



Capitalising on Crises

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

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and measures against its spread and their impact on populations create an opportunity for new dynamics of development of violent right-wing extremism (VRWE). Utilisation of the “corona-crisis” is typical of various forms of violent extremism and terrorism in a global scope (including violent religious extremism) ⁽¹⁾. The specific threat of VRWE is characterised by various forms of manifestation of violent behaviour (so-called corona hate crimes, violent demonstrations and riots, discussions about terrorist attacks, etc.) and by the interconnection of VRWE with a broader spectrum of mass protests over responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and with mass propagandist campaigns in new social media.

Violent right-wing extremist behaviour can be triggered by fake news, conspiracy narratives and hate speech. Traditional narratives of RWE are enhanced by topical reaction to specific events connected with the pandemic ⁽²⁾ (such as traditional anti-Semitic conspirative narratives adopted as arguments to discredit and advise against vaccination against COVID-19). Some narratives are shared globally by right-wing extremists; however, many national and country-specific issues are thematised (usually in the context of the contemporary domestic political situation in various countries). Global as well as national-specific extremist narratives are used. Right-wing extremist anti-government propaganda in the EU and many other democratic countries is supported by external powers, mostly by pro-Kremlin forces ⁽³⁾. People who are frustrated due to the real negative impact of the pandemic on individuals and communities as well as due to inordinate fear and anger after the forced change of lifestyle can be manipulated by violent right-wing extremists to violent activities (in “worst case scenarios”, also to mass riots, coups, insurgencies and other subversive activities).

Mitigation of RWE influence during the pandemic poses a huge challenge for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). This prevention and countering is a multiple issue. It covers a “traditional anti-extremist” struggle as well as specific communication regarding the anti-pandemic measures.

Dissatisfaction of people with the impact of these measures is misused and widely exploited by right-wing extremists. VRWE utilize the growth of RWE in general (including non-violent forms). They are emboldened by the perceived acceptance of right-wing ideas among broader parts of societies and attempt to use this stage to further normalise their violent narratives as part of the discourse. At the same time, governmental political forces have been under pressure during the pandemic and therefore have been more prone to making mistakes or questionable decisions. Countering right-wing extremist narratives must take all these aspects into account, as not all anti-measures propaganda can be linked to VRWE narratives. The coordinated effort of experts on radicalisation as well as experts in the field of public health and crisis management is required. It is important to distinguish between real RWE/VRWE and ideologically non-motivated participants of various controversial activities in the recent era. However, these frustrated people are in the focus of right-wing extremist propaganda and efforts to recruit new supporters to right-wing extremist networks and movements has been observed.

Structure and goals of the paper

The main goal of this paper is to identify the main manifestations and threats connected with the exploitation of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper firstly deals with a general assessment of crisis as opportunities for RWE/VRWE. Secondly, the most important manifestations of RWE/VRWE in a global scope and especially in the EU during the recent corona-crisis are described and analysed as are briefly predicted possible future “black scenarios” of VRWE in close connection to the propagandist narratives and tools of RWE. Thirdly, the issues of P/CVE are discussed and, fourthly, basic recommendations for practitioners and policymakers are formulated (mostly for practitioners from the RAN Working Groups on Communication and Narratives (RAN C&N), Youth and Education (RAN Y&E) and Families, Communities and Social Care (RAN FC&S)).

⁽¹⁾ Kruglanski et al., Terrorism in time of the pandemic.

⁽²⁾ Máca, *Covid jako společné téma*.

⁽³⁾ Weitz, Assessing the Russian Disinformation Campaign.

The paper is based on data and categorisations that are included in policy papers, first scientific articles on this topic, media sources, reports of governmental institutions and international organisations, primary sources from the RWE milieu and security forces, and, in a limited scope, also on observation of several protests over responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by the author of this paper. A simple analysis of risks and threats and forecasting approaches (exploration of contemporary trends) are used ⁽⁴⁾. The dynamics of development of the COVID-19 pandemic are very high and reactions of RWE/VRWE are very flexible. This means that RWE/VRWE react quickly to topical development of the pandemic and related governmental policies and that especially VRWE adopt their strategy and tactics (for example, riots and attacks against parliaments during discussions about anti-pandemics law). Knowledge of previous developments, permanently expanded on and specified in relation to the new events and trends in VRWE activism and RWE policy in general, is necessary. The paper also covers only a part of the development of the issue and can serve as a source for future research and P/CVE activities. Mainly the potential economic crisis and the results of increasing societal polarisation in the wake of the recent corona-crisis will create new opportunities for RWE/VRWE.

Background: VRWE and Crises – Historical Legacies and Contemporary Opportunities

Exploitation of crises is a typical element of RWE activity in modern history, including the rise of VRWE actions. The recent COVID-19 pandemic is characterised primarily by the natural origin of the threat, while in the past crises caused dominantly by human behaviour (socioeconomic crises, international crisis, etc.) were usually exploited. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is explained by many conspiracy narratives as a human plot and — independently of its origin — it caused responses by governments, international organisations and various societal entities. These facts help right-wing extremists aim their propaganda at traditional and/or topical enemies and strengthen their mobilisation potential (including various activities of VRWE).

Overview of exploitation of crises by RWE/VRWE in modern history

The rise of modern RWE is closely connected with crisis situations in several historical eras. The fascist and Nazi movement arose during the post-WWI crisis characterised by economic decline and by dissatisfaction of many people with the Versailles system (at that time, the Spanish flu significantly impacted the societal situation, including VRWE ⁽⁵⁾). During a difficult situation of societal and political chaos people in many countries were receptive and sometimes vulnerable to conspiracy myths about “Jewish power” and they tended to support RWE, including their militant arms (paramilitary groups etc.). People in trouble were a key driver for dissatisfactions that led to the spread of conspiracies. Several other crises in the last 100 years caused at least a temporary rise in RWE/VRWE, as the following table shows.

