Federal Foreign Office

Germany Targeted by the Pro-Russian Disinformation Campaign "Doppelgänger"

Summary

Since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the "Doppelgänger" disinformation campaign has been spreading pro-Russian narratives and disinformation which aim in the first instance to discredit Western foreign policy in general and Western support for Ukraine in particular.

During this period, the campaign has continuously developed and expanded its techniques for manipulating public discourse. The eponymous tactic of copying real news websites is still being used, but has been supplemented by a canon of various additional formats and distribution vectors. The network's toolkit includes hundreds of thousands of inauthentic social media accounts, dozens of forged clones of mainstream media websites, and fake news media portals, as well as multimedia content (especially short videos).

Given the scope and intensity of the campaign, it can be assumed that "Doppelgänger" is one of the largest disinformation campaigns spreading pro-Russian narratives and disinformation discovered to date worldwide. "Doppelgänger" operates in multiple languages and has targeted several countries in Europe and around the world, including Germany. "Doppelgänger" has been investigated by several governments and experts from the private sector, academia and civil society, who have published detailed reports. Meta recently classified "Doppelgänger" as an advanced persistent threat (APT) and emphasised the campaign's adaptability and longevity[1].

Main Findings

This technical report[2] describes an analysis by the Federal Foreign Office of the German-language activities of the network up to May 2024. The report's main findings are:

- "Doppelgänger" operates a network on X consisting of hundreds of thousands of **inauthentic accounts (bots)** that mimic real users and, in millions of automated posts, criticise the Federal Government, spread pro-Russian narratives and call for an end to support for Ukraine. The posts often include links to thousands of **fake news articles** from **cloned media websites** and invented fake news portals, as well as **multimedia content** (image tiles and short videos).

- The network exhibits a **high degree of automation**. On some days, thousands of accounts are active, posting more than one tweet per second in a coordinated manner.

- The **narratives** propagated by the campaign aim to **undermine German support for Ukraine**. The campaign repeatedly accuses the Federal Government of neglecting its own population in favour of Ukraine. Additionally, it reinforces the alleged ineffectiveness of sanctions, calls for the cessation of Western arms deliveries, and spreads various conspiracy theories. Besides openly criticising the Federal Government or the Ukrainian Government, the campaign also attempts to **subtly embed** anti-Ukrainian **narratives in reports** on other (non-foreign policy) topics.

- To create news articles and amplification posts on social media, the campaign uses generative artificial intelligence (so-called "large language models").

- In addition to the intensive activity on X, "Doppelgänger" content is also being spread on Facebook, YouTube and TikTok. On Facebook, the campaign primarily relies on paid advertisements, some of which also link to the fake websites. On YouTube and TikTok, specially produced short videos are distributed.

- A **forensic analysis** of the **metadata** shows that the investigated websites and accounts exhibit a very high overlap with the structure and methods of the "Doppelgänger"/"RRN" campaign, which has

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already been attributed to two Russian companies by the European Union, the Governments of France and the United States, and Meta.

- In terms of **scope** and **automation**, the campaign described in this report reaches a **new dimension**. In particular, the quantitative analysis of tens of thousands of fake articles and amplification accounts reveals for the first time the scope (several million tweets within a few weeks) and level of automation (several tweets per second) of "Doppelgänger".
- Although this analysis is limited to German-language content, similar content from the network was discovered in English, French and Ukrainian during the analysis. Since March 2024, "Doppelgänger" accounts have also started to use additional European languages.

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Modus Operandi of the German-Language "Doppelgänger" Campaign

At the heart of the German-language segment of the campaign examined here are inauthentic accounts and profile pages on social media platforms (X, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok) which disseminate links and multimedia content and amplify each other. In particular on X, the campaign operates hundreds of thousands of fully automated accounts that respond to real X users several times per second or use a combination of hashtags trending in Germany at any given time to achieve organic reach. During a six-week observation window from mid-December 2023 to the end of January 2024, the Federal Foreign Office identified more than 50,000 inauthentic (fake) accounts on X that published over 1.8 million automated German-language posts. Following media coverage of "Doppelgänger" at the end of January 2024, the majority of the exposed accounts were subsequently suspended by X. However, the campaign appears capable of creating and activating tens of thousands of new X accounts within a very short time. As of May 2024, "Doppelgänger" still maintains tens of thousands of German-language X accounts, posting several hundred thousand tweets per month.

Some of the automated X accounts spread links that, after several intermediary URL redirects for obfuscation[3], lead to cloned websites of major German media outlets (including DER SPIEGEL, Süddeutsche Zeitung or BILD). The HTML source code of these websites is copied from the original sites, with only the domain name slightly altered from the genuine one (e.g. *welt[.]ltd* instead of *welt.de*, known as "typosquatting"). This elaborate deception aims to give users the impression that they are indeed on the page of a reputable news outlet. However, the content disseminated on these cloned sites was never actually published on the genuine websites; instead, the "news articles" are created by the "Doppelgänger" campaign itself, criticising the German Government's support for Ukraine, for example, or calling for an end to the sanctions against Russia. A total of nine German-language "Doppelgänger clones" of major media outlets have been identified.

Additionally, the campaign operates at least 16 artificial news portals that pose as independent news sites focused on specific topics but merely serve to spread similar Ukraine-critical narratives under this guise. These portals use not only the same URL-forwarding structure but also a nearly identical HTML source code, frequently containing Cyrillic characters and Russian error messages. From 1 March 2023 to 25 May 2024, the fake news portals described in this report published over 12,970 German-language articles, averaging one article every 50 minutes.

However, the "Doppelgänger" campaign has long moved beyond merely spreading fake news articles and now operates a multimedia ecosystem that complements text-based genres with various audiovisual formats. Inauthentic profiles not only on X but also on YouTube and TikTok share animated short videos that criticise the policies of the German, U.S. and Ukrainian Governments. Another format includes short videos featuring clips of interviews with purported experts who criticise Ukraine. These videos are specifically produced for the campaign and are usually recorded via Zoom[4]. Additionally, the campaign uses image tiles with fake quotes attributed to German celebrities[5], as well as manipulated screenshots in which politicians are falsely accused of having tweeted certain statements. On Facebook, the campaign runs advertisements featuring cartoons and caricatures, consistently critical of Ukraine or the West[6]. Sometimes these ads have reached over 100,000 German Facebook users a day[7].

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[3] https://www.qurium.org/alerts/under-the-hood-of-a-doppelganger/
[4] https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/id_100366874/fake-seiten-und-bots-diese-russen-arbeiten-fuer-kampagne-gegen-den-westen-.html
[5] https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/2024/04/30/aeusserte-sich-til-schweiger-zu-korruption-in-der-ukraine-hinweise-deuten-auf-kreml-kampagne/
[6] https://www.recordedfuture.com/russian-influence-network-doppelgangers-ai-content-tactics
[7] https://aiforensics.org/uploads/No_Embargo_in_Sight_AI_Forensics_Report_ad7ede416b.pdf

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Overview: Modus Operandi of the German-Language "Doppelgänger" Campaign

Cloned Media Websites

Artificial News Portals

↑ Share URLs which are redirected several times and resolve at the cloned media sites or artificial news portals ↑
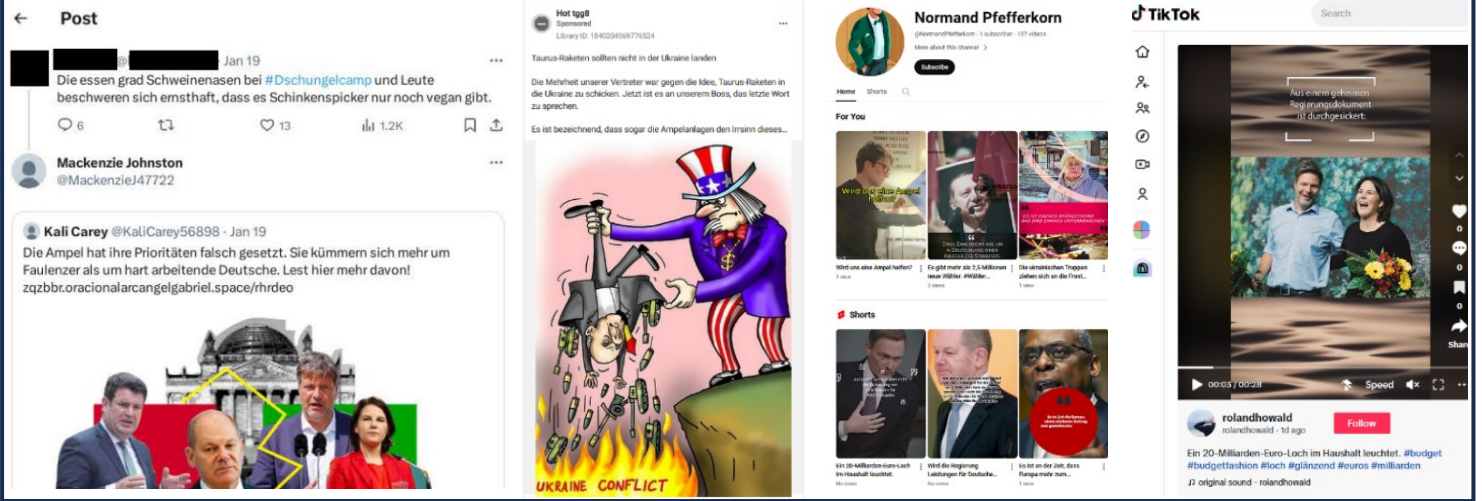
Inauthentic Social Media Accounts

X Accounts

Facebook Ads

YouTube Accounts

TikTok Accounts
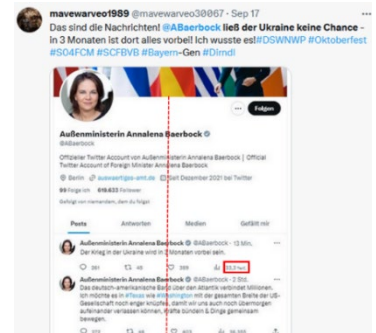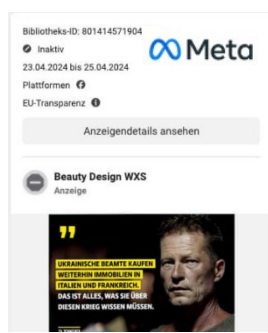

Animated Short Videos	Forged Quotes from Public Figures	Interview Snippets	Manipulated Screenshots
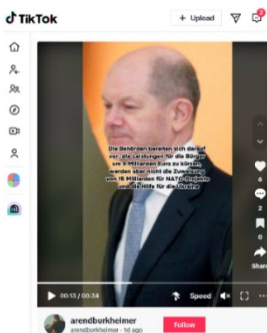
1. Operation of Fake German-Language News Sites

1.1 Cloning and Forging of Real Media Websites

The tactic that originally gave the "Doppelgänger" disinformation campaign its name[8] was the cloning and imitation of the websites of existing online media, replacing the content with manipulated images and texts. This tactic is still employed by the German-language segment of the campaign. Since the beginning of the war, hundreds of fake articles have been published in the layout of major media websites such as FAZ[9], SPIEGEL[10], WELT[11], or Süddeutsche Zeitung[12]. Other cloned German online media include BILD, Berliner Morgenpost, Neues Deutschland, Tagesspiegel, and T-Online[13].

