

The networks and narratives of anti-refugee disinformation in Europe



About This Report

This report provides a snapshot of the different online communities involved in the promotion of hate and disinformation targeting refugees and the migration sector in 2020. It looks at networks of accounts in Greek, German and English language, and provides an overview of the narratives employed in anti-refugee disinformation and the dynamics which drive this activity online.

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Executive Summary

This report represents the findings of a study exploring digital manipulation around the refugee crisis throughout 2020. It seeks to outline the different online networks associated with anti-refugee disinformation and hatred in the Greek, German, and English languages, and the key narratives deployed by these networks.

It is grounded in a network-first approach to analysis, exploring networks of accounts mentioning and being mentioned by social media channels identified as promoting anti-refugee disinformation and hatred. Through this approach we identified a network of nearly 5,000 accounts associated with anti-refugee disinformation and hatred in Greek, German and English language, producing over 280,000 messages in 2020. An analysis of the content produced and shared by these networks evidences the ways these networks sought to mobilise in 2020 around key flashpoints, including tensions on the Greece/Turkey border at Evros in March, and fires in the Moria refugee camp at Lesbos in September. This research also demonstrates the interplay between political actors and extremists in the online ecosystems associated with anti-refugee disinformation and hatred.

Introduction

Between 2015 and 2019, nearly 4.5 million people applied for asylum in the European Union,¹ many travelling by sea routes across the Mediterranean. Over that period, 16,520 people died trying to make the journey.² Dubbed the 'refugee crisis', migration remains a divisive and highly politicised topic in Europe.³ Populist parties across the continent have made it a political cause, while the far-right uses anti-migrant rhetoric to swell their ranks. The results are increased pressures across Europe to further toughen migration policy. Extremist groups worldwide have also weaponised the topic, promoting conspiracy theories which paint migration as a deliberate plot to replace 'native Europeans' and bring about a 'white genocide' through a conspiracy theory dubbed 'the Great Replacement'.⁴ These theories have proved inspirational in a number of terrorist attacks globally, including those in New Zealand, the United States, and Germany.⁵

As the major entry point into Europe for migrants, Greece is at the forefront of this refugee crisis. In 2014, 43,500 migrants and refugees arrived there by sea, a 280% increase over 2013. Around 60% were from Syria, but many also came from Afghanistan, Somalia and Eritrea.⁶ Numbers then soared, and the crisis peaked in 2015 as 856,723 people arrived in Greece by sea and 4,907 by land, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.⁷ Over that summer, some 500 to 600 people were arriving each day on the Greek island of Lesbos alone, which – being close to Turkey – is a key sea entry point for migrants to Greece.⁸ With a population of 86,000, Lesbos played host to more than half a million migrants and asylum seekers over the course of 2015.

This crisis has taken place against a backdrop of widespread online manipulation. An increasingly diverse range of state and non-state actors are using a grab-bag of tactics to disrupt civic discourse online, stoking polarisation and extremism. These actors have seized upon events such as the refugee crisis as a wedge issue, opportunistically using broader societal concerns around the impact migration may have on economic and social stability to galvanise hatred against minority communities. This online manipulation does not stay confined to the digital realm, and it has proved instrumental not only in disrupting democratic processes globally, but in fuelling extremism and inspiring violence.⁹

Such real-world harm means that understanding the online manipulation of the refugee crisis is essential. Migration is not set to decrease. Indeed, through crises such as catastrophic climate change, it is likely that the number of individuals seeking to travel to Europe will increase throughout the 21st century.¹⁰ Alongside this, Europe is currently seeing the impacts of a global surge in far-right extremism,¹¹ with these movements capitalising on migration to radicalise and recruit further, not only increasing the risk of violence and unrest, but also fuelling populist political parties at the ballot box.

Building a better understanding of the different networks weaponising the refugee crisis online, and the narratives they employ, is an important first step in establishing evidence-driven responses to the proliferation of anti-migrant politics as well as hatred against refugees. This report seeks to contribute to this evidence base. It details the findings of a study by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) which analyses online anti-migrant disinformation and extremism targeting the refugee crisis in Greece.

This study is grounded in a network-driven analysis of social media accounts and online outlets associated with anti-refugee disinformation and hate. To generate these networks, ISD's tech partner, the Centre for Analysis of Social Media (CASM), used dynamic relationship-mapping technology to identify online channels which are conversing with and sharing content from Twitter accounts, Facebook pages and groups, and digital media outlets promoting disinformation and hatred around the refugee crisis in the Greek, German and English languages. We selected these languages in order to provide an overview of manipulation around the refugee crisis across Europe. This would allow us to understand what anti-refugee activity looks like both in countries like Greece, where many refugees have entered Europe, and in countries like Germany, where many refugees have found a home.

We then examined the content produced by these networks throughout 2020 to better understand the key narratives employed in anti-refugee disinformation and hatred online and to identify which events correlated with surges in such activity.

Through this process, we identified networks connecting **4,937 social media channels** (on Facebook, Twitter, and to a lesser extent Reddit and Instagram) which are conversing with accounts promoting anti-refugee disinformation and hatred online. These channels **produced 280,627 posts in 2020**. They included **1,117** Greek channels which produced **99,013** messages; **950** German channels which produced **54,342** messages; and **2,870** English channels which produced **127,284** messages.

Although these relatively small networks do not represent a comprehensive mapping of online anti-refugee disinformation and hate in the Greek, German and English contexts, they do provide important microcosms within which we were able to identify key dynamics in hatred and disinformation.

Crucially, this research makes clear that the refugee crisis has acted as a catalyst for mobilising a transnational network of actors, including far-right extremists and elements of the political right, who often share common audiences and use similar tactics. Importantly, these networks do not act in isolation, and we were able to identify instances of cross-border mobilisation. We were also able to evidence the dynamics by which anti-refugee disinformation is spread, including highlighting the role of elected officials in the promotion of these narratives.

Key Findings

The Greek refugee crisis attracted and activated an international cohort of extremist actors:

- Previous ISD research has demonstrated how far-right extremism is increasingly transnational in nature, and this research further evidences this dynamic.¹² Across all networks identified for this study, we found a large number of channels and accounts associated with far-right extremism. In total, 60% of the sub-groups of accounts within the networks analysed here contained far-right elements.
- This included Identitarian accounts, conspiracy theorists, anti-Muslim groups, and members of the alt-right. Our analysis of English language activity highlighted how the refugee crisis has activated networks not only in the UK, but also in Canada, Australia and the United States. Similarly, this research highlighted the involvement of Greek and German far-right networks in anti-refugee disinformation and hate.
- These networks were quick to respond to tensions at the Greece/Turkey border in Evros in March 2020, and, in the Greek and German contexts, to respond to the fires in the refugee camp in Moria, Lesbos in September 2020. The research provided insights into how this known set of transnational actors opportunistically deploys around crises.
- These international actors are not operating in isolation, and our analysis demonstrated how activity by groups from one country impacted on anti-refugee disinformation in another. In particular, we identified an instance where a German anti-refugee activist had travelled to Greece to produce content containing disinformation around the refugee crisis, resulting in spikes in anti-refugee disinformation in both Greece and Germany.

Anti-refugee disinformation has provided a crucial nexus for a range of far-right extremists, nationalists, and conspiracy theorists to overlap with political actors:

- Across all contexts studied, we identified networked clusters of accounts connecting channels associated with the political mainstream with far-right extremists. This demonstrates how online support networks for political parties bleed into extremist ecosystems.
 - In the network of German language accounts analysed here that were associated with anti-refugee disinformation, we found strong evidence of cross-over between channels associated with the Alternative für Deutschland party (AfD) and far-right extremist channels. In all five sub-groupings of the network containing AfD-affiliated channels, we found evidence of interconnection with far-right channels. This represented 41% of our German language network.
 - In the Greek language network analysed here, we found evidence of a convergence of mainstream right and pro-government networks with the far-right in anti-refugee messaging and disinformation. During major incidents involving refugees especially, messaging and networks converge on both Greek language Twitter and Facebook.
 - In this Greek language network, we found that alongside networks around the larger parties, personalities like Artemis Sorras of the “Assembly of Greeks” have established networks that are epicentres of disinformation in general and anti-refugee discourse and hate in particular. Across English language networks associated with anti-refugee hostility, we found evidence that grassroots ‘supporter groups’ for Boris Johnson and Priti Patel were networked with far-right entities.
 - This networking doesn’t show that political parties support extremist activity. However, it does show that their supporters online are also actively engaged in anti-refugee activity, and that their messaging is being shared by accounts associated with anti-refugee hatred and disinformation.
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Elected officials were found to play a role in the amplification of anti-refugee disinformation and hatred:

- In the Greek context, we found that anti-refugee disinformation occurs in a feedback loop between the radical fringes, political actors and the media. In several instances, we found evidence that comments made by members of the New Democracy party in Greece were helping to fuel anti-refugee disinformation. In one such instance, comments made by Greek government spokesperson Stelios Petsas promoting disinformation around the deaths of refugees on the Greece/Turkey border were amongst the most widely shared posts identified in our English language network.
- Several elected officials from the AfD were identified as promoting anti-refugee hatred and disinformation. This included Bundestag member Johannes Huber referring to refugees as 'oriental invaders', drawing on tropes commonly used by far-right extremists.

The Evros border incident and the fires in migrant camps in Moria highlight how key events can act as flashpoints for transnational, multilingual spikes in anti-refugee mobilisation:

- In our German language network, activity surged by 115% between February and March, associated with the Evros border crisis. The Moria fires in September saw the highest peak of activity in our German language network throughout 2020 with 9,395 posts made.
- In our Greek language network, activity surged by 35% around the Evros border incident, and by 75% around the Moria fires.
- In our English language network, the Evros border incident saw the highest peak of activity throughout 2020, with 147 messages made on 2 March.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working with refugees are common targets for harassment and disinformation, both on and offline:

- Across the Greek, German and English contexts we analysed, NGOs working with refugees are common targets for disinformation. This included the widespread promotion of long-standing conspiracy theories, suggesting that NGOs are actively involved in bringing refugees to Europe with the express aim of 'Islamising' the continent and replacing native Europeans.
- In the Greek and German contexts, we also identified more targeted anti-NGO rhetoric, including suggestions that organisations working with refugees in Greece are actively involved in smuggling people and drugs. In Greece these conspiracies were amplified by the national press.
- In our English language network, we found evidence of pro-refugee NGOs being mentioned by accounts and channels promoting anti-refugee hatred and disinformation. These pro-refugee accounts were being mentioned by accounts associated with Greek nationalism, the Greek far-right and the far-right in the UK, demonstrating that accounts which are hostile to refugees are actively targeting organisations which are sympathetic to them. This demonstrates that online manipulation around the refugee crisis doesn't just target refugees themselves but the broader sector of organisations working to support these communities.

