

# SPOTLIGHT

OCTOBER 2022

COVID-19, Violent Extremism  
and Anti-Government Movements

**RANI**   
Practitioners





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**EDITORIAL**

**Fuelled by the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding measures taken by governments and authorities, there has been a surge in anti-government action throughout Europe. Several extremist groups, both from the violent left and right, have been feeding on and propagating misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy narratives and fake news. This reaches a broad audience of people who in turn become violent towards authorities.**

As a result of recent events, we see a growing mix of anti-vaxxers (the anti-COVID vaccination movement), conspiracists – including those spreading mis- and disinformation about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, who are often the same groups spreading mis- and disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic – climate extremists, and many more. The accumulative result is an increase in public distrust, particularly among vulnerable individuals, towards authorities and governments.

This edition of the RAN Practitioners Spotlight magazine therefore aims to take a look at the challenge posed by violent left wing and anarchist extremism (VLWAE), including how conspiracy narratives have fostered anti-government sentiments, and how VLWAE and VRWE groups have exploited the COVID-19 pandemic to turn people to violence. Within this Spotlight you can also find links to various publications and products produced by RAN Practitioners on the subject.

As always, we want to hear from you! If you would like to contribute to future editions of the Spotlight magazine, or if you have ideas for an article, interview or feature, please get in touch with the RAN Practitioners communications team at [ran@radaradvies.nl](mailto:ran@radaradvies.nl)

**RAN Practitioners Staff**

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**ARTICLE**  
**COVID-19, ANTI-  
GOVERNMENT  
MOVEMENTS  
AND RECENT  
DEVELOPMENTS IN  
VIOLENT LEFT WING  
AND ANARCHIST  
EXTREMISM**

**Lorenzo  
MARINONE**

**As with most extremist ideologies, the events of recent years have had an impact on Violent Left-Wing and Anarchist Extremism (VLWAE) too. The renewed relevance in the European and national agendas of issues such as the climate crisis, digitalisation, the COVID-19 pandemic and, most recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has resonated with well-established narratives within VLWAE. This is not surprising, since violent extremism thrives in times of crisis, and VLWAE is no exception. However, it is almost impossible to identify clear patterns in the way VLWAE have reacted to, or tried to exploit, recent events. This has to do with the very nature of its ideology, which can be compared to a Rubik's cube.**

**While its main ideological tenets (the fixed set of six colours) are remarkably static over time, VLWAE presents itself as a changing and diverse landscape, just as any side of the cube can show different combinations of colours. Indeed, each group has its own ideological mix, context-related priorities, and agenda. Moreover, the very notion of 'group' is put to the test within VLWAE, either by fluid and sometimes overlapping memberships, or by adopting spontaneous acts as an ideological keystone.**

As a result, there is no such thing as a 'VLWAE reaction' to the pandemic, or shared priorities about the climate crisis, and so on. At the same time, their ideological framework is flexible enough to support rapid change, as well as to accommodate longstanding narratives to new realities. An important side-effect of this flexibility is a high potential for hybridisation with other movements, for shorter, tactical goals as well as for longer term, strategic calculus.

This feature of VLWAE emerged prominently over the last years when left-wing and anarchist extremists were seen participating in anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine, and anti-Green Pass protests in many European countries. VLWAE swiftly adapted their narratives against pervasive State control, the repressive system, and anti-technology stances, to protest how governments were managing the pandemic, albeit with important differences depending on the specific contexts.

They were also often sharing the same streets and squares with right-wing extremists and conspiracy thinkers, therefore raising fears of tactical convergences with otherwise ideological rivals. Indeed, if one looks back to the past decades, it is not uncommon for violent left-wing and anarchist extremists to join forces with right-wing extremists, albeit for specific, limited purposes.

Arguably, to date this alliance of purposes has not materialised on a vast scale. Anti-authority movements have been quietly but relentlessly hegemonised by the extreme and radical right, and in most countries the share of VLWAE protesters has increasingly

grown thin. Likewise, it is hard to tell if there has ever been an actual strategy beyond the isolated initiative of some left-wing groups or anarchist cells, since in most cases it was individuals with ties to VLWAE who joined the protests.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that contemporary anti-authority movements, and related issues, are not appealing anymore for VLWAE. While the greater presence of right-wing extremists in these protests, both offline and in their online ecologies, may be well explained by the lower numbers of VLWAE affiliates, it could also reflect different modus operandi and needs. Indeed, violent right-wing extremists have exploited the pandemic with the strategic aim of normalising their narratives and going mainstream. They wanted to be visible and use the protests to trigger culture wars. On the contrary, VLWA extremists usually avoid being under the spotlight and do not perceive large-scale normalisation as a priority.

