MEMBER STATES CONCERNED BY THE GROWING AND INCREASINGLY TRANSNATIONAL THREAT OF EXTREME RIGHT-WING TERRORISM

CTED

UPDATE

INTRODUCTION

In April 2020, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) published a *Trends Alert* entitled, "[Member States concerned by the growing and increasingly transnational threat of extreme right-wing terrorism](#)". Based on information collected during CTED's engagement with Member States and insights from CTED's [Global Research Network,](#) the *Trends Alert* provided an overview of key trends relating to extreme right-wing terrorism,[1] Member States' responses, and guidance that might support those responses.

The present update to the April 2020 *Trends Alert* examines how extreme right-wing groups have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and considers the potential related challenges for Member States.[2]

TRENDS ALERT

> Member States and researchers have warned that extreme right-wing terrorists are using COVID-19-related conspiracy theories and disinformation to radicalize, recruit and fundraise, as well as seeking to inspire plots and attacks.

Extreme right-wing terrorist groups and individuals in a number of States have sought to exploit COVID-19-related anxieties and grievances, using conspiracy theories to advance their existing narratives, increase and diversify their support base, and build bridges to other groups.[3] Researchers have warned that, as large numbers of people around the world remain in lockdown and spend more time online, terrorists are adjusting their approach and appeal[4] to try to radicalize and recruit individuals to terrorism and incite violence.[5]

CONSPIRACIES AND DISINFORMATION

As the COVID-19 virus began to spread around the globe in early 2020, scientifically baseless conspiracy theories and disinformation flourished and spread rapidly across the Internet via mainstream and alternative social medial platforms. Bots[6] were also used to spread misinformation and fuel online conversations, potentially increasing the level of polarization

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[1] Experts have identified extreme right-wing terrorism - also referred to as far-right or racially and ethnically motivated terrorism - as a unique form of political violence with often fluid boundaries between hate crime and organized terrorism.

[2] For more on the impact of COVID-19 on terrorism, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism, see [CTED's analytical paper](#) (2020)

[3] [Covid-19 disinformation briefing No. 2; Far-right mobilization](#) (2020), ISD. See also Christodoulou, Mario, [ASIO briefing warns that the far-right is exploiting coronavirus to recruit new members](#) (2020), ABC News.

[4] Ong, Kyler and Nur Aziemah Azman, [Distinguishing Between the Extreme Far-right and IS's Calls to Exploit COVID-](#)19 (2020), *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 12, Issue 3, RSIS.

[5] Silke, Andrew, [COVID-19 and terrorism: assessing the short- and long-term impacts](#) (2020), Pool Re and Cranfield University.

[6] See, e.g., Twitter's definition of "bot" [here.](#)

among the opinions expressed.[7] One study found that between January and April 2020, 34 websites known to host disinformation received 80 million interactions on public Facebook, whereas public Facebook posts linking to the World Health Organization website received only 6.2 million interactions.[8]

Extreme right-wing terrorist groups and individuals have sought to co-opt the pandemic, using some of those conspiracy theories to attempt to radicalize, recruit, and inspire plots and attacks.[9] The number of users joining Telegram channels associated with extreme right-wing ideology or racism has grown. One channel focused on messaging related to the pandemic increased its user base by 800 per cent from 300 to 2,700 users in March 2020 alone.[10] The distinct roles that men and women play in this area remain unclear and are difficult to measure, with online anonymity playing a significant role.[11]

Some of those conspiracy theories have appealed to different parts of the extreme right-wing spectrum, [12] while existing conspiracy theories have been repurposed by recycling prejudices and narratives to fit the crisis.[13] However, two predominant camps have emerged during the pandemic: those who believe the virus is a hoax, on the one hand, and those who accept its existence, but believe it to be manufactured or spread maliciously, on the other.[14]

Racist conspiracies

Extreme right-wing groups have reframed a long-standing racialized and misogynistic narrative - the perceived threat of cultural annihilation and the elimination of the ethno-cultural identities of European people – in light of COVID-19.[15] Anti-migrant, anti-Semitic, anti-Asian, racist and xenophobic tropes have been at the forefront of COVID-19-related conspiracies, including one which maintains that the pandemic has been used to manipulate the stock market, [16] and another that claims "infected" immigrants were "imported" to decimate white populations.[17]

Between February and March 2020, Twitter registered a 750 per cent increase in anti-Semitic Tweets falsely linking a wealthy philanthropist with COVID-19,[18] Reports of hate speech and crimes against people of Asian descent have also been on the rise in the United

