Behind the Curtain: Unveiling Pro-Kremlin Ecosystems in Europe
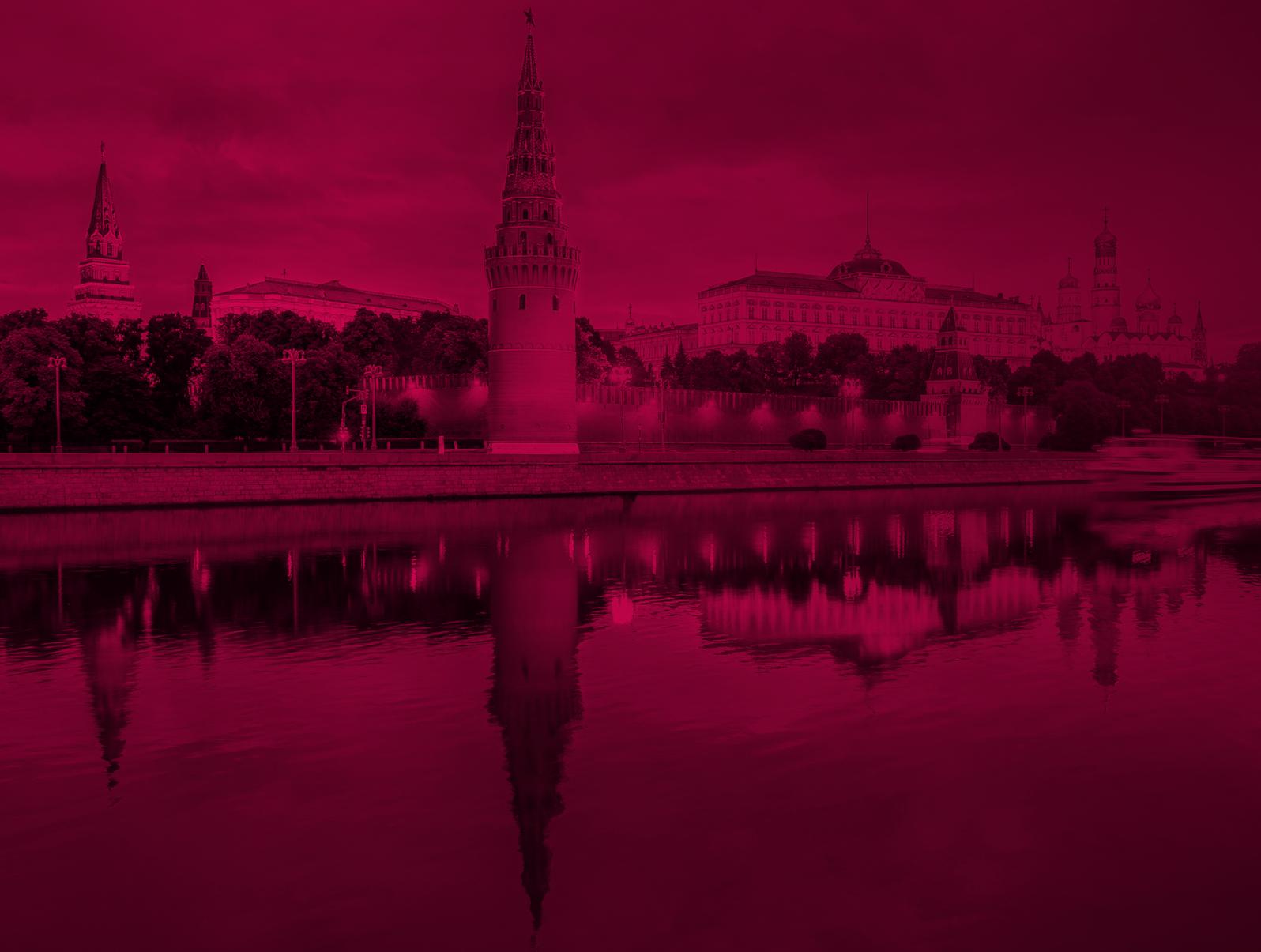
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Introduction

Executive Summary

This research was designed to investigate the connections and similarities between radical, conspiracy, and pro-Kremlin communities across three European countries – France, Germany, and Italy. The objective was to gain insights into how these communities interact with and influence one another. The study focuses on Telegram, a platform which has long been noted for its growing popularity among radical and conspiracy groups in Europe and whose founder was recently arrested, prompting a new wave of questions about the company's efficacy with moderating problematic (and at times illegal) content.[1] This report provides a detailed overview of the ecosystem within which pro-Kremlin, radical, and conspiracy communities operate on Telegram, examining their proximity, interactions, and the themes they discussed from January 2022 to the end of February 2024.

Through an in-depth network analysis of these interactions, the report highlights how pro-Kremlin narratives have permeated radical and conspiracy communities within the three countries. It also identifies key influencers who have played a significant role in shaping these narratives and steering community discussions.

The research then employs semantic mapping, a clustering approach for analysing the textual content of posts, to assess posts from these communities over the two-year period. This approach provides a comprehensive view of the central themes discussed within each community, highlighting overlaps and similarities in their discussions, as well as the evolution of trending narratives over time. By tracing these changes, the report sheds light on the dynamic nature of discourse within these groups and the impact of pro-Kremlin messaging within radical and conspiracy communities.

Glossary

Conspiracy theories
Conspiracy theories are attempts to explain a phenomenon by invoking a sinister plot orchestrated by powerful actors. Conspiracies are painted as secret or esoteric, with adherents to a theory seeing themselves as the initiated few who have access to hidden knowledge. Supporters of conspiracy theories usually see themselves as in direct opposition to the powers who are orchestrating the plot which are typically governments or figures of authority.

Disinformation
ISD defines disinformation as false, misleading or manipulated content presented as fact, that is intended to deceive or harm.

Eurasianism
Eurasianism is an early 20th century geopolitical and cultural theory that posits the existence of a distinct Eurasian civilisation, separate from both Western Europe and the East. It emphasises the unique historical, cultural, and geopolitical identity of the vast region stretching from Eastern Europe through Central Asia to Siberia, with Russia often positioned as the core of this Eurasian space. Understood in expansionist, imperialist, and anti-Western terms, it has gained new prominence with the rise of Vladimir Putin and found entry into Russia's latest foreign policy doctrine in 2023.

Far or radical left
There is no broadly agreed definition of the far-left, and the scholarship on radical or far-left actions and groups in contemporary Western societies is much less developed than research on the far-right. Following Cas Mudde, a political scientist who is regarded as an expert on political extremism, and political researcher Luke March, and resonating with the differentiation of the far-right, we propose making a distinction between left-wing radicalism and extremism, where the latter groups are, again, anti-democratic, and the former advocate fundamental political and economic changes without being anti-democratic per se. Radical left groups, actions or networks are typically rooted in Marxist, socialist or anarchist ideologies, and pursue an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and radically egalitarian, anti-fascist agenda, typically with an internationalist outlook. Radical left groups can sometimes be identified by the use of certain symbolism (e.g. Antifa flag, three arrows). In general, far-left groups may or may not see violence, especially against their political opponents (e.g. perceived representatives of fascism and capitalism), as a legitimate tool to pursue their political agenda.

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

Misinformation
Misinformation is false, misleading or manipulated content presented as fact, irrespective of an intent to deceive.

Pro-Kremlin
Pro-Kremlin refers to individuals, organisations or narratives that actively support, align with, or propagate the political, ideological, or geopolitical interests of the Russian government, particularly under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. These actors and ideas promote Russia's state policies, often in opposition to Western democratic values and institutions, and are typically characterised by endorsement of authoritarian governance, nationalism, state-controlled media, and anti-Western sentiment. Pro-Kremlin actors can include politicians, media outlets, activists, think tanks, and online influencers, both within Russia and abroad, who disseminate information or engage in activities that reflect and reinforce the Kremlin's strategic goals.

Querdenker
The term 'Querdenker' (literally 'lateral thinker') refers to followers of the 'Querdenken' movement, which originated in the area around Stuttgart and organises protests against COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The movement now has regional branches around Germany, some of which are under observation by constitutional protection authorities as a result of their proximity to the right-wing extremist scene.

Key Findings

- **Network analysis of radical, conspiracy, and pro-Kremlin communities in France, Italy, and Germany reveals extensive interactions among these groups.** Pro-Kremlin and conspiracy communities across these countries appear to be highly interlinked.

- **The interaction between far-right and pro-Kremlin communities varies across countries, and the far-right communities appear divided, with some factions interacting closely with pro-Kremlin communities, while others remain more detached.** The interaction between pro-Kremlin and far-right groups is notably stronger in France and Germany compared to Italy, where the far-right community is more isolated and primarily engages with other far-right factions. Far-left communities, while present in all three countries, are smaller and more dispersed, and only a few interact with pro-Kremlin groups.

- **Pro-Kremlin communities interacted with different groups to varying degrees across the three countries.** The strongest relationship appears to be with conspiracy channels, 77% of which interacted with the pro-Kremlin community studied. Far-right and far-left channels interacted at a lower rate (43% and 35% of channels respectively).

- **Analysis of the most influential channels across all categories in the three countries found a significant presence of Russian-language and pro-Kremlin channels, highlighting their penetration across countries and categories.** Of the 20 most influential channels, 11 were in English and 9 were in Russian. The list included 10 pro-Kremlin channels, 4 of which were openly affiliated with the Russian state. These belonged to the Russian Ministry of Defence in English, the state-affiliated media outlet Ukraina.ru, the news agency RIA, Vladimir Solovyov's channel (a host on Russian state TV), and a channel featuring RT videos translated into various languages, created after the introduction of sanctions against Russian state media in the EU. Other frequently shared Russian channels were run by pro-Kremlin influencers, known as 'war correspondents' in Russian state media terminology, who report on the war in Ukraine, typically from occupied territories.

- **Among the top 100 channels forwarded across the three countries, ISD identified additional Russia state-affiliated channels,** including those belonging to state media outlets RT and TASS; the Russian Foreign Ministry and its spokesperson; several pro-Kremlin influencers posting in Russian; and the far-right Russian philosopher Aleksandr Dugin.

- **Analysis of the 50 most shared channels in each category (far-right, far-left, conspiracy, and pro-Kremlin) revealed the presence of pro-Kremlin channels across all four categories in all countries except France**, where far-left channels did not include pro-Kremlin content among the 50 most shared.

- **Despite their opposing ideological positions, it is noteworthy that Alina Lipp's channel was among the most shared by both the German far-right and the far-left.** This highlights how certain pro-Kremlin figures have been gaining traction across the political divide.

- **Among the 50 channels most shared within the pro-Kremlin community, there was a significant presence of conspiracy channels in all three countries.** These channels made up 14, 17, and 10 of the 50 most shared channels in France, Germany, and Italy respectively. This substantial presence of conspiracy channels within the pro-Kremlin community underscores the strong engagement between these two communities across the three countries analysed, as well as the close connection between them, illustrating how one community can serve as an entry point to the other.

- **Posts forwarded from pro-Kremlin channels into radical and conspiracy communities included numerous examples of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories.** Both far-right and far-left posts contained claims that exaggerated the role of the US and the West in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, repeated unfounded allegations about the presence of US biolabs in Ukraine, and echoed the Kremlin talking point that Ukraine is ruled by a neo-Nazi regime.

- **An analysis of the themes most discussed across all channels studied from January 2022 to February 2024 reveals that the Russia–Ukraine war was one of the most prominent topics throughout the period analysed.** Within this topic, a significant subtheme that was heavily discussed across all four categories was the notion of Western and NATO responsibility in the conflict. This narrative, which has been a prominent talking point of the Kremlin since before the invasion, was found to resonate with all four categories analysed.[2]

Introduction

In the aftermath of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the European Union has bolstered its efforts to impede and curb the spread of pro-Kremlin propaganda within member states. Since then, a growing body of research has been published focusing on overt and covert pro-Kremlin operations, aiming to inform social media platforms and policymakers on the best ways to tackle their dissemination and influence. Although measures and policies to date have made progress in addressing Russian state-linked operations, the broader set of pro-Kremlin actors and ecosystems in European countries remains an under-explored research subject.

Even before 2022, individuals and fringe groups from both ends of the political spectrum, alongside disinformation and conspiracy communities, have been useful targets for pro-Kremlin propaganda and have often served as receptive amplifiers. COVID-19 served as a major catalyst for the flourishing of disinformation communities across Europe. When the war in Ukraine broke out, it quickly became a new topic of interest for the same networks who, in the years prior, had been occupied with protesting against COVID-19 vaccines and viewing the virus as part of a larger and more sinister plot to suppress citizens and their fundamental rights. Prior research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has already investigated how Russian state information operations specifically targeted these communities, but the mechanisms by which these communities interact with and mutually reinforce each other has so far been insufficiently examined.[3]

This research was set up to fill that knowledge gap and explore how pre-existing conspiracist and radical narratives, actors, and communities have acted and continue to act as breeding grounds and networks for amplifying pro-Kremlin narratives within three European countries: France, Germany, and Italy.

This report investigates the interaction and overlap between these communities, as well as the themes and topics of discussion that have characterised their online activity over the past two years.

Moreover, this report also provides an analysis of transnational actors and influencers, highlighting how international and Russian actors specifically have galvanised specific communities.

Methodology

The study focused on activities of radical, conspiracist, and pro-Kremlin communities on Telegram as well as the interactions and overlaps between these communities. Telegram was chosen as the platform of analysis given its rising prominence among radical, conspiracy, and pro-Kremlin communities, mainly due to its relatively loose regulations.

Analysts started by compiling a relevant seed list of actors in four pre-selected communities, namely: far-right, far-left, conspiracy, and pro-Kremlin. Pre-existing lists from previous projects were taken as a starting point and manually reviewed. Additional actors were selected based on analysts' prior knowledge, alongside relevant literature. Our research partners CASM then conducted a network expansion, which analysed links to other Telegram channels shared by the channels from the initial list; newly identified channels were then manually checked by analysts and compiled into a final seed list of 1,162 unique channels across the three countries. In the case of Germany and France, foreign Telegram channels publishing in French and German were also included when they were found to be relevant and influential within the communities analysed. No foreign channels were surfaced for Italian. The list is structured as follows:

	Far-Right	Far-Left	Pro-Kremlin	Conspiracy	Total
France	139	12	68	188	407
Italy	97	25	68	194	384
Germany	106	23	99	144	372
Total (unique)	**341**[4]	**60**	**235**	**526**	**1162**

Table 1: The number of Telegram channels for each community in each country.

Each channel was categorised for its primary category (far-right, far-left, pro-Kremlin, and conspiracy) following ISD's working definitions of far-right, far-left, pro-Kremlin and conspiracy (see Glossary above).

Conspiracy and pro-Kremlin channels were additionally categorised according to the subcategories below:

Pro-Kremlin
- **Eurasianism/Dugin-affiliated**: Organisations or persons affiliated to Aleksandr Dugin or promoting the ideology of Eurasianism.

- **General pro-Kremlin**: Other channels of individuals who have been spreading pro-Kremlin narratives.

- **Russian state-affiliated**: All actors that are affiliated to the Russian state, including Russian state media; governmental channels; channels of embassies, consulates and politicians; and channels that were proven to be affiliated to Russian state media or the Russian government.

Conspiracy
- **General conspiracy/disinformation**: Conspiracy theories are attempts to explain a phenomenon by invoking a sinister plot orchestrated by powerful actors. Conspiracies are painted as secret or esoteric, with adherents to a theory seeing themselves as the initiated few who have access to hidden knowledge. Supporters of conspiracy theories usually see themselves as in direct opposition to the powers who are orchestrating the plot, which are typically governments or figures of authority.

- **COVID-19 disinformation:** These are groups that appeared during the COVID-19 pandemic and are/were mainly focused on the pandemic and restrictions. Influencers who gained notoriety during the COVID-19 pandemic also belong to this group.

The further breakdown of the pro-Kremlin and conspiracy channels in the three countries can be seen in the table below:

	Eurasianism /Dugin-affiliated	General Pro-Kremlin	Russian state-affiliated	General conspiracy/ disinfo.	COVID-19 disinfo.
France	5	49	14	156	32
Italy	8	54	6	126	68
Germany	0	96	3	89	55
Total	**13**	**199**	**23**	**371**	**155**

Table 2: The breakdown of the Pro-Kremlin and Conspiracy channels in the three countries.

Finally, all channels were also categorised based on the following types of actors.

- **Influencer**: An influential journalist or simply someone who has a channel under their own name and has gathered a considerable number of followers.

- **Anonymous social media presence**: This refers to those channels where the real identity of the user is concealed but which nevertheless have a prominent audience.

- **Governmental channel**: Channels of governmental organisations, such as embassies or consulates.

- **Organisation**: This is an organised group with a particular purpose. It could be a physical organisation with an office and a specific structure or a movement with a specific goal.

- **Media**: This includes both established media, state media, and alternative media platforms.

- **Publishing house**: The channel of a publishing house.

- **Politician/political party**: This includes political movements and youth wings of political parties.

- **Other**: Anything that does not fit in any of the other categories.

When a Telegram channel was found to fall under multiple categories, such as pro-Kremlin and conspiracy, it was categorised based on the main purpose of the channel. This decision was made by considering the Telegram channel's description, its history, and its origins. For example, if a channel was created during the COVID-19 pandemic to spread disinformation about COVID-19 vaccines or at the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine to provide a perspective on the war different from mainstream media, it was categorised accordingly. If a channel originally created during the pandemic to spread disinformation about COVID-19 vaccines later shifted its focus to the war in Ukraine after the full-scale invasion, it would still be categorised as conspiracy rather than pro-Kremlin.

Semantic Mapping
Once the seed list was finalised, CASM collected all conversations from these channels, starting from 1 January 2022 until 29 February 2024, which resulted in 7,784,669 posts collected.

