

On the banning of Far Right groups and symbols, in an online and offline context

Paper Abstract

This paper aims to consider potential responses to Violent Right-wing Extremist (hereon in, VRWX) online content – such as reference to proscribed groups and symbolism – through a unified EU Member State approach. It will do this by examining the current practices of those that have used long-lists as reference points for assessment the risk of online VRWX content, to develop a set of issues that need to be addressed. These issues will be explored and used to construct a discussion on how a potential an EU-wide approach could be articulated.

Introduction

Whilst the banning of groups and symbols is not a new tactic, it has become a component in the armoury of the European state against extremism, understood by observers as ‘among the most severe measures available to liberal democratic governments’ (Legrand 2015: 165). However, it is implemented inconsistently across the EU and even within Member States, and available studies suggest that proscription may create geographic and functional substitutions, in which so-called ‘extremist’ groups reappear elsewhere or re-engage using different forms of aggression (Dongen 2011; Jarvis and Legrand 2017). Research into online content has posited concerns that de-platforming may create similar substitutions in alternative social media platforms, although the loss of platforms from mainstream social media sites has led to the loss of significant following and finance amongst notable examples of Far Right groups and individuals (Rogers 2020).

Even whilst de-platforming or online bans have shown to be effective, determining exactly which content needs to be moderated is problematic. Symbols or networks may become disguised or deconstructed, deliberately obscured through the appropriation of non-Far Right symbols, numerology or the construction of an ‘ironic’ overlay that make them more difficult to identify without relevant context. As EU Member States grapple with the task of defining and responding to the growing threat of Far Right extremism, understanding these issues is critical in building more effective European responses to the Far Right that combat polarisation whilst simultaneously accounting for the human and civil rights implications of countering or preventing violent extremism (P/CVE).

Discussions over proscription have become all the more prescient with growing concern over online extremism since the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, subsequent national and regional lockdowns, and evidence of a migration of a variety of articulations of Far Right activism online (McNeil-Willson 2020a). A greater online presence – even amongst those without a traditional online focus – may allow for the evasion of national restrictions, the conducting of activism with fewer resources and less chance of disruption and grow new networks from across a far wider geographical area. Thus, responding to this widening threat suggests a need for widening cooperation between EU Member States, addressing the spread of Far Right content and networks in a way that straddles both European offline and online spheres.

This discussion paper will consider the merits of a European-wide list or compendium of violent right wing extremist groups and symbolism. It will firstly consider why certain symbols are considered illegal, exploring existing lists where certain imagery or groups have been problematised and explicitly linked to VRWX, as well as considering how such processes of identification took place. This will help to map current approaches to the (suggested) systematic removal of certain symbols. The paper will also consider why certain symbolism is considered to be harmful to European liberal-democratic practice and what we need to be aware of with regards to Far Right extremist content. Finally, the paper will aim to advance discussion of how this can be put into practice, across EU Member States and in coordination with online platforms and social media companies.

Analysing Current Approaches

To understand the possible means of implementing an EU-wide approach, it is important to consider what current practices have been used by organisations seeking to identify VRWX content. As such, an analysis was conducted of leading existing lists/compendiums of VRWX groups and symbolism by organisations and authorities involved in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), to illuminate existing methodology and findings. The following eight P/CVE organisations were identified as producing relevant long-lists of VRWX content and iconography: Czech police authorities (CZ); the North West Counter-Terrorism Unit (UK); the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz [Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution] (DE); Birmingham City Council (UK); the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (UK); Fare (UK); the Anti-Defamation League (US); and the Radicalisation Awareness Network (EU). Seven of the eight are open source, one closed source and seven are European in their focus, with one (ADL) US in focus (in this instances, all references to VRWX groups and symbolism specifically based in the US and unlikely to be found outside of their geographic context were removed).

From the eight long-lists, all symbols were recorded to create a set of 188 different symbols, which were then grouped into different subsections, such as current and historical group emblems, religious iconography, acronyms, numbers and statements.

