

## Migrating Counterpublics: German Far-Right Online Groups on Russian Social Media

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Due to censorship and deplatforming policies on big social media platforms, far-right users have been forced to migrate to other online platforms that provide them with safer spaces for communication. One of these platforms is the Russian social networking site VK. This research investigates the German political environment on VK, which predominantly comprises online groups supporting far-right views. The analysis of users' activity in the online groups showed that VK functions as an alternative platform and is not used for outward-oriented goals. Looking at the activities on VK in terms of the theory of sustainability practices, we claim that one of the most critical functions of VK is archiving content. This practice ensures the preservation of accumulated narratives in the case of complete deplatforming on a mainstream platform. We found that people who use VK for communication form two different thematic clusters: The first focuses on German domestic issues, and the second focuses on transnational conspiracy theories.

*Keywords: counterpublics, far-right communication, topic modeling, deplatforming, social media*

Social media platforms have become key political instruments for proponents of far-right and populist ideologies in different countries. By exploiting social media, far-right actors (e.g., parties, grassroots movements, and regular users) form ties with each other (Caiani & Wagemann, 2009), recruit new members, maintain a collective identity, and share and spread ideological content.

However, regular users, activists, and politicians supporting radical right views may experience deplatforming and moderation on these platforms (DeCook, 2019; Rogers, 2020). Facing these challenges, radicals may then move to social media platforms characterized by less strict policies against extremist or hate content. Recent academic and journalistic works have found that adherents of far-right ideas from European countries and the United States have actively moved to the Russian social networking site VK, even though this platform was initially created for citizens of Russia and post-Soviet countries and is especially used by them (Golova, 2020; Johnson et al., 2019; Merzlikin, 2017). The studies assume that VK has become one of the "shelters," where far-right users can form online groups without the mainstream extent of censorship from the platform's administration.

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This study investigates the digital environment of German far-right online groups formed on VK through the lens of counterpublic theory. Kaiser and Rauchfleisch (2019) differentiated the functions of mainstream and alternative platforms for far-right users. While mainstream platforms are mostly used for pursuing outward-oriented goals that manifest themselves in spreading counternarratives, alternative platforms function as backups that can be used if the main channel is deplatformed.

In this regard, VK cannot be fully associated with mainstream and alternative platforms from the perspective of European users. With many users from different (mainly but not only post-Soviet) countries, VK is a global media platform that does not represent itself as a safe space for radical ideologies. However, VK has some regulatory policies that are primarily oriented toward the Russian political context and are beneficial to far-right users from European countries. This twofold position of VK makes it an interesting case for studying the strategies used by the far right to avoid moderation and understanding of VK's role in these strategies. To better understand the role that VK plays for far-right users, we investigated the activity patterns and themes discussed in German far-right online groups.

### **Counterpublics in the Digital Age**

In liberal democracies, political challengers of mainstream parties and governments are theorized as counterpublics. In the 1990s, the concept held up for publics on the left side of the political spectrum, social movements, and critical voices that were excluded from mainstream public discourse (Habermas, 1989). The critical opponents of this conception (Asen, 2000; Fraser, 1990) have argued that the public sphere comprises multiple dominant (hegemonic) publics and counterpublics that form alternative communicative spaces. In Fraser's (1990) terminology, counterpublics are created by marginalized groups (at this time, she was writing about women and African Americans) to contest and challenge the dominant discourse. The theory of counterpublics paved the way for research on how oppressed groups use the affordances of social media platforms to create alternative communicative spaces and/or spread their counternarratives (Jackson & Welles, 2015).

Based on the existing literature (Asen, 2000; Fraser, 1990), Toepfl and Piwoni (2018) distinguished between two main goals of counterpublics: inward-oriented and outward-oriented goals. For inward-oriented goals, counterpublics are to find or create a safe communicative space where they can develop alternative collective identities and freely share their ideas and interests. Outward-oriented goals consist of counterpublics' endeavours to change the dominant discourse by spreading counternarratives and reaching wider audiences.

The concept of counterpublics was developed to describe social groups fighting for progressive ideas (Fraser, 1990). However, these social groups turned to anti-democratic groups who used communication strategies and approaches similar to counterpublics on the left. For instance, communities committing to either a radical right or left agenda capitalise on their feelings of being marginalized and excluded from the mainstream public and political discourse and employ similar practices and tactics to change this agenda and/or strengthen their collective identities (Kaiser & Puschmann, 2017; Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2018; Xu, 2020). In this trajectory, the current study focuses on far-right counterpublics from Germany.

### **Far-Right Actors in Germany**

In this study, we focus on the far right scene in Germany. Speaking of far-right ideology, we differentiate between two actors that constitute it: radical right actors and right-wing extremists. The former does not oppose the principles of a liberal democratic system but questions them and criticizes concepts like pluralism or minority rights. In contrast, right-wing extremists do not accept liberal democracy and prefer to gain power violently (Mudde, 2019; Rydgren, 2018).

The essential element of the German far-right political environment is political parties. One of the most notable and successful political parties is Alternative for Germany (AfD), which won 82 seats in Bundestag in the 2021 national elections. AfD has significantly changed from being the non-radical Eurosceptic populist party it was at its inception in 2013 to becoming a radical right party with salient, anti-immigrant, Islamophobic attitudes (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019). Another German far-right political party, the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), has a longer history than AfD (founded in 1964) and is characterized by more radical views. The former members of NPD founded two extremist neo-Nazi parties Der Dritte Weg (The Third Way) and Die Rechte (The Right; Kruglanski, Webber, & Koehler, 2019).

