

INTERPRETATION AND TRUTH.

HOW RIGHT-WING POPULIST DISINFORMATION INFORMS THE DEBATE ON MIGRATION

Executive Summary

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Contrary to frequent expectations, the attitudes of EU citizens about the immigration of people from third countries have not deteriorated in light of the sharp rise in the number of asylum applications around 2015. Nevertheless, since the 'migration crisis', there has been an ongoing struggle for the prerogative of interpretation in the public and political discourse on migration. Right-wing populists have particularly promoted security and control narratives, leading to a "securitisation" of this policy field. The debate surrounding the UN Global Compact for Migration has illustrated the political impact of these dynamics. This raises the question as to which strategies underlie right-wing populist disinformation and how these can be countered?

In this policy paper, we argue that two aspects must be given more attention: right-wing populist disinformation should not only be analysed with reference to elections or major political events (i) and should not be regarded exclusively in terms of targeted campaigns (ii). Disinformation should instead be understood as a constant attempt to gain the prerogative of interpretation over certain political issues (e.g. migration). In this context, the "battle of narratives" fuelled by the functional logic of social networks plays a decisive role. Using the UN Global Compact for Migration as an example, we show how right-wing populist use this competition and carry security- and control narratives from right-wing online media into the more mainstream political discourse.

Three measures should be taken to counteract these dynamics:

- Early recognition and constant monitoring of right-wing alternative media are needed in order to be well-informed about emerging narratives.
- At EU level, the regulation of online platforms must be further elaborated. Platforms, governments and civil society must be involved in an institutionalised dialogue with the aim of achieving the necessary balance between improved responsibility on the part of the platforms and maintaining the openness of social media.
- Moderate parties have to develop a credible migration narrative instead of adapting right-wing discourse or taking a solely defensive position. This narrative should be based on values such as humanity, the rule of law and pluralism in order to convince those parts of the political centre that are still undecided in their perspective on immigration.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Prior to the European election in 2019 it was widely stated that the EU was under threat from a professional disinformation campaign. The EU Member States specially established a rapid alert system in order to be able to share intelligence on upcoming campaigns. The EU Commission obliged large communication platforms to a code of conduct.¹ As disinformation had most recently shaped the debate on the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (Global Compact for Migration), there was a lot of concern that there might be similar dynamics in the European elections on 23–26 May 2019 and that disinformation campaigns in the field of migration could dominate the election campaign.

These concerns did not materialise. Civil society observers did not register any large targeted disinformation campaigns in the field of migration and no warnings about possible attempts of influencing by foreign actors through the Commission's rapid alert system were shared between the member states.

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THE CONSTANT PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION OF DISINFORMATION BY ALTERNATIVE MEDIA SHOULD BE GIVEN MORE ATTENTION.

Is disinformation therefore less politically relevant for influencing political processes than assumed? In this policy paper we argue that it would be simplistic to arrive at this conclusion and to only think about fake news and disinformation in the context of elections or major political events. Instead the constant production and distribution of disinformation by alternative media should be given more attention, as it leads to a shift of public discourse in the long term and therefore brings about actual changes in policy and legislation. To this end distribution channels of disinformation have to be taken into account on the one hand, while the term “disinformation” has to be analysed in the context of the strategies of populist actors on the other hand. In the context of migration this means that it has to be considered how **politicians with a right-wing populist agenda – in cooperation with alternative media – establish discursive prerogative of interpretation through targeted use of narratives and framings.**² European counter-strategies thus have to find both a regulatory as well as a communicative response to these dynamics.

In the following we will show that although the EU population for the most part has not changed its attitude toward migration, right-wing populist actors were all the same able to reduce the discourse on migration policy to a question of national and European security. Subsequently we will illustrate how right-wing populist disinformation could make use of the functional logic of social networks for the processing of “securitization”. Taking the migration pact as an example, we will analyse the process and political impact of right-wing populist disinformation. Finally the paper offers concrete recommendations for action for effectively dealing with right-wing populist disinformation in the realm of migration.

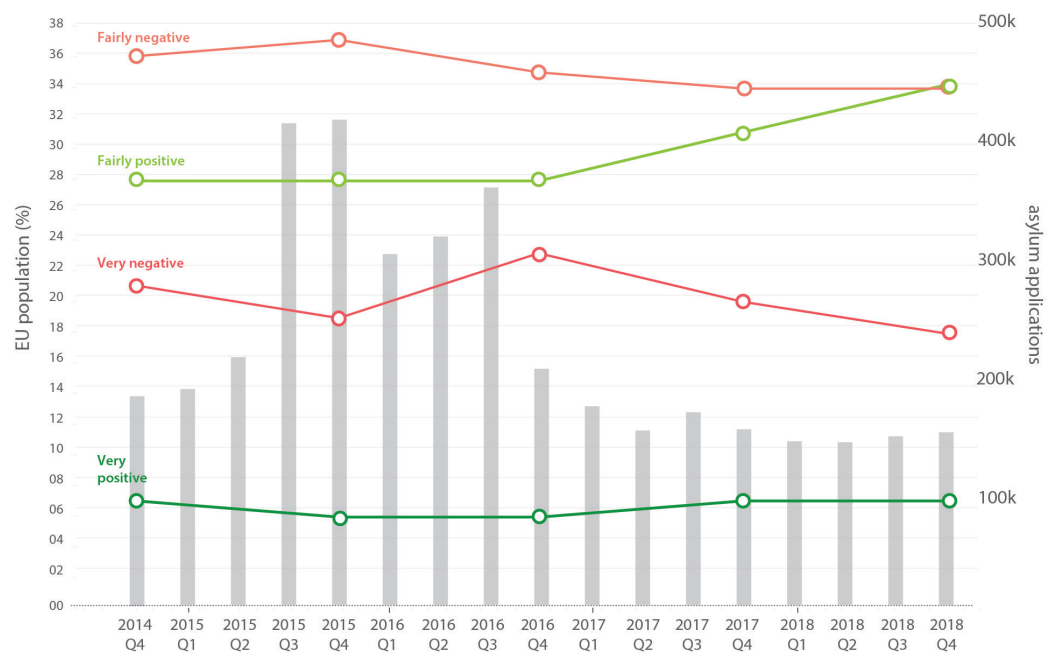
1. European Commission, [Code of Conduct to fight Disinformation](#), 29.01.2019.

