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ALTERNATIVE FOR GERMANY AND FAR-RIGHT NETWORKS ON TELEGRAM AND FACEBOOK



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In April 2020 it was announced on the Alternative for Germany's (AfD) Facebook page that the party had joined Telegram with two channels, one for its members magazine *AfD Kompakt* and one for its national board (*Bundesvorstand*).¹ The adoption of Telegram happened alongside a large migration of far-right activists and organisations, in Germany and elsewhere, that had begun and accelerated over the previous two years.

This report examines AfD's success in establishing itself on Telegram. It evaluates how much engagement the party receives from a large sample of public German far-right channels and groups on the platform and, alongside this, analyse how radical right actors fit into the more extreme far-right networks that make up the majority of the far-right groups on Telegram.

It finds that AfD has largely been unsuccessful in establishing itself on Telegram but it is supported to a larger degree than any other party represented in the German Bundestag. There are also outliers in AfD's effort. Certain channels run by individual AfD representatives as well as its youth wing are more successful. The key findings are:

- AfD's adoption of Telegram should be seen as an expansion in order to reach new audiences rather than a migration.
- The party remains successful and its activity largely unencumbered on Facebook.
- Those AfD Telegram channels that repeat the modus operandi of the wider German far right on the platform, are more successful at pushing content.
- Content mentioning AfD is of a disproportionate amount in relation to the popular support for the party on both Facebook and Telegram.
- AfD is more well regarded than other parties in the Bundestag but it has not managed to meaningfully insert itself in conversations among the far right on the platform.

Social media is an important tool in the toolbox of the far right. Both the radical right, which AfD belongs to, and the extreme right have successfully made use of social media in similar ways to other political movements. It has used social media to reach new audiences, bypass the

editorial process of traditional media and lowered the effort to engage in an otherwise often stigmatised movement. Furthermore, the social media landscape is always changing. To examine different actors' moves between platforms and how they are used is therefore always relevant.



Social media allows for activists and supporters to more easily consume material from ideologically disparate groups and move between them with less friction. In this way it opens up a radicalisation pathway from less extreme to more radical groups. AfD's move to Telegram therefore has the potential to bring its supporters from Facebook and other places where it advertised its Telegram channels, into contact with more extreme elements of the far right.



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Founded in February 2013, AfD's most important issue at the time was heavy criticism of the Euro bailout policy in the wake of the financial crisis. However, in recent years it has firmly transitioned into the radical right and is deeply linked to the broad spectrum of reactionary, racist and nationalist groups in Germany. The party received 12.6% of the popular vote in the 2017 federal election.⁶

Primarily, through its anti-immigration and anti-Muslim positions AfD has established itself as part of a nativist mass movement that has emerged in Germany. The party's 2019 manifesto confirms their position as one of the most explicit anti-Muslim parties in

Europe. It argues that Islam is incompatible with Europe and states that the AfD will "defend" Europe from it. The party has stated it wants to ban foreign funding of mosques, ban the burka and the call to prayer from mosques.

It has also directly supported projects by more extreme elements of the far right. It has joined campaigns against the accommodation of refugees in Saxony and Berlin alongside the nazi NPD. While the AfD officially decided not to collaborate with groups like the Identitarian movement, several of its activists do so, especially those from the party's youth wing.

AfD's adoption of Telegram is not directly comparable to other parts of the far right, which has in many cases been forced to migrate to Telegram after being banned or, in their view, too harshly moderated on more mainstream platforms.² However, AfD was already successful on Facebook. Previous research has shown that AfD relies on mainstream social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube more than any other party in Germany and has been remarkably successful in building a large follower base and stimulating engagement with its content. In a study from 2019, AfD was shown to be more active than all other parties in the German Bundestag and most importantly, sparked more engagement.³

When asked about its own success an AfD spokesman told *Der Spiegel* in April 2019 that people on social networks “want things that are less mainstream than what the other media always publish” and that the party’s outlets produced “unedited material” and aimed to be the “voice of the people”.⁴ While AfD started as a single-question anti-EU party, it is now primarily a populist radical right party focusing on issues of immigration and delves into climate change denial.⁵ It also often criticises political correctness and many of its stories on Facebook highlights occurrences of violent crimes. In other words, it relies on emotive content that works well on social media channels.

