



RISE OF EXTREMISM

Rhiannon Phillips and James Bath report on how COVID has seen an increase in extremism on both sides of the political divide

The growth of right-wing and left-wing extremism in recent years has been well documented. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has provided a unique environment within which extremist narratives at both ends of the spectrum, as well as extremist Islamist narratives, have reached new audiences, exacerbating polarisation and threatening a broader growth in terrorism.

Two fundamental dynamics within the Covid-19 pandemic have contributed to the growth of extremist groups. Most prominently in the US and Europe, the pandemic has provided a holistic narrative that connects

different extremist views and individuals. Groups have framed pre-existing extremist narratives to attract a wider audience disillusioned by the pandemic response. Secondly, the pandemic has stretched government resources, diverting financial and security resources from countering extremism.

Right-wing groups hold a range of views, but can broadly be defined as promoting: “activity that, in reaction to perceptions of negative change, aims to revert fundamental features of the political system to some [real or imagined] past state”. This can then be schematised into racist, nativist and anti-government strands. These strands are frequently linked to conspiracy theories, for example racist or nativist anti-Semitism is often underpinned by conspiracies

Far-right groups have used Coronavirus as an opportunity to spread conspiracy theories

promoting tropes alleging Jewish control of global finance. The Covid-19 pandemic, as with previous crises, has seen an uptick in conspiracy theories offering a framework for understanding and internalising the crisis. As a result, extremist ideologies tied to these conspiracies gain a larger audience. This is shown by comparing how far-right extremists in the US and Germany engage with the pandemic.

In the US, right-wing groups have viewed the pandemic through an anti-government lens, claiming government-enforced mitigation measures are evidence of government overreach. This was most disturbingly demonstrated when members of the Wolverine Watchmen, an anti-government militia group, were arrested for plotting to kidnap Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer. Their motivation was a belief that, through enacting mitigation measures, state governments were violating the Constitution.

HATE SPEECH

In Germany, online chatter around the Covid-19 pandemic is permeated by “racist and anti-Semitic attitudes”. This is especially the case on alternative platforms (Alt-tech) such as Telegram and 4chan, where hateful speech spreads portraying Jews as benefiting from, or even responsible for, the pandemic. This has spread to the offline sphere too, however, and RIAS, a Berlin-based organisation that registers anti-Semitic incidents, found that between 7 March and 17 June 2020, 123 Covid-19 pandemic rallies were accompanied by anti-Semitic statements. In Germany, as in the US, the pandemic has served to reinforce extremist rhetoric. In both countries, intense debate around the pandemic has provided a platform for more people to engage with pre-existing extremist views.

Left-wing extremism has grown in the last year too. One study from the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) showed that in the US there were four times more left-wing terrorist plots and attacks through the first eight months of 2020 than the whole of 2019. As with the right, left-wing extremist views have spread thanks to pandemic publicity. Left-wing extremists have framed the pandemic as an inevitable result of capitalism and have used it to further their calls for greater government spending. While this is not necessarily a far-left ideology, the methods used to advocate for it have produced political violence. For example, on 16 June 2020 far-left anarchists were blamed for violence in Paris during a demonstration for better pay for health workers. Left-wing extremists have also gained support thanks to the growth of right-wing extremism. Through portraying each other as a fundamental threat to society, both sides have gained support from individuals who feel their values are threatened. This development was most pronounced in the US where Antifa and Proud Boys groups used opposition to each other to solidify support.

Islamist extremist groups have reacted very differently to the pandemic in Europe. Where the crisis has reaffirmed left-wing and right-wing extremist values, Islamist narratives have focused on the perceived proof of the existence of God through the power of the Coronavirus. By extension, it has been an opportunity to promote the superiority of Islamic states in fighting the pandemic, albeit this has not led to an increase in anti-Western sentiment. In contrast to their right and left-wing counterparts, some prominent Islamist preachers were leading voices opposing the spread of conspiracy theories related to the pandemic. This demonstrates the multiplicity of extremist narratives and the need to tailor CVE policies carefully.

Covid-19 has had a significant impact on Islamic extremism outside of Europe too. This is most clearly seen in the Sahel where peacekeeping operations have been hampered by the pandemic. In March 2020, the spread of the virus led MINUSMA to suspend regular UN flights to regional bases and, in some cases: “UN programs diverted resources earmarked for reducing community violence toward improving hygiene in rural areas”. Furthermore, the pandemic has exacerbated public animosity towards weak government responses, helping to foster the spread of extremist narratives. 2020 was the deadliest year on record in Mali and it’s likely that the pandemic’s impact on regional assistance programmes and popular sentiment played a significant role that’s unlikely to abate in 2021.

