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Introduction

This summer, I completed a three-month, full-time internship at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) in Berlin through the internship network of the Bard Center for the Study of Hate. ISD describes itself as a global “think-and-do tank” that has spent two decades researching and countering extremism, disinformation, and authoritarianism in all their ideological forms.¹ Almost all of my prior academic and professional work has been related in some way to Ukraine, the geopolitics of the war against it, and human rights research and advocacy. Precisely because that context has defined so much of my work, the appeal of the ISD internship was the opportunity to apply similar analytical instincts somewhere else and work on areas in which I had not previously engaged deeply. ISD also asked me to think about hatred differently: in a more structural sense, as a set of narratives, networks, funding streams, and platform dynamics that can be mapped and quantified. Being able to test this shift in thinking on subjects unrelated to Ukraine, rather than only on the region I already knew best, was one of the most valuable parts of the internship.

Over the three months, I worked across three connected but distinct workstreams: a research project on climate disinformation in Austria, commissioned for the German federal government; content-flagging work under the European Union’s Digital Services

Act (DSA), focused on technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV); and keyword and actor scoping for DSA-related monitoring of the Latvian and Swedish elections. This paper describes these projects, what I found valuable in ISD's methodology, and, as its central concern, uses the Berlin CSD attack as a case study for asking how ISD understands hatred and where additional scholarship or a different institutional approach might sharpen that understanding.

ISD's Approach to Hate

ISD does not treat hatred as a moral failing, an emotional outburst, or simply a feature of "free speech." It treats hatred as a structured phenomenon with an internal logic. In ISD's own framing, extremism is the advocacy of political or social change grounded in a belief system that asserts the superiority of one identity-based "in-group" over an "out-group," while hatred consists of beliefs and practices that malign, delegitimize, or exclude people on the basis of characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.³ The organization pursues this understanding through policy engagement with governments and the EU, community-level education programmes, and digital analysis that tracks how hateful and manipulative narratives spread and move from marginal to mainstream spaces.

What struck me most in my first weeks was how consistently this structure resists two temptations that are easy to fall into in this field: treating every viral spike in hateful content as an existential crisis, and treating hate speech purely as a content-moderation problem that a better algorithm could solve. ISD's researchers were, in my experience, unusually disciplined about distinguishing between content that is demonstrably false,

content that is misleading without being technically false, what the organization calls the “grey area” of decontextualization and selective framing, and legitimate political disagreement that should not be treated as disinformation at all.⁴

Climate Disinformation in Austria

The project in which I had the most involvement was a study on climate-related disinformation and misinformation in Austria.⁵ The project consisted of two main parts. The first was a structured mapping of climate disinformation across German-language social media, including X, Facebook, Telegram, and Reddit. The coding framework separated “clear disinformation” from “discursively problematic content” and from legitimate political opinion, which was explicitly excluded. The second part was an online survey examining how exposure to specific climate narratives identified in the first phase correlates with Austrian attitudes toward concrete climate policy measures, rather than simply with belief or disbelief in climate change.

My contribution to the first part consisted mainly of two tasks. First, together with another Bard College Berlin intern, Jules, I researched academic literature for the project’s comprehensive literature review. My section focused on the global state of climate disinformation, narratives specific to Austria, and foreign influence, including whether particular campaigns or narratives were being spread by third parties or foreign states.

One particularly interesting Austrian-specific narrative I documented concerned right-wing actors and anti-wind groups using misleading claims and conspiracy

narratives to oppose wind-energy projects.⁶ Looking beyond Austria, I also encountered evidence of AfD actors amplifying climate-related misinformation in Germany and Austria.⁷ One of the most interesting findings from the literature review was how frequently climate-related disinformation appeared alongside other forms of misinformation and political narratives. Across the sources I examined, climate narratives were often connected with anti-vaccination narratives, pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives, anti-immigrant views, and broader conspiracy theories. Similarly, some actors identified as spreading climate disinformation also promoted these other views.

Because this tendency repeatedly appeared during the research, the project included a separate section and survey questions addressing this broader ecosystem. Although the main goal was to study climate-related narratives, the research suggested that these narratives can exist within a wider network of political and conspiratorial ideas in which different forms of disinformation reinforce or accompany one another.