2. Research on foreign influence and disinformation campaigns, for example by Russian actors, also indicates that the long-term change of perspectives is the main goal of these operations.

2. MIGRATION IN THE FOCUS OF RIGHT-WING POPULIST NARRATIVES

Since the sharp rise in immigration figures between 2015 and 2016, right-wing populist actors have increasingly tried to co-opt migration. Unlike what is often assumed, the increased immigration figures did not lead to a deterioration of the EU citizen's attitude vis-à-vis migration. As shown in figure 1, **positive and negative attitudes on migration of non-EU citizens largely remained stable between 2014 and 2018.**³ According to a Eurobarometer survey, the majority of the EU population has a negative attitude vis-à-vis migration of non-EU citizens: in 2014 it was 57% and in 2018 it was still 52%.⁴ Interestingly the share of those with a positive attitude vis-à-vis migration of non-EU citizens has risen over the same period of time: from 35% in 2014 to 41% in 2018.

FIGURE 1 ■ Positive/negative attitudes towards immigration of non-EU citizens Source: Eurobarometer



Source: Eurobarometer

Studies attribute the fact that attitudes toward migration remain largely unchanged to individual forming of opinion on migration depending on fairly stable characteristics, while the personal economic situation does not seem to be significant here.⁵ Rather it seems that

3. Dennison, J. & Geddes, A. (17. November 2017). *Op-ed: Are Europeans turning against asylum seekers and refugees?* European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE).

4. Eurobarometer. *Public Opinion: Immigration of people from outside the EU*. European Commission.

5. Hainmueller, J. & Hopkins, D.J. (2014). *Public Attitudes Toward Immigration*. Annual Review of Political Science, Vol. 17. PP. 225–249.

personal values first and foremost determine a positive or negative view on migration.⁶ There is often a distinction between conservative and progressive values. A study of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) adds a third category to this dichotomy regarding German society.⁷ According to FES the German population can be roughly split into three camps:

1. The part of local population with conservative values – i.e. all those to whom societal security and cultural stability in lieu of change is important – is highly represented among the advocates of a restrictive migration policy.
2. These are faced by those with a progressive-optimistic worldview and can identify with a less restrictive migration policy.
3. A third, less clearly cut social group, takes a more nuanced view vis-à-vis the different aspects of migration. This “ambivalent centre” is characterised by a certain pragmatism. While it is mostly open to taking in refugees, it is also aware of ensuing challenges.

According to a study by FES a quarter of the German population can be assigned to one of the first two groups, while the other half of Germans is described as “ambivalent centre”.

Unlike the rather stable attitude vis-à-vis migration of non-EU citizens, the importance given to migration is subject to considerably greater fluctuation. In 2014 only 11% of the EU population thought migration was one of the most significant political challenges.⁸ In 2015 it had already increased to 35%. **The prioritisation of the policy field of migration has seen a particularly sharp increase in Germany.** In the stated period the share of Germans who see migration as the most important political challenge rose from 19% to 76%. According to a survey by IPSOS the EU population believes that this challenge had not been addressed sufficiently.⁹ In the ten member states that were polled, only 14% agreed with the statement that the EU had reacted well to the ‘migration crisis’, while only 31% thought the policies of their national governments were positive. What is more, according to a 2017 survey of Eurobarometer around 61% of the EU population stated that they were not well informed about migration.¹⁰

In sum it can be said that individual attitudes toward migration have remained stable over the last years, despite the increase in immigration figures. Individual values are particularly relevant for the position taken on immigration. Concerns about changes in security policy, discontent with how existing governments approach policy as well as the feeling of not being well enough informed, serve as breeding ground for right-wing populist disinformation and alternative framings.

6. Kaufmann, E. (2017). *Why values, not Economics, Hold the Key to the Populist Right - and to Crafting new Migration Narratives*.

International Organization for Migration (IOM). However, this does not mean that other factors, such as income or educational attainment, have no influence on individual attitudes towards immigration, see: O'Rourke, K.H. & Sinnott, R. (2006). *The determinants of individual attitudes towards immigration*. European journal of political economy, 22(4), 838–861; Hainmueller, J., & Hiscox, M. J. (2007). *Educated preferences: Explaining attitudes toward immigration in Europe*. International organization, 61(2), 399–442.

7. Faus, R. & Storks, S. (2019). *Das pragmatische Einwanderungsland*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES).

8. Eurobarometer. Public Opinion: *What do you think are the two most important issues facing your country at the moment?* European Commission.

9. IPSOS (2017). *Global Views on the Immigration and the Refugee Crisis*. Game Changers – IPSOS.

10. Eurobarometer (2017). *Special Eurobarometer 469. Integration of Immigrants in the European Union*. European Commission.

2.1. The success of right-wing populist interpretation: migration as threat to security

Given the largely unchanged attitude on the topic, the success of right-wing populist disinformation hinges less on changing the values of those with a positive outlook on migration. Rather more, it is crucial how narratives of right-wing populist actors were able to shape the general debate on migration.

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BY USING CERTAIN FIGURES OF SPEECH, THE TOPIC OF MIGRATION WAS INCREASINGLY PORTRAYED AS A THREAT TO SECURITY.

