

CUMULATIVE EXTREMISM

Behind the scenes of toxic us-versus-them dynamics

Annelies Pauwels

- Cumulative extremism is the process by which different forms of extremism interact and reinforce each other, which often translates into a dynamic of violent or non-violent reactions and counter-reactions. The current, multifaceted landscape of extremism in Europe – with some forms of extremism diametrically opposed to one another – calls for renewed attention to this phenomenon.
- Cumulative extremism can act as a catalyst for existing threats of violent radicalisation; it can lead to increased radicalisation of individuals, spirals of violence, and broader trends of social polarisation.
- Far-reaching visions of the in-group (one's own victimhood) and the out-group (the “threatening other”) can perpetuate and escalate processes of cumulative extremism. Governments can influence this toxic framing in negative or positive ways. If they want to mitigate the risk of cumulative extremism, it is important that they commit to creating an accurate picture of extremism that closely reflects reality.
- Diffuse manifestations of extremism, extremists’ use of ambiguous tactics and strategies, and their tendency to operate online create obstacles to any attempt to accurately gauge the various forms of extremism. This situation, as well as challenges faced by frontline practitioners to recognise signs of radicalisation, may lead to over- and underreporting of extremism.
- Such ambiguities in threat assessments may feed toxic narratives about the in-group and out-group, heighten tensions between opposing movements, and fuel perceptions that policy and practice apply double standards when dealing with extremism. This paper suggests a number of avenues for policymakers and practitioners to improve their perception and understanding of the current landscape of extremism.

Introduction

The current landscape of extremism in Europe is multifaceted: traditional forms of extremism – such as left- and right-wing extremism – are regaining prominence, and new forms are emerging. Some of these extremisms seem diametrically opposed. Right-wing extremist movements, for instance, tend to react fiercely to jihadist incidents, and jihadist activity – and by extension Muslim activity – often forms the centrepiece of right-wing propagandistic narratives. It also may trigger right-wing counter-reactions, as suggested by the increase in right-wing violence in the aftermaths of some high-profile jihadist attacks. In the days following the 2015 Charlie Hebdo shooting in Paris, for instance, France witnessed several right-wing incidents: in separate attacks, assailants threw grenades, detonated explosive devices, and fired shots at either mosques or shops owned by Muslims.¹

Right-wing extremist movements are also diametrically opposed to left-wing and anarchist extremists. This at times leads to violent confrontations, as in 2011, when violent protests between German anarchist and right-wing extremists left 500 police officers injured.² Members of each group also directly target each other: about one in four violent crimes by German left-wing extremists are targeted at right-wing extremists or their property.³ In 2021, left-wing attacks on prominent individuals within the right-wing extremist *milieu* even caused factions of that scene to (temporarily) put aside their differences and overcome regional and organisational boundaries that usually fragment them.⁴ In Southern Europe, anarchist and right-wing extremist individuals and groups

also regularly target each other.⁵ Escalating hostility is, however, not limited to religious or ideological extremist movements; tensions also flare between extremist factions of ethnic minorities and sometimes escalate into violence. This happened between Turks and Armenians in France when in the autumn of 2020 tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh escalated and it also happens on a more regular basis between Turkish and Kurdish communities in Germany and Belgium.⁶

This multipolar context of violent radicalisation calls for renewed attention to the phenomenon of cumulative extremism. This is the process by which different forms of extremism interact and reinforce each other. It often creates an escalating dynamic of reactions and counter-reactions that can manifest itself in a variety of ways: a hardening of rhetoric, an increase in physical violence, or an escalation from non-lethal to lethal forms of violence.⁷ The concept of “cumulative radicalisation” stems from Holocaust and genocide studies. The term was first used to describe the escalating extremism of the National Socialist regime in Nazi Germany.^a The phenomenon has also been studied in a peacetime context, particularly to explain certain manifestations of extremism and terrorism today. British researcher Roger Eatwell coined the term “cumulative extremism” in his study of the 2001 riots in the English city of Bradford.⁸ According to his analysis of the incidents, the antagonistic behaviour of right-wing extremist groups in the city had contributed to heightened ethnic tension and led to a backlash from ethnic minority communities. This eventually resulted in the outbreak of riots. Eatwell describes cumulative extremism as “the way in which one form of extremism can feed off and magnify other forms”.^b

a In his research, historian Hans Mommsen argues that the build-up of dynamics within the Nazi regime led to the adoption of increasingly radical measures, which ultimately caused the progressive self-destruction of the political system. See Mommsen, H. (1997), *Cumulative radicalisation and progressive self-destruction as structural determinants of the Nazi dictatorship*, in: I. Kershaw & M. Lewin (eds.), *Stalinism and Nazism: dictatorships in comparison*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 75–87.

b Eatwell’s definition thus differs from the earlier use of the term in the context of Nazi Germany, where “cumulative radicalisation” refers to the gradual radicalisation of the Nazi regime. Rather, Eatwell’s work describes how opposing forms of extremism become increasingly extreme in response to each other.

