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ARTICLE

"We Should Stop the Islamisation of Europe!": Islamophobia and Right-Wing Radicalism of the Russian-Speaking Internet Users in Germany

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Abstract

Starting from 2015, the Russian-speaking residents in Germany have expressed their anti-refugee position in the form of rallies and rising voting support for the right-wing populist party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). Due to the absence of social cues, unlimited space, immediate responses, and minimal censorship online, platforms for communication have reflected the offline mobilization and became the major platforms for the spreadability of discriminatory discourse. This article sets out to investigate why Russian-speaking internet users residing in Germany justify anti-refugee discourse and how they construct the notion of "others." Based on the netnographic analysis of the chosen online discussions and conducted interviews with its members, this article argues that, with the appearance of new "others," Russian-speaking migrants have redefined their symbolic boundaries in order to draw the line between the incoming migrants and themselves—people with a migrant background. In many ways, participants of the analyzed discussions employed the politicized civilizational rhetoric that allowed them to redefine existing categorizations. This research explores, for the first time, the reasons lying behind the online populist activity of the Russian-speaking residents in Germany.

Keywords: far-right populist mobilization; online social movements; Russian-speaking minority in Germany; digital radicalization; digital diaspora; Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)

In January 2016, more than 15,000 Russian-speaking people came to the streets in Germany to protest against the incoming refugees (Kuz'menkova 2016). The majority of them received a WhatsApp message just a few days before the rallies had started:

> ATTENTION! THIS IS WAR!
> A 13-years-old girl was raped in Berlin. The corrupt elite and its faithful dogs "polizei" are trying to hide this fact from us. The press has been silent for a week. I ADDRESS ALL THE RUSSIAN-SPEAKING PEOPLE IN GERMANY! ON SUNDAY, 24.01.2016, FROM 14.00-16.00, LET'S GO TOGETHER TO THE MAIN SQUARES OR THE TOWNHOUSES OF ALL SETTLEMENTS IN GERMANY, ALL TOGETHER, FROM SMALL TO LARGE, AT THE SAME TIME. THOSE WHO IGNORE IT, LET THEM CONSIDER THIS RAPE ON THEIR CONSCIENCE. THIS IS THE FIRST PEACEFUL WARNING TO THE AUTHORITIES. If we do not unite and defend Germany, we will be squeezed down like rats, each of us in our holes. Repost and share (PRESS SHARE), so everyone knows about it! (Mitrokhin 2017)

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The reason for this seemingly sudden mobilization of the Russian speakers in Germany was a viral story of a 13-year-old girl, Lisa, from Berlin who was born in a family of ethnic German resettlers from the former Soviet Union. Lisa was declared missing on January 11, and 30 hours later she returned home half-naked and blamed three "migrants of Arab origin" in raping and kidnapping (Kuz'menkova 2016). However, the official expertise launched by the Berlin police concluded that there were no signs of sexual abuse. After the interrogation, Lisa confessed that she made the whole story up as an excuse to skip classes that day (Kuz'menkova 2016).

The so-called "Lisa case" caused an unpredictable reaction from the Russian-speaking residents in Germany: many did not believe the results of the official investigation and accused German police of falsifying the documents. At the same time, the case was used by the official Russian media to blame the German government for its failed migration policy (Mitrokhin 2017). The "Lisa case" ideally suited the state propaganda, which, since Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict, has tended to marginalize refugees as illegal, uneducated, and "culturally alien" to European culture (Gabdulhakov 2016).

One of the possible explanations for the rapid community mobilization is the lack of cultural integration among the Russian-speaking population in Germany. The majority of all the Russian-speaking residents constitute ethnic German resettlers who came to country in the 1990s as a part of the repatriation program aimed at offering citizenship for those who could prove their ethnic German origin. According to the official statistics, 700,622 repatriates from Russia (*Bundeszentrale Für Politische Bildung* 2018) and 1.3 million from Kazakhstan (2005) entered Germany between 1990 and 2011. In addition, by 2016 more than 245,000 economic migrants from Russia were registered (Bundeszentrale Für Politische Bildung 2018). Another large group of migrants from the post-Soviet space constitutes "Soviet Jews"—in the period between 1990 and 2000, more than 128,000 people entered Germany (Dietz, Lebok, and Polian 2002). As Darieva (2005) has pointed out, for many former Soviet citizens who had German origins, repatriation had a symbolic meaning: the category of citizenship was perceived as a membership in a nation-state; therefore the process of repatriation presented as an opportunity to become "German."

