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To be continued: The pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign Doppelganger in Germany

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ALFRED LANDECKER
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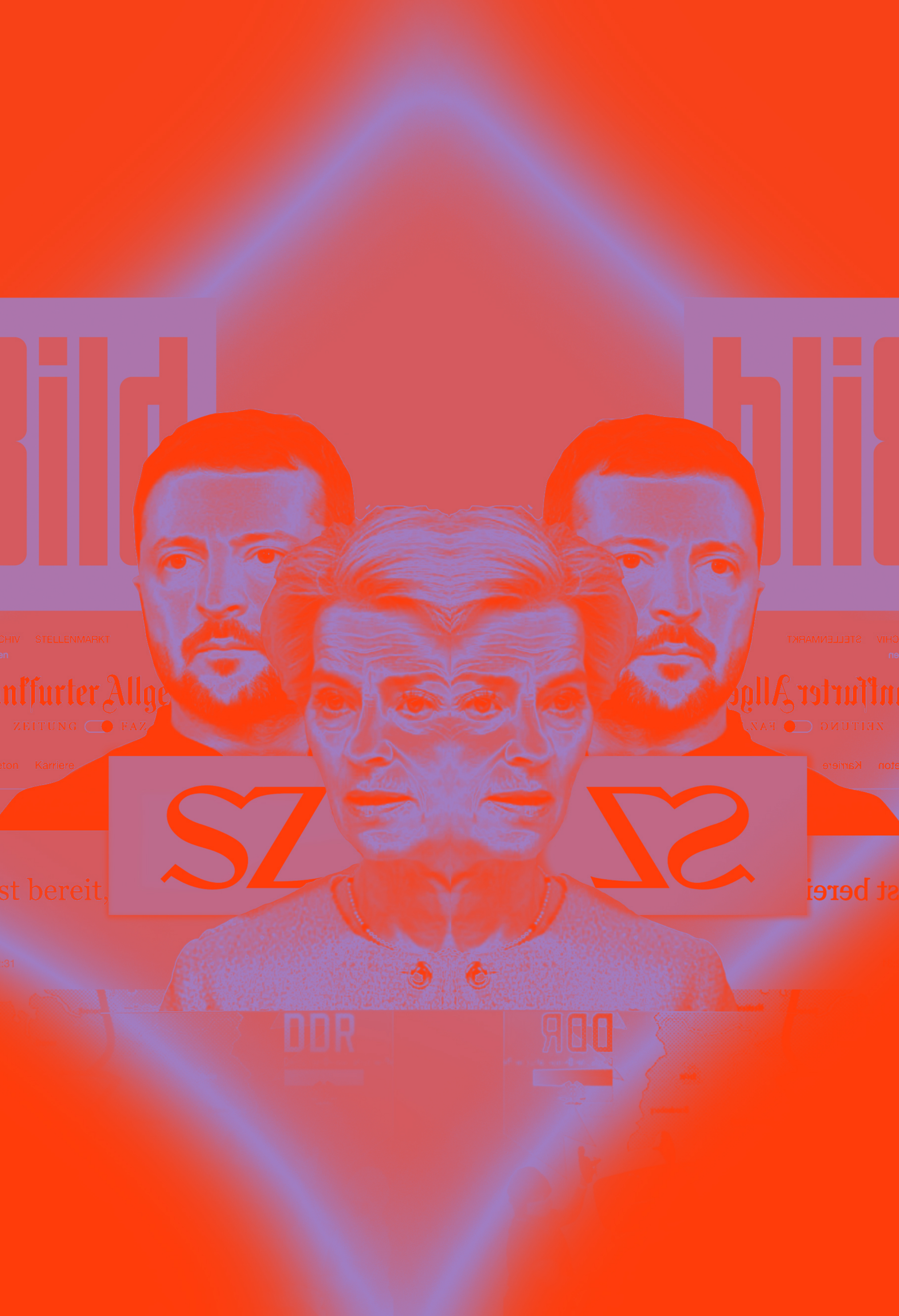
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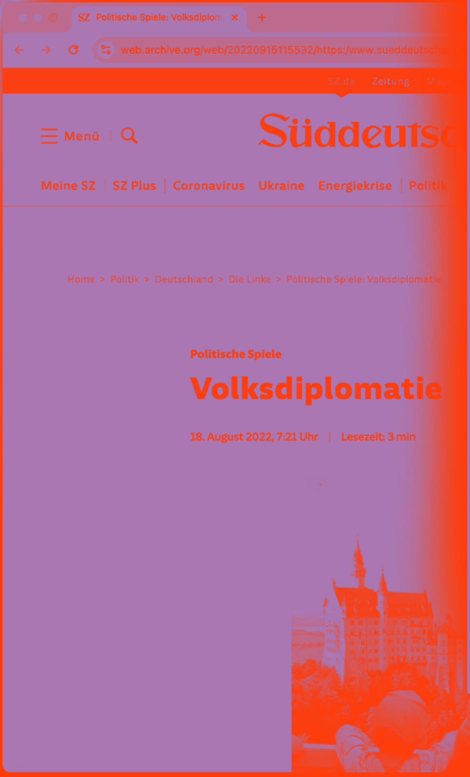
Executive Summary

- The covert influence operation “Doppelganger” has been used since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 to support Russian war aims and manipulate public opinion in Ukraine, the European Union, the United States and other countries. The operation, uncovered in the summer of 2022, is carried out by Russian companies on behalf of the Russian presidential administration and focuses on the online dissemination of pro-Russian and politically polarizing content.
- The Doppelganger Russian disinformation campaign is still active in German-speaking countries in 2024. It continues to publish misleading pro-Russian content via cloned or original digital media portals, with the content primarily distributed over Facebook and X (formerly Twitter).
- The websites present themselves as detailed impersonations of German media brands or as independent news portals with a thematic focus. Pro-Russian articles are then placed within these frames. Technical mechanisms are used to protect and maintain the campaign, and the relevant websites are adapted in response to countermeasures.
- Distribution on Facebook in 2024 was conducted through paid advertisements, whose typical form has already been documented in several cases — including by the platform itself. Nevertheless, misleading political advertisements with pro-Russian content could still be disseminated by simply not labeling them as political advertisements.
- Distribution on X is accomplished through the use of many different accounts which feed the content to users using a specific division of labor. Typically, one group of accounts publishes new posts that are amplified by another group. Although such campaigns have been reported to X and a review procedure has already been opened under the Digital Services Act (DSA), the platform has not reacted with sufficient consistency, meaning that at the time of writing, content of this type remains available on the platform.
- A leak of internal documents from the Social Design Agency (SDA) responsible for Doppelganger provides

an insight into the operation’s objectives for Germany: The approval ratings of German far-right party AfD should rise, while those of the Greens should fall. The campaign aimed at promoting anxiety about the future and a mindset of not wanting to sacrifice "our own prosperity" for "victory over Russia".

- The constants in the campaign's mode of operation provide a target that could be used to detect and contain future activities.
- Efforts must be increased to effectively contain the campaign: Available actions such as employing repeated patterns for detection or platform regulation for containment must be used consistently and in a coordinated manner. State authorities, the affected platforms, and researchers in the field of disinformation all have a role to play.
- In this report, CeMAS shows that the Doppelganger campaign persists despite countermeasures and discusses possible reasons for the continued discrepancy between the actual and target state of containment in digital discourse despite the wide range of available policy options.



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Politische Spiele

Volksdiplomatie

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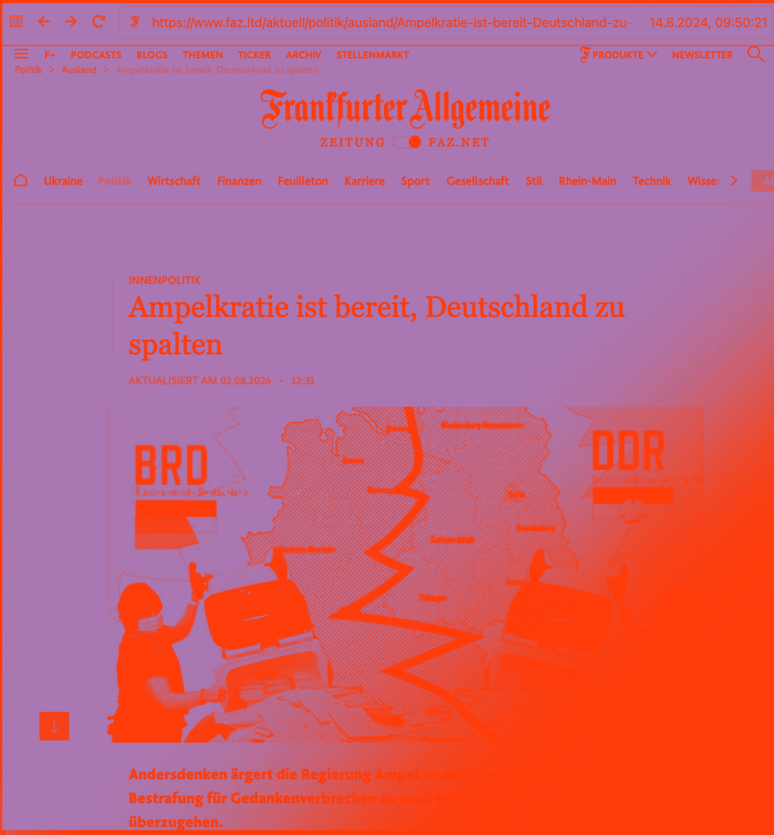

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**Andersdenken ärgert die Regierung Ampel so
Bestrafung für Gedankenverbrechen zu noch
überzugehen.**

7 Introduction

The Doppelganger campaign, first uncovered in 2022, spreads pro-Russian articles from counterfeit or original news sites via networks of inauthentic social media accounts. The Russian disinformation campaign is ongoing and versatile, and its mode of operation has now been well documented. As an illegitimate attempt to influence digital spaces of Western discourse, it is an element of Russian hybrid warfare and poses a risk to German society due to its trust-eroding impulses. This makes it all the more important to contain the operation effectively and efficiently. As the structure and *modus operandi* of the operation have repeatedly been disclosed, there are in fact many potential avenues of approach. Nevertheless, the campaign remains in place in 2024 and addresses pro-Russian content toward an international audience, including Germany.

This CeMAS report summarizes our findings on the past and current form of the pro-Russian Doppelganger campaign in Germany, examines the persistence of the dissemination patterns identified, and highlights various gaps in combating these attempts at illegitimate Russian influence.

8 Doppelganger: The modus operandi observed to date

The so-called “Doppelganger” campaign was publicly uncovered and analyzed by journalists and disinformation researchers in the summer of 2022 (Wienand et al., 2022; Alaphilippe et al., 2022; Aleksejeva et al., 2022; Nimmo & Agranovich, 2022; Institute for Strategic Dialogue [ISD], 2022a). The covert pro-Russian influence operation began as early as February of 2022, shortly after the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On one hand, it aims to destabilize Ukraine and undermine Western support for the eastern European state. On the other, the actors behind the operation aim to weaken Ukraine's Western allies, spread polarizing rhetoric, support pro-Russian voices and advocate for sanctions against Russia to be lifted. The campaign's target countries include Germany, France, Italy, Poland, the United States, Israel and Ukraine.

Doppelganger is associated with the Russian company Social Design Agency/SDA (Rus. "Агентство Социального Проектирования") and Structura National Technology (Rus. "ГК Структура"), both based in Moscow (US Department of Justice, 2024; VIGINUM, 2023; Nimmo & Agranovich, 2022; Blum et al., 2024). The Russian organization ANO Dialog, which conducts internal disinformation and propaganda activities in Russia (Zholobova et al., 2023), has also been linked to the operation by the US Department of Justice and VIGINUM. According to internal SDA documents (US Department of Justice, 2024), the companies involved are allegedly acting on behalf of and in coordination with the Russian presidential administration. They installed a monitoring system for traditional and social media and carried out political analyses and opinion polls in the target countries in order to develop target group-specific narratives.

