



Responding to Anti-Institutionalism in the Netherlands: Challenges and Opportunities for (Local) Policymakers

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International Centre for
Counter-Terrorism

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Abstract

The issue of anti-institutionalism and anti-institutional violent extremism was placed on the policy agenda in the Netherlands in June 2023 with the publication of the report on anti-institutional extremism by the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD). In this report, we will explore the concept and phenomenon, and focus on what anti-institutionalism looks like in the Netherlands. Part of the phenomenon is also the movement of sovereign citizens. They pose a challenge that increasingly more municipalities have to deal with. We question whether it makes sense to qualify anti-institutionalism as a form of (violent) extremism by referencing the academic definitional debate and by comparing the various models to study radicalisation with the way anti-institutionalism is materialising in the Netherlands. After studying the radicalisation process and the underlying push and pull factors of anti-institutionalism, we shift our focus to the national and local response mechanisms and policy frameworks. We conclude with the identification of key challenges and opportunities for prevention response mechanisms.

Keywords: Anti-institutional extremism, radicalisation, the Netherlands, P/CVE, local response

Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing number of citizens have protested against the government and the perceived ruling elite - a combination of legitimate concerns and irrational grievances fuelled by conspiracy narratives. Particularly, the movements driven by conspiracy narratives blaming an 'evil elite' for a variety of problems fall in the category of so-called anti-institutional movements. In the Netherlands, the increase in support of anti-institutional movements particularly became visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Different groups with different grievances and agendas rallied together in response to the lockdown measures taken by the government for economic reasons and because they were protesting the curbing of their freedoms.¹ Others were particularly protesting the vaccination policies or climate policies, or were more involved in spreading mis/disinformation about the war in Ukraine. Farmers organised various massive protests to vocalise their disagreement with the Dutch/European policies to reduce nitrogen emissions, resulting in blocked highways, intimidating politicians, and destroying the entrance of a government building with a tractor.² Meanwhile, Extinction Rebellion (an international activist movement advocating against the loss of biodiversity and climate change) organised weekly blockades of a highway, resulting in massive police engagement in order to clear the highway again by removing the protesters one by one.

While all of these groups were protesting different government policies, some public services started to question when certain behaviours would no longer qualify as (merely) activist or radical, but would enter the realm of (violent) extremism. Evidently, the expectation would be that an answer to this question would offer (local) governments more guidance on how to respond, to counter and to prevent.

The issue of anti-institutionalism, and anti-institutional (violent) extremism as it came to be labelled in the Netherlands, gained policy focus in June 2023 with the publication of the report on anti-institutional extremism by the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD).³ The AIVD considers anti-institutional extremism to be behaviour with the objective to commit non-violent or violent acts to undermine the democratic rule of law based on the notion that our society is under the control of an (international) evil elite, comprised of governments, media and scientist, who have a secret agenda and aim to suppress the ordinary people and enslave or even kill them.⁴

The key concern of the AIVD is that this is currently the most popular extremist narrative in the Netherlands, with a great potential to further increase in numbers of supporters and with a long-term undermining effect on democratic society. According to the AIVD, approximately 100,000 individuals in the Netherlands are supporters of anti-institutional extremism. The key question we consider here is whether anti-institutionalism, as it manifests itself in the Netherlands, can be qualified as extremism, and if so, whether current national and local policies countering and preventing (violent) extremism are adequate.

In chapter two, we will focus on what anti-institutionalism looks like in the Netherlands. Part of the phenomenon is also the movement of sovereign citizens. Sovereign citizens believe they are not subject to government authority, but instead abide by their interpretation of natural law

¹ Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid (NCTV), *De verschillende gezichten van de coronaprotesten*, 14 April 2021, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2021/04/14/tk-bijlage-nctv-fenomeenanalyse-coronaprotesten>.

² Bàrbara Molas, 'Dutch Flags and Maple Leaves: How Conspiracy Theories Created a Transnational Far-Right', *ICCT Perspective*, 10 October 2022, <https://icct.nl/publication/dutch-flags-and-maple-leaves-how-conspiracy-theories-created-transnational-far-right>.

³ AIVD, *Anti-institutioneel extremisme in Nederland: een ernstige dreiging voor de democratische rechtsorde*, [Anti-institutional extremism in the Netherlands: a serious threat to the democratic rule of law], 2023, <https://www.aivd.nl/documenten/publicaties/2023/05/25/anti-institutioneel-extremisme-in-nederland-een-ernstige-dreiging-voor-de-democratische-rechtsorde>. An English translation will become available in due course.

⁴ AIVD, *Extremisme*, [Extremism], <https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/extremisme>; AIVD, *Wat is anti-institutioneel extremisme?*, [What is anti-institutional Extremism?] <https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/extremisme/vraag-en-antwoord/wat-is-anti-institutioneel-extremisme>.

or a selection of historical legal principles.⁵ They pose a challenge that an increasing number of municipalities must deal with. In chapter three, we question whether it is appropriate to qualify anti-institutionalism as a form of (violent) extremism, by analysing the academic definitional debate. In chapter four, we will look into the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the radicalisation to anti-institutional extremism, comparing the various models of radicalisation with the way anti-institutionalism is materialising in the Netherlands, and studying the underlying push and pull factors of anti-institutionalism as they materialise in the Netherlands. In chapter five, we shift our focus to the national and local response mechanisms and policy frameworks in the Netherlands. In chapter six, we conclude by identifying key challenges and opportunities for prevention response mechanisms.

Methodology

For the research of this article, we used a mixed methodology. We used academic and grey literature to research the definitional question. For the analysis of the current policies, we looked at the relevant policy documents. For the overview of the manifestations of anti-institutionalism in the Netherlands, as well as the analysis of the push and pull factors, we referred to quantitative and qualitative data based on different survey reports and general polls, media posts and court cases. The analysis of the current experiences in the municipalities is based on the results of a quick scan and on semi-structured interviews with policy officers at the municipalities and other key stakeholders. The quick scan was conducted among representatives of six municipalities.⁶ Interviews were conducted with representatives of the cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, Delft, Gouda, and Súd-West Fryslân, and representatives of the Dutch National Police, representatives of the Association of Dutch Municipalities, and the Flemish Association of Municipalities, and with a representative of the National Coordinator on for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV). The interviews have been anonymised.

5 Menso Hartgers, “Sovereign citizen groups in the Netherlands are arming themselves: Cause for concern?”, *ICCT Analysis*, 16 July 2024, <https://icct.nl/publication/sovereign-citizen-groups-netherlands-are-arming-themselves-cause-concern>.

6 See also for the outcome of the quick scan: Bibi van Ginkel, *Mapping local threat perceptions and policy responses regarding right-wing extremism, mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarization, and anti-establishment sentiments*, The Glocal Connection – Platform for Shared Security and Human Security Collective, November 2022, <https://www.hscollective.org/assets/Uploads/Report-Mapping-local-threat-perceptions-and-policy-responses.pdf>.

Manifestations of Anti-Institutionalism in the Netherlands

In this chapter, we discuss the manifestations of anti-institutionalism in the Netherlands, including the manifestations of sovereign citizens. We address the wide diversity of agendas driving the supporters, and the conspiracies behind the ideology, the *modus operandi*, and the risks of escalation into violence.

The stark rise in support for anti-institutionalism in the Netherlands dates back to the COVID-19 pandemic. The narratives behind this rise, however, differed: some believed the story of the pandemic was a hoax, some considered the vaccination campaign to be a policy to inject people with microchips or illnesses, some believed the virus could be cured with a healthy lifestyle and love, and others were of the conviction that social distancing measures and lock-down policies were installed to curb their freedoms and rights and to gain economic control over certain sectors of society. One of the organisations driving these various narratives was *Samen voor Nederland* [United for the Netherlands].⁷ Supporters found each other during ‘spontaneous outside coffee-drinking moments’ in times when social gatherings were not allowed due to social distancing regulations. Some of these events led to big protests, where the instructions to keep social distancing were oftentimes ignored, leading to confrontations with the police.⁸

With such diversity of agendas, it is still interesting to note how they nevertheless seem to unite in their overarching objective, not to reject democracy but to replace the current system with a “different interpretation of the system and its institutions, like the government, media, or technology”.⁹ Frens, Van Buuren, and Bakker refer to the concept of empty signifiers introduced by Ernest Laclau¹⁰ to explain how these different groups unite their protests despite these differences in underlying agendas: “Empty signifiers are words or phrases that will be frequently used by a group that seeks to gain a voice in the political sphere, but that are in essence empty.”¹¹ They subsequently refer to examples in narratives used like “the people”, “the elite”, and “the system”, which are not specifically defined in order to unite as many supporters as possible through the empty narratives. Reflecting on the situation in the Netherlands, below we distinguish different narratives driving the actions, as well as the different levels of action inspired by these narratives. In addition, the level of organisation of the supporters and the way they formulate their agenda shows different levels of commitment, morphing from single-issue movements into political organisations with a political programme.

Indeed, while some movements started as issue-specific anti-institutionalism during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as *Viruswaanzin* [Virus Insanity] or *Samen voor Nederland* [United for the Netherlands], some of them later on grew into more ideologically driven movements. *Samen voor Nederland*, for instance, is now presenting itself as a new political party with a programme for all issues of the government, yet based on the idea that the Netherlands has to free itself from the so-called anti-human agenda of the UN and World Economic Forum.¹² The terminology ‘anti-human’ refers to the common narrative with these kind of organisations that they want to be treated as human being of flesh and blood, and that that should thus be central to any kind of policy making. The party participated in the national elections but was unsuccessful during the last general election for the members of the House of Representatives and did not acquire enough votes for a seat in Parliament.

7 Samen voor Nederland, <https://samen-voor-nederland.nl/>.

8 Sebastiaan Quekel, “Ruim 400 arrestaties bij rellen na demonstratie tegen coronamaatregelen”, *Algemeen Dagblad*, 21 juni 2020, <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/ruim-400-arrestaties-na-rellen-bij-demonstratie-tegen-coronamaatregelen~a6e5892f/>.

9 Isabelle Frens, Jelle van Buuren, and Edwin Bakker, “Rallying Around Empty Signifiers: Understanding and Defining Anti-Government Protest in the Netherlands”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Issue XVII, Volume 2 June 2023: 69.

10 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso 2005): 98-99.

11 Frens, et al., “Rallying Around Empty Signifiers”. p. 62.

12 Samen voor Nederland, *Partijprogramma Vrijheid, Liefde, Democratie!* [Party programme Freedom, Love, Democracy!], <https://samen-voor-nederland.nl/partijprogramma/>.

As mentioned, according to the AIVD, approximately 100,000 individuals in the Netherlands are supporters of anti-institutional extremism. In addition to the 100,000 supporters of anti-institutional extremism identified by the AIVD, a larger group is more generally questioning the institutions, stating something is wrong, and calling for people to ‘wake up’ and not blindly trust the government. This illustrates the diversity of levels in both commitment to a specific conspiracy narrative, and actions following on from such narratives. Furthermore, the scale of the actions also differs with individual initiatives on one side of the spectrum, versus large-scale organised events at the other end.

In the last years, several municipalities in the Netherlands have had experiences with different manifestations of anti-institutionalism, including some that have turned violent. Some of the COVID-19 demonstrations turned into violent confrontations with the police, particularly if hooligans hijacked these protests to cause mayhem and looting expeditions. Some clear examples of this were registered in Amsterdam and Eindhoven in January 2021,¹³ and in Rotterdam in November 2021.¹⁴ During the demonstrations that turned into riots, the municipalities had to rely on emergency orders, declaring particular no-go areas.¹⁵ Considering the fact that many protesters called out that certain rights, such as the right to demonstrate, were being curtailed, mayors were placed in a difficult position, having to explain the restrictive measures in order to preserve public order and security.

