



Brussels, 10 October 2022
(OR. en)

13177/22

LIMITE

CT 178
ENFOPOL 499
COTER 241
JAI 1293
COSI 245
RELEX 1313
DIGIT 180
TELECOM 400
HYBRID 98
CYBER 323
IND 396

NOTE

From: EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator
To: Delegations
Subject: Violent anti-system extremism

This paper (1) explores **the risks of terrorism and violent extremism motivated by anti-system views** and (2) offers **ideas for possible EU action**. It does so with a view to the discussion in the Council's Working Party on Terrorism (TWP) launched under the French Presidency in June 2022,¹ which will progress under the Czech Presidency.

The EU and Member States are committed to respect for **freedom of expression and peaceful assembly**, and to **the principles of legality, necessity and proportionality**. Expressions of opposition to elites or to the government, public demonstrations and other forms of peaceful protest, no matter how strident, are part of a vibrant democracy. This paper does not, therefore, question the right to express anti-system views or to stage peaceful anti-system demonstrations, but it is concerned with acts of violence. In addition, as the TWP is a body that discusses violent extremism and terrorism, this paper looks at the potential for violent acts that are more serious than (minor) disturbances of public order.

¹ See in particular 9997/22 (Council Conclusions) and 6248/22.

I. CONTEXT

Many Western democracies face an increase in **anti-establishment sentiment**, expressed on the internet and in large-scale **anti-government protests**. Most of these are peaceful but some have descended into violence. Public marches against measures to contain the spread of **COVID** are possibly the most well-known example of this trend. Other examples are the protests of the **Yellow Vests** in France (which spread to some neighbouring countries as a symbol of anti-government and anti-establishment sentiment), **lorry drivers in Canada** and **farmers in the Netherlands**. In fact, discontent about the government response to the pandemic significantly contributed to the spread and visibility of other, pre-existing grievances. These grievances, in turn, unite people of various backgrounds and of divergent political persuasions.

These online and offline protests oppose not just governments but all '**elites**', such as mainstream government and opposition parties, local authorities, the police, the judiciary, major private companies, healthcare professionals, scientists and the media. Many of the protesters believe that a small elite imposes globalisation on an unwilling population. They advocate a complete overhaul of this 'system'.

Thus, '**anti-system**' appears to be the best overarching term to describe these highly diverse grievances and protests. This paper uses the term '**violent anti-system extremists**' to refer to those who believe that the use of violence is justified but who do not openly subscribe to another extremist ideology (even if in many cases they borrow elements from other ideologies). Violent anti-system extremists form **a small minority** among anti-system protesters.

To various degrees, **conspiracy beliefs**, including those linked to **technophobia**, drive anti-system views. Some also include open or coded **anti-Semitism**. These beliefs are, in turn, bolstered by disinformation. **Q-Anon** is a prominent example of a narrative feeding anti-system views.

Foreign powers, notably **Russia**, spread disinformation that fuels conspiracy beliefs and reinforces anti-system views. In their communication on COVID disinformation, the European Commission and the EEAS state: "*Foreign actors and certain third countries, in particular Russia and China, have engaged in targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns around COVID-19 in the EU, its neighbourhood and globally, seeking to undermine democratic debate and exacerbate social polarisation, and improve their own image in the COVID-19 context.*"² Significantly, as the COVID pandemic loses its salience, some of the strongest critics of the measures to contain it have turned to the war in Ukraine, defending or relativising Russia's aggression.

While adherents of the anti-system trend clearly state what they oppose, their **ultimate objectives often remain vague**. This lack of a clear vision, whenever it occurs, makes anti-system protests **prone to appropriation attempts by long-established violent extremist groups**. Violent right-wing and left-wing extremist organisations frequently fuel anti-system grievances and latch onto anti-system protests. In some EU Member States, long-standing taboos on cooperation with right-wing extremists now seem to be eroding among one-issue demonstrators.

For all its opposition to globalisation, the anti-system trend is **highly globalised**. Communication online allows for the spread of conspiracy narratives with great speed and a wide geographic scope. **Online echo chambers**, brought about by the algorithms of social media networks, contribute to the spread of the conspiracy narratives that buttress violent anti-system propaganda. In addition, violent anti-system extremists take advantage of social media networks with little or no content moderation, notably **Telegram**, as well as decentralised platforms and the dark web to **communicate and organise themselves**.