The potency of right-wing populist actors in this respect hinges mainly on the designation of the increase in asylum applications as ‘migration crisis’, which has contributed to situate the topic as a question of national and European stability. Right-wing populist actors have actively contributed to the process of securitization through deliberate framing.¹¹ By using certain figures of speech, the topic of migration was increasingly portrayed as a threat to security and was thus perceived as such. Describing migration flows as “exodus with biblical dimensions” or accusing Muslim immigrants “of bringing very dangerous diseases with them that had not occurred in Europe for a long time” are pertinent examples for the use of right-wing populist narratives.¹² The debate on migration policy was shaped by security and identity narratives, especially in social networks.¹³ In Italy, for example, Matteo Salvini perfected this form of narrative. With the election motto of his Lega party, “Prima gli italiani!” (“Italians first”) he effectively presented himself as guardian of Italian interests vis-à-vis newly arriving migrants and European elites.

Interpreting increasing immigration figures as a threat to security is explained in the context of “moral panic theory”, in that moral instances (so-called moral entrepreneurs) interpret the demeanour of “others” as a threat to the existing – often idealised – societal order.¹⁴ Apart from established state and religious institutions as well as newspapers, populist actors can also be counted as part of this group of moral authorities. Through the process of securitization the topic of migration was not only portrayed as a risk to security in language. The fact that established parties have taken on crisis rhetoric and associated calls for more control, have contributed to legitimise exceptional political measures. Examples include the EU-Turkey Agreement as well as the establishment of temporary border controls within the EU. What is more, the budget of the EU’s External Borders Agency (FRONTEX) was substantially increased following the call for stronger controls on the external borders: from 2.9 billion Euro for the period 2014–2020 to overall 11.3 billion Euro (2021–2027).¹⁵ In addition, Frontex’s headcount should be continuously expanded to 10,000 border guards until 2024.

Therefore the question arises, with which strategies right-wing populist actors were able to shape the migration policy debate in many EU member states and were able to establish the narrative of a loss of control in discourse.

11. Buzan, B., Wæver, O. & De Wilde, J. (1989). *Security: A new Framework for Analysis*.

12. Farage, N. (17. September 2015). *European Parliament Plenary Session*; Cienki, J. (14. October 2015); *Migrants carry ‘parasites and protozoa’ warns Polish opposition leader*. Politico.

13. Bakamo (2019). *Migration Narratives in Europe 2017–2018*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES).

14. Juhász, A. & Szicherle, P. (2017). *The political effects of migration-related fake news, disinformation and conspiracy theories in Europe*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Political Capital.

15. Rasche, L. (2018). *More Money, fewer Problems? How the ‘migration crisis’ affected funding under the MFF*. Jacques Delors Institute – Berlin.

3. IT IS A MATTER OF INTERPRETATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY

When answering this question, digital disinformation becomes more and more important.¹⁶ The EU defines disinformation as: “information confirmed as false or misleading, which was designed, presented and distributed with the aim of financial gain or deliberate deception of the public and can cause public harm.” ‘Public harm’ is generally understood as threats to democratic processes and public goods, such as the health of EU citizens, the environment and security.¹⁷ An example of such a threat to public goods is the false information distributed by so called anti-vaxxers, mainly online, on the supposedly scientifically refuted dangers of vaccination.¹⁸

This definition is helpful, as it points out the manipulative intent distinguishing disinformation from unintentional distribution of misinformation or simply harmless misinformation, such as poorly researched articles or satire. However, the debate ensuing from this definition still focuses too much on major political events. The EU discussed the role of the targeted dissemination of disinformation, particularly in the context of elections or referenda, such as the outcome of the Brexit referendum.¹⁹ **The focus on elections and campaigns with foreign financing blinds us to another form of digital disinformation:** right-wing populists and right-wing online media constantly trying to gain interpretational sovereignty over migration discourse in the long run with the help of alternative narratives. Therefore it is important to embed the success of right-wing populist disinformation in the migration debate even more strongly into the discussion on media change and the ensuing competitions for narrative, interpretational sovereignty and attention.

3.1. Functional logic: competing narratives in social media

In order to deliberately spread false information one needs communication channels where one’s own message can be disseminated as unfiltered as possible. Through digital transformation the availability of such channels to the public is virtually unlimited. Changes in the media landscape over the last decades have resulted in an increasing shift of political discourse to the Internet, in particular to social networks. Moreover, information cannot only be received in social networks, but can also be returned to the sender immediately and at no cost. Thus the possibilities to establish an interactive public beyond mass media have been expanded considerably.

Basically these developments are positive. After the fall of the de facto monopoly of the mass media (newspapers, radio, TV) on the dissemination of information, it has become easier for individuals or demographic groups formerly marginalised and discriminated against to reach a large audience and to speak with their own voice. For the EU – with its more than two dozen languages and national cultures – social networks offer a unique possibility for decentralised networking across national borders.

16. Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, [Dossier Digitale Desinformation](#), 30.05.2019.

17. European Commission, [Kommission geht gegen Desinformation vor](#). Press statement 26.04.2018.

18. World Health Organization, [Ten threats to global health in 2019](#).

19. Carole Cadwalladr, [The Great British Brexit robbery: How our Democracy was hijacked](#), The Guardian 07.05.2019.

As a result of the sheer volume of information and the abundance of possible interpretations of political events, a **“competition of narratives” has emerged in the battle for the interpretation of political events.** The functional logic of the networks as well as human impulses determine which possible interpretations prevail and are most successfully disseminated in social media. Being private enterprises, platforms such as Facebook or Youtube have an incentive for users to remain on their platforms for as long as possible. This demonstrably works best with unexpected and emotional content.²⁰ Emotionality is transferred to the user and increases their interaction on the platform.²¹ The information supply that is most successfully disseminated and is preferentially shown to other users according to this logic, is often based on narratives playing on emotions and impulses.

