



Anti-Government Threats and their Transnational Connections

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International Centre for
Counter-Terrorism

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Abstract

Anti-Government Extremism (AGE) presents a complex and evolving security challenge, particularly in the transatlantic space. AGE is characterised by anti-system sentiments, and adherents propagate notions of an evil elite controlling societal mechanisms, adapting global conspiracy theories to local grievances. While predominantly non-violent, it harbours the potential for violence, posing a significant policy challenge. This report contributes a comprehensive exploration of AGE by utilising original data, including interviews with security officials and an exploration of AGE spaces online, focusing on Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States. Through thematic comparative analysis, it unveils the nature of anti-government groups and individuals, elucidating their transnational linkages both online and offline. By shedding new light on AGE's manifestations, severity, and responses across jurisdictions, this research illuminates whether AGE constitutes a standalone security concern. Furthermore, it offers insights into practical strategies for addressing AGE, especially in the context of existing policies for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). The recommendations provided are tailored to the differing characteristics of AGE groups, individuals, and networks, ensuring a nuanced and effective response to this emerging threat, both online and offline.

Keywords: anti-government extremism (AGE), conspiracy theories, COVID-19, borderline content, P/CVE

Executive Summary

Anti-government extremism (AGE) has become a catch-all term for all anti-government, anti-institutional, anti-system and hostile to democracy sentiments that fuelled protests which took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. It represents a new type of a security challenge and threat, as its proponents come from a variety of socio-political and ideological backgrounds and featured in pre-COVID 19 protests (such as Yellow Vests, anti-austerity) in different countries. AGE is less doctrinal than other forms of extremism, whether far-right, far-left or Islamist terrorism. Some manifestations of AGE are effectively extreme, conspiracy-fuelled populism which propagates a belief that the world is effectively run by an evil elite that controls the people, not just corrupt or nepotistic but also allegedly criminal. Although many of its proponents are not necessarily against democracy per se, they reject the so-called elites and contemplate alternative political models, whether populist, far-right or authoritarian.

AGE is animated by conspiracy theories which are global in nature, but are then adopted to national, regional, or local conditions to explain grievances held by the milieu's members. These theories spread more effectively in AGE circles online which share a common language, cultural heritage or geographical proximity. AGE is dominated by conspiracies that often originate from the United States, which spread to other countries and get adapted to fit local grievances. These conspiracies and narratives, to a much lesser extent, travel in the other direction, from European AGE scenes across the Atlantic to the US.

With regards to its online manifestation, AGE is comprised of multiple online harms such as hate speech, mis/disinformation, conspiracy theories, extremist content but overwhelmingly borderline content. Distinguishing these online harms is vital as it implicates which countermeasures are appropriate. This report argues that content that is illegal, violates a platform's Terms of Service, or comprises a threat to life needs to be removed, but alternatives to content removal should be considered for borderline manifestations of AGE. AGE is a phenomenon that mostly manifests online, but also has an offline component which mobilises itself via attempts to establish 'sovereign states,' and online channels with an international reach focussed on offline protests. These offline connections came into being either prior or during the pandemic. As the milieu is more anti-something than pro-anything, it has not developed overarching or unified structures which would put together a viable set of demands and expectations, with the exception of sovereign states.

Not the entire AGE milieu constitutes a security threat, but given its conspiratorial, apocalyptic, and versatile nature, authorities must seriously consider its violent potential. AGE violence is mostly perpetrated by:

1. harassers who stalk or attack people with no public profile but may include, for example, those responsible for maintaining lockdown measures in a given locality or companies who inform the public about these measures locally or nationally;
2. lone actors who attempt to attack high profile individuals, officials, or representatives of the establishment such as those responsible for the introduction of COVID-19 lockdowns;
3. sovereigntists or members of parallel societies in their interactions with public services, including with the police;
4. inciters – also includes members of the previous three groups – who openly advise and incite to violence online.

The third group – sovereigntists – constitutes the most acute danger as far as potential incidents of violence are concerned. On the one hand, the "sovereigntists" preach the rejection of a current-day society and state and wish to retreat from these. On the other hand, they seek allies and friends transnationally and prepare for confrontations with agents of states they see as illegitimate.

AGE is inherently transnational as its subsets continuously seek validation of their conspiratorial thinking not only at a local, regional, or national level, but also in the global arena. AGE's main means of mobilisation, as was the case with pre-COVID 19 anti-systemic protests, remains the internet – predominantly through a flow of ideas.

AGE's transnationality, however, is not limited to its exchange of ideas or inspirations online. "Sovereignists" seek like-minded individuals and organisations abroad and wish to establish alliances. Moreover, elements of the AGE online ecosystem are geared solely towards coordination of "real life" action, namely protests, by the milieu's proponents in different countries. Given the automated and sometimes inauthentic behaviour, questions remain whether these could be coordinated by a state entity. Coupling this finding with the fact that large portions of the AGE online ecosystem are genuinely fascinated with President Putin, as an alternative to the evil elite running a given Western country, this report argues that the state behind the aforementioned transnational online protest space could be Russia.

AGE's fascination with Russia is also manifested in other activities of the milieu's members, namely the unsuccessful coups d'état attempts prepared in both Germany and France. Both sets of conspirators either reached out to Russian representatives or used the pretence of developing and maintaining such access to lure others into the plot as all potential candidates had been very positively predisposed towards Russia. As the milieu is heterogeneous in nature, suggestions on how to best tackle the threat from AGE are also multifaceted and encompass the national, bilateral and multinational levels.

List of Abbreviations

AGE	Anti-Government Extremism
AGAAVE	Anti-Government, Anti-Authority Violent Extremism
AVE	Anarchist Violente Extremist
AfD	Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany)
DACH region	Germany, Austria, and Switzerland
DAS	Digital Services Act
EU CTC	European Union Counter-Terrorism Coordinator
FFO	Federal Foreign Office
FPÖ	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria)
FvD	Forum voor Democratie (Forum for Democracy)
MFG	Menschen Freiheit Grundrechte (People Freedom Fundamental Rights)
MVE	Militia Violent Extremism
NCTV	Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid (National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism) [in the Netherlands]
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
REMVE	Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremism
RNC	Republican National Convention
RNCWE	Republican National Convention Welcoming Committee
SCVE	Sovereign Citizen Violent Extremism
TAT	Tech Against Terrorism
TCO	Terrorist Content Online Regulation
UN CTED	United Nations Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate
UNOCT	United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism

Chapter 1: The Origins of a New Threat

On 31 January 2024, an American individual uploaded a video to YouTube in which he chastised President Joe Biden's administration, rallied against far-left woke mobs, illegal immigrants and Black Lives Matter. He also referred to himself as a "commander of the militias" and called on these to rebel against the government. His incitement to violence was backed by the fact that he had earlier murdered his father, a "20-year federal employee," in the murderer's words, and showed his severed head in the video.¹ The video was online for five hours, after which YouTube removed the material for violating its Community Guidelines. Upon his arrest, he was found with bomb-making instructions and was charged with three accounts of terrorism, alongside murder, theft and other charges.² Although the attack is still under investigation, the perpetrator's motives clearly echo narratives related to AGE, and demonstrates how such narratives can result in violent acts. This report will shed more light on this phenomenon, which attracts headlines because of its mobilisation potential – most recently in relation to the "God's Army" convoy, a far-right and AGE protest against "[Joe] Biden's Administration's handling of immigration across the US-Mexico border,"³ as well as its potential for violence.

A standard definition of AGE is the "movements, networks and individuals who reject the legitimacy of the government" and "condone or show willingness to undermine the democratic legal order".⁴ Since early 2020, there has been a seeming upsurge in AGE. An attempt to kill the Dutch Prime Minister,⁵ an attack on a Bulgarian doctor following her treatment of a COVID-19 patient, and a shooting at the German police,⁶ are examples of violent manifestations of AGE within Europe. The most prominent example that genuinely brought the potential for violence of the anti-government threat to light beyond isolated lone-actor incidents, was the Reichsbürger Movement, a group of anti-government extremists who were planning to overthrow the German government.⁷ A smaller and less sophisticated plot was also in stages of preparation in France.⁸

The German plot was underpinned by the notion of 'sovereign citizens', which is the idea that the democratic states of the West are unconstitutional and for this reason people can choose to reject their respective governments and create their own ones via the development of parallel societies. In the US, it is assessed that there are 300,000 people,⁹ who believe themselves to be sovereign, whereas in the Netherlands it is assessed that 10,000 people deem the Netherlands to be unconstitutional.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Dutch Intelligence Agency (AIVD), predicts that there are about 100,000 anti-institutional sympathizers in the Netherlands who believe in an existence of the evil elite.¹¹ Some suggest that this is solely confined to paper terrorism where people send letters to paralyse the local administrations and courts, for instance while refusing to pay taxes,¹² others warn that this type of belief, as well as the creation of these parallel societies, can further

1 Melissa Alonso et al., "Man arrested after video post showed severed head of his father, police say, amid political rant that stayed online for hours," *CNN*, 1 February 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/01/31/us/justin-mohn-father-beheaded-biden-video/index.html>.

2 Man charged with beheading father faces new terror charges; carried photos of federal buildings and bomb plans, DA says, *NBC News*, 16 February 2024.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/man-charged-beheading-father-faces-new-terror-charges-carried-photos-f-rcna139225>

3 Tess Owen, "The 'God's Army' Convoy Was an Unholy Union of the Far Right," *VICE*, 6 February 2024. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/3akejv/gods-army-convoy-take-back-our-border-far-right-maga-groups>.

4 EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator (EU-CTC), "Violent anti-system extremism," October 2022.

5 Ibid.

6 AP News, "Suspected German anti-government extremist convicted of shooting at police," November 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/germany-extremism-police-shooting-trial-9fd899d08c4efd7cb30512fb1761806d>.

7 Jakob Guhl and Dominik Hammer, "The Reichsbürger Movement," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, December 2022. [https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/the-reichsbuerger-movement-explainer/](https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/the-reichsbuerger-movement-explainer/https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/the-reichsbuerger-movement-explainer/).

8 See: Nicolas Henin, "Russia and the French REMVE scene," in K. Rekawek (ed.) *Russia and the European REMVE*, ICCT, forthcoming, 2024.

9 Jelle van Buuren, "Breaking (with) the System: Exodus as Resistance?" *Perspectives on Terrorism*, no. 17 (March 2023): 88-102.

10 NOS News, "Hoge Raad bezorgd over 'autonomen': 'Kwetsbare burgers die verder wegzakken'" [Supreme Court concerned about 'sovereignists': 'Vulnerable citizens sinking further away'], December 2023. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2500032-hoge-raad-bezorgd-over-autonomen-kwetsbare-burgers-die-verder-wegzakken>.

11 Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst [General Intelligence and Security Service], "AIVD-jaarverslag 2022", April 2023. <https://www.aivd.nl/documenten/jaarverslagen/2023/04/17/aivd-jaarverslag-2022>.

12 Interview A2; Interview A3; Interview G1; Interview US1; Interview US2.

delegitimise governments and broader democratic principles in the eyes of the population, and allow for criminal activities within these entities.¹³

Beyond these violent manifestations, there is a non-violent undercurrent that makes up the most significant part of this milieu. Anti-government sentiments increased to unprecedented levels during the COVID-19 pandemic, both online and offline.¹⁴ Offline, this notably led to mass-scale protests, which by no means should exhaustively be labelled as extremist in nature, nor all the individuals who attended such protests as extremists. Online, it presented different individuals with space in which they could look for alternative explanations and share their frustrations.¹⁵ These often fall into the category of borderline content, i.e. material that does not violate online regulation or a platform's terms of service but can still lead to (physical or virtual) harm.¹⁶ Depending on the platform, this type of material would include conspiracy theories labelled as false information, which tech companies started clamping down on during the pandemic. While the vast majority of these individuals are non-violent, and the online material espoused by such people largely falls into the category of borderline content, the risk of violent incidents is real as the above examples showcase.¹⁷ This therefore represents a significant challenge for policymakers, to respond to the most dangerous elements of AGE and prevent violence and further radicalisation, while simultaneously not over-securitising legitimate protests and citizens participating in these.

In order to grasp this, governments have devised a plethora of terms used to describe this complex phenomenon, including anti-establishment extremism, democratic hostility, or anti-democratic extremism. Germany prefers the term “delegitimation of the state relevant to constitutional protection,”¹⁸ Austria recently introduced the category of “hostile to the state,”¹⁹ and the Netherlands opted for ‘anti-institutional extremism’ which is defined as the belief in a world “ruled by an evil elite”, consisting of the government, media, researchers and scientists who wants to oppress, enslave, and even kill part of “the ordinary people”.²⁰ The Swedish Security Service refers to “anti-government rhetoric” and Sweden’s National Centre for Terrorist Threat Assessment to “anti-establishment narratives”.²¹ Finally, the United States introduced the category of “anti-government” or “anti-authority” violent extremists (AGAAs).²² AGAAs are composed of three subcategories, namely militia violent extremists (MVEs), anarchist violent extremists (AVEs), and sovereign citizen violent extremists (SCVEs).²³

To avoid being bogged down by the peculiarities and heterogeneities of the debate around AGE, the office of the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator opted for “anti-system extremists” and focused its inquiries on its violent subscribers or “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

¹³ van Buuren, “Breaking,” 88-102.

¹⁴ Institute for Strategic Dialogue, “New Series Tracks Online Anti-Lockdown Activity Internationally,” 2020. https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/new-series-tracks-online-anti-lockdown-activity-internationally/.

¹⁵ Jacob Davey and Milo Comerford, “Between Conspiracy and Extremism: A Long COVID Threat? An Introductory Paper,” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, December 2021: 1-14. <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/between-conspiracy-and-extremism-a-long-covid-threat-introductory-paper/>.

¹⁶ Dr. Erin Saltman and Micalie Hunt, “Borderline Content: Understanding the Gray Zone,” *Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism*, June 2023. <https://gifct.org/2023/06/29/borderline-content-understanding-the-gray-zone/>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “Verfassungsschutzrelevante Delegitimierung des Staates,” [Delegitimation of the state relevant to constitutional protection] Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2023. https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/DE/themen/verfassungsschutzrelevante-delegitimierung-des-staates/verfassungsschutzrelevante-delegitimierung-des-staates_node.html.

¹⁹ Florian Hartleb, Paul Schlieffsteiner, and Christoph Schiebel, “From Anti-Measure Activism to Anti-State Extremism? The ‘Querdenker’ Protest-Movement and Its Interrelation and Dynamics with the ‘Reichsbürger’ in Germany and Austria,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, no. 1 (March 2023): 127-128.

Daniela PISOIU, “Radikalisierung in Europa,” in Bundesministerium Landesverteidigung. Sicher. Und morgen? Risikolandschaft Österreich, 2021.

²⁰ General Intelligence and Security Service – Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, “Publication Anti-institutional extremism in the Netherlands,” November 2023: 5. <https://english.aivd.nl/latest/news/2023/11/8/publication-anti-institutional-extremism-in-the-netherlands>

²¹ Sweden CR pp. 3-4.

²² Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Homeland Security, “Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism” (May 2021): 1-40.