Broader Implications of this Analysis

- Despite the significant reduction of migrant flows to Europe, migration remains a salient rallying cry for a broad spectrum of actors, from populist politicians to far-right extremists across Europe. The findings outlined below highlight the way in which these networks are activated around key crises, such as events on the Evros border or the fires in Moria, to agitate around long-established hostilities against refugees, minority groups, and the organisations who are deemed to have helped them. The fluidity of these networks helps keep migration consistently relevant to a multitude of different extremist ecosystems and makes clear that while migration to Europe has reduced dramatically, policymakers must understand that anti-migrant discourse has evolved to focus with equal intensity on migrants already here.
- Case studies documented throughout this report demonstrate how anti-migrant discourse constantly evolves to galvanise broader geopolitical concerns and polarising narratives such as anti-EU rhetoric, Greek-Turkish tensions and broader Islamophobia. In particular, refugees are painted as ‘invaders’, ‘warriors’ and ‘fighting-age males’ who are part of the broader Islamisation of Europe. This helps to fan broader concerns around jihadist terrorism. The ability of anti-migrant discourse to increase the potency of such broader narratives increases the serious threat they pose to the wider stability and cohesion of EU Member States.
- NGOs working with migrants find themselves targeted by disinformation narratives and harassment. This hostility draws on conspiracy theories promoted by far-right extremists, such as the ‘Great Replacement’ narrative, but is equally driven by commentary from politicians and the mainstream press. These narrative attacks do not exist in a vacuum, and in a number of instances NGOs working in Greece have been subject to intimidation and violence. If these narratives are left unchecked and unopposed, these instances are likely to increase.¹³
- In particular, we found evidence of both tacit and active stoking of conspiracy theories around the refugee crisis by members of the ruling New Democracy party in Greece. This activity was intimately linked to the legitimisation and amplification of a narrative which we identified as increasing in saliency throughout 2020; one which claims that Turkey is not only actively driving the refugee crisis as part of a strategy to destabilise Greece, but that it is inserting saboteurs and jihadists into the flow of refugees to act as a fifth column. Once again, these narratives increase the possibility of further and increased violence towards refugees as well as wider civil unrest.
- The direct overlap between networks associated with mainstream political parties in Greece and Germany and extremist ecosystems also indicates that this political rhetoric, which draws on widespread concerns around migration, will find a receptive audience amongst – and will thereby further empower – a global network of far-right extremists which has been becoming increasingly violent over the past five years.¹⁴
- Ultimately, the networks involved in anti-refugee disinformation and hate are well-established, with roots into the mainstream media and political establishment. Anti-refugee disinformation itself draws on long-range narratives which intersect with broader societal concerns around security and economic instability. This indicates that the problem these narratives pose is long-term. More comprehensive, long-range responses are therefore needed from policymakers, funders and governments.
- This analysis provides a small snapshot of disinformation and weaponised hate in relation to refugees. However, as evidenced in this report, the increasingly concerted efforts of a range of actors involved in such covert and overt disinformation and the promotion of hostility and hatred against refugees are transnational and long-range. These actors adeptly mobilise to take advantage of crises as, when and where they arise. That has serious implications not only for the safety of refugees, migrants and those who work with them, but also in terms of bolstering support for extreme and populist political forces in Europe over the longer term.

- Any effective, systemic response to this threat will require long-term, strategic investment, underpinned by real-time data and insight into the activities of this ecosystem of actors. Such a data infrastructure would better equip the various constituencies targeted by this content. It should be designed to provide early warning data for the soft target protection of refugees, migrants and the organisations and institutions supporting them. It should also be designed to provide insight into the strategies of these actors and tactical trends in disinformation, including long-range information operations seeking to build support for xenophobic and divisive politics in Europe and beyond. Online manipulation and covert tactics must be brought to light in real time, and platforms urged to act on activity that transgresses their terms of service. Furthermore, to avoid ineffective, even counter-productive communications efforts by organisations and policy makers working on refugee issues, such efforts must be rooted in these data insights.
 - Economies of scale could be achieved by building a data infrastructure for the real-time identification and exposure of online manipulation and weaponised hate in relation to the full spectrum of issues systematically exploited by this constellation of actors, including electoral manipulation to climate, public health and migration disinformation.
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Glossary

Far-right extremism

For the purpose of this report, we recognise far-right extremism to encapsulate groups and individuals that exhibit at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy.

Hate

Hate is understood to relate to beliefs or practices that attack, malign, delegitimise or exclude an entire class of people based in immutable characteristics, including their ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability. Hate actors are understood to be individuals, groups or communities which actively and overtly engage in the above activity, as well as those who implicitly attack classes of people through, for example, the use of conspiracy theories and disinformation. Hateful activity is understood to be antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of Human Rights.

Background

The European migrant crisis, (commonly known as the 'refugee crisis') has dominated European politics, and media, for almost seven years. It began in 2014 with a surge of forced migration to Europe – mainly from Africa and the Middle East – via routes across the Mediterranean Sea, and overland through southeast Europe. Most of those entering Europe were and are fleeing conflict and civil strife (mainly from Syria and Afghanistan). The major country entry points into the European Union have been Italy and, especially, Greece (usually via Turkey) – either by crossing the Mediterranean Sea or overland from the Greek-Turkish border along the Evros River in Greece's northeast and Turkey's west.

The crisis reordered European politics. First, it emboldened hard right factions across the Union, from Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán to nativist opposition parties including France's Front National and Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). Second, it recalibrated EU-Turkey relations: in March 2016, in exchange for €6 billion in aid from Brussels, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan agreed to accept the return of migrants from Greece who did not qualify for asylum, and to do more to control its borders and the numbers attempting to leave Turkey for Greece and the wider EU.¹⁵

Greece experienced severe political disruption – both domestic and foreign – as a result of the refugee crisis. Internally, the far-right party Golden Dawn enjoyed electoral success by campaigning against the high migrant presence in the country, and the state's various migrant initiatives, including the creation of refugee hotspots and reception centres. The party gained 18 seats out of 300 in the Hellenic Parliament during the height of the crisis in 2015. Internationally, ongoing Greece-Turkish tensions over natural energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean and long-standing historical disputes over borders have seen refugee issues weaponised. The so-called Evros crisis in March 2020 caused an international storm when Turkey, in retaliation for the perceived tardiness of EU aid (and other issues), opened its borders with Greece and encouraged thousands of migrants it was housing to enter the EU through the border at Evros; Turkey even organised buses to take migrants close to key crossing points.¹⁶

Evros highlighted the degree to which Greece's migration crisis strikes at the heart of EU concerns, and the degree to which migration more generally remains a live political issue across Europe and for the EU. During the peak of the crisis, Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, went to Evros and declared, 'our first priority is making sure that order is maintained at the Greek external border, which is also a European border'.¹⁷ As Greece and Turkey clashed at the political level over Evros, nationalist and chauvinist elements on both sides clashed in the press and online. The Evros crisis highlighted the degree to which the refugee crisis remains a key driver of extremism, hate and polarisation across Europe; and how it consistently empowers the continent's most extreme elements, both domestically and transnationally.

In this sense, Evros provided a much-needed reminder of the dangers inherent in the migration crisis at a time when both Greece and the EU appear keen to turn away from migration as an issue. In Greece, the gradual implosion of Golden Dawn, which culminated in the 2020 jailing of its leaders after they were found guilty of leading a criminal organisation, has led to a diminishment of the far-right threat in the popular imagination. The Commission appears equally keen to argue that the crisis has been resolved. Since 2015, there has been a gradual and sustained lessening in migration inflows to Europe. According to UNHCR, in 2018, 116,647 people crossed the Mediterranean, an 89% reduction from the numbers in 2015.¹⁸ In 2019, the number dropped to 11,471, and although it increased to 34,154 in 2020, this still represented a much smaller figure than 2018.¹⁹ In 2019, Frans Timmermans, the European Commission's first vice-president, while admitting that 'structural problems remain', claimed that the migration crisis was effectively over. 'Europe is no longer experiencing the migration crisis we lived in 2015', he said.²⁰ Evros proves that, sadly, his words were premature.

Later in 2020, on 8 September, fires broke out in a number of spots at the Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos. Moria is Greece's largest refugee camp and is built to house only around 3,000 people; at the time of the fire, it was home to nearly 13,000 refugees, including 4,000 children, 408 of whom were unaccompanied.²¹ The camp had been in lockdown due to COVID-19, which only added to the stress of the already

overcrowded and often unsanitary conditions. The Greek prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, subsequently announced a four-month state of emergency on Lesbos.²² The Greek government maintains that the fires were a result of arson by migrants protesting that the camp had been put into COVID-19 lockdown. On 16 September 2020, four Afghan men were formally charged with starting the fire.²³ The Moria fires quickly became another catalyst for anti-refugee mobilisation internationally. In Germany, the decision to take in an additional 1,500 refugees²⁴ prompted criticism from the AfD,²⁵ while in Greece the fires were met with on-the-ground mobilisation by far-right extremists.²⁶

An emerging nexus of disinformation and extremism

Events like the Moria fires highlight the fact that migration continues to remain a key issue in galvanising hate, disinformation and polarisation across Europe. First are state actors that have made significant political capital from the crisis since 2015 and continue to do so today. Indeed, their threat is even greater now that EU attentions have turned elsewhere. Member State governments, such as Orbán's Fidesz party, continue to weaponise migration for domestic campaign purposes. In late 2020, Orbán's spokesman, Zoltan Kovacs, tweeted that the country's stance on migration 'has been clear and unchanged' since 2015. 'We must ensure that the external borders of the EU and the Schengen Area remain perfectly sealed along all sections' he said, urging 'member states [to] cooperate in keeping the looming migration pressure outside our borders'.²⁷ A critical question policy makers must address is the increasing tendency of certain Member States to make use of 'grab-bag' disinformation tactics.

