



CONCLUSIONS PAPER

THE EMERGING FACETS OF EXTREMISM IN THE EU: NEW TRENDS AND DRIVERS

Thematic Research Meeting

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the extremist landscape in the European Union (EU) and beyond has been increasingly characterised by composite dynamics. Enhanced ideological flexibility, either as a tactical choice or resulting from the declining relevance of structured, coherent ideological frameworks for (violent) mobilisation, has fostered the convergence of different extremist ideologies. Multiple overlapping crises, such as COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, and the climate crisis have provided extremist actors with opportunities to tap into new grievances and protests to sow distrust and advance their agenda. Notably, this conjuncture has also facilitated the emergence of loosely organised extremist groups (e.g., anti-authority/anti-government extremists) and the infiltration of extremists in peaceful protests. Additionally, emerging technologies such as the metaverse, serve as the most recent testing ground, as extremists continue to find new channels and tactics to normalise their message.

Against this background, the Thematic Research Meeting (TRM) held on 9 March 2023 gathered researchers, academics, and scholars from the EU and the United Kingdom (UK) to discuss the latest trends and drivers likely to influence violent extremism and radicalisation processes in the EU over the next years.

Participants analysed how trends and drivers are interconnected and sometimes mutually reinforce each other, and how disruptive events – such as major crises and ground-breaking technological innovations – can be weaponised to benefit the extremist agenda.

SOME OF THE KEY OUTCOMES OF THE MEETING WERE:

- **Whole-of-society approach:** government, the private sector, and civil society need to be engaged in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) work. An organisationally more fluid extremist landscape requires responses to both the ‘demand’ and ‘supply’ sides of extremism. Since it is increasingly difficult to identify organisational structures for the latter, top-down approaches traditionally used to combat hierarchical groups will likely be less effective.
- **Narratives, information, and trust:** as extremists rely less on coherent ideologies and more on crisis-driven grievances, conspiracy theories as well as mis/disinformation have gained even greater significance for radicalisation and mobilisation efforts. Counter-messaging (including both counter-narratives and alternative narratives) will play an equally important role in restoring public trust and fostering resilience in democratic institutions.
- **Role of technology and tech companies:** there is a need for more awareness/education on the implications of new technologies such as immersive reality. Informed users will be less likely to think of technology as threatening and can embrace it as an opportunity for the development of innovative P/CVE approaches instead. Solely relying on tech companies to self-regulate and moderate content appears to be insufficient; safety by design is an important component of the governments’ engagement with the industry.
- **(Re)defining extremism:** as ideologies, affiliations, and collective action become more fluid, and extremist messaging is disguised and normalised, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish extremists from protesters who may take confrontational stances but are not associated with extremist groups. Violence may not be the only and most useful parameter to categorise these actors. Failure to adopt a more nuanced approach may lead to extensive securitisation, which risks dismissing legitimate demands by citizens, thus triggering new radicalisation processes.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE DISCUSSION

Considering the composite nature of contemporary radicalisation and extremism in Europe, the meeting focused on the discussion of six emerging trends and drivers that are essential to understand the complexity of the current landscape:

- a. Post-organisational violent extremism.
- b. Accelerationism.
- c. The role of gender in normalising extremist messages.
- d. Connections between the climate crisis and extremism.
- e. The influence of international crises, calamities and geopolitical events on extremism.
- f. New immersive experiences such as the metaverse.

The meeting also generated insights for policy-making and identified the main gaps in research.

POST-ORGANISATIONAL VIOLENT EXTREMISM

When analysing the new assemblage of violent extremism in Europe and beyond, **the post-organisational (PO) dimension emerges not just as a rising trend, but as a defining feature.**

PO extremism can be characterised as having three main effects. First, it **blurs borders between different strands of extremism**, which may already be unstable and mixed. Second, it **fosters the emergence or construction of new ideologies** in addition to tactics. This aspect marks a contrast between PO and more conventional 'horizontal' organisations such as the Islamic State, where individual acts of violence do not require coordination with a central authority as long as a shared enemy is targeted. Finally, **group affiliation and support become more ambiguous and fluid**, because ideological affinities replace stricter notions of social belonging and rule-based adherence.