²³ Ibid.

they borrow elements from other ideologies)".²⁴ This approach allows for a differentiation of AGE from other ideological forms of extremism and ensures that its readers will not assume all of the milieu is violent or terrorist in nature. The number of definitions, names, and interpretations of the phenomenon does not help any research inquiry which aims to inform policymakers about addressing the threat emanating from this milieu. As will be shown throughout this report, its members are definitely anti-government or hostile to it, a characteristic they share with most extremist movements, and usually reject further entire parts of the public administration or dominant institutions (like mainstream media). They are not, however, always violent and one can even observe a certain gradation among the most militant espousers of AGE: from harassers and inciters to lone actors and sovereigntists (more on this in the later part of the report). Expressing feelings of perceived marginalisation and oppression by the ruling elite, they also strive for an authority which would take people's views into consideration. Overall, the milieu is multifaceted and heterogenous.

This report will refer to the milieu as AGE – a term which is the broadest and most generic of all, and is already present in expert and academic studies of the phenomenon in question.²⁵ The reference to AGE here is as “movements, networks and individuals who reject the legitimacy of the government” and “condone or show willingness to undermine the democratic legal order”.²⁶ These emerged mostly after 2020 when a new, or seemingly new, group of individuals developed more extreme views while challenging ruling authorities for their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The versatility of AGE makes it complex to understand and difficult to assess and poses many challenges for tackling this issue. Questions arise as to what typical frustrations with governments are legitimate, or what level of anti-government sentiments are acceptable and healthy in a democracy, even when they threaten the democratic order and lead to more violent manifestations.

This report aims to provide clarity on the phenomenon of AGE by providing the first exploration of the anti-government threat in the transatlantic space. Using original data, including interviews with security officials, and focusing on Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States, it constitutes a thematic comparative analysis of the nature of anti-government groups and individuals and their transnational linkages, both offline and online. It sheds new light upon what AGE constitutes in different jurisdictions and discusses the extent to which it has become a standalone or new type of security concern. It focuses on the phenomenon's manifestations, its severity, and responses to AGE in the respective countries and transnationally. While doing so, it also aims to provide comprehensive recommendations on how the threat from AGE should be addressed, especially in the light of existing policies to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE). As will be shown, some of these are applicable to AGE groups, individuals and networks, and others less so.

This report consists of the following elements. First, it introduces the methodology. Second, it dives into the case studies and provides the cross-country analysis. Third, it discusses the transnational connections between the seemingly disparate national AGE scenes and, finally, it offers conclusions and provides recommendations.

Methodology

The research began with a literature review, which guided the development of research themes and provided context in which AGE groups, individuals, and networks appeared and

²⁴ EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, “Violent Anti-System Extremism”, *The Council of the European Union*, 10 October 2022, 13177/22.

²⁵ Sam Jackson, “What Is Anti-Government Extremism?” *Perspective on Terrorism*, no. 6, (December 2022): 9-18. <https://pt.icct.nl/article/what-anti-government-extremism>.

²⁶ EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator (EU-CTC), “Violent anti-system extremism,” October 2022.

then blossomed in the five countries covered by this report, namely: Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the US. Next, a team of national experts from all of the countries studied were recruited to conduct a total of 29 semi-structured interviews with practitioners and policymakers on the AGE threat in their respective countries, based on a common questionnaire, and six representatives of organisations with a focus on international manifestations of AGE.²⁷ Examples include a European agency focusing on security, a US intelligence agency, an EU institution, and a tech industry initiative to counter terrorism and extremism online. Interviews were conducted online in Autumn 2023, and interviewees were granted anonymity.²⁸

Four main themes related to AGE were identified to guide the interview process, data collection and analysis, namely:

1. Understanding AGE's diverging definitions and potential overlaps with other forms of extremism while discussing the perception of its "newness" amongst policymakers.
2. Manifestations of the phenomenon in the five countries, both in online and offline dimensions.
3. Severity of the perceived threat in the five countries and transnationally.
4. Countermeasures and good practices identified nationally and transnationally, both offline and online.

The interviews with national and international experts on the subject complemented available secondary sources. These deepened the project team's understanding on how anti-government extremism is perceived by security stakeholders. The lack of conceptual agreement around the phenomenon of 'anti-government' extremism, meant that at times terms and descriptions varied slightly across interviewees. On the one hand, this made consistency and illustrative efforts a challenge. On the other hand, such heterogeneity emphasized the importance of a research project like this, as its aim is to understand the varying aspects of this emerging threat and how it is understood.

In the next step of the research process, ICCT conducted open-source intelligence monitoring in cooperation with Storyzy, a private company. Storyzy is a SaaS platform, a software as a service provider, and offers disinformation tracking capabilities. This study focused on analysing the transnationality of selected social media channels from the various countries focusing on three elements: the fluctuation over time, the main narratives and ecosystem as well as whether there was indication of foreign influence. This part of the research was designed to help trace potential transnational connections and online attempts to influence the AGE milieu from outside the five country case studies. Alongside this, the project team themselves monitored the spaces included to get an in-depth understanding of the narratives espoused as well as to identify types of online harms present there. It is important to note that for ethical, security, and legal purposes, the open-source intelligence monitoring was done passively with no engagement from the research team. Furthermore, the research also deliberately included websites mentioned in AGE communications so that the project would benefit from taking stock of a broader, more comprehensive online ecosystem beyond social media channels. All channels and website names have been omitted from this publication, to ensure this report does not drive traffic to these online spaces.

²⁷ The national experts are Constanze Jeitler of Austria (PhD candidate at the University of Tübingen), Dr. Matthias Quent of Germany (Professor of Sociology at the Magdeburg-Stendal institution of higher education), Menso Hartgers of the Netherlands (RAN Policy Support Officer and Junior Research Fellow at the ICCT), Dr. Lenita Törning and Edvin Sandström of Sweden (Researchers at the Swedish Centre for Preventing Violent Extremism (CVE)) and Dr. Sam Jackson of the USA (Assistant Professor in the College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security, and Cybersecurity at the University at Albany), and their reports can be found in the first appendix of this report.

²⁸ "Interview AX" refer to interviews conducted in Austria, "Interview GX" refer to interviews conducted in Germany, "Interview NLX" refer to interviews conducted in the Netherlands, "Interview SX" refer to interviews conducted in Sweden, "Interview USX" refer to interviews conducted in the United States of America.

The overall online monitoring sample included fourteen channels on social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and X, as well as two websites. The size of the sample was constrained by the resources available to the project team within the project. This by no means represents an exhaustive account of the online scene of AGE. The online data merely represents a preliminary investigation of AGE online and in the future research section of this paper we comment on this further. Of these 16 online resources, two were focused on the US, two on Austria, five on Germany, two on Sweden, three on the Netherlands, and two had more of an international outlook and audience. The online monitoring allowed the project team to contrast the accounts given by interviewees and compare their perceptions of AGE with the online manifestation of the anti-government scene. It also allowed us to unravel the transnational element of anti-government extremism, investigate the flow of ideas in the transnational milieu, and provide insights as to the extent of potentially malicious external (foreign) influence within the milieu.

This research is unique in that it assesses what AGE looks like in different countries and how it compares transnationally as well as focusses on the current understanding of AGE by practitioners and policymakers within those countries. While doing so it relies on original data collected via desk-based research, literature review, cooperation with country experts (researchers who have studied the issue in the five case study countries), semi-structured interviews with the aforementioned officials and also a dive into the online ecosystem of AGE. It must be stressed here that most of the high-quality reporting done on the subject by academics and experts alike, whose work is quoted throughout this report as well, has mostly been based on the study of AGE's online world.

This approach is far from incorrect as the milieu thrives and communicates in this space, but our report takes a different path. Consequently, this allows for more multifaceted assessment of how well AGE is understood in its current form by the different national and international practitioners and policymakers, and how online data supports (or not) their observations. As will become clear, AGE is a complex phenomenon subject to many competing perceptions and interpretations. In this sense, this report is only a contribution to build a shared understanding, and our findings are necessarily preliminary in nature. This will also be evident in the transnational section of this report where traces of foreign influence are largely suspected or assumed but not outright evident.

Anti-Government Extremism - To What Extent is This New?

Some experts have argued that the current-day AGE is another manifestation of a phenomenon which initially started in the second half of the 19th century with the rise of anarchists, the quintessential primordial rejectionists of the state's authority.²⁹ Their anti-statism was allegedly followed by the so-called 'new left' and its wave of international terrorism – such as conducted by the West German Red Army Faction³⁰ or the Italian Red Brigades³¹ or other "fighting communist organisations",³² which was emerging throughout the late 1960s in Western Europe, and by the so-called 'sovereignists,' a loose amalgam of anti-government activists, who were coming to the fore in the United States during the same decade.³³

29 See: note 1.

30 See: Stefan Aust, *The Baader-Meinhof Complex*, London: Bodley Head, 2008.

31 See: Alessandro Orsini, *Anatomy of the Red Brigades: The Religious Mind-set of Modern Terrorists*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011.

32 See: Yonah Alexander, Dennis A. Pluchinsky, *Europe's Red Terrorists: The Fighting Communist Organizations*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1992.

33 See: John L. Smith, *Saints, Sinners, and Sovereign Citizens: The Endless War over the West's Public Lands*, University of Nevada Press, 2021.

This report will not discuss the historical evolution of AGE but instead focus on its contemporary manifestations. It nonetheless acknowledges that the current incarnation of the phenomenon has a lot to do with anti-system protests predating the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The French Yellow Vests movement that started in 2018 is just one example of this.³⁴ These leaderless protests initially aimed at achieving, in the eyes of the protestors, economic and social justice in France, were often organised illegally and resulted in several violent incidents. Following the COVID-19 lockdowns, this movement evolved towards a stronger anti-vaxx, anti-system narrative, fuelled by conspiracy theories, such as climate change denial, bemoaned unnecessary fluoridation of water and the spread of ‘chemtrails in the air’, or even a desire to ban the vaccine against HPV – the human papilloma virus.³⁵ The Yellow Vests protests extended to some other countries, notably Belgium,³⁶ Finland,³⁷ or Ireland.³⁸ Whereas again, this report does not want to argue that the whole of the Yellow Vests scene should be understood as AGE, it warns that elements of Yellow Vests’ narratives are being co-opted by the current manifestation of AGE, as well as some of its proponents. Sometimes these protests merged with anti-austerity movements, which were also present in countries such as Italy³⁹ or Spain.⁴⁰ Poland also had its own “anti-systemic” movement, as early as 2015, when a seemingly non-political candidate challenged the existing political duopoly and won 21 percent of the votes in the presidential election.

While doing so, he channelled the energy of the rising “anti-systemic” movement, which positioned itself as the only real opposition to the centre-right parties alternating in government.⁴¹ Echoes of that sentiment survived up until 2023 when the far-right Confederacy promised not to sit “at their [establishment or mainstream] table but to overturn it”.⁴² To an extent, the US saw a similar development in 2007 when “anti-capitalist, anti-government, and anarchist leaning individuals”⁴³ chose to disrupt the Republican party’s choice of a presidential candidate by appropriating the name of the Republican National Convention Welcoming Committee, referred to as the RNCWC, while masquerading as the real Republican National Convention (RNC).⁴⁴ Finally, the farmer’s protests across Europe at the time of writing, including in France, The Netherlands, Belgium, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Spain, provide another gateway for AGE influ-

34 Rfi, “The rise and fall of France’s Yellow Vests – what remains after two years?,” November 2020, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20201117-gilets-jaunes-yellow-vests-revolution-macron-violence-green-diesel-petrol-tax>; Jolanda Jetten, Frank Mols, and Hema Preya Selvanathan, “How economic inequality fuels the rise and persistence of the Yellow Vest movement,” *International Review of Social Psychology* 33, no. 1 (2020): 1-12. <https://rips-irsp.com/articles/10.5334/irsp.356>; Lola Girerd, Frédérique Anne Ray, Daniel Priolo, Olivier Codou, and Virginie Bonnot, “Free” not to engage: Neoliberal ideology and collective action. The case of the yellow vest movement,” *International Review of Social Psychology* 33, no. 1 (2020): 1-18. <https://rips-irsp.com/articles/10.5334/irsp.363>; Kipfer, Stefan. “What colour is your vest? Reflections on the yellow vest movement in France.” *Studies in Political Economy* 100, no. 3 (December 2019): 209-231. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07078552.2019.1682780>.

35 The Journal, “A look inside the angry, fractured world of Ireland’s ‘yellow vests,’” December 2023. <https://www.thejournal.ie/yellow-vest-ireland-4440420-Jan2019/>.

36 Anne Dufresne, Corinne Gobin, and Marc Zune, “Le mouvement des gilets jaunes en Belgique. Une contestation largement atypique” [The yellow vests movement in Belgium. A largely atypical contestation.], *Courrier hebdomadaire / Centre de Recherche et d’Information Socio-Politiques*, [Centre for Socio-Political Research and Information], no. 2422 (2019): 46-62. <https://dial.uclouvain.be/pr/boreal/object/boreal:224285>.

37 Ilkka Jauhiainen, “Maanantaina tämä on totta Suomessa! Suomalaiset keltaliivit osoittavat mieltä eduskuntatalon edessä - “meuhkataan” hävisi facebookin äänestyksen”, [On Monday, this is happening in Finland! Finnish yellow vests protest in front of the Parliament House – “meuhkataan” lost in Facebook voting], *Talouseläma*, [Financial Times], December 2018. <https://www.talouselama.fi/uutiset/maanantaina-tama-on-totta-suomessa-suomalaiset-keltaliivit-osoittavat-mielta-eduskuntatalon-edessa-meuhkataan-havisi-facebookin-aanestyksen/49e40-128-7e75-3010-bb23-11b3b4db6b45>.

38 Gavin O’Callaghan, “What are the ‘Yellow Vest’ protesters in Ireland actually calling for?” *DublinLive*, January 2019. <https://www.dublinlive.ie/news/what-yellow-vest-protesters-ireland-15670361>.

39 Mauro Galluzzo, “Italy Pitchfork movement: peaceful or violent protest?” *Channel4*, December 2013. <https://www.channel4.com/news/italy-pitchfork-movement-austerity-group-protests-casapound>.

40 Guillermo Altares, “15-M: how Spain’s ‘outraged’ movement spawned political change,” *El Pais*, May 2021. <https://english.elpais.com/society/2022-05-02/15-m-how-spains-outraged-movement-spawned-political-change.html>.

41 Wiadomosci, “Którzy antysystemowcy są z Kukizem? Co pokazuje barometr jego ugrupowania?” [Who are the anti-system activists supporting Kukiz? What does the barometer of his party show?], October 2015. <https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,143907,18985945,kt-orzy-antysystemowcy-sa-z-kukizem-co-pokazuje-barometr-jego.html>.

42 Wprost, “Idziemy do wyborów, żeby wywrócić stół”. Konwencja Konfederacji pod hasłem “Nowe otwarcie,” [“We are going to the elections to overturn the table.” Convention of the Confederation under the slogan “New Opening”], February 2018. <https://www.wprost.pl/polityka/11102533/idziemy-do-wyborow-zeby-wywrocic-stolik-konwencja-konfederacji-pod-haslem-nowe-otwarcie.html>.

