Contemporary Violent Left-wing and Anarchist Extremism (VLWAE) in the EU:

Analysing Threats and Potential for P/CVE

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Practitioners

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Contemporary violent left-wing and anarchist extremism (VLWAE) in the EU – An overview

Introduction

Contemporary violent left-wing extremism is complex, difficult to explain and even more problematic to address. **The complexity of the phenomenon starts with its definition**, as happens for many other forms of extremism. The classification of violent manifestations in the left-wing extremist scene in the EU is highly controversial both in political circles and academic communities ([1]). Furthermore, the phenomenon has **several ties with anarchist violent extremism**, and, throughout history, the ideological spectrum of violent left-wing extremists was enlarged by the intersection of different ideologies like Marxism-Leninism, Trotskyism, Proletarian internationalism, Stalinism, Maoism, anti-militarism and eco-socialism. This **hybrid scenario** makes it uneasy to unravel the phenomenon, especially considering the contrast existing between the current poor number of studies on violent left-wing and anarchist extremism **(VLWAE)** and the quite high numbers of left-wing and anarchist attacks reported by Europol every year, as we will see later in this overview.

Main gaps in literature

Despite the complexity and fluidity of violent left-wing extremism, the phenomenon is receiving **limited attention from researchers and practitioners across the EU** and several gaps in knowledge persist. The most important ones can be listed as follows:

- **Lack of exact figures** about left-wing extremist attacks and attackers. Despite the existence of the above-mentioned variety of the VLWAE landscape, experts tend to converge around only three main categories: Marxist-Leninists, anarchists, and so-called autonomous radicals. Consequently, making a proper threat assessment based on exact figures is challenging.

- **Lack of a wide-range analysis of the use of the internet and social media** by violent left-wing extremists. This gap constitutes a strong limitation in the understanding of the phenomenon considering the role played by the World Wide Web in radicalisation processes nowadays.

- **Drivers of violent left-wing radicalisation and extremism are poorly understood.** There is a lack of specific studies on drivers of left-wing radicalisation both in the academic and non-academic spheres, especially in the last six years. Even in publications that address different strands of extremism, this topic is rarely mentioned.

- **Lack of fresh data about left-wing extremism milieus.** This is mainly due to the fact that most of the left-wing extremist groups are difficult to be accessed by researchers.

- Considering that the intersection between a wide array of sensitive issues is a prominent feature of VLWAE, research on **group identification** and **how different identities overlap and interact** is an overlooked element of knowledge.

- **Another gap in the literature concerns cross-national comparisons.** VLWAE is marked by international ties, particularly amongst the more extreme groups and violent anarchist and "autonomous" cells. Understanding the violent left-wing extremism scene's transnational network and dynamics could help in deciphering the causes of radicalisation.

([1]) Glaser, Extremist, militant, radicalised?, p. 8.

These gaps in knowledge can find the following, yet not exhaustive, explanations:

- **The historical rise of fascism and Nazism in some European countries** is still alive in the collective memory of their population, producing mixed reactions towards left-wing extremism ([2]), sometimes considered as a lesser threat (if not a threat at all) by some preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) practitioners ([3]).

- Many concepts and ideas associated with far-left ideology, unlike the ones related to other forms of extremism, are close to more **"mainstream" notions**, frequently and openly debated by European public opinion ([4]).

- **Ideological boundaries of the phenomenon** are not as clear anymore as they were in the 20th century. This produces confusion in the detection and identification phase of the threat.

- In some European countries, **the level of the threat** is not currently as high as is the case for other forms of violent extremism (e.g., violent right-wing extremism).

This overview

In light of the above, **the main objective of this paper** is to provide a **concise overview of and updated figures on VLWAE** to help practitioners working in the field of prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism to better understand the complexity of the phenomenon and to identify the existing practices and programmes to be implemented to address issues relating to this kind of extremism as part of their work. This is **to avoid the underestimation of possible dangers** that, if not properly confronted, could favour new polarisation and radicalisation processes in society.

The paper is divided into **four sections**. The **first section** provides a historical overview of VLWAE in Europe as well as an updated description of the level of the threat. VLWAE main narratives, recruitment tactics and demographics are also presented. The **second section** discusses the main challenges that VLWAE poses to P/CVE and prevention workers building on the existing literature. The **third section** presents the main approaches to the prevention of VLWAE following the traditional tripartite division in primary, secondary and tertiary levels of prevention. Examples from EU Member States are also provided when available. The **fourth section** identifies the gaps for P/CVE work with regard to VLWAE, tries to shape ideas to overcome the existing challenges and explores the untapped P/CVE potential in this field.

Left-wing and anarchist violence in the EU

Historically, violent left-wing extremist organisations and individuals have carried out the majority of politically motivated terrorism in the West. Between 1970 and 1980, 93 % of attacks and 58 % of deaths occurred in relation to this cluster. Small cells of revolutionary Marxist or anarchist terrorist groups carried out most of these attacks ([5]). Left-wing terrorist operations decreased significantly in the mid-1980s, yet they have had a noticeable resurgence in the EU over the 21st century. In terms of conducted attacks, the Europol EU Terrorism Situation and Trend (TE-SAT) reports constitute a precious source for gaining **a picture of the scope of this phenomenon in the last two decades**:

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[2] This reflection stems from a train the trainers' workshop on violent left-wing and anarchist extremism organised by the European Foundation for Democracy in April 2021 as part of the EU funded project CICERO.
[3] Ellefsen & Jämte, Violent extremism is not a uniform phenomenon.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2020, p. 64.

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

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

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

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

[6] Paparella & Rinolfi, Marco Biagi, government labour law consultant, murdered.
[7] Kassimeris, For a Place in History.
[8] Anarchists, autonomists and activists with a nebulous ideological bent make up the majority of the Black Bloc. It can be considered more of a set of tactics than a solid entity. During the demonstrations, militantly minded individuals who work in small autonomous cells and are willing to use violence to attain their objectives are gathered. To avoid being identified by authorities and to foster egalitarianism inside the bloc, they normally dress in black and wear black masks. In this regard, see: Mareš, Extreme Left Terrorism in Contemporary Europe, p. 306.
[9] Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2010, p. 7.
[10] Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2010, p. 7.
[11] Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2011, p. 27.

Popular Revolutionary Forces (*Mahomenes Laikes Epanastatikes Dynameis*, 2013, 2 casualties and 1 injured) ([12]), the **Militia Group Popular Justice** (*Organosi Politofylakis Laiki Dikeosyni*, 2015, 1 casualty) ([13]), the **Conspiracy of Cells of Fire** (*Synomosía ton Pyrínon tis Fotiás*, 2017, 1 injured) ([14]), the **Revolutionary Self-Defence Organisation** (*Organosi Epanastatikis Aftoamynas*, 2017, 1 injured) ([15]), the **Armed Revolutionary Forces** (*Enoples Epanastatikes Dynameis*, 2018, 1 injured) ([16]), and **Individuals Tending to the Wild** (*Individualidades Teniendo a lo Salvaje*, 2018, 2 injured) ([17]).

Other attacks were not directly claimed by any specific group although they followed similar *modi operandi*, like the **attacks** carried out by left-wing and anarchist extremists in Greece **in 2010 that caused six casualties** ([18]), those that happened in 2011 when **500 German police officers were injured** by violent left-wing and anarchist extremists during protests against their right-wing opponents ([19]), and those in 2018 when **several police officers were injured** in Germany **in the Hambacher Forst Forest** while clearing the area that was occupied by left-wing and anarchist extremists who used the Hambacher Forst as a setting for international networking ([20]).

In the EU, the **main targeted countries** from left-wing and anarchist terrorist attacks are Greece, Italy, Spain, Austria, Denmark, Germany, Czech Republic and France. Amongst them, **the Mediterranean triangle** composed of Italy, Spain and Greece results in being the most affected one. Most of the attacks were perpetrated by the anarchist violent sphere.

Recent trends

In June 2021, the new Europol TE-SAT report was released. Main findings relating to VLWAE can be summarised as follows ([21]):

- In the year **2020**, Italy was the site of all **24 completed left-wing and anarchist terrorist acts**. In France, one plot was foiled. **Left-wing extremist activity**, like in previous years, **was less violent than anarchist extremist activity**. On the other hand, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland assessed that left-wing extremists' violent activities are likely to escalate.

- **The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on left-wing and anarchist extremist actions** in general. While in the first wave of the pandemic violent actions mainly resulted in riots in prisons, during the rest of 2020 they have exploited chances to achieve a variety of goals: to show their dissatisfaction with official governmental policies; to draw attention to the state's perceived oppressive character; to destroy symbols of capitalism; to oppose the implementation of the **5G communications network**; to spread fake news and **conspiracy theories**; and to support the struggle for an independent **Kurdish state**. In this regard, one of the suspects in the left-wing terrorist plan to kill police and army personnel in France was a Kurdish militia member who had returned from north-east Syria. The topic of Kurdish independence was high on the agenda of left-wing and anarchist extremist organisations in a number of EU Member States in 2020.

- **Left-wing and anarchist extremist organisations** in the various EU Member States have actively **supported environmental movements** by participating in rallies and other activities.

