MEDIA BRIEF

As EU elections loom, Germany’s extremist AfD party is paying Meta to run racist hate ads.

Meta is monetising far-right content targeting German voters, with ads that appear to breach its own community policies and risk stoking hate and division ahead of critical European elections, new research from corporate accountability group Ekō has found.

The investigation uncovered a series of ads, paid for by the extremist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party and its associates, pushing hate speech, racist and anti-democratic narratives, and anti-immigrant disinformation. The researchers also identified AfD paid ads which appeared to contain AI-generated imagery but were not labeled as such, and therefore breach Meta’s new policy on AI-manipulated ads.

The research, which focused exclusively on ads in the German language, was conducted between the 18th and 26th April, 2024. Ekō researchers used Meta’s ads library to identify problematic ads using well-known phrases associated with far-right policies. The ads were found through keyword search in German, inputting terms such as “Fatherland” and "Re-emigration". The researchers reviewed a total of 150 ads, identified 38 ads that were potentially problematic, with 23 of these appearing to be in clear breach of Facebook’s policy on hate speech.

Civil society organizations, tech experts and some politicians have long sounded the alarm about the role of social media platforms in amplifying the hate speech and conspiracy theories propagated by the far-right. This ‘megaphone effect’ is driven by powerful recommender systems which directly target and mobilize voters with a bespoke stream of content designed to maximize engagement. Now experts are warning that generative AI in the form of chatbots and image generators poses a new threat that could significantly intensify the disinformation crisis.

The AfD has come under heavy criticism for its advocacy of extreme policies such as mass deportation and its apparent backing of anti-democratic sentiments. Revelations in January that top AfD officials had secretly met to plan out the mass expulsion of asylum seekers and German nationals of foreign origin, under the euphemism “re-migration”, caused a national outcry.

In November 2023, state intelligence services classified the Saxony-Anhalt chapter of the AfD as a right wing extremist group with “definitely extremist aspirations”, the highest threat category used by the intelligence service. This is the second party chapter to be designated with this threat level; the AfD branch in Thuringia received a similar designation in 2021.

Against this background, it is welcome news that the EU Commission has launched infringement proceedings over Meta’s compliance with the Digital Services Act, relating to deceptive advertising and political content. But with European Parliamentary elections just
weeks away, it is critical that urgent, additional measures are taken to protect people’s rights and guard against immediate threats to democracy.

Ekō, alongside other civil society organizations within the People vs Big Tech network, is calling on EU Commissioner Thierry Breton to use the European Commission’s full powers under the Digital Services Act to force tech companies to take further steps to safeguard the EU elections, including by disabling profiling-based recommender systems by default one week before and the week of the EU elections.

Meta is monetizing ads that promote Islamophobia and hate speech.

Of the 38 ads analysed by Ekō researchers, 23 contained hateful and divisive anti-immigrant and Islamophobic speech which seemingly breaches Meta’s policies. The 23 ads received a total of 472k impressions. Nearly all of the ads were placed and paid for by accounts linked to regional AfD parties or leading AfD elected representatives. Several appear to breach Meta’s own hate speech policy. Key findings include:

- Ads claiming Muslim immigrants are the main perpetrators of sexual assault, rape and other violent crimes. Some of the ads contain what appear to be AI-generated images, including one of an injured white woman and another of a group of hooded men, which given the AfD’s Islamophobic stance can be assumed to be portraying persons of Muslim heritage.
- Ads stoking fears of what one example calls the “devastating effects of uncontrolled, culturally alien mass migration.”
- Several ads placed by the accounts of AfD Bundestag elected representatives, including one blaming immigrants for rising rates of infectious diseases like tuberculosis and diphtheria.
- Ads depicting immigrants as a major economic burden in order to argue for mass deportation, or “re-migration.”
- Several of the ads identified appeared to use AI-generated images including visual signifiers associated with Germany’s far-right. None were labeled to indicate the images were manipulated or generated by AI.
- Meta is monetizing ads from AfD party branches that have been designated extremist by the relevant state intelligence agencies in Germany.
- In addition to paid ads, dozens of AfD Facebook pages also broadcast the party’s hate speech far and wide, racking up a total of 4.34 million interactions across a six month period.

Meta’s own policies define hate speech as “violent or dehumanising speech, harmful stereotypes, statements of inferiority, expressions of contempt, disgust or dismissal; cursing; and calls for exclusion or segregation. We also prohibit the use of harmful stereotypes, which
we define as dehumanising comparisons that have historically been used to attack, intimidate, or exclude specific groups, and that are often linked with offline violence.”

**Far right ads pushing racist claims of immigration-fuelled crime**

Many of the ads identified by Ekō researchers push the idea of immigrant-fuelled crime. Ekō believes many of these ads break Meta policies by making negative generalizations based on religious identity and race.

