



CONCLUSIONS PAPER

TRANSNATIONAL RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM IN EUROPE: THREAT AND RESPONSE

Thematic Research Meeting

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KEY OUTCOMES

Right-wing extremism (RWE) remains one of the greatest threats to European societies and democracies. Increasingly, right-wing extremist groups and individuals are part of a global network, leveraging different means to connect with international counterparts, thereby influencing ideologies, strategies and modus operandi around the world. In recent years, these transnational connections have led to and inspired various acts of extremist violence and terrorism, with each major incident serving as a galvanising force for future attacks.

The facilitation of transnational interactions between right-wing individuals and communities online and offline blurs the lines between domestic and international extremism and terrorism. This globalisation of attacks and RWE groups and networks indicates the need to look at the threat through a transnational lens in order to develop effective responses. Focusing on transnational links would potentially enable the design of counter-terrorism (CT) policies, preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programming, counter-terrorism financing approaches and possible ways to limit the spread of hate by tackling RWE threats earlier and more effectively than is currently possible with a limited understanding of the offline/online integration of these types of extremist networks and organisations.

To discuss the evolving threat posed by transnationally connected RWE groups and movements as well as effective ways to counter this threat, RAN Policy Support brought together 26 experts from across the EU in an online Thematic Research Meeting on 25 May 2022. The event considered how RWE ideology is transmitted through online channels between extremists in Europe and beyond, and how this online connectivity leads to tangible, offline changes in the local right-wing extremist threat landscape. Based on these insights, it addressed how the threat presented by transnationally connected right-wing extremist groups and individuals can be tackled and how P/CVE tools and strategies could be adapted to make them more effective in addressing this threat.

SOME OF THE KEY OUTCOMES OF THE MEETING WERE:

- 1.** The online space is truly transnational and thrives on global RWE narratives with local relevance. This borderless online exchange provides inspiration for copy-cat attackers globally.
- 2.** In the last years, RWE communities have been built transnationally, also largely facilitated by the global COVID-19 pandemic. The online infrastructure that is in place now has allowed RWE movements, narratives, and offline trends, such as anti-vaccine protests or conspiracy narratives, to spread globally in extremely short timeframes.
- 3.** The normalisation and relatability of the conversation around RWE makes it particularly dangerous, requiring innovative approaches that combine offline and online elements to counter this threat.

This paper summarises the highlights of the discussion as well as the recommendations that were formulated by the participants.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE DISCUSSION

- RWE actors are often spreading their narratives through **mainstream media and online platforms** rather than being limited to closed online spaces. This is part of their concerted **effort to normalise their narratives and make them attractive to the wider public**. A part of this strategy is also trying to expand to themes and spaces that are traditionally occupied by the left, such as defending the rights of employees, etc. Once individuals begin to interact with RWE communities in these mainstream spaces, they often gradually become engaged with more extreme conversations.
- **Female RWE influencers** also contribute to the normalisation of RWE narratives by targeting followers with topics that appear apolitical on the surface, trying to develop ‘relatable intimacy’ to reach their fans in an accessible and authentic way. For example, they turn the personal decision of marriage into a political act, portraying it as a means to furthering the white race and the ‘traditional’ nuclear family. They often accuse feminists and the political left of conspiring to replace the white race and portray traditionalism as the antidote to feminism.
- **RWE groups and movements** in the digital space are very **difficult to define**, given their fluid ideologies and the loose affiliations of individuals to group structures. Also, their preferred platforms change very quickly, with RWE frequently popping up in new and different spaces. Common ideological strands of RWE currently present in the EU include:
 - **Identitarianism** first originated in France and is ideologically comparable to the ‘alt-right’ in the United States. Identitarians promote white European identity and embrace Islamophobic views, often maintaining strong connections with counter-jihadist groups.
 - **National socialism and white supremacy** remain popular in Europe, partly given the long-standing presence of websites such as Stormfront that provide forums for these types of ideologies.
 - **Siege culture** is very common on platforms such as Gab.
 - **Eco-fascism** has its roots in historical national socialism and holds a negative view of modern society. Drastic solutions for population control are proposed under the pretence of protecting the environment from overpopulation and destruction through humans.
- There is a clear distinction between **old-school and new-school RWE**. Though they are all connected through overarching narratives and conspiracy theories, such as the great replacement theory or ‘white genocide’, clear differences exist between the two types.
 - **Old-school RWE** tend to be between 16 and 60 years of age, act either clandestinely or out in the open, and include so-called ‘entrepreneurs of extremism’ – individuals who make money and achieve status from the more subtle expressions of RWE, through music events and other offline activities.
 - **New-school RWE** tend to be younger (13-30 years of age) and are often openly involved in illegal, violent activities, frequently as ‘lone actors’ (even if they are part of wider RWE networks).

