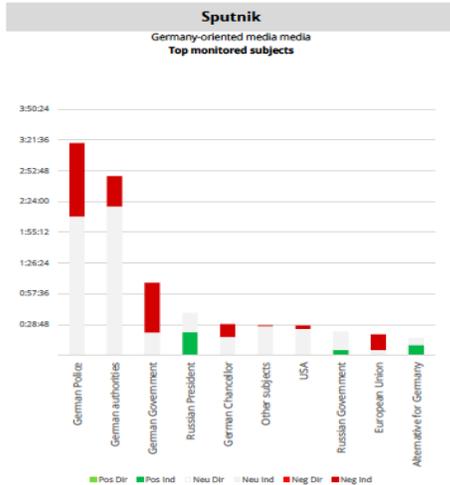## Allies: The Kremlin, the AfD, the Alt-Right and the German Elections
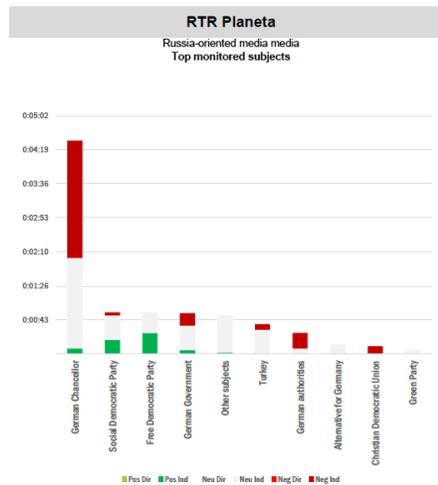
LONDON - Since June 2017, the ISD (Institute for Strategic Dialogue) and the Arena Project at the Institute of Global Affairs, LSE, have monitored foreign attempts to influence the German elections. Our preliminary research findings show that a network of pro-Russian and international far-right groups actively spread messages and memes designed to undermine mainstream parties and promote the AfD. Their activity grew especially pronounced in the final weeks of the campaign. We will be publishing a full report on social media and the German elections within the coming weeks, but in the meantime, here are some of our initial conclusions:

1) **The AfD and Kremlin Media mutually reinforced each other, in both German and Russian.**
   - German-language Kremlin media consistently favored the AfD over other parties.
   - A Russian bot network based in Nizhny Novgorod promoted the AfD free of charge. Our investigation, conducted with journalists from *Buzzfeed* Germany, reveals the details. https://www.buzzfeed.com/henkvaness/these-russian-hackers-say-theyre-using-twitter-bots-to-help?utm_term=.qoqjqEbn3#.pwL2XN6j4
   - Pro-Kremlin German bots, often the most frequent amplifiers of Kremlin media content in German, also shared high volumes of articles and hashtags that supported the AfD. These accounts, which promote *Sputnik* and *RT* at high scale and high speed on social media, also promote alt-right, pro-AfD sites such as *Journalistenwatch* and *Philosophia-Perennis*.
   - Inside Russia, AfD representatives served as spokespeople on popular news programs to support the Kremlin's overwhelmingly negative narratives about Europe. These programs were then watched by Russian-Germans, and shown on AfD Russian social media sites, where they promoted the AfD's cause.
   - Russian-language TV channels focused heavily on Merkel, pinpointing her as an enemy. Our analysis revealed news reports that were unbalanced and subjective, selecting their sources with an intention to present a negative picture of Merkel's government.
   - Until August, *Sputnik* and *RT Deutsch* were consistently negative in their coverage of German officials and institutions, with one exception: the AfD.
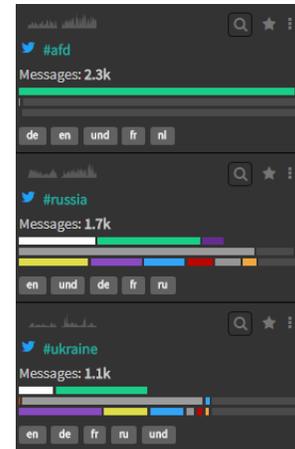
Sputnik.de reporting shows a clear bias towards the AFD, the only German institution presented positively in Sputnik coverage between July 8th and 21st.

RTR Planeta coverage from August 5th to 18th shows a bias against Merkel.

2) **Pro-Kremlin bots supported the amplification of wedge issues and pro-AfD narratives.**

- We identified 10 bots that have been extremely active in spreading pro-Kremlin media in German language messaging. They are the main propagators of *RT Deutsch* and *Sputnik Deutsch* content on Twitter in Germany. These bots have posted 3,735 messages about the AfD/#AfD since June 11th, out of a total of 71,695 messages. This means that as a proportion of their total output, the topic of the AfD represents around 5.2%.