Then there is the problem of powerful non-state actors, notably key opposition parties, which play a critical role in anti-migrant disinformation and, as ISD researchers have noted, even hate speech. Critically, several of these are in leading EU states: Germany, which took in more than 1 million refugees in 2015 – more than any other European country – has seen its AfD party, which campaigns on an anti-EU and anti-migration platform, become Germany's third largest party after winning 94 seats in the Bundestag in the 2017 federal election, in large part due to exploiting migration issues. The AfD plays an especially active anti-migrant role on the ground in key hotspots in Greece and elsewhere.

Migration, then, remains a critical issue. As actual migrant flows have decreased, focus has shifted to migrants already in Europe. As discussed, events such as the fires at the Moria refugee camp on Lesbos have become the new catalysts for eruptions of anti-migrant hate, which is coordinated across platforms – and, critically, transnationally – and which involves both extremist actors and groups, including major political parties such as the AfD. All of this means that the problem is (at the least) Europe-wide – and only growing. Migration is used to radicalise and polarise; and it increasingly descends to hate speech, centred on the demonisation and dehumanisation of refugees. From this, what emerges are several key narratives employed in anti-migrant discourse – many of which have become transnational and unite state and non-state actors, and extremist groups and individuals across Europe and beyond. Moreover, anti-migrant discourse is kept alive through its incorporation into wider social and geopolitical narratives that enable it to evolve and therefore retain a core relevance among a range of parties and actors, transnationally and across Europe.

Efforts to provide ongoing intelligence around anti-migrant activity to policy makers and organisations working on the ground with refugees in order to enable better longer-term responses to these kinds of threats are, accordingly, vital. To provide such intelligence adequately, a proper understanding of the state and non-state networks agitating around the ongoing migrant crisis, the narratives they promulgate and the platforms they use – across fringe and mainstream social media – is critical. Understanding to what degree actors – both state and non-state – are coordinated and how they function in EU political spaces is also vital to combating this threat, which remains perhaps the single biggest driver of polarisation, extremism and hate across the European continent.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand both the actors who are most active around anti-refugee disinformation and hatred in the Greek, German and English languages, as well as the key narratives which these actors employ. Accordingly, we adopted a network-first approach where we first identified online ecosystems associated with anti-refugee disinformation and hate, before conducting a deeper analysis of the discourse across these channels.

To start this process, researchers engaged in a period of scoping research using the Brandwatch and CrowdTangle tools to identify social media accounts which were promoting hashtags associated with anti-refugee social media campaigns, such as #TheGreatReplacement. This was supplemented through additional ethnographic research to produce 'seed lists' of social media accounts and domains producing content which contained either disinformation around the refugee crisis or anti-refugee hate speech.

Through this process, we identified 85 public Facebook pages and groups (with 27 in English, 50 in German, and 8 in Greek); 360 Twitter accounts (with 62 in English, 33 in German, and 266 in Greek); and 47 domains containing anti-refugee content (with 12 in English, 14 in German, and 21 in Greek).

We then used these seed lists as the starting point for extrapolating broader networks of channels involved in anti-refugee activity. To do this, we built infrastructure using Method52, a software platform which uses machine learning to analyse unstructured text. This infrastructure automatically identified additional social media channels which were either conversing directly with our seed accounts (by referencing and being referenced by these accounts in their messages), or which were linking to the domains which contained anti-refugee content.

These additional accounts and domains were then filtered using keywords to identify those which actively discussed the refugee crisis, ensuring that popular channels which were not relevant to our study but which are commonly referenced across social media did not skew our findings. Researchers then manually checked the results to remove additional false positives. This process left us with networks of social media channels engaged in conversation with accounts promoting anti-refugee disinformation and hatred in the Greek, German and English languages, as well as additional links out to content which was relevant to anti-refugee activity:

- **Greek Language Network:** 1,945 social media entities (1,722 Twitter accounts; 223 public Facebook pages and groups); 21,814 links to content;
- **German Language Network:** 950 entities (708 Twitter accounts; 240 public Facebook pages and groups; 2 Instagram accounts); 19,985 links to content;
- **English Language Network:** 2,870 entities (2,513 Twitter accounts; 354 public Facebook pages and groups; 2 subreddits; 1 Instagram account); 14,799 links to content.

The modularity of these networks was then visualised to understand the different sub-networks which are present. Modularity is a way of detecting distinct sub-communities in a network based on the interconnections between actors (nodes). A network with high overall modularity will have clusters of nodes with dense interconnections but relatively few connections between nodes in different modules (sub-communities). For these networks, the nodes consist of social media accounts and of web URLs (links attached to messages) so that accounts and links are automatically grouped together into sub-communities (modularity classes).

These different clusters were then subject to qualitative analysis to establish whether they related to particular communities based on their geographic, ideological or topic-based affiliation.

Having conducted this community-based analysis to identify the key actor groups related to anti-refugee mobilisation, we then gathered the content produced across these networks. This included the 3,000 most recent posts on Twitter running up until the end of 2020, and all posts made by Facebook entities. This produced a total dataset of **280,627** posts produced in 2020.

Due to the fact that our Twitter collection only extracted the most recent 3,000 Tweets for each account up to the end of 2020, our datasets are skewed towards the end of the year. As such, this set does not comprehensively capture all activity across these networks for the whole of 2020.

We then examined the volume of this content produced over time to identify key events relating to spikes in anti-refugee conversation and the most popular pieces of content shared within each cluster of these networks throughout 2020. This enabled us to produce an analysis of the key narratives deployed in anti-refugee disinformation and hate online.

Network Analysis

Using a network-first approach, we were able to determine the broader online ecosystems within which anti-refugee disinformation and hate takes place. By examining the communities actively involved in conversation with known hate/disinformation actors, we gained a greater understanding of where and how such activity gains traction online. This provided us with a more expansive lens through which to understand malign online activity around the refugee crisis; one which goes beyond analysis of a small group of known disinformation actors. Coupling this with a qualitative analysis of the content produced within these networks allowed us to determine more precisely the key issue areas which are leveraged through online manipulation to generate hostility against, and polarise conversation around, refugee communities.

Greek Language Network

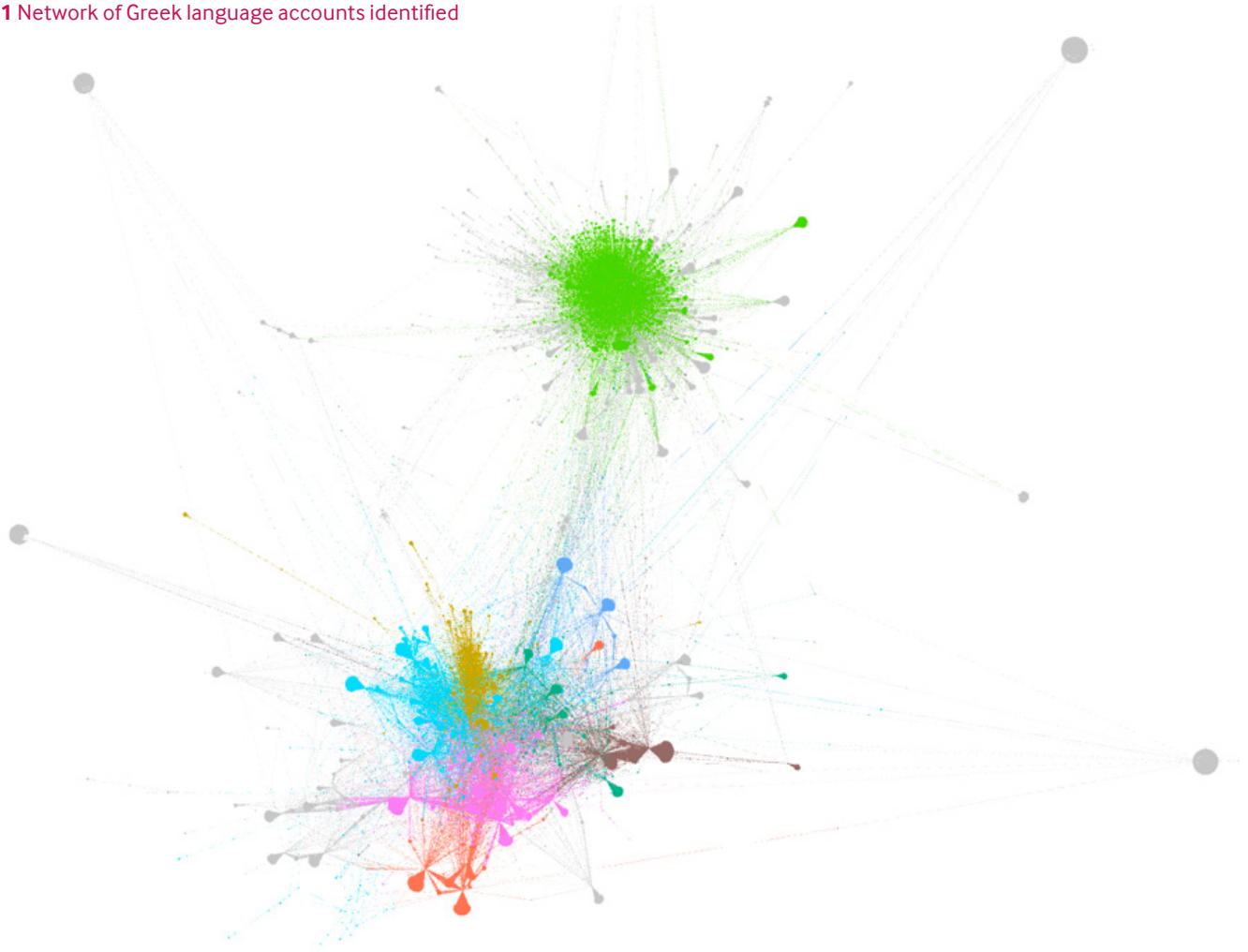
The Greek language network contained eight communities of interlinked accounts which actively engage in online conversation with known hate and disinformation actors agitating around the refugee crisis. These communities bring together a range of actors from within Greek society. Accounts and outlets associated with far-right extremism are commonly referenced within these networks. However, our analysis also revealed the overlap of these communities with a broader ecosystem of Greek nationalist accounts as well as accounts associated with fringe and mainstream politics.