⁽⁴⁾ Smolík, *Prognostické metody bezpečnostních fenoménů*.

⁽⁵⁾ For example, in Denver in the United States, Italian emigrants were blamed for the spread of the disease by the Ku Klux Klan. Kraut, Immigration, Ethnicity, and the Pandemic.

Table 1: Selected cases of exploitation of crises by RWE

Crisis	Main impact on RWE/VRWE	Specific examples of VRWE activity
Post-WWI crisis (economic, international, pandemic)	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.

Who are the actors of VRWE?

For better understanding of the specific strategies of VRWE during crises, it is important to outline a basic categorisation of contemporary actors of VRWE. With respect to the categorisation of Cas Mudde⁽⁶⁾ (who dominantly researched non-violent RWE), expanded on by the author of this paper on specific violent actors⁽⁷⁾, we can distinguish between:

- 1) political parties (only a very small part of RWE parties uses violence directly, such as the Greek Golden Dawn; however, in some countries there exist party militias with vigilante goals or political parties that cooperate with violent subcultures);
- 2) social movement organisations, with Mudde's subtypes of a) intellectual organisations, b) media organisations, and c) political organisations (some intellectual and media organisations can promote violence and a specific subtype of political organisations can also be violent organisations and networks, including terrorist groups, organised rioters, vigilante and paramilitary groups, or secret and hidden right-wing extremist networks in governmental administration, especially in law enforcement agencies and in the armed forces);
- 3) subcultures (people from subcultural scenes can use violence for political reasons, such as football hooligans, and subcultures can generate networks supporting individual or small-cell terrorist violence, such as the global virtual groupings affiliated with the Atomwaffen Division with real violent fringes);
- 4) individual actors (including terrorist individual actors)⁽⁸⁾.

From the point of view of social work and using counter-narratives, it is important to distinguish between:

- 1) organisational and ideological leaders of violent right-wing extremist organisations and movements;
- 2) members and supporters with strong ties to right-wing extremist/violent right-wing extremist organisations and/or ideologies;
- 3) autonomous supporters with weak ties to right-wing extremist/violent right-wing extremist organisations and/or ideologies;
- 4) potential supporters or members of right-wing extremist/violent right-wing extremist organisations and/or ideologies.

It is important to take into account these basic categories if we intervene against specific right-wing extremist narratives. While some people are deeply rooted in the ideological and organisational milieu of RWE, others are under weak influence, sometimes more affected by protest ideas and conspiratorial thinking than by comprehensive RWE ideology.

Various ideological streams can be subsumed under contemporary RWE. As basic types (with various overlaps), these can be mentioned:

- 1) traditionalist right-wing authoritarianism (in some countries interconnected with religious conservatism, such as in Serbia and Poland);
- 2) neo-Nazism and neo-fascism (with regional and local subvariants);
- 3) "alt-right" (recently an umbrella term for modernised ideological streams without declared links to historical forms of RWE, however, with intolerant identity-based politics aimed against specific entities, such as migrants, so-called progressivists and supporters of deeper international integration).

⁽⁶⁾ Mudde, The Far Right Today.

⁽⁷⁾ Some of these actors were mentioned in Mareš, How did violent RWE change in recent years.

⁽⁸⁾ Hartleb, Lone Wolves.

What are the basic strategies of VRWE?

VRWE can generally use several basic strategies, in which violence plays an important role. Political strategies are usually aimed at strengthening political power. Violence serves to threaten political opponents on the one hand and to mobilise own members and supporters (including the creation of shared “militant identity”) on the other hand. If we analyse the role of violence in RWE strategies, we can distinguish between:

- 1) dominant use of violence in their political strategy (these entities connect their identity with the use of violence, for example Combat 18);
- 2) subsidiary role of violence in their political strategy (these entities use violence besides the main non-violent strategy, for example several *Reichsbürger* groupings).
- 3) random role of violence in their political strategy (these entities use violence only in specific situations, mostly if they are confronted with opponents, for example the Assembly for Republic – Republican Party of Czechoslovakia (SPR-RSČ)).

Violence can intentionally support a party’s political struggle (for example, in the form of party militias); however, this form is rare in the modern era (in some cases, a verbal distance from violence by party politicians can be observed, but in fact they can use them for better visibility, as in the case of some anti-Roma riots in east-central Europe. Violence itself can be used by right-wing extremists with the aim to force the political enemy (for example, government) to capitulate in a specific political field, due to fear of violence and/or to mobilise supporters to violent seizure of power. The intensity of violence can be adapted to a specific situation. In some cases, performance is more important than real violent acts (some recent vigilante groups⁽⁹⁾), in some cases it is aimed at the police, and in other cases at political opponents and targets selected due to hate (against migrants, for example), including terrorist attacks, etc. One popular concept of VRWE — the leaderless resistance — is based on free selection of means and targets by isolated individuals and small cells that are connected by common ideas. This leaderless resistance can, step-by-step, generate more sophisticated violent structures.

How do violent right-wing extremists use crisis in their strategies?

Crises are usually welcomed by violent right-wing extremists/violent right-wing extremists, mostly if they can intensify insurgent and subversive activities against the government, political establishment and political opponents. Right-wing extremists can also offer their own political solutions and activities helping people during a crisis (such as social care or vigilante protection) with the aim to show themselves as better than the government. As Michael C. Zeller stated: “Extremist actors have a long history of benefiting from crisis. Social psychological research has repeatedly confirmed a positive relationship between perceived threats—always heightened by a crisis—and authoritarian attitudes. Many individuals are more inclined under crisis conditions to turn to extremist actors that portray themselves as guarantors of order and stability”⁽¹⁰⁾.

