

Germany to tighten screws on online hate speech

February 19 2020, by Mathieu Foulkes



Members of Germany's Greens party staged a protest against hate speech in September 2019

With the danger growing from far-right extremists and torrents of threats against politicians, Germany plans to toughen online speech laws and tighten the screws on social networks.

Ministers in Chancellor Angela Merkel's government approved a new

package of measures on Wednesday, days after 12 men were arrested for planning deadly attacks on mosques, communicating in part via chat groups.

The draft law now passes to parliament for MPs to deliberate.

"In future, those who make threats or spread hate online will be prosecuted in a tougher and more effective way," Justice Minister Christine Lambrecht said on her ministry's website.

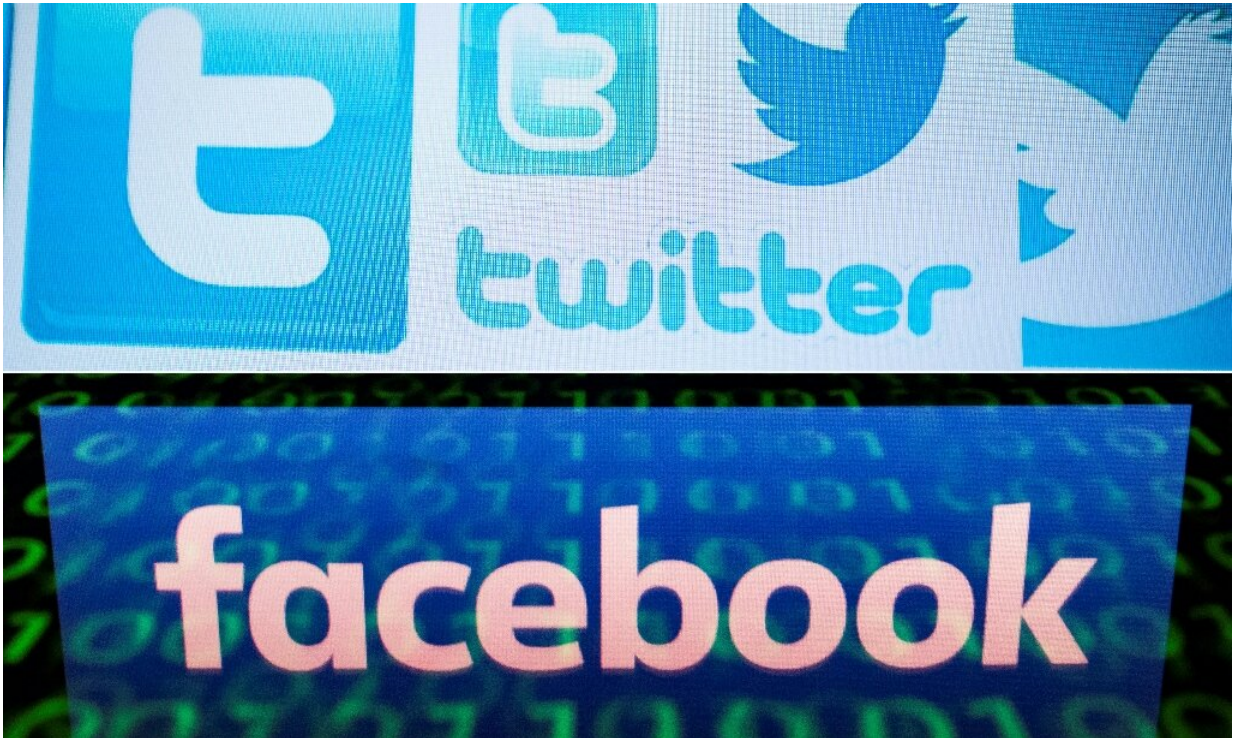
One headline measure in the bill will step up the pressure on social networking firms such as Facebook and Twitter to quickly remove the offending content.

In future, the Silicon Valley giants will also have to report certain types of illegal posts to the federal police, who will be able to pass on actionable data to prosecutors.

'End up where they belong'

Neo-Nazi propaganda or plans to commit a terrorist attack would be covered under such rules.

But people approving crimes, making death or rape threats or sharing child pornography images could also be caught in the widened net.



One measure in the German bill will step up the pressure on social networking giants like Facebook and Twitter to quickly remove offending content

Social media platforms that refuse to cooperate will face fines of up to 50 million euros.

"Hate crimes will finally end up where they belong: before a court," Interior Minister Horst Seehofer said.

On top of the new reporting processes, Berlin wants to toughen potential sentences, including up to three years in prison for online death or rape threats.

Especially in recent months, there has been a growing spread of anti-Semitic messages online—including a bizarre screed written by the

perpetrator of an attack targeting a synagogue in the eastern city of Halle in October 2019.

The draft law would sharpen sentences still further for crimes arising from an anti-Semitic motive, which the justice ministry says have increased 40 percent since 2013.

But there are limits to the rules, leaving it up to the person affected to pursue cases of insult or libel.

In the most serious cases, such as terrorism or murder, network operators will be required to give up users' passwords to the authorities if ordered to by a judge—including if they are encrypted.



The office of Karamba Diaby, Germany's only black MP, was targeted in

January

"Extremists don't radicalise themselves out of nowhere," Justice Minister Lambrecht said.

"Inhuman spreading of hate and threats online lowers the thresholds" to violence, she added.

Ministers' plans have not gone unopposed in Germany, where debate is fierce between those who value online anonymity as a shield against the state and those who see unregulated online spaces as a threat.

Bullied out of office

Elsewhere in the draft law, the government aims to reinforce its ability to protect prominent personalities.

Threats and verbal or physical attacks have become more common against office holders, with 1,241 politically-motivated attacks targeting elected officials in 2019 and increasing numbers requiring police protection.

Some local politicians have in recent months given up their posts or said they will not stand for re-election following such threats.



A synagogue in the city of Halle was targeted in an attack in October 2019

In mid-January, bullet holes apparently inflicted by a pellet gun appeared overnight in the windows of an office belonging to Germany's only black MP, Karamba Diaby, provoking widespread outrage.

Politicians from across the spectrum declared solidarity with Diaby.

The apparent attack came months after regional politician Walter Luebcke, a vocal proponent of accepting refugees, was murdered outside his home last June.

A neo-Nazi with a history of racially-motivated violent crimes is the prime suspect in the case.

In future, the authorities will be able to more easily protect personal data, including on public registers, belonging to people in the public eye like politicians, journalists and activists.

Such individuals will be warned if someone else requests their personal information.

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