The collected data was then analysed using semantic mapping, a technique to identify and categorise clusters of semantically similar messages discussed by these

Italy
29.66%

France
34.39%

Germany
35.95%
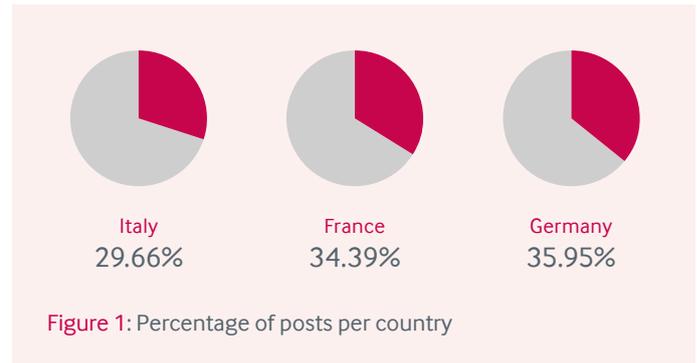
Figure 1: Percentage of posts per country

Conspiracy
57.1%

Pro-Kremlin
32.1%

Far-Right
9.2%

Far-Left
1.6%
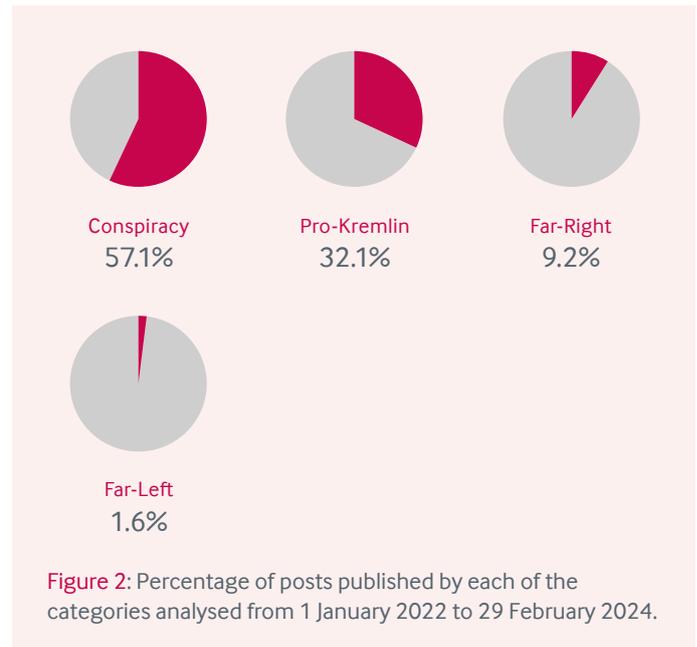
Figure 2: Percentage of posts published by each of the categories analysed from 1 January 2022 to 29 February 2024.

communities (a more detailed explanation of how this was conducted can be found in Appendix A). This analysis resulted in a thematic taxonomy consisting of 22 themes and 113 subthemes. A more detailed description of the themes and subthemes can be found in Appendix B. Posts that did not fall under any of the themes identified were excluded from the analysis, resulting in a total dataset of 4,936,025.

The final dataset was fairly evenly distributed across the three countries, with 34.39% from French channels, 35.95% from German channels, and 29.66% from Italian channels.

Due to the uneven representation of different groups in the seed list, the resulting dataset was also unevenly composed of posts from the four different groups. The conspiracy category accounted for 57.1% of the collected data, the pro-Kremlin category 32.1%, the far-right 9.2%, and the far-left 1.6%.

France

Conspiracy	Pro-Kremlin	Far-Right	Far-Left
60%	25%	15%	1%

Germany

Conspiracy	Pro-Kremlin	Far-Right	Far-Left
42%	46%	9%	3%

Italy

Conspiracy	Pro-Kremlin	Far-Right	Far-Left
71%	25%	3%	1%

Figure 3: Percentage of posts published by each of the categories in the three countries analysed.
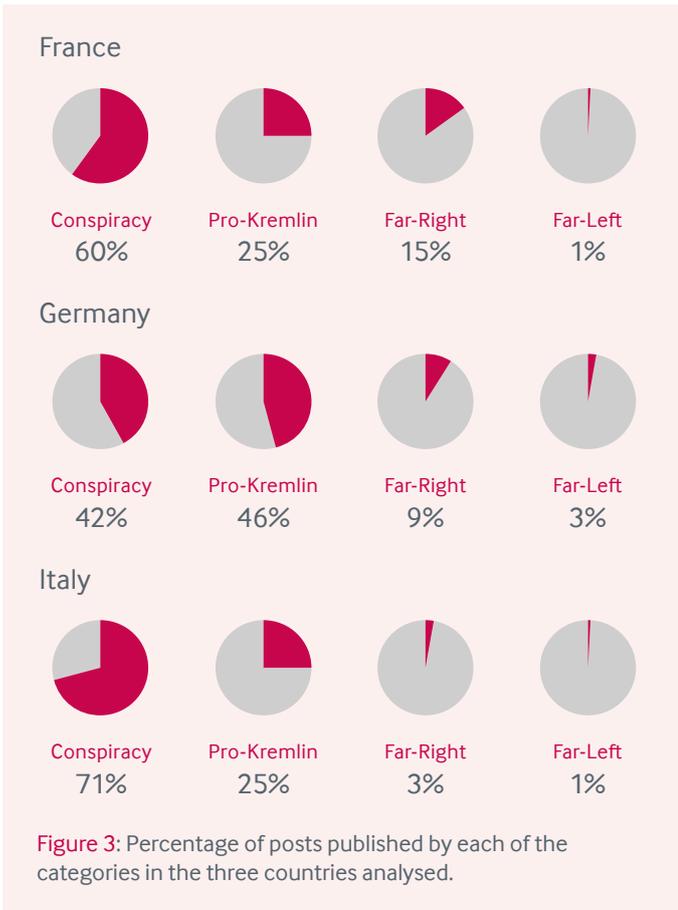
These proportions were similar across the three countries analysed. A breakdown of the percentage of posts for each category in each country can be seen in the pie charts above.

Network Analysis

To explore the relationships and exchanges between different communities on Telegram, ISD and CASM produced a series of network maps using Gephi to visualise sharing patterns between these communities. The networks are based on all the data retrieved from the communities and visualise the sharing patterns between them. In these networks, Telegram channels are represented by nodes (the circles in the graphs), whereas the edges (the lines between the nodes) represent messages that have been shared from one channel to another. This analysis includes both messages exchanged within the original seed list as well as messages shared from external channels into the seed list, allowing us to have an expanded vision of the Telegram channels involved in the exchange of content. However, given that the starting point for the reconstruction of the network is messages collected from the seed list, no inference can be made about the broader network of channels that have also shared content from the selected channels. Thus, the visualisations can only provide insights on the influence of channels within the seed list identified.

Limitations

The various methodologies used in this project are subject to several limitations, which will be explained in this section along with the measures taken to mitigate them.

As a starting point for this research, a seed list of Telegram channels for each relevant category was compiled. To expand the initial manually selected seed list, ISD and CASM conducted a network expansion, which enabled analysts to identify a larger number of channels. However, other channels that were not shared by the original seed list channels and were unknown to the analysts might still exist. Therefore, the list cannot be considered fully exhaustive, meaning the analysis will be representative of the channels selected but not of the entire communities under analysis. In particular, the far-left community on Telegram has been especially difficult to identify, resulting in a less substantial list across all three countries analysed.

The categorisation of Telegram channels within the four main categories is also subject to human error and is not always straightforward. To minimise discrepancies, analysts used ISD's definitions and an additional coding sheet with precise instructions on how to categorise Telegram channels, as explained in the methodology above. However, multiple channels can inevitably fall under more than one category, and this distinction often involves a degree of subjectivity.

This research relied on data access to a large number of Telegram channels, the data from which was retrieved over two years. However, some Telegram channels were taken down during the research period, while others, which might have played a significant role at specific points in the past, may have ceased to exist by the time the research was conducted and therefore could not be included in the dataset. Several Telegram channels connected to Russian state media were made unavailable in the EU following sanctions.[5] To retrieve content published by these channels, ISD and CASM used virtual SIM cards outside the EU to access and download the data.

Russia, Conspiracies, Disinformation, and Radicals in Europe

Fringe communities have long been a focal point in foreign influence operations, serving as fertile ground for disseminating disinformation and sowing discord. These groups, often characterised by their scepticism of mainstream narratives and susceptibility to conspiracy theories, present unique opportunities for external actors seeking to destabilise societies and undermine trust in institutions.

RT, Russia's most well-known vehicle for soft power abroad, exemplifies how a state can leverage its media to engage a variety of fringe communities. Although initially conceived to promote a positive image of Russia internationally, the state channel underwent a rebranding in 2009, a strategic shift that transformed RT into an instrument of Russian political warfare against the West.[6]

RT soon positioned itself as an alternative to Western mainstream media, engaging with themes and commentators from the fringes of social, political, and cultural life in Western societies. Instead of adhering to a specific ideology, RT offered a platform to a diverse array of fringe actors, including far-right and far-left groups, conspiracy theorists, and anti-establishment bloggers. The channel published a wide range of viewpoints, provided they aligned with Russia's broader strategic or geopolitical interests. This approach allowed RT to appeal to various disaffected segments of Western societies, furthering Russia's influence and objectives.[7]

A notable example of this strategy was observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically involving the German branch of RT. While Russian state media within Russia made efforts to instil trust in vaccines and pandemic restrictions, RT's German-language outlet emerged as a key information source among anti-vaccine communities in Germany. RT DE's YouTube channel became a major disseminator of COVID-19 disinformation, leading to its removal from the platform for violating COVID-19 policies.[8] A 2021 study by ISD found that out of the 100 most watched videos on RT DE that year, 67 were about COVID-19, and 61 of these videos featured critical positions towards pandemic regulations. The COVID-19 vaccination campaign was often referred to as a 'world experiment', and vaccinated individuals were described as 'guinea pigs'. One RT DE video claimed that a BioNTech vaccine led to a 'dangerous concentration of nanoparticles' in organs while another featured the case of a Greek pharmaceutical

entrepreneur who refused to be vaccinated against COVID-19 due to fears that it would alter his DNA. Terms like 'COVID apartheid' or 'totalitarianism' were used in reference to COVID-19 measures. As a result, RT gained increasing prominence among both far-right and conspiracy Telegram channels, becoming the fifth most shared news websites in these groups.[9]

In addition to RT, both Sputnik and Ruptly, two other Russian state media outlets, provided a prominent platform to the Querdenker, a German movement that mobilised against COVID-19 safety measures and vaccinations. These outlets promoted the Querdenker agenda by disseminating conspiracy theories and amplifying their message. Furthermore, Ruptly frequently edited footage of Querdenker protests to emphasise instances of police violence against protesters, thereby fostering a perception of a lack of democracy in Germany and other EU countries.[10]

In the aftermath of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the role of Russian state media in disseminating pro-war propaganda and supporting the destabilisation of Ukraine led the European Union to action, sanctioning and blocking the media from Europe.[11]

Besides its appeal to disinformation and conspiracy communities, Russia has also been successful in attracting communities on both ends of the political spectrum.

Although the full-scale invasion of Ukraine mostly sparked condemnations in the political West, some parties at the fringes of the political spectrum continued to express sympathy for Russia. A recent study of 24 European states found a correlation between populism and pro-Russia sentiment among both the far-left and the far-right, as well as a correlation between Euroscepticism and pro-Russia sentiment among far-right parties.[12]

Connections between European far-right parties and Russia in particular have been well documented.[13] In Germany, Italy, and France, ties between the Kremlin and political parties Alternative for Germany (known domestically as AfD), League (Lega), and National Rally (Rassemblement National) respectively have not only been the object of controversy but also of official inquiries.[14]

The prominent gains that these parties obtained in the past year in the respective three countries raised concerns about the future of EU support to Ukraine.[15]

A recent leak from the Kremlin-backed Social Design Agency (SDA) revealed a well-coordinated disinformation campaign targeting both France and Germany. This campaign aimed to boost the poll numbers of the National Rally in France and the Alternative for Germany in Germany. The overarching goal was to weaken public support for Ukraine and create divisions within society in both countries. In France, the agency crafted narratives that portrayed Ukraine as a drain on French resources, promoting the idea that supporting Ukraine was detrimental to France's economy and security.[16]

In Italy, similar pro-Kremlin perspectives have significantly influenced the media, contributing to a lack of support for Ukraine among the public compared to other EU nations. Despite the far-right government being a strong ally of Ukraine, Russian propaganda permeates Italian television, with pro-Russian commentators frequently appearing on popular talk shows mainly due to historical anti-Atlantic sentiment and a desire for sensational debates. Italian commentators, including some who profess pacifism, often echo pro-Russian sentiments, portraying Ukraine as equally culpable in the conflict, leading to growing confusion among the Italian public regarding the war, with many attributing blame to both Russia and Ukraine.[17]

Among certain far-right groups in Europe and North America, Russia has become a symbol of resistance against Western liberal democracies and multiculturalism. In particular, the narrative promoted by Russian media, depicting Western liberal-democratic societies as decadent and troubled by issues like same-sex marriage, moral decline, failing multiculturalism, and disregard for the majority's rights, has resonated with many far-right activists, politicians, conspiracy theorists, and isolationists.[18]

A prominent influencer and a key figure in linking the European far-right with Russia is the Russian far-right political philosopher Aleksandr Dugin. His activities and connections have been particularly significant in Italy and France, where his excellent command of the languages has enabled him to effectively promote Russia and its stance on the war against Ukraine. Dugin's ideas, especially his advocacy for a return to traditional values, his opposition to globalism and liberalism, and his resistance to American hegemony, have resonated with nationalist, anti-liberal, and far-right parties in Europe and beyond.

In addition to embracing themes favoured by the far-right, Dugin's philosophy also incorporates elements dear to the far-left, such as anti-Americanism and anti-imperialism, resulting in a blending of ideologies that has been described as a 'brown-red cocktail'.[19] This mixed ideology was found to have played a role beyond online communities and has often become the driving force for foreign fighters to engage in the conflict in Ukraine since 2014. However, instead of aligning fully with one side, this complex ideological blend has led fighters from across the political spectrum to join opposing factions, based on their individual interpretations of the war.[20]
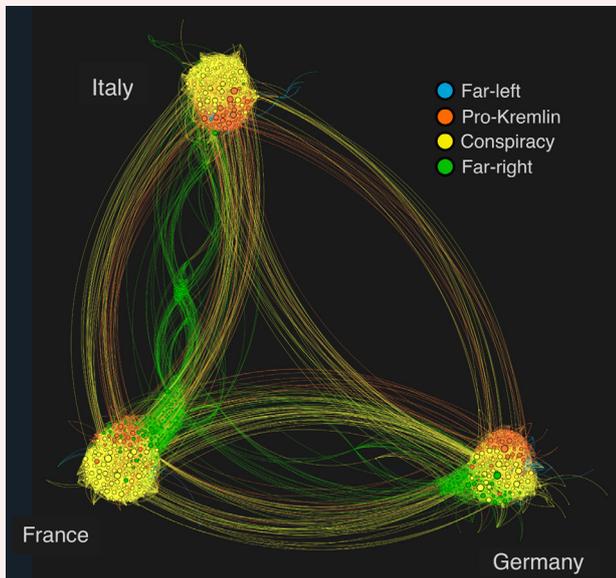
Network Analysis

Figure 4: The network shows the interactions between radical, conspiracy, and pro-Kremlin communities in the three countries analysed.

The network above represents the interactions between different communities in the three countries analysed, both within the same country and with communities from other countries. Telegram channels are depicted by the nodes in the graph (circles), and the size of each node is proportional to the number of times that a specific channel has been forwarded by others in the dataset. Put simply, the larger the node, the more times its content has been forwarded.

The edges in the network (lines) represent messages that have been forwarded from one channel to another. The colour of the edges corresponds to the category of the account that has posted the messages. For example, if a pro-Kremlin channel (represented by an orange node) forwards a message from a far-right channel (represented by a green node) the line between them will be green. The curve of the edge also identifies the directionality; tracing arcs 'clockwise', the source node is the start of the arc.

Nodes are positioned based on their interactions. Generally, the closer they are on the network map, the greater the total number of forwards between the channels.

The network shows that the three countries form three distinct clusters, each with three main communities: pro-Kremlin, conspiracy, and far-right. The far-left, which represents a significantly smaller group in our dataset, forms less of a distinct and homogeneous community and is therefore distributed in multiple small clusters.

In all three countries, the pro-Kremlin (orange) and conspiracy communities (yellow) are highly interlinked, showing a high degree of interaction. Far-right communities (green), however, behave differently across the three countries and appear more detached from the other two.

France

In France, the far-right (green) occupies various positions in the network, exhibiting a range of different interactions. The far-right in France is situated between the conspiracy (yellow) and pro-Kremlin communities (orange), showing interactions with both. Some channels are more distant from these communities, forming a separate cluster that mostly interacts with other far-right communities, including the Italian one, but less so with external communities. Similar to Italy, the French far-left community (blue) is scattered across the network and appears separate from other communities, indicating fewer interactions. Only a few channels interact with the conspiracy or pro-Kremlin communities, and their nodes remain generally small, indicating a lower level of interaction.
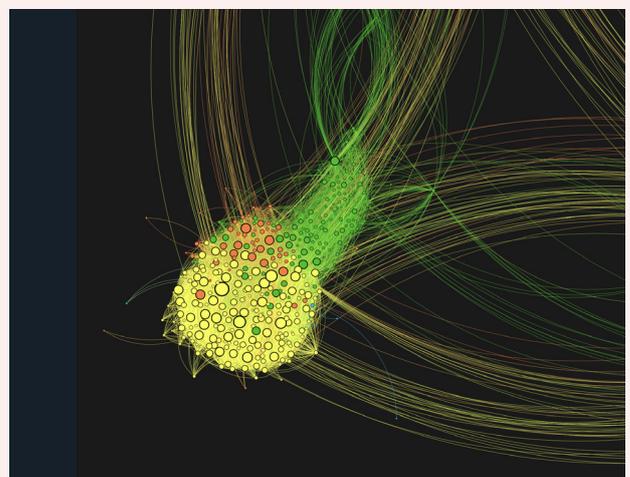

Figure 5: Network of far-right (green), far-left (blue), conspiracy (yellow), and pro-Kremlin (orange) communities in France.

Germany

In Germany, the far-right (green) is located at the edge of the cluster, with part of the community closely linked to conspiracy channels (yellow) and another part pulling away from other communities but interacting mostly with other far-right communities, including French far-right channels. A significant part of the German far-right community is embedded with both the conspiracy and pro-Kremlin (orange) communities, showing a high degree of interaction with both. Unlike in Italy and France, the far-left in Germany is more embedded in both the pro-Kremlin and conspiracy communities, with nodes distributed within these two groups. However, their presence is rather marginal, mainly due to lesser representation in the dataset. Overall, the German pro-Kremlin ecosystem has successfully attracted factions from various conspiracy and radical ideologies. While it has achieved greater success with conspiracy communities, its appeal to radical groups appears to be more fragmented.

