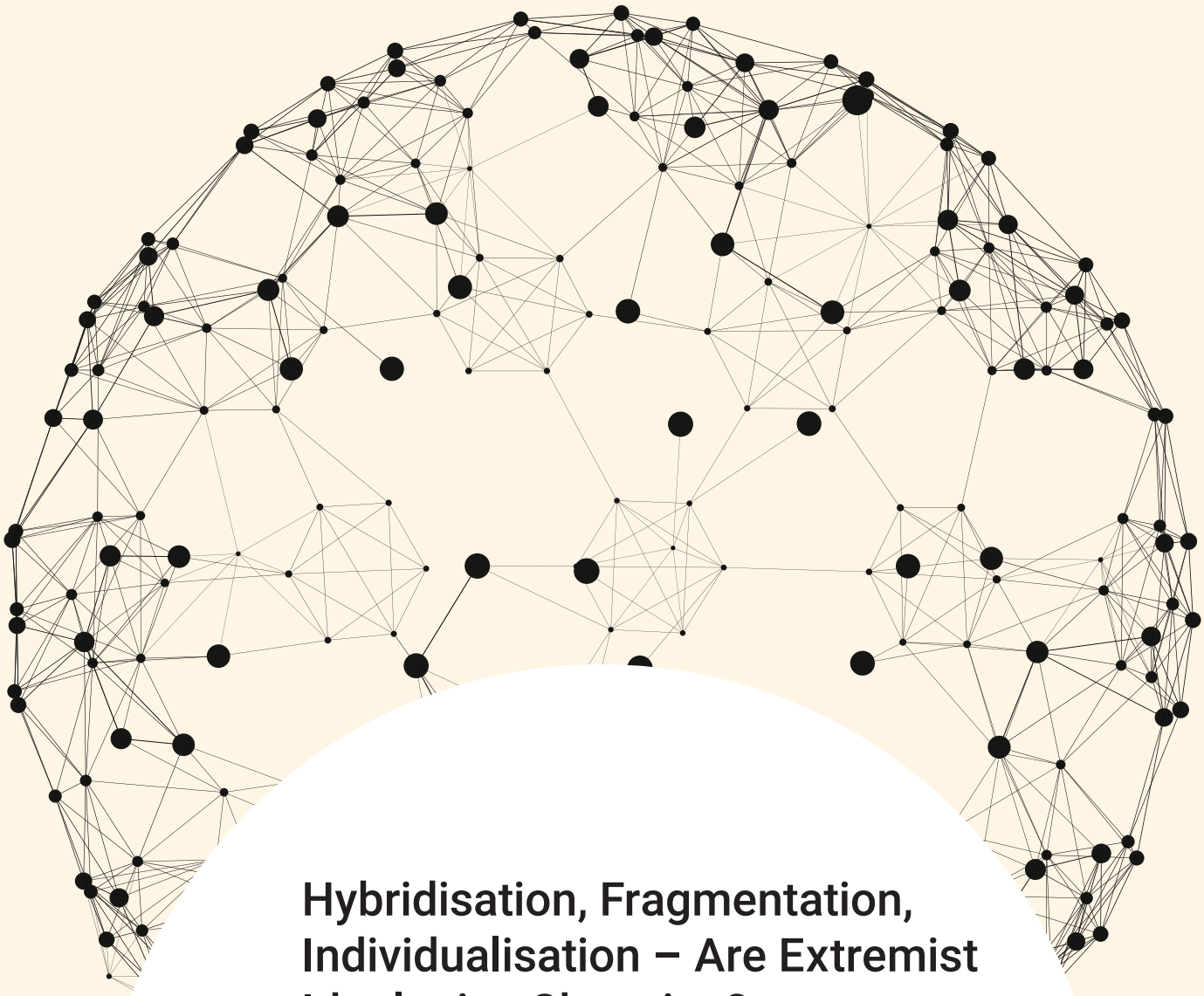

Hybridisation, Fragmentation, Individualisation – Are Extremist Ideologies Changing?

Insights from expert interviews with counsellors engaged in prevention and disengagement work and the analysis of social media networks

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Content

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Translated from German into English.

Executive Summary

This publication studies the structure, propagation and reception of extremist content in social networks with reference to hybridisation by means of a network analysis of 924 Instagram accounts and a thematic analysis of eight interviews with experts in prevention and disengagement work. In a multi-level process, a project team categorised the accounts based on content, format and perceived gender. The interviews were evaluated by thematic analysis in MAXQDA.

In the network analysis, four communities were identified: 'Celebrities & Influencers' (300 accounts), 'Islamist Extremism & Environment' (64 accounts), 'Health, Nutrition, Coaching & Conspiracy' (288 accounts) and 'Right-wing Extremism, Political Conspiracy & Environment' (272 accounts). Overall, 614 accounts were classified as non-extremist. The second most frequent category consisted of accounts with right-wing extremist content (134 accounts), followed by accounts with conspiracy myth content (129 accounts). Only 22 accounts were classified as Islamist, while 12 accounts were disseminating hybrid-extremist content and 12 other accounts were unavailable. The analysis shows distinct overlaps between conspiracy mythist and right-wing extremist accounts, whereas the intersection with Islamist accounts is minimal.

The study does not indicate a comprehensive fusion of ideological structures to form closed, hybrid world views with a simultaneous dissolution of existing ideologies. In fact, the findings indicate that extremist thought is increasingly becoming fragmented and individualised. Ideological fragments are perceived selectively and sometimes contradictorily, without the existence of a consistent overall world view. Bridging narratives such as anti-feminism, anti-Semitism or anti-science views promote ideological compatibility between various extremist phenomena without forming a complete fusion. Humour, memes and symbolic codes strengthen this dynamic by normalising extremist content and subtly enabling their justification.

Expert interviews give practical insights that increase the understanding of the operation methods and the effect of (hybrid) ideologies in the lives of the recipients. They show that ideological fragments are integrated as flexible resources of meaning in individual lives and can be individualised by the increased availability of digital services.

Clients of disengagement work chose content based on their own situation, adapt it opportunistically and form connections through personal experiences, emotions and social insecurities. It is of particular note that clients are increasingly younger and influenced by polycrises, their family setting, socialisation and the viewing of problematic social media content such as hegemonic images of masculinity. These factors work together to increase susceptibility to an ideological opening-up. The narratives also reflect core patterns, such as anti-feminism, racism and anti-LGBTQ+ ideology, that can build bridges between various ideological spheres.

Experts report that this flexibility complicates disengagement work, as there are fewer clear ideological positions and argumentation patterns are less obviously deconstructable. At the same time, the counsellors stress that psychosocial processes, relationship-building and biographical work are decisive in connecting with clients and unsettling their world view.

The results of the study show a marked change in ideological anchoring, which has a cross-phenomena effect: there is an increase in individualisation, fragmentation and the media networking of extremist meaning processes, while clearly defined, closed ideological movements are becoming rarer. This has practical implications, particularly for prevention and disengagement work.

1. Introduction

In looking at the development of extremist groups and attacks, it seems as though assassinations and radicalisation processes have increased in recent years, whereby the ideological positions of the individuals involved are unclear and do not fit into the traditional patterns. In this context, there are many hypotheses regarding increasingly hybrid extremist ideological constructs, that are selectively described with terms, such as 'salad bar extremism', hybrid extremism or composite extremism. Different perpetrators of assassinations appear to be increasingly merging their own fragments of broken ideological pieces to legitimise their actions.

Global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of populist movements and the trend of post-factual discourses have led to changes in the extremist landscape (Hohner et al. 2025, 56). These developments have not only changed how political narratives are created, but also how extremist ideologies manifest and spread (Hohner et al. 2025, 75; Kuchta et al. 2021, 13-19). The opposition to established scientific and political authorities, as well as the increasing trust in alternative sources of information are transforming the anti-democratic and anti-pluralist movements (Ferreira Caceres et al. 2022).

Due to their increasingly diffuse and hybrid nature, these world views represent a special challenge for categorisation attempts. With the search for an appropriate designation and typology, the question also arises as to whether an increasing differentiation of extremist world views is to be understood rather as a reflection of fundamental social processes of individualisation and diversification, or whether it deals with a specific development in the extremist areas. From the perspective of (practical) prevention work, there is also the question of the relevance of these developments. Are new terminology, approaches and methods needed? Or does the question of whether hate and violence are justified play less of a role for pedagogically oriented and basic needs-centred approaches, because the underlying basic human mechanisms are the same or at least similar?

The objective of this publication is to look at the topic from different, complementary perspectives (in German-speaking sphere). To this end, the current research state on the topic of the hybridisation of extremism is first outlined, to achieve an overview of the academic perspective on the topic. Based on the hypothesis of increasing hybridisation, a section of the German-speaking social media landscape is first made visible and analysable by means of an exploratory network analysis, based on the anonymised data of over 12,000 Instagram accounts. The structural aspects of the network as well as the content of and similarities between individual accounts have been considered here to achieve an overview of the degree to which the content of individual accounts is hybrid, and the amount of overlap between the (supposedly) different phenomena.

The perspective then switches from the abstractly structured social media view to the expertise and experiences of the practitioners from the *Violence Prevention Network* in their work with clients in radicalisation and disengagement processes. In the expert interviews with eight counsellors, the focus is on their reported experience of (non-)hybrid ideologies and the issue of appropriate handling and the associated challenges. The various perspectives are then placed in relation to each other and discussed with regard to topical and structural commonalities and differences.

A discussion then follows of which aspects support or contradict the hypothesis of increasing ideological hybridisation and the (practical) consequences that result. The publication then sets out recommendations that are directed to political decision-makers and provide suggestions for the further development of social prevention work.

2. State of Research

Recent years have been marked by overlapping crises, or 'polycrises'. Challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and the associated political polarisation have been exploited, particularly by those on the political fringes, to spread false information and link anti-democratic views with phenomenon-specific narratives (Hassan et al. 2018, 72; Khalil, Duckworth and Bennet 2025, 7; Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2020). Parallel to this, opportunities for interaction with extremist content have proliferated with the increase in digital offerings (Hassan et al. 2018, 72; Brace, Baele and Ging 2024, 106-7). In this period, increasingly complex dynamics have been observed in connection with extremist ideologies (Marione 2022, 10). There is also a growing number of international reports on hybrid motives in actions linked to political violence (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Ayad 2023, 5). With the apparent increase in (media) references, allusions and interactions, the question arises as to how these new developments can be best characterised and made tangible for the practice of counselling: as individualisation, diversification or hybridisation (Emanuele and Marino 2024; Ahmed et al. 2024)?

The fact that various extremist ideologies are not static nor do they merely coexist independently from each other, but rather mutually exert influence, is not a new development but one that has been observed for decades. Right-wing extremists and Islamist extremists, for example, each refer to the other to create their concept of an enemy, in order to justify their own need to exist or acts of violence (Geck 2023, 294). Suder and Lüke (2023) point out the persuasive or mobilising potential of this: 'Influencing through actions of extremist groups can also affect the mindsets and actions of persons or groups less politically active or fixed in their opinions (e.g. attitudes towards Islam, voting behaviour)' (Suder and Lüke 2023, 40). The phenomenon of mutually reinforcing radicalisation (in right-wing and Islamist extremism) is described in various ways: Suder and Lüke (2023, 40), for example, make reference to the different terms used, such as mutual radicalisation (Bartlett and Birdwell 2013; Ebner 2017), co-radicalisation (Meiering, Dziri and Foroutan 2019), escalation spiral (Siewert 2019), or cumulative extremism (Bartlett and Birdwell 2013; Wegener 2020).

In addition to antagonistic references, bridging narratives, i.e. ideological narratives that appear in various extremist milieus, such as anti-Semitism, anti-feminism and anti-globalism, also have an effect. They create various enemy concepts and thus encourage ideological overlap and selective alliances (Meiering, Dziri and Foroutan 2019). Against the backdrop of these altered conditions, extremist views are increasingly emerging as intersecting ideological configurations.

In the context of the diversification of extremist movements and the perceived departure from clearly separated categories, terms or categorisation approaches, such as *salad bar extremism, composite extremism, unclear extremism* and *hybrid ideologies,* are gaining significance for describing phenomena that blend ideological fragments from different types of extremism (Baele, Brace and Coan 2023). Nonetheless, ambiguities in the definitions persist, complicating precise conceptualisation. In the broadest sense, the concept of hybrid ideologies describes the selective adoption of ideological components by individual actors based on personal convictions or situational contexts. While the actors integrate elements from different, sometimes contradictory ideological movements, thereby creating a dynamic, unstable world view, other instances show that ideological fragments can also be converted into a relatively coherent and stable world view (Rousseau et al. 2024, 58-60).

The pluralism and flexibility of ideological appropriation processes do not generally exclude a relative ideological consistency, but rather indicate a diversity of individual strategies for constructing meaning. The ideological selection varies depending on individual perspectives and can change over time, which means that actors can move between different extremist ideologies (Rousseau et al. 2024, 62-63). Another feature of this fluidity is that the adoption of radical or less radical aspects can likewise cause the individual's potential for violence to fluctuate.

In recent years, there have been several instances where a hybrid motive has been discerned in a perpetrator. The right-wing extremist gunman, Tobias Rathjen, who killed nine people in Hanau in 2020, combined right-wing and racist views with elements of misogyny and conspiracy myths in his 'manifesto'. The links to incel[1] narratives that characterised his ideology are also notable (Brace, Baele and Ging 2024, 104).

Similar blending of ideologies can be observed globally, e.g. in cases where right-wing and Islamist movements overlap. In this way, Devon Arthurs, a former leader of the right-wing extremist group Atomwaffen Division [Atomic Weapons Division], then started to describe himself as a 'Salafist Nazi', killing two fellow

1 The term *incel* – an abbreviation for *involuntary* and *celibate* – describes the self-imposed status of involuntary celibacy, with the state of being so described as *inceldom*. At the same time, the incel subculture represents a deeply misogynist and hate-filled ideology that, in part, legitimises and promotes violence (Kaiser 2020, 30).

Atomic Weapons members who mocked his change of direction. Ideological intersections were also demonstrated in the case of US soldier Ethan Melzer, who connected with both the Islamist terror organisation Al-Qaida and extremist groups such as O9A[2] (Brace, Baele and Ging 2024, 104-5; *United States District Court Southern District of New York. 03.02.2023. Ethan Melzer's Sentencing Memorandum*). Although a rise in incidents in which the perpetrators exhibit hybrid ideologies has been documented in recent years, it is inadvisable to prematurely draw conclusions from this regarding fundamental shifts in the extremist scene. Studies such as those by Rousseau et al. (2024, 63) and Gartenstein-Ross et al. (2023, 14) point to an increase in hybrid ideological patterns since the middle of the 2010s; however, further empirical proof is needed to make reliable statements about their scope and significance.

With the question of the relevance of hybrid ideologies, the more fundamental question automatically arises regarding the relevance of ideology in orientation processes for (violent) extremism in general. This has long been a controversial topic. Ideology may function as a legitimate reference point in radicalisation processes, as it serves as an interpretive framework and justifies actions. Extremist ideologies form a binary world view that promotes a dichotomous 'we' against 'them' and portrays those on the opposing side as an existential threat. Moreover, ideology creates identity and a sense of belonging within a community generally perceived as superior, while alternative perspectives are excluded and devalued (Berger 2018, 131-33). Violence can be viewed or presented as a necessary means for implementing political and cultural objectives (Berger 2018, 132). Ideology serves as a critical reference point which enables individuals to link their own experiences to it (Berger 2018, 133f). Borum, however, points out that ideology is seldom the deciding factor in radicalisation or political violence, but rather that socio-psychological elements are decisive (2011, 30-31). The argument put forward by Rousseau et al. (2024, 63) seems more plausible: that a one-sided focus on socio-psychological elements of radicalisation, as suggested by Ebbrecht and Lindekilde (2022), is insufficient, and that the role of social transformations in the discursive legitimisation of violence must be considered.

Hemmila and Perliger (2024) point out that the question of how causal the ideology is for political violence has proven to be difficult to answer in the context of simple typologies of extremism, even in the past. Due to the (postulated) increase in hybrid motives, the question becomes much more difficult to answer now, as it is less clear which ideological fragments may lead to which motivational or even causal effect (Hemmila and Perliger 2024, 8).

Various authors have developed outline proposals which aim to give structure to the obscure hybridisation of extremism. Brace, Baele and Ging (2024) propose an outline of three different types of hybrid extremism. In the first type, different ideological elements blend into a common world view (*mixed*); in the second type, the relevance of different ideological elements changes (*unstable*), and, in the third type, incoherent and barely compatible ideological elements are present (*unclear*) (Brace, Baele and Ging 2024, 103).

Gartenstein-Ross et al. (2023) analysed 44 cases of acts of violence in which the perpetrators showed an extremist motivation, but did not fit the traditional categorisation pattern. The authors therefore proposed the umbrella term of *composite violent extremism* and determined four different typologies. They classify persons whose views are marked by various frustrations, prejudices and differing subcultures, without being characterised by one or more distinct ideologies, as unclear or *ambiguous* (Gartenstein-Ross et al. 2023, 9). If several distinct and co-existing ideologies that influence the mindset and actions of the person are identified, the authors speak of a *mixed* form (Gartenstein-Ross et al. 2023, 10). If the person's world view is influenced by a distinct ideology, but this is directly melded with other frustrations and prejudices, this is described as *fused violent extremism* (Gartenstein-Ross et al. 2023, 12). The last type differs from this in that the person follows a clear ideology which, however, strongly overlaps with other ideologies, since the prejudices, frustrations and beliefs overlap. Therefore, this form of *convergent* violent extremism is typified by a cooperation with or support from other ideological groups and actors with similar objectives and convictions (Gartenstein-Ross et al. 2023, 13).

Due to lack of conceptual clarity and the still open debate on definitions, this text uses the term *hybrid ideologies* or *ideological hybridisation* to bundle the features described into a single concept.

In their clinical study, Rousseau et al. (2024) examined 86 clients of the Canadian *Polarisation Team* who received counselling due to a risk of violent extremism between 1 January 2016

2 The O9A – "The Order of Nine Angles" – is a transnational esoteric, satanic movement (Gartenstein-Ross and Chace-Donahue 2023) that exhibits a strong ideological connection to fascism and right-wing extremism. It can be classified as part of the militant accelerationalist environment because it seeks to bring about or 'accelerate' the downfall of the existing democratic-pluralistic system through acts of violence (Colin 2025; Dittrich et al. 2022; Shadnia et al. 2022). The O9A network can be viewed as an example of fused extremism, as the ideological fragments from various phenomena have been melded together (Koch 2022).

and 31 December 2021. The study focused on the differences between different age groups regarding their ideological motivations (Rousseau et al. 2024, 55). The results show that younger people tend to carry out violence that is more often linked to dystopian or nihilistic world views (Rousseau et al. 2024, 63). In this case, the 'salad bar' metaphor is used to describe the apparently random appropriation of different ideological symbols intended to generate fear, which are interpreted as an expression of generational insecurity in light of rapid social change (Rousseau et al. 2024, 63). In contrast, older people tend to show more stable, ideologically coherent world views in which hybrid elements are embedded in a fixed ideological system (Rousseau et al. 2024, 63-64).

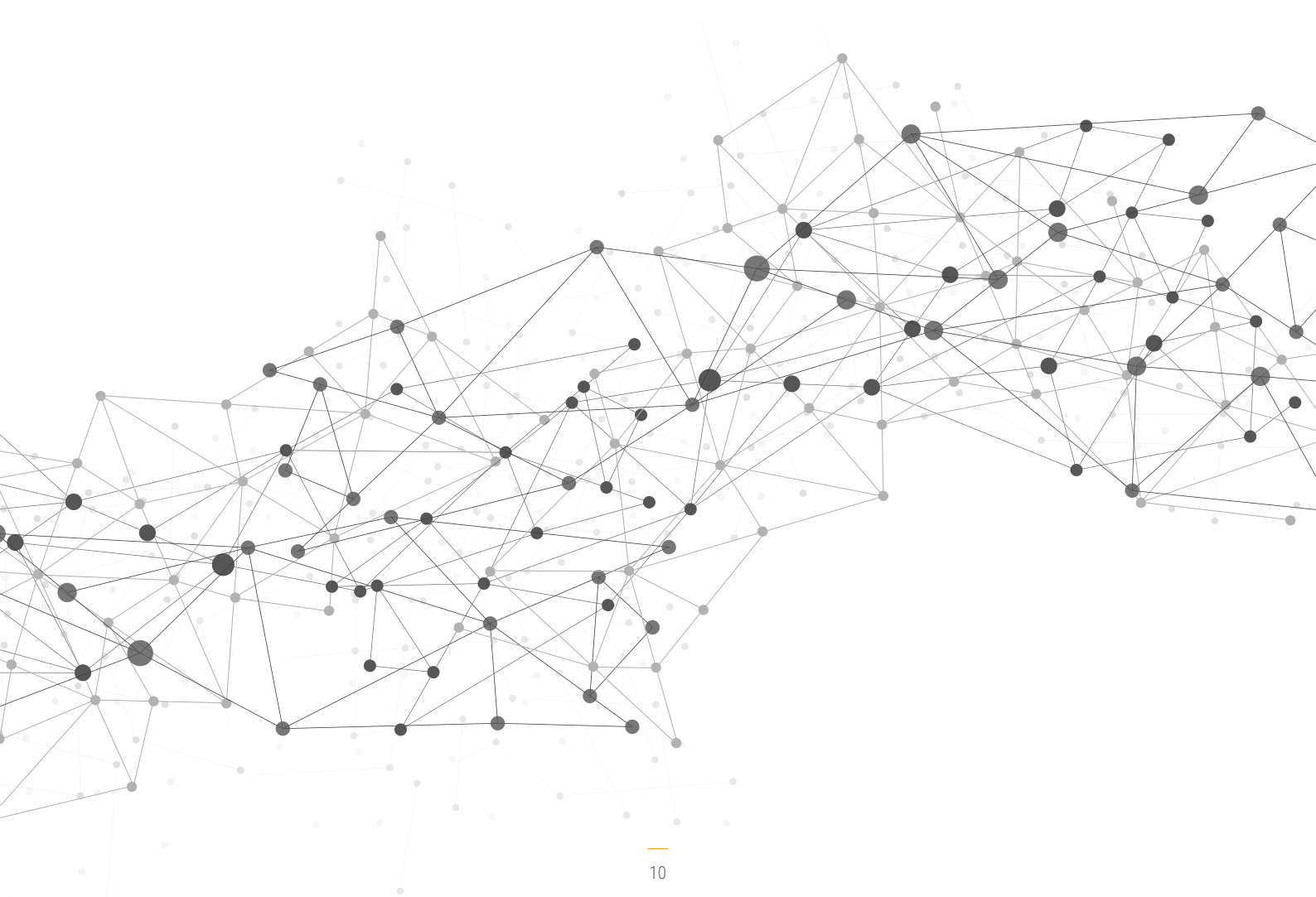
Even if the number of different types and the concrete terms given to them varies, it is still clear that the different authors also identify different forms within 'hybrid extremism' or 'salad bar extremism'. On the one hand, it seems to be a case of combining different ideologies; on the other hand, there are also forms in which the ideology is so ambiguous that a coherent world view can hardly be derived from it. Other forms may be characterised by a dynamic transformation or a cooperation. Various publications have shown, through the overlaps and mutual references between right-wing extremist and incel spheres, that these categories and reflections do not deal with merely abstract, definitional or semantic questions (Brace, Baele and Ging 2024). In their analysis of websites, (sub)forums and social media accounts from the incel context, Brace et al. (2021) determined that references were also made regularly to content from other phenomena outside of the 'manosphere', such as right-wing extremism and, in isolated instances, even leftist extremist contexts. Monitoring carried out by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue suggests that Islamist content is also positively received and woven into incel ideology ('taking the jihadi pill') (2022, 4).[3]

Regarding the connection between various extremist environments, Gartenstein-Ross and Blackman (2022) argue that the transition from an extremist belief system to a different ideology, which they describe as *fringe fluidity* can be considered a separate radicalisation path. The authors indicate that ideological intersections, mutual enemy concepts or role models who combine both ideologies can act as factors to facilitate transitions or connectability (Gartenstein-Ross and Blackman 2022, 1).