Apart from the institutionalized political parties, the far-right environment in Germany includes bottom-up political movements that organize their activities primarily via the affordances of social media. One of them is a racist movement, Patriotic Europeans, against the Islamisation of the West (Pegida), an initiator of protest demonstrations against immigration and Islam in Germany. Another noticeable movement is the Identitarian Movement (IM; "chapter" of the pan-European network of Identitarians), which based its ideology on the intellectual heritage of the French intellectual far-right movement New Right. Being successors of the New Right, IM, while not claiming that some cultures are better than others, defends ethnopluralist stances and speaks against mixing cultures and traditions (Ahmed & Pisoiu, 2021).

Established political parties and movements do not limit the far-right scene in Germany. Many far-right activists join subcultural extremist groups, such as Autonomous Nationalists (AN) or Reichsbürger (Citizens of the Reich). The birth and subsequent popularity of these radical associations are interrelated with the disappointment of right-wingers in NPD who could not succeed in the electoral competition. The adherents of AN and Reichsbürger do not believe in democratic institutions and are sometimes involved in violent demonstrations (Kruglanski et al., 2019).

### **The German Far-Right and Social Media**

A few studies have concluded that despite seemingly different ideological stances of far-right actors in real life, they exploit similar narratives and topics in online settings. Comparative studies of the online activity of AfD and Pegida have shown that the agendas of both actors converge on a nativist issue that manifests itself in a high criticism of Germany's immigration policies and an Islamophobic narrative (Puschmann, Ausserhofer, & Šlerka, 2020; Stier, Posch, Bleier, & Strohmaier, 2017). The exploration of tweets by the populist radical right party AfD, the New Right movement IM, and the extremist organization AN also show that these actors, regardless of their initially different ideologies, exploit the same frames blaming left elites for allowing migrants to come to Germany (Ahmed & Pisoiu, 2021).

Concerning far-right audiences, one of the overarching themes uniting followers of various far-right channels on YouTube is the "refugee crisis" (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2020). Another noticeable narrative in the posts of German far-right crowds is conspiracy theories. According to Hoseini et al. (2021), German users are the most active in discussions of QAnon on Telegram. A similar interest in conspiracy theories was also observed in the far-right environment on YouTube (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2020).

### **Deplatforming and Censorship on Social Media Platforms**

Despite the affordances provided by social media, their usage is more challenging for radical users and communities because of the censorship policies employed. Posts made or shared by members of these groups are often moderated, as they contain hate speeches or radical views violating established platform rules. Some users also experience deplatforming (i.e., banning a user's page). For instance, in 2019, Facebook and Instagram banned the accounts of prominent far-right activists in the United States (including Alex Jones and Milo Yiannopoulos; Rogers, 2020; Taylor, 2019). German and Austrian right-wingers also experienced moderation and deplatforming on YouTube (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2021).

One way extremist actors handle restrictions and censorship from a platform's administration is through digital migration to other platforms, web forums, and hostings. Existing empirical research shows that an increase in the activity of far-right users on the messaging platform Telegram is interconnected with the massive banning of far-right actors on mainstream social media platforms (Urman & Katz, 2020). It is worth mentioning that researchers do not discuss the complete and final migration to other platforms; the far-right endeavour to create a sustainable online ecosystem incorporating various platforms (Baele, Brace, & Coan, 2020; DeCook, 2019). They use mainstream digital venues, simultaneously exploiting the affordances of alternative platforms that are safer in terms of content moderation and censorship (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2021). Johnson and colleagues' (2019) study shows that members of hate groups constantly alternate between different online venues, depending on the changes in moderation policies of these platforms.

The functions of the online groups created on mainstream and alternative platforms may differ. Communication through online mainstream platforms is rather outward-oriented and characterized by an active spreading of counternarratives. In contrast, alternative platforms function as spaces where users can focus on their "collective identity and regroupment" (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2021, p. 7). Alternative platforms also function as backups. Members of hate and extremist online communities feel threatened by administrators of mainstream platforms and anticipate deplatforming. This "anticipation of failure" motivates them to actively create alternative spaces to archive the content they produce on mainstream platforms. The practice of archiving allows them to store ideas and narratives already developed on main platforms, which can be lost with deplatforming (DeCook, 2019).

Social media researchers are concerned with how migration to alternative platforms can influence the activities and communication of far-right users. Kaiser and Rauchfleisch (2021) point out that the narrative of victimhood chosen by many deplatformed right-wingers and the desire to maintain a strong collective identity can lead to increased activity on alternative platforms and the radicalization of content. Overall, the analyses of three different alternative platforms (Gab, Telegram, and BitChute) showed that deplatformed actors could reach smaller audiences than what they had on mainstream platforms (Ali et al.,

2021; Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2021; Rogers, 2020). Furthermore, deplatformed users' communication on Gab became more toxic than it had been on Twitter and Reddit (Ali et al., 2021).

### Research Questions

VK presents a peculiar case of the whole digital ecology of the European far right. It does not present itself as an alternative platform and does not claim that users can safely express their radical opinions (in contrast to Gab, for instance). Moreover, VK, under the control of the Russian government, actively bans and moderates content on its platform (primarily groups of people opposing the politics of government online; Poupin, 2021). However, VK does not fall under the German Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG), which fights hate speech on social media platforms (Hoppenstedt, 2019). This makes communication for far-right users on VK much safer, although it is still not clear if VK affordances fit the needs of migrating far-right users (from previous studies, we know that they use VK, but we do not know how extensive this usage is) or if they are valuable for far-right users in terms of inward-oriented goals (e.g., collective identity formation).

It is also important to study whether VK facilitates far-right users' outward-oriented activity. On the one hand, VK is mostly used by Russian-speaking users and can stop German far-right users from spreading their narratives on the platform. On the other hand, many post-Soviet citizens have migrated to Germany and still use this social media platform. Golova's (2020) study explored the reposting network of the online groups created by post-Soviet migrants in Germany and found that some of these groups that have pro-Russian/anti-Ukrainian political agendas are connected with German far-right online groups. The German far-right environment is not the main focus of this study, so we still do not know how common these connections are with the Russian segment of VK for German users. However, we assume that German far-right groups on VK have some outward-oriented goals and are potentially interested in interactions with the Russian progovernmental segment of VK, which is formed around other issues but is rather prone to support German far-right ideology.