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[7] Coronavirus; Misinformation and Disinformation regarding Coronavirus in Social Media (2020), Carnegie Mellon University.
[8] Far-right exploitation of Covid-19; ISD and BBC Click investigation (2020), ISD.
[9] Silke, Andrew, COVID-19 and terrorism: assessing the short- and long-term impacts (2020), Pool Re and Cranfield University.
[10] Perrigo, Billy, White Supremacist Groups Are Recruiting With Help From Coronavirus – and a Popular Messaging App (2020), TIME.
[11] Intelbrief: Women in the White Supremacist Online Ecosystems (2020), The Soufan Center.
[12] Comerford, Milo and Jacob Davey, Comparing Jihadist and Far-Right Extremist Narratives (2020), Global Network on Extremism and Technology.
[13] Lynas, Mark, COVID: Top 10 current conspiracy theories (2020), Cornell Alliance for Science.
[14] Ariza, Cristina, Covid-19 and the Global Far Right (2020), Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.
[15] Apocalypse now: the conspiracy theories of the radical right (2020), Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right.
[16] https://gnet-research.org/2020/04/21/online-antisemitism-in-times-of-covid-19/.
[17] Ariza, Cristina, Covid-19 and the Global Far Right (2020), Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.
[18] COVID-19 Disinformation Briefing No. 2 (2020), ISD.

States and in Europe.[19] This increase may have been impacted by the intensification in the use of hashtags and online content that encourages or incites violence against specific ethnicities and nationalities.[20]

Accelerationism and apocalyptic conspiracies

Extreme right-wing proponents of accelerationism – the desire to hasten the collapse of Governments and social structures by sowing chaos and creating political tension – have welcomed the impact of the pandemic. High COVID-19 death tolls and fears of economic collapse have fed this theory,[21] while some individuals have called for the "boogaloo",[22] an online meme that encourages impending civil war.[23]

Links to established conspiracy theories

Researchers and civil society organizations (CSOs) have raised concerns at the merging of these more traditional extreme right-wing theories with different conspiracy theories and the groups promoting them. For example, some extreme right-wing groups have embraced claims that link 5G communications infrastructure to the spread or lethality of the pandemic.[24] Others have advanced theories which claim that COVID-19 will lead to a global vaccine programme designed to control or kill parts of the population. Extreme right-wing groups seek to use these theories and co-opt other movements to escalate discord and promote disharmony in society, as a means to "bring down the system". [25]

ANALYSIS

The multiplicity of conspiracy theories generated and disseminated by extreme right-wing groups can act as a unifying and mobilizing force for groups or individuals seeking to incite hate and violence.

Researchers are concerned that the chaos, confusion and fear generated by COVID-19 and the increase in the volume of online propaganda may provide fertile ground in which extreme right-wing terrorists can recruit and gain momentum.[26] Conspiracy theories may act as "radicalization multipliers" (i.e., by reinforcing intergroup isolation and increasing

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[19] Wallner, Claudia and Jessica White, The Far-Right and Coronavirus: Extreme Voices Amplified by the Global Crisis (2020), Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).

[20] COVID-19: conspiracy theories hate speech and incitement to violence on Twitter (2020), Moonshot CVE.

[21] Wallner, Claudia and Jessica White, The Far-Right and Coronavirus: Extreme Voices Amplified by the Global Crisis (2020), Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).

[22] See: https://www.adl.org/blog/the-boogaloo-extremists-new-slang-term-for-a-coming-civil-war

[23] COVID-19 Disinformation Briefing No. 2 (2020), ISD.

[24] Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander and Blyth Crawford, 5G and the Far Right: How Extremists Capitalise on Coronavirus Conspiracies (2020), Global Network on Extremism and Technology.

[25] Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander and Blyth Crawford, 5G and the Far Right: How Extremists Capitalise on Coronavirus Conspiracies (2020), Global Network on Extremism and Technology.

[26] Ariza, Cristina, Covid-19 and the Global Far Right (2020), Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.

hostility toward "the other"), potentially increasing the likelihood that individuals will engage in violence.[27]

Between February and March 2020, there were 104,000 tweets mentioning a "boogaloo", and 25 per cent of messages posted on the anonymous 4Chan imageboard website referred to insurrectional violence relating to "coronavirus." Some Twitter users suggested that individuals take advantage of the strain on emergency services to launch attacks and to spread the virus if they became infected ("holocough").[28]

Although most violent rhetoric and disinformation is disseminated online, there have also been some indications of related offline action. In March 2020, the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) foiled a terrorist plot planned by a Missouri man who planned to blow up a hospital caring for COVID-19 patients.[29] The individual concerned had links to extreme right-wing terrorism and had expedited his plans in light of the pandemic.[30]

In June 2020, global protests opposing systemic racism and police brutality have, in several States, also attracted individuals keen to spread hate on behalf of extreme right-wing causes, and encourage or accelerate civil disorder.[31] Police forces and hate-crime monitoring groups have also registered incidents connected to COVID-19,[32] while in Europe and Canada, telecommunications masts have been vandalized.[33]

CURRENT APPROACHES

As identified in our earlier Trends Alert, Member States, research institutes, civil society and the private sector have been addressing the issue of extreme right-wing terrorism for some time. However, certain additional approaches that are specific to COVID-19 are worth noting.