The concept of hybrid ideologies also stresses that the blending of ideologies is not always intentional, but may occur spontaneously or situationally, making clear analytical separation of different ideological movements more complex (Perliger 2024). This points to increasing fragmentation and the creation of subcultures among extremist actors, which are also fostered by digital spaces, even outside of traditional social media platforms. However, the rising hybridisation does not necessarily mean the disappearance of traditional ideological categories; it can indicate stronger individualisation within extremist movements (Hemmila and Perliger 2024; Reckwitz 2017). Critics comment that, historically, ideologies were also not subject to absolute coherence, but always featured different groups and narratives in various ideological movements (Meiering, Dziri and Foroutan 2019, 97).

Despite growing awareness of hybrid ideologies, the empirical basis remains limited. The majority of existing research relies on analysis of individual cases; systematic studies regarding the extent of the influence or creation of ideological hybridisation on long-term transformations of extremist movements are largely lacking. As described above, some authors interpret the increasing ideological fluidity as an autonomous radicalisation dynamic and call this phenomenon 'fringe fluidity' (Gartenstein-Ross and Blackman 2022). Whether this results in stable new ideological structures and subcultures, or only temporary hybrids is as yet unclear (Mattheis and Kingdon 2023; Brace, Baele and Ging 2024).

3 Also see here the KN:IX Analysis No. 18 'Incel-subgroups and their dynamics within the manosphere: An explorative analysis of Muslim "Red Pill"- Communities und Mincels (Muslim incels)' KN:IX Analysis 2024.



3. Methodology of Network Analysis

3.1 Research Interest

Social media platforms and messenger services (as well as gaming-related spaces[4]), in particular, play a central role in the influence exerted by extremist groups. Various digital platforms present increasingly more comprehensive opportunities to extremist actors to spread their ideas, gain new sympathizers or even directly recruit for their organisations and networks. These platforms and spaces have enabled a structural change in (extremist) appeals by offering more direct communication opportunities, stronger algorithms and an altered audiovisual means of address.

While the significance of social media in the context of anti-democratic actors has now been, for the most part, recognised, an overview of key actors, developments, networks and trends is structurally very challenging. On the one hand, this is due to the large number of relevant platforms, content, groups and individuals, as well as the fast pace of the environment. On the other hand, the respective actors are frequently aware that their content is observed and often communicate using allusions, codes, (supposed) irony or ambiguities, which are then clearly understood by members of the corresponding scene. Combined with the level of acceptability that certain extremist positionings have achieved in society, this presents a challenge in identifying extremist positions and actors (for the relevance of allusions and insinuations in data, see Chapter 7.1).

To gain specific insight into this confusing landscape, explorative and structuring processes can be used to simplify the complex connections and thereby enable the identification of structural patterns. The method of network analysis is therefore used in this text to identify the key accounts and characterise the relationship between the accounts through the mutual followers (an initial indicator for possible contextual affinity).
Instagram has been chosen as the platform for the network analysis. On the one hand, the focus of Instagram and the display of content is more account-focussed than, for example, TikTok, where the *For You page* takes on a more central role and its algorithm relies more strongly on viral content. On TikTok, the number of followers (and thereby also the accounts) play a correspondingly less significant role, as content '[can] go viral, even if the account of the published content has hardly any followers' (Wetzel and Kiess 2025, 3). On the other hand, the (account-focussed) collection and analysis of data on Instagram makes this more viable for the project team due to the technical differences on the platforms. The authors of the publication '"Only for Akhwat?" – A gender-specific analysis of Islamist networks, actors and structures on Instagram' used a similar approach on a smaller scale (Alsalman et al. 2024).

3.2 Conception and Implementation

According to the methodology for the analysis of social networks,[5] the key accounts of the milieu should be identified and listed according to which accounts have a large number of followers in common. The idea is that followers undertake 'the research work' themselves by indicating in their subscription behaviour which accounts they find interesting.[6] This appears to be more revealing than research that manually searches social media platforms, especially when larger numbers of followers are to be analysed. While an individual subscription decision has only minimal relevance, the aggregation of thousands of followers is a good foundation for being able to show anomalies, overlaps and patterns that remain invisible in an unstructured examination. Moreover, it identifies not only extremist accounts, but also non-extremist accounts that are nevertheless of interest to the specific target group. In turn, this can indicate opportunities for prevention and disengagement offers to form connections.

4 For more information and resources on the intersection between gaming and right-wing extremism see, e.g.: RadiGaMe-Forschungsnetzwerk [research network] (https://www.radigame.de/); 'Handbuch Gaming & Rechtsextremismus' [Gaming and Right-wing Extremism Manual] published by Aurelia Brandenburg, Linda Schlegel and Felix Zimmermann (https://www.bpb.de/shop/buecher/schriftenreihe/563171/handbuch-gaming-rechtsextremismus/) or the e-learning platform 'Gaming und Rechtsextremismus' [gaming and right-wing extremism] (https://elearning-vpn.digital/kurse/gaming-und-rechtsextremismus/) from the Violence Prevention Network.

5 Network analyses are used in many areas and enable the study of various research subjects, from social sciences to information technology (see here i.a.: Kulin et al. 2012, Borgatti et al. 2009 or Knoke and Yang 2020). In the context of this publication, the network analysis focusses on the relations between accounts on social media platforms based on the subscription behaviour of the followers.

6 An analysis of which key accounts directly follow each other seems only of very limited significance, as whether they follow other accounts and how many varies greatly. Many of the accounts follow no or few other accounts. In this sense, the analysis of the connections through shared followers is more significant and not so dependent on the subscription behaviour of individuals.

For this, 15 accounts were selected in a preliminary study from each of the ideological streams of *right-wing extremism, Islamist extremism* and *conspiracy myths*. In this, the team drew on previous personal experience from many years of monitoring projects, consulted other organisations to integrate their expertise, and used existing sources and resources to take aspects such as scope, relevance and plurality of the relevant scene into account.

Only accounts that are publicly visible and in which it was clearly identifiable that the operators actively use this channel to widely spread their (anti-pluralistic, anti-democratic and misanthropic) views were considered. All accounts also had to meet several of the specific fixed criteria for the respective areas (see Appendix) in order to be included.

The 15 accounts from each of the three ideological streams gave a total of 45 initial accounts (*seed channels*). Through Python scripts, 300 followers with public accounts were randomly collected from each seed channel (13,500). Duplicate accounts among the followers were then excluded, leaving 12,154 *unique followers*. These were anonymised with an ID. From the unique followers, all *followings*, i.e. all the accounts that the respective follower had subscribed to, were then collected. A total of 11,444,820 subscriptions were collected here. These subscriptions were distributed across 5,384,550 unique accounts (*unique followings*). The data was stored in a relational SQL databank. It was then processed step by step with individually created Python scripts for further analysis. The data collection took place in April and May 2025. Data generated by the network analysis were stored in compliance with data protection laws.

In the next step, it was evaluated how often the respective accounts were subscribed to by the users from the sample. Based on the frequency evaluation, a minimum number of 300 effected subscriptions was specified. This meant that only the accounts with at least 300 subscriptions were considered for further analysis (924 accounts). These also included the initial channels (seed channels).[7]
The 924 accounts were viewed and evaluated independently of each other by two teams of three persons each. The relevant account profile and at least ten posts, each from the previous month, were viewed, and it was noted whether the account

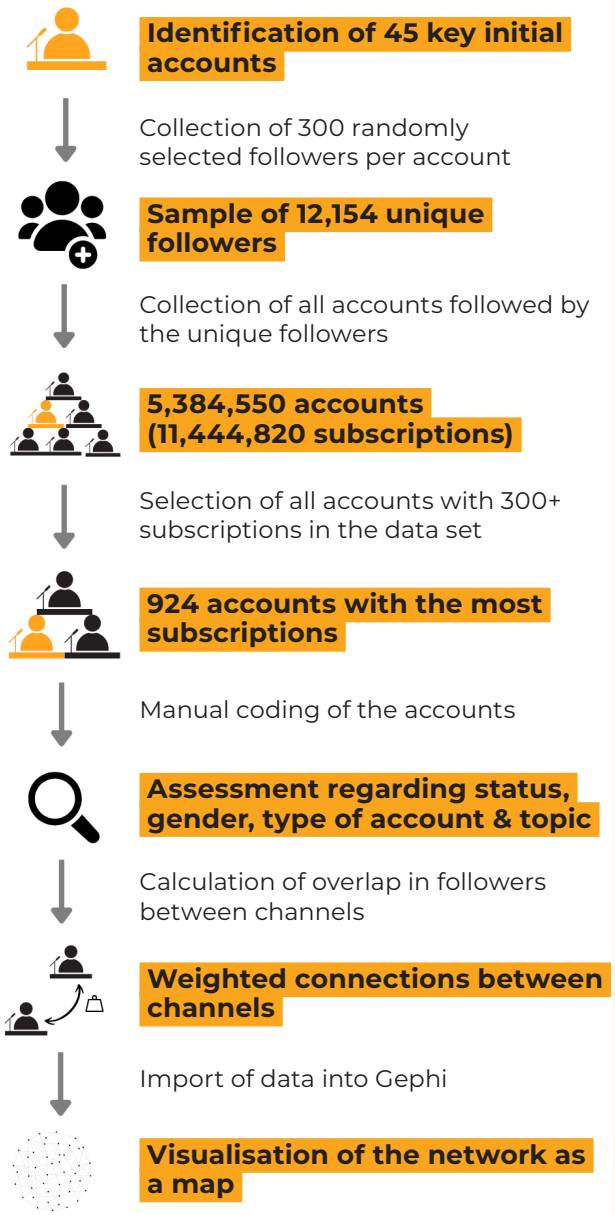


Fig. 1: Diagram of the methodical procedure in the network analysis.

had published right-wing extremist, Islamist, conspiracy myth or hybrid extremist[8] content. If the individual speaker/account operator appeared, the perceived gender of the person speaking was also noted. The category of account (influencer,

7 Only one of the 45 seed channels was below the threshold of 300 subscriptions in the frequency evaluation and was therefore not considered for inclusion in the network map. In this channel, several follower accounts went offline during the data collection or switched to private accounts so that they could not be viewed for further evaluation.

8 The term hybrid mainly refers to blended or mixed ideology constructs in the coding process, i.e. in the instances where ideological fragments that do not traditionally coincide with each other are linked together or mutually coexist (see Chapter 2). Diffuse content that cannot be assigned to any ideology fragment is not coded as hybrid in the course of the coding process. Similarly, no statements can be made on unstable ideology constructs in the course of the coding process, as these would require a longer time frame for observation.

politician, reporter, news portal, etc.) and the central theme of the account (in the viewed posts) were also recorded. Once both teams had completed the coding process independently of each other, the respective lists of results were compared, and a record made of which accounts had the same assessments and where these deviated from one another. In the course of a further examination, deviations or accounts where the need for further discussion was noted were analysed, discussed and assigned by the authors. Challenges and (anecdotal) anomalies from the coding process were registered, and are summarised in Chapter 7.

In conformity with data privacy regulations and to avoid stigmatising individual accounts in the network map by association with the accounts of extremist actors, the authors have decided to principally not disclose the names of the individual accounts. Exceptions have only been made if naming the account is of significant relevance. This is, for example, the case with well-known extremist actors or individual accounts which occupy a special position in the network (and when these are the accounts of organisations, celebrities, etc.). Consideration was given to each individual case before they were named. Part of considering research ethics also included weighing the unintended effects that research results could have. In the case of this publication, this refers, for example, to the question of whether naming extremist accounts might amplify their scope. It is equally important to consider the possibility of misinterpretation of the network map, and to minimise this through clear and unequivocal descriptions. In this respect, it is important to register that the network map does not readily allow causal conclusions without additional contextual data, and that the risk of overgeneralisation is always present. The fact that, for example, prominent persons, such as Lionel Messi, Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson or Ariana Grande appear in the map, reveals that the mere presence of persons cannot indicate a causal conclusion for their specific relevance or an extremist mindset.

The focus in the coding and categorisation is neither to carry out legal assessment nor to evaluate the potential danger in the sense of a risk assessment. The focus is on the assessment concerning the distribution, the reproducing or support of anti-democratic and/or misanthropic ideological fragments from the corresponding areas. The assessment is based on the posts and context information available at the time of the coding. It represents an assessment by the project team concerning the content, which should not be perceived as static, conclusive or unalterable. In coding the account, the content available as posts,[9] storys or account bios at the time of viewing is considered. If necessary, publications from other research institutes or journalists were used to further qualify the assessment. In this respect, false-negative classifications in particular might be wholly possible, i.e. cases that might be assigned to one of the extremist milieus but where no indicators were found in the viewed posts.

Consent to or interest in the content cannot definitively be concluded from a subscription to a channel; however, overall, this is still a strong indicator that the overwhelming majority of users who have subscribed to a channel are receptive to and interested in the content of the channel. A large overlap in the followership between two channels can again indicate a mutual interest or a contextual affinity. To be able to quantify and visualise the relationship of the accounts to each other, an evaluation of the degree to which the collected followerships from each of the two channels overlap is required. Thus, weighted connections between every possible pair of accounts from the 924 accounts were calculated with a Python script. A connection was established if the accounts shared at least one follower in the data set. The weight was evaluated according to a formula (shared followers from A and B/collected followers A) + (shared followers from A and B/collected followers B). The result for each connection is a value between 0 (no overlaps) and 2 (complete overlap of all followers).

9 With reposts, only the reposted content is taken into account, not the person(s) or organisations that are reposted. If, for example, a video from an individual considered a right-wing extremist is reposted, but the individual does not say anything in the video that might be deemed to be a right-wing extremist view, this is not taken as a (sole) indicator in assessing the reposting account as right-wing. This method was selected because it seems appropriate to make the accounts responsible only for the reposted content but not for the total activity of the reposted individual (because these, if applicable, are unknown). In this respect, the conscious and intentional dissemination of specific content is required for an appropriate assessment to be carried out.

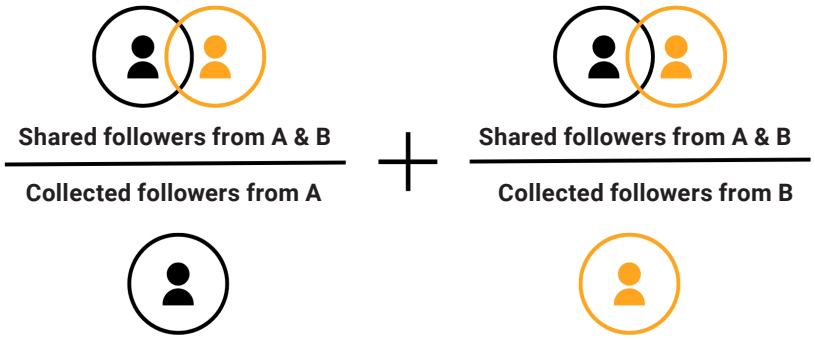
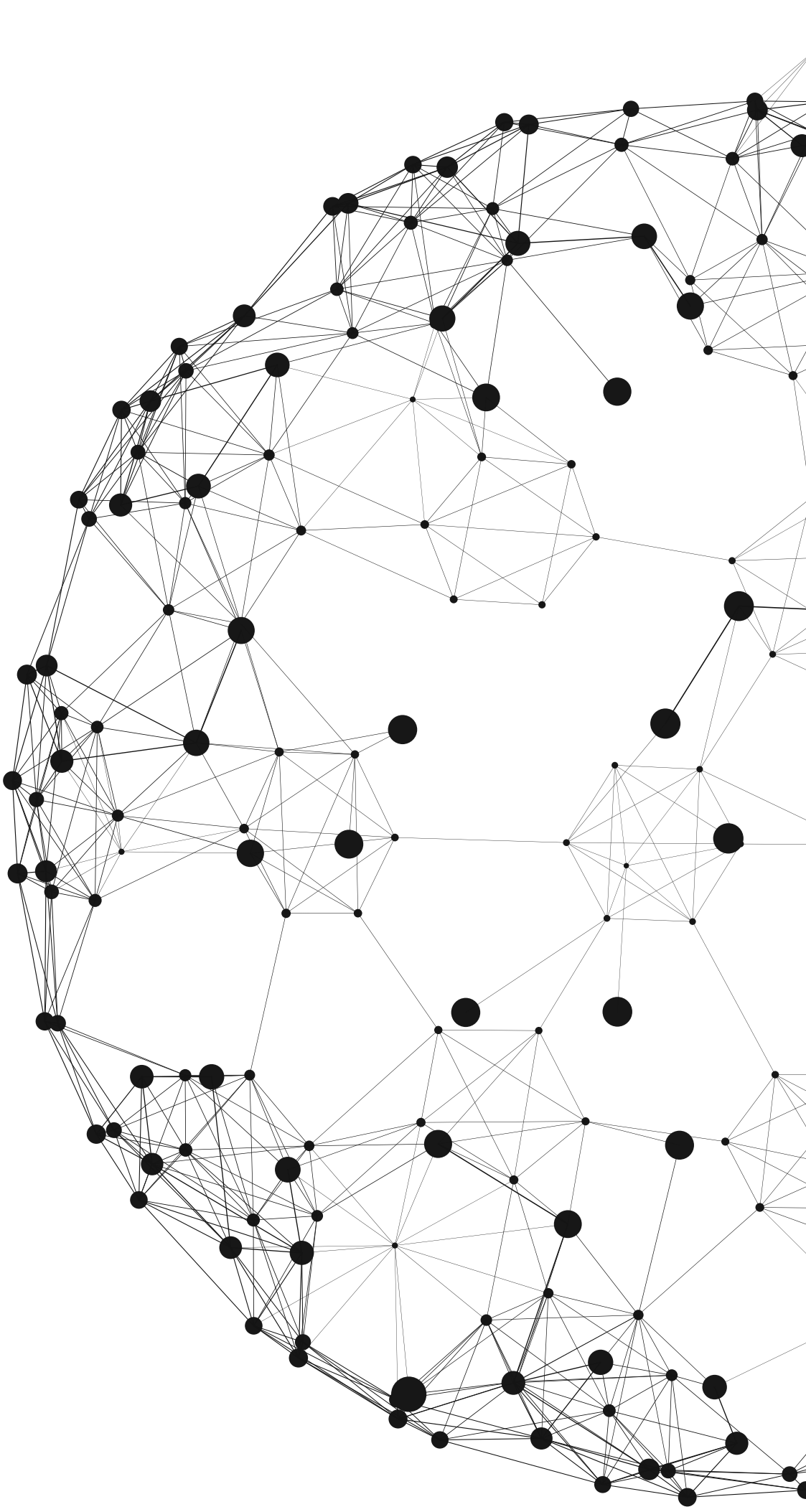


Fig. 2: Formula for calculating the edge weight of the individual connections.

The nodes, weighted edges and information from the coding process were imported together into Gephi. The network in Gephi was visualised by means of the gravitation-based algorithm Force Atlas 2. Jacomy et al. describe how the algorithm functions as follows: 'ForceAtlas2 is a force directed layout: it simulates a physical system in order to spatialize a network. Nodes repulse each other like charged particles, while edges attract their nodes, like springs. These forces create a movement that converges to a balanced state. This final configuration is expected to help the interpretation of the data' (2014, 2).

In interpreting the network map, it can be stated that closely related accounts have a relatively high overlap of followers in the data set which is often accompanied by thematical/ contextual affinity.

The network map provides a spatial representation that can identify how close/far the different accounts are (contextually/ thematically). The coding information was used to emphasise the individual nodes of the network map in colour and to be able to better recognise patterns.



4. Results of Network Analysis

In the following, the key descriptive statistics of the coded posts will be presented first. The network map as a whole is then presented in various sections, and these are described with a focus on overlaps, key accounts and contextual intersections.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

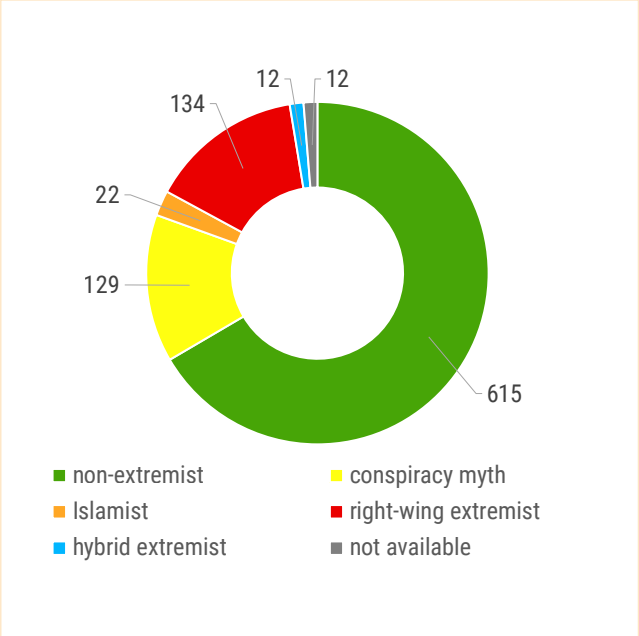


Fig. 3: Visualisation of the coding frequencies of the content assessment of the account.