Therefore, the first main goal of the current study is twofold. First, we will establish an efficient methodological technique that would allow us to identify German far-right groups on VK. Second, we will analyze the internal activity and interactivity of the observed groups to better understand the goals for which these groups were created on VK. The first research question was thus formulated as follows:

*RQ1: Which online groups do German far-right form on the Russian social media platform VK? What are the activity and interactivity patterns of these online groups?*

The second part of the analysis is dedicated to the themes discussed in the online groups. One of the defining characteristics of a counterpublic is that its communication is formed based on issues that play polarising roles in society (Kaiser & Puschmann, 2017). Therefore, this study determines which issues are raised in online groups of migrated users and whether there are any narratives that distinguish their communication patterns from what recent studies have identified on big social media platforms (Puschmann et al., 2020; Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2020; Stier et al., 2017).

*RQ2: Which issues do members of the German radical right counterpublic discuss on VK?*

## **Data and Methods**

### ***Data Collection***

The analysis in the present work was based on data collected from the social media platform VK, the most popular social media platform in Russia. Using the application programming interface (API) of the platform, it was possible to extract most of the public information from the observed online groups and users. The programming language R was used to make queries about the API methods of VK.

The study's first challenge was identifying online groups created by German users. Even though this study's primary focus is the groups with far-right ideology, we searched for German online groups with different political agendas. We made this methodological decision as it was crucial to understanding whether using VK was a specific tactic of far-right users (who were more susceptible to deplatforming or had already been deplatformed) or a common practice for all German-speaking users regardless of their political views. Therefore, the search query included not only German far-right groups but also groups inclined toward other political beliefs.

As we did not know how German users named their online groups, the search started by identifying the prominent political actors (parties, politicians, movements) with far-right, left, and centrist political views, as well as alternative and mainstream German media outlets. With far-right communities, we wanted a complete picture of different groups in the VK environment. Thus, we developed a list of actors representing this ideology's different sides: extremist parties and organizations, radical right and new right parties and movements, and alternative media outlets. In the current study, we limited our scope to far-right political actors in Germany. We did not search for German neo-Nazi music scenes or esoteric groups. Indeed, this approach has some limitations, as these groups can also be highly politicized. The full list of search items can be found in Appendix A.

The search query with left, centrist, and mainstream actors from the German political arena and media environment returned only two groups that could not be located on the right political spectrum. The first was related to the German weekly news magazine Spiegel, and the second was created by Russian supporters of the German left party Die Linke. However, both were outdated since the Spiegel group stopped functioning in 2017, and the Die Linke group last posted in 2015. Spiegel, one of the most influential media outlets in Germany, had slightly more than 1,000 members in the VK group, while, for instance, Journalistenwatch, a group associated with far-right media, had more than 4,000 participants. Die Linke supporters had only 150 members, a much smaller headcount than any group related to AfD.

Thus, the following cleaning and filtering steps were related only to groups returned by the search query for German far-right actors. From the list of the returned groups, (1) all non-German-speaking groups or German-speaking groups representing actors not related to Germany (e.g., Austrian online groups) and (2) groups that did not have a clear far-right agenda were removed. Although identifying the language and country was quite simple, the second condition required manual work. To determine if a community had a far-right orientation, we checked descriptions of the groups (usually, the administrators had written a few sentences about their group's main goals and ideas) and five of the latest posts published in the group. A

group was selected for a final sample if it associated itself explicitly with a far-right political standpoint and/or its thematic focus was dedicated to at least three main themes distinguishing German far-right communication: (1) criticism of multiculturalism, immigration, and Muslim culture; (2) antisemitism and far-right conspiracy theories; (3) criticism of established and/or left German political parties and certain politicians; (4) criticism of traditional/mainstream media outlets; and (5) criticism of democratic and progressive values. After filtration, 44 communities remained. In the second step, the filtered groups were used as seeds to find other groups created by German right-wingers.

One of the study's methodological challenges was developing a method that would allow us to extend the sample by adding online groups that did not have a clear connection with existing political and media actors but still had a far-right agenda. We used snowball sampling (which was already used in far-right social media research; Caiani & Wagemann, 2009), where new groups were found based on reposts. However, VK did not fit this approach well, as the groups appeared to be less active at reposting. Thus, we searched for new groups based on the group members' followings. For this step, the most active users from the collected groups (i.e., those who had left more than one post or comment in one group) were taken, and all the groups they followed (if they did not hide this information) were extracted. The groups that did not satisfy the aforementioned conditions were removed. The final list of groups in the analysis included 177 online communities.

For each of these groups, we collected all textual data (posts and comments to posts) and members' information from the day the group was created until 31 December 2019 (or the last active day of the group). Our research covers the period from 2015 to 2019. From the initial sample, we left for further analysis those groups with at least 50 comments written per one of a group's active years. Finally, we had 125 groups for the analysis.

To estimate the internal activities of these groups, we calculated all the necessary statistics on posts, comments, and members. As in Golova's (2020) research, reposts were interpreted as information flows created by online groups to communicate with other circles on the platform. Thus, by analyzing the reposting activity of these groups, it was possible to determine whether they had outward-oriented goals.

### ***Topic Modeling***

To identify the issues raised by the members of these groups, we applied topic modeling to the comment texts. The exploration of the groups' contents showed that posts in most groups were news items taken from external sources (on average, 67% of these posts were linked to external sources). Simultaneously, as has been shown with media outlets (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2018), comment sections became the main communicative spaces for social media users. Therefore, the text analysis focused exclusively on the comments written by the members. For further analysis, we removed all duplicated comments, comments written in non-German languages, and comments shorter than 100 characters. Afterward, we removed posts that had only one comment and those that had the same user writing all the comments on a post (such an activity, in most cases, is a sign of spamming).

