CROSS-NATIONAL LEVEL REPORT ON DIGITAL SOCIABILITY AND DRIVERS OF SELF-RADICALISATION IN EUROPE

ANNE BIRGITTA NILSEN
NATHALIE PATON
MARK DECHESNE
ALEXANDROS SAKELLARIOU
GRANT HELM
AHMED BAKY
LIAM MONSEL
AND
DANIELLE SOSKIN

DARE: Dialogue about Radicalisation and Equality

Cross-national level report on digital sociability and drivers of self-radicalisation in Europe

Anne Birgitta Nilsen, Oslo Metropolitan University

Nathalie Paton, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales

Mark Dechesne, Leiden University

Alexandros Sakellariou, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences of Athens

Grant Helm, Moonshot CVE

Ahmed Baky, Moonshot CVE

Liam Monsel, Moonshot CVE

Danielle Soskin, Moonshot CVE

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Executive Summary

In this report, we present an empirical cross-national study of supporters of right-wing extremists' (RWE) and Islamist extremists' (ISE) activities and interactions on Twitter. The study is based on ethnographic and automatic text and network analyses of data from Belgian, British, Dutch, French, German, Greek and Norwegian female and male Twitter accounts.

Key findings:

- Twitter is used actively by extreme right-wingers but less so by extreme Islamists.
- Signs of extreme positions and support for violence are visible on Twitter but mostly in the data from the extreme right.
- Extreme Twitter users set up anonymous accounts reflecting their worldviews and interests in the names, images, texts and symbols they choose to display in their Twitter profiles. In this manner, they provide other Twitter users with information about themselves and may also inspire others.
- Extreme views are expressed in texts, symbols, posters and images on some of the online profiles, among some of the influencers, and in conversations on Twitter.

Key findings about right-wing extremism on Twitter:

- There are global networks of right-wing extremists on Twitter, and extremism spreads globally through the connectivity of users sharing topics and engaging in conversations.
- Twitter may contribute to the process of self-radicalisation among Europeans supporting right-wing extremist ideologies by providing a platform with established milieus of extreme right-wing networks in which users can set up anonymous profiles consistent with extreme right-wing ideologies. In these networks, users may gain contact with individuals holding extremist views, acquire knowledge about extreme right-wing ideologies, adopt more extreme views, practise hate speech and talk about themes that concern them.
- The themes generating engagement among the extreme right are: Muslims and immigration, European governments, national identity and the white race.
- The most important influencer in the extreme right-wing networks is the American president, Donald Trump.

Key findings about Islamist extremism on Twitter:

- Established milieus of extreme Islamists on Twitter were not identified and Twitter does not seem to contribute to the process of self-radicalisation among Europeans supporting Islamic extremist ideologies.
- The themes generating the most engagement among extreme Islamists are wars and conflicts in the Middle East and religious life as a Muslim.

1. Introduction

Many countries in Europe are currently experiencing rising trends of radicalisation. There is a growing threat from both Islamist and nationalist violent extremism in Europe (Jurczyszyn et al., 2019). The role of the Internet and social media in violent extremism has been a burning issue since Al-Qaeda started using the Internet actively (Rogan, 2006; Thomas, 2003), but especially after the rise and expansion of the so-called Islamic State (Alava et al., 2017; al-Rawi, 2017; Conway, 2012; Conway, 2019 Klausen, 2015; Pearson, 2018 Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai, 2017; von Behr et al., 2013). The rise of the extreme right in Europe and elsewhere (e.g. in the USA and Latin America) has also attracted much attention in regard to Internet usage, particularly social media (Medina-Serrano et al., 2018; Neudert et al., 2017), and its role in the self-radicalisation process (Hassan et al., 2018; Koehler, 2014). There is an urgent need to better understand these trends. In particular, we need to expand our knowledge about media-assisted self-radicalisation, yet few studies have applied empirical evidence to draw convincing conclusions about online radicalisation, which has negatively impacted the strength of the research on this topic (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai, 2017: 4).

This cross-national report on digital sociability and drivers of self-radicalisation presents a number of analyses designed to describe extreme right-wing and extreme Islamist activities on Twitter in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Norway and the UK. The study forms part of a larger study of media-assisted self-radicalisation, under the umbrella of the European Union (EU)-financed Dialogue about Radicalisation and Equality (DARE)[1] project and was designed by our French partners in the project (see Section 2 of this report). It is based on parallel case studies carried out in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France, Greece, Norway and the UK.

Twitter is an American microblogging and social networking service on which users post and interact with messages known as tweets. Registered users can post, like, and retweet tweets, but unregistered users can only read them. In this report, we present a large-scale European study of current right-wing and Islamist extremism on Twitter based on a mixed-method approach. We rely on the findings from the initial ethnographic phase of the study as well as the results produced from quantitative and qualitative text and network analyses exploiting large amounts of data retrieved from the big data approach during the second phase of the investigation. In each subsection of the report, we present the method employed and the data set on which the analysis was carried out.

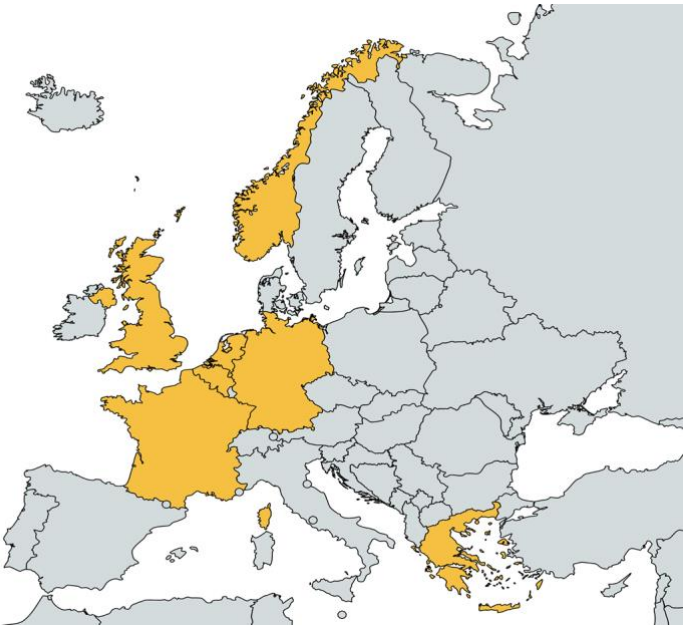

Plate 1: Countries included in the study

[1] http://www.dare-h2020.org/

The literature on self-radicalisation has been primarily inspired by theory, research and practice related to Islamist radicalisation. Moreover, the literature on self-radicalisation strongly links the phenomenon to the emergence of the Internet as a source of radicalisation (Homeland Security Institute, 2009). However, self-radicalisation is not inherently connected to Islamist radicalisation, as it can be observed in other forms of radicalisation, for example, right-wing radicalisation, as demonstrated in this report.

In the cross-national analyses, we explore media-assisted self-radicalisation—a type of radicalisation process in which the radicalising individual is posited as the instigator of the process in which they come to embrace attitudes or engage in actions that support violence in the pursuit of extremist causes; it is, thus, distinct from radicalisation as the result of recruitment by a radical organisation or by one member of a group who collectively radicalises. Drivers of self-radicalisation are the various online factors that may contribute to a process of self-radicalisation. In this report, these factors include the staging and framing of online identities, themes in online conversations, influencers and networks.

The aim of this research is to shed light on whether the use of Twitter represents a threat with respect to processes of self-radicalisation in several European countries. The reason we focus on Twitter is technical, as explained in the general introduction to the national reports (Paton, 2020).

1.1 A note on terminology

Labelling the samples has introduced unique challenges. The DARE project as a whole, focuses on Islamist extremists and anti-Islamist extremists. However, while selecting the sample of anti-Islamists, we found that the specific criterion of anti-Islamism was accompanied by a number of other characteristics not related to the specific issue of anti-Islamism. We, therefore, broadened the label of anti-Islamism to the label right-wing extremism (RWE). To avoid the unintended suggestion that the right-wing is always labelled as extreme, whereas Islamism is not, we also use the label Islamist extremism (ISE). In using both RWE and ISE, however, 'extremism' remains a relative concept and individual users express a relatively wide spectrum of opinions and views.

We selected the samples on the basis of specific characteristics of Twitter accounts as outlined in the general introduction to this series of country reports (Paton, 2020). However, we encountered difficulties finding suitable accounts. This may be because extremist conversations take place mainly offline or on other social media channels or it may be because of recent measures that have been taken to reduce extremism and hostile language use on Twitter. As a result, we experienced difficulty in providing appropriate labels to describe the samples, since they represented a wide range of positions on the spectrum and these positions differed significantly between the two samples. In this report, for the sake of consistency across the DARE project, our samples are referred to as right-wing extremism (RWE) and Islamist extremism (ISE), respectively, with full awareness that these labels do not fully reflect the range of content expressed. Throughout the report, therefore, we subject these labels to critical reflection. In particular, it is important to note that the individuals behind the selected accounts are unlikely to think of themselves as having extremist or radical viewpoints and that, therefore, the understanding of them as such is externally imposed. Moreover, while some of the messages of members of our samples may be considered extremist, that does not mean that all messages are. Moreover, there are significant differences in the content of messages between the right-wing extremism and Islamist extremism samples. Thus, while it was relatively straightforward to identify a sample from the right wing, where we found that violent intent is often expressed and hate speech is an integral part of digital conversations, we found much more limited samples of Islamist extremism on Twitter. This pattern was observed across the European countries we studied.

In this report, in line with the DARE project as a whole, *self-radicalisation* is defined as a process through which individuals become the instigators of their own radicalisation, eventually embracing attitudes or engaging in actions that support violence in pursuit of extremist causes Drivers of self-

radicalisation include various online interactions that may contribute to the radicalisation process. In this study, the staging and framing of online identities, online conversation themes, influencers and networks are considered as illustrative of such online interactions.

1.2 Structure of the report

The second section of this report, provides an overview of the data set from the country level studies on which this cross-national analysis draws. In the third and fourth sections of the report, cross-country findings are presented on right-wing extremism and Islamist extremism respectively. In the fifth and final section, conclusions are drawn about media-assisted radicalisation on Twitter across the whole study.

2. Data sample

This section describes the data sample used to investigate digital sociability and self-radicalisation in Belgium, France, Germany, UK, Greece, the Netherlands and Norway and details the characteristics of the sample. In Table 1 we have listed the number of accounts included in the study.

NUMBER OF TWITTER ACCOUNTS INCLUDED IN THE STUDY							
	RWE male	**RWE female**	**RWE unknown**	**ISE male**	**ISE female**	**ISE unknown**	**Total Numbers**
Belgium	31	6	1	22	16	4	80
France	23	19	2	16	20	4	84
Germany	23	12	3	9	15	1	63
Greece	24	18	9	0	0	0	51
UK	64	41	24	45	11	18	203
The Netherlands	27	22	0	15	22	2	88
Norway	16	20	10	22	15	0	83

Table 1: Number of accounts included in the study

The mixed-method approach adopted for this study combined digital ethnography and big data techniques and was implemented across three phases (see Table 2):

1. *Phase 1: Selection of a sample and collection of an account of ethnographic observations* Creation of 7 country level samples via preliminary ethnographic fieldwork (direct observation combined with other techniques) to gather relevant Internet user accounts 2. *Phase 2: Data Retrieval, anonymisation through automatised processes, creation of a database and preparation of the collected material for analysis* Automatic collection of big data using scraping software to gather raw data on self-radicalisation and media participation, organisation and preliminary analysis of this material 3. *Phase 3: Analysis of data sets and observations*	 *Illustration 1: Locaux de l'IRIT - Campus Paul Sabatier* During phase 2, an academic partner in computer sciences from the University of Toulouse (IRIT Research Lab), was contracted to scrape and store data in a secure safe centre, organise data in a database and assist in the preliminary analysis of data

Table 2: Methodological protocol

The accounts were collected in a pilot study, phase 1, from September to December 2018. We collected 712 Twitter accounts. Of these 712 accounts, 116 subsequently became unavailable, leaving 596 accounts in the final database (see Figure 1). The accounts which were lost may have been deleted by Twitter as a result of their extremist content or they may have been deleted by the owners themselves. Of these deleted accounts, 48 were ISE accounts (10 from France, 33 from UK, 2 from the Netherlands and 3 from Norway) and 68 were RWE accounts (3 from Belgium, 12 from Germany, 9 from France, 32 from UK, 3 from Greece, 3 from the Netherlands and 6 from Norway). Most accounts were lost from the UK; this reflects the significantly higher number of accounts initially collected in the UK.