43 Interview US4 (Email to CET team).

44 Ibid.

encers to mobilize these protests into their narratives. This is not the first time this has been happening, as similar attempts to incorporate farmers' protests in the Netherlands also took place in 2022.⁴⁵

Such protests and movements demonstrate the pre-existing anger and dissatisfaction felt by large chunks of the population against the authorities, already paired with disinformation and misinformation.⁴⁶ The COVID-19 period created more frustration towards governments, and allowed the mainstreaming of various conspiracy theories, creating a toxic mix under which AGE was able to co-opt many of these protests' identity and reached unprecedented scale.⁴⁷

45 Bàrbara Molas, "Dutch Flags and Maple Leaves: How Conspiracy Theories Created a Transnational Far-Right," *Short Read*, ICCT, 22 October 2022, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/dutch-flags-and-maple-leaves-how-conspiracy-theories-created-transnational-far-right>.

46 Gary Ackerman and Hayley Peterson, "Terrorism and COVID-19: Actual and Potential Impacts," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 3 (June 2020): 62. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26918300>.

47 Abdul Basit, "Conspiracy Theories and Violent Extremism: Similarities, Differences and the Implications," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 13, no. 3 (June 2021): 1-9. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27040260>.

Chapter 2: AGE in National Contexts

The report adopts a comparative perspective and sets the developments across five AGE national scenes against a transnational background. This chapter outlines AGE-related developments in each of the countries studied separately. This is to help set the scene for the comparative analysis (chapter 3) and the study of transnational aspects of the phenomenon (chapter 4). As will be demonstrated, developments across the national AGE scenes have some common issues, but they are also full of local peculiarities which need to be outlined before this report progresses into its comparative and transnational sections. The following section was developed by relying on existing literature, available policy and government reports, as well as country-based analyses conducted by national experts for this report (see: the acknowledgement section for more on them). Common guidelines and set questions were given to the interviewers by the research team.⁴⁸ In each case, we stress the context from which the anti-government threat emerged, or when it became perceived as a unique form of extremism by experts in the field of CT and P/CVE. Examples are used for each country to illustrate the nature of the threat, including its ideological components, its structure, and its impact. This subchapter will thus demonstrate that in recent years, the emergence and proliferation of AGE sentiments have gained increasing attention across these five countries. This conclusion will next allow us to progress into the comparative and transnational sections in which the scope of how AGE transcends borders, but also while adjusting to local conditions, will be accounted for.

Austria

In Austria, emerging anti-government movements are characterised by groups or individuals who deny the state's sovereignty by declaring themselves independent from it and by promoting an alternative form of government that would be beneficial to a small number of individuals.⁴⁹ Narratives and ideas about the state being “merely a company” keeping control over the “people” have been prominent and visible for a long time among so-called “sovereignists”.⁵⁰ But with COVID-19, and more recently with the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the “raids and arrests in the milieu of the so-called state deniers in July 2023”,⁵¹ new challenges coming from these types of groups caught the authorities' attention. As frameworks and protocols used by more traditional threats did not apply to the activities of the “sovereignists”, Austria amended its Criminal Code to add the category of “hostile to the state” to sanction “the founding and support of movements rejecting the democratic state order”.⁵² It is worth noting that Austrian authorities do not employ the term “AGE”. The Austrian Federal Office for Cult Affairs (BSS) stated its preference for terms such as “anti- or undemocratic”, “anti-pluralist”, or “anti-state”, which exclude legitimate forms of criticism towards democratic governments.⁵³ Similarly, the Austrian Domestic Intelligence Agency (DSN), prefers “anti-state associations” or “anti-democratic” threats.⁵⁴

48 Country reports are quoted throughout this section using a lettered system. The letters “CR” refers to the word “country report” and the following consists of the first letter of the country in which the practitioner is based. This approach is applicable throughout the whole section which covers the countries comprising our five case studies as well as the following chapter that covers the cross-country analysis when applicable.

49 Florian Hartleb, Paul Schliefeiner, and Christoph Schiebel, “From Anti-Measure Activism to Anti-State Extremism? The ‘Querdenker’ Protest-Movement and Its Interrelation and Dynamics with the ‘Reichsbürger’ in Germany and Austria,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17, no. 1 (2023): 125-126. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27209222>.

50 Ibid, 127.

51 Austria CR p.4.

52 Ibid, 3. See also: Hartleb, Schliefeiner, and Schiebel, “From Anti-Measure Activism to Anti-State Extremism?”, 127-8.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27209222>

See also: Daniela PISOIU, “Radikalisierung in Europa,” in *Bundesministerium Landesverteidigung. Sicher. Und morgen? Risikolandschaft Österreich*, 2021. https://www.bmlv.gv.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/sihpoljahresvorschau2021.pdf.

53 Ibid, 1.

54 Ibid, 2.

Jan Rathje used the term “conspiracy-ideological sovereignty” to describe anti-government threats in Austria as well as in Germany. Rathje defines it as driven by the attempt to (re)establish individual or popular sovereignty against a prevailing social and political order that is understood as being the result of some sort of conspiracy.⁵⁵ This milieu is highly heterogeneous and without a clear goal or organisational structure, consisting of a “loose coalition of groups and individuals from various backgrounds”.⁵⁶ In fact, the merging of groups has already been observed, as it is the case with “Democracy Rejecting Scene”, which is believed to regroup “a number of key actors from the COVID-19 protests [... and] other anti-state actors”⁵⁷ and be “characterized by a loss of trust in democracy, the state and its institutions”.⁵⁸

During the pandemic, the Austrian far-right in particular was able to capitalise on the emotions of those less trusting of the state, co-opting these for its own gains and pushing its own narratives. In doing so, the far-right made use of conspiracy theories, which resulted in them attracting a large variety of groups and individuals in unprecedented ways, including esoteric but also animal rights and environmental activists.⁵⁹ This was made possible by the increasing fluid nature of the extremist scene in Austria in general, which was “true for the milieu of the COVID-19 protests, anti-state associations and right-wing extremism on the one hand, as well as Islamist, Salafist and Jihadist milieus on the other hand”.⁶⁰ The Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), a radical right party and the third-largest in the Austrian Parliament, attempted to harness the AGE sentiments for electoral gains. FPÖ’s current leader, Herbert Kickl, placed himself at the head of anti-COVID-19 restrictions and anti-government protests during the pandemic. Additionally, as a result of such protests, a small new party called Humans– Freedom – Basic rights (MFG), was founded and managed to win seats in the regional state parliament of Upper Austria.⁶¹

Germany

While AGE in Germany is older than the Federal Republic itself, this form of extremism became particularly visible in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶² Popular demonstrations against state measures to curb the pandemic played a central role in publicising and (directly or indirectly) strengthening this threat, with the ideologically diverse Querdenken movement dominating this emerging scene.⁶³ In addition, political parties also had a significant role in mainstreaming this rhetoric. More particularly, the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) made active use of anti-government sentiments.⁶⁴ But while scholars generally believe that the German far-right has played a crucial part in defining this threat, including in the case of the anti-constitutional and revisionist Reichsbürger movement, AGE in Germany has been assessed as a novel threat, or at least as one that cannot be defined as either purely left or right.⁶⁵ This is why, in 2021, Germany created the category of the “delegitimization of the state relevant to constitutional protection,” anti-state or anti-government threats for short.⁶⁶ Ideological strands aside, anti-government movements in Germany heavily depend on conspiracy theories promoting distrust towards

55 Jan Rathje, “Reichsbürger” und Souveränismus, [Citizens of the Reich and “Sovereignism”], *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, August 27, 2021. <https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/verschwoerungstheorien-2021/339286/reichsbuerger-und-souveraenismus/>.

56 Austria CR pp. 4, 7.

57 Austria CR p.5.

58 Ibid, 7.

59 Daniela Pisoiu, “Terrorismus und Radikalisierung in Europa”.

60 Austria CR p.4.

61 Hartleb, Schlieffsteiner, and Schiebel, “From Anti-Measure Activism to Anti-State Extremism?”, 130.

62 Hartleb, Schlieffsteiner, and Schiebel, “From Anti-Measure Activism to Anti-State Extremism?”, 126.

63 Ibid, 124-128; Michael Butter, “COVID Conspiracy Theories in Germany, Austria and Switzerland,” in *COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspectives*, edited by Michael Butter and Peter Knight, Routledge, 2023: 213-214. <https://erc-pact.eu/publications/germany/COVID-conspiracy-theories-in-germany-austria-and-switzerland/>.

64 German CR p.13

65 Germany CR pp. 1, 4. See also: Jan Rathje, “Verschwörungstheorien: “Reichsbürger” und Souveränismus,” *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (bpb)*, August 27, 2021. <https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/verschwoerungstheorien-2021/339286/reichsbuerger-und-souveraenismus/>; Hartleb, Schlieffsteiner, and Schiebel, “From Anti-Measure Activism to Anti-State Extremism?”.

66 Germany CR p.1, 4.

public institutions, a challenge that scholars have pointed out the country is not “equipped to address”.⁶⁷ Such conspiracy theories flourished during the pandemic, in particular online. Illustratively, the Querdenken movement gained traction online during that time, particularly on Telegram.⁶⁸ These channels oftentimes contained harmful content, capable of inspiring hatred not only against established institutions, but also against minority groups demonised by conspiracy theories, especially Jewish and immigrant communities.⁶⁹

AGE in Germany has both a regional and nation-wide character, although “no nationally relevant organization exist[s] in the scene”, and notable regional distinctions remain.⁷⁰ In East Germany, and more particularly Saxony, AGE appears as more radical with a “high level of mobilisation”.⁷¹ Overlaps with the far right are also more pronounced than in West Germany, and so is the urban-rural divide where “more rural or structurally weak regions” appear more vulnerable to anti-government mobilisation.⁷² The Free State of Saxony is an example of a seemingly more centralized AGE effort concentrated on the territory of the former German Democratic Republic.⁷³ In Southwestern Germany, in Baden-Württemberg, AGE seems to take on a rather esoteric and evangelical character.⁷⁴ Finally, a “north-south divide” can be observed, with the northern regions compared to South Germany.⁷⁵

Netherlands

Since 2019, the extremist threat in and against the Netherlands has become more “multifaceted and more diffuse”.⁷⁶ This is partly because of the rise of “anti-government extremists” in the country “prompted by deep-seated distrust, anger and feelings of injustice” against the government and other public institutions, including the justice system, the media, and academia. The phenomenon has been described by the Dutch Central Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) as anti-institutional extremism, where persons and groups “target democratic institutions and processes out of ideological conviction and demonstrate a willingness to conduct (non-violent) acts that undermine the democratic legal order”.⁷⁷ Anti-institutional activities are understood by the AIVD as “activities [that] can range from systemic hate speech to spreading fear, disseminating mis-/disinformation, demonisation and intimidation of individuals, rejecting laws and regulation, or attempting to establish parallel societies that reject the state’s authority”.⁷⁸ Indeed, while this threat emerged as a “radical undercurrent of the COVID-19 protest movement”, it has persisted by shifting its focus to current events and by relying on conspiratorial narratives.⁷⁹ These essentially promote the idea that an “oppressive elite” is at war with “ordinary people” and

67 Butter, “COVID Conspiracy Theories in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland,” 219.; Daniela PISOIU, “Rechtsextremismus und neue Akteure in Zeiten der Pandemie: ein Blick aus Österreich und Deutschland,” Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik (oiip), BAMF-Kurzanalyse 7, 2021.

https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/77357/ssoar-2021-pisoiu-Rechtsextremismus_und_neue_Akteure_in.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y&lnkname=ssoar-2021-pisoiu-Rechtsextremismus_und_neue_Akteure_in.pdf

68 Paula Matlack et al., “Deutschland und der angebliche Klimalockdown: Wie Rechtspopulisten und Verschwörungsgruppen die Pandemie zur Mobilisierung gegen den Klimaschutz nutzen, [Germany and the alleged climate lockdown: How right-wing populists and conspiracy groups are using the pandemic to mobilize against climate protection]”, *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, January 14, 2022. <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/deutschland-und-der-angebliche-klimalockdown-wie-rechtspopulisten-und-verschworungsgruppen-die-pandemie-zur-mobilisierung-gegen-den-klimaschutz-nutzen/>.

69 Jan Rathje, “Driven by Conspiracies: The Justification of Violence among ‘Reichsbürger’ and Other Conspiracy-Ideological Sovereignists in Contemporary Germany,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (2022). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185091>.

70 Germany CR pp. 4, 14.

71 Ibid, 14.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security, Ministry of Justice and Security. Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 57. November 2022: 4.

77 Netherlands CR p.2.

78 Ibid.

79 National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security, Ministry of Justice and Security. Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 57, 31.

that such an elite must be met with resistance.⁸⁰ Anti-institutional extremism in the Netherlands is heterogeneous.⁸¹ It is, however, possible to categorise this phenomenon in two sub-groups: “general anti-institutionalists who believe in a wide range of diverse conspiracy theories, and sovereign citizens (in Dutch also referred to as ‘autonomous citizens’) who follow a more coherent set of beliefs”.⁸² Whilst the former usually remain integrated in society, the latter tend to prefer “self-organisation and self-sufficiency through establishing parallel societies” and seem to be the most successful in terms of mobilisation.⁸³ Examining the motivations of such people, mental health issues and/or personal grievances with the government are considered as relevant factors in individuals’ adopting conspiratorial beliefs.⁸⁴ It is noteworthy that “civil servants - including law enforcement officials, military personnel, and general civil servants” are also found within the AGE milieu in the Netherlands.⁸⁵

The Dutch far-right political party Forum for Democracy (FvD), founded as a “think tank” by Thierry Baudet and Henk Otten in 2016, has been described as an “anti-system” party despite the fact that it has won seats in various elections since 2018.⁸⁶ According to Jelle van Buuren, this is because the FvD expresses its preference for holistic delegitimisation of the political order, promoting a “withdrawal” from society, and defending the idea that the real political power does not lie with the established democratic institutions (described as “globalist powers” or “the globalist elite”) but among “the people”, who need to organise against “tyranny”.⁸⁷

The networks of so-called “sovereign citizens” have emerged in the Netherlands. Nearly 8,000 Dutch citizens have sent legal documents to the tax authorities by which they declared themselves “sovereign”; and there have been a few incidents recorded between the authorities and self-proclaimed sovereign citizens.⁸⁸ Dutch COVID-19 disinformation communities on Facebook grew by 63 percent during the pandemic, with Facebook acting as a gateway to more extreme discussions of COVID-19 on other, less monitored, platforms.⁸⁹ Offline, the Netherlands also experienced anti-government mobilisation. Starting as a non-ideological protest, the Dutch Farmers’ Movement was quickly co-opted by the Dutch and international far-right which became part of an emerging transnational Freedom Movement that confronted the allegedly authoritarian actions of democratic states.⁹⁰

Sweden

The Swedish AGE milieu is considered a new and under-analysed phenomenon. What is clear, is that similar to AGE in other countries, AGE is multifaceted and heterogeneous.⁹¹ The threat has been characterised by loosely organised networks and lone-actors.⁹² Swedish authorities do not refer to the aforementioned phenomenon as “AGE”.⁹³ This is rather referred to as “anti-government rhetoric” by the Swedish Security Service and “anti-establishment narratives” by the National Centre for Terrorist Threat Assessment. Both agencies underline the prominence of conspiracy theories and disinformation as well as highlight the overlap with far-right groups.⁹⁴

⁸⁰ Ibid, 57, 31-2.

⁸¹ Netherlands CR p.3.

⁸² Ibid, 3.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 5.

⁸⁶ Jelle van Buuren, “Breaking (with) the System”, 96.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 95.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 96.