In addition to these large-scale events, public figures like politicians and experts have become the target of several groups both through their online hate campaigns, as well as through physical intimidation, making it necessary to put in place severe protection measures.¹⁶ Threats against politicians have increased significantly over the last few years. In 2022, *Team Bedreigde Politici* [Team Threatened Politicians], a specialised unit of the police department in The Hague, where the Parliament resides, registered 1,125 incidents. This was twice as much as the year before. The number of threats that were eventually considered criminal in court showed an even steeper increase from 373 in 2021 to 889 in 2022.¹⁷ Furthermore, both online and public statements calling for civil arrests and the need to set up ‘tribunals’ to prosecute those public figures that shaped the COVID-19 policies have contributed to further polarisation in the public debate.¹⁸

In early 2023, the City of Amsterdam drafted a “Radicalisation and Extremism” overview of information stemming from the various security and safety partners of the city in order to get a better understanding of the diversity of the threats.¹⁹ These partners included professionals operating in different city departments, and implementing partners. The input was also received through interviews with academics, and information based on the comprehensive person-centred approach [*Integrale Persoonsgerichte Aanpak Radicalisering (PGA)*] and the Radicalisation

13 “Dutch police clash with anti-lockdown protesters in 2 cities,” *Associate Press*, 24 January 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/netherlands-health-coronavirus-pandemic-riots-amsterdam-550ce0c260d45131181727fbf41e8340>

14 “Rotterdam police clash with rioters as COVID-19 protest turns violent,” *BBC*, 20 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59355950>

15 Binnenlands Bestuur, 24 January 2021, <https://www.binnenlandsbestuur.nl/bestuur-en-organisatie/demonstraties-eindhoven-en-amsterdam-opgebroken>

16 Death threats were made for instance against the director of the RIVM, Jaap van Dissel, Minister of Health Hugo de Jonge and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sigrid Kaag. “Leven Van Dissel op zijn kop door bedreigingen complotdenkers,” [Life of Van Dissel turned upside down by conspiracy threats], *NOS*, 10 June 2022, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2432200-leven-van-dissel-op-zijn-kop-door-bedreigingen-complotdenkers>; “Bedreiger van voormalig VWS minister de Jonge veroordeeld tot twee jaar cel” [Person who threatened old minister of Health Welfare and Sport de Jonge convicted to a two-year sentence], *NOS*, 15 February 2022, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2417479-bedreiger-van-voormalig-vws-minister-de-jonge-veroordeeld-tot-twee-jaar-cel>; “Kaag in Rechtbank tegenover bedreiger: ‘Bang dat er iets met gezin gebeurt’ [Kaag in court to person who threatened her: ‘Scared something will happen to my family’], *RTL Nieuws*, 12 October 2021, <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/nederland/artikel/5259922/bedreigingen-doodsbedreigingen-politici-rechtszaak-rechtbank>

17 Openbaar Ministerie, *Niet eerder zoveel meldingen van bedreigingen politici* [Never before this many alerts of threats to politicians], 22 May 2023, <https://www.om.nl/actueel/nieuws/2023/05/22/niet-eerder-zoveel-meldingen-van-bedreiging-politici>

18 “Van Houwelingen (Forum voor Democratie) dreigt Sjoerdsma (D66) met tribunalen” [van Houwelingen (Forum voor Democratie) threatens Sjoerdsma (D66) with tribunals], *NOS* 17 November 2021, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2406005-van-houwelingen-fvd-dreigt-sjoerdsma-d66-met-tribunalen>

19 Gemeente Amsterdam, *Informatiebeeld Radicalisering en Extremisme* [Information radicalisation and extremism], June 2023, [Informatiebeeld Radicalisering en Extremisme \(raadsinformatie.nl\)](https://informatiebeeld.radicalisering-en-extremisme.raadsinformatie.nl).

Support Centre [*Steunpunt Radicalisering*]. It showed a rather diffuse picture of threats based on diverse streams of actions and behaviours, confirming the national picture the AIVD was referring to. It also mentioned the ‘salad bar ideology’²⁰ where people compose their own ideology out of loose fragments of theories and beliefs. Regarding manifestations of anti-institutionalism, the overview mentions that many hateful expressions towards city officials often remain within the limits of the law, but the multitude of negative responses can be very intimidating, burdensome or even traumatic for the target. The expressed hate (online and offline) often focuses on them as persons instead of on the institute, organisation, or policy they represent and is accompanied by strong hostility or even dehumanisation. In some cases, people are hindered in their work. This largely takes place online, whether or not through coordinated mass (hate) actions.

Another remarkable incident, where conspiracy-driven anti-institutionalist extremists took action, manifested itself in a small village in the Netherlands, called Bodegraven-Reeuwijk. The incident is referred to as ‘Pizzagate in the Lowlands’; a reference to the ‘Pizzagate’ conspiracy in the US which went viral during the presidential elections of 2016, during which supporters of the conspiracy claimed that staff members from the Hillary Clinton team were involved in a human trafficking network and paedophile network run from the basement of a pizzeria. A conspiracy was spread by social media claiming that there were graves of children who had become victims of a satanic paedophilia network at the cemetery of Bodegraven-Reeuwijk. Due to the fact that this disinformation was spread rapidly over the internet, dozens of believers of this conspiracy theory visited Bodegraven-Reeuwijk, leaving flowers at the graves with notes claiming they wanted justice for the victims.²¹ The mayor of Bodegraven-Reeuwijk worked closely with the police and the prosecutor’s office to put an end to these actions, and even filed a lawsuit against Twitter (now X), demanding the removal of all messages related to the conspiracy theory.²² The court, however, ruled that Twitter had done enough by removing the original accounts of the individuals spreading the conspiracy, as well as the specific tweets and the retweets. The court did not consider it reasonable to demand Twitter to remove all related tweets.²³ The prosecutor also started a criminal case against the individuals who posted the original message, which resulted in a conviction for death threats and incitement.²⁴

In 2020 and 2021, throughout the Netherlands, there were incidents of arson of 5G transmission towers by anti-5G activists. Conspiracy theories were circulating on the internet claiming the radiation of the transmission towers is responsible for the spread of all kinds of diseases, including cancer and COVID-19. This conspiracy originates from the United Kingdom.²⁵

While the examples above represent actions of people who still participate in society, there is also a trend of people who look for ways to withdraw from society, and who use different tactics to do so. This trend was also identified in an analysis by the Dutch Police.²⁶ In recent years, many Dutch municipalities received letters from citizens demanding to withdraw their citizenship.²⁷ Individuals

20 The Soufan Center, *Intelbrief: The Counterterrorism Challenge of the “Salad Bar” Ideologies*, 29 March 2021, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-march-29/>.

21 Ellen McVeigh, “Satan in de Lage Landen: Hoe Bodegraven het centrum werd van een helse complottheorie” [Satan in the Netherlands: How Bodegraven became the centre of a hellish conspiracy], *Dare to be Grey*, 2021, <https://www.daretobegrey.com/verhalen/satan-in-de-lage-landen>.

22 Rudy Bouma and Nanko Boelman “Bodegraven eist verwijdering tweets die gemeenten linken aan ‘pedomisdrijven’ [Bodegraven demands tweets that link municipalities to paedophile crimes to be deleted]”, *NOS*, 16 September 2022, <https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2444834-bodegraven-eist-verwijdering-tweets-die-gemeente-linken-aan-pedomisdrijven>.

23 *Rechtspraak, Vorderingen van gemeente Bodegraven tegen Twitter afgewezen* [Claims municipality of Bodegraven to Twitter rejected], 4 October 2022, <https://www.rechtspraak.nl/Organisatie-en-contact/Organisatie/Rechtbanken/Rechtbank-Den-Haag/Nieuws/Paginas/Vorderingen-van-gemeente-Bodegraven-Reeuwijk-tegen-Twitter-afgewezen.aspx#:~:text=Vorderingen%20van%20gemeente%20Bodegraven%2DReeuwijk%20tegen%20Twitter%20afgewezen,-Den%20Haag%2C%2004&text=De%20voorzieningenrechter%20heeft%20vandaag%20in,van%20haar%20platform%20te%20verwijderen>.

24 “Complotdenkers krijgen celstraf voor doodsb bedreiging en opruiing [Conspiracy theorists sentenced to prison for death threats and incitement]”, *NOS*, 30 June 2022, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2434712-complotdenkers-krijgen-celstraf-voor-doodsbedreiging-en-opruiing>.

25 “Waarom worden door heel Nederland zendmasten in brand gestoken? [Why are transmission towers throughout the Netherlands set on fire?]”, *NOS*, 11 April 2020, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2330187-waarom-worden-door-heel-nederland-zendmasten-in-brand-gestoken>.

26 Interview 6, 3 April 2023; Analysis shared by the Knowledge Unit of the Dutch Police during a closed session, November 2023.

27 Wim Heesterbeek, “Coronaprotest: mensen verklaren zich stateloos met brief aan gemeente [COVID-demonstration: people declare

oftentimes used forms they bought and downloaded from an organisation called *Burgerfront* [Citizen Front], where information was also provided on how not to vote in the elections.²⁸ These so-called sovereign citizens oftentimes reject the rule of law-based democratic society and the bureaucratic system, refusing to pay taxes, for instance,²⁹ and withdrawing their children from the regular schooling system.³⁰ Due to the fact that they refuse to pay taxes and, for example, electricity bills, debts might build up which leads to aggravating problems and complicated challenges for municipalities that are confronted with these issues. Bailiffs having to collect these debts have also noticed an increase of these cases.³¹ A minority within this group of sovereign citizens goes as far as to showcase problematic (violent) behaviour potentially breaking the law due to violent threats.³² Arrests made in September 2024 of four supporters of the so-called Common Law Netherlands Earth group, who were suspected of plotting a terrorist attack against the mayor of Deventer, is a clear example.³³ Death threats against the mayor of Gorinchem provide another example, leading to the arrest of a man who claimed to be a sovereign citizen.³⁴

In the northern province of Fryslân, a municipality commissioned a report to analyse the letters they received from citizens withdrawing from society.³⁵ The municipality of Súdwest Fryslân has also experienced manifestations of sovereign citizens, such as the request to withdraw citizenship, refusal to show a photo ID when asked by the police, and the refusal to pay taxes.³⁶ It is furthermore possible, although not limited to this region, to pay with their own currency, the Florijn, which is accepted in some enterprises.³⁷ The introduction of a new currency – after the old Dutch currency used before the introduction of the Euro – is a way to step out of the economical and monetary governance system. With ninety thousand inhabitants, the municipality received 135 letters from at least 69 different authors in the period between January 2021 and May 2023. Within this selection of letters, 51 letters were unique, with a total of 439 pages. A large portion of the letters were downloadable forms regarding cancelling the government's authority over them. These forms are offered online by various organisations or companies. Approximately seventy percent of the letters reflected a request to act or not to act to the municipality, and in about half of the letters the authors threatened the municipality with 'legal steps' or fines. Only two out of the 51 unique letters concerned threats of violence. The main themes addressed in these letters concerned the fact that the citizens no longer want to fall under the jurisdiction of the municipality, sometimes also claiming financial fines and stating the municipality has committed

themselves sovereign through letters to their municipality]" *Omroep Brabant*, 3 December 2021, <https://www.omroepbrabant.nl/nieuws/4001177/coronaprotest-mensen-verklaren-zich-stateloos-met-brief-aan-gemeente>.

28 Burgerfront, *Formulier voor opzeggen burgerschap* [Form for cancellation of citizenship] <https://www.burgerfront.nl>.

29 A self-proclaimed lawyer, Youri Plate, set up an organisation called 'Vereniging Juridisch Kantoor Plate', <https://www.youriplate.nl>, which offered advice on how to send back tax bills with argumentation why individuals did not need to pay tax. The Dutch Tax office filed a complaint against him because they received more than 8000 letters of citizens refusing to pay tax; "'Autonomen' luisteren naar niets of niemand, en dan staat de deurwaarder op de stoep [Sovereigns: listen to nothing and no one, and there comes the bailiff]", *RTL Nieuws*, 25 July 2023 <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/nederland/artikel/5398090/principiele-wanbetaler-autonoom-soeverein-deurwaarder-schulden>. The court recently ruled that he may no longer provide this kind of disinformation. "Rechter: autonoom Youri P. moet stoppen met misleidend advies [Judge: Sovereign Youri P. must stop deceiving advice]", *Volkskrant*, 8 November 2023, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/rechter-autonoom-youri-p-moet-stoppen-met-misleidend-advies~bf286869/>.

30 According to research by Radio programme Argos, in 2021-2022, 1771 children were taken out of school for homeschooling, which is a significant increase compared to the 575 in 2013-2014. Argos, *Geen school voor mijn kind* [No school for my kid], 22 April 2023, <https://www.vpro.nl/argos/media/luister/argos-radio/onderwerpen/2023/geen-school-voor-mijn-kind.html>.

31 "Autonomen, luisteren naar niets of niemand"; "Stefano Nocco over burgers die de Nederlandse wet niet meer erkennen [Stefano Nocco on citizens that no longer acknowledge Dutch Law]", *Mr Online*, 18 September 2023, <https://www.mr-online.nl/stefano-nocco-over-burgers-die-de-nederlandse-wet-niet-meer-erkennen/>.

32 The NCTV estimates that a couple of dozen belong to a group considered to be able to use violence. NCTV, *Met de rug naar de Samenleving: Een analyse van de soevereinenbeweging in Nederland* [Backs against society: an analysis of the sovereignty movement in the Netherlands], 9 April 2024, p. 16, <https://www.nctv.nl/documenten/publicaties/2024/04/09/fenomeenanalyse-soevereinenbeweging-in-nederland-met-de-rug-naar-de-samenleving>.

33 Pieter Hotse Smit, "Soevereine 'terroristen' hadden burgemeester Ron König van Deventer in het vizier voor aanslag [Sovereign terrorists targeted mayor of Deventer Ron König]", *Volkskrant*, 19 September 2024, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland/soevereine-terroristen-hadden-burgemeester-van-deventer-in-vizier-voor-aanslag~b1d1686a/>.

34 "Burgemeester Gorinchem op de markt bedreigd met de dood [Death threats tot he Mayor of Gorinchem on the market]", *NOS*, 8 November 2023, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2023/19/minste-vertrouwen-in-tweede-kamer-in-10-jaar-tijd>

35 ANNE+, "Geen eenduidig antwoord; Hoe je als gemeente kunt omgaan met brieven met daarin soeverein gedachtengoed [No simple answer: how municipalities can deal with letters containing sovereign sentiments]", 2024. This report was commissioned by municipality Súdwest Fryslân.

