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## **FAR-RIGHT HATE SPEECH FLOODED FACEBOOK AHEAD OF EU VOTE**

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EU Observer (22 May 2019)

Shady Facebook users have been promoting far-right views ahead of the EU elections, sometimes using graphic images of sex and violence, a new investigation has found.

The more than 500 suspicious pages on the social media firm were identified in France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the UK by Avaaz, a US-based activist group, in recent months.

The pages were followed by 32 million people, compared to just a few million followers for the official Facebook pages combined of the main far-right parties in those six EU states.

But they promoted those parties' ideas by attacking migrants, Muslims, Jews, LGBTI people, and EU officials.

They did it using hate speech deemed illegal in some jurisdictions, as well as disturbing graphic content, and fake quotes that went further than the far-right parties' official social media posts, Avaaz found.

And their posts had high levels of activity - they were viewed 533 million times, or six million times a day, in the past three months, as voters prepare for the European Parliament elections on Thursday.

Avaaz investigators came across animated pictures of Nazi salutes, images of swastikas, and praise for Holocaust-deniers in Germany.

They highlighted one image of a decapitated, bleeding corpse on a British Facebook page with the caption "A billion Muslims want Sharia Law".

They also spotlighted a fake news story on a Polish Facebook page saying migrant taxi drivers in Europe were raping female passengers.

The story showed a picture of a dead woman by the roadside with her underwear torn off her semi-naked body, but the image was in fact a screenshot from a fictional Polish film called "I Am The Murderer".

Avaaz did not accuse far-right parties of orchestrating the Facebook activity, but it said the suspicious "networks" behaved in "systematic" ways to "amplify" the parties' messages.

They did it by publishing identical content on different accounts at the same time or by "inauthentic coordination" of likes and shares and by "spam behaviour".

They also did it via online tricks known as "bait and switch", in which a Facebook page on a popular non-political subject builds up fans then switches to politics at a tactical moment.

The Spanish page Lucha por Espana about free online movies was launched in 2013 but started publishing far-right content in 2017, for instance, Avaaz said.

Other examples of suspicious content included fake quotes by European Commission vice-president Frans Timmermans and wild accusations about EU Council president Donald Tusk.

Tusk, the main political opponent of the nationalist Law and Justice party, was a former communist regime spy, according to one Polish Facebook page.

Timmermans had said "monocultural states must be erased" and "the mass migration of Muslim men to Europe is required for this purpose", according to a picture and caption of the Dutch politician carrying the fake quote circulated by Peter Schmalenbach, a member of German far-right party AfD.

An Italian page showing a fake video (also from a fictional movie) of migrants smashing a car directly supported the far-right League party, even though most of the other suspect pages did not wear their political badges on their sleeves.

Facebook has so far deleted 77 of the extreme pages identified by Avaaz, it noted.

That helped to corroborate its findings, but it was just "the tip of the iceberg", the US activist group said.

The US social media firm "has allowed far too much suspicious activity and malicious content to spread. It needs to clean up its house [ ] immediately run a proactive and EU-wide scan for further suspicious activity," Avaaz said.

"Facebook did a good job so far of acting, but should have done a better job of detecting these pages," Avaaz campaign director Christoph Schott added.

"They should do this themselves. We are around 30 people, they have over 30,000 in their safety and security team," he said.

The hate campaign was designed to have an impact beyond this week's EP vote, no matter how well or badly far-right parties did, he also said.

"They run disinformation campaigns that go on for years ... making a specific issue seem more important," Schott said.