

“MAKE GERMANY GREAT AGAIN”

Kremlin, Alt-Right and
International Influences
in the 2017 German
Elections



About this paper

This report presents the findings of a project that investigated Kremlin and other foreign attempts to influence the 2017 German elections. The project uncovered the tactics and narratives employed by Kremlin-sponsored media, pro-Kremlin social media networks and the international alt right to distort political discourse during the election campaign period. The report explores how these efforts differed across three audiences in Germany: the nationalist right, the left wing and the Russian-speaking population. Through a mixed methodology that included social media analysis, investigative journalism and broadcast media monitoring, the report demonstrates the coordination of attempts to manipulate the debate between the online and offline. The report provides recommendations for steps that can be taken by domestic and international civil society, policymakers, and media in order to build a proportional and effective response to these efforts.

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This project engaged with journalists and academics who provided in-depth research over the election period: Nikolai Klimeniouk; Dr Susanne Spahn; Henk van Ess; Boris Schumatsky and Alexei Kozlov. Their work is provided in the addenda to the report.

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Glossary

Alt-right - the 'alt-right' has become a catchall phrase for a loose group of extreme-right individuals and organisations who promote white nationalism

Bot – a social media account run by a piece of software instead of a human being

Disinformation – messages that have been identified as providing a partial, distorted or false view or interpretation

Extreme-right – groups and individuals that exhibit at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy (in accordance with the definition provided by far-right expert Cas Mudde)

Far left – in the European context, the far left is an umbrella term for groups and individuals characterized by three or more of the following features: anti-globalization, anti-Americanism, militant antifascism, anarchism, a rejection of the capitalist system, and opposition to NATO

Kremlin-affiliated – sponsored, funded or directly controlled by the Russian government

Nationalist right – groups and individuals that exhibit xenophobic or nativist views; in the German context this denotes those who seek to define and defend a 'true' German national identity from elements deemed to be corrupting of that identity

Network map – a graphical representation of how social media accounts are connected across one or multiple platforms

Pro-Kremlin – identifiably supportive of the Russian government or Russian state-sponsored media outlets

1. Introduction & Key Findings

In the run-up to the 2017 German Federal Election, the London School of Economics Arena Program and ISD (Institute for Strategic Dialogue) conducted an analysis of Kremlin-affiliated and other foreign efforts to impact the election results.

In order to uncover disinformation campaigns targeting the German election, this project deployed an innovative multi-sector methodology; using the latest in social media analytics (including various techniques to identify automated social media accounts), alongside on-the-ground investigative journalism and in-depth subject matter expertise. Our research revealed clear and coordinated efforts to influence three key constituencies: (1) the nationalist right, (2) the left, and (3) the Russian-German community.

While it is well established that national governments have been engaging in activities of a political nature outside of their borders for a number of years, the findings of this project contribute some depth and balance to the current discussion around Kremlin influence in European democratic processes. The methodology deployed here allowed us to uncover direct attempts (government-led, government-sponsored or government-affiliated), and indirect attempts – more specifically, how these influence tactics are imitated in grassroots mobilisation.

However, the extent to which broad conclusions can be drawn about the scale and actual impact of Kremlin influence on the 2017 German elections remains limited. There are significant limitations to any study on external influence in political decision-making, primarily with drawing causality between interference and voting behaviour. Nevertheless, these findings go some way towards understanding how the activities of an external actor can manipulate electoral narratives and mobilise existing grievances.

The Nationalist Right

Strong biases were revealed in the Russian state-supported, German-language broadcast media outlet Sputnik in favour of the AfD, often through the promotion of anti-migration themes. These stories were amplified by pro-AfD twitter accounts displaying automated or 'bot-like' activity. US-based alt-right accounts used platforms on 4Chan and Discord to give tactical advice to German far right activists on topics like memetic warfare, fake account creation, parody accounts and obfuscation. The term #MGGA (Make Germany Great Again) appeared in 2,961 posts on public forums, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube between 1st July and 6th September. A Russian bot-net based in Nizhny Novgorod was also involved in promoting alt-right AfD memes.

The Left

Since 2014, there have been significant political intersections between the extreme right and the extreme left in Germany, for example with regards to Ukrainian politics. In Germany, political observers speak of a 'cross-front' ('*quer-front*') between the left and right.¹ In the context of the recent elections, this overlap between the far left and far right audiences manifest itself most obviously around anti-NATO, anti-establishment and anti-West sentiment, which appeal to both the far right and far left readers of Kremlin-sponsored outlets like *Russia Today* (RT) and *Sputnik*.

The Russian-German Diaspora

Broadcast media monitoring revealed that during the election period Russian-language broadcasters popular among Russian-Germans devoted significant coverage to the idea of a strong Russia and a weak Europe, particularly through topics such as the 'Crisis of European Union', 'Western Plot against Russia' and 'Decadent Western Values'. Meanwhile, dedicated Russian-German groups on the most popular Russian platform Odnoklassniki (similar to Facebook in style) were dominated by reposts from Russian and German media. *Russlanddeutsche für AfD in NRW*, for example, featured a mix of AfD campaign material, anti-immigrant reporting and glossy current affairs shows from Kremlin-affiliated media which featured AfD spokespeople. While no official data is available on how Russian-Germans voted, we are able to see a correlation between high votes for the AfD in areas where there is a high percentage of voters with Russian heritage. A persistent trend is discernible in these areas: below-average turnout and above-average results for the AfD.

2. The Methodology

This project used an innovative combination of methodological approaches to determine the efforts of external actors to influence the election; we combined social media monitoring and analysis, broadcast media monitoring and on-the-ground reporting, all guided by in-depth subject matter expertise. The analysis team consisted of ISD, Arena, network mapping experts Graphika², and MEMO 98, a broadcast media analysis company.³ We also worked with a group of investigative journalists to add greater practical depth and exposure to our findings. We focused on three German audiences which we hypothesised may be targeted with Russian state-sponsored disinformation: the far right, the far left and Russian speakers. The methodology for this project is described in more detail below.

Social Media Monitoring and Analysis

As the foundation for the social media monitoring and analysis, we mapped the Twitter networks of each of the three audiences mentioned above. This included identifying the most influential international and local accounts and deciphering who was driving which electoral narratives. This led us to a list of seed accounts for each of the three audiences – the far right, far left and the Russian-German community. The majority of these seed accounts were surfaced by previous ISD and Graphika projects in Germany. For example, the Russian-German cluster was partly built from known Russian accounts that had trolled German journalists on social media, as well as notable pro-Kremlin Russian influencers in German society.

While data collection was geo-bounded to accounts based in Germany, the borderless nature of social media meant that the map inevitably included users from other states, most notably Russia and the US. The network map was updated every four hours, allowing for the analysis of almost real-time trending content (URLs, videos, articles) in each community and for us to better understand how this content travels between the three groups.

To compliment the network analysis, we used commercial social media listening tools such as Crimson Hexagon to track activity on publicly available platforms and networks, including Twitter, Facebook pages and groups, VKontakte accounts, blogs, forums and YouTube. These tools allowed us to identify patterns of behaviour; how certain groups were interacting,

what types of content were being consumed, which narratives resonated with them, who the main influencers were. We collected this data by monitoring specific keywords, hashtags, accounts or URLs, informed in part by evolving insights from journalists on the ground.

