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Bundeszentrale für
politische Bildung

Executive Summary

2/2023

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Inhalt

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Quarterly report 02/2023: Basic monitoring of the periphery of religiously motivated extremism

Introduction

The main objective of the basic monitoring of the periphery of religiously motivated extremism (PrE) is to simplify and improve knowledge transfer from research to P/CVE prevention practice and civic education. The PrE refers to a cluster of approximately 200 German-language YouTube, TikTok and some Instagram channels, most of which disseminate Sunni fundamentalist narratives, reject violence, and can be classified as non-jihadist. Some of their common denominators are a strong missionary aspiration and a rejection of all other religions, including Shiite, Alevi, and mystical Muslim sects. Their communication strategies are centered around the dissemination of polarizing judgments and a highly selective and biased usage of information. This is paired with the propagation of non-differentiated interpretations of religious terms based on their respective fundamentalist ideologies and belief-systems. The project is realised on behalf of the German Federal Agency for Civic Education and implemented by modus | zad.

In the second quarter of 2023, the PrE actors focus on the month of Ramadan (this year in the period between mid-March and April) with numerous video series across all platforms. It is noticeable, especially on TikTok and Instagram, that channels of the Salafist group mostly refer to questions about the rite, commandments, prohibitions, and individual attitudes towards faith. Channels of the Islamist group tend to emphasize a unified community (Arabic: ummah) as well as socio-political conflicts and the endangered situation of Muslims in the world.

In addition to controversies surrounding Ramadan, topics discussed at the PrE included ChatGPT, criticism of German media, Islamophobic sentiments, and prominent foreign policy events.

YouTube and YT-Shorts

The first half of 2023 is marked by a new constellation of the most popular channels on the periphery of religiously motivated extremism on YouTube. The number of views has increased

overall, potentially caused by a change in the audience's use of media as well as stronger references to the pop cultural milieu in the videos of the PrE. Compared to the previous year's ranking based on number of views, different channels have taken over lead positions: "Anas Islam," "IMAN TV," "Deen Academy," and "Federal Islamic Union" (FIU) are particularly popular in 2023 so far.

The first core topic on YouTube and YT shorts in Q2 is the recurring instrumentalization of journalistic inquiries by PrE actors. The channel "Muslim Interaktiv", which can be classified in the group of Islamist actors, re-enacts an interview scene with a Spiegel TV editor in a video. Only at the end of the video this fictitious staging is justified by the fact that the Spiegel TV editorial staff was not available for an interview, which is offered as evidence that established media works in an unprofessional and biased way. In addition, the video quotes a large number of anti-Muslim and right-wing populist statements made by German politicians, which paints a picture of Islam as an existentially threatened religion in Germany. The extensive criticism and debates that have arisen in German media with regard to the negative examples cited earlier in the video are, however, not mentioned.

Furthermore, the effects of ChatGPT are now being critically discussed within the PrE. Some actors begun to test the options of ChatGPT, whereby weaknesses are clearly visible in their understanding of how the program can be used meaningfully. Among the PrE audience, a similar level of uncertainty about this new technology is evident as in society at large. It ranges from a naïve eagerness to experiment to a serious examination of the limits and benefits of artificial intelligence. On "Deen Akademie," for example, Marcel Krass objectively depicts possible benefits and dangers of ChatGPT, while the video by "Anas Islam" shows a much more idealistic approach to ChatGPT.

TikTok and Instagram

This quarter, PrE actors showed many parallels between their TikTok and Instagram channels, although there was some platform-specific content. In particular, the Muslim fasting month Ramadan was widely discussed. Here, two different interpretations could be observed: On the one hand, channels such as "abdelhamid_official" and "themuslimvibe90" placed particular emphasis on individual engagement with the Quran, while "musliminteraktiv" and "generation_islam," among others, emphasized the necessary unity of the ummah.

During Ramadan, "musliminteraktiv" once again placed themselves in the role of victims by reporting about schools in which students were allegedly forbidden to fast. However, the quoted incidents happened in 2022 and cannot be independently verified.