For the topic model, punctuation, numbers, and terms that appeared in less than 0.7% of the comments were removed. All words were stemmed with the help of the spell checker "Hunspell" (Ooms,

2018). After that, comments (only those that had more than two comments) were aggregated based on posts, which produced 75,016 documents in the model. Therefore, in our model, one document represented all the comments for one post. All small documents (less than 100 characters) were removed. The final collection included 69,141 documents.

Most topic models are based on the bag-of-words model, which represents texts as separate words, regardless of their order in original documents. Based on the co-occurrences of words in documents, a model provides a researcher with latent groups of words (called topics). Each topic includes all the words from a corpus, but words relate to topics with different probabilities. Researchers interpret these topics by looking at the words with the highest probabilities for each topic (Blei, 2012). For the present study, correlated topic modeling (CTM) was selected. In contrast to the classic topic modeling algorithm Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), CTM allows the correlation of identified topics, which gives it a better fit than LDA (Blei & Lafferty, 2007).

Implementing CTM in the STM package for the R programming language (Roberts, Stewart, & Tingley, 2019) provided the FREX metric that identified the most exclusive words for a topic. Using both FREX and high-probability words made the interpretation easier and more reliable.

One feature of topic modeling algorithms is that a researcher independently decides how many topics a model should identify. To choose the number of topics, we applied a data-driven approach (Roberts et al., 2019), which conducts several tests to estimate the optimal number of topics, combined with a manual interpretation of the results. According to the data-driven approach, the optimal number of topics varies between 20 and 30 (see Appendix B). The manual interpretation (which included three coders, two of whom were German native speakers) showed that a 20-topic solution gave more consistent topics and returned fewer topics that could not be interpreted. For further validation of this solution, the word set intrusion test from the "oolong" package was employed (Chan & Sältzer, 2020). For each topic, the word set intrusion test puts together high probability terms from this topic and one "intrusive term" from another topic; the task of a coder is to identify this "intrusive term." All three coders conducted the test, and the test results showed that the overall precision of the model was high (mean model precision was 0.88). According to the test, coders could not provide consistent answers for three topics (*Topic 2, Topic 13, and Topic 20*), so they were excluded from further analysis.

To cluster the groups based on the identified topics and determine their thematic profiles, we applied a hierarchical clustering algorithm to the theta-matrix (where each row represented a distribution of topics over an observed group) returned by CTM. Regarding probability distributions, the Hellinger distance was chosen as a distance measure in the clustering algorithm. We explored the resulting dendrogram and calculated silhouette scores for 1–10 clusters to define the optimal number of clusters (see Appendix C). Based on this analysis, we decided to work further with two clusters.



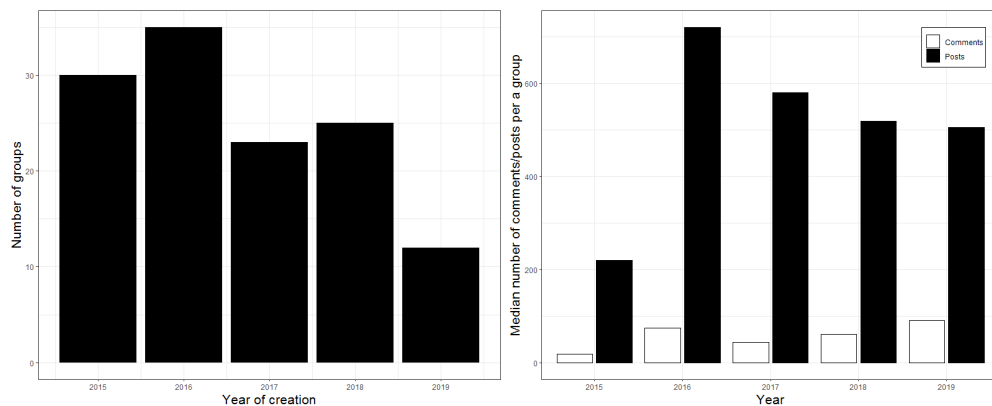
## Findings

### *Activities of the German Far-Right Groups on VK*

As mentioned in the previous section, the German-speaking political environment on VK mostly comprises online groups with sound far-right agendas. It is worth noting that only a minority of these groups explicitly claim that they support or follow existing political or media actors. Based on the names and descriptions of these groups, we can say that *four* groups support the populist far-right party AfD, *four* groups support Pegida, *two* groups support Identitarian Movement adherents, and *seven* groups have a connection with niche German extremist right-wing parties/associations/movements (for instance, Der Dritte Weg). The search query also returned 25 online groups related to relatively prominent alternative right-leaning media outlets and some small media and blogs.

The hacktivist group called Anonymous (*seven groups*) is also present on VK. The official Facebook page of this community (which initially did not have any connections with the radical right scene) was “hijacked” by German far-right users in 2012. Since then, it has mostly been used to spread far-right and conspiracy narratives (Rafael, 2015).

Although the initial search query included only political actors and media groups, the snowball sampling yielded a wide spectrum of German far-right online groups without a clear connection to any political associations, movements, or media (*76 groups*). In contrast to Myagkov and colleagues’ (2019) study on Islamist and Russian far-right communities on VK, most German right-wingers did not “camouflage” their ideological stances and openly expressed their negative attitude toward Muslims and German mainstream politicians in the groups’ names and descriptions. One potential explanation for this openness is that the VK administration is not concerned with European radical right populist content on its platform and does not remove it. During our analysis, only two groups were completely banned; both had highly extremist antisemitic content.