An under-researched topic

The term “cumulative extremism” thus suggests interactive and reinforcing dynamics between opposing groups. These two core aspects of the concept point to key motivations for studying it. Firstly, extremism does not develop in complete isolation; different forms of extremism can exist in parallel and develop in symbiosis with one another. Studying the dynamics and reciprocal relationships between them may thus reveal insights that are useful in the study of each form separately. Secondly, cumulative extremism is not just “extremism times two”. It can lead to the escalation of existing threats of extremism. For instance, it can reinforce and accelerate the radicalisation process in individuals, groups, and the community of which they are a part. The presence and actions of an antagonistic other may, for instance, serve as a tipping point for individuals to join a (violent) extremist movement, or speed up the social disintegration of a wider society. An escalating antagonism between two movements can also lead to spirals of violence; this may occur when movements compete with each other by arming themselves or committing (more serious) violence.

Despite the potentially harmful impact of cumulative extremism, it has not been the subject of many research studies. Since Eatwell’s study, the concept has been applied primarily to cases within the British context;⁹ examples include the escalations of violence between right-wing extremist and anti-fascist groups since the 1940s and between Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland in the

1960s and 1970s.^a More recently, researchers have also analysed violent clashes between Britain’s Islamist and right-wing extremist movements from this angle.¹⁰ Research on how these dynamics play out in other regions is, however, limited.¹¹

Some researchers have also attempted to provide conceptual and theoretical clarity on, for instance, patterns, mechanisms and processes that are at the core of escalating antagonism between extremist groups.¹² Yet many research gaps still exist. For instance, it is unclear why escalation trajectories vary so strongly from one case to another – or why in some cases escalation does not occur at all. Nor has been resolved how cumulative extremism relates to other similar phenomena, such as the escalation of intrastate conflicts, polarisation on a community level, intra-movement infighting^b or even revenge dynamics in gang-related violence.

This research paper aims to add to the existing literature by focusing on how third parties, in particular governments and public authorities, may influence perceptions that in-groups and out-groups have about each other – a factor that lies at the heart of escalating dynamics between extremist movements. In doing so, we follow other researchers’ suggestions that analyses of cumulative extremism should be broadened to look beyond mere spikes of violence between two opposing movements.¹³ Studies often focus on two extremist poles, but the wider environment may also play a part in shaping antagonistic relations between extremist movements.¹⁴ Our approach is also useful in that

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a Concerning Northern Ireland, in the transitional years of the 1960s and 1970s, peaceful protests and counter-protests by members of these communities escalated into a cycle of deadly violence and counter-violence. The clashes between the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and the loyalist paramilitary groups were instrumental in escalating the violence and widening the gap between the Catholic and Protestant communities.

b Research on cumulative extremism primarily studies the relationships between antagonistic movements at opposite ends of an ideological spectrum. Nevertheless, conflicts within the same ideological group typically share many features of cumulative extremism; for example, they can also accelerate radicalisation processes within movements.

it takes us beyond the short-term observation of tit-for-tat violence; this paper seeks to offer useful insights to help policy-makers develop mid- to long-term strategies aimed at preventing, countering or at least mitigating escalating antagonism between different forms of extremism.

The paper is structured as follows. A first section briefly outlines cumulative extremism as a highly complex and dynamic process that is driven by various players and dynamic relations. Psychological, social and practical processes may explain whether or not antagonisms between movements escalate. A second section zooms in on the framing and perceptions that opposing movements adopt and maintain of one another. Perceptions about one's own group (in-group) and another group (out-group) play a determining role in shaping the tensions between opposing movements, often developing into far-reaching visions of the "threatening other" and the in-group's own victimhood. Such a distorted, threatening picture of the opposing group often has an escalating effect on tensions between antagonistic movements. Governments and public authorities can contribute to these perceptions that groups have of each other; their assessment of and strategies against the threat of extremism play into practices where extremist groups paint each other as "enemies".

Finally, the last section describes how the way extremism manifests itself today may lead to shortcomings in official threat analyses. Diffuse manifestations of extremism, extremists' use of ambiguous tactics and strategies, and their tendency to operate online create obstacles to

any attempt to accurately gauge the various forms of extremism. This section also reflects on how this unclear image of extremism can play into the dynamics of cumulative extremism.