Conversely contributions analysing sober statistical correlations, e.g. between criminality and migration, usually have less coverage. Therefore narratives based on numbers are taking a backseat. This development has long also reached politics and the administration. The German Federal Foreign Office thus warns against merely being bystanders in the “competition of narratives” and, for several years, has been trying to actively thwart rumours spread online concerning Germany.²²

This supply of narratives and interpretational frameworks is faced with a demand for information. On the demand side the so-called confirmation bias results in new information being compared to respective individual ideology, i.e. the sum of personal identity, political preferences and moral values.²³ People are thus more willing to believe new information if it confirms an existing understanding of the world and of existing values. Applied to the discourse on migration this means that people with a negative attitude towards migration tend to believe reports on an increase in crime rates due to an increase in immigration figures. It is therefore not enough to correct false reports in order to refute right-wing populist disinformation.

3.2. Actors: right-wing populists as amplifiers of discourse in alternative media

In the past, right-wing populists managed to make particularly good use of the functional logic of social networks as described above, along with the consequences of changes in the media landscape for their purposes. For example, the repeated sharing of articles on individual cases of criminal asylum seekers fanned anger and fear so that as many online interactions as possible would be accessed by their supporters. Right-wing populist actors appear to be successful with this strategy: in most member states their profiles have an above-average number of followers and coverage compared to other politicians.²⁴

There are several explanatory approaches. Populism is often defined as a communication strategy for the acquisition of power. With reference to moral panic theory they present themselves as moral authorities, being the sole advocates representing the popular will vis-à-vis an allegedly corrupt establishment consisting of media and politics. The claim to sole representation of the popular will and ensuing anti-pluralism are key features of populist

20. FanPage Karma, *Studie: Was Wut, Angst und Freude bei Fans auslösen...* 27.10.2014.

21. Adam D. I. Kramer, Jamie E. Guillory, Jeffrey T. Hancock, *Emotional contagion through social networks.*

22. Auswärtiges Amt, *Fake News, Bots und Provokationen – gezielte Desinformation im Internet.*

23. Charles, G. et al. (1979). *Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence*, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 37 No. 11.

24. Paul-Jasper Dittrich, *Social Networks and Populism. Four Things You Should Know*, Jacques Delors Institut – Berlin, April 2017.

communication.²⁵ **This form of presentation as approachable tribunes of the people is in perfect harmony with the functional logic of social networks** (attention by polarising, emotional reports, personalisation, direct communication and avoiding classical intermediaries).²⁶ What is more, right-wing populists often invest more financial and personnel resources in building online communication channels. Admittedly, left-wing populist movements such as Podemos have also been successful with economic policy anti-establishment narratives. However on a Europe-wide basis they do not have the reach of right-wing populists such as Matteo Salvini (3.7 million followers on Facebook) and Heinz-Christian Strache (750,000 followers on Facebook).

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RIGHT-WING POPULISTS
OFTEN ACT AS INTERFACE
BETWEEN AN ALTERNATIVE
RIGHT-WING ONLINE
DISCOURSE AND THE
GENERAL PUBLIC.

What is more, in most European countries alternative online media with wide coverage – sharing many right-wing populist positions (e.g. strong criticism of traditional mass media and elites as well as migration of non-EU citizens) – has established itself in recent years. In Germany these alternative media play a very important role in the shift of discourse in that they support right-wing populists in the battle for interpretational sovereignty in migration policy. Admittedly most alternative media in Germany are officially non-partisan, but their proximity to right-wing populist positions results in their content and narratives very often being taken up and disseminated by right-wing populist politicians of the AfD in social networks. Right-wing populists thus often act as interface between an alternative right-wing online discourse and the general public. To this end they very carefully observe which topics and narratives receive a lot of attention on popular alternative right-wing Internet media or blogs, in order to then bring these into the mainstream. The demeaning terms “knife men” and “Goldstücke” (“gems”) for asylum seekers are illustrations thereof. They were first circulated on right-wing Internet pages and in the meantime have been classified as hate speech by Facebook.²⁷ The AfD chairperson Alice Weidel even used the term in a general debate in the Bundestag.²⁸

Using the discussions about the migration pact as an example, one can illustrate some of the mechanisms described above in detail, with which migration gained attention in the public and could thus be portrayed distortedly. Two assumptions are particularly well portrayed in the debate on the migration pact. For one thing, **the debate illustrates how right-wing alternative media takes on the topic of migration through a narrative of loss of control and thus tries to gain interpretational sovereignty in policy discourse.** For another thing, the history of the migration pact shows how right-wing populists take up disinformation from right-wing alternative media and internalise it. Although the migration pact was controversial in most of the EU member states, we limit ourselves to the debate in Germany in the following analysis, in order to furnish a specific example of the strategies of right-wing populist disinformation in the migration debate.

25. Jan-Werner Müller, *Was ist Populismus?: Ein Essay*. Suhrkamp 2016.

26. Paul-Jasper Dittrich, *Social Networks and Populism. Four Things You Should Know*, Jacques Delors Institut – Berlin, April 2017.

27. “Landgericht Bremen: Ausdruck „Goldstück“ kann Hetze sein”, *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 21.06.2019.

28. “Alice Weidel wettet gegen “Messermänner” und “Goldstücke”, *Berliner Morgenpost* 16.05.2018.

4. HOW RIGHT-WING POPULIST NARRATIVES ON MIGRATION ARE DISSEMINATED – TAKING THE MIGRATION PACT AS AN EXAMPLE

The negotiations on the migration pact were launched by 193 UN member states in September 2016.²⁹ For the first time a multilateral agreement on better collaboration in dealing with international migratory movements and on the compliance with worldwide standards was to be agreed. The agreement specifies a total of 23 goals that should, a.o., contribute to fighting structural causes of flight, act against trafficking networks, strengthen migrants' rights and prevent discrimination. The legally non-binding agreement was, however, only signed by 164 states in December 2018.³⁰ Within the EU the right-wing governments in Austria, Italy, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia officially opposed the pact.