II. POTENTIAL FOR VIOLENCE

Europol and **EU INTCEN** express concern about the potential for violence among radicalised individuals harbouring strong anti-system views. In its Terrorism Situation & Trend Report (TE-SAT) of 14 July, **Europol** points out that "[violent anti-Covid-19 and anti-government extremism] materialised in open threats, hateful messages spread online and, in some cases, the use of violence."³

² Joint Communication of the European Commission and the High Representative, "Tackling Covid-19 disinformation - getting the facts right" (10 June 2020).

³ Europol TE-SAT 2022, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/tesat-report>, p. 5

Corroborating this observation, Europol writes that Croatia has arrested two suspects who encouraged others to attack individuals during COVID protests, as well as members of government and parliament, and to occupy public facilities and infrastructure by means of violence. The agency also reports that Italy and the Netherlands arrested suspects in connection with bomb and arson attacks on vaccination centres.⁴

Several domestic intelligence services, including the German, Dutch and Austrian ones, have **warned** about the threat of violent anti-system extremism in public documents. In its description of the new field of work dealing with 'constitutionally relevant delegitimation of the State', the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) mentions **an increase in intimidation and threats directed against politicians, including 'home visits'** by activists to intimidate them.⁵ Like right- and left-wing violent extremists, violent anti-system extremists practise **doxing** - publishing personal details, notably home addresses, of perceived opponents - on a large scale. This facilitates intimidating 'home visits' and acts of violence.

A scan of media reporting over the last two years shows a series of violent incidents motivated by anti-system extremism in the EU:

- In the Netherlands in September 2022, an anti-system extremist was arrested on suspicion of preparing to murder the Prime Minister.
- In Bulgaria, a doctor was physically attacked by an aspiring local politician in January 2022 following the death of a man she had vaccinated against COVID.
- In Belgium, a professional soldier with right-wing extremist views made death threats against politicians and a prominent virologist, and withdrew into a forest with a stack of weapons, prompting a national alarm in mid-2021. Equally in Belgium, in December 2021, a Molotov cocktail was thrown at the house of a politician. Slogans painted on his house showed the motive to be linked to his stance in favour of COVID vaccination.
- In France in July 2022, the public prosecutor in charge of terrorist cases took over the investigation into abductions linked to an individual long involved in the dissemination of various anti-system conspiracy narratives.

⁴ Europol TE-SAT 2022, p. 15

⁵ https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/DE/themen/verfassungsschutzrelevante-delegitimierung-des-staates/begriff-und-erscheinungsformen/begriff-und-erscheinungsformen_artikel.html

- In Germany in September 2021, a petrol station employee was shot dead by a client following an argument on the mandatory wearing of facemasks. The perpetrator's social media profile showed the perpetrator to be an avid consumer of conspiracy narratives. Equally in Germany, in December 2021, the authorities foiled a plot hatched by anti-system extremists to murder the Prime Minister of Saxony. A few months later, the police arrested four so-called Reichsbürger who had planned to kidnap the German Health Minister.

These examples, which fall far short of an exhaustive overview of cases in the EU, are reason **to take violent anti-system extremism seriously as a threat to our security**. Indeed, in its Conclusions on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the threat posed by terrorism and violent extremism (7 June 2021),⁶ the **EU Council** stated that *"some violent fringes of 'corona-virus denier' movements and groups opposing government measures to curb the spread of the COVID-19, which have attracted extremists from various ideological backgrounds, might eventually pose security challenges due to their potential to commit violent acts and, therefore, depending on how they evolve, further efforts to address them may be required."* Since then, a Project-Based Collaboration, led by Italy, supported by the European Commission and involving 14 Member States, has been established to develop a better understanding of the problem and a common approach to tackling it.