An analysis of the content produced within these networks highlights how both the events on the Greece/Turkey border at Evros in March and the fires in the Moria refugee camp at Lesbos in September acted as catalysts for anti-refugee hatred and disinformation. This analysis also revealed the role the media and politicians can play in amplifying anti-refugee hatred and disinformation.

Communities identified

Using the methodology outlined above, we identified a total of 1,945 accounts from Facebook (223 pages and groups) and Twitter (1,722 accounts) which were conversing with anti-refugee disinformation and hate actors online. Additionally, we identified large clusters of links out to domains external to these platforms which were hosting anti-refugee content, including mainstream and fringe media. In total through this process we identified 99,013 social media posts created by this network in 2020.

We then determined the modularity of this network, identifying eight different clusters of channels which commonly converse with one another. An analysis of these clusters reveals a number of different communities involved in anti-migrant discussion online. The makeup of these clusters is relatively homogenous, with accounts and channels captured generally (though not exclusively) associated with Greek right and far-right accounts – although in some instances clusters also contained pro-refugee accounts which were being referenced by these clusters.

Figure 1 Network of Greek language accounts identified

Cluster	Cluster Colour	Twitter accounts	Facebook accounts	Links	Community Group
Cluster 1	Light Green	1,179	1	-	Mixed far-right, mainstream right, and pro-refugee accounts
Cluster 2	Pink	-	-	5,257	Far-right outlets
Cluster 3	Blue	2	22	5,187	Mixed far-right, mainstream right, and pro-refugee accounts
Cluster 4	Orange	-	5	2,791	Greek Solution affiliated accounts
Cluster 5	Brown	1	5	2,700	Greek nationalist and far-right accounts
Cluster 6	Gold	-	62	2,050	Assembly of Greeks affiliated accounts
Cluster 7	Yellow	2	7	2,022	Pro-government accounts
Cluster 8	Dark Green	-	-	1,807	Outlets focused on anti-Turkish activity

Cluster 1 is the largest group in the sample. It is primarily constituted of Twitter accounts as well as one Facebook page. An analysis of the makeup of this network is that it is primarily constituted of a mixture of far-right and right-leaning accounts promoting anti-refugee content, as well as fringe far-right media outlets. Additionally, this cluster also captured a small number of accounts associated with pro-refugee activity.

Cluster 2 is dominated by a variety of far-right outlets, groups and content hosted on a number of platforms that include YouTube and Blogspot.

Cluster 3 contains some of the only international activity in this network, relating to a right-wing writer based in the US who is associated with outlets and writers that spread anti-refugee content. The Facebook accounts in this cluster contain a mixture of right-leaning and far-right groups, as well as several left-wing pages.

Clusters 4 and 6 are associated with Greek political personalities which are active in promulgating anti-refugee discourse. The Facebook accounts in **Cluster 4** are all associated with the ultranationalist populist party Greek Solution and its leader Kyriakos Velopoulos, and those in **Cluster 6** are associated with conspiracy theorist Artemis Sorras and his party Assembly of Greeks.

Cluster 5 contains far-right accounts as well as a number of Greek nationalist channels which primarily produce anti-Turkish content.

Clusters 7 and 8 reveal how anti-migrant discourse has embedded itself into the Greek mainstream information ecosystem, with one Facebook account belonging to a governing party MEP, while five others are pro-government/party-affiliated groups, as well as a far-right magazine. Content captured within these clusters contains a mix of anti-refugee and anti-Turkish articles, mostly from mid-size outlets and some major mainstream outlets.

This network analysis demonstrates how the refugee crisis has proven effective at galvanising hostility from across Greek society – from the fringes of the far-right to less extreme nationalist outlets, all the way into the

political mainstream. Government-supporting networks are present as well as mainstream outlets and even democratically elected MEPs. The presence of accounts and pages which primarily produce anti-Turkish content also highlights how anti-refugee discourse seeps into – and strengthens – wider geopolitical issues such as Greek-Turkish tensions.

The left-wing and pro-refugee accounts were captured by our network generation algorithm as they were commonly referenced by the original anti-refugee accounts identified in our seed list. A qualitative analysis of this conversation revealed that these mentions were often hostile in nature. This demonstrates the contested nature of broader online discussion relating to the refugee crisis online, with activists and advocates working within the pro-refugee policy, advocacy and activism space finding themselves targeted by hostility and disinformation.

Importantly the visualisation of these networks reveals largely consistent overlap between the different communities identified, demonstrating how communities associated with the far-right, Greek nationalism, mainstream and fringe politics are closely interlinked online. The only cluster which is largely independent in the network map (**Cluster 1**) contains a majority Twitter accounts, and its independence is a reflection of inter-platform dynamics rather than distinct community dynamics. A closer examination of this group revealed that it contains a mix of both far-right and mainstream conservative accounts, again demonstrating how the refugee crisis helps bridge a range of communities in the Greek context.

Key narratives

To better understand how the communities identified in our network analysis engage with the refugee crisis and with migration more broadly, we gathered the top ten most widely shared posts produced between January and December 2020 by each cluster.

A qualitative analysis of these widely shared posts allowed us to better understand salient narratives in anti-refugee mobilisation in the Greek language. Importantly, this analysis demonstrated that the narratives and topics of conversation underpinning anti-refugee mobilisation in Greece appear to be largely homogenous. Discussion across far-right

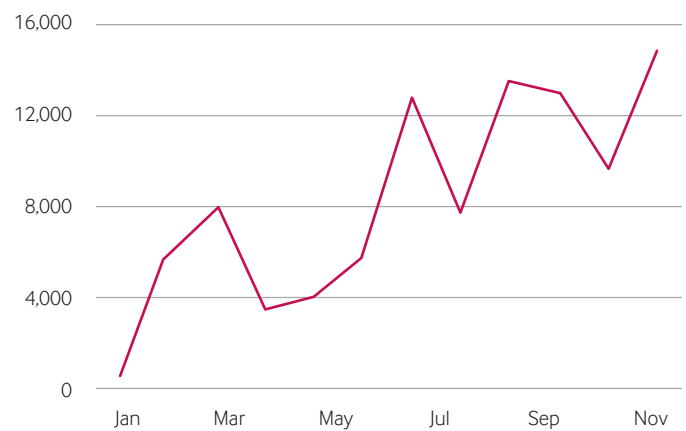
affiliated clusters and clusters affiliated with fringe and mainstream politics contained several consistent narratives. In particular, refugees were often painted as destructive anti-Greek ‘invaders’, with widely shared content focusing on suggestions that refugees had started fires in Lesvos and Moria and that refugees were attacking churches and other heritage sites. NGOs working with refugees were also consistently represented as corrupt or criminal and complicit in broader conspiracies such as drug-smuggling or faking the deaths of refugees to garner sympathy. Across all clusters in our network map, we also identified widespread anti-Turkish sentiment. This included depicting the refugee crisis as a ‘weapon’ of the Turkish state, with an emphasis on the idea that Turkey had deliberately planted agents of the security service, jihadists and criminals within the flow of refugees. In a number of instances, the conversion of the Hagia Sofia back into a mosque by Turkey was juxtaposed with reports of refugee attacks on churches in Greece, to suggest that the flow of refugees is part of a broader process of Islamisation. These clusters also consistently promoted anti-Turkish sentiment that was not tied to the refugee crisis, including discussion of the Pontic Genocide, as well as content which focused on German arms sales to Turkey.

Content produced by **Cluster 6**, which is associated with the Assembly of Greeks party, differed from other clusters in that it promoted conspiracy theories that specifically painted the Greek government as complicit in the refugee crisis. This cluster of accounts was also involved in the broader promotion of conspiracy theories, such as those relating to the COVID-19 pandemic and figures such as Bill Gates.

Spikes in activity

An analysis of content produced by our Greek network throughout 2020 revealed several spikes in activity: one in March, a second in July, a third in September, and a fourth in December.

Figure 2 Volume of social media posts produced by Greek language network throughout 2020²⁸



Conversation in March was dominated by the Evros crisis, with the top ten most widely shared posts across our network focusing on the border incident. These widely shared posts included content which purported to show refugees holding children over fire to make them cry so that they could garner press sympathy. Other widely shared content specifically painted refugees as ‘invaders’, dubbing them ‘Erdoğan’s praetorian guards’.

In July, the surge in activity was not linked to a specific event relating to migration but actually to the conversion of the Hagia Sophia back into a mosque. Here this conversation served as a lightning rod for the broader anti-Turkish sentiment observed throughout the network, which in turn was linked back into the migrant crisis.

The surge in activity in September was driven by the Moria fires. In particular, discussion focused on the idea that refugees deliberately burned down the camp; this painted migrants as inherently hostile and destructive. This was in turn followed by more complex conspiracy theories.

One key narrative which emerged in our data suggested that the German NGO Seawatch was involved in the selling of drugs and fake documents to refugees. This ties into longer-term discussion in Greece that accuses NGOs of nefarious and illegal activity.²⁹ However, interestingly these specific claims against Seawatch originated from the German anti-refugee activist Rebecca Sommer. Sommer travelled to Lesbos in September to document the Moria fires and their aftermath, presenting herself as a mouthpiece for the local Lesbos population on the basis that they have been forgotten by the EU and the UN, and producing a series of videos on YouTube documenting this trip. Sommer's content was largely produced for a German audience, but gained traction amongst Greek networks, with her activism receiving coverage in fringe³⁰ and mainstream media.³¹ The transnational dynamics behind the spread of anti-NGO disinformation are clear to see here; a German activist who sees NGOs as in part responsible for the refugee flow to Germany is able to stoke similar sentiment amongst Greek networks.

Another conspiracy theory which emerged across our network suggested that the Turkish secret service had arranged the fire, as a means of attacking Greece, through the use of secret agents and jihadists planted amongst refugees.

These kinds of conspiratorial narratives, empowered by the networks, about nefarious Turkish actions toward Greece came to a head in December with a story that claimed Turkey was orchestrating the travel of Somali refugees, including jihadists, to Greece. This correlated with the final spike in activity. It is claimed that this plot was being driven with the support of the Turkish IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, and with the cooperation of pro-migrant NGOs in Greece. The narrative focused on the growing military presence of Turkey in Somalia (where Turkey maintains a military base) and linked it to the presence of militants amongst the refugees.