Broadcast Media Monitoring

In cooperation with the media monitoring organization MEMO 98, we analysed both Russian language broadcast media popular among the Russian-German diaspora and the German outlets of Kremlin-owned media. MEMO 98, in cooperation with *Internews Ukraine*, monitored five Russian-speaking channels and three other outlets prior to the elections.⁴ The monitoring was carried out at three strategic periods between the beginning of July and the election date. Given its comprehensive and content-oriented approach, the methodology was specifically designed to provide in-depth feedback on pluralism in media reporting, including the coverage of chosen subjects and topics.

The core objective for this monitoring was to evaluate the level of diversity in the coverage of local and international topics on these channels, and to determine whether the monitored media outlets were providing their viewers with fair and impartial information. The monitoring primarily focused on information concerning Germany, notably its political subjects, as well as the context in which the other Germany-related topics were presented ahead of the elections.

Investigative Journalism

To both inform and disseminate the findings from both the broadcast media and social media monitoring, and in cooperation with editors at *Die Welt*, we engaged bilingual Russian-German journalists and academics to write in-depth pieces informed by both on-the-ground reporting and our own analysis. The project also provided the Axel Springer group and other media houses with regular insights from our monitoring efforts in order to ensure the maximum possible exposure of this material to the German public.

3. The Context

An initial background research and scoping phase found that there are two aspects of modern German political and social life that are particularly important to consider as the context for analysing Kremlin-supported efforts to impact the election.

Firstly, there is a long history of Russian state and corporate investment in mainstream German public life. This includes politicians from across the mainstream political spectrum, commentators, and business leaders. The intertwining of both political and economic investment has helped to foster an atmosphere of familiarity between the two countries, therefore making it 'normal' in Germany to hear Kremlin viewpoints in the mainstream political debate. Here are some examples:

—Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder now sits on the board of Russian oil giant Rosneft. In 2014, he joined a public appeal in favour of the 'secession' of Crimea from Ukraine, orchestrated by Russia, under the slogan 'Again War in Europe? Not in Our Name', along with other politicians, business representatives and celebrities.⁵

—The Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute (DOC) in Berlin was founded by Russian oligarch Vladimir Jakunin. Jakunin is a former KGB colleague of the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and was put on the US government's sanctions list in 2014 for his participation in the war against Ukraine.⁶ The DOC has held events featuring, among others, the former head of the chancellor's office Ronald Pofalla (CDU) and Brandenburg's former Prime Minister Matthias Platzeck (SPD).⁷ Platzeck is also Chairman of the German-Russian forum, a think tank that advocates stronger relations between the two countries, and called for the legalization of the annexation of the Crimea shortly after the Russian invasion.⁸

—Recent actions suggest that the Russian government has sought a special relationship with the Bavarian CSU leader, Horst Seehofer. Of the 6,000 German companies in Russia, 1,500 come from Bavaria.⁹ CSU leader Horst Seehofer, who travelled to Moscow in 2017 with a business delegation, has long been calling for the relaxation of sanctions against Russia, referring to the Ukrainian conflict as a "little gunfight".¹⁰

—High-profile journalists also bring the Kremlin's views into the German mainstream. For example, Jakob Augstein, who owns *Der Freitag* and writes a weekly column for Spiegel Online, claimed that Chancellor Merkel is "no less dangerous" than Putin. In this piece, Augstein writes, "She stirs up the conflict by talking about the endangered European peace order...while Moscow is only defending itself."¹¹ Renowned Russia expert Alexander Rahr also regularly defends Russia in the media. In an interview with Phoenix, Rahr called Putin's actions in Crimea "understandable". Rahr is employed by Gazprom in Brussels as a Senior Advisor on EU Affairs.¹²

Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that the Kremlin's messages are already familiar to many in Germany, and carry legitimacy among some constituencies.

The second particularly relevant piece of context is the growing gap between 'mainstream' and 'fringe' media in Germany that has been fuelled by the refugee crisis. The influx of refugees into Germany has created a new cleavage in German politics. According to an August 2017 poll by the International Republican Institute, refugee policy, terrorism and loss of culture were among the German public's top concerns, with 40% of respondents stating that terrorism and extremism represent the greatest threat to their way of life in the future.¹³

40%

Stated that terrorism and extremism represent the greatest threat to their way of life in future

23%

Agreed that 'Germany and Europe should not take in any more migrants'

Many Germans also remain sceptical of the country's ability to manage the high influx of refugees. When presented with three differing policy approaches to the refugee crisis, 23% agreed with the statement that 'the cost of taking in migrants is too high, regardless government efforts to mitigate them. Germany and Europe should not take in any more migrants'.¹⁴ The two largest and most traditional political parties, the CDU

and SPD, did little on the campaign trail to connect with these voters. This lack of communication left significant gaps in the electorate for others to gain influence.

A similar dynamic emerged in the media space. Though Germany has a strong mainstream media sphere, most of the major newspapers and broadcasters supported the CDU and SPD policies towards refugees. This left the topic open for alternative media, some with links to the international far left and far right – or in the case of Russian speakers, with links to the Russian government - to exploit.¹⁵ An analysis by Jozef Slerka, head of the New Media Studies Department at Charles University, in the run up to the election showed the extent of media polarization in Germany. People who ‘like’ the Facebook pages of mainstream parties also ‘like’ mainstream media whereas supporters of the AfD and Die Linke only ‘like’ alternative German and Kremlin media.¹⁶

The exception to this pattern was the CSU. Those who ‘like’ the CSU site are interested in both mainstream publications such as *Die Welt*, as well as ‘alternative’ sources such as *Epoch Times* and *Journalistenwatch*.¹⁷ It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the CSU saw the greatest amount of votes lost to the AfD: CSU reading habits may have anticipated the defection of the party’s voters.

3. The Findings

The following sub-sections detail the findings of this project, divided by how they relate to each of the three communities studied. As discussed in the methodology, the project leveraged a range of different approaches, including; social media data collection and analysis, investigative journalism, broadcast media monitoring, existing subject matter expertise and desk-based research.

4.1 THE KREMLIN AND THE NATIONALIST RIGHT

Of all the political forces in Germany, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) maintains the strongest links with Russia.

In 2013, the AfD's original founders – a group of euro-sceptics and moderate populists – made one of its founding principles the formation of closer ties to Russia. This foundational belief did not change after the annexation of Crimea. The party was overtaken by nativist, anti-Islamic and xenophobic politicians in 2015, and entered the 2017 election campaign on a nationalist platform.

There is no direct evidence that the AfD has received financial support from the Kremlin. However, many individual AfD politicians have deep ties to Russia and their agendas often overlap with the Russian nationalist agenda. This research found that these interactions are abundant and constitute a pattern of support. Below is an explanation of evidence that led the team to this finding.