During a crisis, many people are frustrated, disoriented and uncertain. The clear identification of alleged culprits of the crisis by RWE is a clear message to the unsatisfied public. The main propagandist arguments of extremists about governmental forces and political opponents are:

- 1) the government and political opponents are not able to solve the crisis;
- 2) the government and political opponents cause or utilise the crisis for their own purposes (corruption, strengthening political power, limitation of freedom, etc.) — conspiracy narratives are usually connected with this point;
- 3) the right-wing extremists are allegedly suppressed by the government due to their capability to offer better solutions to the crisis.

Violence can be used spontaneously or with the intention to support the above-mentioned narratives. Violent demonstrations and riots can be initiated by violent right-wing extremists (primary targets are often police officers). More or less selective targeting of political opponents or perceived enemies can be carried out by

⁽⁹⁾ Bjørgo & Mareš, Comparative perspectives on vigilantism.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Zeller, Extremists thrive in times of crisis.

right-wing terrorists (for example, a highly selective attack against the German conservative politician Walter Lübcke, who supported the creation of refugee homes in 2019, and a less selective Halle attack, initially directed against a synagogue, also in 2019). Wide violent campaigns can be launched during a crisis, such as the attacks at the asylum-linked targets in Germany in 2015/2016 during the so-called migration crisis ⁽¹¹⁾.

Violent right-wing extremists can create specific organisational forms of activism during a crisis (such as the platform “Defend Europe” during the migration crisis), and they can infiltrate broader movements (such as the yellow vests) or use local eruptions of hate (as in Chemnitz in 2018).

From crisis to crisis: How violent right-wing extremists adapt their politics to recent situations

VRWE is adaptable and it can utilise more crises in a short historical era. The societal issues are interconnected and extremists usually have multiple interests. If we want to understand the dynamics of the reactions of violent right-wing extremists to the corona-crisis, we should take into account their continuous engagement in the migration crisis (which has specific overlaps with the COVID-19 pandemic).

In contrast to the so-called migration crisis, which is closer to the narratives of RWE, the COVID-19 crisis is used as a catalyst. We should also take into account the reaction of violent right-wing extremists to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, the so-called cancel culture, and the electoral campaign and its aftermath in the United States. For example, right-wing extremist football hooligans were engaged in violent protests against anti-COVID measures as well as in violent activities against the BLM movement. In all these crises, Russian propagandist and influential actors were involved. As Sophie Marineau wrote, Russian activities were behind the spread of the so-called conspiracy theories about the interconnection of the COVID-19 pandemic and 5G technologies. She stated: “If Russia is pushing theories against 5G, it is perhaps to slow down its deployment and harm the economic development of certain countries” ⁽¹²⁾. The goal of the Russian campaign is to undermine trust in democratic governments and, due to this fact, Kremlin actors can support also violent extremist scenes.

Summary of the main findings about the general exploitation of crises by RWE/VRWE

1. Crises are traditionally a welcomed era by right-wing extremists/violent right-wing extremists because of the possibility to mobilise new supporters from the frustrated public.
2. During crises, many people tend towards authoritarian attitudes and this fact is exploited by right-wing extremists/violent right-wing extremists.
3. In a historical context, the rise of historical fascism and Nazism was connected with various crises; recently, the so-called immigration crisis continuously impacted right-wing extremists/violent right-wing extremists.
4. VRWE is a very heterogeneous phenomenon and various actors use violence of varying intensity (from vigilante performances across riots to terrorism) in different ways in their political strategies.
5. The use of violence is connected with the spread of political propaganda, including fake news and conspiracy narratives (they can also be spread widely by non-violent actors, however).
6. The affiliation of supporters and members of RWE/VRWE organisations and entities is very different; many participants of RWE/VRWE activities do not share the comprehensive RWE ideological mindsets.
7. Violence can be connected with a party’s political struggle; however, it is not common in Europe.
8. Violence can threaten political opponents, mobilise supporters and create shared militant identity, and it can include various levels of selectivity of targets.
9. The Russian interference is typical of several recent crises, including its impact on VRWE actors.

⁽¹¹⁾ Salzborn, *Rechtsextremismus*.

⁽¹²⁾ Marineau, Russian disinformation in the time of Covid-19.



Image 1: Post on the twitter profile of the Czech RWE association Workers‘ Youth (Dělnická mládež) from December 2020: “Get vaccinated“. Taken from :

<https://twitter.com/DMLadez/status/1339526764603858945/photo/1>, accessed 30 April 2021.

Exploitation of the recent COVID-19 Pandemic by RWE/VRWE

The contemporary COVID-19 pandemic was exploited by RWE/VRWE in various ways and the adaptation to new trends and issues still continues. The recent global interconnection of the extremist scene requires to take into account also the VRWE attitudes towards coronavirus in non-EU areas (mostly the United States). Some specific ideas were discussed in non-EU areas; however, due to the global virtual community, they have an impact also on VRWE in the EU. And vice versa — the activities in the EU can have an impact on non-EU countries. In this section, the issue of weaponisation of COVID-19 by VRWE will first be described (which is not a very important problem), then the “corona anti-Asiatic hate crimes” will be analysed (which were typical of the first era of the pandemic), followed by an overview of the main issues thematised by right-wing extremists/violent right-wing extremists during the COVID-19 crisis. Then, the most important modus operandi of VRWE will be described. Three selected case studies will be used for better understanding of VRWE activities.

Weaponisation of the COVID-19 pandemic by VRWE: Threats in the United States and its impact in Europe

In the first phase of the spread of COVID-19 in western countries, some right-wing extremists in the United States tried to weaponise the COVID-19 pandemic; however, these were only a few isolated cases without significant reflection in the EU. White supremacist Timothy Wilson planned in March 2020 a bomb attack at a hospital with COVID-19 patients in Kansas City. According to ABC News: “Wilson may have also believed the additional stress on society posed by the COVID-19 pandemic provided unique opportunities to exploit” and he tried to exploit the situation⁽¹³⁾. The case of Wilson was not weaponisation of COVID-19, but exploitation of the chaotic situation during the pandemic for a conventional attack. However, as Ackermann and Peterson stated: “Far-right groups using Telegram in the United States have encouraged those of their followers who contract COVID-19 to spread the disease to law enforcement, non-Whites and Jews, e.g., by spreading saliva on door handles at FBI offices or synagogues”⁽¹⁴⁾. However, these ideas were not transferred to real acts and they do not have a significant impact in the EU. This struggle for weaponisation was reflected in discussions in Europe. During the development of the corona-crisis in the second half of 2020 and the first half of 2021, the attempts to weaponise COVID-19 by violent right-wing extremists are not known.

