiracist accounts move away from larger, 'mainstream' to smaller, 'alternative platforms'. To achieve this, research focused on the impact of measures such as content moderation and deplatforming on the online activities and user behaviour of German-language far-right actors. In the three-year period during which the project was conducted, several platform and regulatory developments occurred, with implications for current academic and digital policy debates.

The adoption and implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA) at EU level, which replaces the rules and obligations under the German Network Enforcement Act, signifies an important step forward in platform regulation. Under the DSA, those platforms designated as very large online platforms (VLOPs), i.e. those reaching more than 10 % of 450 million users in the EU, face additional obligations requiring them to prevent abuse of their systems by taking risk-based action.<sup>316</sup> However, many of the designated VLOPs – which include Facebook, Instagram, X/Twitter, and YouTube – have decreased their trust and safety capabilities<sup>317</sup> and limited researcher access to proprietary platform data.<sup>318</sup>

### 5.1 Content Moderation and Risk Management Frameworks

The far-right accounts on Facebook and Instagram examined for this study saw an increase in followers and audience engagement on both platforms during the research period. In addition, the link analysis indicates the existence of a far-right online ecosystem on Facebook, as most URLs shared on the platform link to other Facebook content. This finding is in line with previous research showing that far-right extremists use the platform for monetisation<sup>319</sup> and that far-right groups on the platform have been part of propaganda efforts.<sup>320</sup> Although Facebook deplatformed several far-right actors deemed dangerous in the US<sup>321</sup> and in Germany,<sup>322</sup> research points to significant gaps in the enforcement of Facebook's community guidelines regarding far-right and conspiratorial content, in addition to the moderation of hate speech,<sup>323</sup> COVID-19-related mis- and disinformation,<sup>324</sup> or pro-Kremlin war propaganda.<sup>325</sup>

This study also evidenced a growing significance of audiovisual platforms for far-right activity, with YouTube as a focal point. As previous research by ISD shows, extremist content on audiovisual platforms is disseminated both in the form of comments<sup>326</sup> and videos, which have been promoted by recommendation algorithms. For example, misogynist content,<sup>327</sup> including videos by influencer Andrew Tate,<sup>328</sup> has reached millions of views on YouTube. Monetisation affordances like paid Super Chats comments further allow influencers to capitalise on such hateful and sometimes illegal content.<sup>329</sup> Short-form video platform TikTok has equally been found to host extremist content<sup>330</sup> and disinformation.<sup>331</sup> Often, such content is amplified by TikTok's algorithms and thereby easily accessible for its users.<sup>332</sup> As was also found in this study, far-right influencers<sup>333</sup> as well as far-right parties, including the AfD, use the platform for disseminating political messaging.<sup>334</sup> The early adoption of TikTok by official accounts as well as accounts associated with the AfD bolstered the party's reach on the platform.<sup>335</sup> Audiovisual content poses an additional challenge compared to text-based content in terms of detecting and moderating harmful content. Moderation systems need to be supported by human oversight, including contextual knowledge, to allow for nuanced approaches while also preventing false positives.

Far-right accounts studied on X/Twitter received an increase in both followers and engagement during the research period. A notable increase in followers was detected in the dataset of this study in the last quarter of 2022, correlating with the period in which safety and content moderation practices on the platform changed.<sup>336</sup> In December 2022, X dissolved its trust and safety council, an advisory group of around 100 independent civil, human rights and other organisations that had been formed in 2016 to address hate speech, child exploitation, suicide, self-harm and other problems on the platform.<sup>337</sup> Further, X pulled out of the EU's voluntary 2022 Strengthened Code of Practice against Disinformation,<sup>338</sup> which also serves as a co-regulatory mechanism under the DSA and its risk mitigation obligations.