The absence of language proficiency and the massive character of migration flows led to a Russian-language clusterization of urban spaces in many German cities. This negatively influenced the level of cultural integration into the host society; this was especially evident in the case of the first-generation migrants (Meng and Protassova 2017). A survey conducted in 2016 by the Boris Nemtsov's foundation revealed that more than 60 percent of Russian-Germans use the state Russian channels as their main media sources. At the same time, more than 50 percent of the respondents also stated that they have more trust in the Russian media than in German ("Boris Nemtsov Foundation's Survey: Russian-Speaking Germans" 2016), since the German media are perceived to be the "bulwark of Merkel's ideological propaganda." Sociologist Nikolai Mitrokhin (2017) also confirms that ethnic German resettlers think of the Russian state channels as more "objective."

The protests for the Lisa case ended after a few weeks, since the absence of any comments from Lisa's family and the official results of the police investigation did not mobilize the group any further. Nevertheless, the Lisa case had an unarguable influence on the rise of xenophobic attitudes among the Russian-speaking groups in Germany, since even those people who did not participate in the rallies but spoke Russian to communicate, could not escape the rising support for anti-immigrant attitudes. In many ways, the public rallies in support of Lisa and the fake case of sexual assault had an enormous effect on mobilizing the Russian-language agenda in Germany. Since then, many Russian-speaking migrants started adopting discriminatory views, and the internet was the platform for expressing these views.

For these reasons, a perceived discrimination toward Lisa triggered self-mobilization among the Russian-speaking migrant groups. The major platforms for spreading the information regarding pro-Lisa rallies became social networking sites (SNS). Although the Russian government denied its influence on organizing the protests, many journalists and scholars question these statements. For

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example, Mitrokhin (2017) claims that local pro-Russian organizations played a major role in the formation of public opinion about the Lisa case, as well as organizing the protests.

In many ways, the Lisa case had a significant impact on the rising support of the ethnic German resettlers for the right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutchland (AfD). As Dennies Spies has stated (2018), the change in the voting practices of the Russian-Germans could be observed beginning with the refugee crisis of 2015, when Germany accepted more than 2,500,000 refugees. This coincided with the rapidly changing rhetoric of the AfD, which transformed from Euro-sceptical to the anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic party. What caused the attention of many major media sources (Meyer 2017; Oltermann and Soloveichik 2017; Scott 2017; Shuster 2017) is that during its election campaign, the AfD targeted Russian-Germans as a potential electorate by posting agitation posters and gathering party meetings in the Russian language. Many returnees started to actively participate in the political life of the party, some of them (for example, Eugen Schmidt) even ran for the local posts in the cities. During his election campaign, Schmidt advocated an improvement of living conditions for the Russian migrants, the end of political confrontation with Russia, and call off all the economic sanctions. On his personal page on the AfD official website, Schmidt states: "My main aim is to involve Germans from the former Soviet Union as natural electorate for the AfD" ("Eugen Schmidt" n.d.)

That is how the Russian-language SNS in Germany have become the major platforms for political discussions and reproduction of the user-generated reflections on right-wing populism and Islamophobia. As was observed by Simon Hill (2013), in many ways after the end of the "active mode" of social movements, the mobilization comes back to the internet and takes the form of shared views and discourses among members of online social groups. The online pro-Lisa rallies transformed into offline discussions about the "refugee crisis" and its negative impact on German culture, forming the socially acceptable online negative stigmas. Due to perceived privacy, minimal censorship, and immediate reaction from other users (Amichai-Hamburger 2013; Trost and Kovacevic 2013), the Russian-language SNS designed for the German residents have mirrored offline mobilization. Many Russian-speaking users have started to put their concerns about the "refugee crisis" and dissatisfaction with democracy, as well as current populist shift on the online discussions (Amichai-Hamburger 2013; Trost and Kovacevic 2013). Also, such platforms allow users to freely discuss the issues of migration and "refugee crisis," employing Islamophobic and racially biased expressions of the right-wing populist rhetoric, which makes them a major channel for populist mobilization (Lu, Heatherly, and Lee 2016). In the case of the Russian-language groups, this is amplified by the popularity of authoritarian propaganda of the Russian government, which, since Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict in 2015, tends to portray refugees as marginal, illegal, and uneducated (Gabdulhakov 2016), or the spread of bots—fake social media accounts that aim at addressing the specific topics of discussions. Although the influence of Russia's authoritarian propaganda on the Russian-speaking minorities could be an interesting perspective, it is not the task of this article to examine the above-mentioned phenomenon.

This article focuses on how the Russian-speaking internet users in Germany justify their radical Islamophobic views and what categories they use to construct the notion of "others." Hence, this article argues that by using discriminatory discourse against the "others," resident minorities are able to reconstruct the symbolic boundaries between the new-coming "stinky immigrants" and themselves—people with a migrant background. In that case, Islamophobic discourse plays a role of "inclusionary category," which leads to a reconsideration of previous intergroup categorizations. Therefore, discriminatory, far-right, populist views allow migrants to redefine their senses of identity and belonging in order to include themselves in the category of "majority."

