

# French far-right site powered from Poland

Research conducted by EU DisinfoLab and POLITICO prompts backers of France Libre 24 to disclose their ties to Poland.

By **LAURA KAYALI AND ZOSIA WANAT** | 1/14/20, 6:55 AM CET | Updated 1/16/20, 7:27 AM CET



The emergence of platforms like France Libre 24 (FL24) poses fresh challenges for anti-disinformation schemes | Patrick Lux/Getty Images

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France Libre 24 is a website made to look like a French news outlet, complete with French-language articles and an Eiffel Tower logo.

Except those cues are deeply misleading.

The platform, which publishes news stories on French politics and social affairs, is actually run by a group of Polish far-right activists who are linked to the right-wing Konfederacja party and former MEP Janusz Korwin-Mikke, according to research conducted by nonprofit group EU DisinfoLab and POLITICO.

Its content is frequently copy-pasted from traditional sources such as Agence France-Press or Ouest France, but modified to fit anti-establishment, anti-migrant, anti-Islam and climate-skeptic themes, further research has shown. Words are changed or entire sentences deleted to fit the narrative.

The result is a popular, highly partisan platform — it draws about 150,000 monthly visits — that underscores some of the thorniest challenges in the fight against online misinformation: identifying who is behind divisive content, and taking action when the authors work within the European Union. That's a problem for the EU's current framework against disinformation, which is not yet fit to tackle intra-EU campaigns.

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“Far-right groups have gone international” — *Ben Nimmo, director of investigations at Graphika*

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France Libre 24, which was launched about six months ago, also shows how European far-right movements are increasingly working across borders to advance a shared agenda.

"Far-right groups have gone international," said Ben Nimmo, director of investigations at Graphika, a social media analytics firm.



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"It's ironic that these nationalist groups who have railed against globalization now find themselves part of a global movement. It's a definite paradox."

The emergence of platforms like France Libre 24 (FL24) poses fresh challenges for anti-disinformation schemes, many of which were designed to focus on external actors such as Russia, and rely on self-regulation by platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Google.



U.S. President Donald Trump is systematically defended on France Libre 24 | Drew Angerer/Getty Images

Asked how the EU might deal with examples such as FL24, European Commission Vice President for Values and Transparency Věra Jourová said it plans to address new forms of misinformation — including EU-grown ones — via a future framework called the European Democracy Action Plan.

One of its goals will be to "increase the cost of malign disinformation campaigns. Today, it is simply too cheap," she told POLITICO in a statement. "We are actually increasingly concerned about disinformation by actors within member states and we observe cases of disinformation driven by non-state actors, related for instance to vaccination or climate change."

FL24 did not reply to an emailed request for comment. In an article posted on January 12, the site disclosed its Polish backers for the first time, saying it had done so in response to enquiries from POLITICO.

"Our investors being for the most part Polish, our company is duly registered under Polish law at the Register of Commerce and Companies in Warsaw," the post reads.

### **Franco-Polish links**

While FL24 says it has published more than 5,000 pieces of content in its six-month life span, few are originally reported. Most of the posts are drawn from traditional news

sources, then distorted to fit a highly partisan agenda: All French political parties are criticized except for the far-right National Rally. U.S. President Donald Trump is systematically defended. Muslims are described as dangerous and climate change as a “monstrous deception created by left-wing scientists.”

In December, a story posted by FL24 that presented migrants in a negative light was debunked by the AFP’s fact-checking team. FL24 did not amend its text after the fact-check.

The website also picked up an AFP report about a spat between French President Emmanuel Macron and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro over the fires in Australia. The FL24 story copy-pasted the AFP article word-for-word, but deleted a sentence which described the Brazilian leader as “climate-skeptic.” The AFP did not reply to a request for comment.

**Le président brésilien Jair Bolsonaro et son chef de gouvernement ont fustigé jeudi "le silence" du président français Emmanuel Macron sur les incendies meurtriers qui ravagent le sud-est de l'Australie.**

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Onyx Lorenzoni, le chef du gouvernement, a publié jeudi soir une rafale de tweets dénonçant le silence, idéologique d'Emmanuel Macron dont les critiques lors des incendies en Amazonie en août et septembre derniers avaient été très mal reçues à Brasilia.

Ces incendies ont provoqué une brouille diplomatique entre le Brésil et la France qui n'a toujours pas été soldée.

Jair Bolsonaro avait accusé la France notamment de "colonialisme" et n'avait eu de cesse d'affirmer la souveraineté du Brésil sur l'Amazonie après que Macron eut proposé de faire intervenir la communauté internationale pour régler le problème de la plus grande forêt tropicale de la planète.