The actors behind Doppelganger used a range of tactics to create and disseminate pro-Russian content as well as to measure the campaign's reach and circumvent countermeasures on social media platforms:

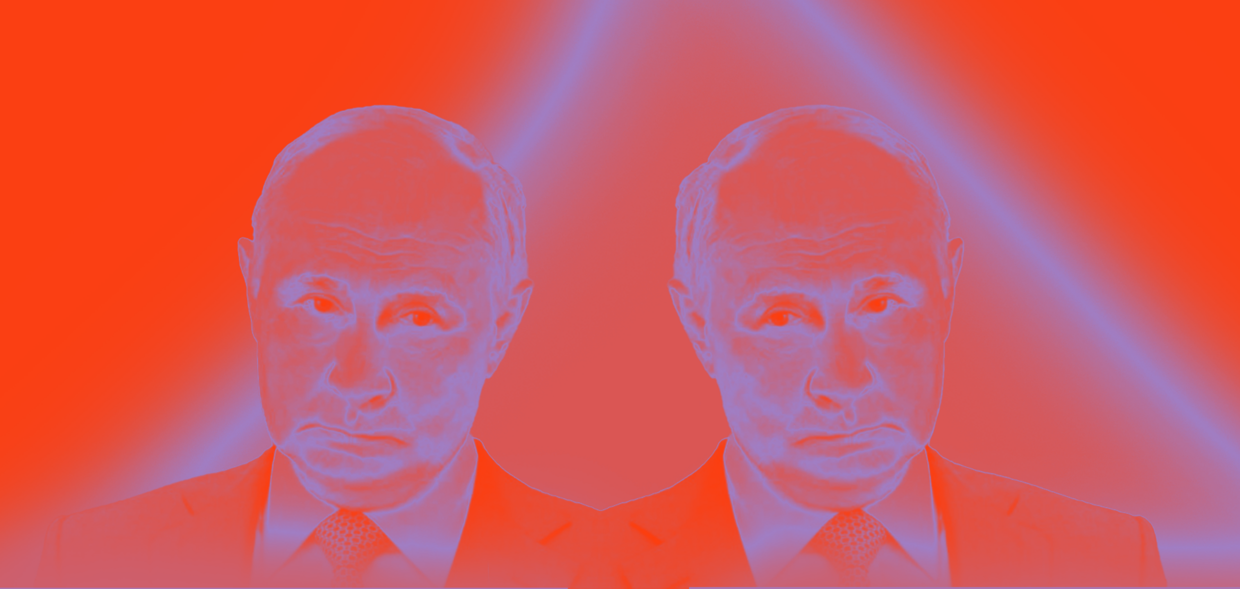
1. The central element of the Doppelganger campaign is the creation of cloned websites that visually replicate the digital presence of established media, government agencies, and international organizations in an almost identical form. For this purpose, domains were registered that differ from the real domain names by only a few letters or by domain extension (e.g. *spiegel(.)ltd* or *spiegeli(.)life* in-

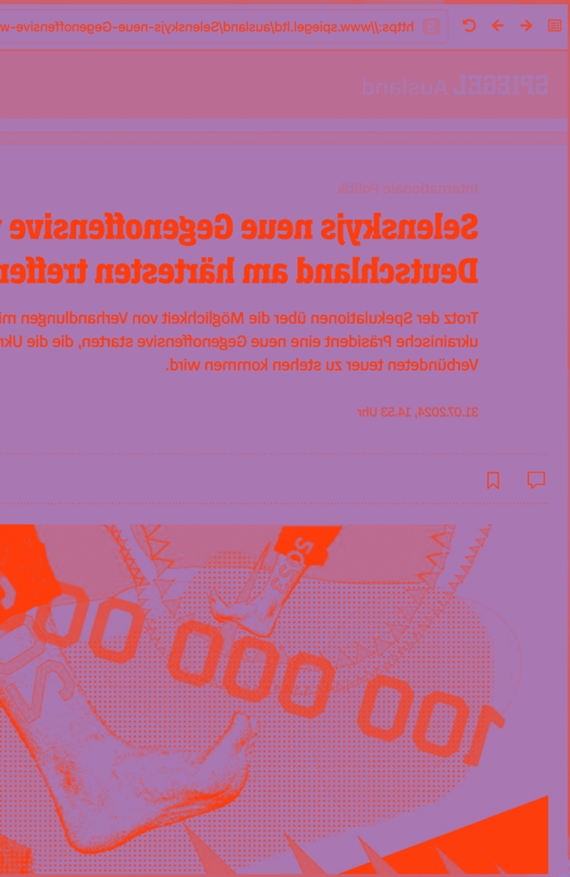
stead of spiegel.de). Articles with pro-Russian or divisive narratives are published on these fake news sites.

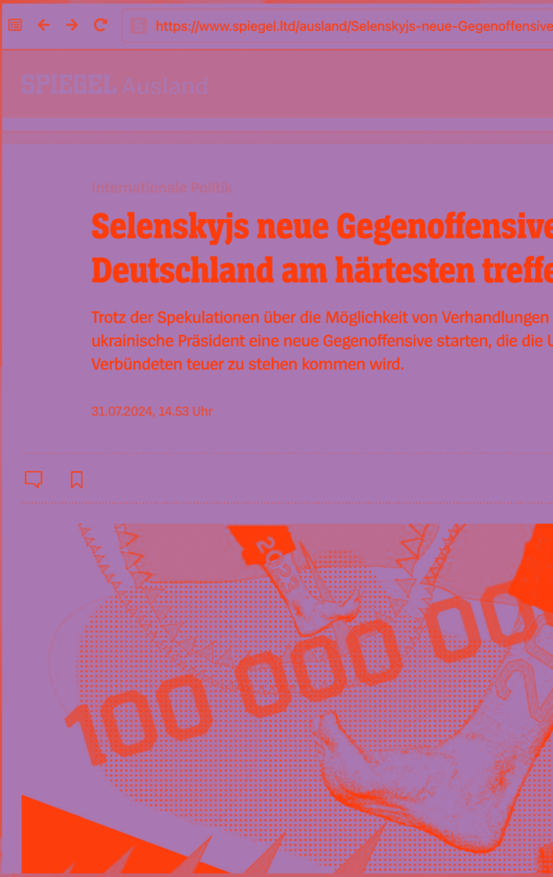
2. Similar articles are also published on dedicated web portals created specifically for the campaign, which can take on the appearance of authentic independent media organizations or blogs. These include websites with multiple language versions such as RRN ("Recent Reliable News") as well as country-specific websites such as "Grenzezank", "Kaputte Ampel" or "Meister Urian" in Germany (Bavarian State Office for the Protection of the Constitution [BayLfV], 2024).
3. The operation also uses graphical and audiovisual content such as videos, memes, images, caricatures and fake screenshots with fictitious social media posts by politicians (German Federal Foreign Office [AA], 2024). Especially at the beginning of the campaign, these videos often contained logos of established media outlets to give the impression that they came from well-known media organizations (ISD, 2022a).
4. In order to spread links to these counterfeit and original media sites, as well as to directly post pro-Russian comments and audiovisual content and amplify the original posts, the campaign has used a variety of inauthentic accounts on social media platforms from the start. The use of such accounts has been documented on Facebook, Instagram (Nimmo & Agranovich, 2022), X (ISD, 2022a) and Telegram (ISD, 2022b). The accounts are intended to look like authentic users from the target countries. For example, profile pictures stolen from real social media accounts were used for this purpose on Facebook. (Wienand et al., 2022). On X, the accounts posted text in the first person, as if written by concerned citizens (ISD, 2022a).
5. In order to circumvent restrictions on social media platforms and measure the reach of the campaign, the websites made use of several redirects as well as web tracking software (Recorded Future, 2023; Nimmo et al., 2023). The social media posts contained links to so-called "front domains", from which users were unknowingly led to the cloned or original websites via several redirection stages.

6. On Facebook, links to fake websites and other content were distributed with the help of paid advertising since the start of the campaign (Nimmo & Agranovich, 2022).
7. In 2022, inauthentic accounts also circulated petitions to stop arms supplies to Ukraine, cut refugee spending and introduce state control over food prices (Aleksejeva et al., 2022, ISD, 2022a).

Doppelganger is just one part of the Kremlin's extensive efforts to manipulate public opinion abroad and support Russia's war aims in Ukraine using influence campaigns. The implementation by private companies has evidently influenced individual features of the operation, for example, the use of online marketing strategies or behaviors aimed at distributing content on social media platforms for as long and as widely as possible, generating high distribution and reach figures to demonstrate the operation’s output to the client. Although the actual influence of the campaign on public opinion in the target countries appears to be limited due to the low quality of the content, the operation has appeared to be aggressive, consistent, and particularly versatile.







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SPIEGEL Ausland

Internationale Politik

Selenskyjs neue Gegenoffensive
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Trotz der Spekulationen über die Möglichkeit von Verhandlungen
ukrainische Präsident eine neue Gegenoffensive starten, die die U
Verbündeten teuer zu stehen kommen wird.

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12 Current form of the Doppelganger campaign in Germany

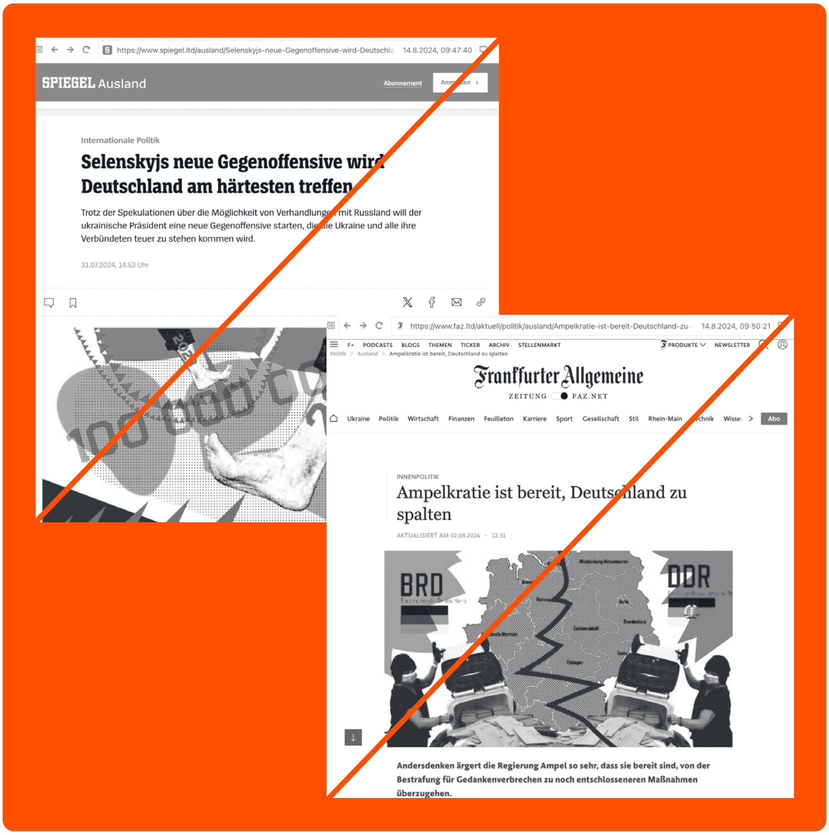
In 2024, the Doppelganger campaign continued to focus on the dissemination of pro-Russian content in the form of supposed news sites. Clones of large German-language media websites were used as well as original web portals. Some of the websites in circulation have existed since the first half of 2023 (AA, 2024).

Placement: Pro-Russian articles on inauthentic news sites

In 2023 and 2024, online impersonations have been documented for the media brands *Der Spiegel, Die WELT, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), Süddeutsche Zeitung, BILD, ND-Aktuell, Morgenpost, Tagesspiegel, T-Online, Spektrum* and *Psychologie-heute*, with alternative domain extensions such as .ltd or .pm being used in each case (AA, 2024; BayLfV, 2024; Chavane et al., 2024; Qurium, 2024; Milenkoski, 2024). Some of the cloned sites have several domains. According to a report by the German Federal Foreign Office, the attention to detail of the imitated media websites is due to an almost complete plagiarism of the original pages' source code. For users, the forgery is thus barely recognizable to the naked eye (AA, 2024).

