

POLICE

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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN POL "The challenges of anti-authorities extremism for police"

23-24 June 2022, Copenhagen, Denmark

The challenges of anti-authorities extremism for police

Key outcomes

On 23 and 24 June 2022, the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Police and law enforcement Working Group (POL) organised a meeting for a group of experts with experience and expertise in recent violent protests and anti-authorities extremism¹. Through presentations and panel and group discussions, participants from different Member States shared their experiences and views on this burning and relatively new topic. In almost all countries, the COVID demonstrations were huge and sometimes even with violent outbursts. Police are confronted with not only legitimate protest against specific measures but also a variety of anti-authorities sentiments and conspiracy narratives. Most police were confronted with protest movements displaying a variety of ideological factions and even people without a clear ideological goal or agenda. There were some familiar faces but many new protesters and organisers also took part. The risk is that ideology-driven extremists, from violent right-wing extremism and anarchism, are instigating, hijacking and abusing the protest of citizens who have the fullest right to protest and express their anger and criticism. The following key outcomes were identified in the meeting:

- Anti-authorities extremism is a new hybrid form of extremism that is different from the "original" or classic forms of extremism. Police in many countries are challenged by new forms of protesting, new protesters, and more violence and intimidation targeted against authorities and institutions. Targets range from politicians and governments to the health sector, scientists, journalists and police. The meeting's participants saw huge similarities in these new challenges for European police.
- There is a need to better understand this "blurry" and hybrid anti-authorities extremism. Sometimes it is not clear what the ideology or the political demands are. We need to better look at who is protesting and demonstrating, and who is *not*. We need to better understand what the drivers and triggers are and what role the social media play. And who is paying, facilitating and organising?
- Facilitating citizens in using their democratic right to protest is a task for police in democracies. Dealing with illegal extremist elements and influences interfering with citizens protesting can be seen as protecting protest and citizens in open societies.
- Especially in times of surging distrust in authorities, police should be perceived by the public as professional and neutral. This also requires differentiating the approaches of specific individuals, organisations, and segments of protest and mass demonstrations.

¹ Different terms are used to describe this phenomenon: anti-authority, anti-government, anti-establishment and anti-system extremism. They are all about the same. Since this is for police, the working group choose to use anti-authorities extremism.

This paper presents the main conclusions of two days of presentations and lively group discussions. Since this was the first time RAN POL had a meeting on the complex phenomenon of mass protest in combination with anti-authorities sentiments and extremists, a large portion of the first day was spent on sharing experiences and understanding variety in the phenomenon. On the second day, the group drafted lessons and recommendations.

Highlights of the discussion

The different faces and targets of anti-authorities extremism and protest

An assessment among the participants of the different Member States showed that the evolving phenomenon of anti-authorities extremism is manifesting itself in several ways.

- “Police for freedom” and veterans and other military are showing up, sometimes in mash-ups of real and made-up uniforms, and pretending to defend the protesters against the government and police.
- Squares fill with demonstrators, ranging from right-wing and autonomous and anarchist to “yogi”, desperate bar owners and angry ordinary citizens. The protest crowds are fragmented and transversal because there is a wide range of grievances.
- Criticism against anti-COVID measures and anti-authority sentiments are sometimes also present among police personnel. This creates confusing and unwanted interactions with demonstrators.
- There are legitimate protests but the underlying extremism could be anti-Semitic or xenophobic.

Anti-authorities extremism, what is it?

Based on discussions on Dr Francesco Marone’s presentation:

- All types of violent extremism promote **radical change** and are **targeting authorities** like politicians and state institutions. So does the new hybrid anti-authorities extremism.
- The first step of anti-authorities extremism is a **deep-seated distrust in public authorities**. This, in combination with crises that call for tough government policies, creates a potential breeding ground for recruitment and mobilisation.
- **Radical conspiracy theories** (QAnon, Great Replacement, Great Reset) **exacerbate attitudes of generalised distrust** in public authorities, with narratives of hidden elites playing dirty games. These are facilitated by **social media**.
- Conspiracy narratives tend to flourish in a complex world where citizens may feel they are **losing their grip on their lives and that their voice is not heard**.
- In small sectors of the population generalised distrust may turn into **delegitimation of public authorities**. Delegitimation can lead to **active hostility** and, in extreme cases, even to **violence**.
- Anti-authorities extremism can combine with **traditional types of violent extremism**, even encouraging unusual convergences; as an alternative, it **may remain without a clear ideological articulation**.

- A lot of doxing and online intimidation of researchers, medical staff, politicians and police officers.
- Targets: An unknown perpetrator attacked the house of the commander of state security with gas bombs.
- Sometimes the anti-authorities extremists are armed and dangerous: The “Reichsbürger” (meaning sovereign citizens) are denying state authority. This dangerous group was already in existence but is now triggered by the anti-COVID-measures movement.
- There seems to be a lot of copying from the United States and Canadian way of campaigning and protesting. Trump and MAGA (Make America Great Again) signs are being used and international support is being exchanged.

- The main binding narratives for the anti-authorities extremists are the Great Reset (anti-World Economic Forum), QAnon (elites sexually exploiting and murdering children), and to a lesser extent the Great Replacement (a hidden plan of “the elite” intending to replace the population with immigrants).
- In cases where police used violence, and sometimes acted in an unfortunate or unprofessional way, members of the public or citizen journalists filmed it and put it online, sometimes out of context, leading to new angry protests, hostility against police, and even doxing and intimidation of individual police officers.

COVID as the game-changer

- In many countries the level of anti-authority sentiments and extremism accelerated in the COVID protests, but it seems to influence other societal protests. The participants expressed that both the sentiments and the way of mobilising and demonstrating are changing and they expect these changes to stay.