This story started to gain mainstream prominence after statements made on 8 December 2020 by the minister for migration and asylum, Notis Mitarakis, about suspicious NGOs linked to the Turkish government. He said: 'According to testimonies and cross-referenced information, NGOs pay the costs of transporting and issuing visas to Turkey, with flights to Istanbul. They are then transported to the Turkish coast, where smugglers, again with the support of NGOs, help them to enter the European Union illegally. These crossings must and will be blocked in every legal way. We do not want our country to be the gateway to Europe'.³² This gained further prominence when the Greek newspaper Real News published a story on 13 December titled: 'ISIS sponsors are bringing Somali immigrants to the Greek Islands'.³³ The story itself is based entirely on 'exclusive information' and doesn't provide any references. This story was quickly picked up across a large number of other Greek media outlets and was amplified across the network of accounts identified here. It was used to justify and promote anti-refugee hatred as well as broader anti-Turkish sentiment.

The idea that jihadis are infiltrating Europe through the Greek islands is a story that dates back to the beginning of the refugee crisis, and it has been covered in the press internationally since then.³⁴ This narrative has persisted in Greece, with MPs and ministers raising questions around the topic in Parliament,³⁵ and is in part grounded in fact, with at least one arrest of an individual suspected of terrorism in a migrant camp.³⁶ However, suggestions that the Turkish security services had inserted agents amongst refugees is more recent, only gaining mainstream traction in April 2020 after Turkish journalist Abdullah Bozkurt of Nordic Monitor told the daily newspaper Ethnos that he had seen evidence in classified documents that MIT had operatives in the Greek camps.³⁷

Our data suggests that the narrative that Turkey was inserting undercover operatives into the refugee flow emerged in anti-refugee communities before this story became more widespread. This narrative was first promoted by the Greek language network we identified on 23 March, with a Tweet from the account of Nikos Sotiropoulos, a member of New Democracy, which was shared 873 times.³⁸ Following Sotiropoulos' Tweet, we identified 3810 posts in our network presenting refugees as potential fifth columnists from Turkey,

before this became a dominant point of mainstream discourse after the fire in Moria, culminating in the Real News story in December and Mitarakis' comments. The accounts sharing these messages are mostly anonymous and affiliated with far-right extremism. However, this content was also driven by politically affiliated accounts, including members of the Greek Solution party³⁹ and the fringe politician Thanos Tzimeros.⁴⁰

Observing the conversation identified in our network throughout 2020, we can see the genesis of narratives claiming Turkey is infiltrating flows of refugees with saboteurs. First, discussion in March focused on the very real fact that Turkey had instigated a mass surge of refugees into Greece with a disruptive effect (albeit embellished on occasion through unverified content designed to promote hostility against refugees), as well as involving the emergence of assertions that the Turkish security services were involved in this flow. Following this, ideas of refugees as a Turkish 'invasion force', which had found expression in pockets of Greek media,⁴¹ were bolstered by narratives around the Moria fires, which those same media picked up and used as evidence of the true nature of refugees.⁴² Finally, this narrative crystallised in December following the Real News story. This demonstrates a narrative feedback loop, whereby discussions of conspiracy theories are empowered by a mix of broader geopolitical tensions and amplification by mainstream media and politicians. Crucially, this case study also demonstrates the ways in which disinformation can serve multiple objectives simultaneously, with the 'Turkish agents' narrative serving to both demonise refugees as a security threat and fan anti-Turkish sentiment.

German Language Network

The German language network contained eight communities of interlinked accounts which are engaged in anti-refugee disinformation and hatred online. This included the widespread presence of accounts associated with far-right extremism, but also a number of channels associated with the populist AfD party.

An analysis of content produced by these accounts demonstrated that, as with the Greek language network, events on the Evros border and fires in the Moria refugee camp correlated with spikes in content containing anti-refugee hatred and disinformation. We found that conversation which seeks to paint refugees as criminals is particularly salient in the German context. Additionally, we found evidence that in a number of instances, anti-refugee disinformation online correlated with the activity of German activists travelling to Greece to document the refugee crisis in a negative light.

Communities identified

Starting with 50 public Facebook pages and groups, 33 Twitter accounts, and 14 domains containing German anti-migrant disinformation and hatred, we built out a network of 708 Twitter accounts, 240 public Facebook pages and groups, and two Instagram accounts.

Mapping this network, we then identified eight clusters of accounts associated with different interlinked communities. In a similar way to our Greek network, the makeup of these clusters is relatively homogenous. Accounts and channels associated with the populist AfD are found repeatedly throughout five clusters within the network (62.5%), mirroring findings from other analysis which demonstrates the importance of AfD networks in the spread of disinformation around other issues such as climate change.⁴³ All network clusters containing AfD pages and accounts also contained far-right pages and groups, albeit in different quantities. This demonstrates how AfD accounts are often referenced by far-right accounts on social media, and how AfD and far-right channels and groups commonly link out to similar content, highlighting how in the context of anti-migrant activity in Germany, AfD potentially acts as a gateway connecting its supporters to more extreme content online.

Figure 3 Network of accounts involved in German language anti-refugee conversation

Cluster	Cluster Colour	Twitter accounts	Facebook accounts	Links	Themes Discussed/Type Of Actors
Cluster 1	Orange	-	23	3,765	AfD local party branches and one far-right page
Cluster 2	Blue	-	42	3,461	AfD and far-right accounts
Cluster 3	Pink	-	9	3,108	AfD and far-right accounts
Cluster 4	Green	639	7	2,223	Far-right, conservative and mainstream accounts
Cluster 5	Purple	-	3	2,460	Conspiracy theory groups
Cluster 6	Yellow	-	6	1,956	Far-right groups
Cluster 7	Dark green	-	9	1,564	AfD and far-right accounts
Cluster 8	Red	-	15	1,448	AfD and far-right accounts

Cluster 1 largely contains AfD pages and groups on Facebook, associated with both individual politicians and local party branches, as well as one group associated with far-right mobilisation, one group which is set up to criticise The Greens, and one right-wing publicist. Similarly, **Cluster 2** is largely dominated by AfD accounts, but these are networked with several far-right channels, two hyperpartisan media sources and a COVID-19 conspiracy page. **Clusters 3, 7 and 8** contain more even splits of AfD accounts and pages and far-right entities, alongside conspiracy theorist channels. The densely networked nature of these accounts, visualised above, demonstrates how AfD supporters online operate within a wider information ecosystem which potentially brings them into close contact with more extreme channels.

Beyond channels containing AfD-affiliated accounts, **Cluster 5** contained conspiracy theory channels, and **Cluster 6** far-right groups. **Cluster 4** contained a broader network of accounts. This included Facebook channels associated with the far-right, but also a broader cohort of conservative channels, a number of non-political accounts including mainstream media entities, and some accounts associated with pro-migrant discussion.

Crucially, analysis of these different clusters demonstrates a close overlap between AfD channels and far-right extremist entities, demonstrating how the refugee crisis acts as a nexus bridging these communities. **Cluster 4**, which contained a number of more mainstream accounts, has less overlap with the remainder of the network map; however, as this cluster contained the majority of the Twitter accounts identified in this process, this is in part a reflection of inter-platform dynamics.

Key narratives

To better understand how the communities identified in our network analysis engage with the refugee crisis and with migration more broadly, we gathered the top ten most widely shared posts produced between January 2020 and January 2021 by each cluster. This helped to provide us with a measure of some of the salient topics utilised in discussion of the migrant crisis.

Across the five network clusters containing AfD pages and groups, we identified similar narratives. The most

common topic of conversation sought to link refugees to crime and was present in 17 out of the 50 (34%) most widely shared posts. Additionally, we identified six posts which sought to link the refugee crisis to COVID-19, questioning the rationale of accepting refugees in the middle of a pandemic; and five posts linking the refugee crisis to anti-Muslim sentiment, claiming that the influx of refugees was linked to the 'Islamisation' of Europe. Beyond this rhetoric, we also identified 11 posts more broadly refusing to accept refugees into Germany from Greece, with posters suggesting that refugees were more interested in coming to Germany for a better life than to escape war. Network Cluster 5, which is associated largely with conspiracy theory channels, contained similar topics of discussion as the network clusters containing AfD entities – including four posts which focused on apparent crimes committed by refugees, three posts focusing on the costs of resettling refugees and suggesting that refugees get 'special treatment' from the government in comparison to poorer Germans.

Several different sources were represented in widely shared posts in AfD-related clusters, providing additional insight into the wider information ecosystem discussing migration which AfD supporters might come into contact with online. Perhaps unsurprisingly, official AfD party pages and the pages of AfD politicians were most widely represented in these clusters, producing 38% of the widely shared posts analysed here. This content is overwhelmingly hostile to refugees, and at times draws on tropes deployed by the extreme right,⁴⁴ such as depicting refugees as 'terrorists' and 'soldiers'. In one such instance, Bundestag member Johannes Huber referred to refugees as 'oriental invaders'.

AfD officials also promoted a number of unverified stories we had identified in our Greek network, such as suggestions made by member of the Berlin House of Representatives Thorsten Weiß that refugees on the Greece/Turkey border were deliberately hurting children to help produce emotive media. Four widely shared posts in AfD-related networks were boosted using Facebook advertising technology, and all of them were originally produced by the AfD-affiliated hyperpartisan news outlet the Deutschland-Kurier. One of these posts was a video which promoted the concept that migration is enabling the Islamisation of Europe, a theory which is commonly used by far-right extremists.⁴⁵

Beyond AfD-affiliated content, nine (18%) of the widely shared posts in these AfD linked clusters were produced by the far-right influencer Tim K, a biker who produces anti-Muslim and anti-migrant content, whom the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung have identified as drawing on anti-Semitic tropes in his messaging.⁴⁶

The most widely shared posts in Cluster 6 contained far-right entities focused on the COVID-19 pandemic. This included three posts criticising the fact that refugees entered Germany in the pandemic, two posts suggesting that refugees were refusing to work during the pandemic, and one post suggesting that refugees were refusing to comply with COVID-19 prevention measures. Additionally, one widely shared post in this cluster sought to link the flow of refugees to Europe more specifically with the 'white genocide' conspiracy theory.