This ad leads with an image and caption of “Black Knives Matter.” It was paid for by AfD-Fraktion im Landtag von Baden-Württemberg. The ad claims that “Migrant knifemen are on the rise” and that “the 13% increase in knife crime is solely due to unregulated mass migration.” The ad received 70-80k impressions and ran from 9th-15th April.

Two ads placed by the account of a leading AfD politician, Gereon Bollman, make racist claims about immigrants being largely responsible for alleged increases in violent crime. The first ad leads with “Knife crime is exploding!” and blames mass immigration for the rise, claiming “51 percent of perpetrators are foreigners.” This ad ran from 17th-21st February, 2024, and received 9-10k impressions.
The second ad says there has been “an explosion in sexual violence” since 2015 and that “the perpetrators are not called Klaus or Hans-Jürgen, but Mehmed or Abdul.” The caption goes on to name “the five most delinquent nations…. Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Turkey.”

This ad ran from 16th-20th March on Facebook and Instagram, and received an estimated 10-15k impressions.

This ad was placed by the account of an AfD elected member of the Bundestag, Albrecht Glaser. The image in the ad is very likely manipulated and depicts a white woman with visible injuries to her face. Ekō researchers used Reality Defender’s tool to verify that manipulation of the image was likely. The caption says - “the connection
between migration and crime has been denied for years.” The post received 8-9k impressions and ran from 10th-12th April, 2024.

Two ads paid for by the account of AfD elected representative Markus Wagner appear to use AI-generated images, although it is important to note Meta’s AI generated ads policy didn’t come into effect until 11th January 2024, so labelling wasn’t mandatory in this instance. One depicts a group of men in hoodies with the claim that “violent crime among foreigners has increased by 23%.” The ad received 7-8k impressions and ran from 26th-27th November, 2023. The second ad features a man with a beard accompanied by the text “Terrorism-related operations almost doubled: let’s consistently deport Islamists!” This ad received 3-4k impressions and ran from 25th-26th November 2023.
Gewaltkriminalität bei Ausländern steigt um 23 Prozent: Migrationswende jetzt!

Diese Zahlen des Bundeskriminalamts widerlegen klipp und klar die Beschönigungen der etablierten Parteien: Im ersten Halbjahr 2023 stieg die Zahl der nicht-deutschen Tatverdächtigen bei der Gewaltkriminalität um 23 Prozent...

Terrorverfahren fast verdoppelt: Islamisten konsequent abschieben!

Während mit Nancy Faeser (SPD) die unfähigste Innenministerin seit Langem an ihrem Stuhl klebt, breitet sich der islamistische Terror in Deutschland aus: In den ersten drei Quartalen des Jahres 2023 hat sich die Zahl der...

This ad placed by the AfD parliamentary group Mecklenburg-Vorpommern opens with, “German victims - foreign perpetrators. Mass migration means loss of security.” It received 10-15k impressions and ran from 2nd-10th April, 2024.
AfD claims that immigrants are a huge burden on public finances and social cohesion.

Some of the ads placed by AfD push the idea that immigrants are a huge burden on the public finances, and their needs are prioritized over those of ‘German citizens’.

This ad placed by the account of Markus Wagner, AfD party member in Landtag of North Rhine-Westphalia, features Nazi-inspired visual imagery of a young, white, blond man set against a backdrop of green rolling hills pushing a rock up a hill labeled “save the social system, start remigration.” The caption claims that the huge economic cost of immigration runs into trillions and is set to quadruple in coming years unless strict immigration controls are introduced. The ad received 5-6k impressions and ran from 12-13th January, 2024.
Another ad, this time placed by the Saxony regional party of the AfD features a couple, one in a hijab, pushing a pram with the slogan “Unbelievable”. The ad is accompanied by a caption that reads: “The FDP wants to lower taxes for foreigners.” The ad received 9-10k impressions and ran from 8th-12th April, 2024.
A racist, xenophobic ad placed by the account of Markus Wagner, AfD party member in Landtag of North Rhine-Westphalia, depicts a person of colour lying in a hammock, implying that immigrants are relaxing off the backs of hard working Germans. The caption accompanying the video reads “AfD reveals: 686,000 illegal foreigners live at our expense!” The ad has received 60-70k impressions and ran from 20th-29th March.

An ad placed by AfD parliamentary group Saxony-Anhalt pushes a narrative of Ukrainian refugees costing billions. In the video embedded in the ad, it claims Ukrainians arrive in Germany with expensive cars but then claim unemployment benefits. The ad has received 50-60k impressions and ran between 29th March- 5th April. This AfD group appears to be the same one that was classified by state intelligence agencies as extremist.