4.1. Right-wing alternative media tries to gain interpretational sovereignty of the pact early on

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THE CONSERVATIVE REPORTING ABOUT THE PACT IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA WAS OPPOSED BY A GROWING INTEREST IN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA, BLOGS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS.

Up to the conclusion of the negotiations and in the ensuing months, the interest of the public media for the migration pact in newspapers, the radio and TV was low in Germany. The conservative reporting in mainstream media was, however, opposed by a growing interest in alternative media, blogs and social networks (see figure 2).

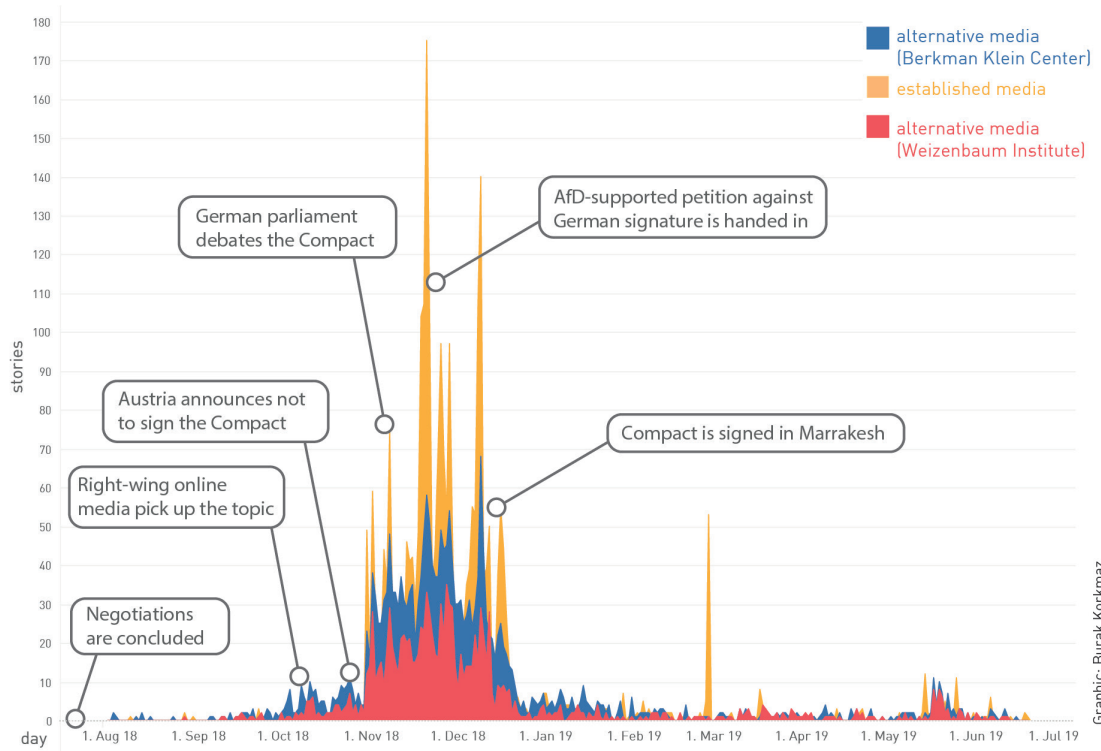
The increased interest in the pact in right-wing alternative media was not a central campaign in the sense of a centrally managed and planned disinformation campaign. All the same, the interaction of various decentrally organised actors from within the sphere of right-wing online media, resulted in the topic gaining increased attention online from September till end October 2018 and thus had a similar effect as an actual campaign. Meanwhile, there was still very little reporting on the pact in mainstream media. This dynamic demonstrates the limitations of a conventional definition of disinformation as a targeted campaign.

An analysis of the frequency of articles on the migration pact shows the increase and decrease of the interest of public media. Figure 2 shows how often mainstream media and right-wing alternative media with the highest coverage reported on the migration pact in Germany. To this end, aggregated data on the frequency of reports with the terms “UN migration pact” and “migration pact” was used. By using this data, we can understand when certain topics are particularly prominent in right-wing alternative media and blogs and when there is a discrepancy in the topic's prominence between right-wing online media and mainstream media. Both sets of data samples on the largest right-wing alternative media and blogs were compiled by the research teams of the *Weizenbaum-Institute for the Networked Society* in Berlin and by the *Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society* at Harvard University aided by the *Mediacloud*