⁽¹³⁾ Levine, FBI learned of coronavirus-inspired bomb plotter.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Ackerman & Peterson, Terrorism and COVID-19.

Anti-Asian hate crimes

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic from China to the rest of the world at the beginning of 2020 caused anti-Chinese or even anti-Asiatic hate incidents with the involvement of violent right-wing extremists. The labelling as “Chinese virus” was accompanied by prejudice against people from China and Asia in many cases ⁽¹⁵⁾, including violent attacks. However, due to the decline of the pandemic in China and due to many national and local problems with the pandemic, this issue became less important in the second half of 2020. It is also important to mention that hate speech was also aimed at non-Asiatic migrants in some cases and the migrants were attacked as potential transmitters of the virus ⁽¹⁶⁾.

A typical case of a hate crime with anti-Chinese bias was reported by the Polish anti-Racist NGO “Never Again”. In Wrocław on 8 March 2020, “a group of assailants attacked a Chinese-born citizen of Poland to the point at which he lost consciousness. The men spat in the victim’s face and felled him to the ground with their fists” ⁽¹⁷⁾. The attack’s target-selection was reasoned by racism based on the victim’s origin and it was connected with the COVID-19 fear. As a result of a wave of anti-Asiatic hate crimes in the United States in the first three months of 2021, this issue was discussed in Europe again ⁽¹⁸⁾.

Development of the thematisation of specific issues connected with COVID-19 by RWE/VRWE

The most important challenge connected with VRWE in the EU during the corona-crisis is connected with mass violent demonstrations and unrests. With the aim to mobilise people on the streets, right-wing extremists/violent right-wing extremists use a mass spread of fake news and conspiracy narratives in combination with a sensitive use of the frustration and depression of many people (caused by the impact of anti-COVID measures on recent daily life). The core of conspiracy narratives remains relatively stable and it is adaptable to new trends and events in the pandemic and measures against its spread. Conspiracy narratives are not typical only of RWE/VRWE, parts of the left-wing extremist and religious extremist scenes are also involved in their spread. Still, the role of violent right-wing extremists in the EU is the strongest in comparison with other variants of extremism. The conspiracy narratives widespread in the EU are connected with the spread of conspiracies on a more global scale (including QAnon, with origin in the United States). They are supported by extra-EU actors, mostly by Russian governmental and pro-Kremlin forces, with the aim to undermine the authority of the EU and its Member States.

The most important RWE conspiracies related to COVID-19 ⁽¹⁹⁾ are:

- 1) COVID-19 is a Chinese weapon against the West.
- 2) COVID-19 was created as a tool of global elites and the “deep state” (represented by Bill Gates, George Soros, “Brussels elite”, etc.), or even the Jewish elite widespread with the aim to a) earn money from masks and vaccination (also the big pharmaceutical industry should be involved in this conspiracy), b) eliminate the Western population (and to replace “traditional citizens” with migrants), or c) take control over free citizens (microchips in vaccination). The use of the 5G transmission towers narrative for the spread of COVID-19 ⁽²⁰⁾ can be added as a subsidiary conspiracy.
- 3) Anti-pandemic measures are misused by governments and by globalists to destroy small entrepreneurs and to create a dependent mass of people.

Real violent protests react to specific measures adopted by governments. If we focus on violent events, in the EU they were connected with the following interconnected topics.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Bayer & Bárd, Hate speech and hate crime in the EU.

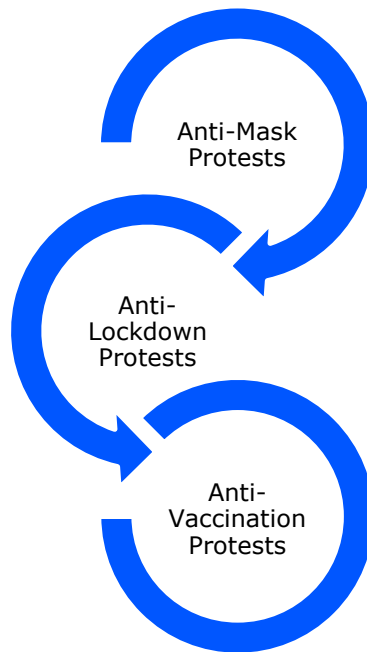
⁽¹⁶⁾ Ibid., pp. 17-18.

⁽¹⁷⁾ “Never Again” Association, The virus of hate.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Damiani, Expert: Pandemic has exposed anti-Asian hate.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Ackerman & Peterson, Terrorism and COVID-19.

⁽²⁰⁾ In this paper, attacks at 5G towers in relation to COVID-19 in France are not analysed deeper because they were committed by anarchists, not violent right-wing extremists. The Connexion, Dozens of 5G antennas vandalised.



Violent right-wing extremists in protest over responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

The most important violent right-wing extremist activities in the EU connected with the COVID-19 pandemic were in 2020 and 2021 (besides the anti-Asiatic hate crimes) mass violent demonstrations and unrest. However, violent behaviour during these protests was not always caused by beliefs in conspiracy narratives. Instead, it was prepared and supported by violent right-wing extremists to win media attention, to mobilise own supporters and to strengthen the political position of the violent right-wing extremist structures. Still, the speeches, mottos and arguments before the eruption of violence usually included elements of fake news and conspiracy narratives. In some cases, it can be difficult to affiliate the perpetrators with a specific form of extremism, because both far-left and far-right activists can be involved in unrest (this is probably the case in the violent clashes in Spain on 1 November 2020 ⁽²¹⁾). The protests are not very homogenous in their classification and amongst the protesters there are many other non-extremist action-oriented entities and individuals.