Due to the absence of social cues, unlimited space, immediate responses, and minimal censorship of the online groups present for minorities, online platforms were a fertile ground to co-produce discriminatory views through user-generated reflections. This article investigates, for the first time, the reasons behind the online right-wing populist activity of Russian-speaking residents in Germany.

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Methodology

In order to understand how Russian-speaking users residing in Germany construct the concept of "others" and how they justify Islamophobic discourse, I apply several methodological approaches. First, I use the netnographic method, the main aim of which is to consider the interaction in social media as a mode of cultural practices' production (Kozinets 2015). I apply it to several discussion threads that are used by Russian-speaking residents to express dissatisfaction with the current "refugee crisis" and support for the AfD. Both discussions were posted in the forum "Germany in Russian," which has more than 1.1 million registered members and remains one of the largest minority SNS groups. The most popular topic in the forum, which has more than 1,169,470 views, is titled "Destroyed Europe. Refugees in Europe," and starts with the discussion of the growing Muslim population in Europe and economic, cultural, and political problems allegedly related to the matter. This message presents one of the most popular opinions in this thread:

> Europe will fall down not because of terrorists but because of refugees and economic migrants. Every person who gets to Europe will beat every European man in his fertility. Crowds of barbarians will come and destroy the civilization, will make it something like an Asian-African tumor with its own culture, laws and appearance! (We can say goodbye to all blonds, brown-haired, red haired beauties). New "European" generation is almost here, and it will destroy everything on its path!

The format of the forum discussions is different from online commentaries, as it allows one to explain his or her views and justify one's opinions through well-expanded arguments.

The study of online platforms, however, also has its limitations. Since participating in Internet life requires technical skills, time to respond to other users, and the "ability to handle mass amounts of information," only the most active members of the community express their views online (Rojo and Ragsdale 1997). Moreover, discussions in cyberspace often imply fake identities, mutual offenses, and the absence of arguments in posts. As has been shown in studies pertaining to social identity/deindividuation (SIDE) theory, online discussions can be polarized, as many participants remain silent members and do not post any comments, while only representatives of the opposite opinions actively engage in discussions. Another problematic aspect of research based on online discourse is the so-called "spiral of silence"—a fear shared by many people who are afraid to publicly express their opinion in case it is different from the views of the majority (Hampton 2014).

In order to overcome the above-mentioned problems, I have conducted four semi-structured interviews using a questionnaire with the forum participants in order to understand the reasons behind radical online discourse of the Russian-speaking immigrants in Germany. The questionnaire consists of three main sections. The first part includes questions related to structural/cultural assimilation: his/her immigrant experience, everyday language, and reflections on life in Germany. The second part of the questionnaire consists of questions regarding attitudes toward the incoming immigrants. The last section includes inquiries into the use of "diasporic" platforms and media consumption (including newspapers and television). Overall, the interviews contribute to the understanding of anti-immigrant discourse, since many participants do not fully express their opinions in online discussions. The pilot interview for this research may be seen as an example. The respondent expressed radical xenophobic discourse online (in the discussion about hijabs): "What can be beautiful in these ugly black furbelows??? Explain me. I want to puke when I see them, these women in furbelows make me want to punch them in the face, and this is exactly what their husbands do instead of me" (v0id* 2017, 67). However, during the interview, the respondent mentioned that he was afraid of Muslim migrants since he was Jewish, and, in his opinion, Germany would experience a series of pogroms in the near future as the police did not do anything to stop "immigrants" from expressing anti-Semitism. The respondent never mentioned these considerations on the online forum, hiding the, behind aggressive expressions and calls for closing the borders. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, three out of four interviews have been carried out via

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Skype with a turned-off camera, which allowed respondents to maintain a sense of perceived privacy and retain some anonymity (Janghorban, Roudsari, and Taghipour 2014).

At the same time, this article is unable to encompass the entire spectrum of opinions of minority groups—only those that were publicly expressed on online platforms. The reader should bear in mind that the study focuses on the analysis of Russian-speaking residents who express extreme anti-refugee rhetoric. Although the majority of the analyzed messages constitutes discriminatory and radical views, this article does not take into consideration messages from those users who have positive attitudes toward the newcomers.

It is also beyond the scope of this work to determine the possible attempts of Russia's government to manipulate the views of its residents in Germany. However, the possibility of the existence of sponsored automated messages (bots) or accounts of "*Prigozhin* trolls" are taken into consideration and would be considered as a part of the discourse, since users interact and engage with these statements by producing self-reflected messages. It is important to mention that most of the quotes in this article were verified to belong to "real" users. Each profile was verified individually through reviewing its activity, availability of shared photos, and participation in the other nonpoliticized discussions.