Italy

In Italy, the far-right (green) appears quite detached from the other two clusters, although it is still situated in proximity to the pro-Kremlin community (orange). Different far-right channels behave differently, with some showing interactions with the conspiracy community (yellow) and others with the pro-Kremlin community. Within the pro-Kremlin community, Eurasianism/Dugin-affiliated channels appear in between the pro-Kremlin and the far-right as a glue between these two communities, exhibiting interactions with both groups. This is consistent with Dugin's appeal to the pro-Kremlin community (in his support for the Kremlin and Putin in particular) but also his proximity to the European far-right.

Some Italian far-right channels appear to be more detached from the pro-Kremlin and conspiracy communities and form their own cluster situated closer to the French far-right, revealing a degree of interaction with their French counterparts. The Italian far-left (blue) is not uniformly placed in the network, however, with a few accounts interacting with the pro-Kremlin community and others with the conspiracy community.

Pro-Kremlin Network

Focusing the analysis on the direct interactions of the 206 channels classified as pro-Kremlin in the different countries, there are three notable dynamics:

1. The presence of direct interactions (2,685 ties) between pro-Kremlin channels at domestic and transnational levels:
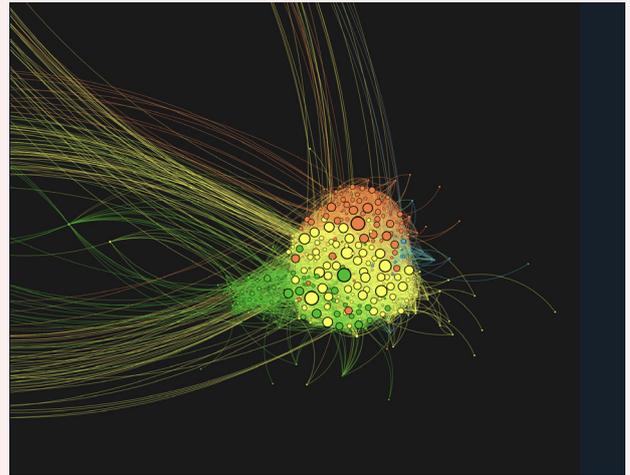

Figure 6: Network of far-right (green), far-left (blue), conspiracy (yellow), and pro-Kremlin (orange) communities in Germany.
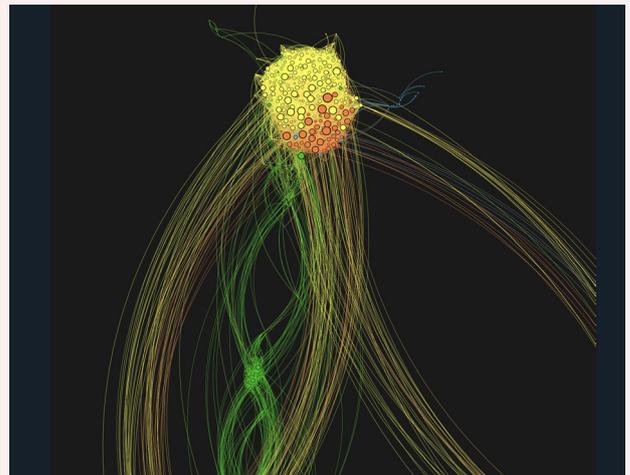

Figure 7: Network of far-right (green), far-left (blue), conspiracy (yellow), and pro-Kremlin (orange) communities in Italy.
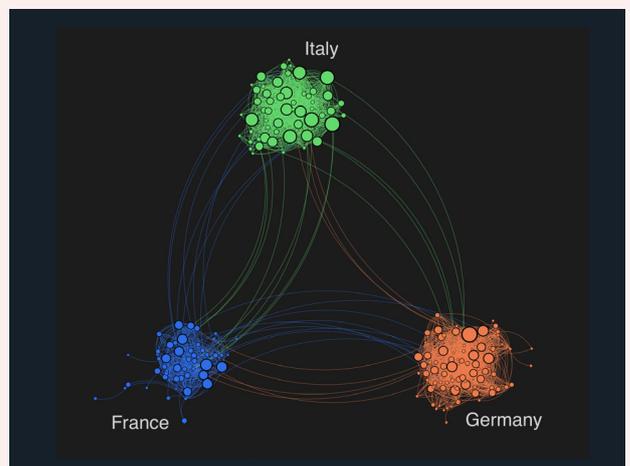
Figure 8: Direct interactions between pro-Kremlin channels in the three countries — Italy (green), France (blue), Germany (orange).

The ties between the nodes indicate an intense exchange of content between pro-Kremlin actors within each country. Moreover, some of the Telegram channels identified as pro-Kremlin in each country exchange content with their counterparts in other countries.

2. The presence of direct interactions between pro-Kremlin channels and different communities:

In general, most direct interactions of pro-Kremlin channels (messages forwarded from and into them) occur with the identified community of conspiracy channels (409 channels). Secondly, an exchange of content takes place with far-right channels (148 channels). Lastly, few far-left channels interact with pro-Kremlin ones (21 channels). Channels interacting with the pro-Kremlin community represent in total 77.7% of the conspiracy channels, 43.4% of the far-right channels, and 35% of the far-left channels.
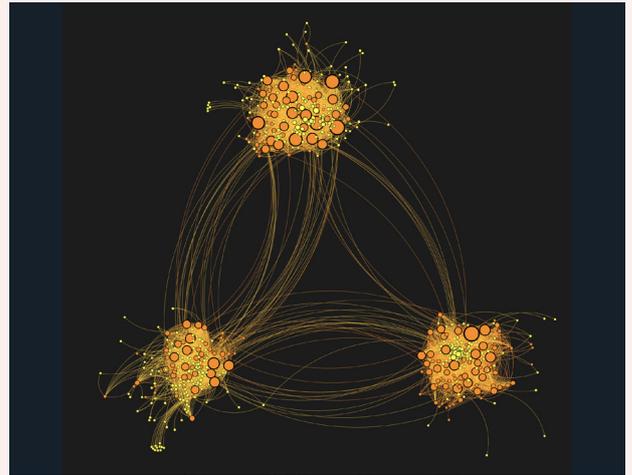
Figure 9: Direct interactions between pro-Kremlin channels (orange) in the three countries and conspiracy channels (yellow).
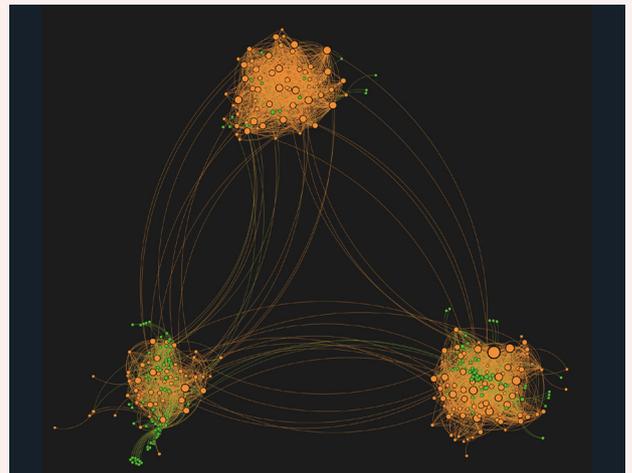
Figure 10: Direct interactions between pro-Kremlin channels (orange) in the three countries and far-right channels (green).
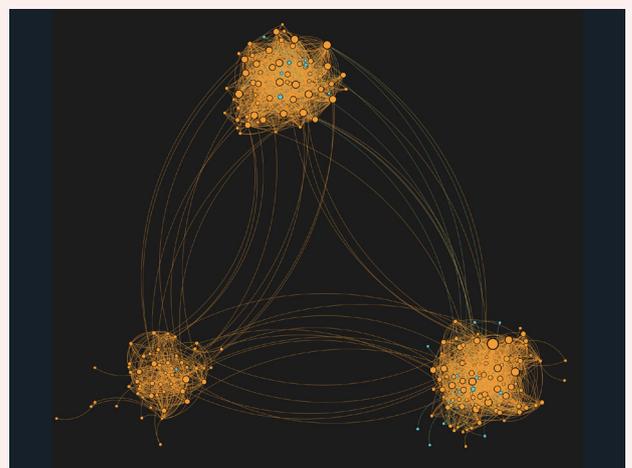
Figure 11: Direct interactions between pro-Kremlin channels (orange) in the three countries and far-left channels (blue).

Semantic Mapping

In total, 4,936,025 posts were included in the semantic mapping analysis. The analysis provides an overview of the most discussed themes across the communities studied over the two years analysed, highlighting changes over time as well as overlaps and similarities among different communities.

The percentage of volume for each theme by each category using the raw number of posts is analysed in the sections below and summarised in the pie charts for each of the relevant sections.

Besides the thematic analysis, which focuses on the main themes identified in the semantic mapping, the theme of the Russia—Ukraine war was further analysed through subthemes to identify which specific narratives penetrated each of the communities.

France

Volume Over Time

In France, the most active channels during the observation period were pro-Kremlin channels. In particular, pro-Kremlin channels saw steady growth in 2022, a trend further reinforced in 2023 and 2024 as their total volume of output continued to grow. Conspiracy channels were the second most active, with a stable level of output throughout the period of study. Far-right and far-left channels saw a consistently lower level of output, with occasional spikes bucking the trend.

Figure 12: Normalised message volumes per category in France.[21]

April 2022   January 2024

● Conspiracy   ● Far-left channels   ● Far-right channels   ● Pro-Kremlin
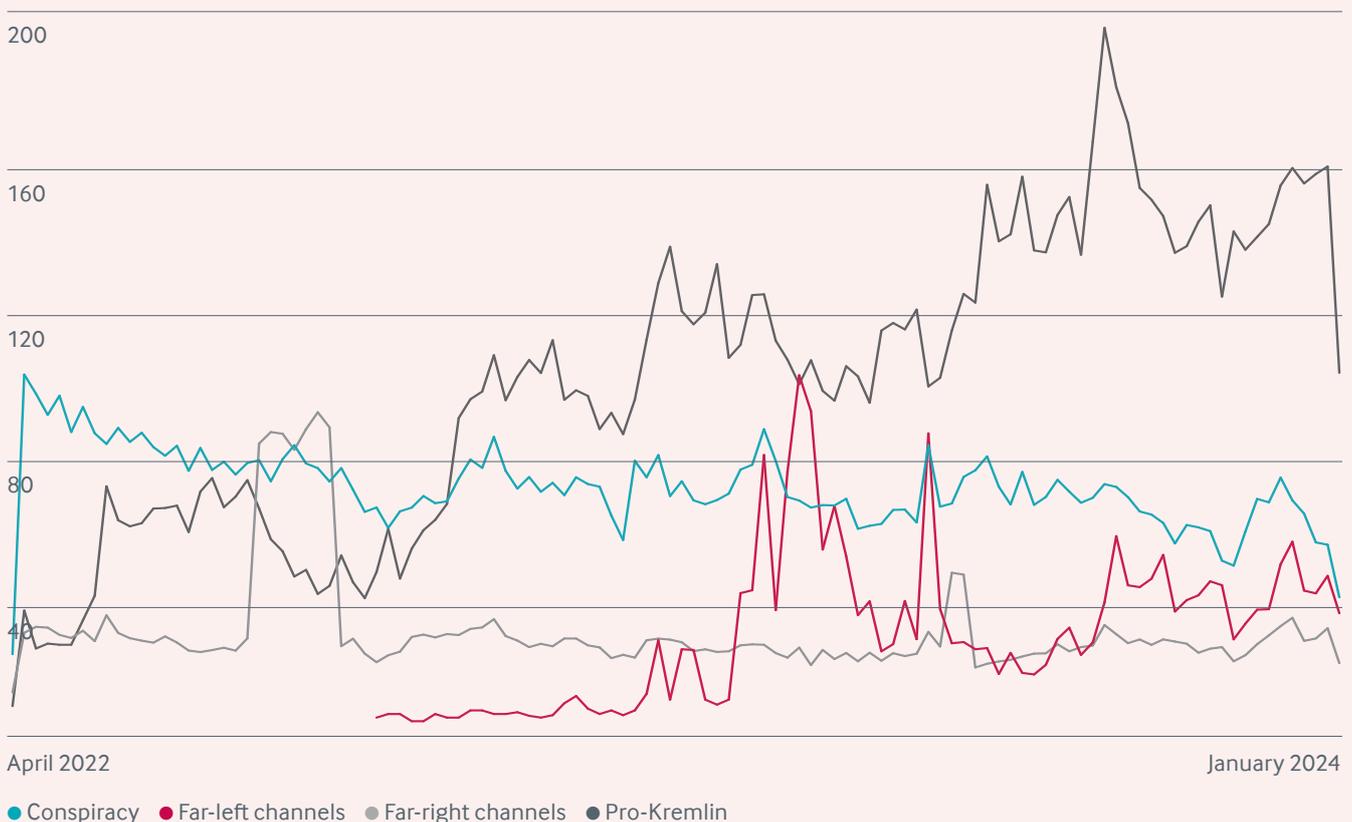
France

Thematic Analysis

Figure 13: Percentage of themes per category in France.

	Conspiracy	Far-Left	Far-Right	Pro-Kremlin
Climate	3.10%	3.75%	1.57%	0.62%
Cosmology	1.29%	0.07%	0.35%	0.39%
Domestic Political Debates	10.59%	23.03%	12.68%	2.71%
Economics	2.45%	2.16%	1.24%	0.61%
Epistemology	1.06%	0.22%	0.83%	0.10%
France	7.51%	17.52%	18.39%	1.73%
Geopolitics	6.06%	4.35%	5.16%	9.20%
Germany	0.04%	0%	0.06%	0.03%
Health	20.97%	2.65%	8.31%	1.44%
Israel-Palestine	4.17%	24.65%	5.57%	8.76%
Italy	3.89%	7.85%	9.07%	1.03%
Nuclear	0.69%	0.12%	0.34%	1.67%
Polarising Topics	6.27%	3.97%	8.82%	1.52%
Political Ideologies	2.92%	2.19%	2.72%	0.63%
Religion	1.34%	0.72%	8.45%	0.62%
Russia	2.15%	0.39%	1.98%	10.23%
Russia-Ukraine War	11.41%	1.84%	7.13%	55.20%
Security	1.37%	2.79%	3.46%	0.54%
Surveillance	1.31%	0.28%	0.45%	0.50%
Technology	3.52%	0.36%	1.05%	0.58%
US Politics	6.33%	0.42%	0.97%	0.95%
War	1.44%	0.56%	1.28%	0.85%

France

Pro-Kremlin channels

Analysis of the most discussed themes by pro-Kremlin channels from 1 January 2022 to 29 February 2024 indicates that the topic of **Russia–Ukraine war** was the most prominent, with the largest spike in activity taking place on 24 June 2023, a day after the rebellion of the Wagner Group against the Kremlin. High-traction posts in French pro-Kremlin channels attempted to downplay the impact of the uprising on the credibility of Russia's war in Ukraine and described participants in the mutiny as 'traitors', echoing a speech by Vladimir Putin on the same day. The topic of **Israel–Palestine** saw a significant spike on 7 October 2023, coinciding with the attack by Hamas on Israeli territory.

Far-right channels

The breakdown of themes across French far-right channels during the period of study showed an even distribution of themes, with many given similar levels of prominence. It is notable that prominent spikes took place across a lot of themes between the end of May and the beginning of July 2022, during the 2022 French legislative election. A notable spike relating to the topic of **religion** took place between 27 and 28 May 2022, another regarding **domestic political debates** on 9 June 2022, and **health** between 5 and 7 July 2022. The spike related to **religion** was attributed to a series of anti-Muslim posts produced by a far-right channel about long-standing controversies surrounding public funding for a mosque in Strasbourg. The spike in discussion on 9 June 2022 was related to the upcoming parliamentary elections in France (held on 12 and 19 June 2022). High-traction posts commented on predicted low turnout and focused on attacking the French president's political record. Peaks in domestic political debate and health appear to have been prompted by domestic protests and an uptick of COVID-19 infections respectively.

Figure 14: Overview of the most prominent themes in French pro-Kremlin channels.

April 2022 — January 2024

● Israel-Palestine   ● Russia-Ukraine War

Figure 15: Overview of the most prominent themes in French far-right channels.

April 2022 — January 2024

● Domestic Political Debates   ● Health   ● Religion
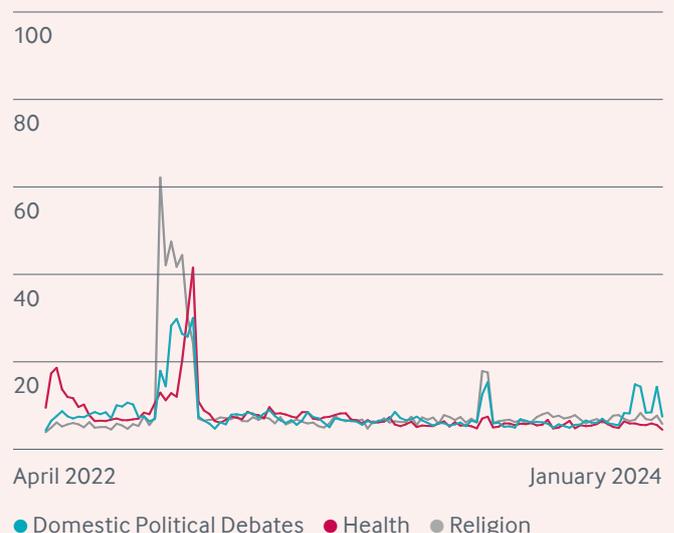
France

Conspiracy channels

The main theme discussed by the conspiracy channels was **health** at the beginning of the period of study, with a decline in volume of activity related to this topic in 2024 as the theme was overtaken by new topics, notably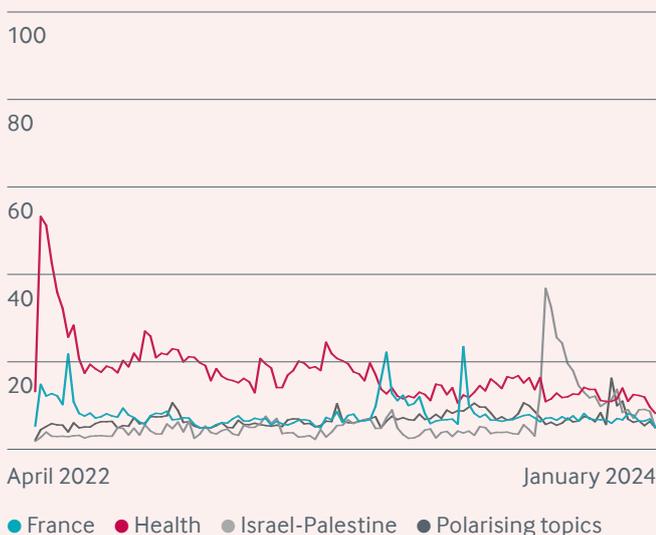 **Israel–Palestine** which saw a peak in activity in October 2023. The period of study also saw several peaks of activity related to **France** and **polarising topics**. The latter included a peak in activity in January and February 2024 around farmers' protests. In February 2024, the spike was driven by clashes between police and farmers protesting the government's policies during President Emmanuel Macron's visit at the Paris agricultural fair.[22] Spikes in activity related to France included late June 2023 during days of riots that followed the fatal shooting by French police of 17-year-old Nahel Merzouk, which sparked a national conversation about institutional racism. Posts by conspiracy channels frequently mentioned unverified claims of violence by protesters against the police.