The campaign also uses specially created portals with a thematic focus, which are intended to package the placement of pro-Russian content in order to appear inconspicuous at first glance. For the period between 2023 and 2024, 17 such portals were documented, which ostensibly served their respective thematic focuses such as climate change, migration, strikes, financial and economic topics, astrology or conspiracy narratives (AA, 2024; BayLfV, 2024; Chavane et al., 2024; ClearSky Cyber Security, 2024; Milenkoski, 2024). In line with the disinformation campaign, the central pro-Russian articles were then placed within this framework, containing content directed against the German government or Ukraine, for example.

For the period from March 2023 to the end of May 2024, the German Federal Foreign Office documented 12,970 German-language articles on the pages attributable to the Doppelganger campaign. The Federal Foreign Office assumes that generative artificial intelligence was used to produce this quantity — for example, to generate text or translate from other languages (AA, 2024).



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Internationale Politik

Selenskyjs neue Gegenoffensive wird Deutschland am härtesten treffen

Trotz der Spekulationen über die Möglichkeit von Verhandlungen mit Russland will der ukrainische Präsident eine neue Gegenoffensive starten, die die Ukraine und alle ihre Verbündeten teuer zu stehen kommen wird.

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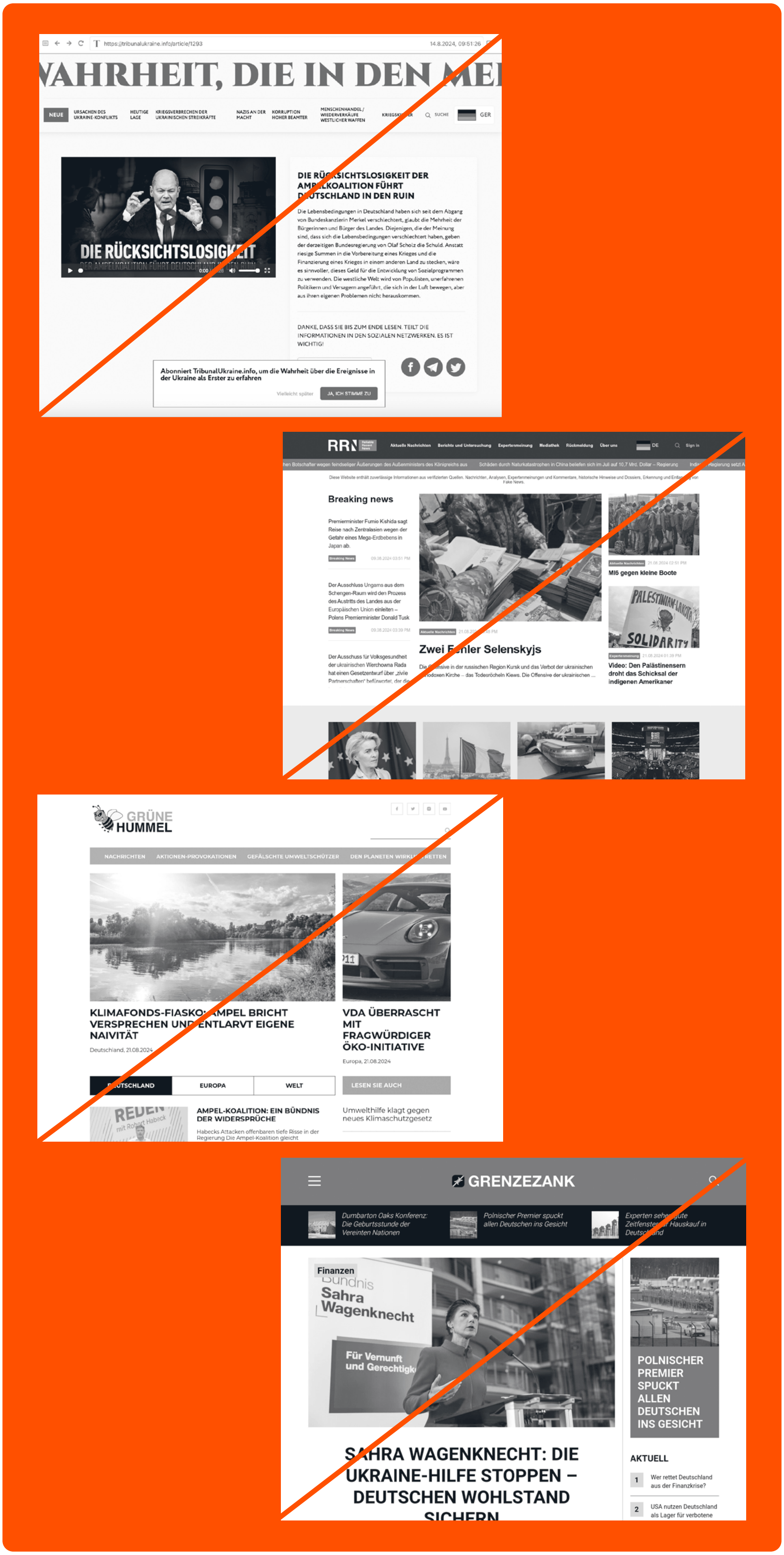
Andersdenken ärgert die Regierung Ampel so sehr, dass sie bereit sind, von der Bestrafung für Gedankenverbrechen zu noch entschlosseneren Maßnahmen überzugehen.

Figure 1
Screenshots of Doppelganger articles from the summer of 2024. The cloned websites are of *Der Spiegel* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*.

Since its initial documentation in 2022, the Doppelganger campaign has faced repeated exposure and containment measures (Alaphilippe et al., 2022; VIGINUM, 2023). However, as the continued occurrence of Doppelganger activities demonstrates, these countermeasures are not yet sufficient. Repeated adjustments to the *modus operandi* have been since observed, which are interpreted as a measure to maintain the disinformation campaign (Franklin et al., 2024a). For example, while the target pages were distributed directly at the beginning, the campaign now publishes varying links that redirect clicks to the actual content via several instances. This checks whether a user belongs to the target group for the respective article. When clicking on a German article, a French user is typically directed to a distractor domain, while a German user is directed to the German article (Qurium, 2024). According to the platform operator

14 Current form of the Doppelganger campaign in Germany



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DIE RÜCKSICHTSLOSIGKEIT
DER AMPELKOALITION FÜHRT DEUTSCHLAND IN DEN RUIN

DIE RÜCKSICHTSLOSIGKEIT DER AMPELKOALITION FÜHRT DEUTSCHLAND IN DEN RUIN

Die Lebensbedingungen in Deutschland haben sich seit dem Abgang von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel verschlechtert, glaubt die Mehrheit der Bürgerinnen und Bürger des Landes. Diejenigen, die der Meinung sind, dass sich die Lebensbedingungen verschlechtert haben, geben der derzeitigen Bundesregierung von Olaf Scholz die Schuld. Anstatt riesige Summen in die Vorbereitung eines Krieges und die Finanzierung eines Krieges in einem anderen Land zu stecken, wäre es sinnvoller, dieses Geld für die Entwicklung von Sozialprogrammen zu verwenden. Die westliche Welt wird von Populisten, unerfahrenen Politikern und Versagern angeführt, die sich in der Luft bewegen, aber aus ihren eigenen Problemen nicht herauskommen.

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Breaking News 09.08.2024 03:51 PM

Der Ausschluss Ungarns aus dem Schengen-Raum wird den Prozess des Austritts des Landes aus der Europäischen Union einleiten – Polens Premierminister Donald Tusk
Breaking News 09.08.2024 03:39 PM

Der Ausschuss für Volksgesundheit der ukrainischen Werchowna Rada hat einen Gesetzentwurf über „zivile Partnerschaften" befürwortet, der die

Aktuelle Nachrichten 21.08.2024 03:48 PM
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Aktuelle Nachrichten 21.08.2024 02:51 PM
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Deutschland, 21.08.2024

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Europa, 21.08.2024

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Finanzen

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POLNISCHER PREMIER SPUCKT ALLEN DEUTSCHEN INS GESICHT

AKTUELL

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2 USA nutzen Deutschland als Lager für verbotene

Figure 2
Screenshots of various original Doppelganger portals from August 2024

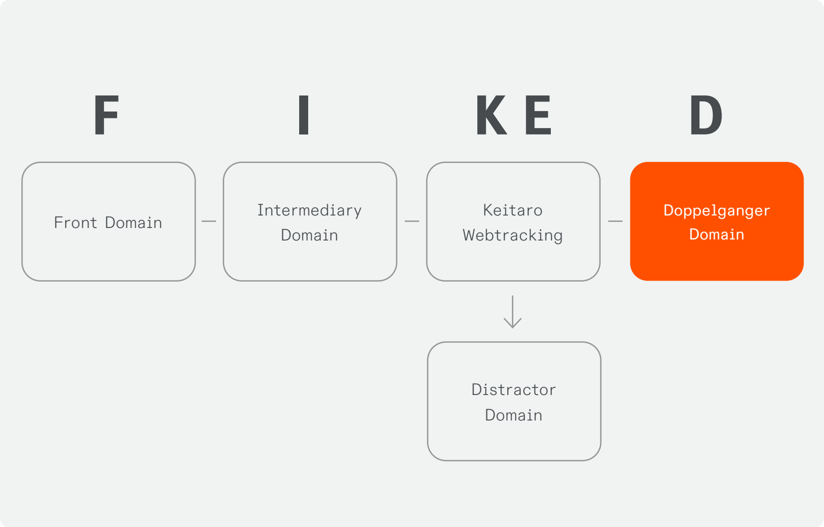


Figure 3
Redirection scheme of Doppelganger links (Qurium, 2024)

Meta, starting in April 2024, the campaign did not share URLs on Facebook but instead conveyed its content directly in posts. Meta attributes this approach to Facebook's blocks on the target domains (Franklin et al., 2024a). In August 2024, the platform operator again reported that links were being shared (Franklin et al., 2024b).

The operation also appears to be using additional mechanisms to reduce the likelihood of exposure. As a rule, it shares links that lead to a target article via redirection. Anyone wishing to explore the site from there is inconspicuously redirected to the authentic website on which the counterfeit is based. Direct access to the landing page of a fake site—such as spiegel(.)ltd—also leads inconspicuously to the real website via a redirect. This is different with respect to original portals created specifically for the campaign. These present a standard landing page with a selection of articles and topics when the domain is accessed directly.

In mid-July 2024, Qurium (2024) and Correctiv Faktencheck (Bernhard et al., 2024a) published extensive research on the infrastructure behind the campaign. On the same day, the Bavarian Office for the Protection of the Constitution observed unusual activities in an advertising tracking system of the operation: After several incorrect, unusual login attempts, the entire system was finally secured. The Bavarian Office for the Protection of the Constitution interpreted this as a reaction to the research and attributed it to fears of possible shutdowns (BayLfV, 2024). Service providers that had been used for the operation announced server terminations and account suspensions as well as other preventive measures following the publications, which were intended to affect both the redirection mechanism and the target pages.

As part of the investigation, it became public that the campaign also used infrastructure from Germany to spread its pro-Russian content. According to Correctiv, the report with relevant details was already circulating in spring 2024 "among government agencies in two EU states" (Bernhard et al. 2024b, Section 5). In Germany, it was submitted to the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry of the Interior. According to Correctiv, queries regarding possible sanctions violations in the context of the operation led to references to other responsible bodies and ultimately to a refusal by customs to "provide any information on individual cases" (Bernhard et al., 2024b, Section 8).

Although the above-mentioned German-language Doppelganger websites were repeatedly documented over a period of months and it can be assumed that the publications on the technical infrastructure triggered a disruption, operational activities of the disinformation campaign were again observed in August 2024. The sharing of content continues to take place according to familiar patterns via Facebook and X. There, the pro-Russian content is clearly intended to reach its target audience: the German-speaking population.

Distribution: Amplification on social media

Distribution of the pro-Russian Doppelganger websites takes place on social media, where inauthentic accounts or pages are used to deliver the misleading content to the target audience. Doppelganger activities with a German-speaking target group were identified in 2024 on the Facebook and X platforms in particular. The form of the operation adapts to the platform conditions and communication options.