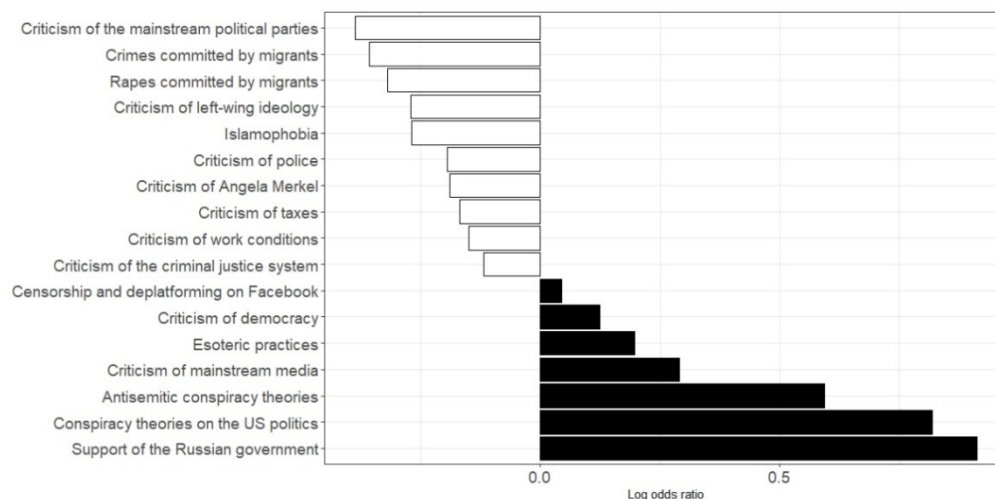
**Figure 1. Activity patterns of German far-right groups on VK. The left chart represents the dynamics of group creation, and the right side represents the posting and commenting activities of the users.**

From the left side of Figure 1, we can observe that even though many German far-right groups on VK were already created in 2015, active posting started in 2016. This can be interconnected with the banning of the highly active far-right Facebook page Anonymous Kollektiv, which occurred in May 2016 (Leisegang, 2017). After 2016, the activity dynamics of German VK users began decreasing. In 2019, right-wingers created only 12 new groups (twice less than in 2018). The right side of Figure 1 shows that the median number of posts also experienced a decline. However, we can say that members of the groups still used VK and produced new content (interestingly, the number of comments in 2019 noticeably increased). It is worth noting that the number of comments was much lower than the number of posts during these years. We also found that most members preferred to be lurkers and not write anything in the comment sections (the median number of members for a group was 710, and the median percentage of members who had written at least one comment was 21%).

Based on the groups' interactivity analysis, the groups did not communicate actively with each other or with external audiences on the platform. On average, 4% of the posts were reposts from other German far-right groups, and only 0.5% were reposts from other groups that were out of this sample. We explored the reposts from the groups out of this sample. We found some connections to Russian anti-Ukrainian groups (as was mentioned in the study of Golova, 2020) and the German antisemitic group involved in the network of antisemitic communities from different European countries.

### ***Issues Discussed in German Far-Right Groups***

The results of the CTM model can be found in the Appendix (see Appendix D). We calculated the log odds ratio for all interpretable topics to differentiate the thematic features of the two identified clusters of the groups. Figure 2 shows how the thematic profiles of the identified clusters differed. White bars represent topics that are more specific to the first cluster, and black bars represent topics that characterize the second cluster.



**Figure 2. Thematic profiles of the identified groups' clusters.**

### *Domestic Issues*

The first cluster (93 groups) adhered to a traditional populist radical right agenda characterized by a radical right populist discourse that combined an ethnic nationalist narrative with criticism of the elites (in this case, established politicians and the mainstream media). One of the specific features of this cluster is that the comments focus exclusively on the internal political situation in Germany. All the groups expressing open support for the political party AfD and the political movements Pegida and IM are related to this cluster.

Ethnic nationalism manifested in digital tactics that demonized refugees as a threat to the German people. First, the comments described immigrants as criminals and perpetrators. In doing so, they used emotional and aggressive vocabulary mixed with warnings that women and children were threatened (*Topic 4*) and collected anecdotal evidence of crimes committed by migrants (*Topic 16*). We can see this narrative in the comment summarizing many users' concerns: "It is also vile when women are raped, and men and women are stabbed with knives and machetes here in Germany" (Commenter 1). Second, by exploiting the cultural dimensions of this narrative, members also argued for the incompatibility of Islam with European values and stirred up fears of the "Islamization" of German culture (*Topic 8*). For instance, one commenter claimed, "The subtle, Western, politically correct distinctions such as Islam and political Islam do not interest Muslims" (Commenter 2).

The criticism of immigration was highly interrelated with anti-elitist stances and aggressive rhetoric against Germany's essential social and political institutions. The far-right groups were eager to criticize the established German political parties and politicians ("These system parties are the downfall of us all and regardless of who voted how—they always legitimize themselves again"; Commenter 3), especially for their immigration policies allowing refugees to come into Germany (*Topic 9 and Topic 14*). Police and courts (both were called "corrupted"), according to the groups' members, acted exclusively against right-wingers while defending their political and ideological opponents and refugees (*Topic 15 and Topic 10*).

The resentment was directed toward supporters and representatives of left-wing movements and parties (e.g., activists of Antifa; *Topic 19*). Left-wing activists were often labeled "nazis" or "fascists" and blamed for opposing freedom of speech ("Who are the Nazis again? [. . .] I think that the guys in the red T-shirts who are always yelling 'Nazis out'"; Commenter 5).

Furthermore, commentators criticized Germany's domestic economic and social security system, especially the Hartz plan for the unemployed and low-wage groups (the reforms for the German labor market) (*Topic 7 and Topic 12*).

### *Transnational Issues*

The second cluster (32 groups) united the groups that were less concerned with Germany's domestic political situation and were highly exposed to the issues of international politics and global conspiracy theories.

