

## Executive Summary

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

Our findings suggest that a mixture of inaccurate Russian state-sponsored news and pro-Kremlin social media manipulation was used to reinforce socially divisive issues such as immigration and distrust of democratic institutions, with a clear bias towards the AfD party.

We found that Kremlin-affiliated media outlets are involved in a mutually reinforcing relationship where they support the causes of German ‘anti-establishment’ movements, on both the far right and far left, who in return support Moscow’s agenda. The same dynamics have been observed in the US and France, where we also saw explicit international coordination. Our research has uncovered simultaneous efforts made by the US and European ‘alt-right’ to work with local actors in order to wage highly coordinated campaigns in support of the AfD.

In order to uncover Kremlin-linked 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 far left, and (3) the Russian-German community.

### Key Findings:

While it is well established that national governments have engaged in activities of a political nature outside of their borders, the findings of this project contribute some depth to the current discussion around Kremlin influence in European democratic processes. The methodology deployed here allowed us to uncover both top-down (government-led) attempts and bottom-up (grassroots-led) attempts at influence.

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

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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1 James Angelos (2017), 'The Prophet of Germany's New Right', The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/10/magazine/the-prophet-of-germanys-new-right.html> (Last accessed 21/11/17)

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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.

## Conclusions and 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.

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## 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 initiatives like the Online Civil Courage Initiative that ISD has led with Facebook have shown that centralised coordination can streamline these endeavours.<sup>2</sup> Cooperation with the EU vs Disinformation Campaign is critical to avoid duplication of efforts.<sup>3</sup>
- 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.<sup>4</sup>

## 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

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2 See more about the Online Civil Courage Initiative at: [http://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/OCCI\\_one-pager.pdf](http://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/OCCI_one-pager.pdf)

3 This campaign is run by the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force, see more at: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>

4 See more at: <https://www.irex.org/insight/ukrainians-self-defense-against-information-war-what-we-learned-learn-discern>

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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,<sup>5</sup> 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

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<sup>5</sup> European Parliament resolution of 23 November 2016 on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties’ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P8-TA-2016-0441&format=XML&language=EN> (Last accessed 24/11/2017)

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.<sup>6</sup>
- 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.<sup>7</sup>

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6 See more at: <https://newscorp.com/2017/05/02/storyful-and-moat-launch-initiative-to-combat-fake-news/>

7 See more at: <https://www.democracyendowment.eu/news/bringing-plurality-1/>

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