⁸⁹ Ciarán O’Connor, “COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation Monitor: The Netherlands,” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2021. https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/COVID-19-vaccine-misinformation-monitor-the-netherlands/.

⁹⁰ Bárbara Molas, “Dutch Flags and Maple Leaves: How Conspiracy Theories Created a Transnational Far-Right”, *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)*, 2022. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48732646>.

⁹¹ Sweden CR p.3.

⁹² Ibid, 7.

⁹³ Sweden CR p. 3.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 3-4.

Conspiratorial narratives have included anti-vaxx theories, the QAnon conspiracy, and tropes related to the Sovereign Citizen Movement.⁹⁵ The Swedish Defence Research Agency stressed that “[a]ctors within this violent extremist landscape are often found on the violent far-right and share many of the same conspiracy theories”.⁹⁶ The movement that exemplified this phenomenon best is the now-dissolved Frihetsrörelsen (the Freedom Movement), which emerged during the pandemic.⁹⁷

The United States

Whilst the “anti-government far right” had been “gaining new traction in the early 1990s with the advent of the “patriot” militia movement”,⁹⁸ a new type of “anti-government” extremism came at the forefront of “mainstream politics in 2020 through the conspiracy theories related to the pandemic, as well as electoral fraud”.⁹⁹ This context was characterised by uncertainty, economic precarity, and populist scepticism towards scientific expertise and media impartiality which was legitimised by political leaders such as the then-President Trump. This situation increased social and political polarisation and distrust towards established institutions, culminating in the Capitol insurrection of January 6, 2021, by which a large but diffuse group of individuals tried to overtake the Capitol in Washington DC, resulting in the death of a security guard and four others.¹⁰⁰ Following this, in 2021, the category “Anti-Government or Anti-Authority Violent Extremists (AGAAs)” was introduced by the federal government to designate “the potentially unlawful use or threat of force or violence, in violation of federal law, in furtherance of political and/or social agendas, which are deemed to derive from anti-government or anti-authority sentiment”.

This may include “opposition to perceived economic, social, or racial hierarchies, or perceived government overreach, negligence, or illegitimacy”.¹⁰¹ AGAAs are composed of three subcategories, namely militia violent extremists (MVEs), anarchist violent extremists (AVEs), and sovereign citizen violent extremists (SCVEs).¹⁰² Hence, AGE in the US is generally seen as a heterogeneous phenomenon diverse in both organisation and tactics and comprised of various groups across the political spectrum, all of which display “mistrust of federal authority, fear of foreign influence, and the need for paramilitary self-defence”.¹⁰³ While some authors insist that anti-government threats in the U.S. may be treated as a sub-category of the far-right,¹⁰⁴ this is not agreed upon.¹⁰⁵ Illustratively, while QAnon is widely understood as a form of anti-government far-right extremism, the Boogaloo movement tends to not neatly fit into any of the traditional categories

95 Sarnecki; Lioufas & Jarlsbo, “Rutten demokrati Konspirationspropaganda,” 54.

96 Sweden CR p. 4.

97 Ibid, 6-7.

98 Kaitlyn Robinson, Iris Malone and Martha Crenshaw, “Countering Far-Right Anti-Government Extremism in the United States,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17, no. 1 (2023): 76. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27209219>; Catrina Doxsee, “Examining Extremism: The Militia Movement,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)*, 12 August 2021. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-militia-movement>.

99 Robinson, Malone and Crenshaw, “Countering Far-Right Anti-Government Extremism in the United States,” 75.

100 Ibid, 77.; Clare Birchall and Peter Knight, “A Perfect Storm: COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories in the United States,” in *COVID Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective*, ed. Michael Butter and Peter Knight. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 336. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/pdfviewer/>; Dale Pankhurst, “When militias go ‘rogue’: explaining anti-government extremism in so-called ‘pro-nation state’ militias in the United States of America and Ukraine,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, (2023): abstract. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2023.2219703>; Doxsee, “Examining Extremism: The Militia Movement”; Cynthia Idriss and Brian Hughes, “Blurry Ideologies and Strange Coalitions: The Evolving Landscape of Domestic Extremism,” *Lawfare*, (2021). <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/blurry-ideologies-and-strange-coalitions-evolving-landscape-domestic-extremism>; Anti-Defamation League, “Extremists React to Pro-Trump Siege on Capitol,” (July 2021). <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/oath-keepers-data-leak-unmasking-extremism-public-life>.

101 US CR p. 1.

102 Ibid.

103 Robinson, Malone and Crenshaw, “Countering Far-Right Anti-Government Extremism in the United States,” 76.

104 This includes: Seth G. Jones; Catrina Doxsee and Nicholas Harrington, “The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, June 1, 2020: 4. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25227>; Robinson, Malone and Crenshaw, “Countering Far-Right Anti-Government Extremism in the United States,” 5. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27209219>; or Sam Jackson, “What Is Anti-Government Extremism?” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no.6 (2022). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19625>.

105 For example: Jared Thompson, “Examining Extremism: The Boogaloo Movement,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)*, June 30, 2021. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-boogaloo-movement>; Pankhurst, “When militias go ‘rogue’”, 5.; Robinson, Malone and Crenshaw, “Countering Far-Right Anti-Government Extremism in the United States,” 74-75.

of extremism, yet both the QAnon and the Boogaloo are seen as anti-government movements.¹⁰⁶ What appears to be particularly disturbing in the US is the increasing involvement of active-duty soldiers, reserve personnel, law enforcement, and veterans in extremist circles in recent years.¹⁰⁷ This is the case within the Proud Boys,¹⁰⁸ Oath Keepers, Three Percenters,¹⁰⁹ and the Boogaloo Bois.¹¹⁰ Jones suggested that more research is needed to understand if “the deployment of soldiers to battlefields such as Iraq and Afghanistan triggered a backlash against U.S. society and the government [...]; whether military personnel have been increasingly influenced by the political polarisation [...]; or whether military personnel have been more active on the internet and social media platforms, which has contributed to radicalisation”.¹¹¹ Indeed, social media platforms have been crucial in mainstreaming anti-government threats. Extremist channels, especially within the online far-right scene, contain disinformation and conspiracy theories that rally hatred and distrust towards democratic institutions and values.¹¹² The central role of conspiratorial thinking in shaping anti-government threats in the US has been such that the FBI has declared conspiracy theories as a new domestic terrorism threat.¹¹³ AGE in the US is both national and local. Some organisations such as the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers exist and operate at the national level, whilst others exist at the local level, like the Michigan-based Wolverine Watchmen, or have a very local focus, as is the case for the “constitutional sheriffs” movement.¹¹⁴

106 Seth G. Jones et al., “The War Comes Home: The Evolution of Domestic Terrorism in the United States,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, October 1, 2020: 3. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26423>.

107 US CR p. 10, and: Seth G. Jones, “Violent Domestic Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, October 13, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep37718>.

108 Designated as a terrorist organisation by the Government of Canada.

109 Ibid.

110 Seth G. Jones, “Violent Domestic Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans,” 7-8.

111 Seth G., Jones et al., “The War Comes Home: The Evolution of Domestic Terrorism in the United States,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, (2020): 8. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26423>.

112 Samantha Walther and Andrew McCoy, “US Extremism on Telegram: Fueling Disinformation, Conspiracy Theories, and Accelerationism,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 2 (2021): 104. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27007298>.

113 Jana Winter, “FBI Document Warns Conspiracy Theories Are a New Domestic Terrorism Threat,” *HuffPost*, August 1, 2019. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/fbi-domestic-terrorism_n_5d430db7e4b0acb57fc91818.

114 US CR pp. 9, 10.

Chapter 3: Patterns of AGE across Countries

This chapter looks at the definition and conceptualisation of AGE in the five countries covered by this report through interviews,¹¹⁵ and a review of key policy documents. Where relevant across the four thematic pillars, the findings from the interviews are discussed alongside the results of the project team's inquiry into the AGE online ecosystem. The latter also informs the report's next chapter in which the transnational connectivity of the AGE milieu is discussed.

Theme 1: Understanding the Threat

This report analyses the AGE milieu at large, looking at its violent manifestations, but also considering its broader conducive environment in five countries. This enabled the research team to better map the milieu, assess the concerns of individuals working on countering the threats emanating from it, and formulate some recommendations.

Key takeaways:

- AGE has a conspiratorial outlook on the world which is animated by a belief in an evil elite controlling/running the world. At times, it can appear as a form of extreme populism. It is also ready to borrow from ideologies coming from both ends of the political spectrum – the far-right and the far-left.
- Due to its assessed magnitude, its fluidity and heterogeneity, it is considered a new phenomenon and not a new variant of e.g., far-right extremism/far-right populism.
- It is simultaneously appreciative and distrustful of the far-right. In turn, some elements of the far right are inclined to enter the online and offline ecosystems of AGE in order to attempt to influence these towards its own more traditional, authoritarian and nativist ends.

Interview data reveals that there is a broad disagreement on how to define the AGE milieu. According to some interviewees, AGE risks becoming too broad¹¹⁶ and constitutes a “catch all general term”.¹¹⁷ Others, on the contrary, deem it too narrow.¹¹⁸ Some respondents highlight the inability of the term to reflect extremist movements that have entered the political sphere and are anti-democratic at the core, including the FPÖ.¹¹⁹ Another criticism of the term stems from the fear that it might run the risk of branding any criticism of the government as extremist¹²⁰ and misses the point that extremist movements, in general, are characterised by some form of anti-government sentiment.¹²¹ Regardless of AGE's violent or non-violent character, and the debate around its extremist nature or not, parts of the milieu can be considered as proponents of an extreme version of populism. The latter is a conviction that allegedly ordinary people are disregarded and conned by the elites. Populism, which fuelled different “protest” movements over time, is, in essence, less conspiratorial and less apocalyptic than its extremist counterpart, AGE. Populism is anti-elite but does not equate the elite with a satanist, paedophilic gang, as will be demonstrated in the case within large sections of the AGE milieu. In the view of one Austrian respondent, “the current rebellion against the existing system is contradictory because, while confronting the system, they also have a strong desire for an authority they can respect”.¹²² AGE individuals desire for a new political and societal order and thus can relate positively to the state and the government. Other

¹¹⁵ Interviews are quoted throughout this section using a lettered and numeric system. The letter part of the code indicates the first letter of the country in which the practitioner is based, and the number indicates a particular interviewee. This approach is applicable throughout the whole section which covers four thematic pillars with which the research team approached the project.

¹¹⁶ Interview G1; Interview S3.

¹¹⁷ Interview G1.

¹¹⁸ Interview G4; Interview S6.

¹¹⁹ Interview A1.

¹²⁰ Interview A1; Interview S1.

¹²¹ Interview A1.

¹²² Interview A3.

interviewees affirm this and explain that these groups and/or individuals reject the present-day form and exercise of power¹²³ of a given government and state, but not of that government or state altogether.¹²⁴ Some respondents consider that it is not so much about being against the state but against the establishment and a perceived elite, “regardless of whether it is cultural, financial, or political”.¹²⁵ The evil elite can be conceived nationally, but also internationally. For instance, the EU is often criticized in AGE milieus as elitist and part of various global conspiracies.

The far-right has relied extensively on populist narratives, criticizing the “system”, pretending to “defend the people”, and overall offering simplistic solutions to highly complex issues.¹²⁶ The far-right form of populism is underpinned by an ideology rooted in nativist, racist, authoritarian, and anti-LGBTQIA+ discourses. While sharing such narratives, AGE differs from the far-right in this regard as having no clear-cut ideological backbone, being politically amorphous, and lacking a coherent plan for achieving and then maintaining political power.¹²⁷ The populist streak is one of the common platforms that allow the more organised far-right individuals or organisations to infiltrate or influence the AGE milieu.¹²⁸ Some of the interviewees suggested that far-right ideology has been “mainstreamed” through AGE, allowing it to reach new audiences,¹²⁹ through “word and space appropriation”.¹³⁰ This alludes to the “seizing” of an event that is perceived by the far right as “relevant” with the goal of “making their presence known and spreading their narrative”.¹³¹

One example uncovered by Tech Against Terrorism (TAT),¹³² an UN-backed NGO that works towards countering terrorist use of the internet, illustrates this recruitment strategy. It found that with the shutdown of Parler, an American alt-tech platform, following the platform’s role in the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, its users migrated en masse to Telegram. They then entered channels that were more far-right in nature, and TAT found recruitment guides that detailed how to radicalise someone from a mere conspiracy theorist to more extreme, white supremacist beliefs.¹³³

As far as shared conspiratorial tropes of both the far-right and AGE are concerned, this predominantly concerns narratives which speak of a global elite plotting against the people so that the latter’s rights and freedoms are constrained. These quite often have an anti-Semitic undertone, such as the conspiracies around George Soros, a Jewish philanthropist and holocaust survivor who is supposedly part of this evil elite running the world.¹³⁴ Similar narratives shared by both extremisms include anti-woke¹³⁵ views and “chaos narratives”,¹³⁶ the end of the white race, the “great replacement theory” (a far-right belief that white people are being replaced by immigrants in the West), and anti-vaxx narratives.¹³⁷ The overlap between the two forms of extremisms does not end there as AGE often display positive attitudes towards far-right figures. This is especially true for the American AGE online ecosystem, which idolises Donald Trump. This is to some extent mirrored in the German-speaking AGE ecosystem (shared by accounts and channels from Austria and Germany), which is scathing towards Angela Merkel but more optimistic about the MFG political party (the People Freedom Fundamental Rights Party) which was vehemently anti-lockdown and anti-vaxx. Moreover, the Austrian far-right political party FPÖ and the German AfD

123 Interview G1; Interview G4; Interview S1; Interview NL6.

124 Interview G1; Interview S1; Interview NL6.

125 Interview S7.

126 Cas Mudde, *The Far-Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 1-160.

127 Interview A6; Interview G1.

128 Interview A2; Interview G5; Interview NL5.

129 Interview G1.

130 Interview G3.

131 Ibid.

132 Tech Against Terrorism.

133 Mark Townsend, How Trump Supporters Are Radicalised by the Far Right, *The Guardian*, 17 January 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/jan/17/how-trump-supporters-are-radicalised-by-the-far-right>.

134 Anti-Defamation League, “The Antisemitism Lurking Behind George Soros Conspiracy Theories,” November 2018. <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/antisemitism-lurking-behind-george-soros-conspiracy-theories>.

135 The definition of woke has changed over recent years, however it commonly refers to being ‘informed, educated, and conscious of social injustice and racial inequality’. The term anti-woke has been used to oppose these sentiments. Kiara Alfonseca, What does Woke Mean and Why are Some Conservatives Using It? ABC News, January 20, 2023. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/woke-conservatives/story?id=93051138>.

136 Interview S3.

137 Interview A2; Interview G2; Interview S1; Interview S3; Interview S7; Interview NL4; Interview NL5.

also get positive mentions in these online spaces. This observation reinforces the point that the AGE milieu actively looks for a strong authority that its members could trust.

The overlap between AGE and far-right extremism is only partial, which is why AGE is considered a self-standing phenomenon. First, the AGE milieu is less ideology-driven, as discussed above.¹³⁸ Furthermore, some AGE members also consider far-right milieus to be part of the system, or to be infiltrated by its agents. For instance, Peter Fitzek in Germany (more on him below) rejected any attempt to align with existing political forces and instead started his own parallel society. Dutch and American sovereigntists profess a similar approach to this issue. The Dutch anti-system party Forum for Democracy (FvD) is seen as an alternative governing party, often praised in the online AGE spaces but also accused by some anti-government sympathizers to have been infiltrated by the government security agencies.