Strengthening resilience to extremism and keeping the public safe requires a holistic approach that navigates both complex historical roots and pandemic-related developments. On one hand, the economic cost of the pandemic has exacerbated the threat from extremist groups across sub-Saharan Africa. On the other, the increasingly polarised nature of Western democracies and widespread public dissatisfaction has inspired a growing extremist community.

ANTIFA AND PROUD BOYS USED OPPOSITION TO EACH OTHER TO SOLIDIFY THEIR SUPPORT IN THE US

The aforementioned right and left-wing narratives surrounding the pandemic have emphasised the perception that large corporations were either behind the pandemic or stand to gain from it, while growing economic inequality has exacerbated political polarisation. Governments and private companies can make use of counter-narratives to stem the spread of extremist rhetoric and address the root factors that push individuals towards extremism. For example, some companies have expanded the reach and capabilities of broadband throughout the crisis. Initiatives such as this, that redistribute wealth generated from the pandemic to underserved communities, may counter extremist narratives, especially within the tech industry, that the wealthy are gaining from the pandemic.

Efforts to increase transparency can also be achieved through initiatives within the financial system. The outsourcing of billion-pound ‘Covid Contracts’ including contract tracing apps and protective personal equipment has entangled private companies in narratives of blame from both left and right. Those perceived to have gained from the pandemic are targeted by the left who accuse them of supporting corrupt capitalism, while the right claim that these contracts expose the financial sector as fundamentally elitist. Greater transparency can be achieved through an increase in private and public partnerships. The successes of the UK’s Joint Money Laundering Intelligence Taskforce illustrates that information sharing and commercial transparency through PPC can become an example of international best practice, and such cooperation could be extended to counter extremism initiatives.

In conflict zones where there is an absence of robust governance and security provisions, extremist groups have exploited public grievances to drive recruitment.

As restrictions on movement are eased in conflict zones, terrorist activity may increase among young people. In these circumstances, the growth of extremism requires community-led initiatives focusing on those vulnerable to radicalisation. Youth mentorship and support programmes have been widely used as a preventative tool in suppressing extremist ideology among those targeted. Studies conducted in Nairobi, Kenya and across the Horn of Africa where fears over the spread of Islamic extremism have caused considerable concern, have shown the effectiveness of this approach.

Efforts to mitigate the spread of extremist ideology are hindered by gaps in legislation that allow groups to operate throughout society with few impediments. The UK Commission for Countering Extremism said in February 2021 that current laws have generated a platform from which extremist groups can lawfully recruit and spread harmful content as their actions do not meet the threshold for arrest or investigation. This is an international problem: there is currently no federal law against domestic terrorism in the US, with extremist content instead considered a 'hate-crime'. Canada's recent designation of four white supremacist organisations as terrorist entities, allowing authorities to seize assets associated with the groups, provides one example of potential action to be taken in the legal field. The legal designation tactic can lead to the perception of authoritarianism, eliciting a stronger extremist anti-government reaction.

Legislative changes are also needed in the tech industry, with enhanced online monitoring key to strengthening resilience to extremism. 2020 and the shift online increased the sphere of online recruitment for extremist groups. As extremist groups have become increasingly decentralised, these 'nodes and hubs' are highly adaptable, and the Alt-tech encrypted messaging platforms help in bypassing law enforcement agencies.

As such, efforts made to deplatform extremists need to recognise that doing so makes it more difficult to track and identify suspected extremists who then engage exclusively on less traceable, alternative platforms. Furthermore, deplatforming weakens the ability of CVE campaigns to target individuals at risk of radicalisation through engagement and advertisement on mainstream platforms. Both of these issues should be addressed in the debate around deplatforming.

While platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are responsible for performing due diligence and banning harmful content, security authorities should not rely exclusively on third-party actors. Enhanced cyber security provisions and cyberspace monitoring are required to effectively disrupt these platforms. An isolated special unit is not enough; as seen in New Zealand where, despite establishing a dedicated investigative team in 2019, the livestreaming of the Christchurch terror attacks continues to be uploaded and publicly viewed a year later. This illustrates the need for experts on the ground who are integrated into the extremist sphere. Policymakers considering greater regulation of social media could learn from the financial sector experience, where public-private approaches to identify illicit cash flows across the financial ecosystem took years to get off the ground. This would allow them to short-circuit the many similar dilemmas posed in bringing greater regulation to social media, and the role of regulators and private companies in tackling new forms of extremist activity.

Following a year dominated by Covid-19, growing extremism will be a threat throughout 2021 and beyond. The approach to tackling extremism must be preventive in nature, multi-faceted and tailored in approach. Strengthening resilience to extremism is a priority for states, with many struggling to fix the damaged and polarised political landscape that has contributed so much to the expansion of extremism ●

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Islamist extremist groups have used the pandemic as an opportunity to increase anti-Western sentiment