36 Interview 8, 24 April 2023.

37 It is possible to exchange Euros for Florijnen at the website 'Betalen met Florijn', <https://betalenmetflorijn.nl/deelnemers/>.

criminal acts. In a few letters, the author claims that not the municipality but God is the highest authority. A direct link with other conspiracy theories is not clear, although some refer to the vaccination policies, the Great Reset,³⁸ and 5G transmission towers.

Due to the worrisome rise of individuals withdrawing from society in the Netherlands, the President of the Dutch Supreme Court, in an unprecedented public statement, sounded the alarm in December 2023 about the increasingly rising number of citizens who declare themselves to be sovereign or autonomous. The estimated number of sovereign or autonomous citizens is anticipated to be in the multiple tens of thousands according to the NCTV.³⁹ The Supreme Court also received thousands of letters from citizens who “cancelled their contract with the State” and claimed no longer having to abide by the Dutch legal or tax system.⁴⁰

Summarising the various manifestations of anti-institutionalism in the Netherlands, it is fair to state that there are similarities with manifestations of anti-institutionalism in neighbouring countries. In an ICCT report published in 2024, in which a comparison was made of manifestations of anti-government extremism in four European countries and the US, the key takeaways of these manifestations were that despite being fluid and heterogeneous in nature, and oftentimes operated in leaderless constructions, most of them were driven by some kind of conspiracy, became more prominently vocal during the COVID-19 pandemic, and if action were taken it could be online, as well as offline in more or less violent manner.⁴¹

38 The Great Reset is a policy proposal developed in the context of the World Economic Forum with the objective to ‘reset’ world economy with a more sustainable agenda, beyond the objective of mere profits. Conspiracy theories suggest that ‘The Great Reset’ was a way for the financial elite to undermine sovereign rights of countries, and to control the people.

39 NCTV, *Met de rug naar de Samenleving*.

40 “Hoge Raad bezorgt om ‘autonomen’: ‘Kwetsbare burgers die verder wegzakken’ [Supreme Court concerned with ‘sovereign citizens’: vulnerable citizens that subside further]”, NOS, 2 December 2023, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2500032-hoge-raad-bezorgd-over-autonomen-kwetsbare-burgers-die-verder-wegzakken>.

41 Bàrbara Molas, Anne Craanen, Sabrina Tripodi, Kacper Rękawek, and Thomas Renard, “Anti-government threats and their transnational connections”, *ICCT Report*, March 2024, p. 20, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/anti-government-threats-and-their-transnational-connections>.

A New Form of Extremism?

Anti-government movements are not new as a concept.⁴² However, recently, national and international actors have considered these movements as a ‘new’ form of extremism, adding them to the portfolio of security risks and threats to follow. In the publication of the AIVD’s report in 2023,⁴³ the term anti-institutionalism was used for the first time, which previously has been referred to as anti-governmental extremism (AGE).⁴⁴ The EU Counter-terrorism Coordinator also recently published a policy brief on violent anti-system extremism, a term used “to refer to those who believe that the use of violence is justified but who do not openly subscribe to another extremist ideology (even if in many cases they borrow elements from other ideologies),”⁴⁵ interestingly defining it by stating what it is not, rather than what it is. Another acronym often used is ASAGE, which stands for anti-system and anti-governmental extremism, whereas others rather refer to anti-establishment extremism.⁴⁶

All conceptual terms aside, meanwhile there is ample discussion on whether this phenomenon can be referred to as extremism at all,⁴⁷ and/or whether this is really a new form of extremism with a *sui generis* character. In this chapter, we explore this question by revisiting the definitions used in the literature on (violent) extremism, elaborating on the scope of anti-institutionalism as it is observed by the intelligence service, and by using various established models of radicalisation to understand the different stages of the process to assess whether indeed anti-institutionalism can actually be considered to be a form of extremism. The insights in this section respond to two key questions: firstly, can anti-institutionalism be qualified as extremism? And secondly, is anti-institutional extremism truly different than other forms of extremism, meriting a completely different approach to counter and prevent it?

Anti-Institutionalism as a Form of Extremism – the Definitional Debate

Defining the concept of extremism or violent extremism has generally proven to be very difficult. Academic literature offers a plethora of definitions, that do not always clearly distinguish between the non-violent and the violent aspects of extremism. Alex Schmid refers to the definition of Peter Coleman and Andrea Bartoli, who describe extremism as “[...]activities (beliefs, attitudes, feelings, actions, strategies) of a character far removed from the ordinary,”⁴⁸ to point out that a benchmark is needed to establish what the ‘ordinary’ behaviour should be from which the extremist behaviour is so far removed.⁴⁹ Making qualifications regarding what does and does not constitute extremism depends to a great extent on whether one can easily distinguish the main objective pursued. If the end goal of these forms of actions is directed at completely overturning the existing governance system, one undoubtedly can qualify that as extremism. However, such a conclusion might not as easily be drawn when completely overthrowing the system is not the main objective per se. The question, in that case, is whether it wouldn’t be more helpful to refer to this kind of behaviour as radical rather than non-violent extremism? This brings us to a key indicator that should help differentiate between unwelcome (from a government’s perspective)

42 Tore Bjørgo and Kurt Braddock, “Anti-government extremism: A new threat?”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 16, Issue 6, December 2022, p. 2.

43 AIVD, *Anti-institutioneel extremisme in Nederland*.

44 AIVD, *Jaarverslag 2020*, (2020), file:///C:/Users/BibivanGinkellCCT/Downloads/AIVD+Annual+Report+2020.pdf.

45 Council of the European Union, *EU CTC policy brief 13177-2022*, 10 October 2022, p. 2.

46 Important to distinguish this wave with the first manifestations of anti-institutionalism in the 19th Century and beginning of the 20th Century, when it mostly concerned left-wing anarchism, see: Bjørgo and Braddock, “Anti-government extremism: A new threat?”, p. 2.

47 Bjørgo and Braddock, “Anti-government extremism: A new threat” p. 2.

48 Peter T. Coleman and Andrea Bartoli, *Addressing Extremism*, White Paper. New York: The International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution, Columbia University, p. 1; http://www.tc.columbia.edu/i/a/document/9386_White_Paper_2_Extremism_030809.pdf; accessed 28 April 2014.

49 Alex Schmid, ‘Violent and non-violent extremism: two sides of the same coin’, *ICCT Research paper*, May 2014, p. 11, <https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-01/ICCT-Schmid-Violent-Non-Violent-Extremism-May-2014.pdf>.

radical civil disobedience, and extremist behaviour, where the aim to pressure or overturn the existing governance model is the distinguishing factor. To a large extent, this distinction follows the same dichotomy as the legal versus illegal behaviour distinction.

While this distinction is relevant when assessing the objective of the groups or individuals, it runs short when assessing the *modus operandi* used. In that respect, the distinction made by Bjørge and Ravndal between radical and extreme right perhaps proves to be more helpful. According to their definition, “what distinguishes extremists from radicals, is that extremists reject democracy and promote violence or other illegal or non-democratic means as legitimate.”⁵⁰ This would be in line with the comments made by Schmid in 2018 in his piece reflecting on his classic work from 2013 entitled *Radicalisation, De-radicalisation, Counter-radicalisation: A conceptual discussion and literature review*, where he expressed his frustration with the lack of clear distinction between radicalism and extremism.⁵¹ Further delving into this distinction, however, is Astrid Bötticher. She offers ten clear distinctions between radicalism and extremism. Some are worth mentioning here, as they are particularly helpful in characterising the radical versus extremist character of anti-institutionalism. She states that

“[e]xtremism is, by its very nature, anti-democratic; it seeks to abolish constitutional democracy and the rule of law. Radicalism is emancipatory and not per se anti-democratic. (...) Radicalism stands in rebellious opposition against the establishment; extremism, on the other hand, is directed not only against the establishment but against all those who do not embrace its dogmatic recipe for a transformation of society. (...) Radical movements tend to use political violence pragmatically and on a selective basis, while extremist movements consider violence against their enemies as a legitimate form of political action. [Therefore, c]ontrary to radicalism, extremism is extreme in both its goals and the choice of means to reach them.”

To summarise, she states “radicalism can be situated on the edges of democratic consensus while extremism lies outside”.⁵²

This brings us to the second part of the key question: when does extremism qualify as violent extremism? While an act of terrorism would definitely fall under the umbrella of violent extremism, what constitutes ‘the violent aspect’ is once again contested. After all, a cyberattack damaging a digital network of an organisation or a state might be considered as such, while it does not include the old-fashioned dagger and sword or bullets and bombs kind of violence. The same is true for ancillary terrorist crimes like recruitment or incitement. Non-violent extremism, by some, is considered an activist strategy.⁵³ This might include political actions, road blockages, hunger strikes, demonstrations, or other acts of civil disobedience. For the Dutch AIVD, who list examples of violent and non-violent extremist behaviour, key similarities would be that both are non-democratic in nature.⁵⁴ This is an important distinction, as hunger strikes or demonstrations as such would not likely fall under this category.

50 Tore Bjørge and Jacob Assland Ravndal, *Extreme-Right Violence and Terrorism: Concepts, Patterns, and Responses*, ICCT Policy Brief, September 2019, p. 3, <https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/import/publication/Extreme-Right-Violence-and-Terrorism-Concepts-Patterns-and-Responses-4.pdf>

51 Alex Schmid, “Reflecting on: Radicalisation, De-radicalisation, Counter-radicalisation: A conceptual discussion and literature review”, *ICCT Analysis*, 21 August 2018, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/reflecting-radicalisation-de-radicalisation-and-counter-radicalisation>; Reference is made to Alex Schmid, “Radicalisation, De-radicalisation, Counter-radicalisation: A conceptual discussion and literature review”, *ICCT Research paper*, March 2013, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/radicalisation-de-radicalisation-counter-radicalisation-conceptual-discussion-and>

52 Astrid Bötticher, “Towards Academic Consensus Definitions of Radicalism and Extremism”, in: *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 11, Issue 4 (2017), pp. 73-77, https://pt.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-06/research%20note%202_3.pdf; Reference is made in this article to the Doctoral Dissertation by Astrid Bötticher in which she surveys many definitions and historical uses of the term: *Radikalismus und Extremismus. Konzeptualisierung und Differenzierung zweier umstrittener Begriffe in der deutschen Diskussion*. Leiden: ISGA, 2017.

53 See: Alex Schmid, “Violent and non-violent extremism: two sides of the same coin”, p. 13.

54 AIVD, *Extremisme*, <https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/extremisme>.

Defining a phenomenon as (violent) extremism is not without consequences. After all, doing so immediately qualifies it as a security issue and brings it into the realm of security and intelligence services. Furthermore, it might have an impact on the policies and interventions designed to counter and prevent it.

In an ICCT report on AGE comparing the situation in various countries, the authors conclude that AGE has indeed become the catch-all phrase for this phenomenon, mainly characterised by the conspiracies driving the supporters, even though these conspiracies might spur from a wide variety of different socio-political and ideological background. They, however, also state that

“[s]ome 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.”⁵⁵

What is interesting is that in this report, the authors state that some manifestations are extreme, and not all are per se directed to completely overthrow the democratic rule of law. In line with the analysis of the academic debate on the distinction between radicalism and extremism, one may question, therefore, whether the term anti-government extremism, or AGE, is the best term, as it no longer distinguishes between radical and extreme behaviour on a personal level.

For the situation in the Netherlands, it is interesting to consider the Dutch definition. The Dutch intelligence service AIVD considers (violent) extremist behaviour to be “prepared based on ideological motives to commit non-violent or violent acts to undermine the democratic rule of law”.⁵⁶ The main characteristic of anti-institutional extremism, according to the AIVD, is the fact that supporters believe that our society is under the control of an (international) evil elite, comprised of governments, media and scientists, who have a secret agenda and aim to suppress the ordinary people, and enslave or even kill them.⁵⁷ The element of rejection of democracy and the promotion of (violent) actions to reach that goal also seems to take centre stage.⁵⁸

While the term anti-institutionalism perhaps better reflects the characteristics of the phenomenon than the catch-all phrase of AGE that is so commonly used, and considering that supporters not only oppose governments but also other institutions considered elite, the key question remains whether both the aim and the means of the manifestations of anti-institutionalism are indeed extreme. Reflecting on the description of anti-institutionalism in the Netherlands in the previous paragraph, and the findings in the ICCT report on AGE,⁵⁹ the academic debate might suggest that not all manifestations are, per se, anti-democratic, and, therefore, extremist, even though they can all be considered emancipatory. Furthermore, some supporters of the phenomenon might consider their actions to be a pragmatic form of political violence, and not driven by a dogmatic legitimisation. However, for those propagating violence and those supporters of the sovereign movement who are completely rejecting democratic society, it is clear that the label of (violent) extremism is adequate. Overall, it would thus make sense to make a clear distinction between anti-institutional radicalism and anti-institutional extremism.