Second, AGE also partially overlaps with, and is open to, influences from other extremist ideologies, namely: communism, anarchism, or more broadly the far-left ideology.¹³⁹ In addition, some evangelical Christian communities are largely anti-vaxx in the Netherlands¹⁴⁰ and overlap with AGE milieu.¹⁴¹ The rejection of the global elites by AGE also bodes well with certain adherents to anti-globalisation theories, traditionally anchored in far-left discourses. This demonstrates that anti-government extremism is fluid¹⁴² and hybrid¹⁴³ as well as indicates its potential ability to take new forms and/or direct its focus on new issues. This is consistent with the overall “lack of ideology” underpinning the anti-government movement, which allows to speak to individuals across the traditional ideological spectrum.

Theme 2: Manifestations of the Threat

Key takeaways:

- The majority of AGE groups emerged or gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic and have tried to remain relevant since then.
- This is both an offline and online phenomenon – the former has waned in prominence after the pandemic, but the latter has led to a vibrant ecosystem of AGE channels, profiles and websites that continue to operate up until today.
- This ecosystem is fuelled by ideas and conspiracies which cross borders and are often adjusted to fit the local reality. In this sense, the phenomenon is simultaneously transnational, if not global, but also national, regional and local.
- There is a general agreement among interviewees that the profile of AGE extremists is mainly male and middle-aged and has an unstructured, permeable, fluid, and leaderless nature. However, online research contradicts this and suggests women are also highly prominent within AGE. More research on this is needed as the heterogeneity of the movement suggests the picture of its rank-and-file members could be more diverse.

As discussed above, elements of the AGE milieu had been active in protests before the onset of COVID-19 pandemic. They found themselves online while organising protests, such as around

¹³⁸ Interview NL4; Interview NL5; Interview NL6.

¹³⁹ Interview S1; Interview S2.

¹⁴⁰ BNNVARA, “Burgemeester Urk negeert handhaving coronapas omdat bevolking vaccinatie weigert,” [Mayor of Urk ignores enforcement of Covid pass because population refuses vaccination] October 2021. <https://www.bnnvara.nl/joop/artikelen/burgemeester-urk-negeert-handhaving-coronapas-omdat-bevolking-vaccinatie-weigert>.

¹⁴¹ Interview NL3; Interview NL4; Interview NL5.

¹⁴² Interview S1.

¹⁴³ Interview S7.

anti-austerity or anti-corruption, but also attended offline events and often maintained connections to one another in the aftermath. Some of these offline and online networks then lent their know-how and members to the ideas animating AGE. For this reason, one should not separate offline and online manifestations as they are inherently connected. In fact, AGE individuals seem to “gather in networks of small groups, rather than a central organisation” and an entrepreneurial spirit exists - a true “do-it-yourself” approach to action within the broader milieu.¹⁴⁴ Members are effectively encouraged to do their own research and then act on it by creating their own local group and/or social media channel/account and to spread the word and educate their new followers. This replaces the need for a specific leader or joining an already established group or movement.

Physical manifestations of AGE come in two shapes:

1. Specific entities: via entities which either emerged during COVID-19 pandemic (Querdenken, Freedom Party/Movement, state deniers, Corona Querfront) or have witnessed exponential growth in numbers or popularity during its course (such as Reichsbürger and Oath Keepers among others). Since the curb of the pandemic, however, a lot of them have either decreased in importance or visibility. One strategy these groups deployed to counter their loss of visibility was to switch to other topics such as the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. So far, however, this has given them relatively paltry returns in terms of retaining their popularity.
2. Loosely organised offline structures: during COVID-19, offline structures were formed based on loosely connected individuals who initially found themselves in the online sphere. This did not, in most cases, lead to the development of organisational structures under clear leadership, which would still exist today. Respondents broadly agree that such a development could be the net result of the “disorganised”, fluid, and amorphous nature of the current day anti-government extremist threat.¹⁴⁵ It is this unstructured, permeable, fluid, and leaderless nature of AGE that might explain its adoption by such a heterogeneous group of individuals and groups of all socioeconomic backgrounds.¹⁴⁶ In turn, the lack of clear organisation, leadership, ideology, and the vast array of individual members’ motivations makes it extremely hard to structure the movement. Interestingly, in some cases, such as in Austria, it is the “know-how for mobilisation and structuring”¹⁴⁷ brought to the table by the local far-right that allowed anti-government extremists to successfully mobilise the seemingly loose clusters of protesters during the pandemic.

What the milieu might be lacking in real world success and perseverance, it attempts to make up in online presence. Below is a concise summary of the content of the online spaces analysed for this report. The observed US segment of the AGE milieu concentrates around the QAnon conspiracy,¹⁴⁸ which perceives the world as run by a satanic and paedophilic gang, as well as conspiracies related to the “great reset theory”, which, among others, sees the evil elite of Wall Street firms attempting to control the stock exchange, as one of the ways to prevent the people. In an attempt to rise up against this elite, the self-coined ‘Wall Street Apes’ (in a reference to the movie *The Rise of the Planet of the Apes*) or AGE individuals are encouraged to resist the diktat and invest in particular shares to undercut these Wall Street firms.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ Interview S5.

¹⁴⁵ Interview G1; Interview G2; Interview NL1; Interview NL2; Interview NL3; Interview NL6; Interview S4; Interview S6; Interview S7; Interview US1; Interview US4.

¹⁴⁶ Interview A1.

¹⁴⁷ Interview A2.

¹⁴⁸ Amarnath Amarsingam, Marc-Andre Argentino. Q-Pilled: Conspiracy Theories, Trump, and Election Violence in the United States. *The International Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, 2020. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/q-pilled-conspiracy-theories-trump-and-election-violence-united-states>.

¹⁴⁹ See: Tara Siegel Bernard, Emily Flitter and Anupreeta Das, “Buy GameStop, Fight Injustice. Just Don’t Sell,” *The New York Times*, 29 January 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/29/business/gamestop-stock.html>.

This narrative gained traction during the pandemic as many individuals saw their incomes reduced while the value of some stock went up exponentially.¹⁵⁰ This inspired an online community, at the time on Reddit, to fight the imaginary evil elite through specific investments in the stock market, notably via hedge funds on GameStop, an American video games retailer. Such conspiracy theories regularly intersect with one another in the online AGE milieu, converging in a broader paranoid, alternative reality. For instance, a post by an AGE proponent on X, formerly Twitter, shows a photo of a statue of a man eating children in Switzerland (in a reference to the European banking system suggesting the bankers eat children), clearly fusing the “great reset” and QAnon conspiracy theories.

In Austria, the online AGE space targets the so-called DACH region (i.e., Germany, Austria, and Switzerland) and is also full of Qanon narratives. The channels analysed for this report continue to pump out COVID-19 conspiracies, and anti-LGBTQIA+ conspiracy theories. For instance, a post claims that an entire city in the United States has been “taken over” by the LGBTQIA+ community. They also dwell on the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the Israeli war on Gaza. They repost any call by an international leader to stop supporting Ukraine, and regularly refer to Ukrainians as “fascist” or “nazis”.¹⁵¹ The Austrian Green Party also received scathing criticism and borderline comments from contributors in this online space who perceive them as the evil elite.

The German AGE ecosystem is also geared towards the DACH region and contains similar conspiracies. For instance, a channel analysed contains posts in German but also includes material from the likes of Robert Kennedy Junior, an ardent anti-vaxxer and COVID-19 denier and a previous US Presidential candidate. Another German-focussed channel centred around an AGE individual on X favours the “great reset” theory, which is also prominent in the US online AGE sphere. Users argue that the World Economic Forum is about to impose a totalitarian world government. Both accounts were most active during the pandemic, with a clear focus on vehement and stringent opposition towards COVID-19 measures, seen as utterly unnecessary and treasonous.

Another German channel on Instagram centres around one person, namely Peter Fitzek, who claims to be a king. His channel primarily reflects the Reichsbürger movement ideology and encourages its followers to actively contest and resist the legitimacy of the post-war Federal Republic of Germany. This also mimics the approach of ‘the Sovereign Citizen’ movement in the US. Fitzek’s channel is one of the online accounts that showcase a parallel society, explaining ongoing efforts to establish a kingdom with its own currency, bank, and social security system within Germany. Another analysed German AGE channel on X focuses locally and targets Angela Merkel and Ursula von der Leyen as the personifications of the evil elite. In addition, there are those spaces in the AGE online milieu that operate almost purely local. For example, a channel on Facebook dedicated to the town Wolgast in Germany, centres on local “resistance” to COVID-19 measures but shifted towards more “mainstream” far-right positions towards the end of 2021, when the pandemic and its counter measures were no longer part of everyday life.

A Swedish social media channel analysed on Facebook mostly shows anti-COVID and anti-vaccine related conspiracy theories, but also weaves in anti-EU sentiments. The other Swedish online space, namely a website, focuses more on the Swedish liberal immigration or asylum policy, which allegedly amounts to “great replacement” in action, as well as pro-Kremlin narratives around the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. The website’s YouTube account was removed in 2020 for violating the platform’s Community Guidelines. Overall, the website can be seen as an alternative media platform, a type of an information environment crucial to the AGE milieu as it amalgamates alternative viewpoints, conspiracies, and oftentimes far-right rhetoric.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ This mirrors Putin’s narrative and justification for the war in Ukraine, which was to de-Nazify Ukraine, which is evidently false and also hypocritical given Putin himself uses Nazis to fight for Russia, such as the sub-unit of Wagner, Rusich.

Two channels and one website were examined in the Netherlands. One channel centres around an anti-woke university lecturer with over 10,000 followers espousing mostly conspiratorial and far-right narratives. Whereas the account was mostly active during the COVID-19 period, in 2023, the content switched slightly more to the theory of ‘controlled opposition.’ The owner of the channel alleges that the party he previously supported, Forum for Democracy (FvD), an anti-establishment party with members espousing conspiratorial, far-right, and pro-Russian narratives, is controlled by the intelligence agencies and the World Economic Forum, hence fusing several conspiracy theories. This case illustrates how some AGE members, like most extremists in general, seek to combine grand theories and ideologies with their own personal frustrations and grievances.

The official website for the anti-government movement in the Netherlands called the Common Law was also studied for this report. Interestingly, the website was taken offline at the end of our investigation, and we have not yet located the new website. Like the Reichsbürger Movement in Germany and Peter Fitzek, the Common Law movement rejects the constitution of the Netherlands, and its members have declared themselves sovereign. In interviews on their website, the members explain that they have a right to defend themselves by holding people’s tribunals and creating their own legal system. Furthermore, interviews with members, as shown on the website, reveal that it was COVID-19 conspiracy theories that “opened their eyes” to other “truths,” effectively referring to other conspiracy theories. They also espouse anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments, most clearly transphobia, mirroring other channels examined in other countries. This movement, whilst currently small, with about 12 ‘core members’, seemingly has a wider support network, and showcases a clear example of the wish and attempt to create a parallel society in the Netherlands in the offline world, not just online. On the Common Law Movement’s website there are interviews with someone who claims he is former military and was allegedly questioned by the Dutch Intelligence Agencies because of his beliefs and involvement in the Dutch AGE scene. What is important to note is that whilst the Common Law movement had a website and their affiliates are active online on social media as well, they explicitly state that the most important thing is to organise offline and on a local level. They have weekly meetings where the members (again through interviews on their website) argue that members should go visit like-minded people in person to convince them to rise up as well.

These seemingly nimble attempts at connectivity and the aforementioned flow of conspiracies and narratives online and, consequently, across the borders, point to the transnational character of the overall AGE phenomenon. As it will be demonstrated in the report’s next section, the importance of the regional – and thus, linguistic – aspect when it comes to transnationality is critical in this context.¹⁵² At the same time, however, AGE can also morph into a local phenomenon as the participants actively use examples of cases, theories, and conspiracies from abroad and tie these or weave them into localised “struggles” against the establishment, i.e. the government, media, financial infrastructure, or doctors. This strategy is usually employed through the use of social media, alternative media, or duplicate government websites or media houses, known as “Doppelgängers.”¹⁵³ These activities are then complemented by recruitment in offline settings, i.e., through meetings, training, and “paper terrorism”.¹⁵⁴ This can then be extended to the “systematic breaking of laws”, including not paying taxes and crossing borders without relevant proof of identity (such as a passport).¹⁵⁵ Regardless of the manifestations of the threat, whether offline or online, transnational or national, regional or local, no clear picture of the socio-demographic composition of the movement currently exists. More research is needed to provide context to statements and comments from our interviewees which seem counterintuitive at times. They generally agree that the profile of anti-government extremists is middle-class, middle-aged-to-

¹⁵² Interview A3; Interview G2; Interview US4.

¹⁵³ Interview G6.

¹⁵⁴ Interview A1; Interview A2; Interview A3; Interview G1; Interview US1; Interview US2.

¹⁵⁵ Interview A2.

retired white men.¹⁵⁶ Some respondents mention that the profile particularly speaks to individuals who have had personal issues with the governments and/or who went through great financial loss during the pandemic, and therefore seek someone to blame, which in this case are the respective government(s). Interviews highlight this also applies to husbands and/or fathers who feel responsible for providing for their families and have lost socio-economic mobility. This could suggest that gender, and especially stereotypical notions of masculinity, such as the idea of having to provide for a family, can play a role in someone's motivation to believe in conspiracy theories or engage in extremism.¹⁵⁷

Some interviewees did nuance their perception of anti-government extremists' profile by mentioning that both those with secondary education (university level) and those without (high school) are prone to this form of extremism, and that both young people and women in this milieu should not be underestimated.¹⁵⁸ Similarly, Dutch interviewees believe that the profile of anti-government extremists might also be more diversified than initially thought.¹⁵⁹ Importantly, government and security officials, doctors, and military personnel have also been found among anti-government extremists. It is worth highlighting that all interviewees – with the exception of some American respondents – also mentioned that conspiracy theories crucial to AGE appealed to a broader spectrum of individuals. They also concluded that women made up a large part of the movement, which online research also confirmed. This is important as it implies the importance of considering gender dynamics while discussing extremist threats, to ensure that individuals who may pose a security concern are not overlooked simply because of their sex.¹⁶⁰ Overall, it is essential to remember that individuals may have entered the anti-government movement through truly diverse entry doors, coming from anti-vax or alternative medicine environments, from Yellow Vests-type movements, or from highly conservative milieus. As such, the potential diversity of profiles also reflects the diversity of groups from where individuals emerge.

Theme 3: Severity of the Threat

Key takeaways:

- Thus far AGE has been responsible for relatively little violence and hardly any terrorism. Predominantly, this movement is non-violent in nature and its members mostly law-abiding in their day-to-day existence.
- This is not to say that the milieu does not have violent potential, as it has developed activities which involve the threat or the usage of violence. These come in four ways: the harassment of key individuals that represent the establishment, incitement to violence, violent lone-actor attacks, and through the establishment of parallel societies.
- Its future violence may not be through large-scale and organised attacks but through attacks on key individuals or symbolic targets by individuals or smaller networks.
- Currently, the milieu is more about retreat or alienation than outright confrontation.