TELEGRAM



According to the company itself Telegram had 500 million active users in January 2021.⁷ The app combines direct messaging features with mass broadcasting features to make it into a competitor, or replacement, to social platforms like Facebook or Twitter. Over the last few years, Telegram has become increasingly popular among the far right and, during the pandemic, also among conspiracy theory movements. It is the platform's extremely limited content moderation practices that has primarily attracted these groups after waves of bans and moderation of their content has made it increasingly difficult to do outreach on mainstream platforms. Telegram only moderates the most extreme content, essentially limited to child abuse material and explicit threats of violence, but in practice even this sort of content is often left in place. Thanks to this even terror advocating far-right groups have made the platform their home and used it for outreach, recruitment and internal organising.

Telegram is not an exclusively far-right platform. With its 500 million users making it a larger platform than Twitter, Telegram is therefore in many ways a mainstream platform. However, Telegram is used by many solely as a messaging app rather than a social media platform to follow channels and engage in large groups. This is evident from the average numbers of followers of these channels, most of which have less than 10,000 followers. Its relative niche position as a social platform alongside the adoption by the far right is what warrants a deeper look into the crossover between AfD and the wider far right on the platform.

OVERVIEW

This report focuses on the presence of conversations about AfD and organic reach of their own messaging on Facebook and Telegram. Telegram has become increasingly popular among the far right in Germany and internationally, and this report examines AfD's success in establishing itself on the platform. It aims to evaluate how much engagement the party receives from a sample of 230 public German far-right channels and groups on the platform and conversely attempts to analyse how radical right actors such as the AfD fit into the more extreme far-right networks that make up the majority of the far-right groups on Telegram. The report looks at data from the period ranging from 1 May to and including 30 June 2021.

Previous research has found that AfD has been successful on Facebook, more successful than other German parties according to most metrics. This has been attributed to the emotive messaging often focusing on current events and immigration as well as the sheer amount of

content AfD outlets produce on Facebook. We also find that AfD produced more posts than the largest party CDU and that engagement with its content was significantly higher.

AfD employs a multifaceted, although not unique strategy, on Facebook. Like many other parties it runs an official national page and individual pages for regional branches. Additionally individual representatives run their own pages promoting their own candidacy and engage with their local voters. It also runs pages for its member magazine; *AfD Kompakt* and its youth organisation; *Junge Alternative für Deutschland*. Besides these, there are also an unofficial network of pages and groups supporting AfD and frequently spread the party's content and provide forum for discussion.

Telegram is a chat application and competes with apps such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. However, it also has features that function as alternatives to social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter. It allows one-way "channels" that allow an unlimited number of followers



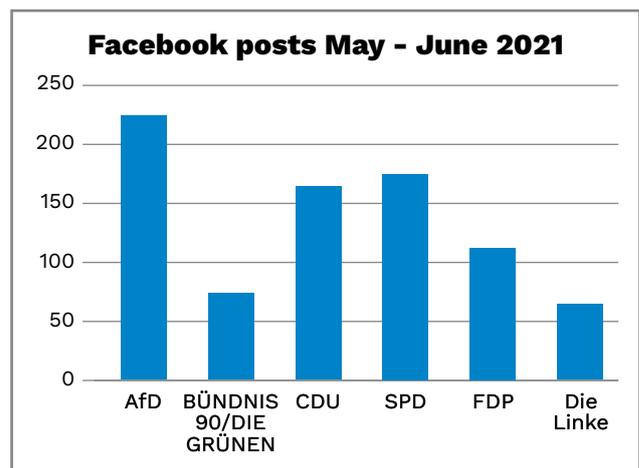
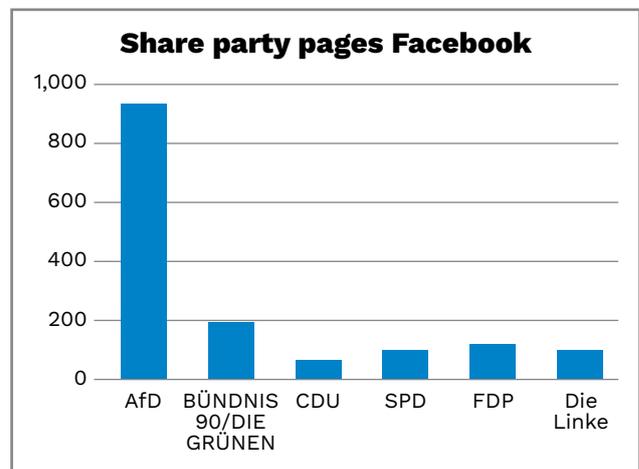
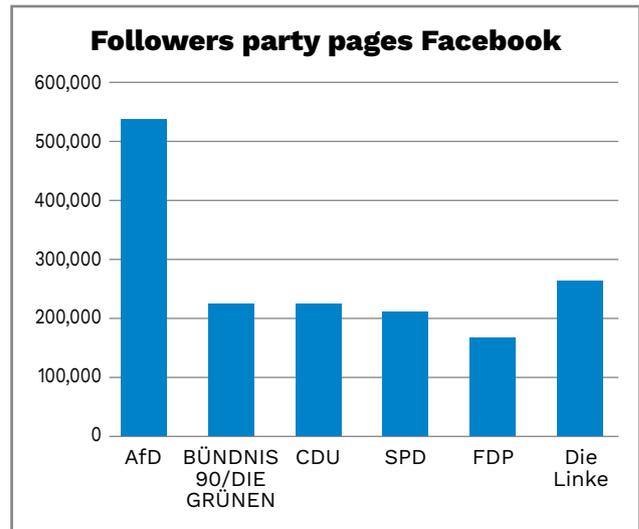
which means the app functions similar to that of Twitter or Instagram. Large, open access, chat groups function more like Facebook groups.