However, in several countries, the involvement of violent right-wing extremists in the protests is clear and significant. The modus operandi is usually similar. The protests were officially announced by a broader spectrum of activists and organisations infiltrated by right-wing extremists, ready for violence. In the first phase, the protests were quiet and within the legal framework. After their official end, they turned violent, mostly with the engagement of militants from specific entities. For example, on 18 October 2020 in Prague, Czech Republic, right-wing extremist football and ice hockey hooligans attacked the police forces in the centre of the city after the official end of the protest rally, while the official organisers of the demonstration rejected violence (later some organisers and hooligans blamed police provocateurs for initiating violence) ⁽²²⁾.

Violence plays a symbolic role; it serves as an expression of the anger of some groups of people and activists from the VRWE scene, who perceive themselves as a vanguard of the protest crowds. They are able to win for violent activities many non-RWE as well. The capability to organise violent activities strengthens the self-confidence of far-right militants and they can also attract new supporters. Unfortunately, for some youngsters, videos with clashes are an inspiration for similar behaviour. Also, some frustrated people can, from their point of view, positively evaluate attacks against the state, which is in their eyes responsible for their misery due to restrictive measures against COVID-19.

⁽²¹⁾ Jones, Spain's PM calls for calm.

⁽²²⁾ Božilov, Hooligans.

The following table presents three examples of violent demonstrations in the EU over responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in which RWE took part .

Table 2 : Examples of violent protests against anti-pandemic measures in the EU

Place and date	Brief description
Berlin (Germany), 29 August 2020	Several demonstrations against the anti-COVID-19 measures were announced in Berlin on 29 August. The total sum of 40 000 participants in these demonstrations was infiltrated by VRWE activists, including members of Reichsbürger (Germany-specific type of sovereignists who do not recognise the legitimacy of the Federal Republic. A crowd with violent right-wing extremists broke the police cordons in front of the Reichstag building and occupied the stairs for a short time. The spontaneous demonstration close to the Russian embassy led to violent clashes with the police ⁽²³⁾ .
Bratislava (Slovakia), 17 October 2020	Demonstration against anti-pandemic measures in Bratislava turned into violence, mostly thanks to the strong involvement of far-right football hooligans from Slovakia and from the Czech Republic and supporters of right-wing extremist groups. Rioters tried to destroy the gate to the Slovak governmental office and to attack the police. The police used teargas and a water cannon. Beside the VRWE activists, some “normal” people also took part in the violence ⁽²⁴⁾ .
Naples (Italy), 23 October 2020	A crowd of people protested on 23 October against the regional lockdown in Naples. Violence against the police escalated during the protests and the involvement of neo-fascist activists (mostly from the movement CasaPound and from right-wing hooligan gangs) was reported. Allegedly, the local mafia structures were also behind the protests ⁽²⁵⁾ .

Threats of violent attacks against politicians and experts responsible for governmental anti-pandemic measures

Serious threats towards politicians and experts who are responsible for governmental measures (or who publicly defend these measures) were expressed by various actors (mostly online or during the public protests), in many cases without connection to the extremist milieu. However, the attacks against Belgian top COVID-19 scientists were planned by Jürgen Conings, a Belgian soldier with xenophobic and neo-Nazi views. He became a hero for some protesters against the COVID-19 measures during a manhunt for him in May and June 2021 ⁽²⁶⁾.

Future threats of VRWE during the COVID-19 crisis and in the post-COVID-19 crisis

Recent vaccination against COVID-19 makes possible a step-by-step limitation of the impact of the corona-crisis. In the meantime, eruptions of violence at some demonstrations with the involvement of violent right-wing extremists in cases of prolonging lockdowns are not excluded. However, a more significant danger can

⁽²³⁾ Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, *Beteiligung von Rechtsextremisten*.

⁽²⁴⁾ Nováková, *V Bratislavě demonstrovali fotbaloví ultras*.

⁽²⁵⁾ Camilli, *Da dove viene la rabbia di chi protesta a Napoli*.

⁽²⁶⁾ Lyons, *The hunt for Jürgen Conings*.

come during the post-COVID-19 crisis, mostly in the case of economic decline and people's interconnected social problems. The distribution of social aid and benefits will be at the centre of interest. The right-wing extremist groups will spread hate against certain entities with new intensity (mostly against migrants, Muslims, Jews, ethnic minorities and anti-racist NGOs) and they will thematise global elites and the deep state as the alleged "winners" of COVID-19. This situation can initiate a new wave of violent riots and also a new wave of right-wing lone actors and small-cell terrorism, supported by global virtual networks (such as the Atomwaffen Division and its fractures). In the case of a rise in crime in the difficult post-COVID-19 era, a new rise in vigilantism with the involvement of violent right-wing extremists can be expected, sometimes with links to the governmental police and the military sphere. On the other hand, the interconnection of some violent right-wing extremists with organised crime structures is also very likely (for example, many bouncers with links to the VRWE scene lost their jobs during the pandemic and they can be active in criminal gangs).

The possible economic and social problems in the post-COVID-19 crisis can lead to the rise of anti-government movements with an RWE ideological background. The rise of various sovereignist (or self-governors) movements, quasi-state entities (as the German Reichsbürger) or infiltration of right-wing extremist ideas into the "preppers" scene should be expected. Individuals and small groups from these scenes can be active in performative violent acts to increase visibility (e.g. by taking control over their allegedly sovereign territories and try to authorize their own "law enforcement") or even in terrorist attacks. European institutions and their representatives can be targeted in countries with strong anti-EU attitudes (amongst others, in east-central or southern Europe), because the EU can be attacked by local right-wing extremist politicians. The rise of the new European alt-right movement with violent elements (with the help of external secret services) is not excluded in the future. From the tactical point of view, the weaponisation of biological weapons can be important for terrorists, at least in a rhetorical dimension ⁽²⁷⁾.

