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opportunistic alliances and ideological  
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## New frontiers of violent extremism between opportunistic alliances and ideological hybridisation: rethinking P/CVE strategies in the contemporary era

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## Abstract

Nowadays, violent extremism seems to be a more complex phenomenon compared to the past. Based on the narratives spread by extremist groups in both offline and online dimensions, the boundaries among traditional extremist ideologies appear increasingly blurred and the connections among these different strands of extremism are more evident. Indeed, transnational connections and opportunistic alliances of convenience among extremists of different persuasions appear to be a growing trend.

This is also true considering those groups historically in opposition to each other from an ideological point of view, such as right-wing and Islamist organisations. Despite remaining enemies, they often share similar narratives, content, and techniques for propaganda purposes and to avoid debunking. For instance, anti-migrant and anti-Muslim sentiments persist within the far-right ecosystem, which advocates accelerationist actions to defend ‘white supremacy’ against perceived enemies and their related religion. Simultaneously, Islamist groups continue to express anti-Western sentiments due to perceived impurity, apostasy of their enemies, and historical resentments related to colonialism and imperialism. However, these groups frequently exploit certain crises to spread shared narratives to weaken common targets. This is particularly evident in their opposition to specific governments and authorities, as demonstrated by the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the manifestation of anti-system, anti-government positions, and antisemitic tropes.

Against this backdrop, though still plays a fundamental role, ideology often becomes more fluid and flexible in order to be adapted to the current situations and ‘accommodate’ practical needs to achieve common goals among the different strands of extremism. Several crises that have occurred in the last years perfectly testified to this new trend. Therefore, this work will analyse anti-system/anti-government extremism (ASAGE) to better understand the similarities and connections among different traditional extremist ideologies, including left-wing and anarchist movements, as manifested in this phenomenon.

In light of these considerations, and in view of the increasing complexity of the violent extremism landscape and the lack of agreement on terminology, the paper is also aimed at suggesting a new category of violent extremism characterised by a mix of different extremist ideologies by adopting the expression of “Composite Violent Extremism” (CoVE), as introduced by some scholars. CoVE seems to offer a more nuanced framework for categorising different kinds of interconnections and alliances among different strands of extremism compared to the so-called ‘salad bar extremism’, by providing four primary buckets: ambiguous, mixed, fused, and convergent.

This is not the only innovative aspect that puts the need to rethink P/CVE and counterterrorism and security strategies and actions.

Exacerbating the already complex scenario is the growing interest on the part of extremist groups in the advantages provided by new technologies, and in particular generative AI, which can boost the spread of their narratives - making them more appealing and adapting them easily and quickly to the user-target type-, fuel propaganda, and facilitate online radicalisation and recruitment. Also, the large-scale dissemination of such content and its virality facilitate casual and opportunistic alliances between extremist groups of different beliefs, which can easily target common enemies.

Moreover, it should be considered that, especially after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, certain protests, anti-system/anti-government sentiments and related conspiracy theories have been shared by the mainstream of society as well. The pandemic has shown that social isolation and economic crises may feed radicalisation processes and foster conspiratorial thinking in society. Violent extremist individuals and groups capitalise on these opportunities by exploiting people's fears and anger for recruitment purposes, to widen the pool of their followers. Their violent narratives, entrenched with harmful conspiracy theories, define specific targets as responsible for socio-economic troubles and, in general, for the evil in society and incite violence against them. Although people do not automatically start radicalisation processes when their campaigns and protests are influenced and exploited by extremist groups, the boundaries between mainstream and extremist groups' narratives and actions are extremely blurring. By adopting the expression 'fringe groups', the authors also will analyse a segment of society that need to be differentiated by those targeting all strands of extremisms.

## Introduction

Radicalisation leading to violent extremism is not a new phenomenon, but its related pathways appear to be ever evolving. Globalisation has fostered interconnection and interdependence among different countries and regions worldwide, complicating the scenario faced by democratic societies. This trend can be attributed to the transnational nature of these challenges and the increased complexity of political, socio-economic, cultural, and security frameworks.

Within this context, extremist groups have exploited such complexity by adapting their ideologies to societal changes, thereby extending their influence beyond traditional boundaries and differences. Transnational connections and alliances of convenience between extremists of different persuasions are becoming increasingly common as a strategy to undermine democratic values and institutions. These interlinkages among disparate extremist groups often hinge on the identification of a common target, explaining the cooperation among factions historically and traditionally opposed to each other for politico-ideological reasons. Such emerging trend turns the maxim “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” into practice. Consequently, while ideology remains fundamental, it has become more fluid and flexible, accommodating practical needs to achieve common goals among different strands of extremism.

Furthermore, in an era marked by widespread distrust towards authorities, particularly political ones, anti-system/anti-government extremism (ASAGE) has proliferated globally. Although ASAG sentiments have already existed before the COVID-19 pandemic, the exceptional circumstances related to the virus and the subsequent restriction measures have amplified these feelings. Increasing political distrust has permeated beyond extremist groups, enabling them to capitalise on public discontent, fears, and anger to broaden their pool of followers by normalising and mainstreaming their extremist narratives. From that, ASAG narratives have been continuously re-adapted in line with consequential crises with the aim of undermining trust in democratic and public institutions such as demonstrated by the war in Ukraine.