"Le monde regrette les incendies et les morts en Australie. Ici, au Brésil on a du mal à comprendre le silence d'Emmanuel Macron. Des réactions différentes quand il s'agit du Brésil... Vraie préoccupation avec l'environnement ou idéologie socialiste...?", a tweeté en soirée Onyx Lorenzoni, en français, après une série de messages en portugais.

Dans un autre tweet, il affirme: "Macron a attaqué le Brésil avec des fausses nouvelles car ici le Président Bolsonaro ne se soumet pas aux idées socialistes".

Mercredi, il avait déjà dénoncé le "silence assourdissant de Macron et de l'Europe verte" sur

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AFP, publié le vendredi 03 janvier 2020 à 08h49

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**Le président brésilien Jair Bolsonaro et son chef de gouvernement ont fustigé jeudi "le silence" du président français Emmanuel Macron sur les incendies meurtriers qui ravagent le sud-est de l'Australie.**

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Ces incendies, largement dus à la déforestation galopante, ont provoqué une brouille diplomatique entre le Brésil et la France qui n'a toujours pas été soldée.

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FL24 copies and pastes AFP wire stories and removes words to fit its narrative.

In another example of manipulating others' content, a story from French newspaper Libération on transphobic assaults was altered by the self-described "free information portal."

While the initial article aimed to raise awareness on systemic discrimination against transsexual people, FL24 changed its title to: "A trans beaten up: He lies because he is left-wing," while still crediting Libération as the source.

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FL24 changed Libération's headline to claim the transsexual person attacked is lying to protect Muslims.

“The trans refuses to explain who assaulted him, that is to say most probably Muslims,” reads the FL24 text. “This case shows how much the debate on homophobia in France is perverted by the Left,” the website wrote.

### Far-right international

FL24 — which made no mention of its links to Poland before January 12 — was set up in July 2019 and quickly drew a substantial following, with peak readership of nearly 400,000 monthly visits in November.

Its Facebook page, which is managed from both France and Poland, has more than 20,000 followers. About 70 percent of the website's internet traffic comes from Facebook.

While articles at times carry bylines, the names do not match up to any online profiles.

"If some of us remain anonymous, it's simply because we take risks and face islamist terrorism and leftist violence," FL24 wrote on January 12.

Research by EU DisinfoLab established that the platform is registered in Poland and has the same IP address as wolnosc24.pl — a website run by a publishing house called 5S Media. The publisher also owns a magazine called Najwyższy Czas! which was co-founded by Janusz Korwin-Mikke, an ex-MEP and currently a lawmaker of Konfederacja, a far-right party in the Polish parliament.

The platform's web archives, which were retrieved by EU DisinfoLab, show it previously listed 6S Media, a company registered in Poland which runs FL24. 6S Media has the same address and a similar set of shareholders as 5S Media.

Several of the main investors behind FL24 are active in Poland's far-right scene, and show a keen interest in French affairs.

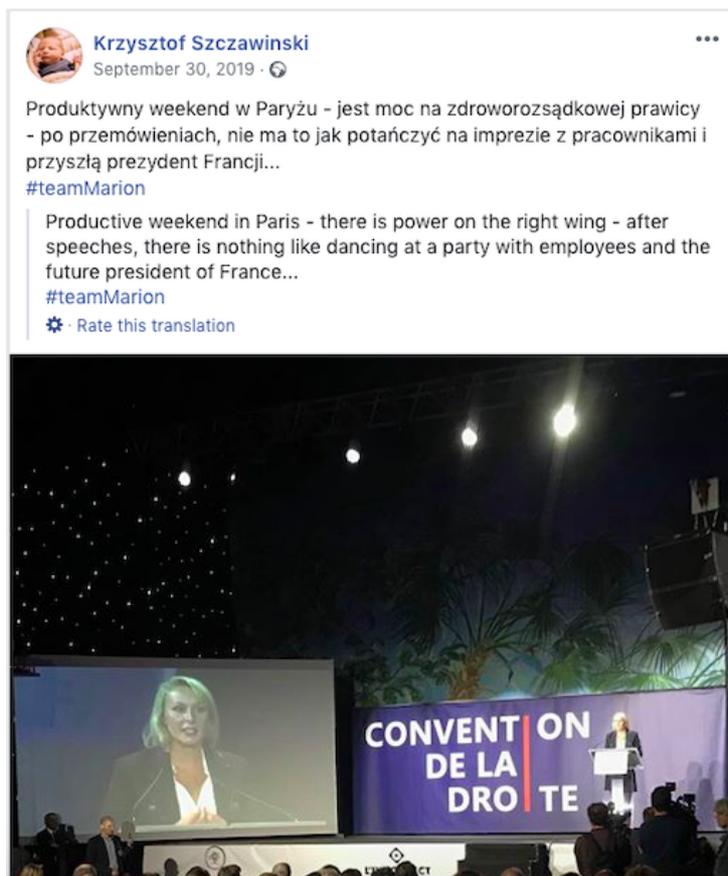
Krzysztof Szczawiński, FL24's majority shareholder, has hinted on his Facebook page that he's involved in Konfederacja's electoral activities. A self-described "private investor in education, media and video games," he also has shown interest in French politics.