- The top three hashtags used between June and September by these 10 bots are #AfD, #russia and #ukraine (see right).

- This group of pro-Kremlin automated accounts also linked to articles from far-right German sites such as *philosophia-perennis*. Popular themes included Merkel's attempt to control the press and freeze out the AfD, as well as supposed electoral fraud in the Nordrhein-Westfalen local elections. After the AfD claimed that it had been the subject of electoral fraud in May, both *RT* and *Sputnik* picked up the story. This was then immediately amplified by a number of these actors, including self-confessed 'Russian Media Sniper' @marcelsardo.
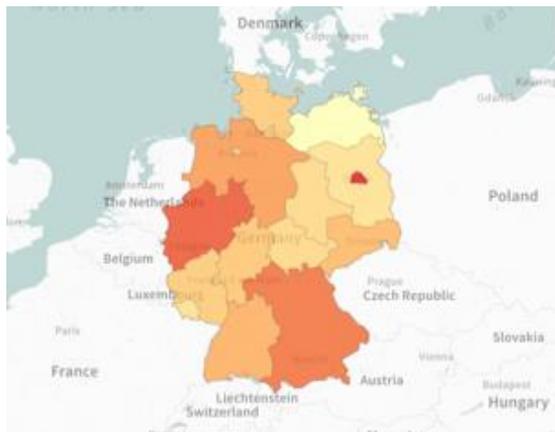
Example posts by two pro-Russian bots in Germany that shared Sputnik articles about election fraud: @Lexx1812 and @proBorderNation.

- We also witnessed the re-emergence of a previously banned bot that was a far-right, pro-Russian amplifier during the French elections. @nousfrancais was active in propagating disinformation about immigrant violence in Sweden. This account posted or shared 117 posts about Merkel, in a mix of French, German and occasionally English. Sources for the original content includes both the French arm of *Sputnik*, *RT Deutsch*, Russian '*Online Magazine*' (@OnlineMagazin) and notorious far-right French outlet, @F_Desouche.

3) **Wedge issues were amplified using disinformation that favoured AfD campaign narratives.**
   - Some German politicians served as enablers for mainstreaming disinformation. For example, former CDU politician Erika Steinbach acted as an amplifier for disinformation about immigrant violence in Sweden. On August 7th she posted a story, 'Raped Sweden Suffers from Stockholm Syndrome' which was originally featured in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, a Russian tabloid. The story is a disturbing portrayal of Islamic immigration to Sweden, comparing it to Syria and Iraq, and perpetuating false information about 'no-go zones'. The website of *Russlanddeutsche fur AfD* subsequently pointed to Sweden in order to call for greater powers for German police, claiming they are targets of Muslim immigrants.
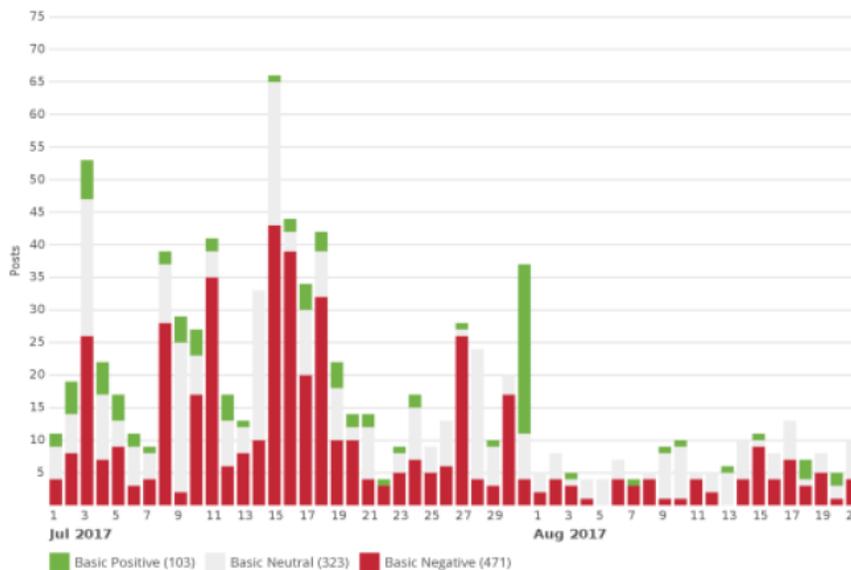

This map shows how the story mentioned above was spread geographically in communities tagged as 'pro-Russian' in Germany. There is particular engagement from Russian and Far Right German media sources, in NRW, Bayern and Berlin.