Combined with the platform’s loose moderation practices these features have made it an attractive replacement for many of the mainstream social media platforms for the far right, for whom it has become a central communications platform in Germany and elsewhere. Since the most extreme elements of the far right are also those that are most affected by moderation on mainstream platforms, it is also these segments that first made their way to Telegram. However, groups that do not openly endorse violence have increasingly made use of the platform as well, including conspiracy theory groups and anti-lockdown movements that have sprung up recently.⁸

While AfD has had some issues with moderation on Facebook, this was not portrayed as the primary reason for beginning to use Telegram. As this report shows, AfD remains successful on Facebook. The use of Telegram for AfD should therefore be seen as a way to broaden its reach and potentially to engage with new voter segments rather than a transition to alternative social media platforms for the sake of avoiding moderation. **In other words, unlike many parts of the far right, this was a case of broadening its social media presence rather than a migration.**

For this report we captured messages from 230 German language Telegram channels and groups for the time period from 1 May to the end of 30 June 2021. 36 of these channels were affiliated with the AfD, the remaining 194 were not associated with any party but belonged to individual activists or activist groups. In total the data set contains 572,507 messages from Telegram.

Facebook’s own social media listening tool Crowdtangle⁹ was used to gather data on the platform. The tool is directly affiliated with Facebook and is provided to researchers and journalists. Crowdtangle data includes all posts from Facebook that are made by a public page or public group that has more than 110,000 likes. We verified that all official party pages were included in the dataset. All numbers relating to Facebook activity were also limited to the time period of 1 May to the end of 30 June 2021.