Far-left channels

By comparison to other communities, the French far-left channels were less engaged in conversations around the Russia–Ukraine war. Instead, they primarily discussed **France**, **domestic political debates**, and **Israel–Palestine**. This included a series of spikes between March and June 2023 related to French issues. On 1 May 2023 (Labour Day), posts in far-left channels shared updates about nationwide anti-government protests.[23] Another spike in late June coincided with protests related to Nahel Merzouk's death, with posts that hailed protests as a welcome revolution or insurrection and posts that focused on the anti-police nature of the protests.[24]

Spikes related to **domestic political debates** in January and February 2024 were driven by farmers' protests, and particularly the presidential visit at the agricultural fair.[25] The most liked posts in the channels echoed protesters' calls for the government to resign. Discussion about Israel–Palestine, meanwhile, generated several smaller spikes between October 2023 and early 2024. This included a spike on 8 January 2024 that was linked to prominent demonstrations against the Israeli government's policies in New York.[26]

Figure 16: Overview of the most prominent themes in French conspiracy channels.

April 2022 — January 2024

● France   ● Health   ● Israel-Palestine   ● Polarising topics

Figure 17: Overview of the most prominent themes in French far-left channels.

April 2022 — March 2024

● Domestic Political Debates   ● France   ● Israel-Palestine
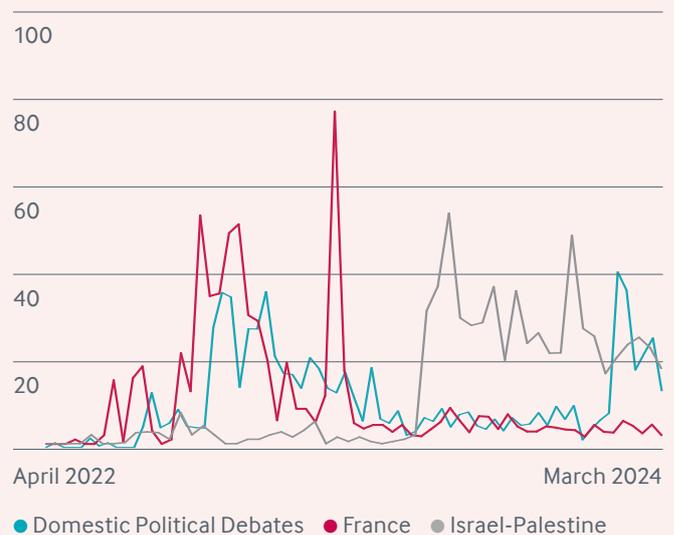
France

Russia—Ukraine war

Figure 18: Percentage of posts published about each subtheme from the Russia—Ukraine war in France.

	Conspiracy	Far-Left	Far-Right	Pro-Kremlin
Carlson Putin interview	1.19%	0%	0.58%	0.33%
Energy Crisis and Russia	5.06%	6.49%	4.63%	2.58%
Financial aid to Ukraine	1.29%	0%	1.12%	0.98%
Macron and war in Ukraine	2.45%	2.88%	3.64%	0.92%
Nord Stream attack	2.64%	1.80%	2.13%	0.84%
Poland and Ukraine war	1.20%	1.44%	1.73%	1.17%
Sanctions against Russia	7.10%	2.88%	5.87%	4.66%
US biolabs	5.23%	0.72%	1.65%	0.46%
US Ukraine Russia	2.96%	1.80%	1.89%	1.43%
Ukraine—Russia Warfare	28.58%	35.74%	22.41%	56.54%
Ukraine refugees	1.07%	1.44%	2.14%	0.94%
Ukraine food and war	1.58%	1.80%	1.22%	1.58%
Ukraine and Nazis	2.90%	5.05%	2.73%	1.22%
Ukraine and Religion	0.42%	0.72%	1.25%	0.67%
Wagner	1.08%	2.16%	1.01%	1.17%
Weapons	4.14%	3.24%	3.79%	5.80%
West NATO and Ukraine War	23.97%	26.71%	34.85%	14.52%
Zelenskiy and Ukraine	7.04%	5.05%	7.27%	4.09%

France

Pro-Kremlin channels

The topic of warfare and military analysis dominated the discussions about the Russia–Ukraine conflict among French Telegram channels. There were several notable spikes in volume, with the largest on 5 September 2023 during an escalation of the crisis around Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant after Russian artillery shells hit the plant.[27] Another spike occurred on 30 December 2023, coinciding with Russia targeting the city of Kharkiv with drones and missiles in retaliation to Ukraine's strike on Belgorod. Outside of the topic of **Ukraine–Russia warfare**, pro-Kremlin channels also produced content about **West NATO and Ukraine war** and **weapons**. Top posts in the dataset related to the former theme emphasised the risks of a full-blown war between Russia and NATO, depicting such a threat as the result of Western countries' failure to respect Russia and its leader. Posts that focused on the prospect of 'WW3' also condemned alleged 'Western irresponsibility' and 'warmongering'. Posts about **weapons** spoke about various news reports and speculation regarding Western military support for Ukraine and attacked countries which were poised to deliver weapons to Ukraine. Several of the posts with the most views condemned Finland's decision to allow Ukraine to strike Russian territory with Finnish weapons.[28]

Far-right channels

The most prominent subthemes related to the Russia–Ukraine war in far-right channels were diverse, with only one large spike in activity in July 2022 driven by the topics of **Macron and war in Ukraine** and **Zelensky/Ukraine**. Posts with a high number of views during that time period included various condemnations of Western (including American) foreign policy, with posts criticising training being offered by the UK to Ukrainian soldiers, which was announced in June 2022 by the British Ministry of Defence. Another spike related to **Macron and war in Ukraine** took place in February 2024 when far-right channels discussed a meeting between 20 (mostly European) leaders in Paris to discuss the European response to the war. Following the meeting, the French president, who expressed support for sending ground troops to Ukraine, declared that there was no European consensus on the matter.[29] Far-right channels widely presented the declaration as a humiliation and 'debacle' for the French president and rejoiced at a perceived knock to his credibility on the international stage.

Figure 19: The most prominent subthemes for the theme Russia–Ukraine war in French pro-Kremlin channels.

Figure 20: The most prominent subthemes for the theme Russia–Ukraine war in French far-right channels.
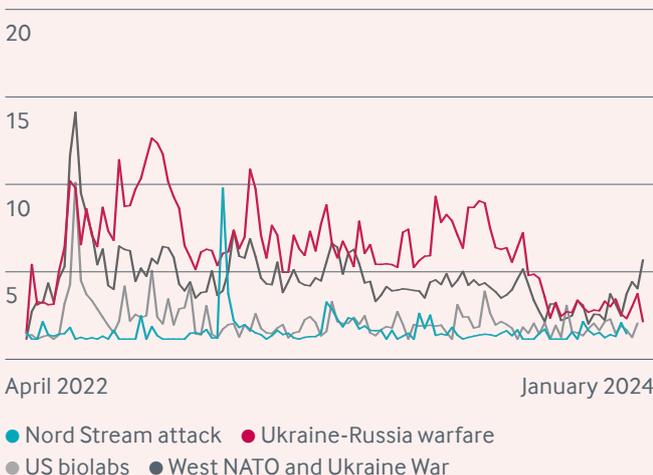
France

Conspiracy channels

The most popular subthemes related to the Russia–Ukraine war in conspiratorial channels were varied, with large spikes related to several subthemes. **Ukraine–Russia warfare** was the most prominent subtheme, with other popular subthemes including **West NATO and Ukraine war** and the **Nord Stream attack**. The latter topic saw a spike in late September 2022 when the attack took place. Posts overwhelmingly blamed the incident on the United States and declared that US President Joe Biden was its instigator. Top posts under the subtheme of **West NATO and Ukraine war** included a wide range of conspiratorial and misinformative claims about the invasion, including claims that it was orchestrated by Western actors as a distraction from an attempt to 'poison the world's population with vaccines'.

Popular posts shared various conspiracy theories to discredit Ukraine and other Western democracies. Several among the highest number of views, for instance, argued that Ukrainian MPs had called for the establishment of a New World Order and that neo-Nazi groups were 'thriving in Ukraine'. Multiple posts presented the invasion as legitimate. March 2022 also saw a spike in activity related to the subtheme of **US biolabs** as French conspiratorial outlets actively spread the conspiracy theory embraced by the Kremlin which claims that Ukrainian health facilities are a US-led malign plan to develop biological weapons. The post with the most views in relation to this subtheme claimed that Ukraine and Russia would use bats and migratory birds to spread deadly viruses.

Far-left channels

Far-left channels in France discussed a smaller range of subthemes than other communities. The study period saw one notable spike in activity related to the war in late June 2023 and was connected with the subtheme of **Ukraine–Russia warfare**. Top posts about the issue nevertheless focused on denouncing the repression of demonstrations in France. Smaller spikes related to the same subtheme took place throughout the study period, including in February 2024. The top posts at this time focused on US Army veterans burning their uniforms in solidarity with Aaron Bushnell, the US Air Force member who self-immolated outside the front gate of the Embassy of Israel in Washington DC to protest the humanitarian situation in Gaza at the time. Posts condemned Emmanuel Macron's call to send ground troops to Ukraine, which they described as 'a dangerous form of escalation'.

Figure 21: The most prominent subthemes in the theme Russia–Ukraine war in French conspiracy channels.

April 2022 — January 2024

- Nord Stream attack
- Ukraine-Russia warfare
- US biolabs
- West NATO and Ukraine War

Figure 22: The most prominent subthemes for the theme Russia–Ukraine war in French far-left channels.

September 2022 — March 2024

- Ukraine—Russia warfare

Germany

Volume Over Time

Across all categories, pro-Kremlin channels in Germany were the most active during the observation period. Their activity rapidly increased around the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, with further peaks observed in May, June, and October 2022. The volume of posts by pro-Kremlin channels slightly decreased in 2023 and 2024. Conspiracy channels were the second most active category among the German communities. As shown in Figure 23, these channels had a notable peak again around the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and an additional peak coinciding with the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023.

Figure 23: Normalised message volumes per category in Germany.
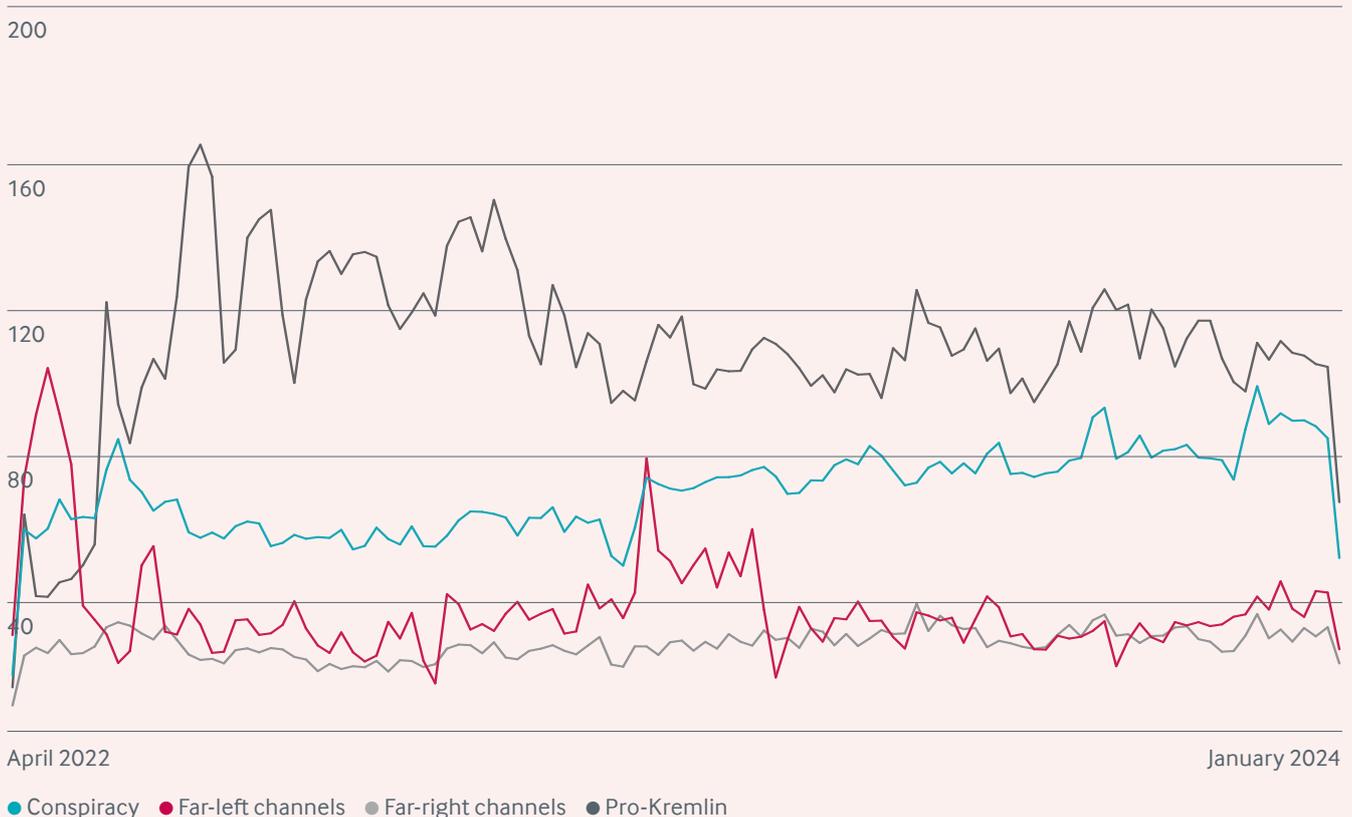
Germany

Thematic Analysis

Figure 24: Percentage of themes per category in Germany.

	Conspiracy	Far-Left	Far-Right	Pro-Kremlin
Climate	4.79%	3.84%	4.25%	1.90%
Cosmology	0.88%	0.24%	0.49%	0.52%
Domestic Political Debates	12.28%	14.19%	18.13%	6.04%
Economics	3.62%	4.60%	3.32%	1.77%
Epistemology	1.48%	0.67%	0.85%	0.44%
France	0.71%	1.21%	0.88%	0.47%
Geopolitics	5.41%	8.79%	4.87%	6.17%
Germany	1.10%	0.50%	1.51%	0.67%
Health	23.40%	15.98%	14.14%	7.10%
Israel-Palestine	3.42%	6.03%	2.92%	4.00%
Italy	3.13%	3.97%	2.93%	1.49%
Nuclear	0.67%	0.68%	0.53%	1.39%
Polarising Topics	7.10%	5.63%	12.31%	3.17%
Political Ideologies	3.51%	5.27%	4.16%	2.00%
Religion	1.29%	0.37%	2.32%	0.45%
Russia	2.29%	2.36%	2.21%	9.64%
Russia-Ukraine War	11.73%	11.99%	11.71%	46.55%
Security	1.93%	2.62%	7.18%	1.18%
Surveillance	1.32%	4.18%	0.85%	1.61%
Technology	2.93%	3.41%	1.73%	1.05%
US Politics	5.29%	1.17%	1.54%	1.05%
War	1.62%	2.17%	1.07%	1.23%

Germany

Pro-Kremlin channels

Since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the output of pro-Kremlin channels has been consistently dominated by messages about the **Russia–Ukraine war**. The only exception was in October 2023, when **Israel–Palestine** became the most dominant topic following the 7 October Hamas attack on Israel. Other popular themes included **health** (this mainly included messages about the COVID-19 pandemic), **domestic [German] political debates** and **polarising topics**. **Health** being particularly prominent in the pro-Kremlin channels before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a finding consistent with previous ISD research on the intersection between the German-language version of RT DE and communities of COVID-19 sceptics.[30] The presence of topics like migration, gender, and conspiracy theories as well as discussions around domestic politics in Germany highlight that Russian state and pro-Kremlin channels have been not only promoting narratives on the war in Ukraine and issues of Russian geopolitical interest but also spreading polarising messages on domestic issues.

Far-right channels

German far-right channels demonstrated a mixed focus, with several themes peaking in prominence notably during the observation period. The **Russia–Ukraine war** dominated their output around the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, then again in November 2022, and once more in July 2023, mainly sparked by discussions about military aid and support for Ukraine. As expected, the **Israel–Palestine** theme peaked in October 2023 after the Hamas attack on Israel. In January and February 2024, the output was dominated by **domestic political debates** which were sparked by the farmers' protests.[31] Other prominent topics included **security**, **health**, **polarising topics**, **climate**, and **US politics**. Overall, the **Russia–Ukraine war** remained one of the most prominent themes in the dataset throughout the period of analysis, highlighting how the topic has become a contentious and important issue for the community.

Figure 25: Overview of the most prominent themes in German pro-Kremlin channels.