Against this backdrop, risks and threats represented by violent extremism are higher since they are further exacerbated by the advent of generative AI<sup>1</sup>, which has made content creation and, more broadly, communication easier, faster and improved, conveying messages more efficiently. On a practical level, this new technology allows virtually any user without training to easily, quickly and limitlessly create contents and share them on the Web. In the particular context of violent extremism, this can be a powerful resource for groups – that have always been interested in opportunities offered by technology and, more recently, have showed a growing interest

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<sup>1</sup> «Generative AI (GAI) is the name given to a subset of AI machine learning technologies that have recently developed the ability to rapidly create content in response to text prompts, which can range from short and simple to very long and complex.» op cit. Greg Pavlik, “What Is Generative AI (GenAI)? How Does It Work?”, in *Oracle.com*, 15 September 2023, <https://www.oracle.com/uk/artificial-intelligence/generative-ai/what-is-generative-ai/>

towards the potential of AI<sup>2</sup> - to amplify the spread of their narratives, accelerating the dissemination of their propaganda, improving the adaptability of the message to different socio-cultural contexts and therefore increasing the risk of online radicalisation and recruitment.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the higher quantity and quality of AI-generated contents, as well as the opportunity to tailor such productions to various linguistic and cultural contexts, make it possible to reach a nearly infinite audience. By attracting a greater public attention, it is also made more likely that such content will be shared by individuals who are not affiliated with the extremist group that originally produced it, or even subjects that are not (or not yet) radicalised. In addition to exposing a wider range of subjects at risk of radicalisation and fringe groups to further threats, this phenomenon can certainly facilitate the aforementioned tendency for casual and opportunistic alliances.<sup>4</sup>

Addressing violent extremism in light of these new manifestations and trends poses a significant challenge for governments, law enforcement and security agencies, and practitioners all over the world. Governments, institutions, and scholars have yet to adopt a common definition of radicalisation, violent extremism, and terrorism, and the complexity of these interlinkages exacerbates the difficulty in reaching a consensus. Therefore, rethinking the categorisation of violent extremism is imperative to enhance understanding of this evolving phenomenon and its dynamics. Recognising the increasingly blurred boundaries among different strands of extremism and how they may coexist in cognitive radicalisation patterns may aid scholars in formulating effective prevention and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) strategies and actions. In this regard, the concept of Composite Violent Extremism (CoVE) may offer valuable insights towards achieving this goal.

Based on these premises, this paper is organised into the following sections. The first chapter provides an analysis of the existing interconnections within various violent extremist narratives, particularly focusing on the common tropes, conspiracy theories, and related memes and tools. The second section examines the primary characteristics, drivers, and trends in anti-system/anti-government extremism (ASAGE), including several examples of opportunistic alliances among different extremist groups and their infiltration into lawful protests. Additionally, this chapter is also devoted to a comprehensive analysis of so-called ‘fringe groups,’ which represent segments of society potentially at risk of radicalisation or those who, while not supporting extremist groups,

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<sup>2</sup> See: C. NELU, “Exploitation of Generative AI by Terrorist Groups”, in *ICCT*, 10 June 2024

<sup>3</sup> See: S. Senno, A. Speziale, “Intelligenza artificiale generativa: un moltiplicatore di capacità al servizio dell’estremismo violento”, in C. Candelmo, S. Senno (eds) “Intelligenza Artificiale: rivoluzione geopolitica e sfide globali (vol. 1), in *L’Orizzonte degli Eventi*, n. 16 – April 2024, p. 14. [https://www.amistades.info/files/ugd/22f66e\\_41952a9aea63477397cbcf6e65301feb.pdf](https://www.amistades.info/files/ugd/22f66e_41952a9aea63477397cbcf6e65301feb.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> S. Senno, A. Speziale, “Intelligenza artificiale generativa: un moltiplicatore di capacità al servizio dell’estremismo violento”, in C. Candelmo, S. Senno (eds) “Intelligenza Artificiale: rivoluzione geopolitica e sfide globali (vol. 1), in *L’Orizzonte degli Eventi*, n. 16 – April 2024, pp. 13-18. [https://www.amistades.info/files/ugd/22f66e\\_41952a9aea63477397cbcf6e65301feb.pdf](https://www.amistades.info/files/ugd/22f66e_41952a9aea63477397cbcf6e65301feb.pdf)

are likely to share and propagate similar narratives and ideas targeting perceived elites of society. The third section elucidates the concept of Composite Violent Extremism (CoVE), introducing its four constituent categories: ambiguous, mixed, fused, and convergent.

## 1. Interlinkages among different kinds of violent extremist narratives

Narratives are stories based on a mix and combination of facts and claims, but also often myths and falsehoods. When linked to extremist purposes, they can serve as potentially effective tools for furthering related ideologies across the political spectrum. The widespread discontent and distrust among the population directed against political institutions and perceived power elites (including economic, scientific, and technological authorities) have been exploited by different extremist groups. These groups use similar points of reference, thereby sharing common foundational structures for their narratives. Consequently, also recurring to social networks and instant messaging platforms, these narratives have gained broader appeal, increasing society's exposure to extremist ideologies. In this perspective, interlinkages in extremist narratives can be considered "shared elements in the construction and evolution/development of the narrative."<sup>5</sup>

As already mentioned, despite a lack of ideological coherence among different strands of extremism, they share common foundations. According to Berger's studies, violent extremism is grounded in "the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group."<sup>6</sup> Thus, cognitive extremism is based on the belief that the in-group can succeed or survive only through the elimination of the out-group. This perspective posits that the identity group is perpetually threatened by the perceived out-group, leading extremist groups to advocate for accelerationist<sup>7</sup> tendencies in response to societal and global crises. The ideological flexibility promoted by extremist groups is crucial in enabling these interlinkages.