The following 10 groupings were drawn from the 188 RWVX symbols recorded, when amalgamating all symbols from the eight long-lists:

- 51 Far Right group icons or emblems
- 19 historical National Socialist or fascist symbols
- 18 numbers or percentages
- 18 acronyms
- 17 statements linked to concepts of White supremacy
- 17 pagan or early Christian symbols
- 14 clothing brands
- 12 general icons appropriated by the Far Right
- 11 Antisemitic statements
- 8 Islamophobic statements
- 3 Other/unclassifiable statements

Whilst these 10 groupings do display a wide variety of different means of expressing VRWX statements – including symbols, letters, numbers, phrases or other iconography – it is notable that the largest group identified in the P/CVE lists were *Far Right group icons or emblems*, with many of those groups listed being banned or proscribed organisations. These are linked to the second most-identified group, of *National Socialist or fascist symbols* – in being almost universally unmistakable in both the *intention* and the *interpretation* of their usage. The prevalence of groups and group-related symbols may not, however, allow us to conclude that groups represent the most significant threat in terms of VRWX online content. Rather, it perhaps suggests that groups and NS symbolism are more easily recognisable by P/CVE organisations and authorities, and therefore more likely to be included in compendiums. For instance, both Far Right emblems and Nazi-era iconography have strict framings in their usage, meaning that those with the *intention* of using those frames are making certain statements that will be largely be *interpreted* in the same manner by those receiving or interacting with the frames. Such interpretation does not, furthermore, require those receiving the frames to have a high level of in-group knowledge.

Other groupings of symbols, alternatively, may exhibit a *strong intention* of being linked to VRWX but levels of *weak interpretation* (such as VRWX symbols, that require in-group knowledge to be understood), or else exhibit a *weak intention* in its usage and a *strong interpretation* (such as symbols that are used mostly in a non-VRWX context but may be understood as such when deployed in very specific contexts). Those with a *strong intention but weak interpretation* include certain numbers or percentages, which are consistently used by VRWX groups or individuals but can only be interpreted correctly by those with the relatively high level of in-group knowledge. Those with *weak intention but strong interpretation* include pagan or early Christian symbols, Antisemitic/Islamophobic statements, or some of the more generalised icons that have been partly appropriated or engaged with by the Far Right. Pagan symbols, for instance, have a greater

chance of being used by actors not associated with VRWX, and significant context is required to successfully judge both the intention of the use of these symbols, and the resulting interpretation.

Symbols, iconography, number or phrases that do not have strong intention and strong interpretation in their usage create an issue for those looking to counteract their potentially widespread use on social media and other online platforms. Where significant context is required, where statements are camouflaged, or new symbols are maliciously appropriated, more sophisticated approaches are therefore required to weed out VRWX content. This is not only an issue of freedom of expression but also a requirement to avoid highly contested symbols being unintentionally further linked to VRWX, legitimising extremist interpretations.