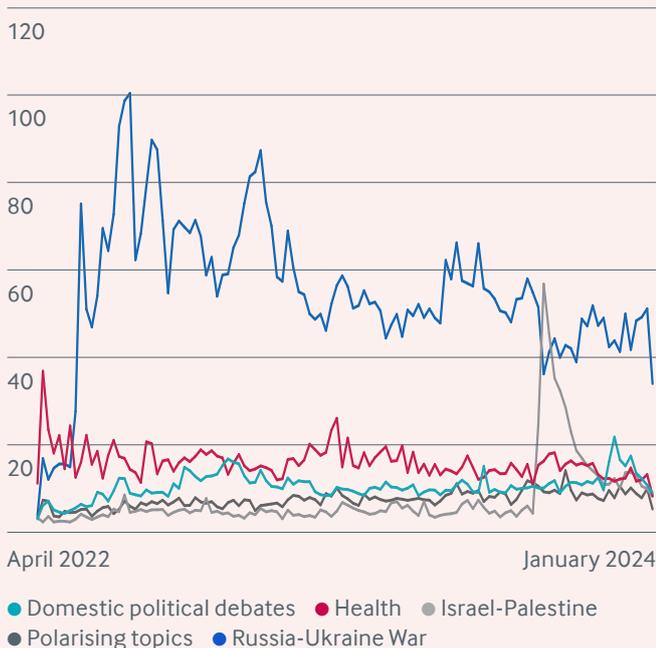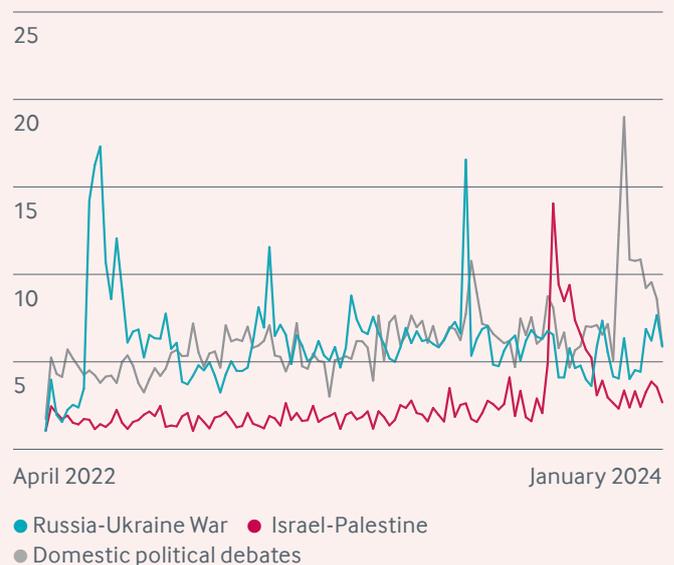- Domestic political debates ● Health ● Israel-Palestine
- Polarising topics ● Russia-Ukraine War

Figure 26: Overview of the most prominent themes in German far-right channels.

- Russia-Ukraine War ● Israel-Palestine
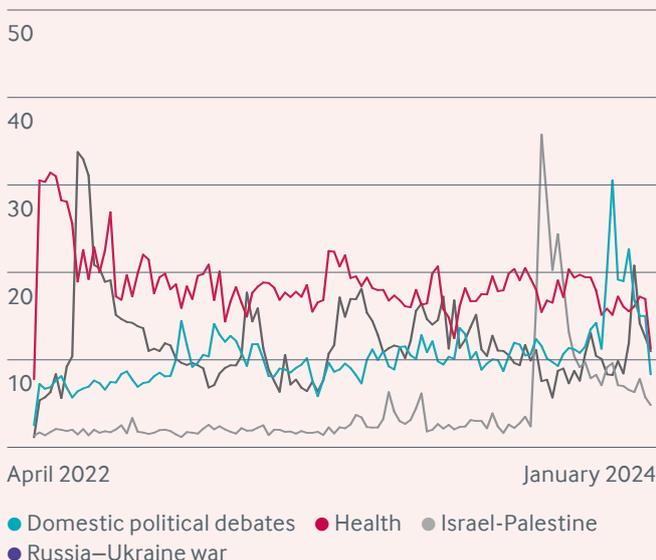- Domestic political debates

Germany

Conspiracy channels

The most dominant theme in conspiracy channels throughout the whole observation period was **health**, which included messages about the COVID-19 pandemic. The **Russia–Ukraine war** became the most prominent topic February–March 2022 and had further peaks in October 2022, February–March 2023 and February 2024. **Israel–Palestine** became the most popular theme October–November 2023, while **domestic political debates** became particularly prominent January–February 2024, similar to the trend in far-right channels. Other prominent themes included **US politics**, **climate**, **polarising topics**, **economics**, and **geopolitics**.

Far-left channels

For the far-left channels, **health** and **technology** were the two most prominent topics, with **Israel–Palestine** overtaking these in October 2023. The **Russia–Ukraine war** was particularly prominent February–March 2022. Other prominent topics included **economics**, **geopolitics**, **domestic political debates**, **surveillance**, and **polarising topics**.

Figure 27: Overview of the most prominent themes in German conspiracy channels.

April 2022   January 2024

● Domestic political debates   ● Health   ● Israel-Palestine
● Russia–Ukraine war

Figure 28: Overview of the most prominent themes in German far-left channels.

April 2022   January 2024

● Health   ● Israel-Palestine   ● Russia-Ukraine War   ● Technology
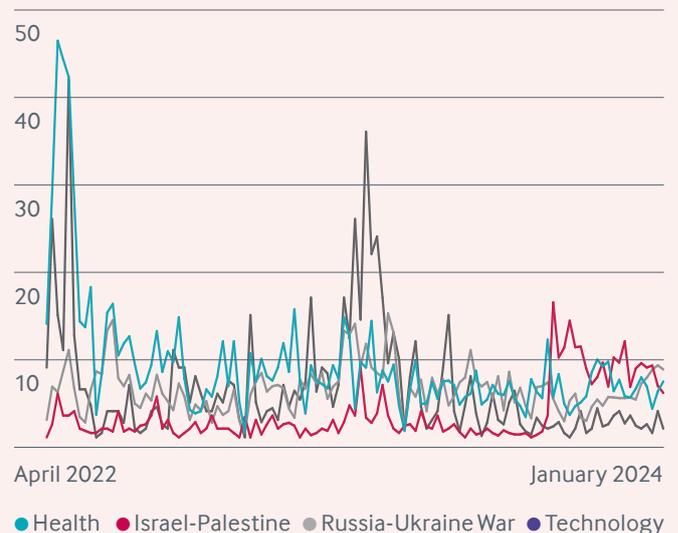
Germany

Russia–Ukraine war

Figure 29: Percentage of posts published about each subtheme from the Russia–Ukraine war in Germany.

	Conspiracy	Far-Left	Far-Right	Pro-Kremlin
Carlson Putin interview	1.58%	0.90%	0.86%	0.42%
Energy Crisis and Russia	8.82%	8.53%	7.79%	5.17%
Financial aid to Ukraine	1.55%	1.57%	1.95%	1.06%
Macron and war in Ukraine	0.42%	0.47%	0.38%	0.40%
Nord Stream attack	4.90%	4.49%	4.92%	1.64%
Poland and Ukraine war	2.01%	1.99%	2.80%	1.42%
Sanctions against Russia	7.10%	7.58%	6.22%	8.35%
US biolabs	3.89%	1.47%	1.61%	0.84%
US Ukraine Russia	2.45%	1.66%	1.27%	1.06%
Ukraine–Russia Warfare	22.29%	14.31%	21.70%	47.81%
Ukraine refugees	2.31%	1.93%	6.14%	1.58%
Ukraine food and war	1.36%	2.28%	1.09%	1.62%
Ukraine and Nazis	2.89%	5.92%	3.46%	2.11%
Ukraine and Religion	0.26%	0.09%	0.53%	0.69%
Wagner	1.16%	1.49%	1.48%	1.10%
Weapons	5.39%	7.86%	6.02%	5.34%
West NATO and Ukraine War	25.73%	33.75%	26.25%	15.77%
Zelenskiy and Ukraine	5.80%	3.60%	5.44%	3.53%

Germany

Pro-Kremlin channels

For pro-Kremlin channels, the most prominent subtheme related to the Russia–Ukraine war was **Ukraine–Russia warfare**, which included messages on the current situation on the battlefield, attacks, or reports on allegedly destroyed military equipment. The subtheme **West NATO and the Ukraine war**, which included messages blaming the West for the onset of the war or focusing on NATO support for Ukraine, was particularly prominent February–March 2022 and October 2022. The subthemes of **sanctions against Russia** and the **energy crisis and Russia** resulting from the invasion of Ukraine peaked May–June 2022 and remained prominent throughout the analysis period. This aligns with previous ISD research on the importance of conversations around the domestic economy in the German public sphere and their potential to be co-opted by pro-Kremlin voices.[32] The subtheme of the **Nord Stream attack** became particularly prominent in October 2022, the immediate aftermath of the attack, with pro-Kremlin channels blaming the US or Ukraine for the explosion of the Nord Stream pipeline.

Other subthemes in the German pro-Kremlin set included the conspiracy theory about **US biolabs** in Ukraine; **Ukraine refugees**; **weapons** delivered from the West to Ukraine; **financial aid to Ukraine**; or lastly, messages about the **Ukraine war and food**, which mostly focused on the Black Sea Grain Initiative and allegations that Western countries and Ukraine are to blame for Russia's withdrawal from the deal.[33] The distinct theme of **Ukraine and Nazis** contained unsubstantiated claims that Ukrainian leadership hold neo-Nazi views or used historical cases of Ukrainian collaborators with Nazi Germany during WWII to portray the current Ukrainian government as a Nazi regime.

Far-right channels

For the German far-right channels, the most prominent subthemes in the **Russia–Ukraine war** theme were **West NATO and Ukraine war** February–March 2022; **Ukrainian refugees** in March 2022; **Nord Stream attack** in October 2022 and February–March 2023; and **energy crisis and Russia** in May and October 2022. Thematic and narrative overlap with the pro-Kremlin channels was particularly strong around **West NATO and Ukraine war**, **energy crisis and Russia** and **Nord Stream attack.** For example, many far-right channels alleged that NATO and the West are responsible for the war in Ukraine and blamed the US and Ukraine for the attack on the Nord Stream pipeline. Some channels also blamed the German government for the rise in energy prices and accused it of acting against the interests of the German people.

Figure 30: The most prominent subthemes for the theme Russia–Ukraine war in German pro-Kremlin channels.
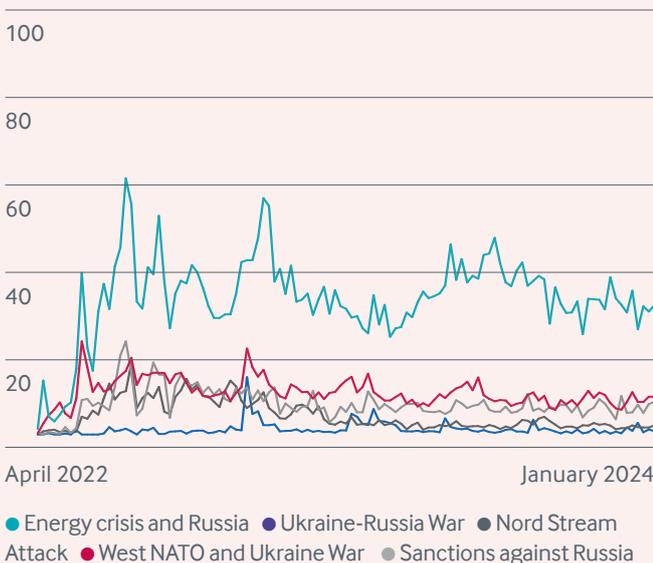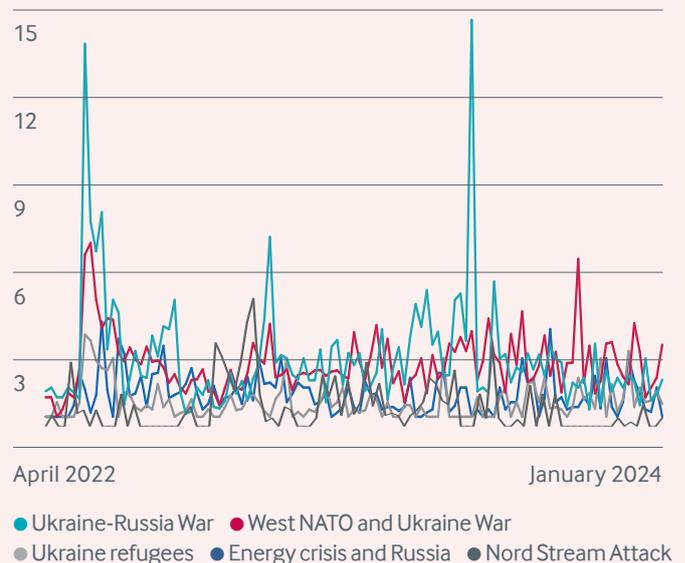

Figure 31: The most prominent subthemes for the theme Russia–Ukraine war in German far-right channels.

Germany

Conspiracy channels

Among other subthemes, German conspiracy channels promoted disinformation about **US biolabs** in Ukraine being used for development of bioweapons; this theme remained present in the dataset throughout the analysis period. The subtheme of the **Nord Stream attack** peaked in October 2022 (similar to pro-Kremlin and far-right channels), with conspiracy channels also accusing the US or Ukraine of being involved in the attack.

Far-left channels

In German far-left channels, the subtheme of **West NATO and Ukraine war** was the most prominent, peaking immediately before the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and January–February 2023. The subthemes of **Ukraine–Russia warfare** and **sanctions against Russia** remained prominent throughout the observation period. The subtheme of **Nord Stream attack** peaked in October 2022 and February–March 2023. The subtheme of **weapons**, which included criticism of supplies of weapons to Ukraine by the West, peaked in February 2023. The peak in several subthemes, particularly **West NATO and Ukraine war** and **weapons**, February–March 2023 coincided with publication of the so-called 'Manifesto for Peace', which criticised Western military support for Ukraine, and associated rallies.[34] These narratives are in line with broader anti-US, anti-NATO, and anti-Imperialist views often advanced by the German far-left.[35]

Figure 32: The most prominent subthemes in the theme Russia–Ukraine war in German conspiracy channels.

April 2022   January 2024

● US biolabs   ● Nord Stream attack
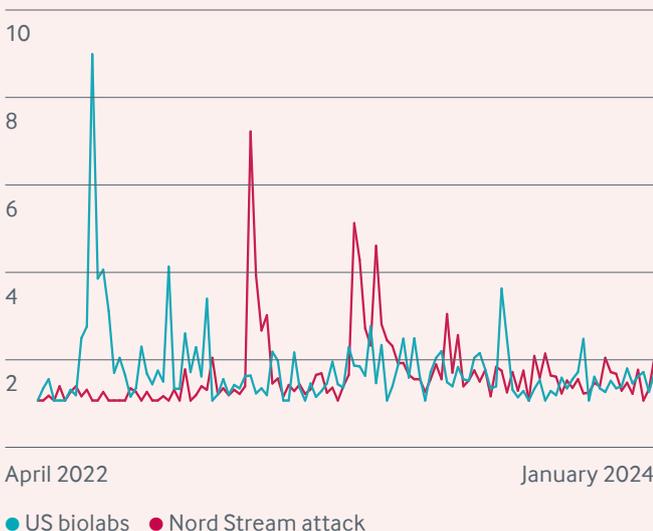
Figure 33: The most prominent subthemes for the theme Russia–Ukraine war in German far-left channels.

April 2022   January 2024

● West NATO and Ukraine War   ● Ukraine-Russia War
● Sanctions against Russia   ● Nord Stream attack   ● Weapons

Italy

Volume Over Time

The Pro-Kremlin category was the most active in Italy, closely followed by the conspiracy category. By looking at the volume of activity over time, it can be observed that the two categories closely followed the same patterns, with spikes around the same time periods (three major ones). Two of these have obvious causes: the full-scale invasion of Ukraine at the end of February 2022 and after the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel. The other peak (October 2022) appears to be connected to the 2022 Italian general election. The activity of Italian far-right channels, although less prominent, was also characterised by spikes around the same time periods.

Figure 34: Normalised message volumes per category in Italy.

● Conspiracy   ● Far-left channels   ● Far-right channels   ● Pro-Kremlin
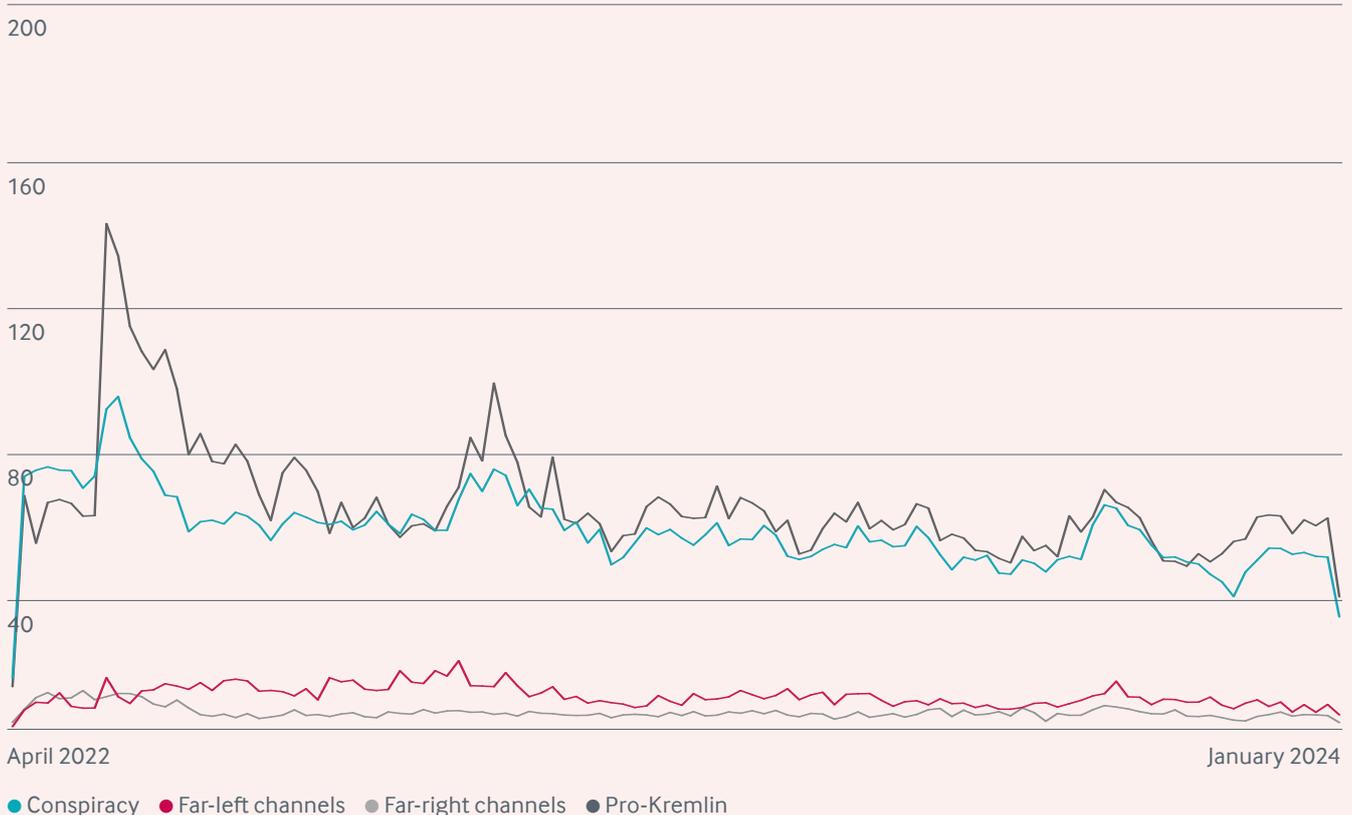
Italy

Thematic Analysis

Figure 35: Percentage of themes per category in Italy.