In the post-COVID era, RWE activists will present themselves as "protectors of ordinary people" against the conspiracy of elites during the corona-crisis. This narrative will be used to mobilise new supporters. People's memories of lockdowns and troubles during the corona-crisis will be connected with the governmental representation from that time. Doubts about the adequacy of such measures will be thematised by right-wing extremists during future crises and will be used for subversive propaganda against governmental, European and international policy and against the political opponents of the extreme right. The argument about the possibility "to close the border" (like during the corona-crisis) will be utilised in nationalistic and isolationistic rhetoric (in future discussions about the migration issues). The debate about the distribution of financial and other support in the post-COVID era can be exploited by right-wing extremists (attacks at facilities serving minorities, etc.). In case of the pandemic's rise in specific regions, people with links to these regions (visitors, diaspora members) can be attacked by right-wing extremists.

⁽²⁷⁾ Marone, Hate in the time of coronavirus.

The most important findings

1. The weaponisation of the COVID-19 pandemic by violent right-wing extremists was typical of discussions in the first phase of the pandemic in the United States; however, it was without impact in the EU.
2. The anti-Asian hate crimes were the first violent events connected with the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe; recently, they do not play an important role (but it can change in the future during the post-COVID-19 crisis, as the situation in the United States shows).
3. The most important violent events connected with VRWE in the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic are violent demonstrations. The demonstrators sometimes try to attack governmental buildings; violent clashes with the police are more frequent.
4. The core of violent activists came from organised violent right-wing extremist milieu (hooligan gangs, CasaPound supporters, Reichsbürger, etc.); however, many unorganised protesters joined the violent crowds. Despite the fact that right-wing extremist parties expressed distance from the violence at demonstrations, they won public and media attention thanks to the violence of other participants.
5. The spread of fake news and conspiracy narratives about the role of global elites, Jews, or persons imagined to be their representatives, such as Bill Gates and George Soros, 5G and COVID-19 “vaccination microchips”, etc. create a stable environment for radicalisation of frustrated people towards VRWE.
6. The self-presentation of violent right-wing extremists as “heroic resistance fighters” will probably be typical of the post-COVID-19 era, in which these people will utilise their image to mobilise new supporters and to intensify their violent actions.

Specific Challenges for P/CVE during the COVID-19 Crisis

Practitioners and CVE during the COVID-19 crisis

Practitioners face during the COVID-19 crisis several important challenges, and these challenges are very specific in comparison with the previous (and partially continuous) migration crisis. The contemporary COVID-19 crisis is primarily caused by the impact of the virus on human health; however, the protest behaviour — typical of the violent right-wing extremists — is aimed dominantly against the governmental measures against the spread of the pandemic. Violent right-wing extremists try to mobilise people to undermine governmental authority. For this purpose, right-wing extremists are active in the spread of conspiracy narratives and fake news. It is interesting that hard “law and order” approaches towards the elimination of the pandemic are (with a few exceptions ⁽²⁸⁾) not expressed by right-wing extremists in the EU. RWE uses subversive tactics against governments and the EU institutions and it tries to delegitimise their authority. Attacks at “traditional” targets accompany this anti-government struggle — such as the anti-immigration rhetoric and hate crimes against minorities and political opponents.

⁽²⁸⁾ On the internet, only some vigilantist initiatives controlling mask wearing in the Czech Republic were announced; however, its real activity is questionable. Janata, *Noste roušky, nebo vás zmlátíme*.

The role of practitioners dealing with violent right-wing extremists is very difficult in this era due to three interconnected fields of problems:

- 1) VRWE use irrational arguments (based on fake news and conspiracy narratives) and narratives. If the practitioners want to discuss the issue with clients from the VRWE milieu, they must use rational arguments, which is more complicated and is based on expert knowledge from medicine, crisis management, etc.
- 2) People are frustrated during the crisis and this is an optimal situation for recruitment by the right-wing extremists or violent right-wing extremists. For practitioners, it is important to explain governmental policy during the pandemic within the broader societal context, despite the fact that governments can also make some mistakes. However, trust in democratic representation and the chance for a successful end of the crisis is an important argument against the RWE/VRWE narratives. Highlighting the government's obligation to protect vulnerable groups of people during such an uncertain time may serve as a well-founded argument here. By utilizing a combination of personal emotions related to protecting vulnerable groups and their good knowledge of the individual's biography, first impulses to re-think their attitudes.
- 3) Some people can see violence as a way to deal with frustration. Practitioners should be able to explain the destructive role of violence for a society in crisis and regarding its solution. For example, the senselessness of use of violence against the police and dehumanising slogans like "All Cops Are Bastards" in light of the importance of finding a comprehensive solution should be explained.
- 4) It is important to take the psychological aspect into account. All people are experiencing fear and stress during the pandemic, which may lead to their seeking for quick solutions and identification of alleged culprits of a bad personal situation. It is also important to outline a long-term perspective of problem-solving, including an individual approach to the individuals' needs (why they are frustrated, what the cause of personal harm and expression of prejudice or hate by perpetrators is, and why the specific victims of RWE are attacked). An explanation of the individual's personal situation within the context of the general situation in society is an important element of discussion with the respective person.
- 5) The positive role (and potential) of citizen activism should be emphasised and the voluntary constructive activism in providing aid during the corona-crisis should be presented positively in contrast to destructive violent demonstrations and other extremist actions. Meetings with the participation of volunteers and protesters can be organised.
- 6) Systematic anti-racism work and criticism towards collective prejudices (such as anti-Asian hate) must continue.