ISD research documented that the volume of antisemitic tweets more than doubled in the three-month period following Elon Musk's acquisition, with many



newly created accounts posting plausibly antisemitic content.<sup>339</sup> Other research by ISD showed an increase in newly created accounts following misogynist accounts on X.<sup>340</sup> Researchers from other institutions also found an uptick in anti-Black racism and anti-trans posts on X.<sup>341</sup> In addition to significant gaps in content moderation, the platform started re-platforming previously banned far-right extremist users,<sup>342</sup> announcing a “general amnesty”<sup>343</sup> for suspended accounts.<sup>344</sup> X further enabled paid “verified” subscribers to increase the reach of their content via its recommender algorithms, including on the For You feed. As a result, it would seem that content by users who have not purchased a “verified” account is downranked in favour of content posted by paying subscribers. In this context, content such as mis- and disinformation or hateful speech has been promoted and amplified by X’s recommender algorithms.<sup>345</sup>

In April 2023, Germany’s Federal Office of Justice (Bundesamt für Justiz, BfJ) opened fine proceedings against X/Twitter concerning its content moderation practices under the Network Enforcement Act.<sup>346</sup> According to the BfJ, there were sufficient indications of systemic failure to comply with content moderation requirements and the obligation to provide an effective and transparent procedure for dealing with complaints from users about illegal content. The case is built on a series of tweets published over a period of four months that contained defamatory statements directed to the same person and which were reported to the platform by users. In view of a recent ruling by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), which affirmed the ‘country of origin principle’ asserting that member states may not subject “providers of information society services” established in another member state to “general and abstract” obligations under national law,<sup>347</sup> the Network Enforcement Act no longer provides a legal basis for such fine proceedings. The German Ministry of Justice confirmed that the BfJ will close these proceedings accordingly. Since August 2023, with the partial application of the DSA, the European Commission holds the competence to supervise and enforce new content moderation rules applicable for VLOPs. Notably, following the Hamas terrorist attack on 7 October 2023, the Commission has employed its investigatory tools, which include issuing a request

for information, to ask Meta, TikTok and X/Twitter about their measures to remove illegal content such as terrorist content, as well as content prohibited by their community guidelines such as antisemitic and anti-Muslim hate speech.<sup>348</sup> Based on this preliminary investigation, on 18 December 2023, the Commission opened formal proceedings to assess whether X/Twitter may have breached the DSA in areas linked to countering the dissemination of illegal content in the EU, notably in relation to the risk assessment and mitigation; the effectiveness of measures taken to combat information manipulation on the platform; the measures to increase transparency; and suspected deceptive design of the user interface.<sup>349</sup>

The observed permissiveness of the current online environment demonstrates the need to implement the safety and accountability rules applicable for online platforms under the DSA. In this context, platforms should implement the following recommendations:

### Content moderation

- Platforms should establish clear and user-friendly notice and actions mechanisms, so users can notify the platforms of illegal content.
- The restriction of illegal content or content incompatible with their terms and conditions may include but are not limited to the removal of content, disabling access to content, or demoting content.<sup>350</sup>
- Content moderation processes should include the unambiguous formulation of community guidelines, clear and specific statement of reasons for any removal measures, internal complaint-handling systems, and redress possibilities to protect users’ fundamental rights.<sup>351</sup>
- The formulation and enforcement of community guidelines should account for veiled and coded hate speech content, including contextual image-based content, as well as the multilingual, cross-cultural contexts of online spaces.
- For example, platforms could develop lexicons of words and phrases in cooperation with local organisations. Such efforts should be trauma-informed.

### Victim-survivor-centred Safety and Privacy by Design approach

- User tools and improved user agency can provide immediate relief and support for users who are targeted by hate speech and disinformation (for example, as this study shows, health officials and politicians, as well as individuals belonging to marginalised groups are often targeted across platforms). Platforms should adopt proactive measures that support users with tools that protect their privacy and reduce exposure to hateful attacks.
- Platforms should also adopt reactive measures that allow efficient as well as bulk reporting (where possible this should happen across platforms, as this research notes cross-platform behaviour). Furthermore, accountability measures should deter and sanction accounts that violate community guidelines appropriately.
- Institutions that flag and report hate speech and provide counselling for victims of hate speech should receive additional support, including through secure and long-term funding.