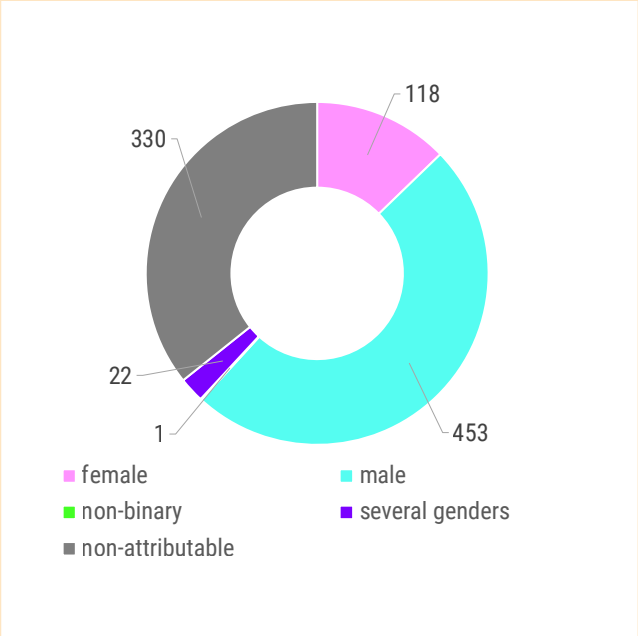


Fig. 4: Visualisation of the coding frequencies of the perceived genders of the account operators or speakers.

The majority (66.56%) of the reviewed 924 channels did not publish content that was classified as conspiracy mythist, Islamist, right-wing extremist or hybrid extremist based on the working definitions.[10] The second most frequent accounts to be identified were accounts that propagated *right-wing extremist* content (14.5%); accounts with distinct *conspiracy myth* content (13.96%) were just as frequent. In contrast, only 22 accounts published content that was classified as *Islamist* (2.38%).[11] Equally rare were accounts that spread *hybrid-extremist* content or accounts that were *not available* because they were, for example, private or had been deleted (each 1.3%).

Classification of the perceived genders[12] could not be carried out for 35.71% because the accounts were either offline/private or an operator/speaker did not appear on the account (as with many 'repost accounts'). The overwhelming majority of accounts in which a perceived gender could be coded were *male* (49.03%). Only 12.77% of the accounts could be coded as a *female* perceived gender. In 2.38%, operators/speakers of *different perceived genders* were active on the account. Only one account could be identified as *non-binary* based on self-description. The average and median follower numbers for male accounts (average: 495.06; median: 421) is somewhat higher than for female accounts (average: 449.68; median: 387.5). However, there is no markedly unequal distribution of subscriptions by gender within the data set.

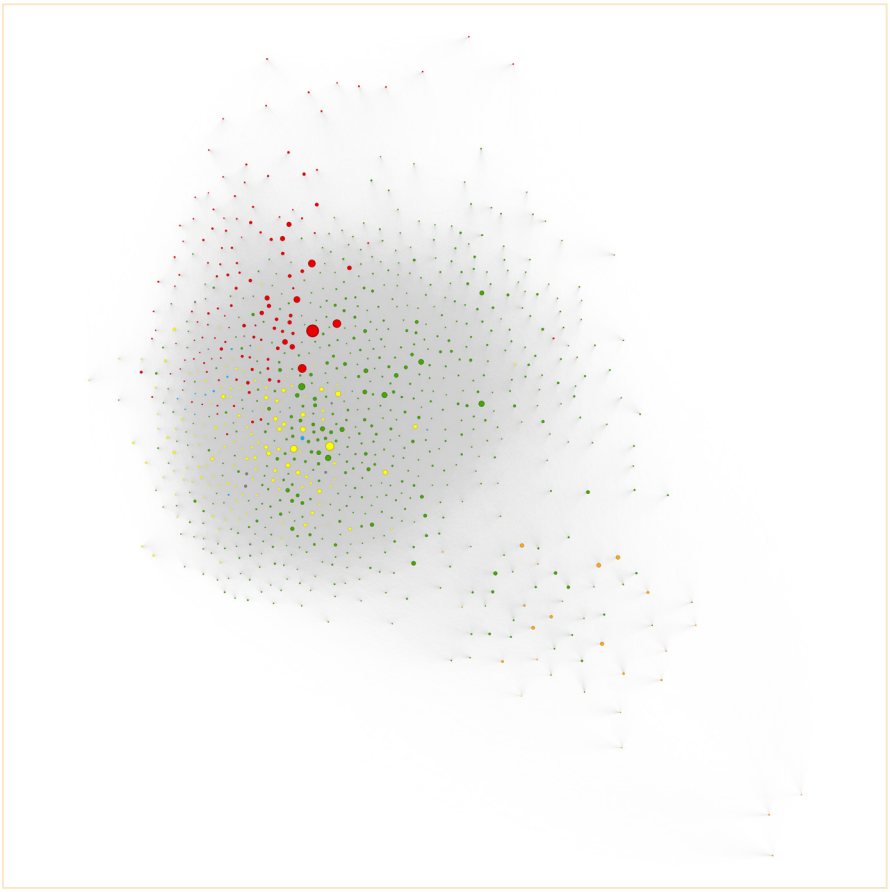
10 However, this does not mean, conversely, that these accounts do not show indications of anti-democratic, anti-pluralist or misanthropic positions. These indications are, however, often insufficient to justify a corresponding coding, so the accounts are marked as 'non-extremist'.

11 Fourteen of the twenty-two accounts coded as Islamist were seed channels identified at the beginning of the study.

12 A detailed description of the coding process for content and perceived genders can be found in the Appendix.

4.2 Network Map and Communities

The network map visualises 924 accounts in the data set with at least 300 recorded subscriptions. The larger the circle (node), the higher the number of subscriptions to these accounts recorded in the data set. The colour of the nodes provides additional information on the status (Fig. 5) or the perceived gender of the account operators (Fig. 6).



network.violencepreventionnetwork.com

We recommend viewing the network map on a larger screen, as the visualisation is not optimised for mobile devices.

Fig. 5: Network map coloured based on the coding of the account content: conspiracy mythist (yellow), Islamist (orange), right-wing extremist (red), hybrid extremist (blue) or no extremist content (green); (grey means not attributable, for example, because the account was private or offline).[13]

The view of the network map shows a very strongly connected network (many connection lines) which, first and foremost, is due to the design of the network analysis, in which a (very weak) connection is already created if there is one shared follower.[14] More meaningful is the spatial positioning relative to each other. Because accounts with many shared followers attract each other and accounts with few or no intersections barely attract or repel each other, the spatial proximity is an indicator of the overlap between the accounts' followers.[15]

13 In the following representations of the network map, the individual edges (links between the nodes) were removed to ensure better readability of the network map. Although the edges are not visible, they represent the central mechanism of positioning the individual nodes in relation to each other in all visualisations.

14 The graph density, i.e. the ratio of actual connections to theoretical possible connections, is very high at 0.993. However this does not pose a problem for the visualisation or readability of the map, because the visualisation is based on the weighted connections and the relative overlap of two channels.

15 Since the nodes exert force on each other, the positioning of individual account pairs should not be directly compared to each other or over-interpreted, as the positioning results from a multitude of (gravitation-based) influences and is thus determined by multiple factors.

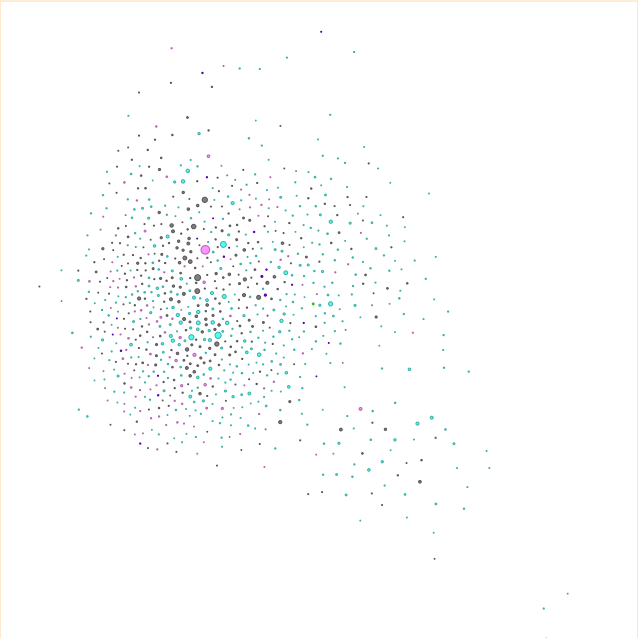


Fig. 6: Network map coloured according to the perceived gender of the account operators: female (pink), male (light blue), non-binary (green), individuals with different genders (violet), non-attributable (grey).

The prevalence of perceived male over perceived female accounts can also be identified in viewing the network map. Moreover, it is notable that perceived female accounts are scarce in some parts of the network map. Therefore, it can be seen that, in terms of both content and perceived gender, certain types of accounts accumulate in different areas of the map and do not occur at all in other areas. The community detection in *Gephi* provides four communities (Blondel et al. 2008; Lambiotte, Delvenne and Barahona 2009).[16] These four communities can also be characterised based on the insight from the coding process, and their features are presented in more detail in the next chapter. In this, there is a focus on the central themes, significant actors, gender distribution and transitions to other parts of the network map; these are supplemented by descriptive statistics.

16 The process of 'Community Detection' involves (various) statistical processes that are oriented to divide large networks into smaller groups of particularly strongly connected nodes, which can in turn reveal new connections or information (Blondel et al. 2008, 2). The modularity score for the present network at a resolution of 1 (see Lambiotte, Delvenne and Barahona 2009) is 0.131.

4.2.1 Community 1: Celebrities & influencers

Fig. 7: Section of the upper right area in the network map depicting Community 1.

The first group (in the middle to upper right area of the map) contains 300 accounts, most notably of influencers (41.67%) and celebrities (28.33%). The overwhelming majority of the accounts in this group are male (60%); only 8.33% are perceived as female. Thematically, this group has a relatively wide range. The majority of the content consists of entertainment, comedy, lifestyle content and sport. Among these are various well-known German and international streamers, athletes, actors and several news portals. It is notable that many of these accounts are very wide-reaching accounts whose existence in the network is not very specific. This is in line with the fact that almost all accounts were coded as 'non-extremist' (96.33%). With Conor McGregor[17] and Kollegah,[18] we also have two accounts in the celebrity area whose statements and positioning are classified as right-wing extremist or conspiracy myth theorists.

17 In recent months and years, Conor McGregor has been noticeable for his increasingly frequent nationalist and anti-immigrant statements (Magee 2024; O'Carroll 2025).

18 Kollegah has already encouraged and served anti-Semitic conspiracy myths in the past (Holly 2018; or more detailed: Baier 2025). On the other hand, no (communicated) distancing was found with, for example, Naidoo. Instead, Kollegah has continued to flirt with diffuse conspiracy myths, for example, in a livestream at the beginning of 2025, and has praised the rapper Kianush (who regularly spreads conspiracy myths) for venturing to tackle such topics.

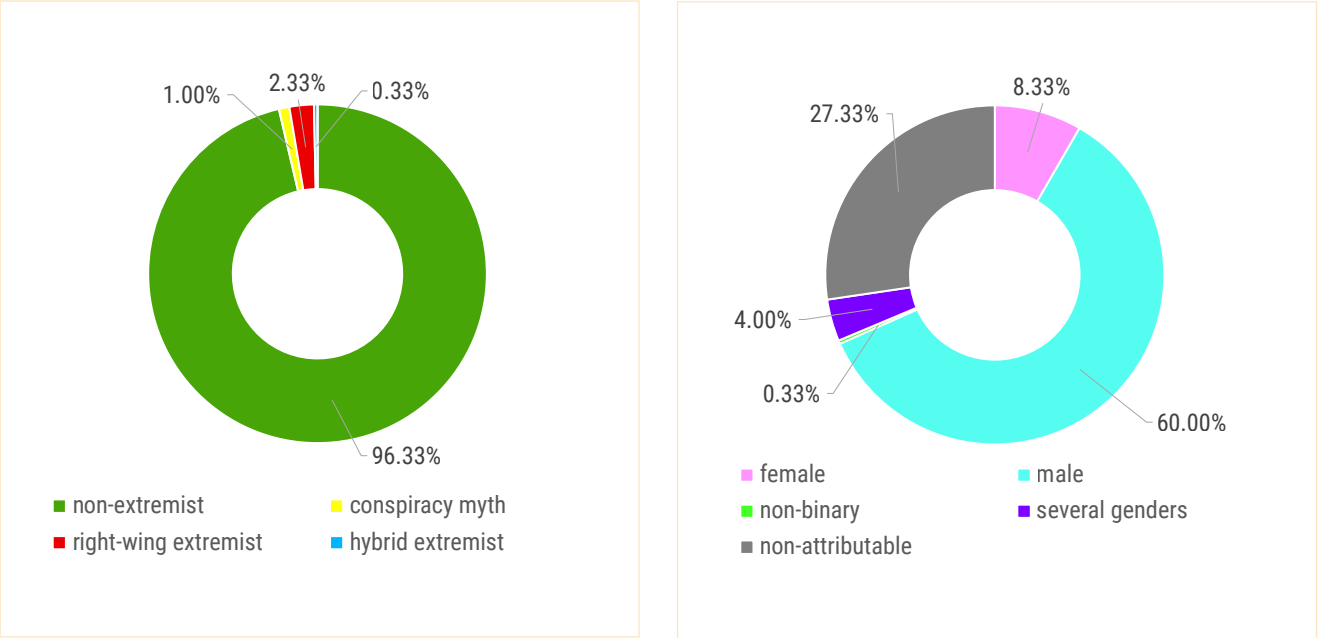


Fig. 8: Frequency of status and perceived gender in Community 1

Several other accounts coded 'right-wing extremist' are on the left of the transition to Community 4; this includes an account of the US President Donald Trump and of the right-wing activist 'Ketzer der Neuzeit' [Heretic of the New Age] (one of the seed channels).[19] At the edge of Community 3 (lower left), the hosts of the podcast 'Hoss und Hopf' are two influencers who partly spread conspiracy theory content; their content appears repeatedly in the coding process (see Chapter 7.1).

At the transition to Community 2, which has many Islamist accounts, there are primarily influencers and athletes. Several mixed martial arts fighters known for their conservative positions on society, religion and gender roles are most notably found at the immediate intersection between the two communities. This also includes Islam Makhachev, whose statement '[s]end him to Dagestan' was decontextualised and became a meme, a recurring Internet reference, frequently with an anti-LGBTQ+ connotation (Wannenmacher 2025).[20]

19 In the upper area, there are also three accounts that are very decentralised. These are accounts that are clearly assigned to the right-wing (partly violent) spectrum. Therefore, assignment to Group 3 is plausible based on the context. Their peripheral position indicates that the accounts do not play a central role in the social media landscape covered. This could be due to, among other things, their outspokenness and (partially evidenced) propensity for violence; these attributes are not as 'presentable' as right-wing extremist positions that (at least ostensibly) reject violence.

20 The statement '[s]end him to Dagestan' originally came from a clip in which the martial artist Islam Makhachev recommended that an interviewer send his son to Dagestan for two or three years if the son wanted to become a good martial artist. In online contexts, the statement acts as code for a specific ideal image of exaggerated masculinity, physical toughness, and strength, discipline, emotional reserve and combat readiness that is linked to an ultraconservative view of society. This form of excessive masculinity is often deliberately orchestrated as a separation tactic from queer identities that are deprecated as weak, unmasculine or inferior. The phrase is particularly used in connection with anti-LBGTQ+ content because queer individuals experience systematic and intense persecution in the Dagestan region (Kousta 2025).

4.2.2 Community 2: Islamist Extremism & Environment

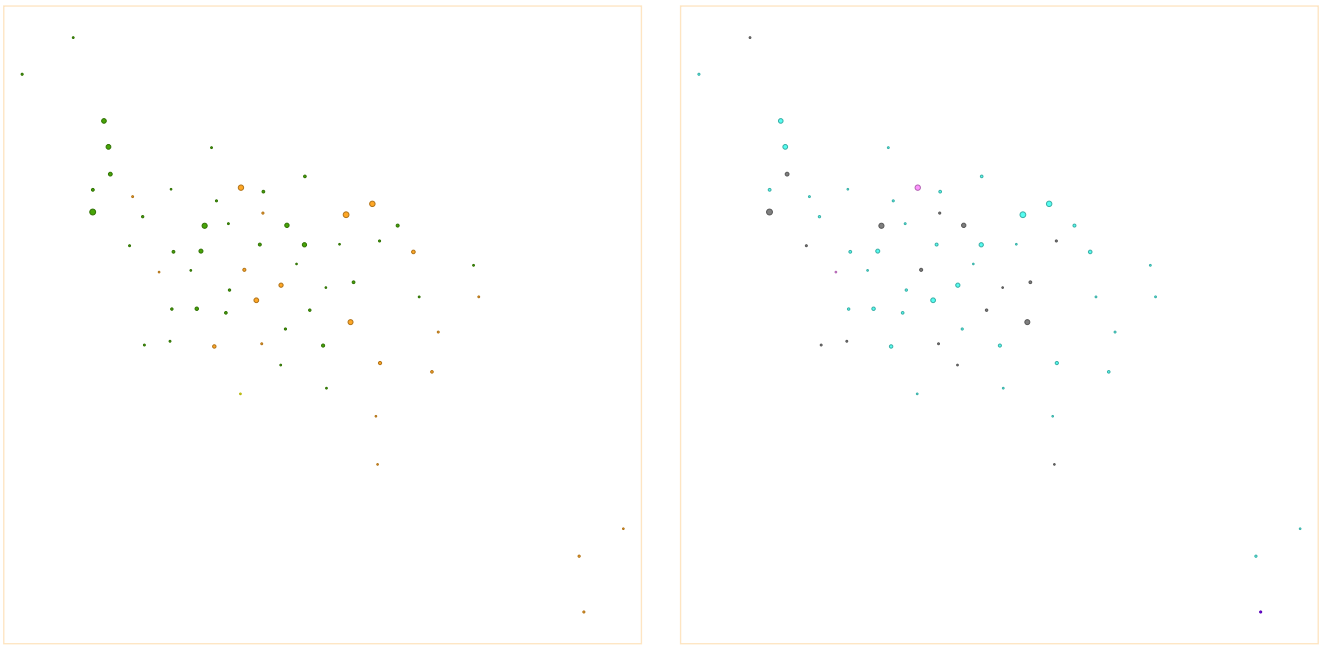


Fig. 9: Section of the upper right area in the network map depicting Community 2.

This group on the map (in the lower right area) is by far the smallest, with 64 accounts. The majority of the accounts were categorised as 'influencer' (50%) or 'preacher' (15.63%). The thematic focus of the accounts in Community 2 is clearly defined and mainly lies in religion (65.63%) and politics (21.88%). All channels coded as Islamist are in this area (34.38%). It is notable that, alongside the 14 seed channels,[21] only eight other Islamist-coded accounts appear in the group.[22] The gender distribution within this area is similarly noteworthy. With 67.19% perceived male and 3.13% perceived female accounts, a considerable imbalance in visibility is evident. This observation corresponds with previous studies and insights from visibility monitoring of perceived female accounts in the Islamist environment (M. Krämer and Wetchy 2023; Büchsenschütz and Brinkmöller 2024).

21 One of the seed channels with an affinity to jihadi concepts did not achieve the threshold of 300 followers, although 300 followers had been selected as a sample. In the account, more follower accounts must have gone offline or been deleted, for example, during the data collection process than had signed up from other follower accounts during that time, so that the account was not considered for the network map.

22 There are differing explanations for this. On the one hand, it could be an indication that many of the scene's particularly central and significant accounts were already selected as seed channels, and therefore (other than in the case of Alice Weidel's account) no other distinctly larger/more frequently subscribed accounts exist in the German-speaking sphere that were not listed. On the other hand, the insight from the coding and the network map suggest that the (selected) conspiracy mythist seed channels have a larger affinity with right-wing extremism than Islamist positions.

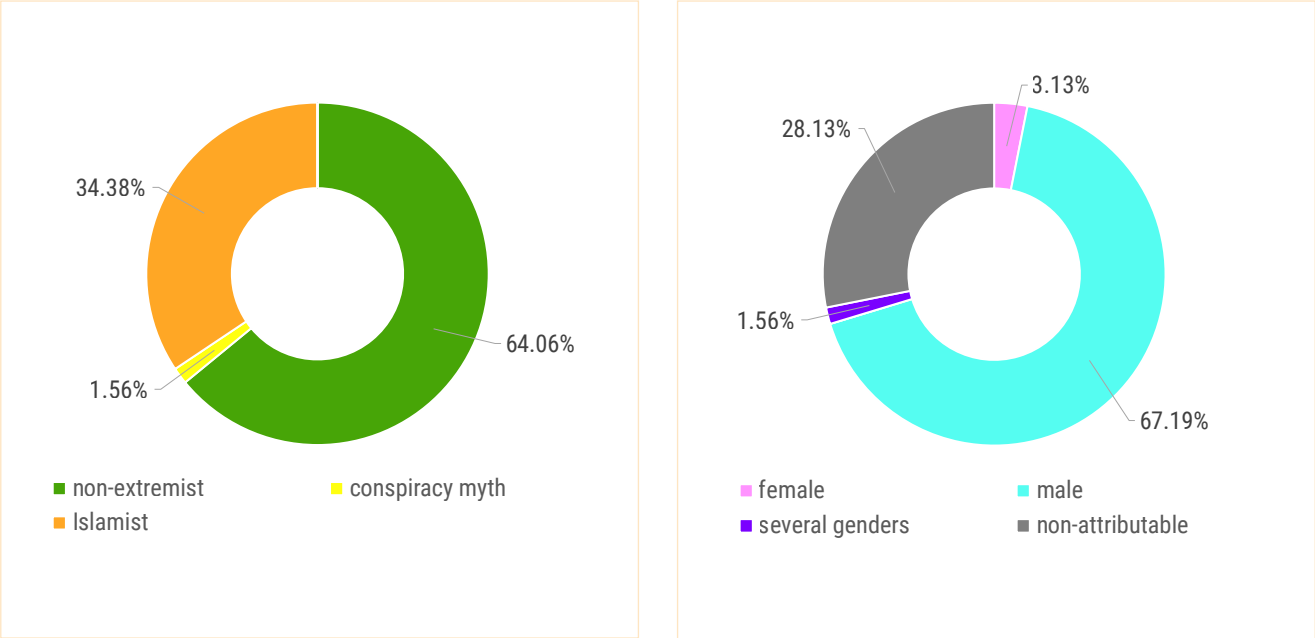


Fig. 10: Frequency of status and perceived gender in Community 2

The central lower area contains many of the Islamist seed channels from the German-speaking sphere, including wide-reaching Salafist actors such as *Abul Baraa*, *Pierre Vogel*, *Hannah Hansen* and *Abdelhamid* as well as key organisations close to *Hizb ut-Tahrir*such as *Realität Islam*,[23] *Generation Islam*[24] and *Muslim Interaktiv*. Most Salafist accounts are located further to the upper right within the area, while actors close to *Hizb ut-Tahrir* tend to be further to the lower left. However, a clear distribution or demarcation according to ideological affiliation cannot be identified.