- **One of the hallmarks of the left-wing and anarchist extremist scene, mostly at an individual level, is international networking.** Extremists from Poland, for example, have formed relationships with like-minded persons mostly from the Czech Republic, Germany, Slovakia and Belarus in this context. Similarly, radicals in Switzerland have ties to Belgium, France, Germany, Greece and Italy. Violent left-wing extremist organisations in Denmark, Sweden and Norway are reported to work closely together on a group basis. These organisations communicate with like-minded organisations throughout Europe.

([12]) Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2014, p. 35.
([13]) Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2016, p. 37.
([14]) France 24, Former Greek PM hurt in bomb blast.
([15]) Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2018, p. 48.
([16]) Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2019, p. 56, p. 57, p. 59.
([17]) Ibid.
([18]) Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2011, p. 25.
([19]) Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2013, p. 32.
([20]) Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2019, p. 59.
([21]) Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2021, pp. 92-97.

VLWAE: A functional description

While Europol provides working definitions for left-wing and anarchist terrorism, **there is no EU agreed definition of violent left-wing and anarchist extremism**. The same issue affects all the other kinds of violent extremism. As stated above, updated scientific studies of left-wing extremism are rare. A recent exploratory study into left-wing extremist groups in the Netherlands emblematically shows the necessity to adopt a very broad definition as follows:

"A left-extremist group is a group or collective consisting of at least two persons, which defines itself as left-wing or is considered as such by others. There are shared values and/or goals and a certain degree of mutual interaction and connectedness; at least one person has acted or attempted to act against the law on behalf of the group or in pursuance of a theme on which the group takes a prominent position, by means of targeted action against objects, companies, groups or persons; the conduct in question may entail security risks and/or affect people's sense of security" [22].

According to a RAN Police ex post paper, **"left-wing extremism is a broad term encompassing many types and differing from one country to another"** [23]. A striking example of this variety of very heterogeneous and non-centralised movements is the so-called **antagonist sphere**. Antagonism pertains to a wide range of ideologies, including revolutionary Marxism and post-Marxist tradition, and entails a binary view that fosters an **"us versus them" perspective** of society: proletarians against bourgeoise, natives against perceived internal enemies in a given country, and so on and so forth [24]. It can be considered as a **contradictory political movement** with anti-system and anti-institutional aims **making selective use of violence**. This translates into the coexistence of legitimate forms of protest and actual manifestations of violence. However, even when these groups and individuals do not resort to violence, this fragmented galaxy **may constitute a breeding ground for radicalisation leading to violent extremism** and may popularise extremist narratives. This preliminary reflection is becoming even more significant **in recent years**, considering that traditional Marxist-Leninist violent extremist and terrorist groups have carried out no attacks in the EU and that **the most active violent groups come from the antagonist sphere** and "adopt an anarchist, anti-authoritarian ideology" with only some of them occasionally using Marxist-Leninist propaganda elements [25].

As a result, to unpack the complexity of the VLWAE phenomenon, one possibility is to provide practitioners with a **functional description** of its main features, especially in terms of narratives, campaigns and recruitment.

Main narratives and campaigns

The most recurrent narrative in VLWAE groups today appears to be the **justification of violence due to an unjust social order**. Generally, their **main grievances relate to socioeconomic issues** [26] (anti-globalisation, anti-capitalism, social inequalities, etc.), **political parties, other forms of extremism** (anti-fascism, and resistance against "extreme right-wing" parties and groups to prevent their voice being heard), **migration relating issues** (anti-racism, resistance to repatriation of migrants as well as opposition to the EU's and the Member States' policies and practices about asylum and refugees), **the criminal justice system** (prison abolition, solidarity with imprisoned like-minded violent extremists or terrorists), **the Kurdish cause** (a number of European left-wing and anarchist extremists travelled to Syria in order to fight alongside Kurdish militias), **environmentalism** (frequent cooperations between members of animal rights, anarchist and environmental extremist groups have been reported in recent years), and **states and governments** (government corruption, the necessity of a classless society without borders or states, etc.).

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[22] van Ham et al., Summary. A view on left-wing extremism, p. 4.
[23] Lenos & Wouterse, Police prevention and countering of far-right and far-left extremism, p. 6.
[24] In this regard, see: Ostiguy and Casullo, Left versus Right Populism: Antagonism and the Social Other.
[25] Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2016, p. 37.
[26] In relation to the theme of income redistribution as a main determinant of support for a radical left ideology, see: Visser et al., Support for radical left ideologies in Europe.

In sum, **they exploit anti-establishment sentiments and socioeconomic issues to develop their "anti-narrative"**: anti-capitalism, anti-neoliberalism, anti-elite, anti-fascism, etc., **with the strategic goal of escalating social and political tensions to accelerate systemic collapse.**

The **ideal of social justice**, or the anti-fascist discourse, for instance, is exploited by violent groups as a recruitment tool to attract someone before revealing their true intentions. The term itself, "fascism", is often used in their narratives and broadly indicates a type of action or a type of government deemed hostile, unfair, and authoritarian.

The high complexity of this ideological framework is injected in some of the campaigns currently undertaken by left-wing antagonist groups, mostly concerned with calls for fairer policies to manage migratory flows, to address economic crisis and housing shortages, to ask for anti-repression and anti-militarist measures, or to hinder major infrastructure projects considered as harmful for both people and the environment. In some cases, **non-violent demands have been parasitised by violent extremists** who turned them into occasions for clashes and armed riots.

Recruitment tactics

Like for other forms of extremism, **the internet is nowadays a means for violent left-wing and anarchist extremists to build alliances with like-minded individuals and groups and to recruit new members**. While more traditional social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are mainly used by these extremists to claim the responsibility for their attacks, a number of websites, blogs, and fringe encrypted social media and messaging platforms like Telegram, JITSI, Riot or other technological solutions to protect their anonymity (e.g. TOR or VPN) are used to disseminate propaganda material and attract new followers.

Recruitment for the VLWAE cause may also occur in formal or informal physical settings such as bars, schools, music shows, neighbourhoods and universities or between peers at school. According to a RAN Centre of Excellence ex post paper on audiences of right- and left-wing violent extremists:

"Both high schools and universities offer fertile ground for left wing extremist recruiters seeking target audiences. Historically, the left appeals strongly to teachers and intellectuals as well as comrades and union workers who are recruited at the workplace. Left-wing extremists also make use of books and the internet for their propaganda (but they don't employ high-profile videos and GIFs as much). Their online presence is less visible than that of right-wing extremists or Daesh" [27].

As far as **the age and the gender** of the most sensitive individuals to left-wing extremism are concerned, there are discrepancies in the available data stemming from the existing literature. However, what is clear is that the **youth are a sensitive category** even though, in the case of left-wing extremism, **the average age appears to be slightly higher than for Islamist and right-wing extremism**. In addition, even if the male category remains stronger in terms of number, the female one also appears to be numerically relevant in the left-wing sphere [28].

In the article 'Trends in Anti-Fascist and Anarchist Recruitment and Mobilization', Ariel Koch stressed that **music also plays a role in the recruitment process** and mobilisation of fans to political activism:

"… music is playing an essential role for left-wing extremists, who use this form of propaganda as a medium, for expression and as a recruitment and mobilization tool" [29].

According to Koch, "this is also true to our days, when songs of anti-fascist bands provide the soundtrack for anti-fascist violence" [30]. Koch also suggests that "the second decade of the Twenty-First century is characterized by the intensification and increase of violent anarchists" who see violence as legitimate for what they call self-defence and struggle against fascist opponents. Reasons for this, according to the author, are the role of the internet in enabling transnational communities, the rise of right-wing extremism, and battlefronts close to western Europe, such as Syria and Ukraine, where extremists of different kinds can get training and join real fighting [31].

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[27] RAN CoE, Audiences of right- and left-wing violent extremists, p. 5.
[28] See: Allington et al., Violent extremist tactics and the ideology of the sectarian far left, p. 1, p. 18.
[29] Koch, Trends in Anti-Fascist and Anarchist Recruitment and Mobilization, p. 16.
[30] Ibid., p. 18.
[31] Ibid., p. 40.

Indeed, looking into the attacks conducted in the last five years in the EU inspired by VLWAE ideology, most of them come from the anarchist pro-insurrectionism landscape.

Left-wing violent extremism appeared to have some **affinities with Islamist violent extremism in the first decade of the 2000s**, which resulted in a desire to recruit in mosques. In Italy, for example, after the assassination of a government labour consultant by the New Red Brigades in 2002, Nadia Desdemona Lioce, a member of the group, gave the following statement to her interrogators: "September 11, 2001, must open the field to the revolutionary vanguards and not only in Italy" ([32]). Between 2000 and 2006, a group of Italian militants linked to the New Red Brigades published a magazine in Paris (*La Voce*) devoted to supporting various Islamist groups stating that "Muslim revolutionary priests are being arrested in Europe on the pretext of the war on terrorism only because the imperialist bourgeoisie wants to silence Islam, which is the religion of the new proletariat" ([33]). Alfredo Davanzo, one of the New Red Brigades' ideologues, demonstrated a spirit of cooperation rather than just moral support for radical Islamists. Indeed, he was intercepted by Italian counterterrorism officials while speaking about the necessity to address recruitment efforts within Italian mosques ([34]). Nowadays, there is no evidence of visible links between violent Islamist extremists and left-wing and anarchist extremists.