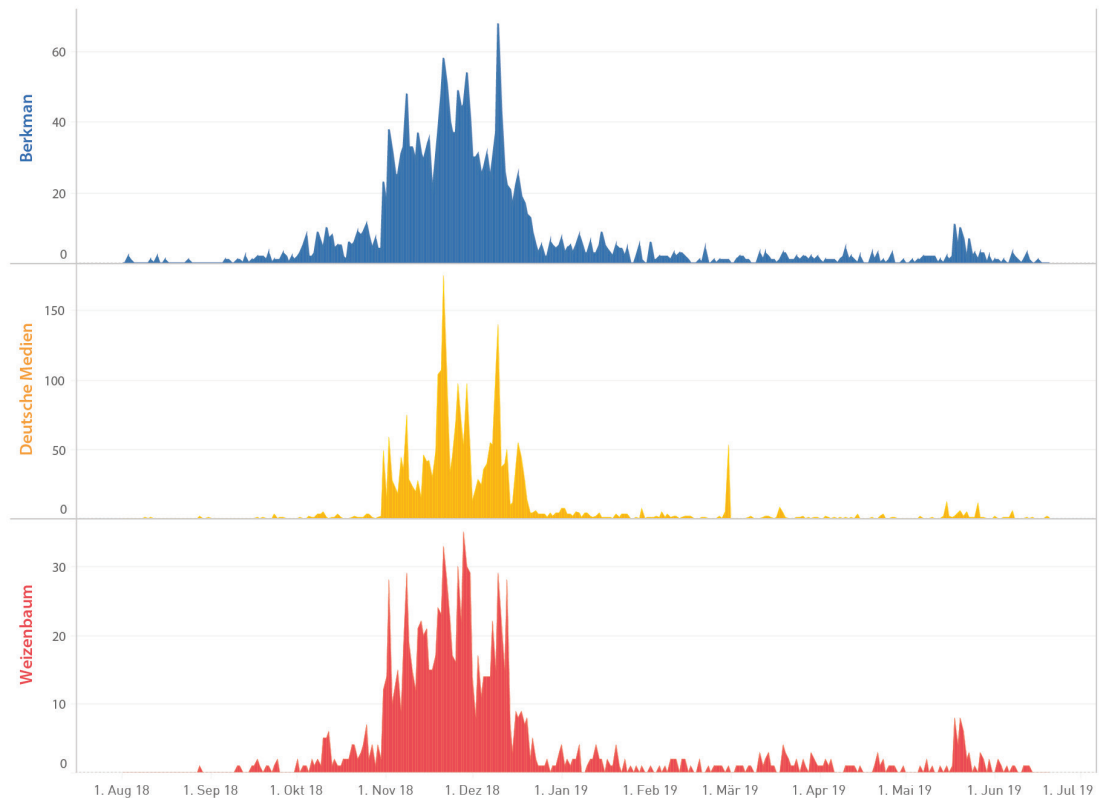
²⁹. United Nations, Full text of the Global Compact *Globaler Pakt für eine sichere, geordnete und reguläre Migration*, 30. Juli 2018.

³⁰. Tagesschau (10. Dezember 2018). *164 Länder für UN-Migrationspakt*.

FIGURE 2 ■ Frequency of reports (reports per day) on "Migration Pact" and "UN Migration Pact" in alternative media (collections of the Berkman Klein Center and the Weizenbaum Institute) and traditional media.



Graphic: Burak Korkmaz

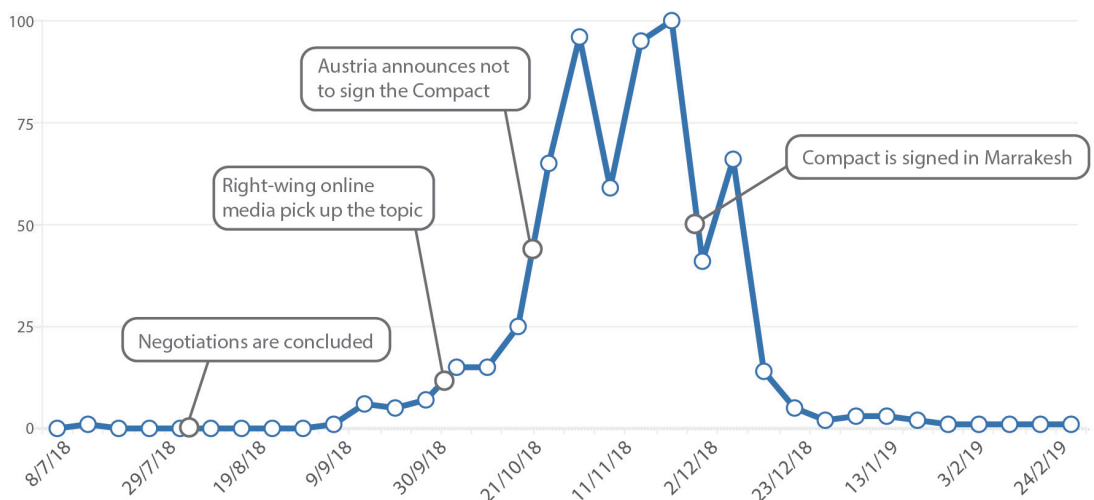


Source: Mediacloud

service.³¹ They were compared to a sample of mainstream German media consisting of magazines, radio and TV.

The migration pact sparked (measured in stories/day) an increase in interest from October 2018. There were more reports on the migration pact in online newspapers and blogs from the Right than in national newspapers or in the online presence of public broadcasting over the whole month. When comparing the relative frequency of Google search terms during the period 01.08.2018 to 28.02.2019 (see chart 3) the impression is confirmed that, in particular in October, there was a slow but steady increase in the interest in the migration pact in Germany. During this period, citizens started to become interested in the migration pact, although there was no noteworthy debate on the topic in mainstream media. Only as of 1st November 2018, following Austria's announcement not to sign the migration pact, was there a surge in interest on the topic in the broader German media landscape. The migration pact and other migration issues continued to be single issues until the signing. They determined political discussions in German mainstream media in November 2018.

FIGURE 3 ■ Relative frequency of the search term “migration pact” in Germany between 01.08.2018 and 24.02.2019



Source: Google Trends

4.2. Alternative media and right-wing populists set their own narratives

Taking on the topic at an early stage, allowed right-wing alternative media and right-wing populists to spread the narrative of imminent mass migration through their own communication channels, although there was no pre-existing narrative on the migration pact. Regarding the content of the narrative, it expressly discussed that the agreement was allegedly legally binding under international law. To this end, right-wing alternative media to some extent drew on narratives and images based on conspiracy theory, such as the “Great Re-

³¹ The collection, compiled by the [Weizenbaum Institut for the Networked Society](#), contains the fourteen German (non-German-speaking) right-wing online media with a high reach: Achgut.com, blauenarzisse.de, compact-online.de, Frauenpanorama, Freie Welt, freie-presse.net, journalistenwatch.cc, jungefreiheit.de, philosophia-perennis.com, pi-news, politikstube.com, sezession.de, tichyseinblick.de, zuerst.de. The [Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society](#) has compiled German rights blogs and news sites. The [122 media-covering collection](#) contains blogs and news sites such as Tichy's Insight, whereby there is a partial overlap in content with the collection of the Weizenbaum Institute. These two collections are compared with a collection of all major German media (daily newspapers such as FAZ, SZ, taz, public radio such as ard.de or deutschlandfunk.de).

placement". Thus, a.o., it was suggested on the website "Tichys Einblick" (popular German right-wing blog) that the migration pact had been negotiated in secret and would enable unchecked migration to Germany.³² In order to mobilise against the pact, the key message of right-wing online media was that the migration pact would cancel out national sovereignty and would lead to a loss of control.