⁵⁵ Molas et al., “Anti-government threats” p. 2.

⁵⁶ AIVD website, *Extremisme*, [Extremism] <https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/extremisme>,

⁵⁷ AIVD website, *Wat is anti-institutioneel extremisme?*, [What is anti-institutional extremism?] <https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/extremisme/vraag-en-antwoord/wat-is-anti-institutioneel-extremisme>.

⁵⁸ AIVD, *Anti-institutioneel extremisme in Nederland: een ernstige dreiging voor de democratische rechtsorde*, (2023), <https://www.aivd.nl/documenten/publicaties/2023/05/25/anti-institutioneel-extremisme-in-nederland-een-ernstige-dreiging-voor-de-democratische-rechtsorde>.

⁵⁹ Molas et al., “Anti-government threats” p. 2.

The Scope of Anti-Institutionalism

The central question in this paragraph is whether anti-institutional extremism is truly different from other forms of extremism. The answer to this question is important in order to subsequently question whether, if completely different, it would merit a completely different approach to counter and prevent it.

The AIVD distinguishes anti-institutional extremism from right-wing extremism, even though there is some overlap. The AIVD explains that, in general, anti-institutional extremism, unlike right-wing extremism, is not antisemitic and does not believe that the white race is superior. Jackson, by referencing the description used by the FBI for various categories of domestic violent extremism, explains that anti-government extremism can have supporters coming from both left-wing (anarchist) extremism as well as right-wing extremism.⁶⁰

As mentioned before, a narrative is only considered to be extremist by the AIVD if it leads to non-violent or violent actions aimed at undermining democracy. In his analysis, Jackson explains there are two main types of what he calls anti-government extremism, namely the ideologically driven and the issue-specific driven one.⁶¹ The latter is more related to specific issues of government policy that the supporters are opposing, such as the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, or abortion or immigration policies. In theory, these issues can be solved in a pragmatic way, while for ideologically-driven extremism, pragmatic solutions are not sufficient to change the extremist mindset. In practice, supporters might also easily shift from one main issue to another.

Although the overall narrative of an evil elite ruling the world is clear and widely shared among the supporters, the various sub-narratives can differ significantly and are supported by different groups. These sub-narratives are often based on different conspiracy theories and fuelled by deliberately disseminated disinformation⁶² pushed through various online social media channels and through public statements in mainstream media with the intent to harm, negatively influence the debate, and undermine (trust in) democracy. The AIVD, in its report on anti-institutional extremism, distinguishes several sub-narratives:

- those believing that the evil elite is also involved in child trafficking, child abuse and satanic paedophilia,
- those who believe the evil elite is pushing a woke agenda,⁶³
- those believing a cultural Marxist agenda is being pushed by the government,
- those who believe the war with the evil elite is connected to the battle between Good and Evil with links to Christianity, Agnosticism and New Age, also referred to as conspiritualism, and
- those who retreat in a parallel society, also referred to as sovereign citizens.⁶⁴

The last category is sometimes also referred to as autonomous citizens, although strictly speaking there is a difference. Autonomous citizens believe the national legislation is not applicable to them, and the government has no power over them. They want to live in freedom and withdraw from the system. They will no longer fulfil financial obligations, since they believe they never agreed to such commitment. This includes paying taxes. However, they do not completely withdraw from

⁶⁰ Sam Jackson, "What is Anti-government extremism?", in: *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 16, Issue 6, December 2022, p. 11.

⁶¹ Jackson, "What is Anti-government extremism?", p. 10.

⁶² Disinformation can be distinguished from misinformation based on the fact that the one disseminating the information knows the information is false. With misinformation, the person disseminating the false information may believe it is true. Both disinformation and misinformation, when disseminated in this context, have the intent to harm, negatively undermine the debate, and undermine democracy.

⁶³ Although a generic definition does not exist, a woke agenda is generally associated with a progressive agenda in matters related to identity and race.

⁶⁴ AIVD, *Anti-institutioneel extremisme in Nederland*.

the system, and continue to claim benefits. Sovereign citizens go further and reject any external authority. They withdraw their citizenship and might, for instance, issue their own passports.⁶⁵

Among the sovereign/autonomous citizens, there is a category called the Preppers,⁶⁶ sometimes referred to as ‘survivalists’. Preppers are preparing for the end of the world or another social catastrophe, like an economic crisis, terrorist attack or government collapse, by stockpiling water, food, medicines, sometimes weapons, and survival gear, and training and planning for survival or escape. Many are associated with right-wing extremist beliefs and the accelerationist movement, but some are associated with left-wing ideas, mostly related to climate change. This group, in general, is still considered to keep ties with society and the government, albeit being prepared to rely on their own survival.

A more concerning category, that is increasingly keeping municipalities and the police busy, concerns individuals that are actually challenging the government’s legitimacy by, for instance, resisting and not obeying regulations, refusing to pay tax, developing an alternative policy/legal system, namely the ‘common law system’, while others argue that maritime law applies, since they are ‘humans from flesh and blood born from the water in their mother’s womb’.⁶⁷ They would also be challenging the government’s power to use violence, and/or even discussing the legitimacy to use violence against government officials. Some within this group consider the Dutch state to be a commercial enterprise, of which the police are a franchise, and since they themselves have no contract with this enterprise, they consider the police or any other authority to have no jurisdiction. They might also appoint their own sheriffs,⁶⁸ call for citizens’ arrests, and or set up or call for people’s tribunals.⁶⁹ They would oftentimes deregister as citizens from their municipalities, issue their own passports, and consider their house to be an embassy of their own state.

The Dutch Counterterrorism Coordinator estimates there are multiple tens of thousands of individuals that fit the qualification of sovereign citizens.⁷⁰ Among this quickly increasing group, a small group prepares itself defensively for potential planned confrontations with the authorities and is considered to be potentially violent.⁷¹ They estimate a couple of hundred might belong to this potentially violent group. In contrast to the supporters of anti-institutionalism, there is a higher degree of organisation among this group. Particularly, the group called Common Law Netherlands Earth has been inciting group members to use violence, advocating civil arrests to fight back against the government and law enforcement.⁷² In the Netherlands, the police have recently made several arrests of supporters of this group for membership in a terrorist organisation and plotting to commit attacks. During house searches, multiple firearms were found. These developments suggest that there is a possible trend towards more violent actions initiated by this group of sovereign citizens and anti-institutional extremists.⁷³

In addition to these forms of potentially more organised violence, there is also the risk of violent confrontations that can occur spontaneously when bailiffs visit the house of sovereign citizens to collect debts, or incidental attacks of individuals who harass journalists, health care professionals, and politicians in the name of their anti-institutional beliefs.⁷⁴

65 On the difference between autonomous and sovereign citizens, see:

<https://www.involon.nl/belastingen/artikelen/257/de+autonome+en+soevereine+mens+wil+geen+belasting+betalen>.

66 Website of a Dutch preppers group: <https://preppers.nl/>.

67 Common Law Nederland (CLN), Common Law NL – De Hoogste Wet van het Land. (commonlawnederland.earth).

68 CLN, *The Common Law Sheriff Training Handbook*, 2023. <https://commonlawnederland.earth/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/CL-Vredes-Officiieren-Trainingshandleiding.pdf>.

69 CLN, *Instructions on how to file a claim with a people’s tribunal*, 2023, <https://commonlawnederland.earth/volkstribunaal/>.

70 NCTV, *Met de rug naar de Samenleving; Een analyse van de soevereinenbeweging in Nederland*, 9 April 2024, p.13, <https://www.nctv.nl/documenten/publicaties/2024/04/09/phenomeenanalyse-soevereinenbeweging-in-nederland-met-de-rug-naar-de-samenleving>.

71 NCTV, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorism Nederland*, nr. 59, 12 December 2023, p. 31, <https://www.nctv.nl/onderwerpen/dtn/documenten/publicaties/2023/12/12/dreigingsbeeld-terrorisme-nederland-december-2023>.

72 Molas et al., “Anti-government threats” p. 23.

73 Hartgers, “Sovereign Citizens are arming themselves”.

74 Molas et al., “Anti-government threats” p.23.

In conclusion, even though anti-institutional supporters and even sovereign citizens do not necessarily share a cohesive ideology, except for the fact that they are against the current government and elite institutions, they are mostly driven by conspiracy theories believing an evil elite is ruling the country with an agenda to suppress the population or worse. There are links between international like-minded groups who share their conspiracies online and inspire each other. Yet, different than, for instance, jihadist extremist organisations, these groups lack clear leadership.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the group of supporters is growing and, because of their anti-democratic ideas seriously undermining societies, causing concerns for governments and their security services.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

Radicalisation Processes and Underlying Factors of Anti-Institutionalism

Radicalisation Phases of Anti-Institutionalism

After reflecting on the definition and the scope of anti-institutionalism, it is also interesting to reflect on the processes of radicalisation vis-à-vis anti-institutionalism. This is especially of importance to help understand the way to prevent or counter it. Is the way anti-institutionalism manifests itself different from other forms of extremism? Over the years, various theories have been developed to deconstruct the process of radicalisation and to understand the drivers and motivational factors of radicalised individuals (see text box below).

Models of radicalisation processes

While most scholars agree that factors on the micro-, meso-, and macro-level play a role in the process of an individual or a group, the gradual process of radicalisation is described differently by various authors. Although these models have been criticised for suggesting there is only a linear development in radicalisation, while reality teaches us otherwise,⁷⁶ there is merit in the models for at least recognising the different stages.

Randy Borum's model of 2003, lists four steps of radicalisation to terrorism:

1. Recognition by the pre-radicalised individual or group that an event or condition is wrong ('it's not right');
2. Followed by the framing of the event or condition as selectively unjust ('it's not fair');
3. The third step contains of the blaming of others for the perceived injustice ('it's your fault');
4. The final step involves the demonisation of the 'other' ('you're evil').⁷⁷

Moghadam used a prolonged staircase model to describe the individuals' cognitive understanding of the structural circumstances in which they find themselves in the six different phases. On the ground floor, the individual will ask themselves whether they are treated fairly. In the next phase, the individual might seek ways to change their situation, but might feel frustrated because they perceive their social mobility to be blocked and their voices unheard. This frustration causes the upward movement on the stairs to the phase where frustration is projected on an outward group that can be blamed for their perceived unjust situation. In the next phase, this outward frustration leads to disengagement of society and moral engagement with like-minded people. The narrative constructed in this phase might also rationalise resistance and possibly the use of violence. In the next phase, the individual gets more involved in and organisational structure where this resistance takes and where the adagium 'you are either with us or against us' is the rule. In the final stage, individuals from within this organisation get recruited to use violence.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ James Khalil, John Horgan, and Martine Zeuthen, "The Attitudes-Behaviours Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism," in: *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34 no. 3 (2022).

⁷⁷ Randy Borum, "Understanding the terrorist mindset", *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 72, 7 (2003), pp. 7-10.

⁷⁸ Fathali M. Moghadam, "De-radicalisation and the Staircase from Terrorism", in David Canter (Ed.), *The Faces of Terrorism: Multidisciplinary Perspective* (New York: John Wiley, 2009), pp. 278-79.

Wiktorowicz, furthermore, introduced the notion of a ‘cognitive opening’ to understand why an individual all of a sudden is interested in a particular ideology or worldview, and which distinguishes the ones radicalising from those who might find themselves in similar circumstances, yet do not radicalise.⁷⁹

Finally, it is helpful to study the pyramid model of McCauley and Moskalenko to explain “political radicalisation as a change in beliefs, feelings, and action toward support and sacrifice for intergroup conflict”.⁸⁰ The top of the pyramid, the so-called ‘radicals’, is associated with increased commitment yet lesser numbers of individuals involved, and the lowest level with a large base of ‘sympathisers’ of the beliefs and feelings (such as distrust, injustice etc). While those at the bottom of the pyramid do not use or condone violence, they provide the fertile ground for further radicalisation. One level higher in the pyramid, the so-called ‘supporters’, you find those who do not commit violence themselves but legitimise the use of it for the shared cause. On the third level, where the group becomes smaller again, the so-called ‘activists’ offer more tangible support in the form of recruitment or political or financial support. The top, finally, consists of those committing the terrorist violence.

Alex Schmid, in a research paper in 2013, questioned whether the process of radicalisation would always lead to radicalism as a political programme. He reconceptualised radicalisation as a socialisation and mobilisation process, defining it as

“an individual or collective (group) process whereby, usually in a situation of political polarisation, normal practices of dialogue, compromise and tolerance between political actors and groups with diverging interests are abandoned by one or both sides in a conflict dyad in favour of a growing commitment to engage in confrontational tactics of conflict-waging. These can include either (i) the use of (nonviolent) pressure and coercion, (ii) various forms of political violence other than terrorism or (iii) acts of violent extremism in the form of terrorism and war crimes. The process is, on the side of rebel factions, generally accompanied by an ideological socialization away from mainstream or status quo-oriented positions towards more radical or extremist positions involving a dichotomous world view and the acceptance of an alternative focal point of political mobilization outside the dominant political order as the existing system is no longer recognized as appropriate or legitimate.”⁸¹

The various available models to study the phases of radicalisation (see text box) are not without criticism,⁸² as they suggest a linear process, which lacks the evidentiary support. They might also suggest that there is only progression into one direction, whereas going down on the ladder, and becoming less of a risk is not taken into account. The authors agree with this criticism, yet still find merit in reflecting on these steps in the models, but merely to provide a theoretical background to assessing the various degrees of anti-institutionalist extremism.