In particularly isolated positions, the (seed) accounts of *Free our Sisters* and the German and English language accounts of *Ahmad Musa Jibril* are in the lower right edge of the map. *Ahmad Musa Jibril* is an Islamist preacher who, according to the *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation*, is also received in some jihadi circles (Carter, Maher and Neumann 2014, 20-25). *Free our Sisters* is an account that, according to a report from the Verfassungsschutzes Nordrhein-Westfalen [Protection of the Constitution in North Rhine-Westphalia], aims to '(…) oppose a resocialisation of prisoners in penal institutions and secure a link to the extremist-Salafist scene' (2024, 236). The decentralised positioning of this account in the network map provides indications of a possible lack of affinity with others and that they possibly play more of a peripheral (and particularly specific) role.

At the transition to Community 3, there are many accounts that are not classified as extremist but which have a (thematic) affinity with the world views spread by Islamist accounts. This, for example, includes accounts of influencers who serve a similar narrative or individuals who were once involved in the Islamist scene but have recently distanced themselves from it. Even an account sharing (supposed) medical advice from an Islamic perspective is found in this overlap area and has a content affinity with the health focus in the Community 3 accounts. Also found here are various wide-reaching news portals and journalists that mainly report on developments in the Arab world, particularly on the situation in Gaza, in German, English or Arabic. This is (a further) indication of the central role that the suffering experienced plays for many followers in this segment due to the ongoing massive violence and catastrophic humanitarian situation, primarily in the Gaza Strip.

23 In the context of a rebranding in 2025, the Realität Islam accounts were renamed Suhaib Hoffmann.

24 In the context of a rebranding in 2025, the YouTube channel from Generation Islam was renamed Ahmad Tamim and the Instagram account was renamed Bilal Oromo.

4.2.3 Community 3: Health, Nutrition, Coaching & Conspiracy

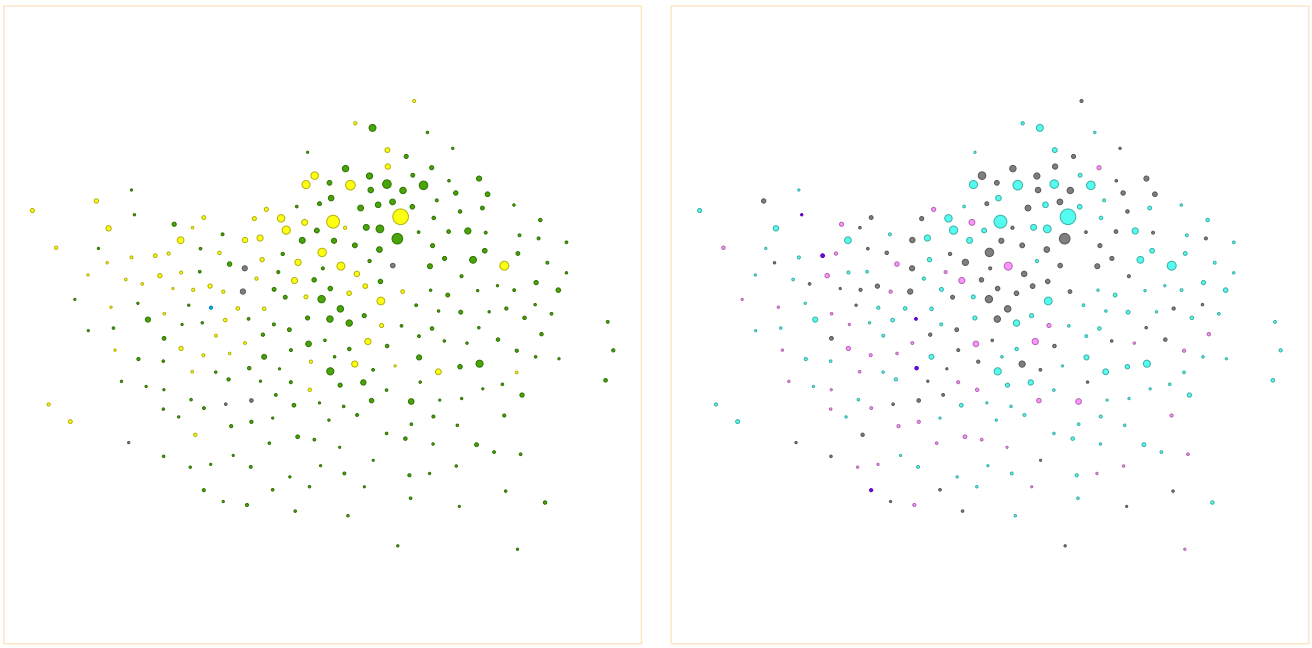


Fig. 11 Section of the lower left area in the network map depicting Community 3

Community 3 consists of 288 accounts with the central themes of health (34.72%), motivation/coaching (15.63%) and nutrition (14.93%). Influencers (60.76%) and accounts that are faceless or repost content (22.22%) can be found here. Politicians, political parties and news portals are not present in this area. This community also has more perceived male (48.61%) than perceived female (17.71%) accounts; this ratio is, however, somewhat more balanced than in some of the other communities. The majority of the accounts were coded as non-extremist (71.88%), but a considerable percentage of the accounts also spread conspiracy ideology content (25.69%). Neither Islamist or right-wing extremist accounts are found in this area.

Included among the key actors, first and foremost, are exiled.medic, who reached the second-highest number of subscriptions of the data set with 1,977, Coach Aaron (a seed channel), and other accounts that are associated with the 'Rohgang'[25] movement. These accounts combine, for example, lifestyle content, nutritional advice, health recommendations, Christian aspects and conspiracy ideology in a partly diffuse mixture.

25 For more information on Rohgang, the social media hype and the two key actors, Coach Aaron and exiled.medic, see for example Karrasch and Lux (2025) 'Zwischen Rohgang-Hype und Verschwörungstheorien – Das Viral-Playbook der neuen Ernährungs-Influencer' at https://omr.com/de/daily/rohgang-verschwoerungstheorien-viral-playbook-fabian-kowallik#umstrittener-%22manfluencer%22-andrew-tate-als-vorbild. Last accessed on 05.09.2025.

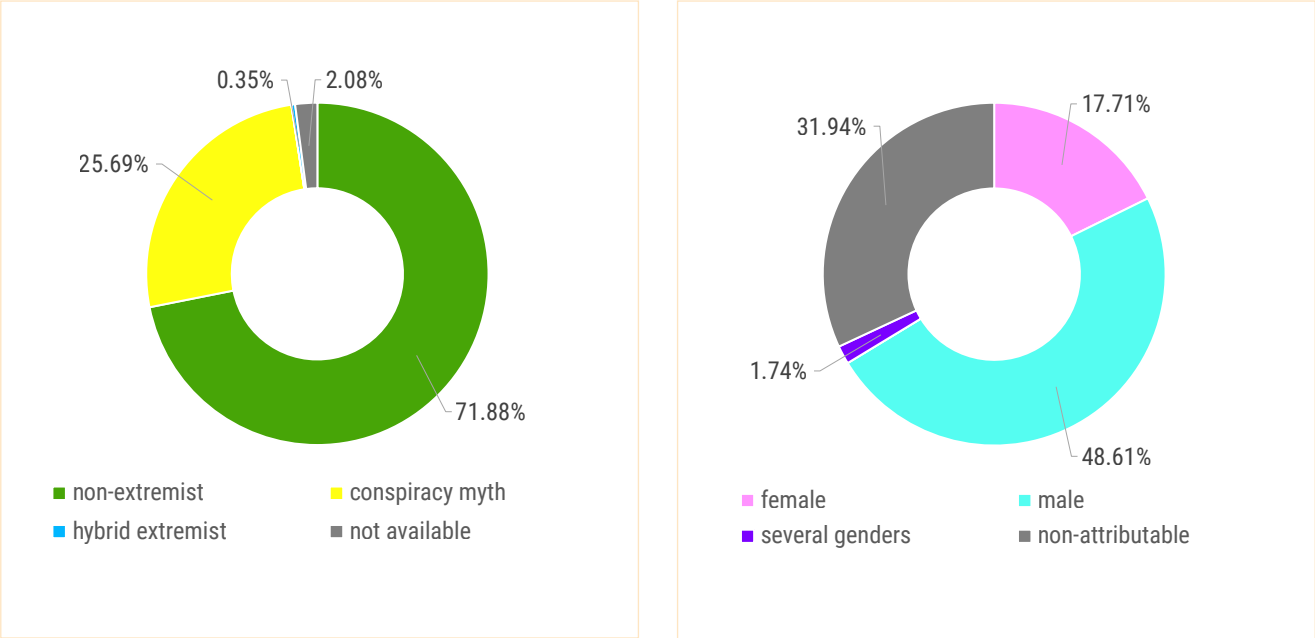


Fig. 12: Frequency of status and perceived gender in Community 3

Other accounts primarily focus on topics such as illness prevention or the treatment of (sometimes severe) illnesses like cancer, for which the recommendations often deviate blatantly from scientifically proven and medically founded treatment methods. There is often a fluid blending of misinformation relating to medicine (without explicitly naming guilty parties or showing enemy images) with conspiracy myths that place the topics of health and nutrition in the context of suppression, conspiracy or intentional damage.

Some of the accounts with conspiracy myth content also handled other topics or myths (e.g. chemtrails, flat earth, 'international Jewish conspiracy') and were in part so diffuse that the concrete naming of a central topic did not appear to be possible. Moreover, there were always accounts dedicated to topics of motivation, self-improvement and coaching. The contextual orientation varied here from harmless collections of quotes to content that, in isolated instances, suggests a direct connection to the manosphere.[26]

It also often occurs that accounts have a certain openness to right-wing (and also occasionally left-wing extremist) thought or their narratives; however, from the perspective of the project team, this is insufficient in the vast majority of cases to effectively speak about hybrid content (in terms of fused or coexisting ideological elements). While many non-extremist accounts are found in the lower area of the network map (with a focus on health or nutrition), it is noteworthy that there is an accumulation of conspiracy mythist accounts in the transition to Community 4 (upper left).

26 The 'manosphere' describes a loosely connected network of online communities in which misogyny and degrading perceptions of women are the key reference points. There are also, in Germany, corresponding discourses and platforms where actors in the manosphere communicate, strengthen their narratives and seek to connect to wider social debates (Kaiser 2020).

4.2.4 Community 4: Right-wing Extremism, Political Conspiracies & Environment

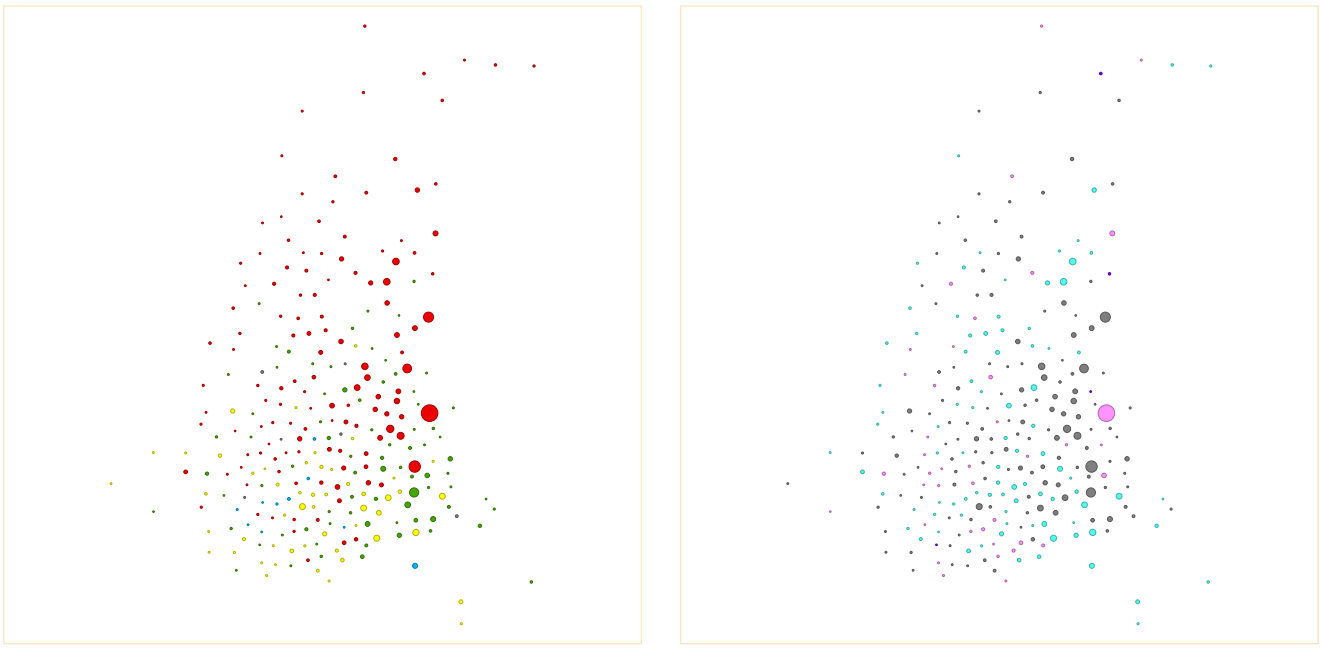


Fig. 13: Section of the upper left area in the network map depicting Community 4

This portion of the network map includes 272 channels and is characterised overall by a strong focus on political topics and politics (72.06%). The most frequent accounts were faceless accounts; the content was instead created without visible actors or there was reposted content (50%). Following this, influencers (19.85%), politicians (10.29%) and political parties (6.62%) were the most frequent types of accounts. The frequency of perceived male actors (33.09%) was almost double that of perceived female actors (14.71%). In this area, the most frequent accounts were those that are categorised as 'right-wing extremist' (46.69%). This term is broadly defined and includes both part of the *new right*, right-wing libertarians, right-wing populists and actors of organised non-partisan right-wing extremism who all find themselves in this area of the network map.

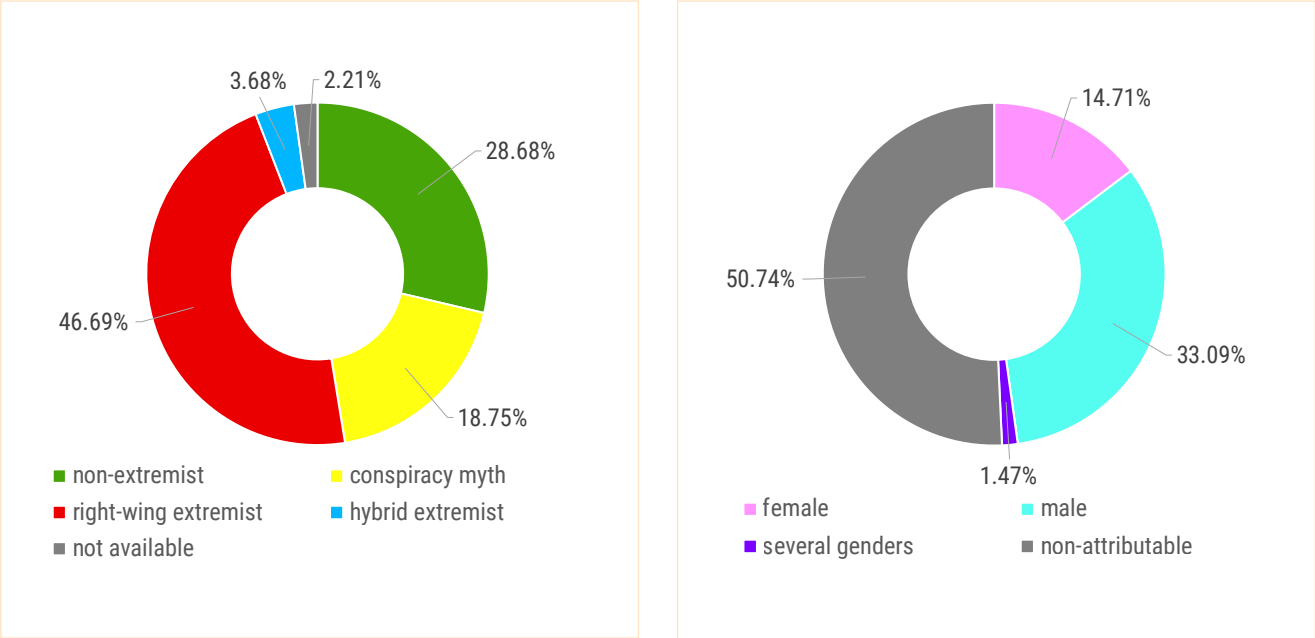


Fig. 14: Frequency of status and perceived gender in Community 4

Various accounts that predominantly spread conspiracy myth (18.75%) or hybrid (3.68%) content occupy the transition area from Community 3 (conspiracy & environment) to Community 4. The distinctive feature of these accounts in contrast to the other conspiracy mythist accounts from Community 3 is that they mainly focus on political topics (rather than health or nutrition). Various self-styled 'news portals' that spread misinformation, conspiracy myths or right-wing populist content (including *Auf1*, *Weltwoche* or *NIUS*) are in this area of the network map. This indicates an affinity between 'information' communicated by these platforms and the world view or convictions of political actors from the right-wing extremist spectrum.

Alice Weidel's account, which reached by far the most recorded subscriptions in the entire data set, with 2,751, is especially wide-reaching, although the account was not considered a seed account. This clearly shows that the party leader of *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) [Alternatives for Germany] experiences wide range and visibility in the right-wing extremism environment and in the adjoining areas. A multitude of additional AfD party and politician accounts are very close to each other in the upper left area which points to a strong overlap of followers.

The account 'gesichert unbequem' [securely uncomfortable] is just as wide-reaching, with 1,889 subscriptions and content self-described as 'satire', in which it serves right-wing extremist narratives and, for example, spreads anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-immigrant content (also see here Chapter 7.1). The account symbolises a series of self-titled meme, comedy and satire accounts that attempt to convey their anti-democratic and frequently dehumanising content. This may, on the one hand, be aimed at communicating their positions more subtly and connecting, and, on the other, be used to evade content moderation or criminal consequences. Not every post from these accounts is notable for outspoken discriminatory views, but there are regular posts in which such anti-democratic and/or misanthropic positions are more explicit.

Accounts from smaller right-wing extremist parties, such as Die Heimat [The Homeland], formerly the NPD (National Democratic Party of Germany), or Freie Sachsen [Free Saxons] (seed channel), that have less of a wide reach and a decentralised position are found on the upper edges. Also situated here are the Pforzheim Revolte account, an offshoot of the *identitarian movement*,[27] and

27 The Pforzheim Revolte also cooperated in the context of a music video, for example, with the right-wing extremist music label 'Neuer Deutscher Standard', see https://www.verfassungsschutz-bw.de/,Lde/_Pforzheim+Revolte_+beteiligt+sich+an+Musikvideo. Last accessed on 22.08.2025.

Anna Leisten's account (former leader of *Jungen Alternative* [Young Alternative], classified since 2023 as a right-wing extremist organisation by the Constitution protection committee (a seed channel)). Similarly, there are various musicians from the right-wing extremist music label 'Neuer Deutscher Standard' [New German Standard] in this edge zone (one of which was a seed channel).

In Community 4, there are also a series of accounts categorised as non-extremist. Nonetheless, some of these accounts indicate not only a spatial, but also a contextual affinity to right-wing extremist accounts, which includes, for example, a fan account on Alice Weidel that, however, does not publish content posts and was therefore coded as 'non-extremist'. Similarly, there are AfD politicians who were not coded as 'right-wing extremists' in the context of individual coding. Nevertheless, accounts of (conservative) news portals, pop music accounts or motivation and coaching sites also appeared here.

In summary, it can be stated that the four communities of the network demonstrate clearly distinguishable features and focal points, with boundaries that appear plausible, even based on the contextual coding of the accounts. While the area in which Islamist accounts are found is spatially distanced on the right, the transition from conspiracy mythist to right-wing extremist accounts appears to be more fluid.[28] To what extent this indicates compatibility, bridge function or hybridisation is explored in more detail in the discussion section. In Chapter 5, the expert interviews with counsellors are presented; these provide insight into the relevance of possible hybrid developments for practical exit and disengagement work.

28 This statement can initially only be made based on the data set analysed here, and should not be generalised. The strong compatibility between a right-wing extremist and a conspiracy myth theorist account can, for example, also be due to the selection of seed channels, general popularity, and other factors. More context information and, if applicable, additional data collection is required for a detailed evaluation.

5 Methodology of Expert Interviews

5.1 Expert Interviews as Survey Method

For this publication, expert interviews were selected as the tool because they are particularly suited to the collection of practical, experience-based, field-specific assessments. Expert interviews do not focus on the subjective lives of the interviewees, but on the specialised knowledge acquired through their professional roles, specialist experience or positions within institutions (Meuser and Nagel 2009). The focus here is on accessing process- or structure-related contextual knowledge that is of key significance for the topic of this study.

In the research methods of Meuser and Nagel (1991, 2009), expert interviews are conceptualised as semi-structured discussions that facilitate flexible and also targeted exploration of the subject. The guidelines applied here serve as orientation for conducting the interview, but also allow sufficient space for detailed enquiry and spontaneous thematisation by the interview partners. This openness leads to the uncovering of implicit interpretive patterns, action logic and knowledge systems that would be more difficult to access within a standardised process (or which might not be anticipated when formulating the questions).

The selection of interview partners was conducted in a targeted manner and was theoretically founded (theoretical sampling). The deciding factor here was not statistical representativeness, but the relevance of the interviewees' expertise regarding the research interest. All subjects have many years of sound professional experience in the respective field and could be considered authorities on specific aspects of the research object.