Ethnic Minorities in the Age of Web 2.0

Beginning in 2001, the internet entered a new stage of its development—the so-called era of "user-generated content" or "Web 2.0." This definition, first introduced by Tim O'Reilly (2009), implies that the specificity of internet communication and development of digital media transformed users from "consumers" to "producers" of cultural, social, and political discourse and practices. As cultural theorist Henry Jenkins stated in his book *Spreadable Media* (2013, 2–3), the digital world's new "participatory model of culture" allows members to reshape, reimagine, reframe, and remix previously preconstructed messages. Although, as was noted by José Dijck in his article dedicated to the agency of user-generated content (2009, 44), the majority of users still constitute passive recipients (around 80 percent), the nature of this shift is in the desire of people to share information among members of their online groups. Jenkins (2013) even defined this phenomenon as a "networked culture," the main feature of which remains spreadability of information. New internet practices could therefore lead to a homogenization of certain types of discourses acceptable among this or that social group.

The nature of this shift also led to an increasing number of online social movements, although several scholars such as Symon Hill (2013) connect the spread of online activism with the global economic crisis of 2001, which exposed inequality in the world system. According to Hill (2013), contemporary social activism reflects attempts of the discriminated majority to reach the elitist class. Sociologist Clay Shirky (2008) states that the specificities of internet communication removed the existing boundaries and influenced a predisposition for social movements' spreadability. In the contemporary digital world, participation in social movements with a clear agenda became much easier than in the offline world, since the practices of mobilization are also embedded in the practices of self-mediation (Thumim 2012). Although there is still no agreement regarding the classification of online activism, online mobilization, and online social movements, most of scholars state that internet social movements could be at the same time instruments for and restriction of social reforms.

This could be especially evident regarding the example of WhatsApp mobilization for the Lisa case. As one of the respondents for this research pointed out:

> You are asking me if I participated in the rallies? Of course, I am! I did it because I was afraid that these Muslims will rape my wife and my daughters. We did not really care if the "Lisa case" was fake or not, all that we thought about is the safety of our families. This is why we protested against new-coming refugees and Merkel's politics. After the rallies we also

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> patrolled the streets of our city at nights, so our women and children could safely return home. I found out about the protests via WhatsApp chat, some of my local friends sent me this message. (Respondent 2, 2018)

As was observed by Evgenii Morozov (2012), online social movements can also cause "mobilization for mobilization"—a situation that arises when a certain group comes to the streets without understanding the reasons and causes for the activism. Another respondent for this research, who resides in a small town in the southern part of Germany, also noted:

> I came to the place that was indicated in the WhatsApp message. The square was full of us—Russian-speaking people—but none of us actually knew why we were there. As the time passed, no one made any speeches, everyone kept asking each other about this rally. And then we just joined hands and marched across the streets of our town! That was amazing! At that moment I felt that we are the power, that we are holding together no matter what! (Respondent 3 2018)

The homogeneity of the spreadable discourse is especially evident on the example of online groups designed for migrant or diasporic communities. The ability of diasporic groups to create stable online interconnections with former co-patriots, called "digital diaspora" or "online diaspora," has attracted some scholars' interest. Victoria Bernal was among the first scholars who traced interconnections between cyberspace and representation of diasporic identities. In her article published in 2006, "Diaspora, Cyberspace and Political Imagination: The Eritrean Diaspora Online," Bernal argues that in the case of the Eritrean diasporic community, cybercommunication plays a role of a "transnational public sphere" specifically designed for reproducing public debates on culture, democracy, identity, and politics. Although the Russian-speaking population in Germany could barely be defined as "diaspora," since it lacks several interconnected factors of a diaspora in the classical understanding as a community of people having a common homeland (Tölölyan 1996), the internet creates a field for homogenization of nationhood practices. In her book *Diaspora Online*, Ruxandra Trandafoiu (2013) claims that migrant internet spaces are predisposed for political mobilization in a situation of possible discrimination toward one of the community members (Trandafoiu 2013).

Diasporic online platforms therefore allow their members to create a sense of belonging to an imagined community and also to reproduce certain practices of nationhood (Bernal 2014). Moreover, cyberspace gives migrants an opportunity to validate their aspirational identities and political perspectives, moving beyond traditional practices of both the home and host societies. In contrast to other online groups, the Russian-speaking digital community is built on the common knowledge of the Russian language, not a perceived ethnicity, and includes people with different citizenships and ethnic and religious identifications (Bernal 2014; Trandafoiu 2013).