The members of these groups were actively involved in discussing the United States' political situation. While having a critical attitude toward the Democratic Party of the United States, the users actively supported Donald Trump. Based on our reading of the comments related to this topic, users also believed in the QAnon conspiracy theory, which is popular in the American public sphere (*Topic 1*). For example, in the following comment, the user recommends a QAnon YouTube video: "A very nice video telling who is behind the control processes and power structures [ . . . ] and Q revealed it!!!!" (Commenter 6). This focus on United States politics can be explained by the users' fear of globalization of United States' left-liberal democratic ideas and how this ideology might affect traditional values that are important for right-wingers (Hermansson, Lawrence, Mulhall, & Murdoch, 2020). Users see democracy as a new form of "dictatorship" and do not want these ideas to spread in Europe (*Topic 18*). We assume that this negative attitude toward the United States is one reason far-right groups actively support the Russian political system, particularly President Vladimir Putin. In the comments of right-wingers, Russia is presented as the "main opposition" to the "enemy" politics of NATO and the United States and as a defender of traditional values (*Topic 11*).

The antisemitism of the users had a similar nature of resentment toward the democratic elites of the United States. Users perceived Jews as global elites facilitating the spread of multiculturalism and liberalism to weaken European countries (*Topic 6*). Some comments related to this topic had extremely radical opinions: "Killing Jews . . . means ultimately destroying the evil in the world" (Commenter 7). The focus on this extremist topic might explain why the discussion about deplatforming and censorship on mainstream media platforms (*Topic 5*) was relatively specific to this cluster. Another explanation for this topic in the second thematic cluster would be that users associate deplatforming with conspiracies of powerful Jewish elites.

Unsurprisingly, the exposure to conspiracy theories on antisemitism and the political system of the United States had a strong connection with the narrative criticizing mainstream media and accusing them of hiding the absolute truth ("Wahrheit"; *Topic 3*).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The current study extends our understanding of the practices and strategies implemented by far-right users in the context of deplatforming and moderation policies on mainstream platforms. Previous studies have shown that far-right users tend to establish digital ecologies incorporating different platforms and migrate between them. It was also found that the Russian social networking site VK is one element of these ecologies (Baele et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2019). However, the role of VK and its functionality have not been explored in depth.

This study shows that the German political environment on VK predominantly comprises online groups with sound support for a far-right ideology. Therefore, we assume that censorship on big social media platforms (primarily oriented toward far-right users) is one of the main reasons these groups were created in Russian social media.

Knowing that the VK infrastructure exclusively attracts adherents of far-right ideas from Germany, it was important for us to explore what role this platform plays for these users.

In terms of interactivity, we found an almost complete absence of outward-oriented goals from far-right communities. The lack of interest in spreading counternarratives can be explained by the fact that the actors representing hegemonic discourse in German politics are not present on VK. It would be quite difficult to reach them from this platform. It makes more sense for far-right users to exploit mainstream platforms for these goals, as they have access to left-leaning and mainstream audiences there (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2018; Xu, 2020). We expected that the specific nature of VK and existing ideological commonalities between European far-right users and Russian nationalists could lead to interactions between these publics. Even though the Russian government's support is present in German right-wingers' discourse, we did not find any significant information flow between these audiences. The language barrier was probably one of the problems in the interactions of these potential allies.

An analysis of internal activity revealed that while the popularity of VK among German right-wingers decreased (probably because of the appearance of new, safer platforms like Telegram), many of the groups still actively published new posts. Presumably, this means that German far-right users experienced little pressure from VK's administration and were satisfied with the platform's functionality. This finding shows a very selective approach to moderation chosen by the VK administration; it seems that they ignore far-right users from Europe on the platform, while actively banning Russian opposition activists who use VK to organize their offline activities (Poupin, 2021). Such ignorance of far-right content on the platform can be explained by positive reciprocal relationships between the Russian government and leaders of far-right parties in Europe (Shekhovtsov, 2018).

Based on these findings, we observed that VK, in terms of functionality, is closer to alternative platforms. Kaiser and Rauchfleisch (2021) theorized that mainstream platforms are used by far-right actors for agenda setting, while alternative platforms are important for the formation of collective identity. Our analysis shows that VK is not used for agenda setting (as agenda setting assumes some outward-oriented agitational activities). Active production of new content shows that German far-right VK users pursue inward-oriented goals.

These inward-oriented goals should be discussed in more detail. Despite the active production of new content, we observed low involvement of participants in discussions. This finding can be explained by the theory of sustainability practices developed by DeCook (2019). In terms of this theory, VK is just one of the developed digital ecosystem nodes that German right-wingers created to be more sustainable and not lose all their accumulated knowledge in the case of potential deplatforming or banning. In this regard, regularly posting new content is a very important archiving tactic that allows users to back up discourses and narratives on other platforms. Therefore, in the case of "failure" (full deplatforming or any other strict moderation policy implemented), users can easily migrate to this platform without needing to create a community from scratch. In this sense, we hypothesize that most users still feel safe on mainstream platforms. The current communication on VK is maintained by a minority of users who have already been deplatformed or by a very loyal group of members supporting an administrator.

Communication that involves an exclusively, loyal deplatformed group of users on a platform that does not have direct access to mainstream audiences can radicalize and be more oriented toward offline violent actions (Rogers, 2020). We found that the narratives employed by most of the groups forming the first cluster represented similar communication patterns already observed on mainstream platforms. As with

Facebook and YouTube (Puschmann et al., 2020; Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2020; Stier et al., 2017), most groups are concerned with refugee policies, blaming mainstream media and left politicians. Indeed, this comparison of VK and mainstream platforms lacking an empirical basis has strong limitations and should be further researched.