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<sup>5</sup> Burchill, R., & Lauretta, D., *The interlinkages in different kinds of violent extremist narratives*, RAN Policy Support – European Commission, 2021, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Berger, J.M., *Extremism*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2018, pp. 75-76.

<sup>7</sup> The term 'accelerationism' indicates "a pre-existing intellectual movement that alleges that certain aspects of modern existence are untenable and destined to collapse under their own weight". M. Kriner et Al, *Behind the Skull Mask: An Overview of Militant Accelerationism*, Global Network on Extremism & Technology – GNET, March 2024, p. 1 (last accessed 9 August 2024). [https://gnet-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/GNET-42-Behind-Skull-Mask\\_web.pdf](https://gnet-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/GNET-42-Behind-Skull-Mask_web.pdf). More specifically, 'accelerationism' is "an ideologically agnostic doctrine of violent and non-violent actions taken to exploit contradictions intrinsic to a political system to "accelerate" its destruction through the friction caused by its features. Unlike vanguardism or coups d'état, dissolution of the system through accelerationism must come from mechanisms within the system itself. The actions of the revolutionaries provide the accelerant. The doctrine includes terrorism, insurgency, guerilla warfare, and political and media manipulation". J., Parker, "Accelerationism in America: Threat Perceptions", in *Global Network on Extremism & Technology – GNET*, 4 February 2020 (last accessed 9 August 2024). <https://gnet-research.org/2020/02/04/accelerationism-in-america-threat-perceptions/#>

The success of certain extremist narratives also hinges on their ability to leverage individuals' emotional states. Paradoxically, emotions often prove more effective and trusted than evidence, which may explain the widespread attraction to extremist tropes and conspiracy theories.<sup>8</sup>

Considering the main bases of extremist belief and the interlinkages between different related groups, several phenomena and trends have been selected to be examined: the COVID-19 pandemic, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, and antisemitism (this latter as a form of hate pervasive in many extremist narratives).

#### A. The Covid-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has been at the forefront of extremist narratives for over four years and continues to resurface in political discourses and societal protests. According to Europol and in line with what has been already stated, the pandemic has provided narrative points to different extremist milieus as well as individuals and groups that had not previously been actively engaged in extremist ideologies.<sup>9</sup> By posing a threat to people's well-being and challenges to governments in finding well-accepted measures to tackle the virus, the pandemic was exploited by extremist groups to capitalise on the fears and anger of people: their aim was to show the perceived failures of governmental institutions and claim that the in-group is being unfairly targeted.

Interlinkages between right-wing and left-wing extremist narratives emerge from messages specifically targeting perceived evil elites. Indeed, despite being on opposite ends of the political spectrum, both extremist groups spread narratives demonising political and scientific authorities. To give some examples, such groups described as lockdown measures (of containment and isolation) as 'Nazi' tactics targeting the wider population. Then, they formulated and spread conspiracy theories about vaccines, also linking them to debates around 5G technology and adopting a clear technophobic stance. According to this specific conspiracy theory, its supporters believe that 5G networks emit radiation which are the vehicles to trigger the virus. Moreover, other narratives suggest that both the COVID-19 pandemic and 5G technology are parts of a

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<sup>8</sup> Neuroscience identifies reasoning with the prefrontal cortex, which is the most recently evolved part of the brain, while emotions are linked to the older limbic system, particularly the amygdala, which responds to danger and signals distress throughout the body. When faced with a stimulus, the limbic system reacts first, followed by the prefrontal cortex, which evaluates these emotional responses and enables rational thought. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman differentiates between 'fast thinking' (emotional and automatic) driven by the limbic system and 'slow thinking' (analytical and deliberate) managed by the prefrontal cortex. Fast thinking has historically helped humans survive by providing quick reactions to threats. However, this automatic response can lead to errors in judgment, especially during stressful situations. Over the past decade, the overwhelming flow of negative news and social media algorithms encouraging rapid responses have intensified these biases, increasing the frequency and speed of decision-making errors. Ming 1, W., "Il mondo di QAnon: come entrarci, perché uscirne. Seconda parte", in *Internazionale*, 18 September 2020 (last accessed 9 August 2024). <https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/wu-ming-1/2020/09/18/mondo-qanon-seconda-parte>

<sup>9</sup> Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2021*, 2021 p. 28.



power elites' campaign aimed at depopulating the Earth.<sup>10</sup> These conspiracy tropes illustrate how the theory links to other forms of 'single issue' radicalisation based on anti-vax or anti-government stances. Shifting from cognitive to behavioural extremism, violent right-wing extremists and violent left-wing and insurrectional anarchist extremists have often joined forces for tactical convergent actions, such as using violence against police during protests countering governmental measures.<sup>11</sup> All these elements characterise a huge part into the Anti-System/Anti-Government Extremism (ASAGE)'s ecosystem that will be analysed afterward.