Cyberspace allows its members to express views different from commonly accepted social norms. Other important aspects that lead to radicalization of online discourse are the perceived privacy and the sense of groupness, which occur when people with prejudiced views take part in radical discussions. Several studies have observed that online channels for communication validate users' beliefs and help them achieve a sense of belonging to a certain set of discriminatory values (Bliuc, Jakubowicz, and McGarty 2018). In the case of migrant minorities such as Russian speaking residents in Germany, the radicalization of migrants' online discourse can be explained through the concept of a digital diaspora's hybrid identity, which was well defined by Jennifer Brinkerhoff (2012) in relation to those immigrants who develop a mix of characteristics from their homeland, host land, and lived experiences. Hence the digital hybrid identity is also a constant process of negotiating the immigrants' "self" in the host society and could be influenced by historical memory, language, religion, and the habitual status of minority to which the immigrants belong. Hybridity activates its agency by using "liminal and ambivalent positions in-between forms of identification

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that may be asymmetrical, disjunctive and contradictory" (Werbner and Modood 1997, xii). The internet plays the role of a medium for digital hybridization of minority groups, therefore creating a field for socially acceptable nonnormative behavior.

Forum "Germany in Russian"

One of the platforms for user-generated discussions on the issues of populism, right-wing politics, and "refugee crisis" is "Германия по-русски" ("Germany in Russian"). The website was created in 1999 and soon became the largest platform for communication designed explicitly for the Russian-speaking population residing abroad. Its popularity has grown with every month. For example, at the end of December 2017, it had 765,758 registered users and 558 "guests," who do not have an account but visited the website in the last 24 hours. By the beginning of May 2019, the number of users has increased to 788,059 members, adding approximately around 1,000 new members on a monthly basis. As Nell Elias and Marina Shoren-Zeltser (2006) pointed out, only 60 percent of those who registered in the "Germany in Russian" forum live in Germany, 25 percent live in other European countries, 4 percent live in the US, and 1 percent live in Israel. Hence, the authors conclude that the forum constitutes a transnational space where Russian-speaking migrants could exchange common experiences (Elias and Shoren-Zeltser 2006, 78).

The Germany in Russian website consists of 10 sections: "Poster," "Dating," "Photos," "Forums," "Groups," "Diaries," "Chat," "Shop," "Firms and Services," and "Announcements." A special interest presents the section "Forums," where members of the group are eligible to participate in almost unmoderated discussions. All topics in the "Forums" are also divided into several subgroups: "Our Living Room," "Culture and Art," "Chat Offline," "Everyday Problems," "Everything about Germany," "Computer & IT," "Immigration, Visa and Consulate' Questions," and "Private Announcements." The first section, "Our Living Room," is designed for the most controversial topics, such as political, historical, and philosophical ones—the themes that people usually discuss in their spare time. The subsection "Discussion Club" consists of a constantly updatable set of themes that usually reflect current news in one or another way connected to Russia (for example "New sanctions against Russia," "Scripal – did Putting really need that??" and others), as well as those discussions that have remained hot topics for the last three years in the discourse of the official Russian media (for example "Destroyed Europe," "Why the West hates Russia?," "Where the Great and Indivisible Ukraine moves?").

According to the rules of the forum, all topics should start with the information about the subject and the author's opinion that he/she desires to discuss. All the messages should contain profound judgments and do not repeat the same arguments twice; users are banned for any insults or transition on individuals—only well-constructed answers are allowed. The regulation rules make the "discussion thread" easy to analyze, as the majority of the all messages have a well-defined opinion.

In the framework of this article, I consider the discourse that is common among two of the three most popular topics in the Discussion Club section: "The AfD is a devil that is not as black as it is painted" (9,555 messages; 222,460 views) and "Destroyed Europe" (19,542 messages; 519,301 views).

Justifying Right-Wing Populism in Germany

The self-mobilization practices of the Russian-speaking population in Germany coincided with the growing role of the right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutchland (AfD). Following the rising rhetoric of populist agenda all over the European Union, the AfD became the first political party in Germany that incorporated mobilizing practices toward the Russian-speaking communities. By putting the posters in Russian, organizing the rallies in Russian, and constantly underlying its "pro-Russian" character, the AfD gained a large number of followers among the Russian-speaking

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population and, especially, among Russian-Germans. Although it almost impossible to trace the actual amount of Russian-Germans who voted for the AfD during the Federal Elections of 2017, some statistics estimate that the most "Russian" district in Berlin, Marzahn-Hellesdorf (due to its inexpensive housing and availability of sustainable migrant network, the overwhelming majority of all residents here came from the former Soviet Union), shows that the AfD gained there 23 percent of all votes ("Erststimmen-anteil Ausgewählter Parteien in Prozent" 2016). Goerres, Spies, and Kumlin (2018) also provide quantitative and qualitative findings regarding the changing voting behaviors of Russian-Germans.

