

European neo-Nazi websites find home in US

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In this picture taken May 6, 2011 an expert at the Documentation Center of Austrian Resistance points at a neo-Nazi website in Vienna, Austria. Attempts by authorities to cripple the xenophobic "Alpen-Donau" forum have been complicated by the fact that it is housed on a U.S. server, highlighting how free speech on one side of the Atlantic can help spread hate speech on the other. (AP Photo/Ronald Zak)

(AP) -- The website is awash with neo-Nazi symbolism and even sarcastically refers to the notorious Mauthausen concentration camp as Austria's largest open-air museum.

But attempts to cripple the xenophobic "Alpen-Donau" forum have been hindered by the fact it's housed on a U.S. server, an example of how free speech on one side of the Atlantic can help spread hate speech on the other.

Austria bans Nazi glorification and Holocaust denial. In the United States nearly unrestricted freedom of speech rights are considered a cornerstone of democracy.

Three people suspected of being behind the website were arrested in April, including Gottfried Kuessel, one of the Alpine republic's leading neo-Nazis. But until a couple of weeks ago it continued to spew extremist and anti-Semitic rhetoric. Germany has also run into the problem of shutting down U.S.-hosted neo-Nazi websites.

Hungary has faced a similar hurdle for years, although hate speech is considered a crime there only if it incites specific acts of violence or abuse. Hungarian right-wing groups regularly target Gypsies and other minorities.

Austrian investigators have suggested that, for forensic reasons, it's in their interest that the website stay online for now because it provides them with vital clues in their probe aimed at tracking down remaining suspects.

But those personally targeted by the site want U.S. authorities to shut it down immediately.

"This is blatant anti-Semitism and blatant racism," said Willi Mernyi, president of the Mauthausen Committee, a Holocaust awareness group.

The website's latest posting features photos of Mernyi and implies he is to blame for acts of vandalism at the former concentration camp where the Nazis murdered about 100,000 people. The site has also posted pictures of teenagers who took part in workshops organized by the group, Mernyi said.

American officials say their hands are tied unless the site violates U.S.

laws.

"I think it's fair to say we don't agree with what's on that website but we agree that free speech as defined by the United States takes precedence over what their views are," said an official familiar with the issue who asked not to be named.

The U.S. norm is that people are free to say anything as long as it doesn't infringe upon another person's rights. In Austria, freedom of expression is guaranteed by the constitution but is limited by a ban on propagating Nazi ideology. Inciting hatred on the basis of any ideology is a crime under the Austrian penal code.

Raimund Fastenbauer, a senior Jewish Community official, said American authorities have legal grounds to cooperate in taking down the site.

"In part, there have been some concrete threats we believe would be punishable under American law," Fastenbauer said, noting that postings have included not only photos but also personal phone numbers of Jewish community members, as well as veiled or coded calls for action against individuals.

Gerald Ganzger and Gideon Jabloner, lawyers at the firm Lansky, Ganzger & Partner who represent the Jewish community and threatened journalists, said Austria, under pressure from the United States and the other allied powers, enacted a law prohibiting the revival of Nazi activities as a precondition for sovereignty after World War II.

"However, nowadays it is the U.S. ... who is preventing Austria from enacting the aforementioned law by protecting the right of free speech of neo-Nazi groups," they wrote in a statement sent to The Associated Press.

The two countries do seem to be working together, if in a limited way.

In a press release dated April 12, Vienna's public prosecutor's office said that - "through cooperation with American authorities" - it obtained server access codes enabling them to monitor the website.

While the site was down for several weeks, it resurfaced with a slightly modified address in time to mark Adolf Hitler's birthday on April 20 and is now believed to be hosted by a server in Arizona. It has been idle since May 7, suggesting authorities may be making more progress or have even successfully caught the remaining culprits.

A video posted on the site claims it is "the only voice of truth" and says [freedom of speech](#) "applies only to leftists and friends of Jews."

"No one can stop us!" says another posting.

In neighboring Hungary, the government succeeded in July 2008 to temporarily shut the extremist kuruc.info website, saying at the time that it did so with help from U.S. authorities. Within six weeks it became active again, moving to another U.S. server, and has been online ever since.

The site is controversial because of its racist content, which includes anti-Semitic and anti-Gypsy articles and imagery. It has also published mobile phone numbers and home addresses belonging to judges and prosecutors who were involved in court cases against people who took part in the country's anti-government riots of 2006.

In both countries, a longterm solution on how to deal with the situation seems far off.

Christian Pilnacek, director general for criminal law at Austria's Justice

Ministry, said the problem lies predominantly with the evolving nature of cyberspace.

"It's a cat and mouse game but one that has more to do with technical advances than different legal systems," he said, noting that the issue would best be handled through international agreements.

But whether that's realistic remains to be seen.

U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder suggested at a news conference after an April 14 meeting with European Union home affairs ministers in Hungary that one way to tackle the problem may be by making it clear to the public that extremist rhetoric is simply wrong.

"I think we have to come up with ways in which we have a counter-narrative that shows this information, this material, to be what it is ... harmful," Holder said.

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