When discussing various phases in the process of radicalisation in relation to anti-institutionalism, one can definitely recognise a phase in which people are, in general, questioning the institutions, which could be identified as the first phase of radicalisation. On social media, this questioning of the institutions or the establishment can be seen, for instance, when people are posting

79 Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*, (Lanham, Md.: Lowman & Littlefield), 2005.

80 Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko. “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20, 3 (2008), pp. 415-433, at 428.

81 Alex. P. Schmid, “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague* 4, no. 2 (2013), p. 19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2013.1.02>

82 See, for instance: James Khalil, John Horgan, and Martine Zeuthen, ‘The Attitudes-Behaviours Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism’, in: *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, 3 (2022).

comments regarding events or statements questioning the credibility of data and the authenticity or independence of individuals. In this phase, they are not offering alternative facts, theories or solutions, but merely doubting what is offered as the truth. A hashtag that often features in this phase, is #justaskingquestions (or #JAQ), which might seem innocent, but this form of scepticism can easily turn into denial of facts.

Various public polls indeed show that there is a sharp decrease of trust in the government and institutions. Particularly, the outcomes of the poll by the *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek* (CBS) [Central Bureau of Statistics] in the last quarter of 2022 showed that of respondents over fifteen years of age, only 25 percent trusted Parliament, and only 21 percent trusted politicians in general.⁸³ This is the lowest point since the CBS started to measure this in 2012. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, in the first quarter of 2020, trust in politicians was 31 percent and 44 percent in Parliament. It might well be that COVID, for many has functioned as the cognitive opening as described by Wiktorowicz.⁸⁴

When zooming in on the poll data, it is interesting to note that trust in police and judges scores amongst the highest outcomes with 77 percent, and local government (municipalities) with fifty percent also score much higher than the central government.⁸⁵ The decrease of trust in institutions is in line with the perceptions of municipalities that vertical polarisation is becoming a bigger problem than horizontal polarisation in society.⁸⁶ After years of dealing with horizontal polarisation, when different groups are opposing each other in society, dealing with vertical polarisation where the divide is rather between the population and the government, demands a different approach. A quick scan conducted among Dutch municipalities nevertheless showed that the perceptions regarding trust in municipalities are still higher than in the central government.⁸⁷

Cognisant of the fact that various scandals came to light where the government made serious mistakes at the cost of several groups in the population,⁸⁸ – including the natural gas extractions from the north of the Netherlands, causing earthquakes which damaged houses,⁸⁹ as well as the systemic discrimination in the automated procedures of the government when issuing social services – it is understandable that among certain groups of the population, trust in the government is lower than in the rest of the country, and feelings or perceptions of injustice and

83 Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, *Onderzoek Sociale Samenhang en Welzijn*, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2023/19/minste-vertrouwen-in-tweede-kamer-in-10-jaar-tijd>.

84 Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*.

85 Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, *Onderzoek Sociale Samenhang en Welzijn*.

86 Bibi van Ginkel, *Mapping local threat perceptions and policy responses regarding right-wing extremism, mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarization, and anti-establishment sentiments*, The Glocal Connection – Platform for Shared Security and Human Security Collective, November 2022, <https://www.hscollective.org/assets/Uploads/Report-Mapping-local-threat-perceptions-and-policy-responses.pdf>.

87 van Ginkel, *Mapping local threat perceptions*.

88 One of the big scandals concerned the Childcare benefits affair, where for years parents were accused of having provided fraudulent information, leading to enormous fines, which drove numerous families into debts, losing their homes, their jobs, and sometimes even their children, as Childcare decided parents were no longer able to care for their children. It turned out that there was an algorithm in the system that based on ethnic background or nationality would label individuals with a risk profile for fraud. This ultimately led to a Parliamentary Inquiry Report, *Ongekend Onrecht*, [Unprecedented Injustice] https://www.tweedekamer.nl/sites/default/files/atoms/files/20201217_eindverslag_parlementaire_ondervragingscommissie_kinderopvangtoeslag.pdf; See, for more information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dutch_childcare_benefits_scandal. Another similar scandal concerned ethnic profiling with the government's organisation that provided student grants. Those students with a migration background were significantly more accused of fraud due to algorithm programmed in the system. See: "Studenten met migratieachtergrond opvallend vaak beschuldigd van fraude [Students with migration background often accused of fraud]", NOS, 21 June 2023, <https://nos.nl/op3/artikel/2479700-studenten-met-migratieachtergrond-opvallend-vaak-beschuldigd-van-fraude-minister-wil-systeem-grondig-nagaan>.

89 The scandal ultimately led to a Parliamentary Inquiry Report, *Groningers boven Gas*, https://www.tweedekamer.nl/sites/default/files/2023-07/Groningers-before-gas_conclusions-and-recommendations-2.pdf.

unfair treatment are prevalent.⁹⁰ The group of people that shares these feelings is large, which is the reason that the AIVD considers the potential for further growth of this already popular extremist narrative to be a serious concern.⁹¹

A group that is more advanced in the process of radicalisation points the finger to those individuals or institutions that they blame for the current 'bad' situation. They, for instance, blame the government for not listening to alternative theories on how to contain the problem of COVID, or deal with the economic consequences. They might also become frustrated because their actions to rectify the situation are in vain, such as the protest against the restriction measures during the COVID-pandemic organised by *Samen voor Nederland* [United for the Netherlands]. And they become even more agitated when dismissed as crazy or, in Dutch, as '*wappies*' ['loony'].

While at first, one could still speak of activism and radical ideas, it entered the extremist narrative sphere once those who are considered to blame, were also considered 'evil'. Referenced conspiracy theories speak of a greater plan, for instance, designed by the World Economic Forum or people like Bill Gates, who would use the Great Reset or microchips injected by COVID-19 vaccinations to control the people. The political leader of the far-right political party '*Forum voor Democratie*' (FvD) [Forum for Democracy] even stated that we are governed by lizards,⁹² which is a reference to the antisemitic conspiracy theory of David Icke.⁹³

There is also a group that further distances themselves from society, and feels (violent) action is needed. In this phase, one generally sees a tendency for more engagement with like-minded people. Reflecting on the findings in the report of the AIVD,⁹⁴ the findings of Dutch police on sovereign citizens and the perceptions of Dutch municipalities, there is indeed a group who believes in an evil elite, and plans or supports actions. The actions in this stage can mostly be qualified as demonstrations, sometimes riots, arson of 5G transition towers, online and offline threats, and calls for tribunals.

A particularly concerning statement made in November 2022, in which Member of Parliament Gideon van Meijeren (FvD) stated he "hoped there would be a revolutionary movement, not to be mistaken with a protest movement, which would - so to speak - march on Parliament," also stating he would not be surprised if violent means were used on such an occasion. This statement resembles the statements made by Donald Trump, eventually resulting in the raid of Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021. The prosecutor's office is taking these statements very seriously, and is prosecuting van Meijeren for incitement to violence.⁹⁵

Although the AIVD concludes that the supporters of anti-institutionalism (with the exception of the sovereign movement) seldom explicitly call for violent actions,⁹⁶ the narratives do, however, set a frame in which the evil elite is considered to be the enemy with which they are at war. Some followers might nevertheless consider this narrative to legitimise violence, and sometimes it just takes a lone actor operating solo, or a few actors operating from within a group of (rioting)

90 Adviescommissie Versterken Weerbaarheid Democratische Rechtsorde, *Koester de Democratie! Een dringende oproep om de democratische rechtsorde weer voor iederéén te laten werken* [Cherish Democracy! An urgent call to make democratic rule of law work for everyone again], 2 November 2023, p. 28, https://adviescommissie-vwdr.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/23-0472-Eindrapport-Adviescommissie_VWDR_V3IM_online2nov_V3.pdf.

91 AIVD, *Anti-institutioneel extremisme in Nederland: een ernstige dreiging voor de democratische rechtsorde*, (2023), <https://www.aivd.nl/documenten/publicaties/2023/05/25/anti-institutioneel-extremisme-in-nederland-een-ernstige-dreiging-voor-de-democratische-rechtsorde>. p. 31.

92 Wilmer Heck, "Complotdenker David Icke spreekt al jaren van 'reptielen'", *NRC*, 18 October 2022, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/10/18/david-icke-spreekt-al-jaren-over-reptielen-a4145595?t=1707224887>.

93 Wikipedia on David Icke, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Icke.

94 AIVD, *Anti-institutioneel extremisme in Nederland*.

95 "OM vervolgt Tweede Kamerlid Gideon van Meijeren (FvD) voor opruiing [Public Prosecution goes after Member of Parliament Gideon van Meijeren]", *NOS*, 12 September 2023, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2490200-om-vervolgt-tweede-kamerlid-gideon-van-meijeren-fvd-voor-opruiing>

96 AIVD, *Anti-institutioneel extremisme in Nederland*.

demonstrators to move the needle in the wrong direction. Furthermore, it is important to look at recent data from the *Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau* (SCP) [The Netherlands Institute for Social Research] which shows that one out of every three people surveyed feel stronger actions are needed to oppose policies they do not agree with, and one out every five even consider that the whole system needs to be taken down. Although most would support these stronger actions, only a minority claims to be willing to take these actions: one out of every eight respondents considers the chance that they will take action themselves very likely.⁹⁷

Meanwhile, the actions and narratives have an undermining effect on democracy and trust in the institutions, which in the long term might have a destabilising effect on our society. A small but radical minority within the sovereign citizen movement is looking for confrontations with authorities, calling for citizen arrests, calling for tribunals, and appointing sheriffs, who they believe should be allowed to carry and use weapons. Some are preparing for a necessary armed defence and creating small militias. If the level of organisation increases, the potential for violence will most likely also increase.⁹⁸

However, the level of organisation within the group of anti-institutional extremists is still in a very embryonic stage. Some supporters of the sovereign citizen movement are getting more organised, setting up their own websites and facilitating their members with downloadable documents that they can use to unregister from their municipalities or to refuse to pay taxes. Although the level of organisation is still not very sophisticated, it is important to be cognisant of various factors that might influence this, such as the transatlantic developments, in particular the developments in the United States,⁹⁹ the developments in neighbouring states such as Germany¹⁰⁰ and Belgium,¹⁰¹ and the speed with which disinformation spreads over the internet.

Push and Pull Factors Influencing Anti-Institutionalist Radicalisation

In order to understand what factors influence individuals who support this ideology, as well as those who are in general starting to question the decisions of the government or institutions, it is important to assess the potential push and pull factors. With push factors, we refer to the root causes and drivers of violent extremism, which can relate to objectively verifiable aspects such as economic marginalisation, but also subjective aspects such as perceptions of injustice, humiliation, and exclusion. With pull factors we refer to the existence and appeal of a terrorist group that needs a support base for its existence and in order to recruit people for committing terrorist activities. Ultimately, each radicalisation process is unique and push and pull factors are highly individualised. Yet, identifying and understanding factors that can play a role is key to effective prevention.

Based on several interviews with representatives of various Dutch municipalities discussing *inter alia* underlying factors¹⁰² and general polls on the trust of citizens in the government,¹⁰³ as well as

97 Emily Miltenburg, Bram Geurkink, Lex Herweijer, and Josje den Ridder, "Burgerperspectieven", *Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau*, Bericht 3, 2023, file:///C:/Users/BibivanGinkell/CCT/Downloads/Burgerperspectieven+Bericht+3+2023.pdf.

98 NCTV, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland*.

99 Kaitlyn Robinson, Iris Malone, and Martha Crenshaw, "Countering Far-Right Anti-Government Extremism in the United States", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume XVII, Issue 1 (2023).

100 Florian Hartleb, Paul Schliefssteiner, and Christophe 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*, Vol. XVII, Issue 1, (2023).

101 In September 2022, the Belgian police in an attempt to arrest a prepper for illegal possession of weapons for a planning an attack, killed the suspect. He belonged to the sovereign citizen movement. A year later, several of his followers are prosecuted for illegal possession of weapons and planning a terrorist attack. See: "Een jaar geleden Yannick V. doodgeschoten door de politie, volgende maand verschijnen drie andere "preppers" voor de rechter [One year ago, Yannick V fatally shot by police, next month, three 'preppers' will appear in court], *VRT*, <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2023/09/28/doomsday-preppers-yannick-v-november-rechtszaak/>

102 Interviews have been conducted with representatives of the cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, Delft, Gouda, Bodegraven-Reeuwijk and Súd-West Fryslân.

103 Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, *Onderzoek Sociale Samenhang en Welzijn*.

analyses of underlying conspiracy theories, we have made an initial assessment of these push and pull factors. Clearly, more research would be necessary to fully understand these driving factors by doing surveys and interviews with those supporting anti-institutional ideologies. Nevertheless, these initial findings provide us with enough input to answer the question of whether this form of extremism merits a fundamentally different approach to counter and prevent it than other forms of extremism.