Ideologically cohesive and **ideologically crowd-sourced or fluid** were identified as the **two main types of PO extremism**. Examples of the former are loose, transnational alliances of extremist groups or networks that seek to mobilise target audiences with consistent messages and narratives. The latter type tends to emerge spontaneously, mainly online, and contains a violent component which can be exploited by extremists. Examples include anti-government, anti-system, and anti-vaccination movements that rely on conspiracy theories, among other tools, to radicalise, mobilise, and support crowd-sourced dynamics.¹

Unlike traditional extremist groups whose sustained existence requires the adherence to and observance of structured ideologies, **narratives in the PO context merely need to be 'good enough' to 'resonate' among a target audience.** This can be achieved by disseminating fragments of extremist messages and promoting extremist frames for specific events, thus increasing the likelihood of interlinkages and convergence between different extremist strands. A particularly important element of convergence, and simultaneously an illustration of the lower barrier to participation in PO extremism compared to conventional groups, is **the identification of a common enemy.**

Taken together, these elements make PO extremism a paradigmatically **cross-cutting trend**, detectable in online subcultures of the far-right, violent anarchism, and in single-issue or issue-

¹ In this context, crowd-sourced dynamics refer to a broad and varied group of dispersed participants who contribute to producing bits of conspiracy narratives. Participants do not need to act in an organised fashion, and there is no need for centralised control over the process, which happens spontaneously.

driven movements such as recent pandemic protests. Conversely, ideologically consistent groups have been able to weaponise this trend to infiltrate and hijack non-violent protests.

The latter scenario was illustrated during the meeting with a **case study of the Italian *mattonisti***. Deriving its name from the emoticon of a brick (*'mattoni'* in Italian), this phenomenon emerged on Twitter in early 2021 as a hashtag campaign organised in a Telegram channel. The brick most likely refers to the intention to 'break' the Italian internet, if not society overall, in the same way a brick destroyed a washing machine in a viral video.² Using consistent far-right messaging while denying connections to far-right groups, most active *mattonisti* users were ultimately identified as members of a neo-fascist university student movement. They first attached their usernames and the brick emoticon to the hashtag #BastaLockdown ('enough with the lockdown'), which can be interpreted as an ideologically consistent alignment with an issue-driven protest movement. However, subsequent promotions of other hashtags turned into so-called 'shitposting',³ for example by filling the initially pro-immigrant campaign #donaunvaccinoaumigrante ('give a vaccine to a migrant') with xenophobic content. In both cases, the primary goal of the '*mattonisti*' is to achieve trending status for their preferred hashtags, which in turn **amplifies and normalises** their message.

POLICY INSIGHTS

1. Post-organisational extremism strains prevention and countering responses. Extremist threats have not only multiplied because they are now dispersed, but they are also more difficult to identify and prioritise due to the absence of hierarchical structures. This **additional burden on P/CVE work** is likely to require scaling up resources.
2. Anti-extremist efforts that were successful against conventional groups risk losing their effectiveness when applied to the post-organisational context. P/CVE policies, including EU legislative instruments directed at online content on social media platforms, will have to **adapt to the fluidity of PO extremism**.
3. The shift from mass-based to loosely networked extremism inherent in the PO trend creates a need for more awareness among policymakers that their **interventions in the name of prevention and countering can be perceived as attacks against freedom of speech** and other basic rights.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

1. There is a need for policy analysis to determine the efficacy of EU regulations (especially the Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act) in addressing PO extremism. For instance, **can currently existing legal instruments successfully capture and moderate the online platforms** and campaigns where PO subcultures coordinate their activities?

² See V. Stefanella and S. Fontana (2021). 'How the Italian far-right is trying to break Twitter'. Daily Dot, 4 August 2021, available at <https://www.dailydot.com/debug/italy-far-right-twitter/> (last accessed 21 March 2023).

³ This term denotes one of several ways in which far-right extremists combine what they perceive as humour with radicalisation. See M. Fielitz and R. Ahmed (2021). *It's not funny anymore. Far-right extremists' use of humour*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021. Available at https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-03/ran_ad-hoc_pap_fre_humor_20210215_en.pdf (last accessed 21 March 2023).

EMERGING ACCELERATIONIST THREATS

Observed as an internationally connected movement since 2010, contemporary **accelerationism** – specifically its militant variant – **seeks to bring about the collapse of Western liberal social systems**. As such, it is a cross-cutting trend that attracts followers from the far-right and the far-left, with neither side embracing political solutions and both claiming to practice a form of ‘metapolitics’.

Accelerationists generally pursue two complementary approaches. They use **discursive means** to frame contradictory and/or problematic social processes as inherently intractable unless extremist positions are adopted to solve them. Meanwhile, their **promotion and use of violence**, mostly in the form of terrorism, is intended as a catalyst for systemic failure. Both means converge in the belief in, and expressed desire for, an imminent civil or race war.