SHARES OF AFD'S CONTENT

SHARES OF AFD'S CONTENT ON FACEBOOK

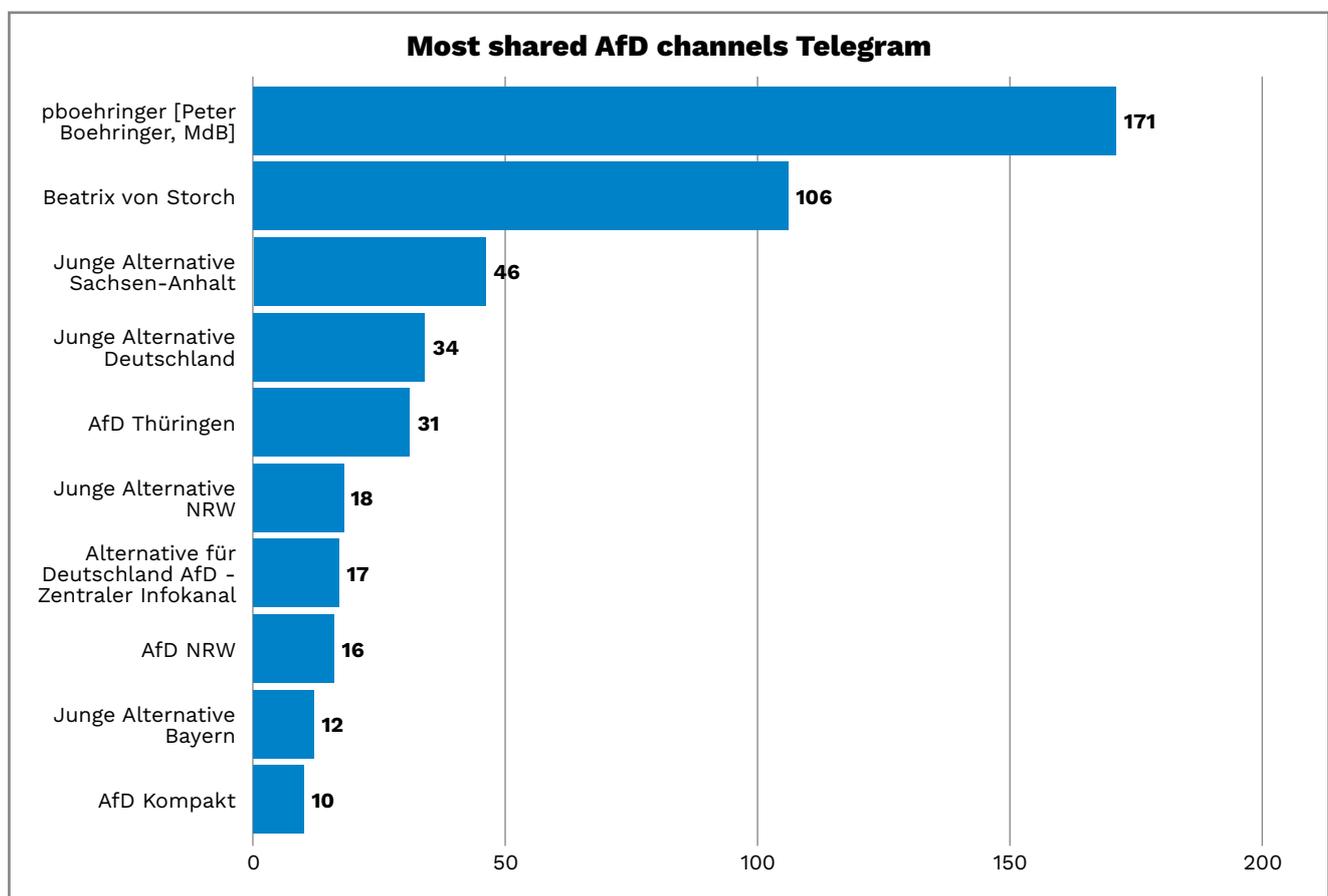
AfD's presence on Facebook is significant. Its official page has 538,271 followers as of July 1 2021, compared to ruling party CDU's 225,763. No other part in the Bundestag matches this number. Importantly AfD's posts are shared (reposted on a users own profile page, optionally with a comment) on average 931 times, 14.7 times more than CDU and 4.9 times more than Die Grünen which posts are the second most shared. Importantly, AfD polls relatively low, currently at 10% (1 July 2021) compared to CDU's 29%.¹⁰ In other words, the party has an outsized reach on social media compared to its popular support. All other parties show similar numbers to CDU and all perform worse than AfD on the platform.

Research by Trevor Davis from George Washington University from 2019 explained AfD's success

through the large number of posts the party produces, the way it often latches on to current news stories and how its messaging is often emotional, playing off of anxieties and fear related to crime and immigration¹¹. A brief analysis shows it still stands out in terms of the amount of content it produces compared to other parties in Germany. Its official Facebook page produced more content than any other party, which along with its large number of interactions per post leads to a significantly large reach on Facebook.

SHARES OF AFD'S CONTENT ON TELEGRAM

AfD runs multiple Telegram channels, most of these representing a regional party or a representative but the party's parliamentary group and its member magazine as well as the Junge Alternative also have channels on the platform



which are among the biggest associated with the AfD. Importantly, several party representatives also run their own channels.

The size of the audience on Telegram is much more limited than on Facebook and direct comparisons between the platforms in terms of interactions is not useful. This analysis instead looks at a specific far-right network of channels and groups and evaluates AfD's presence in those compared to the spread of content from other far-right channels.

AfD's largest Telegram channel "AfD - Im Brennpunkt", which is associated with its members magazine, has 17,600 followers. As expected, significantly lower than on Facebook and other mainstream platforms but still significant when compared to many other far-right channels on Telegram.