Push factors towards anti-institutionalism

There are individual, psychological and socio-economic factors that favour the appeal and attraction to violent extremism. Some of these factors are objectively verifiable, others are perceptions and, therefore, subjective. Among these so-called push factors, we distinguish five categories that play a role in the radicalisation towards anti-institutionalism.

The first category relates to various incidents of systemic discrimination in society and by state institutions. More particularly, the Child-Care-benefits scandal¹⁰⁴ and the Student Grant system stand out, where citizens with a migrant background were structurally discriminated against due to the advanced fraud scrutiny procedures that were applied.¹⁰⁵ Related to this are the feelings of injustice and marginalisation, when the victims of these scandals were not heard and/or properly compensated. This is also the case for the inhabitants of the province of Groningen who are still waiting for compensation for the damage caused by the earthquakes as a result of natural gas extractions.¹⁰⁶ In addition, the farmer community in the Netherlands feels unfairly disadvantaged as a result of the inconsistent policies of the government and now fears the potential forced closure of their farms, or reduced rights due to EU regulations regarding nitrogen emissions.¹⁰⁷ The lack of accountability of the government and the perceived neglect of the concerns of northern provinces and rural areas have contributed to the decrease of trust in governmental institutions and the erosion of state authority.¹⁰⁸

The second category relates to perceived socio-economic deprivation. Due to geopolitical changes, climate change, and inflation, prices for food, petrol, gas, and electricity have gone up, causing depressive socio-economic prospects that are most deeply felt among the communities already living with minimal financial means. Poverty rates are rising, particularly due to the ending of the temporary additional support for high energy prices.¹⁰⁹ Also, those with average income are struggling to make ends meet. This leads to fewer opportunities for the personal development of upcoming generations. Some speak of a generational conflict,¹¹⁰ since the next generation will not enjoy the wealth and opportunities that previous generations have had (or still have). This difference in opportunities for the young generation is also felt regarding affordable housing,¹¹¹ of which there is an enormous shortage.

The third category of push factors relates to the increased divides and polarisation between different social, ethnic, and religious groups in society (horizontal polarisation) and between the general public and institutional ranks in society (vertical polarisation). The impact of the

<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2023/19/minste-vertouwen-in-tweede-kamer-in-10-jaar-tijd>

¹⁰⁴ See, for more information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dutch_childcare_benefits_scandal.

¹⁰⁵ "Studenten met migratieachtergrond".

¹⁰⁶ The scandal ultimately lead to a Parliamentary Inquiry Report, *Groningers boven Gas*, [Groningen over Gas]

https://www.tweedekamer.nl/sites/default/files/2023-07/Groningers-before-gas_conclusions-and-recommendations-2.pdf.

¹⁰⁷ Anna Holligan, "Why Dutch farmers are protesting against emission cuts," *BBC News*, 29 July 2022,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-62335287>.

¹⁰⁸ "Wantrouwen in politiek grootst in Zeeland en Limburg," [Distrust of politics largest in Zeeland and Limburg], *NOS*, 17 February 2023,

<https://nos.nl/collectie/13923/artikel/2464118-wantrouwen-in-politiek-grootst-in-zeeland-en-limburg>.

¹⁰⁹ Poverty raids will likely rise to 5,7 % in 2024. Centraal Plan Bureau, *Concept Macro-economische verkenningen 2024*, August 2023, <https://www.cpb.nl/sites/default/files/omnidownload/CPB-Raming-Concept-Macro-Economische-Verkenning-2024-augustus-2023.pdf>.

¹¹⁰ Interview 1, 20 February 2023.

¹¹¹ "Jongeren lijden het meest onder de woningkrapte [Youth suffers most from housing crisis]", *Vastgoed Actueel*, 15 June 2023, <https://vastgoedactueel.nl/jongeren-lijden-het-meest-onder-de-woningkrapte/>.

black-and-white messaging, leaving no room for nuance, as is often practiced on social media platforms, also has its impact on the way people communicate and express themselves offline. This horizontal polarisation was particularly felt during the COVID-19 pandemic, even within families, between groups having different views on the best approach to deal with COVID, or between those that were even denying the seriousness of the pandemic and those who were very concerned about getting sick or the virus spreading. As a result of these strong divides, people increasingly operate and communicate in isolated bubbles.¹¹² Due to the algorithms operating the online media channels, this can certainly cause further divide and/or withdrawal from a pluriform society.

Related to the problems that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, is the fourth category of push factors, which is social isolation. Research shows that particularly young people have developed mental problems and depression during this period of homeschooling, lockdowns and social distancing.¹¹³ For some youth, it became difficult to develop their identity and peer networks due to isolation. Furthermore, spending a lot of time online, has also exposed more people to dis- and misinformation, conspiracy theories and forms of online radicalisation.¹¹⁴

Finally, the fifth category of push factors relates to people's perceived feeling of losing control (grip) over their lives due to increased complexity in the world and lack of positive and constructive compelling perspectives and political narratives.¹¹⁵ This can relate to the big global issues of climate change, global conflicts and wars and the change of world order, which all have an influence on our daily lives while there is little we can do as individuals to control these issues. It can also relate to the local context of people losing jobs, the rise of prices in supermarkets and social and cultural changes in someone's neighbourhood or work environment.

Pull factors of anti-institutionalism

The factors that pull people into violent extremism can consist of narratives brought by social media and extremist voices that promote a strong us-versus-them thinking and feed polarised positions (for instance, the great replacement theory, or conspiracy theories that can be spread by influencers and/or certain politicians). The dis- and misinformation spread through these narratives is often used as a strategic instrument to address and increase perceptions and emotions mentioned here above as push factors. Technological developments, like the use of hate bots and AI, have facilitated and promoted the spread of these narratives. Pull factors often gain inspiration and strength due to developments abroad, such as the transatlantic developments of anti-institutional sentiments and the appeal of armed groups that use violence as a means to achieve goals.¹¹⁶

Over the years, Dutch municipalities have gathered significant experience in dealing with jihadi extremism. Considering that prevention strategies by municipalities mirror the understanding of the radicalisation process and push and pull factor analysis of extremism, assessing to what extent anti-institutional extremism differs from jihadi extremism is helpful to assess whether current

112 Nathalie Van Raemdonck, "The echo chamber of anti-vaccination conspiracies: mechanisms of radicalization on Facebook and Reddit", *Institute for Policy, Advocacy and Governance, (IPAG) Knowledge Series*, 2019, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3510196>; Carmen Dorlo, "GGZ: Mentale Gezondheid in gevaar door corona, jongeren kunnen 'door ijs zakken'", *NOS Nieuws*, 18 October 2020, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2352807-ggz-mentale-gezondheid-in-gevaar-door-corona-jongeren-kunnen-door-ijs-zakken>.

113 Rijksinstituut Volksgezondheid en Milieu, 30 November 2023, <https://www.rivm.nl/gezondheidsonderzoek-COVID-19/kwartaalonderzoek-jongeren/mentale-gezondheid>; On the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of young people: <https://www.rivm.nl/gezondheidsonderzoek-COVID-19/kwartaalonderzoek-jongeren/impact-coronatijd>.

114 Europol, *Terrorist Situation and Trend Report 2023*, pp. 19 and 53, https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/Europol_TE-SAT_2023.pdf.

115 Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, *Grip, het maatschappelijk belang van persoonlijke controle* [Traction. Societal importance of personal control], 30 November 2023, <https://www.wrr.nl/adviesprojecten/grip/documenten/rapporten/2023/11/30/grip>.

116 Anna Kruglova, Understanding Conspiracist Radicalisation; QAnon's mobilisation to violence, *ICCT Policy Brief*, June 2023; Julia Ebner, Jakob Guhl, *Extremism, the extreme right, and conspiracy myths on social media*, Routledge, 2024; Clarisa Nelu, Exploitation of Generative AI by terrorist groups, *ICCT Analysis*, 10 June 2024, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/exploitation-generative-ai-terrorist-groups>.

prevention strategies are adequate to address these new emerging challenges. Looking at pull factors, we see a clear difference here since the pull comes from within Western societies and has close links with mainstream political parties. It is not an outside terrorist group attacking the West and its values (like al-Qaeda and Islamic State). The narratives are also easier to resonate with our society, within communities and also among civil servants. The push factors are actually not so different but are addressed very differently by extremist groups (less mobilisation of religion, but more emphasis on racism and conspiracy beliefs, and undermining of democratic institutions, rule of law and government institutions and authorities). Also, there is less emphasis on a strategy or alternative and more on the destruction and disruption of existing governance structures. Hence, the constant factor is the provision of an us-versus-them narrative, where the evil (them) against the victims (us) still succeeds in being appealing and compelling to large groups.

In sum, it is our assessment that both the process of radicalisation, as well as the factors driving this radicalisation is not fundamentally different from other forms of extremism. The follow-up question is thus whether the existing policies countering and preventing this form of extremism are still adequate or in need of an update.

National and Local Responses to Anti-Institutionalism

In this chapter, an assessment is made of the national and local prevention policies in the Netherlands, and the extent to which they can adequately address anti-institutionalism.

National policy

In May 2022, the updated Dutch counter-terrorism strategy 2022-2026 was presented by the NCTV.¹¹⁷ The strategy is a whole-of-government strategy ensuring all relevant government organs are involved in the implementation of a comprehensive approach. The focus of the counter-terrorism strategy, however, is mainly on the prevention of terrorist attacks and violence committed by extremist organisations. Other forms of extremism, although considered serious threats, do not fall under the realm of this strategy. This includes anti-institutional extremism. The updated national strategy for preventing and countering (violent) extremism (P/CVE) will focus on this but was still being drafted at the time of publication. Most forms of anti-institutional extremism, as identified by the AIVD, fall under the yet-to-be-finalised strategy for P/CVE, due to the lack of imminent violent threats.

Threats undermining democracy and social stability, however, such as anti-institutional extremism, are included in the National Security Strategy 2023.¹¹⁸ These are particularly related to the decreased trust in the government and institutions, and the rise of misinformation. The government, therefore, aims to strengthen social stability by improving transparency of governance to increase trust, working with a whole-of-government approach to conduct an open dialogue with those criticising the government, investing in awareness raising and training on new threat developments, and actively countering the spread of misinformation.

Given the acute importance of online conspiracies and disinformation in the anti-institutional movement, the monitoring and regulation of online content is another major challenge.¹¹⁹ Although legislation and policies are in place to deal with illegal content, such as recruitment for terrorism, incitement to violence or threats,¹²⁰ content that does not cross that threshold of illegality, and which can be considered as ‘awful but lawful’ or borderline, still poses a challenge. This is because concealing language, memes, and ‘dog whistles’ might appear innocent to the general public but nevertheless communicate a coded language to supporters, and can thus certainly be qualified as problematic content which could potentially undermine trust in the democratic society. The government also announced the development of an approach to deal with online content that falls in the category of ‘awful but lawful’. The approach will have four pillars: dialogue with internet and service providers, strengthening of the legal framework, a local approach, and international cooperation.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ NCTV, *Nationale Contraterrorismestrategie 2022-2026*, <https://www.nctv.nl/documenten/publicaties/2022/05/20/nationale-contraterrorisme-strategie-ncts-2022-2026>.

¹¹⁸ Rijksoverheid, *De Veiligheidsstrategie voor het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden, 2023-2029*, April 2023, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/publicaties/2023/04/03/veiligheidsstrategie-voor-het-koninkrijk-der-nederlanden>.

¹¹⁹ NCTV, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland*.

¹²⁰ According to the legislation of the European Union all member states have to criminalise certain content: According to Article 5 of the Directive on Combating terrorism 2017/541, adopted in March 2017, Member States have to ensure that the public provocation online or offline to commit a terrorist offence, is an offence in itself. In April 2021, the EU adopted a regulation on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online, EU Regulation 2021/748. Furthermore, the Digital Service Act (DSA), Regulation 2022/2065, adopted in November 2022, is a horizontal instrument applicable to providers of intermediary services offered in the EU. Seeking to create a safer digital space for all, the DSA sets rules on the content moderation practices of online platforms, in particular to curb the distribution and dissemination of illegal, harmful content including misinformation, hate speech, and violent extremist content, and to hold online platforms more accountable for their growing impact on everyday parts of society, ranging from their use as a source of news and information to their role in commerce and business.

¹²¹ Ministry of Justice and Security, *Contourenbrief Versterkte Aanpak Online inzake extremistische en terroristische content* [Outline Enhanced Approach to extremist and online terrorist content], 12 December 2023, <https://www.nctv.nl/documenten/publicaties/2023/12/12/versterkte-aanpak-online-inzake-terroristische-en-extremistische-content>.