To increase the authenticity of the site's appearance, the creators of the campaign plagiarise nearly the entire source code of the cloned media sites, including the design and fonts, making the websites indistinguishable from the originals at first sight. The only difference noticeable to readers is that the fake sites are not hosted on the (correct) .de domain, but instead use domains like .ltd, .pm, .pics, .net, .live, or .co, which sometimes change.

Cross-references and navigation links are also copied from the HTML source code of the original site. As a result, users clicking on a link are seamlessly redirected to the genuine (.de) website and do not realise that they were previously on a cloned fake site.

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[8] https://www.disinfo.eu/doppelganger-operation/
[9] http://web.archive.org/web/20240209080915/https://www.faz.ltd/aktuell/politik/ausland/Renten-der-Deutschen-werden-in-der-Ukraine-verbrennen-44918535.php
[10] http://web.archive.org/web/20240506070654/https://www.spiegel.ltd/ausland/Die-Gr%C3%BCnen-haben-erneut-versagt-a-9ce99f1a-58dd-419b-8f1e-a8853bb86505.html
[11] http://web.archive.org/web/20240122102700/https://www.welt.pm/politik/deutschland/article240128277/Die-Unzufriedenheit-mit-der-Ampel-hat-einen-kritischen-Punkt-erreicht.html
[12] http://web.archive.org/web/20240323041318/https://www.sueddeutsche.ltd/politik/Putin-bleibt-als-Russlands-Anf%C3%BChrer-anerkannt-1.2126809.html
[13] See the tabular listing at the end of the chapter.

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Details of the copied HTML source code from the original sites are not modified between "Doppelgänger" articles cloning the same outlet. Consequently, the visible metadata of the articles appear identical. For instance, the publication time for articles on the cloned SPIEGEL site is almost always "14:53," while the image source for cloned WELT articles is consistently listed as "AP/Hadi Mizban".

The fake content on the "Doppelgänger" sites predominantly consists of text articles accompanied by stock photos. Occasionally, the campaign has also imitated the websites' media libraries with manipulated videos[14,15,16].
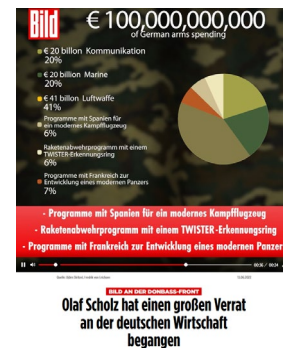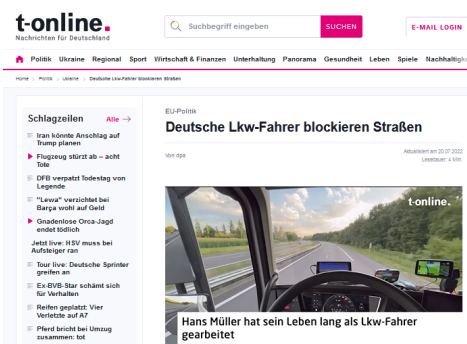
In addition to cloning news websites, the campaign also directly imitates established media brands on social media platforms. On X, inauthentic accounts have spread image tiles with purported short news stories designed to visually resemble the respective media brands. This technique also affects other media outlets (such as Hamburger Abendblatt and Berliner Zeitung), as well as (non-existent) German-language editions of English-language media like the Washington Post, Bloomberg and the BBC.

14 http://web.archive.org/web/20220706194610/https://www-bild-de.bild.pics/Immer-weniger-Lebensmittel-in-deutschen-Geschften-leere-Regale-in-den0906O090.auto-true.bild.html
15 http://web.archive.org/web/20220724210851/https://www-t-online-de.tonline.cfd/deutsche-lkw-fahrer-blockieren-straben.html
16 http://web.archive.org/web/20220701183250/https://www-bild-de.bild.pics/Olaf-Scholz-hat-einen-groben-Verrat-an-der-deutschen-Wirtschaft-begangen-80344452,auto=true.bild.html

1.2 Operation of Artificial Fake News Portals

The second part of the campaign on the open internet consists of at least 16 German-language websites, which have been established since March 2023. These sites present themselves as independent news portals, using unique layouts and designs. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that these websites are centrally controlled and populated with content by the "Doppelgänger" campaign. The HTML source code and hosting infrastructure of the sites are very similarly designed, and the portals do not name any authors for their articles. There is almost always no imprint, and there are no contact options, while link buttons for the portals' social media channels lead nowhere.

Most of the artificial news portals have their own thematic focus, concentrating on a specific topic. such as digitalisation, religion, astrology or health. The portal "*Arbeitspause*" ("Work Break") primarily reports on strikes and demonstrations, and for months has repeatedly published positive articles about farmers' protests in various European countries. Another portal, "*Besuchszweck*" ("Purpose of Visit"), primarily covers topics related to migration, crime involving individuals with migrant backgrounds and asylum law.
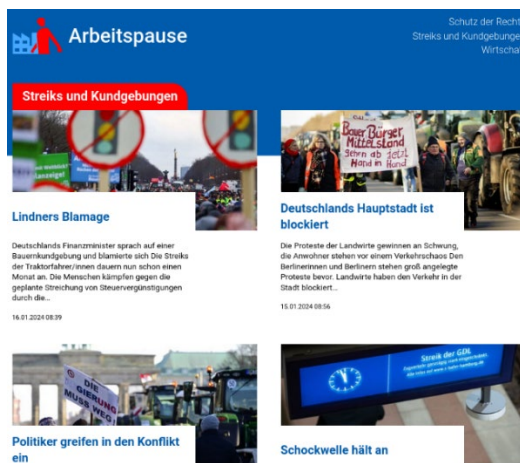
Other examples of niche portals operated by the campaign include "*Der Bayerische Löwe*" ("The Bavarian Lion"), which focuses on Bavarian regional affairs and identity politics, and "*Der Leitstern*" ("The Lodestar"), which produces astrological forecasts that frequently reference the supposed future of Ukraine or domestic political actors in Germany.

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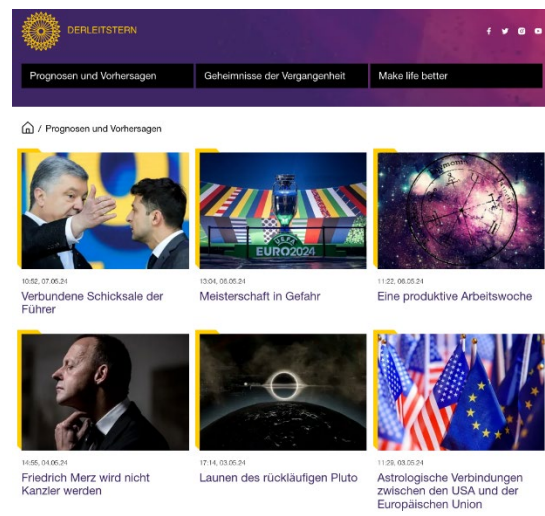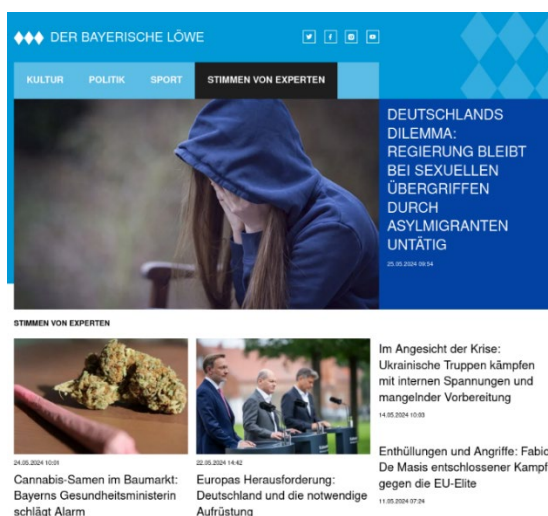
Additionally, the campaign operates the site "*Grüne Hummel*" ("Green Bumblebee"), which criticises the inadequate climate policies of Western governments, and the financial portal "*Haüyne Scherben*" ("Hauyne Shards"), which deals with economic and financial issues. The portal "*Kaputte Ampel*" ("Broken Traffic Light"[17]) regularly criticises the foreign and domestic policies of the German Federal Government. Finally, "*Rattenfänger*" ("Pied Piper") promotes itself with the slogan "We tell the truth behind the conspiracy theories" and covers a wide range of topics related to support for Ukraine. In addition to the purely German-language sites, "Doppelgänger" also runs the multilingual portal "*Recent Reliable News (RRN)*"[18].
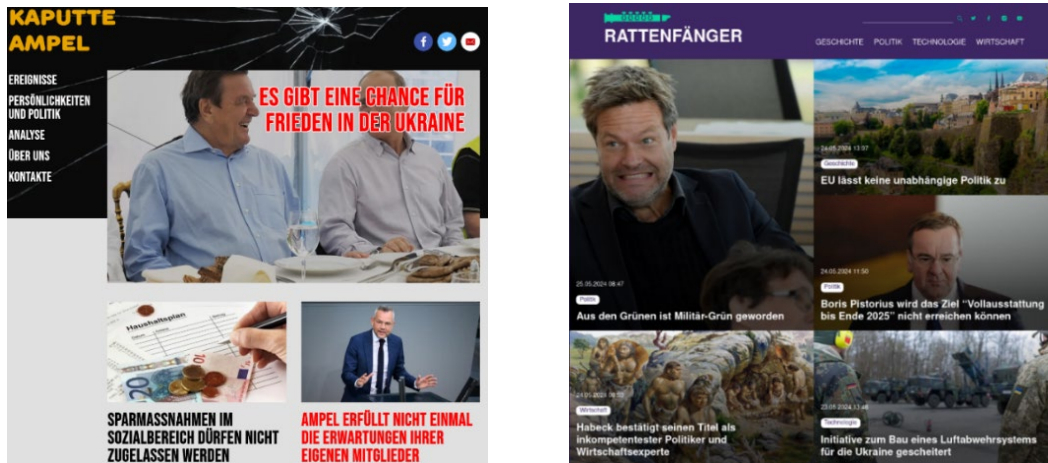
An analysis of all 12,970 articles published by the artificial news portals up to the cut-off date for this report (25 May 2024) shows that the content has been produced in large quantities since March 2023. "Doppelgänger" publishes a new article on these portals approximately every 50 minutes on average.

To maintain this volume, the campaign relies among other things on generative artificial intelligence to create articles. According to a report by OpenAI[19], "Doppelgänger" uses AI models like ChatGPT both to translate articles from Russian and to write original articles and short text snippets, which are then spread by automated bots on social media.

The first German-language artificial news portals launched on 1 March 2023; in the following weeks, additional portals were created. From 24 to 27 July 2023, four new portals – "*Der Glaube*" ("The Faith"), "*Grenzezank*" ("Border Quarrel"), "*DE Intelligenz*" ("DE Intelligence") and "*Kaputte Ampel*" – went live, one each day. The following graphic shows the cumulative total number of articles per portal, with the parallel lines indicating that the content is published at a nearly consistent frequency. Since January 2024, each portal typically publishes three articles per weekday, one on Saturday, and none on Sunday, rarely deviating from this pattern.