And yet, it must be noted that all the issues flagged by anti-authority movements, that retain the highest mobilising power, fall within the greater extreme left-wing and anarchist ideological basket. For instance, the pandemic revitalised traditional VLWAE issues such as scepticism about technological and scientific developments, that featured more prominently during the 1990s to early 2000s, and never really stopped being at the centre of their agenda. In this regard, the VLWAE discourse is also circulating more conspiracy narratives, that resonate with parts of these movements, than just few years ago, albeit on a much lesser scale compared to right-wing extremism.

This is another feature that has facilitated contacts between VLWAE and these protesters. In fact, attacks against communication infrastructure (e.g., 5G) have been conducted both by anti-authority protesters (since 2020) and by VLWA extremists (already before the pandemic, since 2019), for different ideological reasons. As a consequence, it is safe to assume that these movements are perceived by VLWAE as interesting target groups for grooming and proselytising.

Moreover, at least in some cases, VLWA extremists have participated in the protests and rallies advocating for a much more confrontational stance towards police and authorities in general. Infiltrating legitimate movements to radicalise their attitudes and requests is a longstanding VLWAE tactic that has been and still is consistently used across Europe. In recent years, there are some clues that VLWAE groups might be trying to exploit climate protests. For instance, in Italy, a dozen people from autonomous scene in Turin are on trial on charges of trying to infiltrate the local branch of the eco movement Fridays for Future since 2019.

**Lorenzo Marinone is a researcher at the European Foundation for Democracy (EFD). He focuses on radicalisation, violent extremism, and security. He has worked extensively on these issues with Italian institutions as well as with NATO and UN agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization. He is researching radicalisation and P/CVE as part of the team of the European H2020 project PARTICIPATION.**

**“As a result, there is no such thing as a ‘VLWAE reaction’ to the pandemic, or shared priorities about the climate crisis, and so on. At the same time, their ideological framework is flexible enough to support rapid change, as well as to accommodate longstanding narratives to new realities. An important side-effect of this flexibility is a high potential for hybridisation with other movements, for shorter, tactical goals as well as for longer term, strategic calculus.”**



A paper published by RAN Practitioners in November 2021, provides a concise overview of and updated figures on VLWAE. The objective is to help practitioners working in the field of P/CVE to better understand the complexity of the phenomenon and to identify the existing practices and programmes to address issues relating to this kind of extremism. You can read the paper in full [here](#).



# Contemporary Violent Left-wing and Anarchist Extremism (VLWAE) in the EU: Analysing Threats and Potential for P/CVE

Radicalisation Awareness Network



Authored by **Francesco Farinelli**, RAN Expert Pool Member, and **Lorenzo Marinone**, RAN External Expert

## CONTEMPORARY VIOLENT LEFT-WING AND ANARCHIST EXTREMISM IN THE EU: ANALYSING THREATS AND POTENTIAL FOR P/CVE

**Table 1: Left-wing and anarchist terrorist attacks from 2006 to 2020**

Year	Number of failed, foiled, or completed attacks	Main affected countries
2006	55	Greece, Italy, Spain, Germany.
2007	21	Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain.
2008	28	Greece, Spain, Italy.
2009	40	Spain, Greece, Italy.
2010	45	Austria, Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Spain.
2011	37	Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain.
2012	18	Greece, Italy, Spain.
2013	24	Greece, Italy, Spain.
2014	13	Greece, Italy, Spain.
2015	13	Greece, Italy, Spain.
2016	27	Greece, Italy, Spain.
2017	24	Greece, Italy, Spain, Germany, France.
2018	19	Greece, Italy, Spain.
2019	26	Greece, Italy, Spain.
2020	24	Italy.
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>414</b>	Greece, Italy, Spain, Austria, Denmark, Germany, Czech Republic, France.

Sources: Europol TE-SAT reports from 2007 to 2021.

As shown in Table 1, **414 attacks** inspired by left-wing and anarchist extreme ideology took place from 2006 to 2020, mainly resulting in **vandalism** and destruction of property. Nonetheless, a number of **injuries and human casualties** were also part of the consequences that followed from these attacks in the last two decades. The most prominent violent groups that carried out these kinds of attacks include the **New Red Brigades** (*Nuove Brigate Rosse*, 1999-2002, two casualties)<sup>(6)</sup>, the **Revolutionary Organization 17 November** (*Epanastatiki Organosi dekaefta Noemvri*, 2000, 1 casualty)<sup>(7)</sup>, the so-called **Black Bloc**<sup>(8)</sup> (a large Black Bloc presence in a number of violent riots during international summits resulted in many hundreds of police officers wounded in the last two decades), the **Revolutionary Struggle** (*Epanastatikos Agonas*, 2009, 1 injured)<sup>(9)</sup>, the **Sect of Revolutionaries** (*Sekta Epanastaton*, 2009, 1 casualty)<sup>(10)</sup>, the **Informal Anarchist Federation** (*Federazione Anarchica Informale*, 2010-2012, several injured)<sup>(11)</sup>, the **Militant**

<sup>(6)</sup> Paparella & Rinolfi, Marco Biagi, government labour law consultant, murdered.