The anarchist violent galaxy

Nowadays, it is critical to distinguish between the two main branches of contemporary anarchism: intellectual and insurrectional anarchism. **Intellectual anarchism** concerns a philosophical form of anarchism with a strong mistrust in institutions and the belief that the current socio-political system is unfair and must be changed. **Insurrectional anarchism** is an extremist tendency within the anarchist landscape that, under the motto coined by the socialist Louis Auguste Blanqui in 1880 **"Neither God, Nor Master"**, considers violence as a viable tool to achieve its objectives.

A recent train the trainers' workshop organised by the European Foundation for Democracy on left-wing and anarchist extremism within the framework of the EU-funded project CICERO ([35]) gathered 47 participants belonging to law enforcement agencies as well as researchers, civil servants, students, teachers, social workers, and members of civil society organisations and addressed in-depth the phenomenon of insurrectional anarchism. According to the experts who presented in this workshop, four primary ideas can be recognised as structural elements of the insurrectional anarchist movement:

- **Affinity groups' conception:** Members of the group have similar personalities and common sociocultural characteristics. In the history of the anarchist movement, affinity groups are autonomous units of between 5 and 20 individuals who share a common political vision. There is permeability between different milieu because the groups are usually based on personal relationships.

- **Informal organisation:** These are mainly clandestine organisations, with no hierarchy and a very basic structure. Their use of technology is very limited, and the communication is mostly based on traditional means.

- **Direct action:** Insurrectionary anarchists mainly act without any orders from above, in complete autonomy. Their decision to carry out an attack is independent and recognised by a group as affiliation mainly ex post. This direct action tactic shares some similarities with *Action Directe*, the French far-left terrorist group that committed a series of assassinations and violent attacks in France between 1979 and 1987.

- **Double level:** The structure of insurrectionary anarchism is made up of two distinct levels. The first one is public, visible, and composed of theorists and ideologues of the movement who indicate the main strategies to be followed. The second level is made up of low manpower. Its members have a mid-low cultural level, they are indoctrinated by the ideologues and they carry out the actions.

([32]) Vidino & Morigi, Italy's Left-Wing Terrorists Flirt with Radical Islamists.
([33]) Ibid.
([34]) Ibid.
([35]) The workshop took place online on 8 April 2021, under Chatham House rules. Regarding the CICERO Project, see: CICERO: CounternarratIve Campaign for prEventing RadicalisatiOn, Grant Agreement number: 812613 - ISFP-2017-AG-CSEP.

The **International Revolutionary Front** (IRF), also known as **Informal Anarchist Federation** (FAI), is a striking example of a horizontal network with no central command and is constituted by a diffuse group of individuals and cells dedicated to clandestine urban guerrilla tactics and calling out for a revolutionary war against "Power", "State" and "Capital". It is **a loose international network of anarchist terrorist cells** that started its activity in Italy on 23 December 2003, with an attack against the residence in Bologna, Italy, of the then President of the European Commission Romano Prodi, and that has carried out attacks in at least 20 countries around the world ([36]).

With regard to the *modus operandi*, insurrectionary anarchism shares some similarities with the **leaderless resistance model**, a strategy of in-depth opposition that encourages the single individual or very small groups to engage independently in violent action without any hierarchy or central control. In this regard, it is possible to identify **two main kinds of tactics**. The first one consists of low-profile crimes against public property such as acts of vandalism, arson and sabotage. This is the main kind of crime carried out by extremist environmentalists. The second kind of tactics was adopted at the end of the 1990s and resembles terrorist crimes, with homemade pressure cooker bombs, letter bombs and other homemade bombs against human beings, properties and symbolic political targets.

The **main targets** of insurrectionary anarchism are composed of law enforcement agencies, judicial authorities, ministries and other public services, politicians, media, banks, diplomatic authorities and private companies.

Challenges for P/CVE in the context of VLWAE

The previous section has presented the main features of VLWAE groups and militants, and it has discussed the characteristics of its milieus. In this section, we discuss the main challenges that these groups pose to prevention workers at all levels.

Perception of the threat

Data about VLWAE violent acts and the perceived level of threat do not match. The overwhelming majority of the sources utilised for this review points to the fact that VLWAE often is not even perceived by practitioners as a relevant threat in their local environment. One reason that has been already mentioned above relates to the widespread use of violence by extremist groups that were active in the 1970s to 1980s. **The frequency and lethality of that violence dwarf the levels that we witness nowadays.** Nonetheless, a member of a law enforcement agency (LEA) in Italy, interviewed with the aim to collect experiences on the ground for this paper, notes that over the last 20 years insurrectionary anarchism has been adopting "a more unscrupulous use of violence", with "traditional" property damages being coupled with "an increasing use of improvised explosive devices potentially more dangerous than it appears at first glance". Furthermore, as far as the Greek scene is concerned, Retzepi notes: "In the past few years the acceptance and intensity of violence in the far-left scene has noticeably increased" ([37]). Data from Europol's TE-SAT reports mentioned earlier corroborate these latter views.

Practitioners interviewed for this paper frequently mentioned another reason that explains the low-threat perception: **VLWAE militants are low in numbers compared to other kinds of extremism** and their violence is less visible. Moreover, as already mentioned in the previous section, practitioners from Sweden interviewed by Ellefsen and Jämte consider VLWAE a lesser threat because they see "the core values of the LWE as more aligned with those of the wider society, and rather represented a radicalization of mainstream values" ([38]). According to the same authors, in a comparative study about practitioners' attitudes regarding VLWAE, violent right-wing extremism (VRWE), and violent Islamist extremism (VIE), it is clear that:

([36]) Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2014, p. 35.
([37]) Retzepi, Understanding anarchism and the radical left in Southern Europe.
([38]) Ellefsen & Jämte, Violent extremism is not a uniform phenomenon.

"practitioners experience differences between the core values of each milieu, and that these differences affected their view of the milieus. Many practitioners were understanding and sympathetic to the values of the radical left, but condemned their use of illegal or violent protest tactics" ([39]).

As a consequence, VLWAE activities — at least when violence is directed towards objects and not towards people — may be less stigmatised by local communities and society at large. This may translate into **less attention paid to the specific VLWAE milieu, the signals coming from it and its possible evolutions in the future**. In fact, a lack of knowledge can influence practitioners' ability to identify in the first place, and report on, extremist activities, besides impacting their general perception of the threat ([40]).

Getting the milieu right

Strictly related to the above, a second main challenge in preventing VLWAE is **getting the milieu right**: its features, its trajectories and — most importantly — its extension. This is strictly related to the absence of a shared definition of VLWAE mentioned above. **Some sources refer to VLWAE militants using violence as people having "crossed the line".** "They are often very aware of how far they can go before they cross the line, and of the space between criminal activities and non-criminal activities", said a practitioner from Denmark interviewed for this paper. However, he remarked, they also know that "if they act on the right side of the law so to speak, their actions do not necessarily create a lot of raised eyebrows because they (generally speaking) often look just like the people you walk by on a daily basis". The Italian LEA member said that insurrectionary anarchism "is a universe that includes illegal concerts, squatting, remnants of older generations, a dense web of internet sites, forums, bookshops, clubs". Of course, not all activists and militants who populate these locations and events do engage in violent acts.

Still, the very notion of "crossing the line" alludes to the **proximity of the proper extremist milieu with other milieus, where radical subcultures or issue-oriented movements can be found**. The latter may share some narratives with the extremist ideology, even in more moderate forms and without any justification of violence. For instance, a study on the Dutch anarchist scene shows that militants "join the anarchist movement as a succession of another issue-specific activism", as they "were already politically active in issue-specific groups and that a broadening of their perspective eventually led to participation in the anarchist movement" ([41]).

As far as prevention work is concerned (especially secondary prevention) ([42]), **limiting the activities to the perimeter of the proper VLWAE milieu may pose additional challenges**, as it may translate into failing to identify and target at-risk groups. In turn, widening this perimeter means including organised groups and movements that, while being **not yet violent** and entirely legal, may resort to violence in the future, or whose adherents may individually join extremist groups. In fact, it should be considered that, **while important, ideological closeness is not the only reason**. As found by a comprehensive review of factors in VLWAE disengagement, **drivers are also related to socioeconomic situation**, and often connected with the specific social and societal environment ([43]).

A diverse and fluid landscape

As highlighted in the first part of this overview, defining the perimeter of the VLWAE milieu is a challenge in itself also because of the **high internal diversity of these groups and movements**. Ideological consistency is not really helpful given that left-wing extremism and anarchism only partially share their ideological features, and also considering **how traditionally fluid the situation is within each current**.

([39]) Jämte & Ellefsen, Countering extremism(s), p. 207.
([40]) Koehler & Fiebig, Knowing What to Do, p. 48.
([41]) Krüßelmann, Trajectories to Radical Anarchist Activism, p. 58.
([42]) In this report, we refer to primary prevention (or universal prevention) as interventions targeted at whole population groups or everyone within a broad category, to secondary prevention (or targeted prevention) as interventions targeted at defined risk groups prone to committing criminal acts, and to tertiary prevention (or indicated prevention) as interventions targeted at problem groups and individuals who demonstrate problematic behaviour. The definitions of the three levels of prevention have been taken from Bjørgo, Lessons from crime prevention in preventing violent extremism by police, p. 2.
([43]) Koehler, Disengaging from left-wing terrorism and extremism.