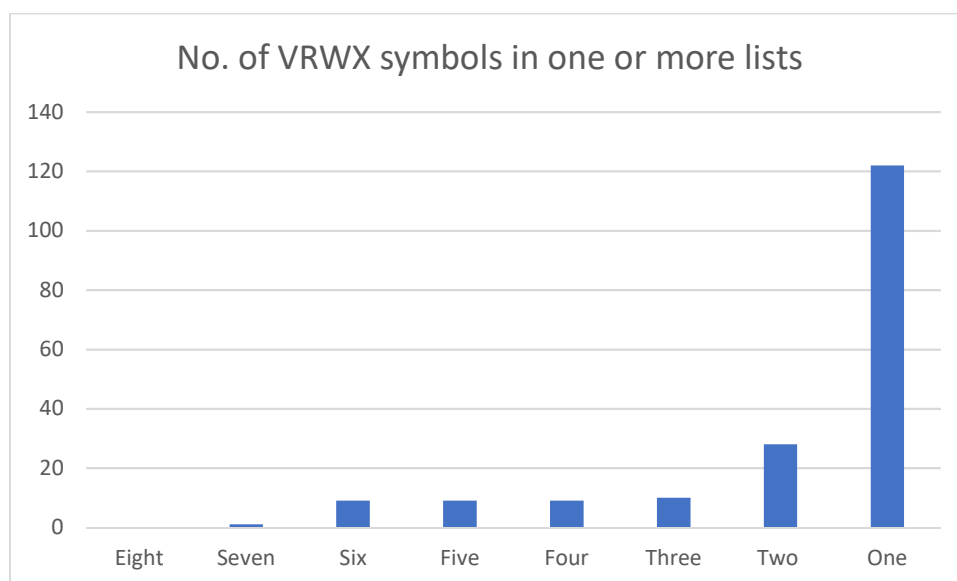
As well as recording the different symbols found in the eight long-lists, the number of times each symbol appeared across several long-lists was also recorded, to determine which symbols had been independently registered as being linked to VRWX by more than one counter-extremism organisation/authority. No single symbol was identified by all eight long-lists as being linked to VRWX; only one symbol was identified across seven of the eight long-lists; whilst nine of the 187 remaining symbols were independently identified in six of the long-lists.

The symbols most likely to be identified in the long-lists are shown below, accompanied by the number of long-lists in which they appear (in brackets):

- i. The *Odal* or *Othala* [O] Rune (7)
- ii. The number 14, standing for: 'we must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children' (6)
- iii. The number 28, standing for the letters BH in the numerological alphabet, the acronym for VRWX group Blood and Honour (6)
- iv. The number 88, standing for the letters HH in the numerological alphabet, the acronym for the National Socialist salute 'Heil Hitler' (6)
- v. The Celtic Cross (6)
- vi. The anti-Left statements 'Good Night Left Side' or 'Rock against Communism' (6)
- vii. Insignia of National Socialist army divisions (6)
- viii. The *Algiz* or *Elhaz* [Z] rune (6)
- ix. The Schwarze Sonne or Black Sun, a variant of the Sonnenrad composed of twelve *Sig* [S] runes (6)
- x. A triskele or triskelion (6)

Except for insignia of National Socialist military divisions and the symbol of the Black Sun – which has not migrated beyond a neo-Nazi context – the majority of these ten symbols are difficult to designate as solely VRWX (*weak* in either their *intention* or *interpretation*). Runes, triskeles and the Celtic cross have a plethora of non-VRWX uses – in neo-paganism or antiquated Christian revivalism, historical research and practice, or in regional heraldry. Some statements, such as those that are anti-Left, do not fall under hate speech or extremism, whilst those that do – expressing support for Aryanism, National Socialism, or proscribed groups like Blood and Honour – are here disguised through numerology. Thus, concerns about context become more pronounced, as those symbols most likely to be identified as linked to VRWX are also those more likely to be highly contested.

There was also found to be significant divergence in terms of what symbols were being included across lists. Of the remaining symbols 178 symbols, nine (9) were identified in five of the lists, nine (9) more were identified in four of the lists, 10 appeared in only three of the lists, 28 symbols were appeared in only two of the long-lists, whilst 122 symbols appeared only once across the eight lists. As such, 65% of symbols – nearly two in every three of those included in the amalgamated list – appeared in only one of the eight VRWX lists. This suggests significant divergence in terms of what is (and what is not) being identified as belonging to VRWX by different groups, depending on the aims or focus of the counter-extremism authorities/organisations putting together the list. Whilst there is, perhaps, a general core of concepts that are being identified by P/CVE organisations and authorities, far more are only being identified within certain contexts or as being linked to certain problematised ideas.



This brief analysis helps to identify some key questions to take forward into discussion on the creation of a unified EU approach to online VRWX content: 1/ What are the challenges of using lists as reference points for assessment of online content? 2/ How should we consider the context of banning groups and organisations in EU Member States? 3/ How should we consider and integrate the context of symbolisms used online into any such list, particularly symbolisms that may be either low in intent (used by several non-VRWX actors) or low in interpretation (can be misunderstood, even by VRWX groups)? 4/ What other information is needed for content moderation, such as manifestos or (live) videos of participation in violent acts? And 5/ what forms and content could a reference list take, and how do we respond to regional or organisational variation, as seen in existing lists regarding the inclusion or exclusion of differing VRWX content?