How to get in touch with affected individuals during the crisis situation

The contemporary COVID-19 crisis is characterised by limits in human interpersonal communication. Limitation of people in one place, wearing masks, and obstacles in public transport and in cross-border travel make contacts with clients from VRWE as well as contacts amongst practitioners from various regions and countries difficult (which is an important issue from the point of view of sharing experiences). The recent crisis forces a change in previous work in the sense of significant strengthening of communication with video programmes (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, etc.) and modern social media.

The progress in digitalisation of communication during the COVID-19 crisis

However, after the elimination of the COVID-19 crisis, the return to face-to-face contact will also be important, amongst other reasons due to new challenges in the expected post-COVID-19 crisis. Trends in VRWE during this post-COVID-19 crisis should be intensively shared within RAN and within the national and local platforms of practitioners.

Challenges

- 1) Practitioners working with individuals from the VRWE milieu may need additional help from various expert fields to counter fake news and conspiracy narratives.
- 2) Practitioners should help increase the understanding for certain governmental responses to the pandemic, despite the fact that governmental measures can also have a negative impact on many individuals (unemployment as a result of the lockdown, limited school education, etc.). To do so credibly, governmental measures need to be logical and coherent.
- 3) The new situation during the recent COVID-19 crisis requires adaptation to the worsening of interpersonal communication. The creation of video chats to keep up direct interaction with persons who are already in counselling is important, especially in times of crisis. Additionally, increasing preventive efforts in the cyberspace is an important challenge. The online-based space for intervention in the field of P/CVE is expandable.
- 4) Practitioners need to be prepared for new trends in VRWE during the expected post-COVID-19 crisis (such as the utilisation of the previous protest role of VRWE in political struggles during discussions about the distribution of post-COVID support).
- 5) Ways and formats need to be designed that allow practitioners to stay up to date with the latest developments while also being able to carry out their daily work. To do so, infrastructure and funding for monitoring and knowledge sharing mechanisms need to be improved.
- 6) The transnational digital connections of various groups of RWE and conspiracy thinkers that mobilised during the pandemic have created a large undefined group of individuals, many of whom might be relevant target groups for P/CVE, not all of whom are clear right-wing extremists. Yet, existing P/CVE approaches are mostly aimed at “classical” VRWE or Islamist extremism and do not yet account for this new set of diversified target groups.

Key outcomes

With respect to previous findings from the analysis of the COVID-19 crisis and previous exploitation of various crises by violent right-wing extremists, several important lessons can be formulated. It is important to emphasise that the COVID-19 crisis was unique in comparison with the Great Depression or with the migration crisis (due to lockdowns, masks, etc.); however, the potential post-COVID-19 crisis can be more similar to the previous ones (including a restart of mass migration flows). In all crises, it is important to understand the interconnection between the ideological background of RWE and the readiness for violent activities. VRWE adopt their strategies and tactics to contemporary developments and often hide their true ideological goals behind a topical, quasi-non-ideological political agenda (for example, the struggle to win authoritarian power is declared as a fight for freedom against corrupt governments and pharmaceutical industry). This knowledge makes it possible to formulate successful counterstrategies.

Key Lessons

- 1) The scope and intensity of violence committed during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 in the EU was not as high as during the migration crisis and after the crisis; however, VRWE was responsible for various hate crimes and mostly for mass violent demonstrations in several countries. Members of the VRWE scene infiltrated broader crowds of protesters. These demonstrations were usually thematised also in the political propaganda of the right-wing extremist parties, despite their official rejection of violent behaviour. Violence during demonstrations was aimed mostly against the police forces as well as journalists perceived by protestors to be from the “mainstream” media. Threats were also aimed at experts and politicians who were responsible for the anti-pandemic measures. These protests may have lowered the threshold to engage with organised RWE networks for people previously not affiliated with them. This may result in an increased number of openly right-wing extremists and potentially even violent right-wing extremists in the mid-term.
- 2) Radicalisation of new supporters into the VRWE scene is carried out with the help of fake news and conspiracy narratives. Various groups of people are attacked in these narratives for alleged responsibility for the crisis as well as for the financial explanation of the crisis (Chinese, Jews, Muslims and migrants, big pharmaceutical industry, global elites and the so-called deep state). These conspiracies are widespread in many alt-right as well as neo-fascist and neo-Nazi platforms and they are supported by external actors. They can radicalise violent perpetrators also during the post-COVID-19 crisis.
- 3) Practitioners in the field of P/CVE (especially VRWE) face many obstacles during the COVID-19 crisis. They have a difficult situation in countering narratives and they have limited access to violent individuals due to pandemic-related restrictions. Adaptation to this situation is an important challenge, including new forms of the use of modern digital technologies. The post-COVID-19 crisis will require a partial return to traditional interpersonal communication; however, the experience from P/CVE activities during the corona-crisis will be utilised in the future by many practitioners.

If we analyse the role of various streams of VRWE, we can see in Europe dominance of neo-fascist and neo-Nazi activists in real violent activities, while the wide spread of conspiracy narratives and fake news was typical also of the “new alt-right” in Europe. Violence was used strategically mostly by football hooligans and neo-fascists. In the whole context of right-wing extremist engagement in protests over responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, the dominance of violence was only temporary and locally limited. It is important to mention that in many EU countries it did not come to the use of violence by right-wing extremists. From the perspective of VRWE development, the era of the corona-crisis in 2020/2021 can be characterised by:

- specific hate crimes and mass protests related to COVID-19 and countermeasures;
- temporary dominance of other topics in some countries for local VRWE scenes (BLM protests, clashes of violent right-wing extremists in Poland with opponents of the anti-abortion law, anti-police protests in France, etc.);
- deepening of global interconnection of chats and webs with conspiracy narratives, fake news and hate speech with the potential to radicalise violent right-wing extremists and terrorists in the future.