Last summer, Szczawiński attended the Convention de la Droite, where prominent French far-right figure Marion Maréchal Le Pen gave a speech. In one Facebook post, he called her "the next president of France" while in another he poses with a FL24 T-shirt.

Szczawiński did not reply to a request for comment made via his Facebook page.

Adam Gwiazda, a second investor who currently lives and works in France, is also linked to far-right movements.

He told POLITICO "he's currently not actively engaged" in Poland and that any questions about 6S



The Facebook profile of one of FL24's investors shows him attending a speech of French far-right figure Marion Maréchal Le Pen | Screenshot from Krzysztof Szczawiński's Facebook

Media should be directed to the majority shareholders of the company.

Jean-Yves Camus, a French researcher on extremism at IRIS think tank, said that he remembered Gwiazda's name from the 1990s when he "was involved in a neofascist movement."

Other investors include Tomasz Sommer — the editor-in-chief of nczas.com and wolnosc24.pl, which shares the FL24's IP address — who also takes part in Korwin-Mikke's events.

Asked by POLITICO to clarify how FL24 operates, he said the site is run by "a French team" but did not disclose any names.

"We operate in the united Europe. We can publish our content wherever we want," he said.

A fourth investor, a deputy editor of wolnosc24.pl named Adam Wojtasiewicz, also owns shares in Cat@Net, a troll farm involved in political disinformation, according to the national court register.

The fact that Polish shareholders are backing a venture aimed at French readers highlights the increasing level of cooperation between far-right movements in Europe.

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“These groups are united by their enmity towards democracy and migrants, anti-Semitism and often pro-Russian connotation” — *Rafał Pankowski, professor*

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Within nationalist Facebook groups, Twitter networks and websites, content created in one country is often translated and shared with similar groups in other EU countries.

"These groups are united by their enmity towards democracy and migrants, anti-Semitism and often pro-Russian connotation," said Rafał Pankowski, a professor at Collegium Civitas and the co-funder of Poland's Never Again organization.

Offline, the best example of this phenomenon is the annual Independence March, organized by far-right groups in Warsaw. Every year it gathers representatives of far-right movements from across Europe: Hungary's Jobbik, Italy's Forza Nuova, and Renouveau français, a French far-right ultranationalist political party.

"The Polish far-right feels more and more confident on the international level," he said. "The scale of the Independence March is respected in the far-right world."

## A new EU disinformation framework

Despite Jourová's concern, the EU's current framework against disinformation is not suited to deal with intra-EU disinformation campaigns and "fake media" such as FL24, according to Clara Hanot, an advocacy coordinator at EU DisinfoLab.

"It goes to show disinformation is a very complex phenomenon that encompasses the whole ecosystem of online media, beyond online ads and platforms," she said, referring to Facebook and Twitter. (In October, the NGO's research uncovered a worldwide network of nearly 300 fake media that was managed by Indian stakeholders.)

"We can have all the codes of practice we want, the current one only covers a tiny part of the disinformation problem. The difficulty for the EU institutions is that they don't have the mandate to look at domestic disinformation campaigns."



European Commission Vice President for Values and Transparency Věra Jourová | Stephae Lecocq/EPA-EFE

That could change with the Commission's future European Democracy Action Plan, led by Jourová, which is expected to tackle disinformation in a broader package about election integrity.

The EU executive is currently assessing the code of practice and will decide on the way forward based on the results. All options are on the table, including regulation, according to the VP.

“We know full well that there are different motivations and different actors behind disinformation, including internal ones,” said Jourová in her statement.

“One thing is clear: I want our efforts against organized manipulation and disinformation to be more mature,” she said.

*Mark Scott contributed reporting.*