Insurrectionary anarchism is reportedly more stable than left-wing extremism from the point of view of ideology. The Italian LEA member interviewed for this paper notes that this extremist movement has showed a remarkable ideological consistency over the last 40 years. The main points of reference remain the same (writings by Italian anarchist Alfredo Maria Bonanno), as do the core issues behind the mobilisation of anarchist cells (prisons, special programmes for prisoners, specific companies accused of being "servants of capitalism", banks and the financial system, and "representations of capital" in general). However, while expanding under the banner of the IRF across Europe, and especially in northern Member States, **local militants have tried to adapt the ideological toolbox to the new cultural and societal contexts**. In Finland, for instance, a new, more violent wave of attacks took place after 2011. According to a study, the anarchist cells that imported the IRF fights to Finland did not simply copy-paste the *modus operandi* from the Italian and Greek scene: "the insurrectionist repertoire was adapted to the Finnish context in the sense that the actions were not as violent and aggressive as those of FAI and CCF [Conspiracy of Cells of Fire]. Transnational diffusion often involves such cultural translations" ([44]).

For what concerns left-wing extremist groups, some sources mention the fact that **in many cases what drives them is more a cause, or a changing set of beliefs, than a structured ideology**. In fact, there is a high degree of fluidity in membership, with militants shifting from one group to another in relatively short periods of time. This is not by chance. In fact, a defining feature of much of the left-wing milieu, as well as of the proper VLWAE milieu, is the idea of **"intersectionality of the fights"**. Activists tend to adopt a systemic approach that helps to connect different issues, which in turn fosters the passage from one movement to another. **In such a fast-evolving landscape**, which provides few handholds to practitioners, **detecting relevant signals of radicalisation from milieus that partially overlap with the VLWAE one appears to be challenging**.

The potential for hybridisation

VLWAE's high internal diversity leads to **varied, shifting processes of radicalisation**, whose signals are more difficult to spot early on. In turn, the number of issues that have a mobilising potential for left-wing and anarchist activists allows VLWAE groups to direct their propaganda and recruitment efforts in many directions, tapping into **different audiences**.

A list of issues and events that triggered processes of VLWAE radicalisation over the last five years, collected through interviews with practitioners, shows how wide and diverse these audiences are:

- Issues closely related to group identity: far-right mobilisation, anti-fascist demonstrations, solidarity with "political prisoners", anti-clericalism.

- On a governance level: disbelief in political representatives, lack of governmental communication, risk of corruption.

- On a policy level: opposition to some governmental policies towards refugees, asylum seekers and foreigners in general; environmental issues, animalism, infrastructural and economic projects (mining, highways, etc.); anti-militarism; COVID-19 and the ensuing economic crisis (also with reference to increasing unemployment); gentrification of urban neighbourhoods.

- Issues with a transnational appeal and reach: solidarity with the Kurdish struggle, solidarity with minorities (e.g. Roma and Travellers), anti-racist movements (such as Black Lives Matter), anti-globalisation issues.

Thanks to a shared sensitivity to certain issues, violent left-wing and anarchist extremists **are found to be actively trying to infiltrate social movements, local initiatives and mainstream non-violent demonstrations** ([45]) **that may resonate with their ideology**. While this provides them with a legal cover, it also allows them to establish contacts and personal connections with activists and thus to explore the potential for recruiting. In the process, and under violent left-wing and anarchist extremist militants' influence, a part of these legal and largely peaceful social movements may start radicalising their requests and, in some cases, militants may commit violent acts. State repression, and sometimes suboptimal management of

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([44]) Kuukkanen, Diffusion of radical repertoires across Europe, p. 196.
([45]) Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2020, p. 61.

political communication, may then trigger more wide cycles of violence. The No TAV movement in Italy ([46]) and some of the French Zones to Defend (*Zones à defendre*) ([47]) are examples of this.

These dynamics create additional challenges for practitioners. In interventions, **drawing a clear line between violent extremists and activists may be more difficult**. In this context, the use of **soft repression** (stigmatisation, labelling, etc.) **may perform poorly or even be counterproductive**. A study on the impact of these measures notes that soft repression leads to mixed results:

"On the one hand, some activists turn outward; they try to engage in the public sphere and remain open and transparent as a way to counter the stigma of the extremist label. On the other, some turn inward, becoming more exclusive and clandestine in their forms of organizing. From this we highlight potential 'backfire effects' (della Porta 2013), as the most militant activists and groups might be further radicalized by these forms of soft repression" ([48]).

Moreover, **an increase in attention to the situation by LEAs may elicit mistrust towards any authority perceived as linked to the state**. Clashes with police may trigger or accelerate radicalisation processes and make the situation less easy to manage. Indeed, as will be explored in the next section, clashes with police are found to be one of the main triggers of radicalisation towards VLWAE, even when the person who radicalises does not support any particular ideology or does not hold strong political beliefs.

Most recently, **in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, VLWAE has been found to actively participate in protest movements in several EU countries together with a wide range of other militants and activists**, including people affiliated with VRWE groups, no-vaxxers, anti-lockdown protesters, conspiracy theory believers and others. According to Europol, in addition to long-standing issues, left-wing and anarchist extremists addressed new topics in 2020, including scepticism about technological and scientific developments, COVID-19 containment measures and environmental issues ([49]).

This has raised the question of whether VLWAE groups may somehow connect with other groups or movements, join forces and **further blur their ideological boundaries**, possibly also due to the wider circulation of conspiracy theories. While at present evidence supporting these developments is quite scarce, **it may be an ongoing phenomenon passing under the radar**.

As for the emergence of blurred ideologies or the hybridisation of violent extremist groups, an Italian member of a LEA interviewed for this paper notes that it is not uncommon for violent left-wing and anarchist extremists to join forces with right-wing extremists, albeit for limited, tactical convergences. A Danish practitioner underlines that rival extremists in that country have recently united under **the banner of the Men in Black protest movement**, a process facilitated by the shared view of authority as the enemy. In the interviewee's view, while most of the militants may revert to their original groups after the crisis, few individuals may create new, hybrid extremist groups. A practitioner from the Czech Republic reports an **interconnection between the Marxist-Leninist spectrum and groups that support Panslavism**.

As for the connections being fostered by conspiracy theories, while at present there is no widespread indication this is happening, the scientific literature consistently finds that **people embracing extremist mindsets (both left-wing and right-wing) are more prone to believe in conspiracy theories** ([50]). While no clear connection between VLWAE and other groups can be drawn as for operative convergence, it should be noted that in 2020, in 10 out of 24 attacks recorded in total by Europol, the perpetrators targeted telecommunication infrastructure, including 3G/4G/5G infrastructure (e.g. repeaters, repeater bridges or cell towers) or other components of the telecommunications network (e.g. relays or cables) ([51]). Conspiracy theories about 5G received a boost in 2020 due to new narratives that connected technophobia with the emergence of COVID-19 and anti-vaccines positions. Moreover, another Danish practitioner finds that "there are some signs, both on- and offline, of a hybridisation" of VLWAE and VRWE, "particularly in terms of shared conspiracy theories".

([46]) See, for instance: Monni, Italian politics and the No TAV movement; and Della Porta & Piazza, Voices of the Valley, Voices of the Straits, pp. 70-75.
([47]) DW, French police clash with eco-activists at Notre-Dame-Des-Landes airport site.
([48]) Jämte & Ellefsen, The consequences of soft repression, p. 384.
([49]) Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2021, p. 92.
([50]) See, for instance: van Prooijen et al., Political Extremism Predicts Belief in Conspiracy Theories; Vegetti & Littvay, Belief in conspiracy theories and attitudes toward political violence; Bartlett & Miller, The power of unreason; and Krouwel et al., Does Extreme Political Ideology Predict Conspiracy Beliefs, Economic Evaluations and Political Trust?
([51]) Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2021, p. 93.

Reciprocal radicalisation with VRWE

By far, the challenge most frequently mentioned in the literature is the **risk of reciprocal radicalisation that involves VLWAE and VRWE**. While this is not a new dynamic, it has been boosted by the recent wave of far-right activism by both radical and extremist groups. A recent study on the radical left and anarchism in southern Europe draws a clear connection between RWE acts of violence and anarchist radicalisation, stating that "the main targets of right-wing extremists are anarchist/anti-authoritarian individuals and groups". At the same time, the author stresses that "this relationship works both ways" and thus "the threat posed by both extremes is multiplied" ([52]). A study about Finland finds that far-left drivers of radicalisation are mainly opposition to far-right demonstrations ([53]). A very similar dynamic is reportedly at play in Denmark, where left-wing radicalisation is said to be mainly triggered by right-wing mobilisation and activism ([54]).

It must be noted that the challenge posed by reciprocal radicalisation is not only framed in quantitative terms (an increase in the absolute number of violent acts) but also in qualitative terms. **If targeted by VRWE**, **groups** that are ideologically close to VLWAE, but use peaceful means only and are not yet violent, **may be pushed to "cross the line"**. For instance, a practitioner from Portugal, where the levels of violence from both kinds of extremisms are generally very low compared to other Member States, considers this a real possibility in light of the rise in popularity of right-wing and nationalist movements, as well as the fact that the left-wing extremist scene has been active in reaction to political and social events and mostly in anti-fascist demonstrations. This is echoed by a practitioner from Denmark, who affirms that "under the right circumstances, the few individuals that we have may turn to violence at some point, if they feel threatened enough by the increased use of violence in the RWE groups". Moreover, according to a RAN paper, "demonstrations with left-wing extremists are more likely to become violent. Violence in right-wing demonstrations is often provoked by left-wing demonstrators" ([55]).