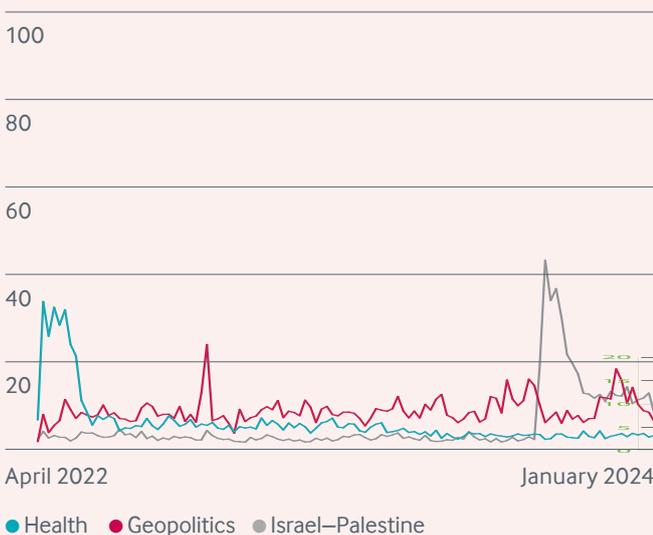|	Conspiracy	Far-Left	Far-Right	Pro-Kremlin
Climate	4.79%	3.84%	4.25%	1.90%
Cosmology	0.88%	0.24%	0.49%	0.52%
Domestic Political Debates	12.28%	14.19%	18.13%	6.04%
Economics	3.62%	4.60%	3.32%	1.77%
Epistemology	1.48%	0.67%	0.85%	0.44%
France	0.71%	1.21%	0.88%	0.47%
Geopolitics	5.41%	8.79%	4.87%	6.17%
Germany	1.10%	0.50%	1.51%	0.67%
Health	23.40%	15.98%	14.14%	7.10%
Israel-Palestine	3.42%	6.03%	2.92%	4.00%
Italy	3.13%	3.97%	2.93%	1.49%
Nuclear	0.67%	0.68%	0.53%	1.39%
Polarising Topics	7.10%	5.63%	12.31%	3.17%
Political Ideologies	3.51%	5.27%	4.16%	2.00%
Religion	1.29%	0.37%	2.3%	0.45%
Russia	2.29%	2.36%	2.21%	9.64%
Russia-Ukraine War	11.73%	11.99%	11.71%	46.55%
Security	1.93%	2.62%	7.18%	1.18%
Surveillance	1.32%	4.18%	0.85%	1.61%
Technology	2.93%	3.41%	1.73%	1.05%
US Politics	5.29%	1.17%	1.54%	1.05%
War	1.62%	2.17%	1.07%	1.23%

Italy

Pro-Kremlin channels

Analysis of the most discussed themes by pro-Kremlin channels from 1 January 2022 to 29 February 2024 indicates that the topic of **health** was the most discussed topic until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Conversations about **health** mostly focused on criticism of COVID-19 regulations, with messages raising doubts about official statistics both from the Italian government and on the international level, as well as spreading conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus. The topic quickly lost traction at the end of February 2022 and was completely overshadowed by discussions about the war in Ukraine, which remained the most prominent theme among these channels through to the end of the data collection period.

The theme was briefly overtaken by discussions about **Israel—Palestine** after the October 7 attack, but this shift in conversation only lasted one month before turning back to Ukraine. The main spikes of activity around conversations on the war in Ukraine took place at the start of the full-scale invasion and in the first two weeks of October 2022. This latter spike was mainly driven by conversations around the Crimean Bridge explosion and the subsequent intensification of missile strikes from Russia that targeted Ukrainian critical infrastructure.[36] Another popular theme was

that of **geopolitics,** with a prominent spike in the first week of August 2022 prompted by the visit of Nancy Pelosi (then-Speaker of the US House of Representatives) to Taiwan.

Far-right channels

Contrary to activity from pro-Kremlin channels, the Italian far-right did not feature any clear predominant topic in the timeframe analysed but rather exhibited spikes of conversations around different topics. The most significant spike of activity was in mid-February 2022 on the topic of **health**, consisting mainly of COVID-19 conversations, with numerous posts discussing cases of suspected sudden deaths and criticism of the Italian Health Ministry. The volume of these conversations, however, declined sharply, and they were then overtaken by the topic of the **Russia—Ukraine war**, which remained dominant from the end of February 2022 until the end of April 2022. The theme of **security** had prominent and recurring spikes, with the major ones occurring in August, September, October, and December 2023, mainly sparked by discussions around cases of sexual violence or violent assaults. The topic of **Israel—Palestine** was also prominently discussed around the week of the Hamas attack; however, it received less engagement than other topics.

Figure 36: Overview of the most prominent themes in Italian pro-Kremlin channels.

● Health ● Geopolitics ● Israel—Palestine

Figure 37: Overview of the most prominent themes in Italian far-right channels.

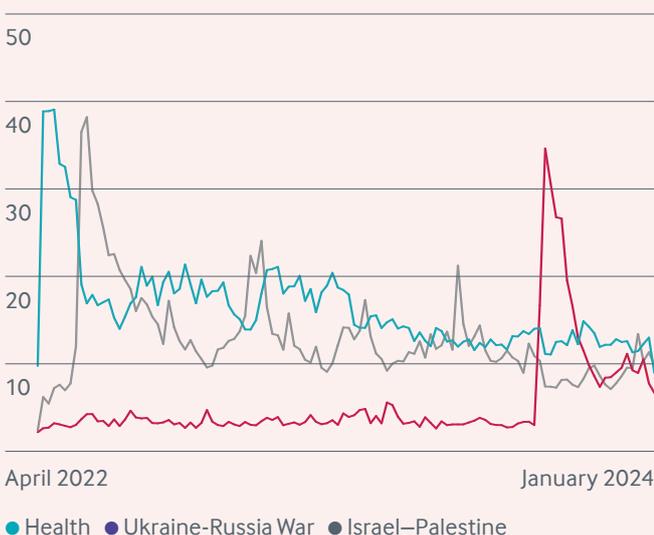● Health ● Security ● Israel—Palestine ● Russia—Ukraine War
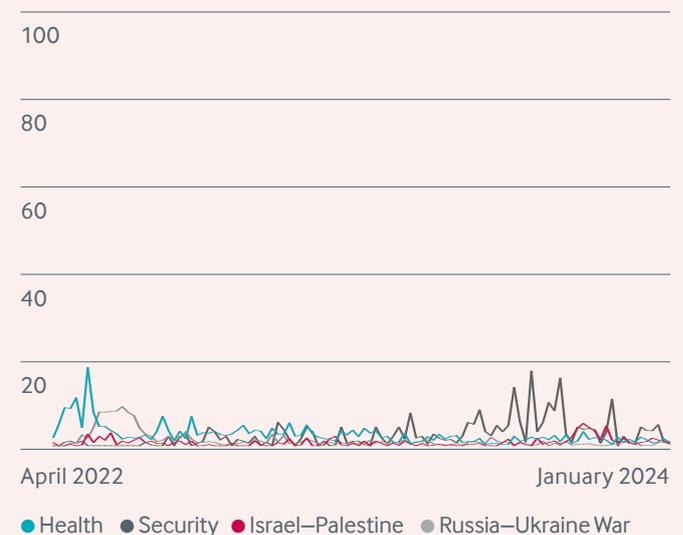
Italy

Conspiracy channels

The main themes discussed by Italian conspiracy channels varied greatly during the timeframe analysed and were regularly affected by major events. Contrary to the previously analysed Italian communities, which were consistent with conspiracy channels in the other two countries, it is notable that the topic of **health** (which mainly constituted conversations about the COVID-19 pandemic) dominated output throughout the period analysed. Despite a sharp decrease in engagement following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the theme was still prominent until 2024.

This finding matches the results of an ISD study on the online mis- and disinformation ecosystem in Ireland, where it was found that the topic of health remained prominent even after COVID-19 measures were lifted.[37] This underlines the importance of the pandemic in creating and strengthening conspiracy communities online, and its lingering popularity suggests the topic continues to motivate and interest the community.
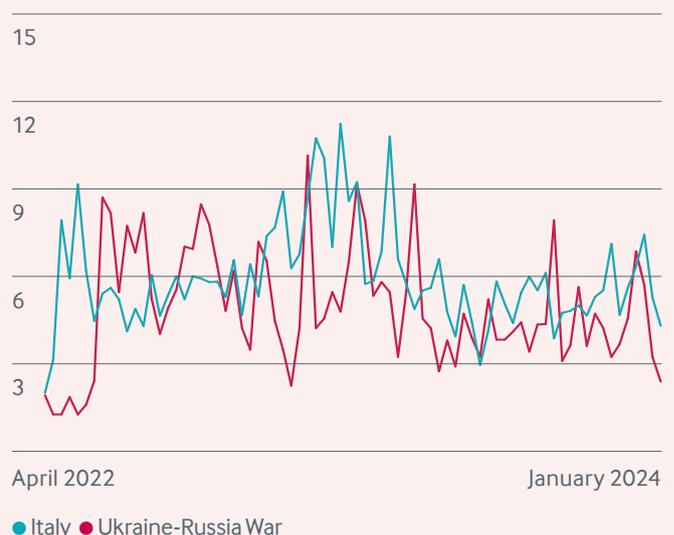
Far-left channels

The themes discussed by the Italian far-left are more varied than the ones discussed by their conspiracy and far-right counterparts. Rather than exhibiting a clear preference for a specific theme, various themes spiked across the timeframe analysed. The most prominent spikes of conversations appear to be around the topic of **Italy**, with messages predominantly about Italian political figures. A second important theme with recurring spikes is that of the **Russia–Ukraine war**, which is analysed in more detail below.

Figure 38: Overview of the most prominent themes in Italian conspiracy channels.

April 2022   January 2024

● Health   ● Ukraine-Russia War   ● Israel—Palestine

Figure 39: Overview of the most prominent themes in Italian far-left channels.

April 2022   January 2024

● Italy   ● Ukraine-Russia War

Italy

Russia–Ukraine war

Figure 40: Percentage of posts published about each subtheme from the Russia–Ukraine war in Italy.

	Conspiracy	Far-Left	Far-Right	Pro-Kremlin
Carlson Putin interview	0.77%	0.29%	0.39%	0.37%
Energy Crisis and Russia	8.20%	4.39%	5.22%	4.47%
Financial aid to Ukraine	1.38%	1.05%	0.67%	0.93%
Macron and war in Ukraine	0.65%	0.54%	0.35%	0.45%
Nord Stream attack	2.14%	1.85%	1.35%	1.02%
Poland and Ukraine war	1.38%	1.63%	1.78%	1.23%
Sanctions against Russia	7.73%	3.95%	5.82%	4.70%
US biolabs	3.64%	0.87%	2.21%	0.77%
US Ukraine Russia	3.15%	2.03%	3.32%	1.57%
Ukraine–Russia Warfare	28.50%	29.07%	31.47%	51.46%
Ukraine refugees	1.01%	0.54%	2.39%	0.96%
Ukraine food and war	1.45%	1.30%	0.64%	1.26%
Ukraine and Nazis	2.31%	7.04%	2.86%	1.88%
Ukraine and Religion	0.53%	0.87%	0.39%	0.86%
Wagner	1.37%	1.45%	1.68%	1.23%
Weapons	4.45%	2.35%	2.61%	4.54%
West NATO and Ukraine War	24.34%	34.51%	29.14%	17.33%
Zelenskiy and Ukraine	6.89%	6.20%	7.61%	4.88%

Italy

Pro-Kremlin channels

As with the German pro-Kremlin channels, the most prominent subtheme for Italian pro-Kremlin channels about the Russia–Ukraine war was that of **Ukraine–Russia warfare,** which includes daily reports from the frontlines of the conflict. The second most prominent subtheme was that of **West NATO and Ukraine War**, which once again echoed the Kremlin's talking points about the West bearing responsibility for provoking the war in Ukraine. Other less prominent spikes were mainly dictated by specific events, such as conversations about **Wagner** on 23 June 2023 and 23 August 2023, aligning respectively with the Wagner Group rebellion and the death of the group's leader Yevgeny Prigozhin. Allegations of **US biolabs** in Ukraine were mainly discussed in the first weeks of March, with less significant spikes in conversation throughout the two years analysed.

Far-right channels

Among the Italian far-right channels, the most prominent spike in conversation was also on **Ukraine–Russia warfare**; however, it mainly occurred in the immediate aftermath of the full-scale invasion and began to decline towards the end of April 2022. The majority of spikes in subthemes about the Russia–Ukraine war also occurred between the end of February and the end of April 2022 after which the overall attention towards the war in Ukraine declined among far-right channels. Another important spike around this time was that of the subtheme **US Ukraine Russia** which mainly included conversations about the US involvement in the war in Ukraine. Another significant spike of content took place in the first week of April 2023 around the subtheme of **US biolabs**.

Contrary to the German far-right, the Italian far-right only discussed the topic of **Ukraine refugees** briefly at the beginning of March 2022, but the theme did not garner further attention or engagement. Accordingly, attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees varied across the Italian far-right. Some messages expressed sympathy towards Ukrainian refugees, who were defined as 'true refugees' (i.e. women and children), in contrast to 'economic migrants' from other countries, who were viewed with disdain. However, other channels displayed resentment towards Ukrainian refugees, portraying them as receiving more benefits than Italians.

Figure 41: The most prominent subthemes for the theme Russia–Ukraine war in Italian pro-Kremlin channels.

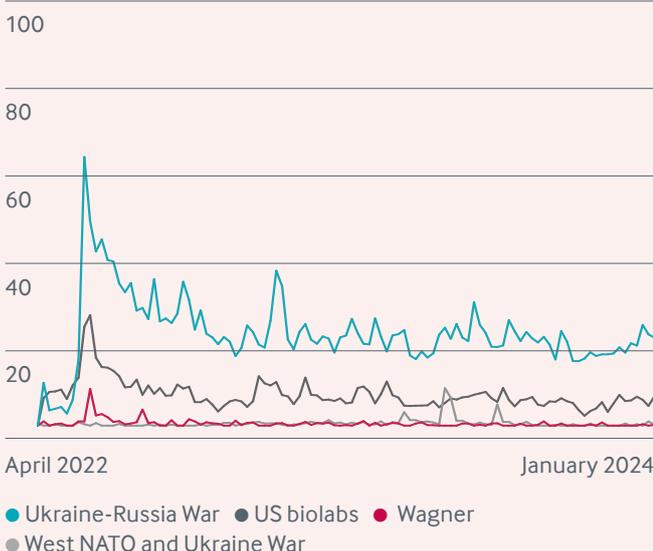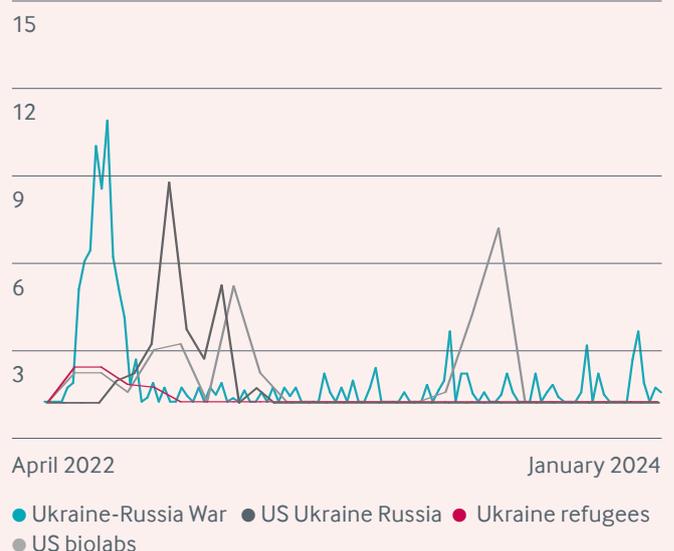- Ukraine-Russia War
- US biolabs
- Wagner
- West NATO and Ukraine War

Figure 42: The most prominent subthemes for the theme Russia–Ukraine war in Italian far-right channels.

- Ukraine-Russia War
- US Ukraine Russia
- Ukraine refugees
- US biolabs

Italy

Conspiracy channels

Italian conspiracy channels have engaged with a large number of subthemes about the Russia—Ukraine war, maintaining high engagement throughout the two years analysed. The main spikes of volume appear around the subtheme of **Ukraine—Russia warfare**, as was the case for the pro-Kremlin category. Another spike that appears in the conspiracy category but not in the pro-Kremlin category took place at the end of June 2023 and corresponds to the Wagner Group uprising (**Wagner**).

Conversations about the **West NATO and Ukraine war** subtheme were also very prominent, especially at the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Similarly, the narrative around **US biolabs** in Ukraine, which was spread by Russia to justify its attack, was also prominently discussed around the same time, providing further evidence that Russian narratives found a receptive audience among certain online conspiracy communities in Europe.

Far-left channels

The Italian far-left channels in this dataset also discussed a wide range of Ukraine-related topics during the data collection timeframe. The most prominent subtheme among these was that of **Ukraine—Russia warfare**, with notable spikes in February, May, and November 2022. A spike that does not appear in other communities is that of **Ukraine and religion** at the beginning of April 2023. This spike corresponds with the eviction of clerics at Kyiv's Monastery of the Caves,[38] which was widely covered by Russian state media as an example of Ukraine's increasing pressure on believers.[39] Conversations from the Italian far-left around this period parroted the Kremlin's talking points around 'Ukrainian neo-Nazi activists' and 'Banderites' attacking and persecuting Christians.[40]

In conversations within the **West NATO and Ukraine war** subtheme, the conflict was often referred to as 'the Imperialist war in Ukraine', depicting it as a geopolitical conflict between international organisations like NATO and the EU on one side and Russia on the other. Rather than simply carrying pro-Kremlin viewpoints, this narrative typically criticises both the Ukrainian and Russian sides, accusing the former of being fascist and the latter of lying and distorting facts about its Communist past. Other conversations within this subtheme are characterised by a firmer pro-Kremlin stance, where Ukraine is described as the main aggressor against its own people and as a puppet of the US and the West.