### B. The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan

The second event that has shown interlinking narratives concerns the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent Taliban taking over the government. Central to these narratives is the endorsement of the Taliban's anti-liberal and anti-democratic governance. This support has manifested in the celebration of oppression and the devaluation of liberal principles, often accompanied by messages inciting violence. Indeed, the theme of liberalism's failure was echoed by jihadist extremists, far-right extremists, and their supporters. Extremists motivated by jihadist ideologies hailed the Taliban's takeover as vindication of their cause and a model to emulate elsewhere. At the same time, far-right extremists in the West praised the Taliban's anti-liberal values, including their oppression of women, and welcomed the Taliban's success as a defeat for the US government under Biden's presidency.<sup>12</sup> While the celebration of this takeover by jihadists is not surprising - despite differences and opposition among Sunni jihadist groups and the faction -, the support for the Taliban cause coming from far-right members and supporters in the West is unusual. However, there is precedent for such alliances of convenience, as shown by far-right extremists' celebrations of events like the 9/11 attacks.<sup>13</sup> In any case, this trend of opportunistic behaviours seems to be likely to manifest on several other occasions.

Concerning the specific case of Afghanistan, some far-right groups suggested that the Taliban were more legitimate than the previous government backed by democratic forces and saw the U.S. defeat as a positive development. The Proud Boys, for instance, seemed to approve the Taliban's enforcement of religious law and execution of dissenters and spread antisemitic tropes

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<sup>10</sup> Farinelli, F., Conclusion Paper. Connections between violent left-wing and anarchist extremism (VLWAE) and other forms of extremism, RAN Policy Support, Thematic Research Meeting – European Commission, March 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Farinelli, F., *Connections between violent left-wing and anarchist extremism (VLWAE) and other forms of extremism*, Conclusion Paper, RAN Policy Support – European Commission, March 2022, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Mark, S., "Western far-right groups claim Taliban victory as their own", in *PoliticoPro*, 8 August 2021 (last accessed 9 August 2024). <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2021/08/western-far-right-groups-claim-taliban-victory-as-their-own-2079334>

<sup>13</sup> MEMRI, "Neo-Nazis, white supremacists react to 20th anniversary of 9/11 attacks", 1 October 2021.

by admiring the Taliban’s rejection of globalisation and attributing Western subjugation to Jewish influence.<sup>14</sup>

Interlinkages among these different strands of extremism regards the use of communication strategies and tools as well. A notable example is the dissemination of memes featuring *Pepe the Frog*, a cartoon character originally devoid of extremist connotations, but then adopted by the far-right ecosystem. Over time, jihadist extremist groups from the opposite ends of the political spectrum also appropriated *Pepe the Frog*, adapting it to their contexts. For instance, in response to Taliban’s victory over the United States in Afghanistan, jihadists circulated memes portraying a Taliban version of *Pepe the Frog* celebrating the takeover from a McDonald's rooftop while holding a *Kalashnikov*.<sup>15</sup> Perceived each other as allies concerning that event, far-right supporters shared those memes contributing to their dissemination.

### C. Antisemitism

Antisemitism is indeed reported as a phenomenon potentially spread by violent right-wing extremism (VRWE), violent left-wing and anarchist extremism (VLWAE) and violent Islamist extremism (VIE). Antisemitic tropes are not only promoted by these kinds of extremism independently by each other, but also by sharing same narratives and conspiracy theories. Since spread by diverse extremist groups, often rivals to each other, these narratives may acquire more credibility to the wider public at risk for radicalisation because they are perceived as potentially true rather than biased. In this sense, antisemitism has seen opportunistic alliances among the different strands of violent extremism too. A number of conspiracy theories ranged from speculations about alleged Jewish control of the international system, also by linking this conspiracy to the abovementioned phenomena.

For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous narratives presented the pandemic and the consequent vaccination campaign as part of a Jewish plot to establish a New World Order including the sterilisation of non-Jewish people.<sup>16</sup> This trope was similarly propagated by the Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps and white supremacists who respectively claimed that the

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<sup>14</sup> Makuch, B., “The far right is celebrating the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan”, in *Vice*, 16 August 2021 (last accessed 9 August 2024). <https://www.vice.com/en/article/the-far-right-is-celebrating-the-taliban-takeover-of-afghanistan/>.  
Sands, G., “White supremacist praise of the Taliban takeover concerns US officials”, in *CNN*, 1 September 2021 (last accessed 9 August 2024). <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/01/politics/far-right-groups-praise-taliban-takeover/index.html>