—In February 2017, party chairwoman Frauke Petry visited Moscow to hold talks with high-ranking officials and to discuss cooperation.¹⁸ Shortly afterwards, Jörg Urban, who represents the AfD in Saxony held a "patriotic salon" under the title "Russia sanctions harm Saxony".¹⁹ Additionally, the AfD formed an alliance between the Young Faction of the AfD and the Young Guard of the United Russia Party.²⁰

—From the beginning, the AfD has historically supported Russia's action in Crimea. Shortly after becoming the co-leader of the party, Alexander Gauland declared that Crimea was "originally a Russian territory" that "could not return to Ukraine".²¹ Earlier, in an AfD position paper, he called for the revival of Bismarck's policy of placating Russia.²² Marcus Pretzell, AfD member of

the European Parliament and Frauke Petry's husband, attended a conference in the annexed Crimea in 2016. His travel expenses were paid by the foundation of the organizer, the Yalta International Economic Forum,²³ which receives support from the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation.²⁴

—The Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeyev, who has been on the EU's sanctions list since 2014 and is accused of financing illegal military groups in Ukraine, maintains close contacts with the AfD. He is particularly supportive of Alexander Gauland and has stated that "the performances of Dr. Gauland signal that Germany will become Germany again, just as Russia becomes Russia again under Putin".²⁵

—In April 2017, a member of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, Alexander Yushchenko, attended an anti-sanctions conference organized by the AfD in Freiberg. It was a gathering of the European far right, with members of the following parties present: Austrian FPÖ, Belgian Vlaams Belang, Czech Freedom and Direct Democracy, Italian Lega Nord. The AfD was represented at a high level by Alexander Gauland. The influential right-wing journalist Manuel Ochsenschlager, editor of the German magazine *Zuerst!* was also present.²⁶

—In August 2017 the AfD held a Russia Congress in Magdeburg. There were about 300 people at the congress, at least half of them Russian speakers. Officially the main focus of the congress was the lifting of sanctions, yet many speeches attacked the US for everything from "gender mainstreaming" to its supposed attempts to destroy Russia. Both speakers and guests referred to Germany as an occupied country, with Angela Merkel as an American puppet who wants to eliminate real Germans and replace them with Muslim invaders.²⁷ Among the participants were activists spreading a magazine called *Die Russlanddeutschen Konservativen*, [The Russian-German Conservatives] an outwardly neo-Nazi booklet full of swastikas and Germanic Ancestors, but also featuring the AfD and its leaders.²⁸

The German far right media has close connections with both the AfD and the Kremlin.

The examples below were observed through the social media monitoring process or investigative journalism carried out to determine the nature of this relationship:

—*Zuerst!* magazine is run by Manuel Ochsenreiter. He has traveled with AfD members to Donbass and Nagorno Karabakh, and also served as an observer for the illegal referendum in Crimea in 2014.²⁹ At an extremely right-wing 'Readers' Meeting' hosted by his magazine, Ochsenreiter called on Alexander Dugin to speak. Dugin is a Russian political analyst known for his fascist views.³⁰

—*Compact Magazine*, founded by the journalist Jürgen Elsässer, has been a steadfast supporter of President Putin throughout the Ukraine conflict. Since 2012, he has been organising so-called "Sovereignty Conferences" together with the Russian Institute for Democracy and Cooperation, a Russian NGO that is influential in German public opinion.³¹ Participants have included AfD leaders such as Alexander Gauland and André Poggenberg, as well as representatives of PEGIDA, the xenophobic movement that has been organizing demonstrations in Dresden and other cities, mainly in Eastern Germany, since the end of 2014 (see below.) *Compact* also has a TV channel, on which Katrin Ziske, a Russian-German presenter, provides a link to Russian-German voters.

—*Junge Freiheit* is a right-wing newspaper that correctiv.org describes as the "central organ of the AfD".³² Again, its articles are sympathetic to the Russian occupation of Crimea. The network mapping and analysis showed that articles from the newspaper were amplified by the international far right, including by users from the UKIP cluster, the Trump support cluster and the European far right cluster. Comments sections on these articles included references to ongoing anti-immigrant debates in Sweden, Hungary and the EU.

—A number of new media with intellectual or religious claims promote Kremlin-friendly positions along with anti-immigrant views.³³ *Philosophia Perennis* criticizes the mainstream media for the alleged bashing of Russia, and also provides analysis of the 'Islamization' of Europe.³⁴

—*Tichys Einblick*, though referred to as an online newspaper, is actually a blog written by conservative journalist Roland Tichy and other authors (there is also a monthly magazine). Its anti-establishment, anti-immigration articles have been circulated by Russian-language troll accounts and pro-Putin social media accounts, and also reach far left circles. One of the most popular pieces shared among these groups during the run-up to the election followed the attacks in Ktanz and Barmbek, and listed Islamist terror attacks that have killed Germans over the last 35 years.³⁵

—Similarly, *Epoch Times* is a news site that primarily runs anti-West, anti-American and pro-Kremlin content – a high proportion of this content is based on unverified information. An investigation undertaken by this project reveals that *Epoch Times Germany* disseminates anti-democratic false news and conspiracy theories, incites hatred against migrants and indirectly advertises for the AfD.³⁶

German far right audiences rely heavily on social media for political information.

The German far right are more likely than other groups to believe fake news stories if they confirm their preconceptions. They are also more likely to read and share information that comes either from Russian or international alt-right sources.³⁷

—Having undertaken an analysis of the content, influences and sharing behaviour of 250 online accounts identified with the German far right, we found that conversations were overwhelmingly driven by the topics of terrorism, threats to European stability and opposition to immigration. Only occasionally – for example when Facebook announced its removal of fake news accounts, or when articles criticized the 'liberal media' – did other topics trend.³⁸

—The online conversation leaders were prolific right-wing individuals, including both known accounts such as Erika Steinbach (@SteinbachErika) and deputy leader of the AfD Beatrix von Storch (@Beatrix_vStorch), as well as anonymous users, many of whom had names linked to words like "freedom" or "truth." In the week before the election, these conversation leaders (unnamed) helped push hashtags which supported the AfD: #fakenews grew by 493% in the German far right networks that we monitored online in the week before the election, compared with the previous seven days. The #MerkelMussWeg [Merkel Must Go] slogan saw an uptick of 238% in that period.

—Overall the AfD dominated the social media debate in Germany, anticipating its success in the German elections. Research published by the Oxford Internet Institute shows that the AfD drove more Twitter traffic in Germany than any other party, and also more than general, non-partisan discussion of the election. The study by the Oxford Computational Propaganda project found that, between the 1st and 10th September 2017, almost 30% of German tweets included hashtags associated specifically with the AfD.³⁹

4.1.1 THE KREMLIN AND THE NATIONALIST RIGHT: ELECTION CAMPAIGN CONTENT

The following findings demonstrate how Kremlin-supported broadcast media, pro-Kremlin social media networks and international far right sources attempted to promote the nationalist right in the 2017 electoral campaigning period.

German-language Kremlin-affiliated media showed a clear bias towards the AfD.

—Broadcast media monitoring found that in July and August, *Sputnik* and the *RT Deutsch* web service were consistently negative in their coverage of German officials and institutions; the AfD was the only exception. *Sputnik* regularly presented the AfD as a mainstream party that has been treated badly by the current establishment due to its opposition to Merkel's migration policy.⁴⁰ Between the 15th and 24th of August for example, the AfD was the only subject to receive some positive coverage on *Radio Sputnik DE*.

—By contrast, the subjects which received the most negative treatment were Chancellor Merkel, the Government as a whole, and the police. The graph below shows an aggregated sentiment analysis of coverage by *RT's* YouTube channel, *Radio Sputnik DE* and *RTVD* on various topics during this period. As shown, the AfD has received the highest proportion of positive tone in its coverage (green).