As shown in Figure 1, we collected 265,469 tweets and 352,691 retweets from these 596 accounts.

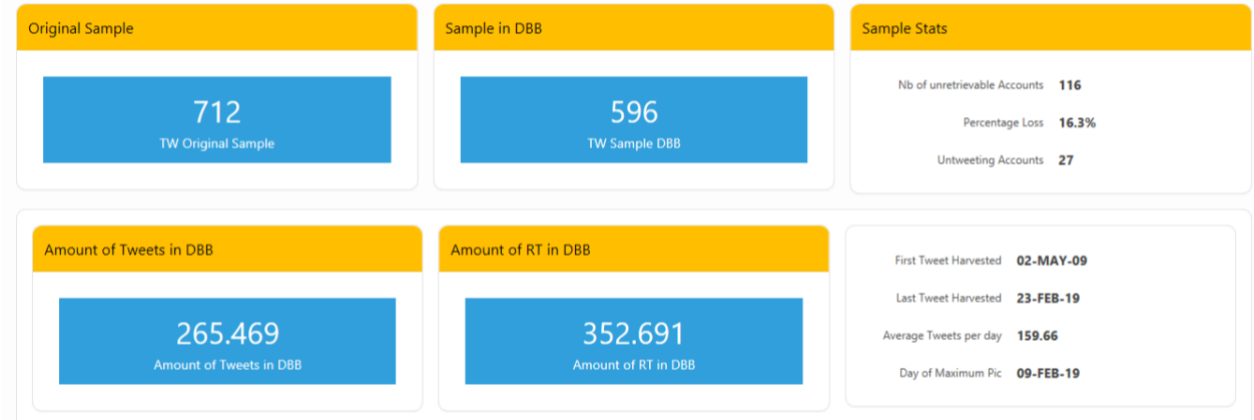

Figure 1: Accounts, tweets and retweets

2.1 Composition of the data sample

Accounts that tended to build profiles supporting Islamism, Salafism and extreme right-wing ideologies were collected as part of the data sample. Thus, the accounts were collected based on cues about their political and religious activism, preferences and ideologies. The Islamist accounts were selected based on their religious indications, and the right-wing accounts were selected based on their political

indications. The online identities of the Twitter users in the sample were, therefore, more ideological than individual.

As we demonstrate, political and religious indications were found in profile pictures, profile banners, the About sections of their profiles, handle names and user names in addition to topics in tweets.

The collection of data was based on an ethnographic approach, relying on direct observation of accounts. We initially targeted accounts that met a large number of criteria pertaining to extreme ideologies, as specified in the introduction to the country level reports (Paton, 2020: 11). Of particular importance at the outset of the sample creation, was identification of accounts articulating a call for violence. In the case of RWE, we found some accounts that fitted this criterion. However, among Islamists on Twitter, we did not find accounts that openly supported or encouraged violence, nor did we find particularly radical views or opinions. The reason for this is probably that those expressing Islamist extremist ideologies had been driven away from Twitter and had moved to more private and protected settings, such as Telegram, to express their opinions (Bloom et al., 2019; Parekh et al., 2018). Thus, in the final sample set the Islamist media participation includes contributions that were far less radical than the contributions of the extreme right.

2.2 Ideology and gender balance

As shown in the descriptions in Figure 2, RWE accounts were overrepresented, with 370 (62%) accounts compared to 226 (38%) ISE accounts. This is because of the relative availability of accounts that met the criteria as discussed above as well as the fact that the Greek sample did not include ISE accounts. It was not possible to detect any Greek ISE accounts.

The final sample also had a gender imbalance, including 306 (51%) male accounts, 226 (38%) female accounts and 64 (11%) accounts without a gender indicated.

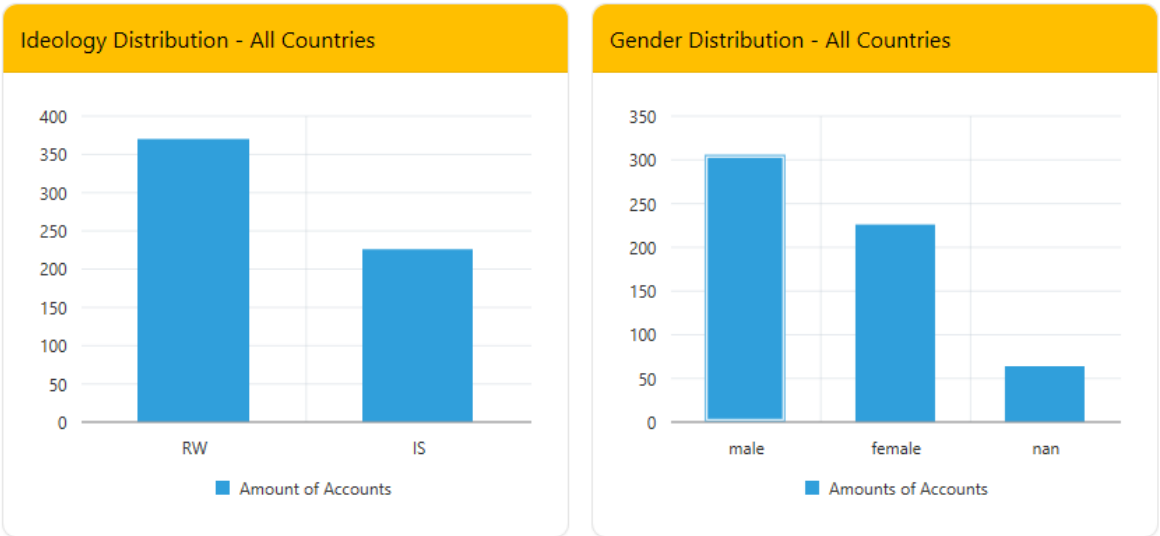

Figure 2: Ideology and gender distribution

A reason for the overrepresentation of male accounts was that male accounts were easier to find than female accounts. This was particularly evident in the UK and Belgian data sample, as illustrated in Figure 3, which shows the ideological distribution and gender distribution at the country level.

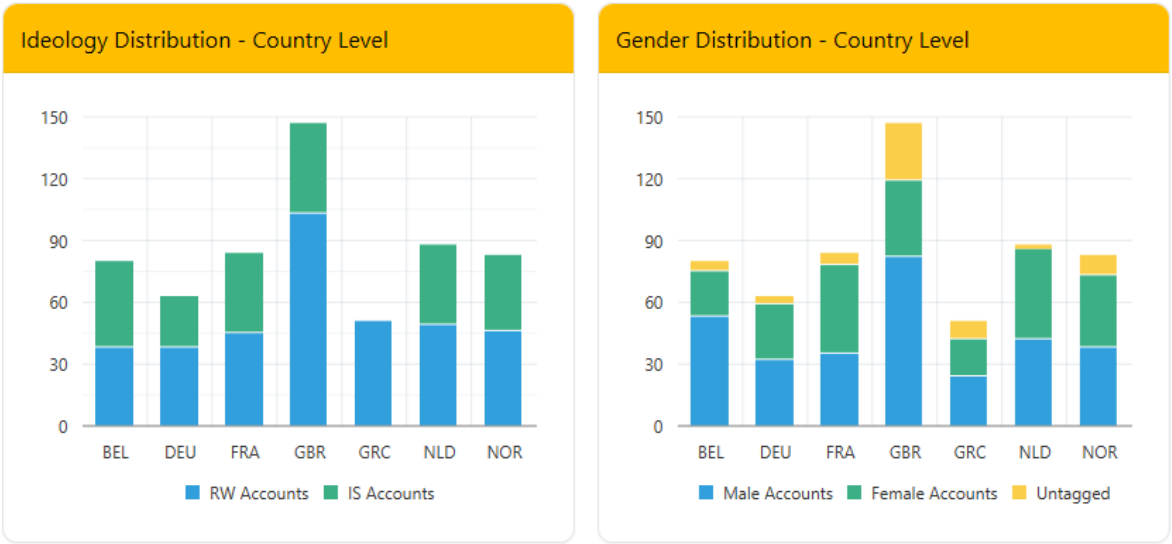

Figure 3: Ideology and gender distribution at the country level[2]

An obvious methodological weakness in using data based on self-registering of gender is that online identities can be deceptive (Parekh et al., 2018).

2.3 Timeline

The Twitter pages were scraped as far back as possible, collecting posts from 2 May 2009, to 14 February 2019. Twitter was launched in 2006; it is, therefore, interesting to note that the first tweets in the data sample were from 2009.

To provide an understanding of the time period and the number of tweets and retweets in the data sample, two timelines are provided below. The first timeline, in Figure 4, covers a shorter period of time, focusing on recent years (2017-2019).

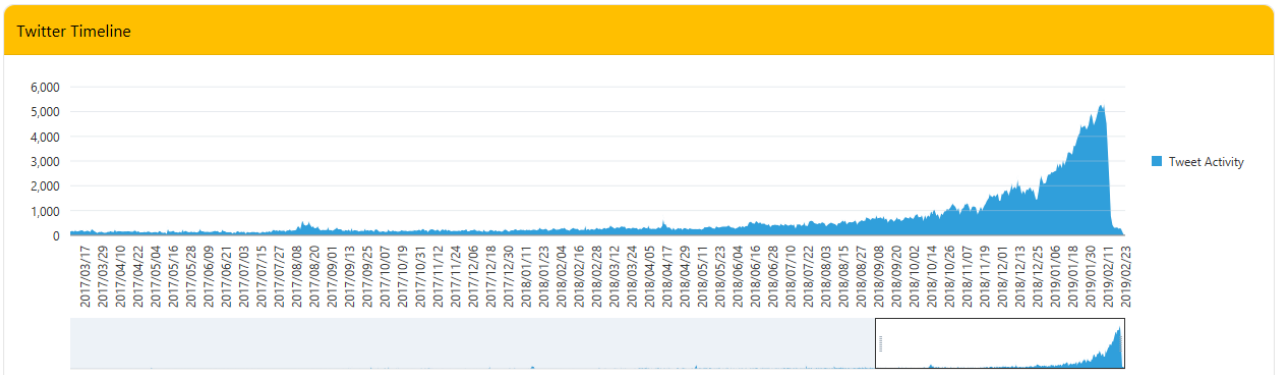

Figure 4: Timeline 1

The second timeline, in Figure 5, zooms out and covers all tweets and retweets from 2011 to February 2019.

[2] In this chart, BEL stands for Belgium, DEU for Deutschland (Germany), FRA for France, GRC for Greece, GBR for UK, NLD for the Netherlands and NOR for Norway.

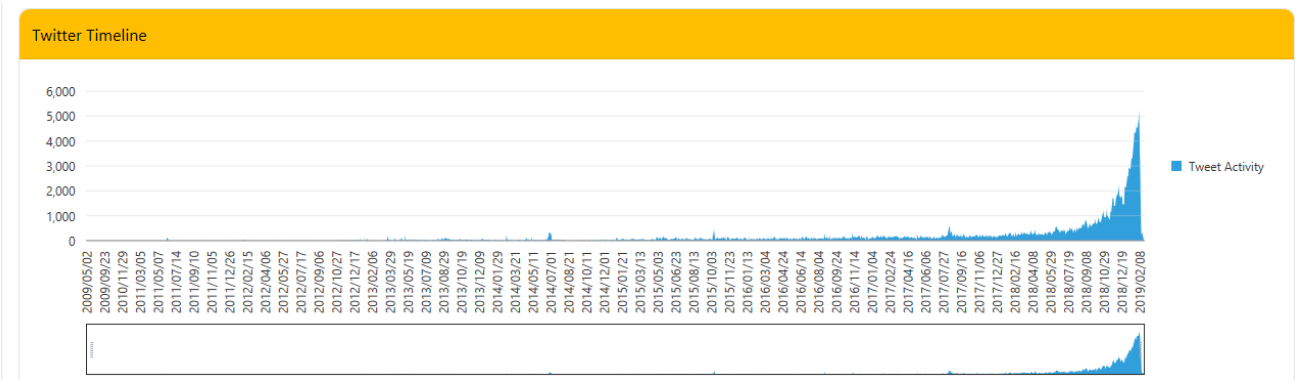

Figure 5: Timeline 2

In the two timelines, a flat line of low tweet activity is evident over several years prior to 2018, when there is an increase in activity. Hence, most of the tweets in the data sample were from 2018 to February 2019.