More than an action-reaction dynamic

The concept of cumulative extremism suggests that extremist movements become more extreme in response to each other's activities: a threat emanates from the opposing side, so counter-reactions are justified and action becomes all the more necessary.¹⁵ In reality, however, this is rarely a simple binary process between two opposing sides. Rather, it encompasses complex and dynamic processes involving multiple actors.

First of all, reducing extremist actions to a dynamic of attacks and counter-attacks misses

the complex, dynamic and multifaceted nature of the process of radicalisation.^a Extremism and terrorism are also often embedded in a historical continuum. Therefore, the various opposing forms of extremism are separate and observable phenomena whose correlations with each other (let alone their causal

relationships) are far from simple.¹⁶ A rise in right-wing extremism cannot be simplified as a reaction to jihadist violence, nor can left-wing extremist actions be reduced to a counter-reaction to a rising right-wing extremist presence.

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^a Research suggests that, for both individuals and movements, radicalisation processes depend, in fact, on various influencing factors. These may relate to the micro and meso levels – that is, individual factors and elements in a person's immediate environment. Examples include personal experiences, issues related to identity and belonging, and the influence of social dynamics. Macro trends and factors also play an important role in explaining radicalisation. These include social context, political events and socioeconomic elements. See Schmid, A. P., *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (27 March 2013), <https://icct.nl/publication/radicalisation-de-radicalisation-counter-radicalisation-a-conceptual-discussion-and-literature-review/>.

Even when extremist violence seems explicitly intended as a reaction to an opposing group or movement, there may (also) be other reasons behind it. Extremist movements sometimes use counter-violence for strategic reasons – for instance, to motivate their own members. They may also abstain from violence if they fear losing the sympathy of their followers or target audience – for instance, when such violence is deemed too extreme or counterproductive.¹⁷

Various actors may also have an effect on whether escalation (or de-escalation) between antagonistic groups takes place. Firstly, the dynamics within and between extremist groups may play a role.¹⁸ For example, an escalation with an opposing movement may be driven by rivalry for control and leadership of one's own organisation.¹⁹ Groups have also used (counter-)violence to distinguish themselves – as the more extremist variant – from other factions within their own ideological family.²⁰ An example is a series of violent actions in 2015 and 2016 against Islamist individuals committed by the British right-wing terrorist movement National Action. This group, which had been founded several years earlier in response to a jihadist attack on a British soldier in 2013, maintained a fierce rhetoric against Islamists. Yet this escalation of violence was primarily an attempt to differentiate the group from other right-wing extremist bodies.²¹

Secondly, third-party actors may also exert an influence on whether, how and why patterns of cumulative extremism develop.²² The interventions or actions of others – such as external provocateurs, the general public and media outlets – may fuel rhetorical or violent escalations by extremist movements.²³ For instance, sensational media outlets may, through negative and oversimplified coverage, reinforce

prejudices that are then rechannelled in the binary worldviews of extremist movements.²⁴ Also, governments and public authorities play an important role in this regard. Their interventions – such as anti-terror legislation, strategies to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE), and police action and the promotion of public order in general – may give a boost to cumulative extremism, for instance when they accelerate radicalisation processes or feed extremist narratives.²⁵ P/CVE and counterterrorism interventions that target vulnerable groups or communities may, on the one hand, foster feelings of stigmatisation within those groups. On the other hand, they may cause suspicion towards those communities or even be seen as some kind of “special treatment” or additional burden on public resources. In both cases, extremist narratives can easily exploit these grievances to magnify the perceived threat from the opposing movement (or, by extension, entire population groups).²⁶

An example of how government interventions have fostered cumulative extremism can be found in the conflict in Northern Ireland during the 1960s and 1970s. The repressive approach by the Northern Irish police to nonviolent demonstrations by a Catholic civil rights movement contributed to the creation of space for the rise of extremist movements along both Catholic and Protestant lines. The heavy-handed attitude towards the protesters (further) undermined the legitimacy of the Northern Irish police and authorities among the Catholic community, who viewed the police brutality as a way of favouring the unionist or British agenda. These incidents were then exploited by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) to launch a violent campaign against the British state and its followers. The violence of the PIRA

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in turn translated into a call on the loyalist side to train militarily, which eventually contributed to the creation of the loyalist paramilitary group the Ulster Defence Association.²⁷

More recently, a study comparing tensions between Islamists and anti-Islamists in Britain and Norway also pointed to the role of government interventions. The various approaches of the authorities are argued to be one of the factors explaining why tensions escalated in the United Kingdom but not in Norway in similar circumstances; in the British case, the more interventionist approach of the police forces and authorities was perceived as unfair by both Islamists and anti-Islamists, and this indirectly led to an escalation.²⁸