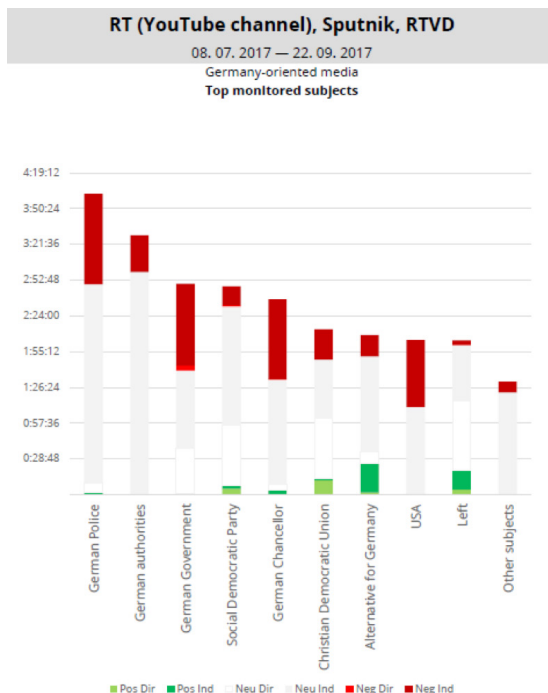


Figure 1: Aggregated sentiment analysis of the detailed topics on three channels

—*Sputnik* in particular presents the AfD as a mainstream party. There was no coverage of the AfD's polling position or any mention that it was supported by only a minority of Germans. There was almost no coverage of the scandals surrounding Frauke Petry. The channel argued that if AfD were to win, it would lift the Russian sanctions and recognize the annexation of Crimea. *Radio Sputnik DE* heavily criticized Merkel and repeated anti-migration themes throughout the campaign, including a public poll that showed that 'lands with more migration are more prone to terrorism'.⁴¹ The channel also provided a platform for AfD party quotations such as, "rape is increasing due to Merkel's policy". Russian language broadcast media, a large source of news for Russian-Germans, showed consistently strong biases against both the German government and the EU.⁴²

Material which originated on *Sputnik* found its way into far right alternative social media discussions via pro-AfD and pro-Kremlin bots.

This pattern was most obvious when looking at two important narratives promoted by Kremlin-controlled media: 1) electoral fraud and 2) immigration.

1) The election fraud story first emerged during the regional elections that took place in North Rhine Westphalia in May 2017. Shortly after this vote, the AfD claimed on Twitter and in local papers that it had been the subject of electoral fraud. Both *RT* and *Sputnik* were quick to pick up the story. Two follow-up stories in *Sputnik Deutsch* aimed to expose 'undemocratic' German elections.⁴³ Another story on 25th May cited the Russian paper *Izvestia* as its main source. Coverage of this story by Kremlin-affiliated media was amplified by a number of pro-Kremlin semi-automated or 'bot-like' accounts. In the month before the election, the use of the hashtag #wahlbetrug [election fraud] increased 4,400% in far right audiences and was most commonly used within messages that professed support for the AfD. The story was actively pursued on alternative social media platforms such as Gab.ai, where right-wing channels like Neuigkeiten feature a mix of articles from *Sputnik* and *RT Deutsch* next to conspiracy theories and videos about how the upcoming parliamentary elections would likely be falsified in the same way.

2) Various far right media sources pushing the anti-immigration narrative appeared to gain legitimacy by comparing the present situation in Germany to other countries. Kremlin-affiliated media were early promoters of the idea that there is an immigration crisis taking place in Sweden, propagating this to German audiences.

The Swedish Chief of Police made a statement in late June concerning the need for greater cooperation

to stem the tide of violence and crime in vulnerable areas in Sweden.⁴⁴ *RT Deutsch* picked up this story on the 25th of June, reporting on the 'no go zones' that they label as immigrant hotbeds of crime and violence, inflating the original language of the Chief of Police.⁴⁵ The official AfD website for Russian-Germans, *Russlanddeutsche für AfD*, then claimed that German police were also being targeted by Muslim immigrants and that they therefore must be given greater powers.⁴⁶ This article quoted the Swedish Chief of Police calling for international help because the country is being 'torn to pieces by Muslim immigrants'. In his original statement, the Chief of Police had in fact just called for greater cooperation in vulnerable areas.

Our network analysis illuminated that a number of the pro-Kremlin bots that engaged with this story on Swedish immigration took the opportunity to amplify other damning reports and articles, like the cancellation of a Swedish music festival due to a series of rapes and sexual assaults supposedly carried out by migrants.

A pro-Kremlin 'botnet' was active during the election campaign.

Our social media analysis, along with collaborators working on similar research projects, found a coordinated Russian-language Twitter network. Using a formula that detects semi-automated or automated behaviour, we were able to monitor the output of this network on an ongoing basis.

—It remains unclear who was managing and/or directing these Russian-language accounts and their sporadic coverage in German of the AfD and the electoral campaign. However, to borrow the words of the Atlantic Council's DFR Lab, it was apparent that "these bot accounts belong to the same network and that the network itself is of Russian-language origin, largely used for commercial purposes, but also used politically".⁴⁷

Among the hashtags these accounts promoted in July were:

#netzDG: concerning the new German law fining social media companies for court-determined hate speech (portrayed as an attack on far right speech)

#linksextremismus: portraying the left as 'extremists'

#barmbek: referring to the supermarket attack in Hamburg, tied to anti-immigrant sentiment

#islam: discussing a core issue of the AfD's campaign

#schorndorf: referring to another attack linked to migrants and the anti-immigration debate

—In our network analysis, we detected 2,480 accounts that were algorithmically determined as 'pro-Kremlin'. Over 60 of these 'pro-Kremlin'⁴⁸ accounts displayed some form of automated behaviour. Many of these accounts hide behind anonymous avatars. Analysis by the Digital Forensics Research Lab at the Atlantic Council has highlighted that the activity of the network of automated accounts in Germany, while coordinated, was still relatively 'small in scale,' at least by comparison to other countries. Most posts from the bots were 'commercial or pornographic in nature', with few political examples. However, the bots were active in amplifying AfD calls for election monitors in the run-up to the German election. Overall, in the period preceding the election, the accounts mixed commercial messages with pornographic material, support for the AfD and attacks on Alexey Navalny.⁴⁹

—Working with BuzzFeed Germany, we obtained evidenced that some of these accounts are run both for ideological reasons and for financial incentives. One Russian hacker, contacted via the Russian social network site, Vkontakte, revealed that he and thirty other people in Russia had been using bots to promote messages favourable to the AfD during the election.⁵⁰ He indicated that 15,000 pro-AfD posts and retweets would cost 2,000 euros; After negotiations, a discounted package included 15,000 pro-AfD tweets and retweets 'guaranteed' to make a pro-AfD hashtag trend. The hacker stated that the posts would 'come from at least 25% "high-quality" bots that would not be so easily identified as fake accounts'.⁵¹ He estimated he would need to send 80 tweets per minute to make a pro-AfD hashtag trend.

Extreme-right groups across the globe were coordinating during the campaign.

Groups from Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, and the US, as well as Russia, were coordinating to achieve common goals, including the prevention of refugee migration to Europe, the removal of hate speech laws and the promotion of far right populist politicians to positions of power.

—American 'alt-right' and European extreme right forums spent months preparing for the German elections. This preparation included sharing best practices from prior election interference campaigns. Accounts that appeared to be based in the US gave tactical advice to German extreme right activists on topics like memetic warfare, fake account creation, parody accounts and obfuscation.