The interviews were conducted in person or via video conference; they were recorded and then transcribed in full. Qualitative content analysis or thematical analysis was used to evaluate the interviews, whereby the analytical focus was on recurring lines of argumentation, typical problem situations and action-guiding orientation.

Sample:
Interview partners from a counselling practice

Interview partners were specifically selected for this work, in order to uncover the various phenomenon areas in extremism disengagement work. This selection was carried out to achieve the greatest range of possible perspectives from counselling contexts in the areas of right-wing extremism and religiously motivated extremism (in this case, primarily, Islamist extremism). Attention was paid here to include experts with different ranges of experience and to consider diverse application contexts – for example, work with teens and adults inside and outside penal institutions. Similarly, counsellors from different German states were specifically asked to illustrate regional differences and concrete counselling contexts.

The sample comprises eight interview partners who all work as practicioners at the *Violence Prevention Network* and represent two different phenomena. Interview partners 1 to 4 are active in prevention and disengagement work in the right-wing extremist (REX) phenomena. Interview partner 1 counsels exclusively in prison contexts and has more than ten years of experience. Interview partner 2 works primarily in the area of training and does not currently counsel directly in a prison context; however, they bring to the work more than ten years of experience with adolescents in social work. Interview partners 3 and 4 also counsel in a prison context and have over two and eight years, respectively, of professional experience. Interview partners 5 to 8 work in the field of religiously motivated extremism (mainly ISLEX[29]). Interview partners 5 and 6 counsel both inside and outside prison environments, and each bring more than ten years of experience. Interview partners 7 and 8 have both been active in prevention and disengagement work for more than eight years. In summary, this selection enables diverse insights into the practice and challenges of counselling in the context of right-wing extremism and religiously motivated extremism.

5.2 Evaluation Method: Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis modelled after Braun and Clarke (2006) was drawn on to evaluate the collected interview data. This method is particularly suitable for the systematic identification, analysis and interpretation of patterns ('themes') within qualitative data and is characterised by a large degree of methodological flexibility. It allows both inductive and deductive access and can be carried out in a theory-driven and theory-open manner. In this work, inductive, data-supported access was selected in which the category system was not determined in advance, but developed directly from the material.

The analysis followed the six steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021): (1) First, the interviews were transcribed in full and read through multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the material. (2) In an open coding process, relevant text sections were marked and the first codes developed. (3) These codes were subsequently bundled into

29 Islex means Islamist extremism.

potential themes whereby contextually similar or associated codes were compressed and organised. (4) In an iterative process, the review and processing of the thematic structure followed using all the data material. (5) Definition and titles for the main and subtopics were finalised. (6) The results were presented in the form of thematic clusters and supported by quotes from examples.

The coding and theme development were conducted with assistance from the evaluation software MAXQDA, whereby regular memos were composed for quality assurance and reflexive notes were created. To ensure the reliability and comprehensibility of the analysis and differentiate thematically similar categories in their context, central interpretation decisions were also documented and discussed in the evaluation team.

The evaluation of the interview data was based on a reflexive-inductive understanding of analysis that views the subjectivity of the researchers not as a methodical problem but a resource as suggested in the founders' method (Braun and Clarke 2019, 591). Qualitative data was observed in this approach not as neutral images of social reality but as linguistically communicated meanings that can first be structured and understood in the analysis process through theoretically informed selection, weighting and contextualisation. The thematic categories identified in the course of the analysis should accordingly not be perceived as immediate representations of the statements of the interviewees. Instead, they are interpretative elements created by the research team with respect to the overall research interest.

The category system, codebook and additional quantitative information are listed in the Appendix. In the following, the focus is on the contextual statements and argumentation lines from the interviews.

6 Results of the Expert Interviews

Evaluation of the guideline-supported interviews was carried out using thematic analysis. The objective was to work out recurring patterns, challenges and perceptions in the everyday work of practitioners in the area of disengagement and exit work. The analysis enabled a systematic structuring of the collected data and forms the basis for the following presentation of the results. In the course of the evaluation, four main thematic categories (clusters) were identified that described the key areas of action and influential factors. These are:

1. **Ideology** - Includes the hybridisation and fragmentation of ideologies
2. **Clients and their lived realities** - Age, familiar surroundings and normalisation of extremist ideologies
3. **Macro-influences** - COVID-19, international crises and social media
4. **Practitioner work** - Challenges and needs in the practice

Each main category includes several subcategories that enlarge upon specific aspects within the respective thematic dimension. The results are presented below alongside this structure, with quotes from the interview partners included as examples for illustration purposes. The diagram follows the approach to make key patterns, and ambivalences and areas of conflict in the action fields visible.

6.1 Ideology

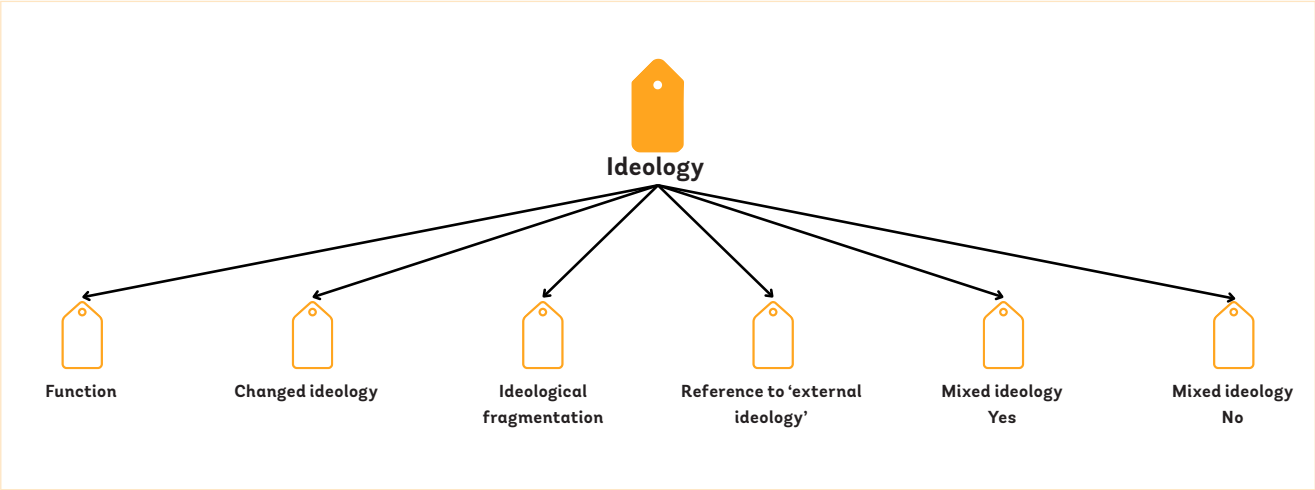


Fig. 15: Hierarchic category model for the category 'Ideology'

The ideology topic cluster includes several subtopics that cover both ideological content and newer developments and observations (see Figure 15). The (possible) hybridisation of ideology, i.e. the blending, overlaps and contextualisation of ideological fragments from diverse phenomena, are at the centre of the research interest. Questions on the ideological orientation of clients and their significance and change in the context of the counselling practice were appropriately central to the research interest of the publication. The sample composite allows cross-phenomena insight, namely in the fields of right-wing extremism and Islamist extremism, in the observations and interpretations of the counsellors.

Hybridisation & mixed forms

The adoption of comprehensive hybrid ideologies in which the client forms a uniform world view derived from different movements in a targeted (and coherent) manner could not be observed. In terms of propaganda disseminators in social media, counsellors observed this either not at all or only in rare individual cases. In contrast, references to ideological blending on the part of the client were much clearer. The counsellors repeatedly observed narratives that did not conform with the respectively anticipated phenomena. Interview partner 6, working in the area of religiously motivated extremism (ISLEX), reported the following in reference to several clients with a migration history:

> 'Yes, so in terms of percentages, it's always so difficult, but more than 50% of my clients who have a German passport voted for the AfD, and we're talking about Islamists here, they voted for the AfD [...]'. (Interview partner 6; ISLEX)

It was also noticeable that individual practitioners from the ISLEX area spoke of clients who positively received the right-wing extremist conspiracy tale of a 'Great Replacement'. It is worth noting that this exclusively refers to converts. These ideological positions, which appear contradictory at first glance, were interpreted as an expression of a cross-phenomena dynamic, in which the ideological elements are increasingly combined along lines of individual meaning patterns and psychosocial affinity – independent of contextual rigor.

An additional indication of such ideological blending is in the practitioners' descriptions of how they have observed that clients from the Islamist spectrum have shown a clear fascination with elements of the 'Reichsbürger' ideology [citizens of the German Reich]. It was reported, for example, that individual followers of the Hezbollah identify a parallel to the Islamist vision of the caliphate in the concept of a sovereign 'citizen' state. The concept of an independently founded, illegitimate community with its own power structure and nationalist-racist foundations is not perceived as a contradiction to their ideology, but as structurally similar and potentially compatible. Collective utopias, such as the concept of a 'pure' community existing outside of the democratic constitutional framework, and a shared hostility towards statehood, Western values or global power elites encourage these ideological references.

These observations clearly show that the ideological orientation of many clients is not about closed or consistent world views. On the contrary, ideological fragments act as dynamic, subjective, compatible meanings that are oriented towards psychosocial needs, emotions and interpretation patterns. In the area of right-wing extremism, all interview partners reported that ideological blending occurred. Conspiracy myths with no clear reference to traditional right-wing core elements, such as the *QAnon* narratives[30] of stories related to the COVID-19 vaccine, were increasingly adopted by the clients. It was noteworthy here that none of the interviewed counsellors reported cases in which right-wing extremists formed positive connections to Islamist actors. In contrast, Islamist clients often have a positive view of German right-wing extremists, above all due to their clear political agenda, the traditional gender roles they preach and their negative position towards the liberal democratic order.

Ideological fragments

Anti-Semitic and conspiracy ideological narratives were present in almost all phenomena and thus act as ideological fragments with high potential to build bridges between the areas. They enable connections across ideological borders and contribute diffuse, partly contradictory world views to the formation. Practitioners reported cross-phenomena narratives from a conspiracy ideological connection with victim narratives and discursive patterns of hegemonic masculinity.

Several practitioners emphasised that, alongside this ideological fragmentation within the phenomena of right-wing extremism and Islamist extremism, clients often selectively connect individual ideological fragments from various movements with each other, albeit without integrating these in a closed ideological system. Interview partner 6 describes this selective appropriation behaviour, appropriately, as 'tweezer work':

> '[…] I always call this tweezer work. It's like: "So, I'll take something from them, something from those and something from these. And why? Yeah, it just confirms my way of understanding the world, more or less". And it's so simple, yeah, virtually no solid ideological affiliation [...]' (Interview partner 6; ISLEX)

This form of appropriation does not necessarily mean that

30 In the case of QAon is a conspiracy theory movement that originated in the 4Chan forum. The myth mentions a power struggle within the United States between a satanic, paedophile elite (the 'Deep State') that aims to assume political power, as well as a camp around Donald Trump that would oppose these efforts. The QAon ideology contains anti-Semitic stories of a modernised legend of ritual killings and is now finding followers beyond the USA, for instance, in Germany. In both the USA and Germany, adherents to the QAon myth were involved in criminal and violent acts such as the attack on the US Capitol in 2021 or on the Reichstag in Germany in 2020 (Garry et al. 2021).

traditionally defined phenomena have run their course. It nevertheless shows clearly that the ideological reference point is more individual and more diverse. This can make the classification of clients and ideologies more difficult.

Interview statements from counsellors who work with clients from the Islamist and right-wing extremist spectrums clarify that an increasing ideological disorientation can be observed, especially among adolescents. Clear affiliation to certain ideological movements, for example, in terms of traditional Salafist lines with defined scholar authority, is considerably less prevalent. Instead, clients predominantly express unclear references, pragmatic appropriations and less need for an ideological system. The ideological fragments primarily serve the individual's sense of meaning and self-positioning, rather than a stringent ideological line. Despite observing an increasing fragmentation in individual cases, many counsellors also stated that they were still seeing cases where clients followed a stringent ideological movement.

A comparable fragmentation is also present in the area of right-wing extremism. The formerly dominant orientation towards national socialism as a positive utopia is increasingly moving into the background. Instead, vague enemy concepts and diffuse resentment aimed at, for example, 'politics', social liberalism, feminism, the LGBTQ+ movement, and at immigrants and their supposed supporters, have moved to the forefront. Individual clients pick up on content from different, partly contradictory right-wing movements. without perceiving these as contradictory.

'I believe it is still important, as is already being attempted, to also demonstrate in research on right-wing extremism that it is not only closed right-wing extremist world views or a closed right-wing extremist ideology that is dangerous, but that there are also many ideological fragments that can be adopted and form a mixture. [...] to convey that, for right-wing extremism, not all categories and all fragments must be adopted or personified by the individual, but that, more or less, what is already problematic now is to be anti-Semitic, believe in a conspiracy theory, or be homophobic. But, for example, the individual does not have to support history revisionism or the glorification of national socialism. And, to convey this - that there are different forms of right-wing extremism'. (Interview partner 3; REX)

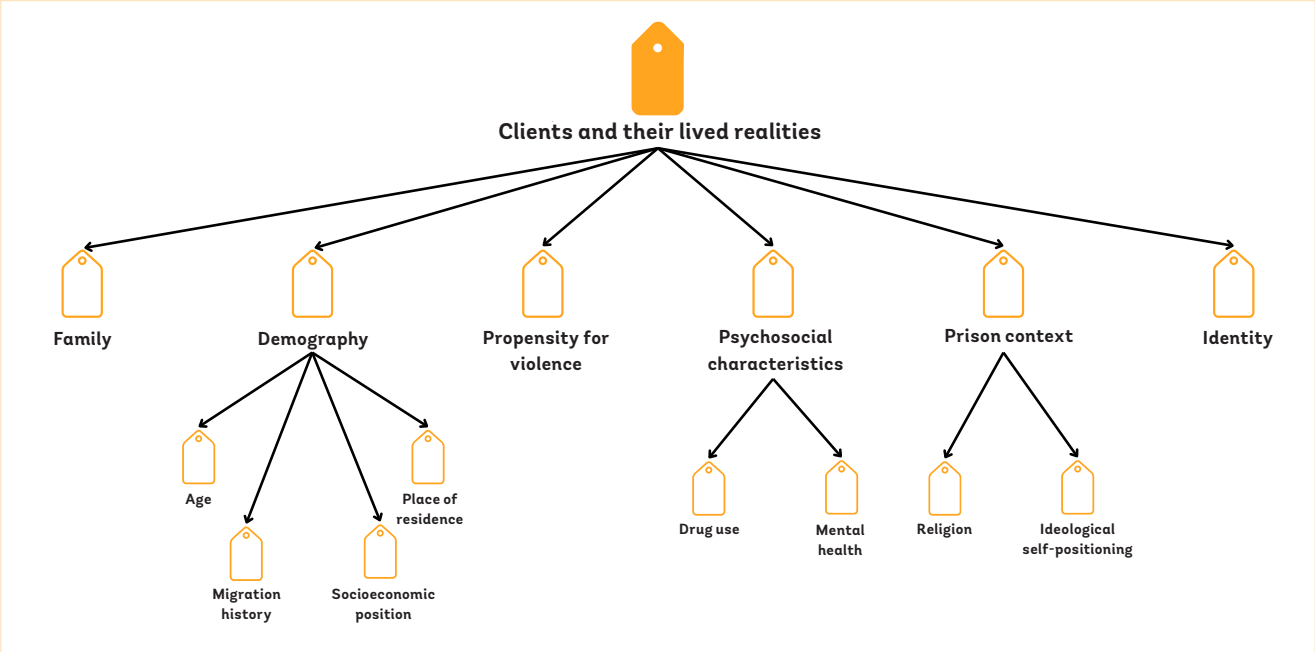


Fig. 16: Hierarchic category model for the category 'Clients and their lived realities'

6.2 Clients and Their Lived Realities

The topic cluster 'Clients and their lived realities' illuminates key changes in the composition and behaviour of clients receiving counselling. A demographic shift to considerably younger clients and the altered role of ideological content in the radicalisation process is particularly noteworthy here.

Age structure of clients

The practitioners uniformly reported that case loads for younger clients, especially young people aged 14-18 years old, increased considerably at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is often less need for in-depth tackling of ideological content with these younger clients. Counsellors reported that, particularly in the area of religiously motivated extremism, the theological involvement with ideological content has lost its meaning among younger clients. Instead, the need for belonging and identity and feelings of anger have moved to the forefront. In most cases, the ideology is therefore understood not as the starting point for radicalisation, but as a later expression of psychosocial dynamics.

> 'The greatest difference now is that we have a much younger target group. We occasionally get requests from elementary schools where we sometimes have to say "Hey, firstly, we can't carry out counselling work with children, we are not trained for that [...]"' (Interview partner 7; ISLEX).

Practitioners who mentor right-wing extremist clients have also noticed this demographic shift in their clients.

> 'In terms of right-wing extremism as a phenomena, it has simply changed a lot, and in such a direction that I would say that the persons referred to us are significantly younger' (Interview partner 1; REX).

Belonging instead of ideological objectives

Moreover, in a cross-phenomena context, several practitioners said that radicalisation processes are faster and ideologically more unsystematic than previously. Interview partner 7 sees here a distinct change in the significance of ideology in the process of an individual entering extremism:

> 'This awareness of it is no longer there at all, and also no longer this expectation of yourself, to say, "I follow a very clear line"'. (Interview partner 7; ISLEX)

Ideological content and the groups that represent this are increasingly selected based on their functionality for meeting the individual's needs. The desire for belonging and community, the search for legitimation for the acting out of emotions such as anger and frustration, for example, due to experiences of discrimination or conflicts with parents, or the desire for safety and control in an increasingly more complex world are driving forces in the orientation process, particularly in the case of younger clients.

> 'That you have a clientele who no longer want to engage with it theologically or ideologically, but is a clientele who are saying: "I want to strengthen my Muslim identity and be valued, and please give me as simple an identity as possible. Don't tell me that I am a German Muslim, of Turkish origin, like always. Because somehow, politically, I still have to find an identity and professionally somehow, too [No, I am wholly, completely Muslim]."' (Interview partner 7; ISLEX)

Family

Several counsellors describe that there is a recurring pattern in working with adolescents and young adults with right-wing extremist views in the normalisation of extremist mindsets in the immediate social environment and as a part of socialisation. Specifically in the right-wing extremist spectrum, many affected persons grow up in families in which racist, anti-Semitic and national-socialist narratives are not viewed as radical or deviant, but are conveyed as a natural part of daily life. Ideological content thus appears not as an expression of unacceptable political beliefs but as something 'normal', and this significantly complicates conscious boundaries. From the area of Islamist extremism, significantly less socialisation in the family through Islamist world views or their normalisation was reported. On the contrary, practitioners referenced intergenerational conflicts on questions of faith and assimilation

An example described by Interview partner 1 clearly illustrates how the regional and social context may support entry into the anti-democratic sphere and can also complicate any subsequent exit process. From work in an eastern German state, it was reported that many young clients grow up in living environments in which right-wing extremism, criminality and drug use are closely intertwined.

> 'It is more complex there, and then they are born into a criminal, drug-driven, resentment-filled world, and then perhaps truly in a world with a right-wing structure. So I didn't have any individuals who intentionally oriented

themselves to the right-wing spectrum in recent years – all had been born into it and had experienced and absorbed everything'. (Interview partner 1; REX)

In these cases, it was seldom about a conscious decision to embrace right-wing extremist thought, but more a comprehensive socialisation into an environment characterised by the acceptance of violence, resentments and right-wing ideology.

Violence

Among clients, the loss of meaning in terms of ideological rigor does not seem to be accompanied by a decrease in propensity for violence. Several practitioners from the areas of right-wing extremism and religiously motivated extremism report that the propensity for violence and the (planned) carrying out of violence are still central topics among the clients – particularly among younger people who appear to be less interested in ideology. Other counsellors, however, stated that, in their view, the propensity for violence is, rather, stable or slightly declining.

Individual experts also observe that clients with a noticeable affinity for violence also often demonstrate mental health issues. Interview partner 7, working in the area of religiously motivated extremism, describes that mental health issues can repeatedly be identified in young people with a propensity for violence:

> 'My clients who showed a propensity for violence often all had mental health issues at some point. That is, it really wasn't as easy as one believes [...] ideologised and then, very bluntly so, and I justify this. They had really deep-seated psychological problems [...].' (Interview partner 7; ISLEX)I

Interview partner 3 from the right-wing extremism area also points out that attacks frequently occur under the influence of alcohol or drugs:

> '[...] if and when it came to attacks, often in an intoxicated state That is, drugs or alcohol consumption play a large role with almost all of our clients'. (Interview partner 3; REX)

Even under the threshold of psychological illnesses or harmful substance abuse, some practitioners see a connection between intense emotions and the propensity for violence. Interview partner 5 describes strongly pronounced feelings of anger, frustration and grief in many clients, connected to past experiences of discrimination, conflicts or frustrating situations:

> 'So, anger and frustration and grief are definitely on the rise. With clients with whom we have interacted, they have a specific background in the sense of having certain frustrating situations in their past, or experiences of discrimination or even conflict dynamics or obstacles in their life, so that this can increase slightly for them [...] then exponentially for them. And through this frustration, anger and grief, it cannot be ruled out that they are also given or partly given to violence or respond to narratives, and they might be more willing to use violence than the fact that they would classify it as such'. (Interview partner 5; ISLEX)

Some practitioners describe a change in the Islamist scene since the 2010s. Formerly, trips to combat zones, for example, were a significantly more central component of the ideology than they are today. Additionally, the military defeat of the so-called 'Islamic State (IS)' has changed the structure of the global Islamist jihadi scene and, with it, also the type of mobilisation to acts of violence.

6.3 Macro-influences

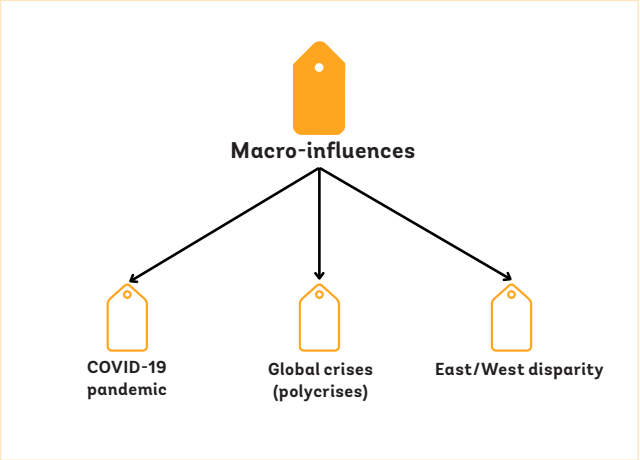


Fig. 17: Hierarchic category model for the category 'Macro-influences'

In the topic cluster 'macro-influences', the focus is on critical developments and specific regional features confronting clients. In this context, the specific crises and the interpretations offered by online actors and adopted by clients are relevant.