My second task was an in-depth assessment of the channels through which climate disinformation reaches Austria. I conducted actor-scoping research, identifying public figures, media outlets, and online accounts that repeatedly produce or amplify climate disinformation or disinformation-adjacent narratives relevant to the Austrian context. These were added to a structured seed list that the project's quantitative team would use to build its monitoring queries.

Actor scoping sounds like a modest task, but it is where the project's central methodological choice becomes concrete. An actor belongs on the seed list only if their

content can be defensibly sorted into the disinformation or grey-area categories rather than the legitimate-opinion category. Doing this well required reading primary material, op-eds, livestream transcripts, and comment threads while constantly testing my judgment against the project's coding definitions rather than my own political instincts about what "counts" as harmful. It also allowed me to apply my existing skills in open-source investigation (OSINT) and human rights research to a new set of topics and methods.

CASM / DSA: Flagging Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

A second responsibility was working on a platform-monitoring project under the Digital Services Act (DSA), the EU legislation regulating online platforms and digital services, including their responsibilities regarding illegal content and transparency in content moderation.⁸ My task was to input and register platform responses to content flagged for removal, with a specific focus on technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X.

In practice, this meant working from a shared "Master Flagging" instruction sheet, submitting flagged content through both the DSA's formal reporting mechanism and platforms' internal Terms-of-Service reporting tools, and logging whether the platform responded through removal, no action, a request for more information, or silence. The resulting data was then used for quantitative analysis of platform responses and content-moderation practices.

The DSA provides a formal reporting framework through which designated trusted flaggers can notify platforms about potentially illegal content, with platforms required to

process these notices according to specific procedures and timeframes.⁹ Doing this work made visible how much variation there can be, even with clearly abusive content, in whether a platform treats a formal DSA notice differently from an ordinary user report and how inconsistently similar content can be treated across platforms.

Latvian and Swedish Elections: DSA Election Monitoring

The third project applied a similar DSA reporting and tracking methodology to election integrity ahead of Latvian and Swedish elections. My responsibilities included building a seed list of Russian-language keywords relevant to the election process, identifying relevant political actors, and searching for keyword combinations that could surface political advertising for the monitoring list. The wider project tracks five research areas: hate speech, elections, TFGBV, terrorist content online (TCO), and gender-based electoral interference (GenEI), across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X. The DSA/TOS content-flagging workflow I supported applies specifically to the TFGBV, TCO, and GenEI tracks, while hate speech and elections use different methodologies. I also researched academic literature for ISD's Latvia Threat Assessment Report.

What connected this project to the DSA work and ISD's broader self-understanding was the idea that disinformation and coordinated political manipulation are not simply unavoidable features of online free expression. They can be strategically deployed by specific actors and can therefore be monitored and addressed through legal and platform-based responses.¹⁰ Searching for Russian-language political keywords ahead of a Baltic election also connected directly to my long-standing interest in Russian information warfare against Ukraine and its neighbours, but gave me a much more

granular understanding of how such activity can actually be monitored rather than simply described after the fact.

Measuring Hate

The aspect of ISD's work I found most valuable, and most different from my prior human rights experience, was its insistence on quantification and falsifiability. In human rights documentation, the unit of analysis is usually the individual case: a testimony, a video, a deportation record, weighed against legal standards of evidence. At ISD, the unit of analysis is often a pattern across thousands or millions of data points. The methodological question is therefore not only "did this happen?" but "how much of this is happening, to whom, through which channels, and is it increasing?"

The Austria climate project's three-tier coding system, the DSA project's response tracking, and the elections project's keyword and actor seed lists all attempt, in different ways, to make a slippery and often subjective category—harmful narrative content—auditable. This is not merely a technical preference; it changes what kind of institutional actor ISD can be. Because its findings are built from documented and repeatable methodologies, ISD can use them to inform policymakers and public debate.¹¹

This connection between rigorous measurement and institutional consequence is, I think, the strongest version of what "think-and-do" can mean. It also requires empirical restraint. During the internship, I was repeatedly reminded that alarmist framing of a new technological or political threat can itself become part of the information

environment being studied, and that knowing when not to escalate a finding is as much a professional skill as knowing when to escalate one.

