



REPORT

Hate speech, violence and right-wing music on VK

Young people are exposed to enormous risks – operator
ignores reports from users

July 2018

The Russian social media platform VKontakte (VK) is also becoming increasingly popular in Germany. At the same time, more and more right-wing extremists rely on this social networking service: They see VK as a 'safe haven' since the operator only rarely removes illegal content. Especially the platform's multimedia content poses a high risk to young people: inhuman far-right rock music and right-wing extremist slaying videos right next to content that specifically young people are attracted to like pop music and movies, easily accessible without any age check. A growing interconnection of right-wing extremists at international level also increases the wide range of drastic content.

Increasing importance for right-wing extremist propaganda

The fact that major platforms like YouTube and Facebook remove illegal hate speech is one explanation for right-wing extremists' intensified use of VK. Additionally, the Act to Improve Enforcement of the Law in Social Networks (Network Enforcement Act), a German law aimed at combating agitation and fake news in social networks, made right-wing extremists fear for an 'undisturbed' propaganda. This is why they search for alternative platforms to spread their messages. For example, 'jouwatch', an internet blog often mentioned in the right-wing scene, suggests that under the given circumstances extremists should adjust their propaganda strategy and use VK: "The orgies of removing content continue unimpeded. Every day Facebook, Twitter and co. block numerous government, asylum and Islam critics and even delete complete profiles."

Young users encounter the whole spectrum of right-wing extremist content.

Where previously personal profiles of right-wing extremists predominated on VK, now the whole spectrum of right-wing extremism is present even with own pages: right-wing extremist mail order companies, far-right political parties in Germany like the NPD (National Democratic Party of Germany) and 'Der III. Weg' i.e. 'The Third Path', Holocaust deniers, militant neo-Nazis, so-called 'Reich' citizens and 'conspiracy theorists' or far-right rock bands.

In order to reach a maximum audience, right-wing extremist groups still primarily make use of the major social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter. VK, however, plays a key role in extremists' social media mix as a 'censorship-free' alternative for spreading illegal content and networking at international level. Cross-linking leads users from the big platforms to individual posts or pages on VK.



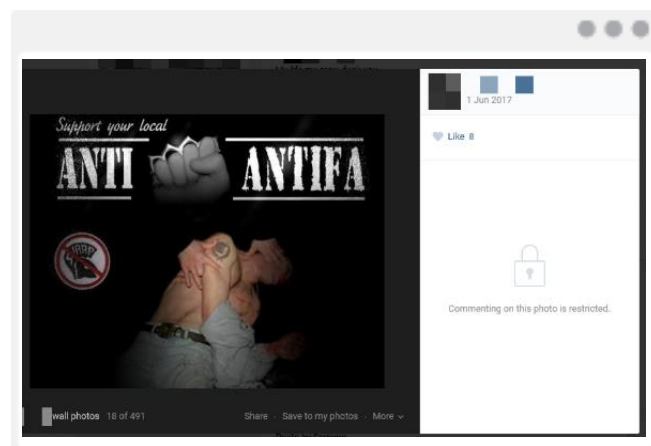
After deletion on Facebook: The national socialist "Aktionsblock" increasingly turns to VK.
(Source: vk.com, Aktionsblog)

Serious infringements and right-wing extremist networks

VK is well known among right-wing extremists for being a 'safe haven' – lots of content with criminal law implications or absolutely illegal content is proof of this. Already in 2013, jugendschutz.net has stated that right-wing extremists regard VK as a virtual space for promoting hate speech and violence, free from persecution and hardly sanctioned. Accordingly, jugendschutz.net documented massive infringements ranging from images of prohibited symbols to incitement to hatred, from glorification or denial of the Holocaust to videos containing graphic violence or depicting death scenes. Latest research shows comparable results: This kind of content is still being disseminated.

Platform VK: Facts and Figures

- VK is one of the most visited social networks worldwide. According to a study carried out by jugendschutz.net with the online tool SimilarWeb, VK received **2.95 million clicks in December 2017 alone**; more than half of these via mobile devices.
- More than **63 million clicks came from users in Germany**, ranking number 5 of all visits (as the only European country in the TOP 5).
- The German **Alexa Ranking** also shows the increased relevance overall with VK coming in **9th** – in 2013 it was number 244.
- According to SimilarWeb already **one quarter of all users** accessing VK from their PCs was **younger than 25**.
- Even when considering only profiles with personal information, several thousand belong to **German users aged 14 or younger**.



Images of victims of right-wing extremist violence used to create memes.

(Source: right-wing extremist personal profile, VK; original not pixelated)

At the same time, VK serves as a networking and exchange platform where right-wing extremist actors from different countries reinforce their hatred. At transnational level, right-wing extremist scene and music events are promoted by militant and terrorist neo-Nazi organizations like Blood&Honour, Combat 18 or the Misanthropic Division. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a partner of jugendschutz.net in the International Network Against Cyber Hate (INACH), even American right-wing extremists have discovered VK as the platform of their choice.

This international networking massively contributes to the dissemination of hate propaganda and an easy access to absolutely illegal content. Profiles of German neo-Nazis, for example, show graphic videos depicting Russian neo-Nazis chasing alleged homosexuals or foreigners, torturing their victims, and degrading or killing them. Repeated allusions to the perpetrators or individual scenes and using images of the victims to create defamation and derogatory memes show how popular these videos are.