Individual AfD politicians also run their own channels, some of which have a relatively large number of followers. AfD parliament member Peter Boehringer's channel is the largest individual channel with 7,800 followers. Boehringer has been a member of AfD since 2015 and of the Bundestag since 2017 and explicitly denies the scientific consensus on climate change.¹² He has also expressed islamophobia and support for anti-Muslim far-right activists on multiple occasions.¹³ Junge Alternative has a small number of followers, just 1,270, making it a relatively small channel in far-right Telegram networks.

Similarly to Facebook, a user on Telegram can forward a message from an open channel into a group or channels they manage. This is one of the primary content discovery methods on Telegram as it prominently shows and links to the original post. It is a common way to initiate a discussion as well as to show support but also to criticise content from another author. It should not be taken as a direct endorsement of a post but spread of AfD's content indicates success in terms of influencing the conversation on the platforms outside of their immediate followers. The functionality is therefore Telegram's closest analogy to that of a "share" on Facebook.

For the full months of May and June 2021, the 36 AfD associated channels, including those of the youth wing, identified in this study were shared in total 491 times. In all of the German language far-right telegram channels, excluding AfD associated channels, 96,095 total shares were made during the same period. Meaning that AfD associated channels constituted 0.05% of all shared content. Among all far-right channels and chats, Attila Hildmann's channel which produce antisemitic and conspiracy theorist content was the most forwarded with a total of 5,873 shares in total. Hildman is a vegan chef that has recently undergone a rapid radicalisation into the extreme right. He is now an ardent antisemite and supporter of national socialism.¹⁴

Channel	Followers
AfD - Im Brennpunkt	17645
pboehringer [Peter Boehringer, MdB]	7899
AfD - Bundesvorstand	4370
AfD Kompakt	4284
Alice Weidel	4161
Beatrix von Storch	4022
Alternative für Deutschland AfD - Zentraler Infokanal	3736
Junge Alternative Deutschland	1266
Marie-Thérèse Kaiser	1165
AfD-Fraktion NRW	949

Among the most shared channels on German far-right Telegram we find channels that are both supportive and critical of AfD. Attila Holdman's channel frequently shares content virulently antisemitic and anti-AfD content recently calling it a "judenpartei". Other channels rarely mention the AfD such as the third most shared QAnon channel "Q7 4 YOU". QAnon is originally an american conspiracy theory alleging the existence of an international cabal that fights against the "deep state" and child exploitation by elites. Among the explicitly AfD supportive and frequently shared channels we find the anti-EU channel "Die Zerstörung der EU" (The destruction of the EU).

Notably, even English language far-right channels are more frequently forwarded than AfD associated channels in the dataset. British antisemite Mark Collett and anti-Muslim activist Stephen Yaxley Lennon's (aka Tommy Robinson) channels are shared 115 and 100 times respectively, beating all AfD channel's except for that of Peter Boehringer.

Boehringer has been a member of the Bundestag since 2017 for AfD, runs a blog and relatively large Telegram channel with 7800 members as of June 2021. Boehringer has been critical of the Covid-19 vaccines and restrictions relating to the pandemic and these are views that he shares with many of the far-right channels in the dataset. Boehringer's content was shared 171 times for the months of May and June, more than other AfD related channels but a small amount relative to general far-right channels. Deputy leader of the AfD Beatrix von Storch runs the second most successful Telegram page associated with the AfD. Her channel was forwarded 89 times in the same period.

The channels belonging to the youth wing of the AfD, Junge Alternative, are also shared more frequently than AfD itself, outperforming both



regional and national channels associated with the party. This is despite it being a relatively small channel. A likely reason for this is that Junge Alternative makes use of the platform in a way more similar to other organisations using the platform. Their accounts, which includes channels for regional branches, posts content relating to their activism and activities alongside propaganda and political statements. Their accounts are also more personal, frequently posting pictures of activists. Junge Alternative also has ties to Generation Identity, an identitarian youth organisation who promote the racist idea of ethnic-separatism which they call ‘ethnopluralism’. Generation Identity, which is banned in France, is well established on Telegram and produces similar content to Junge Alternative.¹⁵

In conclusion, those AfD Telegram channels that repeat the modus operandi of the wider German far right on the platform, are more successful at pushing content.