The mobilisation that triggers a strong response from left-wing militants, regardless of their propensity to use violence, can be elicited by **a range of issues that also retain a mobilising potential for right-wing groups**. These issues are mainly related to identity politics, anti-fascism, anti-imperialism and migrations. A RAN paper on police prevention of far-right and far-left extremism points out that "radicalisation and violence might be growing in left-wing extremists fighting fascism and other right-wing extremist forms; opponents of the migration-policy and in anticolonial and ethnic movements" ([56]). A Danish practitioner interviewed for this paper mentions also parliamentary and public debate on immigration, Islam, gender and identity-related issues.

Against this backdrop, an additional challenge may come from the acute mistrust towards any authority, and especially the **oppositional relation with police**, which features in the wider left-wing scene. A systematic literature review by the authors of this paper finds that **a key driver of far-left radicalisation is clashes with police** ([57]). While the clashes may be triggered by a tiny fraction of violent protesters, these events may increase the acceptance of the use of violence also by non-violent activists. Moreover, whatever the dynamic of the violent episodes is, violent left-wing and anarchist extremists may use these clashes to reinforce an us versus them narrative, resulting in a more polarised environment. Some sources find that this has strong relevance as far as individual radicalisation processes are concerned, even for people without any previous affiliation with VLWAE groups ([58]). Indeed, **clashes with police are found to be important tipping points and radicalisation moments**, during which individuals who may passively support a radical world view may begin to act violently. Moreover, individuals may engage in political violence even before they join an extremist organisation, as often occurs in the context of protests. In some cases, confrontations with police and with violent right-wing extremists can fuel systemic cycles of violence, as found by Xenakis about post-2000 Greece ([59]).

([52]) Retzepi, Understanding anarchism and the radical left in Southern Europe.
([53]) Save the Children Finland, Violent extremism online, p. 9.
([54]) Larsen, Partners in crime?
([55]) Lenos & Wouterse, Police prevention and countering of far-right and far-left extremism, p. 6.
([56]) Ibid.
([57]) Marinone & Farinelli, Far-right, far-left, separatism and religious extremism, pp. 124-128.
([58]) Dzhekova et al., Understanding radicalisation, p. 65.
([59]) Xenakis, A New Dawn?, p. 445.

Use of the internet

This mistrust towards authorities is reflected in the way violent left-wing and anarchist extremists use the internet. They are found to have a **high level of security awareness, both in the case of violent and non-violent left-wing and anarchist extremist groups**. Secrecy and protective measures are adopted even at grassroots levels, especially amongst the Antifa scene to serve the double purpose of hiding from LEAs as well as from right-wing extremists. Over the last years, sources confirm an increased use of encrypted apps to communicate, such as Signal, by activists ([60]). This clearly poses **serious challenges to practitioners who want to monitor the non-violent milieus close to VLWAE** or reach out to individuals or groups through primary prevention programmes.

This kind of secrecy also applies to violent left-wing and anarchist extremists, who are observed to even **run their own communication platforms**. Europol provides an example of an anarchist extremist online network that is called No log and is operated by a Czech anarchist group. The network is inspired by similar services such as Noblogs.org or Riseup.net ([61]). Moreover, a member of LEAs in Italy acknowledges that insurrectional anarchists are active on both the Deep and the Dark Web. It should be noted that **secrecy and internet-related skills are not used only for "defensive" purposes anymore**. In August 2020, an **online attack against a Swiss-based security company** demonstrated the technical capabilities available within the left-wing and anarchist extremist scene. The group of hackers claimed the attack on a platform linked to violent left-wing extremist groups ([62]). Moreover, as highlighted in the first part of this overview, extremists often use traditional social media platforms to claim responsibility for their attacks. Finally, according to a practitioner from Portugal, violent left-wing and anarchist extremists may be actively trying to **recruit young "hacktivists"**.

Compared to other violent extremist groups, violent left-wing and anarchist extremists **usually make less use of the internet as a way to spread their narratives** with the aim of tapping into different audiences or to mobilise individuals or radical groups that are ideologically close to them but do not use violence. The VLWAE organisational structure explored above shows that **personal contacts, face-to-face interactions, are still the preferred way to recruit new militants**. In the case of insurrectionary anarchists, the small number of members composing each cell makes it unnecessary to reach out to large audiences. Moreover, the ideological preference for "propaganda by deeds" is reflected in the lack of elaborated narratives in online posts where they claim their attacks. Justifications are usually limited to framing the targets as symbols of capitalism or state repression. A similar *modus operandi* as far as propaganda and recruitment are concerned is also found in the Swedish autonomous scene ([63]). **A specific challenge for prevention stemming from mostly covert recruiting activities and lack of mass reach-out activities** is the difficulty in calibrating disengagement and deradicalisation programmes. Limited knowledge of the narratives and pull factors used by violent left-wing and anarchist extremists in recruiting and guiding processes of radicalisation makes it harder to identify entry points, leverages and incentives for disengaging. The existing literature does not provide sufficient support. As Koehler notes, what we know about disengagement from VLWAE is mainly referred to groups and extremist scenes that date back to the 1970s to 1990s ([64]).

Reaching out to target groups

In previous paragraphs, we have mentioned many factors or dynamics that make violent left-wing and anarchist extremist militants hard to reach. It appears useful to collect and briefly discuss them, together with some additional factors:

- Anti-authority as a core pillar of VLWAE ideology: it's a basic ingredient in the way VLWAE identifies rivals/enemies through in-group/out-group dynamics. Through these lenses, any prevention worker may be framed as having colluded with the state and therefore not reliable. **This is a challenge even for establishing the first contact and for identifying effective entry points.**

([60]) Kenney & Clarke, What Antifa is.
([61]) Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2021, p. 97.
([62]) Ibid.
([63]) Andersson, What's left of the radical left online?
([64]) Koehler, Disengaging from left-wing terrorism and extremism, p. 23.

- Strong bonds created in the milieu: as acknowledged by Koehler ([65]), violent left-wing and anarchist extremist militants tend to establish strong bonds with other militants and related social networks, thus creating **a particularly challenging positive barrier to disengagement**.

- Core values perceived as in line with mainstream societal values: this appears to be particularly relevant as far as primary prevention is concerned. For instance, a study relates this issue with **difficulties experienced by teachers in finding entry points to discuss with students** ([66]). A Danish practitioner interviewed for this paper mentions violent left-wing and anarchist extremist militants as being generally less stigmatised by society compared to violent right-wing extremists and violent Islamist extremists.

- **"Solid" social background**: some scholars ([67]) mention that individuals from VLWAE as well as from other groups that do not engage in violence are generally from the middle or upper class, more educated, socially connected, well off economically and living in stable communities. Once again**, this challenges frontline practitioners in finding accessible entry points**. Even when the first contact is established, according to a practitioner from Denmark interviewed for this paper, the militants' background may prove to be a barrier. Given the usually high educational level, "they are often themself well read and do know how to talk, to argue and to justify their behaviour as non-problematic". Another practitioner from Denmark depicts violent left-wing and anarchist extremist militants as "typically better educated and socially resourceful", which makes early detection, prevention and exit work more complicated.

- Secretive use of the internet: security measures put in place by violent left-wing and anarchist extremist groups for communication purposes **make any attempt to reach out look suspicious**.

- Organisational structure: as for VLWAE groups, and especially for insurrectionary anarchists, at some point any contact from outside the "affinity group" may look suspicious if not coupled with an earlier personal connection. As for the wider left-wing scene, many sources report that **the absence of recognisable leaders**, together with the relatively high rate of change in affiliations, are found to be **a barrier to establishing limited, occasional and "operative" contacts during protest events**.

- **Drop-out without consequences is an option**: sources underline that members of VLWAE groups can generally drop out without fear of being stigmatised in their community or of suffering bad consequences from the extremist group. As a German practitioner interviewed for this paper puts it, they usually mistrust prevention programmes as they come from the state, and if they are contacted they "get the feeling to be investigated and tracked down easily".

Existing P/CVE approaches to VLWAE

A neglected field of prevention

As discussed in previous sections, VLWAE is quite an overlooked issue in the EU when compared to other kinds of violent extremism. The low attention in the literature devoted to the prevention of this extremism is mirrored by the **scarce representation of VLWAE in P/CVE approaches, programmes and initiatives at all levels** in the EU Member States.

Indeed, there are very few programmes specifically devoted to preventing VLWAE. Currently, out of 219 total items, the RAN Collection of practices database does not include any item classified as related to violent far-left extremism or environmental extremism ([68]). This is not a situation unique to the EU. A study published in 2019 by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue, which assesses prevention programmes on VLWAE and VRWE in three EU countries as well as in Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, finds that initiatives designed to deradicalise and disengage far-left violent extremists are "virtually non-existent" in Europe and North America, and **"certainly less common" than those targeting the violent far-right** ([69]).