<sup>15</sup> Ayad, M., *Islamogram: Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021, p. 34, Figure 51 (last accessed 9 August 2024). <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Islamogram.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Comerford, M., & Gerster, L., *The Rise of Antisemitism Online During the Pandemic: A Study of French and German Content*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue for the European Commission, 2021, p. 17 (last accessed 9 August 2024). <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/the-rise-of-antisemitism-during-the-pandemic.pdf>

pandemic was a “Zionist biological terror attack”<sup>17</sup> and “power grab”<sup>18</sup> by Jews. In line with this narrative, QAnon movement also contributed to the spread of antisemitism as well,<sup>19</sup> linking it with anti-lockdown, anti-vaccination, and anti-5G campaigns. However, the initial ‘drops’ posted by Q and his followers were not explicitly antisemitic. They believed in a ‘deep state’ controlling the world, composed of a wide range of well-known figures, such as George Soros and the Rothschild family. Due to the Jewish background of the abovementioned subjects, QAnon followers began to spread antisemitic references and even violent attacks.<sup>20</sup> Although QAnon potentially includes individuals closely aligned with far-right ideologies, the movement also comprises supporters, followers, and sympathizers with a variety of ideological beliefs across the political spectrum, not necessarily extremist or violent. This is a further example of how diverse extremist groups can interact with and influence non-violent individuals. These individuals are often situated at the ‘fringe’ of the spectrum (as will be discussed later), but many are part of the mainstream, illustrating how extremist groups can normalise their narratives and messages.

Antisemitism also merged with extremist narratives surrounding the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan, revealing another interlinkage between right-wing extremism (RWE) and Islamist extremism (IE). In this instance, some members of Proud Boys celebrated the event, asserting that the West would not currently be ruled by Jews if white men possessed the same courage as the Taliban.<sup>21</sup>

In any case, all these examples demonstrate that hostility towards power Western elites and their allies is a common thread among various forms of extremism. Recognising that such sentiments also exist within the broader population, even among those who do not necessarily adopt extremist worldviews, it is pertinent to introduce the concept of Anti-System/Anti-Government Extremism (ASAGE) and analyse its significant impact in the contemporary era. This perspective helps to add another pivotal piece to the overall puzzle of current extremist dynamics.

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<sup>17</sup> Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, “Snapshot: How Extremist Groups Are Responding to Covid-19”, 24 March 2020 (last accessed 9 August 2024). <https://www.institute.global/insights/public-services/snapshot-how-extremist-groups-are-responding-covid-19-24-march-2020>

<sup>18</sup> Anti-Defamation League, “White Supremacists Respond to Coronavirus With Violent Plots and Online Hate”, 26 March 2020 (last accessed 9 August 2024). <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/white-supremacists-respond-coronavirus-violent-plots-and-online-hate>

<sup>19</sup> Laretta, D. (eds.), *Gap & Solutions Technical Report*, Deliverable 5.4, PARTICIPATION Project, 2023, p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Anti-Defamation League, “QAnon’s Antisemitism and What Comes Next”, 17 September 2021 (last accessed 9 August 2024). <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/qanons-antisemitism-and-what-comes-next?ftag=MSFd61514f>.

<sup>21</sup> Sands, G., “White supremacist praise of the Taliban takeover concerns US officials”, in *CNN*, 1 September 2021 (last accessed 9 August 2024). <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/01/politics/far-right-groups-praise-taliban-takeover/index.html>

## 2. Anti-System/Anti-Government Extremism (ASAGE)

Anti-System/Anti-Government Extremism (ASAGE) has consistently played a significant role in political conflicts throughout history. The use of subversive, illegal, and violent tactics to intimidate, destabilise, or overthrow governments and political regimes is not a new occurrence. ASAGE is multifaceted, encompassing both broad ideological rejections of government and specific opposition to particular policies or authorities.

Indeed, over the centuries, various forms of anti-system and anti-government extremism have emerged. The concept of ‘anti-government extremism,’ which includes individuals, groups, and networks that ideologically oppose the legitimacy of any government, is a long-standing historical phenomenon, as exemplified by movements such as anarchism. In other cases, anti-government extremism arises from a refusal to acknowledge, accept, and follow a specific authority or government, as seen in the Irish Republican Army’s opposition to the UK/Northern Ireland government. This differs from an outright rejection of the legitimacy of government or the state itself.<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, Sam Jackson identifies a third form of anti-government extremism: ‘issue-driven anti-government extremism,’ which opposes a government based on its stance or actions on particular issues.<sup>23</sup> Considering this categorisation, it is possible to differentiate between ‘issue-oriented’ extremism, which targets specific government actions, and ‘ideological’ extremism, which broadly rejects the concept of governance.<sup>24</sup> This distinction can also be framed as ‘relational anti-systemness’ versus ‘ideological anti-systemness.’ The latter is characterised by absolute opposition to the system, rooted in firm ideological beliefs, whereas the former is more flexible and contingent on the actions of other public actors. Groups exhibiting relational anti-systemness adapt their narratives based on changes in the positions of other players or contextual shifts, maintaining a confrontational stance.<sup>25</sup> However, distinguishing between these categories — ideological and issue-oriented or relational — is often more straightforward in theory than in practice.

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<sup>22</sup> Farinelli, F., Marinone, L., Daher, S., *The Anti-System/Anti-Government Extremism Handbook*, RAN Policy Support – European Commission, 2024.

