

## CONCLUSION PAPER

*Digital small-scale expert meeting*

*28 May 2024, WebEx*

# The impact of right-wing extremist narratives on societal debate, increasing the breeding ground for VRWE

## Key outcomes

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The mainstreaming of violent right-wing extremist (VRWE) narratives takes place within several areas of society, such as in sports, the media, politics, and the digital domain. These narratives are strategically adapted and disseminated to appeal to broad audiences within society, aiming to impact societal debate and shifting borders within public discourse towards more extreme views. This leads to a situation in which views and taboos that were previously considered unacceptable, are now “normalised” and considered acceptable.

The objective of this small-scale expert meeting was to build awareness on how right-wing extremists mainstream their narratives and in doing so, impact societal debate, fuelling radicalisation and extremism. Subsequently, this meeting also aimed to discuss how practitioners working in the prevention and countering of violent extremism (PCVE) can signal, counter and/or prevent this development. The meeting outcomes are as follows:

- The process of mainstreaming fosters the erosion of trust in institutions within EU Member States. This is because VRWE narratives tend to question and undermine the reliability of democratic institutions such as the media, government and science by providing easy answers for difficult democratic realities. Therefore, the understanding of diverse viewpoints within society should be fostered. The simple, straightforward answer does not always reflect the only or best answer.
- Mainstreaming of VRWE within societal debate changes views on historical events and the narratives upon which society as a whole relies on and is constructed.
- The media should be aware of their role in the mainstreaming of right-wing extremist narratives. Individuals must be aware of how media attention can amplify the mainstreaming of extremist narratives within society. Avoid becoming a PR outlet by uncritically disseminating press releases.
- Critical thinking and media literacy should be better integrated into school curriculums. These skills reduce the fertile ground and susceptibility to radical or extremist ideologies, even when such ideologies are mainstreamed or framed innocently.

## Highlights of the discussion

### Mainstreaming in everyday life

Mainstreaming refers to radical and extremist actors that gradually and subtly shift public discourse towards more extreme positions. How can one be aware of the process of mainstreaming in an early stage, before harm is done and unconscious normalisation of quite harsh and racist notions develop further? Mainstreaming of VRWE vocabulary, terms and ideological thinking patterns takes place in everyday life in several domains, offline and online. Several examples were presented:

Within the **political domain** several politicians are increasingly adopting the rhetoric of far-right groups. For example, the term 'umvolkung' (repopulation) that stems from Nazi ideology is increasingly used to address challenges stemming from current migration issues. Instead of describing the situation in a more neutral manner an old term is used. Once confronted with the historical background of their wording, some of the politicians who use 'umvolkung' state that they were not aware of the sensitivity or argue that the alleged connection with the past is just a way to harm their reputation. Mainstreaming of terms is also happening in election campaigns. When a party is addressing a new theme during debates, there is the possibility that other parties will adopt the same or similar wording to keep a connection with the voters. The pitfall here is that both extremist ideologies as well as mainstreamed versions feature a clear call to action and offer straightforward, unnuanced solutions. It is not only through terminology, but also it can be a metaphor. For example, a politician recently expressed the metaphor of Europe as a cultivated garden, which must be protected from becoming a jungle. This analogy implicitly compared the influx of migrants, seeking asylum within Europe, to the uncontrolled growth of Europe into a jungle. This suggested the need to maintain order and prevent chaos within EU Member States.

Within the **online domain**, extremist actors are increasingly active, causing extremist and radical narratives being easily disseminated and mainstreamed using humour and memes. Often, moderation efforts turn out to be complicated. The real meaning of this content can sometimes only be understood if someone has background knowledge on the exact extremist narrative. For example, it is hard to counter what are called "dog whistles", the use of coded or suggestive language in political messaging to garner support from a particular group without provoking opposition. The phrasing used is not harmful in and of itself and therefore hard to trace with algorithms or AI. Moreover, countering this content is further complicated by the presence of a grey area between whether something can be considered merely humour or represents an extremist view. This type of content is referred to as "borderline content". Another aspect of society where mainstreaming becomes visible is within the media. The media itself is susceptible to the strategies used by right-wing extremists as well, as several media outlets help to mainstream certain content within the centre of society by providing a podium for these narratives, as they are often controversial or exciting and juicy.

Furthermore, the role of active **influencers on social media** was discussed. A new development in this field is "tradwife". Tradwives adhere to traditional gender roles and wish to fulfil the role of mother and wife in the best way. The choice of promoting tradwives is not ideological or extreme. However, some women active on TikTok and Instagram for instance, seem innocent, while promoting radical right narratives that normalise misogynistic, anti-immigrant sentiments and white supremacist views. An example of this is the encouragement of homeschooling as an answer to alleged LGBTQI+ indoctrination at schools. Another example is the emphasis in several societies on the idea that children of migrants need a form of special attention, based on xenophobic assumptions linked to their non-western moral values and religious background.

Another domain where this process of mainstreaming becomes visible is within **established media**. News outlets and other forms of media have a significant role in how they communicate and report about right-wing extremism and related narratives. As media outlets sometimes seek higher viewership or clicks, news reports or other forms of content are often sensationalised. The risk here is that reporting on far-right events for example, can inadvertently

provide more visibility to extreme views and in some cases the coverage can lead to individuals wanting to join a certain far-right movement.