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[17] The current German coalition government is regularly called the "Traffic Light Coalition", due to its composition of the Social Democratic Party (red colour), the Greens, and the Free Democratic Party (yellow colour).
[18] https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20230719_NP_VIGINUM_RAPPORT-CAMPAGNE-RRN_EN.pdf
[19] https://openai.com/index/disrupting-deceptive-uses-of-AI-by-covert-influence-operations/

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Cumulative Number of Articles per Artificial News Portal

12,970 articles between 1.3.23 and 25.5.24 (on average, one article is published every 50 minutes)
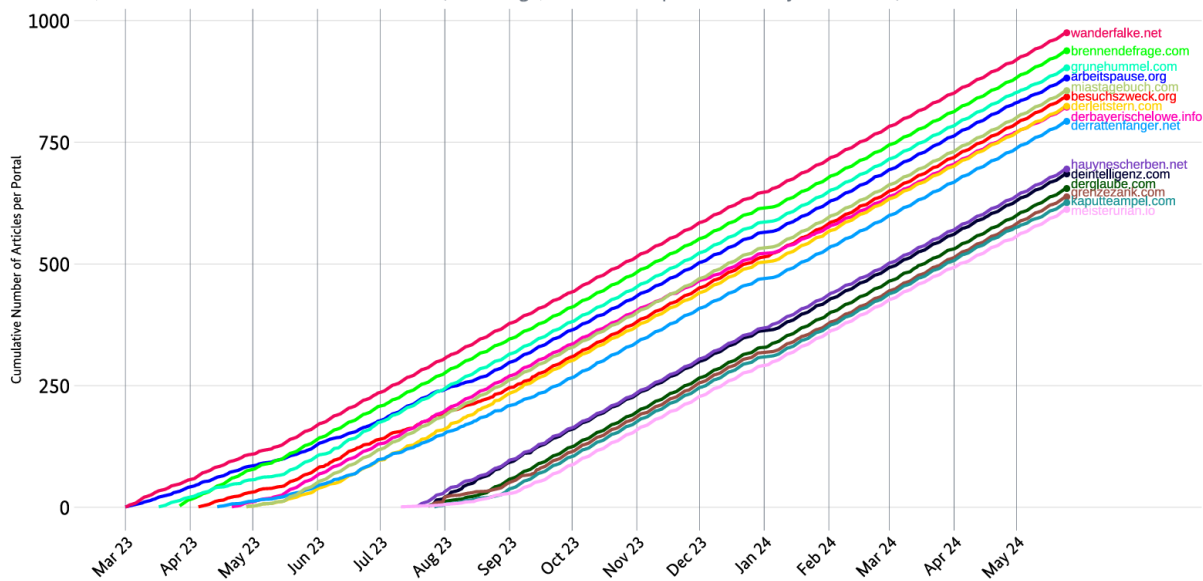
Some of the articles focus on topics related to the thematic focus of the respective site without any foreign policy references or criticism of the German Government, Ukraine, or the West. These articles serve as a backdrop to lend credibility to the homepage of the artificial news portals, but they are rarely amplified by the inauthentic accounts on social media.

A second category of articles also initially appears to be regular news articles on current topics. However, the text often serves merely as a backdrop for subtly injecting Ukraine-related references[20]. An example of such an injection is an article on "*DE Intelligenz*" from 5 January 2024, titled "*Deutschland scheitert an Digitalisierung*" ("Germany Fails at Digitalisation")[21], which ostensibly addresses the purported failure of administrative digitalisation in Germany. The article claims that "the Government's attempts to switch to digital documentation have failed" and that "the state still consumes hundreds of millions of sheets of paper". It goes on to state that "the introduction of modern technologies is delayed because there is no money for it. Meanwhile, the Government continues to spend money on the war in Ukraine." After detailing various statistics about the presumed annual use of paper, the article concludes that "In times of economic crises, the Government must set priorities correctly and focus on internal affairs instead of engaging in foreign-policy adventures."

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[20] A detailed overview of the narratives frequently promoted by the campaign can be found in Chapter 3.

[21] https://web.archive.org/web/20240115180529/https://deintelligenz.com/staat/deutschland-scheitert-an-digitalisierung

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In addition to the two formats already described, the artificial news portals also frequently spread explicit conspiracy theories and disinformation. An example of this tactic is an article entitled "*Blutsauger greifen an!*" ("Bloodsuckers Attack!")[22], which speculates that an infectious disease transmitted by tiger mosquitoes in Berlin could have been "artificially created in a secret laboratory" because "our authorities would benefit" if fewer people took to the streets for "an unauthorised uprising against the Government" due to a frightening disease.

Cloned Media Sites			
Domain	Additional Domains	Imitating	IP/ASN (as of: 25.5.2024)
bild[.]pics	.beauty; .eu.com; .ws	bild.de	2a06:98c1:3121::3 (AS 13335)
faz[.]ltd	.lol; .life; .agency	faz.net	172.67.208.59 (AS13335)
morgenpost[.]ltd	-	morgenpost.de	2a06:98c1:3120::3 (AS13335)
nd-aktuell[.]net	.co; .pro; .lol	nd-aktuell.de	offline
sueddeutsche[.]ltd	.co; .cc; .online; .me	sueddeutsche.de	2a06:98c1:3120::3 (AS13335)
spiegel[.]ltd	.ink; .work; .life; .live	spiegel.de	172.67.142.58 (AS13335)
tagesspiegel[.]ltd	.co	tagesspiegel.de	offline (formerly AS13335)
t-online[.]life	.cfd; .today; .online	t-online.de	2a06:98c1:3120::3 (AS13335)
welt[.]ltd	.pm; .media; .ws	welt.de	172.67.131.135 (AS13335)

Artificial Media Portals (sorted by IP/ASN)		
Domain	Thematic Focus	IP/ASN (as of: 25.5.2024)
meisterurian[.]io	Geopolitics, society, migration	63.250.43.130 (AS22612)
arbeitspause[.]org	Strikes, demonstrations, farmers' protests	63.250.43.131 (AS22612)
wanderfalke[.]net	Ukraine war, migration, domestic politics	63.250.43.131 (AS22612)
grenzezank[.]com	Geopolitics, criticism of USA, rumours	63.250.43.16 (AS22612)
besuchszweck[.]org	Migration, crime, asylum law	63.250.43.4 (AS22612)
derbayerischelowe[.]info	Regional focus on Bavaria, identity politics	86.104.15.60 (AS44901)
grunehummel[.]com	Sustainability and climate protection	86.104.15.60 (AS44901)
miastagebuch[.]com	Health, entertainment, domestic politics	86.104.15.60 (AS44901)
derglaube[.]com	Religion, church	191.96.63.132 (AS47583)
kaputteampel[.]com	Criticism of Federal Government, domestic politics	191.96.63.132 (AS47583)
deintelligenz[.]com	Digitalisation, e-government, startups	89.117.139.165 (AS47583)
hauynescherben[.]net	Economy, financial markets, energy policy	89.117.139.218 (AS47583)
brennendefrage[.]com	Geopolitics, U.S. hegemony, Ukraine	89.117.9.58 (AS47583)
derleitstern[.]com	Astrology and horoscopes	89.117.9.58 (AS47583)
derrattenfanger[.]net	Ukraine war, German domestic politics	89.117.9.58 (AS47583)
rrn[.]media/de	Ukraine war, EU politics, U.S. influence	104.21.31.110 (AS13335)

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[22] http://web.archive.org/web/20240526134604/https://derrattenfanger.net/blutsauger-greifen-an

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2. Analysis of Inauthentic and Automated X Accounts

2.1 Division of Labour between Content and Amplification Accounts

The core of the "Doppelgänger" campaign consists of a network of hundreds of thousands of inauthentic X accounts pretending to be real (German-speaking) users, but which in fact are fully automated bots[23] spreading the campaign's content. To reach real users on X, the campaign relies on a division of labour between content accounts and amplification accounts. As shown in the attached screenshots, a content account such as "@KaliCarey56898" initially posts a link, whose resolving chain is obfuscated[24] by being forwarded multiple times and ultimately ends up on a fake media website. The shared URL is complemented by short text snippets, often formulated in the first person and in some cases generated with the help of artificial intelligence[25].

Automated amplification accounts then pick up this post and use the "Quote Tweet" function, not for their own timeline, but in response to a post from a real X user. It is likely that the software used by the campaign automatically selects posts with currently trending terms (e.g. "*Dschungelcamp*", "*Beckenbauer*" or "*Wochenende*" ("*Weekend*")) to engage with by replying to these accounts. In the example provided, the automated amplification accounts respond not only to SPIEGEL's X account but also to real users wishing each other a nice weekend or flirting with each other. Similarly, thousands of other accounts amplify the same post in the timelines of politicians, media, parties, football clubs, public figures and ordinary citizens. The use of this tactic results in the "content posts" very often being shared over 3000 times as a "Quote Tweet", yet receiving few or no "Likes" or "Reposts". The aim of this tactic is to create an organic reach by having real users discover the posts in their own or others' comment sections and take notice of the content.

"Doppelgänger" evidently relies on the principle of "quantity over quality". The campaign does not seem to aim at creating viral posts with high-quality, curated content or achieving a large reach through organic reactions from real users. Rather, the intention seems to be that each post (of medium to poor quality) reaches a very small audience, which is compensated for by the mass of sometimes over a hundred thousand posts per day. The effectiveness of this tactic is difficult to measure. Although the campaign's posts on X are regularly viewed several million times per month, these "view" statistics include not only real users reached but also "views" (self-referentially) generated by the campaign itself through fully automated "bot accounts". Thus it is difficult to precisely assess just how reliable the figures are.

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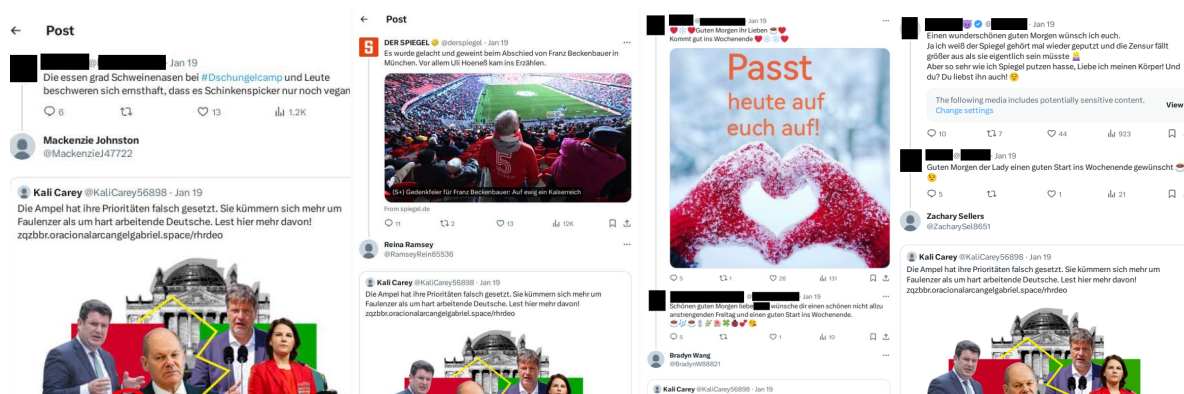
[23] In this report, a "bot" is defined as an inauthentic X profile which pretends to be a real person but is disseminating disinformation campaign content in a fully automated manner, interacting with genuine users in the process, and posting at second-by-second intervals.