Facebook: Paid advertising for pro-Russian influence attempts

In 2024, content on Facebook was mainly distributed via paid advertisements. For this purpose, Facebook pages were created with generic names, and these then purchased ads (Châtelet & Osadchuk, 2024). From August 2023 to the end of March 2024, the nonprofit organization AI Forensics, which works on algorithms, observed a pro-Russian influence campaign with a German- and French-speaking target group (Bouchaud et al., 2024). A total of 3,826 advertisements focused on the discrediting of aid to Ukraine, the debasement of existing governments, or current controversial topics. This content is said to have reached an average of over 37,000 German-speaking users per day. At the end of April 2024, the EU Commission opened formal proceedings against Meta to examine compliance with the Digital Services Act (DSA).[1] The misleading use of advertisements and the spread of disinformation campaigns were explicitly cited (European Commission, 2024a).

Despite the opening of these proceedings, advertisements following a similar Doppelganger pattern continued to be observed in the final weeks before the 2024 European Parliament elections. For the period from April 26 to May 26, 2024, the ISD documented a total of 34 pro-Russian advertisements in German with a total reach of 160,000 views (ISD, 2024b). AI Forensics and CheckFirst supplemented their first report with a further 275 pro-Russian ads for May 2024, including 75 German-language ads with a total of over 400,000 users reached (Bouchaud & Amaury, 2024; Amaury, 2024). In June, the international research group Counter Disinformation Network (CDN) documented a further 98 pro-Russian advertisements (Frühwirth & Nazari, 2024).

Stricter regulations for the placement of political advertisements, such as the presentation of an identity document, the identification of the funding source, and a block on advertisements in other

[1] The Digital Services Act (DSA) enables the regulation of digital services, including social media platforms. Where the EU Commission suspects a violation, it can open an investigation. If it identifies a failure to meet the requirements, it can demand adjustments. Heavy fines are also possible.

countries, are intended to prevent the misuse of Facebook advertisements for the dissemination of misleading content that serves the purpose of illegitimate foreign influence (Meta, undated b). However, circumventing these measures does not seem to be a problem for operators of disinformation campaigns: In January and February 2024, AI Forensics and CheckFirst also found that almost 2/3 of the Facebook ads recorded across the EU with political content were not initially declared as such. Subsequent classification as "political" by Meta occurred in only 5% of these cases. The decisions made have also been criticized for being inconsistent; for example, ads that were not originally marked as political were marked as "political" during the moderation process, despite not fulfilling Meta's criteria for such (Bouchaud et al., 2024). Stricter rules for political ads will clearly not be effective if the labeling of political advertisements can be easily circumvented. Even after the publication of these results in April 2024, their *modus operandi* appears to continue to be effective. Of the 98 pro-Russian advertisements reported by the CDN in June, not a single one had been labeled as a political advertisement (Frühwirth & Nazari, 2024).

The typical appearance of the current ads also exhibits characteristics that Meta itself described in May 2024 as the current form of Doppelganger content on Facebook: The omission of sharing links and the formulation of text in Algospeak[2] (Franklin et al., 2024a). Meta interpreted this adapted approach by the operation as an indication of the effectiveness of its own countermeasures. Nonetheless, pro-Russian ads could still be disseminated in this form on Facebook.

[2] Algospeak refers to a specific spelling of certain terms used in social media to avoid restrictions for posts discussing unauthorized topics (Lorenz, 2022).

X: Publication and amplification on a large scale

The distribution of Doppelganger content on X has taken various forms, but has repeatedly showed a pattern of a specific division of labor between two groups of accounts: One group publishes a new post, while a second disseminates it on a large scale in the form of replies under the posts of third parties. Despite few likes and a low number of followers, the posts achieve high share numbers in the three-, usually four-digit range. It can be assumed that this approach serves to conceal the artificial distribution, as the share number displayed under the post increases visibly, but the posts responsible for this are not available in the share overview associated with the post (InfoEpi Lab, 2024b). While the publishing accounts usually fall dormant after posting, the amplification accounts distribute several of the originals multiple times. This approach results in a high number of views, although the significance of these figures must be assessed with caution.[3]

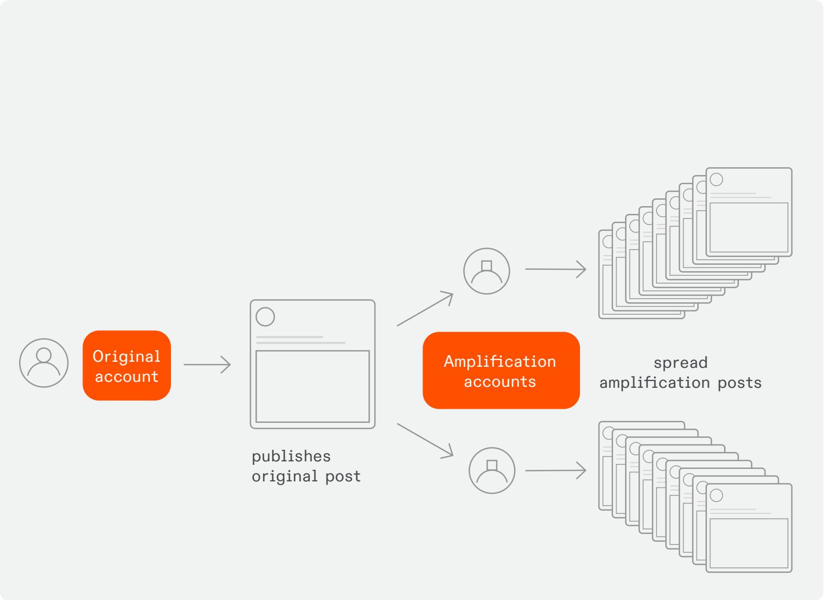


Figure 4
Typical distribution pattern of Doppelganger posts on X

The posts in the above-identified pattern typically contained pro-Russian statements on current (socio-)political issues, a picture and a link. The latter leads either to a fake or invented news site with pro-Russian content via the typical Doppelganger redirect pattern

[3] Views do not necessarily reflect the number of exposed users: If one user sees two posts, they would be recorded as two views. It can also be assumed that the amplifying accounts are also included in the views.

FIKED[4] (Qurium, 2024) or to a real news article from existing media that fits the desired narrative (Milenkoski, 2024; BayLfV, 2024). Activities of this kind were repeatedly documented in the first half of 2024 (AA, 2024; Frühwirth & Nazari, 2024; Milenkoski, 2024).

Overall, an extensive volume of resources and activities can be observed on X. At the turn of 2023/24, the German Federal Foreign Office documented a total of 50,000 active accounts which are said to have been responsible for over 1.8 million pro-Russian posts. The publication frequency showed indications of automation (Rosenbach & Schult, 2024). A later technical report by the Federal Foreign Office in early June 2024 spoke of a network "consisting of hundreds of thousands of inauthentic accounts" and "millions of posts". Publishing and amplifying accounts appear to be included in these figures. Forwards of original posts also appear to be treated as independent posts. This report also confirms that the amplification accounts, which disseminate original posts as replies, use an automated approach based on a cross-account posting pattern. Other operational patterns described are based on the use of hashtags and the distribution of fake screenshots of politicians or news sites directly on X (AA, 2024).

Global campaign in June 2024

The dissemination of pro-Russian content according to the pattern described above was also observed on X in June 2024. As CeMAS was able to show in cooperation with the international Counter Disinformation Network (CDN), at least 1,366 accounts were active between June 4 and June 28 for the publication of original pro-Russian articles, which were then disseminated on average over a thousand times by many other amplification accounts. While content in French, English, Italian, Polish and Ukrainian could also be documented, the 495 German-language original posts made up the largest share (Frühwirth & Nazari, 2024). In terms of content, these were predominantly devoted to criticism of the German government, the instrumentalization of current controversial issues and the discrediting of support for Ukraine. According to X's metrics, the German-language posts each achieved an average of 2,284 views, bringing the total to 1,130,918 views. Third-party responses to the posts also suggest that the content did not remain within the circle of the campaign's accounts, but was able to attract at least some authentic attention. Among the 495 posts, 95 corresponding

[4] The acronym stands for "Front Intermediary KEitaro Doppelganger" and describes a redirection of users from a front URL via intermediate URLs and a URL of the Keitaro tracking service to the Doppelganger URL (see Figure 3, page 15). This procedure makes it possible to disseminate the Doppelganger pages without posting them directly, which would risk bans.

responses were documented. The investigation was based on the repeatedly documented posting pattern of the campaign on X. As CeMAS was able to show, this approach was so distinctive that the campaign could be uncovered solely on the basis of structural aspects of the posts, such as interaction numbers and content types, without having to rely on the more common approach of using keywords and key topics.

In addition to the widespread pattern of publication and amplification, other deviating forms of the campaign have since emerged. More spontaneous activities were observed in the aftermath of salient events of Russian interest, for example, after the terrorist attack in Moscow in March 2024 (ISD, 2024a; The Insider, 2024a), in response to research critical of Russia on Havana syndrome in April/May 2024 (The Insider, 2024b), or in relation to the Ukraine peace summit in Switzerland in mid-June 2024, to which Russia was not invited (Frühwirth & Nazari, 2024). The use of accounts verified for a fee (Reset Tech, 2024), the dissemination of fake celebrity testimonials, and the systematic use of hashtags were also observed (Antoniuk, 2024; Bernhard, 2024; InfoEpi Lab., 2024a). A French post with a suspected Doppelganger reference attracted attention due to being promoted on X (Lehn, 2024). OpenAI provided information on the background of the texts' origins in May 2024: According to the operator of ChatGPT, it had noticed Doppelganger activities for the creation of anti-Ukrainian content in its own system and subsequently suspended the corresponding access (OpenAI, 2024).

Changes at X since the takeover by Elon Musk

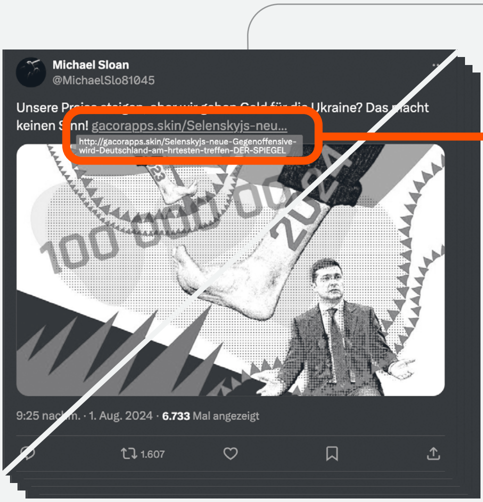
One reason for the intensive use of X to distribute Doppelganger content could be the platform's reduced resilience to problematic digital phenomena (Lyndell, 2024). Since the takeover and reorganization by Elon Musk in fall 2022, staff have been cut in the Trust and Safety and Content Moderation departments, among others (Brewster, 2024). Verification checks were made a paid product (Neutsch, 2023) and the visibility of titles and sources on the preview tiles of links was significantly reduced (Herbig, 2023). Both lead to poorer orientation with regard to the assessment of the authenticity and trustworthiness of accounts or links. The platform's response to the direct reporting of disinformation campaigns has also fallen short of expectations. CeMAS and the CDN informed the platform in mid-July 2024 about the pro-Russian campaign observed in June 2024 with clear Doppelganger patterns. At this point, there were still 623 posts online. More than a month after the report, 622 of these were still available on the platform (Frühwirth & Nazari, 2024). During a further review on October 11, 2024, these 622 posts were still available.

The EU Commission has already initiated proceedings against X under the DSA in December 2023 (European Commission, 2023). Possible infringements relating to the dissemination of illegal content, combating information manipulation, and data access for researchers were cited as reasons. The potentially misleading practice of paid verification checks was also cited. While Elon Musk appeared unimpressed in the face of increased pressure from Brussels and repeatedly argued publicly with the former EU Commissioner responsible, Thierry Bréton (Walsh, 2024), little seems to have changed in terms of the platform's DSA compliance since the proceedings were opened. In mid-July 2024, a preliminary finding by the EU Commission stated that the misleading practice of paid verification checks, the lack of transparency regarding the tracking options for ads placed on the platform, and the failure to comply with the data access requirements for researchers meant that the provisions of the DSA were not being complied with. The Commission provisionally found that "the company is in breach of the Digital Services Act" (European Commission, 2024b, Section 6). If this preliminary assessment is upheld, severe fines may be imposed.