In June 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights acknowledged the need to restrict harmful misinformation or disinformation or any incitement of hatred towards minority groups, to protect public health, but urged that this should not result in purposeful or unintentional censorship. Measures that restrict the right to freedom of expression should adhere to the principles of legality, necessity, proportionality; should

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[27] Emberland, Terje, Why conspiracy theories can act as radicalization multipliers of far-right ideals (2020), Center for Research on Extremism.

[28] https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Covid-19-Briefing-PDF.pdf.

[29] Martin, Nick R., Heartland terror (2020), The Informant.

[30] Silke, Andrew, COVID-19 and terrorism: assessing the short- and long-term impacts (2020), Pool Re and Cranfield University.

[31] Small but vocal array of right wing extremists appearing at protests (2020), Anti-Defamation League.

[32] Ariza, Cristina, Covid-19 and the Global Far Right (2020), Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. See also Ormseth, Matthew, Rise in hate incidents toward Asian Americans during coronavirus crisis, officials say (2020), Los Angeles Times; We experienced a racist assault for wearing face masks in Stockholm (2020), The Local; and Coronavirus: Asians in Paris rattled by racist abuse (2020), Deutsche Welle.

[33] Scott, Mark and Steven Overly, Conspiracy theorists, far-right extremists around the world seize on the pandemic (2020), Politico.

serve a legitimate objective; and should represent the least intrusive approach required to achieve that result.[34]

Some Member States have taken action to combat the rise of conspiracy theories and mis- or dis-information, and their exploitation by extreme right-wing actors. For example, both Canada[35] and the United Kingdom[36] have launched websites to counter misinformation and conspiracy theories about COVID-19.

However, much of the responsibility for countering online disinformation has fallen to the private sector. Since early 2020, many major social media platforms have taken action to stop COVID-19-related misinformation. [37] For example, Facebook has banned advertisements that attempt to exploit the crisis, using external fact checks to add labels to misinformation about COVID-19, and has created a community hub offering various resources, including advice on recognizing and avoiding scams and misinformation online.[38] Twitter has extended its definition of "harm" to including spreading unverified claims that "incite people to action and cause widespread panic".[39]

Information and guidance on bots also emerged on several platforms. For example, in May 2020, Twitter provided in-depth guidance on how to detect a bot, as well as information on platform manipulation.[40] The research community has also highlighted the importance of distinguishing "real" from "fake". One study provides guidance on identifying bots and misinformation.[41]

In May 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) joined forces with the Government of the United Kingdom to run a global awareness campaign, entitled "Stop the Spread", on the risks posed by incorrect and false information about the pandemic. The campaign aims to raise awareness on the risks of misinformation about COVID-19 and encourage individuals to doublecheck information with trusted sources (such as WHO and/or national health authorities).[42]

The United Nations, in partnership with Luminate, Purpose, IKEA Foundation and the United Nations Foundation, has also launched its Share Verified Initiative, which provides COVID-

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[34] Bachelet alarmed by clampdown on freedom of expression during COVID-19 (2020), Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.
[35] Radiofrequency Energy and Safety (2020), Government of Canada.
[36] Clearing up the myths around 5G and the coronavirus (2020), Ofcom.
[37] Starbird, Kate, How to cope with an infodemic (2020), Brookings Institute.
[38] See Facebook statement "Keeping People Safe and Informed About the Coronavirus" (2020).
[39] Starbird, Kate, How to cope with an infodemic (2020), Brookings Institute.
[40] See Twitter blog "Bot or not? The facts about platform manipulation on Twitter" (2020).
[41] Coronavirus; Misinformation and Disinformation regarding Coronavirus in Social Media (2020), Carnegie Mellon University.
[42] Countering misinformation about COVID-19: a joint campaign with the Government of the United Kingdom (2020), World Health Organization.

19-related content and information that is fact-based and reliable, with the aim of countering misinformation and saving lives.[43]

Through its assessments of Member States and its partnerships with relevant United Nations entities; international, regional and subregional organizations; private-sector actors, CSOs; and members of the research community, CTED will continue to monitor the growth of extreme right-wing terrorism, including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a view to identifying ways to strengthen States' capacities to respond in a human rights-compliant manner.

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[43] Share Verified Initiative (2020), United Nations.