Us-versus-them framing

The victim narrative and the “threatening other”

Perceptions about one’s own group (in-group) and another group (out-group) play a determining role in shaping the tensions between opposing movements, often developing into far-reaching visions of the “threatening other” and the in-group’s own victimhood.²⁹ Thinking in terms of “us” and “them” is natural and even inevitable in society.^a Extremist narratives, however, distort “us-and-them” thinking into “us-versus-them” thinking; in this way, extremist

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movements attempt to shape the normative experiences, values and behaviour not only of their followers and sympathisers but also of their social base or target audience. Many Islamist and jihadist narratives, for instance, portray such an adversarial dichotomy: a religious identification within the in-group (Muslims) and hostility towards the out-group (non-Muslims) are attempts to reshape the normative experience of Muslims.³⁰

In the context of cumulative extremism, this us-versus-them thinking primarily revolves around two central and interconnected thought constructs. The first line of reasoning seeks to reinforce the threat posed by the opposing group: the presence and activities of the other group are a threat to the in-group’s own identity, prosperity, security and even survival. This thinking affects a second recurring pattern of thinking: one’s own group is a victim of the other group and is disadvantaged or treated unfairly vis-à-vis the other group. These two themes are ubiquitous in the narratives of most extremist movements. A recent discourse analysis of more than 10,000 Islamist and right-wing extremist messages on German social media supports this conclusion; both extremes often demonise the opposing group and refer to feelings of injustice and victimisation at the hands of the opposing party.³¹

Extremist narratives that reinforce in-group and out-group thinking can foster cumulative extremism in three ways. Firstly, these kinds of narratives have a perpetuating and escalating effect. Research points to the strong interaction and interdependence between the narratives present in two antagonistic movements: they often deal with the same

^a People simply identify themselves as belonging to certain groups and define boundaries with other groups. Group identification is useful because it helps people to better understand themselves, their social environment and their relationships with others. Forming narratives or stories of meaning around us-and-them patterns of thinking helps people to form and maintain these personal and collective identities. See Van Alstein, M., *Polarisation and conflict: A non-violent approach*, Flemish Peace Institute, p. 11-12.

themes and incidents but are elaborated in opposing ways. These two sets of competing narratives then validate and reinforce each other, which can lead to a vicious cycle resulting in increasingly extremist perceptions and (rhetorical) escalations.³² For instance, a perceived threat to the collective identity in one movement can lead to a mobilisation of that group, which in turn will fuel propaganda around victimhood in the other group. An example of this spiral is the jihadist narrative about a global crusade by the West against Islam. In the United Kingdom, for example, this narrative underpinned an attempted Islamist attack on a demonstration of the right-wing extremist English Defence League (EDL) in 2012.³³ The appeal of this victim narrative is also evident in various actions of the British Islamist movement Al-Muhajiroun and is reflected in the name the group adopted – Muslims Against Crusades – after it was banned following a planned controversial protest against the commemoration of British military casualties.³⁴

Secondly, us-versus-them narratives also play a crucial role in the survival of extremist movements. They are essential, for example, in recruiting new members and legitimising the operations of a group.³⁵ Indeed, portraying the opposing party as an existential threat justifies counter-reactions and even makes them “necessary”. The counter-movement then presents itself as the only solution to a threat it has identified.³⁶ For example, the Counter-Jihad Movement – a loose transnational network with followers in Europe and the United States – derives its own *raison d’être* from narratives about the threat of Islam and Islamist extremism.³⁷

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Extremist narratives about the in-group and out-group are also crucial to strengthening the in-group’s collective identity and internal social cohesion.³⁸ Iranian social psychologist Fathali M. Moghaddam, for example, argues that the perception of an external threat can psychologically connect even people who do not directly meet. According to this line of thought, a perceived threat connects individuals in both loose right-wing extremist networks and jihadist movements. Extremist us-versus-them propaganda thus makes people feel that they are not the only ones facing this threat; instead, the threat exists for a whole group of people who are just like them.³⁹ It is possible to find a similar connecting narrative in Covid-19-related extremism, which exists in a global movement involving a variety of subgroups with very different ideological backgrounds.⁴⁰ A recurring theme in Covid-19-related extremist narratives sees the pandemic as having been staged by the political and economic elite (the out-group) as an excuse to take action and subjugate “the people” (the in-group).⁴¹