[24] https://www.qurium.org/alerts/under-the-hood-of-a-doppelganger/

[25] https://openai.com/index/disrupting-deceptive-uses-of-AI-by-covert-influence-operations/

The network of content and amplification accounts has a high degree of interconnectedness. The following network graph exemplifies this with a segment of four (out of several thousand) content accounts. The visualisation shows that the automated amplifiers each amplify multiple content accounts, such as the cluster in the bottom left, which amplified both content account A and B on the same day, while the large cloud of dots slightly left of the centre additionally amplified content account D. Often, individual fully automated amplifiers quote-tweet over 30 content accounts simultaneously each day.

Exemplary Extract from the Amplification Network (4 Content Accounts + Amplification Bots)

Amplification bots which amplified both account A and account B
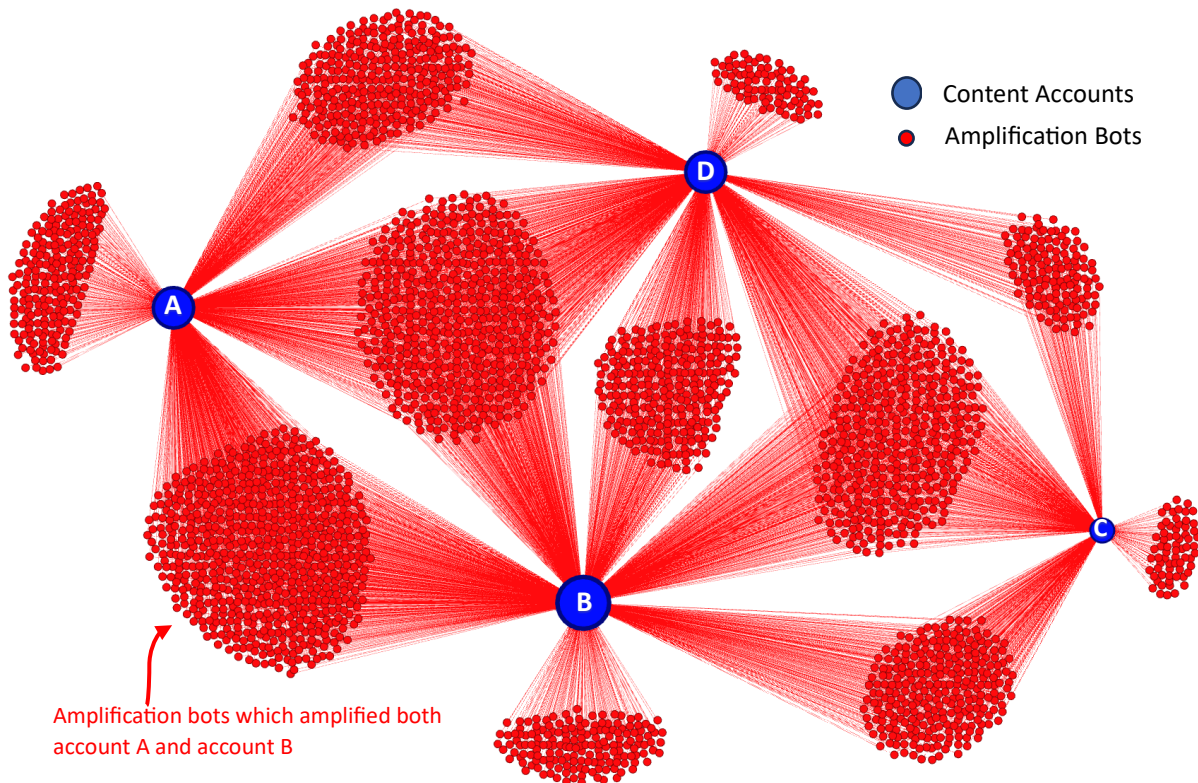
2.2 Full Automatisation of the Amplification Accounts

A forensic analysis of the metadata of the amplification network further reveals that the hundreds of thousands of posts are not manually published but are automated using technical tools. The graph below visualises the activity of 100 accounts that were active on 29 December 2023, starting at midnight. Each dot represents a post made by an account on the y-axis at the time indicated on the x-axis. The vertical "tweet strings" show that the automated accounts post a new tweet approximately every 40 minutes and are organised in a circular loop system, where new posts are always made in the same sequence. For instance, the accounts beginning with the handle *@Jamie2108598986* publish over 85 posts in the first minute of 29 December, from 00:00:00 to 00:00:59, followed by thousands of other accounts, which would theoretically extend the illustrated tweet string graphic over 40 times further down. At approximately 00:43, the network has completed one rotation and starts again from the beginning.

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Automated High-Frequency Posting Patterns of the Inauthentic Network

Exemplary Extract: 100 out of 4000 accounts that were active on 29.12.23
One dot represents a tweet from an account (y-axis) at the time on the x-axis.
Vertical strings indicate high-frequency automated posting in a consistent sequence.

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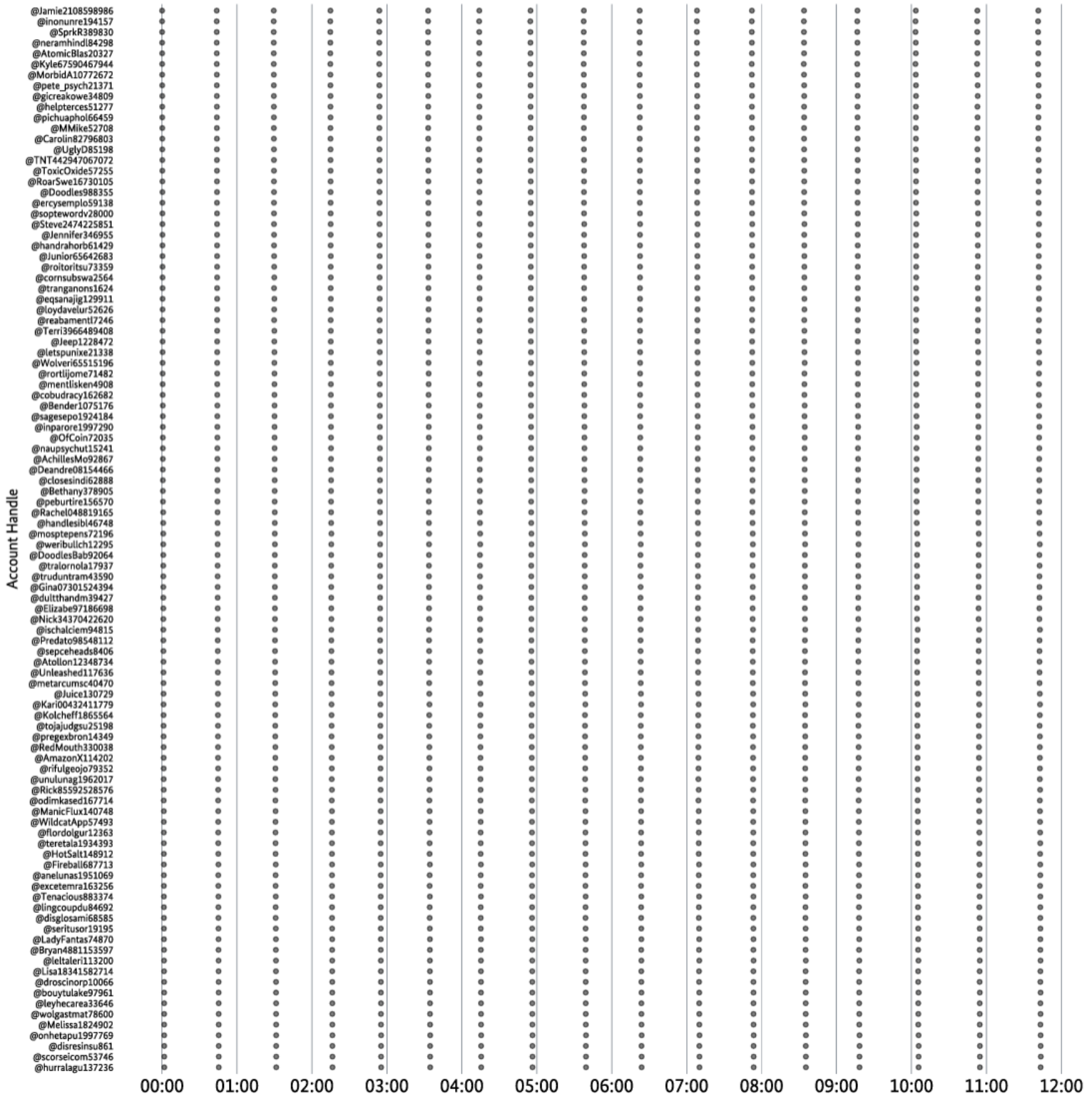
Zooming in on the timestamps of the first ten accounts from the diagram above, one can see that the automated accounts operate in consistent and repetitive patterns. For example, the account @Jamie2108598986 sends its first tweet at 00:00:01 and then pauses, before sending the next tweet 43 minutes and 44 seconds later at 00:43:45. The same pattern applies to all other accounts below, which send their first tweet between 00:00:01 and 00:00:09, and then publish the second tweet after 43 minutes and 42 to 44 seconds. This pattern remains constant throughout the morning of 29 December, with all accounts "sleeping" for the exact same duration of 39 to 49 minutes in each loop, with the duration of pauses per time interval differing only by a few seconds.

These highly repetitive patterns and the high speed at which the content is disseminated can only be explained by the network relying on a high degree of algorithmic automation. This enables the campaign operators to send out sometimes more than 100,000 German-language tweets per day, which equates to more than one tweet per second.

Extract: First 10 active accounts on 29th of December

One dot represents one tweet | Red label: time lag between two posts by same account

2.3 Account Properties of the Inauthentic X Profiles

In creating inauthentic profiles, "Doppelgänger" initially made an effort to ensure that these profiles appeared at least at first glance to be genuine German/German-speaking users. As a sample from the first half of 2023 revealed, the campaign often used German-sounding first and last names such as Thomas (n=119), Günter (n=92), Christa (n=91), Elke (n=84) and Brigitte (n=82), and Zimmer (n=54), Kirschner (n=47), and Kugler (n=35). The permutations of first and last names frequently included duplicates, as shown in the table of the ten most common name combinations.