—The hashtag #MGGA (Make Germany Great Again, an extension of the Trump Presidential campaign slogan) appeared in 2,961 posts on public forums, blogs,

Facebook, Twitter and YouTube between 1st July and 6th September. Messages using #MGGA often linked to alternatives news sites such *Daily Stormer* and *Breitbart*. As a recent report by ISD outlined, the *Daily Stormer*, an openly neo-Nazi website, also called on its readers to make contact with PEGIDA, Identitarians and the AfD.⁵²

—An extreme-right channel on Discord was set up specifically with the purpose of disrupting the German elections, yet it counts over 5000 members from across the world. The Discord channel's server was set up by Nikolai Alexander, a German far right activist whose YouTube channel has over 33,000 subscribers. The stated goal of his Discord channel was to 'ensure the strongest possible showing for the AfD in the Bundestag'.⁵³

—As the election grew closer, international far right like *Breitbart* and Kremlin-sponsored sources such as *RT* became top sources of content among the German far right in our social listening monitors.

4.2 THE KREMLIN AND THE LEFT

Left-wing movements and parties in Germany have complicated relationships with the Kremlin. Some are critical of Putinism, especially advocates of international environmental and climate protection; opponents of nuclear energy; proponents of feminism, international human rights and EU integration. Others - especially proponents of 'peace politics', anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism or resistance to US hegemony - are more supportive. So, of course, are those who still support Marxism or the ex-GDR. The following findings relate to how these relationships manifested themselves most strongly both before and during the 2017 German electoral campaigns.

Die Linke, The Left Party, the successor to the ruling party of the GDR (Socialist Unity Party), has a unique relationship with the Kremlin.

Die Linke has grown closer to the Russian government in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine. The party clearly follows the Kremlin's narrative on NATO, the US and Syria. Below are examples of the complex relationship between Die Linke and the Kremlin:

—The Chairperson of Die Linke's representation in the Bundestag and the Party's top candidate in the 2017 elections, Sahra Wagenknecht, can often be heard speaking of the 'threat' to Russia from the West. At the same time, the intra-party reform movement FDS (Forum Demokratischer Sozialismus) advocates European integration and civil rights, and as a result of

this, condemns the annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine. The matter was resolved the Die Linke Congress in Hamburg, when the Party rejected a resolution to condemn the annexation and the war.

—Individual representatives of the Die Linke retain strong links with Kremlin-affiliated media and state officials. For example, in October 2016 Andreas Maurer and Martin Dolzer travelled to Moscow where they met Russian government officials. Dolzer is a frequent commentator on *RT Deutsch* and *Sputnik*. Maurer, who considers himself a Russian-German, also visited Crimea twice as "Ambassador of German-Russian Friendship" and reported to Sputnik News that he views the referendum to recognize Crimea as part of Russia as legitimate, while sanctions are punishing the people of Crimea for their vote.⁵⁴ Left Bundestag member Andrej Hunko is also a regular *Sputnik* and *RT* contributor. He voices support for an end to sanctions and for the Russian annexation of Crimea.⁵⁵ Along with another Die Linke politician, Wolfgang Gehrcke, Hunko has travelled to the occupied areas of Eastern Ukraine to provide 'humanitarian aid'.

Other pro-Russian left-wing groups and movements are disparate.

In terms of represented political parties, the left-wing in Germany remains fractured and with varying levels of support for the Russian state. For example, while Alliance 90/The Greens party often criticises the Russian state as undemocratic, the movement also occasionally portrays the Kremlin as a victim of the West. Other manifestations of the political left, some of which were discovered during our social media monitoring, and their affiliations to the Kremlin are detailed below:

—Several splinter groups in Germany see themselves in the tradition of the Russian Revolution of 1917. During the 'Class Struggle instead of World War' event held in Berlin on the 7th of November 2017, the anniversary of the October Revolution, leftist activists of different movements drove through the city in Soviet tanks, connecting the German 'peace politics' discourse to Russian propaganda narratives.

—A minority of German anti-fascists describe Ukrainian Maidan protesters as fascists against whom the Kremlin fights legitimately. However, the majority of the anti-fascist movement, as well as parts of the so-called 'Antifa' and the Black Block, regularly and publicly condemn the Kremlin's foreign policy stance.

—Red Help, an organisation with roughly 8000 members, was founded to offer legal support to left-wing activists. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution on the other hand classifies Red Help as an extremist organization and accuses it of supporting violent criminals. Following the annexation of the Crimea, Red Help took on Kremlin terminology about Ukraine, referencing the 'fascist coup', 'terror of right-wing groups' and 'civil war'. It has raised money for pro-Kremlin war efforts in Eastern Ukraine, masked in anti-fascist language.⁵⁶

—'Peace & Friendship with Russia', a group led by human geography professor Dr. Rainer Rothfuss, fundraises to send members on annual 'Freundschaftsfahrt [friendship tours]' to Russia. They meet with the Nachtwölfe ('night wolves'), the pro-Putin biker movement, and officials of the ruling Jedinaja Rossija (United Russia) party, also making a detour to the occupied Crimea.⁵⁷

There are fewer publications on the far left in Germany than on the far right, though some do contain pro-Russian narratives.

—*Der Freitag* carries pro-Kremlin and often sensationalist headlines, for example 'the Russian language was banned in Ukraine'.⁵⁸ *Junge Welt* mixes anti-Ukraine stories with both anti-NATO and anti-American narratives and its editor-in-chief Arnold Schölzel is a known former Stasi informant. In the pre-election period, a range of far left and mainstream left accounts and media engaged with *Junge Welt*, for example the Facebook group of Antifaschistisches Infoblatt (@AntifaschistischesInfoblatt).

Far left social media also reflects Kremlin narratives, though not in the same volume as the far right.

—Die Linke's Twitter account (@DieLinkeKVKN) was the most prolific in engaging with @Jungewelt between 1st August and the election, with almost 1,500 messages mentioning, retweeting, responding to, or replying to @Jungewelt in that period. The authors of tweets in the @Jungewelt network talk about Russia around six times more than the average Twitter user.⁵⁹

—*Ken FM*, though perhaps more of a 'cross-front' outlet, is an Internet news portal that was established by Ken Jebsen. Sitting at the intersection of far right and far left, the site includes a mix of conspiratorial, anti-Semitic content, and anti-American/anti-elite criticism. Jebsen travelled to Crimea in April 2017 with Andreas Maurer (aforementioned) and has also taken part in the 'vigils for peace'. As recently as the 15th of November, Berlin's Culture Minister Klaus Lederer banned an event in which

Jebsen was to receive a media award, referring explicitly to his anti-Semitic views. This has been covered extensively by Kremlin-affiliated media, who see it as a censorship issue.⁶⁰

There are significant differences between the far left and the far right's use of social media.

Our social media monitoring and analysis allowed unparalleled insights into the online behaviours of supporters on either side of the political spectrum in the few months preceding the elections. Below are observations about the German left social media scene:

—'Alt-right' media outlets occasionally cross into online discussion among the left, however they do not appear to be core sources of content. The far left users in our network map showed far less reliance on fringe outlets as top sources of information than those in the far right group. Top shared content on the left is quite varied; on the right, media sources often unify their audiences around coverage of key issues.

—The left also has a wider range of interests, from police aggression to corporate consumption to government snooping, and a greater focus on current events. For example, the G20 summit and the associated riots that took place in July dominated the left's online discourse; in August it was largely the Diesel scandal. Coverage of the election did not appear in the top five pieces of content until mid-September; and then many articles were anti-AfD.

—German left-wing supporters are far more likely to cite mainstream outlets such as *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*, *Speigel*, *Tagesspiegel*, and the left of centre *Tageszeitung*. The only alternative news source that appeared was *Heise.de*, a portal for unaudited 'alternative' news, which includes articles that aim specifically to appeal to pro-Kremlin audiences. Top conversation leaders were primarily these media outlets, journalists, and politicians such as Sahra Wagenknecht.