When we look at the distribution of tweets among the RWE and the ISE over time in the charts below (Figure 6), we see that the ISE tweet activity had a much longer duration than the RWE activity. The accounts from the ISE and those from the RWE were approximately as old; they were both from May 2009. However, when we look at the amount of activity, the RWE activity was very low until 2018, whereas the ISE accounts were tweeting actively from 2009.

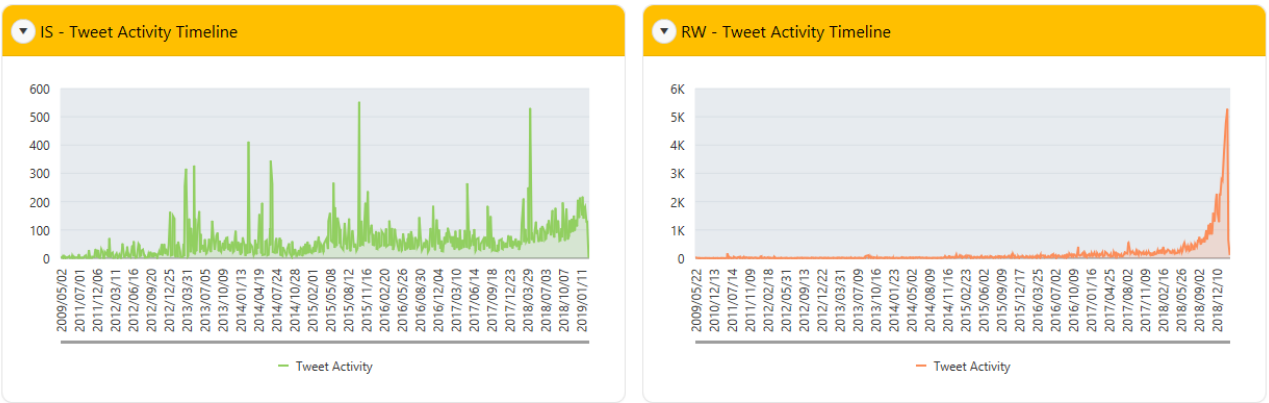

Figure 6: Distribution of tweets among the RWE and the ISE over time

2.4 Languages

An interesting finding from our analysis of the languages represented in our data sample was that 214 accounts listed English as their preferred language although there were only 147 accounts in the UK data sample. This means there were 67 tweeters in other countries who listed English as their primary language. We also noted that 10 Twitter users registered Arabic as their preferred language: seven in the United Kingdom, two in Belgium and one in France.

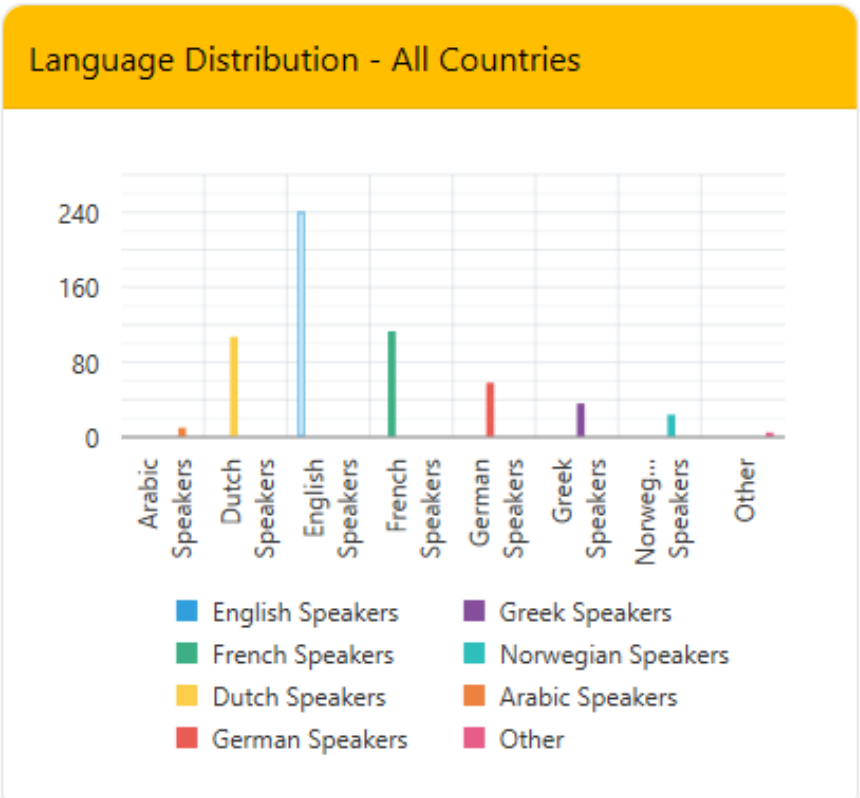

Figure 7: Language distribution

When we look at the number of tweets in different languages for the various countries, as illustrated in the chart below (Figure 8), we can see that Norway is the country where English is used the most. In Norway, 58 twitter users registered English as their preferred language, whereas only 24 listed Norwegian.

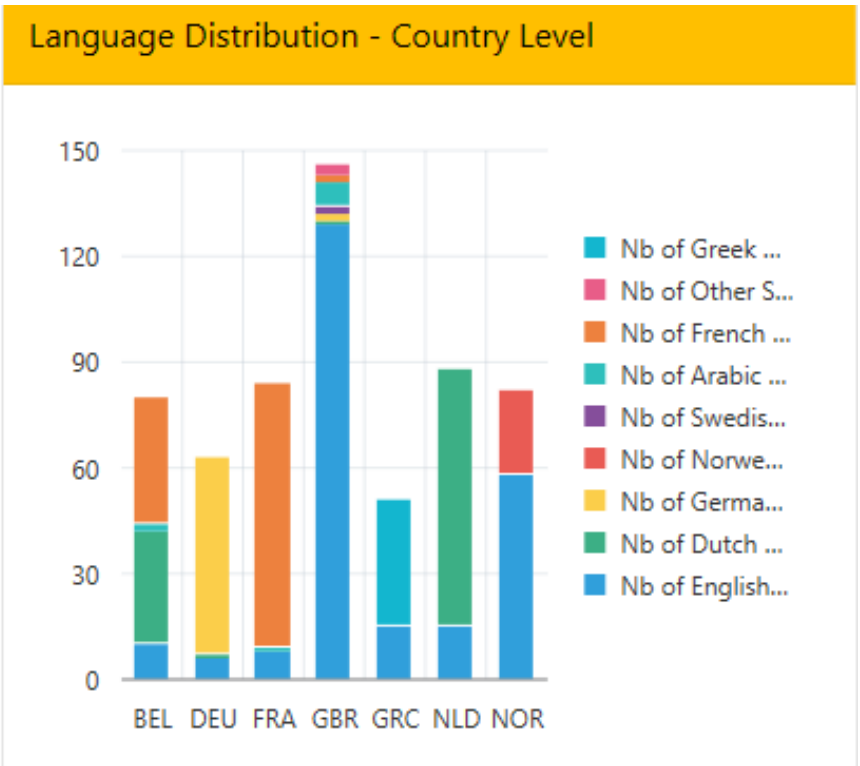

Figure 8: Language distribution on a country level

3. Right-wing extremism (RWE) on Twitter

In this section, we present cross-country analyses of how RWE accounts were used. We present analyses of four different aspects of right-wing extremist (RWE) digital sociability on Twitter: right-wing extremist Twitter identities; key themes in Twitter communication; Twitter networks; and Twitter influencers. In section 3.1 we present analyses of Twitter identities, the semiotic resources exploited and the use of these resources in setting up a profile consistent with right-wing extremist ideology. In section 3.2 we present key themes in the Twitter conversations. In section 3.3 we present the Twitter networks and in 3.4 we present the influencers in the networks.

We provide answers to the following questions:

- How do RWE Twitter users stage and frame their identities? What kinds of symbols, names and images are they drawn to (Section 3.1)?
- What do the RWE Twitter users talk about (Section 3.2)?
- What do the RWE Twitter networks look like (Section 3.3)?

Although gender differences of the participants in the online debates were part of the study, there was little to suggest that gender had a critical role in the RWE conversations on Twitter; therefore, these analyses are not included in this report.

3.1 Twitter identities

In this section, we present descriptions of what RWE Twitter users in the data sample communicated through their online identities and self-presentations as well as how they staged their identities to present themselves for an audience (Goffman, 1969). Drawing on the material retrieved through digital ethnography during the pilot phase of the study, an analysis of issues discussed in the tweets, and the interactions between users and the About section of their accounts, we explore how right-wing extremist identities are formed and what these self-presentations communicate.

The focus in this section is on how right-wing extremists constructed their Twitter profiles to be consistent with extremist ideas. We present the symbols, names, hashtags and images they were drawn to and their exploitation of these resources in setting up a Twitter profile consistent with right-wing extremist ideology. An assumption underlying the study is that observed behaviour is indicative of a deeper set of rules and codes enabling communication: norms, values and worldviews. Where logos, images or names might potentially be back-traceable or identify the original accounts they have been edited or replaced by a similar image in order to preserve anonymity.

The names, images and profile descriptions used by the Twitter users served to position them as members of specific groups, to present themselves as supporters of certain ideas or to establish other identities such as a national identity. Thus, the Twitter profiles we studied mainly expressed collective identities conveying political loyalties. We may, therefore, assume that these accounts were set up and mainly used for specific purposes and for participation in particular communities. The high level of anonymity was also an indication that the profiles were used for specific purposes in particular communities and for expressing certain opinions. In this setting, creating an online profile conveyed both ideological and political messages (Castells, 2002).

3.1.1 Symbols

Typical symbols found on the profiles included references to national cultures, such as the emojis referencing a French baguette and wine (🥖🍾), the ancient meander symbol, now used by Golden Dawn, a Greek she-wolf and the ❌ emoji. This final emoji is a protest against Twitter's banning policies, which are perceived as discriminatory; right-wing extremists and conservative activists have called on supporters or people who have been 'shadow banned' to place a large red X beside their

names.[3] The use of this emoji in this manner is consistent with the wider belief about rising political correctness and suppression of free speech. Other symbols included the yellow vest, a reference to the anti-establishment movement (Plate 2), the swastika (卐), the Russian orthodox cross (Plate 3) and a Viking symbol (Plate 4). Viking symbols and Norse mythology have frequently been used in right-wing extremist discourses (Fangen, 1998). Mattheis (2018) shows how extremist ideologies using gendered stereotypes can be normalised into mainstream cultures by drawing on features from Viking culture.

Plate 2: Yellow vest

Plate 3: Russian orthodox cross

Plate 4: Viking symbol

A few handles and About sections contained the double lightning emoji (🗲🗲) which bears a significant resemblance to the double lightning Schutzstaffel Nazi emblem that appeared on the uniform of SS soldiers during World War II. Lightning is also shown as an image in Plate 5. The OK emoji (👌) made a few appearances as a hand gesture that has allegedly come to symbolise white power, despite having non-extremist origins. The use of this gesture is common among white nationalist and alt-right audiences in the United States and has grown in popularity since the Christchurch shooting when the attacker, Brenton Harrison Tarrant, a 28-year-old man who has been described as a white supremacist and part of the alt-right, made the gesture to camera crews in a court hearing (Feuerherd, 2019). In May 2020, the gesture was also used in a court by a Norwegian terrorist who explained that he was inspired by the Christchurch shootings.