([65]) Koehler, Disengaging from left-wing terrorism and extremism, pp. 16-17.
([66]) Jämte & Ellefsen, Countering extremism(s), p. 213.
([67]) Ibid.
([68]) The searchable database is available at this link: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-best-practices/ran-search_en
([69]) Davey et al., An imprecise science, p. 30.

Considering the challenges to prevention work discussed in the previous section, the situation in the EU usually stands in stark contrast to the level of threat and its possible future trends. For instance, a general review of prevention programmes in Germany, a country with a long tradition of dealing with VLWAE, finds that only 4 % of initiatives targets this kind of extremism, while VRWE absorbs 75 % of initiatives, Violent Islamist Extremism (VIE) is the main target in 14 % of programmes, and 11 % of initiatives target all kinds of extremism ([70]). **This disproportion catches the eye** not just because of the vitality of German VLWAE, but **also in light of the dynamic of reciprocal radicalisation with far-right extremism and its potential impact on the radical left landscape at large**.

At the broader EU level, similar numbers can be found. A systematic assessment of P/CVE interventions, carried out within the IMPACT Europe project in 2014, found that out of a representative sample of 100 cases just 9 focused on left-wing extremism, to which may be added another 4 cases focusing on ecological extremism and 3 cases targeting anti-globalism. More than one third (38) focused on VIE, 21 cases targeted VRWE and 41 cases were not ideologically oriented ([71]).

Prevalence of one-size-fits-all approaches

The systematic study by IMPACT Europe provides some **additional details about the main features of prevention initiatives on VLWAE**. While it was published more than six years ago, this study may provide a picture of the state of the art that is still relevant, considering the low attention generally devoted to VLWAE and the low numbers of new initiatives launched from then on.

Overall, **preventing VLWAE does not appear to purposely involve first-line practitioners**. Professionals in direct contact with target groups are involved in just 2 % of initiatives dealing with left-wing extremism and in none of the programmes targeting anti-globalism and ecological activism. Practitioners with indirect contacts with target groups are slightly more represented, but the majority of initiatives are classified as having policymakers (including at the local level) as end users ([72]). This appears to indicate a prevalence of top-down government schemes over bottom-up, locally designed, place-based initiatives.

The goal of interventions is mainly to prevent people from being radicalised in the first place, thus accounting for **a prevalence of primary (universal) prevention**. This level of prevention is likely even more represented compared to secondary (targeted) and tertiary (indicated) prevention, as inhibiting radicalisation is found to be the goal of most interventions not tackling any specific ideology.

In terms of key factors targeted by interventions, those directed at left-wing extremism centred their methodology at norms more often than any other kind of extremism. By norm as a key factor, the study carried out by IMPACT Europe means that the target is to **re-establish acceptance of authorities and societal values**. Group affiliation (e.g. increase the distance to potentially harmful groups) and emotions (reduce negative emotions, strengthen self-esteem) are less targeted in the case of VLWAE compared to other extremisms. Other factors targeted by interventions on VLWAE more than by interventions on at least one other kind of extremism are opportunities (offer routes back to mainstream society, for example, education, work and housing) and skills (for example, improve social skills) ([73]).

Jointly considered, the three above-mentioned features suit well with what is actually the most widely used approach for preventing VLWAE: the **one-size-fits-all approach**. With "one-size-fits-all approach", we refer to prevention approaches that:

● do not differentiate amongst target audiences, at-risk groups, extremist milieus, and are thus directed at society as a whole;

● are usually utilised to mitigate the root causes of violent extremism, both in terms of ideology and behaviour;

● when applied at the primary prevention level, have the overall goal of reconnecting individuals with "deviant attitudes" to "mainstream" values and behaviours (i.e. more widely accepted by society).

([70]) Gruber et al., Extremismusprävention in Deutschland, p. 20.
([71]) van Hemert et al., Synthesis report, p. 37.
([72]) Ibid.
([73]) van Hemert et al., Synthesis report, pp. 41-42.

Indeed, references to VLWAE are mainly found at a policy level, in primary prevention programmes directed towards society as a whole and in programmes aiming at enhancing social cohesion.

The rest of this section will present some **notable interventions and programmes for each of the three levels** of prevention, and it will identify the main gaps to existing P/CVE approaches to VLWAE.

Primary prevention

The main feature of primary prevention programmes is to be designed so as to adapt to the most diverse target audience. For this reason, these programmes do not usually differentiate amongst extremist ideologies and groups in their interventions. Given the fact that the number of evaluations of P/CVE programmes at this level is extremely low, it remains an open question as to whether they do succeed in targeting VLWAE also. It is also not unusual that programmes originally designed for specific ideologies are said to be adaptable to other extremist groups, while information about how this extension is performed is not openly available. A notable exception can be found **in several Member States in eastern Europe**, where **primary prevention of VLWAE is present** in the form of raising awareness about the legacies of the Soviet and communist regimes. Organisations that are members of the Platform of European Memory and Conscience are an example of this ([74]).

Quite **a sizeable number of primary prevention programmes adopt a universalist, multi-agency approach that aims at promoting democratic values, social cohesion and inclusion**. The main goals typically include stimulating self-reflection, instigating doubts and promoting critical reasoning, supporting the development of social and emotional skills. "Universalist" means that the approach works with all ideologies and it is rooted in the assumption that all extremist phenomena share the same root causes, which are social, economic and societal in nature. It also usually relies on close and flexible cooperation amongst several already existing institutions and authorities at a local level. **This early prevention is mainly focused on young people**.

A very well-known example of this approach is the **Aarhus model**. This model mobilises local resources and follows the concept of Life Psychology, which assumes that extremism may be prevented by jointly helping vulnerable people to develop the skills they need in order to cope well with daily life tasks ([75]). The model integrates primary, secondary and tertiary prevention interventions.

A very interesting approach to early prevention of VLWAE is the one laid out by Germany in the federal programme **"*Demokratie Leben!"* (Live Democracy!)**, started in 2015 as the successor of two other programmes, Promote Tolerance – Enforce Competence and the Strengthening Democracy Initiative ([76]). All three programmes have run pilots specifically designed to increase the effectiveness in the VLWAE scene. They take a holistic approach, focusing on phenomena such as Islamophobia and Muslimophobia, right-wing extremism and left-wing extremism with its associated left-wing militancy, and Islamist extremism. Live Democracy! has an inherently multi-agency approach, as it involves cross-phenomena experts from the implementing organisations (Expert Forum), as well as networking between implementing organisations and other organisations as well as with state-run institutions such as schools and public authorities (e.g. child and youth welfare).

As part of the Strengthening Democracy Initiative programme, **some pilot projects developed prevention approaches with either strong thematic or target-group focus**. In some cases, disseminators were involved to foster **self-education processes** within anti-imperialist groups by using "elaborated 'scene' discourses" on topics such as anti-Semitism. In other pilots, the aim was to reach out to youth close to the leftist scene via youth clubs in left-wing districts with the goal of involving them in **political educational processes**.

This approach of **providing training for educational disseminators** has been expanded under Live Democracy!, specifically designed for left-wing militancy, and positively evaluated by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth ([77]). **It is found to ease access to an otherwise hard-**

([74]) The website of the Platform is available at https://www.memoryandconscience.eu/members/
([75]) See: Bertelsen, Danish Preventive Measures and De-radicalization Strategies: The Aarhus Model.
([76]) Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, German Federal Government Report.
([77]) Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, German Federal Government Report, p. 34.

to-reach target group, which is said to have considerable barriers against both phenomenon-specific and target group-specific lines of access. It is also found to address challenges of targeting a heterogeneous landscape where both youth culture and "ideologically ingrained militancy" are found.

Pilots targeting VLWAE with an **educational approach** ([78]) are developed at different levels while sharing the aim of teaching children how to reflect on their behaviour and of promoting the critical examination of left-wing radicalisation ([79]).

The project *Linke Militanz in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Aufklärung gefährdeter Jugendlicher über Linksextremismus und Gewalt* ([80]) works with **schools at national level** and represents a supplement to subjects usually studied at school. The issues touched by this project are left-wing extremism, anti-democratic values, diversity and political participation.

The project *Frontaldiskurs - Konfrontationen die Stirn bieten mit Medien, Kunst und Kultur* ([81]) involves youth, cultural institutions, street workers, artists and social workers to implement **prevention-themed activities** such as workshops, art, media and cultural activities.

Secondary prevention

This level of prevention is usually directed at target individuals and groups that are identified as being at risk or are already involved in a process of radicalisation. As mentioned in the previous section, one of the challenges in preventing VLWAE is the definition of this extremism and the identification of violent groups and the related ideological and social milieu. Therefore, it comes as little surprise that very few secondary prevention programmes focus on VLWAE.

With regard to this, **a remarkable gap is the lack of training programmes for prevention workers and first-line practitioners about VLWAE**. In the case of Germany, the Federal Ministry of Interior ran a project from 2013 to 2016 about analysing "criminal confrontations between right-wing and left-wing criminals in order to explore the dynamics of these offences". This project was focused on reciprocal radicalisation and had all federal and regional security authorities as target groups ([82]). Germany also established in 2017 the *Bundesfachstelle Linke Militanz* (Federal Expertise Center for Left-Wing Militancy), hosted by the University of Gottingen, whose mandate includes exploring methods to effectively prevent and counter VLWAE ([83]).