Relevant Practices

Contemporary relevant practices in countering exploitation of the COVID-19 crisis by violent right-wing extremists are not well summarised and collected. The reason is the fact that the development is very dynamic and reactions to various mass protests were limited by practitioners from the preventive and social sphere. Repressive police operations — such as the use of riot police — are not the subject of this paper. It is also important to emphasise that an important element in successful work with VRWE in this era is to deconstruct conspiracy narratives about the COVID-19 crisis. For these purposes, the RAN paper written by Francesco Farinelli should be studied by practitioners ⁽²⁹⁾ (for German-reading practitioners, the book ‘True Facts’ by Katharina Nocun and Pia Lamberty is strongly recommended ⁽³⁰⁾). Regarding VRWE, with respect to the available reports and information and with the knowledge from the crisis, the following recommendations can be formulated:

Recommendations

- 1) Provide precious monitoring and assessment of incidents and trends in exploitation of the COVID-19 pandemic by violent right-wing extremists at local, national and regional levels (the reports of the Polish NGO “Never Again” can be mentioned as an example of a good practice). This will remain relevant for the post-COVID-19 era, so efforts to create solid infrastructures and funding for these monitoring and assessments, as well as their transferral to practice, need to be ensured.
- 2) It is important to take into account the diversity of violent activists and the potential for spontaneous violence by some people. In social work with individuals, it is important to explain the meaningless of violence for real solution of the societal problems. It is also important to show that the crisis will be terminated and it is important to focus on overcoming the crisis.
- 3) For countering RWE/VRWE narratives, it is important to monitor relevant sources about fake news and conspiracy narratives and to use the existing sources in the EU and in other international organisations. It is important to show important governmental and EU measures against the pandemic and for mitigation of its impact. The previous RAN paper by Francesco Farinelli (see above) and the RAN conclusion paper ‘The Impact of Conspiracy Narratives on Violent RWE and VRWE Narratives’ should be used ⁽³¹⁾.
- 4) In campaigns against RWE/VRWE narratives, it is important to involve medical experts and also respected personalities from various milieus. Famous personalities like soccer players or mixed martial arts fighters holding democratic views should be involved in a serious debate and should be credible messengers of the campaign against RWE/VRWE narratives (it can have impact on some football hooligans, for example).
- 5) It is important to improve positive campaigns about the police and other law enforcement agencies (including thanking them for their activities in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic), because the police were one of the primary targets of violent right-wing extremists in Europe during the corona-crisis.
- 6) Practitioners from the youth and educational field of deradicalisation activities should visit reopened schools and youth facilities in the post-coronavirus period and discuss the experience of young people with the crisis and the post-crisis situation. Engagement with potential risk groups (from the point of view of VRWE) should be preciously prepared (including deconstructions of conspirative narratives, explanation of the difficult position of governmental authorities during the crisis and protection of victims of hate crimes connected with the COVID-19 crisis).
- 7) The post-COVID-19 crisis can lead to various forms of VRWE, and due to this fact it is important to quickly reach out to at-risk individuals already engaged at the fringes of these protest

⁽²⁹⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network, Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism.

⁽³⁰⁾ Nocun & Lamberty, True Facts.

⁽³¹⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network, The impact of conspiracy narratives.

movements. This could, for example, be done in the online space. To avoid these people being closed in their “echo chambers” is an important challenge for prevention.

- 8) AN individual approach to clients is important. To discuss their personal needs and fears (unemployment, health issues, partner relations) connected with the corona-crisis and the post-coronavirus troubles is an important element to prevent them from the use of violence in the name of RWE in the future.
- 9) Creating multi-professional support structures consisting of medical experts, mental health professionals, social workers, etc. aiming to work on cases together and in a holistic, collaborative manner, instead of separately, may have become even more important in the wake of the pandemic than it was before.
- 10) Practitioners dealing with the victims of RWE should organise discussions and support aimed at threatened communities (mostly Asian communities or communities attacked due to the regional rise of COVID-19 pandemics in the future).

Further reading

The recent academic literature about the exploitation of the COVID-19 pandemic by violent right-wing extremists is still relatively limited; only several journal articles have been published (usually with broader focus on all forms of violent extremism and terrorism and covering also “positive impacts”, such as the lesser visibility of extremists due to the dominance of the COVID-19 topic). Short policy papers and journalist analyses can also be found. Regarding the possible practices of P/CVE towards the issue guidelines elaborated by the United Nations’ institutions are available. The following list includes the most important articles, papers and guidelines.

1. Ackerman, H., & Peterson, H. (2020). Terrorism and COVID-19: Actual and potential impacts. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 14(3), 59-73. <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2020/issue-3/ackerman-and-peterson.pdf>
2. Avis, W. (2020). *The COVID-19 pandemic and response on violent extremist recruitment and radicalisation*. Institute of Development Studies. https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/15322/808_COVID19%20and_Violent_Extremism.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
3. Radicalisation Awareness Network (2021). *Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism – Insights and recommendations for P/CVE*. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/conspiracy-theories-and-right-wing-extremism-insights-and-recommendations-pcve-2021_en
4. Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2021, May 18). *Webinar on ‘Conspiracy myths and violent extremism’* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFu6b2QH1TU>
5. Scott, M., & Overly, S. (2020, May 12). *Conspiracy theorists, far-right extremists around the world seize on the pandemic*. POLITICO. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/12/trans-atlantic-conspiracy-coronavirus-251325>
6. Sold, M., & Süß, C.-A. (2020, March 13). *The coronavirus as a means to an end: Extremist reinterpretations of the pandemic*. Peace Research Institute Frankfurt / Leibniz-Institut Hessische Stiftung Friedens- und Konfliktforschung. <https://blog.prif.org/2020/03/30/the-coronavirus-as-a-means-to-an-end-extremist-reinterpretations-of-the-pandemic/>
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Radicalisation Awareness Network

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