As an arguably distorted interpretation of the Marxist critique of capitalism adopted by Russian anarchists and later Islamist jihadis, **accelerationism is not a novel phenomenon**. However, **the online formation of specific subcultures is a qualitatively distinct feature of current iterations**. Accordingly, recent examples for how accelerationist movements organise, plan, and execute their activities were presented during the meeting with a focus on far-right militants.⁴ Beginning in 2011, various groups emerged in the online forum ‘Iron March’. Participants organised protests and planned terrorist attacks based on shared newsletters dating back to the 1980s, which promoted antisemitic conspiracy theories, fears of a ‘white genocide’, and empowerment tactics of a revolutionary ‘one-man army’. This loose network evolved into various clusters, with ‘Atomwaffen Division’ and its offshoots as the most prominent groups.

The March **2019 terrorist attack in Christchurch**, New Zealand, **was a noteworthy historical marker for accelerationism** in several regards. Not only did the perpetrator explicitly mention this ideology in his manifesto, but consistent with the accelerationist strategy, he also inspired a **wave of similar acts** in several other countries. The online dimension is perhaps just as important: it is where footage of the initial attack went viral, and public attention led many accelerationists to coalesce around the instant messaging service Telegram, not coincidentally nicknamed ‘Terrorgram’, after being de-platformed elsewhere. Telegram subsequently became a vital space for radicalisation and mobilisation, facilitated by the online publication and distribution of training manuals and tutorials, which were cited as inspirational materials by the Bratislava shooter in 2022.

Militant accelerationism can be understood as both a contributor to and beneficiary of the fluid and composite landscape of extremism. Its adherents are relatively heterogeneous – up to the point of ideological incompatibility – and only share systemic collapse as a strategic goal. It is left up to the discretion of individuals to choose the tactics, for instance to what extent they wish to collaborate and how to attack their targets. Potentially divisive topics, such as questions about a collective vision of a new system, are avoided. In addition, the online forums where these discussions play out are ideologically diverse and can change over time, depending on users’ perceptions of utility, which include desired levels of privacy and safety from prosecution. These conditions make it extremely challenging to grow what is essentially a leaderless movement, but they also offer a certain level of plausible deniability when an accelerationist act of violence is disrupted by activists or law enforcement.

⁴ For a closer analysis of a national subset, see Center für Monitoring, Analyse und Strategie (2022). *Militant Accelerationism: Origins and Development in Germany*, available at https://cemas.io/en/publications/militant-accelerationism/CeMAS_Militant_Accelerationism_Origins_and_Developments_in_Germany.pdf (last accessed 22 March 2023).

POLICY INSIGHTS

1. Since accelerationism is a stratum of post-organisational extremism, the comment above regarding strains on P/CVE work applies here as well. More specifically, the increased appearance of ‘lone wolves’ as perpetrators of terrorism suggests that **prevention efforts will have to focus on the earliest stages of radicalisation and mobilisation**, both for individuals and the networks in which they are embedded.
2. Digital platforms that host extremist content can implement **more stringent internal moderation policies** and improve their cooperation with law enforcement to target and expose criminal or terrorist acts. While not a comprehensive solution, **de-platforming** is also effective as a temporary impediment to communication and coordination among extremists.
3. Current policy responses to accelerationism and other forms of extremism tend to focus on the supply side, which is to say the content of extremist messaging, online and elsewhere. A truly holistic approach, however, needs to involve demand as well and would require **addressing larger societal problems that accelerationists seek to exploit**, such as the lack of community or purpose experienced by young people.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

1. Similar to other forms of post-organisational extremism discussed above, there is a need for more research on **the effectiveness of EU regulations regarding digital services**. As an added element of complexity, it has been observed that the average age of militant accelerationists is decreasing. This indicates opportunities for research on the **online accessibility of extremist content by minors** as well as their recruitment and radicalisation in other digital domains, such as **gaming platforms**.

THE NORMALISATION OF EXTREMIST MESSAGES AND THE ROLE OF GENDER

It is both a truism and an overlooked aspect in extremism research that **the use of technology is a gendered activity**. The stratification applies to users and corporate logics, but the discussion of this TRM focused on the former as content creators on social media platforms. While ‘dark web’ and fringe forums tend to be dominated by men, **extremist women tend to prefer mainstream platforms that offer greater visibility** and are designed to appeal to everyone. However, different platforms have different purposes and are used accordingly. Mainstream providers have optimised their products for amplification and exposure, whereas less popular alternatives facilitate communication and mobilisation.⁵ Extremist users are aware of these differences and take advantage of them, which has important implications for prevention efforts.