### 5.2 Researcher Access to Platform Data

The systematic analysis of the spread of far-right content, behaviour and networks of extremist actors across platforms requires meaningful access to platform data, including through respective APIs.

However, limitations to researchers' data access on many platforms remain significant. For example, Meta restricted researcher access to the CrowdTangle API<sup>352</sup> and disbanded the CrowdTangle team within Meta in 2021, with dozens of employees either resigning or being given new assignments in other parts of the company.<sup>353</sup> In January 2022, CrowdTangle stopped accepting new user applicants, citing "staffing constraints" that have not been addressed since. Instead, Meta increasingly focused on selective disclosures, for example, publishing the "Widely Viewed Content" report every quarter that shares data on views and viewers of content in the Feed in the US,<sup>354</sup> relying on the "reach" metric, which cannot be scrutinised by external researchers.

In compliance with DSA obligations, Meta announced in November 2023 that "individuals from qualified institutions pursuing scientific or public interest research topics" will be able to apply for access to the new Meta Content Library and Content Library API, which provide "comprehensive access to the full public content archive from Facebook and Instagram".<sup>355</sup> According to Meta, researchers can apply for access to these tools with the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan. Further, "details about the content, such as the number of reactions, shares, comments and, for the first time, post view counts are also available" and researchers will be able to "search, explore and filter that content on both a graphical user interface or through a programmatic API".<sup>356</sup> It is promising that image-based content including photos, videos and reels can be explored through the filtering options. The provision of additional metrics, i.e. the number of times a post or reel was displayed on screen, also allows more thorough analysis of audience engagement with content. However, these new access tools do not enable the analysis of comments as well as closed groups, thereby limiting research into these spaces.

TikTok released an initial version of its Research API to academic researchers in the US free of charge in early 2023. The API was opened up to researchers in Europe in July 2023<sup>357</sup> and updated in November 2023.<sup>358</sup> It provides data about both content (videos and comments) and accounts (public details of a public user who is aged 18).<sup>359</sup> However, it is currently only available for researchers from non-profit universities in the US and Europe, excluding civil society organisations. In addition, researchers at Stiftung Neue Verantwortung (SNV) noted that the provided data is very limited compared to what data is publicly available via scraping.<sup>360</sup>

YouTube's API only allows owners of videos to download transcripts of their content. This presents a significant barrier to research, as analysing video content without transcripts is more time consuming. In addition, YouTube does not provide guidance on how to reliably collect all videos from a given channel.

On X, researchers are increasingly confronted with barriers given that the company has begun charging for access to the previously free API, causing many research projects to stop.<sup>361</sup> At the time of writing, research into extremist use of the platform has become prohibitively expensive. Impeding researcher access to the platform's API inhibits systematic research and quantitative analysis. In light of its DSA obligations, X recently introduced a new possibility for researchers to apply for access on its developer platform. X's web form for applicants requires researchers to affirm they meet the DSA's criteria for data access (outlined in Article 40), including organisational affiliation, information about their funding, and evidence they are independent from commercial interests.<sup>362</sup>

The systematic collection of publicly available data via access to APIs can help complement digital ethnographic (and other) research methods, by filling in data gaps for the purpose of public interest research. This paper thereby recommends the following:

#### Improved API access

- Platforms should enable access to continuous, real-time or near real-time, and searchable APIs to allow vetted researchers to study the evolving tactics and forms of far-right activities. Though Article 40.12 of DSA obliges VLOPs to provide access to "data, including, where technically possible, to real-time data, provided that the data is publicly accessible in their online interface by researchers", such access is currently restricted to research linked to the "identification and understanding of systemic risks in the European Union". However, it is important for researchers to conduct research on a global scale and across geographies, as demonstrated by the transnationalisation of the far right observed in this study.
- The data access obligations of the DSA apply only to VLOPs, but given the significance of smaller platforms highlighted in this study, should be extended to include non-VLOPs as well. Moreover, though academic affiliation can serve as a gatekeeping function, vetting procedures should allow for non-academic researchers to be eligible for data access.