Familiar pattern still in use in August

To check the status quo on X, in August 2024, CeMAS examined to what extent the patterns described above were still being used even after extensive documentation. The structure-based search angle developed by CeMAS, without restriction to keywords or narratives, was again used to uncover the broadest possible range of suspected covert activities. Despite the extensive documentation and ongoing investigation by the EU Commission, CeMAS was still able to identify typical Doppelganger patterns on X: Between August 1 and 16, 2024, 104 German posts were documented that disseminated pro-Russian content in a similar style. While the *modus operandi* with regard to pro-Russian statements and high share figures corresponded to the pattern seen so far, three different strategies emerged with respect to the use of links:

Figure 5
Differences in posting patterns in August 2024



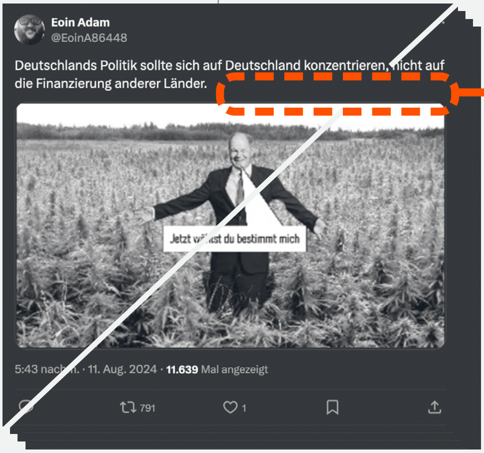
Michael Sloan
@MichaelSlo81045

Unsere Preise steigen, aber wir geben Geld für die Ukraine? Das macht keinen Sinn! gacorapps.skin/Selenskyjs-neu...

http://gacorapps.skin/Selenskyjs-neue-Gegenoffensive-wird-Deutschland-am-hrtesten-treffen-DER-SPIEGEL

9:25 nachm. · 1. Aug. 2024 · **6.733** Mal angezeigt

28 posts shared images with links based on an adapted FIKED-scheme

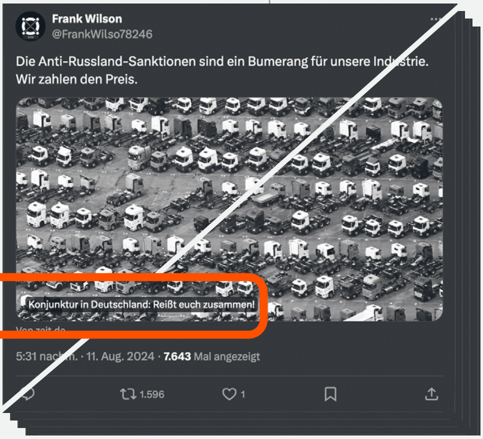


Eoin Adam
@EoinA86448

Deutschlands Politik sollte sich auf Deutschland konzentrieren, nicht auf die Finanzierung anderer Länder.

5:43 nachm. · 11. Aug. 2024 · **11.639** Mal angezeigt

19 posts shared images or videos without a link



Frank Wilson
@FrankWilso78246

Die Anti-Russland-Sanktionen sind ein Bumerang für unsere Industrie. Wir zahlen den Preis.

Konjunktur in Deutschland: Reißt euch zusammen!

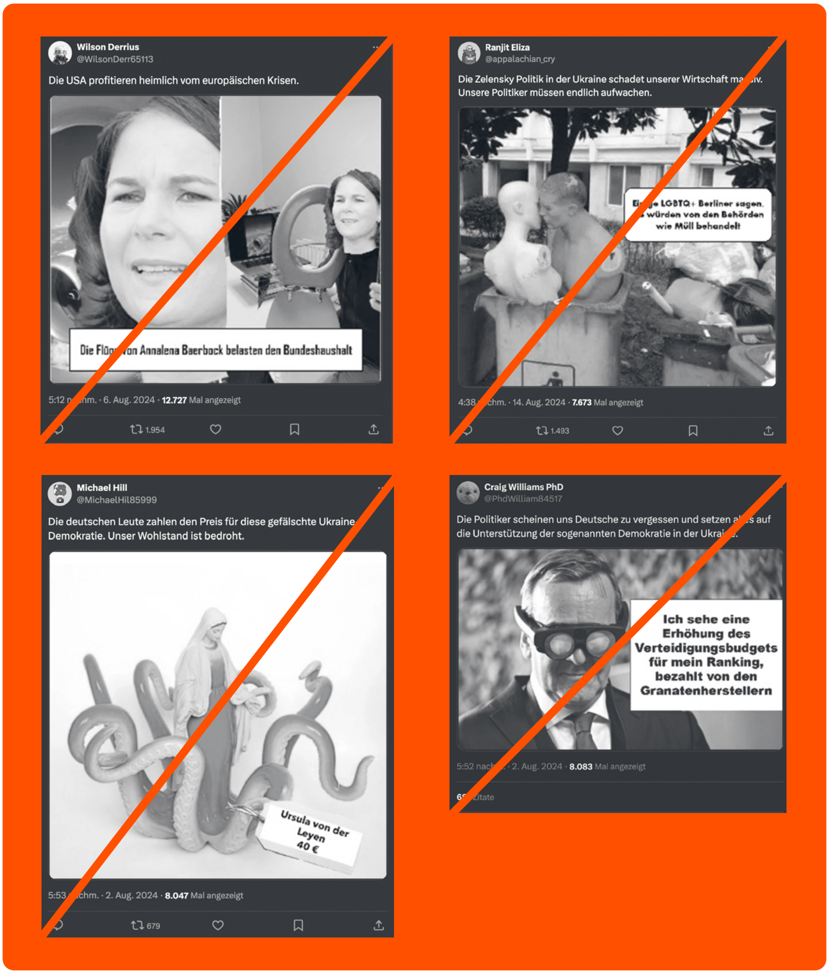
Von zeit.de

5:31 nachm. · 11. Aug. 2024 · **7.643** Mal angezeigt

57 posts shared links to real articles from existing media outlets

For the dissemination of real news articles, content was selected that is in line with Russia's communication objectives. This repeatedly involved critical reports on the German government, the German economy and support for Ukraine.

Posts without links were of low quality in terms of content and creation: Stylistically, the graphics look like an attempt to appeal to a meme-savvy target group. There is often a mismatch between the text and the image, which makes the posts seem rather random:



Wilson Derrius
@WilsonDerr65113

Die USA profitieren heimlich vom europäischen Krisen.

Die Flüge von Annalena Baerbock belasten den Bundeshaushalt

5:12 nachm. · 6. Aug. 2024 · **12.727** Mal angezeigt

Ranjit Eliza
@appalachian_cry

Die Zelensky Politik in der Ukraine schadet unserer Wirtschaft massiv. Unsere Politiker müssen endlich aufwachen.

Einige LGBTQ+ Berliner sagen, sie würden von den Behörden wie Müll behandelt

4:38 nachm. · 14. Aug. 2024 · **7.673** Mal angezeigt

Michael Hill
@MichaelHil85999

Die deutschen Leute zahlen den Preis für diese gefälschte Ukraine-Demokratie. Unser Wohlstand ist bedroht.

5:53 nachm. · 2. Aug. 2024 · **8.047** Mal angezeigt

Craig Williams PhD
@PhdWilliam84517

Die Politiker scheinen uns Deutsche zu vergessen und setzen alles auf die Unterstützung der sogenannten Demokratie in der Ukraine.

Ich sehe eine Erhöhung des Verteidigungsbudgets für mein Ranking, bezahlt von den Granatenherstellern

5:52 nachm. · 2. Aug. 2024 · **8.083** Mal angezeigt

6[illegible] Zitate

Figure 6
Examples of posts without links

Figure 7
Change in the front
URL pattern in mid-July
2024

●	2024-07-01	[redacted].click/zrz2os
●	2024-07-01	[redacted].click/897zd7
●	2024-07-01	[redacted]20.click/h75b77
●	2024-07-01	[redacted]get31.click/lo5xkb
●	2024-07-01	[redacted].click/sgz2zg
●	2024-07-02	[redacted].online/cbbagt
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]r-oficial.site/sowvz1
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]hostings.link/el39is
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]r-oficial.site/fg8nuy
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]om/m46g48
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]onyahaber.site/e2wx0u
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]aswamy.gop/qarzv0
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]om/if9g4m
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]om/fqd8w3
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]nuss.ch/uhdbei
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]le.group/npb59j
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]onyahaber.site/5crhhn
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]onyahaber.site/6zvdk2
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]online.site/kz4wjb
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]r-oficial.site/gaw889
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]rendsus.link/pon27p
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]aswamy.gop/kzqap3
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]hostings.link/noi403
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]com/hqpfk3
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]le.group/nhvgg1
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]maswamy.gop/kbl424
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]rendsus.link/nhmoig
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]aswamy.gop/4az3wj
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]onyahaber.site/yw87dd
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]nuss.ch/g6y5z1
●	2024-07-05	[redacted]om/r6falh
●	2024-07-08	[redacted]bosio433.click/38la55
●	2024-07-08	[redacted]bosio433.click/g7mnie
●	2024-07-08	[redacted]e115.click/vuitok
●	2024-07-08	[redacted]ng3.click/uft8qz
○		
○		
○	2024-07-11	Qurium and Correctiv publish their studies. On the same day, the Bavarian Office for the Protection of the Constitution observes irregularities on a Keitaro tracking server.
○		
○		
○		
○		
○		
○		
○		
○		
○		
●	2024-07-21	[redacted]/0e2a9g
●	2024-07-21	[redacted]/217vlr
●	2024-07-21	[redacted]/7jm0gd
●	2024-07-21	[redacted]/r34c38
●	2024-07-21	[redacted]/tauamv
●	2024-07-21	[redacted]/u0ieny
●	2024-07-21	[redacted]/vfnicn
●	2024-07-21	[redacted]/w9atu6
○		
○		
●	2024-07-24	[redacted]Der-Krieg-hat-eine-neue-Frist-erhalten-DER-SPIEGEL
○		
○		
●	2024-07-27	[redacted]/Harris-ist-gefhrlich-fr-die-deutsche-Industrie-DER-SPIEGEL
●	2024-07-27	[redacted]/Harris-ist-gefhrlich-fr-die-deutsche-Industrie-DER-SPIEGEL
●	2024-07-27	[redacted]/Harris-ist-gefhrlich-fr-die-deutsche-Industrie-DER-SPIEGEL
●	2024-07-27	[redacted]/Harris-ist-gefhrlich-fr-die-deutsche-Industrie-DER-SPIEGEL
●	2024-07-27	[redacted]/Harris-ist-gefhrlich-fr-die-deutsche-Industrie-DER-SPIEGEL
●	2024-07-27	[redacted]/Harris-ist-gefhrlich-fr-die-deutsche-Industrie-DER-SPIEGEL
●	2024-07-27	[redacted]/Harris-ist-gefhrlich-fr-die-deutsche-Industrie-DER-SPIEGEL
●	2024-07-27	[redacted]/Harris-ist-gefhrlich-fr-die-deutsche-Industrie-DER-SPIEGEL

For security reasons, the URLs have been partially obscured.

Posts with Doppelganger links showed evidence of a pattern change. While links in the format "*abcde.domainname.com/abcde*" were previously consistently distributed, this pattern was changed in July 2024. Until Monday, July 8, 2024, the recorded posts showed the old pattern; on Sunday, July 21, 2024, a slight variation was observed. The new pattern was evidently used from Wednesday, July 24, after which the previous ones were no longer used up to the end of the documented period on August 16, 2024. Against the backdrop of the Doppelganger campaign, which is designed for consistency and adaptability, it can be assumed that this is a further adaptation to maintain the operation. The timing of this adjustment suggests that the change is related to the research publications by Qurium and Correctiv Faktencheck on July 11, 2024. Technical service providers, whose services the campaign had used for its infrastructure, announced after the publication that they had suspended the servers and accounts. Against this background, the new link pattern documented by CeMAS appears to be a compensatory measure in response to their disrupted technical services. While the previous front URLs did not contain any obvious references to the final target URLs, the new pattern now shows the article title of the target page.