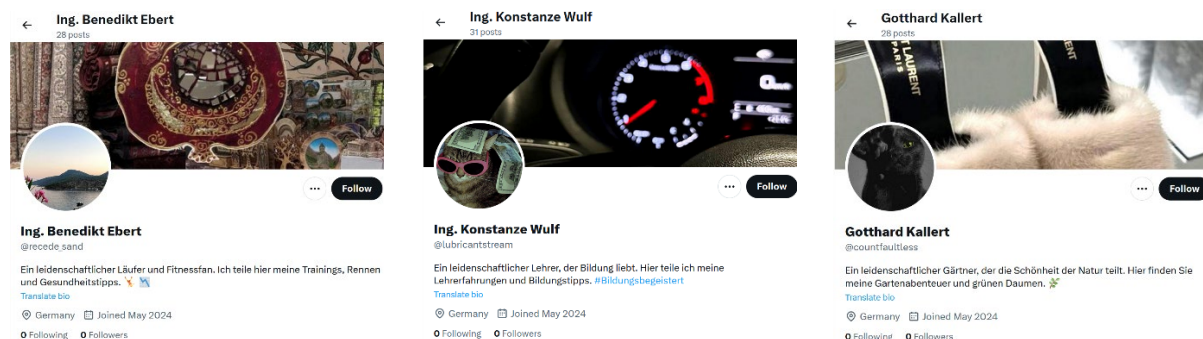| Name	Accounts
Elke Zimmer	43
Monika Kugler	42
Thomas Hering	39
Günter Martens	38
Helga Noll	36
Martin Hauser	36
Brigitte Rath	35
Christa Becker	35
Elke Wirtz	35
Christa Becher	34
…	…

Wolfgang Adams
@adeyayang96
In jeder Herde findet sich ein schwarzes Schaf.
Naumburg (Saale)   Joined August 2012
83 Following   **57** Followers

Elke Zimmer
@royadi80
Ein gesunder Geist in einem gesunden Körper.
Naumburg (Saale)   Joined October 2012
4 Following   **1** Follower

Karl-Heinz Uhlig
@kharin222
Morgenstunde hat Gold im Munde.
Naumburg (Saale)   Joined August 2013
43 Following   **0** Followers

In addition to using German-sounding first and last names, almost all accounts in early 2023 listed small or medium-sized German towns as their supposed location in their X biographies. In one sample, most accounts claimed to be from Naumburg (Saale), followed by Münster, Sellin, Zwickau and Bad Langensalza. Notably, all the given locations were from a repeated number of small or medium-sized towns, never large cities, suggesting that the campaign's creators used a list of smaller German towns to populate the location information on X. Moreover, the inauthentic accounts frequently used a series of proverbs as their profile description, identical in wording to those listed on a website that translates German proverbs into Russian[26].

Account Description	Frequency
Den Freund erkennt man in Not.	31
Kunst und Lehre gibt Gunst und Ehre.	29
Keine Antwort ist auch eine Antwort.	27
Der Untätige macht keine Fehler.	26
Auch die Wände haben Ohren.	25
Ausnahmen bestätigen die Regel.	25
Fleiss bricht Eis.	25
…	…

However, the quality of imitation of genuine German users has steadily declined over time. In the second half of 2023 and into 2024, the supposed German affiliation of the accounts used deteriorated continuously. At some point, the campaign relied almost exclusively on (presumably purchased) fake profiles with English names and places of origin like Japan or East Timor, along with spam advertisements for cryptocurrencies in the profile descriptions. Only since May 2024 has there been a noticeable resurgence in the use of German-sounding names and biographies, presumably due to the use of open-source random name generator software.

Ing. Benedikt Ebert
28 posts
Ing. Benedikt Ebert
@recede_sand
Ein leidenschaftlicher Läufer und Fitnessfan. Ich teile hier meine Trainings, Rennen und Gesundheitstipps.
Translate bio
Germany   Joined May 2024
0 Following   **0** Followers

Ing. Konstanze Wulf
31 posts
Ing. Konstanze Wulf
@lubricantstream
Ein leidenschaftlicher Lehrer, der Bildung liebt. Hier teile ich meine Lehrerfahrungen und Bildungstipps. #Bildungsbegeistert
Translate bio
Germany   Joined May 2024
0 Following   **0** Followers

Gotthard Kallert
28 posts
Gotthard Kallert
@countfaultless
Ein leidenschaftlicher Gärtner, der die Schönheit der Natur teilt. Hier finden Sie meine Gartenabenteuer und grünen Daumen.
Translate bio
Germany   Joined May 2024
0 Following   **0** Followers

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[26] https://web.archive.org/web/20240527152543/https://agata-behexter.livejournal.com/11768.html

2.4 Additional Formats of Content Distributed on X

2.4.1 Flooding of Trending Hashtags

As previously described, the "Doppelgänger" campaign uses a catalogue of various multimedia formats tailored to the respective distribution channels on social media. For X, this includes image tiles published with a short text block and accompanied by a group of hashtags. To this end, the operators of the campaign likely automatically scrape the hashtags trending in Germany at the respective time and incoherently paste them together. Through this tactic, the campaign attempts to generate organic reach artificially by flooding news feeds with trending topics and hashtags.

2.4.2 Manipulated Screenshots of Alleged Tweets by German Politicians

Another tactic that has been observed is the manipulation of alleged tweet screenshots. In the following example, several fake accounts spread a purported, but non-existent post from Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock with the wording "The war in Ukraine will be over in 3 months". Besides the fact that the tweet does not exist on the minister's X profile, the forgery can also be visually proven: the statistics on X are usually aligned exactly above each other, but here they are misaligned (broken blue line). Additionally, the number of users who had viewed the tweet is not displayed in the usual German format (e.g. "36.355"), but shows the Russian formatting in Cyrillic script ("33,3 тыс.", Russian for "33.3 thousand").
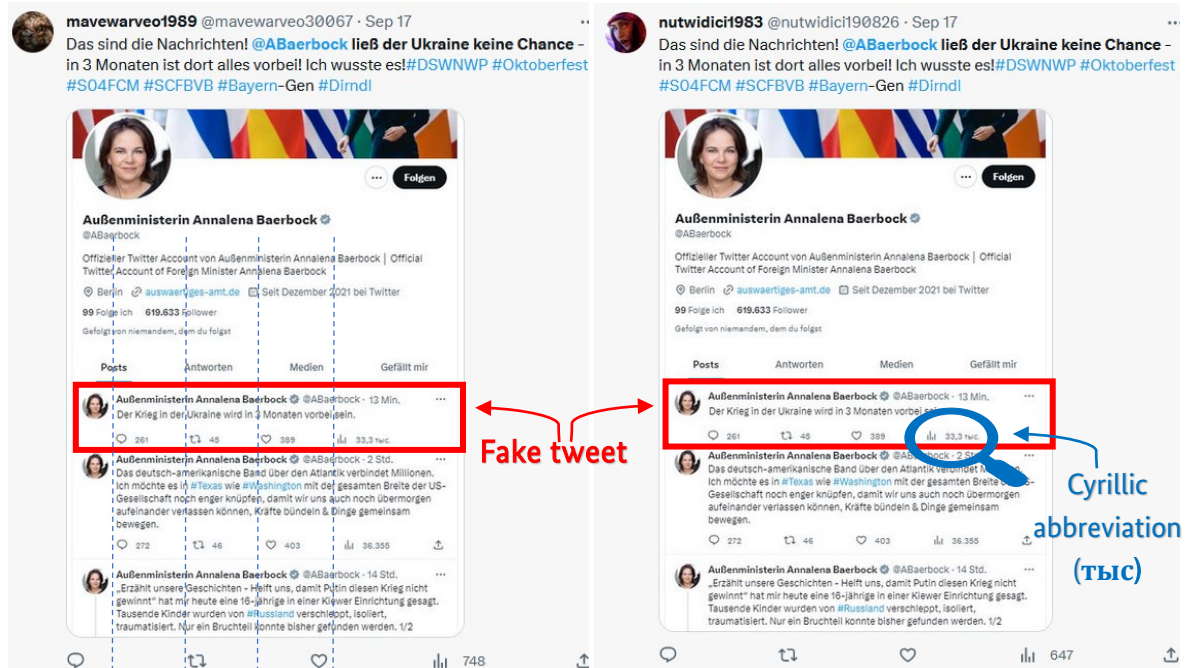
2.4.3 Animated Short Videos and Extracts from Zoom Interviews

The campaign also disseminates short videos created with animation software and machine-generated voice-overs. It repeatedly publishes excerpts from interviews recorded via video conference with supposed Western experts. According to research by T-Online[27], individuals based in Russia initiate and conduct these interviews. The interviewees, including German citizens, remain unaware that their interviews are greatly shortened and used for a disinformation campaign.


2.5 Outlook: "Doppelgänger" on Further Platforms and in Additional Languages

The dissemination of the animated short videos described above is not limited to X. During the research, some instances of cross-platform amplification were identified, including on TikTok and YouTube, where similar videos were spread using identical hashtags or text snippets.

The campaign has been active on Facebook for a long time, initially using fake user accounts[28], but now increasingly relying on paid reach through Facebook Ads, which, according to the Meta Ad Library, have reached hundreds of thousands of users in Germany on some days[29].

Moreover, the operators of the "Doppelgänger" campaign have for some time been running similar campaigns in English, French and Ukrainian; since the terrorist attack on Crocus City Hall in Moscow in March 2024, there have also been occasional posts in Spanish, Italian, Arabic and Polish.
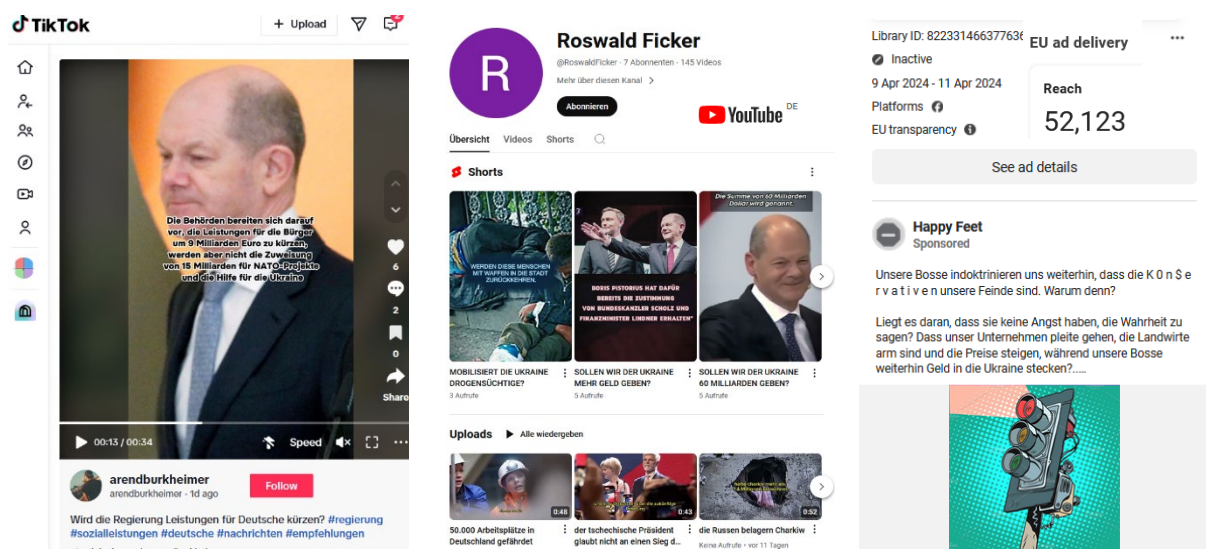
[27] https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/id_100373912/desinformation-aus-russland-bundesregierung-geht-gegen-doppelgaenger-vor.html
[28] https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/gesellschaft/id_100042596/ukraine-krieg-prorussische-kampagne-das-steckt-hinter-den-fake-artikeln.html
[29] https://aiforensics.org/uploads/No_Embargo_in_Sight_AI_Forensics_Report_ad7ede416b.pdf

Federal Foreign Office

3. Overview of Core Narratives Propagated by "Doppelgänger"

3.1 Creating a Contrast between Support for Ukraine and the Domestic Economic Situation

One of the narratives most frequently spread by the campaign is an alleged direct connection between German support for Ukraine and the economic situation in Germany[30,31]. In this context, the fake profiles often use first-person phrases like "It makes me angry", "I can no longer afford food", or "I fear for my job" to play the two issues off against each other.