#### Transparent and clear vetting procedures

- Platforms should provide comprehensive public documentation about legitimate use-cases and research requirements to access API endpoints. It should be clearly stated what access researchers can obtain from the API, and what types of use-cases are legitimate. Regulators and researchers should further scrutinise the reasons why companies impose certain limits on historical searches or caps on data volume. Regulators may ask companies for clarification on these limiting measures and, where appropriate, challenge them if they interfere with public interest research.<sup>363</sup>

#### 5.3 Telegram

Telegram has become both a platform for everyday users and for far-right extremists. Research in this study has shown that a far-right online ecosystem has established itself on the platform, demonstrated by the many internal links found in the dataset (see section 4 of this study). The material analysed in the content analysis section of this study highlights how far-right extremist content, including hate speech, remain accessible on Telegram and that the platform is a key forum for members of the far-right to share content which has the potential to radicalise others and coordinate offline activity. Further, far-right disinformation is disseminated beyond the boundaries of the far-right milieu on Telegram and across platforms via URLs linking to other platforms, especially video and livestreaming websites (see section 2 in this report). Further, the analysis indicates an impact of the blocking of large channels in reducing views, since as noted in section 3 of this study a downward trend in overall views on Telegram was found to occur partly due to the banning of these channels. The measurable impact of content moderation on Telegram in the dataset of this study shows that the enforcement of regulatory obligations should help address the significant gaps in content moderation.

Regarding far-right content on Telegram, this paper recommends the following:

- **Review and update Terms and Conditions:** As of the time of writing, Telegram’s terms of service merely prohibit the promotion of violence and illegal pornographic content on publicly viewable channels.<sup>364</sup> It has no policies addressing hate speech, posing a significant gap in the formulation of its content moderation rules. At a minimum, Telegram should expand its community guidelines to protect users against hate speech, accounting for users’ protected characteristics such as (but not limited to) gender, race, indigeneity, religion, sexual identity, class, or disability.
- **Designate Telegram as a VLOP:** The European Commission should assess whether Telegram is to be designated as a VLOP under the DSA. Since Telegram introduced channels and groups, which enable making content available to the public, it has grown to an estimated 700 million users worldwide.<sup>365</sup> Given the growth and importance of Telegram in the far-right online ecosystem, the European Commission should inquire after further information about Telegram’s user numbers in the EU to re-assess a designation. Telegram has so far reported a lower level of EU users than the VLOP threshold (reporting approximately 33 million users in the EU).<sup>366</sup> A change in designation would expand the risk management and transparency reporting obligations applicable to Telegram, for example, specifying the qualifications and linguistic expertise of content moderators.
- **Leverage expertise of NetzDG enforcement:** The European Commission and Germany’s independent oversight body (which will be part of a network of prospective Digital Services Coordinators under the DSA) should leverage valuable existing experience of the Federal Office for Justice as it previously conducted oversight of Telegram and its compliance with the NetzDG. Notably, the case of Telegram in Germany demonstrates the challenge of enforcing the obligation for regulated providers to name a legal representative in the respective jurisdiction. The European Commission previously noted that the DSA will apply to Telegram by 17 February 2024 when the regulation applies in its entirety, including the obligation to designate a legal representative in one of the member states where the provider offers its services.<sup>367</sup>

## 5.4 Alt-Tech Platforms

This study recorded a significant increase in following on X since October 2022. This finding emphasises that mainstream platforms such as X are still significant to far-right and conspiracist actors, especially when they scale back content moderation efforts. X, designated as a VLOP under the DSA, increasingly functions as an equivalent to smaller alt-tech sites like Gettr or Gab in terms of constituting a safe haven for enabling far-right content to be shared.

A more permissive environment for extremist content on mainstream platforms appears to create competition for those alt-tech platforms that emerged as a consequence of de-platforming activities. Accordingly, the findings of this study suggest that the “free speech” approach more recently prioritised on X has had influence on the alt-tech landscape, given for example the decrease in links to the microblogging service Gettr towards the end of 2022. This indicates that a decrease in content moderation makes a platform more attractive to far-right actors who publish content that would previously have been prohibited by the community guidelines. Consequently, a roll-back of enforcement measures allows far-right actors to reach wider audiences, including the dissemination of targeted hate against persons or groups based on their identity, and in some cases continued monetisation of their accounts.