- **In the offline space, music concerts, festivals, and merchandise, mixed martial arts (MMA), and political marches**, all held together by shared narratives, are popular with RWE groups. Ideological narratives around the need to form a ‘counter-society’ for a better future are packaged into ‘fun’ activities. These offline events are usually not about spreading hate and planning attacks, but about a ‘better path’ and the formation of an alternative society for a better future. This is based around accelerationist narratives claiming that the ‘enemy’ stands united in a conspiracy against the white race, necessitating concerted action to **protect the future of the white race**.
- **The formation of transnational RWE communities has also been facilitated by the global COVID-19 pandemic**. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of **disinformation and conspiracy theories**, even though neither are new phenomena among RWE and beyond. Successful conspiracy narratives are often repurposed, adopted and adapted, with many of the same tropes being used repeatedly in different contexts. Conspiracy narratives related to the pandemic are particularly popular among RWE movements to back up wide-ranging apocalyptic conspiracy theories, providing a ‘trigger event’ to create a sense of urgency to react. The mass-appeal of these narratives has also facilitated community building in the RWE milieu, bringing together disparate actors ranging from traditional RWE actors to militarised anti-government groups, conspiracy theorists and scientific researchers (example: Dolores Cahill).
- **The trucker convoy in Ottawa** earlier in 2022 also provided RWE with an opportunity to gather physically. RWE took a local event and turned it into a global trend – similar convoys formed beyond Canada throughout the Western world, though not to the same scale. The protest also provoked mass international support for a crowd-funding campaign set up by the organisers of the initial convoy in Ottawa. The infrastructure that was established to facilitate the organisation and support of these types of events is there to be used and exploited in future.
- **The financing of RWE milieus remains very under-researched**. RWE movements have gone through a process of professionalisation and have built up several strategies to gather funding, including crowd-funding campaigns such as the one used in the Ottawa convoy, but their financial activities are still largely overlooked by authorities.
- **When looking at offline (and online) RWE, the conflict in Ukraine since 2014 has been an important element**, especially since the Russian invasion earlier in 2022. As RWE have been commenting and arguing about the conflict since 2014, the boundaries are mainly set – among RWE circles, there are fans of Putin on one side, and supporters of Ukraine on the other side, though the love among RWE for Putin as a defender of the white race and Christian values and traditions is partly gone. This does not mean, however, that mobilisation to fight in Ukraine in the current war is RWE in nature – instead, it is predominantly characterised by the mobilisation of concerned citizens of the world, which RWE supporters are only one part of.
- **RWE ideologies are not as prevalent among foreign volunteers in Ukraine as presented in the media**. For example, Azov soldiers do not speak English and therefore do not take on foreign volunteers as they would be more of a hindrance to their actions. Rather than large numbers of new RWE recruits traveling to join the conflict, there are indications that quite a few of the former foreign fighters of 2014, who fought in volunteer battalions on the Ukrainian and separatist side, are returning to Ukraine now, acting as gatekeepers and information points for new volunteers. While a few ‘new’ RWE individuals have gone to Ukraine to fight, much of the RWE support for Ukraine consists of gathering ‘humanitarian assistance’ and trying to spread their message through that outreach.
- **In the area of P/CVE, the online space presents a number of challenges for governments as well as civil society organisations working to counter RWE ideologies and activities**.

Particularly the loose organisational structures in RWE groups challenge traditional P/CVE approaches.

- **Online prevention work** addressing RWE networking and recruitment in digital spaces has been picked up in some Member States, but these approaches are still at a very experimental stage, in the form of pilot programmes focusing on online street work digital youth work, community policing on the internet, etc. Such approaches often lack a clear mandate for doing online prevention, due to ethical issues, privacy issues, and so forth. There is also a question around whose responsibility it is to engage in early prevention, given the lack of geographical boundaries in the online space that could clearly indicate geographical responsibility for a specific municipality, region, or country.
- Membership and support for particular groups has become much more ambiguous for RWE with online activities facilitating the formation of much more fluid membership. This has a number of implications for countering RWE. If we think about purely content-based approaches (for example, taking down certain types of egregious content), research has found that the type of egregious content that helps individuals plan actual violence is in the minority on these platforms. Instead, we are seeing meme banks and image boards that make the ideological case for RWE activity or can inspire activates much more loosely without meeting the threshold for content removal. Therefore, **we must consider a much broader set of ideological tropes that can have an impact on inspiring individuals as the focus of digital policy on taking down content alone is too narrow.**
- **The diffuse nature of RWE may create challenges as the limited resources we have available need to reach the right people at the right levels.** The normalisation and mainstreaming of RWE narratives and conspiracy theories often makes it unclear who should be the target of the interventions. Questions also remain around which age groups to target and which geographical areas to focus intervention in as it is increasingly difficult to pinpoint people geographically.
- Another trend that has been visible over the last years is the **hybridisation of online harm areas** – we are increasingly seeing that the edges of harms like extremism and hate speech online are blurring and bleeding into other harm areas such as disinformation. This has a number of implications for our strategies to counter particular harms. So far, the strategy has been to separate violent extremism, including RWE, from other harm areas. With these online harm areas becoming more blurred, we need to design strategies to counter one set of harms with other harms in mind.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **It takes a network to beat a network.** We need transnational cooperation between governments and CSOs in the EU, North America and beyond to challenge the transnational threat of RWE. Local police and security forces will not be able to handle this global threat alone, and federal cooperation mechanisms are required to facilitate transnational cooperation. Aside from collaboration between different countries, specialised training activities should be set up for municipal authorities who have to make decisions on, for example, allowing RWE music or sports events to take place.
- **National and EU-wide authorities need to focus on following the money when it comes to RWE actors and groups.** This requires de-siloing the different agencies and authorities working in this space and adapting to the evolving trends of RWE financing. Investigations