Source: Crimson Hexagon

4) AfD's Russian-language social media strategy also targeted existing grievances about immigration and the treatment of Russian communities within Germany.

- The AFD is the only major German party to have a Russian language social media strategy. It spans 10 social media networks, including running an account on Odnoklassniki and a Facebook page in Russian, which is estimated to have over a million German-Russian users.

- One group, *'Russlanddeutsche Fur AFD NRW'*, has almost 9,000 members. The timeline contains a mix of AfD adverts and articles by German media outlets. The video feed contains clips from *RTR*, the official Russian state channel, alongside low-quality interviews with German-Russian AfD activists and excerpts from glossy current affairs shows on domestic Russian-language broadcasters, where Russian-speaking AfD members commonly appear. In one excerpt, AfD's Eugen Schmidt appears on a talk show on the Russian state broadcaster, *Rossiya 1*, where he talks of the 'immigration chaos' caused by Merkel. Another story from *Rossiya 1* is about how Russians are being mistreated in Germany.

- Social networks and forums popular with Russian speakers in Germany frequently tap into the negative sentiments around refugees. 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 Russia language media that denigrate Merkel, and negative stories about refugees.
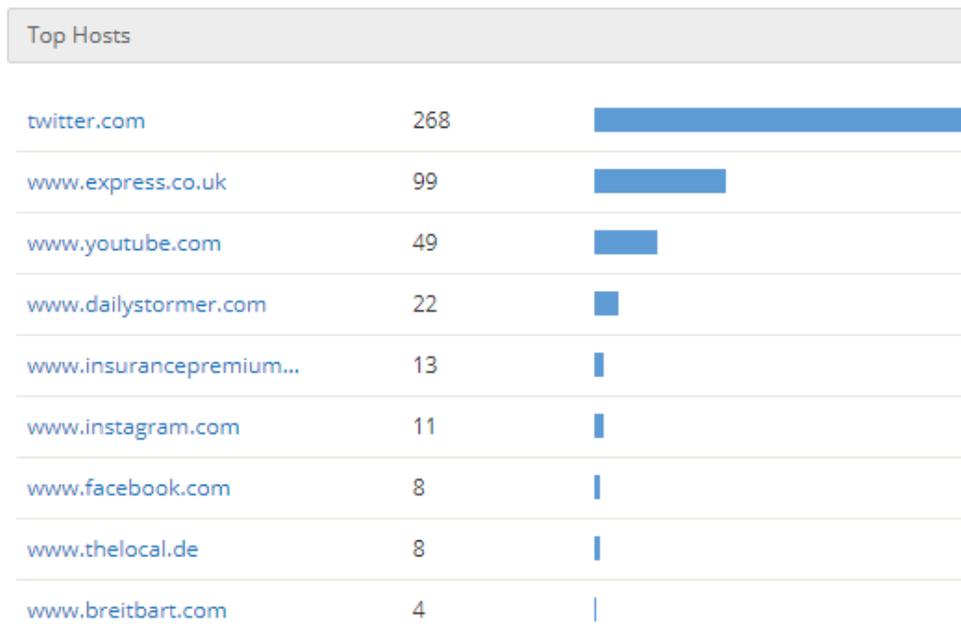
    The image below shows how posts using key words such as 'refugees' in Russian online forums contain largely negative sentiment, particularly in July.

5) The influence of pro-Kremlin and international far-right groups crossed over into alt-right German online forums and Discord channels.

- A deep ethnographic analysis of alt-right Discord channels shows users from the USA and Germany traded tips on how to promote the AfD and discredit Merkel.
- The term MGGA/#MGGA (Make Germany Great Again) appeared in 2,961 posts on public forums, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) between 1st July and 6th September.

Top sites being linked to within messages using #MGGA, including *Daily Stormer* and *Breitbart:*

Top Hosts		
twitter.com	268	
www.express.co.uk	99	
www.youtube.com	49	
www.dailystormer.com	22	
www.insurancepremium…	13	
www.instagram.com	11	
www.facebook.com	8	
www.thelocal.de	8	
www.breitbart.com	4	

- 'Bündnis Deutschland-Russland' is a closed far-right Facebook group where current and former AfD employees have found a home next to pro-Kremlin activists in propagating messages against the German political establishment. This group has 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. There are also over 40 members of this group that are also active in Merkel hate groups.

The full analytical report will be available in December 2017 on the following websites: http://www.lse.ac.uk/iga/arena and www.isdglobal.org.

For more information contact Chloe Colliver, ISD: cc@isdglobal.org or Alistair Shawcross, Arena: A.J.Shawcross@lse.ac.uk.