Cluster 4, which involved a range of more mainstream groups and channels, contained a broader mix of content relating to the refugee crisis. In comparison to the other network clusters, in which all widely shared messages were hostile to refugees, seven out of the top ten most widely shared posts in this cluster contained more neutral discussion of the refugee crisis. Two of the most widely shared posts in this cluster focused on crime committed by refugees, and one post sought to emphasise how refugees pose a risk of destabilising German society by referencing violence committed by refugees in France.

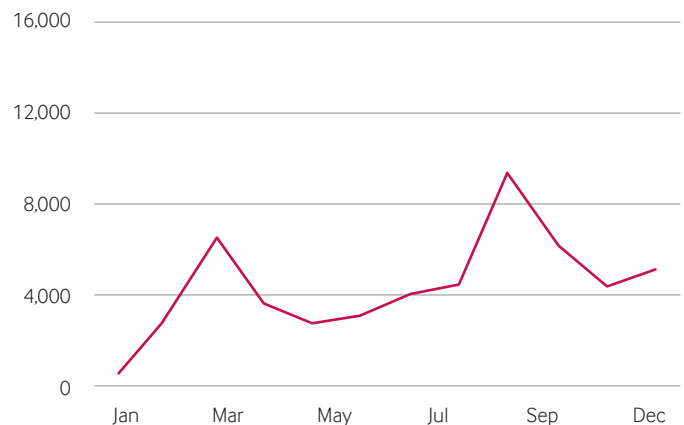
Spikes in activity: Evros and Moria

To better understand the sorts of events which correlated with spikes in anti-migrant activity, we mapped the volume of activity produced by accounts in our channels throughout 2020. This revealed two spikes in activity – one in March and one in September.

Between February and March 2020, the number of Facebook posts produced by our channels increased by 115%, from 2,898 posts in February to 6,248 in March. This activity correlated with the surge in migrants crossing the Greek-Turkish border at Evros. More specifically, our analysis revealed that as well as containing broader anti-refugee sentiment, including content which painted refugees as potential criminals and as opportunists seeking a better life at the expense of Europe, this spike in activity was in part linked to

German Identitarian activists who had travelled to Greece to document the flow of people at Evros.⁴⁷ Importantly this demonstrates how far-right anti-refugee activists do not simply focus their activism domestically, but instead draw on a playbook which includes publicity stunts abroad. This ties into a longer track record of such activity by the Identitarians, including the 'Defend Europe' mission in 2017, where supporters of the group crowd-funded a ship with the aim of disrupting the migrant flow into Europe.⁴⁸ This reinforces how the European far-right are increasingly framing their activity transnationally, documenting the flow of refugees in one country to highlight the perceived risk they pose to an audience in another. More broadly, this also demonstrates the extent to which German far-right activists see the Greek refugee crisis as a threat – refugees arriving in Greece being conceived as an innate threat to social cohesion and security within Germany.

Figure 4 Volume of posts produced by German language network throughout 2020



In September, we observed a second major spike in activity in correlation with a series of fires in Moria. In total, we identified 8,166 Facebook posts made in the month, an increase of 90% on the 4,289 Facebook posts produced by our networks in August. In total, 10% of the most widely shared posts analysed from across 2020 related to the Moria fires. An analysis of this spike in activity shows that it was largely linked to content opposing the acceptance of further refugees in Germany – tying the fires in Moria to the threat of similar activity in Germany. This included posts discussing

attacks on ATMs in Germany which were attributed to migrants, suggesting that refugees have a proclivity for arson. The most widely shared post in September was a video produced by AfD politician Gottfried Curio, which opposed accepting refugees from Moria and linked the admission of refugees to, amongst other things, an increase of crime in Germany.

Part of the spike in September related to activity by German activist Rebecca Sommer, who travelled to Greece to document the aftermath of the fires in Moria, and whose posts identified in our network analysis were shared 13,242 times. Sommer, who styles her activism as journalism, argues that Islam is a direct threat to the European population and alleges that most refugees are economic migrants from Africa who are unwilling to integrate into liberal societies. Through YouTube videos and interviews with conservative and far-right outlets, Sommer helped amplify several key anti-refugee narratives. These include allegations that NGOs were participating in illegal activity on the island, including the sale of drugs; insinuations that NGO were potentially involved in the fires on Moria; suggestions that coverage by journalists is staged to portray refugees as fragile; and claims that Erdoğan is coordinating a Muslim invasion of Europe through Greece.

Sommer wasn't the only German activist to travel to Greece in this period. Additionally, we identified activity from two members of the AfD youth organisation Junge Alternative who travelled to Greece in August and filmed around Moria. On 26 September, the two published a 12-minute video about their trip on their project's Facebook page, in which they suggest, among other things, that the Moria residents knew of the impending fire because they left the camp with packed suitcases. During the film, they repeatedly associate the Moria inhabitants with crime and environmental pollution, including the burning of olive groves. This content was only shared in small volumes across the network we identified. However, it does point towards a broader trend of transnational mobilisation around the refugee crisis, with German activists travelling to Greece to produce content for domestic audiences.

English Language Network

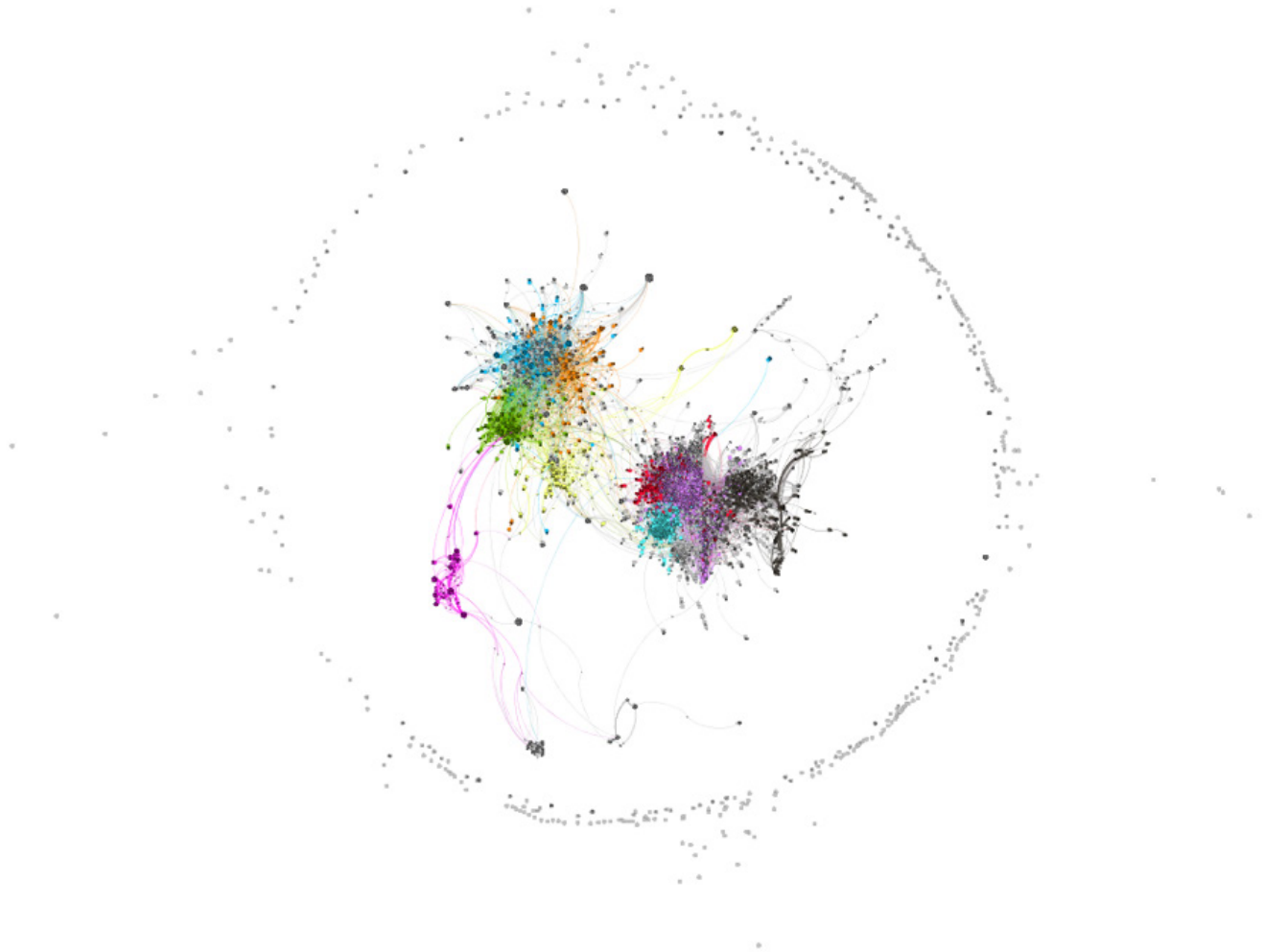
In the English language network, we identified nine communities of interlinked accounts. This included an international cohort of accounts associated with far-right extremism in the UK, USA, Canada and Australia. Additionally, this network generation exercise identified three networks of accounts associated with pro-refugee advocacy and activism. Importantly, this demonstrates the contested nature of discussion around refugees online, with pro-refugee accounts finding themselves targeted by communities which are hostile to their work.

An analysis of the content produced by these networks found that events on the Greek-Turkish border at Evros in March correlated with spikes in discussion from across this network of accounts.

Communities identified

Starting with a short list of 27 English language Facebook pages, 62 Twitter accounts, and 12 websites hosting anti-migrant content, we extrapolated a network of English language social media entities which were involved in the discussion of anti-migrant conversation online. This included 2,870 social media channels (2,513 Twitter accounts, 354 Facebook pages and groups, 1 Instagram account, and 2 subreddits) and 14,799 links to content, allowing us to identify the communities which have evolved around anti-refugee mobilisation as well as the material which these communities are sharing to promote their agenda.

We then determined the modularity of this network, identifying nine different clusters of channels which commonly reference one another. An analysis of these clusters reveals a number of different communities involved in anti-migrant discussion online. Five of these contained a mix of far-right and reactionary conservative accounts; three largely contained accounts associated with pro-migrant activity; and one was associated with Nigerian conversation online.