The discussion called "The AfD is a devil which is not as black as it is painted" started in April 2017 with the user "oldfish" who has a "lodger" status, which proves his constant engagement with the forum on an everyday basis. Oldfish, whose profile picture depicts Peter Falk in the role of Columbo, stated that the major political parties in Germany, the Cristian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), equate the AfD with a far-right party and blame it on populism, because of their own inability to manage domestic policy in Germany and fear that the AfD can make any real changes. Then oldfish discusses the party program. For instance, the author rephrased the party's statement "Islam does not belong Germany" by commenting:

> Racial and religious tolerance in Europe led to a situation when many Islamists began to behave as owners of the country. Mass rapes committed by people from Arab republics, fights and attacks on women with loose hair—it is not the whole list of actions that migrants do. The AfD just made it clear that it thinks that sharia is incompatible with the European values. (oldfish 2017, 1)

As an online platform for minority communication, the forum remains a place where participants can anonymously express their political views, tell about their hopes and desires, and discuss economic and social agendas. The forum therefore plays multifunctioned roles and remains a multitask space. The discussion started with a debate regarding whether AfD is populist or not. Some members were triggered with a comparison of the AfD with populism/far-right movements. In response, these members stated that the party's program does not have anything to do with "populist movements" because it tells the truth about contemporary Germany's place in world politics and gives a voice to the "refugee problem." For them, populism is perceived to be a synonym for a "lie." By placing the AfD program on the other edge, these users justify their support for the party by claiming that AfD reflects current problems in Germany. For example, user Риджио was among the first who reacted on the post: "I do not see any populism here. Germany is one of the leading economics in Europe, every country listens to its voice and it was Germany that together with France made the main efforts to create the European Union. Why everything is conversed now? I think that the AfD does not have any populist ideas" (Риджио 2017, 1). Another user stated that the AfD might be populist, but he/she does not see anything bad in it. As user Roslyz claimed, and many others tended to agree with him/her: "Nobody associates the AfD with the Nazis—otherwise the party would be banned. It is more right-wing populists.… Populist does not mean Nazi or ultra-right, do not worry! Populism presents in all the parties" (Roslyz 2017, 1). The confusion in understanding the term populism also can be clearly seen in this discussion: "There is nothing bad or scary in populism—it is just a reflection of people's aspiration" (the message was deleted after three months), and the direct response to that: "I understand this term in a different way, more like empty promises which are given in response to people's aspirations, but not subjected to perform" (Риджио 2017, 1).

As Rogers Brubaker (2017b) pointed out, contemporary populism presents to be a category of analytic, discursive, and stylistic repertoire that is embedded in discourse of almost all major political parties. What unites all of the populist actors is the four-dimensional dichotomy defining the discourse between "we" vs. "others" and "we" vs. "the corrupt elite." By discussing the possible belonging of the AfD to populism, the majority of all members tended to justify its seemingly

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discriminatory policy by referring to all of the four dimensions. The discursive-political function of the forum, therefore, appears in its ability to express opinions and take part in political debates. The anonymous character of the messages allows users to make additional points or emphasis on topics that people usually confuse to discuss in real life, like support of populism or the far-right movements. In this case, the situation is double-edged since the controversy of the topic and the opening author's position regarding the AfD allowed members of the community to give their voice to the party without being afraid to be excluded.

Many users explained their support for the AfD with the unsatisfactory political climate in Germany that presents to be "undemocratic." According to such users, the CDU and the SDP do not give other parties a chance to change "the rules of the game" (jastin2000 2019, 2; Fraer12 2017, 2), and many people expressed their intentions to vote for the AfD in order to protest against the establishment (2017; Zuckerватте 2017, 2; vhde 2017, 10; лавренти 2017, 10): "I will vote for them [AfD] out of protest anyway. And for nobody else. I am sick and tired of the disillusioned politicians" (Zuckerватте 2017, 2). Some members mentioned an inability of Germans to understand that when one person is re-elected several times, all institutions begin to promote his/her candidature: "Now all German parties support decisions of the Merkel's command. They call it 'democratic consensus'" (Kant_elz 2017, 32).

At the same time, one can observe a huge controversy in the users' responses. On one hand, many claim that AfD presents to be an alternative to the current undemocratic political regime that betrays "European values." On the other hand, the same members of the discussions state their disbelief in tolerance by claiming that European inclusiveness led countries to "hell" (for example Garpagon 2017, 5; vhde 2017, 9), and the main reason why Germany "plays in multi-culturalism" is the Nazi regime (Empire B 2017, 18): "The interesting thing is that 'European values' lie between sodomy and Muslim values, when blues [slightly pejorative for homosexuals] are bitten with stones in Arabia and Yemen"(v0id* 2017, 51).