<sup>23</sup> Jackson, S., “What Is Anti-Government Extremism?”, in *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 16, No. 6, December 2022, pp.9-18, Special Issue on Anti-Government Extremism, p. 10 (last accessed 9 August 2024). [https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27185088.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Abc7d962e1b8446cbd146cdc0c87c89f3&ab\\_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27185088.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Abc7d962e1b8446cbd146cdc0c87c89f3&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1)

<sup>24</sup> Jackson, S., “What Is Anti-Government Extremism?”, in *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 16, No. 6, December 2022, pp.9-18, Special Issue on Anti-Government Extremism, p. 10 (last accessed 9 August 2024). [https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27185088.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Abc7d962e1b8446cbd146cdc0c87c89f3&ab\\_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27185088.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Abc7d962e1b8446cbd146cdc0c87c89f3&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1)

<sup>25</sup> Sartori, G., *Parties and Party Systems*, Cambridge University Press, 1976.

The contemporary ASAGE landscape is further complicated by the convergence of multiple global crises—such as the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical conflicts, wars, and migration issues—resulting in what experts term a ‘polycrisis.’<sup>26</sup> This type of crisis involves multiple shocks that overlap or occur in rapid succession, potentially acting as pull factors that fuel anti-system/anti-government extremism. Concurrently, these crises have intensified negative psychological states, including uncertainty, fear, frustration, and anger. These emotions can serve as push factors for violence, amplifying the demand for simplistic explanations of complex events. This often manifests in the spread of harmful conspiracy theories that blame democratic governments and various international organisations for societal ‘evils,’ aligning with fluctuating extremist narratives and ideologies. Such theories resonate with the objectives of violent extremists aiming to weaken and dismantle the framework of liberal democratic governance.

Indeed, against this backdrop, all the different strands of violent extremism leverage on feelings of victimhood<sup>27</sup> in response to anti-pandemic measures adopted by governments and democratic institutions (including EU and NATO) which are perceived as part of a plan to increase control over the population. In this regard, various extremist groups with different ideological mindsets seek to convince people that both vaccines and pandemic were manufactured by either ‘Big Pharma’, States and powerful individuals (such as George Soros) with precisely this goal in mind.<sup>28</sup>

It is possible to conclude that the modern manifestation of ASAGE exhibits innovative characteristics that distinguish it from its historical antecedents and more traditional extremist ideologies, such as those related to violent right-wing, left-wing, anarchist, Islamist, and separatist movements. Despite these distinctions, violent extremists from diverse ideological backgrounds contribute to the heterogeneous composition of this phenomenon, alongside various other categories of individuals.<sup>29</sup>

In this context, the internet, social media platforms and, more recently, AI have significantly facilitated and boosted the dissemination of polarising and potentially violence-inducing narratives, enhancing their mobilisation potential. Consequently, anti-system/anti-government

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<sup>26</sup> Lawrence, M., et Al., *What Is a Global Polycrisis? And how is it different from a systemic risk?*, Cascade Institute, September 2022 (last accessed 9 August 2024). <https://cascadeinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/What-is-a-global-polycrisis-v2.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Burchill, R., & Lauletta, D., *The interlinkages in different kinds of violent extremist narratives*, RAN Policy Support – European Commission, 2021, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Burchill, R., & Lauletta, D., *The interlinkages in different kinds of violent extremist narratives*, RAN Policy Support – European Commission, 2021, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> Farinelli, F., *Conclusion Paper. Connections between violent left-wing and anarchist extremism (VLWAE) and other forms of extremism*, RAN Policy Support, Thematic Research Meeting – European Commission, March 2022.

sentiments can proliferate more rapidly within a country and easily transcend national borders, fostering transnational connections and facilitating the transition from online to offline activities.

When political leaders, the media, or social elites have no difficulty in expressing hostility towards different groups in society, extremist narratives become mainstream, making the idea of an extremist fringe redundant and normalising extremist views from politicians, the media, and public discussions. The uncertainty faced in society, alongside mainstream discussions based on extremist ideologies, suggests that groups and individuals on the fringe of extremism may be tempted to adopt extremist narratives.

Given the current societal context of uncertainty, where extremist narratives are gaining mainstream acceptance, these narratives have the potential to attract a broader audience, including individuals who are not inherently extremist but are gravitating towards the fringe of the political spectrum. Referred to as ‘fringe groups,’ they necessitate careful consideration to avoid applying the same measures used for extremist groups. It is crucial to develop distinct prevention strategies that differentiate between these categories. Failing to do so may inadvertently contribute to a radicalisation process, leading fringe groups towards violent extremism.

However, in the absence of widespread agreement on the meaning of extremism, determining what constitutes ‘extremist’ thought or behaviour is a complex and contentious process. Attempting to understand the dynamics of ‘fringe’ of extremism is equally challenging due to a lack of clear boundaries of where extremism begins or ends.<sup>30</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic is a clear example making the identification of fringe extremism increasingly complex. According to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), widespread discontent regarding public health measures has brought together “a broad-church of activists, with right-wing extremists rubbing shoulders with New Age spiritualists and alternative health practitioners.”<sup>31</sup> Despite the lack of ideological coherence among these groups, they have collectively engaged in various harmful activities such as disseminating disinformation, harassment, hate speech, and threats of violence. The growing public participation in protests against governmental health measures indicates that extremist ideas may be becoming more appealing to the broader society. This trend complicates efforts to address Anti-System/Anti-

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<sup>30</sup> Burchill, R., & Laretta, D., *Between fringe and mainstream: understanding extremist narratives and the boundaries of fringe groups*, RAN Policy Support – European Commission, 2021, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Davey, J., & Comerford, M., *Between Conspiracy and Extremism: A Long COVID Threat? An Introductory Paper*, Institute for the Strategic Dialogue (ISD), December 2021 (last accessed 9 August 2024). [https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Between-Conspiracy-and-Extremism\\_A-long-COVID-threat\\_Introductory-Paper.pdf](https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Between-Conspiracy-and-Extremism_A-long-COVID-threat_Introductory-Paper.pdf)



Government Extremism (ASAGE), as it has further facilitated the convergence of multiple traditional forms of extremism, making their recognition more unpredictable.