There are programmes and practices of prevention of VLWAE that **involve mainly the police**. Most of these programmes appear to follow an approach based on engagement with militants and activists exploiting events such as street protests, demonstrations, marches and others.

For instance, as part of a secondary preventive approach, the Dutch police has created a small team of officers tasked with engaging and liaising with demonstrators and activists. The aim of this practice is to establish a working relationship with a group leader or influential group members, as well as **setting up and maintaining normative barriers**. While it has been tested with right-wing extremist demonstrators, it is said to be extendable to left-wing extremists as well ([84]).

Reaching out to at-risk individuals, raising awareness about the normative barriers and maintaining them, is at the centre of an approach developed by Norwegian police. Norway has developed a mechanism known as **empowerment conversation**. It aims to stop recruitment processes into violent extremist groups at an early stage. So, when police suspect that a young person is flirting with violent extremist groups or displays worrying behaviour, they meet that individual together with the parents to **discuss the personal and legal consequences of their behaviour**. Together with the family, they try to explore the causes and find alternative ways to solve traumas and problems. Targeted individuals are encouraged to propose tasks and measures themselves that would help them get back on course ([85]).

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[78] A critical review of projects on VLWAE run by Germany from 2010 to 2019 is provided by the Bundesfachstelle Linke Militanz. See: Nentwig, *Modellprojekte Der Politischen Bildung*.
[79] Kudlacek et al., Prevention of radicalisation in selected European countries, p. 65.
[80] Left militancy in the past and present. Educating young people at risk about left-wing extremism and violence.
[81] Frontal discourse - facing confrontations with media, art and culture.
[82] The Federal Government, Federal Government Strategy to Prevent Extremism and Promote Democracy, p. 46.
[83] The website of the centre is available at http://www.linke-militanz.de/
[84] Lenos & Wouterse, Police prevention and countering of far-right and far-left extremism, p. 10.
[85] Ibid., p. 5.

A more nuanced approach that has the police as trigger/pillar of the intervention, but also relies on a wider network of stakeholders, is the **Preventive Police Unit established** in 2021 by Helsinki Police Department. It targets all kinds of extremism, including VLWAE, but the latter is reportedly the hardest group to make contact with. As explained by a Helsinki police officer in a recent interview, "creating contact with the extreme left has been hardest because the group is fragmented, and there are no leaders as such amongst them" ([86]). This initiative positions itself **at the crossroad between community policing, community engagement and creating a local P/CVE infrastructure**. As reported by the Helsinki police, "daily responsibilities of the unit's uniform and plain-clothes police officers include meeting communities and young people, participating in and helping organise community events, visiting mosques, negotiating in demonstrations, and holding seminars and Q&A sessions with communities" ([87]).

Tertiary prevention

Similarly to the cases of primary and secondary prevention, for tertiary prevention too it is hard to identify even a single intervention that focuses specifically on VLWAE. However, **this level of prevention is somehow the most explored**, as countries that have a long history of countering VLWAE groups since the 1970s do have **experience in disengagement and reintegration**. Nonetheless, a review of field experiences on tertiary prevention in Germany (a country that faced the VLWAE threat by the RAF group since 1970) highlights a substantial lack of knowledge about disengagement approaches related to this extremism, as well as practical barriers for programmes such as reaching out to, and building mutual trust with, the target groups or individuals ([88]).

As far as probation is concerned, the Netherlands targets VLWAE, together with other extremist ideologies, through **Team TER** (Terrorists, Extremists and Radicals), whose chief aim is to prevent further radicalisation during probation. According to a review of the programme by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), it has dealt with violent left-wing extremists: "a total of 189 extremist offenders have been aided by the TER-team since its inception in 2012 up until mid-2018. The offenders are all on the spectrum of extremism, ranging from jihadist extremists to left- and right-wing extremists" ([89]). The team designs tailor-made interventions to influence the offenders' behaviour. **Push and pull factors are used to promote behavioural change and stimulate the process of reintegration into society.** After 2017, a review of the programme has checked whether it fitted with VRWE as well, besides VIE. It is unclear if the same has been done for VLWAE compatibility. To achieve changes in behaviour, Team TER tries to **reconnect or establish a connection between offenders and Dutch societal values**, and works with local partners such as police, general prosecution, the Child Protection Board, the Dutch Custodial Services and youth services.

In terms of rehabilitation, Denmark supports detainees in leaving far-right, far-left and religious extremist environments with the programme **Back on Track**. It consists of developing mentoring schemes as a tool to support inmates. According to a study that analyses this initiative, mentors motivate individuals to focus on alternative networks that have a positive impact on their life after release. Moreover, support is provided with practical matters such as housing, education, work and building a new social network. Families and social networks are involved in the process as well during all the phases from pre-trial detention to reintegration. Most notably, the initiative also includes training for mentors ([90]).

As for **disengagement**, Germany's North Rhine-Westfalia has a programme called **Left**, set up in 2018, which is aimed at two groups of people: on the one hand, the German left-wing scene (Autonomists, Antifa); and on the other hand, members of a violent left-wing extremist group from abroad, namely the PKK (linked to the Kurdish struggle) and the DHKP-C (with a strong Marxist-Leninist penchant). The programme draws on the experience of the existing drop-out programmes for VIE and VRWE.

([86]) Roihu, Human-centredness and networks key to tackling extremism.
([87]) RAN, Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism. Approaches and practices, p. 610.
([88]) Koehler, Disengaging from left-wing terrorism and extremism, p. 4.
([89]) van der Heide & Kearney, The Dutch approach to extremist offenders, p. 12.
([90]) van der Heide & Schuurman, *Re-integratie van delinquenten met een extremistische achtergrond*, p. 16.

Overcoming challenges

In light of the challenges for practitioners that have been identified, as well as the existing approaches to P/CVE work posed by VLWAE, a number of gaps can be highlighted. In this section, we identify and explore the most relevant ones, and we discuss them separately for primary, secondary and tertiary levels. When feasible, we suggest new approaches to overcome the main challenges and close the gaps. Specific actions that may be prioritised, or fields with relevant potential for P/CVE work, are highlighted in dedicated boxes.

Primary prevention

As far as primary prevention is concerned, one of the main gaps is about **approaches and tools to modify the perception of the threat** represented by VLWAE. This should be identified as the cornerstone of any programme that aims at effectively preventing VLWAE: indeed, a lack of understanding of the threat undermines the quality of any step that may be taken in the future.

As mentioned in the second chapter, VLWAE is often considered a threat because of the use of violence and not because of the main tenets of its ideology. Moreover, the ideological pillars of this kind of extremism may be perceived as in line with those shared by most of society, just representing a more radicalised version of the latter.

Therefore, in prevention work that is aware of the specific challenges posed by VLWAE, **disentangling ideological stances from the use of violence** appears to be crucial. Failing to address violence separately risks provoking unwanted side effects such as stigmatisation, enhanced social isolation, frustration, mistrust towards authority, and a more pronounced identity crisis in individuals who share those ideological positions and are questioning the way their society, community and social group relate to them. At the same time, VLWAE usually promotes an image of society as a structure that is inherently (and irredeemably) violent, and for this very reason — it is said — it cannot be changed unless through violent means.

In order to overcome these challenges, primary prevention programmes may devote **more attention to how violence is defined, perceived and justified**. In particular, it appears helpful to focus on different kinds of violence, and on what kind of needs are underlined by/through violent acts. This allows to **identify and promote collective answers to the emerging needs, and to encourage seeking transformational change through non-violent means**. A handbook on prevention methods developed within the EU project Rhizome against Polarization aptly suggests that primary prevention may benefit from an approach centred on the analysis of needs, the ways to satisfy these needs and the factors that hinder this satisfaction, in relation to a nuanced understanding of violence (direct, structural, cultural or symbolic). While not being designed for any specific kind of extremism, this approach appears to capture and adapt particularly well to the main features of VLWAE [91].

Against this background, we provide in the box below a more detailed overview of priorities and further potential for universal prevention of VLWAE.

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[91] Nagy et al., *Prevenzione della violenza*, pp. 12-18.

Priorities and potential for primary prevention

1. **Identify protective factors.** There is a lack of research in relation to VLWAE, and gaps in literature are widespread. One aspect that is severely under-researched is protective factors against VLWAE [92]. Practitioners' work is affected by a lack of entry points, especially in education and when discussing values. Focusing on protective factors (e.g. conflict resolution skills, positive role models, sense of agency, etc.) may help to work around this problem. Protective factors at both the individual and the community level should be explored.

2. **Promote peer-to-peer dialogue** when working with youth. Mistrust towards authority is a defining feature of VLWAE and it is a feature also in many radical left-wing subcultures, albeit in milder forms. Especially in education and at the community level, peer-to-peer dialogue may give some edge in fostering positive interactions.

3. **Foster youth participation in politics and policymaking as a preventive measure** [93]. This helps to provide clear alternative paths and to defuse anti-authority stances at the inception. Indeed, the trajectory of VLWAE radicalisation is often one that jumps from one single-issue group to another and it is at least partially driven by growing distrust towards the possibility to achieve the desired change in society through mainstream, peaceful means. This also positively leverages the closeness between mainstream and left-wing ideological stances.