Plate 5: Nazi symbol

As noted by Cynthia Miller-Idris, these far-right symbols are spread by online users 'enabling icons and symbols from nationalist resistance movements from one particular geography to be claimed and appropriated by social and political movements in different locations' (Miller-Idriss, 2018: 131).

3.1.2 Names

Many Twitter handles are names created to fit the intended use of the account and to reflect personal stances or areas of interest. Regarding the contributors' names, only a handful of people from the sample publicised their real names. Instead, people used pseudonyms. Among the names used, some referred to discourses of patriotism and nationalism including historical figures, for example, 'Greek Fighter'. Examples of handles also included fascist nationalists and xenophobes from the ultra-right and names referring to skin colour, such as 'The White Man' and 'White Pride'.

[3] See https://www.albawaba.com/loop/what-does-red-x-twitter-mean-and-why-are-conservatives-using-it-1167028

3.1.3 Images

In this section, we provide examples of images that the RWE users in our data were drawn to. On several profiles we found the use of forbidden traffic signs with, for example, a hijab (Plate 6) or an EU symbol (Plate 7).

Plate 6: Hijab forbidden

Plate 7: Anti-EU

We also found historical references to the crusades in the Middle Ages that were sanctioned by the Catholic Church to take back the Holy Land from Muslim rule, as in Plate 8 below. Another historical reference is exemplified in Plate 9 where we see Ambiorix with Catuvolcus, prince of Eburones, leader of a Belgic tribe of north-eastern Gaul (Gallia Belgica).

Plate 8: Reference to the crusades

Plate 9: Ambiorix with Catuvolcus

Furthermore, images referred to discourses of political opposition (*der Einspruch*), patriotism and nationalism, and referenced Pegida, Alternative for Germany and the Identitarian Movement through either the latter movement's lambda symbol or Pepe the Frog memes (Plate 10). One of the Twitter users had an image of Donald Trump's silhouette as a profile picture, illustrated in Plate 11, and expressed support for him in the About section.

Plate 10: Pepe the Frog

Plate 11: Silhouette of Donald Trump

Some accounts used the old flag for the British Union of Fascists, founded by Oswald Mosley in 1932, while others used pictures that indicated colonial nostalgia or ideation. Neo-Nazi Celtic or pagan symbolism could also be seen among our RWE sample, including the sun cross. In addition, we found images of national flags and variations of the flags, such as the Greek flag accompanied by the symbol of a well-known football club of Thessaloniki-Macedonia (Plate 12) and the Star of Vergina (i.e., the symbol of ancient Macedonia; Plate 13).

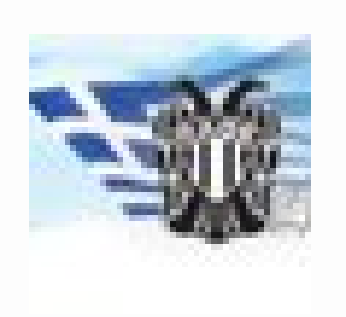

Plate 12: Football club Macedonia

Plate 13: Symbol of ancient

A Dutch variation of the national flag is shown below containing the acronym NL4NL, which refers to the Netherlands for the Dutch (Plate 14).

Plate 14: Netherlands for the Dutch

In the Norwegian data, we found images of national costumes, Vikings, Norwegian nature and the Nordic Resistance Movement's flag. We also found images of soldiers in brown military uniforms, connoting Nazism, as demonstrated in the image below (Plate 15).

Plate 15: Soldiers in brown military uniforms

Other images referred to political parties, such as Golden Dawn (Plate 16), Guy Fawkes (Plate 17), a mask as symbol of rebellion against authoritarian regimes and sarcasm against the EU (Plate 18) with text stating 'Never mind democracy; there is the European Union'.

Plate 16: Golden Dawn

Plate 17: Guy Fawkes

Plate 18: The EU

3.2 Key themes

In this section, we outline the main themes discussed among users in the RWE sample from Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom. Findings highlight how the online RWE milieu is cemented and structured around common themes.

We conducted a discourse analysis based on a descending hierarchical classification that can be described as a succession of bipartitions by the means of a factorial analysis of correspondences. To complete this analysis, we used the Reinert method (Reinert, 1983; 1990) implemented in the free software IRaMuTeQ (Ratinaud, 2014). This method made it possible to determine the themes that composed the corpus. The software grouped the Tweets that tended to contain the same words into separate themes.

Findings from the analyses indicated the themes discussed in the conversations on Twitter were related to incidents in the news. The news which was discussed was often related to Muslims and immigration, the governments in the European countries studied, the white race and national identities. In what follows, these themes are presented in subsections.

3.2.1 Muslims and immigration

Anti-Muslim sentiments have a long history in Europe (Diez, 2004). Since the turn of the century, these sentiments have increased significantly in public debate (Mondon and Winter, 2017), especially after major terrorist attacks by extremist Islamists and the ensuing War on Terror (Sides and Gross, 2013), after the refugee crisis following the war in Syria (Zunes, 2017), and after increased support for right-wing populist parties (Muis and Immerzeel, 2017). The emergence of social media also played a substantial role in spreading hate speech against Muslims (Awan, 2016) with the possibility of creating groups online with a shared interest, so-called echo chambers, where members support each other's views and where conflicting viewpoints are absent.

Hafez (2014: 479) claims that hostility towards Islam and Muslims is rising in Europe, suggesting that Islamophobia has become *the* most powerful new form of racism or even 'a kind of "accepted racism"'. Islamophobia has provided radical right populist parties in Europe a common ideological basis. Alongside the incorporation of anti-Islam discourse into pre-existing extreme right parties, there has emerged a distinctively anti-Islam(ist) or 'counter-jihad' scene consisting of a loose collection of parties, organisations and individuals convinced they are witnessing an attempted Islamic takeover of the West (Lee, 2015: 248). Our findings confirmed Hafez' claims.

We found the hashtags #defendeurope and #reconquista in users' About sections - hashtags that connote the term 'Islamisation'. One of the Twitter users wrote, for example, in his About section that

he misses his homeland and that Islam does not belong in Germany. We found positive terms referring to Germany, such as 'home' (Heimat), fatherland (*Vaterland*) and good old Germany, as well as terms referring to negative descriptions of Germany, such as 'Germanistan' and 'the caliphate of Germany'. Often these terms co-occurred with the terms 'de-Islamisation' and 'Islamisation', which were also found in the About sections of the profiles. In a study portraying the emergence and development of Pegida and similar groups in the city of Dresden, Germany, Virchow (2016) argues that the particular use of the term *Islamisation* by Pegida is much broader than simply placing Islam in opposition to Christianity. It is used as a term claiming that Islam is infiltrating and destroying Western societies (Virchow, 2016: 549).

A concern about Islamisation was represented in the data from all the countries included in our study. We found that through the expression 'anti-Islamisation of France' people were supporting the idea that immigrants should drop their former practices to adopt the cultural and religious norms of French culture, particularly perceiving France to be a Christian faith-based country. We also noted calls for 're-immigration', understood as the return of immigrants to their home country. Much of the focus remained on gender-specific Muslim practices, especially wearing certain items of clothing such as head scarves or full-body bathing suits. These tensions boiled over into stigmatising figures of immigrants, often framed as 'violent', characterised by their 'otherness'. Additionally, the refugee crisis and mass migration were placed alongside words like 'invader', indicating the belief that migration into the country was viewed by the RWE sample as an invasion. The appearance of the word 'Zone' was also significant, reflecting a common far-right belief that mass immigration of Muslims had led to the creation of 'Muslim ghettos' or 'no-go zones', where non-Muslims are not allowed and where Sharia law is allegedly practised.

In the data from Norway and Germany, we found references to particular crimes, such as '*Vergewaltigung*' (rape), '*Attacke*' (attack) and '*Mord*' (murder), and these words were associated with '*Asylbewerber*' (asylum seekers) and '*Syrer*' (Syrians). The conversations conveyed negative representations of immigrants, portraying them as a threat to national security.

3.2.2 The governments

The RWE Twitter users talked about corruption, expressed their anti-European sentiments and voiced their support for foreign leaders, such as Bolsonaro and Trump, recognised as populist 'strong leaders'. Furthermore, there was a focus on the arrogance of the state and the government officials in place. People shared the fact that they rejected the contemporary 'system', described as a single ruling class. Politicians were portrayed as puppets of the European Parliament. In general, much talk concerned the disconnection of politicians from the real world and the existence of a gulf between the ruling class and the people.

The analyses revealed a concern with developments as they unfolded within society and about the way in which governments dealt with these issues. The concerns about societal developments focussed on the perceived threat that emanated from the entrance of Islam into Europe and the weakness of the elite in adequately addressing this perceived threat. The concern was that European culture was gradually being taken over by alien elements.

The economy was also an important theme in conversations concerning living costs, expensive goods and energy prices. It is important to remember that the French Yellow Vests social movement originated from the creation of a new tax on petrol in 2018. Early on, riots were framed as a social movement for more consumer buying power. Likewise, this theme in the data brought forward issues of high taxes and debt in respect to a low minimum wage as well as low retirement incomes. A closer examination of the conversations showed strong support for the Yellow Vests social movement in the French and Belgian data.

In Greece, we found discussions related to the party of Golden Dawn and in Norway we found discussions related to the Norwegian Independence Party (*Selvstendighetspartiet*) which is a

blockchain independent national conservative centre party that aims to promote and preserve the Norwegian people's interests, culture and identity.

3.2.3 The 'white race' and national identity

The Twitter conversations carried a distinct theme of racial politics, displaying essentialist notions of heritage, birth right and race. The French Twitter conversations captured a normative perception of skin colour that discriminates against people of colour and proclaims French people could only be white-skinned or national identity would be threatened. In the conversations from Germany and Belgium, we found words typically associated with white pride narratives, including the words '*reconquista*' and '*reconquistagermanica*' as well as '*befreiungskrieg*' (liberation war) and expressions such as 'it is okay to be white' and 'white lives matter'. Another reference to national pride was found in the hashtag #MHGA (Make Holland Great Again) alluding to Donald Trump's presidential election campaign in 2016. Political correctness was treated negatively with words such as '*Schuldkult*' (cult of guilt) and '*Selbstgeisselung*' (self-hostage taking). There were also references to '*Identitäre*' (i.e. the Identitarian Movement), '*Kulturkampf*' (cultural battle) and '*Widerstand*' (resistance).

Existential fears for the 'white race' and national identity were commonly provoked by, or used to frame, contemporary issues surrounding immigration, the refugee crisis, Islamic extremism and terrorism. The notion of threat was found in the 'white genocide' conspiracy theory in the data from the United Kingdom. White genocide is a combination of several theories of the 'Great Replacement', or the 'Grand Replacement', warning of the gradual extinction or genocide of the white race at the hands of forced immigration and declining birth rates (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2019)[4]. The theories channel centuries of racist discourses that blame critical theory, post-modernism and civil rights for the rise in social degeneracy and the subsequent withering of traditional Western society and racial boundaries (Goodman, Moses and Jones, 2019). In this worldview, diversity, multiculturalism and immigration are not beneficial aspects of modern society but are instead deliberate policies devised by Jewish elites and modern political institutions to debase white purity and undermine Western hegemony. These narratives are common precursors to political violence and terrorism, referenced in the manifestos of terrorists Anders Breivik, Brenton Tarrant and John Earnest, in addition to constituting core elements of National Socialism and the Nazi regime.

3.3 Twitter networks

In this section, a synthesis of network analyses from the seven country reports are presented to further the understanding of the role of media-assisted self-radicalisation. The network analyses for each country were conducted on three levels to examine digital ties: (i) on a sample level; (ii) on a retweet level; and (iii) on a 'mention' level.

We found that the RWE milieu was built at the level of global conversations and not restricted to national considerations, although some countries had more leverage than others within the right-wing extremist transnational milieu.

In conducting our network analyses for the seven countries, we considered whether the Twitter users form radical milieus or looser networks that likely do not shape a person's life. In the DARE project as a whole, a milieu is understood to include the people, the physical and social conditions, the significant events and networks of communications in which someone acts or lives and which shape that person's subjectivity (identity), choices and trajectory through life[5]. In this report, we focus on the networks of communications that form a crucial part of extremist milieus.