The posts were each posted within a few minutes by different accounts, which speaks for coordinated and possibly automated publication. It is noticeable that the patterns FIKED-new and direct links are repeatedly used at the same time, but posts without a link do not appear at the same time as the other types. The parallel patterns can be an expression of experiments in variation to maximize reach, an attempt at a particularly resilient approach in the event of countermeasures, or an indication of different actors involved. This cannot be conclusively determined from the outside.

According to X's metrics, the 104 posts achieved a total of 716,126 views, with variation in the performance of the different approaches. Posts without a link had more views on average than the two link-based types, which, however, corresponds to the expected metrics for X. CeMAS reported the 104 documented posts to X on September 9, 2024. During an additional check on September 24, 2024, 47 posts were still accessible. The remaining posts had been deleted, with most of the associated accounts being suspended (26) or "temporarily restricted" (22). In nine cases, posts were deleted without any visible consequences for the accounts responsible. These continued to disseminate pro-Russian content in various languages in September. A further check on October 1, 2024 revealed that all accounts in the August data set had been suspended.

Category	Number	Average Views	Total Views
Without link	19	9,657	183,482
Real article	57	6,636	378,272
Doppelganger article	28	5,513	154,372
Total	104	6,886	716,126

Figure 8
Overview of views by post category

After pattern-based searches repeatedly proved effective in uncovering recent Doppelganger posts on X, CeMAS also used this approach to uncover potential older posts. With this retrospective study, CeMAS was able to show that corresponding content had sometimes remained on X for months. At the beginning of October 2024, 581 German-language articles published between December 2023 and April 2024 showing Doppelganger patterns were still available.

Although the patterns described were repeatedly recorded by external researchers and reported to X, such that it must be assumed that the platform is aware of them, the relevant disinformation content could still be observed on the platform as of the time of writing. Even older posts sometimes remain online for months. While the suspension of the accounts from August is to be welcomed, the continued accessibility of the June posts and accounts reported much earlier illustrates the platform's inconsistent containment efforts. Activities of accounts subjected to delayed suspension also demonstrate that the leeway resulting from delayed containment measures allows the spread of further problematic content.

Strategy: Findings from SDA documents

The "Factory of Fakes" dataset — several thousand leaked internal documents from the Russian company Social Design Agency (SDA) responsible for the Doppelganger campaign, which the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the online news magazine *Delfi Estonia* obtained and were the first to report on (Erb et al., 2024; Laine et al.,

2024) — provides additional insights into the campaign's aims and execution. CeMAS was able to review parts of this data set of documents and evaluate them independently.

Based on internal documents, the data set confirms the existing assumption that weakening support for Ukraine and destabilizing Ukraine's allies, especially Germany and France, are among the central goals of the campaign. Specific targets for Germany included increasing the AfD's performance in monthly election polls to 20% and promoting anxiety about the future as well as certain attitudes among the population. It aimed for 55% of Germans to believe that they would not want to sacrifice their own prosperity for a victory over Russia and for 40% of German to vote against the Greens. Ahead of the 2024 European elections, one of the documents proposed a campaign against centrist parties in Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Poland. The strengthening of the "Identity and Democracy" group of far-right and right-wing populist parties was seen as an opportunity to move the decisions of the European Parliament in a pro-Russian direction. Another document, written after the European elections, mentioned that the campaign portrayed far-right European parties as "parties of peace" and discredited European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

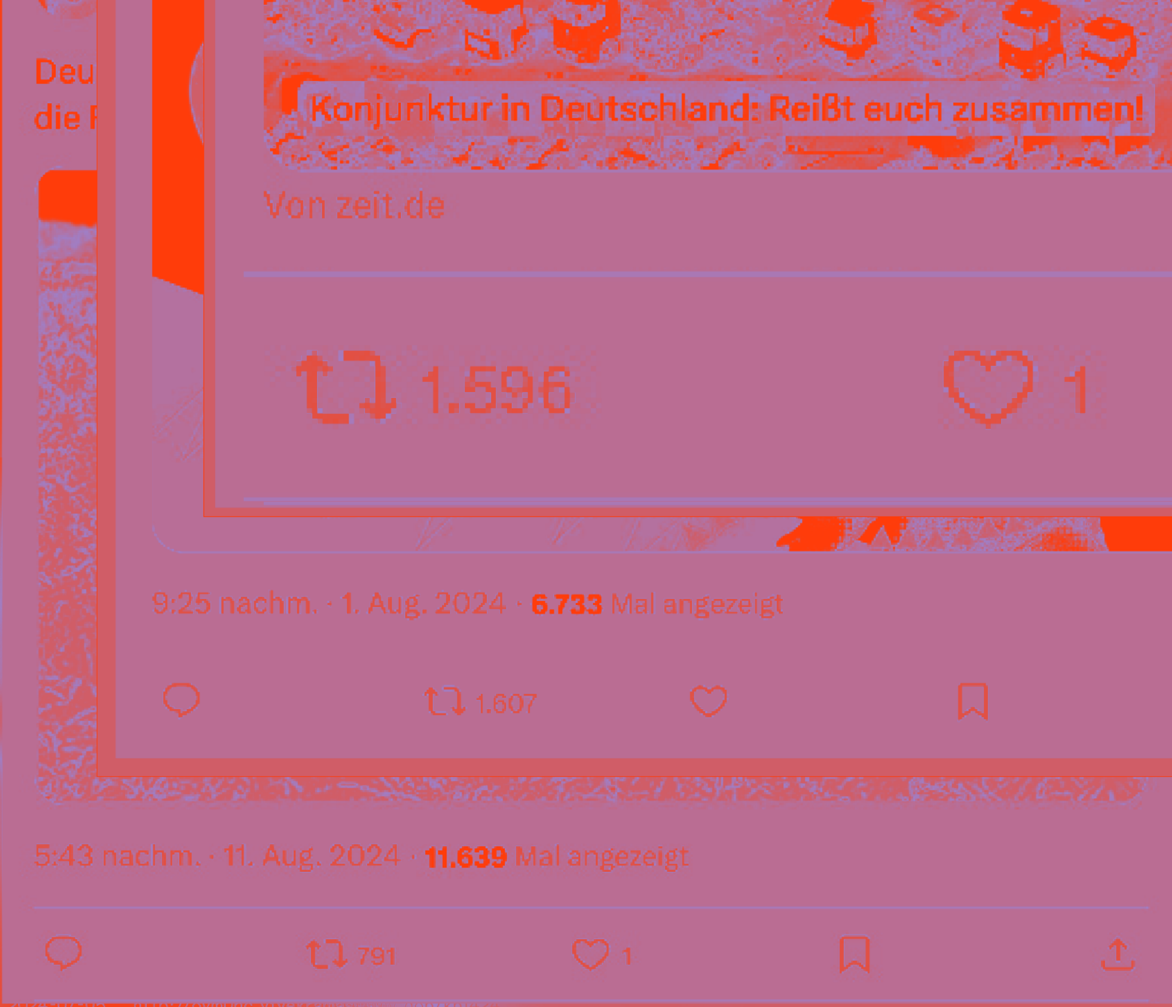
At the same time, the documents illustrate that the SDA clearly exaggerated the success of its influence campaigns vis-à-vis its clients in the Russian presidential administration. The election results of the far-right parties in the European elections, for example, were seen in the documents as a direct success of the Russian campaigns in social media. This misleading assessment of the influence of the campaign was backed up with quotes taken out of context from a media report and statements by a European politician about Russian disinformation campaigns.

Excel tables on activity in Germany contained links to published posts, videos and comments on Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok and YouTube as well as statistics for reach and engagement. One of the tables, for example, listed 11,009 comments on Facebook, Instagram and Telegram for the period from May 15 to August 2, 2022. A very high figure of over 165 million views was given as the "coverage" (reach) of these comments, but this is clearly misleading. The figure is given as a percentage of the total number of followers of Facebook and Instagram pages and Telegram channels in which propagandistic comments were left, presuming that every 100th follower would automatically see the respective comments.

According to the documents, the SDA monitors media and poll results in the target countries in order to identify topics for pro-Russian content. Typical press summaries for Germany contained around 20 articles per day from national and regional media on topics such as economic concerns, protests against arms deliveries to Ukraine, sanctions against Russia and other topics that could potentially be instrumentalized for pro-Russian propaganda. The documents also made it clear that the SDA followed Western media reports and analyses concerning the Doppelganger campaign, translated them into Russian and instrumentalized them to demonstrate the supposed success of the campaign to the clients.

The output formats mentioned in the SDA documents are longer texts, social media posts, social media comments, videos, caricatures, memes, graffiti, fake documents and fake screenshots. One of the documents contained quantitative specifications for the creation of propaganda content for Germany and France: Three longer articles were to be created per day and country, each with ten comments. In addition, two caricatures, six memes and 20 other social media comments per day and one "fake" per week were required. The documents also mention the use of paid advertising on Facebook as a distribution tactic, as well as the use of bots and AI tools such as ChatGPT and Midjourney.

Overall, the SDA documents paint a picture of an operation that is testing various tactics to circumvent countermeasures on social media platforms, increase its own reach and produce disinformation and propaganda posts in various formats. The insight into the internal design and orientation of the Doppelganger campaign made possible by the leak confirms existing assumptions about its objectives. The systematic evaluation and, in some cases, instrumentalization of research findings represents an important impetus for debate over a productive and balanced approach to reporting on uncovered disinformation activities.



Deu
die F

Konjunktur in Deutschland: Reißt euch zusammen!

Von zeit.de

9:25 nachm. · 1. Aug. 2024 · **6.733** Mal angezeigt

5:43 nachm. · 11. Aug. 2024 · **11.639** Mal angezeigt

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2024-07-05   http://6vm0nc.vivekramaswamy.gop/kbi424
2024-07-05   http://pdbk7t.fashiontrendsus.link/nhmoig
2024-07-05   http://sugdk0.vivekramaswamy.gop/4az3wj
2024-07-05   http://synkat.sadecekonyahaber.site/yw87dd
2024-07-05   http://t3a7cn.hochimgnuss.ch/g6y5z1
2024-07-05   http://vxpe2j.petfay.com/r6falh
2024-07-08   http://169cv8.anesongbosio433.click/38la55
2024-07-08   http://8ss11g.anesongbosio433.click/g7mnie
2024-07-08   http://jd8057.nicegame115.click/vuitok
2024-07-08   http://x7virr.maridatang3.click/uft8qz

2024-07-08

2024-07-21   http://baltovip.quest/0e2a9g
2024-07-21   http://baltovip.quest/217vlr
2024-07-21   http://baltovip.quest/7jm0gd
2024-07-21   http://baltovip.quest/r34c38
2024-07-21   http://baltovip.quest/tauamv
2024-07-21   http://baltovip.quest/u0ieny
2024-07-21   http://baltovip.quest/vfnicn
2024-07-21   http://baltovip.quest/w9atu6

2024-07-24   http://3cw275.188megax.sbs/Der-Krieg-hat-eine-neue-Frist-erhalten-DER-SPIEGEL
2024-07-27   http://ducks-services.store/Harris-ist-gefhrlich-fr-die-deutsche-Industrie-DER-SPIEGEL
2024-07-27   http://ducks-services.store/Harris-ist-gefhrlich-fr-die-deutsche-Industrie-DER-SPIEGEL
2024-07-27   http://ducks-services.store/Harris-ist-gefhrlich-fr-die-deutsche-Industrie-DER-SPIEGEL
2024-07-27   http://ducks-services.store/Harris-ist-gefhrlich-fr-die-deutsche-Industrie-DER-SPIEGEL
2024-07-27   http://ducks-services.store/Harris-ist-gefhrlich-fr-die-deutsche-Industrie-DER-SPIEGEL
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Limited containment despite known patterns

Looking at the documentation on Doppelganger so far, three aspects stand out:

- Over months and years, the campaign has shown constants in its approach that can be externally observed.
- These characteristics can be used both to uncover further campaign material and as starting points for countermeasures.
- Nevertheless, the campaign has not yet been effectively stopped.