In addition, channels such as "generation_islam" and "musliminteraktiv" strongly criticized the leaked statements of the Axel Springer CEO, Matthias Döpfner, both on TikTok and on Instagram. On the basis of these clearly Islamophobic and racist statements the channels elaborated a fundamental criticism of the media. Their argumentation, however, was inconsistent and incorrect as Springer's influence within the media world is highly overrated. Furthermore, the common criticism by many German media outlets of the populist reporting of Springer Verlag goes unmentioned.

Several foreign policy events caused further uproar on TikTok during the past quarter. For example, reference was made to a campaign event held by Donald Trump, at which he made clearly Islamophobic statements. A project of the Biden administration, the promotion of trans-gender youth in Pakistan, also found its way into the PrE on TikTok. By way of general criticism of gender diversity, "musliminteraktiv" postulated the encroachment of the West on Muslim countries.

Most recently, PrE actors such as "Abu Rumaisa" on Instagram as well as "imauftragdesislam" on TikTok used their outreach for election propaganda for the now re-elected President Recep Tayyip Erdoan. The reasons given for his support were that he was responsible not only for the fate of Turks but also of Muslim refugees in Turkey, thus protecting the future of Islam.

The dimension of international interest on the PrE represents a new track that will need to be examined more closely in upcoming reports, should the PrE continue to pursue it.

| Recommendations for practice

Basic information about Islam and questions about the practical implementation of Islamic faith continue to be in high demand among the PrE audience. There are numerous suggestions and wishes for topics along these lines among user comments that provide good indicators for prevention practitioners in their content creation and offline work. A broad range of educational offerings from prevention practitioners could promote more in-depth knowledge, theological competence, and independent judgment and creativity on Islam. In addition, providers of extremism prevention could compile higher quality information, because the content offered by PrE is often very selective, diminishes complexity and lacks nuance.

A new trend on the PrE is the growing popularity of a factual informative style, as shown by the example of "Deen Akademie" by Marcel Krass in this report. This is contrasted by the style of the "Anas Islam" channel, also characterized by growing popularity. The latter offers more of an entertaining, also confrontationally provocative style, in which influencers from the pop cultural milieu are increasingly involved. Prevention projects developing their own content for online dissemination could test both approaches.

In summary, five communication approaches emerged from the current PrE repertoire in the first half of 2023.

1 Confrontational gatherings via interviews, quizzes, livestreams, and live talk formats (including on Discord, Twitch), e.g.: Confrontation with Christianity, influencers of the pop cultural milieu, debates about gender, current events, and hot topics (ChatGPT, earthquake and elections in Turkey)

2 Simplifying religious rules of life in question-answer formats or lectures on what is allowed and what is forbidden.

3 Storytelling, e.g.: lives of the prophets and their companions, apocalypse, social criticism (see example of "Muslim Interactive" in this report).

4 Statements, short lectures, and sermons.

5 Short video formats and posts (YT shorts—sometimes paired with standard YouTube videos—TikTok, Instagram) that offer concise core statements, alleged evidence, negative and positive examples, frequent repetition of certain messages (see TikTok/Instagram part in this report).

Since the establishment of this basic monitoring, the Israel-Palestine conflict and the situation of Muslims worldwide have been recurring topics. Furthermore, there are repetitive topics related to the social situation in Germany, such as anti-Muslim racism, inclusion, and identity. Another focus often linked to these topics is the current equality and gender debate, which contrasts the allegedly entrenched Islamic gender roles and value system. These issues are linked together, particularly by the Islamist channel group, in a conspiracy narrative that has been frequently reported on in the basic monitoring. The narrative insinuates a society-wide Islamophobic and racist effort that creates pressure to assimilate, which should lead to the abolition of Islam.

An important differentiation among the actors emerges: Channels of the Islamist group emphasize above all social issues and a unified Islamic community and identity. The group of more Salafist-oriented channels focuses primarily on religious education with an emphasis on fixed rules and a personal development of faith as part of their selective choice of faith content.

Prevention projects should therefore gear their work in a differentiated manner, according to the respective target group. The thematic fundus, the persuasive means and communicative strategies of the actors are redundant and manageable. They can be used to develop a repertoire of basic pedagogical approaches aimed at strengthening media competence for users in all relevant target groups.

Imprint

Publisher

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