<sup>(7)</sup> Kassimeris, For a Place in History.

<sup>(8)</sup> Anarchists, autonomists and activists with a nebulous ideological bent make up the majority of the Black Bloc. It can be considered more of a set of tactics than a solid entity. During the demonstrations, militantly minded individuals who work in small autonomous cells and are willing to use violence to attain their objectives are gathered. To avoid being identified by authorities and to foster egalitarianism inside the bloc, they normally dress in black and wear black masks. In this regard, see: Mareš, Extreme Left Terrorism in Contemporary Europe, p. 306.

<sup>(9)</sup> Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2010, p. 7.

<sup>(10)</sup> Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2010, p. 7.

<sup>(11)</sup> Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2011, p. 27.



The latest episode of the RAN Practitioners podcast series, which hears from a RAN practitioner and an expert in the field – Nicola Hieke of the State Coordination Office Live Democracy! Bavaria (LKS) and Stephan Lewandowsky from the University of Bristol respectively (see 'Profiles' section) – discusses the role of conspiracy narratives in fostering anti-government sentiments. You can listen to the podcast in full [here](#).



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## Anti-establishment extremism



## RAN PROFILES Practitioners

### Nicola HIEKE

### Stephan LEWANDOWSKY



**Nicola HIEKE**

Nicola Hieke is a member of the State Coordination Office Live Democracy! Bavaria (LKS). LKS has been active in the field of dealing with violent right wing extremism (VRWE), group-focused enmity (GMF) and racism since 2007. Nicola develops (counter) strategies and supports practitioners actors throughout Bavaria in their daily work. The main task of the LKS, which is an institution of the Bavarian Youth Council (BJR), is to facilitate networking among local actors, sharing information and providing advice, including mediation work.



**Stephan LEWANDOWSKY**

Stephan Lewandowsky is the Chair in Cognitive Psychology, at the School of Psychological Science, in the University of Bristol. Stephan is a cognitive scientist who studies how people update their memories if things they believe turn out to be false. His research has led him to study the persistence of misinformation in society, and how myths and misinformation – such as those spread during the COVID-19 pandemic – can spread. Stephan has published papers on prebunking to inoculate against misinformation, and the spread of Islamophobic and extremist Islamist disinformation.



**ARTICLE**

# A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES FOSTERING ANTI- GOVERNMENT SENTIMENT

**Alexander  
RITZMANN**

People who believe in conspiracy narratives are often trying to fix a problem. In many cases, they are in some kind of personal crisis (e.g. financial debt, reputation loss, job loss, partner loss) when they subscribe to stories claiming for example that a small “hidden (Jewish) elite” is running the world, that “white people” are being systematically replaced or that Bill Gates is using the COVID 19 pandemic to put microchips in peoples bodies to control them.

**Most conspiracy narratives also promise a caring community, belonging, safety, a status upgrade, adventure and often even heroism. Simply put: people believe in conspiracy narratives to feel better. These narratives promise an essential upgrade to the (subjective) status quo to the “believer”. And they put the blame of what went wrong in one’s lives on someone else, which can be quite liberating.**

Conspiracy narratives that are of particular relevance for P/CVE practitioners and policy makers are those that call for the degrading of others or are proclaiming an existential, apocalyptic threat that justifies or even mandates violence. The “Great Replacement”, “QAnon”, the “War against Islam” and “protect the children/vaccines kill children” fall in this category.

Possible Indicators for potential violence are:

**“Upgrading by downgrading”:** The promised status upgrade of the “believer” is based on the degradation or dehumanization of “the others” (out-group)

**“The end is near”:** The “believers” are facing supposedly existential, apocalyptic threats by out-groups

**“Moral outrage”:** Unbearable crimes are supposedly being committed by out-groups, e.g. the abuse or killing of children.