4. Focus prevention initiatives also on issues that allow **addressing reciprocal radicalisation** as well as potential convergence with other forms of violent extremism (e.g. with respect to right-wing extremism, migration and anti-Semitism).

5. On a more general level, **build trust with authority**, in all its forms.

Secondary prevention

Approaches specifically targeting VLWAE at the secondary prevention level are very few. Most of the time, interventions are centred on the role of police (if adopting a multi-agency approach) or are based on police only. It is safe to say that this level is mostly underexplored by prevention work. Two main challenges discussed above help in explaining such a deserted landscape: difficulty in identifying the VLWAE milieu (and other relevant milieus that extremists may be trying to connect with), and the mistrust towards authority.

To overcome these challenges, **a hybrid approach based on a mix of elements of primary and secondary prevention** may be helpful. Its potential features are listed and briefly discussed below.

- Any exclusively authority-led strategy of engagement is exposed to the risk of failing to reach out to at-risk groups (being rejected by the target groups) or even to push them to further isolate themselves. This suggests that **a community and civil society-led approach** is pivotal for building effective interventions.

- In order to identify, and then engage with, at-risk or target groups and individuals, opting for bottom-up, community-led processes may overcome the barrier of mistrust towards authorities. In this regard, given the fluidity and high internal diversity of the left-wing milieu, a very sensitive step is **identifying and mobilising the right stakeholders**. Identifying the relevant subcultures, at national and at local level, is a good first step.

- Community-based programmes may be **integrated into policies for strengthening social cohesion**, and they may benefit from **participatory frameworks** that allow activating local resources, support in identifying relevant stakeholders and co-design interventions. A list of methods for stakeholder

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[92] A systematic literature review of protective factors finds only 17 reports on protective factors and violent extremism. As for VLWAE, these factors are identified: self-control, adherence to law, appreciative parenting behaviour, good school achievement, and bonding to school. See: Lösel et al., Protective factors against extremism and violent radicalization.
[93] RAN CoE, Policy Recommendations, p. 6.

engagement in place-based interventions, in part already tested against the need for prevention of radicalisation, includes community advocacy ([94]), participatory action research ([95]) and community organising ([96]).

- The first three points may be achieved by **triggering local processes of community engagement** that initially focus on the needs of the community and its priorities, and address them also via traditional primary prevention approaches and tools. While at first not being directly and explicitly dedicated to preventing violent extremism, this will still allow to map the existing socioeconomic grievances, identify vulnerable groups, and grasp a sense of the milieus of at-risk groups and individuals. **This step may evolve in a proper phase of co-design of secondary interventions.**

- At-risk groups usually take actively part in social and protest movements. Engaging them from the angle of violent extremism and radicalisation may be counterproductive. Moreover, failing to clearly draw a line to differentiate between VLWAE and legitimate social movements may further undermine authorities in the eyes of the latter. This suggests that the issues that have a mobilising power for at-risk groups should be addressed in a way that identifies **clear alternative paths to violence**.

- As discussed, violence and radicalisation are found to be triggered by punctual events (e.g. violent episodes during protests), but also by a more general fading trust in the possibility of achieving change through non-violent means. Fuelled by mistrust in authorities, the prevailing attitude is oppositional. Creating **informal spaces for discussion** of sensitive issues, as well as **designing and enhancing inclusive consensus building mechanisms at local level**, may help to calibrate the P/CVE interventions.

- Additionally, **providing training for community leaders for advocacy and organising purposes** may turn them into disseminators and credible voices, with the aim of creating trust-based networks with stakeholders in the community.

Below we provide a list of priority actions to overcome challenges related to secondary prevention of VLWAE.

Priorities and potential for secondary prevention

1. **Train practitioners on VLWAE.** Even if the threat is deemed marginal or almost non-existent, the dynamics of reciprocal radicalisation — especially with violent left-wing extremism — should be a concern.

2. **Engage with social and protest movements** that are focused on issues relevant to VLWAE ideology. Draw a clear line between activism and violent extremism to avoid stigmatisation and being rejected by the groups.

3. **Closely monitor** the wider impact on at-risk groups of prevention strategies such as labelling and stigmatisation.

4. **Invest resources in enabling credible actors** at the local level. This also allows having many reliable frontline stakeholders that can be mobilised and receive awareness training as they contribute, for example, to diagnosing a neighbourhood and identifying problematic situations (caretakers, community workers).

5. Focus on **counter-messaging and alternative narratives** as a complementary measure to the engagement of at-risk individuals and groups.

6. The EU document 'Strategic orientations on a coordinated EU approach to prevention of radicalisation for 2021' highlights as a key priority for the local level the need to establish national hubs, or similar

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([94]) See, for instance: CVE Reference Guide, CVE reference guide for local organizations, p. 1.
([95]) See, for instance: Meringolo et al., Youth violent radicalisation, pp. 27-36; and Cecchini & Donati, Involving Local Communities: Participatory Meetings with Stakeholders.
([96]) See, for instance, the Community Organisers programme initiated by the UK in 2011; website available at https://www.corganisers.org.uk/

structures and mechanisms, to support the local level ([97]). With this in mind, **adding a community-based layer to national hubs supporting local actors is pivotal.**

Tertiary prevention

While tertiary prevention is the field where P/CVE interventions about VLWAE are most represented, significant gaps can still be identified.

One of the main gaps is a lack of **knowledge about disengagement programmes**. Practitioners report difficulties in reaching target groups and individuals, or in establishing connections, mainly because of a deep-rooted mistrust towards authorities. At the same time, the literature provides mixed and non-conclusive evidence about disengagement from VLWAE. There is no consensus even on basic factors that may be relevant for achieving desistance.

This lack of knowledge is compounded by the fact that most of the information available, both in terms of literature and in terms of practical intervention in the field, dates back to decades ago and **refers to a quite different VLWAE landscape**. Especially when it comes to left-wing extremist groups, big and structured organisations (and knowledge about how they work) are not representative anymore of the largest part of the violent left-wing extremist scene. Instead, today **practitioners are facing a kaleidoscope of groups**, mainly driven by single-issue concerns, which often commit violent acts only under certain circumstances.

In this respect, police and other LEAs are most likely to have a more updated and nuanced knowledge of both this violent extremist milieu and the legal activist/militant radical left scene. A **more robust exchange of information** with relevant stakeholders for tertiary prevention, as well as **targeted training** for local beneficiaries (e.g. social workers, health services, etc.), may support designing disengagement interventions. Moreover, this can also support the detection of infiltration into the radical left activist and militant scene by elements from VLWAE groups and spot early on signals of radicalisation within groups that are not yet violent.

This is particularly relevant to tertiary prevention, as mostly short-term or new recruits are found to be more open to contacts with LEAs and the judiciary, while the effect on hardened members is usually quite the opposite and it may push the latter deeper into their commitment to the group's cause. As suggested by Koehler, this means that **concentrating law enforcement on early-stage members of these groups** might be more effective, which can also be the case for P/CVE measures ([98]). However, it should also be considered that a preference for non-judicial approaches before the radicalised individual can commit criminal actions may increase the chances to effectively establish connections and overcome barriers of distrust.

Another area where gaps can be identified is **reintegration**. This is quite an overlooked field of intervention for a number of reasons, including a focus on behavioural instead of cognitive change, perception of values endorsed by VLWAE as in line with society values, low or no stigmatisation from society and communities, and relatively low barriers to leaving the group compared to other extremisms (e.g. VRWE).

In the case of reintegration too, the literature presents mixed evidence to support interventions, which stresses the **need for more knowledge** on the matter. On the one hand, reintegration is reportedly difficult to achieve due to the social background of many violent left-wing and anarchist extremist militants, who usually come from a middle-class socioeconomic milieu and are well educated. On the other hand, socioeconomic motivations appear to play a dominant role in the decision to leave VLWAE groups. The lack of educational achievements and the possibility to handle family responsibilities have been identified as stressful factors. Koehler suggests prioritising these issues not only in disengagement but also in reintegration. For instance, this includes **assisting individuals with completing education, helping them find adequate employment and supporting their family life** ([99]).

([97]) European Commission, Strategic orientations on a coordinated EU approach to prevention of radicalisation for 2021, pp. 6-7.
([98]) Koehler, Disengaging from left-wing terrorism and extremism, p. 24.
([99]) Koehler, Disengaging from left-wing terrorism and extremism, p. 24.

A list of actions that may be taken to address the gaps identified for tertiary prevention is provided in the box below.

Priorities and potential for tertiary prevention

1. As in the case of primary prevention, **identify protective factors**. This knowledge may support managing the transition phase from detention to probation/reintegration as well as adding nuance to the understanding of factors that are relevant for achieving disengagement.

2. **Explore innovative ways to co-produce desistance and disengagement**. A community-based approach that involves other stakeholders besides LEAs may succeed in overcoming positive barriers to leave groups and renounce violence related to mistrust towards authority and state-led initiatives.

3. Contrary to exit programmes for violent right-wing extremists, there is scarce indication that resettlement is needed or even recommended in the case of VLWAE. Contemporary violent left-wing and anarchist extremist groups do not appear to sanction defections as VRWE does. This may allow to **valorise existing local resources** (social networks, social workers, civil society, etc.) **for reintegration purposes**.

Further reading

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