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT AfD

Direct shares of content produced by AfD associated accounts is just one measure of impact on a social media platform. It does not take into account conversations taking place about the party, its representatives, its activities and its ideas. Social media platforms are a form of public discussion forums where anyone can comment on a party in both positive and critical ways. In this section we look closer at the amount of conversation that takes place in public Facebook groups and in Telegram channels and groups relating to parties in the Bundestag, with a special emphasis on the AfD.

During the period from 1 May until 30 June 2021 our dataset based on messages from the identified far-right channels contains in total 572,507 messages. Many of these are however image or video messages and do not contain any text. Filtering out these messages we are left with

489,001 messages containing any writing. In this dataset we counted messages mentioning AfD as well as all other parties in the German Bundestag in order to assess and compare the amount of conversation taking place about each party. On Facebook we counted mentions of the parties in German language public groups.

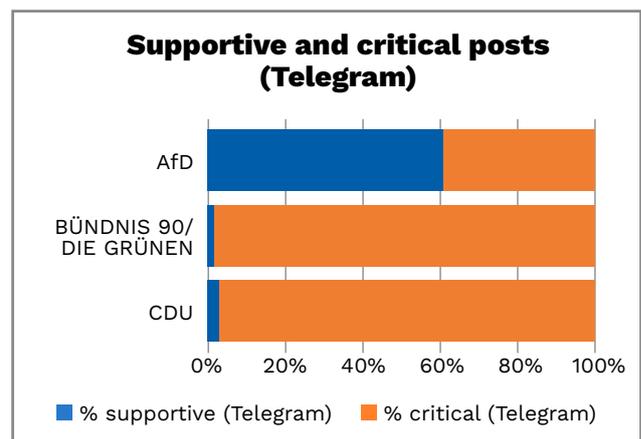
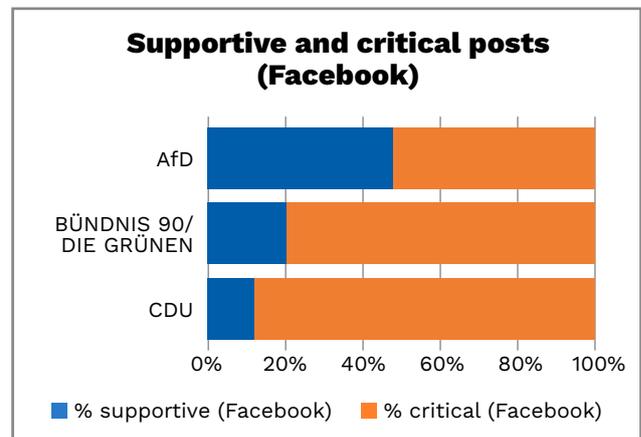
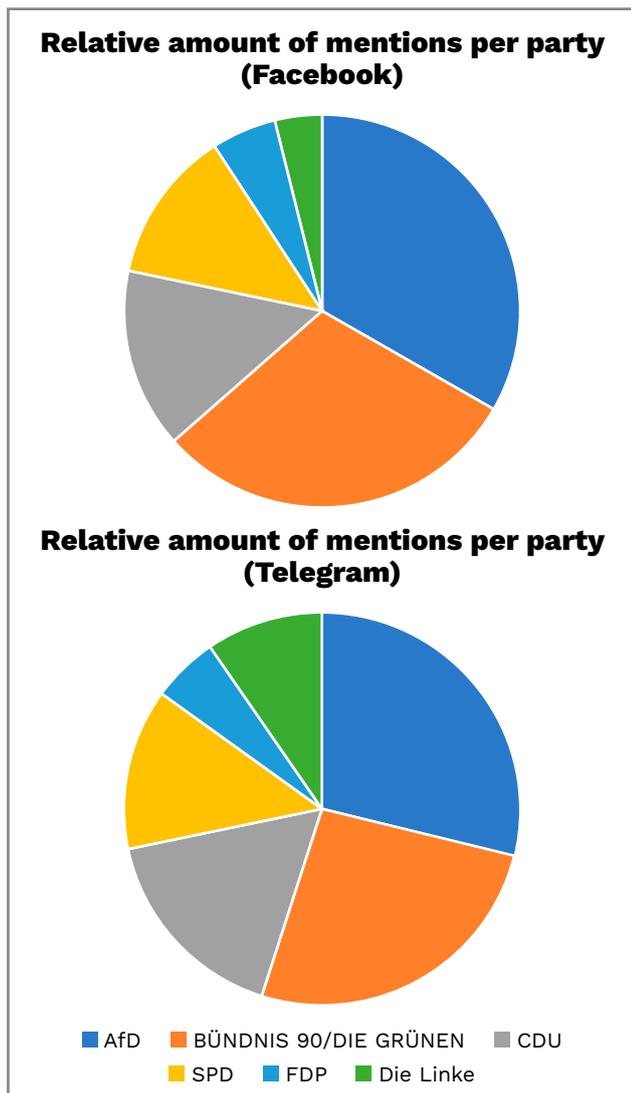
In line with their outsized interactions and activity on Facebook shown in the previous section, **content mentioning AfD is of a disproportionate amount in relation to the popular support for the party.** The pattern is similar on both Facebook and Telegram where AfD is the most mentioned of all parties represented in the Bundestag. 28.8% of all messages in our sample of far-right Telegram messages mentioning a party, mentions AfD. In public, German Facebook groups that number is 33.4%.