The fluidity of ASAGE suggests that this form of extremism can be regarded as a ‘meta-ideology,’ meaning that its significance lies less in specific beliefs and more in the methods used to interconnect these beliefs and attract a diverse range of individuals. Concerning these methods, addressing extremist narratives and actions related to ASAGE has become more challenging. Indeed, in addition to illegal and violent activities, many demonstrations and content are harmful but legal. These conducts, while not technically illegal, still possess the potential to cause significant harm, making countering them particularly difficult.

In this context, the bottom-up process of crafting narratives, disseminating them, and translating messages into actions constitutes a fundamental characteristic of ASAGE. This approach has led to the development of a ‘do-it-yourself (DIY)’ ideology. The flexibility of DIY ideology is facilitated by the absence of a central organisation that establishes and coordinates strategies for the movement. In this sense, a crowd-sourcing dynamic characterizes the development of ASAGE’s ideology, with each supporter contributing to creating, adapting, and spreading narratives and conspiracy theories, as well as defining the movement’s goals. Moreover, ASAG extremists and their (un)consciously supporters tend to adapt their narratives to their local context, with changes and developments occurring in response to specific and evolving needs.<sup>32</sup>

The emergence of a DIY ideology requires practitioners and experts in P/CVE fieldwork to develop new categorisations of violent extremism in order to better distinguish and effectively counter these threats. One such categorisation is Composite Violent Extremism (CoVE), which could help to achieve the goal.

### 3. The Composite Violent Extremism (CoVE)

The CoVE framework has the purpose to address several deficiencies in current methodologies for identifying and categorising ideologically complex violent extremists. Initially, the term ‘salad bar extremism’ has been used to describe how individuals mix and match ideologies, much like selecting ingredients at a salad bar, in fact.<sup>33</sup> However, for many extremists, the blending of ideologies and grievances is not always a deliberate choice. The overwhelming influx of information in the contemporary online environment, especially on social media, can shape individuals more through passive exposure than through the active selection of specific ideas. For

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<sup>32</sup> Farinelli, F., Marinone, L., Daher, S., *The Anti-System/Anti-Government Extremism Handbook*, RAN Policy Support – European Commission, 2024.

<sup>33</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, D., et al, “Will ‘Salad Bar Extremism’ Replace ‘Old-School World’ Terrorism?”, in *The National Interest*, 14 July 2022 (last accessed 9 August 2024). <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/will-%E2%80%99salad-bar-extremism%E2%80%99-replace-%E2%80%99old-school-world%E2%80%99-terrorism-203516>

instance, ideological blending may partly result from the illusory truth effect, where repeated exposure to information increases its perceived truthfulness. Continuous exposure to various toxic online cultures and messages reinforcing existing grievances or ideas might lead to ideological mixing in a far less deliberate manner than the salad bar analogy suggests.

Moreover, ‘salad bar extremism’ lacks a widely accepted definition and a comprehensive conceptual framework, which makes it difficult to identify cohabiting different extremist ideologies and balance their respective impact on cognitive and behavioural radicalisation. The term ‘ideological mixing’ also suffers from this lack of clear conceptualization. At worst, these ambiguous labels create additional challenges because they group individuals with distinct views and trajectories into the same category, complicating P/CVE and exit strategies, thus reducing their effectiveness. On the contrary, a different categorisation could uncover and reveal precise differentiations in behavioural patterns, existing risk factors, or radicalisation trends that may remain ignored or invisible if extremists with any degree of ideological mixing are grouped under one single term.

The concept of Composite Violent Extremism (CoVE) coined by Gartenstein-Ross, Zammit, Chace-Donahue and Urban offers a promising theoretical framework to better understand and categorise different cases of extremist cognitive and behavioural patterns.<sup>34</sup> CoVE indicates a kind of extremism represented by individuals adopting worldviews composed of multiple distinct ideologies, sentiments, grievances, and fixations. As the adjective ‘composite’ suggests, various elements coexist within the same mindset, encapsulating the essence of the salad bar metaphor without implying a clear or rational selection process that shapes the overall worldview. The centrality of each belief within an attacker’s worldview can be assessed by analysing the frequency of expressions and narratives, the connections to specific groups, and the self-identification of supporters and perpetrators with a particular ideological movement, alongside explicit expressions of ideological motivations. The theorists of CoVE have delineated four primary categories to classify individual extremists: ambiguous, mixed, fused, and convergent.