When I asked one of the respondents regarding the notion of the "European values," he answered:

> There are no European values, no democracy in Germany. Merkel is an authoritarian dictator. For example, the state pays anti-fa, disperses the rallies, I once saw how policemen hit the crowds. I think that the AfD is so popular because Merkel betrayed the people by propagandizing authoritarian politics and zombying people to help refugees. Germany does not have any independent media anymore and that is why many Russians here read Russian news. Yes, they also have Putin propaganda, but they tell much more! And German TV does not even invite opposition activists! (Respondent 1, 2018)

Moreover, while reading the comments in these sections, the reader has an impression that users believe in a global network of the far-right parties and claim that they are dependent on one another. For example, the users Garpagon and Oguar discussed that success of the AfD totally depends on the elections in France and the party of Marin Le Pen (oguar 2017, 5; Garpagon 2017, 5), while user Ардальоныч stated that before supporting the AfD a person should know its opinion about the USA as an "elder brother" and "kind policeman" that patronizes Germany (Ардальоныч 2017, 5). By pointing so, many users noted that they do not believe in German independence and its democratic system.

According to users of the forum, the AfD therefore presents to be the only political alternative to the "mass disorder" that is happening in Germany. The politics of exclusion is justified in everyday discussions as "the only honest statements reflecting the real situation," while German politics is represented as "undemocratic," "illiberal," or "authoritarian." The marginalized character of the party on the major political arena in Germany is perceived by the members of online discussions as a sign that party leaders are telling the uncomfortable truth. By explaining their support, many users note that "since the Germans are all blind, we are the ones who can change something." One of the

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respondents also stated: "Why Russian-speaking residents in Germany vote for the AfD? Because Russian-Germans know what it is like to live in a totalitarian state, we do not want socialism anymore! We know what the evil is" (Respondent 1 2018).

Who Are the "Others"?

Starting from the 2010s many right-wing parties have implemented so-called "civilizational" discourse (Brubaker 2017a) by blaming the incoming refugees of not being in line with "white Christian culture." As Hafez points out, this line of discourse could be explained by a desire to get rid of any connotations with anti-Semitism (Hafez 2014). The European Jewish population is often included in the notion of "us"; the desire to protect local Jewish groups is used as an excuse for anti-Muslim statements. At the same time, by contrasting Muslim and "Christian" worlds, these parties marginalize large groups of migrants and homogenize the common image of the modern "enemy."

In the forum "Germany in Russian," Islamophobic, xenophobic, and anti-gay expressions unfold around the statement "Islam does not belong to German culture" and often intertwine, therefore creating a homogenized discriminatory discourse. That also becomes a reason why many users justify the AfD, since they believe that the only aim that the party has is the protection of Christians, not de-Islamization.

This coincides with the "civilizational" rhetoric. All the anti-immigrant and xenophobic views are justified with concern for German culture. For example, user Robot wrote: "Islam is not a part of Germany. Yes, that is true, because Germany is traditionally and historically a Christian country" (ROBOT 2017, 1). Another user also expressed similar view:

> No black people or Arabs will never go to work or fight. For someone's [German] order? Never. They think and position themselves as if they are much better than Germans. Germans in their views are their slaves who should serve them, pay them and work for them—if the situation requires, they would send Germans to fight and die. They themselves (Black people and Arabs) will never do anything. This unproductive, criminal and endlessly growing ballast on the Germany's neck shows itself in all of its glory. (Crea 2017, 22)

Homosexuals are often put in the same marginalized category as "refugees": "Do you think it is great when two mothers would raise a son who could not put a nail in the wall?? Or do you think it is good than two homosexual guys would teach their adopted daughter to wear tampons and put her in the men's toilet?" (v0id* 2017).

For many users, one of the most important impacts of the contemporary refugee crisis is the sense of instability and the lack of security:

> Have you been in any of the public parks that are filled with Negro bazaars? Have you ever walked in the Alex [Alexander Platz] in the evening? Have you visited the Arab or Turkish districts in the center of Berlin? Went to these cities at night, enjoying their beauty and safety? Well, the security that was in 1991? Are you a Jewish believer? Put on kippa and walk around Berlin in the afternoon. Give your child to one of the banned Arab schools. The impressions will be, I promise, sharp. (деградеятель 2019, 964)

In this regard, many users refer to a bad economic and political situation in the country, that "things could not get worse" (Tina555 2017, 15) with the current CDU and the SPD political regimes. For many of them, immigration from Germany seems to be the only way to get away from refugees: "We, as Germans with dual citizenship, have a whole Europe to explore – from Moscow to Spain and Cyprus. According to the passport of the West Germany: every country of the European Union" (Barinov 2017, 15) or "We have already chosen something, and our relatives and friends live there—so we are now looking for special places to stay. We are trying not to naturalize in here

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[Germany] anymore and not to invest there. But the war shows the plan" (vhde 2017, 15). For these respondents the main reason for leaving the country remains the high number of refugees and the inability of the government to deal with them. According to Pål Kolstø (1996), the feeling of nostalgia and abandonment inherent in the former co-citizens of the post-Soviet space refers to the crisis of national identity that appeared after the dissolution of the USSR. As Elias and Shoren-Zeltser (2006) claimed, the internet is a platform that gives diasporic communities a space for expression, positive representation, and empowerment.