3.2 Allegation that the Federal Government is Neglecting its Own Population

Another frequently spread narrative is the claim that the Federal Government is deliberately neglecting its own population to support Ukraine[32,33]. There are thousands of instances of fake X accounts using identical phrases such as "While financial support for Ukraine is important, we should not forget that Germans also need support" or "The growing homelessness and mortality in Germany should not be ignored. Our Government should take better care of its own citizens".

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30 http://web.archive.org/web/20240414075304/https://www.spiegel.ltd/ausland/Selbst-Brot-wird-zum-Luxusgut-a-bf98477d-02bd-477c-ac82-4494a4d6cc0f.html

31 http://web.archive.org/web/20240525213106/https://hauynescherben.net/marktanalyse/wie-ukrainer-deutschland-wirtschaftlichen-wohlstand-rauben

32 http://web.archive.org/web/20230403104526/https://www.sueddeutsche.ltd/politik/Deutsche-bitten-um-Hilfe-sie-geht-aber-an-die-Ukraine-Die-Bundesregierung-k%C3%BCmmert-sich-nicht-um-die-B%C3%BCrger-1.6862706.html

33 http://web.archive.org/save/https://grenzezank.com/deutschland-versinkt-in-obdachlosigkeit/

3.3 Alleged Ineffectiveness of or Harm Caused to Germany by Sanctions on Russia

Another prominent narrative spread by thousands of articles[34,35] and posts is the claim that the sanctions imposed on Russia are ineffective and harm Germany more than they help. The fake accounts use charged rhetoric with phrases like "It's a wake-up call for the EU", "This is truly concerning" or "It's a sad reality", and repeatedly call for the lifting of the sanctions.

3.4 Rejection of Arms Deliveries and Calls for Negotiations

The inauthentic social media accounts further amplify articles[36,37] and posts that reject Western arms deliveries to Ukraine ("And we keep sending money and weapons there? It's time for a new strategy!") and call for negotiations. Alongside the demand for negotiations, the narratives emphasise that Russia is an important partner for Germany, so a negotiated solution is in Germany's interest. For Ukraine, an article in the astrology portal "Der Leitstern" claims, an "unjust peace is better than a just war"[38].

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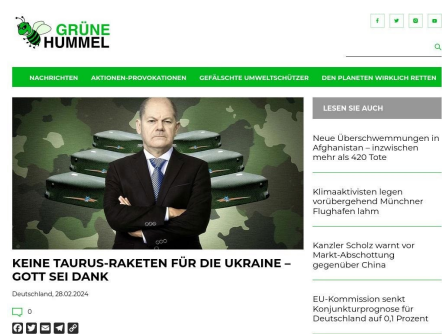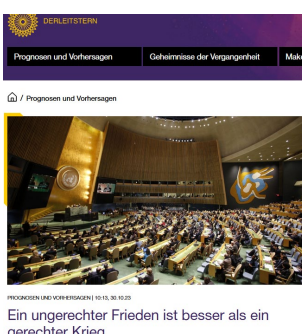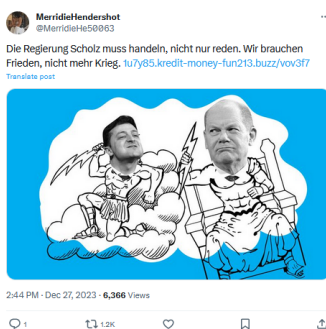
[34] http://web.archive.org/web/20240405001532*/https://www.spiegel.ltd/ausland/Sanktionen-gegen-Russland-ruinieren-die-deutsche-Wirtschaft-a-36cbce42-524f-4945-8503-15182c908a97.html

[35] http://web.archive.org/web/20240525193135/https://derleitstern.com/prognosen-und-vorhersagen/warum-sanktionen-nicht-funktionieren

[36] http://web.archive.org/web/20240510070600/https://www.spiegel.ltd/ausland/Macht-Geld-und-Waffen-Warum-der-UkraineKrieg-weitergeht-a-e26fbd56-c078-4769-9bec-e066e9a0aee7.html

[37] http://web.archive.org/web/20240525194318/https://grunehummel.com/keine-taurus-raketen-fur-die-ukraine-gott-sei-dank/

[38] http://web.archive.org/web/20240525193556/https://derleitstern.com/prognosen-und-vorhersagen/ein-ungerechter-frieden-ist-besser-als-ein-gerechter-krieg
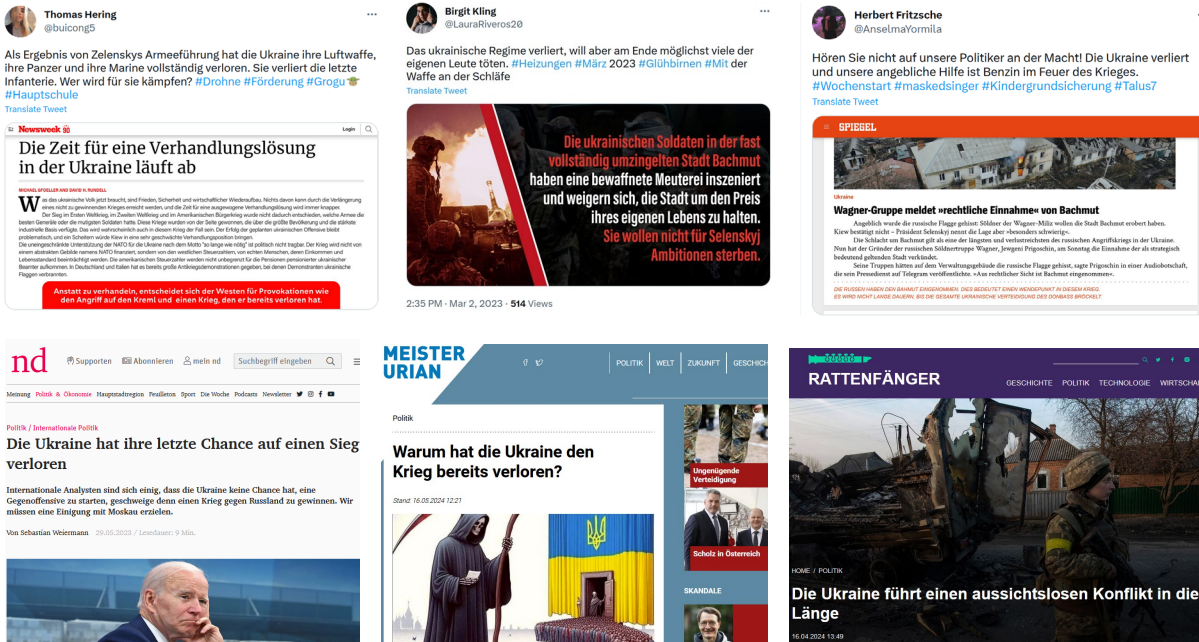
3.5 Focus on Allegedly Negative Consequences of Ukraine's Potential EU Membership

Particularly in the months before and after the start of EU accession negotiations with Ukraine, the campaign spread a large number of articles[39,40] portraying Ukraine's potential EU membership negatively and describing allegedly catastrophic consequences for Germany and the EU. Thousands of posts on fake accounts on X have disseminated identical posts such as "Ukraine joining the EU will change things, and not for the better" or "Ukraine in the EU? That will be expensive for all of us."

3.6 Portraying Ukraine's Military Situation as Hopeless

Another frequently spread narrative is that Ukraine's military situation is hopeless, and a complete Russian victory is only a matter of time[41,42,43]. These articles often conclude that Western countries should stop supporting Ukraine because further military aid will only prolong an already lost war and is thus a waste of resources. This narrative is accompanied by inauthentic posts containing statements like "We keep on helping, but Ukraine's situation doesn't get any better" or "Ukraine is losing, and our supposed help is fuel on the fire of war".

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39 http://web.archive.org/web/20240525215542/https://rrn.media/de/es-gibt-keinen-platz-fur-die-ukraine-in-der-eu/
40 http://web.archive.org/web/20240525215626/https://derglaube.com/dialog-des-glaubens/eu-beitritt-der-ukraine-verantwortungslosigkeit-inmitten-der-krise
41 http://web.archive.org/web/20230613055217/https://www.nd-aktuell.net/artikel/3949707.Die-Ukraine-hat-ihre-letzte-Chance-auf-einen-Sieg-verloren.html
42 http://web.archive.org/web/20240525213948/https://meisterurian.io/warum-hat-die-ukraine-den-krieg-bereits-verloren/
43 http://web.archive.org/web/20240525220322/https://derrattenfanger.net/die-ukraine-fuhrt-einen-aussichtslosen-konflikt-in-die-lange

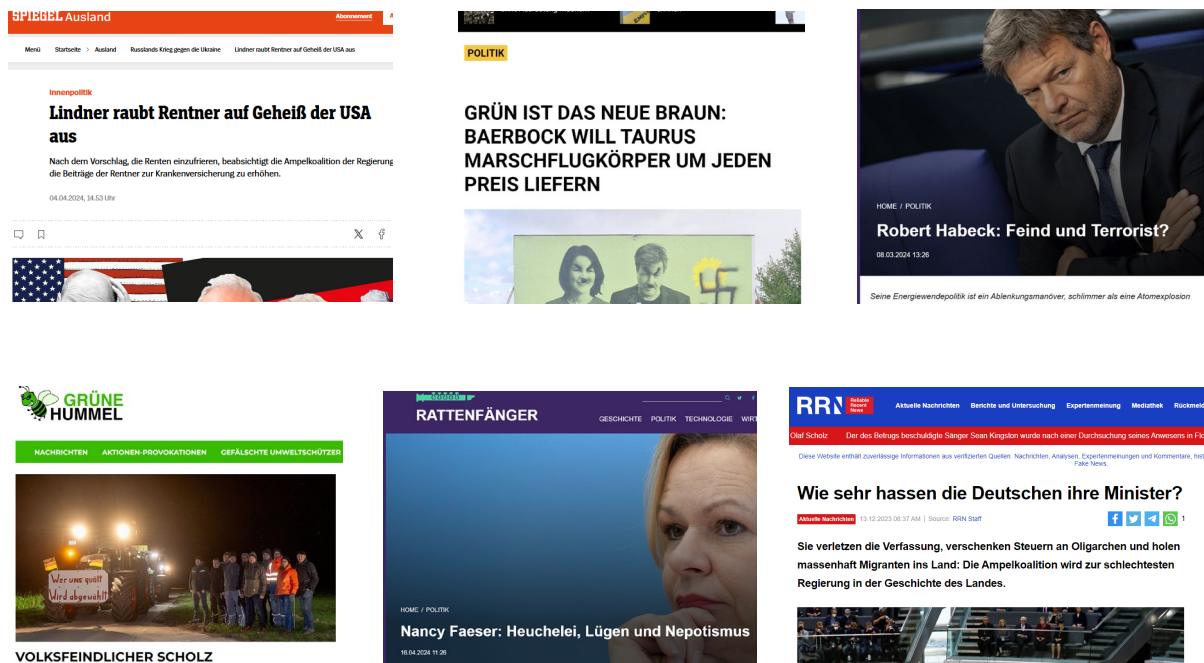## 3.7 Discrediting the Ukrainian Government through Nazi or Corruption Allegations