Furthermore, we found a smaller but more active cluster of groups primarily concerned with international issues and exposed to conspiracy theories. The users of these groups expressed their negative attitudes toward “global Jewish elites” and U.S. mainstream politicians. Although this cluster is not as prominent as the one focused on domestic issues, it still presents an interesting case of forming an international alt-right movement. A similar phenomenon was observed on Telegram, where the discussion of QAnon theory was prevalent among representatives of European countries (especially Germany; Hoseini, Melo, Benevenuto, Feldmann, & Zannettou, 2021). Thus, we may observe how conspiracy theories could efficiently come through national borders and become a social glue for right-wingers from different countries.

We observed that a permanent expectation of danger made far-right users exploit all the potential digital habitats to reduce the risk of losing accumulated social capital and established narratives. For that, they use even the most inconvenient platforms with a completely different national context, where the moderation policies of these platforms are not concerned with European far-right ideologies. We see that the communication on this platform is not very active and does not take radical forms. However, this does not mean that these platforms should be excluded from analyses and observations; their functionality can completely change if the critical mass of users are deplatformed from mainstream platforms and forced to migrate to these outlets.

The current study has several limitations. First, an initial search of these groups (based on the keywords) did not return any closed private groups one could become a member of without approval from an administrator. These groups might have a more radical orientation. Investigation of these groups could give us more insight into the inward-oriented communication of German far-right users. Second, the scope of the analysis of the current study was limited to exclusively political far-right groups, and we did not study German neo-Nazi scenes, esoteric, and subcultural extremist groups. Further exploration of these groups can extend our understanding of how far-right users exploit the affordances of VK.

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### Appendix A

**Table A1. Search Terms Used for Finding German Far-Right Groups.**

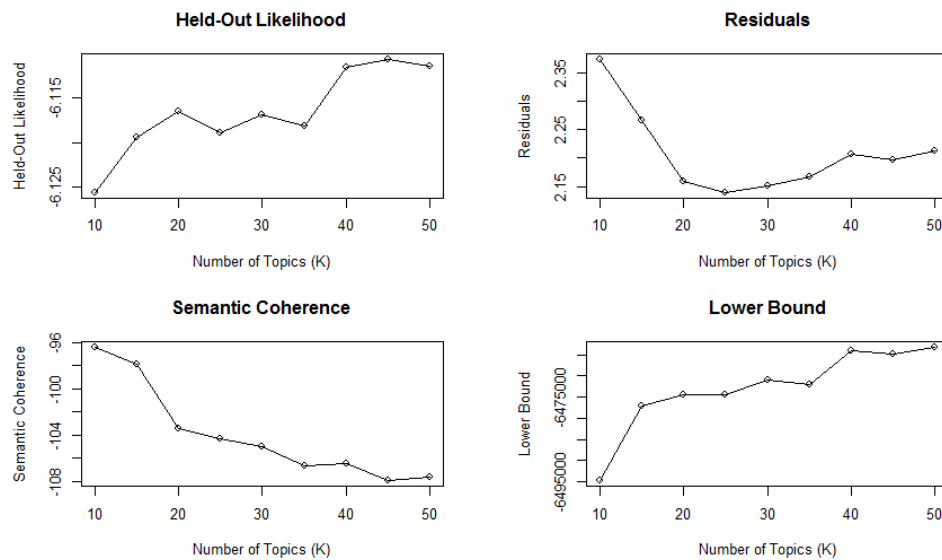
<b>Far-right actor</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Search terms</b>
Alternative for Germany (AfD)	Right-wing political party; in the framework of the federal election in 2017, won 94 seats in the Bundestag	afd, alternative für deutschland
National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD)	Far-right political party; has never been represented in the Bundestag	npd, nationaldemokratische partei
Identitarian movement	Far-right political movement; initially formed in France, but also very active in Germany and Austria	Identitarian
Pegida	Far-right political movement founded in 2014 in Dresden, Germany	pegida
Blaue Narzisse	Conservative youth magazine founded in Chemnitz; played an important role in the formation of Identitarian Movement in Germany	blaue narzisse
Compact	Far-right magazine; has strong connections with AfD and Pegida	compact
Sezession	Far-right magazine	sezession
Journalistenwatch	Far-right internet blog criticizing Islam and traditional media	journalistenwatch
PI-News	Far-right internet blog criticizing Islam, multiculturalism, and immigration	pi news
Autonomous Nationalists (AN)	Subcultural extremist movement	autonome nationalisten
Reichsbürger	Loosely connected network of far-right associations and individuals	reichsbürger
Der Dritte Weg	Extremist right-wing political party	dritte weg

**Table A2. Search Terms Used for Finding German Left and Centrist Groups.**

Political party/politician/media	Description	Search terms
Der Spiegel	Centre-left weekly news magazine	spiegel
Focus	Mainstream weekly news magazine	focus
Die Welt	Conservative daily newspaper	die welt
Die Zeit	Centrist weekly newspaper	die zeit
Christian Democratic Union of Germany	Liberal-conservative party	cdu, christlich demokratische union
Social Democratic Party of Germany	Social-democratic party	spd, sozialdemokratische partei
The Left	Socialist party	linke
Alliance 90/The Greens	Green liberal party	bündnis 90, grüne*