—In the week before the election, the social media networks connected to the far left and fringe elements of Die Linke increased their use of the hashtag #noAfD by 120% compared to the previous week. The top tweet shared during the pre-election week among the left called for the public to take a stand against right-wing racism, specifically mentioning AfD.

—The German left as a whole is less likely to share disinformation and more likely to share articles or tweets that debunk 'fake news'. We saw very little overlap between the left's preferred content and our

other monitored audiences. The obvious exceptions to this were a *Handelsblatt* article arguing against the new round of US sanctions,⁶¹ which crossed into Russian-language groups; as well as an article in *Netzpolitik* warning that hackers can easily manipulate the German Election results, that was then amplified by the international alt-right group.⁶²

Nevertheless, there is some evidence of a 'cross-front' of left and right, as previously witnessed in the 1930s.

—In May 2014, several members of Die Linke, along with representatives of ATTAC, and the German-Austrian Interventionist Left movement, supported the 'vigils for peace' in an open letter that was also signed by many on the far right. From 2015 onwards, these vigils were replaced by xenophobic PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West) demonstrations as the mass movement began to solidify and gain traction. At these demonstrations, the flags of Russia and the self-proclaimed people's republics in Eastern Ukraine were brandished alongside slogans such as 'Putin Help Us' or 'Merkel to Siberia. Putin to Berlin'. According to *Die Welt*, up to 100 German volunteers from this political 'cross-front' fought in support of Russia in Eastern Ukraine in 2015.⁶³

—Media outlets that support the pro-Kremlin 'cross-front' include *Compact Magazine*, *Ken FM*, the conspiracy-driven *Kopp Verlag*, and RT Deutsch. In December 2016, the Russian state news site *RIA Novosti* quoted the PEGIDA organizer Lutz Bachmann as saying that in one year 700,000 Germans had left Germany because of Merkel's politics.⁶⁴

—Our research shows that this 'cross-front' is capable of directly influencing far right audiences, primarily due to its alignment of nationalist views and the far right's fixation with fringe media. This 'cross-front' can at times influence the far left by engaging and featuring politicians and influential journalists with anti-West, anti-NATO messages. This small overlap between the two audiences represents a significant area of influence that is susceptible to outside exploitation.

4.3 THE KREMLIN AND RUSSIAN-GERMANS

Of the three communities studied, the context of the Russian-speakers in Germany is of paramount importance to the analysis of their online behaviour and voting activity during the elections.

Firstly, between two and half and three million Russian-speaking people live in Germany. This group includes

ethnic German immigrants and their relatives, Jewish refugees, academics, migrant workers, Chechen refugees, and EU citizens from the Baltics.⁶⁵ However, the largest group within the broader community are 'Russian-Germans'; the descendants of the Germans who had migrated to Russia earlier in history and who invoked a right to return to Germany as repatriates. In order to receive German citizenship, these migrants had to be able to prove their German nationality and demonstrate a cultural connection to Germany.

This positive reinforcement of citizenship may have created the belief held by some members that they are the 'true' Germans, having preserved traditional German culture and Christian values outside of the country, and now having returned to their 'homeland'. It was apparent throughout the social media analysis undertaken that this community has responded in a frustrated manner to the seemingly 'easy' process currently in place for refugees to benefit from the German welfare system.

The mother tongue of the vast majority of this original group was Russian and accordingly, their habits and lifestyles were essentially the same as those of Russians. In Germany, they are often still perceived as 'Russians' rather than Germans, even by official groups such as the League of Expellees. In official Russian discourse, they are frequently referred to as 'compatriots'.⁶⁶ Yet because the German government originally considered this group returnees rather than migrants no special effort was made to integrate them. German politicians did not recognize Russian-Germans as Russian-speaking because it contradicted the discourse about their German cultural heritage. There has therefore been little systematic political engagement with this group in the Russian language. While most Soviet-born citizens now have a good command of German, Russian-language campaigning could have served as a symbolic gesture of inclusion.

The first and only political party to have a Russian-language campaign strategy was the AfD. For the 2017 elections the party produced a considerable amount of campaign material in Russian, both online and offline, and had an organized group of Soviet-born activists in its ranks. The party had seven listed candidates. Two of the candidates, Waldemar Herdt (Lower Saxony) and Anton Friesen (Thuringia) were actually elected – though it should be noted that they belong to the moderate wing of the party. They are the only Soviet-born MPs among the newly elected members of the Bundestag. Previously, Russian-Germans were not represented in Germany's political institutions, with the

exception of the CDU backbencher Heinrich Zertik, who was not listed for the 2017 candidacy.

Notable Russian-German candidates and activists represented the AfD.

—Eugen Schmidt, an IT specialist, has been the principal organiser of the Russian-German support for the AfD and is the founder of the Russian-Germans for the AfD network in North Rhine Westphalia. Schmidt’s rhetoric concentrated on traditional values and anti-refugee issues and he has had major appearances on Russian state TV.

—Waldemar Birkle, local Councillor in Pforzheim, where previously the AfD achieved record results in local elections – almost 90% of the residents in this district are Russian-Germans.

—Vadim Derksen, who is an influential local figure and co-chair of the local AfD organization in Regensburg, Bavaria. According to local media, Derksen has ties to the Identitarian movement and prohibited neo Nazi groups.⁶⁷

—The Einheit party, a tiny Russian-German party, was founded in 2013. It did not have enough support to take part in the national elections, but it actively advertised the AfD agenda, while proffering a position of independence by criticising the AfD on minor issues. The Einheit party systematically visited companies with many Russian-speaking employees, offering membership in exchange for discount cards of the supermarket chain MixMarkt, which offers Russian food. The chairman Dimitri Rempel is a former Social Democrat who is known for his close cooperation with the Russian government. In 2016 he declared on RT radio in Simferopol that 500,000 Russian-Germans want to leave Germany to go to Crimea.⁶⁸

Kremlin-affiliated media in Russia, with a heavy AfD bias, has a significant reach within Russian-German audiences.

—In August, Kremlin-sponsored outlets devoted significant coverage to topics relating to ideas of a strong Russia and weak Europe, such as the ‘Crisis of European Union’, the ‘Western Plot Against Russia’, ‘Russian Patriotism’ and ‘Decadent Western Values’. The topic of ‘World War II’ was also used to stigmatize the population with the possibility of a war and Russia’s apparent need to protect itself against the enemy.