Conspiracy narratives are mostly not about IQ’s or information deficits. Many “believers” claim to be well informed critical thinkers who spend a lot of time investigating “the truth”. Research suggests that the more intelligent “believers” are, the better they are at defending their narrative. Why? Because believing their truth makes them feel better than the realistic alternative. This indicates that the main issue here is not “the truth” as an end point of scientific research (which is more of a process than an end point anyway), but the lack of “trust” in established mainstream governments, universities and civil society organizations. In that

sense, we are not in a post-truth, but a post-trust era. Conspiracy narratives are probably as old as human language since they promise the above mentioned feel-better functionality. Having said this, previous “gatekeepers” of information, like established newspapers and TV stations, have partially been replaced as moral and factual universal authorities. Partisan cable TV stations since the 1990s, and algorithmically amplified polarisation as part of the business models of social media companies since 2014, have been triggering basic human instincts like fear, outrage and moral grandstanding in a suggestive 24 hours-7 days a week on-demand way.

It is difficult, if not near impossible, to change someone’s mind if their current belief and in-group makes them feel safe and relevant. Some anthropologists suggest that historically, homo sapiens who stayed in tight groups to fight threats spread their DNA more successfully than those who wandered into the forest by themselves, leading to a widely shared biological „need“ for community. Until today, this can make humans pick the “truth” of their in-group over otherwise available information, especially if the “out-group” information challenges sacred values or the group identity. Neuroscientific research suggests that the „threat perception-centre“ of the human brain, the amygdala, which reacts when we encounter a physical threat like a bear in the forest, also takes charge of our behaviours when our most valued/sacred beliefs are challenged. This indicates that confrontational approaches when addressing conspiracy narratives will not work or even backfire, particularly if the “believer” is in a state of “fused identity”, meaning the individual and the group identity have merged.

The good news is that conspiracy believers at some point will have doubts about their life choices again. Maybe the hopes and projections of the promised life-upgrade did not realise. Maybe the leadership of the new community is corrupt, unjust or even dangerous. This can make people re-evaluate their choice and then they might be looking for support to leave. This is the opportunity for a successful P/CVE intervention, very



similar to deradicalization/exit work. In a private context, when family or friends are conspiracy believers, staying in contact, avoiding dividing topics and looking for common ground can help facilitating an exit from the world of “hidden elites” and conspiracies.


The RAN will be publishing a paper with concrete recommendations for practitioners and policy makers with the title ‘Conspiracy narratives and anti-government sentiments in relation to (V)RWE and other forms of extremism’ very soon.

**Alexander Ritzmann is a senior adviser with the Counter Extremism Project (CEP) and RAN Practitioners.**





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A recent paper, published by RAN Practitioners in June 2022, provides local (P/CVE) coordinators and first-line practitioners with insights on how anti-government extremism is manifesting itself on the local level. The paper also discusses possible interventions to prevent violent or near-violent actions stemming from this kind of extremism. You can read the paper in full [here](#).

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**CONCLUSION PAPER**  
*RAN LOCAL meeting on 'Preventing possible violence based on anti-government extremism on the local level'*  
24-25 March 2022, online meeting


## Preventing possible violence based on anti-government extremism on the local level

### Short summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated a momentum for different narratives that are based on the idea of distrusting governments and political policies. These narratives have fostered a new style of "anti-government extremism" that seems to attract a wide variety of extremist groups, such as anti-vaxxers, conspiracists, right-wing extremists and left-wing extremists, and is reaching a broad audience of people who, in turn, become distrustful and sometimes even hostile towards (local) government. Anti-government extremism refers to any movements or actions with an antipathy towards the government's representatives and officials, and democratic institutions. This also means that it refers to the groups that oppose and resist the government's policies and are willing to incite or commit violence, not only against the authorities, but also against any institutions or individuals that comply with or implement the government's policies. In this context, the RAN LOCAL Working Group has convened an online meeting for local preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) coordinators and first-line practitioners to collect insights on how anti-government extremism is manifesting itself on the local level and discuss possible interventions to prevent violent or near-violent actions stemming from this kind of extremism. This paper is based on the insights of this meeting on 24 and 25 March 2022. The participants proposed, amongst others, the following recommendations:

- Use the interventions and action plans for violent extremism that already exist and see how they can be adjusted to deal with (near-) violent actions stemming from anti-government sentiments.
- Create new alliances to include community partners and civil society actors.
- Train and educate local professionals in recognising and acting upon predominant symbols and narratives used by anti-government extremist groups and how to reach out and engage with local communities.
- Use media to report hate speech and involve local key figures or influencers to stimulate public debate and promote campaigns against violence.