Among the discussions there is a shared view on Germans as "weak," "incapable of making decisions," and "torturing themselves with the sense of guilt." At the same time, users do not openly blame them but otherwise claim that Germans "need support." The Russian-speaking users therefore put themselves in a position of "defenders" of the German culture who can clearly see the "real picture" and "are not infected with multiculturalism." In this case, discriminatory discourse plays a role of a self-inclusionary practice that allows users to feel a part of the political and social life of the country. In this regard, it is also interesting to observe intergroup conflicts and arguments that significantly reflect the "identity crisis" of many users. The majority of all the conflicts appear between "Russian-Germans" and other Russian-speaking residents from the post-Soviet space. The nature of all such heated debates is the same: who deserves to be in Germany more. In the case of the Russian-Germans, the discussions are often amplified with the word "invited." By constantly underlining that they were invited as "ethnic Germans," Russian-Germans put themselves in a higher category than other migrants. At the same time, many of them acknowledge the fact that despite being "desirable migrants," they still belong to a commonly excluded group.

Even when the user does not agree with a shared opinion of "Muslims living in every corner in Germany," the discourse remains discriminatory:

> I moved to Leipzig a month ago and I also did not see the domination of Arabs and Negros. They are there, of course, but it is not critical. In Ukraine we also have many of them (in large cities). Once I came last summer to the main squire, our girls walk and among the guys are 80% brown. It seems like it is a world tendency. White race does not reproduce well. Or Africans and Asians do it too well. (Евгений111 2017, 1)

This could also be explained with the spreadability of discriminatory and often racist way of thinking on Russian-language websites. It reflects the existing trend among former citizens of the post-Soviet space, where civil society appeared comparably late and still remains under the influence of state propaganda (Zakharov 2015). Another aspect that influences the usage of Islamophobic and often racist utterances is the influence of long-distance nationalism. For many of the Russian-speaking residents, the understanding of patriotism and nationalism is also very blurred: "Glory to Russia! Glory to Putin! Glory to the AFD!"

Conclusion

This article argues that the spreadability of radical Islamophobic views among Russian-language platforms in Germany can be explained by the desire of minority residents to reconstruct an internal boundary and distinguish themselves from the new-coming "others." More specifically, it analyzes the bottom-up perspective on the issues of the "refugee crisis" and pro-AfD support as reflected in the two discussion threads in the forum "Germany in Russian." For many Russian-speaking residents in Germany, online platforms can constitute imagined communities that recreate practices of nationhood construction. Following this argument, online platforms can also function as self-organized political communities that can reproduce mobilizing rhetoric and create a shared homogenized discourse with socially acceptable discriminatory stigma.

One of the main findings of the present article is that Russian-speaking users in Germany put themselves in a position of "defenders" of German culture by using "civilizational" discourse

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embedded in the right-wing populist parties. The AfD in this case is also perceived to be the only political party able to deal with the rising issue of the "culturally inappropriate Muslims." Therefore, it shows that Russian-speaking ethnic minorities in Germany react with populist mobilization in cyberspace by putting in a political agenda all discontinuities in diasporic thinking: Islamophobia, conservative views that could be translated with everyday consumption of official Russian media, and attempts to overcome political exclusion. Many users explained their support for the AfD with a desire to be finally engaged in German politics on an equal footing. Taken together, these findings suggest that paradoxically right-wing populist discourse could be spread among ethnic resident minorities, since they could use the radical discourse of "otherness" as a way to symbolically include themselves in the social and political life of the host country.

As Tamara Trost and Nikola Kovacevic (2013) have noted, although the study of online discourse does not allow us to analyze the whole spectrum of group attitudes, it still shows that at least part of the group shares the vision that is inscribed online. The salient categories of civilizational rhetoric toward the "others" that are presented in the online space of the Russian-language online platforms in Germany allow members of these groups to acquire the shared vision and formulate attitudes toward minorities.

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Interviews

Respondent 1. Skype interview. November 10, 2018.
Respondent 2. Skype interview. November 26, 2018.
Respondent 3. Skype interview. November 25, 2018.
Respondent 4. Skype interview. November 24, 2018.

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