‘Networked intimacy’ was introduced as a concept to explain how women influencers blend the glamour of celebrity with the intimacy of online influencer culture. They strive to live their politics as an aspirational brand by merging an extremist ideology and the elevated, yet achievable lifestyle of a public persona, thus evoking an aura of authenticity and creating loyal followers. It is less

⁵ For the purpose of defining ‘mainstream providers’, the five social media platforms with the largest market share in Europe for March 2023 were Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, and YouTube. See ‘Social Media Stats Europe Mar 2023’ (2023). Available at <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/europe/#monthly-202303-202303-bar> (last accessed 25 March 2023).

relevant that influencer practices are generally performative as long as they successfully convey certain qualities to their target audience, such as being relatable, accessible, and responsive. In sum, ‘networked intimacy’ can be an **effective radicalisation strategy** because it presents scalable opportunities for extremists to spread propaganda on social media and normalise or mainstream their political views.⁶

The ‘Great Reset’ conspiracy theory serves as an example for the normalisation of far-right extremism.⁷ This case study features overlapping food, health, wellness, and medical anti-establishment narratives. Far-right women influencers have become particularly adept at blending ostensibly non- or apolitical content with coded language to advance extremist causes. Using conventional merchandising and monetisation techniques commonly associated with beauty and lifestyle bloggers, the messaging does not merely pertain to selling a product or lifestyle but also an ideology. For instance, the promotion and sale of raw foods can converge with a populist critique of ‘big agriculture’, ‘government’, ‘media’, and ‘big pharma’. ‘Gastropolitics’ is a source of other, more gendered narrative frames, where far-right women create linkages between the food they prepare and perceived ideals of womanhood in traditional families, while far-right men associate the quality of the food they consume with notions of racially pure reproduction. Similarly, medical science can be discredited on ideological grounds with gendered disinformation concerning birth control and vaccines.

POLICY INSIGHTS

1. Extremist influencer practices present a challenge to P/CVE efforts, particularly from a policymaking perspective, because **their success depends on erasing the line between ‘apolitical’ content and extremist messaging**. Both governmental regulations and self-regulatory practices by private platform providers may need to be adapted to the subtleties and nuances inherent in this radicalisation model. Among other measures, this could include creating more public awareness of how extremist influencers operate online as well as improving content moderation (human and/or automated) to capture the context in which extremist messaging is embedded.
2. From a technical perspective, mainstream platforms offer features such as Instagram story filters, polls, countdowns, and monetisation opportunities that encourage interactions between influencers and audiences. Extremist radicalisation and mobilisation strategies exploit these opportunities, which are frequently not captured by content moderation. **Actor-network approaches**,⁸ however, may be a more promising tool to counter extremist influencers. They enable policymakers to understand how these individuals are connected to, communicate, and coordinate not only with each other, but also with more overtly extremist actors.⁹ In addition, network mapping and analysis can help quantify and qualify the online reach and impact of specific content creators.

⁶ The definitional distinction between ‘normalisation’ and ‘mainstreaming’ is less relevant in the context of women influencers who are primarily active on mainstream platforms. While the two terms are interconnected, ‘normalisation’ can be understood as tactics or mechanisms to spread extremist narratives among a broader (mainstream) audience. Previously cited examples include hijacking campaigns and ‘shitposting’ on Twitter.

⁷ For the origins and background of the ‘Great Reset’ conspiracy theory, see J. Molloy & E. Leidig (2022). ‘The Emerging Raw Food Movement and the “Great Reset”’. Global Network on Extremism and Technology, 10 October 2022, available at <https://gnet-research.org/2022/10/10/the-emerging-raw-food-movement-and-the-great-reset/> (last accessed 22 March 2023).

⁸ Actor-network approaches refer to methodologies that investigate actors’ impact on a system, or network, by considering interactive relationships between all nodes in a network.

⁹ An illustrative example is the case study of the American YouTuber and podcaster Brittany Pettibone who is married to Martin Sellner, a leader in the pan-European identitarian movement. See I. Maly (2020). ‘Metapolitical New Right Influencers: The Case of Brittany Pettibone’ *Social Sciences* 9, no. 7: 113.3, available at <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/9/7/113> (last accessed 2 April 2023).

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

1. **Borderline content**, i.e., narratives and messaging described as 'awful but lawful', is a research challenge in terms of its evaluation as a causal mechanism or catalyst for radicalisation.

FRAMING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE CLIMATE CRISIS AND EXTREMISM

The topic of connections between the climate crisis and extremism has multiple facets and can take on very different contours depending on **how 'extremism' and 'extremist ideologies' are framed**.

As highlighted during the meeting, the climate crisis calls into question the very existence of humanity as a species on this planet, or at least in parts of the planet,¹⁰ and is therefore critically associated with extremist manifestations. **The worsening of the crisis will likely lead to more radical and extreme actions in the future**, including those carried out by 'lone wolves' driven by environmental anxiety. However, it remains unclear what criteria to apply to classify such actions. Additionally, there is uncertainty about which conceptual framework to use to investigate the motives behind these actions and how to distinguish between environmental activism and actual extremism.