—Our broadcast media analysis found that Kremlin-affiliated media operating in German, for example *Radio Sputnik DE* and the *RT* website, presented a number of international and local political events in a biased way,

often with coverage of only a certain range of views, thus depriving their viewers of receiving impartial, fair and comprehensive reporting. There was a discernable difference between *RT Deutsch* website and its official YouTube channel, with the latter presenting stories in a more neutral manner. The graph below shows the proportion of time given to coverage of each topic of interest on these three channels combined:

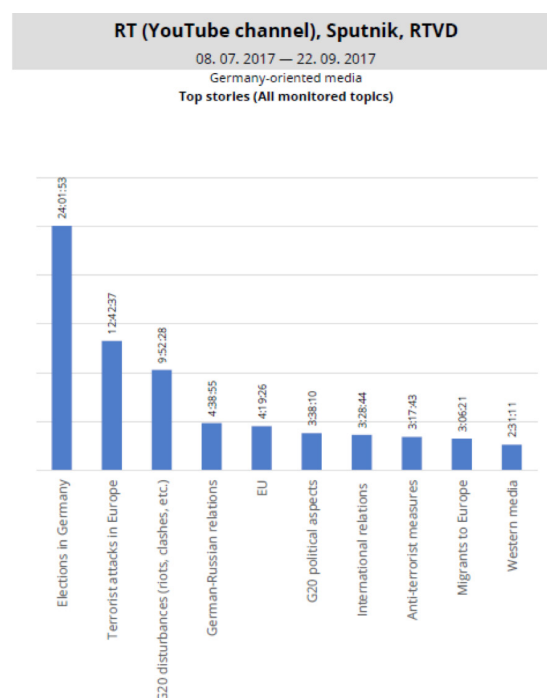


Figure 2: The proportion of coverage (in time) given to topics related to the German elections

—One exception to this bias was RTVD, a Berlin-based private Russian-language network TV-channel, known for its cooperation with the independent Russian channel *Dozhd* and current cooperation with *Radio Liberty* and *Deutsche Welle*. In the pre-election period RTVD showed a balanced approach when it came to covering the different campaigns and candidates - principally by featuring interviews with key figures from all big parties including the AfD leader Alexander Gauland and by cooperating with *Deutsche Welle*’s Russian Service in its pre-election project *Quadriga*.⁶⁹ Unfortunately, the channel’s reach is more limited than larger Russian-language channels as it is only available via premium cable packages.

Russian-German social media accounts were largely insular in their media content consumption.

—Our network mapping exercise demonstrated that the Russian-German contingent (around 1,500 individual

accounts) relied heavily on Kremlin-affiliated news outlets⁷⁰, such as *RIA Novosti*, the state operated Russian news agency, *Life.ru*, a pro-Kremlin Russian news site, *RT* and *Sputnik*, with no presence of mainstream news sources and a notable absence of international, fact-based Russian language broadcasting such as *BBC* or *Radio Free Europe*. The top non-Russian news source for the group was *ZeroHedge*, known for its alt-right, conspiratorial content. Top conversation leaders included Russian news sites, official government accounts such as the Russian Embassy or Ministry of Defence, journalists and self-proclaimed media and political experts.

—Content focused on themes in line with the Kremlin agenda, for example Putin's tough response to sanctions, Russia's successes and US downfalls in Syria, and saving Ukraine from fascism. Conspiracy pieces about the US, Syria and Ukraine sometimes chimed with alt-right arguments, for example that the US pursued regime change in Syria. Very little content appeared that was related to the German elections however this could be because much of the political discussion took place in online forums and Russian language social media platforms.

The social networks and forums popular with Russian speakers in Germany frequently tapped into the negative sentiments around refugees during the electoral campaigning period.

—Many of the larger forums are community, tourist or commercial groups with weak moderation, which gives the possibility for right-wing supporters to promote their materials. For example, a sample from the 'We Live in Germany' news site, which has nearly 37,000 members, revealed that more than half of its videos were negative stories about migrants. The site's timeline contains a mixture of pro-Putin memes, articles from Russian-language media that denigrate Merkel, and anti-refugee content.⁷¹

—The news feeds of Russian-German groups on Odnoklassniki, a popular Facebook-like Russian platform, largely consist of Russian and German articles that focus on immigrant crime, attacks on Merkel, and angry rhetoric against Ukraine. Popular media links in circulation on these pages include *RT* and *anonymous.ru*. Some accounts post with frenzied regularity, suggesting professional or perhaps automated posting.

—AfD Russian-language engagement on social media spanned 10 different social media networks, including a Facebook page in Russian and an account on Odnoklassniki. The Odnoklassniki platform is estimated

to have over a million users. AfD related pages on the platform included the national support page *Russlanddeutsche für AfD* with 8,500 members and regional pages such as *AfD Baden-Württemberg* with 2,500 members and 20-30 daily posts of AfD campaign materials.

—One of the most active networks on Odnoklassniki is the aforementioned *Russlanddeutsche für AfD in NRW*,⁷² with almost 9,000 members. The timeline contains a mix of AfD campaign material and articles by German media outlets. The video feed contains clips from RTR, the official Russian state channel, alongside interviews with German-Russian AfD activists and excerpts from current affairs shows on domestic Russian-language broadcasters, where Russian-speaking AfD members commonly appear. In one excerpt, AfD's Eugen Schmidt (previously mentioned) appears on a talk show on the Russian state broadcaster, *Rossiia 1*, where he talks of the 'immigration chaos' caused by Merkel. Another story from *Rossiia 1* discusses how Russians are being mistreated in Germany.

—'Russkaja Germanija' is Facebook extension of the online paper *Russkaya Germany*, which is aimed at Russian immigrants to Germany. The page has 9,431 likes/followers. The objective of the page is to "help Russian-speaking immigrants to successfully integrate in their new homeland - while preserving their own culture and native language".⁷³ A visit to the website reveals several posts that feed grievances about refugees, including a report by a German organization called GASIM (Centre for Analysis and Strategy to Counter Illegal Migration), which charts levels of 'illegal immigration' in Germany. The hashtags at the end of the post read: #RussianGermany #migrants #refugees #illegalimmigrants.

These social media groups are not just limited to Russian-Germans; they also include users from within Russia.

—'Bündnis Deutschland-Russland' is a closed far right Facebook group where current and former AfD employees join pro-Kremlin activists in propagating messages against the German mainstream political establishment. A sampling from the group showed that two-thirds of the spam accounts refer to Russia, indicating that the automated accounts may be related to Russia. This group has close to 10,000 members and contains over 60 (self-proclaimed) current and former employees of AfD, such as Gunnar Norbert Lindemann and Kay Nerstheimer. Almost 100 people are from Russia.

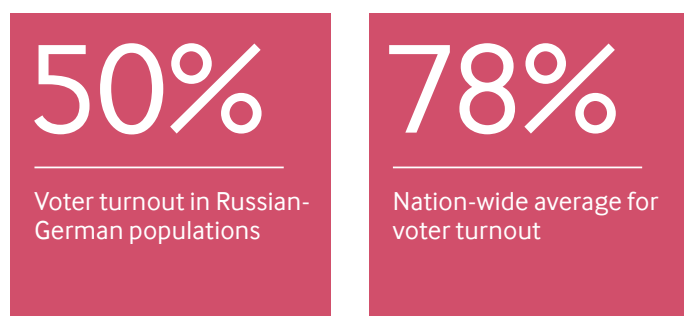
—Several hundred members also belong to various pro-Putin groups such as PUTINISTEN (Deutsche Freunde Wladimir Putins) and the 'Vladimir Putin Fan Club'. Over 40 members of this group that are also active in Merkel hate groups, such as *Offener Brief an die-Merkel-dir das Angela...!*, which requires prospective users to make a declaration that they are 'not a Merkel-friend, not a America-friend and not an enemy of Putin' in order to join.

Election results in residential areas with a high proportion of Russian-Germans offer insights into the impact of pro-Kremlin content.

With hindsight, we can geographically correlate high levels of AfD votes to a successful electoral campaign that targeted areas known to have large Russian-German populations. It appears that for Russian-Germans in particular, political representation on the constituency level remains very influential.⁷⁴

City/District	AfD vote in City/District overall	Russian-German area AfD vote
Pforzheim	19.3%	Buckenberg – 37%
Detmold	9.9%	Herberhausen – 32%
Waldbröl	14.7%	Eichen - 50.4%
Osnabrück	6.2%	Südkreis - 17%

Figure 3: The AfD vote in four cities or districts, plotted against the isolated Russian-German vote for AfD in those areas



—The areas include Pforzheim-Haidach, Berlin-Marzahn, Bielefeld-Baumheide, Detmold-Herberhausen, certain districts in Lahr, Osnabrück, Paderborn and Waldbröl. A persistent trend is discernible in these areas: below-average turnout (around 50%, this is less than the nation-wide average of 78%) and above-average results for the AfD. The table below shows a breakdown of the AfD vote in each district as a whole, corroborated against the AfD vote in Russian-German sub-districts or neighbourhoods.