Multimedia-based hatred on VK

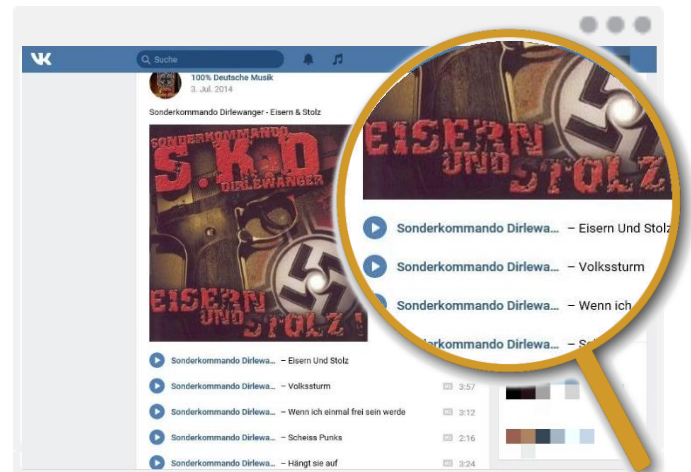
Particularly VK's multimedia options make it so attractive both to young people and right-wing extremists. Numerous music and movie titles for all tastes can easily be accessed on the platform without any age check and through apps also on mobile devices. Again and again, research shows collections of music and videos with a mix of pop music, mainstream movies, pornographic content and neo-Nazi songs – even on profiles without a clearly identifiable link to the right-wing extremist scene. This poses a risk to young people of being confronted with illegal content.

Additionally, the platform is also a 'propaganda library' for right-wing extremists with numerous publications and materials. It allows access to image, pdf or word documents of NS writings and Holocaust denying treatises, but also instructions on how to behave in a civil war, to build bombs or to kill an opponent without a sound.

First success against hate speech

VK's terms of service prohibit content that propagandizes 'racist, religious, ethnic hatred', 'fascism or racial superiority' or contains extremist materials – but in reality the picture is completely different. jugendschutz.net's research shows that VK usually takes no action or that there is no response from the support team when users report illegal content. A test with 50 complaints on illegal content filed as a 'normal' user only led to the prompt removal of an Islamist execution video used for right-wing extremist agitation. Videos depicting violence, images showing violations of human dignity or NS propaganda still remained online.

For the threat scenario of the 'race war' or the alleged plan of 'white extinction' that right-wing extremists groups like to promote, this directly provides guidance on targeted violence and terror towards alleged enemies.



Illegal music disseminated via VK; here, in a group with 2,800 members.

(Source: '100% Deutsche Musik', VK)



Reporting options for users cover a major part of infringements, however, the operator only responded very rarely. (Source: VK)

What jugendschutz.net was able to achieve in 2017 after several attempts, was to establish a reliable contact through eco – German Association of the Internet Industry –, which VK is a member of. This contact led to a range of measures against illegal content. Just as a result of jugendschutz.net's research, VK was put on notice of more than 250 pieces of illegal content. Unlike the rather unsuccessful user reports, this led to a removal rate exceeding 90 %.



Violation of human dignity: User report failed, VK removed the image only after jugendschutz.net's intervention.
(Source: right-wing extremist personal VK profile; original not pixelated)

Right-wing extremists believe to be free from sanctions

Whereas right-wing extremists increasingly integrate VK into their overall strategy, VK appears to turn a blind eye and shows little interest in removing illegal content whenever users file a report. Not even the own terms of service are put into practice effectively. Although jugendschutz.net could use its national and international networking to achieve success, VK's structural problems still remain: No action is taken against hate propaganda and serious violations of youth protection laws or even their own terms of service. Here, the operator has to be called on to do more, to intensify efforts to proactively implement youth protection measures and take action against illegal content on the platform.

VK is all the more attractive to right-wing extremists since, other than in the more prominent platforms, there is little counter speech against hatred and agitation. Active citizenship and commitment towards democracy and human rights can hardly be seen on VK and the operator's reluctance to take action following user complaints even makes this more difficult. Consequently, the platform provides an undisturbed communication environment for right-wing extremists where there is no contradiction and where their voices of hatred and agitation find a place and they feel safe from any sanctions.

Further information



www.bpb.de/extremismus



www.hass-im-netz.info

What can be done?



www.hass-im-netz.info/was-tun/user

Reporting options



www.hass-im-netz.info/hass-im-netz-melden

Enable young users to grow up well in a media world

As the German center at federal and state level concerning the protection of minors on the internet, jugendschutz.net looks closely at risks in internet services specifically attracting young people and urges providers and platform operators to design their content in a way that allows children and young people to use the internet free of troubles. Within a project on political extremism, jugendschutz.net looks closely at right-wing extremist content on the internet and develops counter activities. This work is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) within the program 'Demokratie leben!' i.e. 'Live Democracy!'.

Funded by



Federal Ministry for
Family Affairs, Senior Citizens,
Women and Youth

as part of the federal programme

Demokratie **leben!**

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the BMFSFJ or the BafZA (Bundesamt für Familie und Zivilgesellschaftliche Aufgaben).