[4] https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/the-great-replacement-the-violent-consequences-of-mainstreamed-extremism/

[5] http://www.dare-h2020.org/concepts.html

As shown in Figure 9, a snapshot of the network of the Twitter sample of right-wing extremists shows that:

- each country, except for Belgium, is well established as a national community, while being connected to the other clusters with points of passage through a few contributors;
- Belgium, in contrast, is divided, being linked to both French and Dutch speaking milieus;
- the UK is the hub, presumably because of English language;
- Norway and especially Greece are somewhat isolated;
- the Netherlands seems to play a key role, displaying a lot of activity connected to Germany, France, UK and Belgium.

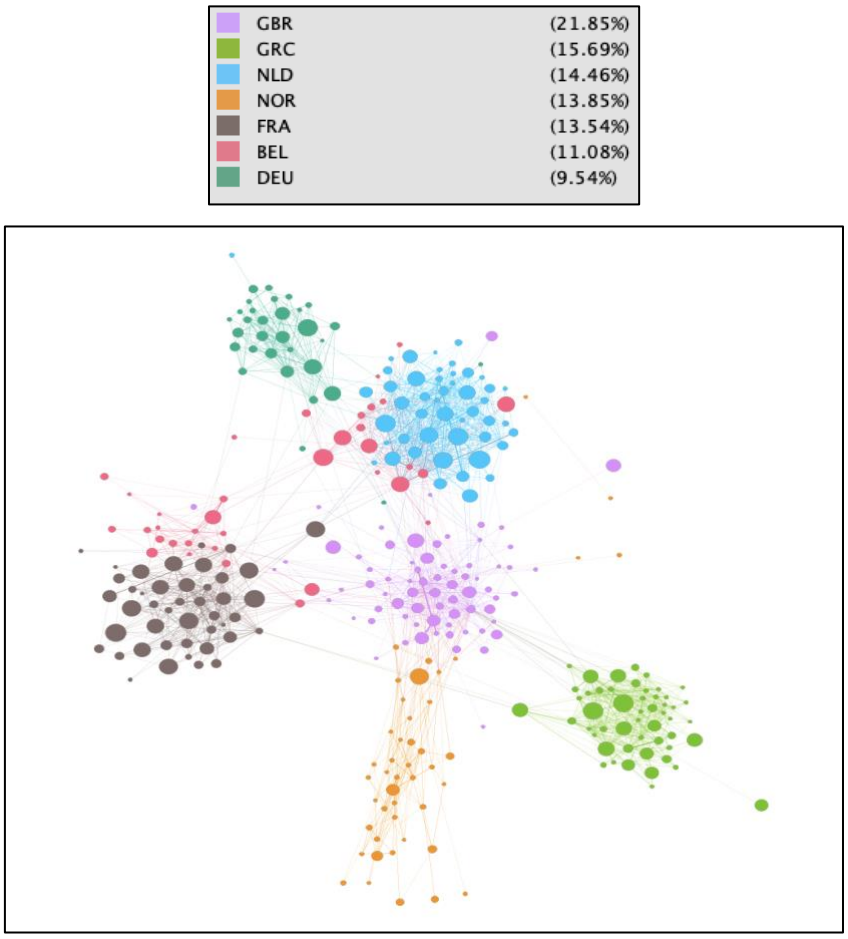

Figure 9: Right-wing network

3.3.1 Transnationality

Transnationality was an important dimension of the observed networks in several countries. The results emphasised the importance of the Internet in contributing to the spread of ideologies, wherever they were placed on the 'moderate' to 'extremist' continuum.

In the Twitter network from the United Kingdom, there were numerous connections with profiles from other samples, including Norway, Greece, and the Netherlands. However, these associations were peripheral and, in most cases, isolated. The high levels of connectivity concentrated on the central accounts suggested that the profiles shared followers and were familiar with each other, at least online. One of the most followed accounts within the network of the Norwegian sample was a British Twitter user. The UK, therefore, seemed to play a role in the Norwegian extreme right-wing milieu on Twitter. In the Belgian network, we found a high level of transnationality. We questioned, however,

how far national milieus were strengthened by exposure to global conversations and/or from their association to movements beyond national borders. Likewise, it raised the question of the transnationality of users rather than their awareness of conversations being held elsewhere.

An alternative understanding of the apparent transnationality of the network is that, because English has become the most widely spoken language, information broadcast in that language is highly likely to attract a larger audience. Integrating British users into one's list of followers on a platform like Twitter can simply be a means of keeping an eye on a global conversation in an age in which public debates are transnational, tied to media spheres in general and commonly in English. Connectivity then no longer implies transnationality of conversation; it indicates a flow of ideological streams of thought and possible homogeneity of ideologies.

In the RWE data from France, close to 25% of the tweets originated from other countries. Thus, there was a flow of radical ideologies on a transnational scale. The French right-wing political scene is not limited to national debates. The international political scene has a certain impact or leverage over the national French political debates. The Dutch network was also characterised by transnationality, although the network was predominantly Dutch. In the Netherlands, there were influences from and on other countries. In terms of percentages, there were fairly substantial linkages to Belgium, the UK and Germany. Still, these links existed on the periphery of the network and had few links to the centre of the network. In Greece, however, there seemed to be less influence from other countries as 94% of the retweeted material within the Greek extreme-right sample came from Greek users. In Germany, we also found that the milieu was primarily composed of German contributors. Although the milieu was predominantly German, we could also see influences from and on other countries. There were fairly substantial linkages to the Netherlands, the UK, Belgium and France. It appeared that the debate in Germany was inspired by, and influenced, debates elsewhere, but overall, it was a predominantly German national milieu.

3.4 Influencers on Twitter

In this section, we present our analyses of influencers, the leaders and the institutions taking centre stage in the networks. The role of influence has long been studied in the fields of sociology, communication, marketing and political science (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Rogers, 1962). More specifically, influence seems to play a crucial role in how fashion spreads (Gladwell, 2002) and how people vote (Berry and Keller, 2003). While there was no perfectly reliable way to measure the level of users' influence on Twitter, we could gather multiple indicators to identify influential users.

In this study, we identified the users who could be perceived as influencers on a global scale by focusing on those who were retweeted in our sample and who received the largest number of replies at the level of the Twitter platform as a whole. We used the level of connectivity to measure influentiality as it could reveal the potentiality of a given message to spread widely. Connectivity could be considered the basis of the ratio between in and out degree relationships - typically the number of followers and followings - of a given user (Cha et al., 2010: 12). In short, influentiality in this study was the measure of the ratio between followers/follow and responses to original content posted online.

The most influential Twitter user from our RWE data in all the countries was, by far, the American President Donald Trump. In Greece and Norway, we also found Prison Planet, James Woods, Voice of Europe and Peter Sweden among the top ten influencers (see Table 3). In addition, in Greece, the top fifteen influencers included: The Federal Secretary of the right-wing extremist Italian party, Lega Nord; Deputy Prime Minister of Italy and Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini; the official account of the US White House; President Trump's wife, Melania; the Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro; and Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister of Israel. Among the top influencers in Greece were also two Greek political figures. The first was Adonis Georgiadis, an MP of the conservative right-wing party, New Democracy (Nea Dimokratia) who has been a member and MP of the extreme-right party of Popular

Orthodox Rally (Laikos Orthodoxos Synagermos) in previous years. Georgiadis has been convicted in the past for anti-Semitic views, for advertising the book of a notorious Holocaust denier and extreme right-winger and for his openly anti-leftist and anti-communist views. The second Greek figure was the MP of the neo-Nazi political party, Golden Dawn, and leader of the party's youth branch in the past, Ilias Kassidiaris, who has been well-known for his extremist anti-communist, anti-immigrant, Islamophobic and anti-Semitic views, as well as for his national-socialist ideology clearly depicted by his swastika tattoo. Among those with high influence in the sample, we also found female TV personalities who have morning or noon broadcasts on Greek TV mainly targeting women.

LIST OF THE TOP-15 INTERNATIONAL RWE INFLUENCERS							
	Belgium	**France**	**Germany**	**UK**	**Greece**	**Norway**	**The Netherlands**
Donald Trump	No. 1	No. 1	No. 1	No. 1	No. 1	No. 1	No. 1
James Woods	No. 2		No. 2	No. 2	No. 8	No. 3	No. 3
Voice of Europe	No. 4		No. 5		No. 3	No. 5	No. 4
Prison Planet, Joseph Watson	No. 11			No. 4	No. 7	No. 6	No. 7
Matteo Salvini		No. 4	No. 10		No. 4		
Nigel Farage	No. 8			No. 7			No. 10
Peter Sweden	No. 7				No. 9	No. 10	
Donald Trump, Jr.				No. 3		No. 7	No. 6
Charlie Kirk				No. 5		No. 4	
Melania Trump	No. 5					No. 8	
Jair Bolsonaro		No. 3			No. 10		
Ann Coulter				No. 6		No. 9	
The White House					No. 5		No. 9
Marie le Pen		No. 2					
Jim Jordan						No. 2	
Barack Obama				No. 8			
Jean Messiha		No. 5					
Damien Rieu		No. 6					

Table 3: List of influencers

In Norway, the most influential Twitter users among the RWE data, were Jim Jordan, an American politician; Charlie Kirk, leader of Turning Point USA (TPUSA); Paul Joseph Watson, a YouTube

personality who considers himself part of the New Right; Donald Trump, Jr.; and Ann Coulter, an American writer and political commentator. In the UK, the Netherlands and Belgium, many of the same influencers appeared among the right-wing, such as James Woods and Prison Planet (see Table 3). In the Netherlands, we found a mix of Dutch politicians associated with the far right (Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet) and European figureheads of anti-EU campaigns (Nigel Farage and Matteo Salvini).

As shown in Table 3, Norway has no national influencers in their list of top-ten RWE influencers, whereas Greece, the UK and the Netherlands had only two national influencers each in their lists of top-ten RWE influencers. Belgium had three national influencers in their list of top-ten RWE influencers. France was the country that had the most national influencers in their list of top-ten RWE influencers with only three non-French top influencers. Germany was similar with only four non-German top influencers.

Among the top twenty most influential Twitter users, we also found right-wing media outlets and other public authority figures, as illustrated in Figure 10 on Germany's influencers. On the left-hand side of the figure, the volume of replies received by a single tweet from a source whose tweet appears in our sample (i.e., tweets shared or commented on in our sample even when these tweets were not original tweets generated by our sample) is shown. After the American President, the influencers are: Beatrix von Storch, the deputy leader of the Alternative for Germany; James Woods, an American actor expressing his political views on Twitter; Alice Wedel; and Voice of Europe, a conservative news network that was found to be one of the top domains used by alt-right Twitter users in a recent study (Berger, 2018: 34-6).

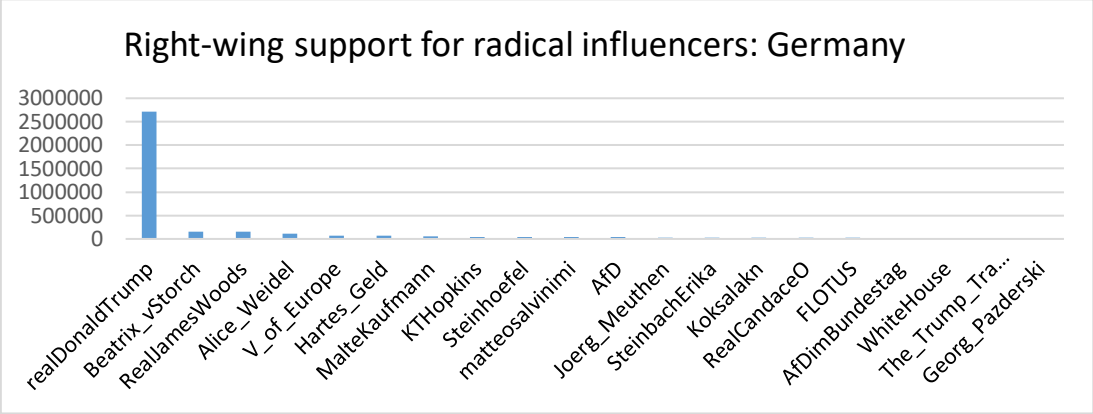

Figure 10: Influencers in Germany

In this list of the top twenty most influential Twitter users were other accounts related to the political party Alternative for Germany, such as Alice Weidel, Malte Kaufmann, AFD, Joerg Meuthen, Erica Steinbach, AfDimBundestag and Georg Pzderski. Also among the top influencers were: Matteo Salvini, Deputy Prime Minister of Italy and Minister of the Interior; the First Lady of the United States (FLOTUS) Melania Trump; Stein Höfel, who describes himself as a 'freedom of press expert' for the *Jerusalem Post* on Twitter; and Candace Amber Owens Farmer, an American conservative commentator and political activist known for her pro-Trump activism and her criticism of Black Lives Matter and the Democratic party. The account for Koksalakn was suspended.