1. The challenges of using lists as reference points for assessment of online content

As identified above, there are significant challenges in using lists as a reference point for assessment of online content. Firstly, (how) should we establish a generally agreed on definition of Violent Right-wing Extremism? Furthermore, what are the limits of responses to VRWX content, and how do we account for existing Hate Crime legislation in EU Member States? How do we properly account for the context of symbols, particularly those that are subject to several different intentions or interpretations? Finally, how do we navigate issues of freedom of expression and assembly that exist in some Member States whilst ensuring a robust form of support is being created against concerns about VRWX,

1.1. Definitions

Firstly, as with any discussion within this field, it is worth opening on the continuing but nevertheless critical battles that take place over definitions. There are no universally accepted definitions of either terrorism nor violent extremism – nor by extension, of terrorist and violent extremist content – a point which presents challenges for all actors involved in addressing such content. Whilst some may hold out hope of reaching a point of agreement, it is perhaps likely that consensus will not be reached – nor, indeed, can ever be reached. As McNeil-Willson et al. state, '[t]erms such as radicalism and extremism have a normative, relational and context-specific value: one is judged radical or extremist against culturally specific benchmarks, and this label is dependent on who is doing the labelling.' (McNeil-Willson et al. 2019). Thus, the present lack of a universally definition should not be attributed to spoilers or malevolent actors within the discussion – as has sometimes been the case (Jackson et al. 2011) – but to a mature understanding that terms such as violent extremism will always remain context-specific because, at their heart, they contain an inherent political component that is contested and contestable.

Definitions of VRWX are thus built upon the credibility of the threat from such movements in any given country/region, as well as the forms of discourse or activism that are deemed acceptable (the placement of the 'Overton Window' within national debate). Such national and regional divergence can be seen between conceptualisations of Far Right extremism in Northern and Western Europe in comparison to, for instance, those found in Southern or Eastern Europe (McNeil-Willson 2020b). The question therefore becomes: are we seeking a European-wide definition of Violent Right-wing Extremism (VRWX), or are there more pragmatic alternatives, in which the contestation of the term is accepted but a unified response is still able to be produced? As an example, whilst some online content-sharing services have developed and published their own definitions of terms such as extremism, others have chosen not to, deliberately avoid a singular definition to account for the fact that no single approach has yet garnered consensus.

Avoiding a singular definition would not prevent a unified response, particularly as a general will is evident to respond to concern over VRWX. However, some solid foundations, upon which content could be recognised and moderated, needs to be developed. Thus, it would seem prudent to additionally address the terms 'violent' and 'right-wing', to make some semblance of the definition muddle surrounding that of 'extremism'. By founding any approach on acts of or incitement to 'violence', any resultant list may be able to remove some of the very legitimate concern by detractors over the problematically wide scope of P/CVE – the increasing legal power it contains, and the means by which it has the potential to be deployed maliciously or inadvertently against political enemies or minorities when politically expedient.

Establishing better awareness of the extreme right is also important, to ascertain where elements of Right-wing extremism risk becoming violent or into contact with the law. Bertzen (2018), Bjørge and Rvandal, Mudde (2002) and Teitelbaum (2017) have developed a much accepted schematic of the Far Right, which divides the Far Right between the 'Radical right' (who propound that the ruling elites must be replaced through democracy) and the 'Extreme right' (who propound that democracy must be replaced and that violence against enemies of the people is legitimate). These two divisions engage with three different kinds of nationalisms: 'Cultural Nationalism' (which suggests that Muslim and some minority cultures are backward and repressive, inherently violent or anti-Western, and must assimilate or leave to a Muslim country); 'Ethnic nationalism' (which suggests that cultural mixing should not take place, that Europe faces an 'invasion' from non-Western peoples but that cultural diversity can be maintained); and 'Racial nationalism' (which suggests that White people are superior but threatened by racial mixing, that revolutionary change is necessary, particularly due to supposed Jewish dominance, and that other races should be deported or killed).