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CONCLUSION PAPER  
RAN LOCAL: Anti-government extremism on the local level  
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## Context of the discussion

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, extremists from different groups have fed on conspiracy narratives **stating that the governments are misleading the public, ignoring their citizens' demands and taking away their freedoms**. This narrative is being used by different extremists' ideologies to further strengthen their cause and grind down trust in the governments, but it has also been embraced by other ordinary people filled with frustrations and uncertainty. **This narrative led to a new form of anti-government extremism that is manifesting itself through a combination of violent and near-violent actions.**

The degree to which anti-government extremism manifests itself through violent means **is greatly dependent on local and contextual factors**. While some participants described the level of violence in their countries as "high" and "growing", others indicated that the violence level in their countries remained "relatively low".

### Manifestations of anti-government extremism on the local level

Type of manifestation	Example
<b>Riots</b>	The most prominent example is what many cities have recently witnessed: <b>violent riots and clashes with the police</b> . In Belgium, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands and Austria as well as many other countries, protesters took the streets to demonstrate against their governments' policies regarding COVID-19 restrictions and vaccinations policies. On several occasions, these protests escalated quickly and turned into violent riots in which rioters clashed with the police and demolished public properties, and set police buildings and cars on fire, such as the protest in Rotterdam in the Netherlands <sup>(1)</sup> .
<b>Vandalising</b>	Another violent example of anti-government extremism <b>is vandalising healthcare and vaccinations centres and assaulting and attacking their employees</b> . Healthcare personnel, especially those working at vaccination sites, were victims of violent attacks by angry vaccine sceptics and conspiracy theorists who believe their governments are violating their freedoms. They vandalised and set the vaccinations centres on fire, one instance of which in Poland was declared by the Polish government as "an act of terror" <sup>(1)</sup> .
<b>Individual violent acts</b>	Note that violent anti-government extremism does not always manifest itself through the acts of extremist groups, it is also portrayed by individuals who, out of anger and opposition to their government's policies, carry out violent acts on their own. One example is the killing of an employee at a gas station in Idar-Oberstein who was shot by a customer after asking him to wear the mandatory mask face <sup>(2)</sup> .
<b>Threatening politicians</b>	Nevertheless, participants also referred to <b>another worrying aspect of anti-government extremism: threatening politicians and officials directly and indirectly via social media and in real life</b> . Also, schools and healthcare personnel implementing the government's prevention and vaccination measures have been harassed and threatened. However, threats and attacks against the local and national politicians are not only aimed to threaten the officials representing the governments. These are also attacks on the democracy and the fundamental democratic legal order in the society. For example, politicians in France received direct emails threatening them with a "hail of bullets" if they pass new restrictions <sup>(3)</sup> .

<sup>(1)</sup> See: <https://www.vox.com/2021/1/26/22250380/violent-anti-lockdown-protests-netherlands>

<sup>(2)</sup> See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germans-shocked-by-killing-cashier-after-covid-mask-row-2021-09-21/>

<sup>(3)</sup> See: [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/french-mps-receive-death-threats-over-covid-19-restrictions/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/french-mps-receive-death-threats-over-covid-19-restrictions/)

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ARTICLE  
**ANTI-GOVERNMENT  
SENTIMENTS  
– A CRITICAL  
REFLECTION**

**Fabian  
WICHMANN**

**The right to disagree with your government, to organise and protest on this basis is a core human freedom and value. Europeans are free to call for the replacement of their governments and to radically re-imagine their governing institutions, up to and including calling for the disestablishment of their state or the creation of new states. These rights, when exercised peacefully, are sacrosanct. But this also means that there is always the danger that this fundamental right will be instrumentalised.**



**Since 2015, various xenophobic and nationalist movements in Europe have been finding more and more topics with which to bring their agenda into the public sphere and thus into the public's perception. This began with the protests around the Pegida group in 2015, which started in Germany and then spread as a model throughout Europe. Migration polarised society and right-wing extremist groups tried to profit from this. It took several years for this wave of protest, which sometimes demonstrated on a weekly basis, to subside. The apocalypse announced by these groups failed to materialise, and thus there was an increasing lack of issues with which the actors of this movement could be perceived.**

This changed in 2020 with the outbreak of COVID-19 and the associated state measures to respond to the pandemic. The measures to contain COVID-19 were associated with the most drastic restrictions on civil rights since the Second World War. And being against this or peacefully protesting against it is not extremist per se. Groups that had previously relied on the issue of migration and fleeing as a tool of political agitation now needed a new topic and, after a phase of reorientation, found it in the state measures to contain the pandemic. Smaller protests, with very heterogeneous backgrounds, grew into large demonstrations. Different ideological groups invaded the public space and tried to gain sovereignty of interpretation. There were participants with different motivations, alongside right-wing extremist actors and powerful influencers. It was difficult for politicians and the media to categorise the protest ideologically. Especially because the topic was socially polarised and the effects of the pandemic, as well as the measures against it, affected all parts of society. And it isn't over yet.