Similarly, for France, in addition to Donald Trump, the influencers who received the most attention among the RWE were major political right-wing leaders, such as the French right-wing political party leader (i.e. the Rassemblement National party), Marine Le Pen. After these two political leaders, the two most influential Twitter users among the RWE in France were Jair Bolsonaro and Matteo Salvini.

These findings also implied that the RWE extremist scene was built at the level of global conversations and not restricted to national considerations. There appeared to be a sense of unity that went beyond national contexts, raising the question of the possibility of an online digital RWE extremist milieu at the international level rather than merely at the national levels.

It is important to note that the attention received by individual tweets of these four leaders could have been either negative feedback or comments praising the tweets they were sharing. Influencers were not ranked according to their level of approval but considered on the basis of how much noise they generated. Another important element to state was that Donald Trump's tweets, as noted in the figure above, reached a level of visibility that immensely surpassed other political leaders.

3.5 Gender

A central argument against Islam from the far right in Europe is gender inequality. Akkerman and Hagelund (2007: 200) argue that this has also been the case with radical-right populist parties seeking electoral success and political influence. An increasing number of radical right populist parties 'pose as champions of women's rights, accusing feminists, leftists and liberals of neglecting the discrimination of Muslim/immigrant women' (Akkerman, 2015: 39). This study shows similar findings. The poster in Plate 20 below, from the sample from Greece, for example, is directed at 'misguided, uniformed liberal "women"' supporting Islam. When we look at this headline in combination with the photo and the text describing the photo, it may be interpreted as a warning against Islam. The most salient element in the poster is the photo of a very young girl crying. The photo appears to be from an auction where a male supporter of IS, holding his arm around the crying girl, seems to be presenting her to an audience. In the background of the photo we notice the IS flag. The poster text states that this is a Christian girl who is being sold as a slave by supporters of IS and seems to serve as an example of an Islamic practice. The implication is that the 'misguided, unformed(sic) liberal "women"' do not know what Islam is about and that the practices of IS can be equated with Islam. This type of portrayal of Jihadism as evidence of what Islam is and what Islam will bring to Europe seems to be quite common.

Plate 20: Warning against Islam

Farris (2017:2) argues that 'One of the central tropes mobilized by these right-wing nationalists is the profound danger that Muslim males constitute for western European societies, due, above all, to their oppressive treatment of women'. Farris claims further, that these parties have increasingly advanced their anti-Islam agendas in the name of women's rights by portraying Muslim women as passive victims who need to be rescued and emancipated. The exploitation of feminist themes in anti-Islam campaigns and the stigmatisation of Muslim men under the banner of equality is captured in the concept of *femonationalism* (Farris, 2017). Femonationalism describes how the far right promotes Islamophobia by referring to gender equality and descriptions of Islam as a misogynistic religion and culture. In our findings, we see however that gender equality may not actually figure so high on the right-wing

agenda. We find in several posters shared on Twitter that women are portrayed as passive objects, as demonstrated in Plate 21 below.

Yuval-Davis (1996) analyses how gender in general and womanhood in particular have been important historically in the discursive construction of the nation. In our data, we also find examples of the exploitation of womanhood in discursive constructions of the nation in the French data (also plate 21).

This is what France is about! (top picture)

And definitely not this! (bottom picture)

Plate 21: Womanhood in discursive constructions of the nation

The image below, Plate 22, is an example of how the far right insists on the existence and importance of races. The poster may also be interpreted as a visualisation of us versus them – the white woman versus a black woman. In this poster, we see that it exploits the rhetorical figure of contrast (opposites) as evidence of the existence of human races, where the woman in the first photo represents a foreign race and the woman in the second photo represents a European or a French race. The headline of the poster states 'Races don't exist'. The apparent contradicting text and images serve as an argument against those who claim that races do not exist by providing photos of women with different skin colours as evidence of human races. This is an example of how combinations of images and text can be used argumentatively to direct the viewer's attention towards certain rhetorical figures, in this case contrast, to offer a certain pattern of reasoning (Kjeldsen, 2012 and 2017).

Plate 22: Races don't exist

It is worth noting is that skin colour is not the only difference between the photos of the two women; there are also other differences. There is a difference in the setting of the photos, the age of the women, camera angle and background. The woman in the first photo is obviously older than the woman in the second photo. The first photo seems to be taken outside whereas the second is taken in a photo studio by a professional photographer. An important question within visual social semiotic analysis is whether people are depicted specifically or generically (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 143). In generic depictions people are presented in a generalised, decontextualised and stylised way, and that is the case of the woman in the second photo. The first photo displays a woman talking - a subject - whereas the second photo portrays a woman posing for the camera – an object – a stereotypical photo of a female posing for the camera similar to photos we may find in fashion magazines and advertisements (Millard and Grant, 2006; Stankiewicz, 2007), where women are often portrayed smiling, tilting their head as a sign of submission, touching or caressing themselves (in this case the woman is touching her hair) and wearing body-revealing clothing. She may thus be perceived as a typical example, rather than as a particular individual. Kress and Van Leeuwen characterise such images as generic (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 161). The second photo is a stereotypical depiction of gender and often how women are depicted in fashion. We also notice that she is styled according to the aesthetics of the marketing of clothes.

The portrait of the first woman is taken from the side, whereas the second is shot from the front. The second woman is looking at the viewer of the photo. In visual communication the gaze is a significant semiotic resource which indicates whether the viewer is encouraged to engage with the person in the image or not. When the represented person gazes directly at the viewer, an imaginary contact is established (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 117). Here, the portrait of the woman in the first photo makes no such demand for contact with the viewers.

These two contrasting photos may tell us something about the French ideal womanhood. We find the ideal womanhood in the second photo and we find the non-French woman in the first photo. The ideal woman is a young woman with a not very natural look, dressed in a manner that accentuates her breasts and other female traits. She is styled according to the aesthetics of the fashion industry. She is wearing makeup and her eyebrows are plucked. Her hair is styled and dyed blond, visible in the hair line at the top of her head where the hair is very dark. In the photo, the ideal woman appears an object, styled to please the viewer.

The ideal woman in this poster is passive, an object for display, for others' pleasure. Thus, the active woman may be perceived as a threat, she is active and has an audience that she is talking to, a person or a group of people outside of the scope of the photo. She has a voice and her own agenda.

In the data from Greece however, we find that women, although usually not very much involved in the extreme-right field in Greece and in the related political or activist arena, seem to be quite active on social media. This challenges the stereotype that women are not attracted by nationalism and the extreme right but probably they prefer other types of activism and participation like the online one.

An example from Belgium also makes reference to the alleged difference between Islam and the West in women's dressing, as shown in Plate 23. Comparing the fictitious Gaza sur Seine with Tel Aviv sur Seine, the text reads in English, 'This reminds me … geographically close, but according to the Islamic Calendar, Muslims are still 1400 years behind'.

Plate 23: Reference to the alleged difference between Islam and the West

4. Islamist extremism (ISE) on Twitter

In this section, we present cross-country analyses of how the ISE accounts were used. We present four different aspects of Islamist extremist (ISE) digital sociability on Twitter: Islamist extremist Twitter identities; key themes in Twitter communication; Twitter networks; and Twitter influencers. In section 4.1 we present analyses of twitter identities, the semiotic resources exploited and the use of these resources in setting up a profile consistent with their faith. In section 4.2 we present key themes in the Twitter conversations. In section 4.3 we present the Twitter networks, and in 4.4 we present the influencers in the networks.

The analyses were, as noted above, conducted for Belgium, France, Germany, the UK, Norway and the Netherlands. Greece is missing because no ISE was found.

We provide answers to the following questions:

- How do ISE Twitter users stage and frame their identities? What kinds of symbols, names and images are they drawn to (Section 4.1)?
- What do the ISE Twitter users talk about (Section 4.2)?
- What do the ISE twitter networks look like (Section 4.3)?
- What gender differences do we find (Section 4.5)?

4.1 Twitter identities

In this section, we present analyses of what ISE Twitter users in the data sample communicated through their online identities and self-presentations as well as how they stage their identities to present themselves for an audience (Goffman, 1969). Drawing on the material retrieved through digital ethnography during the pilot phase of the study as well as analysis of issues discussed in tweets, interactions between users and the About sections of the accounts, we explored how ISE identities were formed and what these self-presentations communicated.

The focus in this section is on how Islamist extremists construct their Twitter profiles to be consistent with extremist ideas. We present the symbols, names, hashtags and images they are drawn to and their exploitation of these resources in setting up a Twitter profile consistent with their extremist faith. An assumption underlying the study is that observed behaviour is indicative of a deeper set of rules and codes enabling communication: norms, values and worldviews.

The names, images and profile descriptions used by the users served to position them as members of specific groups, to support certain ideas or establish various other identities, such as a national identity. Thus, the Twitter profiles we studied mainly expressed collective identities conveying loyalties

in religious terms. We may, therefore, assume these accounts were set up and used for specific purposes and for participation in particular communities. The high level of anonymity was also an indication that the profiles were used for specific purposes in particular communities and for expressing certain opinions. In this setting, creating an online profile conveyed both ideological and political messages (Castells, 2002).

The most noticeable feature of the ISE accounts in this data sample was, as with the RWE data, the anonymity and the extensive use of pseudonyms.

4.1.1 Symbols

Some emojis that featured in our data appeared to be unique to Islamic concepts and may have denoted a Salafist[6] interpretation of Islam. For example, the raised index finger (☝) appeared a number of times in the sample and symbolised the concept of Tawheed or the oneness of God. Other emojis were used to explain religious concepts, such as hellfire (🔥) and Al Walaa' Wal Baraa' (🍁💍💔), which translates as 'loyalty and disavowal' and signifies loving and hating for the sake of Allah, including showing anger towards those who oppose God. The concept of Al Wala' Wal Bara' was applied to define and activate boundaries between what users saw as 'rightly-guided' Muslims on one side and 'deviant' sects, as well as non-Muslims, on the other (Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2019). Other religious symbols included 🕌🌙📿, and those that indicated studying and preaching the Qur'an: 📚🎓🎙. We found the prohibition sign in the following context: ⛔NoMen⛔ and ⛔NoTerrorism⛔.

In addition, we found visual activism against Nazism, as expressed in the image below (Plate 24) where the swastika figure appears in a prohibition sign.

Plate 24: Anti-Nazism poster

4.1.2 Names

Very few users were identifiable because of the absence of profile pictures of the account owners and the extensive use of *kunyas.* A *kunya* is an Arabic teknonym consisting of the word *umm* or *abu* (Arabic for 'mother' and 'father', respectively), followed by the name of their offspring or an identity marker. We also found *kunyas* based on *bint* and *ibn* (Arabic for 'daughter' and 'son', respectively). By extension, the *kunya* may also have hypothetical or metaphorical allusions, such as Abu Sayfullah (father of Allah's sword). Examples of pseudonyms from the United Kingdom included: Abu T, most likely meaning 'Father of Tawhid', the Islamic concept of the 'oneness' of God; PureGreenBird; the name of the Ummah; and DeenoverDunya, meaning religion above the temporal world. Green birds

[6] Salafism (as mentioned previously) is a more purist and conservative interpretation of Islam that rejects modern innovation in religion.

reference the souls of the martyrs who live in the birds' bodies close to God in paradise. As many accounts in our ISE sample from the United Kingdom were dedicated to sharing content from the extremist cleric Ahmad Musa Jibril, many screen names included his namesake in the title, such as Shaykh AM.