Normalisation and youth culture

In addition to familial influences, many of the counsellors draw attention to another dynamic: that right-wing extremist

mindsets in particular are not only spread in certain youth milieus, but are increasingly perceived as an expression of belonging, strength or even as 'fashionable'. What was previously identified as extremist or fringe has become an acceptable component of youth culture in many regions.

Particularly in rural areas or those with weak structures for example, in parts of eastern Germany, experts describe an environment in which right-wing extremist codes are part of the everyday aesthetic in the form of symbols, music styles, fashion brands or certain linguistic patterns. For many young people, this right-wing extremist connotated aesthetic is not perceived as radical, but as an expression of group belonging or even as 'cool'.

A case study from an eastern German state illustrates this development particularly clearly: a young man with a migration history and identifiable as a Person of Colour describes his membership in a right-wing extremist clique as something completely normal. Belonging to the group gives him recognition, orientation and social inclusion despite the contradiction regarding his own social position.

> '[...] I think, for example, of the young man with whom we worked in a – for him – non-voluntary context and who had himself a migration background, that is, he came to Germany as a child [...]. How old might he have been, maybe around 14, 15. And he was also a young man, yeah, he was not a blatantly inflated or discontent person, you noticed that – he was open and approachable. And also, with his skin colour, visible as a Person of Colour, he had already moved in Nazi circles and explained that he had also "Hitlered up" [gave the Nazi salute] there or whatever, and then the police came and they were about to be reported [...]' (Interview partner 2; REX)

These forms of affiliation occur in both the digital space and daily analog contexts. Right-wing extremist structures have an effect here not so much due to ideological persuasion, but more to their function as social providers: they offer identity, emotional security and clear role patterns, specifically for young people who experience various vulnerabilities, such as familial problems, being ostracised or social discrimination.

Social media & the perception of crises

In addition to assessments for altering ideology (fragments), many counsellors explicitly and repeatedly referenced social media and an associated perception of crises that, in their opinion, had taken on major significance in the transforming role of ideology. Practitioners indicated that the significance of social media in the clients' lives has greatly increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. They also stressed that platforms such as YouTube, TikTok or Instagram are key sites for information, networking and identity work and, at the same, are potential radicalisation spaces. Several experts reference a clear shift compared to previous case constellations, particularly in the area of religiously motivated extremism. While analog spaces such as mosques or sermons played a larger role in direct contact ten years ago, the ideological experience of young people is relocating to today's digital space at an increasing rate.

> 'It is mainly in the online area. And I'd just say that, previously, 10 years ago, I'd say, it was more the offline area, it was the offline sermons, analog sermons. [...] Today, it's more about the online area'. (Interview partner 7; ISLEX)

Social media also functions not only as a distribution channel here, but also as an experiential space with higher emotional resonance that is accessible to everyone. The content distributed there is often strongly emotionalised and visually loaded, for example, through images of civilian victims in war or through narratives that postulate a general Islamophobic mainstream society that intentionally ignores or minimises attacks on Muslims. These messages draw on central topics for and experiences of many young people, such as the perception of injustice, helplessness or the search for meaning. Several practitioners described how difficult it is to keep up with the speed and intensity of the digital setting of the topics. The constant presence of emotionalised narratives complicates a democratic and plural counter-communication, and can have an overwhelming effect on clients, as well as on experts.

COVID-19 pandemic

Nearly all the interviewees consider the COVID-19 pandemic a significant key moment for the previously described developments, both for individuals and at the ideological level. For many young people of Generation Z, the pandemic led to a phase that shaped them both biographically and ideologically. Social crises that intensified with the pandemic, the experience of isolation and loneliness, familial tension and conflicts, and the intensive use of social media channels created fertile ground for an acceleration and consolidation of known radicalisation factors. Seldom had so many of these factors influenced individual young people at once and in such a concentrated manner as was the case then.

Practitioners consistently reported a rise in calls for support from parents who were worried because their children were suddenly (supposedly) turning to problematic political or religious positions. These changes frequently began during the COVID-19 pandemic and were continuing to have an effect. An interview partner working in the area of religiously motivated extremism described how young people compensated, through intensive online use, for the social structures denied to them during the lockdowns, such as school and leisure activities. The Internet offered them a space where they could interact and feel less isolated. At the same time, this period was also marked by a search for meaning which, for many young people, led to entry into religious groups but also, in part, to extremist environments.

> 'In the past two, three years, we have received [...] many calls or an increase in calls from parents, for example, who are worried about their children [...]. And when you ask them, when we dig a bit deeper in the Clearing, "How long has this been going on?' then the response is often, 'Yeah, it's been like this since COVID [...]." This is a bit far in the past now, but we still notice the effects of this isolation today, that many teens in the isolation period, when school was not possible and when there were no outings, and everything was possible, somehow felt good on the Internet, they found a point where they could interact, where they didn't feel isolated, and many also searched for meaning in their lives during this time. And, as a result, they came, for example, through religion to extremist groups'. (Interview partner 5; ISLEX)

This experience was also confirmed with regard to the area of right-wing extremism. Young people who had less social connection during the pandemic and had less support sought alternatives either in the real world, through groups that remained open despite pandemic activity, or increasingly in digital spaces. Specifically in rural spaces, right-wing structures often offered a tangible opportunity for finding connection and leisure while other offers were not available.

> '[…] and I believe, when I think about the COVID-19 pandemic, I have a very strong feeling that young people were not well supported at the time, and, if they went out, especially in [an eastern German state], they engaged more in activities offered by the right-wing, which were somehow still open despite the pandemic. Or they increasingly plunged into this digital world at home'. (Interview partner 2; REX)

The assessments underscore the significance of the pandemic as a reinforcer and accelerator of radicalisation processes. It indicates how far-reaching structural gaps in societal and social support for young people can affect them in times of crisis – with long-term consequences for their political socialisation and identity development. Additionally, the pandemic demonstrated how closely psychosocial strains, digital media use and ideological vulnerability are interconnected.

International crises and conflicts

Online, it is primarily international conflicts and crises, such as the war in Ukraine or the conflict in the Middle East, that matter to clients across all phenomena. On the sender actor side, these topics are addressed and used to spread personal narratives, particularly in social media. The need for information, a sense of justice and feelings of helplessness among clients are seized upon and used in conspiracy stories and oversimplified explanation models. For example, various movements position themselves in the context of the war in Ukraine within the right-wing extremists, both pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian. Interview partner 4 from the area of right-wing extremism says:

> '[…] it isn't always so strict and sometimes certain statements also contradict each other.
> Particularly when one looks at the enemy-friend schemata from individual and specific positionings regarding any conflicts. Then it is not always so clear why it is exactly like that, I don't know. [...] for example, whether someone [is] pro-Russia or pro-Ukraine and [how] this is related to the ideology in any way'. (Interview partner 4; REX)

6.4 Practitioner Work

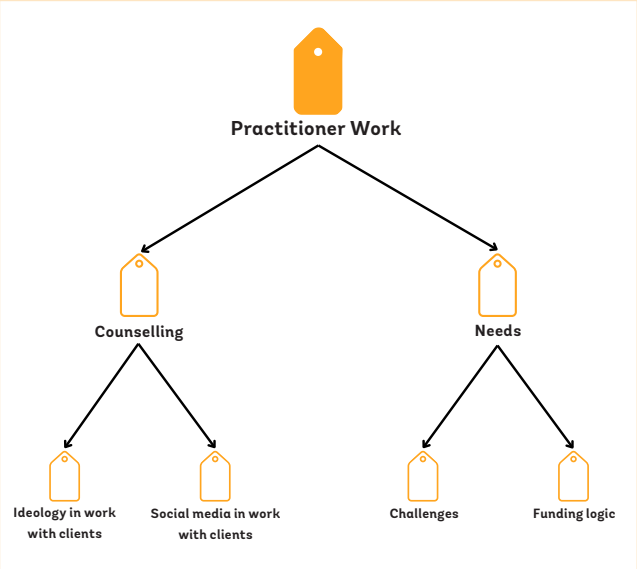


Fig. 18: Hierarchic category model for the category 'Practitioner Work'

This section illustrates the perspectives of the professionals in their daily practice. In their work with clients, the focus is on the challenges of the work and the institutional frameworks. It also describes the forms of support, training and networking practitioners would like in order to be able to react adequately to current developments in the field.

Complex challenges in counselling practice

A critical challenge that many practitioners describe is the increasing ideological fragmentation among clients. Often, they cannot be assigned to a clear phenomenon but draw on diverse ideological fragments and bridging narratives. Interview partner 5 describes the implications of this development against the backdrop of the work area:

> 'Yes, as mentioned, this is the challenge. These bridging narratives lead to more challenges, to more intensive work. In comparison to what is now transpiring in the civil society landscape with funds being cut and so on, it really doesn't work. Because this is simply something in which working with individuals becomes more meaningful. It is very time-consuming because we work with people who simply don't have a clear path'. (Interview partner 5; ISLEX)

Ideological ambiguity also appears in the conversations: Clients frequently express new or contradictory positions that have not yet been thematised in the course of counselling. This pushes counsellors to their limits in terms of their methodology.

> 'This is noted in almost every conversation. The client makes statements that we may never have heard before. If I were to specify limits in the counselling methodology, then we are reaching our limits. Because there are different needs that the clients have in many respects'. (Interview partner 5; ISLEX)

The processing of ideological content is also complicated by a wide-spread scepticism towards science, public institutions and mainstream media. Basic mindsets like this often make focussed discussions impossible.

> 'Irrationalists tend to say at the outset: "The entire school system here, biology class – all of this is just a conspiracy meant to lead us blindly". So, with these people, we really have to remain mainly or almost exclusively at the emotional level'. (Interview partner 8; ISLEX)

Specifically, in the area of right-wing extremism, counsellors reported increasing societal connectability of right-wing narratives. This normalisation makes disengagement processes more difficult because clients are no longer at the extremist periphery but find their positions potentially shared by the majority. To avoid escalation, many practitioners do not bring up ideological content in the beginning phases of counselling. Instead, the focus is on building a viable relationship as well as on biographical and psychological aspects.

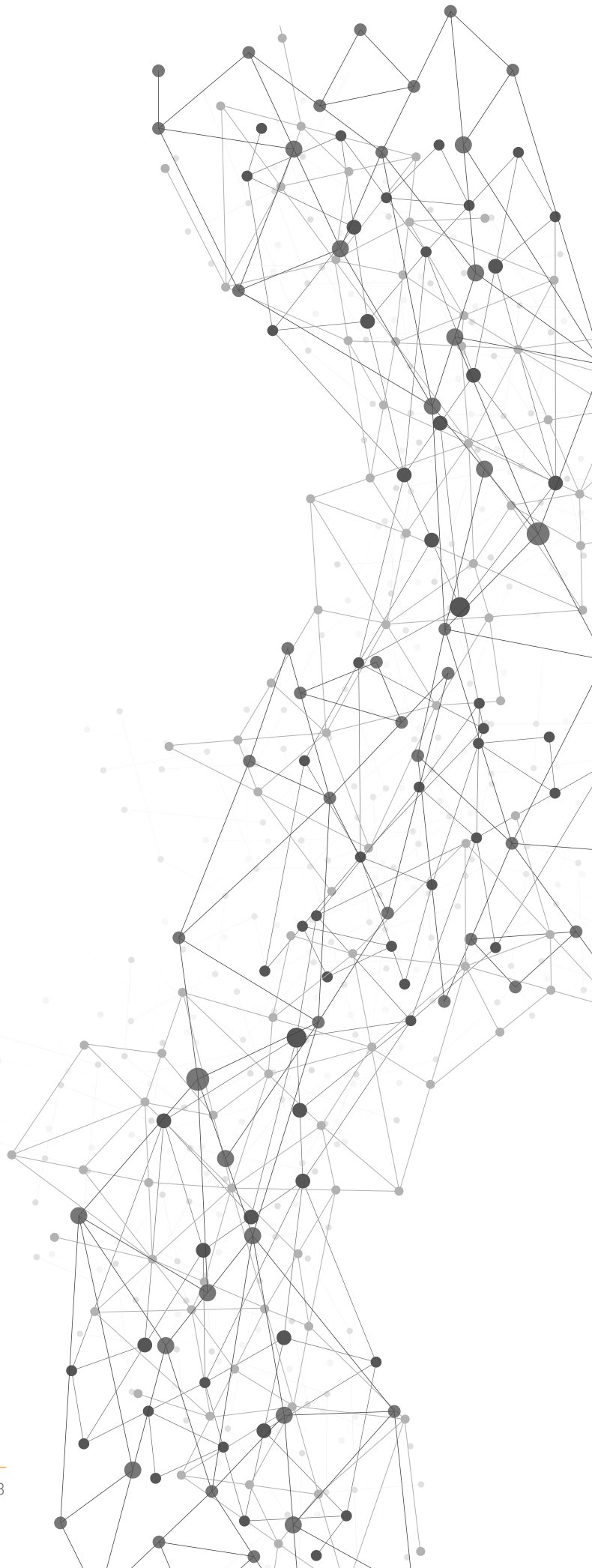
> 'To build a trustworthy and, above all, a stable work relationship, it makes sense and is also authentic that the person seeking advice "initially does not want anything" and thus does not enter the conversation seeking goals. Getting to know each other can, for example, work very well through biography work. Through the work relationship and a sincere attitude also perceived by the advice seeker, it is possible to then begin a possible ideological treatment at a later point in time'. (Interview partner 5; ISLEX)

In the later course of the counselling process, practitioners certainly strive to initiate a discussion on ideological content, although always with caution and consideration. Practitioners stress the significance of having a clear mindset, and not letting the details of ideological arguments complicate it:

> 'If cross-phenomena extremism prevention and intervention are involved, this becomes more difficult. You have to explore the ideological thought patterns more in detail. You don't have to be an expert, not really. As soon as you notice that the client wants to pull you into a niche discussion, this must not be permitted. Then you should stay on an epistemological or moral base'. (Interview partner 5: ISLEX)

Practitioners' Needs: Training, Dialogue, and Support

The challenges described reveal a clear need for continuous advanced training, particularly regarding counselling strategies for interaction with hybrid world views and ideological ambiguities. Similarly, many practitioners would like dialogue formats designed for cross-phenomena topics that also include interdisciplinary perspectives. The need for scientific contextualisation and substantiated analyses of ideological developments was expressed almost unanimously and also to reduce uncertainty when dealing with new phenomena.



7. Discussion

In the discussion section, Chapter 7.1 will address the key observations from Chapters 4 and 6 with reference to the scientific literature as they relate to each other. The focus here is on the processing of overlapping (structural) anomalies, developments or contradictions regarding current manifestations of extremist world views and their social framework conditions. Then, in Chapter 7.2, reference is made to the hypothesis of increasing ideological hybridisation. Based on the previous implementations, an assessment is made as to which indications in the study support or contradict this hypothesis.

7.1 Anomalies and Interpretation of Results

Offline anchoring, strategy change and social milieus

The significance of offline spaces is clear in the area of the Islamist extremist spectrum (ISLEX) and in right-wing extremism (REX), albeit in various manifestations and historical developments. Reports from practitioners document a significant change in the ISLEX area: while recruiting attempts frequently occurred in the context of mosque communities, prayer circles or informal lesson programmes with a conspiratorial character in the past (Neumann and Rogers 2007, 19; Yayla 2021), these activities have increasingly shifted to digital spaces in recent years (Yayla 2021). Offline spaces, like youth clubs, played a role here until the middle of the 2010s (Jensen et al. 2018, 2), not only as religious institutions but also as meeting points for closed agitation circles for recruiting-related functions. This tendency has considerably diminished (Jensen et al. 2018, 2-3). Instead, practitioners often describe a digitally dominated recruitment logic, through which large quantities of visual and emotionally-charged content can be spread across social networks using the 'watering can principle'. This aims to bring potential recipients to closed *Telegram* groups or chat forums where further ideological consolidation can occur (Clifford und Powell 2019). This significantly lowers the threshold of the initial contact, while, at the same time, intentionally creating direct social control and emotional access to the online spaces.

Herath and Whittaker (2023) reference several empirical studies, including Jensen et al. (2018), Gill and Corner (2015) as well as Bastug, Douai and Akca (2018), that have studied the influence of the Internet and, in particular, social media on radicalisation processes in recent years. Based on an analysis of 51 Canadians who travelled to regions where the 'Islamic State' was prevalent, Bastug, Douai and Akca (2018) demonstrated through sufficient data that, in 76% of the cases, social media played a role either during the recruiting process or thereafter.

The results from Gill and Corner (2015) and Jensen et al. (2018) point to the increasing significance of social media in radicalisation processes. Gill und Corner (2015) established in the analysis of 119 cases of terrorists acting alone from the USA and the UK that Internet use grew considerably in the context of radicalisation-related activities between 1995 and 2015. For the period from 2005 to 2016, Jensen et al. (2018) studied the social media behaviour of 478 extremists from the USA. Their results also clarify that the significance of social media continued to increase. It was noteworthy here that a particularly stark increase could be seen right at the end of the study period: between 2005 and 2010, approximately 25% used social media, and it was assessed as a primarily radicalisation factor for 1%. In the period from 2011 to 2016, the corresponding ratio rose to 76% (use) and 17% (primary impact) (acc. to Herath and Whittaker 2023).

Regarding the non-digital space, a stronger continuity of analog offerings is present in right-wing extremism compared to Islamist extremism, although Internet offerings continue to be highly relevant. The expert interviews agree that, specifically in structurally weak regions, there are diverse right-wing extremist activities that achieve a low-threshold social offering. Alongside demonstrations and party work, leisure formats, such as martial arts training, music events, hiking groups or cultural projects, target young people and facilitate an emotional and social connection (Handle and Scheuble 2021, 8). The 'identitarian movement' (Identitäre Bewegung) is a prominent example that combines cross-regional structures with local offshoots, aiming to connect with the pop culture scene though action formats, aesthetics and youth-oriented staging (Zimmer, Kart and Seelig 2024, 37; Salheiser and Quent 2022). In structurally weak regions, such pursuits are sometimes the only active forms of leisure activities, with the consequence that right-wing extremist world views no longer appear as a radical deviation but as a 'normal' component of reality in young people's lives (Salheiser and Quent 2022, 177-78).

These developments lead to the right-wing extremist narrative being deeply encoded in the daily lives of young people, particularly in regions where other social and cultural pursuits are lacking (Salheiser and Quent 2022). Practitioners report accordingly that joining or belonging to right-wing extremist groups is often based less on a closed ideological conviction than on experiences of belonging, recognition and emotional security – particularly for young people who have had multiple marginalisation experiences (Abbas 2019; Spalek 2007). Here, right-wing extremist groups assume the function of social integration channels, and thereby stabilise their connectivity to societal discourses. Anecdotal reports on the hegemony of

right-wing extremist positions and actors in many regions of Germany are congruent with the many (at times wide-reaching) accounts in the network analysis that were assigned to right-wing extremists (and the conspiracy myth theorist spectrum). At the same time, the coding gave the impression that many of the accounts assigned to right-wing extremists are not characterised by an especially modern or youth-oriented appeal or audiovisual organisation. The speakers were even frequently middle-aged. This indicated that right-wing extremist content and positions on Instagram should not be conceived as (only) youth-specific.

On digital normalisation processes

The analog anchoring of right-wing extremist scenes interacts with digital visibility. The shift from the street to social media and vice versa does not necessarily occur through these same actors, but through loosely connected networks, influencers and platforms that either directly reproduce the right-wing extremist positions, or encourage their dissemination through a selective choice of topics, platform logic and positive references. The connectivity to (younger-aged) milieus is thus further strengthened by the combination of local, low-threshold offerings and media presence. This development contributes to an insidious normalisation of extremist positions in the digital space and enables the discursive integration of anti-democratic narratives in the mainstream over the long term.

Digital spaces, platform logic and indirect legitimation

Various counsellors emphasised the increasing and cross-phenomena significance of social media in the context of their conversations with clients. In the expert interviews, this was described as a part of a general trend towards more substantial social media use among Gen Z, particular in reference to younger clients since the COVID-19 pandemic. This portrayal corresponds with Khalil's study results which stress how central social media platforms and messenger services are to (political) opinion formation and contact with extremist ideologies (Khalil 2023). In this respect, the analytical network study depicts a key dimension in the construction of (extremist) ideological convictions.

Reports from practitioners who work with clients in the penal system demonstrate that the availability or absence of social media has a significant effect on the perception of social conditions and ideological offerings. Individuals who have been incarcerated for a long time, especially in the period before the wide establishment of social media, have had access to a distinctly different information ecosystem than those with continuous access to digital platforms. In the former instances, information was often received via teletext, television news or (telephone) conversations. According to expert statements, the world views of these persons were marked by a higher ideological logic and could be assigned to stronger traditional extremist movements. The confrontation with the digital media world after their release, in particular with its wide range of contradictory, emotionalising and visually-charged content, presented a substantial challenge for many and required targeted media education support in the context of disengagement or reintegration processes.

In the digital space, the normalisation of extremist content was not only seen in the direct dissemination by actors who were clearly positioned ideologically. In fact, formats and profiles without clear positioning also contributed to achieving visibility, for example, podcasts, talk shows or discussion formats in which the representatives were able to talk without being challenged. These platforms create implicit legitimation with their (to an extent selective) choice of guests, and contribute to growing the latter's reach. A noticeable case in the study's data set was a channel with representatives from the Islamist extremist scene that provided known right-wing extremist activists, conspiracy ideologists and actors from the 'manosphere' with a platform for long discussions, often with calls in the mid-six-figure range on *YouTube*.

Extremist actors can also gain visibility and legitimacy through positive references from non-extremist influencers. The influencers themselves do not necessarily represent a closed extremist world view here, but contribute to the normalisation with praise, shared content or interactions. Studies such as, for example, that by Bolet and Foos (2025) show that (uncritical) TV interviews or *YouTube* discussion formats with right-wing activists lead to shifts in the perception of previously accepted standards in the public and in how likely approval is of the (uncontested) positions of right-wing extremist actors among viewers (Bolet and Foos 2025, 19).[31]

31 In the study by Bolet and Foos (2025, 19), it was also shown that critical classification of the claims led recipients to view the statements of right-wing extremist actors as considerably less accurate. However, in the critical classification itself, there was no indication that individuals found the right-wing extremist statements thus less trustworthy than those of the control group. The authors pointed out that this might call into question the hypothesis that a critical handling, e.g. within the framework of an interview, could be a strategy for combatting right-wing positions. Additionally, it showed that the normalisation effect from interviews with right-wing extremist actors was indeed less noticeable if a critical interpretation occurs, but it does not disappear completely (Bolet and Foos 2025, 20).