There is a widespread understanding that the risk of violence emerging from AGE is hard to estimate or predict.¹⁶¹ However, in a 2022 report, the EU CTC identified several violent incidents linked to AGE. Although not meeting the threshold to be considered acts of terrorism, these

¹⁵⁶ Interview A2; Interview A3; Interview A4; Interview G1; Interview G4; Interview G5; Interview NL1; Interview NL2; Interview NL3; Interview S1; Interview S4; Interview S5; Interview US1; Interview US4.

¹⁵⁷ Interview A2; Interview NL1; Interview NL3; Interview NL5; Interview S2; Interview US4.

¹⁵⁸ Interview A4; Interview A6; Interview G1; Interview G4; Interview G5.

¹⁵⁹ Interview NL4.

¹⁶⁰ Here, we do not mean gender as in the biological sex, but the discursive constructions that create gendered stereotypes. For example, women being viewed as passive and apolitical and therefore not considered a terrorist threat, whereas men are seen as political and violent. Therefore, it falls within the line of expectation when they express radical, or extremist ideas or become violent based upon them.

¹⁶¹ Interview NL.4; Interview NL.5; Interview S2.

incidents clearly highlighted the violent risk underpinning AGE as a form of extremism.¹⁶² Violent aspects of the AGE phenomenon are manifested fourfold:

1. Individuals who harass journalists, health care professionals, and politicians in the name of their AGE beliefs. A Dutch broadcaster, NOS, had to take the logo off of its vans as these were being attacked and their drivers harassed during the COVID pandemic in 2020. According to the Dutch National Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism and Security, this resulted from the fact that during the pandemic journalists, who informed the public about lockdown measures were often targets of online and offline threats and harassment.¹⁶³
2. Incitement to violence. The project team encountered such incitement in the observed online spaces, for example by the Common Law, who argue that people should start using “civil arrests” to “fight back” against the government and policemen.
3. Lone actors who attempt to kill or maim public figures or individuals inspired by AGE and conspiracy theories such as politicians or doctors administering vaccines or involved in decisions on lockdowns.
4. Rejectionists such as the Common Law or those retreating from the society. This should be seen as a step further than a belief in conspiracy theories or participation in online discussions or protests. Other research¹⁶⁴ suggests that rejecting society further delegitimises the democratic institutions and may lead to more offensive acts by the rejectionists who might then use the liberties of their “liberated” spaces to be used for other crimes such as sexual abuse.¹⁶⁵

Interviewees highlight the incoherent and inconsistent ideology of anti-government extremism as well as its numerous and ambiguous definitions that complicate creating an accurate threat picture. Austrian and German interviewees especially highlighted the risk of AGE meeting mainstream political representation as a potential “violence multiplier” for the milieu.¹⁶⁶ An AGE-friendly political force could, for instance, reach government office and contribute to an exponential mainstreaming of anti-government thoughts and ideas. This could then result in a sudden increase of attacks on, e.g. figures deemed treasonous or criminal by the AGE milieu, or “incidental violence,”¹⁶⁷ e.g. around the time of commemorations or other specific events, such as elections or following undesired outcomes of such elections.¹⁶⁸ Consequently, the AGE’s “apocalyptic and deterministic thinking,”¹⁶⁹ if acted upon, may evolve into a threat to specific individuals more than government institutions, although one does not exclude the other, as illustrated by the January 6 assault on the Capitol in the US, where the combined forces of AGE and militia groups came very close to destabilise the US democratic order, encouraged by President Trump.¹⁷⁰

An all-out assault on the state is unlikely, however, due to the fact that AGE is often not about overthrowing the government, but rather changing “parts of it” or “aspects of it,”¹⁷¹ with exceptions being the Reichsbürger Movement. In some instances, one could argue that it is the society as a whole that anti-government extremists despise and not just the administrators or the governing class.¹⁷² This, however, does not automatically mean that AGE will evolve towards nihilistic violence

¹⁶² EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, “Violent Anti-System Extremism”, *The Council of the European Union*, 10 October 2022, 13177/22.

¹⁶³ NOS, NOS haalt na aanhoudende bedreigingen logo van satellietwagens, [[NOS removes logo from satellite cars after persistent threats], 15 October 2020.

<https://nos.nl/artikel/2352452-nos-haalt-na-aanhoudende-bedreigingen-logo-van-satellietwagens>.

¹⁶⁴ Jelle van Buuren, Breaking (with) the System: Exodus as Resistance? Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 17, No. 1 (March 2023): 88-102. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27209220>.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Interview A5; Interview A6; Interview G1; Interview G5.

¹⁶⁷ Interview A3.

¹⁶⁸ Interview US2.

¹⁶⁹ Interview A3.

¹⁷⁰ See: Barbara Molas, “The Insurrection Wave: A Comparative Assessment of Anti-Government Attacks in Germany, the US, and Brazil,”

International Centre for Counter-terrorism, 23 September 2023. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/insurrection-wave-comparative-assessment-anti-government-attacks-germany-us-and-0>.

¹⁷¹ Interview US4; Interview G1.

¹⁷² Interview A2; Interview S2; Interview S3; Interview S4.

or indiscriminate attacks. At the moment, the trend of moving away from society and retreating to its parallel versions, as exemplified by the “sovereignists,” is more likely, and examples of this have already been discussed in this report. Thus, alienation and not confrontation seem to be the order of the day for the participants of the milieu.¹⁷³ The drive towards alienation and retreat can be assisted by the fact that the milieu possesses its own “super-disseminators”, such as “respectable” citizens such as doctors, judges, and former law enforcement personnel who are able to weigh in on debates deemed necessary and locally influence AGE actions.¹⁷⁴ When challenged or seemingly challenged by the authorities, these individuals can also help radicalise the milieu while lending, for example, their military expertise to actions.¹⁷⁵

Theme 4: Tackling the Threat

Key takeaways:

- Work to better understand AGE is ongoing in the security bureaucracies of the five countries under study but is far from complete and is riddled with challenges. The biggest challenge is how to balance using P/CVE and other measures for the more violent parts of AGE whilst not over-securing responses to peaceful protests by law-abiding citizens who express legitimate frustrations with governments.
- Not all of the existing measures aimed at preventing or countering “violent extremism” apply to AGE for the aforementioned reason.
- This challenge also persists online, as AGE material can predominantly be classified as borderline content, which leaves the response to tech companies.

As AGE is a phenomenon with offline and online dimensions, this section will look at both aspects collectively and discuss challenges which hamper efforts to develop and maintain viable countermeasures. Regarding the offline aspect, response to the threat emanating from AGE is mostly thought about as a large whole of government process, to address the conducive environment beyond the prevention of violent acts. A general consensus is that trust should be rebuilt between the government and its citizens. However, such advice is quite generic, and difficult to operationalize.¹⁷⁶ Some specific challenges include the inability of the government to reach an individual “who calls everything fake news or disinformation” via counter-messaging or counternarrative efforts. Furthermore, distrustful individuals are not traditionally the “target group of social work and de-radicalisation programs,” and based on their profile, might not meet the criteria for “concepts and materials” used by social workers, as these often cater to youth or socially marginalised but not conspiratorial types.¹⁷⁷ Furthermore, there are currently no specific strategies to define or approach the targeted audience (potentially considered individuals at-risk) nor to differentiate between leadership figures or “influencers” and other AGE members. Regardless of such difficulties, most interviewees stressed that efforts to better understand and counter AGE are being developed mainly through security services, notably intelligence services like AIVD in the Netherlands.

Some solutions tend to develop in the direction of a multi-layered cooperation which would be transnational, national, regional and local in nature, often derived straight from the P/CVE handbook.¹⁷⁸ Examples would include “corrective local”, a German newsroom that aims to provide the public with access to information on a local and global scale through investigate journalism;

¹⁷³ Interview A2; Interview A6; Interview NL4.

¹⁷⁴ Interview S4.

¹⁷⁵ Interview NL2; Interview US4.

¹⁷⁶ Interview A3; Interview A4; Interview A6; Interview G1; Interview G2; Interview G3; Interview G5; Interview NL1; Interview NL4; Interview NL5; Interview S5.

¹⁷⁷ Interview NL4; Interview NL5.

¹⁷⁸ Interview A6; Interview G2; Interview G3; Interview G6; Interview NL2; Interview NL4; Interview NL6; Interview S4; Interview S6.

“Demokratie leben” in Germany, a programme that focusses on fostering social cohesion to fight polarisation and extremism at the local, state, and national levels; or faith communities in Sweden, that focus on fostering dialogue between these and governments to promote education around religion. Further inclusion of civil society more generally in the preventive process is also advised.¹⁷⁹ Other ideas include working with families and friends of the most “radical” AGE individuals to help them walk away from the milieu and “re-integrate,”¹⁸⁰ notably through “exit work”¹⁸¹ and individually tailored “deradicalisation” programmes conducted via third party, usually civil society actors.¹⁸² Some interviewees also stress that all of these measures cannot only be available in different urban centres but should also be deployed in rural areas where AGE is quite active.¹⁸³ As far as the online aspect is concerned, most interviewees agreed that mitigating AGE’s reach necessitates monitoring and regulating the phenomenon in an already complex online sphere. This will only become more challenging with the arrival of AI which will enable AGE to, for example, illustrate its points with fake pictures, videos, and other artificially created content. In such conditions, the responsibility of the tech companies and infrastructure providers will only increase. In the COVID period, Instagram,¹⁸⁴ META,¹⁸⁵ and YouTube¹⁸⁶ produced varying responses that centred around removing, labelling, and reducing the spread of the material in question. For YouTube, this meant eliminating material that went against the platform’s Community Guidelines, reducing the spread of harmful misinformation, raising authoritative voices, and rewarding trusted creators.¹⁸⁷ For Instagram and Meta, a similar approach was taken as the platforms aimed to remove material that went against its terms of service and made false information harder to find. TikTok also joined the effort by also omitting conspiracy theory content from their recommendation algorithms to limit the spread of such content.¹⁸⁸

These measures, however, only partly worked for the larger and cooperative platforms. There are further complications with other parts of the internet, such as websites, platforms that are uncooperative, or those that are small in nature and may lack resources to address this threat effectively. If content moderators are unwilling to remove such material, and the law does not stipulate they must do so, then there is nothing preventing users to post material related to conspiracy theory or anti-government extremist content. This also gets further complicated when considering websites. As some organisations have warned, it is a lot more arduous to argue for a website’s removal than for certain content from a cooperative platform.¹⁸⁹ This is even worse when it comes to websites related to AGE, as there is often no legal mandate to remove content that is predominantly ‘lawful but awful’, however exceptions exist which may have led to the removal of the Common Law Movement in the Netherlands. When considering alternatives to content moderation, the only option there would be for search engines to limit the reach of the websites in question.

Beyond tech companies moderating their own platforms, legislative efforts were also underway in 2020 at the onset of the pandemic. Whilst these took a long time to come into force, at the time of writing, the Terrorist Content Online Regulation (TCO) and the Digital Services Act (DSA) are in force in the European Union.¹⁹⁰ In addition, the Online Safety Bill in the United Kingdom has also come into force at the end of November 2023.¹⁹¹

179 Interview G4; Interview S2.

180 Interview A5.

181 Interview A1; Interview A3; Interview A4; Interview G1.

182 Interview NL2; Interview NL4; Interview S6.

183 Interview NL2.

184 Instagram Helpcenter, “COVID-19 and Vaccine Policy Updates & Protections,” n.d. <https://help.instagram.com/268041307701567>.

185 “Combating Misinformation,” Meta, n.d. <https://about.fb.com/news/tag/misinformation/>.

186 “Our commitments: How has YouTube responded to the global COVID/19 crisis?” n.d. <https://www.youtube.com/howyoutubeworks/our-commitments/covid-response/>.

187 Ibid.

188 Rachel Greenspan, “TikTok disables popular QAnon hashtags as social media platforms grapple with the conspiracy theory movement,” Business Insider, July 2020. <https://www.businessinsider.com/tiktok-disables-qanon-hashtags-as-platforms-fight-conspiracy-theory-2020-7>
<https://www.insider.com/tiktok-disables-qanon-hashtags-as-platforms-fight-conspiracy-theory-2020-7>.

189 Tech Against Terrorism, The Threat of Terrorist and Violent Extremist Operated Websites, January 2022. <https://www.techagainstterrorism.org/hubs/The-Threat-of-Terrorist-and-Violent-Extremist-Operated-Websites-Jan-2022-1.pdf>.

190 European Commission, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package>.

191 House of Commons Library, Online Safety Bill. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9579/>.

The TCO focuses on terrorist content exclusively, which excludes most of the material coming from the anti-government extremist scene. Hypothetically, this could include channels centred around AGE reposting material produced by designated terrorist organisations, especially from far-right terrorist organisations. However, this has not been observed in the channels monitored for this report. Therefore, the TCO is of limited use when it comes to the anti-government threat. Whereas the DSA may prove more useful given its focus on other online harms, it is plagued by definitional issues that might hamper its effectiveness in relation to the AGE, e.g., it is unclear whether conspiracy theories would be understood as disinformation.

In the United States, the legislative push is also coming from the state level, with Ohio, Florida, and Texas all proposing state-level bills that seem to protect users from being banned or ‘censored’ rather than focus on content removal like in the EU and elsewhere.¹⁹² In Florida, this also applies to elected officials, or those that are running for office and how platforms cannot remove such users from its services.¹⁹³ This would ensure that, for example, politicians that are anti-establishment themselves and espouse such viewpoints online (most notably in the past, e.g. President Trump) cannot be banned from platforms in those jurisdictions. After the attack on the Capitol, President Trump was removed from Twitter by moderators as his comments went against Twitter’s Community Guidelines for inciting violence.¹⁹⁴ META and Instagram did the same, however, for glorifying people who had engaged in violence, though they did reinstate his account in 2022.¹⁹⁵ This example shows the complexity of tackling this type of speech online, as it was the tech companies that decided to ban Trump with vast consequences for free speech rather than government legislation.

192 Tech Against Terrorism, Online Regulation Series 3.0. United States. <https://techagainstterrorism.org/hubfs/Online%20Regulation%20Series%203-0-0-%20Tech%20Against%20Terrorism.pdf>.

193 Ibid.

194 Twitter, Permanent suspension of @realDonaldTrump, 8 January 2021. https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension.

195 Dan Milmo, “Elon Musk reinstates Donald Trump’s Twitter account after taking poll,” November 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/nov/20/twitter-lifts-donald-trump-ban-after-elon-musks-poll>.

Chapter 4: Is Anti-Government Extremism Transnational?

The following chapter looks into the transnational connections within the AGE movement, based notably on an analysis of online data. Specifically, we are looking into linguistic connections, online channels that demonstrate international coordination, Russian interference with some of the channels in our dataset, as well as the inherent transnationality of conspiracy theories and AGE ideas, which are highly likely to cross national borders.