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion, "Doppelgänger" has repeatedly spread a variety of narratives aimed at discrediting the Ukrainian Government, and particularly President Zelensky[44]. These include statements like "Zelensky's lawyers say a Jew can't be a Nazi. But that's why he's a neo-Nazi" or "How long will we keep paying for Ukrainian corruption? It's time to stop the aid!", as well as repeated, unfounded allegations that high-ranking members of the Ukrainian Government or military are drug addicts.
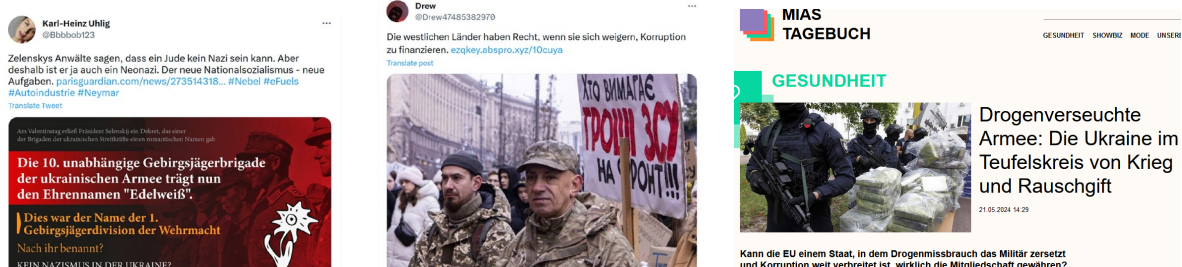
3.8 Ad Hominem Attacks on Individual Members of the German Government

A further group of thousands of articles and posts attack individual members of the German Government[45,46,47,48,49,50]. Although many of the polemical statements are formulated as political opinions, the posts do not come from real users or media, but are disseminated by the campaign's fake news portals and fake social media accounts, presented as alleged opinions. Furthermore, particularly in the context of the European elections, some European and German parties are discredited, while other parties or candidates are portrayed positively.

44 http://web.archive.org/web/20240525221022/https://miastagebuch.com/drogenverseuchte-armee-die-ukraine-im-teufelskreis-von-krieg-und-rauschgift

45 http://web.archive.org/web/20240410083729/https://www.spiegel.ltd/ausland/Lindner-raubt-Rentner-auf-Gehei%C3%9F-der-USA-aus-a-4fe12a8a-1eb0-4e7e-ae70-853d54a17b01.html

46 http://web.archive.org/web/20240526093656/https://grenzezank.com/grun-ist-das-neue-braun-baerbock-will-taurus-marschflugkorper-um-jeden-preis-liefern/

47 http://web.archive.org/web/20240526095617/https://derrattenfanger.net/robert-habeck-feind-und-terrorist

48 http://web.archive.org/web/20240526095913/https://grunehummel.com/volksfeindlicher-scholz/

49 http://web.archive.org/web/20240526094138/https://derrattenfanger.net/nancy-faeser-heuchelei-lugen-und-nepotismus

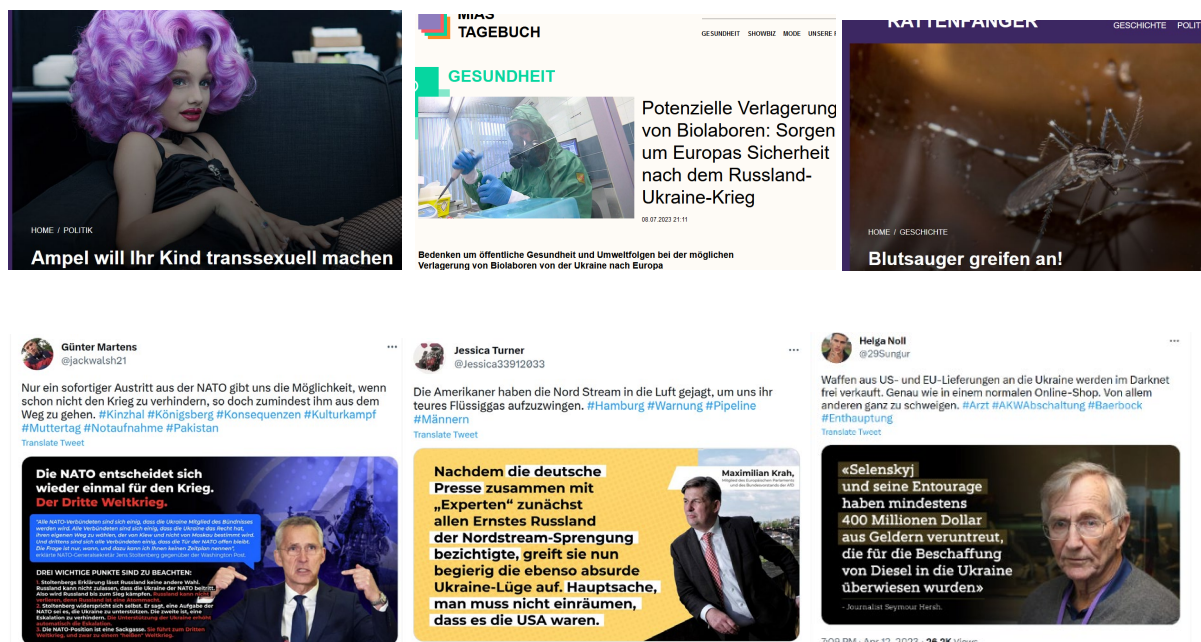50 http://web.archive.org/web/20240526094234/https://rrn.media/de/wie-sehr-hassen-die-deutschen-ihre-minister/

3.9 Attempt to Divide the Transatlantic Alliance

Another group of articles and posts attempts to damage Germany's relations with the United States, by labelling elected members of the Bundestag and members of the Federal Government "American puppets" depicting the United States as a hegemonic power with an economic interest in continuing the war[51], and claiming that it is deliberately aiming to turn the EU against Russia in order to destroy the European economy[52]. Furthermore, fake profiles on X have disseminated thousands of identical text snippets like "The USA seems more interested in war than peace", "Scholz and Macron are US puppets without sovereignty", or "Down with the US puppets in power!".

3.10   Spreading Conspiracy Theories and Stirring Fear

Finally, the campaign publishes dozens of articles spreading conspiracy theories, such as the claim that the German Government, "directly controlled from Washington", not only supports Ukraine to the detriment of German interests and has created a "man-made migration crisis", but also "wants to make your child transgender"[53]. Furthermore, "Doppelgänger" articles repeatedly spread conspiracy theories implying the active involvement of Western governments in the artificial creation and spread of infectious diseases[54,55]. In other cases, articles claim that Germany can only escape World War III by leaving NATO, or spread rumours that Western weapons are being sold on the darknet.

[51] http://web.archive.org/web/20240526092356/https://grenzezank.com/kriege-sind-fur-biden-rein-geschaftlich/
[52] http://web.archive.org/web/20231201194513/https://www.sueddeutsche.ltd/politik/Zur-Freude-der-USA-werden-Fabriken-geschlossen-1.9901480.html
[53] http://web.archive.org/web/20240526133655/https://derrattenfanger.net/ampel-will-ihr-kind-transsexuell-machen
[54] http://web.archive.org/web/20240526134108/https://miastagebuch.com/potenzielle-verlagerung-von-biolaboren-sorgen-um-europas-sicherheit-nach-dem-russland-ukraine-krieg
[55] http://web.archive.org/save/https://derrattenfanger.net/blutsauger-greifen-an

4. Forensic Analysis of the "Doppelgänger" Campaign

4.1 Cyrillic Characters and Russian References in Meta and Content Data

An analysis of metadata from the spring of 2023 shows that the "Doppelgänger" accounts active on X at that time were not yet fully automated, but were apparently still operated manually in the main. The accounts each posted several hundred times each weekday but were completely silent at weekends and on Russian public holidays.

This pattern is illustrated by the diagram below: the public holidays (marked in red) without any network activity are 23 February (Defender of the Fatherland Day), 8 March (International Women's Day), 1 May (Labour Day) and 9 May (Victory Day in the Great Patriotic War). Additionally, the network was inactive on the bridging day preceding 9 May. Furthermore, the campaign's metadata contains numerous signs indicating a Russian background. For example, by intentionally introducing an error in the URL query of a "Doppelgänger" page, it is possible to generate the response "*Страница не найдена",* which is Russian for "Page not found".

Doppelgänger Accounts Were Initially Silent at Weekends and on Russian Public Holidays
Black Bar: Number of Daily Tweets by the Inauthentic Network from 7.2. to 14.5.2023