Given this background, a preliminary interpretative framework has been proposed, divided into **three clusters or 'variants of extremism'** that should be considered when weighing the connections between the climate crisis and extremism.

The first 'variant' concerns extremist ideologies. Different ideologies exploit the climate crisis in various ways, and in some cases, differences can also be perceived among groups that refer to the same ideology. However, it should be emphasised that extremist groups engaging with the topic of the climate crisis are generally very fluid and short-lived. **For far-right extremism, climate and environment are proxy issues rather than a central theme of the ideological arsenal.** This applies both to the narrower field of eco-fascism and to the broader domain of far-right ecologism.¹¹ Nonetheless, it is the extremist ideology where the connection with the climate crisis has the most significant impact in terms of implications (e.g., the attacks in Christchurch, Buffalo, and El Paso). Although the extreme right may produce some ideological content used directly in response to the climate crisis, climate and environment are mainly used as a vehicle for other ideological positions (sometimes even resorting to conspiracy theories). Through frame bridging, two congruent but structurally unrelated frames are connected, sometimes even forcibly. For example, climate change is linked to migration by presenting climate migrants as disrupting the nation's ecosystem.¹² **Left-wing extremism** is the dominant type of extremism in terms of the number of groups and movements when it comes to connections with climate and environment. Although it is less impactful than far-right extremism, it uses the same tactic, frame bridging, to achieve relevance. The tactic involves establishing a connection between the climate crisis and the crisis of capitalism. The argument is that the economic system is structurally responsible for global warming and environmental degradation. Similarly, **religious extremism** has connections to the climate and

¹⁰ See IPCC (2022). *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*. IPCC Sixth Assessment Report, Working Group II, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/> (last accessed 14 March 2023).

¹¹ See B. Lubarda & B. Forchtner (2022), 'The Far Right and the Environment: past-present-future', in V. A. Bruno (eds.) (2022). *Populism and Far-Right. Trends in Europe*. EDUCatt, pp.85-112.

¹² In this sense, one of the most widespread visuals of the Greenline Front, a now-disbanded far-right extremist group, is emblematic. It depicts trees (a symbol of the 'native' ecosystem to be kept pure and protected from external attacks), a bear (the megafauna is often taken as an emotionally charged symbol of the ecosystem), and a young woman (signifying the supposed connection between 'natives' and the nation, an iteration of the traditional Nazi phrase 'Blut und Boden', meaning 'blood and soil'). Natural elements are used to disguise racist and nativist ideas.

environmental crisis, particularly if spiritual cults, food movements, and networks focused on wellness are included under this label. These groups – discussed above in the section about normalising extremist messaging – use the same strategy, whereby it is more likely that climate and environmental issues are integrated as a core ideology.

The second type of extremism discussed during the meeting pertains to those who have been affected by the climate crisis. While there are extremist groups with high levels of organisational complexity, a response to the climate crisis has also emerged in the form of **direct actions**. Such actions are typically planned and executed through bottom-up processes and are linked to grassroots organising. These loose groups are composed of individuals who are generally motivated to act due to the impact of climate change on their lives. The book **‘How to Blow Up a Pipeline’** by **Andreas Malm**¹³ was presented as an illustration of this trend. The author advocates for **sabotaging** fossil fuel infrastructure, which is identified as the culprit responsible for aggravating the climate crisis. The overarching goal of such actions is to block the fossil economy with a diverse range of tactics and solutions. Malm’s book contributes to the wider internal debate within the global climate movement on the acceptability of confrontational and violent actions.¹⁴ During the discussion, it was emphasised that depending on how broadly climate extremism is framed, there is a possibility of labelling hundreds of thousands of people who are already affected by the climate crisis as extremists. This is a crucial challenge for policy-making.

The third ‘variant’ of extremism discussed was defined as **‘structural’** extremism. This term refers to forms of extractivism that are supported by state entities, including decisions to exploit natural resources (e.g., lithium mines). In some cases, this activity involves public health risks. In this context, it was noted that repressive measures adopted by state authorities to handle protests and safeguard such development projects can lead to patterns of social exclusion.

¹³ A. Malm (2020). *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire*. London, New York: Verso Books.

¹⁴ The ongoing debate regarding climate extremism is informed by critical comparisons with past experiences of radical environmental activism, including its most extreme and violent manifestations such as the Earth Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Front. Whether violence is acceptable, and if so which type(s), are two key questions in this debate.