Multilateral Connections & Linguistic Proximity

Cultural, geographic, and linguistic proximity allow for more transnational manifestations of AGE. Namely, AGE individuals in Canada and the United States demonstrate some degree of coordination. The same can be said about the AGE milieu of Germany and its German speaking neighbours. The online data predominantly showed that channels in German were not just relevant on a more local or national level, but also within the DACH region. These online spaces attracted far less participants and contributors from outside Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Narratives and conspiracies originating from North America (especially in relation to QAnon) tend to spread beyond the anglosphere, whereas the reverse process is much more rare. Shared cultural history also allows for anti-government extremism to manifest regionally, for example the Frisian movement in the Netherlands aims to create a parallel society by merging parts of the Netherlands and Germany together. This mirrors similar far-right movements such as the Flemish extremist political party Vlaams Belang who deem that the Netherlands and Dutch-speaking Belgium (Vlaanderen) should reunite and return to a nostalgic representation of what used to be the wider Kingdom of the Lower Lands.¹⁹⁶

Regarding Sweden, the website analysed does show coordinated interaction with Danish, and Norwegian (but also American) far-right websites, which again mirrors how the geographic proximity may allow for transnational coordination. What is interesting to note, is that the other websites in the Scandinavian conspiracy-theory ecosystem frequently repost content from Swebb.tv. The Swedish website's success, however, may not be the result of its genuine popularity in Scandinavia. It should be acknowledged here that some transnational connections might be exacerbated through automated behaviours (i.e., reposts by bots), hence possibly exaggerating the organic nature of these ties and networks.

Transnational Ideas

Many interviewees believe there seems to be a transnational nature to AGE, especially in the global spread of ideas and narratives underpinning this movement. They also suggested that this transnational flow of ideas happens predominantly online, mirrored by our online analysis. All channels examined seemed to rely on similar or overlapping conspiracy theories. Nonetheless, interviewees were adamant that less was known about how these ideas actually spread online (whether it happened spontaneously and authentically), or the extent to which foreign influence was behind this seeming rising transnationality and also facilitating this. The subset of studied channels and websites suggests that the flow of ideas and conspiracy theories happens mainly in a genuine manner which means that real users (rather than inauthentic ones such as bots or trolls) find inspiration from conspiracy theories manually themselves. This usually happens through online searches, which often lead these users towards developments or opinions in other countries or on

¹⁹⁶ Door Hind Fraihi, "Hoe extreemrechts in Vlaanderen en Nederland een zwarte bruiloft voorbereidt, [How the extreme right in Flanders and the Netherlands is preparing a black wedding]", *de Lage landen*, September 2020. <https://www.de-lage-landen.com/article/hoe-extreemrechts-in-vlaanderen-en-nederland-een-zwarte-bruiloft-voorbereidt>.

different continents. This is not that surprising given that the pandemic was a global phenomenon. Consequently, particularly during the acute phase of the pandemic with physical lockdowns, the online space provided users with an option to discuss the evolution of COVID-19 in a comparative fashion and share their frustrations with other users across borders. As we have seen, these frustrations sometimes morphed into their appreciation of specific conspiracy theories on the origins and development of COVID-19, which then acted as their gateways into a broader world of AGE with even more conspiratorial material and narratives underpinning it.¹⁹⁷ Unsurprisingly, the QAnon conspiracy proved to be the most significant present in the online spaces monitored for this project (13 out of 14 channels analysed). Interestingly, the American tropes of QAnon were generally adjusted to local conditions so that they better targeted the regional versions of the evil elite. An example, as aforementioned, would be that of Angela Merkel and Ursula von der Leyen taking the place of Hilary Clinton in the QAnon conspiracy.

Finally, there are those ideas that also allow for the transnational overlap of AGE and the far-right scene. Namely, the identified AGE channels and websites simultaneously interact with the broader far-right and conspiracy-related ecosystem. Consequently, users often arrive at channels and websites from other far-right or conspiracy-related spaces or vice versa. The bridge between the two sides of this interaction is often antisemitism – inherent in far-right beliefs hostile to “others” and adaptable to evil elite conspiracies underpinning AGE.

Transnational Coordination

Alongside the exchange of ideas and conspiracy theories predominantly seen online, some AGE proponents, especially when it comes to sovereign movements, demonstrate offline attempts at international cooperation and coordination. First, the Common Law’s website lists some Dutch like-minded organisations as well as global partners like the Australian People of the Commonwealth, the Republic of Kanata in Canada, and the People of Krystal City in Spain.¹⁹⁸ All these organisations focus on creating their own parallel societies. Furthermore, a member of the Common Law movement in the Netherlands also mentions “the Republic Alliance”, which she claims consists of themselves and similar groups and individuals across 12 countries. They hold weekly meetings to discuss their ethos and mission.¹⁹⁹ Therefore, whereas the AGE community may seem disjointed, the sovereign movements demonstrate some degree of coordination. At least two online spaces that operated transnationally with a focus on organising offline action, namely protests, were identified. These have shown a purposeful attempt at cross-border coordination rather than a mere exchange of ideas. One demonstration-focussed Telegram channel has 1,500 followers and is linked to a broader demonstration movement which covers over 100 countries and involves 36 related Telegram channels. The channels are used to coordinate and call for people to join protests as well as showcase content from those demonstrations. Given the magnitude of the network, involving 36 channels in several languages, there seems to be a significant degree of automation as the translations are nearly time following original posts. In terms of content, the channels also contain far-right material, anti-vaxxer tropes, as well as other conspiracy theories which are utilised to rally people together to protest these causes offline. The movement has already been linked to large and disruptive protests in Australia and Canada, such as the anti-lockdown protest in Australia in July 2021.²⁰⁰

The second international channel, also hosted on Telegram, frequently reposts the aforementioned movement’s material. Beyond reposts, they also centre around COVID-19 disinformation and its

¹⁹⁷ Common Law, Common Law Nederland met Patriot for Justice 1776 News Channel. Accessed November 2023. <https://commonlawnederland.earth/nieuws/>.

¹⁹⁸ Common Law Website “Bereikbaarheid.” Accessed December 13, 2023. <https://commonlawnederland.earth/bereikbaarheid/>.

¹⁹⁹ CommonLaw Nederland. “Nieuws”. Accessed December 13, 2023. <https://commonlawnederland.earth/nieuws/>.

²⁰⁰ Christopher Naus and Michael McGowan, “Who’s behind Australia’s anti-lockdown protests? The German conspiracy group driving marches,” *The Guardian*, July 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/jul/27/who-behind-australia-anti-covid-lockdown-protest-march-rallies-sydney-melbourne-far-right-and-german-conspiracy-groups-driving-protests>.

website is available in ten languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish). Given the transnational element, the coordinated and automated posting, the presence of inauthentic behaviour by users, the focus on offline disruption and the repetition of Russian tropes, as well as proven Russian interference in ‘sovereigntist’ movements and online discourse related to secessionists (analysed below) there is a question of potential foreign influence within these online spaces.

It is interesting to note that these channels show the importance of analysing the entire information environment together rather than focusing solely on the online or offline domains separately.²⁰¹ These examples show that the internet facilitates and coordinates offline action, which is different from other conspiracy-focussed channels, which, at the time of writing, focus less on organising offline protests or events. Thus, different AGE groups or networks utilise the internet differently and it is likely that the ones with a transnational focus are using it to coordinate offline action.

Pro-Russian Narratives and Potential Foreign Influence

The majority of the social media channels analysed (8 out of 14) post material that indicate pro-Russian attitudes. This takes the form of either re-posting Russia Today (RT) material (known for being the Kremlin’s mouthpiece), or taking clearly pro-Russian stances, notably when it comes to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Whereas in some channels, this seems to happen intermittently, other channels show the systematic reposting of Kremlin/RT narratives, such as in a conspiracy-related channel predominantly active in Austria and the Swedish website analysed. There is one exception, which is the channel operated by Peter Fitzek, who posts that Putin is actually part of the satanic and ‘judeo-masonic’ elite (a conspiracy narrative that deems the Freemasons to be Jewish). This is the only part of the observed AGE online ecosystem that is ostensibly hostile towards Russia. It is not entirely clear whether pro-Russian attitudes reflect a fascination for the Russian political ideology and Putin’s leadership, whether it is the result of direct Russian interference or a combination of all the above. For most channels, with some exceptions, it seems to be more a result of ideological affinities.

In the transnational channels described above, there is some indication of Russian influence, with potential interference as well as in one of the Austrian-focussed channels. Whereas this cannot be concluded with utmost certainty, given the automated posting by users across an extensive network of channels, the automatic translation of messages in other languages, the inauthentic behaviour that underpins some of the posting patterns, combined with the consistent reposting of Russian narratives, including Russian state media, this may indicate the possibility of some form of potential Russian interference. It is also interesting to note that these channels are more significant than the average online spaces analysed in our sample, as well as are more transnationally focused, with a clear offline dimension. They consistently call for large-scale protests and not for one-off or ad hoc activities. Such an approach to these online spaces would be in line with the Russian attempts to undermine Western societies and values.

Before the pandemic, the far-right was cast as Russia’s favourite outlet for disruptive socio-political activities.²⁰² Moscow developed different lines of engagement towards the milieu, hoping to use it as a socio-political spoiler within different Western countries. Patterns of this engagement varied from country to country, but it was a general practice that Moscow would attempt to tie certain officials from radical right parties in a web of personal and professional relationships, which would make these dependent on Kremlin’s largesse or political support. At the same time, less direct (and consequently,

201 Chamin Herath and Joe Whittaker, “Online Radicalisation: Moving Beyond a Simple Dichotomy,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1998008>; Stuart MacDonald and Joe Whittaker, “Online Radicalization: Contested Terms and Conceptual Clarity,” in *Online Terrorist Propaganda, Recruitment, and Radicalization*. <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781315170251>. Joe Whittaker, “Rethinking Online Radicalization,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 4 (2022): 27-40.

202 See: Anton Shekhovtsov, “Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir,” *Routledge*, 2018. ISBN: 9781138658646.

less successful) attempts would be made towards the extreme right of which sections developed severe doubts about the sincerity of Russian outreach and whether the country's nativist turn had been genuinely genuine.²⁰³ Seemingly, characteristics primarily associated with Russia, such as traditionalism, conservatism, spirituality, etc., as an alternative to the Western world could appeal to the AGE milieu.²⁰⁴ Moreover, the strongman appeal of Vladimir Putin could also be attractive to the AGE individuals who are looking for a different type of leadership in the West.²⁰⁵ As it was shown, AGE individuals do not reject all authority, but are actually keen to embrace one they can respect and identify as their own. Moreover, this sentiment is also expressed indirectly as the AGE online space, as described above, is full of praise for local politicians and parties (FPÖ, AfD, FvD) who largely parrot the Moscow line on any foreign policy issue and maintain a favourable stance towards alleged Russian traditionalism and conservatism.²⁰⁶ An example of this approach is a German channel on X, which demonstrates favourable coverage of Karin Kneissl, a highly controversial former Minister of Foreign Affairs in Austria, who sat on boards of Russian state-owned companies and eventually moved to Saint-Petersburg. In many other instances, ardent reposting of Russian content available in local languages, such as German, via the likes of the Russia Today services curated to the German market, indicates some form of affinity with the political messaging emanating from Moscow.

The fact that Russia might now utilise the AGE milieu as a new disruptor, is to an extent supported by evidence from the United States. Over the past six years, Russia has supported secessionist movements within the US,²⁰⁷ especially the Texas Nationalist Movement, a sovereigntist movement that is focussed on Texan independence. Russian troll farms shared an interview of the movement's "foreign minister",²⁰⁸ and Russian representatives attempted to meet with the Texan sovereigntists. This attempt was relatively low-key and indicates that Moscow is still unsure of the extent to which it can meaningfully engage and work with the AGE milieu.²⁰⁹ This assertion is supported by findings from Germany and France.

The German case concerns the elements of the so-called Reichsbürger Movement. The movement perceives current-day Germany as an illegal entity. Its members grouped in the organisation "Patriotic Union" planned to attack the German parliament, which would be the first step in the process of restoring the II Reich, i.e. Germany along post-1871 lines.²¹⁰ The Union sought Russian help with their attempt at a coup d'état.²¹¹ The leader of the Patriotic Union tried to unsuccessfully reach out to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and also wrote to Vladimir Putin and introduced himself as the "ambassador" of the German Reich, asking for Russian cooperation.²¹² The PU included a Russian citizen who helped the group with attempts to reach out to Russian diplomats based in Germany.²¹³

203 See: Kacper Rekawek, "Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: The Brown-Red Cocktail," *Routledge*, 2023. ISBN 9781032043982.

204 Nicolas Hénin, – upcoming chapter in the ICCT publication on Russia's influence on the Western REMVE, forthcoming, 2024.

205 Sergio Olmos, "Key to white survival": How Putin has morphed into a far-right savior," *The Guardian*, March 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/mar/05/putin-ukraine-invasion-white-nationalists-far-right>.

206 Benjamin Teitelbaum, *War for Eternity. The Return of Traditionalism and the Rise of the Populist Right*. Penguin. London.2020.

207 Casey Michel, "American Disunion: How Russia has cultivated American secessionists and separatists in its quest to break up the US," in *The Kremlin's Malign Influence Inside the US*. Free Russia Foundation, 2021. <https://www.4freerussia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/TheKremlinsMalignInfluenceInsideTheUS.pdf>.

208 Casey Michel, "Putin's Plot to Get Texas to Secede," *Politico Magazine*, June 2015. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/06/vladimir-putin-texas-secession-119288/>.

209 In late January 2024, a false story alleging that "Putin has come forward and said that he will supply the U.S. citizens with armory to fight against our own government" gained traction in far-right/AGE circles in the U.S. It apparently broke out against the backdrop of the border crisis U.S and the effective standoff between the Texas and the federal government over the handling of the issue. Far-right and AGE groups, such as the aforementioned "God's Army" convoy, have attempted to use this crisis to their advantage. See: Jody McCreary, "False claim Putin, Russia pledged arms to Texas in dispute with US government | Fact check," *USA TODAY*, 7 February 2024, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2024/02/06/putin-weapons-promise-texas-border-fact-check/72440144007/>.

210 Jakob Guhl and Dominik Hammer, "The Reichsbürger Movement," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)*, accessed December 13, 2023. <https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/the-reichsbuerger-movement-explainer/>

211 Anton Shekhovstov, *The Kremlin Far-Right Collusion in Germany: From Fake Election Observation to False-Flag Terrorism*, Forthcoming; Jacob Guhl & Dominik Hammer, *The Reichsbürger Movement*. *Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)*. <https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/the-reichsbuerger-movement-explainer/>.

212 Thomas Fischermann et al. "Reichsbürger: Countdown zum Umsturz, [Countdown to overthrow]", *Zeit Online*, May 2023. <https://www.zeit.de/2023/19/reichsbuerger-umsturzplaene-prinz-reuss/komplettansicht>.

213 Anton Shekhovstov, "The German Far-right Plot and Russian Malign Inspiration" (2023), forthcoming.

France saw preparation for a seemingly similar plot in 2021 when Rémy Daillet, a popular figure within the French AGE milieu (whose conspiratorial forays predated the COVID-19 pandemic), attempted a coup against the French government.²¹⁴ Daillet, based in Malaysia since 2015, used his considerable online presence to rally against vaccinations, 5G, or chemtrails; and to resist the so-called “great replacement”, a bedrock of any far-right conspiracy in the 21st century; and to endorse the QAnon conspiracy. The conspiracy had a facial character as Daillet recruited the plotters through his website and Telegram channel.²¹⁵ Daillet’s link to Russia was, just like in Patriotic Union’s case, more aspirational than realistic. His plotters had a history of speaking of French “resistance fighters” and publicly urging Russia to come to their aid.²¹⁶ Daillet also used an imagined connection that he allegedly had to Russia to help recruit people into his conspiracy – this was his calling card and proof he was on the verge of a successful coup d’état.²¹⁷ Daillet has been a feature of the conspiracy since which flourished during the Yellow Vest protests²¹⁸ and then the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹⁹ He benefitted from the support of Russia Today and Sputnik, which promoted the seemingly heterogenous AGE or AGE-like groups in France. This provided these actors with a more audible voice and simultaneously, normalised their discourse amongst the French.²²⁰

214 Cécile Deffontaines, “M. Macron, nous allons vous chasser: Rémy Daillet, le complotiste qui veut faire tomber la République, [Mr. Macron, we are going to chase you away]: Rémy Daillet, the conspiracy theorist who wants to bring down the Republic”, *L’Obs*, June 8, 2021. <https://www.nouvelobs.com/societe/20210608.OBS45019/m-macron-nous-allons-vous-chasser-remy-daillet-le-complotiste-qui-veut-faire-tomber-la-republique.html>.