Figure 5 Network of accounts involved in English language anti-refugee discussion

Cluster	Cluster Colour	Twitter accounts	Facebook accounts	Links	Themes Discussed/Type Of Actors
Cluster 1	Purple	815	-	3,040	Pro-migrant NGOs
Cluster 2	Green	-	40	2,093	International far-right (English language)
Cluster 3	Blue	1	37	1,894	US far-right and conservative voices
Cluster 4	Black	308	5	1,465	Greek nationalists
Cluster 5	Orange	1	43	1,372	US-UK far-right/conservative
Cluster 6	Red	151	1	1,240	Pro-migration advocacy and research
Cluster 7	Pink	-	12	1,368	Nigerian news
Cluster 8	Turquoise	143	-	1,190	UK pro-migration space
Cluster 9	Yellow	-	37	1,137	UK far-right and conservative

An analysis of the different clusters where far-right activity was present reveals an international cohort of communities converging on anti-migrant discussion online. Two of these clusters contained accounts from different geographies. In **Cluster 2**, we observed accounts from Canada, Australia, the USA and the UK – with the top ten most active accounts being related to Canadian far-right and conspiracy theorist activity. In **Cluster 5**, we observed a mixture of conservative and far-right accounts from the USA and the UK, with the ten most active accounts associated with the pro-Donald Trump MAGA movement. The remaining three clusters were more precisely aligned with a specific geography. **Cluster 3** contained a mixture of far-right and conservative American entities, with discussion from this cluster also focusing on opposing migration to the USA. **Cluster 4** was dominated by accounts promoting a Greek nationalist agenda, which as well as promoting content which was anti-refugee also contained a subset of accounts which were more specifically focused on anti-Turkish activity. Finally, accounts and domains in **Cluster 9** were more specifically focused on the UK. This included far-right channels, but also channels which were associated with pro-Brexit activity, and channels which were established as ‘supporter groups’ for figures from the Conservative Party including Priti Patel and Boris Johnson.

This network analysis demonstrates how the refugee crisis has proven effective at galvanising an international cohort of actors, including communities in the United States, Canada and Australia. This points towards the broader trend of internationalisation of nativism and far-right extremism,⁴⁹ and demonstrates how the refugee crisis is being leveraged by communities which are not directly affected by it. Importantly, the clusters identified above are not exclusively populated by far-right extremist entities and also contain channels associated with mainstream politics. This highlights how anti-refugee disinformation and hate acts as a nexus bridging conservative and far-right actors, potentially providing extremist actors with an avenue to radicalise receptive audiences.

As well as identifying far-right and conservative networks engaged in anti-migrant activity, our network generation also captured – more surprisingly – three clusters of accounts associated with pro-refugee communities. **Cluster 1** contained a series of accounts associated with NGOs working on the ground with refugees; **Cluster 6** contained a series of accounts associated with pro-migration advocacy and research; and **Cluster 8** contained accounts associated with British activists. These accounts were captured by our network generation algorithm as they were commonly referenced by the original anti-refugee accounts identified in our seed list. In particular, our network analysis revealed overlap and discourse with Greek nationalist accounts and accounts associated with the UK far-right. A qualitative analysis of this conversation revealed that these mentions were often hostile in nature. This demonstrates the contested nature of broader online discussion relating to the refugee crisis online, with activists and advocates working within the pro-refugee policy, advocacy and activism space finding themselves targeted by hostility and disinformation.

Finally, **Cluster 7** incorporated a number of Nigerian accounts and entities which were primarily focused on Biafran independence. This cluster of accounts was identified by our system as they followed a number of accounts from (and shared the same content as some of) the American accounts identified in our network. However, as these accounts were not particularly active in discussion around migration, they were not interrogated further.

Across this network, we then analysed the top 25 most active entities, which included three Facebook entities and 22 Twitter accounts. These entities included three Greek nationalist accounts, two of which are primarily used to promote anti-Turkish content; one account associated with the Identitarian movement in Greece; two UK accounts associated with anti-migrant activism; three accounts associated more broadly with the promotion of far-right ideology; two accounts associated with Canadian far-right activity; four accounts associated with the far-right in the United States; one account promoting COVID-19 conspiracy theories; two accounts associated with pro-migrant advocacy; and seven accounts which were not obviously affiliated with a particular ideology or group. This again reinforces how English language anti-migrant

conversation online is driven by a broad church of actors as opposed to a community from one particular geography.

Key narratives

To better understand the different ways in which the communities identified in our network analysis engage with the refugee crisis and with migration more broadly, we gathered the top ten most widely shared posts produced between January 2020 and January 2021 by each cluster. This helped to provide us with an idea of some of the salient topics within discussions of the migrant crisis.

The different clusters bringing together far-right and conservative actors in the network reveal that these communities prioritise discussion of migration from Europe into their domestic landscapes. However, key narratives cut across these different communities.

In UK, US and Canadian contexts, widely shared posts called on the need to tighten border control, using the risk of crime and the perceived security threat posed by refugees to reinforce these calls. In these three contexts, these narratives were also used to criticise political opponents who were deemed to be 'soft' on migration, including the Labour Party, the Democrats, and the Liberal Party of Canada. In both Canada and the UK, we also identified widely shared discussions promoting conspiracy theories around groups perceived to be behind the refugee flow from the Middle East. The UK government and police were painted as being complicit in illegal immigration, as were international NGOs, who were portrayed as deliberately facilitating migration as part of a broader subversive agenda. Across all of these contexts, refugees were consistently portrayed as 'illegal immigrants' – showing how these communities seek to frame discussion around migration within a legal/illegal binary. Refugees were also portrayed as 'invaders', highlighting the adversarial framing of migrants as a significant security threat to their host countries.

The cluster of accounts and pages more specifically associated with Greek nationalism promoted similar talking points to those associated with far-right and conservative voices throughout the English-speaking world. NGOs were again depicted as orchestrating the refugee crisis as part of a broader conspiracy designed

to degrade the fabric of European society, and refugees themselves were linked to terrorism and crime. More specific to this cluster was an additional focus on anti-Turkish discourse which sought to frame the refugee crisis as orchestrated by Turkey as part of an aggressive foreign policy against Greece and Europe, with four out of the top ten most widely shared posts focusing on this topic. Additionally, two of the posts in this cluster focused on fires in migrant camps, using these to portray refugees as violent, but also to insinuate that these fires were part of a broader strategy of 'hybrid warfare' being waged by Turkey on Greece.

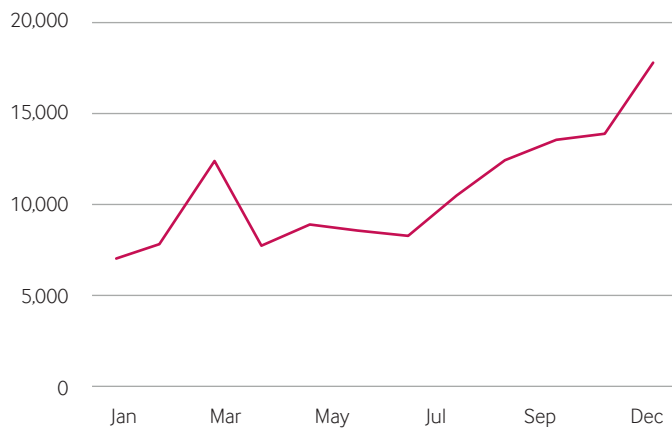
Interestingly, an analysis of the clusters associated with pro-migrant accounts also highlighted anti-refugee sentiment in the most widely shared posts. In the cluster of accounts associated with pro-migrant NGOs, four out of the ten most widely shared posts analysed were from anti-migrant accounts and were suggesting that restricting the flow of refugees is necessary to defend European civilisation. Similarly, in the cluster of accounts associated with pro-refugee advocacy groups, three posts focused specifically on the perceived threat of sexual violence posed by male refugees to European women, and one widely shared post painted migrants as 'Maghrebian Soldiers'. These demonstrate how anti-migrant actors actively target pro-migrant communities online through the promotion of narratives which seek to emphasise the broader threat posed by individual refugees, both to European culture as a whole and to the safety of individuals.

Spikes in activity: Evros

To better understand the sorts of events which correlated with increased activity amongst our networks, we mapped the volume of content produced by these groups throughout 2020. The largest spike in our data occurred in early March, with a peak of 598 messages produced on 2 March. This corresponded with the build-up of asylum seekers seeking to cross the Greek-Turkish border at Evros.

An analysis of the most widely shared posts produced at this time illustrates several important dynamics at play in this period. The most widely shared piece of content in this spike is a Tweet containing footage of distressed migrants arriving on Lesbos, with members of the press in the background. This content was then presented as evidence that 'globalists' are deliberately orchestrating

Figure 6 Volume of content produced by the English language network in 2020



footage with the aim of presenting migrants in a sympathetic light, reinforcing conspiratorial narratives observed elsewhere in this network.

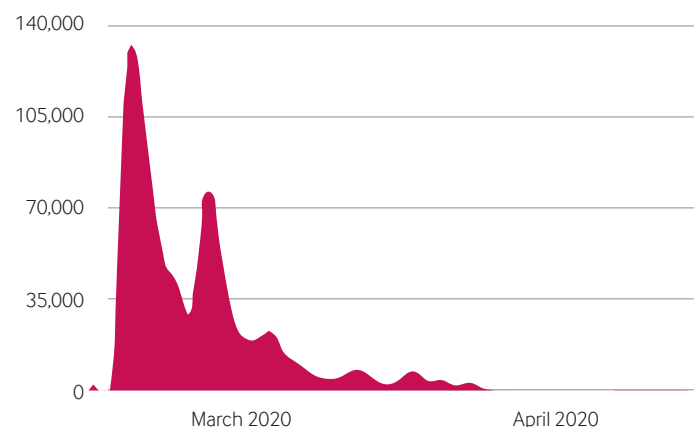
Additionally, four out of the top ten most widely shared posts in this spike were retweets of posts by Greek political figures. Three of these posts were retweets of posts by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announcing a policy of increased deterrence at the Greek border and a halt on new asylum applications. The posts from Mitsotakis were not overtly hateful and did not contain any disinformation, but do highlight how political activity and rhetoric which is 'strong' on refugees and migrants has broader support within anti-migrant networks.