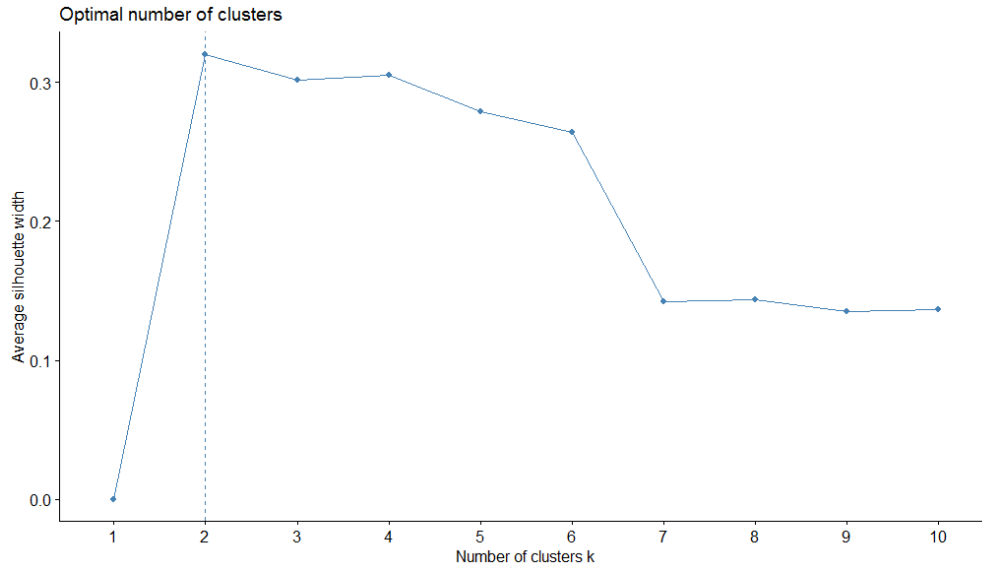
**Appendix B**

**Diagnostic Values by Number of Topics**



**Figure B1. Diagnostics of the optimal number of topics for topic modeling.**

**Appendix C**



**Figure C1. The identification of the optimal number of clusters with the help of average silhouette method.**

**Appendix D**

**Table D1. Results of the 20 Topics Model (With the Words Having the Highest Probabilities and FREX Scores).**

<b>Terms (translated from German to English)</b>		
<b>Topic</b>	<b>Label</b>	<b>Highest prob – terms having the highest probability for a certain topic FREX – the most exclusive terms</b>
1	Conspiracy theories on the US politics	<i>Highest Prob:</i> trump, donald, president, state, obama, dollar, international <i>FREX:</i> trump, donald, president, state, obama, dollar, international
2	No interpretation	<i>Highest Prob:</i> mostly, to seem, some, street, house, white, to learn <i>FREX:</i> home, some, face, sore, white, to fly, thought
3	Criticism of mainstream media	<i>Highest Prob:</i> media, truth, to trust, actually, mean, news, text <i>FREX:</i> media, text, fake, truth, news, info, to inform
4	Rapes committed by migrants	<i>Highest Prob:</i> woman, family, young, men, victims, to rape, mother <i>FREX:</i> woman, men, to rape, young, girl, family, mother
5	Censorship and deplatforming on Facebook	<i>Highest Prob:</i> friend, facebook, to report, complete, internet, blocked, to use <i>FREX:</i> facebook, blocked, maas, friend, internet, deleted, (to) post

6	Antisemitic conspiracy theories	<i>Highest Prob:</i> jew, israel, to destroy, hitler, jewish, soros, zionist <i>FREX:</i> israel, jew, jewish, hitler, to destroy, zionist, to hate
7	Criticism of taxes	<i>Highest Prob:</i> money, to pay, paid, to cost, to tax, to finance <i>FREX:</i> to pay, to cost, money, paid, to tax, to pay, taxpayer
8	Islamophobia	<i>Highest Prob:</i> islam, muslim, culture, muslim, religion, society, christian <i>FREX:</i> islam, religion, muslim, muslim, culture, islamic, christian
9	Criticism of the mainstream political parties	<i>Highest Prob:</i> green, election, party, to vote, to change, elected, green <i>FREX:</i> to vote, green, party, election, voters, old parties, elected
10	Criticism of the criminal justice system	<i>Highest Prob:</i> public, judge, court, to punish, falsely, responsible, to decide <i>FREX:</i> judge, to punish, justice, to punish, court, murder, to judge
11	Support of the Russian government	<i>Highest Prob:</i> war, russia, putin, russian, russian, syria, nato <i>FREX:</i> putin, russian, russia, nato, war, west, east
12	Criticism of work conditions	<i>Highest Prob:</i> to work, work, rich, to care, social, month, to eat <i>FREX:</i> rich, to eat, subject, social, to work, to care, pension
13	Discussion of the Catholic Church	<i>Highest Prob:</i> history, church, holds, similar, remember, to burst, biggest <i>FREX:</i> church, to burst, piece, holds, to dwindle, similar, glad
14	Criticism of Angela Merkel	<i>Highest Prob:</i> merkel, european, chancellor, merkels, (to) plan, italy, regime <i>FREX:</i> merkel, chancellor, merkels, italy, european, austria, regime
15	Criticism of police	<i>Highest Prob:</i> police, violence, perpetrator, to protect, policeman, to call, to beat <i>FREX:</i> police, policeman, perpetrator, violence, to call, to protect, to defend
16	Crimes committed by migrants	<i>Highest Prob:</i> refugee, criminal, to lie, migrant, asylum, unique, turkish <i>FREX:</i> refugee, turkish, asylum, africa, negro, foreigner, criminal
17	Esoteric practices	<i>Highest Prob:</i> schools, strong, energy, to experience, to experience, special, climate <i>FREX:</i> schools, energy, climate, nature, degree, feeling, power
18	Criticism of democracy	<i>Highest Prob:</i> people, govern, system, federal, democracy, to populate, elite <i>FREX:</i> people, democracy, federal, system, govern, resistance, dictatorship
19	Criticism of left-wing ideology	<i>Highest Prob:</i> nazi, left, left, right, left, antifa, to rush <i>FREX:</i> nazi, left, left, antifa, right, to rush, left
20	No interpretation	<i>Highest Prob:</i> city, direct, long, knife, dangerous, to last, ready <i>FREX:</i> city, knife, ready, to last, dangerous, direct, long

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