### **Weaponised distrust**

Existing fears, insecurities and mistakes in the communication of politics and science were used by groups to further fuel the mood via social media and other forms of modern communication. In the process, parties were founded or existing

parties developed into monothematic actors who wanted to expand their reach with their protest and also use conspiracy narratives and apocalyptic narratives for this purpose. Conspiracy narratives that marked a clear enemy image: politics. The aim of this polarisation was to carry one's own political goals into the social sphere, partly covertly, and thus to make them accessible.

The result of this coordinated polarisation were partly violent riots in many European countries and an unjustified generalisation of the protest's perception and description. But there were violent attacks, death threats for politicians and scientists, damage to property and even riots. There have also been individual tragedies, where people committed suicide, murdered individuals or, as happened in Germany, murdered their entire family. The ideological basis for this were these apocalyptic narratives. The degree of radicalisation of groups that had not previously been perceived as violent and the heterogeneous nature of the protest groups led politicians and academics to seek a name for this phenomenon. The protests, while referring to concrete measures in connection with the fight against the pandemic, generalised the addressee of their criticism to politics in general. Thus, it was no longer the measures that were conveyed as the enemy image, but politics in general, as it was held responsible for the situation. Fuelled and reinforced by the processes described above. The result: weaponised distrust. According to the 2022 Global Peace Index (GPI) "The pandemic pushed many countries towards economic and political crises, while also heightening levels of anti-government sentiment and distrust of authority," the report stated. "Countries that had become progressively more peaceful experienced outbreaks of protests and violence aimed particularly at the government's handling of the pandemic."

### **Are we using the right terms?**

Due to the size of the protest and its propensity for violence, as well as the fact that responsibility was addressed to politicians, the protests were described under the term "anti-government sentiments". In some countries, the term also



**“The protests, while referring to concrete measures in connection with the fight against the pandemic, generalised the addressee of their criticism to politics in general. Thus, it was no longer the measures that were conveyed as the enemy image, but politics in general, as it was held responsible for the situation. Fuelled and reinforced by the processes described above. The result: weaponised distrust. According to the 2022 Global Peace Index (GPI) “The pandemic pushed many countries towards economic and political crises, while also heightening levels of anti-government sentiment and distrust of authority,” the report stated.”**

found its way into official observation categories, for example for the domestic intelligence service. A term that at first glance seems to summarise the broad field of actors and issues, but on closer look it poses problems. If one looks at the meaning, it describes an attitude that is directed against a government or an administration. This points to the first problem. The term says nothing about the quality of the protest. Is it violent? Further, it does not say anything about the content or the underlying ideology. What does the anti-government sentiments category convey? What political goal, what ideology underlies anti-government sentiments? In addition, there is the underlying yardstick, with reference to the contextual conditions. Who defines a protest as legitimate or illegitimate, and under what conditions? What social or historical conditions affect the interpretation of the term and how is a protest evaluated under changing social or political conditions? Because of these ambiguities, the term runs the risk of criminalising legitimate protest or narrowing the space for criticism of state action.

It is obvious that the protests around the measures to combat the pandemic were instrumentalised by politically marginalised groups. It is clear that polarisation was followed by radicalisation, which in part had dangerous developments for the police but also for society. The protests have shown that it was always about balancing individual freedom in relation to society and that individual behaviour has an effect on society. There is also no question that there is a need for a decisive response. It is important to understand that so called anti-government sentiments were used by that extremist and other violence-oriented groups, because they wanted to use social protest for their own purposes. And thus wanted to instrumentalise the protest as a revolutionary swing mass, so to speak. Furthermore, the actors and groups described are not to be understood as a homogeneous group.

Therefore, the term only describes a social phenomenon and can therefore lead to incorrect conclusions when dealing with it. It affects the media, politics, the educational field as well as the pre-political space. Nevertheless, in addition to describing and evaluating a phenomenon, we should think more intensively about the naming or re-naming of this phenomenon. Because the problems we are facing are real, but we have to name right.

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A paper produced by RAN Practitioners in February 2022, identifies the main manifestations and threats connected with the exploitation of the COVID-19 pandemic, including how VRWE propaganda and narratives fostered anti-establishment sentiments. The paper also predicts possible future scenarios of VRWE activity and provides recommendations for practitioners and policymakers on how to prevent them. You can read the paper in full [here](#).