The other post was from Deputy Minister to the Prime Minister and Government Spokesperson Stelios Petsas, which claimed that reports of a fatality on the Greek-Turkish border on 2 March was Turkish disinformation. Additionally, after the spike on 2 March, our communities widely shared another post containing commentary from Petsas labelling as Turkish 'fake news' claims that an additional death on 4 March was related to Greek activity. Independent analysis from Forensic Architecture confirmed the death of Muhammad al-Arab on 2 March, and the team concluded that their analysis 'supports the testimony of several witnesses who claim that al-Arab was shot by [a] group of Greek soldiers'.⁵⁰ Similarly, additional analysis from Forensic Architecture, Lighthouse Reports and Bellingcat pushes back against Petsas' claim around

the death of Muhammad Gulzar on 4 March, concluding that their analysis shows that 'it is highly probably that the shots that killed Gulzar ... were fired from the Greek side of the border'.⁵¹ In this instance, we can see that active efforts by the Greek government to obfuscate the truth around migrant deaths resonated strongly with anti-migrant communities internationally, helping to evidence the impact that state-driven disinformation efforts can have on hostile ecosystems online.

More broadly, this spike corresponds with the hashtag campaign #IStandWithGreece, which was linked to 563,599 tweets in the first week of March. This campaign closely crossed over with use of #GreeceUnderAttack and #Greece_Under_Attack, both of which focused more specifically on the idea that the renewed surge of migrants represented an 'invasion' and was a deliberate attack by Turkey. Common topics of conversation in this wider campaign included the idea that individuals travelling to Greece were 'fake' refugees; that sympathetic coverage of migrants was disinformation or fake news; that refugees were linked to plots designed to deliberately subvert and denigrate Europe (either orchestrated by Turkey, or by anti-European 'elites'); and more broadly that the refugee crisis constituted an invasion of Europe by 'fighting-age males'.

Figure 7 Volume of #IStandWithGreece on Twitter, 27 Feb 2020 – 12 April 2020



Key Trends in Anti-Refugee Disinformation and Hate

By comparing anti-refugee activity in 2020 across the different networks identified above, several key trends come to light which highlight unifying and consistent narratives present across our networks, as well as patterns in mobilisation across borders.

The transnational nature of anti-refugee mobilisation

Our network analysis demonstrates the wide range of communities globally for whom the refugee crisis has acted as a catalyst. However, beyond the activation of a wide range of disparate actors globally, our analysis also highlights how the refugee crisis has helped galvanise transnational coordination on disinformation efforts. The Moria fires act as an important case study for this dynamic. Greek far-right networks were galvanised by the presence of German anti-refugee activist Rebecca Sommer on Lesbos, whose interview for a German magazine – in which she claimed NGOs and refugees were smuggling guns and drugs into Greece – went viral and was reproduced by a number of mainstream and fringe outlets in Greece. Here, Sommer was a visible node in a transnational web of anti-migrant social media accounts and media outlets, in which several key anti-migrant narratives emerged – the most common of which was the equation of the refugees accommodated there, or even all refugees, with arsonists.

It becomes clear that not only is migration a topic of shared concern among European far-right, racist and xenophobic users and publications, and even political parties, but that anti-migrant discourse forms a clear connective tissue directly linking nativist, populist and far-right publications, politicians, actors and movements online across Europe.

The interplay between political actors and anti-migrant disinformation

Moria fires narratives percolated throughout German language spaces, driven in a large part by the AfD, which critically used them to drive anti-refugee sentiment in Germany. This was most notable through repeated claims that crimes would be rewarded if refugees were brought from the Greek islands to Germany. David Bendels, editor-in-chief of the AfD-related outlet Deutschland-Kurier wrote: 'Anyone who, as an alleged 'protection-seeker', deliberately burns down his accommodation, endangers human lives and prevents the fire department from

extinguishing the fire with violence, will receive a turbo-ticket to the social paradise of Germany as a reward'.⁵² Alice Weidel, chairwoman of the AfD, wrote on Facebook: 'It is not reasonable for German citizens and the German solidarity community to have to take in and care for people who have extorted access to our country by force and breaking the law...the refugees should stay in Greece. EU member Greece is quite capable of accommodating 13,000 migrants itself'.⁵³

Beyond the AfD in Germany, we noted that since the Evros crisis there have been increasing attempts by elements within the Greek government itself to promote anti-refugee narratives which gained traction within the networks we analysed. This included comments by Deputy Minister to the Prime Minister Stelios Petsas calling reports around violence against refugees on the Evros border 'fake news', which were picked up by the English language networks analysed here, as well as commentary which helped suggest that the refugee camps in Lesbos and Chios are hotbeds of Islamist and Turkish spies. Notably, the Real News story outlined above is accompanied by an interview with the minister for migration and asylum, commenting on the issue. Carefully worded, Mitarakis' comments did not address the full conspiracy theory which emerged at this time (that Turkey was deliberately sending jihadists to Greece). However, this nevertheless highlights the role which government actors can have in fanning the flames of broader disinformation campaigns.

Additionally, our network analysis demonstrates not only how comments by politicians gain traction amongst anti-refugee communities online, but also that supporters of political parties such as the AfD and New Democracy sit in the same online ecosystems as far-right extremists. Crucially, this interplay between political actors and more fringe communities represents an avenue for the mainstreaming, amplification and legitimisation of anti-refugee hatred across Europe.

Anti-NGO narratives

We identified consistent disinformation targeting NGOs amongst the most widely shared posts promoted by our Greek, German and English language networks. This included pervasive and well-established conspiracy theories which paint international NGOs as actively orchestrating the refugee crisis with the aim of degrading the ethnic and cultural makeup of Europe.

Discussion was both broad, focusing on NGOs at large, as well as specific, targeting certain organisations such as Seawatch and individuals deemed to be connected to this broader conspiracy such as George Soros. In our English language network, the connectivity between anti-refugee communities and NGOs working in Greece helped shine a light on the online targeting of these organisations. The case of Rebecca Sommer highlights how the activity of fringe and relatively minor activists is able to galvanise widespread discussion of anti-NGO conspiracy theories, such as those targeting Seawatch in Greece. Given the pervasive and widespread hostility towards NGOs across anti-refugee communities online, the international focus on these groups, and the fact that media outlets and politicians at times fan this hostility, it becomes apparent how new conspiracy theories targeting these organisations can take hold with relative ease.

Anti-migrant discourse co-opted into broader geopolitical concerns and tensions

Our research revealed that the anti-refugee space has expanded to incorporate and galvanise broader geopolitical narratives. As demonstrated by our network analysis, the Moria fires became a key driver of anti-migrant discourse, connecting a transnational network of anti-migrant actors across Europe. However, most immediately in Greece, Moria fires narratives quickly incorporated wider geopolitical issues. On Greek social media, a key narrative that emerged was that Turkish provocateurs were responsible for the fires. This narrative eventually gained traction in mainstream media outlets. The claims made were eventually repeated by Greek Deputy Prime Minister Adonis Georgiadis, though they were later debunked by Minister of Citizen Protection Michalis Chrisochoidis. Many of the key accounts pushing anti-migrant content also displayed strong anti-Turkish sympathies.

An important sub-narrative here is anti-Turkish discussion in Greece that is both Islamophobic but also strongly nationalistic. Beyond localised narratives of Turks being responsible for the Moria fires, several anti-Turkish themes include the crisis being part of a deliberate Turkish strategy, and the crisis posing a civilisational threat with Turkey behind the threat.

In addition to Greek-Turkish relations, we also observed how anti-refugee sentiment is incorporated into broader concern around Islamist terrorism, with refugee flows presented as the infiltration of Europe by jihadists, drawing on broader societal concerns around the risk posed by terrorism. In particular, refugees are presented as 'invaders', 'soldiers' and 'fighting-age males'. This helps portray the refugee crisis as an existential threat to European civilisation.

Here we saw the fusion of discussion around the refugee crisis with that around terrorist attacks, with European institutions being held responsible for attacks, as the European Union is blamed for the refugee crisis. The Austrian 'alternative medium' *Wochenblick* linked the refugees of Moria to the November 2020 Vienna terrorist attack, although the perpetrator was born and raised in Vienna and was not a refugee.⁵⁴ The article was shared on Telegram by organisers of the PEGIDA demonstrations, among others, and on Facebook by an AfD page and the FPÖ politician Roman Haider.

Conclusion

The refugee crisis is a pivotal issue across Europe. Our network analysis demonstrates how it has acted as a magnet attracting a range of extremist, xenophobic, nativist and populist actors. Events such as the Evros border crisis and the fires in the Moria refugee camps acted as catalysts, activating these networks and empowering large spikes in anti-refugee hatred and disinformation.

Crucially, our network-based analysis highlights how this activity does not sit within isolated extremist echo chambers. Examining the online communities which have formed around anti-refugee activity, we can see how the refugee crisis acts as a bridge connecting far-right extremists with political actors. In a number of instances, these political actors actively promote disinformation around the refugee crisis and appeal to tropes which are popular amongst far-right extremists. In the case of Greece, this activity is further helped by amplification in the press. This not only helps to legitimise extremist ideology, but also empowers the online activism of anti-refugee groups.

Importantly, we can see how this activity also impacts on a wider set of narratives. Anti-refugee activity doesn't just focus on flows of people coming to Europe but is intimately linked to broader concerns around terrorism and cultural identity. In the Greek context, we observed how anti-Turkish sentiment was effectively wrapped up in anti-refugee conspiracy theories, allowing this messaging to fill a dual purpose for nationalist actors.

Ultimately, this study is relatively small and does not claim to provide a comprehensive overview of all European anti-refugee activity. However, the networks identified do provide a microcosm through which to observe a wide range of harmful dynamics arising out of the refugee crisis, including the use of disinformation by elected officials and the mainstreaming of extremist ideology. These dynamics are becoming increasingly entrenched and if left unchecked will provide avenues for wholesale attacks on NGOs working with refugees and displaced peoples, as well as the migration policy sector at large.

Effective response to this problem will require long-term investment into analytical infrastructure. This will allow the continuous identification, exposure, disruption and mitigation of coordinated influence campaigns designed to undermine progress on migration policy and action. This work should not only expose in real time – and help to undermine – state and non-state actor malign information operations, but also engage key stakeholders, from frontline and intermediary organisations to policy constituencies and the media, enabling improved mitigation and responsiveness to these threats and also allowing longer-term proactive strategies to be crafted. This infrastructure will enable governments, policymakers and stakeholders combating anti-refugee disinformation and hatred to maximise the effectiveness of responses to a problem that will prove to be – along with climate change – an existential threat to the safety and security of the EU and its Member States over the coming decade and beyond.

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