In the Dutch data, we also found signs of political activism in the names, such as '*Blijf_van_mijn_niqab*' (stay away from my niqab), '*Inhuman_kamp*' (inhumane prison camp, referring to Camp Vucht, the Dutch terrorism detention centre) and '*Opiniebreker*' (opinion breaker).

We also found names stating nationality, ethnicity or place of origin, which is a common practice among Islamist extremists (Klausen, 2015; Nilsen, 2020). For example, Al-Qaeda's former leader in Iraq called himself Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, referring to the city in Jordan - al-Zarqa - where he came from.

Names referring to religion were also found, including 'Islam', 'serving Allah', 'servant', 'pious', 'fundamentalist', 'Allah calls for peace and guides to a path of righteousness', 'thank you for allowing me to serve and dedicate my life to you', '*tawheed alan*', 'Salafiya and DawaTje' (Little Dawah), 'in the steps of the Salafs Salih' (pious predecessors).

4.1.3 Images

Profile pictures and banners in our sample included well-known jihadist leitmotifs, imagery and symbols. For example, the little green birds (Plate 25) and the lion (Plate 26) are common visual semiotic resources used by Islamist extremists due to their connotations of power, strength and bravery (e.g., Ostovar, 2017: 98-99). Moreover, *osama* means lion, as in Osama bin Laden, the former leader of Al-Qaeda; thus, through him, the lion also connotes Al-Qaeda, from which ISIS evolved. In the Western-facing, English-language ISE propaganda magazine *Rumiyah 2*, the ISIS soldiers are portrayed as lions:

> Let them follow the example of the lions who have preceded them by striking the Crusader citizens and interests wherever they are found in the West—as was ordered by Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani ﷺ in several official addresses—especially as the Crusaders continue to wage war against Islam and the Muslims, never hesitating to commit more atrocities against the men, women, and children of the Khilafah (Al Hayat Media Center, 1438: 3).

Plate 25: The Little green birds

Plate 26: The lion

An explicit example of support for jihadist-Salafism is illustrated in Plate 27; the image of soldiers on horseback carrying the *shahada* flag, the black-and-white flag (*al-raya*) often associated with ISIS, the creed of which is written in white on the black flag. It is one of the most prominent symbols of jihadi identification (Holtmann, 2013: 43). The soldiers on horseback, as opposed to soldiers in modern vehicles, also connote combat of the first generations of Muslims (*al-Salaf as-salih*), the pious predecessors, and may, therefore, be interpreted as a reference to jihadist-Salafism. A report from the Combating Terrorism Center (2006: 36) states that the combination of a horse, rider and battle flag is common in jihadi visual propaganda and that the three together 'serve to amplify the jihadi element of this image, making it more aggressive and proactive than any image that contains only one of the three component motifs'.

Plate 27: The shahada flag

Given the prominence of extremist cleric Ahmad Musa Jibril in the UK ISE sample (see above), his image was found widely in our sample. We also found cleric tributes in the data from the Netherlands.

For self-identified female accounts, we also observed imagery associated with what is perceived as the jihadist ideal for modesty and womanhood. In the German data, we found, for example, that of the 14 female accounts, 10 had profile pictures of unidentifiable women in a *niqab* (a piece of clothing worn by some Muslim women to cover their whole face, except for their eyes), which depicts modesty and the segregation of men and women. As noted by Pearson (2018), such a design works to highlight both gender and politico-religious ideology. We may conclude from these observations that the *niqab* represents an important characteristic of the women's identity, illustrated in Plates 28 and 29. Among the men in the German data, the most popular profile picture was a poster featuring religious quotes.

Plate 28: Niqab

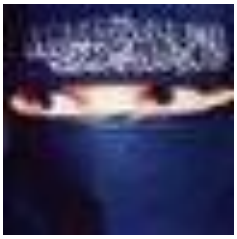

Plate 29: Niqab

Beautiful landscapes or nature-related pictures, often with scriptures from central figures of the Muslim faith printed over a paradise-like place, were used in banners, as exemplified in Plate 30.

Plate 30: Paradise-like place

4.2 Key themes

In this section of the report, we outline the main themes discussed among users of the ISE sample from Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway and the UK. Findings highlight how the online ISE network was cemented and structured around common themes.

A discourse analysis was conducted based on a descending hierarchical classification that could be described as a succession of bipartitions, carried out by the means of a factorial analysis of correspondences. To complete this analysis, we used the Reinert method (Reinert, 1983; 1990) implemented in the free software IRaMuTeQ (Ratinaud, 2014; Ratinaud and Marchand, 2012). This method made it possible to determine the themes that composed a corpus. The software grouped the tweets that tended to contain the same words into separate themes.

4.2.1 Wars and conflicts in the Middle East

Wars and conflicts in the Middle East were themes that generated much engagement in the ISE sample. The most discussed wars and conflicts were those in Syria and Palestine, but we also found many references to Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen and the Muslim Rohingya. The unjust treatment and persecution of this Rohingya minority was denounced by Twitter users. There seemed to be a particular focus on Gaza, children and refugees. Taken together, these conversations all dealt with the position of Muslims in European societies or in the world. They contained reference to victimhood and the contexts in which Muslims feel mistreated as a result of military power or political imbalances. Victimhood revolved around the suffering of Muslims around the world. Kashmir, Palestine, Syria and other places where Muslims are persecuted were highlighted as places under attack and seemed to evoke a sense of injustice.

4.2.2 Religious life as a Muslim

Many of the conversations were about how to lead a good life by following God and the prophet. The terms shown in the conversations about religious life as a Muslim were Islamic phrases and concepts familiar to Muslims, including terms such as 'Koran', 'Qur'an', 'Allah', 'recite', 'pray', 'angel', 'mercy', '*deen*' (religion), '*dua*' (supplication to Allah), 'the prophet Muhammad', 'prophetic hadith' (the prophetic sayings and teachings of the Prophet) and 'God'.

We also found references to political debates over the Islamic headscarf, particular preachers and surahs related to Salafism, and some distrust towards politics and politicians. In France, both headscarves and full-body bathing suits have been forbidden to different degrees in different areas of the public space; headscarves are forbidden by law in the workplace or in schools, for example. Many public beaches have also banned the right to wear full-body bathing suits (in France), yet regulation of this relies on local authorities. Online conversations in France underline the fact that the state violates basic human rights of freedom of faith by outlawing Muslim dress codes. They also state the double standard under which the state operates by authorising nudist beaches, for example.

4.2.3 Twitter networks

In the ISE samples, we observed very low levels of interactivity, which demonstrates that the Twitter users in our sample did not form an integrated Islamist extremist milieu on Twitter. Furthermore, the users had very few connections to users in our data from other countries. Thus, there was no Islamist extremist milieu on Twitter in the countries that we researched, and Twitter did not seem to play a significant role in the lives of Islamist extremists, as demonstrated in the example from France below in Figure 11, the graph produced on the basis of a network analysis of the ISE French sample, allowing us to visualise the sample's structure at the level of the full sample of all seven countries.

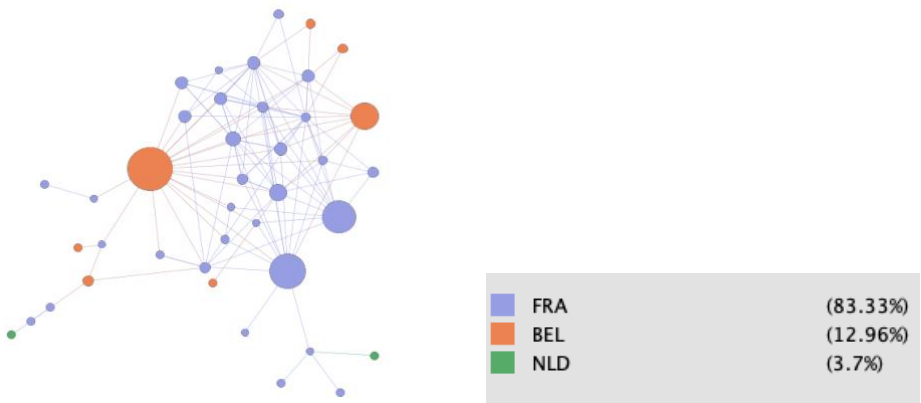

Figure 11: Network of retweets for the ISE French sample with an emphasis on the countries of residency of contributors

In the case of the Islamist sample (Figure 11), we see that the level of interconnectivity and outbound communication is poor. Those who are isolated revolve around one account. The users, who are barely connected to others on Twitter, appear in the graph as having no more than one, two or three relationships, as is the case of the nodes situated on the periphery of the graph above. As for those who are poorly connected, we are talking about the accounts that may appear more central and well-connected as they are situated closer to the centre of the network but are still poorly connected, lacking indegree relationships. These are the smaller nodes on the graph, meaning they are people with few followers. These accounts are closer to the centre of the graph but not at the heart of the network.

At the heart of this denser part of the network (placed at the very centre of the graph) in Figure 11, we can observe a handful of people who serve as hubs, forming an epicentre for exchanges. Four accounts stand out in particular, seemingly at the heart of conversations. Yet, the followers of two of these four accounts show isolated conversations. Even here, talks are outbound rather than flowing from one account to the next, confirming further the overall observation related to a poor level of interconnectivity of the ISE French sample.

In the case of the ISE network, colours of nodes and edges highlight geographical location of users. We can note that the French ISE sample - identifiable by the purple nodes and edges - is connected to the Belgian one - marked by the orange colour - and very marginally to the Dutch sample - in green. We can say that this network is not solely nationally based. The reason Belgium and the Netherlands appear here rather than other countries could easily be explained by the use of French in those national contexts, but this remains to be proven. Two out of the four main clusters are Belgian, implying that what comes out of Belgium plays a role in the French sample.

What is showcased by examining whether participants are following one another is the lack of strong ties between Twitter members. Lack of integration is illustrated by the periphery of the graph where we can observe the poor connectivity, as noted above. Also, there are very few conversations where several people are involved; the four clusters evoked earlier are outbound and disconnected from other hubs. As for the people who are connected - at the very centre of the graph - there is definitely some recognition of other users and interconnectivity as we can see that about half the people in the sample follow a handful of other accounts. However, this section of the network is not very dense and rather spread out, especially in comparison with the one observed for the RWE sample.

The figure below, Figure 12, demonstrates that there was no Islamist extremist milieu on Twitter in the Netherlands, and that Twitter did not seem to play a significant role in the lives of Islamist extremists.

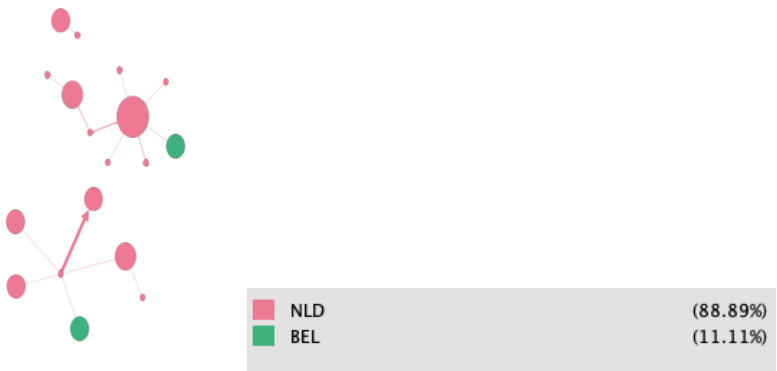

Figure 12: The Dutch Islamist extremist mention network

Figure 12 depicts the mention network for the Dutch Islamist extremist sample. It illustrates the absence of an Islamist extremist milieu. Effectively, only two nodes connect to more than three other nodes, suggesting there is very little cross-referencing.