Focus on the violent, ethno-nationalist elements within VRWX may therefore be more useful in determining which groups and symbols should be accepted on a European-wide list than focussing overly on elements of 'extremism'.

1.2. Establishing the Limits of the Response

Another issue in terms of developing an EU-wide response, linked to that of the developing a definition, is the importance of establishing the limits of a response to VRWX. This involves being aware of existing Hate Crime legislation which may provide a more adequate response to acts of VRWX, as well as the problems involved in securitising elements of the Far Right beyond that which is productive to reducing violence and polarisation.

The launch of an effective, EU-wide list would help to rebalance discussion away from the current approach which over-prioritises 'Islamist' forms of extremism and radicalisation. Weiböck and Kossack, for instance, refer to the 'Islamism bias' that currently exists within the EU and Member State practices in P/CVE, which they claim has resulted in authorities 'obfuscating other forms and more contextual and systemic views on extremism, which would also implicate one's own role in it', as well as 'the underestimation of right-wing populism/extremism, neo-Nazism, as well as white supremacism, racist militias, and similar sorts of hate groups and hate crimes' (Weiböck and Kossack 2019).

Such an 'Islamist bias', evidence of which has been posited in, for instance, the UK's PREVENT programme and other counter-extremism approaches by the UK Government Home Office, has led to contestation about the suitability of the role of elements of P/CVE in civil society, as well as their potential for discriminatory application against minority cultural and political communities. In the long-run, this has undermined UK approaches towards the Far Right, propagating distrust amongst minority communities and risking the stigmatising of legitimate forms of activism. By creating an EU approach distinguished from other forms of P/CVE, detailed in its limits and allowing for existing hate crime legislation or community-led approaches that may be far more effective in countering polarisation and with higher levels of local trust, the list can add legitimacy to EU responses to VRWX.

Existing lists into VRWX suggest the lack of a clear delineation of the limits of VRWX and what an adequate response may look like. As such, the eight lists analysed include a mix of terms, symbols and groups related to cultural, ethnic and racial nationalism, including: National Socialist organisations; White Supremacism; Identitarianism; anti-Muslim propaganda; and Incel or online meme cultures. This results in a problematic 'mission creep' of the limits of the term, and includes several organisations which – whilst generally considered to be unpleasant in their ideological leanings – may not be actively breaking the law nor necessarily be primary motors in the creation of polarisation and violent extremism. Thus, the development of a future European-wide compendium would also require clear explanation of the aims, objectives and limitations of that list from the start, as well as detailed delineation of who the compendium was primarily designed to support.

1.3. Accounting for the Context of Symbols

Another problem outlined in the early research section is that, whilst some symbols can have an unambiguous usage, others may be open either in the intention of their usage, or in their potential interpretation. Furthermore, much Far Right content is coded or highly context dependent. Far Right extremism is increasingly heavily laden with 'irony' or layered meanings that may be difficult to detect without adequate context. This is partly a tactic that has been developed in response to proscription or problematisation of certain symbolism by authorities, allowing Far Right networks to circumvent bans and takedowns but still convey extreme ideas:

- Numerals are often used to make statements that support National Socialism or White Supremacism. These can include the numbers 14, 18, 23, 88, 9% or 100%, which can reference elements of Adolf Hitler's life or name, or spread tropes about 'White Replacement'.
- Antisemitic or racist tropes are often obscured behind alternative language or pseudo-social scientific terms. This includes concepts of Globalism, Great Replacement, Cultural Marxism or anti-Soros statements, which can act as a dog whistle against Jewish communities and other minorities.
- Certain clothing brands or styles of wearing clothes can be used to express extreme Far Right ideas.
- Memes or characters can be used to express Far Right ideas, including Pepe the frog, red pilling or several Incel memes.