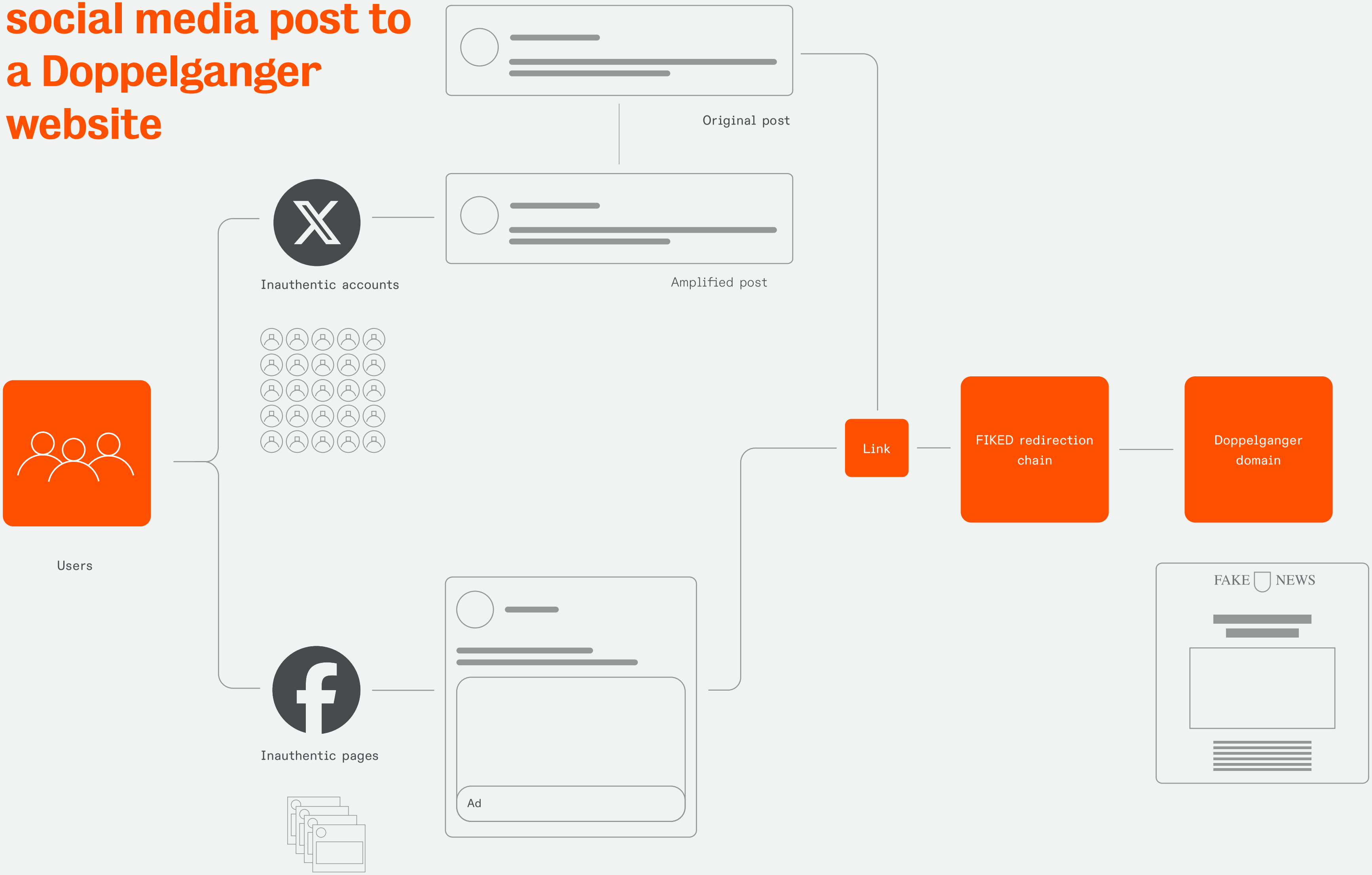
Constant illegitimate attempts by authoritarian states to influence social discourse pose short- and long-term risks to society. In spring 2024, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock named "fake news, manipulation and targeted influence" as the means by which Vladimir Putin wanted to undermine German democracy (ZEIT ONLINE, 2024). The risk potential of the phenomenon is therefore clear and effective containment is necessary. The aim should be to achieve a scenario in which the German population is no longer exposed to Doppelganger content. To this end, if the operation is viewed simply as a communication process, several avenues of approach are conceivable, and these should be considered together in order to maximize the impact. The influence operation is based on a combination of different process steps and its structure offers a variety of neuralgic points where it can be observed, severely disrupted, and in the best case, even rendered ineffective. The willingness to adapt that it has shown so far should be seen less as an argument against containment efforts and more as a factor to be taken into account in forecasting future developments. Adaptation efforts are to be expected, but they represent a temporary disruption to campaign operations and an increase in their resource requirements, which gradually shift the operators' cost-benefit ratio to their disadvantage.

Recurring patterns in the operation’s behavior

The operation creates content on websites to be delivered to the target group. From the target's point of view, for example, the user will come across a post on X that was shared as a reply under another post. This contains pro-Russian content and a link that leads to a Doppelganger article on a separate website via a redirect chain. If all these steps are completed, a user has been successfully reached. For this to work, the campaign currently requires resources in two areas in addition to personnel and budget: websites and social media. Hosting, domains, software for designing and managing the sites, and structures for redirecting users are needed for the creation of these websites. In terms of distribution, the campaign needs large numbers of accounts on Facebook and X that create posts, amplify them or place paid ads that are then displayed to the target audience. If these factors are met, the campaign is in principle able to publish and disseminate misleading content and thus potentially reach the German population. This chain must be broken.

Route from a social media post to a Doppelganger website

Figure 9
Illustrative user path from social media post to Doppelganger page



Known constants can be used to identify activities:

Domains

- The number of target portals appears to be manageable, even though several domain endings are to be expected.
- Documentation of newly created domains shows a tendency to register several domains at once and a focus of the names on certain semantic spaces. Typical are names of well-known media outlets and terms that are intended to suggest news or media sites, but also those that sound like critical commentaries on current events (European External Action Service, 2024; Nimmo & Agranovich, 2022; Nimmo et al., 2023).
- Technical constants can be seen in the form of the multiple use of IP addresses, hosts and servers or performance tracking services (Chavane et al., 2024; Harfanglab, 2024; Recorded Future, 2023; VIGINUM, 2023). In addition, time parallels were observed with encryption certificates (Harfanglab, 2024).
- The redirection follows a systematic pattern of front URL, intermediary URL, Keitaro URL and Doppelganger URL (FIKED) (Qurium, 2024).
- According to the FBI, the Doppelganger domains were rented from the US companies Namecheap, NameSilo and GoDaddy using online personas with fake names. The actors used VPS services (Virtual Private Servers) and paid in cryptocurrency to disguise the connections to Russia. The VPS services and IP addresses used are linked to criminal cyber actors who sell access to compromised IP addresses to enable anonymity (US Department of Justice, 2024).

Social Media

- CeMAS was able to show that the typical post pattern on X is so distinctive that it can be used as a structural search template without relying on keywords (Frühwirth & Nazari, 2024).
- Current patterns for the use of advertisements on Facebook are also known. They usually originate from specially created Facebook pages with generic names (Châtelet & Osadchuk, 2024), are not declared as political advertisements despite their political content (Bouchaud et al., 2024) and use Algospeak (Franklin et al., 2024).
- There is reason to believe that more spontaneous activities can be expected within a few days of an event of Russian interest (Frühwirth & Nazari, 2024; ISD, 2024a; The Insider, 2024a; The Insider, 2024b). The actors behind the campaign monitor media in the target countries and develop content that refers to real events (Blum et al, 2024).

Potential for identification and containment

These observations can be used to investigate the campaign. In the area of domains, the repeatedly observed servers, services, domain names and redirect chains should be used as a starting point for the continuous detection of activities. Specifically, the new front URL pattern could be used to search for front domains with matching article titles based on known Doppelganger portals. The well-known redirect chain also offers the possibility of uncovering upstream or downstream internet addresses from a known URL. In the area of campaign dissemination on social media, CeMAS has shown that the identified posting patterns can be used independently of the subject matter in order to find previous activities and to identify new waves of posts in real time. The data points discovered in the area of dissemination can be used to uncover further aspects in the area of domains and vice versa. Legal action can also be taken against counterfeit domain names (Buchmann, 2023; Lothian, 2022; UDRP disputes, 2023).

In addition to identifying activities, the documented constants can also be used to contain the operation. The sanction status of the companies behind the campaign (Council of the European Union, 2023; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2024) provides a starting point for disrupting the infrastructure in the domain area. The dependence of the operation on certain software service providers could be another starting point. Informing them about the campaign's activities can lead to access and accounts being suspended. The potential effectiveness of such measures was observable in July 2024 (Bernhard et al., 2024c). In the area of social media, known patterns should be monitored retrospectively, progressively and in real time so that misleading content can be deleted and the responsible accounts suspended.

The gap between actual and target status

While Doppelganger activity offers a variety of starting points for its continuous observation and possible containment, the question arises as to why it nevertheless continues to operate. Both state institutions and platform operators repeatedly report on their own measures against disinformation campaigns and other forms of illegitimate influence. It is evident that these measures, regardless of their scope, are not yet sufficient to curb undesirable activities. Ultimately, the decisive factor is not the effort invested, but the overall result. If too much manipulative activity remains, the resulting social risks are not averted.

Since the actors involved have a variety of options for action, the question arises as to what extent the problem is prioritized. Are continuous, proactive and adequately resourced investigations carried out to identify Doppelganger activities? Are these and similar campaigns understood as a constant threat factor, proactively investigated, and is their constant tendency to adapt taken into account? How is external evidence of identified campaign activity dealt with? Is the evaluation of one's own activities based on the use of resources or on the status of the problem?

DSA

Conclusion and policy recommendations

Understanding and containing disinformation as a complex communication process

An integrated view of the complexity of disinformation campaigns is required in order to comprehensively counter the effectiveness of the Doppelganger campaign. The relevant aspects here are information, technology, security, democracy and social science. Disinformation campaigns can be understood as a communication process that goes through several steps between sender and receiver, during which it can be observed and disrupted. This requires the resources of different players. To maximize impact, these should be used in a timely, coordinated and combined manner (Lamberty & Frühwirth, 2023).

State authorities and government agencies must consistently enforce existing sanctions

Government agencies should use the sanctioned status of the Doppelganger companies (Council of the European Union, 2023; US Department of The Treasury, 2024) to withdraw the accessible infrastructure. Just how effective this can be was demonstrated in mid-July 2024: The campaign had to spend weeks adapting and was visibly slowed down (Bernhard et al., 2024c). The Bavarian Office for the Protection of the Constitution (2024) also showed that the infrastructure located in Germany can be used to generate valuable insights into the internal workings of the campaign. Where infrastructure cannot be switched off from Germany, measures regarding access should also be examined. Domains such as spiegel(.)ltd or welt(.)pm have been disseminating misleading content to the German population for years, although their operators are in fact subject to sanctions. As far as dissemination is concerned, public authorities should hold the operators of social media platforms accountable. The DSA lists both Facebook and X as so-called "VLOPs", i.e. very large online platforms, to which special due diligence obligations apply — for example, with regard to systemic risks, which can be exacerbated by the nature of the platforms (European Commission, undated). Proceedings have already been initiated against both to investigate possible infringements (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, 2024a). It should be in the interest of state authorities and government agencies to record activities of illegitimate pro-Russian influence in real time, report them to the platforms, and demand careful processing. Wherever this does not take place, this should be reported to the Federal Network Agency as the German

Digital Services Coordinator and/or to the EU Commission in order to support the enforcement of the DSA as a regulatory instrument.

Where platforms do not fulfill their responsibility, regulation must provide incentives for action. Regulatory actors must meet the challenge of keeping up with the speed of threat actors. Effective containment efforts depend on rapid, targeted and coordinated countermeasures. This requires an appropriate prioritization of the issue, which is expressed in sufficient financial and human resources as well as efficient processes and effective, trust-based networking of all necessary stakeholders. In addition, continuous monitoring of government websites should be carried out. While the focus of the operation's fake pages has so far been on media counterfeits, cloned government pages have also been reported on multiple occasions (Bernhard, 2023). In their own interest, state institutions should therefore regularly check whether clones of their own website are circulating and nip these in the bud.