Thirdly, far-reaching visions of the “threatening other” and one’s own victimhood may trigger individuals or groups to act or lead to an escalation of violent interactions.⁴² Essentialising us-versus-them narratives and accentuating feelings of fear, distrust and hatred can lead to (further) radicalisation of the members of two opposing groups. They may then consider violence to be the only option. This apocalyptic line of thought is ingrained in the narrative regarding an impending civil war between Muslims and non-Muslims, a discourse in which Islamists and right-wing extremists rhetorically validate each other. The idea that a war between religions, cultures or races is inevitable and

imminent has the purpose of accelerating an escalation of existing tensions between and within society.⁴³

Us-versus-them thinking and the role of third parties

Third-party actors – such as governments and media outlets – can positively or negatively affect the development of the distorted in- and out-group thinking that underlies extremist propaganda and people’s receptiveness to that propaganda. Three main guiding principles in this regard emerge from the literature. The first is to avoid risk inflation. An inflated assessment of an extremist threat (and a corresponding over-emphasis in counterterrorism and P/CVE policies) plays into the antagonistic discourses of extremist groups: if the opposing movement poses an ever-increasing threat, supposedly counter-reactions are required. Government interventions, both preventive and repressive, are therefore seen as confirmations by both extremes: if the government responds to a particular group, it means that the group plays a significant role.⁴⁴ An inflated sense of risk can also reinforce both groups’ arguments about a seemingly inevitable spiral of violence.⁴⁵

A second guiding principle is to avoid inequality and unfairness in the approaches towards the two extremes.⁴⁶ The perception of unequal treatment (either favourable or unfavourable) of one extremism may antagonise and embolden the other one.

Researchers have also stressed that perceived unfair treatment may resonate among the social base of both extremes. Feelings of stigmatisation can magnify existing frustrations and erode trust in the government – processes that are often important drivers of the radicalisation process. These kinds of perceptions of preferential treatment are also all too eagerly addressed and manipulated in extremist propaganda.⁴⁷

An unfair government approach has been highlighted in studies covering tensions between the EDL and Al-Muhajiroun. The two groups have employed similar “repertoires” of actions and rhetoric, yet the British authorities have approached them with different measures. This will have contributed to the escalation of confrontation between the two sides. Al-Muhajiroun (and its offshoot movements) has

been banned up to ten times, a decision perceived by its supporters as unfair since the EDL has never been officially labelled as an extremist organisation. On the other hand, the arrest of members of the EDL during protests – while followers of Al-Muhajiroun could continue demonstrating – caused indignation within the former group. This unequal policy attention increased injustice-related grievances among members of both organisations. It also reinforced among their supporters the idea that a kind of

two-tier legal system existed and that the state favoured one side over the other.⁴⁸ In contrast, researchers have emphasised that authorities can de-escalate tensions if they treat opposing groups equally and communicate clearly about their approach.⁴⁹

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A third guideline is to pay sufficient attention to “the middle” and the social base or target audience at whom extremist groups address their propaganda. The aim here is to prevent extremist us-versus-them narratives from connecting with frustrations and grievances felt by these sections of the population. Doing so makes sense for several reasons. Extremist propaganda is not only targeted at those who already belong to or sympathise with the movement; it also aims to radicalise or recruit individuals from groups in the middle. For example, extremist anti-vaccination groups use their pandemic-related conspiracy theories to target those who are distrustful of the authorities or who experience grievances as a result of the measures aimed at preventing the spread of Covid-19.⁵⁰

Extremist narratives often expand “the others” to an increasingly large group. They may frame non-radical opposition groups as “extremist” or as an “existential threat” and thus increase the sense of threat from the other side.⁵¹ In a similar way, a selective in-group gives way to a broader collective identity.⁵² For example, some right-wing extremist narratives extend their in-group to Judeo-Christian civilisation^a and the out-group to the entire Muslim population. Similarly, left-wing extremists and anarchists mainly target right-wing extremists but their rhetoric “attacks” the entire spectrum of right-wing voters.

The constructed enemy images in extremist narratives also interact with perceptions and feelings that are organically felt within those communities from which extremists try to recruit. Extremist movements will try to shape their discourses in such a way that they respond as much as possible to those feelings and perceptions. At the same time, what is perceived organically may also be influenced by extremist

narratives. Researchers have emphasised that governments can play an important role in both top-down and bottom-up processes.⁵³

A blurred image of extremism in Europe?

Third parties may affect in- and out-group framing by extremist groups, a key element in escalatory dynamics. Governments may do so through how they depict and assess the situation of violent extremism – for instance, through threat assessments made by security agencies, or figures and data on extremist and terrorist offences. However, they may find this a progressively complicated task due to the increasingly diffuse, ambiguous and ill-defined manifestations of extremism.