The Berlin CSD Attack

During my internship, one tragic event occurred that is worth examining because the location, circumstances, and nature of ISD's research intersected directly with its context. On the evening of 25 July 2016, a van drove into a crowd near the closing party of Berlin's Christopher Street Day festival in Tiergarten, a few hundred metres from the Brandenburg Gate. The driver then left the vehicle and attacked bystanders with a bladed weapon before fleeing. One woman was killed and 29 people were injured.¹² The suspect, a 21-year-old German citizen of Lebanese descent, had a documented history connected to Islamist extremism and had previously attempted to travel to join the Islamic State group. He was shot and killed by police roughly 24 hours later.¹³

German officials, including Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Interior Minister Alexander Dobrindt, quickly described the attack as Islamist terrorism. ISD subsequently published a detailed analysis, "Five Lessons from the Islamist Extremist Attack on Berlin Pride," identifying several major issues: the continuing threat posed by Islamic State ideology; the targeting of LGBTQ+ communities by Islamist extremists; questions surrounding the authorities' handling of the attacker; the role of online extremist content in radicalization; and the exploitation of attacks by pro-IS online communities.¹⁴

Four days after the attack, ISD Germany published the Digital Dispatch by Jakob Guhl and Moustafa Ayad.¹⁵ The report was, in most respects, exactly what I had come to

expect from ISD's methodology: careful, sourced, and explicit about the limits of what could be known so soon after an event. It traced the alleged attacker's radicalization pathway, examined the authorities' previous knowledge of him, and tracked how the attack was celebrated within online extremist ecosystems.

The report also resisted the temptation to simply blame the individual, instead asking institutional questions about how German authorities had assessed and managed a person already known to them. It explicitly rejected the idea of prematurely identifying scapegoats and instead focused on identifying institutional gaps.¹⁷ That, together with its granular analysis of online extremist reactions, is exactly the kind of measured, structural analysis I described above as ISD's core strength.

Islamophobia and the Limits of the Frame

What the report does not do, and what I think is its most significant gap, is turn its analytical tools on the reaction to the attack itself. ISD's report is unambiguous that responsibility for the violence lies with the attacker and, institutionally, with the authorities who supervised him. But almost immediately after the attack, a second dynamic became visible in German public discourse: generalized suspicion directed at Muslims and migrants.

ILGA-Europe, Europe's largest LGBTI rights organization, explicitly condemned the attack while warning that it must not be used to fuel hatred against migrants, foreigners, or Muslim communities.¹⁸ German Islamic organizations similarly condemned the attack while warning against "pauschale Schuldzuweisungen," or blanket blame directed at

Muslims as a group.¹⁹ A Muslim, gay Berlin police officer, Ali Darwich, also spoke publicly about the consequences of the attack for both queer and Muslim communities.²⁰

This is not a minor omission because it is precisely the kind of narrative dynamic ISD exists to study: a real violent event becomes raw material for a second-order narrative targeting an entire identity group, which can spread across media and political commentary and itself be tracked and measured. The report therefore stopped one analytical step short. It examined the extremist ecosystem that produced and celebrated the attacker, but not the ecosystem of generalized anti-Muslim sentiment that the attack activated, even though ISD's own work on anti-Muslim hate gives it the conceptual tools to do so.²¹

The asymmetry is worth naming carefully. The report holds German authorities accountable for failures that may have contributed to violence against the LGBTQ+ community, which is appropriate. But it does not extend the same analytical attention to the discourse conditions that can make Muslim communities vulnerable to collective blame after such an attack, despite this being squarely within ISD's stated expertise.

Suggestions for Improvement

The CSD attack also showed me how the organization responds to critical situations and supports its workers. Once the news became public late that evening, the general ISD chat filled with messages checking whether everyone was safe. Directors asked employees to let them know if they needed help. One director contacted me directly, asking how I was feeling and offering access to mental-health services as well as time

off. An email was also sent on Monday addressing the attack and again encouraging staff to take time off or use mental-health support. During the weekly ISD Germany meeting, substantial time was given to anyone who wanted to discuss the attack or other concerns. Overall, I believe ISD took appropriate steps to support its employees.