Local Responses

Currently, the prevention of radicalisation mostly falls under the responsibility of municipalities. Over the years, a lot of resources on the national level have been invested in awareness raising, practical skills, and capacities on the local level, as well as in the development of specific targeted projects to build resilience in society. Funds were made available, and municipalities could submit funding requests to implement their own policies.¹²² However, these investments - although ideologically neutral - were mostly done with the threat of jihadist extremism in mind. The policies have been lacking targeted measures to specifically deal with the steep increase in the use of online platforms to spread dis- and misinformation, conspiracy theories, hate speech and incitement for the purpose of radicalisation. Particularly due to the privacy regulations, online monitoring is strictly regulated, and only possible for the analysis of trends, not individuals. The national government is supporting municipalities, however, with a symbols database which can be used to recognise symbols and memes used online which reference to new forms of extremism.¹²³ Also, fact sheets are available explaining these new forms.¹²⁴ Furthermore, investments are made to strengthen digital literacy and resilience in schools.

A key characteristic of the current (local) policies still implemented in the Netherlands is the use of multi-agency working mechanisms. The so-called Care and Safety Houses exist in each of the 25 national safety zones in the Netherlands. This system already existed to address multi-complex individual cases, bringing together stakeholders representing a variety of backgrounds. Some are key partners, others participate when required. The stakeholders include representative(s) of the municipality (both of the care and security domain), police, youth workers, care-workers for all kinds of addictions, public prosecutor's office, (youth) mental health care, representatives of detention centres, community health care, Council of Child Protection (*Raad voor de Kinderbescherming*), probation services, victim care (*Slachtofferhulp*), social housing services, safe home environment centre (*Veilig Thuis*), and juvenile delinquency intervention service (*Stichting HALT*). Since 2014, the Care and Safety Houses have been concerned with individuals who are radicalising, those who are involved in recruitment and support of terrorist activities, those who have been convicted of terrorism crimes, those who attempt to travel as foreign terrorist fighters, those who already have travelled, and those who have returned. Each of the involved stakeholders can nominate an individual case for discussion in the Care and Safety House context. This would contribute to the design of a multi-stakeholder intervention or support to the individual. Such interventions might thus include a combination of preventive, criminal justice, and social integration measures.

Furthermore, municipalities have often developed local prevention plans, which include cooperation with civil society actors. Due to the evolved extremist landscape, some of these prevention plans are currently under revision (Utrecht, The Hague, and Gouda¹²⁵), and questions are asked on whether the existing approaches are still adequate and fit for purpose. Municipalities also look for guidance to the central government, but are, in their view, currently not getting the support needed to address these new problems.

Utrecht

An example is the prevention strategy of the municipality of Utrecht, '*Utrecht Zijn We Samen*' [Together we are Utrecht],¹²⁶ which is currently being updated to be better equipped to deal

¹²² The funds *Versterkingsgelden* provided by the Ministry of Justice and Security, also on behalf of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, are made available to municipalities to support their local comprehensive approach in countering radicalisation to violent extremism, and terrorism. See: NCTV, *Versterkingsgelden*, <https://www.nctv.nl/onderwerpen/versterkingsgelden-gemeenten>.

¹²³ NCTV online, <https://kennisbankterrorisme.nctv.nl/introductie>.

¹²⁴ Landelijk Steunpunt Extremisme, *Factsheet online radicaal en extremistisch gedrag*.

¹²⁵ Interview 4, 3 April 2023.

¹²⁶ Gemeente Utrecht, *Utrecht Zijn We Samen* [Together we are Utrecht], Prevention action plan (currently under review), <https://zorgprofessionals.utrecht.nl/welzijn/utrecht-voor-iedereen/actieplan-utrecht-zijn-we-samen/>.

with the problem of anti-institutionalism. The prevention action plan focuses on three pillars: prevention, signalling, and repression/rehabilitation/care. The interventions related to the three pillars of the action plan were mostly designed to deal with the issue of jihadist radicalisation and extremism. Recognising the early signs of radicalisation towards anti-institutionalism appeared to be problematic. This is partly because the right stakeholders were not involved, and partly because radicalisation takes place online, and the traditional youth workers were operating in the streets. The language and symbols used also changed, and the concealing language makes it difficult to recognise. Risk assessment tools are also in need of an update.

Another challenge is to bring in other stakeholders to the multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder working procedures to better address these new developments. The civil society actors that were part of the multi-stakeholder working procedures dealing with jihadist extremism are not always relevant when dealing with anti-institutionalism. Another perceived challenge concerns the fact that it is not just the department at the municipality level that deals with security and radicalisation and should be involved in addressing the problem, but that every individual working for the municipality has a role to play in rebuilding trust in the government as a whole.¹²⁷ The lack of trust, albeit still fairly present at the local level, is considered to be one of the root causes of anti-institutionalism.¹²⁸

Amsterdam

The municipality of Amsterdam prevents problems resulting from radicalisation and polarisation through three pillars: protection, connection, and focus on risks.¹²⁹ Amsterdam has an individual, case-oriented approach that aims to limit safety risks caused by groups and individuals, as well as their criminal behaviour. This approach targets individuals who have been radicalised. The GGD, the City's Health Service, screens people who are included in this approach when requested by the coordinator (*regisseur* - the one responsible for directing a multidisciplinary team). The purpose of the screening is to strengthen the contribution of healthcare (in the broadest sense) to the approach. The screening detects health risks and social problems of the individuals. The municipality of Amsterdam has identified important threats to public order, among which anti-institutionalism/establishment (AIE), threats to city managers, local politicians and law enforcement, upcoming sovereign citizens, and online intimidation of citizens through trolls and social media are present. Due to the change in the spectrum of extremism, there is less visibility of cases in the criminal domain but increasingly more in the grey area of 'lawful but awful'. The case-oriented approach is not so effective here and has therefore shifted to more attention on victims and less on perpetrators.¹³⁰ Victims can be citizens who are stigmatised and threatened but also civil servants and politicians.

The municipality of Amsterdam has a Radicalisation Support Centre [*Steunpunt Radicalisering*].¹³¹ This is a knowledge and expertise centre in the field of radicalisation. This centre offers support to first and second line practitioners to recognise signals of radicalisation and offers tools to start a conversation with those involved. If signals of radicalisation are present, the advisors of the centre can start an investigation of their own initiative. The Centre has broadened from identification and referral to professionalise responses of city employees/staff.

¹²⁷ Interview 7, 17 April 2023.

¹²⁸ Interview at the municipality of Utrecht; see also Bibi van Ginkel, Bàrbara Molas, Kees Eggink, Teun van Dongen, and Martijn Vugteveen, "Utrecht samen toekomstgericht: Een analyse van nieuwe trends in radicalisering en polarisatie en mogelijke beleidsinterventies", *ICCT Report*, June 2023, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/utrecht-samen-toekomstgericht-een-analyse-van-nieuwe-trends-radicalisering-en>.

¹²⁹ Gemeente Amsterdam, Website Aanpak radicalisering (screening), <https://www.ggd.amsterdam.nl/vangnet/persoonsgerichte-aanpakken/aanpak-radicalisering/>.

¹³⁰ Interview 10, 13 June 2023.

¹³¹ Gemeente Amsterdam, website Steunpunt Radicalisering, <https://www.amsterdam.nl/steunpunt-radicalisering/>.

The problem of sovereigns is a growing issue in Amsterdam. Due to the data protection law, the municipality cannot react directly to sovereigns that return voting cards or send letters. There must be a case or an incident to start building contact. The city uses existing relations with bailiffs, housing corporations, and debt relief services to develop effective communication and structural engagement.

The Hague

The City of The Hague implements an approach against polarisation, radicalisation, and (violent) extremism and focuses on all types of violent extremism. The approach is based on a combination of intervention, prevention, and cooperation and aims to identify new forms of radicalisation and extremism, increasing the resilience of and promoting the reintegration of ex-convicts. The Hague has established the Information Point Prevention, Polarisation, and Radicalisation (IPPR)¹³² that engages in detection and analysis, networking, resilience, and personalised approaches.

Over the last few years, The Hague has seen a strong increase in cases of sovereigns and anti-establishment movements, both in relation to The Hague as representing the Dutch Government as the administrative capital but also on the city level. Since 2021, the city has been increasing its understanding of the new forms of extremism together with partners like the mental health department (GGZ) and the counter-terrorism (CTER) cluster of the National Police. According to a policy officer of the municipality, it has collected and analysed the letters sent to the mayor/municipality over the last years (approximately 160 letters) by sovereigns and has assessed to what extent the existing comprehensive person-centred approach [*Integrale Persoonsgerichte Aanpak Radicalisering (PGA)*] is already dealing with the individuals that create a security problem on the basis of their sovereign and/or anti-establishment ideas.¹³³ Of all cases, approximately one-third come from outside The Hague, and, therefore, do not fall under the responsibility of the municipality. One-third will be redirected to a trajectory covered within the PGA. For the remaining one-third, the municipality is currently defining the right approach on the basis of the security risk that they pose. So far, the city of The Hague sees the relevance of engaging with this group that appears to be turning their backs on society. The policy is thus aimed at maintaining a structural dialogue as it provides the city with a better understanding of the individual's motivations and can help address underlying causes of their grievances that are legitimate and can be tackled.

Rotterdam

The City of Rotterdam has drafted and operationalised the Approach to Radicalisation, Extremism and Polarisation 2018–2022,¹³⁴ and Safety and Security Approach 2018-2023. Recognising, preventing and combating radicalisation, extremism, and polarisation are the important pillars of this approach.

With this approach, the municipality seeks to counter and prevent polarisation by preventing tensions between groups from arising or growing, and reducing existing tensions between groups. It also aims to prevent citizens from becoming radicalised by trying to prevent the thoughts and behaviours of a person or group from becoming more extreme and increasingly deviant from the democratic legal order. Furthermore, it puts effort into countering extremism by individuals or groups consciously crossing the law and committing illegal actions to achieve their goals.

¹³² Gemeente Den Haag on Prevention of Radicalisation, see: <https://www.denhaag.nl/nl/veiligheid/voorkomen-van-radicalisering-en-polarisatie/>.

¹³³ Interview 2 on 9 March 2023.

¹³⁴ In early 2022, a commission evaluated the Rotterdam approach on radicalisation and extremism and the committee concluded that Rotterdam had over-stepped its powers by actively collecting information about individuals by officials on their own initiative, which normally should be the task of police and intelligence services. Rotterdam is currently revising its policy and will provide a clear legal frame to safeguard the operationalisation of the policy. Externe expertcommissie Rotterdamse aanpak radicalisering, extremisme en polarisatie, *Onderzoeksrapport Rotterdamse aanpak radicalisering, extremisme en polarisatie* [Research report Rotterdam approach to radicalisation, extremism and polarisation], 13 January 2022, <https://gemeenteraad.rotterdam.nl/Reports/Document/fb339c18-45b7-4560-81fe-a023281deff1?documentId=19e9efeb-952c-4684-ba6e-9539d10e5856>.

In the *Veiligheidskoers* [Safety Course] of Rotterdam (November 2022), polarisation is identified as one of the themes that pose a potential threat to Rotterdam society and coincides with a diminishing trust in government and local politics.¹³⁵ To counter this, the city of Rotterdam works on a neighbourhood level to know in-depth what is going on.¹³⁶ Rotterdam invests in a network of key stakeholders that signals tensions and polarisation, so that it can identify and interpret in a timely manner and determine the deployment of law enforcers and preventative actions. These networks reflect the diversity of Rotterdam's society, and they strengthen their information position by linking up with other networks. Dialogues and meetings in which issues can be discussed without taboos are of great value for increasing the resilience of the city. Through the training of both key people and professionals, Rotterdam multiplies its expertise too, as many actors contribute to countering and preventing polarisation and tensions.¹³⁷

Besides violent jihadism, attention is also paid to other forms of extremism, from extreme right-wing to extreme left-wing ideas.¹³⁸ Together with partners, the municipality tries to identify potentially violent ideologically-driven behaviour of individuals or groups at the earliest possible stage. The approach is applicable to all forms of extremism, including anti-institutional extremism, and runs along four lines: prevention, detection, intervention, and sustainability. To prevent people from being attracted to violent ideologies, Rotterdam is committed to increasing the resilience of vulnerable groups of citizens, for example by theatre performances for groups of young people. If there are actually individuals or groups that are becoming radicalised, the authorities intervene with a person-oriented approach. This usually consists of a combination of care, administrative and/or criminal measures, such as a reporting obligation. In this way, Rotterdam tries to stop the radicalisation process and reduce the threat from radicalised people and groups.

Delft

The Municipality of Delft has formulated a 'Delft West' approach that is part of the National Quality of Life (*Leefbaarheid*) and Safety programme.¹³⁹ This programme identifies twenty urban focus areas in nineteen municipalities throughout the Netherlands, in which the quality of life and safety are under pressure and problems such as unemployment, poverty, educational disadvantages, housing problems, and poor health are piling up. Many residents in the Delft-West area face a combination of problems.¹⁴⁰ The neighbourhood approach has a number of goals that can only be achieved in the long term (twenty years), such as building social security, promoting neighbourhood safety, being raised in an opportunity-rich environment, and increasing trust between citizens and local government. Young people will be offered opportunities to develop and learn skills. Crime prevention will play a major role.