Not far behind in terms of mentions on both Facebook and Telegram are Die Grünen and then CDU. During May 2021, Die Grünen and CDU briefly polled at almost the same level around 25% but in late May CDU overtook Die Grünen and ended

June with approximately 29% support.¹⁶ Die Grünen’s popular support therefore approximately matched the amount of conversations about them whereas the conversations about AfD on Telegram were approximately 2.8 times higher than its popular support.

Raw amounts of conversation about parties on different platforms is only part of a larger picture. It does not reveal if users on these platforms are supportive or critical of the parties. It also brings about new questions, especially important in this case is to understand the nature of the large amount of conversation about Die Grünen in far-right Telegram chats. Considering that this is one of the parties that most clearly differ from the overarching ideology of these channels which are often denying climate change and opposed progressive values. Specific policies proposed by Die Grünen, such as calls for increased protection for LGBT+ asylum seekers, are especially incompatible with far-right world views.

In order to assess the sentiment towards the three largest parties on the two platforms we took a random sample of 500 messages per party and manually labeled them as supportive, critical or neutral. We chose to only use posts and messages relating to CDU, AfD and Die Grünen as these were significantly larger and the only parties where we have a large enough sample of messages on Telegram.



The results reveal significant differences between the parties and, to a lesser degree, between the platforms. A majority of Telegram messages in our sample mentioning AfD are supportive of the party. Excluding neutral messages, 61% of the sample expressed a positive view of the party. These messages often expressed that AfD was the party the user in question would vote for or that it was the only legitimate opposition party in the Bundestag. This is in line with the party's populist messaging. Users were also supportive of the party's policies, often pertaining to immigration or environmental protection.

This is in stark difference to CDU and Die Grünen which are near universally derided in the far-right networks studied in this report. Less than 3% of the posts in the sample were supportive of Die Grünen or CDU. Messages critical of Die Grünen overall focused on its ideological leaning and was often described as "socialist" or "marxists" and its supposedly contradictory or misguided environmental policy.

Much criticism was also levelled against Die Grünen's co-leader Annalena Baerbock specifically. Baerbock, who has been co-leader since 2018, was at the centre of multiple controversies during May and June 2021 when we sampled the data. This is likely part of the explanation in the large amount of conversations pertaining to the party in our sample.

In May, media outlets reported that Baerbock had not properly declared her income over the last three years, 2018 - 2020. She had belatedly reported an additional 25,500 euros in income.¹⁷ This is the topic of many messages critical of Baerbock, some call her corrupt and others make fun of her supposed inability to count. "Baerbock would probably be overwhelmed with a simple shopping list with two parts", writes one user.

Later in June it was then reported that she had exaggerated her role in the German Marshall Fund and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and she was simultaneously accused of plagiarism in a newly released book.^{18,19}

However, ruling party CDU did not experience similar controversies during the time period analysed and was criticised to a similar degree. CDU is on both Facebook and Telegram accused of corruption and being too left leaning in a similar manner to Die Grünen.

Lastly, a large part of the content pertaining to AfD on Telegram is also critical of it. While AfD is sometimes lauded as the only "real opposition" against established parties, much of the criticism is from those who directly disagree with this view and see it as part of the establishment and not radical enough. "AFD is sham opposition, no more and no less", writes one user on Telegram. This form of criticism is typical of far-right activists discussing less radical parts of the movement



and is common on Telegram which, as previously noted, has attracted some of the most extreme elements of the far right. Evidence of this is also seen in the antisemitic rhetoric used in some of this criticism. In fascist Telegram channels the party is commonly called "Alternative für Israel". One user writes that "The "right" are sheep now, increasingly run by the Zionist party AfD" and another "THE AfD IS A ZIONIST JEWISH PARTY. IT IS A CONTROLLED OPPOSITION FOR NAIVE GERMAN GOYIM".