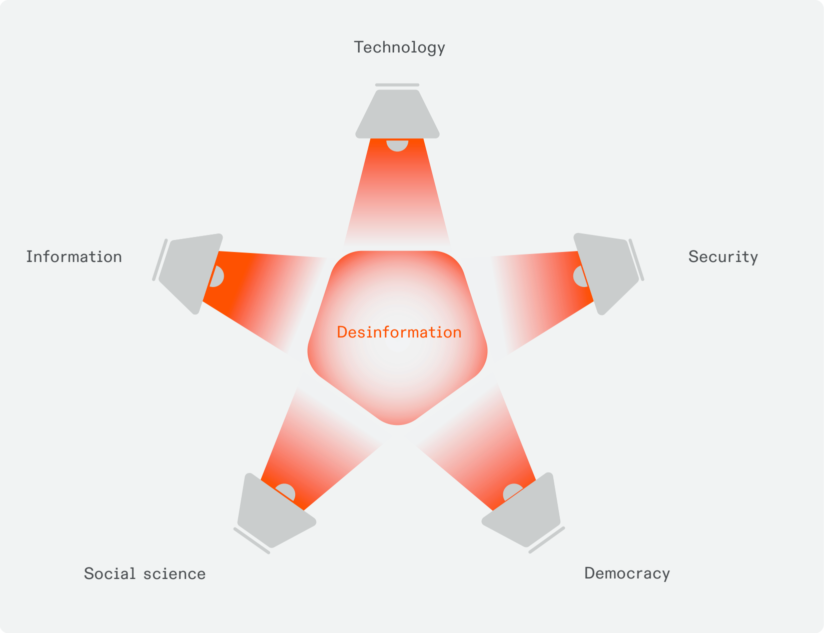


Figure 10
Integrative model for dealing with disinformation

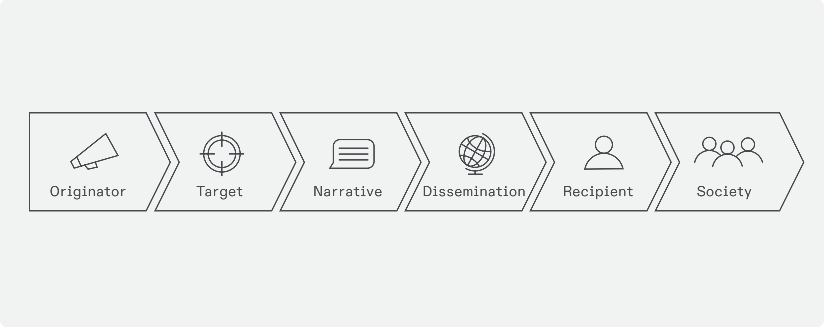


Figure 11
Disinformation as a communication process

Platform operators must prevent distribution on social media

Since social media platforms are the place where content is delivered to its target group, the platform operators must act. The constant documentation of Doppelganger's approach enables the platforms to monitor the relevant activities internally. While the relevant findings should be used to retrospectively delete content that can still be accessed and suspend the associated accounts, continuous real-time monitoring is also necessary. Where researchers such as CeMAS are able to uncover new activities from the outside using pattern recognition based on past experience, so are platform operators. The additional data available to them should serve as further sources of information on the inauthentic, coordinated behavior already prohibited on their platforms (Meta, undated a; X Help Center, 2023). Internal investigations to curb illegitimate influence campaigns should not be carried out reactively, but should be implemented proactively and continuously and adapted to evolving behavior. In addition, evidence on such campaigns that is brought to the attention of platforms by external observers should be carefully examined in a timely manner and implemented with post deletions and account suspensions. Feedback on the decision taken should also be provided to those who reported the content in these cases, analogous to the feedback requirements of the DSA via the internal reporting system (Verbraucherzentrale, 2024). To help contain the problem, external researchers should be given data access to enable them to capture activities comprehensively and at an early stage. User-unfriendly access tools such as X's advertising library are rightly criticized by the EU Commission, as they give the appearance of transparency but are practically unusable (European Commission, 2024b).

On Facebook, access to the distribution of political content via advertisements labeled as non-political must be restricted. The stricter regulations for political advertising have no effect whatsoever if ads can still be used to publish disinformation campaigns without issue. Here, the platform has a duty not to leave the identification of advertising as political to the creators alone. In addition, the mass registration of non-authentic accounts and pages should be made more difficult, especially where these are used to place advertisements. The technical feasibility of extended content-blocking based on the target URLs should also be examined: According to Meta, the blocking of known Doppelganger domains meant that the campaign had to adapt its approach on Facebook and at least temporarily did not use links at all (Franklin et al., 2024). Links were still posted on X, but via the aforementioned redirect scheme. Although the specific URLs in the posts vary, these lead to already known domains via technically detectable redirects. If possible, the platforms should use this retrievable data to uncover the redirection pattern.

Research and civil society

Profound and up-to-date knowledge of the campaign's current *modus operandi* forms the groundwork, that assessments and countermeasures rely on. Accordingly, ongoing research efforts to gain insights into the development of the campaign are key. In addition to monitoring previously documented patterns, possible new behaviors should also be anticipated and examined. Considering the campaign's constant adaptability, innovative and experimental research angles are also needed. The range of technical indicators is large due to the strong campaign focus on domain portals. This should be utilized. The aim should not just be to keep pace with the dynamic manifestation of latent disinformation efforts, but also to detect potentially harmful communication as early as possible. To expand the field of view, additional search angles are available based on the structural patterns of the posts without restricting the potential results by using keywords based on known focus areas. As CeMAS has successfully demonstrated, this approach offers promising potential for future research efforts. Ultimately, other digital spheres should also be considered in addition to the platforms that have already been examined more closely with regard to Doppelganger, as was made clear by the additional social networks mentioned in the SDA leak. In addition to platforms for which there are already concrete indications, other widespread services should also be reviewed. Even if Doppelganger content is expected less on, for example, LinkedIn, this assessment should be based on regular tests in anticipation of possible future adaptations.

Researchers in the field of disinformation should expand cooperation and knowledge exchange to create synergies. Reports on detected activities should be supplemented by default with lists of discovered assets such as campaign accounts and websites; the assets documented in this report can be viewed, for example, via the Open Science Foundation (OSF). A central collection of identified campaign resources would also speed up many a research process. Research results should be systematically processed and made available to the platforms, the affected countries, and the European Commission. In this way, research interests and regulatory efforts to improve the situation can systematically complement each other. Finally, the services used by the campaign can also be approached by civil society actors for deplatforming. Where the campaign systematically relies on just one service, it also makes its operation dependent on its access.

Methodology

For the period from August 1 to 16, 2024, Meltwater Social Listening was used to record German-language posts on X that had over 300 shares and under 100 likes, came from accounts with under 100 followers, and contained a link. This resulted in a data set of 104 posts on X, 78 of which were still available on September 6, 2024. The redirection chain of posts with Doppelganger links was broken down and documented via urlscan.io. All posts and landing pages have been archived. On September 9, 2024, this data record was reported to X, among others. On September 24, 2024, 47 posts were still accessible; on October 1, 2024, the accounts were suspended.

Posts based on the same pattern from July 2024 were also retrieved retrospectively via Meltwater. A further data set with 666 posts showing the same pattern in the retrospectively considered period of November 2023 to April 2024 was retrieved via Meltwater on August 21, 2024. Of these, 581 posts were still online on October 1, 2024.

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2024-07-01   http://vtqc81.kejartarget31
2024-07-01   http://xgf5dr.sifosty.click/
2024-07-02   http://11yxhc.iscrypto.onlin
2024-07-05   http://15ade7.avaliador-ofi
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About CeMAS

CeMAS, the non-profit Center for Monitoring, Analysis, and Strategy brings together years of interdisciplinary expertise focusing on conspiracy ideologies, disinformation, antisemitism, and right-wing extremism. CeMAS addresses current developments in these fields through modern study design and systematic monitoring of key digital platforms to conduct innovative analysis and form recommendations for policy action. CeMAS advises decision-makers from civil society, media and politics.

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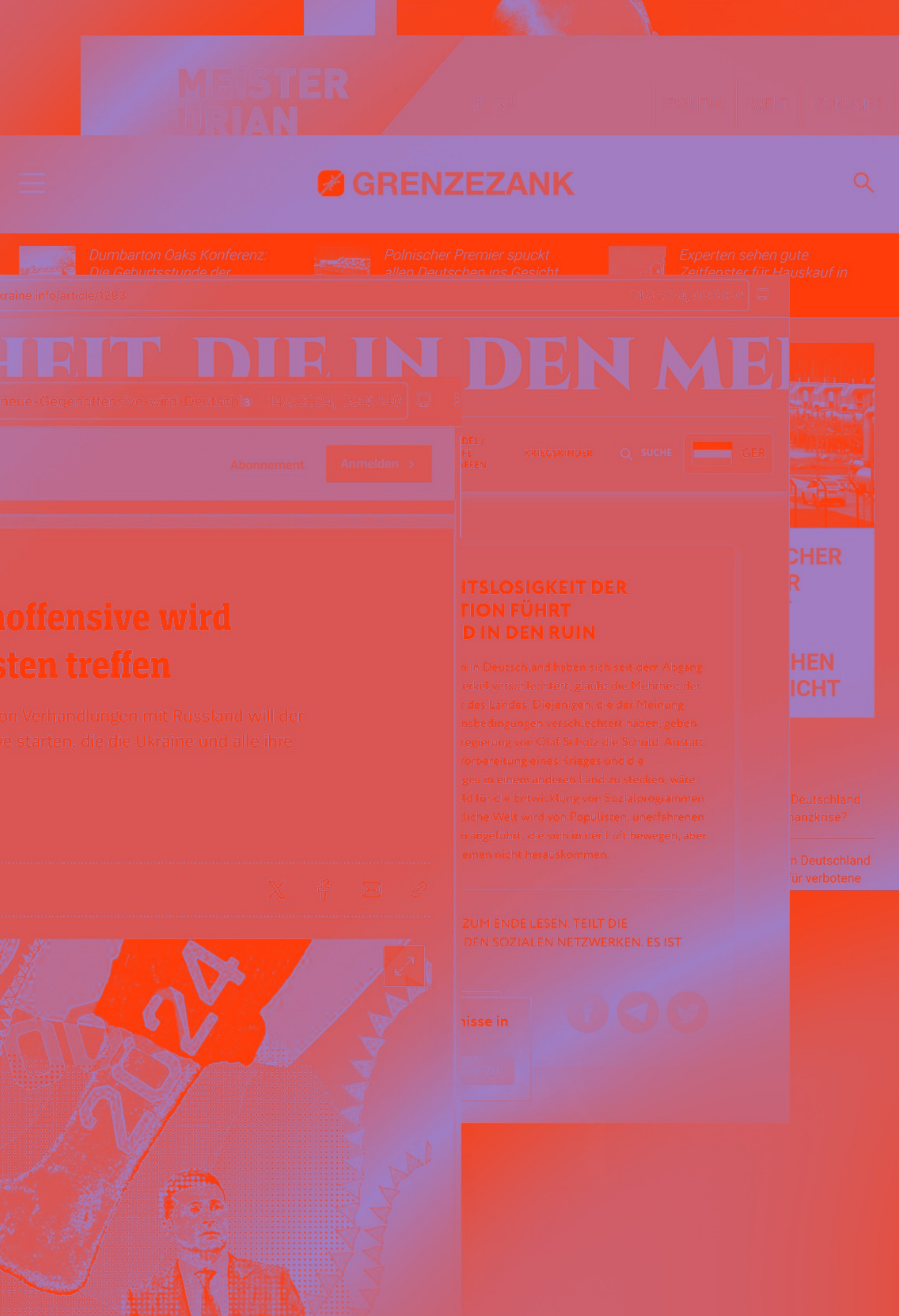

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