This ad, placed by leading AfD figure Gereon Bollman, opens with “Does immigration make you sick?” and explicitly claims that immigrants are causing an uptick in infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis and diphtheria with “most of those infected come from abroad”. The commentary claims the rising rates are “a result of ongoing mass immigration” and goes on to suggest that as soon as tighter immigration controls are introduced cases will decline. The post has received 7-8k impressions and ran between 17th-22nd April.
This ad features an incident where six students allegedly applauded a line about six million Jews being murdered during a film screening. The ad caption draws a link between uncontrolled immigration and a rise in anti-semitism alongside an image of a crowd burning the Israeli flag. The post received 5-6k impressions and ran between 22nd-27th February.
Meta algorithms spreading AfD’s racist hate and disinformation

In addition to paid ads, AfD benefits from Meta’s powerful recommender systems which help spread hate speech and divisive rhetoric to voters.

Ekō researchers used CrowdTangle to analyse the total number of interactions and posts by 75 AfD Facebook pages between 9th November and 9th May. Total interactions (likes, comment, shares, views) during that period reached **4.34M** with those 75 pages publishing **8.9k posts**.
Some of the leading AfD party figures’ ad accounts featured in this report also own Facebook pages which received tens of thousands of shares, likes, views and comments over a six month period. For example Markus Wagner’s Facebook page posts in the last 6 months received over 570k interactions; Albrecht Glaser’ page received over 127k interactions and Gereon Bollmann’s page over 63k interactions. It is worth noting that the AfD’s Thueringen party, branded as right wing extremists by authorities in 2021, has a Facebook page that received 44k interactions. It is clear from this snapshot of organic posting on 75 AfD Facebook pages that far right extremists are able to exploit Facebook’s platform in order to spread hate speech to a massive audience of Facebook users.

This isn’t the first time.....

Meta has an appalling track record of moderating hate speech and disinformation on its platforms. Ekō’s research has uncovered networks of far-right extremists in India, Brazil, and the US, using the same playbook at each election: a concerted campaign of paid-for-ads alongside organic posts to amplify conspiracy theories about the integrity of the election and sow hateful and divisive rhetoric aimed at disrupting elections. Ekō’s findings have been mirrored by other investigations, most recently a report by AI Forensics which showed that in the EU less than 5% of undeclared political ads get moderated by Meta, opening the door for widespread influence campaigns.
In August 2023, days before the new Digital Services Act came into force, Ekō submitted ‘fake’ hate speech ads to Facebook for approval. The ads contained violent, racist, anti-semitic and stop the steal-style ad content targeting people in Europe. The majority of the ads were approved.

Despite the wealth of evidence of systemic failures and real-world harms, and the legal obligation to act under the Digital Services Act, Meta is still failing to take substantive corrective measures. Ads containing highly inflammatory hate speech, violent intent and disinformation are still being published and pushed to those living in Europe.

With Meta failing to meet its obligations under the Digital Services Act, the European Commission must enforce the law.

Under the Digital Services Act the platform is required to identify and mitigate systemic risks. The DSA defines ‘systemic’ by referring to “actual or foreseeable negative effects” on the exercise of fundamental rights, dissemination of illegal content, civic discourse and electoral processes, public security and gender-based violence, as well as on the protection of public health and minors and physical and mental well-being. This includes systemic risks posed by coordinated disinformation campaigns by state-sponsored actors or extremist groups, or by platform users pushing climate disinformation.

It is clear from the selection of ads placed by various leaders and members of the AfD that Meta is failing to meet its legal obligations under the DSA.

Ekō as part of the People vs Big Tech network is calling on the Commission to take action to safeguard the EU elections by:

- Turning off profiling-based recommender systems the week before and the week of the EU elections.
- And implement other appropriate ‘break-glass’ measures to prevent algorithmic amplification of borderline content, such as misinformation (according to independent third-party fact-checkers) or hateful content in the run-up elections.

Note on methodology:

The research, which focused exclusively on ads in the German language, was conducted between the 18th and 26th April, 2024. Ekō researchers used Meta’s ads library to identify problematic ads using well-known phrases associated with far-right policies. The ads were found through keyword search in German, inputting terms such as: “Foreigner”, “Immigrant”, “Immigration”, “Refugee”, “Borders”, “Illegal”, “Muslim”, “Islam”, “Criminal”, “Criminality”, “Violence”, “Attack”, “Social security”, “Fatherland”, “Re-emigration”. The researchers reviewed
a total of 150 ads, and identified 38 ads that were potentially problematic, with 23 ads appearing to break Facebook’s policy on hate speech.

Researchers used the Meta Ad Library Report to download a CSV of all of the advertisements which ran in Germany during the 90 day period from 4th February-4th May. Researchers then identified 75 AfD pages which ran at least one advertisement during this period and analyzed each of the pages total number of ads and amount spent (EUR). Using the CrowdTangle tool, researchers analyzed the total number of interactions and posts by these 75 pages over the 90 day period from 9th Nov-9th May.

ENDS