Mainstreaming becomes visible within several **online games** as well. Apart from the very explicit nazi-worlds and online wars that are held based on racist or far-right discourses there are more subtle developments taking place. Online gaming platforms can provide a place where more subtle far-right opinions can be easily dispersed. Group dynamics play a role here as well, as online gaming may be a meeting point for individuals sympathising with a certain ideology across borders. In addition, the anonymous nature within these online games makes individuals say things they would not normally state offline. Another aspect of society where mainstreaming becomes visible, is through the use of **music**. For example, the melody of the song L'Amour Toujours from Gigi D'Agostino was used by far-right extremists in Germany to propagate xenophobic, nationalistic, anti-migration sentiments such as "Ausländer Raus" (foreigners out) and "Deutschland den Deutschen (Germany for the Germans)". The catchy tune helps to resonate the message and singing the lyrics with a happy melody lowers the resistance to using the words. Meanwhile, many DJs and festival organisers have decided not to play the song anymore.

Finally, **sports** can be a field where the mainstreaming of far-right narratives becomes clear as well. Within active clubs, predominantly centred on mixed martial arts, far-right groups build up well-prepared teams and dojos, positioning themselves as influential actors within the centre of the domain. Leading athletes gain respect in society and are considered as legitimate actors that simultaneously propagate far-right ideas to their public. The scenario, where far-right ideas find expression through legitimate popular actors, is also evident in certain popular podcasts, such as Joe Rogan, where far-right guests are hosted that use racially insensitive language.

### Mainstreaming: Content positioning and susceptibility

When looking at the process of mainstreaming, two strategic factors can be distinguished, namely **content positioning** and **susceptibility**. Content positioning is used by extremists in many ways, for example, through dog whistling. Issue positioning in mainstream news is used by putting right-wing extremist narratives in the centre of public discourse. This is achieved through calculated forms of provocation, with the goal to expand the boundaries of what is considered legitimate within society. In addition, susceptibility to the process of mainstreaming is fostered by the use of humorous forms of communication, such as memes, in order to evade censorship while using democratically legitimised actors as a dissemination strategy. Within this online realm, young individuals especially, seem to be susceptible to memes and humorous content that disseminate extreme right narratives. Unintentional mainstreaming can be, for example, a cultural shift because extreme right narratives are increasingly present within media, conversations and politics. When these narratives are omnipresent and influence societal debate more frequently, individuals become used to them and may become insensitive to extreme right statements. The intentional part lays in the use of strategic framing or the dissemination of disinformation with the goal of shifting public opinion.

The challenge in recognising mainstreaming is that the process often occurs gradually. The boundaries of what is considered normal and acceptable shift incrementally and sometimes without being noticed at all. The narratives used provide simple answers to complex realities. Susceptible individuals are searching for answers for specific problems, such as housing deficits, to make sense of their own circumstances.

### Consequences of mainstreaming

Participants discussed the consequences of mainstreaming. The article of Rothut and colleagues (2024), <sup>1</sup>points out three potential results of mainstreaming.

<sup>1</sup> Rothut, S., Schulze, H., Rieger, D. & Naderer, B. (2024). [Mainstreaming as a meta-process: A systematic review and conceptual model of factors contributing to the mainstreaming of radical and extremist positions.](#)

The first is a diminished reaction or resistance to radical and extremist narratives in society at large. Second, the separation of ideology from individuals and helping these actors to become part of the mainstream community, away from the fringes of extremism. Finally, normalisation can occur where taboos and views that were previously considered unacceptable now become normalised.

What are the consequences of mainstreaming and how can it impact societal debate?

- Right-wing extremist narratives frequently target minority groups, for example, by propagating ideas related to the great replacement theory. The **marginalisation of minority groups** can enhance discrimination and social exclusion present within several EU Member States.
- **Erosion of trust in institutions** is likely to happen when right-wing extremists question and undermine the reliability of democratic institutions, such as the media, science and government. It was stressed that established journalism is increasingly categorised as leftist, leading to the idea that there is a need for more right-wing journalists that show 'the real story'.
- **Changing perspectives** on how society looks at its history and its values can be observed. For example, a European candidate for a right-wing political party suggested that not every member of the SS was a bad person. Such statements can start to change the general consensus on historical events and figures, distorting and downplaying the atrocities perpetrated.

## Recommendations

- Integrate more critical thinking and media literacy into school curriculums. These skills decrease the fertile ground and susceptibility for radical/extremist ideologies, even when mainstreamed or framed innocently.
- Foster understanding of diverse viewpoints within society. The simple, straightforward answer does not always reflect the only or best answer.
- The media must be aware of its key role in the mainstreaming of right-wing extremist narratives. Individuals must be aware of how media attention can amplify the mainstreaming of extremist narratives within society. Do not become a PR outlet by uncritically disseminating press releases.
- Build individual resilience towards extremist narratives by empowering individuals to recognise mainstreaming and misinformation strategies by strengthening psychological resilience towards these narratives.
- Support P/CVE practitioners by providing information on current trends. The main issue of identifying and measuring mainstreaming lies in the subtlety and often invisible nature of the process. As mainstreaming often occurs gradually, the gathering of longitudinal data will allow for the analysis of developments over time.

## Further reading

RAN (2021). [The role of sports in violent right-wing extremist radicalisation and P/CVE](#)

RAN (2023). [The media and polarisation in Europe: Strategies for local practitioners to address problematic reporting.](#)

RAN (2024). [Empowering parents to make their children more emotionally resilient.](#)