4.3. Right-wing populists as discourse amplifiers in alternative media

The topic only started to become really prominent in public discourse when right-wing populist parties in Europe began to incorporate dynamics from the Internet and brought it into the political media debate of established media. Similarly to the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) ("Freedom Party of Austria), the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) ("Alternative for Germany") began to discover the topic for itself in October 2018. There was still little coverage on the topic in the major national newspapers.

On 30th October 2018 – during Austria's EU Council Presidency – the FPÖ announced on its website that the FPÖ and the Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP) ("Austrian People's Party") had agreed that Austria would not sign the pact.³³ **Due to the framings set by right-wing online media, the discourse on the pact was already well advanced at the beginning of November.**

This made it easier for the AfD to subsequently spread the narrative of the migration pact as a floodgate for unchecked migration and to demand that Germany also not sign the agreement. The government coalition consisting of the CDU and SPD as well as the German administration in the form of the Federal Foreign Office were thus forced into a defensive position. The pact and how it came about had to be defended and rumours, right-wing narratives as well as obvious fake news had to be countered. Thereby the agreement's real goals took a backseat. It was impossible to build a narrative on the migration pact's benefits. The emotionality and the drastic and showy presentation of the migration pact in the AfD's narrative and right-wing online media could hardly be thwarted with the supporters' communication strategy that was based on correctives only.

Thus, right-wing populist actors such as the AfD or the FPÖ were decisive for the political effectiveness of the distortive narrative on the migration pact. They often act as interface between alternative right-wing online media and the general public media. The AfD already submitted a parliamentary question on the topic in October and requested question time in Parliament. What is more, a website linked to AfD politicians had collected 400,000 votes against the pact up until October.³⁴ The online discourse in alternative media provided right-wing parties in the EU an argumentative basis to call for resigning from the migration pact. Indeed, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Austria decided not to sign the pact in Marrakesh on 10th and 11th December 2019.³⁵ This chain reaction somewhat undermined the pact's legitimacy, which was supposed to be an internationally valid guideline for dealing with migration. This is even more pertinent for the EU's credibility as a suitable actor in international migration policy.

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THE ONLINE DISCOURSE IN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA PROVIDED RIGHTWING PARTIES IN THE EU AN ARGUMENTATIVE BASIS TO CALL FOR RESIGNING FROM THE MIGRATION PACT.

32. Krisztina Koenen, *UN-Migrationspakt: Bedingungslose Kapitulation*, 06.10.2018.

33. *Österreich unterschreibt UN-Migrationspakt nicht*, FPÖ-Homepage 30.10.2019.

34. Maria Fiedler und Paul Starzmann, *Rechte Allianz macht mobil gegen UN-Migrationspakt*, Tagesspiegel, 31.10.2018.

35. Fabian Urech, Samuel Misteli, Ivo Mijnsen, *Migrationspakt: Diese Länder verweigern dem UNO-Migrationspakt ihre Unterstützung*, NZZ, 10.12.2018.

5. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

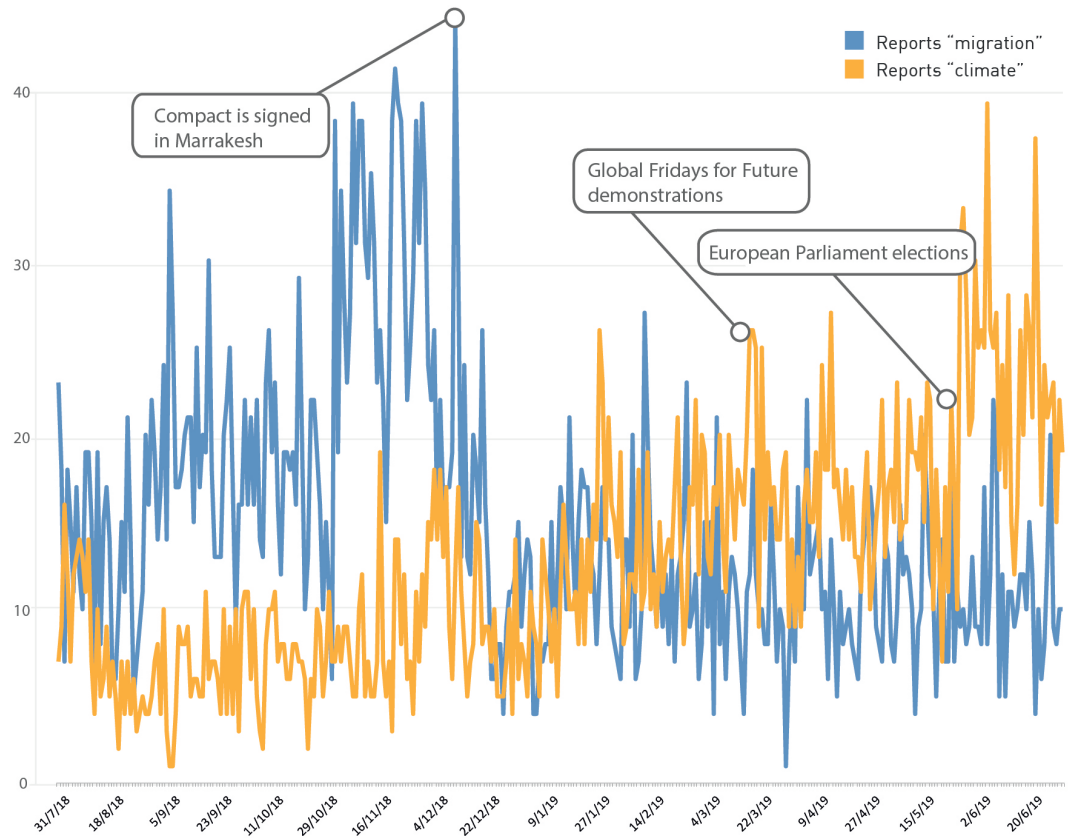
In the battle for sovereignty on interpretation on the sharp rise of immigration figures between 2015 and 2016, right-wing populist actors contributed to the topic of migration increasingly being perceived as a threat to security. In the course of this securitization there were growing calls for more and more strict control measures. Although there was no deterioration in EU citizens' individual attitude towards migration of non-EU citizens, the topic of migration has become considerably more important since 2015. Here there is basically a division of labour: Right-wing media and blogs can impact the discourse and to some extent even undertake agenda setting in that they spread rumours, fake news or biased narratives – often on topics that do not yet generate extensive media coverage. However, these narratives will only have access to a large platform once influential right-wing populist actors, such as leading politicians, pick up on them. This mobilisation has political consequences: with regards to the migration pact it has led to several EU member states deciding not to sign the agreement despite successful negotiations.