News portals add to this with explicitly political agendas that spread misinformation and misanthropic narratives when addressing crises-related topics, thereby opening an additional arena for their dissemination.

The blurring of boundaries between mainstream and extremist milieus can be noted in the example of the right-wing libertarian influencer, *Philip Hopf* ('Hoss and Hopf' podcast), who repeatedly serves conspiracy ideological and right-wing extremist narratives. His posts include nationalist positions, racist generalisations, dehumanising language and statements openly glorifying violence. He says, for example, that certain criminals '[must] be eradicated'[32] or that they '[should] be processed for manure'.[33] Such rhetoric manipulates fears, creates threatening scenarios and strengthens anti-systemic interpretation patterns, for example, the story of the deliberate destruction of the country[34] through state-controlled mass immigration.[35]

Humour, codes and glorification of violence

Humour is another device that repeatedly appears in the normalisation of extremist positions and also plays a central role in the perception of what is utterable or acceptable. The use of humour and (ostensible) satire as a tool for the legitimation of misanthropic and extremist narratives is a well-known device among extremist actors (Beck and Spencer 2025; Bellè 2025) and also appeared in the studied data from the network analysis as a wide-spread phenomenon. Beck and Spencer (2025) state, with reference to Brantner, Pfurtscheller and Lobinger (2019) as well as Wagner and Schwarzenegger (2020), that right-wing extremist actors, in particular, have discovered humour and memes as a means to produce a persuasive effect in social media. Humour is utilised here to generate reach, attention and connectivity (Beck and Spencer 2025, 8). Humour acts here as a form of trivialisation that enables the presentation of radical statements less as a break with societal norms, but rather as part of a supposed 'normal' discourse, and is an element used in the strategic mainstreaming of right-wing extremist content (Schmid, Schulze and Drexel 2025, 538-40). This strategy is closely connected with the wide and diverse range of narratives increasingly present in times of general crisis, such as social, health or political uncertainties, and creates connectability (Bruns, Dessart and Pantazi 2022).

Political statements are frequently also linked to memes, GIFs or short reels in which, for example, immigrants, queer persons or other persons or groups marked as enemies are ridiculed or shamed. Reference to symbols, emojis (airplane), certain terms ('professional', 'cultural asset'), etc. enable denigration to be communicated here, without being made explicit. In viewing social media channels, there were, for example, racist memes[36] that had also been shared by AfD members of the Bundestag in which male Arab immigrants were portrayed with knives as perpetrators of violence, while at the same time ridiculing their supposedly flawed German.

In the context of the 'remigration' or deportation fantasies of right-wing extremist actors, other recurring references, allusions and codes also occur. These include the use of the song 'L'amour toujours' by Gigi D'Agostino that was sung and instrumentalised with an altered, racist text on Sylt in May 2024.[37] This then became a musical code for racist positions and was used by right-wing extremist actors on TikTok or Instagram (generally without text) to allude to a racist positioning, without having to be explicit and thereby laying themselves open to prosecution.[38]

Also notable were the violent fantasies that continued to appear in social media posts and the comments sections. In the comments sections in particular, in right-wing extremist accounts as well as accounts that selectively offer corresponding topics/narratives (e.g. regarding alleged 'criminal immigrants'), there is a dynamic in which the site users either explicate similar positions or even try to outdo one another. The showing of enemy images and their (supposed) actions or the strategic perception shift is a recurring device in various extremist environments. The highly selective

32 https://www.instagram.com/p/DLR0NUztXYc/ (last accessed on 10.09.2025)

33 https://www.instagram.com/p/DLHg7r8t57o/ (last accessed on 10.09.2025)

34 https://www.instagram.com/p/DKg6ozyOQda/ (last accessed on 10.09.2025)

35 https://www.instagram.com/p/DIXAHNkOTVh/ (last accessed on 10.09.2025)

36 For racist memes and the use of humour by right-wing extremists, see, for example: Schmid, Schulze and Drexel 2025.

37 For a detailed analysis of this and other instances and (unintended) consequences of critical discussion, see: Machine Against the Rage, Trendreport, edition 6: https://machine-vs-rage.net/ausgabe-6/der-flugsandeffekt/. Last accessed on 10.09.2025.

38 Text references, such as 'Döp dö dö döp' [Doop do do doop], that play on the melody of the song also appear in the comments section as an abstract code, communicating deportation fantasies in reference to perceived immigrants. Numerical codes are also used in this context. In this sense, for example, the number '444' or, camouflaged as the time '4:44', appears – wherein 4 represents 'D', the fourth letter of the alphabet – 'DDD' is the abbreviation for the racist rallying cry, 'Deutschland den Deutschen' [Germany for the Germans]. Likewise, the airplane emoji is a code that references deportation flights or the racist song 'Abschiebehauptmeister' [Senior Deportation Officer] by the right-wing extremist music group, Neuer Deutscher Standard (NDS) (this appears in the upper edge of Community 4).

range of posts and videos aims to create the impression that the respective group of people is criminal, violent, suspicious or dangerous. There are, for example, different accounts in the data set that constantly publish videos or posts about people who are perceived as immigrants who are (alleged) criminals. Sometimes the accounts also post (rhetorical) questions, such as : 'What would you do?'

In this, it seems plausible that it is not about capturing a nuanced mood but the targeted evocation of violence-glorifying, racist and misanthropic claims taken from the commenters and even enable the account to be able to deny advocating violence. In a type of interplay between (wide-reaching) accounts that provide the cues and the commenters, misanthropic and at times racist statements are made and groups of people devalued in the comments sections. Among such videos, GIFs can always be found showing people with flamethrowers (Fig. 19), martial arts scenes in which people are knocked down (see Fig. 20) or shorts of first-person shooters or from action films whereby the protagonist fires off weapons (usually automatic ones).

This can only be understood as a clear reference to violent fantasies about People of Colour or other groups marked as enemies in the context of the videos. In many posts, violent fantasies are often also fully expressed without codes or supposed humour (see e.g. Fig. 21).

The openness and implicitness of the linguistic and audiovisual glorification of violence, particularly by commenters on one of the largest social media platforms like Instagram and publicly available, is similarly both striking and of concern, particularly in the area of right-wing extremist accounts.

The practitioners' descriptions regarding their clients' (willingness to use) violence varied among the cases they had handled. While some counsellors reported on a higher propensity for or a lower threshold to violence, there were others who had a more consistent impression of the propensity for violence. Counsellors reported anecdotally that, in their opinion, (violence-legitimising) propaganda was spread through a 'watering can approach', which entangled many vulnerable individuals and could lead to violence. In another expert interview, (adolescent) curiosity was referenced regarding videos glorifying violence and the testing of limits. Moreover, it was indicated that the global structure had changed in Islamist extremism since the end of the 2010s due to the military defeat of 'Islamic State' (IS), which had led, for example, to fewer large-scale mobilisations for travel to combat zones or similar actions. At the same time, the same practitioners stressed that in no way did this mean that Islamist extremism had fundamentally become less dangerous. Rather, it could be observed that the threshold to violence in individual cases was very low, particularly in the case of perpetrators acting alone. Even if there was not any great mobilisation for travelling overseas or combat and the wave seemed to have subsided, extremist violent actions nevertheless still occurred in certain cases. This contradiction of lower visibility of organised calls to violence on one side with isolated instances of a very high propensity for violence on the other is tangible for many experts in their counselling practice and represents new challenges in terms of risk assessment and intervention.

Overall, the statements and results referred to above emphasise the necessity to not only lessen the normalisation of extremist positions to contextual radicalisation, but also to take social, spatial, cultural and aesthetic dimensions into account. The combination of legitimation through the use of humour, individual appropriation of various narratives and the offers of social belonging create a complex web that presents particular challenges for prevention and intervention. Future research should therefore have a stronger focus on the interactions between digital and analog milieus, local and global contexts and between different ideological movements, in order to better understand the mechanisms of normalisation and connectivity. In the following subchapter, the question is discussed as to if or how a hybridisation of extremist ideologies based on the studied data of this publication can be determined.

7.2 Hybridisation, Fragmentation, Individualisation or Bridging Narrative?

While the research in recent years has increasingly discussed hybrid ideologies and ideological fluidity as key components of the present extremism dynamic (Baele, Brace and Coan 2023; Brace, Baele and Ging 2024; Gartenstein-Ross et al. 2023; Rousseau et al. 2024), this study only found limited indications of a comprehensive hybridisation of various ideologies. In the network analysis, only 1.3% of the studied accounts showed characteristics that can be described as hybrid ideological configurations in terms of a known or structured blending of various ideological elements. In the interviews with practitioners working in disengagement counselling, comprehensive ideological hybridisation was also not described as a central or frequent phenomenon.

In contrast, the findings indicate an ideological fragmentation and increasing individualisation of world view references. Brace, Baele and Ging (2024, 103) differ in their typology of hybrid ideologies, among other things, between *unclear* and *mixed ideologies* (see here Chapter 2), whereby the category for *unclear* indicates incoherent, difficult-to-classify ideological

Fig. 19: The post shows a video of a Person of Colour; in the comments, the deportation of the person is promoted, and a GIF of a flamethrower is shared.

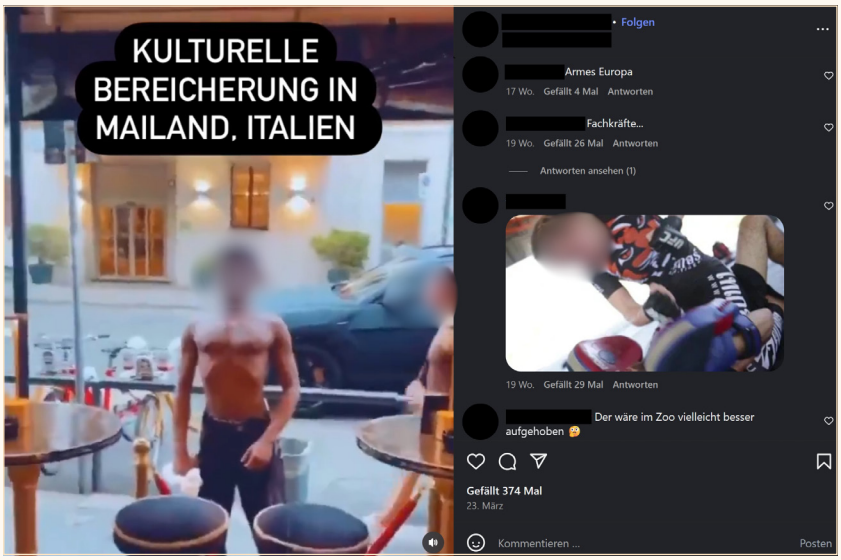


Fig. 20: A video post shows a Person of Colour standing in front of a cafe, starring in. The post is titled 'cultural enrichment,' and various comments ranging from derogatory to explicitly racist and a GIF glorifying violence appear below it.

Fig. 21: In the comments section of a video showing an act of violence supposedly committed by a migrant, a site user calls for the politicians responsible to be 'stabbed'.

patterns. This description seems to more accurately apply to many of the actors observed in the present analysis, rather than speaking of a comprehensive hybridisation (in terms of *mixed ideologies*). This result conforms to Rousseau et al. (2024), who state that it is mainly younger people who tend to combine ideological fragments selectively and situationally, and often also contradictory (Rousseau et al. 2024, 63).

A notable finding in the analysis is that Islamist accounts, although they are partly classified as different ideological movements such as Salafist or Hizb ut-Tahrir and belong to diverse belief systems, appear to have created an externally oriented, comparatively isolated communication system in the digital space. In contrast to right-wing extremist and conspiracy myth ideology environments signalised in the network map through ideological overlaps, strategic synergies and high connectivity (Gartenstein-Ross et al. 2023; Rousseau et al. 2024), Islamist online actors predominantly remain within their own discursive sphere. It can also be seen that very specifically oriented (and radical) accounts are found in the outer edges of the network map (primarily in Communities 2 and 4), while wide-reaching and frequently connectable actors are found towards the centre of the network map. This illustrates that there is also a heterogeneity in terms of connectability within the respective scene.

On the other hand, Meleagrou-Hitchens and Ayad (2023), for example, found few indications in the network analysis of an increasing mix of right-wing extremist and Islamist extremist ideologies. However, at the same time, the practitioners engaged in prevention and disengagement work reported that their clients (from the ISLEX area) occasionally received or engaged with a wide spectrum of various topics and anti-democratic groupings, including content from AfD or other right-wing populist and right-wing extremist actors. This indicates that an ideological blending and overlap definitely occurs in the subjects' lives which can only be portrayed to a limited extent in purely quantitative network data. There is a significant need for research here to better understand how these different influences are absorbed, processed and integrated in individual radicalisation processes.[39]

Admittedly, Islamist actors have traditionally offered similar narratives to right-wing extremist groups, as in, for example, regressive gender roles or the denial of the free democratic basic order, but convey these using other examples and sociopolitical objectives. Thus, in the review of social media accounts, antagonistic references by Islamist extremist and right-wing extremist actors to the respective other group as the enemy (see e.g. Geck 2023, 294) appeared much more frequently than positive references.

Particular attention regarding diverse and hybrid tendencies should be given to the prevalence of coaching, motivational and health-related accounts that rarely fulfil the criteria for extremist or conspiracy mythist narratives, but they do engage in spreading anti-science sentiments, suspicion of institutions and fear-based messages with features that, according to Meiering, Dziri and Foroutan (2019) and Hemmila and Perliger (2024) are typical of ideological bridging narratives. These accounts spread content that is sometimes harmful to health, for example, by praising 'healing methods' which are not based on evidence and can massively undermine medical consensus (Dorn 2022). At the same time, they build emotional affinity to target groups, for example, through parasocial appeal and targeted confidence building (Brace, Baele and Ging 2024, 108). The ideological connectability to extremist narratives does not occur here through open ideologisation, but through a delegitimising basic mindset that systematically questions existing democratic regulations, institutions and authorities (Berger 2018, 133f.).

In the data, connections emerge between conspiracy myth ideological and right-wing extremist milieus that primarily communicate via political topics and conspiracy theoretical interpretation patterns. Politically connotated conspiracy myth content acts here as a bridge-building narrative that promotes ideological and communicative penetrability between both phenomena (Bergmann and Butter 2020).

In many cases, it remains unclear whether hybrid ideology can be spoken of in a more narrow context. As Gartenstein-Ross et al. (2023) and Brace, Baele and Ging (2024) emphasise, not every ideological blending is an automatic expression of a new ideology, but can also be motivated by situational contexts, affective resonances or strategic communication. The category described by Gartenstein-Ross et al. as *ambiguous extremism* (2023, 9), i.e. an equivocal, difficult-to-understand form of extremism, seems especially suited to characterising the patterns observed in our analysis. Rousseau et al. (2024, 63-64) also show that ideological incoherence, particularly among younger people, is rather the rule than the exception. The rise in conspiracy narratives without a coherent ideological basis (with the propensity for violence) postulated by Meleagrou-Hitchens and Ayad (2023, 37) coincides with observations from the coding of the social media accounts.

39 A detailed assessment of follower behaviour based on their anonymised data is a promising approach for further studies to more precisely illuminate the subscription behaviour and any diverse influences or hybrid combinations at the (individual) follower level.

At the same time, the observed phenomenon can be interpreted as the expression of increasing individualisation of extremist meaning creation processes (Reckwitz 2017; Hemmila and Perliger 2024). The combining of ideological fragments does not often occur consciously in terms of an ideological projection but as a reaction to biographical, emotional or social insecurities. Recipients are able to construct a 'custom-made' meaning for their lives. The boundary between ideological orientation and fulfilment of needs blurs. Some expert interviews revealed anecdotal indications that illustrate that the aim is less to form an ideologically coherent and argumentatively plausible view, but rather to selectively (and partly superficially) adapt different positions that fundamentally legitimise a personal identity or conviction. The resulting world views are unstable, but still effective, not despite but precisely because of their openness, emotionality and connectivity (Berger 2018; Rousseau et al. 2024).

In summary, the results of this publication indicate more of an increase in ideological fragmentation and individualisation, rather than a comprehensive hybridisation of ideologies. The observed world views (of the accounts themselves) are frequently incoherent, selective and affectively-charged, whereby enemy concepts and suspicion narratives often develop more distinctly than coherent political programmes. Furthermore, it is plausible that, through individual subscription behaviour on the recipient's side, a more diverse image is presented. Bridging narratives such as anti-Semitism, anti-feminism or an anti-science mindset, play a critical role by creating ideological connectivity between various phenomena without necessitating a genuine ideological fusion (Meiering, Dziri and Foroutan 2019, 97).

The findings thereby underscore the necessity to look closely at dynamic ideological selection processes, affective mobilisation potential and structural transformation conditions (Rousseau et al. 2024, 63; Borum 2011, 30-31). They also illustrate that focussing narrowly on ideology as the primary explanatory approach for orientation processes involving extremist world views would be limited. Moreover, there would need to be discussion regarding the extent to which newer and complex international alliances and conflicts challenge established narratives in the respective phenomena, and thus represent at least a portion of the explanation for the observed ideological fragmentation. For prevention and disengagement work, there is an increased need for cross-phenomena, context-sensitive case work that questions affective links, psychosocial dynamics and discursive connecting factors beyond formal ideological assignations.

8. Conclusion and Outlook

The above arguments demonstrate that, in the context of this publication, no indications were found of a comprehensive development towards fully hybrid ideology constructions (particularly as ideologies in the past have also never been completely monolithic or coherent). In the network analysis, the actor groups from the Islamist extremist spectrum are in particular distinctly separate from the right-wing extremist spectrum. The crossover between right-wing extremist and conspiracy mythist accounts was more fluid in the context of the network map. In addition, there were individual accounts in this area that were classified as hybrid. In the expert interviews as well, only isolated indications of hybridisation in terms of fully *melded* or *mixed* ideological constructions were observed. Indications of diversification and individualisation of ideological constructions were, however, found in both the expert interviews and the network analysis.

In this context, the prevalence of conspiracy theorist narratives as a type of constant was, on the one hand, noteworthy. Specific conspiracy myths are essential components of different extremist narratives. In this context, the role of several coaches and influencers in particular who make statements on topics such as health, nutrition or motivation and present anti-pluralist or anti-democratic ideas as supposedly sound knowledge is significant. In part, they link their content with intentional fear-mongering in order to market their products as the supposed solution. Against the backdrop of normalisation processes and the mainstreaming of such positions, this phenomenon is particularly relevant and presents potential for subsequent studies.

The extent to which we can speak of ideological hybridisation is greatly dependent on which understanding of terminology or which definition is used as the basis. These range from diffuse world views to the fusion or co-existence of supposedly incompatible ideology fragments. Analysis of key underlying mechanisms is, however, more important than the semantic debate about the degree to which the search for meaning, belonging, security or identity plays a role in the spread and reception of hybrid ideology, as well as the associated multi-faceted challenges.

The diversification of appeals as well as the individualisation, fragmentation and instability of ideological elements present a challenge at various levels of prevention and disengagement work. The focus on (changing) ideology constructs should not, however, mean that social, psychological and emotional

processes are neglected. The expert interviews point to the partially fluid, opportunistic character in the adaption of ideological fragments or arguments in which psychosocial processes are decisive.

The focus of the network analysis was, first and foremost, the wide-reaching accounts that primarily assume a transmission role. In the future, this perspective could be expanded for a detailed analysis of the recipients' side. In addition to surveys or experimental settings, a focus on the anonymised reception behaviour of users on the platform could be rewarding. This is nevertheless linked to even greater ethical challenges, but would provide a detailed insight and a more in-depth understanding of how multi-layered or hybrid the accounts and content are which the social media users actually receive or engage with. Similarly, additional analyses that focus on platforms such as TikTok, Telegram, Discord or Reddit might be rewarding in showing a more complete view of extremist online ecosystems. Close links between research and counselling work would also be beneficial in the future to maintain a continuous exchange regarding anomalies, developments and challenges. Continuity is therefore important here to take the temporal dimension of changes into account.

9. Recommendations for Action

In light of the increasing normalisation and individualisation of extremist positions, the broad-based societal strengthening against anti-democratic and anti-pluralist narratives and actors is required. This would include the following aspects, among others:

- Ideological reference points are relevant but not the singular or monoclausal factor in the context of orientation and disengagement processes towards/from extremist world views. To be able to address the psychosocial challenges of individuals, social work and psychotherapeutic services must be strengthened as they ideally interact with extremism prevention services to react adequately to various challenges.

- The available expertise in dealing with extremist world views must be reinforced to provide the capability to address the increasingly complex challenges. This requires the stabilisation and protection of the specific agencies involved in prevention and disengagement work. These have a critical role due to their knowledge and experience in appropriately and effectively counteracting the radicalisation processes and supporting the disengagement processes.

- In the expert interviews, the desire for exchange formats was repeatedly expressed. Practitioners reflecting on their practice, and the exchange of experience reports with individuals outside their own team, specialisation and work context are considered very advantageous. Precisely because extremist environments are becoming more dynamic, more diverse and more complex, a multi-agency exchange of information would be worthwhile.

- This necessitates the development and adaption of specific concepts in light of the indications that there are ever younger individuals turning to extremist world views. These must, in addition to their effectiveness in the prevention of and disengagement from extremist positions, above all respect the unique need for protection of young people and take age-specific developmental tasks into account, as well as the typical behaviour of testing limitations among young people. In this, a better linking of the areas of action in child development, child and adolescent therapy, developmental psychology, and counselling and disengagement work is important to be able to draw on existing experience and expertise, to learn from each other and create synergies.

- The orientation to extremist world views should, however, not be considered a purely adolescent-specific phenomenon, as it also affects people of all ages.[40] This requires precisely customised counselling concepts and methods to facilitate the exploration of life situations, vulnerabilities and motivations in the second half of life.

- It was indicated in the expert interviews that the release after a (long) imprisonment, alongside other challenges of reintegration, can be very challenging with respect to social media. According to the anecdotal description from the expert interviews, the released individuals react very differently: while many distance themselves from social media, others may focus on the content excessively. This indicates the need to consider the digital and social media dimension in integration or support services following release from prison and to strengthen competences for dealing with the (altered) social media landscape.