One view in the debate which goes against Malm’s vision is presented in ‘Why Civil Resistance Works. The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict’ (2011) by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, who provide scientifically consistent evidence that peaceful protests can be effective. Furthermore, policies adopted in response to climate protests have influenced the tactics and the debate. For example, in 2022 the UK passed the ‘Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act’, which gave police greater powers to restrict disruptive protests. In response, the national chapter of Extinction Rebellion announced a shift to non-violent, non-disruptive tactics on 1 January 2023. Similarly, some German mayors (e.g., in Hannover) acknowledged some of the requests by climate activists in exchange for a halt to road blocking, resulting in a shift to non-disruptive protest.

POLICY INSIGHTS

1. The primary policy challenge in addressing the links between the climate crisis and extremism is to **establish clear boundaries that differentiate between extremism, militant activism, activism, and civil engagement**. Failure to do so may lead to the securitisation of the climate issue, which risks dismissing legitimate demands.
2. Extremism is commonly defined by its propensity towards violence. When examining the nexus between climate and extremism, it may be beneficial to **consider various forms of violence**, including structural violence, **to adopt a more nuanced approach**.
3. Given the scope and future trajectory of the climate crisis, climate politics is expected to generate increasingly radical political and social movements. This raises **doubts about the effectiveness of deradicalisation** as a viable strategy for countering climate extremism, while highlighting the importance of **disengagement as a potential option**.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

1. While left-leaning eco-extremism is currently the most prevalent form, research on climate and extremism has primarily focused on right-wing extremism. This oversight is problematic because the left-wing eco-extremist landscape is dynamic, characterised by rapidly forming and dissolving groups with ever-changing ideologies. Therefore, **additional research on left-wing eco-extremism (including anarchist-leaning forms and lone-actor eco-extremism)** is necessary to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the debate surrounding violence in climate activism and militant circles.

HOW INTERNATIONAL CRISES, CALAMITIES AND GEOPOLITICAL EVENTS INFLUENCE EXTREMISM

In recent years, the EU has been confronted with **many critical junctures** that added pressure on governments, democratic institutions, and social cohesion. The impact of the climate crisis globally and within the continent, the challenges posed by the COVID-19 sanitary crisis, the return of war in Europe with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the rise of right-wing extremism, and the migration crisis are all examples of crises that have been widely and **rapidly exploited by extremists of all kinds**.

These crises have also **led to a convergence between different forms of extremism**. The discussion pointed to the case of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, which was exploited in different ways by jihadists and violent Islamists, right-wing extremists, as well as left-wing and anarchist extremists. Another instance of convergence occurred with extremists from both the left and right standing side-by-side at protests against lockdowns and the Green Pass.

To illustrate the complexity and novel features of this conjuncture, the concept of **polycrisis** was put forward. This term describes the co-existence of crises that occur simultaneously or rapidly in succession, have cumulative effects, and mutually reinforce each other, despite often having diverse causes and consequences. A polycrisis thus **represents a higher degree of danger than each individual crisis composing it**.

In this context, **the impact of a polycrisis is also evident in the landscape of radicalisation in Europe**, where the interplay of multiple crises affects various dimensions.

On a **personal dimension**, crises induce fear and can prompt people to adopt a crisis-ridden mindset, while also generating feelings of anxiety, stress, and vulnerability which can lead to an increased perception of social isolation (as observed since the onset of the pandemic). Taken together, these factors create the impression that what is extreme – such as a generalised lockdown at the national or global level – is actually a form of ‘new normal’. This perception makes individuals more susceptible to extremist narratives and provides an opportunity for extremists to mobilise people by offering alternatives within this new normal/extreme situation.

On a **social dimension**, crises often result in increased polarisation and social divisions, particularly when there are already divergent views on how to manage ongoing crises. This situation provides an opportunity for extremists to mobilise people and expand their influence, often by exploiting protest themes.

On a **political dimension**, the increasing complexity of crisis management often leads to criticism of government by citizens. While this dynamic is an inherent part of democratic societies, it also creates fertile ground for extremists to foster distrust by intervening, and seeking to undermine decision-making processes, support fringe parties, and co-opt weak national leaders.

Lastly, the current polycrisis contributes to the proliferation of **dis- and misinformation** and the spread of **conspiracy theories**, particularly through online platforms. As for the former, the overlap of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine has made evident the development of **connections between conspiracy theories about the virus and the Kremlin-sponsored narrative** of the ‘denazification’ of Ukraine.¹⁵ Furthermore, the spread of conspiracy theories has exposed strong links between the extremist landscape in the United States and Europe. Extremists exploit both disinformation and conspiracy theories to propagate their narratives (adapted *ad hoc*) and normalise their message.