The shift in discourse as a result of the functional logic of social networks also raises regulatory questions: Due to the trend towards concentration in platform markets the organisation of public discourse resides with only a few private enterprises. Existing rules on media regulation and soft regulatory factors such as media or discourse ethics, date back to the period of TV, radio and newspapers. There is wide political consensus in the EU that this is not sustainable in the long run. The nature and extent of a potential European regulatory intervention are, however, currently hotly debated.

On the one hand, the discussion is moving toward greater control of content on relevant platforms. Due to political pressure, platforms have started to demonetise some very large websites with blogs whose content is based on conspiracy theory or right-wing extremism or to suppress their coverage. The grey area between statements covered by freedom of expression and justifiable remarks and not least the highly valued good of freedom of speech and expression, make extensive national and European regulation difficult (and rightly so).

The mechanisms described in this paper for the instrumentalisation of topics and for attaining interpretational sovereignty are by no means limited to migration policy. Despite there not having been any targeted disinformation campaigns, the European elections in particular, have pointed out that other policy areas could be subject to these modes of action. Thus climate change has been playing an increasingly important role in right-wing blogs and online media compared to migration in Germany during 2019. It has become even more significant than migration since the European elections, as the sample of right-wing blogs and news sites compiled by the Berkman Klein Center shows (see figure 4).

FIGURE 4 ■ Vergleich von Häufigkeit (Berichte/Tag) von Berichten zu den Themen „Migration“ und „Klima“ auf rechten Blogs und Alternativmedien (Berkman Klein Center Sammlung).



Source: Mediacloud

5.1. Recommendations

The analysis of the dissemination of alternative framings through right-wing populist and alternative media in the course of the migration pact has shown that these actors are able to define discourse, conduct agenda setting and to influence political events. There are three concrete recommendations for action for policymakers in order to counter these developments. They apply both to the general handling of disinformation and right-wing framings as well as migration.

i. . More early detection and monitoring

As this analysis shows, it is essential for the media and political parties to constantly monitor right-wing alternative media and to be well-informed about images and narratives created there on topics such as migration or the climate. Otherwise the situation will occur over and over again that centre parties will fall back into a mode of defending and justifying and have to fight figures of speech and narratives, which have already been set. Populists often exploit such situations, as they can act as saviours, who have caught “the establishment” with its “secret plans”. **In order to better brace themselves, parties should monitor the topics more purposefully, similar to the classic morning press review.** This alternative press review could act as an early warning system. Thus online dynamics and developing moods, as for example with the migration pact, could be captured and precisely countered.

ii. Drive regulation of online platforms

Over the next years, first and foremost, the right balance must be struck at the European level between improved responsibility of the platforms for their content and safeguarding the candour of social media. A possibility would be that platforms, governments and civil society engage in an institutionalised dialogue and affording civil society the opportunity to exercise increased control over the platforms. **Together with an independent regulatory body still to be established, civil society and the EU could verify if the platforms meet their obligations to, for example, really delete hate speech or content endangering the general public.** To this end, deeper access to Facebook and the like's data would be needed in order to check processes on the platform independently and in detail. The still to be established European agency mentioned above, could bundle the resources thus required.

iii. A credible narrative to convince the ambivalent centre

In order to be able to counter the narrative of right-wing populist actors, policymakers of moderate parties should develop a separate and credible narrative, with which a large part of the population can identify. Contrary to present attempts to take on the crisis rhetoric of right-wing populist actors, a narrative should be developed that focuses on protecting human rights. According to Eurobarometer data from 2015 to 2017, the majority of the EU population is in favour of refugees finding support and protection in the EU.³⁶ This should be the starting point for a narrative, which is based on values such as humanity, rule of law and pluralism and can convince the ambivalent centre. These values are not only in line with a left-liberal worldview. Legal order and a free society in particular – which are seen as conservative ideas – are part of the picture of a humane and orderly migration policy. In the permanent competition of narratives, interpretational sovereignty of discourse can only be gained through a separate and credible narrative. In order to better adapt to the functional logic of social networks, such emotionality can complement the previous narrative of moderate actors, which is built on data and facts. Based on such a narrative, individual political processes, such as negotiating the migration pact, can actively be conveyed as part of a clear migration policy strategy. Thus falling back onto correctives can be prevented, while highlighting the advantages of individual strategy.

³⁶ Glorius, B. (2018). *Public opinions on immigration and refugees and patterns of politicisation*. CEASEVAL, Nr. 6.

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