It is, however, important to note that alt-tech platforms serve functions regardless of developments on mainstream platforms. The affordances of these platforms create a specific form of community among their users and fulfil their own purpose within users’ ideological development.<sup>368</sup> Alt-tech platforms also enjoy higher levels of trust among far-right actors, as has been observed in the context of Telegram in the content analysis section of this study. In the discussions of social media, Telegram was portrayed comparatively favourably to other platforms, with users often referencing the platform’s alleged anti-censorship stance. Actors on the far right will continue to seek out online spaces that enable the spread of extreme and illegal content and will accept trade-offs regarding their reach to do so.

The most shared alt-tech video platform in this study's dataset was Odysee, with over 20,000 URLs that were shared in increasingly high volumes towards the end of the research period. This indicates an increased interest in the platform by far-right actors observed by researchers.<sup>369</sup> The platform is currently faced with infrastructure problems as the organisation behind Odysee's integrated cryptocurrency LBC (LBRY) will be winding down operations at the end of 2023.<sup>370</sup> This affects the architecture of the site, including the on-site payment system. Whether the changes in the on-site payment systems of Odysee<sup>371</sup> will impede its rising popularity among the far right remains to be seen and depends on factors such as whether LBC will be replaced by a different currency based on blockchain technology, and whether the changes will uphold the security from censorship the technology

allegedly affords. For the time being, Odysee and other video platforms seem to be increasing in popularity.

Under the DSA, online platforms that do not meet the threshold of 45 million users in the EU are obliged, among other provisions, to designate a single point of contact for communicating with regulators and users respectively; to designate a legal representative in one of the member states; and to provide clear, easily comprehensible reports on any content moderation that they engaged in during the reporting period. Online platforms are also required to establish notice and action mechanisms for users to notify them of illegal content.<sup>372</sup> It remains to be seen to what extent alt-tech platforms, which offer their services in the EU, will comply with these obligations.

## 6. Outlook

A leading assumption at the beginning of this research project was that regulatory pressures brought by the Network Enforcement Act would lead to far-right actors abandoning established platforms for smaller alt-tech social media. This project identified both the relevant alt-tech platforms and the evasion strategies and dynamics of far-right users. It was observed that some alt-tech platforms have established themselves beyond the fringe and are now reaching the political mainstream. At the same time, a persistent, continued use of established platforms by far-right actors was also observed.

However, due to platforms that were initially considered alt-tech adopting stricter online safety practices to gain legitimacy and generate ad revenue, as well as established platforms rolling back regulation and moderation, the distinction between these groups has blurred. Notably, groups or individuals who avoided large platforms due to regulation are seemingly quick to come back once the 'mainstream' platform environment becomes suitable for them again. Whereas this could result in shrinking the alt-tech landscape, a more permissive climate for hate speech on established platforms, combined with diminished researcher access and a decrease in resources for organisations countering

hate speech online, can greatly increase the reach of hateful and extreme content.

The widespread use of VLOPs by far-right actors found in this study demonstrates the necessity to continue research into the social media services and the far-right online milieu active on them. Researching VLOPs, especially audiovisual platforms, requires overcoming the technical burdens connected to analysing these platforms and navigating research into VLOPs that try to avoid scrutiny by academia and civil society.

Despite the continuing significance of VLOPs for the far-right online milieu, smaller alt-tech platforms will remain relevant as focal points of research for those wanting to counter radicalisation online. As spaces for internal ideological learning, for radicalisation, and for the unmoderated dissemination of illegal content, these platforms are used by far-right actors in connection with VLOPs as part of one larger strategy. Thus, to stop the spread of hatred online, smaller alt-tech platforms need to be effectively regulated alongside VLOPs. Continued research into both VLOPs and alt-tech platforms is necessary to build an evidence-base that helps the understanding and countering of radicalisation in far-right extremist online subcultures.

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