# Capitalising on Crises

## How VRWEs Exploit the COVID-19 Pandemic and Lessons for P/CVE

Authored by **Miroslav Mareš**, RAN Expert Pool Member



### CAPITALISING ON CRISES – HOW VRWEs EXPLOIT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**Table 1: Selected cases of exploitation of crises by RWE**

Crisis	Main impact on RWE/VRWE	Specific examples of VRWE activity
Post-WWI (economic, international, pandemic) crisis	The rise of fascism in Italy, establishment of Nazism in Germany and various right-wing authoritarian movements and regimes in the world. They utilized conspiratorial beliefs about the supposed Jewish impact on the financial systems and international institutions on the one hand and on Bolshevism on the other hand.	Mussolini's March to Rome in 1922, mobilisation of the paramilitary Italian Fasces of Combat (so called blackshirts) for threatening the government.
Great Depression (1929 to late 1930s)	The Nazi seizure of power in Germany, a new rise of fascist and Nazi movements in the world. The spread of messages about the "decline of the West" and about the growing danger of the communists fuelled support for RWE movements.	The Reichstag fire in 1933 as a false flag attack committed by Nazis with the aim to discredit political opponents.
Transformation and post-transformation crisis in central and eastern Europe in the 1990s and 2000s	The rise of VRWE and RWE in new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. Alleged anti-national structures from the liberal and leftist spectrum were labelled as "corrupt elites", also the national and ethnic minorities were attacked as "parasites" etc. (mostly Roma).	Violent radicalisation of anti-government protests in Hungary in 2006 by right-wing extremists, including far-right hooligans, utilised by right-wing extremist parties.
The so-called migration crisis in the mid and the second half of the 2010s	Lone-actors terrorism, the rise of RWE parties and vigilante groups. Migrants are characterized as a part of the so called "great replacement conspiracy", democratic politicians are accused of being a part of "cultural Marxist" anti-national front etc.	Bombing of the asylum seekers centre in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 2017 by neo-Nazi activists trained in a paramilitary camp in Russia

Of course, it is not possible to explain the rise and strength of RWE and activism of VRWE only as a result of the crises. The long-term strategies in "ordinary times" and reactions to long-term political issues also create a basis for the RWE movements. However, in time of crises, the right-wing extremists/violent right-wing extremists (RWE/VRWE) can multiply their activism and their mobilisation efforts aimed at members and supporters and competing with and threatening political opponents.



Nicola HIEKE

**FEATURE**

## LKS Bavaria

**Dealing with far right activism and anti-democratic sentiment in the pandemic. LKS Bayern is a specialist office combating far right extremism, group focused enmity and antisemitism in the state of Bavaria, Germany. The organisation coordinates and provides different advice services for various target groups. It aims to support individuals, institutions and local communities that are confronted with far right extremism.**

**FEATURE**

**The main focus lies on the empowerment of civil society as an important actor in the work against the violent right wing.**

Like a magnifying glass, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted underlying anti-democratic, far right and antisemitic attitudes already present in society. Over the past two years they are predominantly fuelled by the spread of conspiracy narratives – often of antisemitic and anti-democratic content – in protest marches against the measures imposed by governments in order to battle the pandemic, in telegram chats and in social media channels run by COVID deniers.

Online or offline – these protest groups mushroomed during the pandemic and are widely infiltrated or sometimes even initiated by the far right. All over Germany, they've built networks, set up fundraising structures and even founded a few political organisations and parties.

As a specialist agency combating violent right wing extremism, we have strongly been impacted by these events in all of our fields of activity, with some particular challenges for the work of our practitioners in the fields of strategy development, counselling and education. As a result, we have learned some lessons and developed a set of good practices:

**Building new alliances:** Our counselling and advise services cater to a broad range of target groups in Bavaria. Another central part of the work lies in building networks with cooperation partners and connecting people from different parts of society. In 2020/2021 nearly 40 per cent of the counselling cases were related to the spread of fake news and conspiracy narratives during the pandemic and were often centred around the radicalisation of adults difficult to reach. This led to new cooperations with, for example, psychologists, church workers / specialist offices dealing with religious cults and representatives from self-help groups.

**Information and Education:** The massive spread of conspiracy narratives leaves a lot of people seeking for advice in dealing with them on a professional level. Over the past two years our practitioners developed educational programmes and formats in order to empower practitioners such as social workers and teachers. These programmes are based on already existing strategies, but also provide knowledge on current conspiracy narratives and the channels, networks and structures they are spread in.