1. **Ambiguous Extremists:** This category encompasses individuals who articulate a broad spectrum of prejudices and grievances without adhering to a specific ideological framework. This is the case of the 2022 Columbine school-inspired shooter, Ethan Miller. The same perpetrator stated in a social media post that he was not a white supremacist or incel but rather hated “everything.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, D., et al, “Composite Violent Extremism: A Radicalization Pattern Changing the Face of Terrorism”, in *Lawfare*, 22 November 2022 (last accessed 9 August 2024). <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/composite-violent-extremism-radicalization-pattern-changing-face-terrorism>

<sup>35</sup> McBride, J., “Ethan Miller, Bend Safeway Shooter: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know”, in *Heavy*, 30 August 2022 (last accessed 11 August 2024). <https://heavy.com/news/ethan-miller-bend-safeway-shooter/>



2. **Mixed Extremists:** These extremists adhere to multiple ideologies, each given approximately equal weight, without any single ideology dominating the others. Zale Thompson's profile belong to this category, where black separatism and Jihadism coexisted without one primarily influencing the other.<sup>36</sup>
3. **Fused Extremists:** This category describes individuals who primarily adhere to one ideology but also incorporate elements from other ideological beliefs. This is the case of Jack Reed who fused Satanism and Neo-Nazism, being inspired by both esoteric satanist group Order of Nine Angles and Neo-Nazi terrorist, Anders Breivik.<sup>37</sup>
4. **Convergent Extremists:** These extremists maintain a specific ideology while collaborating with others who hold different ideologies, driven by shared interests, without adopting each other's beliefs. This category includes two self-proclaimed members of the far-right Boogaloo Boys movement, Michael Solomon and Benjamin Teeter, who sold weapons to an individual they believed was a member of Hamas. They never converted to Islam and Jihadism, but only supported a lone wolf with a different extremist ideology.<sup>38</sup>

The CoVE framework seems to enable scholars, practitioners, law enforcement agencies, and policymakers to deepen their understanding of contemporary radicalisation patterns. It also may offer a robust model for comprehending and categorising complex violent extremists, potentially providing a foundation for future research and the refinement of counterterrorism strategies.

## Conclusion

The emergence of transnational connections among diverse extremist groups suggests that traditional boundaries within extremist narratives have become increasingly porous, leading to opportunistic partnerships that, at a first glance, seem to contradict longstanding and traditional rivalries. This trend, exacerbated by technologies, cyberspace and generative AI, is evident in the manipulation of common grievances, such as anti-establishment and anti-government feelings, which have gained traction in recent years, particularly in response to global crises like the

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<sup>36</sup> Dients, J., "Hatchet Attack on NYPD Officers Was "Act of Terror": FBI Director", in *NBC New York*, 19 May 2015 (last accessed on 11 August 2024). <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/hatchet-attack-nypd-officers-act-of-terror-fbi-director-james-comey/844450/>

<sup>37</sup> De Simone, D., "Durham teen neo-Nazi became 'living dead'", in *BBC*, 22 November 2019 (last accessed 11 August 2024). <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-tyne-50397477>; Brown, F., "Terrifying drawings found in bedroom of Neo-Nazi, 16, convicted of terrorism", in *Metro*, 20 November 2019 (last accessed 11 August 2024). <https://metro.co.uk/2019/11/20/terrifying-drawings-found-bedroom-neo-nazi-16-convicted-terrorism-11189596/>

<sup>38</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, D., et Al, "Composite Violent Extremism: A Radicalization Pattern Changing the Face of Terrorism", in *Lawfare*, 22 November 2022 (last accessed 9 August 2024). <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/composite-violent-extremism-radicalization-pattern-changing-face-terrorism>

COVID-19 pandemic. The new rise of Anti-System/Anti-Government Extremism (ASAGE) is a clear example in this sense. Additionally, the influence of these narratives is broadening extremist ideologies, reaching wider audiences, and potentially appealing to more individuals within society. Indeed, the ability of violent extremism to infiltrate public non-violent protests and influencing individuals and groups at-risk of radicalisation, categorised as ‘fringe groups’, is another challenge that needs to be faced. This emerging framework makes it more difficult to identify how extremist narratives are taking shape as different groups and individuals engage in varying ways. Current trends are increasing pressure on democratic states’ capacity to counter extremism and terrorism as the bandwidth becomes more crowded. To effectively address all the issues related to radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism, it is essential to deepen the understanding of their nature and facets, and to conceptualise them at a theoretical level.

The concept of Composite Violent Extremism (CoVE) offers an insightful framework for this purpose, accommodating the multifaceted and evolving nature of contemporary extremism. By recognising the distinctions between ambiguous, mixed, fused, and convergent extremists, it potentially becomes possible to better understand the motivations and behaviours of individuals drawn to extremist ideologies. This understanding is crucial for developing effective prevention and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) strategies tailored to the nuanced realities of today’s landscape. Violent extremist groups are abandoning hierarchical structures by privileging horizontal organisation and dynamics, and capitalising on the initiatives of the so-called ‘lone wolves’ or those sub-groups and milieus spontaneously originated and organised. This new trend additionally explains the lack of a coherent and traditional ideological framework in certain individuals and groups.

By offering a more precise categorisation of coexisting extremist ideologies as well as more specific related tailored P/CVE strategies, the CoVE framework can play a fundamental role in both prevention and counter-terrorism efforts, including deradicalisation and disengagement. This is also relevant to avoid that strategies tailored for extremists can be erroneously adopted for people that have not been radicalised (yet), but they are on the fringe or at-risk for radicalisation.

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