215 Laurent, Samuel, Damien Leloup, and Lucie Soullier. “Rémy Daillet, l’homme au cœur de la mouvance conspirationniste impliquée dans l’enlèvement de Mia, [Rémy Daillet, the man at the heart of the conspiracy “movement” involved in Mia’s kidnapping]”, *Le Monde.fr*, April 21, 2021. https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2021/04/20/ce-que-l-on-sait-de-remy-daillet-et-de-sa-nebuleuse-conspirationniste-a-l-origine-de-l-enlevement-de-mia_6077448_3224.html.

216 Sylvain Baron, “La résistance française a besoin de l’aide de la Russie, [The French resistance needs Russia’s help]”, *Cameroonvoice*, 21 March 2014. <https://cameroonvoice.com/opinion/2014/03/21/sylvain-baron-la-resistance-francaise-a-besoin-de-l-aide-de-la-russie/>.

217 Adenor, Jean-Loup. “Qui Est Rémy Daillet, Le Gourou Complotiste Suspecté d’avoir Fomenté Un Coup d’État? [Who is Rémy Daillet, the conspiracy guru suspected of plotting a coup?]”, *Marianne.Net*, October 22 2021. <https://www.marianne.net/societe/police-et-justice/qui-est-remy-daillet-le-complotiste-suspecte-davoir-fomente-un-coup-detat>.

218 AVAAZ, “Yellow Vests Flooded by Fake News: Over 100m Views of Disinformation on Facebook.” March 2019: pp. 20-25. <https://avaazimages.avaaz.org/Report%20Yellow%20Vests%20FINAL.pdf>.

219 EU DisinfoLab, “From Infodemic to Information War - EU DisinfoLab.” 17 June 2022. <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/from-infodemic-to-information-war/>.

220 See: Nicolas Hénin, – upcoming chapter in the ICCT publication on Russia’s influence on the Western REMVE, forthcoming, 2024.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

Although AGE is broadly understood as a new threat, the lack of a common understanding of what it actually refers to constitutes a major challenge. This report has addressed this gap to some extent by shedding light on various official and experts' views on the phenomenon in a domestic and transnational context. Although some similarities in content and narratives with the far-right were highlighted, AGE is a distinct movement, underpinned by a general sense of rebellion against the establishment and a perceived evil elite, although indeed often tainted with the likes of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-liberalism, anti-feminism, or anti-LGBT discourses that are shared with the far-right. Furthermore, compared with the far-right, the AGE milieu has a less coherent ideology and less clear views on its ultimate worldview, following the demise of the evil elite. The research team's data suggests that conspiracy theories are pivotal for today's manifestation of the anti-government threat. From QAnon to the Great Reset or the 'Wall Street Apes,' to denying the legality of Western states in sovereigntist narratives, various theories underpin and exacerbate the AGE grievances, more so than among far-right extremist groups. It is essential in this regard that conspiracy theories are numerous and circulate easily worldwide, although the AGE milieu "localises" them turning it into local or regional (within countries and across countries) cause célèbres related to a given place, entity, and individual.

AGE's local focus is further solidified by issues such as common languages, and geographical and cultural proximity. It is much easier for AGE individuals from neighbouring regions or countries to connect online and offline, especially if they speak the same language. As with most globalised movements, narratives travel more easily from English to other languages than the other way around. Indeed, the QAnon conspiracy travels only from the English side of the AGE divide towards the linguistic peripheries and not vice versa. For example, German conspiracies do not proliferate in the likes of the American AGE milieu. AGE is a very heterogeneous and fluid movement, as well as a leaderless one. It seeks to provide answers to every issue or grievance, to everyone and everywhere. It constantly instrumentalises other issues and crises to remain relevant post-COVID-19. As such, it is highly adaptive and, to some extent, it could be defined as a totalitarian movement.

With regards to AGE's offline consequences, these are difficult to predict. However, the latest threat assessment by the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (NCTV) in the Netherlands raised the terror level from 3 to 4, indicating a substantial threat of a terrorist attack, and referenced the sovereigntists and their propensity for violence as one element in the decision that drove the increased threat level.²²¹ In addition, interviewees pointed out the potential for violence against persons that represent the establishment by anti-government extremists. Some individuals with military or security backgrounds seek out these milieus and are actively recruited into them, thus increasing AGE's capabilities and potential for violence. The 'sovereign' branch of AGE should be prioritised as a potential threat in this respect as its members have already come into violent clashes with representatives of the so-called establishment. In its extremes, this could produce situations which the US saw throughout the 1990s, similar to the Ruby Ridge and Waco sieges,²²² in which high numbers of security personnel from different US security agencies effectively battled a given cohort of AGE or proto-AGE individuals in prolonged standoffs and gunfights with disastrous results. Effectively, these results fuelled the rise of a movement which is very much present in the US 30 years after its inception. At the same time, the relationship between AGE and some political parties and representatives also poses a threat as it mainstreams and legitimises the AGE narratives and grievances that underpin this

²²¹ See National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (NCTV). "NCTV verhoogt dreigingsniveau terrorisme van 3 naar 4, [NCTV raises terrorism threat level from 3 to 4]", 1 December 2023. <https://www.nctv.nl/actueel/nieuws/2023/12/12/nctv-verhoogt-dreigingsniveau-terrorisme-van-3-naar-4>.

²²² Both sieges were directly caused by situations in which federal law enforcement agents either wished to arrest or search property of the later besieged individuals. The spur for these actions were federal firearms charges as Randy Weaver of Ruby Ridge and the Branch Davidians of Waco were suspected of illegal purchase and conversion of weapons.

movement. This report also concludes that AGE is transnational in nature, especially in terms of a Western flow of ideas between proponents of this phenomenon. Some of this is spontaneous and involves proponents of other extremist movements, such as the far-right, and happens especially in online spaces catering to AGE proponents' national, regional, or linguistic preferences (e.g., in German in the DACH region). Just as the pandemic was the global boost behind the creation or coalescence of the AGE milieu, its members consume and then transplant news or inspiration from around the world into their online and offline communities and networks. However, this has not led to the creation of international AGE alliances. An exception to this rule is some of the so-called sovereigntists who are more active in attempting to forge meaningful connections to one another across borders. Moreover, online spaces attempt to coordinate global AGE protests in a step beyond a mere exchange of ideas online. The resources needed to maintain these spaces, which feature automated messaging in numerous languages, and a propensity towards pro-Russia narratives, may suggest the involvement of a state actor or a private actor curating these on behalf of Moscow.

The AGE online ecosystem favourably covers and refers to Russia, especially when reposting and repeating the content and narratives by agencies such as Russia Today. Thus, an emerging dynamic might be unveiling itself in Europe with AGE constituting a new means of disruption in the West for Russia. As this report indicated, such a situation would be of immense interest and gain to Russia, which has previously utilised the far-right/REMVE milieu in the role of disruptor before the onset of the pandemic. It has now become clear that some AGE groups, individuals, or networks have attempted to reach out to Moscow for its approval or support. So far, however, Russia's position towards these movements remains ambivalent and overall discrete.

AGE should not be seen as monolithic, but more as a broad spectrum which produces multiple online harms such as hate speech, mis/disinformation, conspiracy theories, and extremist content. Therefore, what is vital is that just as it is imperative that AGE is understood as a continuum with wide-ranging groups and actors being part of this movement, they will also have varying propensities to violence. Consequently, the online material related to AGE should also be distinguished from another with regards to how it manifests and, subsequently, what type of 'online harm' it comprises. This will influence what online countermeasures should be taken to address the threat from AGE. Currently, most material related to this threat that is removed or moderated alternatively, for instance, by downranking it from algorithms, is conspiratorial. Other rhetoric, which may have the risk of being harmful, remains online mainly and operates in this grey space of "lawful but awful" content. This report does not want to suggest removing all such material. There are risks to content removal, such as a migration of users to more protected and harder-to-monitor platforms, as well as furthering someone's radicalisation process by being seen to censor them.

Regarding the role of tech companies and their response, this material does not seem to fall within the remit of the online regulation applicable in the United States (or where it does, it remains unmoderated online). In the European Union, tech companies are therefore left with the responsibility of adjudicating what is acceptable online and what is not. Downranking that is, omitting certain content from algorithms, appears to be an effective measure to counter conspiracy-related material - YouTube noted that after they downranked QAnon content, views dropped by 70 percent.²²³ Another measure commonly taken by platforms is that of labelling information when it is considered false. This, for instance, refers to the fact checks put on COVID-19 information on X, previously Twitter.²²⁴ Whereas there is a lot of debate on the efficacy of fact-checking,²²⁵ it shows another tool that tech companies have at their disposal to counter anti-government and/

223 YouTube Official Blog, "Managing harmful conspiracy theories on YouTube." 15 October 2020. Managing harmful conspiracy theories on YouTube - YouTube Blog.

224 Roth, Yael and Nick Pickles. "Updating our approach to misleading information." *X Blog*, 11 May 2020. Updating our approach to misleading information (twitter.com).

225 Stewart E. Detecting Fake News: Two Problems for Content Moderation. *Philos Technol.* 2021;34(4):923-940. doi: 10.1007/s13347-021-00442-x. Epub 2021 Feb 11. PMID: 33589871; PMCID: PMC7875590.

or conspiracy rhetoric. However, it is imperative that when utilising these, definitions of borderline content are precise and standardised, and any moderation of such material should be included in tech companies' transparency reports.²²⁶ Otherwise, tech companies would be left to determine what acceptable speech is online, impacting human rights and freedom of expression, without the ability of any oversight or accountability. Overarchingly, this report has shown that the complexity of tackling AGE is unprecedented and enormous. This is due to the fact that the milieu has a predominantly non-violent nature with angry and frustrated citizens that are law-abiding and non-violent. To securitise this group of people would only alienate them further and represent a disproportionate response. On the other hand, those that are more violent in nature, whether through harassment, lone actor incidents, incitement to violence or by rejecting society and attempting the creation of parallel ones, may become legitimate subjects of interest for a given country's CT or P/CVE architecture. To differentiate between those peaceful and those with a propensity to violence, and to eliminate the risk of over-securitisation, represents the crux of the problem. To better prepare an adequate policy response, this report concludes with a string of recommendations on the issue.

Recommendations

AGE is a symptom, and not a cause, of a range of issues currently plaguing Western societies namely: decreasing trust in government and its efficiency, alleged or real backsliding of democracy(ies), and societal polarisation. Addressing AGE would, therefore, require a whole-of-government/society approach, which is most certainly a long-term effort.

- Carefully frame the issue and do not over-securitise AGE: AGE comes in different manifestations, some more radical and potentially more violent than others. Careful consideration should be given to when a manifestation or threat should be called extremism or violent extremism. Otherwise, there is a risk of confirming the AGE victimisation narrative, as well as looking at this issue through a security lens only, hence missing its broader social underpinnings.
- Invest in strategic communications to regain trust in institutions: Governments should invest in rebuilding trust in their institutions. While this should naturally result from their work and interactions with citizens, it could also be facilitated through tailored strategic communications campaigns.
- Support domestic P/CVE services' efforts to update their knowledge and practices: The more violent elements of AGE, or members of parallel societies could benefit from a P/CVE approach with a view to prevent violent extremism or facilitate a way out of these movements. Particular attention should be given to sovereign movements.
- Develop and introduce a P/CVE-informed anti-AGE campaign within the military and the police forces. This research demonstrated that individuals with military/security backgrounds are of particular interest to some members of the AGE milieu and can be of particular concern in the hypothesis of violent actions. Successful P/CVE campaigns targeting military and police force personnel to prevent radicalisation towards far-right ideologies should be expanded or mimicked to create one for AGE tropes and narratives.
- Engage with rural areas: Ensure that campaigns are focussed and distributed in rural areas, as our research found that AGE is not limited to urban centres.
- Analyse international law when it comes to the creation of 'sovereign'/parallel societies. As the creation of such parallel societies goes against domestic laws, it is essential to also

²²⁶ MacDonald, Stuart & Katy Vaughan. "Moderating borderline content while respecting fundamental values." *Policy & Internet*, September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.376>.

consider the legal implications on a more transnational level, as this issue is now affecting a rising number of countries.

- Seek assistance from third-sector organisations in anti-AGE activities. Some third-sector organisations can be used as reference points or subcontracted by different governments and international bodies to help fight the online dimension of AGE.
- Keep a gender lens when analysing AGE: It is essential that AGE is understood through a lens of gender mainstreaming, to ensure that stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity do not negatively influence perceptions of AGE, or the individuals that ascribe to AGE. This is particularly important as this study has shown that there is a great number of women in this movement and that misogyny, transphobia, and anti-LGBTQIA+ are a pivotal part of AGE' ideology.
- Design, or fund the creation of a taxonomy of how AGE manifests itself online. Whereas this report showed that material related to AGE predominantly can be referred to as borderline content, it also manifests itself through conspiracy theories (or false information), discrimination and hate speech, or in rare instances, credible and imminent threats to life. It is imperative that rather than addressing all these forms of speech associated with AGE as monolithic, different moderation strategies are developed and then implemented for each.
- Refrain from designing and promoting policies that aim to remove all content related to AGE and invest in alternatives to content removal. Research shows that content removal can lead to unintended consequences, such as users migrating to more niche and uncooperative platforms that are harder to monitor for law enforcement, and users feeling censored, which may aid their radicalisation process.²²⁷ Instead, the focus should fall on downranking as a countermeasure.
- Provide input and emphasise the need for specificity in definitions when it comes to the moderation of borderline content. In terms of borderline content, it is imperative that specific definitions are used to ensure that alternatives to content removal, such as downranking or redirecting, are standardised.
- Establish connections with the tech landscape, not just the more prominent tech companies but also smaller ones. To ensure that in the worst-case scenarios, the material gets removed per government request (as allowed in the TCO and DSA), it is important to ensure that contact points for each tech company are established by different governments, so they are better prepared for sending takedown requests.
- Ensure future AI legislation is fit to counter harms that overlap with the AGE milieu online. Whereas this report has not analysed the use of AI by AGE online individuals or networks, given AI legislation has just come into force, policymakers have the difficult task of ensuring that this will be fit for purpose so that it can provide guidance on the legality of artificially created content that furthers online harms close to AGE, such as conspiracy theory-related rhetoric, disinformation, and borderline content. This is of special importance in 2024, which is a year of elections on both sides of the Atlantic.

²²⁷ Joe Whittaker & Anne Craanen, *The Unintended Consequences of Content Removal*, Forthcoming, 2024.

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