Important conditions for success are that the changes are structural and sustainable, a long-time horizon is maintained, and interventions are aimed at social aspects, economic factors, infrastructure, and housing. The approach is based on networking between the actors and stakeholders, adaptive programming, close-learning, monitoring, realistic expectations, and ambition management. The design and planning phase started this year by organising consultations and workshops with citizens, experts and municipality staff from all disciplines.

¹³⁵ Gemeente Rotterdam, *Veiligheidskoers 2023-2027*, 25 November 2022, <https://gemeenteraad.rotterdam.nl/Agenda/Document/27e3d66a-c8c1-43e7-9c2a-87cf0182b9b5?documentId=9f344dbc-7dcd-4de7-87d0-00989964e6e2&agendaItemId=02e163a5-4cdf-4ec0-a27b-c562c84298d8>.

¹³⁶ Interview 3, 20 March 2023.

¹³⁷ Gemeente Rotterdam, *Veiligheidskoers 2023-2027*.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, *Nationaal Programma Leefbaarheid en Veiligheid*, <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/ronl-b338d560857e5f1227939ee0e47ac14db6d6ee63/pdf>.

¹⁴⁰ Interview 1, 20 februari 2023.

Conclusion: Identifying Challenges and Opportunities for Effective Prevention Policies on the Local Level

Reflecting on the current situation in the Netherlands, as well as the policies in place to deal with anti-institutionalism and sovereign citizens, we conclude that much is still in development. On the national level, the prevention strategy is still under revision, while municipalities are already experiencing the challenges of these new forms of extremism on their doorsteps. These municipalities look to the central government for guidance while taking steps to adjust existing policies. The preliminary assessment of the underlying push and pull factors of this new form of extremism suggests that the problem at hand is not so fundamentally different from the challenges from, for instance, jihadist radicalisation and (violent) extremism, and one would expect that many of the existing policies would thus still be adequate and applicable. Municipalities are, however, experiencing difficulties when having to engage with anti-institutionalists and sovereign citizens since these groups, in most cases, do not recognise the government as a legitimate actor.¹⁴¹ Since the lack of trust in the government is, to a large extent, at the heart of the problem in responding to these forms of radicalisation and in addressing the underlying root causes, national and local government representatives basically have to take a hard look in the mirror and reflect on their own behaviour. While for years, dedicated units within the municipality dealing with security and radicalisation were driving the local policies to address anti-institutionalism, every civil servant representing the (local) government has to be cognisant of his/her potential influence on radicalisation and play a role in addressing this.

In relation to the challenges posed by sovereign citizens, some municipalities have been able to reach out to those who were at an early but alarming stage of distancing from society and from formal citizenship. By approaching them directly (through home visits) and by building structural conversations on tangible and non-sensitive topics such as health care and social support, positive results were achieved in bringing some of them back into society and avoiding further distancing from society. Good practices can be found *inter alia* with the municipalities of The Hague and Súdwest Fryslân. The section on security and radicalisation of the municipality of The Hague, for instance, has trained its radicalisation specialists to keep engaging on matters such as social and financial welfare without getting entangled in endless discussions on conspiracy theories. In the report recently commissioned by the municipality of Súdwest Fryslân, various recommendations were made on how to interact with sovereign citizens sending letters to the municipality. According to the analysis, a number of the letters received contained textual references suggesting the writer is open - or at least not strictly against - contact with the municipality. This could be because the sender explicitly makes it clear or because, for instance, they risk getting into financial problems or losing the custody of their children. In those situations, it is recommended to reach out, either by resending a letter or by trying to set up a personal meeting. The report emphasises the importance of being cognisant of the objectives of these interactions and what is and what is not realistic. Engaging in a deep conversation about the reliability of the conspiracy theories is not the main purpose. Rather, engaging in a meaningful conversation to make contact by trying to understand the underlying concerns, such as the concerns regarding finances and child custody, and possibly addressing them, is considered more useful.¹⁴²

Some municipalities have also invested in strengthening sensitivity to the sovereign citizen issue by better instructing different divisions of the municipality concerned with different forms of service delivery, in order to recognise certain behaviours and to know how to respond in a de-escalating manner (early warning – early response approach). In some cases, municipalities

¹⁴¹ Interview 5, 3 April 2023, and interview 9, 22 May 2023.

¹⁴² See ANNE+, "Geen eenduidig antwoord"; This report was commissioned by municipality Súdwest Fryslân.

trained the mail-service to recognise letters sent by individuals withdrawing from society to mayors and other high officials and to know how to deal with it. Others trained their outsourced services like debt collectors and school inspectors for when they visit people at home.

Overall, we have identified seven main gaps that pose challenges to an effective response to anti-institutionalism.

1. Knowledge Gap

Due to rapid changes in the landscape of extremist groups and their characteristics both at national and international levels, understanding of the backgrounds, interconnectedness and relevance is permanently lagging behind. Think tanks, universities, national counter-terrorism coordinators, and intelligence services should collaborate further on a horizontal level (within the national context) as well as vertically (within the EU, with the UK, and transatlantic) to detect emerging trends and phenomena and analyse their significance, organisation structures, leadership, symbols, and funding structures relevant to anti-institutional movements. Knowledge should be made easily accessible for civil servants at municipality levels as well as teachers, social workers, health care staff, and civil society organisations in order to promote a whole-of-government/whole-of-society approach through collective understanding and sensitivity. The four big cities in the Netherlands (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht) all have specialised knowledge centres and departments on these issues. They have a fluid exchange of knowledge and experience among themselves, but it would be recommended to facilitate access for smaller municipalities that lack the scale for specialised expertise and capacities.

2. Motivational Gap

In contrast to counter-terrorism and P/CVE approaches developed in the wake of 9/11 and during the rise of IS over the last decade, which were mainly focussed on a 'common enemy' attacking the West and its values, we now have to deal with insider dynamics and threats. Extremist agendas are related to grievances and issues perceived and felt by a substantial part of our society and the support base is therefore found within all ranks of society and within political parties. It is no longer taboo for civil servants to express their support for extremist ideas openly and join public protests that confront the police or seek the margins of legality. Simultaneously, however, police officers and policymakers at the municipal level express their frustration when having to deal with climate protests or anti-government demonstrations at strategically sensitive locations. These may be officially legal and permitted, but to manage them, it draws on police capacity that is more needed elsewhere (for instance, to deal with the undermining effects of organised crime). Effective prevention of anti-institutional extremism requires a transformation from within our society, based on inclusive dialogue and leadership at all levels and clear lines of non-violence that cannot be negotiated. It also requires a painful exercise because it is about transforming our own society as well as the roles and authority of government institutions.

3. Legal Gap

Many expressions of extremist thought are in themselves lawful or just on the margin of the law, but together, they have an accumulated impact of undermining the democratic system, and, in some cases, security and the rule of law on which these systems are built. The symbols, memes, and concealing language in this context further complicate this challenge. The question is thus how to maintain freedom of expression and the right to peaceful protest, while at the same time preventing radicalisation or merely maintaining public order and security in the city.

The current attempts at local levels to strike a balance are now leading to inconsistencies in policy responses and have - in some cases - already been challenged in court for potentially being unlawful.¹⁴³ Policymakers and law enforcement officials are urgently looking for guidance of legal regulations to give them the tools to deal effectively and consistently with actions and protests in the grey margins, and with the calls made on social media platforms preceding these protests. Better legal guidance is therefore necessary. Guidance on the interpretation of existing laws, or drafting laws that indicate a clear line between lawful and unlawful online content or public outings cannot start at the national level only. It is a process that needs to be driven bottom-up by civic initiatives, and through an inclusive and well-connected dialogue starting in different regions in The Netherlands.

While management of security and public order is one of the key tasks of the local authorities, and the concerns about whether that is still feasible are genuine, at the same time, it is important to steer away from overcriminalisation, which can lead to further radicalisation, when the drivers are legitimate feelings of injustice and exclusion.

4. Online – Offline Gap

The online and offline worlds are closely connected. Actions in the digital world have an immediate impact in the physical domain and vice-versa; take the examples of mass-protests organised through social media and strategic logistical infrastructure blocked through ransomware. However, the legal mandates for criminal investigation of online content for dedicated law enforcement officers are oftentimes separated, for instance, between cyber units and regular crime investigation units, and inter-agency cooperation is not always a given. Furthermore, this causes managerial challenges - who can strike the balance between whether the physical presence of community police needs to be increased in certain neighbourhoods, or if digital vigilance is more effective? How are early warning networks in the digital domain connected to early responses on physical security? At the municipality level, there are insufficient tools to connect the two. Although privacy and data protection laws, as well as the law regarding the Intelligence and Security Services [*Wet op de inlichtingen- en veiligheidsdiensten*] restrict operations in the online domain and exchange of data, it would be recommended (within the possibilities of the law) to link the online and offline dynamics at the local level so prevention of violent extremism can take place through early warning and early response actions.

5. Representation and Inclusivity Gap and the Subsequent Trust Gap

Representation and inclusivity in decision-making become an issue if there is a lack of diversity in the bodies that represent society or fulfil its most important bureaucratic tasks. Although the government, as an official policy, strives for an equal representation of society and a good distribution in terms of gender, identity and age in their recruitments, the reality does not reflect the wide diversity of society yet. This representation and inclusivity gap is directly related to the trust gap discussed in this report. Citizens oftentimes feel that governments are not acting on their behalf, but are interfering with their lives. Although the lack of trust is indeed a big problem, the level of trust in local governments (as compared to the central government) is still acceptable. Strengthening the overall trust of citizens in the government should, therefore, start at the local level, trying to build bridges between the people and the government as a whole again. One important step would be to make local citizens part of the decision-making process again. This could be as simple as organising genuine consultation meetings in neighbourhoods

¹⁴³ Yoeri Vugts and Maudie Dankerlui "Burgemeesters zoeken grenzen op met online uitingsverbod [Mayors risk crossing a line with prohibitions of online expressions]," NOS, 22 januari 2023, <https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2460838-burgemeesters-zoeken-grenzen-op-met-online-uitingsverbod>.

on the future of the local children's playground or using more advanced methods such as citizen councils and democratic labs as examples of a search for better political representation. They are still at a very decentralised level, but it is recommended to scale up the positive outcomes.

For law enforcement, it is the highest priority to mirror society in the composition of its teams, not only for those operating in the public domain, but also in the back-offices. Issues related to systematic discrimination and racism are serious issues which, when not addressed, add to the push factors in terms of radicalisation and boost the narrative of extremist groups.

6. Reality Gap: Facts and Science versus Misinformation and Conspiracy Thinking

Misinformation and disinformation are powerful tools to influence people. Due to easy access to all sorts of uncontrolled information, people are moving in parallel information structures that are mutually exclusive. If we see the enormous influence of social media accounts on the voting behaviour of younger generations, it is no longer a question if we have to regulate these media streams. Fact-checkers have been introduced to discredit misinformation and to separate facts from opinion and truth from lies, but this is far from sufficient. It is also the question to what extent these debunking efforts will be able to reach those who are already more invested in certain conspiracy theories and have a deep conviction that the elite is not to be trusted.

In such situations, communicating on a factual level will lose out to deeply felt 'gut feelings' that the sources must also have been tampered with, which ultimately only confirms their beliefs. Deepfakes by generative AI have just started to accelerate the problem. Democratic countries will not easily close down media, and freedoms of expression, religion, and beliefs are held in high regard. Hate speech and incitement are unlawful, but in practice hard to stop by legal means, both because accounts cannot be retrieved to an individual poster, and because of the sheer volume of the posts.

Programmes are developed to make younger generations resilient to the negative influence of mis- and disinformation, by critically assessing the information that they receive, and learning how to balance information before making decisions. It is important to build these capacities into school curricula. It is also important to make people more aware of the risks of posting and reposting, not only legally but also morally. The trend of keeping social media providers accountable for the content is a path that needs to be developed further.

In line with what was already said in the previous gap regarding online-offline communication, it is important that municipalities have better insight into the dominant narratives that are communicated and believed by their citizens, in order to take preventive measures if such narratives could lead to violence and undermining of public safety.

7. Governance Gap

Ultimately, the gaps identified above lead to the governance gap our societies are facing. When the undermining effects of anti-institutionalism on democratic societies resemble a trainwreck happening in slow-motion, compared to the clear terrorist attack that our societies are prepared for, the question is: who owns the problem and who coordinates the approach?

Over the last decade, while the issue of radicalisation and violent extremism was dealt with from a security perspective and structured within security and law-enforcement departments, we see that the problems today are now understood in a multi-disciplinary way and other

departments have an important stake in developing policy, like mental health, education, social affairs economic affairs, and strategic communication. The tendency of lifting the problem to the whole-of-government stage is important but also makes it more difficult to own and control. At a national level in the Netherlands, we see that the NCTV was created to have a coordinating and facilitating role between all sectors and levels involved. It would be helpful to create a coordinating structure within municipalities that can keep the lines tight and help the different sectors and departments to build a common awareness and sensitivity and build an integrated approach consisting of hard and soft elements to address the root causes, drivers and triggers of the problem from a whole-of-government perspective based on a clear strategy that sets out the tasks, powers, responsibilities, capabilities of the various stakeholders contributing to the effective response.

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