Miller-Idriss cites two examples that reflect the complicated nature of far-right iconography and the difficulty posed in interpreting them: 'Sometimes symbols are created and distributed with intentional messages that are not received as such – and other times, symbols with no deliberate messaging may be co-opted and marked as ideological in ways that were never intended' (Miller-Idriss 2018: 124). This raises the further challenge of how policy should respond to symbols in which its meaning may not be understood, even by its own consumers.

Particular issues are caused by this due to several symbols used by Far Right extremists being the same as, or similar to, those used by non-extremist or anti-Far Right groups. Symbols such as the cog or fist are used by both fascist and anti-fascist groups; Symbols such as runes or the Celtic cross are used by Far Right extremists but are also central to certain non-political religious or historical groups. Other symbols, such as the Totenkopf, may be confused with other non-extreme variations of the skull and crossbones.

1.4. Between freedom of expression and responding to VRWX

It is important to consider how any EU-wide response can navigate between freedom of expression and providing a robust response to VRWX.

Some groups or communities that have elements linked to the Far Right may also use similar language or imagery to express non-Far Right and non-extreme ideas. This includes Incel communities, who may take part in forms of discussions on sexuality that are not linked to instances violence and criminality. Issues of freedom of expression and civil rights are also relevant here – whilst social media platforms have no requirement to host hateful content and most European countries balance freedom of speech with hate crime legislation (unlike, for instance, the US), the overzealous listing of certain language may be problematic in undermining the legitimacy of this approach in the long-term.

There are also problems raised in elements of online social media platforms. Many VRWX organisations, for instance, have circumvented platform bans by ensuring that all content is hosted in non-European locations. This includes use of platforms such as VK (formerly VKontakte), a social networking platform based in St Petersburg, Gab, based in the US, several Chinese content sharing sites, as well as the cloud-based instant messenger Telegram.

Generally, platforms have come under significant pressure from governments and users to moderate VRWX content, most notably with the 2019 Christchurch Call, a non-binding pledge to prevent the internet being used as a tool for terrorism and violent extremism. However, the OECD (2020) finds that, whilst several services have introduced measures in response to VRWX and other forms of online Terrorist and Violent Extremist Content (TVEC), concerns remain about the limited levels of transparency content-sharing platforms have shown in this process. The OECD finds that only five of the top 50 online content-sharing services issue transparency reports about responding to TVEC, whilst those that do, do so idiosyncratically, using 'different definitions of terrorism and violent extremism, report different types of information, use different measurements and estimation methods, and issue reports with varying frequency on different timetables' (2020:4). This creates challenges simply in understanding the scope of the problem and developing a cross-industry perspective on the efficacy of companies' measures against TVEC online.

Some social media or online business platforms may not have the expertise or means to develop lists related to violent right-wing extremism (VRWX). A unified compendium would help to build a singular approach and combine knowledge from across Europe, incorporating experiences from leading EU researchers and practitioners. This would prevent smaller platforms from inadvertently enabling VRWX content and networks online, providing them with the necessary information for action, decreasing potential workload in developing the requisite knowledge and encouraging them to put relevant actions in place, based on the compendium.

An EU-wide list would also support those EU Member States that may have a limited background in dealing with Far Right violent extremism – either on a localised or international level. A single compendium would help to build a more unified and codified approach to VRWX in Europe, incorporating knowledge and experience from leading EU researchers and practitioners across the bloc. We must also be aware that VRWX is continuing to become more global, 'enabling icons and symbols from nationalist resistance movements from one particular geography to be claimed and appropriated by social and political movements in different locations' (Miller-Idriss 2018: 131). As such, links between proscribed European organisations and their symbolism are not always linear or clear cut. Furthermore, many new VRWX symbols have developed solely in an online environment, again decoupling from certain geographic regions. As such, a European-wide list may carry additional weight in terms of legitimacy and be useful in an international environment, providing a basis for those counter-extremism approaches outside the EU more prone to use against political opponents or minority communities.

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