At the same time, the experience showed me that responding to the immediate needs of employees and addressing the broader analytical implications of an event are two different tasks, and both require attention. I see three related areas where ISD could improve its response to events that cross several of its areas of expertise.

The first is **intersectionality as a working method, rather than only a value**. The CSD attack sat at the intersection of Islamist extremism, anti-LGBTQ+ hate, and anti-Muslim hate, each of which the organization researches through different areas of expertise. A genuinely intersectional response would pair the extremism team's reporting with a parallel or joint analysis of how the public conversation about the attack was developing. Scholarship on intersectionality, particularly Kimberlé Crenshaw's work, is useful here because it emphasizes that overlapping identity categories can produce distinct, non-additive experiences of marginalization.²² The LGBTQ+ and Muslim communities in Germany are therefore not simply separate constituencies. Some individuals hold both identities, as illustrated by Ali Darwich, and an analytical framework organized around single-issue expertise can miss this overlap unless it deliberately looks for it.

The second is **better queer representation and discourse within the analytical process itself**. ISD produces careful work on anti-LGBTQ+ hate, but the CSD case

suggests that having a formal issue area does not necessarily guarantee that queer perspectives are represented when a rapid report is drafted under time pressure. A newsroom-style rapid-response process that deliberately includes colleagues working on adjacent identity-based hate categories, even briefly, could help identify intersections that might otherwise be overlooked.

The third is **stronger internal communication and coordination across adjacent teams**. In an organization structured around distinct expertise areas—extremism, anti-LGBTQ+ hate, anti-Muslim hate, information warfare, and technology accountability—a case that crosses these categories can depend on informal relationships and individual initiative. The CSD attack demonstrated what this can cost in practice: the connection between what happened to the LGBTQ+ community and what happened to Muslim communities in the aftermath had to be highlighted by outside organizations rather than by the institution that had the relevant expertise in-house.

Personal Reflection

This question of how people and institutions respond to violence also became personal for me. As a Ukrainian who has been actively engaged with Russia's aggression for many years, both professionally and academically, I am exposed to reports of war crimes and tragedies affecting the Ukrainian population almost every day. There are videos of civilians being targeted by Shahed drones and missiles, residential buildings and schools being destroyed, and cultural sites being damaged. July 2026 was reported as the deadliest month for Ukrainian civilians since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, according to the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine.²³

I believe ISD's response to the CSD attack was fast and thoughtful, and the organization gave people the space and time they needed to process what had happened. I was also satisfied with the way Berlin itself responded and commemorated those affected. The day after the attack, people gathered at the Brandenburg Gate, while the attack site in Tiergarten became a spontaneous memorial. In the following days, flowers, candles, and messages accumulated at the site. Berlin later institutionalized this remembrance by establishing a permanent place of commemoration, including a newly planted maple tree and a rainbow-coloured bench.²⁴

And yet, I could not completely dissociate myself from the frustration I felt when comparing this tragedy with what I see online regarding my home country every day. For many Ukrainians, continuing to function after being exposed to something traumatic has, over time, become almost mundane. During the internship, I experienced this feeling many times while continuing to fulfil my responsibilities, but I did not consider it a sufficient reason to take a break or ask for additional support. I later shared these thoughts with my line manager when they asked whether I needed any accommodations following the attack.

This experience made me think about the same issue of different perspectives that I had identified in ISD's analytical work. Just as an organization can miss an important dimension of an event when different forms of hate are considered separately, people can also experience and process the same event differently depending on the context of violence and insecurity from which they come. The response of the organization and of the city reminded me that, for many people in Europe, an attack of this kind can

represent an unfamiliar disruption of their sense of safety, while someone who has lived with war for years may process a traumatic event through a very different framework.

This difference is important to recognize rather than compare in terms of whose experience is more severe. For me, however, the CSD attack was also an alarming reminder of how quickly a sense of security can be disrupted, even in a city that I had come to consider home. It made me hope that European societies and institutions will take security threats more seriously and invest in preventing escalation, so that people across Europe will never have to develop the same normalization of fear, violence, and trauma that has become a reality for so many Ukrainians.

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