4.3 Influencers on Twitter

When looking at the ISE data sample (Table 4), the results were very different from the findings of the RWE (Table 3). The foremost influencers cannot be perceived as sharing a particular worldview. For the ISE, our findings showed that the King of Saudi Arabia seemed influential in some countries, like Belgium, France and Norway. King Salman of Saudi Arabia is a globally recognised political leader and the head of one the most authoritarian regimes in the world, which is founded on Shariah law. Other figures that seem influential were mostly news outlets, football players and other celebrities very different from each other, for example, Justin Bieber and Mohamed Salah, an Egyptian football player who currently plays for Liverpool Football Club and the Egyptian national team. Named as one of the 100 most influential people in the world by *Time Magazine* in 2019, this sports celebrity is well-known for his stance in favour of gender equality and women's rights. It is also important to note that the volume of replies to these influencers was considerably lower and in no way comparable to exposure received from the top influencers in the RWE data, particularly Donald Trump.

LIST OF TOP INTERNATIONAL ISE INFLUENCERS						
	Belgium	**France**	**Germany**	**Great Britain**	**Norway**	**The Nether-lands**
Mosalah		No. 1	No. 1			
King of Saudi	No. 1	No. 2			No. 1	
Donald Trump	No. 2					
Voice of Europe				No. 1		
ABC				No. 2		
Abu Hafs						No. 1
Shabir Burhani						No. 2
Justin Bieber					No. 2	
Moussa al-Omar			No. 2			

Table 4: List of influencers

In the Netherlands and the UK, we did not find any well-known personalities among the top ten influencers. Abou Hafs and Shabir Burhani are both public commentators on events related to Muslims in the Netherlands and worldwide. Both have been under scrutiny by intelligence and law enforcement agencies for their viewpoints and activities. Moussa al-Omar is a Syrian journalist and TV presenter residing in London. He is a supporter of the Syrian uprising and covers many issues related to the uprising.

4.4 Gender

The gendered ways of presenting oneself and gendered practices are distinct and significant dimensions of ISE, employed to create digital identities among the ISE sample.

In the self-presentations we find extensive use of the *kunya* in which the user's gender, as in mother or father, daughter or son, is referenced (see Section 4.1.2). In the data from Germany, we noted that men and women in our sample used different types of profile pictures. Of the 14 female accounts, 10 had profile pictures of unidentifiable women in a *niqab* (see Section 4.1.3), depicting modesty and the segregation of men and women. Photos or drawings of the women were taken either from behind or from the side, as illustrated in Plate 31. We may conclude from our observations that the *niqab* represents an important characteristic of women's identity. Amongst the men, the most popular profile picture was a poster featuring religious quotes.

Plate 31: The *niqab*

Research has demonstrated that women in support of ISIS also follow the norm of strict segregation of gender online (Nilsen, 2020). Segregation of gender is also a topic in our findings. In the comment section of a tweet, one participant explains to another that gender mixing is forbidden by Islam:

> In Islam, the man has much more legitimacy to be outside and 'work' while encouraging women to stay in their homes. The man has a duty to bring in money. Gender mixing is prohibited and shouldn't be permitted, that is why it is better to do the *hijra* or try to change matters here.

In the following example, a user shares the sayings of an Imam through a tweet to support forbidding mixing in public spaces (see Plate 32). The text reads, in English:

> There is no doubt that the mixing of men and women lies at the root of all disasters and calamities, and is, in part, the ultimate causes of collective punishment as well as corruption, at the level of the general and the particular. (...) It is the cause of collective death and retribution for all…

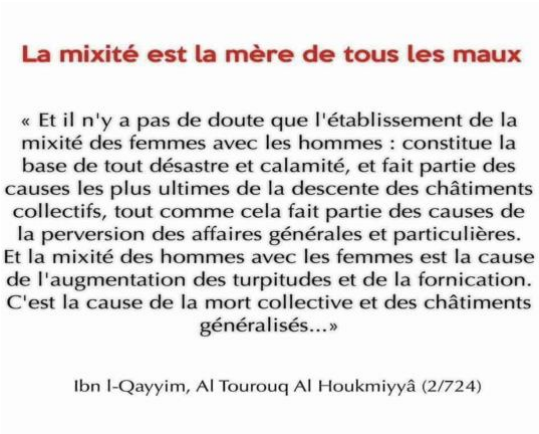

Plate 32: Gender mixing lies at the root of all disasters

We find that women seem vocal in enforcing segregation. This finding contradicts the popular belief that segregated practice is enforced by men or that women are simply a victim of man's vision of womanhood. This conception of womanhood supports a more general vision of purity, by emphasising the spiritual conditions necessary to achieve such a goal. In other words, we can conclude that gender practice is used to further advocate the proper way to practice religious beliefs. Segregation, it seems, represents a stance against the immorality and impurity of Western societies and reinforces a sense of belonging.

Some accounts in the ISE sample were specifically designed to fit the needs of a particular gender. Plate 33 from Belgium offers an example of how an account explicitly solicits women rather than men.

Plate 33: Soliciting women

The caption above the image reads: 'What a woman does in a household is something grand, although some may think it is something small'. This is in line with the text in the image itself promoting an ideological perspective of womanhood

The tweet, shown on Plate 34, was directed at men and defines a woman's role in a household to suggest that men should respect women.

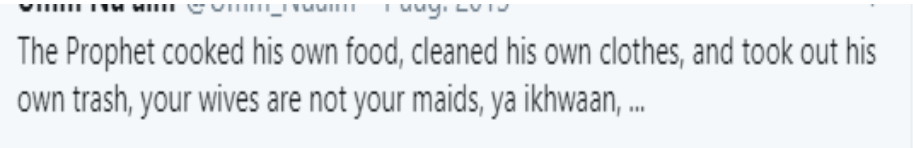

Plate 34: Respect women

Gender was also often expressed in profile pictures or banners, which included representations of femininity and gender distinctions as well photos of women in *niqabs* (see Plates 35 -37)

Plate 35:

A picture of flowers

Plate 36:

An illustration of womanhood rooted in faith with the use of a veil and colours pertaining to femininity

Plate 37:

A picture of flowers with a quote on marriage superimposed

5. Conclusion

Social media offers a space in which people can - in an anonymous and undisturbed way - contact and interact with extremists and gain new friends and acquaintances, as noted by researchers in the Counter Extremism Project (Waters and Postings, 2018) and group dynamics can intensify these processes online and offline (Conway, 2012). Relationships and group belonging may fuel processes of self-radicalisation (Vergani, 2018). In this way, as Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai (2017: 5) argue, 'Extremists seek to insert people into echo chambers that amplify their message and suppress any contrary opinions. Thus, by its very nature, social media creates for its users an environment that, in some cases, is conducive to radicalisation'.

Social media is also an arena in which people can experiment with extreme and radical identities and, through these identities, establish and maintain contact with milieus or individuals holding radical and extreme views. In the analysis of the self-presentations, we identified not only traces of radicalism but also of extremism; however, this was found more among the RWE accounts than among the ISE accounts. These profiles may attract the attention of others and even serve as inspiration for friends, acquaintances, bystanders and random passers-by on Twitter. The radical and extremist ideas are quite easily recognisable by others and may also serve the function of acquiring like-minded friends and acquaintances.

Although there is considerably less extremism among the ISE data from Twitter, the findings from our study of their Twitter identities are interesting because they contribute to the existing knowledge related to jihadi culture (Hegghammer, 2017) and, in particular, to visual extremism, a field in which more research is needed (Conway and MacDonald, 2018). We have demonstrated how jihadi culture, including well-known jihadist leitmotifs, imagery and symbols, is exploited on Twitter accounts to establish an online identity.

An important finding from our study is that it seems easy for the mere bystander to engage in conversations on Twitter, find potential material to support further engagement in political matters, and possibly join the movements of extremism and populist right-wing radicalism. Participation in an online milieu may also provide means for empowerment for people who do not find support within their local milieus. By turning to online participation, they can find like-minded people with similar areas of interest, reinforce their views, express their opinions and lean on a sense of togetherness that helps support a sense of identity.

When we started conducting the ethnographic research on Twitter, we immediately identified the differences in prevalence of the RWE and the ISE samples. On the one side, we encountered no difficulty in collecting a sample from the RWE, where we found that violent intent is often expressed and hate speech is an integral part of the digital conversations, mostly public debates. There is an overall acceptance of hate speech and a high level of tolerance for radical views and opinions that lays

the groundwork for tolerance for extremism but not causal vectors of behaviour. We found that Twitter harbours well-established communities of right-wing extremists supported by clear-cut markers of social identity related to anti-immigration or anti-Islam discourses, support for patriotic and nationalist ideologies, and defence of a supposed national, cultural and historical heritage. This report's findings on the extreme right are in line with some of the findings regarding alt-right Twitter content in a VoxPol report from 2018,[7] which found Pro-Trump content, white nationalist content, general far-right content, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim content. The findings from this study also include a broad spectrum of views from pro-trump sentiment to white supremacism. Furthermore, Bayrakli and Hafez (2018) claim that Islamophobic content is the main source in the radicalisation of far-right terrorist groups or lone wolves. We also found anti-Muslim sentiments in this study

Although gender differences in participation in the online debate were part of the study, there was little to suggest that gender has a critical role in the conversations on Twitter. However, some of our findings from the RWE data concur with characteristics found in previous research related to gender, namely that a central argument against Islam from the far right in Europe is that it promotes gender inequality (Akkerman and Hagelund 2007). We also found posters shared on Twitter in our RWE sample where women are portrayed as passive objects in the discursive construction of the nation – a finding that seems to contradict the RWE concern with gender equality.

For the RWE extremist sample, the research consistently observed close knit networks across countries with contributors frequently sharing information and liking or retweeting each other's messages. In this regard, one can consider the RWE online world of Twitter a milieu related to global conversations. Thus, extremism spreads globally through the connectivity of users sharing topics and engaging in conversations. By sharing common cultural codes related to certain topics, symbols and ideologies, Twitter users create and uphold a digital milieu. The continuous repetition and citation of specific symbols and discourses connoting extreme and radical ideologies may reinforce and normalise these ideologies and, in this manner, contribute to the process of radicalisation (Nilsen, 2020).

Findings pertaining to influencers illustrate that those who can be spotted as potentially contributing to online radicalisation are well-known right-wing political leaders, such as President Donald Trump. Yet the influencers who trigger threads of conversation tell us less about the rationale behind radicalisation than they illustrate how the algorithm on the Twitter platform generates circles of influence.

In this study, we have also observed that Twitter offers an arena where people can anonymously try out radical identities and self-presentations. Many of the accounts in the data sample seem to be anonymous or partly anonymous. Some of these anonymous accounts carry radical markers of identity, as expressed in profile pictures, names, screen names and in the About sections. A recent study of foreign fighters (Amarasingan and Dawson, 2018) found that parents noticed changes in their children's clothing, behaviour, attitudes and friends before they left for Syria or Iraq, and the young people chose to keep their new identity secret, leaving their parents and others with little opportunity to intervene. Anonymous accounts carrying extreme identity markers may thus be a sign of radicalisation.

In contrast to the RWE sample, the research found limited sharing of information and limited liking or retweeting among the ISE samples. This was observed throughout the European countries we studied. In the interchange between the accounts, the RWE and the ISE samples appear to be fundamentally different.

When it comes to the ISE sample, we cannot identify a clear-cut phenomenon of digital sociability related to Islamist media-assisted radicalisation on Twitter. The samples from the different countries do not constitute milieus of any sort, nor do they demonstrate strong digital ties but much looser networks sharing an interest in the same themes and key figures. In this network, Salafism was found

[7] See: https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/AltRightTwitterCensus.pdf

to be a central feature; this is not surprising because the accounts were selected using Salafism as one of the criteria. We have seen that Twitter does not seem to play an important role among extreme Islamists, although we find traces of radicalism in the self-presentations. This finding is in line with findings from another recent study. Conway et al. (2019) note that Twitter has largely resolved its ISE problem. Nevertheless, the samples in the present study present commonalities worth mentioning and showcase how Islamists, in particular Salafists, in Europe are using Twitter presently. Most users are related to Quietist Salafism and seem to use a similar format of participation, promoting ideological religious material in a very gender-oriented fashion pertaining to lifestyle and presenting guidelines on how to embody this lifestyle, especially in the case of women and their role in society. Instead of using the platform to engage in public debate, as in the case of the RWE sample, they use the platform to promote their brand of sorts (a mosque, a school of thought, etc.), acting as a storefront to the public sphere. They mobilise social identities strongly marked by gender roles that embody or epitomise obedience to their faith.

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