It is not easy to reduce the current manifestations of extremism to clear and comparable figures due to their disparate nature. This is reflected in how such movements are rendered in judicial and police databases. Terrorist legislation does not always capture right-wing extremist incidents, which instead may be registered as discrimination offences or hate crimes. They also often remain unclaimed, which may make incidents seem unplanned, spontaneous or isolated. This distinction in classification makes it difficult to compare, for instance, jihadist and right-wing extremist incidents in terms of their severity. A look at terrorism statistics shows only a few terrorist attacks by right-wing extremists in recent years in Europe.⁵⁴ Yet it is known that the number of hate crimes with a racist motive has risen sharply in a number of countries.⁵⁵ Given the large degree of under-reporting of hate crimes – for instance, due to

^a In this regard, however, it should be noted that in the narratives of right-wing extremist movements, only those who “deserve” to be part of the Judeo-Christian civilisation belong to the in-group. The out-group often includes forces in the West that would (in the extremists’ view) undermine Judeo-Christian civilisation, such as left-wing politicians, anti-racist activists and Jews – despite the existence of Jews within Judeo-Christian civilisation.

the small number of victims who lodge complaints⁵⁶ – the phenomenon of right-wing extremism could therefore be considerably underestimated.

In addition, the growing prominence of lone actors – perpetrators who plan and carry out their acts alone – may present a hurdle to a clear interpretation of the risk of violent extremism, in terms of both pre-attack and post-attack assessments. This type of perpetrator often constitutes a blind spot for intelligence and security services, due to the absence of clear and visible links to an extremist or terrorist network.^a In the aftermath of lone actor violence, the question often arises whether it should be considered terrorism, that is, whether the acts were motivated by ideological reasons or rather driven by mental health problems.⁵⁷

Extremist movements also make frequent use of ambiguous tactics and strategies. This may pose a hurdle for intelligence, security and judiciary services to clearly portray current manifestations of extremism. A good example is arson attacks, a tactic that has long been a preferred *modus operandi* of left-wing extremist groups but is also increasingly used by right-wing extremists.⁵⁸ It may be challenging to identify the perpetrators of such acts or to establish a connection between the instigators (e.g. in online propaganda) and the actual perpetrators. Extremists who infiltrate peaceful demonstrations to instigate violence (e.g. through black bloc groups^b) are also

notoriously difficult to identify and convict.⁵⁹

The strong online dimension in current manifestations of extremism represents a challenge of its own. Online attacks – such as online stalking, trolling and doxing of opponents^c – can be difficult to adjudicate – for instance, because of the anonymity of the perpetrators or because law enforcement agencies do not have access to closed groups on the internet. Extremist individuals and movements also regularly flaunt the right to free speech and exploit grey areas between legal and illegal online behaviour.

Skilled extremists, for example, ensure that their hateful messages remain within the lines of the law but nonetheless carry a clear charge for their followers.⁶⁰ In the aftermath of the attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019, members of online neo-Nazi networks spread a meme with the photo of the attacker and the slogan of a Nike campaign: “Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything.” The

slogan of the sports brand – “Just do it” – completed this “ambiguous” exhortation to commit violence.⁶¹

An understanding of extremist threat is not only formed through data from official statistics, such as records in judicial and police databases, but also through a more bottom-up process. Frontline practitioners – such as teachers, youth workers, police officers and penitentiary personnel – may signal cases of radicalisation, and their reports can feed the perception of

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a Lone actors plan and carry out their acts of violence on an independent basis. However, research has shown that ties to online and offline extremist milieus are nevertheless crucial in terms of both lone actors’ motivation and their ability to commit terrorist acts. See e.g. Schuurman, B., et al. (2018), End of the lone wolf: the typology that should not have been. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 42:3, pp. 771–778.

b A black bloc is an informal grouping of militant, mainly anarchist, protesters who act together during anti-capitalism, anti-war, etc, protests, often wearing black hoods and black clothing.

c The term trolling indicates intentionally inflammatory behaviour on the internet. Doxing means publicly broadcasting private or identifying information accompanied by implicit or explicit requests to use the information for online and/or “real world” harassment purposes.

extremism that lives within governments, media and wider society. Over- and under-reporting by practitioners in the field may occur as a result of ambiguous and ill-defined manifestations of extremism, or from practitioners being insufficiently trained to recognise signals of extremism. For instance, in the aftermath of a terrorist attack, practitioners may be extra-vigilant or act prematurely relating to situations that, in reality, can be traced back to innocuous behaviour, such as a teenager's provocative behaviour or the expression of his or her search for identity or belonging. They may do so out of fear of the risks of missing a case of potentially dangerous radicalisation.