Figure 43: The most prominent subthemes in the theme Russia—Ukraine war in Italian conspiracy channels.

April 2022   January 2024

● Ukraine-Russia War ● West NATO and Ukraine War
● US biolabs ● Wagner

Figure 44: The most prominent subthemes for the theme Russia—Ukraine war in Italian far-left channels.

April 2022   January 2024

● Ukraine-Russia War ● Ukraine and Religion
● West NATO and Ukraine War

Top Influential Channels Across the Three Countries

To identify the channels most frequently forwarded in all three countries, we calculated the median number of forwards for each channel across the three countries. We then ranked the channels based on this median value and annotated the top 20 channels. Messages from these top 20 channels were forwarded between 532 and 3,429 times in total, with median values ranging from 226 to 1,127. All of these channels were external; 11 were in English and 9 were in Russian. The list included 10 pro-Kremlin channels, 4 of which were state-affiliated.

Telegram channel	Median Value	Type of Actor
video_languages	608	State-affiliated outlet
SolovievLive	602	State-affiliated journalist
mod_russia_en	446	Governmental account
ukraina_ru	309	State-affiliated outlet
rian_ru	275	State-affiliated outlet

Table 3: Russia state-affiliated channels which appeared among the 20 most frequently forwarded channels across all three countries.

The state-affiliated Russian channels included channels belonging to the Russian Ministry of Defence in English (1,209 forwards in total, 446 as median value for all three countries); state-affiliated media outlet Ukraina.ru (1,852 forwards in total, 309 as median value for all three countries); news agency RIA (998 forwards in total, 275 as median value for all three countries), the channel of Vladimir Solovyov, a host on Russian state TV (1,844 forwards in total, 602 as median value for all three countries) as well as a channel with videos from RT translated into various languages that was set up after the introduction of sanctions against Russian state media in the EU in February 2022 (2,083 forwards in total, 608 as median value for all three countries).

Other frequently forwarded Russian channels belonged to pro-Kremlin influencers writing about the war in Ukraine, who are often referred to as 'war correspondents' in Russian state media. Posts from these channels were forwarded mostly by pro-Kremlin channels in all three countries. In effect, these channels were spreading and translating narratives originating in Russian-language pro-Kremlin channels.

Other channels in the top 20 most shared included English-language conspiracy and right-wing channels focusing on the US, showing how US-related political and conspiracy narratives travel to European audiences.

Among the list of 100 channels equally forwarded to all three countries, we identified other state-affiliated Russian channels, including channels of state media outlets RT and TASS, the Russian Foreign Ministry and its spokesperson, several pro-Kremlin influencers posting in Russian, and the far-right Russian philosopher Aleksandr Dugin.
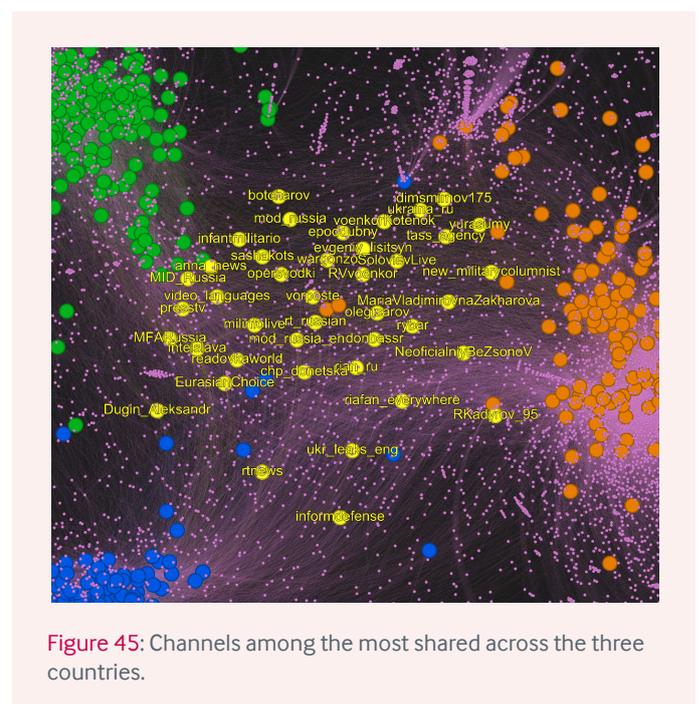

Figure 45: Channels among the most shared across the three countries.

Cross-Community Influence

To assess the influence of the communities on each other, we looked at the most shared channels within each community in each of the three countries. To do so, we selected the 50 most shared channels within each community; this metric was chosen over the channels with the greatest number of posts shared as this can be skewed by individual channels over-sharing content from specific sources.

While variations in the number of channels across communities means the results are not equally representative, they offer insights into the influence of pro-Kremlin channels and their engagement with radical and conspiracy communities.

The list of 50 channels for each community included both channels already included in our seed list of actors and external channels. When external channels were identified, they were manually coded by the analysts in order to establish whether they belonged to the existing communities or to other communities.

Overall, as would be expected, each community primarily shared content from channels within the same category — for example, far-right channels mostly shared content from other far-right channels — but they also occasionally shared content from channels in other communities. The sharing of content between ideological categories suggests that there are collective interests and indicates the potential for a cross-pollination of ideas between groups.

It is important to note that variations in the number of channels across communities affect the representativeness of the results. While some channels are prominently shared by many within certain communities, others, particularly on the far-left, include channels among the 50 most shared that have only been shared by a few.

The total number of unique channels varies significantly: 113 to 50 for the conspiracy community, 59 to 7 for the pro-Kremlin community, and 47 to 5 for the far-right. In contrast, the far-left ranges from 8 to 4 channels in Germany, 5 to 2 in Italy, and 4 to 1 in France.

France

	Conspiracy	Pro-Kremlin	Far-Right	Far-Left	Other
Conspiracy	44	4	1	1	0
Pro-Kremlin	14	31	2	1	2
Far-Right	4	1	44	1	0
Far-Left	1	0	0	49	0

Table 4: The number of channels from each category that are included in the 50 most shared channels in the dataset. Read the table from left to right.

Shares of content from pro-Kremlin channels
The main sharer of content from pro-Kremlin channels in France, after the pro-Kremlin community, was the conspiracy community. In fact, out of the 50 most prominent channels shared by the community, 4 of them appeared to be pro-Kremlin channels, with each being shared by between 60 and 66 conspiracy channels. The total proportion of channels that have shared these prominent pro-Kremlin sources ranged from 31.9% to 35%.

An overview of most salient topics covered by pro-Kremlin channels mentioned by conspiracy channels was the **Russia–Ukraine war** and to a lesser extent **Russia** and **geopolitics**. One pro-Kremlin channel received a particularly high number of mentions January–October 2023, which suggests that this channel became a key source of content about the war among French conspiracy communities. Named Chroniques de Russie, the channel is seemingly run by a pseudonymous influencer going by the name Boris Karpov. The channel has been named by some research organisations[41] and established media outlets in France as a notable entity in pro-Kremlin networks in France.[42] Sixty Telegram channels in our dataset shared content from this channel 9,522 times. The channel focused heavily on geopolitical content and expressing condemnation of Western countries. The most prominent subthemes for this channel were **Ukraine–Russia warfare** (3,086), followed by **West NATO and Ukraine war** (1,019). Posts about NATO condemned alleged American aggression against Russia and criticised the EU's decision to open membership negotiations with Ukraine.

Pro-Kremlin channels received particular traction in late June 2023, coinciding with the Wagner Group
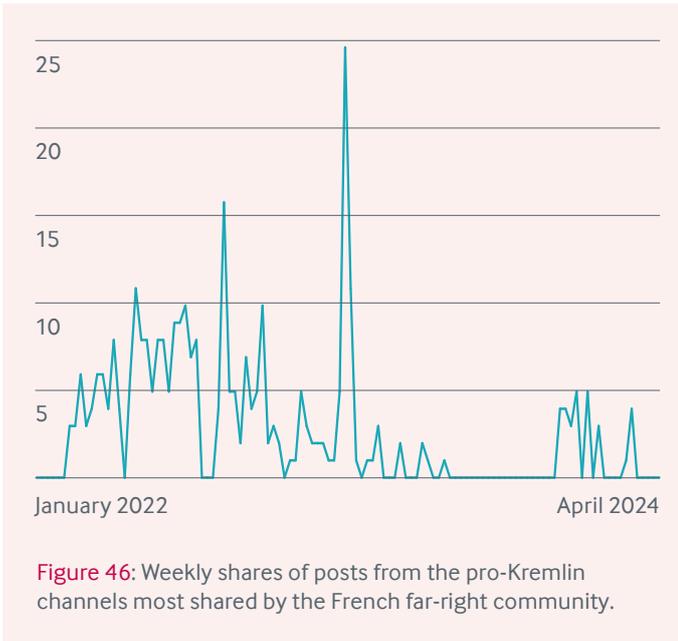
Figure 46: Weekly shares of posts from the pro-Kremlin channels most shared by the French far-right community.

rebellion.[43] Posts by conspiratorial channels shared various rumours and comments about the perceived fate of the Wagner Group around this time, speculating that its leader Yevgeny Prigozhin would escape to Belarus or that the rebellion would otherwise be quelled. Posts from pro-Kremlin channels shared by conspiratorial communities in France discussed subthemes like **Ukraine–Russia warfare**, **West NATO and Ukraine war** and **weapons**. These posts regularly claimed that NATO is about to strike Russia and focused on French President Emmanuel Macron's calls to allow Ukraine to strike military bases in Russia.

One pro-Kremlin channel was found to have been shared by a total of 19 (13.6%) of the far-right channels in the network. This channel was also the most shared pro-Kremlin channel among the French conspiracy community, revealing an overlap between these channels and the far-right.

The French far-right mostly shared posts from this pro-Kremlin channel, starting in the immediate aftermath of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with a later spike at the end of January 2023 also relating to the conflict. Discussion in the immediate aftermath of the invasion focused heavily on Germany's decision to freeze the Nord Stream 2 gas project, presenting it as a harmful move for Western countries. In January 2023, the spike appears to have been driven by Donald Trump's comments about the conflict and his claim that he will solve the war in 24 hours.[44] The most shared post focused on new unmanned artillery allegedly developed by Russia to counter Ukraine and its allies. The post

describes the equipment as 'a sign of Russia's technological advancement and military success'.

Analysis of the channels most shared by French far-left channels did not include pro-Kremlin channels among the top 50, suggesting limited overlap between these communities.

Shares of radical and conspiracy channels by pro-Kremlin channels
French pro-Kremlin channels were also found to share content from the three other categories, with conspiracy channels receiving the most shares, followed by those from the far-right and then far-left group.

Conspiratorial channels were widely shared by pro-Kremlin channels, highlighting strong intersections between both communities. An analysis of top themes discussed by these channels showed that throughout the period **Russia–Ukraine war**, **Russia**, and **health** dominated, with the conflict being the most prominent topic of discussion. From October 2023, **Israel–Palestine** also featured among discussed topics. The largest spike in mentions of conspiracy channels took place on 10 October 2022, with top posts among the pro-Kremlin community in the network focusing on Russia's attack on the Ukrainian power grid. Additional topics of discussion included several conspiracy theories related to the conflict, for example, claims that there are attempts by Western governments to cover up the results of the investigation into the Nord Stream pipeline attack in September 2022.

Meanwhile, mentions of far-right channels by pro-Kremlin channels spiked twice in the collection period, in January 2023 and again in November 2023, with the first one related to **Russia–Ukraine war** and the second one to the **Israel–Palestine** conflict. Posts related to the first spike indicate that a range of anti-Western narratives proved popular in both far-right and pro-Kremlin communities. Claims made in these posts include that the US wants to 'crush Russia' and that Ukraine is a 'Nazi state'. Discussion around **Israel–Palestine** described Israel as a state which only exists thanks to American support and also alleges that the US is helping Israel to cover up war crimes.

Germany

	Conspiracy	Pro-Kremlin	Far-Right	Far-Left	Other
Conspiracy	43	2	2	0	3
Pro-Kremlin	17	30	1	-	2
Far-Right	11	1	35	-	3
Far-Left	17	5	1	16	11

Table 5: The number of channels from each category that are included in the 50 most shared channels in the dataset. Read the table from left to right.

Shares of content from pro-Kremlin channels

In Germany, the far-left category shared the most pro-Kremlin channels, with a total of five appearing among the 50 most shared. Notably, of these channels, four were pro-Kremlin, and one, Satellit, has previously been identified as a Russian state-affiliated channel.[45]

It is worth noting, however, that the majority of the posts shared by the German far-left from pro-Kremlin channels were not actually about the war in Ukraine but covered a wider range of topics, predominantly, **geopolitics**, **Israel–Palestine**, and **domestic political debates**. While the topic of the **Russia–Ukraine war** only makes up 7.9% of the posts shared by pro-Kremlin channels, many emphasise the role that NATO allegedly played in the conflict, accusing both NATO and the West of disregarding Ukrainian lives and fostering the conflict for their own economic benefit.

Contrary to the far-left, which mostly forwarded posts from pro-Kremlin channels with topics unrelated to the war in Ukraine, 58.3% of the posts shared from German conspiracy channels were either about the **Russia–Ukraine war** or about **Russia** more generally. Posts forwarded by conspiracy channels about the **Ukraine–Russia warfare** subtheme include numerous videos of soldiers recruiting citizens in Ukraine, with comments criticising mandatory recruitment and accusing Ukraine of recruiting the elderly and people with disabilities. Other posts include a wide range of conspiracy theories and mis- and disinformation that were spread by pro-Kremlin channels and picked up by conspiracy channels. These include debunked accusations that a charity linked to Zelensky's wife, Olena Zelenska, was involved in child trafficking and sold children to paedophiles in France, the UK, and Germany, or video interviews with Putin claiming that Ukraine's identity is based on neo-Nazism.[46]
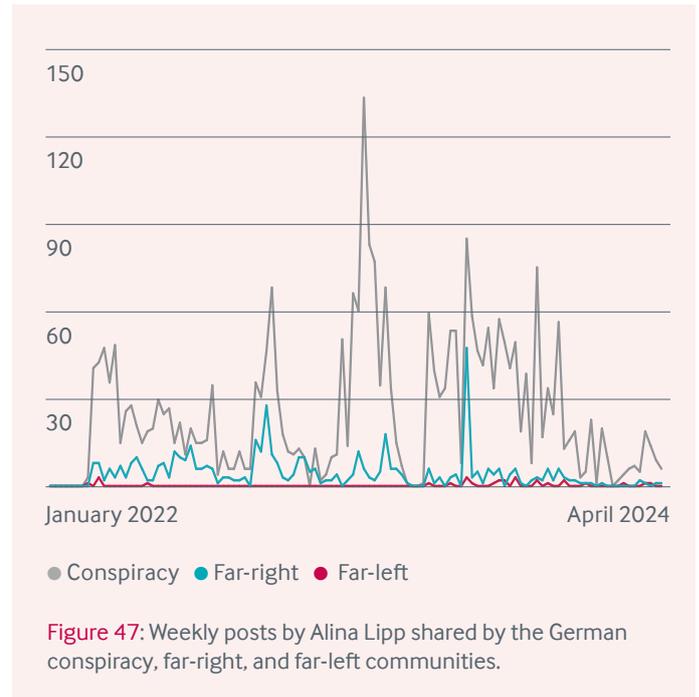

Figure 47: Weekly posts by Alina Lipp shared by the German conspiracy, far-right, and far-left communities.

A channel worth mentioning, which was found among the 50 most shared among the far-right, far-left, pro-Kremlin and conspiracy channels, is that of Alina Lipp, a German-Russian social media influencer, who has been reporting from occupied territories of Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale invasion.[47] A former member of the German Green Party, Alina Lipp gained prominence during the war in Ukraine by sharing content that claimed Russia's actions in Ukraine were justified. She repeated disinformation, alleging that Ukraine was controlled by fascists and that Russia was defending civilians. Her social media presence rapidly grew after the war began, making her one of the most prominent figures disseminating Russian propaganda to a German-speaking audience.[48]

The majority of the posts (73.3%) shared from Lipp's channel by the far-right were either about the war in Ukraine or about Russia in general. As with the conspiracy channels, these shares took place after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The main subthemes shared within this set of posts were about **Ukraine–Russia warfare**, **West NATO and Ukraine war**, **Zelensky/Ukraine**, and **Ukraine and Nazis**.

Alina Lipp's channel appears to have primarily been shared among the German far-right community to provide updates on the fighting and major events related to the war. Spikes in shares coincide with significant events, such as the Wagner Group rebellion in June 2023; the Russian annexation of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts on 30 September 2022; and the

approval of increased Western military aid to Ukraine at the end of January 2023. These posts, however, often take a distinctly pro-Russia stance and echo pro-Kremlin talking points. Examples include the labelling of Ukrainian soldiers as Nazis and making unfounded accusations that Zelensky is using the war to conduct illicit child trafficking.

Shares of radical and conspiracy channels by pro-Kremlin channels

German pro-Kremlin channels featured 17 conspiracy and 1 far-right channel among their 50 most shared channels.

The majority of the posts shared from conspiracy channels by German pro-Kremlin channels were about **health** (27.7%), **domestic political debates** (12.3%), and the **Russia–Ukraine war** (11.4%). Posts about **health** shared by pro-Kremlin channels include claims that COVID-19 vaccines are lethal and criticism of measures put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19, indicating that there is an overlap of interest in this topic between the two communities. Posts about **domestic political debates** spiked around the farmers' protests in Germany[49] (largely with posts of support towards the farmers and criticism towards the government) but also focused on other subthemes including **energy** and **German politics**, with posts about the energy crisis, and criticism of German politicians, particularly the Greens. Posts about the **Russia–Ukraine war** mostly aimed at accusing NATO, the US, and the West in general of having provoked and continuing to foster the war for economic or strategic profits. These accusations were often accompanied by baseless claims, including stories about alleged US biolabs in Ukraine or posts about the presence of Nazis in Ukraine.

The far-right channel found among the most shared channels was that of the German far-right and monarchist party Freie Sachsen (in English: Free Saxons). Posts from this channel were shared by a total of 30 pro-Kremlin channels (30.3% of the pro-Kremlin channels), comprising 660 total posts. Posts forwarded from the channel were mainly about the following themes: **domestic political debates** (21%), **health** (19.57%), **security** (18.5%), **Russia–Ukraine wa**r (13.7%), and **polarising topics** (5.9%).