Challenges for police in dealing with new protests and new protesters

- Anti-authorities extremism may be associated with a (even more) **vague and blurred distinction between legitimate/illegitimate/potentially dangerous** activities.
- A lot of **new protesters**, and **new and improvised organisers** or even a lack of official organisers, often overlap several circles of ideologies or other shared group identities. Also, there are now also many people who were never active in extremist circles. This creates challenges for building dialogue and managing events.
- Police and former police colleagues could have sympathy with the anti-authority sentiments, in protest groups or even in function.
- The COVID protesters sometimes organise their own militant “police” or “defend groups”. For example, the Dutch local defend groups were comprised of hooligans, outlaw motorbike gangs, extreme-right groups, and people with a link to crime or conspiracy. They even created their own brands with flags, clothes and masks. Sometimes they wear tactical protective gear, carry weapons and have their own communication channels.
- For the Dutch police, known for the de-escalating “Dutch approach”, it was a shock to have multiple protests with a high level of violence, mainly initiated by the COVID curfew measures or the COVID policies in general.
- Brussels police have a lot of experience in maintaining public order (“negotiated public space”). The four levels of policing (basic policing, public management, crowd control and riots) and available toolsets (dialogue, negotiations, potential partnerships, communication, feedback, etc.) are being challenged by the new ways of protesting.
- New and alternative social media are accelerating the mobilising and recruitment capacities.
- In Milano (Italy), the police is innovating with intel fusion in the Great Events Room to get real-time intelligence and coordination organised. They pay attention to communication, now even more, on three levels: operational, with the press and with citizens.
- The Dutch police, challenged by the riots and protests of the anti-authorities extremists, are in a process of redefining the changing phenomenon police and society are facing: these cover five phases in the public state of mind: a) peaceful, b) agitation, c) resistance, d) revolt, e) violence.

Additionally, they have reordered the toolkit with around 10 newly defined tasks / products:

- Intelligence
- Public order / riot policing

- Investigation
- Social networks
- Traffic
- Administrative advice (to mayor)
- Communication
- Protection / security

Newest additions:

- Community policing
- Partners: multi-agency working

In big manifestations, those responsible for the above tasks are all present.

Recommendations

- This is a new form of extremism and it is here to stay. Police need more knowledge and understanding on how it is evolving. Perhaps researchers of LOT 2 can be of help.
- Police in Europe should share more information on these developments in a uniform way, in order to get a grip on the scale and nature.
- Police officers need training on this new form of extremism, and in dealing with it in a professional, neutral way.
- Police need to anticipate they are part of the “la bataille de perception” — perception battle — with independent journalists and distrust in the traditional news media. Because of the critical anti-authority attitude of anti-authorities extremism, police need to be extra aware of how their actions are being monitored and presented on social media. Unprofessional police action can easily be used by anti-authorities extremists.
- Police need real-time intelligence and innovation and adaptivity in tactics to meet the gained speed and creativity of new disruptive social movements.
- Police and politicians should be careful not to misuse the extremism label for people who are protesting and are critical towards the government and authorities.

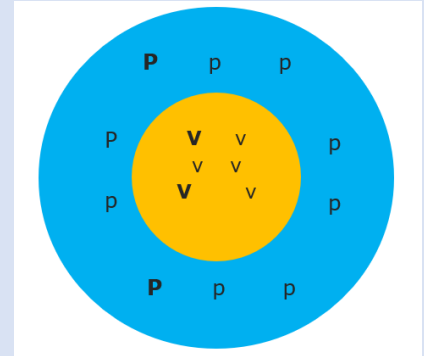
Follow up

- It was suggested that this relatively new and complex extremist phenomenon could be on the 2023 calendar for RAN POL and other RAN events.
- RAN Policy Support could have more research being done on the definitions, nature and scale of anti-authorities extremism.

Relevant practices

The **Swedish police** presented a model (a simplified representation of a more complex reality) picturing a manifestation with protesters with and without violent intentions. The **v's** in the model are the people willing to use violence, and the **V's** are their leaders. The **P's** are leaders, organisers and spokespersons who demonstrate peacefully and who represent **p**rotesters who also protest with non-violent intentions.

The task for police is to facilitate the peaceful protesters executing their democratic right. If there are potentially violent factions, then the peaceful P-leaders might have the biggest leverage on the violence-prone protesters and their leaders. If police in the eyes of the v's, and even the p's, are perceived as acting unjustly and for instance unnecessarily violent in their actions, this will be exploited by the violent leaders to draw peaceful protesters in. This was something that was recognised in many countries. The problem for the "new protest" is that there are more than one of these circles of protesters in one manifestation. So the picture has more dimensions and is more complex. Who are the P's and V's and what is the leverage they have on v's and p's, who might be in one or more circles?



The **Dutch approach** to redefining the new ways of protesting and redefining the existing police tasks and products is still under construction, but it seems like a promising practice in bringing police up to speed with the rapidly and radically changing new ways of protesting.

The **Italian** operational approach from Milano was a relevant approach because of the operational coordination in combination with the communication approach.

Further reading

- Champion, K. Ferrill, J., & Milligan, K. (2021). [Extremist Exploitation of the Context Created by COVID-19 and the Implications for Australian Security](#). *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 15(6), 23–40.
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- Jackson, S. (2019). [A Schema of Right-Wing Extremism in the United States](#). *ICCT Policy Brief*.
- Marone, F. (2022). [Hate in the time of coronavirus: exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violent extremism and terrorism in the West](#). *Security Journal*, 35(1), 205–225.
- Van Dongen, T. (2021). [Assessing the Threat of Covid 19-Related Extremism in the West](#). *ICCT Publications*.