need to go beyond individual criminal acts and instead look into the underlying financing structures. Also, employing an ‘Al Capone approach’ could be useful – targeting tax avoidance and money laundering rather than the financing of terrorist activities alone.

- **With regard to the current war in Ukraine, EU Member States need to start preparing for the returning foreign volunteers that can be expected in the coming months**, taking into account the lessons that were learned when dealing with ISIS returnees. We cannot wait until these volunteers are coming back, potentially with PTSD and other issues. Instead, case managers need to be speaking to families now, and exit workers need to be linking up with civil society and authorities before individuals are returning. There is a window of opportunity to ask Ukrainians for information on who the foreigners are that are fighting alongside the Ukrainian military.
- **The development of hybrid prevention methodologies** combining online and offline prevention approaches is essential, given that offline aspects still remain very important in radicalisation processes with the internet often just acting as an accelerator of that process. Online and offline tools can complement each other well, for example leveraging online anonymity by doing youth work on sensitive topics that would be difficult to address in real life, or enabling exit work by providing informal introduction points online.
- **Online interventions – messaging interventions, campaigns, counter narrative work, direct intervention – are in real need for innovation.** We need to reflect the diversity of online spaces and platforms where we see extremists operating on in countering approaches, for example, imagining what an intervention on 4Chan or on Telegram could look like. This type of innovation would carry a number of ethical and practical considerations, but it should not stop us from trying.
- **Social media P/CVE interventions are only one part of the strategy.** Bad content often outperforms good content, which is not just a case of people liking bad content but structural issues that underpin social media companies. Therefore, we also need to think about the regulatory space. Until we get to a stage where we are **holding social media companies accountable** and promote transparency in their efforts to regulate their platforms and moderate content, it is going to be very difficult to make positive changes in online spaces.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Claudia Wallner is a Research Fellow in RUSI’s Terrorism and Conflict research group. Her research focuses on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), including a multi-year project assessing the evidence base for P/CVE interventions in different thematic areas, as well as contributions to EU-funded P/CVE training and the EU Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Policy Support. Aside from her focus on P/CVE, Claudia is also conducting research on radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremism, with a particular focus on far-right extremism and terrorism.

Dr Jessica White is a Senior Research Fellow in the Terrorism and Conflict group at the Royal United Services Institute in London. Her expertise encompasses countering terrorism and violent extremism policy and programming, as well as gender mainstreaming strategies. She has over a decade's worth of experience as a researcher and security practitioner. Jessica leads research projects focused on far-right extremism, the nexus of extremism and online gaming, terrorism in the media and gender in security.

FURTHER READING

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON THIS TOPIC:

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4. Rekawek, Kacper, "[Looks can be deceiving: Extremism meets paramilitarism in Central and Eastern Europe](#)", Counter Extremism Project, June 2021.
5. Schindler, Hans-Jakob, Ritzmann, Alexander & Macori, Marco, "[Event Summary and Policy Recommendation. Virtual Conference on May 10, 2021: Legal and Administrative Instruments to Counter the Threat from Violent Right-Wing Extremist and Terrorist Movements](#)", Counter Extremism Project, 2021.
6. European Commission & Swedish Defence Research Agency, "[Heroes and scapegoats. Right-wing extremism in digital environments](#)", July 2021.
7. The Soufan Center, "[Extreme Right-Wing Violence and Terrorism: Transnational Networks and Narratives.](#)"
8. Musharbash, Yassin, "[The Globalization of Far-Right Extremism: An Investigative Report](#)", July/August 2021, CTC Sentinel.
9. The Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV), "[The Transnational Extreme-Right: Past, Present, and Future Podcast](#)".