In this **novel phase of radicalisation**, the ideological aspect, though still present, is less significant than other factors. The extremists' opportunistic approach towards exploiting any crisis situation, irrespective of the crisis's content, plays a critical role. These factors, as mentioned in the paragraph on post-organisational tendencies, depict a **more fluid and heterogeneous scenario** as compared to the early 2000s.

This new phase of radicalisation can be analytically described by distinguishing four levels:

- **crisis-driven radicalisation**, which is the composite outcome of the impact of multiple crises, especially at the individual level;
- **conspiracy theory-driven radicalisation**, where conspiracy theories function as factors of aggregation, as people without any affiliation to extremist groups or even first-time protesters come together to protest, while not sharing anything apart from their belief in conspiracy theories;
- **polarisation-driven radicalisation**, which is triggered by the weakening of social cohesion and a public debate, especially online, characterised by confrontational dynamics;
- **reaction/grievance-driven radicalisation**, in which a generic opposition to some event or position serves as the trigger and evolves in an ‘**anti**’-stance, which is more a behavioural characteristic than a proper ideology. Extremists from both the far-right and the far-left try

¹⁵ During the meeting, a case study on about 220 public groups on Telegram was referenced, whose members belong to the far-right and conspiracy world and conversed in Dutch. According to a textual analysis, the topic of online conversations following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine quickly shifted from the pandemic to Ukraine, resulting in a convergence of disinformation narratives. See T. Willaert & M. G. Sessa (2022), ‘From Infodemic to Information War A contextualization of current narrative trends and evolutions in Dutch-language disinformation communities’, EDMO, 3 May 2022, available at https://belux-edmo.s3-accelerate.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/EDMO-BELUX-investigative-report_withoutembargo-mention-updated_compressed.pdf (last accessed 18 March 2023).

to reinforce ‘anti-’ stances, while labelling elites in different ways (e.g., government, globalisation, capitalism, the EU, the financial system, the West).

This new phase of radicalisation generates **new dimensions of extremist threats**. The fluidity of the extremist landscape and the presence of individuals with uncertain or non-existent affiliations complicates mapping active groups and organisations. The absence of ideology as a binding force and primary motivator makes these new phenomena even more challenging to analyse. Finally, the composite nature of the radicalisation landscape amplifies opportunities for recruitment and dissemination of extremist propaganda.

POLICY INSIGHTS

1. The presence of both extremist and peaceful protesters poses a challenge to P/CVE policies and practices. To effectively address this issue, it is useful to **develop methods to isolate and prevent violent elements from mobilising individuals and normalising the use of violence**.
2. As various citizens’ concerns are exploited differently by extremists, a **nuanced strategy** that takes into account which specific set of concerns is driving each respective group of demonstrators would be useful in mediating with protesters, in separating them from violent actors, and in resolving conflicts in this complex landscape. **Engagement with protesters is crucial** to prevent them from being drawn to extremist alternatives. **Protesters who do not associate with extremists but feel excluded from the political process** merit particular attention. This could be achieved through a **whole-of-society approach** and by engaging with specific groups/individuals through local actors and practitioners.
3. Understanding the specific profiles of different typologies of protesters is essential to establish multi-pronged field approaches that can leverage the differences and similarities of demonstrators building on learnings from **adjacent fields, such as protest and riot management**.
4. Tailor-made communication campaigns, counter-messaging, online detection tools (including network analysis), and vulnerability assessments are **useful tools to tackle the current polycrisis**.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

1. Develop an understanding of **how crises act as trigger events for ‘protest communities’**.
2. **Conduct mapping/network analyses of different groups and organisations that participate in anti-system/anti-government protests**. This is based on the idea that networks, however decentralised they may be, still feature hubs (i.e., nodes with a high number of connections) that play an outsized role in maintaining the functionality of the system. Locating these hubs and identifying their motivations could inform new prevention approaches.

THE METAVERSE AND IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES

A recurring characteristic of the evolution of extremism and, consequently, in the dynamics of radicalisation, is the swiftness with which extremists can **seize and utilise the opportunities afforded by novel technologies or new modes of online interaction** as they arise.

Against this background, cutting-edge immersive experiences, such as augmented and virtual reality, and particularly the metaverse, constitute a new frontier for radicalisation. Nevertheless, it was noted during the meeting that such phenomena are not entirely unprecedented, as they share numerous commonalities with other established sites of radicalisation. Specifically, the discussion centred on **gaming as an online experience** and its parallels with the metaverse.

The metaverse as it has been presented and envisioned thus far – given that it remains under development – is essentially **an immersive virtual reality extension of the internet** where individuals can engage with digital objects and representations of themselves and others, and can traverse freely between various virtual environments.