—Although these figures indicate a strong correlation between the numbers of Russian-Germans in certain residential areas and the electoral result of AfD, they cannot be overlaid onto the Russian-German community as a whole. Additionally, it should be noted that these areas are also plagued by social problems like poverty and high unemployment. The overall results of AfD in deprived areas are generally above average, regardless of the number of residents with Soviet origin. The party achieved its best results in East Germany in the communities where Russian-Germans are either not present or play no significant role in the demographic makeup. A relatively high level of support for AfD might be a particular problem among the Russian-German community, but its overall nation-wide success in the elections cannot be attributed to the Russian-German vote.

5. Conclusions & Recommendations

Our findings reveal that both state and non-state international actors attempted to influence the German election campaign in 2017. International far right networks provided actionable support to far right groups in Germany. Kremlin-affiliated media outlets promoted material to far right, far left and Russian-German communities to exacerbate existing 'wedge issues'. Activists unearthed by this research have also engaged in election interference from France, Ukraine, Germany and the US.

In a wider political context, we are seeing the rapid expansion of transnational networks of disinformation and toxic speech, which can operationalise activity around events such as elections. These networks combine state and non-state actors, and form rapidly shifting alliances around a variety of interests and aims. This research demonstrates that it is becoming increasingly difficult to speak of 'outside' groups, let alone merely states, influencing some sort of coherent 'domestic' information space. Instead, we are seeing the emergence of a malign version of the originally optimistic idea of an informational 'global village'.

Responses must bear this international dimension in mind. They should aim to be coordinated internationally, while also addressing domestic fault lines. The following recommendations are addressed to sectors who we believe have a role to play in limiting the accessibility of disinformation, along with those who can help to build resilience against disinformation among vulnerable constituencies.

Recommendations for Civil Society & Foundations

Civil society, academic and philanthropic foundations must learn how to operate online as skilfully and tactically as the international far right. This will mean building technological capacity, working closely with social media platforms and experts.

Initiatives to undertake include:

- **Create cross-border cooperation with fact-checking and civic engagement groups** across Europe and the US. Civil society groups need to be able to operate as speedily and globally as far right groups in order to disrupt and limit the exposure of disinformation and toxic speech campaigns. Coordinated non-governmental led initiatives like

the Online Civil Courage Initiative have shown that centralised coordination can streamline these endeavours.⁷⁵ **Cooperation with the EU vs Disinformation Campaign is critical to avoid duplication of efforts.**⁷⁶

- **Develop ongoing online analytics capacities that are able to predict trends and anticipate political mobilisation.** Organisations in this sector need to improve their understanding of the far right ecosystem. Online engagement must go beyond the largest social media platforms to engage users on alternative platforms that have developed far right echo chambers. Efforts to penetrate these echo chambers must tap into the legitimate grievances that are being manipulated by extremist groups and offer alternative remedies.
- **Engage with Russian-speaking diaspora communities on social networks and enhance media literacy** among Russian-Germans, including older communities with poor knowledge of German and watch Russian state TV channels. IREX's project 'Learn to Discern' for example has carried out pioneering work in Ukraine to enhance media literacy skills through workshops in local libraries and social centres.⁷⁷

Recommendations for Policymakers

Multiple actors, both at home and abroad, seek to polarise German society by emphasising and exacerbating existing wedge issues. Policymakers and political parties must engage in more transparent, cross-party debate on topics such as immigration so as not to cede these issues to extremists. To better inform this process, policy makers should:

- **Support research networks** which reach across borders to analyse far right and far left networks. Supporting researchers to undertake this work in a sustained and coordinated way can provide a valuable feedback loop, providing policymakers with a network of experts to consult on potential policy measures or regulations.
- **Invest in sustainable digital literacy programmes** to help develop resilience among young people in Germany to both extreme-right disinformation and foreign influence campaigns.

Critical thinking skills need to not only be taught in schools, but also delivered via media and public awareness campaigns for adults.

- **Political actors must present evidence of foreign interference to the general public and raise awareness.** Now that the issue of state-sponsored disinformation is topical in other countries such as France and Spain, and with the adoption of the ‘EU Strategic Communication to Counteract Anti-EU Propaganda by Third Parties’ in the European Parliament last November,⁷⁸ **Germany is well-positioned to lead an EU-wide plan of action on this issue.**
- **Joint initiatives with other political parties in Western Europe to challenge Russian interference should be explored.** Members of the UK Labour party along with the British Electoral Commission are leading efforts to investigate Kremlin attempts to subvert the Brexit vote. German politicians with similar concerns should ally with them.
- **Mainstream political parties need to engage with Russian-speaking diaspora populations.** German mainstream political parties, along with those in other European countries with large Russian minorities, must ensure that political campaigns and documents are accessible to these communities.

Recommendations for Media

German mainstream media is losing authority within parts of the population who exist in increasingly closed echo chambers rife with disinformation. Mainstream media need to find ways to re-engage with them and reduce polarisation. To this end, they should:

- **Leverage data analysis techniques to understand alienated audiences and create forms of content that they are prepared to engage with.** Mainstream media need to undertake a thorough analysis of cognitive and narrative patterns in heavily partisan echo chambers, and experiment with delivering accurate information in various ways. A project organized by LSE Arena, for example, will work with Italian newspaper *Corriere della Serra* and data scientists to experiment with

different ways to cover the issue of immigration with a view to reducing polarisation and encouraging alienated audiences to engage with evidence-based research.

- **Encourage responsible reporting.** The aim of both the Kremlin and the international far right is to polarise German society. Mainstream media must have an understanding of how their own content can contribute to such fissures when it is misleading or sensationalist. Media outlets in Germany specifically should coordinate to establish good practices around responsible reporting.
- **Collaborate with the advertising sector to reduce financial incentives for disinformation.** Disinformation makes money: sensationalist lies make good clickbait. Media outlets should work in tandem with advertising brands and advertising analytics companies to initiate processes that can help to demonetize disinformation sites and content. An example of this kind of collaboration can be seen in the Open Brand Safety Initiative launched by Moat, Storyful and the City University of New York School of Journalism.⁷⁹
- **Support quality Russian-language media: both in Germany and internationally.** Russian-German TV channel *RTVD* was shown to be balanced in its coverage of the election, showing that there is both scope and a market for quality Russian-language media in Germany. However, such sources cannot currently compete with the entertainment content and budgets of Kremlin broadcasters and journalists often repeat Kremlin-backed and far right disinformation through a lack of professionalism rather than ideology. Support for quality TV channels, websites, radio and newspapers, is urgent. A comprehensive training and internship programme at mainstream German publications would help to improve standards. It is also imperative to strengthen international, non-Kremlin Russian-language media so that Russian minorities in other countries are provided with an alternative view on international affairs. These efforts are best coordinated with donors from other countries to increase impact. The European Endowment for Democracy, for example, has launched a content fund for independent Russian language video production which Germany can help support.⁸⁰

Endnotes

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