THE RADICAL RIGHT AND TELEGRAM

The overall picture of AfD on Telegram is not a successful one. **The party is more well regarded than other parties in the Bundestag but it has not managed to meaningfully insert itself in conversations among the far right on the platform.** Its content is shared to a relatively low degree and while a majority of posts mentioning AfD are supportive, it is discussed more than its content is being shared.

There are likely several reasons for this. The first possible explanation is found in the AfD's level of radicalism. The AfD is a radical right political party whereas Telegram is more populated to a large degree with more extreme activists and groups. The higher level of radicalism is seen in the large amount of antisemitic and explicitly racist content that is found on Telegram and in the content that we have analysed for this report.

AfD is part of the radical right and does not reject democracy as a system and while representatives of the party have expressed themselves in more extreme ways, this is not the party line. Messages calling AfD “controlled opposition” and “Jewish” are clear signs that some on the platform find the AfD not radical enough.

Relating to how radical far-right networks on Telegram commonly are, is also their overwhelming distrust towards politics. The far right on Telegram is largely made of extreme actors that do not find a home elsewhere because their views and rhetoric break the rules on mainstream platforms or the law. It is for example awash with Holocaust denial which is illegal in Germany. As some of the most fringe segments on the ideological spectrum, these activists and groups oftentimes mistrust parliamentary politics. Similarly, the conspiracy theorist groups on the platform also hold a mistrust towards elite politics.

This bears out even towards AfD despite the party’s populist message and sometimes overlapping rhetoric with the anti-immigration and anti-lockdown sentiments overwhelmingly common in the Telegram channels analysed for this report. Specific representatives of AfD manage better, especially Boeringer clear anti-lockdown messaging aligns well with these sentiments and he is also one of the most successful AfD politicians on the platform. Even so, Boehringers relative success in gaining an audience on Telegram compared to AfD as a party still compares poorly to that of many other far-right channels.

Finally, the party’s engagement in the platform itself cannot be ignored. The most successful AfD associated accounts are those run by individual representatives and those run by its youth wing. These channels produce more content and more original content than AfD’s own outlets, whereas regional and national channels tend to mainly share the same posts as on Facebook and Twitter and frequently post links to its website and YouTube rather than produce new content. This report has not in-depth compared the sort of content produced by different channels associated with the party and it warrants further research.

When arguments for harsher moderation on mainstream platforms like Facebook are made, some of the most common critique is that the actors in question will simply move on to alternative platforms and continue to be heard there. Possibly with the side effect of the adoption of a more extreme rhetoric because of laxer moderation practices. While more research is needed this report shows that for radical right actors like the AfD, who use divisive and often dangerous rhetoric relating to the ongoing

pandemic and global warming on Facebook, this is not always the case.

AfD’s attempt to establish themselves on Telegram has not been successful and its content is not engaged with to a significant degree, possibly in-part because of the ideological contradictions between it as a radical right party and the extreme right on the platform. Facebook therefore remains one of the AfD’s most important platforms for outreach and engagement with its voters.

When it comes to minimising the impact of the divisive and often racist rhetoric by radical right parties like the AfD, the focus should be put on mainstream social media networks where their reach and engagement continues to be significant.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.facebook.com/alternativefuerde/posts/3148346048529046>
- 2 <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/2020/09/27/telegram-far-right/>
- 3 The Rise of Germany's AfD: A Social Media Analysis [Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334155685_The_Rise_of_Germany%27s_AfD_A_Social_Media_Analysis]
- 4 <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/germany-afd-populists-dominate-on-facebook-a-1264933.html>
- 5 https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/HnH_International-briefing-AfD-EN.pdf
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- 9 <https://www.crowdtangle.com>
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- 18 <https://www.politico.eu/article/german-greens-leader-annalena-baerbock-under-fire-for-resume-inflation/>
- 19 <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/plagiatsvoruerfe-gegen-annalena-baerbock-eine-frage-der-sorgfalt-17415993.html>



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