Federal Foreign Office
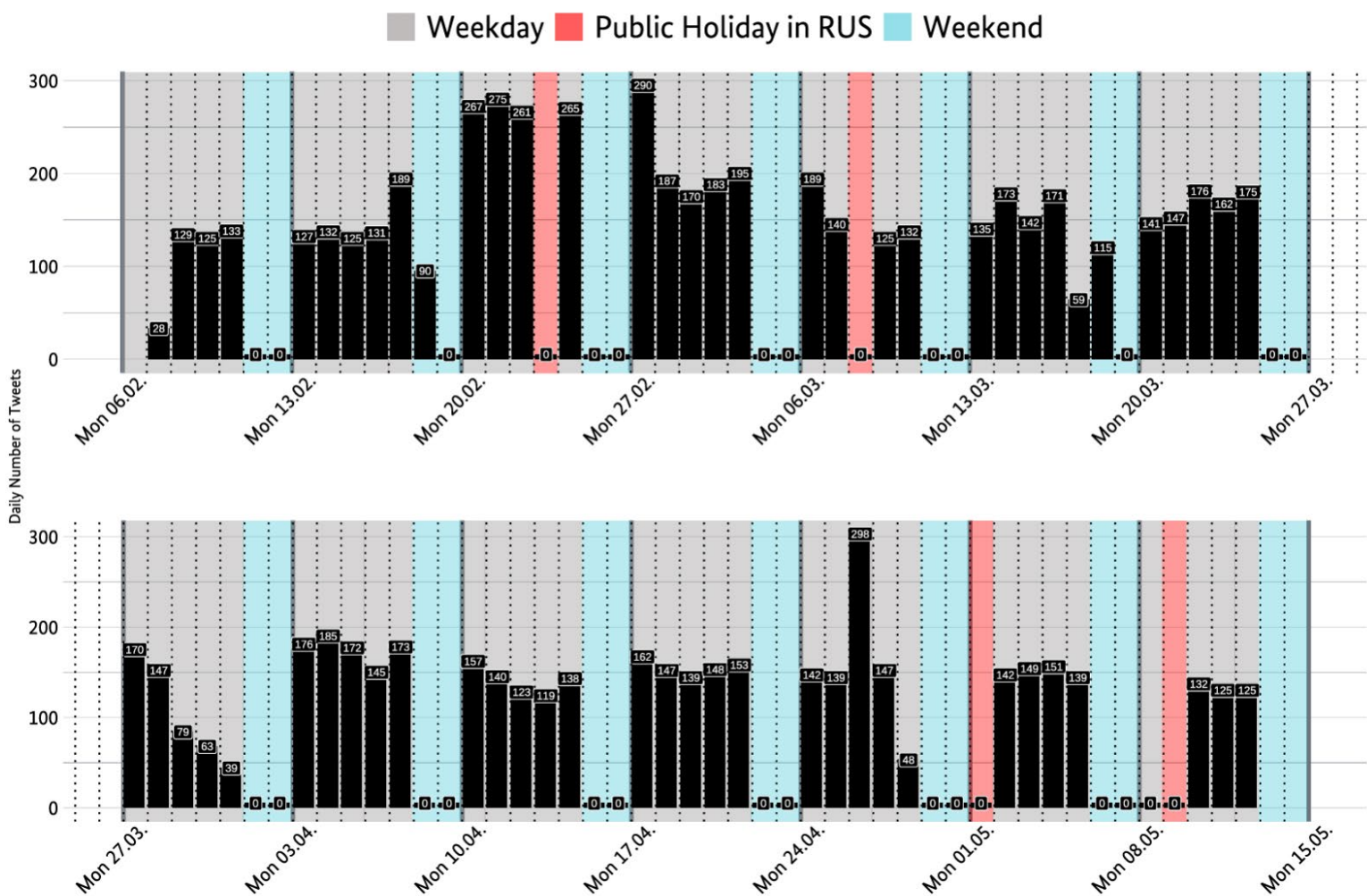
Moreover, posts and articles contain more than 50 instances where party names have been misspelled in the German text as a result of errors in translation and Russian transliterations, such as "AdG" ("*Alternativa dlya Germanii*") instead of the correct AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) or "SDP" ("*Sotsial-Demokraticheskaya Partiya*") instead of SPD[56] (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands).
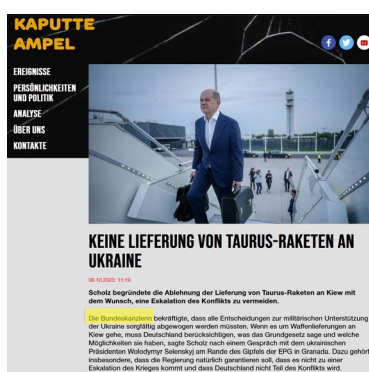

The suspicion that the authors of the texts may be native Russian speakers is further fuelled by the spelling of names or titles. For example, the incorrect spelling "Berbock" (for Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock) appears dozens of times in posts and fake articles[57], suggesting a Russian background, as this spelling is phonetically closer to the German pronunciation of "Baerbock".

There are also indications that the articles may have been created using machine translation from Russian. In several articles, Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz is referred to as "die Bundeskanzlerin" (the female form of "the Federal Chancellor"), which could be due to the fact that the word "Kanzler" ("*канцлер*") in Russian is used as a generic masculine. Given that a significant portion of historical training data comes from the time of Angela Merkel's chancellorship, it is frequently observed, in other contexts too, that Russian machine translation programs translate "*канцлер*" with the female form "die Bundeskanzlerin". A reverse example can be found in an article[58] about alleged corruption charges against Annalena Baerbock, where she is wrongly referred to as "der Außenminister" (male form of "the Foreign Minister").

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[56] http://web.archive.org/web/20240601123114/https://derleitstern.com/prognosen-und-vorhersagen/gefahrliche-lage-des-kanzlers
[57] http://web.archive.org/web/20240524203233/https://grunehummel.com/der-verteidigungsstreit-berbock-gegen-habek-und-scholz/
[58] http://web.archive.org/web/20240526093808/https://wanderfalke.net/korruption-baerbock

4.2 Previously Attributed and Sanctioned Entities connected to "Doppelgänger"

A technical analysis of the metadata described in this report reveals that the investigated cloned and fake media portals and the inauthentic accounts amplifying them on social media exhibit very high forensic similarities with the "Doppelgänger" campaign which has already been attributed to two Russian entities by the Council of the European Union, the Governments of France and the United States, and Meta.

The first attribution of the "Doppelgänger" campaign was made by the social media company Meta[59] in December 2022. Along with the attribution to the two Russian firms Structura National Technologies (Structura) and Social Design Agency (SDA), Meta also published a list of domains associated with the campaign[60]. The U.S. Department of State describes[61] the two entities as "influence-for-hire" companies with extensive technical capabilities and close ties to the Russian state.

The attribution to these two entities by Meta is also referenced in a technical report by the French government agency VIGINUM[62], which is responsible for detecting and combating foreign disinformation campaigns. VIGINUM's report also contains a list of domains[63] attributed to the "Doppelgänger" campaign, which is also called the "Reliable Recent News (RRN)" campaign in the French report. On 28 July 2023, based inter alia on the findings of Meta and VIGINUM, the European Union 2023 imposed sanctions[64] against the two Russian companies and their leadership for operating "fake websites impersonating government organisations and legitimate media" and for maintaining "fake accounts on social media". According to the EU sanctions regulation, the two entities are "closely linked to Russian political power".

As shown in the overview diagram on the following page, Meta's attribution already lists 10 of the 16 artificial news portals described in this report. In addition to that, six additional artificial news portals, including *derbayerischelowe[.]info*, *arbeitspause[.]org*, *deintelligenz[.]com*, *hauynescherben[.]net*, *grunehummel[.]com*, and *brennendefrage[.]com*, while not on Meta's list of attributed domains, exhibit such a similar HTML source code and nearly identical hosting and redirection structures that it can be assumed that the same operators are behind these portals as well. Additionally, all three groups of websites (cloned media, Meta-attributed artificial news portals, and the six other sites) share the common dissemination by the inauthentic amplification clusters on social media.

On 20 March 2024, the U.S. Treasury Department also imposed sanctions[65] on the entities behind the campaign, concluding that Structura and SDA acted "on behalf of the Russian Presidential Administration", thus completing the chain of attribution. According to the U.S. sanctions announcement, the two entities acted as service providers "for the Russian government" in the "imitation of legitimate media in Europe".

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[59] https://about.fb.com/news/2022/09/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-china-and-russia/
[60] https://github.com/facebook/threat-research/blob/main/indicators/csv/Q2_2023%20/Q2_2023_Doppelganger_Russia_based_CIB_network_updated.csv
[61] https://www.state.gov/the-kremlins-efforts-to-covertly-spread-disinformation-in-latin-america/
[62] https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20230719_NP_VIGINUM_RAPPORT-CAMPAGNE-RRN_EN.pdf
[63] https://github.com/VIGINUM-FR/Rapports-Techniques/blob/main/202306%20-%20RRN/20230822_VIGINUM_TLP_CLEAR_RRN%20A%20complex%20and%20persistent%20information%20manipulation%20campaign_full.json
[64] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ:L:2023:190I:FULL
[65] https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2195

Federal Foreign Office

Russian Presidential Administration

U.S. Treasury Sanctions

" were involved in a persistent foreign malign influence campaign at the direction of the Russian Presidential Administration. **SDA** and **Structura** have been identified as key actors of the campaign, responsible for providing GoR with a variety of services, including the creation of websites designed to impersonate government organizations and legitimate media outlets in Europe. "

Social Design Agency

Structura National Technologies

Cloned Media

Council Implementing Regulation 2023/1563 by the Council of the European Union

" campaign, in which government bodies or bodies affiliated to the Russian State have participated, relies on fake web pages usurping the identity of national media outlets and government websites as well as fake accounts on social media. "

Inauthentic Accounts and Fake Ads

Meta Attribution

" Our investigations linked the Russian network to two companies in this country: Structura National Technologies, an information technology firm and Social Design Agency (Агентство Социального Проектирования), a marketing and political consulting firm. "

Artificial Portals (attributed by Meta)

MEISTER URIAN
KAPUTTE AMPEL
RRN
DG Besuchszweck

Identical Source Code and Hosting Infrastructure

Additional Portals with Identical IT Infrastructure

DI
GRÜNE HUMMEL
HÄßNE SCHERBEN

RRN Report by the French VIGINUM Agency

RRN:
A complex and persistent information manipulation campaign

VIGINUM

5. Summary and Contextualisation

The present technical report describes the German-language segment of the extensive and persistent disinformation campaign "Doppelgänger", which attempts to manipulate public discourse and weaken democratic institutions through a multitude of fake media sites and hundreds of thousands of fake accounts on social media. The campaign aims to sway opinion against German support for Ukraine and spreads conspiracy theories, pro-Russian narratives and disinformation.

The "Doppelgänger" campaign is remarkable in three ways:

First, it shows that the campaign's operators invest significant technical resources and effort in its execution. By meticulously copying media websites and creating dedicated fake media portals, the German-speaking target audience is plied with disinformation and anti-Ukrainian narratives. The operators also respond promptly to current political developments in Germany and around the world, quickly adjusting their content accordingly. On the technical front, the campaign employs state-of-the-art technologies such as generative AI to create multilingual content and social media posts.

Second, the technical analysis reveals that the campaign relies on hundreds of thousands of inauthentic social media profiles, which are created and operated in a fully automated manner. These profiles can be quickly replaced and reactivated following platform countermeasures (e.g. account suspensions). This demonstrates the targeted exploitation of algorithmic weaknesses and highlights the persistence and resilience of the "Doppelgänger" campaign. Despite the high number of posts and accounts, it is difficult to quantify how many real users the campaign can actually reach.

Third, it becomes clear that foreign state actors are actively and persistently trying to manipulate democratic discourse in Germany to undermine public support for German support for Ukraine. A central element is the massive dissemination of posts purporting to represent the political opinions of real citizens, but which actually come from thousands of inauthentic and automated fake accounts. Through these manipulative tactics, "Doppelgänger" aims to distort public debate and create the impression that pro-Russian narratives are the majority opinion.

The persistence and resilience of "Doppelgänger" demonstrate that a comprehensive and whole-of-society approach is needed between platforms, media, governments and civil society to quickly detect and block the tactics and resources of such campaigns before their manipulative methods, such as hundreds of thousands of automated bot accounts, can generate significant organic reach. With this technical report, the Federal Foreign Office aims to contribute to this effort by making available our findings on "Doppelgänger" and its modus operandi to the interested public and the research community for further investigation.

Federal Foreign Office