This can translate into false accusations or allegations (with all the devastating consequences for those who are singled out) regarding "suspect" individuals or communities. This proved to be a problem, for example, between 2017 and 2019 in the United Kingdom, where certain categories of professionals were assigned the duty to report cases of radicalisation. An analysis of alerts under the country's P/CVE programme, Prevent, showed that only between 5% and 10% of all alerts were deemed to require intervention. This means that at least 90–95% of referrals were false positives.⁶²

In other cases, fear of a phenomenon they are not familiar with may make practitioners hesitant to act. Social panic regarding Islamist extremism and its religious packaging may have

a paralysing effect on practitioners who under normal circumstances would have the necessary competencies to deal with problematic situations. Frontline practitioners may also simply not recognise the signs of extremism. Online extremist culture, such as coded language and symbolism, may not be easy to "read" for outsiders.^a Lastly, practitioners may also minimise or dismiss signals of extremism if they do not consider them of concern. In a multifaceted context of extremism, the various expressions of extremism are more likely to be framed and problematised to dissimilar degrees.

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Conceptual ambiguities and the absence of a shared vision and framework for action about the phenomenon that needs to be prevented often lie beneath these challenges encountered by frontline practitioners. For instance, a recently leaked extract of an independent review of Prevent denounced a double standard in the approaches to tackling different forms of extremism. This is argued to be in part due to the adoption of a too widely expanded definition of right-wing

extremism and a too narrow interpretation of Islamist extremism.⁶³ Thus, it may be unclear to frontline workers what exactly should be prevented or combated. This is a result not only of the ambiguity with which extremism may be manifested but also of a deficient framework and the absence of a shared vision of the phenomenon of violent extremism and its influencing processes. This may make it difficult for frontline practitioners to assess what radical behaviour means, which statements or acts are

^a For example, right-wing extremist propaganda is often packaged in humour and sarcasm, which makes it difficult to understand its deeper, underlying grounds and objectives. Right-wing extremist movements also make clever use of various online techniques – such as fake news, conspiracy theories, memes, trolling and "shitposting" (i.e. posting ostentatiously contextless content to an online forum with the effect of derailing discussions) – to spread their ideas and to push the boundaries of what is acceptable. See e.g. Keen, F., Crawford, B. & Suarez-Tangil, G. (2020), Memetic irony and the promotion of violence within chan cultures, Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (2020), <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/memetic-irony-and-the-promotion-of-violence-within-chan-cultures>.

problematic, and when radicalisation should be reported.

Slight gaps in the mapping of extremism may at first glance seem rather innocuous; a minor over-reporting of a clearly threatening form of extremism may – according to this reasoning – do relatively little harm and, conversely, a phenomenon that has not really been noticed will probably also represent a relatively minor threat. Yet, a distorted perception can create a vicious circle in which under- and over-reporting continue to increase. Over-reporting leads to greater policy attention, which translates into priority treatment of the problem: the issue is deemed to matter, so more resources and personnel are devoted to counteracting or addressing it. Together with a stronger commitment to, for example, knowledge- and expertise-building, information campaigns, and research, this in turn ensures that practitioners recognise or think they recognise the phenomenon “better”. This again leads to increased reporting, which may continue to stimulate the “counter-terrorism machine”⁶⁴. Conversely, under-reporting can translate into little policy attention and, thus, less knowledge about or attention to the phenomenon in the field. Distorted perceptions then threaten to keep the problem invisible.

A blurred depiction of the presence and activities of extremist movements may also reinforce the toxic us-versus-them narratives that are so central to the dynamics of cumulative extremism. A spiral of over-reporting may translate into an inflation of the risk that the problem represents, while with under-reporting the issue remains under-estimated. In both cases, space is given to extremist narratives. Depending on the perspective, risk over-estimation can be manipulated to make the image of an existential threat from the opposing movement all the more pressing, or, conversely, to raise the issue of unfair treatment by government agencies towards one’s own group or even to spread the

idea that violence towards the enemy may go unpunished.

Conclusions

Cumulative extremism remains an under-researched phenomenon, yet it certainly deserves attention given the existence of antagonistic relationships between some forms of extremism. Cumulative extremism not only may lead to far-reaching rhetorical or physical escalation but may also pose a latent danger to democracy if both extremes are authoritarian and anti-democratically oriented.⁶⁵ What can authorities do to counter cumulative extremism? The escalation or non-escalation of tensions between opposing groups depends on a multitude of factors that are mainly linked to dynamics between and within these groups. Yet there is also a role for governments, which have an interest in preventing tensions from escalating and mitigating their effects. This paper has zoomed in on the possibility of working on what Moghaddam calls the “construction of conflict” – that is, how the conflict and the causes of the conflict are reflected in the narratives of those involved.⁶⁶ These narratives often play a defining role in whether or not conflicts between two opposing parties persist or escalate.