**New target groups:** The radicalisation of a person strongly affects their family members and personal surroundings. In order to meet the changing demands we have extended the target group in our parent and family counselling service. Primarily addressing only those dealing with radicalising youth, the advice service is now available to everyone struggling with radicalisation and conspiracy narratives in their personal environment.

Combating violent right wing extremism and radicalisation is not an isolated task for security services. Connecting people and different actors from state and civil society has always been at the centre of our work and has become a crucial factor in the development of successful strategies on a local level.

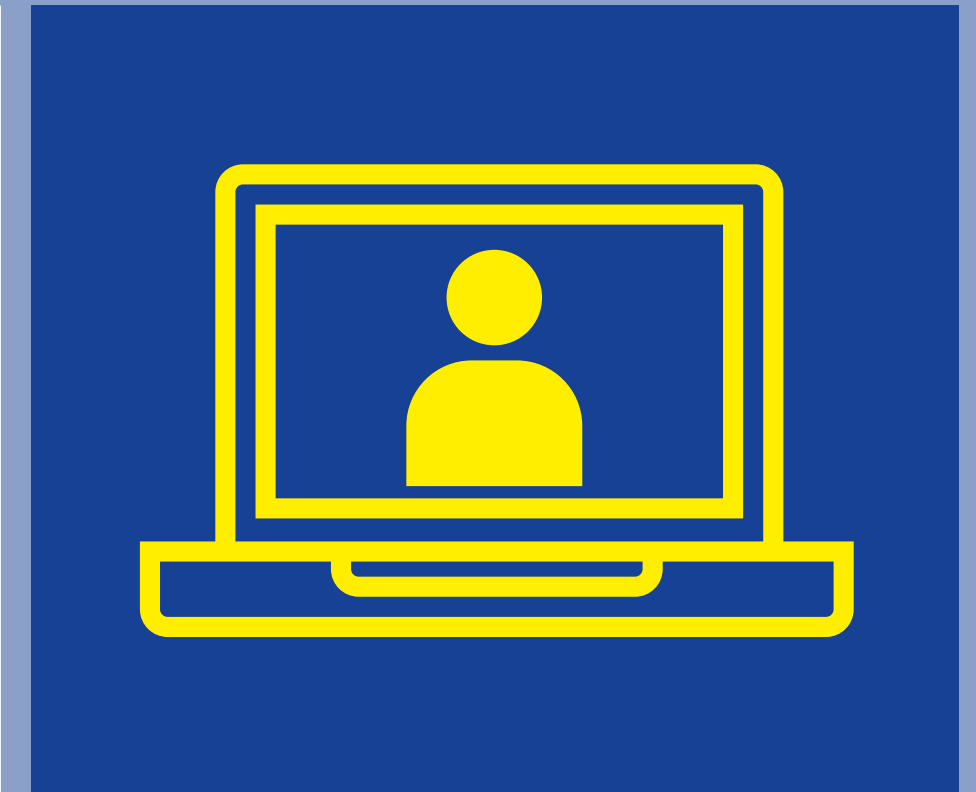
With public attention primarily paid to the protests and the propaganda spread by a large number of people, specific attention has to be paid to those directly affected by these recent developments. While we tend to focus on the (potential) perpetrators, it is more important than ever to also cater to the actual victims of the spike in hate speech and hate crime during the pandemic.

**Nicola Hieke, M.A., has been active in researching and combating violent right wing extremism since 2008, working in cooperation with both civil society organisations and government. She is the head of LKS Bayern. The specialist office is a part of and financed by the German federal programme „Live Democracy“.**

## Highlights: **RAN Practitioners activity**

For the latest on RAN Practitioners activity stay tuned for updates in the RAN Practitioners Update and on RAN Practitioners social media channels.

For more information about RAN Practitioners activities please visit the Calendar on the RAN website [here](#).



**RAN C&N**  
Working Group meeting  
10-11 November

[What's going on online?  
Emerging trends and  
developments in the online  
landscape of radicalisation  
and polarisation](#)

**RAN FC&S**  
Working Group meeting  
22 November

[How can practitioners  
address the effects of  
perceived \(institutional,  
social, interpersonal\)  
discrimination/racism?](#)



# LIBRARY: DISCOVER MORE

If you would like to discover more about the topic of prisons, rehabilitation and reintegration you can get in touch with the RAN Staff, take a look at the [RAN Collection of Inspiring Practices](#) or read through some of the latest [RAN papers](#). We have included some of these papers in a carefully selected collection of interesting and relevant articles below.

**RAN. (2022)**

**[An online P/CVE approach for local authorities: challenges, tips & tricks](#)**

**RAN. (2022)**

**[RAN activities on local coordination and the local approach to P/CVE](#)**



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