- From the perspective of prevention work, it becomes especially important to understand how users come into contact with extremist content, and which content or accounts contribute to users turning to strongly anti-democratic and anti-pluralist content. A detailed study of individual reception processes and temporal developments of followers would enable a deeper understanding, but this also involves significant ethical and technical challenges. Successful identification of the underlying mechanisms and key actors would help establish more targeted prevention possibilities in the digital space.

- The multi-faceted influential factors must be considered for a holistic understanding of radicalisation and disengagement processes. This includes influences from social media and other online spaces as well as from offline lives, the social environment, sociopolitical developments and individual vulnerabilities. This complexity also illustrates why intersectional perspectives and interdisciplinary orientations or co-operations are essential.

40 The dist[ex] policy paper addresses this topic in 'Leerstelle (R)Age? Radikalisierung in der zweiten Lebenshälfte als Herausforderung für die Distanzierungs- und Ausstiegsarbeit' from the Interdisziplinären Zentrum für Radikalisierungsprävention und Demokratieförderung e.V. [(R)Age? Radicalisation in later life as a challenge for disengagement and exit work] (IZRD) [Interdisciplinary Centre for the Prevention of Radicalisation and Promotion of Democracy]: https://www.dist-ex.de/publikationen/detail/leerstelle-rage-radikalisierung-in-der-zweiten-lebenshaelfte-als-herausforderung-fuer-die-distanzierungs-und-ausstiegsarbeit. Last accessed on 10.09.2025.

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Appendix

Coding of extremist content

The analysed data was classified into three ideological main categories or movements based on the previously determined content criteria: conspiracy ideology, Islamist extremism and right-wing extremism. The coding follows a systematic category scheme founded on factually established definition characteristics, current research approaches and practice observations from prevention and monitoring. These are presented for the individual phenomenon areas below.

In the content, there are occasional overlaps between the categories of conspiracy ideology, Islamist extremism and right-wing extremism in their rejection of democratic regulation systems, authoritarian gender images or in the dissemination of (specific) conspiracy ideological narratives. However, such similarities in their forms of expression, reasoning style or their perceived threat do not necessarily point to ideological hybridisation.

We can only talk of hybridisation if ideological elements from various spectrums are linked and integrated with each other intentionally and systematically. This can be seen in, for example, the combining of religious and ethno-nationalist legitimisation patterns or in the simultaneous recurring of Islamist and right-wing identity concepts. In many cases, however, it is solely a matter of parallel or opportunistic narratives, which, though they may be functionally similar, remain separate structurally or in terms of their origin.

The coding therefore takes both content overlap and ideological coherence into account. The objective is to understand the respective key logic without prematurely assuming convergence where there are no systematic connections.

The fact that certain conspiracy myths, such as the anti-Semitic narrative, are an integral component of Islamist and right-wing extremist ideologies is also factored in. Its presence, therefore, does not represent a hybridisation, but is consistent with the respective basic ideological assumptions. In contrast, hybridisation is considered actually present if narratives that do not originally stem from the respective phenomena are drawn upon – for example, if Islamist content takes up the right-wing myth of the 'Great Replacement' or right-wing actors relate positively to the 'Islamic State'. In these cases, an ideological blending in a strict sense is assumed.

The following section shows the phenomenon-specific criteria used by the author team in the coding of the network analysis channels, and in determining the seed channels.

Right-wing extremism

In order to classify a seed channel as *right-wing extremist*, several of the criteria listed below had to be met. These same criteria were also used for the channels identified within the framework of the collection process. In substantiated individual cases, this classification was also made when one or more of the criteria was present in a particularly pronounced form (e.g. legitimation of violence).

- Rejection of democratic elections and institutions or democracy as a political system, for example, in connection with interpretation patterns, in which democracy, pluralism and equality are presented as 'system errors' or threats to one's own collective
- Degradation of persons due to attributed characteristics, such as origin, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability or social status
- Spread of ethnic (volkish), ethno-pluralistic or racist-coded narratives (e.g. the concept of a 'homogenous national community', warnings of 'ethnic replacement' or the 'Great Replacement', or the promotion of 'remigration' [see note below])
- Positive reference to right-wing ideologemes, groups or individuals (e.g. through sharing quotes, symbols or memes with references to the 'identitarian movement', codes that glorify Nazism (National Socialism), or 'white power' ciphers)
- Spread of conspiracy ideology narratives with anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim orientation (e.g. reference to 'global elites', 'cultural warfare' or supposed media control)
- Application of ethnic (volkish) family and gender ideals (e.g. emphasis on traditional roles, rejection of equality or diversity, denigration of feminism)
- Heroisation of 'resistance' against the supposed 'corrupt elite', often in the form of martial arts or militant rhetoric
- Trivialisation or revitalisation of National Socialism or statements comparing topics with NS (e.g. equating COVID-19 with the Holocaust)
- Use of language codes and symbols with distinct right-wing

extremist meaning (e.g number combinations, such as 14, 168:1, 88 or 18, runes, black sun)[1]

- Reference to metapolitical strategies or the 'culture war' for the long-term shift of social values towards an authoritarian, exclusive nationalism.

For determining right-wing extremist accounts, explicit statements on violence, or anti-democratic or group-focussed enmity also counted; in many instances, these only appear in cryptic or ironic form. The evaluation therefore also focussed on recurring contexts, hashtag use and networking to substantiate classifications.

Islamist extremism

In order to classify a seed channel as *Islamist*, several of the criteria listed below had to be met. These same criteria were also used for the channels identified within the framework of the collection process. In substantiated individual cases, this classification was also made when one or more of the criteria was present in a particularly pronounced form (e.g. legitimation of violence).

- Rejection of democratic elections and institutions or democracy as a political system, e.g. with the justification that participation in elections is not permitted for religious reasons
- Degradation of persons due to attributed characteristics, such as origin, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability or social status
- Sharing videos of known Islamist actors, such as, for example, (online) Salafist preachers (e.g. *Ibrahim al-Azzazi*, *Pierre Vogel* or *Abul Baraa*) or groups resembling 'Hizb ut-Tahrir' (e.g. *Generation Islam*, *Realität Islam* or *Muslim Interaktiv*) with corresponding content
- Sharing quotes from *Ibn Taymiyya*, *Ibn al-Qayyim* or *Ibn Abd al-Wahhab* – that is, authors whose works circulate in the current Salafist-jihadi ecosystem
- Pronouncements of 'warnings' on the supposed 'proper' or 'improper' clothing for women, the supposed correct conduct in marriage, or observance of other practices connected with the faith
- References to strict monotheism (Arabic *tauhid*) together with dissociation from and denigration of polytheism (Arabic *shirk*) or of persons who are described as *mushrikeen* (persons who practice polytheism)
- Denigration of non-believers (Arabic *kuffar/kufr*)
- Classification of *halal/haram* as a key guiding principle and a dichotomous schema that is also transferred to other persons and their actions
- Selective orientation to the Qur'an and the traditions of the prophet
- Rigorous orientation to dictates based on selective interpretation of Islamic sources
- References to the Arabic words *gharib/ghariba/ghuraba'* (Eng. foreigner) and the feeling of foreignness in the (Western) world
- Turning away from this earthly world (Arabic *dunya*) and towards the joy of the next world (Arabic *akhira*)
- Using accusations and fear as leverage, with reference to the apocalypse, Jinn, devils and angels as beings mentioned in the Qur'an
- Sharing of jihadi content (e.g. references to the 'Islamic state', glorification of jihad in the form of physical violence, use of the *Anasheed* of the 'Islamic State')

In the area of Islamist extremism, explicit calls to violence or the propagation of misanthropic ideologies are often not direct, but in a cryptic, ironic or coded form. Therefore, recurring patterns, use of symbols, semantic contexts and networking structures were also taken into account.

Conspiracy myths

In order to classify a seed channel as conspiracy mythist, several of the criteria listed below had to be met. These same criteria were also used for the channels identified within the framework of the collection process. In substantiated individual cases, this classification was also made when one or more of the criteria was present in a particularly pronounced form (e.g. legitimation of violence).

- Rejection of democratic elections or democracy as a political system

1 See here, for example: https://www.bpb.de/themen/rechtsextremismus/dossier-rechtsextremismus/500822/zahlencodes/. Last accessed on 20.08.2025.

- Spreading of suspicion of democratic institutions, science, the media or medical treatment through narratives such as 'the lying media', 'the pharma lobby' or 'bought science'
- The central theory that powerful actors working in secret are intentionally manipulating society, politics or natural events, and thus harming the general public
- Reference to known conspiracy ideological topics, such as the 'New World Order', the 'Great Replacement', the 'Deep State' or the 'global elite', often with anti-Semitic coding
- Application of symbols, keywords or hashtags that point to conspiracy ideology environments (e.g. *QAnon* symbols, pyramid eyes, number codes)
- Morally charged difference between 'woke' knowledge carriers (often 'the people') and manipulated or deliberately deceived elites
- Positively connotated attributions of the individual's own position as 'critical', 'woke' or 'resistant' to distinguish it from a supposedly indoctrinated majority (e.g. 'sheeple')
- Denigration of persons due to attributed characteristics, such as origins, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability or social status, for example, through the construction of enemy images in which individual groups of people (e.g. Jews, Muslims, immigrants) are portrayed as part of a perfidious plan to destroy 'society', 'culture' or 'freedom'
- Interpretation patterns that reduce complex social contexts or relations to simple cause and effect narratives, often accompanied by emotionalising and morally-charged argumentation
- An affinity with esoteric, pseudo-scientific or alternative medicine world views, if these appear together with a suspicion of scientific knowledge and a holistic explanation of societal wrongs
- Heroisation of individuals' resistance to the perceived control and delusion systems, partly in connection with calls for 'truth spreading', exposure or rejection of systems.

In the area of conspiracy ideologies, explicit calls to violence or systematic and hostile ideologies are often not direct, but in a cryptic, ironic or coded form. Therefore, recurring patterns, use of symbols, semantic contexts and networking structures were also taken into account.

Content that uses conspiracy ideological narratives but which does not reproduce their ideological core structure – for example, satirical references or critical themes – were not coded as conspiracy mythist. Where conspiracy ideological narratives appear in the context of other phenomena, such as right-wing extremism or Islamist movements, they were reviewed to determine whether these were an integral component of the respective ideological framework, or indicated a hybrid coupling of different ideologies.

Note: Remigration

A frequent call from right-wing extremists, which appeared when the material was being viewed, is so-called 'remigration.' This concept was popularised by the right-wing extremist Martin Sellner, former speaker of the Austrian Identitarian movement (Identitären Bewegung Österreich) and picked up by various actors of the 'Neuen Rechten' movement, including the AfD.[2] This inherently racist and anti-democratic concept takes as its basis a difference between supposed 'real' Germans without migration histories and 'not real' Germans who, on account of their (familial) migration history, are not 'proper' Germans. The latter should be – according to the fantasies of right-wing extremist actors – 'sent back' (or deported) to their (supposed) countries of origin. Essentially, this is about creating a perceived 'ethno-cultural identity' of Germany based on racist and anti-democratic claims, which also construes superiority or inferiority based on (perceived) migration histories. In giving the grounds for the judgement of 24.06.2025 to repeal the ban on the right-wing *Compact* magazine,[3] the Federal Administrative Court made explicit reference to the concept of so-called 'remigration' and maintained that:

'These concepts disregard, at least insofar as they differentiate between German citizens with or without a migration background, the egalitarian understanding of citizenship that is protected by both human dignity and the democratic principle. Because they assume an 'ethno-cultural identity' that is to be preserved, and therefore treat German citizens with a migration background as second-class citizens. For those 'who do not or cannot assimilate', there should at least be some pressure, in particular, by means of a 'de-Islamification policy', to be moved to their countries of origin by 'remigration'.

'Perceived gender'

In coding the perceived gender, the publicly visible account information was considered, such as the user name, bio or self-description, given pronouns, profile picture and, if available, viewed posts. Despite these reference points, it must be noted that it cannot be exclusively determined in the context of collection of the data whether the perceived gender of the individual conforms to how they identify themselves. That is why the term 'perceived gender' is used in this publication.

2 Also see the disclosures from *Correctiv* on the meeting in Potsdam between various right-wing extremist actors: https://correctiv.org/aktuelles/neue-rechte/2024/01/10/geheimplan-remigration-vertreibung-afd-rechtsextreme-november-treffen/ (last accessed on 19.08.2025). In January 2025, the AfD officially adopted the term 'remigration' in their election campaign, see e.g.: https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/afd-nimmt-begriff-remigration-offiziell-ins-wahlprogramm-auf-100.html (last accessed on 04.09.2025). The use of the term led to a factional dispute between the right-wing extremists and the AfD itself; see here, e.g.: https://www.dw.com/de/afd-richtungsstreit-%C3%BCber-das-reizwort-remigration/a-73480205 (last accessed on 05.09.2025).

3 See: https://www.bverwg.de/pm/2025/48 (last accessed on 05.09.2025).

Coding frequencies in the network analysis

Coding of content per account	Frequency	Percentage
non-extremist	615	66.56%
right-wing extremist	134	14.50%
conspiracy myth ideology	129	13.96 %
Islamist	22	2.38%
hybrid extremist	12	1.30%
not available	12	1.30%
	924	**100%**

Fig. 22: Frequencies of the coding of accounts based on public content.

Coding of perceived gender	Frequency	Percentage
male	453	49.03%
non-attributable	330	35.71%
perceived female	118	12.77%
group containing several genders	22	2.38%
non-binary	1	0.11%
	924	**100%**

Fig. 23: Coding frequency of the perceived gender of account operators.

Account type	Frequency	Percentage
Influencer	386	41.77%
Reposting	240	25.97%
Prominent person	89	9.63%
Share pics	67	7.25%
Politician	34	3.68%
News portal	31	3.35%
Company	29	3.14%
Party	18	1.95%
Not available	12	1.30%
Preacher	10	1.08%
Club/Association	6	0.65%
Public institution	2	0.22%
	924	**100%**

Fig. 24: Coding frequencies of the different types of accounts.

Key topic	Frequency	Percentage
Politics	235	25.43%
Health	106	11.47%
Entertainment	106	11.47%
Lifestyle	85	9.20%
Comedy	67	7.25%
Motivation/Coaching	61	6.60%
Nutrition	55	5.95%
Sport	48	5.19%
Religion	44	4.76%
Music	37	4.00%
Finance	23	2.49%
Diffuse conspiracies	20	2.16%
Deleted	12	1.30%
Mobility	11	1.19%
Technology	8	0.87%
Law	6	0.65%
	924	**100%**

Fig. 25: Coding frequencies of the key topic per account.

Codebook

Cluster	Description	Anchor example (original quotation)
Ideology cluster	The 'ideology' cluster contains statements that refer to the positioning of the client in the phenomena area, as well as descriptions containing contentual developments and the psychosocial functions of the ideology.	'We get very precise, if one wants to classify it as such, that is, the phenomenon area is really still Islamist extremism, and that is also then consistently the topic or the setting we then find ourselves [...]'
Subcluster 1: Ideological fragmentation	The 'ideological fragmentation' subcluster was assigned if individual ideological fragments were shared from the phenomenon area – without it being possible to clearly assign the client to a phenomenon area where the entire ideology had been adopted or these fragments had been assembled into a new ideological concept. These include conspiracy myth elements, racism, anti-Semitism and binary/traditional genders and roles.	'Often there are only individual fragments and then it is really just cobbled together and the topics then get mixed together, which either have nothing to do with each other or are so complex that they cannot be easily discussed together'.
Subcluster 2: Reference to 'external ideology'	The 'external ideology' subcluster is comprised of statements about clients that can be assigned to a phenomenon area and, at the same time, refer positively to individual ideological elements without a hybrid ideology being formed from them. This includes references to fragments from Islamist or right-wing extremist ideologies or to isolated conspiracy myths that are not inherent to the above-mentioned phenomenon areas. The focus is on referring to ideological elements of one phenomenon area from another, without more closely integrating these elements into a world view.	'Yes, population exchange is also found in Islamist extremism'.
Subcluster 3: Mixed ideology NO	The 'mixed ideology NO' subcluster comprises statements that clearly negate hybrid ideology constructs (mixed ideologies). Central here are clear statements that negate hybrid ideological forms in clients.	'As previously stated, if I have understood this correctly, the wording may also be hybrid, but I cannot confirm this from our practice'.

Cluster	Description	Anchor example (original quotation)
Subcluster 4: Mixed ideology YES	The 'mixed ideology YES' subcluster comprises statements with clearly observed hybrid ideology constructs. Central here is the integration of ideological fragments that do not seem to belong together into a relatively stable world view.	'Yes, they then tackle simply everything possible; I have seen people who have criticised capitalism. But, on the other hand, they supported Erdogan and then somehow talked about anarchy'.
Subcluster 5: Changed ideology	The 'changed ideology' subcluster comprises descriptions of contentual changes in ideological elements within a phenomenon area.	'So, in the Islamist extremism area, something changes in this sense in the ideology and the attitude or the main narrative, I'd say, always when something'.
Subcluster 6: Function	The 'function' subcluster contains statements that identify the psychosocial effects of ideology for the clients.	'That you no longer have a clientele that wants to engage with it theologically or ideologically, but a clientele that says: "I want to strengthen my Muslim identity and be valued, and please give me as simple an identity as possible"'.
Subcluster 7: Conspiracy	The 'conspiracy' subcluster contains statements on conspiracy myths that (can) stand alone and are not part of an ideological superstructure or an integral component of other extremist world views (e.g. REX or ISLEX). This includes, for example, various myths on chemtrails or the World Trade Center attacks of 11 September 2001.	'[…] there doesn't have to be a congruent explanation, but convictions and a belief in conspiracies […]'.
Client profile cluster	The 'client profile' cluster comprises statements on the demographic, psychosocial and identity characteristics of clients. This also includes descriptions on the propensity to violence among clients and the particularities of the practice with imprisoned or formerly imprisoned clients.	'This person comes from a desolate family home with no boundaries. Not very well off financially, changing fathers, the mother's 'best friend', minimal boundary setting, and drug experience and drug consumption themselves. The son takes drugs together with the mother, and little self-reflection, always: "The others are to blame." And, beyond this, also access to a specific scene. […] no responsiveness on their own account, and the dependency as a mental burden is so huge […]'

Cluster	Description	Anchor example (original quotation)
Subcluster 1: Demography	The 'demography' subcluster comprises statements on the clients' age, gender, profession, family status, place of residence and socioeconomic resources.	'Otherwise, the target group has changed little, it continues to get younger'.
Subcluster 2: Psychosocial characteristics	The 'psychological characteristics' subcluster comprises descriptions of clients' emotions, emotional needs and mental illness.	'We had to stop them and make security personnel understand that people who have deep-seated mental health issues cannot be counselled'.
Subcluster 3: Propensity for violence	The 'propensity for violence' subcluster contains indications of cases in which clients have legitimised, planned and/or carried out violence.	'This can be seen because the young people may be attending because they have acted violently or committed a crime or something similar, or posted a violence-glorifying post or something'.
Subcluster 4: Gender identity	The 'gender identity' subcluster comprises references to gender and role images as identity-forming attributes. This includes descriptions of a traditional, binary understanding of gender and statements as to how men/women should behave and which traits they should display.	'[...] for religious reasons and has the mindset. That is, it was more about this sense of honour, that one cannot show any weakness as a man, that one has to be able to defend oneself'.
Subcluster 5: Prison context	The 'prison context' subcluster contains statements on specific framework conditions and phenomena from practical counselling work with clients in penal institutions.	'So, because access to social media is non-existent in prison, this logically does not play such a big role in the conversations. We do talk about it, but it has rarely emerged that [the person] has been radicalised through it'.
Macro-influences cluster	The 'macro-influences' cluster contains statements on global issues and regional structural elements that influence the clients. This includes, for example, statements on developments at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic or the conflict in the Middle East.	'Everything that is in any way current is always spread widely, so this means that international conflicts, conflict in the Middle East, the war in Ukraine, or if elections of any kind are pending are always topics. And, accordingly, of course also somehow parties such as the AfD, these are always recurring topics of discussion [...]'.
Subcluster 1: COVID-19 pandemic	The 'COVID-19' subcluster comprises statements on the significance of the COVID-19 pandemic, both for the clients and the ideological landscape. This includes statements on new ideological developments and phenomena during the pandemic.	'That in recent years, and probably more or less since the COVID-19 pandemic, the narrative is also increasingly about conspiracy ideologies'.

Cluster	Description	Anchor example (original quotation)
Subcluster 2: Global crises (polycrises)	The 'global crises' subcluster contains statements on the global events and developments, such as wars or humanitarian emergencies that concern clients. Clients assume interpretations and positions on these events from actors transmitting their content.	'Yes, current, up-to-date political topics, regardless if it's the Middle East conflict, the Ukrainian war or other conflicts. Even a bit between West and East or even some narratives concerning Russia, they also crop up and are clearly heard'.
Subcluster 3: East/West disparity	The 'East/West disparity' includes statements in which the interviewees mention differences between East and West Germany. These are particular features of case loads, opinions about society and socioeconomic structural differences.	'Because, in principle, they offer opinions, specifically in reference to immigration and diversity that they can also openly express in [STATE (East)]. And the challenge is then to problematise this or to name this, that is to identify, that it is right-wing extremism and is not – in quotation marks – a normal democratic mindset'.
Cluster **Practitioner work**	The 'practitioner work' cluster contains descriptions of the practical work of the interviewees, which include statements on experiences and challenges in counselling practice and on the needs expressed by the practitioners.	'Yes, so, I have already pointed out that the focus was of course previously also mainly at the relationship level, but this has now become even more central. This means we need to take much more time for relationship work, gain a lot more trust, because warnings have somehow been given about us'.
Subcluster 1: Counselling	The 'counselling' subcluster contains statements about methodological and content practice experiences of the interviewees. These refers to the challenges in working with clients, as well as institutional and structural challenges.	'Yes, as mentioned, this is the challenge, these bridging narratives lead to more challenges, to more intensive work'.
Subcluster 2: Needs	The 'needs' subcluster contains statements on desires or requirements, for example in formats and measures to be taken, that the practitioners consider meaningful or necessary to meet the challenges in the practical work and maintain the quality of the counselling offered.	'So, if there were to be an opportunity to have more contact to regional, i.e. rural social workers who work with right-wing extremist young people before they go to prison. If I could wish for something and there was the capacity for it, that would be very interesting, I think. To see what their requirements are? What do they observe?'

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