Current strategies across Europe to counter violent extremism pay much attention to addressing the root causes of radicalisation, but they have not yet focused on how these causes are narrated in the stories of extremist movements. A good start would be to “get right” what we are currently doing. For instance, how we talk about radicalisation and violent extremism matters a great deal. All those who take an active role in P/CVE or counterterrorism policies – policy-makers, practitioners, researchers, project implementers, politicians and so on – influence the perception of those policies. It is important, therefore, that the

policies (and how we talk about them) are not dominated by problematic frames of thought that feed into the binary worldview promoted by extremists. Terms such as “radicalisation”, “risk factors” and “vulnerable target groups” are often very complex and thus require a certain amount of nuance and thoughtfulness when used in the public sphere.

Such efforts also involve clearly identifying the phenomena that these policies are trying to prevent. Concepts such as polarisation, radicalisation and extremism are often vaguely defined in policy documents. Because of their ambiguity, it is crucial to make clear what exactly is problematic and what is not – and which target group a policy is aimed at. This can be done, for example, by focusing on elements such as the rejection of democratic fundamental values and the (acceptance of the) use of violence. In practice, however, this is not always an easy task. This paper has pointed out that extremist movements often actively pursue ambiguity in their tactics and strategies. They may be very skilled at hiding their actual goals and cleverly walk the sometimes blurred lines between what is permissible and what is not. Yet it is important that authorities do identify (and clearly communicate about) exactly what their policies, interventions, projects and so on are trying to prevent or counter and where the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate polarising and radical views lie. This is relevant to any attempt to mitigate the impact of extremist narratives, which constantly try to expand both the in-group and the out-group – for example, by adding radical or activist individuals to the extremist (counter)movement or stretching the movement to encompass their entire social base or “the middle”.

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Finally, governments can also take concrete steps to create a more accurate picture of extremism. Mapping the diffuse manifestations of extremism requires in-depth and multifaceted analyses that look beyond merely terrorist offences. These only make up the tip of the iceberg of extremist activity. Other extremist actions – such as hate crimes and other crimes with possible extremist backgrounds – should be included in a proper threat assessment of extremism. For instance, there is still an inadequate evidence base on hate speech and hate crimes, which are often committed for ideological reasons. There may well be a large degree of under-reporting of these types of crime – for example, due to inadequate recording as well as the small number of victims who lodge complaints.⁶⁷ An accurate picture should also result

from increased European operational cooperation and data exchange. Some forms of extremism are still largely perceived through a national lens – right-wing and left-wing extremism, as well as other forms of violent radicalisation, such as extremism among 5G opponents and within anti-vaccination movements – despite their transnational character and the interlinking of networks across borders.⁶⁸

It may also be useful to sharpen our vision on the ground. The uncertainties that may still live among frontline practitioners underline the need to maintain a continued investment in enhancing knowledge and expertise.⁶⁹ The multifaceted dimension of extremism also requires governments to broaden their spectrum of partners on the ground with organisations and networks that are able to reach out to individuals and communities vulnerable to the various forms of violent extremism.

Governments, of course, do not have a monopoly on the perception of extremism; extremist movements spread their toxic narratives regardless and feed them with a distorted representation of reality. Indeed, these narratives are essential to justify their *raison d'être*, validate their existence and continue their own operation – for example, by mobilising and recruiting new members. Nevertheless, it makes sense for governments to focus on gaining an accurate picture of the situation: this can help to de-escalate tensions between opposing movements in society, prevent further radicalisation of (members of) extremist movements and reduce movements' chances of

recruitment. When governments do not have this accurate picture, they lose control over their narrative and give extremist movements free rein: the extremists can freely exploit incidents in society and play on feelings and perceptions that reside within their social base as well as in “the middle”. Governments can secure a more conclusive picture by integrating accurate assessments into the comprehensive counterterrorism strategies currently in place across Europe.

Endnotes

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Flemish Peace Institute

The Flemish Peace Institute was established in 2004 as a para-parliamentary institution within the Flemish Parliament. It provides thorough analyses, informs and organizes the debate and promotes peace and the prevention of violence.

Author

Annelies Pauwels has been working at the Flemish Peace Institute since 2020, where she conducts research into radicalization and terrorism.

email: annelies.pauwels@vlaamsparlement.be