At the same time, **there is as yet no widespread terrorism motivated by anti-system extremism** comparable to the threat posed by Islamist extremism and violent right-wing and left-wing extremism. That is why the EU's response needs to be **carefully calibrated**. While a lack of government action would give violent anti-system extremists a free hand, a response widely perceived as disproportionate would inadvertently bolster them, 'confirming' their narrative of an oppressive government. Therefore, this problem should not be addressed primarily through coercive measures. Rather, there should be an emphasis on **prevention**.

⁶ 9546/21

III. SUGGESTIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

The EU condemns all forms of terrorism and makes no legal distinction between various forms of terrorism based on their motivation. In terms of practical prevention policy, however, it is impossible to address the threats we are facing effectively without tailoring initiatives to address specific forms of terrorism and violent extremism. That is why the EU is supporting projects to prevent Islamist extremism and why it has adopted a series of work strands to combat violent right-wing extremism and terrorism.⁷ Europol and EU INTCEN also systematically distinguish between forms of terrorism in their reports. In the same vein, **TWP is advised to discuss dedicated action to address violent anti-system extremism and terrorism**, especially in view of its cross-border dimension.

1. It is important that EU Member States exchange views on **the extent of the (potential) threat** of violent anti-system extremism and **discuss appropriate terminology** in TWP and COSI. It is also important that they continue countering attempts by some violent anti-system extremists to commit attacks and to break laws against racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism.⁸ **Europol** should continue to support these efforts within its mandate. **EU INTCEN** should provide analytical insights into this problem.
2. The threat posed by violent anti-system extremists could be **mainstreamed** in the **EU's prevention efforts**, including the **Radicalisation Awareness Network**, the **Network of Prevent Policy Makers**, the **EU Internet Referral Unit** (which could start flagging violent anti-system content that falls within the definition of terrorism), **Commission-financed prevention and research projects**, the **Steering Board on Radicalisation** and the new **EU Knowledge Hub on Radicalisation** (which will update and reframe the activities of the Radicalisation Awareness Network and should take into account all forms of extremism, including violent anti-system extremism).

⁷ 14132/19

⁸ Member States should pursue their efforts in prosecuting incitement to violence or hatred online and offline directed against a group of persons as requested by Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA of 28 November 2008 on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law.

3. It is important to **continue our dialogue with digital companies**, including the online gaming industry, in the EU Internet Forum (EUIF), the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) and the Christchurch Call to Action, as well as bilateral dialogues, for example to develop **tools to detect violent anti-system extremism**. In addition, the EU should consider **outreach to countries hosting non-cooperative platforms** to discuss liability.
4. The EU needs to tackle the **algorithmic amplification of violent propaganda online**. Major digital companies block illegal expressions, but otherwise prioritise content based on the length of time the user is expected to look at it. Divisive and extreme content often holds people's attention longer and thus has a competitive advantage over mainstream and moderate content. Rather than trying to restrict access to 'borderline content', we could aim at countering its algorithmic amplification. We can do so by ensuring a level playing field in the competition to reach target audiences. In that way, we would protect meaningful freedom of expression and combat violent extremism at the same time.

Member States and the Commission should mobilise sufficient expertise to ensure the **effective auditing** of algorithms under the new Digital Service Act (DSA).

5. The EU is undertaking a wide range of activities to counter **foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI)**. FIMI and CT experts should work closer together at EU level. TWP input is important to ensure that a counter-terrorism perspective is taken into account. TWP can start a reflection on this matter, for instance by inviting those responsible for the implementation of Commission-financed projects to TWP to elaborate on their work and exchange views with delegations.⁹

⁹ For an overview of EU-funded projects, see https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/funded-projects-fight-against-disinformation_en

6. The Commission could be invited to include the practice of doxing by violent anti-system extremists, left-wing extremists and others on **the agenda of the EU Internet Forum (EUIF)**,¹⁰ and the **EU Internet Referral Unit at Europol** could be invited to explore its potential role in flagging instances of doxing to major internet companies.
7. The EU could ask **online payment processors**, such as Visa/MasterCard/Worldline, to enhance their conditions on the spread of material calling for violence. Such action was undertaken in 2020 and 2021 in relation to child sexual exploitation material, with positive results.

¹⁰ Doxing was first addressed in the EUIF workshop on algorithmic amplification and borderline content on 29 September 2022 as one of the tactics used by violent extremists online.