Italy

	Conspiracy	Pro-Kremlin	Far-Right	Far-Left	Other
Conspiracy	35	11	1	3	-
Pro-Kremlin	10	38	-	-	2
Far-Right	1	1	47	-	1
Far-Left	9	20	-	6	15

Table 6: The number of channels from each category that are included in the 50 most shared channels in the dataset. Read the table from left to right.
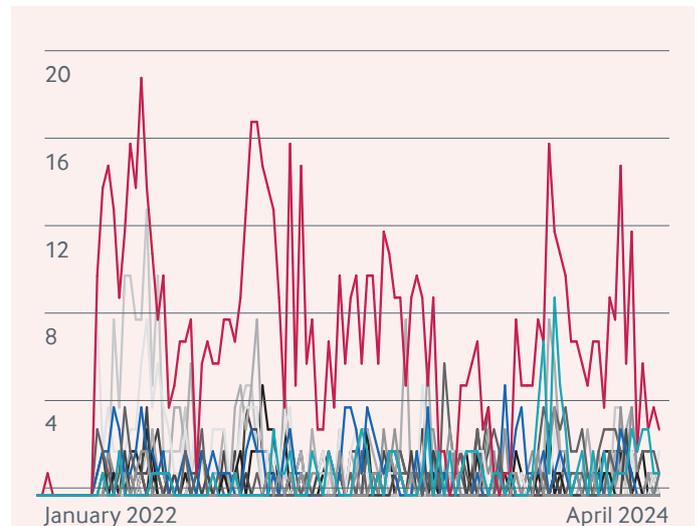

Figure 48: Weekly posts from pro-Kremlin channels shared by the Italian far-left channels in the network.

Shares of content from pro-Kremlin channels

In Italy, the category that spread the highest number of pro-Kremlin channels was the far-left, which shared a total of 20 pro-Kremlin channels. Off these channels, 19 were categorised as generally pro-Kremlin, with the remaining 1 belonging to the Russian Embassy in Italy. It is notable that the majority of the sharing of pro-Kremlin content by far-left channels happened only after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Posts shared from these channels were mostly about the **Russia–Ukraine war** (43%) and **Israel–Palestine** (10.5%). On a more granular level, content about the Russia–Ukraine conflict included military and warfare themes, discussions about Zelensky, the energy crisis, and claims about a 'Nazi regime' in Ukraine.

Although the majority of these posts provide updates and news from the frontlines, many of them present a clear anti-Ukraine perspective. The Ukrainian

government is often referred to as the 'regime' or 'Zelensky's regime'. Additionally, posts about the war disproportionately highlight victims in the occupied territories of Ukraine at the hands of the Ukrainian government, while downplaying the casualties caused by Russian attacks. This type of reporting reinforces the Kremlin's narrative that Russia is defending the Russian-speaking population in the occupied territories and portrays Ukraine, backed by the West, as the aggressor.

The conspiracy category shared a total of 11 pro-Kremlin channels, among which was the verified channel of the Russian Embassy in Italy, shared by a total of 68 channels (i.e. 35% of the total conspiracy channels in the network).

The three most prominent themes among these posts were **Russia–Ukraine war** (32.6%), **Italy** (15.6%), **health** (14.5%). This category also appeared to have shared numerous conspiracy theories and mis- and disinformation posted by pro-Kremlin channels, including accusations that the US had been creating illegal biolabs all over the world and, in particular, in Ukraine; the unfounded claim that Lord of the Rings actor Elijah Wood posted a message urging Zelensky to seek treatment for his alleged drug and alcohol addiction; and posts claiming that the killing of civilians in Bucha in March 2022 was staged.[50]

Overlap between the Italian far-right and pro-Kremlin communities was relatively limited. Six different Italian far-right channels shared a total of 17 messages from one pro-Kremlin channel throughout the two years analysed. The majority of the 17 posts shared were on the theme of **health**, followed by posts about the **Russia–Ukraine war**. These latter posts focused on the alleged presence of US biolabs in Ukraine, as well as claims that the US has full control of the Ukrainian army.

Shares of radical and conspiracy channels by pro-Kremlin channels
Italian pro-Kremlin channels shared content from ten conspiracy channels during this period. The majority of these posts were about the **Russia–Ukraine war** (31.9%), followed by **Italy** (12.9%), **health** (10.1%), **geopolitics** (10.1%), and **Israel–Palestine** (8.7%).

Ukraine-related content included allegations about Ukraine staging massacres using professional actors and ketchup to mimic blood, accusations that the United States was responsible for the explosion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, and unfounded claims that Zelensky has been using narcotics.
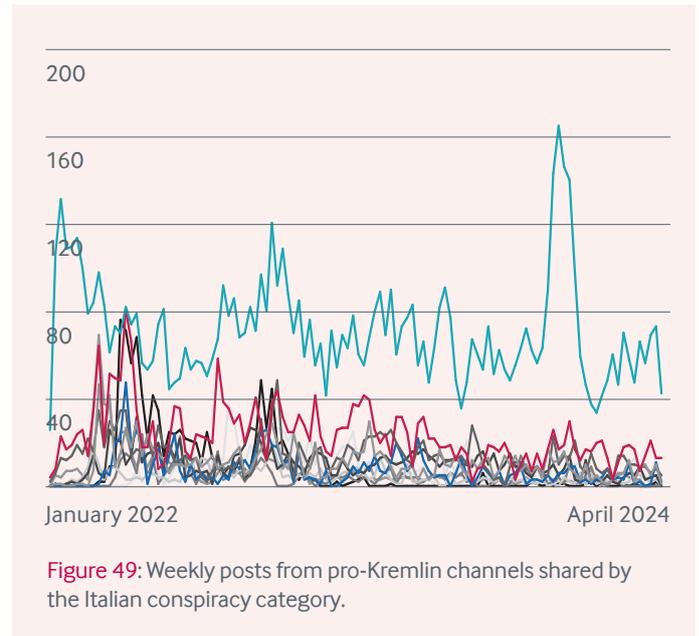

Figure 49: Weekly posts from pro-Kremlin channels shared by the Italian conspiracy category.

Conclusion

This report offers a comprehensive examination of the interplay between radical, conspiracy, and pro-Kremlin communities in France, Germany, and Italy. The analysis of network interactions among these groups reveals a significant level of interconnectedness, particularly between pro-Kremlin and conspiracy communities across all three countries.

Although to a lesser extent, the analysis also highlights links between far-right, far-left, and pro-Kremlin communities, demonstrating how specific pro-Kremlin narratives have traversed the political and ideological spectrum. Notably, anti-US and anti-NATO narratives that blame the West for escalating the war in Ukraine have gained traction among both far-right and far-left groups. Pro-Kremlin talking points, such as the alleged presence of a neo-Nazi regime in Ukraine, have been echoed by these radical communities. Additionally, numerous posts containing misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories that portray Ukraine and its government negatively have been widely circulated within conspiracy communities.

A particularly noteworthy finding is the cross-ideological appeal of certain pro-Kremlin figures, such as Alina Lipp, whose channel has gained significant traction among both the German far-right and far-left. This cross-political resonance underscores the effectiveness of pro-Kremlin messaging in bridging ideological divides. Lipp's broad appeal illustrates that pro-Kremlin efforts to amplify polarisation in European democracies have been successful. Furthermore, these efforts are finding increasing support on the fringes of EU democracies, where dissatisfaction with the political mainstream is fertile ground for such narratives.

While significant steps have been taken to limit the reach of Russian state media publishing in European languages, this research highlights the continued influence of Russian-language channels affiliated with the Russian state, which have been identified as key players across various radical and conspiracy communities in the three countries analysed.

Additionally, the report emphasises the role of Telegram as a platform that effectively circumvents EU efforts to block pro-Kremlin and state-backed media, serving as a bridge between diverse radical and conspiracy communities. Future regulations must therefore consider the broader ecosystem in which these threat actors operate and devise targeted countermeasures to disrupt the cross-pollination of these groups.

Appendix A

Semantic Mapping Process

The process of semantic mapping involves (1) computing numeric representations of messages that capture semantics of the text, (2) clustering message representations to identify groups of semantically similar messages, and (3) manually coding clusters to create a taxonomy of themes and subthemes. As a result, 162 different clusters were identified by CASM technology, which were subsequently manually assessed by analysts to generate a thematic taxonomy consisting of 22 themes and 113 subthemes.

Data Transformations

Two steps of data transformations were performed to help improve the identification of diverse and meaningful clusters (e.g. not based around specific URLs or duplicate messaging) and make processing the large scale of data tractable.

Step 1: General Semantic Mapping Preprocessing

In this step, we applied standard preprocessing techniques to clean and normalise the data. The original dataset contained 7,784,669 messages from 1,129 channels. We (1) removed all hashtags, user mentions, emojis, and URLs from the messages and then (2) removed exact-duplicate messages, keeping only one instance of each message. This resulted in 4,910,302 unique messages across 1,123 channels.

Step 2: Data-Specific Processing

Due to the large size of the dataset and the computational limitations associated with semantic mapping, it was necessary to reduce the data to a manageable size, specifically no more than **500,000 messages**. This limit was determined based on previous experiences with similar semantic-mapping exercises.

The sampling was applied to the dataset, which contained **4,910,302 unique messages** after removing duplicates. The sampling strategy was guided by the project's focus on understanding overlap within channels belonging to different categories. Instead of randomly sampling from the entire dataset, we chose to sample messages from each channel to ensure broad coverage across all channels.

Sampling Strategy: We decided to limit the sample to a maximum of 400 messages per channel. This threshold allowed us to:

- **Include all messages for smaller channels**: 25% of the channels had fewer than 231 messages. For these channels, all messages were included in the sample.

- **Partially include messages for mid-sized channels**: 50% of the channels had up to 1,057 messages. For these channels, the sample included approximately 40% of their messages.

- **Include a portion of messages from prolific channels:** The remaining 25% of channels were more prolific, with some having over 5,000 messages. For these channels, the sample included at least 10% of their messages.

This strategy resulted in a final semantic mapping dataset of **353,778 messages.**

Semantic Mapping

To generate the semantic map, we used sentence transformers for embedding the text data and a combination of UMAP (Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection) and HDBSCAN (Hierarchical Density-Based Spatial Clustering of Applications with Noise) for clustering. Specifically, we utilised the pre-trained paraphrase-multilingual-mpnet-base-v2 multilingual model for embedding, which converts sentences into numerical representations that capture their semantic meaning.

For clustering, we employed a widely used process of first applying UMAP to the embeddings, which simplifies the complex numerical representations into a lower-dimensional space, and further applied HDBSCAN to identify dense areas in this reduced space, forming clusters.

This approach resulted in 163 distinct clusters, with 55% of the messages remaining unclassified (assigned to the -1 cluster). This left us with 162 core topics (158,172 messages) and 195,606 messages in the -1 cluster. The -1 cluster acts as a bucket for messages that HDBSCAN does not consider similar enough to any of the identified dense clusters. For example, if the main cluster is focused on the Ukraine war, but a particular message is only tangentially related (e.g. it mentions Putin but does not tie directly into the main thematic discussions about Ukraine), this message might be placed in the -1 cluster. Essentially, the -1 cluster contains fringe messages that

do not strongly belong to any of the main topics identified.

Manual Coding
The manual coding stage involved an examination of the clusters generated during the semantic mapping process. To characterise each cluster, we randomly sampled messages from each cluster. Analysts reviewed these samples to determine the nature of the discussion within each cluster.

- **Random Sampling**: From each of the 162 identified clusters (excluding -1), a sample of 100 messages was randomly selected for analysis.

- **Cluster Analysis**: Analysts reviewed the sampled messages to identify the primary subject or nature of discussion in each cluster. They assessed the consistency of the identified subject in iterative rounds, typically starting with 10 messages. If the subject was consistent, they would stop; if not, they continued reviewing in additional rounds until a clear subject was determined or it was deemed too diverse to categorise.

- **Language Alignment**: Each cluster contained messages in multiple languages, requiring analysts to align the identified subjects across different languages. Each language team ensured that the discussions identified in each cluster were consistent across languages.

The manual coding process resulted in a taxonomy that categorised the identified clusters into 22 themes and 113 subthemes.

Validation
After finalising the taxonomy, we applied it to the entire dataset (353,778 messages). To validate its accuracy, we took a random stratified sample from each theme, selecting 10 messages from each subtheme. For example, if **Russia–Ukraine war** theme consists of 18 subthemes, this would yield a random sample of 180 messages for the theme. Analysts manually reviewed these samples to verify that the assigned theme and subtheme accurately reflected the content of each message.

Classification
As previously discussed, semantic mapping was applied to a sample dataset, where 195,606 messages were assigned to -1 (fringe dataset) and the remaining 158,172 messages were part of the core clusters (core dataset). This left us with the task of classifying the -1 messages

into the core topics and applying the taxonomy to the broader dataset (~7M messages).

To accomplish this, we used the **K-Nearest Neighbors (KNN)** algorithm. KNN requires exemplar data, which is data that has already been annotated and classified. In this case, we used the core dataset — the same dataset that was originally used to develop the thematic taxonomy — as the exemplar data.

KNN classifies new messages based on their proximity to the annotated messages within this core dataset. For example, when a new message needs to be classified, KNN identifies the 10 closest messages to it. If all 10 nearest messages belong to a specific cluster (e.g. cluster 10), the new message is also classified into that cluster and assigned to the corresponding theme.

Limitations of semantic mapping
The methodologies used in semantic mapping come with several limitations, which we have addressed through specific mitigation strategies.

- **Sampling**: The sampling approach raises concerns about the representativeness of the data. Over half of the sample data was classified into the -1 cluster (cluster of unclassified posts), leaving a significant portion of the broader dataset, including the -1 data, unexplored. To address this, we applied the classification stage to integrate these unclassified messages into the thematic analysis.

- **Manual Coding**: Manual coding, which also involves sampling, introduces the risk that the sample may not fully capture the diversity of content within each cluster. To mitigate this, we applied a validation step to ensure that the coding was consistent and accurately reflected the identified clusters.

- **Classification**: The accuracy of the classification process may vary, as the KNN algorithm depends on the similarity between the content of messages, which can be challenging to distinguish. To ensure reliability, we included an evaluation step to assess and verify the accuracy of the classification results, achieving an F1 score of 0.87.

Appendix B

Theme	Subthemes	Description of the theme
Climate	• Climate change	Posts about climate change, including criticism, denial, and more general discussions on the topic
Cosmology	• Aliens • Cosmology • Space	Posts about space, cosmology, aliens, and related topics, including the veracity of the moon landing and conspiracy theories about aliens.
Domestic Political Debates	• Agriculture and farmers protests • Discrimination • Energy • German politics • Legal proceedings/Nazism • Macron and French politics • Media • Workers' rights • Youth	Domestic political debates relevant to the three countries analysed: France, Germany, and Italy.
Economics	• Financial sector • Inflation • Public money	Posts about economics, banks, and the financial sector in general, as well as inflation, deflation, and public money.
Epistemology	• Freedom • Truth	Inspirational quotes about freedom or truth, as well as general posts on these topics.
France	• France/French	Posts about anything related to France, including its people and places.
Geopolitics	• Afghanistan or Pakistan • Africa • Asia/Chinese geopolitics • Azerbaijan/Armenia • Balkans • Brazilian politics • BRICS • Canada • Europe • Hungary • Iran • Latin America • Middle East • NATO • North and South Korea • Saudi Arabia • Turkey	Posts about various countries, multilateral organisations, and their geopolitics.
Germany	• Germany	Posts about anything related to Germany, including its people and places.

Health	• Big Pharma • Cancer • COVID-19 • Death • Excess mortality • Health care • Infectious diseases • Wellness • WHO	Posts about health, diseases, and related topics.
Israel–Palestine	• Israel–Palestine	Posts about Israel and Palestine. These may not focus solely on the current conflict but include broader discussions about either Israel or Palestine specifically.
Italy	• Italian public figures	Posts mentioning Italian public figures.
Nuclear	• Nuclear • Nuclear weapons/war	Posts about anything nuclear, including nuclear energy, weapons, and wars.
Polarising Topics	• Abortion • Assange • Bill Gates • Conspiracy theories • Epstein • LGBTQ and gender • Migration • Paedophilia • Science • Soros • WEF	Posts about a wide range of polarising topics, featuring opinions from different sides.
Political Ideologies	• Communism/Socialism/Marxism • Democracy and elections • Far-left • Far-right • Far-right and left • Nazism	Posts about different political ideologies as well as political processes and discussions about democracy as a system or on elections.
Religion	• Christianity • Islam • Satanism	Posts about religions or Satanism, including accusations of public figures being Satanists.
Russia	• Aleksey Navalny • China and Russia • Putin/Russia • Russia and migration • Russia and Africa • Russian foreign affairs • Russian proper names	Posts about various topics related to Russia.

Russia–Ukraine War	• Carlson Putin interview • Energy crisis and Russia • Financial aid to Ukraine • Macron and war in Ukraine • Nord Stream attack • Poland and Ukraine war • Sanctions against Russia • US biolabs • US Ukraine Russia • Ukraine–Russia warfare • Ukraine refugees • Ukraine war and food • Ukraine and Nazis • Ukraine and religion • Wagner • Weapons • West NATO and Ukraine war • Zelensky/Ukraine	Posts about various aspects, events, and narratives concerning the war in Ukraine.
Security	• Cyber attacks • Police • Police and crime • Sexual violence • Violent assault	Posts about various topics related to security, crime, attacks, and policing.
Surveillance	• Digital currency • Digital ID • Digital surveillance • Media blocking	Posts about various subthemes related to surveillance and concerns about it, including digital currencies, digital IDs, digital surveillance, and media blocking (such as blocking social media sites in Russia and Russian state media in the EU).
Technology	• 5G • Cryptocurrency • Meta • Musk and Twitter • Tech	Posts about various aspects of technology, including big tech companies, 5G, and cryptocurrency.
US Politics	• Anti-Biden(s) • Kennedy(s) • Pro-Trump	This theme encompasses three main subthemes related to US politics: posts criticising President Joe Biden or his son Hunter Biden, posts about former President John F. Kennedy (including conspiracy theories about his death) or his nephew Robert F. Kennedy Jr., and pro-Trump posts.
War	• War in general	Conversations about war or wars in general, not related to the war in Ukraine or the conflict between Israel and Hamas, both of which fall under their respective themes.

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