One clear point of contact between gaming and the metaverse is **the immersive nature** of these experiences. Gaming, too, is increasingly moving towards the integration of virtual and augmented reality in order to offer more engaging gameplay and, in a sense, to project the user into an alternative universe. In both the metaverse and gaming, **a clear distinction between offline and online is lost**. These experiences similarly tend to blur the boundaries between environments and between the physical and digital domains. Moreover, both essentially constitute a **socialisation space**, where people are encouraged and enabled to build a community. Therefore, these experiences are closely related to the formation of **personal and group identity** and characterised by important **emotional implications**.

Regarding the first point, it is crucial to understand **whether and to what extent actions online can spill over into the offline dimension**. This is an increasingly central theme in understanding contemporary dynamics of radicalisation, as seen in incidents such as the **2020 assault on the German Reichstag** by individuals who had no other connection or motive than belonging to online communities opposed to vaccines and lockdowns, and mostly without identifiable extremist profiles. In this sense, **there are some initial indications that identity fusion is possible**. During the meeting, a study focused on gamer identities was cited which suggests that there are interlinkages between how people socialise online and how they behave offline.¹⁶

Regarding the topic of **emotions**, it is worth noting that the immersive nature of the gaming/metaverse experience results in the user also becoming **emotionally immersed**. This can be a vulnerability factor for radicalisation in its own right, as users may attach high emotional value to features of the online world or experiences made in that domain. From this perspective, extremists can **leverage users' emotional involvement** for radicalisation purposes, as well as use emotions to draw users into extremist narratives. Furthermore, with the use of a virtual reality headset, the metaverse could offer the possibility of tracking users' biometric responses to situations, people, and objects, thus providing an extremely reliable proxy of their real emotions. While this aspect is typically approached as a problem of privacy and invasive marketing, it should also be considered that extremists may gain access to and exploit such data.

Lastly, it is worth noting that the similarity between gaming and the metaverse could lead to a convergence between the two. The metaverse, being a scalable architecture with high levels of interoperability, could potentially **integrate gaming** and attract gamers from adjacent platforms and online communities such as 8chan and 8kun, where extremist individuals and movements are widespread. During the meeting, it was emphasised that the metaverse could offer **vast new opportunities for recruitment and coordination**, as well as providing **possible new targets**. Regarding **recruitment**, the metaverse could allow extremist actors to be 'resurrected' and address potential followers in a virtual space. As for **coordination**, extremists could create digital twins of real targets, such as a national parliament, and train how to attack them. Furthermore, just like in

¹⁶ R. Kowert et al. (2022). 'Not just a game: Identity fusion and extremism in gaming cultures'. *Frontiers in Communication*, vol. 7, doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2022.1007128, available at <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2022.1007128/full> (last accessed 18 March 2023).

the physical world where people and buildings can be attacked, their virtual replicas in the metaverse can also be targeted by extremists.

POLICY INSIGHTS

1. **Evidence-based research** is essential to understanding the current and new tech environment, exploring their interlinkages and similarities, and identifying effective intervention strategies.
2. **Engaging with both the public and private sector** is also crucial, as is encouraging the tech industry to self-regulate and embed safety by design policies.
3. It is also important to **view technology not just as a threat, but also as an opportunity** to develop innovative approaches to addressing these issues. Taking into account the perspectives of all users is essential, including how people interact with these platforms.
4. Finally, developing strategies and approaches to **address the potential risks associated with gaming in the metaverse** is critical. As mentioned earlier, this is an immersive experience that can potentially lead to similar vulnerabilities as traditional gaming platforms.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

1. Research on gaming has predominantly focused on the English language in terms of both sources and analyses, resulting in significant **gaps in our understanding of gaming within online environments, particularly in Spanish, German, and French-speaking populations**, which represent a significant proportion of online game users across the European Union.
2. Additionally, there remains a lack of knowledge **concerning how multiplayer games and gaming-adjacent platforms are utilised by extremists** to reach a more diverse audience.
3. Another knowledge gap pertains to **the relationship between online interactions and offline behaviours**, including the question of whether violent video games lead to changes in behaviours in the physical world. Consequently, there is a pressing need to develop a better understanding of how online and offline behaviours interact.
4. Moreover, identifying the appropriate user groups and understanding their typical interactions, behaviours, and potential susceptibility to extremist narratives remains a significant challenge. Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers need to **locate and engage with the right users, particularly young people**, to better comprehend their online interactions and how they may be drawn into extremist ideologies.

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FURTHER READINGS

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON THESE TOPICS:

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